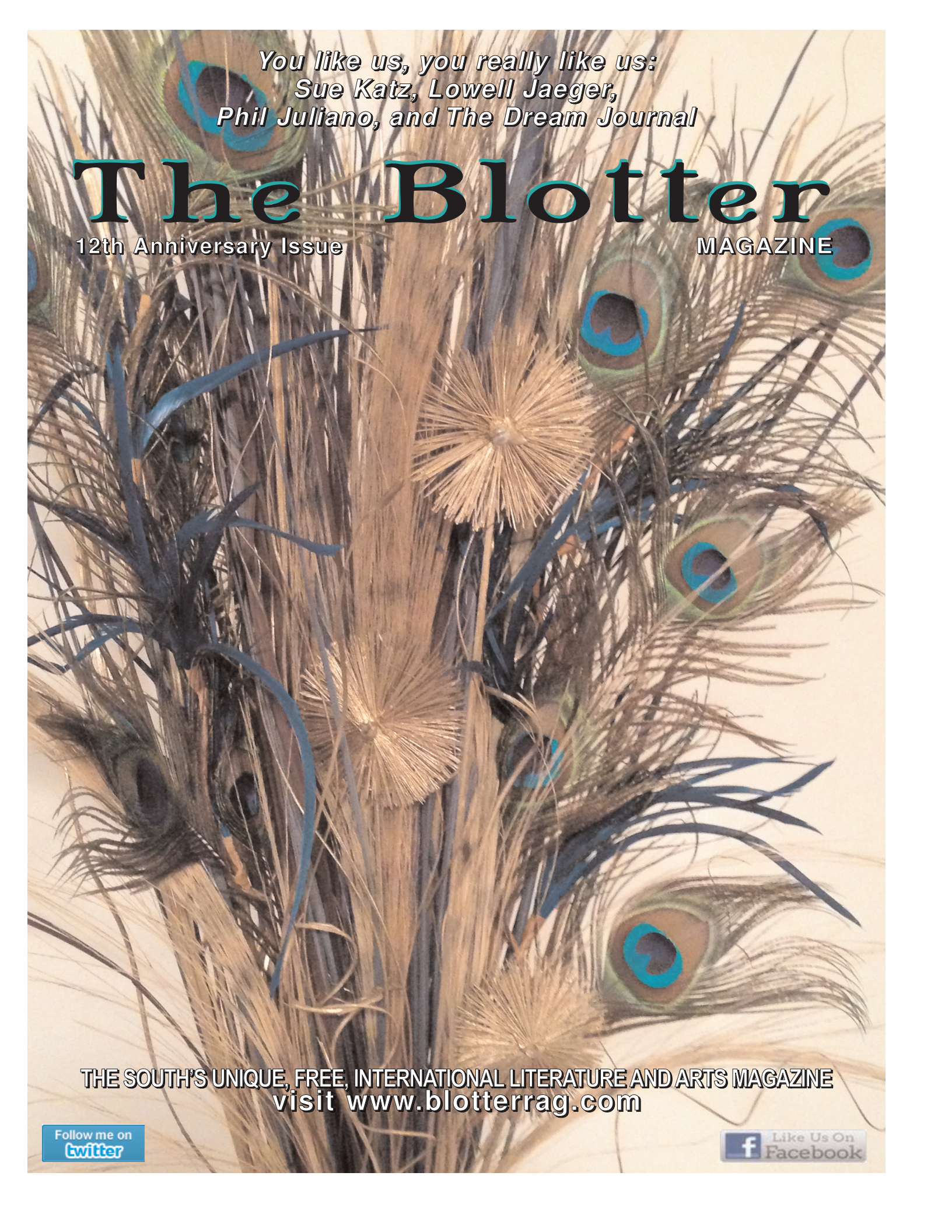




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"Speechless - Unspeakable"

Lately, some things have been rattling around in my head. I think it's because of the weather - as I write this we've been stuck in the house by a late winter sucker-punch of ice, snow, and more ice on top of that. A little bit of cabin-fever goes a long way.

And so I find myself up - the powers-that-be having already abandoned any hopes of getting school to happen tomorrow - and watching a movie. A character on screen shouts his views at another character - what seems at first blush a lucid and detailed argument. As I watch, I imagine that his words are suddenly, subtly, different because he is shouting them, his persona both bellicose and defensive; his audience, (myself included) flinching if not lost beneath this verbal bombardment. He may be right, or completely wrong-headed; it doesn't matter anymore, because we're no longer listening to the words, but rather to the tone in which they are being delivered. A sound message rendered poorly. The ability to have critical intercourse, says the movie maker, appears to rest upon certain caveats, one of which is the speaker's (and our) ability to remain cool and distant from the subject matter. An interesting conclusion to reach, considering the medium the movie maker uses - one often dedicated to maximizing sound and fury.

