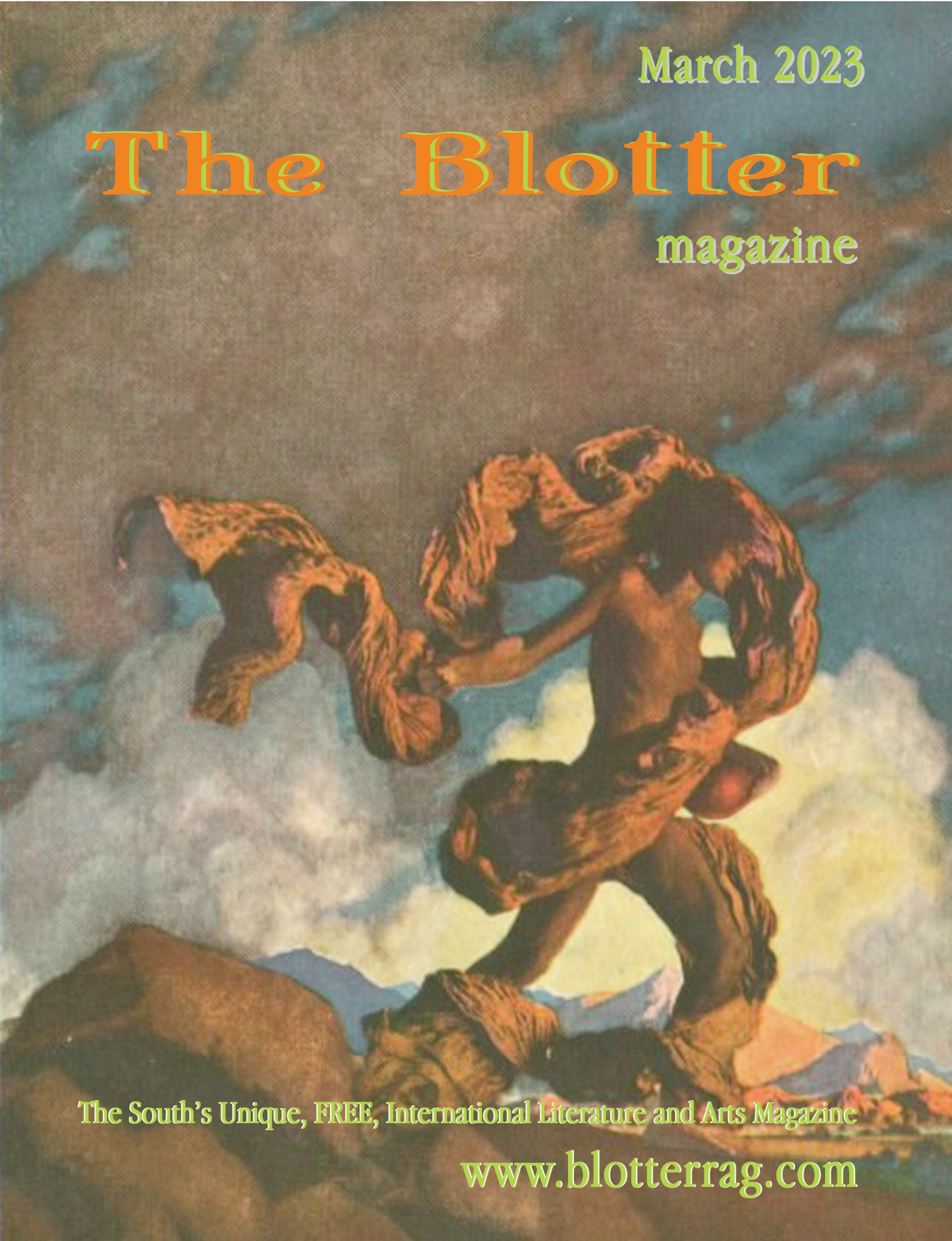


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“Umarell”

Quick definition – *Umarell* is a bit of regional Italian idiom that refers to men of a certain age who stand around, usually at construction sites, observing the goings on and occasionally commenting to anyone within hearing what they think about the work's progress. Giving unsolicited advice. It is a funny sort of a thing because I doubt there are any of us who cannot see in our mind's eye someone like that. Serious-faced, a grandpa type, hands clasped behind their back, grumbling about the lack of this or that, or too much of something going on. Hard not to smile at such a picture, even more difficult not to see ourselves (yes, you too,) in their place at some time. Soon. Maybe now. What I cannot tell in reading the definition of the idiom is if it is tongue in cheek or a serious thing. Are the men being made fun of?

A while back, Dad wrote a short essay, maybe for an adult Sunday school class he was leading, I don't know, about those things we carry in our pockets, and what happens when we no longer need them. The car keys, some spare change, your wallet. Cell phone. Maybe a cylinder of Life-Savers. A penknife. Clean, folded handkerchief. We stop placing them on our person when there is no longer a purpose. No more car keys. No cash or credit cards, no drivers' license. At some point in our life, perhaps sooner than we want, or later than we imagined, we will have nothing to do with taking care of ourselves. And the bitter truth is that this moment will come upon us, will only happen if we are lucky. If we are privileged to have circumstances where we can afford for a level of care that includes...everything. Like royalty, we will walk around with our hands clasped behind our back, possibly literally, perhaps only metaphorically.

Nevertheless, without our self-worth, our obvious purpose – as represented somewhat by our pockets full of stuff, we begin to feel less ourselves. Less involved. Less useful. Less independent. We rely on our perception of those things to be part of the world we live in. Often we receive our perception as interpretation of how others see us. The obvious devolves into the oblivious. (Yes, that is just me being fatuous with wordplay.)

And so we fade away. Or just fade.

Clasping our empty hands behind our backs because we're done with our pockets. Our pockets. Our apparently empty pockets. That lack is what we fear. Lack of usefulness, lack of value. But there is, not to be cartoonish about it, something out there. We have a perception-glitch that prevents us seeing beyond the horizon, as if it is death and we are not permitted to know until we get there, so to speak.

To me, it is a strange irony (like quarks, ironies come in different flavors – hidden, mad, charming, strange, top shelf, and bottom feeding) that we crave solitude, but not when we don't want it. Unwelcome isolation is simply loneliness, and this is a completely different emotional beast. While solitude may rebuild and restore, loneliness seems to only inflict damage. And, again if we are lucky, we wander our mortal coil making social choices – to be with others or not to be with them (no Danish pun intended), or having those choices made for us. We measure ourselves by what we do, what we accomplish and as the list shrinks, so do we.

May I suggest an alternative plan? Don't surrender. Don't let your usefulness be conditional. Get out there by yourself. Tilt at the windmill confidently, *look, no hands!* Maybe a bit of alone-time, in whatever manifestation that takes, when we've had too much group-think. Or immersion in the crowd, when we feel sorry or sad, to help us get past the moment. Yes, I'm painting with a very fat brush – nothing is ever this simple. But I think the point is valid. Be prepared for loneliness. March forward into it. Tuck your hands into the small of your back and stand outside, observing, nodding, gesturing at the world.

