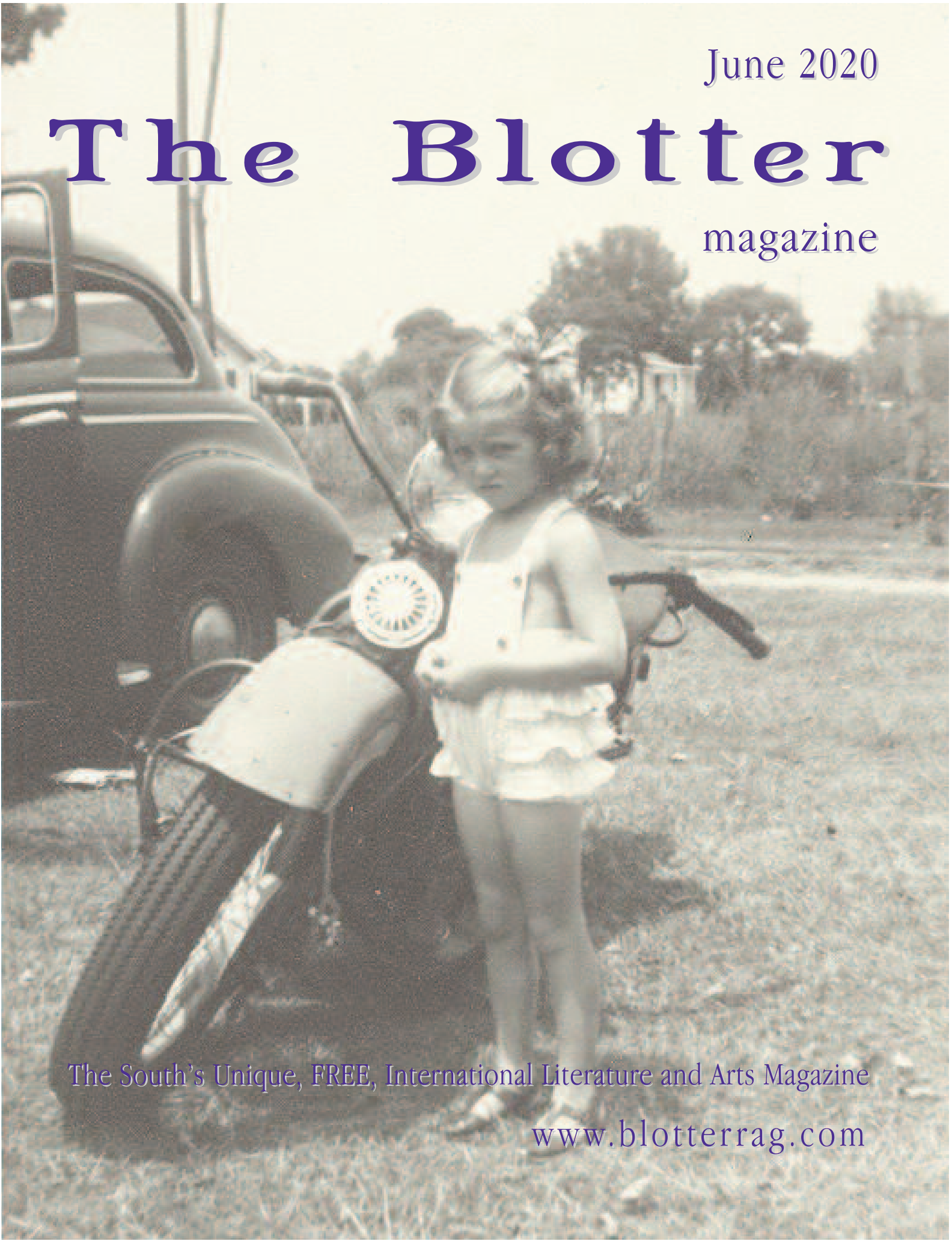


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The Blotter

magazine



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"Excerpt from my WIP"

By now, this should come as a surprise to no one, but when I was a *shirt-tail lad* as my grandpa used to call me, I wasn't the best-behaved child. Case in point, one Friday evening my dad was relaxing in his chair, reading the paper, when he was informed that he had to drive Mom to a meeting at church, so all of us had to pile into the VW bus we owned – our only car. My sisters and I were already in pajamas, on the floor in the gray glow of the TV before bedtime. *Let's go*, he said. *But Dad, we're watching!* I groaned generously on behalf of the children in the family. *Let's go*, he repeated quietly, his single prescribed unit of patience expended. My sisters extended me silent, single shakes of their heads, and got up from their spots, so naturally I thought it best to repeat *But Daaaaadd...!* with more emphasis. *Now*, he barked – the Dad trump-card which warned off any future argument by sane individuals. *Aww, Dad*, I said anyway, because getting the last word when you're not getting your way is an ancient debate tactic and also because I do not reside in the quartile marked "sane individuals with a good bead on reading someone's mood" on any quadrant-chart. I got the not one more word Dad-glare I deserved. *Wear your slippers*, my mom said helpfully as we herded outside.

The ride to church, about two miles from home, was as uneventful as one could expect with antsy children in a car, and a shot-gun-sitting mom's hand free to swat in response to signs of unruliness. We dropped her off, with the plan that she would catch a ride home with one of her church-friends and off we put-putted, Dad lighting up a Raleigh and my sisters and I, at first quietly and then not so, playing grab-ass, pinching, generally pestering each other in the back seats, then stopping and sitting with hands folded, in the hopes that no one or the other of us would draw his righteous ire. Which rhymes with fire. Then, with no evidence that our behavior had been noticed by him, we naturally started up again; slowly, cautiously, then with gusto until my little sister stage-whispered that she was receiving all of the pinches. In such ways do siblings establish, maintain and evaluate pecking order. My older sister hissed at us to stop, then pinched me.

