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Pathos Literary Magazine is a quarterly publication under the guidance of the Portland State University Publications Board. All staff members, writers, and artists are PSU students. Content is chosen anonymously by a submission review committee. To contact us or submit your work for review, email pathos@pdx.edu.
As the editor of a small publication that relies solely on student submissions for material, I am privy to a certain slice of collegiate artistic expression. Portland State University provides a wide net to cast with, and when poems and art pieces start flooding into the e-mail inbox, I can’t help but feel a sense of reverence. Opening one of those files is like opening a window into the collective consciousness. Though Pathos does not suggest a theme when we call for submissions, one always seems to rise out of the work, subtly and slowly.

Sometimes it is cigarettes. Every poem is a cigarette, and everyone is wrapped in smoke. Sometimes it is stars. Sometimes it is rain, or bones. Sometimes there is nothing at all - no submissions, and I am left wondering if I have failed, or maybe if this is the theme: that people, collectively, are just not in the submitting mood.

Yet still, at the end of the day all we have is the submissions; the quality of the submissions is the quality of the magazine. Given this, it follows that as editors we are entrusted with the weighty task of doing our very best with what is given to us. If we do not choose the strongest pieces, or botch the pieces we do choose with clumsy design or editing, we have failed. Now, of course this happens. I would like to say that as editors are but the conduit for something greater than ourselves, whatever it might turn out to be, and this magazine really belongs to the people who send us work, and the students of Portland State University.

So, it is with honor that I present this latest collection, flawed as I’m sure I will find out it is. We have done our best to publish the finest art and writing that was sent to us, in as unadulterated a manner as possible. A word of warning however: you may not like it. Opening these pages is a no-guarantees business, and there is always some mistake, small and probably undetectable to most readers, that like a red spot on white tablecloth, just consumes me.

The worst is when you get a poem flat wrong. Last spring, I suggested a revision to a writer. The last four lines of their poem should really be the first first lines, I thought. A fellow editor agreed that it would make the piece much stronger. The reaction of the writer was swift and concrete: absolutely not. That would ruin the piece, they said. Sensitive to the fact that poetry can be very personal, I quickly relented and said we would print their version. At the release party for the issue, the writer immediately approached me, magazine in hand - furious. “You told me you would print my version!” she said. I protested that we had printed her version. I thought I had made sure to use the unedited version. But right in front of my eyes, in very permanent ink, a new poem altogether. I quickly realized I had accidentally copied and pasted the last four lines into the beginning of the piece. Now they were not only at the end, but at the beginning too. For a poem of only twelve lines or so, this represented no less than murder. Needless to say, I was flabbergasted, embarrassed, and angry at myself. Allison Ferris I am truly sorry. Not that saying sorry takes back the 1000 issues that went out already, but maybe it will make my cubicle in Editor’s Hell a little cozier. At the least my penance will be less than the Pathos editors who, before my time, invented a fake professor and printed an interview with them. Tsk-tsk. I like to think we hold ourselves to slightly higher standards these days. Or at least we try to. We as editors are but the conduit for something greater than ourselves, whatever it might turn out to be, and this magazine really belongs to the people who send us work, and the students of Portland State University.

Concerned reader’s email:
(subject heading: Do you need more submissions?)
I remember reading Portland Fall by Colin Fisher, last year, or the year before. I hope I never have to read about his girlfriend’s “whale baby panties” again.

Editor’s response:
I am sorry for your traumatic experience reading one of the poems in our magazine last year. I’m sure, in time, all wounds will heal, and perhaps a deeper understanding may even arise as to why one would ever feel like they “have to” read anything. As for your question, we could always use more submissions.

