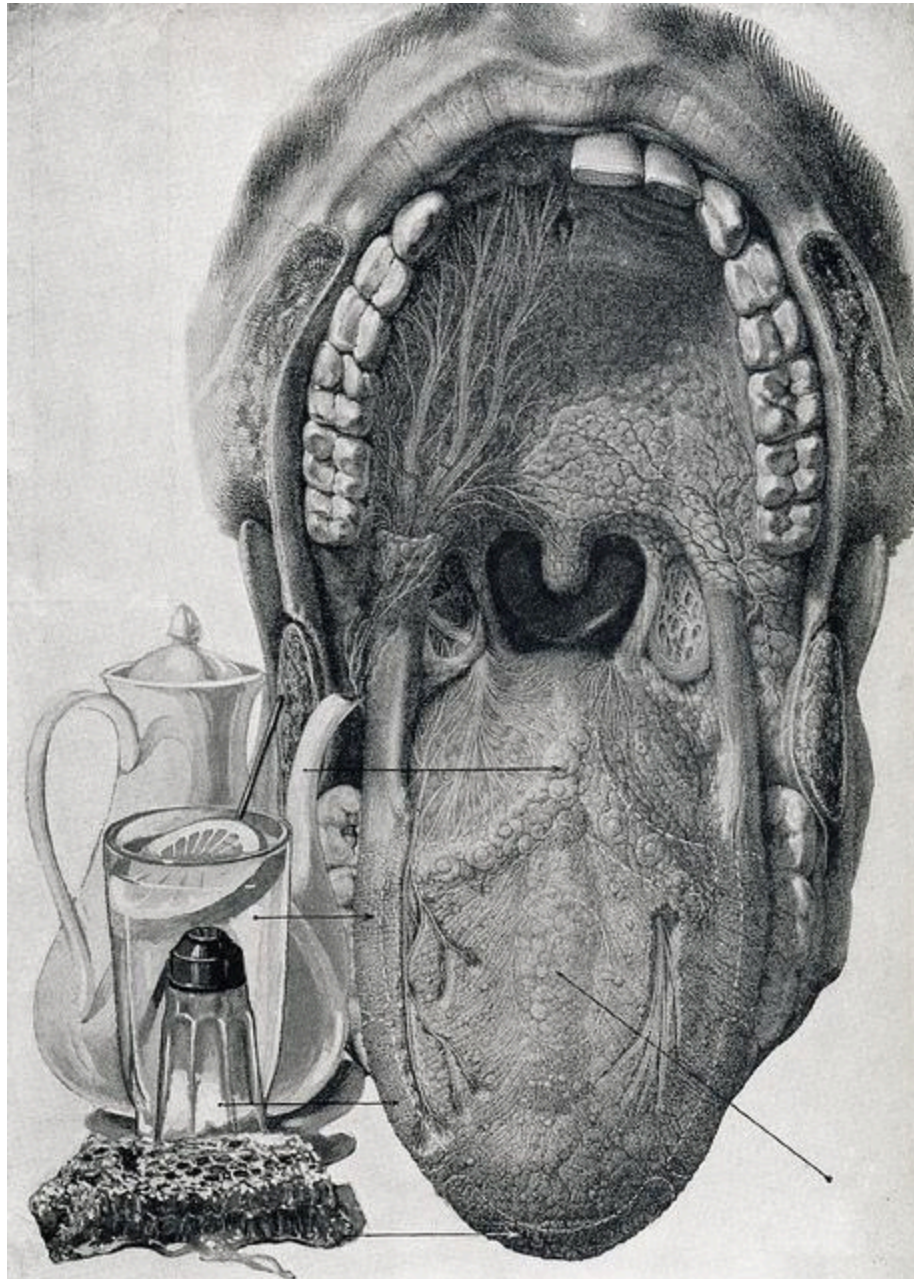


Thick Tongue

Poetry and Prose



Issue # 1

Johnny Sagan aka SnowyWilderness is a writer and art curator based in Brooklyn with roots in the snowy wilderness of the Midwest. Come see his upcoming shows at Superchief Gallery @ Culturefix where he is program director.

Miepje De Vrier

My doctor comes from Holland
She got me sleeping pills
Her office is the aerie
Of stone storks with snapping bills
And interlocking pelicans
Photographs of egrets
She scavenges and swoops to sea
and surfaces with secrets.

I have strewn them on the shore she sees
She wheels and steals me empty-handed
But my catch is laid up in my creel
A lately-living lunch I landed

Vogue's Rules of Etiquette At The Gym #7: "No Exhibitionism In The Locker Room"

As though I never knew or cared
If it was rude
I always stared
At all your dicks
My thoughts were lewd

Like a lonely heartsick hick
I thought I was the only one
Who cared and knew
That men might pick
A place to change
To show their dicks
So I could stare

They fumble
With their underwear
The hanging tumble of my hair
Heats my head
My tiny towel
Slips on my hipbone
I stare like an owl

THE EVERFLOWING SCROTUM

If he had a cloistered life
Without a view of living nature
I would wager that a man would
Come to know infinity

Even in a cloistered life
Locked up, drooling
Day and night
A man would find
The face of Nature

Everflowing Scrotum

Alina Nevada Diebold was born and raised in Washington Heights to a German father and Lithuanian mother. Her family members and the neighborhood where she grew up are the muses for her work. She attempts to write in between managing children's enrichment centers, teaching preschool and raising her 8 month old son. She lives in Brooklyn with her partner Will and their baby-Wes.

