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# The Blotter

magazine



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Brace Boone III.....Marketing Advisor  
Richard Hess.....Programs Director  
T.J. Garrett.....Staff Photographer

**Subscriptions Contact:**

Martin K. Smith  
M\_K\_Smith@yahoo.com  
919.286.7760

**Advertisers Contact:**

Martin K. Smith  
M\_K\_Smith@yahoo.com  
919.286.7760

**Submissions and Editorial Business to:**

Jenny Haniver  
mermaid@blotterrag.com

Garrison Somers, Editor-in-Chief  
chief@blotterrag.com

919.869.7110 (business hours only! you may call for information about snail-mail submissions)

**Marketing & Public Relations Contact:**

Marilyn Fontenot  
marilyngfontenot@gmail.com  
919.904.7442

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## "Poetry Book"

Eleven years ago, I began scribbling in a blank book. Well, it actually just looks like scribbling because my handwriting, even when I slow down and use a fancy pen and really pay attention to the crafting of each letter, my words still come out only borderline-legible. This particular blank book contained the impromptu poetry inspired by sitting in a car (A beige Nissan van) waiting for children to finish. That, however, is not the punch-line of a Dad-joke. Actually, that little blank book was the beginning of a lesson.

Hear me out. I promise, no lecture.

At the time, eldest daughter was in third grade, and youngest was just starting kindergarten. They were both, finally, in the same school, and I was their preferred mode of transport (along with food, clothing, teeth-brushing, face-washing and entertainment coordination.) We passed a lot of time in that old beige van, waiting for traffic to move, school to start, rainstorms to blow over, this or that event to commence. Reading! Listening to a song on the radio. Watching a movie. Snacking on chips and juice-boxes, coloring, drawing, writing poetry. Truth! *Writing poetry.* And my third-grader had reached the point in her education where she decided that she was beginning to understand what poetry actually is.

Far be it for me, at this point (in the story as well as today) to try and encapsulate "what is poetry?" in a 700-word essay. What I did try to do with my daughters is tell them how I felt about a poem, what it was like for me to cobble an image (for at best, I am a shoemaker) and to begin the discussion with them about the difference between a poem and poem-fragment. Poetry is art as much as painting or sculpture. You have to work at it, like a garden that you plant and tend and weed and water. Is a poem the whole garden, or is it a flower in the garden, I asked them once. Oh, Dad, said my third grader. I thought you meant a vegetable garden. Good point. Some of my words stuck and some were considered and dismissed. Which, I think, is both good and as good as it gets, perhaps in equal measure.

I know I promised no lecturing, but I used to think that the responsibility for teaching about poetry, the great poets of history and their works, was a great and wonderful burden that teachers (and parents and authors and editors and other poets) all shared. *This, you see, is good poetry, and this over here? Not so much. Read Gerard Manley Hopkins! Read Yeats and Keats (or is it Keats and Yeats?) You're too young to know what's good for you! (Hey, Dad! Did you know "groan" is a homonym for "grown?")*

And I think I know, if not the precise moment that my mind changed, the two ideas that broke through the calcification. One was a friend's son, who told him that while he respected his father's opinion on some things (like art, politics and career choices) he wasn't going to follow all of his father's advice. Why not? Because he knew what his own interests were, wasn't terribly concerned about making mistakes, and fifty years from now, being wrong wouldn't matter very much because he (Dad) wouldn't be around to say, "I told you so."

Damn – that’s good. By the way, my friend, rather than pushing back against this monolith of sound thinking, has embraced it (his son is wicked smart.)

My own daughter just said “Dad, you’re probably wrong about this.” Concise, and no less true.

So, while I really do think that poetry is the responsibility of those who follow us, what we found to be judged great and wonderful may change, if not for us, for others. Time was our unit of measure. *This poem has been read for a long time, therefore it is good and it must be read by you. You will see for yourself how great it is, and if you don’t, I will explain it to you!*

Rubbish. Those marvelous, dusty works may not resonate for them. I mean, they might, but might not. I still put the poems I love in front of her, and the music and art and films and books and, and, and. But I don’t bludgeon her with how great they are (much) and I don’t dismiss the art she loves. And if my daughters, for example, find poetry in a garden different from mine, who am I to judge them on that? It’s their poetry at that point, all that is and all that ever was. Because I will be gone, someday. And they, and others, will hand that sheaf of papers down to the next group of young poem writers and readers. And trust me, I didn’t make up this line of reasoning – again, my eldest revealed it to me in her follow-on comment to my *wrongness*.

How, I asked her – not at the time; I never have the correct words when I need them (more’s the pity) – will you be certain to give the next generation all the same possibilities to find poetry that...I’m giving you? What I said was “How am I wrong?” (oh, the list of things...)

Easy, Dad, said she. Don’t throw anyone or anything under the bus.

I suspect that this sounds preternaturally profound for a third grader. In any case, I have grown up in the ensuing eleven years to find that she was not only right, but that embracing this idea makes things a bit easier. Throwing people and their art under the bus is a lot of heavy lifting, and nothing good comes of it.

