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Helen

a literary magazine

sample issue

one

october 2014

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a literary magazine

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from the editors

Dear Reader,

We welcome you to our inaugural issue as we launch *Helen: a literary magazine*. Our hope is that Helen becomes a long running force within the literary community of Las Vegas, Nevada.

With gratitude,
The Editors of *Helen: a literary magazine*

Dedicated to our namesake and inspiration,
Helen J. Stewart, the first lady of Las Vegas.

t h a n k s

Helen: a literary magazine would like to thank the following individuals for their support in helping us launch: Jorge Lara & The Las Vegas Poets Organization, Paloma Solamente, Melisa Weikel, Kara Wickwire, Dax Pagan, Ellie Mendre, Jana Lynch of Jana's RedRoom, Barbara Olsson, Laura McBride, Vogue Robinson, Sarah King, Ellen Sussman, Tina Wallace, Corie Weaver, Andy Hall, Arika Elizenberry, Vern Holmstrom, Nancy Holmstrom, Cliff Holmstrom, and the Battle Born Slam team.

s u b s c r i b e

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Helen
a literary magazine



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Helen

a literary magazine

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poetry

Megan Merchant
Tin Can Love
Epithalimium

Tin Can Love

Megan Merchant

Today, the terrain is blowing crazy--
land moving its side winding
body of loose skin, riding easterly gusts,
shaking squat mobile homes
and their tinfoil windows.

Those who live this Mojave life
want loneliness, heart calendars
set to the bloom time of a five
petaled flower, May to September,
and if late, due to an undue cold,
the heart will wait, and would even
if it had something else to do.

It's a tin can kind of love, living on wheels.
A property line of cracked earth-- the dry
lake bed--a lifeline, a claim. Even desert
dwellers own some thing.

A collection of topographic recipes,
perhaps, on inherited note cards--

*For Flax Leaves : crush leaves
in a fist, tear the sweet flesh
of petals as a cure for swelling any parts
of body--lips, hands, even thighs.*

Those wildly inflamed
take the membranous skin
in their mouths
and swallow.

Epithalamium

Megan Merchant

I'm sitting in the car
at 10 am on Thursday
under a sign that reads
The Tour Starts Here
waiting for the doors
of the Liberace Museum
to open,

to book a room in the
back corner of the museum
for my wedding reception-

black clothed tables, unity candles
and a cake next to the silver
spangled piano, gold glitter jump
suit once worn by the legend himself.

It's eccentric, but no more so
than promising to share the circus of my life
with another equally as fallible human being.

While waiting, I contemplate whether
I'm completing a fete never done by another
woman. I'm monumental-

signing loudly along
to the catchy lyrics of
the latest hip-hop sensation
I'm in love with a stripper

flawlessly-as if they had been
memorized alongside wedding vows,
Pound's Cantos, the Our Father,

the human brain has an amazing
capacity to be filled, like time, with the useless,

I can't even recall what color
underwear I'm wearing -
a deliberate choice.

When it's time, I remove the key,
lock the doors and swallow the startled
sensation
of De'ja vu --knowing I may never
be here again, exactly--and that
isn't necessarily, so bad.



art & photography



In The Belly of the Beast

Su Limbert

media: oil on wood cutout

eARThen 1

Nancy Good
media: photography





Le Llama Descend les Escaliers

Ginger Bruner

media: photography

featuring Kuzco the Llama &
Nancy Rouas of PettingZoo2u
with performers Haute Couture,
Onnaleigh Sweetman, and
Georgia Curinga.

Tools 🖐️

Brandon Scales

media: photography



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**Next Issue's Theme: MUSIC
SUBMISSION DEADLINE: FEBRUARY 1, 2015**

Thank You.

Helen
a literary magazine



fiction

Clear Heads
Rose Wednesday

Clear Heads

Rose Wednesday

It's my third day in a row without sleep. In five minutes, I'm delivering a press conference and I'm not going to lie, I feel absolutely great. I've been adjusting the buttons on my suit for the last 30 minutes and I've finally got them into a good position. I slick back my hair in the mirror and give my shirt cuffs each a little tug. I've got gold cufflinks in the shape of headjacks. It's those little details that people write their puff pieces on. I never show cleavage and all of my suits are charcoal gray. They have to say something about my style and the androgyny angle is too obvious. I saw an entire spread last year devoted to "Fatima's Tie Tacks of '20." I feel so fucking great! I haven't eaten in 36 hours but damn if the thought of food doesn't make me bored out of my skull. I wonder if they'll notice the cufflinks or if they'll run a piece on my new haircut instead, shaved on one side to show off my gold headjack. Probably the haircut. Unless that's too obvious. I shake up a tube, take another hit, and tap on the sound stage door. My assistant, Veronica, taps back twice. They're ready.

