A watercolor illustration featuring a hand holding a large, multi-petaled pink rose. The hand is rendered in shades of brown and tan. To the right of the hand is a large, dark, textured sphere, possibly representing a head or a piece of art. The background is a light, neutral color.

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“A Day In The Life”

Mom’s OK. She has a one-bedroom apartment in her stepped-care facility, the Home, and feels pretty good. She’s lost some weight during the pandemic lockdown, not because there’s no food, but because she’s paying attention to it, not nibbling snacks so much, not getting dessert at both lunch and dinner.

Here’s how it goes. Wake up and putter around until she wants some coffee or tea, and get that made. Turn on the music channel she likes on her television. She likes the popular classical station. Lots of Mozart and Ravel and Chopin and Tchaikovsky. Less Mahler. When she wants to listen to Mahler, she pulls out a CD from Pop’s old collection and puts it in her boom-box. That thing needs replacing – the volume control does volume but has little control. It was only about thirty bucks, so it’s done what was expected of it, but as soon as her place allows visitors again, I’ll fetch her a new one. I would send it to her, but she cannot read the set-up instructions, so it will have to do for now. With her coffee (or tea) she may sit and look at the puzzle or crossword for a while, if it’s a sunny day. If not, maybe put such things away until tomorrow. She might read, instead. Large print books, from the nice library that they have at the Home. Or ones we’ve sent her. She finished Towles’ *A Gentleman In Moscow* and is wrapping up *Educated* by Tara Westover. We just mailed her *American Dirt*. I hope she likes it as much as we did. When she’s done, she’ll give them to the library for others to read. That’s how it should always be with books, right?

Time for breakfast. She gets some of her groceries from delivery from the store, and extra milk from the cafeteria for cereal. When she’s done she takes her meds. Blood pressure and cholesterol stuff. She manages her Type II diabetes well. She took a tumble back during the fall, a stumble in the hallway. Was in a wheelchair for about two months. Went to PT to get her legs back in shape afterwards. Now she has some days where her legs don’t want to behave exactly how she wants, and she uses a walker. Other days, she can navigate around the Home – going to the clinic to have her temperature checked, or the library with her mask on, or out to the garden where there are some benches so she can sit in the shade and feel the June breeze.

There are some friends who do this, too. There’s no plan for it –

sunny days they just end up at the benches, masked and with enough distance between them. There's one woman who talks too quietly behind her mask, and they have to tease her to speak up so that they can hear her over the sparrows in the trees. Mom says that the little raised vegetable garden she can see from her patio, started a couple of years ago by local college students and a bit run down and overgrown now, has some volunteer tomatoes and arugula. There are also a few fig trees around the campus that they can grab ripe fruit from, if they beat the grackles and cardinals to them. Ooh, I don't like figs, one of her friends says. Mom smiles beneath her mask and says nothing. Figs are awesome and go well with toast and peanut butter.

Or, if it's raining, she sits next to the sliding glass door that leads out to the patio and listens to it falling on the trees and pavement. Lunch is delivered at the previous day's dinnertime, so she's got it out of the fridge and nukes it for a moment. She's told me she doesn't like the chaise longue she bought herself a year ago because it takes up too much room, but that's where she relaxes, eats her salad and sandwich, listens to her music. We ordered her canned soup – lots of different varieties, but it was on back-order for so long that it seemed better to hang onto it until the weather gets cool again.

The phone rings, and it takes four to get to it. We check in with her every day or so. My older sister calls every single day, and they talk for an hour. *Here's what's going on here. How are you doing? Do you need anything?* My brother in-law calls from work to tell her a joke every day. We sent her some sugar-free lemon drops a month ago. For some reason the best deal was twelve bags of them, so now she has about 9 pounds of lemon drops. Yes, that's loony and yes, we talked her out of putting some of them out in the common area to share, which would be what happened in any other time in her life.

There is a friend in the Home she calls The Cookie Lady who every day for twenty years baked a batch of cookies and went from cottage to apartment to room giving her cookies to her friends. That was how she spent her days. Can you imagine always having the perfume of newly baked cookies about you? She's 102 now, and has a twenty-four-hour caregiver and cannot bake cookies anymore. Mom calls her on the phone and if The Cookie Lady is having a good, lucid day they talk, and they also talk if she's not.