**Garry - chief@blotterrag.com**

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CAUTION

*With the thoughts I'd be thinkin' I could*

## “Notes on a Great-Uncle”

by Heather Smith

I'm not sure when I learned about my Uncle Ralph's "nervous breakdown". I must have been six or seven years old when one of our relatives told me and my two sisters that he'd had one. Naturally we asked what a Breakdown was and how one occurred. We were told it had something to do with his brain and that he was in the thrall of voices which told him what he could and could not do. The long and short of it was that he was mentally ill... had been for years. Since mental illness still bore a strong social stigma then perhaps if it was associated with a noble deed, this might help dilute the family's collective "shame". At least it might sound better to the casual inquirer. So the official story was that Uncle Ralph, my grandmother's only sibling, had been "injured" as a result of direct participation in World War II. In other words, he'd been wounded, but mentally. "Like shell shock?" we asked. No, came back the answer, not exactly like that.

In fact that's not what had happened at all as I learned years later from Grandma. It was true that Ralph was drafted into the army and spent

time in some southern state training to be a soldier during the Second World War. My grandmother said that one day, Ralph's superiors suspected he was malingering and decided they needed to remedy this. The solution was to dump Ralph in a forested area, give him a compass, maybe a map and make him find his way back to camp alone. It became dark and then started to rain. When he did not return at the appointed time, a search party was sent out to find him. They found him wandering around in the thickets, up to his knees in mud, pack on his back and drenched to the skin. Upon his return to camp he was admitted to the hospital since they discovered that "malingering" had actually been measles. He stayed in the hospital a while. Grandma was not sure whether he caught tuberculosis in the hospital or in the barracks, but at some point before discharge, along with measles, Ralph acquired TB. I remember asking Grandma at this point, "So Uncle Ralph didn't go to France to fight after all?" She answered wryly, "No, he never even made it out of boot camp."

Since a guy with one lung is of no use to the army (it was standard prac-

tice before antibiotics to collapse an infected lung hoping to slow the bacteria's spread), Ralph was discharged, bringing an end to his short and not very illustrious military career. He spent time in a TB sanitarium back in California in the San Fernando Valley, "taking the cure" as they called it then, waiting for the microbe to either claim or spare him. He lived, and returned home to live with his mother and according to Grandma it was around this time that Ralph had The Breakdown.

As Grandma told it, one evening Ralph left the house and ran to the home of his best friend. Standing in the street, Ralph called him out shouting, "I want to see you!" His friend obliged and while walking down the porch steps, Ralph attacked him. The police were called, and from thereon in Ralph became a denizen of mental institutions throughout the 1940's and '50's, diagnosed at some point with a "mild schizophrenia". Nobody knew what triggered it then and nobody knows what causes it now. Ralph's body had valiantly withstood measles and survived TB but this new affliction would claim his mind; his fate was sealed at the age of twenty one.

Prior to the 1960s mental institutions dotted the U.S. landscape. A lot has been written about these places where people could be committed for indefinite periods of time. They could



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NIGHTSOUND  
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be confined for a whole variety of mental illnesses, real or imagined, by family members with honest or equally dubious motives. Ralph knew these hospitals well. Norwalk, Patton, and various Veterans hospitals in southern California were places Ralph spent much of his adulthood. But by the 1960s and into the early 1970s the powers that be decided the mentally ill should not be sequestered in such hospitals and released them into the communities. There were some good reasons for this and things might have worked out had anybody bothered to make plans and spent the money that was needed to implement it well. But this wasn't what happened. Politicians along with the medical community made no provisions regarding where the mentally ill would live or where they would get adequate treatment once released. Suddenly, people who had previously been institutionalized, maybe for years, were dumped on the street into communities absolutely unable to cope. And that's the way it is today. But Ralph was "luckier" than some since his mother was willing to look out for him and he could look after his basic needs with very little supervision. It was at this time, during the early 1970s, that I met my great uncle.

When we were children our parents sent me and my sisters each summer to see our grandparents in Los

Angeles. At some point we always paid a visit to Nana our great grandmother who was Grandma and Ralph's own mother. It always amazed me how someone as old as Grandma could also have a mother too but there she was. Nana lived in a very small one bedroom apartment that she owned in Inglewood. It was the only testimony to her years of living frugally on a switchboard operator's pay. The building was directly in the flight path of LAX and every ten minutes or so a jet came screaming over the rooftops, its landing gear swinging slowly down from its massive belly, the wheels barely clearing the TV antennas. As my sisters and I played in the courtyard, we always came to a standstill to watch this impressive sight. It was hard to ignore. The ground shook as the plane approached and I could feel the vibrations travel from my feet to my head as it roared over the shuddering apartment building. The jet engine's sheer power was palpable. The smell of fuel permeated the air. There was always a thin layer of soot on Nana's windowsill and a haze that hung around the neighborhood.

All in all these were rather dreary visits. Grandma and Nana sat at the kitchen table where unpaid bills lay, the two of them talking about these bills, Grandma not smiling and Nana

looking past her at the wall. They were not close. Grandma glanced up as we trooped in from our play downstairs and stated, "Before we leave I want you to see Uncle Ralph." We looked at each other with some trepidation. We all knew that Ralph was the "crazy uncle" and therefore someone to be avoided, even feared. On a previous visit I remember Ralph sitting on the sofa in Nana's apartment, his eyes fixed on a lamp across the room. His head was completely bald. Grandma, lounging in a stuffed chair, asked him why he had no hair and he answered quite calmly that his voices told him to shave it off. I was not standing far from him and recall the stab of uneasiness I suddenly felt and also his proximity to me at that moment. I recall quickly looking over at Grandma and saw her, legs crossed, elbow leaning on the chair's arm with her chin resting in her hand, giving Ralph an appraising and somewhat weary look.

