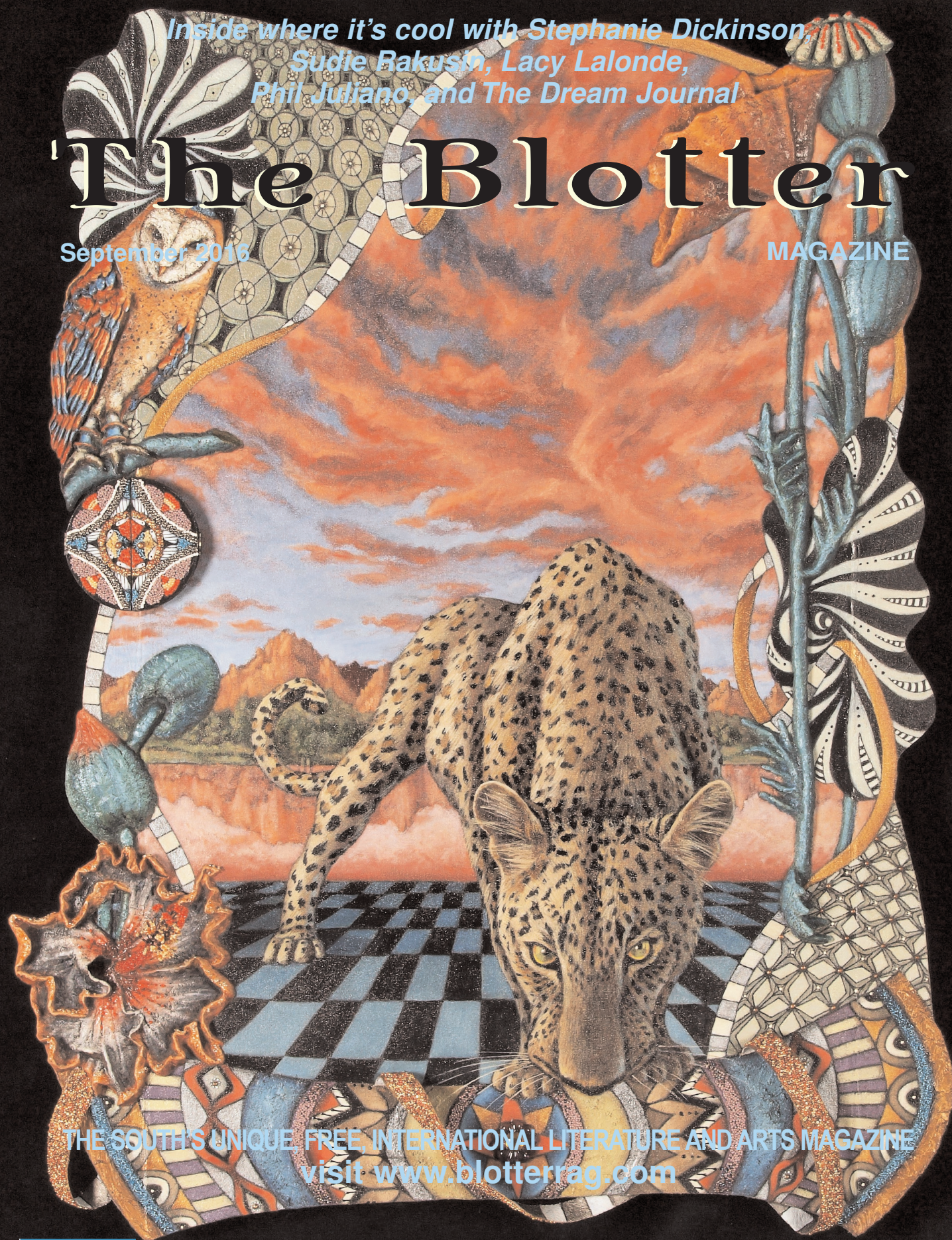


*Inside where it's cool with Stephanie Dickinson,
Sudie Rakusin, Lacy Lalonde,
Phil Juliano, and The Dream Journal*

The Blotter

September 2016

MAGAZINE



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COVER: "cat - the more you go against
 your nature, the more you will know it - hear me
 Heaven!" by Sudie Rakusin.

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"The Driver"

I don't know if I've told you this one about my Grandpa: that he was a chauffeur for Woodrow Wilson for a while. For anyone history-challenged, that was a long time ago - about one hundred years. And yes, it occurs to me that it is strange to imagine that my own grandfather was but a young adult a century ago, barely older than my own daughter is now, but there you go. And the automobile industry was barely an industry in 1912, when Grandpa learned to drive. Machines were still being assembled in garages for public consumption. Motorcycles too. Airplanes! My grandfather got a job driving because at the time not so many people drove. Folks walked when they wanted to get somewhere.



Or they rode a horse. Rode in a wagon pulled by a horse. Took a train, if where they were going was more distant (and the train went there.) And so not many people (ahem, men...) were drivers and officers in the armed forces at the same time. Grandpa had left grad school at Wharton to join the Navy as soon as war was declared. Had gone through boot and training, and was assigned to the troop transport ship USS Powhatan as paymaster and assistant supply officer. They called his ship to port in New York City because the

President was going around the country, drumming up support, and was in New Jersey - his own stomping grounds back as President of Princeton University. He'd run for re-election on the "He Kept Us Out Of War" motto, and yet we were at war. So Wilson's braintrust saw an opportunity to make political hay by having a tall, handsome young man in his spanking new US Navy ensign's uniform driving the President around. Someone like Cyril B. Somers. Yes, my Grandpa was a photo-op.

That's kind of cool. It was one of those things he told us about after a holiday meal, sitting back with a Manhattan and his cigarette. He (I didn't know this until I was an adult) was a little bit embarrassed by the whole thing - because Wilson was a Democrat and Grandpa became a Republican for Hoover in the '20s and stayed one - a fact about which he was very quiet when his vote for Nixon backfired. The truth was, as far as he was concerned, all politicians were made of denser matter. Which is not my point at all.

What I like to do is watch the History Channel or leaf through old books about the Great War and see if I can find Grandpa in the photographs. Hey, you never know, maybe he's in the background, standing just far away enough from the President to be respectful, but close enough for the gentlemen of the press to make the connection between the newly hawkish administration and a brave man responding to *I Want You...*

There is a small collection of images on the Internet of the USS Powhatan during its service as a troop-carrier between the US and France between 1917 and 1919. Men on the ship in their cracker-jack uniforms; officers in starched blue suits with piping on the sleeves and stiff-billed white caps. Is the tall young man in the back Cyril Somers? The bill of his hat shades his face. I'm not certain, but there is a kind of hopefulness that I can reach across time and see my kin.

