



Issues 003 & 004

The Absurdist

- Fiction Mag -

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November & December 2017

ALMOST PARENTS

Elizabeth Heald
Portland, OR

Two people are walking together when they find an abandoned baby. Their names are Seth and Elise. The baby isn't actually a baby, but it looks like a baby to them because they have no experience with these things.

The baby, a boy who's just turned four, is playing with garbage on a patch of grass at the end of a bridge. He is a handsome boy with rosy cheeks and a sweet disposition. He is dressed in a dirty white diaper and perhaps this explains their confusion in calling him a baby. But really it doesn't. When it comes to kids they don't know much.

"Look, Seth," Elise says. "It's a baby!" "Adorable," Seth says. He chucks a nickel at the boy and keeps walking. "Look at those cheeks, so pink and so rosy!"

"Hold up, Seth. Don't give him that money. He's a baby, he'll choke." Elise reaches down and picks up the nickel.

The boy stares up at them from his place in the grass. He plays with the lid of a pickle jar and an empty can of tuna. He thinks these people look pretty nice. He says, "My name's Joe."

Seth and Elise look at each other in awe.

"Seth, the baby just talked."

"Now that's a smart baby," Seth says. "Give him back the nickel. He'll know what to do with it."

Elise watches Seth and sees he's eager to get moving. Onto the next thing, that's her man, Seth. They've been together six years - six years of committed non-commitment. He doesn't believe in marriage because of his mother's eight divorces. He had to endure seven no-good stepfathers, a deadbeat dad, and a lifetime of disenchantment. Elise wants more, however, and she's been trying to find a way to say this. She thinks this might be her chance.

She asks, "Where's your mother little baby? Do you have a mommy or a daddy?"

The little boy scratches his belly. "Mommy had other commitments and Daddy said, *No Dice*."

Seth and Elise take this in.

"Wow," Seth says. "This baby has quite a

range. Listen to all those words."

Elise gasps. "They've left a little baby by a bridge, with water running under? Garbage and strangers all around?"

"My mommy's loose and my daddy's slaphappy," the boy says.

"Whoa," Seth says. "Now I'm really impressed. This kid has a lot to say."

Elise has this look on her face - her eyes are wide, her mouth misshapen. "Seth, I want to keep this baby."

Seth looks at her for a long moment. "You want this baby right here?"

The little boy looks hopeful. "Do you live in a house?" he asks. "Can you afford to buy a few toys?"

"Yes, of course," Elise says. "We'll buy you whatever you like. Everything you've ever wanted."

Seth holds up his hands, says, "No fucking way. We're not taking this baby home."

The boy's face falls. He sits back in the grass and examines his toes.

"Look what you've done to him," Elise says. "Look how you've broken his heart."

"I didn't break this baby's heart," Seth says. "His heart was broken long ago. Look at his filthy diaper. No one's changed that thing in at least a week."

"You're just like your mother," Elise says. "You can't commit to anything."

"Don't you talk about my mother," Seth snaps.

"It's okay," the boy says. "He doesn't have to commit."

"You stay out of this, Baby," Elise growls.

"This is someone else's baby," Seth shouts. "And you know how I feel about marriage and kids!"

Elise is crying. "I'm taking this baby and I'm going to raise him all on my own. You'll be sorry. One day he's going to be famous! And I'll tell everyone how his *almost* daddy left him but he made it anyway. He'll be an actor or a quarterback, you watch!"

"Oh! Like Joe Montana!" the boy cries.

Seth smiles. "Nice one, Baby. You like sports?"

The boy nods and they begin a conversation about football and soccer. The kid really knows his stuff.

"Let's keep him," Seth says. "I like this little guy."

Lowball • Jon Strode • Portland, OR



Elise looks disgusted. "You've only changed your mind because of sports. Some father you are, putting conditions on things."

"What?" Seth says. "You don't want him now? I've committed and now you back out?"

"You've committed for all the wrong reasons," Elise weeps.

"Miss wishy-washy. You're just like your father," Seth says. "And you have his flat ass as well."

"It's okay," the boy says. "She can change her mind."

"Hey shut up, Baby!" Seth shouts. "Stay out of this, alright?"

"Fuck off, Seth." Elise flips him the bird with an angry, upright finger.

