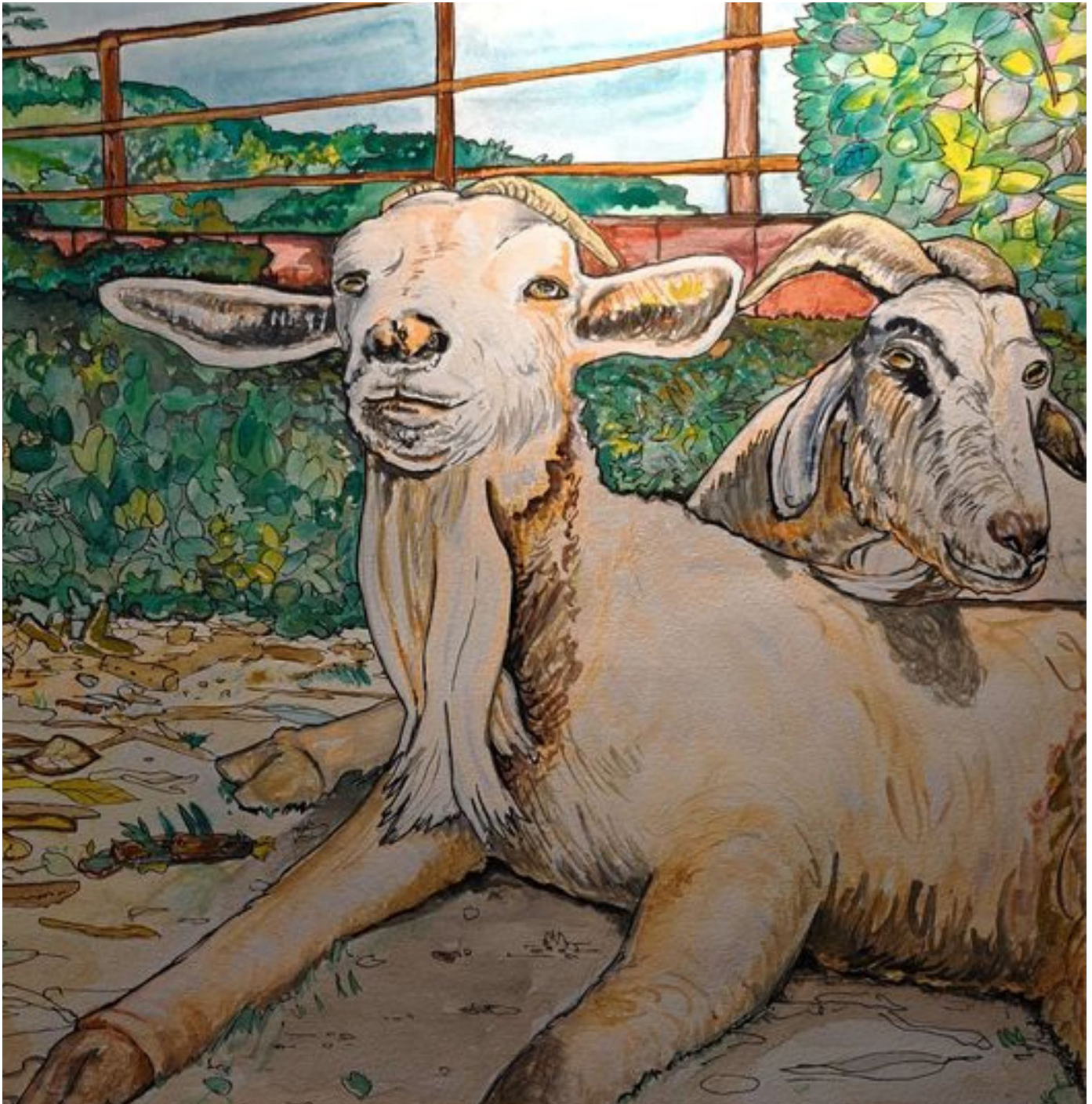


The Blotter

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The Blotter

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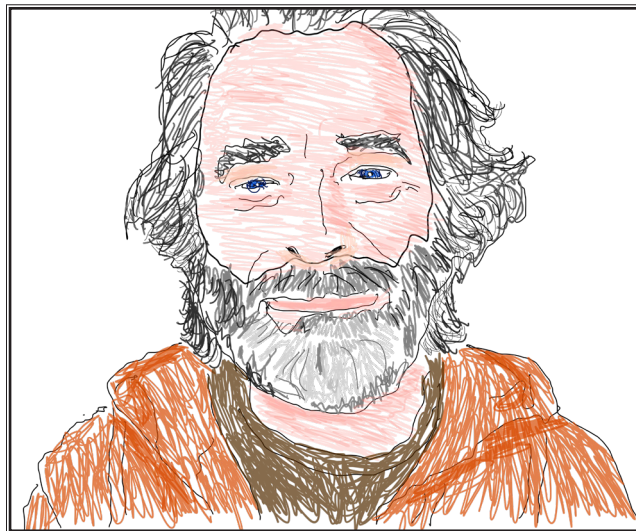
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“How We See Ourselves”

