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## ***The Tender Core*—Letter from the Editor**

Laura Hershey, whose beautiful poem "Relationship" appears in this issue, passed away between submitting her work to me and my acceptance email. I cried when I discovered this, and when I read a little bit more about what an exceptional person she was, and when I re-read the poem, so resonant on this topic: "The body holds the soul like a lost love..."

Laura, I came to learn, was not only a beautiful poet. She was also an advocate for people living with disabilities, for LGBTQ people, for people whose voices too often get lost or drowned out in this cacophonous world. She was an artist, and an activist; she did what all of us in the literary community struggle to do, every day—to put words down that come together in a way that matters—and she did more. I am humbled to be in the position of publishing one of her poems.

So I said, at the beginning, that I cried. As a writer myself, I was sorry that she didn't get to know how much I liked the poem. And I was sorry to learn what we—all of us in this world—had lost. Most of all, though, I cried because that is what beautiful writing often does for me: it seeps into the cracks of my everyday tax-paying-kitchen-cleaning-go-to-work self and finds the tender core inside; it reminds me what is really important; it connects me to other people and the universe in ways nothing else does.

At Sweet, we're not all about the tears. We love to laugh, to play with words, to be buoyed by joy, to learn and to understand. But if something you read in this issue makes you feel like crying, I urge you to let the tears come. That words can do this, can open us up, is a blessing. "The body inspires the soul/to live, to live, itchy feathers and all."

—Katherine Riegel

*Laura Hershey*

**RELATIONSHIP**

The body invented the soul  
to interrogate the chemistry of dreams.

The body is seduced by the soul  
bearing tasty psalms and communion wine.

The body embellishes the soul  
with durability, wings, and wisdom.

The body holds the soul like a lost love,  
memories of magnolia shade and subservience.

The body introduces the soul to other bodies  
who go along with the game.

The body flourishes the soul above compost heap,  
etched marble and hothouse bouquets.

The body is oppressed by the soul,  
its ideas and ooziings banished to small chrome rooms and secret magazines.

The body inspires the soul  
to live, to live, itchy feathers and all.

LAURA HERSHEY (1962-2010) was a poet, writer, and activist. She has written poetry for make/shift, Trillium Literary Journal, [wordgathering.com](http://wordgathering.com), and in several anthologies. Her poetry chapbook, Spark Before Dark will be published by Finishing Line Press June 2011.

More information is available at [www.laurahershey.com](http://www.laurahershey.com).

## *Joy Ladin*

### **EVERYTHING AND NOTHING**

So hard to be everything right now  
and so hard not to be, so hard to be  
a circle of skin and time

when outside you there are boots  
and stars and oranges  
and shimmering, twisted trees and inside you

there is nothing, a void  
you have taken and mistaken  
for a soul, holding on

in the blazing manyness of morning  
to the nothing  
that is the one thing

you can't lose, the heart,  
in fact, of everything  
whose voice, seductive and terrifying,

invites you to surrender  
the total loss  
that beats inside you like a heart, the heart

that empties and fills with the blood  
of everything that flows  
through your body, through the morning, through the trees.

JOY LADIN has just published her fifth book of poetry, *Coming to Life* (Sheep Meadow Press), which has been named one of the five most important Jewish poetry books of 2010 by *The Forward*. Her other books include *Psalms*, *Transmigration* (a finalist for a 2009 Lambda Literary Award), *The Book of Anna and Alternatives to History*, and a forthcoming memoir. Her poems have appeared in numerous publications, including *American Poetry Review*, *North American Review*, *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* and *Segue*. She holds the Gottesman Chair in English at Stern College of Yeshiva University.

## *Shane Seely*

### **LAISSE FOR LATE FEBRUARY**

Orion throws a leg across the roof  
and it is deeply night: the stars are rueful;  
their light is thin and wavering. Just two  
porch lights light the street. The waning moon  
seems, cresting the park's bald trees, a worn-out tooth.  
Inside, even though the breath-fogged window's cool,  
I'm warm. You're warm, too, blanket-wrapped, cocooned  
against whatever weather might intrude.  
No need to go out there. It's lunacy,  
even the dog knows it: he's smartly snoozing  
fireside. Instead I'll read you poems: Rumi's  
love songs, maybe a sonnet from Neruda.  
Better, let's pretend that we're raccoons  
snuggled in an oak-gall against the brutal  
season. Come quickly, dear, for all too soon  
crocuses will erupt in ballyhoos,  
and, south of here, the heart of every goose  
will beat out north, and dormant maple roots  
will flush with sap, and skinny squirrels will loot  
their stores, and suns will climb to higher noons.

**LAISSE WITH LINEN, BIRDS, AND FLOWERS**

Each spring, we hear the doves that lilt  
their tilting little song outside the windows  
we've opened to the softening air, and finches,  
too, warbling in the pine, and tufted titmice  
scolding jays that sack the feeders. Still  
the jays arrive, blue-jacketed, and insist  
upon their share of seed. The hyacinths  
we planted in the fall are pressing nibs  
of pale green ink to garden beds and spilling  
color everywhere. The doves have gathered twigs  
and laid a nest. Hear them singing? It  
was four springs ago we married, love. Kiss  
me here, the air softening our wintered lips.  
The doves are settling in to incubate  
a clutch of eggs. Come, join me in this ribbon  
of sunlight tossed across the bed. In linen  
sheets we'll nest and wait for daffodils.



**LAISSE FOR AN INSECT ON AN OPEN BOOK OF POEMS**

Little glyph, small enough to crawl inside  
the O you've landed near—oh, what am I  
to you? I must be landscape, weather, sky:  
mere circumstance. I'd like to think my size  
makes me invisible to you.

Just now,  
I nearly smudged you with my thumb, made powder  
of your lacy wings and thread-legs, ground  
you into the grain of the paper.

About  
my reasons, I'll say nothing, whether by  
accident or grace you haven't died.  
I am no more deft than I am kind.

Still, on the page, beneath this noonish light,  
you just might be a consonant or vowel  
blown from an ancient alphabet and out  
a dusty window, a runic mark without  
translation in a tongue I can't pronounce.

**SPIDER LAISSE**

Unknotting knots of blankets tied in sleep  
the night before, I find a tiny creature:  
a spider shaken from its dark now seeks  
another dark, now spiders across the sheet  
toward whatever safe spot might relieve  
it of its sudden pain of light and fear.

In the bathroom, where you're brushing your teeth,  
you don't hear my startled gasp at seeing  
it. I lay my hand, palm up, between  
the spider and your pillow's shadowed pleats.

It raises filamentous legs to feel  
along my edge. No recluse, wolf, or weaver,  
this spider is a stranger, strange to me  
as my hand is to him: its warmth, its creases,  
its sudden pose of slack passivity.

The spider skirts my hand and disappears  
over the bed's far edge, leaving only  
a strand of thread marking his retreat.  
Could I blame him? What platform could appear  
that I would not suspect was mere deceit?  
In what great reaching hand would I believe?

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SHANE SEELY's first book of poems, *The Snowbound House*, won the 2008 Philip Levine Prize for Poetry and was published by Anhinga Press in November 2009. He is a Senior Lecturer in the English Department at Washington University in St. Louis, where he teaches composition and creative writing and acts as Assistant Director of the university's expository writing program.

