

*We've got your summer reading list right here: J. R. Sullivan,
Hunter Koch, Arthur Levine, Daniel Pater, Sonny Rag,
Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal*

The Blotter

July 2014

MAGAZINE



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

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"Obligatory -- Oblivion"

Sometimes you roll down the road when a good old tune comes on the radio and you feel an urgency to take your hands from the wheel and clap to the rhythm - really get into the song - maybe even wiggle in a sit-down kind of dance because the music is vibrant, catchy, fun, nostalgic. All good things. You, if you are sensible person, resist that primal need to clap because driving requires that you occasionally steer and maintain a particular set of rules; some man made and others natural. Failure to follow those rules has potential if not inevitable eventualities that bode ill for the music-loving driver.

It's no accident that my thoughts lean towards driving, as my oldest approaches her driver's education days. But there is more to it than that. Every day it seems to me that the same pebbles crop up in our path for us to stub our bare toes on. I ask myself, why aren't we wearing shoes? Why aren't we looking down while we walk? And how hard is it to remember that yesterday we tripped on that very pebble? The responses are manifold. Stop talking to me, I didn't ask for your opinion. Didn't you just stub your toe yourself? What do you know, are you some kind of geologist?

I think that we each have the occasional urgency to do things that aren't in our best interests. Maybe this is a learned trait, maybe it's hardwired in our makeup. My guess is that it's the best of both lunacies, and my evidence for this cropped up this past weekend. I was home alone - a tricky thing for lazy old me - and I was sitting outside on the porch-swing doing much about nothing, to bastardize the bard. I wanted to go down the hill and check on the flow of water trickling along the stream (honestly, I do that) and I happened to look down and see something that made my heart catch just a little in my throat. Two rat-snakes, sunning themselves on the bit of concrete that acts as a sidewalk along the front of our house. Big suckers, too - six feet long, each. They didn't see me, or sense me in some other, serpentine, way. My mind flipped through its file card system regarding snakes - *whirr* - and I acted.

At hand, leaning against the corner of the house, was a long-handle shovel which I used to dispatch the two snakes. Bam! Clang! Bang! OK - let's analyze this puppy, if we may. Two six-foot long rat-snakes (or some kind of black-colored snake - I only knew they were rat snakes after I shoveled them to death) sunning themselves in front of the picture-window of my dining room. They were twined together, probably mating - I'm not a herpetologist, so I can't say that for certain. In any case, they were not poisonous (but again I cannot have determined that for certain without going inside the house and finding a field guide to reptiles). *Why didn't I leave them there?* Because they were snakes. *Why didn't I go in and find out what kind of snakes?* Because I was worried that they would suddenly sense me and try to escape. *And the problem here?* They were snakes.

They were the snakes, in fact, that eat the mice that live under the house that I live in. That is what I was told, am told, am told each time I kill a snake. *Why don't you just leave them alone? They don't want to bother you at all, even the poisonous ones.*

The answers to those questions are both true and lame. Because snakes frighten my wife. Because they wig her out, make her not herself for a good six weeks or so. Because six weeks is like snake-boot-camp, like a reptile antibiotic regimen, like a bad snake haircut. Because no amount of education about snakes makes them less frightening to her. Because snakes do not have a political action committee helping them to be protected from people like me, who must make snake-value-decisions offhandedly, with no time to deliberate the ramifications of killing two large rat-snakes, sunning themselves on my front steps.

So, are there ramifications? Certainly. Rat snakes are slow and steady consumers of *Mus Musculus*, which trouble my household as well. I can hear you now: *don't you see? Leave the snakes alone and they'll eat the mice!* Yes, indeed. We set our mousetraps every October like clock-work (or rather like calendar-work). For my wife, long after her seasonal fear of snakes has worn off, is an angry, fearful mouse-hunter.

Of course, those very mice munch happily on the Carolina Wolf Spiders that skitter up through the vent-shafts to plague my wife, once-upon-a-time sending her into a tizzy, flinging all of her clothes to the ground and screaming naked for me to save her! From. A. Spider. Well, it was one Godzilla of a spider, legs-span about the size of the palm of my hand, face only a mother spider could love. But completely harmless to people. And while it was fun running into the room like Lancelot to a shrieking, buck-naked Guinevere (yeah, she's going to kill me for this, but journalistic integrity demands blah, blah, blah...) I understand how she might not want spiders in the house.

But all the spiders want from me are those camel crickets that live in the crawl space beneath my house. Harmless camel crickets that don't even rub their back legs together in loud cricket symphonies, like field crickets do. So, why do I hate the crickets? Because they try to get away from the spiders and jump up on my bed and walk along until they can get under the covers with me, somewhere around my neck. Which puts me instantly on the ceiling, flopping around and knocking over books and lamps and laptops.

So naturally, I put out glue traps for the camel crickets, that would be eaten by the spiders that are culled by the mice that are savored by the rat-snakes that live near the house that Jack built. I know, I know.

