

PORCHLIGHT

Fall 2009



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Porchlight: A Literary Magazine
Where Narrative, Design, and Photography Intersect.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Last week Dave looked at me and said, “It takes so long to get going these days.” He wasn’t referring to sleepiness in the morning or the onset of seasonal affective disorder as fall brings shorter days and colder weather. He was referring to the act of becoming an adult, becoming self-sufficient with a career, a family (be it with a partner, pets, children, or none of the above), and for our generation, a lack of debt (school, credit card, or otherwise).

In the last twenty years our country has lost most of the industrial and manufacturing jobs that a person could take right of high school. Jobs that many of our parents and grandparents used to “get going,” to begin adulthood and its attendant responsibilities. In the white collar sector, graduate degrees were once reserved for the very few, and an undergraduate degree was enough to launch a career. Increasingly, this is not the case. We pursue further degrees, further training. We reach thirty, start thinking about a family, put it off until some of that school debt is eliminated, and trudge forward. Forty begins to look less like middle age, and more like the start of something.

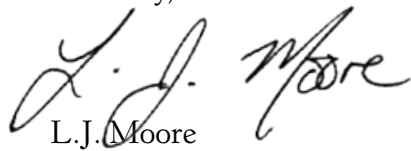
Perhaps we should not be surprised? We also live longer. We have more time on this Earth and thus more time to work and figure ourselves out. Learning more, engaging the mind through better education is never a bad thing. Education fosters critical thinking skills that help in all aspects of our lives. But education is not cheap. We expect whole groups of people to go back to school when they need to change careers, even if that schooling requires massive student loans. Such debt is considered an investment in the future, a mortgage on the brain. Education is one of the only conveyor belts that we have between different classes in the United States, so we make due. But there is still that nagging thought: “It takes so long to get going these days.”

The pieces in this second issue all relate to our theme of “Growing Up.” As usual, some pieces can be more obviously associated with the theme than others, but I think if you look hard, you’ll see that each illuminates a different aspect of this universal experience.

We are proud to present many new voices in this issue, and showcase authors from across the country. We hope that subsequent issues will continue to present original, eclectic work that engages the imagination, critical thinking skills, and emotional core of our readers. As always, submissions are welcome, and you can find our guidelines on the last page.

Enjoy!

Sincerely,



L.J. Moore
Editor

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the First Day of School

ON THE FIRST DAY OF PRE-KINDERGARTEN, MY STUDENTS BRING ALL KINDS OF THINGS TO SCHOOL: BLANKETS, EXTRA CLOTHES, SNACKS, AND TRINKETS PICKED UP FROM HOME OR PUT IN BY THEIR FAMILY MEMBERS. OVER THE YEARS, I'VE FOUND...

