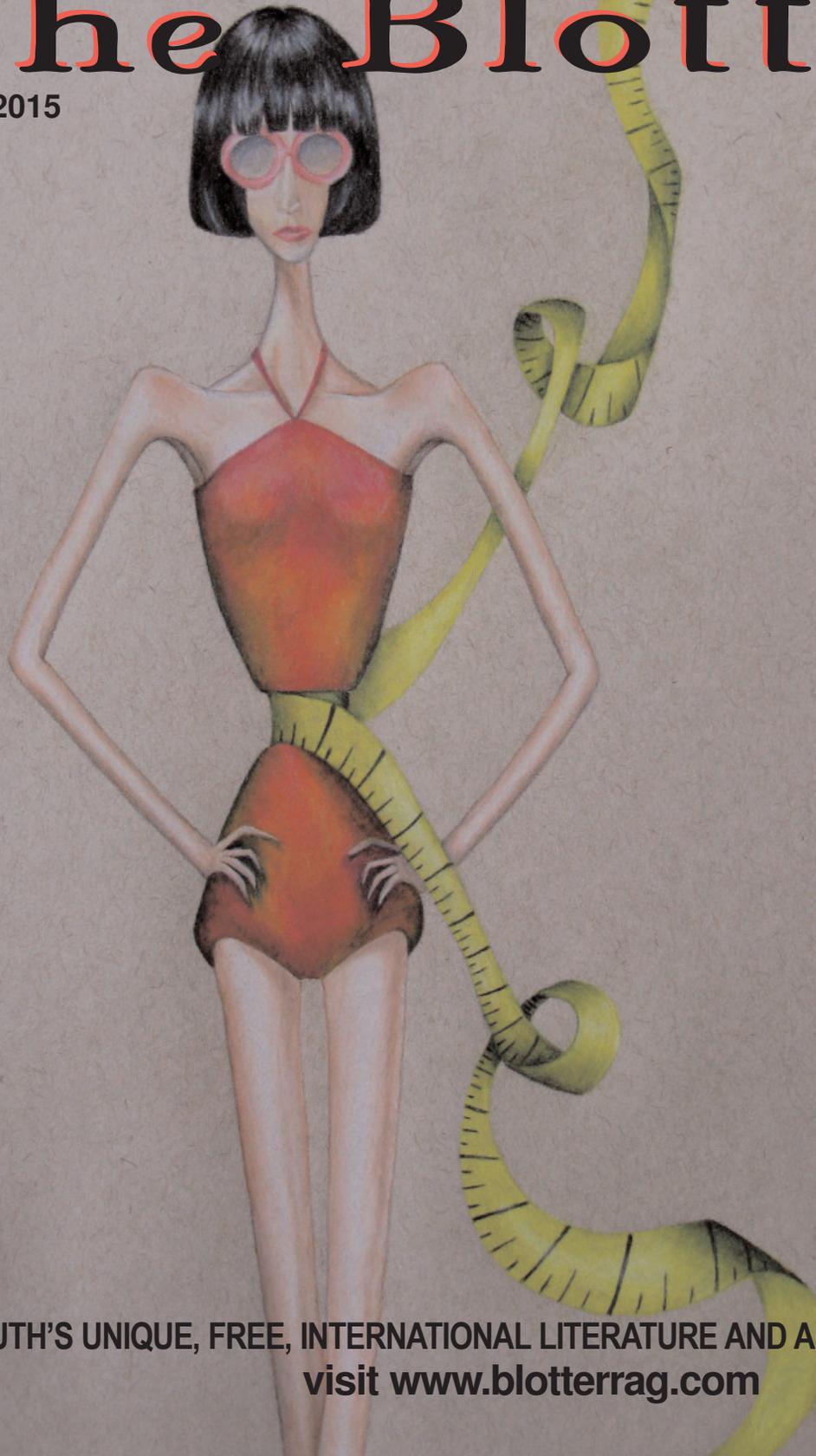


*The eye of the beholder with William C Blome, John M. Brantingham,
Kate Wisel, Kyle Hemmings, Sonny Rag,
Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal*

The Blotter

March 2015

MAGAZINE



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COVER: "Fashion Model" by Silas Waller
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The Blotter is a production of
MAGAZINE
The Blotter Magazine, Inc.,
Durham, NC.
A 501 (c)3 non-profit
ISSN 1549-0351
www.blotterrag.com

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"Winter Blues"

My daughter spends an inordinate (to me) amount of time thumbing her smartphone. Wait, that's not completely fair - I have no real way of measuring if the time she spends is inordinate. No stake in the ground, so to speak. Does she get her homework done? Does she have sound hygiene? Is she eating regularly, getting exercise? All yes. Does it bug me that she could be singing, painting, writing, doing something I consider creative, working the craft, getting the ten-thousand hours, but instead she looks at the ephemera on the periphery of the talent-universe? Some.

