

STREET CAKE

experimental writing magazine

issue 90



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issue 90

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Lost weekend in a hologram of suburban England

it seems upon the screen lies a society
it seems outside the window there's reality
and we do not visit either of those places.

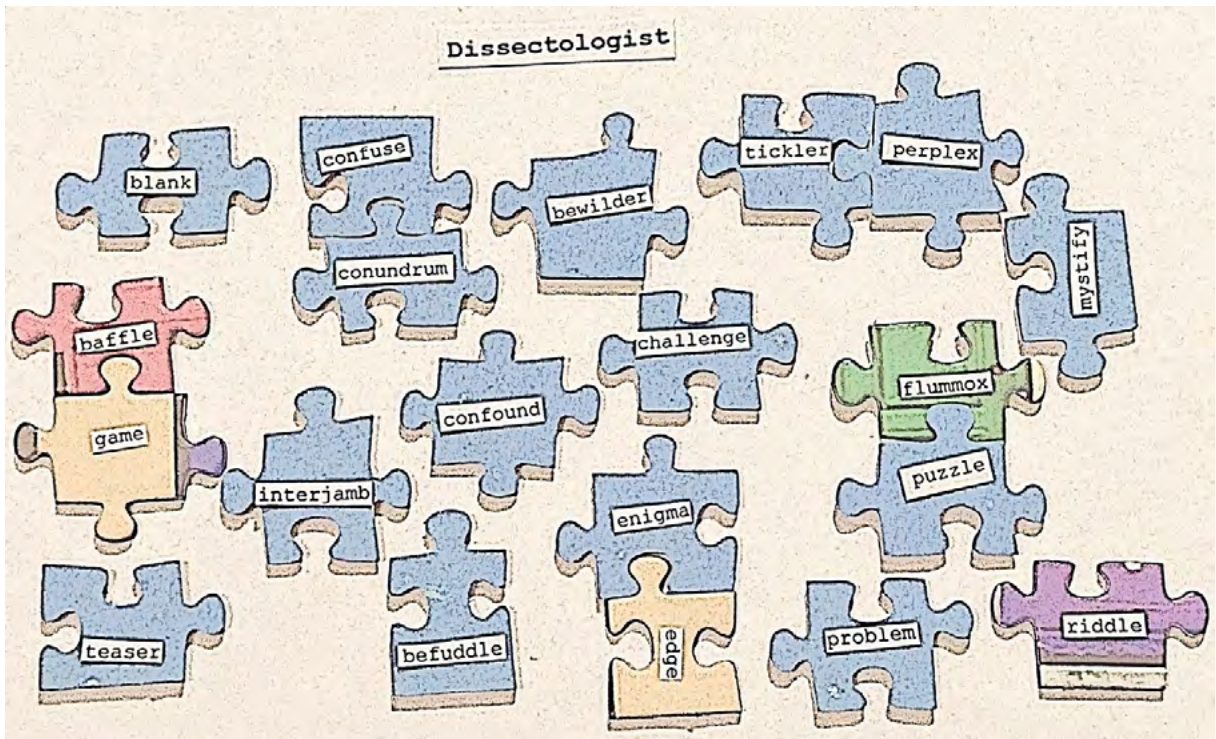
Reality is not what it appears, anyway
—says the semitransparent penguin—
and I leave it loafing on the sofa

and go in search of cups of tea
and digestive biscuits
neither of which can penguins eat

but one has to be polite
and when I return the penguin has anyway
acquired a plate of raw fish fillet

from wherever it is these things come
and the penguin himself
is speaking again:

I am assuming you will disappear
—it gives me side-eye cautiously—
as soon as I get back
into a normal state of mind.



