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“Longevity”

I read, or perhaps it was read to me, that it is terribly difficult to develop a new skill after the age of forty-eight. I don't know whether this is because the talents the surveyed people are attempting to enhance are physical in nature, i.e., yes indeed it's a bit late in life to join the ranks in professional wrestler or take up synchronized swimming, or if they really mean that as we age our heads are hard to crack open and pour in new data so that as he claims, Pop really cannot learn to use Facebook. In any case, my wife, who is Texas stubborn, says that old dogs actually can and will learn new tricks. Maybe she's right. And, while it is a very small moment in the scheme of things, it's been three weeks since I stopped biting my nails – a habit I've had since JFK was president. Now I admit that this is not actually a measure of intellectual success or proof of a revised adage, or even scant evidence that I'm an old dog, but it's still something. I believe it. I think that we can change our spots. We mostly don't, but we can.

This is of particular import to people around my age who are either in the current position of being out of work, or in a position that is just about to be removed from the “paid” side of the ledger. (I've often wondered what would have happened if I was working for a large corporation that decided to lay me off if I told them that I could continue to work for them without recompense. If I said, “hang on, let's negotiate here. How about I contract to work for you for a year without pay? How's that sound?” And, with so many organizations having decided that unemployment is a chronic condition, brought on by the employee, well then isn't this better than being unemployed? Just wondering.) My point here is that we've apparently decided that being older is something that cannot be avoided and, because it cannot be improved on, is less useful. The definition of old is also a moving target on a downward slope like that skier toppling ass over teakettle in the old Wild World of Sports trailer (for you *youngsters*, that was a show back when there were only three television networks, when Dad used to drive to work by peddling his feet under the dinomobile.) This leaves me curious. What don't the folks who make such claims, perform such administrative tasks, and decide such policy understand about themselves? Do they assume that they will never get older? Are they like those fellows faithfully working the guillotines during the Reign of Terror that blanched when suddenly they were invited up on the dais for an opportunity to try out the technology firsthand? Or is this one more surreptitious way of slicing and dicing our society into contentious corners, leaving us sniping at each other instead of dealing with the actual problems of our world? The new order using discord to ease the troubled mind, cacophony to quiet the

envious spirit.

Have the bean-counters become so completely jaded and jacked with power that they believe that if you fall off a bike, you really can't get back on anymore? I understand that there are jobs that must go away (my own code words, if you please) in order for companies to remain competitive. And perhaps they have to butcher those industries with chainsaws and baseball bats first, before they break out the scalpels. But there are folks in roles that are being thrown out because of the confluence of financial events of the past small handful of years. That is a reasonable expectation on our part. And in return, if they've decided that America must say goodbye to manufacturing – at least the kind of manufacturing that the greatest generation was used to - we can't just dive off cliffs because we're too sad about the current state of things to carry on. There must be somewhere between the ridiculous and the sublime for us to carry on.

On a trust-me-it's-related subject, I've recently engaged in an ongoing discussion with a friend about the world in which we're bringing up our children. I do so enjoy a conversation with defined scope. Anyhow, our talks take place while we do our regular daily march uphill at a pathetic 3 miles per hour on the treadmills at the gym. Now, in my experience there are few venues more effective at extracting an honest opinion from someone than huffing and puffing on a treadmill. Sure, other folks at the gym find it more amenable to watch CNN or the financial news, or to attempt to joltingly read the latest potboiler. Me, I prefer to daydream while the miles analogously roll past. But when I walk with my friend, we talk. After a while, we gasp and pant and talk. Our brains become short of oxygen, our hearts race and adrenaline gushes bitterly through our systems. And ideas formulate that wouldn't otherwise. Far be it to claim any organization in such conversation. We bluster about what's wrong, and what's right, stepping on each other's Robert's Rules. But as we puff along we have moments almost resembling insight.

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CAUTION

Our thanks and appreciation go out to all of you for 100 months of joy you've given us by letting us bring these artists, authors, essayists, poets and cartoonists to you.

“Tomato Soup”

by Luke Hawley

“There’s a Ray Bradbury short story – I can’t think of what book it’s in. The Pedestrian. That’s the name of the story anyway. This guy gets picked up by the police one night – this is in the future of course – for not watching his television. He just wants to go for a walk, get out in the air. But it’s illegal to do. You’re supposed to stay home and watch television, I guess.”

Moses listened to his old friend talk. The air was cooling. It was September, but summer had stuck around, stubborn, keeping the leaves on the trees and the days hot and humid. He could smell it in the air though. Winter was coming. Autumn would pass in a blink; he’ll wake up one morning to frost and all the leaves suddenly brown and scattered throughout his yard.

“That’s why I followed John Prine’s advice,” Moses said.

“And what’s that?” Roger was an avid reader but, having

gone deaf in his left ear as a kid, he’d never paid much attention to music.

“You know that old song. I can’t think of the name.” Moses warbled the best he could. “Blow up your TV ... something something ... grow a bunch of peaches ... something ... find Jesus.”

Roger nodded slowly, “Quite a rendition.” He put his hand over his eyes like a visor and looked at the streetlight on the boulevard.

“Of course, I didn’t blow it up. It just quit and I never got a new one.” Moses pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and looked up past the streetlight into the darkness of the sky. “I always wanted to take the parts out and turn it into a fish bowl.”

“You should.”

“Yeah.” Moses stretched his arms over his head. “I’m too old for that.”

They both laughed, low, gravelly, quiet laughs laid underneath the treble of cicadas and

crickets. In the distance, a semi downshifted, jake-braking its way down the slope on the western edge of town.

“I think my brain’s going, Rog.” Moses ran his hands through the hair on the sides of his head. When his hands reached the back of his head, he made two fists and pulled the hair into his fingers. It was strange to have thick hair around his head and no hair on the top.

“Can’t be.” Roger locked his fingers, bent them backwards and cracked them against his chin. “If you think it’s going, then you still have it enough to know something at all.”

“Makes sense.” Moses nodded. “Sure is good to have smart friends.”

“Dad!” Roger’s daughter, Erica, hollered from the front door. “Dad! Can you please come inside?”

Without turning his head: “No dear, I cannot.”

“Please Dad. Nobody likes a creeper. Come on in and watch some television.”

Smiling so only Moses could see: “Absolutely not.”

“Or read one of your books.”



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“Later, Honey.” Roger raise his hand over his head and flopped it back and forth on a limp wrist. “I’m talking with my old friend here. I’ll come in later.” The door shut, echoing a metallic clang. “Speaking of losing your mind.”

Moses hmphed. “Is she pregnant?”

“She thinks I’m losing mine. Because I don’t like television.” Roger stared into the dark sky, trying to measure the space between the stars. “Because I sit out here. So they’re gonna send me away.”

“Say what now?”

“I saw the paperwork on the counter. Ebenezer, I guess, over on the south side of town.”

“That fancy new place?”

“They can dress it up as much as they want. I can see the razor wire.”

“When are they taking you?”

Roger twisted his mouth, most of his lips moving in the direction of his right nostril. “Don’t know.”

“It wasn’t supposed to go this way.” Moses thought of his wife, dead seven years. “Every almanac I’ve ever laid eyes on said we were supposed to be the first to go.” “I feel like an old prune, dried up and unwanted.”

“Now that’s not quite right,” Roger said, holding up his hand, pointing like a politician. “Plenty of people want prunes.”

“Just old people.” Moses chuckled. “Babies too, I guess.”

“I read a blurb about

Bradbury just the other day. Said when he died, he wanted to be cremated and he wanted his ashes put in a Campbell’s Tomato Soup can and sent on a rocket to Mars.”

Moses raised his shaggy white eyebrows. “Better to burn up than dry up, I suppose.”

“Everyone knows about his Mars obsession,” Roger said. “He must love tomato soup too. Just put one and the other together.”

“I’ll be damned.”

“Thing is, Mos, I don’t love anything that much. I don’t love anything as much as Ray Bradbury loves tomato soup.”

