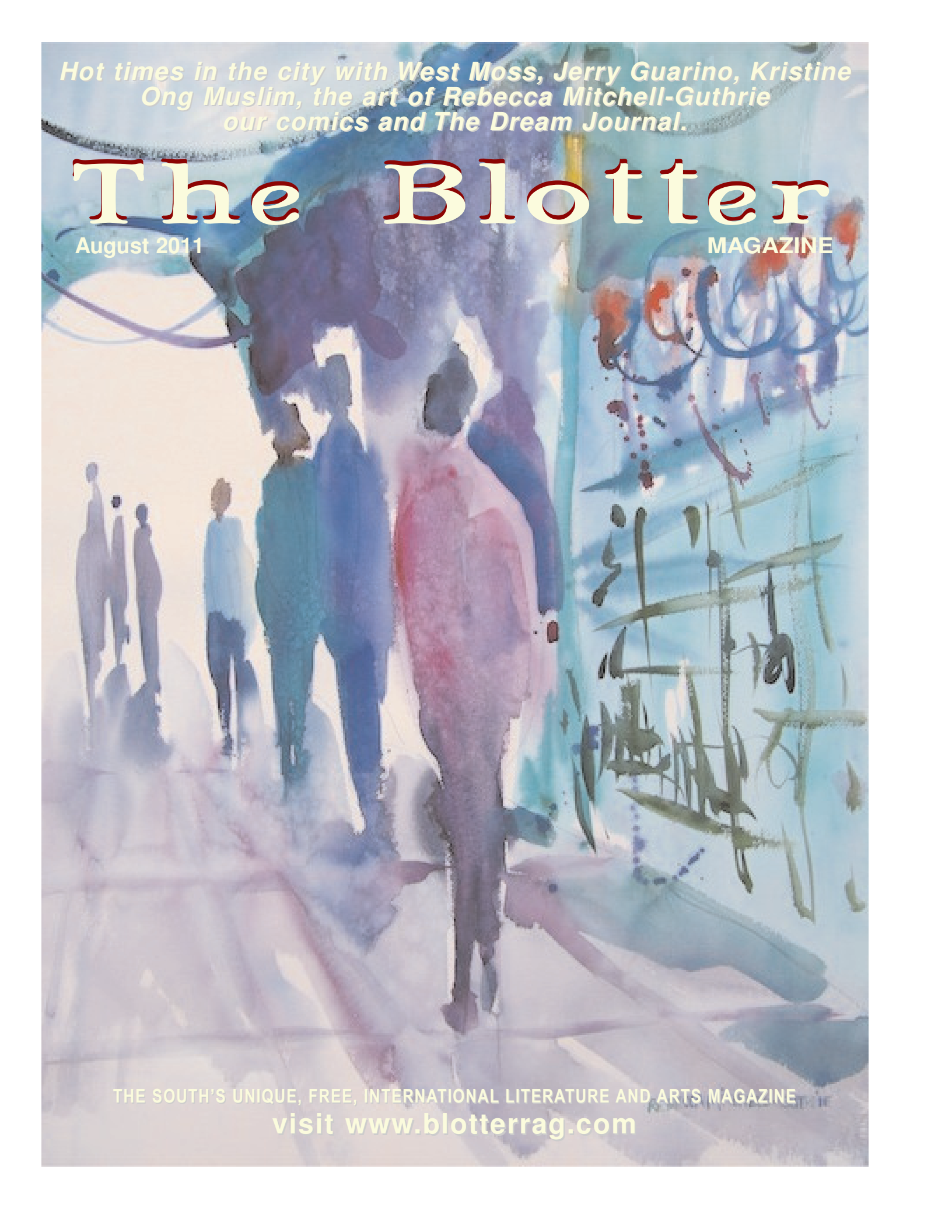


An abstract watercolor illustration serves as the background for the magazine cover. It depicts a group of stylized figures in various colors (blue, green, red, purple) walking along a path. To the right, there are vertical elements resembling reeds or bamboo. The overall style is soft and painterly, with a palette dominated by blues, purples, and greens, accented with warmer tones like red and orange.