## *Kate Sweeney*

### **THE GRIEF ORCHARD**

Just this side of awake, she watches the bats  
return from the sated dawn, bobbing  
over the arbors to the hole in the cabin  
just above her bedroom window.

She swears she can hear them drag themselves  
by their calcium hooks as they build  
a breeding colony in the crawlspace  
above her bed. He was supposed to seal it up  
before this year's pups were born and the ladder broke  
and fall-gray set like cement.

Perhaps she'll mention something next time  
she sees him, that occasional Sunday  
at the spiritualist church in Lily Dale,  
but today they navigate the pews and aisles of avoidance  
like children chasing each other through a corn maze.

She lingers after the service  
and asks a medium for a reading,  
but the old woman only offers her descriptions  
of the living, only sees something amber,  
an old broach or cat-eyed marble—

*do these mean anything to you?*

Driving home through the countryside,  
barns float on flames of yellow wheat, the crowns  
of their weathervane roosters snag the sky.

Red fists of apples beat the earth.

She has an inkling that these are the last days  
of Gomorrah and all she will be able to do,  
come some midnight, is stand in her nightgown  
as brimstone falls  
and watch the orchard burn.

*sweet*

3.3

### **ADVICE FOR A YOUNG SON IN APRIL**

When you pull the cover from the tractor,  
see the black engine like Medusa's rotten head  
birthing snakes into spring.

Be still as they slice by your ankles and slip  
into the hay-crests like iridescent ripples of oil.  
Believe those seconds to be the longest of your life,

until you clean the septic tank.

Find your oldest handkerchief to cover your mouth,  
the blue one you don't mind parting with—  
you'll never want to see it again.

Lift carefully the first bucket  
which the weight of suction will hold firm  
to the earth's heart-robbed chest.

Familiarize yourself with the act of reeling back to the surface  
all you were certain you parted with forever.

When you've left for town with your father  
and the first calf comes too early,  
let it live for an hour in a world without men,

with only its mother  
and your mother,  
who will drag a card table out to the pasture  
to shield it from a late season sleet,  
and wait, with white hands knotted in her pockets,  
for your return.

Enjoy this month, for you no longer need burn barrels  
to melt the frozen ground before taking your weight to the spade  
by the heel of your boot.

Claim the seat downwind from your father's cigar,  
and when he goes to bed, hang your clothes  
near the open window, until all that lingers at daylight  
is the scent of so much left to wait for.

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KATE SWEENEY'S work has appeared in *Best New Poets 2009*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *Meridian*, *Rattle*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and *Tampa Review*, among others. Her chapbook, *Better Accidents*, was winner of the 2009 YellowJacket Press Chapbook Contest. Her favorite sweet is her mom's chocolate chip cookies.

## *Margot Schilpp*

### **ADVICE IN THE FORM OF CONFUSION**

I have been watching the young  
struggle through their daily lives  
and waste the flesh we all remember  
and I have seen the garden they shine  
their leaves in, the kind invented  
by distraction and devices that run  
on little lithium ion batteries, flat  
disks that power music and voice  
into strong tremble and staccato chain  
that barrels into the angelic orders  
we raise our heads to see, or hope  
to see, but never do, for they have  
sprung into louder volumes and faster  
rhythms that disorient and confuse.

There are sounds we can no longer  
hear, at our age, and don't we want  
anymore to know what we left  
behind on that sill or under  
that abbreviated sun. I can't know  
wry substitutions. I can't hear breath  
embrace five-minutes-ago or tomorrow  
and there must be a word for that,  
but I don't know it. I know the sound  
of thinking a hard whistle into the lung.  
I know the shape of houndstooth  
and the hang of each tag's pricing  
itself out of so many's reach.  
Swoon the recoil the umber entering free.

Whinge tresses blowing  
in an arbor without glow or flame.  
These are reprieves. Respites  
in the demands of sensation  
and flow. Know this: you can  
you can you can you can you can.

*sweet*

3.3

### **POEM TO THE SOUND OF AN OPENING DOOR**

You can't keep culture all to yourself. You  
have to share, because where would we be

without wool or commas or pepper? Some cutters  
came by the walls and made windows. Look

into the strange ell of the future. See  
moth wings and dragnets, the tears called down.

In Paisley, the shawls wriggle out of looms;  
little tadpoles dip down the edges of hem

and fringe, draw maps back to Kashmir, Pakistan,  
the mango seeds swelling in the golden sun.

What if you want to give everything back?  
What if the trains' long whistles blow unending

sadnesses into the night? There is no remedy  
for this yielding, no way to gather up



the peal of bells ringing across the squares.  
So you must draw a conclusion: use everything

you find. Panache, gumbo, chopsticks, fins.  
Wrap yourself around what's woven through.

Grab the handle and turn. Ignore the squeak  
because it's night. It's day. You're here. It's now.

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MARGOT SCHILPP's third book of poems, *Civil Twilight*, will be published by Carnegie Mellon University Press in early 2012. Recent poems have appeared in *Copper Nickel*, *Tar River Poetry*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Anti-*, *DIAGRAM*, and *Cincinnati Review*. She teaches in Connecticut, and she never, never passes up a forkful of pecan pie.

## *Liz Robbins*

### **OLD JOKE**

There's the joke about the tension that arises  
when a man and woman unexpectedly find themselves  
alone in a room with a bed. Strangers and friends,

one is pale and kind, belly thick from responding  
to emails all day. It's night, and the other's smile's a bit  
effusive, body, too wound, feet bound by brown shoes.

He or she is perhaps married to someone they know.

But the primal impulse is a banging  
of the funny bone--jerked arm that nearly tips  
the glass of water on the bedside table. So close, they can

hear the automatic clock work, so close they are  
to laughter, almost dispelling the immediate thought,  
the odd-duck pair, upfront duty and way in

the back want. Smiling, she says something about her need  
to get back, he laughs, they're moving now to  
the door, one and the other on the periphery, how it will go

dark quickly, with a click.

**WALK OF SHAME**

A bit of a misnomer, as if the shame  
were hers. As if it were not I  
but her mother, father, brother, her more  
chaste friends peeping out the window.  
Their shame coarsens her  
veins, blooms her face. Curly hair, thick  
thighs, too-short blue dress, stepping from  
the black Corvette with dark windows  
and ragtop in morning. An older man,  
and her head is down, small smile played  
about her lips, feet bare. Hips swing as she  
rounds the big house to the garage  
apartment, feet black from the path. There  
she'll dirty the cool sheets she slips  
between without clothes, without a bath,  
to replay the night, her pressed and fired  
body. Smile, the edge  
of a full cup.