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CAUTION

Don't bother to understand

“Men at Work”

by Dennis Vannatta

Duane was walking toward the Burger Baron at the far end of the strip mall when someone called to him.

“Yo! Duane!”

It was his old buddy Cleo. Cleo was standing outside of Sunshine Cleaners, a stack of dresses draped across his outstretched arms. Duane couldn't tell if he was going in or coming out and couldn't think why he should be doing either. Cleo always worked far in the back on the steamers, just as Duane had done for years before moving on.

“Cleo, what are you doing out here with those dresses?”

“Dresses? What dresses?” Cleo said, then did an exaggerated double-take as if just discovering what was in his arms. Duane laughed. He missed Cleo.

“How are things at old Shit ‘n Whine these days?” he asked.

“My man, you wouldn't know the place. They got all this new equipment. It ain't even hardly hot in there.”

“Pull the other one.”

“If I'm lying, I'm dying. It ain't hardly hot. It's all this new equipment.”

“Dang, maybe I shouldn't've ever left.”

“Aw, you doing OK. You ain't worrying about no heat now, working in that AC at Porky's.”

Duane had left Sunshine to work at Porky's Grill, just a couple of blocks up the street.

“Yeah I was doing OK for a while, but I'm sweating where they got me now. Got me working on that grill. I'm a fry cook now.”

“You're a cook! You done moved up in the world.”

“Yeah, I'm getting a whole fifty cents an hour more for sweating my ass off.”

“You might as well come back and clean clothes. All this new equipment, you wouldn't believe the place. They been handing out raises, too.”

Duane asked how much he was making now. Cleo told him. Duane whistled.

“What's got into them? How come they're paying so much more now?”

“Have to. That's the only way they can get anybody to work. Even then, somebody quits on them damn near every day. People don't want to work these days. . . . Uh oh. Me and my big mouth.”

“Forget it, Cleo. You didn't say anything I haven't said a thousand times.”

“I know that's right. Well . . .” Cleo fidgeted a moment and then said, “My man, these dresses is making my arms sweat.”

Duane told him to get back inside by those steamers and cool off, and Cleo laughed, too loud, and went on in. Duane walked on down to the Burger Baron.

*

The guys from Sonny's Lawn Service were already there, five of them today, occupying two tables on the east in the shade. They got enough sun cutting grass for Sonny's without sitting in it on their lunch break, too.

Duane went up to the counter and got a #1, then joined the Sandy's crew. The running joke among them was who smelled worse, Duane in his Porky's Grill grease or the Sonny's boys, smelling of sweat, grass clippings, and lawn fertilizer.

Even though Duane was friendly with all of them, the only one whose name he could ever remember was Anson. Anson, big as a buffalo with a voice like a bull horn, was hard to forget. Surveying his surroundings with a disapproving scowl, Anson looked dangerous to be around, but it didn't take much for the scowl to transform into a wide smile and booming laugh. He was laughing now.

“What's so funny?” Duane said, setting his tray down across from Anson.

Anson was laughing too hard to answer, so the one Duane called Shorty (a tall fellow) spoke for him.

“His boy, Anson's boy, that Broderick, he done broke his leg.”

“Broke his leg! How—”

Shorty started to answer, but Anson held his hand up like a cop stopping traffic and, still struggling against his laughter, said, “Huh uh, no sir. This one's mine. I'm telling it.”

“Broderick, he just called me,” Anson said, holding up his cellphone. “You know he work for those roofers, that ShinglePro outfit. Well, ShinglePro, they bought them all these new ladders to climb on, not the old fold-up ones we growed up with, no, these aluminum collapsing jobs. You know, like a plastic drinking cup collapses.”

“Telescoping ladders, I think they're called,” Duane said, and Anson said, “Collapsing ladders, that's what Broderick calls them. Well, guess what? The first time he climbs up on one, it up and collapses on him. The collapsing ladder collapsed!”

Anson bent over laughing as far as his big belly would allow, the whole table shaking, Duane snatching up his cup of Dr. Pepper when it started sloshing out.

The others were laughing, too, but it seemed to Duane that they were laughing more at Anson than at the anecdote. Duane couldn't understand

how anybody could laugh at it.

"This is your boy did this, Anson? Broke his leg?"

"Broke his leg! The collapsing ladder done collapsed!"

Anson reared back, laughing up at the ceiling, at the same time pushing against the table. Duane held his Dr. Pepper up in the air.

"Anson, this is your son. How can you laugh, man? This is your *son*."

Anson stopped laughing. He sat with his huge hands flat on the table, leveling a look at Duane.

"Yeah, my boy got hurt working. That'll happen. Tell me, Duane, how's *your* son doing these days?"

Duane stood up.

"Naw, come on, sit down. I didn't mean nothing by it," Anson said.

Duane walked out of the Burger Baron, leaving the Dr. Pepper and the #1 sitting on the table.

*

Duane had been working the early shift since Porky's began serving breakfast, so he was home a little after 3:00. His wife, Marcy, would leave at 4:30 to get to Veterans Hospital for her shift on the custodial staff. "That's how to have a happy marriage—only see your wife an hour a day," he'd joke, but the truth was he didn't know what he'd do without Marcy. She'd know what he was thinking before he did—they were that close.

He'd no sooner walked through the door than she said, "Why so blue, kiddo?"

There wasn't any use trying to fool her. He told her about Anson's "How's your son" crack, and then while she was mulling that over went ahead and told her about Cleo saying that nobody wants to work anymore.

Marcy thought that one over a moment, too, and then said, "So, why's that got you in a funk? They didn't say anything you haven't thought. So what's the problem? Unless . . ." He

waited for her to go on. Then she did: "Unless you feel guilty."

He flared up. "What the hell do I have to feel guilty about?"

"Don't you go using language with me."

"Sorry."

"I'm not the one going around all hangdog like somebody clipped my tail feathers."

"I said I was sorry for using language," he said. His wife was hard to live with sometimes since she'd started going back to church regular. "But I don't have anything to feel guilty about. I never said Trenton couldn't come home. I never did say that."

"No, but you sure never made him feel welcome, either."

"Maybe that comes from him, not me. Maybe he's the one who feels guilty."

Marcy shook her head. "Trenton never feels guilty about anything. That's the big problem you have with him. You want him to feel all guilty and everything, and he won't do it."

Maybe Trenton should feel guilty, Duane wanted to say, but he held off. He wasn't going to win this one.

He smelled beans, cooking low and slow. Marcy was making beans and cornbread for dinner, one of his favorites. She'd serve it early, 4:00 o'clock, so they could eat together before she had to leave for work.

Duane went into the bathroom and washed his face and arms and hands. Then he sat on the sofa reading the newspaper. Mr. Potts next door was the one who had the subscription. He'd come over and leave it on their doorstep after he was finished with it, all except the page with the crossword puzzles. Duane didn't care anything about those puzzles.

