

issue 1. Debut



a journal of the senses

ink(&)ashes

issue 1. Masthead

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My Skin, My Sanity

by Kat Duff

When I turned fifty, the only scar on my body was the thin trace of an incision on my right thumb where a doctor removed a sliver when I was nine. One minute I was gleefully racing down the steps to the beach running my hand along the wooden railing, and the next - days later - I was sitting on the table at the doctor's office staring at the slit-open pad of my thumb. I fainted. A few seconds later the doctor's smelling salts brought me round, but I've never forgotten that glimpse of the meaty-red flesh of my insides pulsing frantically. Nor have I lost my gratitude for that thin, breathing membrane we call skin that envelops and conceals our riotous insides.

When I turned fifty-one, I had a crimson scar careening from the depths of my right armpit across my chest to my sternum. It's a neat surgical scar that is now - one year later - beginning to lose its thickness and color, but not its fluid arc. When I raise my arm it appears to swim up the side of my body.

It's easy to forget there was once a breast there.

Salamanders regenerate tails and legs, but mammals cannot even grow back a baby toe. Once a breast is removed, it's gone forever. Surgically reconstructed breasts may give the appearance of bosoms under the cover of clothing, but they cannot respond to touch, secrete milk or otherwise function like them. Without reconstruction, one is left with an absence traversed by a conspicuous line, like the cicatrix left by a fallen leaf.

When the human body is cut or otherwise injured, it summons extraordinary resources to repair the damaged tissue. It cleans the wound of debris, spins fibers between the sides to contract and close the fissure, inserts collagen "glue" in the remaining holes, extends nerves and blood vessels, prompts epidermal cells to multiply and creep in from the edges to cover the sensitive new tissue and, finally, sloughs off the scabs. In the end, the skin is regenerated and the wound healed, but the repair does not return us to the earlier perfection of unblemished skin. It leaves

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the smudge of a scar that is part of the body but set apart from the surrounding flesh by its density and milky, underbelly-pink color. Given the extraordinary sophistication and complexity of the human ability to heal, one would almost think that this final lapse into imperfection was intended, the way Navajo weavers make tiny “mistakes” in their rugs to let the spirits in.

When I left the hospital after my surgery, I had two tubes coming out of my chest connected to clear plastic bulbs safety-pinned to my shirt by the post-op nurses. The bulbs slowly filled with a bright reddish pink fluid - a mixture of blood and pus - that my partner learned to empty and measure twice a day. The presence of those tubes was harder for me than seeing the incision-in-place-of-my-breast two days later when my surgeon removed the bandages.

My surgeon explained that the tubes were needed to drain fluid collecting in the space left by my breast so that my skin could begin to adhere to the muscle underneath. “The body abhors a vacuum,” she added, “and fills the tertiary space with whatever it can find.”

Then she yanked out one of the tubes with a swift swing of her arm. It felt as though someone had just pulled a string through my insides. Woozy white splotches swirled around me, and I steadied myself with a hand to the table until the room came back into view with its familiar peach-colored walls and instructional posters of dissected breasts.

I immediately noticed that the tube my surgeon held in her hand was twice as long as before and realized that a good ten inches must have come from inside me. She opened the lid of the trash bin labeled “BIOHAZARDS,” tossed the tubing with its dangling bulb inside, and turned back towards me.

“Everything looks good. Any questions?”

“Aren’t you going to take out the other tube?” I asked, hoping she had forgotten.

“Oh no, not now. We have to wait for the fluid to diminish. Make an appointment for ten days from now.”

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In the days that followed, I became accustomed to holding the tube when I changed my clothes and tucking the bulb into my pants to keep it from tugging, but the sense that something was not right, that some sacred boundary had been violated, never left me. That boundary, I realized much later, was my skin.

Some people are afraid of drowning, others of suffocation or fire. My greatest fear, which inevitably returns whenever I become overwhelmingly upset, is that gale winds will rise inside me and blow my skin up like a cellophane balloon until I explode. The fantasy always ends with the explosion, for there would be no “me” or “world” once the membrane that divides and defines the two is ruptured. Inside and outside would mingle in a great roiling confusion of disintegration.

Fortunately, skin is usually present to protect the integrity of the body-self. It works day and night to maintain optimum moisture and temperature levels in our bodies through complex mechanisms of cooling, heating, lubricating and sweating. Fluids that transgress the boundary of skin – urine, blood, vomit, spit, and mucus – inspire visceral reactions of disgust akin to the sense of sacrilege I felt about my drainage tube. It would seem that the protection skin affords to our physical life extends to our psychological life, indeed our very sanity.

Scars mark the places where life and sanity were threatened, ordeals endured, wounds opened and closed. They evoke a queasy awe in the best of us. We stare and look away, want to ask what happened but don't dare broach the subject, as if these patches of mended flesh identified experience beyond the realm of human discourse. Perhaps it's no coincidence that the word “scar” is one letter away from “scare.” I couldn't bring myself to touch my mastectomy line for weeks, and it wasn't that the skin was sensitive. No, I was afraid of what would happen if I got that close to something so not-me. At the same time, I couldn't keep away from this sutured break in me and kept inching my fingers closer, only to jerk my hand away.

When the home health nurse checked on me a week after my surgery, I confessed my difficulty. We were sitting side by side on the blue jean couch, and she was wrapping a blood pressure cuff around my “good”

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arm, the one that still had a breast nearby. “Don’t worry about it,” she responded emphatically. “It’ll get easier with time. Many women can’t even look at their scars at this stage.”

Later, when she was writing down my blood pressure in her chart, she added: “Some women never look at themselves.”

Clearly there’s more involved than fear or disgust. There is the culturally-induced shame and secrecy that comes with cancer, especially when it attacks parts of the body involved with sexuality, and the stigma that attaches to people whose bodies don’t live up to the cultural ideals of femininity and masculinity – all of which contribute to this self-shunning. There is also a taint of failure that attends those who bear scars.

The scarred are flawed and disfigured, their perfection besmirched by this graphic sign of defeat. A friend of mine who has undergone several surgeries in the course of a sex change says that the worst part of the entire process has been ending up with visible scars from the skin grafts. Now he wears long sleeves all the time, even in summer. People go to great lengths to cover, hide or erase their scars in our society, and the rest of us collaborate by never mentioning them.

My aunt and grandmother had mastectomies when I was a child, but I didn’t find out until I was well into adulthood, and never felt free to ask them about their experiences, much less view their scars. Images of women who have had their breasts removed are few and far between in our society, and many (like myself) enter surgery without any idea of what we will look like afterwards. That’s why I show myself whenever I get the chance. I’ll flip up my shirt for anyone who expresses interest in seeing my scar just to defy this culturally enforced invisibility that is euphemistically termed “privacy”

The only people who benefit in stature from the visibility of scars are the warriors in our world: soldiers, gang members, criminals, those who have given up trying to be perfect (if they ever had a chance) and need to inspire fear to survive. Even they will sometimes cover themselves so their scars cannot be used to identify them later.

