

Issue #40

**www.neonmagazine.co.uk
info@neonmagazine.co.uk**

This compilation copyright © Neon Literary Magazine (2015).

Do not copy or redistribute without permission.

All content copyright © respective authors (2015).

Authors may be contacted through the publisher.

Cover image copyright © Sarah Katharina Kayß.

ISSN 1758-1419 [Print]

ISSN 1758-1427 [Online]

Edited by Krishan Coupland.

Published winter 2015.

Subscriptions and back issues available from the website.

C O N T E N T S

Sean Markey <i>The Spider In You</i>	4
Laura McKee <i>Wednesday Fainted In One Of 111 Scenes That Lasted 1000th Of A Second He Asks Me To Call Him</i>	10
Sam Kolinski <i>Hypnagogia Pillow Raft The Invisible Girl Dead Man's Medals</i>	15
Paul Clyne <i>A Small Extinction Consumer Market Rings My Upstairs Neighbour</i>	20
Ruth Brandt <i>Happy Ever After</i>	25
Flavian Mark Lupinetti <i>Division Of Labour Refined Rehearsal</i>	33
Mack Gelber <i>Best Of Drive-Thru</i>	38
Jenny Blackford <i>Mirror An Afterlife Of Stone Something In The Corner</i>	48
Kate Wisel <i>God And Me Bad Behaviour The Dream What Counts</i>	53
Paul French <i>The Lotus Eaters Stage I Testing Love Drug In The Feed The Love Drug Enters The Meat Supply Love Drug In Pill Form</i>	59
Postscript <i>Contributors Supporters</i>	68



Image by "wideye"

THE SPIDER IN YOU

"The Spider In You" previously appeared in Strange Horizons.

We kept our god under the sink, in an old aquarium, so it wouldn't spill its web all over the house. We didn't tell you because you were so curious. Our daughter: you are like an otter, or a hummingbird. How would you stand against such a monster as our god?

We took you to the shore, and watched you play in the surf. You don't notice how special you are, but everything else in the whole world does. The salty ocean spray always falls toward you. When the sun is out, its beams always find you, the heavy centre, the pollen-coated middle; you are always so much brighter than everything around you.

We put you to bed and opened the cabinet under the sink, careful not to wake you or upset our god. Did you know spiders can hiss? Well, not all of them, but this one did. You turned in your bed, dreaming of the blue and red crabs that hide in the piles of rock at the beach. You call them "jellies", and only you know why.

We lit candles around the spider's glass. It reared up against the flame, and in the candlelight it truly looked like a monster.

We asked for good health, for good fortune. We opened the top and tossed in mealworms and cold crickets. The bugs rained down on the spider's fat body, and it turned on them in a rage. While it ate, while its mouth made dark, wet sounds, we broke down:

Be kind to our daughter, we pled. Be easy on her. We love her so much. We loved our children before her, but your poison stopped their hearts, and we did not watch while you wrapped them in your sticky web that smelled like honey, filled our house with the scent of flowers for months while you feasted, hiding the rotting stench. Each child was sicker and sadder than the last, hearing you eat while in the womb, knowing what was in store for them.

We finished our plea, gave our offering, and put the spider back under the cabinet, because it was not time to test you yet. We blew out the candles, put our faces to the floor and wept. You were five, and you would meet the spider soon.

Do you want to know what happened to the others? We named our first child Mahlina, and she had eyes like the ocean. She was the happiest child I'd

ever seen. So happy, so full of love. She cried when she saw our god for the first time. It was my first time handling the spider. I'd been there when our old neighbours Hollyanna and Zavier treated their child with their own god's sharp little kiss.

Mahlina cried when she saw the imperfect body, its eight legs scrabbling wildly against the glass. It hungered for her. It knew her already, and it wanted her. Mahlina screamed when I took the spider from its tank, while your father held her. *Shhh, honey*, I reassured her, *be still. It only hurts for a second.*

Some people have an allergic reaction to their god's venom. When I was a little girl, my brother did. We left the house for four months while my parents' god consumed his body.

I'll spare you the details. Mahlina was highly allergic. My dear little girl, my horrible monster of a god. She did not make it, and our god only took two months to finish her off.

We were more nervous with the second child. His name was Phendon, and he was always a sick boy. I knew he wouldn't make it, but he survived the first bite. It takes three; if you survive three, you are strong for the rest of your life. You will be successful and able to handle your own god someday. You will have been blessed.

Something went wrong with Phendon. He developed a rash around the first bite a week later. Black spots appeared. At the end, he didn't even look like my little boy anymore. His skin hung from his bones. His eyes turned an ugly shade of yellow, and he forgot how to speak. He couldn't even say goodbye.

But you, you are different. And not just the way the world seems to spin around you, to gravitate toward you. You asked me once who we were hiding, and you looked all day. I could never bring myself to ask if you were searching for our god, if its language of spit-and-hiss found its way into your mind. I might have known, though. Everything else found its way to you.

We had a third child. I don't want to tell you this. We had a third child before you, named Ennison. Ennison was the opposite of you. Where you are the centre, pulling everything toward you, Ennison was at the edge, falling toward a heaviness he would never understand. We heard noises one night, but dreamed the reason for them, and we didn't know anything was wrong until the morning. Ennison had fallen toward our god. He had been exploring, maybe he had been hearing the god's voice. He got the aquarium out, turned the spider loose.

We found his body the next morning, covered in turquoise-silver web, our little black god the size of Ennison's fist, crawling around like an actor that owned the stage.

We conceived you that morning, wrapped in grief like blankets against the cold, the storm of the deaths that came before you. It took the whole length of my pregnancy with you for our god to finish consuming Ennison.

When it was time for your first test, I already knew how it would go. I knew, because every day, I would find you sitting in front of the cabinet, where we kept our god. One moment you were playing by the window, the next you were gone. Memories of Ennison flashed into my mind like bullets. I ran into the kitchen, knocking things over on my way, banging my shin against the table. And there you were, reading a book and sitting cross-legged in front of the cabinet. You looked back at me confused, then continued on. It didn't happen just once, but all the time.

You didn't cry when the spider finally bit you. We took the spider out and shut the door so you couldn't run away. But I knew. I took the spider out and walked over to you. You watched it come and you didn't flinch. It opened its legs like an embrace and latched onto your arm. Sank its fangs in. You looked up, as if to see if everything was okay. Everything was so okay.

You didn't even blink. And when we were done, you went off to draw pictures of the god, shapes I could not understand. Your wound dripped poison and blood for a week, but it didn't slow you down.

The second bite went the same way, and I told your father, "This is it. Our little girl. The one we get to keep," but he looked at me like I should know better than to have hoped. I should have; we'd lost three children before you, but I wanted it so badly. We wanted it to be true, for you to stay. We were almost afraid to hope for it.

We had to lock the cabinet between the second and third tests. We caught you trying to get in twice. What were you trying to do? You called it your "pear". What does that mean? So many questions. I was so scared for you, scared for us that we would lose you.

The third bite is always the worst. If you survive the third bite, then you are strong, and are blessed, and you go on from that moment and everything works out. More or less. More or less it balances out over a lifetime. That's the way it works.

Usually.

When the time came for the third bite, we were sweating, swearing,

crying. The night before, we stayed up till dawn with our god, giving offerings, pleading.

Please spare her. Please don't take her from us. She's so special.

You're so special, honey.

I brought the spider close while your father stood behind you. We both prayed like we were dying.

You smiled; you laughed. We were a collective wreck, and you were laughing. You said "pear." Its legs twitched in the air, trying to get closer, to find some purchase to get to you. I could feel it. Some people claim they hear the voice of their god. The truly religious claim to speak to their god always, day and night. We had never heard our god's voice before that moment. It didn't even speak words, just desires. It wanted you. We had such a greedy god; we were not blessed with a god that held moderation in its black heart.