Moses shifted in his chair. They were old lawn chairs, the kind with the plasticky straps woven together. Every time he shifted, the chair tried to fold in on him. He preferred a good wooden chair, a rocker if he could. Plenty hanging in the garage, but they didn’t fold up for the back of the truck. Ease over comfort, he thought: Aren’t those two supposed to go hand in hand?

They were quiet then, for a long time, feeling the cool come down like a damp towel, listening to the buzz of the streetlamp.

“I hate that thing,” Roger said.

“What thing?”

“That light.” Roger pointed to the corner. “Blocks out most of the stars. And buzzes to beat the band.”

Moses squinted his eyes and looked at the light, then at the

sky. “Seems pretty full of stars to me.”

“You can’t even see the half of them.” Roger stood up and began to search the ground around his chair. “Help me find a rock, Moz.”

Moses stood up and looked around the boulevard. “You think it’s plastic?”

“What?” Roger got down on his hands and knees.

“The light cover. I bet it’s plastic. I bet we’ll hit it and those rocks’ll just come flying back at us.” Moses put his hand up over his eyes. Now that he was looking at it, it did seem awfully bright. A world full of people scared of the dark; he was too old for that nonsense now. “Hold on, then, Rog. Let me check my truck.” Roger continued to search the ground and Moses walked around the lawn chair to the driveway. They had been sitting a long time, longer than usual, and he could feel the extra air in his joints. He high stepped and his hips popped, followed by his knees, his ankles, and down through his toes. Moses thought about what Roger said, about the home, and he knew he wouldn’t go like that. He would go rocketing out into the dark.

He pulled his toolbox from the bed and found two long, thick nails, the kind he used making picnic tables. He grabbed a couple of short tow straps and one long one, walked back over and sat down in the chair.

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“Find a good rock?” Moses asked.

“No. But I might walk around back.” Roger stood and dusted off the knees of his slacks. “I think the peonies back there are planted in rock beds.”

“Just hold on. I’m gonna

need your help. Hold this.” He handed Roger a nail and a short strap and set the long one on the ground. He lifted his left boot up on his right knee and held the nail along the inside of the boot, the sharp edge an inch or so past the sole. He wrapped the short

tow strap around his ankle and ratcheted the nail tight against his boot. He took the nail and the short strap from Roger and repeated the action on his right boot. “You’re gonna have to help me over there. It’s tough to walk in pole spikes.”

“You’ve done this before?”

Roger took Moses by the elbow and lifted him out of the chair.

Moses read the worry in Roger’s face. “When we were kids, my brothers and I would shimmy up skinny little aspens and jump from tree to tree, like a bunch of howler monkeys. Lord knows I can’t shimmy anymore.” He chinned at his boots. “This ought to help though.”

They stood underneath the streetlight looking up at the yellow-orange glow. Moses looked past Roger down the block. “Hey. Go grab a hammer from

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the truck, would you?" Roger nodded and Moses staked his right boot into the meat of the pole. The nail dug into the bul-

bous bone on the inside of his ankle. He placed the long strap around the pole and grunted, heaving up his left foot, to where

he was off the ground. He leaned back and let the tow strap hold his weight.

"Here you go." Roger was back with the hammer. "Are you sure about this?"

"Hook it in my belt." Moses shifted his weight towards Roger. "I'm as sure about this as I am about anything anymore. You should be asking, 'Are you sure about you?', in reference to my body. That I am not sure about. But" – Moses took another step, holding tight to the tow strap – "I sure as hell am not going to just dry up and die. Just dying sounds like about the worst thing I can imagine."

"So you're okay breaking your neck for a lightbulb?"

"It's something, ain't it? For stars I can't see?" With each step, Moses grunted louder, feeling the sweat forming on his leather skin. The grunts and sweat were the same as when he worked in the shop, sanding chairs and hammering tables. But the blood pumping to his temples was something different, like the difference between making something comfortable to sit on and wielding a hammer in the name of destruction.. "Who knows, maybe all those extra stars will be my tomato soup."

Halfway up the pole he thought he was having a heart attack and he stopped for a moment. "Are you alright?" whispered-shouted Roger. Moses wanted to wipe the sweat off of his forehead, but he couldn't let go of the tow strap. He grunted again and took the final

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steps to the top of the light. “Is it plastic?”

Moses steadied himself against the pole, leaning into it and put all his weight on the spikes of his boots. He hugged the pole with one arm and with his other hand pulled at one side of the covering, bending it slightly, slipping it out of its hold. He looked down at Roger and dropped the cover to the right of him. It bounced off the boulevard and clanged into the street, sounding like a bucket of spilled soup cans.

“Are you ready?” He could see Roger nodding, smiling, lit like a halo by the brightness of the uncovered bulb. There was something maniacal about him, maybe in the way he held his hand together, close to his chest. With his free hand, Moses pulled the hammer from his belt and swung at the light bulb, covering his face with his swinging arm. Through squinted eyes he saw the explosion, the burst of brightness followed by the sound of glass hitting the pavement of the street. He looked down at Roger, standing off to one side of the pole, staring up past him. Moses followed his gaze, looking up into the night, into the stars, into the millions of tiny lights set against the black backdrop of darkness.



“After the Flood”

by Laura Breitenbeck

As soon as he got custody, he bought a plastic scale model of a triceratops and the Deluxe Young Creation Scientist Paleontology Kit and stood them on the kitchen table where his daughter would be sure to see them. She still liked dinosaurs, he was sure. She had wanted them before and he had given her dolls, but this time he knew better.

She arrived with a small pink and green suitcase he had never seen, with the cartoon face of a girl on it, and one U-Haul box of books. She took one look at the painting on the Paleontology Kit of bearded Noah leading twinned sauropods up the gangway of the Ark and said, “That isn’t real.”

Her mother would have known right away how to answer but he didn’t. He picked up the box and pretended to examine it, as in the past he had pretended to

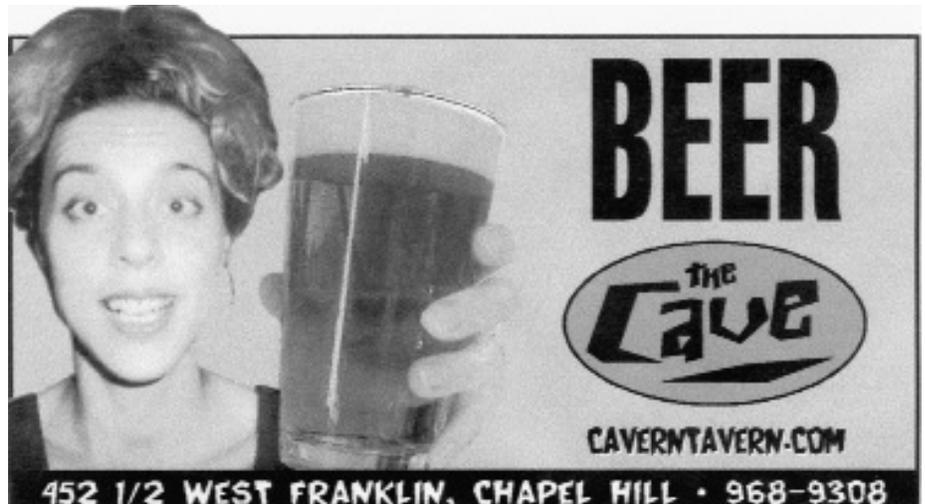
inspect closets and under beds for unseen menace. “You don’t think there was room for dinosaurs on the Ark?”

He tried to bend his head face-level with hers, so she would see and mirror his confidence in God’s ability to engineer a big enough ship for the survivors of the world. But she just stood there, looking at the Deluxe Young Creation Scientist Paleontology Kit as if she were deciding something. She picked up the triceratops and turned it and turned it around in her hands.

“That’s your favorite. Triceratops,” he said. “I didn’t forget.”

“Dinosaurs didn’t live when there were people,” she said.

