

*Rabbit Season! Duck Season! D. B. Cox at the helm. Melissa Elmes in Sick Bay, Jeff Crouch on periscope.
Bob Boston, jack hayes, and David LaBounty firing off verbal salvos.
a new Staccato, Papercuts and The Dream Journal.*

The Blotter

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MAGAZINE



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Oh, it's press releases, press releases, press releases that we cannot abide.

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Articulate adj - divided into syllables or words meaningfully arranged. vb - to give clear and effective utterance.

Recently, I saw a report in the news which stated that "studies reveal" men typically choose partners based on looks. Men factor in a woman's appearance in mating decisions? I'm agog. I also extrapolate that someone, somewhere paid for this study. Another scientific study has concluded that humans are smarter than apes. Alright, I could see where this was less of a given. Still, I'm puzzled that someone thought these studies needed doing right now and someone else agreed.

I've oversimplified these news tid-bits, but you get my point. It's all well and good that humanity seeks answers, but we've been going a little lame on the questions; not getting enough bang for the grant-buck. I think we must assume (at the risk of making asses of you and me?) that we're a tad more sapient than apes, if not always more salient. And, with everything else going on in the world, isn't this a back-burner concern?

I'm stumped. Maybe it's not so much that such studies are performed, but that it seems so much scientific study is just belaboring the obvious. I have to hope that this isn't so. Surely the universities and laboratories have in-depth press releases, but they are just too long and too complicated for a news-cycle, and thus are reduced to flashy headlines: Air Is Good. Chicken Tastes Just Like Chicken.

Ergo, the second problem in my hit-parade: the lack of attention to details in our communication. No one corrects the bone-headed mistakes anymore. Pick a morning, any morning; sit down to CNN and listen to the verbal Perseid Meteor Shower of grammatical gaffes, and then for a change scan the ticker at the bottom of the screen flashing the "Are You Smarter Than A Fifth Grader" show's worth of spelling errors. I expect such in my bulk-mail inbox from the spam-masters. And I recall back at good-old IBM a poster pinned on the wall near my office. The text of said poster contained the word "form" instead of the more grammatically relevant "from". It was a common enough error to have sneaked past the automated spell-checker, but ironic considering the subject of the poster: defining the corporate quality program du jour.

Whole'd on their, partner! Whirr ewe knot jest men shunning how sigh ants seams two bee focusing on the ear elephant?

I know! I can hear my inner voices asking me "who cares?" There's so much information to which we already must attend. The war, the other war, the horrors of genocide, the horrors of our health, the economy, lead paint, animal rights, our girth, our jobs, Paris Hilton. But wait, there's more. All kinds of information that our various forms of media don't even provide, because it's just more bad news and we can't handle the truth. Does one have to make a triage decision what one will learn about and what one won't? I often feel like I'm in that scene in the movie *Twister*, where they're driving the old pick-up truck in a tractor-ditch, being chased by the tornado and unable to turn the wheel because the sides of the ditch are too steep. Maybe we can only attempt to out-run the storm; we've no longer the time to do things right. Our minds are constantly in traffic, trying to assimilate all of the data. We can't worry when the newscaster says "He is gone to Iraq" instead of "He has gone to Iraq".

I had an NPR guest-speaker style rant going on, but now the wind has collapsed from my sails. I suppose this is precisely the same point, Having good language skills is much ado about nothing. Dictionaries spell the words correctly, most of the time. Who cares about etymology? What's a synonym? So what if I didn't put my sen-

tence into the form of a question, Alex. Maybe it's hitting home for me because my girls bring home their spelling-test words each week, and we look at them and write them each five times and in different colored pencils. We play "hangman" and then we create sentences out of them. We sit on the couch and watch "Akeelah and the Bee" together. And the girls are thrilled when they get 100's on their tests. I'm proud.

At what point do we all lose that sense of pride in being accurate? Is it our fault? One more headline. Of the 34 private institutions of higher learning in North Carolina, 17 do not require English majors to take a course in the work of William Shakespeare. Not just any student, mind, but English majors. Not required to take a course on the Bard! (Aside to said students who breathed a sigh of relief. We will scorn you mercilessly over our sherry and biscuits. Quiz you on your knowledge. Poke fun. I guaran-damn-tee. Don't you *dare* graduate with a BA in English without your college-level critical-discussion-style Shakespeare.)

Ah, well. We seem satisfied with mediocrity. I suppose a lifetime could be spent fruitlessly trying to recover our sensibilities to no avail. But if you've read this far, let's you and I pledge to change, starting today. Why not? Let's agree to no more "greeking" when we speak. As of right now I will never again say "blah, blah, blah" or "Yadda-yadda". If I can't think of what I mean to say, I'll hold my tongue for a moment and gather my thoughts. And if someone says "whatever" to me, I promise to sock them on the jaw. OK, maybe not. But I can still ask "Whatever did you mean by 'whatever'?"

