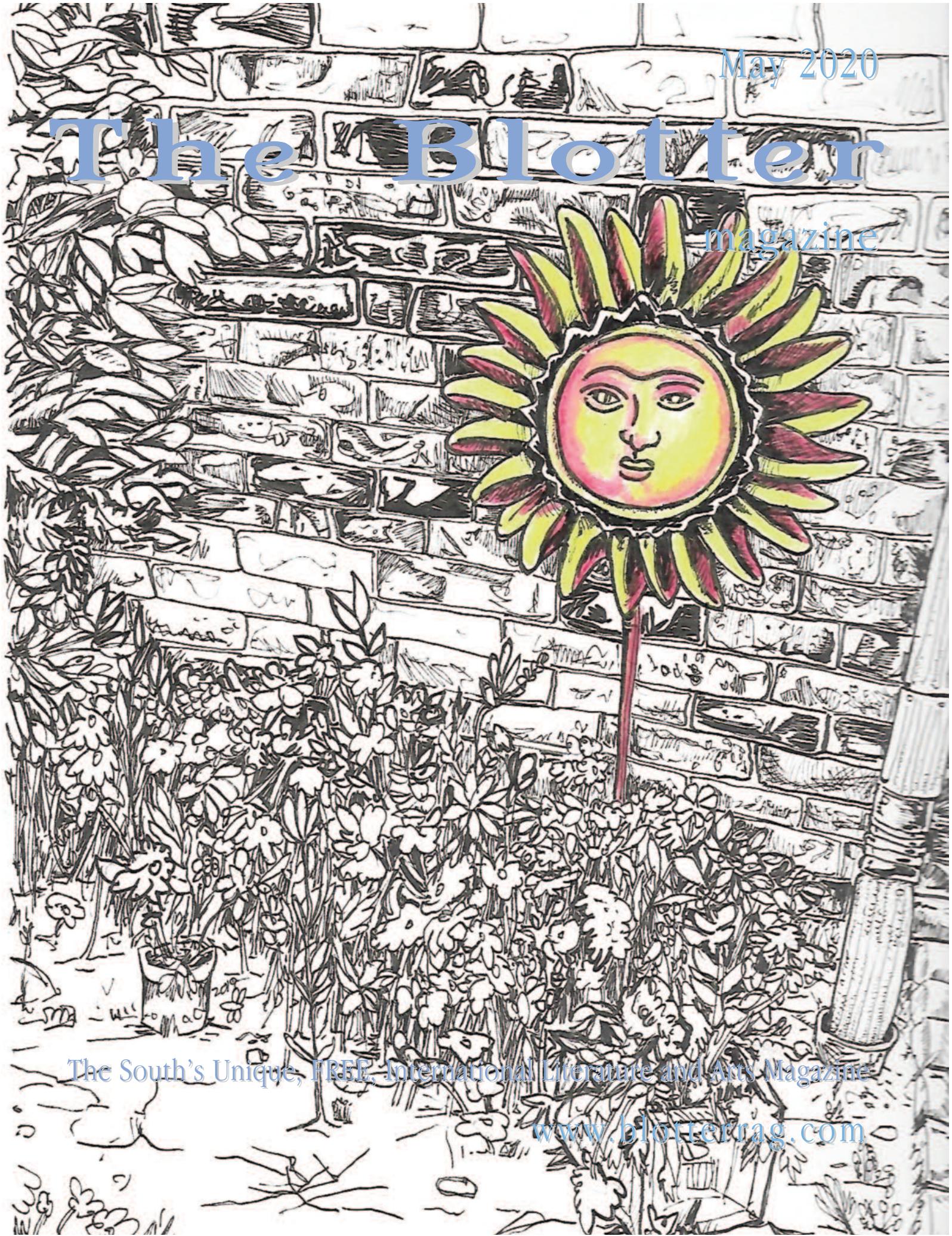


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# The Blotter

magazine



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## "Prayer"

Difficult times. I don't need to tell you that, but I want you to be aware that I am aware. What is there to say that hasn't already been said, or that troubles that which is already disturbed? Good question. . . .

My thoughts are divided into four unequal quadrants: What I know, what I think, what I believe and what I don't know. What I know consists of those things I can verify as facts. What I think consists of those things I have some knowledge of, but cannot prove or verify. What I don't know is that very large set of things about which I yet have shown no interest in or may yet encounter and develop that interest. It is also all things I have tried to learn but cannot. And what I believe is that which I have only hope or faith in but cannot verify or prove. I choose to call the divisions between these thoughts *quadrants*, but this may be a misnomer as there is certainly overlap, for example, between what I know and what I don't know and what I think and what I don't know.

To give you an example of what I'll call quadrant 1, I know that when I type this document and use my software application's save function, I can put an electronic copy of it into a file on my computer's hard drive. It is knowledge that I have had for quite some time, and yet it is new knowledge that did not exist for anyone on earth before I was born, in fact, barely before I became an adult. Computers have not had such capabilities for very long, in the scheme of human existence.

It may be argued by some that I do not know that the computer behaves like this, because sometimes computers make mistakes. The argument is that I only trust that the electrons do what I tell them to. What this is, unfortunately, is a failure in the knowledge of some people. They cannot see, or do choose to agree that particle physics does what it does. I cannot see it, either. It can also be said that I don't know the math that makes particles do what they do, so I don't actually *know* what I think I know.

Hmmm.

What often happens in a discussion like this is the argument, that is the discussion using reason, not the idiom for fighting with words, deteriorates into something ad hominem, which is a point of fallacy, or something anecdotal, which may or may not be evidence, but by itself isn't scientific. It is insufficient, a term that implies and should be inferred as only my opinion, to say "let's agree to disagree." I am troubled that

I hear this so often. There must be some way to have truth and facts, without everyone squaring off in corners, gloves down. Let's just say that What I Know has the least solid foundation of the four quadrants. As it should.

To continue...

*What I think* is a rather large quadrant. That's because I think a lot, about lots of different things. People, my friends and family. Places I've been and want to go, and history and music. Poetry takes a lot of my thinking, and wordplay in general. I think, like many writers do, about my work-in-progress, what is coming together and what's still broken, and what needs to still be figured out. I don't have much free time, because I'm not sure precisely what that means to most people, but I try to keep a lot of balls in the air, am rarely bored, and don't consider thinking as wasting time or "doing nothing." What I think has been full of things like "I think she likes me" and "I think that the first Star Wars is the best," as well as "planets are spherical because gravity makes them be that way," and "coffee is better than tea." As you can see, this is largely opinion, only some of which is based on anything remotely resembling empirical evidence. All of it is arguable, particularly that first one. Sometimes, however, the Think quadrant has good information. "I think that it is difficult for someone to make a living as a poet" skirts that fine line between the Knowledge and the Think quadrants, with even a couple of toes in the "I don't know" quadrant.

I'm not going to spend a lot of time on the What I Don't Know space. It is infinite, of course, and ever growing. I don't know much about astrophysics, and I don't know anything at all about TikTok. And so on, and so on. I don't shy away from my lack, however. I embrace it. Not in the way that sounds, however, like I'm happy in my ignorance. I embrace that there is an infinite variety of things to contemplate and discover, and I reach out into that set to find new interests. I hope to do this as long as I am able.

*What I believe.* And now, the tricky one. We are so inclined to interchange the words "I believe" with "I think" that it becomes hazy what we really mean. Do we really believe that this Sunday we switch back to Daylight Savings? Do we really believe that it's going to rain this weekend, or that there's another jar of mayonnaise in the pantry? We say things like this all of the time. And it turns our communications with one another just one more notch to the difficult. I know what I believe. I know that what I believe cannot be proven – that it is based on the concept of faith, which is a different collection of

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CAUTION

*friends to the show that never ends*

# “Improper Burial at the First Iron Works of America”

by Tom Sheehan

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With one glass eye and with one wooden leg, but with a shovel in his hands, 72-year old Napoleon deMars was an earth surgeon. But he felt cold and clammy when his long-handled shovel painstakingly pried up the buried object. It was disinterment! White of bone came at him, right from the grave. It was a human skull, opened at a wedge in the frontal lobe, and Napoleon knew it most likely had been murder. The skull, and apparently some of its bones holding on to the last known form, lay at the end of his half day's work, a trench at the First Iron Works of America, in Saugus, a mere dozen miles from Boston's Freedom Trail. The site was being excavated for and from history. It was September of 1952. Excavation had been under way since 1948, on a small scale, but steadily. Not a single piece of diesel-driven power equipment had been allowed in there as yet. It was a pick and shovel site, a whiskbroom site, toothpick and cotton swab country.

Now it was a graveyard.

Napoleon, for all his years, for all his toted calamities, felt nauseous.

Three people of varying importance were at the Iron Works site when the grisly discovery was made: Napoleon deMars, the seventy-two year old, one-eyed, one-legged earth surgeon; Dr. Roland Wells Robbins, site archeologist who had found the ruins of Thoreau's cabin at Walden Pond a few years earlier, now in charge of unearthing the site of the very first iron works which had brought to America all the experience Europe was able to muster back in the 1600's; and [www.blotterrag.com](http://www.blotterrag.com)

Silas Tully, police officer of the town, on the force only a matter of six years after his service in the Marine Corps in the once-noisy Pacific.

On that high-blue September day, clouds lain over someplace else, the faintest breath of salt coming off the river, at eleven o'clock in the morning, Napoleon deMars put down his shovel. It was a half-hour to lunchtime and he never stopped work, he never cursed his place in life, he never gave cause to any boss. Here, at the Iron Works, at \$2.35 an hour and the best wage he had ever gotten, where he often thought that he could shovel until he was eighty, he put his work aside.

He looked out over the First Iron Works in America, up off the banks of the Saugus River on the North Shore above Boston. The site was a conglomeration of excavations, mounds, slag piles, marked stone walls which had been retrieved from history, a half dozen trenches cutting across a small piece of Saugus crooked as lightning, ragged as crossword puzzles, and the scattered piles of artifacts yet to be catalogued and put away.

