

Stupor: Cigarettes and Crack and Jerry's Liver.
Art and layout by
Gina Reichert, 2009

1) Introduction:

Stupor is a collection of true stories. Some of these stories, I stole from letters, some by informal interview, some by eavesdropping. Most of these stories came to me in a skeletal form. I put skin on them.

This issue was assembled by Russian-born artist Faina Lerman. I recently had the opportunity to visit her Hamtramck studio. It's a big space with concrete walls, floors and ceilings. On one of her work tables there were several of her old rubber castings. They were smooth and bulbous and floppy. Each had a round core, radiating several grippable phallic limbs. They were like studies of form and formlessness. "I don't make these anymore," she said of her castings. "They are just parts now. They're going to grow up to be something different. I don't paint anymore either. When we bought this building, we had all this work to do. But I'm making things again now. It feels good."

About two years ago, she and her husband purchased an old commercial building in Hamtramck's northwest corner, over near the highway, near the projects, near an industrial corridor of Detroit, near the chemical storage tanks (Sterling Services), which, due to some nincompoopery, caught fire last summer, and a massive tower of black smoke filled the sky. Faina's new work is grounded here.

One of her more striking pieces is a 3-D assemblage over an old painting. Every part of this piece is a leftover that she has reclaimed: bits of clothing, chunks of her old plaster castings, cat hair, her own hair, dust masks, and plastic bags. She's also attached packaging materials with packaging tape to form odd, repetitive, lumpy shapes. Her process is rugged and immediate. She unspools clear, shiny tape and wraps her piece, front to back, connecting and preserving the objects. Her method of wrapping speaks of mummification and loss as well, especially in reference to the strangely shaped packaging materials. In Faina's work they become memorials to shipping and commerce, and better times.

In Detroit, where warehouses are empty and factories are idle, Faina's new work comments on the buildings, jobs, and materials discarded by our failed manufacturing economy. At the same time her work talks about possibility and transformation. Recycle. Re-use. Build and rebuild! Special thanks to Faina for her work on this issue.

(publishing and contact information removed)

2) Piñata Party

Little Joe told me about a party down the street, "It's Marky's birthday and everyone is invited. I really want to go."

"When is this party?" I said.



Stupor: Pigeon Dreams.

Art and layout by
Jeff Karoloski, 2009

“It’s now. It’s right now.”

“Is there anybody going to be watching you?” I asked.

“His mom is there,” Little Joe, said. “His grandma is there too.”

“OK,” I said.

And Little Joe jumped, “Hurray!” And he ran, smashing through the door.

I had been drinking beer all day and Di was out somewhere, spending all our money, buying crap for the kids, clothes or whatever. When she gets back, she’ll hold the little dresses and shirts up for my approval, and say things like “Isn’t this cute?” I’ll nod. Of course, it’s cute. It’s little. And I’ll be wondering how much further in debt this trip will sink us.

When the game I was watching went to half-time, I found Sarah’s shoes. She was drawing pictures of smiling people with spikes coming out of their heads, with withered arms and legs, bent wrong, like happy victims of a car crash. I wedged her feet into her sneakers and took her hand, and we drifted down the street to the party.

We found the kids in Marky’s backyard. They had made up a game that involved tossing a bottle of orange soda pop into the air. The bottle whirled and spun and when it landed, it exploded and if you got splashed with the sticky orange crap, you were out.

“Whose idea was that?” I said.

“It’s a good game,” said Marky.

“No, it’s not,” I said. “Figure out something else to do.”

I rapped on the back door. “Hey,” I said. And Marky’s mom was in there running the blender.

“You want a drink?” she said. “I’m making some.”

“Yeah,” I said, “That’s great.” I watched the kids. Now they were jumping the chain link fence. Into the neighbor’s yard and back. It wasn’t a minute before one of the kids ripped a big hole in his pants. Dumb little shits. At least it wasn’t my kid. I drank my drink. It packed a punch. Rum or something. Marky’s mom downed hers and was pouring another.

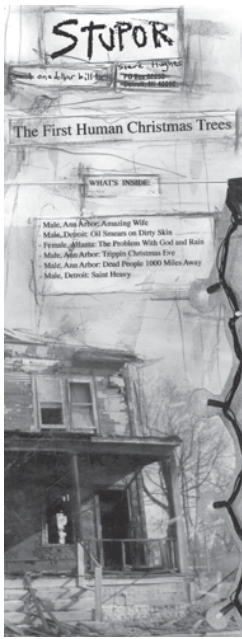
“Kids,” she said.

I nodded. The football game was playing in her house too. I could hear the announcers rambling. Nothing would make me happier than loafing on Marky’s mom’s couch. “You got the game on?” I said. And she either didn’t hear me or she just ignored me.

“So,” she said, “what’s going on with you?”

I tried to think of something to say. I shrugged. “I don’t know. Work,” I said. It was all that came to mind. I guess the alcohol rippling in my veins was reaching a critical point, and I really needed to fall over and fall asleep. I could feel it coming. I didn’t care. I collapsed in a lawn chair and drank up.

The kids were still tearing holes in their clothes. They were having a great time.



Stupor: The First Human Christmas Trees.
Art and layout by
Kamil Antos, 2009

In a minute, Marky's mom stomped out of the house carrying a pig-shaped piñata. She hung it on the clothesline, and gave Marky a broom handle for hitting. The kids were all yelling. Everybody wanted the stick. They all wanted to smash the thing. The broom handle was whirling around. Someone was going to take it right in the face. I knew I should step in and show some control, and at least get Sarah out of the throng. The kids were nuts.

Marky's mom backed out of the mob and looked at me apologetically. I shook my head, and Marky hammered the pig once and wire came loose and the whole thing dropped to the grass. The kids came at it with sticks they'd stripped from the yard, all of them swinging and whacking, and finally one boy kicked it and kicked it until he smashed open the pig's head, which tore away and smacked into the fence. The pig was dead and candy spilled out of the hole where its brain had been. The kids came down on it, grabbing as much as they could as quick as they could.

"You want another drink?" Marky's mom said. "My God, I sure need one."

"Sure," I said, trying to stand, hoping to get invited into the house, wondering what the score was on that game. The screen door slammed in my face. I watched her in the kitchen, drinking right from the blender.

"Sometimes, I swear," she said, getting a breath. "When I'm driving, and they get fighting, I just want to crash into a tree. Just to shut them up."

"I understand completely," I said. She looked at me and started laughing. Not a happy or collaborating sort of laugh but a freaky hysterical thing. "Can I come in and check the score on the game?" I asked. She squeezed her temples. That was her answer, so I let myself in and plunked down on the couch.

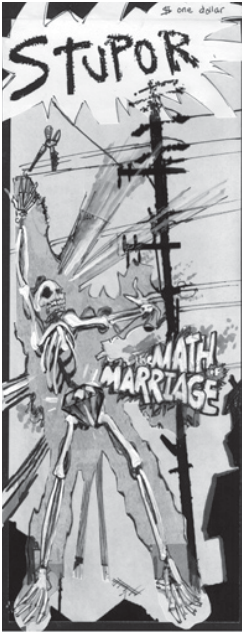
3) Some Sort of Beauty

We were at a very crappy sports bar. He was out of work and broken up over losing his latest girlfriend. She was beautiful. I give him that. She was a knockout. How do you keep a woman like that? Fourteen years younger. She was bound to move on.

So we were eating chicken and talking about books when he said, "You know that thing you wrote about me. That stuff about when I broke up with Mary."

I tried to remember. It was a long time ago. The giant TV was blasting us with some basketball game. "Sort of," I said, "barely."

I'll take a second now to remember it wrong: They're in the alley behind the bar. They're both drunk, and Mary is trying to stand him up. Despite the cold, he's reaching under her skirt. He's wheezing. There is an electricity between them. His negative to her positive. His pants are undone, and he is jabbing his way past her underwear to her warm inside. To be part of her. This is why, this is why, this is why, this is why he loves her. She is perfect inside. After a minute, he has



Stupor: The Math of Marriage. Art and layout by Clinton Snider, 2008

exhausted himself. The screwing ends with his slumping, heaving collapse. A car skids, screaming to a stop at the intersection in front of the bar. They wait for the crash. There's none. It's cold.

"That's it," she says, standing above him, "I can't do this any more." She has said the same thing almost every day for the last month.

He's looking at her bare knees and the bruises on them. "Mary—" he coughs. She runs her hands down her skirt, smoothing the material. Then she's walking away under the cruddy streetlights, under a handful of dull stars. He's alone. He's surrounded by torn up trash bags, and dirty piles of snow. And my friend, freezing with his pants still down around his ankles, sobs and chokes. That's, I think, where I ended it.

I looked at my friend. His face had an expressionless slack. He was watching TV. "I told you that in confidence. I didn't tell you so you could put it in your fucking zine."

"Nobody knew that was you," I said, "just you and me."

"That's not true," he said. "People knew, and it was really upsetting."

