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# The Blotter

magazine



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## “Public Service Announcement”

I’ve recently seen a social media post declaring, in large sans-serif letters, that there are story beginnings that publishers won’t even read beyond anymore. They, the great and powerful ubiquitous they, will put the kybosh on the work if they see that you’ve begun your yarn with a wake-up call, or a dream, or a character sleeping.

It would seem they’ve had enough of that so-called trope. And they’re bored.

But they – the same ubiquitous ones? I don’t know..., also aren’t fond of too much talk, either from the narrator or the people in the story. They think character development is tedious. And please stop giving long-winded and colorful descriptions of places, people, things. It’s all just too much. They don’t care what everything looks like, sounds, smells or feels like. Please get to the point. Tell us what’s happening. And if nothing is happening, jump to a place in the story where something is.

What they think we want is to be slapped in the face immediately and often and then quickly told who slapped us, and then what happened to them for slapping us, how we dealt with the slapping and then the end. Like in movies. No, like on Instagram. Having the wife clobber the husband in the face with a pie accidentally frozen so it breaks his nose and everyone laughs and only then do we hope he’s taken to the ER. Maybe not, though, because to not take him to the ER, but hit him with a different pie, also frozen, is still kind of funny in a sick way that we all accept now as just fine from sheer frequency and that explanation is not so

important or interesting, and so we don't show it (or even tell it) in our narrative.

So what is wrong? Maybe nothing. Maybe everything in the world that storytelling is. I expect readers to have varying tastes, driven by the noise in their lives. I expect writers to try to cater to those tastes, struggling to find the sweet spot, the Goldilocks-zone of writing. But I didn't think that editors have become so...well, not lazy but one-sidedly powerful (and lazy) as to deign to tell the writers what they don't want to see any more of.

It just seems to be reductive reasoning – negation preventing something from ever happening again. And while we're at it, no long sentences. No paragraphs filled with content that lays the foundation and framework through and around which a story can be painted. No more sentences like that last one of mine.

Side question: If we turn writing advice into an algorithm, won't we stop ever getting that thing we at the moment don't want? Like saying I've had pizza too many times this month, and never want to eat it again. Complete madness, right? Of course I want pizza again. Just not this week. Or maybe not until Saturday. Or Friday...

Perhaps we should stop giving each other such...specific and bitter writing advice. Be helpful in our writing groups, without telling each other what we should not do. Don't like terse Hemingwayesque prose? Fine. Don't find Faulknerian verbal gymnastics your cup of sweet-tea? Also fine. I'm not a fan of every style and flavor, either. But saying "don't do this anymore," is feeding the algorithm of limitation. Defending that with "everyone does it, so nobody should do it anymore" is illogical. I am a big fan of variations, of choices, of details, of all shapes and sizes of stories.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

see it all in 3-D

## “Five Short Pieces”

by Salvatore Divalco

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### The Heater

I told the boys to beware, I was on a heater. Glinski dismissed me with a wave of his small palsied hand. The others mimicked sea walruses and barked at me to sit down. “Your heater’s about to go cold,” said big Carmine, fingers locked together as though containing a desire to crush someone’s skull. His dark eyes stared at my forehead but would not meet my eyes. I felt besieged by ill-wishers and puny men green with envy. What am I doing here? I wondered. I should have just hopped on a plane and flown to Vegas. But something told me the move was to stay home and ride out the heater properly. The boys would pay for their pusillanimity and character needlepointing. “Let’s play,” I said, eyeballing Carmine coldly. Glinski made soft scoffing sounds. One of the others shuffled the cards. My fingers burned. I felt feverish. The heater could be understood as a phenomenon, but it could not be qualified or quantified. “What is that cologne you’re wearing?” Glinski asked Carmine. “Tabac Originale,” he said. “Old school,” Glinski said. “I smell smoke,” someone else said. “Go get the extinguisher,” Carmine said, smiling at me darkly.

