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"Situational Awareness"

COVER: "Night flamingos" by Olivia

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I recently had a conversation with myself while shampooing my hair one night. It was following Easter Sunday and while I'm no longer religious, of course I indulge with my family for certain religious holidays, as I've done all my life. We had celebrated with a lunch at my aunt's house; I picked the most, the only, somewhat frilly dress I own to salute the occasion and picked up flowers and an assortment of sweets for the family on my way. The weather was one of April's best and it was a perfect day for indulging in a deviled eggs spread and a sangria. It was the type of warm and breezy you had to open all the windows and crack the porch door during or it would feel like a wasted opportunity.

We had wonderful conversations, as our family always does, and I rarely miss a chance to spend time with my family when I can, but a couple days later I found myself daydreaming having an argument with my mother. Nothing had happened prior; leading up to or after Easter. No quarrels were had, no uncomfortable attitudes to ruin the mood, no unpleasant situations or subtle undertones of a potentially unpleasant conversation...

We were arguing about a difference of opinion, the details of which were the kind that daydreams don't allow you to remember, but the theme was along the lines of t*he lengths the two of us would go to save each other, if ever there was a necessity.*

You are correct. That is neither a typical lunch nor Easter conversation– although one could argue that the story of Jesus's death is a portrayal of the lengths he– yeah, yeah, okay.

Here we were, in my head, having this argument in my aunt's living room. In our Easter garb we stood as we yelled and spiraled towards tears.

While naturally one can't possibly remember every nook and cranny of a dream, I remember I did say something along the lines of *It's not about whether or not I would take a bullet for you, it's about how many bullets I'd take.*

I stopped shampooing once I finally realized what I had been thinking– not even realizing I was daydreaming. I paused my shower routine to ask myself why the hell I was subconsciously imagining such a scenario. I wanted to finish the task I had at hand obviously, but I also wanted to hurry up and get out so I could call her. I hadn't talked to her in a couple of days and I thought she'd get a kick out of the odd thought I had.

I thought about it, for maybe six seconds, then realized what an awful idea it would be. There's a saying in the south and if used correctly, it's usually said as a passive-aggressive put down towards someone you pity. That's not what I'm saying. My mother needs her heart (or soul, potato/tomato) literally and figuratively blessed.

Her eyes start welling up at the mere mention of me or my younger sister growing up. Or dying.

We're in our twenties.

Now, while I'm fully aware of, and always grateful for, the loving and meaningful relationship I have with my mother, this was not about to be a phone call that I potentially upset her night with. To some people, what I had said could be taken as poetry, and I get that. To each their own.

While the testament to how much I love her might be an endearing sentiment, the thought of me *dying* for her would've been the main visual. Not the intended takeaway.

Hanlon's razor states *never attribute to malice what can be attributed to incompetence.*

Sure people make mistakes every now and again; we tell a joke that comes off the wrong way, make a comment during a conversation at the wrong instant, or incorrectly read the room. All these situations and many other like them people actively work to not be in.

Or should at least.

Calling her at 9pm would've done nothing good for her and little for me. Corporate jargon likes to call that *value add.* And there would've been none of that there.

Olivia

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in the Great State of Georgia!

♋

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♌

CAUTION

the cold wind blows, we go

"Waiting"

by Leslie Lisbona

My father was convicted of arms dealing at almost the same time that Oliver North was on trial. I was 25 years old and an actor in a play on Theatre Row.

My dad was innocent though. I was sure of it. The arms in question were night vision goggles, and he wasn't even part of the transaction. To help out an acquaintance involved, my father called someone he knew at the CIA and vouched for him. This was his error: He was guilty of poor judgment.

During the trial, which lasted months, my father was home with my mom and me in our house in Queens. Before the sentencing date, the court summoned him with his lawyer. "Don't be alarmed," my father said. "This is probably good news." He thought he would be allowed to serve his sentence at home with an ankle bracelet.

That day, I went to the city for an acting class and my father went to the courthouse in Brooklyn for the meeting. But there was no meeting. Instead, he was placed in handcuffs and sent to MCC, Manhattan Correctional Center.