In the 19th century, bounty-hunters identified runaway slaves by the

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scars on their backs from whippings. Deserters from the British Army were branded with the letter “D” so they would be recognized for the rest of their lives. Conquerors have inflicted marks on their captives since the beginning of recorded history. Witness the Nazi practice of tattooing identification numbers on the arms of concentration camp prisoners.

When scars are inflicted to exert power, then those who are scarred are made to exhibit powerlessness. It may come as a surprise to learn that people in powerless situations (prisoners, battered women, victims of childhood neglect or abuse) often resort to cutting or burning themselves. Many report that nothing works better to regain control over one’s body, defy the powers that control one’s life, and provide relief from unbearable states of overwhelming anxiety. In short, it prevents disintegration. Paradoxically, self-mutilation helps to reinstate the skin boundary between self and other and maintain one’s integrity. The scars that result declare one’s existence in the face of annihilation.

Skin is our “face” to the world, the banner we fly for others to see and read, whether we like it or not. It displays identity the way gloves show the hands within them. Blemishes, birthmarks, moles, pock marks, freckles, liver spots, wrinkles, warts, splotches, pimples and scars are all letters in the scripts of our lives that are written on our skin.

When I turned fifty-two, I had two long scars running from my sternum to my armpits in the place of breasts. Viewed together, they inscribe a large V across my chest, which I take for the victory of surviving breast cancer despite two mastectomies. Some of my friends see it as the wings of a bird taking flight. I could put on my clothes and try to forget about all of it, but scars don’t let us forget. By definition, they persist long after the events that caused them have gone the way of all things. They write us into history, continually reminding us of what happened and alerting others that something happened.

In the end, we are known and recognized by our scars. They become us – or we become them – until they are as much a part of us as our fingerprints. While fingerprints reveal what is given at birth, some would say pre-destined, scars reveal destiny’s detours, the ones that take us beyond our births and make us who we are, transcribing our stories onto that flexible, renewable parchment we call skin.

The Eater of Grass

by Jada Ach

I know the essence of soil:
how it waxes the gums and
caulks between teeth, how
it tastes like the green lingering
of the almost-dead –

because on that day when they
held out my arms like wings,
like Jesus, and showed me what
lust could do when aided by
force, I felt like Malinche

receiving the sex of Cortés,
tenderly and almost willingly –
and I marveled at how the layers,
rich hues of brown antiquity,
could erode and dissolve inside of me.

Between

by Anna Arredondo

It is from under these
covers that Egyptian Musk rises
like heat. And I think,
you are here with me, a nightsoul
surrounding me.

It is here, that somewhere
a drop of your breath fell
or a strand of your hair pressed
night-oil on my pillow.

It is here, now, as I drift,
then twist each cover tightly
around me, that I need
them close, an impression.

Somewhere here, underneath
or in between these covers,
sweat, incense ashes, candle wax.

These blankets, how I savor them,
wishing I could creep deep
into this percale, weaving into
last night, and your skin.

a cure for ordinary fevers

by Kristy Bowen

Begin with pumice, forsythia
the roots of bulbs unsuspected til spring.

(it will take shape in the throat,
the scaffolding of ribs)

add: 1 cassia bloom, a girl unfortunate in her dress
the hair of a clairvoyant
pomegranate juice, or the swollen seeds (the acoustics of red)
a heretic's tongue, or in a pinch, rosemary

Mix well. First, we must relearn snow, dream of a box with the cosmos inside,
or a tinge of birch bark. Sew in a light blue pouch and place
beneath the bed.

Soon she will suffer of letters, of preludes,
a book open to an uncertain page.
Will dream her body is unwritten,
is a sundial at the bottom of a lake.

Unsound

by Kristy Bowen

The wrist holds impossible cruelties.
Dead pets nest in the curve of an ear,
while every heartbreak has a spot just
below the throat. Even at eleven,
car wrecks twisted the cage of my ribs.
Milk skinned and amber tongued,
I dreamt of my mother's rubied ovaries,
my father's golden body, their accurateness:
me and my sister, our mouths pink
and flawless as a ballerina in a box.
Surely, we rested like a dragonfly
at the tip of her spine, or a knot in the rope
of their dreams. Even now, a grandmother
summers in my sternum, while another swims
the blood stream, the heart's gates and locks.
My ankles still turn at the slightest imbalance.

a short history of the corset

by Kristy Bowen

Note the necessity of small hands, keyholes,
a dilation of the eyes, or the haunted cabinet.

Like in dancing:
lift the torso from the hips like an egg
from an egg cup, and let the chest
lead as if being drawn forwards
by an upward pulling string.

Taken from the latin, corps,
but then all nouns are accidental,
all grammar, merely chance.

We understand
no more than a pale lick of skin
beneath bone, the sighs
of cloakrooms or lilacs.

While hardly fit for bird calling, or orchards,
the body requires correction, the borders defined.

See how easily one could slip outside of a story.
Even through a locked door, quietly.

Lonely Days Lonely Nights

by Julie R. Enszer

Where would I be without my woman?

The Bee Gees

I.

If she dies
suddenly
young
I am going to sell everything
buy acres and acres of land
in West Virginia
with a hunting cabin
on top of a mountain
no plumbing
no electricity
I'll live naked
alone
crying and screaming
until there are no more tears
until my voice is silent

II.

I tell my friend Carole
you will have to visit me
every two or three months
out there in West Virginia
to make sure that I am alive
She tells me
it won't come to that
it won't come to that

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III.

Luna
an orca whale
trapped
in a Vancouver inlet
every hour or two she cries out
for the other members of her pod
it has been two years
since she heard them respond
but still she knows their song
still she sings

How To Eat a Persimmon

by Patricia Wellingham-Jones

Wait
until it's as squooshy
as the breast of a well-padded woman.
Pinch its bottom—
firm is good, soft is better.
Cup the fruit in your left hand
(lefties do the reverse),
pick up your spoon in the other.
A sterling silver teaspoon
deeply engraved or with elegant pattern
yields the most pleasure.
Touch the tip of the spoon
just below the nipple of the orange globe.
Push with intent. Break the skin.
Spoon the almost liquid flesh
into a small bowl. Using fingers,
rotate the fruit. Peel fragile petals,
scrape the custard from the skin.
Sever the stiff ribs, lay them
with the flesh. Dig the tip
of that silver spoon deep
into the base, twist out
the final scoops. Lay the emptied body
gently to rest. Wash your hands.
Carry the bowl as if it were made of gold
to your favorite chair. Lean back,
wave your spoon in a circle, sigh.
Lift the shimmering succulence to your lips,
roll it in your mouth, swallow
slowly. Do it again. Again.
Again.