"I liked the story," I said. "There is like some sort of beauty or raw sort of truth that's exposed by telling it."

"You don't know how embarrassing that was. I don't care how drunk I was when I said it. I told you in confidence. That means you don't go writing it down. It's my story, not yours. So I'm sorry, man, but I'm not going to read your zine anymore. It's full of shit."

He was my friend still. I loved him like a friend loves a friend, and I respected his opinion. I thought about it, but it didn't seem like he owned that story. When he told it, when his breath made the words, he released it. He owned his memory of it. But my version of his truth, that was something different.

4) Sandblasted

Char was high up on the scaffold, about twenty feet up in the metal truss work. She was running the sandblaster. Bill was running the other one on the far side of the space. My job was to make sure the machine that sucked out the bad air was still sucking. I also had to run the lights so Bill and Char could see the metal beams through the thick brown air. Then, last, I had to make periodic checks that everybody was still harnessed in, and that none of the hoses or wires was tangled. It was drudgery. Ugh.

I gazed up at Char. I couldn't see her face at all, just the dusted plastic of her mask. I was spacing out. "Char," I said. "Char Char Char."

Last Saturday, I drove her out to the river, down near the docks, to the lost marina where the old guys just sit around all day and work on their boats and drink



Stupor: God's Power Beam.
Art and layout by
Lisa Anne Auerbach, 2008

beer, and nobody cares what you do, so I built a fire with smoldering green sticks, and we washed ourselves at the edge of the river to get the fine dusty crap off, and came out smelling funny, like motor oil, but when we dried off it was okay, so we skewered some hotdogs, and sat around our fire and drank beer and drank more beer. Then when the fire had fizzled down to red coals and made just the faintest wave of heat, me and her, we climbed into the back of my van and undid our clothes and got into a single sleeping bag, and her skin was dry and rough like mine, and even though it was warm and muggy I don't think either of us sweat at all that night. We were like a couple of cigarettes knocking around in a soft pack. That's what I was thinking.

I was running the lights and thinking about Char. I was saying her name to myself, and that's around the time my allergies really started messing with me. It was like I'd breathed a feather or some pepper. I sneezed again and again, and I glanced up and noticed that Char and Bill had put their guns down, and I convulsed again, and snot ran down my throat and I couldn't even spit because of the mask, so I just swallowed it and got feeling sicker.

Finally, I yanked my mask off, which is against the rules, but screw the rules, and I rushed for the slit in the tent, and I was wiggling my nostrils between my fingers to get rid of the tickle. I got out into the blinding light of the world, and my eyes were blurry and streaming with tears. I guess I didn't realize how close I was to the armature of the air scrubbing machine. When I next blasted this enormous sneeze, I snapped over and smacked my head on its sharp metal corner. And a dribble of blood ran into my eyes and spread out over my pores and dripped off my chin.

I splashed myself with water from Bill's lunch cooler. And I found a rag and wrapped it around my head, and by the time Bill and Char came out, the blood had soaked the cloth and was running all over my face and on my clothes and stuff.

"Holy shit," Bill said as he patted the dust from his clothes.

"You gotta get that stitched," Char said.

I sneezed and it pushed more blood out.

"Man, I'm sorry," I said. I tried to fit my mask to see if its seal would clear my cut, but the blood made a sticky slime against the latex and it made me feel worse.

"Here man," Bill said, "Put some tape on."

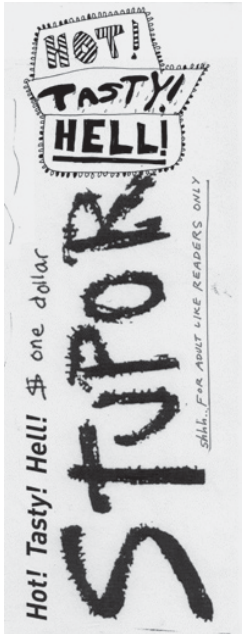
I dried it best I could and ran a big piece of masking tape over it.

"I'm okay," I said, "I feel okay. Christ, I feel fine. I could probably work some more."

Char shook her head. "You better get that looked at," she said, "We're okay here. We're fine."

And that was against the rules too, for them to keep working without me.

"Okay," I said, "I'm going to drive down to Detroit Receiving."



Stupor: Hot! Tasty! Hell!

Art and layout by
Mitch Cope, 2008

I got into my van and lit a cigarette, and gradually the world came back into focus and I started driving and my sneezing stopped, and my head was feeling better, so I drove right past the hospital, and kept going till I got a good stretch down Michigan Ave. Finally, I pulled over and parked by Miller's Bar.

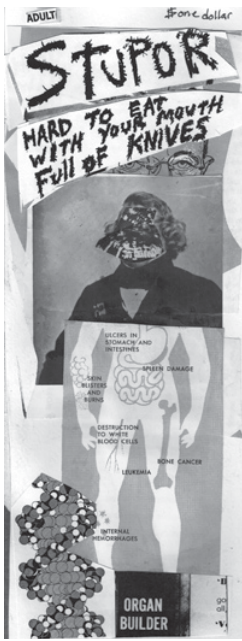
I found a nice dark corner seat, and I ordered two burgers with Velveeta. They tasted so good. My forearms got slick with pink streams of juice and fat. I drank a pitcher of beer. And I forgot completely about my busted head and the tape that held it together. But I didn't forget about Char and Bill and the problems they'd have working in that shitty space without someone running the lights and all. God damn that Char. She's one tough bitch. It was surprising as hell, that day she undid all her clothes and tossed them in the corner of my van. Shit, you'd never guess, under her dirty coveralls and her baggy sweats, that there was this real female-type woman in there.

Well, at some point that afternoon, when I was stuffing hamburgers in my mouth, Char's boot got snagged in the scaffold work or something and she went down. She fell to the concrete while her sandblaster just kept spitting a crazy tornado of dust. She landed bad on her leg and sprung a new joint, and the sharp end of the bone ripped through her muscle and jabbed out the skin of her thigh. Technically, it wasn't my fault, but also more technically, it was. Somehow her harness failed. How does that happen? Human error. I wasn't there to keep check on it. I was ordering more fries and more beer. I know I should have headed back after my first pitcher, but I don't know.

Everything makes me so thirsty these days, and beer is the only thing that really works. And poor fucking Char had busted her leg, and her face was deeply bruised from where her mask got jammed into her, but the mask probably saved her good looks. I mean, she might have broken her face, lost teeth, busted her nose, the whole deal. That happens when you fall onto a concrete slab from twenty feet up. I tried not to blame myself. She didn't blame me. Not at first. But then when I confessed about my trip to Miller's, she did, and then she wouldn't forgive me, and part of me knew she shouldn't. She was better off without me.

I remember that afternoon and the very nice feeling of suddenly being very relaxed and very drunk. But knowing that soon I'd have to drive home, and not knowing anything yet about Char's accident, and calling her to see if I could come over to her place. Of course, she didn't answer. I had to drive soon. I had to leave. I couldn't just drink and drink forever. So I paid, and the bartender asked if I was okay to drive.

"Christ," I said, "I'm fine."



Stupor: Hard to Eat With Your Mouth Full of Knives. Art and layout by Chris Riddell, 2008

5) Help the Cats

Yesterday, me and my brother and Dvante were over at the garage behind the house where nobody lives, and there was this cat in there and it had something wrong with its eye. It was busted and squeezed shut with white stuff coming out of it. And it seemed to want something from us because it didn't run away. It wanted help or maybe it just wanted a scratch under its chin, but Dvante picked it up and bent it in half. He twisted it around at the neck until it cracked and then he threw it on the ground and stomped on its head. I yelled at him, and my brother screamed.

Dvante looked down at the cat and the blood that had squished out of it. And then he looked at me and said, "You better not tell no one."

Me and my brother went running out of there. We ran all the way home. We were both crying because the cat was dead. I told my dad. I blurted it out, and so did my brother. "Dvante jumped on it! He killed it!" I said. And Dad told me that Dvante is messed up bad.

"What a piece," he said, "what a piece." He said, "Stay away from him. He is disturbed. He is crazy. He is just plain bad." Then Dad told us to get our PJs on and watch TV. We got to see some "World Heavy Weight Wrestling," and it was sweet. I kept thinking about how if I had to fight Dvante, that I could beat him good. He knows how to kill little cats, but he doesn't know how to fight people his own size, and then that night I dreamed about it.

I dreamed that me and Dvante were in the wrestling ring, and I was wearing a red mask and I had yellow and blue ribbons shooting from my arms and boots that laced up to my knees. I got on the ropes and leapt so high I could feel the air hiss past, and I came down on him with my elbow right on his dumb, blank, mad face. I hit him so he was bleeding, and that blood was running out between his nose and mouth, and then I did a flip and landed my knee right on his chest. He was so mad that his eyes were bulged out, and he wanted to kill me, but I'm no cat. I was here to help the cats. I just wanted to make things better.