It was close to 4:00 when he finished with the paper. He went into the kitchen. Marcy had just taken the cornbread out of the oven. She was still

wearing those potholder-glove things.

"When's the last time you even spoke to him?" she said.

He did an about-face and went outside and slammed the front door behind him.

The yard needed mowing. He'd have to borrow Mr. Potts' mower. Mr. Potts kept his yard looking like a show place.

He glanced in the opposite direction where the Boldens lived with who knows how many kids, their yard cluttered with toys, the grass knee high. The Boldens didn't have enough pride to borrow a mower.

He walked to the curb and looked up the street. There were houses for another couple of blocks, and then the commercial area began.

He went back to the house. Marcy met him at the door.

"He's working the intersection there by Sam's Club," she said. "At least he was there when I came back from Walmart."

Duane nodded.

*

They only had the one car, that old Saturn, and since Marcy needed it to get to work, Duane set out walking.

It was a cloudless June day, and, although it was only around a mile, Duane was getting hot as he approached the busy intersection outside of the Sam's Club parking lot.

And there was Trenton, not on the narrow concrete island between the north- and south-bound lanes but smack in the middle of the left-turn lane. He'd prance around, thrusting his cardboard sign at an approaching car, then pirouette to the side like a bullfighter and sweep the sign in an arc over the car as it edged past. Once he hit the windshield of a car, and the window came down and the driver yelled something at him. Another time, a window came down, and the driver handed him a bill. Trenton laughed and

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doffed an invisible hat to both drivers in precisely the same way as if the handout and the curse were all one to him.

It wasn't long before Trenton spotted Duane standing on the sidewalk. Without even checking the traffic, as far as Duane could tell, Trenton loped across the busy street and said, "Hi, Pop."

Duane looked down at the cardboard sign, and Trenton barked out a delighted laugh: "Ha! Pretty clever, hey?"

The sign read

PLEASE GIVE

MY MERCEDES NEEDS A TUNEUP

Then Trenton tossed the sign down and said, "Let's go down to Freddy's, Pop. I'll buy you a Coke. I'm flush today."

Before Duane could respond, Trenton bounded off in that easy lope of his, the way he'd run ever since he was a little boy. Duane walked after him.

Freddy's wasn't far—on the next corner down—but Trenton had disappeared inside and was already coming back out bearing two soft-drink cups by the time Duane stepped up onto the patio.

Trenton pointed to one of the tables, and he and Duane sat down in the shade of the big red- and white-striped umbrella. Trenton handed Duane one of the soft-drink cups.

"Still drinking Dr. Pepper, I guess."

"You bet. Thanks."

"Howie's a good guy," Trenton said, nodding back at the Freddy's. "He'll let us sit out here as long as we buy a little something. I've sat out here with a cup in front of me for hours."

"He's the manager?"

"Yep. A good guy. He'll even let us sit inside in the winter. Long as we don't smell."

Duane winced. Trenton noticed it, and his big grin faded.

"So. What's up, Pop?"

"Nothing's up. Can't a man just want to see his son?"

"Yes, he can. Any time he wants to, day or night."

On the walk over, Duane had rehearsed explanations for why he was seeking out his son after all this time but finally realized he was having such a difficult time because he didn't know the answer himself.

"Your mom misses you," he said.

Trenton nodded. "I see Mom sometimes. We talk now and then."

Duane tried not to look shocked—or hurt.

"You could come to the house. I never said you couldn't come home," he said, and Trenton said, "I never said you did."

"You're always welcome."

"No I'm not."

It was going too fast. Trenton was responding too quickly. Duane needed more time, more space between the words to think what to say. What Trenton said was true—they both knew it—and Duane needed time to work his way around those difficult truths like a mountain climber trying to find a path up a vertical rock face.

He'd attempted that rock face too many times already, tried to find the path, the words. They'd used too many words, argued it out too many times, and it always came down to Trenton saying that Duane couldn't be satisfied with his son being happy with his life and Duane saying Trenton couldn't possibly be happy living like that. Where could they go from there?

Duane sipped his Dr. Pepper and Trenton his Mountain Dew.

Then Duane, gathering himself as if for something momentous, said, "Come home with me."

Trenton came right back with, "Come home with *me*."

Duane said, "Right, let's do it," and started to rise from the table, but

Trenton laid his hand on his wrist.

"Pop, I mean, *you* come home with *me*. Come to my home."

Duane sat back down.

He looked away to the southeast where, in the distance beyond the low strip mall down the street, was a tree-covered hillside. There in the middle of the city was a nameless wood rising alongside Bemis Creek. In those woods, it was rumored, vagrants by the score slept, coming out in the daytime to panhandle at the intersections of the commercial district, paw through dippy dumpsters and garbage cans, sleep curled up on bus stop benches, and wander the streets with their belongings in backpacks or plastic bags or pushed in shopping carts advertising Dollar Tree, Walgreens and Trader Joe's.

"All I ever wanted for you," Duane began, but then he hesitated. He'd intended to say, *was for you to have a better life than I did*, but he was afraid Trenton would say that that was exactly what he had. So he started over and said, "All I ever wanted was what every father wants for his son. I want you to be a better man than I am."

Duane had no sooner said it than he thought, hell, now he's just going to say he's already accomplished that.

This time, though, Trenton thought a minute before replying, frowning down at the table as if Duane had posed a difficult case.

Then he said, "I don't see how that can work, Pop."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, think about it. Every man wants his son to be a better man than he is, right? But what if that actually happened? Sons would keep on getting better and better and better until finally they couldn't get any better. Then they'd all be as perfect as Jesus. And then who would be left to crucify Him?"

Duane shook his head wonderingly. "What the hell does that mean?"

Trenton looked at him solemnly a moment. Then here came that grin.

“How the hell do I know what it means? I was just messing with you, Pop.”

“That’s what I figured,” Duane said although he wasn’t so sure that Trenton was just fooling. There might be a message there if only he could understand it. But he couldn’t. It was too much for him, just a fry cook who never made it past his junior year in high school.

He stood up. He’d go home and ask Marcy. She understood things better than he did. She’d explain it to him.

Trenton also stood up. “Yeah, time for me to head out, too. I’ve done enough work for one day. I’m going to go home and put my feet up. Well, it’s been real, Pop,” he said, giving Duane a little wave. Then he strode off diagonally across the street in the direction of Bemis Creek and the woods.

Duane tossed his drink cup in the trash. He was in a hurry to get home while he still remembered exactly what it was that Trenton had said.

He was just about to step down off the patio when he remembered that Marcy wouldn’t be home. She’d already be at work.

He went back to the trash receptacle and reached in and took out his drink cup. He returned to the table and sat down in the shade.



“Basketball Player in Semi-Retirement”

by Kevin Camp

I.

