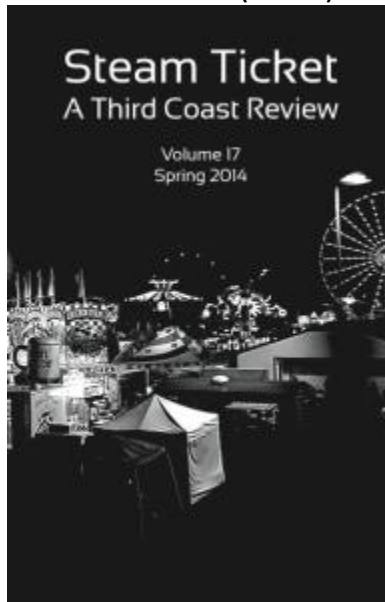


Volume 17 (2014)



Featured Selections:

'Cross Dresser' by Cindy Zelman
'Common Ground' by Lee Chilcote
'Green Revolution' by Ellen Wright

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The Cross Dresser – Cindy Zelman
Notes on the Disappearance of Amanda Price –
Molly Carpenter
Contraption – Jonathan Gotsick
Fajr – Heather Rick
Tadpoles – Joshua Britton
Clones – Brian DiNuzzo
Literature Lovers – D. Michael Warren

CREATIVE NONFICTION:

The Basement – Sheila Burson

POETRY:

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Green Revolution – Ellen Wright
It's a Parade – Gary Lark
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Cocktail – Connections
Late Night Burritos – Joe Gianotti
Nonet (yes, yes) – Kevin Patrick McCarthy
The Whistle and the Scream – Brad Johnson

On Her Knees – Charlotte Walsh
Things the River Can Never Heal – Sean Prentiss
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Coal to Stone – Mark Katrinak
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Reason Becomes Nightmares, Parody of Goya's
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Steam Ticket

A Third Coast Review

Volume 17
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‘Cross Dresser’ by Cindy Zelman



Halloween, 1987, his 75th birthday, and John Jacobs reeled in a fuzzy notion that had been hovering in his brain for decades, and so indeed, he dressed as a woman for the first time. He gazed at his reflection in the glass of the Day Glow Motel entrance. Damn pretty, he thought. He held one hand on a hip and twisted at his waist to view his backside, encouraged by the sexy “v” of the neckline halfway down his back. Damn effing pretty. He entered the motel.

He sunk his plump old ass on a stool at the bar. Black fishnet stockings hugged his fat thighs, and black garters pressed hollows on his calves. He had shaven his legs, and he was grateful; the nylon hugging his skin felt sensual. His crepe evening dress clung also, an inviting dusty rose number he’d found at a flea market. The quality of the fabric made him constantly aware of the material touching his body, his baby-skin waist, his nearly hairless chest. A curly blonde woman’s wig warmed his scalp, and shiny two-inch faux leather pink pumps on his unusually small feet made him feel dainty. He had penciled in a beauty mark on his right cheek with the eyeliner, carefully applied the mascara to his lashes, the bronze eye shadow to his lids, and the cherry lipstick to his mouth. The rouge he had smoothed over his face perfectly, with an uncanny knack at creating the natural look on his first try. John Jacobs weighed nearly two hundred-fifty pounds but he carried it well. John had a feminine face: chubby, but small- featured and wrinkle-less in spite of his age.

Angie, the barmaid at the Day Glow, was an old friend of John Jacobs. She walked up to him to take his order. He could see that she didn’t recognize him.

He smiled politely at her.

He crossed his legs in an elegant sweep and folded his hands together. He viewed his nails and admired the fine light pink polish he'd so carefully applied, his hands steady as a manicurist. He tried to assume a demure expression in his eyes and on his cherry mouth as he looked up at Angie. He wished he'd remembered to put the rouge compact in his purse so he could have checked his expression in the little mirror.

"Do I know you?" Angie asked, looking from his face to his silver bangle clip-on earrings, then back again to his eyes. "You look like someone. Who? His sister, that's who you are! You're John Jacob's sister. Are you? Does he have a sister?" Angie put on her glasses to take a closer look at John. "Jesus Christ! It's you, John. What the hell are you doing?"

John smiled and ordered a white wine.

"A white wine?" Angie said. "You never drink white wine. Always bourbon. What's with the wine?" She handed him the glass and called to Lindsay who worked the check-in desk. "Lindsay, get out here. You gotta look at this."

It was a slow night at the Day Glow, not too many check-ins on Halloween, not too many people at the bar either. That's why John chose to go there where the only people hanging around would be old acquaintances, mostly the help, like Angie and Lindsay. He looked beautiful tonight but wasn't sure how this would go over with strangers. The Day Glow was safe, almost like home. Except here, there were people to talk to. At home, there were only pictures of his dead wife, Mary, and she'd been dead for so many years now he'd lost count.