6) Broken Husband

I don't know what I am thinking, when I say we should go out and meet Julie for a drink. We're broke. But I guess I just can't take it anymore – sitting in this house with my husband, watching the tube, waiting for the phone to ring. I want to feel like a normal person, and besides, he's got an interview the following morning. That's definitely worth celebrating.

So, we walk to the corner bar. The only problem is he keeps ordering more and more drinks. Soon it's eleven, and I'm thinking that we should probably start heading home. I'm just trying to finish a game of pool when I look over and see that he's pushed his glass aside, and he's got his head down on the bar. Suddenly I'm



Stupor: Damn! You're Fine. Art and layout by Teresa Petersen, 2007

realizing that bringing him along was a stupid mistake.

The bartender is calling me over.

“Hey, Julie,” I say, “maybe you can give me a hand.”

Julie is tall, taller than me, taller than my husband, and strong too. We hoist him up, so his arms droop over our shoulders, and we get him to stagger down the steps and out the door.

“Oh, man,” Julie says. “This boy’s got to learn when to quit.”

“I’m okay, now,” he slurs.

He turns to Julie whose shirt is scooped pretty low, and somehow, because of the way his body has slumped against hers, her collar has a funny pull to it, which exposes the top of her bra and the healthy slope of her boobs. My husband may be drunk, but he totally notices, and he lets go of me and hugs his face to her chest.

“Whoa,” she says, and gives him a gentle push, and he sinks against the building.

“Sorry,” I say.

“I worry about him,” she says.

“Don’t worry about me,” he says. “I’m perfect.”

“He should get some help, you know.”

“I know,” I say. “He needs his brain checked.”

I decide I had better go home and get the car. So I walk back, alone in the dark, wishing I could just climb into bed. When I return, she’s sitting next to him, his arms in his lap, his face pointing at the sky, tears running down to his chin. What a mess. He’s a disaster.

Thank God, I’m thinking, Thank God, Julie is there, I could have never loaded him by myself. So we get him in the back seat, and I drive home and leave him there to sleep it off. Before bed, I have a cigarette and watch some late night TV. Then I look out the window and see his not-so-pretty face pressed against the passenger-side glass. I set my alarm, so I can wake him and pump him up with coffee and make sure he’s clean and combed good for his interview.

The next morning, I’m up with the sun. I take a quick shower and get dressed and I’m ready to start the work of sobering him. I unlock the front door and step onto the porch, and I’m met with a hell of a surprise. The car door stands open, and he’s gone. I’m like, what the hell? I’m feeling terrible for locking the door last night. He probably tried to get in and couldn’t. Or maybe he went in the wrong house. It’s true; they all look the same.

I slip on my shoes, grab my keys and start driving around, looking for him. I make a path back to the bar. I’m not finding him. But he could be anywhere. I’m worried. I head back home and try to collect myself. It’s already eight. No, it’s later. It’s almost half-past. His interview is at ten. There’s still time.

I call his friend Mark, but there’s no answer. I call the cops to see if they’ve got him. They put me on hold, and I’m pacing the hell out of my kitchen floor. Finally,



Stupor: Feels Like Demi Moore. Art and layout by Teresa Petersen, 2007

I call Julie to see if she has any ideas, and he fucking answers the phone.

“You bastard,” I say. “You fucking bastard.” I get in the car. I head toward Julie’s. I’m going to drag him home. That jerk. I park out front, but I can’t seem to get out of the car. There’s something stopping me. I’ve got this breathless feeling of defeat. I pull out. I go to the ATM and draw a twenty from what’s left of our bank account then pick up a box of wine and a pack of 100s. I’m not sure what to do. I head back home. It’s after nine now. It already feels like the longest day ever. I open the wine and fill a glass and drink the stuff like it’s juice. What should I do? I sit down and smoke and try to think.

Soon he’s pounding on the door. I look at the clock. It’s ten. His interview should be starting right now. He calls my name. His voice is high and strained. He’s yelling that he’s sorry. The neighbors and everyone can hear. I know they can. I get a small cast iron pan from the stove. I unlock the screen door, and I’m ready to ring his bell, even if that means I’ll have to go to prison. That might just be better than spending another day with him.

“Shell,” he says, “I’m so sorry.”

“Sorry for what!?” I yell. “Sorry you got caught!”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You’re such a liar.”

His face is pale and sweaty. “I don’t feel so good,” he says. He turns his back to me and sits on the porch. I step out behind him. The screen door wheezes shut. I want to hit him. I want to feel the cast-iron ring in my hand when it contacts his skull. I could take his head off. He’s ready for that. I’m having trouble thinking. I’m not thinking.

He pulls two cigarettes from his pocket, Julie’s brand. He lights them both, and without even looking, he holds one out to me. His hand is shaking. I take the cigarette and sit next to him. “Shit,” I whisper. I set the pan on porch and I look across the street, beyond the houses to blue walls of the factory. It’s like a fortress over there. Concrete and steel. White smoke curls from the short stacks and drifts our way. There are men working there, around the clock, even now. They never stop.

7) Army of Junkies

Our neighborhood used to be fine. Everything got screwed when the price of scrap metal shot up. All the junkies and crackheads like woke up one day and looked around and were like, wait: This house right here is covered with metal. It’s really only held on by a nail or two. Of course, their need was insatiable. They maybe finally found their niche, depending on what tools they were able to steal. Suddenly there were all these fucked up entrepreneurs, wandering around our



Stupor: Morning Glories on a Pink Toilet.
Art and layout by Teresa Petersen, 2007

neighborhood with shopping carts full of our siding, our downspouts, and our copper pipe.

One guy cut my neighbor's service drop, you know, the line from the power company. I picture him like wild with the weight of all that copper, imagining how much cash a coil of heavy wire like that's going to bring in. His eyes were swirling, his tongue hanging out, flecks of spittle splattering the ground, and he was panting, panting, breathing harder. Putting his cutter right on the line, and of course there was power running through that wire, and when he ran his snips into it, there was a crazy orange blast of light, and his tool melted, and the electricity found his sweating arms an easy path, crossed his heart – hope to die, stick a needle in his eye – down the veins which split at his kidneys and strung through each leg, and he was blacking and charring as the sparks snapped and arced, forcing his muscles into tight knotted fists, a body of fists, squeezed down and clenching, like if a piece of coal was stuffed between his ass cheeks, he'd crush it to a diamond and it would break his hip socket, but he'd be the richest man, limping in the line at the scrap yard. Anyway, he died.

It was one of those middle-of-the-night surprises when the ambulance finally pulled up. Not long ago, someone discovered that the way into the abandoned hospital was by a metal security door, a door probably worth ten dollars in scrap. And now I see junkies going past pushing all kinds of stuff like wheelchairs full of wire, and X-ray machines.

One night, I heard this amazing, banging, wrenching clatter and I knew that a house not far away was losing its siding, so I called the cops. And they told me they were coming, but they weren't coming. They're just there on the phone to lie to you. And that's what the cops here in this city are best at, lying. I hang up the phone and the aching, yanking, and clanging of the dropping aluminum continues for hours and hours. There's no way to sleep with that racket going on, and there's no way I'm going out there to face them myself. This army of junkies.

8) Two Weeks Away From Hating Me

Sandy left her books at my place. She calls to tell me she needs them. She's got a test. And I'm at the bar, and I'm not ready to leave.

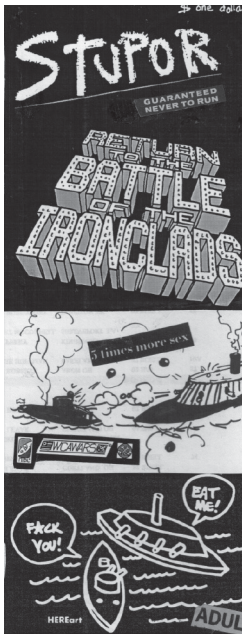
"Stop over," I say, "I'll give you the key." And even as I hear myself saying it, all the warning lights are all going off. Mistake, mistake, mistake. Screw it. I order another whiskey. Before I finish, Sandy is standing next to me.

I pull the key off my ring and push it into her palm. "It's my only one," I say. She seems a little nervous about it, too. She's shuffling and picking at her fingers.

"Can I study there?" she asks.

"I won't be home for a couple hours," I say.

"That's good," she says, "That's about how long it'll take me. Then we can get



Stupor: Return to the Battle of the Ironclads.
Art by layout by Tim Hailey,
2007

some sleep or something.”

“Look,” I say, “I’ve got this interview tomorrow. I’ve really got to get some rest tonight. You know what I’m saying?”

“Sure,” she says.

No matter what I say, I like the idea of stumbling home and finding her there, sprawled out in her underwear, dragging a highlighter over some important line in her textbook. I was about to say something else, but then the bartender delivers me another whiskey. No charge. How about that? This girl, this bartender is beautiful.

“Thanks,” I say. I toast her.

Sandy is about to leave. She gives me a little jab to the ribs.

“I’ll see you in a while,” I say.

She’s giving me this weird, almost hurt look.

“What?” I say. “I’ll see you, okay.”