And out we go. Damn, brighter than I expected out here. I nearly trip on the way to the podium, but whatever, here we are in front of the crowd. I get a giddy feeling, the one I always get when I'm running a long con, from sleeping over at my first girlfriend's when I was eleven to this, my twenty-fucking-eighth year—the feeling hasn't changed a single ounce. Headrush. These snapping camera-heads have no idea I'm high as balls right now.

"Hey, gang," I tell them, leaning against the podium. The crowd laughs because I'm good at this. They made me CEO, but everyone who knows the score knows I'm really PR. I look a lot better than the president who might as well be Walt Disney's pickled head for all the excitement he stirs in a crowd.

"We're ready to tell you the big news," I say. "Although I'm sure a trusted anonymous source has you good people all on edge already, let me be the first to announce that we are FDA approved and commercially available on both the implant and the easy-to-use self-opening tubules in seven

different formulas. Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to symptom-free mood enhancers, relaxants, performance enhancers, and one mild hallucinogenic. Ask your doctor about Stimaplay today." The last line, I give in the old Tylenol ad voice, the soothing one right before they rattle off the side-effects. The reporters in the front row are going wild, many of them young interns eager to get the exclusive. I'm looking to see if there's any I'd buy a drink when I run into her and suddenly I regret switching straight from Amphet™ to Groove™. Noor. This is about to become a bad trip.

She's not doing the hippie look anymore, which is, frankly, a relief. I guess her editor told her it wasn't office-appropriate. She's rocking the cat-eye glasses I told her about, which is how I spot her in the first place. She's got her notebook out like it's 1973 and her pen tip is leaving little marks all over the top of the page. I can see right down her wet pink throat from here. She's about to ask me some ethics question, little miss prude, little miss ethics, haunting my fucking press conference.

"Miss Johnson," she asks, "would you care to comment on the recent allegations of testing on the homeless?"

. . . Or she would have if this were a movie—if someone had gotten her a microphone the whole conference would've gone silent while everyone Considered The Ramifications. But this isn't a movie and we're moving right along to a much louder question about pricing which I handle pretty deftly considering that the reporter in question seems to be bending and elongating a little as I'm talking to him and a wave of Groove™ takes me. When I look back at Noor, she's gone—if she was ever there. No matter. I'm holding onto the podium like it's a life raft, but I can see myself on-screen at the back and I look pretty together. I turn my head to the left a little so everyone snapping pictures can get a good shot of my headjack. It looks good on me, CEO chic. I got them to do a little sunburst of gold that lances out into the shaved part of my head. It's all about branding. Now I'm talking about instrumental success in the war on drugs . . . on drugs. Some days, I just love my job.

Suddenly, it's later and Veronica is helping me toddle offstage. She's such a cute kid, no headjack yet, even though I offered to get her the appointment slot right after mine for all her hard work in putting together the press kit. "Personal reasons," she said, something about her dad being an alcoholic and I had to look sad and understanding. The door shuts behind us and I let myself fall down into the green room chair, giggling like a fiend. I looked at my reflection and for a second I thought part of my head was

missing and this sets off a chain of laughter that just won't quit.

"You've got the launch party tonight," Veronica says but who the fuck cares when there's a gentle dripping rain falling from the sprinkler head, landing lightly on the backs of my hands, the only exposed skin I show because, dammit, it's all about cleavage. Veronica has nice cleavage, which is not the same as having breasts. Cleavage is a little more sterile.

"That's it," she says as she grabs a vial and shunts it against the side of my head. There's a little twinge and suddenly I'm, . . . fuck. "Dammit, Veronica!" She wobbles into focus. My head hurts like the worst hangover I've ever had. The headjack whirs and expels a little dark fluid. Veronica hands me a paper towel for my jacket.

"Get yourself cleaned up," she says, and the look of disgust on her face is more real than anything that's happened in the last three days combined. "You've got work to do."

"Wait," I call after her as she starts for the door. Suddenly, the press conference feels like a bad dream. "How did I do out there?"

"You did just fine," she said. "They ate it all up."

She sounds sad. I ask, "Did you see a chick in cat-eye glasses?"

"Scoping someone out?" she asks. Before I can answer she slams the door.