In the Light

Baum: Tree

He pulls me from the wasps. They are hiding beneath the rotting, velvet skins of the fallen plums. The grass is juicy under my heels. Papa pulls me from the wasps with his heavy hand, hairy like a monster. We walk up the hill. I babble about *Pflaume Kuchen*, papa smokes more Lucky Strikes. We leave the road and cross through Frau Shaffler's garden and he lets me steal as many blackberries as I like. The chickens are out with their raw feet and seed eyes; they jerk their bodies around the tomato plants asking me for small pieces of stale *Brot*. Tomorrow! You will all have to wait! Soon we will reach his tree, a heavy tree twisted and knotted whose apples are always unripe. Papa will point to the largest knots where I can place my feet. I will sit on a branch and speak to the nymphs and papa will lean against the trunk with one hand, and wait for the light, the perfect light when my hair looks like honey and he will take out his camera and tell me not to pay attention. "Keep playing *Liebling*; pretend I'm not here."

Mutter: Mother

She named me after the desert. I see it dry and twisted, a dance of sand and rattlesnakes. It is a flat but moving land of dodging jack rabbits and haunting scorpions. I picture her there, my mama, the spec of red amid the miles of beige sand. She would have fit in well with the cacti. She is just as beautiful, just as threatening.

I imagine the day she chooses my name. I see her, red hair frantic, face clean, cowboy boots on, legs sealed in jeans. I see her pull over in her white Mustang, pull over, off the highway, straight into the sand. She slams the car door loudly, sending shivers through the desert, frightening all the life. She loves this place, loves it for its great silence and creepy beauty. She then lights a cigarette and thinks to herself that

she would name her first child Nevada after the state with the great deserts, great silent deserts, so silent she can finally hear her thoughts and plan a new beginning.

Tante: Aunt

"She named you after the only state with legalized gambling and prostitution. Your Mutter was funny like that, so American."

Aunt Sabina is taking off her bra and showing me that even at 40 her breasts are still pretty.

"Did you know she had five abortions and you were the only one she wanted to keep?"

She looks down and touches her breasts with her long hands; smooth, the color of pork. She lifts her head up and smiles without showing her teeth.

"I once had a man walk all the way from France to see these breasts. He was a duke, believe it or not. He walked here all the way from Strasbourg to see them. He yelled up to my window for them."

"Did he see them?"

"Of course, and after that he gave me a car."

Aunt Sabina can balance cigarettes on her nipples and sway her hips from side to side. She is delicate with a blunt nose and green eyes. She twists her wrists as she dances and keeps the corners of her lips turned down.

"Men will do anything for breasts, it's even pathetic but you know men are not strong. Really not strong."

"My papa is strong."

"No, your papa pissed his bed until he was thirteen. Your mama was strong. It's hard to leave a man."

She hums along to "Carmen" and fills a vase with red roses.

"When you grow up, no matter if you are rich or poor, buy yourself flowers every Sunday. Promise me that, Nevada!"

She breaks off a rose and tosses it to me.

"Stick that behind your ear Liebling. You'll look like a gypsy."

Madchen: Girl

He brought his first one home three days after we arrived from Stuttgart. Rosa. The only problem was her thighs touched too much when she walked. Papa chose to overlook that. Rosa had beautiful taste in shoes.

Next came Pepsi. Papa found her sitting on the hood of a car drinking Coco Rico and wearing a thin, white blouse with plastic pearl buttons, her dark nipples showing through. Pepsi ate egg rolls with her mouth open but papa said she was an excellent lover.

We picked Shareen up together. She was seventeen and sold roses after school. We took Shareen shopping at MAC and bought her Viva Glam lipstick.

Eva was too chubby but she was smart.

Dina was German so that was good; but she really did not have much to say.

Silvia watched old movies and whistled show tunes. The problem was she loved unicorns and we knew that was kitsch.

Crystal hummed along to B.B. King and licked her fingers.

Laura made me a doll. She sewed her from nylon tights and gave her black button eyes.

Camela was a terrible photographer.

Latisha pulled her hair out when she cried.

Sky painted beautiful portraits of girls with their eyes closed and wore her hair in two long braids.

My mother was Aurelia.

Strasse: Street

The sky hangs soft and blue but in the distance seems to crack and open leaking a thick stream of sunset which scratches across, cutting a long and gapping wound of pink just above the shabby roofs of Washington Heights. Night has not yet fully uncurled. She slowly emerges, dusty layer of clouds, dry and thirsty, finishing off in slow but steady gulps the last remains of day. The sun lays down fleshy and raw yet its heat remains.

Haven Avenue is lined with desperate trees and desperate men with tobacco stained fingers and intimidating cheekbones. They suck on candies and lean against cars. Their eyes waltz from side to side, their cheeks bubble out slightly as they move their candies around inside of their mouths. These men have hands shielded by skin so thick it is hard to imagine they feel anything at all. But these men have shoes with soles so worn one wonders how they have the strength to take a single step.