Why does it bug me? Because her circus is no longer my circus. She's old enough (and has enough information in her skull) to make her own free-time decisions. I can't haunt her like a portrait of Leopold - silently scolding my progeny-prodigy. I can only hope that the lessons aren't hardwired, at least they are soldered in well enough.

What are you doing? I ask her. Nothing. Why don't you do something...wait for it...useful. (And now, a collective groan. I just stepped in it, I know. She gives me this one for free.) I'm waiting for inspiration, she says. OK, I say, and back out of the cave.

Downstairs I think. Nothing arrives for free, and certainly not a job well done. For example, I feel bad for the fellow who tried to capture something profound with five years of photographing himself once a day. Same seat each day, same position of his face to the camera. I can only surmise what he might have been thinking; that if a picture tells a thousand words, then sixteen hundred or so pictures must be so profound it will cause a viewer's head to explode. In the end, however, after five years of "good work," there is no such result. He took a crapshot with the snapshot (yes, John - ouch!) and ended up with a stack of selfies, nothing more. The strange thing is, some good may come of it. His project can be seen by us as an object lesson regarding our search for instant gratification. A paean to the mundaeana, if you will (double-ouch).

Anyone reading this who doesn't think that this lesson also applies to them is mistaken, and there is nothing I can say after this that will help. You may as well go play the lottery and good luck!

What is more frightening to a writer than the thought of time misspent? The trip down the rabbit hole that doesn't pan out. Writers live in a constant no-holds-barred wrestling match with two inexorable truths: they have a need to write and that need includes a drowning-feeling that our writing isn't worth reading. Whoops! I called them truths - those are my own words - and still I can imagine someone looking at them saying, "hey, wait a minute, that's not quite so."

Really? Is there a writer out there living by the 80-20 rule? One scribbler

thinking, Oh, what the hell, I've done all I can do with this. Let's sling it up in the air and see who we can splash with it! Or do most of you thrash around in your room, trying to break the code: What should happen next? What is plausible? How do I describe this? What is that damned word?

Like a sweaty, gasping awakening from a lucid dream, many is the plot I've scribbled down that cannot unravel into something workable. But the characters were so complex and rich, I tell myself. I save pages and pages of nothing more than notes, with cryptic file names, in arcanelly labeled folders. I revisit them, from time to time, hoping that inspiration will overcome exasperation. That's what the Bard meant by sound and fury.

Such a story - the clever idea poorly realized, is little more than a punchline. My inevitable conclusion is that the problem is me. That a better writer could do something with it. A more patient typist, even, could make sense of the jumble I throw down. My stomach twists as I stare at a blank screen. Imagine what it does staring at screen after screen filled with words of mine.

But, say you, this is a pointless self-induced tailspin we've all indulged in. The oh, woe is me moment in a writing project. Time to crack open a bottle of cheap wine and wait for inspiration to rear its ugly head (or vice-versa) again. But I don't trust inspiration to foot the entire bill. I make myself do the work. Write the words down. Look at the sentences, the paragraphs. Rewrite them. And again.

So when the muse sucketh wind, I read. A lot. What are other writers doing? What can I learn from them? Is there anything like this in their work? Is there anything new? Anything old I missed? This is thoughtful action I trust.

I've told my daughter this story. A man falls into a manhole and the sides are slick and the hole is deep. He can't get out. Help, help! A cop walking by hears the shouts and looks in the hole. Officer, I'm stuck! OK, I'll go get help, the cop says. The man is cold and afraid. He prays. A priest walking by hears the prayers and looks in the hole. Father, I'm stuck! OK, my son, I'll go get help. The man is desperate and frustrated, and begins cursing, pounding on the walls with his fists. His friend, Joe, hears his familiar grumpy voice, and looks in the hole. Joe, I'm stuck! And Joe jumps in the hole. The man screams at his friend, what are you thinking, now we're both stuck down here. Yeah, Joe says, but I've been here before and I know the way out.