Dad took a different route home from church, one that would first go through downtown before following the long, twisting suburban avenue that would place us back in our driveway. Perhaps he was

bored. Perhaps he was thinking of picking up something from the drugstore. Perhaps he enjoyed the drive, watching the sun set, now that he was out here. He let the cigarette prop in the corner of his mouth, and I sniffed the smoke as it wafted into the back of the VW. There was no car-radio for either entertainment or covering noise in our old car, because that would have cost extra, so only the sound of Dad pressing the clutch in and smoothly shifting gears and the whooshing breeze in his open window venting out the smoke covered our backseat foolishness. It was just a matter of time. Mere moments, actually. Because it had been so satisfying to pinch her before, I gave my little sister another. It was just a peep of a whine, like the distant yowl of a kitten having its tiny tail stepped on by an old woman going to the kitchen in her cottage to pour herself another cup of chamomile tea.

That's it! Dad growled, kicking the clutch and brake together and bringing our microbus to a gravel-skidding halt on the side of the road. *I've had it!* He leaned over the back of his seat and pointed at me. *Alright, mister! You just earned yourself a walk home!*

Dad always said things like that, but it required my still rather undeveloped brain a few moments to understand what he meant. Oh. Get out of the car. *But I'm wearing my pajamas*, I whimpered, more concerned about that than where we were and did I know how to get home from here? and how far was it? and my dad is kicking me out of the car! and the other jumbled thoughts rattling around in my skull. My sisters didn't even look at me, instead staring straight ahead like Midwest housewives as if the VW was still in motion and hadn't yet reached their stop. This may very well have been the etymological root of the term "throw him under the bus." I pulled the handle down and got out, closing the car door behind me. OK, let me back in, I thought. I've learned my lesson. Nope. With a German-engineered mechanical raspberry, the VW pulled away and there I was, standing in the gutter in my slippers and flannel jammies.

Crap. Crappity-crap.

It is a well-known social phenomenon that we all have dreams about being somewhere we don't want to be in a mode we wouldn't choose. At school, standing in front of the class doing a difficult math equation on the board in only our underpants. Why? Because math is hard and because *underpants* is the funniest word in the English language. Being forced to do math up at the blackboard and caught wearing only underpants is, by proxy, the most embarrassing combination our subconscious can dish up. However, I suspect that having actually

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

with half-a-heart surely

"A Gift"

by Francisco J. Villarreal

There are many theories as to how or why I got to Japan. I like to think that it has to do with my teaching, with the scholarship I got from the Ministry of Education and with the desire to reinvent my career on the opposite pole to where I was born. Beside the country itself, I had the habit of going out to find something, I had my obsession with avoiding sunlight and also my favourite sport: dodging my twelve-square-meter apartment. That's how the stories started, how the ideas just kept popping up.

I met Y ko while she was preparing yakitori, me sitting at the counter, answering her questions. The small shop, somewhere between a bar and fast food joint, on the foot of one exit of Uguisudani Station, the one leading to my house. Aside from myself, Uguisudani can brag about its prostitution, wide range of love hotels, street cats, an occasional murder, and eighty-four-thousand statues of Jiz , the deity guardian of kids and travellers. I got to know all of that before, but Y ko was new to me. She worked there, where I tried the best yakitori I've ever had. I wasn't the only one to think that the bar was a complete success, to the point of having improvised tables

on the Street (I could mention that Japanese people are devoted to unnecessary lines, though not so much to abusing the public space). Nonetheless, I was one of those clients that mostly visited the joint, especially when it was raining, for I felt that I got a more personalised service.

Our talks started there. Y ko wanted to know more about me, so I told her about my job, about Kawasaki, about the character-like passengers of the Keihin-T hoku line, about my former-kickboxing-champion Australian boss. She told me about her husband working in Sendai, about her son at Meiji University, about her childhood in Akita, and her preference for Nezu Shrine. Both of us avoided going deep into certain topics to keep a scent of flirting in the air. She smiled to me much more than to any other customer, more than any of her countrywoman had ever done to me before. I allowed her to find me staring at her ass during winter or peaking at her cleavage during summer.

One night it was raining so hard, even under the safety of my umbrella I wasn't safe. I entered the shop with water wringing out my socks and a dripping backpack. I sat and ordered the same as always: a bottle of Kirin, two portions of

negima and two h to.

"¿Shio o tare?", Y ko asked me. She already knew the answer, so I figured her question was intended to tease me, to see my reaction.

"Always shio".

She asked me how my work had been that day and I asked her how her son was doing. In between clients she walked by my seat, sometimes filling up my glass with the bottle of beer next to my hand. When it was time to leave, time to pay to be exact, I got into a fight against my jacket's right pocket, wet and stuck onto the leather of my wallet. My fingers slid and seemed to be trapped by the fabric walls, to the point of making me curse out loud in Spanish. Y ko recognized the anger in my tone.

"Tell me about deceitful clothes", she said behind me. I smiled, trying to make an ally in my annoyance. I wanted to curse again more than interact with her, but instead I just paid and left.

During the following days, each time I searched for my wallet in that pocket, I remembered her comment. At first my doubt was: why could a piece of clothing be treacherous? But I pondered about it and got to a second and more interesting thought: maybe she was talking about something else, maybe it was the comment that I

was waiting so as to take our flirting to the next level, right? Maybe she expected me to ask her about her clothes so she could tell me what she usually wears on her sleep or show me the strap of her lace underwear.

I managed to satisfy my anxiety some days later. The rain was the same as before, my order was the usual. Every time she looked my way, I was doing something to get her attention: I shook my jacket by the pocket, made an angry face, cursed something in Spanish, sighted, with and without a moan along. At some point, she came close and rested her body over her arms, with her face between her fists, looking at me condescendingly.

“If you wanted me to tell you about my clothes you didn’t have to make all this fuss”, she said to me. That fiction was a link between us now. Y ko smiled bitterly, as if she was regretting to have ever said anything. Still, she told me the following story, that I will try to reconstruct.

