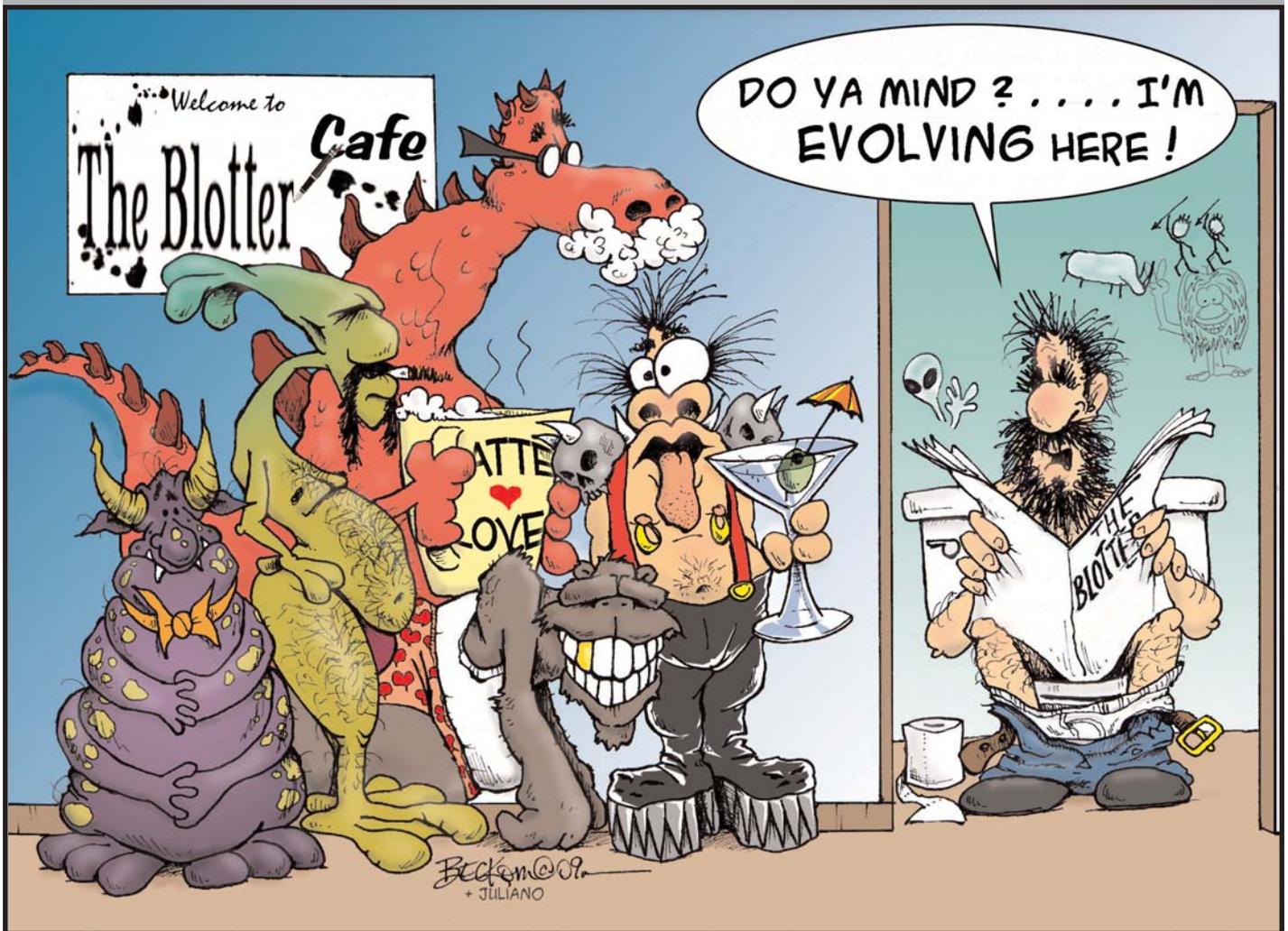


*Hey, Hey! You, You! get off of Joel Wachman, Ivan Faute,  
Larry Holderfield, Five Minutes With political 'toonist Mike Beckom,  
Phil Juliano's Best In Show  
and The Dream Journal.*

# The Blotter

October 2009

MAGAZINE



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

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#### I tole ya an' I tole ya, no press releases.

Front cover: a custom funny made for  
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props to our Phil Juliano). See center-  
fold and page 13 for more.

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## "Travel Notes"

Back from Texas where we visited K's family.

I didn't want to go – I don't like flying. It's a too-small seat and a closed-in steel tube shooting through the sky kind of thing. It turns out though, that I can get on an airplane successfully, with the right medication. And airlines don't ask if you've been sedated when they sit you in the exit row, which has enough knee room for me.

And then it takes about a day of on-and-off sleeping for me to flush all of that stuff out of my system. Nice thing: my wife's family lets me sleep. A lot.

And then what happens is that when I wake up I eat chicken and dumplings made by K's grandmother. She's been making chicken and dumplings for about seventy-five years. She's pretty much an expert. She also makes great pickles. People come by to visit her every day, folks from around town, folks who've known her for so long let's call it forever. They check on her, how she's feeling. Her legs hurt. K's uncle Butch has bought her a chair that at the press of a button leans her back and raises her legs, but it hurts her so she doesn't use it. K sits and explains that it will help her legs feel better. How about a satin pillowcase from Walmart to put over the leg-rest. OK, then. K goes to Walmart. "And a loaf of bread," K's grandmother requests.

I sit with K's grandmother and read while she watches her "story." During a commercial she asks me if I like to read. I tell her that I do. "I don't read books," she tells me. I nod. Maybe for the first time in my life I don't judge someone for revealing such a fact. She's ninety-four this year, makes the best pickles, and has a thousand friends. You can't argue with success, folks.

It's four-hours to Austin; the speed limit varies from seventy down to 35 on a two lane highway that passes from town to town. In Texas, however, there are *courtesy* lanes, which allow drivers like me to get the heck out of the way of faster drivers. They appreciatively flicker their lights when I do. (I find this oddly gratifying.)

In Round Rock, north of Austin, is the newest member of the family, my two year old niece. She is beautiful, currently practicing using "No" on all questions, and still finds peek-a-boo fairly funny. So even though I'm too big and strange and unknown by half, she and I get along like champs.

Greater Austin is going through its longest drought in recorded history. During our visit, the last public boat ramp to Lake Travis is closed. Wonder what the fish are thinking – monster catfish that suddenly no longer hear the daily two-cycle hum of motors overhead. "Where's God?" or, "Well, they've finally done it. Good riddance." Or perhaps, "Had I known this would happen, I would have drunk all the water earlier."

We take a morning trip downtown to go swimming. There's an ice-age aquifer with a surface spring. A small lake of calm, clean, fishless, cool water. Trust me, this is a wonder. By eleven o'clock, it's sunny and 102 in Austin, but the water remains a calm, and constant 68 degrees. Feeling too cold? Just stand up. Whoops! Too hot? Relax into the pool. Absolute genius.