STICKERS THAT HAVE LOST THEIR STICKYNESS



BATTERIES



KEYCHAINS FROM NARCOTICS ANONYMOUS



BATMAN HIMSELF



EMPTY PACKS OF CIGARETTES



GROCERY LISTS



TWEEZERS



BARBIE BRUSHES

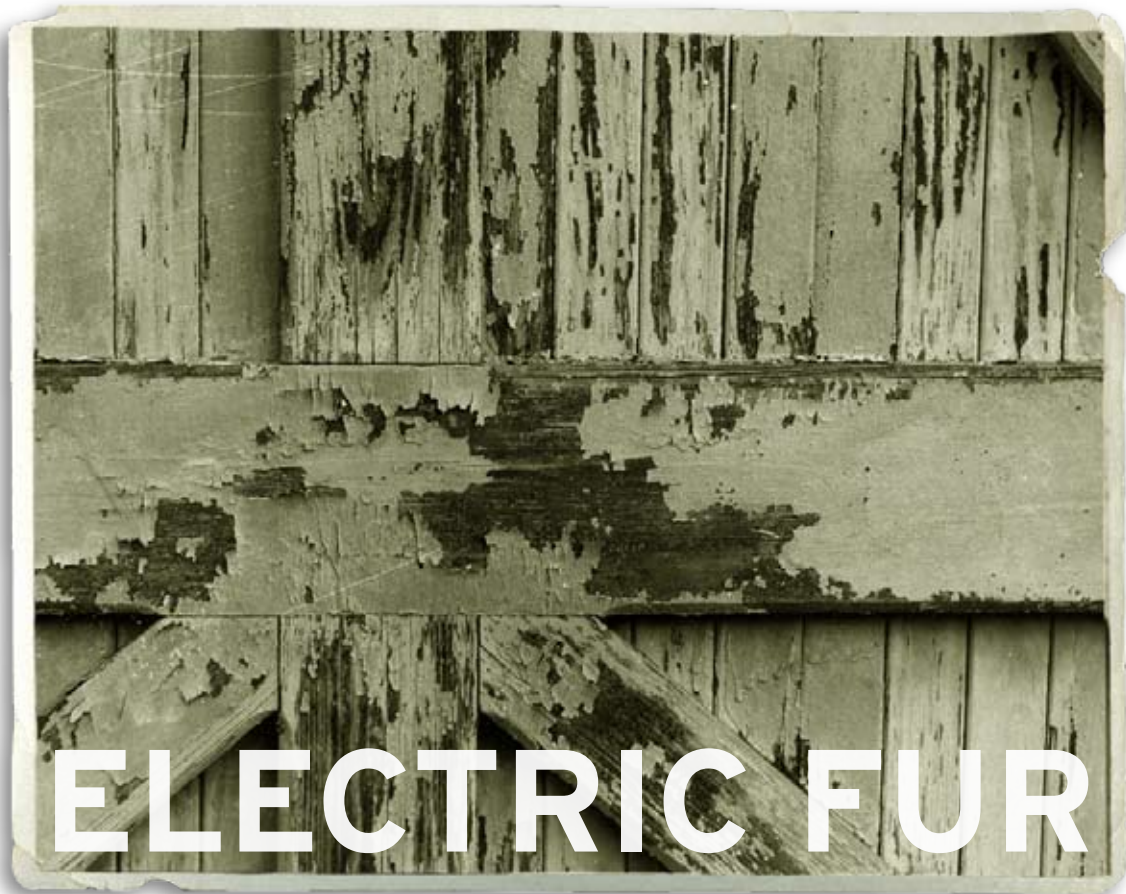


A REALLY ROUGH-LOOKING BIBLE





Anonymous



by Mary C. Charest

The Clarks always rake leaves this time of year. Their sons, strong and tall, pull the leaves in strokes toward a common pile. The rotting leaves twist in the wind, clutching their last curtsy. Disrobed trees stand stoically on the land along with a few sway-backed horses. They all linger, blankly staring over the electric fence, observing.

I watch as well, from the barn door. Mr. Clark pulls off his woolen cap and wipes the cool sweat from his face. Gray hair, slick with oil, plasters his scalp. He hasn't shaved in days; his boys haven't either. Mrs. Clark smooths her fake black fur, and frugally plucks half a leaf off it.

"Why do you always have to wear that old hide?" Mr. Clark asks.

"Because it's mine," Mrs. Clark answers.

The boys, programmed to work, pull the mass of expired leaves close. Sweat saturates their flannels and they muse.

"There isn't a girl within 100 miles of this shack. All we have are those two ancient horses for transportation. Pop's truck has been on blocks for years, and one tire on Ma's is sagged flat."

"I'll fix her soon boys, then I'll take us all out to town, we'll have a great steak dinner," says Mr. Clark, hearing their complaints. The boys continue dragging leaves into piles that

never seem to end. They know it will be at least a few weeks before he'll get around to fixing the tire, if ever. They know they will never taste that steak dinner. At best, they'll stop by town, stock up on canned food, get Pop's beer, and come back.

As their backs stretch into the next pull, I observe that they are handsome boys. The sort teenage girls would fall over and giggle behind if they walked past. They rake harder, and pull the heap onto the tarp. Their muscles groan as they pull the cover closer to the electric fence.

Mrs. Clark pulls her fur tight and walks toward the door. The air is perfumed with fresh apple pie. Made with apples her boys gathered yesterday in the orchard. She thinks about her sons. She wonders how long they can take it in this desolate hole. They are good looking men now, she thinks.

"They might escape this kind of life someday," she whispers, removing the fur. "Maybe they'll take me with them." She pulls the pie from the chipped and pitted oven. She lays it on a worn down butcher board to cool.

"Done yet?" she shouts into the autumn wind. The boys smell the pie and empty their last load into the woods. As they move toward the house, Mr. Clark shakes his head. He watches as his grown boys walk toward the kitchen door.

"Fools. Lazy too." I hear him say. "Don't know what it's like to enjoy doing a job proper," he mumbles, raking up the final wandering leaves.


As Mr. Clark straightens his cap and finishes the pile, I look on. The leaves smell of dirt and crumble under his rake. He stares at the ground and shakes his head, pulling. I am hungry. I'd like to go in for some tea and apple pie, or just the cream at least. I curl my long black tail against the barn door, and I leave the two ancient horses in the cool of the evening, slinking under the electric fence.



PIG'S BLOOD

deadended and so (falls
unbelievably mud a
mud sky) blanket the
sigh of a hog's head's
dream (of a hog's
head's dream) under the
rusted killing floor roof

-Jacob Bromberg



dearheart of mine (you
know it's so) here (under-the-covers-
land) so shiver now quivering
childlike blink and breathe
with no one to be save you and me
the wiser of (no telling) what
touch we (thin touch quiet
touch) touch or feel we each
skin sweet feel and flower

HUSH

-Jacob Bromberg



Heaven Called Galapagos

by Leroy Roberts

A week after that scene with the sirens in the Solomons, we were steaming through the Societies. Morale was low and libidos high as we steered into a harbor no less wide and inviting than a Singapore whore's wash basin.

Yeoman Billy burst out the cabin door with dumb discern. "Captain says we can anchor down if Quigley sees it fit."

Quigley, knowing full well the captain had already drunk himself into a torpor, saw it fit. In the private manner to which we were accustomed, the pious captain had devoutly sequestered himself in his quarters after slurring something about toasting the equinox. Or Rosh Hashanah. Or Eid Al-Fitr. He was very observant, our captain; more likely he was celebrating, under lock and key, his first mutiny-free year aboard our *USS Santa Fe*.

"He also said not to come back without more medicine," Billy blathered. "He looked a little green around the gullet."

"That's gills, Billy," muttered a nearby knife-whetting mate. "Gills."

"Roberts," Quigley barked and dropped his binoculars. "You wanna tell me who the hell called us out here?" Quigley moonlights as first mate. He also hates shaving, naturalists, and the Welsh. In short, me.

"*HMS. Demeter*," Billy blurted as he raised his hand. "Said the natives ate their scout! Just look at the shore! There's a smorgasbord of mates roast like pigs on a spit."

"Those are locals," I observed. "They're not cooked, they're—darker."

"So what's with the body count on the shore?" Quigley queried.

