The background of the cover is a photograph of a two-story house with a white porch and a red door. The house is seen through a window with water droplets on the glass, creating a blurred, artistic effect.

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# The Blotter

magazine

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## “Low-Magnitude Problems”

When I was young, I had a problem with nosebleeds. Not from climbing too high in the rafters of a sports arena or taking a left hook in a boxing match, but just *because*. Sometimes from an unforeseen bumping, sometimes an idle finger. Sometimes even spontaneously, sitting at my desk at school, looking at a division problem on the blackboard and suddenly feeling something wet on the back of my hand, looking down and seeing the deep blush of red of what should only be happening with a battle-wound but was just my nose deciding to suddenly drip.

I dwelt somewhere between embarrassing and traumatic, as much as that word is overused. To me it was, anyway. Curious to my friends. Off-putting to my peers. Interruptive to my teachers. If I would have known these words when I was six or seven, I would have positioned myself with a head shake and a “what the fuck?” and embraced each event for what it was: a sideshow. That might have turned disconcerting into cool. But I never had that skill of timing and readiness with a remark. Few of us do.

Instead, I was appalled with myself whenever it happened – in the classroom, outside at recess – because it made people look at me, and that was bad. Not that I didn’t want people to look at me. I was pleased to spell words correctly during bees or catch a fly at kickball. I was happy back in the days when my school report card pleased my parents. (Less so later, when it reflected my scholastic... deterioration.) But my shock at...leaking life caused consternation. Nothing good comes from consternation.

Think of a time in your own life when circumstances felt like they gathered to pit themselves against you. Not against your best interests, but rather against you in the moment. Playing happily by yourself or with others – time to sit down on a bench with your head leaning back and somebody’s old tissues jammed against your nostrils. *Press hard – to curtail the flow!* Sketching a picture of a SPAD biplane in your composition book instead of doing your reading comprehension test – lean back again, more tissues, and why weren’t you doing your schoolwork?

Here’s what happened, back in the day, to skinny boys who bleed from time to time. Nothing. It was not the end of the Romanov dynasty and I didn’t hire Rasputin to help me get back into the Class Double-A kickball squad. I wasn’t held up to the scorn of the mob, and then scoured, tried and marched up the hill. I didn’t die, everyone attended my funeral and wept and gnashed their teeth at the loss of so much

potential at such a young age.

Yeah, right.

Occasionally I had to get out of the swimming pool. Sometimes, I couldn't go out and play basketball, or have friends over until it stopped. My mom didn't keep me in a bubble, or stuff a protective helmet down on my head. (Not that parents shouldn't do this, in certain circumstances.) She said, "you'll outgrow this." Which turned out to be true, but I don't know for certain that she actually knew this, or was feeding me a line of bullshit. If she was, it was a very good line of bullshit. My nose did stop bleeding. I stopped feeling like a dork, well, most of the time. And if I did feel like one, I learned to embrace the silliness of actually being one. My daughters will attest to that.

Conclusion? I'm somewhat foolish but not so much so to imagine that this is remotely the same as anything else that many people deal or have dealt with on a regular basis – that is, events that alter how we traverse our planet, that affect our perspective. Negative Issues that happen with such regularity that we tend to ignore them, unless or until they're happening to us. My situation was not even in the same ballpark. Of course, not everything in the universe needs to be compared – in competition – with everything else. A comment, an observation, a story, can be stand-alone. Even, or perhaps frequently, a character's conflict - human to human, human to nature, human to supreme being – can be low-impact and remain relevant. It is all in the telling of the tale.

And I would say that I was lucky, but I don't believe in luck. There are only truths and perceptions. I didn't know as much as I should about the former and try to hone the self-righteous judgment out of the latter. That's just me, though. Your results may vary.

**Garry - chief@blotterrag.com**

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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*CAUTION*

*Get it, yeab. Get a piece...*

## “When I was at Harvard”

by Chris Jansen

I’ve never been around Boston. I’ve been to Boston, but I’ve never been around. I send Marcia a Facebook message, asking if I could stay with her and she replies right away: *Yes! I’d love to have you stay with me!*

That’s what I want. A yes from some cool girl in a faraway city. I’m welcome, wanted, expected.

But I have misgivings. I remember when I was talking to XX from the conference. She said, oh you’re friends with Marcia. I hear she’s brilliant. She is. And nuts. Yes, that too.

“I’m staying with my friend Marcia,” I announce to XXXX, one of the office girls. This gets the feminine radar going.

“I’m not going to rape her though.” She looks at me like I just took out my penis and started beating it on her desk. “I’m just saying.”

Her indignation is replaced by the perverse interest of a cop.

“This is one of the cuddle girls?” she asks.

No, this is a different one.

She stares like a Sphinx. A woman staring at you saying nothing is an unendurable ordeal. It’s worse than waterboarding.

“I..I’m not doing anything with her. I mean, I’m sleeping on the couch. But she’s a little nutty.”

“Why would you be worried about it though, if you’re not planning on doing anything?” Huh, married person? No reason. I’m

just sayin’.

I have to remember to stop trusting people, especially women. It’s hard when they seem so trustable. They are all your mother. Trust me, I feed you don’t I? I have your best interests at heart. My friend Mooney says you can never fully trust a woman. Zora Neale Hurston says the same thing. You’d think by now I’d listen, but I still believe.

There’s work to do before I leave. I have to put the network babies, computer babies, and printer babies to sleep so they won’t cause trouble while I’m gone. The people-babies I have no control over. I leave work late and go to my in-laws to sleep but I haven’t eaten and there is nothing to eat but Dreamsicles in the freezer (despite the fact they are both diabetic), so I eat a couple Dreamsicles (despite the fact I am now diabetic) and scavenge a protein bar from my luggage. I put my clothes in the dryer, set my alarm for 3:30, 3:35, 3:42, and lie down, perversely hopeful.

I’m awake, what the fuck?...Slept through...No, it’s 3:15. Anticipation juicing my nerves. I get up and check the clothes. Still sopping wet. This is the first of things that can’t go wrong to go wrong. I turn the dryer to high and hit it again. Fuck!

The dryer is fucked. Now I have to leave my hoodie and half my underwear here and my

mother-in-law will complain that I’m a slob when I get home (which is kinda true), so I’ve got that to look forward to already. But there’s no time for truth now and I don’t want truth anyway. I want magic.

