

*Can't have too much of a good thing with Tom Larsen,
Benjamin Manry, Tyler Bigney, the art of Seth Patrick,
our comics and The Dream Journal.*

The Blotter

Our Ninth Anniversary Spectacular

MAGAZINE



**THE BOYS TOLD WILL HE COULDN'T WEAR THE PIRATE SHIRT ANY MORE
BECAUSE OF HIS REMARKABLE TENDENCY TO FILL INSIDE STRAIGHTS.**

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FRONT COVER by Seth Patrick
 could have been poker playing dogs,
 but it's not. See inside for more.

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Council of Literary Magazines & Presses
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"Browsing"

My sister doesn't read fiction. She tells me that there are too many other important books out there, that she doesn't have time for (my interpretation of her words) *made up stuff*. We've talked a lot about this, to no avail. And although it is perfectly OK to buy someone a book, (unlike art, which for some reason we consider too personal to force on one another) I don't buy her novels, because I think they would pile up on her bedside table, never to be cracked open, never to be bookmarked, never to have a page corner lovingly turned down before the last light is switched off.

I, on the other hand, read a lot of fiction. As I've said before, I try to keep five books going at once, and at least one must be a novel I've not read before. This has led to a pile-up beside my bed of reality-TV proportions, which my wife recently took into her own hands, going to a local "Hold Everything" store and crating up my unread stack. Which bums me out, because I make a lot of my reading decisions based on browsing, and of course there are many levels of browsing, at the local indie bookstore, in other readers' hands at the coffee-shop, in the pile by the side of my bed.

You see, I'm not a book review reader. As a busy adult (don't laugh!) I consume on average about one novel a month, reading whenever I can without ignoring laundry, mowing the lawn, being the designated driver to school, gymnastics, Girl Scouts, choir and karate (I seem to have read a lot more when the girls were younger), or suppers with the family. In other words, I'm fifty-four years old and expect to live with luck and a tail wind another thirty or so years with some reasonable percentage of whatever faculties I currently possess. That's 360 or so novels I have time for, based, as I said, on a current schedule of time-filling/using/wasting. So I don't think there's a place in there for reading about books (much less what you're currently doing which is reading about reading about books).

And I've never reviewed a book before. That is, I've "blurbed," writing a couple of paragraphs about how I feel about a book, but I've never formally exposed a book to the third-degree under the bright lights in what will possibly be received with all the *gravitas* that such an essay sometimes can levy. Which ought to be none, because in my opinion you're much better off taking a chance reading a book already considered "classic" or following the advice of trusted friends who like the same kind of...I don't know...*pizza* you do than reading some stranger working by-the-word for a newspaper that's slowly sinking at one end because it's rammed the Internet iceberg while ignorant imbeciles in tie-and-tails play baccarat and listen to shivering string quartets pluck Mendelsohn concerti at the other while they think what a beautiful starlit night it is.

I'm somewhat but not very afraid that those people who review books for a living, who make it the form they exercise their writing muscles over, who think that it's a form at all in that same way the sweaty people I watch

manipulating the specific muscle machinery in the gym think that what they do is important and more...relevant than my chugging each morning on the treadmill, and that even my attempting to set the weight on one of those machines is at best laughable and at worst insulting to them because I am in their way and because they think I am doing *their thing*, and badly at that. I believe the super-secret of book reviewing is like food reviewing and movie reviewing. Like the super-secret of business management, taught at better universities. The secret that there is nothing new to say, but don't tell anyone. The point of a book review – or movie or food review – is to have a byline, is that super-secret of reviews. Not to review the book and reveal its pleasures to readers. Not to motivate, somehow, writers to write and readers to read. The point of reading a book review is so that you don't actually have to read the book. Right? Right?

No? I guess I'm on my own with this, then.

So here I am with my copy of Paula Young Lee's, *How to Be A Homeless Frenchman*, which I found to be a very entertaining, very funny, very moving book. It is nothing at all like *The Odyssey*, or the poetry of Ezra Pound, or the essays of E. B. White or the literature of the Transcendentalists, or anything scribed by feminist authors or Norman Mailer or Kurt Vonnegut (except one scene that I read and then read again, put down, made a pot of Earl Grey and then picked up and read again I think because I wanted to commit it to memory absolutely and incorrigibly in case I ever succumb to the dust storm of Alzheimer's. What it is like are those books I have read in the past few years by young authors that have played around at the edges of prose styling, developing stories and characters that surprised me and held on to me, hopeful for more surprises. David Mitchell. Dave Eggers. Joanne Harris. Joyce Hinnfeld.

My copy was sent by the author – a generous thing for her to do because she didn't know me from Adam's off-ox and at the time she had paid to have the copies bound and was either selling them or giving them away to her readers by hand, which I think is the way of things nowadays, when publishers are so busy printing novels written by Glenn Beck. Let me say that again. Novels. By Glenn Beck. Thank God I've only got thirty something years left. We really have skidded into the deep weeds.

continued on page 22



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CAUTION

Passengers will please refrain from opening windows in the plane and dropping things to fall down through the blue...

"Night Ride Home"

by Tom Larsen

At the top of the hill the bright lights hit him head on. Must be six of them, for Christ sake, whiter and brighter than normal headlights, scorching his retina, searing the back of his skull. He tries to see past them directly to the right but the light is impenetrable. Anything could be there, a deer, a brick wall. His first instinct is to return the favor. Drill the bastard with his own brights, blinding them both in the time honored tradition. Instead he taps the brakes and eases off the shoulder, squinting into the glare until the car passes. Not a car so much as a troop transport, one of those HUV's or SUV's or whatever the hell you call them. Big as a tank and wider than half the road.

Shaken a bit, Leo takes the Dolington curve slowly, his eyes adjusting as the stoplight turns from red to green. Another mile and he'll be home, the hectic Christmas go-round winding to a

close. The nightcap at his mother's just long enough for Ginny to get the house back together and the kids to bed. By the time he hits Wiley's farm Leo is deep in review of the day's events. Savoring the high points – his mom reading the underpants book to daughter Tess, little Lola getting tipsy when no one was looking. Filing the low lights – his mother's failing health, his brother's troubles, for later consideration.

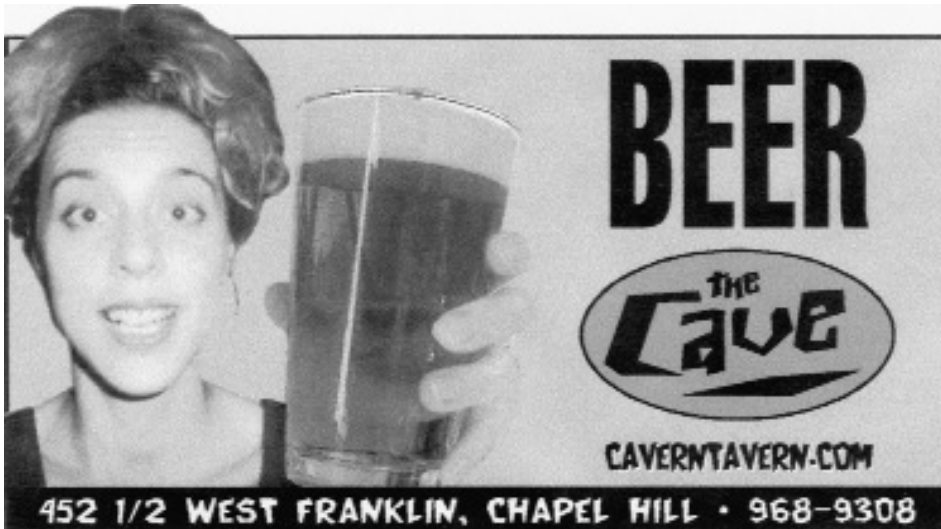
So lost in thought he doesn't see the man until he's passed him, the pink and white flap of bathrobe just a blip in Leo's peripheral vision. An old guy with a cane poking through the roadside brush. Slowing to a crawl, Leo checks the rear view mirror but the road beyond his tail lights is swallowed up in darkness. He considers backing up but the chance that he might run the old boy down changes his mind. He pulls ahead a hundred

yards and turns into the entrance to Chelsea Estates. Circling the bus stop kiosk he kills the lights and cuts the engine. In a minute he can see the shadow of treeline and the pale stretch of grass sloping to the woods. He lowers his window and stares out in the direction of Taylorsville.

