

April 2023

The Blotter

magazine



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

www.blotterrag.com

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COVER: Rupurt eating Pumpkins
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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

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“My Problem Is...”

As an editor of a little litmag, I fear that I haven’t been clear enough about what I like. I can see that, now, as we approach our twentieth anniversary. Other journals delineate their wants and needs and remind their contributors from time to time, so that this list of requirements doesn’t gather dust. Submit using this tool. Pay this fee. Don’t use the Oxford Comma. Don’t put double-spaces after a period. Pick a standard font and stick with it. Don’t send us science-fiction, or gore-filled horror or anything with pop-music lyrics. Don’t go over twenty-five hundred words. No, I mean fifteen hundred. Five hundred. Yes, five hundred. That’s the ticket.

I am led to believe that by not having more strict guidelines, and not utilizing a submission app., I have somehow failed the writing community. No, nothing specifically has been said to me, but it seems that way, out in the heady, often muddled ether of social media. There is so much ado being flung at the wall, and a lot of it is sticking, so that I feel a chasm is forming between writers and the magazines in whose pages they want to be seen. We wrestle with the idea of publishing, of the value of work effort, with cultural and conceptual appropriation, with what should be said, and what we should be careful saying in our written words. And I fear for the future of literary magazines, and imagine a world where they flourish, in nearly equal measure, because they are fragile ideas, and they are also a relatively simple thing to do. (Choose to do it. Let people know. The tools for publishing abound. Ask for help. Let people help you.)

What else have I not done? Well, I have neglected the concept of having issue themes. I could have had them, but it didn’t occur to me until it was so late that I would have seemed like someone who has never done such a simple thing before bringing home flowers. *Oh, really? What did you do wrong, you cad?* (Yes, using the word cad does undercut my point with what appears to be intentional silliness.) And don’t get me wrong - themes are nice, and I like them when I read ‘zines that use them. Prompts are also nice. They can be useful to overcoming blank-page-paralysis. I may have been wrong in thinking that people like random variety, and expect me as the editor to curate a heterogeneous issue every time, one that appeals to as broad a spectrum of readership, yet maintains a certain sensibility. The truth is that I don’t even know what that previous sentence really means. And I don’t want to offend.

I am a normal editor. I want to produce a magazine, with the writing of other people, good people with good stories and poems and essays. I want to share their words with you readers.

And I just like to read.

That is about as clear as I can get on this. I like to read. I like to read. I would shout it from the rooftops, but you wouldn't hear it unless you were in my neighborhood, and I would probably fall off the steep slope of my roof. Maybe the garage, but it's not very high, so...

Reading is an unparalleled joy. I don't know why, for some folks, writing isn't. I don't know why they are lost in the process, the artificial rules, the comparisons/competitions, the politics, the sturm und drang, the stress of it. Why for every joy there must be a corresponding misery. This isn't so, I think, but so much is made of the mythology of us v them, that being unhappy becomes the rule.

And I wish I could clarify to you my opinions – my likes and dislikes - in a way that wouldn't make some of you unhappy. That would be both satisfying and a bad idea at the same time. We already live in a frequently unhappy world, sometimes for as uncomplicated a reason as we express our opinions without consideration for the situation, without reading the room, without being asked. So I'll just leave it there. I'll read. You keep writing.

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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

That's just the way that it goes...

“The Wisdom We Need”

by Kenneth N. Margolin

The wisdom we need for a good and fulfilling life is found in the Bible. To cope with loss, avoid avarice and deceit, find compassion for our fellows, or navigate any of life's travails, the Bible conveys timeless guidance. But, for the non-devout, to read the Holy Book cover to cover is a tough slog. Not to mention the fact that its essential nuggets of wisdom are often in parable form hidden amidst hundreds of small print pages telling the stories of the major and peripheral biblical figures. The Bible is there for the faithful, and the literate non-faithful who have patience and good eyesight. For most in need of the Bible's wisdom, they will never read the text.

In the full works of William Shakespeare are also found the essence of the human story, even if William's eternal truths are borrowed from the Bible. Let's face it, though. In their heart of hearts, does anyone other than English professors and thespians really enjoy reading Shakespeare? To those who cannot bear the thought of reading Shakespeare's oeuvre, I say, “[T]his above all, to thine own self be true.” Where to turn for wisdom? Sure, some guidance may be found in best seller books like Robert Fulgham's “All I Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten,” and others of the pop profundity ilk. You still have to read them. Who has the time?

Fortunately, for the attention challenged, and aren't we all in this

age of texts, tweets and tik tok, eternal truths are an earshot away - in popular songs. The songs that define our culture and stay in our heads even when we wish they wouldn't, are not only about teen angst and lost loves. From the yearning hearts of pop songwriters have come words of profound insight. If we pay attention and pick them out of the cacaphony, they will stay with us as easily as the bubble gum tunes that we just can't seem to shake. I've chosen a dozen songs for their nuggets of essential truths. Readers are encouraged to enlarge this small selection with their own personal favorites. Spiritual enlightenment may be a song list away.

