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# The Blotter

magazine



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## “Something On My Mind”

We – that ubiquitous pronoun that supposedly means more than one but otherwise reveals so little – are parting ways one with another. And not just petulantly saying goodbye, ghosting in whatever way the words or actions manifest themselves, but moving socially, spiritually, politically, morally, tribally, physically, and chronologically apart.

Like tectonic plates inexorably shifting, only *way* faster.

There’s a great deal to this, but at least part of the . . . current *differentiation* between us has to do with our vocabulary. When we use our words – as our parents used to entreat us to do when we were mere ankle-biters – we have an expectation that others within hearing distance understand what we’re saying. There is an assumption that those others speak the same language as us. This is not always the case, of course, and we resort to frustrated and even angry increase in volume and frequency, tone and repetition, in the hopes that we can be understood. When we are not understood we become desperate in our dispartateness.

Louder, slower, more frustrated. Repeating aloud the same thing, again, hoping for some new result. Becoming angry at others, at ourselves, when that new result doesn’t manifest. Acting out our anger. These are not the actions of a society, however we choose to define that word.

Why aren’t we on the same page? We’re speaking the same language, aren’t we? No. And I don’t mean the words brought into this society by other cultures, introduced additions to our vocabulary that enhance, advance and nourish the variety of our lexicon.

I mean the acronyms, shorthand or slang terminology that are created by every generation, with the intention of setting generations apart. Those may be a necessary aspect of life. A minor fad-cryptology, if you will, that permits kids to irk their elders. Fire, sick, righteous, cool, bitchin’, wizard, keen, neat-o, swift.

Or *twenty-three skidoo*.

’Twas always thus, I am told. But it seems very poor timing of late. Purposefully engage in the parting of ourselves, into us’es and them’s, smaller and smaller subsets, the sense as well as the reality of a “we” in society is that we are becoming tinier dots on the communication Venn diagram, without, I suspect, even thinking about it. Certainly not considering some of the consequences. In our efforts to find something to belong to – most of us want to belong – we are creating fences that separate us. Sharp, splintery things.

But fences make good neighbors! goes the old chestnut. Fences keep

things in. And out. They protect, but they divide. Fences permit privacy, but they hide. Good and bad, help- and harmful.

And, if we keep sorting and classifying ourselves, “we’ will become “me.” Me, compartmentalized and alone. Me doing what I want, when I want. Me saying things without regards for anyone else, not caring, not aware. Me not worried at all about not comprehending what that person over there is saying, much less thinking how we are related. Seeing no consequences at finding no common ground.

Or I could be wrong. Maybe how we use our words is not as big an issue as I think. Maybe we’re good at being both tribal and a larger thing, a society. Maybe. I doubt it, though.

Twenty-three skidoo. Do you know what I mean? Has that term ever crossed your radar? Not so very long ago, it was just a bit of silliness painted on the door of a Ford roadster jalopy.

Did it ever actually mean anything?

Funny how origins get muddy. The following may or may not be accurate. Supposedly, the faddish saying of “twenty-three” originated in the first showing of an 1899 play made from Dickens’ “A Tale of Two Cities,” in which the main character, Sidney Carton – going to the guillotine in place of someone else – is being beheaded “by the numbers.” Sidney steps up, gives his number – twenty-three – and that’s that. Edgy, hip folks of the gilded age found that...interesting enough to start throwing “twenty-three” into conversation. Interrupt me? Twenty-three, pal. Want to dance? Twenty-three, darling. How are you doing? Twenty-three!

And we think that skidoo comes from *skedaddle*, a slang term that was being said, shouted even, as far back as the American Civil War when troops saw the other side running away – Look at them blue-bellies skedaddle! - or when they entreated each other to do the same. A bit of British slang - “scaddle” - precedes that, pointing backwards to the Irish (gaelic) word for scatter - “sgedadol.” Now we have a code term that means what we want it to mean, at any given moment – Time to go, baby. Drop whatever you’re doing. Let’s leave, your father is a real jerk, isn’t he? Twenty-three skidoo!

What is the point? Why not just say scatter? Because *we* don’t want *you* to understand what we just said. It isn’t *for* you.

Left, right, red, blue, fake, real, great, hate, cancel, believe, think, know, truth.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

*getting caught in the rain*

## “Environmentalist - New Year’s Eve”

by Victor Pogostin

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*If you think that Greta Thunberg was the pioneer of the juvenile environmental movement, let me share with you a story that happened twenty years before Greta was even conceived.*

Once upon a time in Moscow when religion was still taboo, the communist ideologues banned Christmas, indeed like all other religious holidays from public life. Christmas Tree was downgraded to a fir tree. Every family however had to have a decorated fir tree for the New Year’s Eve. Easy said than done. Deficit thinking of ideologues had led to all sorts of deficits and city dwellers waited in long lines at the New Year Street bazars for a chance to buy a fir tree and most of the time went home empty handed.

Outsmarting the authorities is a Russian national game and on the New Year’s Eve the savvy fathers and husbands armed with axes and saws concealed in duffle bags rushed to the woods.

Catching the savvy is the authorities’ national game and “fir tree” patrols and roadblocks were set up at all railway stations and highways.

My son was born on December 31<sup>st</sup>, and I had a two-fold commitment to make his day truly special. That year he was turning four and the night before the New Year’s Eve after watching a cartoon with Grandfather Frost (communist counterpart of Santa

Claus) and his snow-maiden racing over the snow-capped roofs in their sleigh with eight reindeers, I asked my wife Natasha and little Gosha how about we create our own fairy tale and drive to the forest to bring home a real fir tree that would fill the room with fresh fragrance of the conifer forest.