*Hot times in the city with West Moss, Jerry Guarino, Kristine
Ong Muslim, the art of Rebecca Mitchell-Guthrie
our comics and The Dream Journal.*

The Blotter

August 2011

MAGAZINE

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Press release, darling press release, thank
you for all the joy and pain.

Front cover, "Lost in a Market" by
Rebecca Mitchell-Guthrie See center-
fold for more.

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"Notes on summer break"

I'm not a list-maker, neither by habit or talent, but often it seems that the world works better when things are delineated, categorized plugged-in and pigeon-holed. As I type this note it is summer, the first blossoming days of it, and the girls are home and happy to be here with me (or at least pleased not to be up-and-at-'em for School 2.0.) Bea is a list-maker of the first category, and has absconded with a sheaf of typing paper and all the colored pencils to turn the dining room into a home-school. Dad, she says, tell me what animal to study today. She also has arithmetic, reading and geography assignments for herself. My only task is...I check her clipboard...to have French Toast assembled by 10:30. I'd better get on it. Now where's that syrup?

OK. What else has she planned for me? The pool – in lieu of Phys-Ed, I assume. Or the park, where they can spin on some direct-strength doodad until they are nauseous-dizzy and I can walk laps around a man-made mosquito swamp intended to be what thirty-something mom slash professionals call *green space*. Ten laps equals a half-hour. Climbing a slight uphill is actually less work on my knees than the corresponding downhill. A metaphor for life itself.

Hmm. No doing laundry, no vacuuming? Hey, I like this new world order – with the girls home and no chores of the mundane variety.

Ha! Wrong, daddy-oh. There's a break in the action she and Liv discuss how to multiply fractions, so I put a load of laundry in, and feed Smore, the faithful guinea pig. Smore is used to this stuff, he's here every day, not too talkative, never gets impatient when I'm writing and get stuck on some word, and never interrupts when my sister calls. He does dig around in his litter if I leave it unchanged too long, so I put him in his changing-room and take out the box to dump in the garden. One of life's little ego-setters. I like science – and not just because they've gone outside in the yard to collect leaves. Catalogued them. Sweet-gum, pin-oak, white poplar. All good Southern shade-trees. Then it's time to paint the leaves, for making prints on typing paper. Art and science one and the same. Who's hurt by that?

When I was younger, we spent a lot more time out of the house. My mom enjoyed a kid-free zone even before such an idea was ever coined (was it, really, or is this a false memory inspired by too many 6:00 wake-ups to ask if they can watch cartoons?) My friends and I – no older than Liv is now – would saddle up and go fishing (not literally – we never rode horses. It was the Nineteen-, not Eighteen-sixties.) then we would spend all day pond-side until we ran out of worms, out of peanut butter and jelly on Wonder and strawberry soda, or someone accidentally fell in, which was always a real possibility when four boys were *unchaperoned*. Accident? You decide. But it is interesting that our parents felt comfortable with our being out of sight (walking three miles down railroad tracks to the old clay excavations, long since filled with water and primed with bluegills and catfish) or at least had made their peace with the idea that they might be one or more children short at the end of the summer's day.

Here comes something. Grade this! It's a one-page document on the bald eagle. Do you know why it's called "bald?"

Now, I have an annoying reputation in my house for knowing things. Trivia, I mean. Not more useful information like how to fix the *kludgie* vent fan in the bathroom. What passes for trivia in our society, like correct responses to Jeopardy. This skill causes the girls come to me when they have a particularly odd question. (In equal measure because they want to know the answer and because they want to stump the chump.) I know the old chestnut, nobody likes a know-it-all. In our house we remind the girls that it isn't attractive to play stupid, it isn't sexy to be a dimwit. Smart is sexy. Good grades are beautiful. Some day when they're statuesque and have stop-traffic eyes and strong healthy bodies, what will be most important is what they know and how much of it.

