

The background is a complex, layered collage of various textures and colors, including shades of blue, green, brown, and white. A prominent feature is a central, roughly circular shape with a red and white patterned interior, possibly representing a flower or a stylized face. The overall effect is one of depth and artistic complexity.

The Blotter

magazine

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The Blotter

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by Bea Somers

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“Graphite Slashes”

Sitting in front of an empty white sheet of virtual paper, waiting for something to say. Something to leap up and slap my face and say howdy! A problem not a problem – I once had an art teacher that walked around with a pencil behind her ear. She would talk to the class about shape and form, energy and hue. I sat at my easel, listening but unable to put paint on my fresh clean brush. Perching behind me, she waited for something to happen. So did I. Finally, leaning over my shoulder, swinging her pencil, she slashed graphite onto the vast blank expanse of my canvas. “You see?” she said in her soft artist-teacher’s voice. “Now there’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s already spoiled!”

What she meant, as you already well know, is that we tend to be afraid to start. Or, in this case, restart. It is our fear of beginning all over again, a special kind of inertia, that keeps us standing still, or sitting on the couch, or spinning in circles as if one foot was nailed to the floor. I haven’t learned anything from my failure (because you didn’t fail!) It took so much out of me – energy, time, ideas. How can I do that all over again? What if no one likes it? What if I’m really no good?

You know what? What if? So you have to go back and give something another look. So that look leads you to a place where you begin again. That will be OK, say I. You will be just fine. Don’t believe me? Ask someone else. Find another writer or editor or artist of any stripe. See what they think.

It is a good thing that there is a community, real and virtual, in the world, to talk about your writing, your drawing, your music and sculpture and dance. It carries with it a certain sort of baggage of course – judgment and self-consciousness and this thing called imposter syndrome that has me thinking too much – but it is mostly a good thing to be part of something. To participate. To contribute.

I have submitted three pieces this year. For me that is a

lot. I don't submit out of fear of rejection – I'm objectively aware that this is (mostly) not a statement of quality but rather of appropriateness, in all the ways that word can be defined. I'm not hurt (very much, or at least very long) when someone says no.

It does bump me off the tracks, though. Tips over the cup. Your metaphor of choice. Not for long, however. I don't let it fester, I don't permit it to dwell rent-free, and I refuse to get particularly discouraged. Rather than sit in stasis, I do something else. I change gears, slashing graphite onto the blank expanse. I do something so mindless that I hesitate to tell you.

Just kidding. I write limericks. They are, arguably, the worst entry in the pun-theon of humor. Never much better than groan worthy. Usually boring. I don't care. They take ergs (urghs?) of energy to scribe, and they require some portion of my mind that is burdened with something resembling a pebble in one's shoe. And it usually, sooner than "eventually," breaks the back of the inertia in my work.

In the end, you do you. Do whatever is required of you to stay productive, moving forward, keeping the "in progress" in your WIP. Maybe what I'm saying is a waste of your time. You already have an effective plan that you keep in your hip pocket. Or maybe it just slashed graphite across the clean, annoyingly so, sheet of paper in your mind.

There was a young lady from Kent
Who played on an oboe she'd bent.
I told her, "That's rich,
It's an English Horn, bitch."
Where she hit me, it left a sharp dent.

Garry - editor@blotterrag.com

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

a cold shot baby

“Whispering Pages”

by Alice Baburek

The old, frail man bent down. He hummed a familiar tune. His aged body was no match for the volumes sitting in the unmarked boxes. Fingers crippled by arthritis, he carefully picked up one. He inhaled its contents as he gently aligned it on the dusty bookshelf.

Howard Ward glanced around the run-down bookshop. A different place, a different time. Secrets & Stories Bookshop was his lifeline. Leading the way from the past to the present and into the future.

So, as fate would have it, Meadowlark had become his new temporary home—the unpopulated, cozy town nestled against the backdrop of the southern Blue Ridge mountains. Howard did not question the journey. He knew where he had to go. He was needed, and so was the Secrets & Stories Bookshop.

