

The Blotter

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The Blotter

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“Boo!”

Gone is the summer season, delighted with evening songs of cicadas and turkey and cheese sandwiches by the pool. Oh boy, how exciting it is to look forward to brisk mornings and cinnamon spiced caffeine and the whimsical tradition of waiting until the last moment to think of an above-average Halloween costume idea. Say goodbye to the dog days of 104 and sunny, and say hello to 83 and slightly less sunny.

Take a brief break from the scary news articles, put down the recalled turkey sub, and beat the autumnal equinox heat with a popsicle that may or may not have glass shards in it.

With the spooky season soon among us, and with enough ‘scary’ as things stand, here’s a tiered list of irrational fears, with little to no additional context:

“Everyone thinks this”

Closing your eyes in the pool/shower and a shark swimming towards you.

Teeth falling out, e.g. all at once, like you did as a child — pushing your tongue against it until it wiggles out, or one by one, plonking out of their sockets like apples off a tree.

Note: potentially caused by scurvy and while experiencing other symptoms

Rabies-ridden bats flying out when you check your mailbox.

Sending a bad word in an email. Thanks so much, cunt magically typing itself in the eight milliseconds it took to blink and press send.

Driving behind a logging semi on the highway and the logs break loose and smash into your car inception-style.

“Slightly more niched”

Going to get a haircut, hairdresser carrying trimmer (which of course just so happens to be on) sneezes while walking past your chair — whoops! You’re bald now.

Somehow doing taxes incorrectly, thus ensuing an FBI raid and you consequently getting arrested for fraud.

Snake coming out from the toilet while you pee.

Slipping and falling while cleaning your ear with a q-tip
and it lodging all the way into your head.

“Potentially seek a healthcare provider”

Mirrors in dark rooms. I can't see what's on it. What is it
reflecting? You don't know and you can't tell me.

Getting lost in outer space. Just flailing and frog-kicking in
place.

Waking up from a dream one morning and waking up in a
different seven year old version of yourself and realizing the
life you had lived beyond that point was all a dream.

Moths being the bouba of a butterfly's kiki. No explana-
tion.

Relaxing on the beach, seeing the sand start to move and
build itself up from the ground, and out comes Sandman
from 2007's Spider-Man 3, sprinting towards you.

Goodnight! Sweet dreams!

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

stumble to the kitchen

“Send in the Clowns”

by John Steele

This unlit parking lot in the warehouse district was the opposite end of the city – literally and figuratively – from the quad. Brett wrinkled his nose at the pervasive tang of diesel fuel. He hoped the scent wouldn’t cling to his sweater and follow him back to the house. Checking the time on his phone, he nodded to Tobin and Donny and the other fraternity brothers he’d brought along, Nikki, Mark, and Squi. The impromptu kegger started in two hours. They should have plenty of time to get the pills. It was a pain in the ass that their normal supplier was indisposed – read: locked up – and thus Brett and bros were here, in the ass-end of the city, world of the unwashed and uneducated.

“Think they’ll show?” Donny asked.

“They’ll show,” Brett said, tapping his backpack. Normally he’d just use Venmo to pay for drugs, but this bozo demanded cash. Brett pulled up his sweater a few inches to flash the handle of the Glock in his waistband. “And we’re ready.”

A distant mechanical rumbling pierced the damp silence of the night, grew louder, closer, louder still. Finally, two buildings away, a car turned the corner. Brett and the others shielded their eyes against the one functioning headlight. Oil slick rainbows danced across puddles from the glare. The car engine, its cacophonous clatter reverberating off the warehouses and pavement, was incredibly loud – not powerful loud, but sickly, gasping, is it going to make it this far loud.

“What a piece of shit,” Squi muttered.

The car roared, rattled and stuttered closer. When it finally limped to a halt with a deafening backfire and belch of black exhaust, the headlight was angled just enough that Brett and the others could see the giant, faded pastel flowers in those spots where the paint had not yet given way to rust.

“What kind of clown comes to a drug deal in a junked VW bug?” Donny wondered aloud.

