

The Blotter

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The Blotter

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"Open Mic - Part One"

By the time you read this I will have done something (or perhaps not) that I have not done in eighteen years. I will have read a poem of mine at an open mic. I will have made a decision to do something in front of a crowd, which is nothing at all like typing this and proofreading it and placing it into a PDF. And I cannot explain why it is different from these monthly missives, out there for someone, anyone, to see. Perhaps you already know, and can enlighten me. Real curiosity, no snark intended.

If I do it, I hope it will have been entertaining and even funny. I hope people listen and absorb and even go home later and tell someone they know that they saw this thing, it is difficult to describe if you weren't there, but it was special. And if I don't do it, I hope it is because there were just so many others who wanted to be brave and stand up and share that I was superfluous. I don't know. We'll see. Or, rather, we will have seen.

For those of you who bare your souls publicly and somewhat more frequently than that, this is a non-announcement. Perhaps even a whatever moment. You love your work, you share your love, generously. Or maybe I'm wrong. Does everyone who writes for someone to read feel this level of nerve-bundling, of intentional trepidation? Or some large percentage, better than a baseball batting average?

I get anxious having to go to the grocery store. Or to get a haircut. Or across the street to talk to my neighbor, sitting on the front porch. It shouldn't be like this, I think to myself, but there are so many other issues I could have that this seems little, petty, to complain about. So I try not to. And I don't know if this is different.

What exactly are my anxiety factors? Is it being in front of others? People I do not know from Adam's Off Ox (as Dad used to say.) Ignoring me for the most part, if truth be told. A whole world of people who have their own sit-

uations to consider, and so I shouldn't be anxious if I'm a bit sweaty about reading a poem aloud. Or is it that I am not certain of the quality of my work? That sounds suspiciously like imposter syndrome, which is certainly a thing, but I'm not sure I have it, which may be one of myriad definitions of irony. Is it that niggling feeling that something I want to share might not be fully distilled? Not ready for consumption? Maybe it's not done yet. I need to sit back some more and just stare at it, hoping for revelation.

Which is the exact opposite of how I tend to begin, with a punchline or human quirk that needs needling. Waking in the middle of the night, grabbing my phone and whispering into a notes-app some of what I hope are relevant keywords, and not just sleepy gibberish, that will reflect the nascent idea for something. Oh, I am an ardent advocate of perspiration, but let us give inspiration credit where credit is due.

Somehow, in a cosmic recipe with no rules, I am able to discern the kernel from the flotsam of thoughts washing past on the tide and if I get enough kernels I can construct verse. I reflect on the instruction given to me many years ago – certainly you are familiar with it – to murder my darlings. Remove that which doesn't belong except that my ego wants it there. Tell only the truth. And don't settle for a fragment. Tell the whole truth.

Then I polish like Michelangelo (only not the Michelangelo you're thinking about, the genius who created the David, but the young man who makes pretty good pizza and calzones in the town where I grew up. He could throw pie dough up in the air about four feet), with a practiced touch, one that has not improved in years. Decades even. I take what remains and set it aside, in a file, in more than one file, to ferment. Okay, then, I tell myself. That's done. Or not. We'll see...

Garry (mermaidblotter@gmail.com)

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

graphite and glitter

“How Does Plath Convey the Issue of Loss on Our Sense of Self”

by Jane Helen Lee

To what extent does loss affect an individual's ability to move on from the past? In her poem 'Daddy', Plath explores this question as she comes to terms with the reality of who her father was and the impact he had on her life. The poem describes Plath's unhealthy idolization of her father, who died decades earlier, which affected her self-image and their relationship even into adulthood. On a deeper level, the poem suggests Plath's need to come to terms with her toxic view of her late father in order to separate her father's influence from her own identity. In doing so, Plath explores the issue of loss on our sense of self by confronting her toxic, undeveloped idolization of her father and attempting to separate herself from her father's shadow in order to find her own identity. She achieves this by acknowledging that she never fully knew her father, which affected how she viewed their relationship. In realizing that she was oppressed by her father, she takes back control other men had over her life, a control she had lost as result of replacing her father with another toxic man.

