

The Blotter

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The South's Unique, FREE, International Literature and Arts Magazine

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The Blotter

“Use it or lose it”

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More inside and on back cover

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I recently read a post that said, “When I die, I want my cassette covered in all the old stickers I never ended up using.”

Nothing has ever resonated with me more.

I loved collecting things as a kid. Little things that were handed to me or that I picked up for myself like acorns. Found little homes for them and put them away neatly, a quiet little act of unwitting child responsibility—only some of which including buttons, pins, press or clip on earrings, fun socks (toe socks at one point... yeesh), and during a certain era, silly bandz of course. A lot of them I grew out of over the years, as you do and as one does; jewelry boxes left in an armoire and a shoe box filled with Scholastic book fair erasers shaped like zoo animals and assorted desserts forgotten on a closet shelf. Stickers were the only thing I really still continued to collect. An absolute wad, saved in an old cardstock envelope from mail I’d gotten from my grandma in middle school—the corners covered in tape from being overfilled and worn.

Junior year was when I moved into my first apartment. University meal plan no more and working a part-time restaurant job, it was a feat when I finished a whole clamshell produce container of mixed greens or spinach myself before it started to wilt and stink up the fridge. I did a mass audit of all my belongings before I packed everything up; donating old clothes I didn’t wear as much or that didn’t fit me the same as they had when I bought them, piling up books I’d finished reading so my parents could cart them back home to make room for new books, chucking out makeup that had expired—actually taking a moment to look at those expiration dates for the first time in my life, realizing I still had the same eyeshadow palette from when my mom had taken me on my “first makeup” shopping trip. An exciting event of organization and preparation for a new chapter that quickly turned into a spiraling self-shame fest. All these things I’d saved over the years—an iridescent cheek highlighter that subtly changed colors in different lighting, expensive waterproof mascara given to me as a birthday gift, a container of assorted velvet-like multicolored beau-

ty blenders, and perfume with sparkles in it that made you shimmer like fucking Aphrodite—distraughtly tossed in a garbage bag.

History would teach me that I'd learned my lesson. Yet I continued to sit on my hands. Same shit, different day as they say. Locally-made pie crust from the farmer's market, saved for a nice weekend of relaxing and baking, except the weekends got busy or other plans were made. A face mask purchased for part of a self-care night or post-shower routine that was never made a priority or whatever else this that and the third reason and wasted to dry out and the pie crust eventually winding up in the trash.

Lately, however, I've noticed I buy flowers more than I used to.

Last week I printed meeting notes on paper with dinosaurs on it that's been sitting in a drawer since printer ink was invented.

I call it my "sticker theory." Because why waste away and wait for any kind of so-called perfect circumstance. I wake up with blue jays chirping outside every morning and just my favorite kind of tea in the cabinet.

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in the Great State of Georgia!



The Blotter Magazine, Inc. (again, a 501(c)3 non-profit) is an education concern. Our primary interest is the furthering of creative writing and fine arts, with the magazine being a means to that end. We publish in the first half of each month and enjoy a free circulation throughout the Southeast and some other places, too. Submissions are always welcome, as are ad inquiries.

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CAUTION

believe in love and that is

"The Audition"

by David Rudd

"Is this the fourth floor?" asked Tom, wheezy and confused.

It was a Monday morning, he had a shocking hangover, his jaw hurt, and he was struggling with his voice. He'd hoped to get through the day uneventfully, but this was not a good start. The lift seemed to have lost its way, delivering him not to a conventional landing, but to a furnished room; that is, delivering him right into the room. Not only that, but the room itself was all wrong. The Cornerstone was a modern building, whereas this space, with its ragged carpet, saggy armchairs and period furniture, looked like something out of the 1950s. There were no windows either, and, most significantly, there wasn't a computer in sight, even though he'd told the receptionist that he'd come to fix some desktop PCs. She'd directed him to the top floor, so he'd tapped the lift's uppermost button — number 4 — and, next thing he knew, he'd emerged into this time-warped room, to be confronted by a middle-aged woman sitting in one of the two raggedy armchairs.