Because the Old English word 'balde' means "white."

Oh. Well, there you go.

At game time we start this year's Yahtzee world championships. Invitation only. There's no way of knowing how this will turn out. Last year Bea was troubled by a run of bad luck – but still came back to win overall. You shoulda been there.

We'll read later, both of them cuddled on the sofa and me under the lamp. *Watership Down*, by Richard Adams. One chapter, or maybe two, a night. Who'd have thought that the adventures of a few rabbits would hold us in such thrall. And it'll get us through July. I tried reading this to Liv when she was seven, and then again when she and Bea were ten and seven. It turned out to be too early. The complexities of place and time description that make the book work for parent and child also make it one of those magic-moment events. In other words, my girls are perfect for this right now, this summer. They are almost too old to be read to but are nostalgic for it, for the rumble of my voice after a long day, and with a book almost too old for them. They pipe up as we go with questions that I don't take as interruption, and after we're done I hear them talking quietly together in the dark bedroom about what they heard that evening. I like this part the best. Not because it's day's end, but because I'm in charge of how it ends. I can pick the moment to stop, or go on just a little bit more.

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CAUTION

*This month, just for you,
a clean so squeaky your
momma will hardly know
you.*

"The Pie Case"

by West Moss

The restaurant was quiet on Sunday evenings. The waitresses outside of Mirabel's office door lit candles for the empty tables. The blue light from the pie cabinet filled Mirabel's doorway.

She worked on the staff schedule, thinking about a friend in the news for turning down a million dollar television contract. She tried not to resent the dishwasher she pencilled in for the Thursday breakfast shift. How had her life added up to the sum of disappointed waiters and perishable inventory?

Suzie's pale face leaned in



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Mirabel's door and Mirabel noticed that Suzie had almost no chin. "Come here," Suzie whispered. Mirabel went with her to the pie case, where Suzie nodded toward a woman at a table. Mirabel circled the woman. Her hair and coat looked Upper East Side. She was, maybe, thirty. Her elbow rested on the table and she stared into the middle-distance, her breathing a fixed rasp. Alarmed, Mirabel took a laminated card from the woman's frozen, outstretched palm, and read.

"I have epilepsy and I'm having a seizure." It was typed. "Do not hospitalize me. Please stay with me so that no one takes my belongings."

Mirabel sat with the woman and looked beyond her at the tall coconut cake in the pie case. The woman's breathing slowed and started to sound better.

Mirabel put the card back in the woman's palm and felt luckier than Suzie because of her chin. Mirabel looked into the kitchen as the dishwasher put an enormous soup pot under the spray nozzle. He seemed so far away. She looked back at the woman in front of her and noticed white pouches under each eye. Were those from seizures? The woman's hand slowly lowered to the table and she blinked several times. Mirabel could smell lemons on her breath.

"Can you get me into a cab?" the woman whispered.

"What's your name?" asked Mirabel. She paused and then asked again.

"Joan." Mirabel placed her hand between Joan's shoulder blades and walked her into the night. Joan's unfocused eyes did not look up as Mirabel closed the taxi door and turned to look at her restaurant, at the

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pulsing glow of the pie cabinet deep within and the candles on the tables. The light was fragile, like a heart that might stop beating, swallowed up by the darkness.

Two weeks later Mirabel was working a busy lunch shift when she saw Joan at the door. The tables were packed with young bankers. So sure of their own worth, they didn't bother to look up when they ordered. They laughed with their mouths wide open, aggressively happy.

Mirabel saw that Joan wore the same coat, noticed her pearl earrings and the lavender pouches beneath her eyes. Mirabel steered her to an empty table and they sat.

"I am going into the hospital," Joan whispered, looking down at her busy fingers.

"Are you alright?" Mirabel asked, torn between the waiting customers and Joan.

