MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 15 ISSUE 3
THE VALLEY REVIEW

CHEEK

ISSN 1372-0999 $12.00

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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Cover Art:
Front: "A Turtle's Dream" by Sean Kang
Back: "A Turtle's Dream" by Sean Kang

Printing: Paradise Copies, Northampton, MA
Typeface: Gill Sans, Libel Suit (Ray Larabie)

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Special thanks:
Mark Alan Miller and Justin Pizzoferrato and Sonelab, Abandoned Building Brewery, Broadside Books, Big Red Frame, Topatoco, Joslin Hall, Cyd Scott, May It Howl, Oh My!, Corsello Butcheria, Michael Goldman, 4160 Tuesdays/Sarah McCartney, Avalon Game Cafe, Richard Wayne Horton, David Mintz, Salon 180 East, and all of our sponsors. Our sponsors deserve great thanks - please visit them and let them you know you appreciate their support of the arts!

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Vol. 15 Issue 3, September 2021, first printing. ISSN 2372-0999 (print) ISSN 2372-1200 (online)

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guest salutations from Jane Yolen and Peter Tacy

The Haunting of the Snark

Jane:
When asked to write the editorial for Meat for Tea, Peter and I looked at the name of the next issue and saw it was CHEEK.

Now, Peter and I had both hung around New York (city and state) and several New England colleges and Independent schools in the Northeast for most of our lives. And we said almost simultaneously—"Another word for snark!"

We had met, briefly dated for two months in college, I at Smith he at Williams, 65 years ago. We found one another again after both our wonderful marriages ended in the death of our spouses from cancer. I was a widow for fifteen years, he a widower for five.

I had published almost 400 books by then. He had published two, and many papers about education. I wrote poetry, some of which was published in literary magazines, anthologies, collections. He wrote poetry published in…his bottom drawer. Our first date pre-Covid was at the Emily Dickinson Museum.

The literary snark of yesteryear can still be found in poetry, old and new. Emily Dickinson's rhymes rock with it. "Tell all the truth but tell it slant…" And the last lines of Yeats' poem, "The Second Coming" shouts snark in vicious Irish syllables condemning both church and war: "what rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouches towards Bethlehem to be born." "The Jabberwocky is a hymn to snark , even with most of the words made up. And the marvelous four line epigram that the irreplaceable Alexander Pope had engraved on a collar for the King's dog: "I am his highness' dog at Kew./ Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?"

Peter:

It was Emily's whispered snarkiness that endeared her to us. Immured in two genteel New England educational institutions not far from and not entirely unlike the Amherst of Emily's time, we each had found that we could politely accept much that came our way with good humor and some gratitude — but only if a "cheeky" rebelliousness that was a real part of each of us could find a way to be expressed. Poetry offered each of us an opportunity to be completely present. We both seized upon it—and, in so doing, found an enduring friend in each other.

The snarkiness that we expressed back then, in the 1950's, has not vanished from either of us. It's still here, popping up in what we write separately and together, just as we still pay visits together to Emily's home and grave, in recognition of the special debt we owe her, as our High Priestess of intimately-expressed New England Cheek. Emily lived in times in which she could sustain civil discourse and adopt a polite tolerance of what was absurd and truly malign only if a way was at hand for her to respond honestly to such inanity. Writing poetry was the way for her to do so. It was/ (and is) for us, too.

Life without poetry would still go on, you know; but as something incomplete; small-L life. We prefer the capitalized version.

Both:

How close were our upbringings? When Jane won all the poetry prizes at Smith,

her father said, "You can't get rich writing poetry." When Peter won the poetry prizes at Williams, his father asked, "What use is it?"

"That, dear readers," we answer Popishly, "depends on whose dog you are."

waiting for a storm

Peter Tacy

It's always like this. We bustle about the place,
carrying stuff that might be moved by wind
out of harm's way; checking every space —
then sitting back, to wait for…whatever will begin.

