

JERSEY  
DEVIL  
PRESS

ISSUE 97  
JANUARY 2018

★  
NET  
ZEL





# **JERSEY DEVIL PRESS**

January 2018, Issue 97

ISSN 2152-2162

Online Editor: Laura Garrison

Production Editor: Samuel Snoek-Brown

Associate Editor: Monica Rodriguez

Readers: Rebecca Vaccaro, Amanda Chiado

Founding Editor/Publisher: Eirik Gumeny

All stories and other contributions are copyrighted to their respective authors  
unless otherwise noted.

[www.jerseydevilpress.com](http://www.jerseydevilpress.com)

**Table of Contents:**

<b>Editor’s Note</b>	3
<b>Jumpers, Holt Clark</b>	4
<b>The Lights Are the Eyes of Animals, GJ Hart</b>	17
<b>Travis in Hollywood, Timothy Day</b>	24
<b>Venetian Ink, Amanda E.K.</b>	32

## Editor's Note

January always makes us want to try new and exciting things. Of course, it's way too cold to actually leave the house, so we will take our thrills vicariously, curled up on the sofa with a fluffy cat, a bowl of popcorn, and a steaming mug of Dr Pepper, because we ran out of tea and are feeling adventurous.

Through the magic of the stories in Issue Ninety-Seven, you can start a simple yet unsettling job with us and hold our hand as we leap from a burning building. After you accompany us on a bizarre audition, we'll all get a whole garden's worth of tattoos.

What's the worst that could happen?

— Laura Garrison

# Jumpers

Holt Clark

With a running start a strong jumper can leap from the roof of the Wexler building onto a thin cornice attached to St. Anne's Cathedral next door. Zorf Rierden discovered this possibility while scoping out new territory for his crew. Zorf covered the distance in a surging instant, but it took him twenty minutes of careful climbing, freezing against the cold bricks, to get back down. He stood shivering on the wet pavement after, his breath rising up like steam. He removed a little notebook and a chewed-up golf pencil from his shirt pocket. Eleven feet wide and sixty feet up, he recorded. A beautiful gap.

Jumping was part of a new movement that emphasized the primacy of physical courage above all else. It was a rejection of the digital, the cultural, the cognitive—these were control. A generation of young people had recoiled from the influence of the screen. Technology in any form was unfashionable, passé, meant for old people. Celebrating the human body and its potential was the noble cause of a new age.

Their parents were mystified by it. The logic of this new rebellion was opaque. When asked, their children spouted shibboleths. They spoke of the majesty of biomechanics and the beauty of the human form. Whatever violated their ideology was condemned as anathema to the movement. Beyond this, details were scarce.

Zorf ran with a crew of jumpers known as The Sudden Stop, and their territory was all of Calaveras County. Zorf was known for his discipline, and for his emphasis on what he called, “knowing your architecture.”

"Now your roofing tile patterns are a crucial aspect," Zorf told

his crew. The team had assembled in an alleyway downtown. It was hot, late August. They were seated on trash cans with their legs folded, listening to Zorf lecture. Zorf was all nervous energy, vaulting from ledge to ledge, chattering, boosting off the lid of a dumpster and flying thirteen feet up to a marble sphere that hung from the old dry-goods building and latching on. His two callused hands squeezed it like a balloon he might pop.

"Kylee," he grunted, quizzing her. "Define imbrication!"

Kylee closed her eyes. "An arrangement of tiles such that each one overlaps the next, as on the scales of a fish. Or on rooftops."

"Significance?"

"It can affect landing dynamics. Landing with one's momentum against the pattern is safest. Landing in the direction of the tiles can be sketchier, and with ceramic or slate tiles can dislodge them. You could fall, Zorf."

"That's right you could fall!" Zorf said, and then to everyone: "And what happens if you fall?"

"It's not the fall that kills you," they replied in unison, "it's the sudden stop!"

Zorf released his grip on the marble ornament and fell to the asphalt with total grace. "Footwear inspection," he barked, "line 'em up."

They stuck their feet out in a row and Zorf passed along it.

"This sole is cracking," he said, "glue it."

"Scrape off that gum, Tara."

"Frayed shoelaces, funky smell."

"Learn to tie a knot, this isn't kindergarten."

And then, "Alright, good enough" he said. "Treasurer, read the accounts."

Bianca Folks opened her binder and recited the numbers. "We owe Tar and Mineral three hundred dollars for the broken window

at their Cedarview plant. I got another call about it. That's not going away. We owe six hundred and fifty dollars for the new crash mats. A hundred more for medical tape. Fifty for incidentals and sundries, not including food. We owe twelve hundred dollars to St. Francis Hospital for Keaton's broken elbow." There were dirty looks at Keaton, who'd been careless on a huge abstract sculpture in the park.

"I've said sorry like a million times," Keaton said, still in his cast, "you wish I'd zonked?"

"Keaton's fall was unfortunate, but noble," Zorf reminded his crew. "Let's not be assholes about it."

Bianca continued. "Food costs remain high. We're looking at another four hundred this month just to cover weekly grub. As I've said before, a base camp would cut down on costs significantly, and—"

"Thank you Bianca, that's enough for now," Zorf said, and stretched like a cat to close his hands around the last rung of a fire escape. "OK people," he continued, "in case you've forgotten, paying a debt is not anathema to the movement. It's praiseworthy. So let's hustle. Any ideas for revenue growth?"

Nathan removed his sunglasses. "The McCabe Concert hall is re-painting its ceiling. They need scaffold monkeys with steady hands. I'm going down there at four."

"Take Tad and Monika with you," Zorf said. "Find out what they're paying, and if it's noble, send for two more of us."

Fiona, the smallest member of The Sudden Stop, beamed and shared a recent accomplishment. "I made some scratch climbing the new cell tower for BellComm," she bragged. "You should have seen their faces when I unclipped from the safety line."

"Noble risk," Zorf said, and nudged her with his elbow, "keep it up."

"That's been disbursed," Bianca said flatly, "and it barely put a



dent in our accounts. We need something bigger."

"Well shit." Zorf said. "Damn."

The firefighter's union held a fundraising gala each year for the families of men killed in the line of duty, and all the best people attended. At nine o'clock Zorf and his crew were at the stage entrance waiting to be let in. They were stretching and hopping in preparation for a job. They'd been hired to help re-enact one of the worst disasters in the city's history, a horrendous warehouse fire dating back to the 1960s. The warehouse had been packed full of greasy sawdust and steel canisters of liquid nitrogen. The night's production was titled *Fire and Ice: A musical for Heroes*, and Zorf's crewmembers were to play the acrobatic firefighters who scrambled over the facade dodging flame jets and ice blasts controlled by the FX team.