Well, sure, everyone knows about Texas barbecue, but how about

Round Rock donuts? My God! Brother-in-law and I go out and pick up a dozen glazed and a dozen chocolate dipped. The girl at the drive through looks generally irritated, perhaps for our wanting to buy donuts in the mid-afternoon, but perhaps just cultivating a teenage-angst thing in what is akin to that scene in "Field of Dreams" where Kevin Costner's dad as a young New York Yankee asks,

"Is this Heaven?"

"No. It's Round Rock Donuts."

"Mmm-hmm. (munch, munch) I could have sworn it was Heaven."

The heat during the day saps the strength from your legs. There's actually a name for the syndrome of feeling ill out in the hot sun. I'm mostly concerned that no amount of anti-perspirant defends against it. And then what happens is, as if on command from a higher authority, it clouds over and cools down on the evening we go out to watch a triple-A baseball game. There's even a slight breeze out to left field. By the third inning, my ten-year old daughter is in a groove, shouting at the batters and spilling popcorn on the gentleman in front of us. *Saaaa-wing, batta!*

To K's uncle and aunt, the last leg of our summer's journey. Dallas really does rear up like a mustang out of the flat-land. You can almost hear the theme-music. We're downtown and it's eerie. The distant, beautiful skyline becomes empty buildings as this city is taking the recession a little harder than some. And the burger joints and pizza parlors are as empty as the banks.

But the state farmer's market is hopping. Little baskets of cool black plums. A man works a gas-powered pea-shucker, and bags purple-hull peas. These are different from black-eye or field peas with which I am familiar, but just how I don't know. We keep walking. A cart sells Elotas: corn sliced off the cob and mixed with mayonnaise, chili pepper, lime juice and parmesan cheese. I carry a Styrofoam cup of it, munching, listening to people make little food deals. Watermelon is iced and sliced and offered for us to taste. The honey guy has pint jars with comb floating in the deep gold. Israel melons are a flowery sweet cross between cantaloupe and honeydew. Blueberries are terrific on Kashi puffed rice.

There's even a fellow selling Angus beef right out of coolers. Steaks bigger than any frying pans in my kitchen. If I lived here, I'd never shop anywhere else. If I couldn't live on fruit, vegetables, honey and steak, well, too bad.

And then Uncle Butch makes mud – a chow-chow of onions and tomatoes and other stuff, terrific next to boiled purple-hull peas. We eat and rest and eat some more. Talk a lot. Watch a movie, and find some ice-cream for the girls. Sleep. To the airport. Come home. Nice.

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CAUTION

*Sorry about all the cussing Ma. I didn't mean anything by it. Honest. I won't do it again.*

# "What Little Boys Are Made Of"

by Joel Wachman

*You marvel that this matter, shuffled pell-mell at the whim of Chance, could have made a man, seeing that so much was needed for the construction of his being. But you must realize that a hundred million times this matter, on the way to human shape, has been stopped to form now a stone, now lead, now coral, now a flower, now a comet; and all because of more or fewer elements that were or were not necessary for designing a man. Little wonder if, within an infinite quantity of matter that ceaselessly changes and stirs, the few animals, vegetables, and minerals we see should happen to be made; no more wonder than getting a royal pair in a hundred casts of the dice. Indeed it is equally impossible for all this stirring not to lead to something, and yet this something will always be wondered at by some blockhead who will never realize how small a change would have made it into something else. —Cyrano de Bergerac, "A Voyage to the Moon"[1]*

How miraculous that you are you! The chromosomes that met in your mother's womb twisted and danced, knitting the finest threads of protein into every hard and soft structure, the meats and sauces that make up your body. They continued to do so after you were born, while you drooled and cried and shat yourself in your crib, while you learned to speak and walk, became a curious shin biter, a precarious toddler. Your genes determined the color of your skin, the length of your fingers, the timing of biological milestones, like when you would lose your baby teeth. We gave

you raw materials: macaroni and cheese, chocolate milk, and carrots. The twisted scroll of ancient instructions built your body and your brain, and then one stupendous day, you became aware. So here you sit, book in hand, a comprehending youth made from pieces of earth.

If anything had been different—even a small thing like the shape of a chin or the presence of a heart murmur or a different blood type—your life would be different. You would feel differently, see the world another way. Suppose your eyes had been green instead of blue. The quality of your vision would have been the same, but who would have sung "Blue Eyed Boy" to you? Would your tastes have turned to folk music, and would you have rigged yourself up with a guitar, harmonica, and wire hanger to try to play like Dylan? A green-eyed person is less susceptible to the sun, so we would have encouraged you more to stay outdoors. You might have become an athlete and, on warm summer afternoons, discovered you would rather play basketball with the neighborhood kids than look through your microscope alone in your darkened bedroom. So many small things at the beginning of life are the progenitors of your destiny.

Let us unwind you back into the womb, deconstruct you to a newborn, a fetus, an embryo, and, finally, a blastocyst consisting of only a few

hundred cells. We saw an ultrasound of you when you were on your way. A bright galaxy floating in a field of starlight. It was barely a dozen weeks after your conception, when your mother lay on her back on an examination table, her shirt on but her lower half sticking to the crepe paper. A young woman, a stranger, prepared a catheter and, placing it with empathetic gentleness, sent my sperm on a journey to meet your mother's egg. I did not witness what happened when they met. Now, knowing you so many years later, I can only imagine that the angels sang.

Initially, reproduction is simply about bringing sperm and egg into proximity to let them do their stuff. There are a million reasons why life should not come about. Yet we see life popping up all over the place. Every inch of the Earth is smothered in it. In forests and fields and oceans, of course, but also in places where you would not expect anything to survive. Insects burrow in the most desolate sand pits of the American Southwest or the Australian Outback. Translucent brine shrimp in boiling geysers a thousand feet under the ocean's surface frolic and fornicate like college students on spring break. Every one of these creatures begins as a fertilized egg, where a pair of his and hers DNA molecules dances to a microscopic Lambada. Yet the one single event among these billions that really counts is the one that made you. Where did you come from, that you sit here comfortably reading? Seven years ago you did not exist, and now here you are, sui generis, the result of a simple pairing in your mother's womb.

If all this talk of parental anatomy makes you uncomfortable, imagine it happening to another person or your cat Erwin. And while you're at it, feel free to give the sperm and egg names—Sherman and Ethel—which makes them more approachable, quelling your embarrassment at talking about sexual things. Watching Sherman the sperm dashing toward Ethel, one might think he was a cell with a mission. In fact, sperm are highly specialized cells with only one reason to exist. They have a head to carry genetic material, a body that carries enzymes for softening up Ethel's shell, and, of course, that famous tail, which propels it diligently

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forward and upward through the vast, fusty, alkaline environment of the uterus. That last voyage to the fallopian tube, where the blessed event is to occur, is about three inches, and the sperm measures one six-hundredths of an inch long, so traveling there on his own is literally a marathon: the equivalent of a person swimming two miles, knowing that he has a one in ninety million chance of finding his mate. Meanwhile, Ethel has met the school of sperm halfway and waits passively, hoping somebody—anybody—comes to call before she tumbles too far and it is too late. The moment arrives. An athletic spermatozoon pushes ahead of the rest and nuzzles his head through her shell. Now she becomes unerringly faithful to the one who made it through, forsaking all others. Sherman and Ethel begin the process of mitosis—cell multiplication by division—while all of Sherman's brothers wander about aimlessly and die.