"You're here to audition," she said (it was not a question), peering at him over her half-moon glasses. In her hand she held what looked like a script. She was well-spoken, as though she had once been an actress or, maybe (reflected Tom), still was. Her hair was silvery grey, done up in a French roll, and she was dressed in a smart, dark-green outfit.

Tom now regretted he'd had such a late, boozy night. He and his two mates, Jeff and Baz, had gone to a new club, Dingos, which, as a come-on, had been proffering cheap drink. The three had readily obliged, quaffing more than usual. From what Tom could remember, it had been a good night until

Mandy showed up. And then there was the question of his painful jaw. He couldn't recall acquiring that.

Tom and Mandy had been an item until their dramatic split at the school prom, almost three years ago. Not quite Carrie, but it had been embarrassing all the same. They had both intended to go to drama school. However, following their split, Mandy had opted instead to study law, especially after receiving her outstanding A-level results. That's when Tom had decided against university. Instead, he'd hung around locally with Jeff and Baz, taking a job as a computer technician.

"Why would anyone choose to be a penniless, debt-ridden student," Tom had once asked, "when you can stay home boozing and clubbing to your heart's content?" It had been an impromptu remark, but Mandy's acerbic reply had stayed in his head: "Tom Underling, late of this parish. A computer technician for forty exciting years." The unspoken "duh" still rang in his ears, especially on mornings like today's.

Trying to stay focused on the job in hand, Tom assured this strange woman that he wasn't auditioning for anything. He was there to repair computers.

At that moment, the lift doors closed and the elevator began its slow descent. Perhaps, thought Tom, it was not that the lift had arrived in the room; perhaps, instead, the room had been constructed round the lift — for some dramatic event, maybe? He knew that various theatre groups used the Cornerstone, and clearly this woman must be involved in one of them.

"Computers!" the woman said. "That's an original topic, Mr ...?"

"It's Tom Underling," he replied, starting

to pull some diagnostic equipment from his shoulder bag, as if to corroborate his job title. "Reception said I was expected."

"And you've brought some props, I see, though I don't think we'll need them."

"I will need a computer, though," Tom said, his face contorting into its habitual, sarky expression. However, the pain in his jaw forced him to modify it. Looking round the room, he could see nothing remotely electrical: no leads, no sockets, nothing. It confirmed his suspicions that this space was an artificial construction, a set of some sort.

"Is that giving you trouble, Thomas?" asked the woman, pointing to her own jawline. "Here, sit down and relax." She gestured to the armchair opposite her own.

Was she just deaf, or forgetful, wondered Tom. No one had called him "Thomas" since school.

"Breathe deeply and tell me about it. In fact," she said, putting down what she'd been reading, "let's make it your audition piece."

Tom wondered what it was about the phrase "computer technician" she didn't understand. Why was life suddenly so complicated? Since last night, his existence seemed to have been upended, first by Mandy's disturbing reappearance and now by this weird setup. What was going on?

Then another thought struck him. Perhaps this strange room wasn't for a theatre group after all. Perhaps there was a hidden camera somewhere, videoing his reaction to this setup. That would make sense, especially as this woman clearly expected him to deliver some amusing anecdote. He was a stooge, Tom decided, and soon there'd be some sort of payoff, as on *The Graham Norton Show*, where audience members regaled viewers with a personal story only to be ejected — frequently — from Norton's special red chair. Tom looked apprehensively at what he was sitting on.

After a moment's unease, though, he relaxed. "You can handle this," he told himself. Despite being severely hungover and with

a dislocated jaw (at least, that's how it felt), Tom knew he had the gift of the gab. He envisaged some future audience — Jeff and Baz amongst them — savouring his witty performance. And Mandy, too. Yes, even she might get to see his act. He'd show her!

"Well," said Tom, making himself comfortable and clearing his throat of the debris obstructing it, "funny you should ask about my jaw because, last night, me and some mates were at this club, see? I'm standing at the bar when someone shoves me. Of course, I shoves back, which the guy behind doesn't appreciate, so he's about to crush me against the bar. What he doesn't realise is that I can see him in the mirror behind the Optics. As soon as he comes at me, I shifts to one side." Tom executed a neat sashay in his chair (that will look good, he thought to himself). "You should have seen the look on this guy's face as he smashes into the bar, bottles and glass everywhere. Well," Tom's hand moved to his jaw, "that's when some debris must have caught me—"

"Why have you gone all Estuary English?" the woman interrupted him. "Where's Thomas in all this?" She looked him straight in the eye. "And have you forgotten your audience? This isn't a comedy club, you know."

