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The Blotter

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“Discernment”

It occurs to me that I’m not particularly discerning. Or rather, that is, I’m not very discerning. For some reason, the very in that description is... very important. I can’t say why. I try to avoid cheap adjectives. And adverbs, although so far I seem to be either lying or failing.

I guess what I mean is, I don’t have a good explanation for why I like what I like, and why I don’t what I don’t. There’s not much food I don’t like, but if it tastes wrong to me, I don’t go back for seconds. That seems easy – too sweet, too sour, too salty, bland. I seem to follow the Albert Einstein theory of clothing: keep it simple. No decision fatigue here, only does it fit? Is it warm out, or cool? Clean? Pretty simple. Never “does it match?” or “is it in style?” See? A lack of a certain discernment.

OK, the expectation bar is set rather low for me in selecting things like peanut butters and baseball teams, shoes and haircuts. Perhaps this a perquisite of being my age. Or the sort of acceptance one has for an old family dog that occasionally breaks wind.

But what about writing? Prose and poetry. Literature. One would think that in my position, I ought to have some decision skills. Or at least some mystical credentials that are difficult to ignore. To what do we attribute his taste in books, stories, verse and flash? Can we trust him to make good choices?

I suppose we’ll have to keep reading to find out.

Choice. That’s the thing, isn’t it? Life is almost all about choices. This or that. Work or play. What shall I focus on and what am I required, by lack of time, resources or inclination, to let go? That is the big hammer called choice, not necessarily the fine-toothed comb called discernment. Yes, a terrible analogy, but we’re pressed for time.

To be clear – I am troubled by the definition of the word. Supposedly (that is, according to a couple of different online dictionaries) it either means to judge well, or perception in the absence of judgment, in a spiritual sense. And to this definition I apologize in advance but *what the hell?* Another flammable/inflammable thing? Give me a break. Some further digging suggests it derives from the Middle French of the early 1500s, meaning “to separate.” That makes a bit more sense to me. At a fork, we have to go down one road. Robert Frost insists that this is so. But his argument is, for that moment in his life, real or metaphorical, he is glad he took the one less marred by foot and vehicle traffic.

I hope that it is not a universal, because many times I have fallen back on what I call the Einsteinian theory of choice fatigue. I wear the same color socks and shoes every day. I wear blue jeans 90% of the time. I use the words “90% of the time” regularly, with no regard to the actual mathematics, when I am trying to make a point that something is fairly standard. I take my coffee the same way, every time. (There’s a very good reason for this – back in my NYC, three-piece-suit days, I got transferred cross-town. I came out of the subway at 47th Street and walked a handful of blocks to 909 Third. I queued at the same kiosk every morning, get two cups of regular with two sugars and a cheese Danish. Two bucks. Not bad, eh? After a few months, however, I found that as soon as they saw me – now a “regular” myself – my guys made my coffees while other people were standing patiently in line, and waved me up to the front, handed me my order, gave me a high-five and sent me on my way. It was the luxury of pre-ordering before there was even such a thing as smart-phones.)

In the end, you should and will read what you want to read. Or read what others tell you to. Or both. Writers, submit to the magazines you enjoy, or the ones that impress you, or that you think will impress others. But can we agree on one thing? Discernment is that thing we don’t always get to exercise. And to keep you from turning the page prematurely, returning this to the pile, or flipping it into the recycling, I will not belabor you with a cluster of examples, NPR-wise. You don’t need that. You’re a clever bunch.

Garry - Editor-in-Chief

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in the Great State of Georgia!



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CAUTION

tell me more tell

An excerpt from "Dead Cat Bounce"

by Cody W. Nash

Waves of narcotic, viridian warmth rocked me in a tidal pulse between consciousness and dream.

Once again, I took too much, turning my exploratory trip to the sub-strata jungle of reality wild.

The tinkle-clunk of scattered glass vials falling free to the pitchy floorboards fully brought me back.

The afterglow of my chemical adventure still hovered at the bright edges of my mind, a glittery taste of golden honey simmering in my spinal fluid.

I passed out at my worktable again.

As my vision cleared, I saw what drove me onward through the night. Charcoal dust filled the tight spaces between my fingernails, telling a tale of mad, impassioned scrawling on the walls of my apothecary home while intoxicated beyond coherent memory. I covered every inch of my laboratory's clean structural surfaces with the same repeating forms. My night was spent making intricate copies of a vision, hopelessly snatching at it, frantic to find a way to stop the nightmares that plagued me.

I drew a gateway, surrounded by a lush wood, over and over while in the grips of my alchemical voyaging. To me, the doorway was representative of some deep, hidden meaning, desperate to boil up to the surface of my mind, begging for understanding, to others, it meant the gravestone for my finally departed sanity. I sat and tried to remember, as beaded, mercurial droplets of half formed, scarcely understood ideas slipped through my thoughts, as quicksilver runs over tilted glass. Each lost revelation seemed vital, pointing to some absolute truth,

but they all defied my full understanding, flowing away to be lost again, until the next chemical sojourn returned them to me.

A dun, rolled piece of parchment sat centrally on my table, surrounded by a thicket of crystal beakers and narrow spiraling glass tubes, all now cold. I previously emptied my alembics and hid the most toxic ingredients from myself before taking an untested potion of my own concoction, trying to penetrate the veil of the everyday mundane. To stop the terrors that visited me nearly every night.

Hammering on the adamant sky of sober reality, praying for a breach. Crusading again into a hallucinogenic wasteland to discover its treasures.

I cracked the russet scarlet wax seal on the scroll, feeling the satisfying snap of my master's mark, a B surrounded by insect wings in flight. It stood for Brighton, my childhood guardian and mentor in all things botanical and alchemical. I read over the letter, grimacing at its tone. 'Leo- Don't get high, or you will ruin everything again. The delivery to Nightenglow Cathedral is today, and I'm trusting you not to blow it. The shipment is packed and ready in my safebox. Just deliver the contents of my black leather satchel to the Mother Aria in Rampnettle. Do not give the shipment to anyone else! This is our biggest deal ever for our best client, so attempt to be polite for the first time in your life. Our muscle is coming to escort you, and don't complain that you can handle it yourself, because you can't. I watched you lose a fight with a lantern spider, remember? You screamed and ran away like a coward, and they don't even bite! That's why

you need an escort, just in case any innocent arachnids show up.