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CAUTION

Follow the yellow

"Pelicans Disguised as Wind"

by Stephanie Dickinson

&
10:00 p.m. I make my way down a steep ramp and onto the mezzanine's marble floors. The space echoes. At the information desk I am waved toward a long hallway, told to follow the arrows and signs to the Trauma Center, and there ask for Mr. Cook. The Bellevue Emergency Room on a Friday night is humming along; every wheelchair and gurney occupied. I've arrived in a medieval pest house, with so much misery every few feet—beds jammed together, patients lying knee-to-knee, black, white, and Latino men clad in camouflage jackets, some elevated and taped to boards, groaning men (because it seems like it's mostly males on a Friday night in New York City's charity hospital). Homeless people, their clothing the murky color of Manhattan's night sky, carry the scent of rotting fruit and sweat, the grace note of excrement. Here are the asphalt visions, the flu of shivering owls, and the colds of laughing gulls. Hard to imagine everyone here will be tended to, that the harried staff, these overworked angels of mercy, and the on-call doctors being tugged in one direction and another—can ease all the pain.

I keep moving through the gaunt and the bellied, through the forest of blue-diamond gowns. The beautiful people lodge their ill elsewhere. I find my partner Rob with his shoes on in a bed with a curtain on either side separating him from the next bed, only a breath away. He's reading *The Bitter Oleander* and beside him a *New Yorker* and his cellphone. A few hours ago he was ordered by Dr. Tzimas, the liver specialist, to sign himself into Bellevue's ER. His blood test results—the astronomically high liver function numbers—indicated the possibility that he was experiencing liver failure. I do not yet believe in this chronic liver disease or cirrhosis, and while Rob might wear his hair long like a rocker, might resemble Fabio, the Italian model gracing the cover of romance novels, he's never drunk much alcohol, maybe a 12-pack of beer in his entire life, and smoked weed twice. He lifts weights; he works out daily at Dolphin gym.

Orderlies push a wheelchair past the Rob's bed. The homeless man points at Rob and snorts "Look at this guy! Fabio! Faggot!" Like the witches hurling their curses at Macbeth.

"Even here, I'm an outcast," Rob says.

"Listen, it's only the long hair. Being called *Fabio* is a compliment."
&

If I find it improbable, Rob finds it impossible to ever believe in the irreversible cirrhosis that the sonogram shows, the scarring usually caused by alcoholism. He claims he still feels fine, although he's starved. I bring out the Panini and the fig cookies, the water and apple juice, the walnuts. "My parents gave me every opportunity and look what I've done with it," he says bitterly, and then bites into his

chicken Panini. "You're a writer," I tell him, "and this is all fodder. We're all part of suffering humanity." Rob judges himself harshly, never excusing his isolation or failure to be gainfully employed by pointing to his Asperger's Syndrome, undiagnosed until well into his adulthood, as a defense. He's been adjudged bi-polar and for the last twelve years prescribed low dosage Paxil and Zyprexa. He has no health insurance, only Bellevue's Red Card, his get-in pass. I look at him in his gown (he's put it on over his clothes) and see his eyes, an eerie yellow against the white sheet. Like yellow deli roses no one has bought, like the weeping of chicken embryos. I'm proud of my soulmate. He's reading and eating; he's having a Bellevue picnic.

&
He tells me the answering machine at home is still blinking with the three missed calls. Messages had appeared on his cell phone. "MR. COOK PLEASE REPORT TO THE BELLEVUE ER IMMEDIATELY. DO NOT BLOW THIS OFF. TAKE A CAB." "YOU ARE IN DANGER OF LIVER FAILURE." "WE HAVE FOUND CHRONIC LIVER DISEASE—CIRRHOSIS."

"You should have seen me I was running from one end of the apartment to the other. I couldn't even think." The aides come to take his vitals, his blood pressure. He's told they're waiting on a bed to open upstairs, and then he'll be admitted. "I was born into the middle class, a gift, and this is what I did with it. No health insurance," he says. "Nothing."

I laugh. "Your father has the Harvard syndrome. If it's not ivy-league or covered in the money foliage it doesn't count. You've written brilliant poetry. That counts." Rob's grandfather, a muckraking journalist, was the successful author of 40 non-fiction books like *The FBI Nobody Knows*. From his grave he asks the unspoken question. *How much money have you made with your poetry, Rob?* Struggling writers with books but actual little success, we both stand in

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our shame before his father and my mother, both educators. Neither Rob nor I are able to fend well for ourselves in the practical universe. *Are you still writing that stuff that doesn't rhyme and no one reads?* my mother liked to query. Our conversation proves that neither of us believes in the sonogram's finding or that we do and are trying to staunch a mortal wound that's pouring black blood by ignoring it. The minutes drag into half-hours, then hours.

"I'd like to be anywhere but here," Rob says with frightened eyes. "I wish we were on the bus going to Iowa."

&

We return to that trip to Iowa by Greyhound, when we believed we'd signed into the destitute class. It was official—we were disposable (self-made trash, at that). We were The Impure. In the 21st century, college graduates were rarely denizens of bus depots, and while we held three advanced degrees between us, we'd been unable to translate them into financial stability. I worked as a word processor at an accounting firm and was lucky to have health insurance. We felt at home among those who lived close to the edge, whose faces were marked by the woes of poverty.

In Philadelphia, the bus took on more travelers. Anna and Terrence, newlyweds, plopped into the seats in front of us. Her abundant flesh smelled of overripe muskmelon and baby powder. Pink glasses perched on her pretty face as she listened to her husband tell Rob how they'd spent their one-night-long honeymoon at the Star Wars Museum in Philadelphia.

"We saw robot droids of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader," Terrence said, excitedly.

The couple felt as if they'd gone far into the future; they touched the Force and were carrying it back to Pittsburgh. Anna weighed two hundred pounds, while her man was slender, handsome, and so friendly we

wondered if he was possibly of low intelligence. Another sign of how twisted we'd become in the age of snark and click bait.

"Having my arms and neck covered makes me feel safer," Anna said. Obliging, her husband nestled his head against her neck and kissed her cheek and ear. She allowed him his kisses, then said, "Hand me the Little Debbie's."

He dug into a brown paper grocery bag and found the Little Debbie's fudge bars. Anna and Robert belonged to a bowling team. THE PITTSBURGHER BOOSTERS.

Dusk, the smokestacks of Pittsburgh greeted us, Steel City, USA, now trickling strings of anemic smoke into the iron sky. Goodbye to Anna and Terrence, to the Pittsburgher Glee Club. On we jolted into the fading American night, haunted by the buffalo and bumblebee. "I can see prairie dogs, and they're wearing collars of fireflies. Can you see them too?" I asked.

