

*Our Perfect Storm - batten down the hatches for Serena Alibhai, T. R. Healy and Dick Michener; reef the mizzen with Josh Taylor; lash onto the mainstays of Tosha Rachelle Taylor and Lynn Ingram; and holystone the winter barnacles with Staccato, a new Five Minutes With, and The Dream Journal.*

# The Blotter

FIFTH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE MAGAZINE



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well, hmm, recipes.

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## “Apolitical”

We have always purported to be a non-biased magazine, as we are a literary and visual arts periodical and admittedly most artsy types haven't got a good grasp of such things. Truth be told, there are those of you out there getting angry with me right now, and wondering if you should send a disgruntled letter or e-mail. On the one hand, you are thinking, the letter has a sense of permanence to it, but you're out of that good forceful-looking stationery you've used before with the oil-business guys and the energy-trading guys, so it'll have to be e-mail. But should you use your gmail account, which is your name with the dot in it, or the AOL account with the nifty *nom-de-plume*, which is harder to trace? I mean, just in case you decide to say something untoward and wrathful. See what I mean? Artsy. We can't even remember why we were mad at each other.

Nevertheless, I have from time to time thought about using this space to tell about, or ask about, those subjects of a political nature which interest me. As any friend of mine (or relative, or teacher, or person standing behind me holding their six pack of Lowenbrau in the 12 items-or-less line) will tell you, I have opinions about so many things. And I am of the belief that once you begin critical discussion, it drifts inevitably towards the political, although that may have not been our original intent. Is it art? always slides the slippery slope to you gonna vote? We are only the sum of our metaphysical parts – our considerations and conclusions, constantly tempered by our occlusions. And so, to our good friend/publisher Marty Smith, and with more ado than was probably necessary, we now apologize for stepping over the Blotter line.

My current novel project is about a murder. An African-American soldier in a punishment detail in WW2 era Virginia is killed, and although I haven't yet written the “reveal” the suspects are the Mean Sergeant with no trigger finger, the chess-playing Guadalcanal veteran from North Carolina, a German POW, and the young sailor (loosely based on my Dad, who was a Seabee and did a stint guarding German POWs). It's a fun story, I think, (fun from the standpoint of having a great potential for characters to take us on story twists and turns) all the more so because it's a work of fiction and therefore can contain anything in the universe. Anything. You name it. I can have a German “Afrika Corps” survivor be friends with my “Dad” character, who is trying to understand the inexplicable oddities of racism in the middle of the last century (that's the 20<sup>th</sup> for those of you who haven't been reading the papers), and how a Black man could be less of a person than a German POW in Tidewater Virginia. I suppose I could even have an alien from Betelgeuse on his way to Area 51 come down in a flying pie-plate to explain it to him, and make you enjoy reading about it, if not actually believe it (because I have a way with character development and dialogue, although my narrative skills need polish). Nevertheless, as I have said, the story is more likely to get attention from the publishing industry if it is true. Non-fiction, that is. Why, Santy-Claus? Why?

I've been reliably told (or very possibly made up out of whole cloth) that about seventy-five percent of all books being published in English are non-fiction. Even ignoring textbooks (and which of us isn't doing that right now?) that's a lot of self-helps, personal revelations, mainstream his-

tory hard-covers, and insightful diaries of the semi-famous. OK then, you say. Snob, you say. Yes, well, we, uh, like to read non-fiction, you also say. What's the hubbub, bub? Well, in my opinion, it's not non-fiction that's the culprit for my concern – it is our perception of what is “interesting”. We seem to want to read books, which is a good thing, but not those “fake books”. Fiction is fake (boring). Reality titillates (eek!).

In the not-so-distant past that there was such a hunger for books on various historical subjects – a paper version of our prurient “need” for *expose*/reality TV – that a number of previously well-respected historian/authors were found to be a tad lax in their English-101 skills. In other words, they were allegedly copying off someone else's papers. Allegedly, they hurried their work, they didn't attribute their work, and/or no one at the publisher edited their alleged work. Now I am not surprised to see another shabby episode unfolding in the current non-fiction hunger-thon. The recent shenanigan was a memoir supposedly written by a black woman about growing up in South-Central-LA as a gangster. Turned out she was white, privately schooled, and a fairly good writer. Of *fiction*. Hello?! We (that is, the reading public) liked the book, too. For goodness sake, we cleared the shelves, right up until it was discovered that the story was fiction. Then it was like, you know, OMG, *eww!*

This makes no sense whatsoever to me. I get that we're angry with our politicians for lying, our corporate leaders for lying, our role model athlete-stars for lying, but we show no respect at all for our novelists, whose *sole task* is to lie to you in a plausible fashion, for entertainment purposes only. “Tell us the truth”, we shout to the President, and the rotten-let-tuce heads of Worldcom and Enron, and all the plagiarists and stooges and lickspittles. But what didn't you like about *Moby Dick*? Come on, it's a true story, about a ship called the *Essex* that was sunk by a rogue whale and whose sailors mostly didn't survive being adrift on the Pacific Ocean. How about *A Farewell to Arms*? Another true story, about a young idealist's struggles as an ambulance driver in the First World War. And my book about the murdered soldier? Well, I'm not going to tell you what's true and what's not. We'll just call it a novel, and leave it at that. Wink-wink, nudge-nudge, and let the debating begin.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com



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CAUTION

*Read further and find the Great Elephant. My own great-grand-dad, who crossed the Canadian border, joined the Indiana 11th Cavalry, was captured on the Red River, and spent the war in a prison in Tyler, Texas, saw such an Elephant.*

## “Pure Trickery”

by Serena Alibhai

My house had a thatched roof and our floors were grey mud, caked with dew in the morning. When my three brothers and I woke up, moisture marked where we'd slept as if we had been murdered and the police had chalked the outline of our bodies. My sisters took care of sheep and I gathered firewood and tended to our garden since I was the only girl. Every Friday, we'd all wake up at sunrise and walk to the market. If we walked along the road for about an hour, we reached the market when it opened and made bargains with the merchants. Then, we'd set up our own piece of plastic tarp on the side of the road, outside the market, and sell vegetables from our own garden so that we could afford some meat. At the end of the day, when the merchants were about to close their stalls, we'd make them cheaper offers than the morning and leave home with bags of produce - a lesser quality but a greater quantity.

One Friday morning, a group of three men and one woman came to our village. They'd made a lot of noise outside, slamming their truck door and talking loudly. We

were sitting in the back, eating breakfast. The woman, with blonde hair under her safari hat and shorts tried to speak to us.

“*Jambo?*” she said, with a questioning tone. The men stood behind her, smiling, their ironed t-shirts tucked into their trousers.

My brothers ignored her, and sipped their tangawizi tea. I finished the roasted piece of bread-fruit I was chewing.

“Excuse me,” she continued, bending down as if we were ants under a magnifying lens. She cleared her throat and looked back at the men, who gave her apologetic looks. “We want to offer you some *dawa?* Some medicine?” she asked. “*Dawa?*” she repeated.

My first brother took an orange from our wooden plate (the one I used to clean rice) and offered it to her. Then he went back to sipping his tea. My second brother asked me how many buckets of tomatoes I'd be able to spare for sale in the market. The woman was staring at the orange in her hand

and she walked back to the men, who wore sunglasses. My third brother demanded that I pay attention to the matter at hand.