“I don’t do wilderness. I’d rather stay home and cook.” Said my wife.

Gosha however didn’t mind.

My father-in-law had 0.14 acres lot of land in a still undeveloped dacha cooperative about thirty miles northwest of Moscow. I wrapped a small saw and an axe in the tarp, tucked it deep in the trunk and we set out.

That night, Grandfather Frost was truly bitter. The cold hit right after a brief thaw and then it started to freeze, and the frost glazed the highways with ice. The roads were salted but stubborn ice refused to melt, and we could hear the salt crystals crack under our tires. The lot was about half a mile off the highway down a bumpy country road that ended at the very edge of the forest.

A crescent moon shone bright, and the night was clear and eerily silent. Only feather frost on wide and flat fir trees’ branches tinkled in the gentle wind.

Bundled up in anoraks, trapper hats and moon boots Georgie and I looked like a baby and a giant

teddy bear, at least we walked like ones.

None of the fir trees that I’ve chosen on our plot were approved by the baby teddy bear and we ventured deeper into the forest treading carefully trying to avoid the pockets of deep puddles hidden under fresh ice. Still, I failed to notice one and fell knee deep in the ice-cold water. The spell of the fairy tale night quickly evaporated.

“Now you pick”, I said, “and do it fast.”

Georgie took his time. In about half hour he finally stopped by a small fir tree and gently brushed off the snow off its fresh dark green paws.

“Sure?” I asked.

He nodded.

I cleared the snow around the lower part of the stem and just raised my axe prepared to chop down the tree when I heard Gosha’s clear voice.

“You can’t cut a tree, it’s alive”

I froze flabbergasted.

“Who said that?”

“Nanny”

I sighed and gave up.

We drove back empty handed. Gosha fell asleep in the back seat.

Approaching the beltway around Moscow we were stopped at the “fir tree roadblock” set up by the gas station. A traffic policeman walked slowly towards my car.

“Fir tree?” He demanded.

“No.” I said thanking Gosha in my thoughts.

The officer peeped into the back door window and saw no tree, only sleeping Gosha.

“And in the trunk?”

“Nope.”

“Want one?”

“Sure!”

“Follow me.”

I followed him behind the gas station. Confiscated fluffy fir trees were lined up along the wall.

“Pick.”

I picked a small tree that looked like the one we’ve left in the forest, paid and the officer put it in the trunk.

“Any other roadblocks down the road?” I asked.

“No worries”, he said and showed me his walkie talkie”.

At home I carried Gosha to his bed.

In the morning the decorated fir tree stood by the window sparkling with ornaments.

Gosha stood looking at it in awe for a few minutes and then turned to me, question in his eyes.

“Grandfather Frost brought it for you.” I reassured him and thought to myself: “Blessed be corruption, the country’s third national game.”

❖

## 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 wish I could explain how I feel when I’m asleep and something happens in a dream that moves me to tears. When I’m somewhere from my youth, but I cannot be certain where. Only a feeling that I’ve been there before, like a flavor or scent memory, with no words to express it.

I relish, despite the illogic of it, the sad feeling from a dream that takes me somewhere I cannot go again. My hometown is not mine. It is a different place. The schoolrooms and hallways are smaller, refurbished, with surprisingly different shapes and colors and odors. Where are the trees I climbed. Can they all be crashed beneath storms and chainsaws? Who paved this field?

Relying on a memory feels like a fool’s game. Ephemeral is not a comforting word.

Chip K. - cyberspace

## “I Got Gassed at Auschwitz - part one”

By Chris Jansen

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Wallet, phone, Covid test, vaccine card, mask, extra mask. I jump in the green short bus that is the shuttle to Hartsfield.

“Where to?” says the 60-ish black dude who is every driver on every shuttle I’ve ever been on.

“Poland!” I say, ever the autistic freak. He meant international or domestic terminal. Duh.

“Ok, international,” he says. Another dumb white boy.

“I tellya what, this Covid is crazy stuff, huh?” Hey, I’m a man of the people.

“Mmhmm. Never seen nothing like it. I’m not worried though.”

“Oh because of the shot?”

“Naw, just not worried. I did take the shot though. Didn’t want to. You never know what’s in it.”

Some people might think that’s silly but this is a man for whom the Tuskegee experiment is more than a Wikipedia entry.

“I took it though,” he says. “because of my wife.”

I laugh. “She made you?”

“Naah. She didn’t want it neither. But she got diebeetus. So I said, I’ll take it first, so you know it’s safe. And she did. I did it for her.”

A pretty day dawning. No traffic. It’s Thanksgiving.

“I did it for her,” he says again, as we are pulling up toward the terminal.

I grab my ridiculously overstuffed backpack before he can help me. All proletariat are brothers, comrade!

Wallet, keys, phone, Covid test, vaccine card. Here we go.

The plane is already at the gate. A KLM 787 Dreamliner in blue livery. What a beauty. What an absolute beauty.

