

Jeeyon Shim / The Zine Origins of Pokémon / Our Very First Game

BROKEN PENCIL

THE MAGAZINE
OF ZINE CULTURE
AND THE
INDEPENDENT
ARTS

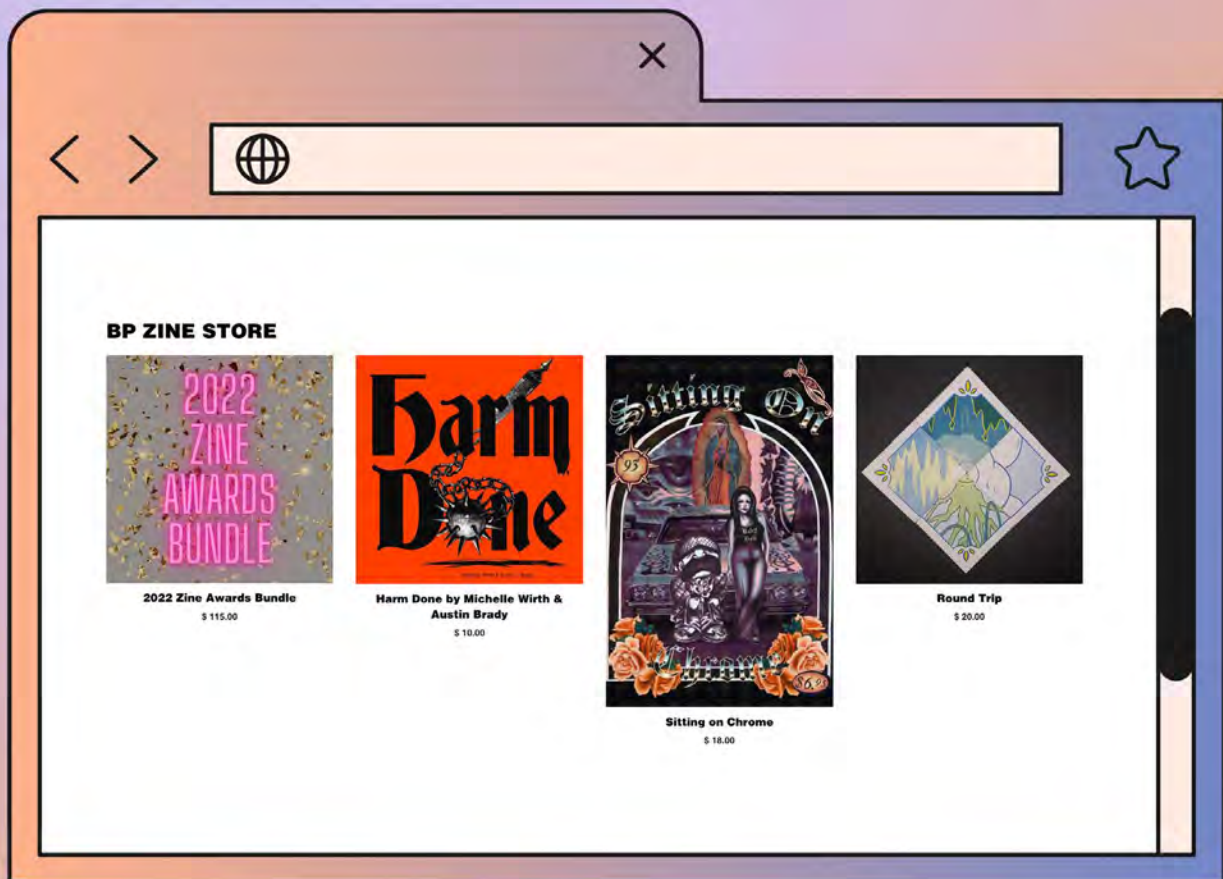


FUN & GAMES

**Our Summer
Guide to
Tabletop
Adventures**

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How can you convey personal memory and mementos in a game that each player makes their own? Jeeyon Shim's sensibilities as an indie designer harken to traditions much older than Dungeons & Dragons. For Shim, participating in a tabletop game is as personal as a handwritten letter.

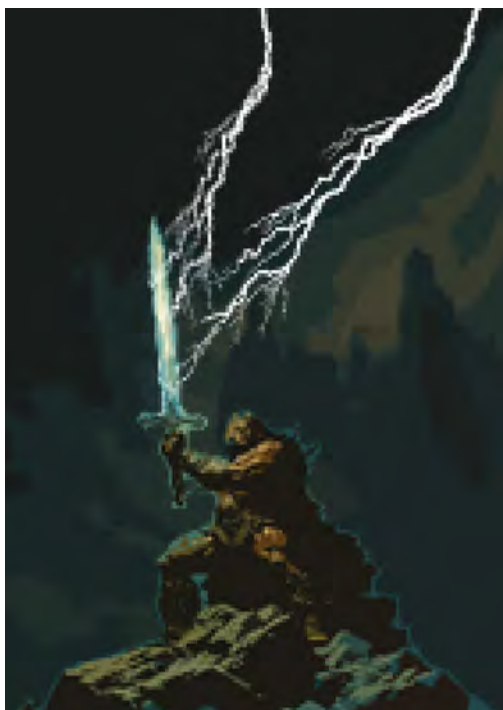
By Sharang Biswas



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The biggest monsters have the most pocket-sized origins. When a teenaged Satoshi Tajiri began making his own arcade fanzines, he had no idea they would lead him towards creating the most beloved video game of all time.

By Michael Hughes



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That's right! *Broken Pencil* is finally getting in on the game... game. Get a sneak peek out of first interactive adventure, a Twine compilation conjured by a hand-picked collective of zinesters!

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Sharang Biswas is a New York-based game designer, artist, and writer. He has worked on boardgames including *Mad Science Foundation*, *Holi: Festival of Colors*, & *Sea of Legends*, as well as tabletop RPGs including *Avatar: Legends*, *Spire: The City Must Fall*, and *Jiangshi: Blood on the Banquet Hall*. Sharang has won IndieCade and IGDN awards and showcased games at the Museum of the Moving Image in New York, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia, and the Toronto Reference Library. He has taught game design at Dartmouth, NYU Game Center, Parsons, and more.



Michael Hughes is a writer based in Bellingham, Washington. His writing has appeared in: *ROMchip: A Journal of Video Game Histories*; *First Monday*; *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*; the *San Antonio Express-News*; and *VGMO: Video Game Music Online*.



Maxwell Lander is a gamemaker, photographer, interactive media artist and feminist pornographer. They have been winning awards and exhibiting internationally since 2007. They have released several tabletop roleplaying games, but are most proud of *Himbo's of Myth & Mettle*, a high camp high fantasy game of big bods, and *Frame 352*, a solo photography game about hunting cryptids. They spend too much time reading old RPG books for the podcast *Read the Fucking Manual*.

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IT WAS SUMMER CAMP when I first encountered *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Amid an environment of preteens and an MP3 player with Tenacious D's 'Kielbasa' making the rounds, we explored fantasy realms of drow, dwarves and taverns. For juvenile boys of our ilk, we were delighted to learn there was a board game that enabled us to do anything our impulsive sewer brains desired. We teased elves. Shoved love potions down orc mouths just to see what happened. We named everything we could 'Buttlord.' A purist would have torn their hair out, but how could anyone play *Dungeons & Dragons* properly before discovering cannabis and a sex drive?

The next school year I told my classmates about *Dungeons & Dragons*, this anything-goes omnigame. Since I had fallen asleep during several sessions and had a natural aversion to math (I didn't become a magazine editor because I aced calculus), I probably wasn't the most reliable source to introduce others to the revered tabletop experience. But the approximation I cobbled up was a blast during recess. We used any figurine or Crazy Bone instead of miniatures. Without maps or placemats, we built architecture out of paper scraps, Jenga blocks and juice packs. As Dungeon Master I made up the campaign on the fly, and any battle or boss fight would run until I felt it was getting boring.

Now I have a greater respect for games and game making, the agony and ecstasy of working within the frameworks created by others. But I think a lot of people are drawn to this realm because of that guttural foundation: between you and a thin sheet of paper is a world where anything can happen.

Today *Dungeons & Dragons*™ is owned by Hasbro, who bought *Magic: The Gathering* makers Wizards of the Coast in 1999, who bought *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1997. This places them under the same corporate umbrella as Milton Bradley and Parker Brothers, meaning that every board game that would end up in a Family Feud category makes bank for the same suite of executives. But never fear, brave traveller, for there is no shortage of alternatives. Journey with us, this quirky magazine in your mighty hands, as



we explore the wide world of games... TOGETHER!

On top of modules and other tabletop RPG bonafides (*Shadowrun*, *Cyberpunk*, *Vampire: The Masquerade*), the world of independent board games has exploded. It is a giving medium for the imaginative. And thanks to new-ish resources like crowdfunding and itch.io, those imaginations can run further than ever. A new generation of creators are making even more with even less. An entire scene is jettisoning from the ground like a wizard's tower.

This issue of *Broken Pencil*, 'Fun and Games,' is all about the past and present of self-published gaming glory. For our main profile, we meet Jeeyon Shim, an indie tabletop game maker whose relationship with nature and gathering fuel her unique design sensibilities. We explore the DIY origins of Game Freak, a zine crew that would happenstantially create the most popular game of all time: Pokémon. Game designer Maxwell Lander takes us through making your own tabletop strangeness. And to top it all off we introduce **our** first game, a choose-your-own-adventure conjured up by a collective of zinester sorcerers.

So roll your 20-sided dice for an adventure through all the treasures beyond the corporatized monoliths of traditional board games, into the wild and ever-changing world of underground tabletop RPGs. Take us with you. It is dangerous to go alone.

P.S. As to why this is issue 99.5 instead of 100, which will instead debut ahead of this year's Canzine... I, the Editor in Chief of Broken Pencil, owe you an honest explanation: I lost a vote. **bp**



Be Glad for SAD

Zine Fest Puts Accessibility Up Front

BY ZACK KOTZER

One of the biggest appeals of zines and their scenes is the low barrier of access. What good is self-publishing if it is too prohibitive for most people to participate? The depth of what that access means should go beyond staples and copy shops.

SAD Fair, a new zine fest with an emphasis on disabled creators, wasn't inspired by COVID. The organizers were originally planning to hold the fest in Oakland in May 2020, but as the pandemic submerged the world the crew at SAD (Sick and Disabled) converted to a fully virtual experience. It has remained that way ever since.

"Depending on the type of event, different access needs are more overlooked than others," says Oby, one of the SAD organizers. "We don't need to consider wheelchair accessibility since our event is fully virtual, but we do have to care a lot more about web accessibility and screen readers."

Oby feels that most zine scene organizers take accessibility for granted, and online or off, there is still a great deal of consideration to be done beyond the standard Americans with Disabilities Act requirements. "Many organizers don't take the time to educate

themselves on sensory accessibility, wheelchair access beyond a ramp to the space, blind/VI accessibility, and d/Deaf/HoH accessibility," says Oby.

Oby believes that zines are a great opportunity for marginalized artists. If we in the zine world believe that they are accessible to all then we must follow through in good faith. "Many disabled people are poor, with lack of access to educational institutions or resources," says Oby, "Zines are a great way to be able to create, share your experiences, and connect without requiring what is simply unattainable for us."

Find out more info at sadfair.com 

Working the Nightshift

A Stripclub Roleplaying Game

BY HANNAH DICKSON

There are no wizards or magic in this board game, but that doesn't mean it's not a fantasy. *Nightshift*, created by Australian artist and ex-stripper Exotic Cancer, asks players to "adopt the role of a dancer" and "charm worthwhile customers into emptying their wallets." Inspired by the creator's lived experiences working as a dancer in a strip club, the artwork, characters, design and themes work in tandem to create a game that is not only fun to play, but also gives players "an authentic and empowering take on this often misunderstood profession."

Players can choose from five unique characters who each have their own attributes and methods for charming customers. You'll need to earn the most money over the night

to win. Navigate your different abilities, power cards, get your customers into the Private or VIP Room, purchase champagne, draw cards to combine dance moves and deepen your connection via dice rolls.

Exotic Cancer's artwork often focuses on the experiences of sex workers and strippers because, she explains, "it's something that has shaped me into the person I am today, and by infusing these themes into a board game, I'm hoping to create an immersive and interactive platform that inspires conversation to challenge the negative stigmas associated with the industry."

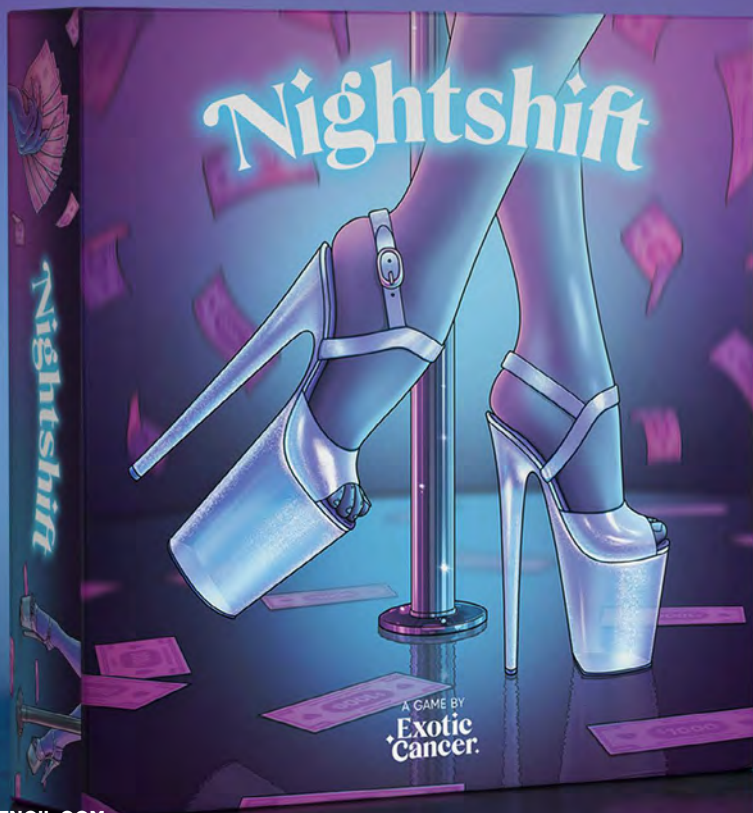
"A board game is something that can reach people well beyond my existing community, who are already mostly very accepting of this line of work."

So why a physical, real-life board game, rather than a digital game? She explains that it's the physicality and the tangibility of a board game that adds dimension to the storytelling and "surpasses the passive consumption of art or animations."

"With this game, unlike social media, players are not just observers, but active participants," says Cancer. "By assuming the role of a stripper within the game, they become fully immersed in the world I've created. Through the design of the game mechanics, players make decisions that reflect the realities of working in a strip club. The inclusion of customer cards, each with a unique backstory, are inspired by real customer interactions that I've had... You also have to keep track of when you're rostered on stage, if you miss it, you'll be fined. All of these things reflect reality. I'm hoping that by giving people a more personal way to engage with my art, it has a more profound impact than just scrolling through social media."

Not everyone who has tested *Nightshift* has quite understood the allure, with one commenter suggesting that they make "the strippers bards instead at a tavern who have to impress tavern clientele" in order for the game to be more appealing to the *D&D* set. But Exotic Cancer says that she hopes "anyone with an open mind will give it a try". She shares that they have had a wide range of play-testers, including sex workers, but also people who wouldn't normally touch a game like this who have been pleasantly surprised.

Nightshift is still in development but is set to be released in the coming year. For information on the launch of the game, check out nightshiftgame.com and follow Exotic Cancer on Instagram @exotic.cancer. 



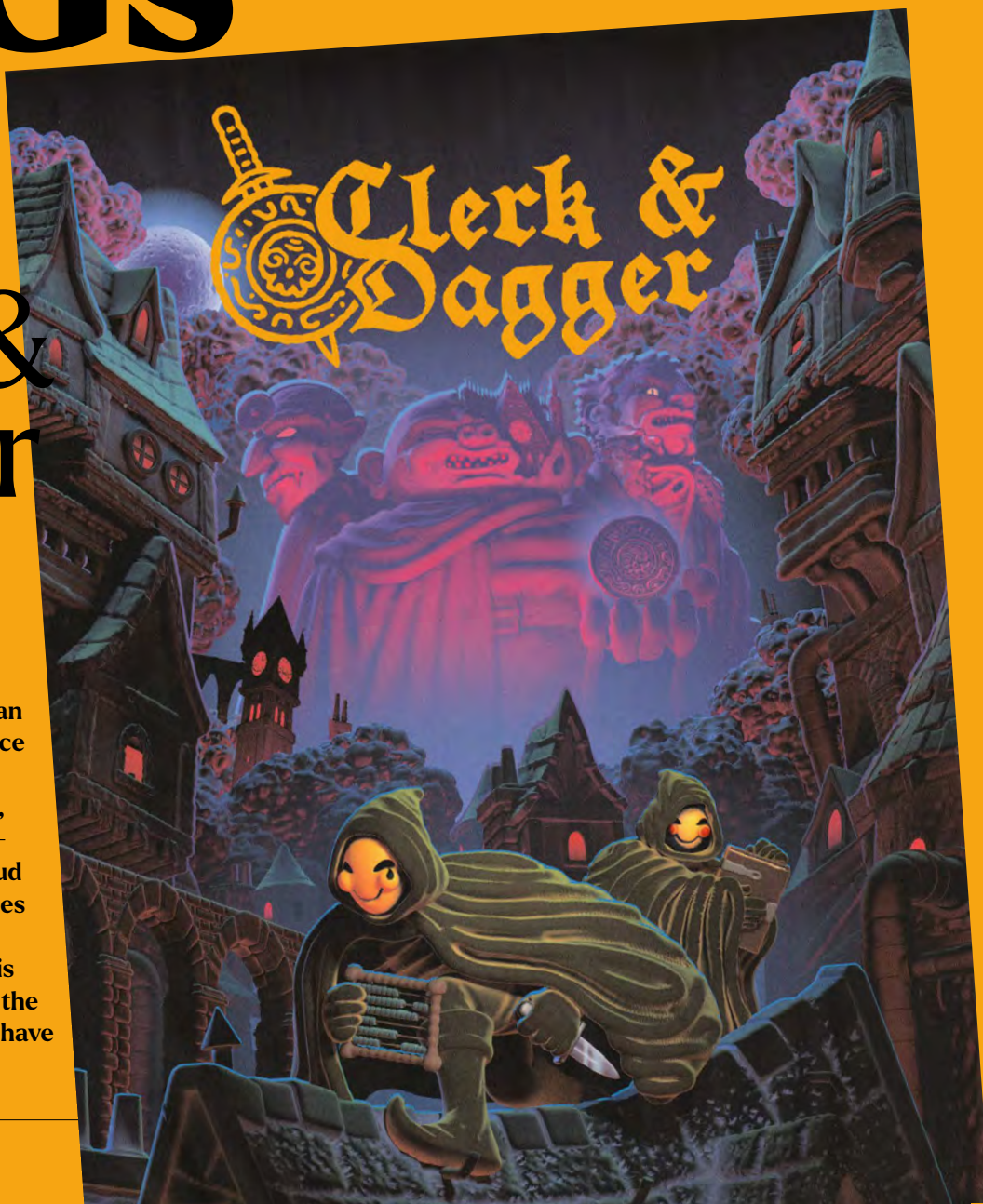
THE BROKEN PENCIL GUIDE TO

Indie Tabletop RPGs

The well of indie tabletop RPGs is rich and rewarding. But if you need some starting points for your great adventures in pen and paper, here are a few recent and upcoming games that we feel are worth questing for.

Clerk & Dagger

Oh sure it's all glory, plunder and spoils... until tax season. There's plenty of games about thieves, assassins and rogues, but who's better at stealing and backstabbery than accountants? The world of Dice Kapital's *Clerk & Dagger* is all about the bookkeepers of Dis, a dreadful city where accountants sneak through the shroud of night and audit their enemies into oblivion. With art from Jordan 'Beefstrong' Speer, this game promises to be some of the weirdest fantasy fun you can have before writing off expenses.





Liminal Horror

You don't always have to travel far for unspeakable terrors. There might be one standing... right... behind you... If not, seek out this game inspired by Junji Ito and other contemporary bumps in the night. Goblin Archives' *Liminal Horror* is light on rules but big on scares. Manage your 'Stress' and 'Fallout' (the kind of accursed states that naturally come from confronting the damned) as you encounter a variety of shapeless creatures in shopping malls, backwoods and darkened office buildings.