Oneliness

Onely is not the same as lonely.
The further shape that makes
all the difference,
is the arrival of enclosure.

loneliness

Thorns

I walked through the back door of night greeted by the screeching of enraged raccoons. They did not scare me. I do not scare easily. I roamed alleys, breathing in rich garbage air and cat piss, my pockets empty. No one could touch me. No one could lay a finger on me. The St. James Tower clock luminously read midnight, but could I accept its premise? Had someone scaled the edifice and tampered with the clock hands? It was possible. Money money money. Fingerless gloves grasping dead air. I despaired for my comrades in failure. Would we *ever* win? And what would the world be like if we did? Would it be any different? Hm. The streetlights spewed yellow miasma. I walked over slick black leaves and multi-crunch lady bugs. Matted rats sprang from garbage bins hissing, forepaws raised, yellow teeth dripping pus and pestilence. A green garbage truck clanked down the alley scattering the rest of the fattened colony. A man in white-face wearing a dark blue kimono, hirsute ankles exposed, waved from a rooftop. I nodded and he tossed down handfuls of zircons that pelted my head and jeweled my path. Was he the Angel of Death? I think not. The door of a low insulbrick building swung open and a woman in a red fright-wig poked her head out then quickly shut the door. When I tried the doorknob, it would not turn. I wondered why I did that as I walked away. Perhaps pertinacity. My life has been one door slammed in my face after another. Does it stop me? It does not. I found a long-stemmed red rose leaning against a tar-papered storefront. I bent and picked up the rose. It was still fresh. Hm. A gust of sour wind buffeted me and made me hate the world that much more even though more than anything I wanted to love it. Time to go. When I escaped the alley and tried to hail a cab, I pricked my right thumb on an unseen thorn and cursed as it bled. A thorn? This struck me as strange. Don't florists remove thorns? I shuffled on, sucking my thumb, spitting blood, and holding the rose in my left hand by the stem, careful not to let it prick me again. I held it to my nose. It smelled of nothing. Stupid rose.

Ronald Marcone Cannot Redeem Himself Alone

3:00 PM

“I need to confess to you,” Ron said, bracing himself in his office chair. “It was a ruse. Henry and I aren’t switching bodies.”

“What?” I said. “I...you got me. I wanted to believe.” Bitter espresso congealed on my tongue. “Well, he’s out cold.” I opened Ron’s office door. “All it’ll do is knock him out, encourage the mild hallucinations. With the way *you* prepped him, he’ll be ready to believe everything. Let’s get him.”

“Just a moment. If he’s unable to work for the rest of the day, then we’re short-staffed.”

At the entrance to Ron’s copyediting department, he lowered his voice. “If he thinks he’s me, he might just believe he has the authority to mess around the rest of his shift. Who’s gonna do his work?”

“You asked me to do this,” I said.

“Now I’m not so sure.”

Ron turned down the hallway, leading to the lye-smelling slop sink. It was where I’d administered the needle into Henry’s pale, brawny shoulder.

Ron opened the door and we gasped: Henry - the worker who’d agreed to switch bodies with his boss, the worker who’d let me drug him - had escaped.

4:03 PM

“He’s just gonna find his way home, maybe play with himself, and pass out.”

“What if he thinks we’ve actually swapped? Could be running around yammering about how he’s me. Carter knows I’m his supervisor. He could...what if he joins one of the four o’clock Zooms I have with him? Logs on as me, puts my name in the chat box, types a whole bunch of shit about his wife’s chest?”

“He’s not—”

Ron gripped my shoulder. “Terry, if I find out he’s at my kid’s soccer practice and tells Jackson’s mother what I’ve been saying to him about her ass, it’ll be *yours*.”

“Calm down. What’s so world-ending about him thinking he’s you for a few hours?”

As we headed back into copyediting, Ron said, “I have an image to uphold. People respect me.” Printers zipped and shoes squeaked on buffed floors. Director Carter’s, Administrative Assistant appeared.

“Ronald, we were wondering if you’d be joining us for the 4:00 PM Copy Supervisors Meeting?” she asked.

“Absolutely not.” Ron clutched his belt buckle in mock-sternness. “I’m kidding. I’m sorry - I’d forgotten.” He followed her out, then turned back to grimace at me; his face leering with a thick temporal forehead vein. A portrait of poor health.

“Stay calm. I’ll check the first floor.”

He marched back toward me. “Oh no – take the second floor.”

“Got it.” I smoothed my coat and pushed my doctor’s bag to my hip. Once I made it out of copyediting, coolness floated through me. But then another thought straightened me: Ron was such a cover-his-ass-first guy that he might take me down with him.

