

*Way too close for our own good. Dona Nova; Phil Juliano's 'toons;
Five Minutes With and The Dream Journal.*

The Blotter

June 2009

MAGAZINE



THE SOUTH'S UNIQUE, FREE, INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE AND ARTS MAGAZINE

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The Blotter is a production of
The Blotter Magazine, Inc.,
Durham, NC.
A 501 (c)3 non-profit
ISSN 1549-0351
www.blotterrag.com

"Death of a Friend"

I have trouble with relationships. I haven't spoken to my best friend from childhood in a couple of years. My college buddies and I have only recently connected once again, via e-mails filled with snarky juvenile humor and metaphorical wedgies. My old co-workers and I rarely touch base. My poker group finally played poker last month after a year of failed plans, hemming and hawing. So the truth is that most of my regular friends hang out at the bookstore. Hanged out. Hung out. Because the good old bookstore is going out of business. Will have closed by the time you read this. This is the bookstore where I sat and talked with my friends, drank my coffee, perused my reading material, read your stories and poems and essays. Where The Blotter issues were planned. Where our little literary endeavor was discussed, displayed prominently, found new readers, and received both constructive criticism and compliment in appropriate proportions.

So what do you do when your place – that comfortable, lived-in hangout of yours, goes away? The place itself was one of the old, best friends. I could pull wireless from someone's un-firewalled network, and do my e-mail and other work. Two old couches were positioned in the springtime-morning sunshine, and I warmed my old alligator bones. By summer, this same seat would be shady and cool while the rest of North Carolina baked. Who else went to such Inca-exact-calendar lengths to ensure my comfort? No one. Ceiling fans turned the air, a speaker somewhere behind the counter dribbled Thelonus Monk or The Dixie Dregs or "Shotgun Wedding" out into the ether, not intruding on my thoughts, just tickling them. Folks came in, looked around, found what they were looking for. Just sitting there, we asked otherwise strangers questions. *And what sort of novel are you looking for? How old is your sister?* (the one who wants the novel, I mean.) *Does she like history? Ah, she reads young adult fiction? How about Markus Zusak's "The Book Thief"?*

We talked a lot. About books and authors and music and art. What we heard on the radio. Politics. The socio-economics of Publishing. How Harry Potter changed everything. Why "The Kite Runner" is different from anything by Jody Picoult. Sometimes we grabbed a little *nosh* from the grocery down the street and nibbled hummus on hunks of baguette and just smiled at how nice a day can really be when you enjoy what you're doing and you're hanging out with people you like. On Mondays a guy came in with his Tai-Chi class, little old ladies quietly bending and shaping energy in a corner of the store-that-wasn't-really-a-store. On Tuesdays women painted, or young people from the University did spoken-word. Fridays parents brought their kids pajama'd and teeth brushed for a story before bed. Saturdays we played with modeling clay, or listened to Trinity singing old-timey music or leaned back and let a poet talk to us. Mostly we hung out on the couch and wondered at how nice it is to do something you enjoy with friends. We recommended to each other. We bought books, took them home and read them, then came back to shout about how "House of Leaves" or "The Raw Shark Texts" bend all of the rules of fiction writing.

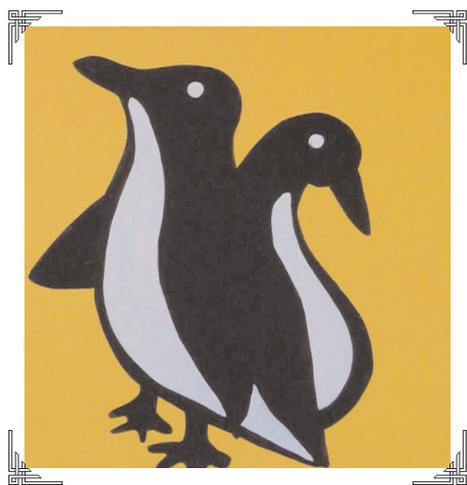
We partied together, because a good fifty-percent or so of any party is "location". And you must know that I'm telling you the truth: remember how much it sucked trying to have a party in your dorm because someone wanted to study in their room? *Please go to the library, Susan, won't you? Pleeeeze?* Well, where else but our bookstore could you get an entire day dedicated to Marshmallow Peeps? Or "Displaced Northerner's

Cuisine”? Or have raucous book launches. (I’m going to miss canapés, I’ll tell you that for nothing.) Or what other bookstore would just have a potluck supper for no reason and invite anyone that came in the door? No other. On a sunny day, the bookstore was a shady, happy place. On a rainy day, it was a nice dry island in the storm. It felt like it was just walking-distance from home, like the old days when everything was just walking-distance. Get yourself a cup of coffee, have a seat. What’s new with you?

We didn’t do anything wrong. The world changed, in insidious ways that we probably could have predicted, argued about, scoffed at, but not prevented. There’s no one to blame, and that’s a bit frustrating. Always nice to have someone to hang in effigy, I suppose. But this is just an *oh, well*, thing. I don’t know where I’ll go now, to sit and think and talk. There’s a coffee shop nearby, but that’s different. No one wants to talk with a stranger in a coffee shop, someone with which you have nothing in common except, well, coffee. But when you’re in a bookstore, and there’s someone else there — a complete stranger otherwise — you can begin to intelligently assume important things you have in common. That you both read, that you probably like books, and depending on what shelf they’re perusing, that you may like similar genres. And how’s that for cutting to the friendship chase?

Now where am I supposed to get my books? From the Internet? From the big-box store? Who that I know and trust is going to give me advice? How can I browse? The Library? *If you don’t stop talking, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.*

When I graduated from high-school — way back when — I just wasn’t ready. Hadn’t made good plans, wasn’t prepared for the plans I did make. There was so much more I should have done while I could. I had so much more to say to my friends, who were now scattering on the four winds. I felt like I’d taken them for granted. I feel that way now, as the doors will soon close, as people will need to find other jobs, as the magic of the place dissipates. I’ll probably hang around outside for a couple of weeks, like a homeless man, my laptop open, pulling un-firewalled wireless, sullenly checking my e-mail, staring unhappily at the glare on my screen.



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The Blotter Magazine, Inc. (again, a 501(c)3 non-profit) is published in the first half of each month and enjoys a free circulation throughout the Southeast and some other places, too. Submissions are always welcome, as are ad inquiries.

Subscriptions are offered as a premium for a donation of \$25 or more. Send check or money order, name and address to The Blotter Subscriptions, 1010 Hale Street, Durham, NC 27705. Back issues are also available, 5 for \$5. Inquire re. same by e-mail: chief@blotterrag.com.



