



The Blotter

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

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“Spring Cleaning”

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There’s a lot going on, isn’t there? If you’re reading this, I’m assuming you know what I mean without me going into sordid details. Or sorted ones. And would probably prefer we change the subject.

We each are trying to get by, get through or around, this. And far be it for me to give you advice on how to navigate and cope.

And yet I’m going to. Why? Friends do that to each other. I mean for each other. We listen and comment and suggest, needle and nudge. We have concern for each other. Friends listen to your complaints and nod affirmingly, even though we’ve heard you before with those same issues. Friends correct your grammar in the middle of making a point. Friends give examples of what we’re doing that may or may not help you, but you never know unless you try. We’re full of unsolicited signaling and things of that nature. We call you when you’re busy, and you answer the phone. Because it’s for your own good.

Yes, when you look at it that way, friends are a burden, often difficult and hard to deal with. But life is a burden, often difficult. Friends keep you in shape for what life is going to throw at you.

So I have a little list. I know you already know most of this stuff. But here I go, anyway.

1 – Have you walked away from your TV yet? And why not? There are no right answers here. Turn it off. Unplug it, even. Don’t push it off its stand onto the floor, or pull it off the wall. We’re not quite at that point. Just off will suffice. And leave it off. No good comes from it.

2 – Take a walk. Around the block, or something equivalent. Don’t want to go outside? I totally get it. So take one hundred and twenty laps around the kitchen island or the coffee table in the living room. Or just march in place, like the wooden soldiers in Babes in Toyland. Pick a song to turn on or just hum. That’s right, the entire song. Something good, like one of the Brandenburg concerti, or Stairway to Heaven. Real science says it is good for you, in all the ways that good can be defined. (Did you know that J.S. Bach composed the Brandenburs for the Margrave of that principality of the Holy Roman Empire, but the man refused to pay for the music. So it goes, says the great Vonnegut.)

3 – Are you getting enough sleep? Set that schedule and stick to it. Don’t check your phone, go and look at email one more time, binge or doomscroll. Give it a rest. Real rest.

4 – Play a game with someone. Outside, if possible. Have a catch with a kid. Deal some cards to your mom. If you want, I can explain how to play cribbage. Again. Set up a boardgame. Don’t compete. Don’t bet. Don’t even keep score. Just play.

5 – Read a book you should have but didn't, or should have finished but didn't, or haven't read recently and should reread. The Book of Hours by Ranier Maria Rilke. The Lathe of Heaven by Ursula K. Leguin. Or Heaney's translation of Beowulf. Plath's The Bell Jar. Then let's talk about it. Send me an email with your questions, and I'll send you one with mine. That seems fair, doesn't it?

6 – Make something. Anything. An origami stork. A batch of cookies. A drawing on a scrap of paper. Or that Japanese thing where you take a broken bowl or plate and put it back together with gold. Yes, real gold. I must admit that one is a bit much. Rekindle your old whittling skills. Make a walking stick, for when you're walking around the block. Here, you can borrow my knife. No, I won't give it to you, because that's bad luck. But I can sell it to you, which is perfectly OK. Did you know that? Isn't that weird?

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

you're never alone you're

“The Mandatory Three”

by Joe Cordaro

I'm not sure I knew I was setting out on an important journey. The last thing I remember before feeling the bullet hit my chest is that goddamn red dress. No one wears red anymore. I should have known better. No one wears red anymore and now that's all I see and it's starting to hurt like hell...

I'm a “Threeloader”. Or at least, that's how I'm referred to by the law. I'm one of a small community of people that have settled into going nowhere; being no one; floating free. We prey on an entire population of socially removed people; weaving, bobbing to their own tunes or wired in to far away conversations, unaware, uncaring about the world that surrounds them; distant smiles on their faces, destinations on their minds. In other words, easy marks.

CC Riders, that's what we call them. “Constant Contact”. “Continual Chatter”. “Complete Coverage”. There used to be a song called CC Rider. “C...CC Rider...see...What you have done.” Oh man, what they have done. Riders are implanted with the “com-chip”. A constant stream of incoming and outgoing messages that used to be relegated to time spent on computers and cell phones. Now it's continual chatter wired directly into the brain. What used to be a warm smile or friendly greeting in casual passing on the street has become physical, emotional and psychological estrangement from contact altogether. Riders are always in contact, never wanting contact.

