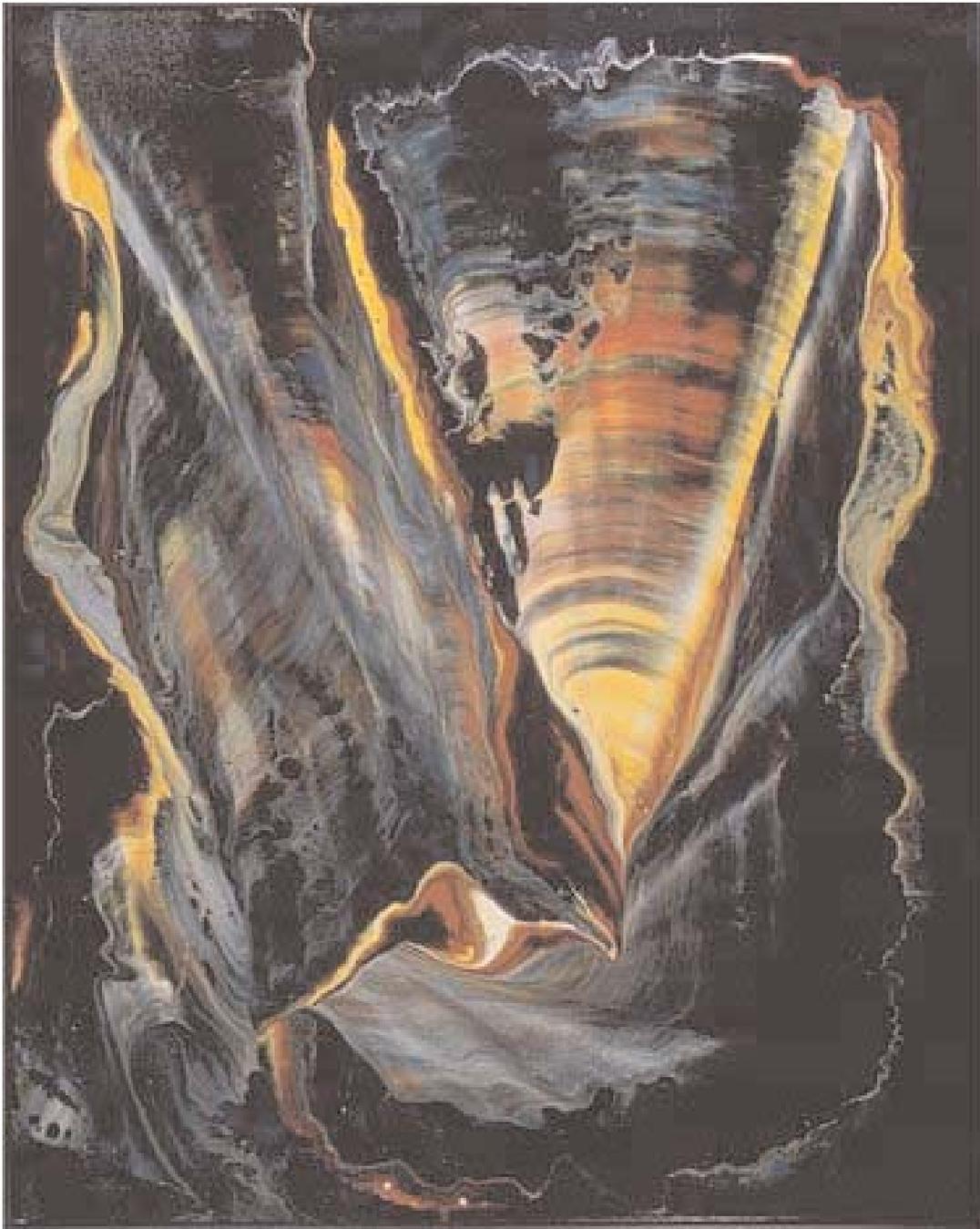


*All of the materials for something big; a yarn with a touch of spinning by David McCaul;
acrylics and a dash of magic by Jim Fuess; the concentrated imagery of Ray Succre;
and The Dream Journal.*

The Blotter

June 2008 MAGAZINE



THE SOUTH'S UNIQUE, FREE, INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE AND ARTS MAGAZINE

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**No press release shall darken these hal-
lowed pages. (W. T. Sherman)**

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"Unexpurgated" (some letters we've received)

"I own a coffeehouse/music venue that houses our local artists' guild of writers, photogs, painters, etc. I came across your magazine recently in Athens, Georgia. What would it take to get a box of your papers in my shop each month?"
* * *

"Have you considered using Verdana size 8 as the font for The Blotter? I sincerely think it is perfectly legible at a size that would save paper/pages. I have no commercial interest in it, of course. I just read that you say in page 2 which one you use and thought of giving you my opinion. This is my 2 cents of Euro."
* * *

"Millions of people across the world have already tested THIS and ARE making their girlfriends feel brand new sexual sensations! YOU are the best in bed, aren't you?"
* * *

"Hey, I enjoyed your rant on our general disregard for the details and rules in communication. Your point to 'hold my tongue for a moment and gather my thoughts' really resonated with me because, in practice, my personal experience is that the (non) listener takes the moment of silence as a cue to finish my sentences. How annoying. Especially when their guess for the completion of my thought process is WRONG. Anyway, your article has been a source of encouragement that I am not the problem for taking time to search for the right word that best describes my point. Thank you for noticing the importance of good communication - that there can be beauty in our ability to express ourselves!"
* * *

"I just found and read through my first issue of Blotter Rag. It's been a long time since I found something new that I truly enjoyed reading and felt the sincerity in the effort behind something like this. It can't be easy getting such a great thing off the ground every month. I hope you guys can reach your goal of a publishing company of books and I think you will. I've got background in advertising, marketing and journalism and with the every shrinking media hole in daily newspapers and the proliferation of crap on the tube and internet your magazine gives me hope. Keep doing it. It can't be easy but keep doing it. You have a goldmine with this thing."
* * *

"Thanks again for helping me off to a great start in 2008. Thoroughly enjoyed the January issue."
* * *

"I do everything by appointment. If you are coming to the area and you want to have a sit-down, I recommend you call at least a week in advance."
* * *

"An article in the June 2007 edition of the Blotter mentions the immaculate conception. Like many Protestants who refer to this Catholic dogma, the author errs. The immaculate conception is not the conception of Jesus. It is the conception of Mary. Jesus' conception is the dogma of the incarnation. Put yourself in the sandals of a medieval monk. The idea is that Jesus is so holy, not only was he conceived without sin but his mother was conceived immaculate. If you have an interest in Marian devotion, you might look at Maria Valtorta's Poem of the Man-God. Maria Valtorta was a nun who suffered from catatonic schizophrenia and had visions of the life of Jesus, which she wrote up as seven volumes of mystical literature. Her writings give you a sense of the Gospels and actually being there. Marians are just about the only group I know that has no organization whatsoever. For example, take any social club. Even if all members do is get together and drink beer, inevitably they feel compelled to hold business meetings, write bylaws, elect a president, a secretary, etc. The Marians I have met never do this. They meet. They pray the rosary. They go home. Organization is the last thing on their mind. They are very peaceful and relaxed too. Prayer is very peaceful and relaxing. If everyone prayed, the world might be a very different place."
* * *

"I've been a big fan of the Blotter for several years and just want to say you've done a great job. Suspect even your predecessor agrees."
* * *

"In case your essay in January's issue ("Failure") represents some genuine self-doubts and soul-searching, I can only say that I admire your talents very much and enjoy your invariably fresh and creative approach to writing. I wish you continued success being a remarkable editor and dad in the future, and please, do more writing."
* * *

"As I drive past your patch of 15-501, writing this letter in my head, there are strangers walking through my house. They could be doing anything. Turning on my TV, seeing how many jars of pickled okra are in the fridge, peeking into my lingerie drawer (which holds fewer matching sets than it did ten years ago). They have my permission to root around like this because my house is on the market.