Mom prefers to do some things in the afternoon. Wash clothes. The

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

Oftentimes, we make up reasons for our

“Bringing Down the Curtain”

by Russell Waterman

The floors were sticky and dirty, littered with red solo cups and used rubbers. It was a beautiful sight.

The dilapidated two-story cinema, dangling off Balboa Peninsula, had outlasted world wars and pandemics, seeing almost a century of life. Its red velvet curtains draped around the modest stage welcoming vaudevillians, strippers, and the occasional rock band wannabes, each act showcasing a unique titillating performance. Eventually, time gave way to the silver screen mainstay of showing first runs and cult classics.

He lived through it all.

The musty smell of cigarettes and pot that impregnated the cloth seats and tattered curtains that hung from the walls covering up the scars of chipped paint and decaying cinder blocks; the uniformed ushers who escorted patrons to their seats, checked tickets and shushed talkative customers, and thankfully looked the other way when couples were engaged in amorous activities; the unruly teenagers lying in wait in the balcony tossing popcorn and jujubes onto the moviegoers below, then ducking back into the dark crevasses before striking again.

All of it brought him joy.

It was the aura of the intimate

cinema that captured Wilfred Alford's heart. The qualities of which were without words; indescribable, yet undeniable. Similar to the feelings he held for the love of his life, his late wife Lucy, that told him she was the one—her spark was contagious.

Each night without fail, Wilfred, sporting a neatly trimmed gray goatee and dressed in his blue overalls with Property of the Balboa Cinema embossed on the left breast pocket, cleaned and scrubbed the three hundred seat theatre. He dutifully picked up the trash left by the customers, vacuumed the floors, and used his trusted putty knife he brought from home to scrape off God-knows-what from the concrete aiseways; he gave this special attention. Through it all, regardless of what filth and decadence he encountered, he posed no ill will toward anyone. He felt happy and humbled for doing a job well done and knowing the theatre was prepped for another round of rowdiness from people seeking a night out of escapism.

He stood in the empty theatre. The seats, although not original, had been refurbished years back, but still looked the part. They were free of popcorn and orphaned junior mints, and their seats placed upright. The wooden rails that

looped the tiny balcony had been wiped of goo and gum, showing only the scuffs of age and usage as they should. The stage was swept and mopped and for years had only been used on weekends during the traditional midnight showing of The Rocky Horror Picture Show when patrons dressed, acted, and sang along to the musical comedy horror movie. On those days, Wilfred always had rice to clean up afterward.

It was 5 a.m.

Wilfred stood on the steps of the center aisle, sniffled and dabbed his eyes with a handkerchief. He grinned slightly, his lips curling up his whiskers at the edges. His eyes glistened as he remembered the movies, the moviegoers, and the one-offs of bands and poets that gave the Balboa Cinema life. Most of all, he thought of Lucy. A tear fell.

Wilfred blew his nose and pocketed his handkerchief. Tonight was his swan song. The theatre was shutting down and closing its doors after nearly a century. Wilfred was past retirement age, but the Balboa had given his life purpose after Lucy passed. This is where they met after a local poet had spoken his last line. A wrecking ball was in the Balboa's future, but what about Wilfred's?

Wilfred Alford took it all in, then sighed and turned to leave. His head hung.

“Wilfred.”

Wilfred stopped walking up the aisle toward the lobby. At first, he thought his hearing aid hiccupped. He took it off his ear, examined it, not knowing exactly what he was looking for or what he would do should he find something, and returned it to his ear. He glanced side to side before continuing his slow pace.

“Wilfred.”

He stopped again. There wasn't a glitch in his hearing aid, nor was he hearing voices in his head. Despite the fact that sometimes he'd sit in the balcony after work and visit with Lucy. He made sure to grab a box of raisinets from concessions first, they were Lucy's favorite. He'd talk with her until dawn.

This voice wasn't familiar.

“Who's there?”

“I'm over here.”

Wilfred turned toward the movie screen. There, sitting in a chair at center stage, was a figure: a man, a single floodlight shown on him.

How'd he get in here? Where'd that light come from?

“Who are you? What's your name?”

“My name's not important. But yours is Wilfred Alford.”

“How'd you know my name? Well, I-I don't know how you got in here, but I'm gonna have to ask you to leave. The theatre is closed—

for good.”