My thinking takes me here - had our photo-hero tried to do something that required effort other than just showing up (something he'd probably been told long ago was 90% of life) he might have something at least worthy of a moment's further consideration. And there may be something he can still do with his sixteen-hundred self-portraits. I don't know what that is, but it's possible.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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CAUTION

Cough between a rack and a horde place

Three short-short stories

by William C. Blome

UNDERWATER

My Chinese buyer, a rich guy I had located on the internet, lived in far-off Manchuria. He had given me two options for when we would meet and make the exchange of my Franz Kline for his bushel baskets full of American currency. He said we could do it either in the San Diego zoo “in front of masturbating golden monkeys,” or “in your own village, but underwater; like, say, in the deep end of a swimming pool.” At first I liked the zoo idea and the sperm-spraying goldens, but oh no, you thought that was too public a venue for me to be carrying my Kline into (or money out of), and so you ordered me to turn down option one, which I did. Therefore, I formally cabled Shenyang that option number two was a go, and that the gentleman could fly to California and consummate the deal right here at our home.

The Manchurian buyer safely arrived, and as I was about to descend into the deep end of our swimming pool, had you allowed me to lug my Kraut painting along as I had always planned, I could have closed the deal right here. He had come all the way to California with his overflowing baskets as promised, and he was already out there in the water when you nixed our agreement, when you kept yelling at me, “Don’t you see, the water’s gonna wash away the artwork, and then all you’ll have in your hands to fork over to the Jap will be a blank canvas.” And the nasty thing is, you physically muscled me aside and tossed my Kline way up on top of our kitchen cabinets, where you knew neither I nor the buyer could easily reach up or climb up to get it.

So sadly and pathetically, we men finally had to slip out of our swim trunks, get back into our

street clothes, and simply call it a day. I’ve just come back from driving the Chink and his money out to the airport, and right now, I want nothing whatsoever to do with your ass, except to tell you again and again that my Kline is *my* Kline; it is a lacquered oil painting; and both the Asian and I knew the abstract expressionist subject matter wasn’t about to vanish, and that the work would not have sustained any damage to speak of underwater in the deep end—the negotiating end—of our swimming pool.

PERFORMANCE ATTIRE

I’ve come to learn that the pudgy conductor’s name was Springham. His band was sizeable by 1990’s standards, some 40-odd men and women bedecked onstage in bleeding madras suits that certainly looked as if they had all been cut from the same bolts of cloth. Springham himself, however,

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always dressed entirely in white, and as he stood in performance, his usual attire included suit, shirt, tie, belt, socks, and shoes. Or—just to be accurate here—it might once in a great while slip into jolting contrast and consist of nothing other than a white tee shirt and a butcher's smock.

To me, Springham's largest calling card of popularity with an audience was his ability and wont to fashion jewelry from raw materials at one-and-the-same time he was standing on the podium leading his orchestra through various Latin jazz favorites. Long improvisational riffs gave him the time to use a sketch pad, a stick of charcoal, lengths of fourteen-carat wire, mucho mother-of-pearl, and a pinpoint, glowing lapidary's torch to keep increasing a stack of self-crafted baubles at his side. My wife hated Springham for what looked to me then like fuzzy, personal reasons, but to tell the truth, I've never known for sure. She eventually rose from her box seat immediately after one of his Valentine's Day performances and used her Beretta belly gun to shoot him in the back as he and

his band were hustling offstage. I think he actually died before anyone managed to stop my wife from emptying the magazine of her little automatic, or before competent help could get to Springham. I recall he looked like a red and white beach ball that wasn't going to move around the floor any more, and my understanding is that the value of his estate turned out to be almost equally comprised of recording contract residuals and an inventory of his rather original jewelry creations.

Even today when I go to see my wife on visitation days, she often forgets she's asked me many times before if all the band members' madras suits were ever delineated anywhere in Springham's will. She doubts, in other words, that the band members ever individually owned their performance attire. I naturally have no idea whatsoever, but she believes all that matching Indian fabric had a good, outside chance of being worth more in toto than Springham's own white clothing, or his jewelry productions, or his still-in-print LP's,

cassette recordings, and CD's.

DUMB LANTERNS

What with Andrew wounded above a knee, it obviously wasn't going to be easy to escape from the bastards with lanterns. They had taken away the night, so to speak, our usually inky and quiet time of bonding, and the five of us were soon captured by a like number of the toughs after a chase that had lasted all of forty-five to fifty minutes. Next the brutes kept pointing at Andrew's knee and cheering loudly in erratic bursts of sound that were like a stadium crowd brought to life by intermittent scoring from the home team. Then, using their lanterns smartly, they huddled us into a bunch and encircled us tightly with a humongous length of rope. Their finishing touch before they ran off was to tie all their lanterns together with both drooping ends of the rope and to then set this package of lanterns down before us on the vines that crisscrossed the ground.