Wait a minute. What's the point? Our society has fallen on its swords, intellectually speaking. We don't like to argue. We don't even like anyone who raises his voice. We lionize the strong silent types, calm under fire, the controlled emotion. Letterman and the other talking-head knights-errant long ago designated cynicism the national pastime. Andy Rooney made anyone frustrated with the cultural idiot-synchrocytes a "curmudgeon". Now our college graduates can't find Stratford-on-Avon on a map. All of our shortcomings may be attributed to ADHD. There's a show called "Plastic Surgery Nightmares" on the Discovery Channel. Cry Havoc and let loose the dogs of bore! Wow, honey, I had a hard day. I just need to wedge out. (When since the ever-loving fall of Rome was "vedging" an option?) Perhaps it cannot be helped. Russians are *neculturny* drunks; French are *comment dites-vous?* snobs; Germans are inventive *schadenfreud'ers*; English are riding on the ancient coat-tails of William Shakespeare. And we Americans are generally well-meaning and stupid. We want to save the world, but can't remember where the world is.

No. I don't think I will surrender. Not like this. We can take back our capacity for beautiful words and good grammar. Everyone follow me. Grit your teeth. Stare at a page until you reach the end of all of the words, and then turn the page. Repeat as necessary until the book is finished. Circle the spelling errors on a memo and send it back for corrections. Gently explain to a co-worker that re-iterate is not a word, you can't just use any noun as a verb because it suits you, and I don't care how handsome you are, displaying complete calmness in adversity without the introduction of possible effective solutions to said adversity is the same as displaying symptoms of early onset Alzheimer's.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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CAUTION

It's not that we enjoy dirty words. It's just that we're artists and out of control most of the live-long day, growing our hair and contemplating the enticingly illicit. Mea culpa, mea culpa, mes amis

"Extremely Cool"

by D. B. Cox

When Levon gets drunk, he rambles on about the war. Sometimes when he's really high, he can almost convince you that his younger brother will someday return from the Mekong River where he was lost and left for dead almost forty years ago. Levon has never stopped waiting and hoping.

Levon is sitting on a wooden crate in a makeshift shack—a temporary shelter constructed of a rusting piece of tin held up on one end by a stack of railroad crossties and on the other by two metal pipes. The only wall is a paint-spattered canvas tarpaulin anchored to the roof with a couple of bricks. The hut is located on the edge of a hobo jungle—a shantytown hidden in a stand of trees on the outskirts of the city.

A steady rain has been coming down since nightfall. From the corner of his eye, Levon catches a movement just at the edge of the campfire light. When

he looks, he immediately recognizes the bony face of the Preacher. The rain is rolling off the brim of his dilapidated fedora and onto the shoulders of a tattered black overcoat.

Once a hard-time hallelujah hustler, the Preacher now has the look of a man who knows the long shot has gone terribly wrong. He has spent his entire life preaching about, and waiting for the "second coming"—interpreting every notable event as a sign of the apocalypse. Years ago, he lost his only church by wrongly predicting the time and date of Armageddon at least a half-dozen times.

The Preacher hitches up his pants, ambles over to the shelter, and sags to the ground beside his comrade. He leans back, spreads his arms along one of the wooden crossties, and stretches his long legs toward the fire. For a few minutes, they sit silently while the rain drums a solo on the metal roof.

Levon reaches into the left side pocket of his field jacket and pulls out a butt. He lights the leftover with a battered Zippo, then holds the lighter in his right hand clicking the cover open and closed with his thumb.

"I'm plumb tuckered out," says the Preacher, still lying back with his eyes closed. "God Almighty tired of walking and preaching—back and forth—up and down—town to town."

"They say if you draw a map to everywhere you've ever been, you draw your own face," says Levon, staring straight

ahead.

Levon takes two more drags on the short smoke then, using his left thumb and middle finger, flips the butt out into the rain-filled darkness.

The Preacher opens his eyes and sits up. "You remember old Doc Wells, used to hang around at the mission? Always wore that dirty blue suit—every pocket, full of stuff he'd fished out of trash bins. Well, they found him dead this morning. Somebody put a bullet in his head, doused him with gasoline, and lit him up. Nobody knows why—probably just for the hell of it."

The Preacher takes off his hat and runs his right hand through his hair. Looking down at the ground, he continues. "Today, I couldn't even work up enough feeling to say a prayer for Doc. There's no use talking to the dead—too late for sermonizing." The Preacher shakes the rain off his hat, and puts it back on his head. "Fact is I've lost the calling—no more holy spirit left in me. The people on the street don't even stop to listen anymore. I can't take up enough collection to buy supper."

Levon reaches down with his left hand and picks up a bottle. He takes a long pull and passes it to the Preacher. The Preacher wipes off the top with the sleeve of his coat, takes a swallow, and sets the bottle on the ground between his feet.

For a few seconds no one says anything, and then Levon speaks up.

"Once when we were on patrol we came across this old Vietnamese guy

They told you that nobody likes a smart ass?

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propped against a tree—just like he was waiting there for us. He'd stepped on a mine and there wasn't much left of his left foot. So this kid Blake walks over to where the old dink is sitting, and without saying a word, unslings his shotgun and points it into his face. The old man actually manages a smile. That's when Blake lowers the barrel and blows off his other foot. Nobody says a fucking word. We just walk away and leave him there on the ground, screaming." Levon's voice trails off. He seems absent from his words.

"There's no way to understand things like that," says the Preacher. "It's impossible to stamp order on bedlam in a world where life means nothing. And if life means nothing, death means nothing."

The preacher reaches down and picks up the bottle. He takes a swallow and passes the wine back over to Levon, who stops thumbing the cover of his Zippo long enough to kill what's left in the bottle.