My mom and I couldn't eat the rice pilaf she'd prepared for dinner. Instead, we moved it around on our plates.

"Mom, that's where John Gotti is," I said.

She put her fork down. "Who is John Gotti?" she said.

We didn't see my father for what might have been a few days, or a week, I can't remember. It seemed like a long time. I wanted to see him so badly and hear his voice again.

On the day of the sentencing, my mom and I were seated on a wooden pew-like bench in the Brooklyn courtroom. It was a spring day in May that felt like summer. I had dressed with care in a burgundy linen tunic top and a matching pencil skirt with black heels. I'd even put mousse in my hair.

We waited. My mom had the New York Magazine crossword puzzle on her lap, her foot bopping up and down. The lawyers and prosecutors took their seats.

My father was an elegant man who smelled of cigarettes and pipe tobacco, always clean-shaven and well dressed: on his wrist a beautiful watch, an unusual lighter in his jacket, a neatly rolled tie in case he needed it, a fountain pen in his lapel pocket. I thought he knew absolutely everything, and he could say it in six languages.

I sat on the edge of the hard bench, anticipating his entrance. In he walked, escorted by a marshal twice his size.

My father looked so small in his gray suit, his eyes downcast. He gave us a quick searching glance. In that glance, I saw that he wasn't the same, and I felt as if something sharp were in my throat. My father's eyes were red-rimmed. His mouth was slightly ajar. He looked bewildered, unsure of his movements. My body betrayed me, and I coughed out a sob, catching it with my hand.

I closed my eyes and bowed my head. Tears

dripped onto my lap, making splotches on my skirt. I gasped, trying to contain the next sob.

"Shhhh," my mother said, "we are going to be removed from the courtroom." She put her arm around me. Someone squeezed my shoulder from behind; a tissue was handed to me. I pressed it to my eyes, and it became a pulp streaked with black mascara. I pulled the tissue into tiny bits.

The judge asked my father if he had anything to say. As my father stood, his chair scraped the floor. He started to speak, in a very low voice, half a sentence devoid of punctuation, and then there was a moment when no words came out. "Ten years," the judge said. My father collapsed into his chair. I cried soundlessly into my mother's chest, my mouth agape, and my father was led away.

"Follow me," the marshal said. Walking behind him with my mom, my whole being was compressed by sorrow.

He led us into another room, a smaller one, darker. My father was being processed. He turned and saw us. As we lurched towards him, the marshal said, "No touching," imposing his body between us. We stood there, the three of us, looking at one another. No words seemed useful. My mother must have said something, maybe "Cheri" or "Leon." Then suddenly he turned away from us. "Daddy," I said, hardly above a whisper. And we were led out of the room.

Somehow we got home to Queens. My crying had become jagged, coming in fits and starts. My mother climbed into bed, her stockings veiling her painted toenails. "You are going to have to call Cyril for a job at the bank," she said, but I already knew that. "Here," she said, handing me $10. "Go to Austin Street and get a manicure." She rolled onto her side, ending all conversation.

I went to my room to change. I glimpsed myself in the mirror. My face was swollen and my eyes puffy. I slipped off my skirt and took off my top, kicking them into a pile on the floor. I threw on my loosest fitting sweatshirt and pants.

I drove to Austin Street, parked, and turned off the engine. I sat slumped in the car, my muscles aching, listening to Sinead O'Connor sing "Nothing Compares 2 U." I had the sensation that my father had died. I didn't know what prison he would go to. I worried that his artificial heart valve wouldn't last until he was released. I wondered if he had his medication. When could we see him again? I was afraid that someone in prison might hurt him, and with that thought I squeezed my eyes shut. Would this bank job give me enough money to help my mother? Would I have to give up acting entirely? Would I have to live at home until my father came back?

I looked at my hands. They were just like my father's hands. His were so capable though. I wiped my eyes and started the engine. I didn't get the manicure. I drove home to my mother. She was going to need me, and I couldn't get there fast enough.

