

**“Sex, Drugs, and VHS”:  
A Review of Black Bile’s *One-off Chapbook Series 3***

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Chapbooks Reviewed:

*Bill Bailey* by Tony O’Neill, \$5, 15 pp  
*Men and the Drink* by Julie McArthur, \$5, 14 pp  
“*Sensational*” *Sherri* by Nathaniel G. Moore, \$5, 20 pp

REVIEW BY TYLER WILLIS

Black Bile Press is back with its third *One-offs* series, this time featuring fiction by Tony O’Neill, Julie McArthur, and Nathaniel G. Moore. These short one-story chapbooks cut right to the quick, both in terms of design and content. Laid out by Matthew Firth, with cover designs by Bill Brown, each staple-stitched chapbook ranges in length from fifteen to twenty pages. The mono-chrome covers run the gamut from hot pink to Mountain Dew green. Different paper was selected for each chapbook; whether this is a stylistic choice is unclear. Firth deviates little from his customary editorial vision, and were the series not titled differently one might assume that these were new issues of *Front&Centre*. Firth has always kept the layout component of his chapbooks minimal, allowing the writing to speak for itself, and so we can forgive the design flaws of *One-offs Series 3*—some as innocuous as layout inconsistencies, others as glaring as back-cover typographical errors. It seems the *One-offs* series is happy to simply dive right into the fiction.

Each of the three chapbooks shares a common thread of substance abuse, loneliness, and sexual obsession. They are raw, like blisters or cankers. Reading these sordid stories means wading through a haze of violence, obsession, Xanax, Ambien, Lorazepam, Percocet, cocaine, alcohol, anilingus, cuniligus, corpses, and pubic manes, but it’s worth the effort.

In the tradition of Selby’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn*, Carver’s *Where I’m Calling From*, and Firth’s own *Suburban Pornography*, comes *Bill Bailey*, Tony O’Neill’s Brutalist contribution to *One-offs*.

*Bill Bailey* is a snapshot story of violence and lust, following the brief exploits of a lonely, chemically lubricated narrator trolling for his next sexual score. The story begins appropriately

enough with a hangover. The unnamed narrator wakes with fractured unease, knowing that something has gone wrong. Death and judgment hang in the air and we emerge from a narrative blackout to relive the night's events.

The setting is typical of other Brutalist fiction, and O'Neill's adherence to his own manifesto of "raw honesty" and "total creativity" is evident. Like the Brutalist movement in architecture that came fifty years earlier, where the design of a project often revealed its functionality, repetitions reveal themselves. O'Neill's dank bars and dingy bungalows are shadowy places—at first familiar, but ultimately disfigured, altered into something alien. His world is populated by a gaggle of grotesques: balding bartenders, gimp-necked construction workers, snaggle-toothed philosophers, and dusty Mexicans. Even the cockroaches are "as big and brazen as Shetland tanks." To top it off, Bill Bailey is a dog.

Because of O'Neill's terse, nihilistic prose, the story keeps us at a deliberate distance, never allowing us to get close enough to love or even care about the characters. We are voyeurs made uncomfortable by the sideshow we can't look away from.

The supporting cast functions more like peeling wallpaper than people, and the femme fatale of the story is Lupita, a hirsute hood-rat with a drinking problem and an absentee husband. Lupita is painted in the least flattering colours imaginable. Whether she is "lit by the sickly orange glow of [a] cigarette machine," or "grinning shamelessly ... gut hanging away from the rest of her torso ... tits laying flat against the corrugated surface of her ribcage," O'Neill's language has a clear goal in mind. Sometimes he wants you to laugh; sometimes he wants you to cringe.

The story hinges on the promise of sex, a coital covenant the narrator seems willing to go to any length to uphold. His obsession with Lupita's ass fuels much of the story's lighter moments. The anatomical references are downright hilarious: "Lupita had been kneading [my cock] like dough all night and I kept thinking of that ass and how it was going to feel against my face."

The narrator is fueled by an obsessive appetite that permeates every page. He is imprisoned by his own animalistic compulsions, and removing the bark-happy Bill Bailey from Lupita's neighbour's yard is the key to his release. A fan of nineties sitcoms might expect a dog-napping scene to play out comically, with an obese mastermind and a pair of torn undies—but O'Neill's description of a desperate man and his canine adversary proves satisfyingly dark, each word inching menacingly forward along the page:

Slowly, cautiously, as he sniffed my hand and turned his attention back to the meat, I found the collar and slowly worked it loose. It fell to the ground with a light rattle. Bill Bailey was free.

The story falters, however, at its climax. Lupita's grocery list of sexual anomalies takes all the focus, and at the end of the story the narrator, and maybe O'Neill, suddenly remembers that the violence alluded to in the prologue has yet to be resolved.

The pacing is compromised with the introduction of a trick ending. A sudden and violent surprise plot point, jammed awkwardly into the final paragraph, reveals the story's most noticeable flaw. The narrator delivers a punch-line confession that is meant to shock us, but only feels like the author is catching up to the reader, and possibly himself, with the story's original intention.

O'Neill crafts a well-written story, but in the end he seems more focused on the brutality of the narrative than its natural progression. Like the Brutalism of the 1950s, the form does not disguise the function.