Tom looked uneasily round the room. Obviously, he'd got it wrong: there were no cameras.

"Look," she leaned across, "just be yourself. Tell me what really happened last night, and in your own voice." For once, Tom found himself tongue-tied. "Just close your eyes and begin," she added.

Hungover and sleep deprived as he was, Tom did as she asked. He had to admit, it was very peaceful sitting there, such that, before he realised what he was doing, he'd begun, haltingly, to tell her about Dingos. Next minute, he felt as though he were back inside the club, talking to this middle-aged woman as if he were on some dodgy mobile, his speech coming out in disconnected snatches.

He found himself telling her about the

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battered sound system and flashing lights, and realised he'd raised his voice so she could hear him over the throbbing music. But then, as he went on to describe Mandy's arrival — along with a few of her friends — the noise of the club seemed to fade into the background and Tom's voice quietened again. As was clear from his eloquent description of Mandy's dazzling presence, he had eyes for no one else. It had made him reconsider his own dishevelled appearance. He'd let himself go, he admitted. Most nights he and his pals were adrift on a sea of lager, and then on top of that heaving brew, they'd try and float a curry.

At this point in his all-too-vivid recollection, Tom found himself looking more discerningly at his two mates. They too, it now struck him, looked adrift. Set against what other punters were wearing, they also appeared shabby and dated. Had the lads suddenly got old? Surely not!

Notwithstanding his appearance, though, Mandy had seemed happy to see him there. They'd talked about old times, even had a dance — despite the jeering presence of his mates. Some of the old magic was still there, Tom was convinced. But, if anything, that only made him feel worse, for she'd left him so far behind. There she was, completing her LLB. Beneath those long, bubbly-brown locks of hers, purred a finely tuned brain, equipped with awesome skills in advocacy, oratory and God knew what else. In contrast, his own brain was on permanent idle. The only thing he'd expanded was his waistline!

As Tom became more immersed in last night's events, so his recall became more fluent. Not only that, he was also becoming increasingly animated and angry. A cauldron of rage was bubbling up inside him until, suddenly and embarrassingly, he found his eyes brimming with prickly tears. O-my-God! What would Jeff and Baz say if they could witness this, thought Tom. "If it ain't football, mate, crying's out of order!"

For the moment, though, he didn't care.

His whole life was out of order, wasn't it? Why bother piddling around with computer malfunctions when your whole existence was bollixed? What did he think he was playing at? And why, most bizarrely, was he telling this strange old biddy about his troubles?

This last thought seemed to break some sort of spell. With a string of expletives, Tom's soliloquy ground to a halt and he looked up at her, suddenly apologetic. To his amazement, though, she was smiling.

"Some genuine emotion at last, Thomas!" she said. "But there's still a lot of tension, isn't there?" Tom, his hands balled into fists, nodded. "You mentioned meeting Mandy at school. Tell me about that."

Tom now found himself more than willing to continue and, with hardly a beat, there he was, further back in time, inhabiting a far younger and slimmer version of himself. He was sitting in Miss Bentham's drama class — perhaps the only lessons he didn't occasionally skip — playing Lysander in A Midsummer Night's Dream, opposite Mandy's Hermia (or "Hernia", as he liked to call her).

This scene then faded into another. It was the day when things got more serious. Mandy had grabbed him by the tie and yanked him into the classroom cupboard, pulling the door shut behind them. Tom had stood there in the dark, gormless, quivering with shyness. Eventually, she'd reached out to him and somehow managed to poke him in the eye. That had set them giggling and, the more they'd attempted to keep quiet, the louder their laughter climbed. Gradually, they'd moved closer, probing, snickering, squirming in the dark.

Tom was just savouring the touch of Mandy's fingers on his jaw when he realised that the hand was not Mandy's. It was this strange woman's! Had her touch not been so soothing, he would have recoiled. What if someone were to walk in? What a pathetic figure he'd cut.

