

Nice Work If You Can Get It - our 13th Anniversary Issue!
Mark Zipoli, Abigail Johanson, Carter Vance,
Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal

The Blotter

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"Rules"

I have friends - writer friends - who do something that amazes me. And when I say amaze, I actually mean *appall*. And when I say appall, I actually mean that I don't know how they do it, and I think I wish I could do it, but I am afraid that if I could do it, it would be a bad thing in the end. This thing, this skill or curse or magic is called creating the story outline.

Or, frankly, maybe it's called something else altogether, some unique tagline that works for each writer in the privacy of their own musings. A story outline is like a map that a writer follows from the blythe (or hair-on-fire) opening paragraph of place and time to the final *OMG* before the reader carefully closes the pages, sets them down and gasps for fresh air. Once an outline exists, supposedly, an author can just plug in the story, fill in the blanks, go into typing-the-words mode. Or so I understand it.

I could, of course, be wrong. I may have absolutely no idea.

That's why I'm appalled, I suppose. Who, I ask, would want to write that way? Answer - many people. Dwight Eisenhower once said that plans are useless, but good planning is indispensable. An author I am friends with believes that it follows right behind copious amounts of research about the subject and finger-limbering exercises in order to avoid carpal-tunnel ailments. I do follow the research-to-writing math (I think it's like ten hours of research for every hour of writing, but that could be some made-up statistic that you'll probably find is both true and an urban legend in the cosmic slush-pile of the internet) and I take notes that are intended to assist my steadily deteriorating memory with things like cute asides and clever repartee and scathingly witty puns and naming conventions, but I don't write outlines. Why not?

Doesn't outlining - plotting the story, creating biographies for the characters, describing the locales, calendaring the events - take away some of the joy of writing, the downhill skiing, the barnstorming of storytelling? Doesn't it spoil it? Doesn't it turn writing into driving a bus - here's your map, your schedule, the passenger listing and your hat. Have a nice day, Ralph Kramden. No, I am told, with a deep frown of disdain. It does not make a writer less creative. It does, however, take some of the pebbles out of one's shoes, the ones that writers (like me) experience. What happens next? I don't know. What should she say to him? I don't know. Why didn't you get much done today? Me? Today? I mostly sat and thought about it, but didn't put any words on paper. Of course, I did drink coffee, so there's that.

But when I do know what's going on, when the planets align and when the story unwinds in my mind like a bit of well paved, two-lane road along the Pacific Ocean it's quite a thrill, like someone else takes over my fingers and the tip of my tongue - that place where the words are just out there on - and it's a wild ride. I don't always measure daily productivity, but when I have a day or a week or a month of that kind of inspiration, the perspiration is gallons. Gallons I tell you!

No matter how much we agree or disagree or agree to disagree, authors can actually be friends with other authors. Although I think Harper Lee used to flick the ashes of her cigarettes into Capote's tea when he wasn't paying attention, until he finally started ordering *Lapsang Souchong*. Writers often enjoy sitting together noodling about their art, their trade, the stuff they do. We are querulous and yet desperate for feedback. We hope that we're not judgmental, and that other writers don't look askance at the voodoo-we-do. Then we go home after and nit-pick with the best of them. And they go home and nit-pick us, so that makes it alright. And we have a code with each other. As an old friend taught me, steal shamelessly. And I do! But don't plagiarize. Wait, what? What's the difference? Everything in the universe.

A writer is a special bird. First of all, we like our cages. We choose them, more often than not. And we believe that, no matter how much planning we do, what we do in the end cannot be done by a programmer. Someone so...retentive cannot possibly feel the muse. And office managers? Bankers? Construction contractors? Heavens no. Plumbers? I doubt it. Pastors? Yes, but not exactly the same as us. Fishmongers? Yes. Baseball players? Yes. Jewel Thieves? Absolutely.

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CAUTION

It's not a bad day for it

"Dear Lou, Please Kill the Cats"

by Mark Zipoli

"Death is like an onion," my friend Owen said, while we rode the #1 train, underground, toward 42nd Street. He held a copy of the Times Book Review open in front of him.

"What d'you mean?" I replied.

"You learn more about someone after he's dead than while you were alive."

"You mean while he was alive," I replied.

"What'd I say?"

"While you were alive."

"I meant him. He's dead, you aren't."

"I didn't know him very well as it was."

"That's not true. You were his friend."

"By default," I said. Owen looked at me as if I'd spit water at him.

"That was cold," he said.

"Sorry."

"Sad, too. Sad and cold. And you were his boss."

"Yes," I said. "I was his boss."

Early that Sunday morning, when I picked up my vibrating pager from the coffee table, I saw the call that I'd been waiting for but had hoped would not come: that Henry Lee had passed away. For a week and a half, while Henry was in a coma, and, at the urging of the hospital's ICU surgeon, I took the 7 train to Vernon Blvd/Jackson Avenue and

then walked a couple blocks just north of the Long Island Railroad train yards. My assignment was Henry's apartment on 51st Avenue, in a bleak, forgotten part of Long Island City. There I searched for the medical directive and his Will. I retrieved whatever company materials he'd been working on: bank reconciliations, deposits, invoices to pay. I looked around for any confidential paperwork he might've had, and picked up his mail. Every day that ICU doctor called me on the phone and asked if I'd found it, that precious medical directive. I suppose he was fairly certain of Henry's outcome.

Once the train stopped and the doors opened, Owen and I stepped off the #1 onto the Times Square platform and, like other secret idolaters, traveled silently along the urine-scented tunnel to find our waiting Number 7 train.

"What were you saying about onions?" I asked, observing a Medaglia D'Oro coffee ad. Our 7 train finally began to move.

"You know what I mean. When you wander through a dead person's apartment, you do it in pieces, layers, and you never find what you expect."

"Sorry, but I've never wandered through a dead person's apartment before," I said.

"I don't mean someone's apartment," said Owen. "I mean someone's life. He gave me a friendly shove. 'Tell me again why I agreed to come with you this morning?'"

"Because you're a good friend and I need one, with what I have to do this morning. I still have to find the god-dam medical directive. That's what I have to find."

"Not any more you don't," he said.

After a minute's delay sitting under the East River, a slight jolt indicated that we would move again. Owen, standing and supporting himself on one of the floor-to-ceiling chrome poles, asked me who was coming to the City to dispose of things.