He tried not to show in his face that he was angry or disappointed. Children noticed



those things and some children were sensitive to them and his daughter had always been sensitive, hoarding secret grudges for things he had already forgotten or never seen. He was not surprised that she had learned the wrong things about dinosaurs. The danger had always been there, not just in misleading books and TV but in everything in the world around her. The sin nature of a child is stronger and hungrier than the child. It eats whatever lies it can and grows on them. In his absence the glassy public library fed it full of marshy paintings and years stacked high as the Tower of Babel. When she opened her mouth to explain it to him, the numbers rolled out heavy as boulders: 4.5 billion, sixty-five million, one hundred million years before Adam was alive to name them the dinosaurs lumbered nameless through the green world. In her solemn slurred voice she listed the ways they might have died. "Like the flood," he said, but she said *no*, sharp as to a stranger's lunging hands.

"*No*, Dad. I already told you. They were extinct."

"Ok," he said. "Maybe that's true. How do we know? Can you show me in the Bible?"

Instead, she showed him a thin paperback from Scholastic Books and left him to discover it for himself as she sat with her scale model on the kitchen floor, humming thinly to herself as she

walked it between the tall mirrored trunks of table and chair. The book was almost all illustrations, with the big rounded text of children's chapter books. After a cross-section of imaginary geological strata came wistful ink washes: heavy drenched brachiosaurs peered with gentle stupid faces through the ferns, a smug maiasaur nodded toward her eggs, a ravenous and sad-eyed tyrannosaur heaved himself up on tiptoe, turning his huge head toward the milky shadows of the forest. "I guess you didn't know that dinosaurs used to live right alongside humans?" he said. She didn't look up. "Just think, if you lived back then, you could have had a real one for a pet."

"No I couldn't."

"If you wanted one, maybe. Remember your Bible? Noah took one of every kind of creature. Dinosaurs are a kind of creature, aren't they? If you lived in the time of Noah—"

"If I lived in the time of Noah, I'd be dead," she said.

At night he opened the Young Creation Scientist Paleontology Kit and laid the balsa-wood bones in a row in front of the box. He would read the spiral-bound Paleontologists' Field Guide and share its facts with his daughter. Did she know that human and dinosaur footprints had been found side by side? Had she been taught that the vast majority of the fossil record can now be conclusively

dated to between 5000 and 7000 BC – the probable time of the Great Flood? Does she understand how quickly and completely she'll forget the things she thinks are essential? When he was her age he used to plug his ears and run out of the room at even the most superficial inquiry into the true identity of Santa Claus, afraid he would hear something that would sow doubt and cost him his presents. But when he stopped believing in Santa, he did not miss his old faith any more than he missed not knowing what words meant, or the certainty with which he had once believed that seven times four was *obviously* seventy-four. It will be the same for her. When the fear of new certainties is past, when she lets go of her impossible primordial swamps and her millions of years, she will feel as if she has walked outside after a long time sick in bed, and she will wonder why held on for so long to things that didn't matter.

After he dropped her off at school, he packed up all the dinosaur and science books he could find among her things and carried them in his car to the dumpster behind the Winn-Dixie. When she came home hungry and excited he set out Oreos and milk and listened to her talk, and felt sure she would soon forget them. But late at night he heard her opening drawers, unpacking boxes, searching

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in places she could not have put them for the books she knew she had.

He bought new books the next day. Nicer books, beautifully illustrated and full of the charts and timelines he knew she loved. *Dinosaurs of Eden. The Truth about Dinosaurs. What Really Happened to the Dinosaurs?* He stacked them on the table next to the sofa so that she would know where to find them when she was ready.

He didn't say anything else about it after that. He just asked her about school and should they go on a vacation, and what did she want for dinner. Sometimes, when she began to laugh, she remembered she was mad at him and covered her mouth with her hand, but not often. Still at night she snuck downstairs to open drawers and file cabinets and to take apart the boxes of printer paper and textbooks and old cracked watercolors. It wasn't healthy, he thought. But he didn't know how to bring

it up.

As soon as he could take a week off, he decided to drive her to the beautiful new Creation Museum where she could see animatronic dinosaurs and fossil skeletons and drink frozen Coke in the museum café. He didn't tell her ahead of time. He just planned it and one day when she came downstairs for breakfast he was already closing the cooler and putting new batteries in his camera.

He put the Paleontology Kit in the front seat, and two books— *The Truth about Dinosaurs* and *Natural Selection Questions and Answers*— in the sleeve of the door. The green hills fell past them and the telephone poles with their outstretched arms. At first she talked too quickly, vying with the music and pulling the nylon shoulder strap of her seatbelt in and out as she asked if there would be mastodons, if there would be T-rexes, if the Creation Museum believed in the meteor theory of extinction, if Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by a meteor. After a while she grew silent again and turned the balsa-wood fossils around in her hands, wrapping one in the seatbelt and unwrapping it, pressing pieces against the window and pretending to examine them. In other car trips long ago she had always ridden in back, grabbing the shoulders of the front seat asking to be told the story of how he met her mother. He would pretend not to

remember and her mother would pretend to be angry at his forgetfulness and he would say, "That story? Come on. You don't want to hear that story again." But she did, she did. She could not hear it often enough. He can't tell if she remembers it now, fitting the balsa ribs into the notched spine with her mother's squint in her mother's seat in the new grey sedan. Who was the first person you ever loved, she asked them, every time. And the answer was always your mother, your father.

"I'm sorry I took your books," he said.

She pinched a balsa rib between her fingers and pressed her forehead against the window.

"Sometimes, you know, when you like something a lot, it's hard to separate what's real and what's not real about it. The good thing is you can always count on the Bible to tell you the truth. No matter what happens, or what other people do or say, it's always there."

"Where did you put them?"

He said, "They're gone, sweetheart."

The red rushed up to her skin and crumpled it. He kept his eyes on the road and the hills beyond the road while she pushed her sleeve under her nose and forced her mouth into a flat line.

Inside the museum, she hovered by the few real fossils, the stone eggs and fragments of

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skulls, while in a nearby alcove the six days of creation played out under serene narration, faded to white and back to darkness on the face of the deep.

“It’s important to make up your own mind,” he said. “I don’t want you to believe the wrong thing just because it sounds right, you know. Just because you want it to be true. Are you listening?” he said.

She nodded and turned away. A rainbow-spotted duckbill leaned over eggs that will go on hatching forever, the one visible hatchling peering and shaking its tiny head over and over, its sibling rocking a cracked egg back and forth.

In the Evolution Room, the mural of Charles Darwin lifting a turtle and Vladimir Lenin jabbing the air lead around a dark corner to where a huge black wrecking ball labeled MILLIONS OF YEARS had cracked the literal foundations of home and church, opening their walls to the winds. Inside, male and female animatronic figures fought in business suits while a baby cried beside an upturned pot on the floor and a boy-mannequin perched formally before a computer screen glowing with the green words INTERNET PORNOGRAPHY, his hands hovering over the keyboard like magnets repelled. She left the room and returned, pushing past blonde families in matching white shirts and downward-staring teenagers. She touched the

broken wall as she touched the rough skin of the dinosaurs. The father’s arm swung upward, the mother’s high heel stomped the floorboard again and again without her.

There was a long sharp-colored diagram along the wall showing how fossils were made and the continents broken by the flood. Four wide screens filled with images of water as a clean low voice explained the sinking trees, the silt, the splitting canyons. It all happened so quickly. In forty days the world was changed forever. It was sad to think of those villages that were mountains now, those canyons where fields had been, but maybe it could be joyful, too, a new beginning, a dew that lasted for days and broke the light to a million rainbows. In time she would be able to see God’s goodness in the spreading sky, in these red roads and little misty hills.

