MEAT FOR TEA

VOL 5 ISSUE 4
THE VALLEY REVIEW

Mince

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.

Staff:
Editor-in-Chief: Meaty Gonzales
Editor: Elizabeth MacDuffie
Graphic Design: Rafæl Lino
Issue Layout: Mark Alan Miller
Impresario: Elizabeth MacDuffie

Contributors: Emily Brandehoff, Carol Brussel, Ramiro Davaro-Comas, Lori Desrosiers, Tonya Dixon, Ian Gamache, James Heflin, Bronwen Hodgkinson, Aunia Kahn, Myra King, George Lenker, Daniel S. Miller, David P. Miller, Damien Ober, Colin Panetta, Claudio Parentela, Connolly Ryan, Bradley Sands, Jessamyn Smyth, Eliza Stassinos, Tom Sturm

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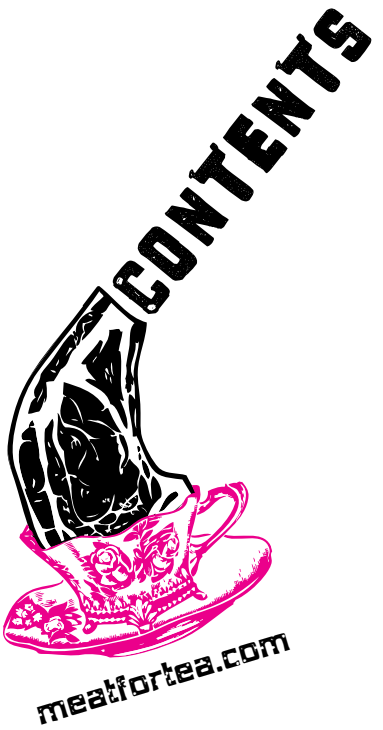


salutations from the editor

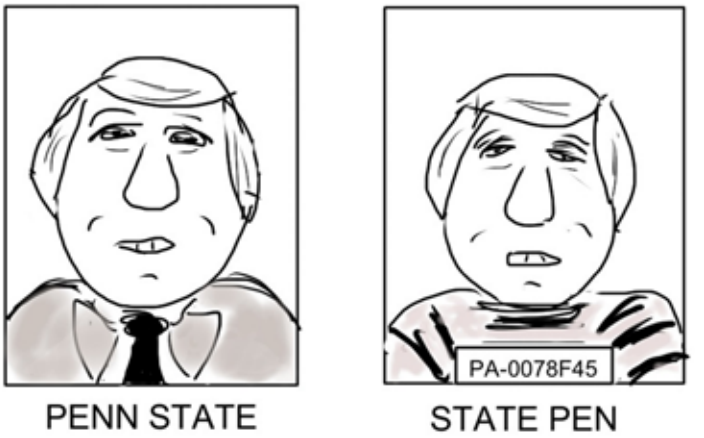
Yet another quarter has passed in our wondrous valley and strange weather continues to make its acquaintance… this time a Nor'easter in late October compromised the bastions of civilization. Poor Meaty had to make do with sponge bathing in saved bathtub water (freshened with bay rum, of course) and dining by candlelight. Not altogether bad things, but tedious done five nights in a row. This storm was the icing on the cake after a year of other strange weather phenomena. Need I remind you of the tornado, earthquake, hurricane and floods that have ravaged this fair valley.? Something is afoot. I imagine tree workers have had a very busy year.

However, the valley has provided many suitable distractions from the forces of nature, including the newly formed Quintessence Easthampton. My dear friend Charles and I enjoyed a tour of downtown Easthampton at a progressive Mediterranean themed dinner party. I, myself, purchased several Ikat oriental rugs to cover my cold hardwood floors for winter, had several prints - including one from Burns Maxey - framed, picked up tasteful jewelry for some loved ones, found a striking side table, and bought a stack of signed first editions. All this, while enjoying baklava, tzatziki, pinot noir, and live music. Speaking of noir, Easthampton now boasts its very own cinema, showing free films and offering wine, beer, and a delightful menu.

For this issue's corresponding release show, Cirque de Fantomes, we welcome the performances of Dan Cashman's Video Mixtape, The Happy Hour Burlesque Troupe, live painting by Ramiro Davaro-Comas, and music by Them There Ghosts, Walking Ghosts, and Azwan and the Savages. Should prove to be an outstanding show.

Besos y Abrazos,

Meaty



The natural transition for Jerry Sandusky

George Lenker


never
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go botanic.
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extracted from the petals of the pink rose
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high potency
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liar

Tonya Dixon

There's a stuck thing in me
Here – at the side of the throat
No, there, just behind the shoulder blade
No, wait – there's something behind the eye – under the lid.

I'm haunting myself
All of the promise of the person I would be
I'm a liar and much too lazy to be a thief.