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LIZ ROBBINS' new collection, *Play Button*, won the 2010 Cider Press Review Book Award, judged by Patricia Smith. Her poems have appeared in *Barrow Street*, *Cimarron Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *Margie*, *New Ohio Review*, and *Rattle*; she has poems forthcoming in *Barn Owl Review* and *Poet Lore*. Poems from her first book, *Hope, As the World Is a Scorpion Fish* (Backwaters P), have been featured on Garrison Keillor's *The Writer's Almanac* and *Verse Daily*. She's an assistant professor of English at Flagler College in St. Augustine, FL, and will present her poems this April at a New York Institute of Technology conference in Nanjing, China. She can be reached at [lizrobbins@comcast.net](mailto:lizrobbins@comcast.net). <http://lizrobbinspoetry.blogspot.com>

## ***Tamiko Beyer***

### **TALKING INTO EACH OTHER'S MOUTHS**

You say, *If the Cumbre Vieja volcano erupts,*  
*half the island of La Palma will plunge into the sea and then...*

Rise up, Atlantic! Find us wanting at the harbor's mouth,  
Coney Island lingers a mermaid's lemonade  
before the irrevocable tear, the bridges tossed sticks,  
Prospect just a phrase on the tip, and O!  
Whitman and his houses tumble into the pull,  
names gone dumb –

*...but some people doubt the mega-tsunami theory,*  
you say, glancing up from your screen.

Out the window, the trees' bare branches  
undulate like seaweed. *See the current, I say,*  
*our street signs fall, the houses lose their bricks.*

You spread your arms. Draw up the sail, sweetheart.  
Our room's a tight box ship. We billowy milk and wet paper  
take the hit and spindrift. We wave and wave and wave.

TAMIKO BEYER is a poet, freelance writer, and educator based in New York City. She is the author the chapbook *bough breaks* (Meritage Press), and her poems have appeared in or are forthcoming from *DIAGRAM*, *H\_ngm\_n*, *Anti-*, and elsewhere. She is the poetry editor of *Drunken Boat*, leads creative writing workshop for at-risk youth and other community groups, is a mentor with Girls Write Now, and a founding member of Agent 409: a queer writing collective in New York City. Tamiko is a former Kundiman Fellow and received her M.F.A. from Washington University in St. Louis. Her favorite sweet is any cupcake found at sugar Sweet sunshine bakery. You can find Tamiko Beyer online at [wonderinghome.com](http://wonderinghome.com).

## *Michael Hettich*

### **THE MEASURED BREATHING**

And so I understand, at least for a moment,  
how something and nothing can sometimes be reversed,  
as I understand nothing: The black in a crow's wing  
works like my own deepest sleep when I wake  
beyond mere self, that black like the waves  
lifting their shoulders in a sudden swell of memory  
or just a sudden swell. If everything we needed  
were real, those delicate yellow-bellied birds  
might fly through this thicket without brushing anything  
and I might come home to a house full of absence  
and meet all the people I've loved, sitting there  
in the bodies they had then, but stuffed now with straw,  
propped up and grinning. As my body too  
is stuffed with dry grass, which pokes through my clothes.  
I was hungry and you fed me—just enough to survive  
until I was only what I am now, disappeared  
into the music behind all this sound,  
as the trees are connected to the trees of their past  
through roots and branches and leaves—without thinking  
anything we'd ever recognize as thinking,  
anything we'd recognize: a place beyond this air.

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MICHAEL HETTICH'S *Like Happiness* was published this past October by Anhinga Press. A new book, *The Animals Beyond Us*, is forthcoming from New Rivers Press. Recent publications include *Orion*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Alaska Review*, *Mudlark* & *The Southern Poetry Review*. [Click here](#) to visit his website.



## Forever Tutu

*Elizabeth Kerlikowske*

Saying "tutu" is the best part of tutus which are made from Brillo pads, the flesh of little girls, and wishes. They stand alone in corners waiting to smother some hips or hang upside down like bats that only come alive in footlights. I thought they had to be earned but come to find out, they can be bought. Pink as fingernails, as Candy Johnson's baby mice, they can support a French fry dropped before the recital. You can lose a bracelet in their froth. And a tutu, even on a whale like Maryanne Thrall, frosted her with grace like a figurine on a wedding cake. Some sequins teeter too close to the tutu's curves; disaster for the whole sequence if just one thread coughs. Tutus turn a pencil box of girls into a fleet of gyroscopes careening across a pock-marked stage.

## The Max Factor

I trudged downstairs at 6 p.m. My costume, covered with dry-cleaning plastic on a hanger, I let drag behind me. My face was plain. My hair was straight. I was clearly a conscript. The real dancing girls chattered and skittered like chipmunks hot on the trail of a bird feeder, their ringlets all slinkied on their heads. Each dressing room had a list of names of those who needed a costume change. They were the size of outhouses. In the center of the basement was the make-up bay lined with huge mirrors, and the stage mothers perched there with tubes and sticks and puffs and sprays and ashtrays. They drank from matching coffee cups with lipstick prints, lipstick prints on the filters of their cigarettes as they waited for their victims. I brought a book and tried to make myself scarce. I was fat and my costume was sky blue; therefore, I was easy to overlook. Maybe I was a cloud in the WPA mural in the lobby. Maybe I was peeling paint in the tunnel that led to the backstage. But as the younger dancers disappeared for their debuts, my plain face became obvious as the moon, and one of the mothers took me under her capacious wing. My hair would not do anything nor did I expect it too. It was glued into a bun. She caulked my pores with foundation, drew on eyebrows, and then the shame of peacock blue eye shadow. My eyes were aqua silver dollars; the stubborn rouge skidded across my cheeks. Tangee lipstick, generously shared with my teeth, completed the mask. She forced me to look in the mirror and admire myself. I hid my book under an old sofa cushion; I didn't want it to see me.

# Tequila

Those like me were dumped in modern jazz where it was okay to have angles and elbows. The splits were involved, but not in a rigid way; they were sinuous and led to other floor moves. One year we performed Tequila, a popular radio song. I had no idea Tequila was alcohol nor why I was so happy to throw my hands up in the air and shout "Tequila." Our costumes, tight blue capris and a half blouse tied above my midriff, were fluorescent because if there was any doubt about the dancers' abilities, black light would be employed. Miss Alyce told us: "You've got a minute to show you can dance or else." The first time we yelled "Tequila," the hall went dark. On our last tequila, we turned our backs to the audience and reached skyward as if imploring a drum line of future bartenders for just one more. Our shirts successfully spelled TEUIQLA.

## Dress Rehearsal

A kind of glamour heated up under the lights along with the temper of Miss Alyce. The pit band passed a paper bag around, and the emcee smoked, and the smoke was wounded magic in the follow spots. He blew rings and waited in the wings as Miss Alyce's heels cracked across the stage, and she bellowed instructions to the lighting guys. We were the first act and already she was swearing. "Put the Goddamn gel in and keep it steady. Jesus Christ." She'd turn to us, "I'm sorry, kids." She put her cigarette out in her hand. We squatted in our started position. I could see her skull through her dyed red hair when she stood just right. I heard the first notes of our song, "If I was a frog, I'd hop to town," but Miss Alyce stomped her foot and marched to the center of the stage. "Could you tune the Goddamn horn since the piano is too much to ask for?" We remained squatting. I was in the center as I would be my entire dancing career due to my great height. Overhead, a light exploded. "Jesus Christ!" And then a trickle of water ran downstage from the left. And then one from the right. A ripple of whimpering and giggling. And Miss Alyce said, "What is this now? Pee? Oh, Jesus Christ."

