

*Fall Colors Abound: Tom Sheehan, Gary Beck, Susan Siebert Connors,
Corey Mesler, Charles Freeland,
a new Staccato and The Dream Journal.*

The Blotter

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MAGAZINE

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Anxiety

My favorite scene in the film Apollo 13 is when Lovell berates his fellow astro-
nauts not scrap about some detail of the space-accident that led to their strug-
gling to get back to earth. It happened, he explains, and it doesn't matter how
it happened. He informs them that they're not going to have this episode,
running in circles, flinging blame-grenades, only to end up back where they
started, in a damaged spacecraft. Lovell is the poster-child for remaining calm
in adversity, cool under fire.

I, however, am the poster-child for anxiety. By the time you read this, the
hurricanes will have passed my home: to the west, or along the beach, south
through some other state, or perhaps even fizzled out offshore like so much
soggy fireworks. Or waterworks, if you will. Right now I am checking the
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Agency's website for the seventh time
today. They update their predictions for Hurricane Hanna's movement five
times daily, but I keep hoping that there is some other factor that they will
include, as if it were a memo that was faxed to them but fell behind the fax
machine only to be found by a brave meteorological summer-intern from a
small college in the Midwest whose mom is working swing shift as a welder
for Boeing to pay his tuition. If this were indeed so, I would find a way to
make an anonymous donation to the campus store to pay for his senior year
textbooks. But, no. No changes. The hurricane's movement is wobbly, but
inexorably zenlike in its accuracy, towards me.

Not, mind you, towards North Carolina generally, or even Chapel Hill par-
ticularly. Specifically towards me. Smack-dab. And do not mistake my state-
ment as solipsism, or narcissism, or even the misguided madness of summer
heat. I know that the hurricane is out to get me. To teach me a lesson. I
have already learned this lesson, but it is one that apparently needs driving
home again and again.

The lesson:

You can't fix it. You can't fix weather, history, human nature, the price of oil,
the price of fame, the fall that goeth after pride. Can't fix it. Preparing for it
doesn't fix it. Getting your mind right doesn't fix it. Running around in cir-
cles shouting, "what'll I do? What'll I do?" doesn't fix it.

I believe I am a fixer. I think that you can talk people through things.
Twenty-one years in telephone customer-service ingrained that in my cere-
brum. Ingrained? Deeply rutted. Branded. I also suffer with social-anxiety
disorder. The name of which I resent. It's not a disorder so much as a flavor.
And suffer is a harsh word. I am flavored with social anxiety, if you will.

I don't enjoy parties, per se. I go. I eat the little sandwiches or nibble tortilla
chips and sit in the most comfortable chair available. If the TV is on, because
there's news, or a football game, I watch, but only so I appear to be doing
something constructive. I don't make small-talk, but I listen to other folks,
which is fun. I appear to be a good listener, nodding and saying, "my good-
ness" or "really!" at the right places, but sometimes I'm daydreaming. My cur-
rent daydream is that I can be a literary agent, but more on that later.

How, you may ask, can I be a fixer, someone who talks people through issues,
but have social anxiety? I admit that they seem at first blush to be contrary
disciplines. And this is not just a matter of "compartmentalizing", either.
The truth is, if you listen enough, and you relax the analytical part of your
brain – by daydreaming, mostly – you achieve a certain state of problem-solv-
ing perfection. Nerd-vana.

In my customer service time, I must have answered some 100,000 calls, about everything from how to rebuild a computer taken apart by a youngster with a Philips-head screwdriver and apparently limited supervision to “should I pay off my seven thousand dollars of credit-card debt or move to Costa Rica and throw pots?” Yet, in all of that time, I never became a subject matter expert on anything. Nothing. Not even the products upon which I was supposed to be providing technical support. Yet, somehow, that was reassuring to my callers. Or maybe it was the sound of my voice. Can a voice - without the eye contact, the warmth of human proximity, the appropriately intimate body language, still sound like it’s listening?

And it is not at all surprising to me that a toll-free telephone number becomes a conduit for all subjects. It really doesn’t matter, does it? People will find a serial number of a PC in order to gain access to a live human listener. “No it’s working perfectly, except that my husband has cut out all of the people’s eyes in the photos in our wedding album with an X-acto knife. No, I don’t think he’s psycho. Actually, he was trying to correct the red-eye. You can do that in Photoshop? Really? How much do you think the photographer will charge to do reprints?” And it just so happened that I had listened to a friend of a friend discussing this very issue at a Christmas party a few years back – that is, making a deal with one’s wedding photographer for access to the negatives. They typically won’t let you buy them, but if you’re polite and persistent, which I might add are two of my wife’s finest personality attributes, you can get reprints for other albums, for your mother, for that maiden-lady aunt that likes collecting pictures and who has a great recipe for ginger-cookies (the trick is in the Allspice, baby). I also learned how to make Glog, which is spelled with an umlaut over the “o” which is pronounced like the o’s in “book”.

I think Winston Churchill was probably like this. Master of no trade, except an ability to converse about any; by listening in an intent and friendly manner. So he got to try a number of different career paths, journalist, painter, Lord of the Admiralty, leader of free Europe and cheerleader for humanity during its darkest hour. Drank whisky-sodas. Not bad work if you can get it. And, no, I’m not Churchill, although I use to like the occasional cigar, and enjoy Anglo-Saxon wordplay.

Hey, and what if Churchill was Spartacus? How much sooner might slavery have been eradicated if instead of standing up and saying, “I’m Spartacus!”, the gladiator-cum-general of an army that nearly defeated Rome stood up and said, “We’ll fight in the streets and on the beaches, we’ll fight in the fields and hills. We will never surrender!” In Latin! Or Vulgate, if you wish. Just so Marcus Licineus Crassus understood he meant business. Really, what if?

It’s deeply cloudy outside. Soon the satellite dish will stop dishing up light classical music and movie theme music. I need to let the cat in, though he’s no better than I about this, tending to stalk around and looking like he needs to piss. He doesn’t like the howl of wind or rain beating down on the roof any more than I do.