Rob nodded. "And do you hear the cricket choirs?"

Riding a bus across the country, you could see the sadness of our land. The accumulation of junk, the parking lots crowding out the green, the trees and foliage bedraggled, towns either half-abandoned or overcrowded. Who could be sure of its name, what to call the tangling powerlines, the strip malls, the plague spreading from town to town? Yet we held hands; we were happy.

I kissed Rob's forehead. "We need to touch the Force and bring it to Bellevue."

&

2:00 a.m. Friday has become Saturday and having reached the end of a long work week I can no longer stay. "Don't leave yet," Rob says, "I was scared out of my mind when I sat in the corridor—a step up from the waiting room but not in the Trauma Center proper." The EMS drivers, hanging around with their clipboards after bringing in

another emergency, were telling jokes. "Hey, what's the difference between intensive care paramedics and God? God doesn't believe he's a paramedic." "So EMS guys pull up on a wrecked Porsche and the yuppie driver's pinned under the car. Oh, my Porsche! My Porsche!" he's moaning. 'I wouldn't worry about the Porsche,' the paramedic says, 'your left arm is missing.' 'Oh, my Rolex!' the yuppie chirrup. 'My Rolex!' What dissonance, he thought. I'm going to die hearing "My Rolex! My Rolex!" A chasm had opened between the EMS guys and him, the penniless poet, between their easiness, and his terror. How uncomfortable their jokes had made him. I wish him to think of the red cardinal fish, a lantern lit in its throat, illuminating the undersea until there is no deep dark, no reefs of ignorance or fright.

&

2:30 a.m. I try to hail a taxi, but on First Avenue the few cabs are headed



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in the opposite direction. Snow flurries are falling. I imagine brown pelicans diving for fish above the street-lights. Vertical dives that should break open their whitish heads. Their throat pouches fill and they drain the snow from the corners of their mouths and swallow the fish. Holding onto my shoulder bag, I can stand here on this tiny island and look out over the city with the dizzying sense that it is all falling away. There are fish in the sky and pelicans disguised as wind.

I cross at the light and start to hike toward Park Avenue. Liver disease has caused life to tilt, the cobblestones I tramp over feel flimsy as clouds. I think of another walk in which I couldn't trust either the ground or the sky, unsure whether my next step would lead to death. September 11th. Only one tower still stood, smoke pouring, billowing over all of lower Manhattan, the dust rumbling. I must get to work, my only thought. I walked no faster but stopped to look behind. The rising smoke was Jehovah clapping chalk erasers together, a volcano erupting. I passed the Astor Place Subway Station. I knew by the mass of people marching through Cooper Square toward midtown No subways running. I fell into step with them. I never joined a quieter crowd. Five abreast as far as the eye could see. Many clutched silent cell phones like rosaries. The stores had emptied, deserted restaurants left behind goblets on linen tabletops, hovering phantom waiters.

A dark-haired man cried out as if telling the sky. "They've just bombed the Pentagon. They're evacuating the U.N."

We had been walking for thirty blocks. The walking did not feel like walking at all. We could have standing in place and the city moving past us. We kept traveling toward the skyscrapers or they kept following us. The Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building, MetLife. The blonde woman in front of me carried a shoe in each hand; her clingy dress was caught in the cleft of her buttocks. We marched past emptying buildings, more and more people joining us. The whole city was on its feet, no one knew where we were going.

"The South Tower is coming down," someone announced. We all turned. A cloud of pulverized concrete rose ten stories in the air. Far enough away to be safe from the 110 floors pancaking down, steel, concrete, paper, window frames, skin, bone, hair, tons of glass, popping, splintering.

When I arrived at the Lincoln Building everyone was in the conference room, teaming up to walk to the Brooklyn Bridge, get to Shea Stadium, the Bronx. The island city was cut off, the tunnels and bridges closed. The office manager ordered sandwiches as the static-laced TV rolled in. The TV

towers on top of the World Trade Center were gone. A tuna salad sandwich and a cucumber pickle soon sat in front of me. I ate them. Diane's sister Eileen worked in Tower 2. No contact yet. "Look," someone cried. On the TV screen a man had jumped from the World Trade Center. He was falling, arms above his head, his legs apart, and feet bare, tie flying up.

Did I really see that? The nothingness I felt then is the same as now. Liver transplant, repotted roots, from your earth to mine. Later they tell us the jumpers died on the way down, their hearts stopped. We learn of the couple who held hands and jumped as the jet fuel burned behind them. Boom. Boom. On different roofs.

&

2:45 a.m. Home. The cats stare wide-eyed from the daybed. Sally Joy and Vallejo, the two puddles of black fur. The lights have been left on and the apartment looks dazed, as if Rob's panic has affected its molecules too. I feed the cats, put on my tights, and scoop the litter box. I return to the table and chose from my reading pile. Weimar Berlin. 1930s. I love Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories*. All around the narrator a post-WWI

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decadence. Artists, singers, writers. The rot of the mustard gas trenches perfuming the artistic air. Gays and straights, transvestites and gartered ladies-of-the night. I eat a protein bar. 210 calories, 105 of them fat calories. I drink green juice. On the margins the right wing—unemployed soldiers are joining the Hitler Movement. Brown shirts. Sally Joy climbs onto the table. I tell her that her caregivers have been blindsided. I am dazed. Cirrhosis.

&
3:30 a.m. the land line rings. "Hello!" It's Rob. They've finally gotten him to a room on the 16th floor. Sixteen, an important number in our lives. I am sixteen years older than him. "There's a guy who sits on a stool and drives the elevators. When the doors opened on 16, gurneys blocked the elevator." Random, not lined up, a clot of wheelchairs and stretchers. Like a crash site. Rob has arrived on the Indigent Ward. It's January and Rob's cold when he finally falls asleep, until fear jolts him awake bathed in sweat. No blanket, only a thin sheet, he's shivering as we speak. "Should I bring a blanket when I come?" Just the fur liner to his leather jacket. He keeps pressing his broken call button, hoping this time it might work. It doesn't. No nurse, RN, LPN, or aide darkens the doorway, although the nurses' station where they all clump together like

a census of starlings isn't far—a stone's throw. His teeth chatter and when he wraps up in the sheet he notices his knee sticking out through a rip in the cloth. "Please come early and bring food. Oh, I forgot my toothbrush too."

I take his order for salads from the Atlas café.