However under Grandma's edict, there was no getting out of seeing him. We dutifully filed out the door and slowly went back down the stairs to Ralph's apartment. One of us rang his bell then knocked on the screen. We waited. Nobody came and with a collective sigh of relief we turned to go when the door flew open and there he was, Uncle Ralph standing in the

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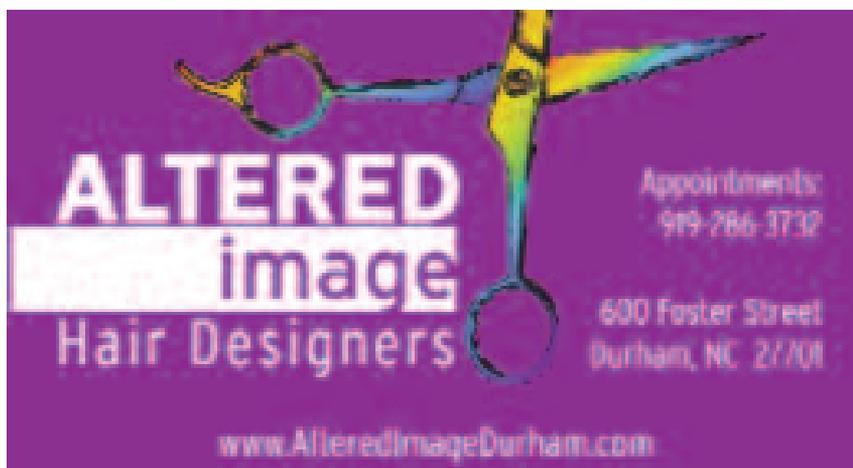


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doorway. At first he looked straight ahead then suddenly seeing us glanced down and fixed us with a piercing gaze. His eyes were large and brown, which was different from the rest of us including his sister since we all had blue eyes. He wore an undershirt tucked into his pants and he was a bit heavy in the midriff but by this time his hair had grown back. A bushy brown mustache grew on his upper lip and the smell of stale cigarettes billowed from his living room. He continued to regard us when finally we had the presence of mind to greet him. This we did in unison; "Hello Uncle Ralph" we chorused and it came out sounding a lot like "trick or treat". "Hello" he responded and stared at us through the screen door. Thinking back I'm not sure if the look on his face was one of curiosity or bemusement; it was not entirely blank. "Well, we have to go", my older sister informed him. She was after all, the eldest and we two younger ones naturally felt it was her duty to talk to him. "Good-bye" he said swinging the door shut. The visit was over.

I would see my great uncle from time to time over the years mostly on holidays when we'd travel to L.A. and once again visit my grandparents. Someone would fetch Ralph and bring him up to the house for dinner. Usually upon arrival he'd greet everyone with a "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Thanksgiving" depending on the season, sometimes sporting a Santa's hat or, more often, a Mexican sombrero. My grandmother, busy in the kitchen would look up and then stare hard at Ralph's choice of attire. He often wore red corduroy trousers stuffed into knee high leather boots for these occasions and a T-shirt that said, "Farm Aid". Her mouth became

hard and she was clearly peeved. The length of his hair, often to the shoulders and white as snow really bothered her. She'd turn back to her cooking and grumble, "God I'd wish he'd get his hair cut." She was always annoyed with him yet she never failed to have him over for holidays. He ate quietly at the table, talking to no one unless spoken to and retired to the couch when he was through. My Aunt Mary, out of all of us, made a concerted effort to draw him out but it wasn't easy. He mostly answered in monosyllables, or remained silent. When Ralph began jerking his head and moving his lips, a clear indication the voices he heard were at him again, Grandma would say, "I think Ralph's had enough" and someone took him back to his apartment. My grandfather often said at some point in frustration after Ralph's departure "He doesn't even take his medication... flushes it down the toilet!" That was true. Ralph stopped taking any medication ever since he left his last mental institution.

The medication was a contentious issue. On it, Grandma had described Ralph as occasionally catatonic when she and Nana visited him in the hospitals. He gained a great deal of weight too. However without it, Ralph was subjected to the voices in his head, and they caused him to wildly yell in an absolutely futile attempt to make them stop. There was a time there where I remember my Grandma had to move him from one apartment to the next due to neighbors complaining about the shouting. She also advised Ralph not to tell people he heard voices because these confessions had caused disquiet in more than one neighbor and required her to move him again. Finally though, Ralph was able to settle down in a

cluster of ancient apartments owned by the county, in San Pedro. From here he launched several trips to a number of places, like Bakersfield, Sacramento or wherever his whim took him.

One such trip took him through Phoenix where I was living at the time. I didn't know he was on the road until I got a call from the Greyhound Bus station. I picked up the phone and at first had no idea who it was. There was a long pause before he said my name and then described his whereabouts. I told him I'd come get him and as I hung up, began to dial Grandma at the same time. I told her Ralph was here in Phoenix. She was exasperated.

"God help us all, what can he be thinking?"

"I don't know Grandma" I answered "but he's here."