The driver’s door creaked open and hung at a noticeable angle. Toodles climbed out, his crushed top hat losing the battle to contain his unruly red hair. His greasepaint frown was as red as his bulbous nose and his oversized shoes. He took two floppy steps forward, took a last drag on what remained of the cigarette dangling precariously from his lips, and tossed it aside. The puddle where it landed burst into flame. Toodles shrugged. He brushed a spec of ash from his dingy, billowy gown. When he spoke, his voice sounded like bourbon and crushed glass. “You got the cash, fuckwad?”

Brett bristled, but then remembered why he was there. He was confident in his ability to get what he wanted, to cajole and threaten, like when he’d gotten that freshman chick from sociology to pay for her own abortion. Jessie, or Jenna, or something. “You got the pills... clown?” Brett maintained a hard expression, though his bros chuckled behind him.

Toodles sighed. “Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that I don’t. What d’ya say to

that?"

"Well, smiley," Brett flashed his own pearly whites now – they were brighter than the clown's sweat-stained greasepaint face. "I'd say that's a shame. For you. Because there's six of us and just one of–"

Toodles rapped on the top of the bug. The passenger-side door flung open and out climbed Bongo. Then KnickKnack in his propeller-topped mortarboard. Then Dinky and Dimples. And ChooChoo and Lulu. And Ocho. Then Onesie, with his glass eye, monocle, unicycle, and eponymous garb. Then Lollypop and Jingles. Then BoBo the Dog Face Girl.

Despite themselves, Brett and his crew waited expectantly, but nobody else got out.

Toodles shrugged and gestured apologetically. "Heh, heh. Yeah, whatever, kid. I was just shittin' ya. I got the pills." He reached into the car and pulled out a grease-stained popcorn bag rolled closed. "Cash? Fuckwad?" His ears wiggled when his eyebrows raised.

Brett strode with a dismissive smirk over to the clown car, nonchalantly avoiding the flaming puddle. In unslinging the backpack from his shoulder, he made sure to twist in such a way that the handle of the Glock was visible. He handed over the pack.

Toodles tossed it over the hood of the car to Lollypop. "Count."

"So," said Brett to Toodles after a moment of uncomfortable silence while Lollypop rummaged through the pack, "you buy those shoes off the rack?" Toodles frowned blankly at him. Brett and his bros chuckled. "No, sorry. Really, though, what's up with the clown shtick? I mean, was the bearded lady busy? Where's the trapeze family?"

Toodles winked. "Don't look up."

"Ha," Brett laughed halfheartedly. His smile lingered on his face a bit too long. Finally, against his better judgment, he glanced up. There was nothing there.

Toodles reached over and poked Brett's nose. Somehow there was a honk. "Gotcha, sport," said Toodles. The clown's humor faded instantly.

Brett tried to swat away the clown's hand but was too slow. "You people are freaky as shit!"

"It is not an uncommon reaction," chimed in KnickKnack, all professorial beneath his whirly mortarboard, "for civilians to find clowns either comical or, conversely, disturbing. Like a penis."

Several of the clowns, as well as several of Brett's bros, cocked their heads quizzically.

"No," KnickKnack continued, "I am not equating a clown with a penis, simply pointing out similar patterns of response, metaphorically." The propeller atop his mortarboard began to spin.

"You like metaphors?" Toodles asked Brett.

"I... uh..."

"Hm," said Toodles. "Must be a business major. Speakin' of business... Lollypop?"

"We're light, Boss," said Lollypop.

Toodles' painted frown deepened. He looked to Brett with sad eyes.

"Oh, yeah, about that," said Brett. "You insisting on cash, that's a hassle. So twenty percent convenience fee. We're not your ATM. So how about you hand over the pills, and we're all on our merry way. Us to a kickass party, and you... I don't know, to go lick lion shit off the lion tamer's boots?" Brett eased his hand onto the handle of the Glock.

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Toodles crossed his arms. He leaned sideways and peered past Brett to the other bros. “Any of you misappropriated sperm want to talk some sense into your braniac grand poobah?”

“Fuck you, clown!” said Donny.

“Yeah!” Squi expounded.