&

The night wakes into the next day. Once again I'm passing the Bellevue information desk bearing a grilled chicken salad, a quinoa salad, two apples, water and apple juice, more walnuts. When the elevator opens onto the dimly lit 16th floor, I find myself tramping down wide echoing hallways. Beached wheelchairs and gurneys parked at odd angles clutter the doorways. At the nurses station four women, none dressed in uniforms, sit on either side of an ancient computer. They stare into space. I stop and ask for Rob Cook. They look blankly at me, as if they're asleep. "Where is Rob Cook's room?" I repeat. An LPN with long black bangs is walking by and points to a door. "Mr. Cook, is in *der*." She has a soft Guyanese lilt to her voice.

Rob's sitting up in bed, an IV running into his hand. Against the white sheets and dirty white walls, he looks wan and spooked. His skin is still a buttery hue. Jaundice signals acute danger. We'll soon learn yellow-

ing occurs when the liver and bile duct can no longer cleanse the blood that normally flows through it. Rather than being excreted in stool it's released in urine, hence the dark pee, the color of apple cider, darker, like root beer. An aide shuffles in to read his blood pressure and a lid to a tube falls on the floor and stays there.

A few feet from Rob's bed the bathroom sits and he can feel the blow when the door wheezes open, then judders shut. "Sorry, man, Rob is it?" Dave says, lurching toward his bed. He wears Bermuda shorts and a tee-shirt. "For lunch they served us glop and said it was frankfurter casserole. It gave me the runs."

Rob's roommates are named Ray and Dave, both of whom have been in Bellevue for two months. Dave, a homeless skinny white guy, has let Rob know that he's no dummy. "I'm a smart man. I'm nobody's fool." Ray, Dominican and religious, gestures to the Bible next to his Au Bon Pain coffee. "That's the only book I need." Ray's circulation is defective in his left leg and they're trying to fix that before his open heart surgery.

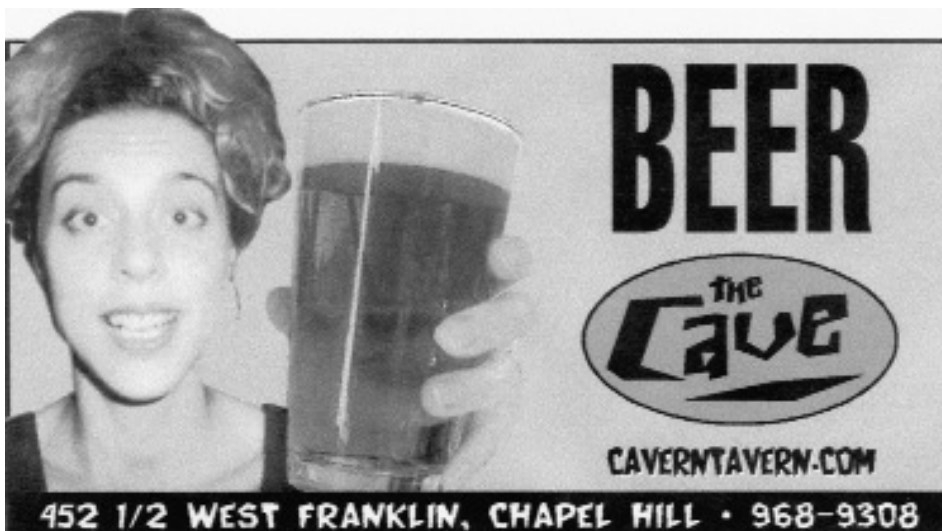
Before I've had a chance to unpack Rob's salads the doctors file in bringing with them a celebrity excitement. A flock of them gather around us. Bellevue is a teaching hospital with the Trauma Center the busiest emergency room in the country. The doctors introduce themselves, Dr. Faro, Dr. Tzimas, Dr. Park, Dr. Wei. They are young.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Cook?" Dr. Wei asks. Rob recognizes his soft hands. "Tonight we'll start the NAC IV drip. You may be uncomfortable in the beginning with the fast release."

"If your numbers keeps climbing and we can't stop it we're looking at a liver transplant."

"What was that?" Rob asks, straightening up in bed.

"With numbers like these it's only a matter of time," Dr. Tzimas



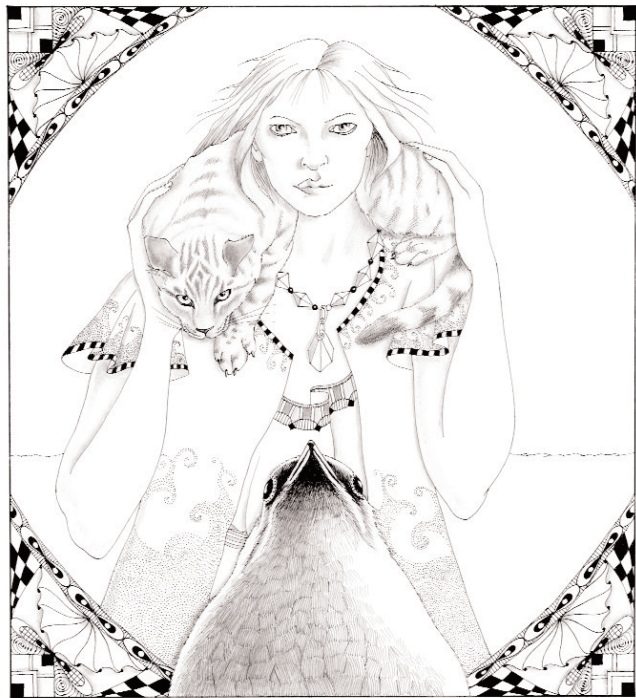
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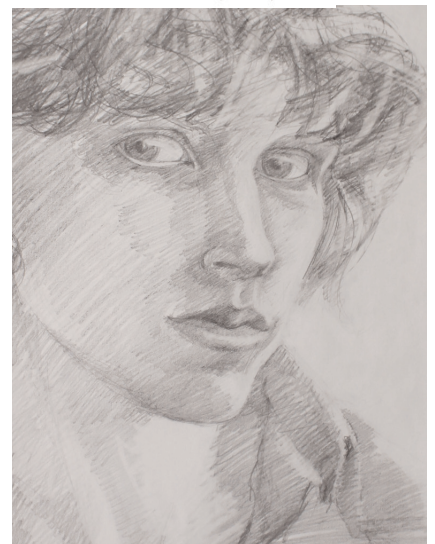
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remarks, pushing his thick glasses up his nose. "We have to watch out for you vomiting blood or blood in your stool. You may always have had these high numbers and they took a toll on your liver, i.e. destroyed it."

