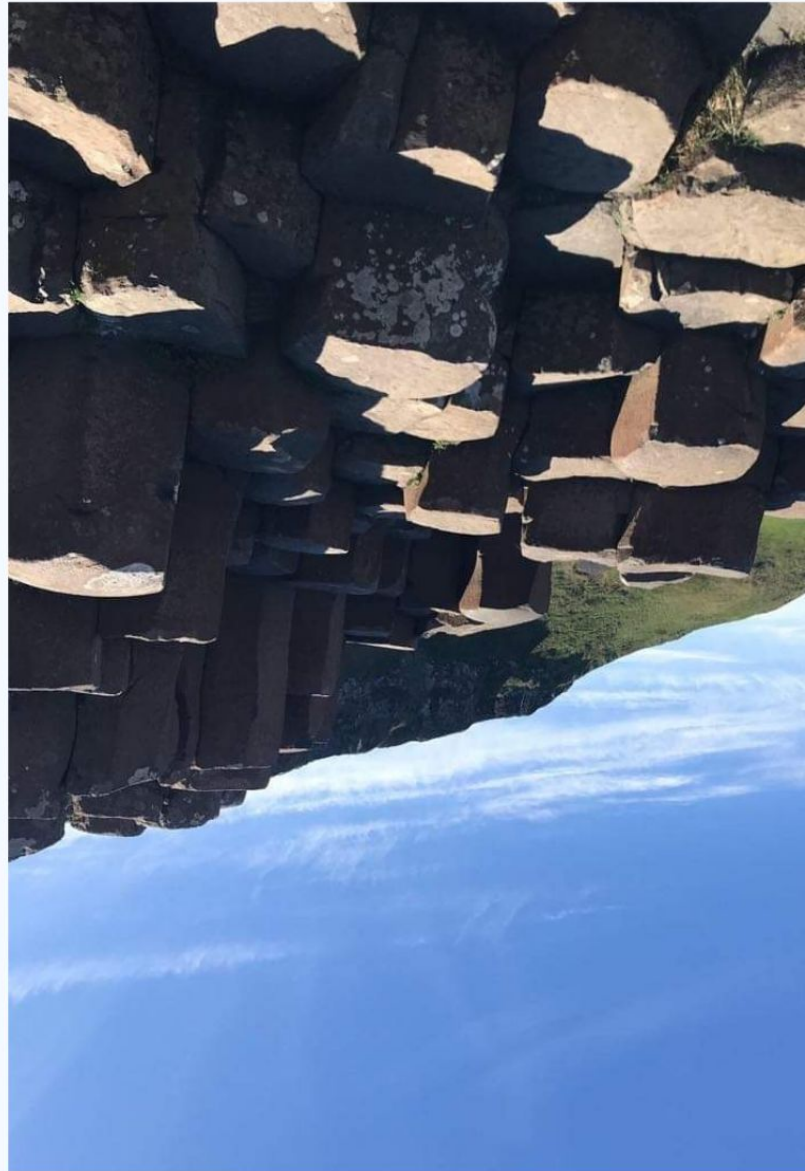


MANY NICE DONKEYS



SEPTEMBER 2023

Volume I, Issue V

Many Nice Donkeys

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dearest Barnyard Creatures,

In these final days of a nearly-gone summer, I find myself reflecting on seasons and cycles, departures and returns—the forces which bring us unwittingly back to the places we began. Appropriate, then, that among the names in this fifth and final issue of the inaugural volume of *Many Nice Donkeys*, we see again a handful of names which filled the pages of the previous four.

Unlike my esteemed compatriots, I spent the beginnings of MND (and, well, every issue up until now) living in the Rocky Mountain West. This leg of life I spent reading and writing poems in western Montana marked my first real geographical departure from home, which was accompanied, naturally, by a significant emotional and social departure. My home felt distant and estranged, my relationships fragile and translucent. This magazine served as a tether to home, my fellow editors as the muscles on the other end of each tendon attaching me to something familiar. Our contributors, then, became (and always were) the most essential figures in a beautifully strange equation. Through them and through their art *I can / disappear from the map all others will read* (Darren C. Demaree, page 15). I can make opaque a landscape whose ground I only touch through the frequent revisiting of this magazine's pages.