Speaking of beauty, here they come, the flight crew. The two pilots, older and younger, like father and son, swagger of competence...and then the flight attendants. Oh the flight attendants. Most airlines have let themselves go. The once scorching babes who inspired works of literature like *Coffee, Tea, or Me?* became the dour, middle-aged cart-pushers. The younger hires, although there was an occasional flower, were more often thick weeds. Not KLM though. Icy blonde with blue eyes full of heaven, tall and thin, like a troupe of models, skirts and shimmering legs clipping along in their silk cocoon. I fell in love with each of them immediately. Hmmm, we could make this work, she’s based in Amsterdam, I can work remote... You laugh but all men do this. No woman ever does.

Onboard, I get lucky. Sitting by the emergency exit and nobody next to me. I’m king of the world! A big-assed past middle age blonde dumps herself in the aisle seat and clicks her belt.

After the preliminaries, the ice fish flight attendant (a not past middle-age blonde) ensconces herself in the jump-seat facing us and belts in. Forgive me, gentle reader, I am not a fetishist but seeing this beautiful lass, the softness of her silk KLM blouse in

an ugly rigid four-point harness, crossing her legs with a woosh of nylon, I understand.

“How long until we get to Paris?” I ask, with wide-eyed earnestness.

The Ice Fish looks at me like I just told her I took a dump in my seat.

“I’m kidding.”

The lady in the aisle seat cracks up. “You’re cute,” she says.

She proceeds to tell me a story about how she’s German but has lived in the states forever and something about her father being sick or dying or a funeral...who cares. I’m lost in the Ice Fish’s fascinating cold unreachable beauty.

I take an extra Trazodone and try to sleep.

At 40,000 feet everything becomes an abstraction. According to the info-screen we are somewhere over England but out the window is pitch black, no moon, no clouds, no trace of human existence below. The idea of England seems silly. All those people and their dramas, their worries. Their little lives beginning or going on or ending, all irrelevant from up here. This must be how God feels.

I’m terminally awake. The aisle seat is fiddling with her video display. She asks me if I know any good movies. The choices are dismal, but I tell her this indie movie “Peanut Butter Falcon” was really good. I glance over later and she’s playing some retarded video game.

We start chatting again. No point in trying to sleep, we’ll be landing soon. She tells me the same story about her father, a

funeral, or no he's just sick, or he died, and she has to go back...who cares, the Ice Fish is gone somewhere. I bet there's an inner sanctum for the flight attendants where they have lesbian orgies. I hope so anyway. Aisle Seat continues but now adds a boyfriend. "...and my boyfriend was already there...my boyfriend couldn't come...my boyfriend loves Tucson..." Strange, the boyfriend didn't appear until we were descending.

"Ladies and gentleman, in preparation for landing..." An apparition. Goddess, Standing with Handset, 2021, El-elyon.

Then again in Dutch. "Aherguvoorgakleininshmiesengoov ertguhun..." Hot, very hot. Mistress of two tongues.

Fog and rain and darkness, like landing in a Bergman film. So this is Amsterdam? I can't see it at all. Aisle Seat pauses her egress to hug me and say it was great meeting you. I tell her good luck with... things.

I shoulder my backpack, the only luggage I have, and cast a last lingering glance at her. No not Aisle Seat. The One. There was only one woman in the world.

What must it be like—to be her boyfriend, her husband, her layover lover. Not to know her is to love her. You either touch nothing or you're sick of her shit. Not much in-between.

I haven't slept but I'm strangely excited. You can tell a lot about a place by the airport. Schipol is brilliant, clean, with friendly-looking staff and expensive-looking stores. Some airport stores don't make sense to me. Like who says be right back, honey, I'm going to the airport to

get a Hugo Boss suit?

I heft that comically heavy backpack and make for my terminal. On the way I pass so many men who look like me. Same pale bubble head and big eyes and faces that are both fat and thin. It's a giant family reunion in which you don't know a soul.

Down a steep escalator, practically in the basement is my terminal. Drop the boulder off my back and spill into one of the remarkably comfortable chairs, like a little loveseat. Everything is so civilized here. There's even a small version of the Rijkmuseum, with Rembrandt and other Dutch masters. In the Cancun airport you can get kitsch paintings of the Virgin of Guadalupe and tin toys that replicate a scene of dogs humping.

The chairs begin to fill up, getting closer to time. A large family sits next to me, kids and parents. Suddenly I'm aware of a very elderly woman approaching me, somewhat frantic.

"Ahheerguvoornten! Geharvagagargan!" she says, waving her arms wildly.

I...I'm sorry...I don't.

"Guvoorgenheesen!?"

I glance around. She gives me an apologetic look and gestures across the terminal where someone is waving at her. Oh. She must have thought I was one of her sons, two guys who look exactly like me and are laughing and waving at her to come on. I guess white people really do look alike. Even to other white people.

*Clockity-click Clockity-click.* I turn back to see...crossing the terminal are about 15 of the most beautiful women I've ever seen in my life. KLM flight attendants. As crisp and brilliant and expensive-looking as the airport they fly out

of. Silken uniforms, classy, perfect makeup, heels, IDs dangling lasciviously over their waists. Clockity-click clickity-clomp. They keep coming, more of them, down the escalator, as if they were angels or statues descending from heaven, a river of women. A river of unbearable beauty. They step off the escalator. Men's shoes don't make noise. Have you ever noticed that?

Clickity Clickity Clickity Clickity. Look-at-me Look-at-me Look-at-me Look-at-me.

Here I am, crazy in love with you, God, and yet you go on torturing me like the motherfucker you've always been.

A short hop and we are descending through the fog and rain. I spot a very old control tower, and some newer, Soviet-era hangars. This would have been a military field in the 40s. The Nazis who ran the camps must have flown in here. Then the Communists. The future is not bright.