Hopeless, we whispered our goodbyes to you, but you didn't even notice. After you said "pear", you snatched the spider from me, held it in your bare hands, and took a bite. I nearly died. My daughter, my special little one, killed our god. Why would you do that?

It bit your tongue. You closed your teeth together. Its legs spasmed. Its dark guts ran down your chin, dripped onto your white dress.

You didn't swallow what you bit into. You dropped the body back into the aquarium, where it fell and bled out all over its webs. You spat, and the half-chewed upper body of the spider fell to the floor. You opened your mouth, and I saw its jaws buried in your tongue. You scraped at them with your little fingernails, and pulled them free.

You couldn't talk for days afterward, but we knew what you wanted. You pointed at the door and said something that sounded like "elly". You wanted to go to the beach, to see the crabs and play in the cold water.

You killed our god! You killed all our plans, and you didn't even pause for it.

Now, you laugh as the hermit crabs drag their heavy shells through the shallows; you pick up smooth stones the waves wash ashore. We can tell you like this new place.

Do you remember the rocks that crashed through our windows right before we left? Or how you cut your feet on the shattered glass? Maybe you don't remember how angry everyone was, how they gathered around our house and demanded we give you to them. That's why we had to find a new home. We would do whatever we had to, because we'd promised each other we would not lose you, our special girl.

You will do great things someday. Doors will open for you that are not open for anyone else. Maybe you will rediscover magic, or find the cure for death. Everything struggles to find you, just like our god, just like the salt spray, the silver fish that crowd around you in the water, the smiles that fall upon you from every face you pass under in this new land.



Image by Jean Froidevaux

L A U R A M C K E E

WEDNESDAY

so they can't be missed
the days are named and blistered
I thumbnail tear the edge
push up from under
and today tips as mercury into the palm of my hand
I lift it to my tongue
to taste nothing

FAINTED

Your brain is the only part of you
not to hurt
because it can't tell itself to feel

Here is a scar that runs
a demi-ring still
around my thumb

On the outer side
is numbness
restraint

as I try to bend it
It shines
reflects his voice

telling me
not to make a fuss
as the room goes black

IN ONE OF 111 SCENES THAT LASTED 1000TH OF A SECOND

I think in the one
where the butterfly tongue
sucked
as expected

but for just that little too long

or when
the match flared
too fast
embarrassed your fingers

somebody needed to be sorry

you struck the jaw
of the immortal robot
she cannot leave this life really
but for training purposes

will play dead

HE ASKS ME TO CALL HIM

daddy

and I think what the
actual fuck I am older
than him
and the hills

so I straddle his lap
to have words face on
about how
he might like to find
a little girl

about how
I am
a real woman
and he whispers
say it

so I hear myself say it
wearily
and he whispers
you can do better than that
princess

with a hiss on the ess
which makes me feel
queasy
deep inside my fingertips
so I say it

in soft anger
into his ear
as he grabs at tiny hairs
at the nape
and I say it say it say it say it



Image by Karen Barefoot

S A M K O L I N S K I

HYPNAGOGIA

In adolescence they were oft-found there,
peering over curved ledge into thick gloom.

What swam beneath the oil-slicked depths
goading their interest, the elders said, wincing.

One night with pleading sister following like
a tail they slunk off with the moonlight.

On her lone return she told tales of the first dip
foot into geometric ripples, not unlike rainfall

to an open pot of paint. How past shoulder-blade
the boys slunk into black basin, rode tethering

their ankles to pole fraying and fragile. Before
the panic set, she felt her mind become a mirror

whatever below not taking kindly to amateur swimmers.
It was too late. The last thing she spoke of before

the silence was the song of her brothers being
swallowed, how it sang to her that they would spend

a lifetime down there, the beasts mimicking them
until they could not be told apart from its own kind.

PILLOW RAFT

In memoriam Emily Willow.

We deciphered it from the manic scrawls
in her journals, how that night she slunk

into the sheets the way an old tattoo
fades into the layers of aged skin.

How they two sable clumps of soot came
to take her, encircling bed like starved sharks.

It's greater than you and us Emily, and watches.
How they clothed her mind with malefic song.

She wasn't afraid, the book said, but wasn't sure
if it was her or the universe who rolled over.

THE INVISIBLE GIRL

It is January. Her nose is pointed
at the horizon like a muzzle nub.
Light oft-darts around her oddness.

It is March. The backscattering
of sunlight flickers on her skin.
She goads it further. *Disappear.*

It is April. She sits in bar a character
in a Hopper painting, laughing with
those weird enough not to notice her.

It is June. She hasn't slept in weeks.
She arrives at sunrise, but it is
another morning with little luck.

It is July. At barb of field, the wind
tells her life is a dream from which
she cannot wake. She rests well.

It is still July. Last night boasted eight
hours sleep. At sunrise she is not there.
Sepia has inhabited an un-shadowed lacuna.

DEAD MAN'S MEDALS

He was dead and dull as stone, dropped
from sky like stringed-conker, sewn onto child's eyes.
Left a wife and grave behind, in Berlin, hero pilot
until it too fell with flame. As dead as you now before me,
sunken onto mortuary metal slab, skin pallid, eyes
all shot and gone. Always wondered what went
through your mind, ephedrine and giggles guiding
you home, dead man's medals pinned to your chest.



Image by Keith Syvinski

P A U L C L Y N E

A SMALL EXTINCTION

Not, say, like the fate of the dinosaurs.
There's no heft to their excavated spoor.
This shit's slow, here and now, subsisting
as it does in the skeletons of film plots.
You sense it beneath the soap opera
histrionics blazing your TV screen:
a quiz show format in its latest guise
reality stars dead behind the eyes
new armies of tweeters eager to scorn.
Anon with a public face.

We used to

preserve species in jars on dusty shelves.
Now they're stored in citadels of hard drives,
genome and map for the progenitor.
Daily we squirrel away bite-size myths,
toggle through filters on our cameras,
frame the bestest selfie. Here's a story for
keyboard warriors impatient to troll :
The Young Man Who Googled Himself To Death.
Reports vary as to the state of his health.

CONSUMER MARKET

Just then, I thought I saw
at the Deli counter, your broken jaw

on sale as exotic meat:
a fleshy mandible, a pair of feet

and more besides. Some
thyroid, spleen, prostate, lung

all manner of choice cuts
oozing blood from slits

your whole body in chunks
and the butcher in a funk

with patrons, who can vouch
to wandering aisles half-mouthed.

RINGS

under the eyes, a careless blink –
the mark of an absent wedding band
as he caresses her with his hands –
growth rings in the iris shrunk back;
shrill ring of phone and the missed
conversation that cost everything.

MY UPSTAIRS NEIGHBOUR

whom I have never met
whom I recognise by
their cavalcade of noise

whom I curse blindly as
washing machine cycles
rattle through cutlery

who manoeuvres speakers
to best experience
Pink Floyd's *Wish You Were Here*

who spoils my Sunday brunch
with pointed and constant
scrape of Hoover nozzle

whose disregard for me
dawned when the ceiling wept
droplets of bathwater

whose name's a misnomer
whose romping bed betrays
my blushing in the dark



Image by Ron Beck

HAPPY EVER AFTER

At the eight hour mark Alfie's mother lies on his bed and pulls his pyjamas to her nose. She breathes in the scent of her son; little flakes of his skin which must still lurk there. She bundles up the fabric, squeezing every last atom of him into her, needing to capture any remaining fragments of his life so that she can nurture them within her again. Downstairs a kettle clicks on, or is it off? It doesn't matter. The room illuminates rhythmically blue. The front door slams. Boots paw the mat. A new voice. She wishes she had closed Alfie's bedroom door, shut them all out.