I'm already certain how it's going to go, but I can't stop myself from turning on the television. I've seen headjacks on the news before so I'm surprised by my own surprise when Fatima turns her head and it catches the light. The camera zooms in on the hole in her head, a small neat eyelet, made of ultra-stable gold, with a little pin in the middle like the tire pressure valve on a bicycle. My ex-lover has a hole in her head. The thought doesn't happen in words, but in a single jolt delivered directly to my gut. I have to cover my mouth. The downstairs neighbor hates excessive noise.

My brother, 'Seem, wanders in, scratching his armpit with one hand and cradling two cans of beer in the other. He hands me a can, and I hold it without opening it. He glances at the TV.

"You still watch this trash, Noor?" he asks.

"Why not?" I ask. "You don't see your friends on TV every day."

He rolls his eyes, cracks open his beer and takes a big swig. "I didn't know you were still friends with that sellout." He wipes his mouth on the back of his hairy arm.

"I don't know," I say. "It's complicated when you've been with

someone for a long time." He's never had a girlfriend for more than a year; they're all strangely interchangeable to him, and he's pleased enough to have them, but once they're gone, it's over. I don't know where he meets them, or where they go after they leave. They all like the things he likes, namely: drinking, good eating, postcolonialism, anticapitalism. Sometimes I worry he'll never find something real, the kind of thing where you can fight about everything and still love each other absolutely.

Back to the TV and it's now obvious that Fatima's tripping balls up there. I'm sure the straight-laced health journalists aren't even noticing it, but I know Fatima; I know that look on her face when she's holding herself together and pulling one over. She's so smug about it I nearly laugh . . . for a second, but then she's fielding a question. For a moment I see that she's focusing on a point just behind the man talking, nodding along with what he says but craning just a little with her eyes to see past him, her eyes going wide with . . . fear, I realize, finally. She always was a visual hallucinator, back when we did that sort of thing—when I did that sort of thing, since clearly, she still does.

"Noor—" she starts to say, and then she stammers, "I mean . . . nor do I support illicit drug use—"

I reach up quickly and switch it off.

"Hey," 'Seem says. "If you're not going to watch that, I'm gonna watch Third World Live."

"Go ahead," I say. "Sorry."

I burrow my way deeper into his couch. Here there be crumbs, and possibly worse, but I don't mind. I don't want to see that look on her face again. Somehow it wasn't like when we used to party together. Somehow it was wrong.

I call Noor from the party. I've done a shot of Alkatrope™ and it's got me jittery but I'm not up like I want to be so maybe some gloating will help. It rings. It rings a lot. Come on come on—

"Hello?"

Relief, surged over me. "Noor? You in DC?"

"None of your . . ." she pauses. "I'm in Dupont. Why?"

"You wanna come down and party with us?"

"I don't do that anymore," she says. "I'm trying to get my life together."

"Oh, come on—" I can barely hear myself it's so goddamn loud in

here—"It's not like we're doing drugs. Just a corporate thing . . . but I want to see you." I wonder if I've got another shot of that cleaner fluid on me. They're supposed to sell them one to one but last time it took me two or three to come down. Probably shouldn't be high for this. Not with Noor coming in. She's got her shit together.

There's a big CFO grabbing my ass and I have to whirl around and slap his back. Camaraderie. I sling an arm over his shoulder and we lean in for the close-up, laughing—office humor! We point at each other's matching sunburst headjacks and grin. Silly photo for the Forbes story. Then I'm laughing for real, but I forget Noor on the phone who is still talking into my ear about how she's getting her coat on and she's coming down here. Holy shit! This was a bad idea. I don't want her to see me like this and this reporter asks me, "Are you seeing anyone? and I'm like, "I'm a butch dyke in the fast paced biotech industry. I'm lucky my cat hasn't moved out. You feel me?"

I catch the last train out; I guess that means I'm taking a cab back. I only have one dress with me, my job interview dress, but it's black and I bought it here so I assume it's Washington-appropriate, although it hasn't netted me a job . . . yet, I promise myself as I ride the swaying train through the tunnels. When I climb out of the Metro station it's spitting a little bit of icy rain; the ground is already slick with it. Nutting is what Fatima would call this kind of rain. She's buoyant; she floats on the surface of things in a way I've always admired. I see rain falling from above; she sees God straddling us. I can imagine her doing the pose, the wrist-flick gesture, the Yeah baby. Her impersonations are divine.

The party is at the Air and Space Museum, which looks ancient and outdated next to the cabs parked in front. As I get there, the press van is packing up and a custodian in a gray jumpsuit is rolling up the red carpet. He looks at me, shrugs, and keeps rolling. I walk through the front doors alone.

