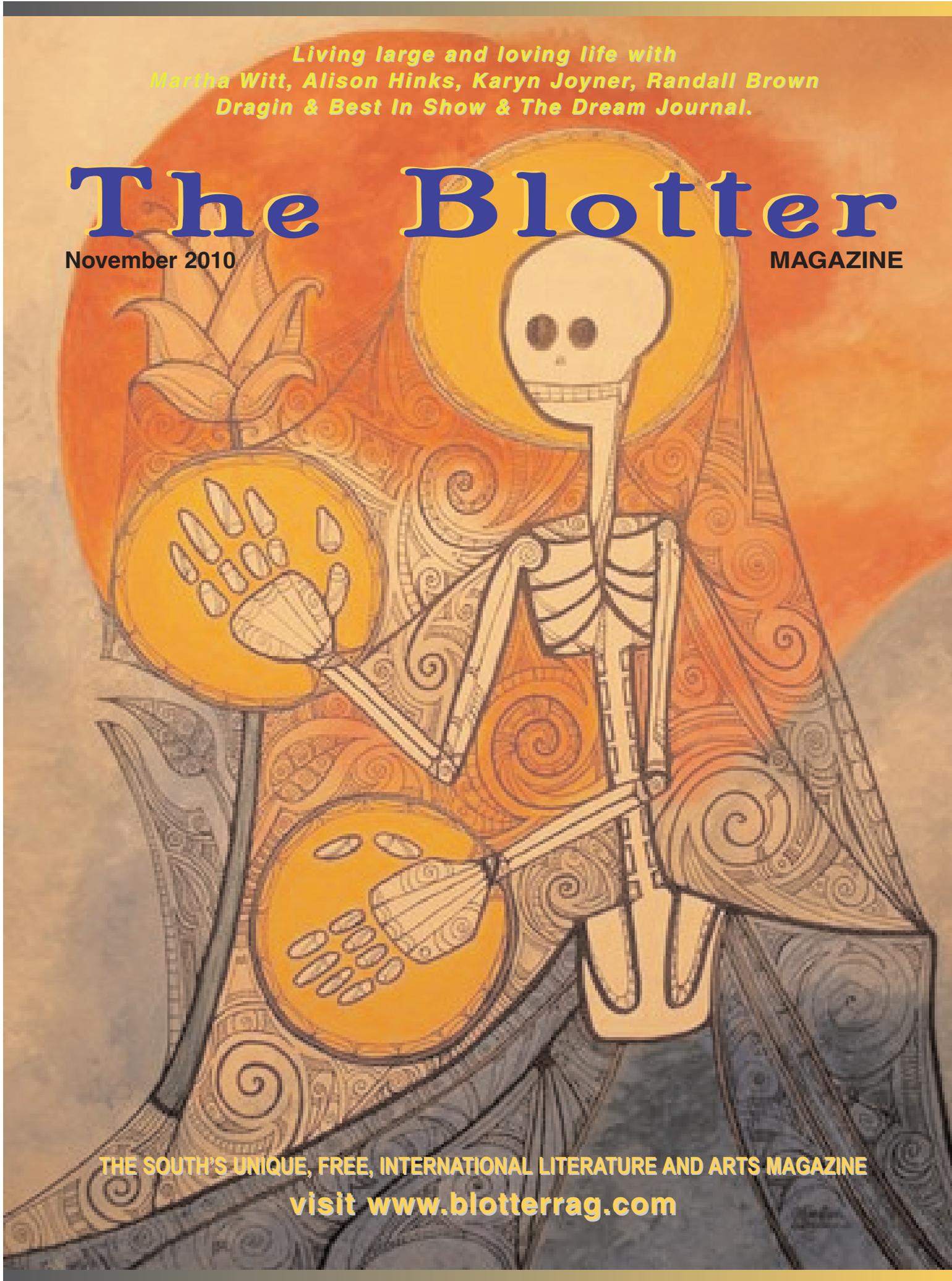


*Living large and loving life with
Martha Witt, Alison Hinks, Karyn Joyner, Randall Brown
Dragin & Best In Show & The Dream Journal.*

The Blotter

November 2010

MAGAZINE



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I think I finally understand press releases.

Front cover, by Alison Hinks - see
centerfold for more.

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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

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“Notes on women. And men. Part 1”

Occasionally, I am invited to talk in my daughters’ classes about writing and the creative writing process and I imagine myself very interesting because the children stare at me. They are enthusiastic about raising their hands to answer my questions, and I am proud that my daughters run up after a session to hug me and say, “good job, Dad.” I need that “positive feedback” as we used to call it back in my go-into-the-office days. And I have thought about becoming a teacher. After all, I’m a smart guy, right?

But I am quite painfully aware that I cannot do the teacher’s job, am not totally certain that the information I have divulged to the children is what they need to do the work in front of them, or actually provided a spark to pursue further learning about the subject. The women teaching my daughters have a different, possibly magical, possibly genetically acquired, competence that makes them good teachers, good day-after-day purveyors of information to my children. And even that is smarmy and incorrect. They’re good at it because they want to be good at it and learned how to be good at it and work to be good at it.

I’m a pretty good Dad – can readily impart Dad wisdom about chess, fishing, baseball line-scores, Tai-Chi Chuan forms, belching the alphabet, making scrambled eggs. But teaching - real school - is a tough business. It requires foresight and farsightedness. And patience. Most male-types don’t have these. Farmers, perhaps. Certain scientists. The rare stock-market investor. Great Alexander the Macedonian. But for the rest of society, results are demanded immediately after performing a function. It’s a guy thing, admittedly Neanderthal in nature. Hunt the Mastodon. Kill the Mastodon. Eat. Life is uncomplicated in the male mind. Lay off employees until you show a profit. Throw out whatever isn’t a core competency. Use all medical research for impotency. Hold mid-term elections...

If our public education system is broken, we need look no further for the reason. Education is not a hunt-kill-eat equation. Teach something today, test on it tomorrow, and Mission Accomplished is a gross absurdity. That’s not how you learn anything – except that we think it’s how we learned what we gleaned from our school days. So it must be right. Or it might be wrong. We don’t know, and elected officials mull over it and try to hunt, kill and eat. If it’s right, keep doing it. If it’s wrong, keep doing it harder! Stomp all over it, and if anyone asks what happened, blame someone.

Certain functions take time; cannot and shouldn’t be measured for progress so often that measuring begins to take the place of the craft. I know this because my tenure as a stay-at-home Dad has taught me – iron-

ically over the long haul. For example, my daughters know to put clothes in the laundry. Not because I said it once, or because I said it a thousand times, but because I talked with them about it, and had them help me with the laundry, and played Lady Gaga (groan) while I folded clothes and because I left the laundry on the floor until that special shirt was needed for some event and it wasn't clean. That's teaching, my friends.

