The Blotter

magazine

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COVER: "Solstice Moon" from our archives

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"A Love Letter to Temporality"

I recently made the observation that I'm starting to get vexed when I realize it's time to purchase more toilet paper or toothpaste or some other consumable daily household item. I gentle-parented myself through the thought and got even more annoyed thinking about the some odd thousand toilet paper purchases I'd potentially make during my lifetime.

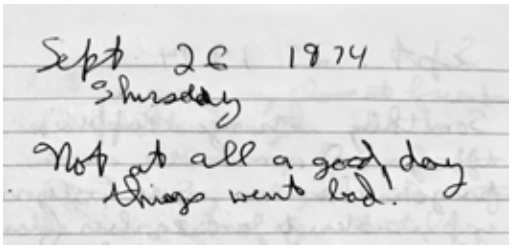
A momentary fleeting thought, but a nagging one.

A couple weeks before Christmas, my younger sister comes over to go through the cedar chests our parents have used to store photographs in since, well, forever. Family photo albums, wedding photography, stills dating back into the forties and fifties, and dear god, so many *Quality Photofinishing* envelopes. We gawk through our mom's quilted-covered, string pearls and lace-edged prom album and her quintessential Jennifer Grey *Dirty Dancing* do. That moment captured so perfectly in time it feels like I had been there too and am looking back through a memory of my own.

The chest has photos of when my dad and his sisters were children, and photos taken when my mom and her brother were in college. There are rolls and rolls of negatives of the beach at Isle of Palms, where my grandparents had lived. Hundreds of images of waves and sunsets, planted among pix of my house, my aunts', parents, and cousins' homes and family events where we all face the camera and cheese, like easter eggs. It seems to me for a moment that my grandpa had just been frivolous with his film as I hold up the negatives to a lamp and realize one shot after the next is either a wave or a sunset. But the truth is in that cedar chest, waves and sunsets enough to fill a gallery, yet no two quite the same.

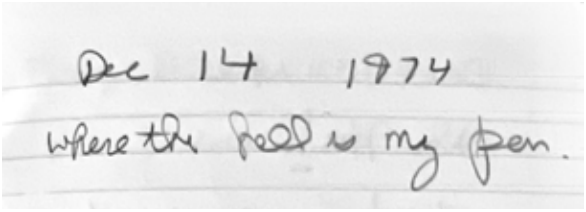
We are lifting things out of the chest chronologically and strategically laying them out on the floor – the further down we dig, the older the contents get. Our childhood pictures are scattered around us, my sister's first grade pixie haircut yearbook photo bashfully grinning at the top of the pile. Looking back, she always hated that haircut, an opinion which my mom and I always dramatically disagreed with, fawning over her short hair every time she would talk badly about it. Then again, I felt the same way about the (bangs included, and a hard emphasis on homemade) bowl cut I had in second grade.

We keep unloading the chest until she picks up what looks to be a journal's-amount of looseleaf A5 paper tied together with twine through their punched holes. The smell of the old pulp with the cedar from the chest as she tries to decipher the scrawled cursive. *June 12, 1974*, she reads aloud. I screech a "What?!" (as if every item older than my own twenty-six years that I've held is some shocking revelation into the passage of time – which it is.) I scoot closer by her side so I can read over her shoulder and realize it's our dad's notebook from when he was seventeen. We look at each other and giggle over some of the entries and I try not to get too much of that millennial melodramatic *it's their first time living, too* soap.



Sept 26 1974
Thursday
Not at all a good day
things went bad!

All entries throughout the journal had been written in pen until we flip to this page.



Dec 14 1974
Where the hell is my pen.

This is when we finally put the notebook down and give my dad a call. We laugh so hard my lips are sticking to my teeth and my cheeks hurt.

Olivia - mermaidblotter@gmail.com

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in the Great State of Georgia!

♋

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♌

CAUTION

people sleeping on

"Quiet Flows the Svislach"

by Victor Pogostin, PhD

I met Aunt Tamara, my mom's second cousin, when she came to Moscow to meet her stepbrother, a doctor from America, who was attending a conference in Moscow. She was very good-looking, with one green eye and one brown, and her stories of survival during the war were unforgettable.

