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The Blotter

magazine



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“Face the strange...changes”

I recently let my blog lapse after ten faithful years of monthly input. Electrons don't actually decay, so this is nothing like no longer writing in a diary, placing the little book in a drawer and pulling it out years later for a nostalgic look and a reminiscent chuckle. Rather, it's like placing the little book in a box in your shed and finding out years from now that sixteen or seventeen generations of mice made a home in the box and chewed your diary to make paper-scrap lining for their beds. The blog is just...gone. Or as gone as my current technical capabilities can muster a search for it.

And here's why it's gone. I found that whatever impetus I may have had those many years ago to broadcast episodes of my feelings into the void was no longer satisfied. Primal screaming (or in my case, primal muttering) stopped having the results I'd hoped it would. No one was coming out of the woodwork to tell me what a fabulous thing my personal blog was, and how it was helping them change their criminal ways and find enlightenment. We're a curious species, but not that curious. And we're lazy – the blog phase of our cultural demise has moved onto and even past podcasts of similar mundane content. Everyone who would read or listen to such...product is too busy creating such product. In a world of prospective writers, why aren't we reading?

Of course we're reading. More than ever, if you believe the articles that talk about the new twists in the publishing industry. Just not this self-serving pseudo-revelation stuff in our online diaries that probably was never meant to be shared. In fact, over a million books were self-published last year. Each one representing a writer who wanted to be read, in search of an audience. Were all of them...satisfied? I don't know – the report about the numbers didn't delve that deeply into the response of the authors to their books being out there on virtual shelves. They did talk about median incomes of authors and such. And they did talk about readers, as they always do, as buyers of books, as customers.

A shame, to be mislabeled like that. Car buyers are almost always referred to as drivers. Purchasers of houses as “homeowners.” Why isn't the relationship between author and reader more direct, and reflective of the feeling one has for the...text? Why does the book and the selling of same always feel disconnected from the people who create and the people who love, hate, learn, disagree, dismiss and even burn (metaphorically speaking, of course) the books? We're readers, after all.

The little bookstores get it. They entreat us to read, even at the expense of everything else. Eat, sleep, read, repeat, they suggest. Good idea. And they have suggestions about what to read, which are also helpful. There's nothing here you don't already know. But, all of those self-published

books. How do we find them? The folks at Algorhythm dot com (wink, wink) have their ways, but they aren't my ways. I am a browser, a Luddite, something resembling a Neanderthal hunter on the steppe with my spear and not much else, wandering shelves of volumes looking for words that stand out to me. Not "key words," not "others *like you* have bought this," (how in the hell do they think that they know what I am like, after all?) or even "others who bought this also bought *this*" (which makes slightly more sense in that some people like chocolate and would therefore possibly like...other chocolate) but some distinct yet ineffable...coordinating device between my eyes and brain that instructs my hand to reach out and gently grasp the book and bring it closer, tells my other hand to adjust my glasses farther up my nose so that I can see the cover, and now open the book and now *read*.

But bookstores they cannot handle the influx of self-publishing, can they? Nor should we expect them to try. Just stay in business, little stores. Do what you can. Be there for us, so we have somewhere less maddening in the world to go.

Yep. It's going to require some change in our publishing to reading path to get to those millions of self-published books. A...tool that helps us see...virtual shelves of all those books brought to life by these perspicacious writers who "if you want to get something done right, do it yourself." We can't rely on the old-school publishing industry – in flux if not turmoil over the changes that have taken place since the technology of publishing began to be more readily available to the writers of books a dozen or so years back – for this. Nor can we look to the mighty online shopping mall. They're not quite ready to embrace the idea that readers don't just search for books, don't always want selections chosen for them, pointed out to them.

We want to browse for books. Not browsing like "surfing," but browsing like "wandering." Browsing like the pleasurable feeling when you find a bookstore in a town you're visiting, and it's open and your dinner plans are for later, so there's some time to go in and look around – just a little; no I won't buy anything, I know I have a bunch of titles on the bedside table I haven't read yet, but then there's this one volume on a shelf that you can't resist taking down and it looks like it just might be beautiful and I don't want to find myself someday with that twenty dollars sitting unspent in my wallet on my deathbed.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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CAUTION

Hey, partner! Are you here to see me?

“Transcendence”

by Kim Farleigh

The charging bull fell, snout dishevelling sand, firework comments cracking critically amid groaning that slithered around the arena, the bull slithering as groaning slithered around the ring.

A bullfighter pulled one of the bull’s horns to get the bull back up, shrill whistling puncturing groaning.

“Puppies are more vicious than this cow,” someone screamed.

Large, pink capes are used at the beginning of bullfights when still naive bulls charge ignorantly, allowing bullfighters to note defects that need correcting if matadors are to create sublimity.

Much correcting was needed here.

The bull suddenly slowed before a pink cape, as if remembering his previous problem, crowd heads flung back, hands flung up, furious flinging ignited by tameness.

“Be careful,” someone yelled at a bullfighter. “That cow could lick you to death.”

Chuckling superiority cracked around the ring. Crowds believe

they would do better jobs than breeders.

A bullfighter huffed at the bull. Finally, the bull charged at the huffing, somersaulting, fulcrum horns penetrating sand, the bull having tried hitting a pink cape with its horns, shrill whistling shrieking amid gasps and groans and guffaws as the flying bull landed flat on its back.

“That cow is drugged,” another man yelled.

The now standing “cow” faced a shouting picador who rotated his horse, enticing a charge. The bull stared at that two-headed beast of unfathomable intentions, the bull’s black Dalmatian patches upon light grey unusual, not plain black or brown like most bulls. And It weighed one hundred and twenty kilograms less than most.

