



Unpacking

Jon Doughboy

Our apartment, newly ours. As is the concept: ours. We think we like the sound of it. Like there aren't enough ours in the day for us to love each other. Like we have all the time in the world.

Three kinds of boxes surround us: yours, mine, ours. We step lightly around the last, cherishing its newness, excited and afraid.

Begin the great unpacking. Razors slice tape. Cardboard collapses. We fill this apartment with the noise of us, with the hope of us. We can't pass each other without touching. The tightness in our backs and thighs is a benediction.

At dusk, nearly done, I sit cross-legged on the floor in the living room and admire the bluish light and you standing in it. You are eager to finish. To be, finally, you say, *moved in*. To ratify the next step in our relationship. But I want to linger at this turning point so when you bend down to open the final box, I lick the back of your knee. One slow lick. You laugh. We stay like this: the taste of your sweat on my tongue, the echo of your laugh running around a room that feels big enough to house our togetherness. Hope and fear, the bluish light.

Time passes. Life churns on. Love, like a switch, turns off. Who are you now? Would those young people unpacking their new life recognize the middle-aged people the years have made them?

Not much remains of that man in the bluish light with your sweat on his tongue. Except hope, dwindling. And fear—far, far too much fear.



Facing Reality

John Grey

I had
to pinch myself
when,
in reality,
there was
no need

UP ROUND THE BEND

Dave Nash

The only thing worse than waiting wet and cold by yourself is waiting wet and cold with someone who doesn't want to be there with you. We waited on the side of the road in the directionless light before the May sunrise. I pretended to be concerned with how the grass collected dew in this valley habitually late for Spring. I might as well have searched there given the other places I looked for it.

Heavy rains earlier in the month washed the sand off the road's shoulder so that the pavement hung a few inches from the ground. A crack in the pavement zigzagged down the road at points crossing over the white line, weakening the integrity, but not grave enough to warrant repair. Mike kicked a stone on top of the sand, it skipped along the shoulder, then ricocheted off the exposed pavement shooting into the grass.

Three years ago our teammate, Corey, died at this scene. The early morning after his best performance, isn't that how it always is. An intruder came around the bend in this road that led out of. Drunk, the intruder drifted into Corey's lane.

All that progress. All that achievement. All that effort spent controlling aggression, building a shared purpose, teaching me — that all careened off the road over the shoulder and into the grass that had been collecting dew in darkness before the May sunrise.

Mike just stood waiting for our other teammates to show up. At least they might offer some sort of respect or remembrance. I don't know what I was thinking coming here with someone who didn't want to be here. Mike was killing my mood, but he was further around the bend than the rest of us and he saw things as they were.

I was searching that morning to heal my wounds. I found cold silence. I searched in the wet grass because that's where I was. I stayed in the gray dawn until I began to look inward. What was I still mourning for? Whether it was Corey or my innocent self, like that stone Mike kicked, neither were coming back.

Arthritis Begins to Feel Political

Kushal Poddar

You will realise —
sleeper agents from both sides
jog with you every morning.

They try to solve you,
dissolve your front,
sleep with and convert you.

One sun has set;
another has crossed the sea.
The other day your daughter
called from the hem
of the towers' periphery.
Silence. Gossips. Silence. Beep.

Your retirement
suffers from notice
of your friends' partings.

You pretend electing both parties,
stroll and jaunt to catch up with
those younger shadows,
talk about the goodness of yoga
and neutrality in a war.

I understand, believe me,
the reason you tease or when
the rain sinks a boat
you begin to fold the newspaper.



如果我的自拍
有一点模糊
那是我醉在此刻
想让你看见模糊的
且不符合时间逻辑的
祝你今天快乐，祝我晚安
这些都不是
但都是昏暗里的一点感觉

又嵐

The Aging of a Mexican-American

Sandy Ruiz

I remember the first time I noticed the hair on my arms. Black wires fill the bronze base. Their stark color and fullness hard to ignore. Fuzzy comparable to the dense fur of a monkey.