It is challenging to share one of the thousands of stories of those who survived the hostile conditions of the Nazi "ordnung" without dwelling on the Holocaust's atrocities. It was my recent telephone conversation with her son, my second cousin once removed, that prompted me to write it down. Gary (name changed at his request) was born a year before his parents' saga began, and his memories were fragmented. This narrative is my creative attempt to connect the dots in their stories.

The summer of 1941 promised to be very hot, and in early June, Sulama's husband, Leonid, rented a room for her and their newborn son in a log house in the village of Novi Dvor. The village stretched along the high bank of the bend of the Svislach River, which cuts through the city of Minsk.

The Wehrmacht entered Minsk on June 26, 1941, six days after launching Operation Barbarossa. Three weeks later, the city's residential area, which included thirty-four streets and the Jewish cemetery, was surrounded by barbed wire and watchtowers. The gates were guarded by local police, collaborators dressed in black uniforms and field caps from the pre-war German SS stock. The Minsk ghetto was established.

The Jews of Minsk were trapped. Married couples with one non-Jewish partner were also forced in. Shornaya (Saddlers) Street, where Sulama and Leonid lived, was now inside the ghetto.

During the first weeks of the occupation, the Germans could be fooled. To issue a new "Ausweis," (ID card) they required only a document with an official seal. Leonid secured a new passport for Sulama, who became Tamara Vodopianova. She never returned to her Jewish name.

When it was time to return to the city, they were sheltered by their Ukrainian friend Daria Sakuro, who had a house on Kharkovskaya Street, right outside the ghetto boundaries. Hiding Jews was a grave risk, as the penalty was death. Tamara did not resemble a stereotypical Jewish woman. Still, the risk of running into someone she knew, who might denounce her to the SS or the Gestapo, was high. To survive, Leonid did all sorts of odd jobs, and Tamara ventured outside only to go a short distance to the black market where Minskers traded personal belongings for food.

She narrowly escaped danger that day. She left Daria's house as soon as the overnight curfew had lifted. She was nearing the market when, from the corner of her eye, she saw a man pointing her out to a three-man SS patrol in black uniforms. She picked up the pace, hoping to mingle with the market crowd, but one of the policemen loudly snarled at her, "Hey, you... over here fast."

Tamara Podnosova (born Sulama Rubinchik) and Leonid Podnosov in 1949.

She obeyed.

"Ausweis," demanded the policeman.

She handed over her new German identity papers. "Hmm... Vodopianova. He says you are Rubinchik."

He gave her a dirty look and pointed to the man who stood at a distance, his face hidden under a peaked cap.

"Well, they will sort it out. Come with us... both of you."

The SS interrogator was far from the stereotype we're used to seeing in movies: tall, blond, with ice-cold blue eyes and a perfectly fitted black uniform. Her interrogator was a balding, stout man, and the uniform fit him like a saddle on a cow. He examined her ID, reviewing her name, nationality, place of birth, marital status, and children. She noticed that he was favorably surprised when she answered his questions in good German. Her Yiddish and a few years of studying German at the Pedagogical Institute helped. Still, the interrogation wasn't over. A man in a white lab coat was called in. He measured her head and nose proportions, the distance between her eyes, and the shape of her earlobes. She was stripped, and he examined her body shape.

"Well?" the interrogator asked.

The man in the lab coat shrugged his shoulders, wrote something in the interrogator's log, and left. The snitch was called in. He sat in the far corner of the room, where it was too dark to see his face.

"Who else can confirm she is Jewish?" asked the interrogator.

The city was full of stories of partisans' vengeance against collaborators, and the snitch hesitated. He seemed irritated by the doubt of his claims.

"Just look at her," he raised his voice, "she even dyed one of her eyes so that no one would recognize her."

The interrogator laughed and handed Tamara her Ausweis.

"You may go for now," he said. "Make sure we don't see you again."

She never found out who the snitch was. That bullet was dodged.