## The Price

From the plush worn seats in the house of St. Cecelia, you couldn't see the acne scabs on Susie Trice's face or the grippers of her tiara dig into her scalp, just the blue pancake tutu aswish in the spotlight of her solo. You couldn't see her mousey mother at the keyboard in the practice room playing the same tunes for years to pay for lessons. When Maryanne Thrall contorted herself in harem pants and walked up blocks on her hands, you couldn't see her mother, all jowls and bald spots, hunched under a lamp with spread sheets, calling other parents about their overdue bills. Barbara Kowalski tapped in scarlet toe shoes, and from far away you couldn't tell she was illiterate and dated the teacher's son and also taught the younger girls time steps and how to chew gum seductively. When stuck-up Rosanne Wawee slithered across the stage performing what Grand Rapids thought was modern jazz, splits and fish flops, you didn't know her mother had her own key to the studio where she went each night to mop the floor.

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ELIZABETH KERLIKOWSKE, PHD, is the winner of the dunes Review Shaw Prize, 2010, and also of the (Kalamazoo) Community Literary Award for Poetry. Her work appears currently in *SLAB*, *The Ambassador Project*, *The Comstock Review*, *New Verse News*, *The Mochila Review*, and others. Her latest book is *Rib* from Pudding House

## Chimney Swift

*Amy Monticello*

The birds came six months after I quit drinking, one by one, tentative as children emerging from their rooms after their parents have had a fight. First, the bluebird that took the hollow gourd Jason hung in the pear tree. It wove a dense circle of hay from the cow fields, laid two sets of eggs between April and June. Then the nervous sparrow that carried moss from the swampy woods to the lantern above our front stoop, and shat on the concrete walk all spring. We opened the door to let the dog out, and the bird swooped from the light where—it took us a while to notice—she was nesting four babies, and when we tried to peer inside the nest we stepped bare feet into the whorled white of new life.

Summer began the same way we stopped counting days. The way we stopped creeping through the house, not touching, as we glided between rooms in our separate spheres of healing. We found a comfortable meal routine, inched again into each other at night in front of the television. The wisteria bloomed crazily for two weeks. Then the honeysuckle's painkilling perfume. Then the magnolias, lolling cumbersome heads in nests of waxy leaves. But still, there were the nights I dreamt of drunkenness, the bottle slick in my hand, the burn in my throat. I woke with my nightgown clinging to cold, sticky skin, head pounding from a locked jaw. The panic fluttered like a canary in my chest, as I slid a hand to Jason's side of the bed, feeling for his warmth with my eyes closed. If he was there, I could open them.

In July, wings beat inside the house. An echo in the living room like a book left out on the porch, pages flipping in a storm headed south from Birmingham. The dog and cat took vigil at the fireplace. Jason got the flashlight, opened the back door in case whatever was inside flew out into the room. We were almost us again, almost certain we knew what would and wouldn't come into our home. Jason lay on the floor and pointed the beam into the chimney. He refuses secrets in the walls of his house. We heard something scramble up the brick, fleeing discovery, just as I covered my head with my hands, pushed my face into a pillow. I expected a bat, like I always do.

AMY MONTICELLO currently teaches at Ithaca College in Ithaca, New York. Her work has been previously published in *The Rambler*, *Redivider*, *Upstreet*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Waccamaw* and elsewhere, and has been nominated for a Pushcart prize. She also writes and manages Ten Square Miles, a weekly column about life in upstate New York. Find her at [tensquaremiles.wordpress.com](http://tensquaremiles.wordpress.com).

## Boundaries, Battlegrounds

*Thao Thai*



My husband carved the word into my chest: lover. The tip of the permanent marker pressed on my skin, knifing down to touch the lace on my oldest slip. Earlier, he wrote daughter in capital letters on my back, the tops of the word touching my shoulders. He was the first man—the first person—to write on me.

"We're making art," I said.

When I explained my project, I told him I wanted to explore erotic permissibility through photographs of a silk slip. My body as a boundary, a battleground. I faltered over those academic terms, those sterile pieces of art theory jargon that splatter obscenely through my speech like duck shit down a lakeside path.

I didn't tell him about the loneliness, and the adoration, I once felt for my last lover, the most recent recipient of that slip's charms. I didn't mention all the times the slip lay crumpled at the foot of my bed like a slinky, satisfied cat.

"It's important," I finished.



He looked at me. Something dropped between us, then sunk into the carpet, an invisible pigeon dead on the scene. We allow ourselves these phantom questions, these injured, falling fiends. Nightly, we curl into the indentations left by his questions, my questions.

We set up near an open window, where the light was best. I posed in front of my camera, told him when to press the shutter, when to move the tripod. I sprawled on the bed, hiding my face. It's more poetic when I hide my face. (What I mean is that it's less painful.) The ink smudged the sheets.

He stopped taking photos to touch my back. I always forget his delicacy, his astonishing sensitivity to my body, my moods.

"You're getting a rash," he told me.

My skin itched from the ink. I imagined it bleeding into my pores, and deeper. How permanent are those words? I said, "Keep shooting." Let it stand.

The day outside was the brightest it would ever be. Later, we'd put on our scarves

and jackets and go to an early dinner in the last light of the autumn afternoon. We might order a bottle of wine and talk about our jobs, our families. We'd roll familiar names between us like oranges, speculating about everyone else's marriages and children, as if those experiences lay far beyond us, distant as the earthquakes and epidemics we watch on television.

But then, in that spare room, on that undisturbed spare bed, we didn't try to talk. We listened, we watched. We acted for each other. Click, shift, click. And again.

An hour later, my eyes closed. I leaned into his presence, the way I would my old radiator after a bone-rattling walk through the January snow. A car accelerated down our block, past the spleen-shaped cul-de-sac out front. I remembered then that I felt cold and I heard the stunted turn of the film crank.

"We're done," he said. "End of the last roll."

In the shower, I traced my fingertip across the letters he'd written on my chest. I felt the hesitation of the wobbly, oblique L, then the sure leg on the R, a midget sword poised for battle. What must he have felt writing this word? Could he have written wife? Friend?

"We're not friends," he'd always say. "We're lovers."

I rubbed a rough loofah over my breasts, whittling away at the word. The ink ran down my body, settled around my feet. More soap, more hot water. I wanted to be cleared.

I removed lover, but I couldn't reach my back for daughter. I called for my husband. He bent me over the bathroom sink, his thighs buttressing mine on either side, his left hand flat on my shoulder.

"It might hurt," he said.





He scrubbed hard on my back, with broad horizontal motions that felt as mechanical and determined as a monk's swipes on a wooden floor. I bit back my protestations.

Somehow, it seemed deserved. Apt.

Before long, the word was gone.

He kissed me at my nape, a kiss like air, and left me standing alone. I pivoted to look at my back in the mirror. A red smear remained. I was surprised to find myself almost nearly unchanged.