Josh Bubble Smith

wot the fucks happened wiv alf?

Like Comment

10 people like this

[View all 6 comments](#)

Chloe Spragg sumfing happened?????

Like

Matt Winterbottom police round the park fuckin hell ☹️

2 people like this

Yasir Husseni Whats up??!!

Like

Between the twenty-fifth and fortieth day Alf is spotted disembarking from a vaporetta in Venice; cycling along Regent Walk in Edinburgh; and alighting from a metro train at Avtovo station, carrying a bottle of Russian Standard vodka and tapping ash off a Belomorkanal. His description is consistent: five foot eight (some an inch taller, some an inch shorter), dark woollen coat, bulbous hat; just as pictured in his photo. By the fiftieth day the reports that have been pouring in from all over the place have begun to tail off.

Each sighting is definitely Alfie; his mother is certain of that. He loves travelling, he loves history and politics. Remember, DI Potter, he is studying those at college.

When DI Potter leaves, she shrinks into the sofa, imagining the chill of the St Petersburg November air, feeling the ache of lungs unaccustomed to smoke, clenching her gullet to prevent the wave of seasickness that consumes her.

On the third day there are no sightings. Nor on the fourth.

On day minus seven Alf sits in Lightwater Country Park with Eleni straddling his lap while she pokes her tongue into his ear. Her dribble tickles his neck and he laughs, smoothing his jeans-contained erection against her fanny. Perhaps they'll head into the copse where, from certain angles, there's a chance they might not be seen having sex. Or perhaps they will stumble back to his place and head up to his bedroom where his mum still insists on folding his clothes.

College has just started and he should be in a politics lesson, or is it travel and tourism? He doesn't remember anymore since he chose the subjects at random and hasn't downloaded his timetable, or looked at the book list, or actually ever turned up. A disappointment? Of course, but then Alf has contributed decent servings of disappointment to the world since the moment he broke free from his mother's womb; an ugly mass with a differing ability that had failed to declare itself on scans.

"So much for fucking technology," his father had said in pretty much his last contribution to Alf's life other than a card sent on Alf's sixteenth birthday. If Alfred was ever in the Crewe area, he must drop in, it said. Otherwise, as Alfred had now passed from boyhood to manhood, his father guessed that was it. Go for it, son. Get in there.

Alf's first operation to reduce the spasms in his malformed leg failed. Never mind, eh; life would ultimately compensate the poor little mite in some way, after all, that's how it goes, isn't it?

His second operation was successful but it left Alf with a pause in his step, a hint of a limp which by Year Three turned Alf into the shark in the playground ocean, a basker who ate first and vomited up indigestible bones. Options? Eat or be beaten; which was he to choose, Mother?

Since his disappointing GCSE results, Alf has spent his summer providing pools of neon-blue WKD vomit for the moonlight to glint off; far more poetic than barely-digested burger in vodka on the carpet. Used condoms under his bed should have contributed too, except Alf hasn't actually managed to get one out and on in his six week sex-fest with Eleni. Still, he has jammed the unopened pack of condoms down the side of his bed to prevent sex-squeak, where it loiters, waiting to fly out when his mother changes his sheets. Unused pack versus used condom? Either way his mother's disappointment is assuaged now that he has a girlfriend to keep him away

from that lot. She's the icing on the cake, Eleni is, proof that her ugly duckling has matured into a cob. Her boy is finally on the road to coming good.

Alf would have liked there to be more names than just Eleni's etched on his bedpost. Seventeen and just the one sexual partner. What the shit was that all about, particularly as he has been watching porn since twelve, knows how to satisfy two women at a time, knows how girls arch their backs and grunt with pleasure? But all that stuff isn't real; watching isn't doing. Doing is different. With Eleni he doesn't need dildos or leather. With her he isn't a spaz. Now his knife stays home.

On the second day the analysis of CCTV footage begins. There, at a bus stop, is the boy-man. And ten minutes later he is spotted passing Game, pausing for a moment to check the display. And then queuing outside the Odeon. There can be no doubt about this last sighting. His face is clearly shown in the high-definition recordings which also reveal the TV channel watched by the retired couple living in the warehouse conversion across the canal, the time they eat, the way they make love to lesbian blue movies.

Do not approach this youth

On the fifteenth day Alfie's mother is woken by a call. She grabs the phone. By the time DI Potter voices the words analysis, hard drive, brutality, she gets the drift.

He's not a bad boy, she explains, thoughts and sleeping-pill induced dreams interweaving. It's his leg, that's all. Disabled, bullied youth turns briefly to regrettable violence then redeems himself. That's where this story heads, surely, to happy ever after.

Have you heard anything, any news, any sightings? Have you heard? Anything?

On day minus five Alf is at Eleni's, a home infused with the scent of moussaka and bouzouki strumming, where the stickiness of baklava lingers on the breath. Everything's going to be all right from now on. Everything's cool.

WHAT TIME ARE YOU
COMING HOME?
MUM X
17:18

why are you yelling?!!!!
17:35

yELLING? i DID NOT i JUST
ASKED A QUESTION? X
17:36

Oops. Any idea? X
17:37

Any idea Alfie? X
17:40

Any idea Alfie? xxxx
18:07

later.....
22:59

On the sixth day Alfie's mother checks her mobile phone, her answer phone, the post, her email, her Facebook, Alfie's Facebook. She wanders round the house, checks the garden, looks for little notes poked between paving slabs, snapped under windscreen wipers, jammed into the bark of the plum tree. A thread from his trousers, a footprint in a bed. A camera whirrs – *chisst, chisst, chisst* – as it follows her progress and she is tempted to give it the bird. Instead she straightens her shoulders and heads back inside to check her mobile phone, the answer phone, her email, her Facebook, Alfie's Facebook.

Day minus four.

On r bench xxxxx
17:56

Where u? xxxxx

18:08

Where r u?

18:17

??????

18:43

On the seventh day there is a confirmed sighting at Piccadilly Circus where Alf is spotted by his former science teacher. Ever wary of Alfred Parsons, Mr Gunter stepped into the gutter to let the lad pass. He seemed meek, Mr Gunter reported the following day, not at all the same lad he held in detention for spitting.

When questioned about the delay in coming forward, Mr Gunter wipes sweat from his forehead before admitting that perhaps the encounter had been a few hundred metres north of Piccadilly Circus, perhaps in Soho, outside Schwang, but please don't tell his wife. His sporadic visits to the sex club are all that have kept his marriage together these past fifteen years.

Subsequent enquiries in the area fail to locate Alf. The trail has gone cold.

On day minus two Alf confronts Eleni. The complete blank in communications. Why? Eleni blinks a lot; she half turns her face away. Why?

On day eight, the minute Alfie's mother hears he has been sighted for sure, she heads up to London. She checks his picture on her phone, the photo that pops up each time she dials his number. Even though his phone goes straight to the voicemail full message, she keeps dialling five, six, seven times an hour. She looks at that picture all the train journey, worried that after the eternity of not seeing him she won't be able to recognise her son.

She stands beneath Eros, on exactly the spot Alfie might have stood twenty-four hours earlier and, even though it is stupid, she is tempted to bend down and check the pavement for a piece of his hair, or a nail he might have bitten off. She hates the delay caused by Mr Gunter's weakness for lap dancers, just as much as she hates the young men who walk past wearing skinny jeans, chatting as though there is nothing at all wrong.

The flick of a coat and the hint of a stooped head and she's off

following. It could be him. She wants to yell out in great big capital letters for real now to attract his attention; shout till her thirty-two point font voice is heard throughout the city.

ALFIE! ALFIE! ALFIE!

She tails him up Shaftesbury Avenue, down Charing Cross Road, until somewhere near Temple he turns.

My son, she tells him. You look like my son.

The man shakes his head and he is nothing like Alfie, nothing at all.