“Okay, I’ll see you,” she says. “Don’t take forever.”

A cold wind gusts in as she pushes through the door. In two days, I’m going on a trip. She knows I’m going. She doesn’t know about the girl I’m going to see, or the porn we’ll watch, or all the screwing and drinking and gorging we’ll accomplish. I can’t wait. I’m not a good liar. I’m the shittiest liar. I shouldn’t have given her the key. I wish I didn’t. I’m poised to make another big fucking mess. She’s maybe two weeks away from hating me.

“I don’t think it’s going to work out,” I say to my friend.

“What?”

He’s watching the TV over the bar. It’s playing something about sharks. They’re showing the sharp triangles of their teeth. A diagram describes their position in the jaw: a row of teeth upright, one angled slightly inward, one behind that, almost perpendicular to the first. New ones are growing all the time because the old ones get stuck in whatever meat or bone they’re ripping apart. They’re disposable.

“Seems like it would be hard to eat like that,” he says, “You know, with your mouth full of knives. But worse, because they keep getting stuck in your food and falling out.”

The TV is showing this one shark, a great white, I think. It eats with complete dedication. Smashing and yanking and smashing and yanking at this poor seal or whatever that thing is? Like there is nothing in the world but this moment and this amazing meal.

9) Ghosts

I’m at the park with my kids. A group of four women are draped head to toe in black. They gather in the alley, past the playscape, where the Mr. Softy truck is just starting up, chugging and smoking a blue haze. The women slip through the gap



Stupor: My Sister's Nipples. Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed), 2007

in the fence and drift into the park. They come walking toward us. I can tell you nothing about who they are. There's only a slit in their head covers for their eyes to look at you, like the narrow rectangular panel that slides back on the door of a speakeasy and shows only a pair of eyes that look out at you to decide if you're okay to let in. But even if you are, there will be no smoky party under these garments.

They spread out across the green grassy field and they are like this: an absence in the world. Where this woman stands, so stands a void. A black blot. A person scribbled over and scratched out. A ghost. They are black, moving heaps. They are bits of night pushed up out of the dirt. They are dirt pushed out of the night. They are nothing. They are nowhere. They are never.

I watch them go. They move slowly in the direction of the closed GM factory, where the trains are slowing hitching, coupling, banging together.

10) Where Plants Come From

I was sitting on my porch steps. My daughter was using sticks to scratch tracks in the dirt. "Sweetheart," I said, "This isn't the sand box." I gave her some chalk and set her up on the sidewalk. Then my neighbor, John, pulled up in his rusty car.

"Hey," he said, and stood next to me, waiting for me to say something. I didn't. I was mad at my husband, and tired of people. It wasn't John's fault, but for no good reason, I felt like punching him. He watched while my daughter drew a lopsided sun.

"Hi, honey," he said, "You like the sun, honey."

My daughter ignored him, too.

"Is your old man working tonight?" he asked, "I haven't seen him in a while."

"Yeah," I said.

"He sure must work a lot," John said, "because I never see him anymore."

"Neither do I," I said. I hate explaining stuff. My friends, of course, all knew we were split up, but I didn't tell the neighbors. Like it's their business? Just so he'd quit asking I said, "Actually, we're getting divorced."

"Oh," John said, "I didn't know. I'm really sorry. Just really sorry." His eyes were sad and wet. "Shit," he said. He wiped his tears back with the palm of his hand. "That sucks."

"Yeah," I said, "we're getting divorced so he can marry his slut girlfriend. I can't believe you're crying about it," I said. "It's not your problem."

"I'm just surprised." He shuffled around. John was definitely weird. "God," he said, "That really sucks."

It was something like a week later when I was folding laundry and my daughter was watching "Sesame Street" that we smelled the burning. I ran around our house looking for smoke. I threw open the door and I saw a dark fog curling from the



Stupor: Clean, Unclean, and Down Right Dirty.
Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed), 2007

cracks in his windows. I called the 911 people. I grabbed my purse and my phone, and we got out of the house.

By the time the firemen showed up, a black haze had filled the street. We had to back away to keep from breathing it. And the firemen bashed in John's windows and chopped at his door with an axe. From where we stood, we could see streaks of orange flame flick right up the side of his house and suddenly it was all over his roof. It took a couple minutes, but they got the hoses hooked up and water finally came shooting forth in hard, straight streams. I could see the vinyl siding on my house was starting to peel and twist, even though they kept spraying it from the ladder truck. And I was worried and afraid that something might go wrong. Like the water might run out, and the fire might make the six foot leap to my house.

My daughter clung to my leg.

"Don't worry," I said. "The firemen are going to put it out. That's their job. Don't worry, honey."

She had tears running down her small, sweet face.

Pretty soon, the wind whipped the smoke around us. It got hard to get a decent breath. So I took my daughter's hand, and we hurried down the street. We stopped at a burger place on Jos. Campau and each got a milkshake. Our clothes smelled like a campfire.

"Really," she said, "Is the fire wanting to burn our house?"

"No, sweetie. No, of course not. Don't worry, our house is okay. Don't worry." Of course, I was scared shitless and upset by how screwed-up everything was right then. Amazing, this moment in my life. What a mess.

Just then my phone rang. It was my asshole husband. He wanted to talk about the car. I told him about the fire and how we had to leave. I didn't want to say it in front of our daughter, but I thought he might come and pick her up for the night because who knew what condition our house would be in when we got back. I tried to explain it to him in a way that our daughter wouldn't understand. But he's an idiot. I might well have been talking to my milkshake.

"That's terrible," he said, "But here's the thing. I have plans, and I really need the car, and if you're taking the house and all its equity you should at least—" I hung up. After about an hour, we walked back home. Our street was still blocked off. I was surprised to see an ambulance backed up on John's lawn. It didn't occur to me until then that he might have actually been in there. I felt weak and wobbly. The paramedics wheeled his body out. They had him covered, but you could see part of his arm and it was black and shiny as coal. I found out later that they were calling it a suicide.

Apparently, John set himself up in a chair in the middle of his place. He poured kerosene over his face and shirt and pants. And who knows what was going through his head. It was really messed up. I can't believe he did it. I can't understand what



***Stupor: Punk, Pabst
and Porn.*** Art and layout
by writer and publisher,
(name removed), 2007

could have been so bad that you'd want to die like that. Maybe he was trying to make a point. Maybe his heart was broke. All I know for sure is that he was a dumb bastard.

Now, it's like a year later. I'm divorced from my son-of-a-bitch husband. But the best thing that happened is the city bulldozed John's house. That day the heavy equipment showed up will always be like a holiday for me. What a relief. They knocked in the walls, and the house collapsed in a black sooty cloud. Then they scooped it up, scraped the ground clean, and hauled it away to some suburban landfill. And all this crap we'd been living with, like all the bad karma that had accumulated and radiated from that burnt up shell of a house, was gone.

Now I've got plans. I'm paying to have a fence put up. I'm getting clean dirt delivered. In the back part of John's yard, I'm making a garden. Last week, my daughter and I spent some time filling Styrofoam egg cartons with dirt and planting seeds. They were so small. Some were just specks. My daughter kept asking where the plants came from. "They're inside these little seeds," I said, "Deep inside. Curled up and waiting."

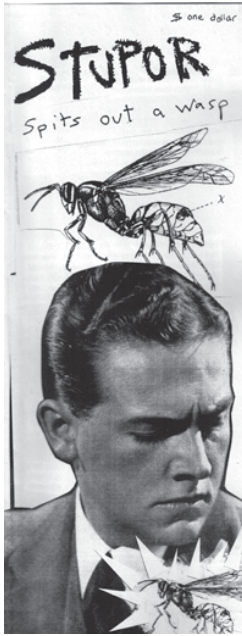
11) Messed-up Version of Heaven

I'm at this house. It's Heavy's place. He's older than me by a bunch, but he's a good friend of mine. We're smoking, and it's very cool, and I'm high. There's a TV playing this movie with Bruce Willis, and he's got a bloody gash on his head. He's sweating and bleeding at the same time. And these guys are hunting him, or the other way, I don't know. Ba-boom! His car blows up. The fireball swirls and rolls all orange and red and black. Bruce Willis is alive in the flash. He's very pissed, and all the little creases and lines in his face get totally intense. He's going to kill someone now.

"You think that's how he looks when he's fucking Demi Moore?" I say.

"I bet they don't fuck," Heavy says. "I bet she sits around the pool all day then bitches all night about how the sun is trashing her skin. I bet she bitches in her sleep. And old Bruce Willis is probably waiting for an opening, you know, so he can get on her, but all that bitching is like a bad dick-shrinker. Poor Bruce Willis gets all that crap rattling around in his head. All that unfixable shit that's wrong with her world. That's stuff you can't change no matter how rich you are."

Then we're not paying attention because these people keep coming to the door. And Heavy has to get up, and he complains about that, but just for standing and walking to the door and doing the handshake, he's like 40 dollars richer. He's like the richest, most amazing person I know. Except for the TV, it's dark in here. He's got his scale on the table and a thousand plastic bags. A pile of twenties like four inches tall. And then comes this real loud, impertinent knock.