P.S. I think you're going to get high and blow the deal. -Brighton'

"Of course that has to be today." I said, pawing through sealed, transparent jars for something to take the edge off my irritation. I found exactly what I needed, a cluster of black, teardrop shaped leaves that required my immediate attention.

"Talkin' to yourself, huh?"

A husky feminine voice made me fumble the open glass jar in surprise. I winced as it shattered on the floor, sending slivers of shrapnel skittering away.

"Dammit, Lynx!" I said spinning to face the tall, slinky swordswoman who was to be my security today. "I'm having you spayed!"

Her attention shifted to the byzantine handwritten scrawl on every wall of my apothecary home. A sort of beguiled wonderment lit her mocha cream features, as if she were seeing something clearly for the first time. "This is it, Leo... You actually lost it, fried yourself brainless with drugs. I mean, we Knew it was coming, but at such a tender age, and still a virgin! Well, I guess it's better this way. Your children would all be horrible drooling mutants from all the weird shit you've used."

"No lectures, please. I'm finally getting somewhere... I told you about my nightmares.. Like unwanted visions I can't control or understand. I can't sleep for days sometimes." I said, carefully plucking a black leaf out of the sharp flinders of glass. "This helps... with a lot of things." The leather-clad swordswoman arched an eyebrow at me, punctuating her words with attempts to steal my fix before I could take it. "Wrong! It's the drugs... that cause the nightmares! You got it backwards!"

I stuffed the dried leaf into my mouth, waiting for its chill calm to

pulse through my veins.

"Maybe." I admitted. "Why do you gotta watch me do it? It makes this no fun."

"How about you get your shit together and we go do this job, huh?" Lynx said, flashing me a grin as she showed me the leaf I thought I ate.

"Hey! What?! Pblehh!" I cried, spitting out a Toadswart leaf. "When did you even do that!? And for your information, I have never once had my shit together."

"Toad licker! That's what you get!" She laughed, sweeping up all the remaining leaves. "Now be a good little dork and get ready. You might get one of these if you act right."

"You just want to drool on Serene once we get to town!" I said, smiling at the effect the woman's name worked on my escort. "Lady Knight in shining armor fetish, much? Her spiked golden hair drinking in the sunshine. Her windswept cloak fluttering as she stands triumphant over her foes, just like in the old stories."

"Shut up. Nobody's supposed to know about that..." She said, her bur-nished cinnamon skin darkening as a flush rose rapidly to her cheeks. "Serene is a hero... like an avenging angel come to save us all."

It was time to twist the knife.

"A hero, or your hero?"

Lynx said nothing, but the way she bit her lower lip told me I was right.

"Not that I can blame you, those flashing aquamarine eyes, her legs so long and toned from combat training. Just imagine them wrapped around your head in the candlelight while...!"

"Stop it! Here's your stupid leaf!" Lynx cried, thrusting out her peace offering.

"Oh, why thank you!" I said, plucking it out of her hand and popping it into my mouth. "Like I was saying, she really fills out that officer's

uniform, but do you think they let out the chest? I mean, that is one stacked woman, and they tend to bounce and jiggle, so she probably has to have someone else help her wrap them up. That could be you!"

"Nyah!" Lynx cried, covering her ears, then fleeing out the door. I assumed to get some fresh air, or maybe she saw a rare bird to sketch?

"If I just gave you a girl-boner, then I won!" I called after her, leaning back to relish my victory.

I sighed in relief as my mouth went cold, the bite of the opiate rich plant sharp enough to hurt. One of the strange properties of the Black Vetch plants chemistry was its ability when rehydrated to lower temperatures. The leaves in great enough quantity could freeze a bucket of water solid on a midsummer afternoon, or save a life if applied to the forehead or base of the neck on a brutally hot day...

Taken correctly in the right dosage, the leaf was a superior painkiller, and when applied topically with spider web, could seal lacerations that normally would be deadly. A blistering fever could be tamed by applying a ground paste of the leaves to the chest and brow of the patient, while any ailments that heated the blood were easily quelled by its use. Also, it was extremely addictive, and got you brilliantly high, soothing pains real and imagined for many hours. Normal dosage was eight applications per leaf, and lethality began around three full leaves eaten within a twelve-hour period.

I ate a second leaf, waiting for the blossoming rush. We hit the road to Rampnettle an hour later. I carried Brighton's black leather satchel, while Lynx bore my traveling apothecary kit along with no small amount of resentment. The country road from my lab to the city was lightly overgrown, used

mostly by farmers making the trek to sell their goods at the merchants' commons and resupply their families with things that could not be easily made at country homesteads.

The Cassion Valley was in the full grip of autumn harvest, so our only company that morning were local producers that wanted nothing more than a hello or tip of the hat, while their wide-eyed children rode behind on barrels and bales, calling for more speed from tired oxen. None of them were strangers. These rural folk were our growers and gatherers of botanicals for Brighton's entire operation. Never too much in one spot, but every homestead possessed a few plots of illegal plant life, growing just for us. In return, I played backwater mediciae for them going back for as long as I could remember, helping and healing as I studied under the demanding tutelage of Master Brighton, always refining my art.

Peeking into the transport bag was a mistake. Pocketing a few choice vials of my favorite things was a bigger one. My master was correct, this was our most important shipment ever. A full assortment of potions, salves, ointments, tinctures, extracts and herbal salts rode under my arm. Fifty pounds of product that was beyond pricing, with each item more illegal than the last. One dose of anything I was transporting would mean a lifetime of servitude to the Thexian Empire. Some of them, like Black Vetch, were punishable by death. This amount of alchemical items would last thousands of patients for months.

"Nnh! This stupid thing is heavy!" Lynx grumbled, shifting my portable potion making kit around on her back. "Nothing about this is protecting you. In fact, the opposite is true! I'm less useful this way if we get attacked!"