So five men, each with his own



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lantern, had corralled us and left their lanterns glowing strongly in front of us, though unexpectedly, the light served to highlight the lanterns themselves more than reveal anything around us. One lantern was a good yardstick tall, a wrought-metal and narrow light with scroll work encrusted on top. I called the scroll work its hat, and I knew if I could free an arm to salute it, I could also forgive this dumb lantern's not being able to return my salute. Another lantern was an antique onion bottle with a thin, burning taper held fast inside by melted wax, and in regard to the bottle's

watermelon-rind color, I dubbed it "Greeny." I tried hard to get Andrew and the others to join me in tugging on the rope and shouting out "Greeny" and trying to open some kind of communication line other than light between us and the lanterns, but no one wanted to even consider it, and they proceeded to belittle me and curse my ass. Andrew, perhaps because of his wretched pain, allowed this slander to happen, and it was some time before I was able to reply that they could think whatever they wanted to of me, but what in the world was there not to like and admire about some inanimate lanterns?

Eventually Andrew decided to ask who among us was going to be responsible for implementing an escape plan, and Olivia (god bless her double D's and the rope that was chafing the hell out of

them), purred that setting the escape plan in motion was her role and that she was "on the case." Naturally, Andrew immediately followed up with, "How long will it be before we are free?" and while Judy and Jake stayed silent as usual before Andrew's entreaties, I piped up that though I had no idea, my replica Breitling was still working fine, and with its glow-in-the-dark dial and sweeping second hand, I'd sure be able and willing to time the escape effort, even if everyone had mocked and insulted me earlier, and even if the swell lanterns in front of us seemed destined to lose their purpose—i.e., via extinguishment, there would be an elimination of illumination—well before the break of day.



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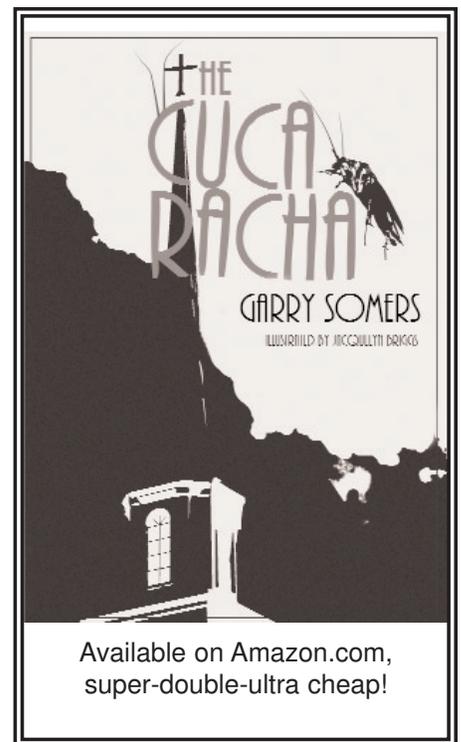
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“The Richest Man in the Desert”

by John M. Brantingham

When the borax runs out, all the people leave, and Johnny becomes the richest man in his part of the desert by default. He decides that as long as he stays here, this enormous hole is his, the ground, the roof, and the empty space inside it. These twenty empty buildings are his too.

He doesn't talk to anyone for the two days after the town empties itself, just wanders around in his warm jacket against the desert winter and thinks about the life for him in San Francisco, his wife, her mother, and her sisters. These women wait for him to walk into town with money falling out of his pockets. When they find out how much he's made here, they'll book him on the next train out to some other job in some other empty valley. Right now, here is good enough.

On that second day, the endless sound of wind blowing sand across sand is broken by something he cannot identify

until he steps out of the building he's been bunking in and into the level sand that once was the town's main road to see the office building at the end of the road completely engulfed in a roaring yellow flame. He stares at it until he thinks he hears, “Johnny!” He turns around looking for the place of the sound. “Johnny!” This time he definitely hears it and finds Carl standing a block away on the top of the once-stables.

“Carl!” he yells as he comes forward. Carl's laughing and waving and building a little fire on the top of that building. “No!”

But Carl's committed. He's built a little pyramid of boards on the roof. He pours liquid out of a bottle and drops a match onto it, all in the time that it takes Johnny to run down the once-street to stop him.