Napoleon walked up the site with the marked limp he had carried with him for more than half a century. The broad band of a suspender hooked over one shoulder and slipped into his belt line where, down inside his pants, it connected to the crude wooden leg he had worn for so long. In reality, this one was his third, and no lighter than the first. Around the site he looked for Rollie Robbins, boss man, a little prissy Napoleon had often thought, but more knowledgeable than any man in town on this kind of an excavation. Often

enough he'd seen the light go on in Rollie's eyes when a new discovery was made, when a ditch gave up clues or artifacts, when the 17<sup>th</sup> Century struggled up out of a pile of dirt or the bottom of a hole like a woodchuck checking the lay of the land.

Now, Napoleon had found this new discovery. With effort he tried to reach back into history the way Rollie did. Long had he marveled at how much Rollie could pull out of a small find, the way a rock sat on its neighbor or what it was made of or how the demarcation in a trench of the natural soil line could tell time as good as a calendar.

Napoleon used his head to signal Rollie, as if giving signals to his dog, and nodded to his current digging spot.

Roland Wells Robbins, dark-haired, round faced, handsome in his ruddy outdoors way, just now beginning to widen at the belt line a bit, tipped dark-rimmed glasses off his face and looked at Napoleon. From long standing he admired the old man, who kept his shovel moving more industriously than any two of the other laborers. Napoleon was also a good luck talisman for Rollie, his charm piece. He remembered the day he had hired the old man, who began methodically shoveling his way through three hundred years of fill. His single eye was a marvelously good organ. A cannon ball popped off his shovel that first day; a half dozen clay pipe remnants (with one bowl intact) turned up an hour later, on the second day the crusted remains of a matchlock pistol were held in the air just as the crew broke for lunch. For that one moment Rollie the archeologist had palmed devilish antiquity.

“What is it, Napoleon?” Sweat was a dark stain on Napoleon's shirt under the one-strap suspender. An off-yellow

color it was, almost like an old tobacco stain, and made Rollie think of his grandfather for the first time in many years.

“Where I’m digging, boss. Down where you sent me yesterday to trench out. There’s a skeleton.” The old man’s one eye had remoteness in it. “It’s in the fill. It’s in some clay. I don’t think I hit it with my shovel, but the front of the skull has been crushed. I didn’t tell any of the others. It must have been a nasty death.” A story wagged deep behind his one eye, his brow leaning over it darkly.

Rollie looked at his watch, smiled at Napoleon. “Thanks, Napoleon. Tell the others they can go for lunch. I’ll check it out myself.” Down the slope Rollie’s gait was deliberate, drawing no eyes.

Down into the trench Napoleon had cut he eased himself. Neatness came at him immediately; the floor of the trench was level, the five-foot sides were cut down as if they had been carved or sculpted out of the sand and gravel and blue-gray hardpan. The pile thrown out humped a long mound stretching away from the trench. The neat trench itself was about eighteen feet long. Beneath him he saw the bones of the skeleton Napoleon had unearthed. The skull indeed was crushed in at the forehead. Arm bones and torso bones had been exposed. A quick little chill spun on Rollie’s skin and danced off someplace. Never before in any of his digs had he seen this. There’d been pots and pans and rocks and stones and clay pipes and glass bottles of every sort and pieces of wood with enough left of their grain that stories could still be extracted from them. But never the hard remains of a human being; just the subtle remains, the storied remains, never the boned and final remains.

The other workers thought it odd

that Rollie and Napoleon during lunch had quickly set up a canvas tent over the trench. They hadn’t seen a tent on-site in almost a year. It was, obviously, now out of bounds for them.

The third party on the scene, a daily visitor to the site, was Officer Silas Tully of the Saugus Police Department. For a couple of years he had watched as Rollie Robbins pieced together so much of the original site from piles of rock and slag heaps and baskets full of artifacts, and now wondered what a tent signified. Curious, he made his way down to the tent, stepping over trenches with his long legs, jumping over small piles of slag or rocks, avoiding larger holes and pits. Rollie and he had become, if not friends, at least daily conversationalists on the topic of excavation. Each loved the way details and mysteries worked on them and each found in the other a sense of mirror. The particulars of each calling worked resolutely.

Si Tully slipped aside the canvas door flap of the tent and stepped inside. Rollie looked up at him from the bottom of the trench, a nonplused look on his face as if a policeman was absolutely the last person he wanted on site. With some effort Rollie climbed the ladder out of the trench. Touching the blue sleeve of Silas’ shirt, a pained look, as if he had been surprised at the cookie jar or caught peeking in the girl’s bathroom, flooded his face. In the hanging light of a Coleman lamp buzzing its ignition as noisy as bees his face reddened deeply.

“Si, we just can’t let too many people in on this until we found out what it’s all about!” His eyes affected beseeching. “They’ll trample the hell out of the place. It’d take us months to recover. We can’t let strangers in here.”

“Find out what’s what all about?” Silas said, and then, swiftly directed, he looked along the length of Rollie’s

arm pointing at the skull in the bottom of the trench, its forehead obviously crushed at a point of history.

Six years on the force and this was Si Tully’s first skull and, moreover, his first skeleton. Bodies he’d seen, that’s for sure, in the islands on the turnpike at crash scenes, laid out on the median strips more times than he cared to remember. This, though, was a new mystery to him; an unknown, a victim how long in the historic grave no one knew or might never know. Something told him that Rollie had made assessments, that one or more leads had already surfaced, that this gruesome crime would be solved. It was second nature to the archeologist. This could be most interesting, a bizarre and intriguing find at the archeological site, more than history unfurling itself.

Si spoke again. “It’s my town, Rollie, and it’s murder clear as a bell, and I’ve got to report it. You know that. No matter how old it is.” The former Marine, the military man, early in this new episode, could see lines being crossed, basic command structure being aborted.

Rollie had seen the quizzical light in Silas’ eyes before. Again he touched him on the arm. This time it was as if he were drawing the young policeman into a strictest confidence; the secret of King Tut’s tomb, a hidden room beneath the Sphinx, a new Rosetta Stone unearthed in old Yankee Saugus. Consciously he decided not to tell Silas of the other waiting discovery; there *were* stars to be earned! Treach had paved the way.

Rollie stood beside the trench looking down at the skeleton, down where history was always telling him stories. A storyteller might have been reciting the sad and gruesome tale to him, a tale of love turned sour, of madness, a tale of clandestine deeds per-

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formed or perpetrated under cover of darkness. In the air he could feel hatred, and despair. A man, he thought, a seaman perhaps, had come home from the high angry seas only to find more trouble at the hearth. His mind kept telling him it had a will of its own, despite the training, the years of experience. Mystery, he knew, did it. But, he thought with some eagerness, he lived on mysteries.

Robby still held Silas by the arm, working on the mystery, the love of details in the policeman which made his own life go 'round. "I'm going to get Professor Hartley out here from Harvard. Loves this place he does and he'll love this challenge. I can see him marshaling the forces at Harvard, getting his cronies in the labs to do us a few favors. His forensic friends will have a small busman's holiday on this, their own little murder to play with. They'll love it, the boys of the old school, in a deep, dark secret, rolling up their pant legs and getting down and dirty. They'll give us the answer to every question we can come up with, you and I. Then, with it all laid out, you can go to the chief or the State or whoever else and lay a clean solved case right on the blotter." There was affirmation in his eyes, in his voice.

He squeezed Silas' arm. They were standing there on the edge of history. It could have been The Valley of Kings under their feet, or Chitzen-itsa or a Ming Dynasty tomb somewhere in China. Again he squeezed Silas' arm, brothers of the mystery.

Early Sunday morning two station wagons rolled into the parking area of the Iron Works. Rollie and Silas met Professor D'Jana K. Hartley, tall, effectively studious-looking in his tweed leathered elbows, but not in a boring way, and his cohorts from the ivy halls; two more archeologists, a forensic expert and his young sidekick with

blond hair and extremely bright eyes, a professor of Humanities who looked to be the most intelligent of all, a man who carried from the trunk of one car a canvas bag of assorted gear, and a young good looking woman wearing denim, boots and a yellow blouse fitting her so well that most others would not believe she was from Harvard. None of the site diggers, that's for sure, noting how compelling yellow was.

Napoleon deMars watched them approach. Leaning on his shovel near the tent, he was still on the clock, still at \$2.35 an hour, and no one, not one soul, had entered the tent since he'd received his orders from Rollie. Perhaps the victim was as old as he was, perhaps a person he had known in his youth. His mind went skipping back through the years for a noted loss. Nothing came to mind. Napoleon watched the Harvards at work and admired the deftness of their hands with the small trowels and brushes they employed, yet was certain the soft leather boots they wore must have cost a week's pay. He tried to hear the whispers and small asides that connected them, made them such outlanders down in the hole he had cut into the earth.

Professor D'Jana Hartley's people were crack specialists. Quietly they went their turn back into the minor history of the skeleton in the trench of the Iron Works. Small talk amongst them, as much whisper as anything could be, as if covering a trail of a known confidant, had scanned a series of possibilities: an indentured servant, probably a Scot, a slag toter or bog digger or barrow pusher, who had fallen astray, perhaps with another slave's woman or the Iron Master's wife, and they tittered at a remark about a new ax of Cane manufactured on the very spot and which had done the improba-

ble deed; a late visitor to the site, pocketbook or pouch laden with crown coin or Spanish gold pieces, fallen under the swing of a metal bar, come slowly as an ingot of first life out of the very furnace whose ruins lay at their backs, in the hands of another indentured servant waiting to buy his way out of contract.

Now and then a giggle caught itself on the tall air. Napoleon, intently watching every move, hearing every sound, thought of his grandchildren at the cookie jar and smiled at the likeness of things. He'd work till ninety if they let him, and if the other leg would hold its own, here in this affable cradle of history. On the way home he'd buy a box of cookies for the cookie jar; it was a fair swap.