And the species slouches along towards something the GPS says resembles Bethlehem, learning, forgetting, missing opportunities, making false starts, causing real wreckage, doing the vastly dumb because at the time it seemed like, you know, right.

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CAUTION

Win if you can, lose if you must.

“Black Pools”

by J. R. Sullivan

Mercer operated each day under the belief that something profane would wash over him and thought it so when Elvis Cotton called him a faggot. Mercer couldn't assemble any meaning from the word, but quickly hated him for it anyway.

After school that day, Mercer came into the kitchen and let his backpack slide off his shoulders and fall to the tiled floor, the linoleum yellowed and peeling. He pulled himself into a chair around the card table. His eight-year old body was loose and thin as if poorly stitched

together, eyes black pools that took up most of his face. Dishes white with grease lay strewn about but he sat cross-legged and fingered the fresh rip in his t-shirt, also a product of Elvis. The word still swam through Mercer's head and almost choked him dry. He wanted to see Elvis sucked down into a whirlpool and never come up, watch him get swept away in a heavy, bottomless tide. Robert, Mercer's father, leaned against the counter scraping mayonnaise across a slice of white bread. A cigarette dangled between his lips and hands and arms moved as if controlled by strings. He'd worked at the galvanizing plant since Clinton's first year in office, but now drew unemployment, repaired cars in their driveway, and sold cords of wood

from the bed of his pickup. Mercer pinched together the tear in his shirt.

“Dad, what's a faggot?” he asked.

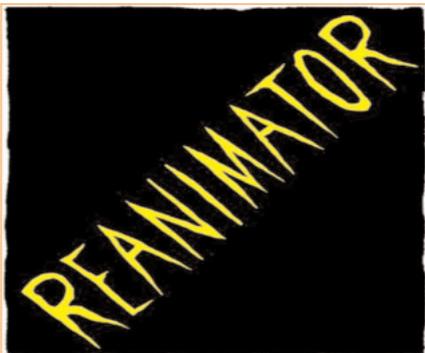
“A boylover.” Robert coughed into his sleeve.

“A what?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“What's that mean? Elvis called me that today.”

Robert set the butter knife and slice of bread down on a plate, turned, and kneaded his hands together. Though squat and pounded to the likeness of a stump, he seemed unafraid of letting himself further wear out, full of some desire to watch himself disintegrate piece by piece. He had a tattoo of a woman's name on his bicep. Lucy, it read in gray cursive, but he'd never



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say where the woman had disappeared to in the world. He toed his boot into the floor.

“He called you that?”

“Is mom home?” Mercer was up now digging through the pantry, moving aside the gallon carton of powdered potatoes and sack of onions.

“And what’d you do about it? Tell me you did something.”

“Is she home yet? I’m hungry.”

“Words matter,” Robert said, raising his voice. “People care about them.”

“What does that word even mean?” Mercer stood straight now, arms and legs wooden at his side but eyes still fixed towards the pantry.

“Do you know how this makes me look? I told your mom this would happen and now look, you didn’t even do anything about it.” Robert crushed his cigarette into the bottom of the pink plastic cup he used as an ashtray, arms tensing.

“Mom doesn’t care. She doesn’t.”

Robert set the cup down and took Mercer by his thin

shoulders.

“Tell me what happened. Tell me every word he said.”

Elvis Cotton wore the same olive, military issued jacket to school everyday, a jacket he said his father -- a war hero -- had given him before again leaving for Kuwait. While still the biggest kid in the second grade, the jacket swallowed his pudgy frame and the bottom hem fell almost to his knees. That day at lunch, Elvis, jacket rolled to his elbows, demanded Mercer give him his pizza square, but Mercer wouldn’t, hungry from showing up to school late and missing the free breakfast. The school offered breakfast to children whose parents didn’t make enough money and he’d struggled through the morning without it. While sitting at his desk earlier that day, he’d envisioned his belly opening and the rest of him collapsing inward, folding over into itself. He usually avoided Elvis, disliking how he always talked of shows he’d seen on cable television, which Mercer’s family didn’t have, and now, sitting at the cafeteria table, wished he’d choke on his food.

After Mercer again wouldn’t give up the pizza, Elvis pushed him from his plastic stool and Mercer’s tailbone struck the tiled floor in a solid concussion.

“Stop being such a faggot all the time,” Elvis hissed, tomato sauce from his own pizza dotting his cheeks.

The other boys around tore open with laughter, mouths stuffed with burnt crust and leathery cheese. Elvis grabbed Mercer’s lunch tray, but it tilted and the side of creamed corn slid off onto the table. Mercer, eyes already rimmed with tears, scrambled to his feet, but his shirt caught and ripped on the bottom of his chair. He tried wrestling the tray from Elvis, but the pizza had already disappeared down his throat.

“And then what?” Robert asked, crouched to a knee to see Mercer at eye level, breath heady with cigarettes and cough drops.

“Nothing. Lunch was almost over.”

