

*Button up your overcoat, when the wind is free; take good care of Susan Lago,
Lisa Jones, Michael Lee Johnson - they belong to me.
Add Staccato, a new Five Minutes With, and The Dream Journal, ooh-ooh.*

The Blotter

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THE SOUTH'S UNIQUE, FREE, INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE AND ARTS MAGAZINE

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"A Pack-Rat's Plea"

I want to clear crap out of my life, but it's not easy. My wife, bless her heart, eyes the clutter on the floor by the bed and reaches an unsound conclusion. She purchases a couple of large plastic containers that look like Tupperware for giants.

"Here," she says, smiling with pride in her initiative. "Put all of the books you don't need in these."

What books do I not need? The question leaves me quivering and causes my eyes to sting with the effort of passing simple thoughts behind them. Does my sweet and gentle wife not understand that I love all of my books equally, in the same fashion that we love our children and with nearly the same devotion? I can't just put some into boxes, even well made burp-them-air-tight boxes that appear to be able to withstand an air burst nuke. I'd sooner toss out my underpants and use that drawer of my dresser as another shelf (TMI!).

Still I, we, have a problem. Ours is a small house and still have two adult persons' supply of assorted furniture and dishes and other clutter it used to be only occasionally annoying to trip over. But our first child came, with her toys and stuffed animals and clothes and changing table and crib, then a pretty bed with bunnies on the corner posts, more stuffed animals and a diaper genie. Our second child arrived, another beautiful girl, and more of everything even though we faithfully hand-me-down as much as we can without permanently affecting anyone's self-esteem. The rafters above our heads hold much of our stuff that we occasionally - but not frequently - use, (and I climb the ladder to carry up Halloween and bring down Christmas). The house groans when we go shopping.

Growing up there was a door in our kitchen that led to the cellar. (We called it a cellar, not a basement. I'm not certain this isn't a soda versus pop thing. Perhaps it's simply the quality of "finished" that the room achieves, or just how underground it is, that determines whether it is a cellar or basement. As my oldest says, "whatever.") Mom would have called it presumptuous, if not an outright lie, to call our cellar a treasure-trove. Lit by bare bulbs, it had a damp concrete floor and granite Belgian-block foundation walls. In one corner sat a cask of what smelled like gone Amontillado. It was not beyond credibility to think that the other side of the granite blocks hid the bones of a writer's friend. Webs cob and otherwise hung with care in hopes that Anthony the Patron Saint of Stuff might soon be there, toting a Hoover.

But Mom never went downstairs although her freezer sat in another dark corner, instead sending one of us to fetch the following evening's dinner staple to thaw upstairs. This was Dad's domain, where three decades of jetsam had accumulated in twenty years. I loved sneaking down into the dank. Martinson cans full of bent and rusted nails - sorted, for some inscrutable reason, by size. Gray pegboard hung from one rocky wall, and oddities hung from that pegboard. Monkey wrenches, clearly for flinging into things to make them more confusing. A rusty sickle, clearly pre-Columbian; that is, before Dad started to teach at Columbia Junior-High. A pair of tin-snips, as sharp and powerful as the jawbone of a velociraptor. Hammers as varied in form and function as the needs of a ten-year-old boy: claw hammer - to be used to dig trenches in the back yard for GI Joe to hunker down in; ball-peen - obviously for breaking marbles into glass shards; five-pound sledge my very own father had borrowed from Thor, the God of Thunder; tack hammer - useful, of course, for hammering tacks into the walls and floor of my bedroom.

The marvels continued. An old trainman's lantern with kerosene still in it, stinky and greasy and sour-tasting. (Yes, I did.) Under Dad's work-table, wrapped in flaking butcher's paper, a pair of wooden-handled barbed-wire cutters that my grandpa had taken from the cold and bloody field of Belleau Wood in nineteen-eighteen. This device could clip bicycle spokes with no effort at all. On the work table were a multitude of glass baby food jars containing nuts and bolts. One contained a brass Chinese "cash" with mysterious markings on the sides and a square hole in the middle. I was sure that this was worth untold hundreds of American dollars. In one drawer I found a mystical picture postcard of a woman in a cowboy hat, covering her chest with one arm and inexplicably wearing a pair of leather cowboy riding-chaps, but no pants or underpants. I reverently replaced this wonder back in its drawer.

Certainly, our cellar also had monsters, as I knew well from my own dreams. But what it was mostly was a repository of memories. I can't say what people who didn't have cellars, or who had converted them to "finished basements" did with their treasure. Perhaps they moved them up into their attic. Our

attic had a giant fan, which when turned on sucked sheets of loose-leaf notebook paper out of your hand, shredded it into confetti, and scattered it over the back yard. You'd have to pay a pretty penny for that kind of entertainment nowadays. Grandpa's house had an attic where there were trunks and picture frames and a little squeaky-spring bed under a window, a secret place where Dad sometimes snuck for a quiet nap.

Such places don't exist anymore. Give us cookie-cutter in everything from our baseball stadiums to our...cookies. Every new home's central air precisely maintains the interior atmosphere. People want standard five-over-four-and-a-door plans, shown in studies as the most desirable *motif* for homeowners. The room over the garage, called the "bonus room" as if you were getting it for free, is a parting gift from your contractor for being a good sport. The bonus room is for large-screen televisions and artwork too tacky for the living or dining rooms, multiple-photo-frames with the ovals and circles cut in the matte for happy snaps at the beach of unshaven Dad slathered in suntan lotion sipping a Budweiser long-neck, wearing Mom's Jackie Onassis sunglasses. The entryway from the garage or deck is called a mudroom, implying I don't know what about the quality of your lawn, but intended to replace the cellar. Mother won't let Father hang any peg-board, though, so tools are piled in a metal closet in the garage, which has the car getting clonked by the automatic garage-door, because big-sis thinks she'll hit the tool-closet if she pulls in too far. Above the master bedroom is something called "crawl-space", with no access except a slide-away hatch made of quarter-inch plywood, placed surreptitiously in a walk-in closet. It's all wiring and pink spun-glass insulation. No treasures here.