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In *Men and the Drink*, Julie McArthur introduces us to another unnamed narrator, one whose addictions include prescription pills, gin, and bondage. The narrator details the complications of her life as though by telegraph. Her abrupt, almost jot-note style reinforces the story's sense of realism, as though the details could easily have been plucked from the pages of a day-planner.

McArthur gives us a young woman tethered to the complex relationships she shares with a number of men. Each man represents a missing element of womanhood that she desperately desires.

The narrator's use of liquor and prescription pills seems, at first, to be a coping mechanism, a barrier against the negative male influences in her life. This initially invites a feminist reading, as the protagonist is impeded by the fundamental character flaws of the men in her life. It soon becomes clear, however, that McArthur is dealing in subtleties, and as the story progresses several feminist ideals are questioned and even inverted.

Her boyfriend, Jamie, is a deadbeat, and she takes on the role of a perverted mother, a provider unable to break away from a sexually addictive lifestyle. She is equally aroused and irked by his obsession with sex. "I was never loud until I met him," she says, secretly pleased that she awakens her neighbours at night. But she is disturbed by the suggestion that he is not sexually fulfilled: "The more we fuck the more he masturbates. This puzzles and annoys me." She delights in his erotic suggestions, and a bondage scene demonstrates with carnal clarity that hers is a willing imprisonment.

She also cares for a geriatric widower who pays her to come to his apartment to cook and clean for him, allowing her to explore her instinct to care for a man in a wifely capacity. But she steals medication and bums rides from her charge, overstepping several boundaries and reaffirming a deluded sense of reciprocity.

Trying to reconnect with her father, the narrator joins him on a trip across the southern states. They down brews and hardly converse—drinking buddies with shared DNA—having little in common besides bar-hopping and hangovers. They are even mistaken for a couple at a hotel and are forced to share a double bed; the incestuous sleeping arrangement further confusing their relationship.

With each man there is a game at play. Her life with Jamie is a “routine,” her time with Mr. Kendal is a “song and dance,” and her road trip with her father is simply “[an] act.” She is dancing, but never without a partner, and the author makes it clear that there are no true victims, that each relationship is one of co-operation and co-dependency.

While McArthur’s realist approach to detail slows the story considerably, its overall goal is nevertheless accomplished. McArthur deliberately gives us few expectations to work with, and when patterns emerge only to dissolve, we are left, like the narrator, empty and disappointed. Feminist expectations are never met, as the author is careful to yank the rug out from the under the narrator’s feet at every opportunity. Nothing much seems to happen, but reading between the lines reveals a number of ideas at play. McArthur certainly doesn’t offer any superior male specimens, but a female alternative doesn’t present herself either. The author gives us a protagonist who is stoic, aware, and yet unable to stand on her own feet without the crutch of liquor and men.

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The third chapbook of this *One-off* series is “*Sensational*” *Sherri*, yet another chapter in the life of Ricky Galore, Nathaniel G. Moore’s favourite recurring protagonist. In this incarnation, he is a young man on “day two of bender six,” struggling to pick-up in a college bar.

This is all part of a painstaking effort to rid his mind of “*Sensational*” *Sherri*, an ex whose memory haunts him throughout the entire story. Moore’s typical wrestling jargon is present—Ricky’s name alone should give that away, even if the flexing “Macho Man” Randy Savage on the front cover doesn’t. When unable to score, Ricky doesn’t pack it in—he “taps out.” But the wrestling nuances don’t stick around for long. Moore makes a wise choice early on, bringing Ricky’s obsessions front and centre, allowing his own to recede refreshingly into the background.

The story orbits around Ricky's troubled mind, mixing memory, desire, and fantasy, shaken furiously and poured over ice. Moore's juggling between past and present is jarring at times; the shifts in narrative position feel like reel changes in an old home movie. There is a recurring motif of archaic media—modes of communication as discontinued as his blown relationship. Ricky moves through his memories in slow motion or fast-forward, "his crisp, youthful likeness appear[ing] in super-VHS glory." He lives and breathes in instant-replay. Even Ricky's dreams transition with wipes.

Moore's technofilic obsession with medium and his syntactically inventive use of language join forces to create some terrific prose:

The next morning, Ricky was dregs, fatigue and somehow knee-bruised. All mobster in sunglasses, tossed down the street by wind and sun and his heart nearly apoplectic as he lodged himself in the phone booth ... promised to make his call brief, refusing to inhale, to comply with proximity.

Much as he did in *Let's Pretend We Never Met*, Moore juxtaposes poetic narrative with sudden flashes of digital distraction—in this case, mock Internet ads and browser searches. This is a voyeur's story. Softer moments of lover watching lover from behind, like a Cohen song, are shattered by hard reminders that this is a remembered, perhaps even invented moment. This creates a sort of narrative enjambment, an unsentimental divide, and Moore's story surges forward, across severed synapses, as realistic and schizophrenic as a daydream.

His use of medium as memory creates an interesting parallel between recovered remembrance and recorded fact. Ricky hero-worships his own image as it appears in the past, with Sherri, when he believes he was happy. "On television spots, on commercials, publicists' official statements on behalf of situations and individual personalities. He missed licking her."

"*Sensational*" *Sherri* delivers fiction that is fractured, frenetic, and full of poetic diversions. Here, Ricky Galore is a drunk, a cynic, and a chronic self-loather, lost in the reverie of his own failed romance. Nathaniel G. Moore's probing of Ricky's mind, "sidetracked in VHS bliss," offers us a fresh look at an old favourite.