The party inside is in full swing. I see Well Enough To Work has gone through, which means that this catering company's waiters are all young men with Down Syndrome in white dinner jackets. I feel conflicted, but I don't trust myself to know what's best so I start counting celebrities until I'm sufficiently mortified and find myself backed into a corner. A waiter comes up and offers me a canapé.

"It's like a pizza," he says, patting me on the hand.

"Thanks," I say, putting one into my mouth whole and gulping it

down. He smiles a little. He's got an implant, a cochlear, I think. Predecessor to the headjack. Now mandatory under Well Enough. I wrote a story on it that didn't get picked up—my editor in Nebraska said no one cared about this sort of thing. The men in black jackets patrolling the room have cochlears too—enhanced hearing for intelligence reasons. What is necessary for some is now optional for others, a bonus . . . in case we were getting any doubts about who had the upper hand.

The waiter and I watch faces together for a little bit; he knows some of the names, and even the ones I don't know seem vaguely familiar. He gets called away, and I'm suddenly alone again in a room full of congressmen and investment bankers. I thought by now I'd be at home in crowds like this, or at least on the periphery, shouting allegations, demanding comment. Instead I feel like a high school freshman at a senior prom.

And then I spot my prom date.

She went with a black suit because she's classy like that, but she's got the tie half-undone and she's arm in arm with a very young blonde woman, a model who's clearly excited under the half-bored face I'm sure they practice. Fatima's got a champagne flute in one hand, and when she spots me, she waves me over with it, miraculously not splashing any. I peel myself off the wall and hobble over to her on my unsteady heels.

She's sober, I see. That's better than I expected. There's a weird stain on the lapel of her jacket, though, and an antiseptic smell hovers around her.

"Noor!" she says. "Veronica," she says to the girl on her arm, "this is my very dear friend Noor Petra. Noor, Veronica's the best personal assistant I've ever had. And this is Branagan, my CFO, contributing to a hostile work environment like a boss, and this is Senator Cain. Everyone, Noor's a writer."

They all whoop and cheer a little bit. Veronica leans over and confesses to me that she's not good at grammar. The Senator asks me if I write teen romances. I look at Fatima.

"Actually, Fatima's giving me too much credit," I tell them. "I'm a freelance reporter."

The laughter is what gets to me. A waiter comes by with a tray. I shoot him an I'm sorry look and take two flutes of champagne and knock them back in quick succession. The discussion has moved on to vacation plans. My feet hurt from standing and my heart hurts from watching the way Veronica leans on Fatima when she laughs, like she can't even stay upright. Fatima's keeping an eye on me, though. Eventually, she excuses herself. "Gents, I gotta hit the girl's room. Noor?"

“Girls,” Branagan snorts, “always going in pairs.”

Fatima leads me through the crowd. Her hand catches mine for a second and I nearly stumble off of my shoe. We duck into the bathroom. As soon as the door shuts, she takes my hands in hers.

“God, you look good,” she says, and I’m startled, almost ready to cry.

“What about your girlfriend?”

Fatima shakes her head. “Man, don’t even,” she says, and then she throws her arms around me. She’s hugging me fiercely, it’s not a come-on, I can feel her trembling. She’s gotten thin inside her suit and I don’t think anyone else has noticed.

“You okay?” I ask her.

“I’m fine,” she says to the hollow of my collarbone. “I’m just so glad to see you.”

And I’m picking up her face from its resting point—I’m taller than her in heels, so it’s up to me to lift her mouth to my mouth. I lean back against the door so I can hold her up. She sags against me. I can smell whatever that thing is staining her jacket, I’m inches from the hole in her head with its delicate gold pin, and my disgust evaporates when I see how vulnerable it is, how fragile she’s made herself. Open your mind too much, my mother used to say, and your brain will fall out. Fatima’s permeable; it’s the reason nothing can ever touch her. Everything gets in, but nothing gets through. I run my fingers over the place where the metal blends into her scalp. It’s a little red, the flesh raised in a sunburst. I stroke her hair from right to left, feeling the stubble grow longer until it becomes curls. She’s mine, she’s mine! is all I can think. All this party world has gone in one side and out the other; compared to this, all that is just static. Alone, the rest of it evaporates.

Noor suggests we smoke some real weed, and I say sure without thinking about it. We take my car back to her brother’s place and I send the driver home. We curl up on the broken down couch and she leans down to pull a box out from underneath it.

“I thought ‘Seem didn’t do drugs,” I say.

“He doesn’t,” she says. “This is my kit.”