I ride through the country in the sacred early morning darkness, not one other car around. When I get to the straightaway I turn my lights off and stick my head out the window like a dog. The sky is alive with the soft white glow of stars, a living world that doesn’t exist until you turn the lights out. Darkness pulsing with light. Feeding, throbbing, moving light, points and haze, particles and waves and scattered blinking colors.

Chaos. The Atlanta airport is predictably insane. Families, vacationers with backpacks bulging with tennis rackets, business guys walking stiffly, trying not to mess up their pressed shirts. I love it. Boston, here I come, and quickly! A woman waits for me.

On board the plane I crawl into my window seat. To some people this is all a hassle on their way to wherever, but it’s always seemed like an incredible privilege to me, seated in a wide-bodied passenger jet, one of the everyday miracles of modern engineering, a sentient polyp in the gullet of this beautiful machine, watching rosy-fingered dawn come gently touching the dark horizon. I think of this song we did at the conference... “In Beauty it’s Begun” *It’s beautiful in front of me, it’s beautiful above me, it’s beautiful around me, it’s beautiful inside of me. In beauty, it’s begun.*

Two cute girls, all leggings and hoodies, come down the aisle and

pause at my row. Nice. For some reason I always seem to wind up next to a hulking divorced lady on her way to Orlando or an iced out 40-something black dude en route to Miami. They are doing the dance of overhead bins, reaching, shoving, pulling, slamming. These two 20-somethings. Not kids, maybe graduated graduate students, old enough to be flirtable, they talk and fret and adjust themselves in the privacy of their friendship, then fix their gaze at the problem in Seat 23A. I look up and smile, friendly and open. "Hi. Good morning!"

I'm a janitor at Athens Heritage nursing home. I'm sitting with Obie at the break table and he's glowing. He's just gulped down a bottle of Mr. Boston, which was his usual lunch, while I'm complaining about college, hoping he has some sage advice like the elder janitor would in the movies.

"White man's paradise," pronounces the great man.

"Not for this white man, Obe. You have to have money or be in a fraternity to get the girls."

Obie senses my despair. He knew being a janitor sucked, cleaning up diarrhea in a warehouse of death. He actually didn't have to work because he was married to a beautiful Filipino nurse he'd met in the navy, but he did the janitor thing to kill time and because he was about to have a daughter in college.

"Don't fret, young 'un," Obie says. "Someday your mind gonna make your money."

Did I really think it was money? No, I just said that. It was something I lacked and money

seemed like a thing. I was trying to say I don't fit in and it's this white man's hell. But what was it I really lacked? I think I imagined that someday someone would find my Woody Allen cosplay endearing and we would tell the world to fuck off and live happily ever after in some bee-loud glad. Just like in the movies.

\*

I can feel it. Alone, then delight, then shame, then sad. It's an ancient feeling, my first memory. I feel it, I feel it, no time has passed. Like a miracle.

\*

"Hi. Good morning!"

Uh-huh, one of them acknowledges on both their behalf.

They wiggle into their seats and click the belts.

I stare out the window again, but all the joy and wonder has fled, replaced by some ancient anxiety. The flight attendants are closing bins. There's the thud of the cabin door closed, and the engines whine to life. The plane shakes and we go backwards, then forward, lights dimmed. Turn, turn, slow. Line up. Cleared for takeoff. The engines scream and we roar down the runway. V1. Fully committed. Rotate, leaving the earth behind. That terrible sinking in the seat as we are hurled into the sky. There could be...could be...could come now...a bang and screaming and us all going down together. Shipmates, let us hold hands and say a prayer or a poem. I glance over at the leggings sisters, both engrossed in their phones. SAY SOMETHING, YOU IDIOT.

"So where are you guys headed?"

\*

I'm in New Jersey, at the Dodge Poetry Festival. I'm sitting in a pew in a large, ornate church converted to a performance space. At the altar Sharon Olds is reciting a poem called "Douchebag Ode." The blond loveliness beside me, earnest and sexy in her nerd glasses, seems enthralled, staring, smiling, joyful as I am, hearing Sharon Olds reading this amazing poem in this beautiful place! After she finishes her reading there is an awkward pause and I start talking to this girl. There was a time when I was using when I would do this, try to chat up the ladies. She goes to NYU (I dreamed of going there and studying film when I was young), just here for the day. Studies literature. Sharold Olds changed her life.

Lunch break. We leave at opposite ends of the pew, and I wind up behind her in the crowd. She doesn't know I'm there. She says to the girl next to her, "Did you see I made a friend," and they share a knowing, disgusted look.

Oh sorry, I forgot. I forgot who I was. I thought I could be a human being with all the rights and privileges thereunto, but you reminded me. Thank you, NYU girls. Thank you. Only fentanyl could make a person believe those obvious lies: You are loved. You are enough.

But...I was sick then, insane. Things will be different now. I'm clean and sober and filled with the beauty of life.

\*

Iceland.

They are going to Iceland. *Iceland* for god's sake! I want to go

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to Iceland someday. I ask about their trip, how they decided to go there. The basic interview.

A while. Yeah. Hope so. Uh-huh. Thanks. (Earbuds held close to the ear-hole, not set in the lap.)

When my wife would go on too long I would tell her in my kindergarten voice, “talking time is over now.” I get that vibe from them and go back to staring out the window at the concrete and diesel drama of the busiest airport in the world, full sunrise now: pink, red, orange streaks reflecting on the terminals and the jet bodies. The promise of a new day, a new beginning.

I hear one of the girls say “Janet Wilkerson.” Did you just say Janet Wilkerson? Oh I know a woman...wait are you guys from Athens? (Of course.) Small world.

They are graduated grad students going on a celebratory trip. Janet Wilkerson, whom I know from the gym, is a very nice lady, very Christian and it turns out they know her from church. They do a lot with the church. (Putting God first in their life, no doubt.) Athens, friends, travel, Isn't it great we have some things in common to chat about? *Talking time is over now.* Iceland.

I spend the rest of the time staring between 40,000 feet out the window and the 4 foot distance down to Miss Iceland's black leggings and milky ankle bones ringed with a blue fringe of sock—somehow much further away than the ground. It comforts and consoles me.

\*

We land in Boston and they collect their stuff and leave fast.

