

The Blotter

magazine

January 2026



The South's Unique, FREE, International Literature and Arts Magazine

www.blotterrag.com

The Blotter

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The Blotter is a production of
MAGAZINE
The Blotter Magazine, Inc.,
Durham, NC. A 501 (c)3 non-profit
ISSN 1549-0351
www.blotterrag.com

"What We're Going Through (we've gone through before)"

There's a well-used song lyric about playing poker – I'm sure you know it and may even find it to be an earworm after reading this. If so, sorry about that. But it does remind us of a number of truths. One is actually about poker, and that's not my point. The other is about having self-awareness. Knowing when it's time to get up and leave. When it is time to stop doing this and start doing that – whatever "that" is. As writers, we should know better. How many times have we looked at a blank screen and let a particular number of minutes (eons) pass before getting up to do the dishes or clean out a junk drawer or call mom to say hello and see if she needs anything just so we can feel productive? Or is that just me?

I like sitting at my desk and working. I don't much like sitting at my desk and not working. It is my understanding that the great polymath Isaac Asimov used to have a number of tables in his office and a typewriter and chair at each one. In each typewriter was a sheet of paper, with some specific project in midstream. The great one would move from chair to chair, facing a different typewriter with a different set of thoughts put to paper, and his mind would shift gears and pick up where he'd left off. I like to think that it was some combination of capabilities which allowed him to behave like that – something like non-linear flow of thoughts, and just a bit of code-breaking the scourge of writer's block. As if Asimov could have a little author's hiccup where he couldn't think of a particular word or phrase, so he got up and walked over to continue doing the writing, only on something else completely. That is a very satisfying concept, and we should all take note.

Side note: sometimes I just can't get going with anything.



In situations like that I play word games. Like why is etymology so similar to entomology? Stamped just a simple auto-correct from stampede? Why is hearty defined similarly to hardy? What is the deal here? Do we need both of these words? What got lost in translation? It's no wonder we make mistakes.

Anyhow, as I write this, I have two different other word files open. One has the beginnings of a poem, something that came to me while sitting in front of the television the other night, with the sound down and an open book in my lap. The notes and fragments I've got on paper (not really – but it sounds better than "in electrons on an otherwise blank piece of digital stock") may or may not come together as something worth saving, putting away to see if it ferments into work worth polishing. The other is my novel WIP, begun in early May, where I'm slogging through chapter eighteen (out of what? Who can say?) and my main character currently sits in a crowded student union of a large university and ponders his situation. It is very possible that this entire scene will be cut from the work in some rewrite, but it gives me hope that I will finish the draft if I just keep asking "and what happens next?" Are there any sentences too long by far? Don't worry about that now.

In fact, don't worry about a thing, as the late champ Rocky Graziano said. Don't know who Rocky Graziano is? Don't worry about it. I don't care about flow, or plot arc or if the dialogue moves the story along sufficiently or if I've had characters shrug or wink at each other too often. I don't care if we've spent too long in the student union, sniffing cranberry vape and dirty laundry that doesn't get cleaner just because it's on the bottom of the pile of clothes, watching the cartoons on the big screen TV in the corner with the sound either turned down or the cavernous room just so loud with happy young-people-noise that my MC just cannot hear Tom squalling because Jerry caught his tail in

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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Subscriptions are offered as a premium for a donation of \$25 or more. Send check or money order, name and address to The Blotter Magazine Subscriptions, 1010 Hale Street, Durham, NC 27705. Back issues are also available, 5 for \$5. Inquire re. same by e-mail: chief@blotterrag.com.



CAUTION

play, I just

continued on page 15

The Blotter

"Coffee Shop News"

by Chris Jansen

Still early. A few angelfish - studious young co-eds - are there and me at my usual table, scowling at things.

A homeless guy comes bursting in. I say homeless because he's all raggedy, hair awry, and schlepping a gigantic beat-up army surplus duffel bag.

Homeless guy deposits his bag in the corner and proceeds to lay his head down on the table for a little shut-eye. After a while the manager goes over to rouse him and tell him he has to buy a coffee or leave. Irritated, he barks something unintelligible back at her and she says she's going to call the cops.

He contemplates the situation for a minute then shambles over to the counter and gets a drink. When he gets back to his seat he opens that giant duffel bag and - I kid you not- pulls out a whole-ass desktop computer with a monitor and everything.