Published in Edifice Wrecked, 2004

Soup Watch

by Patricia Wellingham-Jones

for Forest

I put down the phone,
pick up the knife,
smash garlic with the flat of the blade.
Chop carrots, potatoes, cabbage
with more vigor
than the task requires.
Onions give my eyes
an excuse to water.
I dump the vegetables
into the bubbling broth
from last night's St. Patrick's Day feast.
Add lentils and, at the very end,
corned beef cubes.

All morning while I dice and stir
I watch from afar over your hospital bed.
On the opposite side of the country,
hovered over by your children,
with the flowers I sent
placed in the ICU waiting room,
you slide gracefully
out of your body.

Cat Bones

by Patricia Wellingham-Jones

I like the feel
of their small bones:
the cat elbow dug
into my lying-down shin,
the flattened skull
that rests on the inside
of my shoulder,
thin ribs pulsing
vibration
in my cupped palm.

Oh yes, I enjoy
the velvet fur
of The Black One
and the rough thick pelt
of Camouflage Cat
but my heart shivers

at the knobby ridge of spine
under my sliding hand,
those little toes spread wide
kneading my arm,
the rumble of contentment
deep behind
the angled jaw,
the fragile frame
supporting
the alien mind.

Published in Rattlesnake Review, 2004

Amnesia Motel

by Charlie Newman

an album of faded pictures
laying on an empty bed
on one side of a dusty room
nobody rents
even though the rates are god-awful good

I give up
[not that I invested much in this to begin with]

today passes like yesterday
hollow words
empty promises
donuts in a box on the radiator
and an album of faded pictures
remains unopened
[keepsakes left behind]

sepia suits you
delicate lace and silk stockings and
mauve suits with shoulder pads
style is your substance sweetheart
don't fight it

pungent perfumes remind me of you
heart stopping poses no one else can emulate
[you really set the hook didn't you?]

so I am in this god-forsaken place
reaching for grasping at a little peace
sidestepping shadows [very fred astaire]
doing nothing I can undo

underneath it all: desire

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[somewhere someone I don't know
takes notes]

underneath the desire: fear

[everyone here knows this is true]

underneath the fear: emptiness
or hunger

like the pictures in the album
evaporating in the summer heat
wrenched from me in absentia
sympathy proves insufficient

regardless: everyone who checks in stays

regardless: some never check in

regardless: everyone ends up here sooner or later

my memory justifies nothing
taking the easy way out

arguments bury evidence
to no advantage

secrets are revealed on cue

no one here escapes
devastation depression devotion

grandiose stories
told over and over in the bar
even though none of us believes them

[so what if nobody cares?]

so what if nobody knows better?

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regardless: my album sits on my bed
forgetting nothing remembering all

supposing any of this is real

so what if it's all just another bad dream?
do you care? [did you ever?]

like love: this is never over

mea culpa sweet thing
reneging on history
gets you nowhere
except here

First published in Poetry Bay

jobbed [1]

by Charlie Newman

I get on the bus
and close my eyes.
“I can’t cut it,” I think.
“I’m just not doing it.”
There seems to be no “instead” for me.
I might as well be mopping floors in a gilded tourist spa in Greece,
or washing dishes in a greasy spoon in Toad Suck Ferry, Arkansas.
“All honest work is noble,” goes the cliché.
But should we be grateful for every indignity
suffered in the name of earning?
Yes,
there is meat on my plate.
I just don’t have the teeth to chew it.

Blood Tree
by Margo Roby

The aborigines call it
the mari, or blood tree,
for the gaping wounds
that bleed a scarlet resin
which with age

(like blood crusting on a cut)

blackens.

Painting Walls

by Peggy Duffy

Today my two daughters and I are painting the kitchen. I roll the walls and ceiling; they do the brushwork—the windows and floor moldings and all the corners where the roller won't reach. Painting is soothing. There's comfort in the clean fresh smell. How easily the new white coat covers the blemished wall below. The splattering of grease above the stove. The gray smudges which years of little hands have left behind. The numerous dents and chips of daily living. Each movement of the brush and roller changes the surface of the landscape, no longer marred but smooth and perfect.

* * *

A baby's skin is smooth and perfect to the touch. Unblemished. Flawless. The first time my daughter hurt herself she was ten months old crawling up the three front steps to our house. She stood up and not two feet from me fell forward onto the cement. Time wouldn't stand still long enough for me to catch her. Her forehead oozed blood through a jagged tear in her skin, a broken line of flesh. I held her close, full of wonderment and sadness and guilt at her new flawed self. She was no longer impervious to the outside.

* * *

My daughter, fifteen now, paints beside me. She has a raised white scar which stretches across the bottom of her chin, a remnant of the seventeen stitches she received when she fell off her bike ten years ago, visible only if she lifts her head. How difficult it was for me to sit in the emergency room determined to behave so as not to be asked to leave while the doctor spread the gaping wound even wider in order to remove pieces of the dirt and gravel driveway from inside her. Chins don't bleed very much when cut. There was no blood to block the sight of fat globules beneath her skin, the raw white shell of her chin bone. Layer upon layer of tissue the doctor stitched as I held her hands between mine and listened to her cry.

* * *

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You look at something long enough, you stop seeing it. My daughters and I hadn't noticed how tired and dull the old kitchen walls had become until we started to paint them. I have a scar on my right knee from the time I was seven and accepted a dare to jump off six cement steps. I ran home to find no one there and in my childish mind I sobbed for hours on our back porch, until I'd cried the pain away. The wound scabbed over and slowly healed, leaving behind a round fleshy scar the size of my entire kneecap which seemed to shrink as I grew. It left behind another scar, one that never dwindled in size. Where had my mother been when I needed her to treat my wounds?

* * *

I vowed to be a mother who would always be there, one who would listen, and talk about anything, no subject barred. I'd never leave my children alone in their pain. But even as I extend my arms they push me away, hiding their pain behind closed doors. Perhaps my oldest feels I've already seen too much of her, the ugliness beneath the skin. Maybe there is only so many times you can be patched up from the outside.