Alzheimer's, he thinks to himself. He's read the stories in the paper. Old men stumbling into stranger's houses or freezing to death in the woods. Might be something else entirely, but that would be Leo's bet. He sits and waits, gauging the time and distance. No more than fifty yards to the development boundary. A good place to cross if that's where he's headed.

From the shadows comes the crunch of underbrush and the faint but unmistakable sound of singing. "Silent Night" from the sound of it. Then he sees him moving in a jangly limp along the shoulder, much closer than Leo would have placed him. Looking neither left or right as he hobbles past the nose of the car. Got the season right, Leo smiles to himself. His fingers close around the door latch then release as the warbly vibrato carries over. Lovely really. A sweet tenor fading in the stillness.

Leo waits until the man is well past before starting the car. No sense approaching him on foot. The old fool might be hiding an axe in his robe for all he knows. Wouldn't be the first time a Good Samaritan had his head handed to him. He waits another minute then pulls away from the bus stop and onto the road. His headlights catch a shock of white hair bobbing in the tall grass and for a



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second he's tempted to pass him by. God only knows what this could lead to. Just drive off and pretend it didn't happen. Instead he slows down and lowers his window.

"Hey mister, you OK?" He tries to sound as if he's just wondering.

The old man stops and peers up at the road. The front of his robe is streaked in mud. Leo reaches up and switches on the interior light.

"You need a lift somewhere?" His words swirl in ribbons of steam.

"Is that you, Mike?" The old man stumbles towards him shielding his eyes with his free hand.

"Come on." Leo waves him on. "I'll drive you home."

"By God it IS you. How the hell you been, you old dog."

Dead for decades would be Leo's guess. Still, if it makes things easier he can be Mike. Never much cared for the name Leo anyway.

"Here." The old man shakes his cane. "Give me a hand you old sumbitch."

Leo pulls off the road and sets the brake. Reaching in back he

grabs the dog blanket off the seat and his flashlight from the toolbox on the floor. First thing is to get the old guy into the car without a fuss. If he acts up just leave him be. No telling what the liability might be in a case like this. Leo steps from the car onto the shoulder shining the light a few paces ahead. The old man stands there cackling to himself.

"God damnit Mike!" he jabs the air with his cane. "I thought you was in Harrisburg. What the hell you doin here?"

"Looking for you. Come on, let's get you home."

"You gave me a start there. For a minute I thought you might be one of them."

"One of who?"

"Hell if I know. A whole damn house full. Damn fools wouldn't let me smoke."

"Well, you know how it is," Leo steps up and wraps the blanket around his shoulders. "Everybody's a health nut these days. You might think about giving it up though."

"Don't YOU start in." He whacks him on the leg hard enough to hurt. Leo staggers backward to the old man's delight, nearly tripping over a

tree limb.

"Always was a clumsy sumbitch. I uh, ... say, what the hell you drag me out here for anyway?"

"I didn't." Leo rubs his throbbing leg. "I saw you walking and stopped to help."

The old man stares into the darkness. There are scratches on one cheek, a smear of dirt across his forehead and his upper lip is lacquered in snot. He turns suddenly and heads up the slope to the car, calling back over his shoulder. "Come on Mike. Wouldn't do to keep everybody waiting."

Everybody? A bubble of uncertainty churns in Leo's stomach. From the sound of it "everybody" would not include the non-smokers who are possibly relatives and probably frantic, assuming they exist. The last thing he needs is a romp through the years with some brain-addled senior. How does he get himself involved in these things? Ginny says he's an easy mark but it goes beyond that. Situations arise. If anyone is going to run into a grampa Simpson in his bathrobe on Christmas night it will be Lucky Leo.

"Harrisburg!?" the old man scowls. "Who in his right mind would want to live in Harrisburg?"

"What's wrong with Harrisburg?"

"A godawful place full of crooks and scoundrels."

"It's the state capital."

"A cesspool of corruption. A den of thieves and swindlers. If it was up to me I'd burn it down and send 'em packing."



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Leo checks the old man's seat belt. He hoots and slaps Leo's hand away then struggles for a minute to free his bathrobe. Suitably arranged he leans his head back, mumbles something and falls asleep. Just like that! Leo watches the rise and fall of his puny chest, silver nose hairs catching on intake.

"Hey." Leo gives him a poke. The old man bolts up into the seatbelt, launching his denture into the glove box door. The little door drops on impact and an avalanche of maps and hand-wipes tumble into his lap.

"Sorry." Leo scoops it all back inside. Feeling along the floor he locates the dentures and hands them over. The old man grunts and slips them in his pocket.

"What the hell was that?" he looks over to Leo.

"Nothing. You fell asleep."

"Jesus! I musta been dreaming." He searches his pockets pulling out the dentures and a crumpled pack of cigarettes. Working an arm loose he shakes the pack and pecks one out.

"Where we going anyway?" He fumbles for a match.

"You can't smoke in here," Leo tells him, regretting it instantly.

"Oh hell, she would never be that direct," the old man chuckles softly. "Just kept fanning the air and wrinkling her nose. Shoulda seen her trailing after me with the one ash tray," he lights up, puffing thick white plumes from the corner of his mouth. "And him just sittin there like he ain't got no say in the matter. Which he don't, far as I can see."

Leo fights the urge to roll down the window then rolls it down anyway. The smoke catches the current, moving over the dash in filmy layers.

"Family, right?" Leo takes a guess.

"I don't know who they are. Sure don't act like any kin of mine."

"Do you remember where they live?"

"Big gray house it was. Windows every goddamn place you looked. Whoever they are they're rolling in it."

"Do you think you could find it again?"

"Why in the hell would I want to do that?"

Leo makes a wide turn and heads back the way he came. Snow flakes flicker in his headlights, pelting his windshield like grains of sand. The old guy couldn't have gotten far in that

getup. Another half mile and he'd have to move onto the highway or else ford Swan Creek. The way kids hot rod over that bridge either one would be suicide. They pass a dozen houses but none fit the description. Just before the bridge Leo turns in the gated entrance to Woodland Acres.

"What are you stopping for?" the old man growls.

"You walked from here?"

"Woodland Acres," he squints at the sign then turns to Leo. "Can you imagine that? Back when it WAS woodland they called it Skunk Hollow. Used to hunt down here when I was a kid. Go ahead in. What the hell you waitin' for?"

They ease past the empty security booth and through the gate. The road winds through a stand of pines then opens into a vast expanse of houses. More houses than Leo's ever seen in one

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place. Clumped in circles or strung in patterns so random, they might have fallen from the sky. More than a few outlined in Christmas lights. All of them big, all of them gray. How is it he'd never seen this place?

"Is there a name on the mailbox?" he asks.

"Has to be. How else would you know where you live?"

"So what name are we looking for?"

"My guess is they're Polacks. He has the hen-pecked look of a Polack."

"Their name?"

"How the hell would I know? I'm Scotch-Irish!"

Leo makes the first left. Sycamore Run. The road circles then switches back for no apparent reason. On either side run rows of saplings lashed two to a yard. Might even be sycamores in a century or two. He stops at the first intersection. The street loops in a circle then branches off into a dead end. They sit staring

at a mud rutted lot filled with a cinder block basement. A full minute passes.

"What about you?" Leo hates to ask. "Do you know who you are?"

"What the hell kind of question is that?"