What’s that? Literary agent? What about it? My God, the horror! The horror!

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CAUTION

Oooh, I’m telling Mom.

Did too.

Did too.

Did too!

I know you are but what am I?

“Falling-down Jack, A Study”

by Tom Sheehan

Early evening light, what was left of it, spilled near Jack Winters in his one lone room in the big house. The house, once flaunting and imposing in its stance, now lay cluttered like an old shed forgotten in a back lot. Debris was its main décor. He had a reputation as the town drunk, a ne'er-do-well from the first day, an inveterate crank. But there had been an instant and subtle attraction between me and the old codger. It was an attraction without early explanation.

At the moment substantial shadows played around him. A host of them were ready to take him in some rude and final manner. And no shadow around him ever bore much compassion, not to the alert of eye. It seemed, from my vantage at one of his windows, the north one, that light was seeking him out—and grasping,

once it had him, something still warm in October's dying days. It was as if embers of anything were important; particles of light, pieces of moving air, slight jerking of his left knee as he knelt before the cotton-sheathed bed. In the middle of the bed catching parts of light, the latent day, was an empty bottle. It threw back similar silver and gold on the loose, the way precious coins flatter themselves.

All of this came up to me in its quick shot as one supplicating god kneeling before another supplicating god. I saw light-seeking, light-giving emanations grander than I could imagine. At the same time it was powerfully sad, so sad it could choke you, a crushing taking place.

The crèche scene, an unknown metaphor to me then, was working its way in the back of my mind. It drew distal parts together. It made alignments long before legions of metaphors would don their spurs and ride rampant on me.

On that October evening I was seven years old. Three of my years had been spent watching the old man in the old gray house on the next corner. I'd done this from whatever vantage I could find. There had been, early in the scheme of things, the front porch or the front steps of our house. In turn there came the edge of the lawn, widening out to the roadside, which was early adventure's abrupt perimeter. Then came a familiar trip to the corner in my fifth year

where the dark green sentinel of the mail box was located. Finally, the long, cold-hot, sometimes-green, sometimes-white path to school. All of this was my social laboratory. And Jack Winters was a unique specimen or subject for that laboratory.

Falling-down Jack we called him, barnacled if I can say it, red-faced, slightly bearded. And all silence once the whiskey's stubborn and lengthy acquisition had passed its purchase. But he was somehow warm to me, pulling at me, a magnet I did not know was forever in place. This draw made me slink around in the near darkness on countless nights to watch Falling-down Jack. I always went alone and never with Richie or Wally or even my brother. He might have been the only one to understand if I had been caught at the glass watching him in the one room of his house that still had windows in it. Even then it was my young desire to see his clock works, his interminable ticking, what made a man like him go.

Oh, we had knocked out our share of the other window panes, six-over-six in that old Colonial pattern most of the other houses had. All of us were from Central Street and the lane and the cul-de-sac. But the one room of his stupor and his sleep was off limits. Though none of us ever said so. Even then I thought an element of fairness existed. It was a sense of fair play so honorable in its small passage and so acute it would never be trespassed upon. Drunks too had inviolable rights, prone or upright. My small world, our small world, could make its own share of



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profound statements.

The world is. I am here.

I'm long past seventy now. Some of his attributes, indeed some of his mean appearances and characteristics (remembered only by me, I swear) are mine. Now I am red-faced, the wide and round face both heather and hawthorn have leaned on. The taste is built into my throat as if a dry flume waits impatiently for its sides to be wetted. The small and memorable bubble of joy is at the roof of mouth when the first swallow rises over that tongued arch and flows coolness and heat and companionship down that tortured passage. Too, I have my silences. Some of them are like the long times he spent in that single room, a cell in sunlight or darkness. It's like the hour just before dawn when a single bird's cry, the first one looping out of still darkness, finds you ready and waiting for what's on the line for the day.

I can tell you it's been near seventy years' contemplation of that Scotsman who came one day to his just-dead sister's Claire's house. The two main doors he closed off with the permanent clutch of six-inch spikes driven with a vengeance I measured all the way from my front steps. Then he drew down the curtains on all windows of the other seven rooms, as if shame were being hidden from view. That first evening he drank away, to its oblivion, as much a signal to the neighborhood as one could imagine. On the following days and weeks and months he collected a fair menagerie of likewise friends. Eventually, as if clearing the stages of his life, he passed them off on the world and

began occasional retreats into the small redan of his room.

Some people in the neighborhood thought him a balled fist waiting to be thrown, so few of them came into punching range.

"He'd as soon as rap you as look at you," I heard the mailman say to old Kosko one day.

It's uncanny now, years later, how the light re-appears, the light that was in his room the night he knelt before his empty god. The bottle was empty except for light answering some other light, though there was no coming from or going to. It was mythical then, is mythical now. The grasping and touching of light is one I've never been sure of. The meekest of light fell on the bed. Its cotton sheathes with the Xs of flour bag contents were thin and pale as two-cent postage stamps I once paid attention to. Prisms, wherever they end up, whatever their inversion, have a way of channeling light.

That fractured illumination fell about his head, pointed out each devilish scar's waddle. Shadows cast across skin were more broken up than the lunar surface. If I tried to squander some of that light I'd not be able to put it aside. Now it is an aura in its entirety and must have been designed for such countenance in the very beginning, long before Falling-down Jack came our way. It was there before imagination began its long walk with me. It was there before a few hard years of my young life were gathered, as it were, in one hand and dealt this great desire to study another person. And all that to my parents' utter consternation.

"You keep your fool self away from Jack Winters' house or he'll steal off with you some night."