She was a tough, no-nonsense, flat affect, unemotive basketball star—a point guard, as I recall, more than several inches shorter than the rest of the team. Had she been born male, her supporters might have praised her, upon first examination, as slightly undersized but scrappy. Being that she was not, there were other comparisons made, initially at least, even by her supporters, many of which damned with the faintest of praise. Before she’d even played a second of game action, critics came out of the woodwork, from the shoe repair shop to the drug store, and over to the salesmen at the used car business. All of our town mainstays were highly critical of the decision to put *that girl* on the squad.

This travesty of travesties was nothing more than a publicity stunt. It had to be. Women were fundamentally weaker than men, at least when it came down to crucial facts of life factoids *that everyone knew*, like inferior muscle mass and a profound strength deferential. In those days, women were thought to be weaker emotionally, too—incapable of facing up to the constant pressure and brutality that existed in a man’s world. The games women played surely weren’t exciting enough to hold anyone’s attention. Fans showed up to see dunks, fast breaks, aggressive charging fouls, and long-distance shots—not skillful layups and deadly accuracy at the free-throw line—technically proficient stuff, excellence that wins games, but not exciting, per se.

In those days, female athletes like her were viewed as not much more than *pituitary cases*, or, if not that, maybe a little like the Harlem

Globetrotters—who were then very popular. Entertainment value alone. The very presence of women in any sports setting, had, up until then, served primarily for conversation’s sake and spectacle. Granted, in the minds of the American people, the so-called fairer sex had been Wild World of Sports material for a long while, but one usually saw them in action pursuing more socially acceptable, polite, ladylike pursuits like tennis or archery.

In our own little town, one might say we’d seen and observed far more of the agony of defeat than the thrill of victory. Though the names of those who came before and failed have been largely lost to memory, she wasn’t the first girl to try out for and even make the boys’ team—but she was the first one to be taken seriously. Until she arrived, girls who sought playing time had no choice but to go along to get along. The few women who dared to even try out and make the squad always rode the bench, never seeing even a single second of game action.

It was an incremental step. Coaches could always justify their decisions to play only young men by being able to point to one or two tokens—female athletes, I mean. Reduced to cheerleaders of a slightly different stripe, many wondered why they weren’t shaking pom-poms or chanting upbeat slogans themselves. The effect was practically the same.

It all changed overnight. During the year where the improbable happened, even to this day, decades later, one specific image persists in everyone’s mind. Captured in swelling, grandiose style, a bit like socialist realism, is her towering presence, directing the boys, setting the key, striking a dra-

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matic pose, leading like a general. It was equally fortuitous that she looked physically striking, if not exactly pretty.

She was one of those photogenic kinds of jocks the lens seems to love. Extreme athletic prowess always ends up enshrined for posterity's sake as the school year draws to its conclusion—one celebrated for eternity in glossy, thick, heavy expensive paper.

The other day, I looked at the one and only, the now-famous, persistent image for the first time in years. A few extra details I hadn't noticed before jumped out at me. For one, it was evident that the photo had been taken very early in the season—the first or second game, I think—a time when few people believed that she'd be able to withstand the onslaught of her supposed athletic betters. Though she is clearly in full command of her talents, even at this formative state, the few students seated on the bleachers in the gym look incredibly bored.

That attitude didn't last long. Game after game, round after round of previous doubters were silenced. Previously secret fans began to queue up to enter the gym—they had always been believers but didn't want to be proven wrong, should this underdog of all underdogs before fall short of expectations. Because of her, the whole town perked up and attendance at the games rose dramatically. She became a feel-good story—and suddenly we weren't only flyover country—though that term hadn't been invented yet.

As the season wound on, her stature as the next big thing coaxed even the apathetic and the otherwise occupied doing other things to the old barn. Within a month or so, every seat on the bleachers was crammed full of enthusiastic students and curious townspeople. The elevated upper landing that ringed the court became standing-room-only. Past superstars, long since retired, their playing days a dis-

tant fantasy, they started showing up, as well.

On the night she expertly fed the ball to her teammates, time and time again, producing a twenty-four-point blowout win, crowds were packed tightly together. An inconvenience, but the combined body heat did insulate us from the cold somewhat. Even fans of the other club showed up in droves to observe this phenomenon for themselves. For years to follow, as is often the case, more people than numerically and mathematically possible swore that they were present at several important contests. To name a couple, this included the last-second win against our cross-county rivals or the satisfying trouncing we put on one team from the south of the state, a victory that sent the team to the playoffs for the first time in over a generation.

Fearing accidental calamity, our fire warden, working much faster than usual, capped attendance in the gymnasium at no more than 527 persons. Demand vastly exceeded supply. Tickets, ordinarily, \$3.50 at the gate—became very difficult to obtain, in large part because unscrupulous, but resourceful scalpers grabbed control of the market by breaking into the assistant principal's office, where they were stored. This had never been an issue before. After securing the paper tickets only for themselves, unscrupulous businessmen tripled their price. Without television or radio coverage, the only way remaining to get up-to-date scores was to rely on foot traffic and benevolence—to call the one, solitary, hanging all alone by itself rotary-dialed payphone which gratefully provided a clear view of the scoreboard and running action.

But that was an unreliable method, one that seems especially quaint in comparison with today's high-tech instantaneity and immediacy. In a pre-internet age, it was about the best

system anyone had yet worked out—charming in its simplicity, unlikely to be seen again in this age.

The phone number to the pay phone—the sequence of seven digits that needed no area code—was common knowledge. Those townies who had been around a while, usually old men stooped and bent with age (and with nothing better to do), even remembered the exact day and time the phone had been installed—the way the workman spliced cables from the outside telephone pole and hardwired a functional connection into the building. Such seemingly prosaic developments passed for casual small talk. In tiny locales like ours, local gossip usually focused on a wide range of trite topics much like this.

During a game, a person with intimate knowledge of the progress of the game usually picked up the line, but more often than not, it was only Mike the Pervert, a fixture in our town. Strange man. He reminded a few citizens of a dirty old man version of Billy Carter, who was currently dragging down his brother's good name while simultaneously shilling for beer. Mike only wanted to talk indecently to whomever would listen, not to be anyone's perpetually excited, always obliging, roving ticker tape game action update machine. Nor had he become a gushy superfan, an attitude of attitude that was fast becoming the norm around here - young or old, male or female.

Mike was never caught, though it was rumored that he had friends in high places, which is to say, he was directly related by blood to the town's police chief and thus immune from prosecution.

Our superstar's legacy, once everyone was aboard the bandwagon, was captured extremely well for posterity. Her reliable means of scoring points—the old two-handed set shot—

Lord knows where she'd picked a throwback skill like that up—ranked among many other soon-to-be immortal visual records of this short but thrilling period. A collage of them made their way into the yearbook in grand style, a full-page fold to themselves. In some ways the feat she pulled off that sensational year seemed entirely plausible—we didn't see her accolades as any sort of miracle, regardless of how the newspapers wrote it up.