"Nobody yet," I said. "So far, the family's a couple of aging invalids from Natchez, Mississippi."

"No one else?" he asked.

"That's all we know about."

"No friends and family here in New York?"

"No," I replied.

"You're under the big umbrella now, Walt."

"First it's onions, now it's umbrellas?"

"You know the big umbrella."

"No, I don't."

"Responsibilities, Walter.

Unknown responsibilities. Ones you have to fulfill for other people, but really aren't yours."

"Oh, that makes sense."

"I'm not saying it has to make sense here. We're on our way to a dead man's apartment. I'd rather be back at home, with my girlfriend, with The New York Times and a cup of coffee. But instead, I'm here with you."

"If I'm under the big umbrella how come I'm still getting wet?"

He shot me a look.

"Maybe there's a safe deposit box," he said.

"Yeah, I'm almost positive there is,"

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I replied.

"Good. It makes the job easier."

I did right by Henry. I did my best for him. I set him up with an office-in-the-home within one week after his first hospitalizing attack a year and a half ago. There was a computer, a fax machine, a company-purchased phone line, file cabinets, and office supplies. I even took Henry's trash out for him because, toward the end, he couldn't make it down the stairs.

The train came to rest at the Vernon Blvd stop and the doors opened wide. As we walked through the neighborhood, we were met by a cold late-morning rain. To add to an already disingenuous spine, I felt as if I were being stalked, that somebody would be watching me rummage through the hidden past of a spy.

I explained to Owen, as we walked, how breathing was an arctic challenge to Henry, yet he remained in a godless, gas-lined, three-cat apartment with dusty, dirty, wall-to-wall carpeting and cheap motel furnishings that sent me back to the days of telephone cable spools used as tables and plaster images of conquistadors for that southwest motif circa 1960.

Henry's was an old closest-to-the-factory apartment which one could find easily in this industrialized part of Queens. Adjacent to an open lot, it was a fragile, three-story walk-up. Its front façade was fake white brick; its side façade was fake wood shingles. Each of the 12 windows that faced the street looked as if they shivered from insanity, fearing the implosion of the building, or simply the wretched embarrassment of being set on fire for having such a

homely and forgotten visage. The uneven fire escape hung above the front door and stoop, with an imitation wooden corrugated awning in between.

"You know what this reminds me of?"

"No?"

"*A Christmas Carol*," I began. "When Scrooge accompanies the Ghost of Christmas Future; you know, when those scavengers sell the old man's possessions, his cold body lying in bed all by itself."

"Grim."

"Very grim."

"It's why Dickens is great."

The inside stairwell was a sooty, black wooden staircase connected to a cream-colored wall that gave vertigo even to a fighter pilot. Owen laughed as he negotiated each step.

"Only dead men are found in places like this," I said.

"I'm sure you know them all."

"A weak heart, practically no lungs left, yet he insists on living on the third floor."

"I smell tar," he said.

"I smell failure."

I had kept Henry there, among the yet-to-die. I kept him busy, tied to his oxygen tanks, working, committed, alive.

"What were you thinking," Owen said, as we turned on the short, elbow shaped landing.

"What?"

"Why didn't you let him retire? Jesus, this place reeks with train fumes."

"And the Newtown Creek," I added.

"Fumes will kill ya."

"Not to mention the East River. Great spot isn't it," I said, "if you've got emphysema?"

"Cold, Walter. Very cold."

It was with that last declaration that I unlocked the apartment's front door, its paint-chipped molding and disabused hinges cradling the secrets of mediocre dreams and substantial pain.

"What's that smell?" Owen asked, as we stepped into the kitchen.

"Gas, and the cats."

"Where are they?"

"Oh, you'll never see them, Owen."

The kitchen was laden with disaffected obstacles of every size and shape. We looked from a floor-size, rolling oxygen tank to bags of Little Friskies. Owen's gaze covered stacked cases of water bottles, worn aluminum and vinyl chairs, a bag of garbage, and small dishes on the floor out of which the cats ate. And then there was the color.

The kitchen was a cross between a fading orange and a bright and greasy beige. On the wall above the stove were ceramic cat tiles.



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We cleared a wide enough path to tramp through the room with ease, and then turned the corner into the living room. The onion was now being peeled.

"They hide under his bed, the cats. For the two years that I've visited Henry, I only saw one cat once. Most of the time they're scared shitless and stick to the bed boards. They're all 15 years old, sickly, paranoid, and deaf."

"I guess pets really do take on their owners' personalities. ...What're you going to do about them?"

"Give 'em to the ASPCA or somebody like that," I shrugged. "Unless we can find them a new home."

"For old cats?"

He picked up a handful of videotapes from on top of the television and read aloud their titles. Then he held up a tube of K Y jelly. "Party on! ...He was a Friend of Dorothy, right?"

"And that's one of the reasons we're here: To protect the innocent."

The first of the anomalies were the televisions. They were everywhere. Entering the kitchen we were met by a portable telephone and a small, black television on the table. Carefully positioned on a windowsill sat a micro-mini television. Entering the living room we were met by two telephones (one standard, one portable) and the large, Motorola console television, on top of which sat a nonfunctioning, black, portable TV.

"Looks like the wood was hatched in a test tube."

"I guess it's what he could afford," I said.

"How did he live so long in this

color?" said Owen, looking at the walls.

"It's something, huh?" I said.

"It feels like a headache."

"It feels like murder."

"I'm telling you," Owen laughed.

"The ugliness of this place hurts me. It's like I'm looking into a rusty lung. It's weighing me down, man. The conquistadors'll give me a tumor."

I looked at the wall furnishings. They were, as I explained, harvested out of an old motel, sordid in their obsolescence, revolting in their dime-store singularity. From the walls I drew Owen's attention to the handful of inhalers scattered about the room, on the end tables, and on top of the television; they were as ubiquitous as the dust. Sharing the end tables with the inhalers were multiple bottles of antacid, stacks of TV Guides, and a jumble of cat toys lightly coated with cat hair. Cat hair was everywhere. The origin of the furniture was a mystery.

"Who would save all this?" Owen exclaimed.

On the couch were two stuffed animals, slightly tortured from claws and age. They were only the beginning. Draped over an easy chair in a corner was a cat shawl; perched over the air conditioner was a cat clock; and resting benevolently atop the television was a cat coin bank. I would sometimes sit on that couch, next to the stuffed eyeless animals, opposite Henry, who sat in the easy chair, so incongruous was he in that piece of furniture, with his swollen legs and near-translucent nose, I was starting to feel sorry for Owen. He had no idea what to expect.