"Right back at you," Seth says. "And nice work cussing in front of the baby. What sort of hope does he have in this world with you and your mouth as his mother?"

The baby is sitting on the grass looking back and forth between them. "Do you want me or not?" he asks. "I'd just like to know so I can make plans."

Elise looks at Seth. "I think we'd better just go," she says.

Seth nods. "Sorry I lost it. You know I get hot under the collar when you talk about my mom."

"It's alright." Elise wipes a tear from her cheek. "It just means we're not ready. I mean how can we take care of a baby when we can hardly take care of each other?"

"Yeah," Seth laughs sadly. "Each other or ourselves." Seth takes her hand and they turn and walk over the bridge.

The baby returns to his lid and empty can of tuna, already on his way to forgetting these two people, his almost parents. He adjusts his diaper and looks out across the water, having higher hopes for the next couple that comes by. ■

THE MAN WHO THOUGHT OF WAR

Laton Carter
Eugene, OR

I am not a black egg, thought the man with the beard. Despite this brooding, an egg-shaped silhouette situated itself around the man's shoulders and head. When he jerked to the left or right, the black egg followed each abrupt movement. There seemed to be no losing it. The man with the beard called on his friend, also a man with a beard. *That is not a black egg*, said the friend, *that's a war-head. It's because you're always thinking of war.*

The man with the beard was scared. It was true that he always thought of war. He sought out the residence of a purported fortune teller. The door opened, and the man saw a woman lodged in a black triangle, only her face showing. *What I am purported to be, I am not*, said the woman, and she closed the door. *Please*, said the man to the closed door, *I wear the curse of a war-head*, and from the opposing side came *and I am cursed to every argument*. The black egg dropped to its knees on the doormat as all of the triangle's vectors pulled against its draw. ■

SHE MIGHT NEVER STOP RISING

Charles Rafferty
Sandy Hook, CT

Anna regretted not having oiled her wagon. The back wheel was squeaky again, making it sound as though she were followed by a small and curious bird. She was on her way to return a book about the stars when she saw Thomas Brinks sitting on the steps of the Churchville library. He was smoking a cigarette, and Anna paused to watch him from behind some azaleas so fiercely come into bloom you couldn't see any leaves.

Thomas was the boy every girl wanted to kiss. He was known for the chocolate quartz of his irises, the jaw that could

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- Featuring -

Laton Carter

Eris Gentle

Gherk

Ximena Gutiérrez

Soramimi Hanarejima

Elizabeth Heald

Daniel Hudon

JoAnn LoVerde-Dropp

Joseph S. Pete

Charles Rafferty

AM Roselli

W. Jack Savage

Eva M. Schlesinger

Jon Strode

Bill Wolak

take a beating. Anna watched as he exhaled a huge cloud of smoke that raced away. Then she pushed her palms down the sides of her dress to get rid of the clamminess, and set her wheels to squeaking. When she came out from behind the azaleas, it looked like she was leaving a burning bush.

"I see you've got your wagon," said Thomas. The wagon carried an anvil and two cinder blocks. Anna took it with her whenever she left the house.

"It's just a precaution," she said. Anna could see the little cuts and scabs along his knuckles, she saw how the cigarette fit perfectly inside his lips. "It doesn't happen much. Maybe two, three times a week."

Thomas took a deep puff and together they watched it float away. "You like space?" he asked, nodding at the book in her hand.

Anna felt a tingle starting in her belly and she positioned herself so she could keep both hands on the wagon, just in case.

"Some stars are bigger than our entire solar system," she said. A small yellow butterfly bounced by her head and threatened to land there, but Thomas didn't notice. He was staring at Anna's feet, which had begun to hover an inch or two above the sidewalk.

"You can't stop it?" he asked, pointing. "You can't force yourself to stay on the ground?"

Anna bit her lip and looked at Thomas's dusty boots. "It's like a blush," she said. "Trying to stop it just makes it worse." She saw that an ash had landed on Thomas's shoulder, and she took one hand off the handle and brushed it away. She could feel the muscles underneath his shirt, ready to lift and squeeze.

"Well, it's a good thing you've got that wagon," he said.