I talk with women about things, and always imagined myself smarter because I occasionally hold a fact in my memory that they do not. It made me feel good about my intelligence, made me seem wise to myself. Sometimes women came to me for advice. I shared what I could about whatever subject they initiated. I always thought that they were going to use my wise advice to solve their concerns. Never understood that it was mostly about the talking, not necessarily about *solving*. But in the fullness of time, I have learned that I am not smarter. In fact, I often do not know what to do with the things I know. I do not work well with others of my age, gender or knowledge-base. I do not seek others out for advice, or if I do, it is usually too late to rescue whatever situation I have gotten myself into. I read, and accumulate information, but have no filtering system for useful knowledge versus extraneous. It must be gone, like a missing rib. So I probably wouldn't be a great teacher. Would cause more damage than good. On the other hand, I would probably do well in the current public school system. That should be telltale evidence of how poor a teacher I am.

Well, the homework is getting harder, and my girls go to public school. So here's what I've learned from women teachers – and I suspect that successful male teachers imitate female teachers – that I am putting into my stay-at-home Dad bag of tricks. Listen: to the children, to each other, to parents, and to your own teachers and professors. Approach all subjects with some goals, and from a few different directions. Let the children talk, but have a way to make them stop talking that doesn't involve threats or shouting. Present the information, and present it again, allowing the children to acknowledge that they may have received the information before. Ask questions and listen to answers. Let the children ask questions and answer them. Don't become angry if the questions fall off subject or if you run out of time today – because it's not a mastodon hunt.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

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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

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“How It Ended”

by Martha Witt

Their house is systematized in a friendly sort of way. Though each thing has its place, the boundaries are loose: The cinnamon can be slipped into the space labeled “nutmeg” without causing disturbance; the sweaters can cross into the shirt pile and not throw anything off kilter. Claire, in fact, suspects that David’s approach to organization encourages small transgressions as proof of his ability to keep focus on the greater domestic picture. Today, the upper closet is ordered, the sweaters folded and stacked into small wooden compartments, but she notices that the shoes—his pairs and hers—have mixed with each other over the course of the week, the top of her long boot crossing his brown loafer as though shielding it from a miniature battle that will resume in the dark of that closet just as soon as she closes the door.

All day, she has been thinking about her sister, Tris, and the letter she received yesterday from a man—Jake Murphy—who explained that he’d been living with Tris but had left her when he discovered she’d been writing a memoir. He found the manuscript by accident. “There were cruel things she’d written about me. Mean things I won’t go into here.” The letter ended: “I built one last fire and left that same evening. I know you’re the only family she’s got; I found your address in her address book, though I’m not even sure if it’s current. I know you all haven’t spoken for a long time, and you don’t even know who I am, but

family is owed an explanation.” It was a generous letter. She should call Tris. Claire unbuttons her blouse, then she takes off her shoes. How do women wear high heels? She can barely manage a boost. During tax season, when there’s a full list of clients to see, she makes an effort and wears heels once in a while but feels a little short-changed if she doesn’t receive a few compliments on the shoes to compensate for her suffering. So she’d rather be comfortable and call it a day.

In sweat pants and a T-shirt, she heads back downstairs to the kitchen. If she ever saves a few extra dollars, she’ll re-do that entire room, jack the fake granite tops off herself if necessary and replace those cheap cabinet doors with cherry wood.

There’s a defrosted chicken on the counter that David must have taken out before he left for work that morning. She pulls off the plastic and lifts the bird from its black Styrofoam tray; she’s heard that the red juices aren’t really blood at all but a fluid from the muscles and organs of the dead animal. She cuts off the green “organic” label affixed to its leg. David’s mother would have had that chicken surrounded by fingerling potatoes, bathed in herbs and olive oil, and cooking at a low temperature for hours already. There’d be green beans in a tomato sauce and a first course, no question, with two wines selected—one for dinner, one for dessert. His parents had immigrated to Brazil from Italy. The first time she and David vis-

ited, his mother had told her about the years she’d spent scouring the Brazilian markets for products similar to those she’d known back home. When she found that it was impossible to make anything but second-rate Italian cuisine with the Brazilian fare, she became inventive, combining the new-found vegetables and fruits into her old recipes and eventually writing a cookbook that still, apparently, sells down there. His father is dead, but his mother still watches RAI, the Italian news station, where she gets to see David’s name whenever there’s a story edited in the New York office: Montatore Davide Caruso.

Claire covers the chicken with rosemary and butter the way her own mother used to and turns the oven higher than she probably should. The man claimed that, in her memoir—or so he called it—Tris had written that she wished he’d evaporate: Not die, not suffer, just cease to exist. Those particular words, he wrote, caused him such pain his jaw stung for days. How did he know to trust she was writing what she really felt, and why didn’t he confront her? Claire wonders. Why was he so sure it was a memoir she was writing?

Claire is hungry, and David will be back soon—she wants dinner done so they can sit down straight away. On a scale from one to ten, she wonders as she cuts up zucchini, how evil it is to allow other people’s failures to make one feel more secure about one’s own life? No, evil is not the word: Morally inappropriate. How morally inappropriate is it to view life as a grid and envision others as various colored pushpins moved up and down or sideways? Since childhood, she’s imagined a point at which standards are assessed, all factors having been weighed and the appropriate coordinates determined. In the end—or perhaps by the time one reaches a certain age—the number each person is assigned sticks. The equation is immensely complicated by factors such as goodness, intelligence, honesty, effort, etc, and points are lost or gained for many unseen—and often unconsidered—reasons. How have Claire’s own coordinates been affected by invidious comparisons to Tris?

She hears the suck of the front door opening. “Hi, David!” she calls out, as though she can’t afford to give



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him a few extra seconds to collect himself and then greet her on his own terms, as though she has to make a point of reminding him of her super-sonic senses, her ability to hear, taste, smell, see, and feel things at a level just above the human one. He is determined not to respond immediately. "Hello!" she says more formally, fully out of the kitchen now and smiling at him, holding a wooden spoon.

"Hi," he replies, barely audible, but enough—he supposes—for her hearing powers.

"I'm making the chicken you left out," she tells him. He nods and walks straight to the entertainment center. He takes down a round wooden box that he bought himself as a present when he officially took up residence in the US right after they were married ten years ago. He doesn't carry a wallet, but he rarely loses anything; his money and credit cards go into that box as soon as he comes home.