CAUTION

A pleasant little thematic element, unpretentious yet woodsy, with floral overtones and a fruity bouquet.

The Blotter

“Turtle Bite”

by Garrison Somers

Mrs. Caxton's house was way across a bluebonnet field that her husband prepared every winter, broadcasting horse dung with his old orange Massey tractor. Wrapped up in his Grand-dad's old barn-coat, Jericho had watched while the fertilizer was shoveled by colored men from the back of an old deuce-and-a-half Jimmy onto Mr. Caxton's driveway like a strange Christmas gift. Now, in May, when the breeze blew right, you could smell the field of flowers, and the generations of manure helping them bloom. A good pungent summery perfume – fair enough trade for the holiday horseshit pong. The other day Jericho had glanced out the kitchen-sink window to see on Mrs. Caxton walking her field, waist deep, her hands stretched out and palms down, patting the sky-and-ocean-blue wildflowers like they were her children's heads. This morning, however, she was probably at Sunday-school. She didn't attend church service, but she loved Sunday-school, as she had told him on the occasions when they stood on line together at the HEB grocery.

Between the bluebonnets and Jericho's small side yard was a cow pond, its water still winter-cold. The limestone hills, Grandma told him long ago, were capricious with their hidden springs trickling frigidly to the surface. Jericho could remember no cows, but there must have been once, for the slopes down to the pond were unencumbered by Russian Olive or cattails, evidence of regular tromping

by cloven hooves.

Jericho's other next-door neighbor, Mrs. Arnette, hid her small, neat house behind rows of carefully planted broomstraws and jack pines that struggled mightily with the Texas sun and heat to give her privacy. Out of his bathroom-sink window Jericho sometimes saw her staring hands-on-hips from her side porch at his ramshackle shot-gun house, of which she seemed to disapprove mightily. Well, he thought. Fair's fair. Call us all the busybodies we are. *Could you please put curtains on your windows?* her look said. *And paint – you know, paint?* Although she never told him directly to clean up his act. Jericho supposed that Mrs. Arnette believed in discretion as the better part of sensibility. She couldn't be too pleased about the flower-horseshit stink from the Caxton's bluebonnet field, either, but he suspected that she would take on a mouthful of it before she'd mention anything to them.

Mrs. Arnette thought he was gay. This tid-bit came from Willard who worked short-order at the burger-and-Coke place near the turn for the airport road, where they were thinking of building a Wal-Mart despite everyone in town's apparent unhappiness with the idea. Long ago, Willard and he had gone to high school at the same time, although not together as friends.

“She sez she thinks that you're one of those ‘Things’” Willard had said.

“Things?” Jericho repeated.

“Yeah, that's what she calls

them homosexes. Things. Can you believe it?” Willard was scraping the grill with what looked like a sandpaper block, so he didn't see Jericho's look of bemused astonishment, not so much at being considered gay, but by Willard's own choice of pronoun. “She don't understand, 'cause you moved away and then came back, and you're not married and she aint sure what-all you do for a living.”

“Hmmm,” Jericho said, nodding slowly as he waited for his Frito-pie, because he couldn't think of anything more to say to that. Had Willard always suspected he was gay? Was Willard himself gay and looking for...validation? Jericho was a writer. What's not to understand?

He sat on the porch and rocked in Grandma's old chair. The rocker was comfortable but rickety; he'd had to fasten a couple of the leg supports with carpet tacks where they had wriggled out of their sockets with long use. Summer's humidity and the dry of winter shifting everything around were going to break the chair, eventually. He'd tried a new rocker for size, at the I-20 Cracker Barrel on the way to Dallas, but it was made in China for some stranger's bottom. He guessed that, like the chair, he was well on his own way to being broken by the seasons. He wondered what would come of letting the weather and time and circumstances push him around until parts of him, invisible maybe or perhaps not so, started to fall off or snap away in the wind. Wasn't that how he'd ended up here? The house had also been his grandmother's and he hadn't changed it too much. A place should eventually become yours, he thought. If there is a you at all.



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The bookshelf in the hallway between the living room and the kitchen still had a rank of Reader's Digest Condensed Books, with their faux leather bindings listing the three or four novels contained within that had been heartlessly sliced like some Latvian Jew on Mengele's operating table. He couldn't imagine actually reading one, but hadn't put them in Grandma's old garbage pail in the kitchen. Maybe he'd do away with them one at a time so the garbage men didn't start the rumor.

"You know, he's a writer and he's one of those things, and he burns books."

"He burns books? The fiend."

"Well, not actually. But he throws them out in the garbage, and you know that can only lead to burning 'em."

"My God, you're right!"

Jericho stood and brushed the hitchhikers from his pants, and went in to get a cold drink. It was hot in the parlor, because Grandma's house had only a window unit air conditioner, and it was an ancient hulking Westinghouse that was noisy and drank electricity like Kerouac slugged gen-u-wine bust-head. Jericho saved it

for the nights when he was thinking too much and the air was death-still, and he still needed to finish a couple of pages to make his daily quota. Then the thing's white noise — like a city bus parked outside — was an escape and the cool air blew over him until he could burrow down under the old mothball-smelling quilt that he'd found on a closet shelf.

There had been few real surprises when he moved in. In one cabinet, however, it appeared as if his grandmother had been squirreling away her lifetime one small trinket at a time. Here was a child's shoebox, the cardboard as fragile as graham crackers, which held ranks of old bakelite roll-on deodorant tubes. At first he thought that Grandma had saved them because they were Grand-dad's, from his days as an industrial abrasives salesman, on the road trying to market sand in a desert. But the box was inordinately heavy, as if it had a magic false bottom full of lead. He hefted one of the deodorant containers, and then twisted off the top. Silver dollars spilled into his lap, with that satisfying clinkity-clink that old silver coins have which makes newly minted money

seem like crappy children's toys made in Taiwan. Another twisted top revealed similar results. Holy Guacamole! Jericho had thought, as he counted the coins. He netted a couple grand selling them to a dealer, who gently explained that Jericho would never get retail for them. Then a phone call from a friend back in the city taught him that for crying out loud he should have sold them on E-Bay, that he would have been happy to help him with setting up an account, and how Jericho could have made about fourteen per coin, depending of course on age and quality. Anybody knew that, said the faceless voice of his friend. So Jericho decided not to talk about it anymore, because he'd been pleased with his discovery, and he was starting to feel a niggling resentment at not getting enough money for them, and hadn't they been pennies from heaven, so to speak. Instead, he kept Grandma's cabinet closed and just left the bookshelves and air-conditioner and pots and pans the way she'd had them, smelling of dusting powder and cedar boards and Bon-Ami cleanser. There wasn't enough of him yet to start changing her and Grand-

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dad's old world, anyway.