Plath confronts her unhealthy idolization of her father by accepting that her memory of her father is frozen in time and had adverse effects on her view of their relationship, making it possible for her to finally confront reality. This realization can be seen throughout the poem's structure, as all stanzas have five lines, creating a

structured, organized feeling at first glance, almost like a marble statue. However, when looking deeper, Plath's random use of caesura and enjambment conveys her attempt at confronting the imperfect reality of her father's true identity, as she creates a constant back-forth irregular speed throughout the poem. By making the poem chaotic, Plath acknowledges, though she has idolized her father's memory by viewing him as an immovable statue, the reality that the statue is now falling apart as she realizes that her father was imperfect. Also, it is worth noting how much the beginning stanza sounds like a nursery rhyme, with a reference to the old English nursery rhyme, "There was an old woman who lived in a shoe". Plath puts a spin on this title to convey how she has always "lived like a foot" stuck in a black shoe, creating imagery of her being stuck, having no way to grow or move. This represents Plath's realization that, for thirty years, she had been unable to separate herself from the childish, false perception she had of her father, hinting at how this lack of understanding about him confined her to a narrow view of her own identity. When Plath admits that she "never could tell where" her father put his "root", she comes to terms with the reality that she never completely knew who her father was because she couldn't understand where he came from. An alternative interpretation, beyond not being able to find physical records of her father's past, is that the roots of Plath's rela-

tionship with her father were weak because she never got the chance to nurture their relationship beyond a one-sided idolization. By eventually realizing that her father was imperfect and that her view of him negatively affected her life, Plath is finally able to break free of her father's influence on her perception of self.

Beyond expressing loss through confronting her glorified view of her father and acknowledging the negative impacts of their relationship, Plath also conveys loss and its impacts on her sense of self through her anger and resentment for how her father oppressed her. By finally being able to acknowledge that her father's oppression was a toxic presence in her life, Plath is able to let go of her false, unhealthy perception of him. Not long into the poem, in the second stanza, Plath reflects on the memory of her father and tells him, "Daddy, I have had to kill you". She uses the juxtaposition of the word "daddy", which has child-like and innocent connotations, with "kill" which is a violent metaphorical expression of her desire to break free of her father's dominating influence in her life. This unsettling juxtaposition creates conflicting imagery that shows Plath's internal struggle to remove her father from her life, despite her love for him. This conflict can be seen again through Plath's constant allusion to World War II and the Holocaust. She uses this allusion in two ways: to acknowledge that she was suffocated under her father's influence, both as a child and as an adult, and to reflect on how her relationship with her father negatively affected her sense of self. As Plath admits that her tongue was always "stuck in a barb wire snare" and

refers to her father as a "panzer-man", she confronts the oppression she experienced as a child growing up under her father's control. The metaphor comparing Plath's tongue to being "stuck" evokes connotations of the suffering she went through, creating an image of a Nazi concentration camp in the reader's mind – emphasizing the lack of voice she had in comparison to her father's power. An alternative interpretation could be that Plath, like many Jewish victims, was confined by a barbed wire fence and forced to endure torment. Of course, for Plath, she was confined by an invisible psychological fence that impacted her mental wellbeing and self worth throughout her life. The metaphorical comparison of her father to a "panzer", a German tank used in WWII, strengthens the idea that her father trampled over anything in his way, including Plath, highlighting the power imbalance in their relationship that lasted late into her adulthood. The recurring allusion to the Holocaust also cements the idea that Plath's father had too much authority over her life, even after death, negatively impacting how she viewed herself. In the ninth stanza, Plath metaphorically compares her father to an "aryan", a symbol of superiority and brutality in Nazi Germany. In contrast, Plath refers to herself as a "jew" multiple times throughout the poem, exposing how, in her mind, she always viewed herself as inferior, causing her to have negative perceptions of herself. By confronting the negative reality of the hold her father had over her life, even in his death, Plath finally makes a decision to separate her identity from his.