❖

"Unfinished Exit"

by Claudia Wysocky

I keep thinking
about the time in high school
when you drew
me
a map of the city,
I still have it somewhere.
It was so easy
to get lost
in a place where all the trees
look the same.
And now
every time I see
a missing person's poster
stapled to a pole,
all I can think is
that could have been me.
Missing,
disappeared.

But there are no
posters for people
who just never came back
from vacation, from college,
from life.
You haven't killed yourself
because you'd have to commit to a
single exit.
What you wouldn't give to be your cousin Catherine,
who you watched
twice in one weekend get strangled nude
in a bathtub onstage
by the actor who once
filled your mouth with quarters at
your mother's funeral.
The curtains closed and opened again.
We applauded until
our hands were sore.

But you couldn't shake the image of
her lifeless body,
the way she hung there like a
marionette with cut strings.
And now every time you try to write a poem,
it feels like a
eulogy.
A desperate attempt to
capture something that's already
gone.
But maybe that's why we keep writing,
keep searching for
the right words,
because in this world where everything is
temporary,
poetry is our only chance at
immortality.
So even though you haven't
found the perfect ending yet,
you keep writing.
For Catherine, for yourself, for all the lost
souls
who never got their own
missing person's poster.
Because as long as there are words on a page,
there is still hope for an unfinished exit
to find its proper
ending.

"Of the Soldiers Past - Romeo"

by Victor Pogostin

One day in the month of August 1927 four comrades in arms came to see Romeo off on a business trip to Riga, Latvia. Their arrival didn't promise anything out of the ordinary. There were a few drinks, some friendly banter, and practice shooting from army revolvers converted to a small caliber cartridge. An improvised gun range had been set up in the long hallway. Soon Romeo excused himself and went to his room to pack and dress for the trip. He was in his room fastening the cufflinks, when he heard his buddies' cheering "Wow, bravo!"

He looked out into the hallway to applaud the marksman. At that instant there was another shot. Romeo froze and then fell face first. There was a tiny drop of blood above his cerebellum. He died instantly.

On my wife's night table stands an old "carte postale" picture of a well-dressed young man wearing a tweed blazer and a Prinz Heinrich student cap. He has a book in his right hand and his left palm rests lovingly on the scruff of a large Finnish hound. A handwritten caption read "So that you remember me, this is my old picture taken in 1914." The young man in the photo is my wife Natalia's Italian grandfather Romeo Rafaelo Arcando de-Cusmeni-Batistini. In 1914 he was twenty-three.

Romeo's name was seldom mentioned by Natalia's mother. I never asked why. There may have been many explanations. For instance, my aunt refused to talk about her husband, a decorated lieutenant-general arrested and executed in 1938 during the pre-war Stalinist purges. My parents' friend, a translator-naval officer worked at a weekly newspaper "British Ally" during the war, and after was sentenced to nine years in the same Gulag as Solzhenitsyn. When I asked him to tell me more about those years, he deflected the conversation and when I tried to insist, he said, "I don't want to find myself back there."

Many years later I learned that even the rehabilitated had to sign a gag order.

Some ethnic groups feared social labelling, so people did not talk about their social background or ethnicity. Ethnicity was very hard to change. Julietta, my mother-in-law, who was registered on her birth certificate and her passport as Italian, had to appeal to the 20th Congress of the Communist party, aka Khrushchev's Congress, for permission to change her nationality to

Russian. Letters to the Congress were forwarded to the General Prosecutor's office. Julietta was invited for an interview at the office of the State Counselor of Justice First class (colonel). This was how she reported the interview:

"May I ask why you want to change your nationality?" the grey-haired Counselor asked.

"My children are turning sixteen and must choose the nationality that will go on their passports. All of us were born in Russia, live in Russia and our mother tongue is Russian," she said.

"And who are you now?" The Counselor opened her file and knit his brow. "I see," he said. "On the other hand, you rightfully noticed they can choose, and their father is...?"

"Jewish," she blurted out.

The Colonel winced understandingly, and the request was upheld.

The search for Romeo.