It was time I directed him though

the hallway and showed him Henry's bedroom. We were met with two more telephones (cellular and portable), a new Sony large screen television, two VCRs, and a mess.

"I still can't wrap my head around all these televisions," I said.

"When you're this closed in, you don't want to miss anything."

I stood still, taking in Owen's comment and then the room itself.

"Well, we're here for a purpose, Walter. We might as well start with the dressers."

We searched through the drawers.

"Why all the antacids?" he asked.

He was referring to the dozens of name brand antacids both in tablet form and bottles of liquid that were literally stuffed into Henry's drawers and on top of his nightstand, stockpiled like surplus bombers in Tucson, Arizona.

"Because medicine like Albuterol and Epinephrine, combined with Prednisone used to upset his stomach," I replied.

"Help me out with that one," he said.

"The first two deal with emphysema. Prednisone was for asthma," I explained. "It helped to maintain whatever lung tissue he might have left. But the combination of them, plus his diuretics and antihistamines and the crappy food he ate and being nervous all the time, made him sick."

"What was he nervous about?"

"His job," I replied. "His life."

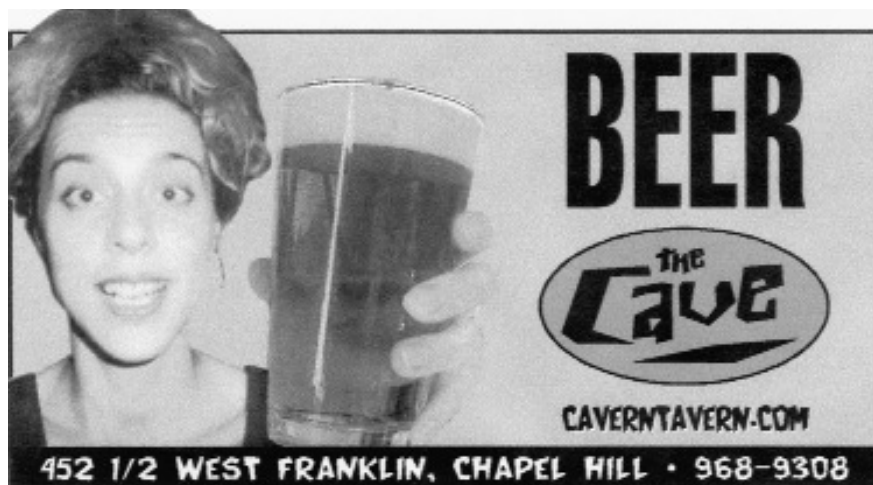
"His death?"

"His death. Another scary thing about his medicines," I continued, "was that it created these blotches on his skin, like bruises, and sometimes they would burst if he strained himself. Once he tripped over his oxygen tubes and caught himself against the wall and they ripped open. He bled all over the sink."

"Is that when you had to come over here to do first aid?" he asked.

"Yeah," I shuddered. "He was in bad shape."

"He's the perfect poster boy for smokers," Owen said, offhandedly, as he looked through a drawer and made a pile of the tubes of K Y jelly. He did it with care and respect as though he were



trying to keep the atmosphere from turning morbid and depressing. "But what is this?" he asked, holding up yet another tube.

"More lubricant."

"More lubricant? He's got more lubricant than the Exxon Valdez."

"For his nostrils, Owen. The oxygen feeding into his nose dried it out and made it chapped. Petroleum jelly didn't work."

Together Owen and I found more typical contents of a typical dresser and nightstand until: "What?!" he yelled. "Hold it! Whoa! We've hit the Mother Lode. You filthy son-of-a-bitch. Here, look at these."

I was handed a dozen male porn magazines. I wasn't surprised. Henry was after all gay. Everyone at the office knew. Everyone knew but didn't say anything because what was the point? How could you discuss sex and Henry in the same sentence? How did you connect a hairless, bloodless, weightless, 53-year-old man with sex? He was so frail; he was a bookkeeper. He was lonely. I slowly examined each magazine before I committed its pages to the trash pail: There was "Honcho," "Blueboy," "Hungry," and "Raunchy."

"I feel as if I want to take them home," I mused.

"Take 'em," said Owen.

"Yeah, but this stuff belongs to a dead man."

"A lot of good they're gonna do him," he muttered, still sifting through extension cords, photographs, and small, inspirational booklets and 12-step guides stuck between countless more stuffed animals and unopened packages of clothing from Sears.

"Yeah, but these issues go back to 1982 or 1983," I said, still holding onto the porn. "Most of these guys are probably dead from AIDS."

Owen stopped. He looked at me.

"Oh man," he said. "Really? ...Damn!"

I continued to flip through the magazines. The will could wait.

"Where should I put these envelopes?" he asked.

"Next to the other porcelain cat," I said.

"Where's that?" he asked.

"Behind the velvet cat," I replied. He looked at me over his glasses as if to say, "Enough!"

"Wow!" I exclaimed, holding up the October 1985 issue of Playgirl magazine. "Hector Macho Camacho! And he's naked! A naked Macho Camacho! Boxing doesn't get any better than this. It's like handling golf-leaf, Owen, gold-leaf."

"That's your world, not mine," he shook his head in mock shame. Another layer of the onion had been removed.

"Well, I can still fantasize, can't I?" I pursued. "I mean, it's all victimless isn't it?"

"Don't make excuses for your personal perversions," Owen laughed. "Stick up for yourself. By the way, no keys and no will in this dresser. But I do see a sports jacket you might like."

He went to the closet and showed me a cream colored jacket with the images, in successive pink, blue, and lavender, of three wide-eyed kittens silk-screened on the back.

"I'm horrified," I gasped. "I never saw him wear it."

"Yeah, but he owned it," Owen examined the jacket, and then pretended to model it. "I guess the stereotype fulfills itself: old gay man, three cats, cat toys, stuffed cats, a cat jacket."

"Ostentatious, eh?" I asked.

"Ostentatious for Liberace," he threw the jacket on the bed.

