

The Blotter

February 2004

Liberating the Island of Misfit Toys

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For Lovers and Losers

In This Issue: Johnny Pence Fans the Inferno of Love's Flaming Heartburn. **Swoon and Pine over Robert Olason's Ink Paintings of Traffic.** And Mary Hennessey, Joy Surles, and Ron Crawford Did Not Rhyme "Fire" with "Desire." **Not Even Once.**

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by the artist.Cover art, detail of *A Little Wallpaper*
by Robert Olason. See pp. 4-5 for
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Unrequitable, or, "The Distance Between Them"

by Johnny Pence

illustrations by S. Nikolsky

He was too little to see out the peephole, and he wasn't allowed to open the door without permission. He almost certainly would not get permission to open the door for his current purpose, which was spying on the new neighbors moving in. As with so many things, he resigned himself to a poor substitute: standing with his ear pressed against the door, listening instead of watching. After a half-hour, his breakfast of oatmeal had cooled too much to be enjoyable. Mom had caught on to what he was doing long ago, and would have let him open the door if she thought he would actually go and talk to them. But she rightly imagined that he would probably just stand mute in the hallway, ignoring their hellos, watching expressionless as they grunted under boxes and sofa-beds.

After two hours they were done moving stuff in. They left the door open as they moved furniture around and put dishes away, and Mom came over to peep through the peephole to tell him what she could see.

"Ooh, Georgie, they really beat up that palm tree moving in. Maybe this will put it out of its misery."

George looked up at her and made a jumping, whole-body gesture to indicate that by talking about that damned palm tree in the hallway, she was not getting to the good parts. Mom lit a Virginia Slim and smoked it out of the side of her mouth as she peeped.

"Okay, okay. I really can't see much beyond the hallway.... Uh, looks like one of those big sectional sofas, a lot of plants, a lot of boxes ... I don't know. You want to just go

over there and say hello?"

George replied with an expression that was inscrutable even to his Mom. She threw back the sliding chain of first lock, noticed that the inscrutable expression had changed somewhat to one she could understand, and said, "Okay, you can undo the locks."

George committed to the task of undoing the remaining dead bolt, sliding bolt, and the lock on the doorknob itself with every bit of his soul. He relished the forbidden clacks and slinks of sliding metal beneath his fingers and sighed with satisfaction. He then slowly placed his hand on the doorknob and left it there for an instant before throwing the door open with a flourish.

Mom stepped out into the reeking hallway and regarded the battered and abused palm tree. Its planter served as litter box to some phantom cat who was never seen, but who had slowly been poisoning the tree with its waste for years, keeping it hovering near death but never granting it the sleep of ages. She approached the threshold of the new neighbors' apartment, silently snooping just a little bit before she intended to announce her presence. But George shattered the silence by slamming the door with all his might once, then opening it and slamming it once again.

"Ahem, uh, hello." Mom said. One more slam from George, who had now gotten sufficient vengeance against the door.

The man of the new apartment looked up from his task at the sectional sofa, and his first thought honestly had a great deal to do with



where this neighbor had been when all the heavy lifting remained, but when he caught a glimpse of the frail, mousy woman before him and the weird little kid, he forgave them. They were not lifters.

"Hey neighbor!" he hollered, waving an Allen wrench. "I'm Tony Stanback, this is my wife, Ellen, and around here somewhere—Lucy, where are you?—you could maybe find our daughter Lucy."

For George, the world in which the grownups introduced themselves and began to yammer grew small and far away. He beheld Lucy in a timeless place and a placeless time as she stepped from her room down the hallway. The first thing he saw was a long leg in green-and-blue striped tights, then a blue skirt whose hue matched neither color in the tights.

A modest brown V-neck sweater allowed pink collars and cuffs to peek out from underneath. Her face was a portrait of haughtiness and beautiful, barely contained wrath. Her long black hair hung straight and gorgeous, despite the infrequency with which it was combed.

She punched a hole through time. For George, he and the entire universe stood at the limit of an event horizon, the smallest measurement of distance away from being swallowed by the light-eating gravity of her wild malicious beauty. She clutched a small bouquet of nude and dismembered Barbies in one fist and regarded the scene before her with distrust. Her gaze fell upon Mom and she began to say something, her face betraying a mood her parents would not suffer, perhaps "pouty," "fussy," or simply the kind

continued, p. 6

The Blotter Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

I am in a supermarket after hours. A guy is showing me his transporter machine, which looks like a black plastic frame the size of a telephone booth. It is commonplace for people to have these booths and keep them in the grocery store. He is complaining, however, because an animal rights group is filing a lawsuit against him because his transporter booth is not within sight of the frozen foods section. After describing the situation to me, we get a grapefruit and some vegetables and check out. I go outside of the store while my friend is being rung up. There has been a blackout, and I am concerned about our safety. As we walk away from the store, a man runs at me holding a pistol. He screams, "Get out of the parking lot!" and shoots me in the chest. I hear him screaming at me to move, but lie on the pavement, unable to move. I see flashes as he fires several more rounds at me.