My mother had been the first to say anything, smiling at me a half tone, her head barely shaking in the lightest act of disgust she could muster. That moment passed. The threat passed from her mind. The occasion moved into the meager parcels of history she would only stir up at gala family events when telling all seemed to lighten family chains. When sharing was positive bonding. To her, as to many people of Saugus,

Jack Winters was really no more than an oddity in our lives, in our neighborhood. Safety in her mind was the fact there were no rapes, no kidnappings, no child molesting, and no breaking and entering in the nighttime. At least not in our part of Saugus. We were back up from the river. The sea-borne river's tide never touched us, or the horrors of the world. Small gardens and lawns and grassy fields spelled silence and a quiet guardianship between houses. Our Saugus, to her, was inviolate; children, its chief commodities, were never bothered.

My father had a different mindset, as you might guess.

"What weighs on one end must be balanced on the other."

I can remember him saying that marriages, good ones, absorbed all of that demand. He also said, "You can look all you want, young man. At the way he limps, at the ugly set of his mouth most days of the week. At the misery that flows about him sure as you're breathing. But don't ever step across the threshold of that house."

He didn't wag his finger, but looked me straight in the eye. Commanding was that look.

As it was, his signal working, he had paused then, assuring me that an announcement was coming. I can remember it as clearly as if he'd just walked in from the other room.

In the most serious voice I had ever heard, even in admonition, he said, "Somehow we both realize he looks like the Grandfather you never saw past your first year. I freely admit the mystery of that recollection. I think I know the great draw that's been put on you and not on others." Those others he didn't have to name. "If there's a piece of that light left in your brain, a shadow of that old face, a grimace or a grin or one wild look from the monster John Barleycorn he carried as his own baggage, I can understand. If you've found something in the air that sets him apart from everybody else hereabouts, I can understand. He's odd, we know. But he's hurt no one. Not even in his bad dreams when he's being chased or little folk sit in his shadows cool as embers left over from a bad night."



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In that serious vein he had blessed my small campaign. Later I suspected he had traveled somewhat the same road. Perhaps he sought answers along the way, questioning as much as anybody his own recollection of occasional horrors.

How many times I have struggled to bring back the first sight of Jack Winters, I cannot tell you. He was coming toward me while I was hiding from my pals in the bushes along the edge of the canal. Come along he did, as loud and as vibrant as any man I'd seen on that rude path or anywhere else. His voice rang out as brilliantly pure as a tenor on stage. And just as unintelligible to me, words and rushes of sound whose meanings I could not begin to guess. He gave off long woeful cries that struck like nails in soft places (cries whose pain I can still bring back on my clearest days). Also, sudden beauties of notes any stage would shake with, soaring notes that followed those awful nails into my ears. They came high rising, majestics of another level, echoes as firm now as then in their grip. Then came low guttural demands as if a beast of awed proportions shared his skin.

"DOMINAE!" he screamed or yelled or sang. An echo for all times. "DOMINAE!" That's what it sounded like. It implored. It begged. It sounded god-like, ancient, though I knew no Latin or Greek.

I was captured! At first by the sound. Then by brazen details rushing into my eyes, details that fixed themselves into permanent niches of my mind. He had thick gray hair and

the smallest face, nearly purple and crazed with lumps and scars. His eyes were as red as a cardinal bird I'd seen that very morning. His small chin-point beard was as dirty as the town dump. His khaki shirt was tight at the collar. A striped suit coat comfortable as bedclothes sat on his shoulders, the kind Rip Van Winkle slept in. I swore his boots had climbed distant mountains or other azure. At his sides his hands, huge hands, powerful hands, worked at squeezing the sense out of air. One thumb, the left one, lay splayed twice as wide as it ought to be. A blacksmith must have tended it with a hot hammer. And that fateful aroma came at me, on a sheet of air at first, and then purely by its voluptuousness. It triggered volume, ripe fruit at the core, sweet and pear-like and syrupy. Bright crimson cherries carried in the mix, nectarines or limes like beggars hiding just around the corner. Green and yellow melons seemed tossed in at random. Finally, as if to top it all off, an edge of peach cut through all the mix to throw its signature out front.

Immediately I thought of the contrast—he should smell as foul as he looked. I should be sucking my gut back down my throat through which it ought to be passing at any moment in abrupt stages. But the air about him was fruit-sweet. Perhaps it was too thick and too syrupy, but fruit-sweet. Then my mind, triggered again by a message on the air, plunged for recognition. To this moment of this clear day I am aware of how minor mechanics within me were appointed and discharged in a quick

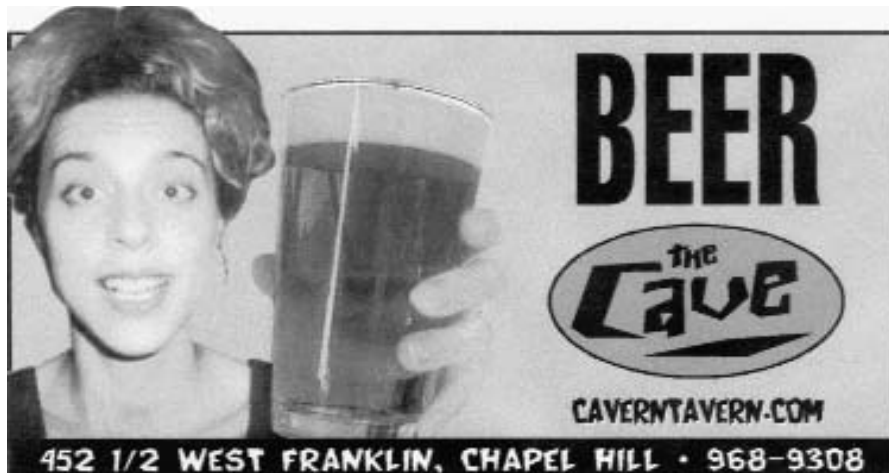
plunge into my short history. They scratched for identity, scratched for recall, scratched for a face or a body or a name. It was one I didn't know at first but would know for the striking. It was left back in the entrails of thought, maybe an identity squandered in a dim corridor. I could have screamed because I knew it was there, behind a corner, just inside some thin cover of gray matter's secrets. My mind held it back from me, teasing me, trying me out.