“How many buckets?”

I told him two.

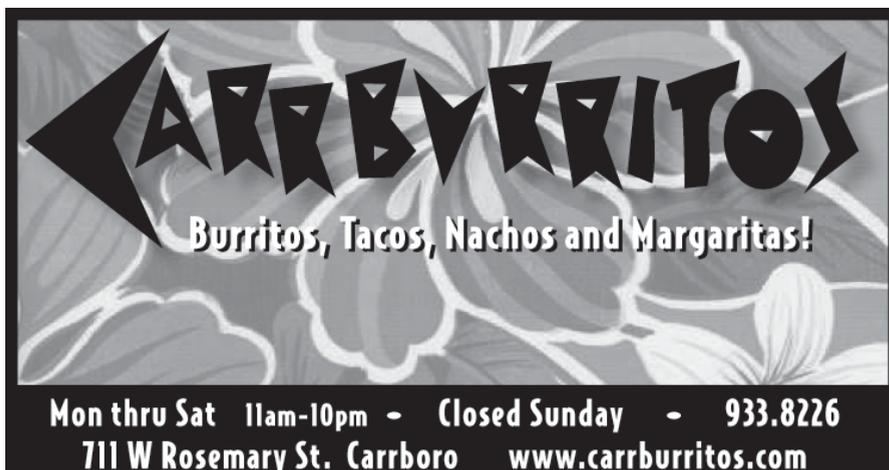
Then the lady came back. We'd heard stories of liars of her kind. How they came to villages and promised to give but instead left behind bad smells and filth. They started projects but left behind messes that wasted our time trying to clean up. It was pure trickery.

“*Mimi,*” she said, pointing to her neck, “Catherine.” And then she held up the biggest needle I'd ever seen, tall and skinny, right in front of our noses. My first brother ordered the two others to usher me into my house quickly.

“We are leaving right now,” he yelled as they pushed me into the house, almost knocking a pile of firewood over. I heard my first brother screaming above my own questions - ‘How will we escape?’ and ‘What if they come inside and steal our food?’

My third brother looked at me as if I was the most stupid girl in the entire village. “Food?” he whispered. “Worried about food?” He shook his head. Then my second brother, the talkative one, said, “Worry that they won't come and steal you, or your soul. You foolish girl. You could be dead tonight if it weren't for us.”

It was true. I wasn't thinking. The vehicle, the one they'd arrived in, totally controlled by them, had killed numerous animals and even some family members. I'd seen it time and time again. They



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laughed as they drove by, and ignored our childrens' waves. The most of the wise elders told stories of those types of people and the land they came from – one filled with hallucinations, evil and ugliness. They raped and pillaged God's earth.

"Go get the baskets," my second brother ordered me, when my first brother came inside, shaking his fist.

"I did it!" he exclaimed, more with a tone of anger than of victory. "I scared them away."

We crouched in our hut and watched from a hole in our roof as they drove away. A thick fog of red sand filled the air after they drove by.

We informed the village leader on our way to the market that someone should keep an eye on our hut in case they came back.

That day, we sold all of our tomatoes. We were able to buy a dozen eggs for only nine hundred shillings. And the butcher even gave us a handful of meat for free.

When we arrived back home, we carefully checked our hut for intruders. It was as clean as a sanded cow horn. That night, among the sound of howling lions and croaking frogs, my brothers and I slept in peace.



## "Threshed"

by Serena Alibhai

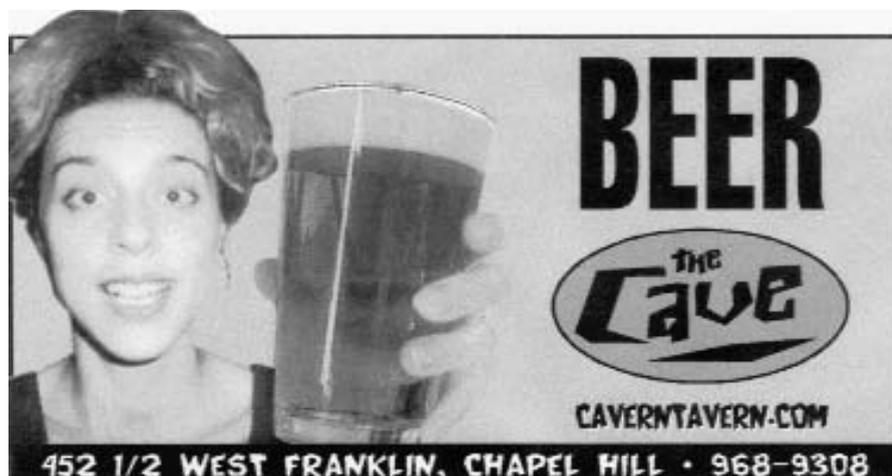
The event shocked the community. On Friday, during the night shift at the Universal Tobacco Factory in Morogoro, Tanzania, there was an accident. A simple worker, one of two thousand seven hundred had somehow had a seizure and fallen into an open threshing machine. The machine was used to separate midribs from lamina of tobacco, and had layers of steel teeth. Mwandambo, a man with a family, hadn't been blessed with much in his life, but he adored his job. He had worked in that factory since he was sixteen. He started off in receiving, and then got moved to shipping and was finally in the processing side of the factory. But now poor Mwandambo was threshed to pieces. The casket was closed and the funeral took place in St. Peter's church in Dar-Es-Salaam. People came from all over Tanzania to pay their respects.

Charlie Tucker, the managing director of the factory sat in the front row. He was a thick man who wore his belt under his potbelly. He smelled like fish, oil or garlic, or whatever he had been eating. It wasn't that he didn't care about

hygiene, he did, but he was a man with dynamic sweat glands. After a shower, he used deodorant all over his body at the suggestion of his lovely wife Ann. She played tennis on weekends and had tea with the other tobacco wives on the weekdays. Ann was used to a certain quality of life, and that worried Charlie. If there was a class action lawsuit, everything could be gone. His deep sea fishing trips in Mafia Island, his children's expensive boarding school in Switzerland, his house on top of the hill.

"Why was the thresher on if it was being fixed and why was this worker even allowed to be up at the opening?" he had demanded to know after hearing of the accident. Mwandambo's boss began to perspire. He had never spoken directly to the Managing Director before. "He was there to rub oil on the threshing barrels."

It was valid. Charlie left the factory that day and drove home. Ann was at a baby shower. He asked his cook to make him his favourite, steak and chips. He ate it in front of the television with a beer. There



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were small kids, starving on television. He didn't want to be starving. What would he tell Ann? Where else could he get a job? He had already moved from Malawi, that wasn't an option anymore. He had been managing director for two years; not nearly enough experience to move to the Mozambique factory, for example.

A basket was passed around; people were expected to put money inside. Charlie put in ten thousand shillings and prayed to God that he would not be sued.

Mwandambo's mother, whose name was Shania, sat in the front pew of St. Peter's Church. She cried into her white handkerchief. The woman next to her patted her hand with love. "It is difficult to lose a son," she said.

"And even more difficult in a church!"

The woman didn't have to ask, she could tell by Shania's Muslim garb. She didn't say anything.

"When he was young I had a private tutor from the mosque come over and teach Mwandambo Suras, D'uas and the Q'uran. Then he eloped and with Cynthia he lost his life."