The dig, though, was a Chinese checkerboard of ups and downs, holes and trenches and piles and mounds of earth, almost a battle zone of sorts. The slag pile looked like it might have oozed out of the place where Rollie had said the furnace originally was. It was twenty feet high or thereabouts and ran towards the river for ninety or more feet. When the sun caught a slick side of slag, like a shiny piece of coal with an enamel surface, one would think of a semaphore signal leaping from darkness. The land sloped away from the Iron Master's House on the high point to where the salt water reached at high tide, a good two miles and a half up the Saugus River from the Atlantic Ocean, itself a trove of history. Legend had it that a pirate captain, Treach or Langton perhaps, had brought his ship a good way up the river and then landed a long boat further up, a boat which had carried much of his plunder to be buried in Dungeon Rock, now a huge hole 135 feet down in solid rock and bare miles away in the Lynn Woods Reservation.

The young policeman, at the

same time, was not standing still. A minor conviction had told him that the skeleton was not too old; at least, not of Colonial age. This conviction he accepted as coming from intelligence and a feel for things that he had cultivated while on the job and while in the military. Immediately he had gone to a retired postman, a neighbor of his for years, who was a veritable historian of the town, gossip or rumor or fact. Silas had found out that the stagecoach road from Boston to Newburyport had, at one time, run right past the backside of the Iron Works. That, too, was on what was now Central Street. That Central Street, still clear in Silas' mind, had once swept right on by the front of the Iron Works. Somewhere in town, a long time ago, but not as long as some might think it, a person had disappeared, or had been murdered, or had been buried in the lap of history. Silas Tully made his mind up that he was going to solve this case, that he would find out whose bones had been buried at the Iron Works.

The weekly *Saugus Advertiser* and the *Lynn Daily Evening Item* seemed to be his best choices and he began a one-man search for a person who had suddenly gone unaccounted for. Through reams and reams of old copies he labored. To old time reporters and editors he talked and in turn haunted the cracker barrels and barroom back rooms and sundry other locations they had directed him to. These were places where history walked, where history talked, where the tongues of history carried on the legends and the lineage that might never make its way into print. Over-the-fence stuff. Dark alley stuff. Stories he never heard before surfaced, debris riding up on the tide, swollen drains dumping pieces of the town into the river, silt of lives streaming away. Old copies of *Saugus Gazette* and *Saugus*

*Herald* and *Lynn Transcript*, Lynn being the next being town over, to the east, brought nothing to light. No headlines, no want ads for a lost person, no missing person with no single accounting. No melodramas in the local library of a missing girl or boy or a triangle affair gone haywire.

But he was resolute.

It was *Ars Veritas* that brought things into focus after Rollie's discovery of the coin.

An informal, unsigned, handwritten report came to Rollie Robbins a mere three days after the Harvard entourage had first hit the Iron Works. Line by line, item by item, he considered the information set forth:

*The subject is male, thirty-one years of age, dead of a savage blow to the frontal lobe of the skull. Death was immediate. It is estimated that he has been covered (Rollie almost giggled at the word) since mid year of 1905. His watch stopped at 2:17 of a day, in the AM we would assume, and was German, a Gersplank, very limited in production and rarely seen this side of the Atlantic. He carried a small sum of coin. One leg, the right, was 3/4 inch shorter than the other. He had been an accident victim prior to his demise, his hip and thigh bone both having been fractured, the right side, and most likely about two years prior to his end. He was perhaps in military uniform at the time of his death, as determined by tunic buttons found at the site, an officer of a captain's rank, United States Cavalry, 22nd Regiment Massachusetts. No military identification was found on-site, which we find questionable and suspicious in nature, inasmuch as his pouch was neither emptied nor removed. Two bones in right index and right middle finger were broken which we assume to have happened at or close to the scene of discovery, at*

*time of death, meaning struggle. A length of chain had been dropped or had fallen onto the body and was found, remains of it, rusted solid on top of the spinal column. No other objects or material were found in proximity of the remains except for a small figure of jade of unknown origin discovered a mere two feet from the left hand, the figure tending towards Chinese but not yet confirmed, but probably pre-Ming.*

*In summation we offer the following: Victim was a 31 year old professional military man with healed bone fractures of hip and leg and was probably in uniform at death but must have been on a limited duty roster; did struggle at time of death as evidenced by broken fingers but was mortally wounded and died immediately from severe trauma to forehead. May have had Chinese or Far East connection, if indeed the jade piece found nearby does not prove to be Incan or pre-Incan. Our camp is exactly halved on this last point.*

*The lack of any evidence of fabric, other than his pouch, gathers suspicion the more we have think about it, especially concerning tunic buttons and no tunic residue of note. It is possible that his uniform was biodegradable and has passed on, but we doubt that. Therefore we think he may have been nude (stripped under duress) and pushed bodily into a hole. If he was nude, the evidence of tunic buttons indicates they may have been placed there to mislead any subsequent authority inquest, and we must ask why. Certainly, the person who committed this deed did not expect it to be discovered in the foreseeable future, but was covering tracks for any discovery some years down the road. It therefore causes us to think he was known to the victim, was himself in the military, tried to*

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*put sand in the gears (so to speak) (Rollie giggled), or, as D'Jana Hartley said on last resort, it was a military man who killed a civilian and tried to thwart any future identification by throwing in the tunic buttons, like the proverbial hand of gravel as in dust unto dust, probably off his own shirt, a kindly killer who took the shirt off his own back.*

*We have a world wide network working on the jade figure and feel that it was indeed a portion of loot from some local robbery. We shall keep you advised as to all incoming information or any changes in our collective thinking. In close proximity to the remains was found a 1903 one cent piece, but we do not know if this coin was interred with the remains or had later fallen into the hole during excavation.*

Archeologist Rollie Robbins, giggling at much of the report, finding the humor effective, the conclusions as palpable as his own, and, for the most part, felt the mystery deepen. Saugus patrolman, and armchair detective when he had to be or needed to be, Silas Tully, at receiving the report and the information on the 1903 cent, found his new starting point and went right to it. For no reason apparent to himself, he gave a grace year to the passage of time, skipped 1904 and went right to 1905. 1905, it appeared, after much scrutinizing of papers and books and magazines and other information almanacs, was the year of the Russias, or, as he quipped to himself, the year the Russias didn't do too well. The Japanese whipped their butt all over hell in their war; they lost 200,000 in the Mukden battle alone, had their naval fleet destroyed in the Strait of Tsushima, lost Sakhalin Island outright, got badly overrun in Manchuria, and a number of other

places. Crewmen of the great battleship *Potemkin* mutinied and eventually turned the ship over to Rumanian authorities. The Russian Grand Duke, Sergei Aleksandrovich, the uncle of Czar Nicholas II, was assassinated by a bomb thrown into his lap by a revolutionary. The Russian pot certainly was stirring and much of the world was in turmoil, and, of course, he realized, being on this side of the information trail one could see to where a lot of all this was leading.

A few other events attracted his eye, disparate events, no obvious ties between them, but events that rode on top of tidal debris, like cheese boxes or pieces of flotsam, bobbing to be noticed: the Cullinan Diamond, all 3,106 carats of it, was discovered in Transvaal and insurance underwritten by a U.S. company; the body of American Naval hero John Paul Jones was found in a cemetery in Paris and was moved to the United States, perhaps in a cask of rum for a preservation attempt; the Russian-Japanese War was ended by a pact signed practically in Saugus' own back yard, at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, after a key role was played by the old stick-swinger himself, President Teddy Roosevelt, and closer to home, just a few miles away, the palatial home of W. Putnam Wesley, on the Saugus-Wakefield line in what had become the Breakheart Reservation, was robbed in the dead of night by an unknown male who threatened three servants with bodily harm or death if they tried to escape from a pantry they had been locked into, chopping off a butler's finger with an old sword to prove his vow.

Silas Tully went to sleep that night after chewing all these things over in his mind, locked in on all the international stuff, he knew he was out

of his element. But down deep something fervent told him he was going along for the whole ride. All the way. And a bare thread of light, the thinnest lisle possible, gossamer at best, seemed to be pulling at these disparate events. Upon W. Putnam Wesley he settled for his first stepping-stone towards a solution. Filthy rich to say the least, much of it come by way of his grandfather from the California gold fields and parlayed by his father, Wesley had various shades of darkness sitting around him. He had journeyed far and wide, especially in Europe and the Far East, often with a large entourage. His interest included, after money, artifacts of historical intrigue (such as dueling swords or dueling pistols from famous encounters), *objects d'art* tending to explicit sex of any selection, gems so special that there might not have been a match with another, all things Chinese that might be described by one or more of the aforementioned. He had had four wives, three of which died in the midst of a long trip or voyage. Silas found one report of his fourth wife having taken a shot at him, in jest as they declared. Silas figured the threat of that single shot to have saved her life.

Wesley was called Puttee from his earliest days, both from his middle name and from his adventurous youthful habit, when playing soldier games, of wearing strips of cloth which circled his legs from ankle to knee, much in the manner of real soldiers. His name he wore well.

The sixth sense was working overtime for Silas a few days later when he sat with Rollie under a tarp at the Iron Works site. They discussed their points of view and all the data of the *Ars Veritas* report.

"It's a crime of passion," Rollie finally affirmed, his voice steady, con-

vincing in its stoic way, his dark serious eyes looking out over the site and seeing, oblivious to Silas Tully, what the site would eventually look like. His baby, Rollie's baby, put to bed.

"A marriage is involved," he continued, "a triangle affair. I think we must look to the Hawkridges. Powerful, money by the handfuls, owners of the site for a long time, their papers still scattered throughout the Iron Master's house like they've just gone away for the weekend and will be back on Monday to square things away."

He seemed to mull over his own words before he added, "Perhaps the Hawkridges were so powerful that the absence of one of the family could easily be explained."

"You've found something?" Silas said, turning to face Rollie as they sat on a fence rail. The light in Rollie's eyes was amber, obvious. Silas, from day one of their acquaintance, knew that Rollie's bent was to the romantic, to the clandestine, Rollie's eye having that other light in them.

