

# The Blotter

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# “Bonsai”

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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

This past fall I experienced disappointment. And you might well say and so it goes. But this is in no way intended to be compared with anything else, anyone’s tribulations, nor to be taken particularly seriously. Just a moment I feel like reflecting on. Spring is only just now arriving, with bird-song and pollen and the promise of blooms. I had planned to transplant a bonsai I had been tending. Those plans, like they occasionally do, are no longer.

It would bore you mightily to hear the details in six years of managing a tree in a little pot. It may very well bore you to hear about what happened this fall. If it does, know that the point has nothing to do with plants and everything to do with living and writing and how we navigate through adversity. That being said, perhaps I should stop typing and sit back and drink tea and let you move on to something else, reading a story or poem or streaming a show or taking a nap with your hat down over your eyes.

I saw the first brown needles on the juniper in September. Didn’t worry about them because this happens from time to time with coniferous plants. And because the brown needles are a metaphor, yes, of course I did worry about them. I won’t lie to you. What was I doing wrong? It was a weird summer after all, full of blistering sunny days and long periods of rain. No drought, though. So I assumed the juniper was getting too much water. Get it out of the rain. I picked up the soggy-soiled pot and lugged it to the front porch.

Yes, the tree was living in a pot. Had been for a number of years. Six, to be exact. Six. A long time, in human years, even if not in tree years. In bonsai time. The pot was big, and as bonsai pots go it was too big. Was it rootbound? Possibly. Were there instructions for caring for rootbound bonsai? Right there, on the internet. Many different sites with lots of conflicting advice. I hesitated following those instructions. (By the way, also a metaphor.) Also, there was bonsai wire wrapped around some of the branches, to shape and direct them. Was I always stressing the tree and didn’t know? Did I go too far? Not intended as a metaphor, but I could see how it might be taken as another one. I took off the wires.



More needles turning brown. But it was now late October. And being on the front porch, was the tree getting enough sunlight? I didn't know. Were any of us? I read more about this. The online answer was that I was not watering the tree enough. Or maybe too much. Or the wrong kind of water. Which just about covers all of the fields in the Venn diagram.

I knew my tree was dying, and that I didn't know what to do, and that anything I did at this point would be the reason I attributed to its dying, although it made more sense that it was dying from something before this, before I even suspected, and this was just the slow passing of the little tree.

And it did die, this winter, in the cold, all of its needles shed. And a small part of me still didn't admit it to myself, even after taking my pocketknife and scraping a small bit of bark and finding the wood beneath the bark as brown as the needles. I was handholding it on its way out. And although I tried to tell myself it was just a lesson, and I would learn and it would somehow come back and we would move on. Wrong.

So what's with all the metaphorical reference? I don't know. Whatever you want it to be. Love. Work. Health. Politics. The Environment. Writing. Overcoming rejection. Anything you've tried and failed at, things that you invested much time and effort in, but which went wrong in the end, or long before the end but you didn't know until it was too late. Events in our lives we didn't learn a single thing from. Frustrations that we all experience from time to time. Life is a bonsai, a bonsai is life.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

never want to do

## The Blotter

# “Kingsville to Lemoore”

by Dale Scherfling

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The Nissan’s check engine light had been on since San Antonio. Martinez told himself he’d deal with it in Bakersfield, maybe, if there was time before check-in. The car smelled like the bean burrito he’d eaten outside El Paso, the wrapper still wedged between the passenger seat and center console.

He’d left Kingsville at 0400, the Texas sky still dark, the guard at the gate barely looking at him as he passed. Three years on the flight line and here he was: NAS Lemoore, another flat stretch of nothing, just with different heat. They told him it was temporary. Everything was temporary.

The I-10 stretched out like every highway he’d ever driven—same truck stops, same cluster of fast-food places around the exits, same people who looked like they’d rather be anywhere else. In a rest area outside Tucson, he’d slept two hours in the driver’s seat, woke up with his neck screaming, watched an old guy in a CAT Diesel Power cap let his dog piss on the concrete.

Somewhere past the Salton Sea, the landscape turned into something biblical and punishing. Dead palms. Dust devils. A prison complex squatting in the middle of nothing. The AC in the Nissan wheezed but didn’t quit. Small victories.