He sets it all up, dons some headphones, and in short order begins snapping his fingers, dancing in his seat, and "vibing." In between vibes he's click-clicking the mouse, so I just assume he's laying down some fire beats.

As he gets real into it he starts singing, "Ewwwww girl...Ooooooh yeah...ewwww-wwswhat aaaaah wa-ant."

This goes on for a while. Click-click. Vibe. "Ewwwww girrrllll. Youuuugirrrrrrrr-rl." ♦

The angelfish start giggling and casting furtive glances at him, each other and then me, as if I know what the hell is going on.

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"EWWWWWWWW GIRRRRRRRRLLL," he croons, impassioned now, then raises his hands to heaven in a gesture of supplication and declares, "PUT YO BIG JUICY ASS IN MY HA-AND, yoooo aaaassssss in my ha-aaaand."

After this last verse, he stops, does some clicks to save the masterpiece, puts the whole kit-n-caboodle back in the duffel bag and runs out the door.

This was a couple weeks ago. I haven't seen him since. He's probably a millionaire by now. I don't know. People are crazy, but they work things out in the way that seems best.

In a vision I saw I would die alone with a copy of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* open on my chest. ♦



“The Elder Goths”

by Bruce Buchanan

Perfect as Cats, the best Cure cover band on the East Coast, soaked in the cheers from the black-clad, hair-sprayed fans filling the concrete box of a nightclub. The band members set down their instruments and stepped through the curtain behind the small stage.

Two of the patrons. Janet Harmon and Stacy Gorham stopped dancing and leaned against Stage Right—their customary spot for post-punk and alt-rock shows dating back to the Reagan era. Close enough to see the guitarist’s pick hit every string. But separate from the surging amoeba of arms and legs in the center of the chairless wooden floor directly in front of the band. The club’s manager always reserved the spot for the two, whom concert regulars dubbed “The Elder Goths.”

Stacy sighed, wiping sweat from under her once blond bangs that now were pure white. Dark mascara ran down her flushed, rounded cheeks. “They did a killer version of ‘Close to Me, right? Reminded me of road tripping to see Robert and the boys in ‘85....”

But Janet’s attention drifted to a small kiosk at the side of the dance floor. A tan young man poured vodka into ice-filled plastic cups. Toned arms extended from short sleeves as he handed drinks over the plywood counter. A new bartender. Probably a student working his way through college. The kind of guy who could benefit from a little experience.

“I’m thirsty all of a sudden.” Janet nudged her friend with her elbow. She nodded at the bartender, whose muscles flexed

as he jostled a booze-filled metal shaker.

Behind cat-eye glasses, Stacy rolled her heavy-lidded eyes. “Oh, no. Sweetie, He’s somebody’s child. He’s young enough to be your kid.”

Janet thrummed her black lacquer nails on the edge of the stage. “Then call me ‘Mommy’.”

Stacy tried to frown, but her lower lip quivered. She pressed the silver ring on her index finger against her lip to hold back the belly laugh that threatened to emerge.

“Relax—we’re just going to talk. Maybe I can score a phone number.” Conjuring her best high heeled strut, Janet sauntered to the kiosk. She shook her long, gray-streaked dark hair behind her.

“Hey there. What can you do for a girl?” She batted her long eyelashes, heavy with dark eyeliner. The tip of her tongue met her black-painted lower lip. She put her hands together on the counter and leaned forward into his space.

The bartender smiled, but stepped back. “Oh, hello, ma’am!” He reached under the counter and produced a green glass bottle. “You strike me as the white wine type. I hear this vintage is good. Not my thing, though.”

White wine—an elderly woman’s drink of choice when dining out. Probably at four o’clock, before an evening of watching CBS dramas.

Janet sighed. “Make it two, please.”

Stacy chuckled when her friend returned moments later. “Guess Two Tickets to the Gun Show wasn’t interested.” She

The Blotter

took her cup and sipped it through a short plastic straw. "At least the vino is good."

"Surprised he didn't offer me an Ensure. He called me 'ma'am,' Stacy." Janet's shoulders slumped. "He acted like I'm an old lady."

The shorter woman snorted. "Sweetie, we ARE old ladies. My knee is barking at me like a pack of hounds." On cue, she lifted her Doc Marten boot off the floor and flexed her left leg.

That's well and good for Stacy. She married the nice guy she met in grad school. Their kids turned out well. Last year, she became a grandmother. My grandma never wore a Depeche Mode T-shirt while rocking me to sleep, but Stacy pulls it off like a boss.