Stupor: Spits Out a Wasp.

Art and layout by writer
and publisher, (name
removed), 2007

“Jeez,” Heavy says, and he’s hauling himself off the couch again.

Bang!

The doorjamb splinters and busts apart into a thousand little sticks. The cops fill the room almost like as fast as it takes me to say, “Oh, shit.” And they’ve got their guns out and the sunlight blasts in right behind them. And it’s like they rode in on that bright light. Like they came with burning swords right from some messed-up version of heaven. But these are just cops, and you know how they are, not like swift and punishing like God, but dumb and yelling and smashing around, and they’re not like careful or anything and everything spills.

I spill my drink all over me. It’s hard enough to roll a joint without having your face slammed right into the wall. I’m bleeding.

“Ouch,” I say. “Ouch, that hurts.”

They want all the guns and money and drugs.

I’m glancing over at the TV and something is blowing up and a man’s body is flying through the air.

The cops are cursing at me, and I don’t have no idea what they’re saying. They’re yelling right in my face. Through some grace I’m able to just turn them off. To make it so I see them and they see me, and I feel them shaking me, but it’s like I’m looking up at them from inside the TV or something. Like I am Bruce Willis and they’re the idiots watching, and they’re all mad because my sound is jacked wrong.

They take me away and make me sit in the jail. I stare at the walls and the graffiti that got scratched in there. Dicks and balls, and pictures like this: (v)! Junk I can hardly read, everywhere. Somebody with a black pen wrote: “Genie Forever I love you.” Makes me think of my wife and my mother and my kid. I couldn’t call them. If they had to guess where I am right now, they’d probably get it right.

12) Hot! Tasty! Hell!

This one cold, very screwed up day, just on the other side of my gate, I found what looked like a heap of clothes, but it was worse. Much worse. It was this messed-up woman. She must have been freezing. Her legs were naked on the cement. And every bit of her skin was splotched and blue and bruised. Her clothes were wrong on her body, like someone else made this rushed attempt to dress her and then pushed her out of a car.

I nudged her leg with my slipper. “Hey,” I said, “Hey, wake up.”

Her chest rose, but she didn’t budge. She was using a pizza box as a pillow. A knot of hair fell against the words “Tasty! Hot!”

I recognized her. I had seen her hanging around the trucks that parked in the lot at the abandoned hospital. The truckers would come at night and idle, and she’d be



Stupor: Smells Like Bacon. Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed), 2006

there. I'd also seen her standing near the Meghna grocery. She stared at me, even me, like trying to get my eyes to touch her, to stop on her, and hang on her so I'd pull over and open my door. Now her eyes were shut, but rolling.

I went back in and grabbed the towel I used for wiping my dog's feet and I spread it over her lower half. "Please wake up," I said.

She wasn't moving. She was way gone.

I went in and called 911. I explained about her and gave them my address. I kept the back door open, so I could keep my eye out for the cops. Gradually, it was starting to warm up. And one hour went by and nobody showed, so I called them again. I said, "Where's the ambulance?"

They put me on hold while . . . what? They finished eating a sandwich or something? When they came back on, they told me dispatch had already been notified, and the driver was on the way.

I went out to check on her. She hadn't moved. I wanted to help her but I didn't want to touch her.

After two hours, I called the cops again. I was frustrated and really angry. I started yelling in the phone. "What's wrong with you people? There is a human being dying right now. She's dying. Do you understand? You need to get someone out here. Right now!"

The cop sighed. I'm pretty sure I heard that. "Ma'am" he said, the jackass, "We're working on it. Dispatch has been notified. They're on the way."

I can't believe how fucked up this city is. Finally, three hours later, an ambulance rolled down the alley.

I checked the clock. I needed to get moving if I was going to get to the shop on time. I stripped off my clothes and took a quick shower. I got my hair fixed and put on my face and I was just about out of there, when I glanced out the back, and saw her, very much alive, and staggering around my yard.

I opened the door and said, "I'm sorry but you have to leave right now."

She didn't even look at me. I could see she was going to throw up. Yeah, she chucked right on my basil. Then my dill.

"You have to leave," I announced. That was when she fell over on my tomatoes.

I called the cops again. I told them they needed to pick her up. They told me they already did.

"Then how come she's in my yard puking on my garden!" I yelled.

I hung up.

I had to go to work. I couldn't be late again. I got my dog on the leash. And I felt bad doing this but I took him out back and immediately he was barking his head off, trying to yank free of me so he could eat holes in this woman.

"You need to leave!" I shouted.

She shielded herself but just lay there while the dog snapped at the air around her.



Stupor: The Slobber of Lava and American Cheese. Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed), 2006

What could I do? I put the dog in the house, locked the door and left for work. Later that night, when I got home, the woman was gone. I haven't seen her since. Seems like maybe with winter coming, she'd get tired of all the work that goes into staying alive. Tired of her body being her only resource. Tired of the sour smell of the truckers. Tired of her own awful smell.

I know that I'm tired of dealing with these people and their limitless needs. I'm tired of them trying to steal my gutters or strip siding off my garage or whatever. I'd like to move. Imagine me trying to sell this house now. "How's the neighborhood?" I'd force a smile. "It's really a good street. But there's maybe some problems with all the prostitutes and addicts that have taken over the abandoned hospital."

13) Getting Back at the Bank

The bank is kicking us out. My dad quit paying on the house, and there's an eviction sign stuck to our door with big bands of blue tape. We have lived in this house since 1972. That's over thirty-five years. It was paid off, and then my dad, dumb fuck, started taking money out, and I don't know how he thought he could repay it. When you're driving a HiLo all day, drunk in a factory like he is, maybe everything makes sense. Then every night he flops out on his chair, and keeps pouring the drinks and lighting cigarettes, and his mouth is all crusted from the factory crud he's coughing.

What freaks me out are his farts. That stench comes rumbling out of his ass and seeps from the cushions till it fills the room corner to corner. Man, if you walk into that cloud, it's like getting sprayed with mace. Or worse. And he doesn't care. He just sits in all that stink, drinking, smoking and coughing, and staring off at the TV. And always some movie is playing, maybe the "Terminator 2" with the cool silver dude who can stretch out his body and kick your ass from twenty feet away. I watch him throw a car at Arnold Schwarzenegger, and then I look at my dad who's got one eye half-open and spit stringing down to a dark blot on his shirt.

You wonder why I'm so fucked-up. Look at my dad. Like he ever paid attention to anything ever but his own fucking liquor bottle. So when the bailiff came and stuck the paper to our door with the blue tape, I looked out and saw his wife sitting in the car with her hair all twisted up on her head, and I wanted to kill them. I wanted to break my dad's vodka bottle and stick the broken end in his neck.

Instead, I don't remember when I came up with this idea. I got an apartment with a couple friends, and none of us were working, so we started tearing stuff out of the family house and selling it for scrap. We pulled all the appliances, the toilets, the tubs, the radiators. Shit, we even took the boiler. Then I busted out some windows, and if I had to piss I'd unzip and let the stream splash right into the carpet. I tried to piss at least once in every room. It got so I could hardly stand being in the



Stupor: Pooped and Plundered: Jellyfish and their Amazing Sting.
Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed), 2006

house. I got my dad to do it too, and even my sister when she stopped by to grab the rest of her stuff, including her amazing two-foot bong. Even she squatted down and let a stream go. And that was great. It was like beautiful. And it was like, in soiling the place, we somehow made it clean, or cleaner at least.

We weren't just pissing on the carpet but on my mom and dad and everything that ever happened, the yelling and screaming, the threats, the awful terrible shit. We pissed on it all. My hope is that it'll seep into the cracks of the hardwood and go deeper to the boards below, where it will stay and stink forever.

14) Spits Out a Wasp

Me and Jim are sitting on the back of my truck, eating our dried-up sandwiches and waving off the wasps. It's late summer and the yellow jackets are all over us, landing on our Cokes for a suck of sugar, and taking dives at the meat that overhangs our bread. It's windy and hot, and dust comes whipping down the street and sprays us. There's a storm supposed to be heading in, and we've got about a third of the roof torn off, four stories up.

This building is the one with the flat roof, and we are framing an addition on top of it – well, it sucks. We have to get a tarp on it before the sky busts apart, and it's all a mess because the biggest tarp we could get wasn't big enough to cover it, so the owner had us hodge-podge together these trusses to make the rain shed to the front instead of the back, where it pretty much just dumps into the dirty building. The trusses sort of work, and since it's rained almost every day since we've started, they're totally necessary. Mostly, though, they're in our way.

Down below from where we're working, the masons have pulled away the wall that holds up the front of the building. So if you're standing across the street, it looks like the roof is floating, held up by nothing but a crazy idea.