“Good God.” Robert stood and cocked his head towards the ceiling, hands at his waist, eyes closed. After a moment he shook his head as if

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freeing himself from a dream and fished a pack of cigarettes from the pocket of his jeans. "Well you know what we have to do."

Robert's truck crossed under the oaks outstretched above the road, leaves, rusted by the cold, breaking from their limbs and swimming through the soft updrafts. The watery October light fell over the clapboard houses aligned along the avenue and Mercer drew a circle on the passenger side window with his finger as they went. If Celia, his mother, were home, she would've stopped this, told Robert to walk around the block or drive and get a cup of coffee, but she worked part-time at the flower shop and wouldn't get off until later that evening. Mercer wanted to go back home, spend his afternoon cutting outlines of ghosts and monsters from used strips of cardboard he'd pulled from the dumpster behind the grocery store. He'd paint the cutouts, prop them in the backyard, and shoot holes through them with his pellet gun. Sometimes Robert would come

outside and watch him form his creations. "You know only girls paint, right?" he'd say, rubbing his hands across his soiled undershirt.

They passed the hospital on the bluff where the homeless and nurses alike sat smoking cigarettes at the bus stop. "I don't know where he lives," Mercer said, adding eyes and fangs to the circle he'd drawn on the glass.

"This is bigger than you. Your mom will see."

"I'll just talk to him tomorrow at school. I'll say something then."

"If you let them say it about you then it's true. Words mean things."

As they crossed the bridge to the far side of the river, Mercer looked out into the low, indigo hills churning in the distance. He imagined Robert somehow came from that same feral country, packed together from dirt and tree and salvaged animal bones.

Whatever he'd planned would be ugly and small, aligned to some crooked star. Some nights he'd

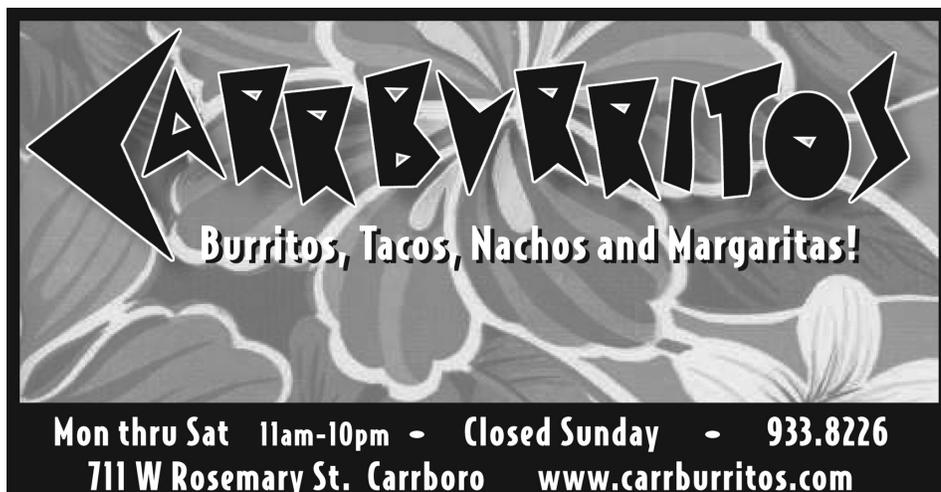
watch television then start weeping into his hands, blue light from the screen falling over his frame crumpled into the couch. He'd cry like a very young woman or a rabbit snared in a trap. "This is why no one will hire you," Celia would say, standing at the bottom of the stairs in her soiled white uniform. "This is why we can't do this." After she'd lock herself in their bedroom, Robert would stumble outside and throw spent beer bottles at the abandoned house across the street, blowing the windows out like missing teeth. Mercer would watch this through an upstairs window, imagining apparitions or ghouls somehow occupied his father. "He can't admit he'll never be George Strait," Celia once said, combing back Mercer's loose tuff of hair. "He can't stand the idea of coming in last."

When they pulled up in front of the house Robert parked the truck along the curb and cut the engine. The house was small and worn, wood paneling chipped of its paint and shingles shaken free from the roof. The afternoon had begun fading into a warm red dusk and light poured from the windows of the all whitewashed duplexes along the street except the one before them. Mercer pressed his palm flat against the window. "I don't think anyone lives here."

"The Cottons have lived here longer than you've been alive."

"What're we doing?"

"You can't let people talk



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to you like you can't do anything about it. We're showing her."

"Can we go home? Let's just go home." He felt caught in a current, slowly pulling him from shore. He drummed his hands against his jeans. "Dad, I want to go home."

"I'm going to tell you the words and you're going to say them."

"I can't. I don't want to say anything."

"You have one chance to do this. You have to get it right."

"Please. Please take me home."

"Just because I don't have a job doesn't make me retarded. I know how to handle this. Your mom can say what she wants, but I can handle this."

"No. Let's just go home. Mom will be home."