Instead, there is a place where everything goes. It's down the road, over the hill, on the way out to the interstate. Personal warehouses, also called Storage Units, or Temperature-controlled Storage Units, or Doberman-Secure, Temp-controlled Storage Units. Hey, if you inadvertently drive by one, don't bother to turn around. Another will come along presently. Every town in America has one or two. Like the pyramids, they guard our offerings to the pharaoh of crap, to be buried with us when we go; the TV trays with pictures of the Myrtle Beach Strand, a carton of mildewed towels topped with an I'm Bathing With Batman shower curtain and the bent-bladed lawnmower kept although we live in a maintained garden-apartment, the Nixon-era World Book Reference Library that's starting to smell like a mouse's butt and great-aunt Maud's Pyrex bowl collection. Protected with a carton of Moisture-B-Gone, gone summertime humid. We've surrendered everything marvelous about cellars and attics - the real treasure - and latched onto the junk part, all at a mere thirty-two dollars a month, first and last month's rent required in advance.

Apparently, certain things are not good enough to keep in our houses, but not garbage-enough to throw out. We've forgotten how to shed our useless skin, something even dim-witted reptiles do instinctually. There was a time and a place when and where we would go through our crapdoodle and place it out on our lawn with a construction-paper sign that said "Yard Sale". We rolled our cars onto the lawn and put the things we didn't want anymore on card tables on the driveway and called it a "Garage Sale". Neighbors came by and tut-tutted at the stack of National Geographics. "Hey, buddy, you'll want that when the kids need to cut out pictures for a science fair project about Mammals of Patagonia," we pitched. There was that feeling you get when the golf clubs that you bought from a neighbor's sale for five dollars because the woods were splitting because they were left out in the rain sold for ten dollars because the shafts were genuine rock-maple and quite desirable.

Did we lose our taste for tossing things away when Antiques Roadshow re-ran the clip about a woman getting a dusty flock of silk flowers for two dollars so long as she took the Delft vase in which they were perched? Or was it the endless repetition of the words "beanie babies are really collectable". Or maybe forgetting the immutable law - junk expands to fit the space surrendered to it - inexorably drove us to duct-tape the unopened six-pack of Billy Beer into a carton. Instead of feeding our things down the line, keeping with the eleventh commandment that one man's doo-doo is another man's double-plus un-doo-doo, we cling to dumbbell dreams: that rust-orange carpeting comes back in style; we learn to reupholster Hide-A-Beds; and that there's a pure-T Ming Dynasty. The terrible flaw in our logic is that the storage unit keeps sending a monthly invoice for \$32, wiping out any accumulated value. So here I go to Books-a-lot to sell my old Heinleins, Clarkes and Asimovs. Sorry, honey, I mean *donate*.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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CAUTION

Minutus cantorum,
minutus balorum,
minutus carborata
descendum pantorum.

The Blotter

“Terror”

by Susan Lago

She was a shoplifter. He was a taxi driver. They met on West Fifty-Seventh Street when she hailed his taxi. He noticed her even before she flagged him down. As he slowed to allow a bike messenger to slip past, he caught a swirl of a purple skirt and flash of orange hightops as she came running out of Duane Reade.

“Mind if I sit in front?” These days, most of his passengers hesitated before getting into his cab as if they thought he was a terrorist although he had been raised in a suburb of Detroit and had grown up on McDonalds and *Saved by the Bell*. So he unbunged the lock and she slid in beside him.

“Want one?” She held out a handful of white oval pills. Her fingertips were so pink they were almost translucent and he felt like biting each one. Not hard. Gently. The fingers were a bit dirty and that made him want to bite them even more.

“What are they?” he asked.

“Vicoden.” she said, popping a couple into her mouth. She had a face like a kitten – little sharp chin and wide surprised eyes. She pulled out a grape Gatorade from a bag concealed beneath her skirt and handed it to him. He took a sip to wash the pill down.

“Where to?” he asked.

Lola and Jack were married a month later at City Hall. The bride wore a Vera Wang off-the-shoulder gown she had stolen from a wedding dress sample sale. Neither of their parents attended. Lola had left home at fifteen and Jack’s parents couldn’t make the trip on such short notice. Afterwards they went out for a couple of drinks and then back to Jack’s apartment in Astoria to begin their married life.

Here is a partial list of items stolen by Lola in her shoplifting career: a bicycle pump, a U.S. roadmap, hair clips, food, a pair of hiking boots, a library book, cough syrup, freedom from her stepfather’s wandering hands, toothpaste, a bottle of Bacardi, Jack’s heart.

Lola’s real name was Jennifer, but she thought Lola sounded more exotic.

Before 9/11, Jack was an ordinary guy driving a cab. After, he was an Islamic Fundamentalist. Never mind that he had never set foot inside a mosque. White men in business suits would wave him on when he pulled to

the curb. Some had the grace to pretend they had forgotten something. “No, thanks, Ayatollah,” a teenager had snarled at him the other day. The black guys at the garage were ecstatic. “You all are the new niggers,” they laughed. “White women don’t even notice us when you’re around. They think you have a bomb strapped to your chest.”

Jack’s real name was Jamil, but he had changed it when he was eighteen so that it sounded more American. Not that it made much difference. His name might as well have been Osama for all the good it did him.

At night, Lola and Jack made love on the futon in his basement apartment. A dank sort of light leaked in through the casement windows, illuminating the single room. Mold sprouted on the edges of the carpet.

At his urging she let the streaks of blond grow out of her hair so that it regained its natural nutty brown color. She was hired as a receptionist at an acupuncturist’s office – the first job she had ever had.

Jack felt an easing of the tension that had held him since the towers fell. When he was with Lola, he no longer experienced reflexive guilt when he heard of a suicide bombing or the stoning of a woman for daring to wear nail polish. He was lighter. He was happy.

They had been married almost six months. These days, Jack hurried home from work through the dimming October light instead of lingering at the garage to play cards with the guys or browse through the latest selection of used paperbacks arrayed on the sidewalk outside the subway station.



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"I had to register today," Lola said one night as they sat in front of the window watching feet walk by on the sidewalk above. They liked to guess what the rest of the person looked like based on the shoes.

"I think that one's a dancer," he said pointing to a pair of black flats striding by in a duck walk.

"It was easy. There was an online form."

He sighed. "I know. I registered last week. So did Abdul and Bennie at the garage. I don't know why you had to, too."

"I guess because my last name is Hashimi."

"I told you not to change it."

"What do you think it means?"

