MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 10 ISSUE 3
THE VALLEY REVIEW

BUBBLE

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review was founded by Elizabeth MacDuffie and Alexandra Wagman. We are a non-academic affiliated magazine committed to recognizing and featuring the work of the artists, writers, and musicians living in western Massachusetts and beyond.

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salutations from the staff

Bubbles burst. That's how to tell them apart from other circles, spheres, very symmetrical rocks, beads, marbles, and particularly dense, well-formed clouds on especially calm days.

When bubbles burst they leave next to nothing behind, just their contents and for an instant and *. This sets them apart from peas and other similarly shaped vegetables, starches, and legumes, recreational/inflatable sports balls, certain balloons, and round and unstable projectiles of most types including snowballs, hand grenades, and jelly/cream filled donuts (which may be referred to as but are not limited to bombolone, beignets, paczki, and any other typological equivalent, up to even and beyond the red-bean-filled steam buns of some East Asian cultures).

As for their contents, often they are produced by rapid movement of air through a rigid, typically circular form, filling them with the standard mixture of nitrogen, oxygen, and environmental contaminants that you and I, the proverbial and generic (inclusive even, in this case, of the royal) "we", inhale several times per minute, birth to death.

Special among these are those that are filled primarily with CO_2 via vigorous exhalation through pursed, puckered, rounded, or otherwise constricted lips. Respiration flows out into the air and dissipates rapidly unless locked inside the elastic shell of The Bubble, allowing it to hold together until collision with sidewalk, carpet, child-sized finger, another bubble, or until its shimmering convexity simply dries out, and, its elasticity gone, it bursts.

-Joseph

taking control

Joe Baumann

Tabitha's sobs are still fresh in his ears twenty miles later as he pedals up the final hundred yards to the peak of Steadman Hill. The road is curvy, two lanes crowded by the craggy rock wall on one side and open air overlooking the buildings downtown on the other; he's hovering near the metal rail, snug between the right lane line and the thin rumble strip that would do little for a car careening off the winding road, offering nothing more than a jostling wake up call, a short premonition of the crumpling death awaiting the driver on the other side of that stringy barrier. He pictures Tabi behind the wheel of the beat up station wagon he cannot convince her to replace, the only sound in the car her humming a church tune she memorized when she was twelve. She can't listen to the radio because that's how they send the messages that control your thoughts, she always says, and the air conditioning is filled with toxins that they mix in when the car sucks the air in from outside. He and Samantha would be sweltering, her in the back seat looking from him to Tabitha, him staring out the passenger-side window, relishing in the breeze streaming through the crack in the window while Tabi screeches along to the hymn on the CD she's had to copy twice because she wears them out, her bright-pink-painted fingers reaching back and happily squeezing Sami's pliant thigh. He shakes his head: in his dreams Tabitha is alone in the car, and she isn't paying attention, so she doesn't slow down when the sharp turn comes and she's moving too fast, and away she goes, and she's diving off the road, the car's front bumper smacking against the guard rail, but she's still going fast enough to topple the car over in a metal handstand, the roof smashing against the unforgiving slope of rock and grass, folding in like a pressed sandwich and flipping over and over, a gymnast tumbling down the rocky cliffs until the car falls and steams and flames and explodes and Tabitha disappears in a blaze of soot and oil and metal that mixes with melting flesh and rupturing blood vessels. Samantha grips his hand at her funeral, the pressure of her fingers a kind of relief, and when she looks at him, her eyes asking *what now*, everything is warm and orange and better and he has answers and visions of a spacious apartment and teddy bears and nights watching television without interruption and eating ice cream from the carton without Tabi screaming at them to not stain the carpet because they'll come—who? *Them, you know*—in their pressed suits with their sleek guns and their indistinguishable haircuts and sunglasses and tie clips. His breathing is heavy and his helmet jostles, loosened by the sweat that clings to his hair and skin. The clip digging into the flesh under his chin is tight so that whenever he swallows a spurt of water the strap catches on his Adam's apple and he winces. Sometimes the cinched material grabs at the stubble under his chin that his electric razor misses and he groans, his voice caught up in the air and twirled around like a loosed baton. He talks to himself while he stares out at the shaded landscape through his sunglasses, telling himself that he loves Tabitha and that it's worth it, that he can't give up the moments when she runs into the kitchen barefoot and grabs him around the waist while he dices fresh chicken breasts or the green beans he's strained. Can't let go of the moments when she clings to his muscled sides and kisses him on the lips, staring at him with eyes that are engulfed by his visage, his cheekbones, the way the clothes hang off him with such loose abandon. The way she feels at his sinewy back, her stomach warming when they kiss, brings him back to the dusted road, his tormented legs. He can feel a heat: it comes from her blood-colored lips, the smile he sees now and then that reeks of such reckless happiness, the kind of ecstasy that would climb atop him in their kitchen, not caring that Samantha is in the next room, no worry that their daughter might see them in a rushed, lusty embrace. As he hits