Another important aspect of the poem 'Daddy' is how Plath finally confronts the

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reality that her idolization of her father led to her acceptance of toxic relationships with other men, including with her husband. The experience she had with her father lowered her self worth, making it easier for her to accept mistreatment from other men later in life. However, when she finally decided to break free, she was able to let go of both toxic figures in her life. This shift can be seen when she refers to her husband Ted Hughes as a “vampire” who “drank my [her] blood”. By metaphorically comparing Hughes to a creature that drank her blood, her life force, she acknowledges how he drained her power and self worth during their marriage. Plath also reflects on how, under her late father’s influence, she “made a model” of men who would oppress her in similar ways. Still, the poem goes on to illustrate how, after suffering in a relationship with yet another dominating man, Plath was finally able to make the decision to separate her identity from that of the men in her life. Plath re-claims her power when she sticks “a stake” through her father’s “fat black heart” and, in doing so, “kills” both her father and her husband. This hints at how, in Plath’s mind, her father and her husband had merged together as one figure seeking to control her. The allusion to the myth of killing a vampire with a wooden stake underscores Plath’s decision to sever ties with these men in order to regain her sense of self. When Plath hangs up “the black telephone” “at the root” so that her father and husbands’ voices can’t “worm through”, she reinforces this idea that she is ready to move on from being controlled by her father’s memory and her husband’s similar oppression. The “black telephone” symbolizes a connection to her past, when she

idolized her father, which led to her seeking similar relationships with other men. By hanging up, she demonstrates that she is no longer willing to listen to their voices or let them control her. This metaphor of hanging up the phone “at the root” could also tie back to the idea of how, because Plath “never could tell” where her father’s roots were (stanza 5), it took her so long to finally cut him out completely from her life. Through acknowledging the far-reaching impacts of her unhealthy relationship with her father, including being compelled to find a man just as toxic, Plath is able to confront reality and break free of both the oppressive figures in her life.

The poem ‘Daddy’ effectively conveys the complex nature of loss and its impact on our sense of self by illustrating Plath’s journey to find her own identity and separate herself from the toxic control and influence of her father’s memory. After coming to the realization that her glorified view of her father was unhealthy and far from reality, Plath was able to release her anger towards him for oppressing her. In doing this, she shares both the pain she had to endure following her father’s death as well as the sense of liberation that came from regaining power over her identity. Her powerful use of metaphor and allegory throughout the poem delivers the message that while moving on from the negative impacts of loss can be painful, it can also be empowering. Plath engages with the lasting impacts of internalizing loss and sends a message that finding one’s true self after the loss of a loved one is only possible if one confronts and rejects toxic attachments to the past. ❖

“Bark, The Christmas Angel Sings,’ a true story”

by James Colasanti, Jr.

“Doesn’t Santa Claus always have helpers?” I turned and asked Butchy, my first dog and my first best friend. “Perhaps this year,” I continued, “we need to help Santa with a special gift for our neighbor, Mrs. Launderville.”

We were seeking to become generous gift-givers this year, Christmas 1964. Butchy and I were both 15, and we had grown up together. And rather than being “just a dog,” she was more like my missing sibling as I was an only child.

Mrs. Launderville lived next door to us in the first floor flat. Her dog, Molly, had passed away due to old age almost a year ago on Christmas Eve. She had been devastated as they were inseparable companions. And I thought what a good way to show our neighborly concern by selecting a new dog for her as a gift. We would scout out the local animal shelter in hopes that the perfect four-legged friend would be there waiting for her.

As my father always told me, “James,” he would say, “a dog is the friend who licks your face when you have forgotten how to smile.”

We got up and energetically pushed open the front door ready to run our idea past my mother. The house smelled like an Italian Hoagie. The aroma of freshly fried garlic and wild mushrooms assaulted our senses immediately as we entered. Supper was well on its way. My mother, Mary, had the kitchen table engaged in the dynamics for making a meal for the family and Butchy

was always included.

“Hey, Mom, what do you think about Butchy and I getting Mrs. Launderville a gift this year for Christmas? Just from us.”

“Just what kind of present did you have in mind?” she asked as she added the Italian sausage to the pan causing a sizzle to stir in the air above the stove.

“Well, you know her dog passed away last year. Don’t you think it’s time for her to have a new companion to keep her company? What do you think?”

“James, you know you should ask your father. He knows more about that sort of thing than I do. How do you know she even wants another dog?” she asked while stirring the vegetables with her old wooden spoon.

“How can she not want another new friend to be at her side, just like I have Butchy. She’s old and she needs a buddy,” I continued.

While growing up I always thought everyone over 30 was old, but Mrs. Launderville was actually in her eighties even though her spry demeanor certainly gave no true indication of her age.