The crowd clapped sardonically, disenchanted by tameness, the bull staring at the shouting picador. Finally the bull charged, smacking the horse’s protective padding, horse’s hooves grounded. Strong bulls rotate horses on their hind hooves. This “cow” had “false

horns.” Someone screamed: “The breeder is more of a crook than a politician.”

Crowds believe they are more morally sound than breeders.

Darkness ironically added sun-rays to the arena’s spotlights. The sky’s slice above the ring’s circular roof exposed a circular moon. The black-bull wind gauge above the arena’s clock swung unpredictably, difficult controlling capes in blustery conditions.

Gleaming Enrique Ponce strolled beside the barrier in a suit of lights. Mist now covered the moon’s slither. Little hope existed that Ponce could blend that “cowardly calf” with his red cape.

An iceberg-cauliflower cloud’s top drifted above the arena’s tiled roof. Difficult circumstances increased Ponce’s salience under that semi-exposed mist, its unsighted section brooding like events destined to turn out wrong.

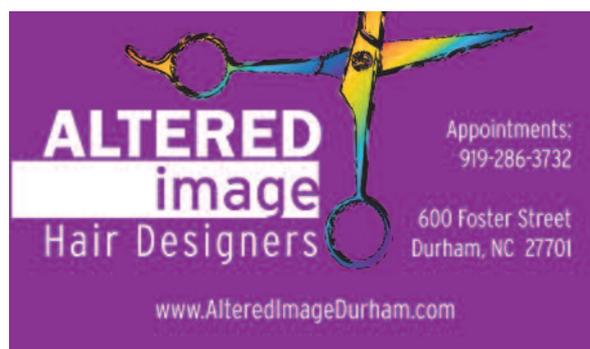
He wet his cape, increasing cape stability, wind restricting correction.

The bull’s increasing awareness of danger increased its fascination for the ring’s creatures, vapour-iceberg rising above a brown-tile sea.

The bull-wind-gauge’s head constantly swung, the real bull station-



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ary before a cape's twitching edges, the bull's flanks reddened by the picador's lance and the banderillas' prongs, picks and prongs revealing danger to a previously inexperienced bull.

Ponce thrust the cape forwards. The bull stared. The crowd whistled. The bull stared.

The bull finally charged, Enrique turning, hand on hip, the bull pursuing a retreating cape, Enrique switching the cape to his left hand, the bull staring, the whistling crowd wanting aggression; the charging bull's front hooves suddenly rose, cape horizontal above the horns, the gasping crowd surprised: Ponce had done *that* with *that* bull in *these* conditions!

Ponce swung an arm up triumphantly, moon-cream and sky-sapphire unifying complimentary hues, the brooding underside of the cauliflower forgotten. But crowds have pliable memories.

Ponce's demonstration that cape-bull unity could occur with this bull in these conditions restored the crowd's faith in genius, Ponce's eyes spearing out a belief that he could eliminate dross.

The pendulum cape swayed behind his legs, Ponce confident because the bull's head turned with the moving cape, head and cape uniting, like the moon gripped by the earth as the earth's seas are gripped by the moon.

Each time the bull passed through where the cape had just been the crowd shouted "Olé", the bull orbiting the man, orbiting smoothness unleashing roaring-crowd delight, unsatisfied desire replaced by tantalising vibrancy.

Ponce swapped the cape to his right hand, horns rising moonwards, ballerina bull flying, crowd surprise becoming cascading applause as Ponce twirled the cape before the bull's face, the bull's head magnetised by twirling, head and cape in mirror-image movement, Ponce twirling the cape around his body, spinning away from the bull, the cape wrapped around a gleaming torso, a bull hypnotised by cape charm.

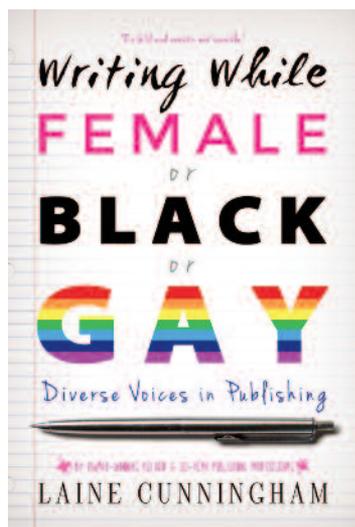
People roared admiringly, the cloudless moon white as milk.

Spellbound silence thickened as the killing sword rose. Ponce could

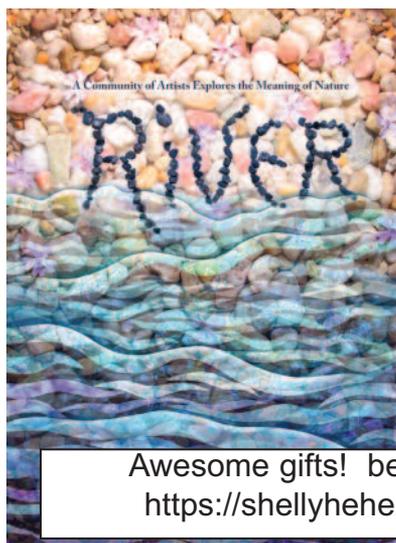
have used the bull's deficiencies and the wind to avoid pleasing the crowd; but he wanted to please himself. Statistics had opposed him, bad bull, difficult conditions, but he had to do his best while doing what he had to do, even if that caused self-destruction.