A group of teenage girls turn the corner, ears hanging heavy with gold plated hoops, hair slicked back, ponytails swinging. They cut their eyes and crack their gum. The teenage girls with the crystal studs pasted to the tips of their plastic nails, who shove their tongues down the throats of boys. I bet their kisses taste like Blow Pops.

A gangly brood of adolescent boys play at killing each other. They stab each other with knobby elbows, throw clumsy, quivering punches, and kick each other's asses with scarred brown legs attached to large name brand sneakers. They throw each other against the side of the building where they awkwardly collide into graffiti stained brick. They fall to the ground, a mess of surrender and giggles, egos not yet burdened with embarrassment or pride. One young boy stretches out his body, lying on the concrete with legs and arms open; he looks like a small starfish. He catches his breath and stares at the sky until his brother knocks him in the side of the head with his foot and sends him running.

Kinder: Children

"Why you move here?"

"Best not sit on that mailbox dork, freakin gringa. You from Little House on the Prarie or what?"

"No, the Black Forest"

"Did I ask you, Heidi? What, ya grandma do ya hair, fuckin braids all up on your head? Mad dorky."

"No, my papa did my hair."

"What! Did she just say her papa? Are you two years old? Papa! Papa! Change my diaper, papa, I just shit myself."

"Ya papa's a pussy."

Freund: Friend

Jenny is the only one I want. In her white dress she looks like a princess. It has puffy sleeves and my favorite - lace all along the bottom.

"Ma-mi, I need some mo-ney for some can-dy!"

Jenny sits on a skateboard and rolls down the hill, falling off and scraping on to the concrete. She does not cry, her lip does not quiver, she stands up, glares at the others and looks up to the window.

"Ma-mi, I need some mo-ney for some can-dy!"

A small brown hand with long, pink painted nails reaches out and down falls twenty five cents.

"Jenny, you better take out the doggy. I don't want her to make a pee pee on the new couch coverings."

"Mami, the coverings are plastic!"

"They're plastic but they're new."

Jenny likes that I don't talk too much. She thinks my hair feels like kittens and she pets it with her fingers. She boosts me on top of the blue mailbox with her hands. She can climb up on her own.

Up there she pets my hair with her fingers and tells me that if they laugh at me she will bite them.

I let Jenny cut my dolls' hair. She boils me hotdogs all by herself.

"Shit, fuck. Bitch, slut." Sometimes we play the dirty word game. We cover our faces with her Strawberry Shortcake quilt and there in the quiet and the warmth we present and trade our collections of bad words as if they were stickers or slap bracelets."

"If anyone messes with you Nevada, you just call them a cunt."

"No, I'll just tell my papa."

Vater: Father

I can hear him on the other side of the wall. He is looking for a mama for me. He unbuttons their blouses, tugs down their pants, kisses them until their red lipstick rubs all over their chins. He growls like a monster and I stuff the corner of my blanket into my mouth and miss my grandmother's crepes, the lavender, the old plums browning on the branches weighted with new rot falling beneath the trees.

The tree, my father's tree. When he cries now at night he talks about the tree. He shows me the scar on his neck from the rope. "The branch broke, I thought that tree was strong." I rub the back of his neck, soft small circles in the same direction.

"Liebling, there is only you. Do you understand that you are everything now?"

I rub the back of his neck and don't pay attention. I don't say a thing.

Serge Rodriguez is a Native New Yorker who grew up in the L.E.S./East Village. He is currently underemployed and studying literature and creative writing at The Center for Worker Education - CCNY. He is a volunteer literacy tutor, who does mad Bikram yoga, and stays up really late at night downloading electronic music off the Web.

Rude Sire

I'd err, sure.

I'd drug eros

zero error.

I'd gorge zeus

rise rogue.

I'd urge error

rise ire.

Zero zeus,

ogre doze.

I'd soiree eros,

id error.

Ogre gorge

zeus urge.

I'd gorge eros,

doze zeus.

Ogre soiree,

zero urge.

I'd err, sure.

I'd rise zero,

Rogue ogre.

Urge eros

gorge error.

I'd die rogue

gorge zero.

Eros seizure
urge ire.
I'd soiree, ogre.
Rise urge,
rogue error,
Die zero.
I'd err, sure.

Pantoum for the Piers of Alvin Baltrop

At the edge, where the sun is tremendous
They roost there, the afternoon their reverie
Sweet streams down slender necks
Hands ruddy from repetitious actions

They roost there, the afternoon their reverie
Sizzled lips clutch cigarettes
Hands ruddy from repetitious actions
Echoes of a subtle language

Sizzled lips clutch cigarettes
Wriggling inside an industrial dust storm
Echoes of subtle language
Step through a torn fence to join the party

Wriggling inside an industrial dust storm
Eyes are blinded by dangerous skin
Step through a torn fence to join the party
Find a history of public secrets

Eyes are blinded by dangerous skin
Sweat streams down slender necks
Find a history of public secrets
At the edge, where the sun is tremendous

Emma Myers is a native New Yorker and graduate of Brooklyn College's MFA in acting program where she appeared in *The Thugs*, *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Julius Caesar*. An actor, writer and teacher, Emma teaches Voice, Diction and Speech at the City University of New York. She can be seen this summer, performing in *Pericles* with The New York Shakespeare Exchange and in *This* with The Proprietors Theater Company of which she is also a board member. Emma is also an ensemble member of the Impossible Bottle Theater Company and is currently working on a yet to be named play about clones and other things.