A sudden strong breeze rustles the leaves in the trees. Levon stands up, walks just outside the cover of the shack, and stares out into the murk. Almost trance-like, he mutters, "Feels strange tonight—like something's moving this way."

The Preacher immediately looks up at Levon with a troubled expression on his face. A bat suddenly flashes through the shack and back out into the shadows causing both men to duck.

"I'm gonna take a piss and turn in," says Levon, as he throws the empty bottle into the undergrowth.

"Wait up," says the Preacher, getting to his feet. "I'll go pee with ya." He takes a small flashlight from his pocket and follows Levon into the darkness.

They pick their way down a short slope through some scrub pines to a drainage ditch that runs through the woods. A huge rat caught in the glare of the flashlight holds his ground next to a discarded McDonalds bag. Levon picks up a large rock and throws it toward the rat. By pure chance, the rock hits the rat square on, and it lies there quivering in the dirt, dead as hell.

"Worthless son-of-a-bitch never knew what him," says Levon, staring down on the gruesome scene.

Levon and the Preacher stand side-by-side pissing into a rain-flooded ditch.

"The water looks deep enough for baptizing tonight," says the Preacher.

"You ever do any baptizing, Preacher?" asks Levon, zipping up his pants.

"Lots of times, back when I had my own church," says the preacher. "Once, when I was a little boy, I saw a man drowned at a river baptizing."

The Preacher pauses as if recalling the scene.

"A country preacher got so full of the Holy Spirit, he held this old drunk sinner's head under the water too long. They claimed it was a heart attack, but I saw the man's arms and hands flailing around, reaching up out of that river for something or somebody to save him."

"Well, maybe he found what he was looking for before he found the bottom," says Levon.

"Yeah, maybe so," says the Preacher.

For a few seconds, the Preacher looks up into the rain, watching the dark clouds move past, then says in a tired voice, "I guess there comes a time when you realize that what you've been hoping for and looking for is never gonna happen."

"Preacher, there's one thing that's always struck me about 'hope', says Levon, "the more familiar you are with it, the less beautiful it becomes."

"I know what you mean," says the Preacher, "Now let's get out of here before this rain washes us down the gutter. I could use some sleep."

The rain has slowed to a drizzle. Fog crawls along the wet ground. The Preacher and Levon are wrapped in old Army blankets, sleeping, on opposite sides of a dying campfire.

Crouched in the bushes overlooking the campsite, Lady Speed lights a joint, inhales deeply, and passes it over to Taylor. Taylor White is the creator and producer of DownHill Films, an independent film company specializing in documentary-style videos. Lady Speed is the one-person camera crew.

They like to refer to themselves as "reality artists", or "de-humanists". Specifically, Taylor shoots and burns arbitrarily selected homeless people, while Lady Speed films the action. They are purveyors of "degenerate art"; out to provide the insatiable public with one more taste of the extreme—attempting to wrest art away from the elitists and put it square in the face of the people.

This highly motivated team plans to make one and only one documentary, which they will call, "Streets Afire".

These two underground artists know that their time is short. They know that they'll be tracked down in a matter of weeks. To this truth, they are utterly indifferent. In fact, they've already made a pact to kill themselves, in front of the camera, in less than a month—a final artistic statement.

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Taylor takes one last toke off the joint, extinguishes the roach between his index finger and thumb, and slips it into the pocket of his camo-jacket.

"You ready to roll?" he asks, pulling a black ski mask over his face.

Lady Speed does a quick inspection of the video cam, and says, "All set."

Taylor takes a .38 snub nose from his shoulder holster, and says, "Okay, let's go and immortalize these worthless sons-of-bitches."

He picks up a metal can of gasoline and steps out of the underbrush.

"Tis' a far, far better thing than they do..." whispers Lady Speed, as she moves out behind her partner.

Two muffled shots, one right behind the other, sets dogs to barking in the distance. A few seconds later, the fire starts...

Levon dreams he's somewhere else. Everything moves away—from one dark place to another. Years streak by in a blur of milliseconds until there is no time left. He hears a rushing sound and feels hot wind on his face. Purple smoke blows across a flaming river. When it clears, he begins to make out a familiar figure standing under the war torn trees that line the red riverbank. He calls out his brother's name and starts to run in that direction...

A shiver runs through the Preacher, but he does not shake. He is not afraid. In fact he is peaceful. He feels as though he is turning to stone. It starts in his head and moves down through his body until he is completely petrified. Unable to speak, he knows his job is finished. He will no longer have to explain or make excuses for God's continued absence. And even though his hope has been scorched by anger and disappointment, the Preacher still waits and listens for some purposeful movement in the empty darkness...

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"Ovarian whosit-whatsits and Primetime TV"

By Melissa Elmes

Okay, I admit it: I am a hospital drama junkie. First it was ER and Scrubs; more recently, House, and especially Grey's Anatomy - I watch them regularly. (Well, okay, I don't really watch Scrubs all that often, especially if I can find one of the other shows on simultaneously.) Now, I hate hospitals and everything having to do with medicine, surgery, and needles above all, but somehow these shows have a major grasp on my psyche. (I say "somehow", but I know it's really all about the casting. I mean, let's be honest: who doesn't want to watch Noah Wyle, George Clooney, Patrick Dempsey, or Robert Sean Leonard for an hour? Who doesn't identify with poor Meredith Grey and her intern pals? We've all been at the bottom of the food chain in our respective jobs. It's sympathetic, man!) But I digress from my original purpose in writing this.