"Did you even hear me?" Claire asks, stepping towards him, holding a large wooden spoon, officially crossing the line that separates living and dining rooms. Since there are no walls between those rooms, the only distinguishing mark is the change in the pattern of the hardwood floors. He does not understand why she must advance, what misconstrued insight is pushing her toward rather than away from him. He finally looks her in the face. No, it is not insight at work, just a magnet locked in the oceanic depths of her and a metal that perversely rises to his surface each time he wants to be left alone. He cannot control the bad machinery at work, observing it like the desperate inventor of a mechanism intended to do good but that instead wreaks a small amount of havoc each

day, its deposits accumulating, and then, well...

"Yes, I heard you," he says, "thank you for making dinner."

"What's with the bad mood?" Claire asks, both hands beneath the spoon's greasy head.

"Just a headache." He exhales and turns to walk up the stairs.

She returns to the kitchen. Since she made dinner, according to David's housework chart, it is his turn to wash up afterwards, but she'll do the favor of cleaning what she can before the chicken is done. When he first created the chart, he'd hung it in the kitchen, but she immediately took it down. "Nothing to be embarrassed about," he argued, "It's just daily life, a way to keep things clear."

"That part of our daily lives is embarrassing," she said, "plain and simple." She remembers visiting Pompeii and Herculaneum with her parents during a family trip to Italy. "When the volcano erupted, it took a good many by surprise," a tour guide behind them was saying to a busload of American tourists. "It looks as though this family here was about to sit down to dinner just when boiling lava broke through, burying everything. But, thanks to the molten lava, you can actually see what daily life might have looked like back then." Claire stood staring at the petrified remains of three children, a woman with bread still under her arm, and a man beside her—the ordinary so blatantly interrupted and incredibly preserved—on display for everyone to see.

She has no doubt that thousands of years from now a tourist would be far more interested in their division of household chores than in any other aspect of her life. Nothing about her and David would hold a candle to the fact that, on her side of the column, he has written "Shovel

Snow." Being Brazilian, he explained, he had no business out in the cold.

She made a point of keeping to her tasks even when she was pregnant. They laughed about it when she marched outside without a coat at the first snowfall, her belly just beginning to bulge, her body temperature so high that, despite the cold, she was sweating after fifteen minutes. Delicate first trimester was over by that snow fall, and there were only three snowfalls that year. As her doctor pointed out, she didn't lose the baby until two weeks after the final one, so it could not have been shoveling snow that did it, but Claire is sure she remembers feeling a pop in her abdomen while scraping ice off the stairs in late March that year, a ping that expanded to a full-fledged ache. Not that she mentioned it to anyone at the time. She miscarried in April in the hair salon while Maria was straightening her shiny blonde locks.

"Your leg!" Maria had exclaimed, pointing and stepping back. Pushing the smock aside, Claire saw the rivulet of blood down her leg. "La gamba," Maria repeated in Italian, as though changing language could keep it a secret between them.

"Oh, God," Claire exclaimed, knowing exactly what was happening. She did not move.

"Oh, Dio!" Maria continued, crouching beside the chair, blow-dryer still in hand, "the baby." Claire looked at her leg. She closed her eyes, feeling the blood pass out of her, straight from the juggernaut, deeper than any warmth in the universe.

"We've got to do something!" Maria said. Claire placed a hand on her shoulder, shushing her. She spoke as though Maria were the one in need of comfort. "Have the girl at the desk call an ambulance. Please accompany me to the bathroom. Get some rags and a bucket...," she said, never losing her calm, never raising her voice, just the kind of mother she had wanted to be: serene and sure.

The ambulance came. David was called, though she doesn't remember how. He told her afterwards that he did not want to try again, that their baby-making days were over.

The kitchen floor is a mess; those white and black tiles dirty so easily. Claire grabs a broom and listens to David's footsteps on the stairs as she



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sweeps and then begins to mop. But there's nothing she can do about the grime on the floor below those cheap cabinets—there is a clear line between the clean tiles and the dirty ones where the mop cannot reach. Even down on her hands and knees with a rag, it's impossible to get to that part of the floor. The dirt just accumulates there. It is irritating. She stares at this miniaturized border, the crossing point between the tiny first and third world nations of her kitchen. She imagines little beings with passports moving from her sparkling tiles to the muck of landfills and waste pushed into that no-man's land beneath the cabinets.

"All right," David says from the dining room. He asks her something, but she doesn't hear him, so he calls, "Do you need my help?"

Claire pops up from behind the counter like a puppet. "Dinner is ready." She smiles at him.

"Thank you."

"The table's all set," she says. "Just sit."

She washes her hands and brings out the food. He serves his plate. "I saw there was a big fire today in Brooklyn. Did you cover it at RAI?" she asks.

"I don't think that would be of much interest to Italians," he says as she sits, "but I did see that a couple of people died."

"Well, you never know. RAI seems to send over news of the most random events going on here." She places her napkin on her lap. David watches her for an entire minute.

"Ines came by my studio today," he says, folding his hands in front of him in the small space between the table's edge and his plate.

He is done with dinner but will continue picking at it so she doesn't interpret his not eating as complaint. "We went to lunch and she invited us to her party tomorrow evening."

"Oh. You lunch with your ex-girlfriend! There's a subject for an Italian-Brazilian soap opera." Claire chuckles. She takes a large bite of chicken. "Did you know she was coming, or was it a surprise visit?"

"She called me this morning. She was covering a story for Globo, and it just happened to be she had to interview someone in the offices right below RAI." He shrugs.

"How is Chris?"

"Busy, I guess. They seem to be having problems."

Claire swallows. "Does she still wish she'd married you?" David smiles. That was how they got along best—joking, cutting straight through the dross out of difficult subjects.

"Who wouldn't want to be married to me?" he asks. They will do okay this evening; they will manage, he thinks.

"Who indeed?"

"It's supposed to be relatively warm tomorrow evening—fifty degrees or so, so they're planning to cook out on the balcony," David says, pushing aside his plate. She lets go of her fork. "There'll be a lot of old friends from Globo."

"You want dessert? We have fruit," Claire tells him. David gets up, takes both plates and carries them to the kitchen. "I'm okay with going tomorrow. That's fine," she tells him.

"Great. I told her we'd call only if we couldn't go."

"I see." Claire remains seated, staring at his empty chair.

A few months after the miscarriage, she had lied to him. It had begun innocently. "Oh!" she'd said, looking down. "I am bleeding." She was referring to a cut on her ankle, but when she saw his face and understood that he believed she was talking about something far more serious, she did nothing to stop him from leaning forward and grabbing her hand. He said, "Bleeding where?" Thinking about it now, she can see how that lie began differently than other, more inconsequential lies she'd told him over the years—that particular lie was more like a net or a shawl cast over them by an authoritative hand, demanding a show of his love, not a fib generated by her, not the deceit of sticky webs. Her fabrication was a means towards embrace, comfort. "My uterus," she'd gone on, stoking back to life a sadness she'd never actually buried. "I spoke to the doctor, and my uterus has not healed from the miscarriage. It could be dangerous." The concern in his face stoked up a warmth in her belly, and she kissed the back of his hand. "I just need rest, David. And peace," she told him.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" he asked.