"I'm sure it's nothing," he said, sure that it was something. Mendel, the dispatcher at the garage had said, 'This is how it starts. First they want to know where you live. Then they tell you when you can and can't go out. Next thing you know you're on a train.' Mendel was an old guy with a German accent who wore long sleeves even in midsummer.

"I hope you're right," Lola said. "Tina said she remembers her grandparents telling her about how they had to go detention centers during the Second World War. They were American citizens, but they had to go just because they were Japanese."

"Longshoreman?" said Jack. Thick-soled work boots stopped in front of their window. A moment later a cigarette fell to the ground and the boots walked on. Jack shook his head. "The world's not fair, baby." They watched the feet and pondered the unfairness of the world, something they both knew to be true but were foolish enough to believe their love might have changed.

They weren't allowed to fly now, but that was okay since they didn't have money to travel anywhere anyway. Jack's cab now had a purple flag attached to the antenna. Ostensibly, the flag meant the cab was restricted to rides within the five boroughs, but everyone knew that it really meant that the driver was of Middle Eastern descent. Rather than take the subway and suffer the indignity of random searches, Jack now rode home with Abdul. Previously, he had avoided hanging out with Abdul and Bennie,

not wanting to be labeled one of the "Arab guys." Now they were thrown together.

The restrictions were less restrictive for Lola. Her skin didn't give her away.

Lola held up a long thin needle. She was practicing acupuncture. "Now relax your arm," she said.

Jack willed the muscles to loosen. Lola peered at a picture in the book open on the table. "Where'd you get this stuff?" he asked.

"I kind of borrowed it." The needle sank into his upper forearm near his elbow and he screamed.

"Oops," she said and pulled it out.

Jack rubbed his arm. A bump had formed under the skin. "Have you considered acupuncture school?"

"I've been watching Dr. Tim," she said. "And I have the book." She pressed her fingers about two inches up from the inside of his wrist. "If I put a needle here, I can knock you out." She grinned.

"I believe you," he said, quickly withdrawing his arm. "Did you pay the cell phone bill?"

"I paid it. Why?"

"I tried to call you this afternoon and there was no service. So I called the wireless company and got a recording saying all representatives were busy and to try my call again later."

Lola wiped the needles and put them back into the case. They both knew why the cell phone didn't work. They could be used as trigger devices for bombs.

Jack's mother called as they were finishing their take-out Thai. "You're father's been detained." Her voice slid up the scale from worried to slightly hysterical.

"For what?"

She whispered, "They say he's on a list. A government watch list. What should I do?"

Jack processed this information. His parents were from Mehlu, a small village in Pakistan, a place they never spoke of. Jack's was a banal American childhood, almost defiantly so. He attended Sunday school at an Episcopal church in Dearborn and had his own paper route. His mother was president of the P.T.A. and on

Saturdays, his Dad coached his Little League team. Christmas was celebrated in his home, not Ramadan. He never heard his parents speak Urdu, not even to each other, although he knew it was their native language. To his knowledge, his parents never communicated with anyone from Pakistan. The one gesture he remembered his father making was purchasing Salman Rushdie's book, the one that had caused him to become the object of a fatwa. After local bookstores banned the book, his father drove into Detroit and bought it. Jack never remembered anyone reading the book. He had tried himself, but he never got past the first chapter.

Now he didn't know what to tell his mother. "Try to get as much information as you can. I'll see about getting a lawyer."

They decided to leave Manhattan the day Jack lost his job. "Sorry, Jack," said Jerome, the fleet manager. Jerome was addicted to Starbucks and Marlboro Lights which he slunk outside to smoke every forty-five minutes or so because of the Workplace Smoking Ban. "It's not my choice. It's the new Clean-Air Regulation. We're required to take forty cabs off the road by the end of the fiscal year." He didn't meet Jack's eye, just turned and hurried back to his office.

Lola was sitting on the sidewalk outside their apartment sharing a pizza with Mrs. Morgan, the homeless lady who lived on the grate across the street. Lola fed a piece of crust to Mrs. Morgan's cat, who was also named Mrs. Morgan. "Bad day?" she asked, glancing up at him.

He nodded, dropping to the sidewalk beside her. It had been rain-



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ing and the wet soaked through his jeans.

"Slice?" she asked.

He told Lola and the Mrs. Morgans about his dismissal. Mrs. Morgan the woman, picked at a scab above her ankle, but said nothing. The other Mrs. Morgan, a disheveled orange tabby, licked her paw.

"We should leave," said Lola, handing the last slice to Jack and getting to her feet.

"It is getting cold," Jack agreed, standing and shaking the chill from his legs.

"No," said Lola, "leave here. Leave New York."

The Mrs. Morgans shuffled back across the street without saying goodbye. Jack unlocked the door of the apartment and turned on the light. "What do you mean, 'leave?' You know my non-alien status means I can't leave the city."

Lola pulled him down on the futon so that they lay facing each other. "Don't you worry your pretty little head. I'll get us what we need."

Jack sat up. "You promised no more stealing!"

She pulled a joint out of her pocket, lit it, and inhaled. "It's not stealing; it's borrowing. Anyway, this has nothing to do with that. I have a friend who can hook me up with the papers we need."

He took a hit off the joint. The smoke hollowed out a space behind his eyes and he felt himself relax. "This is my problem. I don't want you to get into any trouble on my account if you get caught. I have to get to Dearborn and make sure my mom is okay. I haven't heard from her in weeks. There's no reason why you —"

Then he was on his back, Lola astride his torso, pinning his shoulders to the futon. She bent over him, the ends of her hair brushing his cheeks. He smelled the shampoo she used — something flowery — and under that the scent that was uniquely Lola. "You listen here, buddy," she said, wagging a finger an inch from his nose. "You're not going anywhere without me. We're together. Get it?"

His throat tightened. Reaching up, he pulled her to him.

In less than twenty-four hours, they parked in front of his parents' house, a split-level in the middle of a block of split-levels that varied only in color and placement of garages. This one was sky blue and deviated conspicuously from its beige neighbors. Jack turned off the engine and they watched the sun set behind the house, listening to the ticking of cooling metal.

The drive from New York to Detroit had been exhausting. True to her word, Lola had obtained the necessary documentation to get them past the border guards posted at the George Washington Bridge. "You're Luis Gonzales," she said handing him a New York State Driver's license and passport.

"Mexican?" He squinted at the blurry picture.