"Just a question. I'm trying to help."

The old man says nothing. Just refuses to answer like a kid who won't own up. Leo drives on hoping to see some sign of a disturbance, men with flashlights or squad cars parked in a driveway. Geezers in bathrobes don't go wandering off without somebody raising a fuss. Rounding the last bend on Cedar Drive they pass a line of cars parked in front of a big, gray house. Through the windows they see people milling about.

"Were they having a party?" Leo asks him.

"Who?"

"You know, the Polacks?"

"Hah! Wouldn't be much of a

party with no booze and one ash tray."

Leo checks the name on the mailbox.

"Is your name Lawler?"

"I'll tell you one thing. You ain't the same since you moved to Harrisburg, Mike. Made you stupid or some goddamn thing."

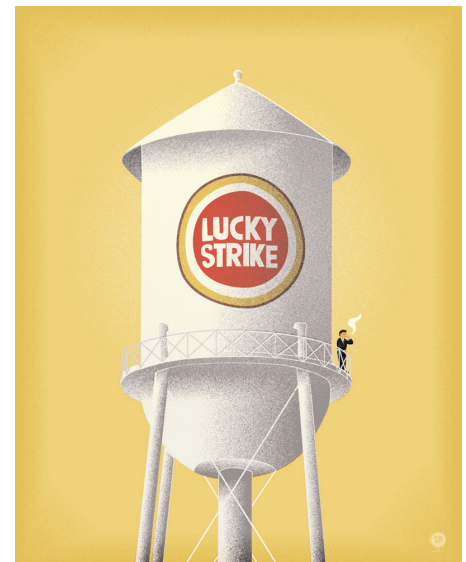
Leo takes this as a no. Still there might be someone here who knows him or the Polacks he belongs to. As luck would have it a car pulls out of a space near the driveway. Leo moves up and backs into it. From inside they can hear loud music and drunken laughter.

"Come on," the old man wrestles with his seat belt. "Let's get us a drink."

"You stay here."

"But it's Christmas ... ain't it?"

"Yes and we need to get you home." Leo locks him in and makes his way up the driveway. The door opens just as he gets there and a giggly blonde swoons backwards into his arms. Bikini'd babes pass by bearing trays of champagne. Bikinis? A drumbeat hammers Leo's sternum as he lowers the blonde into a chair by



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the door. He exchanges nods with no one in particular and passes inside, taking what feels like an olive to the head.

"Shut the door. You're letting the flies in," someone calls from the kitchen.

Leo backtracks and closes the door, then steps across the hall into the biggest living room he's ever seen. A dozen heads turn his way and the din trails off to a murmur. Leo puts on his best hapless grin. A short, balding man in a pony tail crosses the room and turns down the music.

"How can I help you?" he asks.

"I found an old man wandering in the woods. I wondered if you might know him."

A collective gasp breaks off into silence. Leo waits a full beat

for dramatic effect.

"He's OK. He just can't tell one house from another."

This gets a big laugh that dissolves into a chorus of "aawwww's" as the old man steps up beside him. So much for following orders. Leo rearranges the blanket and picks a leaf out of his hair. The pony tail approaches waving two couples from a nearby sofa.

"Come on folks, let's find these boys a seat," he takes the old man's hand and leads him over.

"Susan, get these fellas something to eat and ...," he turns to Leo. "What's your pleasure?"

"I don't think --,"

"A couple of Coronas. And someone grab another blanket from the closet."

"No wait --," but the crowd closes in and Leo is carried along to a table of hors d'oeuvres. The pony tail shows up again and hands him a beer.

"Charlie Lawler, public relations," he reaches for Leo's hand.

"Leo Hardy, pest control."

"That's a hell of a thing you did, Leo. Might have saved the poor guy's life. Sort of a Christmas miracle right here in Woodland Acres."

Leo sees two blondes settle in on either side of the old man who bares his gums and raises his glass in salute. Whatever he's drinking isn't beer.

"You know Charlie, I wonder if it's a good idea feeding him drinks."

"You're probably right. I'll get --," the rest is lost in a swirl of guests. Someone catches Leo's sleeve and pulls him along, releasing him beside a towering

redhead in spandex slacks.

"My name's Lilah," she leans and whispers in his ear.

"I'm Leo," he drinks in her cleavage

"Are you with Tassles?"

"Hmmm? No, I'm with the bathrobe over there," he gestures to the old man, now sporting a lipstick smooch on his forehead.

"I think the elderly are so sweet." Lilah's look-over leaves her wide open. Whatever Charlie's got going here it isn't public relations. The women look like centerfolds and the men are older and badly outnumbered. They aren't local, whoever they are.

"I wonder..." Leo watches as the old man drops to one knee, a la Jolson. That frail tenor rising in Silent Night. "... if you could tell me where the telephone is?"

"There's one in the bedroom, but don't go in there," Lilah warns him. "David and Nikki are hassling."

"What about the kitchen?"

"Lonnie's on that one."

"Would you excuse me?" Leo steps into the crowd and shoulders his way to the kitchen. A whoop goes up as the old man's holds a final note. Lifting a drink from a passing bikini Leo downs it in a single gulp.

Lonnie turns out to be big, black and less than happy with his phone call. He paces in a tight circle, gesturing wildly with his free hand while a cluster of schmoozers pretend not to listen. Leo tries the bedroom but a low moan through the door suggests that Nikki and whosits have reconciled. For a second he considers leaving the old man, but if something should happen they'd



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come looking for him.

Another whoop draws him back into the living room where the old man is perched on the sofa clacking his dentures like a castanet. Leading the girls in a jaunty chorus of "Winter Wonderland," clack, clack. Going it alone for the most part as the girls fall to pieces, laughing so hard their heads conk together. It looks pretty hilarious, Leo has to admit. Poor guy probably hasn't had this much fun in years, if ever. He watches for another round then worms his way through as a cheer goes up.

"Sorry folks. I hate to throw a damper on things," he takes the old man's arm. "We just found out where he lives."

The cheers turn to boos and catcalls as Leo leads him around the coffee table. Oddly enough, the old man offers no resistance except to turn and blow kisses to the girls. The crowd goes nuts.

"So where we going?" he sits shivering in the passenger seat.

"I don't have a clue," Leo tell him. "The phones were tied up. Tell you the truth I don't think those folks were from the area."

"I believe you're right. They don't breed heifers like that around here."

"Heifers?"

"Bless me, yes," his laugh stops short and he turns with a jerk.

"You saw them, right?"

"The heifers? Yeah sure."

"Cause between you and me, my mind has been playing tricks on me lately."

"You don't say."

"Oh, not so's you'd notice. Little things like where I left my glasses or, uh..."

"What your name is?"

"So I ain't as sharp as I used to be. But goddamnit you saw 'em! Biggest goddamn knockers I ever laid eyes on."

"I saw 'em, alright. Tell you the truth I think the big one had her eye on you."

"You think?"

"No telling what would have happened if I hadn't dragged you off. Sorry about that by the way."

"The big one? You might be right."

"I know I'm right," Leo gives him a nudge and they share a laugh. Softly, at first but then long and loud, harder than Leo's laughed in a long time. The old man bucking against his seat belt, slapping the dash until the maps tumble out. Laughing so hard they don't hear the beep of the cell phone deep in Leo's pocket. His Christmas present from Ginny, forgotten until this moment.

"Oh shit," Leo fumbles with zippers and buckles as the phone flutters against his chest.

"What the hell is that?"

"My cell phone," he pulls it out and scratches at the mouthpiece, picking along the edge with his fingernail.

"Phone? You got a phone in there?"

Finding the slit he flips it open. A tiny voice calls his name.

"Leo? Leo can you hear me?"

"Ginny, yeah I hear you. Listen..."

"A goddamn telephone, I'll be a sumbitch!"

"Leo? Who was that? Are you with somebody?"