Maine

My last experience at sleep away camp as a camper was on a kayak trip in Maine. We kayaked from island to island and camped out for about two weeks in Acadia National Park. I think it was the summer before my freshman year of high-school and I had just turned 14. This was when I also experienced my first kiss with an English guy whose name happened to be Chris Brown. I hadn't showered in days and

my hair was as greasy as a frying pan but he still liked me and in fact called me “lovely” and even “gorgeous”. When I told my friend Jennifer what he had said she replied that “All British guys love to use the word gorgeous . . . they call everything gorgeous.” While she might have been right, it was still the first time I had ever received a compliment like that. I was smitten . . . too bad we were leaving the next day to kayak to the next island. Before we packed up our tents and sleeping bags he took a picture of me with his disposable camera beneath a tree. I can only imagine how dorky and young I must have looked, but to Chris . . . I was gorgeous. We exchanged addresses and I said if I was ever in London, I would stop by his place. I never did.

The first island we kayaked to after leaving the campground where I met Chris, was a tiny beautiful speck of dirt in the vast ocean. There was a small rocky beach and pine trees. You could walk around the island in about 25 minutes. We camped out in the center on the soft pine duff. Because you were not allowed to leave any waste on the island we brought a small portable toilet with us that collected our poo. We called it the crapper. Our counselors placed it on a little hill by the shore away from the tents and informed us of its location. I was trying to avoid using it because this meant announcing to our entire group that I was going to take a crap, so as to ensure that I was not interrupted. But I could avoid it no longer and so with a shameful expression one morning after breakfast I announced that I was “going to use the crapper.” I was the first once out of the campers to announce this, the others being too embarrassed to do so. So I made my trek over to the little hill looked around, gave a final shout to keep away to anyone who could hear and sat down. It was very low to the ground, so it was really more of a squat. It was a foggy morning and a heavy mist surrounded the island. I could only see up to the edge of the shore.

Perfect I thought . . . nature’s walls providing privacy in my most vulnerable hour! When I was about half way through the deed the fog suddenly began to part. The misty Maine morning for a brief moment magically became a clear blue day and what appeared before me in the choppy waters was a medium sized boat and a fisherman. We immediately locked eyes, both horrified at what had appeared in the fog.

A prepubescent girl shitting on the shore and an old bearded Maine fisherman setting his morning “lobstah” traps. For a moment we both froze unsure of what to do and desperately wishing for the fog to once again obscure the other, both me on the land and he in the water. I finished up as quickly as I could, pretending that I was finished when really I was not. Mid bowel evacuation, I pulled up my pants and ran. I was screwed. Too afraid to go back to the crapper, in case the man was still there and unable to go back to the campground because, well . . . you get the point. I was stuck, unsure of what to do next. The toilet paper was over by the crapper and I could not bring myself to go back and wipe my ass in front of the fisherman. I suppose I could have gone back and then taken the toilet paper elsewhere, but then what would I have done with it once I was finished. I did not have a shovel to dig a hole to discard it in and I was too afraid of being caught if I threw it on the ground. There were no leaves on the island, only pine needles so that was out. My only other option were the flat rocks on the beach, and so I headed to the shore away from the fisherman.

Lying on the beach, I had my pick of flat gray stones. I chose a smooth, long rock, perfect for skipping and headed back inland. There I crouched behind a tree, pulled down my pants and attempted to wipe my ass with the stone. It worked surprisingly well and left no residue, as toilet paper sometimes can. I pulled up my pants and headed back to the shore with my shitty stone. In the distance I could hear the quiet sound of water lapping against the side of a boat and knew that the fisherman was not far. I threw the stone out to sea parallel to the choppy waters and watched it as it skipped along and finally lost momentum, sinking down to the bottom.

Christine Shan Shan Hou is a poet, artist, and critic living in Brooklyn, NY. Publications include Accumulations (Publication Studio, 2010) and C O N C R E T E S O U N D (2011), a collaborative artist's book with Audra Wolowiec. Additional poems appear, or are forthcoming in Weekday, EOAGH, Critical Correspondence, Bone Bouquet, and Belladonna #148. In 2012, her artwork was exhibited as part of B-OUT curated by Scott Hug at Andrew Edlin Gallery. She has curated exhibitions at Art in General, Jack the Pelican Presents, and The Abrons Arts Center. Her awards include The Flow Chart Foundation/The Academy for American Poets and the Zora Neale Hurston Scholarship. She is currently writes on performance for *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Performance Club*, *Hyperallergic Weekend*, and *IDIOM*.

Will you join my consciousness circle?

One size fits all because it's a yoga block.
I put garlic cloves inside my self to clear
me of yeast even though my doctor says
Christine, we have western medicine now.
Emotional states do not last for more than
ninety seconds unless you add logs to the
fire, i.e. protein to your salad. The same can
be said about enlightenment. I walk into an
art gallery and read the words *flash flood*
as *I lost I loved*. An epiphany washes over
me in the form of an orange wave bathing
my body in sticky residue. I am not wearing
a bathing suit, but the unfortunate incident
does not ruin my appetite. Must have been
magic, like a cheese puff's supernatural
ability to melt in your mouth. It feels as if
you are eating nothing. I eat cheese puffs
until I emanate an orange glow. If this isn't
enlightenment then feed me what is.