Before cellular replication can begin, Sherman has to go inside of Ethel and release his DNA (it seems there is no avoiding charged language after all). Once his genes and hers get close enough, their atoms can begin to bond and rebond, pairing off like partners in a square dance. If everything goes exactly right, the DNA will combine with the other stuff floating around inside the egg to construct proteins. Proteins stack up into structures that become a cell wall, a mitochondrion, and organelles with horror-movie names: the endoplasmic reticulum, the Golgi apparatus. After a while Ethel develops bulges. A new cell wall creeps down her middle. She loses her svelte ovoid shape as her two sides grow bigger and her middle grows more narrow. Egg is a zygote now. In a matter of hours, she will split into two identical daughter cells. Each of those cells will divide and split again. One becomes two. Two becomes four, then eight, then sixteen, then thirty-two, and so on until there emerges a little ball of human flesh called an embryo.

Ruby is fond of saying you were made out of pizza and chocolate. When she got pregnant I assumed she would soon be sending me out on impossible midnight forays for Cherry Garcia ice cream, General Gau's chicken, iced

decaf soy vanilla lattes, or, that ultimate cliché, dill pickles. But she spared me that. Once, after all the stores had closed and our freezer was empty and it was clearly going to be impossible to slake her desires, she did turn to me in her sleep and say, "Mmmm...pepperoni." My eyes popped open and my fingers gripped the mattress in anticipation, but she rolled over, emitted a halfhearted burp, and went back to sleep. Clearly, anybody who is building a new body inside her own needs to consume the necessary components. There is nothing special about the elements that go into that mix. If you separate the water in our bodies from the dry goods, you'd have a pile of sand—about enough to fill your beach bucket—made up mostly of carbon, sodium, potassium, a dash of zinc, maybe a few other elements found commonly in dirt. In short, we are made of the same stuff as everything else under the sun. When the Bible says man is made of the earth and that we will return to the earth, it can be taken literally. My aim is scientific, though, and not theological. I wish to shine some light on the phenomena that made your body grow from a single cell into a person who can read about it. A high school sex-ed teacher would say simply that the male seed fertilizes the female egg, and then a fetus begins to grow. But then sex-ed teachers are paid to gloss over relevant details. With more rigor, we might approach the issue as a professional biologist would, saying that a sperm and egg join, and the combined system undergoes a process of mitosis, producing a blastocyst, which implants sometime later on the uterine wall. A biochemist would say deoxyribonucleic acid undergoes a polymerase reaction in the presence of a catalyst. We can go on and on, zooming inward and downward toward to reveal more details, using language that becomes more arcane with each shift in focus, in our search for a satisfying explanation of how life comes about. Inevitably, we will find ourselves among the very atoms themselves, caught inside a storm of electromagnetic forces, a hail of characters with names straight out of the Bionicles—Hadrons, Bosons, Leptons, Mesons. Perhaps there, in the invisible world of the supertiny building blocks of all matter, perhaps

there, in the permanently invisible in-betweens, we will discover the secret that makes you you.

If you are the kind of person inclined to be interested in how atoms are shaped (and I know you are), you might think of them as tiny malted milk balls: a bunch of electrons encircle a crunchy center made of protons and neutrons. Most of the things we can see and everything we can touch or smell or taste—in fact, all of the matter you will encounter in your life—is made of atoms. For a very long time, scientists believed that atoms were the smallest things in the universe. But atoms, as it turns out, have a list of ingredients longer than a box of Froot Loops breakfast cereal including, but not limited to: electrons, protons, neutrons, gluons, photons, and quarks. It is good and right and very scientific of you to ask what those electrons, quarks, and so on are made from. The answer is tricky. Saying one kind of matter is made of a second kind is a sure way to get caught in a vicious circle. (Steven Hawking, in his book *A Brief History of Time*, wrote about a well-known scientist who once gave a public lecture on astronomy. He described how the Earth orbits around the sun and how the sun, in turn, orbits around the center of a vast collection of stars called our galaxy. At the end of the lecture, a little old lady at the back of the room got up and said, "What you have told us is rubbish. The world is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant tortoise." The scientist gave a superior smile before replying. "What is the tortoise standing on?" "You're very clever, young man, very clever," said the old lady. "But it's turtles all the way down!" [2])

The search for the smallest pieces of matter ends at the point where it is no longer possible to distinguish matter from energy. Atoms, for example, have mass. We measure their mass in terms of atomic weight, starting with the hydrogen atom, which, by convention, has an atomic weight of 1. But in the strictly conventional sense, an atom's constituent parts do not have mass. We measure the size of an electron, for example, in electron volts, which is a unit of energy. It would seem, then, that the closer we look, the more it appears that the world is not really

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made of *stuff* at all. At the smallest level it is made of *influences*.

One such influence, charge, comes in two forms—positive and negative (these names are purely arbitrary and may just as well be called lemon-yellow and orange-orange.) Protons are positively charged and electrons are negatively charged, and in physics, as in romance, opposites attract. When atoms clump together to form molecules, it is because of the opposing charges in their electrons and protons. For example, a molecule of water is two hydrogen atoms married to an oxygen atom. They share their electrons the way couples share finances. The molecule will form only if the electrons have the right amount of energy. At low energies the electrons' meanderings keep them close to the atomic nucleus, never wandering out of sight. With a little more energy, an electron will suddenly pop into an orbit far enough from the nucleus that it may encounter other electrons, other atoms, and begin an independent life. The transition from low energy to high is instantaneous. The electron will not travel from a low orbit to a high orbit as, say, a space shuttle would. When the space shuttle climbs from the troposphere (where airplanes fly) to the thermosphere (where they will dock with the international space station), it visits every place in between. An electron, on the other hand, does not have to visit every place between "close-to-the-nucleus" and "far-from-the-nucleus." When it changes states it disappears from one place and reappears in another in the same moment. Einstein called this a

quantum transition as opposed to a gradual one. All subatomic particles display this sort of behavior. Under the right circumstances some atom- and molecule-size pieces of matter do too. But somewhere between the ultramicroscopic and the visible, quantum effects disappear. That is fortunate because it would be very inconvenient, indeed, if objects like space shuttles, automobiles, or nicely browned slices of toast were to pop out of existence in one place only to reappear in another.