Is it reverence I feel for these writers who, again and again, stop us in our tracks and command our looking? Maybe it's wonder—at the expansive ways in which a mysterious collective “we” layer our selves and our lives in the most curious and overlapping of maps. Definitely gratitude, at the very least, for the complexity and vulnerability offered each reading period by these endlessly endeavoring writers who *are six thousand miles wide, not simple, not only one thing, not so easily explained* (Phillip Grady, page 12).

At the start of this summer, which (much like this issue) was brief and ripe and so very full, I returned home to beloved Kentucky and it asked that I relearn some things. It asked, too, that I learn some things for the first time. It feels powerful to me that we get to make ourselves new in our many comings and goings. That, no matter how familiar a person or a place, change will always outpace our getting-to-know. That *more and more new fog on old trees looks exactly the same as old fog on new trees* (Beth Gordon, page 23) and yet still we'll look long at it for some unperceived revision. And that to end is to begin in the same way that to return is to depart. Volume I, Issue V of *Many Nice Donkeys* grapples with all that lingers, flees, recurs in the big and small of this life. Spending my summer finding these pages has been a true arrival tucked inside of a “welcome home.” *I pray I've changed enough* (Chelsea Bouchard, page 20).

As the season dwindles and our lives shift, I hope you'll join me in these pages, which I'll return to again, again, again.

Sláinte,

Nik Moore
Editor-in-Chief
Volume I, Issue V

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Motorcycles

When the light turned green,
two motorcycles, headlights bright,
roared past my open driver's window
so loud my heart darted like a fish.
I didn't give them the credit.
Maybe the engines, curled like fists,
stirred some life in me.
I think it had more to do with this evening,
hung like silk from each tree,
the summer air with fingers through my hair,
the sun the exact shade of an overripe peach,
setting before I could show it to anyone.

Devon Neal (he/him) is a Bardstown, KY resident who received a B.A. in Creative Writing from Eastern Kentucky University and an MBA from The University of the Cumberlands. He currently works as a Human Resources Manager in Louisville, KY. His work has been featured in *Moss Puppy Magazine*, *Dead Peasant*, *Paddler Press*, *MIDLVL MAG*, and others.

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Isa Pickett

I've Been Meaning to Speak With You

CJ & I split a 9% beer outside the monster truck expo on the Delaware's dusk side. It's the spring of sports trivia, cult witnesses, askew wigs on child actors. Somewhere a step-dad resting on a rotting fence thinks of names for classic rock stations. *The Lever, The Scythe, The Gear.*

Our new mayor is a cop & the bus lines are being reworked to a series of concentric circles. A string of Ws plod the sky—It's the only day of the year with no birthdays.

CJ and I play a game of whisper down the lane, the two of us trading the same thing back & forth: *I'm awake.* CJ tells me about the quarry back home filled with orbeez, the beaver that hit his sister with its tail. I mention Tito tapping a fire hydrant to water the community garden, how last week I carnally needed an orange.

I tell him there's a lot I didn't say—how I believe in ghosts, how I never abandoned our suspicion as to what trailer the treasure was buried behind, how our childhood crested a horizon we couldn't watch. But he doesn't listen.

I'm alone with the distant engines, the civic reggaeton, the brown noise buzzing out the zeppelins. I start to think my regret is just desire in a big coat. It doesn't always happen this way. A monster truck does a wheelie down the pier. A man pulls up his shorts.

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Isa Pickett

And What Is Important?

You sit on a lover's checkered kitchen floor. The pothos plant in a macrame hanger is about to abandon a bad leaf. The two of your rings rest on the radiator. The world ends tonight.

The cat, Terrence with the loose teeth, rubs against your bare leg. His purring unfolds an old paper within you. You wish you could remember all the jokes you've made in candlelight. You wish you could bring back the feeling of first touching a horse's nose.

Your lover fiddles with their taser, moves the dial from pleasure to pain to pleasure again. You play memory while the pasta water boils: Daylilies as hats, muggy drives under Mount Knob, tiny bugs swallowed and mourned for on days-long camping trips through the governor's labyrinth. How the best way to get out was to feel along the wall.

You turn to numbers: How many light bulbs unchanged? How many haircuts? How many rolls down a hill?

What you'll miss most: Dancing, lighting birthday candles, starting your dad's old car, your childhood dachshund nuzzling his head into your neck, speaking at the same time as someone else, the neighbor's tattered lawn chairs.