Kametar, one of my ancestors, had taken long to choose the materials to make a beautiful kimono with light fabric. Describing the design is as difficult as depicting a mirage. There was a yellow moon shining over a blooming sakura tree, with small flowers and petals covering almost half of the left side of the attire. The design was cut in half by a bridge, which was vermilion and intense like blood. Under the bridge and in the shore of a

stream, there was a courtesan sitting, writing in a scroll. It could have been Murasaki Shikibu herself, telling the loves of Prince Genji, or Ono no Komachi, writing one of her tales shaped as poetry.

The sewing was made according to Chiyo’s size, his youngest, the first female after four sons. She was the miracle Kametar had been waiting and her crossing to femininity was something he was going to honour. She would wear the kimono for the first time on the day of her twelfth birthday. Chiyo was playing with other kids when her mother screamed at her to take off the kimono so it wouldn’t get muddy. The girl left it on a bench and climbed the trees wearing a white and long underskirt that got tangled on a branch and dragged Chiyo in a fall. She plunged until she halted twenty centimetres above the mud, the clothes tangled on her neck, her little purple face announcing death.

The kimono was then forgotten, among sorrow and belongings of a dead little girl, the grief and a halfway parenthood. Kametar repeated the bitter aftertaste of pain every time he saw the kimono. It took some years until he developed a sort of tolerance, right when his brother’s daughter reached Chiyo’s age. Then, Kametar concluded that if his daughter could never wear that kimono again, his niece was the best alternative. The first day of the new year, his niece wore it for hatsum de, the first visit to a shrine

in the New Year. She went with her family, collecting looks of admiration on her way, the colours on the kimono left a trail behind her feet. Kametar’s niece fell into Sumida river as she walked on the shore on a walk home during the second day of the year. Three days later they found her dead body when it got stuck in the mud, swollen and wrinkled, one kilometre away and in the opposite shore.

There are four or five ways to talk about something cursed in Japanese. Y ko chose the one that was related to an idea of anger and divine punishment. Some weeks later, when the funeral rituals were over, the kimono was returned to Kametar’s house. Imprisoned by his silence, in the very bottom of her heart he actually felt some sort of relief knowing that he now shared the pain with his brother. Years later, both of them died due to natural causes only weeks apart. Kametar was survived by his wife Aiko. She, however, didn’t feel haunted by the shadow of the kimono. She saw it as one of those things he obsessively thought about until he wasn’t able to think about anything else. Through the years, Aiko had dedicated her days to her grandkids, a full-time tribute. When her oldest granddaughter was about to turn thirteen years old, she remembered the kimono and though it was the ideal present. Did Aiko also remember the little Chiyo hanging from the tree, purple and with a hanging thread of saliva in the corner of her lower lip, as she

wrapped the kimono as a present?

Kametar and Aiko's granddaughter welcomed the kimono with a child-like joy. A gift from her grandmother that included some of her grandfather had a bigger value. She wore the kimono for her birthday celebrations and hinamatsuri, some days after. She was wearing it when the fever started rising, it rested by her side when she puked blood as her mother cleaned the dirt on her skin, during one of the seven days she agonised. When they took the body to cremate, Aiko looked at her granddaughters remains, dried and yellow, decomposing by the minute and transforming into a rotten thing; and tried to hide the kimono under the inert body. They got a message from the temple the next day to return it. And so, Aiko was condemned to have a token of the worse moments of her life, in a corner of her house, always ready to remind her what she wanted to forget, that thing that she repeated to herself should not have happened. In her dreams she only saw flames orange, blue and yellow, flames extending on her backyard, destroying soil and plants, flames crawling through every corner and making everything scream.

The next morning, Aiko went outside, showered the cloth in kerosene and lit it. At first it was a calm, slow, blue flame. But then and in crescendo, the fire became orange and the fabric started to crackle. The kimono started shaking, sparkling, the sleeves extended

almost in a spin, the fire was throwing sparks that resonated like screams. It was the year 1657. The great fire of Meireki had started.

That's what Y ko said.

A fire which, historically, had started in the Hongo district in Edo, a couple of kilometres where I was eating yakitori while listening to her wrapping me up into her fiction. More than three hundred and fifty years had passed since that day. It was somewhat far-fetched that she could remember a name, even less a clothing from those old times. Turns out that as the fictional Aiko was lighting the kimono on fire, a typhoon was reaching the shore with winds that spread the flames at high speed and in different directions. At that time, Edo was a populous city and with little space between the houses, not like today's Tokyo, characterised for being spacious. In those days, structures were made of wood and fire-squads were a novelty with few resources. Also, this was (still is) shitamachi, the inner city of Tokyo, the place that was more of a slum back then, even if now it's full of touristic attractions. And that wouldn't be the end for the fire, things would complicate even more when the winds changed direction and dragged the fire. Some of the flames reached what was then the Edo or Chiyoda Castle, centre of the shogunate's power, being the inaugural of a series of fires that would take the castle to its ruin.

Y ko stared at me with a smile

from the other side of the counter. I would've liked to ask her if she wanted me to congratulate her, if she wanted me to repeat her story to others, if she wanted advice on how to improve the plot of her narration or develop the characters in more depth. She knew about my love for literature, so maybe she wanted me to workshop my way through her story. I held my beer glass in the air. Trying to understand what she expected me to do, as my eyes were nailed to the flames wrapping the yakitori. There is an expression in Japanese that can show how apathetic one is towards something.

"Naruhodo", I answered. . ❖

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.

My back hurts when I sleep a certain way, and that affects the nature of my dreams, or at least the dream sequence, the part of sleep that instigates dreams. I am being followed, for example, and want to hurry away but my legs won't do what I want them to because my back hurts and I slip in and out of the dream - returning oddly always to the same scene like a continuous loop. This happens when I try to look down at my legs to see if they are caught in mud or hot tar or if my shoelaces are tangled in roots or vines or something. My eyes close somewhat and then I slip out of the dream. Looking up, the dream scene returns and I am trying to hurry, the street is back, or the road or the country lane with a fence along it. I am not worried about getting somewhere on time, or being attacked, which is good, because that turns the dream into a nightmare. I am more worried about falling over my feet and hurting my back more.