Joel Eisenhower

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Grinding
Cooper Lee Bombardier

My body is a traitor in more ways than one.
In the night my teeth are soldiers,  
the north clashing against the south.  
I am dreaming of flying dogs and secret rooms,  
but my bicuspids are cracking like glass, like gravel -  
an oral refinery,  
processing every ounce of rage or grief or anxiety  
my waking self isn't even aware of.  
It is the grit of desire and doubt,  
the friction of devotion and doubt,  
the deep, throaty growl of a V-8 engine - dual exhaust -  
the low rumble of a thousand hard-ons in the night.  
I dreamt your mouth was a factory where  
everything in the world was kept and made.  
We will keep moving against each other  
until we find a place to rest  
or we will break  
and fall away.
Sasquatch Hearts Nessie, Amanda Lee James
I hitched my way to New Orleans
to try my hand at playing a Southern belle, tried my best
at calling up Blanche DuBois’ restless ghost.
   Spell it out for me, Cat on a hot tin roof, I’ll even offer you
a bowl of jambalaya as a sacrifice to your restless spirit.
   For some advice on method acting,
   I’ll buy you a slice of pecan pie.
Gather, debutantes!
   I’ll make a batch of macaroons
if you’ll teach me how to dance the cotillion.
   C’mon, we’ve got to clean out my trust
before Grandmother finds out her grandson Daniel
is now her granddaughter Daniesa, hawking muffalettas
and sweet tea at the Café Du Monde.
   Let’s get fucked up in the cemetery
like in Easy Rider
   and see if we can’t invite a few vampires
to drain me of my privilege.
   Care for a julep, sir?
   One or two lumps of sugar, missy?
Does it get easier?
   I asked the ghost of the crystal gazer.
As you might expect, the glass flew towards “NO” and cracked in
two.
I was six, and we were in Australia. This was back when my parents had money and ambition. We were in some sort of animal reserve, essentially a really big tropical zoo, being guided around by some thirty-year-old who found his life calling in the almost-Outback. This was the tamer outback, where the bats were friendly and you could hand-feed the wallabies. It was lush and green, and all blurred together the way that childhood memories are. We were in a pack of tourists following the Almost Dundee through the thicket, guided by a wooden path. My nostrils were filled with the humidity, like a tropical rainfall in my nose. When I opened my mouth, the air was so thick it tasted like I was drowning.

As we shuffled through the not-so-wild-outback, Almost Dundee came across a fruit bat. The fruit bat looked like a prop someone had clipped onto a nearby tree for Almost Dundee to continue his act with. Almost Dundee followed his role dutifully and scooped up the bat. He began to narrate to the crowd all about fruit bats.

"This here is Stella. She's a sweetheart, loves hugs and kisses...." Almost Dundee droned on enthusiastically. He stretched out one of Stella's wings to show what a big hug she could give.

I wasn't interested in lectures and following crowds around. I wanted ice cream. I was tired and a bitch of a little kid to deal with. I tugged at my mom's leg. She was preoccupied, looking through her camera lens into the bat's eyes. I tried my dad. He offered a ride on his shoulders. Nope. Wasn't interested.

"...and she really loves children and fruit...." That was the bat's cue. Its beady little eyes fixed on me. It jumped out of Almost Dundee's control. It flew. Stella wasn't a very graceful flier; she sporadically flopped from side to side. But she made up for her lack of grace with her aim. Stella knocked into me with one of her hugs. Her wings stretched out at me, her little hook claws clung to my shoulders. Her tiny rat body was huge and threatening to me. Her fur rubbed my shirt the wrong way. My shoulders stung from her grip. She hugged me like a long lost relative. Like a lover I'd never see again.

I screamed and pushed and tried to fight the bat's grip. I tried to teach Stella that children are not worth her time. That they do not always want hugs and kisses. I turned to cry for help from my parents, but I didn't even see them behind the flashes of cameras firing off. I was a joke, a story to tell tourist families. Remember that little girl that got hugged by a bat and freaked out? It was so cute! Here, let me show you some pictures....

I crumpled to the ground crying. Almost Dundee managed to pry Stella off of me, rescuing me from enduring more torture. I wasn't grateful. I started to suspect that the bat was trained to do that. It was a routine, edged on by Almost Dundee. It was a conspiracy against whiny little children to get them to shut up; just send the bat after the brats to smother them with hugs.