We shouldn't be surprised when the perfect celebrity marriage ends in divorce or we learn that the acquaintances who post their ever-smiling lives on Facebook are mired in despair. No one if they live long enough, escapes loss, heartbreak, illness, injury or some other of this world's infinite tragedies. There is so much out of our hands. The control we do hold is how we respond to life's large and small challenges. Mary Chapin Carpenter is a pop country singer whose songs include some with catchy tunes and others with forgettable lyrics, her most well-known probably her rendition of Lucinda William's “Passionate Kisses,” a ditty that contains lines that strain painfully to rhyme. But, in one song she reminds us unforget-

tably of our power to balance fate with choice.

We've got two lives, one we're given and the other one we make.
“The Hard Way,” Mary Chapin Carpenter.

Why is it so hard sometimes to leave bad situations? Who doesn't have a friend who has stayed in a toxic relationship or job that they hate, maybe for years as their lives roll on? Is it fear of the unknown, inertia, or fear of change itself? The truth is that exiting a bad situation is not like walking out of a darkened room into the sunlight. There may be loneliness, self-doubt, that awful feeling of being adrift, before settling into a more fulfilling life. Toby Keith, the country singer who wrote the anthem for guys lamenting the end of their youth - “As Good as I Once Was” - recognized the sacrifices of our brave men and women who serve in America's military in a song with words that also remind us why breaking free of familiar situations that keep us down can be so hard.

Cause freedom don't come free.
“An American Soldier,” Toby Keith.

Losing, loser, lost, defeated, blew it, choked, failed, failure. These words strike dread into us all. From the time we first began to coo, speak, walk, we got affirmation for achieving, and we never lose that desire for approval. There is undoubtedly hardwiring at play as well. After all, civilization's advances require successes. It is too easy to forget that most success is built on failure. No one escapes failure. There was no joy in Mudville when Mighty Casey struck out. Tom Brady has played football for twenty-two seasons before his current campaign, and won seven

Super Bowls, so failed to win a Super Bowl during fifteen seasons. General Douglas MacArthur left the Phillipines in haste as the Japanese closed in - but, he returned triumphant. What holds us back is fear of failure. If we don't swing we can't miss. Many have probably never heard of The Ozark Mountain Daredevils, an early 1970s rock band that is still active today. For at least one time, famous or not, they were prophets, and for a life more boldly lived, we should heed their words.

Ask a winner and you'll probably find [ooh Jackie] they've lost it sometime. "Jackie Blue," The Ozark Mountain Daredevils.

Did you ever notice how perfect that old lover becomes as the years put distance between memory and the reality? So much easier to get along with than our current spouse or significant other, more bliss, less work. Sure, he was something of a slacker, smugly narcissistic, counter-culture cool, not someone you would raise a family with, but that was part of his charm. You would have transformed him over time so that only the best of him remained. And that job you left ten years ago to make more money. With some imagination on your part, it could have been more than fulfilling enough to make up for impecuniness. You were so happy there, and your life so much simpler with less. Why didn't you stay? If only, if only.... We all do it, romanticize what might have been instead of working to improve our realities. The ever-talented Jackson Browne reminds us of the trap that we must avoid.

And while the future's there for

anyone to change, still you know it seems it would be easier sometimes to change the past. "Fountain of Sorrow," Jackson Browne.

This one is tough. No writer wants to be accused of cliché, but some popular song wisdom is too profound to ignore no matter how over-played the song itself. To strive, to seek, to yearn is human. More romance, a less caustic boss, bigger house, quieter neighborhood, a better tennis game, all the unstructured time we need to pursue our hobbies. Why not seek these things? Whether we would really be happy with perfection, no one will ever know, because no one will ever achieve it. The pop singer who seems to have been with us forever, and may indeed be immortal, Mick Jagger, reminds us that life can be fine despite our unmet longings.

You can't always get what you want ... but if you try some time you just might find, you get what you need. "You Can't Always Get What You Want," The Rolling Stones.

How many times have we observed something we knew to be wrong, and were unsure whether to speak up? The decision to confront someone or hold one's tongue can be difficult, the correct move not at all clear. I remember some years ago seeing a large angry woman in a supermarket, berating her child with a tone and volume that felt like violence, then yanking the puling child who was perhaps five years old, hard by his wrist. She hustled him out of the store before I could decide whether to say something was my business, and whether to do so would cause a hostile or even dan-

gerous confrontation. The memory has stuck with me. Whether it is inappropriate behavior by a family member, an employer, a government official or anyone else, we may choose to remain silent out of fear or uncertainty, but as the Tremeloes understood, the vision that disturbed us will remain.

Silence is golden, golden, but my eyes still see. "Silence is Golden," The Tremeloes.

A friend once recited for me a verse from what she described as a long forgotten poem by an unknown poet: "All my life, my heart has sought a thing I cannot name." How often we see people who seem to have it all, money, looks, love, success, the adoration of others, yet are never satisfied. Whatever they acquire or achieve, they always pursue that one essential thing that remains forever out of reach. These people are to be pitied, I suppose, though it is human nature to envy the rich and famous. Maybe not the better part of human nature, but undeniably a part. Of such sentiments is born celebrity culture. The Eagles, a group considered by many pop music lovers to be one of the very best, captured in succinct words the curse of forever yearning for more, and did indeed look upon such people with pity.

Now it seems to me some fine things have been laid upon your table, but you only want the ones that you can't get. "Desperado," The Eagles.