4:57 PM

Ron and I frowned into the bathroom mirror. The tang of urinal cake wafted into my nose.

“This is the worst day of my life,” said Ron.

“Don’t say that. We’ll find him.”

“What’s got you so free and easy?”

Then Peter, the Financial Controller, strolled in. “Precious little time from you,” I hissed.

Peter approached Ron and, in the mirror, it appeared as if the two men had fused. “Sorry Carter chewed you out. He neglected to say that *I* was the one who saw Henry. Right there.” Peter pointed. “Looking at himself.”

“Looking?”

“Henry...wasn’t keeping any secrets.”

“Help me understand.”

“He had it out on display!” said Peter.

“Jesus.”

“I wouldn’t be ashamed of a pet like that. But I was shaking my head. ‘Is that mild-mannered Henry?’ Then, hello nurse! You might want to say something about exhibitionism.” Peter washed his hands then took his glasses off and washed them. “I’m not one for showing off. But nobody should feel like they have to prove virility here.”

“Was he joking?” I said, after Peter left.

“I don’t know what he was trying to do. Jesus. Playing with his dick cause he thinks it’s mine?”

“Sounds as though he wanted to - visualize what his...boss’s member looked like. Seems probable.” I shrugged.

Then Ron’s phone rang - the stock default, an ascending tintinnabulation. Only those who failed to appreciate life’s details kept that ring. Ron might’ve been looking at his own viscera the way he glared at the screen. “Selena? I’m terrible. What’s wrong, babe? Says— oh God. Yeah, he’s kind of my confidante. I tell him...but Goddammit, he asks too many questions!” He paused. “Yes. Thinks he’s me. Well, he’s still there? You’d keep him there for me? Yes. I’m afraid he wants vengeance.”

Ron stuffed his phone into his pocket. “We’re going to the club.”

“Club Cap?” I raised my fist to my lips to press pretend trumpet buttons. I’d catch Ron’s bands when we were young and then at Club Capital once he graduated into the leagues of professional musicianship. “Does that mean...”

“C’mon, we’re taking your jeep. Jane has the Lagonda.”

5:21 PM

Ron jogged through the parking lot then slumped into my passenger seat. He pushed my *Scientific American* and Staff Appreciation paperweight into the emergency brake’s scoop. Ron was panting, seatbelt rising over his chest. “My friend,” I said. “You’re breathing like a dog. Try to get out of the office more.” I’d meant exercise - like the summer he’d played on the Shanghai cruise - the fresh air had healed him.

“In this situation, where we’re trying to save both our asses, please, cool it with your goddamn methodologies.” He glared out the window. “Christ, imagine he gets into Maxine’s Pastries. They give me the day-olds on Tuesday. Henry knows. Or my vet. Bringing Cleo in

will be a non-starter after this - Jane will have to. My bodega. Christ. Henry's always asking me about my weekend. How my kids are. And I make the mistake of telling him."

I wondered if Ron had ever offered Henry a pastry.

6:06 PM

Club Capital looked like a hulking, concrete chain grocer. We cleared my dog blanket and camping equipment from the backseat in case we managed to extract Henry from the Club.

"Good lord," he said, shielding his eyes from high beams, "I might have to stay with you again after this."

"I'd prefer to wait in the car," I said.

Inside the club, the jukebox flashed black - someone had smoked it. I saw quartz shimmering - but it was only broken beer glasses. I watched Ron sidle up to what remained of the counter and elbow two drinkers aside to talk to a bearded bartender. The action looked rude, but maybe that was the tenor at Club Capital now. Certainly the whole world wasn't Ron's servant.

"He asked why we didn't have 'Oye Como Vas,'" said a woman who'd just sauntered in with curly, shoulder-length hair and a sandstone tube top. "He said he was you, but I got past that quick." Selena introduced herself to me. "He asked for my number. I almost gave it to him. Cute kid. But then he settled on 'The Boys Are Back in Town'. That's when he danced up the customers, doing the finger gun things." She made finger guns.