The woman wished that Shania would lower her voice. She sank into her seat. The church didn't seem evil, she thought.

"It's been so embarrassing," Shania continued. "First there was no Muslim wedding, my grandson was raised without a religion and married a Christian woman, and now this. I can't even lay him to rest with dignity. I don't know what to tell my friends, my brothers and sisters are sitting in the back, and after this, we will pray all by ourselves. How can I pray with my daughter in law?"

"I guess you can't," the woman whispered.

"You're damn straight I can't. It's horrifying. I can't even describe the amount of heartbreak I'm feeling now. I gave birth to him, I raised him to be a good Muslim, and now? He's gone, where will his soul go?" And then Shania wiped her tears and swallowed the lump in her throat. "My son is Muslim and now, I sit in a church," she said, sobbing. The woman patted her shoulder. Shania looked up as her eye caught a new problem. "And look at that man,

he's despicable! He used to be our doctor before he was divorced. Dr. Thresher. He's a real slime bucket, flirting with all the young girls. Now I have a Muslim doctor."

Next to Shania, sat Mbwana, who wasn't listening to the crying woman next to him, he didn't even introduce himself. Mbwana's head was spinning in a circle of thought far away from where he sat in St. Peter's church. He was there that day, and after he heard screams that sounded like the Devil himself, he jumped on the back of a forklift from the storing warehouse all the way to the processing building next door. The man driving the forklift had stuffed his ears; with toilet paper, and barely noticed Mbwana hanging off of a stack of ten bales of tobacco in Hessian sacks.

The blood wasn't visible until you climbed up to the threshing cylinder. And then the guilt came. It came as thick as tobacco pumped with moisture. It was steaming hot and caused Mbwana to pace in his bedroom instead of sleeping. It caused him to lose his appetite except for nibbling at kernels of roasted corn. And it caused him to cry like a baby whenever he tried to smoke bangi, something he had been doing for years. There was something about the smell of the stuff that brought back dreadful memories. The smell mingled with the feeling of terror and guilt. It was the bangi that caused this mess in the first place, Mbwana thought. If only he hadn't pressured Mwandambo to smoke before his shift that day. He had the seizure, he fell into the cylinder, the blood, and the thoughts were enough to make Mbwana shake with guilt. "It's only a marijuana cigarette,"



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Mbwana remembered telling his friend when Mwandambo had refused. Mbwana remembered taunting him, "You weakling, what's wrong, is your blood too thin, you should take it like a man."

Take it like a man; take it like a man, Mbwana thought of his words in his mind over and over again. Mwandambo was in bits and pieces now, and if the coroner's report ever emerged, and anyone found out that there was bangi in his friend's system, then Mbwana would surely be blamed. Everyone would know that he did it. He was known for smoking the stuff and his bosses had warned him.

The loaded cigarette that day had made Mbwana's teeth chatter. It had to have been laced with something, maybe it had given Mwandambo hallucinations and that had scared him causing the seizure. Or maybe it had made Mwandambo's heart race. But whatever it was, now Mwandambo was dead. And no one knew whose fault it really was. My fault, my fault, my fault, Mbwana thought and wished the words would dissipate or at least decrease. The guilt would surely drive him insane. Mbwana knew after that funeral, he would never smoke any sort of drugs ever again. He just didn't deserve to, he thought.

Next to him, in the front pew, directly in front of the closed casket, was Mwandambo's wife, Cynthia. She wore a black hat and form-fitting dress that showed off her slim but curvy figure. Her lips were painted red, and matched her nails. She had dark skin that glistened with moisture. She wore no eye makeup, even though her sisters had urged her too. "I am going to

my husband's funeral," she cried. "I don't care what I look like!"

It was her sisters who got her into a shower, had laid out a borrowed dress for her and painted her nails while she napped. She slept more than usual after her husband died. Her dreams were vivid. She dreamt of the first time they had kissed, the first time she summoned up the nerve to tell him how she felt about him. She dreamt of them on a boat, in the ocean, eating fish and laughing and holding each other. "I miss him so much," she told her sister. "I can't live without him, I loved him with all my heart. How can I go on without him?" They used to talk. Before they fell asleep they shared facts about the factory, workers who bullied him and what parties they would attend in the weekend. Sometimes, Mwandambo would wake his wife up and talk to her about something only she could understand. He felt comfortable expressing himself to her and she never judged him.

Cynthia had been a good wife by anyone's standards. She worked during the day, cleaned the house, cooked meals especially to her husband's liking, and always stayed faithful. She prayed for him, took care of him when he was sick

and kissed his forehead after he fell asleep. When they decided to marry, she didn't want to elope. She felt it would be an insult to his mother, but he tried explaining to her that his mother would never be satisfied, even if she were Muslim. She even, for his own comfort, she believed, hid how much she actually loved him. It was a fact that to show too much love to a man was suffocating for him. She wanted him to be happy. So after years of dating, Cynthia changed after she agreed to become Mwandambo's wife. She began serving her husband, something she never imagined she would do before. Slipping into the role of 'perfect wife' wasn't something that came naturally at first, but she was so in love, she would do anything.

Now that he was gone, really gone, gone forever - Cynthia felt like going too. She had dreams of jumping into the earth after him. "There's no point," she sobbed, "My whole life was my husband." Cynthia's sisters shook with worry each time they heard the deep guttural weeping of their sister before she fell asleep. She sounded like an animal, the low moan of a buffalo just shot, experiencing palpable pain.



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Jonathan, Mwandambo's son, sat next to his mother's sister and stared blankly at his father's coffin. Why had he fought with his father just before he left for work that day? The day before was ok, even the week prior had passed without incident. But that very day, and to argue about such a small matter! Nobody fights about wet sneakers. All he had to do was listen. How hard would it for him to have taken his shoes outside? His argument was that it might have rained. That was silly. Pointless. He could have put them under the Banda; those stupid shoes would have been all right. But shoes weren't the topic at hand anymore; he just wished he could get the shoes out of his head. There was something bigger.

He just found out he was having his own child. He wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. Susanna had called him just before the funeral. They didn't speak everyday, so she didn't know anyone had died. She lived in Arusha and hadn't heard yet. He would be a father in seven months. Susanna was a pretty girl, shorter than he, lighter than he, nice hair and good teeth. Their child would be adorable, he thought. It wasn't

planned, but he felt lucky. He would marry her if she agreed. He wanted his child to grow up with two happily married parents as he had. If he were still alive, he could have had a real conversation with his father. They would be able to talk as two men who had things in common. How ironic, Jonathan thought, becoming a father the day he lost his own.

Farzana sat nearer to the back of the church, she was Muslim, but wore a skirt and blouse. She left her head uncovered. She didn't feel out of place even though she didn't know very many people at the funeral. If asked, she would tell them that she was a friend of Mwandambo's late father and that he and she had grown up as neighbors in Morogoro. Once, when she and Mwandambo were eating at a restaurant in town, something he was against, but she had insisted upon, he used the same excuse. She wasn't in love with him, she wasn't stupid, and she knew he was married, but she had pursued him still. She wasn't a wealthy woman, she had tried to get married herself, but it hadn't worked out. Her ex-husband thought it acceptable to drink himself to exhaustion every night at the bar, leaving her with baby twins.