When your house is for sale, you learn the art of picking up and going. Not to say that you travel light. You have to pack your dog's bed, your dog, a leash, today's New York

Times and a big ole bag of “stuff” that you have subtracted from your home’s overcrowded shelves in an attempt to achieve a spare appearance for the showing, into the car before you head to the Chatham County Starbucks. Least that’s how I came to the Starbucks today—with a full car.

Because it is winter, even minor annoyances can propagate themselves in the mind of irritable customers like myself at fine caffeine-loading establishments, er, chains. A man speaks too loudly about his son going “poo.” My cup has been filled too high to accommodate every grain of turbinado that I need. But my eye beholds a familiar sight on the shelf, and I open the March Blotter.

I read with interest the part where you talk about Beatrice and the rainbow, and then I come to the part about (your sister) and Hawaii. (Your sister) and Hawaii have really been on my mind a lot lately.

It all started in college. An anthropologist gave me a book to read called *Habits of the Heart*. The nonfiction piece is somewhat of a cautionary tale of just what can go wrong in a society when folks lose sight of a sense of family or place. Take me for example, although we could stick with (your sister). I spent the first thirty years of my life in one state in the Midwest or is it the gateway to the South, or could we just say Kentucky, Land of Wendell Berry. And man, did I feel provincial. I complained of wanderlust. Finally I moved to Houston (for one year only, did not even sell my house), but just like my dad predicted, it was never to return.

Probably my advanced degree and super specialized specialty put me at high risk to have to travel where the jobs are. Doesn’t everybody do this today? Become a little more nomadic and a little less quotidian? This geographic flexibility comes at a certain cost. Lately I am really trying to find ways to reconnect with my own past. Let me repeat and rephrase that. I am trying to reconnect with myself. Because now that both my parents have died and the husband that I met when I was thirty-something is the longest-standing fixture in my life, and I live in a state not even contiguous with the one where I was born, it seems that I have been cut off from that me that existed, say in 1982.

Somehow I have now glorified this past existence. But after all, it was pre-September 11. Back in the day of growing up Catholic in Louisville, the biggest shocker was not terrorism. It was small-town scandal. Here’s what happened in the 1970’s in my parish: The priest left the priesthood for the church guitarist, a divorcee named Vivian.

We had seen it coming. And when I say we, it is pretty telling that even an 8-year-old peeking through the slits in her prayerful eyes had a sense that the priest was watching Vivian tap her toes on the altar she sang:

Bring me a rose when my baby’s born/
When it’s hard to get/Bring me a rose when my
baby’s born/How easy we forget/
Or especially on this one:

I can almost see the lights of the city/
Shining down on me/ I can almost see the lights
of the city/Forever more, I shall be free.

Could have been singing about the neon in Vegas. My recall is that they didn’t leave town. He just moved from the rectory to her house and her kids started calling him “Daddy” instead of “Father.” Course none of us would call him “Father” ever again.

Part of me yearns for those days of church scandal in place of these days of global unrest. I can only conjecture that if I felt more anchored to church or family or terra firma that I could bear this modern life with more fortitude. Whoever wrote *Habits of the Heart* was onto something.

It is safe to say that in this day and age, not many of us as adults will be able to play cards with our siblings on the porch of the family river retreat while the no-see-ums bite us even though the porch is screened. But man, I had the same fantasy. I saw my mother’s family in Kentucky do this and it sure looked good to me.

As for my sister and me, we saw ourselves living out our last days together in a high-rise in east Louisville, old maids.

You and your sister and I and my Robyn will not know these pleasures. And yet there is that joy of discovery when one moves. Finding the just right friends, like the 80-year-old ex-wife of a Greek diplomat who has so much to say. Doing things you’d never thought you’d do like staying up late with the editor of *The Blotter* to be on a talk show in Raleigh. Or finding that all along you have kept your same ole perspective that it really is the simple things like a drive out to Maple View Ice Cream that beats all.

When the movers come there are some things that ain’t going on the truck. Into my car I am going to load with greatest care those earthly possessions that reconnect me to my past: my acoustic guitar that reminds me of my second-grade aspirations of becoming a guitarist, my novel manuscript that keeps the dream alive, and the carved African couple that graced my grandparents’ living room table in every home of theirs that I can remember.

The rearview mirror will hold most of the continent in it by the time I get to California. And this gypsy heart will still be beating, by sheer programmed habit, and praise be, that’s what is keeping me alive.

Forever more, I shall be free.”

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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CAUTION

I like bananas because they have no bones. (come on, sing with me!) I like bananas because they have no bones. I like bananas because they have no bones.

"The Last Match"

by David McCaul

I heard the crack of a branch and then Allen's cry- piercing, insane- for that instant of his falling, just before the splash. I raced to the edge of the lake's elevated bank and, with the yellow beam of my flashlight, caught his wet face, bobbing above the water.

"Holy shit oh shit oh lord mother it's COLD! Oh so much colder than I ever, ever could have imagined."

He looked ridiculous, having on a whim pig-tailed his long brown hair an hour or so prior.

"Quick, grab that branch!"

"Where, where branch?"

A dark-brown object floated at his back, the piece of potential firewood for which he'd been reaching when he'd taken the spill. I cast my beam in its direction and he flailed over to it.

"Give it here and I can pull you on up."

I heaved and Allen hoed... and he hung there, panting, the soggy bark breaking off in his grip. I set my flashlight down, positioned it on the bank where I could still see Allen, his head and the wet T-shirt that clung to his frail shoulders. I got a better foothold beneath an overgrown root and waited, but Allen grew suddenly pacified. He shrugged. "Huh. A case of shock in the uh, a case of crotch-shock s'all, but now that's over, and I must, must say," (his face bright with wet red lips, the clear water droplets slipping down the sides of his slender face) "I blew the temps a bit out of proportion." He sputtered water off his lips.

"Really?" I noticed that his glasses through all this had remained perfectly in place. With a knee on the bank's edge, I lowered a test hand, still holding the branch with the other. "No, no." I swirled my fingers in the water. "No, that's cold all right. That's really, really, almost exceedingly-" A yank of the branch and I lurched forward. Off-balance I almost toppled into the water but caught the stirrup of a root with my foot.