We are a number-obsessed culture since we like to quantify, to qualify, to come to a decision based entirely on numbers. No longer do doctors hazard a diagnosis without first a battery of tests. Within 24 hours Rob went from thinking something was wrong but that he was getting over it to cirrhosis. Now he hears *liver transplant*.

They bombard Rob with rapid fire questions. He can't keep track of who is asking him what.

"What exposures have you had?"

"Have you ever traveled to Vietnam? Thailand?" Dr. Wei takes a pen from the pocket of his lab coat.

"You have chronic liver disease as well as an acute one. It looks like you may have been exposed to Hepatitis B," Dr. Faro says in his classy British accent. "There's an epidemic of it in Vietnam. We have to find the causes of both the chronic and the acute."

"What? Wait wait. What?" Rob asks.

"What have you been using? Extreme Edge protein drinks? Green tea?"

"How long have you been taking Zyprexa and Paxil?" Dr. Park says, chiming in. "Thirteen years? You're going off both of them tonight. The NAC should help cleanse the Zyprexa from your liver. Your spleen is huge too. We've never seen numbers like yours. If we can't stop it..."

If we can't stop *it*. What is *it*? Who is *it*?

"We need to get you on the transplant list." Dr. Tzimas goes on, his face boyish behind seriously adult black frame glasses. "It's only a matter of time before your liver fails."

The hairs rise on the back of my neck. *A matter of time*.

"Livers don't just show up. Where

do you plan on getting it?" Rob asks. "The A&P?"

His humor never leaves him. We'll learn one of the best things to feed the liver are calf livers. You eat the liver of another being to heal your own. We'll learn about the post-mortem livers, the ones that come from nursing homes, not the ruddy ones taken from the still breathing accident victim or the partial liver removed from a living donor. Liver transplant like repotted roots—from your earth to mine.

"Mr. Cook, we have scheduled you for a liver biopsy," Dr. Faro says, in his King's English. "Unfortunately, Mr. Cook, it is Martin Luther King Jr. Day on Monday and no biopsies can be scheduled. Wednesday is the earliest we can fit you in."

"But what do you think might be causing it?" Rob asks, with an intensity that sounds like pleading.

The liver men shrug and move toward the door. "It's a mystery."

Rob shudders under his sheet. I too am freezing in the overheated room.

&

Wednesday. My god is today Saturday, he thinks, so how can he survive here in Bellevue until Tuesday? He will expire before then. His roommates Dave and Ray, haven't they been here for months? Perhaps, they've been forgotten. Surely their trays appear by coincidence. The nursing staff, mostly aides, seems to move in a stupor, one LPN wandering among them, and one-half of an RN, a gaunt-looking Chinese woman, borrowed from another floor.

I have gone home. All night he replays Dr. Faro and Dr. Tzimas, their voices of doom and the numbers hovering above his torn sheet and disembodied state. The devilish NAC IV is started after midnight and the fast drip feels cold going in like a melting black ice—the last chance to cleanse his liver. His Paxil and Zyprexa bottles stay in his shaving kit, and he has

taken neither for over 36 hours. The chilling sweats have begun. His brain is casting its net everywhere, on a desperate search for the two drugs. As the slimy NAC IV trickles its cold mop bucket water into his veins, he begins to cough. He wants to scratch the back of his throat. One of the aides appears at his bedside. The light turned so low in her eyes, he thinks of a penlight peering out of a gunny sack. She takes Rob's temperature and delivers a fresh sheet. His other knee protrudes through a hole.

You shouldn't have told me about Faye's sister," he says to me on the phone. "I can't stop thinking about her."

The NAC rushes into his body. Given to acute liver failure patients by intravenous drip, NAC was originally tested as an antidote to those suffering an acetaminophen overdose. It was only later we discover that NAC's primary treatment goal is a survival rate of three weeks.

&

He keeps replaying Faye's medical horror stories, especially those about her sister's cancer and the hack surgeries. Rob dislikes the receptionist at my workplace, but he's always been amused by her outrageous behavior. I picture Faye's hair, a dark brown with orange highlights, her flour-pale face with large blue eyes, and a face that retains an attractiveness making you think she must have once been very pretty. Faye finds medical procedures erotic in the extreme, and the titillation of an illness irresistible. I mention Rob's travail at Bellevue (the Charity Ward), his body in the throes of withdrawal from Zyprexa cold turkey, while on an IV drip of NAC for 45 hours. Her thin lips form a hard oval like the lip of a water goblet. For years whenever Faye was out, I would have to answer the phones. Terrible days. You never knew whether she'd be in or had left word of her food poisoning, wood tick stinger, kitchen flooding, dog emergency, pneumonia, vertigo,

or another death. Death was her favorite. When her *mother* died I reminded her after she returned from bereavement leave that she'd told me her mother was already dead so who was this *mother*? "Oh, she's not my biological mother but the woman I called Mom." Then her husband's mother died, and Faye took more bereavement leave.

She had cried wolf so often that when she first announced her half-sister Dixie, a surprisingly sophisticated and beautiful woman, had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. I wondered if I could believe her. While Faye enjoyed doctoring and took great pleasure in mammograms, colonoscopies, and other invasive procedures, her sister feared doctors and delayed going. Faye described the quickie botched operation, an attempt to remove Dixie's cancer that spread tumors everywhere. Her words tumbled out. "My brother-in-law Bobby took Dixie back to the hospital on Thursday. They cut out more of her bowel and the rest is totally blocked with tumors so she can't evacuate. She can't eat anything. She can't even drink Ensure. Dixie keeps saying, 'I'm so hungry.'"

An American horror story. The opening motif of Tristan-Isoldes. Unable to swallow pills or drink water because liquids seeped from her stomach incisions, the hospital discharged her. Fully insured, yet they decided

not even to keep her overnight. They sent her home in a cab." And later when the torture seemed without end, Faye reported "Dixie's husband says he'd had to see things a husband shouldn't have to see." He worked for *Deutsch Lufthansa* and the couple had flown all over the world. In Dixie's closet hung mink and silver-fox stoles. "Now she's being given morphine lollipops. She hasn't eaten for two months. She can suck on crushed ice and when she drinks even the littlest water, Bobby said, it was like a baby taking a pee, the liquid spurting out of her stomach incisions. Between you and me I pray for God to take her."

All morning Rob thought of Dixie and the liquid spurting out of her incisions. He remembered the John Cheever story entitled "The Black Widow," wherein the protagonist is drawn to death bed lovers and wasting diseases. When she appeared you could about bet you were terminal. Now Faye was asking questions about him. "How's Rob?" She was praying for him, or so she said.

He wonders if Faye is praying for God to take him.