The perils of grade school outdoor recess finally disappears only to be replaced by worries about grades or the scary thrill of a first crush and

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dating. College, if that is one's life path, or the workplace, bring endless challenges, and along with pleasure, annoyances small and overwhelming. Marriage - well, it's not for the faint of heart,

I believe some wise person once said. At least, there is finally the sanguine peace of retirement, with no worries other than where to travel, what new hobby to pursue, or where to have a martini lunch with a friend. That might be true in some alternate universe yet to be discovered. Here on earth, retirement comes along just about the time that the travails of aging gain speed, the reality of mortality sets in, and the obituary pages seem to carry familiar names with ever-increasing regularity. Saturday Night Live's Roseanne Roseannadanna said it during every appearance - "[T]here's always something," but I think that Bob Seger captured the life truth of no heaven here on earth, more eloquently.

Well I'm older now and still running against the wind. "Against the Wind," Bob Seger, The Silver Bullet Band.

If you have lived for some decades, try going back to the street where you grew up as a child. You may find it disorienting to see the complex of ten story apartment buildings on what was once the field where you played tag. The corner convenience store where your parents took you for a treat of sour balls and penny candy is long gone; in fact, the corner no longer exists because it stood in the way of the new road constructed, unbeknown to you, just a few years after you moved. Nothing is constant but change is one of the truer observa-

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tions ever made, a variation of those words first attributed to the Greek philosopher, Heraclitus. For those who were never into Greek philosophy and who need reminding of the eternal reality of change, there are the memories of Joe South, that capture it perfectly.

There's a drag strip down by the riverside where my grandma's cows use to graze. Now the grass don't grow and the river don't flow like it did in my childhood days. "Don't It Make You Want to Go Home," Joe South.

One of our country's major newspapers has a regular column in its "Personal Journal" pages, called "The Workout." To read this column is to feel hopelessly feckless. The subjects are typically late career or retired executives in their sixties or seventies - to describe them as "type A" personalities does not capture their maniacal obsessions with defying aging through monster workouts. If one avoids self-comparisons with these Masters of the Universe, the workouts described can be entertaining; the hundred pushups upon waking, followed by the fruit shake in preparation for the eight mile run, mile swim, and jog up the local mountain trail. Unspoken is the belief these zealots must secretly harbor, that they can defeat mortality itself. If only they had listened to Kansas, they may have gained some humility, not to mention extra hours of sleep.

It slips away, and all your money won't another minute buy. "Dust in the Wind," Kansas.

Guilt is among the most powerful of emotions. No person who has ever lived made it to the end without

acting in some way that caused them to feel guilty. I'm not thinking here of major criminal transgressions, but of the lapses of judgement or honesty, minor or worse, we wish we could take back - lying to a friend, cheating on a spouse, treating our child unfairly. Time may push our painful memories of guilt deep and deeper into the recesses of our minds, but will never erase them. At some random times, maybe years later, we remember the wrong we did to another and we flinch, feel guilt once again until we can force it back into its neural box. Perhaps the universality of the emotion of guilt saves us from being overwhelmed by the recollection of our perfidies. In one of the most memorable lines in the entire pop music canon, George Michael captures the power of guilt and its enduring impact on each of us, even if that impact is not quite as profound as it was to the protagonist in Michael's song.

[I'm never going to dance again] guilty feet have got no rhythm. "Careless Whisper, George Michael."

Does it seem that every other pop song is about love? Writing an article titled "What Has America Been Singing About" in the journal *Psychology of Music*, 2019, Peter G. Christenson, et al. went so far as to analyze themes in American top-40 songs from 1960-2010, and found that nearly 70% spoke of relationships and love. No shocker there. Who doesn't spend enormous amounts of time and emotional energy thinking about love and relationships? The list of great songs of love seems endless; "At Last," Etta James; "When a Man Loves a Woman," Percy Sledge; "Unchained Melody," The

Righteous Brothers; “Your Love has Lifted me Higher,” Jackie Wilson; “I Will Always Love You,” Whitney Houston; “Lovesong,” The Cure, made more famous with Adele’s version; “Take my Breath Away,” Berlin, to name a very few of very many. The pop songs of love speak of desire, longing, and expressions of endless devotion. But, what of love’s deeper import, how giving and receiving love can make the life of the most simple or challenged human being as worthwhile and well-lived as any president or king? In his ethereal song, one of America’s most revered singers and cultural ambassadors reminded us of love’s transcendence.

The Greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return. “Nature Boy,” Nat King Cole.

We end these musings where they began; the Bible.

Wisdom is the principal thing; therefore get wisdom; and with all thy getting get understanding.

Proverbs 4:7, The Holy Bible, KJV.

And - keep listening.



“Laundry”

By Martha Witt

For the past ten months, ever since we moved here, the closest neighbor at least three miles away, our pile of laundry has accompanied us through each meal. My husband will not fold it, nor will my daughters. I already do the lion’s share of chores around here and am not about to take this one on. We dump the clean clothes on the outside table, the only dining table we have, and then the four of us grab what we need. Since there is always an influx of clean laundry, the pile’s size doesn’t change much. I notice that the strap of my favorite bra has intertwined with the sleeve of one of my husband’s shirts, clinging in a manner so desperate that I worry about how the obvious implications of this accidental portrait of domestic life may affect our girls, one a pre-teen and one a full-blown adolescent. To preempt any undue influence, I want to separate the items, but I remind myself that this pile is not installation art; we are hundreds of miles from Rio de Janeiro, the closest major city. There is no art gallery, cultural center, or museum nearby. It is just like me, my husband says, to impose symbol and metaphor on a pile of laundry.