I've bounced my smile off the faces of these wanderers for years. I resent their disconnect from reality and miss the physical contact. I guess if I'm going to be honest, I deem myself fortunate to have been on the outside looking in. Well, to be more accurate, reaching in. Living in the world outside the pack, while frightening to most, has been alright for me. I've made a good living all these

years preying on the hustle bustle.

Back in the day, there was more risk involved in the actual heist. It was generally a scenario of a mark coming out of a store or a bank with a young child pulling and tugging on one arm while they struggled to maintain a conversation on their cell phone. The kid is yelling for them to hurry up. They're split between two worlds. Which means, only half the attention is here and now, and only half of that, is aware of anything beyond the kid's screams.

We worked in pairs in those days. One of us would swoop down, create a distraction which would swallow up that little bit of awareness they still had left over of their surroundings. Once this was accomplished, the other would move in and grab the goods, be it purse, bags... this was pretty effective.

More times than not, we'd get away with it. Certainly worth the risk. If there was a hitch, it was usually that someone nearby, who wasn't doing three things at once, would make us.

This became everyday for me.

But then, it evolved into what I like to call the plentiful years, the good times, easy street. The implants had gone mainstream. Very seldom was there someone nearby who wasn't wired in. The change was damn dramatic. It was like being in a room full of five-year-olds and walking through with a tray of Twinkies. Nobody cared who was standing next to them anymore, they just wanted what was on that tray. Consequently, my job became a lot easier and the risks had diminished considerably.

There were a lot of people who knew from the get go that this whole implant thing was a bad idea, but it just snowballed into a horrible idea real quick. Once people were hooked up, or mainstreamed, they were locked in because of the “Mandatory Three”. Those

three minutes it takes people disengaged from the wire to begin to feel the pull back to the pack. It seems to be a sense of, “What do I do now?” “Where do I go?” “I need to call or be called”. Crazy bastards. I can tell from the look on their faces when the panic is beginning to set in.

As people were beginning to get swallowed up by the distractions of constant input and law enforcement began to catch up to the reality of a subculture of predators feeding off the general population, a special task force was created to look into and reduce, if not eliminate, the incidences of muggings and attacks. The public was being warned of the dangers of carrying around anything of value while being wired in and new government licensing regulations forced chip manufacturers to broadcast public service announcements warning of the addiction to the wire. Unfortunately for me, as public awareness grew, people began carrying less and less. Damn if this didn't make my job harder.

Look, with all this going on, I was beginning to feel the pinch of not having access to easy money. It was becoming difficult to score for a breakfast or walk away with a day's worth of groceries. And trust me, there's no work for someone who isn't mainstreamed.

The cops attempted to make matters worse by setting up stings. Riders that weren't Riders. That fell apart pretty quickly though, because the wired cops couldn't stay offline long enough to get the job done properly. Christ, if they didn't nail a Threeloader within three minutes, the Mandatory Three would suck them back and blow their cover. With the sting thing out of the way I figured I had some breathing room to satisfy my own needs.

When the bodies started piling up, the cops began to feel the real pressure. Skulls were shattered and chips were ripped from their brains. It all had to be done in a hurry. If you could plug the chip in within a few minutes there was a very good chance of grabbing access codes and draining accounts before the door slammed shut on you.

So today started out pretty much like any other. It was morning and I needed breakfast money. I turned the corner to scout out

Riders at one of my favorite outdoor café locations, expecting the same old same old, when I saw the damnedest thing!

She was sitting at the café, wearing red and actually appeared to be enjoying the salad on the table in front of her. Red. This woman made a conscious choice this morning to be different from the pack. Yet she belied her appearance by exhibiting wired pack behavior; sitting at the table alone, the movement of the lips that betray the ongoing internal conversations with faraway people. That ridiculous twitch or little flip of the head that Riders felt was necessary to change internally wired connections. Implants received continuous input. They were designed so the mere mention of a keyword would cycle the Rider through phone conversations, c-mail or info-web, but human nature being as it is, folks felt as if the only way to flip the switch was to physically hurl the word across the skull at the implant.

But “something different this way came.” I'm convinced she was wired. The choice of a red dress, and the effort she put into actually enjoying her salad nagged at me. My eyes took it upon themselves to float down from the fast lane of her wired head to absorb more of what her red landscape had to offer.

After watching her for a while, I began to wonder whether she was actually able to play it both ways. I couldn't help myself. Without another thought I found myself sitting opposite her.

She reacted to me immediately by looking up and casually placing the silverware back on her plate. This was all wrong, but Christ, I was getting excited! She reached down to her lap, slowly came up with her napkin and dabbed, not wiped, her mouth of whatever dressing might have lingered there. The trip back to her lap was just as deliberate. When she brought her hands back up from below the table I was staring at the short snout of a Glock 23.