Your lover drains the pasta, stirs the sauce. You eat on the fire escape. Other people in other places follow. Fork sounds on bowls. Car horns. You hear the parade of cultists in the city center singing the sixty hymns to their creator.

Around hymn 44, your lover says tonight let's make paper dolls. A long row of hundreds. Crayons to color their outfits, hair out of yarn. Give them each a name and pronoun set. They'll be servers, bankers, artists, deadbeats, rednecks, interns, teachers and mechanics.

We'll hang them over the shower, above the doorways, in the stairwell.

And in the morning we'll wake up late and string them over the street.

Isa Pickett is a writer and educator currently pursuing their Master's of Divinity at Earlham School of Religion. Her poems have previously appeared or are forthcoming in *Five South*, *ANMLY*, *Many Nice Donkeys*, *Colorado Review*, and elsewhere. They live in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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Joanna Theiss

Barrier Islands

Giselle's membership in Save the Turtles has lapsed but she wakes up with me anyway. From the top bunk she watches me put on the reflective vest I wear to help guide the sea turtles from their underground nests into the gulf. Giselle leans down with the blankets around her shoulders and braids my hair and lists all the ways sea turtles can die: crushed under car tires, snapped in half in an osprey's beak, suffocated by algal blooms, decapitated by the propellers of a motor boat.

Giselle's new boyfriend is twenty-two and sells drugs to the tourists. In the mugshot on the sheriff's website, he smiles so wide his face cracks open like a canyon. Giselle reads the list of crimes he's served time for, shrugs, and says *at least he didn't use a gun*.

Giselle was suspended but nobody will tell me why. When the bus drops me off after school, Giselle is in the front yard, lying out on a beach towel. Her bikini is untied and the skin on her back has burned to the color of the inside of a watermelon. I am supposed to make sure that Giselle stays in the house and finishes her chores while Mom works a double at the resort, but snitching is worse than crying about dead sea turtles so I walk past Giselle and into the kitchen and hope that none of the neighbors will tell on us.

*

Giselle's boyfriend makes us ride in the back because we are jailbait and he can't afford to get pulled over. As the Honda idles at a four-way stop, Giselle feeds me the lie I'm supposed to say to Mom in case she finds out we're gone. Giselle has to shout over the car's bass, rattling from speakers in the trunk.

When I get it right, Giselle leans in close. She smells like perfume stolen from the mall. She says *happy birthday, Chicken*.

The lobby is crammed with people wearing t-shirts with the band on them. I grab Giselle's hand as the overhead lights in the lobby flash but she says *I'll meet you in there*. Her pursed lips and quick-blinking lash extensions say she's worried, which means I should be, too, except the wave lifts me into the theater and the band takes the stage and the energy crackles through me like static. I am not alone, the crowd knows all the words to all the songs, too. I snap my fingers above my head, bracelets crescendoing down my arms. I think *I am fourteen years old today*.

On the ride back to the island, Giselle leans against her window and doesn't speak, even when her boyfriend reaches back and pats her knee and says *you did good*. I want to describe the concert to her but I'm not sure if her boyfriend knows that she missed the whole show. Because I don't know who is in on which secret, I don't speak, either. The car bends over the causeway. The sky is starless, the bay stripped of color.

*

In the field next to the detention center, white ibises strut through beggarweed and crabgrass, picking up bugs in their curved beaks. A white ibis cannot digest the shell of a sea turtle, but it can eat fifty insects in a single day.

MANY NICE DONKEYS: VOLUME I, ISSUE V

Joanna Theiss

The wind lifts the corner of the homework I haven't finished. I begged Mom to let me go inside and see Giselle, too. Mom said *it's not a place for kids* yet that is exactly what it is. That's what the word "juvenile" means.

Giselle used to tell me ghost stories knowing they would scare me so badly that I would crawl up into the top bunk. There, she would put her face in my hair and clutch me to her like I was her teddy bear. When she was four and I was two, she gave me a nickname and now she's the only one who calls me by it.

My sister has secrets, but when I reach up on tiptoes to hear her tell me this one, she closes her eyes and pretends to sleep, a stranger to me.