She asked me if I could go get him. I said I would and she urged me to get him back on the next bus to L.A. I told her he might not want to go back. She told me to try to get him on it anyway. I said okay, doubtfully, and then drove down to the depot. It was late afternoon but the place was crowded and ungodly hot. This was summer in Phoenix and the air-conditioner at the bus station consisted of a fan sitting on a ledge rotating its round head up, down and sideways. Particles of lint and paper caught in its frame trailed in the wind it struggled to make. I saw Ralph sitting on a plastic chair. By now he'd grown a beard that was all white. He wore a baseball cap and his standard corduroy pants stuffed into knee high leather boots.

"Ralph?" I said. He looked up at me and at first didn't recognize me.

"Mary?" He asked. He thought I was my aunt.

"No," I told him. "It's me." His eyes lost their searching quality and he greeted me. "Come on Ralph," I said, "I'll take you to my house." He got up stiffly and gingerly walked with me to the car. I asked him what was wrong and he told me his feet had swollen up. I groaned inwardly, wondering how I was going to deal with that and we got in the car. I rolled down the windows to get air circulating. The car had no A/C either but the heater worked great. I felt sweat trickling down my back and a rising anxiety as I tried to figure out what I'd do next. "Ralph." I said in what I hoped was a firm voice, "Grandma wants you to go back home."

He didn't say anything at first and gazed out the window. The air wafted in like an open oven. Presently he said, "Well, I think I'll just keep going to Cedar Rapids".

I glanced at him and looked back at the road.

"As in Iowa?" I asked, startled.

"Yes." He said calmly and we pulled up to my apartment.

We went in and I made him dinner and as we sat I tried working on him again. "Ralph, you can't go to Cedar Rapids. It's. . . . ." I caught myself in time before I said, "crazy". He chewed his food methodically and looked over my shoulder. He quite deliberately cleared his mouth and then said,

"Yes, I think I'll go on to Iowa."

"Do you have money?" I asked, incredulous.

"Yes." He had a backpack with him. Ralph unzipped it and pulled out a crumpled paper bag the kind you put your lunch in.

"It's in there?" I asked him, pointing at the bag.

"Yes," he said again and pushing it back into the pack he continued to

plow through his meal. My culinary abilities were stuck at the fried egg and bacon level but Ralph seemed to enjoy it. Frustrated by his stubbornness I got up from the table and dumped my dishes in the sink.

"Where did you get the money?" I asked him.

"I saved it" he replied casually and sat back, now finished with his dinner. I took his empty plate and started to do the dishes, wondering how on earth he managed to save enough money from his disability check.

As I started scrubbing the plates Ralph opened the pack again and extracted a cigarette in preparation for a post-prandial smoke. He was about to light up but I directed him outside in no uncertain terms and he went out to the front porch. After washing up I joined him. It was night now. The porch was a communal affair that everyone living in the fourplex could use. The building was constructed in the days when apartments had been built to look like houses and also feel a little more like one. Some chairs were placed out there for anyone wishing to take a load off. Feeling so inclined, I sat down in one while Ralph stood and smoked. The sky was deep black and a wind kicked up. It was the monsoon season in Arizona and soon it would rain. The wind grew stronger carrying the scent of sage on it from the desert. There was a roll of thunder and lightning began to streak across the sky in bolts looking like bony fingers. Then there was a terrific clap and the rain started to pour into the street. Other people living in the fourplex wandered out onto the porch just to watch. They talked in low murmurs as the rain continued to drum down. The wind still gusted and the air felt cool and refreshing against

my face. Ralph stood beside me while I sat.

"Well," I said, "I think we should call Grandma". He was silent as he dragged on his cigarette which illuminated his face briefly.

"Besides," I continued, "I have to get up early for work in the morning."

"Where do you work?" He asked. It was the first thing he'd asked me since he'd arrived.

"At a hospital" I replied, "in the microbiology lab."

"I spent many years in hospitals. I know all about them. I had TB". He said this with some finality. The porch was empty now; everyone had gone back in.

I said carefully and quietly, "That wasn't the only reason you were there, Ralph. Weren't some places you were in actually mental hospitals?" I looked up at him. A single light bulb lit the area and Ralph's profile was somewhat in shadow.

"Yes." He said with that same air of finality. "I don't know why I was there. A lot of the people they have in there are perfectly sane. More than people on the outside." I didn't know how to reply to this so I suggested we go back inside. Back in the apartment, the window air conditioner chugged away and I made up a bed for Ralph on the sofa. I reminded him he had to call Grandma and so he did. From his end of the conversation I could tell Grandma was trying to get him to go home and he was equally determined to continue to Iowa. He prevailed (How could he lose? He was halfway there anyway) and they said their good-byes. Ralph didn't apparently pack any pajamas and so as he prepared to sleep in his clothes he sat down on the sofa and began to pull his boots off. I watched skeptically as he struggled with it for a bit and then

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offered to help. Since his feet had swollen it was going to take some effort to remove them. I told him to hold up his right leg and then I grabbed the boot and began to tug at it. He in turn braced himself against the couch and pulled back with his leg. We struggled like this for a while and then as I started to laugh at the whole situation his foot finally came free of the heavy boot and I staggered back with it. He wore no socks.