Nevertheless, camping before a now turned-off TV, in the middle of the frosty nighttime, I wonder what it's like when you can't communicate to someone exactly what you mean to say. Of course there are more important problems - not having enough food to eat or a way to get out of the cold - but I can imagine the frustration of not having accumulated the vocabulary necessary to be...an adult, in an adult's world. Or the methodology for stringing those words together in the most coherent, persuasive rhetoric. I think on how such a lack of precision must drive the fists to clench and the teeth to grind. Or perhaps it doesn't. Maybe it just causes one to shake their head and ignore all discourse. Or to keep buggering on, without reaching out. This must be equally vexing. Except for the person who doesn't know what "vexing" means. Or buggering.

I didn't mean to sound so pompous just then. Sorry about that.

Back to shouting-man: I say I can imagine his problem because I occasionally have discussions (read "fights") in which the way I present my words - the mood I create, that is - prevents my audience from appreciating my actual message. In other words, when I'm angry or frustrated, only my anger and frustration is received, not the points I intended to convey (which are often counter-intuitively not intended to turn my listener off, but educate, enlighten, and prevent future problems of various natures.) Does this happen to you, too, or are most of you mature, thoughtful people? I have not yet learned to apportion my reasoning mind to telling a story and consistently keeping my head about me when those around me are losing theirs. Based on my track record, I may never.

Only slightly tangential to this was my elder daughter's recent list of vocabulary words in Honor's English. Handed the scrap of notes she'd taken, I

was trepidatious (a word actually referred to as being in the OED, but not in Webster's nor the American Heritage, and therefore "not in mainstream dictionaries" - please excuse me while I pop a couple of Advil) , and was pleasantly relieved that the words were interestingly advanced. They really are teaching language, the craft of it, the richness of it.

I am better suited, perhaps, for the written word. Perhaps, says the voice of an old friend, not. Like him, my gruff male voice creates a predisposition in the listener. "Uh-oh," or "yikes," it says, when I confront with a topic for consideration. It pushes away with the strength of basso profundo, if not actual basic profundity. And, like a Wallenda on a wire, there is no room for error: one false growl, and...well, click - the channel is changed. Better to stay on the ground, let my fingers do the walking, go back and check, recheck my typing, ask all the important questions: is this really necessary? Is this inflammatory?

So now I'm like totes-super careful about what I say when I get the, you know, bully pulpit. I make sure that I have something to say, know how I want to say it, and that it is the right time to say it. One man's observation is another man's reason to unfriend.

Whither goest the written word? Am I crafting letters to post with hand-delivered tussy-mussies? Essays to nail to church doors? Of course not. We're modern. We have little word-worlds to hang out in. And following this thread down the rabbit-hole, I am guilty as the next guy of hiding behind a persona on one electronic application or another, while I release my frustration using someone else's words. Or worse, pictures. Or worse yet, pictures of words. It's rather pathetic, actually. And by pathetic, I don't mean lame, because pathetic doesn't mean lame, no matter who uses it to mean that and how many times they do so. It means to arouse pity, which such behavior does. For me, at least. I know the difference between words, between, as the title says, speechless and unspeakable - the difference is infinite to me, no matter how little this matters to others. Words, in the end, are all we have. As we speak, someone is knocking down everything else.

The reason this troubles me is because so much interaction between us is being jammed into tiny portals of...data. I'm not the first person to groan about this, and I won't be the last. And I'm not going to just blame the young people who find instantaneous everything fascinating and anything longer than one blink of the eye tedious. My fear is that because we substitute our emotions with brief little yellow shapes, there seems to be no room for actual emotion. So I push my chair away from the keyboard and piss-and-moan about the vacuousness (not a real word, but who at this point cares?), strutting and fretting between the posts, literally and figuratively. As soon as the words leave my lips, I am chastised for how I present my words, and my words are ignored.

Well, not completely, but you get my point.

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CAUTION

I find that I can scarcely keep a thought in my head.

"The Cold Butch and the Carpetbagger"

by Sue Katz

My ad was clear. "Dyke in her early 50s wants no-strings sexual friendship with an independent woman of a certain age." And hey, as my inbox filled up, it seemed like there were a lot of women in town who were looking for the same.

"Just escaped a 17-year relationship after my sweetie cheated on me," Rose wrote. "Trust me - last thing I want now is getting all entangled." We met up at a café in Pittsburgh's Shadyside. She was pretty hot - her nails were short and natural, just like her hair - and I suspected the attraction was mutual. A little too mutual. Before I had sugared my coffee, Rose was asking if I would consider moving to Carnegie, the town where she lived.

Next was Lydia. When I reached out to shake her hand on meeting her outside an ice-cream shop, she sandwiched my hand in between both of hers, and refused to relinquish it. There I was, standing on the street with my hand imprisoned and people going by. The fact that she was extremely short made it especially

awkward. If I pulled away, I'd look like a bully. Nope, it wasn't going to work out with Lydia.