"Before when?" she responded, squeezing his fingers—when had they last held hands? "I just found out." It seemed that they were friends—they could have been mistaken for a couple that regularly held hands, discussing tete-a-tete. He had always credited her with supersonic senses and a particular attunement to human bodies—his, her own, others—their needs and failings. She was aware of his profound trust in her, but she took advantage of it. The ends might justify the means, and the ends might be that he cared. Cared about her.

"Isn't there anything to be done? An operation? You can't just be bleeding!" he declared, sounding as angry as usual, but this time his outrage was on her side. She shook her head.

"I need tranquility."

"There has to be something we can do."

Well! Claire felt her tears well. "Everything will be okay," she told him, covering his hand with her own. They sat there. Outside the window, their tiny yard filled with the late fall



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dark that came too early; she had lost their child and was sitting with her husband, hand in hand.

"We both need rest," she said. "Lots of rest and a lot of fluid and good food, and good company," she smiled, "and all will be fine. I had the wind taken out of me, that's it."

"That's enough," he reassured, pushing a lock of her hair behind her ear. "Are you in pain?" She shook her head. "Then let's get you to bed." He came around to where she was sitting, picked her up, held her head against his chest, walked her upstairs, and tucked her into bed. He did not ask to look at the blood or inspect her in any way, which is why she convinced herself that he was a willing participant in the lie, relieved to have found an excuse to take care of her. They kissed. That night, he got into bed next to her.

For the following few days, he made their meals and called her at her office at least once a day to know how she was. But he didn't urge her to see the doctor or get a check-up. Then, he stopped calling. Their routines resumed, and the dismal feeling returned to her belly, a wind over that empty space. Claire started sending three hundred dollars a month to an organization one of her clients told her about. She researched the charity, found it legitimate, so she began her donations to a family in Haiti with five children and a single mother sick with AIDS. The money was much more than she would advise a client at her income level to donate. She imagined that her baby's soul had flown off to inhabit that far-away family. A jumpy, agitated soul, it popped from body to body, so when she received

pictures and updates from the mother, Claire stared at the photograph of the six of them and felt something akin to love. She'd marked their birthdays on her office calendar and sent presents. She'd even sent Christmas gifts back in December. Claire wrote a letter in her basic French, wishing them happiness and good fortune, and the mother responded with a note in a shaky hand full of references to God and the Virgin. Claire kept that note in the top drawer of her desk at work. David did not know about the family, and since she and he kept their finances separate, and she did their taxes, he had little chance of finding out.

David serves them both fruit. "So what stories did you cover?" she asks.

"I'd rather not talk about work." He stirs the fruit in his bowl. "It's enough that I have to spend eight hours a day in that place. Did you hear anything more about your sister?"

"Well, I told you about the letter from that man named Jake who says he was Tris's boyfriend. What got to him was a line she wrote about wanting him to disappear."

"To die?" David asks.

"No. Just cease to exist." Claire shrugs. Now that she's telling David about it, the words sound ridiculous, and she feels foolish, as though she's trying to get him to take seriously the beliefs of a cult or the religious underpinnings of a television evangelist.

"Claire," David says calmly, finishing his fruit, "you have to forget her and whoever else is involved with her. She's not right in her mind. You know that." Perhaps if English were his first language, he'd say something

like, "She's gone off the deep end," but his talk is more formal and stilted; it stops her in her tracks.

"She's not crazy," Claire argues.

"Insane," he says, pointing to the side of his head. "A person to stay away from. Just forget her."

Claire swallows. "She's my sister." Claire puts her napkin on the table. "Well," she says, standing up to clear the rest of the dishes, "let's get the show on the road."

"I'll clean up. You cooked," he tells her, pushing back his chair.

"Thanks."

He piles the dishes by the sink and begins with the glasses. As he pulls a glass out of the soapy water, he thinks about his lunch with Ines. Since Ines had done a news segment on the restaurant when it first opened, they'd been given the best table in the place, and the rib-eye he'd ordered was so tender the knife sliced in with barely any effort on his part. Between them stood a bottle of deep-throated red.

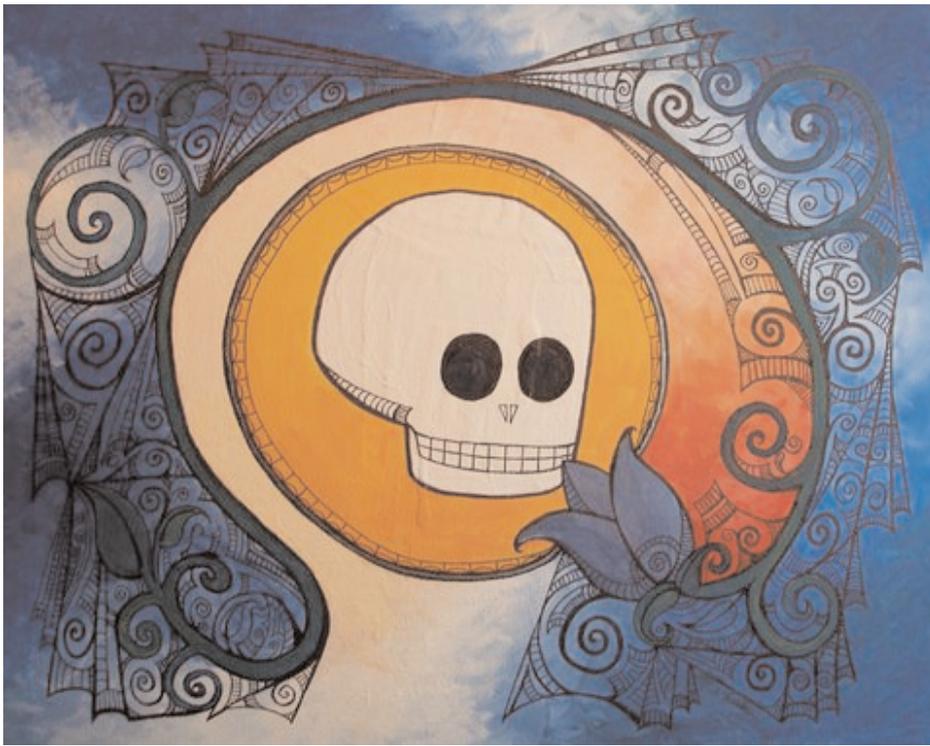
"Are you happy?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, knowing enough not to hesitate. She was ready to pry. "What about you?"