In the late 80s, the economy "of the developed socialism" collapsed. Buried under the rubble were some of the restrictive laws and practices of the Communist regime. Emigration rules eased. An "exit visa" was no longer required. The challenge now was not how to get out, but how to get into the country of your choice.

A fellow Italian journalist suggested Natalia apply for an Italian passport. One catch, she had to prove that her grandfather was born in Italy. That was easier said than done. Finding a birth record in Italy was next to impossible unless you knew what year and what province and city your relative was born in. A logical option was to sift through mountains of bureaucratic documents and profiles Soviet citizens had to fill in. Romeo's paper trail was more than scarce. Just a few postcards to his wife and daughter and a dozen photographs, all without return addresses. How on earth has one supposed to find a man, a tiny speck in the Civil War maelstrom? As facts were so unavailable, I had to reconstruct the story of Romeo's short life by juxtaposing the indirect evidence with family tales, my knowledge of the country's history, and ordinary common sense. Romeo could have been part of the Italian diaspora that had settled in Russia long before the revolution. That seemed unlikely. The 1914 photo of a well to do and well dressed in the latest European fashion student didn't really seem to mirror the images of his Russian contemporaries. Moreover, the Finnish hound in the pictures didn't look like it was rented from a photo studio. Still, Romeo could have been one of many European adventurers, who came to Russia after the October 1917 revolution to fight for "bright" communist ideals.

My mother in-law and her cousin insisted that Romeo had studied in Finland and was fluent in four European languages. I contacted several Finnish universities, but no records of Romeo Batistini were found.

From 1918 to 1921 Romeo participated in the postrevolutionary civil war. Most likely he joined the regiment that had an Italian battalion that took part in many battles in the Volga region. At the end of 1918, a typhus epidemic broke out in the regiment. The Italian battalion lost more than half of its fighters and was disbanded. Romeo, presumably sick or wounded, was hospitalized in Saratov. There he met his future wife Marfa, a nurse at his hospital. She was my wife's grandmother, Marfa Petrovna Strukova, born in 1893. Her birth certificate was issued "By order of His Imperial Majesty and based on the evidence of the Tambov Diocesan Administration...". Twenty-seven years later a church marriage certificate was added on the reverse side

"This is to certify that Marfa Petrovna Strukova entered into the first church marriage with the citizen Romeo-Rafaelo Arcando de Cusmeni-Batistini..." It was signed by the Rector and the Deacon of the Alexander Nevsky church in Saratov on April 26, 1920. That church document issued in Tsarist Russia and then supplemented in the Soviet era amidst the civil war, was in fact the only documentary evidence of Romeo's presence in Russia.

I hoped the church wedding certificate might be my clue to more information about the wedded couple, perhaps even of Romeo's place of birth. In vain. The Bolshevik's anti-religious campaigns in the 1920s and 1930s resulted in destruction of churches. Its priests and many of its believers, were shot or sent to the Gulag. In 1930 the City Council of Saratov gave the Alexander Nevsky church and its premises to the artisan's cooperative club and in 1931 to the sport society "Dynamo", initially created within the system of the NKVD (secret police). All records of the Alexander Nevsky church were destroyed.

Released from the hospital, Romeo served as the Deputy Commandant in the Office of the Military Commandant of Saratov. In January 1921, Marfa gave birth to Julietta, my mother-in-law. Saratov was going through a very tough time. The Volga region that used to be "the breadbasket of Russia" was hit by the economic chaos that followed in the footsteps of the Civil War that led to the first Soviet era famine (Golodomor) of 1921-1922. The famine killed about five million people. Fortunately for the young family, in 1922 Romeo was transferred to Moscow. After the introduction of the NEP (New Economic Policy 1921-1928) that allowed private enterprise under a system that otherwise forbade private property Moscow was booming. Its private food stores and farmers markets were booming. The consignment shops were bursting with jewelry, silverware and antiques that impoverished noblewomen and intelligentsia tried to sell to buy some food. Entrepreneurs and profiteers from all Russia aspired to Moscow. Even Chinese entrepreneurs flocked to the city and quickly monopolized the laundries and the haberdashery trade.