To his surprise the papers had worked and they made it over the New York border in the Chevy Nova Jack had bought from Abdul. The car was about twenty-years-old and looked like an old newspaper that had been crumpled up and smoothed out again. Abdul was leaving, too, flying to Belgium, part of the last wave of resident aliens permitted to go. Jack had to admit he was relieved to see Abdul

leave. In past weeks, the surface tension of Abdul's face exposed, rather than veiled, his anger. Bennie was a quick, heated presence beside him. Jack avoided being inhaled into their vortex, drawing his American-ness around himself like a superhero's shield.

When they got to the Michigan border it was snowing, flakes seeming to float up from the ground. Lola was at the wheel while Jack pretended to be asleep, a baseball cap pulled down low and his head resting against the window. There were only two border guards at this checkpoint. One motioned for Lola to roll down her window while the other disappeared into the thickening snow to check a car on the other side of a high cement barrier. Their guard, his face a red fist, scrutinized Lola's license. Then his eye flicked over to Jack. "Excuse me, Officer," Lola said. "I have a letter of authorization from the governor." She rummaged in her oversized bag. "Wait a minute. I know it's here somewhere." She pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to him. As his hand closed on the paper, Lola seized his wrist and turned it over, sliding one of her borrowed acupuncture needles into his inner arm, a couple of inches above his wrist. He sank out of sight.

"See? I told you it would work," she said turning to Jack. She grinned.

"Are you nuts?" he yelled. The snow fell thicker and faster. Lola pulled sedately onto Route 75, heading for Detroit.

Now brownish snow crunched under their feet as they tramped up the path to the house. An American flag hung from a pole beside the front door, snapping smartly in the cold. "I feel like I'm being watched," whispered Lola, looking over her shoulder at the surrounding houses, their internal works hidden by shades that glowed yellow in the dusk.

Jack found the key under the garden gnome and opened the door. At once, he was assailed by the unmistakable smell of his childhood: a combination of furniture polish, fabric softener, and his father's Paco Rabanne. He tried the light switch. "Guess there's no electricity,"

"Wow," said Lola. "Your parents really like blue."

It was true. Lola and Jack stood in the tiny foyer, the living room



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opening up before them in an unbroken expanse of blue that included a matching living room set, walls, and carpet. Blue glass objects – vases, figurines, bowls – were displayed on every available surface. “My mom collects glass.” Jack said.

Lola picked up a cobalt blue swan and tucked it into her pocket. Jack reached in and took it out, placing it carefully in its place next to the elephant.

Silently, he climbed the stairs, Lola behind him. His room. Here was the shelf with his model car collection, the trophy he had won for track his senior year of high school. Here was his twin bed covered in brown plaid. Here was his desk and chair, the chest of drawers that had held his clothes. He fingered the crack in the wall next to the closet where he had thrown his baseball bat the night his team lost the championship in seventh grade. What weren't here were his parents. Without turning, he reached behind him and took Lola's hand.

Somewhere, deep in the darkening house, the phone rang. They hurried down the stairs, following the ring to the kitchen.

“You've got to leave.” A woman's voice, pitched low as if she were afraid of being overheard.

“Who is this?” said Jack.

“Who is it?” mouthed Lola.

Jack shrugged.

“It's Mrs. Nicholls,” the woman said, “your neighbor across the street.”

Lola drifted away into the dining room. Jack could hear cabinet doors opening and closing. Clink of glass.

“Oh hi, Mrs. Nicholls. I remember you,” said Jack, not sure if he did. To his childhood eyes, all the women on the street had looked the same, with their uniforms of streaked blond hair and pastel track suits.

“You have to leave.”

“Excuse me?”

“My daughter knows.”

“Knows what?”

A sigh. “Gretchen saw you arrive. She's going to report you.”

“Report me? I'm not sure what you're talking about, Mrs. Nicholls.”

“It's a program they have in school called Safety First. The children are told to report any suspicious behav-

ior to the proper authorities. Even if it's their neighbors,” her voice dropped even lower, “or their parents.”

“I'm sorry, but I still don't see how this applies to me,” Jack said. More clinking from the dining room.

“They warn the children about the threat to our national security. Once a week, they practice lockdown drills. Sirens go off and the children and teachers lock themselves in the classroom and crouch down so they can't be seen from the window. Of course, the children are afraid. They think every Muslim is out to get them. Even the ones without turbans.”

“What does this have to do with me?”

“There's an award. A Patriotism Award for reporting suspicious activity.”

Jack swallowed. “I still don't-“

“A few weeks ago, Gretchen saw your father. He was pacing up and down in front of the mailbox. Your mother was in the yard, pleading with him to come inside. He kept pointing to a piece of paper. Gretchen was watching from our window. The next day they came and took your father away.”

“How do you know your daughter had anything to do with it?”

“When she got home from school she had one. A Patriotism Award. She put it on the mantel where the whole family could appreciate it.”

“Who took him? Where did they take him?”

“I don't know. All I know is that the men had on some sort of government uniform. They took him away in handcuffs.”

Jack leaned his forehead head against the wall. “And my mother?”

“Your mother was a good friend to me, Jack. I've known her for over twenty years.”

“Where is she?”

“I don't know. But you have to leave. After Gretchen saw you get out of the car she went straight to the shelf, took down her award and smiled at me.” She was crying now, the words swallowed in the sound. “I don't know my own child anymore.”

“I have to go now. Good luck to you,” she said and hung up.

Lola was standing in the doorway holding two wine glasses. “Who was that?” she asked.

Jack wiped his hand across his eyes. “My neighbor, Mrs. Nichols. She was just calling to say hi.”

“That didn't sound like a hi kind of phone call.” She handed him one of the glasses.