"OK," Zorf told them in his pep talk, "we have an opportunity here. Eight men lost their lives fighting this blaze. They saved ten city blocks. When you're up there tonight, remember their sacrifice. Remember their steely nerve and the steadiness of their feet on the ladders. These were strong, vigorous public servants fighting a terrible enemy of the urban landscape. Do your best for them, and for all the martyrs to physical courage in our time."

"And for seven hundred and fifty dollars." Bianca said.

"Yes, and for that" Zorf said. "And we get paid after, so no screw-ups."

\* \* \*

The program booklet listed them as the Sudden Stop Stunt Players, and the mayor was curious about them. "Who are these guys?" he asked his wife at intermission.

"Oh, just some neighborhood kids," she said, "they're playing the firefighters, the heroes."

"Are they actors?" he asked.

"No, not really. They're one of those new street gangs, the ones who jump off buildings."

"Off buildings?" asked the mayor. "Onto what?"

"Onto other buildings, mostly. They're daredevils, dear."

The mayor frowned. "It's like our Shannon then," he said, "kids today have gone crazy."

"Shannon is perfectly fine," his wife said, "she's only going through a phase."

"That's a phase?" the mayor asked. "Walking from Alaska to Florida is a phase? She's been gone three years."

"Sssh!" his wife said, "it's starting."

As the house lights were brought down the air in the theater chilled and clarified like filtered water. The audience re-entered its heightened, hyper-oxygenated state. By now the musical's main characters and their sympathetic back-stories had been artfully established and the chief conflict—that deplorable fire—had been hinted at. An aching suspense had been masterfully built up and was now ready for release. When the curtain parted on act three and the flames were pouring from every window of the four-story prop representing the doomed warehouse, the audience gasped. It was ecstasy.

The Sudden Stop Stunt Players clambered like lemurs along the wooden facade, impressive in their shiny yellow coats and bright

red hats. The FX men had primed them on the pattern of the flames and the blasts of ice (which simulated bursting nitrogen tanks) so that they would know which windows were safe at which times. None of them wore microphones, so Zorf had to yell his instructions above the crashing, apocalyptic music coming from the orchestra down in the pit.

"Higher on the left side!" Zorf called out, and they climbed up one story. "Two points of contact!" he said, "No dangling!"

The spotlights and the fire had the stage up over 100 degrees and when a blast from the ice cannons swept by it was like the window of a stuffy apartment opened in winter. They lingered when they should have ducked, but no one noticed. The FX men were laughing and winking at them as they arrived at each window, which Zorf considered unprofessional. These FX men had no discipline, Zorf decided. Their boss was a drowsy slob munching on a cigar backstage, barely engaged with the production. He had no gravitas, no duty to leadership.

Their scene was three-quarters over when the accident happened. One of the flame guys was off his mark behind the facade, his cell phone in one hand and his torch in the other. He was texting. He wore a thin smile on his face over some remark he was reading.

"Hey Donnie," his boss called out, "hit window eleven!"

But Donnie was out of position and too far from window eleven, so when he launched his jet of flame it licked the wooden construction of the prop. The fire liked what it tasted, and began to devour it. In ten seconds the entire right corner of the faux warehouse was ablaze and burning sheets of cardboard painted like bricks were curling up and falling onto the stage as ash, spreading fire wherever they landed. In twenty seconds the panic was a tangible force in the theater and Zorf realized that the music

had stopped and that all he could hear was the animal breathing of the fire and the screaming of the audience behind him. He pointed his canvas hose at a patch of conflagration and pulled back on the handle to release a deluge of water, but nothing happened. Oh yes, he remembered, it was all pretend.

The fire exits disgorged the crowd exactly as designed. The city's entire upper crust came streaming out of the burning theater and onto the sidewalk in their tuxedos and evening gowns. They were covered in black soot but otherwise unharmed. They ran wildly until they were clear across the street. From this spot they began yelling "Fire!" and "Help, quickly!" into their cell phones. They were calling the members of their local fire department, most of whom were standing next to them in formal dress. They were calling about the great warehouse fire of 1965. It was burning again.

Inside the theater Zorf and the Sudden Stop were still roped-up on the façade. They couldn't get their harnesses off. The FX guys had tied impossible knots behind their backs. Zorf pulled a pocket knife and cut his straps, then made his way to the others and set them free in turn. By now the stage had entirely collapsed and a smoking cavity had burned clear into the theater's basement. From above it looked like the roiling mouth of Hell. The only direction clear of fire was up, which is where they climbed.

"Head for the catwalk!" Zorf called out.

The long steel platform stretching above the stage was close enough that they could reach it if they jumped. Zorf was the last person over the rail after boosting the others. Moments later the whole facade tilted and fell like a domino into the dark rows of purple seats.

"Run!" Zorf screamed, directing them off stage.

The grating on the catwalk was scorching hot and their shoes were melting so badly it was like sliding in mud, but finally they reached the access door to the roof. They took turns kicking at it until the deadbolt broke and they could fall onto the flat gravelly rooftop in exhaustion, momentarily safe.

They had suffered minor burns and their hands shook with adrenaline. Their heads were empty like the sky. They focused on taking clean air into their lungs and circulating oxygen-rich blood through their bodies. They stayed like this for a long time, spread out like stroke victims in wonky positions across the roof, listening to the fire growing inside. They all knew the roof would collapse at any moment.

Finally, someone spoke. "Now what?" Bianca said. They all laughed. Wasn't it obvious?

"We jump," Zorf said.

"To where? There's nothing."

This was true, or seemed to be. Zorf gave the order to break into groups of three. Each group was responsible for checking one side of the building for a landing zone.

By this point in the city's life, urban renewal had almost entirely demolished the grand old buildings that had once bordered the theater. On two sides The Sudden Stop were met by only a wide expanse of asphalt. The remaining two sides each had an adjacent building, but neither one was attractive. There was Kellerman's law firm, located in a squat, hopeless strip mall. That jump demanded a sixty-foot fall. The better option was east: St. Anne's Cathedral. A portion of the church's footprint extended across Dewbury Street and into the realm of possibility for a jumper. One of its five domed turrets was only twenty feet below the edge of the theater's roof,

maybe fifteen feet distant. Still not an easy leap. Broken bones were possible. In addition, the curvature of the dome would make for an extremely difficult landing. Someone would almost certainly fall.

A crowd had formed on the sidewalk below. They were waving up at The Sudden Stop and filming with their cell phones. A few people called out encouragement. "Hold on!" they said, and "rescue is coming!"