"That's not how I dance," said Ron.

“Manny wants you to pay for the damages. The kid kept saying he was you. ‘Henry is Ronald Marcone now.’ Be careful,” and she pointed toward the stage doors, “if you’re going in there.”

“Why?” I said.

“I...made the mistake of telling Henry how they screwed me over after my surgery.”

He grunted. “Let’s bite the bullet.”

Selena walked us toward the blinking door and opened it.

Red, green and white light beams shone inside bundles of smoke and machine fog. The slick floor shone with more broken bottles and glasses.

When Ron stepped into the light, a chorus of groans moaned at his arrival. About twelve more toppled chairs and several broken glasses glistened. At first the band pit appeared like an open-air market of rotten vegetables. The old players lay prostrate. Phil’s nose was split and blistered like a bad mango. The man I didn’t recognize - he must’ve been the new trombonist, Gus, in sunglasses, the one who’d taken Ron’s seat - pressed a diaper damp with blood to his forehead.

I fought the urge to scrutinize the wound. “Can someone please tell me what happened?”

Leon pointed to the door. “This nut strolls in here mid-song and asks to sit-in. Then says we ruined his life. Stopped the show in front of paying customers.”

Gus said, “Right in the middle of ‘Chameleon’. And what did he say? ‘I’m Ronald Marcone and I’m back, so give me my trombone?’” Gus tore off his sunglasses, revealing a black eye. “Then he jumps into the pit, grabs my bone and starts wailing on me. He on something?”

I imagined Ron revealing it'd been me who'd drugged him. Then I remembered the musicians - how Phil hosted summer barbecues which made Ron eat so much he'd bemoan afterwards. One night Ron had had too much dancing, beer, and watermelon vodka, and tumbled off a campfire log to break my Martin acoustic. "So you're the guy who sent that nut?" Gus staggered from the pit toward Ron.

"You going to call domestic violence on me? Do I look like that kid who fucked you up?"

The trombonist craned back his fist. I shielded my face with my doctor's bag.

"Leon, stop!" echoed from the catwalk.

It was Selena in a new outfit. Blue light framed her. Ribs showing - underweight likely. "Ronald would never sic anyone on you," she said. I tasted tart again - Ron had tried to flaunt polaroids of Selena to me during the week in January when Ron had to stay on my couch.

"Security!" said Gus, pressing the diaper deeper onto his temples.

We sped off in my Jeep.

"If anyone follows us—" said Ron.

"Selena looks just like Jane," I said. "I'm sure you've inspired attraction in him. If he thinks he's you."

"Don't talk about my wife right now."

7:07 PM

My Jeep bumped onto the cobblestones next to Ron's red, souped-up Lagonda. I'd always marveled at Ron's home, which my friend had bought with his first years of session

royalties. I'd even imagined myself living in the Queen Anne Victorian on ritzy Walnut Lane while my friend's music career was rising. A piece of the gothic turret's paint was slabbing off - it was a lot of house, with much work on it always needed - for Ron to never be home now. And there'd be more if he were truly up for a promotion to the Medical Records Department like he'd said.

Ron pushed the iron gate and it squealed open. His collapse had started when Club Capital dropped him; I'd had to secure him the office job.

"Front lights are out," said Ron. "Not a good sign."

The porch floodlamp shone into the living room. Four broken spindles lay on an oriental rug. Ron flicked on the light. The rug looked like a decomposing seagull. "He better not have talked to her about those lentil gyros with the dill cream sauce." In the light, Ron's haggard face cringed at me.

"That's what you're worried about?" I said.

"Jane!" he shouted, up toward the bathroom door. A frame of light shone around it.

"Up here!" a voice shrieked. We ran up the steps.

In front of Ron, on the toilet seat, sat Henry. Blood splotted the collar and shoulder of his once-white Oxford. Bruises marred his cheeks. I shut the door.

The back of Henry's hair stood up, revealing a gash behind his ear. A pair of fuzzy heart handcuffs held him to the toilet. Jane sat down on the rim of the contact-lens-looking bathtub. "I thought he had some news about you," she said. She pulled her blonde hair back above her widow's peak. "He barged upstairs talking about my squash steaks," she said. "No salted ramps tonight! He was really going in." Henry's bloody knuckles left streaks against the porcelain between lid and tank.