But Anna kept rising. Slowly her feet floated up above her head, and her dress slid down to reveal her underwear, which had elephants marching in a line across her bottom, trunk to tail, little behind big. Thomas grinned as Anna struggled to put her dress to rights while keeping one hand on the wagon. It felt like someone was tugging her feet toward heaven, and eventually her hand slipped

off and she floated away.

Thomas made a half-hearted leap to catch hold of Anna's dress as the wind began to carry her, but Anna kept going - until she was higher than the rooftops, higher than the steeple. Thomas stubbed his cigarette out in a windowbox full of impatiens and followed her down the street. Some people began pointing, others called out. Above the gathering crowd, Anna did her best to keep the billowy dress clenched between her knees.

Anna worried she might never stop rising. It was almost evening, and she saw the beginning of a moon. She could feel where the stars were trying to break through the deepening sky. She got up so high she stopped worrying about her dress, and let the breeze blow over her however it wanted.

That's when she learned that she could swim. If she just kicked her feet and scooped at the air, it was like the sky above her town was a vast invisible lake. She could still see Thomas on the street below her, and she used him as a target, something to keep swimming back toward after the wind had nudged her east again, above a block of freshly tilled earth that would soon be full of corn.

When the spell ended, Anna descended slowly to the street. It was not the plummeting her mother had told her to fear. She was able to do a lazy backstroke to avoid the branches and power lines. Thomas's face was shining, balanced like a melon above the people surrounding her to see if she was okay.

Anna was fine. She wanted only to pick up the conversation where she and Thomas had left it on the library steps. She told him if you have enough dust it becomes a star. She told him the dust

that doesn't ignite obscures the dust that does. They came to a clearing, and he listened as she named the glittering specks that grew brighter as they walked. Thomas couldn't help himself. He asked to pull the wagon, he asked to hold her hand. When they finally got to Anna's house, she yanked up the garage door and pointed to where he should leave it. ■

THE CAMPAIGN

Joseph S. Pete
Location unknown

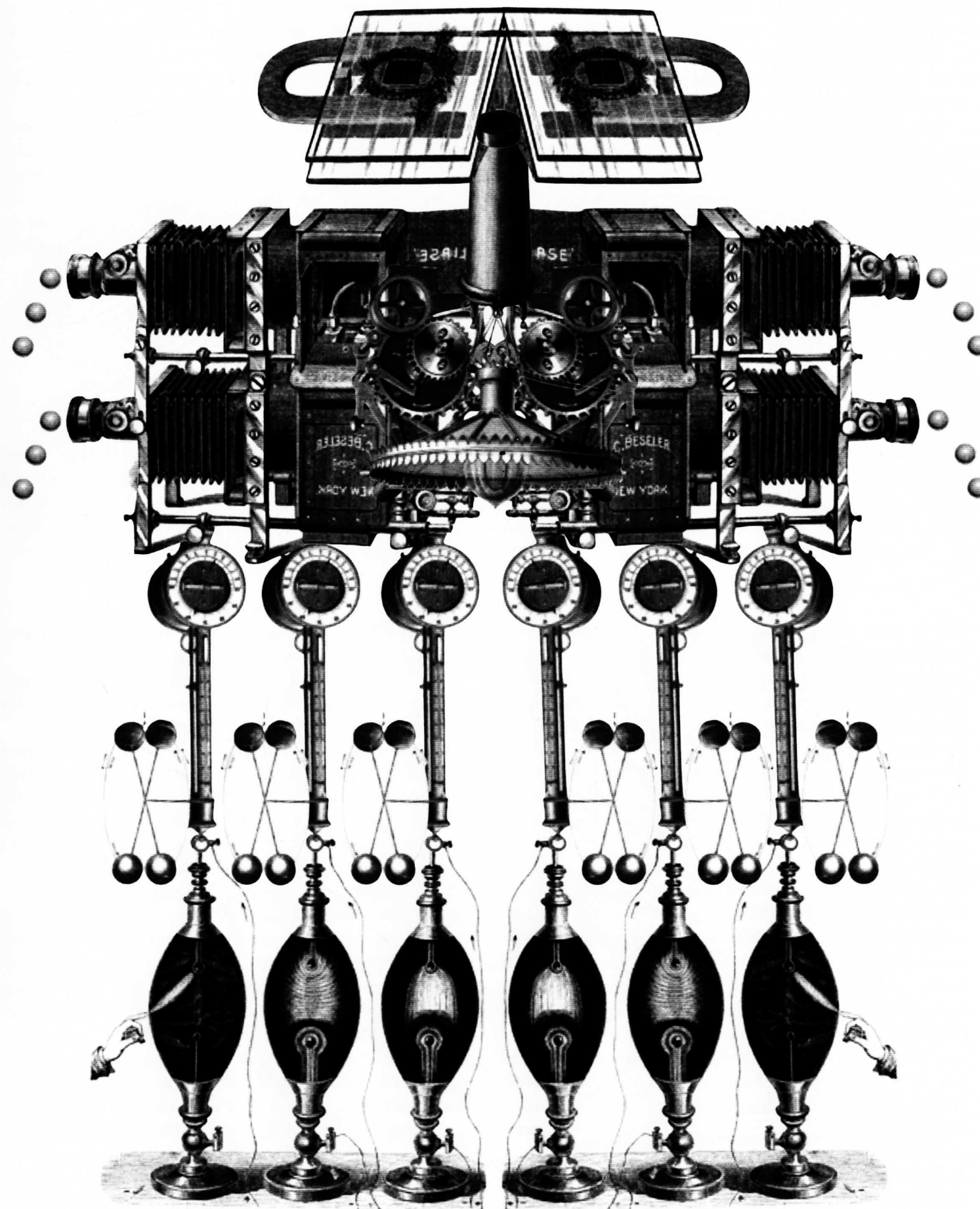
His campaign to be student president cratered.