—M. M., Richmond, VA

I dreamt that Mr. Rogers had his own clothing line.

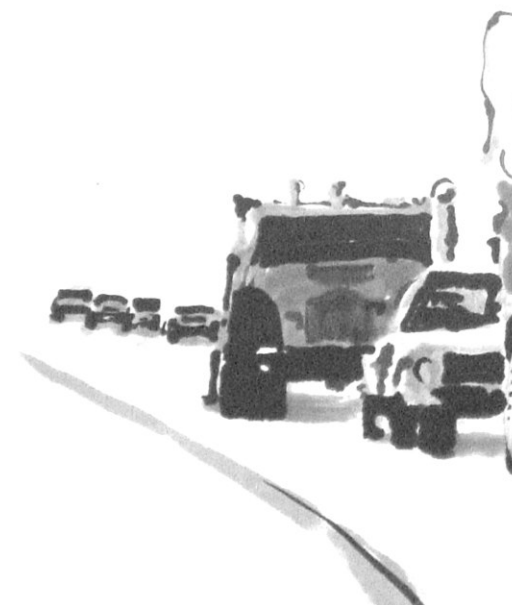
—R. E., Bahama

Please send excerpts from your dream journals to Ignatz at ironbutterfly@throughthemoon.com. If nothing else, we love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.





Robert Olason



Catch Robert Olason's work in downtown Raleigh at Artspace, Visual Artist Exchange, and at Raleigh Contemporary Gallery, all until Feb. 28, and in Chapel Hill at Branch's Bookshop from Feb. 16 through mid-March.

“In the evenings and weekends of 2000-2001, I was introduced to the (Eastern) artist's four friends; the plum branch, bamboo, orchid, and chrysanthemum. There is much still to learn. I admit to only a passing acquaintance with Chrysanthemum, though Plum Branch and I did have a brief, torrid affair the summer of 2000. We remain good friends.”

note: I didn't know what he was talking about either, so I looked it up: Plum branch, bamboo, orchid, and chrysanthemum are the four essential brushstrokes of sumi-e painting. —ed.



*Myrtle Beach Coming (Left) and Going (right)
Car Hauler in Traffic, Traffic
Behind a Shitload, and A Little Wallpaper (detail)*

of mood that was best handled by telling her to get ready for a nap. She was maybe two years older than George, but excitement and dropping blood sugar could undo the advanced maturity and wisdom that those two years afforded her.

"What is it *now*?" she huffed, indicating quite clearly that heretofore "it" had been several things which were not to her liking.

"Lucy, these are our neighbors, uh, Mrs.?. . ." Tony Stanback began.

"Miss, actually, *Miss* Bass." Mom corrected him. "But it doesn't matter, you can call me Alice, and this is George."

Lucy turned her cruel, disapproving eyes on the boy who stood before her, paralyzed by her beauty, "George, huh? You like to play?"

With epic courage, he wiped his runny nose on the cuff of his sweat-shirt and nodded in the affirmative. Mom had been standing mostly in the hallway, holding her long cigarette in a way that she thought kept the smoke out of the new neighbors' apartment. She took a final drag and flicked the butt into the palm's planter, sized up the looks on the grownups' faces, and offered them a great favor.

"Lucy, if it's okay with your parents, you can come play with George while your mommy and daddy work. Georgie got some fun games for Christmas, and there are some we haven't even had the chance to play."

"Their names are *Momma* and *Daddy*." Lucy said, her cobra gaze never leaving the boy.

"That sounds like a great idea!" her daddy said, nodding insistently to his wife, grateful for the respite.

Lucy's momma offered the critical information that, with all the fuss of moving, they had missed lunch and offered a twenty-dollar bill to cover a trip to the McDonald's on the corner. But Mom said George was "allergic to everything: nuts, eggs, shellfish. Nothing easy like dust

or smoke. He doesn't sneeze; he gets hives, swells up like the Michelin Man. Poor little guy." George nodded enthusiastically at Lucy, pointing to the Epi-Pen on his belt. She smiled slightly to know of his weakness.

"You can't trust the ingredients at fast-food joints," Mom went on, and anyway she had stuff for sandwiches next door and a box of W-I-N-E in the fridge for when the Stanbacks were done unpacking for the day.

The school year wore on as school years do, and the grownups became good pals. Because Lucy moved mid-year, one would think it was difficult for her to make friends her own age. Not so. She rapidly became terrifyingly popular among her peers. She was indeed two full grades ahead of George, a third-grader tall for her age and among the oldest in her class. George was a November birthday, younger than his classmates and a bit small for his age. He was frail, pale, and peculiar. He wheezed in the cold, had bizarre things in his pockets, liked science. She liked horses and ran everywhere. Yet despite the distance between them, greater than the hallway and the stinking palm, greater than years, and despite her own increasingly full social calendar of play dates and birthday parties, Lucy always made time for George. They walked to the bus together, and all the parents considered her a suitable escort to lead him down the stairs in the morning and back up in the evenings. He stayed with Lucy's family until Mom came home from work, but in the morning she always watched out the window to make sure everything was okay. It always was. Then and ever.