She took her necklace and fidgeted, which was so unlike her that he was prepared for the "No" before she spoke it. She offered no other explanation, a privilege afforded her by years of working her ass off. She is the best anchorwoman Globo has had in the past decade, so she's purchased the right to speak in monosyllables if she chooses. He didn't question her; she has risen beyond what either of them could have imagined back when they were kids, just kids in Rio. "I asked Chris for a divorce," Ines finally told him, taking a few more bites of whatever she'd ordered—a salad with slices of roast pumpkin and goat cheese, walnuts, something like that—and then she cocked her head and folded her arms against her chest as though prepared to close a deal. The news surprised him, but he didn't let on. "He's too American, and Americans don't understand us," she explained softly. "There's really no way for them to get it."

"Don't get what, Ines?" he asked, though he knew where she was pushing because he'd dated her more than half their lives ago when she was a clumsy girl of sixteen, before she





I think skeletons are gorgeous. So many intricacies...but I also won't deny I'm a bit of a dark bunny and gravitate towards the macabre! My first skeleton painting was based on a sketch I found in the margin of a notebook from college. The only time I made for art back then, I guess.

Before i start a work, I go to this little room in my head. I open the door that is usually closed and I take a look at what is inside. Then i paint it. Well, wait: that is where I begin, but as i work on a painting, it becomes a practice of trust in myself. A practice of trusting that what i saw in the room is worthwhile. And a practice of faith, because even if i don't know for sure where the painting is headed, having faith that it will surprise me in the end.

While I've always been "artistic" I think I took one art class as a kid. I've always put off actually sitting down to put paint to canvas until I was asked to donate a piece to Works of Heart charity art auction...and my painting had sold for higher than the asking price before i even got to the event! That floored me.

Where do the skeletons come from?



I just worked on a mural at a yoga studio and that was such a challenge! I mean, that's just a lot of real estate to cover. And to have people see it in various states of doneness...fairly stressful. I think that opened me up a little, though, to have to share a work in progress. But I won't say i wasn't scared. (And no: it was not a skeleton.)

Right now I'm working with Ellie Snow of mintdesignblog.com, making custom illustrations for her print and web design. A very fun gig, indeed! She call me up and says, "I need an anchor!" and I say, "I'm on it!" It challenges me, but allows for so much freedom of expression that I can't really imagine something more fun. Plus, Ellie does all the hard work.



Alison Hinks - Chapel Hill, NC
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I have always had what I call a "Clark Kent job," meaning: a day job having nothing to do with art. Finally I have come to value that arrangement. Mostly because I now understand that I can be an absolute, bull-headed perfectionist when it comes to my own work. I have no one to answer to. I don't have to make it marketable. I paint what I see in my little room. I make it exactly what I want. And i can still buy groceries.

Before painting, I started several cover and originals bands. I also studied my love movement through performance, choreography, modern dance, contact improvisation, ballet, Karate, kickboxing, trampoline, aerial dance, Chinese acrobatics, and flying trapeze and now I also teach yoga.



The Blotter

became seamless and unreadable. He'd gleaned her information early on, and he trusted that there was a continuous thread, a narrative line, a cradle to grave consistency to every person—there are no true born-again unless you count the crazies.

"I want to go back home," she told him, again soft. "I miss Rio. They're happy to send me, too."

"Come on, Ines, you sound like an old immigrant," he laughed. His mother used to talk that way about Italy: 'home'.

"I am an old immigrant, David!" She smiled with only one side of her mouth. "We both are, Darling, old immigrants, though our immigration wasn't intentional the way it was in the case of our parents, was it? I mean, we always meant to go back." David avoided her eyes by looking at the table beside them where a bald man was holding court.

"So you've decided to leave?"

"Perhaps," she said. They were silent a minute. "You remember when we came to New York together?" she asked, resting both forearms on the table, the salmon-colored fabric of her suit jacket layered over the cuff of her yellow, thick silk blouse. A pretty combination.

"What about it?"

She was wearing three pieces of gold jewelry, and he knew for a fact all three had been gifts from her husband, so she really had no business sitting there reminiscing about that tiny apartment they'd rented with Jorge and Paolo and the noise, and the way their raft of a bed shook as though about to go under, and the front entrance that always smelled like fish despite the Clorox, rubber gloves, and hours spent on hands and knees trying to rid the place of its stench. "You accused me of being obsessed with

making that apartment our home," she told him. "You kept reminding me it was only temporary, that we'd find a new home together and then, eventually, go back to our real home." Ines smiled, glanced towards the window then back at him. "But that never happened. We didn't find a home together afterwards." She took a swallow of wine and laughed. "That fish smell would have been there had the place burnt down; isn't that right, David?" she asked. "It was part of the property." When he didn't say anything, she slid her hand towards his water glass, and traced a pretty fingernail up its stem to the rounded base so the tears of condensation slid down, rivuleting over her finger. He'd had enough.

"Right," he said firmly, taking up that glass and making a show of drinking, keeping his eyes on her face this time so there would be no misunderstanding in what he was about to say. "It was good, Ines, but I'm grateful for the life I have now with Claire." Unlike when he spoke English, in Portuguese each word was clear-cut, had its edge. "You are talking about years ago, a lifetime ago." He put the glass down, out of her reach, and said, "Tell me what's going on."

She shook her head, frowning as she examined her wet fingertip with the scrutiny of a scientist. "Another time," she said. They went on to talk about a few of the friends they had in common, then—after an appropriate amount of time for a lunch hour had passed—David asked for the bill.

"My treat this time," he said. The waiter shook his head.

"There's no bill," Ines insisted, smiling as though the word had lost all meaning. She rested her hands on the edge of the table, looking unabashedly into his face. "They never charge me here. I will just stay on a bit to thank

Signore Toldeo. You go on back."

"All right, then, thank you. Thank the Signore for me," he said, folding his napkin, tucking it by his plate, and standing. "Back to work for me."

"Back you go," she cheered, altogether different from Claire. Ines had shut herself tight, not a centimeter exposed, not a piece threatening to reveal the complicated machinery or invite tinkering.

"We'll see you and Chris tomorrow evening, then," he said, kissing her cheek and grabbing his jacket off the back of his chair.

"Supper," she said, arching her back, "come with an appetite." One day Ines will slip through a passage in the earth, and he will hunt every field until he finds the entrance. Once there, he'll commit the place to memory, that deep blue vein to the center of earth, her final resting place, his rabbit hole when he misses her enough. But for now he had only to recognize the bald love she'd accidentally exposed in him. He would kick the dirt over it again, smother it down.