He thought about calling Sarah but didn’t. She was in Virginia Beach with her new guy, some contractor who didn’t deploy. Martinez had seen the photos on Insta-

gram—deck beers, sunset cruises, that kind of thing. He deleted the app outside Indio.

By the time he hit Bakersfield it was 1900 and he was running on Monsters and sleeve tattoos of exhaustion. He skipped the mechanic. The check engine light was just a suggestion anyway. He gassed up at a 76, ate a Clif bar that tasted like sweetened cardboard, watched a woman argue with a cashier about lottery tickets.

Lemoore was another hour north. He’d never been, but he could already see it—flat fields, chain restaurants, a base that looked like every other base. Barracks that smelled like bleach and old regrets. Same khakis, different ZIP code.

Martinez merged back onto the highway. The sun was setting, turning the whole valley orange and empty. The radio played something he didn’t recognize. He turned it off and drove in silence, his orders folded in the glovebox next to the burrito wrapper, the registration, and the broken sunglasses he kept meaning to throw away. ❖

# 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 waiting in a diner near my daughter's school. Maybe the weather is bad. Maybe I'm early, and this is a good place to take a seat and relax. In any case, I'm minding my own business, or I think I am, anyway. This person: a man, short with short hair and clean-shaven, starts to talk to me as I am standing in the pick-up your coffee line and I don't know what it is about, but he gets mad at me. Maybe because I'm tall. Taller than he is. Not that matters much in a barfight. Or dinerfight.

The short man with short hair pulls a pocketknife out and opens it. Waves it at me. It looks pointy, if not sharp. Then, for reasons I am unable to explain, I reach into my own pocket and pull out a knife, which I wave back at him. Which does not keep him from making threatening gestures at me. What is he thinking? I don't know. I put away my knife and grab him by the throat, like some sort of action movie hero, which I am not. He keeps trying to confront me, so I take him over to the counter (where the coffee pick up is) and bash the back of his head against the counter. More than a couple of times. Not good. He's unconscious now, and outside there is a siren. Cops? No. Fire Department. I carry the unconscious person out and hand him to the fireman who is about to come inside the diner.

Standing here, outside the diner, which is suddenly and inexplicably underground, where train tracks run beneath the street? A subway, perhaps? I jump down on the tracks and carefully cross over them and try to work my way up to street level. Some sort of construction is going on, and I am sure that I am being followed by someone – the law? – so I am urgent to find my way. Each sunlit hole up to the surface is too small for me to climb out. Imagine.

I wake up and feel like I did not rest much.

Alyssa - cyberspace

# The Blotter

## “Wolves”

by Sarah Forman

---

The scent of bark and dying leaves draws me to the woods edge. I stand, staring up at the wall of trees canopying out over my head like my father had loomed over me this morning before kneeling down to buckle my shoes as I stood in the doorway of the bedroom still haunted with the sickeningly sweet scent of Grandma Jo's butterscotch candies.

The gently rustling leaves and the soft gurgle of flowing water under the din of gossiping birds tug at me as if the forest has invisible fingers, slowly wrapping around me to pull me in. Hot breath against my ear is a temporary anchor as my cousin whispers, “There are wolves in there. They eat little girls that come too close.” A tickle of fear and anticipation in my chest.

My name rings out from my aunt's back porch and I run.

The crunch of the forest floor under my feet echoes behind me, marking my path. I refuse to look back as I duck under low branches, jump over exposed roots, swing away from thorny bushes that want to trap me, make me turn back. I run until I hit a clearing, half stumbling to the ground, collapsing onto my back to stare up at the half-covered sky.

As my heartbeat quiets I notice the water is louder and lift my head, leaning up on my elbows before scrambling over to the flowing stream at least as wide as my father is tall.

I sit up and take off the shiny black,

buckled shoes that pinch my toes and the white socks with the lace edging and scoot to the edge, adjusting the meticulous folds of my dress between me and the moist, moss-covered ground, dropping my feet into the stream and gently rocking them with the flow of the water.