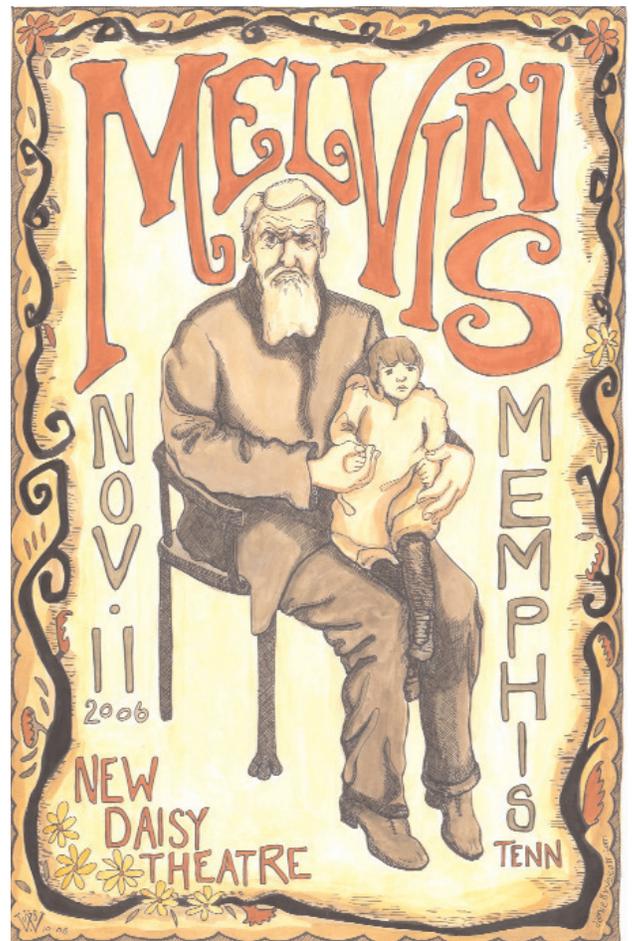
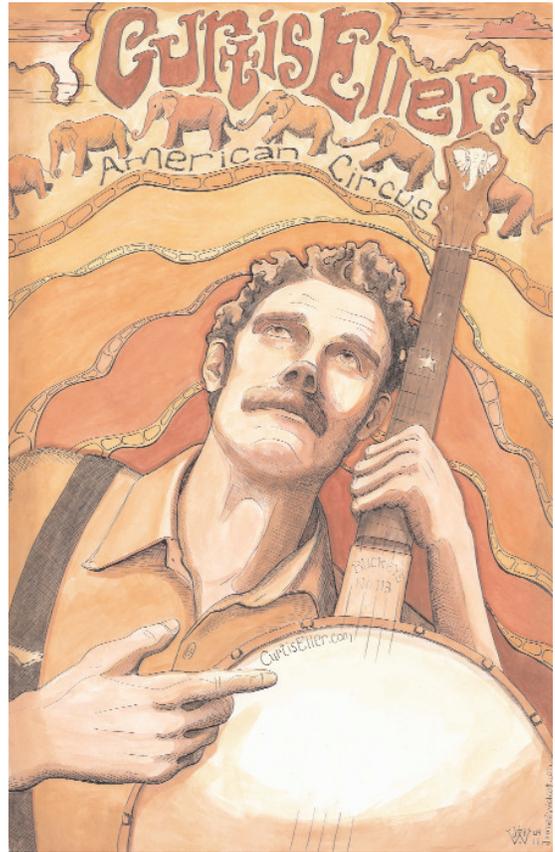
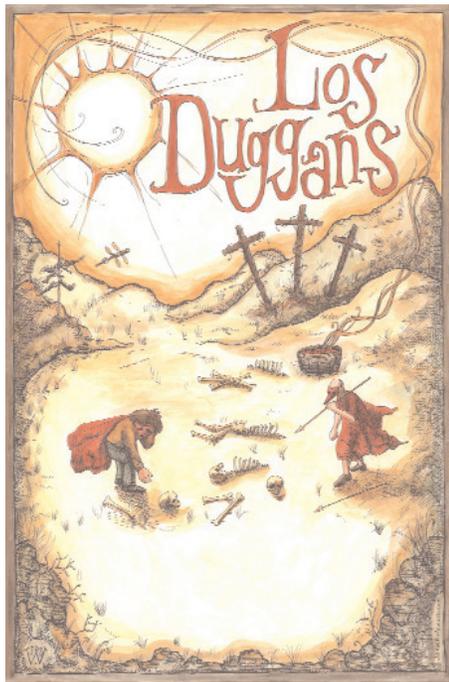
In the gift store outside the Eden Experience, he bought her another scale model, a tiny velociraptor with jeweled skin. In a square of real grass and real flowers two living boys crawled on a life-sized triceratops with a red leather saddle. “That looks like fun,” he said. She waddled the raptor across the sign explaining how sin entered the world and tried not to let him see her watching them.

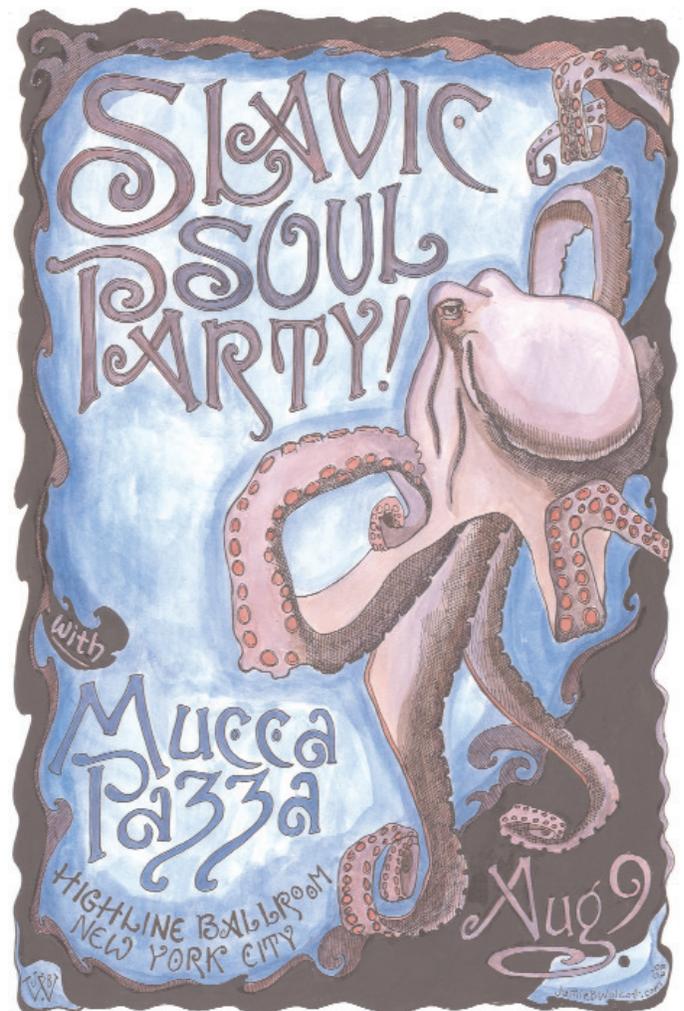
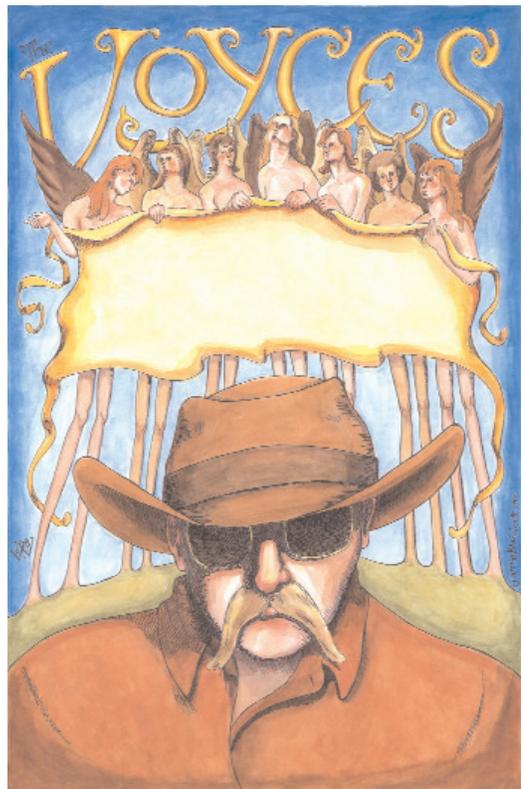
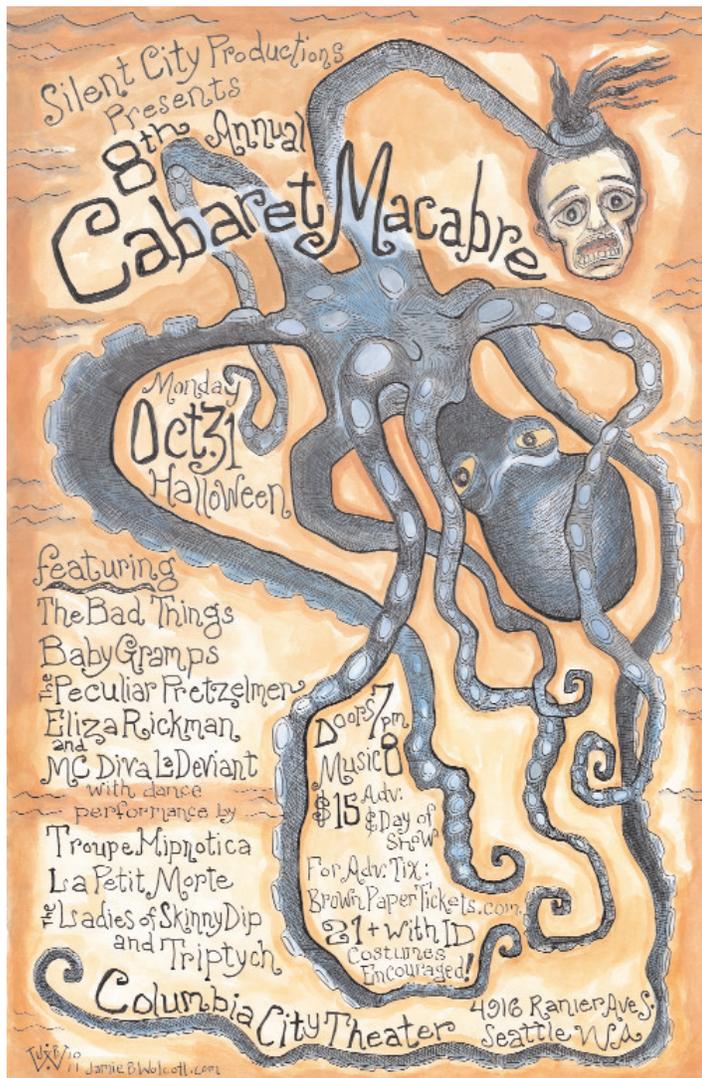
“Let me get a picture,” he said. “Just for fun.”