Carl backs up slowly keeping his eyes on the fire and

seems to know without looking where the edge of the roof is, where he turns, jumping off the one story and rolling when he hits the ground.

“What are you doing?” Johnny asks when Carl runs up to him.

“I'm sorry.” Carl is panting harder than the short run would have demanded. “I didn't know you were here.”

“I don't understand. What's happening?”

Carl points at the office burning down. “Boss Dragon is in there.”

“Boss Dragon? What are you talking about?”

“Boss Dragon set out across the desert two days ago by himself. I followed him. I got a clean shot, and I took him out.”

“You took him out? You killed him?”

“Shot him in the back, and he was struggling like he was drowning on land, so I shot him



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three more times. I brought him back here, and I put him in the office.” He puts a friendly hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “They’re never going to find him now, not in that.”

“Who?”

“Boss Dragon.” He looks expectantly at Johnny. “James Reddington.” He says this like it should be obvious, and maybe it should be, Reddington was a dirty kind of man. Always paid them at least a week late. “Don’t worry. They’ll never be on to us.”

“Us?”

“Us. You and me. We’re never going to be caught for this and Boss Dragon, you know how he was always complaining about how little money he had?”

“Yeah.”

“The man had over five thousand dollars on him. Makes

me think of all those times guys didn’t get their full pay, and he just told them that’s all the company sent him, like it wasn’t his fault.”

“I didn’t do this, Carl.”

“You didn’t stop it. Anyway, you’ll get your split.”

“Hold on a second,” Johnny says. He walks into his little room and pulls his pistol out from his bunk. He loads it goes back into the street and fires six shots into Carl Rigby who is watching the fire, his back to Johnny.

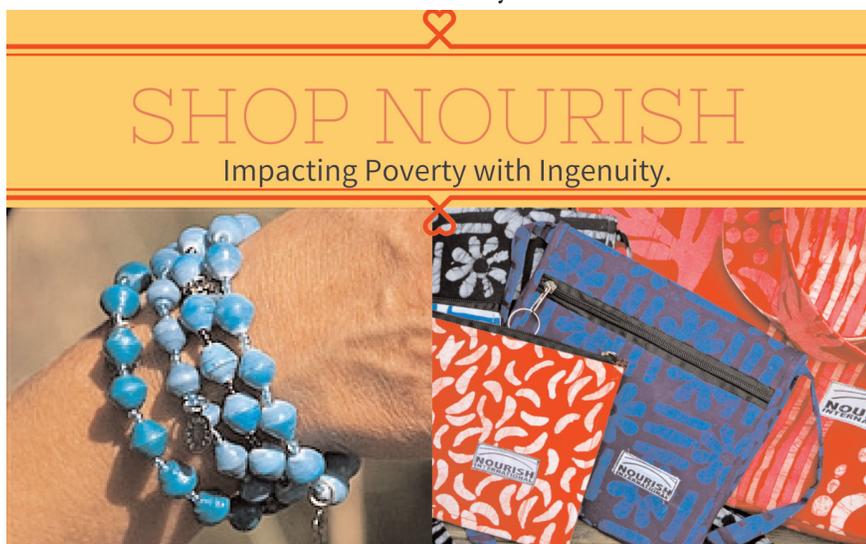
When the only sound in the town is the fire once again. Johnny sits down on the ground and thinks about how Carl would have told them that Johnny had been a part of it. He might have. He thinks about how they would have chased him and

caught him.

Sure enough, inside his coat, Carl has over five thousand dollars. Johnny thinks about taking it and giving it to his women, or taking it and going to Paris. He wonders how long that kind of money would last in France. In the end though, he puts the money back into Carl’s jacket and puts Carl’s body in the stable.

This world doesn’t give people like Johnny five thousand dollars. He can see himself bringing it home and in a month being tracked down by whoever it is who would bring Reddington’s killers to justice. He thinks about the trial and how he would beg. He thinks about hanging.

So that day and night, he watches the buildings burn and then smolder. In the morning, he takes the money he earned and begins that slow trek toward his home. He will walk as quickly as he can. He will reenter the world of women.



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“Man”

by Sonny Rag

All evening and into the night Robert Patterson considered himself. What sort of man am I? What are my good points and weaknesses? Who plots against me and which are my true friends? He nearly fell asleep, propped by pillows in the deep green chair, thinking heavily on what made up the things that were uniquely him. Sad, he had to admit, that I bore even myself to exhaustion. But he could exorcise no demons, could not bring himself to tears. I am not even worthy of a snuffle.