That wasn't enough to drive her away, but when he began hitting them as well as she, it was time to leave.

Mwandambo had paid for her apartment, food for the children, and sometimes brought clothes for her. He bought side tables, shoes, birthday cakes, toilet paper and whatever he could manage while still remaining inconspicuous. The sex was good for her, probably better for him; he liked the fact that she was young. He thought she was sexy, he told her all the time. When she asked about his wife, he said nothing. Mwandambo didn't talk a lot.

With the twins growing up, Farzana asked Mwandambo to give her more money so that she could send them to a better school, but he had refused. She hadn't pushed the matter until those ladies at the mosque had bragged once at a party about where their children were schooling. The school the twins were going to apparently wasn't good enough. "They won't gain an advantage at that school," one woman had told Farzana. The embarrassment that Farzana had felt made her face turn red. She left the party early. The only one who she could ask was Mwandambo, he had been taking care of her for about five years. She needed him. So she decided that the only thing she could do was give him an ultimatum. She knew it was wrong, she saw the disappointment in Mwandambo's face when she did it, but she had no choice. She had her own children to think about. They didn't have a father; they needed a good education. So she cornered him. She threatened to tell Cynthia everything. The next week he died. There was no point now, now he



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was gone, she'd have to survive on her own. No more leaning on Mwandambo. Life was tough without a husband or a man to pay the bills. But she would have to do it on her own. Somehow.

As the funeral procession rolled down the street, those who didn't know Mwandambo went about their business. Sunday was generally a lazy day. Not all the shops were open. People went for picnics. Children were riding their bikes. Beggars were few because the Christians felt generous. Charlie Tucker feared for his job, Mbwana decided to take up smoking regular cigarettes, Shania prepared to go to the mosque, Cynthia's sisters took her home for lunch, Jonathan called Susanna from a payphone in the bank and Farzana accepted a ride home from a man named Dr. Thresher, a divorcee who was looking for a woman to take care of. Tomorrow would be a day of new promises.



## "Kitchen Woman"

by Serena Alibhai

"He's coming to me," Herma said. She tossed her orange hair around a plastic clip. "I just got a great text message from him last night," she said leaning into her co-worker, Marge. "This time he's really coming."

Marge stuck a fat finger into her egg sandwich. A bird swooped onto their lunch table and tried to take a fallen piece of crust. "He said he was coming in December." She looked at her watch. "It's March now."

Herma smiled. There was lipstick on the tip of her tooth. "He had trouble getting a visa. This time, he's coming. I can just picture him now: tall, gorgeous and that adorable dimple in his chin. We'll feed each other cake after dinner and spend Sundays at the park. Just in time for my birthday."

Marge tossed her sandwich down in front of her. "This sandwich isn't good. Needs more mayonnaise. More butter." By next month both she and Herma would be forty. She looked around the table and bench. "Have you seen my gloves?"

Herma picked up the yellow rubber gloves on the bench and gave them to her friend. "Dinner tonight? We can try that new place."

One of Marge's eyes started to wander. She stood up and smoothed out her apron. "I've got one hundred pastry crusts to make today. I don't think I'm leaving the

kitchen until eight - at least. I won't last that long, I'm tired as it is."

"Marge," Herma urged, "Just get Phillip to help you. This place apparently has a nice little dance floor and even an old juke box."

Marge snorted. "Oh I can just picture Philip in his suit and perfect hair in the kitchen. That's not happening. We'll have to go another time."

"Just try, I'm dying to tell you about him. I'm so excited Marge."

Marge put her hands on her hips and stared at her friend. "Get excited about it when he's here and you have a ring on your finger."

Herma shook her head. "It doesn't happen like that, Marge, you are so naïve!"

Marge pointed at herself. "*I'm* naïve? Come on, Herma. I'm not the naïve one. If anyone, it's you."

"Love isn't as easy as baking a cake. Things change sometimes and you have to alter your plans."

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about. I've got to go now, Herma. Lunch break is almost over."

Herma changed the cross on her legs. "Fine. I'll meet you in the kitchen, then."

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"You aren't coming with me?"

"No," said Herma. "I think I'll just stay here for a minute. Go ahead. I'll meet you inside."

"I can't have you not finish your custard today, Herma," Marge complained. "I always get the brunt of it from Mr. Luknow"

"Don't worry," said Herma, lighting a cigarette, "I'm almost on my way. Goodness, Marge, you talk to me as if I'm a kid or something."

Marge walked away, putting her rubber gloves on and heading for the washing room. Herma sat alone, looking at the birds flying around the egg sandwich. Herma threw it in the trashcan just as Phillip, Mr. Lucknow's son in law, walked past.

"Poor birds," said Phillip. "They could have eaten that."

"No one wants scraps. Even Marge couldn't eat it," said Herma.

Phillip sat down. He wore black pants and shirt with a collar. On his belt was a cell phone in a case. "Do you mind if I take a seat?"

Herma blushed. "I don't mind, Phillip." She extinguished her cigarette on the ground, with her eyes still on her boss.

"It's just that," Phillip said, "I wanted to ask you about your work in the kitchen."

"I've got a boatload of custard to make today. How's your wife?"

"She's still in Thailand visit-

ing her sister," Phillip said, nodding. "And the custard? It was supposed to be ready and chilled by this morning."

"I had a headache yesterday at around three o'clock. You must miss you son. But he's probably having fun in Thailand."

"You also had a job to finish yesterday at around that same time, Herma," Phillip said, rubbing his eyes.

"The pastry isn't even made. It has to cool for at least twelve hours."

"I make the schedules around here, Herma. I want the custard to sit for at least twenty hours. It's best thick. You know that."

"How much money do I really make here in this kitchen of yours?" Herma asked. "Things cost money. Houses, children, weddings," she muttered.

"Excuse me, Herma?" Phillip asked. His eyes, red, widened. "I don't believe it's your position to ask."

"It's true. I mean you and your father own this place and you get most of the money. We are the ones, Phillip," Herma said, "We are the ones who actually make the dessert and get paid not even seven dollars an hour!"

"Herma, you have a job to do."

"I know that."

"So why are you analyzing the profitability of a business you

don't even own? It's just not your place."

"Oh well, Phillip, use big words but I think it is. I have a boyfriend you know and he tells me,"

Phillip put his hand up and interrupted. "Your boyfriend is not my concern and yes you have already told me. My concerns are those sponge cakes, those glazes, and those custards. We have orders and the dessert must be made whether it's by you or someone else. Is that clear Herma?"

"Would it hurt you to even just hear what he has to say?"

"What who has to say?"

"You know very well, Phillip," Herma said, crossing her arms. The lunch bell rang.

"Your *boyfriend*, Herma?"

Herma looked at him as though he was deaf and dumb. "Yes my *boyfriend*, Phillip! Why, are you jealous?"

Phillip pressed his lips together. "I am not having this conversation with you, Herma. In fact, your lunch break is over now. The bell has rung."

"He's got a very senior position in his company. He's been working for them for the last fifteen years, ever since he was twenty-two. And before that, he went to *university!*"

"What do I care about a man I don't even know and, might I add, a man you don't even know? You, yourself, are in love with a man

you've never even seen!"

"Of course I've seen him!"

"Pictures, maybe."