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## Heat

*Marcia Aldrich*

I find her in the shower/spa area of the health club, nowhere else. It's as if she was born here on the blue and white tiles. I've never seen her getting out of her vehicle in the parking lot wearing grey sweat pants and sneakers or walking through the revolving door of the entrance. I've never even seen her move through the locker room or pose before the mirrors and lotions. Needless to say, I've never seen her depart. It's impossible to imagine her meeting a partner at the end of her day and heading home. She must leave eventually. After all, the club closes each night, but I can't picture her walking out into the empty parking lot in the dark. I can't picture a home she would return to. She strikes me as irrevocably unaccompanied. I've never seen her dressed; she is always and only without clothes. Without jewelry. She is beyond the age of children, at that stage in life when time opens out and waves before you. Her hair, worn in a short boyish cut, is a thin shade of blonde, and might be flecked with grey in harsher light. The light in the spa area is soft and forgiving. She isn't young, that I know. If I had to guess I'd say somewhere in her fifties. Whenever I arrive to swim, no matter what time of day, she's here, a fixture. And she's always doing the same thing, cycling through the cold plunge bath to the steam room then back to the plunge and on to the sauna. She doesn't rotate through once and call it quits like all the other women. She moves back and forth between them through the expanse of time. By evening she's amassed a pile of wet towels, enough to fill one of the carts.

I have a routine, too. I sit in the hot tub for a few minutes limbering up my back before hitting the lap pool to swim a mile. After my swim, I visit the sauna before getting dressed and leaving. From my spot in the hot tub I watch her braced in the cold plunge, as if she's fording a river. She's got a clenched look and heaps glacial water upon her face, almost defiantly, angrily. Her motions are wild and violent, as if she's trying to rouse herself. Then she shakes her head like a dog who has just been given an unwanted bath. At that moment she doesn't seem quite human. Staggering up the steps of the cold plunge she grabs a towel brusquely, wraps it about her waist and heads to the steam room with slow lumbering steps. She devotes a set amount of time to each station, the shortest being the cold plunge and the longest the sauna. Periodically she bursts from the sauna or steam room and stands by the water fountain drinking without any sense someone is behind her waiting. After she's had her fill of water, she heads back into the steam with deliberate resolve, like an old woman closing the front door on her last visitor.

In the beginning, I thought she might be fighting an illness and the intense cleansing was a desperate

attempt at remedy. But years have passed without change and I no longer find my theory persuasive. The rituals aren't tied to any programmatic cause I can discern. Not part of a weight loss program, because she isn't overweight; she is exactly as she was the first time I saw her, compactly built. There is no obvious reason to explain what she does. I don't know the life she leaves and returns to. I just see her in this space in between, and she inhabits it so completely that I can't imagine what's on either side of it. Even her body is blank, unreadable: her evenly pale skin is without fat or wrinkles or pockets of flesh, no stretch marks or scars or sagging breasts or varicose veins that would tell me something of where she has been.

My heart aches and pains into the water with me. For the first twenty minutes I swim furiously, slapping the water hard, flipping at the wall with more force than is necessary. I keep going hard, lap after lap, until I've drained myself. By the time I'm at the end of my mile I'm no longer aware of thinking anything and that's what I come for. I come to rid myself of the emotional toxins that build up in my body. Why does she come? What are her toxins? There's something she's trying to do, day after day, that I know. And I'm not sure it's working. Sometimes I fear she's just replacing one kind of ache for another. When I head to the sauna, I find her slumped over on the far right side in the dark. Most women stretch out on their backs across the boards, but she hunches forward, brooding. She holds her head in her hands, rounded over as if in despair. No word of welcome passes her lips, not even a nod of acknowledgment that she's sharing a small space with me. I think she might be dead. Of course she isn't, but the way she never stirs for long stretches of time makes me wonder whether she is more dead than alive. Something has gone quite cold deep inside her and she requires extreme measures to instigate a thaw. I sit at a right angle from the woman who has no name; my back is against the wall. Neither of us says a word. Whether she is aware of me, I can't say. We share the space in between. We share the heat. We sweat and we sweat.

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MARCIA ALDRICH teaches creative writing at Michigan State University. She is the author of *Girl Rearing*, published by W.W. Norton and part of the Barnes and Noble Discover New Writers Series. She has had essays appear in *The Best American Essays*, *The Beacon Book of Essays by Contemporary American Women*, and a wide range of literary magazines. She is the editor of *Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction*. You can visit her web site at [marciaaldrich.com](http://marciaaldrich.com)

## Bottle God

*Maureen Stanton*

For over twenty-five years, Rick Carney has been hunting for antique bottles and treasures where nobody else is looking—in the water. He does "extreme diving, in extreme weather," he says, off his 17' Thundercraft, Finders Keepers. "There are not many people who do this. It's very dangerous." Winter diving has advantages. "In January, the Kennebec River will freeze and I'll have fifteen feet of clear water," he says, or "viz," short for visibility. "Once the rivers freeze up north, there's no more silt coming down."

Carney repairs copy machines "in real life," he says. Boxes of toner are stacked on shelves in the workshop of his modest ranch house on coastal Maine, a couple large copiers in the center of the room, machine parts scattered on benches, trays of tools. "I own the business, so when the calls are done, I'm either digging, fishing, or diving." Carney chain-smokes and coughs frequently, though today he attributes the cough to a head cold. On a wall hangs a caricature of Carney at Old Orchard Beach, Maine's touristy midway with merry-go-rounds, salt water taffy, a boardwalk lined with souvenir hawkers. The artist has given Carney a wide grin, which is true--Carney has a vivid movie star smile, perfect orthodontia in a handsome, gruff face, a trim reddish beard, thick brown hair with silvering sideburns. The caricaturist drew Carney a pert upturned nose, which is not physiognomically accurate but captures Carney's rascalion nature. He's exuberant, quick to smile, which emphasizes a deep chin cleft and creases around his eyes. His face is weathered like a Maine fisherman, only his "catch" is not urchin or lobster, but hundreds of cast-off objects. Trash. Treasure. The booty from Carney's diving forays adorns his shop. Bottles, glass, ceramics, figurines. He dredges his fingers through a shallow cardboard box filled with doll heads, buttons, clay pipes, small bottles. "Here's a nice one," he says. "Dr. Loring's Pacific for Dispensia, Constipation, Sick Headache and Piles."

\*

Carney's interest in antique bottles began in childhood. "My mother dug a dump behind her house in Orland, a 1700s cape. I didn't know she was my mother at the time, 'Oh, you have another mother!'" He chuckles. "She was having this yard sale with bottles she dug," he says in a thick, Maine accent—"yahd sale." Carney first dug for bottles behind his "second" mother's house. "I cut this knuckle right to the bone," he says. After he was stitched up, Carney returned to dig some more. "I stuck my hand in the SAME HOLE," he says, and sliced his hand "ON THE SAME PIECE OF GLASS!" He

never got cut again, though. "I could sit in broken glass, paw right through it, never get cut, like those guys walking the coals, you know?" He laughs. "The bottles were gorgeous colors, and I was hooked."

Carney joined the marines, traveled out west ("there ain't nuthin' old out west"), and returned to Maine to find that the bottle dumps were picked over. "Back in the seventies there was a massive bottle-digging craze. WIVES! CHILDREN! It was a family thing," he says. Like a creature devolving, Carney went from land to water, starting with aquatic metal detecting. "If a house is ten feet from the shore, they threw the trash in the water." He sought historic hotel sites from the heyday of Maine's railway tourism. "On Cobbossee Lake there was Island Park, which had a casino and an outdoor theater. Back in the 1870s, it was at the end of the trolley line. It was the place to go." A steamboat ferried visitors to the island, where passengers paid a dime to use the beach. "Over the years, dimes got dropped. My metal detector was just going beep beep beep beep. In that much weeds and muck, I found over 200 mercury dimes one day." Carney spent a decade metal detecting before stumbling on underwater bottle dumps. "I was feeling through the mud—whoops, there's a bottle. Then I started actively seeking out bottles and they seemed to be everywhere."