The man stood smiling. His smile wasn't devilish, it was gentle. The chair he sat in disappeared. The illuminating spotlight followed the man stepping toward Wilfred. He was dressed in a stylish wool three-piece suit with a white shirt and matching tie. He held a cane and wore his fedora tilted just slightly. He looked as if he was about to dance.

Wilfred couldn't tell if he was young or old. Maybe he was both?

“Anyone who's ever entered this cinema knows who Wilfred Alford is. You're quite famous really.”

“Famous?”

The man twirled about at the edge of the stage, shuffling his feet as if he were dancing a jig, and fluently moved his cane into his empty hand. You could feel his joy as he completed his pirouette and bowed.

“We all know you're not an actor or musician, singer, or even a dancer... like me,” he said, gleefully. “No, Wilfred, but your talent is much deeper. You alone have kept this cinema alive all these years, blessing the rest of us with a place to perform. This is a magical place where artists of all sorts were allowed to bare their souls, their hopes, and dreams. From dancers to singers, from poets to actors, each of us owes a debt of gratitude to you. Without you, Wilfred, all of us would be the lesser for it.”

Wilfred relaxed ever so much and thought, *I wish Lucy were here*

to see this.

“My reason for being here at this moment is simple. I'm here representing all the performers you've helped along the way in this beautiful theatre.”

“Yes?”

“I'm here to simply say... thank you. From all of us, Wilfred, thank you. Your Lucy is very proud!”

The man bowed deeply at the waist with a smile as wide as the stage. He spun around one final time, and then was gone.

Wilfred took a step back when the man suddenly vanished. He looked around the theatre, spinning around himself. There was no trace of the man.

“Is. The man said Lucy—is—very proud,” said Wilfred.

Wilfred smiled. A tear ran down his cheek. He would grab a box of raisinets on his way out. ❖

“Blind Crossover”

by Hareendran Kallinkeel

I see a blind man, a blind man who tries to cross a road.

He stands on a pavement near me, holding a walking stick, a massive fist tight around its handle, knuckles white.

His eyes, unseen by me or the other pedestrians, may be roving behind the dark goggle he wears.

Maybe, he isn't blind after all. Do his stout body, broad shoulders, and muscular chest under his Tee-shirt convey a different story?

Eyes hidden behind the shields of darkness, he wants to observe me furtively, a foe who watches my moves. Is he looking for a moment I become vulnerable; to pounce upon me, throw me on my back and slice my throat with a slender sword he'll draw out from its sheath in the guise of that walking stick?

But, blind men can't see. Still, they can have well-built bodies too.

Yet, they can't see the holes, manholes that open to underground storm drains.

Like I can't observe his emotions, I have no instruments, something akin to a walking stick, to tap around and experience the emotions that churn in his mind, to prepare for my defense.

Blind men also cannot see the empty coke cans that float in the

drain, nor the used condoms. They can, though, smell the stench of rot that fills the air they breathe in.

Blind men also can listen to the music that flows out of those bulbuls' tiny beaks after they've relished the nectar from flowers in a garden behind us.

I wield a sword, double-edged, razor-sharp. I relish evening sunrays deflect off its blade, reflect on his dark glass.

I regret he can't savor the delight dancing in front of his eyes.

If he isn't blind, I'll have shown him the sun's glory as it sets in the west in its orange splendor.

Several heads have shifted location, my sword's smooth glide decapitating the victims. Bundles of money have come into my hands, stained with the blood of men and women I kill for a price.

Cap of the manhole displaced, the ugly water in the drain carries an image of the horizon. White clouds rally at the bottom, unseen by the blind man.

The pit poses a threat; a threat to a man who can't see the lurking danger. My recognition of the peril disturbs me, pricks my conscience.

A strange feeling I've never known, not even when I slice throats for a price... It's their karma, I've pacified my conscience. The one who pays for a kill pays for

a reason.

My reason, at least to me, is clear; mouths to feed, to quell the hunger notching empty stomachs. I have every reason to kill for a price. My wife hasn't, like Valmiki's, reminded me that while she eats the fruits of my sin, the blame is mine alone, the punishment of which only I'll suffer.

Valmiki, a forest-dweller who eschewed looting and killing, appreciative of his wife's warning, has gone on to write an epic, *Ramayana*, and later become a sage.