"Listen honey," he glances at the old man. "Something's come up."

"Are you alright? Who's with you?"

"Lemme see that," the old man hooks his arm with the cane but Leo fends him off, jabbing the rubber end into his ribs. The old man yelps and tries to wriggle away but Leo's got him now. Poking at will as the old man doubles over in belly laughs.

"Leo? What is that?"

"Nothing honey. Listen OWW! Will you stop..."

"Is that Gerry Lambert? Leo? Where are you?"

"Listen honey, I'll call you back."

He turns into the municipal parking lot. The new station is a pale green complex built in the middle of nowhere. Leo checks to make sure the old man's sleeping then parks next to a pair of patrol cars, one of them running. The snow has stopped for the moment but the air is brittle with

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cold and wisps of steam rise from the vapor lights. He should have done this to begin with, Leo thinks to himself. Now Ginny will be mad and the old man will be mad and his family will be worried sick. What the hell was he thinking driving around with a senile old coot?

Through the double doors he sees a young patrolman stirring sugar packets into a styrofoam cup. So taken by his task, Leo waits for him to finish before pushing inside. For a second he thinks back to the old police station in town. The elevated desk with the real desk sergeant. A busy place across from the courthouse, flanked by law offices and luncheonettes.

"Help you?" The patrolman

looks him over.

"Yeah, I found an old man wandering in the woods over by Taylorsville Road."

"Striped bathrobe?"

"Right. You know who he is?"

"Let's see," he grabs a clipboard off the coffee counter. "That would be Warren Dunston. Family's been calling every ten minutes for two hours. You just find him?"

"A little while back."

"Is he alright?"

"A little disoriented, but OK physically."

"Can I see some identification, sir?"

Leo doesn't like the sound of that "sir". He takes out his wallet and hands over his license, wondering suddenly if there's liquor

on his breath.

"Leo Hodge," the patrolman reads it, matching Leo's face to the photo. "Any relation to Lawrence Hodge?"

"He's my brother."

"Hmmm," he sets his coffee on the counter. "And where is Mr. Dunston?"

"He's asleep in my car. Right outside."

The patrolman gives back his license and unclips a cell phone from his belt. Leo busies himself with his wallet noting a bail receipt for Larry's last DUI.

"Will?" the cop turns away. "It's Jake back at the station. Someone just brought in the old man. ... Yeah right, ... Better get back here so I can run him home."



"It's OK, I can do that," Leo says but the cop puts a hand up. A big meaty hand that stays up longer than would seem necessary.

"No, some guy named Hodge...yeah right, the brother." He laughs and Leo stifles a wince.

"Right...got it..." the cop looks right through Leo, nodding his head as if Will could see. "Oh don't worry about that...no, no I can handle it."

Handle what? The young cop's tone implies that there have been things he couldn't handle. Leo sets his eyes on the Christmas tree listing badly in the corner. The patrolman reclaims the phone then scribbles on the clipboard for nearly a minute. Leo listens to

the roll and peck of his ballpoint pen.

"OK sir," the patrolman slips the clipboard under his arm and reaches for his coat. "Let's bring him in."

Bring him in, like it would take two of them. Leo follows through the door maintaining a distance. The young cop walks with a cocky bounce and Leo wonders, not for the first time, what it is about law enforcement that beckons the brainless. He sees the old man crumpled against the door and steps around to the driver's side. The patrolman waits on the sidewalk while Leo leans in and gives him a shake.

"Huh!" he wakes with a start.

"Come on partner, time to go home." Leo releases the seatbelt and circles around to the passenger side.

"Where the hell are we?" the old man struggles then spots the patrolman. "What's he doing here?"

"We're at the station. They're going to take you home."

"Home? What the hell we need him for?"

"Well, he knows where you live."

"So why don't he just tell you, for Christ sake?"

"I, uh..." Leo looks to the patrolman who shakes his head no.

"The officer says you have to wait here."

The Dream Journal

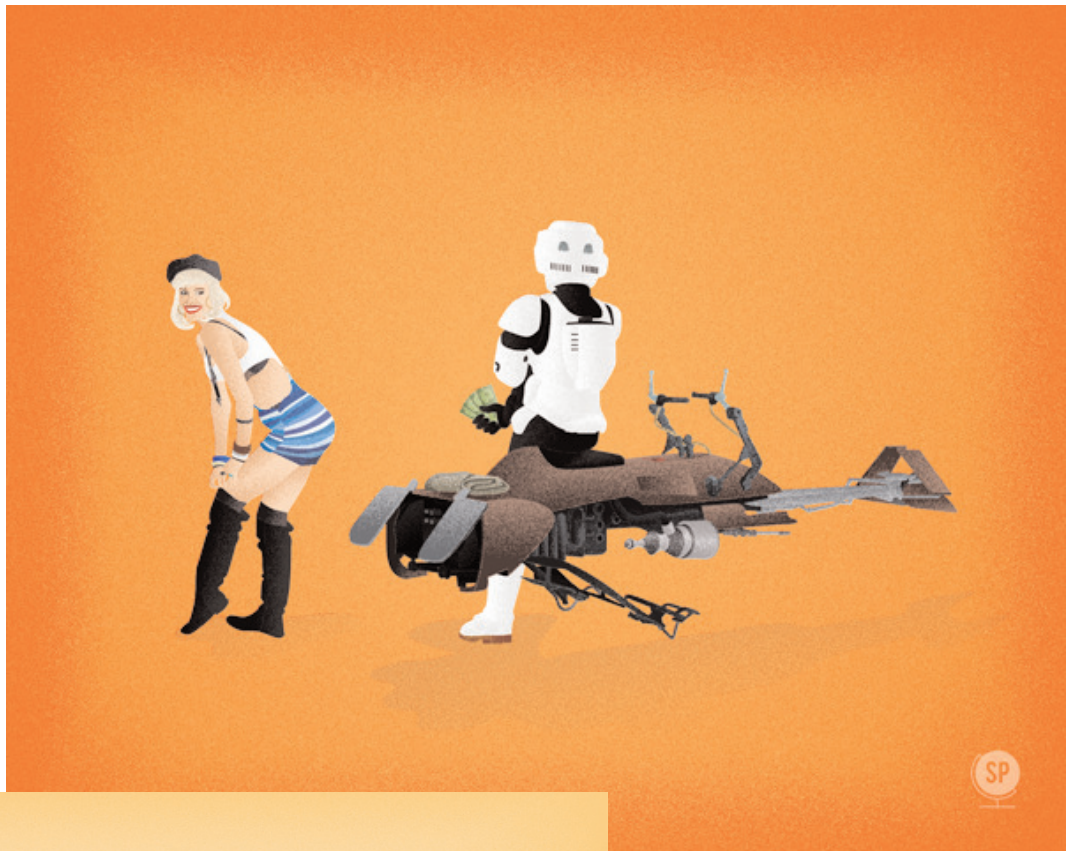
real dreams, real weird

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@blotterra.com

I remember entering the adobe-walled bar, but it seems I had come in from a place that was less Southwest and more Gillette, N.J. Inside the bar there were two men - one behind the former bar, hunkered down to hide from the barrage of fire, and another near me in the alcove to the right of the door. The bartender warned that there were few places to hide and stay where we were so I heeded him but watched warily. I saw a grey clay-covered Algonquin-looking Indian creep through the door unnoticed, and rather than give away my hiding place, watched him as he neared the barkeep, before the other man and I escaped through a passage to our right that led to stairs. The stairs went up three more floors through rooms that were entirely covered in 60's era wood paneling, including the closets that had no doors. Nowhere to hide. Then we climbed out the top floor window onto a narrow balcony and the three of us (there was now another woman with us) walked around the balcony to the side of the building and jumped only 6 feet to the snowy, slushy ground. I said, "follow me," and proceeded to walk, stepping in large footsteps to cover our snowy escape. The woman followed me, but the man floundered in the snow, leaving new tracks. Unfortunately, the footsteps meandered and after much trudging, I was only outside the next house when the "bad guys" were visible in the windows of the house we had escaped. They were coming out of the windows and moving fast when the now somehow 4 of us entered the dilapidated house next door through the crumbling sub-basement walls into a large room that had a number of walk-in refrigerator and freezers with big doors, but no place to hide. We found the wide stairs and went up to another basement filled with detritus of former owners. We went up the narrow stairs to the first floor, but had to remove a metal brace at the doorway in order to enter and the doorway area began to sag badly. The first floor was covered in old oriental rugs and lots of lamps and Victorian overstuffed and wicker furniture and was occupied by many squatters, one reading in the hall area, one knitting in the dining area and one watching television in the parlor. There were two empty sofas on the other side of the TV area and we walked over to sit down to wait for our captors.