"Yes," Rollie said. "One of the Hawkridges, Carlton Theophus Hawkridge. About thirty years of age that I know of. Went off on a trip somewhere around 1905, perhaps a bit later, and was never heard from again."

"How do you know that?"

"From a few letters I found in a box in the upper rooms. Went off supposedly very quickly on a trip for his health. Not the most likable fellow, not from what I gather, but *family*."

"Do you think the family did him in?" Si's eyes were deep with question, his scowl like punctuation.

"I really don't know that, but we scrambled at the beginning of all this to go a lot further back than we thought we could. "What have you come up with?"

As though he expected no reply,

Rollie looked away from Silas, seeing the sun catch on the water of the river, an angular slicing of light in the late afternoon, sometimes gold, sometimes blue, that leaped across the river and onto Vinegar Hill where he just knew Treach's treasure was buried. The hole being dug he could picture, the chest being lowered, the rocks being piled up. He could see the descent of the crew back down to the longboat, could see their soft and easy float down the river to the ship shifting slightly at anchor. He knew where his next job was coming from. And if the skeleton in the trench was one, or could safely assume to be so, Carlton Theophus Hawkridge knew the move to the next dig would be a cinch. So much depended on the young policeman sitting beside him. Spoon feeding him would be a challenge. Subtle as a snake it would need to be.

Silas Tully gave nothing away. Not even the fact that he knew he was not a rank amateur, that knots in spite of all apparent were being slowly tied, that the gossamer thread would come to rope. If Roland Robbins had his blind romance, he had his own.

"I just keep poking along, Rollie, trying to tie things together. It's all so far away, as if never touching us with reality."

"If it's Hawkridge, Si, I can see a spread in the Boston papers for you. Perhaps a magazine article. You could turn this old Yankee town right up on its ear! They'll be beating a path to your door. You couldn't beat them off." His smile was broader than a shovel blade. And the shovel blade was slicing deep into a pile of manure.

"The Japanese tried that, Rollie. It didn't work for them either." There was a declaration he hoped Rollie would understand. Edging off the fence rail, he waved slightly, almost half-heartedly. "I'll keep you posted,

Rollie. You do the same." There was another one.

As Si walked off, Rollie looked out over the site, saw a glancing shaft of light leap off the river and leap up to the crest of Vinegar Hill. Treach just knew he was coming after him! Bet on it!

The gossamer thickened indeed later that week for Silas Tully. An article in an old issue of a discontinued Boston paper, about Old Ironsides and the Charlestown Navy Yard, tied together John Paul Jones and W. Putnam "Puttee" Wesley. It was a single line implying that the container bringing home the body of the hero was used to illegally convey some priceless artifacts. And Puttee Wesley was accompanying the body home, a service he so graciously volunteered to perform, inasmuch as he was in Paris and on his way home. President Roosevelt accepted the offer. The thin line of gossamer, with a little more body to it, seemed to fall like a shadow of netting on the piece of jade that had lain so long in the earth beside another body.

Silas had come to abrupt attention, as if the old Commander-in-Chief himself had walked in on him. Life was full of little pieces of goodness. Find them, that's all you had to do. They were at your feet, in your back pocket, around the corner.

Puttee Wesley, he decided from all that he ingested of him, was not afraid of playing either the pirate or the brigand or the smuggler to get any of the items his heart desired. If money wouldn't buy them, he'd get them one way or another. In 1919 he had died suddenly, unprotected by his money or his treasures, from a bout with influenza. The family then, as many families do under pressure, had scattered, their fortunes wasted, and little evidence of Puttee Wesley's existence

## The Blotter

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hung on. Breakheart had become pond and forest and a scattering of trails, the huge mansion gone to ground, a bare bit of stone foundation thrusting out of brush. But to Silas there came echoes repeating themselves like gunshots down between canyon walls, the continuing onslaught of the same notion...all these things, Jones and Puttee and the jade piece and the skeleton, were caught up in the same web, the same gossamer spinning out of his mind, spinning out of the twist of all the years.

Rollie Robbins had tried to plumb Silas' mind a number of times, tried to steer him to the Hawkridges, but fell short with each attempt. The stubbornness of the young policeman, though a craggy veteran, bothered him more than he let on.

Treach had waited this long, but he might not wait forever. Even in death the pirate might be a most rambunctious ghost.

It took a strange turn of events to swing matters in the correct direction, the kind of luck that Silas Tully knew would come of endless scratching, endless probing, endless digging, his own *l'affair archeology*. If his French were much better he'd be able to spell it right.

It was a naval clerk at the Pentagon who remembered Silas Tully's numerous inquiries about the John Paul Jones transfer, who had seen Silas' letter concerning the suspicions surrounding the hero's remains being brought home, who a long time earlier in his current assignment had begun reading old documents in the Navy archives.

Seaman First Class Peter J. Leone wrote the following to Officer Silas Tully of the Saugus Police Department:

*This is not an official document and is only sent to you on a personal*

*basis because of the interest you have excited in me about the Admiral John Paul Jones situation. I have come across a number of old documents and communiqués concerning the Admiral's coming home to where he should have been. If there is anything else I might furnish, I will try, but I think you will be interested in what has caught my eye in the files. The president at the time, Theo. Roosevelt, was advised of certain shady deals that might be attached to the movement of the Admiral's remains. The information came in a letter to him from a Bruce Jacob Bellend, a captain in British intelligence, who had accidentally come on the information while on a separate assignment. It did mention illegal movement of precious artifacts that had been taken from unknown sources. The president assigned a personal representative, Captain Arthur G. Savage, U.S. Navy, to proceed to Paris and accompany the remains home and to investigate and report to him any and all findings he might come across. None of the captain's reports are in file, but I did find the following information about him: he was from Grand Hawk, Minnesota, was a graduate of the Naval Academy, was captain of the U.S.S. Standish at one time, did suffer a serious accident aboard ship that required medical leave (hip and leg injury in a fall, right side), had a deep scar on his left cheek of unknown cause, was a gutsy and devoted leader of men, and loved nothing better than his country. He was reported as being missing in July of 1905 and nothing more is known of him, as though he had gone off the face of the Earth.*

Silas Tully brought his case to rest, though it lay at his feet for a few days, being stepped on, turned over, and cemented back into place. He

could see Puttee Wesley or one of his henchmen knock the captain on the head, take him under cover of darkness to where Central Street was being filled in, dropping him in the hole, throwing on top of his bare body the buttons of some army tunic to throw leads elsewhere in case the body might be discovered. The jade piece, still unidentified, was sacrificed to help the scattering of leads. The remnants of chain continued to be nothing more than a corrosive coil in his mind. The precious artifacts put away for the time being.

Silas Tully told it all to his wife Phyllis and none of it to Rollie Robbins.

Napoleon deMars, with the help of two grandchildren and two sons-in-law, held sway over the tent for another week until the remains of the unknown body, as it was officially treated, were laid quietly to further rest in a shaded area of Riverside Cemetery, just outside of Saugus Center, alongside the railroad tracks no longer in use.

One evening thereafter, Rollie Robbins, maverick archeologist, ramrod of stones and bones, continued to watch the late afternoon sun glance off the river with surprising richness. Flares of light flew like spears; shy sparks reigned as though diamonds had been loosed from chest or pouch. Gallant red wing blackbirds from both sides of the river flew across and through shafts of late light like arrows onto their targets. Dusk, as part of shadow, settled itself softly, a dust, atop the colonial town. Vinegar Hill and Round Hill and Hemlock Hill and Indian Slide and dark passages of Breakheart Reservation shifted into the shadows that history continually lends to its constituents. Treach had such a night, he was sure. And he was out

there, his subtle remains, waiting for him in those shadows.

And one night a few weeks later, when all was quiet, the sky a dark canopy, Silas Tully, a policeman always, a Marine forever, a patriot feeling the pains of wounds he had long forgotten, his eyes raw with sadness, thinking of the admiral and the captain and the president and the seaman at the Pentagon, knowing the town he loved would cement the ultimate resolve, affixed above that single grave at the Veteran's Section of Riverside Cemetery a wooden sign he had carved one long night filled with the deepest of thoughts. It read: *ARTHUR G. SAVAGE, CAPTAIN U.S. NAVY, WHO DIED IN THE SERVICE OF HIS COUNTRY.*

There would be no fanfare, no clarions or trumpets or drums. No gunfire. The captain would sift into the past, along with all the other veterans from all the other wars, all the warriors the town had ceded to history. He'd have a flag atop his grave on Memorial Day, put there by the American Legion. The breeze and the sunlight would catch at it, flapping it about. Children would wave back. A few seniors, offering up their own kinds of parades, would offer serious nods. The wind would come back again and again, a rapture of touch, a salute of sorts. Nights would accept the continual silence abounding in Riverside.

Silas Tully thought he could give Captain Arthur Savage nothing more precious than that.

When he told his wife, she loved him all over again. ❖

## "The Turn In The Weather"

by Jillian Dhyana Oliver

"Play some really old music," Kit called over to me as I sat on the couch. Mom chuckled from her favorite chair across from Kit at the kitchen table, her eyes fixed on the screen of her Chromebook as it sat on the glass tabletop. Her laugh always stole my attention, though a stranger wouldn't think anything of it. It made me wonder if she laughed at the computer screen, a jest from Kit, or a voice beside her ear that was inaudible to me.

Mom nodded at Kit's request. Opened a tab for Youtube on my tablet and played the 1890s version of Daisy Bell, then the Haydn Quartet songs from the 1900s. Doing so, I felt uncomfortable, as if I should play something else, something Mom and Kit wouldn't relish hearing. Maybe I was being irresponsible by letting them get nostalgic. But how stupid to create an issue over something as silly as an old song. And what else was there to do when the roads of Wilmington were covered with ice and snow?