She was right, no matter how you wore it, the rosewood box was bound

The Blotter

with iron bands that dug aching ridges into your flesh. "Sorry. I usually carry it, and Brighton carries this. I have to bring it along because so many sick parishioners come in when we make our delivery. I'm going to have more patients than I can handle, so I'll end up staying a few extra days to cover for the old badger."

"Wait, you're the medicinae that everyone's been waiting for? That's rich!"

"What's funny? I can totally do it! I've watched Master Brighton for my whole life!" I protested, secretly hurt and unsettled by her jibes.

"Leo, look at this from my perspective. You're a twenty-two-year-old shut in virgin who is too scared to talk to women, except me and I don't count. You read bodice-ripper romances and study plants until you inevitably get bored and make up some new concoction to get wasted with. You couldn't even guess what real life is like, or what people actually do!"

"I object to the term 'bodice-ripper' being used in a negative context."

"So Leo, when you read those, do you pretend to be the man or the woman? I mean, you aren't exactly an alpha male." Lynx said, giving me her best wolfy grin. "Getting ravished might be just what you need to fix your nervous disposition."

"Pretty sure I could say the same thing about you and Serene, or do you, think you're tougher than the Overmarshal Champion of the Thexian Empire? I bet she would have you cleaning and baking her cookies in only a lacy apron with nothing else but a smile faster than a greased beaver down a log chute."

"Whoa! Ok, truce! I yield!" She laughed, swatting at me.

That's the way it was between us. We could, and did, say absolutely anything to each other, no holds barred.

She was my best friend.

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"Have I ever told you what a great pal you are, Lynxie?"

"Sit on a high, hard one."

"Sorry, what does that mean? I'm an innocent shut-in."

"Ok, that's it! You're carrying this stupid box!" She said, trying to wriggle herself free.

"You know, lugging that thing all the way to Rampnettle is a great way to get your figure toned. I'm sure Serene would love to run her hands over your washboard stomach, then down along the hard curve of your...!"

"Stop it!" She cried. "I hate your bodice-ripper logic!"

I snickered to myself as Lynx decided she needed to carry the box.

We made good time, passing through the rich roseapple-gold and tawny green farmlands at the crest of harvest without incident, until I found the mushrooms. I'm a terrible sucker for mushrooms, intoxicating or not, and these were rare beauties.

"Hey! Hold up! It's break time." I said, crouching down a few paces from the packed dirt road.

"Watch your step please, Lynxie. These are vanishingly scarce fungi."

A clunk-thunk came from behind me as she put down her burdensome load. "Let me guess, Leo." She huffed, catching her breath.

"Judging from your excitement, these are dangerous and narcotic? Please tell me I'm wrong."

"You're wrong." I said, gently spreading the weedy foliage away from my little treasures. "They're neurotoxic and hallucinogenic, big difference."

"Right. Look, I don't care if you pick them for later, but don't do any until the job is done, ok" She asked, sounding disappointed already.

"What!? These are Ghostmuses! I've never even seen one! I'll only do a little bit... The effects are different when dried, and I'll never have this chance again!"

"No bullshit, Leo! Promise me

you won't take them yet." Lynx said, suddenly standing over me to block the mid-morning sunshine.

I gritted my teeth, knowing she was in the right, but hating it. "I promise you that I will not eat Ghostmuse Mushrooms until our job is done... I swear it on my art, to cast it away if my vow is broken."

"Or smoke." She added.

"Fine!"

"Or put the infused water of the aforesaid in your eyes or up your nose."

"Ok. You really know me, don't you?"

"Or shove Ghostmuse Mushrooms in or around your maidenly rectum."

"I won't take them any possible way! ...Man, you admit to something one time and it haunts you for the rest of your life..." I sighed, turning back to the delicately frilled pale violet caps of the mushrooms.

There were six.

"I need my fungi collection kit, please. It's next to the Toadstool Identification Guide in my box."

"Every time you say something like that, the chances of ever having a non-imaginary girlfriend get slimmer and slimmer."

"They're just about to spore, isn't that exciting?!" I asked, ignoring her prodding and donning my bright white cotton collection gloves. "Ill have to cut them individually, then wrap each one in parchment and linen before pressing. Good thing I brought my iron-framed mushroom press."

"That's what I'm carrying!? Cast iron fucking mushrooming equipment?" Lynx cried, poking me hard in the ribs.

"Hey! Stop it! No, no!" I objected, my hand gently brushing a Ghostmuse cap as I twisted to fend her off.

The swollen fungi quivered, then popped, releasing a cloud of fluores-

cent lavender spores right into my face.

I gagged and pushed Lynx away, hoping she would be spared whatever mindmelting effect the glowing spores would have on me.

Then the trip began, spinning my reality out, down, and away.

I was in the basement.

The Ghostmuse spores hadn't just altered my perceptions, or given me a new soaring euphoria to chase, they dragged me into a warm, black poly-infinite starscape. Outlines of half-remembered forms floated around me, shifting into different, unknown objects and places. Two-dimensional figures popped in and out of existence, leaving resonant echoes of rippling influence to wash over other ideas, morphing them out of shape and time.

I hovered in the endless thought-space, watching as visible ideas coalesced, then drifted apart into fractal copies of themselves, a constant cycle of attempts to attain perfection spinning all around me.

Predator and prey iterations of interlocking concepts hunted and died in a sprawling nebula of all colors. Logical mandalas bloomed, then imploded into fine pinpricks of distant starlight reaching impossible density and occult light-gradients until they failed, creating a new omnivoracious void star to draw in all possible things, physical or not.

"Welcome to the Every-Any. An ocean of infinite idea blueprints. All possible potentials exist here."

A woman said from beside me.

I turned to see her. My mind judgered in surprise, needing a few extra moments to take the structure of the creature before me completely in. She was all glittering jade, with the lower body of a mighty scorpion, and the torso of a statuesque human female. The light from swirling idea forms made her shimmer and twinkle, send-

ing emerald flares into the impossibly black void.

"Hi..."

"This is the place you have been seeking, Leo Mora. I am Aloe, the Empress Scorpion, guardian of your consciousness from outside forces."

"My mind needs a guardian?"

"Oh yes." The scorpion woman said, turning to me fully. "Toxic and viral thoughts seek to nest in your mind. They exist only to breed and control their host. You make my task more difficult by taking so many substances. They open the unconscious to all manner of influence, and increase the powers of suggestion others have upon you."