And me? I've got my career—and the scene. But sometimes, I feel like I've stayed on a train for too long. Now it's pulling into the station for the night, and I've missed my stop.

As if on cue, Stacy pulled Janet into a one-armed hug. "Quit pouting and drink your wine. The band's about to come back on stage. I bet they'll do 'Just Like Heaven'."

"Yeah, I've always loved that song." Janet stabbed her straw into the cup. However, she couldn't help but smile.

Janet pushed down a yawn and poured herself a large cup of coffee. Despite the late night the previous evening, she made it to work at 8:30 the next morning.

A sensible gray skirt and button-up white blouse replaced the floor-length black gown she'd worn the night before. She made sure to button her sleeves, so her co-workers wouldn't notice the bat tattoo on the inside of her wrist. No sense mixing this place with the scene. They wouldn't understand.

Bloop! A text alert popped up on her phone. She lifted it.

Stacy: Guess what, Sweetie—New Order is coming to the City Amphitheatre in October! I'll get the tix. CAN! NOT! WAIT!

Janet raised her eyebrows and suppressed a giggle. New Order had been one of their favorite bands since their days as college roommates. Seeing them in October would be pure magic.

Clicking her wireless mouse, she glanced at the quarter's performance chart. She managed an eight-person marketing team for a regional corporation. Ad impressions were up fourteen percent. Customer satisfaction up seven percent. All eight on-site events went off smoothly and successfully.

Another successful quarter for a department that had been on an upward diagonal line since Janet took over. She sipped her black mug and gave the report another satisfied look.

"Janet, hey. Glad I caught you..."

She turned and looked over her shoulder. Brad, the company's CEO, stood in the doorway to her office. Blue business suit, yellow tie, and a tan burnished on a hundred golf courses, he looked like the grown-up fraternity boy he was.

"Sure, Brad. Come in." He closed the door behind him and looked down at the short gray carpet. "Is everything okay?"

Oh, God. Has someone had an accident? Jeanie, our graphic artist, was out sick yesterday. Did something happen...?

Brad fidgeted with the large gold class ring on his right hand. "I don't know how to say this but.... Janet, we've got to let you go."

What?!? This didn't compute. Janet had her team running full throttle. Morale was high, expenses were under budget. Her personal reviews were stellar as well. Brad would know—he wrote those glowing eval-

uations.

All unassailable points. But Janet couldn't lift her jaw off the floor to make them.

Brad filled the silence, "It's like this. Management thinks you've done an awesome job getting your team in shape. So good, in fact, they think the team is self-sufficient."

"By 'Management,' you mean yourself." Janet dug her nails into her palm as Brad shuffled in his chair.

"You are one of the highest-paid staff members, so the cost-savings are significant. And besides, you've put in your time, Why not take an early retirement? Go to the beach or something?"

Brad stood and pulled down the hem of his suit jacket. "Someone from HR will be up momentarily with your paperwork. Don't worry—you'll get a generous severance package. And if you need a recommendation, just let me know."

"Thank you." The words escaped through pursed lips.

A job referral letter. What every sixty-four-year-old wants. Might as well throw in a complimentary colonoscopy.

With trembling hands, Janet collected a few personal items. She'd seen enough corporate downsizing to know that a security guard would accompany the HR rep to escort her out of the office. She shoved a favorite hairbrush and a crystal trophy she'd won a few years back into her oversized purse.

She stopped when she picked up the only framed photo on her desk. Her face and Stacy's, unlined by age, stared back from the summer of 1987. The two sat arm-in-arm from arena seats as they waited for Depeche Mode to take the stage. A magical moment that hadn't seemed so long ago until now.

Her eyes twitched staring at the photo.

"Janet? I'm so sorry, but it's time..."

She put the photo into the bag and pulled her face into a tight facade. Work had taken plenty. It wouldn't get her tears, too. Taking a deep breath, she swiveled her chair for the final meeting of her professional career.

Janet spent the next day in bed. By Day Two, she needed a shower and real clothes. She threw on her favorite Siouxsie and the Banshees T-shirt. After thirty years, the faded, threadbare garment still fit.

She snorted a laugh. Maybe they'll bury me in it.

Janet settled into a recliner in her town-home's living room and scrolled her Instagram feed, looking for cat photos and 1980s music videos. She didn't move until the sun went down. Her back cracked like wood in a bonfire when she stood.