Falling in love with your mother was a quantum transition. One moment I was a lonely, miserable sod plodding close to the ground, the next moment I was carried aloft in fresh air. I never experienced a moment of being in between. And when, a few years later, you were conceived under the fluorescent light of a clinic examination room, my body became entangled with yours in the way that particles do, and wherever you go so goes part of me. We almost didn't meet, your mother and I. On the day my bags were packed and my pocket held a one-way ticket to Paris, Ruby showed up at my farewell party as a friend of a guest. I didn't realize then how striking she was, how even her most casual movements were efficient and intelligent. I was too entranced by the wit and spark of her conversation. Where, a few hours earlier, I had been keen on my new life, the sweet anticipation of distance and liberation after years of study and work, her appearance was an unwelcome shard of light and heat. The tenor of my departure had changed. When I got on the plane the next day, I was

encumbered by the tug of regret for something important I had left behind. Six months later I saw her in a bakery buying a raspberry tart. She was passing through my adopted city and just happened to find herself on my street at the moment I was walking past. If we had been lazy or fatalistic, we would have chuckled nervously, shared a polite moment, and moved on. But Ruby was a romantic. Soon after our second meeting, I started receiving handmade postcards and elaborately wrapped gifts of music and books. Our love reached across the Atlantic, traveling by post, by satellite, cable, and ship, until, one day, your mother appeared on my doorstep, carrying nothing more than a book and a passport. We could easily have chosen different people, different paths. We could have been the parents of other children. Looking back, it may appear that we were fated to have you, but fate is only the reinterpretation of past events. In the present moment you always exercise free will. So, if Ruby and I hadn't experienced that series of haphazard events, can we say things would have been the same for you but for a different father and mother? Or must we admit with cruel precision that you would never have been born?

The biologist Richard Dawkins explains that all life on Earth could have arisen from a single chemical event almost four billion years ago. Perhaps a single strand of rogue proto-DNA replicating in the primordial soup, more like a virus than an actual living thing, was the ancestor of every bacterium, plant, and animal from Tyrannosaurus Rex to garlic, from *E. coli* to Angelina Jolie. The constituent parts of DNA, amino acids, are the natural product of the chemical reactions that would have taken place when the Earth was young and hot. You can cook some up yourself in a high school science experiment involving ammonia, water, various salts, and electricity. It is likely that the first cells came about once the amino acids got organized enough to assemble themselves into proteins. That all happened a very, very long time ago—about 3.5 billion years before you were born. The proteins piled on top of one another to form a complex self-replicating crystalline structure, and for many generations the seas were



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peppered with these prebiological specs—first simple ones, then more complex ones that finally looked like cells. You can see their millions-times great-grandchildren today in a drop of pond water under your microscope, wiggling haplessly, entirely unaware that they are the oldest things on Earth. In theory you can trace your own ancestry back to those insensate microorganisms by navigating a reverse course through adaptation and mutation. It only takes a very tiny change in the DNA of an animal, says Dawkins, to affect very significant visible changes in the species. The most difficult thing, for we who live but a clipped century, is to grasp the idea that evolutionary change happens gradually, generation after generation, over hundreds of millennia, and that a small change is magnified when it is part of a long-lived or very complex system. Each mutation that propagates to another generation causes still others, as cause and effect ripple through time.

The guiding principle of classical evolutionary theory is that mutations happen randomly. They become permanent features in a species as individuals carrying that mutation adapt to their environment. Darwin first noticed this on the Galápagos Islands, where he found several kinds of finches living together. These finches differed mostly in the shape of their beaks. Some had narrow, sharp beaks suitable for rooting insects out of small places or picking leaves and berries. Others had stubbier beaks that could crack open hard nuts and seeds. In almost every other respect, they looked similar. All of these subspecies could have had a common ancestor, but over time the birds developed these different beaks to reduce competition for food.

A modern twist on evolutionary theory called adaptive mutation blames mutations on the illustrious quantum. The microbiologist Johnjoe McFadden

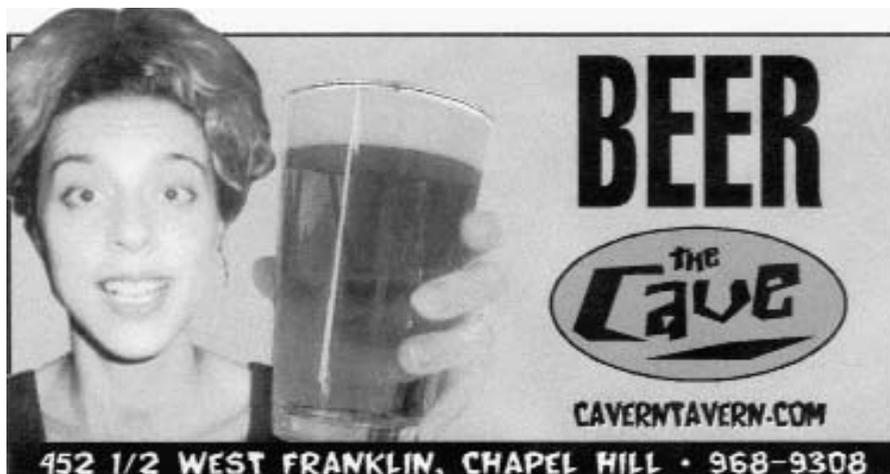
proposes that mutations can be the result of quantum uncertainty among individual atoms on a single chromosome. At any given time during cellular replication, some atoms may be in a superposition of states. In typical quantum-mechanical fashion, reluctant to make a choice, each atom is both bound to its neighbors and not bound to them until it is forced to choose one state or another. The choice can result in the production of two entirely different molecules, which, in turn, produces a mutation that gets passed on to the progeny. In McFadden's example a lactose-intolerant strain of *E. coli* mutates into a lactose-loving strain in very few generations. So far adaptive mutation has been observed only in bacteria. But it is easy to extrapolate this theory from the protoplasmic locale to larger organisms and, eventually, to the windswept moraine of the Galápagos Islands, where a dearth of nuts and berries causes a generation of finches to pass a long beak gene on to their young.

The principle of cascading effects does not only apply in evolution, but in living individuals as well. A single synapse firing in your brain might lead you to make a choice—to turn left or right? Eat that cupcake or leave it for later? Reach for a shiny penny on the ground or keep walking? Imagine how any one of these choices can affect your future, your happiness, the kind of adult you become. Could it be that some elements of human thought are set in motion by quantum events? A synapse fires because of a buildup of electrical charge—an excess of electrons on one side of a gap, a dearth on the other. But sooner or later, upon the

arrival of that last electron, the one that breaks the camel's back so to speak, the reaction is set in motion. The charge is released, the electrons make the leap across the great divide, and the signal travels to the next neuron over, completing the thought. You reach down and grab that penny. But now you can see under the bushes that line the fence to the park. Through the fence you see a man playing the guitar and harmonica. "Come on, Dad." You tug at my hand. We walk around the corner, past an old hot dog vendor, through the gates with the gargoyles on top, into the park, where it is ten degrees cooler. The man with the harmonica and guitar is just around the bend in the path. You run to him and plunk yourself down on a damp rock nearby and listen raptly. The man smiles at you, then at me, from behind his harmonica. He smiles with his eyes. He is playing the folk classic "Blue Eyed Boy." It is easy to dismiss these things as a series of random events. But it is anything but random. Each event is dependent upon the previous, and one can trace a direct line backward from your harmonica to the penny, to the synapse firing in your brain, to the arrival of that last electron. From there we find our way to the development of your mind and body, to the doubling of cells in your mother's womb. To the penchant for musicality you inherited from your grandfather, the concert violinist, from your great-great-grandfather, the famous 19th-century Lithuanian cantor. There are many paths forward but only one way back.