I remember the gleam of the “kid-safe” scissors from across the classroom. Lauren’s thin blonde wisps in their glory. The ugliness in my body ravenously slicing the wires down. Snipping so fast there were shreds of brown flesh and blood pools.

I remember when Kaylie asked me if I was white, just to “make sure.” Her own mixed blood questioning mine like a traitor to ambiguity and cause for confusion.

I remember staring in the yellowed bathroom mirror looking to see what I was missing in adequacy to be recognized as Mexican, while being American. My nose full like a chile relleno but skin white as snow without a proper sun kiss.

I remember my grandmother’s honey glazed eyes assessing my American accent possessing my mother tongue. Constant reminders of practicing Spanish at home but forced to assimilate anywhere else slashes the remaining threads.

I remember feeling my tongue swirling between the roof of my mouth and front teeth, rehearsing pronunciation. Fear wells up in my throat and chokes before a sentence spills out with a mousy voice and weak enunciation.

I remember the first time they asked me to say a word in Spanish. Quickly I found out that being Mexican American meant to entertain the pupils. Teacher egged on with elbows on her knees beckoning for her word of the day. *What is my name in Spanish?* They all circled begging me.

I remember that just as they may treat your bilingualism as a gift or talent they will shame and bully it out of you. They are quick to remind you that you mispronounced that word, misused another, and sound funny speaking yet another. Never let you live down that their tongue shoots faster and stronger than yours.

I remember the ache in my chest when these memories rise to consciousness.

Thick breath wheezing American oxygen and exhaling Mexican carbon dioxide.

I remember walking into therapy to talk about the effects of these microaggressions.

Self-esteem cowers, self-talk tears existence, while brain belittles.

I remember telling my patria I wish I was Mexican enough to prove my heritage and remember telling the foreign land I wish I was American enough to be embraced.



DN

Sick

Melissa Lemay

Marion Street wasn't an area where you saw many white people walking after dark. Or at all.

"Where the fuck is he?"

Her body shuddered and she felt cold. She walked by the old row homes on the street the size of an alleyway. Cars lined both sides.

She felt like she might vomit, and she could barely keep her balance in the leopard print stilettos she wore. She tugged downward at the fringe of her jean skirt. It kept riding up, walking so many blocks. Summer in the city.

Suddenly, a black Buick LaCrosse rolled up next to her, keeping pace with the click of heels hitting the cement sidewalk. The windows were tinted, and she couldn't see anyone inside. The passenger side window slid down, and a man with dark skin and dark eyes stared out at her.

"What's your name?"

Click, click, click, click.

"Hey, baby, what's your name?"

"You don't need to know," she retorted, looking dead ahead.

"Come on, baby, get- get in the car."

She walked on towards the block's end, and she saw headlights up around the corner. She breathed a sigh of relief as her dope dealer's black Suburban came into view.

"Thank God."

The Ballad of Bippy and Cole

Alex Prestia

Cole

Cole Hamilton is a competent loser. His Youtube Channel, originally named “Cole Trucks Doing Cole Things,” now shortened to “Cole Trucks,” has been stuck at 75k subs for a year. He checks in somewhere around 5’10, 140 with that skinny-muscular look that white rappers often have. He is not a white rapper. He is white, but that was probably already obvious from his Youtube Channel’s name. In highschool he went on a protein powder regimen to no great avail, topping out at 155 before deciding that biweekly GNC runs were eating into his slim earnings from the local Jiffy Lube. His face is long with a defined, chin, pointed nose, and gaunt, colorless cheeks. He looks severe. He is a male version of that one picture of Virginia Woolf that everyone always uses, where she is in profile and it’s clearly her best angle and fans of her know she didn’t look like that but rarely bring it up because they support their girl and non-fans don’t know better anyways. He looks like that: severely handsome. Handsome in a mean, Carhartt way that causes other men to assume that he’s good-looking, but when it actually comes time to speak with the fairer sex he is often found wanting.