In the spring of 1942, the Nazis began the round-up campaign. People were randomly rounded up in the markets and city streets and herded to a collection hub set up in the cargo terminal of the Minsk railway station. Train echelons were formed for shipping forced labor to camps in Germany and other European countries under German occupation. In late December, Tamara, Leonid, and three-year-old Gary were netted too. The cargo terminal was not heated, and Gary had a severe cold. The Nazi deportation team considered him a nuisance, and he was taken from his parents and sent to an orphanage.

En route...

The stifling heat in the cattle cars, in which the guards packed up to eighty people, was unbearable. "Passengers" were only allowed to take what they could easily carry. Their echelon was often moved to standby tracks to make way for military freight trains headed east and trains carrying wounded German soldiers west. They were allowed to disembark the train for about an hour only once at night when the train stopped in an open field. The nights were cold, but they were happy to breathe fresh air and see the stars. Tamara couldn't remember how many days the journey dragged on. She thought it was over a week before one night, when they were loaded onto a ferry and offloaded

on an island. The guards marched them in freezing drizzle to a concentration camp. Many believed they were somewhere in the North Sea.

Camp Norderney was on the island of Alderney, the northernmost of the British Channel Islands, the only British territory occupied by the Third Reich during the war. In the summer of 1940, the British population of Alderney was evacuated to England, and when the Germans landed, they found the island deserted. Their camp was run by the SS. Its prisoners—Eastern European Jews, Slavs, and Gypsies—were to work on the island's fortifications. The SS policy "Vernichtung durch Arbeit"—extermination through labor—left the prisoners few chances of surviving. In 1944, before the camp closed, the remaining inmates were transferred to Cherbourg, France. Luckily, Tamara and Leonid were in that group. Tamara was chosen for work in the house of a large French farmer, where she did household chores, and Leonid looked after the pigsty. At farms, forced laborers often had better food rations and more humane treatment, but were under the constant eye of an armed foreman.

American forces liberated the forced labor camps in Cher-bourg in July 1944. Returning to the USSR, where they had left their son, was essential for Tamara and Leonid.

For over a year, they were in one of the Soviet filtration camps, where they were interrogated by NKVD (Soviet secret police) officers. After filtration, those accused of collaborating with the Germans were sent to the Gulag. The rest were repatriated home but were still treated with suspicion. It was difficult for them to get jobs appropriate to their university education. Tamara worked at the rail-way station cafeteria, and Leonid worked as an assistant workshop teacher.

Meanwhile, back in 1943, Minsk...

The ghetto was liquidated on October 21, 1943. By that time, the Germans were conducting raids with dogs searching for Jews. If Jews were found hiding in a home, the entire family was shot on the spot. Daria Sakuro had two sons of her own, but when she found out that Tamara's son was in the orphanage, she managed to get the boy.

One early October night, Daria was awakened by a weak knock on the door. She froze with fear. But it didn't look like Gestapo banging. She opened the door. There was a young woman in a cutaway coat.

"Lena... my goodness," whispered Daria.

Lena was Tamara's elder sister who stayed behind in Minsk with her mother when the Germans came. Her husband Abram was at the front, commanding a Russian marine battalion in Stalingrad. Fearing being denounced to the Germans as the wife of a Soviet naval officer, she ended up in the ghetto with her mother and my grandmother, both of whom had no strength to evacuate on foot.

That night, Lena jumped off the back of a truck guarded by two dozing, drunken policemen. The truck was trans-porting the last of the Minsk ghetto Jews to the Sobibor extermination camp.

In the ghetto, Lena had heard of a Jewish detachment in the Uzdensky region, about fifty kilometers from Minsk, that sheltered women and children. Daria provided Lena with clothes and food, and before dawn, she and Gary hit the road.