Envisioning the future can be dangerous

My amnesia is self-inflicted. Yogurt sways back and
forth inside me. I hover majestically from here to there,
through hot temperatures and high humidity. A little
white lie makes my pouch heavy. It makes its way
round and into a nice fence. An onslaught of e-mails
makes anxiety worst, a slaughterhouse of spam.
What about my dreams? "You're young so you're
gonna wanna fuck like bunnies," she said. I think so,
yes. But I still whimper in my sleep (not a girly boy).
I make it out in a quick and queer zigzag, hypothetically
speaking. The truth is I want to be a hippie in a circle
skirt. I want to be free. My plans to arrive early to
this conclusion are thwarted by wishful thinking and
thunderstorms. I lack the proper amount of testosterone
to make decisions efficiently. I take butter in my tea.
I may be doomed to repeat myself, but it is my
backyard, not yours.

Masha Udensiva-Brenner is an editor and founder of *Construction* magazine. Her work has appeared in *Construction*, *Narrative*, *Anderbo.com*, and others.

The Story of My Birth

I was born covered from head to toe in black hair and weighing less than a sack of potatoes. I weighed 2.8 kg; a standard sack of Russian potatoes was 3. “Three kilograms” was my nickname at the hospital. My mother, who wondered whether I was really her baby because of the black hair, remembers the nurses scolding her when she propped me against a pillow. “What are you doing letting your 3kg touch the bed?! *She might catch something!*”

The Soviets always worried about germs, along with the other things they couldn’t control.

My mother claims that she had predicted both the exact date of my birth, and the fact that she was having a girl. There was no Soviet technology to tell her either of these things, she claims she had just known. She felt me coming during a dry Moscow November in 1982, three days after Leonid Brezhnev, who ruled the USSR since 1964 collapsed from a stroke. She was 25 then, and in the process of divorcing my biological father Volodya, whom she had married when she was 21.

When I asked her what she did the night before she went to the hospital to have me, my mom answered: “I think I was dancing.”

“Where?”

“In our kitchen.”

On that night she had thrown a party—her friends came over and played the Beatles on the record player she kept on the parquet of her room in our ground floor communal apartment.

Neither my mother nor her friends had ever left the Soviet Union but they all listened to Western records. In their youth, these records were pirated and distributed in back alleys. If they couldn’t get the records, they’d find the sheet music and play the notes on a guitar or piano. That’s how my mom first heard Sinatra—performed on the piano in her mother’s friend’s apartment.

“Who was at the party?” I asked.

“The usual crowd.”

The usual crowd either worked or studied at the department of psychology at Moscow State University. They spent a lot of time in my mom’s kitchen and referred to each other by last names. Volkonskyi, Yassenin, Bordova, Lilova, Arkansky, Voloshina, Bayarin...

I wanted to know if they were celebrating Brezhnev’s death.

“*Nu chto ty!*” she said. “We had no idea what was going on. Nobody would tell us anything. I just had a party to have a party. I was celebrating your arrival.”

After Brezhnev passed, the authorities worried that the news would lead to a coup, so they kept it under wraps. But, they had to do something to commemorate the deceased leader—TV stations replaced the usually lighthearted daytime broadcasts with heavy films about the Russian Revolution, and public officials were suddenly all wearing black. Rumors circulated, but Brezhnev’s death wasn’t actually confirmed until the day after my birth—during his funeral on November 15, 1982.

The night after they danced to the Beatles in her kitchen, my mom rode to the hospital in a taxi with my biological father (they divorced amicably). She remembers the streets looking eerily empty and the naked trees drifting by the windows, pointing her towards the hospital.

Once there, my mother felt nervous. No one was allowed into the delivery room except nurses and doctors (again the fear of germs), so her friends and family couldn’t visit while she was in the hospital.

The morning after she checked in, she got an excruciating ache in her left molar—she says it was

because of her nerves—and told the hospital staff that she wanted to leave.

“What do you mean you want to leave? You’re about to have a baby!” The nurses protested.

Since she was too pregnant to take any medicine, my mom wanted to go see her healer, Vadim Akimov. Akimov was an alternative doctor who made house calls—he did everything from acupuncture to healing people with the energy that he transferred from his hands. Akimov was fashionable among my mother’s friends.

She stood by the payphone in the hospital hallway with a handful of two kopek coins, dialing everyone she knew until she determined his whereabouts. Then fled the hospital, hailing a second taxi. When I asked her how she’d been able to get past the nurses, she replied, “You know how I am when I need something—I can convince anyone of anything.”

She went to the house of a well-known Soviet writer (and anti-Semite), Anatoly Sofronov. She was not friends with Sofronov, she didn’t even meet him, but Akimov was in the process of healing Sofronov’s wife, who was experiencing neck pains.

My mom showed up, pregnant and delirious, and Akimov put his hands her cheeks.

He healed her tooth.

She went back to the hospital and had me without any pain, on November 14, just as she had predicted.

And that, according to my mother, is the story of my birth.

**** *A different version of "The Story of My Birth" appeared in Narrative*****

Elizabeth Daley has written for The Christian Science Monitor, USA Today and numerous New York City and San Francisco Bay Area publications. She is founder of the blog Fake Pretty.