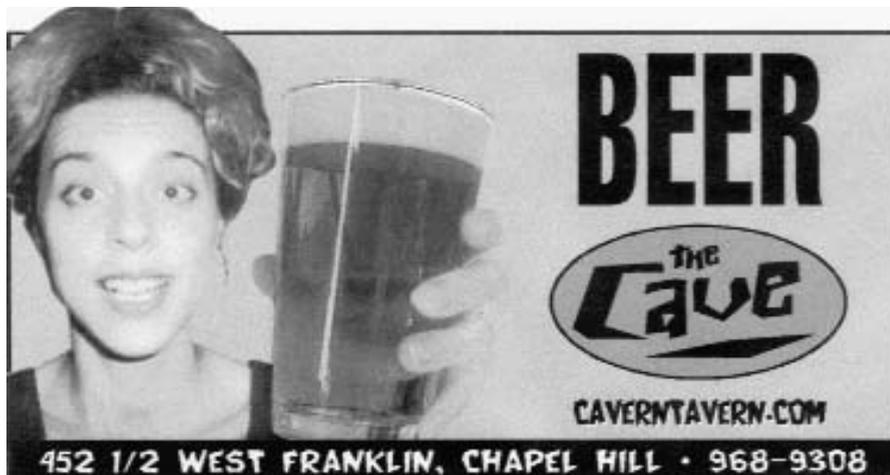
“What's this?”

“Peppermint schnapps. It's all I could find.”

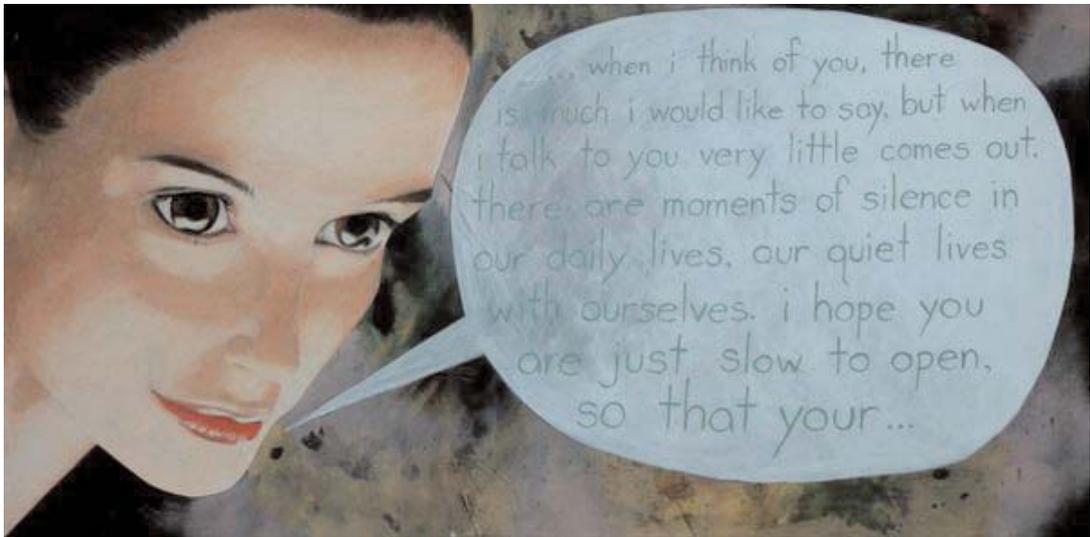
He took a sip. Cool in his mouth and a slow burn going down.

They found some Beef-a-Roni and ate it cold out of the can, chased by the schnapps. Lola had found some candles in the dining room and set them on the kitchen table. They cast a small glow in the kitchen.

In his room, Jack undressed Lola and lay her back on the brown plaid. Then he lay down next to her and piled the blankets on top until they were cocooned in the warmth created by their bodies. After they made love, Jack pressed a kiss between her teacup breasts and then wrapped her in his arms. As Lola's lids began to droop and her head grew heavy on his arm, Jack started to talk. He told her about the blond, blue-eyed characters on his



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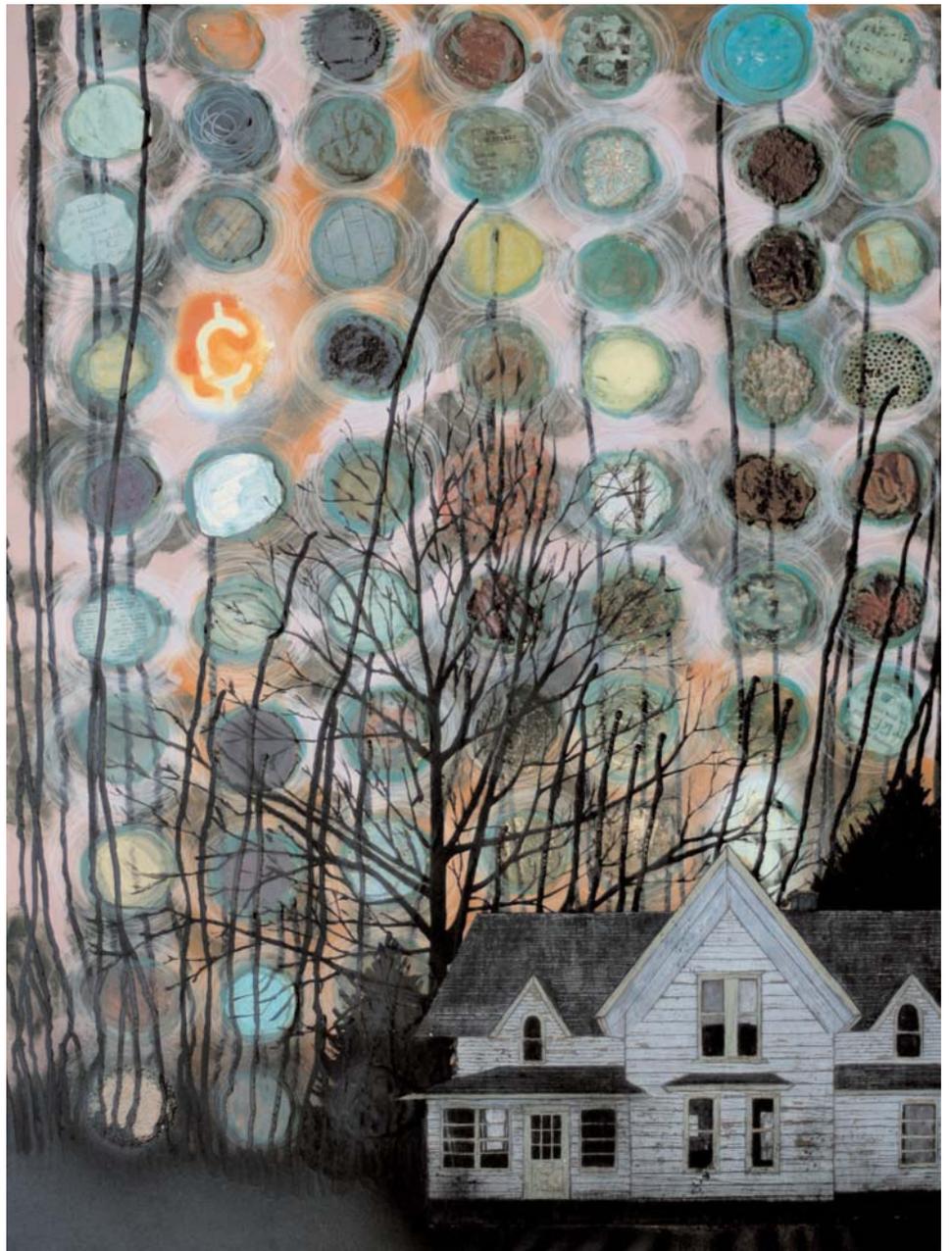
Left: High School