“Well no wonder your foot got swollen Ralph” I exclaimed “My God, you don’t have any socks on!” He did not reply to this but offered up his other leg for de-booting which took about the same amount of work and left me laughing helplessly again. Later, as I lay in bed listening to Ralph snoring in the living room I wondered at the phenomena that was my great uncle. Despite the fact that his mind had been high-jacked by what people used to think were evil spirits he was still able to function to such a degree that he could buy a Greyhound ticket and board a bus going anywhere. I have known people who are healthy in mind but are too afraid to leave the safety of their own orbit. For good or

ill, Ralph did not have such fears. The wind blew outside, the rain came down and a freight train’s whistle sang out in the distance. I drifted off to sleep.

In the morning, after a quick breakfast of Cap’n Crunch (which Ralph had liberally sprinkled with sugar) I drove him back to the bus station. It was as hot as before inside, decrepit fan and all and I watched as he climbed aboard. That was to be the last I saw of him for a while. A few days later, Grandma called and said Ralph didn’t get to Cedar Rapids. Apparently he fell asleep and didn’t get off at the designated time to catch the right bus. He wound up in El Paso, Texas and had to wire Grandma for money to get back to LA and home. “But he had money!” I told her, “He showed me. Why did he need to wire you?”

She sighed and said, “When he woke up he went to the bathroom at the station and left all the money in a bag on a sink. When he remembered and went back to get it, it was gone.”

“Well, at least he got back home in one piece”, I ventured, looking on the bright side.

“Yes,” agreed my grandmother, “I keep thinking someone is going to mug him on one of these trips. He did get mugged once, you know, when he lived in New York City.”

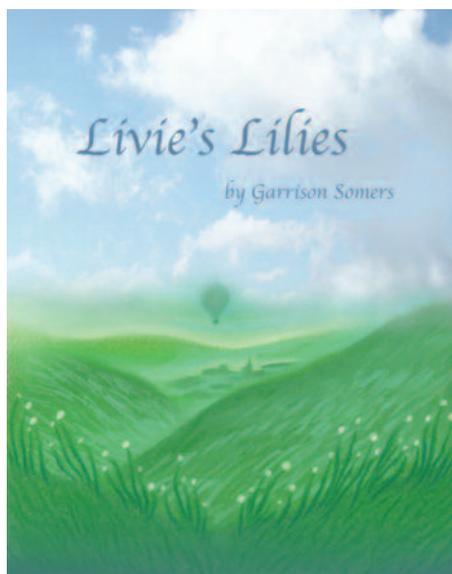
“Ralph lived in New York?”

“Yes, on one of his trips when he was much younger he rode out there on a motorcycle and worked for a while at the Salvation Army. Two guys held him up at knife point.”

Information about Ralph was always a revelation. Grandma became the main repository of most of it over the years because Ralph never told much to anyone and one had to be

with him when he chose to divulge. As it happened I would not see Ralph for the next several years. These years involved quitting my job in Phoenix, moving for a brief stint to Tacoma, Washington and finally winding up in Birmingham, Alabama where I went back to school for another degree. But all roads must eventually lead back to Los Angeles especially if you are originally from the West. A city of almost four million sitting in a county of ten million generally makes for jobs. And, if you can get past the insane housing costs, the packed free-ways and just the sheer number of people living cheek-by-jowl in this sprawling semi-desert city then LA if not exactly Shangri-La can be where you find employment. And I did.

Grandma and Grandpa still lived there and so did Ralph. Strictly speaking Ralph lived in San Pedro but when you talk to people who are not from LA and you actually live in Carson, Torrance, Hawthorne or one of those identical “suburbs in search of a city” you say you’re from LA. I found a flea infested apartment on Normandie Avenue and started working at the health department. I lived alone and the city felt positively cavernous; big, impersonal, with buses roaring below my window all night long. From time to time I’d visit my grandparents and



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spent a quiet night in their neighborhood. I'd ask after Ralph and Grandma would say he was doing fine. "Or" and she'd add with the familiar wryness, "as fine as can be expected. . . . he needs a haircut," she lamented, shaking her head. I decided to visit him.

Ralph still lived in the county housing that Grandma had found for him in San Pedro. It was not too far from the bay and as you drove down the hill to Ralph's place you could see the enormous cranes owned by the Port of Los Angeles towering over the water. The apartments themselves were a ramshackle group of very small bungalows that looked like at one point they'd actually been a tiny motor court motel back in the 1920s or 30's. The buildings stood facing each other, and in between the two rows of houses was a narrow courtyard with a few bushes struggling to survive. Ralph's front door opened into the living room and directly to the right was his tiny bedroom furnished with a small bookcase and a twin sized metal bed without head or foot boards. Behind the bedroom separated by a doorway was the bathroom that in turn was separated from a kitchen by yet another doorway. Once you were in the kitchen, Ralph's living room lay to the

left, again via another doorway. So the whole effect was circular. That is if you started running from the living room going right you'd wind up in the bedroom, straight ahead the bath, hang a left into the kitchen and another left back into the living room.

However, nobody was going to get much exercise making a circuit like this.

Multiple coats of paint had been applied to the walls over the years and a ceiling fan hung in the living room, its blades covered in many layers of dust. Ralph always had it on and it creaked incessantly. If he turned it up to its maximum power it wobbled so vigorously on its base it looked like it could spin right off its foundations. I occasionally had visions of it catapulting right through the front door like a sideways helicopter. There was a wall furnace in the living room and Ralph kept it constantly running in the winter creating a tropical heat. It could get a bit chilly even in San Pedro, but the heat flowing from that furnace was like a blast from Botswana. It was up to the residents to keep the place clean. Grandma was lucky to find and get a place for Ralph to live in subsidized by the county at all. Any extra amenities were out of the question.