W. Lewis, Jesup, Georgia





Seth Patrick - Durham, NC
www.sethpatrick.com



The Blotter

"He what!?" the old man looks incredulous. "Since when do we take orders from this little pissant?"

"Sir? Technically speaking you're in our custody," the cop explains.

The old man works his gums as if considering this. A stiff wind lifts the flaps of his bathrobe and Leo sees his socks puddled above his slippers. Up on the sidewalk the young cop folds his arms across his chest, determined to wait them out. The old man grunts, puts his finger to his nose and clears one nostril. He does the same to the other then turns to Leo with a scowl.

"Screw him. Let's go back and find those heifers."

"Sir? Would you step away from the car please?"

Leo looks over. "Come on buddy. Look. I could have him home in minutes. What's the harm?"

"I don't make the rules sir. You brought him here. That makes us responsible."

"What if I sign something. A waiver or something."

"Sorry sir. We're not authorized to release him to you."

Leo swallows his anger and

takes the old man's arm, guiding him passed patrolman-pissant. Once inside he lowers him to a folding chair and when the cop isn't looking, tries to rub the lipstick from his forehead. The old man flails away at his ankles.

"Is he hurt?" the cop comes up from behind.

"No, it's just lipstick. ... I think."

"Lipstick? How'd that happen?"

"Beats me. Maybe it's something else."

"HAH!" the old man pounds the floor with his cane. "You know damn well how it happened. You was right there when she planted it on my noggin!"

The cop turns to Leo "What's he talking about?"

Leo takes the patrolman aside. "Look, the poor guy's out of it. He thinks we were at a party together. I figure why argue, you know?"

"But the lipstick, ... how'd it get there?"

Leo shrugs. "I was wondering the same thing."

The patrolman tries to fit the pieces but his face freezes over and his eyes lose their focus.

"Hey Hodge," his lips barely moving. "You think we'll ever get like that?"

"I think I'm halfway there already."

The young cop smiles and Leo feels himself relax.

"Go home, Hodge. The chief should be back in a few minutes. We'll take it from here."

"Harrisburg!" the old man barks. "State capitol my ass! Stick 'em out where nobody can see what they're up to. Why you'd have to hold a gun to my head

..."

Leo smiles sadly. "Poor guy's all over the place."

"If I ever get like that I'll put a gun to my own head."

Leo crouches by the old man's chair taking hold of the cane just to be safe.

"I gotta go now Mr. Dunston. The officer will see that you get home alright."

"Don't leave me with this pissant."

"It's OK. You'll be fine."

"You're not even Mike are you?"

"No, I'm Leo," he offers his hand.

"Leo, eh?" the old man gives it a shake. "Well Leo, I gotta tell you that's the best goddamn Christmas I've had years."

Turning left out of the parking lot he sees it roll across the passenger seat, a single cigarette, bent but unbroken. Like a sign, just one will be OK, a small reward for a job well done. He hesitates for a minute before reaching for it, another mile before raising it to his lips. Just for a second, what could it hurt? But by Dolington he can feel his resolve crumbling, every nerve tingling in anticipation. His hand is halfway to the lighter when the cell phone rings.

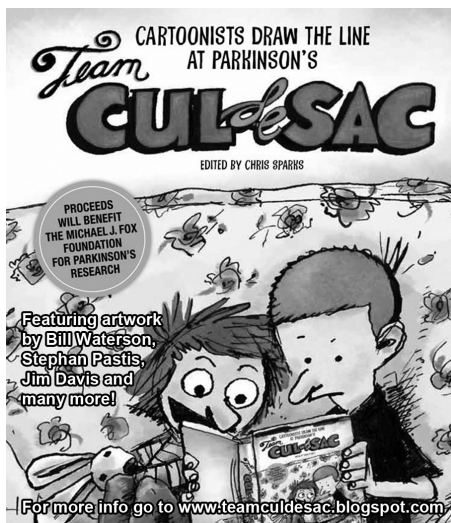
"Ginny? Is that you?"

"Leo, what is going on?"

"It's a long story, Gin. I stopped to help somebody. I'm on my way home now."

"I've been out of my mind with worry. I wanted to call the police but I thought you might be trying to get through."

"We'll talk about it when I get home, OK?"



"OK, I'm sorry ... Leo? ... so the phone works alright?"

"Perfect. And look at me! Like some hot shot in a SUV."

"A what?"

Leo sees flashers a mile ahead. To the left just passed the fork in the road.

"You know, one of those Broncos or Blazers. Like they drive in Woodland Acres."

"Leo, what are you talking about?"

"Nothing honey. I'll be home in five minutes ... Love you."

He pockets the phone, flicks the cigarette out the window and bears to the right at the split in the road.



"Hell, the Musical"

by Benjamin Manry

Boy had a three string guitar, a broken home and a bad attitude. Boy was fifteen, but he felt like forty. He worked at it—and succeeded for the most part, in sounding like warm cocoa feels, except for the cracks in his voice. He didn't go by Boy at home, anymore—he'd be called James or nothing at all. His hair was like the threads of a dreamcatcher, long and twisted and tangled and treated with a fierce pride; the same as he had for his ripped clothes, his three string guitar, his broken home, his poverty. Boy happened to be black, and he knew like he knew the streets of Seattle that this was what the blues was made of.

He knew just as well that [Elvis Presley](#) was wrong, and walking out of the concert, he felt angry. No prettyboy wop with his long black hair and dancing that looked like a couple of broken legs had earned the right to the blues. Not like James had, not in the least.

The pulse and chatter of the crowd surrounding him set him on edge: sockhopping bobble-headed blonde girls, brunette girls trying to pretend to be scandalized by 'rock-and-roll' and the boys of the girls who weren't sure why, but were harboring private ambitions of having a few rough words with Mr. Presley. He let the mass' exodus carry him as far at the end of the block before he slipped out and tried to light a cigarette.

His efforts were frustrated when a blonde girl in a long dress was pushed in to him by the press of people, knocking his matchbook somewhere in to the stampede.

She looked up and began to apologize. "Oh, sorry! I wasn't looking where I... Hey, you're a musician, right?"

James was taken aback, and his mind was still with his cigarette. Thinking of his beaten and untuned three-string, he summoned the cocoa to voice and murmured, "Yeah, I know a couple licks."

The blonde opened her mouth in surprise, her eyebrows in danger

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The Blotter

of disappearing behind her bangs, when suddenly a black-haired girl of a similar age materialized on her shoulder, a mercenary glint in her eye. She lifted her chin a fraction of an inch, and, looking at James:

"Lizzie, who's your new friend?" The blonde girl turned, the vague, excited look still clinging to her face.

"Sasha, you won't believe it, he played in Elvis' band!"

Ah. That was it. Hadn't been thinking, had he? It was only fair. Presley had a number of black musicians playing backup for him tonight. Course she meant that band. He started to shake his head, but the girl Sasha was quicker.

"Oh, did he? That's funny, I don't remember seeing him up there. Where's your instrument, Mr. Musician?" She said all of this without blinking.