The triceratops was green

and yellow, its thick skin like dark dense-packed grains of sand, and the motors moved not only its heavy legs forward and back but its sides in and out as if in breath, and now and then its rubber skin rippled like a horse against flies. The huge head turned slowly and the motor rumbled and whirred inside it. He saw her hesitate and heard the nervous half-laugh that comes on children at the edge of understanding something that will change them. She laughed that way when he explained how the angles of a triangle fit together, like God’s plan, how no matter what angle she started with it would add to the same sum every time, perfection looming at every turn like a wall of blinding light.

Her feet found the stirrups and her back straightened in the saddle as if she recognized its shape from long ago. Look, he wanted to say, how God gave everything its own perfection, see how even what we can’t believe was ever ours was made for us. But she laughed for real then, and he stepped back with his camera covering his eyes. The light of the flash washed over her. One more, he said, and she held her neck stiff and her lips shut tight, but the laugh was still there behind her mouth. When she thought he wasn’t looking she leaned her head along the wrinkled rubber neck beneath the crest and scratched gently in the hollow between its horns, as he might scratch a stranger’s dog





Jamie B. Wolcott -
Durham, NC

www.jamiebwolcott.com

The Blotter

goodbye, goodbye to all things loved in and gone from the world before she knew it.



The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

mermaid@blotterrag.com

I'm not sure why the faceless baby didn't upset me, the wobbly wheeled car, the clouds rushing across the sky and up into space, but the thought of my mother at home with her credit card and the telephone was why I was rushing through the streets, dangerously fast. We'd been watching TV the night before, and every channel was a paid advertisement infomercial or a shopping network show with those two big-haired women talking to each other as if they were just friends sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, or the bearded fat-man with chubby, indelicate fingers offering forty different pocket knives for two dollars each. Who needs forty pocket knives, Mom asked, incredulous, but the more the man showed the antler handles or the special amazon river hardwood or bottle-opener blade, Mom would lean forward in her chair and straighten her glasses in order to better see. Now the traffic is building, crowds grabbing onto my car like the Japanese invasion of Shanghai and Mom is picking up the telephone and dialing QVC to make a friendly purchase.

BD - Chapel Hill, NC

"Five Minutes With: Ron Cooper

Hey, we've known philosophy professor, novelist, musician and Blotterfriend, Ron Cooper since he was classmate and fellow ne'er-do-well and troublemaker, Ron Cooper, and we wanted to ask him some questions. And, so we have. The truth is, it's more than luck when your best friend is also one of your favorite authors, it's evidence that there is a higher purpose overseeing the universe, known and unknown. But that's a discussion for a different day. Here we just want to understand the written word and how things are going with it in the new century. Check out Ron's stuff at www.roncooper.org

Editor: As we speak, somewhere out there in the never-never the final Border's Books is closing. What is your thinking on the nature of publishing - e vs paper, online mega-bookstores vs browsing. Is there a loss of intimacy or was there never any there to begin with? Do you long for the old days when publishers were all-powerful and there were lots of them and strong editors supposedly screened the garbage out of the typing, or do you like lots of ways for people to be heard, even if they shouldn't be heard at all? Does this affect what and how you write, or are we overthinking this altogether, and is that surprising to you, really?

Ron Cooper: The extremes are

represented by the Jeremiahs who bewail the death of the book and the revolutionaries who tout the democratization of publishing. I tend to agree with Neil Postman who, in several of his books, pointed out that technology is always a trade off of good and bad results and that by the time we can evaluate the worth of technological change, it's already upon us and here to stay. We have no choice but to embrace the changes, but I simply cannot get accustomed to my e-reader. I sometimes buy books from online megastores, but nothing beats hanging out in a dusky used bookstore. I wish we had room for both, but unfortunately too many independent bookstores are struggling.

The indie bookstores tend to be much nicer to authors, too. When I've done signings in the chains, they given me a table and left me to my own devices—at best they've hung a poster in the window. The indies are much better at promotion, and because their customers are usually loyal, those regulars trust the store owner's taste in authors and buy more books.

I believe in the old fashioned publishing house, and that's where the good work is published, especially by small, independent publishers who are willing to take chances on edgy work. The large publishers release some good work as well, but

they're primarily responsible for the tons of crap flying off the shelves out there, which is how they make their big bucks. Small publishers that look for high quality and innovation do not publish best sellers.

If you want to find really innovative fiction, you need to go to indie literary journals. They're the ones with the guts to publish only quality work, not crowd pleasers.

None of this affects how I write, although if I want big sales, it should.

Ed: What do you think about the dearth (or death) of editing in the world. I had a submission by someone recently who claimed to have 500 published poems, and I felt myself leaning towards responding in some Groucho kind of way *a la* "...I take my cigar out of my mouth every once in a while." Are the changes taking place in publishing, removing quality from the equation, or just making it more difficult to find? I guess my question is also "are editors quality-discerners that we surely miss, or merely tastemakers we can do without?"