By Day Three, Janet was ready to climb the walls. She scanned the online job sites, clicking away when terms such as "Entry-Level" and "No Experience Required" punched her in the face.

A 45-minute spin on her stationary bike burned off a little energy. But after toweling down, she checked the clock on the stove: 11:19 a.m.

Is this my life now? Figuring out how to fill the empty spaces between waking and sleeping? Janet pulled her arms close to her body. A chill crawled over her skin.

She lifted her cell phone to text Stacy, then set it down. She's working at the library. And if she isn't, she's got a million things to do. Sorting her record collection alone would take weeks.

Guess I should look at some more job postings. Maybe I'll find one that isn't code for "No Old Fogies Wanted". Janet filled

The Blotter

a water glass at the fridge when her phone rang. Probably a damn telemarketer....

But the display read "Stacy," so she clicked the "On" button. "Hey, girl. What's going on in the real world?"

"Janet, it's Joe. Not Stacy."

Stacy's husband? Why would he be calling?

"I'm here at the hospital with Stacy. She went back to surgery—"

"Wait? What?!" Janet's breath came in sudden, shallow bursts. She grabbed the edge of her black granite kitchen counter to keep herself upright.

"Yeah. She was walking the dog this morning and her knee gave out. Apparently, she had a ligament tear—that's why she's been in so much pain. But it completely ruptured and they're going in to fix it."

Janet exhaled. Oh, God. For a minute, I thought.... "I'll be right there, Joe."

Janet inched open the door to Stacy's hospital room and poked her head inside. Stacy lay flat on her back, mouth open. A low snore filled the antiseptic-scented room. Miles of gauze bandages and surgical tape swelled around left knee to the size of a hornet's nest. An IV dripped fluids into her right arm.

Heh. Reminds me of the '83 road trip to New Orleans for Echo & the Bunnymen. Stacy had three hurricanes and was out before you could say, "Bring on the Dancing Horses."

Joe raised his head when the door opened. Dark bags hung below his eyes. He held his wife's right hand in his.

"Hey, Joe." Janet stepped into the room and gently pushed the door shut. "How's the patient?"

He exhaled. "Surgery went fine. But the surgeon said it could be months before she's

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able to get around like before. Particularly at her... well, our age."

Janet stroked her chin. "Hmmm... we shall see about that. Why don't you take a break? There's a canteen down the hall with coffee and some decently fresh banana nut muffins. I know you like those."

He smiled. "You know me well. I could use a breather. The walls in here are closing in. But I'll be back in a few."

As Stacy slept, Janet arranged picture frames on the table in front of the hospital bed. Photos of Stacy and Joe on their 20th anniversary vacation to England. Their two daughters on their college graduation days. Stacy's beloved grandson Joey crawling up her lap. And the picture of Janet and Stacy waiting for Depeche Mode to take the stage on a hot summer night nearly four decades ago.

"All... that for me? Shoulda been an interior decorator, Janet."

Janet turned and grabbed her friend's hand in hers. 'Welcome back to the land of the living. How do you feel?"

"Like I did the morning after the Echo show?" Stacy put her hand to her forehead and leaned up. Janet stuffed two wafer-thin hospital pillows behind her back.

Stacy poked out her lower lip. "I'm afraid, Janet. What if...." Her voice caught in her throat. "What if this is it, y'know? When I laid there on the stretcher waiting to go back to the OR, I thought, 'Maybe this is where the downward spiral starts.'" Janet handed Stacy a tissue. She blew her nose with shaking hands.

Janet stood up straight and put her fists on her hips. "Stacy, I don't care how much gloomy music we've digested—you can't think like that. Besides, we've got a New Order show to attend."

The doorknob rattled. Joe reentered

the room, a steaming paper cup of coffee in hand. And behind him followed a short, wavy-haired woman in a lab coat. The woman lifts a clipboard off the end of the bed and flips through it.

“So how are we feeling post-op, Stacy?”

Janet squeezed Stacy’s hand. “Hi, Doctor Ives. I’m so doped up on pain meds that I can’t feel much. Honestly, I haven’t taken anything this strong since the ‘80s.”

The surgeon grinned. “Glad we didn’t remove your funny bone by mistake. The good news is that we were able to repair the ligaments in your knee.”

“I know how this works—bad news is coming.”

Dr. Ives shrugged her shoulders. “Well, it doesn’t have to be. But there is a catch. Your injured leg will atrophy if you don’t use it. You need to get up and move around—and that’s not going to feel good for a while.”