On Blackfriars Bridge she stares into the tide sweeping upstream and understands that the only reason for her existing any longer is for Alfie to return to once this stupid misunderstanding has been sorted. He has to come home.

On day eight Alf makes his way down the steps outside Sea Containers House onto the Thames shore where amber lights glisten on a discarded rubber sole, a comb, a shard of glass. He scuffs at a piece of blue pottery, stamps on a clay pipe bowl the river has failed to destroy. His coat, laden with rain, tugs him down and the lazy wind blows straight through him.

Under Blackfriars Bridge, dribbles of brackish water creep towards him and a shooting star slices through the night sky. He lights a match for warmth and lets it burn his fingers.

The day itself is warm. Alf has said he will be waiting on their bench. One last chat, Eleni owes him that. He sits, elbows on knees, fingers clicking. He is ready, knows what to say. She arrives alone.

He's got a reputation, she says. Bit of a psycho.

Hey, he says, laughing it off. This is me you're talking about.

Yeah, she says, but you know.

They mock my leg, he tells her. What am I to do? Let them?

Yeah, she says. The leg.

Is that it? he says. It's over because of my leg?

Nah, she says.

Fuck them, eh. He slaps his knuckles into the bench seat. And fuck you

too if you believe them, Eleni.

And they go to the place, the one where they could have had sex without anyone seeing them, probably. And he has his blade with him again.

And Eleni? Eleni? If he can't have her then no one can. Fuck them. Fuck her. Fuck the whole fucking world.

Once upon a time there was a boy.



Image by G Schouten De Jel

DIVISION OF LABOUR

I don't like it when my friends decide
the time has arrived
for me to thumb down
yet another car.

But you're the best, Claire says,
With your hollow chest,
your skinny hips, your dimples.
At the edge of your mouth, that pretty little scar.

She has a point.
I do find it easier
to get picked up
than Claire and them do.

Besides, says Beth,
you sound so embarrassed
when you ask if
your friends can ride, too.

The tiniest bit of colour
rises in your cheeks,
and your eyelids flutter
when you look at the floor.

You totally sell the
impression that you feel
you must apologize for
these *losers* clambering through the door.

Also true. And, to be fair,
my friends ask only that
I hitch the ride, make five minutes of small talk,
and get ready to take the wheel

They never
ask me to stick
the knife in,
all the way to the hilt.

REFINED

First day on the job at the Quaker State,
The newest of the oil rats hang on every word.
Don the foreman lectures, "Keep a tight grip on the rail.
Double back your safety harness. Don't forget to clip your cable.
No horseplay on the catwalk. You don't want to get refined."

Forty feet below the cauldrons simmer.
Fifty thousand gallons each of sulfured Pennsylvania sludge.
Sweet gasoline mixed in somewhere,
Elixir for the towers to extract.
No horseplay on the catwalk.

Hydrocarbon essences condense upon the soles.
Metal grates concede no traction.
"Your eyes *will* become accustomed,"
Don promises the men who blink back tears.
No horseplay on the catwalk.

At noon Calhoun the crew chief
Invites the young guys to the river.
Under canopy of bushes a joint passes down the line.
Smoking anything on these grounds, grounds for immediate termination.
No horseplay on the catwalk.

The older guys all swear that once it happened.
Different versions differ wildly that describe just what they found
After draining precious oil into the river.
Some said only metal shanks from his work boots.
Others swore that his body stayed intact.

Graffiti in the shitter drives home the warning.
There once was a dude who fell in the crude.
The poem's remaining lines distilled away.
No notes about the poet or where the full poem can be found.
No horseplay on the catwalk.

REHEARSAL

I have started to learn my lines,
the ones I will recite after you depart.
"Thank you." An easy one to remember,
something simple to say
to friends who offer condolences.
"She would have loved this party."
A line to elicit wan smiles
from those who come to your memorial.
"I know I can."
This, to reassure people who promise that I can count on them.

I have started to plan
my wardrobe and my makeup.
The former calls for clothes with a baggier fit,
reflecting the inevitable loss of weight.
The latter requires little effort
on my part, only slightly longer
intervals between haircuts,
a few more days that I don't shave,
and a general indifference to how others see me.
My character will reveal his predisposition to concerted acts of neglect.

I have started to practice my memories.
This preparation will stand me
in good stead, because just as
rehearsal enhances the credibility
of one's performance, the efficient
management of grief demands
a proper sorting and ranking of memories.
My most vivid memories
will consist of those occasions
when I could have treated you with greater kindness.

The greatest challenge of this role lies in
not knowing when the performance will begin.
I have become the understudy
for a part I never auditioned to play.
You express irritation when I suggest a miracle
might occur, the playwright might amend the script.
You call this an absurd contrivance, and I
defer to your dramatic judgement.
I shall continue to rehearse.
And I shall conquer my stage fright by the time I hear my cue.



Image by Andrew Martin

BEST OF DRIVE-THRU

—Welcome to Large Burger. Where the burgers are large and the smiles are on the house. Can I take your order?

—Do you have a chicken?

—We offer a range of chicken options including our signature Ranch Wagon and Ultimate Chicken five-piece dinner. Chicken sandwiches are also available in nugget form, with a variety of dipping sauces including our popular Asian-Glazin’.

—I’m looking for a chicken. He’s not coming home.

—Our chicken is guaranteed one-hundred percent free-range and sustainably harvested. Patties are locally sourced from Guatemala and assembled by machines.

—He’s healthy, good-natured. I take excellent care of him.

—Perhaps I can interest you in our Large Chicken Smokehouse Grinder, now available for a limited time only.

—He might be in the closet. Sometimes I wake up and he isn’t here, and I look and I look, and then I remember to check the closet. Please. I’m trying to keep it together. I swear to God. I am really, really trying.

—Also, I’ll have a vanilla swirly.

—Welcome to Large Burger. Your one-stop shop for all your burger needs. Can I take your order?

—What?

—Can I take your order, sir?

—What? Speak up. This is America, little girl.

—Better now, sir? Can I help you with anything today?

—You think it’s funny, torturing an old man? Someday you’ll look like me. They’ll laugh at you, hurl sprockets at your head. I hope you remember my face.

—I apologize, sir. There must be some issue with the microphone. Maybe you’d like to come inside?

—Do you know what happens when a man catches fire? What happens

to his insides? Or his dermis?

—With valid identification we offer a senior discount on qualifying items, including our Large Chicken Smokehouse Grinder, now available for a limited time only.

—I'll tell you. Listen to me, little girl. I'll tell you what it is to burn.

—Welcome to Large Burger. Voted Favourite Burger Restaurant in *Best Of The Plains Region, 2007*. Can I take your order?

—I know what you did.

—Say again, sir? Please speak directly into the clown nose.

—I've been looking for you a long, long time.

—In that case, you must be very hungry! For future reference, all Large Burger franchise locations are available on our website, with directions by car and train.

—You pulled out all the stops, didn't you, Nightingale? The uniform. The little fucked up car. What is that, a Subaru? Jesus.

—Sir, this is the drive-thru window. If you'd rather purchase a meal inside, we offer the same quality fare and service for which Large Burger is internationally renowned.

—I know who you are.

—Welcome to Large Burger. Chew it! Can I take your order?

—I'm looking for a chicken. He's close now. I can feel it.

—Your order, please, ma'am?

—Listen. I know he's inside the establishment. I know all about what's going on in there, so could you please stop acting like nothing's happening? Please. I don't want to have to beg.

—I'm sorry, ma'am, but I'm afraid there's no chicken here. Just the kind that comes on a kaiser roll.

—You hurt people when you pretend actions don't have consequences. Do you know what a consequence is? Huh? Do you?

—Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to pull around.