"Looks like we got a bug, sir."

"That so? I hear tell they cut their own throats."

"No sir. The live ones killed the sick ones and stacked 'em up like firewood."

"That don't explain why we're two days off course." Quigley also ghostwrites the captain's log. In a way, we don't have a captain or a first mate. It comes to the same.

"Well, the *Demeter's* got another notion. Seems today's a kind of anniversary. Bigwig witch-doctor bought the farm some years back."

"Well, sir, we camped out here during the war," the yeoman blubbered like a ketchup bottle.

I relieved Billy from the burden of thought: "The Admiral decided this would be as good an outpost as any to keep our eyes on the goddamn Japs. A destroyer pulled into the bay one day, and some Major Tom bought off the islanders with whistles and buttons. After Midway, the crew shipped out. Tom promised he'd be back with more cockle bells, but they haven't seen a red cent from us since. Far as they know, the war's still on."

"So we've got a hardy little cargo cult," the first mate ruminated. "Classic Nimitz! The ol' codger."

"Shall I radio the *Demeter* to go it alone?" Billy shuddered.

"No, not yet. No point in surveying another rock when we already got one godforsaken enough. Gotta think o' the overhead, son."

Our first mate did not appreciate the yeoman's prescience. When Billy, armed with the needful brown Barbados medicine, returned to the captain's quarters, he found his master unawakeable. Quigley held my shaving mirror up to the captain's purple lips.

"We ain't got a preacher," someone pointed out.

To this, a glutinous murmur. "How are we gonna give him a proper burial when we don't have a preacher? Better at least get a casket."

Quigley lost it. "O? You think we got a cargo o' coffins aboard? What do you propose we do? Saw off some hull for a pine box? Or do ya fancy we prop him up fer a masthead? The man's a salt, not the Reverend Mother. There's plenty o' crates in the mess. Now, ninnyhammers, go empty one out afore I carve the stupid out yer melons."

So they did. After which, they dumped the captain in. I added my mirror. Two secured the line with knots that would make a boy scout blush. The crane lifted the crate off the bow. A good three yards up, the crane swung portside. The rope snapped. Down on the rail crashed the crate, whose lid popped off, and while the empty box toppled overboard, the body simply sprawled across the deck. Gasps—but no gags. Even after he brandied himself to death, our chief had more rum than blood, and from the captain's corpse wafted the spicy aroma of well-soused fruit cake.

"A bad star!" Billy shrilled. Thereafter, Quigley nominated the yeoman and me to go ashore and investigate whatever plague was playing Pizarro among the natives. I did not share Billy's enthusiasm. But I am also not a pallbearer, so we rowed to the beach.

"Do you speak English?" I asked a saronged man with a fishing spear.

"Most certainly," he replied. "But I cannot answer your questions. The Duchess will give you audience. You'll find her on 117 Church Hill." He offered himself as escort.

The Duchess was buxom and animate, adorned with amethyst rings that matched her gold and violet skirts. She had a habit of smiling and furrowing her brow. Her co-regent, the Duke, served us Earl Grey and biscotti while I recalled the day's unfortunate news.

"Such a death. Small wonder! He was an odious man. I should think you'd feel relieved to release him to the dead."

Billy raised his hand. "I don't much care for this kind of talk."

The Duchess stared. Then continued. "As for the *Demeter's* scout, he was the source of this pandemonium. I expect the rest of his demon crew will join him."

"Captain might've been crusty round the edges," Billy pressed, "but he had a beluga's courage, a lamprey's cunning, a porpoise' posture—" My elbow interrupted his troublesome breathing.

"Preposterous!" she cried. "The blessed gates of Galapagos' are closed to your dead man. No great man dies on this most inglorious of days. Darwin forbids it! Till you rewrite his life, the dead walk among the lost, like those wandering the beach, unsure whether they belong on the blessed isles—or, mercy on your captain's soul, on the dread Iwo Jima."

"Well, pearly gates or no, he was no scoundrel or scallywag!"

"You deceive yourselves! Or was it, I wonder, he who deceived you? Your crew would do well to reexamine his life for clues to his untimely demise."

"Ah!" the Duke trembled and turned to us. "You mean, you haven't put down his tale?"

"The death day tells all," the Duchess intoned. "You must reinterpret his life according to his sediac sign."

"You mean, zodiac?"

"No."

"Who are these seamen," whispered the Duke, "who don't know the calendar?"

"Soft, sir," she hissed. "Judge not those who have not heard the prophets. Saint La Caille has sent them to us wanting instruction, and instruction they shall receive!"

The Duchess turned to Billy. "Come, the stars will reveal whether your captain's legacy is a curse on your *Santa Fe*."

So as not to besmirch her skirts, the Duchess gingerly lifted her pleats, proceeded past the Duke who held the thatch door, and quitted the hovel with Billy yapping at her heels.

"I hope it isn't far! We've orders to report back by sundown."

"We can't very well see the stars by day, can we?" reasoned the Duchess. She kicked a snake off the trail. We followed the winding footpath round the hut and down the mountain. Billy held an uneasy hand on his machete, but the trio and I encountered nary a soul, lost or no, save a boy in a loincloth clutching a tin can and a boar's bristle brush. As the party goose-stepped down a craggy bluff, we found him painting a red X on a lychee tree.

"I saw one scramble up the trunk, Mum," gestured the vermillion brush.

"Well, threaten him best you can with the axe!" was her advice. "We can't have them taking refuge this side the island. But take care you don't cut the bark. We've curses enough as is."