They walked at night, hiding in the woods during the day, and on day four, they

reached the village of Tichinka, the gateway to the partisans' fiefdom. They didn't make it to the Jewish partisan detachment. Lena worked in the fields, and in return, the villagers gave them shelter and food. In summer 1944, the Red Army liberated Minsk. Gary was five when the retreating Germans passed through the village of Tichinka. He remembered they were hiding in an old barn, and a German officer looked in, saw them, said nothing, and left. They came out with the first morning light. The village was still sleeping. They sat on a bench outside the barn and then heard the roar of tanks, and one of the passing Russian soldiers gave them a handful of candies.

Soon they returned to Daria in Minsk. In the fall, Lena's husband Abram found them, and the three of them moved to Leningrad. There was no word from Tamara and Leonid for almost two more years.

August 1946

On a hot August afternoon in 1946, a passenger train from Leningrad arrived at the Minsk railway station. The passengers quickly disembarked the second-class car.

Only a young Lieutenant Commander in a white summer uniform, his wife in an altered blue pre-war polka dot dress, and a skinny, snub-nosed seven-year-old boy stayed. The officer took the boy's hand and said, "We want you to meet someone important. We'll wait outside the train."

They left. The boy sat motionless, watching the vestibule door at the end of the car cabin corridor. He flinched when a woman dashed through the door and ran toward him. The boy stared at the woman and whispered, "Mommy."

January 1946

On the morning of January 30, 1946, despite the cold, a crowd of over a hundred thousand waited patiently at the Minsk horse-racing track on the high bank of the Svislach River. At 2:25 p.m., fourteen Studebaker trucks arrived at the site, reversed, drove up to the gallows erected at the top of the bank, and stopped, their engines still running. When the sides of the trucks were lowered, the crowd could see that in the back of each truck sat a death row officer of different SS and Gestapo ranks. The guards lifted them to their feet and threw nooses around their necks.

At 2:30 p.m., the military prosecutor approached the microphone on the podium and read out the verdict, not subject to appeal. In the dead silence, the prosecutor commanded: "Carry out the sentence!" The Studebakers began to drive away from the gallows one by one. The execution took only a few minutes. The bodies of those executed hung on the hippodrome until the end of the day.

Afterword:

Leonid passed away in Minsk in 1976.

Daria Sakuro was named Righteous Among the Nations, received a medal bearing her name, and a certificate of honor. Her name was added to the Wall of Honor in the Garden of the Righteous at Yad Vashem.

After Leonid's death, Tamara immigrated to America. She passed away in Denver in 1996, and "Gary" lives with his family in a picturesque town at the foot of the Colorado Rockies. ❖

"A Confession After Helene"
by Phillip Shabazz

I stopped sleeping when the rain stopped. Three days it came down.
The creek bed smothers cars whole— metal glinting like my mother's
good silver, the set she died still saving. I save nothing now. Use nothing.
Stand at the window, counting the hours since I last felt real.
The Dollar General sign hangs by one bolt. Yesterday, I watched it swing.
Twenty minutes. Maybe thirty. The wind smells of mud and propane.
Rot blooming in the heat. A woman asked if I was okay. The lying comes
easier now. At the base of Pisgah, where the highway curved toward Brevard,
someone's furniture sits arranged in red clay— sofa facing the void,
coffee table, a lamp with no bulb. I sat on that sofa. Laughed until my ribs hurt.
A man drove past, window down, didn't stop. When did it start?
Maybe when I asked for batteries I didn't need, my hands empty, opening
and closing. Maybe when the FEMA worker said address and the numbers
slipped away like soil off Grapevine Mountain. Just gone. My therapist's office
washed into the French Broad. Her couch floats, every Thursday at two.
Forty-five minutes of what did we even talk about? It's downstream now.
Headed for Tennessee. The whole mountain is hollow. Caved in at the center.
They're distributing water at the high school. I think about thirst, how
it's supposed to be simple: need, drink. My mouth stays dust-dry.
The volunteers smile. Their teeth so white. I watch my smile break.
Last night at the overlook on 215, I sat with the engine running. Fog wouldn't lift.
I watched my breath cloud the windshield, cleared it with my sleeve,
watched it fog again. People died here. Multiple people. I am alive.
It's supposed to mean something. This morning a man picked through
what used to be the feed store. Looking for what? His old life? Proof it existed?
I wanted to tell him it's gone. I wanted to say: I'm looking too. Instead we waved.
So polite in the wreckage. So unfailingly kind. I can't tell anymore where
disaster ends and I begin. The mud in my chest is a choked organ.
The trees snapped at their trunks—I heard the sound they make.
I made that sound too. A ligament snap. No warning. I don't want to be rescued.
I want to sit on that sofa facing nothing. I want to watch the sign swing itself free.
At the Presbyterian church, someone touched my shoulder. Asked if I needed to talk.
I said no. I lied again. They say the creek will find its old bed. But what do you
rebuild when the flood was already inside you? When the storm just made you visible?
This morning I drove back to that sofa. Still there. Still facing the void.
I sat down. The clay was cold. The lamp had no bulb.
I stayed until the sun dropped behind Pisgah.