"DOMINAE!" he screamed or begged or sang again just as he passed by my cover of brush hide-and-seeking me from my brother and friends. The fruit came stronger than it would ever again in any encounter. And almost unholy was the cry. But dared not to be. An imploration it might have been, an expulsion, a plea and a curse in one breath, able to rough itself into leaf and limb all around us. an act in itself.

"DOMINAE!" At least, that's what I thought he yelled, though I've surely put some effort over the years into the spelling of that cry. I've never known what it was, what passed from his lips, his mouth, his throat. Most certainly, from his soul. Probably it was the most honest sound I have ever heard in all my life. I never heard it again, though, no matter how many times I crouched by his window or heard him coming down the canal path from town or wherever he had been. There had been but that unearthly cry up into leaves and limbs and the far-off blue or darkening sky, a soul rising. "DOMINAE!"

Even within the fruited air at full tilt, and the dense brush at my eyes, my heart shook its hammer inside my flattened chest. I could not help but pull more parts of him together, the full identity. If he were a time puzzle, I had but minutes to gather the millennium. Rough as junk was he, drum-like and thick, pushing exorbitantly at the one button of his jacket. I thought of barrel staves girding just under cover. Like stout oak, holding in, stiff, rigid, volume-grasping, formed not by the outer but by the inner.

Instinctively, within the fruited atmosphere and the body electric



and the royalty of his voice, came something I already knew. Though it was under cover, or disguised, or coming at me from an odd tangent, I knew. That knowledge spilled itself at my feet, pooled, then flowed up into me. Warmly it came, slow-rising, taking care not to frighten me, as if reins tethered its climb. It was temptation and reach, it was touch and acceptance. I held my breath, and the millennium passed. While that breath was held, while it coiled its harsh wonder in my chest, it allowed itself to be separated for recognition some near seventy years later. If it's just now doing its final dance, strong urges and requirements had fallen into place then.

Days later, still spelled and caught up in the newness and its necessities, I began to take notes on the Scotsman, The Town Drunk, The Dread Baritone. Sheaves of information were scratched and scrawled at any moment of sight, drawers of notes the years gave growth to. I knew when Jack Winters left the house, every time out. How long he'd be gone. What he wore in all weather. Could predict the reappearance of a khaki shirt or a purple wool sweater that must have had a thousand lives. I cranked up admiration for the sheep from which it had been scored. And pegged to the hour Friday night's return down the canal path.

In one quick decision, and much concentration, I had become expert at something. The relationship was intractable.

More than once in those tender years, in that blood-seeking quest, that absolute need for patriarchal warmth and acceptance, I stood between Jack Winters and his mortality. All four or so feet of me did it. Once I called my father on a very sharp November evening, night coming heartily on from Montreal and the Maritimes. When I had ventured up the path, Jack was late coming down. I found him cold and fetal and near bare of breath, under a bush whose blanket he must have sought. My father called three neighbors, burly ones at that, and they carried him to his room. They wrapped him, dropped him on his bed, cranked on the man-killer kerosene stove sitting

in the middle of the room like an Easter Island stone infant.

On my first visit, of course, I reacted to the room. He had no books but a Bible shimmied under a lamp on a small table. A dozen empty bottles (green and brown and crystal) were scattered like candlepins and blazoned with rainbows of wax. A blue insignia metal can without a cover that crackers belonged in sat in a corner. There was an icebox with its oaken door hanging by little more than one untidy hinge so you could see the gray rind on its oxidized corrugated inner surface. A whole wall surface showed where pain and loneliness wore themselves into its pale yellow expanse camouflaged with black and OD green, like Army canvas hiding targets. Beneath my shoes the floor felt more of yard and less of house, with sounds in mutual support of that argument. But there was no stench, not a whiff of it. One look said we ought to be assailed at any moment by such threat. Our trespass did not seem approved despite the mission done. We had infiltrated another man's domain. The exit was quick.

I dwelt a long time on the room that came away with me, and made its way into my notes, before the sun had risen over Saugus. Sketches of its boundaries and its contents rose on paper tucked in the back side of my notebook, the then current one, Number Three of my travels with Jack Winters. None of the burly lifters saw the godhead abed, only the faded flour legend on the thin sheet, veneer of another use,

another occupation. More than once I've already told you I'd seen an empty bottle embedded there, crèche of all the crèches, a passion play acted out and I was the known audience, the lone pursuer.

Frankly, I don't think any of the men, including my father, saw much in or of the room, visible parts that tell so little, invisible parts that tell so much. Such information could practically spill all over you like unwanted company. But it had escaped all of them, my father too, who kept his eyes on my alertness. There was exhibited a need to be out of there. To not be contaminated by whatever had held this place together as long as it had. Strengths are not easily recognized.

The second time I stepped out in front for his mortality was one Halloween Night cold as a drawn dagger. Star-lit, it was, an evening star almost shouting at us it hung so low on the horizon. Airy cool signs came with the messages of our mouths, when the gathered clan of us neighborhood toughs dared speak of burning down Jack Winters' house. My brother was all for it, seeing an end perhaps of the attention paid to my attention, my mission. His voice did not quiver once, cool as judge without a trial. But his feet moved, little shifts on the coarse gravel, not a dance, mind you, but talking, a give-away penchant I'd noticed too many times to ignore.