Who's going to share my sin, even if they eat its fruits, I don't know. But, eat they will, the fruits of my sin; share they won't, the punishment for the sin, they'll let the flames of hell swallow me whole.

A sound wakens me from contemplation.

The old man prepares to step on the road, knocking around with his walking stick. Its tip, for a moment, poises in the air, lands on the manhole's outer edge.

It doesn't find the vacuum, that blank space, the threat.

The sound of wood against iron communicates to him a sense of solidity, a message of safety.

Breath chokes inside my chest. My vision hurts me. The thought he

may land inside the hole, and break his leg, causes my stomach to knot.

The blind man initiates his step, his foot hovers in the air for a frozen moment.

Will a random act of kindness save my soul, rid me of the burden of my sins, absolve me of my guilt?

Maybe, it will lighten my heart, provide some solace.

I lay my sword, flat across the manhole.

The blind man's foot lands firm, the strength in his thigh muscles apparent by the quivers under his tight pants.

Blood that has flowed along its blade makes the sword strong, perhaps. It holds the foot, bears his weight without a bend.

The blind man negotiates the manhole, not knowing what lies beneath.

Yet, he feels the grit of the sword, under his foot, gains the benefit of a vulnerable moment he has waited for.

The blind man removes his goggles. I notice the blue, glassy spheres, a universe dancing in them. A cyborg, or a god, descended from heaven, I wonder.

Revenge or payback; hardly have I, a chance to decipher.

He draws out his sword from its sheath, the walking stick.

Gifted with sight, sans insight, I see the sunrays deflect off his sword, as he takes a swing. ❖

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.

Music turns on and off. It doesn't exactly repeat itself, but it's hard to tell if it's a loop or a skip in an old vinyl record. A mobius skip, that loops around again, but it's a different side of the same record. The light is pale, too dark to read by, but only gray shadows beneath things. The tables, chairs, shelves are all neat and things are put away, but something tells me that they are in use, that this is not like a furniture store, one of those big ones where living room after living room is displayed so you can just keep walking around and try fitfully to imagine the pieces in your own little, pathetic space. Massive coffee tables that would protect from an explosion outside if you could just get beneath one, huddled like a skinny first-grader following the instructions of a teacher.

A lamp needs a lampshade. I am now shopping for a lampshade to put on this metal stand-with-a-lit-bulb. I don't know why things changed from this being someone's home to absolutely being some sort of furniture store/warehouse, but it has. Was thinking about it the trigger, or was it always this and I only just now figured it out. And why am I looking to purchase a lamp, and why this one and where are the lampshades. I don't see other lamps like the one that I want, nor are there any on shelves or hanging from coathooks. There are pillows and throw-blankets and rolled up carpets that you cannot see the patterns on, which makes it hard to make a purchasing decision, I think.

I bump a bookcase and it folds on itself and comes apart. The books scatter on the floor. I pick one up and it is a Readers Digest condensed book of four short novels. I remember reading things like this when I was younger, at my grandparents' house. A short version of In Cold Blood. When I read the complete version of the Capote novel, I was astonished by what Readers Digest had chosen to leave out.

The bookcase was held together by little screws and that was not enough. I don't think I bumped it that hard, but I must have. I would like to tell someone that I've bumped it, knocked it apart, but I don't want to call out "can I get some assistance" because it is a very big place and the noise would echo back on me.

Everything I touch is smooth like glass is, but only those things that shouldn't be, like walls and pillows and stair railings and pencils. The things that should be like glass – doorknobs and windows and tabletops, feel like they are made of marshmallow – they squeeze out of shape and hold onto my fingers. Picture frames cling to me as I brush by, and they hang askew despite my attempts to straighten them.

I've a pencil in my pocket, loose, and I take it out and use it like the tip of my finger, to adjust what I have fouled up. I don't know whose home this is, whose store, whose warehouse, but I don't want to leave a trail of clutter behind me.

I have a sensation that just around the next corner of this hallway, this room, is someone who can help me, or someone making coffee and Danish on a plate for me to have, or a door to the outside that probably won't lead to my car, but is at least a start.

I could use a restroom right about now, but wanting it and finding it are two distinct things, never to merge.

The music is now off, but when I think about it being off it is on. If I try to listen to it, it stutters again, unrecognizable as tune and harmony, like a conversation being held by two interesting people at a cocktail party, just over there, just beyond my reach.