Maybe it was his lack of personality or his lack of populist ideas or his proposal to have salads every day in the cafeteria, perhaps with kale and pistachios since that was what his mom liked and his worldview was as narrow as his suburban cul-de-sac. Maybe it was the fifty tentacles that protruded from his back and writhed involuntarily like a frothing tank full of eels in an unrestrained feeding frenzy.

Whatever the reason, no one had his signs taped to their lockers. He affixed a campaign sign with his prominently featured surname to his own locker, but it was stolen by third period.

He tried to sleuth out the surreptitious thief himself, traversing the hallways and scouring the trash cans to figure out who done it. After failing and giving up, he told a teacher, who apathetically sent him to tell the main office. Some wild-haired wiry kid was in there reading announcements over the intercom with theatrical aplomb. Everyone else seemed pretty indifferent to everything, seemed

The Fleeting Trance of Orgasm
Bill Wolak
Bogota, New Jersey





not to care at all about the whole soul-crushing affair. One of his tentacles involuntarily, reflexively curled around a pencil sharpener, ripped it off the wall, and silently deposited it in a trash can.

No one even noticed.

This wasn't the way it should have been. He was going up the chain of command as he was supposed to, but everything in the central office was just matter-of-fact, business as usual.

The secretary told him this kind of thing happened all the time and they'd try to help him, they really would. But she had to be honest, they didn't know what they could realistically do under such circumstances. Signs vanished all the time. His tentacles raged, coiling up like muscles and then flailing around with mounting fury. It was almost a blur, a flurry of unruly, obstreperous tendrils. She didn't bat an eye.

He felt betrayed, like no one would ever do anything for him. His head drooped. His shoulders slumped. He completely gave up. He sagged like a deflated

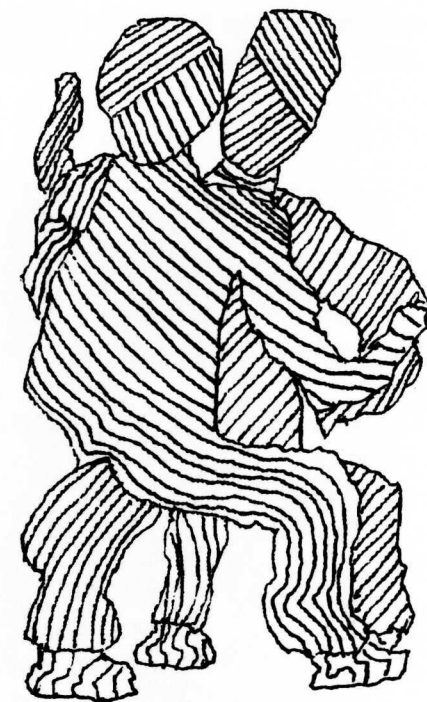
balloon. His tentacles froze, sagged a little, suddenly crashed down, and languished like day-old calamari.