Ruby described her life-long devotion to a handsome selection of reptiles, a commitment which precluded any kind of live-in mate. "Every inch of my home and every second of my life is focused on the study of these comforting pets," she wrote. "But if you'd like to meet up on my porch sometime, I'd be delighted to host you between feeding times." This one had clear boundaries - but she also had a houseful of snakes and lizards. Not really arousing.

"I know this is a lesbian site," wrote Bobby, "and I am confident that you will protect my cover, but I'm actually a man and I would love a 'no-strings sexual friendship with an independent woman,' like you said in your ad. Especially if she's a lesbian. That sounds like so much fun to me. Would you mind sending me any extra women who write you but you don't want them? I'll be glad to take them. I thought we'd work together since we are both looking

for the same thing. I'll send you my left-overs too. Okay?"

But none of these experiences can match what happened with Sharon.

We meet up Friday afternoon at the parking lot of a bakery café. It is a place I have often used to get together with girls I find online. The location in Shadyside is convenient, the lot reduces the hassle, and the walls are all glass. Transparent. Nothing untoward can happen out of view - because wherever you sit, you're exposed.

Sharon says that I will know her by her yellow Mercedes convertible - how did I miss *that* red flag? - and that she'll stay in her car until I find her. I park on the street right in front and then stroll into the lot.

I walk up to the passenger side of the only yellow convertible in the lot. "Sharon?" She looks up at me, pulls off her full-ear Bose headphones, and springs out of the car. We meet in front of the Mercedes. She's all self-assured elegance, but in

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a super square style. What's with the matronly skirt just down below her knees and those clumpy high-end pumps on her feet? Even her charm bracelet makes me a bit queasy. I haven't seen one of those since the early '60s – but I've never seen one that seemed so solid gold. She is all suburban and charity-board-memberish. I feel like a ruffian from the other side of the tracks. Oh right, I *am* a ruffian from the wrong side of the tracks.

"My oh my," she says, her voice vampy as she slides into my arms, although I'm not holding them out, "What have we got here?"

Her condescending flirting style is an instant turn-off. When she presses herself vertically against my body, I grab her upper arms with my hands and push her back. "Let's shake hands, yeah?" I put out my hand and it takes her a moment to lay hers into mine, as delicately as if it's a precious piece of lace.

"So nice to meet you," she says.

"That's better," I say. "Let's go in and you can buy me a cup of coffee."

"Me?"

I laugh. "If it's a hardship, I'll pick

up the tab. Not to worry."

I start toward the entrance. "Could I ask a favor?" She dips her head at an angle, reminding me of those 40s va-va-voom pin-ups the GIs used to put up in their lockers, many wars ago. Her brunette hair even looks finger-waved.

"Do you live close by? I'd so much rather go to your place for a quiet *tête-à-tête* than into that café. I'm allergic to places like that."

Can you believe I miss my *second* red flag? I don't realize until much later that she doesn't want to be seen in public with me.

"I'm not really set up for guests," I answer. "Anyway, I have a rule: never take home a stranger on a first date. That's put me into too much hot water in the past."

She giggles. "Oh, this isn't really a date. You're not dressed..." – I take offence – "and I'm not dressed..." – a blatant lie – "and I haven't bought theater tickets or made nightclub reservations. Have you?"

What? We're not talking the same dating language. She seems an odd mixture of clueless and confident, with more than a dash of entitlement. I lean against her car, won-

dering if she is a girl-virgin and what she wants from me. I can't very well drag her into the bakery and I don't feel like having an intimate talk standing out here.

"So what do you drive?" she asks, breaking a short silence. I cringe.

"A car, usually."

"No really, what do you drive?"

"You're kidding, right?"

She sees that she is alienating me. "Tell you what," she says, "I'll go inside and buy some pastries and a couple of cappuccinos to take to your house. How's that?"

Who the hell is this woman, I wonder. The next thing I know, I'm tooling up Negley Ave. in my grey Corolla with the big dent in the bumper and the taped-up side window and she is sticking close to my ass with her Money-Mobile.

My house isn't ready for strangers – really it's not all that ready for friends either, but it is what it is. I clear off the surface of a little table where she can put down the coffees and pastries and we sit opposite each other and get started.

"I liked what you outlined in your



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ad and I'm very interested in you," she says.

"How come?"

Is she slightly flummoxed? Instead of answering, she says, "Can you put on some music?" I choose Al Green – my default date album – and on my way back from the boom box, she looks up at me and pats the seat next to her. I'm reluctant, but I can't tell you why. She's beautiful, flirtatious (which I usually like), must be rich – maybe that's what bothers me. There's something in her attitude that makes me feel like she's here to buy a hunk of me – or to try to anyway.