Claudio Parentela

excerpt from canticle

Tonya Dixon

Blink's here. I can feel him. Probably hiding in the pantry or under the stairs, wondering how long it'll take someone to find him. I often ignore his little game – it doesn't seem fair for me to look for him; I'd find him too soon and ruin the game.

Auntie and Blue are here, too. Blue, sitting at the table, reading the paper. Auntie, her arms speckled with little marks of burns where years of bacon grease lept from the hot iron skillet to her brown arms. Auntie, the polka-dotted lady, like every other lady on that street, except for the strange woman who lived in the yellow house in the middle of the block. They say she only eats grass and potatoes, and spends all of her time in the woods and in the creek beyond the field. They also say she's never left her house. I don't know what to believe, so I don't think about it when I remember to forget.

Grass and potatoes! What an unfortunate soul who hasn't had the pleasure of spending time with the bacon-angel.

Lydia sidles over to the counter, and sneaks her hand close to the bacon plate, close but…

Pop! spatula on the back of the hand – "Get out of there, greedy. Wash your hands and set the table." That was Auntie. "Hmph." That was Blue. Blue wasn't Auntie's husband. Lydia knew that for sure. But she wasn't sure just what Blue was. He certainly wasn't a table-setter. But he was a bacon eater.

Table set, hands washed, Blink out from hiding – food is served and eaten. Grunts and um-hms of appreciation richocheted around the room. Thank yous said, kisses given on a summer morning. Dishes scraped and door to the outside slammed! No dish washing today for Lydia because it is the last day of summer and a Saturday besides, and on one cared if she was in her nightgown. Nothing but the chickens and Blink out there anyways.

It was too hot already for other folk who had grown soft and fat and unaccustomed to OUTSIDE. The cool of the indoors and the low hum of the air conditioner friend enough for most.

For Lydia, in her wrinkled nightgown and greasy fingers, the short trek to the long grass was a delicious coda of summer's song. Can we do it again?

What if one becomes two? Or two become one? That, the latter, we profess to be quite familiar with. The two become one. The one is always trying to become two – believe in a world of duality – where there can be no black without white, no ground without sky, no heaven without hell.

*

pirate treasure

Bradley Sands

I used to think the walls in my bedroom were invincible, but now I'm all grown up and armed with a hammer. The room has metamorphosed since I discarded it for a series of "big boy" rooms where the rent didn't include the muffled sound of our parents' voices. This is my diagnosis: It's caught the living room's illness. A décor that stresses looking rather than touching; enjoying the view rather than sitting, sleeping, existing.

An expensive couch cushion lies on the Formica platform that formerly supported my mattress, covered in decorative pillows. A chess set that no one has ever played sits on top of what was once my desk. Plants and mementos from our youth have claimed the bookshelves. The walls showcase the paintings of an artist who's paralyzed from the waist up and draws abstract shapes with his feet... and I'd like to mention that I've removed each one to preserve their monetary value.

Whenever I came back to visit, I would escape into this room to get a break from the chaos of our family. But it never took long for our mother's radar to detect the funny business that I was up to. She was so afraid I would smudge a surface with a fingerprint or rearrange her carefully constructed order that she would escort me off the premises every time.

I wonder if she used my former bedroom to compensate for not having a room with a view. Did she sometimes open its door and peek in to get an eyeful of the beauty that she had created? If you ask me, the room looks ugly and tacky - a middle-class woman's quest to reproduce a room of an upper-class home. I don't believe any of that supernatural bullshit - but if I did, I'm pretty sure her ghost would be gazing through the doorway, furious with my behavior. I can almost hear her screeching, "Why are you doing this to me, Matthew? Why are you destroying my walls?"

And I keep pounding with Dad's hammer. Through my coarse, brown wallpaper. Past the drywall. My eagerness to discover what's inside releasing plaster dust and mold that I hope isn't toxic.

I hit something solid, making a clang. It deflects the hammer off course, tearing a strip of wallpaper off to the side, and the hammer makes its final descent into my right thumb. A little blood drips onto my new suit. Not that it really matters. I bought it especially for today and doubt I'll wear it again.

The tear in the wallpaper unveils a few chocolate chip cookies. It's the painted kind, not the fossilized, belonging to Cookie Monster in a mural of the Sesame Street characters that our parents commissioned before I was born. God, I haven't thought about it in years. When I was young and fresh out of stimuli, I would try to catch a glimpse of the mural by staring at the unappealing wallpaper that our dad put up after I was too old and embarrassed to have a giant bird on my wall. But all I could make out were abstract shapes, sort of like the paintings that are lying at my feet.

The phone rings. I don't understand why the room needs a phone. Our mother has been enforcing her "no sitting rule" ever since I graduated and moved out. At least up until two days ago.