The secretary smiled, told him it was just student council, something like that scarcely mattered. She turned back to her computer, clicked a few times, called up surveillance footage of his locker and started fast-forwarding through it. "Here, let's check the tape anyway," she said.

Soon she found the correct place, and they watched the screen together. He was in the hallway, walking away from his locker when one of his tentacles suddenly lashed out all herky-jerky and knocked off his own campaign sign. He then continued obliviously on, and a janitor swept it up a few minutes later, long after the bell had rung and all the students that had crowded the hallway cleared the frame.

A great weight was lifted off his shoulders. He'd done it himself. No one was persecuting him. No one was targeting or ostracizing him.

"Kiddo," she said gently, "sometimes we



self-sabotage. Sometimes we undermine ourselves without even realizing it."

The secretary scrunched her face, exposing rippling gills along her neck. She smiled knowingly.

"You know, I was the next Queen of Atlantis, the heir apparent, but I skipped too many classes and never finished college," she said. "Now I'm here in the front office. It could be worse, but it's not great. My Mazda has 200,000 miles on it." He gulped, nodded.

"Sure, you might lose this election," the secretary said. "But so what? There's a lot more you're going to lose in life, even if it generally goes well. Just don't sabotage yourself. There's enough obstacles out there. It's hard enough."

All this seemed confessional, strangely intimate. He was so nervous he felt well-night catatonic. The sudden trilling of the bell gave him a reason to make an exit. He turned.

"Just don't trip over your own tentacles, kid," she said as the hallways flooded with students. "Mind yourself."

He frantically stumbled out into the jostle and bustle of the hallway, immediately tripping himself as if on cue and face-planting.

An epiphany struck. Hallways! Of course! Hallways were too crowded, downright dangerous. Hallways would be his issue.

Then he realized he had no policy, no solution, nothing substantive on which to hang a campaign. He just had the vaguest outline of an idea, nothing more.

Still, he thought as his tentacles gathered up all the books that spilled from his bookbag, it was something. ■

IN THE SHELTER OF A QUIET MIND

Soramimi Hanarejima
Portland, OR

There's been a soundspill up north. An accidental release of high-volume, raw frequencies intended for music production. And it's spreading rapidly. News of the disaster's approach sends the

city's population into a panic. To buy earplugs or - for those who can afford them - noise-cancelling headphones; to pick up their children from school or daycare; to prepare the parts of their homes that have the most sonic insulation with enough provisions to last into the evening. The advancing din will sweep through in mere hours, so they lose no time turning frantic thoughts into frenetic action.

But not her. She is secure in the knowledge that soon she will retreat into your thoughts, the quietest place she knows, where - she believes - the two of you will wait out the passage of the spill in each other's company.