Depends so much on where and when. I am old, but not every day, not all of the time. In truth, I cannot always consider the specifics of being old. Perhaps it is when the cold sneaks under the covers at night – a self-inflicted wound, we leave the ceiling fan on all of the time. Or when I give a thought to the seventeen years I’ve been doing this very thing, typing the preface to an issue, sipping a cup of coffee as my muse. Seventeen is a goodly number of years. Much has come and gone in the meantime, you can wax nostalgic or make your own little happy list of those things. My point is only that I am glad that I am here, with my coffee at this desk in the old dining room of this house in this neighborhood in this town. I’m not always a fan of certain changes and having a place I can go where I belong, well, works for me. This may be different for you. We are each individual in our likes and dislikes. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.

I am a loner. Or is it a loaner? I’m here, temporarily. Also, at the moment, by myself. You do the math. Alone, I get to pick the music, the temperature of the room, literally and figuratively. And it works better to be alone when you are writing. You can do weird things, like talking to yourself, repeating the same sentence over and over until you fix it. Humming along with the radio, to clear the noise in your head. Staring out of the window at the folks walking their



dogs on the frosted sidewalk. Much may be accomplished by doing this sort of stuff. Maybe I'm not a loner, because while I think I do well by myself, I like knowing that there are others out there. You, and them. It is...stabilizing to be aware of you all.

I am a reader. I have five books open on the ottoman behind my chair. If it were in front of my chair, I might resent that the books are in the way of my feet being put up. Can't have that. Five different volumes, each with its own appeal. I stop writing and move to my other chair, which is draped with a blanket – a throw, I am informed – and lean back and pick up one volume and begin on the page at hand. The middle of something. *In media res*. It is good, I think, when you get older, to be in the middle of things. Yes, that is a clunky sentence, but I'm going to leave it there, anyway.

I am a writer. I have survived the write what you know and the don't appropriate eras of modern writing history, and am quite comfortable in the current write what you love period. Even if it is fleetingly brief, I wish everyone would get here, and soon. I think it's pretty great. I enjoy working in a personal genre somewhere between the verse of Robert Frost and the prose of Hunter Thompson. Gonzo with a dash of rhyme, if you will. Maybe it works. I don't ask, at least, not often. I'm not certain it's a matter of opinion. I'm not saying that I'm writing in a vacuum, but that when I work it's a solo flight in a very light aircraft. It must be so, or I will never get from point A to point B. Much buffeting from the headwinds, but worth every strange assembly of words.

I am a partner. My wife likes when I read to her, or at least she says that she does., which is the same thing. I can read anything to her, even my own work. She does like when I'm excited about something I've written. The truth is, however, she doesn't always get what I've written. I'm not her "genre." So it goes, as the great man said. I do not take it personally. I try not to take anything personally, when it comes to writing. I am close to my work, but I am not tied to it, on a train-track with the three-fifteen express barreling down on us. That saves a great deal of grief.

I submit work to potential publishing situations, from time to time. It is emotionally consuming to do so. My I also say that I don't know where 400-word stories came from, but it's an oddly specific number of words. What was wrong with

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

I keep forgetting we're not

continued on page 15

"After Robbie"

by Neil Ellis Orts

I checked the caller ID on my phone as it vibrated. I let it ring another time before answering it with narrowed eyes. "What's up?"

"Please come home for Christmas."

"No."

"This will be her last Christmas."

"Probably not. You said her 80th was going to be her last birthday but here we are."

"Would it help to know she's asking about you?"

"No."

"Pam—"

"Is she asking after Robbie, too? Maybe it's dementia, asking after her dead children."

There was a silence on the phone. "She's our mother, Pam."

"She was Robbie's mother, too."

"It's been 30 years—"

"Thirty-four. It's the 34th anniversary of Robbie's last Christmas."

JoAnn sighed. "Okay, 34. Listen, not to manipulate you, but she's in home hospice care. They say she might last beyond Christmas, but not much beyond." She was silent for a few seconds while I searched for a snappy retort. "Come home for Christmas for me, if not for her."

JoAnn is my baby sister, ten years younger than me, 18 years younger than Robbie. He left home for college right after she was born, so he was always someone I talked about, not someone she really knew. She doesn't know how he looked after me, how he was my best friend for my whole childhood. She didn't get to have that with Robbie.