My husband generally washes the clothes in the large sink at the back of the house. I am the one who hangs them on the line till they become redolent with sunshine. Our clean laundry is the kind that people back in the States idealize.

It’s beautiful here, and I awaken much earlier than I did in New York, partly to enjoy these January mornings before the heat of day sets in, and partly simply to sit out here alone and look out at the hillsides, dotted with herds of white cattle. The death toll everywhere keeps mounting, but I can manage to forget that for swathes of time. Some days, I’ll rest an elbow on the soft pile of clothing and watch blue-tailed emeralds hover around the flowers while violet-capped woodnymphs swoop into the valleys.

The view is so magnificent and the veranda so generous that we spend most of our time out here, even when it rains. How strategic the four of us have become around mealtime when taking our seats at the table. Seating preferences, though, change depending on moods. Sometimes there’s no jostling at all, and we naturally break into two near-pilers and two far-pilers. The disadvantages of being a near-piler include accidental brushes with a hem or a button as well as the constant awareness, when conversing, of having a pile of laundry at one’s back. On the other hand, a far-piler in conversation must turn towards near-piler, and contend with the blot on the lovely view. If I am in a particularly chatty mood, stocked with enough conversation for an entire dinner, then a near-pile seat is preferable. If, on the other hand, I’d rather eat in silence and can keep my

eyes trained straight ahead, avoiding a near-piler's attempt to engage me in conversation, then I'll aim for a far-pile seat. Of course, my husband and kids have developed their own tactics.

This evening, though, I lost out. A phone call from a friend lasted longer than expected. It couldn't be helped. I arrived late to dinner and am now a near-piler when I am in absolutely no mood to talk. It seems to me, as matriarch of this family, I should have first dibs on seating. My husband is also a near-piler, and obviously not by choice. Just look at his face! While the girls describe the *capivara* they saw down by the waterfall, he scowls. But sulking will do no good. I am a wife and a mother, and times being what they are, it is incumbent upon me to call this family to attention, to remind everyone that this is not a vacation, that these days should entail serious reflection, a taking of stock. A single yowl grabs their attention, and my family stares at me. No need to speak. The pile at my back serves as the corrective, the reminder that beauty, so easily eclipsed, is as transient and fleeting as life itself. ❖

"The Fishing Trip"

by George Somers

To think that just a year earlier I'd gone out on the pier in Asbury Park to better see the burning remains of a freighter that had come steaming out of the supposed safety of the Raritan River, heading south for Norfolk. It was a spring weekday morning, and Dad was out of town again so it was easy for me to sneak away. I was with a couple of chums, Johnny P. and Gaylord W.. We'd skipped out on school and taken the dawn train to the shore, to fish for spring blues, something we'd done it a half-dozen times before since starting high-school, always with no adult chaperones and using money we'd earned at odd chores. That morning, however, there would be nothing biting because of the scum of fuel on the water, and the balls of congealed oil washing up on the beach sand like some strange sea beast's greasy turds. There were no other ships out there, no other cargo carriers trying to run the gauntlet, no fire-tug pumping water onto the flames, no rescue launch nearby, and you could see all of the broken and burnt remains of crates and other flotsam that hadn't washed up on the beach yet. We already knew all about U-boats, the newspapers spoke of the rash of ship sinkings and there were the pictures pressed in my scrap-book hidden under the bed, culled from Mom's *Life* magazine that showed the merchant marines doing their brave duty to supply England and the Russians with

tinned Hormel hams and Studebakers, and then what seemed like those same fellows, their faces covered in oil after being pulled bodily from the chill water of the North Atlantic after some fiendish and clever U-boat captain sunk their sturdy ship out from under them. This was all very exciting reading for young boys living in the middle of New Jersey, an entire morning's train excursion away from the sea. But now, here it was in all of its spit-drying, heart-thumping reality.

A small crowd had gathered out on the pier, locals in oil sweaters and underdressed and shivering beach-combers looking out at the smoldering ship that refused to give up and sink. A man was renting binoculars from a cardboard carton for a nickel, and I was going to get one for us to take a look when Johnny grabbed me roughly by the shirt sleeve.

"No, George. It aint right to look out there. Not for money, anyhow." I looked in his eyes, and they were as cold as flint. Johnny was shorter than I was and skinny as a rail, with an unkempt shock of black hair. He was always more serious than the rest of us, and we sometimes teased him about it. It was commonly understood that I could probably whip him in a fight. It sure didn't feel like it at that moment, though.

"There's dead men out there, George. Maybe they might once

have been afraid to die, but they got on board their ship anyhow. And when the Nazis looked at their ship, they didn't see the men on board, just the ship and the cargo and stuff in the ship. We shouldn't be looking at it as if it's just something burning." He glared from me to Gay and back again, frowning mightily.

Then Johnny let go of my shirt as if he was surprised that he had touched me. But he wasn't done. He stalked over to the fellow renting looks at the burning ship. The man was as short as Johnny, with a prominent gut stretching out his flannel shirt in front of him and a ragged ball cap perched on his head. He was leaning out on the rail of the pier, looking through one of the pairs of binoculars at the smoldering wreckage.

"Why do you want to look out there, fella?" Johnny asked him matter-of-factly.