Lower left: Snowhouse

Below: 4 Hearts

Right: House With Circles 2

Lower Right: Green Hair



The Blotter

favorite childhood TV shows. How left out he felt when he saw the Muslim kids leaving school early to get ready for the festival of Eid. How when groups of children knocked on their door with offerings of sweet seviyan to celebrate the breaking of the Ramadan fast, his mother would pretend not to understand. How in the all-white church where they gathered to worship a fair-skinned god, his family stood out like a smear of mud on white pants. Finally, Jack ran out of words and just watched her, counting the connect-the-dot freckles across her nose and savoring the feel of her against him.

When the portion of sky visible from the window turned from black to indigo, he extracted himself, pulling the blankets up over her shoulders. She snuggled deeper into the warmth and gave a little sigh, but didn't wake. The crushed Vicoden he had stirred into her schnapps while she washed the dishes would keep her out for a few more hours at least.

He crept downstairs to the den, or what his father termed "The Library," although it contained only one low shelf of books, mostly sci-fi and Tom Clancy paperbacks. He opened the desk drawer where his father kept the important papers. And there it was. A plain white envelope with the seal of the U.S. Government. Dear Mr. Hashimi:

This letter serves as notification that as a person of Resident Non-Alien Status (*Executive Order No. A-066, dated January 1, 2008: defined as persons of Middle Eastern ancestry who are deemed a potential terrorist threat*) you are required to report to the Federal Detention Center in Pollock, Louisiana, on or before January 15, 2012, for deportation proceedings. Failure of persons to comply are subject to the provisions of this Public Proclamation No. Z-4 and shall subject such persons to immediate arrest.

The letter was signed by the Secretary of War.

Jack rose slowly from his father's chair. The leather was cracked and had a stain on the seat where long ago Jack had spilled a Coke. He remembered how he had blotted up the liquid and then denied knowing anything about it when his father got home from work. His father had said nothing, giving Jack the space he needed to confess, but Jack remained silent. Finally, his father had walked away. It

was worse than any punishment he could have given him.

The sun was up now. He didn't have much time. Jack washed his face and changed into clean clothes. In the kitchen, he found some more cans of Beef-a-Roni, a couple packets of Cup-a-Soup, and some bottled water and stuffed it all into his backpack. He opened the door slowly, knowing where it would creak.

The cold grabbed his breath and forced it back into his throat. The windows of the car were covered with frost. Now he would have to let the car warm up so he could run the defroster, giving the little monster across the street a chance to see him. He slid into the seat and turned the ignition.

"So where are we going?"

Jack jumped and turned around. "Lo!"

She climbed over the seat back so she was sitting beside him, slipping a long, steel slim-jim into her bag. "So you were trying to be all brave and heroic, huh? You didn't think one little pill was going to put me out? I've built up quite a tolerance, you know." Lola was wearing a nubby knit cap of his mother's. A matching blue scarf was wrapped so many times around her neck that only her eyes and nose were visible. She pulled a map out of the bag and unfurled it. "Did you know the Canadian border is less than twenty miles from here?"

Jack peered around the edge of the map, out the little hole cleared by the defroster. He was grinning so hard his cheeks hurt. "Of course I know. I grew up here." Then the smile faded. "I want you to go back to New York. You'll be safe there."

Lola tilted her head, studying the map.

Jack sighed. Okay then. "What *about* Canada?"

"We could get in touch with a human rights group. Maybe they could help find your parents."

"I don't think I can do that — leave the country while they might be here." He explained about the letter, Louisiana.

Lola folded up the map and tucked it back into her bag.

The frost had melted and the windshield was clear. The sun sent sparks of light bouncing off the ice-covered trees. It was — Jack saw — a beautiful morning. "Well, what do you

think?"

Lola took something out of her pocket and pressed it into Jack's hand. Looking down, he uncurled his fingers.

"Lola."

"Let's go already," she answered, buckling her seatbelt and stowing her bag between her feet.

Turning the blue swan over and over in his hand, Jack pulled away from the curb into the crystalline morning.

Meanwhile the rest of the street was waking up. At number 87, a woman in a nightgown and snowboots took little scotch steps down her walk and picked up her morning paper. Mr. Wilde of number 89, oxygen tank in tow, sprinkled salt on his front steps. Hidden behind her new damask drapes, Brenda Johnson poured a healthy dose of brandy into her morning coffee. And at 88, a girl with two corn-colored braids and eyes blue as summer, stood at her bedroom window, watching a man come out of the blue house across the street, get in his car and drive away. Enemy of the State, she thought and closed her notebook. Capping her pen, she shouldered her bookbag. It was time to leave for school.



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Five Minutes With: Homer H. Hickam, Jr.

From time to time, on particularly clear, crisp nights, I take one or both of my girls outside and down the hill so that we can stand and look up at the stars. I can point out some constellations to them and look “kind-of smart” as the little one says, and I have a lot of fun reminding them that I was born the same night that Sputnik was launched. That may be one reason why I felt an instant affinity for Homer Hickam, after reading his memoir about growing up in West Virginia and discovering a love for rockets, home and family. After you read this, I want you to go to his website homerhickam.com, and see everything he’s up to. For all of you who wanted to be an astronaut when you grow up, or a paleontologist, or a teacher, or a writer, or a soldier, or a scuba diver, or a raconteur – Homer Hickam is living proof that you can be any of those – or all of them.