"My medication stopped working." In the sunlight Mirabel saw tiny veins twining around Joan's nostrils. "It's brain surgery. I don't know

how much I'll remember, and I wanted to thank you ... while I remember."

Mirabel felt a sharp desire for Joan to remember her. "Lunch is on me. I'll be right back," she said, excusing herself to greet customers at the door. She heard a crash behind her and turned to see Joan on the floor under Table Eleven. Her body was convulsing with such might that she looked like a dolphin to Mirabel, trying to break free of a wave.

Mirabel crawled under the table and cradled Joan's head. She looked up into the bankers' faces peering down at them, their eyebrows knit, their mouths still chewing. She bent and cooed, "It's alright," trying to shield Joan from their eyes. When the seizure subsided, Mirabel helped Joan up and walked with her while Joan's eyes blinked and refocused. Mirabel put her hand on Joan's back and once again steered her outside and into a cab in the chill sunshine. They did not speak.

When Mirabel got inside one

of the bankers handed her a twenty. "Thank you for taking care of that," he said gravely, tilting his head toward Table Eleven. She took the money and put it on his table, looking out after Joan's cab. She was perfectly still. The ribbon of her life unwound an inch. Taking a deep breath she turned back to her restaurant and whispered, "What's next?"



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"The Love Beads"

by Jerry Guarino

Joey jogged in from warm-ups to meet with the coach, his Beatles haircut bobbing in the breeze. His high school girlfriend Linda smiled as he came to the sideline. Parents and students started chanting for their undefeated varsity soccer team. "Hey" said Linda, proudly standing there, still in her blue plaid Catholic school uniform, knee socks and blue and white shoes. "Hi sweetheart" said Joey; he touched the tiny red and white beaded necklace she had given him, matching his school colors and soccer uniform. Nearby, Joey caught a glimpse of his father, who often made time to come to his games.

In 1969, it was common to see boys wearing beads. But his father was from another generation and thought the necklace was feminine, or queer as they called it in the 50s. "Take

those off," he said to Joey. Joey was puzzled and a little embarrassed. He quietly came back. "What for? Coach has no problem with this." But his old-school father wasn't arguing. "Take them off." Joey knew any more talk would draw attention from the others, so he pulled them off and threw them to his father. Seething, he returned to the field to start the game.

Linda saw this and frowned. Joey had promised to wear it during the game, displaying his affections in public. He looked back at her with an apologetic wave of the hand. "After the game" he said. "OK" Linda said, still puzzled but supportive.

His father left after the game, giving Joey time to explain to Linda. "I'm sorry. My dad doesn't understand. Where can I get another one?" Linda, relieved now, gave him a

hug. "For my star winger. I'll make you one tonight." Joey kissed her; seeing this, his Latino teammates gave out some mock hoots in Spanish. "I'll pick you up at 7:00," Joey said, and then jogged back to the locker room, punching his friend in the arm. "Who else is going to get you the ball Jorge?" They laughed as they left the field, still hearing the cheers from the crowd.

At dinner, his father ignored the earlier incident. Not wanting to get into this in front of his mother, Joey avoided the subject too, but his glare made it clear to his father what his feelings were. "Did you win today Joey?" said his mom. "Yeah, 3 nothing; I had two assists. Dad was there." His mom smiled. "My star player, following in his Dad's footsteps?" But his father was an all-state football player and now



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grossly overweight. Joey forced a smile. "Something like that, I guess. I'm going to the movies with Linda" as he brought his empty plate to the kitchen and took off.

Linda bounced into Joey's car, a 1969 Dodge Dart, not the Charger he wanted, but at least it was new. Joey stroked her long, dark hair, took her hand and kissed her. "I'm so sorry Linda." Linda gently pulled his face back to her, clearly indicating she had forgiven him. "Look what I have." She pulled out another red and white beaded necklace and fit the elastic around his neck. "How's that feel?" They went to the drive-in and continued their reconciliation.