This airport is promising though! Clean, efficient, orderly. And the people are...beautiful. Schipol was nothing. *Everyone* here is gorgeous. The security ladies look like models. The border control officer, usually the biggest, most intimidating dude in the place, is a smiling statuesque blonde. Even the janitor is a stone-cold fox. And nobody is fat. So unlike home.

I find my ride arranged by Gosha at the hotel. I've never seen Gosha but from her correspondence I imagine her as a middle age blonde goddess with a warm, friendly disposition. But that's what I'd like her to be in my fantasy-prone imagination.

The ride in is un-beautiful. Countryside with some rundown houses. Rural Michigan on the way to Detroit. As we get into the city, things pretty-up quickly. Lots of stately old buildings that could be Mozart's Vienna. Most of them are marked with Polish graffiti, which seems incongruous and silly at the same time. So this block is ruled by the Zgrb Czs? They must be some bad motherfuckers. I'll be careful. I think about the Mayan ruins in Tulum, with hundreds of red ochre handprints covering the temple walls. People all over the world want the same thing: to say, "I was here."

My place is near the city center, in one of those old buildings. As I step out of the car I'm greeted by a tall, incredibly beautiful woman, with a warm, friendly disposition. Gosha. Just as I imagined her.

Dzien dobry!, I say.

Dzien dobry, welcome to Krakow. Come zees way!

Wherever you lead, goddess, I will follow.

"...and thees is your hrooom," she says, opening a long skinny door. "Wi-Fi password here."

Big bed against brick wall, kitchen, windows on a courtyard. It's huge and wonderful and I paid almost nothing for it.

"That's it Gosha, I'm staying. I'm never leaving here."

"Ah, well, ok, but where eez your luggage?"

It's just this, I say, dropping the boulder.

"You got everyseeng in your hroocksack?!"

I like the way she says "hroocksack". I want to throw her

down on the bed and make violent love to her. She's friendly but not that friendly.

"I cook you breakfast in zee morning?"

You can cook me breakfast every morning until I die.

"I'm never leaving, Gosha."

"You are so funny. Enjoy your stay."

I've been up for over 24 hours but it's too early for bed and my time here is short, so I decide to hit the city. I had imagined Krakow as a dark, ugly prison full of decaying brutalist architecture. There's some of that on the outskirts but the old city is remarkably beautiful. There's a wide town square where vendors are setting up for a Christmas fair, an ornate Gothic Cathedral with double spires rising above the city like a medieval antenna, and something I've seen before but will never get used to: a 13th Century stone edifice with a McDonald's inside.

On the way back I'm approached by a homeless woman who looks like Melania Trump. I put some zloty in her bowl.

Despite the city's charm, it IS dark here. Only five o'clock and the sun has vanished and the temperature is dropping. Misty rain making it colder. Hurrying to get "home," I pass an ad for a Chopin recital. A university book store. An art gallery. So different from my last trips. No piano recitals in the Bahamas. No book stores in Honduras. But—warmth, and sunlight (something I've not seen at all here), sugar beaches gently lapped by teal water. And food literally falling out of the sky in the form of cashews, mangoes, papayas, and coconuts. But no art galleries. And nothing works. And

the tapwater is deadly. And don't use your debit card. And watch your stuff. It occurs to me you can have an environmental paradise or a socio-cultural one. Choose wisely.

Back in my room I stand, puzzled, in the shower. Let's see here, pull this knob? Ok, cold. Turn left? Nothing. Maybe if I pull and turn... right, left, right. Cold, colder, coldest. Hmm. What if I pull both knobs and turn... HOT FIRE...ok shut everything off and try again. Lukewarm drizzle. Jesus. Before we tackle climate change can we get an international treaty that all hotel showers have the same controls?

Sort of showered, I lie on the bed. I want sleep but I get anxiety instead. My heart pounds, my mind races. Oh my god, what have I done. I'm in fucking Poland and I'm getting sick. Pick up my phone. *New Variant Discovered in Schipol*. I was just there! My goddamn luck. Asthma, diabetes, high blood pressure. What made you think you could do this??? Idiot. Fucking idiot. What will I do? I'm going to be sick with Covid and stuck here for two weeks, meanwhile my SpO2 will deteriorate... I have a vision of gasping for breath in some Krakow ER, trying to pantomime my medical history to a stolid Polish doctor. I'm too tired to sleep. This was a mistake. What if what if what if... When I think I'm going to have a full blown panic attack, sleep comes, unexpected, merciful, as it does sometimes.

I smell food. There's life happening somewhere on the other side of that door, just like when I was in rehab. Just like my other trips. Just like home.



Home. Where is it? I knew once. It was Albany, my hometown. When mom died my dad got remarried and they sold the house. I don't blame them. Home was there but not there. Later I had another home, with my wife and the kids and our guinea pig, Alex, whom we called Poozybear. It was always a safe place to retreat when the chaos whirled around me. But then that evaporated too. Now I rent an apartment. It's nice. In fact, it's better than nice, it's the place I always wanted to live. But it's not home. If you don't live with a woman you are homeless.

I get up and make myself presentable. Maybe a little extra-presentable. Floss and smell good. You never know.

The dining room windows are high and look out onto a beautiful street scene. Sunlight is pours in and Gosha emerges in a black dress, wearing low heels and a little apron, like a fifties housewife.

Good morning, Dzień Dobry. How do you like your eggs?