&
Rob wakes in an icy sweat. He wants to stay sleeping and it is the same yearning he remembers as a boy, wanting the light to stay on but knowing the light must go off—a big boy sleeps in the dark. Bellevue still surrounds him. Machines breathing out of sync,

call-buttons hopelessly blinking into the ether of the unredeemed. The purgatory of plastic. He'd like to live in outer space on a bed island, with all our cats, the quick and the dead. Drifting endlessly through space; children of the cosmos. Instead NAC flushes through his system, teeming wet weeds surround the bed. His boat. Each dip of his hand catches in a syrupy gaseous tangle. In the neighboring bed, separated from his by a threadbare blue curtain sagging from its hooks, Dave screams into his cell-phone. His social worker neglected to file the correct papers to approve his transfer from Bellevue to St. Luke's, and because she forgot, he'll be tossed out onto the street.

&
Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. The white sun's too far from the earth and no more warming of the sky. The sun is a mug of cooled, warm milk thrown at the 12:00 p.m. The grey ice stays crusted to the curbs and manhole covers, the sidewalk cellars, and subway grates. A frozen world. It's the beginning of back and forth, coming and going. I've just arrived in my long hooded coat; the bitter winter clings to the leopard-spotted sleeves. Takeout bags breathe out the street chill. I offer him a roast beef sandwich and after two large mouthfuls he stops. "I can't eat this. It's too salty." A first intimation that beloved foods, meats, deli sandwiches, salts, sugars, will all be

Best In Show Comic

by Phil Juliano



The Blotter

off-limits, his liver unable to tolerate them. It's the beginning of tracking the books that accompany us (or rather me) in this journey that involves waiting in alien spaces. Collette's *The Pure and The Impure*. The sophisticated, decadent worlds Collette renders with elegance and clarity contrast with the murkiness of Bellevue. Collette immerses me and I sit with her on quilted mattresses in the opium den, I look out for the "big glistening eyes" of flirtatious women. My senses too become "tentacled," "deep sea creatures part weed, part arm." Beautiful sentences writhe from her pen like "blue smoke from endless cigarettes." Like "blissful decapitated women whose heads float among narcissi and blue toads." To escape from the too real of Bellevue, I travel to 1778 when the Ladies of Llangollen, two young girls from good families eloped into 50 years of domesticity. A same-sex 18th century couple married in fact if not in name. Permutations of love.

&

At 7:45 a.m. Wednesday Rob is taken to the operating theater where he lies shaking in the antechamber. He's freezing under the one thin sheet. The doctor's late and when she at last arrives apologizes as she was delivering the lecture. Trembling, he asks for sedative but she tells him the biopsy is a local procedure and he'll get a topical only. The doctor and technicians use the ultrasound to guide the needle into his liver's terrain. The red planet. The organ meat. Rob can feel the needle poking, and then he hears a fast and sharp sound like a hole punch—the sample taken. Sections of this most private organ, a rich mahogany nestled beside his spleen, now on a slide. The sample will be explored for Wilson's disease, hemochromatosis, autoimmune hepatitis, and a host of unpronounceable maladies. It will be given the blue stain test.

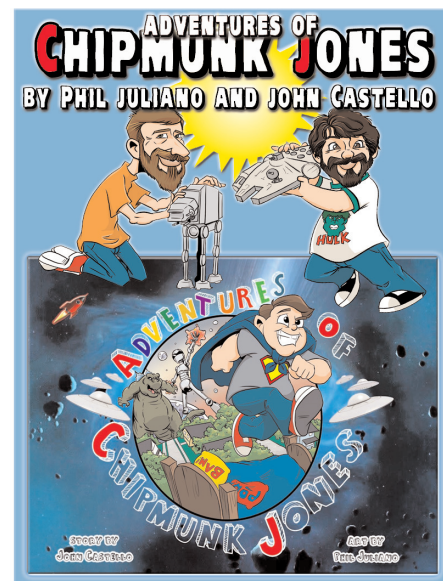
&

On January 22nd, one of the coldest days of the year and 2014's a cold winter, he's being released. I take a taxi and ask it to wait. 9:30 p.m. and the cold echoes in the Bellevue lobby. The cold of real winter nearby breaching the steam radiators' heat. *Remember if the liver fails, it goes very fast.* This grey night, this bone-deep iciness brings out the lobby's ghosts at home with the century-old stone, the ceiling thirty feet overhead, the balconies of space. The hospital desires the ill, craves the pale, the faint, those whose organs have turned against them. I see him from the ramp sitting alone on a bench along the wall. In his leather jacket, his long hair brushed down, he looks pale, thin, and handsome.

Already he's lost ten pounds. He's the only one sitting in the huge lobby. Waiting, he looks vulnerable, as if a bird of prey could swoop down at any second.

I think of how brawny the wind must have been that came for the 215 year old beech tree in Ireland, toppling it and exposing a 900-year-old skeleton entwined in its roots. Like the force that came to tear Rob's liver from his body, swelling and scarring it, some medieval wind.

We hold hands. The night air has false starlight and a haze rises from the ground like the smoking cold ruins of 1945 Berlin. There is no way out. The only direction to be taken is straight ahead. One step at a time. ❖



Two new book projects from Blotterfriend and artist Phil Juliano!!

First: 'Peej and Spencer: The Amazing Time Traveling Toy Rescue'. It's a novelized version of the syndicated comic strip, 'Best In Show'. This story touches upon all the typical issues a seven year old has to deal with: bullies, math homework and a little sister. What's different? Our seven year old hero begins his story as a middle-aged comic geek that is so nostalgic for his prized Star Wars toy collection that he devises a way to go back in time to retrieve them. Of course, things don't go according to plan. Expected release date is Winter 2016. Fans can follow along with the project at www.facebook.com/PeejandSpencer.

The second is a collaborative effort titled 'Adventures of Chipmunk Jones' written by John Castello and illustrated by Phil. 'Adventures of Chipmunk Jones' is the story about Chip, a comic loving kid that can't catch a break. He lives with his mom and sister and all he really wants is a best friend and some stability. Chip's story resonates with just about everybody that ever wanted to have friends, fun at school, and catch the pretty girl's eye. Expected release date is October 2016. Check out the GoFundMe page at <https://www.gofundme.com/chipmunkjones>.

"Two Degrees Celsius"

by Lacy Lalonde

The current world population is 22, 762, 798, 713, give or take a few hundred thousand every other second. The limit, as told by scientists for the last century, all that the earth can withstand is no more than 16 billion. For the last century attempts were made at regulating the population with little to no success. Most of the world's countries have instituted a one child per family rule, in some countries sterilization is mandatory after a certain age, and adoption over procreation is supported. Homosexuality is celebrated and favored by the majority of world governments. Abortions are perfected with no deadline for when they can be performed. Religion is at a low. Science is God now.