Seconds later, however, he did pull away — not through embarrassment, though; rather, the woman's touch had triggered another

memory: the cause of his jaw-ache. It had been Mandy! She'd walloped him before storming off, leaving Jeff and Baz hooting until, finally, they'd come to his aid. "Best rid, mate," was their take.

As Tom's words tumbled out, relating this buried memory, his speech was once again hesitant, but this time it was because he wanted to be completely honest about what he was telling his confidant. He talked and talked until, finally, he ground to a standstill.

Tom had surprised himself. He could hardly believe he'd opened up to this old bird holding court in this eerie eyrie, telling her not just about Mandy, either; or indeed about his mindless job; but about his whole meaningless existence! Her sensitive fingers seemed to have touched a nerve, unlocking him. Even his jaw hurt less. It felt freer and, in his voice, he could hear a new openness. It had a richer tone. Tom was again reminded of Miss Bentham, who'd always told him that he had a secret weapon there. He might have half destroyed it with booze and fags but, clearly, something had survived.

"Thomas Underling," this woman carefully articulated, as though reading from a school register. "Do you realise," she said, "your name contains all the vowel sounds? Just enunciating it constitutes a warm-up exercise." She repeated it, slowly, breaking it into its five syllables.

Before Tom could ask what she meant, the lift pinged, announcing — like a kitchen timer — that his time was up. Although he'd been impatient earlier, he would now have liked to stay longer. However, he was also keen not to miss this elevator, which seemed to have its own erratic schedule. Apart from that, he suddenly remembered he had a job to do — one involving computers.

Once again, the woman seemed to have anticipated him, for she'd been repacking his testing equipment. "Is this the future, then?" she said, handing Tom his bag as they both moved towards the lift. "Or might it be ... something different?" She made an expansive

gesture which seemed to encompass not only this strange room but to reach beyond, out into the world.

Tom started to answer, but the lift doors cut him short. "Good luck, Thomas Underling," was all he heard before the lift swallowed him.

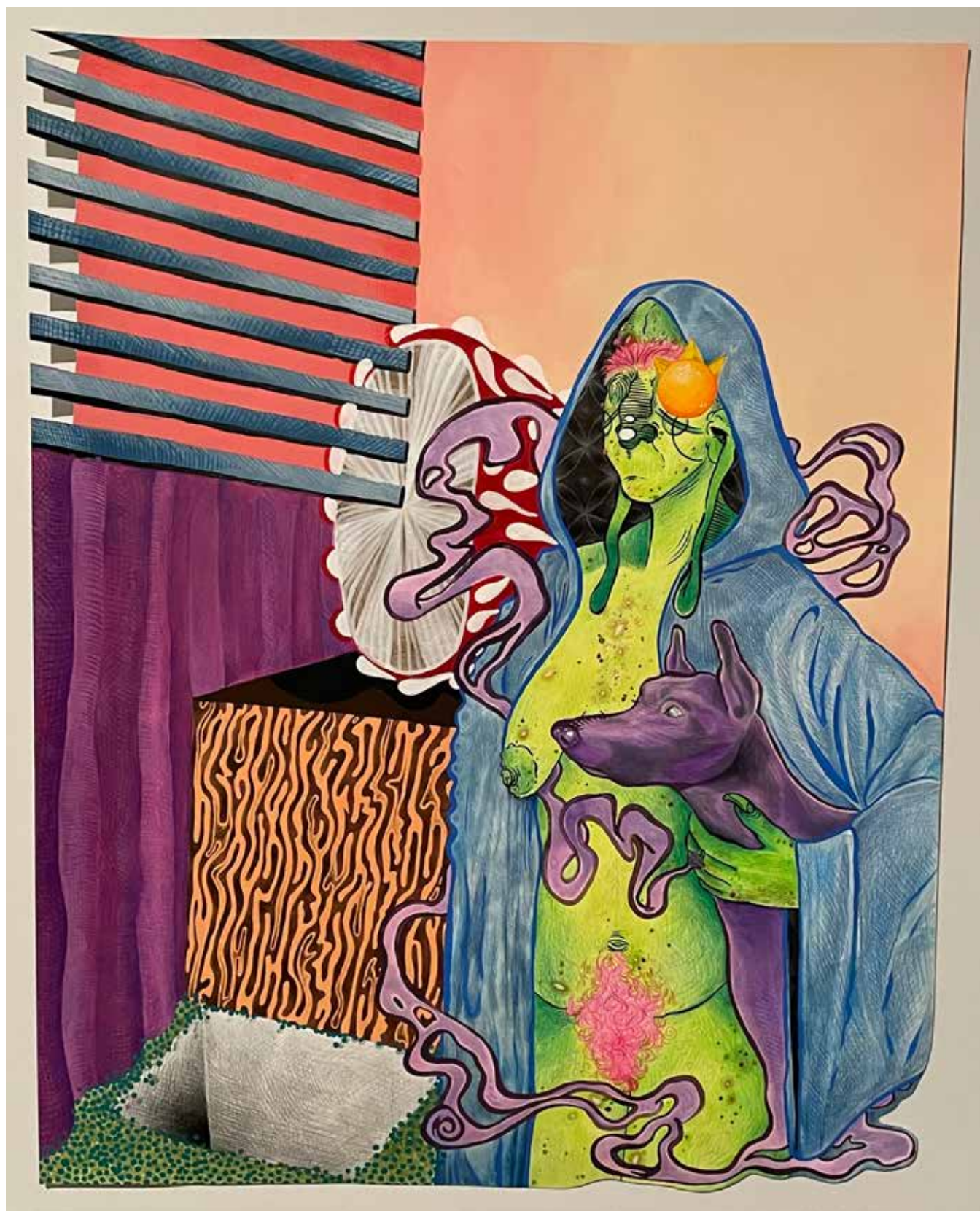
Sliding down its mechanical gullet, his queasy guts once more made their presence known. In the mirror, he examined his reflection. Had that been an audition, he wondered, and, if so, had he passed it? He certainly felt different — as though he'd been reconditioned, like some outmoded mobile phone that could now reconnect with the wider world. He gave his reflection a smile, being careful not to awaken the pain in his jaw. His poor jaw! That was something for Mandy to explain.