I tried to be to JoAnn the older sibling that Robbie was to me, but I never quite got the hero worship I gave Robbie. She was devoted to me in her own way. Hell, it was her devotion to me that kept her calling me. Any

other reasonable person might have written me off years ago. Really, devotion is sort of her mutant super-power. She was also devoted to Dad, never held it against him that he left our home when she was eight, always made the effort to keep up with him after she was grown. Surely Mom had things to say about that, but JoAnn seems truly indifferent to what others say or do to her. It's like she decides who in her life is important and she loves them, even when they are in conflict with the others. She doesn't take sides. She didn't with Mom and Dad, she doesn't with Mom and me.

Mom doted on her, as the baby, and it was hard to watch sometimes, given the way she'd turned so cold toward Robbie. Mom tried to be warm with me, but Robbie's death was like a slow-acting poison. It took a few years but it eventually killed our relationship. She wanted to forget Robbie and I wanted to keep his memory alive. Two immovable objects or irresistible forces or however that goes.

When I moved out for college, I never moved back home. I came home often for a while, but I'd inevitably mention Robbie. I wanted JoAnn to remember him, which pissed off Mom. I'd end up yelling at her and she'd clam up with JoAnn fretting to the side and how much fun is that? I eventually stopped going home.

JoAnn, on the other hand, never left home. She went to the local university and got a job teaching kindergarten at the same school we both had attended. She's taken care of Mom, the good daughter I could never be. I've often wondered if we could maintain a relationship after Mom died. I guess we'd find out sooner than later.

I sighed. "I already have plans for

Christmas day,” I said, and it was true. It was my year to have my own adult daughter for Christmas, at my house. I wasn’t going to drag her to her estranged grandmother’s deathbed.

“How about the weekend before? Just for a day? I’d like to see you, too.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Okay, okay. I’ll see what I can do the weekend before.”

The Saturday before Christmas, I drove the four hours to my hometown in east Texas. The exterior of the house was remarkably the same as when I grew up in it. The shade may have been a little different but it was still a pale green with off-white trim. JoAnn greeted me on the sidewalk with a hug. She had an outward warmth that didn’t mask how anxious she was. Inside, on the living room sofa—I think that was different but in the same place—sat a stranger, a hospice social worker, her face dappled by the glow of the blinking Christmas tree lights. JoAnn still set it up where we always had it as kids. I wasn’t expecting the social worker but then I got the impression her presence wasn’t intentional. It was just part of her regular rounds. I didn’t want to talk to her, though, so I got right to business.

“Is she in her bedroom?” I asked.

“Yes,” JoAnn answered. “Want me to go with you?”

“No. Give me a few minutes with her.”

JoAnn glanced at the social worker as I headed down the familiar hall. Everything about JoAnn silently said she hoped for some holiday, deathbed reconciliation. A Christmas miracle, if you will.

That felt unlikely. Even if Mom suddenly had a last-minute pang of conscience—so what? What would I do with that? I didn’t know. What’s more, I didn’t expect to find out.

I hesitated when I got to Mom’s door. I wasn’t ready.

My old bedroom was across the hall so I stepped in there for a minute. It still held

some vestiges of my teen years. My old bookshelf stood in the same place with books I read in high school. JoAnn had kept it much as I left it thirty-some years ago. I’m surprised Mom hadn’t removed more of my stuff, but she must have bowed to JoAnn’s influence. JoAnn was the sentimental one. In any other family, it would have become a guest room, but I don’t imagine they have many sleepover guests, so it just stayed my room.

I’d already walked by it, but since no one could see me from the living room, I tried the doorknob on Robbie’s bedroom door. It opened and I stepped in. It had become Mom’s office after the divorce, but I guess it was more JoAnn’s now. There were traces of both of them in it. There was no trace of Robbie, of course.

He died at the end of August that year, and the next week, I started my sophomore year of high school. It was a miserable week and on Friday, I came home to a pickup truck with a flatbed trailer parked in front of our house. I recognized everything on the trailer. Robbie’s possessions. In the house were two men, wearing surgical masks and gloves, removing every piece of furniture, every book, record, stitch of clothing, scrap of paper, everything from his room. I gathered they were supposed to have been gone before I got home, to prevent the scene I inevitably created. I didn’t hold anything back. I screamed, I slapped the men, beat at them with my small fists. One yelled, “Hey lady, come get your kid!” Mom came at me with a broom and chased me to my room. She gave sharp orders to stay in there, then equally sharp orders to the men to hurry up and get out. She stood at my door with her broom and I slammed the door shut on her. I went to my window, which looked out on the street, where the truck was parked. They weren’t even being careful with the furniture. Everything was tossed into the trailer haphazardly, clearly destined not for resale but for the dump. I pushed the screen out of my window, crawled out, and ran to the trailer. I was wild with

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emotion, helplessly looking at my brother's short life in a heap. I grabbed some records and ran back to my window. I crawled back in and frantically looked around for a hiding place. I finally dropped them hastily in the back of my closet. I was about to go back out to the trailer but one man was tossing a box on top of the heap. "That's the last of it," he shouted to his partner. "Then let's get the hell out of here," said the other and they drove away. I stood at my window, screaming. No words, just wails of raw grief, unlike anything I cried when Robbie actually died.