"Whattayou talkin' about?" the man said. He pointed a dirty finger out at the freighter, smoking blackly at bow and stern, the plumes drifting individually into the morning sky, joining high above in some spring breeze.

"That's what I'm talking about," Johnny said. He tried to slow down his words, to quietly explain to this man who must be a reasonable person, to ask why what he was doing was wrong. "There are men on that ship who were killed, right? They might be Americans. Maybe someone from around, you know? A guy whose folks don't know yet that he's burned or drowned." To my sur-

prise, the binocular man nodded thoughtfully, still peering through his binoculars, as if getting a last glimpse of the wreckage before putting his enterprise away.

"Don't you agree that they deserve some respect?"

"Probably," the man replied softly, still without looking at Johnny. Then he stood up, and lowered the binoculars. He looked at Johnny and nodded again. His face was wind and sun worn, with eyes tucked deep behind hairy brows.

Johnny nodded back.

"Fuck off, kid," the man then said, and gobbled mightily on the deck at Johnny's feet. I'd never heard a grown-up say that word, not even one of the track coaches when someone stumbled or wasn't pushing it in a meet. The binocular man shook his head at my friend. He hadn't seen the look in Johnny's eyes, something like confusion and shame and jaw-tightening frustration, the look that had me wondering what was coming next. With no more warning than pulling back his little knot of a fist, Johnny socked the binocular man on the jaw, as hard as his ropy muscles would let him. The ugly fellow was tougher than I thought he would be, though, because although he went over pretty easily he quickly came back up, as mad as a snake in a burlap sack.

"You cruddy little son of a bitch," the binocular man growled. His face went a dark shade of red, like a long summer day's sunburn. That he took the time to badmouth Johnny was his mistake, a tough guy's mis-

take. Johnny hit him again, popped the guy right on the button, with his other rock-hard fist. No one in that morning's crowd, now looking at us instead of the wreckage, would have accused the binocular man of having a glass jaw, but two punches took the wind out of his sails for a moment. And we sure as shit took this as our cue, high-tailing it back along the weather-beaten gray boards of the pier and down the boardwalk. At the first stairs, we jumped down to the beach.

It felt like a mistake as soon as we'd done it. Our sneakers dredged in the dry sand, kicking rooster-tails of it behind us, but we kept running down the sugary stuff until the pier was just a black line behind us, reaching out into the ocean. Finally, I flopped onto my stomach, giggling and rolling around in the sand. Gay collapsed next to me, too winded even to laugh, and Johnny pulled up nearby.

"Damn, Johnny. You really hit that guy!" Gay puffed, lying on his back, eyes wide looking up at nothing but the blue sky, his voice wheezing from the exertion of the sprint. "God, my legs ache. I can't believe you hit that guy. Man, you dropped him like a sack of groceries. How'd you hit him so hard? You think he'll call the cops on us?" He lifted his head and shading his eyes looked up the strand for anyone that might have followed us.

Johnny ignored him. He stood, feet apart and panting, but with a scowl firmly planted on his face.

"Hey, Captain America," I said, still

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grinning. “What do you do for an encore? Push airplanes away from the Empire State Building?”

“Knock it off. I don’t want to hear it.” Johnny was hopping mad. When he was like this, the tendons in his neck twanged like ropes. He was stronger than he looked, and his temper gave him an edge.

“Jesus, fella. We’re on your side.” I sat up, brushing the sand off of my shirt.

“It’s not a joke, George,” he growled.

“Well, good thing, because I’m not laughing,” I said, still trying to lighten everything up, but my friend frowned even harder at me. “No, really. What’s not a joke?”

He kicked at the sand like a frustrated little boy.

“It’s just those guys.” He turned and looked at the plumes of smoke rising from the water. “Can you imagine what it’s like? What happened? Maybe you were asleep, or sitting around drinking a coke. Suddenly, no warning, or almost none, you’re knocked to the floor when the torpedo comes smashing into the side of the ship and explodes. Everything’s falling, alarms are going off like mad, smoke and fire everywhere. And maybe you’re hurt, arm or leg broken and you want to get out but you can’t move so good. The captain’s shouting to get off the ship, swim for shore. But no one knows who’s on board anymore, and who’s jumped for their lives. Maybe you burn. Maybe you drown. That’s a bad way to go.”

Gay was sitting up, his arms wrapped around his knees, looking at the sinking freighter. But I was watching Johnny-boy. I don’t think I’d ever heard him talk so much at one time. He wasn’t the silent type, but not much of a chatter-box either. So he was my hero that day. Wild horses couldn’t have kept him quiet. He was telling a story, so that we’d all be in the same place, in the same mood.

“And the guys that did it were already gone, diving into the night, hidden by the same ocean that’s about to drown you. I hate the Germans, I really do,” Johnny was finished. His voice was carrying away on the breeze, washed away by the gentle breakers. We could smell the burning oil now. It tickled my nose, and I pressed my upper lip with my fist so that I wouldn’t sneeze at that moment, like some kind of fool.

“Goddamn cowards,” I said, although I couldn’t say for sure why. Maybe it was in support of what Johnny was saying, the Germans and their underwater war. Maybe, though, it was against all of us, for running away from the fat man with the binoculars, or the people standing on the pier watching instead of doing... something. I don’t know. With nothing else to do, I pulled a packet of cigarettes from my shirt pocket, taking one and handing the pack to Gay. Sitting on the beach, smoking, feeling dizzy from the running and smoke, watching men die, we all felt older. But I felt something else as well.