the top of Steadman Hill and his bike teeters between peak and valley, he thinks about turning around, taking the slow descent that swirls around the high hills, finding Samantha freshly-bathed and holding a Teddy bear and running to him when he comes through the door, Tabitha smiling and leaning against the kitchen sink, her face covered in the exhaustion she wears every morning, her hair disheveled by the hands she can't help but run across her scalp. But he pushes his weight forward and lets the pedals churn, his feet light, spinning in fast circles as he flings himself forward. He grips the handles hard. When the weight of his bike gives in to the gravity of crossing the peak he lets his legs spin involuntarily, and he lets go. He sees himself and Tabi and Samantha at the grocery store, buying nothing but canned food—they can't poison you as easily that way, Tabi says—standing in front of the beans, Tabitha asking Samantha to pick a can. Then him, then Tabi. They each point at a can and then she plucks one none of them have pointed at, smiling as Sami bursts into tears. She tells them that the sleeper teachers—the ones who come in when you aren't awake and tell you what to do, what to think, what to feel, tell you who you are ("They say you're Sami, you know? Is that your real name?" she says to his daughter, leaning down to stare at her at eye level), the ones who come and instruct you, reciting the dogmas of the elite government while your eyes twitch and your body rolls over and disturbs the cat, throwing everything out of whack. They want them to pick that can, so they have to take another one, a different one, one no one has chosen. And by the time they are done shopping he is exhausted and Samantha is crying, numb, terrified, hungry, suffering all of the things that good parents never let their children suffer and hate themselves for making their offspring go through, and he has to smile and charm the cashier while Tabitha bites her fingernails and stares at tabloids, picking them up one at a time and reciting their headlines, telling him there are hidden messages in them if only you look at them right: she turns them left and right and upside down before returning them to their caddies. Everything can be decoded, she says. Everything is a message. The sun, the snow, the rain, the report cards, the weekly coupons, the news reports, the basketball game scores, the popcorn settings on the microwave, the lottery numbers, the electric bills, the gas prices, the radio stations. They are all a part. They are all cogs in the system. He is moving fast now, the bike chains screaming, his legs barely leading the pedals as they spin in joyous circles, whirring and breathing through the air. He can see the curve ahead, the cut to the left, the rock wall receding and the airy space expanding. The brakes: he needs to apply the brakes, soon, stop the rubber tires from continuing their perpetual churn, but he waits. He hears Samantha's giggle, the sound she used to make in the kiddy pool they set up in the lumpy back yard, all gravelly and forlorn, hardly any grass despite the seed he laid and the watering he did. Samantha ran around, her feet cutting across the painful pebbles without a wince, while Tabi stood in the kitchen and watched through the window. I have to protect the food, she said. We can't leave it alone or someone will contaminate it, or steal it. She said that all the time, and he would take a pitcher of lemonade, sigh and touch Tabitha's shoulder, beg her to come outside with them. He'd look down at his ridiculous board shorts, the curl of stomach hair erupting around his belly button, and ask her to please put on a bathing suit, please, for their daughter, for her laughter, for the bubbles she wanted to blow and the friends she would one day want to invite over for a sleepover. For the meals he wanted her not to burn, for the clothes he wished she'd remember to throw in the hamper so he could wash. For the afterglow of their television when they fell asleep. For the sunshine. For their taxes and bills and annual charitable donations. But she would shake her head, bite her lip, cock her head like a pixie and smile sometimes. And he, with his bulky shoulders and father arms, would sigh and walk through the sliding doors and ask her to at least dry the dishes if that wasn't too much to ask. He is moving fast now, the tight turn coming up quickly, zooming in.