"No," Robert said, adjusting in his seat to better face his son. He repeated what Mercer needed to say over and over, pronouncing the words like a prayer, slow and steady and full of reverence. It took almost ten minutes, but he made Mercer say back the phrase until he'd committed every syllable to memory. When Robert felt satisfied, he turned back in his seat and set his hands on the steering wheel. Mercer pressed his hand against his throat. "I can't say that," he said, pinching his eyes shut.

He eased up the walkway to the door. Dead leaves wrinkled across the yard and the breeze flowed through the rip in his shirt. If he turned back,

Robert would refuse to leave and they'd sit in the truck until Mercer could get the nerve up again. He had to do it now. He couldn't escape it.

At the front door he knocked and waited. From inside he heard someone moving about and a television squawking. His hands shook and he stuffed them in the back pockets of his jeans, his father's words swirling in his gut. Elvis would surely come out and fight him for even coming to his house and Mercer would take the punch and collapse to the ground as he had in the cafeteria.

But after a moment the door opened and a beautiful, overweight woman stood before him. She wore purple nursing scrubs and her face was smooth and soft, but eyes hungry for sleep. He could have almost mistaken her for his own mother and this made him want to vomit up everything he'd ever eaten. "Can I help you?" she said, almost smiling.

"Is Elvis home?"

She took a step into the house.

"You have a friend here," she called, voice light and dry as talcum puffed into the air. Though she'd said the words, her diction somehow communicated they were not and could never be friends.

Heavy steps came bounding towards the front of the house. And then Elvis stood there, wedged between the woman and the open door. The sleeves of his jacket were again

rolled to his elbows and he held a half eaten ice-pop, which had begun melting and running down his wrist.

"What are you doing here?" he said, biting off a mouthful of the ice-pop, the inside of his mouth stained blue. Mercer could hardly breathe and recoiled from them, Robert's words filling his lungs.

"Are you alright?" the woman asked.

"If you really think I'm a faggot and suck boycock," Mercer choked. "Come out here so I can kick my foot up your tired asshole."

The woman's lips fell apart so delicately it pained him, parting just enough to see the white fronts of her teeth. She furrowed her brow and raised her hand to her forehead as if blocking out the sun. Elvis' eyes were flashbulbs.

"No. I don't think you're really a faggot," he said, swallowing down the ice-pop.

"Who's that?" the woman asked, pushing past Elvis to stand on the porch. "Is that Robert?"

"Ok, good," Mercer said, still reeling. The words had risen up from some deep well within him and their absence left him dizzy with relief and he could almost mess his pants because of it. In a panic he turned and flooded back down the walkway to the truck, the motor already cranked and in gear.

"Wait, please," the woman called from behind him. He flung open the heavy door

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and sprung for the seat, letting it catch and cradle his weight. The truck skittered from the curb and he turned towards the rearview mirror. In the reflection he watched the woman stagger down the walkway and into the street, raising one hand as if signaling for help, as if stranded downstream. But, as the truck dipped down the small hill towards the boulevard, she soon disappeared, fading into the orange twilight.

As they coasted back over the bridge and onto Market Street, Robert broke into a dull, pinched grin. He drummed his hands against the steering wheel and seemed to let the truck drive itself and drift by the little cafes and restaurants hunched along the avenue.

Mercer looked down at his open palms, studying the creases that ran and crossed together like little rivers.

“Is she mad?”

“You acted like a real man back there. You listened to me and it worked perfectly.”

“What if his dad brings him over to our house?”

“David Cotton hasn’t stepped foot in town since Lucy got pregnant. He’s vapor now.”

Mercer hooked his index fingers into the hole in his shirt and further ripped the fabric. That name, Lucy. The tattoo.

“He fights in the Army.”

“The Army wouldn’t want him and he’d never enlist. He bagged groceries at Buehler’s then skipped town before your little friend was born.”

“Elvis said he was in the Army. He said that.”

“But you did good son. See, I knew how to handle this. She said I am not good with this stuff, but look at us. Let’s see what she says now.” He turned the truck by the post office and into the lower and dimmer stretches of the city. Mercer pressed his palm flat against the window, watching the drab apartment buildings and storefronts skip by and vanish. Thoughts of Elvis wrapped in his camouflage coat, sitting alone in front of a television set. Maybe his beautiful mother was still in the road, the wind surging around her frame and tangling

her hair, and how the words couldn’t change regardless of how she felt about them. And he worshiped her then, but couldn’t fathom ever seeing or speaking to her again. What could he ever undo?

As they passed the cemetery on the hill, Robert reached his arm across the seat and gently squeezed his son’s shoulder. Mercer gave to a faint smile, yawned, and leaned his head against the seat, baptized in the evening’s dark. The radio played an old Jim Reeves song, piano twinkling and delicate under the hum of the engine. Mercer’s eyes lulled and floated in their sockets, lights tracing by as the truck swam in and out from under the streetlights. “Faggot, faggot, faggot,” he whispered.