On a normal day I would stay busy — on my laptop at a coffee house downtown, or at my university in midtown, or taking a long walk after work to keep from going home — wondering, *will I make enough for the rent? when will Mom support herself on her own? Or at least make an attempt? It's been three years since Dad died, and here I am at the age of twenty-four, cooped up in a two bedroom apartment with my mother and sister.*

When the unlikely snow storm hit North Carolina in 2017, I took solace

in the knowledge that my freedom would return when the snow and ice cleared; but for now I had to stay patiently nestled on the suede couch, with my cinnamon candle lit on the coffee table, watching flurries behind the window as the wind swept against them, impeding their descent and whisking them here and there.

I glanced down at the small bookshelf just under the window. How old are those glow in the dark Buddhas sitting on the shelf? I thought. They were surely as old as that chunk of amethyst Mom unwrapped in her bedroom when I was ten. The figurines were still pristine, aside from the Seraphim angel, whose cracked-off head balanced awkwardly on the upwardly curved hem of her pink dress. I couldn't get away from those little reminders of my childhood. I hadn't noticed these anachronisms in so long

Placidly I listened while Daisy Bell bellowed strenuously through the apartment, the lyrics barely intelligible. Then came Billy Murray's Shine on Harvest Moon, followed by more of our favorite artists: Ruth Etting, Benny Goodman, Ella Fitzgerald. The second snow day was the same — store closures and the three of us cloistered in the apartment like that dusty cluster of buddhas.

Despite the small comfort of the old music, and the scenic winter I hadn't witnessed in years, a disquiet persisted, with a voice inside me that said, *Don't get too comfortable with this. Don't let it be the way it used to be.* Maybe it did feel better to be away from judgmental eyes of coworkers

and students who no doubt wondered, *why is she so strange, so avoidant?* But it would only get worse if I stopped facing them.

I turned around and looked toward the kitchen table. Kit sat in front of a bowl of cereal as she tied her long, black hair in a ponytail. Mom tapped and slid her index finger along the touchpad of her Chromebook. There was another Seraphim angel, handless, and propped next to Mom's boxes of Kashi cereal. She concealed it there so it wouldn't be seen by all the visitors she wouldn't have.

She was wrapped in the oversized blue robe Dad had given her around thirteen years ago — long before we moved to this apartment, long before Dad died of lung cancer. Steven, Kit's and my long absent brother, was even living with us back then, before his schizophrenia became too much, and our parents sent him away to Port South Assisted Living.

She had kept the robe well preserved even though she hadn't preserved herself quite as well. Looking at her, I wished I could have seen the mother I knew when I was ten; the one who had all her teeth (now two incisors and three molars were missing), a complexion that wasn't yet sallow from her cigarettes.

But it was still so comfortable, quaint, and familiar just to sit in the living room in our small apartment. *Don't get too comfortable* I gently reminded myself. But part of me missed our old, secluded life in Pennsylvania and the 19th century home we lived in on Scotrun Avenue.

It was a quiet street, separated from the main road only by a stretch of sparse trees that flanked a canal. On a mountainous incline behind our house stood a dense forest and an incongruous trailer perched above all

the old, two story homes.

From one of the windows in my room I could see the highway through the arms of a red oak in front of the house. Cars and trucks zipped by above the canal and vanished behind white oaks and pines. I watched intently and longed to know where they were headed.

The Scotrun diner came to life in the early morning — an event I'd wake for at 5am, just to watch the lights snap on like opening eyes and all the cars roll in. From my window I saw a neighboring house that stood within a scattering of trees about two hundred feet away. I watched its six dark windows and pale siding during the early AM hours. The fake candles that shone through the curtained windows helped me conjure up fanciful images: the shadow of Nosferatu cast across the lawn, and mysterious, ghostly impressions of horses hooves and carriage wheels on the snow covered driveway.

Mom once said she wanted us to live in our own little world, and we certainly did. There would be no school, few outside influences. At Scotrun all we had was five cats, old films and music, and immersion in Mom's peculiar beliefs.

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One afternoon, Kit and I danced in the kitchen while our silver boombox, smeared with some dark, sticky substance and two or three cigarette burns, played *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*. The song, our favorite of the Andrew Sisters, prompted Kit to grab my wrists in her fingers and we spun in unison, arms locked. We clumsily tried to move with the pace of the song across the alabaster tiles. I looked down at our arms and noticed for the first time in a while that Kit's skin was a shade paler than my own. A

shock of dismay. I had imagined I was as light as the starlets of the '30s: Myrna Loy, Jean Harlow, Ginger Rogers. I had watched Rita Hayworth's porcelain face in *Gilda*, and since I wanted to be Rita that week, I needed to believe I could erase the complexion my Italian mother passed down to me. I didn't realize then that Rita had been made over to look whiter than she really was, and that her black hair and darker, olive skin had been bleached. All I knew was my frustration with not knowing where I'd fit in one of those black and white films. Could I be Dolores Del Rio? I didn't care for her much, and I was tired of being Pier Angeli for months at a time.

I hoped Kit wouldn't notice what I had noticed, but in the absence of other influences, those old movies had taught us both to be attentive to even the subtlest contrasts between people. "Look at how dark your skin is next to mine!" she bragged.

We were distracted by a familiar sound above our heads: bedsprings stressing repeatedly with the vigor of an intruder testing a locked door. Chortles seeped through the brass vent cover in the ceiling.

Placed like a cork in a bottle of wine, the antique vent cover could be conveniently removed from below or above with just a push or pull. And there were many other parts of the house that hadn't been updated in decades: cast iron doorknobs, yellowed light switches, faded floral wallpaper, and two attic panels that released flakes of wood when we pulled their strings. Floors groaned like an achy old man just from the stress of a cat's paws scampering across the red and blue carpets. These sounds never failed to frighten me when I was in bed and the sounds of

Mom's bedroom activities were just as permeable through the vents and cheap drywall.

"She's at it again," I said with a Ginger Rogers-style sarcasm and an eye roll, just to let Kit know that I was wise to the things grownups did when they were alone. Kit followed suit, making an effort to change the wide-eyed innocence that initially appeared on her face. "She's probably wearing that slutty black nightgown," she replied. "Bet it's rolled up to her neck!"

To distract ourselves from the commotion, we loudly played our "Swing Is Alive" CD. We'd hear *Gambler's Blues* follow *Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy*. This was the song that always made us laugh. Following The Andrew Sisters' peppy beat, Stan Kenton's bluesy tune was a drag; so much so it even warranted pantomimes from Kit. As old as the joke was, we needed the humor in that moment.

We forced our laughter, anxious to get caught up in the hilarity of the skit Kit was about to perform. She let her arms fall limp at her sides, swinging lazily as she tramped the floor hard with bent knees in tune with the song's opening. I laughed even harder when she'd muss up the tight black curls around her chin and untuck her floral blue sweater from her brown pleated skirt. I wondered if she noticed how fake my laugh was.

One day, when the distractions no longer worked on Mom's laughter, Kit marched over to the dusty corner by the cellar door, grabbed the broom, and pounded the vent. The laughter turned to small whispers. The bed springs were still. I imagined her sitting on top of her comforter, telling her invisible lover that the children were listening. Soon she was as silent

as the icicles I watched drip from behind the thick glass of the twin windows.

I widened the little holes in our yellow, vinyl tablecloth while I waited for the sound of the rattling brass to stop. Kit threw the broom back in the corner, scattering clumps of dust. She let a "Jesus Christ" slip from her mouth. "I'm sick of this crap!" she added as she stormed toward a box of Little Debbie Moonpies on the table. She slapped one on a saucer she got from the drainer and put it in the microwave until the chocolate was half stuck to the china.

"I just wish she'd stop acting so loose." I said.

Before placing a spoonful of melted moonpie in her mouth Kit half whispered in a sardonic tone, "I guess we shouldn't say anything too loud. She always says they hear us."

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On our fifth month in the house, near the end of winter, I heard Kit uttering something unintelligible as I sat in my bedroom, as if she'd just experienced a shock — though there was some delight. She barreled up the steps and stopped at my room. "There's a noose in the basement!" she said to me with hazel eyes that were as wide as walnuts, and her normally pink cheekbones nearly blended with the snow gathered outside my window. A smile was trying to twitch across her face amidst the horror. With a groan I abandoned my 1947 issue of *Time* and followed her down the steps. On the way, I walked over shedded cat claws and noticed all the clumps of black cat fur that had accumulated on each step over the months we had lived there. As we made our way through the red carpeted room outside of the kitchen, Kit recounted the tale of how she

found her noose. It seemed she was standing at the kitchen sink washing dishes when she had felt as if someone wanted her to turn around. When she turned, her eyes fell on the cellar door.

"I felt freaked out that the cellar door was open, so I went to close it. I looked inside first, though. There was nothing odd." She said.

She had looked down at the four-panel door that lay horizontally on the mildewed wood and opened to the cellar steps. Kit closed the cellar door and went back to the dishes. Soon the strange feeling had nagged her again while she set plates and mugs in the drainer. When she opened the cellar door the second time, she decided to switch on the light, and as she did her finger slipped through a loop in the light's string.

"I could have sworn that string was straight. It was straight wasn't it?" She asked.

"Yeah, definitely," I said.

To demonstrate, she grasped the cellar's cast iron knob, moving slowly, dramatically, as if she were opening Bluebeard's forbidden chamber. When she turned the light on, the flimsy noose swayed stiffly next to the dust covered bulb. Initially I had imagined a thick rope dangling directly above the cellar steps after having appeared from nowhere. I even added some dust or maybe blood, nearly black and dried up. But there was only a flimsy rope, not much wider than dental floss. It had been tied with a tiny running knot above it.

We stood gawking at the ominous noose and I asked Kit if Steven could have gotten to the cellar without her noticing. We agreed that he would be capable of doing this since it perfectly suited his humor and his preoccupation with strange things like

death metal and fallen angels. The latter of which spoke to him, or so he claimed.