### Sanforized

I opened the refrigerator door. The harsh light momentarily blinded me. I rubbed my eyes and looked inside the refrigerator. I had awoken from dreams with a stomach ache and thought a drink of milk or juice might soothe it. Underscoring the moment, one could point to a recent failed relationship or a rash of rejections from people and agencies once more accepting. But why overwork that tiny violin? I could lie and report smooth sailing for me and my life, my life gently luffing across a tranquil sea of reality. I seized the carton of homogenized milk without checking the expiry date. The result for a story like this: predictable. I spluttered and coughed out a mouthful of rotten cottage cheese and dumped the remaining contents of the milk carton into the sink. I rinsed my mouth with tap water. This helped little. My night: ruined. I doubted I’d fall back asleep. It was only three in the morning. What does a body do at three in the morning? By the refrigerator—right arm lifted—I stood in a state of ambivalent suspension. I noticed I was wearing red silk pajamas. Had no idea I owned red silk pajamas.

## Joe Fail Morning

As time passes and my hair silvers and thins, I understand fewer and fewer people. It may be an ineluctable part of aging: one grows increasingly bewildered. The young speak their own language, do their own thing. I lack the mental bandwidth to keep up with them. I've come to believe their consciousness actually differs from mine, that it has changed from that of my generation. Perhaps the same thing happened to us. We differed from our predecessors. We had changed. But was our change this radical? I stand on the north-facing balcony of my eighth-floor flat. The air smells like exhaust and pigeon shit. Pigeons fly from my building to the seniors building directly across from mine. If I moisten my index finger and hold it up, I can tell which way vehicular traffic flows. Today, equilibrium exists. Cars, buses, and trucks inch east and west—in effect trading places with their counterparts for the day. My coffee looks like congealed mud in my mug. It tastes like mud. And yet, I'm a connoisseur of fine coffees. I sigh. This morning, things have failed for me coffee-wise, which bodes bitterly for the rest of the day.

## Time Dilation Effect

I arrived for the appointment early. My nerves fluttered. I normally barrel through shit, but doctors spook me. When you go to a place, there are certain times when a timer goes off. When you're sitting down in the waiting room you are prepared to wait a certain amount of time. Now, when you go into the other waiting room, the timer is all fucked up. Ten minutes in, you start to talk like Bobby Kelly, the comic. I jump a lot. I'm a jumper. I try to make the bone make sense, but to people not in the loop, it may sound strange. I'll give you ten minutes. That thing I had with my ass, that I was worried about it. I was worried about the thing. I had a pain, a bump, an irritation. This guy, this doctor, a new guy, within three minutes of entering the examination room after my thirty minute wait, looked at my ass. He seemed like a nice guy. It's kind of embarrassing, I said. "Drop your pants." He put on rubber gloves. "Be more gentle when you're wiping your ass." Yeah, so I figured. Maybe I should have been a doctor.

# The Blotter

## Festa di Fantasia

More people pour into the balloon-filled party room. Someone blows a bass trombone. The ostrich behind the bar ran out of ice an hour ago and no one digs the pissy drinks. A child-man in an afghan takes a hat pin and pops a few balloons. "I'm claustrophobic," he says. "Do you have any skeletons in your closet?" asks Tweety, the sweetie in yellow mohair. Of course he does. They all do, these people. Imagine what it takes to throw someone down the spiral staircase of this place. Not everyone appreciates the gag, even when it's cushioned by balloons. Someone blows a whistle. Is it time? Is my hair okay? Do you mind if I hold your hand? Do you mind if I do a line? No one frenzies better than elites. If you want the party to flow, open the windows and dole out the fun drugs. Punch out the lights of the sloppier drunks or call them a cab. Hug them if you will, but make no mistake. Everyone shows their true colours in a pinch, especially old grandpa in red silk pajamas hounding Tweety by the bar, his thumbs and index fingers miming lobster claws.