I was locked in shock and the last thing I remember before hearing the explosion and feeling that awful, fucking thud was the sound of her voice, “Transgressor Threeloader L35 you are to be terminated for the violent deaths of innocent civilians.”

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I was looking up at the world. Struggling to hold onto a breath. Damn if the cops didn't find a way to wire in without the disconnect from here and now. She was standing over me with that damn red dress. The bait. All I could think about is what it would be like to hold her. I saw myself walking home, coming through the front door, calling out her name. "Upstairs" is the reply. I tossed my coat on the railing, walked up the stairs. As I walked down the hall I saw her red dress on the floor at the entrance to our

room. She was lying in the bed, the blankets casually thrown over her body. I peeled off my clothes as my heart started to race. The last words I heard before climbing into bed with her were, "Come keep me warm baby. Come keep me warm." A wonderful feeling washed over me. As I closed my eyes, I understood I have finally come home. ❖

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 feeling like my dreams are driven by some sort of AI prompt. A Chat-GPT that someone out there is suggesting into a talk-to-text microphone and it comes up on my ethereal list of things to be accomplished and some director who's not doing his job well says "roll film" and the madness ensues.

And it is madness, or rather, a lot of the time it is. When it is not, it's unsettling. Not unsettling because it's not madness, but simply unsettling in its own right.

What is an AI dream, anyway? Derivative, mostly. Stolen plot modules, weak character development, an arc without much going for it, and no pacing control. You might read a book with some of these issues, but not all of them. You would set it down and shrug, because you spent time (going to the library) or money (the bookstore) and maybe you feel a little crummy wasting either of those.

And I also feel like the program, if that is what it is, is following a path intended to find the most annoying or troubling images and concepts it can, no matter how badly it presents them to my sleeping self. The sleeping-algorithm trying to keep me from sleeping. This makes no sense to me, because it can only exercise its creativity by me being asleep. So it is nothing at all like a virus, because a virus does not intentionally destroy its host, although that does frequently happen.

There are people who think that we are living in a computer program, a matrix, so complex that it seems real and as rational as anything can be. Here's the problem with rational thinking, though. It is all relative. What seems sensible to one is madness to another. And I think that is the point – my dreams are dredging in a place I've never been. How can that be?

Mr. T.G. - cyberspace

“February Thaw”

by John Steele

The backyard is writhing. The ground – that expanse of leaf litter and pine needles where there is no grass and we are not enslaved to a nonexistent lawn – it is churning, roiling, leaves flipping into the air like bubbles bursting in a pre-spaghetti pot of water headlong toward boiling.

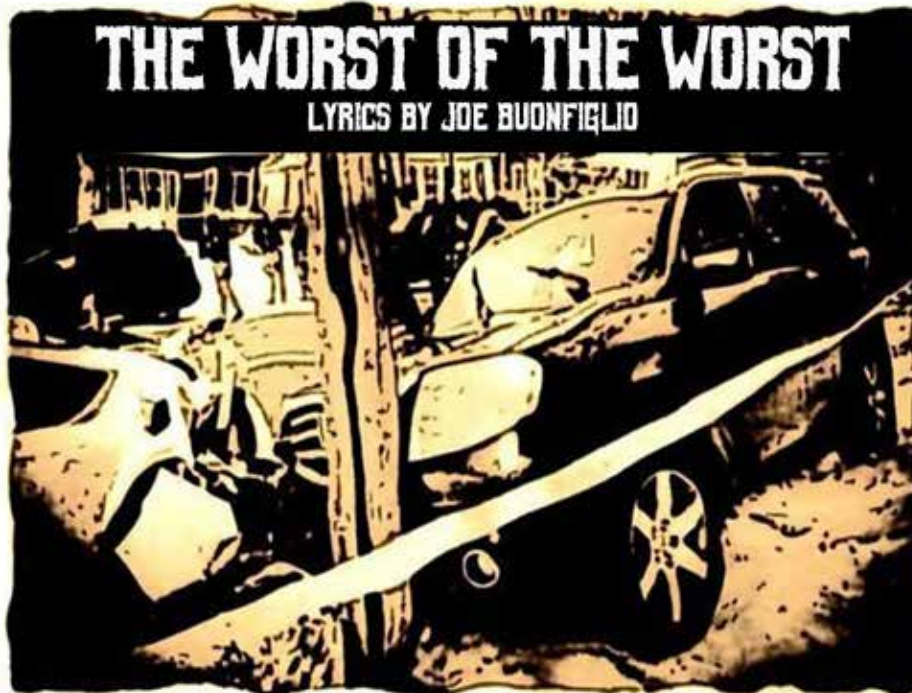
Wind? No wind.