We've been told that the Earth is dying under the collective weight of our individual feet. Together we've stomped out 87% of all forests and too many species to mention. The zoos of the world house more animals within their walls than exists outside of them. The last migratory bird died in captivity two years ago. Things got really bad after the bee extinction, that's when this whole science is our savior thing started. The dried and dusty crops and fields were everywhere, dead animals and dead people, no one could ignore it. There was talk of it being the end of us. World news reports and media outlets pummeled us with worst case scenarios hourly, day in and day out for close to a year. Mass starvation, suffocation and a world plunged in total darkness was the picture they painted for our future. And then the scientists came and saved us. About a century and a half ago a group of scientists calling themselves *Two Degrees* got together to fight the world governments on climate change. Their name comes from the international treaty they penned and presented to the world nations stating that it was imperative to keep the atmospheric warming to no more than

two degrees Celsius, the point after which disastrous climate change was inevitable. Their treaty went unheard, and it was not until the effects of a warming planet could be seen that they were taken seriously. Two centuries later *Two Degrees* solved the bee crisis and skyrocketed to international fame, hailed as modern day heroes by creating a new brand of bees to spread pollen. An organic based Nano technology, little tiny flying robots to extract pollen and spread it, resistant to any and all forces of nature, has a functioning life span of eighty years and even buzzes when it flies. We showered those scientists with every medal and award we could pin on them. There were parades with scientists riding floats and confetti being rained down on them. We were all very relieved and grateful. World governments shoveled more and more money at universities and scientists for labs and research, removing restrictions based on ethics and morals, hoping they might fix other problems, and they did.

The rising temperatures made the effects of smog and pollution much worse, and depending on where you are, breathing is no longer an unconscious act. Oxygen dispensing machines, created and patented by *Two Degrees*, now exist throughout most buildings and allow us to breathe easier. People with respiratory illnesses have to exist entirely within these

structures, and asthma has become a larger cause of death than starvation for the poor. The major cities throughout the world now live under a protective dome, allowing for a controlled environment and constant disbursement of clean air. Those living outside of these cities limit their lifespan significantly. Even if they own an oxygen dispenser, the pollutions are still there, and regular exposure leads to respiratory illnesses within a short period that if left untreated will lead to suffocation and death.

When scientists began to make predictions, unnerving end of the world type predictions, crucial factors that we were not able to see as clearly as the pollution, we listened. The first prediction the scientists made they named, 'The Great Sink', and stated that various regions along the San Andreas Fault would sink under the rising tides of the Pacific Ocean. There was some skepticism at first, a handful of media and government persons spouting conspiracies of a takeover by the world's scientists. But after we lost the second island those skeptics were fired and chosen scientists were put in their place. And then Scientisms started, a show with its own channel produced and directed by *Two Degrees*. It started out as an hourly program broadcasted before the evening news every day. Now it runs 24 hours with no commercials. It's broadcasted globally. Occasionally there are short videos, animations to help simulate the future events as predicted by the scientists. It's the same thing every day, a scientist stands in front of a white board, wearing the white lab coat, explaining in the simplest ways possi-

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**NIGHTSOUND
STUDIOS**



The Blotter

ble how the world is dying and how it is or will soon directly affect us and what we need to do about it. Hotter temperatures, acid rain, ozone depletion, rising sea levels, stronger and more frequent natural disasters, all of which was already in existence but will only get worse they tell us, unless scientists are given the support and the means to come up with ways to prevent them. When it first came on I watched it religiously, just like they wanted. I learned all I could. I read every single paper and study done by Two Degrees over their lifespan. Then I branched out, started reading other books on fringe science by outlier scientists, learning from sources not always supported by the mainstream Sciencers or members of Two Degrees. On the first episode of Scientism, a handsome scientist explained that the problem really was all the people. That the only way the human species could survive would be if a great many people died so a remaining bunch could live sustainably on this planet.

For a brief period talks of destroying entire countries floated around. Setting off tsunamis and earthquakes in certain areas where death tolls would be the highest, eradicate millions of people with one giant wave. But killing millions of people in one swoop wouldn't do enough and the damage it would cause could not be accurately calculated. People needed to die quickly and with the least amount of damage possible. Euthanasia had been made legal for over 50 years to people with terminal illnesses or those unable to care for themselves. Public opinion on that changed quickly after Scientisms began predicting what will happen if our population isn't brought under control as soon as possible, preferably immediately. If you wanted to die, for whatever reason, you could. The world leaders informed their followers thusly and set up euthanasia clinics anywhere they could. In my city there are two in every retirement home, one in every university and major office building, one in every bank, three in every hospital, and others peppered throughout the streets. It helped with the economy

too. They were advertised, and there were slogans:

IT'S OKAY TO WANT TO DIE

HELP SAVE THE WORLD, GIVE YOUR LIFE TODAY

TAKE YOUR LIFE BEFORE IT TAKES YOU

A lot of people went for it, probably more than anyone had anticipated.

In every home since that initial discussion of overpopulation on Sciencisms there has existed two clocks. One that tells the time and the other that tells the human population of the earth, created and patented by Two Degrees. The Gamut Clock, as it is called, is a digital clock synced with the world population counter. On top of The Gamut Clock is a single round button that when pushed switches the digits from displaying the world population to the world male population, female population, births, deaths, and current population growth at any given moment throughout the day. I checked it every morning and every night, staring at it like everyone else does, watching the individual digits spin. After 6 months of implementing the suicide program the population had managed to slow down. Billions and billions of people still needed to die. Scientists decided more incentive was needed to persuade people to see it as a positive and that the government should give remunerations for death. The person giving their life could choose to give their death earnings to their family or a loved one or to their charity of choice. But the idea never left the ground, no government could afford it and despite being one of the wealthiest organizations on the planet, Two Degrees didn't offer any financial support. So the scientists thought, what is better than money? The orgasm, scientists said. And that is how it came to be, this new plan to reduce the world population, a life for an artificial orgasm that is said to be better than the best of the real thing. It's done through injection, a cocktail consisting of the most loved drugs known in combination with the

ones our bodies naturally produce. An orgasm worth your life. An orgasm so good that the receiver goes into a permanent state of catatonic bliss before being injected with a lethal cocktail dose that I am told consists of morphine and barbiturates and a potassium solution. Some say that the feeling is so good, so intensely amazing, that people see things beyond themselves. Other dimensions, far off spaces, beautiful visions that alter your perceptions of life as you thought you knew it and in that moment you are changed and you find peace in it all. Since its implementation the world population is decreasing every day, especially on the American continent. It makes sense when the majority of the population lives in poverty, with a lifespan of around 35 hard years. The ill and the poor and the low are lining up to end it all. Not fast enough, they say, but at least it's working. Things really took off when a non-lethal dose of the cocktail was administered to an elderly woman live for everyone to see. She was given 1/10th of the actual dose, just a taste the scientists in their white lab coats said to the world viewers as we watched her eyes closed. There was complete silence for the first sixty seconds after the injection, and then a low vibration could be heard, a scientist leaned over the elderly woman and nodded to another scientist. A small microphone was pinned to her shirt and the low vibration became a constant and definite purr. When the elderly woman woke up she said that there were no words to describe it, that everyone had to try it. I thought they did a better job with the slogans too.