Penumbra City

When the world falls, money is merely dead weight. From the Strangers in a Tangled Wilderness collective comes *Penumbra City*, a game where unlikely allies fight for survival in a fractured civilization, and wealth matters very little compared to your reputation. Bikers, occultists, mushroom fiends, gangsters, poets, marines. Fix yourself up with one of the bizarre denizens of this smoke-ridden hole and scrape your way up through the heap.

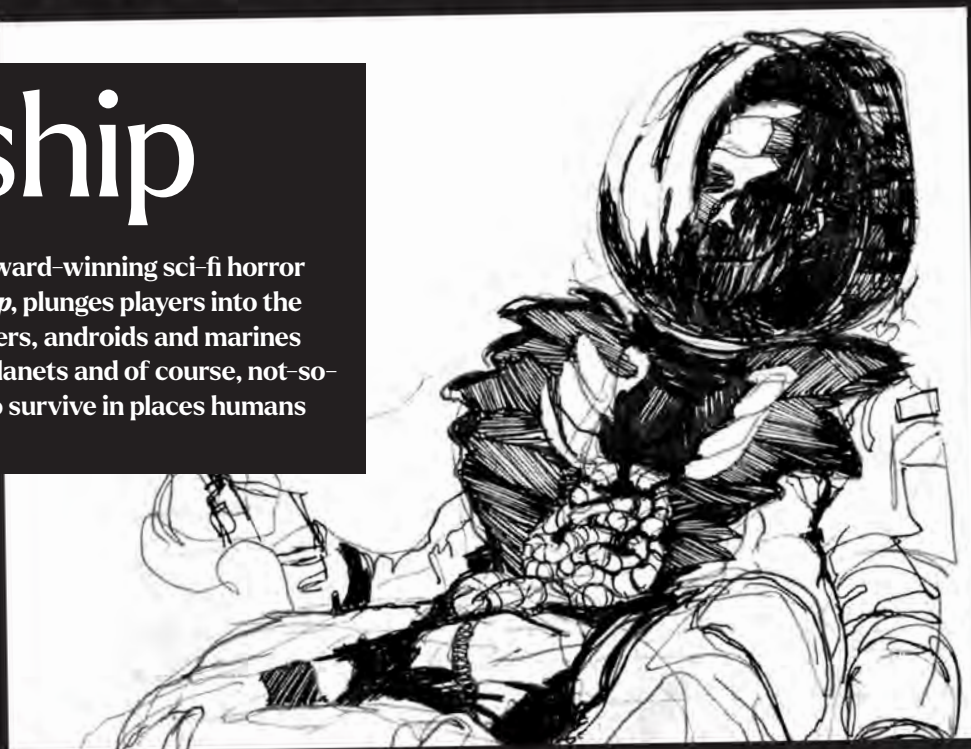


Tuesday
Knight
games

MOTHERSHIP

Mothership

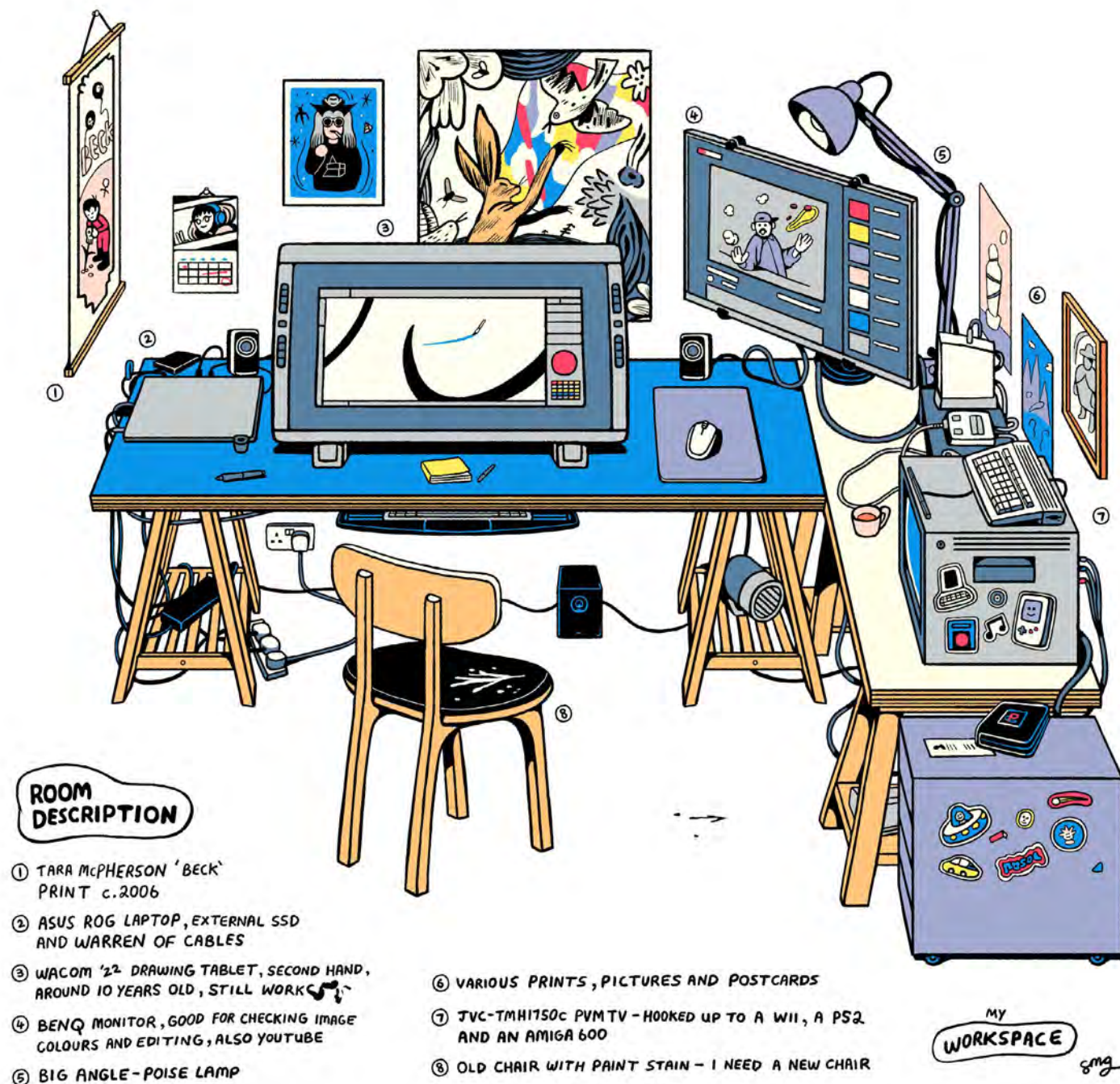
In space, no one can hear you roll. The award-winning sci-fi horror from Tuesday Knight Games, *Mothership*, plunges players into the depths of space. As researchers, teamsters, androids and marines you'll explore ghost ships, inhospitable planets and of course, not-so-friendly alien lifeforms as you attempt to survive in places humans were never meant to roam.

Yazeba's
Bed &
Breakfast

Many tabletop adventures begin at a tavern, but how many of them remain at those accommodations? From the acclaimed game makers at Possum Creek comes *Yazeba's Bed & Breakfast*, a game about a bizarre, magical manor where it's always September 15th. Players fill the role of one of the staff or tenants of this fantastical hotel in stories that can be divvied up into short, easy-going play sessions so you can always go home again.



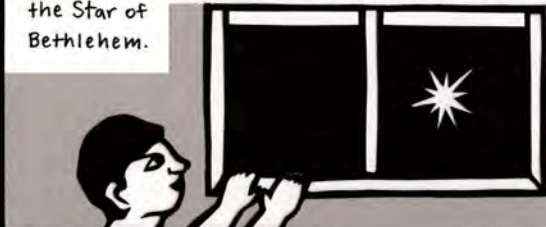
Creators Diagram Where They Work



I moved house, and country, a few years back, as the COVID restrictions were being lifted. I work from home so I've claimed one of the smaller bedrooms as my workspace. It neatly fits these two Ikea art tables in a 'L' shape and I've just crammed in all my tech stuff so on one side is everything I need to draw and work, and on the other is a 17" PVM TV to play old retro games when I get the chance. On the other wall, not pictured, is a big set of shelves with books on there. The room needs repainting, it's a little drab and beige, but it is cozy and warm in the winter with a window looking out on the garden so it's not without its charm. Making this image I realize how much my workspace looks a lot like the things I draw. We'll probably be moving house again soon, so this is a transitory, functional space, maybe the next place will receive a bit more forethought and love on how it all fits together. **bp**

Find more of Stephen Maurice Graham's work at STEPHENMAURICEGRAHAM.COM or [@SMGDRWS](https://www.instagram.com/smgdraws) on Instagram.

Winter solstice rituals from the pagan feast of Szczore Gody have been tied into the Christmas Eve celebration called Wigilia <the vigil>. The meal can't begin until the sighting of the first star in the night sky, representing the Star of Bethlehem.



I was taught that we placed straw under the Wigilia tablecloth to echo baby Jesus in the manger. Before Christianity, this was done as part of the feast to ward off evil spirits.



In pagan times, the first star was a sign of the newly reborn sun on the longest night of the year. The star was also a symbol of Gwiazdorz <starman> who judged the year's deeds and gave out gifts.



Straw collected by the family had a protective quality. Handmade straw mobiles called pajaki were also made to ward off evil. They were burned in the autumn and remade anew.



Lazy Comedians by Lisa Wool-Rim Sjöblom

I don't honestly know what I find most offensive about this White, Swedish, comedian: His preoccupation with telling jokes that fuel racism against Asians in a time where hate crimes against Asians in the West have gone up exponentially, or that his comedy is so fucking lazy that he doesn't even bother coming up with new racist jokes.





Make Your Own TABLETOP RPG

BY MAX LANDER



I WROTE MY first RPG a couple months into the pandemic. I had re-ignited my sci-fi book club since we were all still enthusiastic about remote and safe socialization. *S*, by Doug Dorst and J.J. Abrams, is one of those clever format books. It's a novel, yes, but then it is also another story written in the margins of the novel as a conversation between two characters. At some points extra ephemera are inserted into the novel: postcards, newspaper clippings, letters. There's even a code breaker wheel in the back. Sometimes I find these gimmicks irritating (looking at you *House of Leaves*), but I really enjoyed my time with *S*. Every extra element was curated to make me feel as if I had found the singular copy of a marked up tome in some cavernous used bookstore. The entire time I was reading I could not stop thinking "I want to play this."

If you are reading this and looking for resources on how to make your first TTRPG you have probably already had your own version of this moment.

I love craft. I deeply respect and believe in technical knowledge, theoretical frameworks, research, design practices, and skill development. I also love scrappy weird little broken and failed art projects. I wholeheartedly believe in lived experience being the most important elements of a creative practice and hate the classist and oppressive structure of hierarchical knowledge enforced by the academy. It's hard out here for a little fat trans who comes from poverty but wishes they could live their days in a salon environment arguing about *Art and the meaning of life*.

I bring this up because a lot of people who are making RPGs have, somewhere in the back of their lizard brains, an ancient synapse that refuses to let go of the idea of mastery in a creative field. This manifests most commonly in the form of best practices lists, blogs about correct use of bullet points and endless twitter wars about what is or isn't the right way to employ a dice roll during play. But we have to figure out how to respect experience without devaluing the genuine brilliance fresh eyes and clear heads bring.

Why am I sharing all this when you thought this article was going to be some cool shortcuts and tools to make

an RPG? If you want advice on how to make a best selling RPG product and negotiate your way into a full time career in the cesspit that is this industry, it's not gonna come from me. If you want help making your scrappy little art game full of weird characters and personal opinions and you think nerding out about systems to help enable your dream kind of play sounds like fun, let's roll.

1) Be weird, stay weird.

There are, without a doubt, more good TTRPGs in the world than most anyone has time to play. There are even more bad TTRPGs than that. When there is such an abundance of riches within a space the best thing any of us can hope to contribute to it is something *different.* The easiest way I've found for doing this is to go extra hard into the parts of my game that are infused with my personal experience and opinion. This doesn't necessarily have to be weirdness, but many of the best game projects I've seen come from designers leaning hard into their sad (like Batts), disturbing (Wet Grandpa), sexy (Adira), scary (The Wretched), or even toxic (Blood feud) traits.

2) Mechanics only matter if you want them to.

What is a game, really? Don't answer that. Many TTRPGs run off the same base system and the creation of a new one can be as simple as skinning parts or the entirety of something already in existence. If the system design side doesn't interest you or you feel overwhelmed at the thought of designing mechanics from scratch, System Reference Documents (SRDs) are here for you. Many designers and companies release SRDs, which are documents that, with varying degrees of designer commentary, outline the basic systems they have designed and the ways in which you can use them for your own games. The most famous of these is without a doubt from Magic: The Gathering makers Wizards of the Coast. However, indie designers have been making the most useful, interesting and inspiring SRDs in the last few years and they are undeniably the perfect starting place for your first foray into design. They comes in all

shapes and sizes and can help you make all kinds of games:

- * You could make a classic adventure game with Cairn
- * You could make horror themed solo games with Wretched & Alone
- * You could make a competitive 2 player game with Vis-a-vis
- * You could make a single player game that uses physical activities with Lay on Hands
- * You could make a combat heavy video game like game with LUMEN
- * You could make almost anything at all with Belonging Outside Belonging

In addition to SRDs, many indie designers (myself included) release their work with open licenses that encourage you to hack their games and ideas into new forms. An incomplete list of good games to hack:

- * Cybermetal 2012
- * Sledgehammer
- * Bloodbeam Badlands
- * Himbos of Myth and Mettle
- * Apocalypse World
- * Lasers & Feelings

3) Playtest! Or, for a level up bonus, playstorm!

The single most useful thing in game design is gathering constructive feedback from people who have actually played the game you are making. Playtesting can feel scary for people who aren't experienced with it. There's a misconception that your game should be close to its final shape in order for it to withstand the flurry of criticism. Putting clear guidelines on your playtesting can help with this and be clear about the type of feedback you want.

Are you trying to figure out if one of your combat rolls works how you want it to? Are you trying to see if players all gravitate towards one type of character over another? Are you trying to get feedback on the setting or world of your game? If you make that super clear to anyone you've asked for feedback you are less likely to get bogged down in a lot of information you won't find useful.


4) Playstorming is rad AF.

Playstorming is like levelled up playtesting. Chaotic, lawless, hectic. In playtesting you have notes, ideas, mechanics, *things* to bring to the table and test. In playstorming, you have *ideas*. Really the boundaries between these two activities is often nonexistent, but playstorming largely lives between brainstorming and playtesting. Playstorming can be hard when new because, in my experience, it's a little more vulnerable to involve other people in the very early stages of an idea. The flipside is that we come up with solutions to problems and creative design ideas that we never would have if left alone by ourselves. If you want to try out playstorming, grab some friends you trust and a couple ideas, like "I want to make a TTRPG about battle where we use word association to resolve conflict," or, "What about a solo game about a household from the perspective of a cat?"

5) Engage in the community conversation and resources

The last piece of advice I have for you is the least concrete. The indie TTRPG space is often a hellfire of toxic actors and horrible online behaviour. It's also extremely welcoming and hugely resourceful for newcomers. There are Discord servers full of designers who love to talk shop and give helpful feedback, a never ending cycle of jams on itch.io where tools and boundaries are provided for people hoping to make their first game. There are Patreons of artists who, often for as little as \$1.50/month, release art that can be used in your commercial and creative projects. There are layout guides for your PDFs and templates for your itch page to help ease the difficult space between writing and releasing. There are even grants and mentorship programs for helping new designers make their games (check out the Chapbook Co-op, for example). I have yet to desire for a resource that the TTRPG community has not already made and released somewhere.

So in life, also in RPGs: do the stuff that is fun, let people help with the stuff that is not.

Stay weird. 



JOURNEYS ON PAPER



Jeeyon Shim and the Personal Resonance of Tabletop RPGs

BY SHARANG BISWAS

“THE BEAUTIFUL THING about mushrooms is that many of them have lots of great names,” game maker Jeeyon Shim tells me. Mushrooms constituted the first topic of conversation our breezy semi-decade-long friendship, obviating the need for stiff introductions.

In 2021, Jeeyon posted a series of threads on Twitter about mushroom

foraging. *Candy Caps*, true to their name, carry the aroma of maple syrup. “I’m torn between making candy cap sable cookies to keep in my ice box or candy cap lace cookies to eat all at once,” Jeeyon tweeted. On the other hand, consider *Witch’s Butter*. Its name does a lot for it: the simple act of naming it “Witch’s Butter” transfigures it from a streak of

urine-lurid forest slime to a gorgeously thick, cheese-like layer the colour of fairytale sunshine. Unfortunately the name is deceptive. The fungus is apparently quite flavourless, Jeeyon once informed me.

I don’t think Jeeyon intended it, but our discussion about mushroom nomenclature carries a curious resonance with her style of RPG design. In her work, Jeeyon tends to eschew the complicated stat tables, long lists of character abilities, and involved dice-mathematics that typify “crunchy” tabletop roleplaying games. After all, Jeeyon’s first TTRPG experience was through *Dread*, Epidiah Ravachol’s celebrated Jenga tower-based horror game. “This really influenced how I thought about any kind of game that essentially consists of make-believe for adults,” she tells me. To new-gamer Jeeyon, there was no *Dungeons & Dragon*, no *Shadowrun*: there were only rules-lite story games.

Today, Jeeyon’s most celebrated contributions to the field come in the form of contemplative journaling games. In them, players might spend long, loving hours over seemingly small details like character names in order to craft powerful symbolic resonances. In Jeeyon’s work, things like names, often trivial in games, might matter a great deal.

What’s going on with TTRPGs?

Once there was *Dungeons & Dragons* —

Scratch that. Once there was Charlotte and Emily Bronte writing letters to each other, pretending to be insurrectionists and heroines —

No, that isn’t quite the beginning of the

story either, is it?

Once there was a person — of an age, nationality, and historical epoch of your choice — who decided to play pretend. Once there was *imagination*.

Humans have been roleplaying for fun for as long as humans have been human. It didn't start with *Dungeons & Dragons*, with *Chainmail*, or *Kriegspiel*, or any of the other (war-themed) games your nerdy friend can think of. It started with some unknown human going, "What if I weren't me?"

And just as tangled and multimodal are the origins of roleplaying games is the tabletop roleplaying game (or TTRPG) scene today. You have the heavy hitters like *D&D*, *Pathfinder*, *Vampire: The Masquerade*, and *Shadowrun*, often accompanied by lavish Actual Play podcasts or streams. You have indie darlings like *Bluebeard's Bride*, which masterfully highlights the horrors of domestic violence and intimate-partner abuse, *Dialect*, which shows us how language death and culture death are inextricably linked, or *Wanderhome*, which evokes the gentle gambolling of woodland creatures. And you have the great, teeming mass of tiny one-page games on platforms like *itch.io*, or lyric games, of games that are untested, of games that were patched together in 48 hours for a game jam, of zines and pamphlets, of orally-transmitted playground games.

A far cry from the 80s and 90s, today's TTRPG scene is as diverse as the people who constitute it. You can find indie games of every stripe, exploring the joyful, the dark, or the fantastical aspects of humanity. Today's TTRPG scene is as expressive an artform as any in the history of humanity.

◆◆◆
In Shim's *The Last Will and Testament of Gideon Blythe*, where players explore questions of family, identity and inheritance after discovering in their father's will a promise of a priceless boon, your protagonist's name powers the story's thematic heart. "Which of your elders are you named after?" she asks. "Write your elder's name under your own on the first page of your album, with black ink," followed by, "Draw a box a few inches in width and height, with black ink. At its very center, using white ink, write your elder's worst trait, which

you share with them." Here, the simple act of naming connects your character directly to a hidden, unpleasant legacy, a legacy that you yourself are complicit in creating.

Jeeyon's games often ask players to tackle such heady topics. And it's the nature of solo TTRPGs to afford such emotional explorations. Free from the scrutiny and judgment of table fellows, you're granted the liberty to craft narratives infused with personal hopes, fears and knowledge. No one can "correct" your interpretation of text or prompts. Funnily enough, mushrooms can be like that too. *Lactarius camphoratus*, one of several species of mushroom Jeeyon might recognize as her prized, mapley "Candy Cap" mushroom, is also known as the "Curry Milkcap." The sugary scent cherished by Jeeyon has been interpreted by others as the smell of curry. And who are we to naysay their personal experience?