Ponce had pursued his desired path when young because he scorned doubters. What do they know about inspiration and talent? He didn't care if he failed pursuing perfection because pursuing his desires trivialised everything else. This meant blending himself with bulls via capes, increasing self-destruction's threat, a threat irrelevant because only transcendental acts relieve you from self.

His left hand, holding the cape, fell, horns following, the blade, rising over the lowering horns, plummeting into the bull's back, the banderillas on the bull's flanks bouncing as the bull's head got flung back by the shock caused by the blade, the bull wobbling on hooves that were now in strange positions. Then the bull collapsed, the crowd's waving of white handkerchiefs imploring that an ear should be cut from the bull in official recognition of a fine



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performance, a sudden increase in crowd roaring erupting when the bullfight's president's white cloth got draped over his balcony's balustrade to indicate the cutting of an ear; then Ponce was circling the ring, hats flying from the crowd being thrown back by Ponce and his assistants, reinforcing unity between man and crowd, Ponce raising his hat to a man in the crowd, that man's black hair tied up into a bun, Ponce touching his heart with his hat, the man with the tied-up hair raising an arm in a bent-arm salute, Ponce raising his hat again to the man and then touching his heart again with his hat, that man having told Ponce when they were teenagers that Ponce was going to make it, that man being kissed by his girlfriend in a display of "this tall, strong, handsome beast, who knew much more than you lot did, is mine!"

Then Ponce was on a man's shoulders, Mexican-wave photography flashes flashing with Ponce's movement around the ring. Then Ponce, above a mass of followers, disappeared through *la puerta grande* to be cheered by a mass waiting outside the ring, bad conditions having made popular imaginations think that glory had been unachievable, popular imaginations underestimating needs to transcend, perception as flexible as memory. ❖

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"Accordion"

by William Cass

When I was twelve, I wanted to become a rock star. Or at least what approximated a rock star in the mid-sixties when the Beatles, Beach Boys, and Elvis battled for supremacy. At the time, I was a gawky, self-conscious seventh grader at St. Richard's School in North Olmsted, Ohio, outside of Cleveland. My father worked for an insurance company as a regional supervisor, which meant he was on the road for much of every week. I waited for him to come home one humid Friday evening in early September just before my thirteenth birthday to ask him if he and my mother would give me a guitar as my only gift.

He frowned, loosening his tie. "Want to be a musician, huh?"

"Guitar player."

I saw my mother smile at the kitchen counter. My three younger brothers were outside in the backyard horsing around, and my baby sister was asleep in her high chair.

"Tell you what," my father said. "Another usher with me at church teaches music lessons: Sal Leverino. He lives up the street. We'll walk over after dinner, see what he thinks."

He ruffled the buzz cut he gave my brothers and me with his electric clippers every Sunday night and got a can of beer out of the refrigerator. It made a spitting sound when he cracked it open.

Sal lived in another tract home like ours and others in the developments that had sprung up at the town's outskirts in what used to be farmland. After we rang the bell, he came to his front screen door holding a newspaper. My father explained what we were there for. Sal nodded thoughtfully, then stepped out on the

porch next to us, the newspaper dangling at his side. He was a short, round man, balding, and wore thick black glasses with a sleeveless T-shirt against the heat.

"Well, if he wants to play guitar, he should start by learning music on a keyboard," he said. "That's always my recommendation. Piano or accordion. I can teach him either and have a few accordions here that I rent. If you want a piano, you have to go to a music store, have it delivered. Accordion is cheaper."

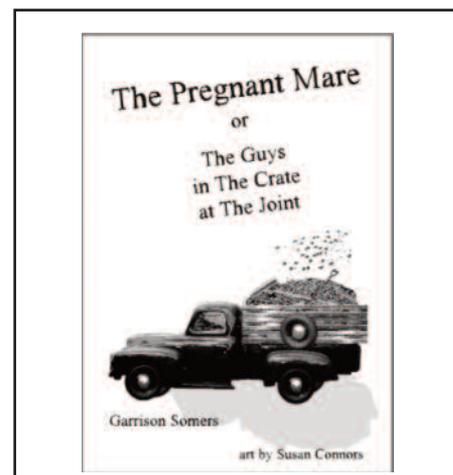
A short groan escaped me. "Can't I just learn on a guitar straight off?"

My father looked down at me. "You heard what the man said. Are you the music expert, or is he?" He turned back to Sal. "Accordion will be fine. When can he start?"

While they discussed details, I blew out a long breath and shook my head. They agreed on Mondays at four o'clock for my weekly lessons, starting immediately after the weekend.

Sal gave me a serious glare and said, "You'll need to practice at least a half-hour a day. You ready for that?"

"Of course, he is," my father



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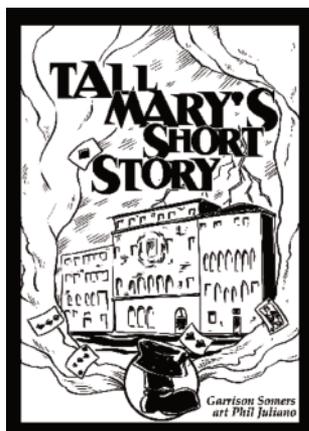
replied and placed his hand on my shoulder. "Thanks, Sal. He'll be here on Monday. I'll send him with a check."

They shook hands and we left. A sprinkler shot slow arcs of water in the front lawn of the house next to Sal's, and a group of kids played kick-the-can in the street. The light was falling towards gloaming. My father's hand was still on my shoulder. He squeezed it and said, "Happy birthday, son." I kept my grumbled reply silent.