This sort of breakage in the dream function also occurs when I accidentally kick off my covers in the cold, leaving me in a scene of some sort where I'm chilled - near the ocean with wind and waves or walking up Fifth Avenue in New York, trying to hail a cab but no one will stop for me and my clothes are wet in October.

It is completely logical, but fairly out of my control. That's the part that is perfectly dream-like. If I could control it, just not go to bed with the covers pulled up or sleep on my arm until it gets pins-and-needles, it would be interesting to see what happens. Unfortunately, I probably couldn't get to sleep properly like that.

TJD - cyberspace

Five by Simon Perchik

*

This cup grows old while the table
overflows, wobbles then lists
—for a long time now the watermarks

smell from smoke as the dim light
from wood hour after hour
shedding its colors though the chair

pulls you closer, smoothing the way
through daydreams and the mist
that quiets its makeshift sea

empties the Earth with your mouth
kept wet to let in the waves
that once had it all, were walls

for a room now fallen on its back
though your arms ache from lifting
over and over forgetting where.

*

What did you expect! with just its scent
an old love note lights this lamp
the way bats sip from flowers and darkness

and though the ink has soured
it's the night that's draining you
as the arm around her shoulders

—word by word it becomes again
a butterfly, is dipping into the flourish
over your name lit by hers and shining.

*

It takes stone though your breath
heats by waiting for something to change
the way sunlight inhales, unnoticed

is floating alongside these graves
in riverbeds and kisses —stone
can save her now that the ground

has more time to count
each mourner coming by empty handed
looking for someone else

—stone! without the rush, left in the open
in a pillow filled with mountains, not yet
the one day more as a ready-made hole

melting your lips for their brightness
—every afternoon is blinded
by a stone made from wood

as if smoke could start over
and you hear a long ago name
rising out the light and emptiness.

*

Though this leaf was a child
when it let go your hand the branch
took a little longer, was weakened

by its over and over reaching out
while the tree no longer moved
—a heart was being carved

urging it on with your initials, short
for kisses, kisses and the afternoons
that have no light left to offer.

*

You weakened the paint with salt
from the off-white evenings
changing colors in the open

misled the can by lifting it
close to your arms then campfires
and songs still getting together

reaching out for the trails
that dip into your heart
are carried along as the streams

wanting to rush through walls
one by one —you begin
with your fingers, disguised

as there and back and thirst
then mostly it's the photographs
and certificates whose frames

were already promised
spiders, moths, corners
that have no other place to hide.

Two by Susie Gharib

"Oriental Superstitions"

Many Syrians touch wood to deflect the evil eye
but this is a Celtic cult I recently found out.
To appease the spirits that dwelt in trees,
the Celts would knock to beseech their shields.

Jinns can be evoked to cast a spell
on a husband who has been playing truant:
a scribbled note by a man of God
can yoke a partner to the nuptial bed.

Owls, ravens, and crows are shunned.
They are birds of ill omen, ill luck.
Owls herald death and everlasting doom
When seen, or ears are afflicted with hoots.
Ravens and crows since clad in black
can bring misfortune in their wake.

Don't eat anything you dropped on the ground
for Satan would lick it with its tongue.
No self-viewing in a broken looking-glass
because shattered pieces reflect one's demise.

"Seditious Ink: Satire"

I was requested to pay a tribute to you,
the man for whose guile seditious ink would shed its blue,
so where should I start, with a deformity or two?
The eyes that squint or the tongue,
a cactus whose succulence glues.
The face, a topography to forecast abuse,
and sugared smiles on whose trickle mosquitoes cruise.

The chronicles of thy villainy are the litany of rogues,
commanding every scoundrel to slit the throat of Truth.
Have you done Sire with my cousin, my pal, and Zeus?
Wet are your fangs with the Luciferian juice.
How can the fleas of the world but respect your bruise,
the parasitic lore with which you have Dracula enthused!



Bruce Baldwin

Two by John Tustin

"I'd Kiss Gina"

If I could do just one thing
In one moment
When it's time to die
I would go back to when I was six
And be six and
I'd kiss Gina
Right on her full six-year-old mouth,
Tangling my hands in all that thick black hair
Because not trying to do that
Was the first mistake
I remember making

And I just kept making more.

“I Like Playing Opera”

I like playing opera
As loud as loud can be
At 11PM on a weeknight

And since my neighbors leave their windows open
And let their dog make his monotonous
Roo...roo...roo..barking sounds with the windows open
All morning long,
Even in winter

I just say “Fuck ‘em!
Here’s Caruso and Ancona four times in a row
Because while I am trying to sleep in the morning all I get is
Roo...roo...roo
Without a trace of melody.

So think about The Pearl Fishers’ Duet
While you drink your coffee
Or dip your tobacco
Or whatever the fuck you do in the morning
Instead of training your fucking dog
Not to bark.

“Love in the Makerspace

by Amanda Yanovitch

The makerspace is closed now. They said they couldn't justify keeping it open after what had happened—too many lawsuits. And nobody can argue with that. We have no way to form arguments. Nobody remembers how to do sentences.

When the university announced they were taking away the humanities, I said fine. Nobody majors in English anyway. Nobody majors in philosophy or history or religion or any of that bullshit. STEM is where it's at. You want a job, you major in computers, end of story. In ten years the computers will figure out that people aren't even Googling liberal arts information anymore and delete it all, and that's a good thing. It'll speed up processing.

I'd been at Jefferson U. for four semesters when they made the announcement, so when I saw the English department packing up and clearing out, I knew exactly what the administration was putting in. I mean, the Jefferson mission statement is everywhere: “To Foster Better Processing through Collaboration and Invention.” The English people with their thesis-statement this and topic-sentence that played no part in what we were about. And I got a C and a C- in my first-year writing courses
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when I shouldn't have had to take that crap in the first place. Here's how it went down when I stopped by Prof. Surdo's office to get my final paper back:

Me: “Hey, can I get my final paper?”