Editor: We appreciate that you don’t necessarily want to re-hash the same stuff about your memoir *Rocket Boys*, but it’s hard to argue with success. Like John Grisham (with the best-selling novel *The Firm* following less successful *A Time To Kill*) your second book took off (like a rocket, say,) and secured your place as a “famous writer”. Moreover, a person coming to read your work after watching the movie gets a real flavor for your skill as a “tell the truth on myself” kind of author, which we think is both fine and rare. But we like *Torpedo Junction*, too, and can see the same qualities there, the research and craftsmanship. How much is it your “first child”, and do you prefer your novels and non-fiction or your memoirs?

Homer H. Hickam: Without *Torpedo Junction*, there might not have been a *Rocket Boys* memoir at all. TJ worked out the kinks of writing for me, and gave me a measure of confidence that I knew what I was doing when I began the rather tricky process of writing a memoir meant to be more about the people who raised me than me. Early on during the process, after at least one major false start, I hit upon the idea of

telling the story through the events that occurred during the three years when I built rockets. It turned out to be an excellent idea and I recognized it almost at once as my writing was suddenly energized. Something similar had already occurred when I wrote TJ. After gathering a huge amount of research and sorting it out sequentially, the obvious thing to do was to write a long book about sinking ship after sinking ship after sinking ship. Instead, I decided to tell it in a more personal way, using the crew of of a single little Coast Guard cutter as my touchstone. This worked perfectly. A writer has to trust his instincts to tell a story or he will soon get bogged down. As to which I like best, my novels or memoirs, they are all written with all the passion I can summon to create good, page-turning reads. They are also all different. I decided early on not to stick to a template so even within a series, each book tells its own unique story in an evolving style. This, of course, does not please publishers since they prefer that an author stick to a single genre or “brand.” I hate that word. It’s what you do to cattle. I’ll never be a writer who keeps writing the same thing over and over dressed up in literary camouflage in the hope the reader won’t notice. It’s just the way I am, I guess, a little stubborn and I also don’t write with a financial calculation in mind.

Ed.: In your memoirs, your Mom is a tough-as-nails woman, a Bodicea-like alpha-female in what is obviously an old fashioned male dominated world of coal mining. Were the Coalwood women the real strength behind the men? What percentage of you is your mom, would you say?

H3: Based on the rather large amount of fan mail I receive, Elsie Hickam is the favorite character in my Coalwood memoirs. Interestingly, Hollywood made her into a minor character in the film *October Sky*. They just couldn’t handle a woman so strong! Most of the women of Coalwood were like my mom, tough and very smart. They ran Coalwood with a firm hand but they

couldn’t run the coal mine, the exclusive province of the men. That’s part of the tension that runs through the memoir series. As to which of my parents I am most like, I am similar to my mom most of the time which means, once I start anything, I simply will not give up even when it seems in my interest to do so. During times of extreme stress, I can turn into my father in a heartbeat which means I am perfectly capable of being authoritarian and logical to the extreme. I have to watch both tendencies and use them when I need them. When I was in Vietnam, I was my dad most of the time which was beneficial to getting things done and keeping me and my men alive. When I face a book deadline or, say, find myself trudging through the heat and dust of the badlands of Montana looking for dinosaur bones, Mom comes out and kicks me along that extra mile.

Ed.: At what point in your life did you think that you had a story to tell, worth telling to a wide audience? What were the events/directions that led to being a novelist and a memoirist? Was there a single turning point in your career(s) path?

H3: After *Torpedo Junction* came out in 1989, I got extremely busy with the first joint Japanese-American mission called SL-J. As the crew training manager, I dedicated myself to its success which didn’t leave a lot of time for writing anything book length. So I wrote magazine articles for a variety of publications including *Smithsonian Air & Space* magazine. I had in the back of my mind the idea of writing about growing up in a coal town but didn’t really know how I wanted to do it.

One night in December, 1994, I was asked by one of A&S’s editors to write a “filler” of about 1500 words. I chose to write about building rockets as a boy. The piece got an amazing response! I knew right then I was on to something and maybe that was even the best way to write about Coalwood. I began writing *Rocket Boys* in 1995, it was completed in 1997, and went out for auction to the publishing world in 1998. By then, Universal Studios had already optioned the rough draft manuscript. It began a very nice ride that’s still going. There is now serious work being done on a Broadway musical based on the book.

The Blotter

Ed.: Two of your books are North Carolina based - did you spend time here? Did you ever get to dive off of the New Jersey coast for the mystery boat - U-869?

H3: I spent months on the Outer Banks of North Carolina in three-five day increments over fifteen years. Most of this time was research for Torpedo Junction which I also later used for The Keeper's Son, the first of the "Josh Thurlow" series. I not only explored the great wrecks off those lovely barrier islands, I got to know the people who lived on them. In The Keeper's Son, I brought the people of my semi-fictional island of Killakeet alive. I couldn't have done that without all those months over years on the Outer Banks. Although I was aware of the U-869's existence, it fell outside the time frame of Torpedo Junction. I concentrated on two U-boats off the Banks, the U-352 and the U-85, and undertook underwater expeditions aboard them. I tracked down the captain and crew of the U-352, as

well as some of the crewmen of the cutter that sank them, and uncovered a fascinating morality story of courage, ineptitude, and kindness. I also interviewed the captain of the ROPER, the destroyer that sank the U-85, who, because of a flawed decision, killed all of the German crew after they had gone screaming for help into the water. Those Germans, by the way, are now buried in the Hampton National Cemetery in Virginia. There were just so many wonderful stories to come out of that terrible, bloody battle.

Ed.: You seem to have been "in the middle of things" in spite of a reader's first blush conclusion that you grew up somewhat out of the way in rural WV. Timing obviously has something to do with it - you and your friends' interest in rocketry had a national stage in the late 1950's, going to college in the 1960's, a decorated officer in the Army in Vietnam, and working with NASA during the ramp up of Space Shuttle missions, celebrated author - it looks almost like a "Forrest Gump" string of events. At the very least you are a champion of buckling down and working hard. How do you see your life? (although we know that a good West Virginian doesn't pat himself on the back)

H3: Yes, I've been called West Virginia's Forrest Gump and I take that as a compliment. It seems like I have been involved in historical events, one after the other, whether I liked it or not. A few of them: As a teenager, I met JFK in West Virginia and suggested we should go to the moon, I built a big brass cannon for Virginia Tech that became a legend there, I was in Vietnam for the famous Tet Offensive

of 1968, I ferreted out what actually happened during a secret battle along the America coast during World War II (Torpedo Junction), I was friends with most of the Challenger crew, I trained the first Japanese astronauts, I taught David Letterman to scuba dive (!), I carried the Olympic torch through Huntsville on the way to Atlanta, and I gave Jake Gyllenhaal his first big role (as me). There are others but that'll do as a short list. As for patting myself on my back, I don't get puffed up about any of this. I was just lucky to be around when it happened.