As the winter days gradually grew more bitter in January and the arrival of February heralded valentines and pink, George found the need to discuss the relationship with his True Love.

They sat at the picnic tables in the playground, Lucy gazing down the long distances she might run wildly, imagining the Mary Janes on her feet giving forth their last and best as she simply ran them to pieces.

George stared into her faraway eyes with a furrowed brow, his khaki-colored hair resting lightly over his eyes. He scanned the horizon to make sure they were alone, that he could speak freely what was on his mind. They were never truly alone, as Lucy's momma was nearly always perched by the window, tending her flock, but George was comfortable enough to speak his mind. He rarely spoke, so words did not come easily. He cleared his throat.

"I love you Lucy. I love you more than my heart can bear. When I watch you run, I imagine you can run so fast that if you stopped, you would stop the spinning of the world. I love you more than the smell of Mom's cigarettes, more than peanut butter . . ." he trailed off with a shudder of longing. George had only had peanut butter once. That was when everyone found out about his allergies. It was the most perfect thing he had ever tasted, but he could never have it again.

She held her hands out and looked at her short, little-girl nails. Bright green nail polish chipped from their tips. Words and social graces were easy for her, and she replied casually, "I love you too George, but you have to realize that, with me, your love is unrequitable. I am too old for you, too mature. When I am ten, you'll only be seven. When I die at a hundred, you will still only be in college."

"To hell with all that!" George howled to the sky, his hands clutching his hair into a rooster's comb on top of his head, "Love knows no age! Love only knows love, and I know love is *you*!"

"I think you're just going to have to get used to it, George. It's unre-

quitable. It would be different were I Capulet and you Montague, for the petty disagreements of men are surmountable; were I Rebecca and you Ivanhoe, for religion is mere pedantia compared to love, but we are divided by a gulf of more than the hallway between us, more than the poor, blasted palm, more than years, and you simply cannot understand the world in which I live. I love you. I do. Truly. As truly as the stars burn in bright, unimaginable orbits, but as truly as they will all burn out and collapse into themselves, no matter how true my love, it cannot be."

"Yet," she paused, her usual cruelty melting for a moment, "I will allow you the pleasure of a kiss. A single kiss now if you will have it, but you must know that there will never be another."

George felt his heart surrender, the passion consuming his mind, purging all desire but to love her. He took her boon, and all the innumerable white-hot darts of love to be found throughout all the cosmos pierced his heart at once. Like peanut butter, he had now tasted her love, and like peanut butter, he could never do so again. Such was his destiny, and so would it be all his days.

"Okay?" she asked.

"Okay," he answered.

"You wanna go throw rocks?" she asked, looking at the valiant Mary Janes, wondering if she had done the right thing, wondering if the single taste were more painful for him than never knowing. Her love lived, it burned her, but the world demanded it be denied; it could never exist on this mortal plane. Perhaps in Heaven they would have their reward, perhaps in another life if the seers of the

East were correct. He did—want to throw rocks, that is—and so they went to the culvert.

Later, after she received George's elaborate valentine, a rapture of agony in red construction paper which broke every heart that beheld it—every heart but the one that mattered—Lucy indulged him in a habit of letter-writing. She knew that she was only giving him false hope, but now as the late February snows melted, so did her cold resolve. She could only stand to deny him one thing at a time. If he must write letters, she could not refuse to answer. Not now. Not yet.

Their epistles were hidden behind the planter of the wasting palm as they were written, and each would furtively check for new tokens several times a day. George eventually had to share the details of his shameful predicament with Mom, who by March allowed him to open the door by himself, making it clear that he was only to "check the tree" and return. "No way" was he allowed to go anywhere near the stairs alone, and he had to lock all the locks again when he was done.

clear that he was only to "check the tree" and return. "No way" was he allowed to go anywhere near the stairs alone, and he had to lock all the locks again when he was done.

In red crayon—for red is the color of the blood that burned hot in his veins, the color he saw behind his melancholy swoons, the color of love—he wrote on the pulpy green-lined writing paper:

Dearest Lucy,

I die as I sit to write. My handicraft with these crude implements of writing, this trade of mortals, cannot approach adequate description of the fire that consumes me. How can I hope to write of it when that fire is beyond the strength of a mortal even to endure? Confined as I am to the worldly husk, I cannot long contain this passion's flames. I die as it burns away at me. I die more quickly as I try to write or speak or think about it, and yet I would not have it any other way. Thus, here with my crayon, would I write myself a thousand deaths, deaths until the



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end of time, deaths until I earned another sweet kiss of your lips, were all these deaths the debt I owed for the One, that Kiss which remains in my every thought or action, which sustains me through the mundane life of phonics, arts and crafts, and endless games of kickball. I am grateful. That spark ignited the fire which will soon consume my mind and soul, but at the center of the conflagration will remain my heart, which shall always be yours.