Mom opened my door. She hissed at me, "Stop that noise! The neighbors don't want to hear all that."

That was the moment I knew the neighbors were the reason Robbie was allowed to come home at all, allowed back into this house. What would the neighbors think if they found out Robbie hadn't been allowed to come back in his dying illness?

Of course, they never heard the word AIDS from my mother. "Cancer," she said. "Riddled with it all over. Can't even tell where it started." If Robbie hadn't told me himself, I guess I might not have known. I'm sure the neighbors still figured it out, though. By 1987, most people who were paying any attention at all knew that a young man with a mysterious cancer was code for AIDS, "the gay cancer."

Standing in Robbie's room again, I thought of his last Christmas, when it was clear he was dying but we didn't know how much time he had. He forbade me to buy him a gift. "What do I need anything new for?" Mother had no problem abiding by that wish. Dad couldn't help but get him new clothes that went to the dump, never worn. Me, I found my way between honoring his wish and still getting him something. I handed him what was obviously a record album and he looked at me sadly. "I hope it's something you like," he said. He opened it and laughed. It wasn't a new album, but it was one he no longer owned, lost to a college roommate who

moved out early and took it with him.

"I do like Stevie Nicks," I said.

"Put it on," he said. I took it to his stereo and soon we were singing along, holding hair brushes for microphones.

"Come in out of the darkness . . ." we sang and our eyes locked, not knowing what to do with that line.

"Turn it over," he said. He was still able to get up and dance a little, then, and "Edge of Seventeen" was at least danceable. We barely got through two verses before we collapsed on the bed, giggling.

Bella Donna. That wasn't one of the albums I salvaged from the trailer.

Anway, that was Robbie's last Christmas. What did JoAnn actually remember of it, anyway? After he moved back home, Mom didn't allow JoAnn in his room, made her use the master bedroom's bathroom so she wouldn't share a toilet with him. I guess Mom wasn't worried about my health. I think she was just glad that I was willing to be his caretaker so she didn't have to.

To be fair, I guess we all did our best to shield JoAnn from the horror of Robbie growing more and more skeletal. Maybe that was the right thing to do with a five-year-old. Maybe I'll eventually get up the nerve to actually ask what she thought about it. I realized she and I had never had that conversation. What did she remember of Robbie's death? I guess I've assumed she would remember. Or should remember.

That day when Robbie's room was stripped bare, I went in there, incredulous that it could be so empty. Bed, stereo, bookshelves dresser, everything just gone. I stood there weeping and Mom appeared at the doorway.

"Get out of here," she ordered. "Stay out until I can get it sanitized."

I looked at her, stunned. As if I hadn't been the one to sit with Robbie throughout his dying weeks and months. As if I hadn't been the one to help him to the bathroom

when he got too weak to go himself. As if I wasn't the one to help him clean up when he didn't make it.

Not just me. Me and Dad. Those last summer months, I stayed with Robbie while Dad was at work and then Dad made me leave the room for a while every evening, telling me I had to take care of myself, too. Before the summer months, Robbie just stayed in his room all day, except for restroom visits when he was still mobile enough. And when he couldn't make alone anymore, I'd sometimes come home from school to find him in a soiled adult diaper. Mom wouldn't touch him. She considered him too dirty for her to deal with, especially when he soiled himself. At first, I tried to convince myself that it was just her way of dealing with her firstborn child dying, but eventually I came to understand she thought being gay was dirty and she would be clean.

It was a hell of a way for a 15-year-old girl to spend a summer, but I have no regrets.

Turned out, Dad didn't know Mom was planning to strip Robbie's room. When he got home from work that day, they had a terrific fight. Despite Mom's intentions, the neighbors overheard a lot of yelling that day.

Dad filed for divorce my senior year. Two years of grieving a son his wife no longer acknowledged ever existed had become too much for him. He didn't want to leave JoAnn, but his lawyer told him it would be an ugly custody battle that he was unlikely to win. He didn't want to put his girls through that. He said I was old enough to decide what I wanted to do, but I decided to spend that last year at home with JoAnn, to look after her. Dad seemed to understand and I visited him as often as I could.

Dad never remarried. Between that and his sympathy for Robbie it crossed my mind that maybe he was gay, too. I'll never know. It's not the sort of thing I would have discussed with him. Once, after Robbie had died and after our parents were divorced, I was with Dad at some gathering and someone

asked about the years between his three children. He made a joke of it. "She only got pregnant when we had sex." All the men laughed, but I couldn't help but wonder at other implications.