Sal taught me my lessons in a tiny den at the back of his house. I was skinny, small for my age, and the accordion felt massive while I struggled with its bellows as it knocked against my chin. Sal wore a golf shirt buttoned to the neck, shiny gray trousers, black socks, and scuffed loafers for each of our lessons. We progressed slowly in that cramped space from scales with each hand separately to the simplest of melodies where my left hand answered the right with a repeated progression on the same three buttons. Sal sat on a desk chair next to me as I played and nodded to encourage the proper tempo. Whenever I finished a piece, he clapped once, his eyes dancing behind his big glasses, and announced, "Good...better. Try again."

"So how long before I can move on to the guitar?" I sometimes asked him.

When I did, Sal would cock his



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head, show his palms, and say, "Not sure. I'll let you know."

I kept my accordion lessons secret from my friends and practiced in our basement in the hopes that none would hear me playing when they were near the house. My best friend, Jimmy Erlin, lived in another housing development directly across Lorraine Road from mine. We spent many hours together listening to his older brother's record collection or in his garage where his parents had allowed him to set up the drum set they'd given him the previous Christmas. Jimmy would play along there to songs on the radio. He was self-taught but had learned quickly and could match the rhythms on most of the popular hits we idolized. He bobbed his head with his eyes closed, swinging the drumsticks, the little curl of hair in front that he slicked with Brylcreem bouncing like a pig's tail against his forehead.

Another boy from our class named Brett began coming over with his electric bass guitar, lugging the amplifier by its handle against his shin. Brett was more Jimmy's friend than mine. He thumbed random riffs while Jimmy banged away on his drums, and we all nodded at one another idiotically as summer gave way to fall, leaves changed, and the trees finally became bare.

"You know," Brett said one afternoon shortly after Halloween as we were getting ready to leave Jimmy's garage. "If we had someone who could play melodies and sing, we could form a band. Wouldn't that be killer?"

"Absolutely," Jimmy replied.

I hesitated, then said, "You know I'm in the church choir. And I can play melodies."

They both stared at me blank-faced until Jimmy asked, "On what?"

"Well." I felt my lips forming a sheepish grimace. "Accordion. My dad made me take keyboarding lessons before getting a guitar, which will

happen soon. But, we could start with it, just fool around. I know some songs. Wild Thing. Louie, Louie. Barbara Ann. A few others."

I watched them exchange glances, then stare back at me. The whine of an airplane passed in the sky outside. Finally, Brett said, "When do you get the guitar?"

"Soon," I said. "Very soon."

They looked at each other again, then Jimmy shrugged and said, "Sounds okay to me."

Brett shrugged, too. "Why not?"

They both turned their gazes my way again. I felt a wave of lightness and excitement spread through me. I said, "Okay."

"So, bring you accordion tomorrow," Jimmy said. "Can you wear it this far?"

"It's in a case."

"All right," Brett said. "Let's give it a go. See what happens."

We practiced almost every day through the remainder of that fall and early winter. Jimmy's dad used to work on the side as an auctioneer and dug out his old microphone for us to use that we plugged into Brett's amplifier. So, it was me on the accordion, Brett on bass, and Jimmy on drums until we could manage a passable rendition of a dozen or so simple songs. I sang vocals and Brett would join me at the microphone for any chorus. As we serenaded that empty garage, I suppose we each created our own images of an audience of fawning girls from our class to whom we were all too shy to speak.

During that same period of time, Sal gave no indication that my tutelage on the accordion would be ending. In fact, I'd begun playing old ballads, polkas, and some rudimentary classical pieces with enough precision that my father said Sal told him at church that I had a real and unique gift with the instrument. By Christmas, he'd convinced my father to increase my lessons to twice a week in order to further develop that talent. And unbe-

The Blotter

knownst to me, he encouraged my parents to sign me up for a regional novice competition in late February, which they did. The song Sal selected for me to play for it was Marianne Polka.

A cold afternoon came early that month when Brett burst into Jimmy's garage while the two of us were setting up to practice, his eyes wide. He said, "You both better sit down."

We did, Jimmy on the stool at his drum set, and me on the aluminum folding chair I sometimes used with my accordion. Brett made no attempt to hide his grin. "So, listen to this," he said. "My neighbor asked us to play at her nephew's birthday party. He's our age. Over thirty guests, and she'll pay us twenty bucks." Jimmy's and my eyes and smiles grew as large as his. "Our first gig!" Brett shouted, and we hooted along with him.

"When?" Jimmy asked.

"Next month. Second Saturday. Two o'clock. VFW Hall."

"Will girls be there?"

"Of course. Tons."

Jimmy looked back and forth between us, then beat out a drum roll and yelled, "Hot damn!"

Our practices intensified, as did my own private ones with the Marianne Polka in my basement for the accordion competition. Brett told us that we needed to have matching outfits in order to look like a real band, so we scraped together our allowances and savings and rode our bikes down to the big department store in the Great Northern Mall where we bought identical paisley shirts, tight corduroy pants, and wide plastic belts with shiny square buckles. I tried without success to get my dad to forego his weekly buzz cuts, so instead began wearing a black steve-

dore-type cap I found at Salvation Army that resembled one I'd seen John Lennon wearing in photographs.

Brett and Jimmy spread the word at school about our band and its upcoming performance, never mentioning that my accordion was involved, and we began noticing new sorts of glances from our classmates. The ones from other boys seemed mixed with grudging admiration and envy, and those from the girls held a slightly titillated interest that made the bottoms of my feet tingle. We walked the cracked linoleum hallways of that old school building more erect and tried our best to affect a dreamy, removed countenance.

The morning of the regional competition was full of snow. My parents drove me towards the city in our old station wagon with its faux wood panels as the windshield wipers made their steady clap and I sat uncomfortably in the backseat in my too-small suit and bow tie that ordinarily only came out for Christmas and Easter Mass.