RC: The line between publishing and printing has been blurred, and a similar smudge is found between editor and gatekeeper. Those gates are not closed enough, though. I know someone who created a couple of online "journals" in which she published mostly her own poems. Then she went to a sub-

sidy press and printed her chapbook. So, on a resume, she looks like a published poet. Some online journals publish quality literature, but it's tough for them to convince possible readers of that without being overly concerned with a pretty website and suspicious promotion. Now when it comes to a traditional publishing house, an assigned editor can make or break the success of a book. Unfortunately, even the big publishers have cut back on their editing staff. The days of a Maxwell Perkins who would (could?) recognize that lyrical diamond in the prosaic rough and nurture a writer's talent. Your work has to be polished before submitted at all, which may be, in a way, good for the conscientious writers who'll probably be pushed to work even harder.

Ed: And while we're on the subject, what is the deal with reviewers? That same kind of "anything goes on the Web" behavior applies to them, doesn't it? Or is it a "those who can't do, teach" mentality? Do you let reviewers get your goat, get under your skin? Get under your goat?

RC: I think more years have to pass before the industry takes lit bloggers seriously. I've seen many of their sites, and some have terrific taste and write penetrating reviews. Too many, however, have no more to say than "awesome" or "sucks." An excerpt on the cover from a review in the *New York Times* is what sells books,

despite how idiotic some of those reviews may be. (In the interest of full disclosure, my novel *Purple Jesus* received a not-so-hot review in the *NY Times*, by a reviewer whose steady job was writing for ESPN.com! Go figure.)

I've been lucky in that I've received mostly great reviews, and I'm not too upset if someone doesn't enjoy my work. I've known all along that my stuff isn't for everyone, and if think everyone should love your work, the literary world is not the place for you.

Any serious student of literature knows that some great literary critics did no creative writing, but I'm most flattered when another novelist says something nice about my books. Even then, nothing matches the feeling of having a stranger say, "I read your book, and I really enjoyed it." After all, one writes to entertain readers. That's what it's all about.

Ed: Do you work in a vacuum, or do you work with a writers' group? Who is your sounding board as you plow the writing field? Who do you trust to give you honest feedback?

RC: I work alone. I'm sure that many people get good comments and receive needed support from their writers' groups, but they're not for me. Besides, I confess to being a little snobby when it comes to others' opinions. The only people to whom I show my works-in-progress are, first and foremost, my wife (who is the

The Blotter

most insightful reader and ruthless critic I've ever known) and the editor-in-chief of *The Blotter*.

Ed: (Blushing) I work alone, too, but not as much as I need or would like. God, that sounds like a first draft of a bad George Thorogood lyric. Funny you should say those last two things –

my own wife is a terrible critic but the most ruthless editor, and I only ask to read your stuff because I desperately need my semi-regular intelligent humor fix. And is your goal to someday be able to write full time? When are we too old to be *wunderkinder*? Is there any kind of angst that you feed off to get in

the writing mood, or do you take all this much less seriously? Who do you like out there in letters, and who not so much? As we dig deeper into our 50's, what regrets are there, and what have you kicked to the curb as something silly from our youth?

RC: Most people who write poet-

Call for Entries!

"The 2012 Laine Cunningham Novel Award" The Blotter's Third Annual Long Form Fiction Contest for Novella and Novel length works

1. The purpose of our contest is to provide a venue for writers to have their work read and commented on by our editors and judges. Additionally, the winner of this contest will have his/her work published here on these pages. And last but not least, the winner will receive a monetary prize! (Award monies are provided by the prize sponsor and the entry fee for the contest helps offset The Blotter's costs.)
2. Our pre-reader judges are intelligent and highly proud of their educations. Our final judge is smart, well-read and dangerous if she doesn't have her morning coffee. But we told her that she could be the final judge and what can you do?
3. In a world chock-full of scandal, transparency is very important to us, and we make every effort to eliminate any conflict of interest situation from going down in our contest. Blotter volunteers and their family members and/or employees are prohibited from entering our contest.

To enter the contest, please submit your work with a \$25 entry fee by check or money order to: The Blotter Magazine, 1010 Hale Street, Durham, NC 27705. Entries must be received between October 1, 2011 and January 31, 2012 (you see, we're already giving you an extension, so don't put it off!)

Your entry must contain the following: no less than 10 pages, no more than 20 pages of the opening of your novel or novella, (or subject/character-connected short story chapbook) typed & double-spaced, without your name. On a separate cover page type your name, snail-mail and e-mail address, telephone number, the title of your novel or novella and a one page synopsis of your novel or novella. Remember, you have to have the entire book written, so that if and when you win, you can show us the rest!

BONUS: Enter the writing contest AND get a year's subscription to The Blotter for only \$30! (Regular annual subscription donations are \$25 total and you don't even get to enter a writing contest with that price!)

Well, now. \$650 in cash prizes, plus anything else we can wrangle together that we think has value. All placements, including honorable mentions, will receive an award certificate, proof positive of your success as an author, suitable for mocking your sophomore English teacher, who always wondered how it was that you graduated at all.

Our contest will be run in line with the rules of ethics and mechanics recommended by the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, as outlined in their 2006 monograph on the subject. You can't view for free, but you may purchase the monograph entitled "Publishing Contests: Ethics and Mechanics" through the CLMP at <http://www.clmp.org/about/monographs.html>. This is the document we have used in coming up with the rules and conditions of this contest.

So that's it, then - now get to work!

ry or literary fiction don't write best sellers and must have another source of income. Most of them teach, as I do. If I rubbed a lamp, and a genie offered me a choice between writing money-making best sellers or lower-selling, high quality, literary novels, I'd take the latter in an instant. I hope that's what I'm doing now. The nice thing about teaching for a living is that, not only do love it, but I don't have to worry about churning out books to bring in some cash. I have the luxury of writing at my leisure and not because I have to put groceries on the table.

Most literary prodigies do something of note when young, but they're extremely rare, and in nearly every case their best work comes years later. Once in a generation you get a Carson McCullers, but you're more likely to get a William Faulkner, whose early novels would be long forgotten had his later masterpieces never appeared. More interesting to me are the late bloomers like Walker Percy, whose first novel appeared when he was 45.

I take my writing very seriously, not in the sense that I'm producing great art that will save readers' benighted souls, but in that it takes such sacrifice to write: time from one's family, time from other things one could be doing, and the toll that all these solitary hours takes upon one's psyche. Let's face it—writing is a self-absorbed activity, and a certain amount of guilt accompanies it.

Also, although I am not aware of any actual study that compares the numbers to those in the population at large, writers sure seem to have high rates of alcoholism, depression, and suicide. This may indeed be true, but we don't know the causal direction of the correlation. Are people who tend toward depression for unknown reasons drawn to write, or do all those hours alone lead to mental instability? Some writers are, of course, well adjusted folks, but even they will tell you that writing is hard as hell; perhaps even some of the best writers simply aren't cut out for the peculiar sort of stress we put ourselves through. When I give workshops I warn people about those other workshop givers or creative writing instructors who say asinine things like, "Just listen to the muse," or "The writing should flow from you." I've got news for you—the muse died with Virgil, and if something's flowing from you, it ain't ink—seek medical attention.

Cormac McCarthy is America's best writer, and either he or Salman Rushdie gets my vote for best living writer in English. Plenty of other enormously talented writers should be more widely read, like Ron Rash, Harry Crews, Donald Ray Pollock, Padgett Powell, Eric Miles Williamson, and Michael Gills. Plenty of writers should stop writing. I can't for the life of me understand all the fuss over Jonathan Franzen.