There were times in the beginning when Ruby and I argued so hard that we almost broke up. Once she made it

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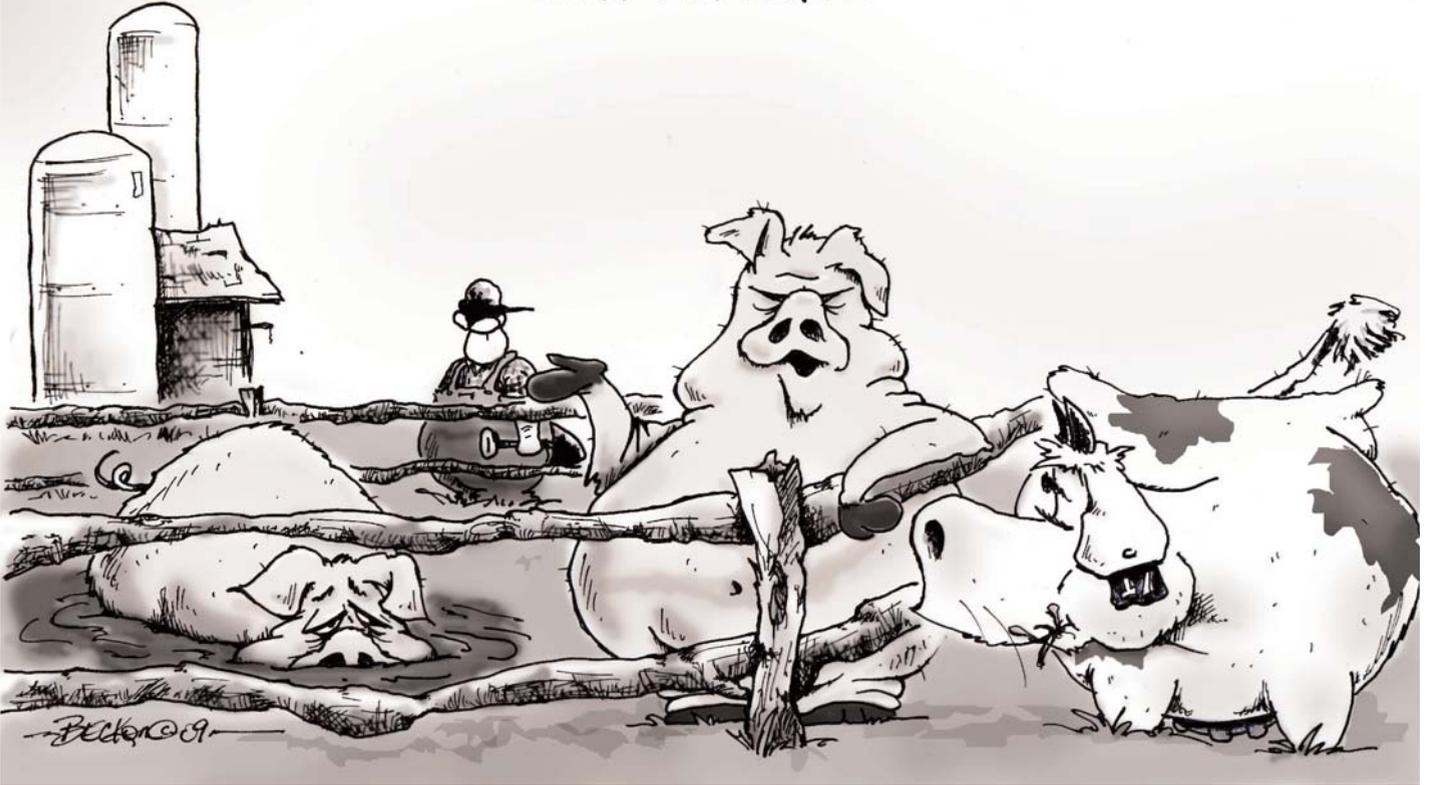
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MASS HYSTERIA !



HE WAS SINGIN' - "I'LL BE HOME  
FOR CHRISTMAS" . . . . I FIGURED  
HE WAS TAUNTING ME !



## The Blotter

all the way into the Métro and was waiting for the next train to the airport. I tumbled down the stairs, breathlessly calling her name, the echoes of my plaintive apologies arousing the curiosity of the homeless men. Had it been an argument over some irreconcilable philosophical or political difference, perhaps I would not have tried so hard to recant. Certainly, one cannot go on living with someone when your world views demonstrate a catastrophic failure to intersect. I remember feeling as if a little part of me died that day. I did not think we would ever recover, either as a couple or as individuals. Ten years later we are still together, our love deeper than ever, and the episode entirely forgotten.

Then there was the time I stepped in front of a bus and your mother saved my life. It was in London, on Piccadilly. We had just come out of a stationery shop, where she had bought me a gift of matching pens. A fountain pen and a ballpoint, sleek and black. (I am using the fountain pen to write this story.) We were about to cross the street to a pub. I don't know why it happened then. I had lived in England on and off for decades, driven on country roads and in the city. I knew intellectually and intuitively that British automobiles drive on the left. Nevertheless, I stepped into the street with a useless glance in the wrong direction. I heard her yell and felt her grip my shoulders to pull me back. I came to my senses and looked up in time to see a white panel van barreling down on me. I was scarcely back on the curb when it whooshed past. The driver hadn't time to put on the brakes or honk the horn,

but I saw the look of surprise frozen on his face. It is a moment that remains indelibly in my visual cortex, a millisecond amplified until it fills a whole minute, like one of those photographs taken with a strobe lamp—a bullet piercing a balloon, a hummingbird's wings paused midstroke. When I realized what I had done, I broke into a sweat and saw stars. Many years later, as Ruby lay on the exam table, her legs in the stirrups, waiting the recommended ten minutes after being inseminated, I wondered if the reason we were having trouble was that I wasn't supposed to be there at all. I should have died in London five years earlier. My continued presence was an accident that put the universe out of balance, and now there was one life too many.

What a confluence of accidents made you who you are! Your mother and father met and worked hard to have you, but had they not met, had their parents not met, and their parents' parents, and so on as far back into your genetic prehistory you care to explore, what would have happened to the essence of you? This is a question better left to the mystics and not to scientists, as the answer is more metaphysical than physical, an impossible ontological conundrum like the grandfather paradox. You are the result of everything that has happened before you. You are the leading edge of a wake formed by your story, pulsing forward through the stream of time. You are you at this moment, as you read this sitting in your armchair, sipping a cup of tea. You are you again but slightly different a few hours later when you go to bed.