Back on the ground floor, the lift doors parted like theatre curtains, revealing what looked to Tom like a keen and receptive audience. He ignored them, however, having spotted a sign for the Gents. Before he could get there, though, he heard the receptionist's voice.

"Mr Underling," she shouted, exhibiting some disapproval, "where have you been? You were expected on the top floor!"

Tom spent a while trying to protest before he let her march him back to the elevator, just as its doors once more parted. She leant in and pressed the top button, which, as Tom could see, was clearly labelled "3". It was a shock, but he was not overly bothered, for Tom now knew he could go higher. ❖

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"The ABCs of Banned Words"

by John Steele

PEN America has compiled a list of hundreds of words and phrases flagged by the administration-that-shall-not-be-named to scrub from government websites and trigger reviews by federal agencies.
(<https://pen.org/banned-words-list/>)

A is for abortion, accessibility, affordable housing, air pollution, at risk.

B is for bias, bisexual, Black.

C is for Cancer Moonshot, carbon emissions mitigation, clean fuel, clean power, clean water, climate, confirmation bias, contaminants of environmental concern, cultural differences.

D is for DEI, disability, discrimination, disparity, diverse.

E is for elderly, electric vehicle, emissions, environmental justice, equitable, ethnicity.

F is for female, feminism, fluoride, fostering inclusivity.

G is for gay, gender, gender-based violence, Gulf of Mexico.

H is for hate speech, health disparity, hispanic.

I is for identity, inclusive, immigrants, implicit bias, indigenous, injustice, integration, intersectionality.

JK is what we wish, Just Kidding, that this were all one giant, malicious JoKe.

L is for LGBTQ, low-emissions vehicle.

M is for marginalized, measles, mental health, microplastics, minority.

N is for Native American, nonbinary, non-conforming.

O is for opioids, oppression, orientation.

P is for people of color, person-centered, pollution abatement, prejudice, privilege, pronouns.

Q is for queer.

R is for race, racial diversity, racial inequality, racial justice, racism.

S is for safe drinking water, science-based, segregation, social justice, socio economic, solar power, stereotypes, sustainability, systemic.

T is for they/them, trans.

U is for under-represented, under-served, underprivileged.