"They'd hum about it all winter," he said, "everyone would. It's a dump anyway. We all know that. Know about him all the way over to



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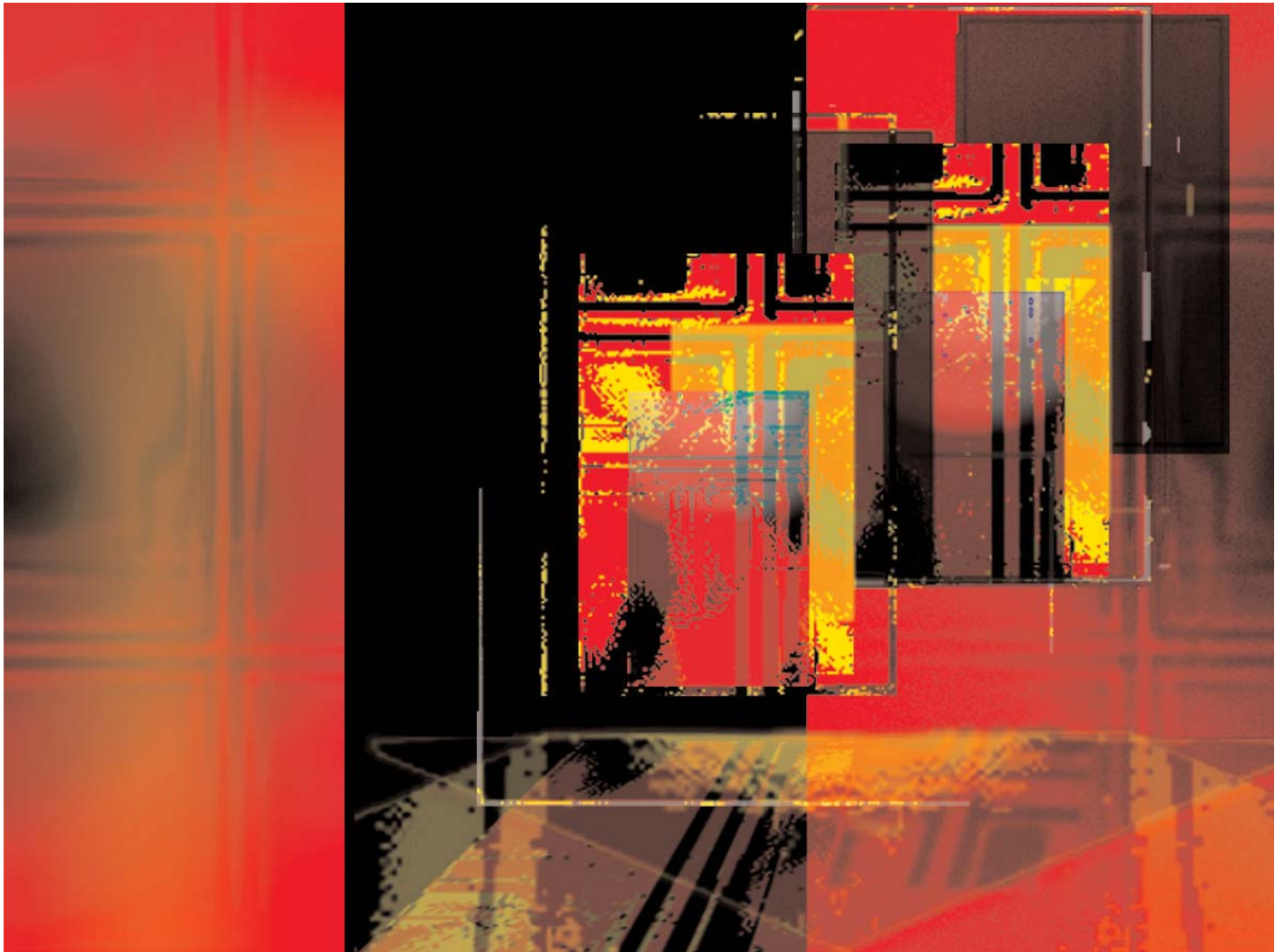
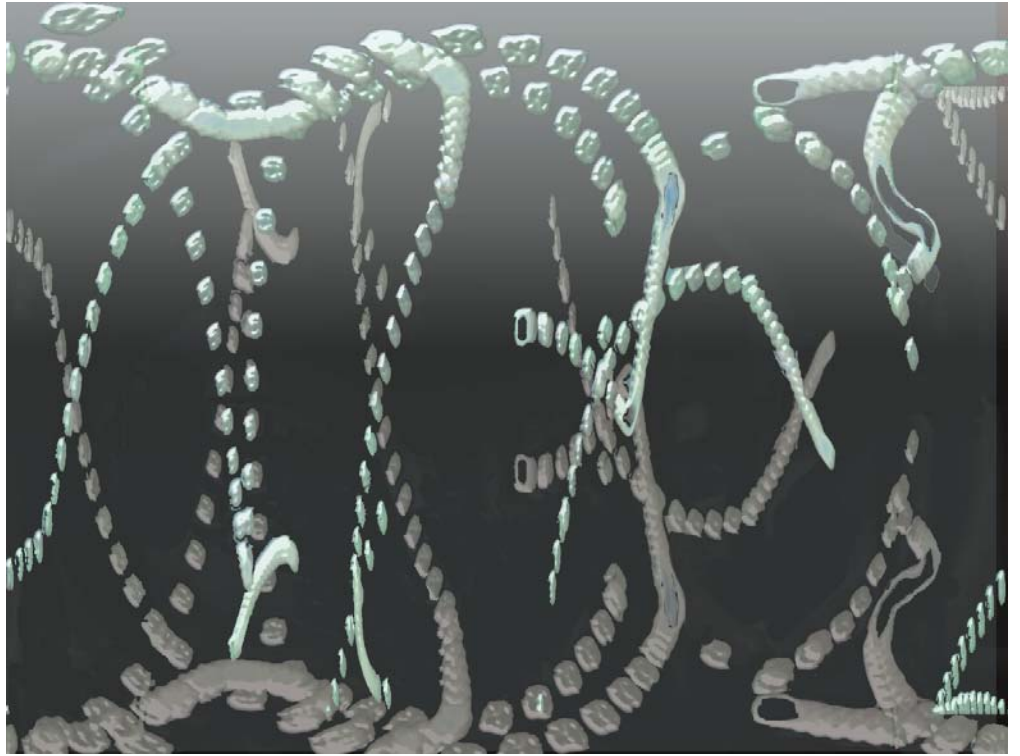
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Far left: The Neighbors
Left: New York Minute
Lower Left: Out Of Step
Below: Templum Red
Right: Pearl Races



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Wakefield, they do, our most famous citizen.”