James felt a sudden urge to slap her which came on at the same time as a sudden urge to go sit somewhere cold and look contemplative while feeling sorry for himself. He wasn't sure where either one came from.

Instead, he just shrugged his shoulders, shook his head and said, "I don't play for Elvis."

The light faded from the blonde girl's eyes, giving her the look of a toddler who's just tugged on St. Nick's beard and found it was held on with tape. She breathed a small, "Oh, I just thought ... Because you were... Um. Smoking," and a bloom of red

crept in to her face. A very confused, but distinct, sense of shame settled on James.

The black haired girl didn't miss a tic, though. "Oh, I see. Just a wandering minstrel then, perhaps? Here to sweep some young girl off her feet with a song and a sultry glance?" She screwed her lips into a wry smile and suggestively cocked an eyebrow toward her friend.

James (again, fifteen) froze while the part of his brain that detects sarcasm was crushed under the weight of a dozen conflicting hormones. In its last gasping death rattle it reminded James that drooling right at this moment would be distinctly uncool. His mouth snapped shut, nearly decapitating his tongue in the process—not that that would have been so terrible. Silence was preferable to saliva. Instead he attempted some eyebrow gymnastics of his own. Passerby might have taken this for a stroke.

Sasha, however, took it for advantage. "Look, what's your name?" she said, sweeping her hair back, "James? Okay. Well, we're only in town for the concert... But it's still early and we don't feel like sleeping. You're from around here, right, Jimmy? You play music... We like music... So..."

Walking home, brain no longer a hormonal time bomb, James ruminated that, perhaps, the girls hadn't been asking for directions to the Highway 99 Rhythm and Blues Club. Mentioning that his daddy was expecting him back

home soon might have done well to be kept to himself, too.

It was probably for the best, though, he thought, turning on to the block. What was he gonna do? Take those girls back home and play them some Robert Johnson on the gramophone? But not too loud, or his dad would wake up. Maybe B.B King was more their style, except no dancing because you might step on a bottle and nobody wants that. You don't really dance to B.B. anyway...

He stepped inside, remembering to catch the screen door, which would slam almightily if you didn't. On the way to his bedroom he did a one-footed jig over a broomstick that had been part of an aborted attempt to build himself a diddley bow a few months ago. Entering his room, he collapsed, fully dressed, on to his mattress in the corner of the floor. No, you don't dance to B.B. King. Elvis was more their style.

He lay there for a few minutes, fully clothed, and thought about music. He thought about Leadbelly, about Howlin' Wolf, about Muddy Waters, about Elvis, and yes, about B.B. King. Then he thought about his own three string guitar and his fingertips which still hurt when he played for too long. He thought about those girls some, too, but not like most fifteen year olds would. He thought about them liking Elvis. Then some more about his guitar, if you were generous enough to call it that. Then he started thinking about Robert Johnson.

Bolt upright and out the door, he flew with his guitar. Left behind him only the slam of a screen door.

Robert Johnson was the first music he'd ever heard. Well, that isn't entirely accurate— More like that hearing those old records changed what it was he called music. Hearing the man play guitar was like...

No.

No. It's hardly worth trying to put down in words, music. Tell a blind man about the color blue, tell a deaf man about the blues. If you've heard, you know. If you'd lived it, you knew. And if you haven't heard Robert Johnson... Well.

Well, that's just it, James thought. Elvis just ain't lived it like I have, so he can't tell it like I could. And those girls... Those girls got what they got through Elvis. It ain't them.

That's the real problem with music; that there ain't any other way to let it do what it does. It has to be music.

He was really running now, cooking, burning up the block, down the streets, scanning left and right, looking for a crossroads. It

has to be music. Music's the only way to make those girls understand, to make Elvis understand—Hell, make himself understand—what *real* music really is. Elvis may not have earned the right to the blues, but then neither had James. It wasn't enough just to try, to trip over untuned strings and bum notes, because bad didn't turn to good just by wishing.

That three string wasn't the blues. His haircut wasn't the blues. Broken bottles and broken homes were not the blues. Wanting was not anything but a lack.

If the blues weren't something to be earned, then they were something to be taken. He'd do what they say Robert Johnson did: he'd find a crossroads— he'd sell his soul.

Oh, that's how the story goes, at least. They say Robert couldn't string two licks together to save his life, but the fire was in him. So one lonesome summer midnight he took himself down to The Crossroads (wherever that was), and there he handed his guitar to the devil himself. Well, the devil took it and tuned it and played a run or two, then he handed back to Robert Johnson

and Robert Johnson handed the devil his soul, fair deal, no take backs.

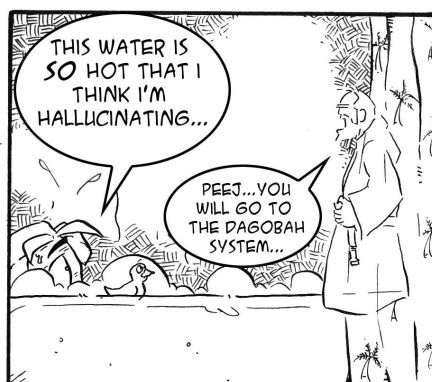
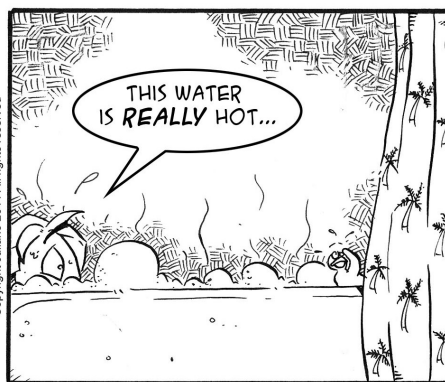
That was the story James'd heard (though he couldn't be sure where), and to him, the only reasonable explanation for how music like Robert Johnson's could come in to the world. He ran all the way to the dance hall, the same one where earlier that night he'd heard Elvis play. He knelt down in the middle of the street, which as providence or coincidence or pure dumb luck would have it, met in a crossroads.

He lay his guitar down on the asphalt in front of him, gently, carefully, like it was a lover, or like it was a life. He looked it over more carefully than he ever had, memorizing its cracks and splinters, the crooked bend of its neck, the twitch and hum of its strings. It radiated destiny.

Destiny's a dirty word to a kid with no future, though. It's a word with an assumption attached to it, that it's even a thing, or if it is a thing, that's it's something that's small enough to be named. People made too many assumptions as it was, and everyone knows what people say about assumptions...

Best In Show

by Phil Juliano





After a time the blast of a car horn shook James from his reverie, and it occurred to him that he hadn't the first idea of how to sell his soul, and that he'd been crouching in the middle of main street for the better part of a half hour just staring at his guitar. Feeling extraordinarily foolish, he scurried out of the street and out the path of the big black Benz that had honked. The fight went out of him and the fire fled his eyes. A crushing melancholy suddenly flooded him, coursing through his body like the crash of a blue tide. The car shot past, leaving James alone in the dark and the dust, soul still sadly unsold.

He stopped and opened his mouth as if to make a reply, but shut it. He'd half turned on his heel to start the walk home, when out of the corner of his eye he caught an enormous figure in a pinstripe suit, face obscured by the halo of a street lamp, bent double in the middle of the street, where only moments before he'd been. It occurred to James that he wasn't holding his guitar at the same time he noticed the stranger was.

A long lonesome note floated on to the night air, first deepening

then sharpening. Then another joined it, and another, boiling and resonating in the dim cool dark, finding equilibrium between themselves before evaporating into memory. The stranger was tuning his guitar.

He drifted slowly closer to James, all the while coaxing the prettiest melody from those strings. The stranger was playing his guitar.

The stranger was on top of James before he knew it. Sprouting from the pinstripe suit was a face black as charcoal, grinning a bone-white grin with teeth broad as tombstones.