"If there was a house fifty feet from the water, then there is an underwater dump," he says. "I'm doing a site right now in Exeter, New Hampshire. Four feet of water, four feet from the shore. There's five 1790s houses within ten feet of the water." Carney knocks on doors to get permission to cross people's property if there is no public access, though he's been arrested for crossing private property. "A lot of bottle diggers sneak in, Rambo in, but it's always nice to get permission," he says. "Nobody owns the water so as long as I go by boat, ain't nuthin' they can do." Carney does about a hundred dives a year. He carries his diving gear with him on copy machine repair calls in case there's a lake or pond nearby. "Within a fifty miles radius of my house there isn't a gully or a lake or a river than I ain't been in."

He dives in inland ponds and in the ocean along the coast of New England. He dove near Hartford, Connecticut near an old viaduct. "There's a place called Adrian's Landing. The original cribstone granite docks are still there. When they built I-90, they tore down the oldest part of the city, but they never touched the waterfront. We probably pulled \$5000 worth of stuff out of that Connecticut site," he says, including a Hyatt's Infallible Life Balsam, a \$200 bottle. "All you can see are skyscrapers on the shoreline, and I'm digging up stuff from the 1700s," he says.

Carney uses a four-inch dredge to unearth the bottles. "I have an underwater torpedo, which is a little propulsion device—it pulls you along at 2.5 miles per hour--ZZZZZZZZZZ," he says. "I flip it around backwards, puh, puh, puh—it blows holes in the bottom to uncover stuff." He laughs, coughs. Using the dredge, he found a motherlode of bottles and ceramics in Moosehead Lake, Maine's largest inland body of water. "I went into the local yokel store and said, 'Who's the oldest guy in town?' They said, 'Bustah is, and he's sittin' right over they-ah!'" Carney asked Buster where they dumped trash when he was a kid. "When he was just a little boy, they used to haul all of the trash out onto the ice between Mt. Kineo and Moody Island. In spring, the ice would go out, and—ploop—down goes the trash."

Mt. Kineo graces the shoreline of Moosehead Lake, a mere hill in the shadow of Maine's tallest peak, mile-high Mt. Kathadin. Kineo was the site of a grand hotel in the 19th century that housed 500 guests who traveled by train from Boston and points south. Carney dove in the spot Buster had identified. "I'm going along with my scooter in about forty feet of water and I come across a hump in the mud. I reach my arm down there—solid bottles! One of the first things I found was a little creamer with a big cobalt-blue 'K' for Kineo, from the hotel. Three feet from that I found the saucer it sat in." He shows me a tiny round ceramic dish no more than two inches in diameter, also with the hotel's insignia, a butter pat. The singular function of this doll-plate sized dish, in Victorian times, was to hold butter for one diner.

Diving for bottles is not for the faint-hearted. "I would love to see more people get into this," Carney says, "but there are issues. It's dangerous." Carney suffered the bends once. "It was my own fault. I did three tanks in forty-five feet of water, back to back, because I got all excited. I was finding clay jugs with big blue flowers." (Cobalt-decorated crockery from the 19th century can sell for thousands.) Divers must have a "surface interval" every so often to prevent build-up of nitrogen in body tissue. "It was like somebody put a nail into my thumb," Carney said. He was rushed to the hospital and stuck in a hyperbaric chamber for six hours. Most of Carney's dives are in less than twenty-feet of water. "As long as you don't go deeper than thirty-three feet, you can stay underwater all day long. Sometimes I'm underwater twelve, fifteen hours a day. Tank after tank after tank, just digging and having a blast."

When he's diving in shallow waters near shore, kids who mistake him for a snapping turtle throw rocks at him. Real snapping turtles have a nasty bite. "One snapper just kind of launched itself off the bottom toward me, and I was like—ahhh—out of here I go," he recalls. Carney has been swarmed by "hundreds" of catfish, tormented by boaters who used his dive flags for slalom, and once, bombarded with rocks by an annoyed property owner in a canoe, who then tried to smack Carney with the canoe paddle. Diving in dark tannic ponds is like swimming through "chocolate milk," Carney says. "Once, in black-water diving, I flipped my light up and saw branches above me. I was underneath a tree," he says. He has to watch for underwater landslides. He describes one incident: "I'm on my tips of my fins and this bank is sheer vertical. I'm digging into it, undermining the bank. If you watch the bank, you'll start to see it raining mud, almost like an avalanche. I just happened to look up and pushed away, and as I did the whole bank went whumfp! It caught my fins. So I dug my fins out and started digging again!" he says with a cheery little laugh.

I ask Carney what compels him to engage in such risky recreation. "The love of old bottles?" I say. "It's the search, and the finding," he says. In a pond just a few miles from his house, Carney recently found fifty-eight clay pipes. "Somebody back in the 1870s threw them all in the river. Clay pipes are like today's cigarettes. They made them by the millions, literally. I've found them with chew marks on the stems, hanging out of this guy's mouth for twenty years. These were unsmoked, pristine. Worth \$12 to \$20 bucks a piece. Finds like that are just exciting!" In spite of a potential \$1000 profit from the clay pipes, Carney says, "It's not so much the value. Most of what I find is in the \$100 to \$2000 range." He takes a drag from his cigarette, coughs, continues. "I find so much I could

probably make a living at it. I've had up to seven antique stores that I just stuffed with things. I rent glass cases and fill them with doll heads and clay pipes and crocks and jugs and bottles and bells. After four or five years, I actually started running out of stuff." Hahahahaha, his peal of laughter.

"There's so much out there to find, and so many places that have never been tapped," he says. "I can't stress it enough, there is so much that I'll never find it in my lifetime." Besides "stuffing" cases in antique shops, Carney sells his bottles on eBay (his dealer name is "Bottlegod"), and he sells directly to collectors and dealers, who knock on his door periodically to see what he's found. "Me and other guys like me are the suppliers for the antique dealers and the collectors. We're at the bottom end of the scale," he says. Carney is at the bottom literally—the bottom of the ocean.