"Don't film us!" Zorf yelled back at them. "Is nothing sacred?"

"I hope you have a plan," Bianca said, "because we need to go." Flames were shooting from the door they had escaped from and little tremors in the surface of the roof could be felt when they stopped to feel for them. They had minutes.

"We're jumping to that tower," Zorf told his crew. "That's our exit."

"It's too far," Monika said, "I've never made a jump that far."

"You'll make it this time," Zorf told her.

Kylee was worried about the landing surface. "It's round," she said. "It looks polished."

"Aim for the spire and grab hold of it," Zorf said. "I'll go first, followed by Bianca. After we land, we'll tie our clothes together in a rope and secure it to the spire. We'll throw the rope to you as you jump, in case you're off target." Zorf could *feel* their doubt, but no one objected. There was nothing else.

Zorf crouched at the edge of the roof and assessed the gap. It was wide, at the limit of what he'd done with the team. He'd made longer jumps alone, but never onto such a tricky surface. Zorf tied his shoelaces into a tight, triple knot. He retreated several yards. The team watched this in silence. Zorf took a moment to visualize his success: his hand would grab the wrought iron spire, the cold metal tight in his palm. He imagined pulling himself towards it,

battling the momentum that would try to carry him off the dome. Then he would hold it close, his face and lips crammed against it, the taste of oxide in his mouth. He imagined the relief that would then wash over him.

Zorf sprinted hard and in a matter of seconds reached the edge, planted his right foot, and launched himself into the sky. At which point he began to float, as he always did on a jump. His soul, suspended over nothingness, exulted. It lasted less than an instant, was infinitesimal, but for a split second he was totally alive. Euphoric. He was every organism that had ever lived. He was mortal, but undying.

And then the downward arc began, and the shiny metal dome hove into view beneath him, rapidly increasing in size between his legs. And then there was a crash, and darkness. And pain, though not overwhelming. A shaft of light filtering down into a black room filled with dust. He'd broken through the skin of the dome. It hadn't been a substantial cap of metal, as he'd thought, but a thin veneer with a void inside, where he was now. Zorf coughed. His eyes itched from the insulation. It was very quiet.

"Hello!" he said, his voice echoing sharply in the chamber. "Can you hear me?" he yelled. The wind played at the tattered opening above him like a dry flute.

Zorf limped around the room, looking for an exit. He was inside an architectural flourish, a windowless, doorless ornament. It wasn't meant for people. His predicament at first panicked, then calmed him. He was alone, and responsible for nothing. He sat down, closed his eyes, and focused on his breathing.

After Zorf disappeared into the tower The Sudden Stop gave all four sides of the building a second pass. They found the fire escape right away. It was narrow, and painted green. They'd overlooked it

in their panic to find a suitable jump. The whole team took it single file all the way down to the street. They felt sheepish in front of the crowd, which cheered. A few minutes later the theater's roof collapsed and the beautiful structure was reduced to a pile of smoldering debris. The fire department, which had come from two counties over, finally arrived and put it out easily with fat spouts of water. The Sudden Stop told them about Zorf, and asked if he might be alive. They said it was worth checking, and so a ladder was raised against the tower and a team of able men scaled it. They dropped a metal basket into the opening and extracted Zorf like a clog from a drain. He was deposited on a limestone bench in the church's courtyard.

Someone filmed your jump," Bianca told him. A foil blanket was draped around his shoulders.

"What?" Zorf said, "Who?"

"Just someone watching," Bianca told him. "It's already online."

"Oh my god," Zorf said.

"Ask me how many people have seen it."

"I don't care," Zorf said. "This is anathema beyond anything."

"Seventeen million," Bianca said. "They're calling it the leap of faith. You know, because of the church."

"Even worse," Zorf said.

"I know, totally," Bianca said. "But there's all this money now, is the thing. From donations."

"No," Zorf said, "no way."

"We didn't set it up, OK? It just happened. Zorf, it's up over a hundred thousand dollars. And still growing."

"Give it all back," Zorf said. "It's bad money."

"Not if we spend it on something good," Bianca said. "We could pay off our debts. Grow the team!"

Zorf stood up. "I don't want our team to grow."



"But we could buy an old gymnasium, like we've dreamed about. Fill it with our gear. We could put down roots."

"No," Zorf said. "You put down roots, and they can get at you."

Bianca shook her head. "Who?" she asked him. "Who can get at you?"

"The order-keepers," Zorf told her. "The protectors of the status quo, the powers-that-be. All those establishment jerks we nearly got cooked for today. Even those brainless zombies watching us online. All they want is to control us. Make us 'safe,' legitimize us."

"Well, what's wrong with that?" Bianca asked. "We aren't criminals, are we? If we had a place of our own, we wouldn't need gigs like this. And no more trespassing."

"I like trespassing," Zorf said. "It reminds them of the score."

At this point the team sensed something important was being decided, and gathered to listen.

"Look," Bianca said, "I'll be eighteen this year. No more school. No more money from my parents. Do you feel like sitting behind a desk? Because I don't. This could be our ticket. We could make a living at this."

"I don't want a living," Zorf said.

Bianca stared. "I have no response to that."

Zorf adjusted his stance, his eyes wide. "You think you can hook up to their digital panopticon and live off the charity of its attention span? Please. It will destroy you." Zorf made a gesture so as to include the whole team. "Ask yourselves what we stand for," he said. "Is it comfort? Is it praise? Or is it struggle. Challenge. Risk! We're cliff-dwellers, Bianca. We're way, way out on the edge—no, beyond it! That's our habitat. State of nature. Pure physicality. If that isn't what you want, then you aren't Sudden Stop. You're anathema."

When he'd finished, Zorf looked around and saw that his

teammates were all frowning. They looked sorry for him.

Bianca placed her hand on Zorf's shoulder. She patted it gently once, twice, and turned away. The team followed her. Zorf, having said what he had to say, could only watch them go. He listened as their bright conversation echoed back to him off the storefronts.

"First thing we'll do is find a good bank," Bianca was saying, "then contact an ISP, and I'm telling you I want a *blisteringly* fast connection . . . " and so on.

When it was dark and the first-responders had gone home and the caution tape was in place around the smoking ruin of the theater, Zorf stood up. The only people left on the streets were staggering drunks and their caretakers. A bank of rolling clouds blotted out the stars and the wind was icy and swift. Zorf buttoned his jacket, rolled up his trouser legs, and climbed the radio tower on 7th Street. From this height he sat watching the sky, mindlessly tying his shoes over and over and hoping for a cold, soaking rain.