"Your friend just about got run over back there," it boomed. The stranger handed the guitar back over to James, who took it without a sound.

The two looked at each other for a long, quiet moment, before:

"Well, good night to you then," the stranger said, tipping his pinstripe hat and turning to cross the street again.

"Wait!" cried James.

The stranger turned back around.

"Are you the Devil?"

The stranger turned a strange look on James, before letting out a laugh.

"I been called worse, but I ain't. Just a musician going home from a set." He gestured to the unlit marquee behind James, advertising in broadside brocade lettering:

ELVIS, IN CONCERT!
TONIGHT ONLY!

James blinked. "You played for Elvis?"

The stranger nodded. "Mhmm. I played guitar with him tonight. Maybe you saw."

It was James' turn to nod.

The stranger gave James another



"Four miles"

I left my car in a field on a back-road,
when we get there, our feet will sting,
Because from what I can remember,
it's a good four miles back, parked by
the river my father taught me to drink from,
by cupping my hands together, and then
bringing them gently to my mouth. Doesn't
matter if the water's dirty. Nothing
in it that can hurt you more than anything
else already has, or inevitably will.
Someone once told me the sun was
going to burn out, or explode, maybe
tomorrow, maybe a million years from
now, but still, we're going to freeze.
There won't be enough blankets to burrow
under, fire bright enough, arms
strong enough, or a heart big enough
to keep you from closing your eyes &
drifting into a dark matter that will wrap its
arms around you & hold you there forever.
Four miles isn't far, we can walk it,
and if I had to bet my only dollar,
when we get there, the sun will be, too.

Four by Tyler Bigney

"Sunday morning"

There's darkness again, descending.
I need something I can punch my way out of.
I ran barefoot through fields, my feet
like thunder, my heart chicken wire, bore
full of holes. No good can come from this.
I dream of things burning – airplanes,
trains, the neighbours horse shaped mailbox.
Whiskey sours till three a.m., woke
next to a woman who wouldn't let me
kiss her mouth. I kissed her neck,
tasted shame, and wrapped
myself in a sheet and hammer fist the
screen out of the window. A world full
of treacle air, alders, grays. I had
nothing, silence– my mouth a frozen
rictus of lecherous sadness. If you ever
find me, it won't be me you find.

"Indian summer"

We pushed the bed against the wall under the window
and stripped down to t-shirts, sweating,

listening to the TV – sounds of gunfire in Libya ,
"Freedom" screamed in a language we couldn't understand.

Flat broke, we boiled noodles, soaked them
in cheap butter. Spent our money double fisting

rum and cokes at a strip club the night before. You said,
"I know you fall in love with everyone, but don't

fall in love with them." But then I did.
Whiskey sick, eyeing a murder of crows flock

from tree to power line, breathing out our mouths,
wringing our hands, praying for a cool breeze.

"Blackbird"

The same day my best friend shot down a blackbird
from the sky with a pellet gun, my father taught me
how babies were made – a man and a woman lay in
bed naked together. And I cried that night,
because a week earlier, I had laid under a thin sheet
with a girl, naked. Just talking. Not thinking bad
thoughts, not thinking any thoughts. The warmth
of our bodies inches apart, our breath lifting the
sheet, then letting it collapse into our open mouths.
The open mouth of the blackbird in the field under
some maple, the heat. How he didn't know what
to do with it, or his guilt. *I didn't think I'd actually
hit it. I thought I would miss.* I didn't know what
say, so I bent down and dug a hole with my fingers,
and when the earth became too tough to dig, I used
a stick. Both of us bent over in the sun like that,
our backs burning, our necks a ring of fire, our mouths
open, singing, because we'd been to funerals and
that's what people do there. Amazing Grace, backed
by a violin. When the hole was deep enough, we
buried him in it, mixed flowers in the dirt, so
he'd have something to look at – his dreams in color.

CONTRIBUTORS

Tom Larsen of Milton, DE writes, "I've been a fiction writer for fifteen years and my work has appeared in *Newsday*, *New Millennium Writing*, *Best American Mystery Stories* and *The LA Review*. My novel *Flawed* was released in October."

Benjamin Manry goes by Ben. He was born in Austin in the '90s and never really left-- the city or the decade. He divides his time between writing, playing the slide guitar, and listening to punk rock.

Seth Patrick is a designer, artist, and illustrator. He moved to Durham three years ago from Virginia Beach when his wife Caitlyn started her medical residency at UNC- Chapel Hill. Most days he stays busy telecommuting as the main graphic designer for a New Mexico based consulting firm, but he has the flexibility that allows him to take on all forms of freelance projects. In Virginia he worked as a graphic designer for a small publishing company and then as the art director of Port Folio Weekly, a local alternative weekly (think of the Independent here) based out of Norfolk. Ever since he can remember, Seth has created art to express his feelings on the world around him. The images all start with a simple idea from life and are created using Illustrator and then textured in Photoshop. With this style, he can create rich and colorful work that hopefully makes people laugh or smile; and maybe even think about things in a different way. Along with his pretty wife, crazy dog Macho and lovely cats Wednesday and Picasso, he loves the beach, maps, chicken wings, home-brewing, sports and trivia."

Tyler Bigney was born and raised in Nova Scotia, Canada. He's been nominated for the Pushcart Prize a couple of times. He's never won. He's currently reading some short stories. You can read his work in Pearl, The Meadow, Poetry New Zealand, Iodine, and Neon, among others.

Phil Juliano draws the line at Parkinson's. You should too. See the ad on page 14 and go to www.team-culdesac.blogspot.com

Firstly, I think Lee didn't pay anyone to have the manuscript laid out, or was trying to come in under some arbitrary budget, because it was hard to see because of very small type, but I got out my heavy duty readers and suddenly I couldn't put it down. Carried the book around in my car because you can't rush the Girl Scouts and you can be productive if you don't happen to be one of those people who texts or dials friends on their cell phone to say absolutely nothing important as often as is financially possible. Hell, I don't even call people when there are emergencies, like last May when the house was hit by lightning and it blew out the phone, the electricity, and knocked me halfway across the kitchen floor. That's because I'm old-school tough. Or mildly brain-damaged. But I digress.

Ms Lee is the real thing – the historian-poet who's turned to writing prose. It's always better when you love the words themselves as much as you love telling a story. Here is Bertrand's mother, Fatima, following the British Lancasters' thrashing of Dresden:

“Desperately, she tried again to shut her ears, but the din walked through walls and tunneled through her pores. She struggled to climb up, but she was trapped under the house, pressed into a pocket deep inside raw earth. No sense hoping for rescue. Could she have a glass of water, please, before going back to sleep.”

You never know what's going to be the glue in a story; that not so ineffable thing that keeps you coming back to the current dog-ear. I thought that the circus-performers having a beautiful little girl in Europe during WW2 (and the bombing of Dresden that I mentioned above) was going to keep hold of my attention. But that wasn't really the point of things, not yet, not really. And, like David Mitchell did to me in *Cloud Atlas*, suddenly I'm off on a different tangent – the son of said beautiful little girl, managing to screw up the apparently free ride you get as a citizen in the post war army of France, well, except for what I'm pretty sure would be a terrible time fighting against the Algerian freedom fighters or the Viet Minh or any of the African colonies of France trying to chuck off the absurd yoke of *Liberte, Egalite, Fraternite* which apparently doesn't translate exactly as I thought it did but means “go shit in your hat, you colonials, we're never going to call you ‘French’.” So he acts a little loony just to be in “section *huit*,” which in America would be a very bad thing, I think, but in France is not as terribly bad, or at least not much worse than normal life in France. That very tact was taken by *Papillon* when he tried to go *en cavale* from Devil's Island. As for Bertrand, well, his life is simplified somewhat, down to core essentials: food, music, talking. But In America, where the tides eventually dump him – tired, poor, somewhat wretched – the core essentials apparently include cellphones with unlimited texting. That's why we spend all of our sane hours going insane trying to make money, and any extra time we have we play internet solitaire. You'd think “that'll teach us” but you'd be wrong. And maybe that's OK. All this has nothing to do with the story. The 1960's United States where Bertrand washes up is still hopeful, possible and dare I say it, still optimistic. How so? Perhaps he has the great lesson of Socrates, that failure teaches us more than success.

