Amber Ponomar
Independent Press Report
Caketrain Journal and Press
December 2011

Caketrain Journal and Press

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Oven Light
Caketrain Illuminated

Who They Are

Caketrain was born in 2003 out of the heads of Donna Karen Weaver, Amanda Raczkowski, and Joseph Reed. Raczkowski and Reed described baby-Caketrain in an interview with ASU's Hayden's Ferry Review: "we wanted to stay connected to the literary world and felt that starting Caketrain would fulfill our desire to be part of a support system for the literary community." At first they only existed as a journal, publishing approximately annually, but with a little time, and $1,500 saved, they began publishing single-author titles.

Caketrain hosts a yearly chapbook contest that, over the years, has gained considerable prestige. A guest judge chooses a winner and a runner-up, and those titles are published along with a third manuscript that Caketrain has acquired. Though the founding editor, Donna Karen Weaver, left the journal and press in 2007, Caketrain has continued to flourish. Now in their eighth year of existence, editing team Raczkowski and Reed keep their books in print and are endlessly polite and personal in all their dealings.

Where They Are

Caketrain journal and press distributes print editions online, at www.caketrain.org/books, at Powell's Books in Portland, Oregon, and in e-book format at www.amazon.com.

Back issues of their print journal are available *(for free!)* in pdf form on their web site as well.

What They Want

Caketrain's annual chapbook contest accepts manuscript submissions from May through October annually. Submissions are judged by a guest (this year it's Rosmarie Waldrop, co-editor of Burning Deck Press, one of the most influential small press publishers in the US). The winner and runner-up manuscripts are acquired and published along with one to two other titles.

Unsolicited Submissions? Yes

Electronic Submissions? Yes

Simultaneous Submissions? Yes

Genre or Form Preferred? (Paraphrased from an interview with Hayden's Ferry Review) Caketrain is concerned first with prose and poetry that sounds and looks appealing, and secondarily with the literal meaning. They publish collections of poetry or stories, full length novels or novellas.

Contact Caketrain at:

Address:
P.O. Box 82588,
Pittsburgh, PA 15218

E-mail: caketrainjournal@hotmail.com

Who They've Published

Catalogue: Ryan Call, *Weather Stations*; Sarah Rose Etter, *Tongue Party*; Lucas Farrell, *Bird Any Damn Kind* (out-of-print—acquired by University of Massachusetts); Sara Levine, *Short Dark Oracles*; Ben Mirov, *Ghost Machine*; Kim Parko, *Cure All*; Matt Bell, *The Collectors*; Tina May Hall, *All The Day's Sad Stories* (out-of-print—acquired by University of Pittsburgh); Claire Hero, *afterpastures*; Tom Whalen, *Dolls*; Elizabeth Skurnick, *Check-In*

They also publish novellas *within* their annual print journal. Most recently: *Here*, by Alec Niedenthal.

All single-author titles and the current issue of Caketrain can be purchased from their web site, www.caketrain.org/books.

Average Print Run: Four titles annually at about 400-500 copies initially. Further editions as needed. (For example, *Tongue Party* by Sarah Rose Etter is in its second edition)

The Coin in the Cake—Finding (and Sticking With) Caketrain

I first heard of Caketrain in my bright-eyed high school days. Through a jungle of links and recommendations on other websites, I'd made my way to the blog of Amelia Gray (forthcoming *THREATS*). I was charmed by her dark wit, and began not only to frequent her blog, but her published work in magazines, and soon I was reading the magazines themselves. Finding that blog literally introduced my high school self to the greater literary world; it has a special place in my heart.

Amelia Gray was published in Caketrain 5. I didn't look too far into it at the time because they were a print magazine, and I was more interested in online endeavors. Several years later, though, I stumbled across them again while perusing Poets & Writers' list of journals. I was intrigued that Caketrain was a journal and press, and even more intrigued when I explored their website and found only two editors in their masthead.

See, Caketrain's eleven book catalogue might seem petite when held next to biggies like Candlewick or Soft Skull, but a quick glance at their masthead reveals an inkling of what enormous effort they put forth. Unlike Soft Skull or Candlewick, Caketrain Journal and Press gets on with just two great minds behind it. With day jobs, no additional editors, and a journal to publish as well, Raczkowski and Reed publish four single-author titles a year.