I don't want to be rude so I sit on down next to her and before I can lift my coffee to my lips she is crawling all over me, rubbing herself on me, and sucking in air at my ear, giving me the best kind of shivers, and, hey, what's a girl to do? We end

up in my bed. Believe it or not, I happened to have done laundry in the morning so the sheets are all clean and taut.

So it's a bit of this and a bit of that. It's okay. Not great. Not bad. She's into it enough that she wants to cum again and by the time we go another round, it's about 10:00 in the evening. I get out of bed and make tea and bring it in on a tray with those pastries we didn't touch and we finish those off. There's a pause – she's kinda cooing – and then I say, as I always do in one form or another, "Thanks for coming by. This has been very cool. Let's talk soon." Something along those lines.

She looks at me like I'm speaking Dutch. "What are you saying? Are you asking me to leave?"

"Well, it *is* getting late. I've got to get up in the morning." That's not

strictly true, but I'm trying to be nice.

"You just had my body and now you want to throw me out?" She's outraged. I've run into this before, in fact I've never really had a warm and fuzzy response when I ask someone to leave. I know it's not the usual thing, but I don't like people staying over, I just don't. Never did. Friends tell me I have a lousy reputation among the women for being a cold butch, but why do people just assume that if there's a little hanky-panky it obligates me to host them through breakfast? Where is it written that there is an automatic sleep-over if two people rub on each other?

"Well, I'm not going anywhere," she says.

"I don't want to be rude, but you're not invited to stay. I don't like people to stay. I don't like to share my bed."

"Well, you should've thought about that before you seduced me into your bed," she says, getting all haughty.

Whoa. Now I seduced *her*?

I get out of bed and dress. I go over to the chair where she laid her clothes and bring them over to her. She's sitting up clutching the covers to her neck. "I'm sorry if we've got a misunderstanding here, Sharon, but I don't have people stay over. We never discussed it and you just figured in your own head maybe that you'd stay, but I'm ready to wrap up the evening."

Okay, that wasn't all that elegant



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and not even kind, but I'm pissed that she pretended to be some poor little innocent that I lured into my clutches. That's the kind of accusation that can get a dyke in trouble. Now more than ever, I wonder where she's coming from.

I won't bore you with the back and forth and then the forth and back, but it takes me about an hour to convince her to get dressed and skedaddle in her Fancy-Mobile. What is this Sharon's story? She's very demanding, but she's also not very forthcoming. My first suspicion had been that she was a tourist from Hetero-land looking for some girl-on-girl for a change. I'd resisted the attentions of plenty of those types in my time. They like me because they think I'll be like a man without actually being a man, and then they go all strange when I show them my tits and my dildo.

No, it isn't that. After being in bed with her, I know she's been with women before. It's more that she's parsimonious with who she is, her private life, her basic identity. Now that she's finally left, and in quite a steaming huff, I realize that I don't know what work she does, how she got that luxury car, who she lives with and where – zilch.

I straighten up and go to bed with my dog magazines. I like dog pictures, like to keep up with the competitive dog scene – I just don't want to actually own one or live with one. Don't like any creatures staying in my home that aren't paying rent. No dogs, no babies, no fuck-buddies.

About 6:30 in the morning, someone is ringing my doorbell. Over and over again. It's Sunday for

Christ's sake – let me sleep! I slip on some sweats and go downstairs and look behind the curtain and there is Sharon looking quite crazed. I don't take off the chain as I crack open the door. "What's up?"

"Please, let me in."

"It's the middle of the night, Sharon."

"No, really. This is serious."

Seems serious. Seems like she is in a state, so I undo the chain and in the woman comes, carrying a suitcase! A suitcase! I bet she doesn't even know the classic lesbian joke: What does a lesbian bring on the second date? A U-haul.

She lurches up the steps to my apartment – I've taken the case from her, because she looks like she'll hardly be able to propel herself upstairs. She goes straight for the bedroom, kicks off her shoes on the way, and before I'm in the room she is under my covers.

"You've got to help me," she says. "I'm really ill. I don't know what happened but I woke up about an hour ago. I've got a high fever. I feel really weak. I think I've got the flu and I don't have anyone who can take care of me. Please help."

Now you tell me: is that fair? I don't want her *or* her flu in my bed. I don't know the woman and I've never exactly been known for my high standard of nursing.

"Don't you have friends? Family?"

"I'm in a bit of a crisis in my life lately," she says, not to anyone's sur-

prise I might add, "and it seems that all I have is you."

You don't have me, sweetheart, I say, but only to myself, what with her high fever and all. I make her some tea and for the rest of my Sunday she ties up my room. I kiss my Sunday goodbye and do what must be done in terms of tea and juice and soup. I mean I'd do it for a sick dog. Not the juice, but you get my drift.

At night I say, "I hope you're feeling better because you have got to go now. I need to get myself together tonight."

She looks at me blankly. She looks as if she has rheumy eyes, only she doesn't. But she is squinting or something.

