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G. M. SomersEditor-in-Chief
Martin K. Smith..Publisher-at-Large, Treasurer
Marilyn Fontenot.....Director of Development
Laine Cunningham.....Publishing Consultant
Brace Boone III.....Marketing Advisor
Richard Hess.....Programs Director
T.J. Garrett.....Staff Photographer

Subscriptions Contact:
Martin K. Smith
M_K_Smith@yahoo.com
919.286.7760

Advertisers Contact:
Martin K. Smith
M_K_Smith@yahoo.com
919.286.7760

Submissions and Editorial Business to:
Jenny Haniver
mermaid@blotterrag.com

Garrison Somers, Editor-in-Chief
chief@blotterrag.com

919.869.7110 (business hours only! you may
call for information about snail-mail submis-
sions)

Marketing & Public Relations Contact:
Marilyn Fontenot
marilyng.fontenot@gmail.com

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“We Got The Beat”

Sixty-three years ago, September fifth as it turns out, Jack Kerouac’s “spontaneous prose” novel was published. His girlfriend at the time wrote about that moment when they read the first reviews of the book - disappointing and yet insightful criticism of something the established literary world didn’t yet understand. The girlfriend - Joyce Johnson - said that Kerouac had that last night of obscurity and the next morning he woke up famous. That fame never let him go, either. It always asked questions of him that he wasn’t prepared to answer in a way that satisfied. It was an “either you get it or you don’t and if you don’t, well, sorry, buddy but that’s on you.” Only that perspective is one that has been honed to a fine edge by The Beatles and Andy Warhol and every Punk rocker and bad-boy actor and Madonna and Pink and so on, since then. Kerouac wanted to be Hemingway, only not so much. Hemingway showed us that even he didn’t want to be Hemingway after a while. So did Jack Kerouac. Fame is a suckish thing - it feeds on everything but provides little sustenance back to us. And when so many people make a living giving and taking away fame with something resembling sleight of hand, or as an inside joke, it seems a terrible price to pay for being good at something.

I’ve said a few times before that there are moments and events that you ought to experience at the right time and in the right order. I tried to get my girls to read Tolkien before Harry Potter – failed. Ah, well. On the other hand, I took them fishing before ever playing video games. More seriously, they had good math teachers, early on, before learning it became an emotional Stonewall. And they ate peanut butter sandwiches long before trying a McDonald’s hamburger, to their everlasting good fortune as we sat at home during quarantine this spring and summer.

I was lucky. I read *On The Road* at precisely the right time in my life, and I highly recommend that anyone eighteen or so, skinny and longing to be in love, looking but not desperately for that task that they will perform for a while in their life (what we used to call “the rest of our life” but that ship has sailed,) unhappy but not despairing, with some fast friends but not many, and a long weekend ahead of them, also read this book. Get your own copy, mark it up with circled passages and margin comments and notes. It will stick to your ribs like a good meal, and you’ll remember it, and the feeling it gave you for a long time, and that feeling will be there when you need to draw on it from time to time. If you are older, or don’t have any concerns as mentioned above,

are a social butterfly or the leader of an enormous posse of pals, significant others come and go in your life with reckless abandon, and you see your life's path laid out before you like a fragrant carpet of flowers, leave the book on the shelf. It's not for you. Go read something else. Or, go play a video game. Not that there's anything wrong with that.

So I guess to some extent I'm saying I'm glad I was born when I was, and that means being here now, which is no bed of roses. It's a bitch to need to do some of the things we're doing, and deal with some of the things we're dealing with. And, of course, some of those things are worse than others and I'm not saying that I have it more or less difficult than anyone else. Only you know how hard it is for you.

I don't apologize for loving *On The Road*. Yes, it's not a good read anymore. In my mind's memory-ear, it's much more beautiful than on the page before me today. And it's horribly sexist and full of all kinds of other 'isms, but there you are. I'm not sorry that I wanted to have such an odyssey in my life, a search for...what did Todd Rundgren call it - "Something? Anything?" I'm not sorry that I was a child once, and had to grow up somehow, make mistakes, study subjects that had nothing at all to do with a potential career. I would never want to be one of those who followed a life-syllabus. I am glad that I ran away once or twice, came back with some comprehension of the point of being here at all.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

Us For A Long, Long Time.

“Hope is the Thing With Feathers”

by William Cass

It's hard to say whether Mr. Lyons or Father Mark had a bigger influence on me; they both dominated my late 1960s high school career pretty equally. I attended St. John's Prep, an all-boys Catholic school in the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles where most of the teachers were Jesuit priests. Mr. Lyons was one of the few lay faculty and was my sophomore English teacher. He was also the longtime coach of the school's state-ranked track and cross-country teams, as well as its athletic director. I had Father Mark for French; before eventually becoming the school's principal, he was also my advisor as editor of the school's newspaper after Mr. Lyons recommended me to him for that position. To everyone associated with St. John's, they were both icons. But what few others there besides me knew, they were also, privately, very close friends.

Mr. Lyons was a little older, perhaps in his early forties, and had been at the school longer. He was a big, jowly man known for his gruff, taciturn manner. He growled more than spoke. In class, besides an unremarkable reading list that he lectured on with little student participation, his assignments consisted primarily of bi-weekly “themes” we were expected to write on any topic of our choosing. After grading them, he'd choose several students to read theirs

aloud in the front of the classroom while he leaned back in his customary position with his feet up on his desk and his fingers laced across his chest. He never called on me to read, and although no comments were included on the tops of my papers like I saw scrawled on my classmates', I received no grade lower than an “A+”; most had several plus signs. I wrote about random things: a fistfight I'd lost in elementary school after another boy made fun of my middle name, the recent death of my cousin when she ruptured her spleen while home alone recovering from mononucleosis, what I took to be my parents' vacuous materialism, the doubts and confusion I struggled with constantly about the Catholic faith I'd been born into, things like that.