"Aye, Mum."

"It seems the lost souls have taken to the trees," she explained.

At length, we arrived on the narrow western shore and tread the hot black sand. A wooden line of posts extended into the sea. Billy the idiot wondered aloud why one should build pier posts but no pier. Duke and Duchess exchanged glances. There in the shallow bay lay scattered haystack rocks. Across the falling tide, Billy espied on these rocks barnacle hides and emerald slimes and aloft, nests of gulls unseen. Two women in white cotton peignoirs collected conches in a wicker basket. Sandpipers raced the span of the strand, and a fisherman moored his dinghy to the nearest post whose black satin shadow measured progress of the crimson sundown. Our *Santa Fe* lay other side the island.

"G'day, Missus," the white whiskers bowed low before the Duchess. He instantly perceived her mission. "We've a lantern but no fire. We're soon to light one for the soup. Won't you sup with us afore the ferry to the ship?"

Though Billy and I saw no ship in sight, our guide graciously accepted. The Duchess threw her skirts up, and they billowed like a balloon down, collecting in falling folds as the four of us seated ourselves around a fire pit. The twin conch collectors curtsied and set to work raking ashes just so, stacking driftwood just so, kindling fire in just such a way, their backs never once turned toward their protectress. A glance over their shoulder would have betrayed a vulgar mistrust, and even dim Billy perceived in their austerity a ritual dated generations immemorial.

"Now," the wizened fisher entreated us, "let us prey."

And so with shell spoons we devoured the crustaceous concoction in the cast iron cauldron. And as was the custom, the fisher recalled a cautionary tale—

"And this," he concluded, "is why one never writes one's name with a cuttle quill dipped in squid's ink."

Duke, Duchess, daughters and I clapped politely while our fourth looked in vain for the point he had quite obviously missed. By the time our supper ended, the tide had gone out entirely, and the black pier posts stood at attention as the Duchess passed. We climbed into the fisherman's dinghy and rowed out to the haystack rocks. Between two loomed a wreck's silhouette; by our fisherman's light, the mastless ship's few remaining timbers were thatched with guano. With torch in hand, the whiskered one led us atop the barnacle hide and through a hole in the hull. He handed off the torch and left us standing in a ceilingless captain's quarters with intact telescope. We followed his regent's lead, squinting into the dusky abyss and its diamond isles. From a sagging crossbeam overhead, the Duke produced a musty footlocker and, opening it with pomp, presented to the Duchess a vellum volume: *Deii ex Machinus*. The book opened to the desired page, and she pointed toward the god star, Sirius, of which a glimpse she had always wanted but never found, for its light was only visible from oceans other than hers. The parchment pages revealed stars whose constellations she made strange to the yeoman and me:

"Here we have Telescopium, and there, Microscopium. Then Puppis, the stern, Carina, the keel, and sacred Vela, the sails. After which comes Antlia, the pump, Caelum, the chisel, Pyxis, the compass, Sextans, Mensa, Reticulum, and Horologium: these twelve clusters comprise the sediac. By the course of the planets through the constellations, we can learn about the souls of men. By the death day, we can determine the significance of their life. Here is the thirteenth sign:

your captain died under the new moon in Fornax, that is, in the Furnace.”

“You’re certain he’s damned?” I asked.

“Clearly. Your *Santa Fe* doesn’t have much time before the lost find you.”

I pondered this curiously inanimate menagerie. “Tell me, why are most of the sediac’s constellations machines and devices?”

“These are the gifts of Darwin’s messenger, the dog, the beagle, *Canis Major*.” The Duchess bit her lip. “They remind us that all fixed things, even the stars they comprise, will rust, buckle, and fall asunder. Yet our world is proof that their elements are salvageable: only adaptation begets salvation. But even that takes time.”

I felt helpless. “Tell me how we can help.”

“By the eyes of St. La Caille! Don’t you see? The *Demeter* radioed you because we’re running out of flesh. You have to destroy the ship to starve her demons ashore.”

“But we’ll need her in order to rescue your island’s survivors.”

“The advantage is no longer ours. As Major Tom foretold, the end time approaches: Midway is at hand.”

“So—you don’t want us to rescue you?” Billy whimpered.

“Darwin told us this day would come. We need fear no more: Galapagos has called us home. She will welcome us with open arms.”

Indeed she would.

Galapagos had called on heaven, and in turn, heaven had called Galapagos home. I stood on the western shipwreck, debating whether or not to tell the Duchess. Decidedly, it came to the same.



FUTURE JEWELRY

It was the eighties and we didn't play House. We played Teenagers, and then Roommates.


In Teenagers we put pink jelly bracelets in our mouths and called them braces.

In Roommates we put cocktail picks in our mouths and called them cigarettes. We made up dates and hairdos. In Roommates we never played, "You ate my half of that turkey sandwich I left in the fridge? I was going to have that half of a sandwich for dinner with the rest of my cottage cheese and the can of peaches. That was my dinner."

But besides that, the way we acted was pretty much totally the same as how young women really are with each other, and how they really are with young, imaginary men.

-Amy McDaniel





In and Out

BY: WILL
ULBRECHT

It might be a perfectly miserable day were it not so goddamned gorgeous outside. I want a gray-clouded dreariness to match how I feel, so I say a quick prayer for a low-pressure system and hope cumulonimbus will smear across the tidy Friday morning. What I get is relentless sunshine and a cheery blue sky.