“So, where’s Dad?” I asked in hopes of getting this gift search underway.

“He’s in the attic untangling the Christmas lights for the front porch. You might not want to bother him just now while he’s busy,” she added. “You know how he is.”

Butchy and I climbed the narrow steps to the attic hearing the Italian grumbings long before we reached the top. My father,

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James Sr., sat in the far corner pulling a string of lights out of a large cardboard box in which they had been stored.

“Dad,” I shouted so he would know we were up there. “Can we talk to you (I always included Butchy)? We would like to get Mrs. L. a dog for Christmas. She’s been without one for almost a year now and we think it’s time.”

“Do you think she’s really ready?” he asked. “Sometimes it takes a while to get over a loss like that.”

And it was often moments such as this in which my father would go into his philosophical mode.

“You know, James, the dog who has been your friend and your companion in life never really dies.”

I looked at my father inquisitively.

“He or she will always walk at your side every day for your entire life. And do you know why this is true?”

I shook my head.

“It’s because your dog is always with you in your heart. It is a never-ending bond.”

We sat by the side of the cardboard box, Butchy and I, listening attentively with Butchy resting her head in my lap as I gently stroked her back fur.

“Even though I am not really sure about your ‘gift idea,’ I will tell you what’s good about this whole situation. It’s that you are looking out for someone else. That makes it extra special. And that kind of gift is something that will always be appreciated. We’ll go to the shelter tomorrow.”

The next morning as we entered the pound, we saw Robin, the head clerk, was on duty. We knew each other because I had volunteered at the shelter, cleaning out the

runs and walking the dogs.

“What ‘cha doin’ here, Sport?” Robin asked from behind the counter.

“We’re here to see if we can get a dog for our neighbor, Mrs. Launderville. She’s been without one for a year and we think it’s time for her to have a new friend to keep her company.”

“Well go see who’s here. See if you can pick one out for her.”

We walked slowly down the main aisle, looking to the right and to the left, when suddenly Butchy raced ahead of us to the very last kennel. She stood up against the fencing and barked until we got there.

In the very last kennel was a small black and white Terrier dog, and to my dismay I saw that the dog was missing her right front leg. The hand-written 3x5 card listed her name as ‘Feather.’

I ran back to Robin’s office with Butchy on my heels to inquire about this dog.

“Well,” Robin began, “I named her ‘Feather’ because with only three legs she’s as light as one. She fought a hard battle with a truck and it cost her a leg. But she’s not broken you know. I think she’s a real sweetheart who’s gotten a bad deal in the past. But I do believe with a little love and attention she’s ready to make a comeback and can share the rest of her life with someone who thinks she is really special.”

“We’ll take her,” I said without hesitation. “She’ll be perfect!”

Under false pretense, we invited Mrs. Launderville over for Christmas Eve supper. Eating at our home was something to be enjoyed, each and every time you did it, and not just on special occasions.

After supper, Mrs. L. said to me, “I haven’t seen Butchy all evening. Where are you

hiding her?”

“She’s in my bedroom guarding Christmas gifts for Santa,” I replied. “She’s got some real special ones to look after this year. I think Butchy has a Christmas gift for you, too.”

“For me?” questioned Mrs. L. “Well, you shouldn’t have. I’m too old.”

“You’re never too old for Christmas,” I shouted as I ran up the stairs.

I opened my bedroom door, whistled for Butchy to come, and I carried ‘the present’ down the stairs to Mrs. Launderville.

“Her name is Feather,” I said, “and she wants to come and live with you and be your friend. Butchy and I chose her just for you.”

“Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy, Jimmy, and Butchy, you, too. She’s my little Christmas angel. You have put a warmth in my heart that has been missing from my life for the past year.”

As Feather licked away Mrs. L’s tears, I turned, and looked at Butchy and said, “Now that’s the best ‘Christmas therapy’ ever---a dog licking your face.”

Butchy cocked her head and issued a soft bark in total agreement. ❖

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 have nights where I don’t turn out the lamp. Where I regret having to go to sleep.

When I am not running to or from something, late or early, I am sometimes just sitting in the sun, squinting out at the forest, or field, or a storm forming above the ocean, and something moves – a deer, a dolphin, a hare galumphing through the scene, running to or from something, too. I prefer these by far to anything considered exciting or frightening. I am not entertained by the extreme, either too much or too little. I don’t know if this makes me odd or normal. I don’t ask. I don’t want to know.