* * *

My younger daughter has pale skin and light brown freckles which, like rings on a tree, increase in number with each year of her life. On days she hates those freckles she attempts to camouflage them with a layer of moistened face powder. "Why do I have so many freckles?" she asks in exasperation. "Because I have freckles, your father has freckles, your grandfather had freckles," I tell her. I try not to adopt my mother's tone, the one I remember from when I was thirteen, the one that says if this is the worst life throws at you then you have nothing to complain about. I project compassion into my voice. I give her a hug. In spite of my best efforts, I've once again said the wrong thing. She pulls away and gives me an ugly look. I'm the reservoir of her flaws.

* * *

It's uneven, this relationship between three women in one household. We mar these walls and then we paint them. I stand back to assess the results of our efforts. Already the paint in the kitchen is drying and the

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old imperfections are coming through. A grease stain that paint will never adhere to. A seam where the wallboard has shifted. Yet painting is bonding. The three of us, brushes and rollers in hand, hair tied back and splattered with paint. Time can't slow enough for me to savor this moment.

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Good Weed, Bad Deed

by Jackson Lassiter

I was a late-bloomer as far as sex was concerned. At least compared to the other boys in my dusty little hometown in northern Wyoming. Most of them bragged about nailing some cheerleader by the time they were fifteen. Even by seventeen, the only nailing I did involved a hammer and wood. But I did like hearing their stories. The locker room talk was steamy.

Sure, I had dates. Plenty of dates. I'm good-looking in a ruggedly handsome way. I have loads of wavy hair, sky-blue eyes, and nice muscles. I'm lucky in the looks department. And the girls liked to give me attention, appreciating my sensitive and artistic nature as much as my physicality. It's just that when it came down to the cold facts, I got cold feet. Cramped up in the back seat of someone's mother's Chevrolet – an overheated nymphet wriggling beneath me with her mound of Venus thrust toward my hesitant member – I froze. I knew I was supposed to slip a sweating palm beneath her bra cup or shove it under the elastic waistband of her panties, but I couldn't. I always found a reason to stop.

"Not here. I don't want it to be like this. Let's wait," I would whisper. What I really meant was, "not here, not you, I'm scared and I want to go home." Eventually I would extricate myself from the damp tangle of arms and legs and partially clothed torsos. After a moment to cool down, the girl usually found my reticence romantic. I was just happy it was over. Girls petrified me, and I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

Then Peggy found me.

In the mid-seventies, in a one-light town in the middle of a huge nowhere, without a theater or club or even a late-night restaurant, a group of teenagers will find other means of entertainment. My friends and I turned to marijuana. Enter Randy and Peggy.

They moved in from Minnesota, kids and dog in tow. After an introduction through someone's older brother, Randy became our "source". He received shipments in the mail, usually in the form of a cute little stuffed

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animal, its cotton batting replaced with high grade Mexican weed. This was a decent second income for his family, and we provided him a good business: such good business that we ended up seeing a great deal of them. Eventually we all became friends. Their living room became our hangout. It didn't matter that they were in their thirties and we were in our teens. Ganja was the great equalizer. We passed the time rolling fat joints, eating junk food, and laughing. We were one big, high, happy family.

Randy was a huge man, unkempt, over six feet tall and burly, with hair and beard like Grizzly Adams and arms bigger than my waist. He was loud and aggressive and ruled his house with an iron fist. Literally. His dog, his children, even his friends toed the line. Nobody wanted to incur Randy's wrath. Funny thing is, Peggy might not have been as big or loud or aggressive, but she definitely schemed better. Peggy didn't take crap. Everyone, including Randy, ended up following her lead. He had the cocksure bravado, but she ruled that roost like the clucking mother hen she was.

By no means a beauty – two children and lots of marijuana munchies had left a sag here and a bag there – Peggy's infectious laugh and easy comic flair were her appeal. She was the jovial den mother for our troop of Rastafarian-wannabe scouts, a merry leader with an uncanny ability to get exactly what she wanted. We all loved Peggy and the power of her wit, and where she ventured, our little band of misfits and outcasts followed: a string of hapless, stoned baby ducks. No one loved her more than I. In the midst of this spaced-out crush I gave up grappling with girls and devoted myself to spending time with Peggy and her bong. I would have gone anywhere with her.

As it turned out I only had to go as far as Billings, 135 miles to the north. In this wide-open part of the country, this was the city. It was time to restock our pothead paraphernalia and Billings lay claim to the only headshop within driving distance. Peggy arranged for the two of us to make the trip on everyone's behalf. I skipped my classes the day of our venture, dressed with care and an eye toward looking older, and we headed north to Montana in a blaze of smoke. Peggy drove. I loved being with her as she guided us through the city; I even liked the way her breasts jiggled when the car passed over bumps in the highway.

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As night fell and we headed back to Wyoming, I was quiet. Shopping for the latest in dope accoutrement had been fun, but being with Peggy was a schoolboy fantasy. I was reluctant to return her to Randy. When she suggested a detour through Yellowstone Park for a moonlight drive, I quickly agreed.

It was a warm autumn night. My new Fleetwood Mac cassette was terrific, the breeze was pine-scented, and the moon cast a gentle blue glow to the forest. The romance overpowered me. When Peggy suggested that we stop to stargaze, I was only too willing. She climbed into the back seat – for a better view, of course – and I followed her without hesitation, pulled by the electric current between us.

As we spooned in the back seat, her ample bottom pressed against the crook of my torso, I found myself getting hard. I guess Peggy found it, too. She flipped around, kissed me, and took off both our shirts in what seemed like one quick move. As she slid my hand over her maternal breast my palm wasn't sweating, and I didn't resist when she licked her way down my bare chest, unbuttoned my straining jeans, and took me in her mouth. Later, as she straddled my hips from above and aimed herself at my dick, her hippie skirt hiked up and my jeans pulled down, I had a sudden flash of understanding. Maybe it was her intensity, the way she took command without offering a chance for protest. This is why she and I had made this trip alone. This was her purpose. And I didn't care. At that moment I loved her more than anything.

After the initial wilderness devirginization she became insatiable, plotting ways for us to be alone. We would clandestinely drive to the country, rocking her car on some solitary farm road, or she would pick me up a discrete distance from the high school for my lunch break and take me to her house, her hand in my pants the entire distance. Creeping in the house to avoid being seen, she would toss me to the floor and ride me like a banshee for exactly 45 minutes, both of us with one ear cocked for sounds of Randy's unexpected return. I would leave her wet and asleep on her living room floor, running back to class five minutes late and flushed red.