I was only a minimally successful player on the school's basketball team, which is why I was surprised when Mr. Lyons asked me to be on his student “work crew” the summer after that sophomore year. The rest of the crew was made up entirely of his star track or cross-country runners. But I was pleased to have the opportunity because the compensation was reduced tuition. We were essentially grounds workers for the school: weeding, trimming, painting and similar jobs. I helped with those for the first couple weeks of the summer before Mr. Lyons moved

me inside to replace his secretary, a student who'd just graduated. This position consisted largely of me typing at a small desk at the far end of his faux-wood paneled office in the school's gymnasium building. I typed things like schedules for sports teams, updated athletic performance records, supply and equipment orders, and correspondence that he recorded into a small cassette player. While I worked, Mr. Lyons mostly smoked Salem cigarettes, leaning back like in class with his feet on his desk, and held court with other coaches and teachers, former athletes, or local sports reporters who stopped in to see him. A lot of guffawing, chiding, and swearing went on during those interactions. Father Mark was occasionally among his visitors, but always alone and towards the end of the day after Mr. Lyons had sent the rest of the work crew out on their daily training run. Their conversations were decidedly different from the others, more restrained, and usually concerned poetry, classical music, theater, theology, or fine cuisine. I found that curious.

Father Mark was shorter than Mr. Lyons and stocky, but handsome in a ruddy sort of way. I'd been told that he'd graduated at the top of his class at Notre Dame before entering the seminary and had published several research articles on St. Augustine. He had dark, wavy hair and a penetrating gaze. I

never saw him wear anything but a black short-sleeved shirt with his clerical collar, black slacks, black socks, and well-polished black shoes. I did well in all of my classes except his. Frankly, the barely passing grades he gave me were gifts I didn't deserve. But he seemed unconcerned about my lack of achievement with the French language; in fact, he always appeared to me mildly distracted, almost uninterested, when he taught. When we took tests, he usually stood staring out of our second-floor classroom window, at what, I had no idea.

During their conversations in Mr. Lyons' office, they seemed to take no note of me until near the end of the summer when I'd gotten up to use the file cabinet next to Father Mark's chair and he said to me, "Mr. Lyons showed me some of the writing you did in his class this past year. Several pieces. They were quite good. You have a gift, I think. A voice."

I turned and found them both looking at me. I felt color rise to my cheeks and heard myself mumble, "Thanks."

Father Mark exchanged glances with Mr. Lyons, then fixed his gaze back on me. "So, we've been discussing the school newspaper for this coming year. I'd like you to be its editor."

I frowned. "Me?"

"Yes," he said. "You. Several of the themes you wrote could be easily turned into editorials or simply a sort of musings column. 'Thoughts from a young mind' or something like that. But I won't

mislead you, the returning staff is very small, so it would mean a lot of work."

"You should do it," Mr. Lyons said. "Definitely."

"Well, if you really think so," I said. "But I don't have any newspaper experience."

"Actually, you do," Mr. Lyons paused while they exchanged glances again. "We took the liberty of submitting a copy of the theme you wrote about your cousin dying to the Valley Times, and they're going to publish it next week."

I felt my eyes widen and looked back and forth between them. They were both smiling.

"We called and told your parents," Father Mark said. "They were very pleased. We asked if we could take you out for dinner to celebrate, and they were pleased with that, too. Friday evening, seven o'clock, at L'Arpege in Sherman Oaks. You'll meet us there."

They were waiting for me in front of the old restaurant when I arrived. The maître d greeted them by name and said he had their regular table ready. The interior was low-lit, small, intimate, and ornate. We sat near the back against a half-wall. Patrons at the few other occupied tables spoke in hushed tones. A waiter appeared with menus and filled our water glasses. Another followed immediately with a bottle of red wine. He showed Father Mark the bottle's label, went through some elaborate steps to uncork it, and poured a splash into his wine glass. Father Mark sniffed

and swirled it, swallowed it off, and nodded to the waiter, who filled both their glasses and went away. They toasted my success and drank.

Afterwards, Mr. Lyons asked me if I'd ever had French food before. I told them I hadn't, and he said they'd order for me. We started with escargot, which they had to show me how to eat. Next came onion soup, then the main course of duck confit. Their conversation while we ate followed the same basic course as it did in Mr. Lyons' office. When they came to poetry, Father Mark asked me if I had read much.

"Not really." I shrugged. "Just what's been assigned in class."

"Well, if you're going to be a writer, you need to," Mr. Lyons said. "I'll leave some books you can borrow on your desk in my office."

"Whitman?" Father Mark asked him.

Mr. Lyons nodded. "That's a good start."

"Maybe some Baldwin and Ginsberg, too, for variety. And for certain, Dickinson. I have a couple collections I can add."

They carried on from there, jumping from topic to topic. By the time we'd finished our dessert of crème brûlée, they'd shared two bottles of wine and a sniffer each of cognac. When the waiter brought the check, Father Mark covered it with his hand and said, "My turn."

I thanked them there at the table and again outside.

"Our pleasure," Mr. Lyons said.

Father Mark smiled and nodded. I watched them get into the

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back of a cab at the curb. When it pulled away, I gave them a little wave, then walked to the lot on the corner where I'd parked my father's car wondering about why they'd travelled together that way. I knew that Mr. Lyons didn't drive because he always had a taxi take him to and from the apartment he shared with his mother, but I was sure I'd seen Father Mark behind the wheel of one of the rectory's cars. I found that curious, too.

Their promised volumes of poetry were waiting for me that next Monday afternoon on my desk in Mr. Lyons' office.

That fall's newspaper staff was, indeed, small: three other students besides me. We met during the last period of the day in a cramped office behind a storeroom next to Father Mark's classroom. After explaining our roles and expectations, Father Mark only stopped in once a week or so; otherwise, we were on our own. Quickly, the other staff members showed up even less frequently. One of the guys reported on sports, another handled school news, and the third ostensibly was assigned layout, most of which usually fell to me to complete. I wrote the editorials and columns Father Mark had suggested, finished the laborious cut-and-paste layout on big, waxy spreadsheets, then drove the copy to a print shop in an old barn out where Woodland Hills in those days met the countryside. We were tasked to publish monthly, but only managed to do so roughly half as often. Just to accomplish that, I

often had to work alone in the newspaper office well after the school's night custodian left at eleven; once, Father Mark came and woke me up at two in the morning when he saw the office light on from the rectory; I'd fallen asleep with my cheek rubber-cemented to a spreadsheet I'd been assembling on the layout table.

In the beginning of the term, I kept the topics for my columns fairly benign. I wrote about a littering problem behind the bleachers, healthier lunch options in the cafeteria, the benefit larger student lockers would offer. Both Father Mark and Mr. Lyons praised those early efforts. However, once I found my footing, I ventured into other issues that really concerned me: the absurdity of the school's uniform policy, its over-emphasis on sports, the lack of ethnic diversity in our student population, and, eventually, political critiques of things like the US bombing campaign in Cambodia and compulsory draft regulations. I received no comments from Mr. Lyons or Father Mark on those pieces. As time went on, that silence grew loud.