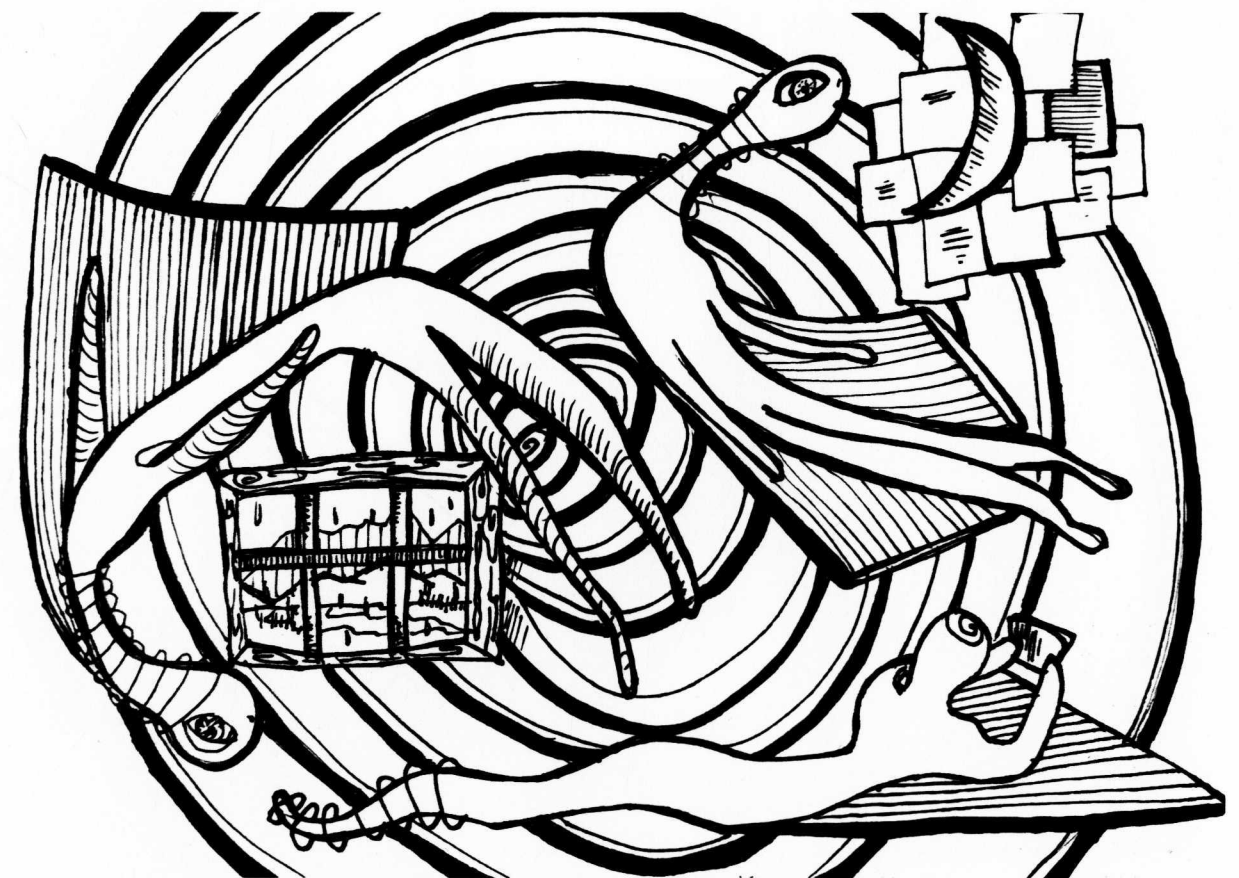
And indeed, you will be there. Because you're already there, stalking loneliness, to wrestle with it in this realm where it is palpable.

She has, however, no idea that when she finds you there, her presence in your thoughts will rarefy loneliness into phantasmal elusivity, permitting it slip from your hold and billow away. You will be, not exactly miffed, but

disappointed. She will offer to help track down loneliness, and you will have to tell her that loneliness will keep its distance so long as she is around. Then, even though you won't blame her for anything, she will feel terribly about showing up unannounced. Much as she will then be compelled to, she can't head home. Harsh noise would bombard her from all directions the moment she leaves your thoughts. Neither of you want that, though she will almost take seriously the idea that she deserves to endure such aural havoc after disrupting your fight with loneliness.

So you will have to distract her from her guilt by taking her to your mind's eye, revealing to her the part of your psyche that looks upon this world within you. Together making the journey across consciousness, you and she will come to the intersection of experience, memory and imagination where the eye hangs low and luminous over the mental realm.

There, she will marvel at the orb of perception and wonder why she has never thought to seek out her own. Then





colorada mi niñez

y ahora que voy para vieja,
canto desde la madrugada.

she will wonder what would be required to elevate it, to grant it greater observational ability.

"Is it crying?" she will ask you when she notices the fluid dripping from it.

"I guess you could say that, but what you're seeing at the bottom is the gathering condensation of attention," you will explain. "It's heavy with the information it holds, which falling drops of attention will then carry to the subconscious. That attention will then percolate through layers of unconscious thought to be cleansed of information, leaving it all behind as attention moves through that part of the mind. The purified attention then makes its way to a reservoir."

Taking to heart this lesson in cognitive ecology, she will silently vow to keep negativity out - or at least at the edges - of her attention, to keep it from clinging to her mind's eye and from infiltrating her unconscious mind.

But all this is still hours away.