Jeeyon's games are all about that

personal experience. Take this player prompt from Jeeyon's *The Shape of Shadows*:

"Close your eyes. Think of an owl. What is the first defining characteristic you see in your mind's eye? Write it down and underline it in the Scratchpad section of your journal, and underneath describe the whole bird in as much detail as you can see in your mind's eye." I have only vague, generic ideas about what an owl looks like, and when I playtested this portion of the game (to prepare for my contribution to it), I was perfectly content with my own, rather multicoloured rendition of an owl. It was Pride season, after all.

In this age of online sharing, it's perhaps not surprising that many of the personal experiences of Jeeyon's games started their own social media trend. *Field Guide to Memory*, a solo RPG Jeeyon co-designed with Shing Yin Khor, asked players to

MEMORY PALACE



a mini game for The Shape of Shadows
by Jeeyon Shim






"I WANT TO MAKE THINGS ANYONE CAN PLAY AND MAKE ROOM FOR IN THEIR LIVES."

build out the physical journal they were playing with and populate it with photos, drawings, and samples they might find in the wilderness. The game birthed a popular Twitter hashtag (appropriately #FieldGuideToMemory) with adherents including luminaries such as famed Firaxis Narrative Director Cat Manning, and best-selling, award-winning co-author of *This Is How You Lose the Time War* Amal El-Mohtar. This response to *Field Guide* emblemizes two of Jeeyon's design philosophies: community-building and crafting.

Community-building has long been a part of Jeeyon's life. Even with mushrooming, Jeeyon frequently poses questions to a "nice" mushroom group, and observes with awe a "very, very mean mushroom ID group who I am scared of but crave validation from." And Jeeyon ventured into game design through her experiences at children's outdoor education programmes. Her first were live-action role playing games

designed to promote land stewardship among the kids. Kids learning together how to work with the natural world, and what our roles and responsibilities as part of the human community meant about our interactions with nature. This connectedness to other people was crucial to Jeeyon's reentrance to games after a long break: "The social gathering aspect was reintroduced to me!" she says. So Jeeyon and Shing coined the term "Connected Path Game" for *Field Guide*, referring to the pathways that link players to the creators and to each other. In a sense, *Field Guide* was designed to be anything but solo.

Crafting too, comprises part of the Connected Path ethos. "Connected Path games are the process itself being shared," Jeeyon told Polygon's Nicole Carpenter. Jeeyon adored the loving, handmade process that players put into the game. Players took pains to choose just the right notebook for the game, to design stamps

and stationery for the fictional institutions within the game, even to cook the recipes included in the game. "I'm always going to return to tactile games as my keystone," Jeeyon tells me.

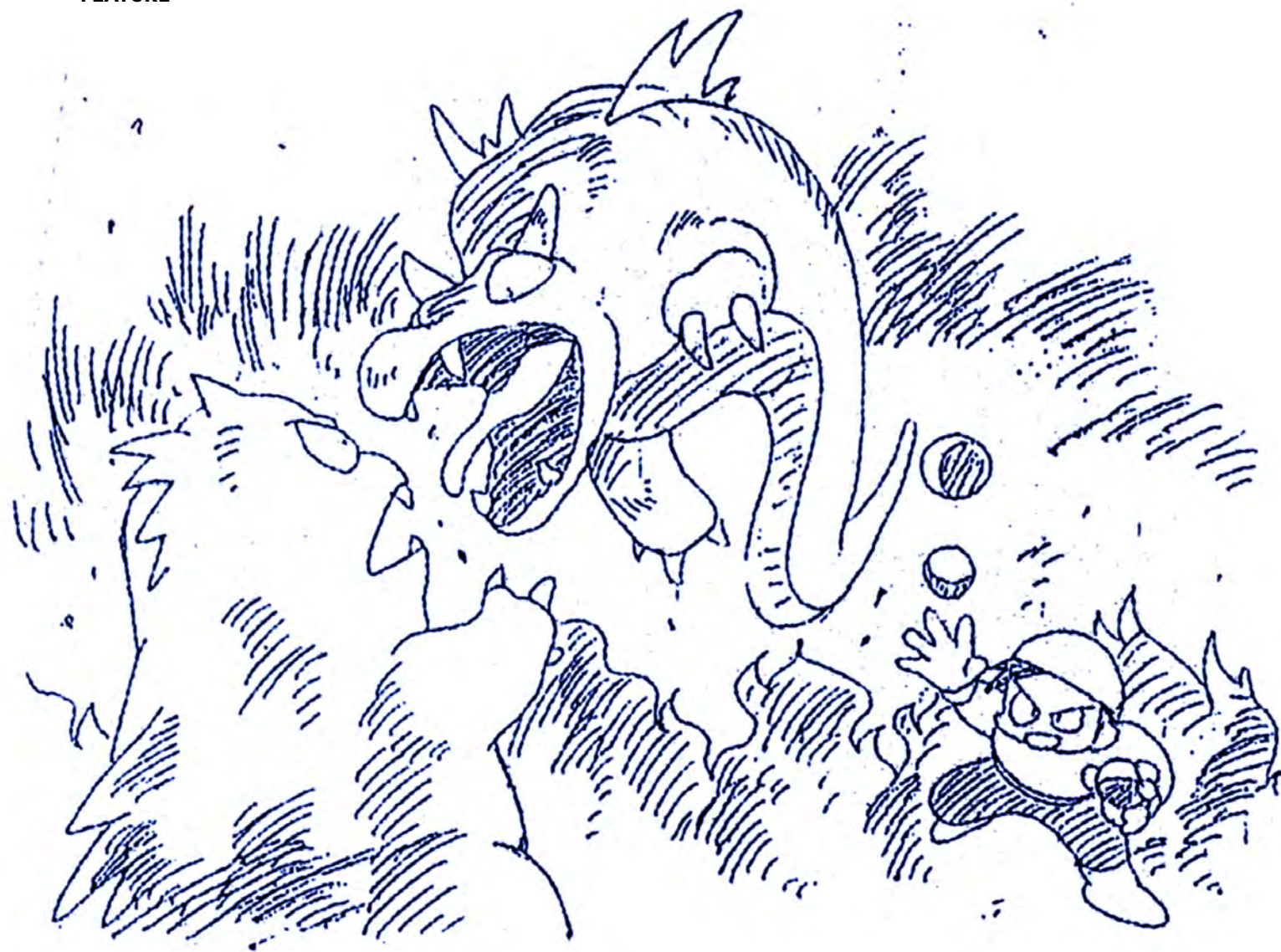
In fact, many of Jeeyon's crafting hobbies directly relate to game design. She speaks to me of wood-carving and whittling, and how it teaches habits that are directly translatable to creating games. "You can't force the grain," she says, dispensing a piece of writing advice when asked what carving taught her. "If you can't work with your own currents, you're just fighting yourself."

"Working with one's own currents", unfortunately, has become a dominant theme in Jeeyon's life in a painful way. While COVID isolation hit her just as hard as anyone else (games helped her stay grounded: "Playing *Band of Blades* with you & Ross Cowman got me through the pandemic!"), Jeeyon has become disabled due to long COVID symptoms. She can no longer enjoy much of her life in the same way as before. The experience made her think, of course. "Disability is a marginalization anyone can enter regardless of background," she asserts.

Consequently, Jeeyon is attempting to put accessibility at the forefront of her new designs: "I want to make things anyone can play and make room for in their lives." For quite a while, the tagline for Jeeyon's body of work has been "games that face the world," referring to the way she makes players look at nature and their surroundings. The tagline remains, but her experience with disability has lent the tagline new shades of meaning. Now, Jeeyon wants to give those who live in isolation, or those who live with disabilities and difficulties a way to face the world through her games. "This is going to happen to a lot of people," she reasserts.

But her words don't carry pessimism. After all, if working with nature has taught her anything, it's that people are resilient. We can evolve. Despite a pandemic, despite periods of artistic block (something Jeeyon is no stranger to), despite a substrate of death, disease, climate decline and geopolitical turmoil, humans can still create connected paths of art, of feelings, of longings, of dreams—can still send out tendrils of life into the earth, into the air.

Much like mushrooms. **BP**



Dr. Bug and Mr. Game Freak

The Fanzine Origins of Pokémon

BY MICHAEL HUGHES

Consider the controversy that follows any attempt to identify the most influential entity in its class. Somewhere, out there, people are locked in arguments about the most important movie, or the most influential album. Hell, even cookware has partisans.

Identifying the most famous fanzine isn't like this. It's closer to proclaiming the world's most famous postcard. There isn't much in the way of competition. There's notoriety, *Maximum Rocknroll*, *Sleazoid Express*, *White Dwarf*, but by definition fanzines rarely rise to the level of infamy as what they're about. Nevertheless, every class of creative expression has its preeminent entry. Its exemplar, or a high

score if you will. In the niche of video-game fanzines, there is one that became more famous than any of the software it covered.

In 1983 17-year-old Satoshi Tajiri created *Game Freak*, a handmade tips-and-tricks guide for his favourite arcade games. If the name sounds familiar, it's because Tajiri also happens to be the creator of Pokémon, the highest-grossing media franchise of all time.

"Do you like to collect things?" – Professor Oak

Satoshi Tajiri grew up in Machida, a rural suburb of Tokyo. A budding entomologist – his friends called him Dr. Bug – Tajiri spent the idyllic hours of his childhood

catching and contemplating insects. But his favorite pastime was buried, literally, by the pressures of urban development. "Every year they would cut down trees and the population of insects would decrease," Tajiri told CNN in 1999. "The change was so dramatic."

In a momentous twist of fate, an arcade center was built atop the pond where Tajiri once caught crawfish. If he resented this change, he didn't hold it against the structure that displaced his former hobby – quite the opposite. Like many boys of his generation, the course of his life was forever altered when, in 1978, he first heard the *wub-wub-wub* and *pew-pew-pew* of *Space Invaders*.

Tajiri was hooked. Overnight, his interest in the natural world was supplanted by a fascination, even obsession, with virtual worlds. “That was the point in my life when my interests instantly turned to video games,” Tajiri told *Nintendo Online Magazine* in 2000. He began ordering his life around opportunities to abscond to arcades. “I liked video games more than studying. [so] I went to a cram school that was next to the arcade. Whenever I had a 15-minute break at school, I would run to the game center to play *Missile Command*, then hurry back,” Tajiri said. It was around this time that he acquired a new sobriquet: the earthy Dr. Bug became the giddy ‘Game Freak.’

But in 1979, video gaming was a new hobby with a still-emerging ontology; a new language was being invented to describe it. Even the name of the pastime had yet to be settled. Accordingly, video game reportage – the writing that explained games to the uninitiated, that connected fans to one another, that brought the experience of play out of arcades and into the wider culture – was largely nonexistent. This lack of information was especially acute for cash-strapped players, who could neither play as much as they liked nor indulge their passion vicariously. At 100-yen per session (about .82 US dollars), Japanese arcade games were expensive, more than three times as expensive as games in the United States. If you yourself weren’t playing, you were looking longingly over the shoulder of those whose pockets bulged with coinage. You certainly weren’t encountering games or their derivations outside of game centers.

In circumstances such as these, what was a game freak to do but make his own media?

Special Magazine for Game Life

There’s a funny kind of continuity between Tajiri’s childhood hobbies. He went from playing with insects to playing with bugs – software bugs. Tajiri published the first issue of his fanzine, *Game Freak*, in March 1983, three years after *Space Invaders* sieged his every waking hour. It was 14 pages long and sold for 200 yen. A portion of the debut issue is devoted to game bugs and how to trigger them.

He titled it *Game Freak* after his own *nom de high score*. “It was handwritten,” Tajiri told *TIME*. “I stapled the pages together. It had techniques on how to win games, secret tips for games like *Donkey Kong*.” The issue was credited to “Tajiri Corp.,” a semi-fictional company, but one that would eventually become the studio Game Freak, the world-famous developer of Pokémon.

This foray into folk media wasn’t entirely unprecedented; Tajiri already had some experience with self-publishing. In

elementary school, he made newsletters for his fellow classmates, the expression of a youthful propensity for research and experimentation, and for sharing his innovations with others. In the same *TIME* interview, Tajiri recalled one such episode from his Dr. Bug days:

“I liked coming up with new ideas, like how to catch beetles. In Japan, a lot of kids like to go out and catch beetles by putting honey on a piece of tree bark. My idea was to put a stone under a tree, because they slept during the day and like sleeping under stones. In the morning I’d go pick up the stone and find them. Tiny discoveries like that made me excited.”

The discoveries that Tajiri published in *Game Freak* were of a different order than this, but they stemmed from the same intrinsic source of pleasure. With its xeroxed pages and redrawn game screens, *Game Freak* was obviously handmade: amateurish but hardly naive. In its professional aspirations, *Game Freak* recalls the early work of Leonard Maltin, the film critic whose fanzine, *Film Fan Monthly*, rivaled commercial magazines in the scope and seriousness of its coverage.

A typical *Game Freak* issue ran to about 28 pages and featured the kind of information that would soon appear in the instruction manuals of retail video games: item compendiums, bestiaries, detailed instructions on how to play and win. Impressively, each issue featured meticulously redrawn game sprites and recreations of game stages. The latter sometimes numbered a hundred or more, a testament to Tajiri’s scrupulousness and his skill as a player. He was also among the first to attempt an historiography of the inchoate medium. In an early issue, Tajiri traces the design influences that culminated in Namco’s *Xevious*, a blockbuster space shooting game released in 1982.

Tajiri had no trouble connecting with readers; after all, they were as starved for information as he was. And as a fan-cum-creator, he was hardly alone. He had the tacit support of the *doujinshi* community, a loose network of amateur writers and artists who self-publish manga, novels, and art books inspired by (and sometimes wholly derivative of) commercial characters and properties. In fact, *Game Freak* was sold in *doujinshi* shops, common in Japan. One of the readers who discovered Tajiri’s fanzine was none other than Ken Sugimori, the artist who designed most of the original 151 Pokémon. Sugimori was so impressed by *Game Freak* that he wrote to its creator, offering his services from the ninth issue onwards.

Thereafter, *Game Freak* sported slick illustrations on its covers: manga-style characters in dynamic poses, rendered in crisp lines and shaded with screentone. From the start, *Game Freak*’s value proposition lay chiefly in the scarcity of the information it contained: “more important than style was selling information,” was how Tajiri put it. With the addition of Sugimori, however, *Game Freak*’s readers didn’t have to choose between the two.

Game Freak Grows Up

In the beginning, *Game Freak*’s readership was small enough that Tajiri could manage its production himself using a photocopier and sweat equity. By its 18th issue, he had so many readers that DIY was no longer an option. *Game Freak* had hundreds of subscribers. A special issue devoted entirely to *Xevious* sold upward of 10,000 copies. Professional printers were needed.

At the same time that Tajiri was writing about games, he was learning how to make them. In 1984, Nintendo released *Familly BASIC*, an approachable dialect of the already friendly programming language. Tajiri began experimenting with this software, using it to understand “what was actually going on inside the Famicom,” a video-game console released in North America as the Nintendo Entertainment System. Tajiri, ever the autodidact, built a “handmade developing environment” consisting of a circuit board, a battery for storing game information, and the terminals of his deconstructed Famicom. This jerry-rigged system launched Tajiri’s game development career, one that quickly progressed from second-tier puzzle games, such as *Yoshi* and *Mario & Wario*, to 1996’s *Pokémon*, the design and theme of which Tajiri had privately nurtured for years.

Game Freak’s 1987 debut was a tile-swapping game called *Mendel Palace*. The fanzine that gave the company its name had run its course. Its 26th and final issue appeared that same year. Game development was an all-consuming passion, one that left Tajiri, already prone to working punishing day-long sprints, with little time for hobbies. He set writing aside, but not before leaving his mark on the development of video-game journalism. Making *Game Freak* had sharpened Tajiri’s insight, his game-making acumen. It helped him forge connections with people, such as Tsunekazu Ishihara, longtime president of the Pokémon Company, who would later prove instrumental to his success. *Game Freak* transformed him from dilettante to developer. It gave him an audience. In turn, that audience gave Tajiri the confidence to make real his dreams. All this from a pen nib, paper and some staples. **BP**

Folio asks artists and curators to gather works made with unexpected materials and adapt them for the printed page. In this issue we speak with **LONESOME BILL WALKER**, whose woodwork and puppetry explore queerness and its rich strings throughout pop culture.




I HAVE an affinity for toys because they are beautifully crafted works of art meant to be destroyed, loved to death, and subjected to our freakiest explorations of identity. Toys are our culture's most explicit encouragement to play and I feel like that's a big "fuck you" to capitalism, no matter how much it tries to Funko Pop us into debt.

Puppets in particular have always fascinated me because they encourage us to allow objects to tell our stories. Quite the opposite of the uncanny valley, puppets are meant to look fabricated, and yet evoke such humanity with their use. From modern day Snuff Puppets performers and Miss Pussycat stage shows to the shadow puppets and marionettes of yore, we naturally find ourselves rapt in attention watching a puppet show.

I'm a huge fan of body horror, so naturally I'm drawn to gross-out costumes and characters. It's almost cliché to say it, but body horror is such a distinct Trans allegory, manifesting our internal worlds as perceivable traits, a sort of physical maximalism. For us Queers, the boogeyman therefore becomes something inherently erotic — society casts Trans people as the ultimate transgressor, making t4t monsterfuckers of us all. When I create my puppets, I look to characters whose fashion and physicalities reclaim horror as gender fuckery at its finest. Pee-wee Herman will always be my muse with his scotch-taped face and garish lipstick, and Grace Jones, made out of nothing but cartilage and sharp angles, draws my attention endlessly. At the end of the day, it's all about celebrating the sensual world (erotic and otherwise) of Transgender people.

I actually have no formal training as an artist —my background is a hodgepodge of community outreach, manual labour and linguistics studies. My first job was cleaning the machines in an industrial woodshop, where I learned the basics of carpentry, and then later I worked on farms selling produce. I used whatever was laying around to teach myself how to paint so I was using wood scraps and brown paper bags and poster paint.

There was never a shortage of industrial debris on a job site and art stores are prohibitively expensive, so I took home whatever castoff material I could to tinker with after hours. That approach to making art with found and industrial mediums proved to be exactly what my brain needed to make shit uninhibited, and thus was born the wood/paint/hardware holy trinity of my practice. 

You can find more of Lonesome Bill's work at LONESOMBILL.COM





broken pencil presents

Fun & Games

PRESS START

It's summertime, and you know what that means! Cool drinks, hot weather and endless forest fires making the air too toxic to enjoy any of it. If external factors have harshed your summer, or you're hoping to revive playful vibes year round, Broken Pencil has been cooking up a very special project that may do the trick.

We call it: *FUN AND GAMES!* Broken Pencil's first foray into Twine, we've commissioned zinesters to create zines based around the theme of games and play. Then the real fun begins. We're converting these zines into interactive, choose-your-own-adventure games that you'll be able to enjoy virtually.

So play your *Dungeons & Dragons*, your *Legend of Zelda*, your pickleball. Get it all out of your system. Because when you're ready, there we shall be, *Fun and Games* aplenty. Keep an eye on our site and socials for updates on Broken Pencil's very first video game-adjacent adventure. No cheat codes required!

Sewer Trash Bros.

BY Lina Wu

SEWER TRASH BROS.