Lindsay came into the bar and looked at John. She walked up close to him. The light was pretty dim, just the sickly yellow glow from the plastic star-shaped lamps hanging down from the ceiling, tacky fixtures that remotely resembled the shape of cartoon suns. The lounge was empty as there was no entertainment tonight. At the bar sat Richard Wright, the town selectman, three stools down, reading the paper, and at the far end, Rolanda Edel, the alcoholic bookkeeper who was singing to herself as she got a good drunk on after finishing the posting of the motel accounts into the ledger. John had surveyed them all before Lindsay walked in, and now he encountered her pretty little frame as she stared at him. She was always the prettiest thing at the Day Glow, except maybe for tonight.

It took Lindsay longer to recognize John than it had taken Angie. She actually never did recognize him. He had to tell her.

"It's me," he laughed. "John Jacobs. It's Halloween. It's my birthday. This is my costume. Don't you get it?"

Lindsay looked scared. He reached across to her arm to touch her, as if to remind her of his familiar flesh that had sat at this same bar night after night. Lindsay jumped backwards at his touch but just for a second. It was the initial shock that had alarmed her, he realized, because she laughed and held his hand in her own and said with her pretty little mouth, "Oh, John, you really had me going. God. What a Halloween trick!"

"I thought you would all get a kick out of it," he said. "But I do look kind of pretty, don't you think?"

"You sure do, you old pervert," Angie said.

"John, let me get the camera out of the office and take your picture," said Lindsay. John felt quite pleased with the idea of being photographed. Lindsay came back in five minutes and started snapping pictures. Polaroids, instant developing, and John was thrilled with the results. He swung around for the third shot and got up from his stool so Lindsay could get a shot of the whole outfit, wig to pumps. The flashbulb had already distracted Richard Wright, who looked up at John and Lindsay, scratched his head for several minutes and said finally, "What the hell is this? Damn, is that you John Jacobs?"

John flashed what he felt was sexy woman's smile at Richard, and infused a sexy womanly-like bounce into his walk as he made his way to Richard's stool.

"Yes, it's me, sweetheart," he said, and he put his arm around Richard and poised his face close to the selectman's.

"Yeah, you're giving me a real hard-on Jacobs. Jesus, Lindsay, don't point that camera towards us. There's an election coming up."

"Put on some music, Angie, I want to dance," called John as he let go of Richard. Angie reached down under the bar and turned on the lounge stereo and some tinny-sounding big band music began to play. Ballroom lighting glowed over the dance floor, red and purple, like the sun going down.

"I'm not dancing with you, damn fool," said Richard.

"It's not you I want to dance with, sweetheart. I want to dance with a beautiful woman, one as beautiful as me. Hey Rolanda, how about a dance with me out in the lounge?" But John could see that Rolanda's head was already hanging in a drunken stupor. Angie was behind the bar and not his idea of beautiful, anyway, so he turned to Lindsay. "How about it, beautiful lady?"

"Well, John, I should get back to the desk, but why not? There's no one to see us now, we can do what we want."

Lindsay and John walked arm in arm to the dance floor in the lounge and experienced a moment of confusion as to who would lead. More out of habit than out of desire, John assumed the man's role in the dance. John tried not to hold Lindsay too close to him in case she was still feeling afraid, but she had a big smile on her face so he stopped worrying about it. He held her quite close.

"John Jacobs, you are a crazy old man," she said.

"No, not so crazy. I've always wondered my whole life what it must be like to be a beautiful woman."

"So, what's it like?"

"Ha." John couldn't put his answer into words so he closed his eyes as he and Lindsay danced. He made a picture of his dead wife inside his head, when she was still living, when she was as young and as beautiful as Lindsay, whom he could feel against his chest. What was it his wife once said to him? "Men don't know anything about women; they don't understand anything that a woman feels." He used to tell her that he wished he could understand what it meant to be a woman, that he knew it was more than the outside appearance. She would look exasperated and sigh. "Ah, John, you're a sweet guy, but you're a man, you can't know." The Women's Libber's started up in the 1960s, and John saw new light in Mary's eyes. He didn't really understand what these women were making so much fuss about, but he saw how happy it made his wife, so he encouraged her to take part. His encouragement had only made

her sad and she'd said to him finally, "I'm in my 50s, John. This is a thing for young women who still have a chance."

It was just two years later that she'd died, breast cancer. When she died, he felt as if it was partly his fault because he hadn't tried hard enough to understand this woman thing. For a long time he thought that if he'd understood her better, she would have been happier, and maybe her brain wouldn't have told her breasts to make cancer. He'd wished then they'd had a daughter, in addition to the three sons he and his wife had raised, so maybe he could have learned from a little girl growing up.