How I ever got to this place I'll never know. I was the good kid, and smart, the one who cracked jokes and hung around the other affluent kids that never got in trouble. I played sports—the right sports—and wore my hair short. Sure, I harbored a deep mistrust for authority and sometimes I was confrontational, but my parents had important careers and a household income touching six figures. Bending the rules was my fucking right. I never expected to be in the same hemisphere as the low-lives, let alone sitting next to them in the air-conditioned waiting room of Planned Parenthood.

I abandon my seat, and go stand outside, just beyond the double glass doors next to a concrete ashtray full of sand and crushed cigarette butts. My mouth hangs arid, and the giant sun edges me closer to a stifling confusion. A bead of sweat born between my shoulder blades drips down my back and into the elastic band of my underwear. I squint in the bright day and look across the parking lot at the interstate dividing us from a respectable shopping center. I imagine there was a good reason for Planned Parenthood to choose this nondescript building severed from the bustle of our little town, but now it stands out, awkward, like a beacon of our dirty secrets.

I wonder what I ought to feel instead of this dull annoyance. I should be devastated; I should feel a burden of guilt on me like the weight of the thousands of teenaged fathers who have been where I am now. I should be disgusted with myself, frightened to the core about this crazy detour my life has taken. But at this particular moment, I just feel aggravated.

On the other side of the mirrored glass doors, behind a veil of discretion and permission slips from her mother, my girlfriend is getting an abortion.

I reach for a can of snuff in the front pocket of my jeans as a navy-blue Chevy Corsica pulls haltingly into the parking space directly in front of me. Two large women sit tightly in the front seats of the car. The girl in the passenger seat has a blank expression and curly brown hair that falls just past her shoulders and onto her white sweatshirt. The driver is an older woman with blonde hair framing a worn-out face painted up with too much make-up. Their trailer-park appearance is proportionate to the shabbiness of their vehicle and I figure all three could use some major bodywork.

I try not to let them see me, but the front of their car is only a couple feet from my left shin. Both women stare at me, and their hollow eyes lock me in place. I don't want to look back, mostly because I'm uncertain how much emotional frailty I'm wearing. The older woman opens the driver's side door with a heave. I sense she knows I'm watching her now, and her movements become more theatrical. She tries to glide nimbly from the car as if unencumbered by her volume, but her size requires broad movements.

No words pass between the two women as they exit the vehicle. I analyze every miniscule detail of their walks, hoping I can find a defect that makes their plight seem more obvious than mine.

After they're inside, I return my can of snuff to the pocket of my jeans. I spit. The little pop on the sidewalk gives me an odd satisfaction as I wait. A whisper from the double glass doors calls my attention to the broken figure of a girl, emerging from inside and floating to the door of my pick-up truck. It takes me a second to recognize that this hunched-over, cross-armed, softly-sobbing human is my girlfriend. She doesn't budge her eyes from the pavement. The procedure took as long as a prom dress fitting, and it has completely undone her.

I try to comfort to her as I unlock the door, but she has retreated into herself, and she is only moving her arms and legs because she wants to leave. It's too late for chivalry, but I open the door. She gingerly sits on the bench seat and latches the seatbelt. This image above all others will stay with me forever.

I wrestle with the knot in my throat and try to maintain an even keel, even as I feel I am thrashing wildly. If I were older, seasoned, I might have the right words to say to her. I might be able to describe the thick calluses that will eventually cover our old blisters. But I'm barely 18.

Even though it's just after two in the afternoon, a darkness descends on us as we pull into the driveway of her house. I walk her inside. She has stopped sobbing. In the living room she collapses on the couch and I make a feeble offer to get her anything she needs, but she doesn't answer. I pause, then tell her I'll run to the corner store and grab some cold pops. I reach for the doorknob; I'm not coming back. I just want to drive my truck North, until I can quit playing adult forever.

THE THE SHOWN SHOWN WORLD WORLD

REVIEW OF FILAMENT MAGAZINE

SARA FAYE LIEBER

"Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of a woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object of vision: a sight."

— John Berger, Ways of Seeing

Filament, a new woman's magazine out of Britain, has a big red star marking the headline, "First erection pictorial in a UK women's magazine!" just below its subheading, "the thinking woman's crumpet," on the cover of the October 2009 issue, its second ever. Without even opening the cover on which the colors are slightly off (a printing error that the self-proclaimed riot girls who publish the magazine apologized for

profusely in a very un-riot-girl-esque little note slipped into every copy sent to subscribers) the thinking woman wonders: since when did the wedding of desire and intellect ever yield anything good? Confronted with these strange bedfellows, mightn't the intelligent lass—targeted by the editors of *Filament* with their strange pairing of “beautiful men” and “stimulating reading”—be bewildered? Isn't the whole point of peaking at a picture of an attractive man with a perfect, erect penis to be stimulated in a way that lets you forget, if only for a single blissful second, to think at all?

For clues on this curious content coupling—indie rocker type male models in various stages of undress primed and bathed in warm light complimented by brassy articles on women's rights—I first looked to the word “crumpet.” After all, Americans don't eat crumpets, let alone lust after them, so I wondered if that could be part of the disconnect I was feeling regarding *Filament's* whole male-objectification/female-empowerment project. The first five definitions of the crumpet in the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* are all pastries, i.e. various versions of savory treats to accompany tea, but the sixth definition, which is qualified as being British slang, was more promising. “Women regarded collectively as a means of sexual gratification. So a bit (or piece) of crumpet = a (desirable) woman; a ‘bit of fluff’.”