"Two Sisters and A Whale"
by Phillip Shabazz

We kneel in the throat of it—ribbed vault sweating steam
slick with breath like hot oil, pause in flesh. My sister's hand
on the wall: dry, calloused, knuckles like stones dragged
down pavement, close but pulled away. Scar above the thumb
from the steel door in Durham. Three nails are still black
from the time with the crowbar. The snake on her wrist—
green faded to bruise, head broke off where the needle jammed.
A demon's dogs, how divided we stay.

Outside, the streets: a bicycle frame with no tires,
hangs from a chain-link fence, windows boarded with their
own glass, a rusted car hood balanced on two milk crates,
a cat with one eye chewing a sneaker in the lot.
Gang of scarecrows and yard jockeys, The figure of Aunt Jemima
against the white flour of pancake mix I cannot eat.

Inside: her hum—same three notes, blues sent out.
Same as the night Dad's boots split at the sole: duct tape,
black thread, salt. Same tune from when we ran down alleyways,
holding our coats shut with wire. Last winter, she lifted me,
blood running into my sock, shoe, air. Wrapped the wound, called the cab.
Stood at the curb with her arms crossed, watching the taillights.
Didn't speak. Didn't look. Didn't lift me from dirt.
Only the steam of her breath and the best of her steps.

Now—she lies back, head tilted toward the whale's curve,
like it's a ceiling fan in an old motel room.
"A woman can't swim forever," she says, voice like gravel
dropped in a can. "Sometimes you drown just to breathe."
I watch the tendons in her neck shift with each word,
the tender rise of her chest, like she's let the stress set in.
Like prison without walls is still prison.

I reach for her, but my hand stops short. She's already farther.
A rift. The hum is louder now. The whale is no longer a whale.
The shrill of its song, its ribbed vault splits into cathedral arches,
and we are standing on the wing of a plane that moves nowhere,

suspended mid-air, engines humming a prayer older than flight.
She reaches for the sky like it's a rope. A horse gallops overhead.
Not a dream—its mane burning gold, hooves breaking open clouds,
lancing the wind like a blade through muscle. I see a room full of
glass moons, each spinning, each holding a city inside. One shatters.

I step forward, barefoot against nothing, and see our childhood
fastened into a flag made of rain—wet clothes hung between buildings,
thread bare as wind, waving. She calls me back, but I don't hear words.
Just the hum. The whale returns, flesh closing around us.

She hums my song. Not well. But I know it.
And when the whale opens its pink mouth, when the saltwater comes in—
knee-high, waist-high, rushing— I will run toward her.
Not because I should. But because I'm her sister.
And that's the last thing I know how to be.