John and Lindsay were into their third dance when John began to loosen his grasp, weakening his role as the lead until Lindsay was forced to assume it. He heard her giggle once when the shift in power became apparent. He continued to keep his eyes closed. With Lindsay now twirling him around the dance floor, he felt as if his little fat man's breasts had grown into beautiful, voluptuous ones and as if his protruding genitals had been replaced by the soft, fleshy folds and warm hollows of a woman. He felt loving, he felt nurturing, damn it if he didn't feel womanly. And it felt good, it felt beautiful. He still couldn't put it into words. What was it, this thing so womanly just beyond the grasp of his comprehension? His eyes still shut, he allowed himself to feel.

When the dance was over Lindsay had to get back to the desk. He kissed her goodnight on the cheek. It was almost midnight. He went up to the bar and kissed Angie goodnight, too. He walked to the end of the counter and lightly kissed the drunken Rolanda who looked up at him with glazed eyes and said, "Who the hell are you?"

"You're beautiful," he whispered. "We're beautiful."

Rolanda was opening her mouth again to say something more, but her head fell back into its stupor before she could get it out. John stared at her for a moment, swept his hand down the length of her right arm, which was hanging limp from drink. Rolanda made him sad, she reminded him so much of Mary. He wanted to say to her, "I understand what it means to be a woman," but he knew it was too soon. He did not yet understand. He left Rolanda's side, and ignoring Richard, walked back to his barstool where he picked up his white fur coat and swung it over his shoulders. He went out to the parking lot and got into his car.

When he arrived home he did not undress. He took Lindsay's Polaroids out of his purse, tacked some around the bedroom mirror, and leaned the best ones against pictures of Mary. Then he lay in his bed until sleep came. It was a peaceful sleep of sweet dreams of his wife and his dance with Lindsay from earlier that evening.

The next morning when he awoke, he kissed Mary's picture and his own Polaroids. After a breakfast of cereal and toast with honey, John Jacobs left the house to go clothes shopping at the Big Women's Plus Store. That night, he headed for the Day Glow dressed in blue chiffon.

'Common Ground' by Lee Chilcote



At Arthur Bryant's Barbeque
you can order a pulled pork sandwich
that spills from the soft white bun
and eat it messily with your hands
with a cold draft beer
while glancing at the strangers
in the booth beside you.

East of downtown, the squat brick building
sits on a fault line all the locals know,
the cafeteria's greasy floors
an uneasy common ground
where residents east and west of Troost
meet over the sweet taste of barbeque
slow-smoked over hickory logs
and served with a tangy side of sauce.

Beyond this bountiful meal,
jayhawkers and bushwhackers
attack each other on dusty roads.
Freed slaves step off of trains
looking for work in a boomtown.
They find jobs in meat packing houses

and live in the shanty shacks
of the West Bottoms.

We travel these rutted tracks back
beneath broad boulevards
and gushing fountains.
Charlie Parker wails a tune
that bubbles up from manhole covers.
The steam of laundry houses
and streetcars rolling south
are pressed beneath the concrete.

‘Green Revolution’ by Ellen Wright



Regulators Reassess Safety After Lettuce Outbreak
— The New York Times, 06.27.10

So virulent was the lettuce attack it crowded
the ailanthus out of backyard Brooklyn. Creepers
of radicchio insinuated themselves through cracks
in the sidewalk. Wormed their way up chimneys
and glommed onto brick walls. Our parks
once polka-dotted with blossoms
suddenly choked mowers on mountains of mesclun.
Not a single sign or lamppost or bridge remained
un-muffled in ruffles of romaine.

Cashing in
on the roughage invasion, a plague of rabbits has
grown to menacing proportions. They hang around
the farmers' markets radiating attitude. You can't
turn a corner without gangs of them flashing
their cucumber tats and their broccoli grilles—
spoils of ascendancy over a carnivorous species whose
food supply they have driven from pasture. All day
armed rodent patrols roam the 'hood brandishing
semi-automatic artichokes from the backs of tractors
and demanding 14-carrot tribute from a terrified
citizenry.

Meanwhile we creep around
shadows of our burger-chomping selves haunting
the margins of a world where kohlrabi is king.
Hanging our heads during public salutes to the Stems and Stalks.
Gagging on seventh-inning acclamations of God Bless
Arrugula.

Mortifying as it is to pay our bills in cabbage
and hold our collateral in escarole, the worst insult
is our loss of religious freedom. Not only has the Dear Lepus
requisitioned our houses of worship for cold frames,
he has pre-empted morning television to hold forth smug
and self-righteous in his jumpsuit. My dear brothers
and sisters in Cress, he splutters through his buck teeth,
lettuce pray. . . .