The competition was held in the auditorium at St. Edward High School where most of my male classmates and I would be anxiously applying for admission the following year. The school was just a few minutes from downtown and not far from Lake Erie, which we passed on our way to it: its water gray against the gray sky and the smoke-stained gray buildings that crowded the streets beyond it. Sal met us in the foyer with several of his other students and their families. He explained to us how things would work; he would lead us students backstage, check on the registration arrangements and order of participants, and then join the parents in the auditorium's seats.

He did that, and we soon found ourselves skulking about in groups of a dozen or so competitors of various levels in the wings off stage behind tall maroon curtains. The novice division went first, and I was second to perform. I was happy to get it over with early and found myself surprisingly calm when called to the stage. I suppose the reason for that was my general disinterest in how I would play and my preoccupation instead with our band's upcoming gig. A bench was perched in the center of the stage with a music stand in front of it. I'd memorized the song, so moved the stand out of the way, settled onto the bench with my accordion on my lap, and looked out into the audience. A group of judges sat behind a table at the very front, and perhaps a third of the seats in the cavernous space were occupied behind them; I stole a glance at my parents who I saw over to one side, but didn't return the smiles and waves they gave me.

The judge in the first seat leaned down to a microphone on the table and asked, "So, what song are you going to play?"

"Marianne Polka."

"Marianne Polka," he repeated into the microphone. "Fine. Whenever you're ready, then."

I nodded once and began to play. I tapped my right foot as Sal had instructed to keep the beat and trained my eyes on my fingers moving across the keyboard. I could almost picture men in lederhosen and women in long dresses with apron fronts dancing in some Austrian beer hall as I tried to accentuate the repeating "umpa pa" pattern. Several minutes later, I was finished and laboring off the stage with my accordion still strapped over my narrow shoulders to what sounded to me like hearty applause.

My mother had only been able to arrange a sitter until noon, so we left before the rest of the competition was



half over. Sal said he'd call my parents later with the results. I had my bow tie off before we got to the car. There was enough time on the way home for my parents to stop at a drive-thru for burgers and milk shakes as a treat. As we neared our development, the snow stopped abruptly and rays of sun poked through the canopy of clouds.

Sal called about four o'clock. I heard my father greet him by name when he answered the phone down the hall from my bedroom where I lay on my back propped up on pillows leafing through a teen magazine Jimmy's big brother had discarded. Perhaps five minutes passed before my bedroom door opened and my father and mother appeared in its threshold.

"That was Sal," my father said.

I dropped the magazine to my lap.

He grinned and said, "You won your division."

"What?"

My mother had her hand over her mouth. She took it away and said, "Can you believe it? We're so proud of you."

My father nodded. "So, those lessons worked out pretty well, didn't they? Next stop, state championships in Akron two weeks from tomorrow."

I sat staring at them, blinking. My first feeling was one of relief because the birthday party gig was the day before.

"Sal says you can play the same

song," my mother told me. "And you played it well. Really well."

"So, practice up," my father added. "Maybe you'll be the next Dick Contino."

I thought of the slick-haired Contino playing the accordion with his big, toothy smile on the Lawrence Welk Show that my father loved so much. At his insistence, our family rarely missed watching it together after dinner on Saturday nights.

"Gee," I heard myself mumble."

"Gee, indeed," my father said.

"Get your brothers and sister washed up for dinner. Then we can watch the real Mr. Contino."

There wasn't much to North Olmsted in those days, and for those entering adolescence, little to occupy minds or ignite passions; youthful dreams were born elsewhere. Our community park had a crafts program during the summers in which many of our parents enrolled us where we learned to weave lanyards and make plaster of Paris molds of ducks and horses that we'd coat with tempura paint. We had an indoor roller rink, a miniature golf course, the mall to hang out in, a White Castle, and woods behind our development with a creek that was wide enough to skate on when it froze over in the summer. For the athletic-minded, spring offered Little League and late fall, CYO basketball. I wasn't very athletic, and neither were Jimmy or Brett. That was why

our band and upcoming gig filled such a large and thrilling place in our lives. As the day of the party approached, I was so consumed with anticipation that I could hardly sleep at night. So, in that context, I guess it's not surprising how what happened next impacted me.

It was four days until the party, and the three of us were at the bike racks after dismissal at school. We walked our bikes around the church like always to the corner where Brett would go his way and Jimmy and I would ride in the other to our houses. Brett stopped there, looked once at Jimmy, then turned to me and said, "There's something we have to tell you."

I watched Jimmy lower his eyes to the ground. I felt my eyebrows knitting.

"So, I have this cousin," Brett continued. "Name's Joe. He's a couple of years older than us. Been playing guitar for a while. He wants to join our band." He glanced at Jimmy. "And we want him to."

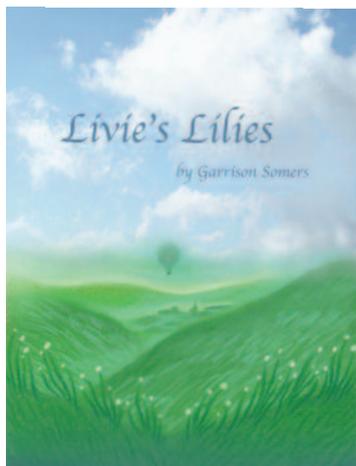
"Okay," I heard myself say.

"Guitar player would be all right."

"He sings, too," Brett said. "He's good."

He and Jimmy stood side-by-side holding their bikes. I straddled mine across from them, the sun behind me just above the treetops. It made Brett squint as he looked at me.