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"Business"

by Arthur Levine

*You're headed somewhere
I've been to somewhere
And somewhere is nowhere at
all...*

Shel Silverstein/

Dennis Locorriere

Cliff unfolds the scaling knife and slices the strap so Joe can wriggle his arms out of the strait jacket, then lays the knife on the porch railing.

"They just use you up and throw you out," Joe says, but Cliff isn't listening.

Absently strumming the ancient Silvertone and humming quietly to himself, Cliff remembers Annette, how she got out when the getting was good.

He tosses the cap from the Old Crow into the kudzu growing wild on the side of the

porch, takes a long sip and passes Joe the bottle.

Joe frowns, "They don't give a damn, just use you up and throw you out," he says, "I got a mind to..."

"You got a mind to what, Joe?"

"I don't know. It just ain't right, is all."

"Nothing you can do. It's just what it is. How things is," Cliff says, then picks up the rhythm on the guitar,

*Hey, listen mama, the
world is done gone away*

*Hey, listen mama, the
world is done gone away
I've got a bad-luck deal, get
me troubles every day...*

"You figure Annette?" Joe says.

Cliff leans the Silvertone

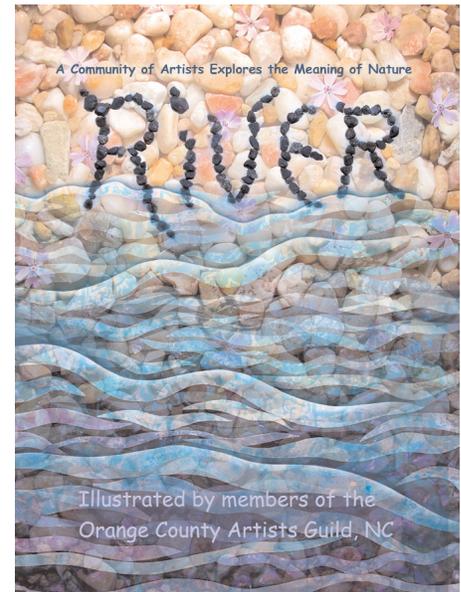
against the water barrel.

"I don't know. Annette's hard to figure. Could be it was her. Maybe not."

Joe leans back on the wooden rocker and lights a Camel. "Wished I knowed. Wished I knowed for positive."

"Wouldn't help now, even you did. We fucked up is all. Best we just let it go." Picks up the guitar.

"Can't. Just can't. Tried.



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Can't."

*Red rooster says,
'Cockadoodle doodle do'
Rich woman she says, 'Any
dude will do.'*

"How I am is some things I just can't let go. That's just how I am."

"You got to, is all, else you'll end up in another of them jackets. You'll see."

"Figure they'll get me?"

"Nah. They just chase down folks come from money what got the insurance. You ain't worth shit to them. They're just losing out on that deal. State don't pay worth a crap. It's insurance is what they's after. Moneyed folks with insurance."

"Wished I knowed for positive it was Annette done it."

"Wouldn't help now, even you did. We fucked up is all."

*...Moon and stars
Sometimes I feel
He's not, she's not, it's not
real
Bound to lose...*

"Put that damn thing down and help me figure on this!"

"Ain't nothing to figure."

"If it was her that makes it all different!"

"No way to say."

"Then I got to find her is what."

"Won't do no good. Won't do no good, plus if it was her she'd sooner shoot you dead as admit to such."

"You think?"

"I know."

"I think she liked me. I thought she..."

"You thought she what?"

"I thought she liked me."

"So what if she did? Maybe she did maybe she didn't. She'd still shoot you. Even if you care for somebody...Let's say she did. She does. Even so, she don't want some other fool trying to mind what she figures is her business. She'd as soon shoot you dead. It don't matter none if she likes you or she don't give two shits. Ain't nobody wants some fool trying to mind what is not their business."

Cliff polishes the last drop in the bottle of Crow and lights a Camel. He picks up the guitar and fiddles with the tuning pegs.

Joe grabs the scaling knife, and unfolds and folds the blade a few times.

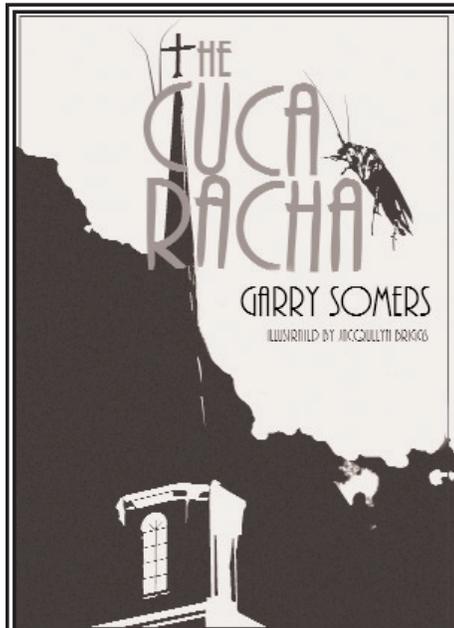
Cliff strums an E chord.