V is for vaccines, vulnerable populations.

W is for water pollution, white privilege, wind power, woman, women, women in leadership.

XXX is for the obscenity of your spite and cruelty.

Y is for Why the hell did 49.8% of American voters think this was a good idea? For those of you who are merely racist-misogynist-homophobic-corrupt-climate change denial-evangelical-fascist adjacent, I hope you enjoyed your tax break.

Z is for your zero-sum, fucked-up world view, where for you to win, someone else must lose.

"And She Is Still Not Listening"

by Richard Van Ingram

I never repealed the law that held me imprisoned
to the little boy oaths I swore on the playground
a million worlds ago.
I never renounced the burdensome hunchback of desire
that drove me to swing madly from the bell ropes at vespers.
I never denounced her when my beloved heretic was placed
on the stake in the city square with glowing faggots.
When she fell, she never touched the earth
in the sanctuary of my heart.
When she left, she found a secret residence
in the halls of my thoughts,
respite within the vast café of my sleeping hours.
And all of this is April snow seeking cold,
all of this is wet pine needles resting on the forest floor
wishing for a spark.
Sitting alone by the window in a car or train,
I yearn to know - what was the point?
Who misses what never was his own,
who speaks to the deafness of the living dead?
Who covets the breath of a woman
that has forgotten her idolater?
Who anticipates the tongue that will never come,
who tastes the liquor of absent mouths?
But there is nothing but the road,
and the road knows nothing of wishes,
and the wheels whisper nonsense in response.
She has become like a god, unknowable,
immune to the aggravation of questioning.
She is the moon, for eyes and hearts,
not for hands.
She is the moon, sister of insanity.
She is the moon, light for your way,
but neither the way nor the destination.
She is the moon, recline in awe.
She is the moon, a shining key;
you are the lock, your days are a winding chain.

c.1999/2026

"Colloquy"

by Nick Young

Did I invite you in? I don't believe I did.
Well, no, but I—
So you assumed I want you here.
I don't mean to intrude. I'll leave if you like.
Why would you after you've gone to the trouble to let yourself in?
That seems to have bothered you.
Your assumption.
Perhaps this isn't the best time.
For what?
My visit.
So this is a visit.
If you like.
I don't know if I do.
Why don't I leave?
When you've only just come?
I feel as if I've already overstayed.
Nonsense.
Well, if you don't mind—
I might.
I'm going to leave.
For God's sake, make up your mind. Sit down, will you?
There are no chairs.
Of course.
Would you like me to stay or not?
Stay or go. I cannot compel you.
I thought, given your situation, that talking might be helpful.
My situation?
Yes.
And what is my 'situation?'
I thought that would be obvious.
If it is so to you, then you will have no trouble explaining it to me.
This is the hospital's hospice wing.
So they've decided my case is hopeless.
There is no cure.
I could have told them that seventy-five years ago.
I'm sure they wished to prolong—
Yes, of course, prolong.
It's not what you wanted?

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I had no say in the matter.
You weren't given a choice?
Choice...the grand illusion perpetrated on us from birth.
God gives each of us the ability to choose.
Ahh, so now it's clear!
What do you mean?
Your intrusion.
I had not thought of it as such.
Of course not. You hold it to be your prerogative.
I can still leave.
As you wish.
Staying may have some value.
To me?
Yes.
That is your conceit.
Then I will leave.
Is there no end to your dithering?
I...
You prate on about choice. so choose.
I will stay.
Or go.
I've decided.
As you wish. Now, sit down, will you?
There are no chairs.
Exactly. Then open the window. Fresh air will do us good.
But there are no windows.
Why would there be?
May I ask—
The choice is yours.
Are you always this...argumentative?
Only at this time of the day.
And how would you know?

Know what?
The time.
I look at the clock.
There is no clock.
Of course.
Are you not afraid?
Aren't you?
I'm asking you.
Of what should I be afraid? That you will never leave?