They're beautiful books, they're cheap (each one is only eight dollars), and they offer generous previews in an easy-to-read pdf format, sidestepping the issue that's brought up in most e-book naysaying conversations: "you can't browse." On Caketrain's website (www.caketrain.org) you *can* browse. The scroll-through catalogue is short enough that it's not overwhelming but long enough that it would take you hours upon hours to read all the previews they provide. With no long-winded mission statement or elaborate editor bios, it's obvious Caketrain's focus is on the authors. But they don't just promote from an island: on their "Reccomendations" link. Caketrain offers connection to a greater online literary community, just like I found through Amelia Gray's blog years ago. Like that blog, Caketrain beckons me to read, to experience, and to reach out again, making my way through the jungle that is the literary world.

Interview with Caketrain Editors Amanda Raczkowski and Joseph Reed

by Amber Ponomar: November 2011

Amber Ponomar: *Amanda, in an interview with Duotrope you were asked to describe Caketrain in 25 characters or less, and you responded: "language monsters." How do you pick out a language monster from a line up—what makes something monstrous and why are you drawn to it?*

Amanda Raczkowski and Joseph Reed: Since the beginning, "language monsters" has served us as a sort of signifier for creative writing that is splendid in its aberration—writing that shakes itself free from tradition, that pushes beyond the jurisdiction of realism, that often even vaults beyond the trenches of established good taste and communicative clarity. It takes courage to birth a language monster and skill to make it ambulate. It's as easy for us to find one in a line-up as it is to locate a fish in a row of birds, but monstrosity isn't enough; experimentation must ultimately render some effect upon us as reader, and that's where this becomes especially hard to articulate. The stories and poems in Caketrain books are there because they've all stirred something inside us on a deeply personal level, touched something inside us that we were only half-aware was there.

AP: *The first few issues of Caketrain are not accompanied by books, so I take it that you weren't originally a press. What prompted you to become a press, or was that always your intention? How did you get it up and running?*

A&J: It was always our intention to publish single-author titles in addition to the annual journal; like so many independent efforts, it took time to accumulate the capital to make it work. At the outset, the two of us and a third editor—Donna Weaver, who stayed with the press until 2007—culled together $1,500 to get the ball rolling, and since then, the press has grown (from one new title a year in a limited 200-copy edition to four new titles annually in expanded runs which are frequently reprinted) and sustained itself through the support of an ever-growing readership. Book sales account for approximately 80 to 85 percent of annual revenue. An annual chapbook competition, open to entries in the poetry genre in odd-numbered years and fiction in even-numbered years, provides between 15 and 20 percent of the funds to operate the journal each

year, but more importantly, it allows us to print two books each year by a winner and runner-up who are often making their book-length debut.

AP: *The first story in Tongue Party, "Koala Tide," by Sarah Rose Etter builds up child-like hope and dashes it violently, viscerally. There's the shock of finding eyeless koalas washed up where Cassie thought live, baby pets would be, but what also lingers is complete disappointment. This theme crops up in Short Dark Oracles by Sara Levine, too. Is the reality of disappointment part of what makes a work monstrous, or does that have more to do with form?*

A&J: Your observation about the reality of disappointment calls attention to the truly unusual trick that Etter manages in "Koala Tide." Here we have a reality which is revealed to us in perhaps the most bluntly matter-of-fact prose you'll encounter in the entirety of *Tongue Party*, a reality that is firmly earthbound but for Cassie's fantastic expectations, a reality where no koala tide could possibly be—and so when the koala tide arrives, in flagrant violation of what we've ascertained in the preceding pages, the reader and the narrator seem to pass each other on opposing trajectories—for us, the narrative lifts off into the surreal, while for Cassie, reality shatters the illusion, exposing the koalas as empty, eyeless husks. And Levine, it's true, shares Etter's preoccupation: in her story "A Promise," each time young Thea's mother exposes her to another disappointing reality of daily life, the circumstances of the story, as if to settle the score, drift a little further toward impossibility.