Trouble in mind

I'm blue

*But I won't be blue for
long...*

Joe doesn't know what makes him do it, but he can't help himself. He gets up off the rocker, grabs the empty fifth of Old Crow, and slams it across the side of Cliff's head. Then he opens the scaling knife and methodically saws at the steel guitar strings till each one finally breaks.



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“Reminiscence: Sunny Acres Farm”

by Daniel Pater

Old Joe and Ziggy are brothers, sons of the old country. They have worked together forever. Their father, Stanley, is far too old, with his clouded cataract eyes and teeth skinny as a picket fence. The gums have long receded in his ninety year old jaw. He makes no decisions in the running of the farm anymore. Lumbering slowly across the yard to throw chicken bones to the tethered black dog; he leaves behind a boiling cabbage odor of Poland.

Nowadays Ziggy commands the roost. The home-grown Kirk Douglas profile snaps and grumbles from early morning to yellowed days end. Joe parks his weary self on an upturned milk case after driving his daily route, grinning while Ziggy's blood rushes to his face.

“What do you mean we're out of bottlecaps?” Zig snarls. “I told you to get some on Monday!”

Joe's cigar ash clings to his open shirt. He pulls the wet stub out of his mouth.

“I've got too many deliveries to remember that. Shaddup!”

“Shit.” Ziggy kicks gravel in the driveway and steps down over the granite step into the milk room. We're late in bottling today. Probably won't be through until nine tonight. He turns on the steam and I line up the milk jugs. We each grab a handle and the bottom rim to dump the milk into the pasteurizing vat. It swirls, bubbles like the sea.

Steam billows out of a ragged hose end. I wash the jugs and caps, then turn them upside down to drain on the rubber mats. These old cans have been hand to hand, farm to farm, like tired limp money. Names like

ArnHow Farms in Framingham, Brox's Dairy in Kenwood, Rolling Hills in Pelham, N.H. are stamped on their battered scarred sides.

“Get plenty of steam in those jugs now. It kills the germs.” Ziggy shouts from the giant stainless steel vat. He's big on cleaning, fastidious as an old French woman. He worries about the farm constantly. We even have plenty of caps for bottling today.

Joe hunkers in the door. “I need three cases of half pints for the nursing home tomorrow,” he yells across the room, to be heard above the rushing steam. Ziggy's arms are sunk deep in the hot water tub as he scrubs stainless springs for the capper. He peers over at Joe, saying nothing.

“I'll throw the bottles in

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The Blotter

the washer, Joe.” I shout, wheeling tinkling milk cases full of empties to the carousel.

“You delivering the milk on Thursday?” Ziggy asks, looking at Joe cockeyed.

“I work on holidays, that’s right. Even on the Fourth of July!” he yells the holiday sternly.

“If I didn’t have the wife I’d be working too.” Zig snaps back. “She wants me home with the family. We never take vacations. You work, work all the time she tells me. She’s right! For Christ’s sake I haven’t had a vacation since World War II!” He scrubs furiously, soap foaming in the tub. Joe laughs quietly and looks my way.

I first started on the farm working Saturdays with Joe. We rode together in his blue pickup truck delivering milk all over. At fourteen years old I’d race up four flights in tenements in Lowell. The route ended with riding to pine shaded homes by the lake. That was long before

leaving for college in Boston, quitting in my sophomore year and coming back here to work. Joe and I have a connection despite the years between us.

“I never get a day off”, he says to me with Ziggy out of earshot. “Last Saturday night me and Tuttle drank that apple wine- that new stuff.”

“Boone’s Farm.” I fill in. “Yea! Boones Farm Apple Wine. I had such a glow on I almost drove to the beach!” Joe’s blue eyes widen.

“Sounds like a crazy night.” I tell him, lining up quart bottles into the washer.

“I don’t know why I stayed on the farm. You know what I always wanted to do Peter?”

“No, what?” I asked, remembering full well what was coming.

“ Ride the rails!” His voice flies like a politician driving home his clincher.

“A hobo, ride the trains across the country. Sleep out in

the open. Not a care in the world!” Joe’s robin egg eyes gleam in his wrinkled face.

Old Joe drifted off in his sleep one night soon after. But he never really left. His soul slipped slowly down the rusty coal chute into the stonewall cellar. It curled up in the egg box, by the cobwebs and sawdust in a corner where the grinding stone sat. Tired spirits often hole up in cool musty shadows like that. My eyelids felt like soggy gloves whenever I’d creak those cellar stairs, sniff the wet wood odor, and squint until I got used to the gray light. I always sensed another presence.