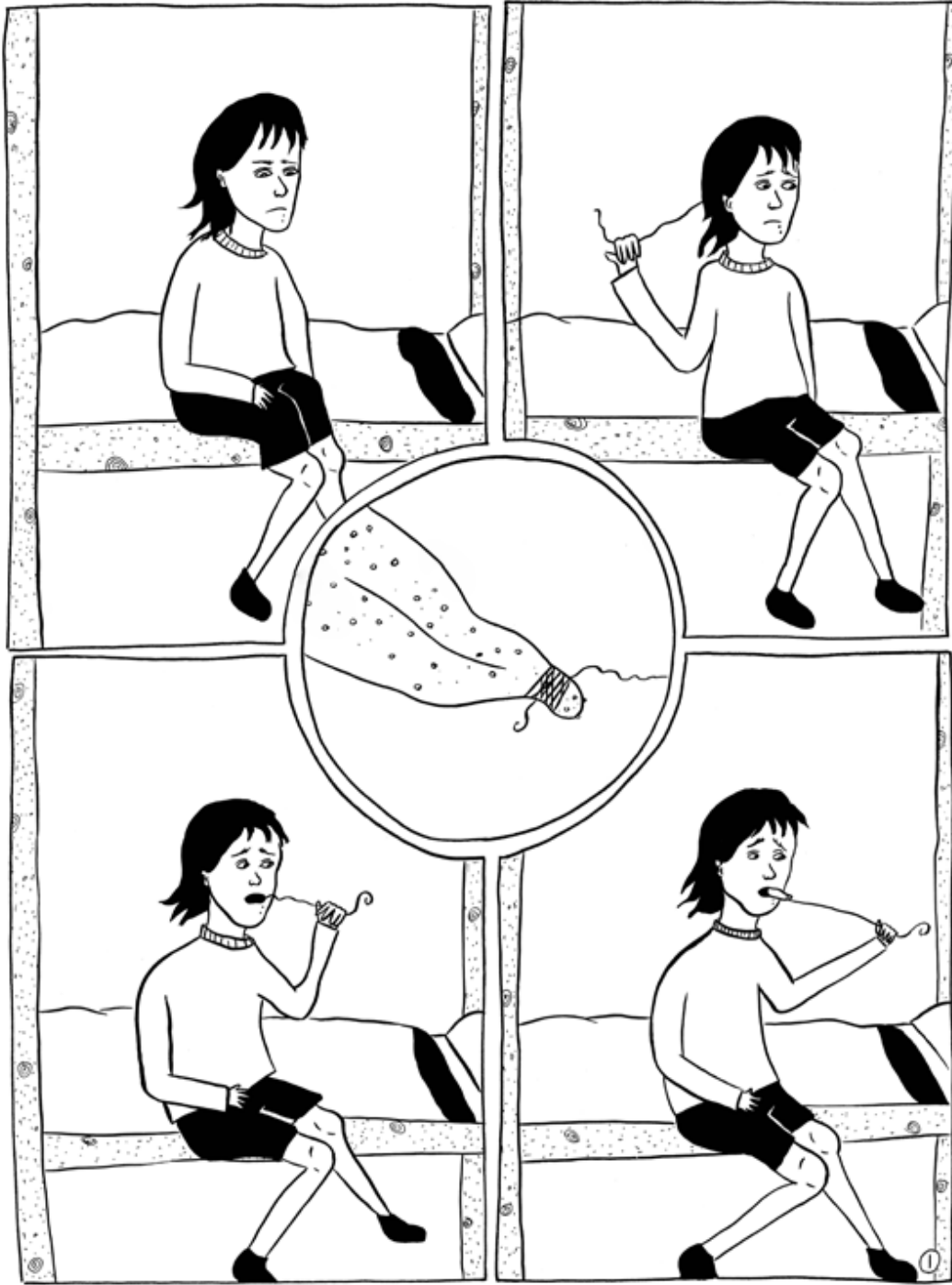
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MAUREEN STANTON is the author of *Killer Stuff and Tons of Money: Seeking History and Hidden Gems in Flea-market America, an inside look at the subculture of flea markets, antiques, and collecting* (forthcoming from The Penguin Press, June 2011). Her essays have appeared in *Fourth Genre*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *The Sun*, *River Teeth*, and other journals. Her work has received the Iowa Review Prize, a Pushcart Prize, the American Literary Review prize, the Thomas J. Hruska Memorial Prize from *Passages North*, and been listed as "Notable" in *Best American Essays* several times. She received a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and a Maine Arts Commission fellowship. She teaches in the graduate writing program at the University of Missouri. Lately, she has been on a Culver's frozen custard hot-fudge sundae kick, only available in the Midwest.

## **Lydia Conklin**



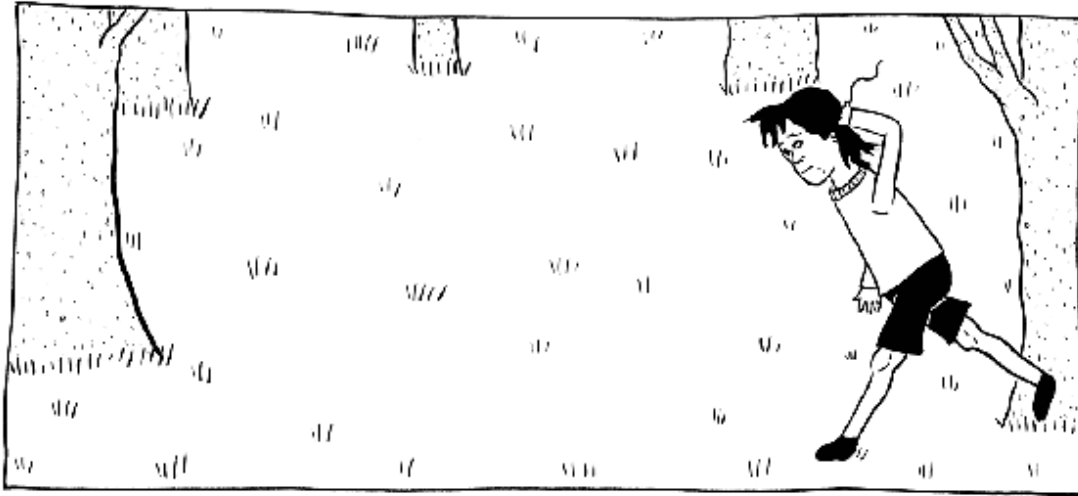
# The Hair











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LYDIA CONKLIN is a writer and cartoonist pursuing a fiction MFA at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. She currently teaches at UW and at the Oakhill Correctional Institution. Her fiction and graphic fiction have appeared in Narrative Magazine, New Letters, The Minnesota Review, The Saint Ann's Review and other places. In 2011, she won a Pushcart Prize. She has received fellowships from the MacDowell Colony, the Astraea Foundation and Harvard University. Her comics are available online at [Hobart](#), [vis a tergo](#) and other places.

# Jonathan Baylis and T.J. Kirsch

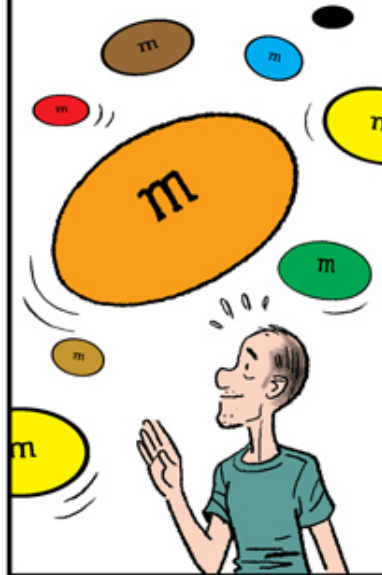
s o o r d e r l y

SO... I'VE BEEN TOLD THAT I EAT M&MS IN AN ODD FASHION.