"I'm sure Claire will be happy to see you," he said. "Ciao."

Simply put, he is not a pathetic dog that cheats on his wife.

"David?" Claire asks from the dining room table just as he finishes the dishes and pours the dirty water down the drain, "It turns out my friend Josh is coming to New York to try out for a play and wants to know if he can stay with us for two nights."

"A conveniently free hotel in New York," he says, not looking at her. He places the glasses neatly in the blue plastic dish rack. "I think we can help him find a cheap hotel."

"He's my friend." She's holding the back of a chair.

Best In Show



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www.bestinshowcomic.com/wordpress

by Phil Juliano

"Then he'll understand that it's unfair to ask your husband to host people in a house barely big enough for the two of us."

"What am I supposed to say, David?" Claire steps into the kitchen holding the salt and pepper shakers in one hand.

"You're a skilled woman. Word it nicely," he says, moving sideways as she advances towards the sink. He dries his hands on a dishcloth. "You asked me a question, and I answered it. I don't want guests."

"Jesus," she complains, the salt shaker slipping from her, plunking around the tiles before settling.

He sighs, hangs the cloth back on its hook, and leaves the kitchen. Through the dining room, through the living room, she follows behind him, stopping only at the base of the stairs, speaking loudly as he heads towards their guest room.

"Why do you have to make everything so difficult for me? Why can't you just give me something?" she asks. "Why can't you give me something?" she repeats as he reaches the upstairs hallway, "Do you hear? Oh, come on!" she shouts, watching as he mounts the stairs, "It's just a couple of nights." He says nothing, and the sludge starts moving through her body, aching into each limb. It will melt, but there's no exit, nowhere for the dirty waters to go in that fabricated circulatory system, no detoxifying from that brand of cold. "Say something!" she demands.

There is nothing to say. All he can think to say is, "You don't know what to ask for," which sounds like self-importance, the worse version of sincerity, not who he is at all. Not him.

The next evening, they are standing in the threshold of Ines's apartment on the Upper East Side

with Ines beaming, exclaiming how delighted she is they have come. Her green silk dress and high heels would qualify anyone else as over-dressed, but Claire is no longer surprised at Ines's skill in exempting herself from common standards. She kisses Claire on both cheeks then takes David's hand and kisses him once. "So glad you are here," she says in English, eyes from her muscular face darting from Claire to David. Ines is comfortable, Claire thinks, perfectly comfortable in her own skin.

"This is for you," David says, Japanese sake in hand, a tradition between them—she drinks it from a small clay cup.

"Oh, you're wonderful," she laughs, taking the bottle by its neck.

"Just point us towards the food," David says, "I smell pastel and kibi."

Ines grabs his elbow. "Pera ai. The only one of you who can afford to eat is your wife."

"Hardly," Claire manages. She chose to wear her white skirt with blue flowers, a black t-shirt, and black pumps. She feels like a girl trying to make an impression, a child at an adult party. David was wearing his usual—jeans and a button down white shirt.

"There's the man," David calls out, looking over Ines's shoulder towards her husband, Chris, who is weaving through the other guests and towards them.

"David and Claire. Two people who deserve a good drink," Chris announces when he gets to the door. He takes Claire's hand, pulls her fully into the room, and moves to kiss her cheek. She turns too soon, accidentally brushing his lips, and there's no way to stop the blush that rises to her face. Ines smiles as Claire says too loudly, "Oh, great to be here."

"A toast is exactly what's called for," Chris says, hand on her upper arm.

"It's been so long," she tells him. "I mean, since we saw you last," she clarifies.

"Ciao, Chris," David says. Chris is a small, perfectly proportioned man with the grace of a dancer. Claire has always liked him. "My poor husband has been working far too hard," Ines tells them, placing a hand on Chris's back. "According to him, Wall Street is on its way under and it's his job to avert a crisis. Can you imagine?"

"Forget business tonight," Chris tells them. "Time for a good red."

"We can get our own drinks," David says, "go back to your guests." Chris winks at Claire, kisses Ines on the cheek, and heads back through the room. Ines continues in Portuguese with whatever she'd begun saying to David. Out on the balcony, Chris picks up the spatula and begins serving steaks. It's a February evening warm enough that a few people are standing outside. Claire looks back to the dining and living rooms, which are sparsely furnished, large and airy; she can hear Chris's laughter, a kind sound that touches her. Suddenly, she recalls the Cartwells, a poor family that lived down the street from where she and Tris grew up. Those kids laughed. They used to eat clay, and Claire remembers thinking there was a connection between their laughter and the dirt they ate. "Dirt Eaters," Tris had called them. She found out from the pharmacist that the dirt provided some nutrient that was lacking in their diet. "They get the vitamin or whatever that is, and it feels good."

"It feels good?" Claire had asked. One difference between childhood and adulthood, Claire thought,

by Michael Cole

DRAGIN



The Blotter

is that it now makes sense how you can need something so badly you'll eat dirt to get it.

"Let's get dinner, Claire," David says, nudging her towards the table. Ines heads to the kitchen. "What a feast!"

The large marble table is overflowing with various salads, fruits, Brazilian appetizers and David's favorite baccalau as well as all the necessary sauces. Once David and Claire get their plates of food, he goes over to talk to a journalist he knows from his days working at Globo. She remains standing by the table and soon becomes involved in a conversation. The woman's name is Annie, and she is telling her about how she got to New York by way of many other countries and states, beginning with Georgia.

"I married my third husband six years ago. He was the one who brought me here. I couldn't be happier." Annie smiles. She's got a pleasant lilt to her voice, a slender nose, and her eyes are lovely—small blue gems set deep in her skull and spaced a surprising distance apart. Her skin is a little weathered, wrinkled but tanned, even now, in February. Claire figures she must be in her early fifties—was she beautiful six years ago when she remarried? Is there a gaggle of husbands somewhere, or another generous source of men to which this woman has access? David is on the far side of the room, still talking. He looks differ-

ent when he speaks Portuguese or Italian, less burdened by that smile he sometimes wears when speaking English. Leaning back and laughing at intervals, her husband is obviously taking actual pleasure in whatever the man beside him is saying.

"I traveled to France and Germany and even lived in the Caribbean with my first husband." She stopped, took a sip of wine, then remarked more quietly, "He was in love with me, but I was not in love with him." A year ago, this statement would have annoyed Claire, and she would have begun slipping out of the conversation, but this evening she continues listening. "He was originally from France and wanted me to move back there with him, and that's when I realized I didn't love him enough." Claire notices a small black dot above her lip. A beauty mark or something more sinister?