He knows he needs to slow down. But his feet keep following the whizzing arc of his pedals. His shoes are pliant, short, malleable. He breathes in and out; the air whirs around his ears. They are uncovered; he cut his hair so recently, at her behest, because it was easier for them to control you if you had long hair, because you wouldn't notice the implants, and could you please, please, pretty please cut it. I know you'll look handsome and I'll always love you, and her, and you and, and we'll be so happy if only you'll cut it. And now it doesn't catch the sweat, and his heat falls off him, and the curve is getting closer and closer, and he can feel the pedals moving with such ravenous speed, his feet perched on them, holding on for dear life, his toes curling and terrified, but happy, too, so happy and pleasant and loose in the wind whipping past him. His sunglasses are smeared with sweat; Samantha might need glasses. He'll need to buy them for her, because Tabitha thinks that all doctors, eye, teeth, nose, mouth, foot, they are all part of the sleeper teachers, all embedding their patients with bugs and chips and brainwashing devices. He tenses up, thinking of her, of Sami's smile. She lost four teeth all in a row, all in her upper lip, in the front. She cried and said she felt ugly and he held her, told her she was pretty. He called her a jack-o-lantern as he held ice wrapped in a washcloth up to her face after the last tooth fell out, and no one else could say they looked like a jack-o-lantern, and she giggled, and he kissed her on the forehead and then slipped a dollar bill under her pillow that night. And now he doesn't want to keep going, he wants to brake, wants to squeeze his fingers shut over the levers on his handlebars and skid to a stop, but he thinks it might be too late—isn't it always too late—and he sees the white outline, the lumpy rumble strip, the metal guard rail, and is he too fast, or is he too slow, or is he too small, too insignificant, too alone, is there someone out here with him, and can he stop or can he not, can he hold Samantha or can he console Tabitha, can he hold them both, can he hold either, and will he see them, and might he fly, and might he touch them both if he rides off into the sky, and is that the ground beneath him, and where is he going, and where has he been, and who will write his obituary, and who will he tell about his wife's difficulties, and will he give his daughter away to a nice boy from out of town, and what will his grandkids' weight feel like on his knee, and what will it be like to die in his sleep? And who is he, and how far has he gone, and what, what, what: what is his story? Who will be there when he has crumpled into nothing but dust?

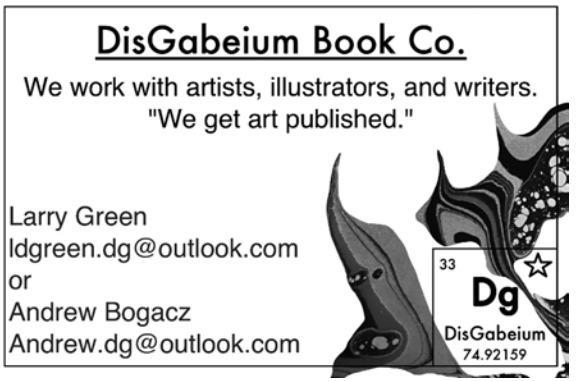
Jared Skolnick

the last mission

Stefan Lovasik

year of the rat
month of ears and skulls
24 days short and i'm
crawling toward an ancient temple
shrapnel scraping into bone
crawling to high ground
to save what's left of me
to kill whatever fills my scope
whatever enters this green field of death
that has torn my brothers open
their screams a chorus of long vowels
that fall in the tall grass/
i think i hear you call my name
i think of your last kiss
your warm breath
but i know this is where demons graze
where misery gave birth to something worse
yet my prayer is that the monks are there to tell me it's over
to bless me
to give me over to whatever god

i don't remember the blast of light but
i'm sure you were there
kissing me hard
your breath covering my twisted body



the prayer

Stefan Lovasik

after the war
it's as if i walk through dark rooms
to find a prayer to believe
a breath of mercy to blow down
from my black memory
from my disturbed sky to draw
me up
so i can look down
to find the pieces of me lost
among the dead
to remove the stain of our fury
and bless the jungle's green
where blood once washed it into red
and see the prayer written in the eyes of all those burned behind mine
and hold them until
we remember nothing but light
and all die into grace
as a prayer that can never be denied

confection

Adam Grabowski

What I'm asking is for you to think about water,
of what we collect things into,

a pitcher here, a pitcher there—
here today is bread, yesterday shampoo foam.

We all have things waiting for us,
ask the cloud as it purples.

A bridesmaid in water dress,
a bubble she's told to walk into.