The room was shadowy and night displayed in each window. His eyes rolled to the black forest cuckoo clock marching in step on the wall above the gray television screen. The hands were invisible. How long have I been sitting here? Forever? Whatever was I watching on TV? He couldn't recall. He reached down and took a sip of his coffee. It was cloyingly sweet and northerly-cold.

After a while the bird clucked once, providing no insight. Somewhere within the bowels of the house his wife slept. She would be gently snoring, the purr of an old tomcat, oblivious to his pain, or rather, to his inability to produce even pain. His achievement of utter bland perfection. Worse yet, the imperfection that blandness implies and delivers. He furrowed his brow, a single line across his undermuscle forehead. He held his face there for as long as he was able, a handful of pendulous tick-tocks, then released. Ergs of work with no measurable result.

His left hand was tingling. Perhaps it was going to sleep from lack of blood flow, or the pinching of a nerve in his elbow or wrist. His heart was failing, ineffably, inexorably. His hair ached. His eyes itched. Damnable. Time shrank with each bim-bam of his heart. How long did he have? How long?

He'd experienced going to

work without sleeping, so he stood, made his way to bed, stopping in the bathroom to pee. He shuddered then sighed, a dribbly stream, the leaky drip finishing its course through the labyrinthine stones of his makeup. His life force was draining from him, as he stood there holding his unfortunate pecker. Waste, he thought. If piss is life force, my existence was at a zenith and now wanes.

“Enough,” he said out loud to no one. He padded to the bedroom without flushing, the tart redolence of effluent lingering in his nostrils.

His wife had left the television on, flickering, volume low. Her dreams, occasionally recounted, the quiet, panicky variety of close-to-death situation tragedy that the nearly-elderly commonly suffered, must include violent electric storms in some silent vacuum of space. Robert Patterson scratched his belly, pushed his hair, clicked his teeth, noted the shortness of each inhale, the staleness of each exhale. Life was cliché. He found the clicker and snuffed the TV. Rolled up next to her. At that, she hmm'd softly and wiggled her warm backside against him. He patted her there, closed his eyes, and let his disappointment spin vaguely out into the universe.

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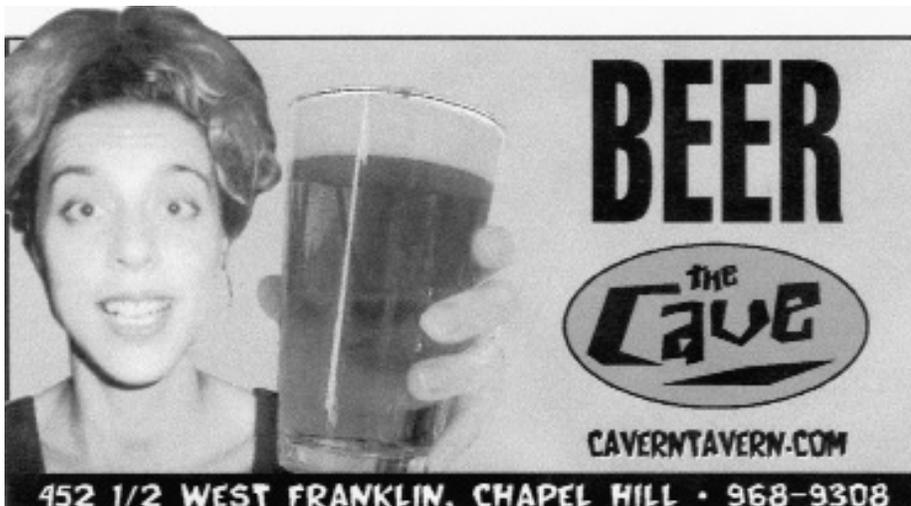


“Late-Night Pick-Up”