Gosha moves between the table and the stove, her legs measuring the world like a sextant. I feel guilty just sitting here like the King of Krakow. I don't like people to serve me.

"Gosha, can I help you with something?"

"No! You just..." she searches for the right English. "Sit still."

Okay, I can try.

I have some time to kill before the shuttle pick-up. I love walking these streets, feeling like I'm back in time. A streetcar clatters by. I pass a heavy-doored stone building and pause to look at the notices outside, announcements of babies being christened. A church? I venture inside. Darkness and warmth. Candles burning. My eyes

adjust. A Catholic church. An old couple is sitting one of the ancient pews, praying. A still more ancient priest reclines next to a confessional. At first I think he is a prop or wax dummy or something, but I see one thumb moving across some rosary beads.

I think about Wallace Stevens. "The holy hush of ancient sacrifice." There's an old woman pushing a yellow mop bucket across the medieval floor. Deeper in, I pass a side room where a group of people are saying the Our Father in Polish. It sounds more profound, more possibly true this way.

I press on, past walls lined with mini-altars. Golden suns and gold beams of light radiating from crucifixes. At the heart of one is a flaming gold triangle enclosing an all-seeing eye. Jesus, the paganism! Who is redeeming whom and from what? Who wins in the end?

I go deeper into the church, trying to be quiet and unobtrusive. I don't want to profane this sacred place, playing tourist and gawking at the believers. Down another long hallway and I arrive at the Final Boss altar, a huge imposing display that rises high above the small pews. Gold and shining jewels and candles. A dwelling place fit for God. Beneath the altar in a glass case is what appears to be a desiccated body (?).

As I'm taking this in a hidden side door opens and an elderly, gray-faced nun emerges with a green watering can. She kneels at the altar, blesses herself, and waters some plants, whose green arms reach up toward the dazzling gold and the body of Christ. Done, she kneels again, blesses herself and disappears through the secret door.

Out on the street the sun is rapidly disappearing. I head for the pick-up address, passing by a bakery with sumptuous pastries in the window as well as a loaf of bread shaped like the eucharist complete with a bread cross and bread body of Christ. How did they do that?

People are gathering along the street. This must be the place. School aged kids and a few middle-agers. It's chilly and I'm a little fatigued from the travel. There's just enough room to sit on a stone window-ledge. Why is it called "traveling" anyway? All you do is line up and wait. Should be called waiting. "I'm going to do some waiting next week in Poland. I'd like to wait in Paris someday."

"That is smart," says a middle-aged lady with a Dutch-angle haircut. We chat a bit and she introduces her husband and daughter (a 20-something vision of loveliness with long blond hair and tall leather boots). They are from Amsterdam. Their daughter is a teacher and she wanted to learn more about Auschwitz for her lessons on the Holocaust. Mom is a nurse.

"I work in... this word... do you know 'hospice'?"

I know hospice.

"I have had patients who were in the camps. I wanted to see it for myself."

"Oh, they were children then?" I ask.

"Kinder," her husband says.

"Oh, ja, kinder. Children. They talk about it when they are dying. All of them do."

"It never goes away then, that trauma."

"No, it does not. When they talk about it to me they believe they

## The Blotter

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are in the camps again.”

It never goes away.

Time to climb aboard, into the warmth of the idling mini-bus. Big comfy seats and hot cocoa if anyone wants it. Next stop Auschwitz.

A long ride through rural Michigan again. A new convenience store. A few old railway stations. Lots of time to think. What is it like, a place where over a million people were murdered? Does the land bear witness in some way? Do the rocks contain cries? And why am I here, really? Fleeing “home” on Thanksgiving Day to come to the epicenter of death. You want to change the way you feel. The same reason you snorted fentanyl. It’s a great distraction. The ultimate amusement park.

Well thanks, accusatory voice in my head, but that’s not quite it. I feel like I’m investigating something. Humans. God. The death of God. It’s a cold case I’m trying to solve. And then there was the reality of reality. So much of what we are—what I am—was shaped by images. Movies. Auschwitz is a stock line, a stand-in for “very bad.” An object made from newsreels and Hollywood. I don’t want it filtered through cinematography anymore, with an uplifting ending where the Bad Guys get theirs, and a moving soundtrack telling you how to feel along the way.

We pull into a parking lot with a bunch of other vans and buses. Ok, let’s go. Time to line up and wait.

Let’s go, Let’s go. Mach schnell.

We join a long line that snakes into a sprawling brown brick

building. Is this it, really? The real thing or is this something built later? I consult some pictures I’d stored on my phone of the camp layout. . . I see it now. . . this is the “Reception” building where prisoners were initially processed, had their possessions and clothes taken and were deloused.

At least the line moves quickly. It’s been a long ride and I’m ready to find a bathroom and offload the gallons of coffee I quaffed down at breakfast.

Closer. There’s a painting in one window, a plate with a knife and fork and wine glasses and a sign: “Auschwitz Cafe and Fine Dining.”

Ah...well, I guess. I mean people have to eat somewhere. It’s just. . .

Move, move, move. Here we go. I glance at my Dutch friends, who are a little further back in line. Into the entrance. Bad und Desinfektion.

Just inside and next to the “Fine Dining” there is—dear God—a gift shop. A gift shop? I mean come on. No, not a gift shop, a “book store” the sign says. But there are posters for sale and other nick-nacks. It’s a gift shop. God almighty, they sell souvenirs? What else? T-shirts? Maybe. “I got gassed at Auschwitz” like something from Sr. Frog’s or the Salty Dog Cafe.