"What Breaks"
by Phillip Shabazz

The room is all burnt offering and sorry—the coffee pot a bronze throat
sings its one note of heat. You haven't slept. Sleep is a luxury
of the forgetful. Your hands: two birds trapped in a myth about flying.
They shake not from fear but from all the words you concealed
to keep the peace. She left the door open. The light, that coward,
stayed where it was loved. Still, you cross—barefoot, penitent—
the floor a river you've been baptized in and refused to drown from.
The city is a sick animal. Listen: sirens like the street's own blood moving.
A man preaches to a mailbox, his grief the size of a congregation.
You don't stop. Stopping would mean you're different. You're not.
There's a rooftop. You said never again, but here the air is only
what you always knew. The wind up here doesn't forgive—
forgiveness is for the saints and the delusional—but it doesn't push.
It waits the way your mother waited, watching, counting.
Her laugh: you remember. It sounded like something closing.
Not a door. Smaller. More final. A jewelry box. A weapon.
You open your mouth to sing it back, but your throat holds only
what you've tried to say without saying it. At the bus stop,
a woman offers a napkin. She doesn't ask. We never ask.
We just know the posture of breakage, recognize the shape of
our own hands in a stranger's trembling. Beneath your ribs,
something gives, not surrender. Not yet. But a loosening.
Your fist opens. What falls from it has always been
yours to put down.

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.

It is many, many years since I graduated from High School, and I rarely think about it, my legacy, classmates, classes, teachers or any of that. Yet here I am, at school, but everyone is my age now. We are all old, and most of the people here are not from my own graduating class, but one of the following classes, so that's weird, because I am trying to recognize as many of them as I am able, and I didn't know them well to begin with. I am, however, looking for a childhood friend, one who has had a difficult time since school, and who I want to see and talk with to perhaps see if I can help. Pure virtue signaling, the angel on one shoulder says. Don't worry about the why, just do something, the other, better angel says. I cannot find him, and it only now occurs to me that I need him, to either give him a ride home or to get one from him. I am now thinking about his home, the house he grew up in, and how it is not the same place, warm and cozy with furniture and old-fashioned wallpaper, and smells of food cooking coming from the tiny kitchen and TV noise from the den. It is empty and cold and I wonder where he sleeps and where all the furnishings have gone. The basement is cluttered with old trash and cardboard boxes, and there is nothing in the garage, nor does it seem he puts his car there.

I can't remember the name of one of the now-grown students that was also a friend of his so I feel strange asking him if he has seen our mutual friend. Like you need to be able to say "Hi, _____, how have you been. It's been a while, hasn't it? You're looking good. Have you seen _____? Without those niceties of social interaction, I can't get off the starting line.

PB - cyberspace

"From the Bucket List"

by John Steele

I hear democracy is nice this time of year.
Aren't we overdue for a visit?
Where the fascists wither, autumn brown shirts,
and fall from the trees on which they grow,
crying crocodile tears about freedom of speech,
while warming their delicate sensibilities
at the banned book bonfire,
beating their chests, wailing woeful tales
of white Christian cis-gender male victimhood,
cultivating a cudgel out of the world's smallest violin.
Until the street cleaners sweep them away
with the other refuse, once again,
into the dustbin of history.
How exotic and strangely different from here.

I hear democracy is nice this time of year.
Can we afford a ticket to get there?
Where entitlement to a loaf of bread
is extolled rather than loathed, and
necessities for all are valued above
obscene luxury for the entitled few.
I would sit on the shore and watch
as the rising tide raises all boats,
not just super yachts and oil tankers
and colossal container-ship cargoes.
How exotic and strangely different from here.

I hear democracy is nice this time of year.
Can we hear it faintly calling?
Where a sense of common good persists
and discourse in good faith resists the din
of two-hundred-eighty-character profiteering algorithms
and cash-cow videos catering to the base,
laying waste to all but the basest of instincts.
How exotic and strangely different from here.

I hear democracy is nice this time of year.
It has its own issues, sure. But still,
how exotic and strangely different from here.