I can call it resolution now, because I can’t find the right, true word. But

seventeen-year olds don’t resolve, can’t really commit. We can stick to a task if it’s not too complicated. We can follow our friends or march in lock-step, grinning at each other, for a few miles before we start griping. If you had been there, you might have thought that at that moment I should have been scared off from joining the Navy, and you would have been right. I suddenly had no intention of going out in deep water in a steel ship. But I’d already made commitments, signed papers. I would go because I didn’t know how not to.

We sat there, smoking my cigarettes, until there was a little stack of crushed butts in the sand. My mouth tasted like the creosote that they paint on telephone poles. We’d stopped worrying about anyone chasing us; no one had paid us the time of day. Despite the offshore horror show, the beach was empty down here. Was everyone gone? Had they come, looked, shrugged and left? Was that how concerned or dedicated we were to this war? I guessed that folks just couldn’t be bothered, not for long, anyhow. There were still things that had to be done. It was one thing for high-school boys to skip school and go look at a tragedy at sea. Quite another for mothers to leave their children at the breakfast table and wander out on the beach.

By Gay’s wristwatch, we’d shot the day. We’d have to catch the train back soon, if we didn’t want to be caught skipping out on the school-day. Before, though, whenever we went fishing we always set aside

enough money for a feast before returning home. We decided that there was still enough time for that. A beachfront hole-in-the-wall named The Starving Sailor served breakfast all day and for fifty cents you could stoke up on fried eggs and bacon and toast and butter. I didn't drink coffee, but Gay and Johnny ordered it, so I did, too. Sitting in a booth, leaning on checkerboard oilcloth, we chowed down without talking. I thought about oil fires and deep water and wished I'd gotten an orange juice to wash the grease out of my mouth. The front door of the joint had a bell that rang whenever it was opened and it made me turn. Three older men in sweaters and wool hats, too much clothing for the sunny spring day. Knee-high black rubber boots, tops rolled halfway down. Fishermen. My nose wrinkled at the diesel stink coming from their clothes. Were they local boatmen that worked their casts in search of doormat sized halibut, or into fierce schools of bluefish? Or had these fellows motored out to the burning wreck, to look for bodies in the water? I wanted to ask them, or I wanted Gay or Johnny to ask them so that I wouldn't have to, what happened to someone who drowned, when the body was pulled down with the ship, or even in the U-boat if it was sunk by one of our warships. I wanted to know what someone thought, or if they even gave it a thought at all. Maybe my friends didn't think about it. I convinced myself that probably it wasn't even a passing idea in their minds. But I was afraid to ask. Instead I bravely drank the coffee that tasted burnt

now, like diesel smoke, and puffed the last of the cigarettes, letting the smoke puff out in front of my eyes like fog so that I could barely see my two chums across the table from me. I kept my fears to myself.

And truth be told, in the end it was Johnny who didn't go to sea. He went into the Army instead. He revealed to me later, on that day when we both took the bus down the hill from home to the recruiting depot, that he was probably jinxed about ships. You that study that told about how flying is safer than driving? Of course, using the impeccable logic that there are fewer airplanes crashing than cars it made some sense, I guess. No one ever tells you that crash for crash, more people die from airliners falling out of the sky than cars swerving off of the road or bashing each other in supermarket parking lots. Well, Johnny talked himself into the idea that he was better off dodging bullets than trying to stay alive on a metal ship floating in water. Come to think of it, he might have been right. Anyway, he joined up same time as me and then got himself an infection in his foot just after starting his own basic training and just about missed the whole ball of wax right up until his unit entered the Huertgen Forest, which is where he got his bleeding and a bronze star. That was a bit of strange and awful timing, if ever there was one. It was as if Johnny, who couldn't imagine that a blister on his heel would ever go septic, had to make up for it by standing his ground alone in the darkest recesses of the evergreen forest-valley of Huertgen. And then, Gay tried to get into the

Marines, where he discovered he had a heart murmur, and learned what a heart murmur does to you. That bit of news ended up keeping him out of the service altogether. He was frustrated about that, but then he did his part, too, working in Hollywood as an artist. He created that funny stuff they always had in training films - the cartoon monsters in pictures about venereal disease, the dancing Hitler and Tojo ice-skating in Hell. You had to see it, they were great.

And so I alone went into the Navy. ❖

two by Gurgun Barents

From time to time my whisper
Gets rid of the earth's gravity,
Tears the layers of the atmosphere,
Breaks through the space
And comes to the world
About which I know
Absolutely nothing.

The voices of that other world
Every now and then they come into my world
That they know about
Everything - to the smallest detail.
Voices from that other world
Easily penetrate my whisper
And dissolve it in themselves.

I know for sure - one day
My whisper will merge, mix
With universal consciousness.
It will know everything
What other voices know
Of another, distant world.

And when it wants to come back
To the home planet,
To familiar, native voices,
To tell the secrets of the universe,
Suddenly it turns out: this is impossible.
Earth's gravity is omnipotent
Within the boundaries and within the scope.

My whisper will calm down and become
One of the voices of another world.

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.

My hands were cold, although it wasn't cold where I was, outside. Maybe a sunny spring day, I can't be sure. When I hugged her she jumped, because I touched the bare skin on her back. She didn't say anything, though. She did not ask me to stop hugging.