The tour went on. I never got my ice cream.
There is So Much To Look Forward To,
Cooper Lee Bombardier
Umbrage
Megan Jones

We’re sitting at the bar
eyes focused on our hands,
only drinks cupped between our hands
and as we talk she begins to stare
at the bartender’s cleavage, openly,
while I examine the six-legged
spider gracing the ceiling,
barings its fangs.

I’ve told her I’m a writer,
my favorites Poe and Plath and
she says aren’t those guys both
dead? I think you look
like a writer – and you use big
words and shit.

Over the bartender’s shoulder I see
the decorations of blood & viscera
dripping down the employee entrance,
the cobwebs obscuring
the grime lining the walls of
every dive bar, ever.

I write too, I write poems sometimes
about how I feel about
my exes, how I feel alone – you
look so serious, I can tell
you’re really listening to me.

I start listening when I hear her
say the word ‘listening’. I was trying
to focus on something less macabre
than dating – greasy overgrown rats.
The likes of which surely inhabit this bar,
their yellowed gnawing on knucklebones
strewn through random graveyards
as night festers and fills white.

I’m not sure what I want – I want
a girl who knows what she wants and
I want a best friend, someone
to spend all my free time with. And sex
but not just sex, ya know?
I don’t want commitment yet but...
Am I making any sense?

I watch the window open,
wombward, on two women
and wish the dead would stay dead.
But tonight, the moon will draw blood
as I search for one
simple thing – a woman
who sends the right kind of
chill down my spine.

Her mouth keeps moving
and I keep wishing
the drinks were stronger, or
at least refillable.

The bartenders bump
each other, an empty
glass falls and shatters in time
with the vodka-flavored ice
I’ve been squeezing between
my back molars.

Swallowing the shards,
I consider
how the person I’d most like
to spend my free time with
is me, a woman
whose smile is not
deepest at its surface.
Taco

Steven Cody Woll

I was sitting crisscross on the floor of the living room—probably playing some video game. I reached up and scratched the corner of my eye when I saw Taco walking into the room. Taco didn’t look too interested in what I was doing nor in me. His attention was fixed on the windows that allowed the morning sun to heat up the room, and put a vexing glare on the TV. Taco meandered past me, whipping his tail this way and that, and I concentrated on my game.

A second later, his little black and gray head pokes its way under my arm. He looks at me, and I at him. I smile but he keeps his immutable face and trenchant eyes on me, but only for a moment. Taco decides he would like it better in my lap, so he slowly wedges his way through the small space between my arm and leg. After going through this rebirth, he curls into a little ball on my legs.

We stayed like this for an hour, him seemingly asleep, laying benign on my jeans, while I was enthralled in my video game. Every few minutes I would check to see if Taco was alive by scratching his tummy or under his chin or just playing with his whiskers.

I had wasted my morning, and had only a little time before I needed to leave. I looked down at the little mackerel Taco tabby in my lap and said, “Alright Taco, I need to get going.”

He looks up at me and says, “Okay, but I just wanted to let you know that I am glad we got to have this morning together. I really just want to say thanks for everything that you do for me, too. Thanks for all the times you gave me a little corner of cheese off your sandwich; all the two handed petting, even though it messes up my coat.” Taco turns, a little abashed, “And thanks for cleaning the litter box and not making a huge deal about it.”