By the next week the eggs were passed out on the route. Old Russians and sad eyed Greek children gobbled them up in tenements on the other side of the Merrimack River. Joe may have crawled out by then. I tend to believe that because a year or so later I had a dream about him. It was so vivid I couldn’t shake it



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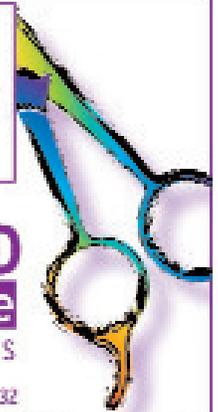
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out of my mind for days. He sat on a milk case in the barn while Mike ran the first milking. His eyes were silvery, glowing like embers. The milkers were chugging, sucking in rhythm. Ray, Joe's only son and I looked at one another. We knew Joe was dead. He had nowhere to go. The only time he left was when he and half the world went off to war. "WW Two, the big one", he used to call it.

Agrarian life spins back in time. Far back enough to where theater blends in, with both tragedy and comedy. Farm life has an edge. When the ax swings too wide towards a dirge, it rolls back with a child's lullaby, a lilt-ing laugh.

Milk bottles chime, sliding in the worn smooth carrier. I clutched cold steel, cursing gloves left in the truck. Cracking ice along the walk, I quick foot through the courtyard of a redbrick housing project.

"She's a sweet old lady,

used to be a nun. If she doesn't answer the door come back and I'll do it. Two regular and one skim." Ziggy barked the order, not needing a reply.

Locks opened, clicked shut and opened again to reveal myopic eyes angled up at from waist high.

"My, you must be the new boy. And tall!"

Her words ran together in Canuck fashion, the last one stretched with pursed lips. She shuffled slippers across a gray kitchenette. Bony fingers grasped the empties. I placed the fresh milk in her refrigerator, taking inventory of teabags, sugar, crackers, and teacups occupying shelves of the icebox door. She was too short to reach even the first cupboard above the sink. Her eyes caught mine surveying her humble cave. I felt stifled in my winter coat.

"I do not want him to see me... in my robe." She said, her eyebrows raised behind clouded glasses.

A chair blocked the television screen in the far corner. The Pope talked, no sound.

"Oh, it's the Pope." I said, trying to sound enthusiastic.

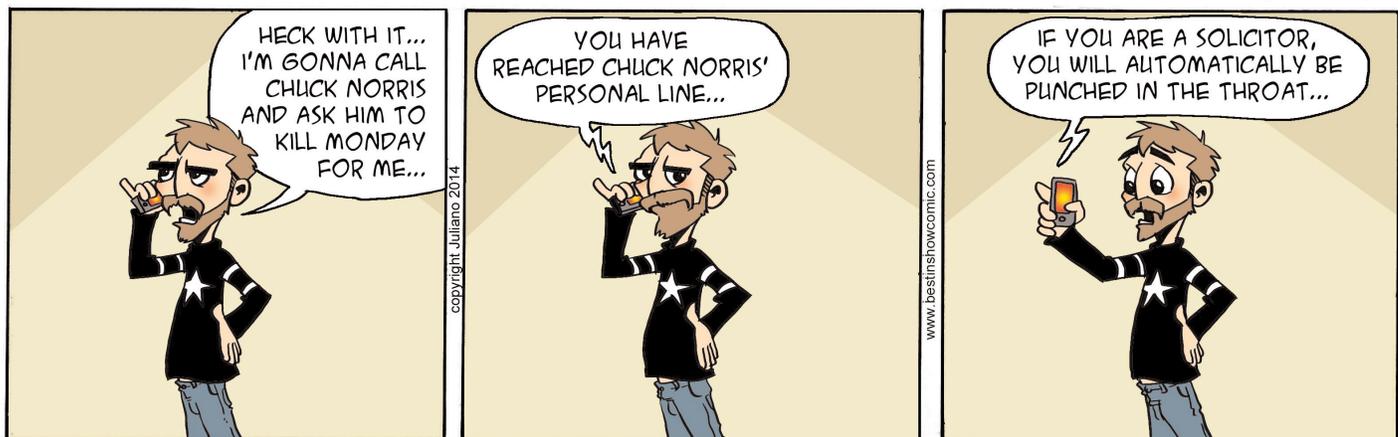
"Yes," she smiled serenely.

We bid each other good-bye. I bounded the stairs to the crisp, smoky cold day.



Best In Show

by Phil Juliano



“Modern Love”

by Sonny Rag

Once, she walked briskly past the doorway and shook him to his core. He was in a meeting at the time, one of those pathetic departmental affairs with regular scheduling minus real purpose, that he lacked the courage to miss and the team leader hadn't sense enough to cancel. He was gazing out the door wistfully, and thinking about her.

She was nothing special, except in the ineffable way that all women are special. Had he more closely examined his perception of her, perhaps using a Venn diagram, he might have concluded in a trite way that she was blessed with increasingly apparent beauty as one's subset of potential dates and realistic mates shrank, perhaps based on some time line or personal-success factoring. In any case, she was heavy of calf, her clothing selection process disregarded the words “understated elegance,” and her inexpensive haircut wouldn't sit or flatter. And so what? He was a short-sleeved, soft-middled coffee mug toter. And he'd heard her speak before - to friends at lunch, on the phone across the air-conditioned prairie-dog town - and he'd enjoyed her accent and elocution; western Carolina soft with

a touch of speed-chatty, like she'd once done a stint in New York.