"Course it's cold!" he shrieked. "Ya' think I wanted this, to submerge myself in something this cold?! God wanted it, Ol' Man Fate or Little What's Her Name wanted it, but not me! Damn, I almost had you, too." The branch fell at Allen's side into the water with a splash. He pushed it downstream with minimal coordination, then, "Okay, watch out."

I stepped aside and observed as Allen threw himself against the bank.

He clung there, one hand outstretched, just...short...of a rock- "oh...[groan]God...won't...you..."

"I don't know, that rock's looking pretty slippery to me."

"please...help me!"

I grabbed his hand and threw my weight onto my back foot. A low branch hooked his T-shirt, then released it. He flew up the muddy bank onto his hands and knees.

"Y'okay?"

He wrung his left and then his right ponytail into the mud. They looked like two emaciated, eyeless squirrels.

"Phew! Whooo-hoo, yeah." He flicked water off his fingertips at me. A single droplet stung my right eye. "Nothing like ice cold in your veins!" He hopped over to a tree, tilted his head to the right, then flattened his palm several times against his left ear. Leaning with one hand on the tree trunk, he removed each of his boots and upturned their watery insides. "Think you've got enough there, fuel for the fire?"

I cast my light upon the six measly branches piled on the ground beside me.

"Ah, for shame, what a shame this is." He tore his T-shirt over his head. "No choice, I'm afraid." The shirt fell, heavy and wet, at his side- "Case, when the fire dies, there's only one thing for it" -and his hands pushed a soaked pair of jeans down his thighs. "Ya' gotta bring it back!"

"Yes, yes." I aimed my beam over Allen's shoulder, down the tree corridors, the ground laid thick with dead pine. Thanks to all the rain we'd had, scarcely a twig remained that wasn't waterlogged. But after six days of paddling and portaging through

They told you that nobody likes a smart ass?



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Northern Minnesota's Boundary Waters, self-delusion seemed every bit as vital as did trading turns blowing on Bic lighters.

"Ah, this feels good! It feels just right, you know?" Allen's deep brown eyes sparkled in my beam. His fingers worked at the laces of his hiking boots. "I'll be dry in no time. I'm afraid, however, that we *will* have to run."

He was naked save his boots. The rest of his clothes lay in a soggy heap.

"Be so kind as to shine your light on our canteen?"

The canteen mixture was Carlos Rossi and coffee, a favorite of ours in college. As he tipped it back I eyed his squat penis for not the first time, not even close. A former housemate of ours had been bothered by Allen's parades around the household, but in Texas the summer heat could get to be more oppressive than the homophobia. Years later, Allen's penis, his shock of pubic hair, appeared no more startling to us than, say, his ears did.

"Savor the earth tones of that vino? There's a hint of tannin there..."

Allen was already running. I screwed the cap back on the canteen and bounded after him. The canteen had a button-down leather strap that hooked around my belt, and it swung and bounced off my right hip as I ran through the trees. I slashed bright yellow streaks across the tree trunks, a dimmer egg-yolk haze over Allen's ass-crack as he zoomed ahead of me.

"Ah, c'mon, Case!" he called over his shoulder, "you're the light man! Gimme something!"

I pulled within ten feet or so of him and flashed my beam back and forth over the ground ahead, across the black soles of his heavy-looking boots. On his left a thin branch jutted from a bush at knee-level and SNAP!- he wrenched it free in passing. Without breaking stride he swooped down to his right and swept up an armful of brown-needled-twigs, stumbled, then regained composure enough to reach and- yes!- catch a gnarled branch on his left.

"Hey, hey! Over yonder! Two o'clock!" I dragged blind fingers through piles of wet leaves as I chased, training my beam on the terrain ahead while at the same time trying to snag any leftover sticks Allen passed up or missed. Allen leapt decaying stumps

with their moss neon-green in my light, his pigtailed slapping at his cheeks. The branches of his growing bounty curled up over his bare shoulders and bounced in his arms.

Everything I had gathered was too wet, and I noticed too that Allen bobbed and dropped branches each time he stooped for more. But the deeper we flew, the faster we went, further and further from the bright blue dome of my tent. No winds blew except those generated by our movement. The forest spread out before us at a gentle room temperature. I scribbled yellows right and left upon everything still, everything dead until my frantic beam crossed over a rock or leaf and painted life onto it the way a projector would a movie screen.

I drew closer to Allen, his lower back and bony ass covered in little red slashes. I flicked my projector onto his hairy chicken legs and with the strobe effect he appeared to move at an incredible speed. His pale ankles flew up behind him and his boots scarcely made contact with the ground.

"Heads up, ten o'clock!"

A needled branch flew from its precarious perch atop his shoulder as he swerved left, seized a large chunk of bark, then spun full around- branches leaves penis knees- and sped on.

"Beautiful, beautiful." It was all a sport and I his biggest fan. "Keep going- no slowing!" (short on breath, thinking of a rhyme) "Watch for what I'm showing!"

I caught Allen's red face in yellow as he spun- "Worry not! My pile's growing!"- then back around to keep running. After a pause he yelled over his shoulder, "Do you think soon...[breathless]...the wood we'll have to be stowing?"

"Eleven o'clock! No, no way of knowing. Where to find-" And I gave up the rhyme, a moment's distraction and it loosed itself from my grasp, flew over my shoulder. The sound of my voice, the words dispossessed like the wet branches scattered in our wake, swallowed up by the enormous unseen, that which my flashlight couldn't possibly reach.

The ensuing quiet, the stillness bore down on me, made louder the scrape of quick-breath in my throat and squelch of mud underfoot. The soles of my sneakers were caked in an inch-layer of mud, and each stride felt heav-

ier than the last. Still I kicked the caps off overgrown peach mushrooms like Nerf balls, gritted my teeth against nature's wild and unruly imposition, the trees all uprooted and carpeted thick with furry green. All that was ours existed in a ray of yellow light, the flash of needle where it appeared, enmeshed in the thick wooly fabric of the forest, threading deeper and deeper...

* * *

I find a clearing, an air pocket. I collapse in the dew at the edge of a pond and breathe, feel my legs, my chest-heave, the sun bloody against my closed eye-lids. Stillness...a moment in a breezeless, noiseless vacuum. Then a burst of grouse among the leaves, the underbrush racket I can't tell where but I expect it's Allen, come from the night. I cringe, trembling, unprepared to look him in the face. Has to be a different Allen, I tell myself. A forgiving Allen, an Allen of infinite understanding, soft in the new morning.

But nothing about today's light, the mercilessly bright yellow-orange-green pond reflections, is soft. I open my eyes and everything looks hard: the pine trunks that enclose me in this space, the needle-encrusted earth, the jagged rocks at the pond's edge. The hard truth: I'm alone and profoundly lost. I throw a stone into the pond. A momentary hole opens up in the fractured sun, swallows it with a gulp. I shiver, wrap my arms around my legs. I should be looking for him. No, first the tent. The tent- he will be there, his sense of direction superior to mine, he'll be stoking a fire, the smells of pancakes and instant coffee will trigger my senses and AWAKE, suddenly.