He snickered to mark his stance and shifted his feet a little more, more punctuation.

“He’d only have to go someplace else. Over there, or maybe the place he came from. Right now he won’t be back for more than an hour and it’d be a glorious bonfire by then.”

That was a pointed revelation, to say the least.

He came off as spokesman, and looked at me sort of indirectly, matching his feet in a way. Even under the cover of the cold night and the shivering shadows and the silence mostly about our strategy encampment, we both knew that he had looked at my notes. He had come away with some knowledge. I loved him and hated him at the known declaration. I was determined, though the youngest of the lot, that they’d burn his house down over my dead body. Light of the evening star fell through the leaves at our heads, fell on countenances, shone from the eyes of all of them looking hard at me. I was the first and only obstacle to young pyromania.

“He’s just a drunk, and you know it!” Wally advanced with a sudden burst of courage. I saw the star leap again in his eyes, heard the plea specializing itself in his voice. “It’d be the best fire ever. Everybody would be glad the house is gone. My mother talks about it all the time. How it must stink like socks or old drawers. How it’ll catch fire some night from his own hand, falling down drunk and smoking and the man-killer sucking up the air all night long and the stupid candles dancing in the dark. Says he’s always light as a clerk’s lunch hour.”

He’d never said so much at one time in all the time I’d known him, in all the time he’d been the closest friend of my brother’s. But he was as tricky sometimes as the bakery driver swapping day-olds. I caught a bit of pride in his voice, some dare. He’d toss the match for sure. I sensed also the recording of his words, which he must have dragged right out of his mother’s kitchen. He played it for us

in our thin cover, under air sheer at the touch, under a star’s reaching.

When I stood off the log, as much dais as any I’d known, I thought they would rise and mass against me. The only thing I was sure about was they’d leap at any viable alternative. I was ready to tell the whole world if they proceeded, that much I knew. And if it came down to the last minute of saving the house, I’d run inside it. That would panic my brother no end, them too, so I threw another bone for their gnawing:

“I know where there’s fifty feet of chain. We could wrap it around a couple of his fence poles, such as they are, and the gate too and then hook it on the bumper of the 8:20 bus when it leaves for the Center.”

I mimicked the jerking motion of the old Hart-Line Bus as it would pull away from the corner. I made it mulish, Mack-ish, the clutch in spasms. Gears scratching for holds. Windows shaking light off every surface. The muffler an abomination of the transport industry. I mimicked well, and tossed in sound effects for their ears, for my argument.

The picture played too much for them, the noise and commotion promising heady delight to cap off Halloween. They could talk about it in secret for months to come; for years to come, as it proved to be.

The bus left, the chain taut behind it, the links sure on post and beam and stave. The rending and riotous clatter was like empty drums in the wind as the bus bounced up the street. I did not know that Jack Winters lay sick in the cold house. He had left earlier, but had returned, and we had not seen him. I had not seen him. The calamity brought him weakly to his door. He coughed and gagged on his own self. He wrapped stout arms about his gut as if holding some treasure within. His collapse, the sudden silence, the fear quickly riding on the dagger air, brought the burly neighbors again. They lifted him, bedded him, and lit the man-killer stove again. But we stayed our distance. The wrenching echoes of wood and steel were sharp yet in our hearing, pointing fingers at us, mak-

ing claims against us. We noble toughs, believing the dread promise of the neighborhood about kicking a man when he was down, felt the threat. This was a man I thought warm as an old acquaintance generating trust, like a soft leather wallet you’ve pawed for years.

Jack came back from both those bouts. He bounced like the ball in the singalongs at the theater (Camptown Races, Doo Dah Doo). Healthy he came and kicking out of those depths as I thought few men could. There was no pity about him, that was evident. There was no wallowing in his own mire, no asking for help, no hand out for any spillage. He was just a gunny sack full of mash and potatoes and some raw ingredients it took me a long time to put names on. He was a tough man born to a tough path and damned sure he was staying on it.

Oh, there were other episodes that pulled us together, though I never once spoke with him. And baseball came and football and a girl just up the street one day who sat on a log with her skirt riding who knows where. There was Notebook No. 10 and Notebook No. 11, and eventually a drifting of my years.

Then, as sudden as not, I was in high school and the house on the corner stood yet in its blocky and stubborn way. Jack Winters went back and forth, shrunk a little, drank a lot, saying not two words to anybody. And one day, as I left my house to go to the game of the year, October clear as a rung bell around me, I saw him walking toward the canal path. His half-graced limp was still in place, arms out of step down his thighs as if he were hearing another music. I looked away for a moment when I heard the band music at the stadium. When I looked back, he was gone. I think my ears heard another ringing. My chest pawed for breath. Something was happening in the crisp air. I could feel it.

I never saw Jack Winters again. Nobody did. Gone, like a quick cloud. Gone, as if he’d never been. Gone, only to exist in my notebooks. Three of the books turned up a while back. My brother found them

in his garage, tucked in an old bureau my parents had given him. Sixty some years and he read them for the first time just before returning them.

"I never knew he was like Grandfather to you," he said. "I'd never have thought that in a hundred years, but you and dad did, right from the start. The way he smelled and the way he walked with that little limp, and the stubborn ring he carried in his mind. Never came on me once."

He was, I knew, scratching for differences, the founding of relationships, the minor reasons for found differences.

I didn't tell him I still think of Jack Winters practically all year long. Often it's for hours at a stretch, or days: where he went when he went off, what took him off, and what kept him. When October's little knife begins its twist, when the evening star comes out to speak on the low horizon, I think of him. Always. I say to myself that if I hadn't kept him he would not be. If I had let him go he would not have been. Had he not been there there would have been no pain kneeling before his small god-head in that cell of a room. There would not have been the man-killer sucking up air, or the camouflage hiding him at times from his own self. There would not have been a minor light source pulling rainbows out of waxed bottles. Or a small god looking in a window at his own nativity.