I thought that she looked a little sad, now I knew why. This wondrous apex creature was dealing directly with my everyday bullshit.

"I'm sorry about that... You must be extraordinary to do all this, and I have to say you are quite beautiful. I'm very lucky to have an ally such as you in my head. I probably deserve worse, like a shifty, irritated tough guy who smokes cigars on his breaks, and just lets anything do what it wants to my mind."

She laughed, clear and high. Then smiled at me and ran a bright emerald claw down the line of my face.

"Is there something I can do for you? I'm not sure if everyone has a mind guardian, I mean, I've never even heard of one. Can I get you anything, or would you like a favor?" I said, feeling as if I owed this scorpion woman something personal.

"VWIP-KRACK!"

Faster than I could follow, Aloe's tail whipped past my head. The death screech of a quivering bat-like creature made of pure darkness sounded as it came back impaled on her barbed tip. Aloe plucked the warped thing free from her stiletto shaped stinger and ripped into its still twitching body

with surgically sharp fangs. Crunches and pops of broken bone made gooseflesh ripple down my spine as crimson blood ran in twin rivulets down Aloe's face, plip-popping on her heavy jade breasts to flow down the curved line of her hard stomach.

The Empress Scorpion let out a sigh of gorged satisfaction, bliss making glinting eyelids flutter. Her serpentine tongue slithered around plump lips, licking up all the errant blood. "Haa... Those are my favorite. That was a self doubt inducing replicator bat. They burrow into your mind and reinforce circular thinking."

"You ate it?" I said, still slightly unnerved by her raw red feast.

"I grow stronger every time I take of a creature's anima... Leo, not everyone has a mind guardian, only those with astounding potential. We assist the ones who need us most, and we are too few... But I am rambling, and your time here is ending. I want you to take this." Aloe said, handing me a tiny statuette, fashioned from clear crystal.

The little gemstone scorpion sat nestled in my hand, catching the shifting light of curious idea forms hovering around us, breaking them into scattered flecks of every color.

"It's gorgeous! This is really something... I feel like I'm gonna break it."

"Keep it with you always. As for a favor, I do want one, for us both."

"What is it? I'll give it my best shot."

"This is important, Leo. I have come to respect you, flaws and all. In your heart you are a true *mediciae*, a fixer of the world's hurts, and nearly selfless, but... there is one key problem that will be our undoing. The surge of self-loathing and hatred building up inside of you, I think you refer to it as a nightmare state, is all from one thing. A relentless corruption that you cannot fix alone. An emptiness

that cannot be filled with narcotic escape, or erotic fantasy books..." I stared at her in stunned silence, carefully holding my shimmering gift.

"You must fall in love. If not, you are doomed to an empty void within yourself, an isolated, desolate soul that wanders lost for all eternity in a personal hell of your own creation." She said, leveling her jade gaze at me.

"But I have trouble trusting people and...!" I stammered, trying to wrap my mind around her request.

"But nothing! You are so introverted that it causes you pain! You think no one will ever love you for who you are but that is absolutely wrong! You are destroying yourself! Find a woman, talk to her and enjoy her company, let your feelings bloom for one another, then tell her you love her! That is my favor. If you don't, the dark parts of your psyche will swallow me up, and without a guardian for your immature mind, you will slide into madness and disaster. All the signs are clear. You must let someone share the joy and trial that is life!" Aloe began to fade.

"I'll try... I mean, with Lynx I can...!"

"Lynx doesn't count! She's the only one keeping you sane, cherish her! Swear to me upon your art."

"But. I freeze up inside, and who would want to...?!"

"Swear!"

I closed my eyes tight and gritted my teeth, hating everything about this. "Fine... I swear to do as you say."

The Empress Scorpion was gone, and on the horizon of my endless thought-scape, things moved in the dark that never slept, waiting to be born. ❖

"The Accident"

by S. E. Wilson

I ran outta cash and that's my cue. In a half-ass attempt to help curb my drinking I've been leaving my credit card at home, so when I get to the bar after work and only have twenty bucks, I can only have twenty bucks worth of alcohol. It doesn't always work that way though. Sometimes people buy me drinks, or the bartender Chuck will give me the mis-pours. But neither of those happened today, so I leave, feeling a little less than satisfied.

It's a little past eight and it's still light. On the drive home I keep my windows down. I like the heat of the summer and the long days. There's too much darkness in this world and the summers seem to make it all a bit easier to shoulder, even with the humidity.

There's a sudden twinge of hunger beneath my ribs. But there's no food at the apartment. No hot dinner waiting for me. None of that. Not anymore. Not since my wife left. We had only been married for a year when the accident happened.

It was our one-year anniversary. We had a nice dinner out and shared a bottle of wine that I drank all of. Once it begins, it's damn near impossible for me to bring it to an end. When she went to the bathroom before leaving, I knocked back two doubles at the bar. By the time we left, I was drunk—something that she hated and that I could never seem to do anything about.

On the way home she was quiet. The leaves had begun to fall and they stuck to the wet road. Streetlights passed over us, glowing in the damp air. Sometimes when I drink I get

goofy—funny—or at least I thought I did. My wife rarely thought I did. She thought that the drinking just made my childish, which maybe it does. But for whatever reason, I thought that it would be fun to spook her by driving fast and pretending to lose control. I don't know why I thought this, but I did, and I should've known better, but I didn't. I sped the car up to almost sixty—twenty-five over the speed limit. She looked at me white in the night, her eyes wide and scared, and she told me to slow down. But I wasn't done yet, I had to deliver the punchline. I swerved, but I overdid it. My tires lost traction on the wet, leaf covered road. What was meant only as a joke became all too real all too fast. Her side of the car slammed into one of those heavenly streetlights. The car was totaled and she was injured. But it wasn't the visible injuries that were the most painful. Turned out that she was pregnant. The unborn child didn't survive. To this day I still don't know if she knew that she was pregnant that night, or if the news came like a knife in the gut while bandaged and lying in the hospital. I spent a week in jail for the DUI and when I was released, she wasn't there to pick me up. We separated soon after.