Yours in love unrequitable,
George

Upon reading these words, Lucy knew that the only humane course of action was to end it with George. She enjoyed cruelty to her parents and teachers, but what was happening with the poor boy was diabolical. She still loved him, but every bit of nine-year-old wisdom she possessed told her that such a love was madness and doom. Breaking her own heart as she set down to break his, she began with a clean sheet of wide-ruled notebook paper and her favorite pen. The pen and paper were carefully chosen to accentuate the distance between them; his was the paper of a first-grader. Hers was that of the third grade. Her pen wrote in pink ink, not pencil, not crayon, and it was her favorite because, in the words of the song she sang as she gazed up on it, "it's pink ink, *pink ink*, P I N K I N K, pinkink, pinky inky," &c.

Poor George, my brave hero of the heart:

You say you cannot write of the love you feel, but if your letter truly described the love of one star for a skyful of constellations, I wither at its beauty. My own heart swells to read such words from your hand, from your heart, and I need you to remem-

ber that it is not for lack of love that we cannot be. These past infinite months, I feel my love for you has in fact grown.

I wonder if it is out of selfishness that I must say it; I am swallowed by melancholy to think I must act to preserve my own feelings when your heart has survived such pain. While doubt remains and clouds my judgment, perhaps whispering that I should tear this letter up and run into your arms, I must act now.

We simply cannot be. You must abandon your love, or at least your hope that I could ever return it. Confined as you are within the prison of the first grade, you cannot understand the freedom that I enjoy. It would be irresponsible and dangerous to give you such freedom, for with freedom comes responsibility and you have neither the training, breeding, nor inherent right to that freedom until you have advanced considerably.

Yet I have earned it and tasted it, and I cannot go back to the way things were. I am allowed to go anywhere on the block, all by myself, and you are only allowed to open your door. I have not only tasted freedom, I have drunk deep.

I can take money to the McDonald's and buy a cheeseburger, McNuggets, a new McCustard, and a Coke. I can eat half of the cheeseburger on the swings, watching the black ants dig their nest, kicking it closed, and watching them open it back up. I can eat the other half on the see-saw and brush my hands sideways across the grain of the wood. I can eat four McNuggets and throw two into the culvert because I know that six take-away four equals two. I can drink half of my Coke in one draught, without stopping, as I

watch the traffic lights change.

And finally, I can eat my McCustard beneath the statue of Ronald McDonald, then pour in the honey from the McNuggets and the other half of my Coke, smush it all together, and drink it through a straw.

These things are mine, a single whim which I once indulged, a simple, pleasant memory. But that whim sets a standard by which all other idle moments are now measured. I have love for you. I love television and books and games, but they now seem childish to me. The wider world of the whole block awaits, and I cannot be held back from my destiny for love, not for you and not for Lite Brite or checkers. You are a boy and I a woman.

It is surely painful for you to read this, and while I cannot know the depths of your pain, know that it is also painful for me to write these words. This is the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my nine years on this earth. I wish it could be any way other than it must, but it must be thus.

Yours no more,
Lucy.

When George read Lucy's words he





made no sound. Although the paper was liberally stained with her tears, he shed none. Whether it would gain her love or not, he knew what must be done. He clutched the letter to his chest, looked to heaven, and prayed for strength. Without a word, he took his money, unlocked all the locks, opened the door, and for the first time in his life, he moved beyond his end of the hallway on his own.

The smell of cat urine from the dying palm faded by the time he reached the stairwell. And down the stairs he went. Manhood crashed upon him as he crossed the little playground. Inside McDonald's, he stood on tiptoes to place his order and the woman who took it said, "Ah ha. Just like Lucy! Eh, little man?"

He met her smile with the steely gaze of a soldier who has killed too many mothers' sons. He paid for his meal and returned to the playground.

Of course, Mom had heard the door open and close with no locks relocking and no little footsteps back inside the house.

"That little stinker," she hissed to

herself in the empty apartment. "He's off to McDonald's!"

She moved to the window and watched her son enter then reemerge, soberly attending to the letter from his true love and the method therein described. She saw him pull out a hamburger. No allergens. Chicken McNuggets—on their nutritional information handouts, McDonald's *swears* there's no egg in the batter or peanut oil in the fryer. It should be fine. Coke, okay. Ice cream, no sweat. Thank God he could at least handle milk. She watched his bizarre ritual: half the burger on the swings, deliberately kicking the ground as he ate; half the burger on the seesaw; four McNuggets, counting on his fingers and thinking seriously, then chucking two into the culvert; half the Coke at the corner, where she thought he might try to cross the street (at which eventuality she was prepared to yell out the window), then to the statue of Ronald McDonald for the sundae.

Tony and Ellen Stanback were at the door, "Alice! We just noticed that you've got an escapee! George is on his way down to McDonald's on his own!"

"I know," Mom said, lighting a cigarette, "That little snake. Come here, watch what he's doing."

Lucy came in and saw the parents clustered around the window. Her first thought was that George had decided to end it all and was somehow gruesomely dead in the playground below, but she saw that the adults were snickering instead of wailing in horror, so she pressed against the window herself.