"So," Claire says, her wine-glass poised between her thumb and forefinger, "are you able to answer whether it is better to love or to be loved?" She smiles with only the left side of her face, hoping to convey how ridiculous she knows her question is.

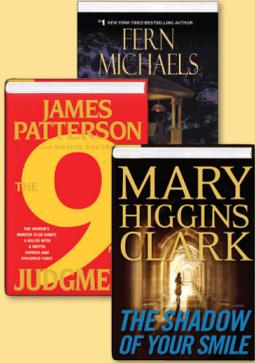
"My second husband was a kind man," she says. "He worked for the UN. I remember one day he came home and told me that we were being transferred to Turkey for a year. I had never thought about Turkey ever in my life, and all of a sudden it had

become a place where I was expected to live." Annie scoops up a forkful of stroganoff and eats. There are a few seconds of silence between them while she swallows. "All of a sudden, Turkey was everywhere. I mean, I remember turning on the TV and there'd be something about Ankara. A documentary on the long-haired Angora goat. Whoever heard of such a thing?" Annie laughs, shaking her head with gusto, and takes an ample sip of wine. Her movements are larger than might be expected from the slightness of her frame. Claire reaches over and takes a nectarine from a bowl full of fruit. There is more food on that table than Ines's twenty or so guests could ever eat in an evening, and that is not counting those steaks outside. When Ines and David came to America together, they hardly had anything. Now look at her. "Well, Ankara, that's where your mohair comes from," Annie informs her, replacing the wine glass squarely on the table. "But, like I said, Turkey was everywhere. I'd go to the meat section, and I'd see 'Turkey on sale' and I'd stand there looking at that big red sign like it was some kind of prediction." She purses her lips and waves her right hand in front of her face. "Or premonition," she says. "That's not the right word, but you know what I mean."

Claire nods. An entire wall of the living room is glass, so one can look over the tops of buildings all the way to Central Park. "How long did you stay?"

"Almost a year," Annie exclaims. "Like living in a desert during the summer. My throat dried so bad it felt like I was breathing fire. You have no idea," she says, smiling more generously, as though Claire has just said something pleasing. "But it was pretty. You could call it pretty." Dropping her gaze, Annie tucks a hunk of platinum blonde hair behind her ear. If her face were younger, Claire might believe her hair color was real. Her eyebrows matched, and her skin was pale. She may indeed have once been a natural platinum blonde. "But I found out in the craziest way that he had a mistress. He met her while we were over there. She wasn't even Turkish—she was from Minnesota. Can you believe it?" Annie asks, as though the woman's nationality had been the actual deal breaker.

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"There we are in this foreign place with women gorgeous enough to have made me likely to forgive him for cheating, and he goes and finds a plain old housewife hauled over there from Minnesota." Annie scoots her plate onto the table, upsetting her wine-glass, which she catches, taking a sip in one smooth, choreographed motion. "In any case, that's long over." She purses her generous lips, "but it was crazy."

"You have no kids?" Claire asks.

"A saving grace. No kids. Not one kid dragged all over the world." Annie looks at her and asks, "Does your husband miss Brazil?"

"The weather," Claire responds.

"Hmmm," Annie remarks, pulling a whistling breath through her lips. "So let him go. Let him go to back there," she says.

"No, I mean," Claire begins, staring at Annie, but she's stopped short, caught by an arm on the left side of her waist.

"Oh, there you are. There is someone I'd like to introduce you to." With a single spin, Ines manages to stand between Claire and Annie. It is Ines's dance, the feline arching of her back, the soft, almost accent-less speech: "I want to introduce you to a friend of mine." As though by magic, Ines produces a large woman in a blue cowl neck dress. "Victoria is a writer. She is writing a memoir. A book." Ines takes Claire's hand and pulls her towards the enormity of this new woman, vanishing Annie into the people behind them.



"I'm Not a Saber Tooth Tiger"

by Randall Brown

I'm telling her I'm too terrified to go back: to lie, once more, still for the fifteen minutes it takes for the camera to x-ray the heart, post-treadmill. I'm telling her that, to the body, it's like a sabertooth tiger leapt into the room; it's that level of terror.

"I just went to the dentist." She opens her mouth wide. "Look, they've all been filed down."

Oh fuck. So this is the consequence of revelation, to be treated like a five-year old. For people to use logic to make it go away when the terror defies all logic.

Later, as I will be lying there and she will holding my hand and telling me a story about the cats in the alley and her capturing them, fostering them, rehoming them, I will feel that divide between the terror underneath and this sweet sweet woman going far beyond the responsibilities of her job description.

At some point, I will surely say, "I'm trying but—" And she will say, "I know. I know. You aren't alone."

And I will go home, thinking that I survived something, when all I was doing was lying still and trapped for fifteen minutes. And now next time I will think I need my hand held and stories to be told to me, and without those things, I will be even more terrified, more beyond able to handle the world.

But now she is saying, "I tell you what. You don't want to have to

come back, do you?"

"No," I say.

"What can I do to have you stay?" I am 44; she is probably fifteen years older. Do I need a mommy? Is that the state I've reached? I picture myself lying there still under that camera and there's that terror, beyond my ability to reason with it. What is it really? A fear of death, the permanent stillness? Of being trapped as if by fate? Is it the loneliness of childhood that returns, the terror of the absence of adults or friends?

"I won't leave you," the nurse says to me. She takes my hand. She strokes the fingers. She leads me to the coffin-like table, lies me in it, and begins her tale of the cats in the alley, the food in the open cages beckoning to them, like home.



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An Essay On Poetry

by Karyn Joyner

I think great poetry is the finest expression of the human heart couched in the choicest words and figures of speech. What is there not to like about poetry? I must admit that to me it is essential to be able to understand a poem although I know some would disagree with me. I also want poetry to be lean and uncluttered and for this reason prefer fairly modern poets.

In a book I have been reading, "Great Poems by American Women," certain themes seem characteristic of the female mind, themes such as the love of freedom, the beauty of nature, the loss of love, the appeal of religion, and the love of country. The poems in the book are arranged chronologically. The first one is from the early 1600's and the last the middle 1900's. It is interesting that the compiler of the anthology did not include poetry from the last half of the 1900's. In her preface she doesn't give a reason. One point she makes is that a large percentage of the poets in the book were born in New England where there were greater educational opportunities.

In the book the earliest poem that attracted me was the least characteristic of women's themes - Julia Ward Howe's "Battle Hymn of the Republic," written in 1861 and put to the tune of "John Brown's Body." The music had a lot to do with its appeal to fight in the cause of freedom; it has a drum-like beat. It is curious that such a violent message referring to loosing "the fateful lightning of his terrible swift sword" and "the fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel" should be written by a woman. The last stanza begins poetically - "In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea / With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me." It concludes by comparing Jesus' dying "to make men holy" with the Northern cause to "die to make men free / While God is marching on." Thus it uses the age-old argument in wars that "God is on our side," a powerful message to soldiers.