Waiting — for all that comes our way — no matter what
we wish or intend or plan to do: is this a metaphor?
Life is like this. Yes, we plan, we hope, we plot,
but in the end can only wait…and hope for more…

More life to live. This is how the world explains
that we're all just waiting for our hurricanes.

getting strangled as gracefully as possible, or a year in the belly of the whale

Amanda Palmer

I. SKY STUFF

I've never been much for following Sky Stuff, but I've always felt like I'd be a more admirable and wholesome person if I did. I feel like my friends who follow Sky Stuff are somehow one rung up the Adult Ladder from me, like the people who know how to play chess, or do their own taxes.

It was May 26th, 2021, the night of the big Blood Moon Eclipse that everyone was twittering on about. I figured I should do something, find something, go, you know… look at it.

I managed to make the effort when Ash was a tiny baby, in 2016, to fly on a few days' notice — with a baby strapped to my back — from New York to Tennessee, to plant myself somewhere on the Path of Totality of the full solar eclipse. I still can't believe Path of Totality isn't the name of a New Age Nü-Metal Band. Then again, there are perhaps — fortunately? — not too many New Age Nü-Metal Bands.

I drove with some Tennessee people I barely knew to a field in the middle of nowhere and then wandered off with Baby Ash, standing in awe in some random southern summer cornfield as the light went strange and dim and the animals all quieted down.

The most remarkable memory of those few eclipse-minutes was the fact that Ash went down for a nap just as the light dimmed — like all the other mammals, he was fooled — and I lay him lovingly on a little patch of farm grass as I enjoyed the relative freedom of no crying baby. I stared up at the missing sun, tried to think profound thoughts, and did a few yoga sun salutations while listening to the far-off whoops and whoos from far-off neighboring farm fields, peering through my eclipse glasses from time to time at the strangeness in the sky.

When I picked Baby Ash up from the grass, he was covered in red spots.

I'd inadvertently allowed him — in my blissful moment of sun worship — to get bitten by a mob of chiggers, little practically-invisible members of the arachnid family that live in tall grass and bite the shit out of you if you don't wear long pants in the south.

He looked like he had chicken pox. Poor fucking baby. The proud time-lapse footage that I had cleverly captured by setting my iPhone against the root of a nearby tree — a one minute film of the darkening and lightening sky, starring my noble-looking sun salutations and my sweet innocent child wrapped in swaddling clothing at my goddess-like feet — now felt more like CCTV evidence of child negligence.

Last month, a rare moment of Sky Stuff — the Blood Moon Eclipse — came the way of Aotearoa New Zealand. Some folks in America were getting a bit of a view, but New Zealand had the jackpot viewing location.

Neil had Ash for the night, which was a nice coincidence. The Sky Stuff was scheduled for about 10pm and Ash would likely be asleep anyway, but I was also pleased that I would avoid any stupid encore of accidentally injuring my child during the act of sky-gazing.

Ash is almost six now. He has not been in America since he was three.

He turns six in September, and he loves telling people his birthday date — September 16th. He also loves telling people about Greek Myths, particularly the fact that Hades has smoke coming out of his head, and did you know that Medusa's hair is made out of SNAKES, and did you know that there is a river that divides Dead People and Alive People and that Dead People can't go where Alive People are and Alive People can't go where Dead People are, and he also loves telling people that he and his friend from kindergarten Aya HAD a wedding planned, but then they just decided to be best friends, but they are still going to have a wedding but that it is going to be a best-friend wedding, and about the habits of all the different carnivorous plants, listing the various ways such plants lure their prey.

"DID YOU KNOW…." he will begin many sentences, sounding remarkably like his father, whose propensity to begin most sentences with "DID YOU KNOW…." is so habitual that it's entered the lexicon of Things Neil Says That I Make Fun Of But Hopefully Not To The Point Where His Feelings Are Hurt But Seriously He Says It So Often It's Comical So I Have to Point It Out.