Taco didn’t move from my lap; he only stared—waiting for a reply. I laughed at his meowing-spell, “Oh Taco you’re so dumb. Just sitting there meowing and purring at me. I don’t speak cat. Move man, I got to go to work.” I uncrissed my cross and he fell through my legs. I filled his water bowl and went to work.
in your crazy motorcycle self-loathing
artist’s eye cracking behind whiskey bottle frames and tattooed actresses
and your favorite girl who took her clothes off twice a week for money
your dreams financed on exchange rates and dives on fourth and fifth,
red ants seeping through everything and
the quiet hour in the back rooms where you never fit, quite
wanted one thing over another at least not clearly.
i had given up by then on a whole slough of dreams
that moved to the east coast and got a good job,
i had my own early morning hatred in the glass above the sink which gave us
at least one thing in common.
This year I received an unexpected letter. “Kitty, I’m coming to visit, do you have time for an old man?” The unmistakable letter - with the shaky childish penmanship of a man who never writes, was in the mailbox the day I was leaving for my annual camping trip to the 1000 Islands. “Why did he call me ‘Kitty’,” I wondered? It was the pet name he had stopped calling me years ago. Just then the phone rang. Then the dogs barking to be fed distracted me, and the letter was left behind on the kitchen table.

Every year since I was a child, I have taken this late-in-the-season camping trip, with its drive through colors of the changing trees, and then the solitude of the cold and deserted campgrounds of autumn. Every year I stay at the same campsite; a tree surrounded spot at the end of a dirt road with the dark green river a short walk away. Every year I set up camp, eat a quick meal, tidy up and secure my belongings, then head off on foot towards the 1000 Island Bridge.

The walk to the bridge was always absent minded. Later, when I was back at the campsite and had snapped out of my reveries, I’d wonder at how my feet had gotten me there and back while hardly noticing my surroundings. This annual walk was the only time I thought about memories from years past, which I usually kept neatly tucked away. This year, with news of my father’s unexpected visit, I distractedly arrived at the foot of the bridge, stopped to figure the math, then confirmed to myself that it had been fourteen years since I had seen him. I continued walking, and then standing at the height of the red arched bridge pictured in all the brochures of the region, I thought of the thousand islands or more splayed across the St. Lawrence River. Looking down at the muddy green water, I remembered my father’s small fishing boat. The engine would cut off at the rocks jutting up out of the water, a few feet away from an island. The fishing line would be cast, then my father would absentely stare out, while the sun burned my scalp and we drifted further away from where we began. To shake the memory, I quickly turned around to view the river from the opposite direction, and began walking. Every year I walk to the height of the bridge then turn back, but in my restlessness, I spanned the bridge to the other side where I ate at a small family diner just off the road, staring out at the ducks in the river.

Returning to my campsite that evening, a golden retriever barked and ran towards me. A man’s voice yelled for the dog to come and I noticed I had a neighbor at the next campsite. There was nothing at his site except a van, with a fishing boat in tow, and a folding chair propped near the fire he was building. He called out “hello,” and as I approached him standing intently over the fire with his face lit up, I heard him apologize for the dog. He looked up and put out his hand, “Don...nice to meet you.”

“Catherine...hi.”

He took up the folding chair and put it down beside me, then turned again to his fire. I extended my hands out towards the warmth and rubbed them together.

“I have to get back to my campsite soon; I’m pretty exhausted,” I said, and then I stood for another minute and sat down in the chair.

He talked as he poked at the logs with a stick: he told me he was retired, had no family, only his dog. He said he mostly traveled around in his van, camping and fishing from place to place.

He asked if I would like to go fishing with him early the next morning. I considered his life, how lonely he must get.

“Sure,” I said, “I haven’t been fishing in years.”

We agreed that he’d call me in the morning when he was ready, then we said goodnight and I climbed into my tent where I fell asleep immediately.

When I woke in the morning it was already a beautiful fall day. I groggily stepped out of the tent and stretched, letting the sun warm me and noticing how it lit up the golden autumn trees. I happily began unpacking the cooler and food basket to prepare
breakfast, when I remembered the night before and my plans with Don. Walking around the dense trees that separated our sites, I stopped and stood in front of his empty lot. The van and the chair were gone. I walked over to the fire pit. Standing, looking over the ash from the night before, I mumbled that I had only agreed to go fishing with him to be friendly. I decided to dismiss the incident and to busy myself. I ate breakfast, then hiked a path that followed along the river and went up into the hilly dense woods. I had been walking for a few hours when I realized I was too distracted to enjoy myself, that the incident with Don kept returning to me like a riddle I might repeat for years and never understand. I suddenly wanted to be home and I almost ran back to my campsite. When I got there it was late afternoon and cold, the clouds had pulled in over the sky. I quickly broke down the tent, packed my things into the car and drove home, ending my annual trip early.