I'll overflow with apologies then. I'll laugh, nervous at first, then



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hearty, unstoppable laughter, spitting breakfast morsels from my mouth. *Can you believe it, Allen? Because I can't. Fishing privileges for you, all the way back to the pick-up point, I know that doesn't make up for what I did but...*

No. A glance of sunlight catches my eye and whites out the pond's blue. He'll be bruised and tired, we won't speak to each other, not at first anyway. Anyhow we'll have to hurry and pack up our gear; we left too much work for the last day, a whole twelve miles. Someone will be waiting at the pickup point with a car to drive us into town to the outfitter's place. Someone is waiting for us.

In the car, then. We'll talk in the car. Apologies first. Then, later, attempts to understand. The premonition, however abstract, had been overwhelming, but- *no, Allen, not agoraphobia. That's reductive, that's fucking insulting.*

Agoraphobia... Terminology leftover from some Intro to Psych course will be there behind his narrowed eyes with their slanted condescension. And there, between his thin, curled lips, in that trembling oval of imminent rebuke. *Go ahead and categorize my reaction, Allen, fine- undermine it. Meanwhile you won't even for a second accept the possibility that what preceded my reaction, what provoked it, might have been more like intuition.*

He'll argue, he'll write me off as irrational. I feel it as sure as I feel the damp cold on my lower back. The sun has no effect other than its brightness, the sun hasn't been here all week and it's too late now. My insides, frozen and hardened from a week of rain, won't thaw. *(It was a potential, Allen, an inevitability that some activity, something*

bigger than us presided over this forest. And you just fucking sat there)

I can't help but feel that neither of us will recover from this; we'll bear permanent grudges. Something will keep us from making this trip again, the excuse will take the guise of a lack of money or time but underneath it'll be our cracked friendship, the gunshot echo of our misunderstanding.

Hopeless, then. And profoundly lost.

* * *

"The animals are lowing, no winds a'blowing," Allen sang it, his usually Cash-deep baritone a little whinier as he fought for oxygen. His pace and mine fell from a sprint to a scurry, then finally to a heavy-footed perpetual falling. I grew more wide-eyed curious with my flashlight-scanned all 180 degrees from side to side and illuminated the thick hanging vines overhead, the mammoth trees around which we had to veer. A mere few nights previous I had cowered in secret fear of the pairs of red eyes that hovered low in the periphery of where we slept each night. But now no eyes, no mass of fur and teeth planted amidst the trees and like an apparition materializing all of a sudden in my lighthouse sweep, no living things except Allen and I, our bright lights loud voices.

"Hey hey hey, yo yo yo- [CRASH THUMP]- Awwwshhht!"

"Allen?" Ahead leaves trembled just beyond a massive trunk, a felled tree on its side, high as my waist... *oh fuck.* I rushed over and- "Dude, y'okay?"- he was there, upside down face in the dirt and legs twisted up the trunk. Collapsed like Gumby's horse, and positioned in such a way that I was forced to address his ass.

"Oh, my bad Allen, I'm so- I didn't see it coming, I swear."

A muffled groan, then his head turned and spit out something small, a piece of dirt. "Oh, I believe you."

"Sorry... We'll have to re-gather your bounty, it's been scattered."

"You see I can't move, Case. Can't budge I'm afraid."

I wasn't positive but his voice sounded shrill, close to tears maybe. From my side of the trunk, with an Allen boot in each hand I attempted to maneuver his limp body onto his back. With some effort I had his torso halfway turned when I glimpsed what lay concealed beneath his stomach: the crumpled mass of needles and branches he'd worked so hard to acquire, the eagle's nest of it imprinted all up and down his stomach and legs.

"You're a fossil," was all I managed to say.

He was on his back now, sucking air in short bursts. I worried for a second that he'd crushed a lung but then- "Why oh why?!"- he wailed, his voice gravelly in a way that I'd never heard it before.

I had an idea. "Hold on. Here, should fix you right up." I unbuttoned the canteen and handed it down to him, he accepted and glug, glug glug... tears rimmed his wide eyes, his Adam's apple rose then fell, rose then fell. I waited in suspense, outwardly calm but feeling the first pricks of a nervous fear. Allen's threshold for pain had always been incredible, it was difficult to tell with him but if anything at all was broken or twisted... "Finish her off, Allen, drink her down. I've had my fill." We had seen one couple and only one after our first evening, and still had two lakes, two portages, twelve miles altogether before we would reach our pickup location. The distance immeasurable in my mind given the hindrance of a twisted ankle or torn ligament.

"Ummm, rich oak flavor, tones of autumn, exquisite really."

I climbed over the trunk and hoisted him up on his shaky feet. Everything seemed okay, a couple leaf scraps and twigs caught in his pubic hair, a few scrapes across his stomach, slits of blood not yet coagulated, but otherwise fine.

We left the sticks and logs where they'd fallen and, with Allen's arm slung over my shoulder, we hob-



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bled around the trunk's upended, massive root system. Roots thick as my arms jutted toward us at sharp angles. Once so vital but now petrified, they stretched to nothing, a lack. Little balls of thick web clung between the roots like sock-lint between toes. Were these cocoons of some sort? I stopped.

"Allen?"

"Hey now... What is this?"

A sleeping bag. A normal, white and blue checkered flannel bag. But not normal. I spun around and dashed light across the thick foliage at our back. No one.

"Wait, Case, shine her here again."

A torn piece of white cloth all wadded-up. The sleeping bag, laid out in the hole the roots had left: a pit about two feet deep, six feet long.

Slowly, we lowered onto our hands and knees.

"This isn't right," I said. "Would someone?"

"Ditch the bag out here? Can't understand why. Perfectly good." He dangled two fingers to the edge of the bag and-

"Don't!"- I slapped his hand away.

"What what?" He glanced over his shoulder, then back at me. His mouth fell open and he grinned, his eyes radiant. "Oh it's too late now, Case. If this is someone's bed then dude's been listening to us now for some time."

This damn tree that had tripped Allen up- I'd jerked my light in the direction of the crash and then that branch, those leaves had trembled. Beyond them a yellow haze that dimmed green, then gray, then black. The forest beyond that was an empty nothing hole.

Allen reached to touch the bag and this time I didn't stop him. He flipped back a corner of it and felt underneath. "Ahh, nice. Feel that."

I reached down and a thick mass of leaves welcomed my palm, the sleeping bag damp and heavy against the top of my hand. Deeper down Allen fished out shavings of birch bark. Then, before I could protest, he unzipped the bag a few inches and peeled back the top layer. Faded and soiled blue-white-blue-white checkered pattern and then- "Look!"- a book of matches, white and unmarked. Allen picked them up, folded back the front

cover. Three matches remained. He ripped one out and tried to strike it.

"Oh Jesus Christ, Allen."