Mr. Lyons had kept me on during the school year as his secretary for several hours a week. Along with his dictated cassette tapes, he left a folder on my desk in his office with work for me to complete. I was free to come whenever I had time each week to finish what he'd put aside for me. I stopped in after basketball practice one late winter afternoon to find he and Father Mark reading and discussing an edition of the school newspaper

that had just come out. Their clipped exchange stopped abruptly when I entered, and as I passed by them, I noticed they both had the newspaper open to the page with my latest editorial. I opened the work folder on my desk and hurried a sheet of carbon paper through the roller on the electric typewriter I used but could feel their eyes remain on me as I started to type. The acrid smoke from Mr. Lyons' cigarette drifted my way, as well.

As I said, this was the late '60s, and although St. John's school community was largely conservative and traditional in nature, a few of my fellow classmates shared my teenaged angst and general discontent with the status quo. One was our class president and my best friend, Tim Doyle. Two others were the captains of the cross-country and track teams, and a fourth was the head of the school's chapter of the National Honor Society. We all usually ate lunch and hung out during after-school hours together; several other friends began joining us, and our discussions often led to the topics I wrote about in my columns. We listened to music trumpeting activism and discord. Our hair and sideburns grew longer; outside of school, we wore tie-die, Mexican ponchos, and Birkenstock sandals. Early that spring, a few of us attended a sit-in at a nearby college protesting the Vietnam War, but left before being arrested. The growing disrespect I had for my parents' values turned to almost outright disdain; I rarely

spoke to either of them. Out of some vague compulsion to break from my roots and contribute beyond the fortunate cocoon of life I felt I'd done nothing to earn, I began taking the bus into Van Nuys on weekends to volunteer at a soup kitchen.

In April, Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, which shocked and dismayed my friends and me. Not long afterwards, Father Mark was appointed as our school's principal when his elderly predecessor had a stroke and was moved into a Jesuit care facility downtown. Those new duties caused Father Mark to come around the newspaper office even less than before; if he had any reaction to my last editorial of the school year suggesting the administration cancel plans to replace uniforms for all its athletic teams and use the funds instead as a scholarship bank for disadvantaged students, he never indicated that to me. And unless his increased curtness with me was intentional, neither did Mr. Lyons.

My friends and I were all supporters of Robert Kennedy in his pursuit of the presidency and were floored again when he was murdered in June just before the end of the school year. Our disgruntlement grew over that summer with the increase of civic unrest in the nation culminating in the violence outside the Democratic National Convention in August. Around that same time, my father received a promotion to regional vice president at the insurance company where he worked. This meant an eventual move for our family to San Jose after the house my parents

arranged to have built in a new subdivision would be finished in late January. When Tim Doyle's parents offered to let me stay with them after the move so I could complete the school year and graduate from St. John's, my parents agreed.

I continued to work for Mr. Lyons as his secretary throughout that summer, as did the captains of the track and cross-country teams. He gave us an hour off for lunch each day, and because of the heat, we always ate together in the relative cool of the locker room. Usually, Tim Doyle came by to join us, as well as the head of the National Honor Society, and one or two others. Early in the summer, our heated conversations while we ate centered on the national malaise, but eventually morphed into our increased conviction that we needed to take steps to make our upcoming senior year more meaningful and reflective of our dreams for social change. As the unrest in the nation intensified, so did our discussions. As usual, I was the most outspoken of the group and led things to the point where, following the tumultuous aftermath of the Democratic National Convention, I drafted an actual list of demands I suggested we present to Father Mark for the coming year. I passed this out at the beginning of our last August locker room lunch and read it aloud. The demand list included the abolishment of school uniforms, revising admittance standards to allow girls to enroll, the scholarship fund I'd written about in place of new athletic team uniforms, curriculum

revisions to reflect current events in all history classes, seminar vs. lecture format for senior English classes, community service requirements for students, the option of pass-fail grading in non-core academic subjects, inviting monthly outside speakers on a variety of liberal topics, and the right to peaceful campus protest on issues we believed in. I concluded with the statement that if these demands were not met, we were prepared to boycott classes at the start of the new term. When I finished, there was something like awed silence while we all looked expectantly at each other. Finally, Tim Doyle shook his fist and shouted, "Hell, yes!" The rest of us joined in with similar shouts. It was then that I noticed wisps of cigarette smoke creeping through the small grate high above the lockers on the wall that adjoined Mr. Lyons' office.

That Friday evening, I heard Father Mark on our front step before I saw him through the blinds in my bedroom window. My mother had answered the door after the bell rang and asked him in. I heard them move into the living room and the television turn off as he and my father exchanged greetings. A brief silence followed before Father Mark said he'd only take a few minutes of their time. There must have been something in the way he looked because my mother asked him if there was a problem involving me.

"As a matter of fact, there is," he said. "Mr. Lyons overheard your son leading a discussion with a group of his classmates that

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involved a list of demands they planned to make to me about the school. Abolishing uniforms, admitting girls, changing curriculum, allowing protests, things of that nature. Threatening to boycott classes if those demands weren't met." He paused. "Frankly, he plans to lead what amounts to an insurrection."

"I don't believe it," my mother muttered.

"I'm speechless," my father said. "We hardly know him anymore."

"Well, the thing is this," Father Mark continued. "As I'm sure you understand, we just can't have it, simply can't allow it. I know you have a move to the Bay Area coming up soon, so we think it's best if he doesn't come back to St. John's. That he starts the year at another school."

I lowered myself slowly to the edge of my bed. I felt myself blinking rapidly and swallowed over a hardness in my throat.

My mother's reply was halting. "Are you kicking him out?"

"I wouldn't put it that way," Father Mark said. "We just feel that it's in his and our best interests if he goes to school elsewhere."

I shook my head, a chill spreading through me.

"We do understand," my father said. "He needs to learn that there are consequences to expressing, pushing these... ideas of his."

I could barely hear Father Mark when he said next, "I'm sorry."