On the drive home, Joey asked Linda. "Are you coming to our game with Nutley?" Linda looked disappointed. "Sorry dear, I have a community service requirement for graduation. Did you make up with your dad?" Joey shook his head. "Not yet." He put his arm around Linda's waist. "Besides,

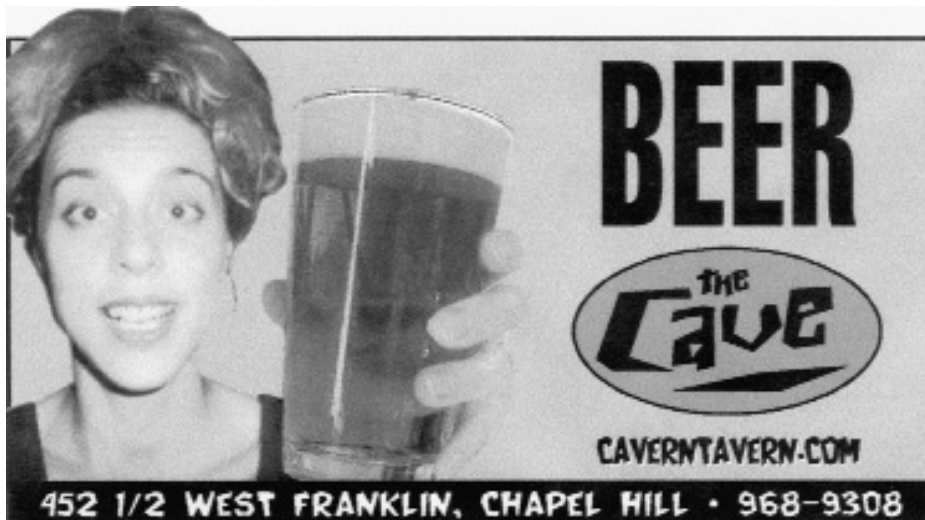
I have the perfect girl." Linda leaned into Joey and pouted. "Oh, now you're making me sad that I'll miss your game."

But Joey's father was there. Joey saw that his father was having difficulty standing. At half time, he went over to his father. "You all right dad?" Beads of sweat appeared on his forehead, even in the cool November afternoon. "Maybe you should go sit in the car or have some water." His father shook his head. "I'm fine. I just want to ask you one thing son. Are you queer?" Joey couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Why would you say that? You know I have a girlfriend." His father hesitated. "The beads, not what a guy should wear." Joey gave him a disgusted look and headed back to the field.

But this affected his play in the second half. His concentration was broken and he misplayed several passes. Jorge hollered at him. "Torpe. Watch what you're doing." Joey tried to run through his angst, giving Jorge a stopped hand signal.

"I'm ok, just run your pattern." On the next attack, Joey floated a ball over a defender, right in front of Jorge, who made one of his moves and punched it into the net. "Goal," came the chant from the crowd. Then there was a scream. Everyone turned to the sideline. Joey's father was lying on the ground, clutching his chest.

Fortunately there was an ambulance on site. Joey's father looked up at the EMT, gasping for air and holding his arm. "Don't worry sir, you're going to be all right. We're just going to stabilize you and bring you to the hospital for follow-up." The EMT was wearing a blue jumpsuit, white high converse and a utility belt with stethoscope, scissors and other first aid equipment. Joey's father pointed at the EMT and tried to speak, but he couldn't make out the words. The EMT interrupted. "Relax sir. Don't try to speak; are you pointing to my necklace. My fiancé gave it to me to remind me of her when I'm at work. Sort of like an engagement ring for guys."





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"Love Lost"

by Sonny Rag

"The reason," he explicated to the winsome thing seated the next stool over, "we broke up was because of boogers."

(Imagine if you can using the word boogers in a sentence, in a saloon, in a salacious pick-up. You'd think it can't be done. As the lion says, not nobody, not no-how.)