by Kate Wisel

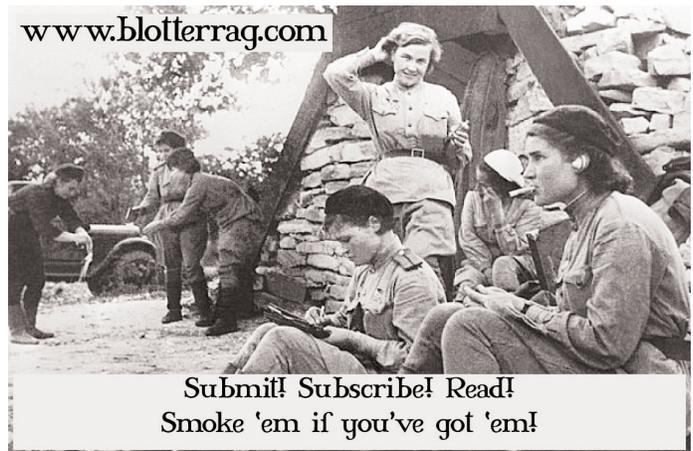
1.
Mom wakes us up in the middle
of the night, says *hello*
my sleepyheads and *I know*
when we tell her we are so sleepy. She tugs
coats on over our PJ's, then buckles us
into the van. We wait chattering
our teeth, till the ice melts
on the windshield. James and I
stay awake, with Connor slumped
asleep in his car-seat. I poke
at his veined eyelids, watch them flutter
up. I imagine he is dreaming
about bottles, coffee tables, all the things
you get to see, crawling
around on the carpet. When he starts
to fuss Mom catches
eyes in the rearview.
I put my hands in my lap.

2.
It's so boring, to drive and
drive in the dark past
the CITGO sign. James and I
say *tell us a story*
tell us a story! and Mom asks
to be *specific* and I say *love*
story and James says *outer*
space at the same time. Mom tells
us the story about how she met
Dad when he cooked
at Rocco's but we already know
how it goes because we ask her
to tell it to us over
and over. The parts I remember
most are how Dad wore suspenders
when nobody else did *crazy*
guy Mom says and we ask *how crazy?*
and Mom says *messy-hair*
crazy. It was New Year's
Eve and Dad walked straight
up to her table, then took her
walking, late at night and showed her
Sam Adam's statues
in the city. There are only
a few cars on the road.
Mom turns up the heat.



3.

We wait for Dad in the back parking lot. It takes forever, even when we can hear his voice, like we're in a movie theater, from inside the car. The guys standing by the back door are smoking cigarettes. He says things like *Atta boy* and *See you Mike-ay!* then pats them real hard on the back, like he's saving them from a choke. When he heads towards us he floats, into the smoke from the exhaust. I watch him climb into the front seat. His shirt is always stained with red splotches. The door to the van slams. He leans back on the headrest. He lets out a short *argh*. Mom turns to look at him as she's pulling out. The car fills with his scent: soy sauce, onion, sweat. Now I pretend to sleep, with hair in my face like Cousin-It. This way I can listen. And when they get quiet I still smell him. A sizzle of steak in the close of his fists, or a giant pot opening in the mess of his hair, how the heat sticks up after he grips it back.

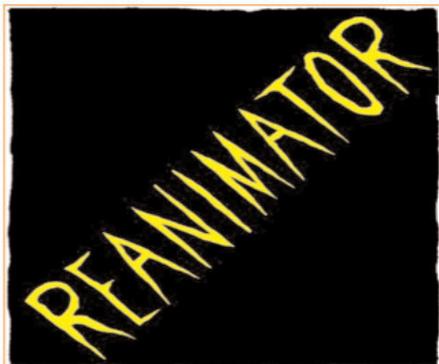


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Two more by Kate Wisel

“Swinging”

Halfway up to the swings
for our nightly ride we see
a baby bird on the concrete, it's wing
clipped off, spinning
around like a broken break
dancer. You're so concerned
about the bird, you even call the Animal
Rescue League and say *but it's
dying*. An hour later you rest
the bird on the grass and I pretend
to cross myself. When we get
to the top of the hill a police
car zooms past and you seize
my arm. We chase
after it, *Sir! Sorry
sir, there's just a bird*, you start
as he rolls down
the window to reveal
the face of a grown
man. Later on the swings, as we gain
speed you turn to me, your face
shocked against the wind
and mouth *I'm
the bird*. We force
our feet into the sky
screaming: *I'm the bird! We're
the birds!*



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“Gym People”