I said, "I don't get it.



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West Moss

Editor, Story Doctor, Manuscript Consultant

West is an award-winning writer. Her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *McSweeney's*, *Salon*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Blotter*, and elsewhere. She teaches writing at Gotham in NYC, and at the university level.

"West is genuinely interested in people and writing, and is willing to share her experience and dedication to the craft of writing." — Robin Caine

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The Blotter

Brett raised his eyebrows, then blurted, "So, you're out, and he's in. That's just the way it is. You know, the accordion... well, it just won't..."

My heart clenched and my stomach dropped. Brett shrugged. Jimmy was still staring straight down; he kicked a pebble into the gutter. I swallowed over a hardness in my throat.

"Well," Brett said. "I guess that's it then. Thanks for everything." He cuffed Jimmy on the arm. "Joe and me will be at your garage in an hour. He has his own amp."

I watched Brett climb onto his bike and ride away in the direction of the mall. The church bells in the steeple behind us chimed three times, a slow, grudging pause between each trill. When they finished, Jimmy finally looked up at me quickly and said, "Sorry."

Just as quickly, he climbed on his own bike and wobbled away down Lorrain Road towards our developments. I didn't follow him. I just stood there, a numbness filling me and watched the back of him until I could no longer see him.

When I got home, I didn't go down to the basement with my accordion like I usually did. Instead, I lay on my stomach on my bed with the curtains pulled. When my mother knocked on the door to remind me about practicing, I told her I wasn't feeling well. I stayed there through dinner, feigning the same excuse. My father came in afterwards, sat on the edge of my bed, and placed the back of his hand on my forehead.

When he took it away, he said, "You don't have a temperature."

I grunted into the pillow.

"Stomach hurt?"

I grunted again.

"Well, get some sleep. You'll feel better in the morning."

I heard the door click closed behind him. It had become fully dark in the room. I was vaguely aware of the sound of the television from the

family room and the occasional burst of laughter from some combination of my family members as they watched it. At some point, I turned over on my back and stared up into the darkness. During the time I'd been laying there, I'd decided that all I'd been taught about faith, hope, and charity during catechism classes had been a lie. I kept shaking my head back and forth.

The next morning, I didn't wear my stevedore cap to school. I parked my bike in a different corner of the playground and avoided Jimmy and Brett throughout the day. When I got home, I dumped my bike and book bag in the garage and didn't go inside at all. Instead, I walked back into the woods to the hidden fort that Jimmy and I had built there out of scrap lumber and hunks of corrugated metal we'd scrounged from a housing site several years before. There were still a few of our comic books strewn about, as well as the empty coffee cans we'd used to pick blackberries from the surrounding bushes in the summer. We'd coated the floor of the fort with straw that had now thinned and smelled cold, dank. I flipped through one of the comic books for a while, then tossed pieces of straw into one of the coffee cans and thought some more. Light fell. It grew chillier, my breath coming in short clouds; I pulled the hood of my coat up over my head and cinched its cord tight under my chin.

By the time I got back to the house, my father had already gotten home from work. He and my mom were sitting side by side in the living room in their matching blue chairs, as they often did when there was time before dinner, drinking Manhattans. I walked up and stood between them with my jaw set tight.

My father stopped speaking to my mother in mid-sentence and they both stared at me. He waited a moment, then asked, "What's up with you?"

"I'm done with the accordion."

My father frowned deeply, and my mother shook her head. She said,

"You can't do that. The state championships are just few days away."

"I'm not going to play anymore."

"You don't quit things you've started," my father said. His voice was unusually soft. "We didn't raise you like that."

My breath had quickened, and I could feel my heartbeat thudding away at my temples. I said, "I don't care."

My mother said, "Think about how Sal will feel. And we've already paid him for your lessons this month."

"I'll shovel snow to earn money and pay you back. Mow lawns. I'll knock on doors."

"Go to your room," my father said quietly, his glare hard. "And stay there. If this is what you've decided, you'll tell Sal yourself. I've never been more disappointed in you."

So, I did. Later that night, I heard my mother's footsteps stop outside my bedroom door, then leave. When I opened it, I found a tray with my dinner on it under a dish towel. I brought it to my desk, sat down, and began to cry. I ate a little of the meal, then sat staring at the white globe of light thrown by the gooseneck lamp onto the piece of lined paper I'd set on my blotter. By the time I'd decided on what to write to Sal and had scribbled it down, the house had grown silent. I taped the letter to the top of the accordion case and dropped off both on his front porch the next morning before school.

That was almost fifty years ago now. My children have grown into fine adults and made their own mistakes along the way. I'll be a first-time grandfather in a couple months; I look forward to that. Both of my parents have passed away: my father about six years ago and my mother last July. They never moved from that house in North Olmsted, so I stayed around after my mother's funeral to arrange for its sale and take care of her other affairs while my brothers and sister went back to the places they'd settled in various locations across the coun-

try. I was the oldest and a teacher on summer break, so it made sense for me to be the one to do that.

I'd moved to California myself after college and had only come back to Ohio on rare occasions afterwards. Instead, my parents made annual trips my way, both before and after my divorce, as they did to all my siblings' homes. It had been quite a while since I was last in that house, so I lingered going from room to room before going down to the realtor's office to drop off the keys. I drove by Jimmy's old place and St. Richard's on the way; they hadn't changed much. I hadn't spoken to Jimmy again since that afternoon when I got kicked out of the band; his father's work transferred them to Minneapolis before the end of that school year and I never knew what happened to him afterwards, though I've thought of him from time to time. I have no idea either what happened with the band.