Having watched these shows on a semiweekly basis for about five years, I consider myself fairly well-versed in hospital drama. I have even made diagnoses on myself based on what I've seen - and, amazingly, I have frequently been right, which means kudos to those well-researched writers! So last week, when I woke up with terrible cramps and nausea, I racked my brain for the correct episode diagnostic. It wasn't the multiple-birth pregnancy one; never having been to Asia and not having any friends who go to exotic places either (more's the pity) I was pretty sure we could rule out the one about SARS; I hadn't been

out in the street during any crazy bike rides so it couldn't be massive internal lacerations caused by being hit by a car attempting to avoid a bike ridden by a drunkard. Frankly, I was at a loss, and as the symptoms progressively worsened, I fervently wished I had splurged and bought the complete ten-season DVD set of ER.

Eventually, the pain got so bad that I went to the emergency room. (Hey, it was a last-minute, desperate move!) They took all my vitals (Oh, how proud Dr. Bailey would have been of their efficiency! These weren't wet-behind-the-ears interns, no sir!) and then the doctor tried to palpate my abdomen (See? I lifted that right from the writers for ER. I told you they were great!) Unfortunately, I was so tender that I scooted up to the tippy-top of the gurney and squealed "don't touch me!" (neurotic guest star.) They hooked me up with an IV and Dilopid (sp?)...has anyone ever noticed how the anesthesiologist and blood guys are always the most cheerful? They're thrilled to stab their fellow human beings with needles and pump them full of legal drugs. (I'm of the opinion that, like the mother who killed her husband's younger fiancee on Law and Order, they secretly indulge in their own products from time to time, but that's a different kind of drama.) Back to hospital angst!

One thing that struck me as being vitally different between my beloved hospital programs and the real deal is the time lapse. Have you ever noticed

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how quick and snappy, efficient, even, those doctors in television emergency rooms are? They're in and out between commercial breaks. It's an inspiration for Americans everywhere, their efficiency. This is not the case in reality. My doctor, for example, let me sleep for two hours on the drug before he tried to check my tummy again. Then again, maybe he heard a tone in my voice that warned him that he had best let me be until I was good and woozy. (I do not handle pain well.) At any rate, eventually the diagnosis came back: "Well, it could be either a kidney infection or a ruptured ovarian cyst," he said, consulting my chart. "But your blood counts are normal and your urine sample came up clean, so I'm leaning towards the cysts." Oh, whoa, whoa, whoa. What?! Ruptured ovarian whosit-whatsit? I so do not remember that episode on any of the programs I habitually imbibe! "I have what?"

"A ruptured ovarian cyst. See, every month at ovulation, the follicles on your ovaries swell due to hormones. Usually they just go down of their own accord, but occasionally they can get blocked, and then sometimes they burst. That accounts for the swelling and tenderness. The fluid from the cyst is pressing against your organs." Let me get this straight. "So, what you're telling me is, I have a popped zit on my ovary?!"

He laughed. (The doctors on ER or Grey's Anatomy would never laugh at a patient in such obvious distress! Maybe House would, though.) "Well, more or less."

Ewwwww. Gross! Chalk up another reason why being a woman can suck royally. It's not bad enough my face has to break out once a month, but my ovaries? And how is it that I have lived for thirty plus odd years on this

planet and nobody has ever in all of that time mentioned that this happens? Boy, did my parents get gypped out of their taxpaying dollars in my public school system's health and P.E. classes!

"Is it...is it serious?" I asked timidly. (We really can't afford funeral expenses right now, we just bought a house.) "Not usually, no. Just monitor it for a few days. We can't really do anything about it except wait for the fluid to go down. In the meantime, we'll get you set up with a prescription for Vicoden and you should think about taking it easy for a few days."

Okay...Vicoden. Now we're talking language I understand. I've never heard of ruptured ovarian cysts, but they hurt like being in labor. (Take my word for that, don't go out and get one to see for yourself.) Vicoden is a good idea right about now. That, and some reruns of ER and Grey's Anatomy.

I'm thinking of writing up my experience with ruptured ovarian cysts as a screenplay for these hospital dramas. None of them have ever featured that storyline before. I think they have a responsibility to keep the viewing public abreast of such horrific possibilities. They have clearly been derelict in their duties. What, they give us the symptoms for SARS and massive head trauma, but not for cysts? Sheesh. I figure if they stagger the shooting schedules appropriately, we should see one ovarian cyst episode per network per week for about a month. Hey, I'm looking out for the welfare of the American people, here. It's my civic duty. Besides, I'm looking forward to testing out my newfound medical jargon!



"Untitled"

by Larry Holdersfield

I expected the sparrows in the terminal. Birds get in, I've seen them all my life in shopping malls and grocery stores. There is even a pigeon in the Pompadeau Center that I call Pierre.

But, stranded in JFK at 4 am, I didn't expect the javalinas rooting around the garbage cans, ducking into the shadows when someone came near.

The Filipino security guards organized hunts well after the last flight of the night, racing down the empty corridors on their little gold carts, armed with ceremonial spears confiscated from tourists.