Joni - Earth

“On The Other Side”

by Leah Holbrook Sackett

They said life was better without you. I would no longer have to battle your addiction. My faith in my family allowed me to hobble away. You didn't want to let me go. I told you if you love me, if you ever loved me, then please let me go. You let me go.

Life, on the other side, is stable and productive. It is less intense. They said with time I would forget you, and they were wrong. Many of them are married to their first love, what the hell did they know about walking away from love. Decades later, I'm still walking away, but I'm looking back. I daydream of bumping into you. I Google your name and pay for illicit background reports. Thanks to the internet, nothing stays hidden or forgotten. I see pictures of you, and I realize I'm still fantasizing about the boy you use to be, not the loser you've become. According to the file I've compiled, you are not the same. You got older and fatter, too. I'm chasing a love fettered in time. I'm living a freedom within society's confines. I left you because you were smoking pot. I am not vindicated, nor are you redeemed. I wait in line at a dispensary.

I'm going to call this fiction; this “crazy little thing called love.” We filled the spaces with Queen, Nirvana, and The Eagles, a buzzing soundtrack burning in my mind, synapses firing a pathway back to you, a closed loop. Can you hear it? It burns out the electric fence of freedom.

If you come by my dreams in the deep of night, I will be there with open arms. I never did forget the taste of your lips, sour apple Now and Laters and Camel cigarettes. I've wrapped us in our naked embraces and tucked us into the fleshy lobes of my lungs so I could breathe while you were gone. I've not lived an honest moment since I've been here on the other side. ❖



Bruce Baldwin

Two by Brooks Lindberg

"Taller Gods"

Aspen are best with their gashes.
They do not weave their abrasions
 or broken branches and bristles
 into mausoleums or mystification.
Instead, they leave them unstitched.

Their gods are taller than ours.

Each night,
their leaves fondle the air
seeking out an inscription for why
when the wind washes their wounds
they shriek.

“Carnwennan”

Grandpa Jay made sharp knives.
They could whittle
crows out of the night
and peel
the shadow off a cat.
They also worked well on shallots
and trout. But the more you dice things up
the less fantastical they seem.

For one bear hunt,
Jay only brought his knives.
He stalked the woods for days
but found no bears.
So,
one night,
he straddled his campfire,
knotted its braids of smoke in one fist and
scalped it.
40 bears rushed through the darkness
each roaring to claim the kill
only to find Jay in the dark
and his blades.

He sheathed those knives in each of us
and the bear blood keeps them from rusting.
I pull mine out on occasion. It's soothing.
A naked blade hides nothing.

“Adulthood”
by Sanjeev Sethi

We decimated the barriers
and complained of clogging.
Impressions about our outing?
Ravenous and rattleboned beings
trying to filch some skin.

There was hardly any
so we fed on each other.
Satiety is a strange idea.
It charmed us into believing:
distance is detachment.

“Mental Off-Roading?” (with apologies to Jack Kerouac)

By Joe Buonfiglio

Welcome to my absurdist stream-of-consciousness experiment. While I have absolutely no i— Okay, I admit I wanted to go with the obvious “Welcome to my nightmare” opening, but I didn’t want to be sued by Alice Cooper ... again.

Let’s start over, shall we?

Welcome to my absurdist stream-of-consciousness experiment. I have absolutely no idea where it will lead me (or you, for that matter), but I am hopeful it will be somewhere strange; a delightful high-weirdness romp through my gray matter.

Will it enlighten?

Will it reveal?

Will it cause you to clench your buttocks?

There is only one way to find out.

I doubt it will be on par with Jack Kerouac’s seminal masterwork *On the Road*, but one never knows. Perhaps it will be a big bust. (Must ... resist ... Napoleon or Marilyn Monroe ... jokes. MUST RESIST!) On the other hand, maybe it will produce the complete works of William Shakespeare ... or at least *Strawberry Fields Forever*.

Great. I avoid being sued by Alice Cooper only to face legal action from the estate of John Lennon.

Anyway, here we go; complete stream-of-consciousness composition without any thought or care as to logic, continuity, proper grammar or structure, or even coherent thought.

Enjoy.