Joe patted Stacy’s thigh on her good leg. “Message received, Dr. Ives. I’ll help her.”

But Joe would be going back to work in a day or two. When he did, Stacy would sink into the couch, scrolling on her tablet and listening to her endless collection of records. And her left leg would get weak in the process.

That wouldn’t work. “No, Joe. We will help her.”

Three days after Stacy’s return home, Janet showed up as Joe stepped into the garage, satchel strapped over his shoulder.

“Off on another exciting day of writing code, Joe?” Janet sipped a ceramic cup filled with hot, honeyed tea. In her other hand, she carried a brown paper lunch bag.

He nodded. “Wish I could stay home. But you being here with Stacy lets me breathe easy.”

“How’s she doing?”

The balding man’s shoulders slumped. He exhaled. “I dunno, Janet. She... she’s been on the couch since yesterday. I can’t convince her to try standing.”

Janet blew out a breath into the warm summer air. This isn’t going to be easy. Not that life ever is.

Stacy pulled off her headphones when Stacy entered the garage door. Janet heard the thumping drumbeat of Joy Division’s “Disorder” coming from the stereo.

The song’s manic rhythms contrasted with the still woman on the couch. Stacy still wore her nightgown. Her white hair tangled on top of her head. Three pillows propped up her heavily bandaged left leg and she sat against a fourth, arms crossed.

“Good morning, girl. Brought you a strawberry muffin.” She set the paper bag on the coffee table in front of Stacy, inches beyond the woman’s reach.

“Not hungry.” Stacy closed her eyes. She leaned her head back on the couch’s padded arm.

Janet shot her a dose of side-eye. “You need to keep your strength up. We’ve got front row tickets to New Order.”

Stacy groaned. “I don’t think I’ll be able to go, sweetie. It hurts to move. Even to breathe.” She turned away from her friend and pressed her hand to her chin as she gazed out the living room window. A faint sob slipped between her fingers.

She’s supposed to be the rock of this duo. I’m the mercurial, tormented one. That’s how it’s been for forty-five years.

Janet’s mouth got dry, and she took another swig of tea. No. I’m not giving up so easily. And neither is Stacy. She set her cup down and put her fists on the hips of her black yoga pants.

“C’mon, girl. The surgeon said you

The Blotter

needed to move around. Doctor's orders—and mine."

"I mean, I want to," Stacy turned back to her friend. By this point, her voice quivered as much as her fingers. "But I don't think I can."

"You can. And you will." Janet threw Stacy's arm over her shoulder and turned her into an upright seated position. "Don't make me lift you out of this couch."

Her feet dangling over the floor, Stacy shook her head. But her voice cleared. "You are a harsh taskmistress."

Janet smirked. "Like I've never heard that line before. I'll put on some music to get you in the mood."

Two ceiling-length oak bookcases filled most of the wall behind Stacy's head. Books completely stuffed one of the bookcases. Like a good librarian, she kept them organized by the Dewey Decimal System.

The other case overflowed with vinyl records, souvenirs of more than four decades of music store bin diving. Janet wrinkled her eyebrow and pulled out a pink and purple sleeve from the middle shelf. New Order's Technique album. The click-clack of drumbeats bounced off the living room walls.

Soaking in the music's energy, Janet crouched to put her weight under Stacy's arm and lifted her off the couch.

They took a lap around the living room. Stacy stepped ahead with her good leg. Then, using Janet as a crutch, swung her injured limb forward and rebalanced.

The pair repeated this ritual dozens of times until it became a steady drumbeat. Stacy's breath grew labored. Sweat pooled in the line creasing her forehead.

Janet eased Stacy back onto the couch. She then lifted her friend's injured leg like it was a newborn baby and returned it to its

elevated spot.

"That's enough for now. Not that you went far."

"B...but I did." Stacy leaned back on her pillow, then put her hands over her face to collect herself. "Thanks to you."

The days to follow were filled with tears and laughter, shouting and music. Always music.

One day, Janet arrived to find Stacy not sitting on the couch, but in a chair. Her healing leg propped on a footstool as she sifted through a stack of records. From the pile of ten or so records, she put eight in a plastic milk crate at her side.

"What is this—spring cleaning in August?" Janet put her hands on her hips, but couldn't help smiling.

"Something like that—can you put these two on the coffee table?" Stacy handed two David Bowie albums to her friend. "I'm clearing out some of my old records. After collecting all these years, I've got more than I know what to do with."