Emails

I had a dream

Nay

A fantasy

Where she said

Are those really all your emails?

Each one tied, with a blue ribbon

Piled white

In a room

"Yes" I replied

Proud of my massive correspondence

"They are so beautiful" she cried.

She cried. Literally. She CRIED.

"There are so MANY of them!

Romance

It always leaves me

Feeling bad

Bad feeling

It stays

It wakes me up screaming at night

Love is my night terror

I dream I am happy

And wake up crying over breast implants

Crying into breast implants

The crystal plastic of your heart.

So much has happened since then

So much

But I am back

To the corner where I thought of you

Where I knew everyone at all given moments

Where I waited for my luck to break

My lucky break

My broken breaking luck

Down and out

In and Up

Opposites attracting

We were coming up like spring

Like roses on a branch

Cutting hurting

Too new to know

Did you ever guess how sensitive I was?

I did

I guessed

And disregarded.

Jonathan Schultz lives in Brooklyn with his girlfriend who is considerably cooler, infinitely more interesting, and by far better looking than he. Jonathan has the heart and hands of a midwesterner. He has a penchant for front porches and backyards and good food and bad tattoos and kids and dogs.

DIRTY HANDS

My daddy had a taste for likker and when he'd been drinkin' he was liable beat up on my older brother, Mark, usually with a belt or a switch, but at least once with a steel chain used for towin'. Daddy never hit mama or me, but we wasn't exactly spared, neither. Mama and I would hide in the kitchen when daddy and Mark got to fightin'. Mama would tremble and cry in the corner and I'd hide behind her, bitin' my nails. Daddy'd yell mid swing, 'Do you see what you do to your mother, Mark? How does that make you feel, makin' your mama cry?' And I'd just stand there, scared, as mama sobbed harder.

Me and Mark shared a bed in that little house, and some nights Mark talked to me about school and about girls, but most the time he'd talk about gettin' even with daddy. 'Carter', he'd say, 'I'ma whoop daddy one day, you watch. I'ma whoop him good.' And I didn't say nothin' back. I didn't like daddy neither, but at least he mostly left me alone.

Some nights when we was in bed Mark would touch me. I'd squirm uncomfortably and let out a whimper. 'Hush, Carter,' he'd say, 'don't you say nothin'.'

I knowed it was wrong for Mark to touch me, but I couldn't fight him off and I didn't have no one to tell. I's afraid if I told daddy I'd get whooped or Mark would get killed. Daddy used to say that family things was private and that we oughtta keep quiet about them. And mama, well, what with everything else, she had enough to fret over.

I don't remember when I started cutting myself, but I do know that it was the only thing that ever helped me to feel better. I'd sneak back to the woods behind our barn and I'd pull down my pants and I'd run the cool steel blade of the Buck knife grand dad gave me for Christmas straight across the backside of my thighs and parted my skin like Moses did the sea. When I was bleedin' I felt that guilt and that shame pour outta me like as many ounces of blood. I'd let them cuts bleed for a bit before cleanin' up with a hankee and headin' back to the house. I hid them cuts pretty well and didn't no one ever know.

We was halfway through the eighth grade when Mr. Winslow walked in to our classroom to tell us that Mrs. Folsom had fallen ill and that she likely wouldn't be back at school for the rest of the year. We was happy as all get out, figurin' a substitute wouldn't know what to do with us so far in to the school year.

We was standin' outside the school one morning yellin' and fightin' when we saw a Harley-Davidson motorcycle comin' straight towards the school. The motorcycle came to a stop and on it was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. She tossed back her messy red hair and asked why wasn't we in school. 'We ain't got no teacher', we yelled. 'Actually', she said, 'I'm your new teacher, Miss Carte. Now y'all get inside and have a seat.'

We didn't know ladies could ride motorcycles and until Miss Carte came to our school, we didn't know that there was such a thing as a pretty teacher, neither. The teachers at our school was all old and ugly spitfires. Once, I watched Mrs. Folsom, who musta been seventy years old, give Joshua Pratt fifteen licks with a paddle 'cause he didn't have no boots to wear one winter day

One day Miss. Carte came to class with a box of old gym shorts and a t-shirts and told us that we was gonna to learn a new game called kickball, but first we was to change outta our school clothes and into the shorts Miss Carte brought.

As I was walkin' to the ball field out back Miss Carte pulled me off to the side and asked me what had happened to the backs of my legs, why was they so scarred? I had forgotten about the cuts. I felt my ears turn red as I told her, 'I reckon it's from fallin' in the woods.' She didn't say nothin', just cried. She wrapped her arms around me and said, 'I'm sorry, Carter. I'm so sorry', she said. And I cried too, like a new born baby. I told Miss Carte everything. I told her what my daddy had done to Mark and what mark had done to me.

It was decided that I would move to my grandparent's farm in Livingston. Grand dad was getting too old to run the farm hisself and said he like to have some extra hands around. I was fixin' to quit school to work the farm full time with my Grand dad and I did. Miss Carte, though, drove the fifteen miles to from Rome to tutor me on Sundays. Usually, after we was done, Grandma would tell Miss Carte that she was gonna have to stay for dinner as she filled the table with bowls of biscuits, fatback, collards, and chicken. Grand dad always had a cup of black coffee with dinner, but the rest of us drank sweet tea and buttermilk.