You are you and nothing else. I mean this in an existential, not an empathetic, sense. You cannot know what it would be like to be the child of different parents, just as I cannot know what it is like to be my own son, a blue-eyed boy. I have been a child, and I have looked up at my parents' loving faces, but I never looked up at my own loving face. I have been rocked to sleep by your mother, but she is not my mother. I can imagine the experience of being blue-eyed, being color-blind, of having your name. But in all these cases, I would be thinking about me, myself, younger, shorter, standing in your adorable light-up sneakers. My experience is permanently, inescapably filtered by the fact of my being me, the author of this sentence. The quality of being a specific individual begins in the womb, perhaps before the first moments of cellular division. The curves and workings of your body and mind are set in motion by the choice of sperm and egg; by the moment of conception; by your parents' choice of mate; by their parents' choices before them. In this sense I am apt to accept Martin Luther's proposition that: "All things whatever arise from, and depend on, the divine appointment; whereby it was foreordained who should receive the word of life, and who should disbelieve it; who should be delivered from their sins, and who should be hardened in them; and who should be justified and who should be condemned."

If by "divine appointment," you choose to say God, so be it. If by "God," you mean the incomprehensibly rich chain of events that led from the moment of the Big Bang to the moment of your conception, then perhaps you are a scientist after all. Where is that elusive substance of you? In the superstrings that hold together the ten dimensions of the particles of your body. In the quantum jump that caused an electron to leap from your mother's DNA to mine. In the contrived meeting of Sherman and Ethel in a hospital room on a sunny day in June. Because a certain couple made a thousand right decisions and ended up together. Because their firing synapses, hormonal juices, and lonely flesh made them ready to love one another. Because of the lives they led until then and the way they were born and raised and five



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hundred generations back to your ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, who were subject to the caprices of nature, even while they were touched by the hand of God. And back a thousand generations more to the not-too-distant origins of man. Because human life evolved that way. Because conditions on Earth were just right, the necessary chemicals were present in the right concentrations, and the temperature on the newborn planet was not too hot, not too cold. Because Earth was the right distance from the Sun. Because of the laws of celestial mechanics, which, in turn, were decreed at the beginning, fourteen billion years ago in the first picosecond, when everything that ever was or ever will be was contained in a singularity the size of two human cells. Look! Look! There you are. Deep inside that quantum spark. How marvelous, you crumb of universe. And there, surrounding you, closer than the smallest grain of space and burning as hot as ten trillion suns, there and everywhere is my love for you. It is the size of all known space and time.

THE END

<sup>1</sup> This translation from an excerpt found in Italo Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1992, pp 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> Hawking, Stephen (1988). *A Brief History of Time*. Bantam Books. ISBN 978-0553053401.



## "Gordon and His Amazing and Spectacular Dog Boncer"

by Ivan Faute

The thing is, Gordon just couldn't stand to part with Boncer. Boncer the dog had greeted Gordon every day after High School and then on those dreaded college breaks. Boncer was there every time, waiting at the door, as if he just knew.

So, when the time did come, Gordon pulled out the ravaged newspaper advertisement he'd kept for so long and dialed the number. They used freeze drying, the salesman said, in any pose you wanted. Gordon had Boncer put on a cart with a wheel under each paw. He was a big dog, and Gordon figured he could move him from room to room on wheels. Unfortunately, the wheels made him too big to fit into the car. Gordon went to rent a truck. But on the way he realized the taxidermist was only four miles away from his house. It seemed longer because he had to cross the highway, but, really, four miles was nothing. He and Boncer used to walk that far all the time.

He grabbed his strong leather leash out of his trunk. The pet modelers, as they called themselves, had put Boncer's favorite collar on him. His coat was shiny and clean – they'd even fixed the small bald patch on his left leg that had appeared when he'd gotten older. With beaver hair, they told Gordon.

He pulled his dog happily out the door. It was almost as if Boncer were really there – his glass eyes even

looked a little wet like they always had.

It felt so natural to Gordon to be out walking Boncer that it surprised him when someone stopped him. They wanted a picture. It was the funniest thing they had seen, they said. Gordon wasn't sure if he should be offended or not, so he said ok. He posed with Boncer while they took a picture. Then they asked if they could be in the picture and Gordon would take it. He was delighted. Everyone was happy, and they gave Gordon five dollars for his trouble.

Within a year, Boncer and Gordon were on their six state tour. The next year, they had a deal with a Venezuelan toy company. Gordon thought the half size Boncers with the wooden knob on the end of a string was the best. Boncer Balls, a series of books, and all natural doggie treats were next. Gordon turned down Boncer BeeBee Guns because his dog wasn't a hunter.

He never did get another one.



## "Best In Show" by Phil Juliano



## “Micro-fiction”

by Larry “mckenzee” Holderfield

### CHAPTER ONE

William was a flannel man, a baby botherer. You know the type; thick glasses and thinning hair.

William worked in the back room, you never spoke to him. He wore gray flannel pants and a blue striped shirt with a Belmont collar, worn pale at the elbows. William always brought his lunch.

No one ever called him Bill or Billy. His father had called him Willy Boy on occasion, or so he had heard. William’s father was a salesman, with all the inherent charm of that breed. But Mother knew that a charming man would never stay at home, and so she had assured that William would not suffer from charm.

William always smelled of damp card-

board.

William would eat his bag lunch, then go to the library to use the computers. After work, he liked to drop by the hospital and stare at the newborns. People assumed he was an uncle or grandfather, but the nurses recognized him. “Hey, Jane, the baby botherer is here again.” No one ever spoke to him.

On Saturdays, William tried to do something cultural. Mother had encouraged that. William would walk through the museum or the zoo, staring indifferently at the exhibits, seeming not to distinguish between a monkey and a Monet.

Sundays, William attended Mass at Saint John the Proclaimer. William never prayed, as he was sure God wouldn’t like what William believed about Him. William liked to light a candle and lean his head against the cold stone. It reminded him of Mother.

Most things reminded William of Mother.

Once a month, there was a gathering at the old Cinaplex. A dozen flannel men, wearing their raincoats and rubber boots, would mill about, then eventually move inside, buying buttermints and grape sodas, and settling into Theater Seven. Something with Peter Lorre or Bogey would play, they would suck their mints, stain their teeth with soda, then shuffle out, each returning to their

back rooms and bed rooms and basement studios.

Those were the happiest days of William’s life.

### CHAPTER TWO

One day, while William was watching the babies, his heart decided to start. Jane came over to him, when the other nurses were away, and spoke to him. She spoke of pain and loneliness and birth and Mother.

Jane straightened his hair and complimented William on his diction.

Many weeks later, Jane accompanied William to the zoo, pointing out her favorite monkeys and convincing him to feed the small red deer from his hand.

Jane did not remind William of Mother.

### ALTERNATE CHAPTER TWO

One day, while William was watching the babies, his heart decided to stop. There were no other visitors at the time and due to a trick of architecture, none of the nurses noticed his fall.

The janitor eventually found William.

Jane was the only one to attend the service at Saint John the Proclaimer. She came out of a vague sense of duty and guilt and because she liked to light the candles.

Jane was a flannel woman.



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## Five Minutes With: Mike Beckom

YEAH . . . IT'S ABOUT AS POINTLESS AS HAVING A NO-TINKLING SIDE OF THE SWIMMING POOL . . .