Ash is obsessed with Animals Killing Other Animals, Plants Who Kill Animals, Gods and Monsters and Trolls and Beasts who mangle and swallow things whole; he's basically just really into murdering, killing, trapping, poisoning, and the destruction of life in general.

This seems natural and predictable to me. If we were living in our usual hunter-gatherer situation — unlike this mess of a modern world — he'd be following his parents around all day, watching us hunt, trap, gather and forage, instead of this confusing barrage of nonsensical images he's exposed to: adults driving cars, adults sitting in chairs, adults getting very stressed about emails and texts, peering anxiously into little three-inch screens as if that's where the food is coming from.

None of this is what his DNA has conditioned him for. He's supposed to be learning from us how to find shelter, evade predators, hunt, get food. It's futile, but I'm trying. Whenever possible, I take him to the local Countdown Supermarket and he gets to pick any vegetable he wants and we cook it for dinner. It is not like taking him hunting, but it's better than nothing. We hunt the wild celery under the punishing fluorescent lights of modernity.

I wondered what to do for eclipse night.

I heard through our local babysitter, Bee, that there was a cacao ceremony somewhere on the island, hidden in the bush (that's what they call the woods here in New Zealand. I know, it's sort of funny) on the other side of our tiny village, in some private house that apparently gets used for little yoga events and other hippie undertakings. This isn't unusual on Waiheke. A lot of things just happen in people's houses, it's a tiny island, and there aren't a ton of venues. Massage therapists work out of their living rooms and rely on word of mouth, people teach yoga out of their converted garages, and people run craft beer and ping-pong speakeasies out of their basements.

I was intrigued by the idea of going to hang with the hippies for Sky Stuff night. I didn't have any other invitations, and the idea of just going to the beach by myself felt kinda lonely. I've been lonely enough this year. Like many people displaced or locked down because of COVID and forced into monastic celibacy for a variety of reasons, my thirst for any sort of human contact has been raging.

To further entice me, I'd also just taken part in my first cacao ceremony a few weeks before, while on a hiking retreat in the freezing South Island mountains. It was, from the outside, basically just a group of people in a circle, doing a little meditation and drinking some super-nice unsweetened hot chocolate.

But it was also a ritual. We were asked to consider our paths, our families. I hadn't eaten anything for a while, and I was therefore full of feelings, so when I drank the cacao I got immediately weepy. I then wrote a long letter to the part of myself who talks too fucking much. It was relieving.

So I decided to go to the island cacao ceremony and maybe see if I didn't have another enlightening insight about something, anything.

Like many traditional sacred gatherings, the cacao ceremony was being organized solely through Facebook. I never message through Facebook, but I grumbly submitted, sending the guy in charge of the cacao ceremony a little message reserving my place with a promise that I'd pay him the $27 in cash since I didn't have a Kiwi bank account to do a bank transfer as requested. The person running the sacred ceremony sent me back a thumbs-up emoji.

Who are these people? I thought.

The ceremony was scheduled — according to the Facebook event page — to start at 8pm, and planned to leave my island rental house at around 7:45pm on my bicycle (my heavy-duty electric bike that I bought in Hawkes Bay, my beautiful bike that has a kid-seat on the back,

my bike that I speed down to Ash's school on to pick him up with a banana or an apple in my pocket, my beloved bike that was very expensive and tarnished-silvery-gray and heavy with thick tires, my lovely bike that is the pride of my loins, and *oh* my blue bicycle helmet) in order to arrive at the Hippie House at eight o'clock on the dot.

But at around 7:30, as I finished up eating a tiny salad in my quiet kitchen, the clouds parted and moon — in which I had taken a sudden new interest this evening — started to look really alluring. I could see it rising up over the low, rugged mountains to the east from my front porch, an astoundingly round and bright sight, this blood moon that was about to be partially swallowed up by the shadow of the earth.

Somehow the knowledge that the moon was about to be partly erased gave it a different appearance, a kind of thrilling sheen.