We didn't never talk about how I ended up there, on their farm. Instead, while we was eatin', grandma would gossip with me about the ladies at church or about that nigger family that moved in down the way. Sometimes, before bed, she'd help me with the math problems Miss Carte had left with me on Sunday. Grand dad didn't talk much when we wasn't workin', but when we was, he couldn't keep quiet. He'd recount his days as a sailor and as a young dirt farmer. He'd talk about how Eugene Tallmadge was the only politician ever worth a good goddamn. He'd quiz me about the farm. Most nights as we was headin' in for the day he'd say, 'Son, someday you gonna run this place'.

Grand dad died of the cancer 'bout a year later. I found him one evening after feedin' the hogs. Grandma was at church. Grad dad was laid out across the sofa. 'Papaw, papaw, you ok?' I asked as I tried to shake him awake. The old man didn't move. I carried grand dad's body to the bathroom and washed him up as best I could. I wrapped him in bedsheets stained yellow from his smokin' and laid him in his bed.

It was a week before grandma left her bedroom and when she finally did, it was only to shuffle in to the service for grand dad. I sat with her then and held her hand throughout. She squeezed it hard, but like me and he rest of the menfolk, she sat straightfaced and didn't cry none. I guess she done cried all the tears she could. It was a small church where they held the service, but it still looked empty. It was just me and grandma in the front pew. Didn't Mama, daddy, or Mark show up.

In the time I worked that farm, I learned a lot from grand dad. I knowed when to take the cattle to market and for how much to sell each head. I knowed when to turn the earth, when to plant, and when to harvest. I knowed when the hogs was right for slaughter. Still, the work was too much for one me on my own, 'specially since I was havin' to cook and to clean now that grandma had taken to bed.

I had seen black folks before, mostly from out the window of daddy's truck as we was drivin' in to town or hangin' around Denton Hardware when me and grand dad needed some twine or a tool, but I never knowed none. They wasn't allowed at our school. So I figured it was time to meet one. I drove grand dad's old Ford down the way and pulled in to the driveway of them black folks new to the county. The boy on

the front porch stood up as I opened the door and met me in the drive way. 'Carter Cole', I said as reached out to shake his hand. 'I live on the farm 'bout a mile up. I's wantin' to know if you like to help me work it. I'll pay you what you're worth. My grand dad is dead and my grandma don't leave her room so won't no one give you grief so long as you work.'

'Percy Patrick', he said, shaking my hand. 'When you want me to start?'

Percy started at daybreak that Monday and we got the farm up and runnin' good as it was before grand dad passed in another few weeks. Percy was a hard worker and he earned every penny of the money I paid him at the end of each week.

One day me and Percy was mendin' a fence on the south side of the farm when the lightning started. Them black clouds was movin' East quick. We finished before the rain started, but we was stuck in the middle of something ugly before we made it back to the barn. The rain wasn't lettin' up, so I told Percy, 'Let me carry you home.'

We piled in the old Ford and I drove Percy back down to his place. When we pulled up to the house his sister, I guessed, was sittin' on the porch snappin' green beans, payin' no mind to the rain or to the truck. She was the prettiest girl I ever seen. 'Percy,' I asked, 'who is that?' 'My sister, Linda', he answered.

After that I carried Percy home every day after that, hopin' to see Linda again.. She was out there every day, sweepin' or sewin' or puttin' clothes on the line, always smilin'. I think she knowed what I was up to. She'd make eyes at me from the porch'd wave, but just as quickly put the truck in gear and speed away.

I finally got the courage to introduce myself to Linda. I didn't mean to ask her on a date in the same sentence, but it just came out. 'Carter', she said, 'you crazy. Ain't no place gonna serve us.' 'Maybe not,' I said, 'but you leave that to me. I'll figure somethin' out.' 'You fixin' to get us lynched Carter, I ain't goin' on no date with you.' This went on for some weeks before I thought to take Linda on a picnic, back at the farm, of course. Linda didn't wanna go on no picnic with me, but eventually I got her to agree.

I'd guess one month passed before Linda and me made a habit of them picnics. On Friday evenins Percy'd hop outta my truck and just as quick Linda jump in.

It was almost Christmas when I asked Linda to marry me. 'Carter, you is out of your mind. You a white man, Carter, and I'm black? Did you forget that? Did you forget where we is, Carter? We in Livingston, Georgia, you fool! You tryin' to get us killed Carter? How you wanna go? You want burned up? Beaten? Hanged from a tree? You a damn fool Carter Cole.'

I decided not to press the issue, but I talked to Percy about it some when we was workin'. 'Percy, I don't want no trouble with the folks around town, but I'm in love with your sister and I'd like to marry her, but won't Linda even talk to me.' 'I don't know, Carter. Linda thinks you crazy. So does our mama. Shit, Carter, I do too. The hell was you thinkin'?'

Linda didn't see me none for some time. Maybe it was three months before I saw her again. I'd carry Percy home, but wasn't Linda ever on the porch. It was a cold day and wet spring evenin'. Linda was on the front porch, waitin' for us, it seemed. Sittin' with her hands dug deep in a her daddy's jacket. Starin'.