Surdo: [looking at me over bifocals like she was busy] “Andrew Zacharias?”

Me: “Yep.”

Surdo: [shuffles through stacks of wasted paper, finds nothing, starts over]

Me: “I can come back. . .”

Surdo: “Your thesis statement. . . here you are. Your thesis was primarily summary. The goal was rhetorical analysis—”

Me:

Surdo: “There's a rubric stapled to the back.”

Me:

Surdo: “If you re-take the course, the higher grade will replace the lower one in your GPA.”

So yeah—screw critical thinking. That won't be missed. And hello, makerspace.

A makerspace was a dream come true for an engineering student like me. Picture a place where anything you want, anything you can imagine, you can MAKE. Picture plastic modeling blocks, foam forms, hand tools, vinyl cutters, non-metallic sheathed wire, and a

desktop soldering station. Picture me, bending over Mackenzie Wagnall, bending over a drill press.

Mackenzie had glossy black hair and huge glasses and she creamed all of us on the ENGR 202 final. She had a perfect freaking 4.0. I fell so hard for her first semester when she finished the midterm in under an hour and stood up in ass-kicking boots and a short dress and left. It was like there was this energy inside her, something I could almost feel. I've never had a girlfriend, and I have never loved anything but computers, but I loved Mackenzie Wagnall.

I loved her more when she threw a cup of coffee at me and told me to go fuck myself. From most girls that kind of response would have been a turn-off, but Mackenzie never talked to anybody. She was dead silent in class. Professors didn't call on her because she'd stare back at them with pure—I don't know. She was impossible to read. The first time I saw it happen, the computer science prof kept waiting for her to answer. He repeated the question. She didn't respond so he leaned in close and asked if she understood the question. Then it was like he saw something in her eyes that scared him shitless and he jumped back, wiping his palms on his no-

iron khakis. Nobody tried to talk to her after that.

The day I got Mackenzie to tell me to go fuck myself, we had been sitting back-to-back in a computer lab when all of the machines crapped out at once. I stood up and turned toward her, and she looked up to see what I was doing. Before I could overthink it I said, “The server just went down on me. You wanna go next?”

I didn’t care about the coffee—it wasn’t hot. What shocked me was that her voice was thin and shiny and glittered like copper. She sounded like an angel, sweet and high. And then she slammed the cup down and turned back to her work.

Every decent institution of higher learning had a makerspace by then. Hell, the middle schools all had makerspaces. I couldn’t believe it took us that long—then again, half of the Board of Trustees were humanities majors who thought that building character meant wasting our time and financial aid. The plans got stalled in committee after committee. But in the end, nobody could deny that a room full of PVC pipe had more potential than a damn bookshelf. It was getting embarrassing.

The tweeds had to bus heavy cardboard boxes of anthologies and volumes to the parking lot. The cartons they carried out last were the smaller ones packed with handwritten cards from students, dusty pictures drawn by their own chil-

dren years ago, whatever. Then they all went back in for their framed diplomas. They crammed everything into the front and back seats of the shitty cars they could afford and drove away. Plastic-and-fabric adjunct cubicles were disassembled, bolts zipped upward from their holes by efficient wireless drills. That’s engineering for you.

One glorious day I peeked into the construction site and there it was—almost 1,000 square feet. Empty. Mine for the making.

Except all kinds of groups were already laying claim to it. The knitting club wanted to meet in there twice a month, and the architecture students wanted to get in there every Wednesday, and the robotics team thought it had been built for them. Hell, a local Scout troop had already reserved it every other Tuesday night. No offense to the knitters and wet dreamers, but what a waste.

An hour before the makerspace grand opening celebration, I headed into the girls’ dorm and knocked on Mackenzie’s door. I had apologized a lot after the coffee thing. She hadn’t spoken to me again, but I got the sense that she didn’t hate me. Her roommate, Rina, answered and said Mackenzie had already left. She started to shut the door, but I leaned in a little.

“Does she talk to you?” I asked.

“No. Best roommate ever.”

Rina shut the door. I headed out of the dorm and across the

quad.

Homer Hall smelled intoxicating, like new paint and polyurethane. Through the double glass doors of the Dr. and Mr. J. Leonard Putzer Makerspace I recognized a few people I knew—a dozen engineering students, a physics professor, a couple of math people. My buddy Colin opened the door and pulled me in. He knew what I was looking for and nodded in the direction of the 4D printer in the back corner. And there was Mackenzie, fondling a huge red spool of universal filament.

As she turned I gave a half wave, but Colin pushed me and I had no choice but to start walking over. She put the spool down and crossed her arms at me.

“Hey. What do you think?” I asked.

Mackenzie began to fix me with a magnified stare, but I was ready. Unsure of whether people had ever been in this situation before where a guy likes a girl but the girl might not like the guy, I had Googled it earlier that day. It actually *bad* happened before, many times in fact, and persistence with smoothness was the recommended approach.

I picked up a spool of yellow and turned it over in my hands. “Did you hear they’re ordering a PVB polishing machine?”

Her eyes lit up. It started with a steady orange glow beneath the white. Then her pupils ignited and

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a gold flash circled her irises. She turned away so I couldn't see her face, but her voice glittered: "Really?"

We met in the makerspace later that night—the geniuses in charge had installed digital locks on the doors, as if nobody knew how to get around that. After we had played around with just about everything, I took her hands and tried to get her to look me in the eye. She stared down at her lap. Drops of melted plastic were drying on her chin. She was crying.

I put my arms around her and told her I didn't care that she wasn't completely human—who is these days? But she said she felt like her whole life was a lie. She was sick of hiding it. When she looked up again, her eyes were cool.