Ed.: And did you ever get to meet Dr. von Braun?

H3: No, although the director of October Sky let Jake meet Dr. von Braun (or at least an actor playing him). I appreciated that!

Ed.: Thanks again for your time.



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all day long at
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“Making Excuses”

It was a waffle sandwich with chicken and cheese made to order downstairs by Wilma the famous cook from before any of us were born. I could have sworn I knew her from somewhere, when I was wiser and younger and sober, but that's a different story. The story now is about getting the waffle sandwich to the other end of the dark hallway safely. The sandwich smells like a greasy promise of a pleasanter afterlife.

I am not, nor have I ever been afraid of rats or bugs or snakes, but filth is a different story. As a child my mother cleaned my room with chemicals and a desperation that haunted my dreams and filled them with invisible parasites and predatory slime beings. I have not been able to shake off these phantasmagoria, no matter what opposing ideas I try.

Jesus was a beggar, rags and rat feces clinging to him under supernatural magnetism? Can't see it. If Jesus was dirty, my family got to work on him years ago, and my mother is planning to finish the job, so that by the time I get there he will be down to fingernails and the stubborn dead skin behind the ears.

Fossilized records of humans might show them flossing their teeth, crushing a recyclable can, or carrying dog poop around in a carefully sealed plastic bag, but then again there might be nothing at all. Some vermin can eat through bones. What if the aliens finally get here, and there is nothing to indicate that we ever walked the Earth? Will they marvel at the skyscrapers that the rats have built, or worship the cockroach for its seemingly impossible mastery of atomic energy?

A dark hallway is not aware of anyone, could hardly fathom that the purpose it serves is to ferry people from one arbitrary point to another, and that in its highest and most pure form it is pretty much just a line of people who understand that this is where one can travel without invading the personal space of other humans who happen to be in close proximity.

A hallway does not care whether its occupants are human or vermin or rail cars full of salt mined deep within the Earth. It does not care if there is sufficient light for a man and a waffle sandwich to traverse it. Nor does it care if there is, for example, a potted plant standing pointlessly in the middle of the darkest part, which is as inhospitable to a photosynthesizing organism as deep space is to a human.

This is how I came to drop the waffle sandwich, by tripping over a dead or hibernating desert plant that someone had banished to the communal space which is not intended for storage at all. I trip over the plant and drop the sandwich in order to catch my considerable bodyweight and prevent further contact with the prickly obstacle in my path. The sandwich makes a squishing sound as it connects with the already stained and filth encrusted carpet. I think I hear cheese oozing into the fabric.

I pick myself up, locate the plant and the devastated sandwich, and decide to leave the one for the other, in case some mutation allows this plant to gather sustenance from a waffle sandwich instead of the light which is utterly lacking in its hallway world. And that, officer, is why I am going down the fire escape instead of the elevator like everyone else.

Two by Joshua Booth

“The Messiah in His Mid-Twenties”

He's like that, long nose stuck up in the air like he wants to use it for a sail, far back as I can remember. And what's more furthermore, I can't remember the last time I saw him in here with a new coat on or a girl or a haircut for that matter. Calls himself a prophet or a seer or something. If he has any customers they must not pay him much. Guess nobody wants to know the future. I know I don't. Seems like it's all bad news these days.

And when he does come in here it's always with a paper and a sandwich he got from God knows where. He doesn't buy anything, just sits by the window in the back looking into that playground and eats his sandwich. I asked him one time about the news and he said he was checking his accuracy.

Anyway he was sitting back there and this guy is in here and he's a real meathead. I mean he plays football sometimes but not wearing pads. He comes in here wanting a fight and goes straight for the guy in the back, who by this time is filling out the crossword without looking at the clues. Well this big goof puts one foot up on a chair and starts to say something but the little guy doesn't even let him start. Here's what he says.

“I know you want to fight because your father beat your mother and made you feel responsible. I know you beat your girlfriend too, but she'll marry you anyway. I know you drink too much because you are shy and afraid that people won't like you. Don't worry about that either. It's just everyone hates a drunk. Now, what was it you were going to say?”

Of course the guy is too stupefied to respond, and Mr. Know-it-all goes back to his crossword. Well the big guy starts laughing and then he says, “You needs a drink.”

“What's your drink?” He says, “I bet you drink wine. A classy guy like you has to drink wine.” The little guy sits there thinking for a minute and then orders a beer and a packet of peanuts. So I give it to him. Well they start talking for a long time and the little guy drinks his beer and the big guy eats the peanuts, and when they are done the big guy gives the little guy his business card and leaves.

I go over there at the end of my shift because I have to close all my tabs, and I mention it to him and he says the big guy just forgot and he'll be back tomorrow to settle the tab. And sure enough the big guy came in the next morning and settled a five-dollar tab. Gave me a five-dollar tip, too.

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MY MOVE

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Lisa Nicole Jones has graced our pages before with her art. She has a big show starting 12/5 at 101 Lounge & Cafe in Raleigh and in January she'll have work at Bean Trader's Coffee Shop in Homestead Market off 54. (That's Triangle talk, ya'll)

Joshua Booth writes, "Contents: less than five hundred words on humanity, divinity, and the gossip that defines each. The author has been published in *Edifice Wrecked*, *Brittle Star*, *Opium Magazine*, *The Duck & Herring Pocket Field Guide*, *Quarto*, and other magazines."

Michael Lee Johnson of Itasca, Illinois is the author of *The Lost American: From Exile to Freedom*. He has also published two chapbooks of poetry. He is also publisher and editor of four poetry, flash fiction sites and you can find him on <http://poetryman.mysite.com/>

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MAGAZINE
thanks all our contributors, advertisers, donors, volunteers and readers for a great year. Here's that puppy we promised.

Staff Photo