"I know, I know." He turned his chin and laughed off to one side in that girlish manner of his, then narrowed his eyes at the matchbook. "It's maddening, isn't it? But I can't help myself." He bared his front teeth and rubbed his pointer and middle fingers horizontally back and forth across them- "imagine if they still work?"- then placed the white head of a match against the surface of a tooth. "Seen me do this one?"

"Huh?"

A flick of Allen's wrist and *shhhttt* the match was lit. "Ah ha! Magic." A light more orange than that of my flashlight dipped down his neck and chest.

"Oh wow, so now we've gone and fucked with his matches."

Allen looked over his shoulder, the match still burning in his hand. I splashed yellow in the direction of his gaze, held my projector in between two trees, the beam dimmer than it had been before. I had to squint to see fifteen feet. "Shhhh" I hissed. "Listen."

Allen blinked at me. "What we listening for?"
* * *

A pair of eyes. I look up and opposite the pond from me, no more than thirty feet away, is a pair of eyes, beady-unblinking. Pre-comprehension I simply stare, vacant. Then, the tan-brown body takes shape, the head and slender neck, the thin legs half-concealed by the wall of green, the far wall of my room.

It is only a doe. But- uneasily I consider that I heard nothing, saw nothing... how long has it been there, watching? I expect it to bound off but it doesn't, just stands there, its fixed gaze a question mark- *Are you?*

Soon other flashes of brown, other forms appear in succession. Four, five, six- how many might have slipped unnoticed before? How many hundred might the pines have concealed as I sat here numb all morning? Each deer threads through the plexus of pine branches with the softest crunch of leaves beneath its hooves. Then, for a moment, each freezes, its head held high, the unseen antennae of delicate senses writhing for sight-sound-smell.

Don't move. Every ounce of me tightens with the simple desire to

remain undetected. Nerves rubbed raw from the night seek outlets in the thrum of pulse in my neck, the twitch of tricep muscle in my left arm, a cramp in my right thigh. All else is still and stunned. Leaves, green tongues lolling in the sunlight, pause to hang motionless. Not a sound, not an echo of an echo of a sound, can be heard.

A snap of twigs breaks the silence, releases me; a doe hops through the foliage into the clearing, lowers its head. The others hang back, apprehensive. *I'm not even here, I promise.* Cautious steps, anxious adjustments rustle amidst the leaves, brush against the enveloping, spindly coats of pine. A second deer crosses the thick threshold of underbrush, then a third. I sit rigid, certain that some predetermined proximity to me will trigger fear, that the painstaking alacrity of their advance will snap all of a sudden into reverse- a thrown object, reaching its zenith, a gravitational zero the instant before descent.

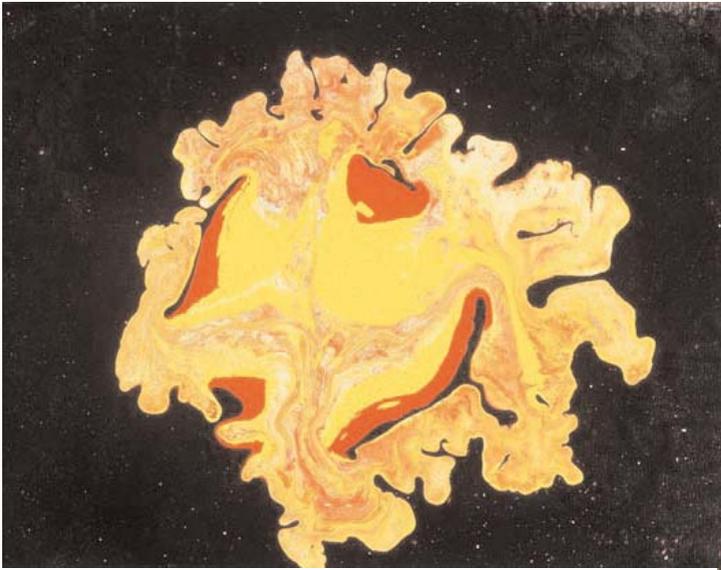
But the lead doe, the one that first appeared, reaches the pond's edge. A last glance in my direction and now with fatalistic conviction I foresee its flight; yet it takes another step. Its slender neck planes forward over the damp ground, then appears both above and upon the surface of the water. I wait, urging what comes next: the drink, the soft kiss and trickle of water, begging for it- *go on, it's yours, please.*

It happens. Two doe, two muzzles meet, then meld, the muddy puddle below an extension of the eyes and ears above. I breathe, warmed, relieved. The others converge upon the water, coaxed by the sight. Holes in the sky's reflection open up and close around their thin legs; the still water drinks them. Gentle slaps and splashes upon the water muffle the sounds of my breathing; the water's hold on them eclipses my presence.

I pose no threat, then. Successfully passive, harmless...barely existent. Flies encircle the animals' coats as though attached by invisible leashes, their presence acknowledged- or not?- by the unconscious twitch of tail. So beautiful, the deer's union with the water, the fall of droplets from their muzzles *blip blip blip.*

I want to let go and concede to these animals' graceful advance, their overtaking of my space. I close my eyes, surrender my mind and sit still.

Jim Fuess - Berkeley Heights, NJ
www.jimfuessart.com



Left: Drunken Amoeba
Lower Left: Alone
Below: Evolution
Right: Banshee
Far Right: Baboon
Lower Right: Underwater Fire





The Blotter

Atoms of me like water like the sky
might part round their bodies...
* * *

"Man, put the matches back, leave it like it was before."

Allen snuffed the match on his tongue, replaced the matchbook, then paused. "Huh." He reached and coaxed the zipper further down the bag. "So, we're thinking, if it wasn't ditched, then—"

"I don't want to think about it."

"Wait, though." He unzipped it all the way down, past row after checkered row and for a second I expected to see... there was nothing. "How long does dude make it with just the bag, this cloth thing- totally worthless- and then a coupla matches? Assuming he hasn't got a weapon—"

"But he'd take it. If he has a knife he's got it on him."

"Touche, right you are. But wouldn't you build yourself a nice big hut? Bravin' the wild's all fine and good, but c'mon, ya gotta have at least a lean-to."

The woods behind us- and who knew how many acres there were; miles and miles- weighed on my back. A suction pressure spread across my shoulders and pulled at the ridges of my ears. I turned and scanned the trees, three quick swipes of light. I couldn't leave them alone, the way a kid scratches his chicken pox.

"Was the beam always this weak?" I clicked the flashlight's power off and on. "Hey are you—?"

I turned and Allen was in the hole, feeling hands and knees on top of the bag.

"Dude, no."

"You wouldn't believe me, no one would believe me if I told them how comfortable...wow." Stiffly, slowly, he eased onto his back and lay down, stretched his legs.

Something rustled at my back. I burst. "Jesus Christ I'm gonna freak out here will you- Jesus Allen get the fuck out of there!" I grabbed his ankle, squeezed it wanting to snap it in my grip.

"Shit, Case! Okay alright!" He bolted upright, tore his ankle from me. "Just know, just know Case- you're afraid of something that doesn't exist. Totally, totally irrational."