He work(s)ed construction and other odd-jobs around Lake, Mississippi before earning a livable amount of money from Youtube. He realized quickly that Truck Youtube was ruled by the old adage: you gotta spend money to make money. A tricked-out Lambo racing through the mud always out-algorithms a truck racing through that same mud. Being a natural with his hands, Cole’s niche on the platform is a mixture of potty humor, off-roading, and dumb stunts. It does not reach Jackass’ comedic depravity or Nitro Circus’ production value. Once, in a video titled “SP-125s Are Garbage” he took a perfectly fine Honda commuter motorcycle through ditches, into mud, and jumped a kiddie pool all before before revving it up to it's top speed (60mph) and running it straight into a brick wall. He ended the video by jumping it off of a ramp into a pond. The video was one of his most successful, garnering over 2 million views from a bike that cost him only a thousand dollars plus import fees. Two weeks after the video went up he received a notice in the mail that he had violated the Dingell-Johnson Act by littering the waterways of a National Forest Management Area. Included was a fine for two thousand dollars. Being the entrepreneur that he is, he spun this into a multi-part series named “Fighting the Forest” which paid for his next few videos.

The Ballad of Bippy and Cole

Alex Prestia

Bippy

Beatrice “Bippy” Johnson is an incompetent winner. Most of her life is spent in front of a computer screen — precisely 62% of it. Three months ago she realized that sleeping in front of her camera at least once a week increased her subscriber count by 15%. On stream she plays Fortnite, CoD, Minecraft, and whatever new trend/fad/paid sponsorship aimed at 15-35 year old males comes her way. Her kill/death ratio and win rates are abysmal. Crashing in flames is her brand.

Six years into streaming, she’s transitioned more and more to “just chatting” content. At least then she can take extended breaks off-of-cam while letting the stream run, claiming all the while that she’s changing outfits. A hint of nearby nudity goes a long way. They’re basically all the same outfit, lowcut black shirts, frilly around the edges, complementing her black eyeliner, pitch black hair and (occasionally) bleached tips. She has a gruff voice. Since she was in sixth grade people have asked if she smokes. She thought (back then) that it sounded hot, mature; she sometimes wonders how much of her rasp is affectation and how much is natural, she’s been doing it so long that she can’t be sure. Her general lookbook mirrors a thirteen year old goth-girl that only wears what she was able to steal from Hot Topic on the weekends. Her round, curvy figure looks good in black. Cleavage is half the battle. Her chreubic cheeks, short forehead, and massive eyes align her closer to the Bratz than to Barbie. She knows her angles (from the left at 20 degrees). More importantly, she knows her personality, her vibe, slogan: “There are infinite bimbos on the interweb, but there’s only one Bippy.” Men, or more specifically boys, start watching her because she’s a fail streamer, constantly taking L’s and playing horribly, and then stay because of the special something in her wink as she loses, her bounce on the seat as her character is shot, or her cheeriness while being btfo ingratiates them.

“Do you even like video games?” an audacious question on a terrible Hinge date with a finance bro in a Burger Bach in Bricktown. Bippy did the math: \$5 gas to and from the restaurant, \$16 burger, \$10 cocktail (just one), \$8 chocolate fudge volcano cake, \$0 walk around Bricktown afterwards: \$39 total (he didn’t tip the waiter). 2ish hours of her time. She books private gaming sessions with her tier-one platinum fans for \$100 an hour. Finance bro is decent looking but also balding. Waste of time.



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“Facing Reality” by John Grey
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“Sick” by Melissa Lemay
Website: <https://melissalemay.wordpress.com/>

“Up round the bend” by Dave Nash
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“Arthritis Begins To Feel Political” by Kushal Poddar
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“Untitled (如果我的自拍...)” by 又嵐
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