A year passed and we were still secret lovers. I graduated from high school and took a job in one of the mines, putting off college because

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Peggy asked me to stick around. I was working the swing shift, volunteering for the less desirable evening hours so that my days – when Randy was working – were free for frolicking. Over time Peggy became more and more brazen, flicking her tongue against the back of my neck in their kitchen when Randy wasn't looking or groping me as we passed in their hallway. She was in her stride, but for me things were at a standstill. Gradually my days had settled into a numbing inertia that I couldn't explain. I worked, smoked pot, and put out for Peggy as she arranged it. We professed our love for each other but I felt something was missing, and it felt like something important. I didn't know what it was, but even the sex lacked velocity. Sure, I was living every boy's fantasy but I resented the secrecy. I was reduced to a pat on the ass here, a quick cup of the balls there, a toss on the floor when time and opportunity permitted. I wanted something else, but I didn't know what. It was a push-pull situation. I loved the love, but hated being her meat. And I couldn't stop.

One afternoon as I lay naked on my back on her living room floor, Peggy grinding on top while I followed with the appropriate motions from below, I noticed her youngest daughter had quietly slipped in and was watching us. She had sneaked home unannounced from a neighborhood friend's house. At six, she wasn't old enough to know exactly what was going on but she knew it wasn't right. She bolted. Peggy didn't care; she wanted to finish.

That night when my shift ended and I walked through the moonlight to my car at the edge of the graveled parking lot, I really wasn't surprised to see Randy leaning against it, waiting for me. I may not have been worldly in matters of sex and relationships, but after a year of hiding from this behemoth, I knew that things had come to a head. I had practiced for this moment. I was prepared. When I noticed that Randy was holding the biggest bone-handled hunting knife I had ever seen, my rehearsed speech about the love that Peggy and I felt – the love that could never be denied – stuck solidly in my throat like a piece of dry bread. Before I could catch my breath, he began to speak. He didn't look at me; instead, he focused on cleaning the grit from beneath his fingernails with the tip of the blade.

“Do you think you're the only one? That she hasn't done this before? Do you think I didn't know?” Randy mumbled, as much to himself as

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to me. He continued, not waiting for a response. "It's always a boy like you, some kid she can boss around. Some skinny little sensitive kid who does exactly what she wants. Do you think she really loves you?" The polished metal of the blade glistened delicately in the moonlight, and I thought it best not to speak.

He looked at me and continued, slowly. "She likes boys, sissy boys, and you're just the latest. Why do you think we left Minnesota? God-dam it! I tell her every time that she can't keep doing this." He turned his head and spat at the ground, as if clearing his throat would help clear his mind. I remained silent. We both stared at the dirt-flecked puddle of spittle as he spoke.

"She loves me, you know. She doesn't love you, and she didn't love any of them. She just likes a young dick. She's always going to be with me, and I'm always going to be with her. We are a family." He looked at me with a steely glare, opened the door and motioned for me to get in, gesturing to the empty driver's seat with the knife point. He did not break eye contact. As I slid past his imposing bulk, I noticed that I really was much shorter and smaller than he. Oh my God, I was a skinny kid! I sat behind the wheel and he closed the door behind me. He leaned through the open window, his huge frame filling the space. "Only I'm not leaving this time," he said, nearly whispering. "You are."

With an eerie calm and more authority than I had ever heard before, he told me that I had to be gone by morning. I couldn't say good-bye to Peggy; I wasn't to tell anyone about our conversation. As if to illustrate the seriousness of his instructions, Randy absent-mindedly made a series of cuts in the rubber window moulding as he spoke. The flawlessly sharpened knife effortlessly sliced through the fleshy material. I watched in awe, barely hearing him yet completely understanding every word. Then he walked back to his old truck and waited for me to drive away. He followed me out of the parking lot, so close behind that in my rearview mirror I could see the glint of the knife he continued to hold in his hand as he drove. He followed me all the way home.

Through the early morning hours, as I packed what I would be taking on the road, Randy's words came back to haunt me. "Skinny, sensitive kid.

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Sissy boy.” It was a mantra that repeated as I drove away from the sleeping town at sunrise. “Skinny, sensitive kid. Sissy boy.”

I wasn't sad. Rather, I felt renewed, as if breaking the surface for fresh air after being submerged far too long in a murky depth. Here in the bright morning sunlight, the fresh country air fluffing my hair through the open car window, both the boy having sex with an older woman on the floor of her living room and the “other man” being threatened in a dark parking lot seemed so distant, so remote. Leaving the only life I had known, I drove alone, without a destination but for the first time in my own direction. Unfettered by expectation, I saw myself with clarity, not in a bright and sudden flash of insight but incrementally, a gradual claiming of the pieces of myself I found along that highway. My sensitivity was both salvation and strength. I finally began to understand that I was gay, and I knew that I had to move forward to live that destiny.

Life opened for me that morning. I felt like I had been given a gift and I was grateful. I wanted to turn the car around and drive straight back to Randy and Peggy's, to thank them for setting me free. I wanted to reassure them that they would be OK, that I would be OK. As I searched for a wide spot in the highway to make a U-turn, my hand came to rest on the jagged edges of the cuts in the window moulding. Tracing the sharp outlines with one finger, I realized that turning around wasn't such a great idea. Let them fend for themselves. I pointed the car south and pushed the gas pedal. And I haven't looked back.

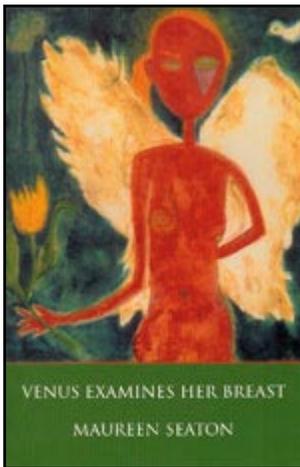
Venus Examines Her Breast

by Maureen Seaton

Carnegie Mellon University Press; 2004; 65 pages

Review/Interview

by Lauren R. Mathews



It isn't always clear from where poetry will emerge. The grocery store, a great love, or some previously unfathomable journey through loss. It is precisely that journey that Maureen Seaton leads readers through in her most recent collection *Venus Examines Her Breast*, a demanding book in which the reader is simultaneously witness to and recipient of the profound wisdom Seaton earned through the great loss of her mother.

Seaton's mother was diagnosed with breast cancer in the early 70s and underwent a radical mastectomy. That same cancer, which metastasized into her bones, would end her life in 1999. Her mother's prognosis was a few short months and Seaton took a leave of absence from her teaching position to become the primary caregiver. But a few months turned into a year and a half of trying cope with her own feelings while caring for her mother and watching her father collapse under the stress of losing his wife – not only physically, but mentally. Seaton's mother had Alzheimer's as well.

“My father came out that time with Parkinson's. His hand began to tremble one day that second winter (1998). His nerves simply broke,” said Seaton. While she was fully dedicated to be with her mother until the end she admits she “was afraid at several points that I wouldn't make it out alive myself”.