I don't know why my hands were cold. I don't really know that they even were. Maybe it was a tactile illusion. Was it winter in my dream? Was it just a cool day? I cannot say.

I don't know why there's not much weather in my dreams. No wind blowing my hair in my face, or snow flurries. I assume there is a logical reason – my bedroom, any bedroom, is reasonably temperature controlled, or I'm under a blanket. It doesn't rain – not that I can recall. Maybe there was rain, but I was inside and didn't get wet myself.

I've been on trains and ridden in cars in my dreams, and looked out of the windows. Fields or houses or city buildings passed by, without me really watching with intention. The clouds are white and gray, but not telltales of storms to come, or even just finished. Have I dressed appropriately for the season? Who can say.

CJM- cyberspace

The bees have disappeared
I cry for the bees.

The birds have disappeared
I cry for birds.

Watch out for poets!
If poets disappear
There will be no one to cry
For bees, for birds...

"Song Song"

by Gurgun Barents

I remember the day of Your crucifixion.
You were dying, the sky was bursting at the seams.
I was confused, I was unable to believe,
That this is happening in reality.
You were dying - to the joy of the Pharisees.
They already breathed a sigh of relief.
And their eyes burned with triumph.
You have forgiven them - You are God. And I couldn't.

I saw Your resurrection.
It was Monday. The shaft fell off,
And the guards ran away of the tomb.
Here it is, your shroud. And it is empty!
I was confused. I didn't know what to think.
Two angels dressed in white
They asked me: "Why are you here?
Are you looking for the living God among the dead?
Are you looking for God? He is among the living.
He is in your heart. Seek Him there."

I saw your ascension.
You were ascending to heaven - quietly, smoothly,
You were ascending - with outstretched arms,
And dissolving in white clouds,
You have gone to a higher abode.
You were ascending. A few moments
The cloud hid you from us.
How quickly forty days flew by!
Two angels in snow-white robes
They told me that you will come back.
You will return – and undo pain and death.

I believe in Your return.
In Your Coming and in renewing peace.
In Your Right, for the Unrighteous - The Last Judgment.
In Your Supreme Court, we so longed for it!
And in the triumph of good, in Your victory
Above the Devil, above evil and lies.
And in the New Heaven above the New Earth.

Without this faith, my life is not life.
I cannot live without this faith. Can't live.

Contributors:

Kenneth N. Margolin is a retired attorney, father of two daughters, and lives with his wife, Judith, in Newton, Massachusetts. During his legal career, he made it a sacred mission to avoid legalese in his professional writing, believing that legal writing should be good writing. Ken's stories and creative nonfiction have been published or are upcoming in print and online in *Short Edition*, *Sport Literate*, *Dash Literary Journal*, *Concrete Desert Review*, *Evening Street Review*, *Twenty-Two Twenty-Eight*, *The Literary Hatchet*, among others; poetry in *Shot Glass Journal*.

Martha Witt is the author of the novel *Broken as Things Are* (Henry Holt, 2004) and *The Truth Lies Between*, a novel-in-progress for which she was awarded a 2023 Fulbright grant. Her short fiction, some of which has been translated into Italian, has appeared in *One Story*, *AGNI*, *Boulevard Magazine*, *The Literary Review*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *Narrative Magazine*, and many other national literary journals and anthologies. The recipient of a Watson Grant, a New York Times Fellowship, and a MacCracken Fellowship, she has also held several residencies at the Yaddo, VCCA, and Ragdale artist colonies. In collaboration with Mary Ann Frese Witt, she translated Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (Italica Press, 2013) and *Henry IV* (Italica, 2016), as well as Grazia Deledda's *Ivy* (Italica, 2019). Her translation of Grazia Deledda's *Dance of the Necklace* is forthcoming from Italica Press this year. Martha is a professor of English and creative writing at William Paterson University.