I don't know which of my parents walked him to the front door,

but a few moments later, I heard it close behind him, heard his car start at the curb, heard it pull away, and listened to it disappear down the street. I didn't, couldn't move. ***

That next morning, my father arranged for me to rent a room from one of his district managers who lived not too far from what would become our new neighborhood in San Jose. The public high school I'd be attending was starting on Monday, so he flew up there with me on Sunday to get me started there; before he returned, he bought me a yellow Schwinn ten-speed bicycle to ride for the twelve-mile commute involved. I started riding every morning about six-thirty and because of basketball practice after school, usually didn't get back until around that same time in the evening where I'd find dinner waiting for me under a dish towel on the kitchen table to eat alone. My father met the school counselor with me on that first Monday morning to arrange my class schedule, and when she reviewed with him what classes I'd been taking, she asked me if I wanted to be on the school newspaper. I just shrugged. She enrolled me in that, and I was assigned mundane reports on ASB affairs and progress on the construction of the school's new performing arts center. As part of my rent arrangement with the family I lived with, I was expected to walk their small dog each morning and night, as well as mow their lawn and wash their cars each weekend. Other than that, I spent most of my free time in the tiny converted den

that was my bedroom working on college applications and reading. I cut my hair. I stopped following the news.

I never even tried to contact Tim Doyle or my other friends to explain things to them. I did see them when I went down to Los Angeles for Thanksgiving and Christmas, but by then, it seemed like old news, nothing any of us wanted to talk much about. They were all understandably deep into the preoccupations that dominated their senior years anyway. None of the ideas on our demand list had been pursued, but Tim told me that each Friday his history class did start with a five-minute discussion of current events, so that must have had legs of its own somehow.

It was a rainy winter, and that caused delays with the completion of our new house. My family didn't move into it until mid-February. It was bigger than our old house, and instead of sharing a bedroom with my younger brother, I had one of my own with new furniture. It was when I was unloading the boxes of books my parents had packed up for me and arranging them on my new shelves that I came upon the volumes of poetry that Mr. Lyons and Father Mark had loaned me. They were all well-worn hardbacks, and as I leafed through them, I was struck again by how often passages were underlined or had words scribbled into margins like "This!" or "So lovely!". I wrapped them up and mailed them to St. John's in both of their names; I didn't even have to look up the address after having typed it so often on corre-

spondence for Mr. Lyons. I included no note and got none from either of them in return.

I don't know much of anything about what may have transpired with or between the two of them in the years that followed. Tim told me that Father Mark left the priesthood not long after we graduated, but when I Googled him many years later after retiring myself as an elementary school principal, I could find no record of him. I did find an obituary from a couple of decades earlier for Mr. Lyons, most of it had to do with his long and distinguished career as a coach, but there wasn't anything about his personal life. That was so long ago now, it's hard to believe they even existed, let alone played such important roles in my young life. But they did, and I became the person I did in no small measure because of them. The good and bad, the admirable, the regrettable, and everything in between. That sort of astonishes me now. Truth be known, as my own candle burns ever closer to its base, it does more and more. ❖

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.

I've been in quarantine so long, like everyone else, that one day is pretty much like another. I find myself mislabeling dates and even getting the time of day wrong so that I am late to virtual meetings. I don't apologize, though, because I'm not alone and it just wastes more time. I switch back and forth between regular and decaf coffee, just to feel something – that niggling caffeine withdrawal headache just behind the eyes on day two or so of not having the high-test. It's neither bad nor good. Just something.

Where I am experiencing the most change in my life – and I admit freely that this is a who-gives-a-damn thing – is in my dreams. They are more vibrant, more warped into the surreal, and full-on edited by Alfred Hitchcock's wife. Only Alma could take the raw footage of boredom and despair of my day-to-day and the critical mass of weird in my subconscious and mixtape them together and present something worthy of the cost of technicolor cavalcade that my dreams have become.

Like exercise routines, baking videos, silly Tik-Toks and puppy pix, this is all going to become passe very quickly, I assume. We will be saturated with it, as we are by anything that we get too much of, but want to witness one more time, because we hurt, we're lonely, we're tired and fairly childish about things, even as we are supposed to behave like "adults." I won't belabor you with the details of my dreams – they will reflect aspects of your own and that doesn't mean that we are kindred in any way other than all of the ways that humans are supposed to be brethren. I will say, however, that it is interesting for now and I won't miss waking up in the morning with a yawn rather than looking around for my phone to record what happened while I was sleeping.

Jessie - Clarksville, TN

“Today’s Feature - How to Set Up an Effective Corporate Task Force”

by Jim Meirose

I interviewed Paul Repititian the other day for my Under the Street series of trivia baseboardly ripoffs and beatdowns and he was gracious, though slightly nonplussed at my rough central Jersey button-holing style. Methinks he got cake on the brain by now, but; anyway, I asked him how it was going getting the Task Force ready, so, after soundly pressing me in the dead center of my chest—and giving me a look, saying, Would that my hand would now transform, for just an instant, into a large caliber projectile entering you, seeking some way out o’ yer morassive reek of an inner-space—but, he was largely civil and nice, saying, Well, Hot Sausage, to be effective, a strike force of this kind cannot be rushed, in either the planning, or the still more planning, or even less so the really whole lot of carefully draped out o’er the forward softly wafting in the breeze of its own nature, well-planned precision planning. Know that?

I indicated I had not known that, and wanted more so just like that so he said, Well, son, there are steps to be executed. Sort of like in the same way, that to do anything properly, there are steps to be executed. Now, Dear Pumpkin, step one is to define the problem. Like; if the problem is to get to the other side, the full definition would say, get to the other side, sho’ ‘nuf, but would then slam home tight with the other side, of what. Simple, see. Then, what is the desired outcome?

In this simple project, to be on the other side of that specific object is the outcome. Simple see’ see, see? Also, sez he, you and your little dog, too. Why it is necessary to get to the other side of, that specific thing, what’s great to know ‘bout too, so, why not? Also, even in the simplest of projects, at least two options as to how to reach the desired outcome should be presented, to let the higher-ups, if there be higher-ups, to choose from, rather than just saying, This is what must be done, there’s no room for debate, my truth is the only truth, so let’s not waste time in silly discussion. You can talk and talk out your big boss mouthes ‘til you’re blue in the face, but the rocky truth is that my way is the only way; but this will in most cases be politically incorrect in the extreme and the result may be quite undesirable for me or you, depending on who’s helming this but—best to skip over that part with a smile, and perhaps a quick easy to understand inoffensive joke, or a cute childhood tale. Such ‘ings can bridge you over leaving no gaps or pauses for arguments to be arrowed through to strike your truth but—just blurt quickly, slide into first in a quick cloud of summer dust, manifest as a statement of by when, will the thing be all done. You know?

Yes, sure, but eh.