The can of Dr. Pepper he pulled from the old fridge cracked open with a Pffffff! He sipped and stalked the rooms of the house. This was what he did sometimes, when he wasn't sure what he should do even though there was work to be done. It was an old writer's problem. Suddenly, as if he had left a pot of beans on the stove, he startled. Real heat. Witching Hour had begun – that moment when the early summer sun finally climbed above the big side-yard oak tree that shaded the house for most of the morning. Grand-dad had built the house carefully, planning on this. If you wanted to sleep late on Sunday, you could, but by the time worship started at the First Baptist Church you'd better be there, because at home the oven would be on. Jericho didn't go to church and Grandma's parlor was already too warm to sit and read in, and he wasn't prepared to wage war against the cosmos with an antique air conditioner.

He pulled a beach chair down from the garage rafters. The aluminum was pitted and white with oxidation. The nylon webbing looked OK, but it was brittle from years of sun. Ah, well, Jericho sighed, for an afternoon it would have to do. Down to the cow pond he trooped, toting his towel and chair and Dr. Pepper. It was hotter out here, but Jericho told himself that it seemed cooler. Unfolding the beach chair beneath the branch of a lone willow, whose new leaves already curled in the sun's rays, he draped his towel over the chair and stood still, because a tiny swirl of a breeze had skittered over the water and caressed his face.

With a glance at the Caxton's driveway, Jericho shrugged off his tee-shirt and jeans and tucked them under the chair. He wore no undershorts. Aint that just like a writer, he muttered. Another tiny warm breeze tickled the hair on his privates and made him shiver. He hadn't shivered outside in more than a month, and it was a real pleasure. He looked down at himself, the hair patchy on his legs from years of trouser cloth exfoliating his knees and calves. His soft gut, rounded from lack of motion on his part. I am lumpen proletariat, he told himself. Oh, well. Then he realized that his pasty white butt was facing Mrs. Arnette's pine trees and he ducked down into the cool murk of the cow pond.

"Ah," he sighed again and arched his back, letting his cool-shrunken pecker float on the surface. This beats all, especially for a Dr. Pepper drinking, gay book-burner. He used his hands to paddle around in a circle, then back over to the bit of dappled willow-shade and relaxed his neck, letting his ears dip under the water, cooling his skull and promoting the general approach of Nirvana that he had stumbled upon this Sunday morning.

What Jericho heard was:

"Hugo, salvo gain sun-tea something gets something under Willie." Which made no sense at all, and so he continued floating on his back, trying to connect a couple of thoughts beyond how comfortably cool he was. Then, suddenly, Dive! Dive! Bow Planes full down, Aye!

He came up sputtering cow-pond-water and algae. She repeated

herself.

"You know, it's all fun and games until someone gets a sunburn on their Willie."

He wiped the goop from his eyes and looked. At first it was a vision of loveliness, then he wiped his eyes some more and it was a young woman, not all that visionary after all, but not excessively hard on the eyes, either. Tall and thin, she wore a short sleeved white blouse and pants and a burnt-orange Longhorns baseball hat over a blonde ponytail. He squinted, and saw that she was grinning at him. Pale. Like a Hollywood bit actress working doughnuts at a canteen during the war. Where in the world had that obscure reference come from? He was staring. Time to say something. Nothing came to him.

"Willie?" he sputtered.

"Not my personal choice. I prefer *tally-wacker*, because that's what Auntie calls them, when she calls them anything," the girl said. "She actually told me a joke with the word tally-wacker in it, once. If I think of it, I'll tell it to you."

"Ah, ha," he said, as he always did when he was slightly confused or had nothing more to say or wished that he didn't have to say anything, but could just observe from a comfortable distance.

"Auntie. You know, blah blah blah Arnette," she turned and pointed with a long thin finger past Jericho's house. Staring, Jericho completely missed Mrs. Arnette's first name, which he still didn't know even after having lived next door for half a year.

"Of course," he said.

"I'm just visiting for the weekend, and Auntie has headed off for church," the girl said. "You must be the book burning 'Thing'; the sinner that doesn't go to First Baptist."

"Guilty," Jericho croaked, stifling a laugh that would have probably been a guffaw, embarrassing in its abandon. At the same time he kept paddling in place as carefully as he could so that the water didn't waft around his privates. He assumed that at some point he would have to come out of the water. A silly song about a polka-dot bikini entered and exited his consciousness with frivolous abandon.

"Auntie has concluded that you'll probably go to hell," the girl said, with a mock frown.

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"No doubt, for one reason or another," he said, patently aware that his was a heretofore undeveloped ability to verbally joust with a woman growing more attractive with each passing moment.

"Mind if I sit down?" she nodded at his beach chair. "Oh, but we haven't been properly introduced. I'm Hope, the too-tall, too-forward Thespian niece from Austin." She bowed theatrically and sat down on Jericho's towel. The chair gave a groan as the nylon webbing began to tear.

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry," Hope said, shifting her weight onto the aluminum frame.

"No, please, don't be. It's Annette Funicello ancient," Jericho said, grimacing at his metaphorical lameness.

"Do you mind?" she asked, picking up his can of Dr. Pepper and taking a sip before he had a chance to say yeah or nay. Eyes closed, she sighed as loudly as he had earlier as she swallowed the pop. Then there was no sound at all for a while, except his paddling as he tread water.

"Thespian?" he said, finally, as he registered the verbal oddity.

"Auntie thinks I play for the other team," Hope said with a sneaky smile, like she'd been waiting for him to catch up. She belched aloud from the Dr. Pepper and without missing a beat, or excusing herself, leaned overconfidently back on the aluminum chair and began talking. Jericho grinned and listened. How can you not like a burping Thespian?

She was a Tudbull, she said, which *apparently* meant something in town. What that was she neither knew nor cared. She was only Tudbull by marriage, anyway, and the connection hadn't lasted. Hence, everyone's

suspicion of Thespian tendencies. Auntie had said that Thank The Good Lord she was not a Kilgore Tudbull. This was crucial, Auntie had clarified, because she didn't want to be associated with the Kilgore Rangerettes, a baton twirling team of local reknown. The Kilgore Tudbulls, you see, set a lot of importance on being Rangerettes and held not being so against all other Tudbulls.

"Rangerettes," Jericho chuckled.

"I know, right?" Hope grinned. "The best I could ever hope for was being in the Flag Corps."

"Mm-hmm," Jericho said; this time because he really was interested and wanted Hope to go on talking.