“Fuck you!” Nikki added for good measure.

Toodles stood back up straight. He shrugged and handed the popcorn bag to Brett. “Suit yourself, kid.”

In the blink of an eye, BoBo the Dog Face Girl went for the jugular.

Brett was no match for her Whippet-like speed. As she took him down, the Glock, still in his waistband, discharged. Canines at his throat, the other side of his face smashed pavement by way of the flaming puddle.

Onesie was no slouch either. He ably demonstrated how a unicycle can be used as both a form of rapid transport and then a weapon. Donny went down with a concussion and several fewer teeth, which clattered across the asphalt. He was one of the lucky ones.

The rest of the clown posse swarmed. Never could the frat bros have anticipated the onslaught of seltzer water, juggling pins, and cream pies that crashed down upon them that night. ChooChoo and Lulu enacted their animal-balloon fantasy with Squi playing the part, in turn, of each of the five animals. Until he died many years later, he could never again abide the sight of a poodle or a giraffe.

Tobin ran, but was pulled down from behind by a whip lashing around his ankle – Jingles was a friend of the lion tamer, no bootlicking required. Dinky and Dimples made a waffle cone sandwich out of Nikki.

He would never speak of it to anyone, outside of therapy. Bongo performed the rabbit out of a hat trick on Mark, fortunately with a cotton candy rabbit, unfortunately not with a hat.

Eventually, when Toodles reached down and picked up the greasy popcorn bag and tried to brush off the droplets of blood splattered across it – succeeding merely in smearing the blood – his frown seemed slightly less sad. But only slightly. He took the backpack from Lollypop, peered inside. “Drinks’re on me,” he said wanly. As his crew piled back into the car, he surveyed the scene of crawling, groaning, crying, whimpering, and bleeding bros spread across the parking lot. “There’s one born every minute,” he said, shaking his head.

“Maybe we should check out that party, Boss,” said Lollypop. “Seems like they’re gonna need some pills.”

Toodles sighed. “Nah,” he said. “We don’t need those clowns.” He rolled up his window, and they lurched spasmodically, belching exhaust, into the night. ❖

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.

How did I end up here? This place that has no recognition factor for me. Is it an amalgam of places I do know, stirred with such intensity that all of the pieces are blended into something so different, so new, that I cannot place it? Surely there is a door, a horizon, a person's eyes that I can discern from somewhere or someone I've seen before. A sound would help – it is a quiet place and the wind in trees gives nothing away for free. Is there birdsong? Not here. Odd.

The houses are close together, with no yards, but steps that lead out directly to the street. Why is there no sidewalk, either? Do people not come out these entryways? The windows are dark, even though it is rare (I think) for someone to not have a lamp or kitchen light on, even during the day.

I carry a backpack over one shoulder – something I haven't done since school. Am I going or coming home? I don't feel the loss of not finding my home in this neighborhood, if you can call it that. I must be heading to school. I am not late, although there are no other children out here (in the street?) No bus to wait for. (I rode a bus for a short while IRL.)

I want to just stop and toss away the backpack, and just go up to a house and open the door, see if it is merely a front with no interior, or toss a match and see if everything burns, or turn around and see if anything is behind me. But I am stuck between thinking this is an unreality and the possibility that this is something tangible that I must figure out. For that reason alone, I do not shout or whistle or sing a song to break the strange silence.

BAD - cyberspace



"Condemned Building, El Paso Barrio" by William C. Crawford

“The House I Carry With Me”

by Cynthia Goble

There is something strangely intimate about being handed a key. It weighs almost nothing; a few ounces of metal small enough to disappear into a pocket or be forgotten on a kitchen counter. Yet I have never thought of keys as ordinary. A key says you may enter; it says there is a door that will open for you. Perhaps most importantly, a key says someone expects you to come back.

I learned the significance of that long before I had words for it. As a child moving through foster homes, I became practiced at entering other people's houses, quickly learning that every home carried its own sounds, smells, expectations, and invisible rules. Some doors closed gently while others slammed. Some kitchens were places where people lingered after dinner, while others were rooms you moved through quickly. There were houses where laughter seemed to belong naturally, and others where silence told you more than words ever could.