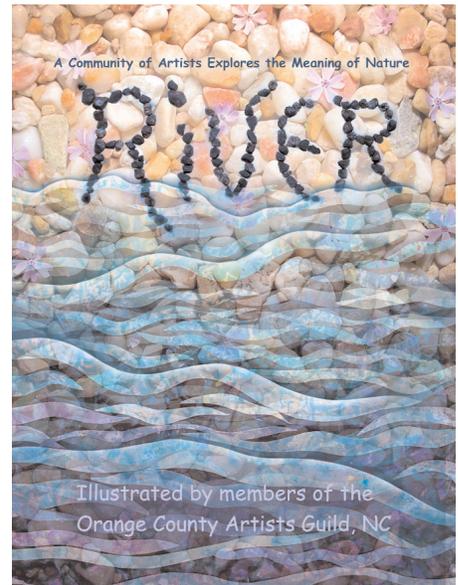
Headphones or magazines, heavy-metal weights or easy ellipticals, angry determined people, or lonely lost people, you or me. In my sweatpants I don't dare sweat. Less is less and more to keep inside. I watch you sprint in place, like you are shaking your feet free from an invisible noose. You slide under the bench as I flip a thin page with my licked finger. This elliptical has the buoyancy of an old father's knee. Next you are doing stomach curls on a bar. When you dip down, your head, just grazing the floor, is a tattoo of an upside down fire. I take in the dire things that are happening on the news as I pretend to stretch, checking out hips as you check out shoulders, biceps. In the gym it's not us we're after.

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Two by Kyle Hemmings

“Emma Is Never Frugal with Wishes”

It feels like a word could be the tail of a shark. Her work days are full of missing teeth, a slow parade of mute closings. So she moonlights to see better. Pulling up ghosts from old cow tunnels under the city. Pretends she’s a distressed whore in the meatpacking district. The smell of animal blood mixed with a greasy rain. Or she’s in the park, stealing a homeless man’s plastic dolls, which she suspects are salvaged from dumpsters. When he’s not looking, she drops a twenty into his cup. A gratuity for his forgetfulness. In bed, she nurses the dolls, listens to what they cannot say. In the dark, they could be blinking, too tired to pee. Under her bed, she hears voices. Tempted to fetch a flashlight, to hold herself tightly as she descends stairs. Too many stairs. She doesn’t have to go anywhere. The voices are rising to meet her, dying once again to be saved.

“When a House Is Not a Home”

Bad neighbors keep popping up like flies on my King’s Market mushroom. I’m infested with their soap operas. Not even a minor character in their teleplays. My wife wishes to turn to soup. Small turtles start disappearing in the house. The neighbors blame the accidents on concave streets and tunnels. My wife threatens to have affairs with men who sound like elliptical fish. I joke that I should buy a gun that fires lampoons. The neighbors refuse to leave. No solace until Sunday. My wife blanches hermeneutic frog legs.

Best In Show

by Phil Juliano



The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

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mermaid@blotterrag.com

She was holding a puppy in her arms - the little thing was dressed in a sweater, as toy or teacup breeds sometimes are. You could see the joy in her eyes - she'd wanted a puppy for so long - years actually - that it made you want to smile; hell, it would have caused even the least empathetic anti-social type to stretch the rictus of their pursed lips into something resembling pleased. Then, suddenly, she was distracted. I don't know what it was, a bird in a tree, a bit of cold air on her un-scarved neck, but she raised an arm and when she returned it to her lap, where the pup had been less than a moment before, it was no longer there. The sweater, garish and silly, was there, empty. The puppy was not just gone - it wasn't. Wasn't there. Had never been. Her despair collapsed over her like sunset.

J - cyberspace

CONTRIBUTORS:

William C. Blome is a writer of short fiction and poetry. He lives in-between Baltimore and Washington, DC, and he is a master's degree graduate of the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars. His work has previously seen the light of day in such fine little mags as *Amarillo Bay*, *Prism International*, *Laurel Review*, *The Oyez Review*, *Salted Feathers* and *The California Quarterly*.

John M. Brantingham is a familiar voice in *The Blotter*. His work has been featured on Garrison Keillor's *Writer's Almanac*, and I have had hundreds of poems and stories published in magazines in the United States and the United Kingdom. My newest poetry collection, *The Green of Sunset*, is from Moon Tide Press. I am the writer-in-residence at the dA Center for the Arts.

Sonny Rag is occasionally enigmatic and frequently phlegmatic.

Kate Wisel of Brookline, MA sent us some poems, then sent us some more, because we were too slow to capture the first ones. The second batch was as fine as the first. We'll tell you what we told her - sometimes we don't know how such fine writers find our little experiment in free printed literature but we're secretly glad.

Kyle Hemmings lives and works in New Jersey. He has been published in *Your Impossible Voice*, *Night Train*, *Toad*, *Matchbox* and elsewhere. His latest chapbooks are *Underground Chrysanthemums* from Red Bird Press and *Terminal* from White Knuckle Press. He blogs at <http://upatbergasse19.blogspot.com/>

Phil Juliano (Minneapolis, MN) 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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xxooxooxox - The Blotter Gang



photo: Joshua R. Craig

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