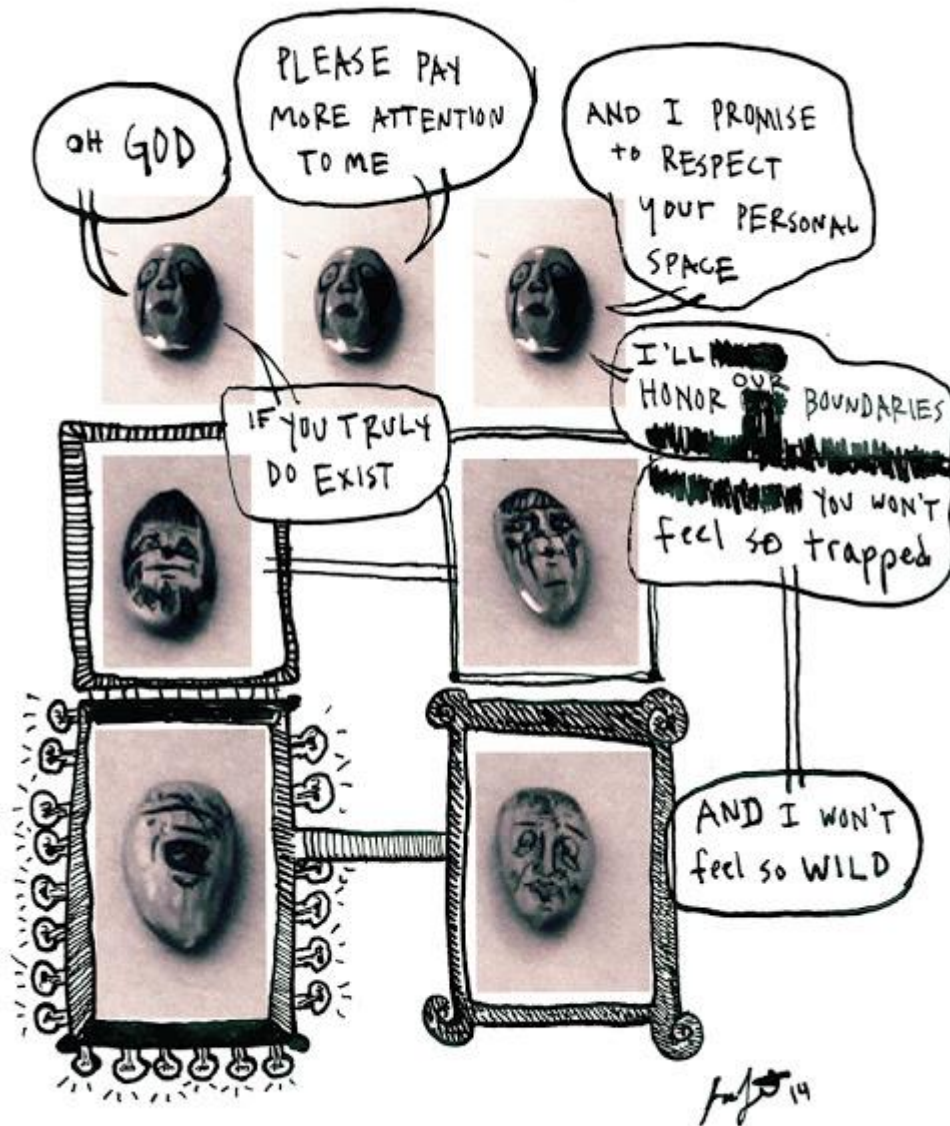


Everything's Major: An Interview with Comic Artist Sara Lautman from Doll Hospital Issue Three



Interview from Doll Hospital Issue Three, available in full [here](#).

As I write this my scalp is bloody from hair pulling. I have tried hat wearing, pony-tail styling and good old-fashioned guilt tripping but I cannot stop ripping my hair out. And that embarrasses me. Like a lot. It pains me more to admit that my hair looks flat and patch-y after a hair wash than it does to think-piece about suicide. It humiliates me more to visit a hairdresser and have them inspect my damage than to cry in public or whatever. Trich is ugly. And I don't want to be ugly. I want you to like me. Any number of sins can be excused as long as they are aesthetically pleasing. And I fucked up by not being the pretty kind of sick, my