We reasoned that taunting Kit in this way would be nothing to a guy who fantasized about rape and cold-blooded murder. But Kit also suggested an alternative: ghosts. “I just don’t understand how Steven could put all those tiny knots in there,” she said. “It looks difficult to do. And he has big fingers, too.” To settle the matter, we decided to go to Mom, since she would certainly have a clearer idea of what was going on, considering her connections to the spirit world.

Mom’s bedroom door was at the top landing, but set back enough so that it looked like it was peering over the stairs. We journeyed back up the stairs and opened her door. She lay in bed with a piece of printing paper on her lap—her handmade ouija board—with the alphabet, numbers, and ‘yes’ and ‘no’ penned with blue ink. Beside her outstretched legs, just within reach of her pale hand, was a quartz pendulum. And, of course, there was the display, the shrine of framed Gene Kelly photos lining the top of the dresser that stood beside her bed. In front of the photos sat even more pendulums made from amethyst, crystal, and obsidian, plus spheres of the same materials that sat securely in their gilt stands.

Mom appeared secure as well. She wore her pastel pink slip, and her expression was so serene. It was the look of a woman who was momentarily relieved of all life’s stress, a result of constantly hearing voices from the spirit world, consisting largely of her favorite dead celebrities.

“You won’t believe what I found in the cellar!” Kit said so jubilantly she jumped a little. She told Mom the noose story. Mom came downstairs

with us and examined the noose for herself. She concurred with Kit’s opinion—the culprit was what Mom called a “negative entity.” Of course Mom’s word would be taken seriously by both of us. After all, Kit and I did have some experiences of our own that we couldn’t explain. We would sit in the attic waiting for spirits, jolting at creaks that seemed to come from nowhere and human voices that percolated through the vents on either side of the attic. Sure, the voices could have come from people outside, as Dad once suggested, but it didn’t feel that way to us. Despite my initial doubts about the noose, I supposed, with some hesitation, that Mom *bad* to be right.

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Following the discovery of the noose, I dreamed something that I believed explained our hauntings. There was a little girl in Kit’s room dressed like a porcelain doll who fell of her own will out the window. Then I was thrust down the carpeted hallway to the edge of the stairs to see a woman hanging from the attic, her legs dangling over the stairs.

“I know what happened to everyone who lived here!” I exclaimed to Mom in the morning when I was on one of my regular visits. She laughed at the gothic drama my brain conjured up. “That’s a little over the top,” she said incredulously.

But certainly there was a negative entity somewhere in that old house, and it had chilled Kit’s calves one night when she was trying to enjoy an Astaire-Rogers film and a hotdog dinner. Mom responded to it then with a stalk of burning sage and a long rant at the frigid ghost. “Don’t you dare hurt my daughters!” she had shouted at the top of her lungs. But clearly the entity couldn’t stay away for long. In response to the noose, Mom

armed herself with more sage and bathed every corner of the house.

More than a week after the saging, I lay awake in bed thinking about that negative entity until my back formed small beads of sweat that dampened my flannel nightgown. The dampness of the nightgown turned cold quickly. I forced my eyes shut and thought about the dream I’d had, the negative entity—whatever it was—that wandered around the house tying strings into nooses and making noise in the attic. My mind, while half asleep, started to chisel a dark, shadowy man walking out on the lawn in a steady pursuit of me.

Steven’s bedsprings screeched and he whispered and whispered. His voices always acted up in the middle of the night, whereas Mom’s were more active in the day. I hoped the agitation in his whispers wouldn’t escalate, as they so often did, to shouts or bangs or crashes.

The thought of moving, getting out of bed and crossing the hall to my sister’s room seemed impossible. It was so dark, the hall was so narrow, though only a few feet across, and the railing around the stairs would be right next to my feet. My toes tingled just thinking about some invisible arm reaching through the rails and grabbing hold.

But my anxiety, like a flimsy string, broke after being wrung too tightly and I finally found the will to dash across the hall to get to Kit’s room. Her room was much narrower than mine and resembled a large closet more than it did a bedroom, and this somehow made it safer. I gripped her plaid nightgown and shook her arm. “Kit, I feel like there’s someone in the house,” I whispered emphatically. She started, then reluctantly got out of bed and we braved the hallway to get to the light

and we went to Mom's room. She, too, was hesitant to get out of bed when I told her about my impression. I didn't hear footsteps anywhere in or around the house, after all; nor did I hear the doors being tried out front or to the side of the house in the sunroom.

Mom walked down the steps and reached around for the hall light just behind one of the pillars. She glanced at the living room to her left, then the red room around the other side, then she walked heavy footed back upstairs. "There's nothing," she said groggily. Steven poked his head out of his room, which was set to the top right of the stairs, like a small companion to Mom's room. "What's going on?" he asked. His black, graphic tee shirt had holes in places and he wore his usual pair of white briefs, which were now beginning to part from the waistband. "Nothing's going on, honey," she said.

When Mom and Steven went back to bed, I stayed in Kit's room, looking out the window overlooking the two acre yard, covered in snow. I returned to my room before the sun came up and opened the window, feeling healed in the winter air, watching cars move in and the warm lights go on at the diner. A cool bath to temper a fever.

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Mom needed our help staying awake one night. Kit and I had been watching *Top Hat*. The film came near its end with the "Piccolino" dance number, which we weren't interested in because Astaire and Rogers were married by this point in the film and his pursuit of her had thus ended. The thrilling chase and all the romance was over. So we went to the kitchen and poured ourselves some Cran-Grape juice in wine glasses and began sipping delicately.

We heard "Girls!" plaintively

shouted from upstairs. It had the tone of a five year old's importunities to her parents. We went upstairs and Kit opened the door and we wandered in.

Mom sat on the edge of the bed with the sheets in disarray, as if they were involved in some struggle. I didn't bother imagining what had happened. I decided I'd set up a blockade in my head to conceal the thoughts I shouldn't have. But I never could block out the noxious smell that always hit us the moment we opened her door. It reminded me of our cat's litter box, or maybe peed sheets that hadn't been washed for weeks, or maybe just stale incense. I didn't like to let on that I picked up on the odor. I believed I wasn't supposed to know.

Mom swung her pendulum over her paper ouija board, looking down on it lovingly like it was her own universe. "What's going on?" Kit asked. Mom was silent as the pendulum swung vigorously. Kit asked again.

"Don't be afraid," Mom reported carefully, as if she were receiving morse code and translating it for us bit by bit. "I'm going to take your mother away for a while. . .but she'll be back." Mom shook her head. "I'm done with this," she said as she let the pendulum fall from her hand. That night she said she was "sick of being told what to do." "I'm an adult!" She said. "You have no right to make me do anything!" She was angry, tired of being harassed, yet Kit and I could see a smirk struggling betray her fiery demeanor. We passed a knowing look to each other.

Mom decided to enlist our help in fighting the domineering force. They had a tendency to pull her by force to her bed when she didn't comply, but this time Kit's and my muscles would help fight them. Mom was already sitting up so all we had to do was hold her arms on either side,

but the entities were strong and pulled her with a sudden push down on the bed. We tried to hold her arms firmly, but she jerked to and fro and pulled towards the bed. At one point her body snapped away from us like a catapult and she began running around the room squealing something in protest. We followed her trail, grabbing at her arms, tugging her away from the bed as she leaned in that direction, seemingly without her control.

As she giggled, I was uncertain if she was still under the influence of the spirits or if she even wanted our help still. Finally, her energy spent, she crashed on the bed with a long sigh. "You can go now." She said. In the hall, my face felt hot and my limbs were tired as if I had just gone jogging under a summer sun. I didn't realize how much strength it would take to fend off something that was invisible. I quickly lost the adrenaline as a sudden sadness swelled in me. I couldn't understand what it was about. Kit's face looked the way I felt. She went to the bathroom next to Mom's room and looked into the oval mirror, her brows knitted with sadness and irritation. Then tears and sobs burst free.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I'm just so tired of it." She said, lifting her head enough for me to see tenuous avenues in her face powder.

As she continued crying, I had a feeling that she was *truly* sick of the nights when Mom got out of hand, or Steven twitched and mumbled at demons. Maybe she knew there were problems with Mom's belief in her voices, the spirit realms, and the sage, and ouija boards. Maybe she was starting to suspect that something else was going on that couldn't be explained by ghosts. And maybe my resentment towards Mom was not

## The Blotter

simply jealousy like she believed. If Kit agreed, we could tell Dad what was going on. Even though he tried to make us watch modern films, what if we could still trust him somehow?

Kit's tears soon dried and ivory powder paved the avenues. We settled back on the sofa, staring blankly at the screen. I glanced at her from time to time. Her stoic expression never changed.

In the days that followed, we ate breakfast, went sledding, concocted games, and watched movies, without ever mentioning what had gone on with Mom. The noose wasn't mentioned much either until one early afternoon.

\*\*\*

The snow was melting away and the sun appeared around the house in patches through the curtains. We had watched *A League of their Own*, the only "modern" movie we were willing to watch, and it inspired us to dress up in our skirts and tee shirts and play baseball. I was getting dressed for a baseball game and Kit, meanwhile, went to the cereal cabinet, a white, six-foot-long structure with twin doors—old like most everything else in the house. On the middle shelf a jewel sat behind one of the cereal boxes. As with the noose, Mom was immediately consulted.

I could hear from my room a conversation taking place behind Mom's closed door. There were nerves like spores breezing in my stomach as I wondered what Kit was saying, what Mom was saying, but I didn't want to get close enough to hear. When Kit emerged, she walked down the hall to her room.

From my room, I watched her sit on her bed, first looking at the jewel in her palm and then searching one of her plastic bins for something. "What's wrong?" I asked as I cautiously walked

through the opening of the door. "It's a little jewel I found in the cabinet." She said tenderly. "I'm certain it wasn't there before. It just appeared for me to find." I sank beside her looking at the little square shimmering pink and sometimes blue and red. Kit let me hold it while she continued searching the bin. I ran my index finger along the soft velvet svelte on the back end and I clicked my fingernail on the iridescent plastic.