**HOLT CLARK** survives by working as a tech writer for some of the largest companies on earth. You've probably thrown out his instructions before. In his free time he writes fiction. His work has been published in *Gone Lawn* and *Abstract Jam*. You can contact him at [holtclark@gmail.com](mailto:holtclark@gmail.com)

# The Lights Are the Eyes of Animals

GJ Hart

Winter had arrived, had squatted down hard and the old Hamerton Millhouse was frozen, filled with chills skiffed off the rump of Raven's Ait and Dylan, perched on the table, legs wide, sniffing fingers as his steel cap sampled the door's creak and his mouth snapped with the *whys*, never the *hows* and the best thing—Diane couldn't care, the question was an old toad, *a lifted wheel*, it served only to remind her that, ignorant or not, she still got paid.

Four weeks previous, as Diane hurried along the high breach wall, the Thames hidden behind—a dog, *a beloved collie*, panting around the gantry piles and buoys, its fur matted with the slime sliding from the smoggy sky and Diane patted it, in her mind patted it, scratched its ear and strode on, up the beheader's steps, around the banker's hat and down towards the exclamation that was Hamerton Millhouse.

Dylan greeted her at the gates.

Scanned her ID and led her across a leafy courtyard, up concrete steps to an office in its attic. The office was tiny, narrow as a galley kitchen and stank from the damp that bloomed and spiraled across every wall. The room was dark, illuminated by a window no wider than an envelope and practically empty, furnished with only a wooden chair and a plastic table that to Diane seemed better suited to outdoors. Upon the table sat a bland contraption, constructed from mahogany and a stainless-steel facia plate mounted with two knobs—one red, one blue. Above each knob was an LCD bulb and from its back hung two cables, one leading to an electrical socket, the other running up the wall and disappearing through a hole drilled in the plaster cornice. The console looked like technology

from a different era and disguised its purpose thoroughly, carrying not a single sign or symbol to indicate its function.

"Here," said Dylan, pointing at the chair. Diane took off her coat and sat. Dylan laid a hand upon the box.

"Seems simple yeah," he said, shaking his head.

"Sorry?"

"Simple. When the light flashes red, you turn the red knob. When it flashes blue, the blue one. But here's the thing—you can't faddle daddle."

"Faddle daddle?"

"Quick, you need to be quick, you need to Con. Cen. Trate. You need to pounce."

"Pounce?"

"Imagine a tiger, its children are starving, its mate is dead. Above the sun is devilish hot and then... moving through the grass."

Diane had no idea what he was talking about. "Got it," she said.

"One hour for lunch, if you take longer, I'll know. And see those doors we passed—authorised personnel only . . . "

"What does it do?"

"Sorry?"

"The box, what does it do?"

"Authorised personnel only," he repeated, ignoring the question, "and you Diane are not authorised, so don't go sniffin' about."

Dylan stood, looking suddenly very serious.

"Please understand, lives may depend on what happens in this room," he said and tapping the table, took one last look around and backed out of the room, leaving her alone in the grotty half-light.

Diane pulled up her chair, rested her chin and began to watch the box. By any standard the job was odd, and it pained her that she accommodated its strangeness so readily. But desperation was its own consolation—what choice did she have since her husband's illness had nullified the unspoken and equitable contract apportioning their endeavours. Now she jumped like a starving cat at whatever the agency offered—senseless work, gruelling work, work that left her self-esteem in shreds. No matter, as long as it secured the roof above their heads, her answer was always *yes yes yes*.

And then, on the fourth day, Tiffin arrived.

A cruel wind swirling outside and inside the office trilled with draughts as Diane shook before the console wearing so many jumpers she resembled a large brown egg. As she sat rubbing eyes raw from the perpetual study (still neither bulb had flashed) she heard a rustling and scratching, a scramble of tiny feet from the corner of the room. A mouse, she guessed, but was too afraid to confirm it and groping in her bag, pinched off a corner of a sandwich and threw it down. She heard it chew and sigh and called it Tiffin (due to the time) and because she loved the word and would have loved to stop for tea.

Diane begged Tiffin to stay but by lunchtime she was gone, so she sat again, before the loophole and ate and drank and watched the boats go by—the ferries like glass houses and thumping barges and swinging on two legs, lost herself to the pendulums of hull and water, until catching the time, returned to the table and settled again before the box.

Before she left that night, she crawled beneath the table, dragged herself along the skirting board until she found Tiffin's hole. It was no bigger than a plum tomato and littered with dead insects and crumbs. No meal for a mouse, she thought and decided tomorrow she would bring the wheel of brie she'd been saving for Christmas.

The bus ride home was hot and wet and so violent, Diane wished she owned a brace. As she stepped down to the pavement, she decided to take the long way home and wandered past the cemetery and butcher's yard, the abandoned building site, giving each her full attention and finding these studied places, normally obscured by familiarity, far too strange. As she turned into her road, she saw Doctor Murray's ancient green convertible parked outside her house and her guilty heart sank.

To Diane, her dissidence felt like a sty, a shoe stone, a skelf wedged between nail and skin: she hated the Doctor, hated that he called so often, but had to admit the succour he brought, to her husband and by extension herself, was beyond price. He would be in the lounge now, treating him, snipping away the fibres grown thick as party straws from his belly and groin. Then moisturising the holes and blocking them with the grey putty he carried in jam jars around his neck and that later Diane would spend hours picking from the sofa.

Diane turned her key carefully and crept inside, attempting to avoid summoning the doctor who would, whenever possible, corner her, place hands upon her shoulders and whisper to her in a language she didn't understand. He terrified Diane, huge beneath his cape, a wardrobe of a man, his eyes like paws, his moustache looped about his ears and bulging like a bird feeder. And always that reek, his cologne, a mixture of lavender and yeast. It had infiltrated the house so conclusively, to Diane's disgust, it now smelt like home. To save herself, she learned to skulk from room to room, like an intruder in her own house.

Her husband was no help, he became more distant each day. 'I'm a discreet fellow' he would say whenever she enquired after his health and clutching his head, would roll into a ball and remain that way until she left. Later she would hear him pacing and singing, typing and shuffling papers—his illness had become his opus, Diane would find watercolours and poems stuffed behind

radiators and cushions all dedicated to it and although thematically mawkish and crudely executed she studied them avidly since they afforded her the only insight into his suffering.

As Diane crept past the lounge she heard snippets of conversation—Chopin—*such a fool*, Graston cottage what a view! And that idiot baker—no perspective, and Diane, Diane, Diane—mouth like two horns and *how do you stand it*. Ignoring it all, she walked through to the kitchen, opened the French doors, and headed down to the shed.