I looked everything over. In my hands were numerous booklets, key chains from Alcoholics Anonymous commemorating five years of sobriety, pocket cards and commemorative pins all relating to Henry's active participation in 12-step programs: Words of inspiration to help the addict get off of and finally control the monkey on his back. My eyes glazed over what looked to be an antique silver hand mirror that lay on the floor tucked just under the bed. There was considerable weight to it, the handle was decorative (with a miniscule cherub surrounded by ferns) and it lay positioned, not dropped, with a perfect tilt so as to see under the bed.

"What's the mirror for?" Owen asked.

"To keep an eye on the cats," I said.

He looked at me with sympathy. It appeared the cats' collective paranoid were active even when it was simply Henry at home. In the mirror I spotted another tube of K Y jelly.

"I feel as if I should apologize," I offered sullenly.

"For what?"

"For him."

"What're you talking about?"

"All of this. I should've visited him more, talked to him more."

"Here were go," he shouted. "Next I'll hear that you never sang for your father."

"I'm serious," I said. "He deserved more than just budget words and account balances and procedures or do we have the funds for payroll."

"What does anybody deserve?" Owen asked, holding up a shopping bag full of TV Guides. "Walter," he said. "These are from 1980."

"Yeah, so?"

"What does a grown man do with ten-year-old TV Guides?"

"The synopses? The crosswords?"

He put the bag on the bed and knelt down on the floor to read the titles of shelved videocassettes.

"He was such a recluse," I said.

"Maybe he wanted it that way. Most recluses do. What are these?" he asked.

"Videotapes."

"Of naked men?" Owen asked uncomfortably.

"I hope so," I replied.

"Then you deal with them. I've got cat toys and asthma medicine to dispose of. This guy was nothing but fibers and pills. Make sure you put 'em in a bag. He's got neighbors. Let's see, inventory under the bed: a sealed package of loafers, a rubber ball, and more lubricant." He looked up at me. "You're kiddin' me, right?" He got up and dusted off his knees.

"What should I do with the tapes?" I asked.

"It's your call. You just don't want Mammy and Pappy Yokum from Natchez, Mississippi, to find 'em."

"He ... just... couldn't hold on, could he?" I stood still, looking at the telephones and the unfilled bank state-

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ments and unpaid invoices. "When I would talk to him over the phone he was always out of breath, gasping for it. His voice shook except when it was so tired and hoarse that he sounded like he was speaking from the grave."

"He was," Owen said from the bathroom down the hall. "He was telling you that he was already dead and to leave him alone. DO YOUR OWN BUDGETS, GODDAM IT! And there's a portable TV in here, too, on the clothes hamper!"

I followed Owen down the hall, adjusted the aerial on the bathroom TV, and then went to the kitchen. The dryness and the dust and the death floating everywhere had parched my throat to microwave proportions.

"You want a bottle of water?" I asked, opening the refrigerator. I was staring at ten bottles of spring water.

"No."

"Why not? They're closed. They're sealed."

"I don't care, man. I'm not drinking anything from this house."

I returned to the fold carrying my bottle of water and handed him a bottle, too. He took it.

"When I would visit him, his hands would shake so much I wondered how he wrote anything out or how his fingers stayed on the keyboard."



"I think the cats typed for him," Owen said, "in between mouthfuls of Kibbles 'n Bits."

"I'm serious," I said. "What did he see when his hands shook so much?"

"I think he saw that he'd never be able to draw a straight line again," Owen said.

"I was still able to read what he wrote."

"You and who else?"

"Just me," I said.

"So what you're saying is, you were doing his work as well as your own without even knowing it. The poor guy probably just wanted to be left alone, Walt. If you want to apologize for something, apologize for that."

"I thought I was doing him a favor, keeping him working."

"Why?" he asked, looking around at the piles of cosmetics and pharmaceuticals we made. Owen sifted through a box of photographs. Envelope after envelope was opened, examined, and put aside. He exhaled:

"Jesus Christ, this is sick!"

"What?" I asked.

"Three hundred photographs, here, Walt. Two hundred and ninety-eight are of cats."

"And?"

"That's two-hundred and ninety-six past crazy. The other two are of men," he said. "And in this one they're naked," he held up one of the photos.

He passed those two particular photographs to me. I had lied about Henry being friendless in New York; I'd failed to mention that he had a buddy named Jody Grant. One of the photos

Owen handed to me was of Henry and Jody, a man who was slightly younger than Henry, trim, and of slight athleticism. I never met Jody, but once in a while Henry would speak of him. I knew that the man was living in an AIDS hospice on Jackson Avenue, not too far from Henry's apartment. I knew also that they weren't lovers but friends; and I knew it was a visit I was going to have to make.

Then there was a knock at the door. Another layer of the onion was about to come off. We dropped everything and, in a businesslike fashion, we walked to the door.

"Hi," I said. Owen stood behind me to my right, with his hands in his pockets.

"Hi," came the aging voice of a matronly woman with dark short-cropped hair on a balding head, wearing glasses with thick lenses and two-inch frames. She reminded me of Shirley Booth dressed as a man impersonating a woman. She was flanked by another woman who looked to be long-retired and glad of it. She had curly red hair and a round face adorned with extra make-up.

"I'm Lou," the first woman said. "This is Gerri."

We shook hands. I introduced myself and Owen. They were Henry's neighbors and saw Owen and me enter the apartment. They remembered me from the previous visits I'd made.

We talked about Henry's death, his illness, and the fact that he was a loner and that Owen and I were trying to find the will at the request of Henry's

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sister in Mississippi. I didn't tell them about the magazines and the video-tapes.

"It was awful when the ambulance came," Lou reflected, her gigantic eyes blinking through those inch-thick lenses. "When he was being carried out of here he was screaming. Oh, God, it was awful. There he was, being brought downstairs on top of a tarp. You know a tarp? They couldn't get a gurney up here; the hallway's too narrow. So they had to use a tarp. Same with me. I'm a diabetic, and when I get nervous I take candy, you know? And for a diabetic that's not good. And a couple times I had to be brought to the hospital. You don't want to know what for. And they had to come upstairs. I live upstairs, you know, the next house over. And they had to carry me down in a tarp too, because our hallway's too narrow. You can't get a gurney up there. The whole neighborhood was built for midgets I swear. So Henry had to be carried out on a tarp.

"You know, he was screaming," continued Lou. "He was in pain."

"Real pain," added Gerri, eyes blinking identically like Lou's. Her hair was as curly and thick and stiff as Lou's was thin and vanishing.