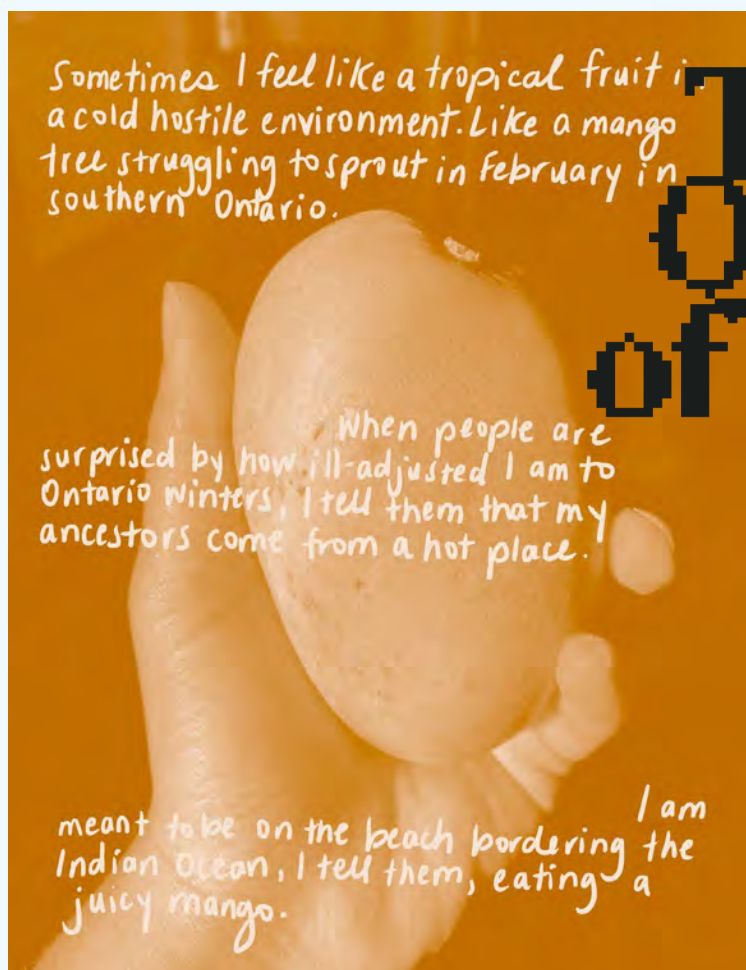
is a choose-your-own-adventure minicomic following longtime friends Jade and Avery. When Jade spirals into a video game addiction, Avery hatches a plan to bring her back down to earth. What follows is an expedition into competitive glory, masculinity, and self-discovery. *Note that any similarity to actual intellectual properties is purely coincidental.



I-Spy Parkdale

BY Paterson Hodgson

I REALLY WANT to understand everything of what's around me and in front of me. I think of art as a process of translating what I've learned and putting it down on paper. I've discovered in the last few years, thanks in part to COVID isolation, that there are surprising depths to my neighbourhood if I decide to investigate — or simply stop and look.



The Queen of Fruit

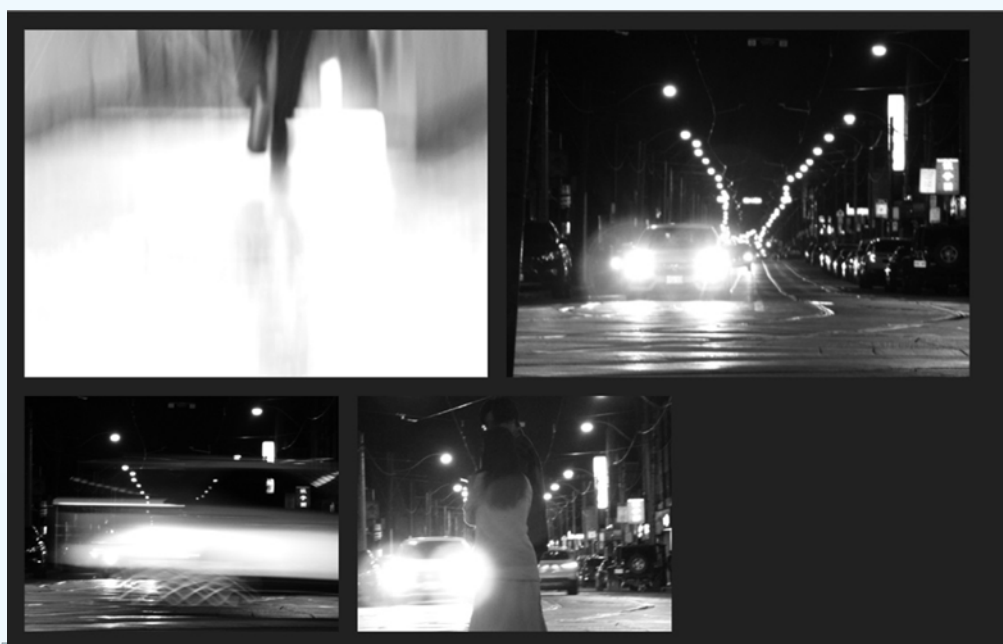
BY Sonali Menezes

THE QUEEN OF THE FRUIT is Sonali's newest homage to the mango, her favourite fruit. It is about connections between seasonal affective disorder, mangoes, diaspora, migration and pleasure.

Last Call

BY Michelle Joseph

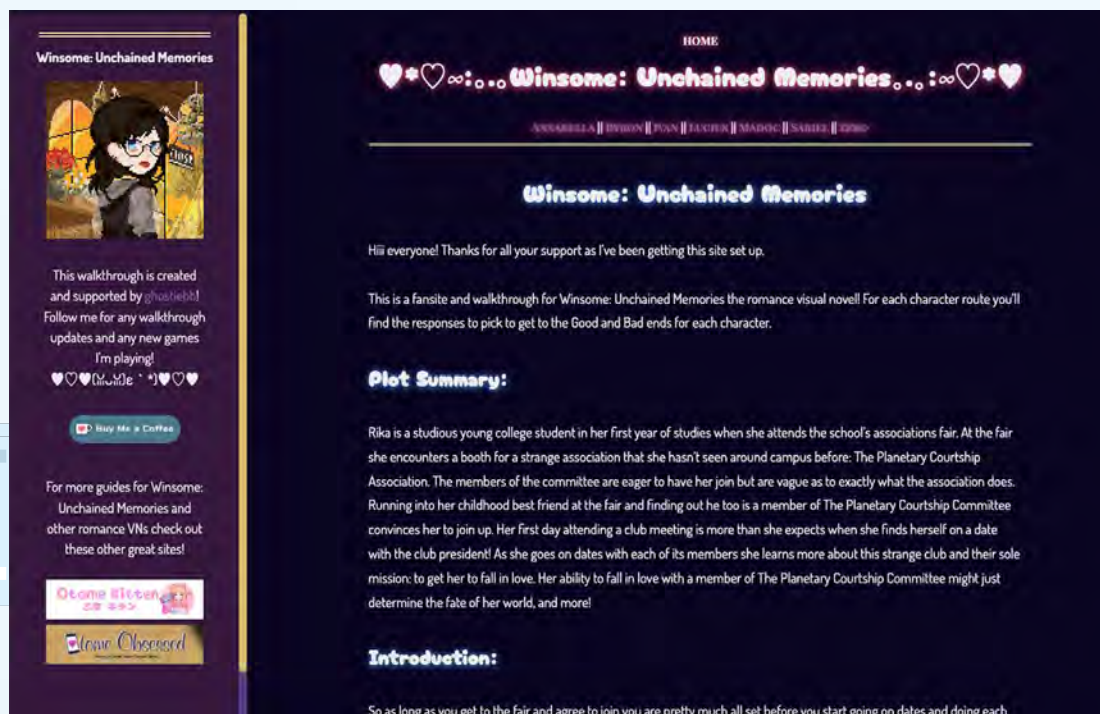
I HAD A 'Carnival @ Play' idea as well incorporating the idea of 'Playing Mas,' the cultural reference of wearing a costume during the celebration. I was one of those little babies wearing the giant glittery costumes and the tradition of it has been part of my family for generations. The Twine would be poetry over photos of mas players and their preparations.



Unchained Memories

BY Seb Pines

I **DECIDED** to go maybe an unconventional route with the 'fun and games' theme and the interactive Twine format by creating a fansite and walkthrough of a fictional visual novel.



Bean Ball

BY Shannon Reeves

WHEN I THINK ABOUT 'fun and games' I think back to elementary school, and all the games my friends and I would come up with during recess. Like "let's pretend we're cats and try to fake-murder each other" or "the playground is lava but also one kid is an evil monster and if they catch you then you become a monster too." The kind of games where imagination determines the rules you play by, often making them arbitrary. So for *Bean Ball*, I thought it'd be funny to recreate something like that, where a random kid approaches you on the playground and asks you to play a game, except the game doesn't hinge on logic and gets kinda weird.



The Afternoon Slump

BY Sara Miz

THE AFTERNOON SLUMP is a look into the beauty within mundane afternoons. Inspired by my time after classes on campus, I wanted to create a story looking at the fun in moments that feel insignificant but make up parts of an experience. Using my time at university as my muse, I developed these illustrations based on the most ordinary moments of my days and how they've tinged my memories of campus with beauty and nostalgia. *The Afternoon Slump* falls into a larger body of my artwork that looks at passing instances of connection between myself, those around me, and the places I arrived at during my time at university, titled *Briefly in Scenery*.



At some point, you sit by a willow tree at the dog park, watching puppies chasing each other. It could be fun to have a dog someday, you think. You wonder how this place looks in the summer. Flower beds filled with roses and irises probably line the street, and kids play street hockey instead of sitting in classrooms.

You think of how much you appreciate the balance. Nothing is ever all fun and games, but there are doses of sweetness spread across the seasons. In the quiet of fall's arrival, you can watch trees lay down their leaves and slumber while anticipating the arrival of the snow. You can have silent beauties, instead of constant excitement, instead of thunder and fireworks and kids running around. You can have this afternoon to rest, enjoy the delicateness of life and do your readings when you get home.

AuriaCity

There is an elderly man who busily knits his black and yellow striped shawl. He rocks his chair outside at the porch. The weather is oppressive hot as there is a big can of cold water on a little table beside him.

A big drop of honey falls on his feet from the roof. He looks up and sees that the roof is melting. He sighs. Every year, his caretaker comes and fixes his roof by pouring more pollens to seal the roof but this year, his caretaker doesn't come. The man isn't worried. The city is deteriorating slowly. Everything is made of honey and pollens and now there is shortage of supplies flowing into the Auria city.

The man senses someone from above of him, so he looks up and sees his beloved niece.

"Uncle", his niece Cassie waves with her hands excitedly. She enjoys flying around in the sky, then glides down to the ground. She lands on the ground perfectly. She nods with a great pride while she rests her fists against her hips. The uncle chuckles. The uncle tells her to come and sit with him. Cassie shakes her head and tells him to come with her to an assembly.

They communicate in sign language.

Uncle asks, "What it is about?"

Cassie looks at him and says, "You know what they will talk about. The city is dying. There is not a lot of pollens and honey here."

Uncle says, "Oh I am coming with you. Please wait for me. I need to take my bag and sunglasses."

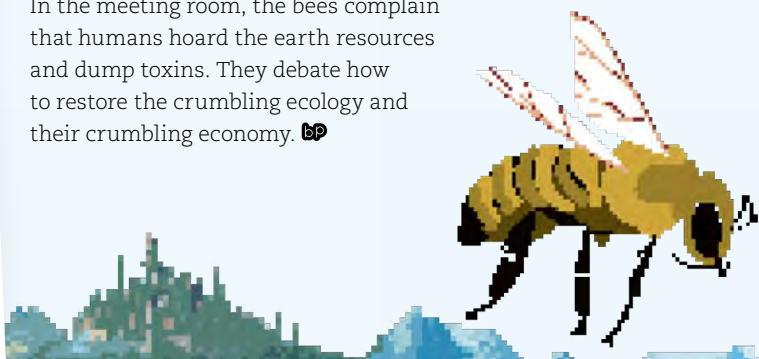
Cassie rolls her eyes impatiently, "Go and hurry up."

Uncle raises his eyebrows and says, "Excuse me, I am getting old. I am not faster like you ok?!"

Cassie says, "Ok, sorry!"

BY Tamyka Bullen

BEES ARE WORRIED about the Auria City they live in since the production of pollens and nectar are low. They aren't able to produce honey to support and maintain the city. The Bee depends on pollens and nectar for diet, cosmetic, residences and buildings, roads, vehicles and much more. They use the honey to make roads and vehicles. In the meeting room, the bees complain that humans hoard the earth resources and dump toxins. They debate how to restore the crumbling ecology and their crumbling economy. **BP**





Bones

Comic, Stephanie Kenzie, 8 pgs,
stephaniekenzie.com, Free

Bones is a joyful, seafoam coloured zine covered in skulls, 70s orange flowers, beautiful brown vines, and white specks of dust.

Immediately I meet a witchy-like, maternal woman in her forest home with her three blob-like pets. All of which have adorable hairstyles of either mushrooms, flowers or messy fur. The 70s living room colour palette is consistent throughout the comic panels as the unexpected happens (which tickled me by surprise). Our witchy-woo-woman and her blob pets (of which more have appeared and I now am assuming are blob-like angels) are not surprised by a pile of bones left on their front porch. They recognize the dismembered visitor and together they channel magic from the moon, clean up the skeleton and boom: a body is formed again.

I loved the idea that our bones can be recognized and that a talented witch could put me back together, regrow my flesh and allow me to continue to live my life out in the woods once more. What I loved even more was the sweet, older woman with her blob companions waiting in the woods for whatever might need her assistance. (Marisa Kelly)



Boobless: A Top Surgery

Pazine, Birch Rosen, 34 pgs, birchrosen.com, \$10

Birch Rosen's *Boobless* is a follow-up to their 2018 zine *Transitioning & Attractiveness*, which touched on their

decision to medically transition and wanting to be hot. In *Boobless*, the reader is offered a personal view of what it means to go through top surgery, from finding a surgeon to the procedure itself and the lengthy after-care. I just want to note that if you are squeamish, this might not be the zine for you as there are descriptions of wound care and infection.

In an age where gender affirming

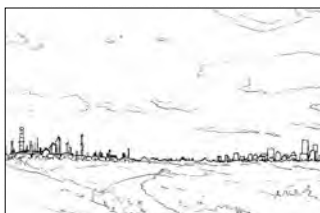
care is increasingly being restricted, it is a political act to describe your journey through top surgery. As a cis person, it was very informative for me to read about the different possible surgery types as well as after-care procedures. Birch is a good writer and breaks down how difficult recovering from this surgery would have been without the support of their partner, friends and family. Who knew that without the use

excerpt from **Bones** by **Stephanie Kenzie**



of your pectoral muscles, tasks such as pumping soap or opening taps would be impossible. As you follow Rosen's journey, you'll also discover more about their personal life as well as what shows and music supported their healing journey.

Boobless is a great resource for those who are considering top surgery, as well as for allies who might want to help a loved one through the recovery process. Birch also recommends zines by other non-binary and trans writers in their conclusion. (Maxime Brunet)



everyday oil: energy infrastructures and places that have yet to become strange

Infazine, Anne Pasek, 10 pgs,
heliotropejournal.net, Free

If you haven't had the chance to read Canadian cartoonist Kate Beatons' *Ducks* then Pasek's *everyday oil* is a perfect prologue. If you have read *Ducks*, then Pasek's brief comic is a great place to fluff up your Alberta tar sands knowledge and realize just how much of Edmonton is dominated by its relationship with oil.

Pasek, the former Albertian, went back to her hometown and observed everyday moments (without judgement) and what we got is this here zine. Each page brings to light something new; a new organization involved in oil, a new pipeline, private clubs founded by oil men, the realization of downtown buildings names and where they originate (spoiler alert: oil). I don't feel the black and white, pencil and printer paper does the content of this zine justice and I had wished for more colour to help illustrate the realities of Edmonton's oil ties.

Regardless, I am left with the grave understanding that oil and Edmonton are inseparable and what that means for increase in late capitalism, pipelines on Indigenous land and our ever-deteriorating environment. (Marisa Kelly)



Most Unwanted Zine

Artzine, Liz Mason, 18 pgs,
etsy.com/shop/LizMasonZines, \$5

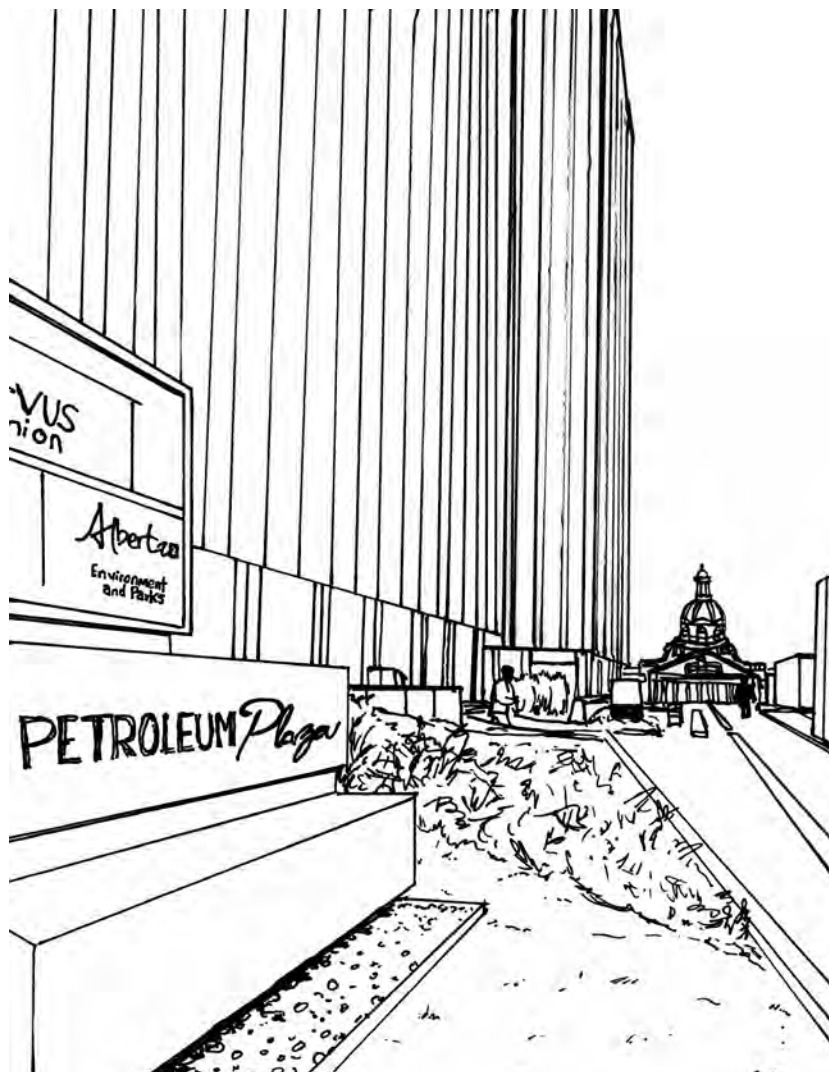
I wasn't sure I was going to like a zine that pokes fun at zines. Sometimes meta jokes are tedious or, worse, miss

the mark with their stereotypes. But I straight up cackled throughout my entire reading of Liz Mason's *Most Unwanted Zine* — oddly, because I felt totally called out. And let me tell you, that's not usually something I find amusing.

Right from the overly complicated cover, Mason draws you into the joke. At the outset, I was afraid that I wasn't conversant enough in zine culture to get the humour, but I discovered that no such "inside baseball" knowledge is necessary. The reader only has to be familiar with delicate souls who identify as artistes and take themselves way too seriously. There's no shortage of those in my orbit so I was good to go.

The opening essay in which the zinester has no idea how irritating they

excerpt from **everyday oil** by **Anne Pasek**



are already had me snickering. I moved on to the photography piece entitled “30 Fire Escapes” which delivers as described and nothing more. Since this is the exact kind of monotonous street photography from which I pretend to glean philosophical meaning, I burst out laughing. At this point, I wondered whether I, too, had a victim complex and often used words that I didn’t know the meaning of. Maybe there’s a reason why I know so many artists?

Quickly the writing was on the wall: the section on witchcraft was such an indictment on my life that Broken Pencil almost convened a grand jury. (My coven broke up in March. Not kidding.) Meanwhile the vegan recipe was disgustingly accurate and accurately disgusting. And the break up poetry, rife with belaboured metaphor, was a master stroke.

What really makes this zine terrible and fantastic is Mason’s commitment to the bit. She includes a QR code at the end that connects you to her research on what zinesters loathe about bad zines. I’m talking Google surveys, I’m talking supplemental field research, I’m talking pie charts galore. She really went the extra mile to make this the be-all, end-all, most unwanted zine.

It worked. It’s the worst. I loved it. (Jen Bonardi)



Olea’s Room

Comic, Olea Kim, 20 pgs, oleakim.shop, \$15

Olea’s Room is packed. Not Olea Kim’s actual room, I can’t speak to that, though the room of the Olea in *Olea’s Room* does look a little crowded with magic paraphernalia.

Olea’s Room covers a lot in 20 pages, with Kim’s eyes tending towards “sword and sorcery, queer narratives, dreams, magic items, eco-justice, video games, weird tales, and world building.” With the framing device of the reader meeting the titular (but not the eponymous) Olea in the majestic keep/crib they call home.