Three barrel locks, one padlock—she had to be careful. And then, despite the spiders and rats, she sat before the console she'd built from a gramophone and two candles, turning dials over and over, hour after hour, until she heard the front door slam and the Doctor's cars fire up and buzz away. Only then would she blow out the candles and return to the house.

Soon a routine developed beyond the common peg and each day Diane would bring cheese for Tiffin, who, prompt at eleven, would arrive to eat, then curl around her feet, bringing warmth and happiness and Diane reciprocated, bringing her rarer, more delicious titbits each day.

Four weeks of numbness and silence passed before Diane saw Dylan again. She heard the clip of his cork lifts, his door cards clonking and throwing open the door, down he sat, without introduction and immediately she asked him about the box, what it did, and Dylan replied with *important* and all of its synonyms but still made no sense.

"Work, work work," he said, "there's more to life, Diane," and apropos of nothing, began to rhapsodise about his love for hunting.

"We go out most nights," he said, and turning his phone, showed her pictures of his dog—*Buster*—and his trophies—rabbits and foxes lined up and limp and lit by headlights. Diane leaned back, away from the stink of his words.

As he droned on, Diane heard Tiffin scratching and munching on the Stilton she'd bought the previous day and thrown by Dylan's presence, she turned, searching her out and Dylan's eyes followed and seeing Tiffin, he yanked something from his pocket and flicked it down, hitting her with a thump and pinning her to the skirting board.

Diane flinched, saw Tiffin wasn't a mouse at all and wondered how it had ever contained life, ever drawn breath.

"Filthy fucking things," said Dylan and bending down, plucked up the weapon and whipped it against his sleeve.

Diane grabbed at the edges of her chair, a bone anchor no match for the waves of rage and tearing up the box, swung it, striking Dylan's temple. He stood a moment with a baffled look, then thrust out a hand, placing his full weight on the table's edge so it pitched and spun and but for his boots, covered him as he fell upon the floor.

Diane ran from the office, twisting along the corridor, shouting for help and hammering doors and when no answer came, she flung them open to find others like her, sitting wide eyed and shivering before identical boxes. "Please Help me," she begged, but none responded, would even turn, so on she ran, down the steps, through the gates and all the way home.

She hit the head of her road expecting to see the Doctor's car ticking down, parked askew, but the pavement was clear, an uncanny void before the laurel bush and she dismissed it—a burst tyre, a dead battery, a taxi taken and flinging open the door, called for him, needing him, *this fucking once*, but no answer came and she flew from room to room, concerned for her husband, *never the*



Doctor and finding no one, walked through to the kitchen and here, on the table, balanced between condiments, she found a once folded, hand written note.

*My dearest Diane,*

*I am very much afraid I have left you and placed myself entirely under Jeff's (Doctor Murray) care. Jeff (Doctor Murray) opines that his constant attention will be my only salvation and so to facilitate, I will live with him henceforth at Graston cottage. Unfortunately, I see no sense in pretending it would be pertinent for us to meet or talk again, so this, my dear Diane, is my final goodbye.*

*Your loving husband,  
Gerald*

Diane folded the letter and placed it back between the salt and pepper pots. She poured a glass of wine and sat awhile, listening to her house, the hallway ahead, its silence officious between the clock's clonk and above, the bathroom's orderly drip and beneath, the lounge, *the Doctor's room*, covered in boot marks and cologne and empty now, it muttered to her, sleepy and soft.

Behind her, the garden, tethered to darkness by birch and maple and to Diane, unknowable. Simple? It really is simple, she thought and finishing the last of the wine, she turned off the lights and stepped outside.

**GJ HART** currently lives and works in London and has had stories published in *The Molotov Cocktail*, *The Harpoon Review* and others. He can be found arguing with himself over @gj\_hart.

# Travis in Hollywood

Timothy Day

I woke up at eight and couldn't fall back asleep. My neck ached from lying on the living room floor again. Next to me a woman was twitching in her sleep. The blanket was too short and her feet lay bare on the carpet, making kicks. On the couch somebody lay folded into the cushions, their identity concealed beneath a towel draped over their head. Someone else was on the mattress in the corner, mouth ajar. It felt like a waste to be the only one awake. I dragged myself up and made coffee in the kitchen, then returned to the living room and stood drinking it by the window. The blinds were bent and lopsided, sunlight spilling through the gaps. Outside I spotted Julia picking up a photo from the ground and shaking off the dirt. It was a relief to see someone else up and I hurried out the door.

Julia was standing with a pile of her headshots pressed into her chest, looking into the distance. She was wearing a long brown blouse, her rail-thin forearms swallowed in the sleeves. Her hair hung in flattened red curls around her face, like birthday ribbon gone stale. I followed her gaze to the *HOLLYWOOD* sign perched on the hills above us.

"It's like staring into the sun," I said. "Except with your soul."

"Trite sentiment," Julia said. "But well phrased."

"What happened?" I pointed to her headshots.

Julia consulted the stack and pressed it back to her navel. "Let's get coffee."

We went to the café two blocks down and sat by the window. There were a handful of people inside whom we had seen before but never talked to. They sat bent over scripts with mugs of tepid coffee, mouths moving silently over their lines. This place would

always take us, as long as we had two dollars. It would give us coffee on a day our parents wouldn't take us in if we were bleeding out.

I blew on my mug and took a sip. "Headshots?"

Julia leaned in. "So I had a pile of them on my dresser, right?"

"Yeah?"

"This morning—*poof*," she fanned her palms out to either side of the table. "I look out the window and they're scattered all over."

"The fuck?"

"I know."

Steam rose from our mugs and we sipped and squinted in the 8:30 light. Julia asked what I was doing today and I told her about my audition for a Carl's pizza commercial. I was playing a delivery boy who delivers a pizza late. The customers tie me up inside their house and make a game out of throwing knives at the wall behind me while they eat the pizza. One of the knives hits my shoulder and I start to bleed but it turns out my blood is tomato sauce and the customers spread it on the pizza and eat it. The customers smile in satisfaction and my screaming fades out as a voiceover says: *At Carl's, we bleed good pizza. Order tonight.*

Julia shook her head. "Pandering to the cannibal crowd."

I laughed. "Untapped market."

Julia said she was going to buy a motorcycle with the money she'd gotten from her guest spot on one of the hospital shows. She liked the idea of riding one, flying filter-less down the highway, free and removed at the same time. I had a fleeting image of riding behind her, arms crossed over her abdomen with my head pressed into her shoulder, everything liquid.