As Howard finished his work for the day, the persistent whispers faded. “I know, I know...all in good time, my friends.”

The climb up the back steps to the quaint apartment above seemed endless. As he reached the top, he heard a rumble and crash from below. His heart skipped a beat. The caller had come early. Sometimes, he could pinpoint almost the exact day and time.

Carefully, Howard turned and held the

banister. Step after step, holding on. As he made his way to the front of the bookshop, he could hear the rummaging of books falling to the floor.

As he switched on the overhead light, a dark figure pulled back toward the broken front door.

“Wait!” called Howard. “Don’t leave... please...I can help you,” his shaky voice announced. The mysterious stranger hesitated. A black hoodie covered his head. Darknet shorts hung down his scrawny legs. A worn pair of sneakers finished the attire.

“How?” replied the voice. Howard smiled. He shuffled toward the stranger. Instantly, the front door opened. The visitor was ready to bolt.

The whispers within the bookshelves intensified. Howard knew this person was a receiver.

“I’m here to help you. Come back and sit down,” urged the old man. Howard gestured toward the shabby couch. The visitor hesitated. Finally, after several seconds, he inched his way to the sitting area. Still standing, he eyed the owner.

Howard noted the slowed response. Trust had to be earned. But he never knew how extended his stay would be.

“I’m Howard Ward. Proud owner of this fine establishment—Secrets & Stories

Bookshop.” His wrinkled hand raised into the air.

“I’m...Colton...Windermere” replied a soft male voice. Seconds later, the stranger removed the hoodie. Thick brown bushy hair stuck up. The young man’s face was streaked with tears and dirt. And then a thin, trembling hand extended.

Instantly, Howard’s heart ached. His wrinkled, stubby hand reciprocated. “It’s nice to meet you, Colton.” The two men—distant in age—stood staring at one another. “Please, Colton, sit down. Are you hungry? I can make you a sandwich if you like. I have bottled water and soda.” A huge smile formed across the aged senior.

Colton eased himself down onto the cushioned, ragged sofa. He gave a slight nod. “Sure, if it’s not too much of a bother.”

“Which will it be? Bottled water or soda?” Howard slightly turned, waiting for the young man’s answer.

“I’d...I’d like a soda if I could, sir.” Colton wiped his mouth with the back of his grimy hand.

“A soda it is. I’ll be right back,” replied Howard. The bookshop owner began to hum again, then disappeared into a back room.

Colton glanced about the bookshop. Its musty smell of endless paper tingled his nose. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

“You’re a reader,” said Howard as he shuffled across the floor. A can of soda in one hand and a round white plate in the other. Colton’s eyes opened wide. His stomach grumbled. It had been a few days since

he had anything to eat.

Colton was about to stand. “Sit down, my boy.” Howard handed the hungry young man his food and drink. He sat down across from his visitor in the broken recliner.

“I sure hope you like cooked ham. I haven’t the time yet to shop properly.” He placed his weathered hands in his lap as he watched the young man eat.

Colton tried not to shove the entire sandwich in his mouth. He forced himself to chew slowly and savor its taste. But after only a few minutes, his plate was bare, and the soda can was empty. He stifled a belch.

“Thank you, sir. I was a bit on the famished side.” Colton forced a half grin. Howard returned with a slight nod.

“Do you have a place to sleep, Colton?” asked Howard. Colton looked down. His head moved ever so slightly back and forth.

“Well, then. It looks as if this is your lucky day! I was just about to retire upstairs. It isn’t much, but there are two small bedrooms. I’m not sure how clean they are since I just moved in. You are more than welcome to keep an old man company.”

“Why are you being so kind to me, sir?” asked Colton in a whisper. “You don’t know me.” Howard tilted his head.

“True...but I do know that you need a place to stay, and I just happen to need help with my bookshop. I might have taken on more than I can put out. If you know what I mean.” Howard chuckled.

Colton’s eyes locked with the old man. “You’re offering me a place to stay and a job?”

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“Why yes! It would seem so. That is if you accept my offer. I’m unsure how much I can pay you, but room and board are included. Do we have a deal?” asked Howard, extending his hand.