I've also speculated about JoAnn's sexuality. She's never dated, that I know of. And Mom wouldn't be someone you'd call sex positive, so I've wondered about her, too. For all I know, I'm the only straight person in the whole family. It's all speculation, though.

It wasn't even something I ever talked with Robbie about, not really. If not for the AIDS diagnosis, I've wondered if or when he would have ever told me. I asked him if he knew how he got AIDS. I didn't know when he might have had a blood transfusion, but I had to ask. He just rolled his eyes at me and said, "Pammy, I'm gay," like I should have known. That's all he ever said about it, though. I tried to ask about boyfriends, more to signal my acceptance of him than anything, but he'd clam up. It was the only time I ever saw Mom's iciness in him. Those were such different days.

I needed to stop stalling. I took a deep breath and found the will to go see Mom.

I entered my mother's bedroom, fighting back childhood feelings. We weren't really allowed in there as kids, and it felt transgressive now. I looked around. Very little had changed. Bed, nightstand, dresser, rocking chair—all were pretty much where they always had been in the decades since Dad left. That was the last time she rearranged the furniture. There was a nod to the season, though. A tiny ceramic Christmas tree was blinking with tiny colored lights on the nightstand. A poinsettia kept vigil on the dresser.

She lay there sleeping. I found it hard to look at her. I wasn't prepared to see, in her drawn, dying face, Robbie's face. I wasn't ready for that at all.

I wondered how much morphine was in the drip by her bed, if she'd be coherent if she woke up. I didn't try to rouse her. I sat in her rocking chair and stared out the window, into

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my childhood backyard, swing set and treehouse long gone. The live oak was still there, looking sturdy as ever. In my mind's eye, I saw the treehouse in its branches. I saw teen-aged Robbie, calling down to me. "No girls allowed, but you're an exception!" I must have been six or seven years old, and probably had no business climbing that ladder, but I did it. I climbed that ladder to his secret boy place as quickly as I could, afraid he'd change his mind. He told stories about his classmates and our cousins and giggled incessantly. I didn't understand the implications of all the stories, but I giggled because he did. He had a package of Oreos up there, and we licked out the cream and threw the dry cookies over the fence into our neighbors' yard.

That's how I remember Robbie. Giggling and making exceptions for me. He always included me. He was the best big brother in the world. Later, when he'd come home from college with new records—ABC, Hall and Oates, Yaz, Sheena Easton—we'd dance in his bedroom until we collapsed on his bed, always full of the giggles.

I looked again at Mom. She looked miserable in her sleep, mouth open, I.V. drip stabbed into her hand. Her hair was white, but short and combed back. She really did look like Robbie with a bleach job. Dying brought out their cheekbones. I half expected her to wake with a start and call out for her mother, as Robbie had done. I was prepared to tell her, like I told Robbie, "Your mother isn't coming." No, not like I told Robbie. I'd tell her with an edge in my voice.

I sat there fifteen, twenty minutes. I thought of JoAnn, sitting with the social worker, hopeful that Mom and I were having a good, conciliatory heart-to-heart. Did JoAnn wake her to talk? She acted like Mom was talkative.

I stood up and the rocker creaked. Mom looked up. We locked eyes for a moment.

"Pamela."

"Hi, Mom."

I stood there, letting her look at me. I

tried to read her face, the face that not only gave Robbie his cheekbones, but also the arched eyebrow that could devastate when raised. Mom used that eyebrow to kill. Robbie could never maintain it. His attempts at devastation always dissolved into laughter.

I stepped up to her bedside, tentatively. "Well," I said. "Here we are."

"Here we are," she answered, slowly.

Neither of us had prepared anything to say to the other, maybe because we never expected to speak to each other again. So I addressed that.

"If you have nothing new to say to me, I have nothing new to say to you."

Her closed mouth tightened, grew narrow. Age and infirmity made her lips more wrinkled but I knew that look. I had a childhood full of that look, which was never followed by words. It was a sign that words were done, silence as a judgment and a punishment. I hated how it still held some power over me.

"Fine," I said. "Well, that's done." I turned to the door and as I opened it I turned back to her. "You look so much like Robbie in his last hours," I said, and stepped out into the hallway.

Cruel, yes, and later I would wonder if those were really the last words I wanted say to my mother, but in the moment, I hoped it gave her a pain the morphine couldn't reach.

When I reentered the living room, the social worker was still there and they both looked up at me with similar faces of expectation.

"How'd it go?" JoAnn asked.

"It was lovely," I said.

"So you'll stay the night?"

I never made any promises about that and I decided I really didn't have the moral fiber to do it. Driving another four hours would be easier. "It wasn't that lovely," I said.

"Oh Pamela," she said, but that's as far as she went. She got up and went to check on Mom, probably to make sure I hadn't strangled her in her bed. The social worker was

still there. She looked awkward and puzzled. "Hi again," I said.