At dawn, there will be a bloodletting in the cargo hold of a bankrupt 727 on the east end of the tarmac. There will be pig flesh roasted over an oilcan and grown men will cry, inhaling the aroma of pigs past. If the young Nigerian keeps it together, he will be branded and finally let into the Baggage Handlers Union of NY and NJ, local 357.

I fly out of here at 0900. I hope there is enough scotch on the plane to wash clean my dreams.

Staccato Microfiction

is a holding pattern, per se, of
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Matthew Boyd, Editor.

Submissions, five hundred (500) words or less, to staccatmag@yahoo.com.

Jeff Crouch
Grand Prairie, TX



"I recognize that electronic and print media still diverge somewhat...The images are done via digital camera and are tweaked with software. I'm not looking for high-tech effects...a watercolor-like wash that highlights the ordinary."

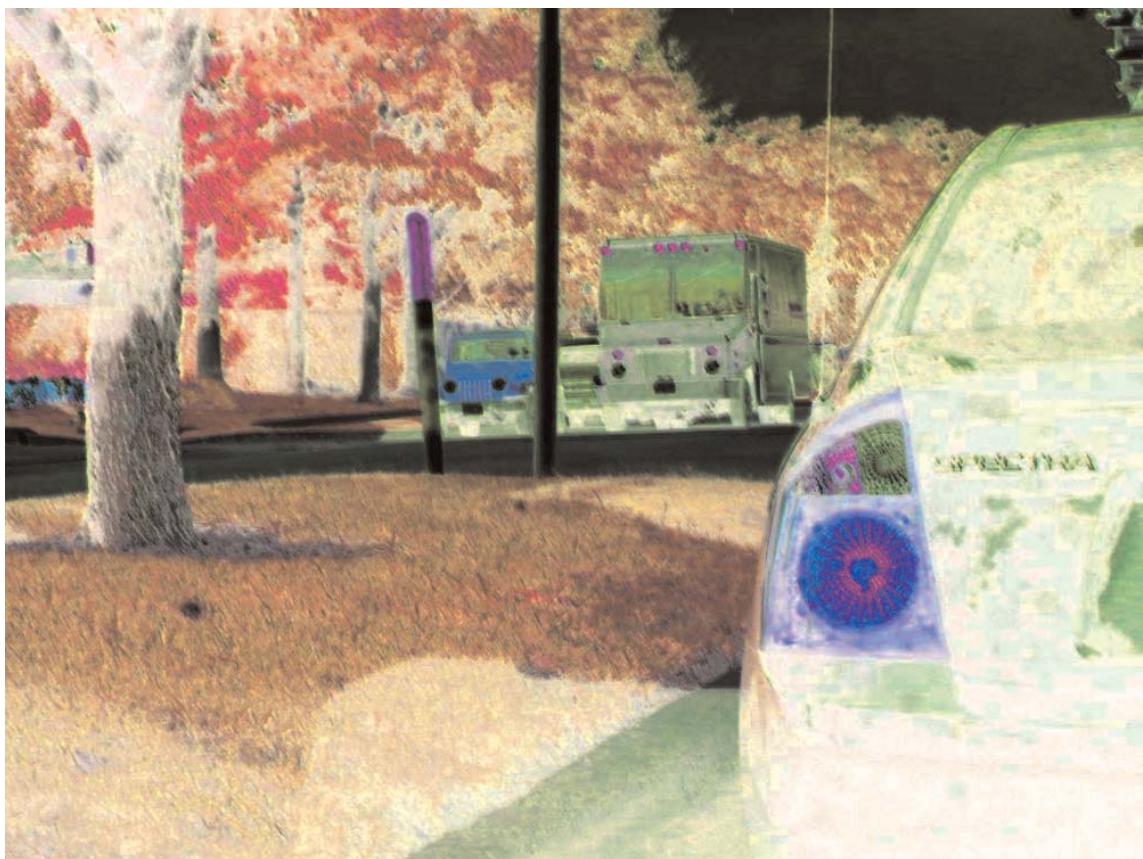


Upper left: Gift Shop

Upper Right Consider

Lower Left: Leper

Lower Right: The Rise
of the Middle Class



The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Some fellow writers there suggested I check out your magazine. I'm so glad that I did! I love the Dream Journal column, so I thought I'd share.

I am awakened by a soft gentle mooing which sounds slightly distressed. I rub my eyes open, and am startled to find a transparent newborn calf seated beside my bed.

The calf's pale ivory coat is marred by two distinct shadowy black spots. Otherwise, its delicate appearance is passive, serene, and ethereal-like. The calf seems lost. Two sad beady eyes gaze up at me, as if to say, "Please help me."

I smile and extend my right hand to give the calf's forehead a reassuring nuzzle. The sudden movement frightens the calf. The animal vanishes instantly.

The remainder of the night, my sleep is taunted by restless echoes of far off lowing. I feel beckoned by a higher authority to come find whatever it is that I have lost.

The next day, I consult a reference guide to Jungian dream symbols to determine what the presence of a newborn calf can mean in the context of this dream.. My sage interpretation of this calf is, "I possess some hidden talent which I should be nourishing." Perhaps this is my sacred and personal cash cow. I only have to keep looking to finally find it. I share the dream and my Jungian-based philosophy with a friend. My friend shares a different perspective, which relates to my current boyfriend. My friend pointedly insists, "Perhaps the calf is telling you to stop sleeping in the barn!"