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Her escape – writing poetry, collage style. Seaton kept a journal to “keep myself sane and to stay even slightly grounded” and she created visual art and collage poetry there. She included drawings of herself, her mother, and even glued in notes her mother had written and left around the house.

“There was one horrific afternoon and evening where she went through opium withdrawal, hallucinating, etc. and I went into the little spare room where I slept and wrote it all down. It was a way to handle my rage at the medical profession, which was really my rage at cancer and my own powerlessness to help my mother. The night of the day she died I wrote about the moment of her death. That year and a half was a whole separate world, an island, a banishment. People said things about God’s will – lots of God stuff – and it all sounded so incredibly goofy to me. Sometimes almost obscene. Writing helped with all of that.”

That journal became *Venus*, a collection that is unsettling, vivid, and packed with profound images. It is ultimately a beautifully narrated, hauntingly detailed message to the living. Seaton documented and explored the death she found herself surrounded with to unwittingly craft a guidebook of sorts, a territorial survey on death for the rest of us.

Not bad for poetry that was never intended for anyone else to see. But that’s not to say the collection is easily accessible.

The book begins and ends with the only truly linear poems in the collection, a framing technique Seaton wisely employed knowing that her use of collage style “is more difficult to absorb” than lyrical or narrative poetry. It is precisely that difficulty that makes this collection so wildly alive and surreal between those frames without losing itself in obscurity or its own artfulness.

In one brief section from the 10 page poem *You’re Babylon and I’m Brazil*, Seaton writes:

*I wish my name were Zelda. I wish I were a filmmaker. When all of me
collides with all
of you will I be too busy? I just missed being killed by a huge window that
flew*

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*off a red skyscraper and sliced a woman in half under the awning of a
pizzeria.*

Peter Greenaway, watch over me.

*There's a story about a woman who was stepping on a manhole cover
when it blew her
sky-high. I fear that word, sky-high. It reminds me of how air is for sale
in the city, how lives*

*develop like cones into heavens. How much for the fourteenth floor,
a twenty-ninth?*

*How much for a cubic foot of space, a cloud caught in an air-shaft, how
much would you pay*

*to shake hands with the sun? Put'er there, I've heard people say as they
hold out their hands.*

Put'er there, pardner.

A tremendous amount of the element of the weird is weaved throughout the reality of this work. For instance, in *You're Babylon and I'm Brazil*, Seaton arrived upon the scene of a terrible accident in Chicago moments after it happened.

“The fall before my mother died (1998), a woman I didn't know was killed in downtown Chicago. She was walking south on Wabash, west side of the street, and a piece of window fell from high on the ‘red building’ and struck her. The little daughter, who was holding her hand when it happened, was physically unharmed. I arrived right there – the spot where the glass hit – a few minutes later. *Venus* is about that death as well, and about my own sense of vulnerability. The book is a heavy one. My hope is that the images and multiple small stories of the collages make it easier to take in.”

Venus is one of the few poetry collections that not only can be read from start to finish in one sitting but should be read that way. To take any poem in singularity causes a dissociation and rift in time that is not easily repaired without exploring the work as a whole. Thoughts and images are fragmented and circular, people die and live in the same stanza, colors are feelings are magic are lightening are violence are psychic.

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From *Riding Hood*, Seaton writes:

Once I touched a dying woman. She could not be touched in the conventional way. I stood at her feet – she looked nothing like she had in her other life – and I touched her beyond her skin where she was already dying into, where no one could touch her but me.

Let's take our wombs and hide them in the sunflower fields.

Oh night fighter, oh scrumptious fatigue.

“The movement of time was excruciatingly slow during the year and a half of my mother’s illness. Time was circular and seemed to spiral. It moved around us, sucked us down, my father, my mother, and I. We were in a little boat and we rowed our asses off toward a horizon of land we absolutely couldn’t see. The day my mother died was a flash. Flash! Then they took her out of the house and it was over.”

Seaton has finished a new manuscript of poems about caves and towers and sea monsters “sounds like fantasy,” she said, “but it’s still just my life”. She continues to write in her journal and is looking forward to discovering what poems will emerge this summer.

Other collections by Maureen Seaton:

The Sea Among the Cupboards

Fear of Subways

Furious Cooking

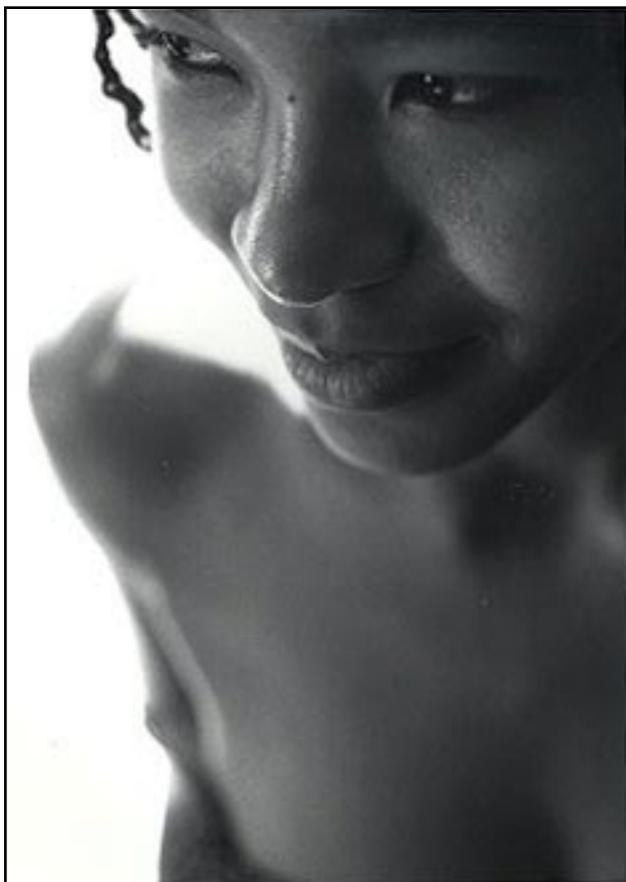
Exquisite Politics (with Denise Duhamel)