"You know the Google test where it says 'I am not a robot' and you have to click the box?" she asked, picking at the cold blue dots on her cheeks. "I don't know what to do. What do they mean by *robot*? What kind of bullshit is that? Like, where am I supposed to draw the line?"

I had never thought about it, but she was right—why are we still labeling people? Why do we all have to promise that we're human? What if someone wants to upgrade a little? Where's the box for "I'm clicking this box because I need something, you a-holes, and it's not your business what I am"?

She leaned into my shoulder, and we talked for hours. It wasn't

easy for her to say what she thought because she mainly knew things. She showed me what she could do with her hands—they snapped off right at the wrist. She had spent the past summer printing and replacing about half of herself. She offered to help me design any parts I wanted.

That was just the first night. By the end of the week, a couple other people knew. I told Colin he couldn't tell anyone, but I'll be damned if he didn't show up in chem lab one day with a brand-new head.

"Colin, what the fuck! You can't do that! They're gonna find out where you did that!"

He smirked at me, peeling his new lips apart like Twizzlers. "Go fuck yourself, Andrew. You can't keep this to yourself. And by the way, it's not just me."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I said. He shook his head and went back to cleaning his glassware.

"Go talk to Jake," he said. "He's in there now."

I stormed out of the building toward Homer Hall. My big toe was still a little tender where I had soldered it. My toenail had gotten crushed when I was nine and it had been shriveled and dead since then. The new toe looked amazing. I posted a picture of it and my mom even commented that it looked real with the hairs and everything.

My throat closed up when I saw the glass doors propped open and the line spilling into the hall-

way. One guy in line saw me and nudged his friends, and they all shut up a little.

"Everybody needs to leave," I said. "NOW. When Dean Echols finds out what you're doing in here—"

But then I heard it, tinkling and spinning above the noise of the crowd—her soft metallic laughter. My heart sank, and as it dropped, it occurred to me that I could make a new one. And that I didn't want to. I turned around and walked back to the dorm.

When I left my room late that night, I knew what I'd find in my makerspace. I'd find a bunch of idiots burning up the university's resources to trade out a mole-covered neck or a pigeon chest for a perfectly engineered replacement. I'd find Mackenzie, no longer mine, surrounded by assholes who suddenly wanted to be her friend.

But I did leave. I remember I was confused by the sirens and the lights across the quad. An ambulance was wailing into the Homer parking lot with another close behind. Police cars blazed. A crowd was standing out on the sidewalk. A girl was sobbing. A guy I knew from first year spotted me and tried to stop me from going in. His forearm was a full-size keypad. He looked terrified. I broke into a run.

I pulled open the door and saw her before the paramedics could make it into the building. Mackenzie had gone to pieces. Her beautiful head was on the drafting table, crying, and her legs were by

the supply cabinet. Her torso was bent over the printer, a sea of new arms rising around the station like so many people drowning in the floor.

I called to her, but she didn't have a reason to answer. Her ears were disconnected. She was too far gone.

I cried into my pillow all night like a little kid. Why couldn't she stop working on herself? Why do so many people come apart? Why do we all keep trying to live when being human absolutely sucks? I Googled it, but a lot of that content had been taken down.

By the next day, everyone was talking about dangerous glitches and accidents. One of my friends went to the emergency room because of his new brain, which was a high-end but apparently toxic CPU. A girl became frantic about her new coding fingers and had panic attacks. The problems piled up fast.

Mackenzie was the only girl I had ever loved like that. After she fell apart, I tried everything to make myself go on. I tried going back to classes, I tried therapeutic coding—but nothing had any purpose. Nothing felt real.

Sometimes I sit on the slope in front of Homer and think about her glossy hair and how fast she could process. In my dreams, arms tumble from the printer, piling up around my feet. My toe adhered nicely, though many others weren't as lucky with their upgrades.

We formed a club to help us

code about our feelings. Someone remembered writing was once a way people had used to record sad experiences and think about them and help other people avoid the same mistakes. I wanted to try it, but nobody could remember how it worked. Colin said he thought it had to do with selecting the right words and typing them into a particular order to express ideas, and then moving things around until the sentences met certain rules. That was enough to turn everybody off. In the end, we agreed there had to be better things to do with our emotions than generate them as words and embed them, one by one, into a shareable format. ❖

"When Giddy Comes Round"

Giddy only comes round on good days:
When the sky is starkly blue and clouds are as
thin as picked-through cotton;
when glaze brushed boys recognize sugar on parted lips;
and light dreams manifest into woven realities.

Giddy shines like phone screens:
Rays radiating from coated skin, she
seeps into the grooves of your brain and
drips down in, plopping into the pocket of
your stomach where she tap dances till the
thud-a-dud-thud of beat down
aluminum creates a new rhythm
in the vacant cavities of your chest.

You float with Giddy inside you.
Like carbonated bubbles rising
towards the rim of foggy glasses.
Up, up, up you go, till worries
rest far beneath the soles
of your calloused feet.

She makes you feel good.
But don't get used to Giddy.
She comes as quickly as she goes.
And when she does,
you'll be left to reap the
falsities she sowed.

"Let Me Fix You Some Tea"

Let me put the kettle on
and fix you some tea.

We can listen for the
whistling water and watch
the heat rise into the faded
yellow streaming in
from sleepy skies.

Let me put the kettle on
and fix you some tea.

Nothing fixes pain like
hot earl grey coating the
sides of your throat, seeping
into your stomach tissue and
spreading throughout.

Let me put the kettle on
and fix you some tea.

I'll sweeten your day
with condensed milk, let
it drip from silver spoons
like cream painted silk.

If that won't do, let me
fix you some Horlicks too.

Sprinkle warm milk
with powdered memories
of your mother stepping through
clouded nightmares and into
your room to soothe you with
hot malted sleep.

Or how about I fix you some Milo.

I can go down the block
to the Mom and Pop shop and
pick you some up, with Bun
and Cheese so you can chew on
raisins and cinnamon until
your mind goes numb with ease.