From here, we’re regaled with three

short fantasy tales. In the first, an elf finds themselves trapped with a sect of “Beckinsians” in a cave with no way out. Given their poor constitution, they’re placed with the ‘rockers’-fellow cave dwellers that are rocking back and forth grasping their knees. The conceit here is that leaving the cave does not place you where or when you left, and though the story is over before this is fully explored, it’s an enticing premise that I hope Kim returns to.

The remaining stories are biographical in nature (biographical about fantasy world Olea, not Kim themselves, unless Kim and friends also killed a god...) “Hunt Club” sees a young group of adventurers debating whom amongst them is pure enough to kill a beast found in the “Labyrinths and Leviathans” manual. In the third story, a young ‘prince’ is sent out into the world to mingle and learn amongst the common folk, as Olea flies off on a magic carpet and takes in a show at a tavern.

Kim’s linework, and seemingly simple character designs hide a real talent for expressions and movement. With as many concepts and elements of the world introduced as there are, no element of *Olea’s Room* is ever out of step with the other. If I have one gripe, it’s that the black and white printing can leave things looking a little flat. Kim shared *Olea’s Room* on their Instagram with a purple colouring that worked very well and having seen much of their previous work in colour, it’s unfortunate they weren’t able to use that here. Regardless, *Olea’s Room* is a strong first issue, and I hope we’ll be invited back soon. (Graham Sigurdson)



On Sneaking

Comic, Jon Iñaki, 44 pgs, Small Sword Press, adequatewebsite.com, \$15

I’m not necessarily a “big” guy, but at 6’2”, sneaking is not my forte. Try as I might

to crawl under lasers or somersault my way past cameras, I keep getting caught and causing exclamation points to appear over the heads of Shadow Moses security guards. Blessedly, Jon Iñaki’s *On Sneaking* has fallen into my hands. Giant searchlights will spot me prowling across courtyards no more.

On *Sneaking* sees the fittingly named Sneaker outline their philosophy and tips to avoid detection. You must avoid lures that lead you into traps. You must unmesh yourself from the distortions that have so far distracted you from your path. As Iñaki notes midway through, “People whose world is black and white have nowhere to hide but oblivion. But you’re strong when you don’t exist.”

At just about 3 by 5 inches, *On Sneaking* isn’t the biggest comic, but Iñaki certainly squeezes some big ideas into it. Across its 44 pages, the ‘silliness’ it opens with gives way to pages that are heartfelt and emotional. As Iñaki notes on the final page, some moments of *On Sneaking* were ones they experienced themselves, revealing that Iñaki’s stylistic and artistic choices — be they the cuteness of the character or the detached narration — are just another form of sneaking. Very sneaky.

Iñaki’s use of red and blue risograph ink and pink paper combines to create an intensity to things that would otherwise have been absent had it been produced any other way. It’s a truly effective melding of the comic’s content, and the comic itself as a physical object. It’s a small and impactful little package that, one might say, really sneaks in under the radar. Sorry. Had to sneak that one in. (Graham Sigurdson)



Prestige Goblins

Comic, Alexander Laird, 58 pgs, Frog Farm, frogfarm.bigcartel.com, \$20

Prestige Goblins is so good it makes me want to go goblin mode. As the Frog

Farm site describes it, *Prestige Goblins* is made up of “a bunch of new comics from Alex, all goblin related.” It’s a misleadingly simple description. The bulk of *Prestige Goblins* follows the behind-the-scenes production of the television series “Goblins.” Makes sense right? The cast and crew speak towards the ‘camera’ about the difficulties and dramas that have arisen, be those interpersonal — actors not remembering their lines or not reading the source material or taking shits in each other’s shoes — or technical, such as the author of the source novel being banned from the set, leaving the writers with the difficult task of producing more consistent material. It’s all very funny stuff, like a high fantasy *Larry Sanders Show*.

Alongside these comics are a few other pieces of Goblin related ephemera. A failed geography quiz by “Caleb Humus” on Canada’s “Reptile Island” hints at a larger, stranger world outside

of the TV studio, which leads into a Nintendo Power-style preview (also written by Humus) of the new video game “Goblin 64.” Laird (as Humus) produces a pitch perfect “Late 90s game magazine” tone with the text here, and the blurry Dall-E mini produced “Goblin 64” screenshots soon begin to tell a story of their own. I could have dedicated this entire review to just this part of the collection with how much I love it, but describing too much of it would lessen its effect. Without spoiling anything, what immediately follows is incredible.

Once again, Laird has outdone themselves with *Prestige Goblins*. If you liked *Sleemor Gank* and *Guaranteed Spooky Stories*, you probably already have a copy. If not, then what are you doing? Get out of that goblin hole and gobble up some comics, you troll. (Graham Sigurdson)



Proof I Exist #40

Perzine, Billy McCall, 23 pgs, iknowbilly.com, \$2

Billy McCall is a celebrated, prolific zinester who has both judged and won some of Broken Pencil’s annual awards. The unassuming bio blurb on his website — “middle-aged white dude living in Albuquerque” — belies his voluminous resume as a zinester, not to mention as a singer, graffiti photographer and board game manufacturer.

I’m bowled over by his fecundity. Intimidated, really. I’m not sure why. I

excerpt from **Prestige Goblins** by **Alexander Laird**

THE FIRST 100 SHOTS OF...

GOBLIN 64

preview written by Caleb Humus

It has been a difficult five years since the last release of **CRYSTAL MAZE** on Super Nintendo. I know as a young lad I couldn't get enough of this magical world filled with Goblins. Let me just say from the hour and fifteen minutes I was given to play a sequence of this game I have come back without any disappointment in the very bit. In fact I am honored to be dazzled by the mysterious footage of a soon to be masterpiece: **GOBLIN 64!!**

Thanks to the amazing new 3-D graphics in *Goblin 64* a brand new level of emotion and tension can be conveyed that has never been able to be achieved before in the Goblins story and universe.

Mr. M promises the magical world that used to only exist in his mind has never felt so close to reality before this.

A new page in the Golden Tomes of the Goblins...

MorphCore HQ and Mr. M have been very scant on details when I asked them what the story would be for **GOBLIN 64** but they did offer up a few details. Take everything with a grain of salt, they say, as story plans could change on a dime. That being said, this is what we know so far: the Golden Age has long ended since our last outing to Nebarnuul. The goblin we play as this time is the ancestor of Hamchar the Pensive (the humble advisor turned supporting hero from *Crystal Manor*.) Our new goblin, the dev team are calling “Ebubobo,” must collect magic books from wise elder-ores that contain certain spells which unlocks a powerful relic from a bygone age that will allow Ebubobo to travel to a new realm. What these new realm(s) could be is unclear, but Mr. M promises we will not be disappointed, as we will meet plenty of new goblins along the way...

The Next Generation of Goblins...

am not trying to make a board game.

This sense of awe is my essential reaction to reading *Proof I Exist* #40, along with pure enjoyment of the material. The author's prose is engaging, covering an eclectic array of topics without seeming scattered. Honest and reflective, McCall provides anecdotes that are both workaday and philosophical, in a voice that adds to their relatability. He talks about "writ[ing] without fear," resolutions vs. goals, learning to listen, shame about the past and the fading line between artifice and reality. It's a darned good little read.

The zine calls to mind the capitalist question of our times: how does one continually produce quality content? I suppose it helps being old enough to have amassed countless tales. But it's more than that: to be this creative, you have to be consistently taking in information from a myriad of sources. McCall's implicit curiosity about life is what makes his written musings feel like you're engaging with them instead of reading a navel-gazing old LiveJournal account.

McCall acknowledges the challenge of releasing control of your art and letting people judge it as they will. It's a balm to read that even this heavyweight struggles with doing that. The last couple pages of this issue are his admission to feeling the alienation that we all feel these days, as well as an entreaty to be there for others. McCall is doing a lot with his existence beyond proving it, and we're lucky to reap the rewards for only two bucks. (Jen Bonardi)



Resist #50

Zine, Mat Resist, 62 pgs,
Resist Transmogrification Laboratory,
resistlaboratory.com, \$5

I am not handy; I can do very little with my hands in terms of making, fixing, repairing. Or rather, maybe I can do

excerpt from **Ritual** edited by Joe Carlough



these things, but I don't know how and am too afraid or have too little faith in myself to learn. So, when reading *Resist*, a fascinating (and, honestly, intimidating) deep dive into DIY everything, I can't help but imagine some mirror-universe version of me building my own world, my own home, chicken coops, cigar box guitars and sundry other projects for surviving and thriving in the Anthropocene. With this issue, *Resist* is officially 50 issues deep. That's institution-level status. And like a kind of Foxfire book series for punks, Mat's *Resist* documents an immense output of projects, ideas and exhortations to make and do our own shit.

I first encountered Mat Resist's zine *Resist* in probably 1999 or 2000. I found issue 6 or 7 lying somewhere at a Christian alternative music festival, rife with DIY bike talk. The fest was held on the site of a former pig farm way out in American corn country. A faith-based Woodstock with no drugs. I suspect that for many of us there, fests like this were a safe place to tiptoe away from a stifling, sheltered evangelical subculture where thinking for oneself and trusting oneself were suspicious dispositions. We were sneaking toward some semblance of another subculture,

a more interesting, more dangerous one with distorted guitars and safety pin earrings. And indeed that tiptoeing did lead somewhere: to an escape hatch. Mat comes from that world, too — a fellow escapee. But one with much more confidence today than I have: confidence to make, build, create, tinker, to try, to err and try again.

One of his pieces in #50 is about looking for old ska radio shows he'd taped off the radio, but to his disappointment, only finding old Christian punk cassettes instead. Analog detritus of where we've come from. The meat of this issue, though, is retellings of projects completed, biking adventures had, doing, producing — all in a context of an unquestioned DIY ethos. I can't help contrasting Mat's natural joy in tinkering, making and repairing with my fear of doing these things. There are parts of the lack of self-trust that I haven't fully escaped. So I applaud Mat Resist on 50 issues, all the changes in life navigated and documented therein, all the projects, all the bike miles logged. Good on you, Mat. (Joshua Barton)



Ritual: Reflections On The Things We Do

Anthology, Edited by Joe Carlough, 24 pgs, displacedsnail.com, \$6

This zine contains texts and poems from various writers that explore the idea of 'ritual.' Though this theme should unify the content, it was difficult for me to really get into the writing.

From describing full moon rituals to intricate political art projects and daily habits, many kinds of rituals are on display in this anthology. The longest piece describes an artist's journey in attempting to sequin all the names of people killed by police officers in America, a process she eventually discovers through three years of daily work and education on the matter, would be depressingly impossible to complete. The heaviness of this journey, which discusses race relations in America, seems to clash with the next section, which is a poem following another author's head injury and daily walks with his dog.

Overall, this anthology would have benefitted with more context on each piece as well as an introduction and perhaps even an outro, to tie in all the writing. (Maxime Brunet)



Road Meat

Comic, Mason Jar, [instagram.com/mxsonjxr/](https://www.instagram.com/mxsonjxr/), Free

Road Meat is a visually appealing comic by former bike courier, Mason Jar. He originally uploaded the zine, panel

by panel to Instagram. Though it is partially autobiographical, it takes a strong surrealist turn. Our protagonist's difficult relationship with his bike culminates in sexual passion.

A strong theme in Mason's work is personification. Personification is a helpful literary device and in this zine it helps exemplify the fact that while objects are not living breathing people with feelings and flesh, they can have just as much practical impact on our lives. We see this in Mason's bicycle, the car clogged roads the protagonist dangerously travels, drones, phone technology and its inability to be helpful, surveillance cameras and riot police protecting personal property.

The bicycle itself had a huge impact on Mason's life. He couriered during the pandemic; a frontline worker. He relied on his bicycle to survive but, ironically, his life was in danger every day. Toronto is not the most bike friendly city in the world and after a slew of close calls Mason finally was struck by another courier at high speed. He survived but his bike was destroyed.

Mason says he's always enjoyed making objects into characters. He likes to imagine where their faces would be and what their personality and motivations might be like. In a world built for things, is it any wonder Mason might go the surreal place where his protagonist beds down with a bike, in a flurry or suck and fuck ecstasy? If stuff is our new master, take a page from Coco Chanel's book and sleep with the enemy. (dustan j. hlady)



Smash the Skatriarchy Vol. 4

Infazine, Edited by Amelia Bjesse-Puffin, 30 pgs, Microcosm Publishing, microcosmpublishing.com, \$6.95

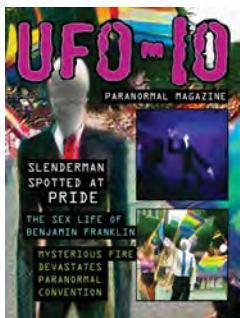
This primer on making skate parks accessible to and comfortable for everyone tackles the topic of girl skaters in its fourth issue. *Smash the Skatriarchy*

Vol. 4 conveys lessons and practical tips around welcoming the "unashamed presence of new identities," as one interviewee put it. The graphics and type across its large, square pages are visually appealing and the photography is duly inspiring. Editor Amelia Bjesse-Puffin demonstrates that her finger is on the pulse of the skater community with the issues that *Smash the Skatriarchy* chooses to address: consent in public photography, scooters and the skate scene in Portland.

While it's odd that two of the three people interviewed for the sexism issue are men, the pieces are captivating with nuggets of real insight. I loved that Brixton Gage's interview draws parallels between scooter-riders and women in order to foster a better understanding from a different perspective. Seasoned skater Melissa Dafnos' statement on what she loves about riding is profound in its discussion of identity, proficiency and adventure. While she "couldn't imagine how lonely it would be without other skaters," fellow old head Sam Harang says skate parks have "only recently become vehicles for [him] to meet new people." Without denying that some skaters want to conserve an exclusivity to their scene, he is happy to report that social media seems to have diversified and democratized skating culture.

I have only one concern about this zine but it's a big one: Who is the readership? It seems to me that anyone interested enough in dismantling systems of oppression to pick up this zine already knows the basic tenets it provides here. The editor undoubtedly means well but outlining the official 'Right Thing To Do' comes off as formulaic and jargon-y. The Supporting Survivors section, for example, contains good ideas in theory but there's much more nuance to it in real life application. Concepts like calling in vs. calling out and "do[ing] internal work" are as ill-defined as they are of dubious efficacy. The cringey MLK quote does little to help.

Harang tells us that he used to instruct others on skating: "I thought I was being gracious and supportive but in retrospect, it seems like I was trying to establish status at the skatepark." Bjesse-Puffin is encountering the same stumbling block as an activist. Nevertheless, her zine gives a voice to those who deserve to be included in skate culture and that is truly commendable. (Jen Bonardi)



UFO-10: Paranormal Magazine

Fanzine, Kyle Kerezsi, 32 pgs,
kylekerezsi.gumroad.com, \$10

Talk about your deep cuts. This magazine is a spoof of *Fate*. *Fate* is an underground, still treading water, paranormal magazine that started over 70 years ago. *UFO-10* lovingly pokes fun at *Fate*, the publication that began with a small readership and has spent 70 years losing them.

Though the write in segments, articles, advice letters and their responses all sound distinct, the entire pseudonym-filled rag is the work of Kyle Kerezsi, a multit talented Philadelphia-based writer/cartoonist/comedian.

The writing is from a cynical stance. Kyle is no believer nor does he seem to want to believe. Some portions are total farce, like the interviewer who harasses a cartoonist through email while adding thought-provoking questions to said cartoonist's cease and desist. Other parts are truly interesting ideas that seem to be added because of their exoticism, not necessarily their comedic effect.

The 'Tales From The Readers' could all make great books or films. A strong theme that seemed to pop up a lot was the issue of control and the question of how much control we have over our own lives. I don't know if this theme shows up as a criticism of the paranormal-obsessed, who are often criticized for finding a world run by lizards and parasites is more comforting than the chaotic greedy alternative we genuinely live in. Maybe Kyle himself feels like he doesn't have enough control over his own life.

Zine writers often create out of the need to operate outside the boundaries and limitations of capitalistic writing institutions. Either way I found this response from 'Paranormal Dear Abby'

chilling: "Imprisonment is inevitable. Your life and actions will always be manipulated by the mysterious forces of the universe."

At any rate, *UFO-10* is an out of this world, interesting fanzine that will have you chuckling, scratching your head and rubbing your belly. (dustan j. hlady)



Video 99

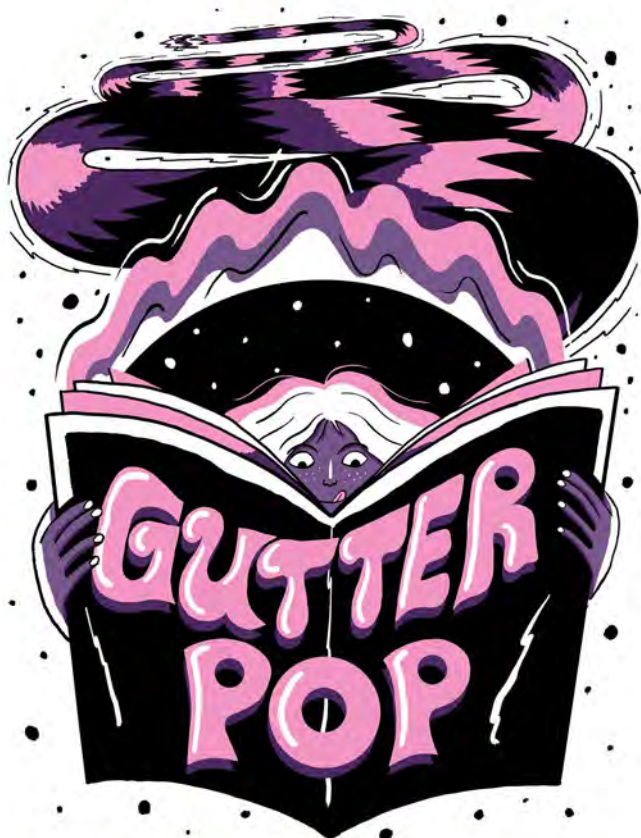
Comic, Zeekayart, 6 pgs, zeetheraccoon.com, \$3

The days of the video store come back to life in Zeekayart's *Video 99*. The nostalgia is cranked high as we go through the age-old process of renting a movie from local chains like Bonanza, Jumbo and, of course, Video 99.

The story takes place circa 2003. Nowadays when you're streaming a film, if you don't like it, you shut it off and choose one of the billion other things you could watch. Back then, you had to gamble on a film and then if your gamble didn't pay off, TOO BAD, Video 99 is closed and you're already in your PJs.

The protagonist wastes her time on a certain 2003 comedy. One of those comedies where all the funny parts are in the trailer but you have to watch through all the dead zones just to rewatch the portions you already know. In an interview, Zeekayart described the experience like a comedian trying to convince you they are funny.

I should also add, the art of the zine is remarkable and sentimental. The shelves, the signs, *The Land Before Time 2*. I haven't seen a video rental store in a while and this art was a nice reminder. Join Zeekayart's trip to the past. In a world where autobiographical creative non-fiction usually relies heavily on a writer's past trauma or family drama, *Video 99* is a fresh look at a simple outdated ritual. An act those of us who remember it, miss dearly. We even miss the trauma of picking a stinker for the weekend. (dustan j. hlady) **BP**



Music

Critical Failure

Critical Failure

Independent

criticalfailure.bandcamp.com

Could anything feel worse than buying the latest RPG expansion pack only to discover you can't create your favourite character type? "Why did the gnomes go away-ay-ay?" On their first album as Critical Failure (they sound like experienced musicians who have ventured other rodeos), this Montana-based quartet tackles that specific heartache, those game night atrocities, via Devo-influenced, metaphor-heavy pop and with a complete lack of pretense. They're trying to pick up at the laundromat. They're playing "the sports ball." They're feeling invincible after two pints of beer. They're clearly dorks, but they make entertaining music.



PONY

Velveteen

Take This to Heart Records

takethistoheartrecords.com

This sophomore full-length from Toronto's self-proclaimed "reigning power pop champions" is often very Veruca Salt-like; you could easily sing "Seether" to the music of opening track "Très Jolie." They say themselves in "Peach" that they "get distracted by the saccharine," but there's no worry of that happening with *Velveteen* — the dark underbelly of these songs is never far from the surface (some subtlety would serve them well). The most noticeable thing that's missing in these stories of unhealthy relationships, neuroses and self-destruction is a devastating slow number. This is a one-trick PONY, though they perform their trick admirably.