I was excited, and lonely, and done with my day's work, and for the first time in days, I had no child with me. So, feeling giddy, I decided to flip on the internet and do a quick little piano-stream webcast thing for my patrons.

I hadn't done one of these spontaneous patron-only streams in ages. Even though I knew I couldn't show the bright, bright moon through my camera phone on a web-stream, I figured I could at least put on some goth make-up and share the excitement. With parts of the whole earth being excited by the moon and New Zealand being in the first time zone to see the Blood Moon, I felt somehow privileged. *I am in a remote place in the world where there is Sky Stuff happening! And I am PARTICIPATING!*

I never really get dressed up anymore. There's kinda no reason to. Not that I have many dress-up clothes here. I came to New Zealand in March of 2020 with a single suitcase, expecting to go home to New York a week later. Then Covid and the ensuing collapses and disasters happened. Nightlife and dress-up life are a distant memory. Even though I could theoretically swing it, I haven't been performing much, I am too exhausted. And I never really go to parties, as there aren't many parties to go to, and I'm also too exhausted, and anyway the kinds of parties I would go to are the kinds of parties where I wear jeans and flip-flops. It's an island.

So I put on my one Nice Dress, the only one I've bought since getting here: it's a long, flowing two-layered rainy-grey tunic that I spotted in an Old Lady and Tourist shop back in Hawkes Bay, the first town we lived in after lockdown. We lived there for ten months before we came to Waiheke, in time for Ash to start Kindergarten.

The Nice Dress makes me look a little like a Greek-goddess statue, and a little like a clothesline.

It's floaty and expansive, with no waist; if you spread your arms out, it's just a giant square and you're almost as big as an ordinary twin-size bedsheet. The material is scarfy; thin enough to feel soft and delicious, but thick enough that you can wear it without immediate nipple offense.

I donned the Nice Dress, I did the salad dishes, I lit some candles, I put on some eyeliner for the first time in ages, and then I did about thirty minutes of frolicking in front of my patrons as the moon begged to be described. I chatted with strangers through little text bubbles, played the piano a little, and then looked at the time. Again, I hadn't eaten much that day, possibly in a subconscious bid to re-enact my enlightening cacao experience #1, but on that note, it probably wasn't wise to drink two glasses of red wine on a tiny salad in any scenario.

I left the house in my flowing grey tunic with my wallet, phone and keys tucked safely in a cross-body bag. I felt electric. I had made it through the day, I had made it though the fucking year, I had managed to do something on the internet for my patrons, which is always a thing that makes me feel fulfilled and less guilty, and I was on my way to a cacao ceremony on a tiny island in New Zealand on my electric bike. IN A NICE DRESS. I put my blue helmet on. It was dark. I switched on the little headlight in the front of my bike. I pushed back the kickstand and started rolling down the steep driveway.

We live atop a hill. The whole island of Waiheke is a hill. Volcanic, dramatically squished in on itself, there are practically no flat areas, no broad streets, no expansive flat fields like our last town, Hawkes Bay, where everything was endless sheep and apple fields as far as the eye could see: the Kansas of New Zealand.

Our volcanic driveway is short and sharp, I keep banging the undercarriage of my car on it, and the actual street itself is also mildly perilous. I checked my phone before tucking it away, one final time, into my cross-body bag. It was 8:15, but the cacao ceremony certainly wouldn't start *exactly* at eight o'clock. I had a few minutes, and the Hippie House was only a ten-minute bike ride away. The salty ocean air started to rush past my face as I floated out into the night, feeling like a beautiful apparition in a beautiful dress, having just done something magical, about to embark on something even more magical. I felt so… I dunno… proud of myself.

At the bottom of the driveway, I began to pick up speed. I turned right onto our steep street. I was flying now, the moon directly in front of me, beckoning me onwards, rising, rising, shimmering between massive cumulus clouds. I felt invited. I felt inspiring, like a Good Witch on a Bike, a kind sorceress, going past Dorothy's window in a black-and-white dream sequence.