"Tomorrow morning I go to work." I'm trying my best to be patient, although that's not my strong card. "Monday, you know." She doesn't seem to have to be anywhere, anytime.

"Go? Are you out of your mind? You expect me to drive in this state?"

"I'll take you wherever you're going tonight."

"I'm not going anywhere." And she turns over and I swear in seconds she's asleep. If I had to testify in court, I couldn't say whether she's faking it or truly sick.

So now I'm in a conundrum. I get out some extra bedding from the hall closet and lay myself down in the living room on the sofa. Before I'm very settled, I leap back up to go

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in my bedroom to get out my work clothes and shoes and hope I've grabbed everything I'll need for the morning. So I lay back down on the couch – it's getting awfully late and she's got a whopping snore going – and then I remember my briefcase. Damn it. I tiptoe back in there to liberate it and stub my toe on one of her damned pumps.

Next morning I come out of the shower and she's sitting up and her hair has been combed and she doesn't seem to be going anywhere. "Listen, I'm not comfortable about you staying here while I'm not here. It's not something I do. So could you please get yourself together?"

"No. I'm just too ill to move. Sorry. I don't mean to be a burden." Should I call the police? Should I

call a couple of my girls to help me carry her out of here? It's like Invasion of the Sex Tourist. I give up and go to work.

She is still there when I get back from work and the house has been not so much cleaned as just slightly rearranged, every corner of it, just the kind of thing you dread to find when a stranger is in your pad.

"I'm feeling better," she tells me, lounging on the piled-up bedding I used in a corner of the sofa. Great, I think, spread your cooties on my only other set of bed sheets.

"And I'm so sorry that I came down with this wretched flu. I wanted to see you, but not when I'm all feverish and weak. If only I had somewhere else to go, I would've gone there." And then, in a kind of *non sequitur*, "I find myself so turned on by you. Oh how I wish we'd made a more agreeable start."

"I understand." I remain standing by the kitchen door.

Now her tone changes. More kittenish. "I want to get close to you. In fact, would you please sit down here now?" She pats the edge of the sofa. I am even less interested in a relationship with her germs than I am in one with her.

"I'll make dinner," I say, and start to head for the kitchen.

"I already did," she says quietly and my first thought is: Did you wash your hands?

She had been through my cupboards, that's for sure. She has combined rice and some canned beans mixed with chopped onions and a zucchini I had in the fridge. It is actually delicious, but hard to swallow as she sits, big-eyed and hopeful, across from me at my tiny table.



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"Sharon, what is it you want from me? You don't know me."

"I have a feeling," she says leaning forward, and I realize that she has put on a push-up bra under her nightgown. What the hell else did she bring in that suitcase? "A really strong feeling that we should be together. I'm ready to tell my husband about us, to leave him. But I would have to bring the kids with me, of course."

It's a good thing that it's hard to choke on rice, that's all I can say. "What husband? What kids?"

"Didn't I mention that I'm married? Yes, for 14 years. And most of them quite unhappy." She looks around, assessing my digs. I have a kitchenette in a corner of the living room and a table for two in the other corner, one bathroom, one bedroom, and an alcove where I keep my computer and files and stuff. "I don't know how we'd all fit in here. Why don't we look for a bigger place together?"

So it hasn't been the flu. It has been some kind of terrible brain fever or a bad acid trip.

"Sharon, first things first," I say, realizing that I'm dealing with an unstable being here. "First you need to pack up your stuff and go back home. Then we need to talk through a number of issues."

She nods in a serious way as if this is rocket science and I am her professor, but when she speaks it is clear she has understood nothing. "I suggest we take a different approach. You say I don't know you. And that's right, in a certain way. Perhaps I could stay for about a week – so that we could get a better sense of each other. I brought enough underwear for a week."

"That could happen," I lie. "We could decide to spend a week together, but that's something we'd want to plan forward for. You're here because of an emergency. That's over, right?" She nods her head, girlish again, almost puppy-like. "So the original reason for you to be here is over as well."

"You don't want me to stay?"

Is the woman thick? "That's right. It's not a good time to have you here."

Her eyes fill with tears, but I don't find them convincing. I wonder if she rubbed her finger in onion and then stuck it in her eye. Clearly I'm getting rattled – no one would go that far.

She gets up with a god-awful groan and drags herself into the bed room where her sniffles mark each item she returns to her suitcase. She shuffles to the bathroom and gathers her stuff from there. She moves through the living room picking up a book and an emery board and a small notebook. She even has a transistor-type radio in the kitchen she stops to scoop up. This woman could teach a course in colonization. If she decided to apply for a job as an eminent domain official, I would write her a recommendation.

Finally she leaves, refusing my help with the suitcase, but then kinda



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bouncing it down each step. My neighbors on the first floor are probably being tortured, step by step, but believe me, as the noise gets dimmer and dimmer, I feel more and more liberated.