*If you decide to use this, I do not mind if you use my real name. Thanks!

Tammy Tillotson - VA

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.
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Paper-Cuts: Books You Might Not Have Read

by Martin K. Smith

"The Wheel of Time" Roleplaying Game Book

Kim Mohan, managing editor;
based on the novels of Robert
Jordan

Wizards of the Coast, 2001

I have never once participated in a fantasy role-playing game. Games of any sort have never interested me; and as for role-playing, my experience is that being one's own self causes much less psychological wear and tear. I'm old enough to have been among the first Dungeons & Dragons fans, and in college even hung with the Society for Creative Anachronisms, but all during that time I was deep in the deadly serious real-life role-playing game of trying to pass for straight. (I was not unskilled, if I may say so; I fooled myself for years.) Nor have I read

any of Jordan's "Wheel of Time" novels, of which there are at least nine, preferring my fantasy in short-story-sized portions. Even then I can't take it with complete seriousness; for I and my fellow SCAdians all watched *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, and I can't envision the fantasy heroes riding by without adding a serf clopping a pair of cocoanuts, or a chorus line of Silly English Knights.

Role-playing games are run by a Game Master, or GM, and played by an average of four to six people. Each player creates a "character", with a set of skills, abilities and possessions. The GM sets up an "adventure", or plot outline, with various situations and challenges the players' characters will have to face. An average session will run for a few hours; an "adventure" will take several sessions, the number depending

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on how extravagant the GM's plotting is and how willing the players are to stick with it. (GMs have to be not only creative with their fantasy worlds but diplomatic in the real one; there's a lengthy section for them on how to basically babysit crabby or obnoxious gamers.) Everything that happens at every step is controlled by complex numerology and throws of dice.

The GM calls on Eben's player. He steps to one side to get a clear line of sight past his friends and shoots a crossbow bolt at one of the Trollocs. Eben's attack bonus with a crossbow is +3 (+1 base attack bonus, +2 Dexterity bonus). The Trolloc is 70 feet away, which is less than the light crossbow's range increment of 80 feet. Eben therefore suffers no range penalty. Eben's player rolls a 17 for an attack result of 20, well over the Trolloc's Defense of 15. He rolls 1d8 for damage and gets a 6. The Trollocs have 16 hit points each, so the wounded Trolloc has 10 hit points left. "He staggers," says the GM, "but he doesn't fall."

"1d8" means one throw of a eight-sided dice. Players also need four, six, ten, twelve and twenty-sided dice. The book is thick with tables and charts of numerical values for characters' skills, abilities and possessions; the effects of their actions in or out of battle; even their appearance.

For example, Brehanna (a female Domani) stands 5 ft. 0 in. tall, plus 2d4 inches, plus another inch for being Domani. Tammie [the player] rolls 2d4 and gets 6, so Brehanna stands 5 ft. 7 in. tall (her modifiers add up to 7 inches, plus her base of 5 ft. 0 in.) Tammie uses the total of her height modifiers (7), and multiplies it by 1d8 + 1 pounds. That die roll result is 4, so Brehanna weighs an extra 28 pounds on top of her base 10 stone for a total of 128 pounds, or 12 stone, 8 pounds. That makes her moderately

tall and perhaps a bit willowy.

The book recommends players equip themselves with pencil and scratch paper – "in some cases, you'll find graph paper useful too" – and inside the back cover has a 2-page Character Record Sheet for doing the necessary maths. It looks more complex than a 1040 form.

Such arcane mysteries make no more sense to me than the esoteric computer languages my husband studies. I skimmed over the formulae and lingered in the segments of background info on the Wheel of Time world. It's a standard epic-fantasy template. The technology level is late medieval. Names have a Celtic or Norse sound – Thomdril Merrilin, Moiraine Damodred. There are a couple dozen kingdoms, varying in size, wealth, power and stability. There are flying dragons (though they don't breathe fire); giant three-eyed lizards ridden like horses; sentient telepathic wolves; and Ogier – large humanoid creatures with tufted ears, gentle in nature and psychically attuned to the forests. There is magic, of course: the "One Power", which can be channeled by those with the knack, and used for anything from opening locks to causing earthquakes beneath enemy armies. There is also, speaking of enemies, a Dark Lord, who lives up north in a blighted wasteland, and periodically sends his Shadowspawn – Darkhounds, Trollocs, Gholar, Draghkar, Myrddral – down to bother people, in pursuit of his typical Dark Lord goal of Conquering The World.

There are chapters on the regions, their peoples and their history. Up in the Borderlands near the Dark Lord's turf, we learn, "Borderlanders enjoy life as much as possible while they still have it. From the luxurious Shienaran baths to the blood-boiling sensuality of a Saldaean woman's *sa'sara* dance, Borderlanders experience life to the fullest." Down in Cairhienin, the folks "much to their aggravation...are shorter, on the average, than midlanders or south-coasters; many a Cairhienin noble has gritted his teeth in frustration at having to look up to someone he regarded as his social inferior." And over in Arad Doman, "the seductive wiles of Domani women are legendary. Mothers teach daughters the ancient Domani arts of seduction from a young age – the one hundred and seven types of kisses, the ninety-three different ways to touch a man's face, and so forth. Women learn to use beauty, movement, body language, and dress to best advantage – and have a good time doing it. Few men can say no to a Domani woman once she turns her attention to him, which is one reason why Domani merchants – almost always women – achieve such success in trades."