"He had no clothes on except his underwear," said Lou.

"Yep," added Gerri, "carried out with just his underpants and his Blue Cross card."

"Moaning and half-naked, arm raised high into the air holding that damn card," Lou said.

"I felt sorry for the paramedics,"

Gerri said to Lou.

"Why?" said Lou.

"Well, there he was, naked," replied Gerri.

"He had underwear on."

"Yeah, okay, but he was making all that noise," Gerri insisted. "And he wasn't very attractive to look at, naked and all. Bloated stomach, too. And this place is such a dump as it is."

"Have you looked at ours? No difference Gerri," Lou glared at her friend. Then looking back to me: "What're you going to do with the cats?"

"Well," I began, "I asked his sister, and she told me to take care of them anyway I could. I even spoke to Mary, because she's been feeding them." I turned to Owen: "Mary's the mother of the building manager and she's done a few errand-type things for him."

"Henry gave us some money," explained Lou, switching gears, changing the speed. "It was to take care of the cats when he couldn't bring them to the vet, or even to buy some food if we happened to be down at the store and it was on sale, you know? You know, Tender Vittles and..."

"...Yeah, they're all over the house," I interrupted her.

"So what're you going to do?" asked Lou.

"I thought I'd call the ASPCA or something."

"No," Lou brushed in, her words quick and well aimed. She was inside the kitchen before I knew what happened.

"I have a better idea."

"Yeah?"

"Don't call them."

"Okay."

"Don't do it that way."

"Okay."

"Like I said, I have a better idea. The ASPCA? They'll screw things up. I'll take 'em to my guy."

I nodded.

"He'll kill them," said Lou.

"Poof!" exclaimed Gerri.

Owen began to cough behind me.

"Cat hair," he choked, eyes wide with amusement or horror.

"Like I said," Lou continued. "I'll take the cats and I'll kill 'em!"

I looked at her. She blinked.

"How're you going to get them?" I asked. "They won't come out."

"Oh, they'll come round. Mary's seen 'em," replied Lou.

"But not lately," said Gerri.

"No," added Lou. "Not lately. Mary's been feeding 'em but she hasn't seen 'em. I understand that."

Our exchange unsettled me; the conversation was turning gothic. To keep my balance, I grabbed hold of the back of one of the decrepit vinyl chairs.

"I think they know something's wrong," Gerri interrupted, still talking about the cats.

"They know," Lou confirmed. "They mourn."

"They mourn," said Gerri. "They know."

"Well," I said. "I'm going to ask around, and then I'll make the final call. I'll let you know."

Lou thanked me for giving her the charge of the cats and for understanding that Henry was a stranger to them even though he'd been living there for years and years. And then they left. As we walked back to the living room, we both felt as if we'd had our teeth pulled.

"I'll kill them," Owen mimicked Lou.

"Geez," I said.

"A goddam tarp," he said.

Back in the living room, I felt the two pictures in my pocket once more, and then turned my attention to the documents on my lap. Quietly and with purpose, Owen filled up more garbage bags and I sifted through handfuls of documents.

"Oh guess what?" I said, breaking



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the comfortable silence.

"What?"

"I have the bank statement."

"Yeah?"

"Interesting," I said, ethereally, examining Henry's bank statements then looking at Owen. "He has over one hundred and six thousand dollars in the bank."

"What?!"

"You heard me. There's a lot of money here."

"This just went from the gothic to the absurd," he laughed, as he tied a knot in a garbage bag. After he threw it into the kitchen, he came back into the living room to start over again.

"You never told me the cause of death," he said, inflating the bag with his hands.

"Abdominal obstruction," I replied on my way to the kitchen, "whatever that is."

"He didn't even die from what he was dying from?" he exclaimed. "Help me with that, Walter, will ya? You have no instructions, no safe deposit key, and no will; but he beats emphysema by dying of abdominal obstruction? Figure that out."

Standing in front of the open refrigerator, I was deciding whether or not to take another one of the dead man's bottles of water. They were cold and I was stuck inside a dry apartment in Long Island City. I took one, opened it, and gulped half the bottle.

"He pisses me off," I belched on my way back to the living room, to resume a conversation against my better judgment.

"Why?" was Owen's response.

"He had all this money and he stayed working for us, knowing he was going to die. I would've..."

"You would've what?" he interrupted.

"I'm sorry, I don't know, but two

years left to live and with a hundred grand in the bank, I'm splitting."

"Hey," Owen laughed, "me too. No fucking way I'm staying in this hole." And after a contemplative moment or two of tossing medicine into the garbage he added, "He was a sick man."

"I don't buy that," I said. "He was a smart man. He knew exactly what his situation was. He didn't take care of things," I said. "He could've been out of this nightmare. He's got Nosferatu and her cousin on his doorstep wanting to whack out his cats. He's got a TV every eight feet and TV guides to catch up on a 1962 episode of I Love Lucy he might've missed. Nothing here is resolved. I have to find out if there's more next of kin. We've got all these things here, all this money, and then we have those three cats."

"Walt!"

"What?"

"Everything's resolved. He's dead."

I stared at Owen trying to make sure I agreed with him.

"That's just the beginning," I whispered dryly. "His death opened it all up for somebody else to deal with. He knew his situation. He should've taken care of it. He should've brought some meaning to the last days of his life. It all seems worthless. He didn't even die with somebody loving him."

"You're looking for death with a reason," Owen said, more so in counsel than in reaction to what I was saying. "His body had had it. You can't justify the end of his life, or the lack of an end of his life, and you can't explain why he lived the way he did, with no friends, far from any links to his family, stuck up in a waste of an apartment in the most depressing section of Queens..."

He took a long gulp from his water bottle.

"...Maybe you would've done something differently. Well, everybody would do everything differently if they could. As for all the other existential questions, it's not for you, Walt."

I held one of the stuffed cat toys in my lap. I was missing something.

"What the hell kind of an existence...?"

"I don't know," Owen said. "What

the hell did he have all that money for and why did he keep it all in the bank? I don't know. Why the hell didn't he go to Florida and live out the rest of his seven-hundred and thirty days in relative comfort with a day nurse and a constant supply of oxygen? I don't know. But Walt, that's not for you to decide. It's not for you to know. It's just the end."

I looked at him as he said those last four words and a shudder went through me like none I'd ever felt before. Who would pick up after me? I thought.