Howe wrote the poem while visiting an army camp. She was a lecturer on women's suffrage, prison reform, and international peace. It's nice to think she was as much in favor

of peace as she was of war!

Emily Dickinson (middle 1800's) is probably the best known of all American women poets. So many of her little poems have become famous. I've always loved the humor in her "I'm nobody! Who are you?": "I'm nobody! Who are you? / Are you nobody too? / Then there's a pair of us - don't tell! / They'd banish us, you know. / How dreary to be somebody! / How public, like a frog / To tell your name the livelong day / To an admiring bog!"

In our modern celebrity-mad world this is such a refreshing outlook!

In Katharine Lee Bates' "American the Beautiful" (1895) we have another poem set to music, a poem of such beautiful imagery that it is often called our unofficial national anthem. I much prefer it to the warlike and hard to sing "Star Spangled Banner." Here in the second stanza, "O beautiful for pilgrim feet / whose stern, impassioned stress / A thoroughfare for freedom beat / Across the wilderness" is the thought of what it meant in the formation of the country to have immigrants moving across its face, beating a path for freedom as they came. Bates refers twice to "brotherhood" in the lines "God shed his grace on thee / And crown thy good with brotherhood / From sea to shining sea!" This is a concept that seems to be lost today.

Bates wrote the poem after climbing Pike's Peak. She was an English professor at Wellesley College for forty years.

Moving to more typically female fare, in "I Shall Not Care" the poet Sara Teasdale (early 1900's) begins with a delicate metaphorical personification that is a sharp contrast to the hard ending, reflecting the bitterness of rejected love: "When I am dead and over me bright April / Shakes out her rain-drenched hair, / Though you should lean above me broken-hearted, / I shall not care. I shall have peace as leafy trees are peaceful, / When rain bends down the bough, / And I shall be more silent and cold-hearted / Than you are now."

This seems to be a perfect gem of a poem, mixing the beautiful

imagery of nature with human emotion. Teasdale won the Pulitzer Prize in 1918 for "Love Songs."

I must admit a great fondness for the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay (early 1900's). She wrote lyrical and passionate poetry, among the most famous being "First Fig."

My candle burns at both ends; / It will not last the night; / But ah, my foes and oh, my friends - / It gives a lovely light."

It sums up her amoral, bohemian approach to life, as the standards of sexual morality loosened over the years. If you haven't read "Renascence" lately, here is the last stanza of that remarkable poem: "The world stands out on either side / No wider than the heart is wide; / Above the world is stretched the sky - / No higher than the soul is high. / The heart can push the sea and land / Farther away on either hand; / The soul can split the sky in two, / and let the face of God shine through, / But East and West will pinch the heart / That can not keep them pushed apart; / And he whose soul is flat - the sky / Will cave in on him by and by."

And when autumn comes, read the gorgeous "God's World" a s a burning tribute to the season. Millay received the Pulitzer Prize for her book "Ballad of the Harp-Weaver."

The last poem I will mention and the one that makes my heart stop is a poem by Emma Lazarus (1849-1887), "The New Colossus." If the title means nothing to you, consider these words in it and think again: "Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, / The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. / Send them, the homeless, tempest-tost to me, / I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

If that doesn't bring a tear to your eye, you have forgotten your heritage, your ancestors who might have been part of the "masses yearning to be free," and ask yourself where you might be if America hadn't taken them in. Ask the inhabitants of Arizona. And then hope for a kinder, more hospitable nation than we have become, and work to make it happen.

These are some of my favorite poets and their poetry. What are yours? I salute the women poets of our history who expressed themselves and their times in the finest poetry.

The Dream Journal

real dreams, real weird

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

mermaid@blotterra.com

Her cheeks, chin, neck, are easily twenty years shy her fifty-two spent on the planet. It is her eyes that sometimes give away her real age, they are occasionally tired and often care-worn. Right now, however, they are shielded by expensive sunglasses. Ironically, she lets her hair go to gray, it is worn as a badge rather than hiding beneath some chemical shade. Thinner than usual, like a teenager might wish to be. She is missing meals. Why? What stops her hunger? What is making her shoulders slump? An invisible weight. Her hands, when she pushes her sunglasses up out of her way, are frail looking, just shy of clawed. They seem almost to shake although they do not, actually. They are the real tell-tale. Something has happened, is still happening, that is bringing her apparent and real ages together, swiftly and abruptly. She need say nothing at all.

PIC - cyberspace

CONTRIBUTORS

Martha Witt is the author of the novel, *Broken As Things Are* (Holt; 2004/Picador; 2005). Her translations and short fiction are included in the anthologies *Post-War Italian Women Writers* (Northwestern University Press) *The Literature of Tomorrow* (Rinehart, Holt, and Winston), and *This Is Not Chick Lit* (Random House) as well as *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Boulevard Magazine*, *The Saranac Review*, *One Story*. She is currently an Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at William Paterson University in Wayne, NJ.

See pages 8 & 9 for *everything* on **Alison Hinks**.

Karen Joyner of Burlington, NC, has been keeping us on the straight and narrow. As a retired teacher, she has the chops to do so.

Randall Brown of Wynnewood, Pa, teaches at St. Joseph's University and has had work in many fine journals including *The Laurel Review*, *Connecticut Review* and *The Evansville Review*. As an editor with the *SmokeLLong Quarterly*, he has had numerous Pushcart and Best of the Web nominations.

Phil Juliano and **Michael Cole** are lucky ducks, watching the Asheville fall colors. Phil was recently interviewed by folks with *Comics Coast to Coast* - the podcast is on www.comicscoasttocoast.com

Call for Entries!

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3. In a world chock-full of scandal, transparency is very important to us, and we make every effort to eliminate any conflict of interest situation from going down in our contest. Blotter volunteers and their family members and/or employees are prohibited from entering our contest.

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Our contest will be run in line with the rules of ethics and mechanics recommended by the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, as outlined in their 2006 monograph on the subject. You can't view for free, but you may purchase the monograph entitled "Publishing Contests: Ethics and Mechanics" through the CLMP at <http://www.clmp.org/about/monographs.html>. This is the document we have used in coming up with the rules and conditions of this contest.

So that's it, then - now get to work!

Final Tid-Bits: I can tell it's Fall because the chickens aren't laying eggs anymore. They just stare at me as if I'm to blame for the leaves falling off the trees and weather turning cold. Visit your local independent bookstore, they have plenty of things to read - I don't want to hear any of you saying, "I'm bored." Got it? Good!

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