"Hi," she said and shifted in her seat. "JoAnn says you and your mother had a falling out."

Those were not the words I would have chosen but, okay. "I guess you could say that."

"You know, family can be very important at times like this," she said. "JoAnn says nothing is more important to her."

I involuntarily let out a small bark of a laugh. "Yes! Very important! I wish Robbie were here to tell you how important!"

"Robbie?"

I studied her a few seconds and it dawned on me. "You don't know we had an older brother, do you?"

"An older brother?"

"He died just after graduating college. I was a sophomore in high school. JoAnn was five."

She glanced around the living room. There weren't many family photos but none of us as a family before Dad moved out.

"Does Mom talk to you?" I asked.

"Yes, some."

"Ask her about Robbie. She'll like that." Before she could respond, I called down the hallway. "JoAnn, I'm heading out!"

JoAnn came down the hallway at a trot. "Pamela, are you sure? Couldn't you stay just one night? We haven't really talked yet."

"You have your hands full. I know what it's like to care for a dying relative."

"Pamela—"

"I'll come for the funeral. I'll do that for you. We can talk then."

Without further goodbyes, I left my childhood home and drove away.

Mom lingered through the holidays. JoAnn and I exchanged quick phone greetings on Christmas day while my daughter called her dad. She sent me an email every other day or so, which I dutifully responded to, if briefly. I was fine with JoAnn being the one to sit at Mom's deathbed, clean her up, spoon

feed her, whatever Mom needed. I drove eight hours, round trip, for that visit. Let the record show I made that much of an effort.

Then late on January 5, I got this email from her.

Pamela,

Mom died this morning. I woke up and she was gone. It's been a busy day.

We'd already planned most of the funeral before she died, so there's not a lot to do there, but we have to set the date with the church and such. Let me know if you want to be involved in any way.

The last week, Mom started talking to dead people. She talked to her parents and Aunt Jillian, even Dad and Robbie. Most of it was incoherent, but I understood the names. I thought you'd like to know that in her last days, she did say Robbie's name.

Love,
JoAnn

How do I explain it? It was a little bit like hearing someone from high school had died. I felt sad, but not really bereaved.

I clicked "reply" and told JoAnn I'd be there whenever they planned the funeral. I offered to coordinate the luncheon after the burial. I could do that much.

I hit "send" and sat back. The computer screen was the only light in my office as evening fell and I let that be enough.

I wondered if Robbie really visited her as she prepared to die. I wondered if he was kind to her, if she tried to make amends. I wondered if he would visit me in my last hours. I hoped he would. I hoped he would make me laugh and maybe dance for me. That would be a comfort, I thought. I still miss him so much, even after all these decades.

I found Bella Donna on a streaming service and listened to the whole album, weeping in the darkness. ❖

The Blotter

two by Keith Niles

"The Blotter"

The blotter keeps shadowing me.
It wants me. It wants to take away
my light again.

I keep my eyes scrubbed and my
pipes drained but sometimes you
need to suck clean a date stamp or
relieve a fountain pen just to
maintain. You drive a car fast on the
outskirts of zen, the sheriff is parked
with his headlights on outside the
gates of delusion, you can see
his cuffs glinting in the moonlight.

The blotter keeps shadowing me.
The dogs are barely visible through
the sleet, the editor of the local news
will take anything he can get.

I veer suddenly onto a dirt road and
lose the world for a few seconds but
the darkness races after me. I hit a
bump and fly and my car lands like a
carcass, groaning, but I whip her on,
we're racing for the sun we're racing
for the sun, but the blotter wants us.

I wake at my desk at work, bitter and
pissed at the world and plotting my
vengeance I hit on a bottle of dr.
pepper hard and feel the deep burn,
the blackness filling me like a drug,
it wants me, it wants all of me.

I go to the bathroom past faces
I can't make out anymore and
release, the cake soaks up
all the black ink. I take a huge breath
of pure white happiness
and hold it up in there as long as I
can bear, but I see a shadow beneath
the door, the shadow is waiting.

The blotter wants me. The blotter
wants to take away all my light
again.

"The crabs refrain"

The life lived backwards and forwards
the life moving sidelong across time the
life not set in a groove the life free from
form, the ego juggling hearts like pins
the soul slumbering deep beneath the
snow.

The life that dives deep down through
the universe in search of stars, the dogs
barking somewhere off on the periphery.

The neuroses of the disengaged, the
backdraft of pain that shuts down the
office for a week. The secret broken
heart of the king, the laughing maidens
winding down and sleeping like ragdolls
on the wood floors.

The life lived backwards and forwards
the rules all following fools down the
deadly abyss. The sex that keeps on
coming the sex that isn't sex.

The unpublished life the lack of a record
label the dreams that happen with the
recorder switched off the stares from the
insides of the queers the straights of the
cleaning lady's fears.