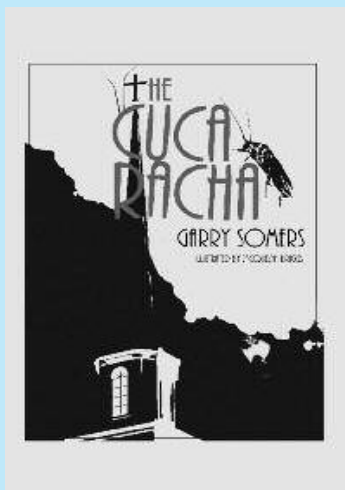
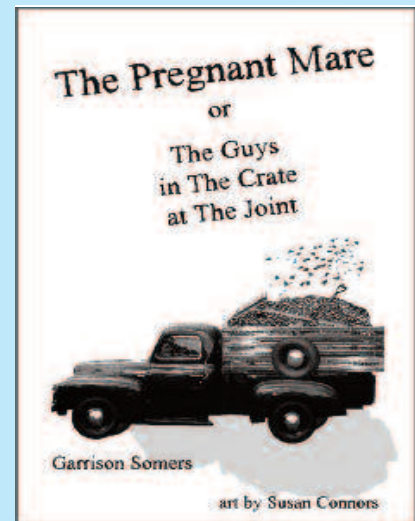
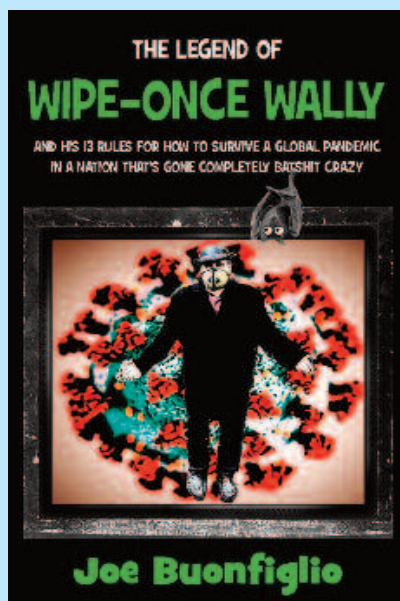
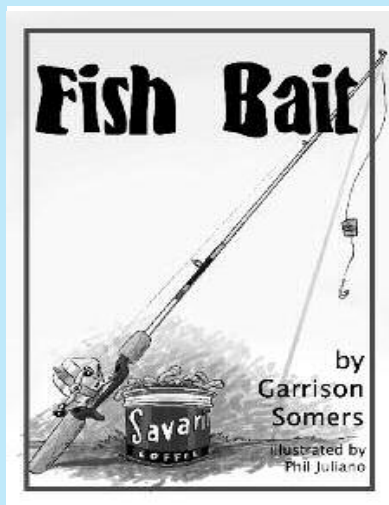
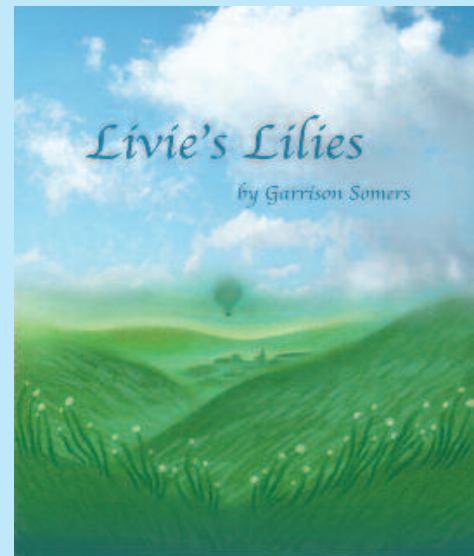
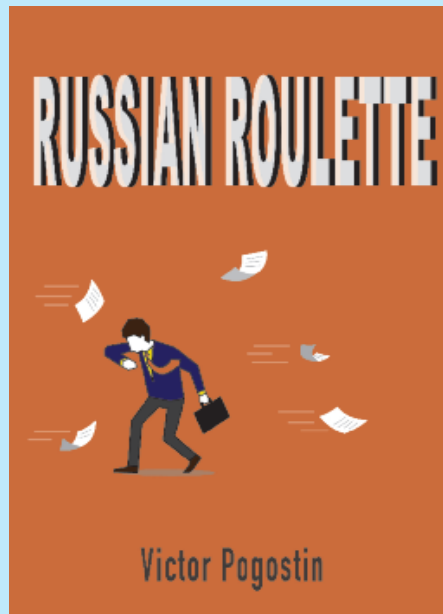
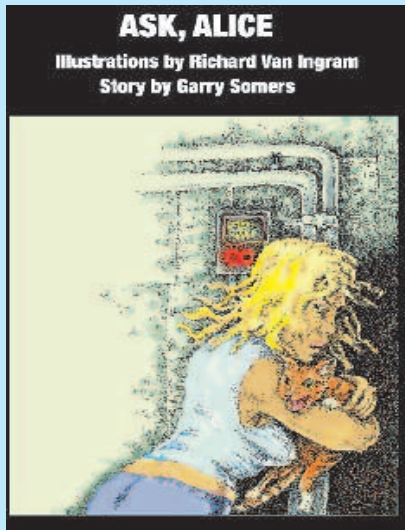
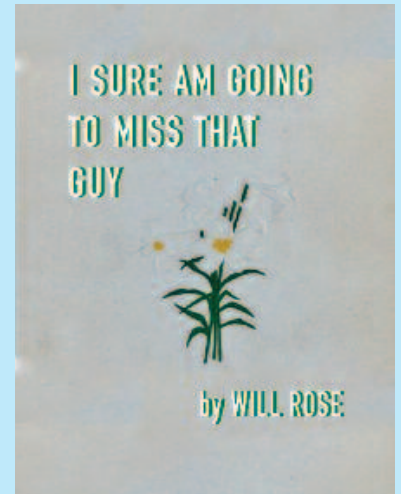
George Somers was a Seabee during the war, stationed many places, including Guam. Pop taught history and social studies for thirty-odd years, and this was one of his yarns, edited by *The Blotter*. It actually happened, inasmuch as anything he regaled us with was true.

Gurgen Barents (Gurgen S. Karapetyan) - Poet, prose writer, translator, journalist, and literary critic. Ph.D. of Philology. Member of the International Academy of Literature and Art. Author of more than 2000 publications, and several dozen translated books. Poems and translations were published in dozens of anthological collections of modern Armenian and Slavic poets. The works have been translated into English, Armenian, Bulgarian, German, Ukrainian, Slovak, Serbian, Polish, Persian, and other languages. Winner of many international literary awards.

Bruce Baldwin is an artist living in Cary, North Carolina working in watercolor, ink, color pencils and markers. His paintings and drawing have been on display in various locations with upcoming shows in Cary.



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