"How do I know this? I don't know this." Damn it! He knew I needed to turn and scratch the itch with my yellow beam, he knew and was waiting. I restrained myself, took a deep breath and said, "I don't care. I've ruled out sleep already, seriously. Look at what you're lying in. I mean, fine, okay- so there's a body, the person who slept here, half-devoured by bears somewhere in the woods, right? That's fine, great. Or maybe there's a person, right now, who can survive with *nothing*. This, right here, is all he's got, all she's got, whatever. I'd love to talk to that person, I really would, if there were bars or a glass wall, something between us so I could observe him like at a zoo. But this, right now, this isn't ours and we're seriously, seriously out of our element."

"Ah ha! Wrong!" Allen karate-chopped the soil for emphasis. "Okay, I don't want to say you're wrong- but you are, I'm afraid, in this case, wrong. And besides, how do you know what you think you know about these peeps who sleep beneath the trees and such?"

Why do we fear them?"

"Because..." I paused, breathless, overwhelmed by a rushing sensation at my back, the rising forest tide and undertow. "...I guess I just can't imagine who this person is. What slides inside this bag, the legs, I can't relate to any of it. I want to know, sure, but—"

"-but this being or- or this concept of our minds you need to cage it? Why'd you paddle yourself out to BFE if you're suddenly the big zoo fan?"

A solid wash of black and Allen's face disappeared. I gasped. Click. "Don't give me this." Click Click Click. *The batteries*. I unscrewed the bottom of the flashlight, fingers unsteady, then dumped the D batteries, juggled them in my palm and replaced them. Click, click click- "Allen... Allen get out of there."

"Wait, here, wait a second." Leaves crackled and a zipper zipped- the matches. *Shht. Shht.* Third try and a drop of orange flared in his hand. "You see?" A dimple appeared on his cheek, a little round shadow pocket.

Darkness lapped at the edges of our igloo of light, a fuzzy blackness like shadows in the folds of an old movie theater's curtains. My flashlight, my projector was dead. "Get the other match...get the other match and let's go." A sudden burst of leaves and it-he-she would be upon us, the owner of this bag, someone, watching us. A presence that hung tense in the periphery and like a shadow unfolded itself every which way with the fall of absolute darkness. A taut line extended from it to us and it held that line like a fisherman, delicate pointer finger poised, awaiting the slightest of vibrations.

* * *

Like water, like the sky... My mind is restless with scents of pine in the damp morning air, the feel of a slight flush beneath my eyes. What's more, I can't shake this impulse to test them, to trigger the deer's alarm with the slight movement of, say, the index finger of my right hand. So predatory, so much like a spider with its eight-legged surveillance of the web, its Morse code taps signaling death's advance. Each instant of our co-existence is capped with an excruciating sense of foreboding; built-in mental stimuli- mine and theirs- threaten their



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every move. The deer, all six of them, wade closer to where I sit, and meanwhile fear pencils in boundaries, draws up borders between us that are at once intangible and inviolable. I open my eyes; I see it happening. And still there's nothing I can do.

* * *

"Allen...seriously..." I couldn't say what it was, I couldn't speak. I only knew we needed to go or- or what? Something terrible...

The halo of orange light ebbed upon Allen's forehead. As I stared at him his eyes, minutely responsive, quivered with something close to compassion. And guilt, maybe a trace of guilt in the deep brown of his eyes as well, a reaction to the fear he saw in my face.

But neither of us spoke. I shot him a look of panic, of desperation, too humbled by my fears to conceal them. The orange glow dipped further down his face. His cheek bulged near the top of his jaw line as he clenched his teeth, then the match- "Ow!"- burnt down and singed his fingertips. As he worked to ignite the other- our last hope for a lighted escort- I heard a swishing sound at my left shoulder. I turned my head, the flashlight's futility weighing heavy in my right hand. Again a noise, tiny but urgent pops of pine needles and reflexively I drew the flashlight behind my head, aimed it. Waiting... waiting... *there!* I hurled it, the last thought on my mind *how stupid* and then a CRASH! of branches and the flashlight landed with a thud.

"Case?"

I gulped. "I threw your light." "High time you calm down there."

I wanted so badly for him to concede to the potential danger, admit that he was scared and willing to head back with me, running all the way. But instead we sat there, frozen in silence. The thought of the last unlit match was a desert mirage; I didn't mention it.

"Quite the crooked path it was we took here," he said quietly. "Wanna go back?"

My arms-shoulders-neck stiffened like he'd forced a handful of ice cubes down my back. His hesitation was perverse.

"Kinda have to admit we're none too close to camp," he continued. "Not a smidgeon of light. Fire's out by now anyway. And my leg, Jesus, my

leg."

What about your leg? Soundless words stuck in my throat, the hollow of me, winded by his intimation that we stay.

"And hey," he continued, "dawn's always showing, showing up just after the darkest hour. No?"

I leaned in and ducked the roots that beetled out somewhere over my head, reached for his tired, raspy voice. I felt an elbow with my right hand, brushed across his left hip then his stomach. Naked and propped on his arms, Allen wasn't moving; weighted to the earth, he felt immobile as an oak. For some reason incomprehensible, he wanted to stay here.

I found a shoulder and squeezed it. My nails hadn't been trimmed for maybe a month. I sunk them into his skin. Deep.

"Okay that hurts."

Then deeper, harder. The resistance of his flesh only infuriated me further.

"Ow! Get the fuck-!"

He grabbed my right wrist, pulled it and my index fingernail tore through scabs down his chest and stomach.

He screamed, a scream that entered me, razored through my clenched teeth down my throat. I didn't see but imagined his face twisted with hurt eyes, his legs crossed beneath him, bare-assing the wet blue-white-blue-white. Knuckles gouged the thin skin just below my Adam's apple. I reeled back and with a violence that widened my own eyes I grabbed his thighs and pulled, pulled with an electric rage in my arms. A boot toe hammered into my ribs. I had him halfway out, legs kicking, almost free of the

sleeping bag pit and matches, free of the roots' stranglehold. *Get out!* I lost my grip on his thigh, grabbed an ankle. Wide-open space at my back and *why did he make me do it this way damn it!* *All his fault as long as long as he's in this hole I have to-*

-I let go. The solid toe of a boot crunched into my shin and I let go, my feet dropped out from under me. On the ground, shaking, I searched for something to hold onto, to pull myself up.

"You walk away or I'm not-you attack me like that again I'll put an end to your shit, your afraid-of-the-dark bullshit."