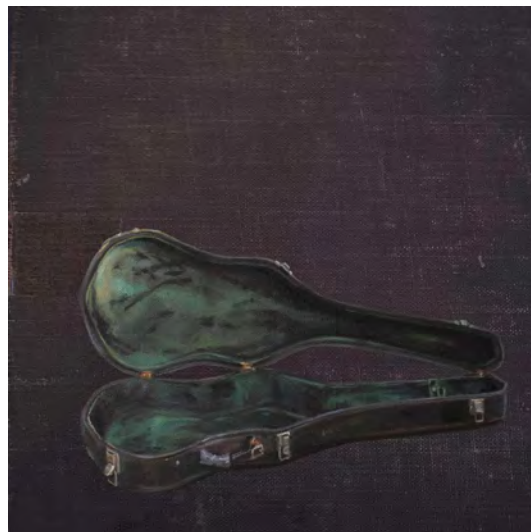
Hayden

Are We Good

Arts & Crafts

arts-crafts.ca

You know what sort of album you're in for when one of its songs starts with 45 seconds of whistling. As Hayden Desser has aged, he's transformed into a master of mellow old man music and it's a satisfying destination if you've been aging along with him. A person in their 20s wouldn't give Hayden a second thought these days, but if you were 20-something when he released *Everything I Long For*, it's likely you're fully on board at this point. This tenth record is predictably full of relationship heartache and joy, and it's viewed through seasoned and regret-free eyes. (All reviews by Scott Bryson)





100 Boyfriends Mixtape 3: Fuck Boy Anthem/How I Spent My Summer Vacation

Directed by Brontez Purnell

BRONTEZ PURNELL starts *100 Boyfriends Mixtape #3: Fuck Boy Anthem/How I Spent My Summer Vacation* how he means to go on — shaking his ass face down.

Coming in as the third of a trilogy of short films from the Alabama-born and Oakland-based writer, choreographer and multidisciplinary artist, it is easily the most experimental. While all three pull from his long-running print zine *Fag School*, this specific video-zine throws away the idea of narrative entirely and embraces a choreo-poem style clearly pulling from works like Marlon Riggs' *Anthem*. Constituting this are a mish-mash of poetry readings, song, stills, held singular shots and more.

100 Boyfriends Mixtape #3 is deeply engaged with the complexities of (Black) queerness in a digital age. You get sequences clearly filmed on a smartphone of Purnell and others in masks bearing BLM slogans. Snippets of phone calls over stills which can best be described as artsy nudes. Flashes of Purnell leaning in front of a man's junk with an Angela Davis wanted poster in the Black. At one point we pull out from a flogging scene to a recording of a video call with the

directors of the specific scene watching along and saying, "Being directors is a form of fetish." You are being shown the seams and dared to decide what's real, what's construction, what's fantasy, ending a monologue with the line "rest assured you don't know me." Ultimately that is the reality of a world where the digital bleeds into the material and vice versa. We live and die and fuck and protest all on camera and all at the same time. To separate would be nonsense.

It would seem very possible for this web of overlapping mediums and frames and ideas to lose itself, but the real master stroke of this film is the precision with which the chaos is constructed. Nothing overstays its welcome. The switches in saturation and volume and audio quality are always pushed right to the edge, but never over it completely — a rollercoaster ride in the best sense of the phrase.

Purnell's rejection of constraints or definition is refreshing and allows for a real engagement with the full complexities of gay and queer existence. In this, the film is able to have images of men's genitals and include trans men without skipping a beat or including a PSA to be

more legible to an outsider audience. *How I Spent My Summer Vacation* is also able to show Purnell and others crossdressing, and otherwise embracing the complicated relationship between sexuality and gender non-conformity without having to confine anyone within the frame into static identities. It's a middle finger to the current status quo of queer film and life where our bodies must be ephemeral vessels for deep misery or placid contentment. It's also just really fun? There are lots of moments which had me cackling, obvious gags and inside jokes that need no explanation.

We are in a time where the fragile "acceptance" (or more accurately begrudging and selective tolerance) of the past decade, built upon the bargain that queers wouldn't be too loud or too messy or too working class, has been stretched thin and is finally snapping. This is at once terrifying and also a powerful new opportunity to reconsider the radical and tangible foundations of what queerness and queer art looks like — and it seems like *100 Boyfriends Mixtape #3: Fuck Boy Anthem/How I Spent My Summer Vacation* is ushering us into that new age. (Oluwatayo Adewole) **BP**



Who's Lila?

Developed by Garage Heathen

WHO'S LILA? by Garage Heathen is one of the most wonderfully disturbing horror games I've ever played. The bastard genius of this horror mystery adventure game lies in its central conceit: the use of a neural net that detects emotions from facial expressions. That is, the player must construct facial expressions by manipulating the face of their avatar, William, at critical points. Based on how well the player is capable of reproducing a smile, a frown, a gasp, a furrow, a terrifying rictus and so on, the neural net will interpret happiness, sadness, fear, surprise, or anger.

William lives alone. Every morning when he wakes up he has to go to the bathroom to practice his expressions in the mirror. With a cursor, the player manipulates his blank face like it's made out of putty, pushing his muscles into the desired position before the timer at the bottom of the screen runs out. Sometimes this timer is slow, and other times, in hectic scenes, it moves faster. Sometimes the player must perform a


frustrating string of expressions correctly in a row, like an evil Simon Says. The screen is split, usually with William's face on the left side and the area the player is in on the right. The game uses a Unity engine, and offers unlockable color palettes filtered with heavy dithering and high contrast that gives everything a stark, sinister yet ephemeral feel.

When William feels confident enough to leave the bathroom and make his way to high school, the phone may ring. A cryptic message telling him to meet a man by the train station might play. The player is powerless to move as this happens. If William goes to the kitchen, the player will notice several items such as old pizza boxes and beer cans, keys, a hacksaw and a black trash bag. William will have to take out the trash everyday. You may get the feeling it isn't trash in that black trash bag.

There are other items, and other paths one can take besides the train tracks and school. The game has a Groundhog

Day quality to it, with ten endings corresponding to specific tarot cards that the player unlocks. Each one is represented on the branch of a tree, connected to a central and murky truth that only gets murkier and more surreal as the player unlocks more endings. Several of these endings can only be revealed in a specific sequence, each one building upon things discovered or achieved in the last one. Little by little we learn that a classmate, Tanya, has gone missing, and that William was the last person seen with her. We learn that our friend group, including Tanya's late boyfriend, Michael, suspects William of having something to do with it. We learn, perhaps on the same day, that something lives in the bowels of the school, a building whose geometry seems to fold on itself. That thing is a monster, and we must let her consume us to unlock an ending. That thing is Lila.

It always feels a little cliché to call something Lynchian, but in this case the story literally centers around a boy possessed by a tulpa. Lila is the manifestation of a certain kind of psychic energy — perhaps created by the government, or by rituals performed by some malevolent priests, or by our own collective demons. To William, she appears as the missing Tanya, but she can take many forms. To have any knowledge of her keeps her alive in the corner of someone's eye — and remember this as the game breaks the fourth wall constantly. The player will have to, at one point, install a separate DLC software that opens up to a window with a little demon in it that knows codes and phone numbers. The player will have to visit the Twitter page of the game and other websites to find critical information, and even change the time on their desktop to unlock certain events.

We will eventually learn what happened to Tanya, and what binds her to William and to Lila. But everything remains somewhat open-ended, shrouded in occultist mystery and terror. The game fractalizes into a meditation on ego and identity in the shared dream of the digital age. Are you you? Are you William? Are you Lila? Perhaps it is less about the destination, and more about the tulpas that possessed us along the way. (Lana Polansky) 

FICTION



What Comes Echoing Back

Leo McKay Jr., 304 pgs, Nimbus Publishing, nimbus.ca, \$23.95

Leo McKay Jr. has been teaching high school in Truro, Nova Scotia for almost thirty years. Along the way he's clearly seen a thing or two. He's also written some impressive books, including a sprawling historical novel and a short story collection, *Like This*, that is on my personal list of cult classics of Canadian fiction. In his accomplished new novel, McKay taps into both his high school experiences and his hard-earned talent as one of the East Coast's premier fiction writers.

What Comes Echoing Back tells the story of two teenagers struggling to rebound from catastrophic events. Sam's life fell apart after she and her friends were drugged and assaulted at a party they should never have been at. Robot, a budding guitarist, is emerging from time in juvenile facilities after a meaningless high school fight resulted in the accidental death of the other combatant. The two meet in music class and forge a bond neither of them quite understands. The story unspools slowly, moving back and forth in time and in between the two characters. It's a testament to McKay's craftsmanship that this transpires seamlessly. Slowly the tension builds as we reach the pivotal moment in each of their backstories.

These sections, leading up to the horrible events that will scar their lives forever, are astounding. Three friends messing around on a sleepover, McKay piling on the details that Sam will ponder over and over again — a pillow fight,

three girls on the cusp of adulthood clinging to what's left of their innocence, one of the girls growing more and more restless until she just has to go, somewhere, anywhere. For Robot, it's a bully with a video camera determined to orchestrate a fight to add to his YouTube collection. Robot roams the halls, a mouse in a trap, his tension overwhelming his better judgement.

McKay is at his best in those moments before it all happens. Afterwards, there is the let down. Maybe McKay tries a bit too hard to offer some solace, some glimmer of hope. Maybe that's also inevitable with characters so finely wrought and imagined that McKay felt compelled to give them some path out of the abyss of poverty, cruelty and techno-fuelled fantasy he so remarkably portrays in this fine novel. (Hal Niedzviecki)



Troll

Logan Macnair, 250 pgs, Now or Never Publishing, nonpublishing.com, \$19.95

Millennials are the last generation to remember a time before the omnipresence of the internet, but they were also the first to be raised by it. Who in our generation can truthfully say they did not at some point explore at least one of the web's dark recesses? *Troll* tells the story of what happens when one never returns from those youthful spelunking expeditions, but instead chooses to live down in the cave with all the bats, snakes and guano. It lets us meditate on what sort of creature might emerge years later with its hand shading its eyes from the blinding sun.

Troll delivers on this ambition on several fronts. The protagonist, Petrol Riley, is a hybrid between Alex Jones and Jordan Peterson if you were to toss in some guy

off the street with even the slightest semblance of a conscience. His decision to pursue the dissemination of hate begins as a parody and results in accidental fame he finds impossible to refuse given the only alternatives are to abandon his acting craft altogether or slog away for years for potentially no payoff. This is both believable and relatable in the aftermath of the Great Recession. Where the story somewhat falters is in Petrol's first-person narration, which occasionally becomes repetitive and a little draining.

The real strength of this novel is how its author leverages other tactics to tell his story. The use of message board logs, epistolary and scripts is compelling, well-researched, and highly entertaining. These sections succeed in honestly depicting how online communities can slide from havens of free speech into hotbeds of hate. More importantly, Macnair succeeds in tackling a serious issue facing our society as we continue to grapple with a situation where major segments of the population can't agree about the nature of reality. He does so with an impressive level of nuance that elevates this novel above the flood of contemporary fiction that boils down to little more than a sad attempt to say the right thing. (Jason Smith)



We Won't Be Here Tomorrow and Other Stories

Margaret Killjoy, 224 pgs, AK Press, akpress.org, \$18 USD

Every good ghost story should make you feel like we live in a haunted world, but Margaret Killjoy can do this in her stories even when you don't meet any ghosts. Sometimes the occultism is front and center, as in her Lovecraft-inspired

tale “The Bones of Children,” where the protagonist chases down the source of dreams in which she brutally dismembers children. But even in science fiction tales like “The Fortunate Death of Johnathan Sandelson,” where a rebellious fast food worker finds herself on the run from the law in a mostly automated world, there is a strain of bewitchedness running through the story. Not only because the well fleshed-out characters carry their curses like crucifixes, but also because the technology itself often acts like something of a genie, passively granting humanity its wishes, but always for an unforeseen cost.

Short story collections like this one, where the tales spread over multiple genres and themes, can sometimes be a little disorienting or variable in quality. Not so here. There is a strain of folksy heroism that runs through this book from front to back. Whether you’re reading about a tribe of people living as orcs, bound together by their love of Goblin Metal music, or a hitchhiker who unwittingly unleashes a plague of wood ticks upon the Earth, Killjoy will have you rooting for flawed characters, preparing for an uncertain future, and ready to stomp on the toes of some institutional oppressors.

Before picking up this book I’d already liked Margaret Killjoy as a podcaster. Now I absolutely love her as an author and fully plan to devour every word she writes. (Alex Passey)



Through the Billboard Promised Land Without Ever Stopping

Derek Jarman, 120 pgs, House Sparrow Press, housesparrowpress.com, £9.99

Prompted by Derek Jarman's 1964 journey through America, this shimmering

Author Spotlight with Logan Macnair

Author of Troll (Now or Never Publishing)



In *Troll*, you convincingly fictionalize the /b/ board. What do you think it is about these online communities that enables them to transform from relatively benign – if offensive – message boards into petri dishes of hate?

Broadly speaking, I think the initial attraction of the /b/ board and similar spaces, especially for younger people, is that they are transgressive and allow users the opportunity to anonymously say the things they’re not supposed to say without any real consequences. There are exceptions, but I generally don’t believe that most of the young people sharing these memes and jokes are especially invested in (or even fully aware of) the ideology behind them. It’s more about finding a likeminded community of people to bond with over their escape from the perceived confines of polite and politically correct mainstream society.

Most of these individuals do tend to age out of this behavior once the initial thrill and excitement of being shocking starts to wear off. For whatever reason, there are a minority of individuals who remain firmly entrenched in these spaces. The term ‘irony poisoning’ has been used to describe the process where exposure to offensive content, even if it starts as a joke without any actual malice intended, can over time slowly become internalized, eventually blurring the line between a purposefully edgy joke and a genuine or sincere belief. As enough of these ‘true believers’ stay invested in these spaces, they start to alter the ‘tone’ of them toward a more explicitly hateful orientation.

In *Troll* I tried to authentically capture the language, tone, and discourse of

these spaces in a way that didn’t just present an exaggerated mockery or satire of them, but rather showed some of the nuance and variation that exists among their userbases.

It appears that the “West” is in a moment of epistemological crisis, where conspiracy theories now constitute reality for tens of millions of people who aren’t likely to be converted by a novel. So, we’re curious – what motivated you to write the book?

It does seem quite egregious now, doesn’t it? Conspiracy theories and conspiratorial reasoning have always been around to some extent but tended to exist on the fringes and didn’t have much influence on mainstream society. Today the Internet has amplified and exacerbated these narratives to a degree that is historically unique, and this is certainly troubling given the real-world social and political consequences we are starting to witness.

The purpose of *Troll* was not necessarily to ‘deradicalize’ such people, but rather to shine a light on the modern Internet and the role it plays in our lives. One of the main questions this book explores is *why* people get swept up in these movements/spaces in the first place. The answer that *Troll* gives emphasizes the fundamental disconnection and sense of alienation that many people are currently experiencing. In the book, just like in real life, many people get caught up in conspiracy theories and extremist reasoning precisely because they offer a remedy for this alienation. They give people the opportunity to belong to something, which I think is a very natural human desire that has unfortunately become easily exploitable by some of these more nefarious movements. **bp**



novella tracks the surreal travels of a young blind King and his valet, John. The rediscovered luminous tale is a valuable addition to Jarman's rich and varied body of work, serving as a cornerstone to its foundation.

Filmmaker, artist, activist, gardener and significant alternative cultural figure of 20th century Britain, Derek Jarman (b. 1942) initially penned *Through the Billboard Promised Land Without Ever Stopping* in 1971. It was not until recently that House Sparrow Press published it for the first time. Steeped in notes of Americana, the brief novella is a poetic fairy tale of a fantastical road trip across a trippy landscape. It is an endearing hybrid of William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), but haunted by the ecological issues that were arising at the time Jarman was writing.

Between the book's enchanting iridescent covers, Jarman's story is contextualized by four lovingly written accompanying contributions: a foreword, a memoir, an afterword and a final note. Each supplementary text provides insight into the artist's life and work. Scattered throughout are pictures of original handwritten drafts from Jarman's archive. Additionally, there is a QR code that connects the reader to an intensely intimate audio recording of Derek Jarman reading the story out loud. In his afterward, Jarman scholar Declan Wiffen vividly imagines the artist at home on the Dungeness shore in Prospect Cottage, reading the story into a cassette recorder. The text printed within the book's pages has been transcribed from this recording.

In *Through the Billboard*, Derek Jarman establishes the themes and aesthetics he consistently composted, recycled, reused and revisited throughout his creative career. This rediscovered gift is an excellent entry point to his entire body of work. (Alex McMillan)



Raccoon: A Wondertale

Sean Kane, 320 pages, Guernica Editions, guernicaeditions.com, \$25

One sees them at night, scurrying around in backyards and alleyways, or sees their handiwork the next morning: trash bins upset; garbage all over the place. But what is life like for a raccoon? If Sean Kane's new novel *Raccoon: A Wondertale* is any indication, it's much wilder than you'd think.

The novel follows three cubs — Clutch, Touchwit and Bandit — as they leave home to make their way in the world. And this raccoon world is an interesting one: from the families up north who live by elaborate, almost Elizabethan rules of conduct, to the anarchist clan of artists in the city, there's a wide variety of lifestyles at play. After a prologue where they live with their mother in Kane's chimney, the three cubs set out into the world. Before long, all three return to the city under various guises — spy, rebel leader, freedom fighter — to overthrow a repressive government headed by their deadbeat dad, a sly trickster raccoon named Meatbreath.

Kane's story spins out and out, building up momentum and scope as it goes along. What starts as a cheeky little story about the author listening to animals through a wall in his house slowly unfolds into a whole world where species don't just interact but have detailed histories and even schools of thought. The way Kane fleshes out this world is reminiscent of Donald Harington's novel *Cockroaches of Stay More*, but the way he works in allusions to current events brings to mind Orwell's *Animal Farm* as Meatbreath yells about fake news and migrants who want to overturn society. Ultimately *Raccoon* stands apart, coming across more as a charming fable for adults.

In a short afterward, Margaret Atwood lays out some history for this book, both in its origins (a serial story for an ailing

friend of Kane's) and who she thinks inspired each character. There might even be some truth to what she writes. But such details aren't relevant to *Raccoon*. The story Kane tells might be a little long in the telling, but aren't the best stories the ones that encourage you to stay up past your bedtime? (Roz Milner)

NON-FICTION



Together We Make the Dream Real

Travis Egedy (aka Pictureplane), 186 pgs, *Alien Body*, alienbody.com, \$40 USD

The 2010s were an explosion of mixed emotions. Hungover from a war on terror, the western world seemed to be rounding the bend into a brighter progressive future, especially if you were young. A surge of independent artists and scenes gave everyone a place to feel miserable and alien.

From this stew came Travis Egedy (aka Pictureplane), a Denver-based musician best known for his 2009 album *Dark Rift*, remixes from noise rock knob-adjusters HEALTH and coining the term 'witch house.' His book, *Together We Make The Dream Real*, is a lengthy tome of compiled poetry, lyrics, tour notes, flyers, runic doodles, vintage Ninja Turtle trading cards and collage-like ephemera. An earnest and unfiltered travelogue of the early 2010s, *Together* parses half-thoughts about isolation, extinction, loss and art among a frenzied scene. On one amusingly contradictory page, Egedy laments, "Sick and tired of the world, can't help that I'm a loner" above a VIP pass to the dancehall party ensemble Major Lazer.

There are plenty of strolls down memory lane. Flyers for gigs with Washed

Out, The Death Set and Big Freedia. The unending development of a personal aesthetic. So many moments of those years to crinkle your nose at, like previously all-consuming existential questions that seem trivial in the rearview but simultaneously pivotal to a current self. This is a personal but shared history for people of Egedy's generation and an interesting collection for those still trying to make sense of their twenties. (Zack Kotzer)



If It Gets Quiet Later On, I Will Make a Display

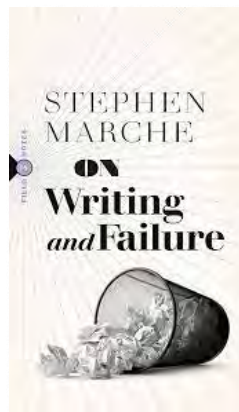
Nick Thran, 136 pgs, Nightwood Editions, nightwoodeditions.com, \$22.95

As someone whose job also involves making book displays, I was immediately interested in Nick Thran's book-fueled memoir. *If It Gets Quiet Later On, I Will Make a Display* revolves around Thran's move from New York City to Fredericton, New Brunswick — in itself a shocking enough contrast that is layered on top of a change in lifestyle (home-ownership) and career (moving to full-time childcare). Later during his time in Fredericton, Thran takes on part-time work in a bookstore, reviving a skillset he had developed at many bookstores over many years.