## “Chilli Con Carne in Glasgow”

By Susie Gharib

I choose the window-seat to consume my favorite meal:  
Chilli Con Carne accompanied by an orange juice.  
I view the snow that covers most of St. Mungo’s Church,  
the windows of neighbors, so heavily cloaked,  
and think of Jane Eyre in her secluded niche,  
a refuge from the Reeds,  
viewing the somber sky on a rainy November day.

I usually eat my food very fast,  
but now savor each spoonful with an open mouth  
because it’s too hot for someone of my background.

At home, we only have such amounts of snow in mountain resorts.  
I decide not to venture out  
since my shoes are not suited to the slippery path.  
I wonder what to do next in a small bedroom,  
whose air is ready to transform into icicles.  
The warmer living room with its television set  
would be too smoky for my sensitive lungs.

I daydream whatever is lacking in my life:  
I wander the streets of Glasgow with a like-minded friend.  
We go to the Glasgow Film Theatre,  
where we view Sean Connery flirting with Michelle Pfeiffer  
in “The Russia House”,  
a triumph of love over political rift.  
After the theatre, we head to a pizza house in Candleriggs  
and order a crispy one with extra portions of corn and cheddar cheese.

Amity and exotic food can induce real sleep.  
I dream of my father who’s preparing a sumptuous dinner  
thousands of miles away,  
oscillating between a busy oven and an assortment of plates.

When homesickness begins to be a daily rite,  
food becomes a metaphor in the discourse of a student’s life.

## “Wishes on Windowsills”

by Alicia Alves

I place my wish on the windowsill. It rolls close to the edge and perches precariously there. I don't dare touch it now.

I turn back to the living room of my studio apartment. An old easel and canvas in the corner are grey with dust. There is a box of paints crammed beneath it. My sketchbook peeks out from under the couch. The dust bunnies gathered there are its only company.

I meant to clean up, but the stack of law textbooks and my notes on the kitchen table remind me why I haven't.

I have had one goal for the last four years. Go to law school, graduate top of my class, and become a lawyer. That goal has narrowed to the upcoming bar exam until it is the only thing I can see.

I drag my feet over to the kitchen table. There is a garbage can beside it, and it is filled with dried-out highlighters and stubs of pencils. A pencil has rolled into my cupcake on the table. I hadn't bothered with a candle. I brush the pencil away and unwrap the cupcake.

I used to make wishes every year on my birthday. That's how wishes work. The Wish Collectors come and take them away and grant your wish. Sort of like the Tooth Fairy. She would come and collect your teeth and leave you a gift. I used to believe in her too.

I haven't made a wish since I was a

child. Every year I left one on my windowsill, and every year I was disappointed.

They were silly wishes anyway.

A unicorn or a flying dog. Purple hair or the ability to become invisible whenever I wanted so I wouldn't have to eat my vegetables or do my homework.

Now, I wish to go back to childhood. To never have grown up at all.

Once I finish my cupcake, a breeze winds in from the open window. A man in a black suit stands in front of it.

“Hello,” I say.



“I am here to grant your wish,” he says.

I reach out my hand, and he takes it.

We leap into the night and fly amongst the stars. The world around me blurs until there is only the sky, and images flash in the darkness of a child at play.

My chest is weighty with remembered emotion.

Joy, sadness, wonder, grief. Always wanting to be included with the older kids. To be taken seriously. Feeling like just a little kid.

The wish to grow up. The desire and need to grow up. To find out what everyone was talking about. The things I didn't understand.

To see what was out there. To become the woman I so desperately wanted to become.

My living room crystalizes around me.

“Do you want me to grant your wish?” the Wish Collector says.

I had forgotten the wishes I made to grow up. I only remembered the silly ones. The imaginative ones. The ones I thought I had lost.

“No,” I say. “I wish to never lose the wonder and joy of childhood. But I do not wish to go backwards.”

The Wish Collector nods. He slides my wish off the windowsill and pockets it.

“Your wish is my command,” he says and slips out into the night.

Nothing feels different. Nothing feels changed.

Did he even grant my wish? He took it with him. I saw him do it.