MISTER PEEPERS PUMPS THE BRAKES

by Joe Buonfiglio

Mister Peepers is a rat bastard. He’s the King of the Rat Bastards. He doesn’t see himself as a rat bastard, but he’s a rat bastard nonetheless. He drives around town with his nose up in the air in that 1978 Dodge Omni, notably an abomination of a vehicle, as if he was in a fully restored antique Rolls-Royce Wraith.

Look at him. Licking the drippy remnants of his pistachio ice cream domiciled in its sugary-cone, sloping artificially colored dairy product all over the threadbare seats of his rusted-out car. So smug. So self-assured.

“FUCK YOU, MISTER PEEPERS!”

Uh-oh. Mister Peepers is pumping his brakes; not so much slamming on them, as you might expect. Definitely pumping them.

I slip out of the summer sun on the street and into the air-conditioned shadows of Big Jim's Bar.

I'm not quite sure why it's called "Big Jim's," because the owner and bartender is a dwarf named Charlie, but there was probably a day when the name made sense.

The bar is empty. I can hear Charlie on the phone from the storeroom in back yelling at some vendor for screwing up his pickled eggs order. I love pickled eggs. With Charlie unaware I've entered his establishment, I see the opportunity to steal one from the oversized jar on the bar without him demanding some form of just compensation from my rather currency-light wallet. I gingerly, silently, unscrew the lid of the mammoth glass container, take one of the pinkish eggs from its preservation bath within and quickly shove it into my mouth. Immediately so giggly to the point of giddy at the thought of my reprehensible act of larceny am I, my gag reflex almost announces my act of unlawful appropriation to the otherwise occupied purveyor of libations in the back. Luckily, I regain composure before any betrayal is realized.

I'm about to also purloin a short beer as well, but soon come to realize that Charlie's ire at his marinated-ovum distributor was warranted. The eggs are contaminated. I want to vomit, but instead pass out.

My ass is— My ass seems— My ass feels ... moist. Squishy. Beyond humid. More like drenched.

Did I shit myself?

No, I've been there before. I'd have noticed the telltale smell.

This was weirder. Stanger. Far more bizarre.

Oh my God. Is that something licking my ass?

Is that Mister Peepers dressed in a "southern gentleman" uniform? Why is this Colonel Sanders wannabe licking my—

Wait.

Hold on.

He's not. Peepers appears to have grabbed the ketchup bottle from one of the tables and is squirting it into my— I pass out again.

I can't stop dreaming of pickled dwarves; all stuffed into a large mason jar as if that were perfectly normal.

It's coming back to me now. It's ALL coming back to me. The manager of the Knights of Pontius Pilot's (not Pilate, but a play on words as they were all retired Air Force) pancake-breakfast room trying to get the drop on me in his homemade-syrup vault.

"I like good old-fashioned maple, you son of a bitch! Don't try pawning off that blueberry shit on me!" I scream.

The swirling vortex of irrelevant time is all around me, but I feel nothing. It's all bullshit trying to con the collective of humanity, the riders down the mortal coil, into accepting its significance. No, more than that; into accepting its legitimacy.

"I'll wake up when I damn well want to so-called "Time," you arrogant crack whore. No one tells me when to pull the ketchup bottle out of my ass!"

Peepers! Goddamn Mister Peepers. Rushing in and out of my anal cavity with his condiment of viscous obscenity, all the while plotting to sip on the anonymity of my mediocrity as if some kind of delusion vampire.

“Fuck you, Peepers! Fuck you and the blasphemously aging Chrysler product you rode in on, you indecent destroyer of waffle cones and pickled dwarves! I hope you rot under whatever—”

Oh, great. What the fuck vision of this personal Hell confronts me now? Why can't it just go away and let me wallow in a puddle of my own urine in peace?!

... At least I think it's my urine.

It just occurred to me that I have no idea — no fucking clue — what unicorn dung looks like.

Is it “rainbowy”?

Is it as soft as a roasted marshmallow at 4-H camp that one golden summer?

Does it smell of your first trip to a Disneyland public restroom?

I think I'm dying now.

Am I dying now?

I'm pretty sure I'm dying now.

What?

The unicorn agrees.