Her portrait marks a familiar, aesthetic aspect inside the yearbook—the usually yawningly ordinary transition wherein slightly fuzzy black and white student portraiture is abruptly interrupted to introduce dramatic, athletic school spirit, in full color. Since then, I've wondered who on yearbook staff picked an image that with time was turned into a locally popular poster—a very stirring image looking a bit like *Guerrillero Heroico*, or maybe *Kiss* by Tanya Chalkin—a more contemporary example—which in time found its way onto the walls of many teenage bedrooms and dorm rooms.

Yearbook was a strange little group of people, most with concealed, but highly ambitious goals, seeking to pad their college CVs with only one more extracurricular activity.

Nobody at the reunion talked about being on yearbook staff.

II.

My younger brothers knew I was about to call a girl. Following a swift conversation between the two of us, which lasted at most twenty unbearably awkward, agonizing seconds later, my brothers let me *know* that they *knew* loudly and plainly, which made a mortifying situation much worse. A few strangulated vowel sounds coupled with an unexpected early onset of Bell's palsy later, the heavy, black plastic phone replaced in its cradle, my heart finally no longer racing, I was

sure that the worst was over.

Escape is never that easy. At the dinner table, I faced two competing, note-perfect imitations of myself on the call for a good two weeks to follow. It seems that they'd both been spying on me the whole time. One had even managed to conceal himself inside my bedroom, camouflaging himself expertly behind a large laundry hamper. I was too much of a nervous wreck at the time to have ever noticed or thought to sweep the room for listening devices. They heard everything, because my other brother picked up the receiver within a second after I heard the dial tone.

This singular focus of my affections and obsessions was my own height exactly, which is unusual, because I'm a good six feet in my stocking feet. Most people thought of me as tall, but compared to the players on the team, I was rather short in stature. It was different, but not unwelcome to be able to look a girl directly in the eye without the need to crane my neck downward. The preternatural calm and poise she displayed on the court perfectly disguised the way she felt about herself, which is to say *100% Amazonian freak show on display*.

Her athletic skill was such that one boy, a senior, who had previously been a starter the previous two years, was entirely left off the final roster after she made the team ahead of him. No room left in the inn. The decision produced considerable resentment from many corners, but one could argue (and make a particularly strong case while doing it) that the entire system itself was wholly corrupt and unfair. Coaches were supposed to judge players based on merit, God-given ability, while all the time invoking whatever Scriptural passages that, when reverently offered to a benevolent and amused deity prior to games, always grants good luck to athletes.

Most of the time, anonymous contributions made under the table to the school's booster club proved to be as good as skill itself. Good is good, though. Honest talent will almost always win over bribery. When she had proved herself to be a true standout, as has long been the case with talented young jocks, adults hoping to ride the coattails of their own, unique, potential protégé to be dramatically obsessed and wrung their hands about the possibility of her future sprained ankles and anterior cruciate ligament tears.

Everyone wants to make a deal and to follow the gravy train wherever it leads—be it to mammon or power or both. Egos are stroked and deals are struck, which is how it's always been and likely always will be.

The team's season was up and down. At first, her all-male teammates, out of spite, simply would not cooperate with their new teammate. They would not pass her the ball. The sulky four, as the hectoring student paper and obliging student body swiftly dubbed them, refused to believe many things. They refused to see a woman as their equal. More importantly, they would not accept female leadership in any form. Plays that coaches had drawn up and painstakingly mimeographed in potentially dangerous, but still aromatic chemical purple for the benefit of every player were actively sabotaged.

Unsurprisingly, the team struggled out of the gate. But, in time, talent began to speak for itself. Due to her bold and fearless play against opposing teams, who, if anything, resented her presence much more than her supposed allies and comrades—within a few games, the team began to win. It kept winning. That girl was surely brave and not only that, but talented. Fans love to see an athlete playing absolutely lights out.

Not all Cinderella seasons end with perfect Hollywood endings.

The Blotter

Though the team on which she played was eliminated by way of major upset at an early round of the state playoffs, it almost didn't matter. The sensation of the story alone had attracted attention—substantial press that eventually extended to nearly everyone in a four-state area. Multiple bulky television cameras and newspaper columnists had been dispatched to tell her story. Even before the season was over, stellar play and sensation produced an offer of several college scholarships, many to the very best teams in the country. One thing was for sure—no matter where she eventually enrolled, she knew she'd always be the sole female player on the court.

Every program wanted her. And if they couldn't have her, other teams scoured the country and indeed the world to find their own female superstar, someone who could compete. Many now wanted to knock her down from lofty heights and reduce her status in the minds of everyone to that of mere mortal—not borderline divinity.

The season got going and everything moved faster than it ever had before. Not just the pace of the game itself, *everything* went at a fast-break, super-fast tempo. The school paying the cost of tuition, textbooks, and meals to its prized players now owned her body and soul. College was supposed to be fun, she thought, but especially during the season, she got an early taste of the same lifestyle that faces every potential professional player—a peripatetic life on the road. It's simple, really. You make friends with your teammates, or you have no friends of which to speak. Everything comes second to the team.

And it's hell on romantic relationships, too. Partners must be understanding and compassionate about the lengthy periods of space and time apart, sworn to strict fidelity. Fidelity can be a challenge under the best of

circumstances, but for overgrown teenagers, still in very many ways children themselves, it's a pretty tall order. She had a few partners here and there, but nothing too serious.

While the venues might constantly change, the court and the strategy and the basketball itself, that crucial, spheroid, bouncing object—all of that persisted. Every whistle, every foul, every splatter of sweat onto the shiny hardwood floor (mopped up within seconds) began to seem identical to the one the game before. She didn't know how to pace herself through the monotonous slogs at the outset of the season, the constant grind of practice, game, practice, game—the transitions from half-empty arenas at the beginning of the season—packed houses by mid-December into January.

Papers for classes were routinely completed by longhand in airports or in flight. Tests and lengthy examinations, much to the chagrin of her professors, had to accommodate twenty away games—often more than that, depending on how deep the team went into the conference tournament. Every game on the road, due to the particularities of the league, could sometimes be scheduled as far away as California. It had been great fun at first, but with time, the pace, to say nothing of the games themselves began to drain her.

Tournament time was beyond fun and was a fun ride, but she could look beyond it. She was blessed with the ability to see into the future with surprisingly effective accuracy. Maybe it's not surprising that a smart player would be thinking earlier than most about a time in the none-too-distant future where she'd eventually need to hang up her sneakers. The term *journeyman* would even seem almost appropriate here. A whole career wrapped in one little word. Always on the go and never one place for very long. But I guess that's one way to

make a little money.

She was a good college player, but not a superstar, as many had expected. When the newness of her presence subsided after four solid, but unspectacular seasons, the sports media dubbed her *groundbreaking*. This much was true. It was no longer in question as to whether a woman could fit in seamlessly and prove she belonged in a rugged, almost all-male sport. She'd elbowed and pushed and shoved her way and somehow changed enough minds in the process. The first-team All-American achievement she achieved for each year of her college career was well-deserved, even if she underwhelmed a little.