Bingo, I said to myself, here is the clue to solving the mystery of his Italian descent. I was sure that the Ministry of Defense would have records on an Italian combatant who participated in the civil war, was hospitalized, served as the Deputy Military Commandant of a large city, and then transferred to Moscow. The Ministry of Defense response to my query was absolutely disarming: the archives had no records on the Red Army personnel in the civil war.

At that point, my search for Romeo narrowed to the five years that he had lived and worked in Moscow. With the lack of any relevant documents related to that period, not even photographs, I had to rely on whatever scattered memories the family had. Julietta was only six when Romeo was killed, and she died long before I began my research. She had a brother, Oleg Batistini, born in 1924, but in 1941 Oleg joined the volunteer military unit and in 1942 was declared missing in action.

Another potential source of biographical information were the House Registration books. House books in the USSR and in contemporary Russia have detailed records of all the residents/tenants in a household. In addition to full name, date and place of birth, the books contain data about marital status, children, when and from where the person came from, the purpose of relocation and for how long, ethnicity and nationality, when and what office issued his/her passport and whether the subject was liable for military service, occupation, place of work and position, police registration at the place of residence, and, if relocated, when and to where.

This was how I learned that for the first two or three years the Batistinis had lived on Tverskaya 54, and later moved to a larger apartment on Tverskay 20, a two-story annex to the nineteenth century house right across the road from a luxury mansion that before the Revolution had housed the English Club. The Club was the oldest aristocratic meeting place in Moscow. Count Lev Tolstoy in his novel "Anna Karenina" called it "a temple of idleness." After the Revolution the Moscow militia was housed in the mansion.

My search in the Central State Archive of Moscow yielded no results. For some inexplicable reason the House books for apartments in the neighboring houses were in place, but the book for Tverskay 54 had disappeared. The Tverskaya 20 House book had only the entries about Marfa, Julietta, and Julietta's children. Romeo Batistini was nowhere to be found, not even mentioned. The one family flat with a long corridor and rooms on each side was turned into a communal apartment. Three more families moved in and Marfa, Julietta and two of her twin children were allowed to keep only one room.

In old Russian family albums, you often find photos of funerals with the face of the deceased in the coffin. Some historians believe that this tradition spread in Russia at the time of the Civil War. At the time, photos of the war heroes' funerals were even published in newspapers. My wife's box with old family photos had one of those too. The thirty-six-year-old man with strong jawline, prominent cheekbones, and brown hair looked peaceful and calm in the coffin filled with carnations.

Surrounding the coffin were his wife Marfa, their six-year-old daughter Julietta her brother Oleg, and his comrades, rough looking men in military tunics with cross belts.

The photo prompted me to look for another source of information that should have contained information about Romeo's place of work and position. The only other official evidence of Romeo Batistini life in Russia besides the church marriage certificate was his death registration certificate. I found it in the files of the district office of the civil acts' registration. It had no mention of his place of work, the job title said "Chief" and the cause of death "a gunshot wound to the skull by a stranger's hand". Not much for the country that meticulously documented its residents' personal life from conception to death.

In 1993 our family relocated to Canada. The search for Natalia's grandfather's place of birth had lost its relevance. Was his death "by a stranger's hand" a tragic accident or was a bullet in his cerebellum a known trademark of an NKVD executioner? After all, according to the family tales some of his ex-comrades-in-arms have worked for the NKVD. Were his biographical records not available due to the sloppiness of the Soviet archival system or were the files containing information about his work and death in Russia deleted or classified?

On April 22, 2007, I came across the New York Times essay "The Iron Archives" about the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History now partly available on the Internet. I hoped to find the clue to my search. Indeed, in the section that contained the documents of the USSR Communist International (COMINTERN) I found the reference to a personal file on Batistini, ital. Was it a file on our Romeo? I tried to open it, but further access was denied. The puzzle remains unsolved. ❖

"Read It Or Don't"

book reviews by Mary Fallon

Held by Anne Michaels

Anne Michaels published this novel, Held, in 2023 and I have just discovered it and read it – twice. I like to read a book first, barging through it to get the story and the characters. If its good, I reread it to enjoy the words, sentences, descriptions.