But robins. Dozens of robins. Blitzing insects by instinct, overwhelming worms in a whirl, diving, divotting. Shocked and awed quarter acre, almost Hitchcockian moment, collective nouns insufficient: not a bashful blush of robins, no insouciant bobbin of robins, no reliant, not a rouge, not a breast or the rest. There’s just no –

Ah. A riot of robins.

Not what you expect in your backyard, even after snow and ice have melted, and birds are aggressively aflutter, all just surviving. Meanwhile in the wider world’s sadistic carnival mirror, it is ICE running riot, federalized terrorists puffed up in paramilitary plumage in a feeding frenzy of their own cruelty. Resistance. People with phone videos and whistles, putting their lives in harm’s way.

Always the seasons turn. Be alert. They are distressingly early this year, the first fascists of spring.



THE WORST OF THE WORST

LYRICS BY JOE BUONFIGLIO

I met an old man in the park the other day.
He looked tired and beaten in that old man kind of way.
Sat next to him on the bench, but he just looked straight ahead.
“There’s a story to be told here,” was all the old man said.
“Go ahead,” I replied. “I’ve got some time today.”
He offered a nip from his flask which I just waved away.
“I’ve seen plenty of living.” A smile came to his face.
“And far too much dying,” as his mood fell from grace.

And I listened as his soul seemed to drift:

It was a grand old party. We thought the band was here to stay.
But then the DJ showed up with tunes he shouldn’t play.
“We won’t sing those hateful songs,” we yelled again and again.
But he just played them louder for all the old white men.
They burst in with their masks, burst in with their guns.
Because the DJ thought he’d have us all on the run.
As they cleared the hall and dragged us away;
The sinful ghosts of history retook the stage that day.
He says, “I’m only taking the worst of the worst.”
But if that were true, the ice chill would’ve taken him first.

I met a young woman in the park the other day.
She was done in and bloodied for just driving away.
I sat on the bench as her hourglass ran out.
Would I keep up her fight; defeat my self-doubt?
I looked at her and said, “But why don’t you fight on?”
She smiled at a crying child, and then she was gone.
That lit the match, a rage ‘cross the land.
The DJ then knew this would not go as planned.

And I saw as the people fought his vile grift:

It was a grand old party. We thought the band was here to stay.
But then the DJ showed up with tunes he shouldn't play.
"We won't sing those hateful songs," we yelled again and again.
But he just played them louder for all the old white men.
They burst in with their masks, burst in with their guns.
Because the DJ thought he'd have us all on the run.
As they cleared the hall and dragged us away;
The sinful ghosts of history retook the stage that day.
He says, "I'm only taking the worst of the worst."
But if that were true, the ice chill would've taken him first.

I met all the outraged in the park the other day.
Eyes opened and angry and would not look away.
Take down the weak strongman and the flunkies that he bred.
The lady in the harbor swings her torch at their head.
The larger the crowds got, the smaller DJ became.
Won't give up until they smother his dark flame.
"But the secret police; won't they shoot you dead?"
Such fear could not stop the angry protest's spread.

And I saw the people push his ballroom dreams off a cliff:

It was a grand old party. We thought the band was here to stay.
But then the DJ showed up with tunes he shouldn't play.
"We won't sing those hateful songs," we yelled again and again.
But he just played them louder for all the old white men.
They burst in with their masks, burst in with their guns.
Because the DJ thought he'd have us all on the run.
As they cleared the hall and dragged us away;
The sinful ghosts of history retook the stage that day.
He says, "I'm only taking the worst of the worst."
Could he feel the icy chill as we came for him first?

'Cause he's the worst of the worst. The worst of the worst.

The worst of the worst.

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To hear the song, go to Joe's YouTube page at
<https://www.youtube.com/@JoeBuonfiglio>

or scan this QR Code:



The Blotter

"Gully people" by Benjamin Manifold

They call it an artist colony,
on Mobile Bay,
they have the art walk,
the bluffs, the big pier,
flowers line the streets,
cute little shops.

Zoom in a little.
Scuba gear from the 1970s
blasting caps stored improperly
boxes of ammo, half empty.
Mementos without memories.