With one hand on the wheel, an elbow out the window, I think about where she is now. With her new boyfriend no doubt. A man she met at work. A man that I know too. And I know that he spends a lot of time at our house—her house. I know this because I like to drive at night. It's easier than being at the apartment, alone.

It's with this thought that I

decide to take a left on Cascade instead of staying straight on Broad. Every time I drive by I get the same confusing feelings. I want to get out of my car and march up the steps to the front door. I want to let her know how I feel. To let her know that I might still love her. And I want her to know that it doesn't feel great. I want her new man to say some smart ass remark, and I want to punch him square in the nose. But I never do anything. Sometimes I can't even bring myself to slow down because I'm too afraid of being seen. I've never seen them though—not their bodies—but I've seen his car. I've seen the lights on. And I've seen the lights go off, too.

There's a loud and heavy thud beneath my car and I slam on the brakes and look in the rearview mirror. But I don't see anything. I sit there for a moment, staring in the mirror, waiting for something to happen, for something to appear, but nothing does, so I put the car in park and open the car door. When I step out into the dying light, I hear something, something like a kettle, and when I look toward the sound, over the roof of my car, I see a little girl in a pink dress that's losing its color in the coming night. She stands on the front lawn of a small brick ranch-style home. She's crying, staring not at me, but at something behind me. When I turn to look, the breath is pulled from my chest and the heat from all around me is forced down my throat, momentarily suffocating me, unsteady me. There's a dog in the middle of the street. A white, fluffy dog, bloodied and unmoving, its eyes open, its tongue hanging from its jaw. I swallow but everything is dry. The girl cries out but I don't want to look at her. I only look at the dog. Then I move toward it, slowly, not wanting any of this to be real, not wanting the dog to

be dead, and not wanting to be the reason why. But it is, and I am.

The body is warm and heavy. The head slumps over my forearm as I carry it from the street to the lawn. I look at its lifeless body, at its white and slightly bloodied coat surrounded by the green grass. Then I look at the girl. Her hands are in her mouth.

"I'm sorry," I say.

And I keep saying it. Then I realize that my body is trembling.

The front door to the house opens and a man exits—a large man, wearing a wife beater and khaki shorts. I can barely make out his face in the fading light. He just looks big and almost naked. I just stare at him, kneeling above what I assume is his dog, the dog that I killed, and that I'm certain of.

I stand as he begins to come toward me.

"What the fuck did you do?!" he shouts.

As he gets closer, I begin to see his face. It's a fat face, red and unshaven, and everything seems too big. He's at least a six inches taller than me, and fifty pounds heavier. But his eyes are small, and they're dark.

"I asked you a question!"

He's closer now. And in my face. His breath is hot and rancid and I can smell the liquor. Spit flies out of his mouth, so I take a step back, away from him and away from the dog. Everything suddenly feels too close, claustrophobic in the hot night.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't mean to. I didn't see it. Jesus."

I lift my hands, my palms out, submitting, staring at nothing, at a patch of grass behind the man and beside the dog. But in the glow of the streetlights, in the remnants of the dying daylight, it almost looks fake. Everything looks fake.

"Are you on drugs?"

I lift my head and I feel his breath.

Over his shoulder, I see a curtain move. In the glass, behind its glisten, I see a woman. She has dark hair and wide eyes. I open my mouth as if I'm about to speak, but before I can, I'm knocked to the ground. My brain is rattled. I lie in the wet grass, looking up at the man who stands above me. I see his daughter behind him, the window with the curtain drawn behind her, and the dog between us all. My face hurts and it's warm. I bring my hand to it and feel the wet blood coming from my nose. I'm shaken and I can't get myself to react. I'm too busy connecting the dots.

"Now get the fuck outta here," the man says, quietly, under his breath through gritted teeth.

I get to my feet and I feel unsteady. I look at the little girl and I'm about to say I'm sorry, but before I can—

"Go!"

I drive away, unable to look in the rearview mirror. I roll up the windows. The wind was making my eyes water. I drive fast, faster than I should, and I go home.

The apartment is dark and quiet, and through the darkness I make my way to the kitchen. The light from the freezer spills across the floor and over the counters, revealing the dirty dishes in the sink. I grab a bag of frozen peas, then a cold beer from the fridge. When the doors close, I'm returned to the darkness. I sit on the couch and lean my head back. I place the bag of frozen peas on my face and crack open the beer. As my eyes adjust, I can see the shadows of emptiness, and knowing that it was once filled, makes all that emptiness feel a bit deeper. When I look down, I can see the blood on my hands and on my pants. And I wonder whose blood is whose.

The Blotter

But I know that it doesn't matter
because the blood is the same. All of
the blood of this world is the same.

As the cold press numbs my face,
and as the can empties into my stom-
ach, there's an ache in my bones and I
feel so damn lonely.

Maybe I should get a dog. ❖

"Accidental Zeitgeist Novelist"

by Ben Macnair

You become that which you most despised, in your callow youth, the author of the book that everyone is talking about. You are this year's Accidental Zeitgeist Novelist.

People you have never met describe you as a genius. This book, which you wrote in three months and was meant to be a break between all of the research you did for the novel you wanted to be known for is the published one that will be spoken of on Radio 4.

You are known for the simplicity of your prose, the coarseness of the language a sad reflection on the place you wrote about, but never spent any time in. The people you know view you differently. They expect you to buy all of the drinks in the pub. They think that character A is them, but it isn't. It never is. You never thought about these people when you were writing it.

You are, after all a writer. You write people, places and events that never happened, but in the writing you have some control. You can make sure that the nice people meet each other and live happily, and the unpleasant people meet unpleasant ends. The bloke that met his maker under a piano was an old boss, but you have had seven old bosses. The girl with the piercing green eyes could have been one of your former lovers, only none of them had green eyes.

It is a biting indictment of its time. A call to arms. A rallying cry.

It is none of those things. It was never meant to be anything.

But, here it is.

The wet dog in the rain that shakes itself and never does anything right.

The book that will buy you a house, and keep the publisher in fancy caviar and champagne for a while.