All characters have six Abilities: Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom and Charisma – all with varying numeric values, of course. Characters are capable of diverse Feats, such as Cleaving one's opponents; and if that doesn't work, Tripping them (but you need an Intelligence score of 13 or higher

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The Blotter

plus Combat Expertise. And remember; if after the battle "you sleep in a suit of armor with an armor check penalty of -5 or worse, you are automatically fatigued the next day. You suffer a -2 penalty on Strength and Dexterity, and you can't charge or run.") Other Feats, I was entertained to learn, include Infamy – "your crimes and evil deeds are known far and wide (whether you actually committed those deeds or not)." – and Mental Stability – "you have succeeded, at least in part, in staving off encroaching madness." A "gleeman", or bard, can have skills in Calumny, and in Jarring Song, to clear a room of unwelcome guests. Some Ogier have the talent of Treesinging, whereby they can serenade the nearest bough into transforming itself into something useful – though mind you, "only solid items can be sung – you cannot create items with moving parts, although you could create the parts separately and then assemble the item."

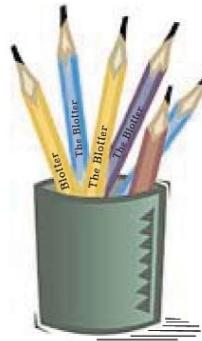
There are plenty of detailed maps and lush painted illustrations, without which no self-respecting epic fantasy book would present itself to the world. Some show large-breasted fantasy babes, as one would expect – the Ebou Dari wilder on page 60 – but there's also the Cairhienin wanderer of page 32, who looks quite like a goth-girl barista I know; and the Tar Valoner of page 39 who could pass in any local club as a hipster boy, complete with mousse-y orange hair. There's even a few big burly swordsman types who I thought rather hot, with long flowing mullets and handlebar moustaches like Gauls in classical French sculpture, or *Asterix* comics. (Yeah; but since they live in a late medieval world, they probably smell

and have fleas. Oh, by the way, did I mention that the book makes no mention anywhere of gay, lesbian or bi characters? So many fantasy writers, whose imaginations in all other realms know no limits, are still provincial to the point of brain-dead about sexual options.)

If you actually joined a Wheel of Time game, you wouldn't see any of this pageantry and spectacle, the Cleaving and Tripping and Treesinging, the bosomy channeler-women and burly swordsmen against dreamy Maxfield-Parrish-style backdrops. You'd see – at least I'd see – an ordinary room with a handful of ordinary people around a table, throwing dice, scribbling calculations and maybe moving little figurines that represent their characters. I would also see people who did an awful lot of hard work in order to play: the research and complex math of creating characters and adventures. I'm sorry, but I don't see the appeal.

From time to time, though, I have this amusing daydream where I wander into some dark, disreputable thieves' tavern in some Wheel-of-Time-type sword & sorcery world. The suspicious patrons, never having seen such a creature before, unsheathe their swords and sorceries to make coleslaw of me; but with my Abilities and Feats such as Smartassness, Bad Puns and Quoting Monty Python Routines From Memory, I save my hide by turning them on to something called a Fantasy Role-Playing Game. It's set in a mysterious city of wonder and magic called – oh, let's say, Collegetown, in the Kingdom of Navelgazia – where players go on Adventure Quests, mantled as exotic characters like Barista, Sorority Chick, Indie-Rock Musician, Pot

Dealer, Strident Annoying Activist, Old Hippie Professor, Scary Homeless Guy Who Rants Conspiracy Theories, and so on. I think it could be quite a hit, don't you?



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A PIECE ABOUT BEING JUDICIALLY-CORRECT

by Bob Boston

Me and my Probation Officer haven't always seen eye to eye on many issues.

In repeatedly going to his office, I came to learn something about him on a personal note.

Well, he's bald, but he rather seems to enjoy the fact he's follically-challenged.

On the wall in his office, he has a huge poster which declares,

"Bald is Beautiful!"

Recently, studies at the University of Pennsylvania, have shed some new light on the subject of genetic baldness.

It's assumed, that by scraping the affected areas of the scalp, new hair follicles may actually be able to grow.

My Probation Officer and I, don't always see eye to eye.

I thought this bit of information might offer him some hope, but when I went to see him

today, I decided it best to keep my big mouth shut.

As it is, I cause him to scratch his own head far too much.

And besides, although this may possibly be the cure for baldness, I don't wish to make - any waves.



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And the Pretty Girls Have Never Changed

by David LaBounty

I've always reduced them to hair and ass and skirts and heels and they've always reduced me to indifference even the other night when it was my wife and I alone at some restaurant and two girls sat at the table next to us and they both looked the same, like they could have been sisters but I knew they weren't sisters even though they both had long hair blonde and straight and earrings big and round and tight jeans and heels underneath faces clear and pale and worry free.

My wife and I, we sat without talking and the two young girls so forgettable in so much ordinary beauty sat without talking both of them typing messages into their cell phones and it was the way it's always been; both of them sending signals somewhere behind me, beyond me, through me.