"Oh now I get it," Herma said, "You heard that I met him on the Internet."

"No. You make it sound like I talk about you around town. You told me yourself."

"I knew him before. We were reunited on the Internet. You're just jealous, Philip."

"I am not! How could I be?"

"I don't know," Herma sang happily, "but you are! You say you care about custard and tarts and whatever the big order of the day is. But I know you! I know that you are interested in what happens to me!"

"You are delusional."

Herma stared at her boss. "Admit it."

"I will not, and please may I remind you once more. The lunch bell has rung and you are needed in the kitchen. You have a job, I wouldn't want you to lose it."

"Fine," said Herma. "I'll go. But think about this," she said, standing up, "How good a woman I must be for a man to quit his job and move to another country just for me. You know what they say; a woman good in the kitchen is worth double in the bedroom. Well I've spent enough time in the kitchen. I want to experience other things now."

Phillip said nothing and also stood up.

"Have you seen my hairnet?" Herma asked, checking the pockets of her smock.

"No," said Phillip, taking out his cell phone and looking into the screen.

"When's your wife coming back?"

Philip narrowed his eyebrows.

"I'm only five minutes late," said Herma, "So just relax. I'll be working the whole day. And you know I make better custard than anyone else."

Phillip nodded. "Off to work then Herma." He dialed his phone.

"Will you miss me when my boyfriend

comes?" Herma asked. She found her hair net in a pocket and squeezed it.

"You'll still be here."

"Yes, but no more talks."

"There's no harm in talking, Herma."

"I give all my attention to what I'm concentrating on, you know that, Phillip."

"Yes I do know that, Herma," said Phillip. "Then I guess I will miss our conversations."

"I know you will. And this time, no matter what anyone says, he's coming. He's coming for us. We'll get married and be together."

"Well, Herma," said Phillip. "I've got an appointment with that pastry supply guy."

"Oh, I think I know who," said Herma. "Martin."

"Yeah, Martin."

Phillip watched Herma waddle to the kitchen, stuffing her short hair into the hairnet. Just then, Phillip's phone connected with Martin.

"That was odd," said Martin on the other end of the line. "I could hear what you were saying."

"But the phone just connected now."

"I could hear. I think it was Herma saying that she knew me."

"Is that all you heard?"

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"Maybe a little more. She's a good cook anyways."

"She's got the promise of a new boyfriend."

"Ah, the anticipation of love is often better than love itself."

"Maybe," answered Philip.

And then, as Martin began to talk, Phillip found himself salivating. He pictured creamy sweet custard inside flaky pastry. If only the custard pies made tomorrow at the shop could have come from his kitchen at home.



## "Lucky Bones" by T. R. Healy

---

Slowly Santangelo cruised Greenbriar Boulevard as he did nearly every evening, his eyes gleaming in the approaching headlights. His face, round as his steering wheel, was creased in concentration. On the tape deck Pavarotti sang the "Nessum Dorma" aria, and, brashly, he sang along with the powerful tenor in his own scratchy voice. He knew the music by heart, having listened to recordings of the Puccini opera since he was a youngster. Alone at night, behind the wheel of his truck, he often pretended he was on a stage somewhere performing one aria after another before thousands of appreciative fans. Sometimes, after he returned home, his voice was so hoarse he had to gargle saltwater for a few minutes.

Up ahead, approximately a quarter of a mile, Santangelo noticed a purple station wagon parked on the shoulder of the road. At once, he turned down the volume of the Pavarotti tape, moved into the inside lane, and pulled up behind the station wagon. The hazard lights were flashing but no one was inside the vehicle.

"Hello?" he called out as he climbed out of his truck with a flashlight.

No one answered.

He switched on the flashlight and walked toward the station wagon. "Is anyone here?" he called in a louder voice.

A moment passed, then a branch snapped sharply as a gangly figure in a Marine field jacket stepped from behind a walnut tree at the edge of the shoulder. "Yes? Is there something I can do for

you?"

"You having some car trouble?"

The man, spotting the revolving light of the tow truck behind his station wagon, smiled and shook his shaggy head. "No. My car's fine. I just stopped to collect some walnuts for my wife to bake a pie."

"Oh. I saw your hazard lights were on so I figured I'd stop to see if you needed some help."

"I didn't want anyone to hit my car while I was out here," he explained curtly. "But I appreciate your concern."

"Sure thing."

Santangelo snapped off the flashlight and returned to his truck, revved the engine, and slowly rattled past the smiling walnut picker. Faintly he nodded at him, disappointed that the man's station wagon was not on his hook. When he saw those hazard lights, he thought for sure he had found some work tonight. Maybe around the next bend, he told himself without much confidence, maybe he would spot a stalled car there. Instinctively he turned up the volume of the tape deck and, louder than ever, accompanied Pavarotti.

Some forty minutes later, on the opposite side of the road, another car appeared with its lights flashing and its hood raised. Santangelo smiled, figuring he might earn a few dollars after all tonight. He moved into the left lane and started to cross the faded dividing line when he noticed in his rearview mirror a tow truck blazing hard down the road toward the broken-down car. Immediately his smile dissolved,

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with the corners of his mouth curling into a familiar scowl. Most likely it was one of Shadbolt's trucks since the used car dealer owned more tow trucks than anyone in town. When people had problems with their vehicles, they usually called Shadbolt because he had been in the towing business for close to fifteen years. His name and telephone number were plastered on benches and billboards throughout the community.

He did not stay around to find out if it was one of Shadbolt's trucks, though, but continued up the road, his singing reduced to a raspy growl that was barely audible above the drone of his engine.

\*

Santangelo moved to the state last spring with his sister and her husband who quickly found domestic work at a small beach resort. Unable to find anything for himself, he made his way up the coast in search of employment in his clattering truck. Someone he met at a diner along the way suggested that Spanish Head might offer some opportunities because its population had increased significantly in the past decade. So he arrived there nearly four months ago, but discovered that it did not offer much more business than any of the other places he had visited.

Night after night he cruised the narrow streets, hoping to find drivers having car trouble before they had a chance to call Shadbolt. Many nights he was fortunate to find even one job so he supported himself by washing cars during the day at a rental agency around the corner from the bus depot. If his prospects did not improve pretty soon, he knew he would have to move elsewhere to find decent work.

\*

Among all the bills Santangelo received in his mailbox a few days later was a stiff green envelope that appeared as if it contained a greeting card. His birthday was not for another five months, though, and he could not think of any holiday around this time of year. It had a Spanish Head postmark. Quickly he opened it and removed a plain yellow card. Inside, printed with a black marking pen, was a brief message: "You know what you did and soon everyone will." There was no signature. Frowning, he leaned back from the breakfast counter, idly tracing a thumb across the corner of the envelope where there should have been a return address.

Near the end of the week a postcard of an illuminated lighthouse appeared in the mail, also unsigned, and it said, "The only luck you deserve is bad."

Another came the following day of an enormous walrus with a cryptic message: "Rattle your own bones."

Three days later he received another lighthouse card. "Go back where you came from thief!" it said in letters nearly as high as the illuminated lighthouse.