It is said to be the book that future generations will mark their adolescence by, but they grew up in a time of social media and Donald Trump as a former president. You are in your forties, and remember Donald Trump as the bit-part actor in Home Alone II.

It starts slowly and then builds to be juddering end, where nothing is what it could be. The novel has no easy resolution, like life. Do the Boy, girl, and the other boy end up together? Will they find closure? Will they make peace with their pasts, and with each other?

All of the questions are waiting in the sequel. Or, that is at least what the publisher hopes. You don't have it in your heart to write a sequel. You will be the one hit wonder. You have other things to do than sit in a studio at 5.30 waiting to answer questions, or to talk about film rights, the play that will surely come from the book, although you don't know how they will film the piano sequence. That was a bit gory in the book, fun to write, but gory. It would need a fifteen certificate at least. ❖

“Thanks, and then some”

by Craig R. Kirchner

‘J’ - How’s your game?
With a twist, you remembered,
it’s been a while. The chip says 6 months,
it will be part of the tip.

“The holidays are quiet and predictable,
mostly couples between stops.”

A sip and drizzle, then immediately
a sucking gulp. The lonely stare
now has more of a purpose, as it
settles on the congregation of brands,
sitting opposite, and curtailing
the view of the twin in the mirror.

As the elixir swims through the system
and awakens the id,
the different shapes and colors
become flesh and blood,
easily personify and become fading friends.

The short squat 12-year-old
Irish Red Breast - mustached Bobby G.
Spent a week soaking up incredible hospitality,
flew home during the pandemic,
never called or thank-you-ed or inquired.

‘J’ revisits, pours. Tells about his 65,
from the white tees.
“Everything went in.”
Doesn’t stay, there’s no one else down this end,
except yours truly and ungrateful Bobby.

The Old Grand Dad bust takes
on a Dan Hall look of contempt.
Judgement from an overweight lawyer
who has trouble getting air-born,
even with his new senior shafts.
Says I’m offensive and that he knows,
plenty of five-year-olds, should be in cages.

An arrogance from the pear-shaped Dalmore Malt.
The grand disdain of sponsor, Don C.,
belittling my short game, and patience,
pontificating from the top shelf,
staring with a 12-point buck around his neck
at this festive falling from the wagon.

And then there’s you, Bombay Sapphire,
a dirty martini waiting to happen -
in your brilliant blue flirt maxi,
lip-syncing a juniper kiss across the bar
as you mime a glass-to-mouth motion
and proclaim that Queen Victoria
and I told you so.

There should be an exit here,
but the weather has become miserable.
Dan wants to buy a round, Bobby apologizes,
and ‘J’ just thanked me for stopping in,
wants to talk about his grip,
and a tee-time at TPC.

Three Prose Poems

by Salvatore Difalco

“Unnecessary Flair”

Immersed in our elegance, we walk through the cool blue tones of the deserted beach and the wet concrete of its sand without concern for our pastel cashmere sweaters or our white cotton chinos. Your choice to bring along a frilly parasol even though grey clouds deadlift above us struck me as unnecessary flair. Better would have been an umbrella, though the optics would have suffered for one on the end of a spy-glass some distance away. With pathos remote, I wonder what emotion we evoke, what thoughts if any. You smile as you lift your feet and plant them before you one at a time. In this way we make progress. Behind us thread our footsteps. The waves intensify on cue and wash away the footsteps. The sun glows with a muted northern intensity. Indeed all sounds emerge muffled. A gull circling in the grey makes no sound at all. I hear you breathing at my flank. And when you jog ahead, holding the sides of your chinos, and stop and turn to me, I cannot hear what you shout though I know you are shouting. “Stop shouting!” I want to shout. You ask me why I am laughing. “I am laughing because it is funny,” I say in my head, my mouth too parched to open at the moment. What are we doing here, eh? Are we playing a game? Are we creating art? Are you with me on this? But say what you will, a mystery intimated by a foul note in the breeze writhes beneath the wet sand and threatens to upend this tranquil melancholy with something more pernicious, more urgent, more rank. “You always spoil everything.” Your words wound me, man. I slow down and you continue trucking ahead over the wet sand, the bottoms of your chinos darkening with each step and your form moment by moment diminishing until a cool blue shadow remains, then a soft blue slip, then an envelope closes and you are just a memory of this moment.

“This Is Me”

I was running on fumes. I barely made it up the stairs to my room. I left the door unlocked. I collapsed on the futon and thought I would fall into an endless slumber, but my legs ached so much I could not get comfortable. I tossed and turned and tried to realign my legs in every position possible, but after a few minutes of this I grew so agitated I bolted out of bed and ran to the bathroom and splashed cold water on my face to calm me down. Someone had recommended this to me, and I found that the cold water tore me out of my manic spin cycle. I sat on the couch in the living room without switching on any lights. The darkness, as incomplete as it was given the city’s light pollution, still provided me comfort. I felt alone but understood that everyone is alone insofar as soul-sharing is not a thing. Even when you’re in bed with a lover, say, in the heat of the moment, you are still alone and climaxing alone and alone in your own bubble feeling the inevitable postcoital gloom which is in itself a form of loneliness. Then again, it had been a significant amount of time since I’d experienced a lover in my bed, and perhaps I was wrong about all this. I’ve not settled on a new position about this, so I’ll leave it open. I urge people to stop me in the street and let me know what they think. I prefer face-to-face interactions over anything electronic. No trolls please. I have been known to punch people who annoy me. But violence is neither here nor there in my contemplations. Give me a song, not a skirmish. Singing brings out the best in most people unless they’re tone deaf or have never heard themselves recorded. So I was running on fumes, as mentioned, and thought that perhaps my life had entered its closing chapter. I was wrong, obviously. What you experience oftentimes are temporal shifts without the connective tissues or threads that justify them. But the mind works in mysterious ways. Or some minds do. I still had some fight left. The physical weakness stemmed from psycho-

logical and emotional anemia. But as I said, singing brings out the best in most people. As I could hold a tune from years of musical theatre, I sang myself back to sanity and health. The song I found most salubrious and uplifting was

This Is Me.

Oh-oh-oh-oh

Oh-oh-oh-oh

Oh-oh-oh-oh

Oh-oh-oh-oh

Oh-oh-oh, oh-oh-oh, oh-oh-oh, oh, oh

This is me.