I only knew him in his rough years
second childhood.
It broke my heart to see him young and vital,
some sort of adventurer.
Fuck brain cancer in particular.

You left your hometown
something bad in the soil
a legacy worth fleeing.

You went just as far
as the acceptance letters
and financing could take you
so you watched,
as distant and passive observer
you watched that sprawl bloom
green to grey in timelapse.

We had these incredible gullies.
A sea of formless smothered matter
under crashing waves of kudzu.
Anything could be living there.
We made up stories about the gully people.
City of Fairhope filled in all the gullies.

You watched the pull factors pull,
as the push factors pushed,
as new life fills the void you left
to be poisoned in turn
courtesy of Dupont Chemical.

You would visit on occasion
go for walks along the pier,
watch the glorious paper-mill sunsets
and refuse any food sourced from the bay or the bayous
Those waters are for sport, not sustenance.

They call it an artist colony,
at the mouth of the mobile river,
they have the art walk,
the bluffs, the big pier,
flowers line the streets,
cute little shops.

Cancer alley fallout flowers Fairhope.
Fannie Flagg tourist bag.
Gorgeous Georgist jailhouse.
We don't talk about the lake.
The old mayor was a murderer.

"The Pond" by Benjamin Manifold

woods big enough to house apparitions
the pond housed a monster
alligator snapping turtle
it fed on smaller
snapping
turtles
all the way down
three feet wide
elemental cannibal monster
cause for respect
take a foot clean off
no infection like
a snapping turtle
infection.

woods big enough
to be the fog of bear
silhouettes. nobody
will believe you

the stuff that turns up
wreckage of Frederick
peel a trailer apart
in that wind like a skull
covered over by the

pine straw of years forming
moss and loam in the mobile home
ruins

woods big enough to find
leftovers of a chevy gone to
forest rodent hive conditions

pond got filled in but
that monster snapping turtle
waits in the red wet clay
under those new homes

i hope
the
apocalypse
is
at least
leafy

“Childhood”

We spent years
in the backyard playhouse:
the years between
parents and expectations
wrapped in societal
implications.

Quiet times
away during the day
with everyone occupied
with everything
and everyone else.

The damp
exterior plywood walls
8p nailed on unfinished
2.x4s exuded humidity
of privacy, protection,
and promise.

The 8x8 concrete slab
a sheet of arctic ice
against bare
feet washed in whispers,
giggles, and dreams
of a life
we desired but
couldn't
quite grasp.

two by Keith A. Dodson

“Employment Interview: Tell Me A Little About Yourself”

My first answer to a “yes” question
is always “no.”
I quickly discern how each new concept,
proposal, or procedure
will fail.
Problems are easier
for me to identify than
solutions.
And, in a team setting,
I am very seldom
proven wrong.

"If It's Bigger Than Your Head, Don't Eat It"

by Richard Montana

The homily went something like that
Couldn't hear it over my stomach grumbling
Every funeral is a kneel sit kneel situation
Which takes calories I don't have

The host dissolves at the roof of my mouth
and the Blood's always bitter but
it reminds me of kettle chips and saltwater
washed down with beach boxed wine

At the side entrance just me and the statue of St. Anthony
posture crooked his feet covered with wet mulch
all those slivers of wood marinating in the sunlight
glistening like pulled pork well-sauced

Cousin So-and-So whips up a lighter when he finds me
We ash into St. Anthony's palm and I ask both of them,
"Remember those candy cigarettes he'd sneak us from Chinatown?
The ones that smelled like chicken feet and soy sauce? Or when

At the fancy McDonalds
the one in Des Plaines
he thought a trash can was the drive-thru microphone
and argued with his own scratchy echo about forgotten
ketchup
Which was important small as it was
Like how he made that day the exception to the rule
and Gramps let us eat in the car?"

Since our limo could never fit within drive-thru
the hearse tires tear through hot gravel road
the whole cemetery sizzling as people gawk at the coffin
as one observes fajitas

There'll be a buffet at my funeral
Crab legs, sausage & peppers, five-spice mushrooms
for everyone who mouth watering eyes watering
remembers everything except to eat breakfast

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“The Professor” by Richard Montana

Wasn't his wife, but he kissed her goodbye all the same
Most would agree there's honor in the bare minimum
He looked like a schoolteacher although he wasn't anymore
Someone is always more, or less to the right people
He wore glasses with the good frames
Thick, tortoiseshell