**Blotter:** OK – we promise, none of the “Where do you get your ideas” stuff - unless you want to tell on yourself... Here we go: Did you do cartoons as a kid? What kind of stuff did you turn out - and who did you show them too?

**Beckom:** I usually get my ideas from watching a LOT of news and then asking my friends, relatives and neighbors what THEY think about certain issues. My ‘big pitch’ to prospective editors is that I draw my ‘toons from a ‘southern’ perspective. I ‘say’ in my ‘toons what these folks would like to say but don’t because they don’t wanna be considered politically incorrect. They have boundaries....I don’t. For the set-up of the pictures, I have a HUGE collection of cartoon books....all of the Bloom County series, several Herman, some Non Sequitor, a few Mother Goose and Grim and a small collection of BC.

I started out copying the Sunday comics with my dad when I was about 4-5. That’s the only real training or instruction I ever got. I got pretty good at it and when I was about 8 or so, I won a contest to design an original baby blanket print. That \$100 prize got me hooked. I drew all throughout my life to impress girls and get dates. Chicks dig artists. Later, when I became a dad, I drew to amuse my kids and the other neighborhood kids who lived near us. Never really got serious about it ‘til after my dad died. Then, I

wanted to try to get something published as my way of saying.... thanks, Pop’...I love ya! After the initial rejection, I got the green light from one of my favorite editors (thanks Mrs. Elaine Rider – BHP News Chronicle in Belton, SC). A few other editors noticed I was doing her ‘toons and contacted me about creating some for them. It kinda snowballed from there. I’ve now won the SC Press Association top award 3 out of the last 4 years taking 2nd the other two years to syndicated cartoonists.

I’m the only Christian, Republican-leaning conservative editorial cartoonist in SC. I don’t draw certain things because of my beliefs. However, I DO get to include some things that help to

emphasize a point when I get to inject my beliefs into a toon. My editors work with me on an ‘as used’ deal. I supply the toons. They either buy them and publish them or they don’t. There is no contract and neither of us is under any obligation at any time. In the 7+ years I’ve been doing toons, I’ve never had a week where I didn’t sell any toons. I do not consider myself to be an artist. I am an ‘inkslinger’. Artists create works of art. I draw silly cartoons that attempt to tell a story, communicate an idea, make people laugh or piss people off. I’ve often told people that I equate what I do to having a beast that lives within me. When I draw or paint, it’s quenching the beast’s appetite or slaking its thirst. I cannot simply choose not to create. After a lifetime of crappy jobs, I’m back in school working on my Commercial Art degree....so I can spend the rest of my life doing what I love....feeding the beast.

**Blotter:** Who is your “drawing inspiration?” - who do you think is the best out there in print?

**Beckom:** Paul Combs is probably the absolute BEST editorial cartoonist I’ve ever seen. However, Wiley Miller, Mike Peters and Robert Ariail are right there with him. Of course, my bud Phil Juliano ranks right there with these guys. He’s a phenomenal talent who just hasn’t blown up yet! All of these guys aren’t necessarily ‘editorial cartoonists’, but they use their ‘toons to make editorial comments.

**Blotter:** How is it being a political cartoonist in South Carolina? Would it be tougher or easier in one of the big cities (Chicago/NY/LA)?

**Beckom:** It’s not necessarily easier or harder being from SC and drawing editorial ‘toons. They may have more material or issues out in LaLaLand or another big city but we have enough right here. As long as there are elected officials and stupid people in the world, I’ll never run out of stuff to draw. I

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# The Blotter

might get more exposure in a big city but so what? I don't do this to make a living...I do it because it's fun! I get to voice my opinions and get to make a few dollars for doing it! I get paid to be a butthole! GOD bless America!

**Blotter:** Do you get flagged by the editors because of the delicate sensibilities of the readers? Do you ever hide "your claws" in a drawing?

**Beckom:** I DO sometimes get shot down by editors. They are in the business of selling papers. If I offend too many of their readers, they lose subscriptions. I kinda have to walk a thin line. Most of my editors will let me push it to the edges...but there definitely ARE edges I can't cross. I'd love to have the total freedom to just rip someone a new one sometime on this issue or that issue....but then, if nobody buys the 'toons, what's the point? I think that for the most part, I can make my point and still not feel like I wussed out with the 'toon.

**Blotter:** Can you show us how you build a 'toon? Characters or "story" first? Do you ever pick friends to make characters out of?

**Beckom:** I had another cartoonist tell me once that to make a good 'toon, you should look to marry the serious with the absurd. That's usually the 'formula' I try to follow. I may take some serious issue like smoking regulations in bars and restaurants and then start jotting down silly stuff with it. A couple of my favorite 'toons came about from that issue. Once I get the serious/silly marriage thing working, the characters usually are already formed from that. The drawing is the easy part. I tell people it's like when you were in school and the teacher used an overhead projector to put up notes. In my head, there's a projector. I look at a blank sheet of paper and I can 'see' the 'toon. It's just me tracing what I 'see' there already. All of my family and most of my friends have appeared at least once in my 'toons. I try not to repeat too many characters so I can keep my readers interested and keep my 'toons fresh.

**Blotter:** Any five people in history at the dinner table with you - who would you invite and what kind of beer would you serve?

**Beckom:** If I could invite 5 people from history to dinner....it'd probably be Jesus, Thomas Jefferson, Michelangelo, John Lennon and Jeffrey Dahmer. Jesus because ...well...he's Jesus. Thomas Jefferson so I could ask him what he thinks of the mess we've made of their grand ideals. Michelangelo because the man was TALENTED and I'd love to learn a few tricks. John Lennon because the dude

was smart AND cool. Lastly, we'd need Jeff Dahmer....to make sure there were no leftovers. I would not serve any beer. Being from the south, there's only one drink real southerners serve....sweet tea.

**Blotter:** Who wins in the UFC cage match between Picasso and Pollock?

**Beckom:** Picasso kicks Pollock's buttocks! Since I just finished a summer school course in art appreciation, I can say that without hesitation....Picasso was talented and could draw and paint in numerous methods, styles and variations. My 2-yr old grand-daughter can splash paint on a canvas and make a 'pollock'.

**Blotter:** So how do you build a cartoon? I can't draw a lick.

**Beckom:** I usually come up with the bones of a toon from watching/reading the news. Inevitably, someone will say something that just sounds funny to me. From there, I figure out what kinda characters I can have doing or saying the same things that I just heard. I do a couple of rough 'idea' sketches to round out the character ideas. Then, I plug em into a lay-out....the setting of the toon. The BIG thing is to be happy with the characters. They make or break the whole thing. I can move them around in photoshop if I don't like the placement in my lay-out. I may change their costumes, add props like a drink or cigarettes, cars, appliances, etc. Then I use my light box (\$20 special at Michael's) and transfer the whole thing to a piece of Bristol board with a regular #2 pencil. I ink in the stuff I wanna keep and erase all my pencil lines. Scan it into my computer, a little photoshop for shading and drop in some witty punchlines and Voila!...a toon is born!