It was her eyes, though, that were exceptional: blue with flecks of gold and green at the edges. A morning sunrise. He'd had the opportunity to really see them. Standing in line for coffee and a muffin, the rare opportunity to stare surreptitiously. They crinkled at the corners when she smiled; she was about the age he supposed she was. Nearer to his own age, not a gen-ex or gen-why or someone with whom he had so little in common the gap must certainly be at the gen-etic level. Instead, she seemed comfortable, like an old college sweatshirt or a warm, sugary bowl of oatmeal. He wanted to kiss her, to put arms about her waist, snuffle the warmth of her neck, span his hands across the soft breadth of her backside. Of course, she'd never said more to him than hello, with him nodding greeting in return. Absurd.

And so, leaning, chair back on two legs, mind whirling in daydream, and suddenly she appeared in the doorway. He startled, so much so that the whoosh of his heart in his ears had to be audible. She turned

her gaze and looked at him. Then her tongue slipped out between her lips, playful, childish. *Nyah, nyah.* He blinked and she was gone.

He clumped his chair onto all-fours. Glanced left and right; no one else returned his look. The doorway remained empty. Part of him wanted to leap up and follow her, to the copier, the water-fountain, her shared cubicle. He could say *hello*. Or maybe *hi, you want to go get a latte after?* He could ask her name; find out what department she was in. There really was something to intuition, to pheromones and body language. On the other hand, it had to have been a mirage. Just his bored meeting mind playing tricks. He chastised himself: you need to get a real life.



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

Every time I just about reach the place where I'm going to fly, I can't. Sometimes there are too many people in the way for me to run really fast, like down a hill, so that I can reach the critical speed necessary to take to the air. People like kittens and bunnies underfoot, sunning themselves on the grass, or walking arm in arm, but I try to dodge around them and still aim into the wind as if that were somehow necessary for flight, which I suppose it is, if I were a B-25 Mitchell and the hill was the USS Hornet or something, which I'm not and it's not. But in a dream your brain does take over from time to time and the rules change - flying is still possible for a mortal man, but you have to turn into the wind and get up a pretty fair head of steam or no go. I really hate when I can't run fast enough, but still try to fly, because it is the sleeping equivalent of a face-plant. I don't feel any pain (thank goodness) but it's somehow embarrassing to try and fly in front of all these strangers and not be able to do it. How would that work for Superman, for example? Would he have to bend steel in his bare hands afterwards, just so people would go "oh, well, look at that, he's still pretty darned super, isn't he?"

BF - cyberspace

CONTRIBUTORS:

J.R. Sullivan tells us, "I'm a writer from Nashville, Tennessee. My work has previously appeared or been accepted for publication by *Gray's Sporting Journal*, *Fourteen Hills*, *Short Story America*, *Nashville Scene*, *Home & Hill Magazine*, and *The Sequoia Review*, among others."

"Double," taken by **Hunter Koch**, a sophomore at Northwood High in Pittsboro, NC. This photograph was entered into the North Carolina Scholastic Arts competition and placed 3rd in the state. Koch has been shooting for three years this fall, and enjoys taking portraits as well as pictures of her brother who plays lacrosse.

Arthur Levine's work has been accepted by the editors of over thirty print publications in five countries, including "*Washington Square*" (New York University Press, Issue 26 - Summer/Fall 2010), *Crannog* (Ireland, Issue 32), *Blue Crow Magazine* (Australia, Issue 3, April 2011), *Ottawa Arts Review* (Canada, Volume 2), and *Orbis* (U.K., Issue 166, Winter 2013). But not to overstate the case, it's been rejected by the editors of probably hundreds more.

Daniel Pater was last seen in the pages of *The Blotter* almost ten years ago. He writes, "I've lived in Carrboro now for 17 years, after moving with my wife and two children from Encinitas, Ca. Grew up in Lowell Mass, where I worked on Sunny Acres Farm years ago. Sunny Acres is set at a dairy farm started by an old Polish immigrant, Stanley Lachut in Dracut, Mass. Stanley was a friend of my grandfather, Hipolit Pater, who had a grocery store in Lowell, from 1928-1954. They both arrived here in the US back in 1910 or so. I like to think that Jack Kerouac as a young boy may have stopped by the store and met my grandfather. Kerouac, or Ti Jean, as he was known when a boy in the French Canadian section of Lowell, lived close by. As mentioned in Sunny Acres, those same tenements in Lowell haven't changed much since Kerouac's boyhood."

Sonny Rag is kind but inconsistent, firm but lazy, a good cook with terrible table habits.

Phil Juliano has been cartooning for over twenty years. "Best In Show" is currently being featured in several newspapers and magazines and is syndicated by MCT Campus where it is distributed to college and university newspapers across the country. To see more of Phil's work go to www.bestinshowcomic.com

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