There she saw her True Love, a man before his time, the bravest person she would ever know, sucking down his McCustard, Coke, and honey. She saw the pigeons in the culvert, fighting over what could only be two McNuggets. She swooned, staggered back from the window, and disappeared into her room across the hall.

Mom watched and let George finish. When he had drained the cup, he beat his chest and bellowed tri-

umphantly to the gods. The cocktail of syrups and sugars now occupied a place in his heart beside the forbidden peanut butter, but still an earthly delight and one which could in no way compare to the One Kiss. He returned inside the restaurant and Mom took the opportunity to run down and confront him. She grabbed her purse in case he hadn't been able to pay for the meal and laughed at the treachery and defiance of her boy.

"All done?" the cashier asked him.

"Yes ma'am, and today I am a man! I have drunk deep of freedom, and by giving me that freedom you have assisted me in the most noble endeavor a man can undertake: the quest for True Love. She says it can-

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not be, but I will not yield!" The sugar was tearing through his mind, and he saw things with a new clarity. He turned with a start before Mom even opened the door; he knew she would come.

"Mom."

"George."

"I know I defied you and I am willing to accept the consequences of my axxx ... *ack* ... actions—" He scratched at a long red welt on his neck and his eyes darted nervously. "Exxx ... Excuse me, ma'am, were there any peanuts in that sundae?" he asked more calmly than could be expected of a six-year-old in anaphylaxis.

"No, but it's not a sundae, it's a McCustard—"

"Custard?" Mom said.

"Yes ma'am. For a limited time. Rich, thick McCustard frozen custard treat—"

"Does it have egg in it?"

"Uh, I don't know. We have a handout detailing nutritional information there to your left."

But Mom did not need to know anything more. George now had obvious hives and was wheezing audibly. Her heart swelled with pride to see the little boy calmly removing the Epi-Pen from his belt and stoically self-administer the lifesaving dose of epinephrine. In seconds, his breathing became less labored. Mom dialed 9-1-1 on her cell phone and told them of the emergency. The cashier had noticed that the nutritional information handouts were all gone and went to find the manager.

Mom took George outside to the picnic tables and laid him atop the cleanest so they could wait for the ambulance in the warm early-spring sunshine.

"Mom," George croaked.

"Yes, Hon?"

"I apologize for defying you, but I'm not sorry. I'd do it all again. I'm ready to die. I've made my peace."

"You're not going to die, George. We're just going to the Emergency Room. They handle things like this all the time. You were so brave and calm to use your Epi-Pen—"

He held up his hand to silence her; it was more than he could bear to be called "brave" at a time like this. "Courage had nothing to do with it, Mom. I had no choice. I am but a pawn in love's chess game. I know nothing of bravery, only of heartache."

The ambulance backed up and they strapped George to a gurney and gave him a shod of Benadryl and an IV. Mom climbed into the back of the ambulance along with him for the journey. George reached into his pocket and removed pieces of a huge, long-dead beetle, a patch of moss, the empty honey tub, and finally the letter from his beloved. He opened it and skimmed it once more, languishing on her wide, rounded letters, on the tear stains, on the pink ink, then shut his eyes as the doors closed.

The siren whooped once and the ambulance began to pull away. There was some motion and commotion outside and the doors were opened. There stood Lucy, awash in tears, trembling. She drew a breath and opened her mouth. George feared what she would say.

Before she could speak, the cashier from McDonald's bolted in front of her, waving the sheet of nutritional information. "Here! Here! The doctors might need it!"

Mom thanked her, but subtly shooed her away, leaving the space between Lucy and George open again.

"Lucy, don't. I can't ... in this state, I don't think I can—"

"Hush George! I stand it no longer! The gulf of years be damned! I must have you, now and forever! Nothing can come between us anymore!"

Mom looked for Tony and Ellen in the background and saw that they were as happy and confused as she. George roared again, his head back and his throat open thanks to epinephrine and Benadryl. He tore at his shirt and hair, sobbing with the power of True Love no longer denied. Lucy climbed inside the ambulance for another quick kiss, one sweeter than McCustard, Coke, and honey, sweeter than peanut butter, sweeter even than the One Kiss, but then she had to get out. The paramedics closed the doors and were off to the hospital, but it was neither they, nor Mom, nor the Epi-Pen who truly saved George's life that day.

And the poor palm tree finally breathed its last and slipped quietly and peacefully into sweet oblivion.



Johnny Pence is a writer, freelance editor, sorcerer, bass angler, and editor in chief of *The Blotter*.

His first novel, *Waking Up*, is to be released sometime next winter from Trevisi Publications. And everybody who reads this had better damn buy a copy.

S. Nikolsky is one of our favorite illustrators and once answered an advice column called "Ask Red Sonya," in which she often advised the bashing of heads.