Ron kneeled next to Henry. "Convince me this wasn't a job action. I have half a mind to fire you."

“It’s your fault!” I yelled at Ron.

Henry gritted his teeth and squinted. “I’m going back to work!” he shouted, the toilet top grating.

“You’re not me. You know that, right? Nurse Gardella here...with my blessing...got you high. But we didn’t think you’d take it serious. What’d you think when you looked in the mirror?”

Henry sobbed in hiccups. “That wasn’t a rampage!” he cried.

I began to protest but Ron barred his forearm in front of me. Henry said, “I was just going where Ronald would. Doing what Ronald would do. Henry knows Ronald won’t go to the club anymore. Henry *knows* Ronald can’t drink like Ronald did at jazz college. And Henry knows Ronald can no longer trombone.”

Ron touched above his lip.

I said, “But what about this violence?”

Henry said, “People kept trying to get in Ronald’s way.”

“Wait a moment. Are you saying that you expect the average person, who I hold no sway over, you expect them to lay down for me like you? Like Henry does?”

“Yes. Henry loves Ronald. Henry wanted Ronald to flex the life Ronald can’t have.”

Ron touched his heaving chest. Heart attack after all, I thought. I was almost relieved Ron wouldn’t be able to blackmail me.

Jane said, “You all need to leave.” She opened the door. A cop blocked her way. She had a blonde buzzcut and looked as if she were on the 20th of a 24-hour shift. I smelled aloe; on the stairwell, Carter and his Administrative Assistant stood behind them, staring up at the door. On the seagull rug stood the quintet from Club Capital. “We’re looking for Ronald Marcone,” the cop said. “We have some questions related to an incident at Club Capital.”

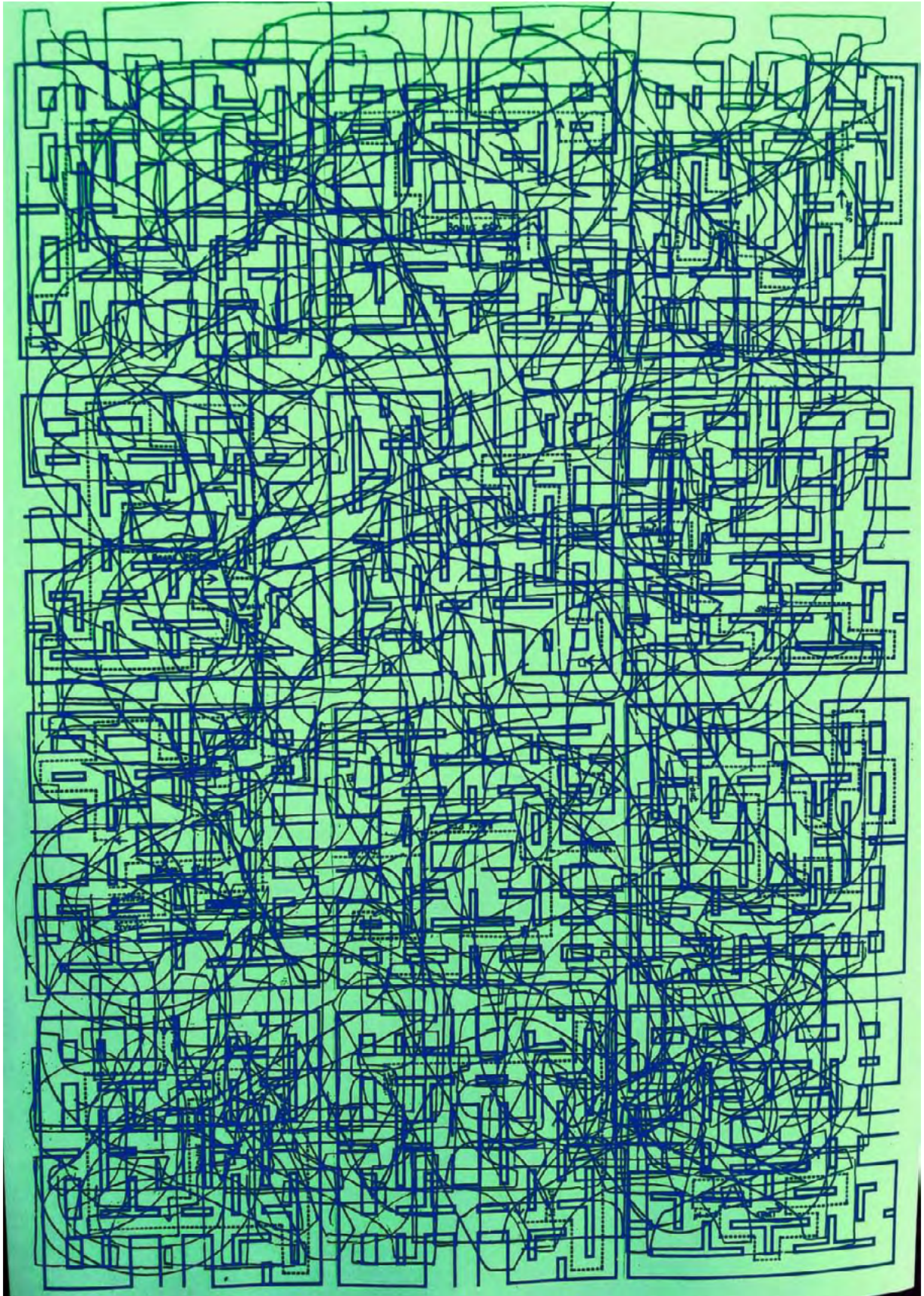
“Club Cap...” Jane began, glaring.