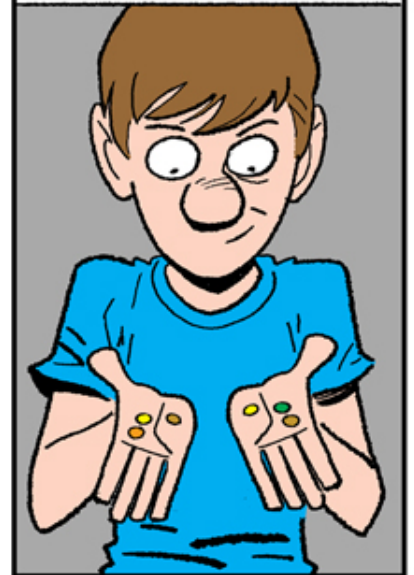


I DON'T THINK IT'S THAT WEIRD.

I JUST HAVE A CERTAIN ORDER I FOLLOW.



IT STARTED WHEN I WAS A KID AND THE COLORS WERE SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT.



IT WENT: ORANGE, LIGHT BROWN (ANYONE REMEMBER THOSE?), GREEN AND YELLOW WERE KIND OF INTERCHANGEABLE, AND ALWAYS FINISHING WITH DARK BROWN.

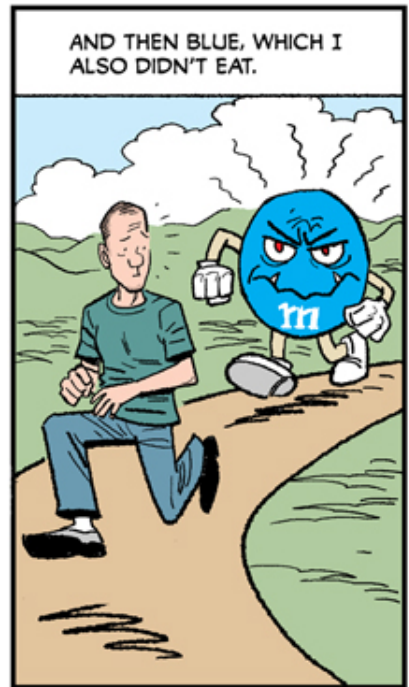
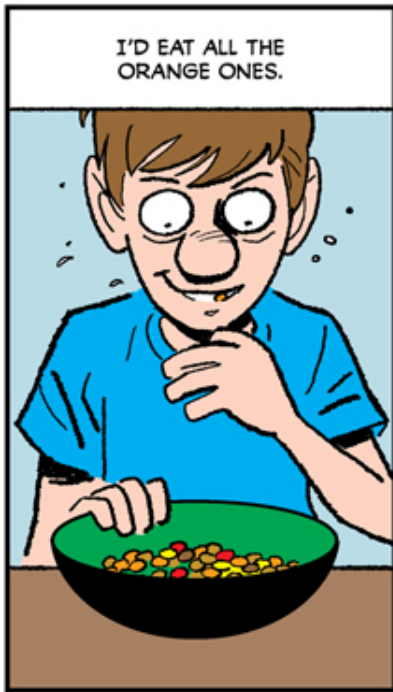


I ALSO EAT THEM ON INTERCHANGING SIDES OF MY MOUTH. FIRST RIGHT, THEN LEFT. BUT THAT'S ANOTHER STORY...

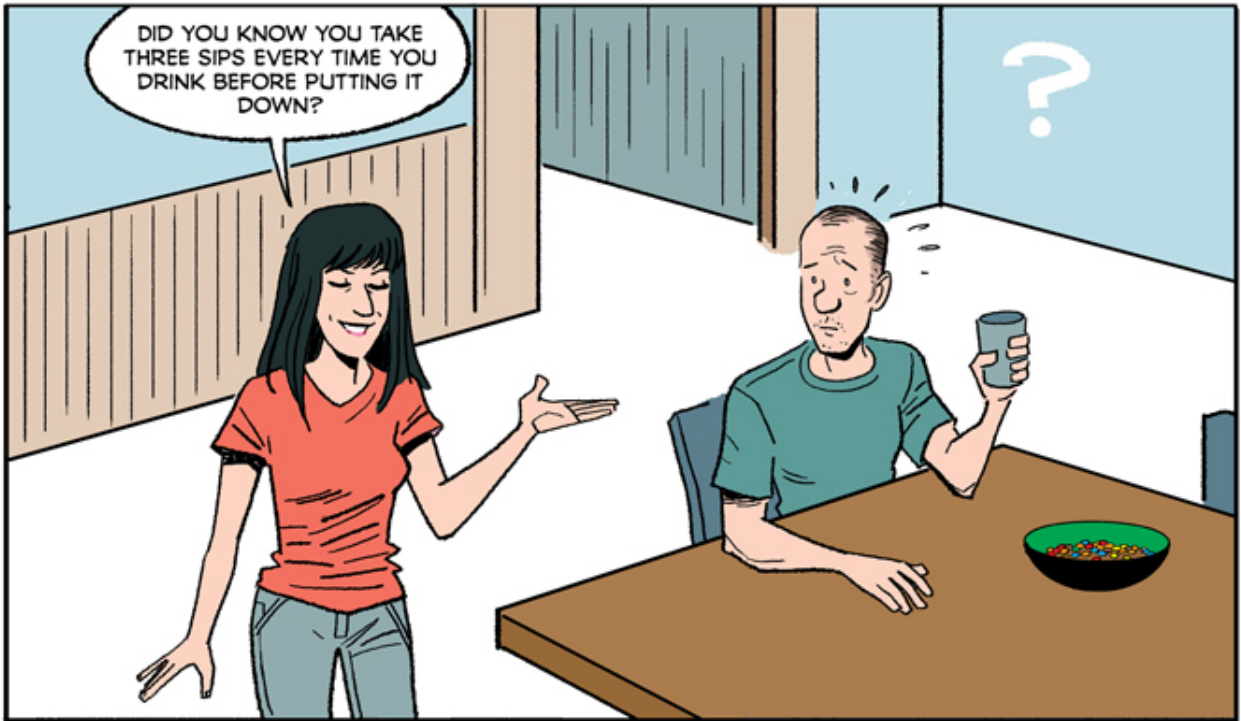


WHEN PRESENTED WITH A BOWL OF THEM FOR ENTERTAINING GUESTS...









DEDICATED TO JUSTIN GREEN

## EPILOGUE





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Before JONATHAN BAYLIS wrote auto-bio comix, he interned at

Marvel Comics, Valiant/Acclaim Comics, and was an Associate Editor at Topps Comics. His comics have been published locally in New York City in *Free Comics NYC*, *The Comical Magazine*, & *The Comedians Magazine*. Jonathan & T.J. had a couple of two-pagers published in "*I Saw You... Missed Connections*" and "*Side B: The Music Lovers Anthology*." More stories can be found at [www.sobuttons.com](http://www.sobuttons.com)

T.J. KIRSCH has drawn comics for *Archie*, Oni Press, and lots of anthologies. Currently he's drawing a webcomic written by Kevin Church called *She Died In Terrebonne* at [www.kimimuracomic.com](http://www.kimimuracomic.com). Please direct all fanmail to [kirsch.comx@gmail.com](mailto:kirsch.comx@gmail.com). He lives in upstate New York with his lovely wife.