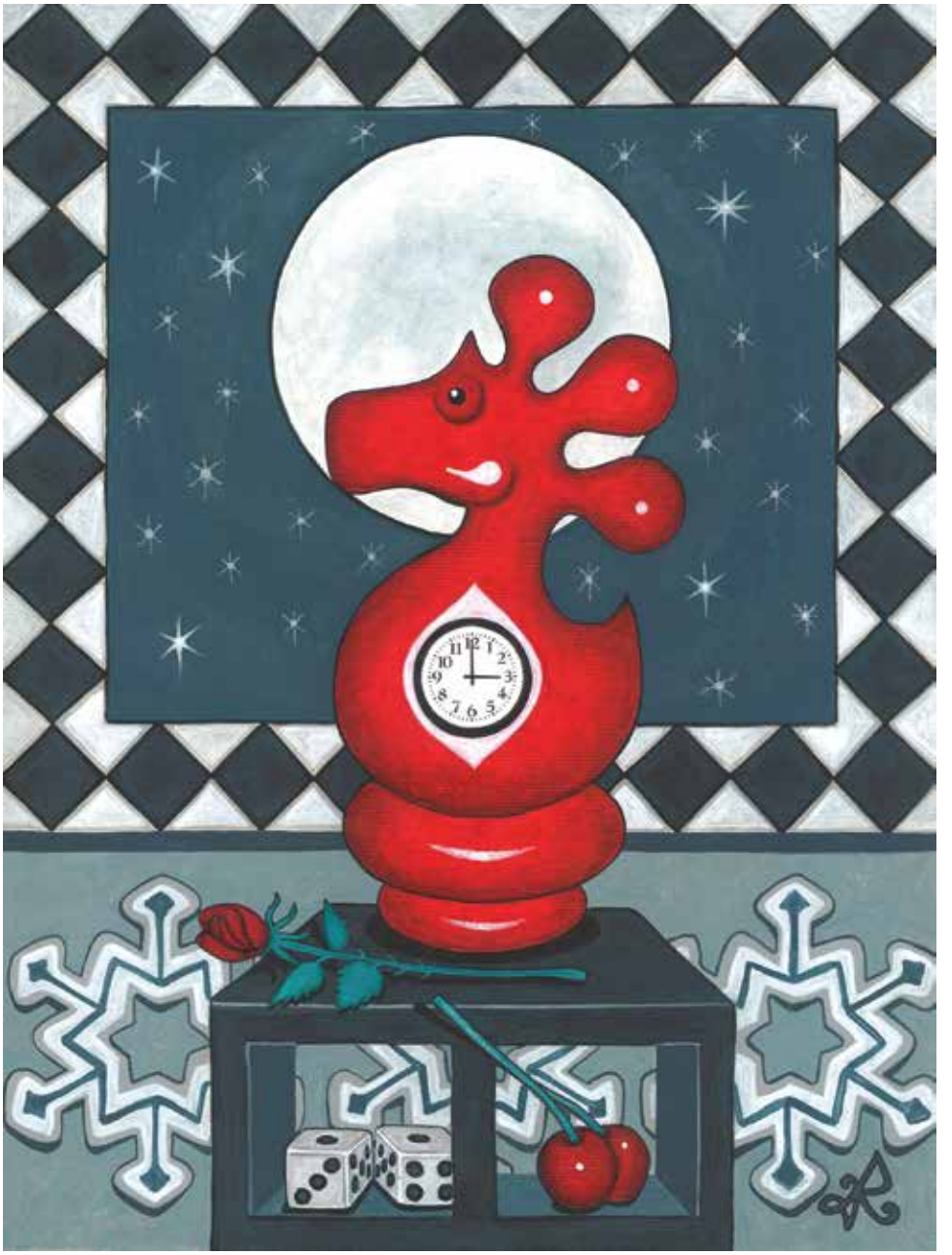
You need to be gardened by a love poem,
watered and sunned, waited for and arrived.

love in space

Bruce Weigl

The thinking I was doing as I worked
in the garden to try and understand
who should live with whom and why, the angle
of the sun throughout the changing summer
day, imagining them grown full with fruit,
the two maples dying but they won't admit it so, no,

the bare winter branches don't make them look
the same as every other tree.
When we turn towards winter there is a
particular grey light that comes to
inhabit the late afternoons and evenings.
It may or may not be dangerous to
be caught in that light. It happened to me
once. I was transported by some eyes so
far away I could barely hold on. If
you resist, you're pulled further in. Watch the
miles disappear, watch the time mean nothing,
watch the love grow and tangle, and then grow again.



an unforgettable one knight stand

Roopa Dudley