If you haven't already guessed, breakfast is extremely important to me; **EXTREMELY** important. Now, Mama Flippie's was a “breakfast barn” considered an iconic eatery on southside Broad Street. It had been at that “on the other side of the tracks” location since I was a kid ... since before I can remember ... since before time for me began. Mama F's had the best damn flapjacks either side of the Mississippi and any floating breakfast joints you might find slowly drifting down the grand old river itself. Known for its “Colossal Cakes” pancakes and “Brobdingnagian Buttered Biscuits,” each dripping with butter (whether you wanted butter or not) and only full-sugar maple syrup with which to top them. None of those fancy flavors, calorically “lite” or low-sugar options here.

As Mama Flippie herself would say, “You want haute cuisine? Try the next state over.”

Mama F's was the best. I say “was,” because it burned down today in the predawn hours. I should know, because I watched it burn from the back corner of Tim's Tires across the street.

I should know, because I'm the one who set it ablaze.

Pay my tab or no more service? I don't think so.

I had a dream last night that I was supervillain whose weapon of choice was a crack pipe that sprays cheese queso dip. I gotta stop eating Mexican before bedtime.

“Hush little baby, don’t say a word. Daddy’s going to buy you a dried up turd.” You can see why I always hated my father.

Somewhere in the world, there are people drawing up the plans for a new, more powerful machine to chuck pumpkins through the air. This is how they choose to spend their time. Oooooooooooh, but I’M the loser!

For my 21st birthday, I went to Las Vegas. I still have the scars.

FUCK YOU, MRS. BRENDAVIER! THE THREE STOOGES ARE TOO A NATIONAL TREASURE! Bitch.

My mouth is writing checks that my ass can’t cash ... on a Sunday ... ‘cause the ass-cashing places aren’t open on Sundays.

I don’t want to live in a world where *The Wacky Races* aren’t real and bananas are.

There was a day, not that long ago, when I wanted to be a pirate bus driver. Not a pirate bus-driver, mind you, but a pirate-bus driver; the driver of a bus that was, in essence, a pirate ship. I would drive around town swilling rum and lawlessly disobeying all the traffic regulations, taking my cutlass to the throat of any mercenary privateer-cop who tried to stop me, kidnapping and thus causing distress in damsels and robbing them of their booty (read: jewels, you sick bastard). Ah yes, the bus driver of a pirate ship’s life for me! Yo-freakin’-ho!

Did I ever do it?

Don’t be daft! Do you know what the security deposit on bus-driver costume rentals goes for these days, not to mention a custom paint-job on city-owned vehicular property? It’s not as if I walk around with that kind of cash in my back pocket, Mr. Moneybags III.

I AM NOT A FAN OF SLOPPY JOES, OKAY! DON’T MAKE THIS A BIG THING!

I’ve never really understood the need to post a sign saying “Slippery When Wet.” People aren’t idiots. Just tell them if it’s wet or not and let them make their own determination as to how dangerous the level of moisture is. To just make the blanket statement announcing the obvious is a disservice to your supposed audience and, quite frankly, makes you come off as somewhat of a condescending narcissist and more than a little bit of a putz. So, do us all a favor and stay out of the sign shop for a while. Our own ids, egos and super-egos will get us through this whole slippery-or-not thing without any help from you, thank you very much.

The sight of a dog pooping makes me throw up in my mouth just a little bit. Unless it’s a labradoodle. Everybody knows labradoodles poop rainbows.

Yes, besides pancakes, I clearly also have a thing for all that is “rainbowy.”

Are pantaloons a la Italiano commedia dell’arte a legitimate pizza topping? I’m asking for a friend.

Okay, I have no friends. You saw right through that one, didn’t you?

Is there a wax figure of Madame Tussaud in Madame Tussaud’s wax museum? If not, that would seem as if a bit of a major oversight, don’t you think? OH, AS IF THIS QUESTION DOESN’T KEEP YOU AWAKE AT NIGHT, TOO!

If you, too, are wondering if I could possibly get any fatter, the answer is “Yes.” ... “Yes!” ... “YES!” ... a resounding “HELL YES!” Now pass the mayonnaise and cinnamon bagels.

It seems as if it is all coming down on me, collapsing into itself, imploding, drawing to an unforgiving culmination. Time is closing in on me. The slowly revolving engine of the cosmos has caught the necktie of my soul and is pulling me in to my demise with the relentless hand of Dark Matter. I can taste the fuckitude spreading over the tip of my existence at the dull edge of The Creator’s rusty butter knife. It is an existential crisis of a delicious magnitude righteously carrying out a brutally judgmental sentence upon the indecency of my contemptible impurity.