As the light sparkles through the swaying branches growing bare in the Fall breeze and dances off the water, I think of when Aunt Jane started to visit every weekend after Mom moved to the special bed in the dining room. She stayed with Mom, at first lying next to her but later, when the contact became too much, in the chair I favored, her hand through the guard rail, lightly caressing the delicately tissue skin on the back of Mom's hand while I hid in the kitchen at the connecting archway pretending they didn't know I was there, unwilling to fully give up any of my time.

The last time Aunt Jane visited they told stories of the fairy land in the forest behind the house they grew up in. About the healing spring they never found the end of, how every time one of them got sick, they'd drink from the spring and feel better.

This could be the healing spring. Mom and Aunt Jane grew up close to here. Maybe Mom got sick because she moved away. And the water Aunt Jane brought her didn't work because...because Mom had been gone too long.

Maybe the stream knows she's gone and will take me instead.

The coolness of the water soothes me and I look around but I don't see any wolves. Maybe they are waiting for the water to heal me. They can tell I'm not just any little girl. I'm special and I belong in the forest. Once the water heals me, the wolves will come out and welcome me home. They'll show me where to sleep and what to eat. Just until I grow strong enough to know on my own. Because I will. I'm from here.

I take a deep breath and a new scent makes me pause. So familiar this morning mixing with the smell of butterscotch, offering comfort. So out of place in this place.

He moves forward, heavy on purpose.  
"The water nice?"

I nod and let the water start to move my feet again.

He sits down next to me, clumsy as he takes off his shoes and socks and rolls up his pants. He drops his feet in the water, starts to kick like me.

"Tommy says there are wolves here."

"Hm." He glances around. "Have you seen any?"

I half shake my head. Does he know that I'm not really his daughter but my mother in a new form? That when her body died she came into me so that we could return to this place? That I belong here, with the wolves and the magic spring that will return me to my true self. A strong, healthy creature that only gets sick when I leave for too long. But I'm back now and I can't leave until I'm fully healed, and then only for short periods of time because I was gone for too long and now the forest won't heal me completely unless I prove that I won't leave again because I have my own magic.

That it misses me when I'm gone for so

long.

I almost reach out because I don't think he can really sense the magic of the water, but maybe if I touch him, just put my hand on his, maybe he'll be able to.

I look up at him and notice the new lines on his face.

I turn away and shake my head again  
"I called you."

I nod, holding my breath before, "We have to go?"

"We don't live here."

"We could." The words pour out of me.

He takes a deep breath, exhales, "No."

He puts his arm around my shoulders, I lean into him, letting my cheek rest on his chest. I can feel his heart beat, an echo of mine, and match my breathing to his. Almost falling asleep I pull away, mask my fear by scooting back from the edge, dragging my feet out of the water. I use the edge of my dress to dry my feet before offering it to him. Smiling, almost awkward, he takes it, gently rubbing the bottoms of his feet, around the heels before pulling socks over his not quite dry feet. I pull on my socks and my shoes that feel more foreign than they did this morning in the butterscotch room.

He stands and I take his offered hand, leathery and warm, engulfing mine a little less it seems than before we came here. I let him lead me through the woods, thinking I'm walking him back so that he doesn't lose his way. I'll see him safely to the edge of the woods as a thank you for the love he's given me as his daughter, for the love I have for him, but there I will say good-bye because he understands this is where I belong. I belong here, with her, with the wolves, where I won't cry anymore and he won't...

## The Blotter

he won't...cry...

My thoughts start to drag with my feet as we approach where the trees clear. I can hear Aunt Jane yelling. Probably at Tommy. I let my father take me out, but after three steps I stop and turn. He doesn't tug at my hand but won't let it drop either. He waits as I look back into the woods. There are wolves there. I can see them. But I turn back and go on. ❖