Joanna Theiss is a writer living in Washington, DC. Her short stories and flash fiction have appeared in journals such as *LEON Literary Review*, *Bending Genres*, *The Dribble Drabble Review*, *Fictive Dream*, and *Best Microfiction 2022*. In a past life, Joanna worked as a lawyer, practicing criminal defense and international trade law.

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MANY NICE DONKEYS: VOLUME I, ISSUE V
Mike Bagwell

Poem with Many Things on Fire

Instead, the man opts for working himself back
into the household objects. It's a process
of summation, all numbers leading to thingliness.

You'll be fine, his friend tells him, and they both
stop apologizing. Natural phenomena
tell him to watch westerns. He is a better person

while TV. His daughters find themselves
in female/male situations or female/female—
all being kinds of violence for which he has failed

to prepare them. The world is filling up
with little hearts. All of the things
he pretends to be disappear in their beating.

His friend is a liar. The liar wears a coat
with pockets deep enough to hide her whole arm,
a kitten, the people on television, another storm.

Outlines suffer the pain of defining. Even this bit
between us catches the wind and wants nothing
more than to float away like a hair. And then does.

Mike Bagwell is a writer and software engineer in Philly. He received an MFA from Sarah Lawrence and his work appears or is forthcoming in *Heavy Feather Review*, *trampset*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *HAD*, *Bodega*, *Whiskey Island*, and others, some kindly nominating him for a Pushcart. He is author of the chapbook *Or Else they are Trees* and was founding editor and designer of El Aleph Press.

MANY NICE DONKEYS: VOLUME I, ISSUE V
Phillip Grady

The Winged Sandals of Hermes

Late summer at a rental cottage in Normandy, with the windows open. Flies patrol the air in our room. Dogs bark next door, but they're uncooperative next door. Can't do anything about the neighbors. Your mother's long affair with an estate agent has been exposed, and she paces back and forth on the beach in a floppy hat, muttering to herself, her skin lacquered with sunscreen. Weak surf spits up seaweed while she invents reasons to blame your father for everything.

The last time that I'm truly happy is with you, half-asleep in bed, sweating. I begin to say, "Do you think . . ." but you slap my shoulder with the back of your hand, and say, "Please, let's not think."

Never mind that we fight on the train to Paris, then sulk for six thousand miles as we fly to Oakland. The first evening that we're home, I'm planted on the couch with my laptop, reviewing my schedule. You want to go see friends. "Oh my god, the traffic on 80," I say. "Are you crazy?" The world spins around and around. I bleed days for work, the same as anyone else. In January, I'm returning to my office with a sandwich while I consider my next patient's anxieties. A car passes through me in a crosswalk. At the hospital, I listen to what the doctors tell you, although I can't speak, or move, or breathe. You call my brother.

I lie uncomfortably in your mind as you make arrangements to cremate my body. You bury the ashes and turn to leave, but I'm carried along wherever you go, an unwelcome houseguest in the pit of your stomach. Odd memories linger at two in the morning. Arguments over nothing. What color to paint the bathroom. The point of buying organic produce. Or my constant, nagging reminders to use less salt, eat less butter, drink less wine. *Je m'en fous*, you say to the bedroom ceiling. My sour, little ghost. That's what you call me.

We fly red-eye to Boston in February. You ignore messages from your father, who has become lonely since the divorce. Ice on the sidewalks, ice in your thoughts, your fingers turn to ice. You'd hoped that attending a conference would shake me loose, but I follow you from the hotel and prod you awake as you doze during the afternoon keynote. The speaker drones on and on. Afterward, you fill your head with gin like a snow globe. I'm standing right behind you. I witness everything. Inside, you're torn, bruised, and panicking—although you kiss cheeks, laugh, make small talk. You are invented. An actor. Peter Tabbot keeps touching your arm while you chat about hotels. Timothy Nguyen gloats over an award. An annoying man from Atlanta won't stop talking. He says, "When I'm in Paris, everybody thinks I'm French. It's how I tie my scarf. That's my little disguise. People ask me for directions to the *musée*, or the Marais, or the wherever-ays."

Disguises. You are not who you are today. Your mind reels, and the room shrinks until there is no room left for you. As you flee through the crowd, you accidentally walk into someone. Your cocktail glass pops in your hand. You deposit the shards on an empty table, retrieve your coat, and struggle to finish the buttons.

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Phillip Grady

Marie Gibbey from New Orleans grabs your wrist. She says, "Patrice, what happened? You've got blood all down your coat. Are you okay?"