The life that jumps from ladder to ladder
the cuffs of the pants soaking wet, the
alcoholics slamming cigarettes like
beers.

All the buns in the ovens crossed all the
egos alphabets all the dograces fixed.
The life lived backwards and forwards
the clocks that only tick.

"The chosen few"

by Keith Niles

I got my midwest bros i got my cuzzes from the north
pole i got exes from athens georgia and the inland
empire i got exes from the valley and the sunniest
cults the southwest can produce i got bros half my
age and sisters twice as smart i got a couple poets in
my posse and even a couple of pals with third eyes
and deep wells full of soul i got guys i wouldn't trust
with a fiver i got acquaintances would lie to you
before they'd give you the satisfaction of some sort
of truth i got narcissists and headbangers and
bombshells that are like 90 proof i got coworkers got
my back and an aunt in redondo beach who's always
been extremely kind...

i got a mind of my own but thing is it gets all muddy
and polluted and black and sometimes i'm walking
blind through all the muck and i'm groping around
for one motherfucker i can truly trust, one
motherfucker to help me through this dark dark life
and you know as well as i do that's when you reach
for the black book and try to fuckin find the fuck.

"Fifty things you cannot do" found poetry by the Blotter Gang

Tell a football family that their child probably won't play professionally. Understand the economic factors of Africa's hunger. Voluntarily stop driving when you are so old you no longer have the hand-eye coordination. Want only one piece of pie. Consistently touch her in that perfect spot. Satisfactorily film fireworks. Actually agree with a lover on what made a movie good. Understand how this very morning someone is waking up next to the person you find the most beautiful in the world and thinking oh, for pity's sake, not again. Either fix or damage France's self-esteem. Keep constituents consistently content. Rationalize the business reason for outsourcing to your laid-off employee. Explain pluralistic thinking to a fanatic. Successfully explain your boyfriend to your father. Make banana bread with fresh bananas. Make Woody Allen funny ever again. *Ever*. Win over a college basketball star to the argument that one more year at your alma mater is a fair trade for five million dollars in the NBA. Find someone as good a hitter as Joe DiMaggio. Paint as well as a sunset. Appreciate childhood during childhood. Stop and smell the roses. Hold back the coming of the night. Argue with the sun. Improve your career by bicycling to work. Not scratch that ineffable itch. Have good plastic surgery. Make mosquitoes or cockroaches go away. Imagine Hell. Fight off the gag reflex forever. Put quality into words and use those words to improve quality. Explain why you love your brother. Teach a child to love fishing on the first try. Read Finnegan's Wake in a coffee shop. Comprehend China. Taste donuts in a dream. Be truly cool after you're fifty years old. Convince a man who's upset about his

hair loss that a good short haircut will fix it. Have imagined that Jose Feliciano could actually cover The Doors' "Light My Fire." Envision a chance meeting in 1955 between Yogi Berra and Albert Einstein. Teach a cat. Say, "Keep constituents consistently content," five times, really fast. Keep your eyes closed when someone says "now, don't peek," and leads you up to the edge of the Grand Canyon. Don't say "ya'll" really badly when you move down South. Not deserve two for flinching. Not watch your lover while they undress. Drink Vodka like a Russian. Suppress your deep discomfort at the urologist. Not wonder what really happened to JFK. Sneeze without blinking. Quietly flag a New York City cab. Gracefully eat mac and cheese.

The Blotter

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.

The rooms we were once in are firm in our memory, solid as the joists and studs and nails and frames can make them. And yet, we are hard-pressed to describe them. To say the words – the brick was smooth on the side, and blue-green like a strange, hard sea, is not as easy as it is to have them clothe a dream, an idle hallucination in the night.

And to wake and be able, once more, to see the place in the mind's eye, as if it were a previous day's excursion, is both astonishing and insult to our capacity for recollection. How did we find the file-card that contained that place, that classroom, that drugstore, that tree beneath which we once sat on an early summer afternoon? And how to procure it again, because it is precious and missed.

I hear people say that they don't dream. They seem proud to not have such sleep-induced delusion interrupting their sound unconscious. I nod and pretend to agree but my truth is that I cannot imagine their lives. What are they missing? If not the variegated fragmented strips of bizarre film that make up the human brain at rest, then at least they lose the visit into their own past, with its own well-polished gemstones.

SC - Cyberspace

CONTRIBUTORS

Neil Ellis Orts is a writer living in Houston, Texas. He writes in a number of forms, from articles on dance and other arts to plays, short stories, and prose poems. His novella, *Cary and John* is available wherever you order books.

Keith Niles' poetry can be found online at sites like Underground Voices, offline in mags such as Artillery Magazine, Caffeine, and sundry small zines, and on video via youtube.com. He was the host of the open mic at the Little Joy dive bar in Los Angeles during the aughts, an egalitarian scene where the the ethos was to always present new work.