"Yeah, I know," she said, smiling brilliantly. "The other girls in school used to call us the 'flag hags'." She laughed at that. So did Jericho. He was happy and couldn't understand why the girls had called them the flag hags. If the others in the Flag Corps had looked anything remotely like Hope, they weren't hags in the slightest.

"So, I'm just a run of the mill Tudbull," Hope said. "Course, being D-I-V-O-R-C-E-D doesn't help either." She chuckled, spelling out the ignominious word.

"Auntie doesn't want to come too close to me, like whatever I got that made me leave my husband might rub off on her. Like it's contagious. She's a little bit confused, and it's worse when I come to visit. I could even see her trying to hook me up with Mr. Singh." She closed her eyes and shook her head slowly. Jericho had not yet met Mr. Singh, the Indian man who drove Mrs. Arnette whenever she went anywhere. He'd waved

through the dying pine tree wall to the neat little man while Mr. Singh detailed Mrs. Arnette's Caddy.

He could well imagine Mrs. Arnette being simultaneously concerned and confused. Once, entering the local Blockbuster out toward the airport, he had seen her perusing posters of current releases. Despite his better judgment, he'd waved hello and asked her what she was planning to rent.

"Well, I don't normally watch movies," Mrs. Arnette said, as if making a judgment against everyone who did. "It's a sin to sit for two hours and do nothing like that." She shook her head slowly. Jericho nodded, because it made sense to agree rather than to ask what she was doing in a movie rental place if she didn't like movies. Maybe she was protesting or planting a bomb or something.

"But there's one film that I've been waiting for and they don't seem to have it here. It seemed to be worth my time. *Finding Private Nemo*."

Jericho choked on his own saliva. He nodded again and struggled to say something.

"Hmmm." It was all that came to him. He wondered what Mrs. Arnette imagined the plot was behind a movie title like that. Rescuing a little clownfish on Omaha Beach. He recovered enough to tell her good luck and good hunting and moved on.

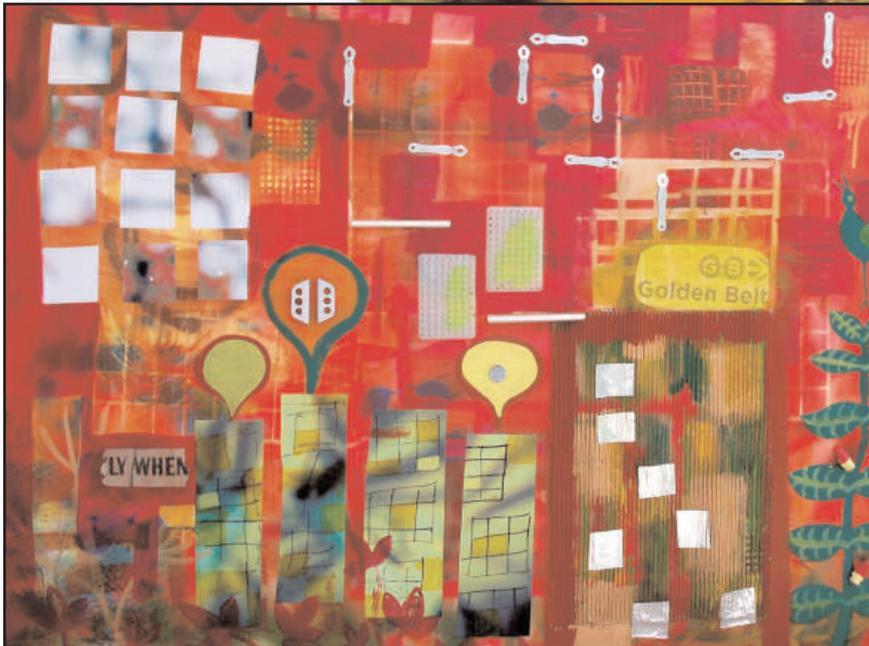
Hope opened her eyes and leaned towards Jericho.

"Why she's worried about that I can't say. She's been a widow for umpteen years, you know? What does she think she'll catch? She's in her mid-eighties, for crying out loud. Are there even any available men around?"

Jericho thought about the col-

"Best In Show" by Phil Juliano





Above: Sushi Pool

Upper Right: Does Not Compute

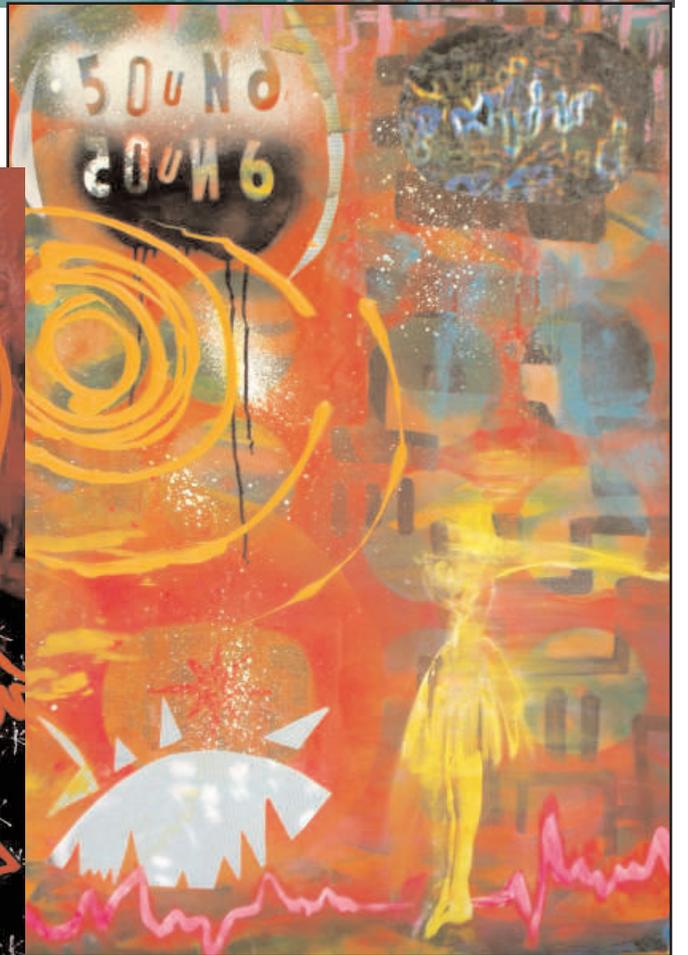
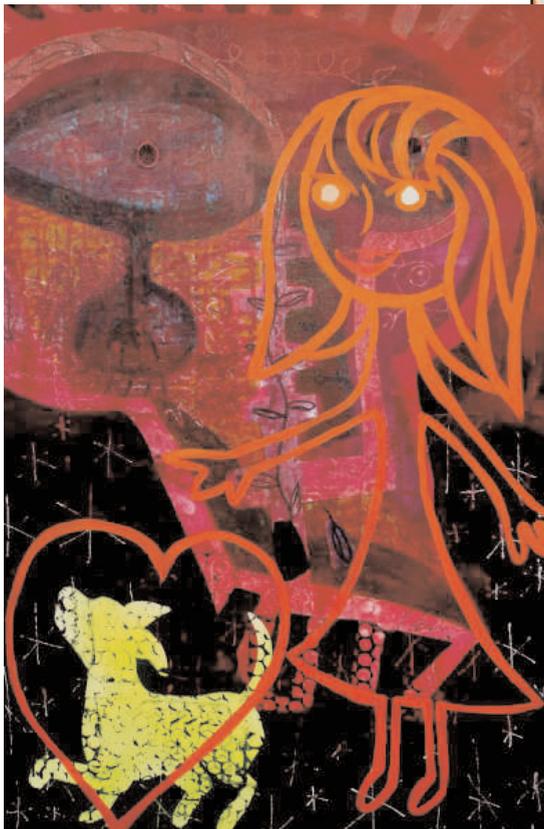
Far Right: Low Pop Lounge