She packs the bowl like a pro. I taught her that. I’m so tired suddenly. Coming down is a bitch. The antidotes were supposed to make it easy. Gotta get the lab guys on that. Tomorrow.

“I thought you were going straight,” I say.

“This is medical. I had a prescription in Nebraska.”

“Shit,” I say. “What’s wrong?” If Noor’s dying this is about to become one night I can’t stand. I’ll have to call my driver. He’ll make fun of me and I’ll have to hold my shit together, nothing’s worse than crying in front of your fucking chauffeur—

“Don’t worry about me,” Noor says. “It’s for my anxiety.”

“You’ve got anxiety?”

“When you make that face, I do.”

She sucks in and holds, leans over, presses her mouth against mine, exhales slowly into my lungs as I draw in. I’ve been jacking THC TLC™ every night to help me sleep, so I’m surprised at the difference here. I feel my lungs burn a little. I feel my pulse slowing down. I know the air in my lungs was just in her lungs, down in every little pink bronchiole. I suddenly regret the meeting where I voted for lobbying efforts against medical marijuana.

“I want the headjack to become a ritual, you know?” I tell her. “I want to find a way to make it feel the way this feels. For it to make people feel closeness like this, because this is what drugs are really about. I want to make it something people share.”

“Shut up,” she says. “I don’t want to hear about your plans to trademark spiritual experiences right now.”

“People do it all the time, baby,” I say, reaching for her.

“Yeah, and it sucks every time, baby,” she says. She’s not feeling it the way I am; I’m locked into every fiber on her cheap dress. I’m picking the pills off. Noor doesn’t have cleavage. Noor has breasts, small and ripe and widely spaced. I want to rest my head in the hollow between them. Noor is all hollows and hills, bony clavicles and meaty thighs I’m tracing with my hands, smoothing the tension out of the muscles, loosening the drawstrings that hold her body taut until she’s soft, leaning against me. She closes her eyes and sighs.

“Come on,” I tell her. “I just mean I wish everyone could feel like this.” My eyes are burning. “I wish I could always feel like this.”

I love kissing her. We’re kissing now. I love kissing her. It’s like lying on the shore at the edge of the tideline and feeling the little low waves lap over you. Her weight and her warmth, they change me. Her hands and the soft beating of her heart erase the idle chatter. I wonder how I ever believed jacking could replace this slowness, this perfect stillness. A word creeps into my head from the side where Noor’s cheek is pressed to my temple, and that

word is “Internal.” I invert it, like I do, and suddenly it’s “Eternal.”

The next morning I wake up to Fatima pulling on her pants. I lie still, buried in the couch, watching her, because it’s amazing to watch how she moves when no one is watching her. I used to do it when we were little, when I’d sleep over at her place; she liked to get up earlier than me even then. She’s all smooth delicate movements like a dancer. She really is too thin, though; I can see every bone in her back. And then I realize she’s shaking.

I watch her, feeling like a spy. She fumbles in the pocket of her coat and I see her pull out a glass tubule. She shakes it, presses it to the side of her head. There’s an aerosolized, pistoning sound, and she sighs and sits down on the coffee table, watching the shaking in her hands slow and finally stop.

She looks over and sees me watching her.

“What the fuck?” is all I can say.

“What?” She tries to scowl at me. “I’m just getting going for the day. I’ve got a lot to do.”

I stare at her. I stare her down. She looks away and grabs her shoes.

“You should let me call the Times editor for you,” she says. “He’s a good guy. He’ll give you a job.”

I think about it. I really do. Fatima mistakes my silence for judgment.

“You know what?” She grabs her coat off the back of a chair. “Fuck you. You just stay here, in this shitty apartment, and avoid the future and act all noble with the strength of your convictions and stay the fuck away from me.” She hasn’t tied her shoes and she’s banging her way down the front steps. The door is wide open behind her, letting in the cold morning air.

I stand up and shut it, and lean against it hard.

Later, I will be glad she left, I know this. It makes it easy to drink coffee with my brother and hunt for jobs I know I won’t get, to fall asleep at night in the declining scent of her that lingers for days in the hollows of the couch. I can easily imagine myself at the Times, tugging my long hair down over the fresh hole in the side of my head, writing stories I can’t stomach knowing that at 5 PM I could leave, take the train home, and have Fatima meet me at the door with a glass tube in her hand and a sloppy grin on her face. I toss and turn on ‘Seem’s lumpy couch with the strength of my convictions jabbing me in the back, imagining how good it would feel to just open up my head and take it all in. ■

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