Hmm, doesn't that sound sweet?

Let me be there for you with
the swivel of my spoon and
the shake of my wrist and the
strength of my grip as I pour
happiness and tea and dreams
and Horlicks and peace and
Milo and all of me into the
emptiness of your cup.
Watch it fill up and
take a sip.

Yes, let me put the kettle on
and fix you some tea.

Two by James Thurgood

"grade 9 boys"

these photos: how hilarious in the park
that June – our park – posed like a team
but with paper-bag hoods:
eye-holes cut, faces painted on
fierce, comic, workaday – one just ripped

did we know this was a last hurrah
before late-shifts and booze and dope
or books and study, training for glory or crime

the point of this game was that it had none
– the only approval sought our own

we were something, weren't we –
though no one thought to say
now a shot without the masks

“proverb”

a fine-china tea-pot
sits in the cabinet, a gift
– this drab green thing
came from a yard-sale
– it’s chipped, stained
and not charming

but when you pour
then tilt up the spout
it never drips

hold onto a two-bit tea-pot
that doesn’t drip:
it’s worth more
than many a fifty-dollar pot

it’s akin to an old neighbour, say
who walks down the street
to buy something he doesn’t need
from your yard sale

"The great void"

By Matthew Bartlett

Imagine you're agnostic:

a word whose meaning has been shred by history;

imagine you are it's real meaning: agnosia: (the dark knowledge of God in the cloud of unknowing);

or better yet, you are every Eastern belief: Zoroaster's twin god carriers in the womb.

You are Pagan, Druid, Shaman; you were everything there was before Christianity was born and consumed them all,
like the wolf Fenrir consumed the sun.

Now become the levee break of Western ignorance

Would you still believe that life is bound and fitted to its rigid categories, its tethered barriers? Material and attachment?

You, with your dark eyes' mystical influence

evokes memories of reckoning

like Proust's Madeline.

These eyes whose gaze of prized wine

dizzy me like a long-pipe smoker in an opium den.

Now rather than imagine, commence becoming everyone,

and they become you;

you see Polaris and ponder what it is you truly want here;

beckoning prolepsis.

Now look at your hours: they pass;

they vanish in the sky in arrangements of funeral flowers.

Think of the men in your life, how many you thought you knew but brandished weapons,

cheated on you with wives, mistresses, pornography;

lies decorated in priestly gowns.

Now look at the guiding star Polaris looking down

on you in a thousand begettings of a broken lodestar.

Look at the ones who couldn't promise a prayer

for my dying mother unless the song was gone.

The song that is called the world's scream;

for they taught you that the universe is not too big to fathom,

and God is physical:

this narrow gorge and stream,

too small to fit the image of an infant's dream.

Now say you were just below the seven firmamented gates

where the bridge-crystal exodus is a universal covenant,

and suddenly God's hundred-thunder-words penetrated glass to dimension bending echoes;

would you parallel diverge in wended purplets

and parallel your lover's death?

Because you miss the way he dove into the tunnels of your flesh,

whispering in your ear that you are more beautiful than the creation of the world?

Would you trust your life to his last breath?

Would you really want to?

Think of some floorflusher gondoliering a Venetian sea
 trying to keep it even,
 the breeze that cannot stop the grass-blades
 falling from the drops of Eos;
 the dance of life- like Rumi's dervishes
 are universally arranged, and most, like the dark
 Autumn of your hair my hands caress,
 fell behind your ear,
 and some against our soft-eyed kisses.

Polaris was raptured in a poetic fit.
 He cannot even shine his brightest and illuminate a fucking fleck of the planet!
 "I'll tell you why you don't know what you want," the star retorted,
 "because you already have it,
 and you'll never know you have it because you never can,
 just as the godhead is never the object of its own knowledge;
 like a fire can't burn itself out,
 nor the bridge drown out the water.
 The "void" is not the emptiness,
 It's the full realization of love,
 of letting go; of "otherness."

Now look where you are: the Tao; Zen.
 You look to the sky and see no Heaven.
 You feel no heat of Hell under your feet;
 they are children;
 not even: they are the twin connection in the womb
 of the Earth's emergent fervour.
 Christianity dies for choosing faith over action,
 as every denomination breaks holes in the Jesus Christ diction.
 All opposing forces are the same within;
 yet it broke the "one" into individual concepts
 of "existing" or "living in sin,"
 Your existence is a grain of sand
 and a "house divided cannot stand."

Sent withIn this great void, you are completely pure.
 Polaris ignites Oblivion through your crowded hair;
 watching you as someone else,
 brand new breathing in the beginning air.
 Restored, you're back to Earth's first blush
 of color to the sky's delight.

Everything was as Eden, and you were new,
 yet still brilliant, mystical,
 devastatingly beautiful;
 and what came with you, you couldn't know.
 But it was something that you lost along the way.