The one who was beside me, whom I chatted with down the aisle, looks back and waves bye over her shoulder without looking at me like you would passing a homeless person. That's the hot privileged Christian girl's version of “Nice talking to you. See you around.” Who would Jesus disdain? The God of this world reveals herself, you just have to pay attention.

\*

Boston! Not Iceland, but not bad. I have a flashback of being in this airport years ago when I was possessed by the goddess of heroin. My credit card was declined at the rental counter and my phone had been cut off for lack of payment. I got through like I got through the last twenty years. Somehow. My credit is good now. I don't have to shuck and jive and make excuses. Got my car and turn out of the underground parking lot into a bright cool day and...what the fuck these crazy drivers! What the hell...I feel like even my GPS is freaking the fuck out. Turn right. Keep straight. No, STRAIGHT. These motherfuckers are crazy! I turn off into some shitty south Boston neighborhood that makes me feel at home since ghettos are the same in every city all over the world.

There's a large hospital complex, gleaming glass and steel. A sign: “Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary.” Oh I know that! Prize of residencies and one of the most illustrious teaching centers in the world. If I could only have been less fucked up in school I might have become a doctor here and then my life would be gleaming glass and stainless steel and my dad

would be proud of me.

I turn onto a bridge. The Charles River. I remember an immunologist saying that when a child is born they should put a drop of water from the Charles River under his tongue thus immunizing against a wealth of nasty bugs. I see an elderly black guy trudging purposefully across the bridge, scraggly beard like Spanish moss, clothed only in a white sheet like a Greek philosopher on his way to the *agora*. Maybe he is.

\*

It's been a long day already, worthy of any given Odysseus, and I've now driven around the block three times and I can't find Marcia's place and there is of course nowhere to park and walk to wherever the hell it is. I know it's on “School street” and I see a school but not her. I turn down Berkeley, up Prescott, onto Oxford. Even the streets are pretentious here. I text her I'm close but lost and she replies, kind of impatient, that it's right there and there is parking right in front (dumbass).

I'm here. She runs out to meet me and she's wearing a flowing green dress and brown strappy wedges. A pretty girl is expecting you and she got fixed up. There are few pleasures in the world more satisfying. If there is a heaven, the vestibule will give of this.

“You found me!”

I did. I'm home.

\*

I'm exhausted, no sleep, parking, plane train, cunt, Christian girls, Boston, rental, but Marcia's dress wakes me right up. Oh and...what does this mean

exactly? She was so enthusiastic about my staying with her...And she looks so delectable. Should I rape her right away or save it for later?

I'm running on fumes here, perfumes. Marcia's place is a beautiful old house in Somerville, up on a hill with a small porch and a view of the city. Inside she shows me some of her woodworking creations, big, heavy things for the kitchen, crafted with skill. A comfy couch and a bookshelf full of poetry, including some of mine. It's just perfect. I note a few empty Jack Daniels airplane bottles scattered by the window.

I collapse into the comfy couch. Marcia plops down next to me and fingers the charms on my bracelet. The way she sits and flirts. Definitely asking for a rapin'. And yet there is something perverse and contemptuous in it that keeps me from seizing the moment and her tits.

She gets up to go to the bathroom and I lie down on the couch. Not for sex appeal, I'm just fucking exhausted. She comes back and pounces on me but there is still some strange distance. She is lying on top of me, soft and warm, knowing so many things. Did she learn this at Smith? Suddenly I remember her father passed away since I last saw her. I think about when I lost my mom. I wanted something. Some sympathy from a pretty girl. I wound up married.

"Marcia," I say to her canine face hovering over me like the moon. "I'm so sorry...about your Dad."

"Huh? Oh. Right." This does not compute.

The delight leaves her eyes,

replaced by a reptilian apathy as she extricates herself from my arms.

I sit up. What the hell. Sorry (?).

She hands me her guitar. "Can you play something for me?"

Last time we were together at the conference I played and played and we even wrote a song together and she danced while I played. I was mostly high out of my mind on Oxycontin.

I take it, strange, in my arms. It's one of those cheap boxy ones like my first guitar, which needed constant tuning and was impossible to play.

Marcia grins like a jackal. I haven't played since my wife brought me my 12-string in rehab. My hands are claws. I know a little of this, that, start a song, can't finish. She seems delighted by this. And I'm so, so tired.

I give up on the guitar. How about some boxing instead?

I packed my gloves and mitts to do some boxing with the poetry conference folks. They desperately need it. Maybe this will wake me up.

Marcia has done a little boxing before and she has her dancer's proprioception. I'm trying to imagine the two-standard-deviation Aspies taking her dance classes at MIT and Harvard. Oh the earnest Port De Bras. Oh the lacklove masturbatings. A girl.

I start her out with stance, then we work on a few punches. She picks it right up and I can see she enjoys the punching. It's fun working closely on mitts with someone. With guys you're providing a kind of male nourishment, like those tribes in

New Guinea where as part of their initiation young men drink the blood of older men. Blood is male milk. With women it's like dancing. Only with punches. Blood and dancing.

We've graduated to punching and slipping and Marcia looks every bit ready to start sparring when I "gas out" as the fighters say. I shed my mitts and drop dead on the couch.

"I'm sorry," I say. "It's been a long day. I think...I need to rest."

I collapse onto comfy couch again, but this time I'm really spent. I need to rest before the bell dings for the next round.

Again she seems amused by my weakness. No mercy.

Marcia disappears and I lie back on the couch and stare at the ceiling. What now, God?

I lie there a long time. I could almost sleep, almost, almost.

I go to pee and see Marcia's door closed. She must be in her room. Should I go in there and do some raping? I lie back down instead.

\*

Marcia appears in the doorway, now in t-shirt and sweatpants, her black hair mussy like a wolf spider that's been roused by something in its web.

"I took a nap."

I see. Sleep is preferable to my company. I feel the same way and wish I could have napped.

Why don't we go to dinner? She changes and we head out, a strange couple questing for something.

\*

The lights of Somerville have

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turned on for us. Marcia gives me random facts as we stroll along.

“Do you know what the call you if you are from Somerville?

What?

“A Somervillain.”

She looks like a Somer villain.

“Do you know what you are if you’re from Cambridge? A Cante Bridgian.”

It’s like the world’s smallest MENSA meeting.

[Two years later I will meet a hot blonde who tells me she’s from Cambridge and I will say oh you are a Cante Bridgian and she’ll look at me like I’m an asshole.]