Janet's right hand covered her mouth. Oh, Lord. I've heard about people getting rid of their favorite things before they...

"Hey, let's not be so hasty. You love your records. There's no need—"

Stacy grabbed Janet's wrist. And she smiled.

"No. I love the songs on them. I've got it all on my phone, my tablet, even that dumb personal assistant device Joe installed in the kitchen. But I don't need the physical records. At least all of them."

Janet rubbed the side of her face. "So you're not...?"

"Giving up? Is that what you thought?" Stacy pushed a tear from her eye with her thumb. "Far from it. I'm sorting these records because a new idea hit me this morn-

ing. But to make it work, I'm going to need help from someone with some free time on her hands. Someone with good taste in music."

Janet leaned forward. "Go ahead. I'm listening."

The pit in front of the stage swelled with concert-goers, many of whom wore T-shirts from the newest record store in town. Business there had been brisk, and people said the two women who owned it knew their stuff. Particularly the older sounds that were coming back in vogue.

A synthesizer hummed. A guitar chord rang out. A bass line hypnotized the crowd into swaying left to right, like a cornfield in a gentle summer breeze.

And Front Row, Stage Right were Janet Harmon and Stacy Gorham. The stage lights caught the silver jewelry around their necks and fingers. Stacy leaned against her cane, bobbing her head in time with the drummer's frantic motions.

Janet smiled and extended her arm toward the stage. She locked mascara-smeared eyes with Stacy and they belted out the words to a song they've sung together a hundred times.

The Elder Goths are together again. ♦

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.

Had a fun and funny dream about being in an office environment (as a guest? A visitor?) and the oligarch who ran the company, and presumably the building, came and was ordering his way around when he needed something and I was the only person who could hear him and I picked up the thing – something small, like a stapler or just as ridiculous – and he made me his assistant. Suddenly, I'm the second ranking person in the organization. Just like that. I don't know what this means just yet, except that I am now clothed in somewhat extensive power.

Which would mean nothing at all, except that I am transported, in that way that only dreams can, to a large departmental meeting which is being run by a jerk. You know the type: one of those people in the workplace who imagines that management means being mean and condescending. Everyone is called into a room and sit or stand in a semi-circle around the clown holding court. Tiring, wasteful of the patience and productivity of an organization. But the thing is that now I am the top of the food-chain. The one person who thinks he's the boss doesn't report to me, but I am his superior. That makes him very frustrated when I tell him to stop talking. And he confronts me, and I tell him that he's no longer in charge of this meeting. It's quite satisfying.

Geri L. - cyberspace

"Three Porcelain Friends"

A Fable

by Elena Malkov

There were once three friends, all made of porcelain. Two blond, thin-shouldered boys and a tall bony girl with a loud laugh and a self-conscious slouch. Their beauty - and they were beautiful - expressed itself only in the shining awkward promise on their porcelain faces. Even now that small cracks ran along the sides of their noses and patches of oily sheen appeared on the slopes of their foreheads, they sparkled with that promise. Only -

Well, they were made of porcelain, after all.

The two boys were in love with each other and hated themselves for it. The girl was in love with them both, if only in an abstract way. Childish love, tightly tethered to its familiar triangle.

The energy between them crackled and flared. They fought, formed complex alliances amongst themselves. It was a rare moment when all three were at peace with each other, but those moments gleamed like morning ice in the mountain air. Their childish laughter rang out, spreading across dim yellow classrooms and darkened movie theatres. They laughed, primarily, at each other, still learning how to laugh at themselves.

As they aged, these peaceful moments grew more frequent but became tinged with an impish recklessness, building and building. The three porcelain friends were pushing, without knowing it, at the boundaries of their friendship, testing their tenuous affection for one another.

Yet the friendship survived, even as

school days ticked away and their final summer in that forlorn suburb loomed, adulthood threatening to fling them apart. They clung to each other in fear of the future.

And one day, tragedy struck.

Like so many stories, this one starts with a bottle. Several bottles - lined up and dutifully emptied; a boisterous evening. The three porcelain friends were celebrating life itself! They laughed, danced, chipped their porcelain fingers against clocks and lamps.

The night crested; they piled onto a large bed. The one who loved the other two dared them to kiss, and of course they did. Something dangerous: the way they grasped for each other in melancholy desperation. Quickly, quietly, she stole from the room.