"No kidding?" the adorable waif said, grinning. "Boogers?" Not: Oh! Boogers; confirming what he said. *Boogers?*, the question. As in, please tell me more about boogers; don't just leave me hanging, you know, like a booger. On the other hand, boogers are sort of funny. But what you do with them is your own business. And he always said *if they're smiling, they're spreading 'em in their minds*. Well, no, he never actually said it to anyone, but he thought it to himself a lot and he considered his inner self a good listener.

"Yeah, yeah. We were driv-

ing up to Connecticut on the Merritt. To a friend's wedding." He almost said 'of hers', but caught himself. You never want to sound like you're not still attached. Even if you've broken up, well then your side of the relationship is intact. You *become* the deserved recipient of some sad. Being pathetic from time to time proves beyond a shadow that you're human. "She was asleep, I was driving, the heat was on. It was December. I was thinking about Christmas coming."

"I do that," she said offhandedly. "I pretend that I'm little again."

He hmph'd a laugh. Jesus-God, she was little last year. The year before that she was playing with My Little Ponies. Today, she sat pouting and peeling the label off a Yuengling. Her tee shirt under an open flannel button-down hid *adventure*. He gently pushed all her words into a pile and stepped

over them. If he let her, she would talk him out of *a ride* and into a ride. Exreme make him over into big brother. Not Nineteen-Eighty-Four, but rather Wally to her, *ahem*, Beaver. That was not the plan at all.

"Yeah, well, the old Parkway has those concrete joints and the tires were thumping the American Dream meditation in my head, you know, I-got-your-boom-boom-boom, and all of a sudden I was seven again, knuckling a particularly annoying crusty."

"And yet, you could still drive," said the waif, mouth wet with beer-spit. He liked that sound some girls got, like they didn't quite know how to swallow before they talked. He glanced into her eyes, *are they really that green or reflecting the best work of Pottsville Pennsylvania?*, ascertaining whether he'd lost her, or if she was still interested in his gross-

Best In Show



by Phil Juliano

out story. No sign of defensive body language. Elbows at rest on the bar, pink fingertips fiddling with the green beer-bottle. Eyebrows in that position of anticipation, slightly raised, asymmetrical. Yeah, she was still listening. A flickering thought. How'd this little corner of a page of nothing know about the nation's oldest quality brewery? Then, time to go for it. Torpedoes away!

"Well, she woke up," he said. "Shouted 'What the hell?' Leaped from REM to buzz-kill in a single bound. I realized that I was brain-mining, yanked Pointer from the olfactory cavern. Painfully, I might add. But I'd dredged a mighty nosetreat, and there was nowhere to go

with it. So I flicked it, right up on the windshield. The last civil words I ever heard from her were 'You are absolutely disgusting'. Like she hadn't just been feet up on the dashboard a half minute earlier, breathing through her mouth and leaking flatulence."

"She farted?" The waif gave him the gift of a couple of beagle-bark laughs. "Are you *kid-ding*? I love it. Farting is a *hoot*!" He leaned back, smiled on the side of his face she couldn't see, and ordered them both another round. *Ballgame!*



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DRAGIN



by Michael Cole

"A big joke about dolls"

is that they are prettier than you and I will
ever be. Their eyes are glassy and bleak

as if the only future they are looking at is the pre-
sent. They are the ghosts we have nurtured like a

wedding dress. Their silence is the death hand,
that one that turns the wheel, the one that cups

the water cold. We always walk away from them,
cut the air clean, the blank space between stanzas.

"New Self-Portrait"

This time, I will not beg; the mouth is obscured
by a splotch of acrylic. Now weightless—all the
stitches have been airbrushed to resemble skin.

I tug at the fabric to simulate smiles. From the
margins of the canvas, I collect four pairs
of extremities—all callused, but *there*.