I noticed everything: the footsteps coming down a hallway, the tone of a voice from another room, the subtle way someone's face changed when I entered, whether a question was really a question, and whether silence meant peace or trouble. I learned to read a room before I knew there was a name for such awareness. It wasn't curiosity; it was survival.

When you are a child living in someone else's home, you become a student of atmosphere. You learn that belonging can feel

conditional, even when no one explicitly says it is. You understand instinctively that there is a vast difference between being allowed to stay somewhere and knowing you truly belong. So I adapted. I watched, I listened, and I tried not to take up too much space. Somewhere along the way, I began carrying an idea of home that had very little to do with walls.

For years, I didn't recognize it. I thought home was something only other people possessed; people with family photographs stretching backward through generations, stories everyone at the dinner table already knew, and shared memories of Christmas-es, vacations, and weddings. They could say, “Remember when?” and someone else remembered too. There is an intimacy in shared memory that is difficult to explain to someone who has never had it. I wanted that kind of remembering; I wanted to be part of the sentence that began with *we*.

Instead, I became very good at *I. I can do this. I'll figure it out*. Those sentences helped me survive, but they also followed me long after survival was necessary.

Years passed. I became an adult, built a career, formed relationships, and navigated my share of accomplishments and disappointments. I learned how to walk into rooms full of strangers and appear as though I belonged. Eventually, I understood something the child I had been could never have imagined: you can become highly

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capable at living without ever becoming completely comfortable with staying. Living requires competence, but staying requires trust. Home, I would discover, requires something even more difficult, it requires allowing yourself to believe that you do not have to earn your place every morning.

That realization did not arrive dramatically. There was no grand revelation, no music, no cinematic moment when everything suddenly made sense. Instead, it came through the ordinary: a familiar chair, books arranged just where I wanted them, a quiet morning with no demands, a dog asleep nearby, completely unconcerned with whether he deserved to be there, and a key.

Perhaps healing often looks like that. Not fireworks or forgetting, but just ordinary life slowly becoming safe enough that you stop preparing for it to disappear.

I moved again recently. At this stage of my life, I find myself paying close attention to what I choose to bring with me. Moving turns possessions into questions: *Do I need this? Why have I kept that? Who was I when I bought it, and who am I now?* There is something deeply revealing about packing your life into boxes; objects you haven't noticed in years suddenly demand a decision: *Keep, give away, discard, or carry forward.* I have discovered that memories ask the same questions. Some should be kept, some can finally be released, and some cannot be discarded because they have become part of the structure holding us upright.

I cannot pack away the child who watched doorways, nor would I want to. She taught me to notice and to listen beyond words. She taught me that the person standing quietly at the edge of the room may have the

most important story to tell, and she taught me how much it matters when someone communicates, without ceremony: *There is room for you here.*

But she also believed something I no longer do. She thought belonging was bestowed; that someone else had to choose you, welcome you, and decide whether you could stay. For a child, of course, much of that was true. But I am no longer that child. It has taken most of a lifetime to understand that belonging is not entirely dependent upon being invited. Sometimes it begins when we stop abandoning ourselves, when we stop rearranging who we are to fit every room we enter, stop apologizing for the space we occupy, and realize that home can be something we carry.

This does not mean other people cease to matter; quite the opposite. I cherish the people who have made room for me. I treasure friendship differently because I know what absence feels like. I notice kindness because I remember uncertainty, and I value the people with whom silence is comfortable and conversation doesn't require performance. But I no longer ask them to prove that I belong. That is no longer their responsibility, it is mine.

These days, I am drawn to simplicity. I need less than I once imagined: a quiet place to write, a comfortable chair, a few meaningful possessions, morning light through a window, my books, my dog, and a table where conversation happens without hurry. There was a time when I might have looked at such a life and thought it too small; now I understand its abundance.

Perhaps people who spend years searching for home eventually discover that it was

never going to be the biggest house, a perfect family photograph, or a permanent address. Perhaps home is simply the place where vigilance finally puts down its bags; where you do not listen for footsteps out of fear, where silence is just silence, where a closed door is simply a door, and where you can sit at a kitchen table without wondering how long you will be allowed to remain.