—You're keeping my baby in there, and you're acting like nothing's happening. There's a consequence for that, lady, and it's not a fucking kaiser roll.

—Our manager will be right out, and he'd be happy to speak to you about any complaints you may wish to lodge against Large Burger or our affiliates at 连雀 .

—Baby. Baby, it's me. I know you're scared, but right now I need you to hold on. Can you do that for me? I'm going to be with you very soon. Don't take any strange medicine. You hear me? Don't listen to this bitch.

—Welcome to Large Burger. Where the burgers are large and the smiles are on the house. I am legally obligated to inform you that our Smileburger Original sandwich is not on the house. It is three ninety-nine.

—Nightingale. Guess who.

—I'll take your order when you're ready, sir.

—You have a beautiful home. Love what you've done with the grounds. What's that called? Cobblestone?

—Sir, I need you to order or move to make room for other customers.

—And the kitchen: wow. I bet you make some mean Ranch Wagons in there. Who knew flipping burgers could be so lucrative? Do you get tips?

—I'm afraid I'm going to have to flag you on, sir. This is one of our busiest times. I'm flagging you on now. Please advance your vehicle.

—I've seen the cones. They're beautiful. No, I'm moving. See? I'm moving.

—By the way, my kid sister's in town. What the hell do you people do for fun around here? Stare at corn? Christ.

—Welcome to Large Burger. For the discriminating burgervore.

—Yeah, hi. I want one Large Burger, all the toppings, double cheese. Hold the tomato.

—One Large Burger, no tomato, double cheese. Anything else, sir?

—Yeah, let me get a Large Chicken Sandwich with Asian-Glazin', pickles on the side. Order of Large Fries - large, please. Rings if you've got 'em. Throw a couple of ketchups in there, mustard, mayo. Two orders of the cornbread, with the little diced-up little chillies. You still make those? Yeah? Two orders of the cornbread. A riblet. Actually let's make it two Large Burgers, double

cheese, no tomato. You can go ahead and put those together. Kind of fold them into each other. Keep the riblet separate. Uh, I'll also get an Ultimate five-piece dinner, a fifteen-piece nuggets, a Ranch Wagon, a Whack Stack. A black-and-white shake. A slice of apple pie. You got Mello Yello?

—Yes, sir, we have Mello Yello.

—Well, Tom Terrific! Okay. You wanna read that back to me?

—Two Large Burgers, no tomato, double cheese. Asian-Glazin', side pickles. Mustard sachet. Mayonnaise sachet. Ten-piece nuggets.

—Fifteen.

—Fifteen-piece nuggets. Whack Stack. A Ranch Wagon folded into a riblet.

—No. Wrong! Separate, I said, I want the riblet separate! Can we be a little more engaged here, please? Fuck!

—Riblet separate. Cornbread. Two orders cornbread, with the little diced-up chillies. Fries and rings, large – large fries. Ketchup sachet. A slice of apple pie. A slice of apple pie. A slice of apple pie.

—Sorry. Ma'am?

—A slice of apple pie.

—Hello? Ma'am?

—...Yes, sir?

—Are you all right?

—Welcome to Large Burger. Please be patient while we calibrate your smile.

—Baby?

—Large Burger. Order please.

—Mommy misses her baby. She misses him so very, very much.

—Order please. I will not hesitate to call the manager.

—I see you, you know. I see you inside your microphone, counting your money, drinking the blood of innocents!

—Ma'am. I will not hesitate. Large Burger is a money-making establishment. It is not a chicken coop. It is not ominous. It is a fast service subsidiary of 连雀 Heavy Industries with over two-hundred franchise locations in the United States and across the globe. Large Burger does not kidnap.

—Sometimes we like to sing a song: *Yummy, yummy, yummy, I've got love in my tummy-*

—What do you want, lady? Do you want a burger? Here, have a burger. Have all the burgers. Have a chicken sandwich! What does it take?

—*and I feel like loving you. Yes I feel like loving you. Yes I do. Yes I do.*

—Large Burger.

—Hello, I'd like a double chocolate shake and a – just kidding. Howdy, Nightingale. Some weather, huh? I don't know why, rain always makes me hungry.

—No. Service denied. Please pull around.

—Did you know over one hundred people are killed each year due to faulty gas lines? You're just standing around, fixing up a Whack Stack, and then...

—I'm within my rights to contact the authorities if this threatening behaviour continues. I can do that if I need to. I have a button.

—Authorities – is that what you call those goons in the minivan, "authorities"? Two six-foot guys with the nine-irons and the haircuts, came knocking around my motel room last night? I've never met cops who liked golf so much. Good swing, too.

—Sir, this is not the time to be pushing me.

—It's a shame; I really liked that TV. Thanks for scaring my sister, by the way. Class act. She's seven.

—Sir. Sir? Just whip it out already. I know you're going to do it, so can we just get it over with? Please? Let's settle this like adults. I think we're both very tired.

—I've seen the cones. I know how you're moving them. I know everything about your little operation, Nightingale, and all you can do is sit in your booth and watch while I burn your world to ashes. You can send in the brigade, have them slash my tires, leave messages on the mirror in shaving cream. I don't care, and do you want to know why? Do you? Because you'll still be in there, and I'll still be out here.

—You want something?

—Large Burger, medium fries. Medium diet cola.

—Drive up to the window. Your shitty meal will be ready momentarily.

—Excuse me?

—I said to please sit tight while we coagulate your burger.

—Excuse me. Miss. Do you know who you're talking to?

—You sound kind of like Lee Majors. Lee Majors?

—This is quality control. Corporate. Normally I'd reserve my comments for the Quality Evaluation Thumbnail, but I don't let anybody talk to me that way.

—My apologies, Mr Majors. I wasn't aware that you'd renounced the glamour of show business for the life of a mid-level beef spook. Next time I'll be sure to treat you with the kind of conduct befitting a man of your stature.

—I'd like to have a word with your manager.

—I am the manager.

—Your manager, please.

—I am the manager of this fine establishment. I run it from top to bottom, and I run a tight ship. Go ahead, file a complaint. Be a hero. Did you know that over one hundred people are killed each year in explosions resulting from faulty gas lines? You're just standing around, picking your ass, and then—

—You'll be receiving word from corporate.

—Yeah.

—Hi there! Can I place an order with you?

—Clown nose.

—Too cute. Give me one second here... Honey? Do you know what you want?

—We're out of Smileburgers.

—You want to talk to the lady? You want to talk to the nice lady? That's a big boy. Miss, I'm going to put my son on?

—Too cute.

—...Hiya. I wanna Smileburger.

—We're out of Smileburgers.

—I wanna Smileburger. I wanna hundred Smileburgers.

—We're out of Smileburgers.

—Hi, miss? Sorry. You're sure you can't rustle up a Smileburger for him?

—We don't have any Smileburgers.

—Would you mind checking quickly for me? I'm sorry. It's just that he

really wants a Smileburger.

—Okay. Let me check. We're out of Smileburgers.

—Hey, I'm just trying to feed my son. We made a special trip out here. We drove all the way from Pine Acres. Do you know how many hours I've been listening to Kidz Bop?

—Ma'am, this is our busiest time. If you don't place an order I'm going to have to ask you to pull around to make room for other customers.

—There's no one behind me.

—Please pull around now. Do not force me to contact the authorities.

—Mom, why won't she give me a Smileburger?

—Do you know who I am? Do you? This is my domain, lady, my little petty fiefdom, and around here I'm fuckin' God. I am the arbiter of the Smileburgers – and no, you can't have one. That's right: I'll take away everything you have, lady, everything you love, and there's nothing you can do about it. Fine, drive away. Drive far away! Large Burger values your patronage! Someday your children will replace you!

—Nightingale.

—

—Why'd you have to hurt her?

—

—She didn't know anything. She was just a little girl.