Ralph let me in on my first visit and conversation was limited. He had the same white beard and long white hair. He wore a stained t-shirt stuffed into pants held up by a thick belt that seemed to cut his slender waist in half. A rosary hung from his neck and another was pinned to his faded jacket. I wondered a bit about the rosaries because our family's not Catholic but since Grandma told me Ralph also attended a local evangelical church I figured perhaps he was hedging his bets. As I stood there he appeared to be appraising me, but then he abruptly turned around and sat on a chair next to a small table loaded with paper that also functioned as a place for meals. There was a plate with a half-eaten dinner on it; a tamale pie. My questions were mostly answered in mono-syllables with Ralph gazing out the window on one side of the house. But looking around the rooms showed me that he needed some help. Ralph's diagnosis had been a "mild schizophrenia". If his was mild I would've hated to see him in the throes of a "severe" schizophrenia. . . . the kind that I saw played out on streets in downtown LA.

My visits became a fairly regular thing. Ralph said he needed a vacuum cleaner and after I bought it I was satisfied to know he actually used it. A shower curtain, socks, sheets and groceries followed over the years. In return he thanked me from time to time and gave me a plate decorated with larger-than-life strawberries and a bread loaf pan. He also sent letters.

He didn't send them just to me but to every member of the family, including an uncle whose distaste for Ralph was palpable. I have to admit that I groaned inwardly every time they came in the mail. The letters fol-

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A mysterious will by an unknown hand; and murder...

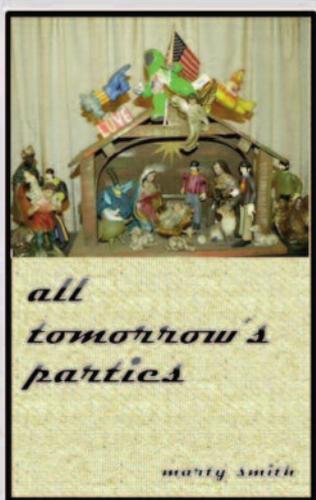
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by Marty Smith

(publisher & book reviewer, "The Blotter Magazine," contributor to the "Urban Hiker;" former host of "New Frontiers" and "Laugh Tracks" on WXDU - FM, Duke University Radio)

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## The Blotter

lowed a particular pattern in the topics that he brought up. One was about the power of positive thinking (Ralph believed that you could “wish away” illness), another was his assertion that life was getting “better and better” on a pretty constant basis. Considering that he couldn’t point to his own life as proof that his beliefs actually worked I wondered at his optimism.

He often brought up in these letters an announcement that he’d be visiting someone within the family, “fairly soon”. This always caused anxiety in whomever he’d indicated would be the happy recipient of his company. One of my sisters called me worried that Ralph had sent her a letter saying his drop-in was imminent.

“What should I do with him?” She asked me. I told her to pick him up at the bus station, drive him to a motel and put him up there one night or a few days, depending on her finances. I also told her to give him bus fare for the trip back because he might not have any money on him when he arrived. This seemed to work because Ralph’s motivations for travelling weren’t for the pleasure of conversation but stemmed from the voices within. Perhaps the trips helped mollify them for a while. Once he told me in the car that he intended to visit the uncle who didn’t like him. Worried that he really would, I told him that Uncle William was a real bastard and I didn’t recommend a long bus trip for the sake of one bastard. Ralph seemed to think this over for a minute then

said with the finality I was accustomed to, “I’ve had a lot of experience with bastards.”

And he had. As an inmate in more than one mental institution he’d gotten to see the darker side of humanity. Given to few words, you had to be there at the right time when Ralph talked about his past. Suddenly over a bowl of ice cream we were having on one of my visits, he told me that beatings at the asylums were common. If they found out you’d complained to family members about conditions in the hospital, like poor food, you’d get a beating later. And somehow they always seemed to find out. He said this very matter-of-factly. Ralph further related that as a punishment for smoking he was strapped to a bed with restraints for a long time.

“How long?” I asked him. He did not answer.

Instead he said nonchalantly, “I ran away.”

“How?” I asked with surprise and genuine interest.

He’d finished his bowl of ice cream, and as was customary with him, did not look at me as he told me how but instead gazed at the wall. He’d lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out his nostrils.

“They had us on a work detail. We worked in a small factory making shoes. They’d line us up and march us over to this building off the hospital grounds. I was at the back of the line and when we were marched forward, I hung back. There was a wall running right alongside us and I vaulted over it.” I wondered how he could spring over a wall so easily then remembered he’d been on the track team at George Washington High School.

“Did they catch you?” I asked, amazed.

“Not for a while” he said as he

dragged on his cigarette.

“When?” I asked him, impatient to know the rest. But Ralph was finished talking and said nothing more. I learned from Grandma later about what happened.

“Oh, that.” She said and sighed. “Well, Ralph found an abandoned house and he stayed in it for a few months.”

“How did he eat?” I asked her.

“Lord knows.” She looked at me, propping her cheek on her hand and said, “They say God takes care of fools and children. Maybe he takes care of people like Ralph, too.” Then becoming less reflective she went on. “His luck ran out though. Somebody must’ve noticed him coming and going then told the police who picked him up. They called Nana and asked her what she wanted to do with him. She told them to send him back to the hospital, and that’s what they did.”