Aware that she was under a microscope, she was cautious to always be politic and pragmatic—to always deflect individual praise during every on-camera, post-game interview, while making sure to praise her teammates whenever possible. With time, graphics posted in the middle of the running action, the sort used to guide and direct ravenous, hyperactive commentators telling old war stories—visual hyperbole no longer pushed her profile as it once had before. Instead, from time to time, she was labeled an impact player, one of the most meaningless of meaningless sports clichés.

She saw nothing particularly glamorous about a career away from her eventual husband, who, by then, she had met. Should she make it to the pros, her life and career for the duration would be placed on steroids—though not literally. More intensity. More skill against skill. More time spent in airports, taxicabs, buses, hotel rooms. The promise of greater salaries and signing bonuses were tangible, even possible outcomes, sure, but with them arrived very real fear of potential trades and prima donna teammates. She been told that practices weren't like boot camp in the pros, as they had been in college, but the games? They

were not for the faint-of-heart.

III.

In my terrible teens, I wasn't exactly invisible, though I very much wished to be. I was at least superficially well-known. People knew my name, but at the same time somehow, I was a complete enigma to everyone. Which is strange, because I went to school with around twenty-seven intrepid souls who had known each other since they were six years old. We'd had around twenty-eight until the father of one of our classmates got a new job out in Texas somewhere.

That day, I felt nauseated.

The result and final answer to my earlier inquiry had been telegraphed, strategized, designed, and put into action before it was finally revealed to me, around 3:02 pm, as memory serves. As I saw a bobbing mass of curly black hair, hollow cheeks, and gangly arms (which turned out to be one of her teammates) heading my way. I think I was able to maintain maybe three full seconds of eye contact with the messenger before my head sank to the floor. I had not expected much. The previous night's phone call had not promised success, more an amused and unexpected chuckle.

She said she's sorry but no.

Routine. Matter of fact. Outsourced labor, or more likely gossip fodder. I only hoped the word hadn't traveled far, though it probably had.

Somewhere around ten seconds of brisk walking ahead of me, as I peered down a shadowy hallway streaming with kids, I saw the first significant, flagrant, infantile disregard for school authority committed—my welcome to high school.

Shortly before, the bell signifying dismissal rang out. Lockers began to slam shut. Most of us were already streaming out of previously closed doors, down the hallway, down a nar-

row winding stairwell, and then off and beyond to the buses. We were headed home, loaded down with books, enthusiastic as always to be dismissed, and chattering to ourselves. Freedom. You knew you'd have to come back tomorrow, but at least for today you could return home.

On that day, home got delayed. Some older kid, who would, around three months later, chase authorities and school officials on a reckless, half-hour bicycle joyride on the school rooftop, pulled the fire alarm for the sheer hell of it. Doing so required grabbing hold of an upside-down T-shaped plastic handle and yanking downward with some force. It shook everyone up.

IV.

Years later, I was working from home and living far away from the place of my birth. My wife worked at an office downtown, leaving before the sun rose to hit the gym, shower, and then to dress and depart for work. Her husband was in the military and, as a result, was deployed for long stretches of time. She and I were both veterans, not of foreign wars, as was true of her husband, not of an athletic team, as she had been the case for her, but rather of mild disappointment. We understood what it felt like to somehow be missing something crucial in a relationship—even if neither of us could define it to ourselves or even define it to each other.

Whereas I had no children, she was raising a young son of which she was most proud. My wife and I never produced any offspring ourselves, and, as a result, we were forced to live vicariously through other peoples' kids. After date two, she made it extremely clear that she never intended to have a child. Had we differed there, we would likely to have needed to part ways sooner rather than later. But as it turns out, neither of us wanted to be parents.

We were everyone's reasonably enthusiastic aunt and uncle.

I worry too much. I'm the kind of person who is always petrified of dropping a new baby. But I am different, I recognize, because I am not especially eager to coo and fawn over any and every infant.

As for why my wife and I remained childless, that information remained hidden or neatly brushed aside for a long time—to resolve the situation immediately, against my better judgement, I regressed to a default setting. I reembraced the stultifying stonewalling that had tormented my childhood—the burying of discomforting issues, an approach that had driven me more than slightly crazy in a younger age. Should we be pressed, vague *female troubles* were periodically invoked, with downcast, embarrassed eyes. Few questions followed.

Sometimes the only thing it really takes to create a spark is to be in the right place at the right time. Her husband could often do no right in her eyes and, as a result, I became her primary confidante and sounding board. The other young mothers, with their own individual preoccupations and concerns on the base, simply could not suffice. She didn't blend in well with the ultra-feminine army wives and their drunken, gossipy dice games. She was a fish out of water and, like so many former athletes, utterly rudderless when sports are removed from the equation.

Though reluctant to share pictures of herself with me at first, in time she did. In the first photo she showed me, which had been sent to me by way of the regular mail, I saw a much older version of her than I was expecting. No socialist realism here. No towering figure of power, grace, and excellence. No longer did she appear young and triumphant. Instead, I noticed she'd put on a little weight and was wearing eye-glasses. She'd relied on contacts for

years, especially on the court. And she looked very old and tired. I was shocked.

V.

She was a prideful, stubborn person, someone who had *overcome adversity*—someone who proved to be *resilient* on the court. That was how she first addressed the news when it arrived. Throw enough bulletin board statements together—a few trite phrases, some motivational patter—and even then, it's just not enough. The problem with coachspeak is that, once closely examined, it's effective only as a locker room pep talk—which sounds impressive until you begin to unpack it and reduce it to its component parts. In other words, it doesn't hold up well under analysis. Words and words alone.

And when affection from her did arrive, it seemed tainted or somehow trivialized. It's not as though she threw herself at me—that would have never been her style, but neither could I experience the thrill of pursuit or the chase. She got right down to the point, you might say. Flirting, done right, should be fun—this was not fun to me. Her concerns were far more practical. Desperation looks good on no one. I opted out.

I'll concede that we were treating each other as though we were each other's therapists. I found this to be comforting and she never registered a complaint, at least at first. And as I got to know her intimately, my opinion towards her changed substantially. For one, I realized how totally wrong we were for each other. We would have never worked out as a couple, back then, especially. I chose to overlook this usually disqualifying fact, as I was equally desperate in my own way to hold her attention and keep her nearby.

Like me, but don't like me too much.

There would have been a time where I'd have killed for this much vulnerability and intimacy.

The tough façade collapsed, and many of her prominent insecurities finally showed through. They were much more numerous than I'd even anticipated. But I was not scared away, in large part because I don't mind taking risks and gambling. Some people can't stay away from risk and chance. Contrary to what I'd always been taught, impulsivity and daring got me many places that restraint and circumspection would not have.