Based on this morsel of British English etymology, what the women involved with the production of *Filament* appear to be attempting, is to spark a kind of role reversal, a shifting of power which is meant to be the fiber, the *Filament*, the electric thread that connects the two. By making adorable men their frivolous “crumpets,” the female creators of *Filament* are re-appropriating an age old derogation and attempting to turn the tables of sexual power in the process. Whether this works is another matter all together. It is time to get past the off-color cover, which features a waifish gent with snow-white skin, long raven hair, and more than one piece of body jewelry, and peer inside to see what, if any, satisfaction an American gal can glean from the naughty bits she finds in its pages.

Many of the images of men that Soraya Sidhu Singh, head editor of *Filament*, and her co-proponents of “the female gaze” have manufactured are not hard on the eyes. This thinking woman in particular was partial to a spread in the first issue featuring a brawny Clive Owen look-alike seemingly at war with his leisure suit. But though the finely-tuned specimens in these pages are easy enough to fancy, it is impossible to ignore the prevalence of piercings, tattoos, male make-up, and other distracting intrusions that punctuate the flesh of the models in more than half the photo spreads. (I counted a direct ratio of 1:1 for piercing to model. As a few of their costars were still, as yet, unpunctured, this means that the majority of *Filament's* men were dotted with virtual mini-constellations of holes—mostly in their naval and facial regions.) All of which is to say that if this is the new hetero-feminist aesthetic, it is a very specific type of feminist indeed. (In addition to piercings there was also plenty of male make-up, blindfolds, bleach blonde hair, crosses and chains.)

Who is the *Filament* female? According to issues one and two, she is a modern European gal who has more reservations about bikini waxing than pegging (the practice of a woman laying her man with a strap-on dildo), has more qualms with soft-porn than hard drugs, is interested in history only when it pertains to witches, venereal diseases and prostitutes, likes

light bondage (as long as it is respectful), is vegetarian (based on the meatless recipes bordered by glittery lipstick-wearing, pierced, shirtless male models fondling fruits and vegetables), is into androgyny above all else, wears black to weddings, and fantasizes about spontaneous, guiltless sex with a hot stranger (preferably on Halloween while dressed as Ophelia or grinding to overpowering music in a crowded club) whom she then learns she can trust and call upon later for more favors without any emotional risk. In short, the only thing one can ascertain about the woman whose tastes these pages are tailored to is that she is utterly confused.

Which is not to say that fire-truck redhead Soraya and her minions are not onto some intriguing leads. The opening article in the October issue (following the pages where readers write in to express their undying devotion that there is finally a magazine for ‘them’ and send in hot amateur pics of their boy toys) is about two women’s campaign to get pictures of men on the cover of anthologies of women’s erotica. Apparently, almost every erotica anthology published in the past few years has featured a picture of a woman on the cover, whether the content inside was written for men, women, or both. *Filament’s* coverage of this phenomenon and their support of the campaign to get images of men on the covers of books of erotica for women seemed relevant to their mission, and the fact that their lobbying for more photographed male flesh got *X-cite* books, a large UK publisher to change the image on the cover of its *Sex & Satisfaction 2: 20 Erotic Stories* to a steamy male torso just out of the shower seems like a real triumph in terms of what they are trying to accomplish.

Man, does this thinking woman wish they would stay focused on the task at hand though. Other articles in both issues were flat, discordant, and at times completely inappropriate. Profiles of women who do “Editing for Television” and “Girl Geek Careers” reminded me of the infuriating backs of Girl Scout cookie boxes when I was in primary school. “Girls can do science too!” the unavoidable bold print between a thinking girl and her Thin Mints screamed. Of course they could. It was the eighties, women had been getting advanced degrees in science for decades. Similarly, I’m not sure what these profiles of women in mid-level tech careers have to do with sex or feminism. Maybe I have just been in Manhattan too long, where female execs walk the streets and ride the subway along with the rest of us. Perhaps if I had been born in Surrey, or on the Isle of Wight, I’d be in on all the excitement about getting trapped in a cubicle for the rest of my life.

Doze-inducing of profiles of the working Jane Doe aside, there is an inconsistency to the voice and type of article that falls between each male flesh-fest that quickly cools any fleeting excitement gained from the glossy photos. In the September issue we go from hooded, topless Simon to an analysis of the pros and cons of bikini waxing that is far more prudish and clinical than its counterparts in mainstream women’s magazines. From there we get, “Women who do comedy!” and move on to “Motherhood: One Atheist’s View,” which could be interesting except that it has that same Girl Scout backwardness about it. Dayna, a newly atheist mother, says she is proud of her atheism, but defends it as wildly as if she were a Satanist, raving, “Screw Genesis. Give me the drugs,” which, aside from not making any sense, is a downer for anyone who takes atheism seriously.

Proceeding forward we plow through two pages of “Girls who work with computers!” to Anthony, my dear favorite model wrestling out of his suit. After learning that Anthony loves deep tissue massages, we get slapped with the insufferable “Girls who play instruments!” section, which rolls straight into tattooed Steve’s spread which says his “big fear isn’t failure, it’s never trying.” Steve is cute despite his chinstrap goatee and huge-gage ear holes, but then it’s onward to an article on witchcraft written by “historian” Jo Edge that reads like a chapter out of her dissertation. From there we hit a somewhat fun feature on science fiction, but are quickly brought back to Earth by another academic essay on the questionable ethics of hard versus soft porn supposedly written by a Dr. James Matthews, which is a pseudonym. It’s odd that a Dr. would need a pseudonym to publish such a dry paper, even about porn, but that’s beside the point. (This thinking woman’s first thought was that he is probably Soraya’s father, but that could just be the absurdly paternal tone of the article.) Furiously, we flip past the dirty Dr. to bald model Jex Weston, who is pictured surrounded by a web of lasers he has spun around himself with his “Mitochondrion,” a big, glowing rod he made himself from LEDs “and a bunch of other stuff.” Then we fumble through lackluster advice columns like, “Ask a Feminist” which somehow fails to be either humorous or informative, and then splash into two poems printed over an illustration of an androgyne with a huge erect penis and flowing white tresses drowning in a pond of water lilies. More vaguely creative, vaguely erotic, mostly bland creative writing ensues until we end on model Jean-Paul, posing with a Celeriac root beside a recipe for casserole featuring it as the main ingredient.