There are things out there, and we give them names. Creature. Monster. Dragon and beast. They have the capacity to frighten and we know that they can hide in the dark, until they no longer need to hide and come out into the light where we see them. When we don’t know what they are we call them these things, and even after we know. Often we keep these names to ourselves, and that way no one knows of what we are frightened, or how often we are subjected to our worst fears. Or if they are our worst, by their frequency rather than their amperage.

EP - cyberspace

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“Every Dog...”

by Dale Scherfling

Cut my newspaper teeth on the old Lorain Journal, back in the '60s and '70s. Damn good paper. Sports desk first, then rewrite — which is why I still edit as I go — and finally photography.

That photo bunch...what a crew. We had some good ones.

Ross Baughman — J. Ross, we called him — went on to win a Pulitzer for his work in Rhodesia.

Kurt Smith, National Press Photographer of the Year, for covering the shipyard deaths when the Roger Blough caught fire.

Michael Good, Ohio News Photographer of the Year at nineteen.

“Damn,” Michael said when he won. “What do I do next? I’m capped out at eighteen. Nowhere to go but down.” He ended up a nationally noted wedding shooter — big following, big business, big teaching gigs.

Those were the full-timers. The stringers and part-timers could’ve filled a book by themselves. Characters, every one.

Take Susie. With us only a short time, then gone. Married, maybe. I heard she might’ve been the first female photog at a major Ohio paper. Can’t swear to it. We all swapped tricks of the trade — no “that’s my style, learn your own” crap. One of the guys showed her something, she thanked him. He shrugged.

“You owe me one,” meaning buy me a beer

sometime — standard currency in our shop.

Susie blinked those big blue eyes and said, dead serious:

“Will a blowjob suffice?”

Another stringer, angling for a full-time slot, got drafted to Vietnam. Ran into two Charlies in the jungle — just as surprised as they were. He killed one with his bayonet; the other shot him dead. Got a Purple Heart. Should’ve been more, I always thought. Bronze Star, maybe. But it wasn’t an “official” battle. Army didn’t consider surprise encounters a battle. Dead’s dead, we all figured.

We used our own gear — mostly black-bodied Nikons. Chrome bodies were for your grandfather. And the more banged-up, the better. Shiny metal showing through meant battle scars. We were big on that.

Kurt Smith had two black-bodied Nikons and a Leica. Big time, that Leica.

“Saved my candy money for it,” he said.

One guy had a Petri. Everybody scorned it. “Every dog has his pee tree,” we’d say when he walked in. ❖

"face rag (an observation)"

by Stephen Ground

scouring Rorschach grime for irrefutable clues,
chaotic hints freshly smeared from oily, scar-
flecked skin—grease swirled roughly into

mystifying fibres, painting vague-ish portraits of
barely familiar faces with sallow eyes softly
blackened from dissonance seeded in neglect,

oblong mouths crying boldly for better luck [or
any] & round-tipped isosceles lips sharpened into
bitter screams for promises unkept. agony, agony,

blips of transcribed memory inverted & flipped yet
entirely enough to undo me like a poorly zippered
bag of squirming creepy crawlies so I wipe once

more clean-ish & quick, roughly wad my slimy
past & dump it deep in concrete darkness—a cat
piss-scented crypt for another me's forgotten days.

"Cat Man"

by John Grey

Why should it only be
old women, their brains
already in the grave,
who get to hoard felines?

Every time I pick up a newspaper,
it's "Cat Lady" this, "Cat Lady" that.

There's a kind of reverse
misogyny at work here
which is why I'm accumulating strays,
adopting from shelters,
even taking in the unwanted
from my friends.

And I'm not ancient.
I'm no cliché.
I'm just a man, in his prime,
who chooses to share his modest home
with upwards of two hundred cats.

Yes, most are starving.
Many are dead.
And the place smells like
a crapper from the plague years.

Luckily, the neighbors are complaining.
The authorities have been by.

At last, the nation will have
its Cat Man.
I'll dominate the news cycle,
set the pundits tongues rattling,
go viral on the internet.