\*

Each time he received a card his anger deepened, he felt more confused and frustrated, aware that he was the target of a diligent campaign to get him out of the area. He really didn't want to leave Spanish Head, he had left so many other places already in the past year, but he didn't know how he could remain in the face of such hostility. Eventually he became so distraught that he felt he had to tell someone about the strange cards. The person he knew better than anyone in

town was Freddy Knox, the manager of the rental agency where he washed cars, so one day after work he slipped into his closet of an office and showed him the cards, including the most recent one of a striped beach umbrella with just a single word on it: "Thief!"

"Excuse me, Vincent, but I don't understand," Knox said after going through the postcards.

"Neither do I, frankly."

"The word thief is mentioned twice. What are you supposed to have taken?"

His shoulders twitched as if he were shrugging off a heavy overcoat, though all he was wearing was a nylon windbreaker. "I'm not sure. But my hunch is that it might have something to do with the line about rattling bones."

Knox glared at him, obviously confused. "How's that?"

"There was a report on the radio about some cemetery at the north end of town being vandalized the other week."

"Oh, right, the old gypsy graveyard. I read about that in the newspaper."

"I guess whoever is sending me the cards thinks I had something to do with it."

"That's preposterous."

"Of course it is, but that's the only explanation I can come up with."

Knox remained confused. "Why, in God's name, would anyone think that?"

"According to the report I heard, some folks believe gypsy bones are lucky and dig them up because they require a change of luck in their lives," he explained, jangling the tip money in his pocket. "I can't deny I could use a change in my fortunes and I guess someone in town thinks I am desperate enough to dig up some

## The Blotter

gypsy's bones to get it. I can assure you I'm not, though. The whole idea is repellent to me."

"I always figured it was up to people to make their own luck."

"I couldn't agree more."

"You have any idea who sent you these postcards?" Knox asked after a short pause. "Who might have thought you capable of such vandalism?"

Santangelo, sighing, gritted his teeth. "Someone who wants me to leave town evidently."

"And who would that be, Vincent?"

"Maybe someone who doesn't appreciate the presence of another tow truck operator in town."

"You think Shadbolt sent you these cards?"

"Maybe not him personally, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was someone who works for him."

"God, I can't believe anyone would do something that despicable."

"Neither can I," Santangelo muttered. "But you've seen the postcards."

"Indeed I have."

"And I'll probably continue to get them until I finally pack my belongings and leave town."

"I hope not."

"So do I, Freddy."

\*

A second cousin of Freddy's was a freelance photographer who often had his photographs published in the afternoon paper, and as Santangelo hoped he would, Freddy told him about the harassment the car washer had recently experienced. That same day the photographer came out to the rental agency and asked to take Santangelo's picture standing in front of his battered tow truck. A couple of days later the picture appeared in the paper, along  
[www.blotterrag.com](http://www.blotterrag.com)

with a brief story describing the menacing postcards Santangelo had received. Nothing was mentioned of his suspicion that Shadbolt or someone connected to him was responsible for sending the cards, but the story did convey his strong belief that someone wanted to put him out of business and force him to leave town. Also, the telephone number for his towing service was printed beside his picture.

He was amazed at the kind words of encouragement offered to him by others in his apartment house, including some he barely knew. Even customers whose cars he washed seemed more cordial, offering tips as generous as their smiles. More importantly, after his picture appeared, he began to get calls from people who needed their vehicles towed. Almost too many at first, with calls coming in sometimes before he was able to respond to ones he had already received, but someone he managed to take care of everyone who required his assistance. Soon, he suspected, he would no longer have to wash cars to pay his bills because he was getting so much work. Then he could be on call during the day as well.

Late one evening, as Santangelo hooked a decrepit Subaru to the winches of his truck, the driver mentioned that she had read the story about him in the paper and had copied down his telephone number in case of an emergency. "But I never thought I'd be needing it so soon, however," she laughed anxiously.

"That's the thing about emergencies," he said, tugging a cable until it was taut. "You never know when they are going to happen."

"Are you still getting those strange postcards?"

"No, not since I was written up in the paper. But I suppose they

could start up again anytime."

"I certainly hope not," she said, climbing into the passenger seat.

"So do I."

"It's not right for someone to be forced to leave town and I, for one, hope you don't yield to that kind of pressure."

"I appreciate that, ma'am."

After he towed her car home, he cruised the streets for another hour then returned to his apartment. He was bone-tired, having towed six cars and a small panel truck tonight, and cracked open a Coors and plopped down on the couch. He thought again of the supportive owner of the Subaru, convinced that as long as there were people like her he would never have to leave town. Smiling faintly, he sipped his beer. When he was through he crushed the can in his left hand, got up, and threw it into the waste basket. He then went over to the drawer where he kept the kitchen knives and pulled it out and removed a short stack of beach postcards he had purchased the other month at a drugstore. He glanced at the glossy lighthouses and sunsets for a minute then, confident he would no longer need them, tore the cards in half and threw them away too.



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## "Five-second Faith"

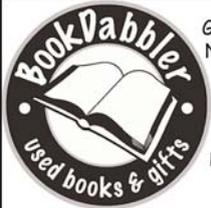
by F. D. Marcel

In passing, five seconds to look into her eyes and fall in love, and we're shuffled back into the maze of people, of crowds, of modern times. Five seconds for me to remember her face, for her to remember mine, for the pictures of a wedding band and children and a joint bank account and a minivan to all flood through my head in a dizzying spiral. And five seconds to look over her body and let my mind wander into that particular daydream. Five seconds over phonelines and cable modems, five seconds for the S&P to drop five points and five seconds for unleaded gas to reach a new high before the weekend. In the time it takes for someone else to die in the middle east, for genetics to take a step forward, for the American dream to make its comeback, for death on the highway in the evening rush as we watch the wreck from the news helicopter. In the time it takes for conception to an old FM radio song, for a fetus and its song of clinical finality. In the time it takes to breathe of fresh air, to blink and miss a shooting star, to ignore a cry for help, to overdose on a batch from a new dealer, to die on a Friday and return on a Monday, to hum the first few notes of all everlasting atoms and what it feels like to be alive. And five seconds to forget her and, in passing, five seconds to look into new eyes and fall in love and we're shuffled back.

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### “Five Minutes With - Firoozeh Dumas”

The bookstore that I constantly trouble – MARKET STREET BOOKS in Chapel Hill, NC – has a practice of letting me browse their advance reader copies, those editions sent by publishers for independent bookstore personnel to peruse, with the hope that they make buying decisions. This seems to me to be the next level of slush-pile for the aspiring author, or the semi-successful career writer. How in the world can a writer weather the initial mind-breaking work of writing only to be confronted with the query-letter hurdle, the agent-seeking-a-publisher hurdle, the publisher seeking-shelf-space hurdle? It is too much. I find myself enthusiastic, therefore, about looking for gems on this little metal cart in my bookstore. I tell myself look past the cover – it’s not finalized. Read more than the prerequisite 30 pages that I give every book I decide to begin (a piece of advice given to me long ago by a wise teacher). Maybe the book wasn’t meant for you, but perhaps you can still find something good about it.