For now, her attention is filled with excitement as it flows to her mind's eye, some of that eagerness coalescing into scenes of you two setting up camp in your mind as the city's air turns raucous. ■



The Moon Talk

Ximena Gutiérrez

Bogotá, Colombia

Static there you can see them, without any reason to be.

Look carefully now, because I won't say it again:

Who are they? I have told you already,

Guessing is now your burden to bare.

THE TREE INSIDE

Daniel Hudon

Boston, MA

I had a splitting headache. The doctor looked into my eyes, shone a light into my ears and shook his head.

"I'm afraid this pain will last. You have a tree growing inside you."

"What?" I said as a branch pierced the back of my eyeball. "What kind?"

"A maple, I think." He scanned a chart on the wall. "But we won't know for sure until it leafs out. Can you come back in the spring?"

I frowned. I felt the force of branches stabbing the roof of my skull.

"Come on," he said, "we can't cut it down. Yesterday I saw someone who had an elephant inside her. A huge tusk. Imagine the damage those tusks can cause. She kept it."

I rubbed my temples. "How tall is it?"

"Fifty, maybe sixty feet tall."

"You know," I said after a thoughtful pause, "what I really want to do is climb it, see the view from inside my head. Is there a way I could do that?"

The doctor shrugged. "Try taking a yoga class."

I signed up for a yoga class and was soon able to put my foot behind my head. Then, with breathing control, I squeezed my foot and entire leg into one ear. I was making excellent progress - my instructor even said so before offering me privates - and next made room in my ear for my arms. My head was starting to feel funny with a leg and two arms inside but it was nice to be distracted from the pain. With some pushing and tugging and several deep relaxing breaths, I squeezed my

other leg into my ear, followed by my torso, and my chest and shoulders. Finally, after a flurry of admirable facial contortions, I pulled in my nose and face. I had climbed inside my head!

The maple towered above me and I began climbing with the confidence of a teenager. How long had it been? And now to be climbing the one inside my head... Life is full of surprises. As I ascended I noticed many branches pressing directly into the top of my skull and it hurt to see them stuck like that. One by one, I bent them so they would curl along my ceiling instead of pressing in. The pain evaporated. My whole head opened up and I felt I could see all the way to Africa. To my surprise, the full moon floated into view, so the entire tree began to glow.

On my way down, I saw a woman waiting for me by the trunk.

"Who are you?" I called down. "How did you get in here?"

"My doctor told me about you," she said. "I've been having trouble with my elephant."

My first thought was that she was worried about poachers. Then I realized who she was and said, "Perhaps he just needs to go for a walk?"

She smiled and took my hand to help me out of the tree. "Wait till you see him," she said. "He can be a little wild, but he's beautiful." ■

FRIENDS FOR LIFE COACH™

JoAnn LoVerde-Dropp
Kennesaw, GA

You are ashamed because last night you dreamt you couldn't stay awake while driving - that your car swerved while you prayed to survive and your head lolled slack upon your shoulders. Ashamed, even in the dream, because you couldn't stay awake and you swore in the dream before this one that you would never again drive while sleeping.

This is something only Dr. Covey will understand. The one who does not blink when you shyly pull out your hand-sewn, full-body bonnet from your oversized handbag then ask for help with

pulling on your tights. Dr. Covey, the one who cares enough to transform her office into a miniature golf course for her 3:00 on Tuesdays. You know this because you are her 1:00, and the two of you often picnic on the greens. It costs a little extra because you have to pay the delivery fee from Boston Market, but you don't mind. You don't mind because she understands that coaching isn't taking notes and nodding emphatically while you talk in circles about the same shit for fifteen years. She knows that when you open your palm and a dozen tiny hair bands bounce onto her desk like caterpillars in a pride parade it's time to take your car keys, call Brandy at Sunshine Cabs for a 2:00 pickup, and get the vodka from the filing cabinet. What you don't know is that your *Friends for Life Coach™* did her doctorate work in The Urbanization of American Gerbil Communities; that she belongs to an underground social experiment organization called Project Play Date (you are subject 45C); and that she files her tax returns under the registered business name *Furry Friends for Life, LLC*. What you also don't know is that for the past five years, you and Mr. 3:00 Augusta Nationals have been funding a research study on *The Psychology of Snacking* as it pertains to domesticated gerbils left alone for more than twelve hours a day. A study unequivocally denied both federal and state grant monies seven years running. To date, you and 46C have supplied 64 Gerbil Cams, 128 exercise wheels, 6720 liters of pet bedding, and the Internet domain www.galaxygerbilrescue.org. None of which matters because scribbled in a one square inch box under Friday, March 12 are the words, *last night I stayed awake in the dream.* ■