Marcia suggests some dirty sandwich joint but I want DINNER, so we keep walking. Ah, darkness and light and tables. “Machu Picchu Fine Peruvian Cuisine” Perfect!

\*

I don’t think Marcia is used to this. Probably no one under 40 is. It seems oddly formal, like from an old movie. I mean hey, we’re not getting engaged or anything, so why go someplace nice? Mooney would say I’m a slave to old-order thinking, that this is the transaction part of transactional sex. He may be right, but I like it. I like class. I like nice. I’m nostalgic for beauty. Magic. Sue me.

\*

At dinner we talk about our hometowns.

“I grew up in a shithole.”

“Nice. I grew up in a swamp.”

I’ve never had Peruvian food before. Why would I, when there was a McDonald’s on every corner? But I wanted to try it and I have tried it and I like it and I want to try it again sometime.

\*

Night now. The long-love of a summer day conquered by darkness. We begin walking home. Did I mention I was tired? It doesn’t feel right to hold her hand. She would probably think it was quaint or even patriarchal. We pass a pretty, old house, with a wraparound porch, lights in the windows, warm and inviting. Every house seems like home as we wind our way back.

“I want to show you something,” she says. Hmm.

We turn away from home and she walks faster. “Here...”

Out of the darkness emerges a woody hill, right in the middle of this flat urban landscape.

Marcia scrambles up the mountain, her strappy heels making little landslides in the dirt. She’s surprisingly spry, but then her dancer’s body is accustomed to knowing where its feet are.

At the top of the hill there’s a fence with a NO TRESPASSING sign and a building that looks like a tiny castle.

“They are doing construction, but we can...hold on...” Next she’s on the ground, her dress in the dirt, rolling under the chainlink.” On the other side of the fence she smiles at me. Come on.

But I can climb and roll on the ground and jump too. I’m in such good shape I could bear-crawl up and down this place. I jump up and dust myself off. I’m strong. I’m a man. My body has been honed from hours and hours in the gym and I’m proud of my strength.

“This is Prospect Hill. It was a thing during the Revolution. Supposedly Washington flew a flag here.”

I’m looking.

“But they took it down for the construction.”

We stand in the darkness at the top of the hill, removed from the world of busy evening below. The Boston skyline lies on the other side of the distance.

Well. Here we are.

“Let’s go,” she says, and scrambles back down the hill.

Back into the flat world below.

\*

We get home and the house is dark. She doesn’t turn on a light. In the front room we hug and hold each other close in the darkness. I move to kiss her—and she looks down, the same way Jen did that time. I kiss her forehead anyway. I feel like laughing for some reason. People are always how they are.

“You’re such a funny girl, Marcia,” I say, into her hair.

She’s about as funny as rectal cancer.

\*

The couch wasn’t bad, but when morning finds me I’m still exhausted. I didn’t sleep. Maybe too tired. Maybe the reminder of who I am. Still am. Despite everything.

No time to reflect on The Problem now. It’s a three-hour drive to Damariscotta, so whatever I’m going to do I need to get going. I go for one of those ridiculously long morning pees and wind up staring at this plaque above Marcia’s toilet. I like it so much I take a picture so I can remember it.

Marcia appears in the hallway with her white skin and long black mane, looking like that girl in The Ring. She seems completely rested

and ready to torment me for the day.

Somerville is even more charming in the gentle morning light. Summer mornings in Georgia are always a reminder that the sun hates you and wants you dead. But today I am loved. We walk to her favorite breakfast place and get the biggest plates they have from a surly old waitress and cook who remind me of Flo and Mel from Mel's Diner.

"Don't say what everybody says when I say this," I warn her.

She gives me a 'no promises' look.

"I want a pet monkey."

"They're terrible pets. That would be awful."

"I told you not to say it."

"I used to work with monkeys," she sniffs. Of course. She's done everything. "They're mean. And manipulative."

"You got to *work* with monkeys?"

"Yeah, it was a volunteer job. I got to know them and their personalities and they got to know me. They would triangulate relationships. Like play one against the other and use me as currency. They're terrible."

Not at all like humans, who are so well-behaved.

I won't be dissuaded though.

"I know. Everyone tells me it's a terrible idea, but I don't believe them. What about those people in wheelchairs who get disability monkeys."

Contempt. "Do you have a disability?"

Oh the fantasy. Oh the reality. If you only knew.

"Yeah. I have a crippling lack

of monkeys in my life."

I pay and we're off to explore the town. We work our way south across Somerville, through pretty sunlit streets and more homes. The houses give way to a few crisp, clean buildings that look classical and modern at the same time, wide green stretches of neatly trimmed lawn between them. This is a college campus.

I start seeing students, parents, unmistakable in their just beginnings and beginning to endings. Parents no longer believe in their future—in fact, there is something pathetic about those who do—but they do believe in their children's. Looks like they are setting up for a commencement on the lawn. A few deliriously happy looking kids strolling around in cap-and-gown.

Marcia moves fast for a runt. I have to power-walk to keep up with her.

We come to another old-new Greek revival-style building that reminds me of the UGA main library.

"So this is..." I say to the back of her head. I stop to read the inscription in the granite.  
LANGDELL HALL HARVARD LAW SCHOOL

"This is Harvard."

I...I'm overcome. I just...this is it. That mythical place, the holy of holies, shorthand for perfection, for unassailable success. If I went to school here my dad would be proud of me, and I'd be worth something. —No, that's not true. But it feels true to the retarded boy who lives inside me.

"I used to teach here, you know," she says. "Dance."

"That's wonderful, Marcia. Really wonderful." I say this because it's true.

All the fatigue of the last two days evaporates. I'm giddy. I could skip. I could dance. But not just because my vanity and grandiosity are being fed, although they certainly are, but because I'm in a special place, a place where people have thought seriously about things. T. S. Eliot walked here, and William S. Burroughs, and Thoreau. Teddy Roosevelt. Kennedy. And Robert. All these names, characters that inhabited the blessed country of thought, so far, far away from the swampy shithole where I grew up. (And yet wasn't there music?) Now here I am, walking in the shadow of these illustrious names with a pretty ballerina used to teach here, who thought it worthwhile to spend some time with me, if only for sadism purposes. Retarded Boy is pleased.