Right: The Best Love

Left: Green Beginnings



Dona Nova
Durham, NC



The Blotter

ored men who drove the horse-manure truck. They were elderly gentlemen. With Mrs. Arnette? Probably not, he mused with a wry smile.

Hope looked around from her perch on the chair, at the bluebonnets and the fluffy clouds in the white-blue sky.

"It's right hot. And I drank all your cold drink, I'm sorry to say," she said with a glint in her eye.

"There's more in the fridge, if you want to run up..." Jericho started.

"No, I just want to cool off," Hope said. Tossing her ball cap onto the grass, she carefully stood up from the rickety chair and tugged her blouse up over her head. Jericho started to turn his head, some archaic chivalry hard-coded into him, but Hope was staring right at him and something about that look kept him from moving, other than to continue treading water. Pale skin, nearly translucent, marvelous even from out here. She wore a sheer, lacy bra that was both dainty and sexy. Her breasts were small but aggressive. Strange word choice. Time seemed to hold still for him as he looked at her looking at him. He expected her to make a face that would cause him to turn, but she didn't. It's because we're strangers, he told himself. She's very pretty, and I'm no great shakes and therefore harmless. She's seen my pecker, so what's the big deal, as it were.

Bending at the waist, the young woman stashed the blouse under the chair with his kit. Jericho almost feared to blink, watching the skin of her belly as she folded and twisted. It was taut, though it seemed to be from not eating rather than running or stair-climbing or whatever

people who were slightly crazy did with time that really wasn't free at all, but rather squandered on some fleeting fingernail-grasp to hold onto youth.

With that thought, he felt the beginnings of a cramp in his side from treading water in the cool. That'll teach you, he told himself.

Hope unfastened her pants and nimbly peeled them over her hips and bottom and let them fall to the ground, which they did. Stepping one foot out of sandal and pants, she let the other kick them under the willow tree. Her legs were as long as a race-horse's. If she was considered something less than a cheerleader or pom-pom girl back at her old school, well then to hell with them. Macular degeneration was too good for them. Yes, they were gams, no doubt about it. He tried to keep his eyes from zeroing in on her breath of silk undies, off-white by the grace of God and some parts per billion of the color of a newly blooming bluebonnet. Oh, my, Jericho thought. Please let this not be some kind of air conditioner died during the night and I'm hallucinating from the heat underneath the old moldy quilt dream, and I hope she keeps her undies on if only so I'm don't have a heart attack right here, in the middle of this cow-pond, and why is she here, anyway? – if this is the welcome wagon six months late, well then *pleased to meetcha!* Or maybe she was just one of those women that liked the idea of writers because they think we're more sensitive and clever, and that makes up for a great deal of less than physically attractive. Oh, but then she did slip off the panties and unsnap the bra in front and let it slide, and Jericho

went under like a rusty bucket.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "Was that a joke? You didn't take on any water, but you felt heavy as a sack of groceries."

Jericho was sitting in the mud of the shallows and Hope was behind him, over him, holding him up. His head, he realized, was resting against her flat belly and when he tried to turn his head, his face bumped a chill-spring-water hardened nipple.

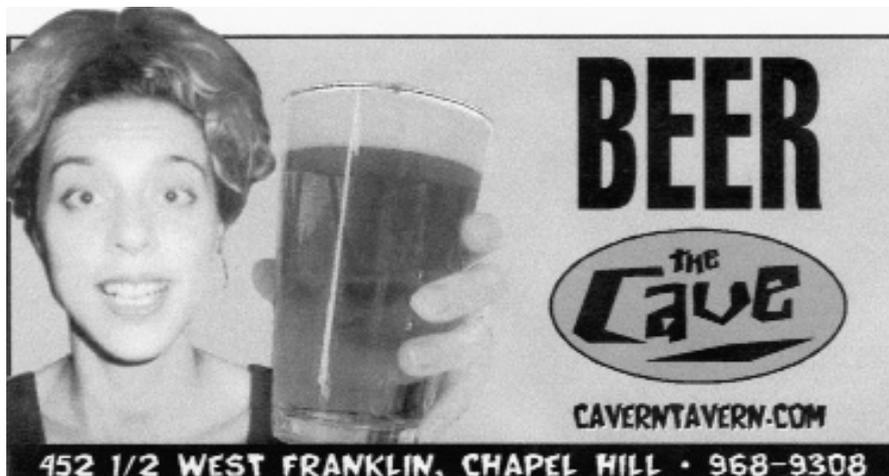
"Stitch," he grunted. "From the cold."

"That'll do it," she said, wiping water from his face with the soft side of her hand.

"I'm Jericho," he said. "Pleased To Meetcha."

"Likewise," she said, and they burst into waves of laughter that flushed a handful of doves, sending them whickering out of the bluebonnets.

The laughter and nudity might have assisted in the deterioration of the situation into some iteration of passion (oh, for crying out loud, Jericho rolled his mind's eye), except that Hope wanted to swim and he had recovered at least enough to stand waist deep in the shallows and covertly get the mud out of the crack in his butt. Then, because he did still feel that he was no great shakes, he didn't swim over to Hope or, alternatively, get out and go wrap himself in a towel. He allowed himself to sort of float in the shallows, watching her while she swam and talked, hoping for and occasionally getting glimpses of her firm pale bottom and perky boobies while she splashed around in the cool, still clear enough water. As she swam she sang snippets of songs, none



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of which were immediately recognizable to Jericho, until he realized that they were his high school's fight song, sung for him, he presumed. Suddenly she squealed; one part fright and one part laughter. She jumped in the water with a strong scissor kick and flailed for a second.