I'm relieved to be free of her attitude, that sense of entitlement to take over my life. It isn't just the snobbiness. It's her assumption that once she deigns to bestow herself on me, I will jump at the chance to take her on, offspring and all. This is her notion of no-strings fun?

Anyway, I don't call her and mercifully I don't hear from her for a couple days, although I flinch at every sound. Thursday dinner-time the doorbell starts that same frantic screeching I remember from Sunday morning. Nobody just turns up at my door unless they want my vote (they can't have it), they want me to buy something (I can't afford it), they want me to pray (I don't), or it's Sharon.

She just won't stop. She makes it into a war of wills – how much can I take and how much can she inflict? What can I tell you – I lose. I go downstairs, but put on the chain before I open the door, not that

she'll take the metaphorical hint.

I crack the door. Her face is pressed up against the crack, covered in tears and snot. She's hysterical, sobbing, sniveling. She's probably attracting a lot of attention from the neighbors. This is ridiculous. I don't even know her last name. I undo the chain and she literally falls on me, sobbing! "You've got to help," she cries.

I sigh. I check if she has a suitcase. She doesn't, but she's carrying this big shoulder bag, like a carpet-bag. I wonder if she's communicating in metaphors to me as well.

She clings to me in an annoying way, like when someone is shot in a Western and you have to drag them to Doc, until I can deposit her on the couch in the living room and go into the kitchen to make her a cup of tea. Oh shit, I've burned my dinner in the meantime. Hotdogs and beans, no less. It'll be a hell of a job to clean that skillet.

I bring out some herbal tea for her and some Earl Gray for me and sit down opposite her. She's taken out a handkerchief, or rather a lacy hanky, and I watch her sop up her bodily

fluids. She's really beautiful, she's obviously passionate, she's got a pot of gold, she's chasing me – but I don't want her. Maybe I'm not as shallow as I might seem, or maybe I'm just smart. Or maybe I hate liars. Not fibbers like me. Liars. You know, like that little omission about being married and the mother of dependents.

When she can finally breathe more easily and after she has sipped her tea, baby finger arched skywards like a caricature of the aristocracy, she speaks. "We've got a little problem," she says.

"We?"

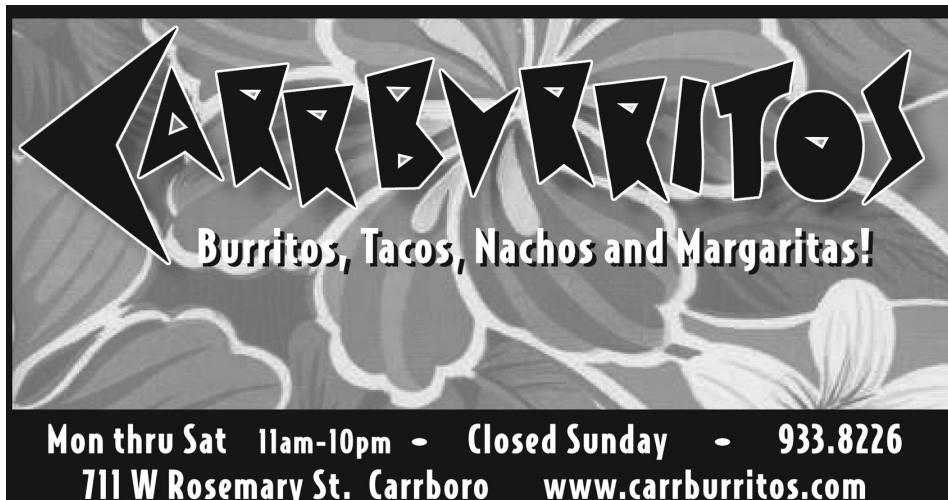
"Unfortunately, yes." She drinks some more. She's going to make me work for this.

"Can you explain?" I ask.

"I told you I was married, right?" I nod. "Well, really it was like an arranged marriage. My parents insisted on it when I was rather young. He was widowed and as a prominent Rabbi, he needed an accomplished wife. My father was his follower and so my parents thought they were doing me a favor."

"Whoa. Your husband's a well-known Rabbi?"

"Yes. And we have three kids. He had four with his first wife – she died – but only one of those still lives with us. But if I was coming here, it would only be with my three. Because they go where I go. If you love me," and she flashes me the kind of smile you'd flash at someone who has just confessed that they



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love you – “if you love me, you need to love the kids as well.”

“You said there was a problem.”

“Yes, somehow my husband has found out about us.”

“There’s no ‘us’. I don’t know you, let alone love you. There is definitely no ‘us’.”

“Jacob is not just some synagogue Rabbi. He’s the Chief Rabbi of the conservative wing. He’s personal friends with the governor. He’s really very well-connected. The former Israeli President is his first cousin.” She snuffles and mops. “Sometimes he uses his power for good, sometimes he ruins lives.”