"That's John Harvard," she says, pointing at a statue with a long line of people standing beside it. "They are rubbing his foot for luck."

I want to rub John Harvard's foot too but it's a long line and who needs luck anyway. I think back to summer last year. Snorting fentanyl and "falling out," unconscious, then miraculously coming-to so I could snort more. I'm already luckier than I deserve.

We hustle under a stone gate on our way to wherever she is taking me. A bustling sun-struck street. I turn back and look up at the inscription: ENTER TO GROW IN WISDOM.

We merge with the stream of sidewalk strollers. It feels like there

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is a hidden trajectory in our steps and we are suddenly standing in front of a bookstore. One word stands out.

“Oh look, they have a *poetry* bookstore!”

Marcia seems both unaware of this place and unsurprised at the same time, a point of pride for her to show disdain for anything I'm enthusiastic about, even something she so clearly loves as well, and the love of which make us both a little odd and by my calculus should have us taking refuge in each other but for some reason she strictly avoids at the risk of making the world a slightly less painful place to die in.

“Wow!” I blurt out like the bumpkin I am. “Wow.”

A store about the size of my childhood bedroom but walls stacked and crammed up to the high ceilings with volumes and volumes of books and people and things I love.

“Marcia, look...” I'm pointing at a first edition of e. e. cummings on a high shelf.

“He spent a lot of time here,” says the severe-looking grand dame behind the register. “This was his hang out when he went to Harvard, and later as well. He delivered the six nonlectures right across the street.”

I think about my intense adolescent loneliness. Feeling so weird inside, estranged from the girls but so unlike the other boys. But when I read my first Cummings poem, “since feeling is first / who pays any attention to the syntax of things...” I got a glimpse of some kind of home.

“Conrad Aiken used to live

upstairs,” she goes on. “And, of course, T. S. Eliot.”

T. S. Eliot!

T. S. Eliot was my constant companion in high school years. I had memorized Prufrock for the pleasure of it, then *The Waste Land* because I thought it would impress girls or something. I was a lonely boy. But in the gnats and the heat and the bullies and the untouchable beauties and the constant, oppressive stupidity, I walked and talked with Eliot. Now here I was, browsing the same shelves, breathing the same air as Thomas Stearns Eliot! And yet it wasn't that this place or any place had some essence, “contagious magic” as anthropologists have called it, it's that we wound up here. I found the beam and followed it home, like with the Conference. It seemed ordained by God.

Marcia lets her disdain go for a minute, genuinely enjoying the browsing. It's nice to enjoy what I enjoy alone only with someone. It may be the happiest I've ever been.

This place isn't large but feels vast, filled as it is with so many small books of verse. It's just...filled, absolutely filled with intensity, beauty, like poetry itself. In one corner of the store there are these broadsides (that's a poem turned into a poster, with stylized lettering and decoration) and they look—wait I know these! There's a poem by Coleman Barks, my old poetry professor. I signed up for his class at the University of Georgia simply because I like the name and the class changed my life. And the broadside itself, I recognize that too! The shimmering green ink, the

poem's floating in luminescence against the paper...It was made by my conference friend Robert Smyth. I didn't know...And next to it there is one of Tony's poems, “Into the Mystery.”

I browse, high. I was meant to be here. I was summoned. Wasn't I?

I pick up a small chapbook. “The Dregs.” I wind up buying the book, something to take home like proof of my real life. Some poets souvenir of life is now my souvenir of life.

We spill out onto the street and I'm conscious of time again. I need to leave soon to get to the camp in time enough to register, claim a bunk and recharge. It's so beautiful though. Just a bit longer.

“Too bad you have to go,” says Marcia, with a dreamy smile. “We could go visit Walden Pond. I could show you around there.”

Visiting Thoreau's Walden is tempting as a side adventure to this side adventure, but skipping out on the conference, dead-tired, so I can be the human version of a German shepherd following Marcia loyally around on the vague promise of sensual delights is too much, even for me.

“Maybe if I get back early, or...another time.”

On the way back we cut through a building on the Harvard campus. Colleges are surprisingly open places. I stop to peek in an office, look around at the desks and knick-knacks. Take in a deep breath. This is what it smells like in a Harvard professor's office. It may seem silly but it's just so far away from my cracker childhood, throwing dirt clods at other idiots, our ears and eyes crawling with

gnats like the yellow dogs that were everywhere. Strays.

We are skipping back across the elegantly manicured campus.

"I'm really happy," I hear myself say. "You know. This has been a wonderful day. I'm so lucky and grateful to be here." It's such a silly thing to say. But it's true. It's the truest thing I know right now.

I pause, wanting some acknowledgment, agreement, some *gemutlichkeit* (that's a word I used in my last book and you should start using if you haven't already), but Marcia is femininity itself: endlessly dissatisfied with you and your lame thoughts, feelings, ideas, and physical presence.

"And I just realized something—now I can start saying 'when I was at Harvard. . .!' It's technically true! I'm going start dropping that into every casual conversation."

This earns an amused grunt.

On the way back we cut through Cambridge and I remember the e. e. cummings poem about "the Cambridge ladies, who live in furnished souls." Then we actually pass a placard saying cummings lived here with the selfsame poem on it. Weird. Maybe out of spite for the poet, but Cambridge seems actually quite charming. A girl walks by us, pretty and unadorned, twisted hair and frowny face, with her big braless tits wagging in a thin belly shirt.

"I see underwear is optional here," I joke.

Load feminism.exe. "Why shouldn't it be? Should women have to make themselves uncomfortable just for your comfort?"

"I know people have the right to do whatever...it just seems...impolite, I guess. I wouldn't walk around with my junk out."

"Women don't exist as sexual objects for you."

"Right...You know I wonder where e. e. cummings house was. . . " I take out my phone. "It's...Irving Street and we're on. . ." We are standing in front of a large, understated grey home with a high fence. This is it!

Just then a highly appropriate Volvo station wagon pulls in and a middle-aged guy with a shaggy gray mane emerges. I think that's \_\_\_\_\_, the famous psychologist. I'm pretty sure it's him. \_\_\_\_\_ lives in e.e. cummings old house! This is one crazy dream. He looks friendly. Should I go up to him and ask if there's such a thing as free will? Nah.

Marcia goes up to the guy.

"Hi, I'm Marcia and this is my friend Chris. He's from Georgia."