Of what lies ahead.
And what might that be?
Surely, you're aware?
Of what?
Do you not fear what follows...this?
If we must engage in this tedium....
Is that all this is to you?
Do you see the light switch?
There is no light switch.
Why would there be?
Well...
When the switch is thrown, the light goes out. What is there to fear in that?
What follows.
And what would that be?
If you believe in God—
Ahh, here we go again, the insidious purpose behind your visit.
Why did you suppose I'd come?
Perhaps to offer something useful.
I'd hoped that I could.
Well, if you intend to go on about God...
It goes with the territory.
Too late in the game.
It's never too late.
A comforting illusion.
The peace that passes all understanding.
And another!
Is that all it is, delusion?
Could it be anything else?
Then I should leave.
Are we going to go through that again?
What would you have me do?
You could start by waking up.
But I'm not asleep.
Yet another delusion.
God can quiet your cynicism.
It's all I have left.
And quell your anger.
Typical of His cruelty.
What would you have Him do, then?
End the farce.
Life is no farce.
It may not have begun that way, or so you who peddle the myth would have us believe.
It is no myth.

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If that helps you sleep better at night.
God had His plan.
To create perfection?
Yes.
Then why plant the tree of its undoing?
His plan—
Yes, His 'plan.' A mistake?
He cannot err.
Then intentional.
He would not. He is just. And merciful.”
Surely of great comfort in the barracks of Treblinka.
We cannot know His mind.
The most soothing delusion of them all!
It is not delusion.
Quod erat demonstrandum.
So I have nothing of value to offer you?
You could offer me a drink of water.
There is a pitcher but no glass.
Thus does God provide! Yesterday there was a glass but no pitcher.
It's time for me to go.
Or stay.
I think not.
Your choice, but if you stay, sit down.
There are no chairs.
Precisely.
I'll leave.
As you do, turn out the light.
But there is no switch.
I already told you that.
No, I told you.
Are you now going to argue with me?
No. I'm leaving.
Or, you're free to stay, just please sit down.
But there are no chairs.
Of course.



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.

She rests her head against my arm. I can feel the weight of it, and the softness of her hair. She says something but there is noise in the room. No, not a room but outside on chairs on a deck of a coffee shop or café. "What was that?" I ask, and someone else in the room says "What?" even though I was talking to her only and not the whole group of people now out on the deck of the coffee shop. There is music, too, and it is turned up more than it was a moment ago. The girl resting on my arm says something again – that she is cold, perhaps. It makes sense, as we are outside and it might rain, I think. It is not a sunny afternoon, or even morning, I'm not sure which.

With no warning, I am looking for my book and sunglasses in a room filled with backpacks and changes of clothing in little piles. There is a large Florida Room style window on one side and many deck-chairs outside that I can see and they are filled with young people talking and working on laptops while sunbathing. I don't know why I put down my things, but every time I find the sunglasses, I misplace the book. Every time I locate the book, I've set down the sunglasses again. No rhyme or reason to this.

A friend's smile. They are sitting outside. It is time to go. We are out in the parking lot, but it is already empty. The group's buses have already left. We need to go to a particular intersection in the city to catch a public bus. We run down the street, much more athletically than I know is real. Jump over mudpuddle in the street, impossibly large.

RS - cyberspace

Contributors

Dr David Rudd, 70+, is an emeritus professor of literature who turned out academic prose for some 40 years before allowing his imagination freer rein. His stories can be found in *Bandit Fiction*, *Horla*, *TigerShark*, *Black Cat Mystery Magazine*, *Literally Stories*, *Jerry Jazz Musician*, *The Blotter*, *Erotic Review*, *Scribble*, *The First Line*, and *Creative Webzine*, among others. He also enjoys performing folk/blues music on guitars, fiddles, harmonicas, etc., but this latter pastime is far more derivative.

Richard Van Ingram is in San Antonio, TX and is a good friend, artist, poet, teacher, philosopher and other cool things.

John Steele lives around here and writes poetry and lets us sit and drink coffee and talk with him. He is a kind and generous person that way.

Our cover and interior artist writes, "My name is **Hassan Abu-Judom** and I am a Palestinian - American visual artist."

Nick Young is a retired award-winning CBS News Correspondent. His writing has appeared in dozens of reviews, journals and anthologies. His first novel, "Deadline," was published in 2023. He can be found on Bluesky @youngnick.bsky.social. He lives outside Chicago. Ed. Note:: This piece first appeared in *The Nonconformist*.