This one day, we're eating lunch and we look up at the sky, and it's bruising over like a rotting fruit. And we're like, shit, we better cut our break short and get up there and start horsing around with the damn tarp. And Jim, sitting on the back of the truck bed, takes one last bite of his sandwich, and suddenly he's up, bent over, digging in his mouth, spitting blobs of chewed-up bread.

"Fucking wasp," he says. "Fucking wasp stung me in the mouth." His eyes are red and watering. And he guzzles some water and sprays it out. His face is red.

"You need to get to the hospital and get a shot," I said.

He sits back, takes the lid off his thermos and fishes out some ice to suck. His eyes are streaming with sweat. "No," he says. "No, I'll be okay. It just hurts like fucking hell."

His face is turning purple and the veins on his head are all standing out. He sticks out his tongue which resembles a big veiny blob of pounded up meat.



Stupor #9: Stupor Goes Down The Toilet. Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed) with Tim Hailey, 2000

“Jesus. I’ve got to take you in, man. You’re a mess.”

“No,” he says, “I’ll be okay.”

“Well,” I say, “if you have trouble breathing, that’s when we have to go.”

He takes up his thermos and we climb back up to the roof. Just north, a pretty good shock of lighting flashes. So we start yanking the tarp up over our trusses. We nail boards over it to hold it in place. And big cold raindrops begin to thump and splat around us, and we get the last board fired into place just before the sky breaks apart. And suddenly the wind hits us, cold and slantways. It scoops the tarp from the underside, making a giant sail out of it, and the trusses are straining, and they’re bending until one lifts right off the roof and starts slamming up and down, and Jim is out there fighting it, like it matters, pulling it down against the wind, but it starts lifting again and Jim’s going up with it.

“Get out of there!” I yell. “Let it go!”

The trusses are cracking and snapping, and swinging around.

Jim, all purple and soaked by the rain, comes running over the roof while the wind gusts in, lifting our tarp and trusses and using them as giant hammers to smash up our work. The tarp is roaring. The rain is hard, pelting, horizontal. Finally, the trusses fail completely and the tarp rips away and flies over the edge of the building, and the rain is dumping in hard.

Jim is holding his face.

“You okay,” I say.

“Yeah,” he goes, “I’m fine.” He’s looking out over the roof. What remains of our trusses is splintered, shattered. “That’s a lot of work just trashed.”

The tarp is flapping wildly, a dozen or more two-by-fours have flown off. The masons are down there. The rain rushes right into the building. There’s not a damn thing we can do.

“Hopefully no one is dead,” I say. “It would suck if someone was dead. This is a fucked up day.”

“Yeah,” says Jim, “I’m starting to feel better, though. The rain feels good.” He takes another ice cube from his thermos and pops it in his mouth.

15) Forever a Fuck-up

I’m at the park talking to Betty while our kids play. I like her all right but, if I had to guess, I’d say she hates me. I’ll say something like, “My husband is putting in a new window today,” or something, and she’ll just squint at me from behind her small black-rimmed glasses. Yeah, we’re real different people, but so what? Her boy is sweet and he loves to play with mine. I don’t mind standing around with her, despite her super low standards: Like her boy might miss school because nobody feels like driving him; like if we’re carpooling, her husband will answer the door,



Stupor #8: Stupor Goes Wrong. Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed) with Tim Hailey, 1999

half the day passed, and he's still wearing his pajamas, his hair sticking up in every direction; or like her and her floppy set of breasts, falling down either side of her fat gut, her T-shirts and stretch pants, and her lame, random tattoos – sports logos.

So anyway, we are standing in the grass talking about the kids or who knows what, and this minivan rips around the corner and it's roaring and shaking on a busted muffler. And I'm like, "What a jerk!" I can smell the exhaust almost before he passes. It's a nasty cloud of blue fog. "Oh, my god," I say, "That is SO LOUD! That guy's got to get that thing fixed. Where are the cops when you need them?"

Betty is watching the car not saying anything, unflinching, expressionless.

It rounds the corner and pulls into the parking lot and tries for a spot that is just too tight. We hear the loud bang and scrape as he whacks this car, a light-blue sedan. The front fender on his minivan is tweaked and almost falls off.

"Oh, my gosh," I say, "Betty, did you see that. That guy in the van just hit that car."

Betty's watching, "Oh, yeah," she says, "that's Bill."

The door opens, a wrenching, rusted sound, and her husband gets out. He walks around and looks at the car with the long smeary dent down its door. He takes off his hat and scratches his head, like he's trying to work some thought through the thick mantle of his boney skull, but nothing seems to surface, so he gets back in his smoking van and finishes his parking, then lopes across the street into his house.

"Betty?" I say.

"Oh, yeah, Bill has been working on that van as a favor to his Uncle. The fender keeps falling off." She shakes her head like she knows that Bill is forever a fuck-up.

I'm not sure what to say, so I don't say anything.

A couple days later, I see the same light blue sedan that Bill had smashed and it's driving past the park where, again, I'm standing around with his wife, and the car is now fully fixed with duct tape where the side panel and mirror were scraped clean. Finally, Betty says, "Bill's home."

That's when I realize that the car he hit that day was his own.

"Bill's home," she says again, like that's some sort of relief.

16) Damn! You're Fine

It's been two months since it happened. It was my landlord that screwed it all up. He's older than me, but not that old, and he's got one of those big square chins, but something looks wrong with his jawbone, like maybe he was in a car accident and they got the angles wrong on the rebuild. I ran into him at the Elbow Room.

"Hey," he said, "2242?"

"What?" I said.

"2242, Apt B."



Stupor #7: Neighbors.

Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed) with Tim Hailey, 1998

“Oh, yeah, scumbag.” I smiled.

“I can’t help it,” he said, smiling too. “My mother ate too much rat poison while I was inside her belly.” He leaned back and stretched, like to take me all in. “Damn!” He shook his head.

“What?” I said.

“You’re just so fine. I forgot how fine you are.”

“I didn’t forget what a scumbag you were.”

He nods, taking the insult in stride and sipping his drink. “I’ll give you that,” he said.

My mistake, my big mistake was that I was thirsty, and he seemed to understand that and bought drinks and I sat down with him, trying to get over the fact that he was a disgusting human being. And then he started talking about how he was going to swing the mayoral election just by giving all his section-eight tenants forty-ouncers and sending them to the polls with his list. I told you he was scum. I guess that was part of the reason I kept listening, because he was so despicable. I couldn’t hardly believe the crap he was saying.

“You’re gay, aren’t you?” I asked.

“Nah.” He said, “I’m just strapping and rugged. But I’m no homo. But it’s not like fags bother me. Fags are OK as long as they pay their rent at the beginning of the month. Fags are fine, but no pets.”

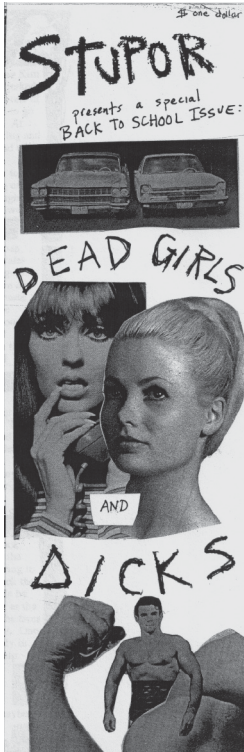
Like I said, I was thirsty and not real laden with cash or nothing, so he bought more and more, and suddenly I was totally messed-up, and back at my place, and he’s flipping through his ring of keys to let us in.

“Holy crap,” he says, throwing open my door. “What a disaster.”

So I’m a slob, that’s the truth. What do you care? Besides, I’m not the worst – Erin’s worse – and I’m sure he’s not perfect either, but I’m sure his wife cleans up good behind him. All this talk about my mess made me have to throw up. Like the room started tilting and turning and he was just this blurred slime of a human taking up my visual space and making me feel sick. I made it to the bathroom and puked and sat there next to the pot for a while getting my bearings.

He had pushed some clothes around and was sitting on my couch. Waiting. What like I want to kiss him now? He got me a drink of water. After a couple minutes I felt better and then he kissed my barf-mouth. Look, I don’t care, a kiss is a kiss, no big deal, but then he’s trying to get his hand up under my clothes. His fingers were hard poking stupid stubs, jabbing and grabbing around my body.

And I’m like, “You’d better go.” Maybe I was mumbling. Then he found my underwear up inside my skirt and pulled it down my legs. So is this a date rape? I guess. I’m sick talking about it. I was more ashamed with myself for going along with it all, for not kicking him out, for not saying no, or even suggesting he might stop. I just took him in like water running into a drain. It’s not really a date rape? It



Stupor: Dead Girls and Dicks. Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed), 1998

was me and him, and I knew what we were working toward. I just didn't care.

So now rent is due, and I feel like he ought to give me a break. I don't want to give him anything. So I'm like, screw it. And Erin gives me her part and I stick it in a book and shelf it. And every day that I wake up I'm paranoid by any opening and closing of the door that it might be my landlord with his big ring of keys. Like I'd be there in the shower, standing in a couple inches of water, and he'd be flipping his keys around, smiling his sicko smile and saying, "Damn! You're fine."