This woman is now threatening me although I’m such anonymous potatoes that I don’t see what “life” exactly her husband could ruin.

“Let me get this straight: he’s mad that you’re answering ads from dykes and somehow he found out?”

“No, no, he encourages me in that. He’s mad that I was seen by someone begging at your door. That’s not our arrangement. He’s mad that you didn’t open the door faster.”

I am sorry that all I had to self-medicate with was this cup of Earl Gray. I wish I had a syringe of heroin I could shoot straight into my brain. Note to self, I thought, get that ad removed from the dating site and never go out with anyone else ever again.

“Let’s go back, a bit, Sharon,” I said in a remarkably even voice. “Let’s go back to the bit about him encourag-

ing you.”

“Oh that. My husband is somewhat perverted. He likes me to sleep with other people and tell him about it, as long as I am very careful. Men and women, but he prefers women. Afterwards he has me tell him exactly what I did with the other person and that’s the only way he gets excited. Then we have intercourse.” She looks straight at me for the first time and when she sees the dismay on my face, she adds, “He has a whole Biblical explanation for why it’s a good and holy thing. I guess it makes him fruitful and multiplying.”

“So what’s his worry about you being seen?”

“He wants it all very private and hush-hush. I’m afraid for my life now. He’s very upset with me – and with you. I think we should go away together for a while. I’m just not sure if we should take the kids or not.”

I stand up. I am done. In fact, I say, “Sharon, I’m done. Yes, you should go away, anywhere but here. Get out.”

When she doesn’t respond immediately, I grab her carpetbag off the couch and open it. I rummage until I find her wallet and I pull out her driver’s license. “Mrs. Sharon Goldfarb,” I read, “1330 Shady Avenue.” She snatches it out of my hand. I repeat out loud from memory, “Mrs. Sharon Goldfarb, 1330 Shady Avenue. And if you don’t leave now, I’m going to call Mr. Rabbi and tell him to come and get you.”

There were no tears now. Just fury. She grabs her bag and goes to the door. “You’ll be sorry,” she says.

“What are you going to do? Get your husband to send me to hell?”

She leaves and I quickly clear the tea-cups – I want all evidence of her gone, gone, gone. I toss the congealing hotdogs and beans, and the burned pan as well, straight into the garbage in a moment of celebratory flamboyance. I call the local pizza and ordered a large with everything. And a Coke. And an éclair. What the hell. Life is short. Oh, and I write on a post-it: Mrs. Sharon Goldfarb, 1330 Shady Avenue, and put it on my fridge just in case.

It must’ve been eight or nine months later that I am in the bathroom, taking a dump – or rather taking my sweet time trying to do so, and reading the newspaper. Because it’s taking me forever, I’ve even finished the obits. There’s, like, nothing more left to read except the damned society pages, so I skim those. There is a picture of Sharon and a very big man with a very small yarmulke on his head. Sharon and him are each holding a tiny person wrapped in a tiny blanket. The caption reads: “Rabbi Jacob Goldfarb and his wife Sharon leave the hospital with their newborn twin boys after a visit from the Governor.” Jesus, I think, this is how a sperm donor must feel.



"Natural Lawlessness"

Just wanted to see birds, lots of birds up-close
enough to distinguish their jackets and tails,
learn their names. Wanted to offer crumbs
like saints I'd read about and neighbors
who claimed they could lure a skittish
chickadee to perch in an opened palm.

Had no suspicion how greedy, jealous, quarrelsome
squirrels could balance like circus experts,
tip-toeing a thin line I'd strung to hang
a feeder of corn. No idea, when corn fell
and birds pecked in the turf, snarling chipmunks
could bully them aside. Had a plan

to mount new feeders on long wrought-iron rods
from deck rails outside the kitchen door,
two stories up. Did persuade a pair of yellow warblers
to lunch one early afternoon, and a red-breasted
stranger after that. A gang of little grey
nobody-specials spit and scattered seeds, bickered

and flew before I could find them painted
in the fieldguide. And the game warden said it had to be
a bear, a big one at that, who'd bumped his shaggy butt
up the back stairs - while we slumbered trustingly,
thin walls away - and he'd twisted the iron rods
like pipe-cleaners, smashed feeders, licked the spillage clean.