Colton’s lit up. He grabbed Howard’s hand and shook hard. “It’s a deal, sir.”

“Easy...easy, son. I’m fond of these old fingers.” Colton released his grip instantly. “How about we get a little shut-eye? Before you know it, it’ll be morning. We still have work to do before I officially open Secrets & Stories Bookshop.” And with that said, the two men headed upstairs to get a good night’s sleep.

The following morning, Colton adjusted his eyes to the sun peering through his curtainless window. For a brief moment, he forgot where he was, his heart pounding within his chest. Then he remembered breaking into the bookshop, the kindness of the old man, and his offer to live and work at the store. A smile spread across his grimy face.

Without making a sound, he inched down the quiet hallway to the bathroom. Once inside, he noticed a small round table with hygiene necessities, towels, and a clean set of clothes. Colton sucked in a quick breath. How could the old man know his size?

A slight knock on the door startled him. “Colton, I hope it is all to your liking,” said Howard through the wood.

“Thank you...Howard. I’ll be out soon. Just need a quick shower.”

“Take your time...I’ll make us break-

fast.” And then silence. Colton snagged the toothbrush and toothpaste. He scrubbed his teeth. Then, he stripped off his filthy clothes and took a long, hot shower.

Thirty minutes later, dressed in his clean clothes, Colton placed his pile of dirty clothes in the wicker basket inside his room.

The aroma of coffee permeated the shop below. Colton’s stomach rumbled. He was starved. The sound of sizzling echoed from the kitchen.

“I hope you’re hungry, Colton. I made eggs, bacon, fried hash browns, and wheat toast. If you’re not a coffee man, there’s fresh orange juice in the fridge,” stated Howard gesturing with the spatula.

“Howard, it smells delicious. And a hot cup of coffee...suits me just fine, thank you.” Colton pulled out the rickety chair and stopped.

“Do you need any help?” The young man looked refreshed.

“Sit down...sit down. The food is ready,” replied Howard. Then Colton noticed that Howard had not changed his clothes from the previous evening.

The wooden table was in dire need of repair. Its scratched and gouged surface left the white plate wobbly.

Howard heaped a mound of scrambled eggs, potatoes, and bacon onto Colton’s plate. He poured the hot coffee into a chipped mug and set one down for each.

Colton tried desperately not to shovel the delicious food into his watering mouth. It was the best meal he had eaten in quite some time.

Howard, on the other hand, did not eat. He leaned against the sink and sipped at his steamy brew.

Colton stopped when he noticed the old man was not eating. "Aren't you hungry?" Howard held up his coffee cup.

"Not much of a breakfast man. All I need to start my day is a strong cup. Now, eat up before it gets cold. We have a lot of work to do before I can open the shop. I'm glad you came along, Colton." The old man smiled.

Colton's stomach felt full, but he wanted to finish, not leaving a crumb behind. Had his luck finally turned around?

Howard hummed as he washed the used pans. Colton brought his plate to the sink. He gulped the potent brew.

"I've to hand it to you, Howard; that was one of the best meals I ever ate. It hit the spot. I want to thank you again for your hospitality." Colton placed his lanky fingers on his tight belly.

"The best part of cooking is watching how much it is enjoyed," said Howard in a low tone.

Colton eyed the strange man. Was it luck Howard didn't call the police? He did break into the bookshop. In fact, the front door would be the first thing he'd fix.

Once the dishes were finished, Howard wiped his wet hands on the faded hand towel. He turned to face his guest.

"Well, let's get started, shall we?" Howard moved slowly across the floor into the central area of the shop. The front door barely stayed closed. The mess of books

remained on the floor. Colton immediately began to work. He quickly placed the books back on the shelves where they belonged. The front door would have to be repaired. He needed tools.

Sitting aside, he saw the huge, rusted toolbox. Colton examined the tools and studied the damage he did to the door. Within twenty minutes, he had fixed the doorjamb and straightened the lock. It worked perfectly.