I told my roommate that I feel like a fugitive. I didn't explain why. She thinks I'm crazy.

"Maybe we should clean up sometime," she says.

Another month passes and Erin gives me the rent and I make like I'm getting my side together too and then pull out another book and shelf the cash. Two months come and go, and then we get an official-looking letter stating eviction proceedings and their imminent schedule. On the bottom of the page is a quick scrawl in his hand about getting a drink and talking it over. I'm always thirsty. I'm freaking out.

"Erin! Erin!"

"What," she says.

"We have to clean our apartment and drink some gin. I can't take it anymore."

Our house is the messiest it's ever been. We're completely lazy, slopsters.

Dishes are stacked on dishes on food that once was food but now is brownish goo. And the sink is plugged with salad, cereal spill, and sourish yellow curdled gunk. I can't touch it. How can I? Erin! The trash is piling against the refrigerator, the bags splitting with pizza boxes.

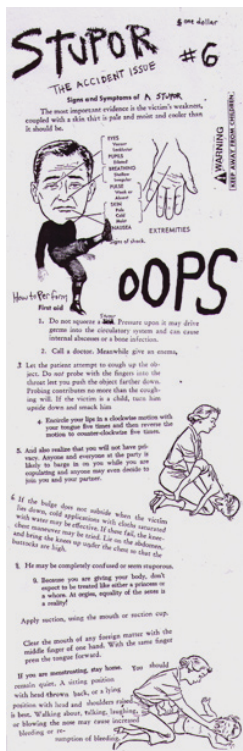
I scoop up the dirty clothes from the bathroom floor: the socks, the bras, the wads of Kleenex and hairs curling to make paisley patterns on the tile. And we pour some gin and get ready to clean more, but really what we're getting ready for is the next gin, which is better, I decide, with ice, and better even with a lime.

So Erin and I end up drinking and laughing and having a great day and I think we're really bonding. Like best friends. For the first time in weeks I feel like going out. We head out the back door and there he is in the lot, sitting in his car. As soon as I realize it's him, I grab Erin and turn her around. "Let's go out the front!"

And before I can get the door closed I hear him yelling at me, "2242, Apt B!" he yells, "I need to talk to you!"

"Go!" I push Erin back through the door, and we're running down the steps and out the front door. "Let's go." She thinks it's funny. I know I should tell her but I don't know exactly how to start. Out the front, we get in her car and take off.

A couple weeks pass, our court date, looms, I could care less. I hate doing it to Erin. I'm probably screwing up her credit — whatever that means. She's going to kill me when she finds out, but I can't seem to find my way around it. So that's what I'm drinking to now: endings.



Stupor #6: Oops: The Accident Issue. Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed) with Tim Hailey, 1997

17) Blissed

After surgery I didn't have any trouble getting used to taking painkillers and sinking into the couch. It hurt to sit up, and standing took some work, and sometimes the pain was so focused and astonishing that I felt like I was going to barf, but it didn't matter because I knew I'd get better, and I could sleep as much as I wanted even though my wife was pregnant, and our three-year-old son was tearing up the place.

I remember sitting through the afternoon on our porch glider, wasted, and the orange sunlight was filtering through the trees, and the usual neighborhood racket was going on all around me.

It was beautiful. Blissful. Even with the cars blaring down our narrow street as the kids from a couple houses down yelled and threw balls over the pavement, and Junior, the teenage delinquent, was drunk on his porch, his teeth broken to points. He sat on a lawn chair with his screen door propped open and played the worst music. I remember thinking that he's not a really bad kid, just really dumb. Then I was thinking about beer and grilled sausage, and a car was cruising the street. It double-parked and honked until Junior stumbled forth to complete some money-for-baggie trade.

My truck hasn't moved in five days now. I'm not yet ready to get it going. I can hardly walk, so I'm not sure when I'll be able to get back to work. They're finishing a roof now. No way in hell I'd get up there.

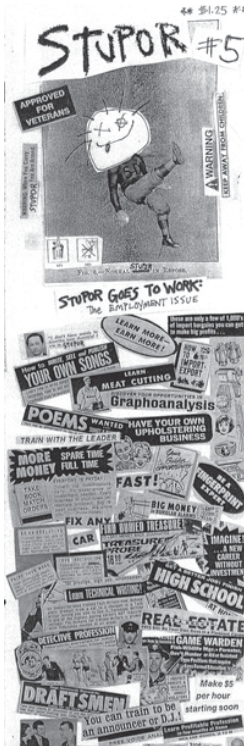
So since you're here, you want to touch my scar? Let me show you. It's about three inches – not quite. It runs through the valley of the shadow of my pubes. Fear no evil. My pubes are shaved away and just growing back, a five-day stubble. Anyhow, big deal, this is what's cool: my scar is a pucker. It's like a mouth that's been sewn shut. And I wonder what it's got to say.

Did I tell you that I woke up in the middle of surgery? The doctor told me to hang tight. He wasn't done. I was so doped. I told him to take his time. Don't worry about it, I said. Somewhere down there my dick, the saddest dick of all time, was flopped to the side and held in place with a piece of tape.

18) A Place for Zombies to Stack Their Clothes

It was Halloween, and I was a zombie. Jill was something dead too. Who wears a floor length dress and then dies? A dead lounge singer? A drowned starlet? She was pale and white and looking like she should lie down on the hard floor of the office and close her eyes and let me crawl all over her and chew her apart. I could do that? My God, I'd like to. God damn.

We were working still. There was supposed to be an office party, a costume party, but the party got canceled because the boss got the swine flu, and all his kids



Stupor #5: Work. Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed) with Tim Hailey, 1996

got it and so that morning, he imposed a quarantine on himself. But really that meant he had gone home to watch TV and do nothing, while Jill and I worked our asses off to get his stupid project done. It was due yesterday, but he kept changing it and making Jill redo all the work she'd already done, and driving her crazy and saying rude things too. The boss is an asshole. My wife was also pissed because I was supposed to be doing Halloween stuff with the kids, but there were problems, I told her, big problems at work. What could I do?

Thankfully, Jill stayed too. Because without Jill, this place would really suck. Thank God for Jill. All we were trying to do was save this fucked-up booklet before it went to press. It was for our families, too. That's what I tried to explain to my wife, but she didn't care. She was just pissed that I was here and not there.

Jill was just copying everything and shoving stuff in a Fed Ex envelope, and we're about done when the machine started taking a crap on us. She's opening the side panel and slamming it shut, and pressing buttons and turning it on and off.

"Shouldn't this be somebody else's job," I said, "Not ours. It's hopeless."

"If it's not one thing it's another," Jill said. "This company is going to tank whether or not we get this booklet out on time."

Soon our work was done and the papers were packed and sealed and ready for pickup. It was late. We were tired. We were slap happy. We started just laughing, and laughing at nothing. Finally she said, "I don't want to go home. Shit, I'm too wound up." I was too.

"Let's get a beer," I said. We were still dressed up for that party that never happened. Might as well go to the bar. It seemed like a very good idea. I looked in the mirror. My zombie paint had sort of faded. I'd brought a tube of fake blood to squirt on myself for the party. It said it might give you an allergic reaction in small print. I slapped it on my face like cologne, I got it in my hair by accident. I got it on my clothes and the blood was bright and orange and gooey. I looked like a car crash.

We drove till we found a place, one she knew, a long narrow bar where no one goes. The air was stiff and hazed and breathed before, a hundred times. We sat at the bar, and the barkeep teetered toward us. She was dressed like a liver transplant. Yellow and sweet. She held the counter and paced. We didn't ask, but she told us her husband was not here, that he was asleep in the back or upstairs.

"It's okay," I said, "we aren't looking for him. We're looking for beer." So the beers came and Jill and I drank and talked about the work that still needed accomplishing, and the bad situation with our asshole boss and the whole dumb company. And after more beers and a shot, we were both tired but our frustration had drained away, and she was suddenly leaning on me and pressing her mouth to mine. And I didn't expect to be there in that kiss, discovering her mouth, her tongue.

"Holy shit," I said, "That was nice."



Stupor #4: Sick. Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed) with Bill Rohde and Tim Hailey, 1995

We kissed again. She smiled. Her mouth was covered with my fake blood. She was my first and only kill.

“Now you’re going to turn into a zombie,” I said. I’ve infected you.

“Hmm,” she said, “Is that how it works?”

“That’s it, sort of. Only I should have probably chewed off a hunk of your tongue to make it stick. But, yeah, I give you two hours, and you’ll be a brain-eater, and then the party can really begin.”

I gave her a napkin.

“We should go,” I said, “It’s getting late.” It was late, and I was feeling wild and great and dizzy with Jill, and I knew my wife was probably still awake, with pillows propped behind her back and a magazine in her hand. She’d be angry whenever I came home.