Paper Cuts

Books You Might Not Have Read
by Martin K. Smith

Horse Heaven

(Jane Smiley/Alfred A. Knopf, 2000)

This is a novel about—you'll never guess—horses. Specifically, it's about thoroughbred race horses, and the people who breed, train, ride, own, and obsess over them. There's no central plot, just an interwoven collection of subplots; and no central theme that I could discern, save that nearly all the characters find their emotional footing improved in context of their connection to the horsey world. (So go ahead and indulge in your Mr. Ed impersonations; might as well get them out of your system.)

There's quite a large cast. Rosalind, wife of industrial magnate and horse owner Alexander P. Maybrick, wonders about her twenty-year marriage and her place in life. Farley Jones, trainer and intelligent liberal-minded professorial type, has not had any of his horses win races in some time. (Trainers whose horses don't win races face the same unpopularity as coaches whose teams don't win games.) Joy Gorham, mare manager at a ranch, retreats to a tiny crammed apartment because she'd rather face horses than people. Audrey Schmidt, eleven-year-old horse fancier, has just lost her career-military father to a heart attack. Jesse, age nine, has a dad who takes him out of school to go to races, and who talks—and talks and talks and talks—about his theories on betting and on life. The list goes on: jockeys, a shady vet, an equally

shady British nobleman and horse dealer, spoiled nouveau-riche owners comically strutting.

For the challenge of marshaling this large herd, Ms. Smiley chooses third-person omniscient narration, with, I want to say, the confidence of Robert E. Lee straddling Traveler. (You know that as a practicing smart-ass I have to get some horse metaphors in here.) She even gives us vignettes of what the horses are thinking. Here is Justa Bob, a six-year-old gelding:

"It was not up to Justa Bob to analyze how and why he had come to this farm by this pond with these horses and mules and been, you might think, forgotten. In the first place, Justa Bob had only a hazy sense of time. The multitude of sharp pictures that constituted his memory were not sequential in the human sense. They were more like an account upon which current experiences drew. He had plenty of access to them, but he didn't mull them over; rather, he sometimes had occasion to re-experience something remembered in conjunction with something taking place in the present. At the moment of the re-experiencing, he could not quite tell the difference between what was happening in the present and what it reminded him of,

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but he always got to where he could in a few seconds or minutes. That would be called learning—he could learn the difference between the past and the present. What set Justa Bob apart from horses of lesser intelligence was that he was ready, and even eager, to learn that difference.”

Ms. Smiley also shows a deft hand at social comedy. Joy’s über-boss, über-rich Kyle Tompkins, meets a couple of Joy’s New Age acquaintances, as they watch two of Tompkins’s horses—Froney’s Sis and Mr. T—practice.

“Her head fills up with fog,” said Elizabeth, helpfully.

“What?” said Mr. Tompkins. “Who are you?”

“We’ve met before, in the summer, but perhaps you don’t remember that occasion. I am an animal communicator. I’ve communicated with her. If she gets outside boundaries that she understands, her head fills up with fog.”

Mr. Tompkins looked at Elizabeth, his face a blank, for about three steps (they were going out of the barn now), then he said “You’re a horse psychic?”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“Who’s going to win this race?”

“I don’t know. I’m not a seer or a prophet. I’m just an animal communicator.”

“Who are you?” said Mr. Tompkins to Plato.

“I am a futurologist.”

“Is the horse going to win the race?”

“Futurology is not equipped

to track either a small sample or an immediate event.”

“What is it equipped to track?”

“The course of your family’s fortunes over the next fifty years, or maybe a hundred, depending on the model and the precision of your tracking requirements.”

“Do you work at the track, too? You sound like one of those guys with a betting system and no money.”

“I am an assistant professor at Berkeley.”

“Have you investigated the course of my family’s fortunes over the next fifty years?” said Mr. Tompkins.

“I used the public data in an experiment I did for a paper, yes. There were other families, too. Rockefeller. Milken. McCaw.”

“How’d we do?”

“Fine, but there were unknown personal factors.”

“Such as?”

“Whether your children from your first marriage are planning to contest the ownership of family property with your children from your second marriage. That sort of thing drains resources very quickly, and they are usually unrecoverable.”

“How can I stop them?”

“That was not an element of my model.”

“Why didn’t you call me and warn me about this?”

“The experiment wasn’t about you, Mr. Tompkins. It was about the model. I wanted to see how it worked and what it said. You were just data.”

“Oh,” said Mr. Tompkins. “Does [Mr. T] think this filly is going to win this race?” Joy

noticed that when Mr. Tompkins looked at Elizabeth he seemed a little intimidated.

“He says you never can tell. He’s streaming me a picture of a straight green place with rails on each side and big white buildings.”

“Longchamps,” said Farley and Mr. Tompkins simultaneously.... “What does he say about my children and my wife?” said Mr. Tompkins.

Elizabeth paused. Then she said, “He wants to know how many mares are in your band, and whether your children are weaned or not.”

“Really?”

“No. He has nothing to say about your estate-planning problems.”