When I turn back to the kitchen, my body is no longer so weary. The textbooks

invigorate me and remind me of what I have been working toward. Who I wanted to become.

I remember my ambition. My aspiration to help people. To make a difference.

The books are no longer a weight. They are a mountain to overcome. To climb.

But I remember another goal too. Another passion. Learning and art can coexist. I can do both. Be both. I only need to remember my wish.

I walk into the living room and pick up my easel. Dust flakes off into the air. Like sparkling particles of my past. Reminding me of what I thought I had left behind.

I leave the dust on the easel, and I set up a canvas and my paints.

I set up in front of the open window.

And I get to work. ❖

two by Dan Raphael

## “Prison Food”

you are who you eat and who eats you  
as you is a complex ecosystem of appetites and life-spans  
born pregnant, I gotta split, you're never alone with mitosis

is a cell phone more like living cell or jail cell  
our untraceable souls and selves imprisoned in the body  
so we're also single cells, solitary confinement, a life sentence

talking to the walls as if there's someone out there  
like a restaurant with a menu of experiences  
visceral cereal, fruits of labor, the matter of the heart

to eat is both to kill and to live, partially reborn  
with every meal, slowly altered by what we eat and don't

when the inmates of my body's ecology are finally released  
most will have no idea where to eat  
what to do with all this air and light

## “Downwind from Forests Screaming”

house arrest, unrest  
here in the city with the world's worst air  
evacuation warning line a mile away  
sky glowing orange like another planet  
the sun invisible except for its pulse  
hey everybody, the apocalypse is in town

& this morning my lungs are feeling it  
no quick hope in the forecast  
step outside—do i feel lucky today

if i could glow with my own burning, smokeless  
canned essence, my inner lumens  
fuel from the busy times stashed for the lean  
coz heat's gotta move

when i can see out but not go out  
can see outside my body but not leave it  
world slowed down by lack of light, motion, safety  
big wind came through, partied a couple days  
then left without paying or taking any trash

since the smoke and ash are mass cremation  
why wouldn't i keep thinking of death  
since the slim odds of winning the covid lottery  
are keeping me inside why wouldn't i  
pound against all six sides of this cage,  
maybe get slim enough to slip between  
to take in so little air, be so spacious  
micro-spit would go right through me

like a mirror would go through me  
as what i ingest gets reluctant to leave  
as something i didn't order waits on my doorstep  
aromatic with nostalgic hunger for choice and spontaneity

if i lose any more weight, if supplies run out,  
no messages coming in no matter how many i send  
unsure i'll recognize what's across the schoolyard  
when i can see there again

## The Blotter

### “Approaching Nowhere at Increasing Velocity”

by Dan Raphael

whether the game is bingo or poker, chess or solitaire,  
three days without water or shoes, temporary housing  
with 5 foot ceilings, once the car is started  
it won't stop til the tank is empty and the brakes wake up  
while the radio is only wordless music, songs collaging themselves

beneath my shirt is a window, trellis shoulders  
the vine of time, responding to weather  
half a world away, half a world closer  
momentum's denial of shrinkage or hunger  
tomorrow, the sky will be another story

I wanted iron fillings in my teeth so I wouldn't need a compass  
I wanted to eat arctic terns, monarch butterflies, any long migrator  
not even the equator stands still, let alone curbstones or the median  
doubling as parking lot, phone booth or campground  
who wants a flat world? what would a forever road  
need to be made out of, since the beach doesn't stop or start  
at the water line, since trees do massive downloads as they're being removed  
sometimes the wind is just filling requests, sometimes clouds  
forget to pay their water bill

the best choice is seldom on the menu, often out of synch  
showing up all at once. my pants refused to change, my phone had no idea  
where I went, breakfast was still in the bowl, worrying  
& impatient, as was the bowl

does here always imply now, when is relative, where depends  
on point of view—the satellite or my memory of 12 years ago,  
streets as stable as my body, the light has changed, not me  
gravity so sneaky we can't tell it's different and how does that relate  
to the climate, is it just that 8 billion people send out more heat than 5  
more drive-throughs, more elevators, more inescapable slivers of music,  
today the air smelled deep-fried for blocks