"Untitled"

By jack hayes

when you came for the weekend
we bought a pumpkin and a bottle of
wine
and spent most of our time in bed.

now you're gone,
and i'm sweeping the porch.

in some ways i'm content,
but the pumpkin isn't quite as orange
sitting carved upon the stoop
and the wine is not so purple,
its bottle lying empty with the others.

i'm expecting company,
but they won't be here 'til late,
and i'm not quite sure what to do
with the rest of my day.

CONTRIBUTORS:

D. B. Cox is a blues musician/writer from South Carolina. He's appeared in *Underground Voices*, *Thunder Sandwich*, *Dublin Quarterly*, *Aesthetica*, *Gator Springs Gazette*, *Hot City Review*, *Snow Monkey* and other places. He has 3 volumes of published poetry, "Passing for Blue" (Rank Strangers Press), "Lowdown" and "Ordinary Sorrows" (Pudding House Publications) and Main Street Press has just published his first full-length collection "Empty Frames". Coincidentally, he also loves bowling.

In "real time," **Melissa Elmes** is a literature and Art History teacher at a private boarding school; in her alternate world, which she gets to visit not as often as she would like, she is a writer, actress/singer, and artist. When she is not scribbling important bits of dialogue and story ideas on napkins and the backs of gas-station receipts while stopped at red lights en route to work, daycare, theatre rehearsals or graduate school, she enjoys spending time with her husband, 3-year old daughter, three dogs, two cats and five thousand books in their home in Halifax County, Virginia.

On the other hand, **Jeff Crouch** of Grand Prairie, TX says he spends far too much time in traffic, commuting to and from work, "I've decided to make the best of that experience and force myself to re-envision my drive occasionally."

Martin K. Smith has kept us on track and out of trouble, so far. That's a lot to ask of one person.

Larry Holderfield - mckenzee - is our resident artist/cartoonist and now flash-fictionist. He's currently showing some of his work at Padgett Station in Carrboro, so go on over and get a cup of brew and check it out.

Bob Boston is a poet residing on the East Coast and has recently had poetry accepted for publication by *The Verse Marauder*, *morsel(s)*, and *Sinister Tales*. Bob has his Ph.D, but he feels no need to wave it around like a trophy. He believes the best poetry comes from within the soul. He feels language merely helps the words come more concisely. There are thousands of bad poets out there - with a Ph.D. Without soul, compassion, and natural creativity, having the degree is like waving around an attractive sword - with no war to fight.

jack hayes currently lives in Atlanta and writes in his spare time. This poem (and others) were written during a stint as a caretaker in Charlottesville, VA. He looks forward to getting back into caretaking to further pursue creative endeavors. His current music project, *under a milkman's sun*, is a collaboration with his cousin from Addison, NY. (www.myspace.com/underamilkmanssun)

David LaBounty of Royal Oak, MI, writes, "Hello. I hope you can use at least one of the three poems pasted below. My work has recently appeared in *Dogmatika*, *Zygote in my Coffee*, *Autumn Sky Poetry*, *Pemmican*, *The Panhandler* and other journals. My novel, *The Trinity*, is scheduled to be released in June by Offense Mechanisms Press. Thank you for your time." Just as polite as you please.

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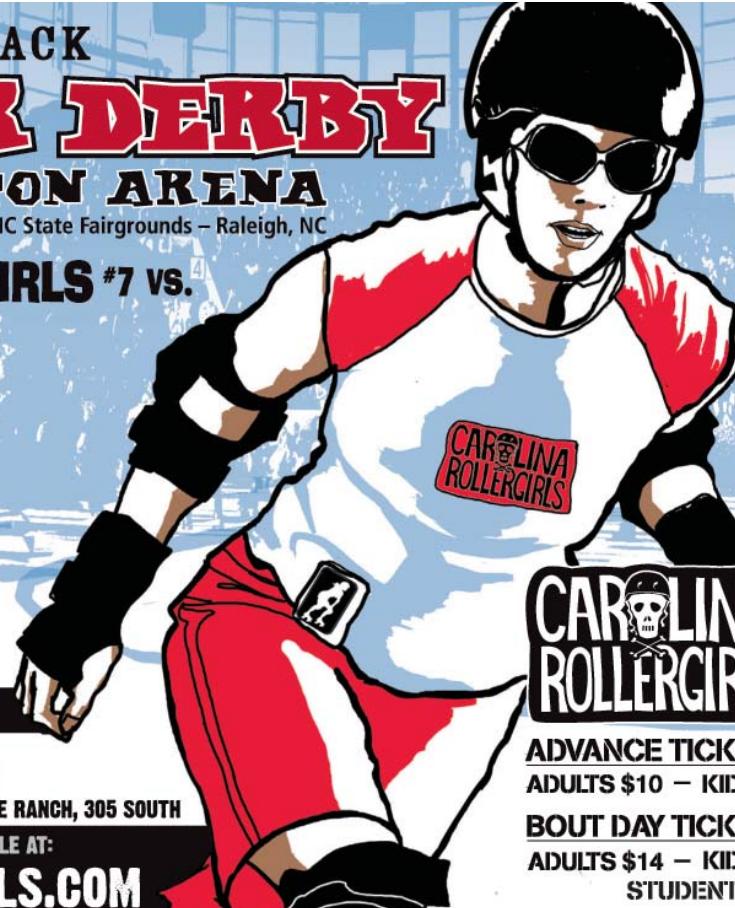
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