Sometimes I regret that I didn't

start writing fiction seriously until I was in my 40s. I was writing in the meantime, but it was mostly arcane, philosophical stuff for academic journals. Then again, perhaps I needed to purge that out of my system. I suppose a deeper regret might be that I was too cocky as a youngster 30 some years ago to take seriously the great advice you and I got from our teachers. Paul Allen [our creative writing teacher at the College of Charleston, now retired] was so much better than we realized. His voice rings in my ears as I write, and the older I get the more I realize how wise he was about patience, practice, and perseverance. Had I started trying to write serious fiction in my 20s, I would not have been willing to think of all of my writing as an exercise and work for hours on a sentence—I wanted to think that each thing I wrote was a gem.

I also wish that I'd had a better appreciation of the canon 30 years ago. I'm certainly not a stick in the mud when it comes to what should be considered great literature, but if you haven't let yourself become absorbed into Shakespeare, Dostoyevski, Melville, etc., you simply don't have the base to build upon. The more you grasp their genius, the more you will get from Nabokov, Pynchon, and Hannah, and better writer you will be.

Ed: Out of time, old friend. Thanks for this.



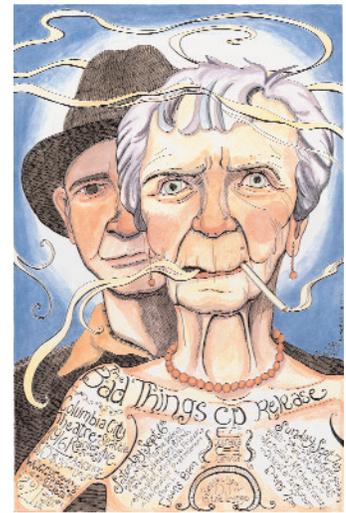
Our Poster Child: Jamie Wolcott

Jamie B. Wolcott is a poster artist and illustrator. Her work resides in the place where these disciplines intersect. Using a rare watercolor technique that mimics glazing in oil paint, she creates vibrant and highly illustrative poster art for punk rock bands, revolutionary cabaret performers, vaudevillian lunatics and 20th century country music legends.

Miz Wolcott's artwork is informed by her lifelong fascination with antique circus posters, 19th century advertising art and the work of the masters of the Golden Age of illustration. Her

images always tell a story and she draws much of her inspiration from her vast and weird collection of antique family photographs.

Having earned a bachelor's degree in Illustration from the School of Visual Art in Manhattan, she spent the next decade as a professional poster artist in New York City. Along the way she has created posters for *Emmylou Harris*, *John Prine*, *The Dresden Dolls*, *The Melvins*, *Curtis Eller's American Circus* and a host of others. In addition to posters, she has designed CD



covers, stickers, t-shirts and occasionally provided illustrations for magazines and children's books.

In 2011, after 16 years in New York, she uprooted herself and moved to Durham, NC with her banjo-playing husband Curtis and their daughter where she continues her work as an illustrator and writer.

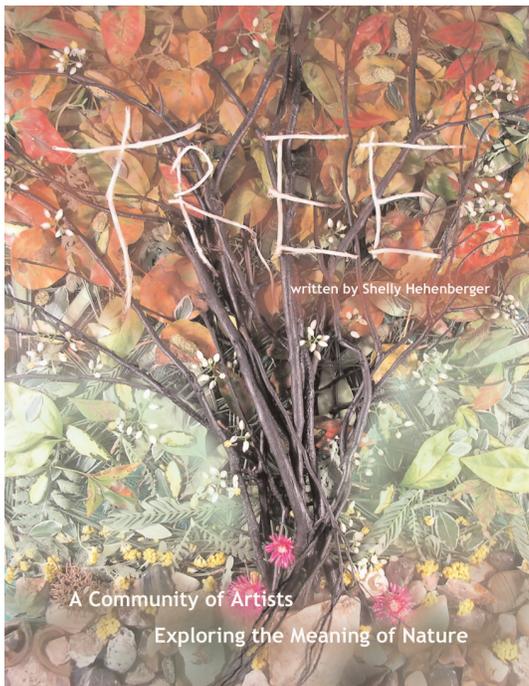
Jamie will be participating in the *Durham Art Walk* this fall (November 19th and 20th) and spring (April 18th and 19th). Her work will also be on display at *The Beehive Salon* in Carrboro throughout March and April 2012. In the winter and spring of 2012, Jamie will be teaching classes in book illustration at The Durham Arts Council.

For more information about upcoming exhibitions and classes, to purchase prints or commission new artwork visit www.jamiebwolcott.com



The Blotter Magazine's
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present **Tree**,



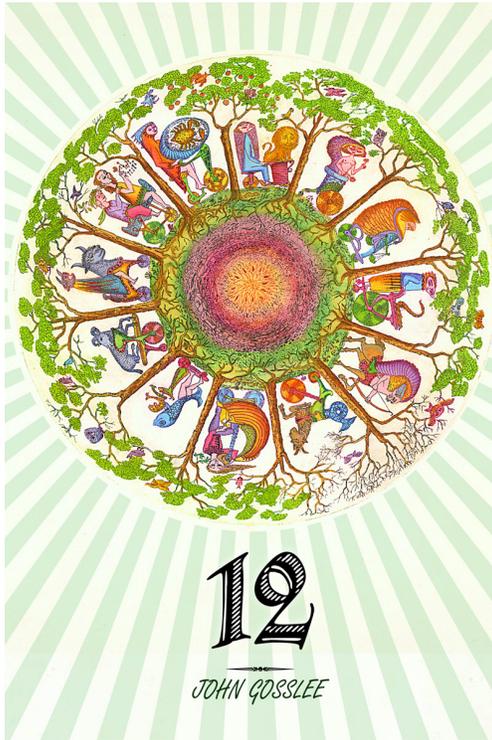
a collaborative, all ages, fine arts book illustrated by members of Paintbrush Forest, a group of artists from the Orange County, NC, area. All proceeds from **Tree** support the Haw River Assembly, a NC environmental organization. Check out www.paintbrushforest.com to bid on the original book art, to

make a donation, and to order your own copy of **Tree**.

Thank you.

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Praise for *12* by John Gosslee

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—Carolyn Kreiter-Foronda
Virginia Poet Laureate

“In orchestrating his poetics, Gosslee creates a tricky dialog between the human and the ideal, between what we can and what we can’t control. He accomplishes this with a combination of spontaneity and clearheaded distillation. This is the kind of work that comes around rarely.”

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“Never Touching The Ground”

by Jeffrey Moses

I am not quite sure how I ended up here. Fate I'd suppose. It doesn't matter now. I sit here behind this dumpster in the dead of night, waiting for the call. I never should have gotten into the secret agent game. But that's what life is; a never ending series of games. Some are fun, some are dangerous, but most are social trickery with ends that mean nothing at all.

“We're in position badger, all clear?”

“Roger that, smooth sailing. No..... hold.”

I don't like the feel of this compound. There is something eerie, something alive. The dew is a little too heavy. It's just a bit too quiet. Nothing seen, nothing heard. I know something is there.

“Report badger?”

“It doesn't feel right. Members hold. I need a closer look.”

The fear sets in. It begins

in the stomach and if you have any game that's where it stays. If you're green, or don't have the senselessness at all, it continues on. Usually to the legs first, they become shaky and weak. Like a near miss in the car. Then the hands tremble, sweat beads on the brow and neck. It feels cold and belongs to someone else. After the sweat, fear creeps into the mind. Slowly so you won't notice. That is the killer. Panic gets your team killed. You'll be first.

About twenty yards open sprint and I will make the tree line. The semi-safety of cover is always a blessing. Like my father told me; “run without touching the ground”. It is almost possible. Then slide on my belly in the muck. Hold. Look. Listen. Not a sound, nothing. Thank God it is cool, I hate snakes. So I crawl.

I can see the top of the fence, razor wire glistening in the

stars. The moon will be coming soon. What is it, quarter, half? I forgot to check the cycle. No matter. We've got to beat the moon. No light is the right light.

I have no idea what's behind that fence. Maybe fighters, alarms or worse, dogs. Dogs are my worst fear. They make noise and get rowdy forcing you to shoot them and expose yourself. I wish I was playing baseball instead. At least I'd have stats on the pitcher. It's too late for that now. I'll get right up to the fence and see what I can see. One more sprint through the clear without touching the ground.