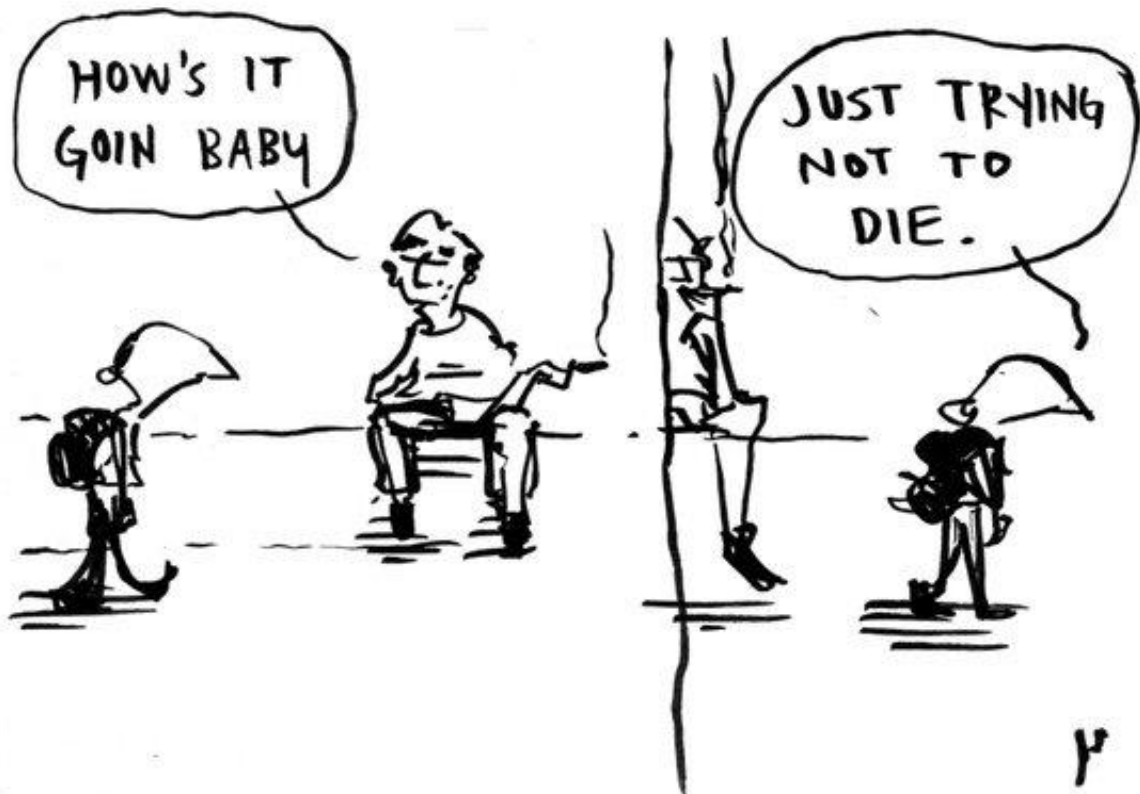
trich living in conversation with my own funky physical health to create a distinct brand of Not Cute. It kinda feels like a contradiction that people on Instagram or whatever say they like my hair? That they wish theirs was as thick and curly. But a woman's self-destruction is racialised so the compliments I get for my hair and my desire to destroy my hair are one and the same y'kno?

So yeah, trich sucks, everything sucks, but Sara Lautman, the comic superstar creator very much does not. Her work on memory, moomins and mental health have appeared in a bunch of neat places including Jezebel, The Hairpin, The Rumpus, she runs the zine series Macrogroan, collaborated with Sheila Heti to create the cut up story piece 'The Humble Simple Thing' and her comic on trich is my favourite thing ever. We talked about self-destruction, stigma and Charlie Brown and it was super cool and awesome so maybe the world isn't entirely awful after all.



Bethany Lamont: Comics (and actually beyond that cartoons and picture books too) are so good for expressing the impossibility of trauma and the ridiculousness of mental illness. Like whether that's Peanuts (I love your self-portrait as Charlie Brown picture by the way!), Rory Hayes, Nekojiru, or that Robert Crumb documentary that took me like a week to recover from. What is it about the genre that lends itself so well to that stuff?