The morning arrived too soon with its brutal brightness. The friends in three separate bedrooms, each drowning in unnamable guilt. Today the sun would not glint against their porcelain skins, it would burn the glaze into pockmarks and blisters. Life, it seemed, had begun its downward turn. This was only the ennui that follows a drunken night, but they didn't know that yet. They stared at their porcelain faces, horrified, inconsolable, slathering themselves with expensive oils that only made the cracks deeper and angrier. These sweet children didn't know their beauty lay in an unhopred future, in the sturdy realm of age.

Fear is the common language of youth. The world seems too big, impossible to fill with the infinitesimal self. The porcelain friends, fragile and precocious, thought they knew what nights of desperation or short

January 2026

beautiful romances, poetic in their brevity. Why wouldn't they choose the latter in their innocent wisdom?

Severed from the comfort of a shared past, they felt the chill of despair fill their hollow porcelain bones.

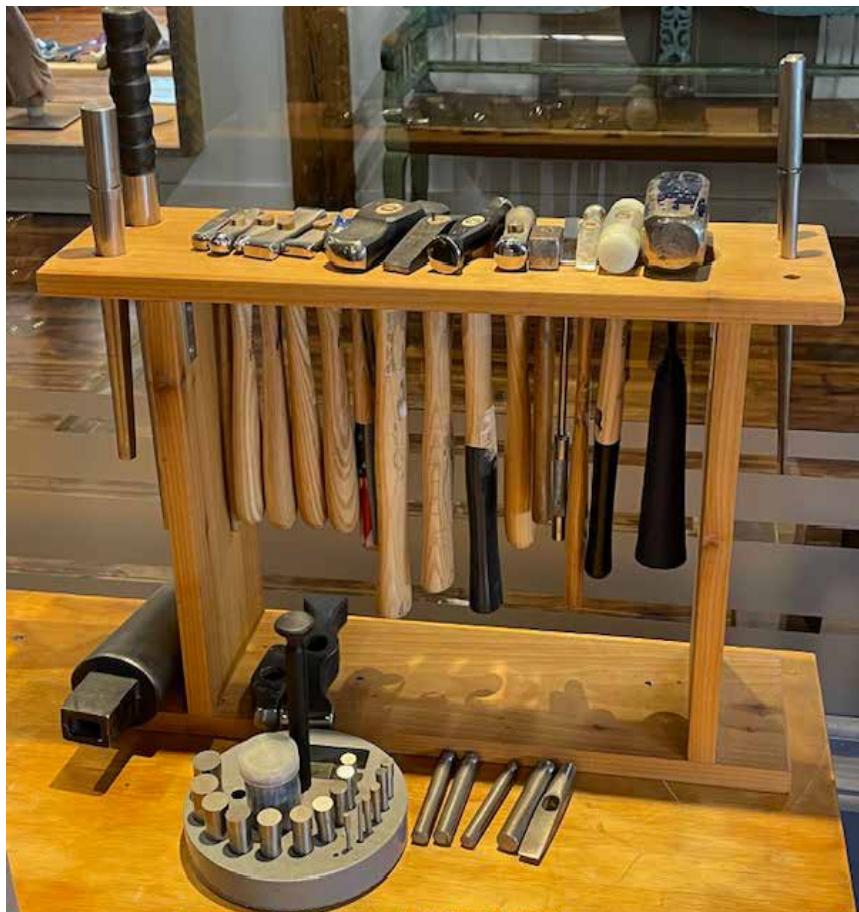
One of the boys renounced all pleasure, unable to conceive another life within the rigid strictures of religious ritual passed down dutifully through the generations. Abstemious celibacy and pious rage filled his porcelain heart and he flung away his past, drowning it in the deep echoes of organ pipes.

The other boy, parched for culture and trapped in the home of a cruel patriarch, went mad and flung a wine bottle at a lover, trapping his fate in the dark corridors of a

maladjusted legal system. He forgot how to remember and even how to breathe.

And the girl? She remained devoutly in love with them both. One day, she broke all the mirrors in her house, filled up three notebooks with a shaky, illegible scrawl of half-baked dreams and metaphors, and leapt off a squat building - afraid of a long descent - knowing she needed just a few feet of air to smash her porcelain head. Pale enamel fragments haloed around her sorry form.