We left the apartment and carried out six large trash bags of terminated porn magazines, useless paper, old receipts, unopened bottles of Prednisone, Albuterol, and the other bronchial opening drugs, diuretics, bottles of antacids, bottles of laxative, chewable laxatives, nasal decongestants, inhalers, menthol and eucalyptus drops, prescription eye drops, and twine-bound TV Guides. I ran back up the stairs to lock his door, but in mid turn, before I consigned the contents of Henry's past to the exhumations of some relative from Natchez, I told Owen to hold on, and I returned to the bedroom for one last item.

Two days later, after work, after the rush-hour, I took the 7 train back to the Vernon Blvd/Jackson Avenue stop. I was, as Owen described it, living daily under the big umbrella. The moral sanitizing of Henry's apartment before his relatives or the State of New York came to claim things, the disposition of the three old cats, and the ambassadorial visit to Henry's friend Jody, all comprised individual sections of the big umbrella. "And you have no way out of it," Owen had told me. "This particular umbrella is about Death."

At seven o'clock, as I reached the top of the stairs leading out of the subway, I was met by darkness and the wind screaming off the frozen East River. Walking to 48th Avenue, where the hospice was located, accompanied by a few residents and commuters, I felt as comfortable in the neighborhood as I would have been had I been born there. Each building and storefront stood in perfect perspective, only three stories tall at the most, and usually only

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two at that. I accepted the quaintness wherever I looked. I might have been in any small town in the Midwest; except there was the clear view, across the river, of the Empire State Building.

The hospice was a small brick building, a converted warehouse of unassuming means, with two thick-laden red doors closing off a one-truck loading dock. Its glass-block windows created the effect of a fortress. I rang the bell at the red metal door to the left of the loading dock and was greeted by one of the house nurses. She looked like someone from a farm in Nebraska, big and open, and gave me a warm smile—as she was expecting me. She told me that she had already told Jody about Henry. Her friendliness, accompanied by a competent affection, led me down a hall into one of the common rooms to the rear of the fortress, which opened onto a narrow terrace. Outside Jody sat bundled up, looking at the trees on the next block, smoking a cigarette.

His cheekbones were pronounced, as if they were arms growing out from beneath his eye sockets. His face, receptive and encouraging, was adorned by a partial and struggling goatee. We shook hands, mine cold and dry from the walk outside, his encased in cold but white gloves.

“Walter Vann,” I introduced myself.

“Jody Grant. Thanks for coming here, of all places,” Jody said.

“Seems like a nice little set up,” I said stupidly.

“I was lucky to get in here,” he said in a raspy voice. He grabbed hold of my wrist and motioned to an empty chair.

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“I’m not a good business decision for this kind of residence. You know, people like me are always going to need more medicine and more help from the nurses than the others.”

Letting go of my wrist, he stubbed out what was left of his cigarette, lit another one, and offered me one as well.

“I brought you this,” I said, declining the smoke and handing him the photograph of Henry and him together.

“Hmm,” he said.

“There were two-hundred and ninety-eight pictures of cats,” I said, “and only two of people. This is one of those.”

“And the other?”

“The other...”

“The other was a bit risqué and you tossed it. Right?”

“Yeah.”

“Mmm. Two-hundred and ninety-eight photographs of cats and two of human beings. And I’m in one of the two. You have a picture of yourself?”

“No,” I laughed, “well, except for my driver’s license.”

“That won’t do,” he said. “Identity is at best a lie; the least you could do is to treat yourself to one spec of truth, even if it is selfish. Like a photo. Don’t you think? Vanity isn’t always vanity, Mr. Vann, sometimes it’s survival.” He inhaled reflectively, with a discreet affectation, and then looked back at me. “Did he leave me anything?”

“No, I’m sorry. There was no will, no medical directive, no instructions.” I had to pause because I couldn’t get it out: “But there is a bank account...”

Jody looked at me intently.

“How much?”

“A hundred and six thousand dollars.”

Jody took in the information as he took in more smoke.

“He stayed in that feline madhouse with that kind of money?”

He continued to smoke with a determined forlornness and looked me in the eyes.

“You know, I told him we should go to Key West. It was not a big dream, but it was a dream nevertheless.”

He gave me a fragile, noncommittal smile.

“Key West is my go-to dream,” he said. “Henry could be so cheap.”

“I suppose he was worried about the cats,” I said.

“Yeah, I know. The little bitch thought more of *los tres gatos* than he did about me.”

I laughed.

“And where’s all that money going?”

“I guess to his people.”

“Those people from Matches...?”

“Natchez, Natchez, Mississippi.”

“Natchez. Matches. Those southern folks just set things on fire.” He sighed and held my wrist again. “All that money.” Inhaling and exhaling, he turned to me, with the reluctant love of a dog unsure if the petting hand is criminal or saintly, and confided: “They’re niggardly about the opiates in this place, you know. They want to stuff me with pills that give me the diarrhea. And not a moment of pleasure in any one of those tablets, I’ll have you know.”

“Should you be smoking as much as you do? Or even at all?”

“This is not going to kill me. What’s going to kill me is my memory. And regret.”

“Regret?”

“Yes, regret kills. Hey, whose side are you on?”

It was then that I took out of my backpack Henry’s antique hand vanity mirror.

“I thought you might like to have this,” I said. “I think it’s a family heirloom. And I don’t think the family’s going to miss it once they get the money.”

He took the silver mirror from me with the timid grace of a little boy receiving something precious from his father’s own childhood. He knew what Henry had used it for. He knew it was to help him see the cats beneath the bed. He held it up, fixed his eyes on the handle’s rim.

“I’m looking for the little A squashed between a couple of strange symbols. Yes, it’s an Alvin Sterling 5000, and worth a lot of money. Now, it’s for me,” he said. “Only now, all I can see are these,” he pointed to the reddened unshapely blotches on his face. “Here,” he pointed to his left temple, “I had a sarcoma that resembled the map of Patagonia.”

I shuddered as he told me about his body becoming ravaged by his wasting disease, how his legs had swelled and then, with the inevitable defacement of his dignity, Kaposi’s sarcoma had rolled over him. He shared every movement and every thought of movement with red, purplish black lesions and blotches that dotted his chin, cheeks, forehead, and neck. Those that appeared on his

The Blotter

arms stretched to the size of dates and walnuts. Disfigurement was his new persona.