You are six thousand miles wide, not simple, not only one thing, not so easily explained. "It's nothing," you say.

Marie gives you a paper napkin. "You should take a dab at your eyes, too."

"I'm sorry, excuse me," you say, as you push through the door.

We stroll arm in arm back to your hotel. You swallow a starch-white pill, undress, and climb into the wide bed. You reach this way and that way in the sheets trying to find me, stretching until your fingernails graze the waxy, polished wood of the headboard, but I'm not anywhere. The pill hums in your head, and then you aren't anywhere, either.

I'm with you in a new home, at sixteen, across the kitchen table from your mother, who's darning your father's socks. She listens to you complain about a boy. She says, "My dear, don't ever cling. It's over. You're only holding yourself back. Isn't that true?" You go outside to throw gravel at the hedge until your arm aches. I remain with your mother, who sighs, recalling the scent of the estate agent's cologne. She wonders what element best described Étienne. Air? Of course. Air. Everything above was his. Nothing mundane. No soil. His feet were never so ordinary that they descended to the ground, were troubled with mud or bothered by dust. The winged sandals of Hermes, not these worn-out socks.

Your mother looks at me. "Do you understand why you're here?" she asks. I can't answer. I speak dust. My throat is packed with mud. "She wants to be who she was before she met you."

You're awake in Boston, changing into running clothes at five in the morning, pushed out of the room as an electric current. That's how you escape, seeking ground without a wire. In the elevator, you want to curse and scream, but you hesitate when you see yourself in a mirror. You're crying, your hair is a tangled mess, and your youth is gone, scattered, evaporated by life in this freezer with me.

We run away into the cold and dark. Your pace and breathing quicken. By the third mile, there's a release, and if only for a moment, a relief creeps into your chest, settling in behind the breastbone. You're thinking about today, tomorrow, and what's coming next. What you need. What's possible.

Your last gift for me. Yes, there it is. A coin for someone's waiting, open palm.

Phillip Grady writes in Boston, where he is revising a stubborn novel that refuses to sit still and be quiet, along with a collection of interconnected short fiction. His work has appeared in *Overheard*.

MANY NICE DONKEYS: VOLUME I, ISSUE V
Laura Marie Bailey

The Witch's Lament

Sycamore and oak bow their heavy heads in requiem. They chant your hymn, your threnody, in whatever tempo the thunder beats. Their voices creak and crack and groan with every genuflection.

See how the sky takes up my veil, how the train of her mourning dress shadows my footsteps? See how she covers the mirrored moon, how she dresses the Earth in nightshade and thorn?

If I run out of wailing, I'll let the wind speak for me, counting down the days of June and keening each one's end. And if I am wrung too dry, the clouds can drown this valley, march their dark procession into the west.

We don't have a word for this grief. I used to think that was strange. I understand now.

Laura Marie Bailey is a self-published author whose work includes poetry collection *Grey* and novel-in-verse *Johnny Kid & The Art of Dreaming*. Their poetry has recently appeared in *Rat World*, *Alternative Milk*, *Crab Apple Literary*, *Livina Press*, and *The Summer Gothic Anthology* (Panorame Press). They are a retired model and serial hobbyist living in Ohio (US) with their husband and cat.

MANY NICE DONKEYS: VOLUME I, ISSUE V
Darren C. Demaree

Emily as the Forest Yields

It is June
& there are still dead leaves
the anthropologists

don't care about
at the base of our split-rail
fence. A torn tarp

can be a blanket
on this land.
I hear the world overhead

& Emily squirms.
Nothing means more
than our daily work

cast aside. Nothing means
more than the season of her
good shudder.

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Darren C. Demaree

Emily as a Holiday

Frothed by the static of this day is not
an actual day, we hung from our bed
like two plastic clothespins in a storm
that settled on just being the weather, rain
or wind, Emily can be the whole borderland
of my mind when she wants to be. I can
disappear from the map all others will read.
Anyone who knows us will tell you this.
We care very little for the mechanics
of all this war, hardly more than a red sale
on human frailty, we choose to be nobody
crying. I reach over to miss her body,
but know I'm close to it. How deep
I reach into the dark matter of this calendar.
I understand the desire to be fattened
by each small ghost of our shared history.