FYI, ANYONE can draw. I go every year to my son's schools on Career Day and teach the kids to do toons. Every year, I have 2-3 kids come back and show me stuff they drew since the last time I came. THAT Rocks! I ask them if I can have them and then get them to 'autograph' the drawings for me. They feel like rock stars and I get

some cool new artwork.....perhaps the next Picasso!

**Blotter:** Thanks, Mike. Outa time, gotta run.

## 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@blotterrag.com

I waited at a crossroads for a tour bus to come take me to a basketball game. A small green wooden bench with two men sitting down, one a young man, wearing one of those pork-pie hats popular again, the other an old man in a raincoat, although it is only overcast, not raining. They are fussing about the game we are going to see, but not from opposing sides, but rather about the fine points of playing basketball, and how the different players behave on the court. Without it being said, I know that the young man is a recent high-school graduate and a fine ballplayer that cannot go to college for some reason, and the old man is a long time fan of a team with a long record of losing - but not one of the teams we are going to see. He does, however, believe that he can put "hoodoos" on other teams and hex them into losing, just as he feels that he has hexed his own team, somewhere back in his youth. The bus cannot be seen in any direction all the way out to the horizon, like the scene in North by Northwest, and I feel like I need a shower and someone in the hotel to brush out my suit, or that the devil should come and teach me how to play guitar.

CC - cyberspace

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## Call for Entries!

### The Blotter Long Form Fiction Contest for Novella and Novel length works

1. The purpose of our contest is to provide a venue for writers to have their work read and commented on by our editors and judges. Additionally, the winner of this contest will have his/her work published here on these pages. And last but not least, the winner will receive the monetary prize of \$500.00. (FYI, the entry fee for the contest helps boost our ability to give a prize of this size and any excess funds we collect will help this lil' rag to keep on truckin'. Nobody's getting rich off these fees, rest assured!)

2. Our pre-reader judges are intelligent and highly proud of their educations. Our final judge is smart, well-read and mean as a snake. But we told her that she could be the final judge and what can you do?

3. Transparency is very important to us, and we make every effort to eliminate any conflict of interest situation from going down in our contest. In that light, Blotter volunteers and their family members and/or employees are prohibited from entering our contest.

To enter the contest, please submit your work from October 1, 2009 to January 31, 2010, with a \$25 entry fee by check or money order to: The Blotter Magazine, 1010 Hale Street, Durham, NC 27705.

Your entry must contain the following: no less than 10 pages, no more than 20 pages of the opening of your novel or novella, typed & double-spaced, without your name. On a separate cover page type your name, the title of your novel or novella and a one page synopsis of your novel or novella. Remember, you have to have the entire book written, so that if and when you win, you can show us the rest!

But WAIT! There's MORE!

Check out this BONUS deal: Enter the writing contest AND get a year's subscription to The Blotter for only \$30! (Regular annual subscription donations are \$25 total and you don't even get to enter a writing contest with that price!)

Once again, first prize is \$500, plus a "library" of books selected by The Blotter (many signed by the authors). Second prize is \$125, again with a "library" of recent releases. Third prize will be just the "library." All placements, including honorable mentions, will receive an award certificate, proof positive of your success as an author, suitable for mocking your sophomore English teacher, who always wondered how you graduated at all.

Our contest will be run in line with the rules of ethics and mechanics recommended by the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, as outlined in their 2006 monograph on the subject. You can't view for free, but you may purchase the monograph entitled "Publishing Contests: Ethics and Mechanics" through the CLMP at <http://www.clmp.org/about/monographs.html>. This is the document we have used in coming up with the rules and conditions of this contest.

That's a lot of stuff to remember. Check out [www.blotterrag.com](http://www.blotterrag.com).

Final Tid-Bits: You may notice that our short-short fiction this month is not labeled "Staccato." That's because the folks at *Staccato* - edited by our friend Matt Boyd - have found their way back into publication! We've handed the sword of justice and the shield of freedom back to them, as well as their name, and they'll be looking for your microfiction submissions, all you scions of brevity. Check them out at [www.staccatofiction.com](http://www.staccatofiction.com). So plenty of things to read - I don't want to hear any of you saying, "I'm bored." Got it? Good!

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Joel Wachman** writes, "As a writer and computer technologist, I bridge the fine line between the sciences and the literary arts on a daily basis. My work features a similar syncretic relationship, exploring the subjects of fertility and reproduction using philosophy and physics. While I am neither a biologist nor a physicist myself, my formal education in the sciences and humanities at Harvard and MIT honed my ability to assimilate the greater concepts of both fields. A longtime Bostonian, I live in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with my wife and son. My essays have appeared in the Harvard Review, The Boston Globe, and in the official publication of the National Outdoor Leadership School, The Leader. In 2006 I wrote the winning essay for the Creative Nonfiction Writing Award at M Review. In the 1990s I wrote and published a magazine called Par Avion, which focused on travel and the ex-patriot experience."

**Mike Beckom** lives in South Carolina and his work can be found in a bunch of papers including *The Messenger* in my Mom's hometown of Hartsville, where I spent many a summer vacation whiling away throwing pecans at the back fence and drinking sweet tea.

**Ivan Faute** writes, "The Blotter published a piece of mine about a year ago. Since then, I've had pieces appear in Other Voices, The Mochila Review and Harpur Palate. I also presented a play in the New York Fringe Festival last year."

**Larry Holderfield** reports that he ended *Sinister Bedfellows*, the comic, and will be launching *BearCats of Mandhu* in Jan. 2010. He adds, "I'm still renovating the Bungaloid, and I've quit my day job to go back to college at 41. I start at UNCG Business on Monday. Oh, and my new glasses are titanium, red and black checked, from Denmark."

Find BearCats of Mandhu: <http://bearcats.updownstudio.com> (coming 01 Jan 2010) Sinister Bedfellows: <http://mcken-zee.comicgenesis.com> (ended) Cõulhuviða: <http://cthulhuvida.updownstudio.com> (ended) Books: <http://lulu.com/mckenzee> Blog: <http://mckenzee.livejournal.com>

I'll bet our **Phil Juliano** is currently drinking a chai latte and imagining the fall colors of Asheville laid out in the palette of his mind..

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**MUSIC**

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Our Liv believes that if she swings high enough, she'll fly. Hey, you never know. Perhaps all of that effort and hope and energy builds up until you just take off. She also scouts for pennies on the ground. Occasionally, on the sidewalk outside the coffee shop or near the front desk at the bookstore, one will appear, dropped inadvertently or cast irreverently. "Good luck!" she shouts, displaying the tiny bit of pressed copper. "Very nice," I always tell her. Sure, pennies have almost no value. But they add up, right? We at The Blotter believe that. So does GoodSearch. Each time you search the Internet using the GoodSearch search engine with Blotter Magazine as your designated charity, we earn about a penny. Not much. But maybe all off you doing it, well, means continued stories and poetry and essays and art. Maybe it's good luck! Please put GoodSearch on your home page, and Blotter Magazine in Durham as your designated charity.