“Why didn’t Nana let him come back home?” I asked Grandma.

“Well, he was ill, he shouted at his voices and she didn’t know what to do with him. And anyway, one time she did let him come home to stay a while. But one day he was sitting in a chair and when she walked by him he suddenly grabbed her around the waist and pulled her onto his lap. She got scared and sent him back.”

At some point when Ralph wasn’t in one of the hospitals during the 1950s, he’d bought a Harley-Davidson. How he got the money nobody knew, but he took off on a tour of the U.S. and ultimately, Mexico. This was common family lore. But what actually happened in Mexico we didn’t know. I found out one day when I came to help Ralph wash his clothes at the laundromat. Usually Ralph laundered his clothes in the kitchen sink using powdered soap and then hung every-

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thing out to dry on a line stretched outside his bungalow. But this time, noticing the dirt ingrained in his tube socks I insisted that we use a machine to do the job. While we sat there at the laundromat watching the clothes tumble round and round in the drums I asked him about the Harley-Davidson trip. As was his wont Ralph would not answer an open-ended question like that directly. Instead, I asked him particulars like what happened on the trip and he filled in the blanks.

Apparently the ride across the U.S. was pretty uneventful except for a speeding ticket he got in Alabama. But when he rode back to California he decided to swing south into Baja. At some point he was noticed and nabbed by the local police. Knowing no Spanish and not inclined to talk anyway in addition to having only a few dollars on him, they threw him in jail.

“What happened in there?” I asked, worried about life in a Mexican jail.

“We sat around.”

“There were other people in there with you?”

“Yes many others. It was a big cell. They taught me a little Spanish.”

“What did you eat?”

Instead he told me how the food was served. They gave each prisoner a rusty can plus a spoon, and as they'd file past for their meal, a man with a large pot on a table would flop the food into the can. However, Ralph informed me you had to eat it pretty fast because the holes in the bottom of the can allowed what was in it to leak out rather quickly. He said he was in jail about a month.

At the end of this month the authorities, finding they'd gotten nothing out of Ralph and that he was harmless, decided to let him go.

They'd impounded the motorcycle and wouldn't let him have it back. Instead they drove him to the border at Tijuana and San Diego, pointed him north and bid him a cordial “adios”.

“How did you get back to L.A.?” I asked him, spellbound by this story.

“I called Virginia (Grandma) collect and asked her to wire me money. I took the bus back.”

Ralph related these adventures as though he was talking about how he did his laundry.

When Ralph was in his eighties one of my biggest fears would be that he might die and nobody would find him for days. Ralph hadn't seen a doctor in years due to his deep mistrust of the medical profession in general. He would never see one, not ever.

Grandma was also elderly and by this time was unable to drive so she could not visit him as she used to. By this time I was living in Lancaster, a town in the high desert whose only redeeming feature was cheap housing. It was about two hours from San Pedro and I could get down there about once a week but that was all. Calling to see how he was doing was not reliable enough because Ralph's paranoia extended to answering the phone. Since he didn't know who was calling, he wouldn't pick up. I knew someone who was a therapist and she suggested that to get around the paranoia I could tell Ralph that I'd let the phone ring twice, hang up and then call back. That way he'd know it was me. It mostly worked, but not every time and I couldn't be sure if he was in his apartment or not if he didn't pick up the phone when I called prior to my visit. This led to my sometimes driving down to his place and finding that he wasn't there, or wasn't answering the door. I knew one of his neighbors. Grandma met Warren first when

she used to look in on Ralph and told me he was a reliable guy. Warren was a Japanese-American man who actually did fight during World War II in Italy. Although he returned home in one piece something had happened to his mind and so he too, lived in county housing. At any rate Warren could be relied on to answer his door and so I often went to his place if Ralph wasn't home to see if Ralph (a) had left or whether (b) he just wasn't coming to the door.

On this occasion Warren opened his door and smiled at me. He was a short, wiry man with close-cropped gray hair and a creased face. It was a typical balmy, sunny day in San Pedro and Warren wore a t-shirt, shorts and flip-flops while he held a cigarette burning between his fingers.

“Looking for Ralph”? He asked, still smiling.

“Yes, Warren, have you seen him lately? He doesn't answer his door.”

“No, I haven't seen him for the last several days. You know how he is,” Warren gently said.

“Are you worried about him?”

“Yeah. If you do see him tell him that his niece has been here looking for him.”

Warren agreed and I turned to leave. Not especially eager to get right back on the freeway for home I decided I'd go over to the supermarket across the busy street. When Ralph did his own shopping he could be found there. I went in and looked through the aisles, knowing that I wouldn't see him. I walked up to one of the check-outs and saw a familiar face. I recognized the young woman across the counter from the times I'd stood in line with Ralph. I asked her if she'd seen Ralph. She laughed briefly and said, “Oh yeah, the guy who always wears the sombrero! Long

## The Blotter

white beard, right? I've actually seen him walking around San Pedro, too, not just here." Then she looked at me apologetically. "No, honey, I haven't seen him today or for the last few days." I thanked her and as I walked back across the street I mulled over the fact that Ralph was rather a fixture in this neighborhood now.