Hi, I'm Chris. I crawled out of a swamp.

I'm still unsure if this is \_\_\_\_\_ or not, but he's awfully friendly. We ask about the house and he confirms it was e.e.'s. He says Julia Child lived down the street and when they cleaned out her house he went through the garbage and took a rolling pin.

Well this was very nice. Ersatz \_\_\_\_\_ couldn't be more friendly but he's a busy guy and we must be going too.

"So...no ghosts in the house or anything, right?" I ask haha-ly.

"Well. . ." The famous rationalist pauses and his brilliant eyes brighten. "There was

something odd that happened a few years ago."

?

"We heard this noise, a knocking from inside one of the walls. We were doing remodeling at the time, but we couldn't figure out where it came from. Then when we opened that wall we found a letter. A love letter. From cummings to his wife."

It feels like I'm killing our baby, the adventure we could have had, but I have to go. The novelty of Harvard has worn off and I'm just a tired person getting into the car for a long drive. With some googling I find guy we met wasn't \_\_\_\_\_, but he looked like him and I wanted him to be, so he was. We never found T. S. Eliot's house but it was there somewhere.

"I've got an idea," I say.

Say what you will about Marcia, she's always up for an idea. And one thing you don't know about her is that she was banned from the conference last year but showed up anyway, never registered but just sort of hung around. "I'm going rogue," she told me.

The conveners eventually flushed her out of wherever she was hiding and gave her an extra-double-perma ban but there continued to be rumors that she was hiding somewhere in the woods and someone had seen her by the picnic table or behind the dining hall.

"Let's take a picture, you and me, in the car like we are headed out, and I'll tag it with 'to the Mother conference or bust'." It's a diabolical plan. She loves it.

We say goodbye. I post the

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picture of us on Facebook and tag it “#tothemotherorbust” and take off.

Two minutes later I’m turning onto the highway when my phone starts rattling and chirping with texts, calls. DMs. Multiple lines calling. I answer one.

Ultra-casual. “Hellooooooo?”

Frantic voice.

“Chris...it’s...Janet, are you...”

“One sec, Janet, I’ve got another call.”

Pure panic. “Chris! it’s Tracey! we heard, I mean...*Is Marcia with you!?*”

I’m not sadistic enough. “It’s a joke, Tracey, we just hung out in—

Pure relief. “IT’S A JOKE,” I hear, echoing in some room. “He was joking! It’s a joke...well, uh ok, look, drive careful then...ah see you soon.”

I set the phone down, gone back to death as quickly as it had erupted.

I’m alone again, going somewhere, trying to find home. Would I be happier driving with the tang of Marcia’s pussy on my tongue? Or would it just make me hungrier and more empty? I think and think. Was my fear that she was dangerously nuts justified? Was I paranoid, thinking something monstrous would grow from any brief, sanitary pairing?

I recall a girl from the conference I used to catch staring at me. It was the girl-look, do you know it? As if they are under some spell. It’s bizarre and somewhat frightening, primal instinct, unmoored from reason, begging for something like a dog at the table.

“I’m going to get you,” it says, “any way I can.” Until it’s over. Then the [www.blotterrag.com](http://www.blotterrag.com)

same spell is re-woven in backwards Latin like a Black Mass: “I’m going to punish and destroy you by any means necessary.”

Back to this girl. She was cute and lithe and young and soft-skinned and slightly nuts in a sexually promising way. I saw her, felt this great magnetic attraction, never did anything about it and she was gone. Months later I saw she wrote a long Facebook about how it was perfectly appropriate to withdraw consent *after* sex. That is, you could enthusiastically consent during the humpy-hump but afterwards decide you’d been raped. Perfectly reasonable. Encouraged even.

I thought about Nicole, my earliest memory. I must have been on back for a nap or something because I was staring up at the sun, a baby, thinking, well, here I am, this is what life is like. A figure leaned over me, blotting out the sun. A smile, delight. Golden hair, strange and magic like rays from the sun. I reached out to touch her but she was gone.

What did I want? Pleasure, tenderness, wholeness, acceptance. Communion. Intimacy. Love. Same as any male widow spider setting out on a journey. I’m grateful Marcia didn’t fuck me, because then she would have been compelled to snap my head off and eat me, and I need my head for whatever’s to come.

It’s a beautiful drive up the coast. There are high grey granite cliffs exposed like the bald heads of philosopher kings. The trees can’t cover them over, or they were cut into for a highway. Anyway, they are there, inexorable, implacable.

Like a truth that cannot be denied.

T. S. Eliot said, “Humankind cannot bear very much reality.”

*Iceland, Iceland, I’m coming...*

New heading: compass north, to the Conference on the Great Mother and the New Father. To the Mother or Bust. ❖

# “Request for Proposal”

by Jason Sallinger

*Author’s Note About This Submission: Request for Proposal would be classified simply as Horror. Black Comedy would be wrong. But I did try to incorporate some comic elements. So that your readers weren’t alerted as to what is coming (there is a bit of a twist in its short path), I might instead choose the genre, Appalachian Misadventures.*

*For a brief summary, I might say this is a class struggle; to expound somewhat I might say it is a cautionary tale for urban professionals, so that they take care to be alert when selling their wares in the backcountry.*

*I conceived this work as a framework for an excuse to use the neighbors’ names in print. Since a trip to the NC coast this past summer, I had been savoring the name Slumpy Jacks.*

*Slumpy Jacks was a name I used to refer to a busboy (busman, really) who had chewed my and Alicia’s ears as we transitioned between fried seafood and the paying of the bill. In the matter of 10 minutes we learned of his move from the suburbs of Boston; love lost; trouble with drugs.*

*Months later, I asked Alicia what we had used as a moniker for the busman. Slumpy Joe? Skimpy Pete? She lost patience with my guesses. But when I hit the combination of Slumpy Jacks I knew I*

*should write it down. The rest is here before you.*

\*\*\*

Gerald Hoskins’ team arrived at the cabin in Wersmire Village. He was planning to have this meeting take no longer than half an hour. He wanted to be back at the office with enough time to file the proposal, and leave early for home.

Morty walked over to Gerald’s car to meet him as he got out. “You sure this is the place, Gerry?”