Slobber • Gherk • Oceanside, CA



GHERK
2017

NEVER IS A LONG TIME

Eva M. Schlesinger
Berkeley, CA

Never Is A Long Time, she decided, would be her pseudonym. Every writer needed one. She imagined shaking hands with dignitaries at the party and introducing herself.

For now she stayed huddled in the corner, trading inside jokes with the hummus or the sour cream and onion dip. They loved the company. She loved feeling appreciated. She loved that she could go to a party at all.

Usually she was a stay-at-home writer, who stayed at home. She sank into her black bean bag chair with gusto every morning at 10:00. If she did not sink in with quite the right amount of oomph, she stood up and tried again. Over and over till she perfected her gusto sinking. Revision was important to writers. That's what she had heard. She was trying to do the right thing. Sometimes her gusto sank all on its own without her sinking into the black bean bag chair. Sometimes her gusto sank when she sank her teeth into black bean stew, which she thought would be good to eat, until she ate it twice a day fourteen days in a row.

At the party, she headed gaily forward or backward or sideways to the refreshment table. She ate the momos in her muumuu. She was on good terms with everyone on the refreshment table. They talked. They laughed. She communicated by waving her hand and diving it down into the nearest potato salad, then zooming over to the potstickers, and landing with a somersault of fingers into the chopped parsley, cucumber, and tomato salad, looking around at the people talking.

They held wine glasses. Their lips moved much like fish and sea snakes doing the underwater do-si-do. A lot of what they said was gibberish. She couldn't understand one word.

She preferred the quiet of the refreshments. They were refreshing. She left her card with them. She noticed the other writers carrying cards and, not wanting to be outdone, she got one too. She was standing around with Mr. Potato Chip, who was acting ruffled, when someone walked up to her. Someone who looked familiar. A man with blue blond hair. "It's been a long time," he said. "A very long time."

She shook his hand. She said, "Never Is A Long Time."

"A Very Long Time," he repeated. "Pleased to meet you." ■

SHARPIES AND COCONUT MACAROONS

AM Roselli
Salisbury Mills, NY

Nella wants to tie people down. Not everyone. Just those with hair like piles of snow. Their old translucent skin resplendent in odd brown patches and mottled crimson swatches. Nella believes wrinkled skin is cosmically linked. She must bind old people together and connect their age spots with Sharpies to make star maps to God. Old bodies are closer to heaven each day. She has visions. The giant Moai heads of Easter Island are not empty. No one is empty. Nella feels empty. Her head hurts all the time. She sees invisible stars on wrinkled skin. The other night while she was walking home from the Quik Mart with a

coconut macaroon stuffed in each pocket, an elderly couple strolled by her. They were so close, Nella could smell the accumulated years on their skin. The gentleman held, not his wife's bony elbow, but a tiny Pomeranian. The hobbling couple were glowing more than the bitty dog's sequined collar. Twinkling glass shards embedded in the grimy sidewalk dulled to dirt near their worn shuffling shoes.

Nella thought about using her green belt to tie them together but feared her pants would fall down. Besides that, the Pomeranian would likely bite her in the ass. And anyway, she wasn't armed with a stalwart Sharpie. The Quik Mart worker said they expected a Sharpie shipment sometime tomorrow. Nella was dubious. The young man behind the counter had done nothing but stare at her breasts. She'd forgotten to wear her only bra, blue and decorated with black Sharpie stars.

Not defeated, just delayed, Nella climbed the seven flights to her apartment. She ate her coconut macaroons and danced by herself. She used her long brown hair to dust the floor while dreaming about star maps.

Her head is not empty. It is full of ropes and lights and hammers. Endless headaches reminded her to work when she feels lazy. She needs God's help. She swallowed the last bits of coconut then leaned out her apartment window. Down below, so many old people to tie together. So many chances to find salvation. ■



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