And then I felt something around my neck, strangling me.

I knew immediately what had happened.

My flowing tunic had gotten caught in the back wheel, and was pulling me off the bike.

I was careening down a hill in the dark, going fifteen miles an hour, being strangled by my own fucking dress.

***

I called my mother the other day.

She and John, my lifelong step-dad, have been on Cape Cod for most of the pandemic, living near the sea in their little summer house.

She asked me if I had heard the Story of the Whale.

I had not. What was the Story of the Whale?

I haven't been on social media much lately, and speaking as an addict, I am increasingly grateful for that, and proud of myself.

Even after Trump lost the election, the doom-scrolling still kept a tight grip on me. The January 6th attack on the Capitol happened, and things still felt urgent. I could not stop scrolling.

But by around mid-March, with Covid still surging and moaning but with no news from the States blaring daily emergency warnings about the immediate safety of my friends and family, I decided to detox. I stopped reading the New York Times every few hours. Then, for a few days here and there, I stopped reading it at all. For a week, I stopped scrolling through Facebook, and Twitter, and Instagram. Then another week. I stopped even listening to RNZ (the Kiwi equivalent of NPR, which I've found very comforting to listen to since arriving in this foreign country).

I started taking pleasure in just reading the kind and thoughtful comments on my Patreon. I started hiking more.

And then these things happen, like the Story of the Whale, and, like the old days, I don't know unless someone tells me.

And as it turns out, it was my mother who told me the Story of the Whale, and I think, had my mother not told me, nobody else would have told me.

After she told me the Story of the Whale, I went on to share it with many locals over the course of my day. Ash's babysitter (she'd seen the story on The Internet). The woman at the grocery store, where I go almost daily to get fruits and vegetables (she'd also heard about the whale). The optometrist, as she administered my eye exam and had to kill some time while my pupil re-dilated. We sat there, making small talk, and I said: have you heard the Story of the Whale?

She had not. I got to be the one who told her the Story of the Whale.

After my eye exam, as we walked out of the examination room, she told her husband behind the counter (he's also an optometrist, it's the cutest thing, they're both optometrists, and they run the little island glasses store as a couple).

Anyway, he HAD heard the Story of the Whale. Maybe he saw it on the internet. I don't know. Maybe he heard it on the radio news. Maybe it made international headlines. I'll never know. I just know my mother told me and by the time I left the house that day, most of New Zealand knew the story.

This is the Story of the Whale.

Off the shores of Provincetown, a veteran local fisherman named Michael Packard was underwater, pulling up lobster pots when his co-fishing friend Josiah noticed a burst of white bubbles emerging from Michael's diving gear. Then Josiah saw an explosion of white water. Michael Packard had been literally swallowed by a humpback whale — a young one, they think.

He was inside the whale for almost a minute, and then he got spit out.

I was inside it. I was inside its mouth, he said.

It tried to eat me….I could sense I was moving, and I could feel the whale squeezing with the muscles in his mouth.

From the Washington Post: [1]

> *At about 8 a.m., Packard plunged about 45 feet deep, and almost reached the ocean floor when he "felt this truck hit me and everything just went dark," he said in an interview with WBTS.*
>
> *"And I could feel just … hard stuff all around me," Packard said. "And I just thought, 'Did I just get eaten by a white shark?' And then I said, 'No, I don't feel any teeth.' And I said, 'Oh my God, I'm in the mouth of a whale. With his mouth shut.' "*
>
> *Packard felt the whale swimming and shoved his breathing regulator back into his mouth.*
>
> *"I'm like, 'This is how you're gonna go, Michael. This is how you're going to die. In the mouth of a whale,' " he recalled thinking.*
>
> *For about 30 to 40 seconds, Packard twisted, turned and coped with an agonizing pressure on his legs. He could feel the whale's forceful head shakes.*

***