Sara Lautman: I'm not sure exactly, although I know what you mean. Maybe it has to do partially with the advantages of the medium and partially with the temperament of the artist. Different artists have their own unique advantages and tools. All the artists you mention here deal with showing pain differently. For Rory Hayes the writing of pain is more expressionistic, and the comfort element seems to be in mark-making. With Peanuts, the expression of pain is humor and the comfort element seems to be in somehow getting through or around the isolation of that pain to some kind of fellowship. All the characters in Peanuts are defined through their unique weaknesses and problems. Linus needs his blanket. Lucy's love is unreciprocated, and she is cruel. Sally hates school. Charlie Brown is Charlie Brown. Humor is a magic flute that lets people connect with one another in the midst of pain. Crumb, I think is a little different, because he is both a mark-maker and a humorist. He needs a lot of comfort. This is probably the category I identify most with. There's a Lynda Barry quote about how being bored feels like "a cheese grater on your face" but then at least if you're doodling, it's like "sandpaper on your face". It's a little bit better.

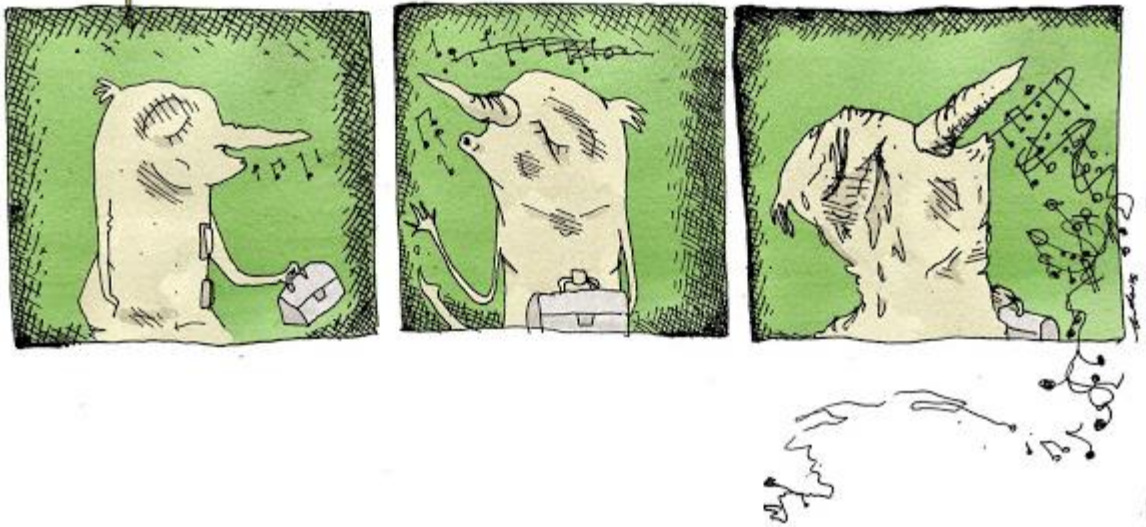


BL: The murkiness of memory is a recurring theme in your work and as a mentally ill woman who struggles with experiences of unreality, trauma and disassociation I struggle with this in my work so much! I question the validity of everything I experience which in turn makes me not want to fix it in a static space like art and writing. Is this doubt and weirdness something you embrace or is it still a struggle?

SL: Embrace. I'm not writing any memoir comics right now, so it hasn't been a big issue recently, but I think that the adjustments my mind makes in

memory are interesting. I like them. The most interesting is the difference between what I think happened and what someone else thinks happened. If I have access to someone else's version of something, I want it. That's the best case - getting multiple versions of a memory. But I don't feel harassed by a need to "get the truth". I'm a bad journalist. I suppose it is always a low frequency struggle, but the struggle is the fun. (Or the point/journey - however you like to think of it.)

The parasite



BL: I know you've written about queerness and comics before-queer is an identity I go back and forth with but that's another story haha-and I was wondering if you consider comics themselves to be a queer medium?

SL: Comics and queerness are the same in some ways - but I feel like I need to be more specific about the comparison. Comics used to be marginalized, now they've been accepted as a valid, even prestigious, art form. Creating an assimilation analogy between comics and queerness seems misplaced to me. Comics aren't people. Comics makers (and readers and publishers and editors and everyone) are people. Underground publishing, feminist comics, and showing lived queer experience through the medium of comics had real influence on the lives of real gay and trans people. I guess at this point I'm excited and fascinated by ways in which queer comics makers helped us (and by "us" I mostly mean "other queer comics makers") live another day, to make more comics, and be more gay. I'm less interested in formal qualities of the medium that might let us call it "queer" - like, a neither/nor quality of comics being "a third thing" is interesting, but not the coolest part of how reading or making comics relate to being a dyke or genderqueer or trans. All the queer cartoonists I know are engaged in very personal, socially inclined work! I sense that the queer comics world is not bloodless, or obsessed with formalism. It's all genre mashups, autobio, porn, deeply invested research projects. It's great. The opposite of bloodless. Bloody.