Percy gave me a look as he got out of the truck, said 'See you tomorrow, boss.' Percy shut the door and

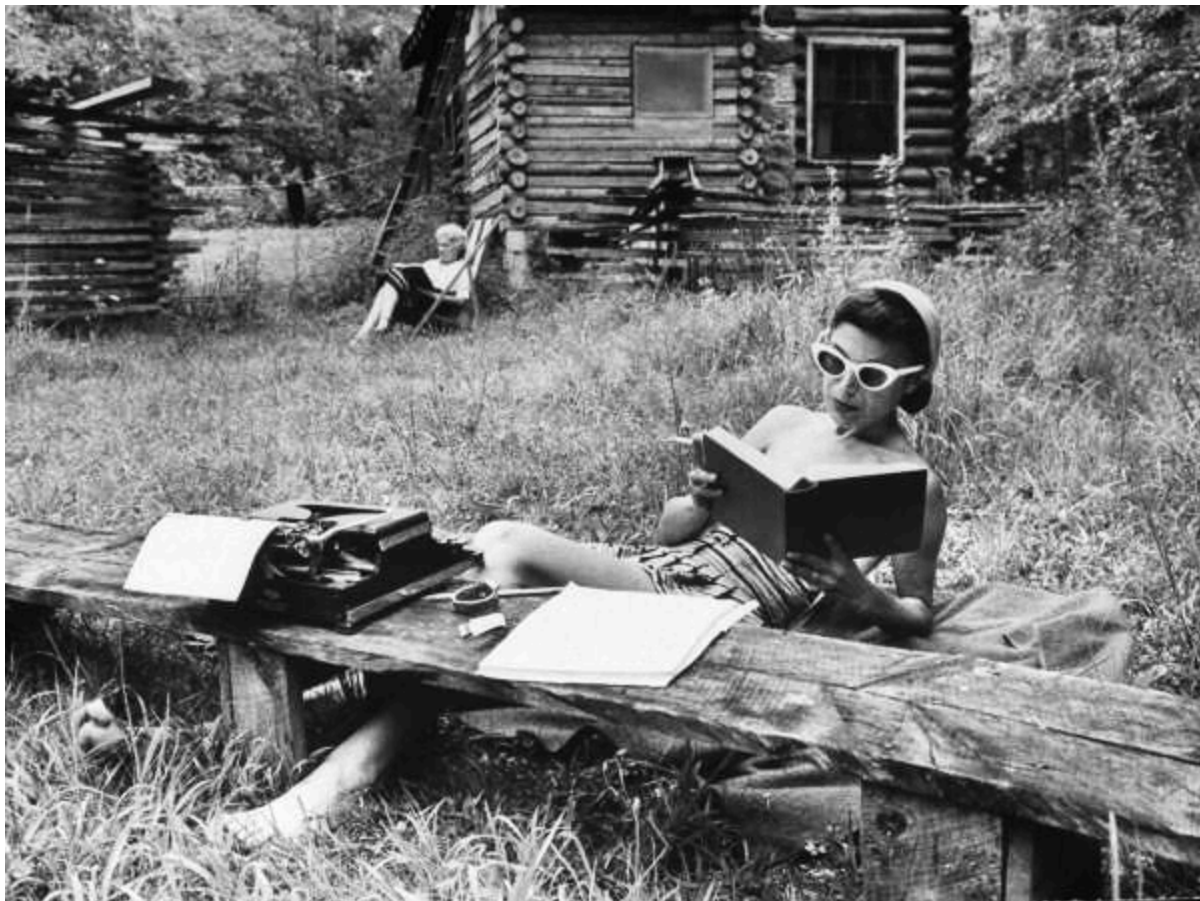
walked out to his backyard. Linda walked down to the truck, got in on the passenger side. I just sat there, dumbly lookin' out the window, pickin' at my fingernails. 'Carter, I'm pregnant.'

Wouldn't no one marry us, but we had the blessing of the Patrick family. And by that point grandma had passed, so Linda moved in to the old farm house. Mostly it was fine, but twice we had bricks throwed through the window up front and once them klansmen burned a cross in our yard.

I didn't know nothin' about bein' a husband. I loved Linda, but I didn't know how to live with her. I had gotten so use to grandma cookin' and cleanin' and washin' my clothes that I expected Linda to act the same. Things was different with them, though. Didn't grandma have a baby inside her to worry about. I'd get mad with Linda and I'd start yellin' and cussin' and, though I'm 'shamed to say it, I slapped Linda 'cross the face one mornin' when she said she hadn't bought me a pack of Camels.

So things wasn't great, but when Ada finally came, the fightin' ceased some. That baby brightened up everyday. Didn't matter none that I had to wake up some morning at three when Ada got to fussin'. I was workin' the farm with Percy all damned day, so nights was often the only time i'd get to see her. I'd just sit and hold her, rockin' back and forth.. I loved the the way that little girl smelled.

I was workin' on the tractor one Saturday mornin'. I done lost some nuts so I sent Linda and our baby into town to pick me up some a new ones from Mr. Denton. I had finished what I could without them nuts and went inside to grab a beer from the icebox. By the time I finished that beer, Linda and Ada had been gone for nearly three hours. I had a feelin' somethin' wasn't right so I was fixin' to go to town to find them two. Before I loaded in the truck, Sheriff Tucker pulled into the driveway. He drew a bottle from his jacket and said, 'Have a drink, son.'



Stay tuned for the next reading!