Not to break the spell too loudly, I asked Jody why Henry came to this part of Long Island City, at least, to this half-remembered neighborhood.

"If you'd only stayed in Greenwich Village," I said, "maybe he wouldn't have bought things like that cat jacket of his. He certainly had an odd sense of taste."

"Or taste-less-ness," Jody said as he stubbed the last eighth of an inch of his cigarette against the wall. "Greenwich Village was the first stop when I got here, after I left Topeka," he continued.

"I lived in Peoria, Jody, and you don't seem Midwestern."

"I'm not. The child version of myself originates from West Virginia. My mother got pregnant. I got born. Then she began to get hit...my father. So we ran."

Jody got up, holding my shoulder for support, and indicated that he wanted to go in.

"My mother and I had to get lost," he said leading. "You can get lost in Topeka. You can get lost in Detroit, St. Louis, Minneapolis, Chicago; take any American city."

We sat down on one of the couches near the old but working, four-column, cast-iron steam radiator.

"My mother lost herself as well as everyone else. That's how I ended up here," he smiled like a Broadway chorus girl.

"But Queens?" he continued. "Long Island City? Henry came here to be out of the way. Same reason I chose this hospice: To be out of the way. We

weren't wanted in Manhattan. In New York, you can't be gay and be ugly; it's without mercy if you're gay, ugly, and dying of AIDS. I'm better off here. Or in Key West."

I looked at his swollen legs and then took one of the couch's throw pillows and placed it on the coffee table in front of us. Following which, with some effort, he raised his legs and rested his ankles on the pillow.

"My mind's been fried from years of narcotics that can take you out of yourself. And who wouldn't want to come out of this?" he asked, referring, with a wave of his gloved hand, to his body. "But Key West is mystical. It's like a dream so sweet that waking up from it is cruel."

I smiled.

"I stole that last little bit from a Japanese novelist."

I wished to myself that I could have known Jody. He was clever and literary and he made me laugh. He was, above all, realistic and unsentimental. As if reading my mind, he reached out for me but stopped in mid-air: "You were his fifth best friend after those damn *tres gatos*. I, however, was a mere fascination." He rested his head back against the couch and looked at the ceiling. "Why am I here and not in the Keys?"

"You make Key West sound like the land of Oz."

"Paradise is whatever your options are, Walter. The way I feel right now, I'd like my options to include being escorted to the other side. To slip silently into that 'secret snow.'"

I looked at him with sincerity: "Is that a request?"

"I'm not asking you to participate. I'm asking you to empathize."

We fell silent for a few moments, then Jody turned his head.

"You know, in the Seventies and the Eighties, I lived by a very hedonistic but worthwhile code; that is, Whenever offered, always accept a drink, because you never know when or if you'll get the next one."

I looked at him, at his hollow eyes, raised cheekbones, the three or four sarcomas on his forehead, then at the hairs

of his goatee.

"I'll remember that."

"Do."

I stood up, as it was getting late, and I could hear Jody's stomach grumbling from lack of food.

"I think I should go now," I said.

"What happens after he gets buried?" he asked, looking up at me.

"Cremated," I corrected him, putting my coat on.

"Okay, cremated. What happens after he becomes 'irrevocable and the property of history.'"

"Is that the Japanese novelist?" I smiled.

"No, it's Tolstoy."

"Well, then, after he becomes the property of history, I suppose, we all get on with it."

"Yes, you are after all still living," he sighed. "Well, good-bye, Walter. You know, I'm going to gossip about you all over the house. No, make that I'm going to lie about you. I can't wait." He smiled and I reached over and gently shook his white-gloved hand.

When I descended the steps to the Vernon/Jackson subway platform, it was almost eight o'clock. My pager vibrated. It was Owen's telephone number on the read-out. Before I approached the turnstile, I found a pay phone and called him.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"I had to run an errand."

"Sarah and I are going to Sun Luck. You want to meet us there?"

"No, I've got something else to finish. Bring me back some kung pao chicken."

I replaced the phone on the hook, went back up the stairs to the cold dark boulevard, and walked down to Henry's block. I stopped by Lou's worn-out old building and, in the impossible darkness of her porch, found her mailbox. I took out a pen and my 48-page Field Notes memo book that Sarah had given me for Christmas. I tore out a page and positioned it behind the rusted metal plate of Lou's bell. On the piece of paper I wrote: "Dear Lou, please kill the cats." ♦



**NIGHTSOUND
STUDIOS**



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.
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From my Dream Journal: Ally Dream 2/21/16

This dream would have knocked my socks off, if I'd been wearing any. Dream as Warrior Ally. Dream fully confronting repetitive doubts, regrets and habitual limitations, and defensive introversion. Dream, a gift, medicine for what impedes. A rare and finally, yes, ecstatic evening, not so alone, on the pillow..... Awareness consistently meeting deep flowing, mysterious joy.

Joy? An effusive word set against how I find myself so regularly tabulating losses, worrying and living in scarcity beliefs.

Here am "I", immersed in dream, softening around edges of long held persistent fixations and mental formations. Appearing to me, a wild composite of changing faces and forms. A mobile mongrel visage of so many people I have known. All radiant, with strangely earnest serious and intent demeanors. Old friends, ex-husbands, discarded boyfriends, and bosses, deceased parents, children, animals. All, shining through this living color melange. Firm, focused, at ease and secure, vital, nourished, in short, needing nothing. They glowed whole and **complete** in the dream, as I have not seen them in life or in thought life.

Baffled by these apparitions, so real, charged with positive energy. My doubt (so reliable a companion) hung there in space wavering in confusion. Thoughts that I think are me, hovering about darkly—shocked by this direct contradiction. A reversal of their ordinary boxed and narrow, predictable view. The old view that lingers about myself: an amorphous cloud of bitter divorces, betrayals given and received from intimates, neglect, avoidance, pettiness and jealousies, apathy, confusion. A black hole, void of meaningful ethics and definitive noble character. Fire and insanity,

Ally Warrior Dream is something new, a moving entity of renewed beings, in their all embracing friendliness, somehow with agency, guiding me away from my routine attachments. Taking me away from the kind of unhappy familiar experience of myself that clings to "me." Now the witness gone, I am adrift in an unconsciousness wave, probably absorbed in feelings of lightness and un-tightening.