The October issue is slightly improved, probably because one good thing about Soraya and the rest of the *Filament* team is that they really respond to reader feedback. My guess is, that as a result of this, the second issue has a much higher ratio of male photo spreads to annoying articles. Still though, in between the vampiric model Targ Patience, and the buff, black, doe-eyed Marcus Thomas, the thinking woman has to bare the brunt of a mother’s angry article on the challenges of raising an autistic child, and a cheerleader-y how-to guide on pegging (see above) that doesn’t once mention the fact that most straight couples have absolutely zero desire to try such a thing (not that there is anything wrong with it if you do, obviously there is no such thing as normal sex), or give any kind of advice on what happens if it goes horribly awry (one benefit of sex advice in traditional women’s magazines). Then we get, “Women who do martial arts!” followed by another dry article by our pseudonymed doctor, this time about hard drugs. It is just as dry as the one on porn, but far more alarming because the good Doctor says things that could be pretty dangerous to impressionable readers. Things like, “No one sensible thinks the life of a severe heroin addict is good... But there is a clear difference between a user and an addict, and the tricky ethical question is whether there is anything wrong with being a user.” Wait, are there really sensible people who think that being a moderate heroin user is okay? People other than the fake Dr. James Matthews? If so, I haven’t met them. Finally more boys, this time naked and wearing ties, but not long later we are dredged into the valley of another super-long, medical text type article, this time titled, “Beyond Low Sex Drive.” At this point in my perusal, I’m beginning to think that Soraya and her buddies are all lapsed Catholics or something, because self-flagellation is pretty much the only explanation for so much punishment between PG peeps.

Apparently, this inkling was positively prophetic, because next we arrive at an academic article about venereal disease in the early nineteenth century in which various peoples private parts literally rot and fall off, followed by tortured looking boys in chains and blindfolds. All of this penance we must endure before we arrive at the much advertised “Wakey, Wakey” photo spread featuring Britain’s first actual erection published in a women’s magazine. The aforementioned erection is more difficult to see than the editors would like because of the problem with inking that they apologized for so profusely, but it is still there, just barely visible for blurring into the stomach of its owner, and belonging to a skinny, stoned-looking, light-skinned, middle-aged man with rib-length dreadlocks who, when asked how he feels about being “the first man to appear in a UK women’s magazine in a state of obvious arousal,” disturbingly answers:

“I go back and forth between being excited and paralyzed with fear. On one hand, I’m happy to be breaking an unnecessary taboo; on the other, I’m actually extremely shy and the thought of strangers seeing me undressed is the stuff of nightmares.”

What? Is this supposed to make us all hot and bothered? I suppose there is a line of reasoning in which model Emmy Jackson’s honesty could be intimate and appealing. But looking at this delicate, thirty-eight year old man holding his erect penis and staring bashfully into the camera, and by proxy, me, doesn’t turn me on. Instead, it reminds me of a passage from Edward P. Jones’ book *The Known World*, a historical novel about blacks in the American South who became slave owners themselves after they were freed because it was the only way they knew to attain the status and power which they had so long been denied. In the scene I’m thinking of, a father, who bought freedom for himself and his son by selling hand-carved walking sticks, is appalled by the fact that his son has become a slave owner, whacks him hard in the back with one of the sticks and shouts, “That’s how a slave feel!” The son picks up the same stick and breaks it in half. “Thas how a master feels,” he says, and leaves, unmoved (Jones 138).

Yet it’s possible I am mistaken in making such a harsh allusion in relation to what could be seen as a pretty lighthearted project, to seemingly frivolous photographs and sloppy prose, to such a long overdue and eagerly anticipated reversal of sex roles. Maybe I am looking at these photos and interpreting these articles too harshly, priggishly even, reading them wrong. Perhaps I should have politely opted out, declined to write this review based on my own bias, my own discomfort in being caught in the “female gaze” long ago, an exploitation I didn’t understand was happening at the time, and so became complicit in.

In the fall of my fifteenth year, angular, angry-looking women invaded my high school. Sheathed in sleek, militaristic pants and blazers, their goal was to elevate a few of us up and out of the dullness of teenage mediocrity by featuring us in the glossy pages of *Seventeen*. I happened to be wearing a pair of engineer-striped overalls over a rainbow baby tee, an ensemble I suppose could have been taken to encapsulate the grunge fashion that teens were credited with inventing at that time, but

which I had actually thrown together because it was late in my mother's vast and complicated laundry equation. To the envy of my more polished friends, I was selected for the shoot.