If It Gets Quiet includes mainly essays, poetry and memoir-style writing reflecting on the role of independent bookstores mixed with a miscellaneous selection of writing projects that feel more fragmented. While each individual piece — a short story or a magazine article about Calgary's Old Trout Puppet Workshop — is interesting on its own, as a whole they are different enough that it makes reading the book feel a bit disjointed.

The strongest material here ends up being about independent bookstores

and what we are losing when they are overcome by Amazon and chain stores. These parts of the book are funny, intimate and familiar. One poem sweetly describes the feeling of bookstore work as being “just a little bit high on the feeling of being of use.” Thran is a good writer and each individual chapter is interesting, but the full collection is a bit bumpy to read. (Megan Clark)



On Writing and Failure: Or, On the Peculiar Perseverance Required to Endure the Life of a Writer

Stephen Marche, 87 pgs, Biblioasis, biblioasis.com, \$15.95

I'm always amazed when my earnest undergrad students approach me with the YA fantasy trilogy or dystopian sci-fi adventure they've been scheming up, worried only about how they'll spend their inevitable millions. The writing, they imagine, is a mere formality to be gotten out of the way before glorying in fame and success. They don't yet know that most books are never written, and an astonishing number of those that are never find an agent or publisher. The average book sells a few hundred copies and makes maybe fifteen hundred bucks. In Canada, moving 5,000 copies is considered bestseller territory.

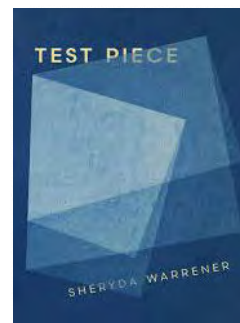
Stephen Marche is here to set the record straight in his slim volume of hard truths: writing is failure. It's not a route to fame, money, or even a basic living. It is hard work, suffering, and sacrifice with little guarantee of reward. It is constant rejection — “throwing yourself against the door so that a crack may allow light in.” *On Writing and Failure*

is driven by difficult questions posed with hilarious (indeed, maddening) bluntness: “You think it should be easy to sell your feelings? You want to be congratulated for it? You want them to throw you a big party?”

The book is composed of brief, sobering anecdotes, mostly about canonical (read: white, male) writers who we consider “successful”: Samuel Johnson was “broke as fuck” and Richard Savage died in debtor's prison. The only publisher Vladimir Nabokov could find for *Lolita* was a pornographer invested in destigmatizing pedophilia. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* was published so long after he'd written it that the political allegory was hopelessly misunderstood. James Joyce couldn't even get a job as a part-time lecturer at a low-level college. Jane Austen had to pay up front to have her books published and didn't live to see her name on any of them. As Marche so aptly asks, “Why would it be any different for you?”

Marche is reluctant to give generalized advice, but what he does offer cuts right through the bullshit: the quality of your writing has depressingly little effect on your career, yet it is the only thing that matters. If you want to write well, you'll have to do it for its own sake, submitting and persevering. No whining. No complaining. Just write. (Maria Cichosz)

POETRY



Test Piece

Sheryda Warrenner, 80 pgs, Coach House Books, chbooks.com, \$22.95

A field of flowers, seen from the window of a speeding train; the serene energy of

a clear morning; translucent sheets of an unfamiliar textile — what could it be made of? — that comprise a modern artwork. Unfolding from such striking and thoughtful scenes, Sheryda Warrener's third collection of poems interrogates our drive to understand ourselves and the world despite the fallibility of even our most vivid memories. Throughout, Warrener's succinctness and clarity of vision give the feeling of closing the loop on a longstanding concern of modernist poetry, even as her musings invite a life of unfixed identity and perpetual reinvention.

Test Piece is primarily composed of four fragmentary long poems in which Warrener reflects on visits to art galleries, domestic life and the work of reading and writing. The book's poetics are openly inspired by collage, experimentalism and process-based artwork, as is evident in its inclusion of four mixed-media visual pieces titled "Interior Portrait." In one poem, Warrener even reveals a prompt she once shared at a writing workshop:

"Let the process show through, and fray."

Nonetheless, Warrener's lines are generally less avant-garde than crisply imagist, illuminating everyday objects and experiences with plain yet vibrant language: "water, kettle, blue claw of flame / three counter-clockwise turns to bloom the grinds."

Warrener also breaks from more disjointed, materialist poetics by giving each of her poems a discernible intellectual arc, culminating in erudite, even scholarly insights into memory, wholeness and the imprecise construction of the self. These notes are just as clear and condensed as Warrener's more concrete descriptions, artfully blurring the line between what one sees and what one thinks. Overall, *Test Piece*'s wisdom is neither neat nor conclusive, yet its vision is enduringly resonant, relevant and grounding: "repetition a mode of / protection / delicate calibration with a / steady hand." (John Nyman)

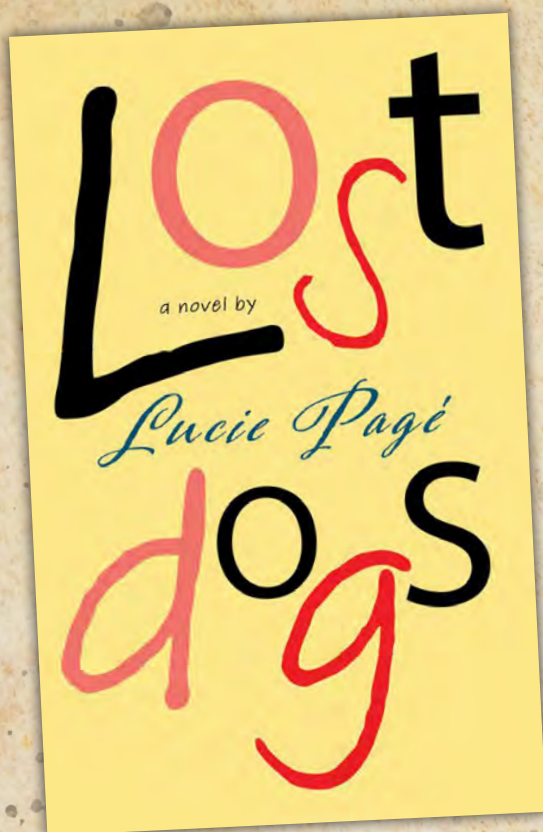


***A New English Grammar**

Jeff Dolven, 80 pgs, *dispersed holdings*, dispersedholdings.net, \$22 USD

I have this one friend who always DMs me grammar jokes — do you know him? The key word there might be "one," since my friend's sense of humour isn't for everybody, but Princeton professor Jeff Dolven's **A New English Grammar* is certainly the book for him. Pairing dense excerpts from academic grammar textbooks with fanciful light verse, this slim collection is a grab bag of prescriptivist puns and occasionally entrancing — though short-lived — bursts of playful lyricism.

**A New English Grammar* is heavily conceit-based: each of Dolven's original poems



"Peeling back the binary of cold and explosive personalities, ambition, anxieties, and desire, **LOST DOGS** is a story about what all of us fear and long for. Pagé brings her acclaimed television writing experience to bear on the novel, creating a compulsively readable, character-driven tale."
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proceeds from an “ungrammatical phrase quoted in the explication of an obscure grammatical principle. For example, Dolven reinvents the incorrect formulation “*I was recognizing her* — a misapplication of present continuous tense to a non-durational act — into this imaginative stanza:

I was recognizing her, and then
there must have been a change of light.
I had to start all over again.

The resulting poems are whimsical and absurd, reminiscent of Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky” but structured more like an ESL class than a fairy tale. Some of their most compelling, albeit rare moments are those in which the lines approach pure nonsense, as in, “how other she is than I am own.” Unfortunately, these glimmers of intrigue are often stymied by the poems’ brevity and Dolven’s extensive use of repetition, which tends to close off or redirect his otherwise promising flights of fancy.

In theory, *A New English Grammar* touts a radical freedom from the constraints of “proper” English. In practice, however, its liberatory vision is held back by Dolven’s enduring fascination with an arcane and unrelatable understanding of language whose mandates rarely hold water in the real world. Ultimately, *A New English Grammar* isn’t a revelation, but for the linguistics nerds among us, it may be a delight. (John Nyman)

COMICS



Artist

Yeong-shin Ma, 636 pgs, Drawn & Quarterly, drawnandquarterly.com, \$44.95

It’s difficult to exactly say what *Artist* is going to be about just by looking at its cover. Dancing middle-aged men? Technicolour joy? A guy with a frontal lobe so developed it would make

Megamind jealous? “Yes to all three” was my response as I picked up this translation published by Drawn & Quarterly.

What drives this graphic novel is the characters: three friends representing the three main branches of art. You have the painter, who is so debauched, corrupt and pathetic that you can hardly look at him without the bile threatening to explosively exit your esophagus. Then there’s the womanizing musician whose early success gets to his head. Finally, you have the idealistic writer who’s forced to compromise at every turn. Amusing as it is honest, *Artist* achieves what few can in creating a cultural product about artists that doesn’t fall prey to the temptation to navel gaze or air sour grapes. Instead, Ma makes the choice to be descriptive and self-deprecating, resulting in an insightful work that is easy to interpolate with.

Something should also be said about the quality of this translation. The graphic novel goes to great lengths to explain aspects of the Korean literary establishment that may not be immediately apparent to foreigners, and the additional footnotes go a long way in filling the remaining gaps. In this way, very little appears to be lost in translation. (Jason Smith)



Spa

Erik Svetoft, 328 pgs, Fantagraphics, fantagraphics.com, \$34.99 USD

I haven’t been to a spa for many years, and after reading this wonderfully creepy graphic novel by Erik Svetoft, I’m in no hurry to go back. Bringing to mind the works of Junji Ito, *Spa* uses stunning black and white artwork and the mixing of simple character designs with disturbing biological horror to tell a tale of disgruntled employees, snobbish guests and some very unusual pigs.

Set in a classy European spa, the book follows a quirky ensemble cast, each

with their own problems and story arcs. It’s clear from the unsettling opening scenes that the cast will be in for more than just a relaxing getaway. Sure enough, the weirdness starts to creep in with the appearance of an oozing black substance, bringing chaos all the way up to the book’s mind-bending conclusion.

Spa deals with themes of power and class differences, following mistreated employees, shallow, oblivious guests and a debt-ridden director. It was amusing to see the characters casually shrug off violent or horrifying scenarios, as when a guest is mistakenly shot by a harpoon and simply states, “No worries. Accidents happen.” The spa must maintain its perfect image, after all.

While not especially action-packed, the book’s mood and pacing draws readers in immediately, often resembling a disturbing dream sequence by David Lynch. The simple and quirky character designs bring a bit of cuteness to the work, and combined with the odd dialogue and framing, I was reminded of Wes Anderson’s movies.

Spa is absolutely recommended for fans of weird horror, especially the works of Junji Ito, David Lynch and Cronenberg and Alex Garland. While clearly a terrible advertisement for spas (or maybe a wonderful advertisement, depending on your tastes), as a horror graphic novel, it’s fantastic. (Tina Olah)



The Third Person

Emma Grove, 920 pgs, Drawn & Quarterly, drawnandquarterly.com, \$49.95

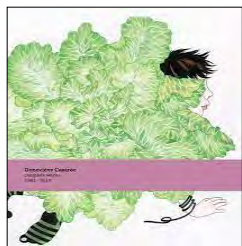
Emma Grove managed to write a graphic novel both literally and figuratively heavy — coming in at 920 pages, this thing is a complete brick.

Here’s a quick premise: Edgar (Ed for short), no longer content with living life as

a man, goes to therapy in hopes of receiving a referral for hormone replacement therapy. Toby, his emotional and rather inexperienced therapist, starts to notice signs of Dissociative Identity Disorder in Ed, who often presents as alters such as Katina, a protective party girl, or Emma, a shy woman who loves to read and write. All of them must sort through their mess of childhood memories to fill in the gaps, otherwise they'll never get approval for hormone replacement, and their transition will never be complete.

At once emotional and psychological, Grove's work explores all the different parts of ourselves that culminate into one being. As a memoir, the graphic novel was pieced together from each of Grove's alters but reads seamlessly. It unravels with solid pacing, the simplicity of Grove's art style furthering understanding of a complex topic. It's a real page-turner of a mystery right from the initial moment when Emma asks, "Do you wanna hear about the new book I'm reading?"

As someone who lost a friend constantly struggling with Borderline D.I.D., I found *The Third Person* therapeutic. The complexity of the disorder and its impacts on identity are so deeply rooted in memory and experience that Grove exposing her own experiences spreads positive awareness about both D.I.D. and gender identity. (Emma Santos)



Geneviève Castrée: Complete Works 1981-2016

Geneviève Castrée, 562 pgs,
Drawn & Quarterly,
drawnandquarterly.com, \$99.95

Geneviève Castrée, the Québécoise comics artist and musician best known for her 2013 graphic memoir *Susceptible*, passed away from an aggressive form of pancreatic cancer at the age of 36. It's difficult to fathom how she managed to pack such intense productivity into those scant few years: her *Complete Works*

has the dimensions of a phonebook, and despite its title, a considerable amount of her comics work was left on the cutting room floor. (And that doesn't even account for her sizeable musical discography, or her poetry collections.)

While *Susceptible* is present in its entirety, as is her final children's book *A Bubble*, several of her earlier works (including her 2004 breakthrough *Pamplemoussi*) are represented only by excerpts. Notable as these omissions may be, as I turned its pages, I was constantly struck by the sense *Complete Works* conveys of a full artistic life. The book takes a broad approach to the notion of 'works': not only the scribbly punky little zines of her late teens but sleeve art for 7" singles, art show posters, journal doodles, sculptures, illustrated personal letters and a deck of 'oracle cards' she made during her final illness. Friends and collaborators like Anders Nilsen frequently spoke in interviews about how Castrée's public work was only a fraction of what made her such a compelling figure. Here at last we can see the breadth of the eerie, intuitive, bent-humoured art they so admired.

Towards the end, the compilers note that her "art practice became almost totally about spell-casting a positive outcome for her dire cancer diagnosis." Assembled by those who loved her, *Complete Works 1981-2016* feels like its own sort of ritual: determined to keep every part of her together, every last lovable scrap, binding as much of what she left as a spine will bear, returning her to the world. (JM Francheteau)



Boat Life Vol. 1

Tsuge Tadao, 352 pgs, Floating World Comics,
floatingworldcomics.com, \$24.95 USD

The perfect blend of mundanity and the fantastic, *Boat Life* collects

Tsuge Tadao's stories serialized from 1996-2000 in a wonderful volume by publishers Floating World Comics. A contributor to the classic alternative manga publications of the 60s and 70s, Tsuge's recent work follows Tsuda Tenta (in part a stand-in for the author) as he wanders the banks of the Tonegawa River, fishing, sleeping and meeting insightful river folk both real and imagined. He is drawn toward a simple life away from the ills of modern society: urbanization, economic recession, cultural change. Leaving his wife and two adult children to tend to the family business, a denim shop increasingly catering to a youth Tsuda feels out of touch with, he spends time on and near the river relearning to let life be guided by experience rather than self-expectation.

The art is gorgeous. The drawings are filled with emotion and an earnest empathy for the characters. There's room to breathe and for the art to capture the reader in this uncrowded, leisurely paced story. Cartoonishly rendered, often exaggerated caricatures make space for the sweeping riverside landscapes Tsuge clearly has reverence for. Backgrounds are detailed and rich, the characters rendered with the expressive, controlled, deceptively simple strokes of a seasoned cartoonist. It's wonderful to look at.

Boat Life is at times melancholy, often nostalgic (especially in Tsude's reconnection with his old friend Koyama Tome, who returns to town and anchors Tsude to his post-war teenage years), and an empathetic look at what it means to grow old and jaded while desperately trying not to lose sight of youthful exuberance and the freedom to wander and imagine. It's funny, but poignant and sweet as it explores the different ways we experience modern life and the people who weave through our own stories throughout the years. The river might just be the perfect place to escape and find oneself. (John James Dudek) **BP**



Immovable Tangible Property

BY COLTEN DOM

We can't do it alone: there is no further frontier, no more free real estate, and even the homes that dot the shittier streets of your far-flung hometown are reserved for millionaires. Ten years after graduating, I work a good job—she doesn't, but I do—and now there's mold in the basement suite. We wake up with stuffy noses, listening to the dripping windows and the leisurely gurgle of a sink that doesn't drain. It's a strange taunt, hanging Christmas lights on someone else's house. And she wants a garden; we'd have to ask permission to plant a single tulip.

Housing market? D'you mean the thing down the street with apples, oranges, and tampons? Or an entity that hides in newspapers, jumps from burning bed to burning bed—Toronto, Victoria, Vancouver—and sloshes around inside of you like a dark, breathing sea, numbers and currencies flowing through your ventricles? Soothsayers ride the waves: sirenlike realtors with blonde hair, suntans, and razor-sharp teeth, surfing through your life like a cannonball. Can you spit it out? Vomit it up? Just once, I'd like to see someone grab a home off the grocery store shelf and cram it into their shopping cart...

One day, we baby-talked throughout high school, I'll live in a *great big mansion*. But now the kids in the break room—even the gals with business degrees and the guys with accounting jobs—all agree: there will be no castles, no penthouses. Their eyes grow moist as they spell out a little standalone with a petite backyard, a second floor for their parents, and a suite for an international student. Bunkbeds downstairs and Lego bricks in the dining room. A frenzy of stray cats and rescue dogs.

I had a nightmare about death, a dream about my inheritance, and woke up, retching, to the sound of the gurgling sink and the slow blink of the Christmas lights. She doesn't have a good job, she has a great job, but no teacher gets paid much in their twenties. We want kids but not specifics, realities like *when* and *where*. We don't talk about it; we can't say that the next rung on the ladder is a headstone. It's unspeakable.

Then the glacier shifted, a recession rippling across the country, then the province, then the city. For some families, the revelation arrived alongside a diagnosis—diabetes, or one of the less lethal cancers—and

the promise of at-home care. For others, it appeared alongside a surfeit of historical inquiries, front pages dedicated to headlines like "Defining Multi-Generational Housing," or "Refusing to Sell After a Century." Awkward, even embarrassing, at first, to re-acknowledge that great, antithetical need—kin, clan, house, home—and the contradiction in the centre of a sociopolitical creed. After all, wasn't it as simple as reaching down for your bootstraps?

My family wandered through a darkened neighbourhood. Like great ships in the night, homes buoyed atop the curling driveways as if the cul-de-sac were one giant concrete marina. Passing the *For Sale!* signs bobbing atop the frosty lawns, we stood outside the two-storey craftsman we had come to see. *Been inside yet?* my mother asked. *It's open house.* My parents looked pale and old. Feeling sorry, weak, you waited alone at the bay window until you overheard the women glowing about the low-slung living room and the dense kitchen, already sailing ahead and offering each other the master bedroom, giggling, and you locked eyes with your father. A gentle transmission, his clouded irises like smoke signals, blinking a wordless

acknowledgement, an approval to grow old and die there in that ancient house (we'll fix it up), on this cold street (we'll meet the neighbours), in this gentle, infant town.

Together, we make a single millionaire. Who would've guessed that, in the end, the near-entirety of human history had been correct? That the grandiose economics of spreading peanut butter across some four-thousand kilometres of toast—two centuries of stolen space carved into states and provinces, a continent of long whooshing hallways, empty living rooms, and throaty elevator shafts—could be wrong?

But when the glut of things subsides, whistle, and let us find each other. Let us meet back on the sidewalk in front of the old abode; we'll remember how to do it, how to *be* it, that family, again. Pheromones and genetic memory will aid and abet, taking us back to Dad gargling in the bathroom and Mom kicking us out of the kitchen. The generational helplessness was not learned but shared—and most of the retirement communities have sunk, are sinking, or will sink beneath the white-hot sea regardless.

The banks hurt as the mortgage market fell apart, but fuck them anyway. They couldn't match the petty cash tucked on the mantelpiece, hidden under the four-legged jar of Clive's ashes, nor the late nights across the dinner table, your parents in their chewed-up slippers, secret pains all over their aging bodies, diving into their retirement fund and saying, *Okay, we'll help you out*. The op-eds tracked the fall, miles of print and talking heads wailing, trying to write away the flood, to legislate against the new weakness. But how could a news channel understand the infinite strength of helping your mother weed the backyard? Of your father handing you the sledgehammer to knock down a dividing wall, inhaling the gypsum together? Of bobbing amid the currents of a Sunday morning kitchen—around the pot of coffee, over the sink, across the cutting board—and cooking omelettes for the sleepy-eyed relations grumbling in the hallway?