Oh, we're all so hindsight-wise that we know that Bertrand's adopted home is or is about to be a Nixonian train-wreck. It's a nation-wide lunatic asylum of filth just ten years off of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and *Silent Spring* and chock full of itself. Did we ever really think so clearly as to help win a world war? That's hard to believe.

But as Lee's Dresden is like no Dresden you know – not History Channel's, not Uncle Kurt's (which I always suspected was like Manhattan, all neon lights and gargoyles seen from the Verrazano Narrows Bridge) Bertrand sees the world through fresh eyes as well, without filling up space with the Michelin Guide or Zagat's. This 1960's America has no Monkees or Mama Cass. Bertrand is stripped of the K-Mart vision of his adopted space. He seems to be tossed into a dream-America, without a frame of reference. Why am I here and what did I do wrong or right to get here? Maybe America actually is a vast silly place where a moderately talented Frenchman can

come to be...nothing. Not a slacker, because that implies a certain intent. Not a loser, because that requires judgment on if not our part, *someone's*. Not lost, because that needs a starting point, which Bertrand doesn't really have, and an end point, which this non-Odyssey novel doesn't permit. Let's put a placeholder word here. Call it *unspecial*.

No, I think that's too mean. Like Jean-Michel Basquiat, Bertrand is one of those people who hasn't received the cruel-but-inevitable lessons of life: that hunger won't kill you, that scribble-scrabble isn't art, even if Warhol says it is, and that money isn't everything. Every one of us came out of that mental sausage grinder, ready for riding the bus to public school. Or maybe he ignored that wrong-headed lesson somehow.

Well, that's all I have. Sorry, what? Where, you ask, is the symbolism? Tell me about symbolism! Or the threnody to all of the souls lost in meaningless conflict. How the pain of one man manifests itself in every last one of us. The juxtaposition of civilization and the disenfranchised, yet rugged individuals on the outside of society. Outsiders in general – the art of the mentally challenged. Edgy, strange rhetoric, with a bit of saucy humor. How we all miss our moms, no matter who we are. Something to prop up an academic conversation in a world of shtick, pith and wit. No, sorry. It may be, but I don't care. Nowadays I find that I just want well written characters and a sense that there's a story in there even if it's only "in there somewhere."

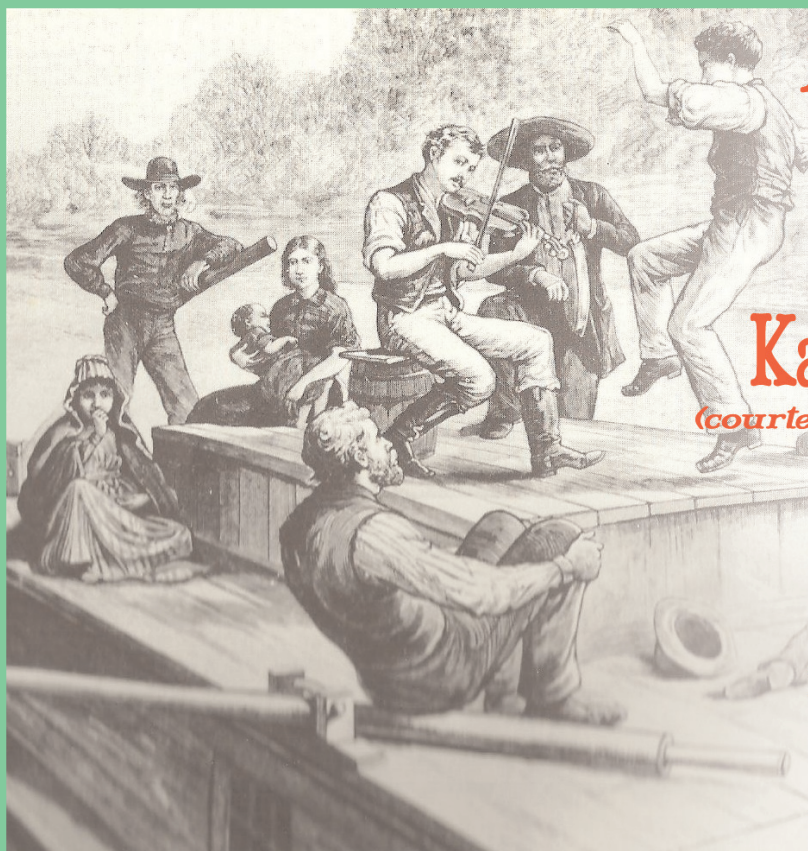
At supper, we sit in front of the TV, the dining table covered with unfinished, nearly due school projects, gym bags, laptop computers opened and ready to *skype*, the week's accumulated junk mail. On the screen is a man trying to lose weight without spending any time or much money. He's hired three teenaged girls to follow him around. "Eew," they say. "Serious. That's so gross." Everything he does. *Eew. Serious, dude. That's so gross.* Here we are, at the low water mark in our culture, the common denominator being, apparently, some unknown number so large that none of us agree on anything. What is the lesson of Bertrand's story? I think it's to surrender your pride, that sin which goeth before a fall. Pride lashes you to beliefs with no validity, ideas without merit, actions with false heroics. Bertrand knows this, somehow. Maybe it's intrinsic, maybe genetic.

We are a fussy, self-centered people. The more we have, the more we worry about keeping it from someone else. The more we don't have what we think we should, the angrier we are at everyone else for having what should be ours. The world's become somewhat more weird for wear – and anyone who says otherwise isn't paying attention or is lying to themselves – so maybe Bertrand has the right idea. He's not a drop-out, though. He's just broken the code – what you don't have at all and have no way of getting is easy to stop worrying about.

In the new world without browsing – often finding ourselves lost in a high-speed electronic tsunami of blogs, tweets, snippets and pix – it may soon be a matter of pure luck that something good to read ends up in your hands. With *How To Be A Homeless Frenchman*, you can count yourself lucky. Lee's characters are captivating, her prose crystalline, her storytelling worth your precious time. Sit down, have fun, read on.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

Final Tidbits: Found this cool new food truck - which is great because Chapel Hill seems to have finally gotten with the food truck program - so if you're out and about, try "Sympathy For The Deli" (www.sympathyforthedeli.com). We were sent this very cool CD of jazz by Boling, Brown & Holloway called *Trio Life on MaBo Music*. Find it on www.markboling.com and give it a listen - the girls and I play it in the car and trust me, it soothes the savage all right. Our *Tree* is out there in a lot of very cool retail locations like Flyleaf Books and Frank Salon and Quail Ridge and you should chase yourself down a copy. Summer is barreling in on us, the daffodils are slightly confused by all the spring weather from February on and it's not too late to donate to the good fight at www.blotterrag.com. So, buy yourself a copy of *Tree*, and one for a friend that you want to like you even better than they already do - it's published by PencilPoint Mountain (www.pencilpointmountain.com), an imprint of The Blotter Magazine, Inc. What is an imprint? When my daughter washes her Zebra facepaint off and leaves a black and white trail from the bathroom to the bedroom. Follow us on Twitter @blotterrag - that's where we tell you about art and music and other stuff goin' on near you. Or not near you, but near where you wish you were. Make a donation to The Blotter (www.blotterrag.com). I'm not kidding - it's good for your soul. Visit your local independent bookstore, last bastion of real poetry in America. Open a book, turn on some tunes, chew a piece of Juicy Fruit and give someone you like a kiss, they deserve it, and if they don't, well, you do. Got it? Good!



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