Firoozeh Dumas is the author of one of these little gems, a collection of memoir-essays called *Laughing Without an Accent* (to be released 04/2008 by Villard Books). Sitting on the couch at MSB, I began leafing through it thinking that I might pass it on to my wife. Surely, it was a chick-lit thing. But, I didn’t put it down. I head out the door, marking my spot with my thumb, as I drove to school to pick up the girls. I sat outside at the picnic tables, reading about Ms Dumas’ observations

about growing up Iranian, then coming to America, her going to college, her married life. Normal stuff, with a cultural twist. Yes. My mom would like this, I thought, these slices of life. I was going to put it down, but didn’t, sitting instead in the car reading while the girls played on the swings, coming over to me only for a cheese stick and a gulp of water, then running back to climb the slide or pull dandelions. And I’ll be damned if I didn’t laugh, a lot, to the point where I decided to find Ms Dumas and ask her a couple of questions. Her agent (see hurdle one) passed my e-mail immediately on to her.

Ed: Thanks for talking with us. In one essay in *Laughing Without an Accent* you mention drinking black tea. Personally, we like strong Keemun or Lapsang Souchong, (which my wife, unfortunately, finds as foul as drain cleaner). What kind of tea do you prefer and how do you take it?

F.D.: I like all kinds because I love the ritual of having tea. The idea of having to slow down and wait for something to cool is just what we need in this hurried culture. This would be a more sane society if we all stopped in the middle of the day, waited for our tea to cool and had a conversation or two.

Having said that, I tend to drink black tea with a little bit of milk, which is not Middle Eastern at all. But if invited to have a cup of tea with someone, I am more than happy to drink anything, even something that tastes like drain

cleaner. Accompanied by a good conversation, drain cleaner is not that bad.

Ed: We think that the world is divided into two groups – folks who understand that “family” is more important than any of the trouble that people who are related to each other bring to the table, and people who let that trouble divide them permanently. How and why do you maintain “family” with all of its headaches?

F.D.: This is a good question. The only way for someone to understand that family is worth the headaches is by having experienced the comfort that comes with having that safety net. There is no way that my family would have survived in America were it not for the emotional ties we have with one another. Believe me, I would sell some of my relatives on eBay if I could, but even those annoying ones, the ones that I try to avoid at family gatherings, they have added something to my life. I have learned something from each and every one. As a result of having a big, close-knit family, I am more empathetic and hopefully, a bit wiser.

Ed: Your stories rang true for us – my mom drives my younger sister crazy sometimes (never me, of course) and my younger sister drives my older sister crazy (again, never me, of course). Is there someone who has the responsibility of being a “diplomatic corps” in your own family, one that goes between family members, trying to clarify, make peace, etc?

F.D.: Absolutely! In my extended family, my father is the peacemaker. He is always reminding everyone that forgiveness is a gift

we give ourselves and that carrying a grudge is a complete waste of time and energy. He really annoys me, especially when I'm in the middle of feeling justifiably angry. But he's right. Darn it.

Ed: I remember the revolution and the "hostage situation" in the late 1970's — I was in college at the time and there wasn't much else to watch on TV while I studied my Shakespeare except M\*A\*S\*H (which may explain why I think that there is a character in *King Lear* named "Trapper John"). We all were so frustrated because it seemed that the whole country of Iran was angry with us personally. And being brilliant scholars every one, we tended to treat the situation as if it was a football game, or some kind of physics equation, aggression requires aggressive response. I was quite moved to read that your father was appalled by the hatred coming across in the news-film footage from his countrymen, particularly because my own father, typically a gentle man, occasionally let his anger get the better of him, although it may have been the pre-empting of his TV shows by the "Hostage Crisis" news shows that came on in the evening. Your thoughts?

F.D.: The whole hostage crisis set me up for becoming a writer. It was so strange to suddenly find myself hated by all of America. The hostages were not in my garage but that did not seem to make any difference.

I learned that for most people, it's easy to jump on that hatred bandwagon. It makes people feel like they're doing something, but it's toxic and we all suffer from it. Most Americans don't realize that there is

no freedom of speech in Iran so you don't hear any dissent. Believe me, it's there.

This is why I spend all my time writing and speaking on the lecture circuit. I know that our commonalities far, far outweigh our differences but most people don't know that. They think of Iranians as "the other," the bad guys in the *James Bond* movie. If only life were that black and white! In the meantime, I will keep talking and writing and hope that my words make people pause, and think.

Ed: Oops, sorry, out of time.  
F.D.: Thanks again for telling your readers about my book. I really, really appreciate it.




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### “Kiss The Pig”

by Dick Michener

---

As dusk enveloped the Great Smoky Mountains on an early spring evening, my wife Sandy and I watched preachers running back and forth atop a high ridge. We also watched doctors doing the same thing as, seated inside the spacious gym at a local high school, we attended an annual “Jawbones/Sawbones” charity basketball game. Jawbones signified preachers, while Sawbones represented doctors.

As Sandy and I entered the crowded facility, an usher directed us to sit with the preacher fans in the eastern stands. We wondered if we should feel complimented or insulted. The preachers had more supporters than the doctors, whose fans kept their decibel levels higher. On the southern wall of the gym hung a huge logo, nearly the size of the scoreboard, depicting the school mascot, a mountain man. Dressed in gray clothing and sporting a gray hat, he resembled a Confederate soldier without the military markings.

The game unfolded briskly as preachers and doctors of various ages displayed a portion of their former skills. They took the contest more seriously than the spectators, who hurled good-natured jibes down at players and referees.

The preachers had trouble playing as a team, except for five minute stretches at the beginning of the first and the third quarters. Unified, they outscored the more athletic doctors. However, five minutes seemed to be the maximum

limit for preachers from different denominations to work together toward a common goal. Picture a lineup comprised of free-will guards, predestination forwards, and a holiness center.

The preachers exhibited consistent form in only one aspect of their play. They rushed to smite the opposition with hard fouls which, in a regular game, might have resulted in technicals. One doctor, tomahawked from behind, leapt off the floor toward a preacher’s face. Fortunately, this doctor remembered he had been raised never to slug a preacher.

Sandy and I did marvel at the appearance of the doctors, who wore braces and tape on various portions of their anatomies. We debated whether most of them were combating injuries or practicing preventive medicine.

Except for one player, the doctors had more fun than the preachers. That exceptional doctor remained swift and skilled. However, a ferocious glint in his eyes and a fierce set to his jaw indicated that, if left in the game for too long, he might become dangerous. Most of the time, his posture and his behavior mirrored a doctor’s reaction when besieged by incompetent representatives of an intrusive HMO. Sometimes, he embarked on a search and destroy mission against the opposition who may have mutated, in his mind, from a band of preachers into a pack of malpractice attorneys.

The other doctors enjoyed themselves on court, methodically passing the ball around on offense, and switching back and forth on defense. On the bench, they solicited applause and waves from all the spectators. Two of their oldest members gave lovely glimpses of earlier styles of play. One retained a soft touch with his sideline jumpers, even if his vertical leap had vanished. Another made several reasonable facsimiles of sky hooks.

A few young preachers resembled basketball clones of Will Rogers, never having met a shot they didn’t like. Although trained to love the Lord, they liked Mike (Michael Jordan, that is). However, their flashy dunks and drives produced few baskets and many turnovers. Sandy and I knew the preachers were doomed when, in the middle of the third quarter, their fans began to shout: “Lord, have mercy!” Although these fans would have stayed for the entirety of a Sunday service, they streamed toward the exits early in the fourth quarter.