WHERE YOUR FINAL WORD IS YES!

LOOK FORWARD TO DYING!

MAKE SURE YOU EXPERIENCE ALL THAT LIFE HAS TO OFFER – CUM TODAY! ❖

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

Please send excerpts from your own dream journals. If nothing else, we'd love to read them. We won't publish your whole name.

mermaid@blotterraag.com

We must have been conversing in that dream world state, that kind of conversation through which nothing is conveyed except emotions - the transcript, rather than a string of words, was instead a hazy exchange of fears and desires communicated simply by our shared presence at that moment. Those dream shadow cut-outs of our corporeal bodies faced one another on my balcony, and yours abruptly motioned towards a plant that stood both faraway and nearby on a pedestal in the corner. The plant's waxy green leaves were illuminated against the grey ethereal mist in which we temporarily found ourselves, a foggy landscape created solely to hold us and this nightworld relic. A smudge of yellow appeared at the top of the plant - a flower, which shifted in and out of focus with accordance to the changing perceptions of distance our dream eyes encountered. We stood observing the thing, uncertain of its meaning. After a moment, you and I shared a sense of horror and repulsion, the depth of which is only truly felt in dreams, when the living body lies unconscious and susceptible to all those demons it spends the waking hours appeasing and quieting.

We were disgusted. This yellow blotch of color had transferred, without logic, what you and I knew to be true. The flower was rotten. A putrid, unholy energy emanated from it as its petals leaked a sludgy and bright, toxic pus. We looked on, shivering at the macabre object. Dismayed, I broke away from you and stepped closer to the plant, drawn to the decomposition as a maggot might be. Maybe I could somehow set things right, reverse whatever events caused a beautiful opportunity for life to decay into this fetid mess before me. Leaning in, I faced the flower alone.

"Look! It's not rotten!" I shouted to you, actual dream words leaving my fragile reflection of a body. "It's only not ready to bloom. It just wasn't ready. It hasn't even had a chance yet." I saw the yellow petals were not rotting, they were only tender, soft tufts still partially folded into themselves within a premature bud. Their existence whispered that they would one day push forward and emerge as they should. I turned to you, excited and filled with hope. Your own refracted image, that part of your soul which always only stands before me in the dream world, smiled at me, because you could see it there, too, before us.

Krista D - Albuquerque

CONTRIBUTORS:

Stephanie Dickinson, an Iowa native, lives in New York City. Her work appears in *Hotel Amerika*, *Mudfish*, *Weber Studies*, *Fjords*, *Water-Stone Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Rhino*, *Stone Canoe*, *Westerly*, and *New Stories from the South*, among others. Her novel **Half Girl** and novella **Lust Series** are published by Spuyten Duyvil, as is her recent novel **Love Highway**, based on the 2006 Jennifer Moore murder. *Heat: An Interview with Jean Seberg*, was released in 2013 by New Michigan Press. Her work has received multiple distinguished story citations in the Pushcart Anthology, Best American Short Stories, and Best American Mysteries. * **Sudie Rakusin** writes, "My paintings, drawings and sculptures flow from what moves me and from where I find beauty: women, animals, the earth, color, pattern and light. My art represents the deep connection I feel with these elements. Through my artwork I am envisioning and creating the world as I would like it to be; a place where harmony is present between animals and human. / In college I was introduced to feminism. I began to realize that the underlying slant of words and behaviors could be coercive and oppressive in their intention. Feminism challenged me, but I did not have real clarity until I read Mary Daly's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Her work galvanized and synthesized historical events, making connections between them that I had not seen before, helping me understand that no choice is benign. At that point my artwork began reflecting my newfound awareness and beliefs, moving from creating classical figurative images of women to works showing them in all their diversity, shapes, colors and ethnicities. / My feminism evolved into considering that the oppression was not only of women, but included the abuse and neglect of animals and the earth. I began questioning the hierarchy of all living things, wondering why most humans believe they are superior to animals. / When I am with animals I can feel their essence as sentient beings whose unique purpose deserves to be considered. It is a deep connection, both visceral and soulful. I have been calling animals kin for many years and actually feel a greater affinity with them than with humans. I don't understand the inherent coldness and cruelty I see in people and feel safer surrounded by my animal companions and art. / There are times I feel a parallel existence. My life carries on with the quotidian - working in my studio, feeding my dogs, running errands, reading, going to the kitchen for food. The predictable. The usual. Simultaneously, I can feel the dry heat of the savannah where my kin, the elephants, are traveling to the next water or food source. I can hear the pounding of their feet, the earth trembling from their weight. Surrounding them are human predators who will take their lives for the ivory of their tusks, murdering their young or leaving them to die of broken hearts. They are not safe, these big majestic creatures. There is so much pain and sadness in this reality. I know all elephants carry this betrayal with them. I wonder how long it will take the collective to rid itself of the circus. This is just one species I am drawn to and care deeply about. / Images have the power to affect the viewer's mind and make them question the status quo. Within my work I hope to portray a visual alternative to the world as it presently exists. My desire is to offer a world where there is a collective heartbeat and a soul. A world with no hierarchy, where there is equality and freedom, a mutual respect, a communication and an understanding." * **Lacy Lalonde** of Halifax, Nova Scotia, has work published or is forthcoming at *Gravel Mag*, *Crab Fat Magazine*, *WOLVES Magazine*, *The Fem Lit Mag*, *The Maudlin House*, and *Little Fiction*. She is an East Coaster who believes in aliens, fosters cats and dogs, and sometimes writes fiction. She tweets, @lacylalonde * **Phil Juliano** of Minneapolis, MN, is a good Blotterfriend. Follow his adventures on philjulianoillustration.com (and check out his current projects on page 12.)

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