BL: You point out in your comic 'The Itch II' that "trich is a disease that makes you destroy a highly commodified part of your body" which makes me think of the media stereotype of fetishised white sick girls. As a mentally ill woman there's an expectation of prettiness and like...blondeness, that our struggles are a visual cue for some random dude and trich seems to work against that myth of mental illness as an exaggerated version of some fantasy idea of femininity.

SL: Exactly! That's why it's so unwelcome. Because it's very difficult to spin or reposition as something that flatters a male gaze point of view. What would a way to do that be? The career woman so driven that she has plucked herself bald. If the ultimate male construction of acceptable female mental illness is a depressed waif, maybe the archetype that follows anxiety and action is much more threatening. It's more active.

MOST ADULT WOMEN WITH SIGNIFICANT
HAIR LOSS JUST GET STUCK UNDER A WIG
OR A SCARF.

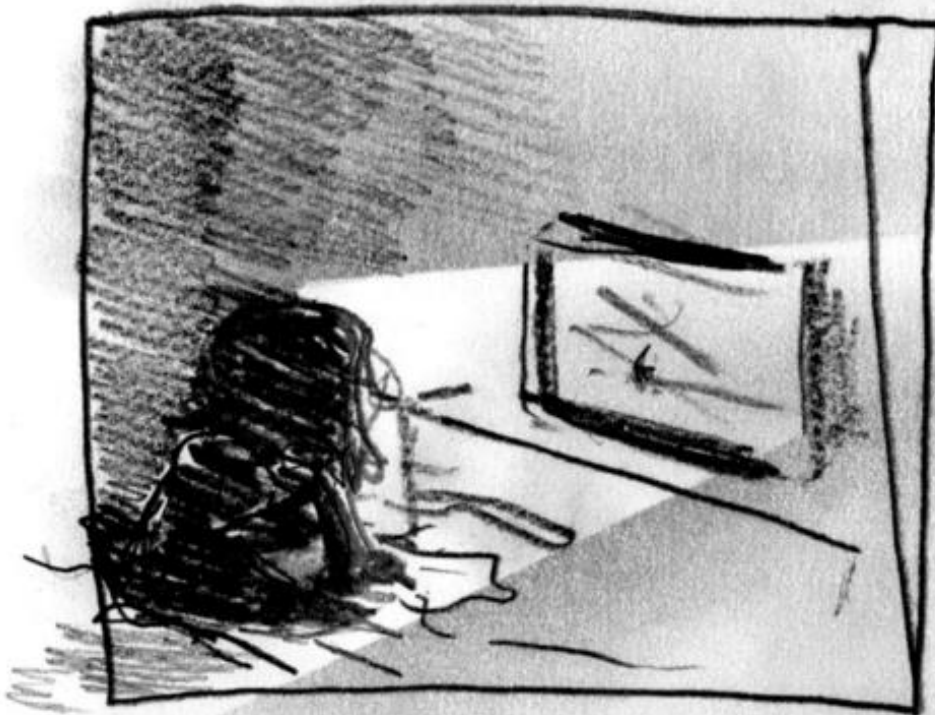


BL: In 'The Itch II' you say that "trich is defined by its stigma" that it's "so utterly untalked about that its support culture is defined by shame". I've been thinking a lot this for this issue of Doll Hospital, why there are certain parts of my mental health I'm embarrassed about and like it's so bizarre I've written about suicide and extreme trauma a bunch of times, but for some reason I draw the line at trich?! And it's like....??????

SL: Totally. I was nervous about making that trich comic. I think making it in pictures - and this goes back to your first question - let me feel safer than I would if I had just been writing text. The illustrations are sort of a diversion from the text, which feels much more intimate to me. I'm not really sure why. Maybe because writing represents a processed version of my thoughts, and drawings are a purer, more complete expression of my id? It's ironic that I should feel more protected exposing a "pure id" thing. I think the real exposure, the real risk, is in people seeing the choices that I've made in editing and writing text. That's scary. With drawings, it's more like, well! Here's my gross mind! Can't help it! Of course, that distinction has a lot to do with my personal attitudes toward writing and drawing.

I'VE ONLY SEEN TRICHOTILLOMANIA
ONCE, EVER, IN ART.

IT WAS IN THE 2011 MOVIE YOUNG ADULT,
WRITTEN BY DIABLO CODY, DIRECTED
BY JASON REITMAN. CHARLIZE STARS.



