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Editor's Note

We suggest the following tea pairings for the pieces in our ninety-ninth issue, each of which possesses a lovely, quiet oddness and is perfect for reading to your cat.

"The Stenographer," by Alec Hershman: jasmine green tea

"Puffer," by Bruce Shields: Lapsang Souchong

"The Lady of the House," by Daniel Galef: Lady Grey

"Strange Affliction," by Rob Tyler: chamomile

Thank you for stopping by; we always enjoy your company.

— Laura Garrison

The Stenographer

Alec Hershman

Now we know what he meant by *lacquer*
the bark of the finest birch proposes,
shining off a storm.

Like bit players with their single lines,
the trees call out to her. Their lofty stage whispers
are contemptible, are not to be acknowledged,
all the way to work.

At the courthouse, the jurors adjourn for lunch,
their name tags flipping on the windy steps.
Their talk is light,
and scatters like kibble.

She shuts a nostril to the steam
that rises from a grate.

It is courtroom air, quiet and exact
that follows her down hallways
to the office where she types. At her knee,
a chill no larger than a leaf hovers.

Everything chattering
for transcription, lifting at the chance
to be immortal. She thinks, *one at a time*,
please—then rolls her chair
tight against the desk, and wishes
for something unwavering,
like courtesy.

ALEC HERSHMAN is the author of *The Egg Goes Under* (Seven Kitchens Press, 2017). He has received awards from the KHN Center for the Arts, The Jentel Foundation, Playa, The Virginia Creative Center for the Arts, and The Institute for Sustainable Living, Art, and Natural Design. He lives in Michigan where he teaches writing and literature to college students. You can learn more at alechershmanpoetry.com.

Puffer

Bruce Shields

He stands and paces the room, a strut, she thinks, before slipping on his boxers and plopping himself back onto the mattress. It makes a sudden rust-iron squeak, as if surprised by his weight. Even in the afternoon, he smells like morning, stale and yeasty.

He stands and walks over to the dresser and for the first time since she's sat, she looks up to regard him. She's curious more than anything. He curls his back, hunches, pressing his face closer to the puffer. She can only see him from behind, his spine curled, his buttocks flaccid and relaxed beneath the thin fabric of his shorts, but she knows he's face-to-face and the puffer is looking at him. It, too, is curious.

Where did it come from? he asks, but his voice is so thin and filled with static she doesn't think he's talking to her, only to himself.

If she were to answer, she'd tell him it didn't come from anywhere. It's always been a part of her. It wasn't a thing born but a thing released like a plug of mucus her body was ready to dislodge. Before she'd expelled it, the puffer slinked up through her esophagus like a mat of hair, choking and suffocating, until it spilled out like a slosh of vomit. Before then, she'd felt it in her gut. For years, it sat there, painful as a needle's prick if a needle's prick could be a permanent sensation and not fleeting and temporary.

She wants to tell him he doesn't understand it because he doesn't understand her body. Last night and then again this afternoon, she'd let him press his body atop hers and fidget with

his prick until he slipped it inside, all the while wearing a mask of dumb-teenager befuddlement and awe across his face. She'd be willing to bet he has that same stupid expression on his face now.

You can touch it, she hears herself say even though she doesn't remember willing the words from her mouth.

I don't want to . . .

Go on. It's okay. I don't mind.

For a moment, he just stands there and she knows he's thinking about it. In a way it's beautiful, the color so deep and black it looks like an endless void, space without stars. It puffs, fills the edges of the jar and he reaches toward it, tapping the tips of his fingers against the glass's edge.

BRUCE SHIELDS writes and lives along the Colorado Front Range where he received his MFA from Colorado State University. Previous work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Occulum*, *Coffin Bell*, and *Kansas City Voices*. You can find and follow him on Twitter @ 321ReadySetGo.

The Lady of the House

Daniel Galef

Is something—off? The captain scoffs: ‘Pizzazz!’
That’s not it, but I don’t dare say he’s wrong.
I heard the butler whisper that she has
A tooth or two too many, or too long.
I’ve seen her prick her ears up like a cat,
Which gave me a peculiar hunted feeling.
She smiled and said ‘Why, any can do that,’
And then returned to dusting off the ceiling.
She walks the moorlands: Cold and arid climes
Are where she says her noble line arose.
She’s strangely secretive at other times,
When asked, say, why she hasn’t got a nose.
But love erases flaws, and hides all scars:
To err is human—Who’s to say, on Mars?

DANIEL GALEF is an undergraduate student of classical philosophy and classical literature at McGill University in Montreal. His poems have appeared in *The Lyric*, *Measure*, and *Light Quarterly*, and his genre poetry in particular in *Sein und Werden*, the *Surreal Grotesque*, and *Child of Words Fantasy & Science Fiction*. He also writes musicals and won the Krivy Award for Excellence in Playwriting at the 2016 McGill Drama Festival.

Strange Affliction

Rob Tyler

My father used to work with isotopes created in an atomic pile located in a lead-lined bunker beneath building 27B in Kodak Park. This may or may not have had anything to do with the strange affliction he developed in his sixties, after he retired and moved upstate to the ranch house in Glens Falls.

ROB TYLER lives in Upstate New York, known primarily for foul weather and disease-bearing ticks, which has shaped his preference for indoor activities, such as straightening up his crooked old Victorian (as in house, not person), tending to his snarky old cat rescued from Attica prison, and writing. Short fiction, mostly, and sometimes weird. A long career in marketing and technical writing has forged the necessary neuronal conduits for composing language on paper; the challenge, of course, is escaping the ruts, which, as in bobsledding, is easiest on tight curves. The exhilaration of catching air is worth the landing. He hopes his readers feel the same.

On the cover:

“Welcome to the Surreal”

AVA WADLEIGH is 17 and a junior at Tacoma School of the Arts. She looks at art as a way to express abstract concepts and ideas and believes strongly in creating fearlessly. She is grateful for all the support from her family and teachers and can't wait to further her journey into the world of fine arts.

Follow her on Instagram @
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