I sometimes think about all the houses I have lived in. I cannot remember every room or every address, but certain details remain remarkably clear: the angle of a staircase, the light through a particular window, the sound of dishes in a kitchen, and the feeling of standing somewhere, knowing I was temporary. For many years, I thought those houses were evidence of what I had lost. Now I see them differently. Each one taught me what home was *not*, which ultimately helped me recognize what home could be.

Home is not permanence; almost nothing in life is. Home is presence. It is the ability to inhabit your own life without constantly looking toward the door. It is knowing that wherever tomorrow takes you, you will not arrive empty-handed. You will bring the person you have become, the lessons, the memories worth keeping, and the capacity to create belonging where none existed before. You will bring the child who once stood quietly in unfamiliar rooms, watching and listening; only now, she does not have to wonder whether she is welcome. I know she is.

This morning, my key is where I left it. Nothing remarkable has happened. The house is quiet, my dog is resting nearby, and ordinary tasks are waiting to be done. Later,

I will leave. I will put the key in my pocket and close the door behind me. When I return, I will take it out again; a few ounces of metal, a small turn of the hand, a door opening.

For most of my life, I thought the beautiful thing about a key was that it could let me into a house. I know differently now. The house I was searching for is the one I finally learned to carry with me. ❖

"Suburban Family Robinson"

So we're shipwrecked
in suburbia,
have cut down trees
to make some kind of
three-bedroom shelter
with just enough left over
for a two-car garage.

After all this time,
we've given up on rescue,
so we have to make do
with what this place provides:
supermarkets, hair salons,
fast food joints, big box stores.

Day after day,
we work hard
just to hold onto what we have.
Luckily, there's no hostile tribes
in the vicinity.
Just the bank, the insurance company.
And, unlike most cannibals,
they know me by name.

We still send out smoke signals –
in summer, via the grill,
in winter, up the chimney.
But the only ones
who see our message
are other people marooned here
in suburbia.
And they're too busy
sending out signals of their own.

"Doomsday Love"

Her strained, smokey voice cuts through
the forest chatter.

The campfire sputters,
apes the long gone sun,
and she tells me - softly, lullaby-like –
what would happen if the light gave out.

Her subject is extinction,
her tone, matter of fact.

First the green things would shrivel up,
then the grazers, then the hunters,
then the ones who feed on the final breath.
We are somewhere in the middle,
a species with hands and hope,
but not immune to the order of endings.

(I never ask for oracles,
at least not one so near to me.)

We'd have some more time together,
she whispers,
eight minutes maybe,
because light travels slow.

Then the air would cool.
Planets would blink out, one by one,
like Christmas lights boxed in January.

Each kiss she gives me
is a star freed from the tyranny of daylight.
Each theory she offers
wipes the salt from my cheek,
as if knowledge could dry sorrow.

But after a silence that feels like mourning,
she says— it wouldn't be enough.
Yes, she says, the earth would still burn...
from memory, like we would do.

"Voorhis Avenue"

By Peter Mladinik

The street RoseMarie grew up on was on national news; that's where the nutcase who shot up all those people at the Fourth of July Parade in New Milford lived. Two dead: a grandfather and a young boy. Why did he do it? Because he had a gun. Then his father, the shooter's dad, got in hot water; his son had access to the gun. Don't ask what kind; I don't know guns. Two of my best friends own guns, and one even owns an assault rifle. The media always says "the shooter." Well, this one is a murderer, and yes, a person in need of help. Hart Crane said "bedlamite" on the bridge, shirt blousing out in the wind, ready to leap. Maybe this unfortunate young man (Flannery O'Connor says lunatic) should have offed himself before going up to the parade. The granddad and the boy would still be alive, maybe. You never know. But I know Voorhis is where RoseMarie grew up, a nice tree-lined street of pre-World War II houses, and in the middle of the block John DeChristophoro's, who excelled at baseball and football, and was a heartthrob, and later on did two years in Rahway Prison for embezzlement, for which he felt shame, because he was normal. But that was a long time ago. This "shooter" shot up the parade five years ago. When I saw it on the news I texted RoseMarie. She moved from Voorhis when she left for college in Split Rock, Pennsylvania, where she met her future husband, and where I met them. After they got divorced, her ex grew distant from me; I wasn't there for him.