From out of the bin Kit pulled a ring box that was similar to the svelte in color and texture. "Mom thinks the spirit gave it to me as an apology for the noose." She said. The box was empty and she took the jewel and slipped it into the slot that once held a ring she got on her birthday.

The nerves in me were now dampened by the realization that I was powerless. Ideas root themselves so firmly that I would only hurt myself if I tried to pluck them out in one pull. I could only hope to slowly untangle myself from their grip.

On Kit's bed, I sat and nodded complacently as I half listened to her echo Mom's narrative of capricious spirits. I thought ahead to baseball, to Dad coming home off the road, to the next movie. I looked down at the open ring box and stroked the plastic with care, as if it were something special. ❖

## 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.

It's not a good time to keep a dream journal. It's not like many of us are sleeping well, having happy thoughts and wondering if they can remember what they dreamed to write down and keep for some sort of posterity, or as character development for some story or novel coming down the road. I snapped awake last night because the person to whom I was talking suddenly had no eyes worth mentioning and reached out for mine, and I just wasn't feeling that generous. I have dreamed, recently, that the grass out back was good enough for a meal, and I snatched fistfuls of it, put what can only generously be called lawn-clippings in a cereal bowl and went barefoot back into the house. Springtime is best, someone in my kitchen said to me. By summer it will be too full of silica. I don't know if that's true or not, and I don't want to know, I replied. Cows have two stomachs. Yes, the person said. And a horse walks on its toe. It lost all of the rest vestigially. I don't know if that's a word, I said, trying to prepare my lawn for consumption, searching in the cabinet for something. What, I don't know.

Madeleine D - cyberspace

# “Rabbit Town”

by Horia Pop

He said: ‘Never tell any boss you’re desperate to work. Because they will believe you’re so wretched you’re going to snatch some dough directly out of their pockets. Play it cool, be smart, pretend you’re interested but if they don’t have anything for you, that’s ok, cause you still got time. You want to work, that’s right, but you’re not here *to beg* for some work. Above all, don’t let them smell the slave that hides in every one of us when we’re down in the bottoms. That’s plain philosophy, kid.’

We were on the road. I had hitchhiked that afternoon from the caravan park where I slept, and from all the drivers the only one who stopped was a philosopher.

– Sir, it’s been weeks I’m looking for one, and I’ve already been in every farm in the area and...

– Are you still looking for one? he interrupted me.

– Yeah, sure, I answered too quickly, with as much conviction in my voice as I could afford then. But, I thought, could it not wait my afternoon booze first? That was the reason I had hitchhiked. To go to the shopping centre and get some cheap pack of beers.

– Well, I’ll drive you RIGHT NOW to some friend of mine. The only question is: ARE YOU MOTIVATED SON?

– Oh sure! THANK YOU SIR!

Next time, I should learn to keep my mouth shut...

He pulled over on the road and turned back. I could hear my cross being nailed somewhere close.

“Here it is, son. I reckon she’s

somewhere back there. Come with me.”

We arrived at a farm I had already been to, but I said nothing. I thought, they would probably recognize me and with a little luck I could go grab some booze and lay back.

A wrinkled over-tanned orange small lady walked towards us. I didn’t know her but I had a bad feeling inside.

– How’s it going mate? she asked.

– Fine thank you. Yourself? I asked.

But she didn’t bother to answer, ‘cause he took her a little bit further and started talking with her about my huge motivation, or something close to it I suppose. Next thing I heard was: “No worries mate I’LL TAKE CARE OF HIM.”

– Well goodbye, mate! said the philosopher, with a firm handshake.

– Goodbye! and thank you VERY MUCH!’ I replied.

So here I was: left on my own, with what looked like a supervisor to me. I craved to start running away, but instead I asked her as leisurely as I could: ‘What kind of fruits you grow in here, ma’am?’

‘No fruits mate. We grow carrots mate. That’s all there is in here: CARROTS.’

Well, I had been a dishwasher, in the heat and hell of the doomed kitchens of this little earth. A factotum, paid to clean up the dust in warehouses. A farmhand, employed to bend down low and die in the sun while picking up tomatoes, zucchinis, aubergines, grapes, pumpkins, chili

peppers and what else? I had worked my way into greenhouses so close to hell, the Devil himself shared my mad-laughter in the hot summer afternoons... So now what, carrots? It could *not* be worse.

Then, she explained the job to me: to each backpacker, a line. Into each line, carrots were supposed to grow. To grow well, each backpacker had to look and LOOK WELL, for any weed and take it out. In other words: the weed: bad. Carrots: Good. Easy does it.

It was my first day, very first hour and I went fast into my line. Money, money, money. I looked up and saw all the other backpackers way behind me. I was proud of myself. All the hard jobs had finally paid. These guys knew nothing of the pain in the sun. Here came the real man. Show them the way, Spartacus!

‘Hey mate! how’s it going for you?’ It was the over-tanned orange supervisor who woke me up from my dreams.

‘Great mate, really great. I think I like this job.’

‘Good to hear mate, but come with me, I want to show you something.’

‘No worries, mate!’

I followed her whistling one my favourite tune. My shadow was dancing on the ground and I had a big smile on.

Show me something? The john? The beers in the fridge? The way out?

‘See these things mate?’

‘No, not really.’

‘These things here mate.’

‘What things?’

‘THESE things!’ She pointed some strange little things, barely visible. I had to drop on my knees and look well. But even from that distance, I could not see what she saw.

'Uh?  
'HERE. And... HERE... And...  
HERE. HERE. HERE. And...'  
'Wait, do you mean THESE  
things?'  
'YEP, MATE.'  
'You mean I have to take THEM  
out too?'  
'THAT'S RIGHT MATE!'  
'Oh'  
'Go back mate and start it all  
over. And this time LOOK WELL. You  
got to clear EVERY WEED ON YOUR  
LINE.'

I walked back slowly. Very slowly.  
Meanwhile once or twice, I accidental-  
ly caught some of my new colleagues'  
smiling faces. It looked like they could  
not hide their happiness to see me  
back among them.

With my knees deep into the  
ground, and my pride a little bit deep-  
er, I started all over.

Five minutes later, I had a shad-  
ow over me. I felt her presence. I was  
bending over a tiny bitty little greenish  
thing that was to *become* some sort of  
weed. I held it on the edge of my little  
finger and examined it. It was barely a  
grain of dust. Perhaps the cousin of an  
atom. Some ersatz of weed at its best.  
Could that baby weed be dangerous  
for the carrots? I had to lift that weight  
from my shoulders.

'Is that BAD weed ma'am?' I  
asked.

'YEAH MATE, THAT'S BAD FOR  
THE CARROT. NOW YOU DIG IT!'

'Ah.'

'AND LEAVE NOTHING BEHIND  
MATE!'

It lasted three weeks. And then I  
felt it was time for me to move on  
once again. So I paid my debts to the  
caravan park, packed up my things  
and I went back to the first big city on  
the map. Wanna know how? By train.  
I've never hitch-hiked again. ❖

## Two by DAH

### "Paperclip"

What if clouds were afraid of heights  
and no longer participated in precipitation

What if the heart were not a beat but a song  
like a Siren calling you inward

What if when drowning in the sea we awoken  
to peacefulness never known before

What if when speaking words appear in the air  
so we can edit them before they are heard

What if along with seeing colors we could also  
feel and hear them too

What if our bodies were shaped like paperclips  
so we could attach ourselves to so much more

What if light is generated by darkness  
and we've been wrong about seeking the light

## “fragmented no. 32”

today is the hour / today,  
/ now on the verge of rising,  
of awakening

when i step / into the breeze  
with the sky sealed blue / and  
a light humming

of early bees / the lighter humming  
of earlier birds / and this is easy  
to imagine:

the body, as a cover, as cloth / as  
a basin or a river / these chains  
of emotions

attached, like zippers / and pulling  
like trains / the shapeless effect  
of moonlight,

a flickering ghost / a shaky hand  
/ and one's last breath, as a spell  
casting death.

i sit up in bed / as if a child asking  
for water, the extent of this dream  
above me / light years away.

in this space of near darkness  
streetlamps are faraway planets,  
as if light years away:

in this dream, i've cut my finger  
a glass cut,  
a papercut, a knife cut ... ?

## 'Kiss Ass:' (The Story of A & B)

A is always busy,  
Always so, so busy,  
And B wears a mask of wood.  
B doesn't know to kiss ass is to be a performance  
While A gets her philosophy hand-me-down.  
A has too many cogs inside her  
Like a Rube-Goldberg toaster,  
And B uses Miracle Grow on her memory.  
But B's tiny branches must scratch A's neck  
Even if she can't fall far from the 'me.'

Two by Michael T. Smith

## "Pink Flamingos" (In the Lawn)

Using the zoom like a drunk man,  
the cameraman cock-pecks at the world  
that he is never in --  
but like him, fields sit around the characters in it:  
divine and as regal as a planetary body.  
It's all a head-spin of glamorous proportions  
(but do remember the chicken is a very stupid animal).  
Meanwhile, Kibosh sausages hang off a dirty word --  
"it's garbage," sells the film  
(and one might debate, at the end of the day,  
that it's a complex form of sorrow),  
in which  
a century is displaced, in a very Freudian sense.  
These fat delinquents,  
licking upholstered couches thick,  
whisper to a camera too thin  
to capture the whole image,  
blinking its  
c\*\*\* eyes of unspoken gender.

# “Makerspace”

by Amanda Yanovitch

The new Jefferson University makerspace is pretty impressive. I went in last week thinking I would just build a popsicle-stick bridge or make some kind of project with whatever odds and ends they had. I’ve always been into arts and crafts. Instead, I ended up meeting a bunch of people and got completely new hair. Some people were doing crazy shit with the 4D printer—new arms, new eyes, new whatever.