I had some time before my audition so I walked with Julia to the motorcycle dealership. On the way we came across two more of Julia's headshots lying on the sidewalk, caked with grime from

passing shoes. As she picked up the second one we noticed a woman looking at us from across the street. She was smoking a cigarette and making what looked like sign language at us. We kept going. Behind us a throaty voice called out a string of expletives. I put on my sunglasses and almost ran into a pole before Julia took my wrist and tugged me out of the way. A car honked. The throaty shouting continued, words overlapping to create their own angry language. We kept walking. In the distance, the Hollywood sign inched closer.

The motorcycle dealership was a big rectangular lot attached to a small office. Motorcycles were strewn across the concrete at awkward angles, spare parts piled to the top of the surrounding fence. The salesman's face was doughy and unexpressive and his limbs had a sudden, flail-ish animation to them, as if controlled by a sentient joystick. Julia picked a rusted red motorcycle lying on its side beneath a layer of metallic debris. We waited in the office as the salesman gathered the paperwork. In the corner there was a pot of free coffee for the customers who made it this far. It was shitty but we drank it. The walls were brown and mostly blank but there was one photo hanging above the desk, frame askew. The picture showed the salesman shaking hands with someone who looked like Johnny Depp, but on the wall beside it someone had scrawled (*not Johnny Depp*). I asked Julia if she believed in the Depp.

"I do," She said. "But not for a higher price than doubting the Depp."

The salesman came into the office and handed Julia the paperwork. He sat behind the desk and put his head in his hand. Julia signed the forms and slid them over. The salesman squinted up at her.

"I've seen you," he said. "You were on that show."

Julia nodded and smiled. "Yes, thank you."

The salesman sighed. "I was only stating a fact."

Outside, the boulevard was static and thick with golden fog. My audition was in twenty minutes. Julia said she had a meeting with her agent or else she would give me a ride. I shrugged and said it was just a few blocks. It was actually seventeen but I liked to appear as someone for whom life was a breeze. We hugged and Julia got onto her new motorcycle. The road before us lay barren and course, a shed snakeskin waiting to be worn. A gust of wind came through and another one of her headshots fluttered past us. Julia started the engine and took off behind it.

I was late to my audition. They gave me a shot of espresso and then hurried me into a pizza delivery outfit and handed me a box containing a plastic pizza. They told me to keep the box closed and I wondered if the fake pizza was pointless or if I was just forgetting why it mattered. The psychopathic customers stood by, real slices on a plate next to them. We ran through the scene. By the end of two takes my shirt was streaked with tomato sauce and the customers had eaten six slices. They sat on the floor and rubbed their stomachs. The director thanked me for coming in and said they'd let me know, but my screaming needed work. I tried another quick howl on my way to the door, putting some rasp into it, but they were busy fixing something with the lighting. One of the assistants dumped the fake pizza in the trash.

I ate a pack of raisins on the way to work and got coffee from the day-old pot in the office. I didn't know where I worked exactly; the letters on the sign had weathered until they were no longer readable and the owner had died several years ago. Everyone just called it the motel next to the jiffy lube. That afternoon I was tasked with cleaning up the parking lot. I put latex gloves on and went around tossing cigarette butts and used condoms into a black bag. The sun beat down on the concrete. In the corner of the lot there was a priest sitting and drinking bourbon. A vacuum cleaner stood

next to him. Upon getting closer I saw that the prongs attached to the vacuum cord had been pressed into the priest's arm, faded blood framing the spots of their insertion. I knelt down beside him.

"Shit, you okay?"

The priest nodded wanly. "Just fine." His eyes were bits of coal that sat deep within a pair of crater-like sockets. He took a swig of bourbon, cord lifting with his arm. "I see you're cleaning up," he patted the bulging bag of his vacuum. "Mind if I dispose of myself?" He unlatched the canvas bag and shook it out over the pavement. We sat and watched as a thick cloud of dust rose from the ground and enveloped the lot. I was reminded of what I saw when I closed my eyes, before something more concrete entered my head. After a moment the priest stood and slunk away down the sidewalk, vacuum rattling behind him.

During my break I went behind the motel and leaned against the sepia siding. Before me a small desert of gravel separated the motel from the highway, silver sedans passing into metallic specks on the horizon. I opened another pack of raisins. Suddenly a figure approached from my left, emerging from a cloud of copper smoke. Annie. She sidled up to me and nodded. Her sunglasses were dust-coated and cracked, cheeks hollow and tired. She had a line on her forehead from the time her brother had gotten drunk on Halloween and pretended her head was a pumpkin. We'd both started working at the motel around the same time, though it had become difficult to remember when that was.

Annie lit a cigarette. "A guest died in their room today." Her voice trembled at the edges.

"Fuck," I said. "How?"

Annie laughed nervously. "When I found them, it looked like they'd sunk halfway into the floor," she said. "Then I turned them

over." She tried to take a drag but her hand was shaking too much and she dropped the cigarette and buried it in the gravel with her shoe.

"Jesus," I put my hand on her arm. "Are you okay?"

Annie turned into me and buried her face in my shoulder. She screamed, the sound muffled in my shirt, and then screamed again. I couldn't help but think how good a scream it was, how raw and guttural. I could feel her teeth vibrating against my skin.

After my break I went to the office and got more coffee from the day-old pot. I stood drinking it while I listened to the ticking of the clock, the cushioned footsteps of the manager as he stepped around my form. My heart felt like it was beating in every part of me. I felt a sickness sink down from my head and spread over my body and I became vaguely aware that I was swaying from side to side. I fell into the wall and steadied myself, coffee swishing out of the mug and onto my shoes. The manager blinked at me, then went back to stocking the stevia.

The rest of my shift was a pastiche of callous bed-sheets and stained bathroom tile. It was nearly dark when I left. I headed to the bar Julia worked at in our neighborhood, stopping at a coffee stand on the way. The remaining light illuminated the barista's hand faintly as it reached out from the dark with my 20-ounce drip. I drank it quickly and opened my last pack of raisins. My agent sent me a text telling me I didn't get the pizza commercial. I felt nothing. It had been three months since I booked a role. I only wanted to be a part of certain lives that played in my head, certain textures of existence that wrapped me in a tiny world of love and simplicity. I drifted through everything else like a passenger waiting to land.

A motorcycle that looked like Julia's was parked in front of the bar when I arrived across the street. The sight of it relaxed my senses and I almost got hit by a car after neglecting to look both ways. I went inside and sat at the bar. It was already crowded and everywhere people were talking to each other, exchanging ideas and phone numbers. One of the bartenders poured me a bourbon and I asked where Julia was. They looked as if they were thinking for a moment and then they shook their head and walked away. I drank my bourbon and looked around the bar. I didn't recognize anyone. I tried calling Julia but my phone died after the third ring. I closed my eyes and saw the motel room, blinds drawn and a layer of shadow over everything. On the floor there was the body, facedown, half-below the carpet. I saw my hands reach out and grasp half their arm. I turned them over slowly, and then all at once. The front of their head was like a portal.