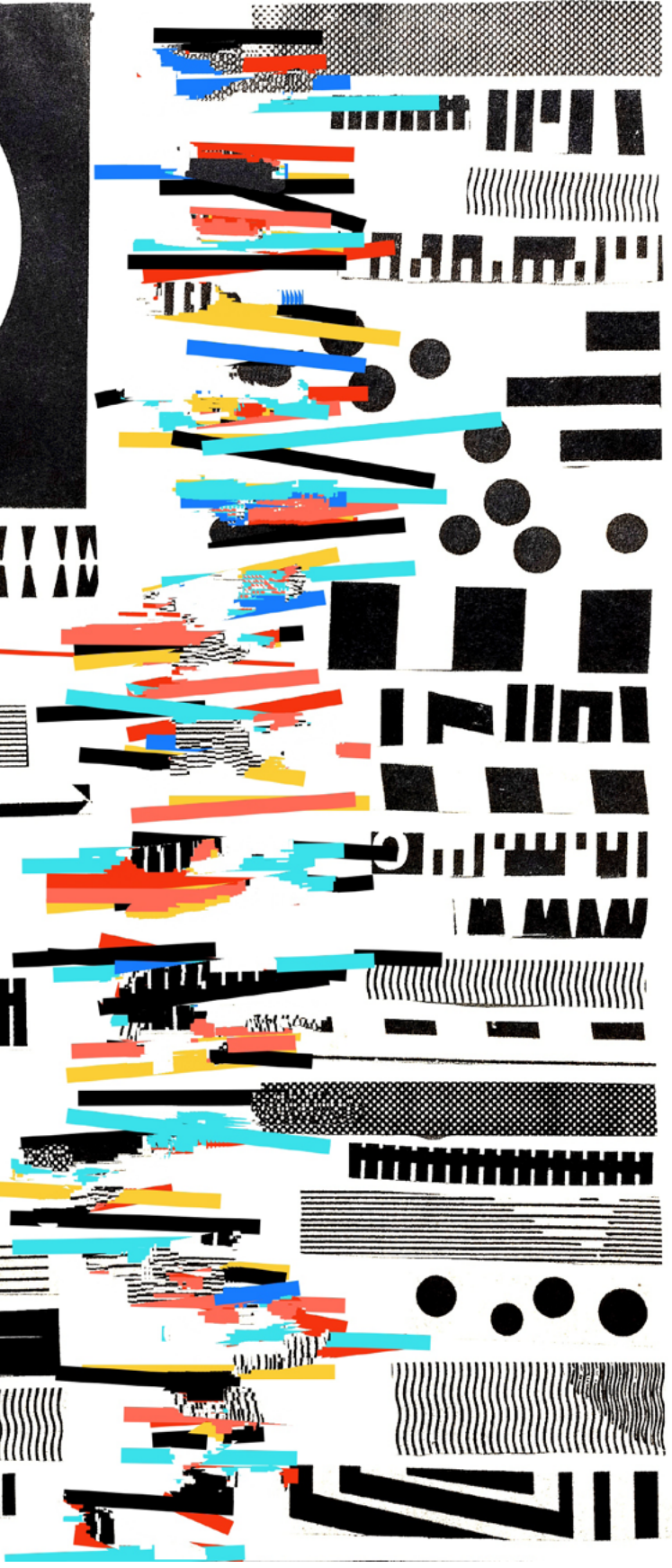
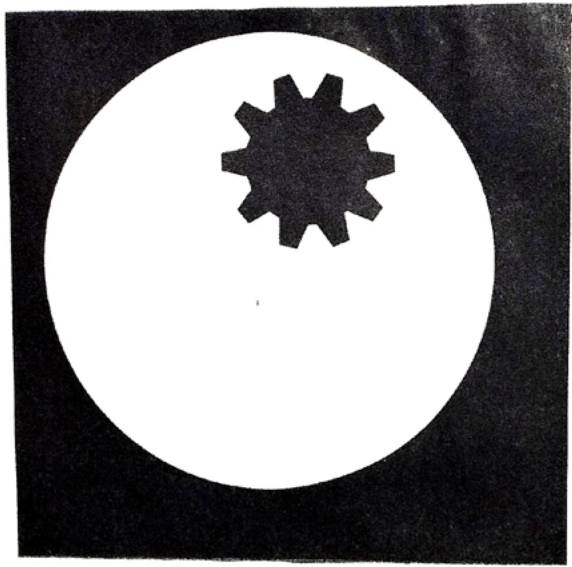
“That’s me,” Ron told the cop, showing her his ID.