The following morning, the women from the magazine dressed and prepped me for the supposedly candid photos. Wardrobe gave me sparkling new clothes to wear; makeup artists redesigned my face. A horde of professionals attacked my wild hair, spinning it in minutes from matted yarn to cascading satin. When I arrived home that evening, my parents were hosting a dinner party. One after another, the guests commented on my metamorphosis, unaware of its catalyst. Every adult in attendance applauded what they considered to be the external manifestation of some great inner leap of consciousness. Half my life later, the day the women from the magazine simultaneously expanded and reduced my idea of who I was and what I could become stands out more in my mind than my first kiss, or the awkward afternoon soon after when I first shed my clothes with an older boy who recognized me on the street from the picture he had seen of me in the magazine. A line had been crossed, though I didn't realize it at the time—an innocence whisked away. I was inducted into the world of women in a flash of camera lenses and quickly flipping pages and there was no going back. I don't write this without a heap of irony and a hint of sadness, but I'm convinced it's true all the same.

The battle of the sexes be damned, a peep is never free, and no gaze without its own special pollution. To hell with their lofty intentions, Soraya and her pack of panting ladies had better proceed with care.

Sources:

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Filament magazine. Volume 1 Issue 1. September 2009.

Filament magazine. Volume 1 Issue 2. October 2009.



OLD MONEY

I've seen you, you'll never understand. I've seen
how you crave primarily what you need—
salt, fat, heat, relief. And here I am with all these party
bikinis and not one decent bra.

You and your little sister's headless
dolls and her pretty dreams of bloody horses. You and
your older brother's tidy electronics, he of the expensive
odor, he who loves your parents and your sister and
you so reflexively and concretely.

You, a weak metal pudding of obligation and mistrust.
I can't help but suspect that you are the thief!
Karate chop!

-Amy McDaniel

The Portland Adult Soapbox Derby









by L.J. Moore and Dave Moore

**A DEAR JOHN LETTER TO MY CREDIT CARD
BY BEVERLY BENTLEY**

Dear Visa,

I must first thank you for all your love these past few years. I remember when we first met. I was in college and in a particular pickle, during which I was sure that I would not be able to pay my car insurance or rent. So I went to the bank and was very excited to become a grown up, and finally, got my own credit card. You were pale blue and had a paltry \$400 limit. But you helped me. You took me on vacations that I otherwise could not have gone on. You gave me a new transmission and took me to countless dinners when I otherwise would have stayed at home or cooked. I do thank you for those experiences. Through the years I would get letters from you stating,

"Congratulations! We are raising your limit to \$1000." It would feel proud that it was so fiscally responsible that you wanted to give me increased borrowing opportunities. Really, it do thank you.

However, it feel that our relationship has always been out of balance. It would seem it is a give and take, but you always seem to take a little bit more. And yes, it did get to see all of those wonderful things and drink wine way out of my salary range, but aren't we supposed to be working on my future? A bright and happy future with a savings and Roth IRA? How are those possible if you keep asking me out to margaritas and wine dinners? Why are you always telling me that that

plane ticket will get paid off next month?
For six years I have taken you with me. And
kept you balance on my mind and heart
every day, an unhealthy obsession indeed.

I am sorry. I found someone else.
His name is Dollar. He treats me right.
I can hold him and he seems to be more
honest and open with me on his terms and
conditions. Please understand. I also found
out in your text messages that you have been
seeing about 300 million other Americans, so
I am sure you will be just fine. Enclosed.
you will find one last, parting check, sprayed
with my perfume. I know you will call me
and send me letters but they just won't work.
This is goodbye, my love.

Goodbye.



OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Lauren Benbrook is an independent comic artist based in Athens, Georgia. More of her work can be found at <http://squidarms.blogspot.com>.

Mary C. Charest is a freelance writer and dramatist whose plays have appeared in the Catherine Lindsey Actors/Playwrights Workshop and are being considered for production at the Palace Theatre in Hamilton, New York. Her nonfiction has been published by *Point of View* and *Blood-Horse*, among others. Her fiction has appeared in *Tangent*. In 2003 and 2004 she also received the Garvin Lally Writing Scholarship.

Jacob Bromberg is a poet and translator living in Paris, France. He has not been published in the *Paris Review*, *Poetry International*, or *Pleiades*.

Leroy Roberts is a freelance writer living in Charleston, South Carolina, by way of rural Pennsylvania and the rainy Pacific Northwest. He is currently at work on a novel.

Amy McDaniel is a freelance writer based in Atlanta, Georgia, where she was born and raised. She jointly runs the *Solar Anus* reading series, showcasing established and up-and-coming writers in the Atlanta area. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Saveur*, *Alimentum*, *matchbook*, and *The Agriculture Reader*.

Will Ulbrecht is a freelance writer based in Portland, Oregon, where he writes copy anonymously for an advertising firm. He spent his formative years living near one of the most contaminated nuclear sites in the country, and sadly, has no superpowers to show for it. He is currently at work on a non-fiction collection about his experience growing up in the Yakima Valley.

Sara Faye Lieber is a second year MFA student in nonfiction at Columbia University, where she teaches undergraduate writing. Her essays have appeared in *PANK* and the anthology, *Make the Most of Your Time on Earth*. She is the co-author of the book *MTV: Best of Mexico* and a blogger for AOL's *Switched.com*. She was recently awarded an Honorable Mention in the *Gulf Coast 2009 Nonfiction Contest*. Sara is currently at work on a book about the environmentalist writer Rachel Carson.

Beverly Bentley is a freelance writer who enjoys the peace of mind that comes with freedom from debt.

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SUBMISSIONS: We accept submissions in poetry, fiction, non-fiction, photography, and graphic art (including comic strips).

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- We look forward to reading your work.