The Adversary in my head: So what there’s a gift sh— er. . . bookstore. It generates revenue and that revenue pays the workers and services the museum. You want them not to have a gift shop and then have to close more days, lay people off?

No, it’s just. . . it seems wrong. It’s as if God has been unmasked as the almighty dollar. Money. Everywhere, money changing

hands. Paying the fees. Is there anything else? Or can we simply call it Good, the way things are and the way they ought to be?

Shuffle shuffle forward. Keep moving. Just like Detox. Just like the airport. Do not hold up the line!

Speaking of the airport. Take off your coats, your belts, your watches!  
*Gebuwenmeesengevoortenarmbund urb!*

Phones, keys, coins go in here. Keep moving!

I’m standing here with my pants falling down watching my valuables trundle away through the detector.

The security guard indicates I am to go in another line now. Around the corner, I find myself in front of a gray lucite-walled box like the airport scanner. The guard motions me to step inside. Arms up! Ok, I’m standing. . . waiting for the scan. . . waiting. . .

Nothing. . . And then, from tiny spigots in the top of the box—gas.

A fine mist at first, faintly sweet, gradually gathering and rolling down my body until I’m enveloped in a thick white cloud.

I’M FUCKING BEING  
FUCKING GASSED AT  
AUSCHWITZ!!!!

The guard motions for me to turn around. I see coming around the corner are my Dutch friends from earlier. My eyes must be screaming my thoughts because they stare back with pleading expressions that say YES YOU’RE FUCKING BEING FUCKING GASSED AND THIS IS FUCKING INSANE AND WE ARE NEXT!!!!

The gas stops, the door opens and the guard motions me out.

Covid, right? Bad und Desinfection. But. . . here? I’ve been

all over the world during the pandemic and I've never encountered anything like this. Why is it here? It's just too fucking weird to be coincidence.. Could it be that there are a limited number of tropes of the universe? And they simply continue to incarnate in different ways? Or is it simply a meaningless thing that happened and there is no significance whatsoever.

I don't have time to theorize. Collect my stuff and hastily redress. Don't hold up the line. Just like Detox.

Outside, I have a minor panic attack and pat myself down until I discover my phone where it had been since I picked it out of the bin. In my hand. Ok, bathroom, whew!

In the courtyard I see the others from my bus surrounding a tour guide who is holding up a sign. She hands me a headset and receiver, and we all start dialing in her frequency.

"Kssb... Can everyone...  
shbk... Can everyone hear me?"

This is Lydia, our bird-shaped Ukrainian tour guide, who I will soon learn has surprisingly nimble feet and an explosive, spit-flinging stutter.

"We go now."

Lydia moves fast and we have to hustle to keep up with her. Through the main gate. Arbeit Macht Frei. Metalsmith prisoners fabricated this sign and did so with the "B" upside down as a silent signal that things were not right here.

We follow Lydia through the gate, between the double barbed-wire fence and we are inside the camp.

She addresses us over the

headset. "*Shbk*... You see the sign on the G-G-G- GATEBEHINDUS. This was not meant as an inspirational message, but part of the m-m-m-M-MOCKINGOFPRISONERS meant to dehumanize them.

"Here, in this courtyard the S-S-SELECTIONTOOKPLACE. An SS man would stand here and send those who could work to the right, while children, the elderly, and persons with D-D-D-DDISABILITIES were sent to the left to be killed."

Wow, that's a tough stutter. The SS man would have sent her to the left for sure.

I hang back taking pictures as the rest are scrambling to stay close—but not too close—to our guide.

So this is Auschwitz. The real thing, not words, not old black and white photos. Not Hollywood. I look around. Take it in. The brick barracks appear very well-built. Nothing is crumbling. German engineering and slave labor. I bet they will be here a thousand years from now, if there's anyone around to see them. There's something lacking though. I thought there would be some feeling or trace of the suffering here, but looking at the neat rows of red and brown brick buildings the word that comes to mind is—God forgive me—charming. This could be a small liberal arts college built in the 40s, with its neat rows and Gothic lettering on the signposts.

"*Sshk*... We will N-N-N-NOWENTER..." Shit I've lost the group.

I scramble to catch up and find them entering a barracks.

Inside is no different than the exterior. The stairs, doors, hallways and windows are wide, solidly

constructed. This place is nicer than my high school.

I go into one of the open rooms and look around, look at the view out the window, a long gallery of barbed wire and railroad tracks disappearing into the forest. The barracks is empty except for a gleaming brick and tile furnace for heating. I touch the small furnace. Open and close its heavy iron door. It's very cold, and my hand becomes cold grasping the apparatus.

What is it about the nice-ness of this place that is so disconcerting?

It's care. The cement stairs outside with their smooth multi-colored pebbles, the curling black sturdiness of the stairs' safety rail. The pretty furnaces, tiled and shiny, still ready to receive coal or wood. If a place was built with care, then the people who constructed it must have cared. And if they cared so much about craftsmanship they must have cared for other things. When you do a job well isn't there some intimation that God is watching? I pass my hand over the furnace. How could there be such care?

I take a few pictures but there's no time to linger. Other groups are crowding in behind us and Lydia is sprinting out the door to the next exhibit.

These buildings are exact copies of each other. The only way to distinguish them are the signs designating their Block number. I am familiar with some of these from my research. Each had their own purpose. Block 10 was medical experiments. Block 3 was for Russians. Block 11 for punishment and execution.