Francisco J. Villarreal is an Argentine writer and teacher, specialised in Language and Literature Education he worked in his studies in the field of Japanese Literature. In 2014 he was selected by the Japanese Ministry of Education to be part of the Teacher's training program for Japanese culture and language. Once he finished his research he stayed in Japan working as a teacher. In the midst of this language and culture mix, he keeps writing and trying to illustrate a life along the in-betweens'. *** **Simon Perchik** of East Hampton, NY has appeared on these pages before. He writes, "My poetry has also appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. Hope winter has been kind to you." *** **Susie Gharib** is a graduate of the University of Strathclyde with a Ph.D. on the work of D.H. Lawrence. Her poetry and fiction have appeared in multiple venues including *Down in the Dirt*, *Impspired Magazine*, *Synchronized Chaos*, *Leaves of Ink*, *Peacock Journal*, *The Opiate*, *Mad Swirl*, *The Blue Nib*, *The Poetry Village*, *The Curlew*, *A New Ulster*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *The Ink Pantry*, *the Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *River Poets Journal*, *Westward Quarterly*, and *The Blotter*. *** **John Tustin**'s poetry has appeared in many disparate literary journals in the last decade. fritzware.com/johntustinpoe contains links to his published poetry online. *** **Amanda Yanovitch** earned a BA and an MA in English from the University of Virginia and worked in publishing until she could no longer resist the urge to take up dry-erase markers and share the good news about composition and literature with students at John Tyler Community College. She lives near Richmond, VA and spends her days fighting to keep STEM from taking away all of the nice things. Check out her story "Makerspace" in the May *Blotter*. *** **Bruce Baldwin** is an artist living in Cary, NC, working in watercolor, ink, color pencils and markers. His paintings and drawing have been on display in various locations with upcoming shows in Cary. Fixated on the world around him, his works are mostly of nature. Buildings, street scenes and life in general as seen through the eyes of North Carolinians are captured in the mediums Bruce employs. He'll have 30 paintings/drawings at The Bond Park Community Center, 150 Metro Park Dr, in Cary starting Wed, July 1, ending Mon, Aug 31 with the reception July 31 from 6 until 8PM. *** **Amari Pollard** is currently a Roy H. Park Fellow at the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media and previously worked as the Head of Audience Development at The Week. Her writing focuses on relationships, culture, and politics. She has been published at *The Week*, *Bustle*, *MindBodyGreen*, *Reader's Digest*, and more. *** **James Thurgood** was born in Nova Scotia, grew up in Windsor, Ontario, and now lives in Calgary, Alberta. He has been a general labourer, musician, and teacher – not necessarily in that order. His poems have appeared in various journals, anthologies, and in a collection (Icemen/Stoneghosts, Penumbra Press). *** **Matthew Bartlett** lives in New Haven, CT, and he has been writing Poetry since his early teens. He grew up reading the Symbolist and Modernist Poets, his favorites being Hart Crane and Wallace Stevens. He has published poems in journals and magazines, and is currently finishing a Poetry chapbook. More of his Poems can be seen on Instagram, Handle: [dionysus_poetry111](#)

continued from page 3

acted out such a thing – standing on the side of the road in my hometown in my pajamas trying to figure out how to get home without being seen – my subconscious no longer finds it sufficiently cruel and unusual. It prepares scenarios for me that would curdle milk, peel the siding off the house, send a normal person screaming into the night.

Moreover, let it be known my fight-or-flight instinct contains almost no measure whatsoever of "fight" and a double-big-boy helping of "flight." Spinning slowly in a circle, I got my bearings and lit out for home. Running along the sidewalk in the gloom of sunset, past the blue-green catch-pond at the chemical plant, past the bank and train-station, through town just before streetlight sensors turn them automagically on while pharmacies and hardware stores wrap up the day's business with one more customer pulling up in front to fetch a bottle of Bayer aspirin, a ball-peen hammer, or grabbing a Hallmark card for an nearly-forgotten wedding anniversary. Hey! See the nine-year-old boy in his pajamas scamper past with a look of terror on his face? Strike you as odd?

I might have made it all the way home, I don't know...let's call it *unscathed*..., but about halfway there one of the moms from my neighborhood was Oldsmobiling back from a get out of the house for a moment trip to the supermarket and saw me chugging along and pulled over, rolling down her car window and shout-

ing my name. *Is everything OK? What are you doing out at this time of night? Are those your pajamas? Do you need a ride?* Fortunately, by the time I was nine I had already learned that choosing to politely answer only one of multiple questions would be seen as performing the job of communicating with adults to sufficiency.

Why, yes, I said, panting. Yes, thank you, I could use a ride.

Now, it needs to be said that at this moment my Dad had completed going around the block and returned to the place where only minutes earlier he'd most ceremoniously dumped me like a cat he no longer wanted to have as a pet. My sisters had already said the unnecessary and yet magic words, "Dad, he's gone." Dad had leaned out and shouted my name in much the same way my neighbor had. God in heaven must have chuckled a little at the synchronicity.

He drove down the street I had just moments earlier run along, turned around (rather than heading home and possibly seeing me scurrying along the side of the street) and retraced his path, scoping left and right for what he thought he would see - a pajama'd, crying child. Turned and tried again. Thumped the steering wheel with his fist. Shook his head when my big sister said, "Oh, no. You've lost him," and my little sister began to cry. He turned one more time and headed back to church to get Mom.

Dropped off by my bewildered neighbor (whose private theories about our family were now supported by ample evidence), home and alone, I scurried upstairs to my room, kicked off my slippers and climbed under the covers. I knew I was in deep trouble – abyssal - would have...heck to pay later, and wanted one last night of peace to rest up for whatever was coming my way.

And that was the end of the story, from my certain perspective.

But let it be said, let it be written that the following day, as I always did on Saturday mornings, I went out to play. Shooting baskets at my friend's house the next morning, his mom came out and asked *so what happened last night?* which is out-of-the-blue-parent-speak for I know you did something and I want the details, sporto. I swear I thought she was talking to her son, but she kept looking at me and he was now looking at me (with some relief, I might add) and if I had had a mirror at that moment, I would have looked at me. And because nothing particularly special had happened that I wanted to talk about, I shrugged. *I mean*, my friend's mom asked, *why were the police driving around with bullhorns calling your name?*

What?

And so, it turned out that Dad and my sisters had picked up Mom, somehow explained while all of them together drove around looking for a child crying in his pajamas by the side of the road somewhere, then gave up and went to the police station to report what had happened. And the police gave him the stink-eye and then set out to find me, in the gloom of a Friday evening. Cruising the suburban streets of town, shouting my name with bullhorns.

Yeah. That can't have gone well. I guess I'm glad I wasn't there, or found immediately or even soon. And when I was found, later, in bed asleep, (because my parents went upstairs to find a piece of laundry of mine for search dogs to sniff) – oh, hell, yes – it was a kind of miracle that they chose to not wake me up and, I don't know, strangle me in front of the cops.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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