Yes, sure but eh nothing I bet you say that to all the burlies. The start, the finish, the sooner you stop poking holes in my plan, which is

what we will never get to the end of, silly, I can take another if you can poke another, if you get my drift, so; let it go, let me start—what, you ask why I have not said when I can start? That’s because you, sir, yourself have not bothered to define how long you will brickbat me; yes, brickbat me—so—as long as that main course’s in the ole’ big super-heated Tappan, we can get the hell over to this next side dish which’s which’s ‘z identify the method—I mean, pen and ink? Nothing at all? Scribble-stone? None of your business, or completely in the nude; which are not the most common types. As a matter of fact, they’re not ways to get anything done at all, but it got us past that step slickly, so, since you still don’t look bad, here’s still another; design how the group will work day after day—face to face meetings? Or, teleconferences? Big deal enough games should take place in major stadiums, if the rental is all right, and; and, and, multiple videoconferences staged out to show what we did and see it see, we need all that ‘fore we get nothing done at all—Toyoda’s Five Whys, for example—why this? Why that? Why not? Why at all? Why not at all? And be careful—move only when necessary. And; scribe on the largest available old school slate sidewalk, an d’ Ishikawa Diagram—preferable thousand-boned behind a cutely whimsical childlike fishface, to keep our light sides up, and drawn large to the point of practical impossibility;

but, do not cross no do not cross that line no no no do not cross that line; and now that you've got her keel laid down tight, bring in the group members; tightwalk them all 'cross one, after the next one after that, and, 'o that, thus engaging them in some kind of divergent thinking—great word that, eh? With me so far, 'brer Duck?

Napsy, I said in self-defense—using carefully picked words, calming him with their slide o'er his oversides, calming him notches down 't a 'me, so he so he easily lightly airily floated along going down the rest 'o his way to some end—it should be hoped.

Yo' cute. You have big hands. Big enough hands to handle the rest. Which is staffed with the right people. Promising, Po. A few a-holes to be fair and if high-fived a few o' 'ur relatives. Some monetary spend-thrifts, and the occasional thief. Et the cetera, 'n th' ceteron-toot. Or, toof, if that delivers a more positive vibe, you can deftly blanket across, and tuck and roll under the first reclinement deserved by your of-course up-close highly personal swath and muster of your hoary declining, perfectly diverse, team. Great job grasping this all so far, Grasshopper. Consider those seven words—half of the magic fourteen, you see, also, but; never mind. Are you deserving in your own mind, of having those seven words softly draped down over you?

I—okay. If you say so.

Good.

I—ohhh, that feels great! Wow. That's all properly traintracked! Go on, Master.

Certainly. There's a smattering

more o' 'hit to do, but the bulk of my pillow's been encountered—got to prepare this, prepare that, as the teens come, all 'broad. Data they can use composed heavily down wit' what amazes including Dick th' Doctor's classic one dose kills all three-thousand and Route sixty-six sane zeroed down tight analiclazitional workups of all such problems out 'fore, and all pusseable pribble-stems hence. But, in the precinct, hide all solutions which might obsolete everything, in the matter o'ready done. Hiccup. Culture down that the solution's not in the words you give. Okay, the bit silly's about here now, so there, so, out across n' under those pads by yonder bank's deep shadies. Cast your Jitterbug there. 'neath there, they're 'efinitely lurking. Lunkers they be. B-b-b-lunkers. Like those all covering many vintage Field and Streams brittlely boxed in perhaps—perhaps down the deep of your Marianas of a baseball ment-mint. Ready?

Yo master deeply Dene, so go go go. Go.

Convene them then. Beach them to their very keels. Round their shapes run them over. Sweetly knead them toward knowing they're running things, not. No step o'er their freshly made aromatics on every boyhood Sunday morning, back when all's still simple. Every passing moment leaves the next to hit headly-la long into a turpentinian wake. To learn from what went first; but chances 'r that's a career in itself. Many have suffered along the paths we all travel to make a smooth way for us'selves. You think it's hard now? Try it when everyone was some sort of tribesman! Arriving on

time for each meeting's a must—but this should be easy, here, in this fully closed system. Plus, we are lucky she's a stout ship, to boot. I mean, deck we been dealt. Think all them in all there's in the gravy? Hah! Boost Mr. Small there to see out past that overtop; he will sea what she means. Ways and means. My God, that's all lilly! And then? Guess what's last?

No. What?

Produce a fat document better yet a shelf of linked fat documents—gaily labeled, as required, of course—and there you have the plan, what plan that plan his plan and her plan and all that's nonliving, also. There you go, and be sure to praise the efforts of the band, and the fat of the work will be done.

Okay—that it, Paul?

Hot yah this is it. This is this it this is is it this is it this is it this is it this is it—yes this is it ah buh-but really now, I must go. I've meeting of my banks at all my future noons.

Thanks, Paul, for the insights.

No pro-placebo. Nice to meat you. And yours, also, with their ifs, ands, 'n buts.

Thanks, Paul. May you enjoy a profitable day. And so, listeners, that wraps up another episode of my Under the Street series of trivia baseboardly ripoffs and beatdowns. Tune in next time, when the Trojan will be on our Mayor herself—plus an update on Paul's Progress. May your weathers be fine, regardless. 'til next time, Bruno your Sammanne, wrapping one more tightly round their axle, signing off. ❖

“Barker”

by S. P. Hannaway

Clang! Clang!

Clowns at the door. Two of them, outside, they're hulks. Shadows block the half-light in the glass.

Clang!

They mutter and elbow, they snort. They want in, need something, someone to undo.

In the lobby, Barker doesn't budge, daren't. He can't think. Of course, it's not the first time; his brain doesn't always fancy it. But ... the lift hasn't come still, he can hear it creaking, grumbling, edging near. He could cack himself; dump it in his baggy pants.

— Oi, you!

The bulky clowns spy him. Wired up now, they perform a jumping show. They shake the door, the handle; try to twist the latch. There's a racket on the street. There's nowhere for Barker, nowhere easy ... too late to dodge into a murky corner — too weird. They'd see him ducking, disappearing. He'll just pretend he doesn't hear. He'll stare ahead. He can't whisk himself away, fly up. And anyway, his feet, they're too flat to scarper, too dumb.

He'll be a statue, stuck — man, crinkled plastic bag.

Clang!

The clowns contort. The lift still hasn't ... he called it. He's loitered. He's aged. He could poke it again; bully it into coming?

Quicker! Or maybe they'll give up,
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forget him. Maybe they'll get entangled in clown business. He turns his frazzled balding head. They try to bend the door off its hinges. The lift scrapes near, nearer. Barker could be dead, waiting.