Two weeks later I was preparing for my father’s visit. After coming home from my camping trip, I had crawled up in the tight attic space looking for my box of photographs. I sat on the living room floor and laid out the ten photos I owned of him. One picture in particular caught my interest and I stared at it for minutes at a time, finally taking it and hanging on the refrigerator. Every day for two weeks I would come home and stand in front of the refrigerator. The picture was of my father and I, taken at the highest point of the 1000 Island Bridge arch. I know the picture is from when I was twelve because I am wearing the green baseball cap I religiously wore every day that year. It looks cold and windy; my hands are in my pockets and my shoulders hunched, bracing against the wind. I’m looking at the camera, smiling through the chill. My father is standing beside me...

“...I’m looking at the camera, smiling through the chill. My father is standing beside me...”

what I would say to him when he arrived, if it would be awkward; and trying to visualize how the years had physically changed him. While reaching down and grabbing an armful of dry, crackly leaves, I wondered why people let these distances build between them. The answer was so simple, right then, that I felt ashamed for having let so much time pass. Then I shook that thought out of my mind, not wanting to ruin my mood for when he arrived. I finished raking the leaves in the front yard while occasionally checking the food on the stove. Then I set the table and finished tidying up the house, even sweeping the back porch and replacing the light bulb in the pantry. I took the dogs out in the back yard listening to the rustle of their running through the leaves, while I sat on a bench looking through a cookbook for the next night’s meal. The sun went behind clouds and it instantly became unbearably cold. The dogs had run off after a squirrel into the far corner of the wooded backyard and I had to go drag them back into the house. It was 7:00 p.m. by this time and the food had been ready for hours. I started a fire and sat in a chair close by, absently staring at it until I fell asleep.

In the morning, I put away the food from the night before and made breakfast. After cleaning up the dishes and taking a shower, it was 11:00 am. The sun hadn’t come out at all and I was exhausted. I made another fire and sat in a chair, covered by a blanket. From where I sat I could see the photograph on the refrigerator, but I couldn’t make out the people in it. All I could make out were the red lines of the arched bridge, spanning over the St. Lawrence River with its thousand little islands and all the distances between.
In a place unfamiliar, words of caution ricocheted from the skin covering my eyes and ears.

With belongings on my back I ventured alone toward the fanged frontier between two countries.

Pistolling through the crowd, bumps and brushes against my body conspired with fierce eyes and lazy lips. I clung to my bones and stumbled upon two campesinos that shared a cab, quivering as I entered its rusted shell. ‘Vamos ala frontera,’ I coughed out. As we sped away their words bulleted through my skin covered ears, unable to translate fast enough the snickering Spanish they spewed. We machine gunned along the thirsty roads, their eyes screaming at mine, tearing through the invisible sheath I had foolishly fashioned over my irises.

We arrived to nowhere with both scavengers demanding payment and the border closed for the day. My hand rifled through my pocket
for the fare, and found only dust as my fist clutched at the emptiness. ‘No hay la plata’ fired from my mouth, and vanished bills fueled surges and shouts from the taxi drivers demanding more than my bewildered, pale face had to offer.

A crowd of condors swarmed waiting for first strike, to follow lead and rip my meat to carrion just as a solitary hand reached out from an alarmed concierge. I felt my heavy bundle become buoyant.

My rescuer shelled out the toll to the taxi banditos, and routed me into the shelter of his hotel.

Later locked inside a costly room, I watched the television channels turn to zebra-striped static as they slipped into the hollow. Slippery specters trembled around the room, taunting my tremors, humming black hymns in my ear.

Dawn sedulously arrived, and the shadows escaped taking with the flayed skin from my eyes and ears. I exchanged traveler’s checks and buried the currency in my money belt close to my privates.