A couple months later, she informed me that we simply couldn't talk to each other anymore. In her eyes, it was now in doubt as to whether her marriage had indeed been truly blessed by God. *You don't even know him or his friends.*

VI.

Four of the twenty-seven of us died in car accidents, two got terminal cancer, and many more than I would have ever dreamed overdosed. She did confide in me once that she played an entire semi-pro game, held somewhere in Israel, high on speed. The pro career hadn't worked out, but she still had some name recognition, so she quickly cashed in on the publicity for a career spent wherever she could be paid for her participation.

The end came eventually, as it does for every athlete. During a time out, one of her teammates made a special point to pull her aside. An observant person as well as player, he knew what she'd done immediately and let his displeasure show. When she talked to me about it, she felt that the criticism was deserved but felt the drug use was necessary—she couldn't maintain the absurdly high bar she had set for herself. The pressure to perform from outside was significant enough, but she only heaped more onto it herself. She'd

become a standard for achievement, especially for those on paths towards achievement that had historically been denied.

A strong stimulant, speed began to tax her heart, even though she was otherwise in great physical shape. Nine years following graduation, her intention, at this juncture, was no longer to set records, merely to hang in there against other players, who only got younger and younger every year. These days, she was playing for a pension—fighting hard to get ten years in, which was the minimum age to qualify. And she had a child to think about—his future. To me, at least, her motives made some sense but did not hold up under scrutiny and examination.

At first, people believed that her malady was at least partially a product of hypochondriasis. Back then, medical science was ignorant of many conditions and the few tests that were available often missed a lot. Instead, the existing conventional wisdom held that years of stress and strain on her body had created a perpetually neurotic state, one which got worse and worse with time. In those days, it wasn't socially acceptable to talk about addiction—except maybe alcoholism, and often not even that. A compliant, fawning sports media did not spill the beans. No one wanted to reveal the reasons for the decline of a trendsetter and idol for millions of fans, especially young girls.

VI.

She'd had time to write her own obituary, an effort that used several choice phrases I'd spoken to her online—words and patterns, unbeknownst to me, that had been unconsciously memorized and utilized in sequence for some future usage. When I recognized the influence that my words made upon her, I have to say I was embarrassed and, underneath the

surface, pleased, too. If it'd been me, I would have helped her edit out the patent desperation to document a life only halfway lived, one increasingly existing only in her own mind—a supposedly important academic degree achieved, rewarding, low-paying jobs dribbling a basketball in Greece or Italy (but making no money), then marriage, retirement, a pregnancy, and a child.

I got the feeling she'd fought hard to say exactly what she wanted—on her own terms. In those days, remember, we had to rely on newspapers and tiny print. Though slightly awkward, the obituary was crudely effective. While I knew her family might have wanted a more generic, unsatisfying, but uncontroversial boilerplate rendition of her life—one that was neither informative, nor inspiring—a person in her situation might have opted easily for melodrama, but rather than resorting to verbosity and theatrics, her prose was brief. Short choppy sentences alone conveyed a very simple, and yet profound message. She had been born. She had excelled. She had not excelled. She had been humbled. She knew she would die and did not know why.

VII.

The sports world, aware of her situation and what had happened, granted her one last hoorah. For one day the big television cameras returned and a microphone was pointed her way. *Where is she now?* They went right to the source, to our small town, interviewing the team's head coach, several former teammates, and even opposing players, who granted her a degree of grudging, but heartfelt respect. It was a nice gesture to see. Her character had always been well-liked by other players. Her only enemy had been herself.

Two hours' worth of footage was condensed into a ten-minute video eulogy, which aired on a major network during primetime. The channel

recorded the broadcast on tape for playback and posterity—it was later released on home video, but that was years later. For a long time, memories were the only thing we had.

As the credits rolled, that same awe-inspiring pose of her precedent-shaping year—the one found in our yearbook—was showcased alongside

her full name, date of birth, then date of death. And when I read it, I dropped my head down, frowned, and remembered for a second or two what first rejection and new love feels like. ❖

"Buoyancy" by Susie Gharib

They marvel at my buoyancy,
my ability to keep afloat
in very deep water for long,
within a whirlpool of abuse,
and when submerged with applause
for I never boast.

I nearly drowned as a child,
the sun was setting
and no one was around.
She never noticed my absence
or the hands
that snatched me as my eyes began
to bid the world goodbye,
my feet failing to touch the sand,
but I survived.

I never groan
when I am falsely accused.
I endure all types of psychological bruises,
and the tears that my eyes refuse to shed,
they pour instead into my head.
Wary I am of every praise,
the alluring bait
that attempts to turn me into a snob.

"The House"

by Susie Gharib

The house that slumbered on top of the hill
with close-shut eyelids,
too heavy to lift,
had clouds brooding on its brow
refusing its eyes the sky's rare smile.

Torrents of rain then whipped its cheeks,
ripping the blush,
the sun's old gift,
drowning its heart
in pools of mud,
with doors flung open,
so wide apart.

The house still stands with hollow eyes,
inviting birds
and snakes alike,
a haven for hearts
bereft of hope,
a blinded hearth
but exuding warmth.

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.

I ran across the two lanes of traffic to the median. I felt as light as dust in the air. It was glorious to move with such alacrity.

In the middle of the highway, there was a patch of green – weeds mostly, untended, perhaps even unintended. Up to my knees, even higher in some places. Ladybugs lit on the ends of the fronds, blown by the passing traffic, hanging on for dear life.

An unhoused man sometimes stood here, I remember, and there is a place where his campstool has pressed down the undergrowth, where he has walked back and forth, silently asking for assistance of any kind.

Some pages from a book were tucked beneath a broken piece of the concrete road. I would have thought that they would be fused together from rain and dew, but they fluttered, yellow-brown, in the artificial wind of passing cars.

I reached down, but stopped just before I touch them, not because they are not mine, nor because I am worried that I will lose them, but because I suddenly had a feeling that I might catch something from them, from touching them. Instead, I looked to make sure it is alright to continue across the rest of the highway, and walked.

After I get there, I think about the thought I had about catching something from the pages of the book. It is not a good feeling.