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Three by Kristine Ong Muslim

"Old Self-Portrait"

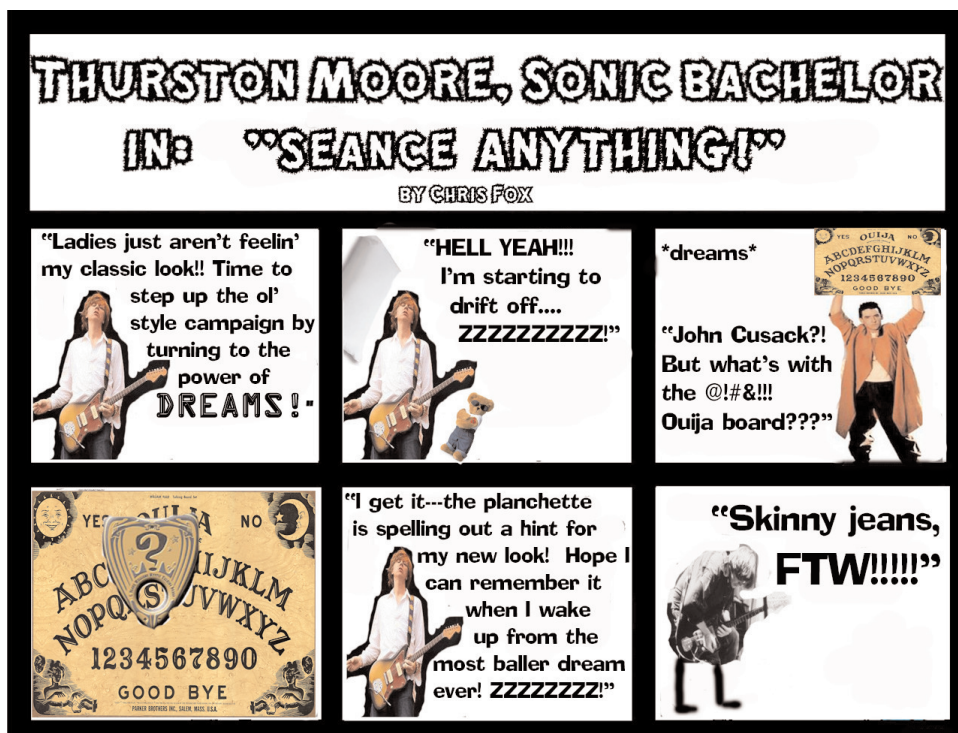
The posture suggests the twitching of the restless: that set-up to grind hunger and happiness together.

The hands are bent; the joints protrude. They have reaped what is ripe to replace what the eyes have lost by watching.

The hair is limp over an orb of a head.

The mouth is a jeweled purse where secrets and names are muffled in order to be taken seriously.

In the middle, the nose mars the symmetry.



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.

mermaid@blotterrag.com

I can't tell if the others are prisoners like me, or inmates hospitalized because of some mental infirmity that will only display in some future moment. The "boss" is older than I am, not bigger than I am, but he feels bigger and he uses that no-win kind of authority that breaks in a newbie quickly, because it leads inevitably to an educational beating. One that a prisoner never wants repeated. Every move one makes must be requested from the boss. Everything the boss says is an order and must be responded to with "yes, boss." No argument, no backtalk.

My turn comes at mealtime, when we are all cleaning up the kitchen where our poor, tasteless food comes from. I don't realize that the food is tasteless because it is dream-food, tasteless because I am breathing - panting almost - through my dry mouth. I sit at the table, and it is one of those rough wooden kitchen tables that remains in the kitchen from generation to generation. I look up as one of the others turns on the hot water in the sink to let it fill to wash dishes, but then goes away and instead of coming back to take care of the rapidly filling sink, is given some other task to do. I call out - I think I am calling out - "turn the hot water off here, boss," but the kitchen is noisy with other chattering "...here, boss" - "...yes, boss" and no one hears me. I call out louder - the sink is full and steaming and fingers of water are reaching out on the counter and rolling towards the edge. And boss does arrive before the water spills to the floor.