I got up to find the bathroom. It was way in the back, past a small serving station that was strangely stacked with clothes. Pants and underwear and shirts with collars. Why are they here? An old man was back there too, slumped over and sleeping in a booth, and there was a line of something running from the corner of his mouth. He looked propped-up and dead. But then he jerked and snored and kept sleeping. The booths were dark and quiet and dusty. It was a place to sit and whisper, a place for zombies to take off their clothes and stack them on the serving station and forget about wives and home and work.

I wanted to slide into a booth with Jill. I wanted to peel away her clothes and fold them and organize them into piles. I wanted to feel her drunk, warm, friendly body. I wanted to smear the rest of my fake blood all over her chest and stomach and thighs and test for allergic reaction, and then hold her ribs and her spine and her skull and sink my bad zombie teeth into her and crunch up her brains and let her crunch mine and look terrible and frightening, with bloody hunks of skin and muscle, and ropes of intestine and stomach and liver spread out on the table before us, until we were so exhausted from feasting on each other that we would fall asleep and drool and never go home and never go back to the office, but stay in this place until there was nothing left of us to eat.

19) Morning Glories on a Pink Toilet

Finally, the baby fell asleep, so my wife and I started drinking beer. Only she didn’t have much. She was too thin to drink, and her hair wasn’t all grown in yet. She was coming back to life slowly. The chemo had more or less fried her guts.

For some reason, I can’t remember, she was mad at me. Probably some disagreement about the baby or about my cluttered office, or just the list of stuff that needed to get done. But it was Saturday and I needed a break. So I climbed on our roof. It was quiet there and you could see down the alley past the ghetto palms and



Stupor #3: Shame. Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed) with Bill Rohde and Tim Hailey, 1995

weed-ridden lots, across the rows of rooftops, all lined up and symmetric, to the huge blue wall of the pawn shop on Jos. Campau Street. I found a spot in the shade of the chimney and opened another can. Foam ran over the cold rim.

Well, sometime during the day, we had microwaved some spinach pies. They were pretty good.

“Hey,” I said, “Will you toss me some hors d’oeuvres.”

She was reading a magazine. She didn’t even look. She’s like that when she reads, completely absorbed; even now with her chemo-rattled brain. So I leaned back and drank my beer.

After a while I began to study my garage. I’ll be the first to admit that it looks like shit, but the neighbor’s garage was a real mess. Its shingles curled and peeled like burnt paint. It also sported a huge hole, maybe from the tornado, years back. No one had lived in that house for a while. It had been boarded up. I’d been in the garage before. There was nothing in it besides, rats, a soggy hide-a-bed, some newspapers, and a stack of flagstones that would have looked good in my yard. Too bad I never got around to swiping them. Things were better now that new people lived there. They had fixed some of the windows and made an arbor in the backyard from hurricane fence. Then, to my wife’s dismay, they tore out a pink toilet and set it up right under the arbor. You could see it from our deck. Something was growing on it, probably morning glories. At least that’s how it looked.

I crushed up my beer and tossed it back in my yard. My wife, who was sitting in the sun alone, looked up. She was pale, and the bones of her face were sharply visible. She had no eyebrows.

“I think I hear the baby,” she said. “Yep, that’s him.” She rose and went into the house. Beyond her, the trees were full and green with summer. Someone down the alley had fired up their barbecue, and smoke curled past the garages. I was drunk. I lay back and the shingles pressed their texture into my skin. Things were starting to feel normal again.

It just wasn’t that long ago when she had said, “What am I going to do if my hair falls out?”

“Well, we’ll get you a wig,” I said. “Or you can shave it like Sinéad.”

“I just hope,” she said. “I just hope I don’t lose it.” She held our four-month-old son, nursing him. That was before the chemo tainted her milk.

20) God’s Power Beam

The Witnesses came once more. It was sometime after my wife left. They’re the ones who used to leave the magazines with the corny pictures. Here’s one of a very mellow, bearded Jesus. And he’s getting blasted by God’s power beam, but he’s like one cool Jesus because he doesn’t even notice these white and yellow lines of light



Stupor #2: Childhood.
Art and layout by writer
and publisher, (name
removed) with Bill Rohde,
1995

that are busting apart and ricocheting from his back and firing off in every direction.

These pictures were always sort of a joke between me and Jeanie, back when she still laughed about stuff, but at some point that changed. She said it was me. It's true, I got fat. It disgusted her. The pills made me that way. I couldn't help it. I had to take them. "So what," she said. "So don't eat so much crap."

Then these Witnesses, they'd come over to our house and bang on our door, and they'd want to pray with Jeanie. And then, I don't know, I guess they broke her down. She'd let them in to talk, and then once I walked through the room, and I was blown away. Jeanie was praying with them.

"Who the hell are you?" I said. That's a woman I didn't know existed: My praying wife. She's faking, I felt like saying. She's really going to eat you.

And now they're here again, the Witnesses. Of course Jeanie's gone. And I'm having to tell them the bad news, which is really a bummer. "Jeanie's moved out," I say. I don't know exactly where she's gone. Just gone. She wanted a clean break. Like that was fair. She took like one big bounce off my giant stomach and, suitcases packed and car running, she launched herself into the drivers seat and blasted down the street. It didn't seem real then. It doesn't now either. But now, I'll tell you. It's too damn quiet around here. And now, I'm lonely as shit.

So anyway, I invite these Witnesses in, and I ask them to sit down.

"No," the older one says, "We can't."

"Of course you can," I say. "Please," I say, "Sit down. I can't talk about the end of the world standing up."

So they take chairs and I cut them each a piece of pie.

"I hope you don't mind," I say, "But I'm starving." I offer them champagne but they won't take it. I fill my mug and sit down. And they talk at me for a while and I watch them talking, and I get looking at this one who is kind of pretty in her blue skirt and suit. She looks like a younger happier version of Jeanie. I can't stop looking at her. I take a big bite of pie and wash it down with the bubbly.

"You want another slice of pie?" I ask. They shake their heads. I cut another piece.

Then they want me to pray with them.

"Well," I say, "I don't think I'll be very good at it, but I'll give it a go." So we were going to pray for my soul. Then I say, "We might as well pray for Jeanie's. She's the one with soul problems. Can we do that?"

"Sure," the pretty one says.

"Do I need to close my eyes?" I ask.

"You're supposed to," she says.

But with my eyes closed I can't listen to any prayer. I'm not even thinking of my wife anymore, but how it might be with this pretty Witness girl. I think like how if we were alone, her and me. I could guide her toward the bed. "Here," I'd say, "let's pray



Stupor #1. Art and layout by writer and publisher, (name removed) with Bill Rohde, 1995

in my bed. Take off your skirt suit. Take off your underwear and that weird girdle-like thing that's squishing your tits down." Like so many times with Jeanie, we could screw and then order a pizza or something and eat it right there, lying with our legs under the sheets.

I may be fat, and that maybe makes some people not want to touch me anymore, but I'm still rock solid. I mean, you can see my heart beating right there under my skin, pulsing: thump, thump, thump.

Then I guess our prayer is over. The Jehovah's Witnesses, or whatever they are, really seem to want to save my soul. I appreciate that. Of course there's no saving me. Then they pull out their magazine.

"Sweet," I say. This one here shows this hilarious scene where these people are lying around with all these animals like from the zoo. They tell me that this is what happens after the time of trial when fire rips up the sky and cooks up every hotdog and cockroach to a crunchy crisp. This is the thousand years of peace.

"Looks good," I say. And I'm thinking about Jeannie and the pretty Witness girl. It would be nice if we could all get together and just wear those robes like Jesus or the Romans at some homosexual bath, and we could lie in the grass like in the picture and be surrounded by all sorts of wild animals like rhinos and tigers and rainbow-colored birds and nobody would want to argue or criticize anybody. We'd all just want to be friends and to be happy and to hump and hump and screw every day. And nobody would laugh at me just because I'm fat. Nobody would call me Fatfuck or Creepo. And me and this girl and maybe even Jeannie too, we could open our robes and my belly would slip off to the side and lay there like something separate from me. I'd pretend I don't recognize it. And we could touch one another without having our guts torn out by the lions or bones gnawed by wolves or eyes plucked clean by vultures or crows. And not even the sun would burn our skin or seep in and twist our cells to cancer.

I look up from the picture at these women in their stiff blue skirt outfits with their white blouses undone, one button down from the collar, and I know they wouldn't touch the skin under my chin or be tender and caress the layers of flesh flanking my ribs, not even the homely one. Not during the thousand years of peace. Not ever. That's okay. I understand. I'm not an attractive person. Jeannie made that clear.

It's like she said before she left me, "If you just cared a little about yourself, you'd stop eating so much crap. But you just don't give a shit. And everything you're stuffing in your mouth just makes you fatter, and you're getting fatter and fatter and fatter." Those words were like these screwed-up bells ringing over and over.

She was right. It's true. I'm doing my best not to let shit like that bother me. But she was right, and nothing is sadder than the truth. I look up at the Witness women. They want to pray one more time.

"Do you think," I say, "Do you think this time we should hold hands?"