“Strategy of the Deity”

The inflated Madonna watches me from a window. She is eating an apple. She is composed. Her mouth is tiny, her eyes are pinpricks, her nostrils like buttonholes. She wears orange today. Sometimes she wears yellow. Sometimes red. Never dark clothes. Never whites. Forget about stripes. She knows better. Orange chiffon today sounds yummy. She wears it well. She eats the apple with little mincing bites. Hurrah! She’s invested in fruit. Hurrah! She’s trying, she’s trying people, to be the best that she can be. And where is the Lord in all this business? Where is the little man-God, the little sufferer to be, the future water-walker and resuscitator, the holy of holies? He is cribbing perhaps, or composing symphonies, or laying out his plans for the New Kingdom, or contemplating the Second Coming, or playing with a crude wooden toy donkey. This little guy is doing his thing. His mother meanwhile, still working on the apple, stops for a moment and stares at the half-eaten thing. She stares and then smiles with her tiny mouth. Her happy cheeks flush. Perhaps she’s thinking of Eve, her predecessor, and how foolish she was, or how brave, or how inevitable. What would we be without you, Eve? Where would we find ourselves? Or would we ever find ourselves or be ourselves? O to be human and sanctified. The inflated Madonna finishes the apple and chucks the core out to the road, where donkeys pass pulling little wooden carts and carpenters saunter by towing their levels and saws, and the fishmongers pass, pulling small reeking wagons, and lemon sellers and fig merchants and money-changers and magicians, all get on with business, with their business, trafficking the known world for business. All this makes the Madonna happy and ready to offer succor to the little deity gurgling in his crude crib.

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.

The cat has a name, but I swear I cannot recall which one belongs to it. I even don’t remember if it is a she or a he. Somehow this doesn’t matter, but still makes me worry, because it must matter to the cat. It pads across the bedroom floor and leaps effortlessly to the end of the bed and continues walking as if everything in the world was on the same plane, with very limited gravitational pull. Then it perches itself on the thin frame of the bedhead, as if it were a bridge it must guard through the night so that I am not disturbed. No, that can’t be true. The cat doesn’t care if I am disturbed.

Dibble-dabble - cyberspace

“Dreamboat”

by Craig R. Kirchner

Going the wrong way
on the Baltimore beltway,
choking on carb-flooded gas,
over-heating over first date curfews
as we left Carlin’s Drive-In
already an hour late.

A death trap, black ’60 Falcon,
was not only my first car,
but the first on the drug store corner
which made him a celebrity,
and yes, for sure, he –
lost half the time, on the make the other.

We’re straining brittle, bone-on-bone
ball-joints and bald tires, while keeping
right white buck and pedal to the floor,
rubbernecking to spot that landmark,
that yes-we-now-know-where-we-are,
building or corner.

The little engine that could,
all the time switching channels,
constantly on alert for the right hot tune
or ‘Wild Thing’, the Beatles,
or anything by the Stones
which was always right.

Your father home, cursing hippies,
belting shots of bourbon -
would have been loading his gun,
and waiting in the driveway
if he had seen the feature from our back seat
and those coming attractions in your hair.

“untitled cry # 8”
 from “A suite of tears”
 by Sharon Lopez Mooney

hurts again and again/ hurts passed on thru love confusion/ hurts the child the mother
 hurting the father afraid/ hurting from his childhood crying mother no father/ where’s father/
 call daddy calls silently not heard hurts/ building a wall protection insulation from more hurts/ a
 child hiding hurt/ grown up hard and afraid of hurting his own child/ afraid no voice to stop it
 no line to safety for either/ no vision no exit

father sees his own hand raised/ frightened of hurting stops calls for help/ from hurting stops
 and cries to give up the pain/ stops for the inheritance this father stops/ crying he is freed to
 stop/ healing the hurts a child cries/ the hurts stopping/ the hurt healing/ the cycle stops is heal-
 ing/ child and father crying together pain of hurting crying and healing the inheritance

Contributors:

Cody W. Nash writes, “I am currently incarcerated at Avenal State Prison serving Life Without Parole. Writing has saved my life. Given me new meaning. Gifted me a reason to continue on at full throttle. Empowered me to channel self-destructive emotions and impulses into a creative medium. Through this process, I have been able to confront themes such as depression, drug abuse, violence, hopelessness and loss, focusing on them through a fantastic lens that I hope will resonate with readers.”

S.E. Wilson is originally from Northern California but now lives in North Carolina with his wife, son, dogs, and cat. In his spare time, he enjoys being with his family, fishing, grilling, and working on his home.

Ben Macnair is an award-winning poet and playwright from Staffordshire in the United Kingdom. Follow him on Twitter @ benmacnair