I've read Michaels' Fugitive Pieces. It is one of my favorites, and I've read it more than once, recommended it more than once. This is the best quote from that book, and I usually cannot finish reciting it without choking up:

I know why we bury our dead and mark the place with stone, with the heaviest most permanent thing we can think of, because the dead are everywhere but the ground.

There is so much in Held: fishermen and photographers, nurses and soldiers. They all fall in love, experience pain, loneliness, hardship – all while being held, or longing to be held. The book spans time from the early 1900's to 2025. I looked up all the places, which are real, and had to look up gansey sweaters. There is even a part on Marie Curie and Hertha Ayrton. Yes – I had to look up Ayrton.

My column says read it or don't, but this one – read it.

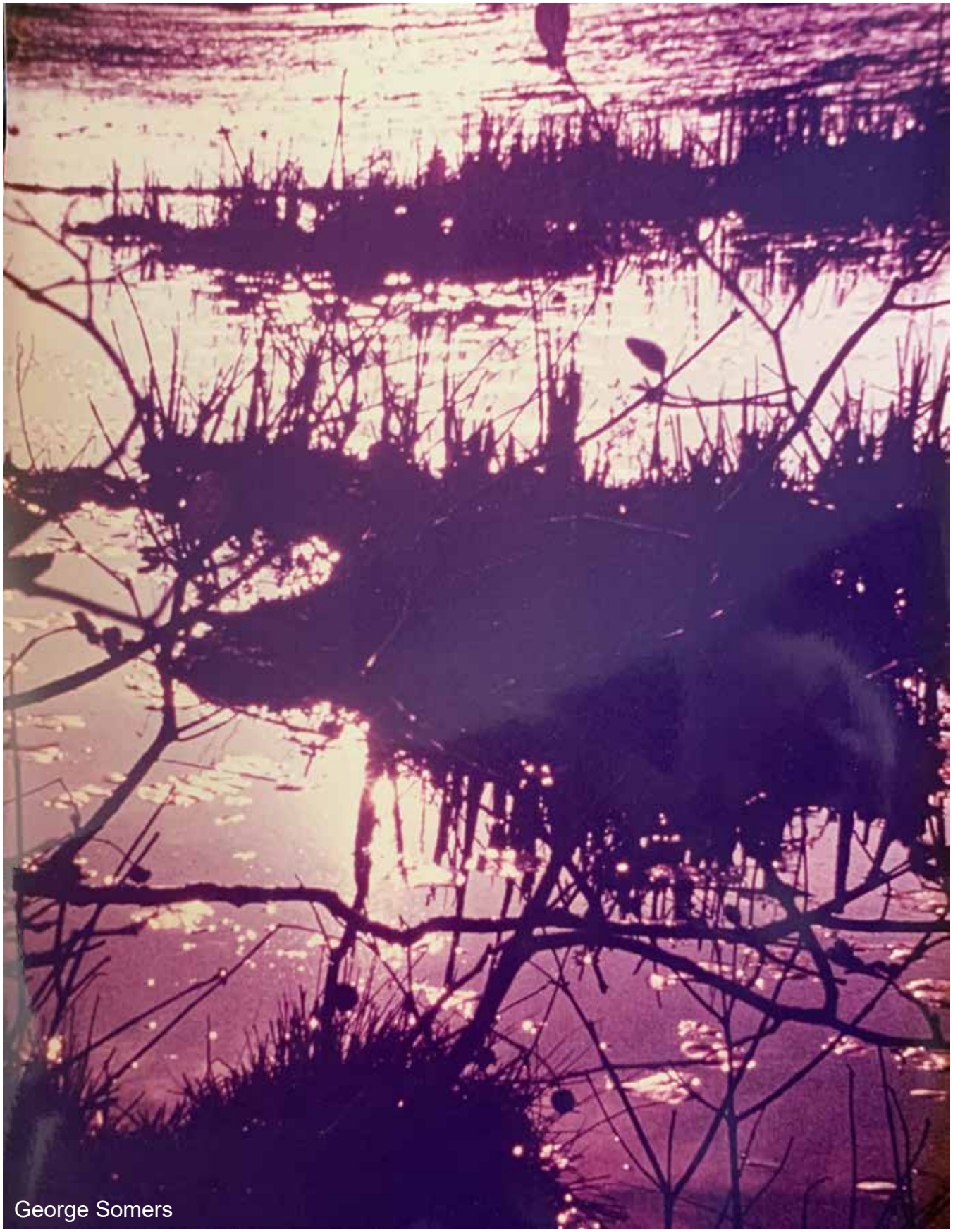
The Heaven & Earth Grocery Store by James McBride