"On our left you see B-B-B-B... BLOCKTWENTYFOUR. This

was the camp brothel.”

Say what?

“I’m sorry, did you say it was a *brothel*?” I ask.

“Yes, the women were volunteers who were given extra rations and P-P-P-Privileges. They were sterilized first and had regular hours during which they had sex with non-Jewish male prisoners as a R-R-R-R-REWARDFORHARDWORK.”

Can we go in?

“No, this Block is not open for tour. It currently houses the museum’s IT department.”

Lydia leads us into another Block. Inside are photos of the prisoners as they were processed into the camp. It is very moving, looking into the faces, defeated or defiant, pretty or homely, scared, numb, human. Date of birth and date of death. All of them have a date of death. Not one made it. But I didn’t come here for pictures. I came to see what Robert Bly called “the teeth mother, naked at last.”

We chase Lydia up the stairs as she explains how the victims were told to write their names on their luggage and it would be returned to them later. Around the corner, there are suitcases.

Not a few examples. Not even a pile. It’s a huge mountain of suitcases and it stretches the length of the building. There must be thousands here. This is my first glimpse of what is really here. The is that is no longer seem. Names written, some hastily, some elegantly. The perversity of having them write their names knowing their fate. The utter perversity of orchestrating hope.

Braverman, Helen.

Rosen, Neti.

Dr. Kurt Welstein.

That “charming” feeling I had. It’s now a spreading chill, the touch of the sinister.

Another Block. This time a jagged mountain range of braces, crutches, canes, artificial limbs. An arm. A wooden foot. In the opposite room, a huge heaping pile of eyeglasses, like a silent monster made of eyes.

Next. Another mountain that reaches nearly to the ceiling and goes on and on. Shoes. Mostly indistinguishable, brown or black leather, but every now and then a spot of color. A slim red slipper with a chunky heel. Someone must have worn those to go dancing. And then the little shoes. Lots and lots of little shoes.

Too much. Too much. The exhibits are so massive, the weight of them too much. Accuse and convict. Try to turn away. Too much. Please.

Each Block is more horrible than the last. We are approaching something.

Another “charming” dorm. Another room. There are no lights in this one though, only what little sunlight comes from the windows. You almost can’t make out what this mountain is. Then you see. Hair. So much hair. Brown, black. Lots of knotted gray. But occasionally a long swoop of blonde like a wig tossed onto the tangled mass. Too much evidence. The scales are buried in evidence.

Answer the question.

You didn’t come here for any

high-minded philosophical reasons. Your reason was purely selfish.

“Step 3: We made a decision to turn our lives and our will over to the care of God as we understood him.”

You are a drug addict and an alcoholic. AA and NA saved your life. You met yourself over and over again in those meetings, and those doppelgangers who made it, stayed clean and sober and lived beautiful, meaningful lives, were the ones who worked through the steps, and part of that was step 3, accepting the idea of a God or “Higher Power” that cared for them.

This whole thing has been a test, God on trial. It’s not the first time. The Jews have stories going back hundreds of years of God being tried in absentia. Elie Wiesel says it actually happened at Auschwitz. The verdict was *chayev*: Guilty.

The silent hair is a kind of shrieking in my mind.

Do you still believe? Can you? If so, in what. Certainly not a God who loves us and arranges everything. Maybe some impotent gas-phase spirit that practices non-attachment.

Something lesser. Deism?

Lesser.

Pantheism?

Lesser.

Physics?

Physics. But what kind of life does that make? It reminds me of a line from a Woody Allen film. “Your problem is you have no spiritual life. All you care about are quarks and pussy.”

Lesser. Nothing. “Nada y nada y pues nada.”

Don't be a child. You sound like a teenager who just discovered Nietzsche. You want a world where terrible things are forbidden? Disney World is the saddest place on earth.

I stand in the darkness of natural lighting with the hair.

I want something, connection perhaps, and look around for a familiar face. But the Hospice nurse and family are gone, replaced by others. I realize it's been too long time since I heard anything over the headset.

Shit! My group has left.

I slide out past the somber crowd shuffling in and realize I'm totally lost and left behind. Slight panic. Down the steps and outside. Which way should I go? Suddenly

I'm 6 again and lost my mom in the grocery store.

Lydia, where are you?

I hustle around a couple Blocks. Nothing over the headset. Then, "...to the l-l-left..." I try to go toward the signal but it's gone again. Fuck.

I sprint down the walkway and find myself at what must be the end of camp, where high barbed wire prevents anyone going further. The Block there is the same yet has all the windows boarded over like a blindfolded face.

Oh, I know what this is, the infamous punishment cells, Block 11. It's the only building that has a walled courtyard. The notorious "Wall of Death" where so many were executed. Before they got the execution assembly line in place

they simply shot people here.

There are stories from survivors who were able to see into the courtyard from the adjoining buildings. Polish people, in the early days. Those who opposed the Nazis. They shot the whole family, one at a time in front of each other, starting with the infants, then children, then wife, then the man.

Still believe? In what?

"Kssh...and now we will continue..." Oh damn, here comes Lydia leading the group! I'm unreasonably grateful to have found her and my group again. I must have gotten ahead of them somehow.