AP: *When you decide to publish a manuscript, how involved is the author? What do you expect from an author?*

A&J: The author is always closely involved throughout the process. Usually, once the decision has been made to publish a manuscript, we go through an editing process over several months in which we volley the manuscript back and forth with proposed changes and questions and refinements until we end up at a point that both we and the author can agree upon. At the same time, we're discussing topics like cover art and blurbs with the author, as it's important to us that the author have input in every part of the process. We don't enter the process with any specific expectation in mind, but all the authors we've worked with so far have been fantastic to collaborate with.

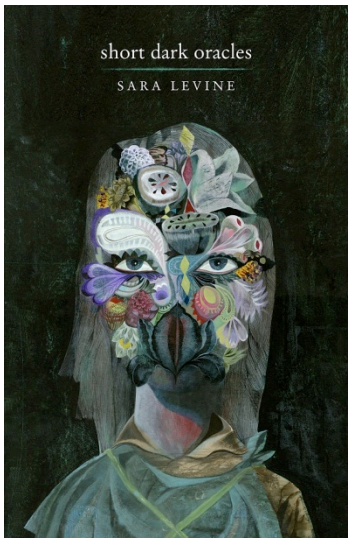
AP: *Amanda, your writing's been published in places like elimae and Lamiation Colony. How do you balance being a writer and being an editor?*

A&J: Although we've both done our share of creative writing in the past, since we started Caketrain we've made a sort of informal commitment to focusing exclusively on the journal. It hasn't really been a balance, in other words; editing and publishing four books a year is enough to keep us quite busy, and keeping just one project in front of us ensures that we're making it the best it can be.

AP: *What drew me to Caketrain in the first place is the fact that you function as both a press and a magazine. What kinds of challenges do editors of an independent press face that a magazine editor might not be familiar with? And vice versa?*

A&J: Because we're both involved in everything from reading and editing to packing and shipping, we don't really observe the press and journal as two distinct entities. On the simplest level, the journal functions as a sort of drawing board—the monster nursery, in a sense. This is not to suggest simply that the work of the press is more fully developed—though it often is, simply by virtue of the fact that it's been through more considerations or a more thorough editing process—but also to suggest that the journal is the ground floor for experimentation, and that some of the weirdest and most daring things we publish are found in the journal. The challenges, though, aren't really so different, and that's probably because we think of the whole thing as a continuum. Our ultimate goal is to earn trust, one reader at a time, so that whatever we're releasing each year, people are willing to make the leap with us because they feel they can count on us to deliver good work every time—that's one of the reasons that the more books you buy from us, the less expensive they are—we depend upon the adventurousness of our readers as much as that of our writers.

AP: *Just looking at the hodge-podge face made of flowers on the cover of Short Dark Oracles by Sara Levine, I can tell book covers are important to you. How much does a cover influence how a book sells? Since Borders has fallen and people are meandering toward buying more e-books and books from Amazon, are covers going to play a larger part in selling a book than they used to?*



A&J: Covers are certainly important. For better or worse, they get a lot of attention, and we always try to find something that's both eye-catching and appropriate to the text. In the case of the single-author titles, we always get the author's input on this, too—in fact, in the case of *Short Dark Oracles*, Sara was the one who suggested the artist Olaf Hajek. At the end of the day, again, you're just trying to get people to make the leap, and if a cover can do that, so much the better. There may be something to your theory about covers being even more important online; at the very least, they serve the important purpose of giving people something visual to post, an avatar for the text itself.

AP: *What do you think about e-books? Have they affected how you approach editing, and Caketrain in general?*

A&J: A former, less aware version of us saw e-books as a necessary evil. "They'll destroy our precious layout," we protested. "What is to be done about line breaks?" we wondered. So for the longest time, we only released PDF editions. We've since learned much that's helped to change our tune, but perhaps the most convincing evidence was the testament of an older reader whose vision had somewhat deteriorated, who rejoiced the fact that she could now read the books she loved without having to carry a magnifying tool or unwieldy enlarged-print edition. E-books are still less than ideal in some ways: poetry is a serious unresolved issue—at least one forthcoming Caketrain e-book will be issued with a calibration page giving readers the option to coordinate their font settings and/or orientation to ensure faithful replication of line breaks, and we have at least one paperback coming next year for which, due to the nature of its layout, an e-book edition seems nearly impossible—but e-book sales get the work in the hands of more readers at a lower price point, which is the ultimate goal, and they help to support both the press and the authors, as the virtually nonexistent upfront costs allow us to offer profit-sharing arrangements which are

prohibitive for the print editions. Overall, e-books have been a huge, huge plus for us, but that being said, we'll still print paperbacks for as long as it remains feasible.