Heaven and Earth is another book I actually liked and would recommend. James McBride wrote The Good Lord Bird, loosely based on Harpers Ferry. I liked that one as well.

McBride creates wonderfully crazy characters with crazy names like Big Soap, Dodo and Monkey Pants. The book is set in Pottstown, PA and is full of a variety of characters some that are black, some Jewish, and some disabled. Of course there is a grocery store, but also a "jook" joint and a mental institution.

It starts with a dead body in a well, and unfurls the story from there. The corpse was not who I thought it would be!

Another one that I can say, "Read it".



George Somers

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 prefer to go downstairs by standing on the railing and surfing my way past other people, clogging up the way, stepping down or up, befuddled by the effort. Sometimes I throw myself over the railing and float gently to the bottom. Sometimes the bottom has something I don't like there. Spiders. Trolls. Barely remembered bullies from my childhood. Something to deal with, and soon. Still, it is nice to temporarily defeat the laws of gravity.

It is also nice when the stairs we speak of are those in my elementary school, which is no longer a primary grade school, but some sort of administrative building. A shame. The school was positioned on a hill, so that playing out front was a different level from playing out back, and when I was young, third grade or so, our teacher would offer us the option to pick upper or lower. Sometimes she would let us play dodgeball or this game called *bombardment* (apt for the time, troubling now) or she would have us all sit under a big oak tree and read to us.

When I was in school there, I would scamper up the stairs (if I was allowed, without supervision of a competent teacher) hand-and-foot like a puppy. Going back down, I would jump from the second stair, or the third, or even more as I got older. I never sat on the rail and slid, it was not built to do that, with intention I am sure. But I think it would have been terrific.

I miss that. I would go back to that, if I could. Yes, Mr. Frost - I know better – it was not an innocent time, and I would give up much, but I would like to go back anyway. Maybe that's why I do things in my dreams I cannot do.