The cabin didn’t look like most (or any) of the meet sites where Colson Engineering made house calls. The cabin looked to be made of wood, mottled with what might be a dark moss. There were a couple of places where it looked like sections of outer beam were cut out. Gerry thought he could hear faint music coming from inside the cabin. “Yeah. They said this is their *decidin’ ball*”. Gerry raised his eyebrows at the descriptor.

Jonas caught up to them from Morty’s passenger side. “Wow. Get a load of this place.” They each slowly took in the four other buildings in sight. “What is that, a bank? We couldn’ta met there instead?”

“Easy, Jonas.” Morty let out a barely audible chuckle, as he usually did when Gerry admonished the younger associate. “OK. Should be a standard meet n greet. Jonas, take some notes.”

As Gerry approached the door he noticed it didn’t have any signage. It was customary for him to simply enter the building where these meetings were taking place. And, the cabin door had no fastening mechanism from the outside - just a vertical handle. The girth of the logs that made up the door and outer walls didn’t look to be given to knocking. Gerry tried an open slap, and another, then called, “Hello? Colson Engineering!” The door had no give and was, in fact, very solid.

“Oh, yeh-yea-ah”, he’d heard from inside. Gerry waited a pregnant pause then assumed to open the door.

Two things became quickly apparent as the heavy door swung with a creak: what he thought before was the scent of the diner across the street was instead a strong odor of meat cooking from within this cabin. Gerry cooked a fair bit himself and did not recognize what meat it could have been. Secondly, his ears did not betray him; he had heard music from the outside. He now identified it as some piano- and banjo-based, faster-than-mid-tempo instrumentation. He focused on a sole man inside. Gerry caught the eye of who he presumed was the one that made the call. “Gus?”

“Dat’s right. You Jeery, right?”

Morty caught the mispronunciation right away. Jonas was too busy taking in the interior of the cabin to notice. Gerry decided that now was a time to let it slide. He’d heard many variants of his name.

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Gus was close enough. "Yes, sir." Morty became uneasy at Gerry's discretion. He had been reading a number of self-help books that promoted assertion. He knew that Gerry was not one to roll over on anything. Morty then remembered Gerry's rule of trusting his decisions. He still felt on edge.

"Cole, Chawse, they here." Gus said these words as if they spilled out of his mouth in a slow puddle. Simultaneously two other men came out of separate doorways, on either side and just behind Gus, who was standing in front of the cast iron wood stove. The timing of these men appearing as if waiting for a command further worried Morty. Jonas had his back to these men, looking at an old black and white photograph on the wall.

Gerry smiled, "Gentlemen?" He walked forward and gave a manila folder to Gus. 'Always be closing', he thought. The way these men appeared was a bit odd. They could start hoe-ing down to this music, as long as he could get them to sign.

Gus took the folder, opened it and quickly scanned the first two pages. He then placed the folder on the filing cabinet in the corner. Morty thought it out of place that there was a filing cabinet next to a stuffed falcon and under a hanging of large antlers. Jonas had finished with the photograph and was now looking back and forth between the two men that were new to him. He was caught up in playing a game of *See If You Can Find All The Differences In These Two Pictures*.

Cole and Chawse both had overalls, yes. The one on the right didn't have one side of his bib fastened. They both wore what looked like train engineering caps. The one on the right wore his hat slightly off center. Jonas estimated this hat was rotated 18 degrees left of center and maybe 15 degrees higher than the one on the left.

Gerry continued, making an effort to disguise his exasperation that Gus appeared to be less than ready to settle matters. "I believe you mentioned that this new road will connect at the existing intersection out in the town square."

"Now, I don't see pruhvision to kinneck our people's property."

"I'm sorry. Which property?"

"We gots 5 houses ah kinneck." Cole and Chawse both crossed their arms. Jonas delighted in this symmetry. Morty did not.

"I see. So, that's fine. This isn't something we discussed in our call on Friday. We can add them to the estimate. We'll need names and addresses so we can put it into the proposal." He turned to Jonas. "Write this down, Jonas."

"Eh kay. Lessee what we got. Chawse, you rememberin who a kinneckin?"

Chawse identified himself as Cabinman, Stage Right, by motioning with his right hand while mouthing what seemed to be counting. "Uh, so. We got. Stumpy Joe..." He shook his head a couple of times.

Cole picked up the slack, and

rattled off the rest. "Toothy Jed. Slumpy Jacks. Spennymoor Gort."

Chawse followed, "And Alice."

Gus looked back at them, "Who?"

Jonas, mid-scrawl, snorted. "Haha, right!?"

Each of the three cabinmen looked at Jonas for a moment in a cross of confusion and irritation. Chawse broke the awkward silence, "Not Fat Alice."

Gus nodded at Chawse. "Oh yeah." Then he looked back at Jonas and cleared things up. "Alice."

Jonas kept writing. "Spenny? Is that a first name, or..."

Gerry, sensing getting home at a decent hour was about to slip away, put his hand up, motioning for Gus' attention. "Gus, please do me a favor. Can I ask you to collect copies of one bill from each of them? Water, electric, anything with an address. I'll swing by personally at the end of the week and pick them up."

"Dat fine."

Chawse looked at Jonas but addressed Gerry. "Joan-ah comin back...right?"

Jonas had stopped taking notes once he knew they would be getting copies of their information. Looking at Chawse made him suddenly queasy.

Gerry started buttoning his coat, signaling their retreat. "There is a possibility. Gus, please give me a call to let me know when will be

good to pick those up.

Gentlemen?” Gerry always dealt in handshakes. But with more discretion, he turned to open the heavy door behind him. With his left hand he pulled the door open, ushering Jonas in front of him with his free hand. He kept his eyes on the cabinmen and smiled until it was his turn to leave and pulled the door shut.

The late November afternoon had given way to darkness. Morty and Jonas were too busy looking over their shoulder at the closing door to notice a man with what appeared to be twice the normal count of teeth in his upper jaw, and another man who looked to have painful scoliosis. As Gerry pushed the door closed, a third and fourth man converged on him: one missing a total of 5 full fingers, and the other – tall, hulking, and carrying a hatchet.

Gus, hearing the three men cry out in the night, looked at his brothers and smirked. “We eatin fancy tonight.”