But what could I do? I was in Minneapolis trying to hold down my shipping clerk job at Fineberg Distributing. I was in the meat-cutters union, going in and out of coolers and freezers, handling blocks of dry ice wrapped in thick light brown paper that tore easily. I tore the paper, and the dry ice block smoldered. I watched the cold smoke rise. The blocks were in a large case, like a cooler someone could stuff a body in. By the time I texted RoseMarie, her ex, Steve was deceased. After I wasn't there for him, we talked long distance a little, a very little. He wasn't the same Steve.

Contributors

John Steele is a North Carolina poet and writer. He has studied creative writing at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. He does not have “a thing” about clowns, but he does firmly believe that the only food that should taste like bananas are bananas.

Cynthia Goble is an author, speaker, and founder of Rise and Resilience, LLC. She is the author of *Forever A Foster Child: A Memoir of Resilience*, a deeply personal exploration of foster care, belonging, and the lifelong journey from surviving to thriving. She is also a featured author in *Mission Hope, Volume 7: Finding Strength in Every Storm* and the forthcoming *Mission Hope, Volume 8: Passion & Purpose: From Spark to Mission Driven*. Her inspirational writing has appeared in Guideposts' *Angels on Earth*. Through her writing and work, Cynthia explores resilience, belonging, compassionate leadership, and the transformation of adversity into purpose.

William C. Crawford is a prolific street photographer with a throwback, minimalist approach. He got his start as a photographer in Vietnam where he was a combat photojournalist. He was mentored by three Pulitzer Prize winners. He is based in Winston Salem, NC. See bcraw44 on Instagram.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Midnight Mind*, *Willow Review* and the *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*. Latest books, “Bittersweet”, “Subject Matters” and “Between Two Fires” are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in the *MacGuffin*, *Touchstone* and *Willow Review*.

Peter Mladinic's most recent book of poems, “The Whitestone Bridge,” is available from Anxiety Press. An animal rights advocate, he lives in Hobbs, New Mexico.

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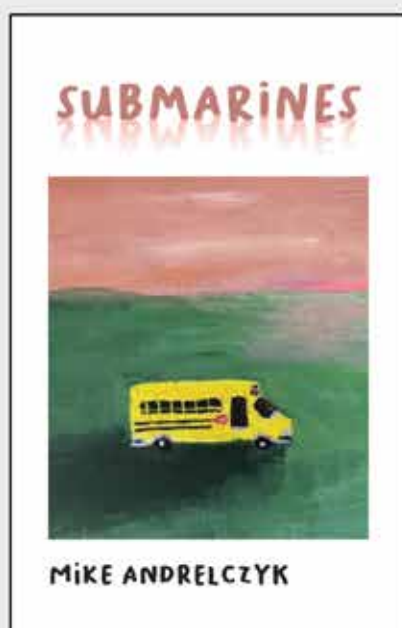
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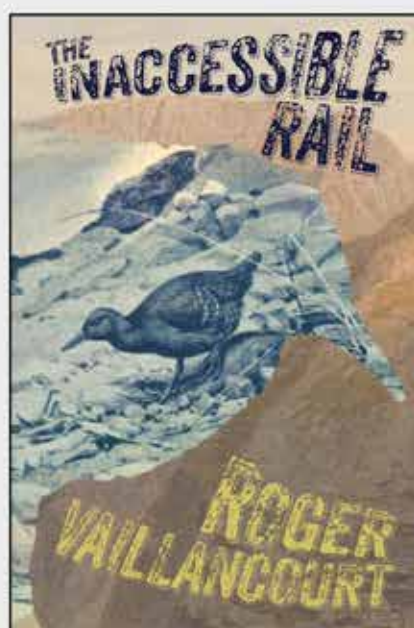
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