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Two by Lowell Jaeger

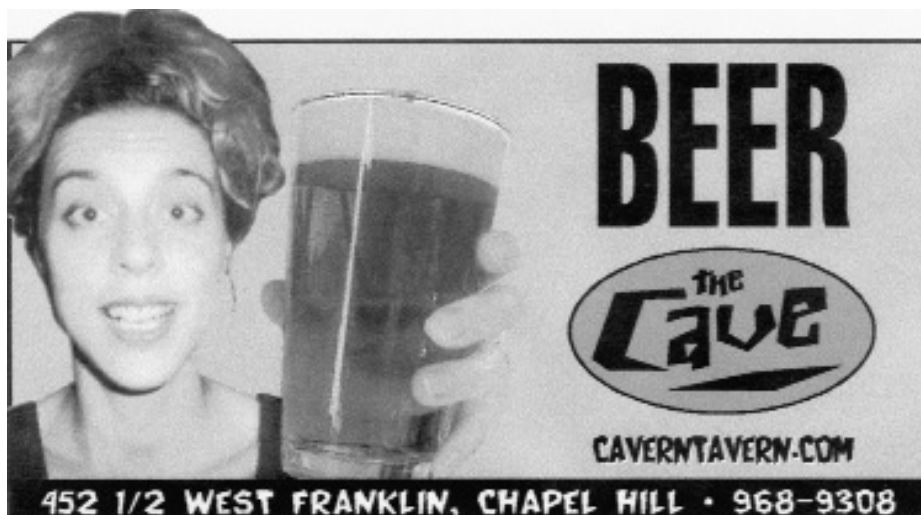
"Aging"

As a young man - muscled, lean, strong of bone,
striding with confident intention, rich with promise - all
eyes took notice when I entered the room.

Now, the checkout girl in the grocery store mumbles
her numbers and rarely smiles. I'm invisible
to boys racing their speed bikes past me
where I've stopped at the mailbox, hoping
even a stranger might have stumbled upon my address
and deigned scribble my name.

Where I've gladly lost long afternoons peering closely
into filigreed contours of a leaf, details
of an aphid's determined munchings, color spectrums
cast through a single crystalline grain
of common sand - now, without reading glasses
and light of a bright lamp, I press my nose close
and what's nearby blurs
as if it's a day's journey beyond me.

Such a struggle to have once loved sweating a scree slope,
scrambling toward the summit. To have relished
hard work, hefting stones, shoveling hillsides
of dirt - dawn till dusk. When now, I'm inexplicably
exhausted so early, my shoulders slumping, fatigued.
At times, I wish day would hurry toward dark.
Even shadows topple me over. Easily.



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"We Take and Take"

by Lowell Jaeger

We take a borrowed canoe
lashed to the roof of our Subaru.
Two coolers. Two sleeping bags.
Paddles and life vests.
She takes a broad-rim straw hat.
I take a skullcap bandana.

We drift, sunup to sundown
- take our slow sweet time -
drinking beers, snacking on chips and salsa.
We take breaks on shaded sandbars,
slather sunblock, dare each other
to skinny-dip, laugh and scramble
for cover when other boaters float by.

Near dark we beach the boat, pitch a tent,
build a fire. I take a walk
to take a look at what's beyond
the sage and grasslands of our open-country
camp. We take note of cowpies everywhere.
Hope the herd takes care not to stampede
us in our sleep. But we forget

to worry after fried steak, onions, and potatoes.
Take advantage of the night sky, take
pulls from a bottle of gin we pass between us.
Dance wild. Take all the stops out.
Take it as far as we can.

Best In Show

by Phil Juliano



The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals.

If nothing else, we'd love to read them.

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mermaid@blotterra.com

I find it interesting that I can go to sleep in pain - headache, toothache from these damned braces, cranky elbow or knee joints - and fall asleep to dream, but my dreams do not include these pains. How does my subconscious mind separate out the actual sense of discomfort? Is there something sub-subconscious in my dream state that happens that I'm not aware of in which my awake pain takes form in my sleep? I wonder if I am unable to fly in my dreams because my knee hurts. Or if I cannot run fast because of my headache - which I hesitate to medicate because that does in fact alter my sleep. I still have dreams about defying gravity - jumping down the last six or seven stairs because I am late to some long-ago class (my embarrassment at being late a constant reminder that I have not completely grown up.) Am I getting old, and can no longer make the final bell?

GMS - CH

CONTRIBUTORS:

Sue Katz is up Boston way and is a "wordsmith and rebel" who has been widely published on the three continents where she has lived. She used to be proudest of her 20-year martial arts career, her world travel, and her edgy blog *Consenting Adult* (suekatz.typepad.com), but now she's all about her collection of short stories about the love lives of older people, *Lillian's Last Affair*.

As founding editor of Many Voices Press, **Lowell Jaeger** compiled *Poems Across the Big Sky*, an anthology of Montana poets, and *New Poets of the American West*, an anthology of poets from 11 Western states. He is author of five collections of poems, most recent of which is *How Quickly What's Passing Goes Past* (Greyson Books 2013). He is the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Montana Arts Council and winner of the Grolier Poetry Peace Prize. Most recently Jaeger was awarded the Montana Governor's Humanities Award for his work in promoting thoughtful civic discourse.

Phil Juliano (Minneapolis, MN) has been cartooning for over twenty years. "Best In Show" is currently being featured in several newspapers and magazines and is syndicated by MCT Campus where it is distributed to college and university newspapers across the country. To see more of Phil's work go to www.bestinshowcomic.com

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