—

—What, you want me to place an order? Large fries and a Whack Stack? Extra ketchup, please! You monster.

—

—You know, I used to work in a place like this. I flipped the burgers. For the first week I had to wear this hat that said "I'M A ROOKIE – PLEASE BE PATIENT". That was what they called you, "rookie", like it was ice hockey or something. Bunch of asshats.

—

—The fryolators always put me in a trance. I would stare at the fry oil for hours, space out. They said if you spilled pop in there the whole apparatus would detonate on impact, sending death and raining oil everywhere. That was how they phrased it in the training video, "raining oil". It's funny what sticks with you.

—

—You were in my dream last night.

—

—I was nineteen, back in my burger-flipping uniform, wearing the rookie hat. I never worked the drive-thru in real life, didn't have what they called the necessary people skills, but in the dream I guess it was my lucky day, right? I was standing in that booth, actually, pretty much where you're standing now. Anyway, a car pulls up, the only car we've had all day, and I can't see you but I know you're in there. You park in front of the speaker, but instead of ordering you get out and walk up to me. You stand right in front of the booth. And it's weird: you're hovering right on the other side of the glass, kind of watching me, maybe, or half-watching me. Like you're seeing straight through to the rear wall and the long row of freezers, just past my shoulder, to something I can't quite see. Meanwhile I can hear the grill grilling, the fryer frying. And I look out the window and I think: raining oil.

—

—Raining oil.

—

—Then I wake up.

—Have you seen my baby?

—

—Hello?

—Oh. It's you.

—He's not coming home. I've looked everywhere, I've spent days sitting by the phone. I've washed my hands a hundred times but it doesn't ring, it still doesn't ring.

—Ma'am.

—I just want to see him again.

—Ma'am, I think something bad is going to happen here. This isn't a good place for you.

—Have you seen him? Is he here? Please, just tell me: is he here?

—He's... Oh, Christ. He's here.

—He's here?

—The chicken is here. The chicken – your chicken – is here, and he's doing great. Better than ever, actually. Yes. Your chicken, he loves you, he

misses you, and he's grateful, so very, very grateful. But now it's time for him to go. He hopes you can understand that. It's time for him to leave.

—Baby, can you hear me? Are they treating you well? Are you getting everything you need?

—I'm sorry, ma'am, but now it's time for you to go, too. Please do this for me. Please. I need you to drive.

—My darling. My sweet, sweet bean. Everyone here's been so nice to me.

—Welcome to Large Burger! Where the burgers are large, and the smiles are on the house. My name is Mavis and I'll be your meal facilitator today. Can I take your order, sir?

—What?

—Can I take your order please, sir?

—What? Speak up. This is America, little girl.

—Sir, I am so sorry. This is my first day. Can you hear me now?

—You think it's funny, tormenting an old man? Someday you'll look like me. They'll laugh at you, hurl sprockets at your head. I hope you remember my face.

—I'm sorry. I don't know what's wrong with this thing. Hey, Gerry? Sorry, Gerry? Can you help me with this customer?

—Do you know what happens when a man catches fire? What happens to his insides? Or his dermis?

—I'll be right back, sir. I just need to check something with the manager.

—I'll tell you. Listen to me, little girl. I'll tell you what it is to burn.



Image by "korry_b"

J E N N Y B L A C K F O R D

MIRROR

*"Mirror" was previously published in Midnight Echo and
Ticonderoga's Best Australian Fantasy And Horror.*

She screamed each time, she knows
she screamed, but no one came.
Perhaps it was a dream,
the mirror and those eyes, not hers,
so many times. Perhaps
it was a dream.

Years on, grown up, she's still
afraid. What if those eyes –
imaginary eyes, not real –
can find her here, look through
the mirror on the wall
in this new place?

When she must close her eyes,
must pull, let's say, a dress
or jumper overhead,
she checks the mirror once
again. What's in it now?
The room, herself.

So far, so good. But whose
eyes look from it at night
when hers are closed?

AN AFTERLIFE OF STONE

*"An Afterlife Of Stone" was previously
published in A Slow Combusting Hymn.*

The lumpy wrinkled flesh
of some great ancient beast

a woolly mammoth
or elasmothere

lies mummified beside the Hume
near Gundagai.

She must have strayed here
so far south

on long-lost sunken land
or melted ice

and never found her way
back home.

Her body dried to rock
by endless sun and wind

spreads wide
across the plain.

Distant sheep are maggots
crawling on her lichened skin

their new-shorn fleece
the painful

almost-white of larvae
on raw meat.

She doesn't seem
to mind.

Perhaps the warm
quiet company

of woolly beasts
however small

still comforts her
in the long

slow afterlife
of stone.

SOMETHING IN THE CORNER

*"Something In The Corner" was previously
published in The Duties Of A Cat.*

The cat's convinced there's something in the corner,
something bad, behind the heavy coat-rack of
dark old wood and brass by the front door.
The subtle scratching's hard to hear by day.
Perhaps it's rats, or something even smaller – mice?
Perhaps a nest of furry little mice, scabbling
like dead babies desperate to escape the walls;
ten tiny fingers, ten tiny toes scraping
translucent baby fingernails...

There's nothing in the corner, cat. What sort of people
would they be, who'd shut a baby up inside a wall?
We will not think about the skulls that builders
used to plant under foundation stones.
No one would do that here.

It's getting dark. The scratching's louder now.
The cat mews his discomfort. His ears are back,
his tail fluffed. He hides behind my legs.

It's getting darker all the time.
I'd leave, if I were you.
At night, the babies cry.



Image by Lisa Lippincott

K A T E W I S E L

GOD AND ME

As you can guess I no longer care
about god. Whether he is watching
or not, logging on to some complicated
system to check on me, I don't
care. It's a free show. When I was a teenager,
I cared deeply about god. I thought
he could be proud of me. That if I buried my face
in his jacket he would take me
around the party and I wouldn't
have to introduce myself
to strangers. God and I were like lovers
who became jealous too easily. I asked
people questions like *Oh have you seen god?*
We were supposed to meet
for coffee at two. And then, pressing
the issue *Has he ever done this to you?* I obsessed
over him and knew we could never
be together ever again. Sometimes I would create
tests, seeing if he might come back, by jumping
off buildings or becoming far too dark
for anybody to bear. It was a very bad
time for me but now I don't care. We've become
like distant friends who still know
the same people. The other day
I casually asked my friend
how god was doing and she said *Great!*
God is great. If I see
a photo of god's kids
on Facebook I will like it, to further
prove I have no lingering
feelings about god's
love and god's authority.

BAD BEHAVIOUR

It starts before
your company holiday
party, our first fancy
invitation on the fridge. You come in,
with a thirty and a few snowflakes
on your shoulder. I'm clapping
under my chin, in the kitchen
by the ironing board. You kick
the door shut then twirl
me to the counter where we crack
beers, the iron hissing through teeth
behind us then burning. I turn
Arvo Pärt up on the speakers
and say *mood music* when you ask
what the hell this is. You lay
ties out on the bed, then
me, your neck wet with cologne
where I bite it. We fight
for the shower,
and the mirror, our arms
scribbling on fast forward with blow
dryers, combs, and cans, holding up
hangers and chapstick, twisting
to zip. You're mouthing *we're
late!* on the phone
with the cab as you slur our address
and I shrug, make like I'm slitting
my throat, run over to
squeeze you. You watch the clock
on your wrist by the door
as I click around with a blank
look, searching for better heels, tearing
through closets, tilting
to stab earrings into closed
holes. Christmas is
coming, I want more
than you know.

THE DREAM

If I squint I can see
you at the end
of the aisle, with your skinny
tie and your chewing
gum and your tilted
fedora. It's taken me
twenty hours
to get ready. Heel
by heel, lash
by lash I come
to you. The crowd
gasps. I bow my head
so we can whisper. Negotiate.