"What happened," Jericho asked, standing, lumpily ready to rescue the fair maiden.

"Something bit me on the butt," she replied.

"Hard?" he asked.

"No, not hard. You know, a nibble. Like it was...tasting me." She winked. He pretended to fall back, his hand over his heart. Hope guffawed in a very unladylike manner.

"Turtle," he said after a moment.

"Oh," she said, with mock disappointment.

That cracked him up again, so that he was stomping in the mud, which was stirred up enough now to create a curtain of modesty for the two of them beneath the water. Hope was smiling as she sang and swam and flashed herself at him at delightful intervals.

Of course, they didn't hear Mrs. Arnette stomping through the grass in her high heels, aerating Jericho's yard with each off-balance, potentially hip-breaking step. Hope's Auntie was huffing so hard that she couldn't get the words out of her mouth, which would have undoubtedly been...

"Hope, what are you doing in that pond?"

...so Hope obliged her unspoken question as she stood hands on hips, swaying on the grassy bank from her exertions.

"I'm swimming." Which

Hope was.

Mrs. Arnette took a full minute and a half, by Jericho's own count of his pulse, slowed again by the cool water after being surprised by his elderly next-door neighbor and judge of all things in her scope of existence and span of control. Finally,

"Get out of that water, please," Mrs. Arnette said.

Jericho looked at Hope who right back looked at him. Neither was certain that the command had been for them and not the other, so no one moved to extricate themselves from the water.

"It's nice and cool, Auntie," Hope said.

"I can see that," Mrs. Arnette said, still huffing a bit. "There are days when I'm not sure we shouldn't have a law that makes young women wear those clothes the Afghanistan women wear."

"Burga," Hope offered.

"Chador?" Jericho added helpfully.

"That's right," Mrs. Arnette said with a glare at him that kept his answer to one word. She looked at Hope.

"You're bare-naked aren't you." More statement of fact than question. Hope nodded sweetly.

"He's gay, you know," Mrs. Arnette said as if Jericho wasn't there, like this wasn't a pond in his own yard, and if he was, and if it was, well perhaps he didn't understand English and even if he did, then at least she'd said *gay* and not *thing*, and it was just the truth and she was not the first person to report it.

"Auntie, you are a piece of work. Hey! Didn't you know, it's OK if two gay people fool around, because nothing can happen? Two wrongs

don't make a right. Anyway, he's a writer. You should be more worried about that than which side of the plate he swings from." Hope was treading water in little circles so that she looked like she was performing water ballet. Jericho caught himself spying for little visual gifts whenever she kicked, rising out of the water enough to flash her small but perfect breasts for him. Mrs. Arnette caught him watching, too.

"Enough," the elder lady snarled.

Her cheeks were red and Jericho was worried. It was damned hot, outside this oasis.

"Mrs. Arnette, would you please have a seat?"

"Auntie, are you alright?" Hope asked from the middle of the pond.

Mrs. Arnette took the advice and plumped herself down on Jericho's beach chair, the webbing of which parted with a *Rrrriipp!* The towel covering the seat slid along the frame, and Mrs. Arnette's somewhat ample bottom sank ungracefully into the hole in the webbing so that she was folded into thirds. She was also quite stuck.

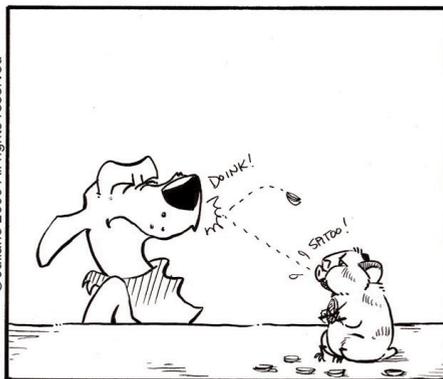
"Oh," said Mrs. Arnette.

Jericho began to climb out of the pond, but realized he could not, as his clothes were underneath Mrs. Arnette. There was no way. He turned to Hope.

"Go!"

He scrambled out of the pond, mud and algae clinging to his skinny shanks and water streaming from his balls and buttocks. Mrs. Arnette's eyes grew, fearing some horror never before experienced in her eighty-something years. Her cheeks were deeply flushed, but the rest of her was white as the proverbial ghost. He

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grabbed her arms, which were slowly flailing in the air. Her butt was down on the ground, well, on the clothes heaped beneath the chair. Jericho grabbed her arms and tried to lift her out of her constraints, but she was heavier than she looked.

"Aaagh!" Mrs. Arnette screamed weakly, her face mere inches away from his damp and dangling *tally-wacker*.

"Oh, Christ!" Jericho exclaimed, as he noticed this.

Hope was there at his side, coolly naked.

"Tip her over, and we'll yank the chair off of her," she said over Mrs. Arnette's howls.

The two of them gently tilted the chair onto its side, putting Mrs. Arnette in the soft sunny grass. Jericho tugged the broken beach chair by the legs and it came away from Mrs. Arnette.

"She's too hot," Hope said. "Singh!! Singh!!" she shouted for the family driver. She carefully rolled Mrs. Arnette onto her back. The woman had stopped shouting, but was still panting like a bulldog.



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"No, let's cool her off," Jericho said, grabbing the towel and dunking it in the muddy water at the pond's edge. He gave it a half-twist to shed some of the water and handed it to Hope, who dabbed at Mrs. Arnette's face. Kneeling, Jericho lifted the woman's legs by the heels of her shoes to elevate them. Mrs. Arnette struggled, trying to kick him in the slats with her high-heels, but he held her calves firmly. Hope smoothed her Aunt's skirt and the three of them rested, looking like a scene from a Bosch variant on "The Sinners Arrive Exhausted at the Nether Gates."

Singh came, left, came back again with the Eldorado, driving carefully over Jericho's lawn. He assisted the nude man from next-door with lifting Mrs. Arnette by the shoulders and half-walking, half-carrying her to the back seat of the car. Mrs. Arnette's niece – such pallid skin and so much of it – stood holding a damp towel, which she pressed against Mrs. Arnette's forehead.

"Do you want to get dressed, Ma'am?" he asked her.