I woke up, relaxed, happy, at ease, with a warm sensation turning in my chest. Amazement upon waking up in the morning. Rejoicing? When I came to, my legs and feet were actually warm and I had no hesitation in getting out from under the covers. Was my dream "lucid"? Was it visited or inhabited by Angels and Archangels? Hmmmm... I don't know what to write. I saw a neon sign within pulsing: *Forgiveness. Grace. Forgiveness. Grace.*

I am o.k. with Joy. Here's to an ecstatic culture. Well, at least for this moment, post dream!

Shen - cyberspace

Best In Show



"Disturbing New Teen Trend"

by Abigail Johanson

i.
THE NEW TEEN CRAZE of
Butt-chugging Cough syrup
has parents concerned!

Somewhere in the country of the 6 o
'clock news two young women
have made their short mark on history
robotripping out of obscurity
and into the enfolding bosom

this is no new news,
just
the latest Reddit thread
in the tapestry of human experience -

the dextromethorphan enema becomes
the orphan poster child
of escapism
the transcendental experience
reduced
to a cheap trick
with the specter
of liver damage
over all

ii.
In Mexico
The Huichol gather sacramental
peyote
5,700 years of documented
human use
informs spirituality
of a people whose
offerings to their gods
are works of art

Gourds pressed with beeswax
and thread and beads
patterns of the mind
reverberating
contained within the
microcosm of a bowl .

Peyote buttons in ceremonial
caves
carbon dated
to 3780 BC
a year given context
in the Western world
only through its relationship
to the birth of a man-God
on a continent

an entire ocean
apart.
the Huichol way of life,
surviving the Conquistadors,
succumbs slowly to
protestant evangelism -

their sacred mountain
sold
a mining company
laces the land
with cyanide,
pit mines raw
silver
for crosses
and bullets.

iii.
For five dollars
a dose
Flakka
gatecrashes
the criminal economy

purchased from China
by the Kilo
for a grand
and sold for Fifty K
stateside
five dollars at a time

college students
with credit cards
clear thirty thousand
a week
and drive Lambos
off the lot
within a month

Bath Salts' big brother
Flakka
whose only
ruling Goddess
is Eris

takes flight
in the vein
of the impoverished
the ill-advised
the downtrodden
addicted
and pained
and blossoms

a curling red
insanity
runs hot
breaks muscle
into bloodstream
and psyche...

iv.
The country romances the mushroom
cloud
and bastardizes the mushroom
whose spores seed clouds -
inside every puffball a prayer for rain

Curandera Maria Sabina spoke with
the Little Children who lead her by
the hand
to the foot of God. The Little
Children knew the names of every
plant and tree
for healing , Mazatec knowledge
retained through decades in a patch of
slim psilocybes.

1960s dawned the knowledge of the
magic of mushrooms
spilling like spores across
the collected mind of the North
American Mystic,
the Counterculture Revolutionist,
the Socially Dispossessed, the
Spiritually
Alienated. The human machine
demands new software -

Seekers arrived in great numbers.
Maria was
not prepared for this. She welcomed
them kindly - those
who wished to firsthand experience
communion with the divine
God-Seekers
who had no need for purity -
God-Seekers whose taste for ritual
ebbed with each trip and every wave
of fresh converts,
God-Seekers suffering
from no illness
beyond disenchantment.
The North American onslaught
stripped the community
And the Little Children
turned inward.

When the ash settled
did the Little Children fruit
in the shadow of the last
standing timbers of her home? ❖

"How Do You Feel About Europe?"

by Carter Vance

I thought about kissing you in the Sandinista rain,
grey sky storming reflected in revolutionary sunglass,
trains carrying our tender skin, milk-white in shade
from Beirut to Buenos Aires and back, and
never had I known your touch from the opposite
side of a kitchen table.

I thought about you at a rooftop party in Brooklyn,
the dusk of August breezes dancing through strands
of your hair as hitchhikers and squeegee men through
a Don Valley traffic jam; you'd make the round,
red wine glass in hand and talk to me just the
same as the others.

My life seemed so bland to compare, colourless, eating
Tesco bread and jelly snakes in a County Tipperary
coroner's office, the sun tick-tapered behind about
six layers of concrete and piping, double that
for clouds and clinging indifference coming on
tight as turning hairpins.

I thought about your many-coloured coats streaming through
Prague's November snows and the breweries of Plzen,
standing still as Cubist lampposts on the side-street,
my legs shivered bone-deep beneath thin polyester pant,
reaching limit, stepped into the bar with the *pivo* place-mats,
neon flicked a second
off.

CONTRIBUTORS:

Mark Zipoli was born and raised in Connecticut, and received his B.A. in English from Queens College/City University of New York. He has lived in Santa Monica, California, for the past 25 years, and is the office administrator for Southern California Foster Family & Adoption Agency. His novel, *The Long Habit of Living*, was published in 2010 via Createspace, and his short stories have appeared in "Uncharted Frontier," "Hirschworth," "Writing Tomorrow," and "Blue Monday Review" magazines. He keeps a blog at markzipoli.blogspot.com and he is currently at work on the sequel to *The Long Habit of Living*.

Abigail Johanson currently resides in Kansas with her husband Jacob Johanson (an incredibly talented poet by his own right), and their blended family of four talented daughters. Abigail is fascinated with studying medical herbalism, plant-based religions, and ecologically-mindful homesteading and self-sufficiency practices. At night she dreams vivid, full-color cinematic dreams, quite often featuring intelligent plant entities and occasionally the stray dinosaur

Carter Vance is a student and aspiring poet originally from Cobourg, Ontario, currently studying in the Social Work program at Algoma University in Sault Ste Marie. His work has appeared in such publications as *A Swift Exit*, (parenthetical) and the *Scarlet Leaf Review*. He received an Honourable Mention from Contemporary Verse 2's Young Buck Poetry Awards in 2014. His work also appears on his personal blog *Comment is Welcome* (commentiswelcome.blogspot.com).

Phil Juliano of Minneapolis, MN, is a good Blotterfriend. Follow his adventures on philjulianoillustration.com



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**4 DAYS
4 STAGES**
**ROOTS ROCK
BLUEGRASS
ZYDECO FOLK
BLUES
FUNK REGGAE
AFRICAN CAJUN**
**MUSIC LOVERS'
PARADISE**

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LOCOS POR JUANA • FATOUMATA DIAWARA
DONNA THE BUFFALO
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