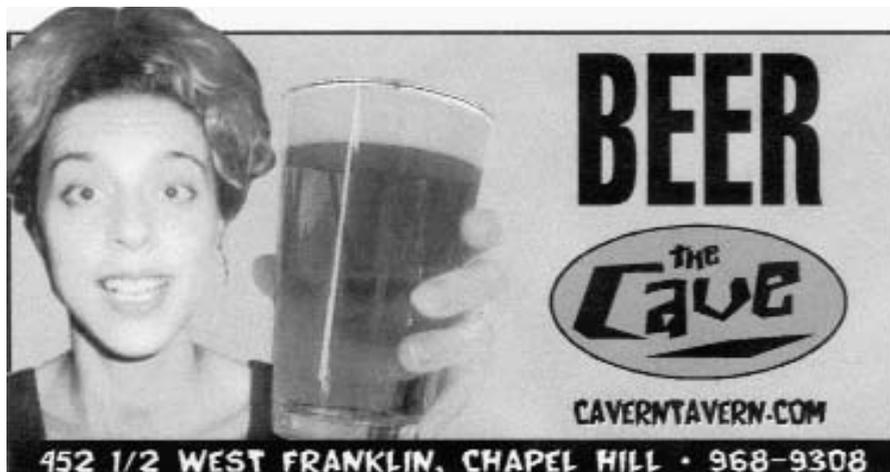
It didn't sound like him at all, I couldn't even tell from where the voice came. I felt bark, pulled myself onto my feet. Dizzy, I reached for words- "Get out GET OUT OF HERE!"- and flailed for something to steady myself.

"GET THE FUCK OUT!"

* * *

A doe's neck snaps rigid. It stares. A droplet of water hits the pond's surface and then another doe's eyes dart up. Then it's three, four, all six pairs of eyes and I knew this would happen, I saw it coming and still the hard-edged terror of their gaze, the hallucinatory intensity of their defense mechanism are beyond me.

With muzzles poised inches above muddy reflections and thin legs all swallowed up, their eyes penetrate, inquisitive and sharp. It has to be that they look through me, has to be that their bullet eyes fly through my tenuous presence and past the trees but *how far? What is out there?* I think hard and listen for a breeze that doesn't come, a scarcely audible footstep, some distant



The Blotter

falling branch. And in that moment of breezeless silence is everything the deer know, and everything that I do not.

BAM!- a wave of muscle movement tears across the pond. The sky erupts in water explosion and rapid-fire hooves. White tails shoot up above the splashes, one after another leaps onto the shore, then plunges into the trees. White tails pop through a wall of green and then they are gone. Bushes lurch, branches sway, back and forth, back and forth. Then still. All hangs still.

The pond is blank but for collections of ripples, concentric circles that emanate from invisible centers in the deep blue of the sky. They expand, stretch themselves thin over the emptiness. (After the fight with Allen I'd thrown myself into the night forest, viciously determined to stay on the outer edges of an inflating fear, a balloon of hot breath immediacy)

Ripples, ghosts of ripples pinch the sky, crawl in creases up to its grassy edges. A grouping of six deer explodes through the trees beyond, tramples the leaves, tears up the soil, the territory everywhere marked with urine, with hooved-depressions crisscrossing back and forth through the trees.

The sky is pockmarked with zeros, the suggestions of trauma wrinkling the fragments of sun, distorting the clouds. And then the surface settles. The circles recede and vanish in flashes of sunlight.

I'm not even here, I promise.

My torso, my neck spin as with the flick of a marionette's wrist and in that split-second of my turning it strikes me that I want to see it, whatever it is that frightened those deer. Unable to bear the nothingness of this infinity of tree corridors, I'll face up to my own death if it is to materialize there in the forest. But there is nothing. In turning, I see unmoving trees and rocks of hard reality. I squint. Nothing stirs, no faces between the leaves. Nothing.

I stand up in a panic, walk into the trees. My pace quickens into a jog, my legs carry me past stumps and underbrush unfamiliar in the dappled sunlight. Shadows cut beneath my feet at right angles to the trees. The leaves blur a golden green in my peripheral vision. Any moment now and I'll find the spot. It's not something I can escape, I never could- that idea of

escape so ridiculous beneath my consciousness, always just beyond my reach. *But not even self-awareness could have prevented it, Allen. No amount of compassion can touch what's automatic in us. At bottom we're helpless, we're insulated animals, look: we fight to survive and we don't even know why.*

I run on, pulled by strings of intuition. When the felled trunk appears I hear a spitting sound and know it is-

"Allen?"

I sprint to the base of the tree and there he lies, shivering, shadowed beneath the roots outstretched.

"Allen... you're still..."

...still propped on his elbows, his pigtailed ratty and full of debris. Blue and white checkers conceal his pale flesh up to the nipples. First it is shame; I feel embarrassed for the both of us. Then fury, an inability to understand the foolhardy obstinacy that has kept him here.

"Case, I'm gonna"- the words come out in breathless spurts, his chest heaves with the effort- "this isn't good, we're fucked."

He shifts his weight and I see his shoulders tremble with the difficulty of supporting himself. His eyes bulge, trained upon a spot on the flannel, like he's been tracking the minute advance of a tiny insect across one of its squares. I approach him, my chest vibrating with my heartbeat, my fury transitioning to fear. I bend down and Allen looks up at me, eyes watering, dirt smudged across his pale cheeks. I feel for his legs beneath the flannel.

"Don't." His fingers are thin and cold upon my wrist.

"Ankle?" I hear myself say the word but without understanding. Allen is nodding and the questions surge up inside of me in a terrible thick mass, an enormous sob suffocated and suffocating. *Did I do this?*

"Can't carry me, Case, we're too far."

I open my mouth to disagree but then a terrible thought takes hold of me, the idea of the hours he's spent here, the long dark seconds stretched in what must have been painstaking anticipation of this moment, the moments to come.

"Okay, okay"- almost choking, stricken dumb with guilt- "I'll book it to find help, Allen, just stay here." But even as I say this it doesn't seem plausi-

ble, none of it does. "I'll drag you to the tent." I grab him beneath the arm to hoist him up but he resists, dead weight in my trembling hands.

"Case. Leave me."

His eyes, round with fear and hurt, are beyond placation. "I'm getting help," I tell him. "They have- there are doctors, at the pickup point." I stand up, unsure of whether this is true, unsure of everything. I need a white lie, something to make it easier on him. But it is too late, Allen knows the difficulties all too well, the portages and lakes that I'll have to cross to find anyone.

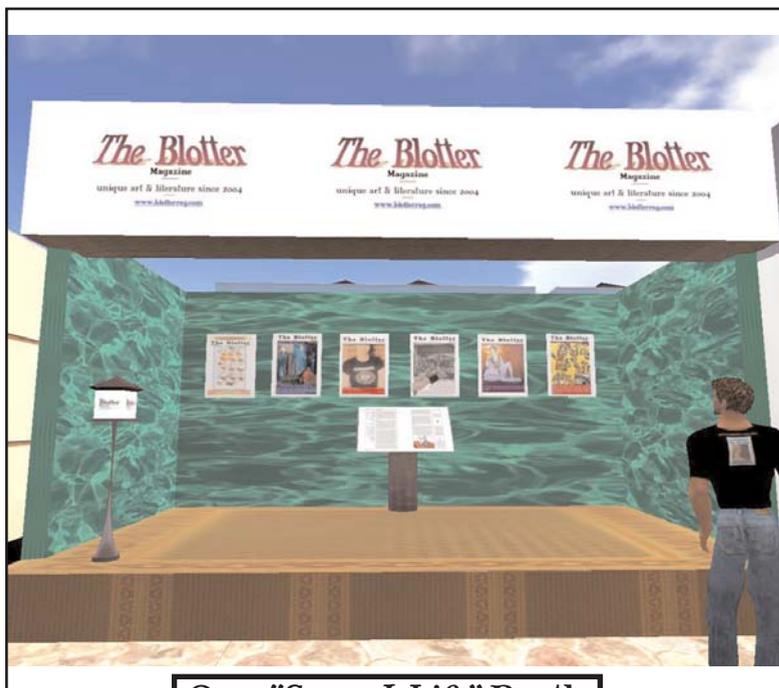
"I'll get the food, Allen, the water, the wine. I'll do that first and then I bet I get lucky and run into canoers on the way, we saw that couple the other day. With their help, or anyone at all..."