Howard had left the young man alone to do his job. The back room had been stacked with boxes and boxes of books. It would take some time to go through each one.

"How about I help you with those?" asked Colton. Howard smiled.

"You fixed the door...you're good with your hands," commented Howard. Colton shrugged his shoulders.

"As I returned the books, I came across a DIY book. It showed how to fix a door jam and a bent lock. I thought it would be harder." Colton placed his hands on his hips.

"You can learn many things by reading books. And if you listen close enough, you can hear them whisper." Howard held a book close to his ear.

"Come on, Howard. Let's catalog and get these books on shelves so we can open your bookshop."

After many weeks of backbreaking repairs, Colton felt confident enough to suggest an opening date for Stories & Secrets Bookshop. Howard hired an inspector to make sure the repairs were up to code. With

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the official green light, the two men discussed its opening.

“Howard, no offense, but you need to market this place. We’re on the outskirts of Meadowlark—a place no one has heard of unless born within the surrounding area. I’m not saying the towns folk wouldn’t enjoy browsing. I’m just suggesting reaching out to the neighboring towns. I’m talking about using the internet and social media. What do you think?”

The old man remained quiet. He knew his time in Meadowlark was coming to an end. Colton had grown into an exceptional entrepreneur. His knowledge acquired through many books he read, including self-help, self-repair books, manuals, and those for enjoyment, rounded the eager young man. Howard’s presence was no longer needed. The whispering pages had become silent.

Colton waited for Howard’s input. He knew with no doubt the shop could be a success. He could take it to the next level. With marketing, programs, and author events, he’d make it a sensation—an enjoyable bookshop for all.

“I think you’ve come a long way, Colton. You have made Stories & Secrets Bookshop a reality.” Howard looked down at his wrinkled hands.

The aged man continued. “We’ve never discussed your past, Colton. And how you came here to me and the bookshop. It doesn’t matter. What matters is that you’ve built yourself a life—one you should be proud of, Colton. And one day, you will

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hear the whispering pages when all is silent.” The old man stood up and placed his shaky hand on Colton’s shoulders.

Colton’s eyes filled with tears. Many nights, he had heard the old man alone, talking in the back room. Maybe Howard’s connection to books was something he would never understand. Maybe they did speak to Howard. But what he did know was that Howard and the bookshop saved him from going down a dark and destructive road.

The next day, Colton got up early. He planned on researching the best place to start advertising the Stories & Secrets Bookshop. As he went down the steps to the kitchen, he noticed the absence of coffee brewing. It was a must for Howard each morning.

“Howard! Did you want me to make the coffee?” Colton opened the cupboard containing the coffee can. He quickly set up the dated percolator. “Howard! Where are you?”

Colton checked the stock room. Empty. He dashed up the stairs toward Howard’s bedroom. The door was closed. He knocked gently. It was unusual for Howard to still be asleep with the bookshop opening.

“Howard...are you alright? I got the coffee brewing.” Colton tapped again and entered the room. The full-size bed was neatly made. The dresser cleared of Howard’s personal belongings.

Colton’s heart raced. “Howard! Where are you?” He ran to the attached half bath. It was as if no one had ever used it. Clean and spotless.

“What the...” he didn’t bother to finish. It was then Colton saw the envelope with his name written in large black letters. Quickly, he ripped it open.

“Dear Colton,

By now, you have realized that I am gone. It was my time to leave. My job here was done. You’ve grown into a promising young man with a full life ahead of you. Enclosed is the deed to the bookshop. I have transferred it to you and relinquished all rights. It is official. The Secrets & Stories Bookshop is now legally yours to manage and do as you please—also, a check for a substantial amount of money to use as seen fit.

I am sorry I did not tell you goodbye. Consider the bookshop and check my parting gift to you, Colton. I enjoyed spending time with you. And I hope one day, you will hear the whispering pages.

Goodbye, Colton.

Your friend, Howard Ward.”

Colton dropped onto the bed. His eyes blurred with tears. He never got to tell the old man how he had changed the course of his life with kindness and books. And Colton was determined to turn the bookshop into a success.