Darren C. Demaree is the author of nineteen poetry collections, most recently *neverwell*, (*Harbor Editions*, June 2023). He is the recipient of a Greater Columbus Arts Council Grant, an Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award, the Louise Bogan Award from *Trio House Press*, and the Nancy Dew Taylor Award from *Emrys Journal*. He is the Editor-in-Chief of the Best of the Net Anthology and the Managing Editor of *Ovenbird Poetry*. He is currently living in Columbus, Ohio with his wife and children.

MANY NICE DONKEYS: VOLUME I, ISSUE V
R. Gerry Fabian

Autumnal Equinox

Now is the time for hoarfrost and nuts.
When the morning air brings a chill
and grass begins to crinkle underfoot.
When oatmeal breakfasts reemerge.
A time to sharpen axes and split wood.
Now the vacant gridiron stadiums
come alive with chanting.
Leaves paint themselves with color
and you go to the cedar chest
to bring blankets for the bed.

R. Gerry Fabian is a published poet and novelist. He has published four books of his published poems, *Parallels*, *Coming Out Of The Atlantic*, *Electronic Forecasts* and *Wildflower Women* as well as his poetry baseball book, *Ball On The Mound*.

MANY NICE DONKEYS: VOLUME I, ISSUE V
Angela Townsend

Suspend Before Low

There is a function on my insulin pump that saves my life, or at least my glucose tablets.

“Suspend before low” dams the insulin river when I float too close to hypoglycemia. In consultation with a mushroom-shaped continuous glucose monitor, the pump protects me from continuing to plunge. Going low? No! We can catch the rapids in a glass, no juice required.

It’s genius. It’s comforting. I fantasize about wider applications.

“Suspend before low.” Can you imagine? You’re slugged in a squat morning, accomplishing precisely nothing but excess coffee consumption. Your morning mettle tarnishes, and the slide begins. *I am lazy. I am not so hot at this job, this life, this human experiment. I am grody. I am aging. Nobody likes the way I smell.*

Or simply: I’m having a bad day.

Going low? No! Suspend before low. *I am fine. This is one snow-globe moment. I can shake the damn thing anytime I like. I can undamn myself. I give many damns. I smell damn great today.*

“Suspend before low.” Wouldn’t it be helpful? You’re in a meeting that should have been an email. Everyone is agitated. Everyone is sending tiny gnats across the table. Everyone is a little hungry and three barrels of lonely and increasingly convinced that humanity is unworthy of the coffee and the eyeshadow and the effort.

Or simply: I want to get out of here.

Going low? No! Suspend before low. *Amici, let’s take a break. Paesani, we’ve done enough for today. Cutie pies, there’s always tomorrow.*

(My insulin pump manual strongly advises addressing one’s colleagues as “cutie pies” at every opportunity. Worth a try.)

“Suspend before low.” Can you fathom the implications? Aunt Mafalda comments that unmarried women over forty are usually unhinged. Your grandfather asks if you’re a Marxist. Cousin Bev sings the Gospel of Keto. You contemplate announcing that you are running a jewel heist and getting a face tattoo of Emmanuel Macron.

Or simply: family is challenging.

Going low? No! Suspend before low. *Famiglia, let’s get really real, ricotta-real. Let’s all be impressed with each other. Let’s talk about our spectacular abilities to freak each other out. If all else fails, let’s judge the people who call gabagool “capricola.”*

MANY NICE DONKEYS: VOLUME I, ISSUE V
Angela Townsend

“Suspend before low.” How might it change our lives? God, do you hear me? God, why do you keep hurting me? God, am I your least favorite? God, why do I have to try so hard? God, I’m tired.

Or simply: God. God. God? God!

Going low? No! Suspend before low. *Little one, let it out. Kitten, cry. Sparrow, nestle. Starfish, fit inside My hand. Beloved, be loved. You are tattooed upon My heart. Suspend fear. Suspend disbelief. And if you can’t — I know when you can’t — suspend striving. I will go low with you every time.*

My insulin pump is only so powerful.

But “suspend before low” goes all the way down.

Angela Townsend is Development Director at Tabby’s Place: a Cat Sanctuary. She has an M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary and B.A. from Vassar College. Angie laughs with her mother every morning, delights in the moon, and has lived with Type 1 diabetes for 32 years. Her work has appeared or will be published in upcoming issues of *The Amethyst Review*, *Braided Way*, *Dappled Things*, *Fathom Magazine*, and *Young Ravens Literary Review*, among others. Angie loves life dearly.