For dinner, Rice Crispies
and every guest must take the GREs
on a damp napkin. I forgot
the DJ we hired was from New
Jersey and the cake we bought
was a burlesque show
as the photographer
snaps you winking. A slow
song comes on and our grandparents
lean into each other
then die on the dance floor. The wind
from the helicopter blows
my dress up over my head. We make
my heels like ice picks and chip
and climb, noticing how things are
from far and farther away.

WHAT COUNTS

1. Let's get Everything

You like these? you ask
tossing chips in the cart.
Then we stride down the aisle
kissing, but with your ten million
arms whirling in more, like a fan
in motion so I barely notice.

2. Taxes

They take out a little each month
but because your job
is real, a little is a lot. *But isn't it
relative?* I say *If everyone has to pay?* I can tell
you're still thinking about it like a pie
chart and what's missing
which reminds you to surprise me
with some kind of next-level dessert soon.

3. You Look Good

With your fresh cut and your aviators
and your Burt's Bees lips. No argument
here. I'm waiting for you
to come out of the dressing room
in your tangerine pants. You look
so happy. Like there's a monkey
on your shoulder. I can see you
in your swivel chair. *How do you pronounce
BVLGARI?* I ask, fingering
the glass over the glasses. *You don't.*

4. I Don't Get It

It's like we're a special effect.
I don't know why
you took us here. I'm checking
my savings under the table
and it's not saving anybody.
You say, *we're on vacation*. I say *No*
we're not. I'm confusing
the waiter, *I'm great with water!*
Which is horrifying you, *just get*
the drink. I don't get it
but I do. On our walk home
I pick up lucky pennies
to embarrass you. Another one!
One more. Every
second counts.



Image by Mariola Streim

P A U L F R E N C H

THE LOTUS EATERS

The endocrines are absorbed by the altered receptors of the brain.
Therefore the rodents start to cuddle.

It is deeper than the sea, even if it's a rodent's brain.
Though all mystery can be measured.

There's nothing in the body a surgeon's knife can't find.

The subjects I've observed don't even notice the needle anymore.
We've put them in so much love.

Don't worry. I'm just like you.
I too want that experience to be godly.

And maybe, like you, I've felt it already. And maybe, like you, I haven't.
Want remains either way a problem.

And what about those who've lost or never held it?
Can anything be too sacred for medicine?

Take a look at this century's Want.
He's right here, wearing his lab coat.

So the dosage is increased, the receptors enhanced. Suddenly, you're
finding forever-bliss in a friend, a wife, a stranger, a dream.

It's not like Soma, either. What we use is completely natural, endogenous
peptides in the brain, the source of it all.

Worst case scenario: one day, we'll wake unmedicated in our tightly
shared bed and realize that there's irony in paradise.

So be it.

STAGE I TESTING

He imagines how she looks in her too-far house, also a cage, bars only a bit thicker than her bones, but stronger.

He hates the form that sometimes comes to stick its white arm into her home and steal her. The arm will play with her body. She squirms and he hates it. The form cooes, There, there, MINNIE. There, there, and he glimpses her for a second and hears her name.

One day, he himself is rising. He sees her from above, noticing his body held like an egg by the form – the same way it took her, and the thin spear slips into his gut a sensation. He'll warm in the hand of the form who says his name.

I watch the pattern continue for three days. Soon the receptors are reopened and enhanced.

With an increased addition of the hormone complex, the voles develop an exaggerated form of their naturally intimate bonding.

I watch the interactions intensify. Even their fur is softer, I think.

These two are healthier than the control group, more active. Their bone density's higher, and, notably, when wounded, they recover at an accelerated rate. Just as I thought, nothing suggests any negative side-effects.

They are gentle animals, but sometimes I find myself holding my fingers next to their mouths, hoping they'll bite.

LOVE DRUG IN THE FEED

Alex and Tom roll the beat teal F-250 up to the main gate by the medical barn. The light comes off in a skim from the horizon, like a grin from a half-gotten joke. It washes against the bodies of the cattle as Alex brings a cigarette up to his lips and looks to his brother.

So, it's here, huh? Valentine's Day.

Tom scoffs.

Yeah, regular love-fest out there.

They can hear the cows lowing. Tom listens to see if it's any different.

Sparks in the air, Alex continues dryly, but Tom does feel that it's something like that – a hum, maybe, the air is humming. The cows move in huddles like bees.

I can't help but think we're in the way somehow, Tom says. For hours, they sit on the hood of the truck and listen together.

That night, when they return home, their wives ask about the awful stink they're wearing, deep-set in their shirts and pants.

Smells like money to me, they both say, right before leaning in to plant one on their wives' cheeks, miles away from each other.

THE LOVE DRUG ENTERS THE MEAT SUPPLY

What? she said.

Nothing, you're just pretty.

What's gotten into you?

She sensed he wanted to leave. His arms were stiff, bolts in his shoulders, his mouth stiff also like a gusted flag. He took her hand and kissed it, right there in the yellow and brown booth, like they were in high school –

his face shiny by the lips with grease from the three burgers he'd just wolfed down, as her fingers squirmed next to the wet crease of his smiling mouth. *I am going to devour you*, she thought he could have

said, as his grip tightened, pinching her long middle finger and holding it above the centre of the table, above the bunched rolls of waxy yellow paper and thumbby swipes of red ketchup.

She hadn't said anything about him eating too much. He'd seemed so sure about it. *I'll have a Number 1, a 2, and a 3*, he said like he was cueing a band, in a way both dramatic and expected.

I am going to devour you, he said,

kissing up her fingers and hand as far as he could while the other customers watched from a litter of surrounding tables.

He seemed not to care about them. He kept forcing his mouth up her knuckles, waiting for her to say something back or do nothing at all.

The air buzzed with noise: warm saxophones, the cash register, the fryer alarms, and the faint bubbling of wire baskets inside them.

I know I've been distant. And I'm really sorry about that. From now on things will be different,

he told her through the kissed fingers he'd fanned over his mouth like a mask. *PAUL,*

you're acting really weird. She was about to leave. She felt assaulted, even though the look on his face was so dumbly open, like a cartoon cow. Suddenly

there was an odd noise behind her, a half-stertor, a cardboard chuckle.

She turned to see a large man choking. His hand swept in a panic his table's paper, cups, and crumbs, clacking the floor like the guts of a dropped purse.

In an attempt to unclog the pipe, he rapped his chest like a gorilla, his enormous coat swallowing his hand with each fist-pound against the wool. His body convulsed; his spine bent back and forth. *Oh God!*

she cried, but no one shuddered, all just gazing dumb and drunkenly from their tables. And PAUL still had her hand on his mouth.

She yanked it away, scratching him. She darted to the man and braced herself against his back, her arms barely reaching around his body. He looked desperately to her and breathed a sound like paper curling in fire.

A few people in the restaurant were finally speaking around her, trying to will something to happen. She thought she heard, *You can do it*, and a kind of soft cheer.

She squeezed at the man's middle, hard as she could, the backs of her thumbs digging deep into the fabric of his coat. She squeezed again, violently, until a knuckle of brown popped out, a piece of meat that dropped dead centre on the table.

He collapsed with a heave, chest shelved on the table's metal edge – breathing with relief. *Goddamn it!*

She yelled at the customers around her. No one had gotten up. She was surrounded in the a room by warm murmurs, a soft *Thank You* falling like downy paper thrown into a box.

Thank You,

the saved man said, as his baggy short body lifted from the table to hug her, his forehead flush at her neckline. She cringed at his chin, moist on her chest, and felt his heavy breath let out against her skin, pressing, like wind against a pane. She pulled away and there were his eyes.

Thank You!

Thank You!

I thought I was gone!