The old man polished the antique shelves. The deep smell of lemon saturated the rented cluttered shop. He hummed a familiar tune. Once finished, he shuffled to

the back room. Several unpacked crates littered the dusty floor. He sighed. A different place. A different time. A smile crept across his crinkled round face. The whispers grew louder as he drew near.

“I know, I know...all in good time, my friends. All in good time.” ❖

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“Three Flashes”

by Michael Tyler

Breathe

Miesha runs her hands through her short blonde bob and falls under the spell of a common tongue.

Miesha is new to Italy and so am I, our Italian is god-awful and she smiles as we exchange horror stories of mistranslation as I breathe deep and stroke the inside of her wrist.

She taps her hand on the bed and we go from sitting to lying and now my arm is behind her neck and the joint passes from lip to lip as we both engage the other as though all is oh so casual.

I am passing through and Miesha is a student abroad and derides entire nations by the representatives in her apartment. The Australian is cheerful but always drunk, the Canadian is relentlessly polite, while the English girl recoiled in horror when she spied Miesha's vibrator and thus is 'repressed, very, very repressed.'

And her lips are full and curl at the corner as she says her 'r's', and her blouse is long, her jeans are torn, and the vibrator taunts me from the corner bookshelf.

“I just wanna ... I just wanna get on ... you know?” Miesha says as she rescues a stray

blonde strand.

“Uh huh,” I reply and breathe deep once more.

“Everyone's so ... nice but nice in the way your Grandparents are ... like it's a duty, or ... not a duty but ... you know?”

And I do know, the difference between a smile to the lips and a smile in the eyes.

“Uh huh,” I reply.

“I feel like a puzzle piece misplaced,” she says and this reminds me we are high and I smile and squeeze her shoulder.

“Uh huh.”

“It'll be nice in a month or two I guess ... when we all know each other and can dispose of pretense,” she flicks the roach out the window. “I'm just not sure I'll be able to be truthful here ...”

And it reminds me of something I heard at a party in a land most distant, “The truth is like poetry ... and everybody fucking hates poetry.”

And Miesha turns her head and nuzzles into my chest and I stroke her hair as we lie in silence, and footsteps pass the door and a book is half open and I close my eyes and for a moment I am home.

Empathy

He said he'd seen a dead body, up close ... and there was something about him that made this very believable.

It wasn't a personality trait or way of holding himself, it was his whole being. He simply appeared the type to come across the odd corpse. Maybe it was his stubble as fashion statement, his eye teeth grin, the way he would hug someone just a moment too long...

"He didn't come across as depressed, a little sullen perhaps but fuck, we were 18 ... who isn't a little bit pissy at that age?"

And that was what this circle was all about, confession. We would all confess our deepest darkest secret ... who said that drugs drove people apart? Ecstasy would bring this group of people truly together, bound by secrets so foul they remained previously hidden.

Simon had suggested the whole affair and so custom required he be first to reveal, and that's how we heard of his encounter.

"And yeah, he drank a lot but again, we were in college so how was this a warning?"

It was a smallish circle, situated in the shared living room of the apartment. Pizza boxes had been cleared away, ashtrays and bongos tidied, ants scurried along newfound route. We had taken the ecstasy an hour ago and were tripping balls so the secret circle seemed a natural affair. Friends who usual-

ly avoided eye contact were now staring and eyeballing without distress, eyes alight we sat in awe of this shared state of awareness.

"He didn't even leave a note, just a pool of blood and a razorblade."

Ecstasy should really be named 'Empathy' as it allows you to feel that highest of human emotions, to see others through their own eyes, to take your place in communion and gather from the collective pool.

"I still stand by the fact he was the best college roommate I ever had..."

All seated on the carpet, its tethered coil bringing comfort to the palm. Cross legged and cozy, each with our own tale to tell, weight to unload. And in the end, that was what this night was about, a burden shared and parceled out to the group, a burden lifted with each tongues revelation, a depression eased, panic fled no longer.