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MANY NICE DONKEYS: VOLUME I, ISSUE V

Brad Rose

Too Many Lawyers?

Today, I'm trying to enhance my leisure experience, so I've stopped thinking about what I'm thinking. Speaking of which, I don't know why they call it *Happy Hour*? Do you? At least it's not called *Killing Time*. Fortunately, two things can't occupy the same spacetime, simultaneously. For example, yesterday, I found myself behind the wheel of a company car—just smoothly cruising through the bedroom communities—when I noticed how tricky it is to tie a hangman's knot with your hands tied. I guess my ideas of perfection are far from perfect. Say, how long do your personalities last? My attorney, Mr. Muscles, says I'm an inverse introvert with poly perverse tendencies, although he assures me it's never too late to go straight. In fact, he says that if I keep the low down on the down low, it may not even count against my parole. Of course, even with peccadillos as tiny as mine, you can never have too many lawyers on the payroll. Just to be on the safe side, I always bring along my own handcuffs. That way, no matter what the jury decides, I know they'll fit.

Brad Rose was born and raised in Los Angeles, and lives in Boston. He is the author of five collections of poetry and flash fiction: *Lucky Animals*, *No. Wait. I Can Explain.*, *Pink X-Ray*, *de/tonations*, *Momentary Turbulence*, and the forthcoming volume, *WordInEdgeWise*.

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MANY NICE DONKEYS: VOLUME I, ISSUE V

Chelsea Bouchard

Consumable

We're supposed to meet in the funeral home parking lot because we both agreed this relationship postmortem felt too big to hash out in the same space as your mother's open casket. When you called to tell me she'd finally succumbed to her ethanol-scarred liver and the bleeding varicosities in her throat and ask me if I wanted to—I answered yes, emphatically yes, to any possibility: attend the wake, hate fuck in an hourly-rate motel room somewhere off the interstate, fight you.

I wait under a light pole with an ultra-light between my fingers, frivolling smoke around my face. I don't smoke, but maybe I've changed enough since I moved out that you'll believe I do.

I assume you'll want to talk about the last time we spoke, which was through an open window at midnight. You, shouting, your body hanging halfway out the window of our third-floor apartment, and me, on the sidewalk, holding a laundry basket full of dirty clothes, the espresso machine, our ancient cat. You were drunk and hollering about the English teacher I'd slept with in high school, that I should call him to see if he'd let me stay in the same bed as him and his wife. As I drove away, I visualized you falling, shattering on the sidewalk below, over and over in a violent loop.

Before the cigarette exhausts itself, you slip out of the building through an emergency exit. You look different. What I mean to say is, you look better. You look like you've been seeing a therapist. "You cut your hair," I say across the parking lot.

"And you've taken up smoking?" You lean up against the light pole next to me. We watch two feral cats pick apart a sparrow while we talk.

"Was she sick long?"

"She's always been sick," you say. "I've been working on not being." Your voice falters before you say the next word, which is *sick*. I look at you and wonder if you are still the person who brings home strays and lights candles for frozen dinners. I wonder if you still dance down the baking aisle and threaten to kill yourself when it rains for too many days in a row. I wonder if we are the same people.

I light another cigarette, this time in my mouth. I intend to practice my breathwork, but the air stalls, barricaded by the quickening in my throat. You pluck the cigarette from my lips and take a long drag. "You don't smoke, do you?" You exhale tobacco and gin fumes.

"No," I say, which means the jig is up, and you know everything about me again.

You finger the keys in your coat pocket and startle one of the cats, who whisks the bird behind a fence, its wiry carcass dangling from his mouth by the feathers. I leave the wake with you, and while you drive us back to the apartment, I perform a private séance in my mind and beg your mother to release you from this generational curse. I cleanse the air with nicotine. I pray I've changed enough.

MANY NICE DONKEYS: VOLUME I, ISSUE V

Chelsea Bouchard

Blood Orange

I was cutting oranges for the non-alcoholic sangria because it was your baby shower, and you wanted a citrus-themed party, and I couldn't tell you I thought that was stupid. I was drunk.