He was crying, and his look was gifted with a simple care that she began to accept despite everyone else. She found herself smiling, and the restaurant erupted in applause, employees approaching from the counter to commend her as she patted the man's back and returned to her table.

What an angel you are!

PAUL said, like a child, as she joined him. Was she feeling proud? She could feel her heart pumping in her chest as if a new one had been planted there. But before she could respond, the manager had come to offer a passcard for free meals.

It's the least we can do, please, Ma'am.

No. Thank you. I'm okay.

She caught herself laughing this, her chest swollen, heart jumping out of casement. The manager left and asked everyone there to give her another round of applause, and they did. She laughed again, covering her open mouth with her palm. PAUL took her other hand and held it.

Take me to a movie,

she said, and his eyes lit up. They left their table a mess, which nobody minded cleaning up. Nothing could stop the people in the restaurant from feeling perfect after that. The manager was even able to give her the card, just as she opened the door.

LOVE DRUG IN PILL FORM

It's expensive.

An old man claws out fistfuls of cash from the calf leather of his wife's purse for another bottle.

The clerk approaches, says they're out of stock, and you should hear us scream. We turn toward the old man before he makes it through the mob.

Soon there's a pearlish skitter on the shoe-scuffed linoleum. The youngest are fastest to their knees, as the height of the mob shrinks, becoming insectile and fiercer. I am half-conscious of how voiceless we've become as my fingers sweep the dust in search of two.

I remember the first commercials. A woman gowned in red. A man in a tux. Both of them standing in the middle of an elegant staircase. It looked like the Titanic, like James Cameron's *Titanic*.

They meet, feverish, marble-eyed, faces lit up in a jazz-warm glow. It's not a confident love. Not a fashionable love. Trembling, apoplectic, both of them with desperate mouths.

The tension felt so real to me. It was impossible to stop watching. Like a fire struggling to stay alive. It's not in the TV anymore. I remember it. I see them embracing and feel the bath of relief all over again.

The couple liquefies just as they kiss. They burst into a pink mist as the picture dissolves. We're transported to an average-looking office building as the pink wafts into a stairwell, where our two actors meet again, both, this time, wearing black suits.

But then we zoom out – the mist pushing at the limits of the frame. We see that everyone on the stairs has been paired, couples of every type bonding together on the stairs – their dropped papers and pens washing down the steps as the shot follows.

Finally, there's only a broken pen and a piece of paper in the shot. The ink spills out from the pen and its pools form the company logo: a simple, unembellished heart. We zoom into the heart's pool until a white script enters the centre:

No professional actors were used.

This was a documentary.

It's the only commercial I've ever dreamt about. I realize though that everyone has stood back up and left the store. The clerk is standing over me, looking concerned.

I scan the floor around me. There's nothing but a few streaks of blood. The clerk sighs with pity and places a hand on my shoulder, but then I stand up and open my hand. I open it palm-up so he can see.

We share a laugh.



Image by Anita Berghoef

C O N T R I B U T O R S

Sean Markey is originally from Charleston, SC. He is currently pursuing a Bachelors of Art in Elementary Education at Westminster College in Salt Lake City. His fiction has appeared in *Fantasy Magazine* and *Sybil's Garage*. For more about him and his work, see his website. Contact him on Twitter @seanmarkey.

Laura McKee lives in Kent and began writing poetry by mistake, a few years ago. Her poems have appeared in print journals, as well as online, including *Aireings*, *Other Poetry*, *Obsessed With Pipework*, *Prole*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *The Lake*, *The Journal*, *Morphrog*, and *Lunar Poetry*. Contact her on Twitter @Estlinin.

Sam Kolinski began writing in Glasgow. His poems have surfaced in numerous publications, most recently *The Glad Rag*, *Dactyl* and the *Glasgow Review Of Books*. Poems are forthcoming in *Southlight*. Sam was recently shortlisted for the Jane Martin Poetry Prize 2014 and is currently preparing his debut pamphlet.

Paul Clyne lives and works in Fife, Scotland. He graduated from the University of Stirling with a BA in English Studies. His poetry has appeared previously in *Magma*, *Snakeskin*, *The Open Mouse*, *Nutshells & Nuggets*, and *Ink, Sweat & Tears*.

Ruth Brandt was raised in Bristol, England, and now lives in Surrey with her two sons. She is studying the MFA in Creative Writing at Kingston University. Her short stories have appeared in anthologies including *Take Tea With Turing*, *Bristol Short Story Prize Four*, *Leaf Books*, *Ripple 2013 & 2014*; have been performed by *Liars' League*; and published in magazines including *Litro*, *Gold Dust*, *Candis*, *Yours*, and *Ireland's Own*. She is currently working on a novel.

Flavian Mark Lupinetti, a writer and cardiothoracic surgeon, obtained his MFA in Writing from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. His stories and poems have appeared in *Barrelhouse*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *The Examined Life*, *Cutthroat*, *Kestrel*, *Red Rock Review*, *Words And Images*, and *ZYZZYVA*. He lives on the northeast coast of the United States with his dogs, the Four Weimaraners Of The Apocalypse.

Mack Gelber works as a writer and editor. His fiction has appeared in *Joyland Magazine* and the *Bushwick Review*, with work forthcoming in *Juked*. Find him on Twitter **@mackgelber**.

Jenny Blackford is an Australian writer and poet. Her stories and poems have appeared in places as diverse as *Cosmos*, *Strange Horizons* and *Australian Poetry Journal*. Her first poetry collection, *The Duties Of A Cat*, was published by Pitt Street Poetry in late 2013.

Kate Wisel lives in Boston. Her fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Drum*, *Mad Hatters' Review*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Compose Journal*, and her poetry in *The Altar* and *The Blotter*. She has attended writing workshops in New Hampshire and Guatemala and was awarded a scholarship to The Wesleyan Writers Conference.

Paul French was formerly the Managing Editor of *Puerto Del Sol*. His work has been featured in *Word Riot*, *Slipstream*, and *Harpur Palate*, among others. He was the recent winner of a Kevin McIlvoy and a Peter Harris-Kunz Fellowship. He has just finished the manuscript of *Love Machines* and is currently seeking a publisher.

Sarah Katharina Kayß studied Modern History in Germany and Britain. Her artwork, essays and poetry have appeared in literary magazines, journals and anthologies in Germany, Switzerland, Austria, the UK, Italy, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. Sarah is a recipient of the Austrian-VKSÖ Prize and winner of the manuscript-award of the German Writers Association for her poetry and essay collection *Ich Mag Die Welt So, Wie Sie Ist* which was published in Germany in 2014. She edits the bilingual literature magazine *The Transnational* (**www.the-transnational.com**) and works on her doctorate at King's College London. **www.sarahkatharinakayss.com**.

S U P P O R T E R S

This issue of *Neon* would not have been possible without the generous support of:

Udita Banerjee (about.me/uditabanerjee)
Øyvind Eide
MAKAR
Mark Hla
Ross McCleary
Tracy Fells
Sandeep Jonah Newton
Billie Pritchett
Petr Titze
Julia LaSalle
Emilie Collyer (www.betweenthecracks.net)
John Friel
Jonathan Huston
Al Kratz (pitheadchapel.com)
Mark Gillespie
Blasted Books (www.blastedbooks.com)
Alexander Romano
Charlie Hill
Sean Watkin
Gavin Cruickshank
Alexander Briggs (alexanderbriggs.tumblr.com)
Natasha Sudiaman
Anna Young
Eleanor Mears
Alina Rios
Nick Lord Lancaster
BC Bergan
Jones Jones (jonesjones.moonfruit.com)
Mark Plummer
Janet Olearski (www.janetolearski.com)
Katy Lennon
Matthew Macdonald
Jennifer Singleton

To find out more about how you can support *Neon*, please visit the website