So the two porcelain boys chipped away to nothing and the porcelain girl shattered. Youth had broken them in one drunken night; they hadn't waited to grow up. ♦♦



“Mistaken Identity”

by John Steele

It's not very often I'm mistaken for the Unabomber.
I smile, I don't lash out or grow sullen or somber.
But inside I wince, you see,
not at all a fan of Ted Kaczynski.
It's usually a joke, I know, which softens the blow.
Still, I add their names to the list on my manifesto.

continued from page 3

the front door. That's a lot, I know. Try and keep up, if you are able.

I cannot say that I am anything at all close to being in the same cosmos of a playing field as Asimov. That is no reason I cannot attempt to wield the tools that he used so effectively. Having a bad scribbling morning? Sure – go wash the dishes, they are starting to crust and will take twice as long to clean later. Call your mom. But also open a new file. Something you already started. Something blank and ready to go. Then go.

Garry (mermaidblotter@gmail.com)

CONTRIBUTORS

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Bruce Buchanan's influences range from the novels of Margaret Weis & Tracy Hickman and Stephen King to the Marvel Comics stories of Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Steve Ditko. Bruce is the author of several anthology short stories as well as the new adult fantasy novel *The Blacksmith's Boy* (Aug. 2025) and the upcoming adult superhero novel *The Return of the Cerulean Blur* (2026), both from Wild Ink Publishing, He lives in Greensboro, N.C.

Elena Malkov is a fiction writer living in Richmond, Virginia. Her stories have been featured in *Slippage Lit*, *Third Street Review*, and *RIC Journal*, among others. She is co-founder and fiction editor of *Sublunary Review*.

John Steele has studied Creative Writing at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Under the pseudonym Gherbod Fleming, he is the author of fourteen novels and several novellas and short stories. He has been a teacher, a nonprofit tutor, a logistics coordinator, a high-ropes-course director, a warehouse technician, and, for one fateful day in the deepest, darkest, coldest recesses of January in southern Indiana, an arborist assistant. Poetry is the loose thread of sanity at which he cannot stop tugging.

Bruce Baldwin is an artist in Cary, N.C. and has graced us with his art in previous issues, and we are all better for it. For information on purchasing art contact Bruce at brucebaldwin798@yahoo.com



Victor Pogostin, PhD,
is a teller of tales.
Stories that are often
funny, sometimes
moving, but always
entertaining.
And they're true.

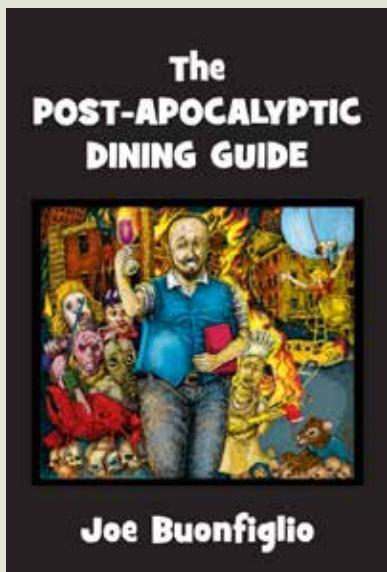
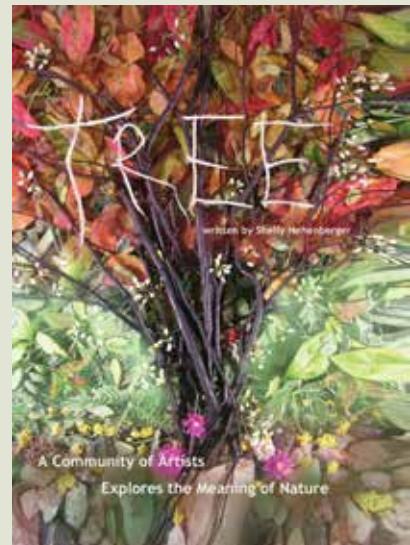
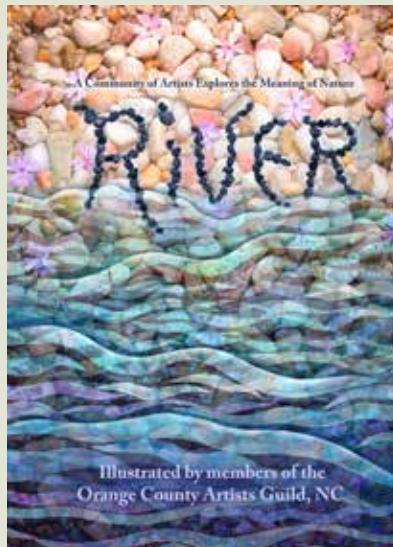
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