So sorry, kooks.
Sorry, all you amateur kitty magpies.
Best start corralling skunks
or turning your basement into a viper pit.

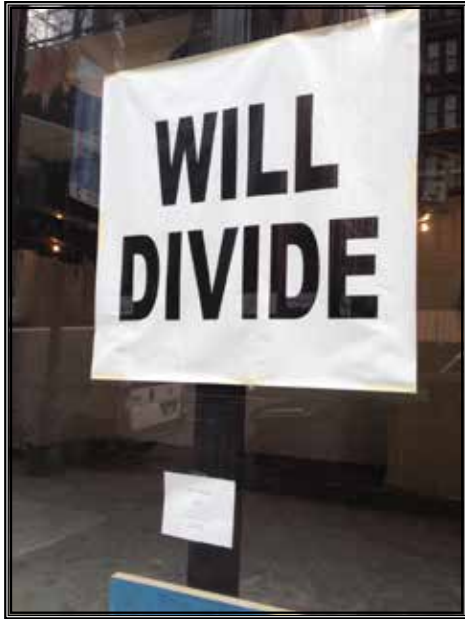
For I am Cat Man.
My secret identity is America.



"Travails of the Other Guy"

by John Grey

Birds alight on his finger.
They won't come to me.
Women find him sympathetic.
My soothing words,
they stay clear of.
He's clever.
I can't replace a washer
in a dripping tap.
He can run the hundred meters
in under eleven seconds
and has won three triathlons.
You know me.
Sometimes, my own way
defeats me.
And yet, whoever he is,
he's not married to you.
I am.
In different circumstances maybe...
But circumstances
are always the same.
I know that.
He's not meant to.



CONTRIBUTORS

Jane Helen Lee is a Korean-American writer currently based in Seoul, South Korea. She has been recognized by YoungArts and the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards for her work across screenwriting, poetry, and fiction and is an alum of the Kenyon Young Writers' Workshop. Her work has been published in or is forthcoming at *Stone Soup*, *AvantAppalachia*, *Skipping Stones*, *Altered Reality*, and *Wildflower Post*. Jane also serves as the Editor-in-Chief of *Unseen*, the academic journal of the Korean Youth Honor Society, and finds joy in writing, debating, and volunteering at her local rehabilitation center.

James Colasanti, Jr. is the recipient of four Maxwell Medallions given by the DWAA for excellence in storytelling.

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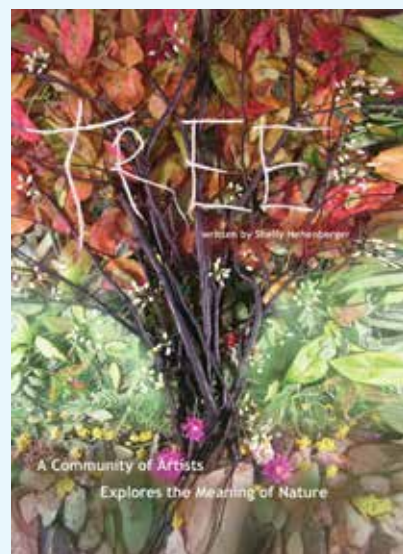
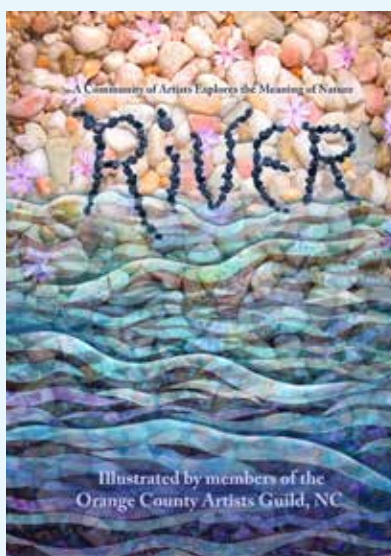
John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Shift*, *River And South* and *Flights*. Latest books, "Bittersweet", "Subject Matters" and "Between Two Fires" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Rush*, *Spotlong Review* and *Trampoline*.



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.

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The Post-Apocalyptic Dining Guide drops you into a realm of pure madness. The humor comes from a dark place...a really dark place. The tale is completely absurd, and the events downright shocking. Who knew the end of civilization could be so much fun!!

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