It is the end.

For you see, only an idiot would have left their *Arsons-R-Us* business card on the sidewalk in front of the burning Mama Flippie’s breakfast diner.

Apparently, I am that idiot.

In retrospect, this was an error in judgment on my part. So, to be continued.

... in about 10 to 20.

... depending on time off for good behavior.

... which is not likely.

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Contributors

Russell Waterman is an Amazon published author, including his latest, “The Adventures of Dave Diamond,” a short story complication. His fiction has also appeared in *Jerry Jazz Musician* and *SIA*.

Hareendran Kallinkeel writes from Kerala, India, after a stint of 15 years in a police organization and five years in the Special Forces. His most recent publications include *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Infection House*, and *Manawaker Podcast*. His stories will soon appear in *Modern Literature*, *Lalitamba Journal*, *Aaduna*, and *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*.

Leah Holbrook Sackett writes, “I am an adjunct lecturer in the English department at the University of Missouri - St. Louis. This is also where I earned my M.F.A. My short stories explore journeys toward autonomy and the boundaries placed on the individual by society, family, and self. I have published short stories in several journals including *Connotation Press*, *Blacktop Passages*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *The Writing Disorder*, *Crack the Spine*, and more. Learn about my published fiction at LeahHolbrookSackett.com.”

Brooks Lindberg is poet and playwright currently attending the University of Utah S.J. Quinney College of Law. His poems have appeared in *Lost Sparrow Press*, and *Wild Violet*. His interests include tax law, roving the country to gourmandize, and hiking with his wife and their dog.

Sanjeev Sethi is published in over 30 countries. He has more than 1250 poems printed or posted in literary venues. He is joint-winner of Full Fat Collection Competition-Deux organized by the Hedgehog Poetry Press. His poem, *A Factory of Feelings* was voted Poem of Month March 2020 at Ink Sweat and Tears. He lives in Mumbai, India.

Author and “Literary Absurdist” **Joe Buonfiglio** loves penguins (quite literally) ... and cheese spread ... often at the same time. Oh, and his best friend is a caramelized onion named Silvia. That’s probably important to know about him. His childhood pet was a rusty unicycle named Bobo. Actually, that one was supposed to stay in a thought bubble.

If you’re weird enough to want to experience more of his locker-room intelligentsia laced with the tears of polite society, go to his Twitter page [@JoeBuonfiglio](https://twitter.com/joebuonfiglio) (<https://twitter.com/joebuonfiglio>) and his eponymous website (<https://www.joebuonfiglio.com/>) featuring his dark-humor Absurdist blog, “Potpourri of the Damned.”

We now return you to the “Gardening with Toilet Duck” program.

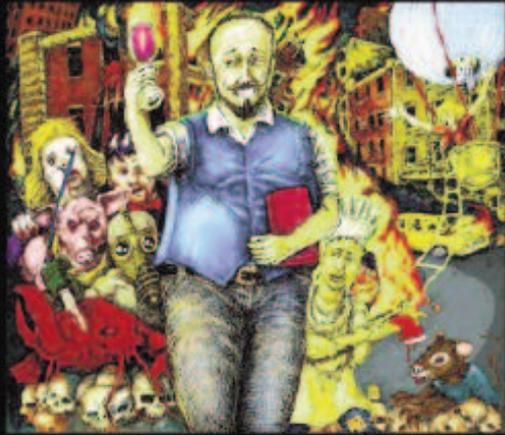
continued from page 3

washers and driers are down the hall, and usually empty this time of day. If you call her during this time, you may get her voicemail, and have to call back in a little bit. Her walker holds the laundry basket just fine. It takes a little time to get down there, set up the loads, get them done, dried and folded. Walking back and forth is good exercise. Then supper arrives from one of the masked and gloved caregivers. She knows everyone by name, and they know her. Afterwards, she cleans up the kitchen, and winds down for bed.

She watches a little news in the evening, then switches back to her music. Too much news is not just overwhelming, but it is also a bummer. If it's not too late, and we haven't talked today, it's a good time to call. We always say I love you and I'll talk to you soon. We laugh together about how her always telling us as kids to wash our hands has done us well during these complicated times.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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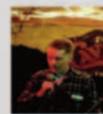
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