"No, just go, Mr. Singh," Mrs. Arnette's niece said. "I'll be along directly, if Mr. Jericho would be so kind as to drive me?" She looked at the nude man from next-door. He nodded at her without speaking. Then Singh drove carefully to the emergency room where they checked

Mrs. Arnette for heart attack and heat stroke, neither of which, it turned out, she'd had.

Hope sat next to Jericho in the waiting room. He sniffed the feathery perfume of her, limestone spring water and mud and algae and White Linen. He almost reached out to hold her hand. We've swum naked together and rescued a family member and everything. She drank my Dr. Pepper. What does this all mean? He didn't though, relaxing his hand into his lap. They sat without talking for a while, as the hospital activity took place around them, sneakers squeaking, medicine odors wafting, automatic doors opening and closing. Then she took his hand instead.

"You can't make up stuff like this, can you? Just gotta let it happen." Squeezed.

"Mmmm-hmm," Jericho said, this time meaning yes and oh yes.

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Five Minutes With: Dona Nova

by James Maxey

Stepping into Dona Nova's studio at Golden Belt is an intense experience. Every wall is covered with canvases splashed with a riot of colors, as well as many items you don't normally find affixed to paintings. Bits of scrap metal are embedded in numerous canvases, creating an army of humanoid robots. Christmas lights poke through another painting, creating a glowing constellation amid a dark, swirling dreamscape. From every wall, animals stare at you: Stark black and white penguins, giraffes that appear to have mated with lava lamps, day-glow octopuses, dancing dogs filled with fire, countless owls with dark and knowing eyes. I recently got to pick Dona's brain on what lies behind her distinctive and daring work.

James Maxey: I've been a fan of your work for almost a decade. During this time, I think I've spotted some trends. I used to think of bold lines and bright, strong colors as being defining features of your style. Lately, I notice that you've moved into much more organic shades and blends of color, with many images and patterns laid over one another. Some of your hexagonal paintings remind me of patterns found in nature—shades of wet and dry sand on a beach, for instance, or swirls of oil on water. Do you have any thoughts on the way your work is evolving? Do you have ideas of where it's likely to go?

Dona Nova: You're exactly right; my work changes and evolves a lot. I have always been attracted to visual boldness, which is where the intense color palette comes from. The bold lines were a significant element in an earlier style where I was focused on simple, graphic elements. Now, I am interested in more complex compilations, very

ethereal, layered moments. Many of them are a reflection of a single moment where something liquid becomes trapped in one fluid moment forever. The work now has a lot of movement created as I allow the materials to dictate the final form. They're still modern and bold, but they are more natural and hopefully evoke the complexities of nature.

I suspect the layers will become more and more complex. I also know I've always been drawn to pattern, and I do see that some of my recent work could be translated into fabric. I'm very into the graphics of the decorative 1960's now, and that will also be showing up more in my work.

JM: I was looking at your painting "Red Dog" on your web site and there's something totemic, almost supernatural in the attitude of the dog. The dog is surrounded by images of the natural world—an owl, a bird, flowers and mushrooms—yet the colors are drawn from a palette of fire tones. Is there a symbolic significance to the creatures in your art? Like, what's up with all the owls?

DN: Yeah, I do get obsessive about certain things (owls, birds, robots, mushrooms,) and I don't always know why. It's an urge to play with those subjects that usually lasts for a good while and then changes into something else. It is funny, though, that when I do that, I find that people really respond to those images as a group. For instance, I used to paint a lot of moths and dragonflies, and everyone bought the paintings with those elements in them. Now, I've been consistently selling robots, owls, and birds for a couple of years now. I

wonder if it's some kind of collective subconscious phenomenon.

The color palette of "Red Dog", for example, is just related to my mood. I've been using oranges and other "hot" colors for the past few years, to the extent that I feel I should buy some new paints to drag myself away from them. I did the same thing with blues and greens before that. I am intensely drawn to interior design, and the colors in the paintings are always present in my living space decor. I must be trying to envelope myself with the colors that make me feel good. I'm very sensitive to my color surroundings.

JM: Since many of your paintings do take up residence in your home for a period of time before you make them available to the public, do you ever feel like you're saying good-bye to an old friend when you sell a painting? After all, when I sell a book or a story, I get to keep the original manuscript, and it's only copies that make it out into the world. Selling your paintings is the reverse process: You sell the originals, and only keep photos to remember your own work by. Do you ever see your paintings in someone else's living room and feel wistful?

DN: There have been a couple of times when I first began selling paintings that I had a moment of remorse... but not for long. My favorite works are usually the most recent, and I always know there's more where that came from (with luck). Mostly I just want people who love my work to be able to have it. That's why my prices have remained affordable. I'd rather my work be enjoyed in people's everyday lives than for me to keep it.

I have, however, seen my work in people's homes and felt like I was seeing an old friend. Sometimes I'd forgotten about that piece, and seeing it is always great — seeing people enjoy it is even better.

JM: You have a lot of paintings of humanoid robots. While your animals are often depicted in very bright and playful shades, I notice that your humans often are charred husks against chaotic landscapes. I'm thinking of "Robot Box," "Electric Girl," and "Skull and Bonex." All are haunting figures with the most prominent facial feature being a dominant glowing eye much larger than the other eye. Is there some underlying message or philosophy underlying your depiction of humans?

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DN: Hmm, that's a very insightful observation. Do I do that on purpose? Maybe... I do the eyes as weirdly as I can, partly because they are such a prominent feature of facial compositions. I try to always be pushing the envelope of visual reality. I want to be as unique as I can be, and I also love asymmetry. I'm also blind in one eye, could that be related? I believe that eyes expose a lot about their owner. I like the viewer to wonder what in the hell is going on inside that head

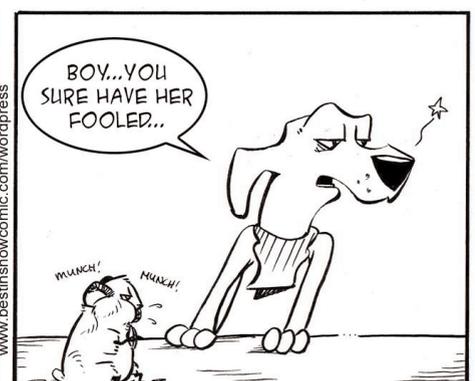
As for the charred figures, they were all done around the same time and are meant to juxtapose with very bright backgrounds and graffiti-esque scrawlings. I alternately love huge contrast in my work as well as the smooth, blended layers of the more natural works. I oscillate between these issues. I have to say, though, that I am very content with my relationship to nature, but not so much with my relationship to humans. (No offense to any humans reading this, of course).