Little Ice Age

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Delana #7

by Jacob S. Knabb



issue 1. Photography

Delana #47

by Jacob S. Knabb



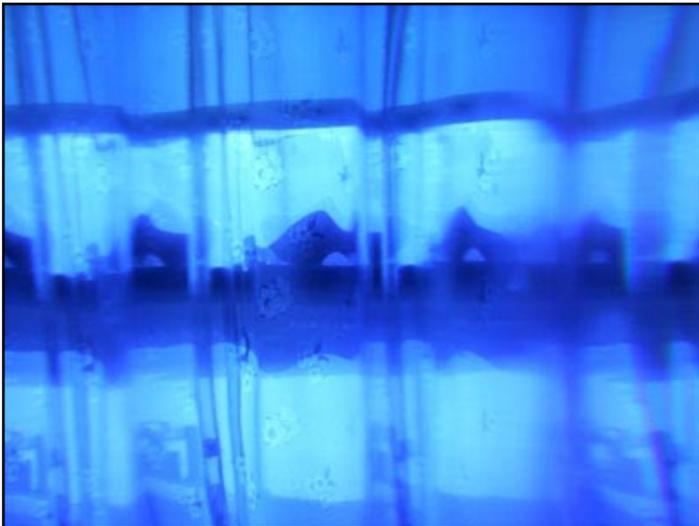
issue 1. Photography

FJP standing in the street

by Fides Julian Proctor



Clogs on a Ledge
by Anna Ressler



issue 1. Photography

Come Inside
by Anna Ressler

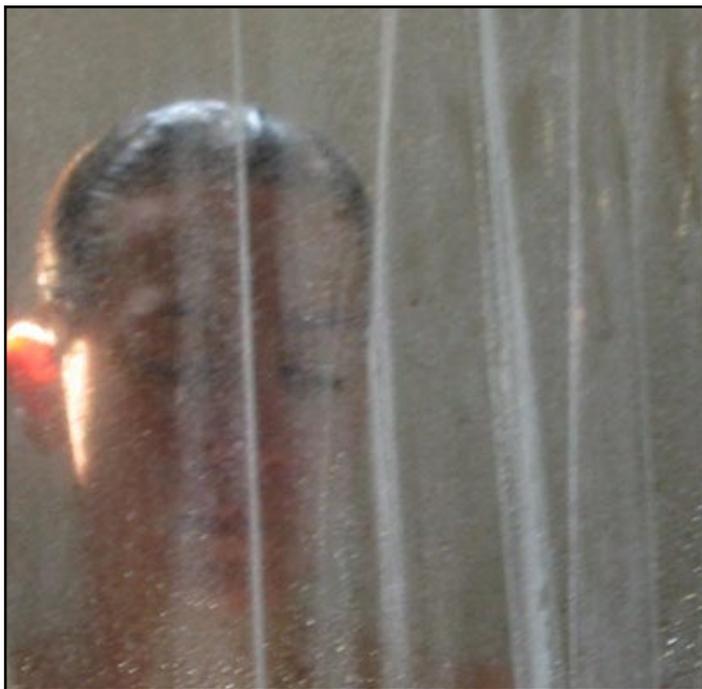


Who Wants to go for a Walk
by Anna Ressler



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Cleansing
by Shawn Sargent



issue 1. Photography

Isolation
by Shawn Sargent



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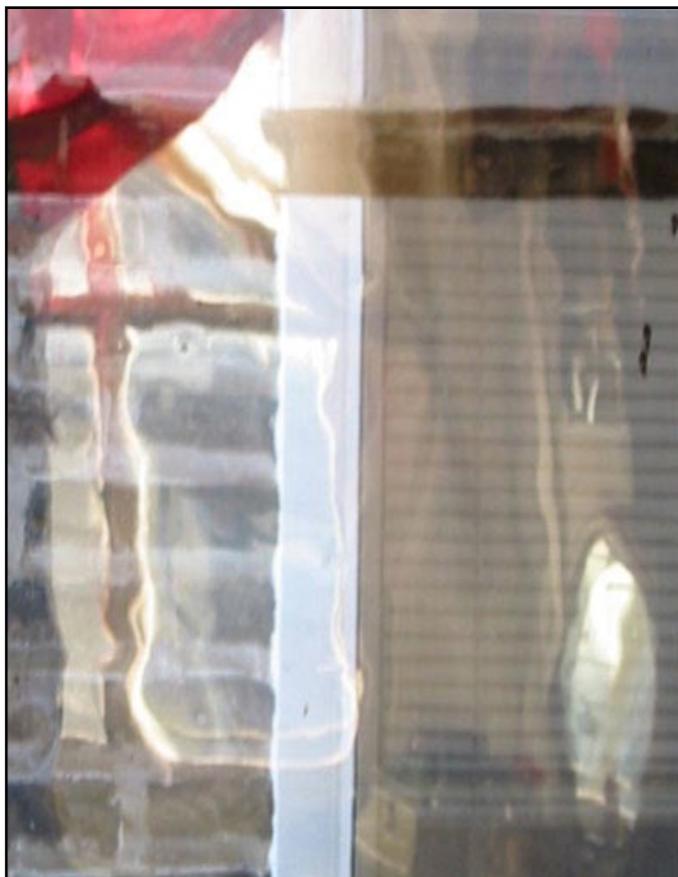
Lemon

by Shawn Sargent



issue 1. Photography

Within
by Shawn Sargent



issue 1. Photography

Prayer
by Shawn Sargent



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Jada Ach Since graduating from Ball State University in 2003 with a double major in English and Spanish, I have lived in three time zones, four states, and six cities. Currently, I am working and writing in Chicago; however, in August 2005 I will hit the highway once again to pursue a Master's Degree in English at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona.

The cultural and geographical landscapes of South America, Mexico, and the American Southwest frequently emerge in my poetry, as I have spent much time traveling in these areas. When encountering new communities and cultures, I am forced to rely on tastes, smells, and images at a greater intensity in an attempt to relate them to something familiar. My poetry gives me the space to discover these zones of connection and disconnection, granting me a different perspective of who I am and how I relate to the world.

Published works:

El Once de Septiembre en Córdoba. Barnwood Press Magazine. (Fall 2004)

Newspapers. Ball State Women and the Arts Festival. (Spring 2002)

Bus Window. MTCup Review. (Spring 2002)

Ana Arredondo is a 2003 Graduate of the University of Illinois at Chicago's Creative Writing MA program. She is currently working on her first collection of poems titled, *Negatives*. Ana lives in Chicago and works as an Adjunct Instructor of English at Richard J. Daley College in Chicago & Harper College in Palatine.

Kristy Bowen's work has appeared in a number of publications, including *Diagram*, *Stirring*, and *Poems Niedergasse*. Her most recent chapbook, *belladonna*, is available at her website. A three-time Pushcart nominee, Bowen was recently awarded first place in The Poetry Center of Chicago's 10th Annual Juried Reading Competition. She lives in Chicago, where she edits the online journal *Wicked Alice*, and is the founder of *Dancing Girl Press*, devoted to publishing work by women poets. More of her work may be seen at: www.angelfire.com/poetry/wickedpen.

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Kat Duff is the author of *The Alchemy of Illness* (Bell Tower). Other essays have appeared in *Parabola*, *The Taos Review*, and *Women of Power*. She works as a child forensic interviewer in New Mexico.