A few days earlier, after my siblings had left following the funeral, I'd walked back in the woods and miraculously found our old fort still intact; it sat empty, dirty carpet samples now covering its the floor instead of straw, a few spent b-b's scattered at its entrance. Also, on one last drive through our old neighborhood before heading to the airport, I saw Sal making his slow, hunched way with a walker to his mailbox at the curb in front of his house; I felt a chill crawl up inside, but I didn't stop to talk to him. I didn't greet him in any way.

I never learned to play the guitar. Never sang again in any organized group again either. I wish I had. I guess I still could. And I can't recall the last time I heard an accordion, or a polka being played; seems like time has sort of passed them by. I suppose I could find a way to listen to both if I tried hard enough. Maybe I will. But, there are things, I've come to know, that are impossible to retrieve; I realize now that some opportunities are simply gone forever. ❖

"The Packages"

by Molly Ashline

You see, I've been wondering about all these packages that have been showing up in front of the door of the apartment across the hall. They come in all sizes and colors from online retailers both large and small, and they always bear the name of someone who sounds like a wealthy socialite, but who happens to live in the same economical walkup as I do.

I often try to imagine what treats and baubles and gadgets lie beneath the layers of packing tape, cardboard, and Styrofoam peanuts, and so far, I've come up with three possibilities.

The first and, I think, the most likely due to the sheer volume and frequency of the packages is that my neighbor is slowly entombing herself with small LEGO pieces, Polly Pockets, Mega Bloks, and other childhood construction-related nostalgic items. This willful 'Cask of Amontillado'-esque hermitage is no doubt an extension of her robust online life that is booming with reflections of the past through memes and 90s kids-only pages and generationally themed trivia quizzes that could only be answered by people who lived through the era and not by people who simply have access to history and the Internet.

She is building this fortress of remembrance piece-by-piece, pausing only to refresh her tabs and warm up a package of ramen noodles that she ordered in bulk from Amazon. Sometimes, I think I can even hear her clicking another two-by-six LEGO into place with her hope of someday only to leave a space big enough to crack her door and squeeze more packages through the slit.

As I said before, this theory is the most likely, but I will, of course, share

the other possibilities.

The second is that my neighbor has lost a limb or two, and for some inconceivable reason, she is living on the second floor of an apartment building, which doesn't even boast a single ramp (the latter is an accessibility, ableist issue I intend to take up with the leasing agency), so she doesn't often take on the burden of getting in and out of the apartment. Instead, opting to getting the necessities delivered and saving herself the trouble.

The third and least likely is that she, like me, will often, usually at around half past two in the morning, find herself thinking of that one thing that will brighten her day or bring an inch more convenience to her life, or just look really cute in that one corner of the room or on top of that shelf, and when it arrives, it will be like a small present to herself that reaffirms her independence and puts a smile on her face even if behind that smile there is a slight hint of guilt at being wasteful with money or paper and cardboard, but hey, we're busy girls.

Maybe I'll write her a letter to tell her to stop building the wall, or, you know, knock on her door. ❖

*"Who gave these idiots
microphones?"*
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“We Are Third World”

By Sandeep Kumar Mishra

Although we are forefathers of self acclaimed
first world nations but we are third world
In their so called socioeconomic indexes
and other “modernity is the real development” indices
We don't do dinner parties
But dream of a well fed day

Our children study on the floor of old public school
Know the other world by the greenery and
Figures hung on its pale walls
They wish to run on the velvet grass
Instead of rag picking every morning
As children leave old toys you have abandoned us

Here a child gets mature in his teens
He recognises the outline of a dark futuristic structure
In a pattern of present dots of daily burdens,
In the tragic repetitions of a homeland song
He dreams of a young entrepreneurship but
A termite death hollows out the roots of endeavour

You say to our men “Keep It In Your Pants!”
And to the women, “Lock Your Knees!”
But here sex is the only amusement we can have
For a three minutes of relief we are ready to repent for life
Corruptions and immorality are in full flow here

Although some taxable souls fashion to run charity
The poor wears tattered clothes
But rich wear them to look different

Friendship, loyalty, nostalgia, and the joy and healing power of music...

A Southern college town and its thriving local music scene,
where the music's neither “sacred” nor “profane” so long as it's
good...

A lost tape of a beloved band's legendary show...

A record label, poised to break big, which certain people want
to be part of - by any means necessary...

Two visitors, whose own music has been muted by regrets over
long-ago bad decisions: Chuck McDonough, former grad student,
who skipped town after learning things about himself he couldn't
face; and Penny Froward, whose attempt to help a friend in
danger almost destroyed another woman's life...

A mysterious will by an unknown hand; and murder...

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by Mary Smith

*(Publisher & book reviewer, “The Blotter Magazine” contributor to the “Urban
Hiker,” former host of “New Frontiers” and “Laugh Tracks” on WXXI - FM,
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There is an agreement between the person sitting in the car
And the poor begging for some help

Devalued lives full of shadows of slaves
Where poverty live with out evacuation
We are caught here in the web of the foreign aid spiders
We prop up this capitalising protuberance
And force feed the bourgeois class

Our propaganda has become just to see and sigh and cry
Civil war is source of political life and death
We don't turn palms upright to foretell futures
The line of our hands has become undefined
We have failed to understand the kind of battlefield
We are in and our weapons to deal with it
We shout for freedom of expression but never tried to know
The difference between our skin and our Lips

We are a nation that sighs and cries for debt relief,
A divided country, brainwashed by anti-propaganda
Its leaders becoming millionaires every second,
And the people, poorer every minute,
The land filled with milk and honey,
Still cries "no money"

Our self styled media with fake morality
Aiming for PR and controversy
They interview a petty thought repeatedly
To make it a philosophy
Their voice spreads pure venom
By wearing gentle dress
On the throat of third world
In the name of so called minority
Every news is labelled with religious stamp
They highlight the immoral as a face of nation
Belittle the good-intentions

Sex and violence is a new form of entertainment
Here big lawyers and corporations openly
Influence in the demo-crazy capitals
To gain huge profits

Is this injustice with poverty and suffering
Not a clear indication of false thoughts
That argue over a Third World at this juncture.