The highly anticipated “Kiss the Pig” segment took place between the third and the fourth quarters. Individuals had collected contributions for the privilege of kissing a piglet. A clown led the top eight fund raisers to center court, and all of them, to universal acclaim, took their opportunity to shower affection upon the lucky victim. Sandy and I thought he should have been replaced by one baby-face preacher, a voracious ball hog. Given the local economy, it also would have been appropriate for the finalists to kiss ramp, gin-seng, or tourists.

The final result of the game did not concern which team won and by what margin. Instead, it involved the amount of money raised for a children's advocacy group. Our county has the highest reported incidence of child abuse in our state, but that's another story.



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We won't publish your whole name.

mermaid@blotterra.com

In a walk-down basement beneath the mall is a small room, surrounded by the plumbing mains, and storage for holiday decorations. The room's doors push open and I see instead that it is an elevator, with room for one adult and a handful of children, who pile in behind me. We begin our descent, nine undocumented flights of unmeasured depth. I feel my claustrophobia kick in, except that when I look up I can still see the light from the basement shining down on us. The kids are excited, they seem to know where we are going, some kind of Dr Doolittle and Willy Wonka meet Journey To The Center Of The Earth place, carved out of the bedrock long before the mall's construction. The elevator shudders to a halt and we open the doors. It's snowing, but the snow is not cold. There are already people here, children playing, middle-aged women working in a farmhouse kitchen making biscuits, and a Captain Kangaroo's Mr. Green-Jeans man sitting on the front porch, hard at work repairing an old radio, for what purpose I cannot fathom because we are certainly too deep for any reception. There is Easter candy everywhere, and little birds that have either been brought here, or took the elevator inadvertently. The children immediately understand the situation, and begin eating biscuits or candy or making snow forts. I step out of the elevator and see that the room extends off to the horizon, with perfectly hidden cloudy-day lighting and hills that hide the support walls of the cavern. There is room in the farm-house for finding a couch to relax on while the kids play, and everything smells like a winter morning just after breakfast.

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## **“Transcontinental”**

**by Tosha Rachelle Taylor**

I've never been to California.  
I always imagined it as the edge of the earth,  
that ships sail off a watery cliff  
into eternity and planes crash into  
a blood-brick wall, carefully disguised  
as sky. I've never seen West Coast sand.  
About California, O West-Bound Baby,  
I never knew a goddamn thing.  
I spent my first years  
looking at hurricane trees, not fault lines.  
California? Oregon?

—Where? The flight  
to Bangkok stops in Istanbul, not  
Los Angeles. After China come  
the volcanoes, the fiery island ends.  
The Eastern seas bleed into some great  
blue god called Pacific; his mouth  
is a waterfall to nowhere.

It's the Atlantic that has ever held  
my heart, that hermaphroditic deity,  
bridging moist, leafy clime  
to clime, pale north to pale north.  
The first man, that child of light,  
might have once walked from  
the Egyptian deserts to the emerald  
jungles of Brazil, sipping  
from the great Atlantic river before  
it grew so pregnant it covered his footsteps  
and bisected his nascent empire.  
It was a finger of the Atlantic in which  
Ophelia drowned. Her last breath  
—a shaking sigh, a trembling  
whimper of a sigh, like a virgin trying  
to reach orgasm—blew air into  
the water that fed into the shores  
of Morocco and Greece.

## **“What Remains”**

**by Lynn Ingram**

He smiles a lot now,  
almost all the time,  
when someone speaks to him.  
He never speaks back.  
The words are gone.  
The ones for sentences, anyway.  
But he sings all the praise songs in church,  
all the ones he knew  
before the neurons began to die.  
And he says the Lord's Prayer,  
every word.  
Amen.

She told me last week  
that he wants to dance now.  
She has learned that a certain look,  
a certain few motions  
mean “I want to dance with you.”  
So she puts a record on the player,  
and she goes to him,  
and he holds her in his arms.  
And they dance.  
They just dance.

## CONTRIBUTORS

**Serena Alibhai** lives in Tanzania and has been published in literary magazines such as *Thema*, *Eclectica*, *The Sink*, *Red China* and *Me Three*, as well as the newspaper *Coastweek Kenya*. She has a degree in English Literature from McGill University in Canada.

Portland, Oregon's **T. R. Healy** was born and raised in the Pacific Northwest, and his stories have appeared in such journals as *Blink*, *Bent Pin Quarterly*, *The Flask Review*, and *riverbabble*.

**Josh Taylor** resides in Chapel Hill, is a stay-at-home Dad, writes and illustrates children's books, dotes on the Tar Heel basketball team, made our cover especially for this month's anniversary issue. Click to his website, [www.joshtaylorart.com](http://www.joshtaylorart.com), and see the awfully cool stuff he can do. Buy a tee-shirt while you're at it, willya?

**F.D. Marcél** began his career as a staff correspondent for the Reading Eagle newspaper. His work has appeared in various publications, both online and in print, including *The Centrifugal Eye*, *Getgo Magazine* and *Zygote In My Coffee*, as well as upcoming work in *Cherry Bleeds*, *decomp* and *The Outsider Writers' Lit Circus*. When not wandering North America aimlessly, he can be found sleeping comfortably somewhere between Memphis, TN and Philadelphia, PA.

**Dick Michener** is from Waynesville, NC. He says of his story, "like most of my work, it tackles serious subjects but leavens them with humor. My columns, essays, and stories have been published so far in the USA, Canada, Australia, and England. No books yet, but I am working on that."

**Tosha Rachelle Taylor** of Woodlawn, Virginia writes, "I am a senior in the BFA program at Radford University and recently placed first in the *2007 Nan Lacy Poetry Chapbook Competition*. I have previously been published in *Exit 109*."

**Lynn Ingram** picked up **The Blotter** for the first time last month at UNCW. She writes, "I like it. A lot...I've been a writer, off and on, for a long time, made a living freelancing for about 10 years, doing some stuff I loved and a lot I didn't, and I quit and did other things. One of those other things is being a grad student...and another is having finally published a book this fall, (*Necessary Things*) through Main Street Rag." Her work has also appeared in *Sasee*, *The Charlotte Observer*, *Progressive Farmer* and *Lake Wylie Magazine*. Her first book of poetry, *The edge of light*, will be published this summer. A native of Cheraw, S.C., she now lives on Oak Island, in southeastern N.C.

Well...thanks. A lot.

*One Final Note:* Speaking of thanks, we haven't thanked everyone recently. So, thank you to...everyone - you readers and authors and artists, our faithful advertisers, Marty and Robin, Lewis and Brace, the gang at the Market St. Books, John-The-Webmaster, you FOBs (Friends Of the Blotter) who listen no matter what, the Poker Gang, the graduating classes of all our institutions of higher learning, Go Heels, Dogs, Pack, Devils, Horns, the confoundedly disenfranchised (bless you all and good luck on your finals and trust me, don't take a job you don't love doing), my folks, and K and the girls.

And hey, we're putting together a heck of a fiction contest with a cool prize. As soon as it's...I don't know...eighty-percent jelled I promise I'll let you know what's going down.

Meanwhile put on your sunscreen, get plenty of rest, don't lose your glasses again, eat all of your vegetables, and those Brussels Sprouts on your sister's plate as well, get someone to tie your shoes in a double-knot, cross at the green - not in-between, and close the refrigerator door, you're letting all the cold out.

How was that, Mom?

g

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