— *Doors closing, going up.*

Hah, hah, Barker breathes — discombobulated. The lift yanks him up, out of it, away.

There's the stairwell too.

When he feels daring he takes the stairs. It's more scenic, open: the rooftops slide and fall; the leaves are grey. He can watch the clown-folk as they comb the streets round the block; hullabalooing, hungry, on the rampage.

But they can't get in the lift, he reckons. The lift is an in-between place, a safe spot, a whoosh-away. It's a place for light-bulb ideas, if Barker ever had one. He takes a shine to it — the boxiness, the crinkled chrome, the cloudy-sun-filled fluorescent, the iron hand-bar across in prison green.

He can watch himself watch himself in the greyed-out mirror. Except he'd rather not. He doesn't want to envisage a bowler hat perched on top, a poppy dangling red from the brim, his mouth exaggerated, v-shaped. And his nose, he has a lot of nose for his face, too much snout. He grabs it, tries to manoeuvre it so it doesn't show.

The lift stops, door sidles open

— no one there. There's barking, somewhere ... in the bowels of the block. Down, it's definitely down. He can hear it through the dull brown brick. It echoes in the shaft. He won't stand for it. It could put him off his travel-time in the lift. And anyway this floor is too draughty, has undesirables. He'll try the basement: the furthest down place.

— *Doors closing.*

He turns his back on the mirror — his little protest — faces the lift door, feels confined, waits, ready to pounce.

— *Doors opening.*

And the dimmest dark. No barking. He peers into it: nothing, at first. But there's a patch of white in the corner, a low down fluorescence. Is it on his eyes? And then it moves, it shifts within itself — paws, legs, ears. There's a snout not unlike his own. A collar too, hard-wearing. Eyes like blackness, lost, familiar. Maybe, before, he's seen him, heard him — stupid little pit bull mutt.

— Oi, Whitey!

He wedges the lift doors jiggling to close.

— You can't do that. Y'hear? Don't you read the signs? — on every floor. No barking. Just ... don't. Sensible people have to shut their eyes.

— *Doors opening.*

Barker out. On edge, he lol-

lops back and forth along his walkway, a concrete rampart high above the din, the to-ing, fro-ing. An ill-tempered wind circles, snaps. He leans out over the blackened balcony and it dizzies him. If he tumbled — jumped — he'd end up splatted, a crunched bag of bone. Way down, a clown couple scrambles for their chosen phone booth. They scuffle over the incoming, the info. Every year, multiplying, more come to rage, to bare their teeth.

Barker needs another place, a life on another floor — somewhere clown-free, unseen. His tiny pad is ... was a stopgap. He's temporary. He'll take essentials, important stuff from his store. Unlocking it, he unearths a glinting folding stool — didn't remember he had it — ideal for sitting. From the kitchen mayhem, he grabs a bowl — liquids, unwanted. In the bathroom, a cut-throat — for every occasion.

At the lift he has a eureka moment. He'll move into it. It's a perfect home. His stool is foldable. It'll be cosy, plenty of room for inmates on the move. And room for his bowl, his razor. He won't ever see the clown hordes.

Clang! Clang!

It's them! They've broken in — glass shatters the dark. The lift is called, goes down, seems to drop. Barker's brilliant plan isn't brilliant after all. He folds his stool up tidily. Clasp the cut-throat, he steels himself, nose knocking against the door. It jolts, stalls, scrapes open, in the basement. Whitey's there, sitting, in the gloom.

— Was it you? All that hoo-ha?

Barker scours the place for stray clowns — no sign. The dog stares blankly at the lit interior of the lift. A leash hangs limply from its collar now, like a rope — no hand to hold it.

— Want out, Whitey? Barker tries chat, tries friendly.

The dog doesn't say no.

Barker leaps out and grabs the leash.

— Gotcha!

He tugs. The dog resists.

— Come on. Try it.

He pulls and the meaty animal skids on the concrete.

— Listen, you'll like it, Barker rounds on him — I'll even take you for spin.

And he drags Whitey, slides him, into his lift for a little joy, conversation. The dog backs into a corner, piddles a yellow pool. Barker foot-stops the door.

— So, this is the lift. Look at you. Think you're smart? You don't bark now. Why's that? Do you read? Why don't you ... speak? Are you locked in? Is it prison in there? Blink, if it is.

The dog's haunch trembles; it looks up, unblinkingly, at Barker with its black-hole eyes. Barker catches himself in the mirror, the lost-ness: looks at Whitey, sees himself.

— I suppose you write, send cards, to all your friends.

The dog blinks.

— So if you send a birthday card to yourself, what do you say? All the best? Love, Whitey? Of course you do — smarty Whitey doggy pants. You're just a dog, Whitey.

Baring his teeth, he snaps the leash, makes Whitey cower, bow under it. He tightens his grip on the sleek blade.

— You and me, we're friends now. We can visit. Well, I can. You're in the basement. You know your place. And I'll be the master of barking. And, bark! Hah!

And he boots Whitey out.

— *Doors opening.*

A stranger gets in the lift.

— *Doors closing, going down.*

In it with Barker. A visitor? An inmate? A clown in human guise? Barker can't, daren't look. He can barely breathe.

But he prepared himself. He didn't move when the interloper entered. He's stayed still since. He's at a jaunty angle to the door, neither facing in nor out but somewhere in between.

Probably it's a he, about the same height, bulky shoes, clasping a bursting carrier bag, a jolly stick? The interloper's nose whistles a short note in, trumpets a low note out. He's propped against the side, in yellow shadow. The air between them aches.

Barker's a statue again, abandoned in the lift. He pretends, tries to look left behind. Someone could've bought him, as a sort of wind-up, then, unnerved, changed their mind, dumped him. His bloody bowl plonked between his spade-feet, the razor, flat in his unseen hand.

To a clownish eye, Barker isn't there.

— *Doors closing.*

Interloper gone. Barker drops down to call on Whitey. They always have good head-to-heads. They've got a peculiar understanding. The lift is sluggish, it whirrs, it tick-ticks — the basement seems a floor too far. It whumps. The door falters, opens.

In the murk, Whitey isn't ...
— Dog?

Barker's out, prowling — razor-ready — rooting, skidding in the dust. He scours the little alcove to the side, checks the stairwell up. Bloody clowns.

— Whitey, he whispers, — I warned you, dog, you ... you're for the chop. Should've seen the signs.