The bartender poured me another bourbon, and then another. I went to the bathroom and spent a long time looking at myself in the mirror. The circles under my eyes were enunciated and my complexion was sickly-pale. It looked as if I was halfway through preparing for a haunted house performance. Back at the bar, my glass had been refilled. My vision began to blur at the edges as I drank. I finished the glass and stood, then took slow steps towards the door. The room grew quiet as people turned to look at me. I could see them in my peripheral vision, their eyes muddled and black. I felt the weight of their watching, their silence, their recognition of me as something worthy of anonymous attention. My vision blurred further and I had to stop just before I reached the door. Everyone waiting. Finally my legs gave out and the world went dark. There was nothing to catch me.



I woke up in a hospital room. The silence was broken only by an intermittent beeping. An old television mounted in the corner was playing live footage of a dive bar. Nothing was happening. The door creaked open and a shadowy head looked in on me.

“Travis?”

I sat up, wrapped in thin green sheets. “Hello?”

Julia entered the room in a white coat, stethoscope looped around her neck. Her skin looked vibrant, hair freshly dyed.

She sat on the edge of the bed and smiled at me. “How are you feeling?” Her mouth had hardly moved.

“Where am I?”

“The hospital. You fainted.” It was as if the words were passing through her independently, requiring no participation of the lips. She leaned into my ear. “Say, *I’m scared Julia.*”

I paused. Julia’s gaze was gleaming hazel. “I’m scared Julia.”

Julia put her hand to her chest. “I know,” she said. “But we’re going to be okay Travis.” I heard a sound like clapping from below the floor. Julia lay down beside me and closed her eyes. On TV, someone who looked like me entered the shot and sat at the bar. I felt like screaming.

**TIMOTHY DAY** poses as an adult in Portland, Oregon, where he is pursuing an MFA in fiction at Portland State University. You can find links to his other stories here: <https://frogsmirkles.wordpress.com/published-stories/>

# Venetian Ink

Amanda E.K.

## Session 15: July

Naked women hanging on the walls taunt me with their lack of pain.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

This place smells like sanitizer and ink and the sweat from under my arms. I hold my breath and curl my toes. There's a crack in the corner of a scuffed black tile exposing an insect graveyard.

I groan as the stinging drag of the gun grazes my shoulder. I try to focus on the music overhead. Reggae, rockabilly. There's a worn bit of stuffing seeping out of an old green chair. A pile of magazines collects dust on a coffee table shelf.

Ow, ow, fucking ow.

"Need a break?" asks Paul, sensing me tense up.

I clench my fists and cross my legs and tell him to ignore me.

"Impossible," he says.

I smile but he doesn't see.

Paul: dreadlocks, Rasta hat. Rose tattoo with a woman's name. One hand on my shoulder, the other on my neck. I want to push him up against a wall. I want to feel his hands go lower, lower. Although not today—day two of my cycle from hell. God these cramps don't help.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

I squeeze a stress ball while the painted ladies stare me down—Jess' prints, an artist with half-shaved purple hair and tribal tattoos up the sides of her neck. She's just finished with a woman's forearm and comes over to inspect Paul's work. I'm used to this.

I'm inked from left to right across my arms and chest—flowers, herbs, leaves, vines.

"Gorgeous," says Jess. "It all looks alive."

I thank her through my gritted teeth.

*On my forearms: aster and chrysanthemum. Baby's breath and clover.*

We take a break and I slip a Xanax with some Skittles. I use the bathroom without looking in the mirror. I like to be surprised. Outside, steam rises from the pocked and crumbling pavement as a summer storm rolls in and I see Jess through the window struggling to light a cigarette. Not a cigarette—a joint. I join her and so does Paul.

Jess and I talk music under the awning—shoegaze, grunge, goth. She's into Nirvana. I tell her to listen to Women. We can both agree on Joy Division.

Paul blows smoke rings into the parking lot, into the mist where they morph and fade. When he goes quiet, like now, he's thinking about Imani. Wife. Thirty-eight and had a stroke last spring. Still in and out of hospitals and lacking basic motor functions. I want to help alleviate his pain. Remind him what I have in common with his daughter—eight years old and in a situation I'm all too familiar with.

I see myself being for Zariya what I never got to have—a mother to watch me grow from a child into a woman.

But I know my place and keep quiet.

Paul asked about my burn scars during Session 1.

"I got them the night my mother died," was all that I could say. My body, marked by fire, confronts me every day.

I value friendships like religion, when friends like Paul—a man who's never eyed me with disgust—are few and far between. He says he's revising my skin to match the beauty underneath.

Back in position—me beneath, he above. I breathe heavy, inviting the tip of the gun to pierce my expectant skin as I offer up control of my sensations.

Paul: long fingers, full lips.

Broad. Dark. Fine.

I want to eat him up. Take care of his needs not met at home.

I imagine us exhausted on my bed, lying tangled and content.

He presses down with a dark blue and I suppress a groan. A lock of my hair falls down my arm. He brushes it away. A shiver runs through me and there's a warmth, a rush of blood between my thighs. I cringe and curse my body's timing.

Dreaming of the numbness of drink, I say we should head to Skylark when we're done.

He wipes the blood and ink away and looks me in the eyes. "As you wish," he says, and I feel like the Princess Bride.

The next morning, I wake from a dream, sweating and damp with blood.

In the dream, Paul was watering my mother's grave with a can of scarlet ink. I approached, as though invisible, and crouched behind the stone. The ink sprinkled my skin, unseen by him, and as it merged with my tattoos, every vine, leaf, and flower sprouted from my flesh and sunk its roots into the earth. From above, the full moon dripped silvery blue light like a cosmic feminine taboo, and I felt

connected to all the women in my family line before me—all their unique experiences of pain.

*Inside my elbows: daffodils and poppies.*

In the shower I smile and cry while shaving my legs. (Water doesn't feel like the opposite of fire when it draws out my most difficult emotions.)

It's getting harder not to tell Paul how I feel. That I've fallen in love with him for his soft encouragements and his patience and his daughter I can't help but see as me. I'm trying to respect his situation—like I did last night, despite his leg pressed against mine under the bar. There were subtleties coming off him like sidewalk steam. Eye contact that read like a teleprompter. It's obvious he's attracted to me too, he's just got to play it safe.

He won't cut his hair while Imani's still sick. One of the few details he can control. His mom plays nanny, nurse and cook, and goes to work when he comes home.