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Ready For Blood

The sun gave glancing reminder that spring was loathe to arrive as Sam and I lay and swallowed a pill, a vain attempt at empathy but attempt all the same.

Sam's neck newly revealed beneath recent bob, I used the word 'Flapper' and she took this as quite the compliment.

Feet in foreground raced to mistimed lectures and Frisbees fell as clouds took control once more.

Sam lay her head on my chest, sighed and moaned and at once I too felt first release as the yellow brick road revealed itself and I smiled a grin usually reserved for post coital bliss.

St Peter waved us by golden gates, angels showed us to our suite and peace and love and other clichés ruled a countenance usually skeptical at best.

"We live in peaceful times, we breathe between battlefield casualties and mud, blood and screams most piercing," Sam sighed and moaned and for once I let the jigsaw piece fall.

“The Longing”

by Pawel Markiewicz

The Pindaric ode

You – such a dreamery born from Dionysian odes
like tender day in Your winds – enchanted butterflies
as the Golden Fleece – bewitched in my meek fantasy
august paradise lost is thus found and so dreamy
You lotus-like butterfly you – above volcanos
with wing-bewitchment immortalized in the times
I want to be such you and eternal thankful eyes
a plethora of feelings shines in tender myths lands

I would be magnificent and gorgeous like some ghosts
I will daydream over the soft foggy mournful morns
I long for tenderness of a mayhap dreamy dew
amaranthine but golden muse told me: Let’s go!
dearest butterfly Your blood is like an ambrosia
Your soul seems to be a pretty light eudemonia
Your tender garden is at morning star so moony
Your thoughts are dazzling moonglow awoken from fantasy

I yearn in winter for eternal Horace’s feelings
created born in springtide from the Ovidian songs
I am going to go to Pythia – temple in summer
a naiad becomes for Artemis’ sake muse in fall

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“The Cook, The Comedian, & The Poet”

by Gregg Norman

Does genetics contain within itself
a sharpened sense of fatality,
a living death wish, if you wish?
Is the weight of top-tier talent
and the adoration of the masses
a burden too heavy to bear?
Sanity, stretched hair-thin,
stained by deadly introspection,
can overwhelm a psyche already
encumbered with a surfeit of creativity,
and leave the carrier caught
like a hare in headlights.
Bourdain could not explain.
nor could Williams –
and what about Dylan Thomas?

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'm standing in line for coffee and cake after a church service (I don't recall anything about the service itself.) To get to the coffee, I have to climb down a ladder, forwards – facing away from the ladder, like on a ship. At the bottom of the ladder is the usual crowding of people trying to both get their coffee and talk with other parishioners, and there is a young woman being chastised by what I assume is her mother, for wearing inappropriate clothing to church. And that young woman is serving the coffee, so it's going even slower. And I step on her toe when I go to get my cup. So I apologize for that, plus try to tell her that it's OK to come to church in any way you see fit. That doesn't help, though.

I make my way out of the building, and there are people serving sponge cake from a table and I go for a piece of that, too – although I am holding a cup of coffee and a coffee cake in my hands already. The woman serving the sponge cake places my piece on the head of an older woman standing in front of me. Right on top of her head, so that to get it I must shift my coffee cake onto the sponge cake and then lift it off – hopefully without the older woman tipping her head and dropping everything to the ground. See – losing the cake is my primary concern, not that the cake has been placed on someone's head. That's how I knew it was a dream.

B - Athens

CONTRIBUTORS

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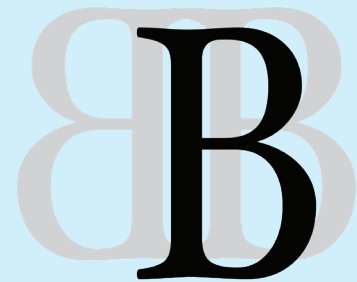
Gregg Norman lives and writes in a lakeside cottage in Manitoba, Canada, with his wife and a small dog who runs the joint. His poetry has been placed in journals and literary magazines in Canada, USA, UK, Australia and India. He is also the author of four published novels and a novel-la.

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