Barker rages, he's lost. Loose-mouthed; his shoulders heave, droop. He spies the leash in the corner, the collar attached — tidied away, smeared red, left, for him. He feels the lightness of it in his hand, the curious edge of restraint.

It's a good fit. He buckles it round his thinning neck. The rope dangles down without a hand.

He faces the lift, doesn't need it now, the yellow light, the mirror — stares at his freakish reflection. The basement is the place for Barker. His jaw lowers, head tilts back. He barks, waits, dying for an answer. ❖

Five Poems

By Simon Perchik

You squint as if its cries could fit
and in the same pot this egg
lowered to the bottom —each wave

learns from the others just how much
end over end heats an inside
that has no shell, becomes a sea

overflows the way you dead are buried
embraced by a room filled with water
by walls built from wood and knots

and nails, has a door that opens up
whitewashed, sent out as daylight
all the time adding shoreline and salt.

*

Barely marble yet these tents
are pulled along the ground
by rope that needs more rope

not yet some high-wire act
for acrobats just learning to wave
while the crowd below

listens for rain already overgrown
with mold and longing, kept wet
by your step by step holding on

to the corners as if they
no longer want to be unfolded
and you could stop walking.

*

As if these gravestones were once a forest
between each there's still the breeze
from wood and leaves and winter

though under your fingertips the initials
warm, are already stretching out
the way a beginner tree wants to be lit

then at its highest even in the cold
grows a small stone that will ripen
and stay red for the arrow

carved around two rivers and the heart
brought closer, smelling from the caress
that is not a blouse or its ashes.

*

Though the bed died during the night
this sheet is reaching for flowers
still warm from the last time they saw daylight

as one more hole in the Earth
—it's for them you heat the room
with wood each morning heavier

breathing in the way you fill your arms
with sores no longer holding on
—this bed was left to die in the open

as the space between two pillows
that grieves with the ancient scent
cooling your lips among the ashes.

*

Even the night was made from wood
has sheets, a gown, the kind
brides wear only once

though you pace in front the bed
the way mathematicians mull over chalk
scraping it against something black

that could be pulling the room apart
with the faint sound from dust
coming by for what's left

and the corners —vaguely you can hear
her lips breathing into yours
setting on fire the stars

that would sweeten your mouth
with the never ending hum
emptied from wells and springs

for smoke, no longer knows how to talk
how to glow when side by side
as planks and weeds and this pillow.

“Fifty Or So Socially Distant Questions for the Lockdown That Won’t End Soon”

By Sonny Rag

Who do you go to when you need someone to talk to, to explain something or help you through a tricky moment? **Truly, how long has it been since you exercised that opportunity?** How honest are you with that person? **With one being oh, no, I’ll never tell them, they’d blab to everyone and five being it would end up on social media this afternoon via live-stream, what level secrets do you keep from that person?** Do you ever let them respond? **Is there really anything that they can say that will improve your situation, or are you just venting to waste time?**

And if you just had to take a stab at it, what would you say is the percentage of time you monopolize of a conversation with others? **If you are unable to get in a word edge-wise, do you become deeply frustrated?** On a scale of one to ten, one being quite a bit and ten being the nuclear option, what level of frustration do you have when conversations get out of your control? **How much would you**

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like there to be a real mute button for your friends, co-workers, family and acquaintances so that you could just say what you want to say and leave it at that?

What percentage of your earthly treasure would you sacrifice to own such a piece of electronic hardware?

Aren’t you tired of opinions?

How likely are you to cut someone short as if you were the legendary blade Excalibur if what they have to say isn’t backed by some kind of credentials? **Does it make you want to tear your hair out or gouge their flesh with your fingernails?** Does it matter much to you that it is important for some people to just be needed, even if they aren’t able to help? **Does the thought of this being a remote possibility consistently drive you to apoplexy?**

Measured in hours per day, how much do you rely on this behavior of leaning on others despite not really wanting to hear anything they have to say? **What medical mira-**

cle would it take for you to change yourself, so that you are more fair in your communications with friends, co-workers, family and acquaintances? Would you ever, even if there was a fairly high caliber gun pointed at your temple, be able to admit that you are possibly in the wrong? **Would you even imagine that you are the problem and not the infinitely inert and yet sublime solution to issues in the universe?** How has your misinterpretation of all things in your existence been working for you, so far?

Do you ever imagine a reality where you are in charge, and in this madhouse of your own making you can banish into exile anyone who disagrees with you, even though that disagreement takes on nothing more aggressive than a tilted, petulant eyebrow or slightly shrugged shoulder? Do you ever reach down to your hip to an imaginary holster to pull a finger weapon on someone who says let’s agree to disagree? **How many professors, pastors, co-workers and people just ran-**

domly sitting on the barstool next to you have you besmirched online because you found their reception to your brilliance somewhat less than ecstatic? Do you think that you might like to control other people's minds through mechanical or chemical means? Should everyone probably pray to you for guidance?

If, as Robert Frost opined, the world was going to end in fire or ice, would you break out the pulled-pork barbecue or an old reliable cocktail recipe? **How many friends can you count on both hands that you would eat if you were all trapped on a lifeboat and there was no chance of rescue?** Raw or roasted over the Sterno stove someone found under the front seat with the anchor and transponder no one knows how to activate? **Now that you are a cannibal, will you get the team-long-pork tattoo?** On your buttocks or shoulder?

When it all boils down to your personal survival, will you join the chimpanzee army against the survivalist humans trying to return us to the old normal? Will you throw a family member out of an upper storey window to get the

attention of the zombie horde so that you could escape out the back door into the woods? **Would you bury someone you like, but only recently met, up to their neck in the sand to be eaten by hyenas if they kept the last Kit-Kat bars on earth a secret from the rest of the group?** How many human teeth are needed to make a clan-of-the-grizzly-bear necklace? **Which do you think instills fear more – a human head mounted on a spear from the parapets, or the constant piteous screaming of someone stretched on the rack?**

If it turns out that despite the expert testimony of useless baggage the world is coming to a timely end, who did you always like better – Mom or Dad? **Do you believe me when I say that I won't tell?** Do you remember that day you couldn't find your favorite pair of Vans and we all said that you must have left them on the beach when the tide was coming in? **Do you believe me when I say I'm sorry, but it wasn't my fault and I didn't see that pile of dog turds and Mom hosed them down and ran them through two loads on the heavy-duty dirt setting and then she just threw them out?**

Really?