## “A Sudden Burst of Outside Light”

by dan raphael

in the light  
at the edge of light  
an hour before sunrise  
waiting for the light to make up its mind

when the sun rises around the world all at once  
what sun what world  
clocks running fine, body clocks confused  
which side of the mountain am I on

hours like dominoes, ouroboros hours  
new ones risen before we get back around  
breathing across 24 time zones, atmospheric slices/segments  
breathing my way across the pacific

as China can be one breath  
as time is different at the highest elevations  
what's oxygen got to do with it, the cosmic rays  
not vacuum but exposure, some unfamiliar options

when my radio has power but stays silent  
not even static, if the dial would go just a little further  
beyond the infra- and the ultra-  
hearing with the bottoms of my feet  
the antenna hairs atop my head immune to gravity  
powered by curiosity, the need for a new song  
repeating in such a casual loop I can leave  
the rest of my mind blank, non-verbal, here and now

is the sky gray because of interference  
or is blue the contaminant.  
if all the clouds came together in one place  
what could the rest of the world be seeing—  
windows, mirrors, unending hallways  
a spiral that smells like freshly baked bread  
yes, the eyes know that smell  
as my hand knows sunlight before my eyes say a thing

a sudden burst of outside light, no windows but translucent walls  
walls of type and images shifting too quickly and faintly,  
merest vibrations—don't try to get past the past, to light up a room  
with implicit autobiography, my personal spectrogram  
a never quite still or complete tablecloth of elements  
from transitory to signature, lines I don't think I'm balancing on,  
there's always another room, so much like this one  
lighting up as we step in

## “Going Just to Go”

when my afternoon routine is entropy  
like naptime without sleeping or laying down

another snapped strut  
another jar I won't refill

when I clean and put away all the evidence of lunch  
& stay still for minutes, a couple things start to move  
or movement from behind things, a cabinet door  
opening just a sliver

I can't stay that still, my skin isn't bark  
my clothes aren't moss or lichen  
time doesn't add to me but takes away  
little bits here and there so the absence not noticeable  
unless I move in a way I haven't in a long while, if ever

like I've never stepped off the roof of a building before  
or my yard's the roof of a structure that sends occasional voltage  
through whatever I try to dig there

“open up” I say to the next minute, but I must wait  
until it gets where i no longer am

I think the smell from the basement is august sky.  
today could be the 13th month, which can show up anytime  
and seldom stays long

I'm looking for a weaver to redo my walls, for a brewer  
to update my plumbing, for a pastry chef to seal my roof,  
a tongue against my neck and no one's there  
but the window I didn't open now is

unlike books or videos, you can't fast forward life  
and often when you go back, it's not how I remembered it.  
after decades in this house, we've slowly crossed into another state  
I might not be allowed to vote or stay here long

## “Just Another Week Without Sunshine”

when the light's this angle my protractor has no number for  
as if I can see spherically, see the clouds beneath my feet,  
the roots and worms in the sky

am I more than a thread, how elastic, how easily severed  
a thread that can heal itself, often without lumps or scars  
when weaving goes all the way, in every direction  
the mix of gases in our atmosphere, the metropolises  
in a shovelful of living soil

the components of a waking day seldom isolated, like seeing an estuary  
from above, from winter through spring through summer  
a life as a year, the moments a life changes axes, scale  
scans peering through the cloud cover of skin into the body's flows and pasts  
like the lucite bridge in the new orleans sculpture garden  
where eight intermingling lines of different colors  
trace the mississippi at different years

flush times, steady growth, slow or sudden decline  
when my stock market crashes and no one's investing  
what's next week worth to me, level of sacrifice vs. rate of return,  
rates of patience and need. how one can miss a couple payments  
and be too deep in debt to recover, downsizing one's horizon,  
a window the sun only shines through a couple hours a day, if at all

oh yeah, there's at least one other window, maybe the sun got lost,  
maybe the clouds have come back from vacation,  
maybe I could trust my own shine

# The Blotter

two by John Grey

## “PLUCKING A WEED”

There is something about a living thing  
that a rock won't tell you- not color,  
for that stone is a perfect grey,

but the order, the history of matter,  
the most abstract being of cells,  
and chemicals inside those cells  
with strung-out names,  
furtively sneaking numbers  
between their C's, H's and O's.

A rock tells you this is it,  
shift me from my perfect place  
and you move all of me-

but a living thing takes yesterday  
and tomorrow along with it as  
you pull it up by its roots.

It defies you to separate the brute  
strength of your fingers from the  
thick fertilizing saliva of its roots,  
its yearning for the light.