Peggy Duffy's short stories and essays have appeared in numerous publications, including *Newsweek*, *The Washington Post*, *Brevity*, *Octavo*, *Drexel Online Journal*, *Three Candles*, *Pierian Springs*, *So To Speak*, *Literary Mama*, *Smokelong Quarterly* and *Gin Bender*, where this essay first appeared. Her fiction was recognized by the Virginia Commission for the Arts as a finalist in the Individual Artist Fellowship program for literary artists. Her short story, "First Thing in the Morning," was selected by storySouth for the Million Writers Award, Notable Online Short Stories for 2004, and two of her stories were selected by storySouth for the Million Writers Award, Notable Online Short Stories for 2003. She maintains a website at <http://www.authorsden.com/peggyduffy>.

Julie R. Enszer is a writer and lesbian activist living in Maryland. She has previously been published in *Iris: A Journal About Women*, *Room of One's Own*, *Long Shot*, the *Web Del Sol Review*, and the *Harrington Lesbian Fiction Quarterly*. Her work is forthcoming in *Poetica* and *Sunspinner*. She is working on a collection of poetry entitled, *Limnings*, and a novel. You can reach her at JREnszer@aol.com.

Patricia Wellingham-Jones, a former psychology researcher and writer/editor, is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee. She has had work published in numerous anthologies, journals, and Internet magazines, including *Möbius*, *Red River Review*, *Rattlesnake Review*, *Phoebe*, *A Room of Her Own*, *Thunder Sandwich*, *Edifice Wrecked* and *Niederngasse*. Joining chapbooks which include *Don't Turn Away: Poems About Breast Cancer* are her newest collections: *California: Mountain & Stream Suite*, *Bags*, *SkyWords* and *Voices on the Land*. Her website is www.wellinghamjones.com.

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Jacob S. Knabb is a Chicago-based writer and photographer, currently splitting time between the two disciplines. He has recently been named Fiction Editor of Another Chicago Magazine, and is currently at work on a series of photographs based on textures.

Jackson Lassiter grew up nearly feral in the hills of Wyoming, where he gleaned an appreciation of the vagaries of Mother Nature and human nature. He now lives in Washington, DC, with his partner and a snappy Shih Tzu named Mona. You can reach him at jrinluck@verizon.net

Chicago poet and Web designer **Francesco Levato** works as Poetry Editor for Ink & Ashes. Drawing razor thin lines between what is seen and what is hidden in daily life, Francesco pulls from his own experience to write about the darkness lurking in the suburbs and the potential loss of self in the face of an increasingly aggressive culture.

Francesco recently returned to Chicago after living and working in Italy for two years. During his time in Italy he developed interactive media projects through his studio, Levato Design, a multi-media, international design firm working with clients such as Motorola, Leo Burnett, and Jaguar.

Francesco currently performs in Chicago where, as Interactive Media Director for RAW: Recorded Art Words, he broadcasts live poetry events over the internet. Some of his work has appeared in Witness: Anthology of Poetry by Serengeti Press; Chicago Poetry; Snow Monkey; Outsider Ink; Poems Niederngasse; Xcp; Streetnotes; Poets Against the War; Newtopia Magazine; and Voices in Wartime.

For more information on Francesco or the organizations he's involved with, visit: <http://www.levatodesign.com>

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Writer, artist and feminist activist **Lauren R. Mathews** is Literary Editor for Ink & Ashes. She writes and makes art to uncover and reveal the tragic, beautiful, and sacred landscape of women and femininity.

She, along with her partner Skye Enyeart, is the founder and executive director of Survivor Circle, an Illinois Not-for-Profit working to educate and advocate the use of art as a fundamental healing process in the aftermath of sexual and domestic violence. Additionally, Lauren is the poetry coordinator for Woman Made Gallery and is also the co-host for R.A.W. Chicago.

Lauren earned her degrees in Professional Writing and in Women's Studies from Purdue University and studied political journalism at Georgetown University. Her work has appeared in PoetryMidwest and The Pedestal Magazine. She has exhibited at Woman Made Gallery, Havana Gallery, and Around the Coyote.

For more on Lauren or any of the organizations she is involved with, visit <http://www.survivorcircle.org>
<http://www.womanmade.org>

Charlie Newman was born in Newark, NJ in 1943. He started writing poetry in 1956. He's had 4 books and 2 CDs released. His 5th book and 3rd CD will be available from FractalEdge Press in Spring, 2005. He's performed at The U.N. Dialogue Through Poetry; Insomniacathon (2001, 2003, 2004); The New York Underground Music & Poetry Festival; The London International Poetry & Song Festival; ChicagoPoetry.com Poets Against The War; ChicagoPoetry.com Earth Day Event; ChicagoPoetry.com Chicago Poetry Fest (2003 & 2004); and ChicagoPoetry.com Café Cram 1, 2, 3 & 4. He hosts Tuesday night open mics at The Café, 1st Friday poetry shows at DvA Gallery, and The Café Poetry Circus on WZRD-FM. He was named 1 of Top 15 in The Chicago Poetry Scene by Third Coast Press.

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Fides Julian Proctor is a first generation Filipino, born in Chicago in 1971. A couple of years ago she backpacked through Southeast Asia to learn about and experience other asian cultures.

Anna Ressman is an artist who works mainly with photography and mixed media collage. She is also a writer and a singer. Anna uses a variety of methods of expression in order to explore the creative process in both intellectual and intuitive ways. She resides with her husband in Chicago where she has been known to spontaneously admit dirty little secrets and to practice the delicate craft of sarcasm.

Margo Roby is a teacher of English Literature at Jakarta International School, and has lived in Indonesia for fifteen years. Her writing credits include poetry published in WORM, Pebble Lake Review, Lunarosity, Long Story Short, and Applecart Magazine.

Artist, writer, and educator, **Shawn Sargent** worked professionally in various fields prior to beginning her studies at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Primarily, she was a freelance image editor, she taught private art lessons, and she managed a self-owned business. Her goal of fostering an awareness of everyday surroundings, human interactions, and the spaces in which they exist brought her to the School of the Art Institute in Chicago two years ago, where she earned her degree in Visual and Critical Studies.

Shawn records the subtleties of daily experiences. Her detached observation and heightened sensitivity uncovers both the fragility and permanence of spaces, emotions, and interactions, to reveal the sensual tactility and humanness of ordinary moments that are often overlooked. She uses architectural elements to make evident the tensions and harmony between private and public, self and other, connection and isolation.

Currently, Shawn works on collaborative projects for a local government organization and helps educate children through creative and academic tutoring. She exhibits nationally, and since moving to Chicago has published several articles and works of non-fiction.