With God's help, Old Man Fate, Little What's Her Name... Allen's string of invocations flash across my thoughts. I remember the splash and *what a fucking joke*. Allen fell into the lake and there was no *why*- only the splash, the hole, the ripples of a displacement.

I look once more into his eyes, the sparkle extinguished by the long night. And so difficult to bear- harder than his wincing, harder than the unspoken but suspected truths of when he did it and how it happened- is that I can't find the loathing, the accusation. There's no room for it and he knows, informed by the pain, the interminable darkness when there was no one for him, nothing out here but his own determination... and then me. And now that I've come, I'm to leave him again. I can't see any other way.

As I run through the trees back to camp, I think I hear something, a crunch of earth and leaves at my back. I don't have to turn around to know that it is nothing.





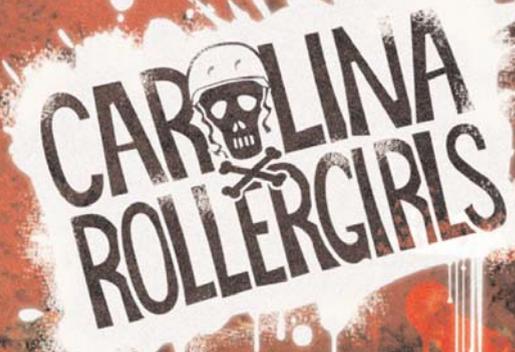
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By Ray Succre

Guile as Through a Syringe

Bitter-ender, succulent ember shot
from the teeth at a quilted wound;
her cancel of his cares a nail scratched
across the emery:

His nature raked on arid, judicial eyes.
Did she think him lazy? Procrast?
She thought him chronic off. Lesser.
Did she know?

She knew his errors and uncovered
his faults approximate:
The savvy sots of a penetrating tourist.
She was doubtful long to stay.

“Who are you?” he asked, “Why are you
doing this?” “I’ll go home.” she said.
“What?” “I’ll go now.”

And there was no why, which left only
how:
Two feet, doorway, and stairs to the out.

Sonticus Speculum

I husband this gauntlet proper,
you must ascertain cars: spot set, set up,
hoods lifted back,
vibrancy of underside lighting.
Mass of performance,
meet the new paint.

I walk too far around their lot of cars;
I’ve an escalating fear of notice.

At four blocks from,
I find a red shirt reaching into a dumpster,
supporting itself with green, holey pants
on bare feet.

The man is a tall yield, and
I take another route, too abruptly,
so as not to pass him;
I’ve a diminishing fear of where I’ve been.

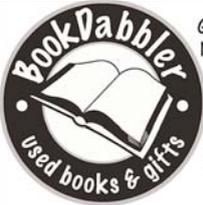
The bank’s readerboard clock drips
its blood down... late, early,
and this gauntlet has milled me into panic.

Reclusivity: Feel the world being
witched away from you.

Can one brighten blacktop beyond a
lulling grey?

Perhaps with a red shirt.
Perhaps with a lit underside.

I’ve made a labyrinth of town,
but scurry and topple past no real snare.
When I reacquire my home self,
safely contained in the known rooms,
the rabbitty portion resides,
its power left outside where it can wait.
I am again exploding lovely in the world,
but that singularity of my absurd panic
will recur to mind, burned into it outside,
like an image of the Sun,
a lover’s deformity,
a man’s proudly silent face in the casket.



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The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals.. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

mermaid@blotterra.com

Who keeps knocking on the wall just before daylight starts leaking in under the curtain, and why do they want to wake me up? Whose patience is so damaged? Or is it that they cannot sleep and their own *schadenfreude* causes them to wish to share this moment, to steal the last pleasant bit of sleep, the final act of dream? Sometimes it sounds like the knuckles of a prize-fighter and sometimes the cracked, scratching fingernails of a tired woman home from somewhere she should never have been in the first place. They never speak, or if they do, it is with voices that cannot pierce the barrier of wall and near-sleep.

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CONTRIBUTORS

David McCaul writes, "I live hard and play the piano softly in Chicago. A short-story of mine entitled 'Three Blocks from the Sun Door' is forthcoming in *Lunch Home Stories Magazine*. It would be an honor to survive your slush pile.

Ed: David, the honor is ours.

Ray Succe currently lives on the southern Oregon coast with his wife and baby son. He has been published in *Aesthetica*, *Main Street Rag*, and *Rock Salt Plum*, as well as in numerous others across as many countries. He tries hard.

Jim Fuess writes, "I work with liquid acrylic paint on canvas. Most of my work is abstract, but there are recognizable forms and faces in a number of the paintings. I am striving for grace and fluidity, movement and balance. I like color and believe that beauty can be an artistic goal. The painting technique involves using squeeze bottles with different viscosities of liquid paint, two brands of paint, and a number of interchangeable nozzles of different apertures." Jim is the Chairperson and Founder of the New Art Group (NAG). He was the curator for art shows in his hometown, at the Berkeley Heights Library.

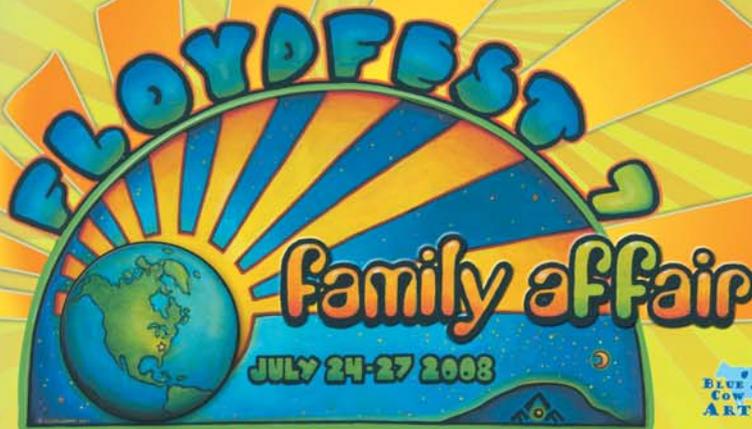
Ed: Hey, Homeboy! In my "yoot" I spent many an afternoon in the BH Public Library, reading Heinlein and checking out the cute librarian interns.

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