"Let us go into this, Block 11, which is the most terrible as you shall see." ❖

## "Desperados"

by Brooks Lindberg

Two Utahns were lost in Utah. So they summited a snowcapped mountain in Nevada to orient themselves. But they were still lost. So they met with a banker in Boston to better their credit. But they were still lost. So they vacationed in Spain and ran from the bulls in Pamplona. But they were still lost. So they wandered the Atacama. But they were still lost. So they bartered for moonbeams in buckets of snow-water on the streets of Johannesburg. But they were still lost. So they sled Shackleton's ashes across Antarctica. But they were still lost. So they snorkeled Atlantis. But they were still lost. So they bought a Labrador. But they were still lost. So they returned home to Utah. But they were still lost. ❖

## “Solitary Scholar”

by Ricardo E. Rojas

Far from the people,  
at the base of a mountain,  
a tall tower stands.

Near the pinnacle,  
on the side of this building,  
two narrow windows.

Inside this structure,  
Scholar wants information  
and does not have it.

A strong horse gallops;  
Archer sits astride this beast  
and fires an arrow.

The upper window  
receives this fast projectile  
that enters the room.

Scholar sees missile,  
goes to the lower window,  
proclaims gratitude.

The arrow contains  
exactly what Scholar needs  
on attached paper.

## Contributors:

**Victor Pogostin** was born in Moscow. He graduated from The School of Translators of the Moscow State Institute for Foreign Languages, worked as translator for the Soviet Trade Mission in India, taught Russian Language and Culture course at the Aligarh Muslim University, served in the Long Range Naval Reconnaissance Aviation of the Northern Fleet. After his return from military service he defended his PhD dissertation on Ernest Hemingway's Nonfiction. For many years he worked in the Institute of Sociology of the USSR Academy of Sciences, while working as a freelance author/translator for national newspapers and literary magazines throughout the former Soviet Union. In addition to translating fiction and nonfiction into Russian, he has compiled, edited, and written introductions and commentaries for over a dozen books by North American authors, including the works of Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. In 1993 he relocated to Canada with his wife and son. In Canada he worked in senior executive positions for companies doing business in Russia and for the past seventeen years in the conference production industry. He is the author of "Russian Roulette," a collection of true stories from his life in the Soviet Union, published by Blotter Books.

**Chris Jansen** lives in Athens, Georgia, where he coaches boxing and dotes on his guinea pigs, Rocco and Teddy. He was nominated for 2020 Georgia Author of the Year for "We Can Be Heroes: a Rehab Memoir."

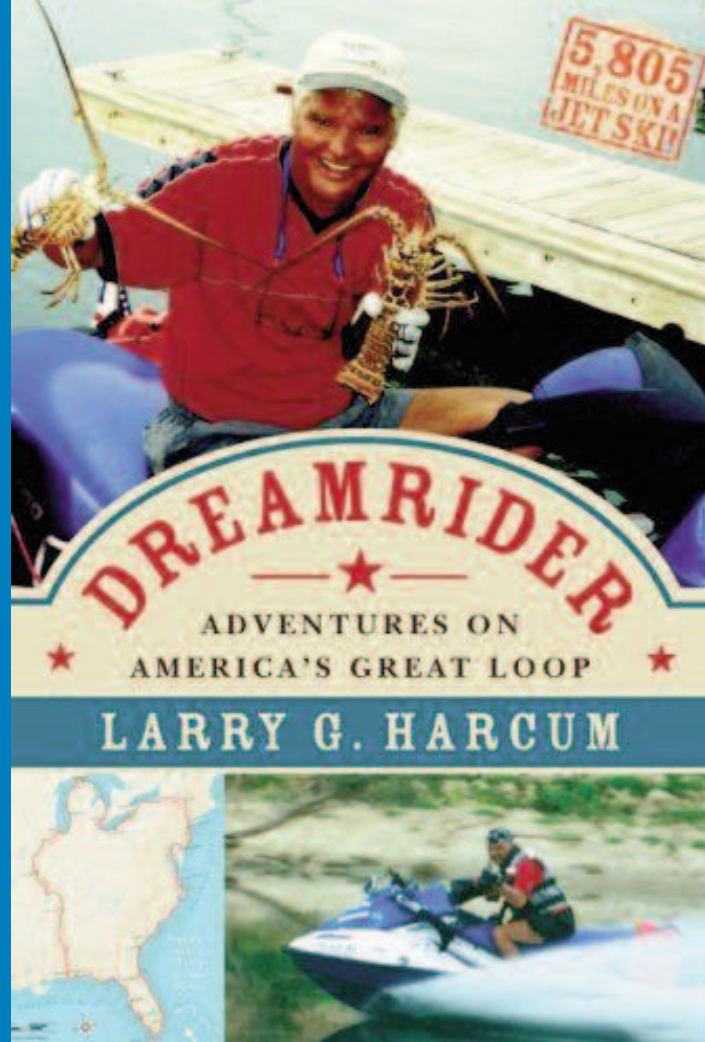
**Brooks Lindberg** recently moved from New York City and now lives in the Pacific Northwest. His poems have appeared before in *The Blotter Magazine*. Others appear in *Squawk Back*, *Wild Violet*, *Lost Sparrow Press*, and elsewhere.

**Ricardo E. Rojas** is an Associate Professor of Mathematics at Northern State University in Aberdeen, South Dakota. He regularly posts his haiku and short stories on <https://oldruinsoldtales.wordpress.com/>, a website that he created in May 2020. He thanks *The Blotter Magazine* for both publishing "Solitary Scholar" in this issue and "Teacher" in September 2022.

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