The market grew still, financial waterways now an anchorage: a flotilla of concrete, rebar, and wallpaper embarking on one long stationary voyage, sailing through the days and decades. After the boxes emptied out and the moving trucks rumbled away, the real work of patching and painting began. The attic needed re-insulating; we

blocked over the squirrels' doorways and portholes. We steadied ourselves in the galley, sealing the countertops and pulling up the rotting boards. In no time at all, sailors were signing on: international students, cousins, or the odd tenant at reduced rent. Stowaways practically sprang out of the woodwork when her job went steady and she got pregnant. Once, twice, the years turned. A dog showed up, then a cat. Soon enough, the kids had become mariners, manning the curtains, cleaning the ribald mess, and protesting the chief officer's bunk inspections.

Inside, outside, the generations resonate; a thousand times, a million times cleaning and refilling the hummingbird feeder. The compost bin has been there longer than any of us, an entire civilisation of worms with border-town anthills and raiding groups of spiders. We survive in the cross-section of a song, a symphony of voices: the wind snickering in the chimney, the croak of the stairwell, icicles snapping inside the gutters, plus the human instrument of steps sneaking through the house for late-night leftovers, or to scroll porn on the family computer. Who needs photo books when your chipped tooth records the patio step? When, for three months of the summer, the barbeque clocks overtime, etching the siding in chicken burger soot? Arteries fail; Grandma passes; her dented mattress is dragged downstairs; the teenager inhales the dust of her dead skin every night. He sleeps with his first girlfriend atop it.

The walls do not listen (but they do), and the floors cannot breathe (yet they must), existing in the preternatural *now*, in the tide of an entropy that neither a dozen renovations, new countertops, nor fresh bathroom tile can stop. For the house, there are only these people and this time. Carve your initials in the attic beam; in a century they will only be lines. Hairballs grow in the shower drain. Saltwater moves to fill the space, be it a cup, bowl, or jerrycan; love, likewise, can flood a drafty mansion, a stuffed apartment, or the tent atop a concrete sidewalk. Beneath the bedroom nightstand, we still have our cookie tin of vibrators and lube, just a little quieter with the kids down the hall. She giggles as I lock the door. I stare at her forty-year-old breasts. *Do you think Dad will knock?*

The news gets worse, uglier, as you grow older and warmer. So come on home—the diaspora is over. Dreams, nightmares?

Come back and kiss the rolling deck, sniff the familiar carpet. You can finish your university courses from the bedroom desk. You can check in on telework from across the ocean. There was once a time when you could say, *I planted my father in this paddy; I raised my son in this field*.

How else can I tell you? Don't hate this house with its leaks, copper pipes, and creeping mold. Try and see it for what it is, existing somewhere in the process of material between a thatch hut and a starship. Sure, there are the too-hot summers unsuited for the architecture, the flooding basement, brownouts humming in the walls. But it goes on, be it a tent or a mansion, a hovel or a flying saucer.

And so what of apocalypse? So what if they go and drop it, that final bang? Then the house only becomes dust, or glass. This home may end, sinking to the bottom of a still-darker sea; many will not. You hand the international student a glass of wine at Thanksgiving dinner. They look well-fed and frightened. *If you get out of school early, you tell the sailors, come straight home. And, if you're hurt shooting hoops in the road, come right on back.* And if the world should end while I'm sitting downtown, let me struggle past those burning highways, sparking powerlines, and drowning people. Just let me make it home in time to tack up the Christmas lights.

The outhouse feeds the tulips. The moths eat Grandma's furs, then her daughter's fakes. Please, let me rot here, fading out beneath the lawn—at worst, spread my ashes in the garden where the racoons walk so when they lick their paws, they taste me. We never told you about when you were in diapers, did we? And those same bandits got into the trashcan and boom, exploded it into a million pieces, all across the carport? Don't feel embarrassed; there is no glory here, only a house. There is no fantasy, no dream, and we are not sick dogs—come in from the outside, come and die in the burrow. But don't forget, after you bury me, to exhume my lower jaw. Wash it clean with the garden hose, then submerge it in the bird bath so that when spring comes again I can kiss the robins, tooth to beak. **BP**

Colten Dom is a graduate of the University of Victoria Writing Program where he won the Haig-Brown Award for Conservation Writing and received a British Columbia Arts Council scholarship. His fiction has appeared in *This Side of West*, *Filling Station*, and *The Missouri Review*.



Fruiting Bodies

BY KASIA BELOUSSOV

The thing that was once a woman strides through the sprawling mycelium with a tired grace, indifferent to the glowing tunnels that would strike awe into an average human. The cave brims with floating spores and thick tendrils that pulse like veins. As colourful as a dart frog. Luminescent like a jellyfish. Patterned like a cobra.

But, after years of work, Foxtrot is desensitized to the deep purple rock of the endless caves. The sight now has the same notability as a corpse would to a scavenger. It is something to be harvested. It is normal. Typical. Expected.

Foxtrot remembers the first time they saw the sprawl, only days after their sixteenth revolution. The heavy suit had made them feel like they were playing the lumbering fool, a truffle swine shuffling and searching the forest floor. It took months before Foxtrot could move with the serpent-finesse of their superiors.

Their feet now barely leave a trace on the spore-dusted ground.

They find what they are looking for a few kilometres into the tunnels, inside a pulsating mass of mycelium. To a layman, a ripe root is as noticeable as a hair in a hurricane. To a trained venator it's obvious; it pulses like a human heart and the glow has a personality the

surrounding roots lack. It's recognizing a fellow being rather than a drooping mass of fungal hyphae. The effect is so subtly human even the most advanced machines cannot register the difference.

Foxtrot grins in quiet victory, taking a long moment to appreciate the familiar beauty of the ready root before unhooking their belt tools and combox.

"Ven. F-18." Foxtrot's slight drawl echoes, muffled by their filter mask. "Tunnel 5N, local 1-68, H891. Found an absolute looker, nearly jumping out of the knot."

Sierra's voice warbles back, thick with static. "Ven. S-13. Affirmed. Drain it dry."

"Yes, Ma'am—"

"Call me Ma'am one more time, I'll go into the sprawl myself and pull that tongue out through your teeth." Foxtrot can almost see Sierra's eyes squinting in annoyance.

Foxtrot kneels atop the dusty ground, the hallucinogenic spores clinging to the fabric like powdery scales from a moth's wing. "Empty threats from someone who hasn't left her desk in months."

"Yeah, yeah...I'd go back out if they'd let me. Just...collect and get back here, it's gross-boring on my end, over."

A fuzz resounds across the surrounding rock as Sierra ends the transmission. In the silence of the caves, Foxtrot brings out a collection of thin evacuated vials

and sterile tubing, moving with the bored precision of any expert.

Wielding a hair-thin needle, Foxtrot begins collecting the liquid gold.

"You used to be a man didn't you?" The bedazzled woman smiled at Foxtrot with teeth like a porcelain display case. She gestured a peace sign, touching the two fingers together like a pair of scissors. "Before they... I can tell by your jaw."

She touched their cheekbone with light fingers. Foxtrot wasn't sure if it was supposed to be seductive or sympathetic, although the two weren't mutually exclusive with non-venators.

The woman's smile and glittered face reflected the artificial neon of the bar. The whole place was a facsimile of the naturally luminescent tunnels, stinking of sweat and perfume instead of peat and mould. The building pulsed. Foxtrot didn't know why they liked the place so much. Perhaps it was familiar, perhaps it was offensive.

Perhaps they just liked the strong beat of the music and being desired.

The woman's hand crept up their thigh and slipped under the hem of their shorts. This was normal. Typical. Expected.

"You're like a child, aren't you?" the woman purred.

Foxtrot downed another shot of off-coloured liquid that burned on the way down. Alcohol was their preferred drug; street hallucinogens had long since lost their potency. "I've seen twenty-five revolutions, Ma'am."

"That's not what I meant." She signalled to the bartender for more drinks. If Foxtrot played their cards right, they wouldn't have to buy a drink tonight, and years of chemical therapy to combat the sprawl's effects had turned them into a delightfully cheap drunk. "I'm so sorry. You do important work, sure—"

"We do invaluable work."

"—but they took so much, so young... you're a hero for your sacrifice." She was close now, her chest grazing their bicep. Most would find it alluring. "They took your humanity, your love, your heat."

Foxtrot did not smile. "There's no taking fire from the ocean."

She hummed and Fox's breath hitched as her lips found the point where their ear joined their jawline. Foxtrot kept their eyes trained on the bottles that lined the bar, trying to let their mind slip enough to possibly enjoy the attention. Her touch was overwhelmingly everywhere, the hand that wasn't inching into their

waistband was gently holding the back of their head. If Fox had hair, they were sure she would have it twisted in her fingers.

"Come back with me and I'll prove they didn't cut all that heat away. I know some of you do it."

Foxtrot closed their eyes, trying to find a reaction. The woman's teeth tenderly bit their earlobe in a practised motion. Someone once told them of the magnetic attraction people felt, and Foxtrot felt nothing. Barely even regret as they moved away from the bar counter.

The woman sensed their waning interest and her fingers gripped their shoulders. "No, I mean—you don't even have to do anything, you can just watch, or I can fuck myself on your thigh?"

"Have a good night, Ma'am." Foxtrot smiled. All teeth.

The woman's stare burned with an anger and hunger they would never understand. Before the bartender even set down their drinks, cheap vodka soaked Foxtrot's shirt. It was more a waste of booze than an offence.

"You lot are all deficient." The woman was so close Foxtrot could smell her perfume. She had lovely eyes. "Mutilated beyond repair."

Foxtrot calmly disengaged and wished her well.

They would've argued if they didn't agree.

When Foxtrot comes back to their senses, the needle hasn't even pierced the fungal root. Their breath is coming heavy, fogging up their goggles and filter mask. The glowing lights are too bright, and far too colourful. *Where did the spore get in?*

They pat down the sealant on their mask, blowing breath and paying attention to any air escaping. Nothing. It must've only been one spore, being such a short hallucination. Such a short memory.

"Ven. F-18." The buzz of their combox grounds them. "Locale unchanged. Seemed to have inhaled a spore, but no leak was found. Proceed with harvest?"

"Ven. S-13." Sierra's voice seems only distantly worried. It isn't an unusual complication. It's somewhat normal. Typical. Expected. "Affirmed. Resume harvest...stay safe. Over."

Foxtrot takes a deep muffled breath. The filter mask is a necessary barrier but its constant presence is annoying. It's doing surgery while wearing oven mitts.

Foxtrot brings the needle to the pulsing mycelium root and inserts it deep in

the glow. Ink-dark liquid flows into the vials. The collection process stretches for minutes, the repetitive motion of switching out the vials calming in nature. Foxtrot cleans the root with an alcoholic wipe afterward, covering up the sweet smell of the liquid. The harvest is quick and careful after the first puncture. They aren't the only creatures after this stuff.

"Ven. F-18. Harvest completed at 1325. I'll meet you in the mess hall, over." Fox hooks the combox back on their belt. It rests right above where their womb used to be.

Twelve vials of aurum in the end. Liquid gold, they call it. Not a true panacea, but damn close when it comes to the ugly infantile diseases that have cropped up in recent decades. Each vial is at least a hundred lives saved. A priceless good, naturally produced leagues underground in a place so heavy with gentle radiation it slowly kills anything that dares to go after it.

Years ago, the first of the venators returned to the surface moaning in pain after only a few harvesting sessions. Foxtrot has seen the archival imagery from the surgery records. The autopsied bodies, opened up and brimming with red tumours, had looked like butchered salmon bursting with roe.

The process has since been refined. Nowadays, potential venators are hand-picked from a population less likely to reproduce, and the organs prone to the sprawl's effects are neutralised. One hysterectomy and a double mastectomy later, alongside a continuous cocktail of meds and chemical treatments, Fox's projected lifespan is almost fifty years. Sure, they lose their ability to have children and the backend of their life, but they serve their society and community. Foxtrot has seen those years, in family members that grew old. They're only losing the bad years.

As for children. Well. You can't take fire from the ocean.

The venator that used to be a woman violently emptied the contents of their stomach onto the street. The latest round of chemical treatments had not been mixing well with alcohol, and that last shot had thrown their body over the line between tipsy and uncomfortably intoxicated.

Fox wiped their mouth with a shaky hand and leaned against the panelled wall outside the bar. The world spun around them and every movement of their head threatened to bring up what little stomach contents they had left.

They watched the street from a distance, watched the crowd, watched the night, watched the world unfolding with a vibrancy that almost matched the sprawl.

Across the street were two figures. Fox wanted to puke again at the sight, the couple leaning into each other and laughing like it was easy. They loved each other and made it look natural.

Foxtrot's people were desired as a taboo. Their look—their bald heads, slightly stretched androgynous faces, and poised demeanour—was clockable at a distance, and if people weren't made uncomfortable by the venators' natural lack of desire, they were getting off on it.

Foxtrot took a drag from a thinly rolled biri as the man kissed his partner. Even from a distance, Fox could see how softly he held the woman, how gently his arms settled on her shoulders. Foxtrot attempted to rest casually against the wall and play a game where they didn't stare at the couple kissing.

A game they lose every time.

"F-18?" A voice fuzzed out of their belt.

Fox's head spun as they unbuckled the combox and whispered into it. "M'sorry... Was just sick. On the street." Their voice slurred into the drawl they'd tried so hard to lose. "Please don't be mad. I know we're suppose'ta be professional in public an' all."

"What? No—Foxtrot, I'm getting feedback of a presence approaching."

"It's so isolatin' sometimes." Foxtrot stared down the kissing couple and thought about their filter mask down in the caves. "D'you know how hard it is to notice when someone's missin'? Like the opposite of the roots... my doctor noticed before I—"

"Fox, please reply." The couple linked hands and started walking away. "It's a large presence, oh Fox please run, I'm sending backup—"

Foxtrot's mind was like their filter mask. There had always been a barrier, it wasn't added by their superiors, nor was something cut out on a cold metal table. For forever, there was a wall between Foxtrot and everyone else that blocked out the humanity and love and heat that the woman at the bar and this couple so clearly burned with. If the world had been kinder to them, they weren't sure if they ever would have known they were different.

Deficient. Their doctor had flagged them as sexually deficient.

"FOXTROT REPLY." Their combox echoed through the cold street air.

They'd been called frigid before. Cold blooded, like a reptile. Foxtrot was

cold, but not like how a snake is cold. It was like how a wall is cold. Distant. Impersonal. They were told, once, that was what it was like having sex with them. It was like fucking a wall.

The combox's buzzing and yelling and pleading climaxes into the loudest static and brightest light. Right next to Foxtrot's ear, it explodes, the force violently splintering the world around them, the night sky breaking into fragments of glowing spores as Foxtrot's body slams into the rocky cave wall.

Foxtrot is back in the real world, back in the sprawling mycelium caves. Even while stunned, the logical part of Fox's brain hopes the precious aurum vials didn't shatter when their body crumpled against the rocks.

They only absentmindedly register the hulking dripping sprawl-mutated *thing* pinning their body to the stone, worm-like and writhing, rows of teeth spiralling into its stretched and fasciated maw. It might've roared.

Ah. This is abnormal. Atypical. Unexpected.

Fox sluggishly gropes around their belt, feeling for the cool metal of their stunner. Vision blurry and ears singing, they pull the trigger. Again. And again.

It is almost beautiful how the roar of the worm kicks up the spores like dust particles in a sunbeam. Fox is so disorientated they don't even feel the beast dig its claws into their face. They only barely realise their filter mask has gone flying, seemingly miles down the cave.

Fox might've sneered and pushed the worm off. They might've clawed out from under the fleshy and tumorous mass, biting and scratching and unloading their stunner. The blood of the worm might've tasted like the bitter pith of a rotten citrus fruit. All of these things might have transpired, but Fox's head is too blurred to know.

What Foxtrot did for certain, without their filter mask, is inhale more and more hallucinogenic spores with every heaving breath.

Fox's fingers dug into the eye of the worm and pulled, pulling the hair of another venator. They were sparring and sparring dirty, early training, it must have been. The other venator swept Fox's legs and pinned them to the mat. Charlie, or maybe it was Kilo, held them there for one second. Two seconds. They got close to Fox's head, leaned into their neck, pushing Fox further into the mat, the hard vinyl giving like it was made of foam.

Now a man kissed their neck with a

hot tongue and a determination to prove something. Fox had picked someone they were told was attractive, all hard angles and muscles. His hand was between their thighs, fingers curled slick and machine-like. It was wrong but not because it was sinful. It was wrong but not because it was unwanted. It was wrong because it felt like nothing more than a release.

The hand that came up to caress Fox's face wasn't strong and male, but feminine and gloved in latex.

"There's our very special future venator!" The nurse's eyes had the patience of a hawk. "It won't be a long operation and the risk is minimal, so don't you worry, dear."

Foxtrot had been so proud. Even if a teenager was flagged early, there was no guarantee they would make it as a venator. Foxtrot was special. And besides, their monthly blood was getting in the way of their training. Their responsibility wasn't to be a regular citizen with a regular life, producing sick children for a dying world. Their role was to produce aurum, to save lives. That was their purpose.

Their one and only use.

The nurse smiled as she lowered the anaesthesia mask onto Foxtrot's face. And Fox smiled back. The nurse almost looked like Sierra in the hazy glow of the operation room.

Foxtrot wasn't on the surgery table anymore. They were leaning into Sierra on her worn leather couch, her lean arms wrapped around Fox. She'd lost so much weight after the most recent surgery and hadn't gained it back in rehabilitation.

"Do you miss it?" Foxtrot had asked her, watching her eyebrows furrow. They felt her exhale, the dark skin of her flat chest and neck left puckered with scars from the attack months ago.

"Kilo says I should be back in a few months. I hate that damn desk, taking reports while the rest of you are down there." She took their hand in hers. "I never thought I'd be isolated in isolation."

Foxtrot leaned into her hand. "You didn't answer my question."

They felt a puff of air as she exhaled a laugh. "I miss hunting with you. I miss the beauty of it, how the whole place is breathing and...alive."

"You miss the clunky suits and horrific creatures, of course."

"Naturally." Sierra laughed, a rare thing these days. And with her shallow breathing, thin muscles, and gentle eyes, Foxtrot loved Sierra. Their friend, the one who'd seen more of their tears and shared the same amount of laughter. And

they were both still called loveless.

"The wurms were tolerable." Sierra smiled like it wasn't a worm that left her body mangled and bleeding earlier that year. "I just don't miss feeling like I was giving so much for nothing in return. But, I guess we're used to the nothing, aren't we?"

Fox watched in quiet horror as Sierra crumbled, her face caving in like loose salt. The whole scene splintered to the tune of combox static and muffled sobs.

Now Foxtrot was in an alley sharing a vial of illegal spores with a stranger that seemed to understand while running in a field outside their childhood farmhouse that hadn't seen flowers in a decade and puking chemicals in the bathroom of a penthouse apartment they never thought they would own. They were simultaneously stared at on the streets and ignored by the public and flocked by cameras, lined up with the rest of the venators outside a children's hospital and using the muscles in their face that looked like smiling. Their bruised face was pinned to the cement alley sidewalk while someone desperately searched their body for aurum, their blood mixing with pools of rainwater. They were blacked out in some gutter. Dragged home by an officer that recognised them. Deficient. Delayed. Cold.

Abnormal. Unusual. Sacrificial.

They were falling. They were pushing. They were biting. They were once a woman in the same way a storm is a woman, a force of nature, a force of power. And every storm eventually breaks.

They found Foxtrot's body convulsing in a massacre. The dead worm was bleeding like a tree rich in sap; Fox's suit and under-uniform dripped dark green blood smelling of putrid fruit. It took a team of fellow venators to get a filter mask on Fox and hold them through the seemingly endless hallucinations.

When the rescue team found Foxtrot, their wiry body was curled into a ball, hugging their legs protectively, encircling twelve unshattered vials of aurum.

Like a cobra guarding its eggs. **bp**

Currently based in downtown Toronto, **Kasia Belousov** tells stories through fiction, poetry and hand-drawn animation. She believes hard topics are best delivered through a familiar and nostalgic medium, and works to have her art balance whimsy and real-world issues.

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