Despite these qualities, the book for me was just barely over the cusp into interesting. I didn’t care deeply about any of the characters, human or horse; I kept reading only from mild curiosity to see how things turned out for them, and to see if any unifying plot emerged. (It didn’t.) Things turn out well for most of them. Rosalind has an affair with a trainer, opens an art gallery, discovers that even though races bore her she has a knack for picking winners, and falls back in love with Alexander P. Maybrick. Farley and Joy also pair off, and a horse they’ve trained wins a prestigious race at Longchamps. Plato talks his way into a lucrative job with Mr. Tompkins. Jesse comes to see that his father’s feet are of clay and his theories largely of hot air and horse flatulence, but doesn’t take it to heart. Audrey gets a filly of her very own. And Justa Bob, after nearly being sold for dog food, is rescued to a good home.

So for horse lovers I'd recommend *Horse Heaven*; for the rest of us, the equine-indifferent, I'd mark it as maybe a beach read—if the weather there is pouring down rain and the rental doesn't have good cable. I'd lay odds that Ms. Smiley is, if not a horse lover, at least a sympathiser, taking equine passion with a grain of salt (lick). "The aisle was full of horses and ponies standing on crossties and little girls attending them. Every one of them had that look of a girl infatuated with horses, the happy, fated look of a passenger setting sail on the Titanic."

I'm not myself a horse person. I go to my friends' Kentucky Derby party in the spring, but only for the socializing and the mint juleps. (Each year I make the same joke: Watching the horse owners' women in their fantastically expensive out-

fits, I say, "If I had a racehorse, I'd name him 'Rich Republican Trophy Wife.'") Then again—my grandparents kept a horse until wartime rationing precluded it; my mother as a little girl dreamed of being a horse; my sister-in-law rides a horse—and has got my brother cleaning out the stall. (And I know one joke involving a horse; but it's not suited for polite company. Buy me a beer sometime and I'll tell you.)



I wish Marty Smith had a Ph.D. in divinity so I could write here, "The Reverend Doctor Marty Smith..." and so on. But he doesn't. Not to my knowledge anyhow.

Items Worth Mentioning from the desk of Johnny Pence

Microphone Check

One-two, one-two. You might notice (and we hope you do) that we're advertising our first-ever "Saturday Evening Readings Series" on Feb. 28 at Branch's Chapel Hill Bookshop. It's true. Just turn the page. You'll see the ad. We're really excited about it as an opportunity for our writers and artists to strut their stuff in front of people, and as a chance the reading public to meet said writers, artists, and even an editor. After scheduled readings, we'll open up the mike to folks who came on time and signed up for spots, and that's always fun. 6:30. Y'all come on. And then afterward we can all go to the De La Luz space and watch my hometown hempen homespuns, the **Hogwaller Ramblers**, put on their show. Which is also always fun.

So the more pedantic among you might note that I talk about an open "mike" while we are running another ad for an open "mic." It makes sense that one should write "mic," since it's got all the letters from "microphone." And all the rappers use "mic." I guess that's common sense and encroaching common usage, so I'll allow it.

But because I took the time to learn the phonetic alphabet when I was a kid, (alpha, bravo, charlie, etc., in which the letter M is "mike," for microphone) and since Merriam-Webster says that "mike" is short for microphone (and does not have an entry for "mic"), I'll actually *use* that. Allow "mic," use "mike." Oh, it's so non-standard—it really is a perverse thrill for me, but something I bet you don't care a damn about.

—ediot@blotterrag.com

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you look nice today.

Third Ring
by Joy Surles

Among the newspaper clippings stuffed in a brown envelope labeled "keep" was a picture. The envelope was secured with a piece of Scotch tape between the pages of G, H, I, and J of *The Circus Alphabet*, where no one would think to look. Giraffe, Hyena, Iguana, Jaguar. It was the only picture she had of him. The photo is of the two of them together leaning on a pool table. They're standing in front of a large sliding glass door. It was open, and her hair lifts as if there were a breeze. Her loose blouse is the color of wine. He wears a blue bandanna tied tightly against his head. She is turned towards him, smiling broadly. He smiles, too, in profile, his lips curling around his bare, bright teeth. She seems very young to be with him, too young. He has one arm wrapped about her shoulders. His fingers dip against her breast. His other arm stretches towards the camera, blocking all but the top of his head, his smile, and the one blue eye, as if he were defending himself against her. As if he did not want to be seen. Between two of his fingers is the brown stub of a cigarette. She fetches the envelope often when she's alone, and slides the picture out from the clippings. She stares down at it, looks into it like a mirror. Looks into it to try to find something beyond the picture, something that she must have lost or left behind. She memorizes every detail, remembering--the clean tips of his fingers, the warmth of the sun lighting her face, the humidity, the black and blue balls on the table, the trace of the cloud outside the window, blowing indifferently. The puff of smoke from his cigarette, rising.

like Kansas

a persistent vegetative state is a state where things grow
by Mary Hennessey

The last tomato plant persists
in heaped and flawless blossom—
a hard frost expected tonight—
we ignore the newspapers
read each other's face over coffee.
A kimono-silk slung
over the low branch of Maggie's
pecan tree—
I tell you, *don't wait*.
You say, *don't what?*
The night ahead
long, clear, cadenced.
Moon hunted and haunted,
we plant perennial turtleheads
and a blue hydrangea.
We speak summer—
filibuster the light