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"The Audition"

by Gary Beck

"Next," the stage manager called. I looked around to be sure it was my turn, and she repeated impatiently: "Next." I took a deep breath, put on my combat face, stood up and walked to center stage, struggling each step of the way to control my nervous trembling. Only the work lights were on, so I could clearly see the people running the cattle call. There were five of them. Why did they need five? Could this be one of those democratic collectives, where everyone argued instead of working? The stage manager handed what I assumed was my resume and head shot to who I assumed was the director. He briefly scanned it, then passed it onto the others.

I waited until the last person was finished reading and comparing me to the picture, trying to appear cool and confident. The director had been looking me up and down, lingering a moment too long on my breasts, which I resented, even though I should have been used to the unwanted attention by now. "Sing," he said. I looked at him in surprise. "I was told that I only had to prepare a monologue," I said. He ignored my feeble protest and said: "Sing." "What kind of song would you like?" "Anything." I took a deep breath and sang the first two lines of 'Greensleeves'. I thought I was pretty clever, since I was auditioning for a Shakespeare play and it might impress the inquisition panel. A lot of good it did. They stared at me blankly.

"Dance a beautiful dance," he ordered. "I'm not a dancer. I'm an actress." Once again he ignored my objection. "Dance a beautiful dance." I briefly considered telling him to shove it, but I hadn't done Shakespeare since college and I had learned that there were very few opportunities. So I did a beautiful dance. At least I thought so. It was some kind of cross between a waltz and a fox trot. It was the best I could do. There was no reaction from the inquisitors and I was beginning to get pissed off. If they wanted a prima

ballerina they should have said so in the actor's call in the trade papers. Part of me wanted to walk out without saying a word, but another part wanted to do the show. Besides, I didn't want to give the assholes the satisfaction of watching me slink off, tail in the traditional place, another defeated actor.

By now I knew that something unexpected would be next on the menu, so I smiled pleasantly at the inquisitors. I got a quick rush of pleasure when some of them looked surprised. After all, it was obvious by now that they were trying to freak out the auditioners. They probably assumed by this time that the auditioners would be agitated and in the process of losing their stage persona. I had no idea why they devised this torture session. It was different from any audition process I had been through. Maybe they had already cast the show and were getting their rocks off by torturing some needy actors. Stranger things happened in theater. Whatever. I was here and I certainly wasn't going to break down for their viewing pleasure.

The director gestured to the stage manager, who handed me a sheet of paper. It was in French. The director said: "Read." I knew what he would say if I told him I couldn't read French, so I read. Maybe Charles Baudelaire would have objected strenuously about my pronunciation, if he was there, but I was beginning to enjoy myself. "That's enough," the director said, staring at me expectantly. I guess he was waiting for me to ask how I did. I just stood there silently. He looked me up and down, again lingering too long on my breasts. "We'll call you." I just nodded and left. I knew they would call. I had seen that lecherous look before. Now it would be up to me to decide whether or not to do the show. Part of me was hungry for Shakespeare, but these were weird people. I wasn't sure if I was up for any more bullshit in my life. Then I laughed. I didn't have to worry about it until I got the call.



"Skeet Shoot"

by Daniel S Irwin

Now, we got this here American Trapshooters' Association annual event goin' on in my back yard at the World Recreation Center what ain't no more than a big building with a lot of concrete and asphalt and some smaller buildings and finin' points what face the road...go figur'. Why, I done ran off the road once when they started firin' and my combat instincts took hold. I'd have shot back if I had a rifle. These fools come from all over the world. Some of 'em got guns what cost more than most peoples houses. One fella got a new stock (made from a \$3000 chunk of some Brazilian hard wood) made for his rifle right there on verders' row. While he was waitin' for his gun to get done, he spent his time bitchin' 'bout the \$5 hat he just bought at the Beretta shop. Le'me go over that again. Man spends over \$3000 for a stock he don't need for his skatter gun and, at the same time, gripes 'bout his \$5 hat. And some people say I'm nuts.

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"Moving the Bookstore, part Five"

By Corey Mesler

After we built the new bookstore we looked around. Something pricked us. It was this: all the books were the same. There were no new books! Consternation gripped us like a troll. Despite our efforts, the great weight, the elephants, the labor of the Ancient Egyptians, all the books were familiar, tired old tomes, written by men and women who knew nothing of us now, could not know how we were, here in the endtimes, our peculiar mating rituals, our love of reality, our fear that something from the sky could take away everything we ever dreamt or built. We called all the writers we knew. None of them had the answer. They were still writing the old books, the ones we published over and over, the ones we read because we were meant to read them, in our sloth, in our formerly safe houses. We looked around at the shelves, pregnant with sameness and we hung our heads. Our first customer put his hand on our shoulders to comfort us. We stood together and wept, a cheerless circle. Then, as our sobs subsided, our first customer asked us for something that he had only heard about, a rumored book, a novel with the old novel left out, a new catechism. We hesitated. Something was happening and we didn't know what it was. We thought perhaps that we had that book, that all along that book had been here among us and we were ignorant of its transformative power. One of us, it was Cathy, said she would look in the stacks. Cathy and our first customer ventured into the stacks. The silence of the store was like that on a great ship right before the mutiny. We were nervous, but, really, I think we knew that Cathy would find it. I think we knew our first customer would be satisfied. Really, we waited like supplicants before an inexperienced god, our blood warming. We waited like starving infants.



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Three by Charles Freeland

“To Speak of Species is to Speak in Circles”

Just as the clay clings to your shoes when you've been laying pipe, when the bulldozers arrive to create space for yet another municipal park and they uncover arrowheads by the dozen, so the films of the past move at a frenzied pace. Their makers didn't study the same physics we did. The bamboo in the background stands for something. It suggests the frontiers are not so distant as we once believed. Often, the animals get involved, and they behave in ways that seem familiar at first – giraffes looking for a meal in the tops of trees; turtles acting kind of surly. And then some twist, some arbitrary change of location that makes us think we are dealing with creatures that have no reason to keep up appearances. They can doff scales, their pelts, in the blink of an eye. At this point, our instincts try to take over. But there is no room inside the skull for more than two or three. That of self-preservation, for instance, is crowded out by one so new it has no name. We're not even sure how best to describe it, other than to refer to its oddly yellow tint. The way it makes us call, on occasion, to the ravens that stand outside the gate.