A. H. - Cyberspace

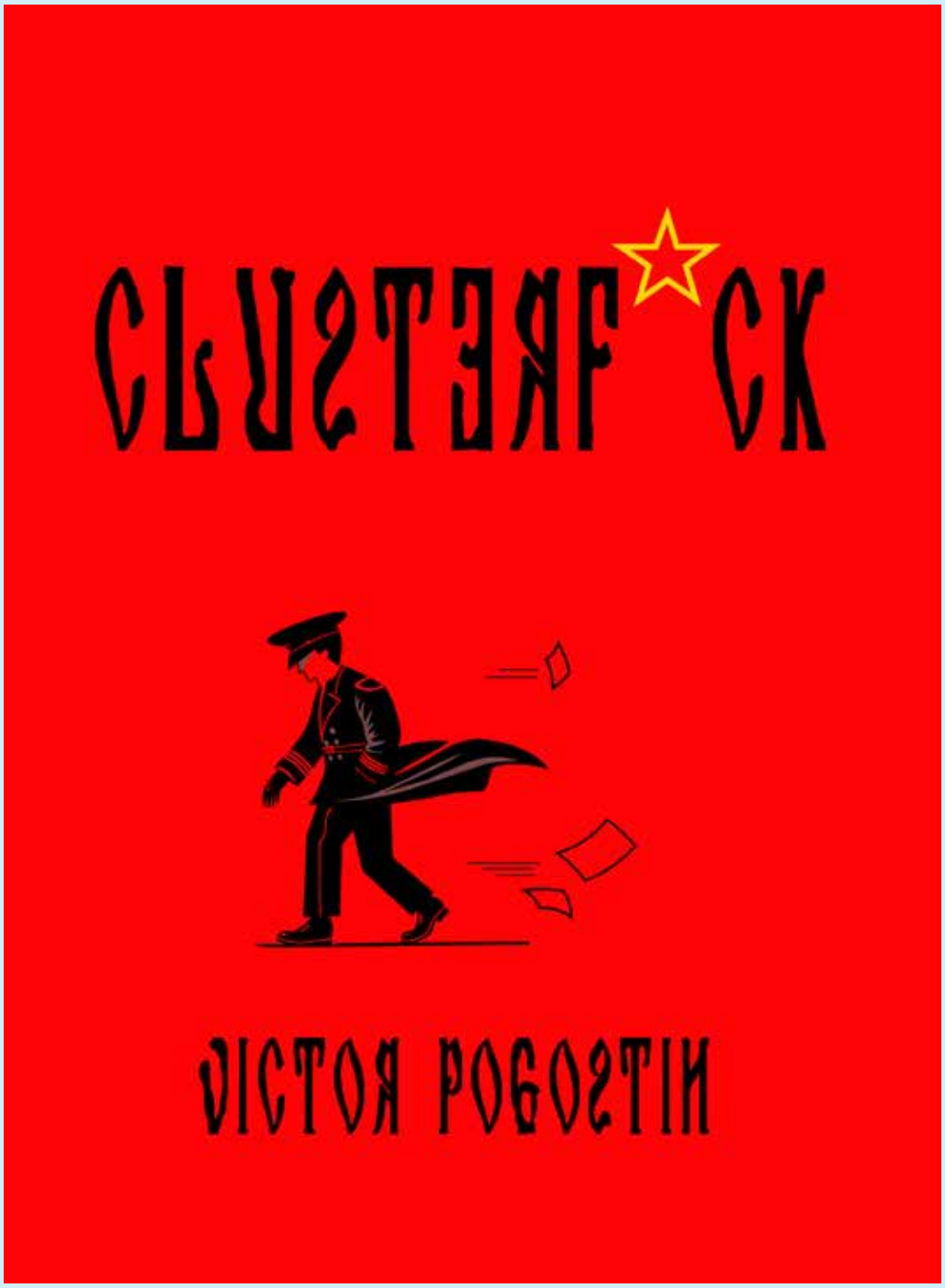
CONTRIBUTORS

Leslie Lisbona has been published in various literary journals, most recently in *Wrong Turn Lit, The Bluebird Word,* and *Dorothy Parker's Ashes*. In March she was featured in the New York Times Style Section. She is the child of immigrants from Beirut, Lebanon, and grew up in Queens, NY. Her published work can be found on leslielisbona.substack1.com

Claudia Wysocky is a Polish poet based in New York, celebrated for her evocative creations that capture life's essence through emotional depth and rich imagery. With over five years of experience in fiction writing, her poetry has appeared in various local newspapers and literary magazines. Wysocky believes in the transformative power of art and views writing as a vital force that inspires her daily. Her works blend personal reflections with universal themes, making them relatable to a broad audience. Actively engaging with her community on social media, she fosters a shared passion for poetry and creative expression.

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 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. He is the author of "Russian Roulette" and "Clusterf*ck" - both volumes published by Blotter Books.

Mary Fallon is from Buffalo, New York and is a voracious (and opinionated) reader. Her mother, Edna, got the wagon out every week and dragged the Fallon children to the local library. It became an addiction for all 4 siblings. In the 80's Mary was living at home, and made the mistake of leaving her partially read book on the kitchen table when she went to work. When Mary returned from her day, Edna was almost through the book. Mary never left an unfinished book out again.



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Blotter Books

Victor Pogostin, PhD, is a teller of tales.
Stories that are often funny, sometimes
moving, but always entertaining.
His are about being in the Soviet Navy.
And they're true.

find it on Amazon