"I haven't been that devoted to anyone since, well, never," I said after a couple drinks. "Is it weird that that actually sounds nice?"

He gave a sardonic laugh and looked away.

"Is there anything I can do?" I asked, hoping for an invitation to spend time with Zariya—help her with homework or braiding her hair.

Instead, Paul asked me for the story behind my scars. And since I was tipsy, I started at the beginning.

I was four years old and staying with my grandparents while my mother was in Rochester for another cancer surgery.

They said I used to sleepwalk. They found me that morning in the yard, screaming in the grass—yelling: stop, drop and roll!

A man in a glaring red suit and red hair had come into my room and poured a potent liquid on my bed. I asked him who he was. Fire Man, he said. I've brought your mommy with me. Then he dropped a match onto my sheets, where the fiery form of my mother licked up.

By instinct I reached out and held her tight for what was to be the last time.

That same night, at that same hour, my mother passed away at Mayo Clinic.

I never heard the cause of death. My family must've figured I was too young to understand, but in their silence I read the truth of my assumptions. That it was me. That I'd created Fire Man to make her disappear, because then maybe there'd be no more excuses for why she wasn't with me.

They said the fire in my room was an accident, started by an oil lamp—my memory altered by my age.

I never showed anyone the blackened match I found in my sheets, that I kept clutched in my fist like some cruel souvenir.

At the funeral my mother slept with potted flowers that stung my eyes with fragrant tears.

Every year since then, I attach a fresh bouquet to the stand beside her grave. Then I burn the old petals in my kitchen sink, and save the most resilient for display.

Paul took my hand in his and said, "I'm so sorry you went through that, Venetia. I get it now . . . your interest in Zariya. Thank you for telling me."

## Session 16: August

I'm on the phone with Paul to plan my next appointment. He tells me Imani tried taking her own life last week. I don't know what to say.

"Can we meet?" he asks, choked up like he's been crying. "I need to get away."

I find him at Skylark and wrap him in a hug. His large frame feels lifeless in my arms.

He moves on from beer to liquor.

"I'd prefer death, too," he says into his glass. "She can't even be a mother. Zariya hardly knows her."

His sentiment knocks me down. Did suicide cross my mother's mind as she lie immobile in her bed? Did she think death might make a better mother than would a patient?

I shiver and finish my drink.

*Underneath my upper arms: heather and hydrangeas.*

Paul studies the bar top, picking at a chipped mosaic tile. "This isn't what I planned," he says. "I planned to have a wife. I planned to have a family. I planned . . ." He trails off, finishes his drink, and sighs.

"Wanna go for a drive?" I ask. I process best when going fast, and I have a feeling so does he.

Eighty miles per hour. Ninety. I feel so fucking free. The road curves and I'm thrown against him. I lean out the window while he takes the wheel, my hair flying in my face, wind in my pores—a sensation I want to bottle and drink from for eternity. I scream at

the night, commune with the waning moon, that feminine cycle from which the Earth is born.

Paul asks me to pull over.

I say nothing as I can see he's working out something to say.

"Imani won't get better unless I'm present. Some days," he says, "it's like I've lost my own identity. Like all I am is Dad, Husband, Saint. I'm sick of people's sympathy. I'm only thirty-three. I want a normal life."

"I want that for you, too," I say. I've ached in all too familiar ways.

Paul kisses my forehead, and we sit in silence, fingers linked, watching for shooting stars through the bug-spattered windshield.

In the arid early morning I dream again of Paul.

We're in the graveyard with Zariya, running through the cemetery with such a gusty chaos that a storm begins to brew. We find shelter in a mausoleum, and she smiles at the disorder, welcomes it as kin. The clouds open up, making puddles of new grass. I see my mother's gravestone, glowing fiery with light. Imani steps out, the picture of perfect health. She hugs me and I cry out as cords of skin rise from the lines of my tattoos. The inky ropes of leaves and flowers wither, flake, fall lifeless to the ground. I grasp frantically at their liquid shapes, but they only stain my hands.

There's a heavy lingering sadness from my dream for several days. I wander the city, searching for a sense of self. Not finding it in drink or smoke or unrestrained indulgence. Feeling lonely but avoiding friends, avoiding closeness for the fear of loss.

At home I start fires to watch things blister, shrink, and blacken.



Cassette tapes and marshmallows. Junk mail I'll never read.  
*On my biceps: Queen Anne's lace, magnolias and ivy.*

## Session 17: September

At the shop, I'm getting lilies for Zariya. My scars are mostly buried.

Imani isn't better.

Paul studies my design and arranges his inks in a neat arched row.

He's quiet. Too quiet. I should say what's been on my mind for months, so I finally just say: "I'm here for your family . . . anytime you need." And maybe I don't need to, but I say, "No ulterior motives."

Silence. Piercing, irritating, like the cramps low in my belly. I hold my breath to ride a wave of pain. I hate when he's unreachable.

Paul takes a break and I take out a pouch of Pop Rocks. I love their fizzy entropy. I go outside to smoke but keep my Xanax in my purse. I want to be a good example to a future daughter of my own. I want to stop chasing what I can't actually have and be okay with who I am. I've been burnt by love too many times because I go in treating partners like they'll leave me.

I want to be someone's person who will stick around.

I want to be rooted to the ground so deep that I sink in—to bloom in perpetuity, thriving on decay, and flourish where I once was singed and fade where I must fade.

*On my chest above my breasts: Forget-me-nots and orchids.*

**AMANDA E.K.** is the editor-in-chief of Denver's *Suspect Press* literary magazine, and she's a member of the Knife Brothers writing group. You can find her work in *Suspect Press*, *Birdy*, and at [yubikwetes.wordpress.com](http://yubikwetes.wordpress.com) where she writes creative non-fiction vignettes.



## On the cover:

### “Einstein Owl”

**ERIN WETZEL** is a single mom to two little girls who are the inspiration for her work. They are also interwoven into Wetzel's process of creating art while she carries them with her through each day as a homemaker and homeschooler. It's a messy, beautiful, disarming experience that is constantly challenging and changing Wetzel.

There is extraordinary beauty in ordinary

moments, we just need the opportunity to stop and see it. Wetzel is always looking for ways to open hearts with her work, to take the pain that life presents us with and paint it into something meaningful. When we capture a moment and create art out of it, that act of creation is a statement: There Is Something Important Here. Life is full of connection; art just reminds us how to look for it.



You can look for Wetzel's art at [ekwetzel.com](http://ekwetzel.com). as well as at @ekwetzel on Instagram, Facebook , Twitter, and tumblr.