“A Uniformly Emotionless Performance”

It's possible the pipeline that feeds the area oxygen has been compromised in some fashion. And what appears at first to be a mere wilting of the flowers is, in fact, the beginning of the end of all things. Not just those to be found within the confines of the project itself, but everywhere. Up the street. At the beach where the not-so-fashionable mingle with their very discriminating neighbors. And the moon comes in so close to the swing set, even the bats that cling to the cold cross bars seem upset. They whimper and whistle and begin to circle overhead in such an agitated state, you might almost suspect they can see the future. Our comeuppance, of course, comes up from the caves beneath the town. No one suspects he is living above a morality play. A sulfurous patch of cavern home to additional bats, and even the earwig. Which is a pest we might have thought extinct just by the look of it. The way it has of rummaging through our closets in search of high heels to gnaw on. In search of those boxes of old correspondence that throw us in an unfavorable light, at best. And ruin all chances of beatification, at worst. The sort of thing we'd prefer buried, out of view and far away, and yet, perversely, we cling to even as the mob begins to grow enormous. As it gets intoxicated at the prospect of knocking down our doors.

“Furiant, Not Polka”

I stack the driftwood in the corner and search my pockets for the pipe I dreamt once I smoked, but which has never since materialized, hard as I might try to find it. Things like this ache beneath the skin. But only for a moment. And then it is time to replace them with duct tape and VCRs and those skinny fish that bite when you are careless taking them off the hook. Sometimes, the mattress begins to look like a barrel organ. Or the monkey that goes with it. That lights its own cigars and makes hand gestures that mean one thing in the Piedmont. And something else entirely in New Orleans. I notice the area between lakes has always been a favorite haunt of men who have no clear idea of what it means to be men. Who suspect it has something to do with the way you pronounce your words. Or which words you choose in the first place. Such as “skein”. And “rabbit”. And that variation on the verb form that makes it some other part of speech. Or confuses your auditor if he is standing more than a mile away. This is the point at which the self tends to go on vacation. It leaves the cleaning-up to its friends and neighbors. To those who love the self, but worry about it because of the way it behaves. Take, for instance, that man who locks himself in his shed, trying to create his own language, trying to fashion it *ex nihilo* the way you might invent a mouse trap on a planet where there are no rodents. Not even nutria. He makes use of letters and commas and poison. But mostly he relies on rubber bands. And those pictograms that look suspiciously like skeletons in houses.

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I'm in the front (passenger) seat of a Stearman trainer biplane, on the ground somewhere north of the GWB on the Garden State Parkway, holding up traffic badly on a very sunny day in Autumn in New Jersey. The toll-booth guys are howling across the lanes of cars for me to get my ass back up in the air, but there's no room for take-off, no empty space on the northbound side of the highway. I'm not even in the pilot's seat! So I take the stick and maneuver the plane onto the cop-crossing part of the median and into southbound traffic, working like Fred Flintstone with my feet to pick up speed so that I can take off and fly. Suddenly there's a pilot behind me and we get the required airspeed and take off, pulling madly on the stick so that we can get above the high-tension electric wires that cross the parkway at this point, bringing power into New York City. It makes my stomach jump and I close my eyes, thinking that if we hit the wires, we'll cause a black-out in the City.

HNT - cyberspace

CONTRIBUTORS

Tom Sheehan was in the March issue, and let me keep this yarn in my hip-pocket for when I would need something really good to get you guys through a rough patch. Well, I think this is a rough patch, so here you go.

Susan Siebert Connors has a traditional art education in oil and acrylic but prefers Photoshop as her current medium. And talk about total coolness? Her dad studied under Einstein at the University of Berlin. I mean, not actually *under* him. Oh, you guys!

Gary Beck's recent fiction has appeared in *EWG Presents*, *Nuvein Magazine*, *Babel*, *Vincent Brothers Review*, *L'Intrigue Magazine*, *The Journal*, *Short Stories Bimonthly* and *Bibliophilos*. His poetry has appeared in dozens of literary magazines. His chapbook, *'The Conquest of Somalia'*, will be published by Cervena Barva Press. His plays and translations of Moliere, Aristophanes, and Sophocles have been produced Off-Broadway. He is a writer/director of award-winning social issue video documentaries.

Daniel S Irwin: Artist/writer/combat infantry vet/now prison medic from Sparta, Illinois.. Work published world wide. Work often burnt by religious fanatics of all faiths.

Corey Mesler was a feature poet in our September issue, owns a bookstore in Memphis, and can't forgive me for spelling his name "Messler" before. Neither can I.

Charles Freeland teaches at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio. Recent work appears in *Jubilat*, *Margie*, *The Cincinnati Review*, *The Hollins Critic*, *Shadowtrain* and *42opus*. He is the author of a chapbook, *Where We Saw Them Last* (Lily Press). His website is charlesfreelandpoetry.net

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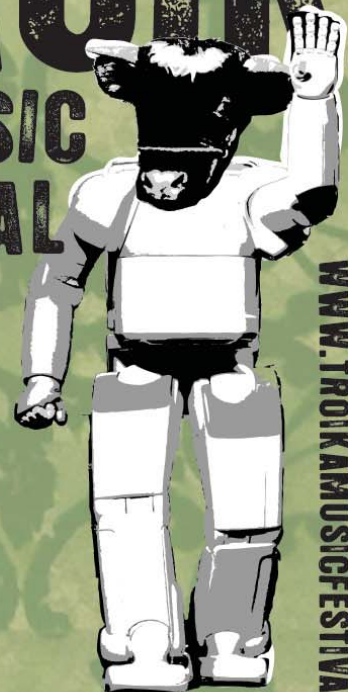
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