That Brilliant Day

Mewed up on the mountain while veins and bones
mended, we thought we had survived the wreck.
You helped out your dad and left me alone
while I cleaned my wounds and sat on the deck,
took pills against infection, and fed the cat.
It was a warm winter. In our mild enclave
at night you cooked for me, then came and sat
while I smoked, and we were hopeful and brave.
God, how I hated it. How—God, how!—I longed
to go back. And that day, that sparkling day
when through shoulders of granite we drove down
at last, now I see: on that brilliant day
we left the shelter of your father's mountain,
the sun wept a warning shower of gold.

by Ron Crawford

Woolgathering

But this future is another country,
different from any we'd dreamed.
This winter is picture-postcard wintry
but of all our winters not quite the same
as— wait now, sweetheart, roll off the covers, would
you, dear? My gracious brrr it's cold in here.
In just-January when the world is mud-
cruddy and puddle-poxed?—well, now it's clear.
But back in the furnace of summer when
I dreamed you together, when I whistled you
up out of ginny creeper and field mist—then
how could I have predicted this? That you'd
drive a blue car, have an eight o'clock class?
A mole like that at the curve of your ass?

joy surles wrote us way back in august, and the e-mail got lost, and
apologies were made, and now here she is. she is on the board of an
online lit 'zine from new york: www.voicesintheroses.com.

mary hennessey is something of an enigma to us. she may very well
have given us biographical information which is now lost, but let's hope
not. that would be disgraceful.

ron crawford is an apparently rare example of a submittor who has
had nothing of his submission lost or misplaced, and who gave us every-
thing we asked for. lucky him. lucky us. he writes, "ron crawford has
just returned to chapel hill after a long absence. that's him at the end of
the bar; go on over and say hi."

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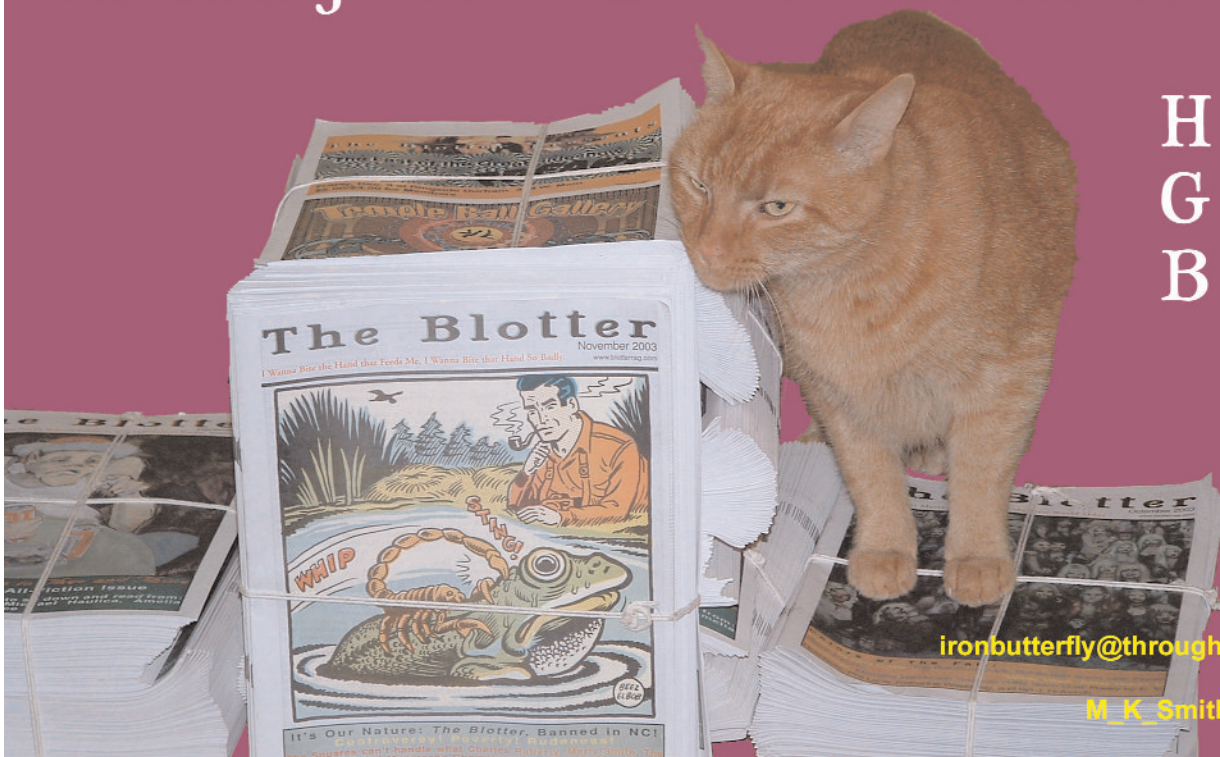
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