Bruce Baldwin is an artist living in Cary, North Carolina working in watercolor, ink, color pencils and markers. His paintings and drawing have been on display in various locations. Fixated on the world around him, his works are mostly of nature. Buildings, street scenes and life in general as seen through the eyes of North Carolinians are captured in the mediums Bruce employs.

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500? I will say this: it isn't enough to tell me I'm in a forest. I need to know what kind of trees I'm seeing. Am I in Oregon, or the Hurtgenwald? Is it raining? Cold? Did I remember my galoshes? The old ones with the hole in the toe, or my birthday present pair?

How 'bout you? Do you let someone else dictate how you write? Do you respond to prompts, or look for validation on your cellphone's panoply of electronic interaction? Do you worry that you are in a slump, or have lost your muse, or your enthusiasm? Where did you last have it? Look there.

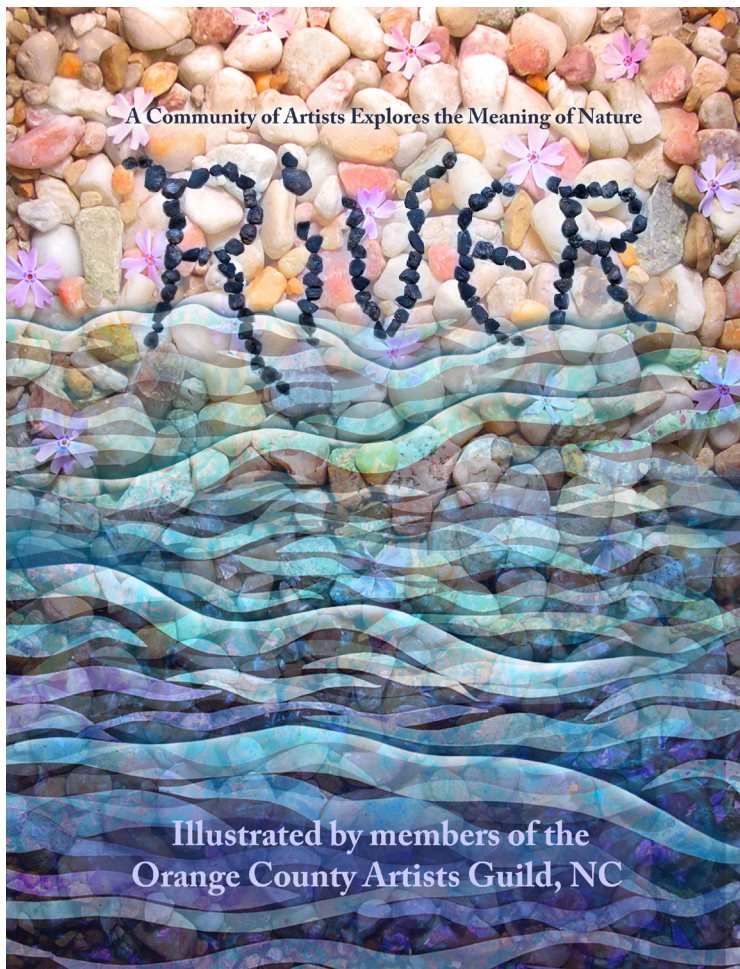
Me? I look in the mirror. I receive, they say, a skewed version of myself from this view. A form of bias influences the truth. What I know, because I am told this, is I need a haircut and a shave. Still, I try to not give too much credence to what I see. Is that lemon or butter yellow? I don't know. My mom in her wisdom chose to teach us the world she lives in, one of limited sight. Don't let first impressions have the whole game. Listen to people, to music, to teachers and nature. What bird is that? Feel. Is it cold outside? Wear a coat. Is it January in New Jersey? Wear a coat, even if it isn't cold at the moment. Playing cards with a guy named Doc? Wear a coat. What I know, objectively, is I'm wearing a thirty-seven-year-old sweater, blue, crew-neck. My smile is real, because I am not smiling at my reflection, but at the idea of having one. It is still fun, even at this late date, even in this train wreck. I am almost ashamed at how much fun it is. Perhaps I have a sort of imposter syndrome, in which I think I am a successful writer. Who cares?

I have no other unsolicited advice. Find a place. Be in the middle of things. Don't take your reflection so seriously. Wear a coat. That's enough for now.

My coffee is not hot anymore, but I don't really care and so take another sip. I could heat it up, but I am lazy in that regard. That much is not news. Everyone that knows me is fully aware. I wish I had an almond croissant, but I don't. We downsized to one car (there's a sentence that is rife with privilege) a couple of years ago, so I can't go get one. No, it is the epitome of foolish to DoorDash one.

I know, I know: I really need to get over myself.

Garry - editor@blotterrag.com



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as seen
through
the eyes of
different
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