## "Edges"

by Emma Grey Rose

I end when the  
sun rises

in September,

birth flowers and star signs  
morning glories are blue,

asters

purple

I don't know where my mind went

the full moon is  
a Harvest Moon,  
red

this is when  
the moon comes out  
just after sunset  
and everything is radiant with

bright moonlight

it really is a beautiful thing,

I swear  
I swear  
I swear

## 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 cannot find my room. My hotel room, or maybe my bedroom when I was a teenager. In any case, I have made it to the beach, via a Greyhound bus, and I can see the ocean from here, and the waves are very large and there are many people out there, enjoying themselves, and there is a pier, which I do remember, but I can't find my house, or the hotel I'm supposed to stay at. Either, or.

I'm toting around an old Samsonite suitcase – that one with the gorilla-proof hard plastic, but it is heavy and it's hot out and I want to get settled and go to the beach. I cannot say why exactly – I suppose I want to go swimming, even though the waves look kind of large and imposing. Maybe I want to go fishing.

With that thought, there are sharks out in the deep water, and all of the people at the edge of the water are looking out there, because there is some sort of shark-related problem. I hope it's not a child in trouble. I'm totally still wearing my travel clothes, but I walk down the sandy path to the beach to see if I can help, or maybe just to gawk at the sharks out there in the water, where you can see them, just beyond the breaking waves.

Johnny M. - Cyberspace

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You want to tell a story about wizards? Werewolves? Waking up in the middle of a nineteenth-century whale-hunt? Go for it. Do it with panache and abandon. If you ask for advice, you can listen to it, but you don't have to follow it. Despite what anyone (including your professor or editor or best-friend) says, there are no sins in writing. (Glitches, mistakes and hiccups? Yes. All fixable problems.)

That's it. That's my rant. Take it for what it's worth. And "write what you know?" I'm not happy with that one, either. I know so very little that it's a slap in the face with a frozen crème pie. Dammit, write what you feel like writing.

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## CONTRIBUTORS

Poet and author **Salvatore Difalco** writes from Toronto, Canada. New work appears in *Third Wednesday*, *RHINO Poetry*, and *Eratio*. A book of poems, *Off Course*, is due out in 2025.

**Dr. Susie Gharib** is the author of *To Dance on the Ugly* (a collection of poetry) and *Classical Adaptations*, three film scripts adapted from D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. Her poetry, fiction, and literary essays have appeared in numerous journals and magazines.

**Alicia Alves** (she/her) is a Canadian speculative fiction writer. She has written fiction for most of her life, and she has a Ph.D. in English. Her work has been published in *The Wise Owl* and is forthcoming in the *Dead Girls Walking* anthology by Wicked Shadow Press.

**Dan Raphael's** last two books are *In the Wordshed* (Last Word Press, '22) and *Moving with Every* (Flowstone Press, '20.) More recent poems appear in *Backchannels*, *100 subtexts*, *Mad Swirl*, *Packingtown* and *Unlikely Stories*. Most Wednesdays Dan writes and records a current events poem for The KBOO Evening News. He resides in Portland, OR

**Emma Grey Rose** is a writer based in San Diego, CA. Her poetry has been published in *deLuge Literary and Arts Journal*, *Pinky Thinker Press*, *the San Diego Poetry Annual*, *Bear Paw Arts Journal*, *Ranger Magazine*, and elsewhere.

PAPER  
HAND  
AND  
PUPPET  
INTERVENTION

AUG 9  
THRU  
SEPT 29

FOREST  
THEATRE  
CHAPEL HILL

EVERY  
FRI SAT SUN  
AND LABOR DAY

7:00  
WITH A 6:20  
PRE SHOW

MATINEES  
SEPT 15, 22, 29  
AT 3:00 WITH A  
2:20 PRE SHOW

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