Any more intelligent,  
any more aware,  
and it could affect speech -  
but not to thank you.

## “A BREAK FROM ROUTINE”

Each morning, we go our separate ways  
into the world, rejoin at dusk,  
weary selves holding each other up  
with a grandiose sexless hug.  
But, from time to time, we are  
inspired by how the day transpires,  
give the possibilities of love  
and life together another try.

On any given weekday,  
we are at the bidding of our daily routine  
but the nights play into other needs.  
Home together, requirements  
are now possibilities.  
For all the cooking and cleaning,  
the parlor chairs and television,  
imagination has the wherewithal  
to steer us elsewhere.

.  
Then the bed, guardian of the night,  
emerges giddily transactional.  
“Why not?” it says, when it normally  
mutters just “why?”  
The bed’s main job is to let us sleep.  
But its side gig is a lustful awakening.

## The Blotter

to me

### “a death i can imagine”

when i am rotting away  
before they find me  
and the rats and the critters begin to feast on my body  
will my skin taste like the sweet  
that it did before?  
will my fingertips  
taste of you?  
the trails they paved on your skin?  
when they reach my heart,  
will they fall overwhelmed  
with the familiar feeling that you brought?  
or perhaps,  
i am just another human being  
and my flesh is that of the man next to me  
and the woman next to him  
and the child,  
and the widow,  
and all that stand beside them.

## Contributors

**Dale Scherfling** is a fulltime writer and poet, and a creative writing and photography instructor. A former newspaper sportswriter, editor, and photographer, he is also a retired U.S. Navy photojournalist. He has nearly 50 accepted works, including *The Monterey Poetry Review*, *San Diego Poetry Annual*, *Chiron Review*, *Mangrove Review*, *The Blotter Magazine*, *Close to the Bone*, and *Yellow Mama*.

**Sarah Forman** was born and raised in San Francisco, CA, but has enjoyed moving around in her adult life. She fell in love with writing at a young age and while she has enjoyed writing short stories is currently working on a full length mystery. *Wolves* is her first published piece.

**dan raphael's** 27th poetry collection, a chapbook, *How'd This Tree Get In?*, will be published this spring by Ravenna Press. More recent poems appear in *Unlikely Stories*, *Rundelania*, *100 Subtexts*, *Indefinite Space* and *Mad Swirl*. Most Wednesdays dan writes and records a current events poem for *The KBOO Evening News*.

**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Midnight Mind*, *Trampoline* and *Flights*. Latest books, "Bittersweet", "Subject Matters" and "Between Two Fires" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Levitate*, *White Wall Review* and *Willow Review*.

"a death i can imagine" was sent anonymously to *The Blotter*. We thank the poet and place it exactly as it was submitted.

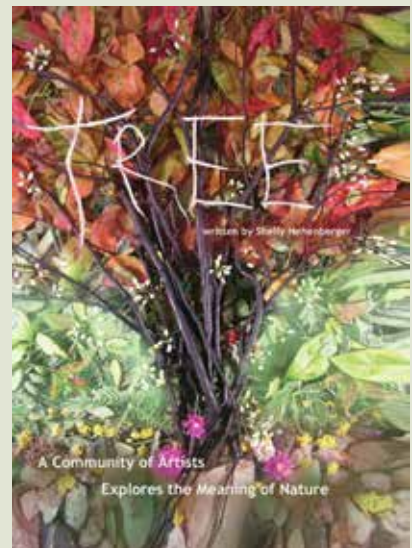
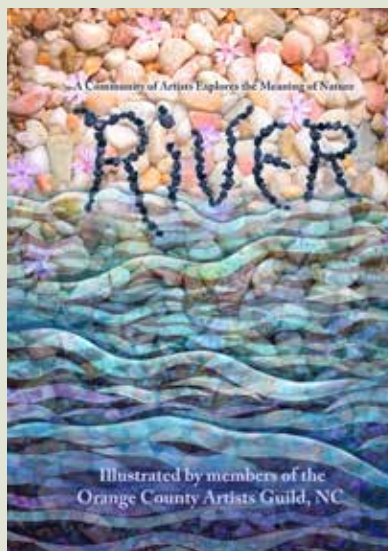


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