“Innovations Reviewed”

by Ben Nardolilli

With each album comes a training class,
some new way to listen to music,
treating the experience as an experiment,
what it is like to hear the sound
surrounded by silence in a bedroom,
or how it struggles against the jagged
rhythms of trains and copy machines,
what does it offer to the listener
who is focused? To ears that can hear
but are competing against distracted eyes?
An album also trains one in argument
with oneself, over the very definition
of a genre, or the nature of a song,
the idea of lyrics might be reconsidered too,
and not because the work is great,
even the terrible stuff that oozes
out of speakers like melted plastic
teaches one just how far an art can fall.

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

A friend of mine in Real Estate makes the deal of her life and is celebrating by jumping into the ocean in full regalia – gold blazer and all. I run upstairs to get her one of the striped beach towels to dry off with – or at least wrap up her wet self – and by the time I get back she's already talking with prospective clients at the hotel bar. We walk back to her car, across the street and through a parking lot and over a fence. There it is, an old '70's gold pickup truck with special inserts in the back for catching vermin. She's finally on her way, and now I have to find my way back to the hotel. I cross the parking lot, walk up a hill with a family of hikers, cut over a stream bridge and see the architect's development, with all of the stainless-steel ornamentation. I go in the front door and down the hall, out the back door and almost run into a forest ranger. In the back yard are many gang members doing mischief of one sort or another, but I cannot find the bit of woods I'm supposed to cut through to get to the road that I cross back to the hotel at the beach. I do, however, run a long way, which is good, because I haven't done my exercise yet today, and this will count.

Gingersnap - cyberspace

CONTRIBUTORS:

Kim Farleigh has worked for aid agencies in three conflicts: Kosovo, Iraq and Palestine. He takes risks to get the experience required for writing. He likes fine wine, art, photography and bullfighting, which probably explains why this Australian lives in Madrid; although he wouldn't say no to living in a French château or a Swiss ski resort. 154 of his stories have been accepted by 91 different magazines.

William Cass of Coronado, CA, writes, "by way of briefly summarizing my publishing background, I've had over 150 short stories accepted for publication in a number of literary magazines such as *december*, *Briar Cliff Review*, and *Zone 3*. My children's book, *Sam*, is scheduled for release by *Upper Hand Press* in April, 2020. Recently, I was a finalist in short fiction and novella competitions at *Glimmer Train* and *Black Hill Press*, received a Pushcart nomination, and won writing contests at *Terrain.org* and *The Examined Life Journal*."

Molly Ashline writes, "I am a North Carolina writer and am beginning my MFA in writing at Antioch University in June. I recently completed a performative art collaboration in Greensboro called *Blue Breath*."

Sandeep Kumar Mishra is an outsider artist, poet and lecturer in English Literature. He runs Kishlaya Outsider Art Academy in Rajasthan, India. He has edited a collection of poems by various poets - *Pearls* (2002) and written a professional guide book - *How to be* (2016) and a collection of poems and art - *Feel My Heart* (2016). Recently his work has published in *New England Review*, *Society of Classical Poets*, *Permafrost Journal*, *Human Touch Journal*, *Blue Mountain Review*, *International Times*, *Literary Yard*, *Mud Season Review*, *Verbal art*, *Stone coast Review*, *Asian Signature*, *Chiron Review*, *Convergence*, *Harbinger Asylum*, *Helix*, *High Plains Register*, *Literary Orphans*, *Marathon Literary Review*, *Phenomenal Literature*, *Quail Bell*, *Really System*, *Red Fez*, *The Brasilia Review*, *The Criterion*, *Third Wednesday*, *Ygdrasil*, *ZOUCH Magazine & Miscellany*.

Ben Nardolilli currently lives in the great borough of Brooklyn in New York City. His work has appeared in *Perigee Magazine*, *Red Fez*, *Danse Macabre*, *The 22 Magazine*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Elimae*, *fwriction*, *Inwood Indiana*, *Pear Noir*, *The Minetta Review*, and *Yes Poetry*. He blogs at mirrorsponge.blogspot.com and is looking to publish a novel.



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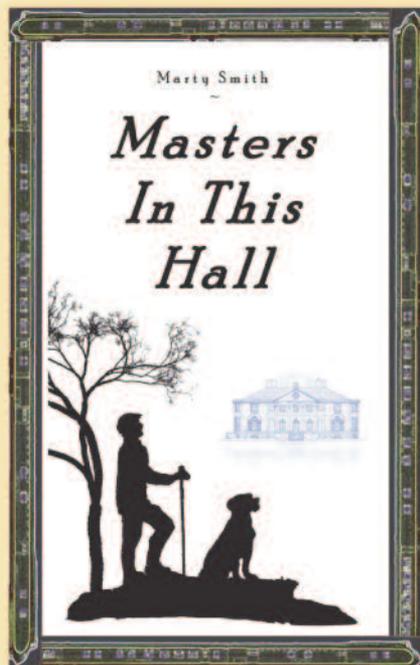
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