Everyone else was on the patio, eating lemon curd tarts and freckling under the midday sun. You were resting under the dogwood tree on the throne we'd made for you out of throw pillows and an Adirondack chair, feet elevated, ankles swelling between the straps of your heels. You blamed the heat, not the progesterone or the differentiated mass of tissue and viscera growing under your sundress. Your husband was getting you a drink.

I sliced myself with your paring knife. It was an accident, but the knife was dull, and I was heavy-handed. The flesh of the orange and my thumb split under the blade, blood and juice and pulp stinging, muddling into a port slurry in the rim of the cutting board. I rushed to the sink, careful not to spill too much of myself onto the tile.

As I sat on your countertop and let the tap run over my wound, I wondered if this might be the thing that estranges us. My enduring Romulus complex, my constant one-upmanship. You got pregnant, I had a miscarriage. You bought a house, I wallpapered my one-bedroom apartment without my landlord's permission. You had a baby shower, I bled into your kitchen sink.

Your husband walked in on me. He stared at the scene, the knife, the blood, my bare feet on the quartz. I didn't attempt to explain myself; if you'd known we were alone together, anything I said would've become incriminating. Evidence to your conspiracy that I wanted to steal him from you.

Before he poured you a glass of non-alcoholic sangria from the spigot, he noticed the orange and, with only a slight hesitation, put the wedge in his mouth, sucking the segment I'd bled on. We watched each other: watched me flush, watched him wipe his mouth and swallow.

He eventually left to rejoin you with your drink while I exsanguinated into your garbage disposal, wondering if my blood tasted like wine.

Chelsea Bouchard is a writer and evening shift nurse from New Hampshire, where she lives with her husband and two tuxedo cats. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Beaver Magazine*, *JAKE*, and *BULLSHIT*.

Instagram: @chelfmarie

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Churchyard: Arroyo Seco

Here, as in everywhere
we go, you notice everything:
the black SUV that drives
up and down our gravel road, its
mysterious passenger in straw hat,
the neighborhood dogs & their barking
patterns & favorite sticks, a sign
for Mary's Garden, were we find
there is no garden but a grave,
which is not what you want to see
or photograph or praise on the eve
of your 70th birthday. The plaque
on the adobe church says 1834
which makes it twice, but not three
times your age. Still standing,
as are you, both encircled by
roses & birch trees, mesquite & poppies
& a collection of tombstones, those family
and friends who did not arrive
with you on this day in the middle
of June in the year two thousand
and twenty-three. Of course you read
the inscriptions, of course you miss
their voices & the way their eyebrows
raised at a measurable arc when
they laughed or dusted cobwebs
from a corner. Of course we tread
gently on this hungry ground, recalling
recipes: cathead biscuits & coconut cake.
Of course I read the inscriptions, also,
having been invited to this day. Here,
as in everywhere we go, you point
my gaze to the clouds, to the locust
trees & olive trees, God howling
from the mountain. God insistent
that our prayers are meaningful
and heard, if not always answered.

MANY NICE DONKEYS: VOLUME I, ISSUE V

Beth Gordon

Auld Lang Syne

Is it enough, then, to blast Nirvana across the room like angels we have heard on high, enough to dance like an angry adolescent, ice lingering on the sidewalk? More & more I'm content and more & more I wonder if contentment is fuel enough for everything I want to say. More & more my memories are uncaged animals driven to murder by hunger or thirst or something unholy. Craven. Is it enough, then, to tell you that one New Year's Eve I walked down the stairs and saw my parents on the dining room table. Their bodies, taut & melodic. Enough to tell you that the next morning we sat inside the blooming church, stained glass saints watching us from both sides of the wall? The preacher insistent that our souls were in need of salvation. More & more new fog on old trees looks exactly the same as old fog on new trees. As the new moon rises, we recite the list of our beloved dead. We slow dance like old lovers. We recall our sins. We lean into the unsaid. Yes. Enough.

Beth Gordon's poems have been published in *Poet Lore*, *Citron Review*, *SWWIM*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Moist Poetry*, *Okay Donkey*, and others. She is the author of several chapbooks including *The Water Cycle* (2022, Variant Literature) and *How To Keep Things Alive* (forthcoming from Split Rock Press 2023). Beth is Managing Editor of *Feral: A Journal of Poetry and Art*, Assistant Editor of *Animal Heart Press*, and Grandma of *Femme Salvé Books*.

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