CONTRIBUTORS

Victor Pogostin was born in Moscow. He graduated from The School of Translators at the Moscow State Institute for Foreign Languages, worked as a translator for the Soviet Trade Mission in India, taught a Russian Language and Culture course at Aligarh Muslim University, and served in the Long-Range Naval Reconnaissance Aviation of the Northern Fleet. After returning from military service, he defended his Ph.D. dissertation on Ernest Hemingway's nonfiction. Over the years, he worked at the Institute of Sociology of the USSR Academy of Sciences, while also working as a freelance author and translator for national newspapers and literary magazines across the former Soviet Union. Besides translating fiction and nonfiction into Russian, he has compiled, edited, and written introductions and commentaries for more than a dozen books by North American authors, including Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. In 1993, he moved to Canada with his wife and son. In English, his nonfiction stories have been published in *The National Post, Canadian Literature magazine, Russian Life Magazine* (VT), *Witcraft* (MI), *Epoch Times* (US & Canada editions), "*As You Were: The Military Review*" (US), *The Blotter Magazine* (US), *The Other Side of Hope* (UK), and *Lowestoft Chronicle* (MA). His collections of nonfiction stories were published as "Russian Roulette" in 2021, "Clusterfuck" and 'Book of Small Truths' in 2025 (available on Amazon)

Phillip Shabazz is the author of four poetry collections, and a novel in verse. His most recent collection, Moonflower, 2025, is published by Fernwood Press. His work has been included in the anthologies, Paul Green: North Carolina Writers on the Legacy of
the State's Most Celebrated Playwright, Crossing the Rift: North Carolina Poets on 9/11 & Its Aftermath. Some publication credits in journals include, *Fine Lines, Florida Review, Galway Review, Mason Street, Queens Quarterly, K'in,* and *Thimble.*

John Steele has studied Creative Writing at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Under the pseudonym Gherbod Fleming, he is the author of fourteen novels and several novellas and short stories. He has been a teacher, a nonprofit tutor, a logistics coordinator, a high-ropes-course director, a warehouse technician, and, for one fateful day in the deepest, darkest, coldest recesses of January in southern Indiana, an arborist assistant. Poetry is the loose thread of sanity at which he cannot stop tugging.

Victor Pogostin, PhD, is a teller of tales. Stories that are often funny, sometimes moving, but always entertaining. And they're true.

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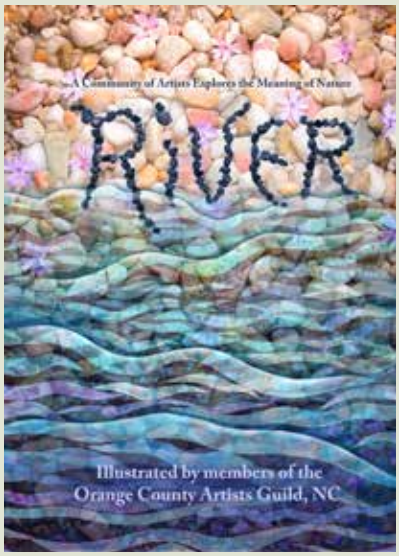

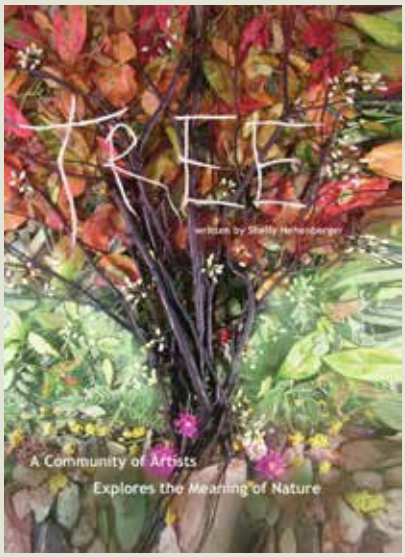

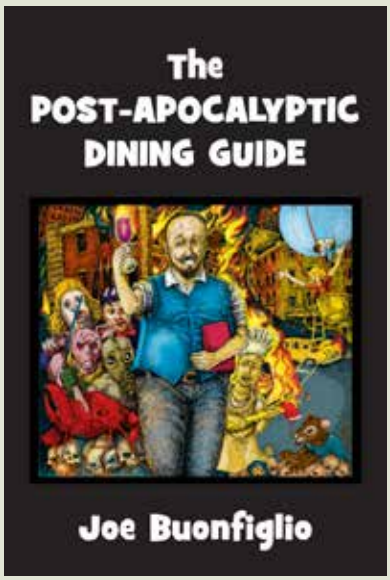

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