*May all your parking spots be close and legal...* ❖

## 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.

### Snakes

In a corner next to my wardrobe, I spot an empty plastic bottle of mineral water and wonder at its presence in my own bedroom since I am averse to drinking anything from plastic containers. At a closer look, I see two loops of a black thread, as thick as wool, imperceptibly wriggling with a subtle type of life. I think it must be a very long worm. Suddenly, I find the worm has turned into a snake whose face inspects mine and keeps eye contact all the time. It follows me all around the house, arching to be as tall as I. The head looks young and tenacious with a malicious intent, but no tongue flickers in any form. I want to be rid of it before being bitten and find myself pricking its skin with a piece of discarded paper on which I drafted short stories and poems. It disappears within a minute. [Dec 2021]

Innumerable fat snakes of different colors are twisting their heavy bodies on the marble floor, constricting my leaden feet that panic at the absence of a single stepping space.

A snake entwined its long body around my arm, resting its head on the veins of the inside of my elbow, to bite with all its might.

Susie - Aleppo

## Contributors

**Chris Jansen** is a recovering addict. He lives in Athens, Georgia, where he coaches amateur boxing and cares for a disinterested guinea pig named Poozybear. Chris was nominated for a Georgia Author of the Year Award for “We Can Be Heroes: A Rehab Memoir.”

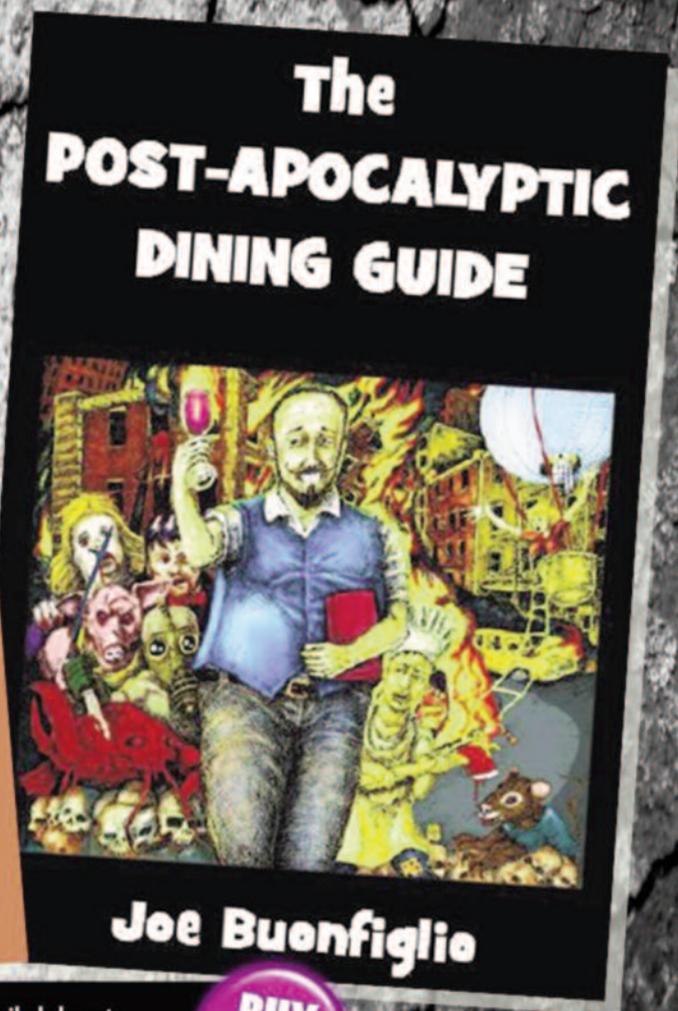
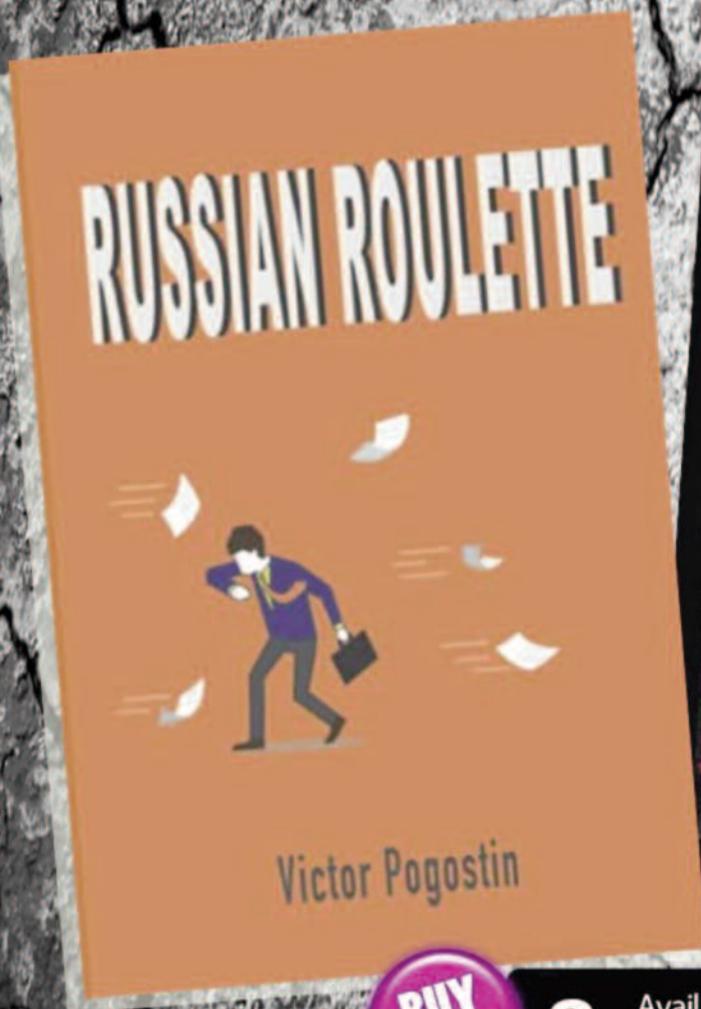
**Jason Sallinger** writes, “As a 50-year resident of a society that increasingly needs to define things, I would characterize myself as a toxic metrosexual. When I'm not watching sports, I can be found somewhere in my gourmet kitchen, usually cooking for other people. When I'm fortunate enough to not have any other obligations, I will be in my studio cranking distortion. I've written enough short stories to fill a volume. A volume that would take just enough space to come between two other books in a bookcase. To date, none of my stories are terribly long. I even dabble in poetry. At the end of the day I have no idea what I'm doing. Do any of us?”

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