I feel it in my pre-sprint crouch, it's moving from my gut. I feel a slight tingling in the calf, just a little tremor. The fear is moving. Go.

Line of sight is much better here. I have clear view of twenty five percent of the compound. It is well kept, smells like new cut grass. Can't clear the feeling that someone is here, watching, guarding, laying in wait to stifle our efforts. And if they are

Best In Show

by Phil Juliano



so be it. It is what we trained for. It is what we are paid to do.

Sweat is beading up around my eyes. I'm letting it go to far. Breathe. Breathe deep. Relax. Look. Listen. I hear something. A voice, footsteps click-clicking boot heels, scuffling dog paws and a short, tight chain gnawing at its own links. Creaks and squeaks of leather in training. All of life is a conflict.

So dark I can't see them. I'm expected to make the kill quietly, with prejudice. It's my job. It's for my team. It's for the mission. Why me? Why did this happen while I have point? My stomach is on fire. My legs are shaking. I can't stop it. Sure signs that I am no killer. Breathe. Breathe deep. Relax.

Get tight into the shrub. Cover. They're getting closer. Too close. I can't chamber a round.

The dog will hear it. How could I have forgotten to cock and lock. A sure sign that I'm no killer. Let them pass. I'll take them next time around. What if they stop? What if there is no next time around? What if the dog catches my scent? If I'm found, all hell will break loose. Breathe. Breathe deep. Relax. I'll have to risk it. If they don't come around again, I'll go in after them.

Lay perfectly still. The boots are so close I can smell the polish. Big, knuckleheaded pit bull barks the other away, distracted. A few more steps and I'm clear. Move on. Please move on. Watering mouth, sweat on the sides of my neck. Body tries to shake without touching the ground. Breathe. Breathe deep. He stopped. Not a sound.

Eyes closed. Deep breathe, slow. Hold. Move on. Please move on.

He turned. He's facing me. Hand in his pocket, fumbling and pulls out something shiny. He flicks it open, lights his pipe and for a few seconds disappears in a cloud. Did he look alarmed? I forgot to notice. I am making stupid mistakes. I am

going to get killed.

The smoke is pleasant. Not like a cigarette. The dog moves around to face me. Ears perched with a curious look. Lunges, chain snaps tight. Hold, hold, breathe deep.

They're moving toward me, haven't seen me. He looks concerned. Right up to the wire. The dog is going crazy. Should I chamber and shoot now? Should I hold? No time to calculate the sequence of events that would ripple from either choice. He's stooping to face to the fence.

"Eric! What are you doing son?"

"Just playing Poppa."

"You look scared to death son. Take a deep breathe, relax. Now run on in and wash up for supper; and don't let your feet touch the ground."



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CONTRIBUTORS

Luke Hawley lives in the cold of Minnesota with his wife, two small kids, border collie, and mother-and-son cats. He moonlights as a songwriter and otherwise spends his time writing, growing a beard, and building bookcases out of old windows. You can find his work in Hobart, Grey Sparrow, and forthcoming in Sleet Magazine.

Laura Breitenbeck of Auburn AL writes “Here are some facts about me in the third person. Laura Breitenbeck grew up in Michigan and went to school in Las Vegas. She is currently unemployed. . . . I hope that is not too glib or too boring. If it is, I can try to fix it. Unfortunately, I am a little boring for short bios.” *Ed. note: Nah, it’s perfect.*

Jamie B. Wolcott: See page 16 for everything Jamie! And biggest ups to her for taking on the custom cover for this month!

About **Jeffrey Moses**, (the hack, not the famous author or surgeon): Born in California with the deep spiritual knowing that he was somehow supposed to be southern, Jeffrey Moses eventually made his way to the promised land and now resides near Athens, Georgia. Using ten percent of his brain and a knack for time management Jeffrey has achieved the status of husband, father, construction God, hack writer, hack musician, hack soap maker and holds a self awarded Maters Degree in “General Hacking”. Despite his dreamy nature and lack of drive, Jeffrey spends his spare time thinking up funny things to say and teaching a course in advanced Chicken Hypnosis. *Ed. note to Jeffrey - trust me - as a writer named Garrison - sometimes you can’t win the name game. Just be yourself and keep typing.*

Chris Fox, who lives and works in Chapel Hill was going to tell us a lot about himself, but we interrupted him in the middle of something and now he’s teaching us a lesson.

Phil Juliano is a reliable source of folic acid and fiber.

Final Tidbits: It’s nearly holiday gift-giving and party time. Come to our party (see our ad on the back page!! It’s not too late to get your entry to our long form fiction contest (our third annual, that is). You can follow us on Twitter @ blotterrag, get art, music and other cool updates. You could buy a copy or two of “Tree,” published by PencilPoint Mountain (www.pencilpoint-mountain.com), coincidentally an imprint of The Blotter Magazine, Inc. How about making a donation to The Blotter (www.blotterrag.com). Buy a Blotter tee-shirt while you’re there. Got the reading and writing bug? Send us a review of something you’ve perused. And visit your local independent bookstore, they have hot cocoa! Or go to a museum, see a concert, read something not assigned to you, take a walk in the cool morning air. I don’t want to see any of you hanging out at the coffee shop saying, “I’m bored.” Finish that project on non-linear equations, ask a friend to proofread it and have a pumpkin-mochachino. Got it?

Good!

continued from page 3

For example, we both agree that there's entirely too much implied violence (solving of crimes where the crime took place off camera), too much mature behavior (well, maturity is certainly a moot point with most reality shows), too much news-and-that-which-takes-the-place-of-news, and generally too much talking on TV for the two of us. Everyone's anger is stirred up much too often. Or, perhaps we're just becoming old farts, says my friend. Or, maybe we're right, say I. On such agreements friendships are based. I know it's not going to happen, but television and radio need to shut up, say, about half of the time. Put on some music and back away from the microphone. And while I am fully aware that my radio does not actually make the decisions of what comes out of its speaker, I still want to know what has happened to radio that it thinks we want to hear voices constantly shouting about politics and the economy and other subjects that are at least somewhat innocuous when separated, but, like Frankenstein's monster, so awful when cobbled together. Radio talk is no longer entertainment, but a sour spew leaking into the pipes. Quite frankly, anything lacking a script written by a competent writer nor oversight provided by an experienced editor is not entertainment, unless it is an uninterrupted symphony written more than two hundred years ago played by a skilled orchestra. And, as long as you're taking notes, please stop using video cameras in random ways, looking for something to broadcast. In any other period in human history that would be rude. Stop being impolite. Yes, that's my point, now that I've finished my three make-believe miles.

Q: Would *everyone* please stop being impolite?

A: Oh, you mean me? Yes, and how about me. Well, I, um, have a lot to learn. (*Get on with it, then, I hear in my mind's ear.*) Alrighty, then. It's time to be polite, say you. Well that should be a neat trick – I've spent years and years just being myself – being "honest" to customers, being "honest" to my family, mumbling under my breath at other drivers, eating the bigger piece of cake on the plates. OK - find the word impolite and globally replace it with "jerk," and there's a task I can sink my teeth into. So to speak, that is. And while we're on the subject, a more recent rude awakening is discovering, and admitting to the discovery, that I'm not a team player. *Oh, how can that be?* quips the annoying interior voice. Ignoring the sarcasm, I've always said sir and ma'am and held the door open for the next guy, when I thought they were taking notice of how kind I was being. I've always paid my share, and donated my share and volunteered my time, when I enjoyed what we were asked to do and when I knew there'd be appreciation of my efforts. How was I to know that I was a lone wolf? How did I not see what a poor teammate I was? Maybe more is required of me, of us. If only somebody would have said something. Or, perhaps they did and we weren't listening.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

Had enough turkey? (and enough of the relatives?)
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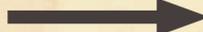
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