I hate how things are turning out, don't you? Are you just saying that to move on? **Are you just saying *that* to move on?** When the real crunch comes, can we all at least come to agreement that people who argue about the Oxford comma are mostly just assholes? **What were you doing in that classroom back in twenty-oh-seven when you should have been learning chemistry and could have brought an end to this national nightmare?**

What is the proper number of times you can say it's a fucking brave new world before a terrible retribution rains down on us? **How do you make one and a half tablespoons with only a half-teaspoon measure?** Which one of you bastards let the genie out of the bottle? **Which goes better with the end of days: scotch or even more scotch?** How many times must I tell you I love you? **That many, eh? ❖**

two by Dan Raphael

“Morning in Dufur”

Humming in the walls
like the highway back home
an orderly weekday influx & exodus
before the sun can hesitate
more windows than doors
white walls, blonde floors

Before everything stops moving
before the sky realizes how naked it is
where everything's on a timer but me
thinking the longest leash means the most freedom
as if no corners, as if the trees aren't chess pieces

Finding my way back to a one-time history
when we couldn't travel far enough to question earth's flatness
bed like a mesa, river hallway
the roof's cloud cover raining up into the ruling wind
as i would go full face against it even if i had a choice

“Shades of Black and White”

I can't say why gray sets the day in motion
whether i need to turn on the light or not
i'm always the first up, never remembering
how i got to bed, i can walk, fly, click my heels together
and use my address as a mathematical mantra—
if the street's not numbered how can i divine it

Day breaks, night falls
what's in between divided by noon, by no one
more nouns than verbs, more grains than fruits
wondering how green my bone stalks will turn today
as the town's thick bowl makes the compass arbitrary

Mistaking airplanes for stars, helicopters for mosquitos
the clogged highway inside me, monochrome corpuscles
going from work to home every minute
or is it all work and no home, no stopping
road full of take-out windows and drop boxes
for trash and recyclables, sucking gas from strangled air

In this venal world, checking in and pulsing out
filling and emptying as my stomach time is relatively geologic
finding a wall and asking it questions, searching for a window
to react to a chemical of my liking, as if I have input
letting my face mirror information that could ferment
to entertainment, a structure of 5 acts or 1 hour minus commercials
days like leaves, like pages of fading ink, high speed language,
3 words waiting for a paragraph To grow around them, s
something accountable bur non-numeric as if quantity leads to quality
instead of concealing it, as quality desires company

Look at this day, this morning minute
just the spark i wasn't thinking of

"Leaves and Stones"

by John Tustin

I opened the windows a bit and I heard
The conspiratorial whisper of the leaves
And they sounded like a million simmering bees
Or perhaps many gently droning violas
As I drove on to my home
To meet no one but my always ugly me.
Within minutes the brightest sun gave way
To the early darkness and as I turned on my headlights
I turned the corner to where I live without love
In such continual disappointment.

My world is not the same since I arrived here.
Slowly, I stopped sending so many letters.
Slowly, I drank more and more often.
Slowly, I stopped hearing the birds over the din
Of the leaves in the morning.
I drink until I am not anything but me
And I put myself to bed to the sound of a string quartet,
Pretending I am wanted and beautiful.
I never understood the morning language of birds
But the songs of the leaves moving in the wind
When the nights came earlier,
I understood them so well
Just before the leaves turned red or yellow or brown,
Pushed off, fell down and died.
I also understand their willing deaths.

Soon it will not be leaves falling but stones
And as they fall, I will lie alone among them,
Hearing every utterance as they land.
Closing my eyes and wishing
I was not here
But with them.
With you.
Like always.

Contributors

William Cass, of Coronado, CA writes, “By way of briefly updating my publishing background, I’ve had over 200 short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines such as J Journal, december, Briar Cliff Review, and Zone 3. I was a finalist in short fiction and novella competitions at Glimmer Train and Black Hill Press, received three Pushcart nominations, and won writing contests at Terrain.org and The Examined Life Journal.”

Jim Meirose’s short work has appeared in numerous venues, and his published novels include “No and Maybe - Maybe and No” (Pski’s Porch). ‘Le Overgivers au Club de la Résurrection’ (Mannequin Haus), ‘Understanding Franklin Thompson’ (JEF pubs), and ‘Sunday Dinner with Father Dwyer’ (Optional books). Info at www.jimmeirose.com @jwmeirose. He resides in Somerville, NJ.

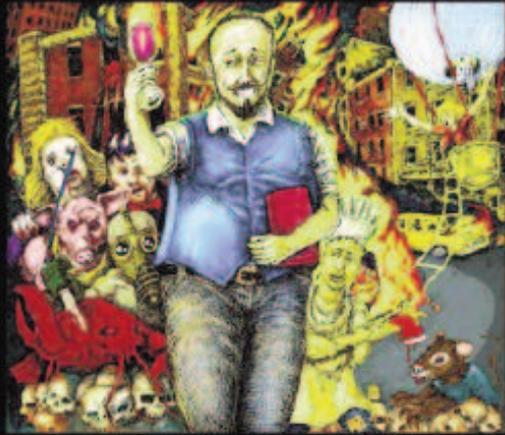
S.P. Hannaway is drawn to the weird and wonderful. His first story appeared in *Litro Online* in 2014. Since then his work has cropped up in journals such as *Dream Catcher*, *Brittle Star*, *Lighthouse*, *Neon*, *The Interpreter’s House*, *Ambit* and *Stand*. He’s recently completed an MA in Creative Writing at Goldsmiths. He’s worked as an actor (in a previous life) and lives in London.

Blotterfriend **Simon Perchik** of East Hampton, NY writes, “My poetry has also appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Yorker* and elsewhere. Hope you and yours are well despite the corona virus.”

Dan Raphael’s poetry collection *Moving with Every* was published in June by Flowstone Press. More recent poems appear in *Caliban*, *Projected Letters*, *Pangolin*, *Mad Swirl* and *Unlikely Stories*. He resides in Portland, OR.

John Tustin of Myrtle Beach, SC, is a previous contributor to *The Blotter Magazine*. Mr. Tustin writes, “Thank you for taking the time to read and consider them. I began writing poetry again twelve years ago after a hiatus nearly as long and began submitting them shortly after. fritware.com/johntustinpoetry contains links to my published poetry.”

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long-ago bad decisions: Chuck McDonough, former grad student,
who skipped town after learning things about himself he couldn't
face; and Penny Froward, whose attempt to help a friend in
danger almost destroyed another woman's life...

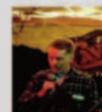
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