The answering machine kicks in after a few rings. Dad says, "Hello, you've reached 486-2585," while I suckle the wound on my thumb. "Please leave a message after the beep."

It's the first time I've heard his voice in weeks. Maybe I should have called more often? Yeah, I probably shouldn't have only called when I needed some extra money.

The beep hits me like the harsh buzz of my alarm clock and wakes me up from a pleasant daydream about spending a day with Dad.

"Hi, Matt. Are you there?" you say. "Pick up if you're there. Come on. Pick up. Pick up. Pick up. I thought you might be here. Where the hell are you? Everyone is already here for Mom and Dad's funeral. Except you. Well, maybe you're in the bathroom or something and will get this later. The service starts in an hour, so get your ass over here. Everybody's asking for you. Last chance to pick up, c'mon . . . Ok, I'm hanging up now."

Why do you even bother? I've told you over and over again that I like my final memory of a person to be from when they were living and breathing rather than stiff in a box. Or flying out to visit me in California six months ago, not lying side-by-side in matching coffins, rendered unrecognizable by a car crash and a mortician's success (ensuring that grieving relatives don't get nauseous) and failure (giving them the features of strangers). I'd rather spend my morning lurking around our childhood home, choosing what memories to take with me and what to leave behind.

I eject the answering machine cassette and slip it into my pocket. Now whenever I'm missing Dad, I can listen to his voice - assuming I can find a small enough tape recorder. I really should have called more.

The abstract shapes of the mural seem to throb beneath the wallpaper, enticing me to excavate the bliss of childhood. Using the claw of the hammer, I rapidly scrape at the wall. An hour passes and our parents' service begins, that is unless they've delayed it for my benefit. I'm dripping in sweat. Tiny scratches now cover the wall. I squint my eyes, creating a rainbow of faded colors. I call it quits.

Pirate treasure beats out children's show murals every time.

I raise the hammer. And swing.

Metal hits metal.

It's astounding. During the pause between raising the hammer and swinging, I didn't stop to remember the outcome of my last thwack.

I guess I was thinking about Dad.

I eyeball the hole in the wall. There is a dented pipe. Fortunately, it is not spouting water all over my new sports jacket. Unfortunately, this is where the treasure is supposed to be and nary a gold doubloon is in sight. I reevaluate my map.

The treasure map is spread out over the chess set, with the pieces lying in a pile off to the side. I procured it some time before you were born, after surviving the thirty-seven foot drop on the Pirates of the Caribbean ride and having my fears alleviated by merchandise from Disney World's pirate-themed gift shop. And let me tell you, having a brand new brother was just soooo great. Life was jut soooo wonderful after Mom and Dad couldn't afford any more Floridian vacations.

X marks the spot, but I guess I miscalculated the location of the spot. I'm not going to blame myself - I was only eight. In second grade, I spent a winter's worth of recesses sitting at my lunchroom table and studying the map. Two months into the task and the Caribbean islands started to resemble the rooms in my house with my bedroom bearing an uncanny likeness to Crooked Island.

X marks the spot on Crooked Island=the wall above my bed.

I asked Mom if I could knock it down. She said no. I spent the remainder of my adolescence obsessing about what was hidden behind the wall.

When I came across the map in a kitchen drawer two hours ago, I knew that I either had to search for the treasure or mourn all the time I wasted during my youth.

Yeah, the treasure must be in another room.

***

Fluorescent lighting swan-dives over the kitchen, spotlighting its countertops. A smorgasbord of tasteful delicacies is being kept under wraps, awaiting the post-burial luncheon.

Our extended family will mosey in, famished from their emotional flume ride, prattling on about how I didn't show up for my own parents' funeral. If my plan is to succeed, I will flee before an aunt has the chance to pass over the threshold. Instead of staying around to explain my absence, I will eavesdrop from behind the locked door of my bedroom, sticking my tongue out in the face of social obligation.

They will gasp at the sight of the wall across from the refrigerator in unison. And I'll shrug my shoulders, unmoved by the second shock they've had to deal with this week.

A feeling of regret will pass through the crown of my head, sneaking into my mind without an invitation. I wonder how you'll react to the destruction of the place where you grew up. Will you blow your top? Weep at first sight? Or gasp along with the others?

I don't think I'll be able to survive that collective gasp. I'll never know if you'll be among the hoard. Even after living with you for thirteen years, I still can't recognize one of your heavy breaths.

But I still can't stop hammering. Thinking about Crooked Island has brought on a craving for pretzels. And although Mom and Dad stopped stocking pretzels after we moved out, I chose the kitchen to be my next victim. It's flawed logic, I know, but I didn't have any better ideas.

It feels like the calm before our father used to get home from work whenever we'd done something exceptionally naughty and Mom chose to avoid responsibility with a "Wait until your father comes home!"