Travelling by train is cheaper than a flight
And travelling alone is travelling light
He sat first class
Chicken coop wiring was a world away
Eight cars back, sixteen cars back, the cattle
He dreaded waking up in the place he'd left

Banking intimidated him
Hundred-dollar inches he measured by hand, all embarrassed
He insisted on counting them himself
He stopped counting halfway through
However much it was for her, it was too much
But there's honor in the bare minimum

Travelling by train is cheaper than a taxi
It's difficult to ignore the people built into the city walls
People that were once schoolteachers
The deadbeats
But that's all much less severe than his current predicament
He combed his hair in the hotel's mirror for the first and last time

He got lost, even though he chose the restaurant
He asked for directions
At first, he thought the girl was his daughter
She wasn't
Shows you can't trust people
That's the excuse he'd use, at least

He found the one that was his daughter, eventually
She reminded him vaguely of teachers lounges, altars
Of a one-way train ticket he once purchased
“You know how stressful it is to schlep around a suitcase full of money, in this city?”
But that's not the kind of conversation to have with the kid
Do you kiss a daughter you've only met once?

In Changchun they plate the whole animal to give the appearance it's genuine
The gesture, that's the important part

He ordered family style
 The suitcase made its debut
 He balanced stacks slowly, to make a point—
 He wasn't a schoolteacher anymore
 That's a big deal
 Even if you've never even met the guy once
 He bragged there's honor in doing the bare minimum for your family
 Nobody laughed, not even the people in the walls

Later, he said "I saw my daughter,
 Impressed her with a rats' nest of cash,
 Especially on her schoolteacher salary."
 One stone, two birds
 In, out
 Which is more than what most other guys would've done."

Contributors

Joe Cordaro is a digital "pen & ink" artist/illustrator who also expresses himself within fictional narratives. His works flow between the sweet and sour of human expression. He displays his artwork throughout the Southeast.

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.

Joe Buonfiglio is a writer, literary absurdist and karma extractor specializing in on-call nihilist evacuations. Sure he has OCD; but man, do his toilets shine!

Wait. That's his Twitter-X bio. Here. Try this...

Joe's affinity for running naked with penguins and the fact that his best friend is a caramelized onion named Sylvia only bring consternation to his— No-no. That's no good either.

Okay, so Joe is a Society of Professional Journalists award-winning writer, co-creator (writer/director/producer/voice talent) of the Theatre of the Absurd radio show, *The Entropy Hour*, which aired on public- and community-radio stations across the country as part of the nationally distributed Radio Works program out of New York, and author of the books *THE POST-APOCALYPTIC DINING GUIDE: An End-of-Days Search for American Haute Cuisine* and *the Meaning of Human Existence* and *THE LEGEND OF WIPE-ONCE WALLY* and *His 13 Rules for How to Survive a Global Pandemic in a Nation That's Gone Completely Batshit Crazy*. He has written lyrics for a number of songs for the UK group *Unintentional Martyrs™* and the recent *THE WORST OF THE WORST*, a country-ballad protest anthem.

Benjamin Manifold writes, "I mostly write about decaying things, things falling over, things on their way out, memories, things like that. Things that seem to want to be frozen in amber. I've been told my work can be a little bleak. I do hope it connects."

Keith A. Dodson pounds a keyboard fondly remembering the days when typewriters ruled the world. Recent poems have appeared in *Beatnik Cowboy*, *Ink Nest*, *Jackdaw Review*, *Mocking Owl Roost*, *Molecule*, *Prudence Dispatch*, *The Argyle Lit Mag*, and *Wingless Dreamer*. Keith lives in North Carolina and occasionally enjoys a premium cigar while contemplating retirement.

Richard Montana is an author in Asheville, North Carolina. Site: richardmontana.wordpress.com

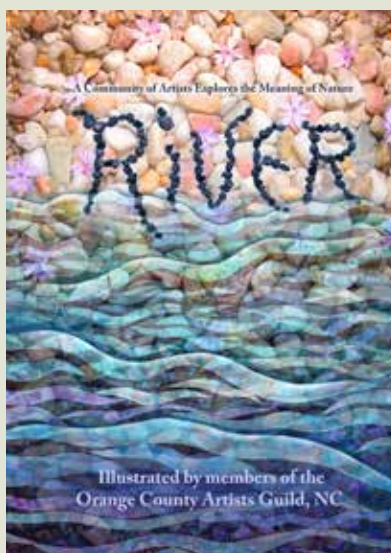


Victor Pogostin, PhD,
is a teller of tales.
Stories that are often
funny, sometimes
moving, but always
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