The officer handcuffed Ron and they walked toward the stairs, but Ron paused in front of Henry. “You know, you’re next in line for supervisor. The Department, my position, will be yours it looks like.”

Henry’s eyes watered once more. “No,” he said. “Nobody should be able to wield the power you held over me. Nobody.”

After the officer left with Ron, Jane slunk downstairs to confer with Carter - she looked much happier talking to him, and would be even more so after the divorce. Henry asked if I could drive him home. He had questions about what had happened to him, but now I only wanted peace.





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pauline mccarthy

Hypothetically

I operate in theoreticals,
 preoccupied by provolone
 and bounded by bread,
 stuck thinking
 with one foot in the gutter
 and the other

launched

into the sky.

What are we reaffirming?
 Messy scribbles
 scream out
 in nauseous regards.

We grow up

to become grasshoppers
 looking for
 greener

pastures.

Stop tickling

my latent desires,
 and speak to me
 in carpeted barren mattresses.

Can we decipher these ruins,
 or will we let them take us

to the murky deep?

Let's get tangled

in the rounds of time,
 and quit getting lost
 looking for misplaced dimes.



In Loving Memory

I b **r**ok **o** my **o** **W**n bones
 an **o** cho **o** **o** ed on my teeth
 Sli **o** my **o** **W**th **o** at
 an **d** wa **t**ch **e**d **m**y **s**e **f** **t**eed
 and **r** **i**pp **e**d **b** **o** **n**e **f** **r** **e** **s** **i** **n** **e**n
 Sh **e** **m**y **o** **W** **h** **o** **r** **a** **n**s
 die **d** **f** **r** **o** **m** **w** **i** **t** **h** **i** **n**

My PhD In Maths

The number scheme

began with

zero

so I counted that as

one.

When

I

got to

one

I

found

that that

was

really two.

A WALK IN THE PARK

a
wp
park
parlk
park
r