I need to think more about who I want to be, I guess. My elementary school PATHS testing showed that I was a theatre kid instead of a STEM kid. My folks are both engineers, and I had always loved to build things. They panicked when the notice came:

Dear PARENTS OF FRANKIE SCANTLING,

Please review the enclosed results of your child’s PATHS testing. Our district has used this method of placing children into appropriate educational pathways for the last five years with great success. Research has shown that children thrive in structured learning environments free from distractions. Placing them into career tracks by age eleven has been shown to improve testing performance in middle school and is one way in which our district has successfully developed a workforce that...

Dad wasn’t going to have it. He went in to meet with Principal Ziege, and they went over each section on the test.

“Thanks for coming in, Mr. Scantling. I think—yes, please have a seat—I know this is very hard. It can be a quite a shock. I’ll just tell you this—defined pathways are vital to the well-being of children. We cannot choose their tracks. It’s our job to support them once they are placed in a track, but it’s highly detrimental to interfere with the placement.”

My dad asked Mr. Ziege to show him the first question:

DRAW A PICTURE IN THE BOX.



Dad swallowed. “What did Frankie draw?”

Mr. Ziege flipped to the answer sheet.



Dad stared. Mr. Ziege moved on to question two:

WHICH ONE DO YOU LIKE?

- A. Science
- B. Technology
- C. Engineering
- D. Math

Ziege put a finger to his temple. “Frankie didn’t pick anything for that one.”

“Well—could she have just, you know, skipped it? She’s nine years old! Maybe she got distracted?”

“Mr. Scantling, these kids all know how important PATHS testing is. We spend the entire second grade year preparing them for this.”

“But there are no theatre people in our family! My wife and I are both engineers!”

“Frankie is her own person. If PATHS says she’s a theatre kid, we all need to support that result. I’ve seen parents try to force kids down a track that the test didn’t choose. It never ends well.”

Dad fell back in his chair. “Frankie’s always loved to build. She’s always been an engineer. We got her the STEM infant pack with the BuildIT Pacifier. She memorized the entire Baby Archimedes video series before she could walk! She did science-based Pre-K and finished the Junior National Engineering Readiness Degree before she even started at this school! I mean... I can’t—”

When he got home, he and my mom went upstairs and didn’t come back down for hours. Mom eventually came down and hugged me and asked if I wanted dinner, but it was different. She never looked at me the same way again.

I decided that my first choice for college was the Sullivan Institute’s School for Theatre Arts. That’s where all the theatre kids went. It was a state school, and their theatre tech department was ranked third in the country.

Of course, it closed. All the schools that didn’t produce enough STEM majors got shut down. The only other school I could get into was Jefferson University. I came here for set design, but they axed the drama department in my first semester and turned the theatre into a planetarium. The green room is where kids go to barf if the motion of the universe makes them sick.

The theatre professor is still my advisor. When Jefferson closed the drama department, the administrators called her into a meeting to fire her. They apologized, but it wasn’t their fault, they said. Times were changing. They had no control over things, they said. No funding.

She stood up and placed her hands on the table. “This is the excellent foppery of the world,” she said, “that when we are sick in fortune—often the surfeits of our own behaviour—we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars, and adulterers, by an enforced obedience of planetary influence, and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on.”

It was Shakespeare, which she knew would confuse them, and it worked—the administrators nodded to each other, baffled. Then she sighed and told them that she had a minor in planetary science and was ready to roll out the new curriculum that very semester. They were pretty shocked, but also relieved since she was the only person on campus who knew how to work the lights and sound in the planetarium.

She smiles every time she tells us that story. She doesn’t actually have a minor in planetary science. She’s just a really good actress.

All of the students know this, but nobody is complaining. The fact that ASTR 101 is actually an improv class means that all the astronomy students are developing amazing interview skills. According to the Student-Customer Satisfaction report published by Jefferson last week, astronomy students now have the lowest rates of suicide on campus. The administration credited the new planetarium for increased student success.

Sometimes I sneak into the workshop behind the old stage. I flick on the fluorescent lights, let the tall doors close behind me, and breathe in the sawdust. It’s a makerspace cemetery. I think of the kids in the new makerspace. What are they printing today? ❖

Two by John Grey

“A Secret Society Forms”

In lieu of secret handshake,  
a salute was created.

To make the salute,  
you made a downward circular motion  
with your right hand,  
starting quickly  
but then wound slowly down  
to total stillness.

We referred to it  
as the whirlpool.

Whenever we came across  
each other in public,  
we saluted.

People looked at us  
like we were weird  
but that didn't matter.

It was a signal  
of recognition.  
We were all  
part of something.

All that something  
needed now  
was something to do.

“The Change In Life”

I surprise myself  
with how much  
easier it has been  
to fall in with  
the unified actions  
of others  
rather than going it alone.

It is gratifying  
to be part of  
the relief,  
the satisfaction,  
of belonging  
to the crowd.

And it makes less and less sense  
to try to free myself  
from the conviviality,  
the impetus,  
of this common identity.

Solitude had had  
its lonely day.  
It's time to embrace  
the group dictate.

I intend to give up writing poetry,  
join a gun club.

## "The Body In The Lake"

by John Grey

A body's floating in the lake,  
held up from below,  
illuminated from above.  
Fat sun, high mountains,  
and human detritus.  
Throw in a darting fish  
and a leaping frog.

A body merely rocks in place.  
It doesn't bask on a rock like the turtles.  
Or overhang as does the willow bough.  
The egret is on the slow, deliberate, march.  
But the carcass does nothing for its keep.  
There's less to it  
than a dragonfly  
snaring mosquitoes in the marsh grass.

Soon, a rescue team will arrive,  
fetch the corpse out of the water.  
The wildlife will keep their distance.  
But nowhere near the distance  
the body keeps.

continued from page 3

knowledge and thinking on my part (hence some more overlaps in my quadrants.) But I try to never confuse it with things that I think can be proven (yes, there is more mayo), and I am not troubled by the idea that details underlying beliefs are sometimes questioned by those who need more evidence, or proof. Or pose questions to me about what can or cannot be done.

That's a good start, I think. I don't know. I know I'll come back to this. I believe it has potential for being useful. Like I believe that things will get better. I think it will take time. I know that we've been through difficult times before, and come through them. I don't know how it will look at the end.

And I hope you are OK.

Garry - [chief@blotterrag.com](mailto:chief@blotterrag.com)

## Contributors

**Tom Sheehan**, in his 93<sup>rd</sup> year, (31st Infantry, Korea 1950-52; Boston College 1952-56) has published 48 books, has multiple works in many sites and magazines *Rosebud*, *The Linnet's Wings*, *Copperfield Review*, *Literally Stories*, *Indiana Voices Journal*, *Frontier Tales*, *Faith-Hope and Fiction*, *Green Silk Journal*, *Rope & Wire Magazine*, etc. He has 16 Pushcart nominations, 6 Best of the Net nominations (one winner). He was 2016 Writer-in-Residence at *Danse Macabre* in Las Vegas. Latest books released are *The Grand Royal Stand-off and Other Stories* and *Small Victories for the Soul VII* and *Poems and Reflections for Proper Bostonians*. In submission cycle are *Beneath My Feet This Rare Earth often Slips into the Far Side of Another's Telescope* and *Saugus, My Home Town*.

**Jillian Oliver** is a freelance writer and student from Wilmington, NC. She wrote and edited for publications such as *Movie Babble Reviews* and *Season Magazine* and her fiction has appeared recently in *Gargoyle Magazine* and *The Quail Bell Magazine*.

**Horia Pop** lives in Salon-de-Provence, France and currently works as a night audit and writes poems, plays and short-stories. When he saves enough money, he'll quit his job to travel again. His has set his mind on Kamtchatka and Antarctica, but hush, his mother still doesn't know it

**DAH** is a multiple Pushcart Prize and Best Of The Net nominee, and the lead editor for the poetry critique group, The Lounge. The author of nine books of poetry, DAH lives in Berkeley, CA, and has been teaching yoga to children in public and private schools since 2005. He is working on his tenth poetry book, which is due for release in September, 2020 from Clare Songbirds Press. To find out more, visit: [www.dahlusion.wordpress.com](http://www.dahlusion.wordpress.com)

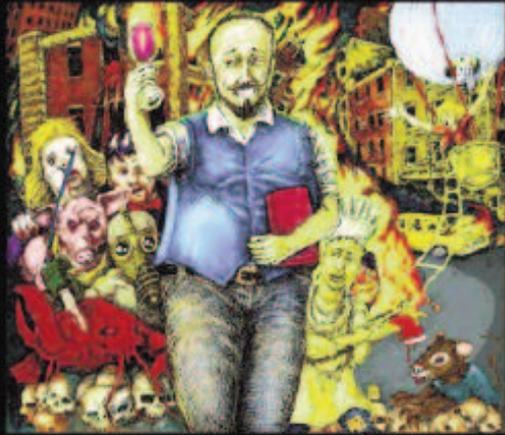
**Michael T. Smith** is an Assistant Professor of English who teaches both writing and film courses. He has published over 150 pieces (poetry and prose) in over 80 different journals. He loves to travel.

**Amanda Yanovitch** earned a BA and an MA in English from the University of Virginia and worked in publishing until she could no longer resist the urge to take up dry-erase markers and share the good news about composition and literature with students at John Tyler Community College. She lives near Richmond, VA and spends her days fighting to keep STEM from taking away all of the nice things.

**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Dalhousie Review* and *Qwerty* with work upcoming in *Blueline*, *Willard and Maple* and *Clade Song*.

**Bruce Baldwin** is an artist living in Cary, NC, working in watercolor, ink, color pencils and markers. His paintings and drawing have been on display in various locations with upcoming shows in Cary. Fixated on the world around him, his works are mostly of nature. Buildings, street scenes and life in general as seen through the eyes of North Carolinians are captured in the mediums Bruce employs. He'll have 30 paintings/drawings at The Bond Park Community Center, 150 Metro Park Dr, in Cary starting Wed, July 1, ending Mon, Aug 31 with the reception July 31 from 6 until 8PM.

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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...

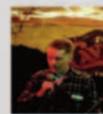
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