But he doesn't let me speak - he rails at me for wasting hot water. The sink overflows as he tells me that tax-payer dollars aren't for wasting. He tells me about the damage that the spilled water will do to the flooring beneath the linoleum. He is in my ear, and his hand is on my shoulder, heavy, as he explains again "how things work here."

The beating is imminent, as he twists a towel in his frustration with me.

J.L. - cyberspace

Final Tidbits: I love when we're not at work and not at school and not on a trip and not at camp and not at the various and sundry places that we go because we're so very, very busy, running full tilt at everything. I much prefer when we're all sitting around, reading, or getting up to fill up a glass with lemonade or a cup with this morning's coffee. I like going outside to feed the noisy chickens and to poke some clover through to the rabbits. I like sitting for a while in the shade and listening to the warblers, well...warbling. I like not fighting and not roughhousing and not planning and not doing so much and not worrying and not fetching or scraping or neatening up. I like that its warm and later it rains. We've been selling books and paintings and prints for our first release "Tree" for a couple of months but I still haven't seen your pre-order. Lots of fine people are helping with the project and we want you to do your part. Talk it up, think about who you like giving gifts to, and go on over to paintbrushforest.com or pencilpointmountain.com and do it. While you're mulling that over, consider a donation to The Blotter (www.blotterrag.com) as your good deed for the year! And visit your local independent bookstore, they have hot cocoa! I'm serious, I don't want to see any of you sitting around the pool saying, "I'm bored." Don't make me toss you in the deep end. Got it? Good!

CONTRIBUTORS

West Moss is an English teacher and writer living in New Jersey. While she has published work in the *New York Times*, the *Parents League Journal* and elsewhere, this is the first piece of her fiction to be published. Check out more of her writing at <http://farawayteatown.blogspot.com/>

Jerry Guarino of Hayward, CA writes short stories and plays. Please visit his website at <http://thedevilsorchestra.us> Writing since January, 2011, his work has appeared in four countries with the journals *6 Tales*, *Bewildering Stories*, *The Chaffey Review Literary Magazine*, *Daily Love*, *Eskimo Pie*, *The Fringe Magazine* (Australia), *Hackwriters Magazine* (Great Britain), *Larks Fiction Magazine*, *Leaning House Press*, *The Legendary*, *Litsnack*, *MediaVirus*, *Piker Press*, *Postcard Shorts*, *Ray's Road Review*, *The Scarlet Sound*, *The Stream Press*, *Weirdyear*, *Writing Raw* and *Zouch Magazine* and *Miscellany* (Canada). He is currently working on a murder mystery for the stage.

Rebecca Mitchell-Guthrie is an artist in Durham, NC. She finds inspiration for her large scale watercolor paintings through her travels, her garden, and her imagination. See more at www.rebeccamitchellguthrie.com

Sonny Rag hails from hereabouts, or maybe out thataway. His work has darkened these pages before. Apparently he sits up at night and scribbles ideas down like some sort of Lord Voldemort with a pencil instead of a wand. There's no controlling him whatsoever.

Kristine Ong Muslim of Maguindanao, Phillipines, writes, "My publication credits include more than five hundred publications including *Boston Review*, *Contrary Magazine*, *Harpur Palate*, *Narrative Magazine*, *Potomac Review*, *Sou'wester*, *Southword*, *The Pedestal Magazine*, and *Weber*. I have been nominated five times for the Pushcart Prize and twice for *Best of the Web 2011*." *Ed. note: She's also been in The Blotter before, a fact for which we are very proud.*

Chris Fox, from somewhere around Chapel Hill, knows what funny lurks in the hearts of men.

Michael Cole draws on childhood inspiration and **Phil Juliano** draws on 20 pound copier paper from Staples. *Ed. note. He most definitely did not say it was OK for me to say that, and I'm expecting a very stern letter from him any day now.*



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