Miss Wilshire - cyberspace

Contributors:

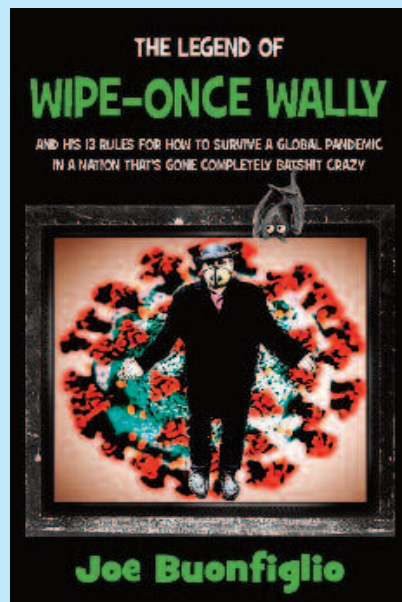
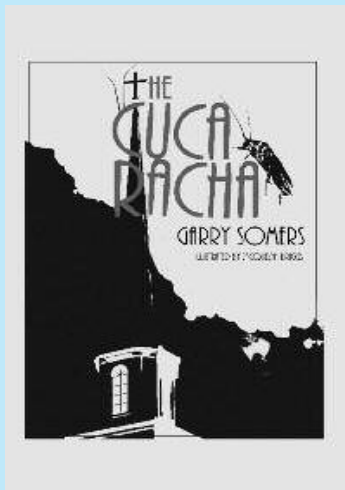
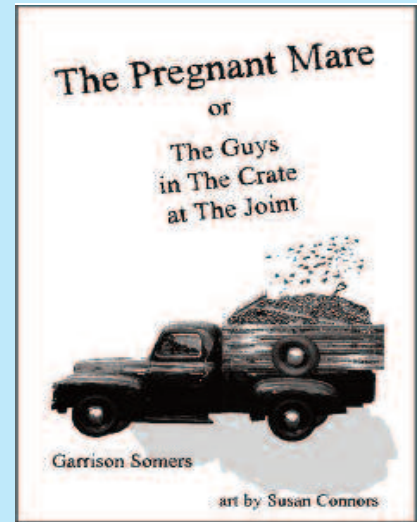
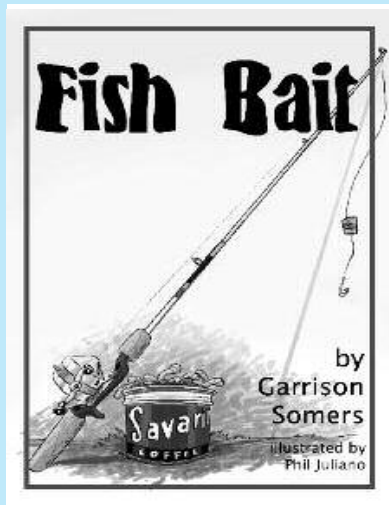
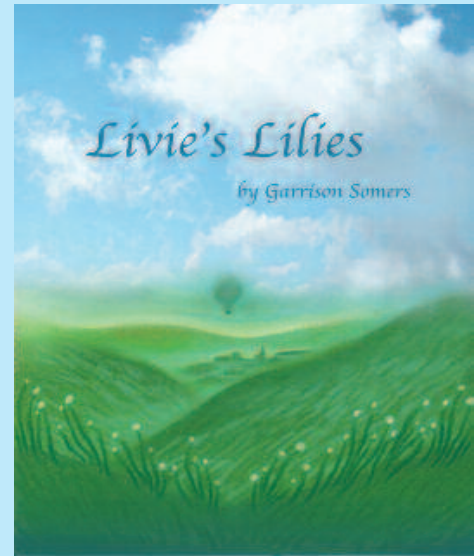
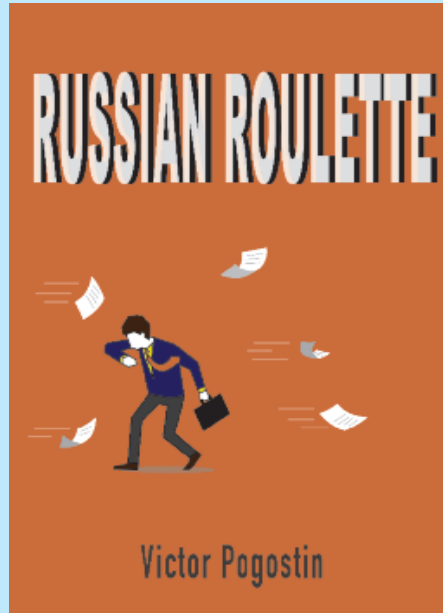
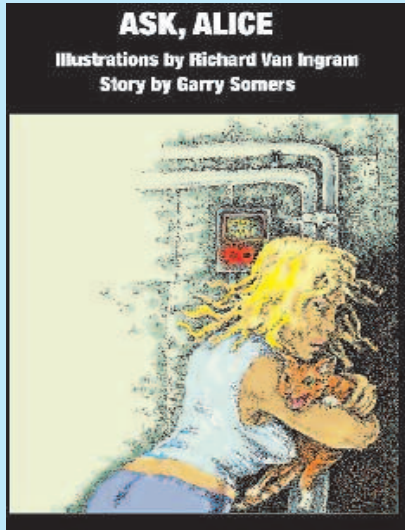
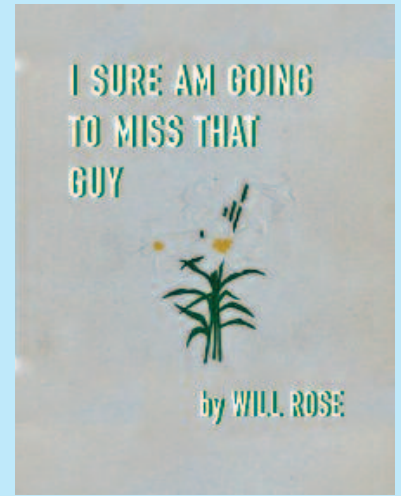
Dennis Vannatta is a Pushcart and Porter Prize winner, with essays and stories published in many magazines and anthologies, including *River Styx*, *Chariton Review*, *Boulevard*, and *Antioch Review*. His sixth collection of stories, *The Only World You Get*, was published by Et Alia Press. He lives in Little Rock, AR.

Kevin Camp began his writing career by focusing squarely on religious matters. He was first published in essay form in a 2010 book anthology entitled "Quaker Rising," which included the written works of young adult Quakers across the United States and Canada. A second essay was published in 2012 by *Friends Journal*. His life story was included in religion writer Mark O. Pinsky's book "Amazing Gifts" which was published by the Alban Institute in 2013. While continuing to work on new writing pieces, he contributed frequently to the metablog Daily Kos, writing in the site's Community Section and regularly featured on the front page. In May 2020, Kevin was published in a journal of the weird, *misery tourism*. His contribution was entitled "Messiah Online." Later that year, in November, "Messiah Online" was reprinted in Cough Syrup's "It's Working" short story section. In March 2021 his short story "Holding It Together" was published by *The Summerset Review*. In August 2021, his story "Bird Dog" was published in the magazine *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*. In October 2021, the story "A Change of Scenery" was published in *Derailleur Press*. In July 2022, his story "Grandfather's Lungs" was published by *Silver Pen - Fabula Argentea*. In October 2022, the story "Sleep Deprivation Road Trip" was published by *KNOT Magazine*. Also in October 2022, the story "Supermarket" was published by *Lotus-eater Magazine*. A proud member of the Religious Society of Friends, Camp lives in Hoover, Alabama.

Dr. Susie Gharib is the author of *To Dance on the Ugly* (a collection of poetry) and *Classical Adaptations*, three film scripts adapted from D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, and Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*. Her poetry, fiction, and literary essays have appeared in numerous journals and magazines.



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