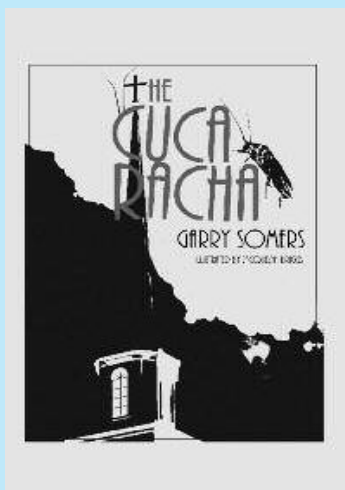
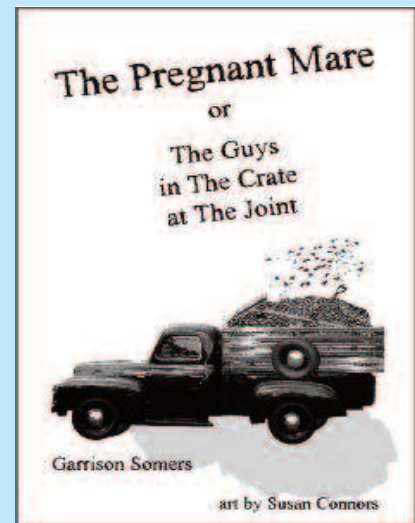
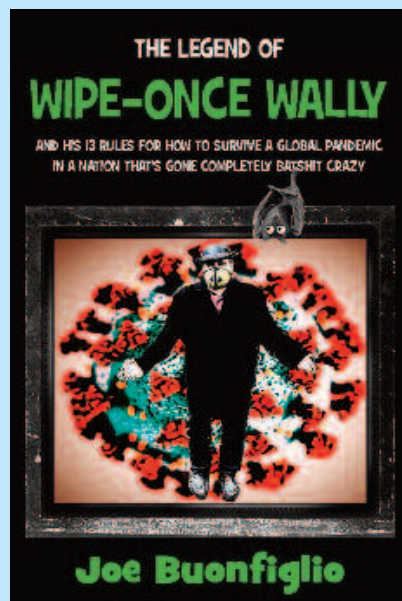
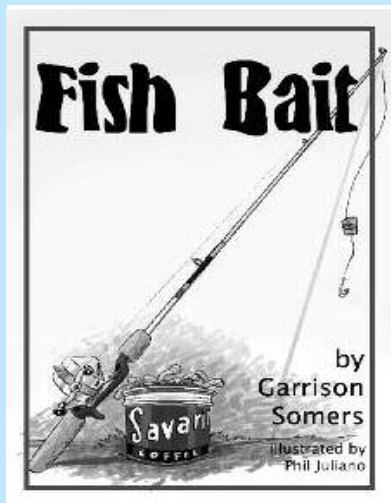
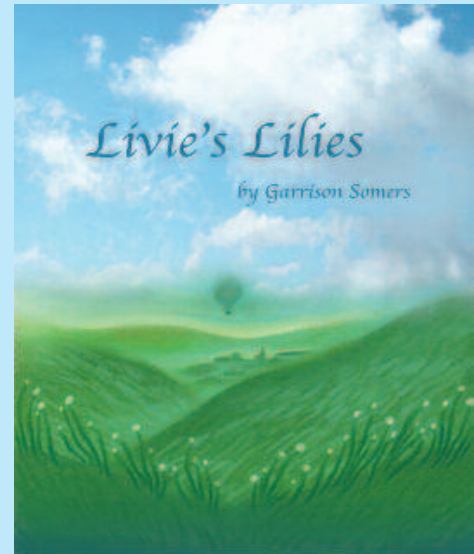
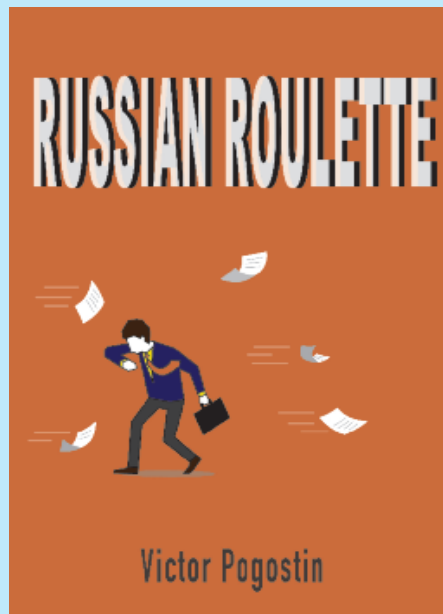
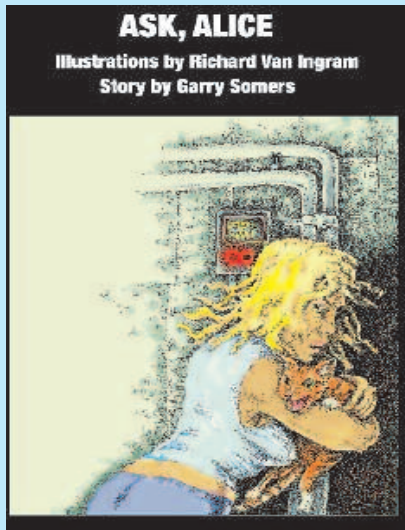
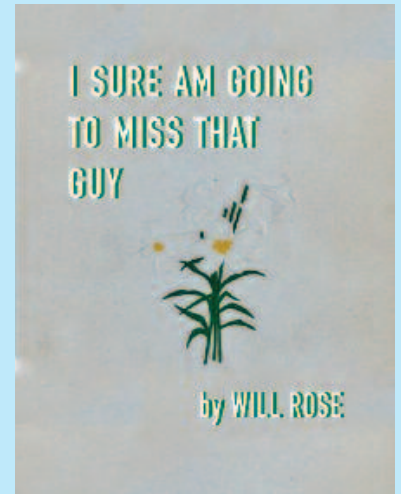
Sharon Lopez Mooney, poet, is a retired Interfaith Chaplain from the End of Life field, living in Sonora Mexico, and part-time in California. Mooney has received a California Grant for a rural poetry series; was a “Best of the Net” nominee, a “Peseroff Prize” finalist, and honored with “Editor’s Choice” and “Elite Writer Status”. Mooney’s poems are published nationally & internationally in such as: “*Glassworks, The Blotter, Umbrella Factory, MuddyRiver Review, Revue{R}Évolution, Avalon Literary, Alchemy & Miracles, Ginosko, California Quarterly, Galway Review, Existere, Ricochet Review, Adelaide International, Field Guide Poetry Magazine*” and elsewhere. Currently she facilitates poetry feedback workshops. Mooney’s poems are indexed at: www.sharon-lopezmooney.com

Salvatore Difalco lives in Toronto Canada.

Craig R. Kirchner has had two poems nominated for the Pushcart, and has a book of poetry, *Roomful of Navels*. After a writing hiatus he was recently published in *Decadent Review, New World Writing, Neologism, The Light Ekphrastic, Unlikely Stories, Wild Violet, Last Stanza, Unbroken, W-Poesis, The Globe Review, Your Impossible Voice, Fairfield Scribes, Spillwords, Bombfire, Ink in Thirds, Ginosko, The Blotter, Quail Bell, Ariel Chart*, and has work forthcoming in *Heart, Last Leaves, Literary Heist, Yellow Mama, Rundelania, Flora Fiction, Young Ravens, Lit Shark, Versification, Vine Leaf Press* and the *Journal of Expressive Writing*.



Blotter Books



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