AP: *I've noticed some of your back issues are out of print, which is understandable—most print magazines seem desperate to get rid of their old issues. Some of your books are out of print, too, though you make an effort to bring them back. How do you choose when to let things go out of print? Is there an understanding between you and the author?*

A&J: We've joked about how for the first few years, the goal was simply to sell out our print runs, while today, the challenge is to keep the books in print. Yes, all the journal issues go out of print—it's funny, the work inside them is perennial, since virtually nothing in their pages has any relation to current events except in the most abstract sense, but when a new one comes out, people tend to stop buying the old one, and we've found that making them available as PDFs goes some way toward maintaining a sort of permanence. In terms of the single-author books, on the other hand, the only ones that are indefinitely out of print are Tina May Hall's *All the Day's Sad Stories* and Lucas Farrell's *Bird Any Damn Kind*, and that's because the work has been subsequently published by other presses (University of Pittsburgh and University of Massachusetts, respectively). Apart from those two, we make an effort to keep all the books in print, an uphill battle that seems to get a bit easier each year.

AP: *I'd like to shift the focus on* Tongue Party *now. First off, the name: was* Tongue Party *Sarah Rose Etter's choice? Was it editorial? Why was that particular story's title chosen to represent the collection?*

A&J: *Tongue Party* was the title Sarah always had in mind for the collection; we never really talked about it, but I think it's because she recognized—as we do—that there's a prominence to that story that justifies it. It has to do with its placement in the sequence: the first three stories seem to grow in intensity and reach a crescendo in "Tongue Party," and then afterward there's a turning point where the protagonists start to take a more active role in the action, as opposed to being acted upon. There's another unique feature to the story as well—it forces the reader to reckon with the juxtaposition of two seemingly unrelated narratives, and the effect of that is amplified by the fact that it's the only story in the collection to do so.

AP: Tongue Party *is a collection of short stories revolving around the same character, Cassie, though I hesitate to call it a novel in stories. What do you call this form, and how do you market a book of such a nature?*

A&J: It's funny—in spite of the character name, we've never really read these stories with the assumption that they might all be about the same character. And that's further reinforced by the ways she complicates the protagonist's identity throughout the collection. You have here four stories which mention Cassie by name; three stories which leave the protagonist unnamed, one of which is told in the second person (a second is added in the e-book edition); and one "story" which is actually a non-narrative series of commands. It's our opinion that the use of the name Cassie again and again is a subtextual suggestion Etter is making, one that perhaps says "it could be me; it could be you," but which mainly invites the reader to wonder why. We just call it short fiction—it's one of those things that makes more sense in practice than in theory, and so to market a book like *Tongue Party*, we post copious excerpts; the more accustomed you are to Sarah's voice, the more you begin to understand what she's accomplishing in these stories. And this is definitely a collection, in our opinion, where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; each piece is interesting in its own right, but it's the internal telephony of themes, the parallels and the points of divergence, that elevate the collection.

AP: *Just curious: were there any stories that didn't make the final cut?*

A&J: In the original version of the manuscript, the one which won the contest, there was a story called "The Grizzly Bear" that Sarah removed from the final cut (you can read it at the online magazine *Blue Stem*). Several pieces were also added and resequenced during the editing process, and we revisited the manuscript again when we added two bonus stories, "Love Film" and "Heart Digger," to the e-book edition; this was a particularly interesting exercise for us, because the ultimate goal for us was to add two pieces that could fit into the manuscript and not simply be appended to the end of the book, all while preserving a similar flow to the paperback sequence.