Do you think that other mothers mine bad sitcoms for tips on child rearing?

Remember when I pushed you on your Big Wheels across the basement floor and we ran over a carelessly positioned extension cord and the television came crashing down behind us? That wait felt like the Pirates of the Caribbean line. We didn't do anything for hours but look out the front window and twitch. But after he walked through the front door and Mom turned us in, he just grinned. Instead of the customary attempt at making our ears bleed with his anger, he told us he was glad no one was hurt.

I hope you'll take a page from his guide to being a dad, and I'll regret that I won't hear you smile. But I'm putting my money on a more audible response.

The kitchen wall bends to my will like putty. "Didja see me, Dad?" I would say if he were here. "Didja see me build an observation station into the center of your wall?" He used to tell me I would never be able to create anything with my sweat and grit. "For Pete's sake," he once said, "you can't even change a flat tire." Then he snatched his toolbox from my hands, forbidding me from opening it until I could tell a flathead from a Phillips screwdriver.

I didn't want his testosterone-dripping box anyway. I was just searching through his closet for the porn stash that every father is required to have. But I know the difference between the screwdrivers and Dad's hammer makes me feel like I have the power of Excalibur surging through my hands.

But my dominion over the wall does not extend to its interior. The hollow, empty space is outside my kingdom. Captain Barnacle is sorry, he chose to hide his treasure behind another wall.

Captain Barney Barnacle, Scourge of the Seven Slip and Slides. Hey, I was a second grader with an overwhelming need to name everything. I wish I could still remember the names of my toes.

My stomach does the Funky Chicken.

I open the refrigerator, spoiling my view of coupons struggling to escape the captivity of magnets. The inside is bare, except for a Ziploc bag filled with cookies-it's as if Mom and Dad took the week off from grocery shopping so their food wouldn't be spoiled when they came back from their vacation. While I'm at it, I relocate the luncheon food to the fridge. I wonder who left it out on the counter. Was it you? Did you even stop to consider that unrefrigerated food doesn't go well with the stomachs of the bereaved?

I grab the bag of cookies, open the seal, choose the biggest one, and see if it fits in my mouth. Deliciousness unbound! It's one of Mom's famous chocolate chip cookies. Growing up among indistinguishable, bland meats, we celebrated it as her token achievement. The gooey mess in my mouth stops me from giving in to our father's conditioning to compliment Mom on the quality of her cooking after my first bite. I increase the speed of my chewing, anxious to experience one of those rare moments when I'm not lying about her cuisine. When my mouth is empty enough to accommodate the sound of my voice, I let loose a "Wow, Mom. This was really good."

Mom and Dad forced me to attend a few funerals in the past and each one of them honored our family's tradition to pass up the opportunity to stand on a pulpit while expressing grief and reminiscing about all the good times. But factoring in the possibility of a rogue element in our family, there's a slight chance the eulogy portion of the service has begun. And if I were a masochist like you, I would be over there, trying to blare out our relatives' sobs with tales of eating these scrumptious cookies.

Needing brain fuel to work out the location of the treasure, I eat the entire bag. My excesses leave me with an upset stomach and a recollection of our father's crooked teeth.

***

An imaginary line splits our parents' room in two, dating back as far as I can remember. There's such a strong contrast between the sides it feels like I'm standing in two different rooms. They are funhouse mirror images-with identical closets, sides of their mattress, bedside bureaus, and chests of drawers-but the furniture is distinguished by its accessories. These objects separate the sides into genders, designating Mom's territory and Dad's territory. I stand there, watching as Mom's romance novels team up with her pantyhose, second favorite red dress, and impractical shoes to fight a never-ending battle against Dad's dirty tighty whiteys, television remote, and electronic toothbrush.

I sneer at the spot above Dad's bureau, above his toothbrush, and give it a whack. The wood howls. I hope the pirate captain had a good reason for hiding his treasure above a middle-aged man's toothbrush. The wood howls again.

I imagine them arguing. Dad saying, "Let him do what he wants! This isn't our wall anymore! The accident has stripped us of our rights to it." Mom escalating the conflict by squabbling over who can shout the loudest. Dad winning. Mom celebrating his victory by throwing their VCR against the wall. Dad rushing off to the movie theater to take his anger out on a violent action movie. Mom waiting. Dad returning. Mom and Dad making up. Hugging. Kissing. Additional things that I refuse to visualize in my head.

A cloud of dust puffs up around me. I keep going, ignoring the sting in my eyes. One more blow and the wind hits my left cheek, a speck of sunlight adds to the sting, and I know I'll have to start all over again.

The stillness of the untouched walls mock me. The pirate gold could be hidden behind any of them and my ill-considered twists of logic have neglected all but one. My cheek itches, maddeningly, but I don't let myself scratch it. I don't deserve relief. Captain Barnacle didn't