HER CHARACTER, A DEPRESSED WRITER
OF YOUNG ADULT SERIES BOOKS, IS
WATCHING TV.

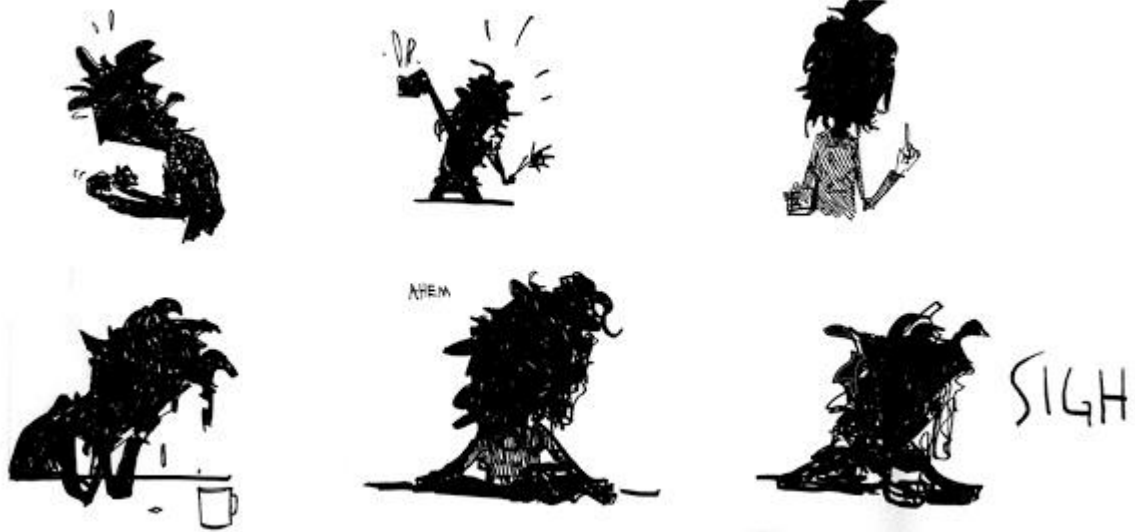




HER HAND GOES TO HER HEAD, SHOPS WITH PURPOSE FOR A HAIR, AND PULLS IT OUT.

BL: It's so true that the movie *Young Adult* is the only media depiction of trich anyone is aware of. I'm actually making a documentary on movies and representations of mental illness with my friends Cat and Claire so we're sifting through a ton of misrepresentations of particular mental health narratives but like with trich there doesn't seem to be ANYTHING!? Why do you think that is?

SL: I know! I could not believe it when I saw that movie. Diablo Cody is great, and a brave writer for doing that. There are so many reasons trich is invisible. From a writer or filmmaker's perspective, I imagine that pulling in trich would be scary because showing something so socially loaded without precedent is a lot of pressure. Plus, like you noted before, even within the secret society of trich, the conversations center around shame. So even the safe spaces, for all the considerable good they do, reinforce closeting. It's really bad.



BL: On a practical note do you have any advice on dealing with trich? Whether that's resources of organizations or just like random things you've found to be useful?

SL: I'm not up on the current strategies. I did try taking that supplement called NAC - I have the bottle right here, it still has some pills in it. Let's see. NAC stands for N-acetyl Cistene. It might be snake oil. I read a bunch of testimonials and the results of an iffy study from the U of Minnesota before I bought it. It was like seventeen bucks. It's supposed to help "curb unwanted behaviors" so that could mean anything - a placebo effect is definitely part of the story here. I tried it for like two or three months and then I started forgetting to take it. I should have kept a journal while I was taking it because I can't remember if it worked or not.

I haven't really found an effective way to really get control of it. So far, my problem hasn't been consistently intense. It gets worse when I'm very anxious about something. It was worse when I had a car. I'd always be at it when I was driving.



BL: How do you keep on creating art when struggling with mental illness? Because a combination of shame, self loathing and zero motivation to even get out of bed means I never seem to do anything? How do you do it?!

SL: Back when I started drawing seriously, every day, I did because it helped. I'm grateful that I'm able to spend as much time drawing as I do in my life now. At this point, there's a greater momentum and investment behind the whole enterprise, so pushing myself to make work is not the difficult part. As for the rest, it was a learning curve. Daily exercise is major, eating food that doesn't make you feel awful is major, getting enough sleep, major. If you use meds (I do), managing that is major. Seeing friends is very major. Everything's major.