<u>Tongue Party</u> by Sarah Rose Etter

Caketrain Press, 2010. 79 pages, $9.00 paperback, $2.99 e-book

ISBN: 1110000055094

Reviewed by Amber Ponomar

Somewhere close, too close, Sarah Rose Etter is cackling and rubbing her hands together like Lady Macbeth as you read *Tongue Party*. The strange thing is you *love* the discomfort. Her collection of melancholy, yet hopeful, stories hover over my shoulder, breathing heavily through chicken masks onto my neck.

Yes, I said chicken masks. In this winner of the 2010 Caketrain Chapbook Competition, a surreal sensibility clings to the stories like your wacky great aunt's signature perfume. Cassie, who also appears in the title story, has a "Chicken Father." He's worn a lifelike chicken mask since her mother's death. At home, with the blinds drawn, Cassie loves him "with the full fist of [her] heart." She understands his rubber-inhibited language. They sit in their living room, she with her homework in her lap, he in his underwear and a chicken mask, and watch a video of her parent's wedding. Cassie tries to forget her mother. Her chicken father lets himself feel the pain.

In public, she hates the mask. She is embarrassed by him everywhere. Jehovah's witnesses flee from the sight of him. At the mall, Cassie pleads with her eyes that he is insane. But he's not.

Cassie realizes what the mask is worth the day she steals it from him and wears it at school. "[She is] not the girl with the dead mother. [She is] the girl with the chicken mask on." It's liberating to not have to be who she is.

This sense of dark, internal liberation, and its opposite—detainment by love—surface throughout Etter's two-part collection. The first part, which includes the titular story, offers situations like the Tongue Party, where passive women are violated and exploited by the men in their lives. Whether through suggestion, meaningless one night stands, or, say, a wife forced to eat an entire

cake so her husband can get off, the women consent to other people's definitions of love. They are imprisoned in their own willingness to please.

The second part is populated by women who—whether through mental illness or their own manic decisions—create and follow their own definitions of love, which include trapping a group of men behind soundproof glass, wearing a chicken mask, taking to the sea in a boat made from a coffin, and allowing an endlessly ravenous husband to devour his wife because he can't ask for more than that.

Etter shapes moments of failure into trumpeting announcements of freedom. She takes a skilled hand to the amorphous concept of love and stretches it like silly putty in all directions, testing the limits, the situations, the possibilities. In the part one, there's "Tongue Party." Cassie and her father have a deal with the men at a bar that they may lick her if they stand in line and pay. This time, the men won't pay. They won't wait in line. They hike up her mini-skirt, lower her to the floor and attack her with their tongues, licking between toes, up thighs. Cassie quietly pleads, "you didn't have to do it like this." Cassie, and all the women in Etter's collection, teeter at their breaking points, and there they must decide what matters most to them. They find comfort, they find love, and they allow themselves to be a part of it.

Not all love is kind, though. Etter displays it from its flabby, unflattering angles: a father's obliviousness and spinelessness, a husband's selfishness, a woman's false infatuation with people she cannot know. In "Men Under Glass," in part two, Cassie lures men home from a bar and traps the anonymous "Tim Brad Tom Sean Mike" in her basement behind a pane of bullet-proof glass. She watches them obsessively. She falls in love with small things like "the stubble on their cheeks growing into full beards [and] the shapes in which they sleep." That she does not have to hear them chew or speak or gasp in adoration is the "greatest part of [her] love." Like "Men Under Glass," each story questions what love is by revealing what love masquerades itself as—it's an exploration of how we imprison ourselves as much as it is of how we free ourselves.

At 79 compact pages, *Tongue Party* is a quick read but is by no means light. Etter's way of experiencing these situations in new ways, "pull[ing] words from the throat like long pieces of

hair from shower drains," lends a fantastic, ethereal quality to her work. She paralyzes; she reaches out from the text, grabs you with damned-spotted hands by the throat, and looks you in the eye. *Tongue Party* is something I return to like a favorite album. I skip through to the story that suits my mood, putting "Chicken Father" or "Men Under Glass" on repeat, soaking in the desperation, the intrepidness, the mania, and I love it. And I sigh with relief.