JM: You mention being blind in one eye. I know that you've dealt with impaired sight since an early age. Do you think that since sight isn't something you've been able to take for granted, this has influenced your perceptions?

DN: I've asked myself this question a lot. It has to have had an impact. It's hard for me to say what that might be, since I've been legally blind all my life and can't compare it to anything else. But, I do think I have a heightened sense of visual awareness, which I would have had regardless. The fact that I don't take sight for granted probably enhances the happiness I feel when I see something amazing. I'm constantly amazed that I notice visual details that other people sometimes miss. How is that possible? It feels good.

There's also the factor of how I see

"Best In Show" by Phil Juliano



things.... I see the overall picture, not the minute details. Maybe that contributes to the fact that I am attracted to bold visuals. Those are the ones that get through to my brain.

JM: In some of your work, I can see images that remind me of things one might see under a microscope. I have an octagonal painting of yours, all black and white, with a lot of swirls and rods that are reminiscent of images of bacteria in a petri dish. Is this deliberate, or am I just imposing my own interest in the scientific world onto what are simply abstract images?

DN: I'm enamored with tiny microscopic worlds. It's no accident that those types of subjects live in my paintings. Little single-celled organisms are so bizarre and beautiful. You know, there again is the "pattern" thing. Under a microscope they look like nature's fabric. Same thing with those bioluminescent oceanic creatures. I wish I could have those as pets. Sea Monkeys don't really cut it.

JM: What do you think is the most productive state for producing art? Happiness or hardship?

DN: I've definitely had both and they've both had some merits. I prefer happiness. When I'm feeling good, I get excited about going into the studio. I'm working with pleasant energy, and it's fun. I let go, try not to over-think it, and just have fun painting. When I relax I get the best results. On the other hand, hardship does give fodder for new subjects. After my divorce I painted a lot, and in a style I hadn't used before. It was successful, but now when I see those paintings I feel that I've moved on from that place. I'll choose happiness for me every time. It's cathartic either way though.

JM: You recently moved from a rural studio to Golden Belt in downtown

Durham. Has there been a cultural adjustment for you, from working in relative isolation to working surrounded by other artists?

DN: I was comfortable in my rural studio. I used to only work alone, and over the years I worked around other artists enough that I now find it energizing. Working at Golden Belt required me to adjust to a much smaller work space, and to have a presentable public space most of the time. It's part working studio and part store, which takes some juggling. The best parts about working at GB are, of course, the other artists and the public visitors. A collective group of creative people is a great catalyst for new ideas and energy. The fact that the public can now see our work on a daily basis is amazing. The Third Friday Open Studios (every 3rd Friday of each month) are my favorite event. There is a great festive atmosphere and we've had amazing turn-outs every time. It gives us all an event on a regular basis that we can work toward. I change my paintings and studio arrangements every time, so there's always something new.

For the next 3rd Friday I am starting a silent auction for one painting each month. I'll be announcing the painting via email weeks before the event, and will accept bids via email until the night of artwalk, where I will have submission forms. There will be no minimum bid on this piece, and we'll see how this works out. I do send out special discounts to my email list patrons already, but I'm thinking of expanding this to include more discounts and maybe door prizes on 3rd Friday. I just want my art enjoyed by the world, not stored in a studio. Like I said last Friday to one customer "You should spread the coolness".

JM: Thank you very much.

Ed: To see Dona's work in person visit: Golden Belt Studios, 807 E Main St, Building 3, Durham, NC 27701, Dona Nova studio #140 Dona's phone is 919-933-4477 (call if you would like an appointment)

Golden Belt Studios are open 10am-7pm Monday-Saturday, 1pm-5pm on Sunday.

Third Friday Artwalk occurs every month from 6pm-9pm with lots of drinks, food, and live music.

You can also see Dona's work on the web:

- www.donanova.com
- www.goldenbeltarts.com
- www.myspace.com/donanova
- www.cafepress.com/donanova



CONTRIBUTORS

Garrison Somers Yes, it's all about me. Always about me. Ha!

Dona Nova - see our "Five Minutes With" interview!

Phil Juliano has been doodling on napkins, school table tops and bristol board since he was twelve years old. After co-founding an independent comic company, Luchador Enterprises, with his good friend Alex Dorantes in 1991 Phil was able to channel and focus his love of drawing into the black and white panels of a comic book page. They went on



to create such diverse titles as "Stone Parker, P.I.", "Captain Whamo" and the grim noir classic "Retribution." Phil's comic book interests shifted in 2004 when he was able to fulfill one of his life goals...to be the proud owner of a Chocolate Lab, whom he named Spencer, after Robert B. Parker's hard-boiled private investigator. The challenges and follies of raising a puppy, coupled with a brain-numbing solo drive from his home in Herkimer, NY to his guest table at the Small Press Expo in Bethesda, MD, led to the creation of Phil's first solo comic project "Best In Show", a cartoon strip chronicling these new responsibilities as a respectable pet owner. Since it's launch in 2004 "Best In Show" has seen print in various media outlets, including Lisa Wogan's book "Dog Park Wisdom" published by Skipstone Press. Phil is looking forward to being a regular cartoon feature in "The Blotter" magazine.

James Maxey of Hillsborough is the bestselling unknown author in the free world, the author of *Bitterwood* and *Dragonforge* and the cult superhero novel *Nobody Gets The Girl* and those are my copies, go get your own!

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Hell is a freight train, pulled into a many-tiered station, and you are the engineer. The station-master is the worst bully from your childhood, and his instructions are shouted in your face. You have to help all of the acquaintances from your childhood, people you knew but weren't really friends with, go downstairs in the station and gather all of the things you need to fill your train. He gallops off. Your childhood-acquaintances climb down from the locomotive and begin to disperse - to find the necessities for your boxcars. Suddenly all of the people from your adulthood, when you were in the military, your first jobs - the ones that you kind of knew but didn't keep up the relationships after you moved on - are there asking you if you want to go get a beer. You are torn between doing what you've been instructed to do, which you don't completely understand. Fill the train? With what? Supplies for a hurricane-hit city? War-material? Gold bars melted from the spoons of Aztecs for the King of Spain? Wouldn't it be easier to go with these almost-friends and have a brewskie than go look for the faces from your childhood and try and complete the assignment? You decline the beer, and climb down from the train, running off into a Mall-of-AmericaHell. The really bad part is you see another person from your childhood, can't remember his name. Shouting some completely wrong name you ask him if he's seen Steve, which isn't the name of one of the people you're looking for. He says yes, and points over his shoulder. You thank him for the information, and continue on your way. It's going to be a long day.

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