I decided that before I left I'd look around the rear of the bungalow and see if the back door that opened onto the alley was unlocked. It wasn't and so I shouted through the window that was open in the bathroom. There was no answer. I would not be down for another week and again the uneasy thought occurred to me that Ralph might be sick or even dead in there. I decided I'd crawl through the bathroom window. This I did but it was no easy feat. The window was high enough off the ground that pulling myself up to the sill took great effort.

With my eyes bugging out and a lot of grunting I managed to swing a leg up and lay there gasping half in and half out. The window was wide enough and the bathtub was right underneath it but the drop down into it was a lot farther than I had anticipated. After falling in a heap I climbed out of the tub and looked around Ralph's apartment. He wasn't there of

course, and it was hard to tell if he'd recently left or had been gone for a while. His ceiling fan still wobbled magnificently on its base, the heater blasted away and the bungalow was strewn with papers, old bills, towels folded hither and yon, dishes, clean and otherwise lay about. An ashtray holding stubbed out cigarette butts sat on the table next to a cup half-full of cold coffee. I was taking this in when suddenly Ralph came through the door. Usually Ralph did not make eye contact but right now he stared at me for a full few seconds, his mouth twitching. I felt intensely embarrassed trying to suppress an urge to giggle and started to speak but Ralph brushed past me and went into the kitchen.

"I wasn't expecting you", was all he said.

I tried explaining that I was worried, that I couldn't get him on the phone so I came down and then...broke into his house, I finished lamely. Ralph was fixing himself a sandwich in the kitchen. He didn't say anything but sat down at the table and ate with gusto, occasionally stirring the ice in his cup of Coke. I sat down too and said, "Sorry about that".

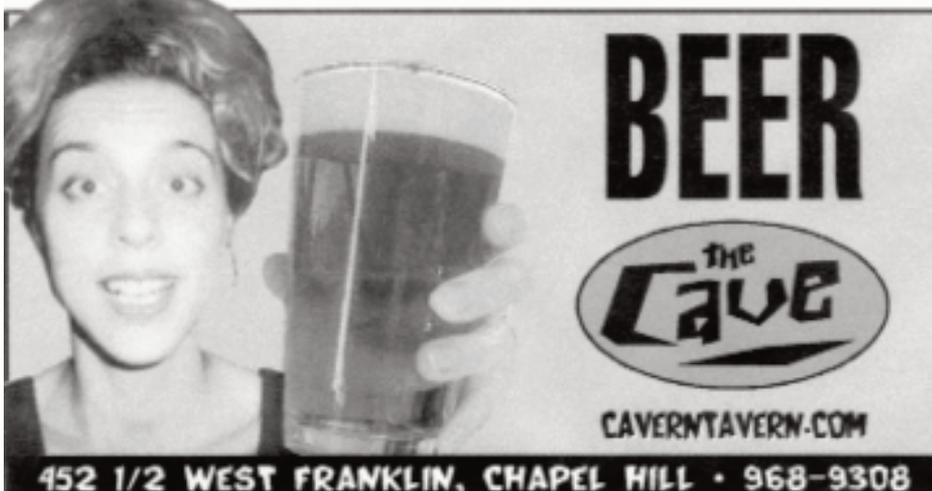
He did not seem perturbed and asked, "How's Virginia?"

"Oh, fine, fine," I answered quickly and then asked where he'd been.

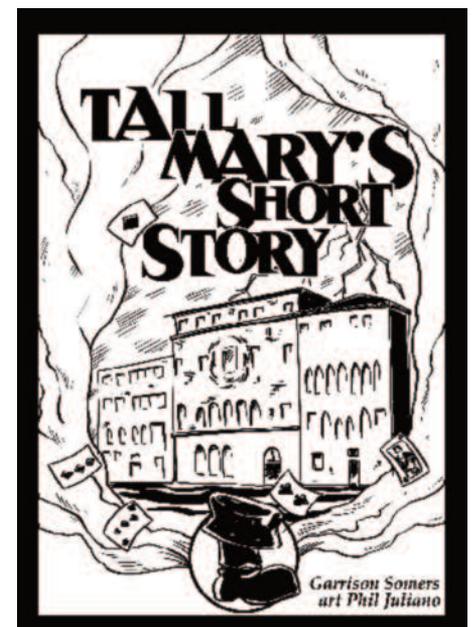
"I took the bus up to LA." I understood now that if he'd taken the municipal buses he would be indeed gone for quite some time, stopping at every corner between San Pedro and Los Angeles. By this time he'd finished eating and lit a cigarette. Then I thought. "Ralph. Do you think you'd like to get food delivered to you, right at your door?"

I'd been trying to get a social worker to look in on him but when I told her over the phone that Ralph didn't always come to the door she informed me that the visit would be pointless. "But that's the trouble", I said trying to convince her and feeling annoyed, "his illness makes him *NOT* want to answer the door sometimes but he needs someone to look in on him...to see if he's okay. You understand, right?" I hadn't been able to persuade her and that's how Anna Orozco from Meals On Wheels came into the picture. Her office was located in a town optimistically called

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Harbor City, an industrial portion of greater Los Angeles not far from San Pedro. There are no harbors in Harbor City but there are refineries.

Anna was a heavy set woman, quiet and friendly. She'd been born in Mexico and made the journey north when that had been an easier thing to do. She'd answered my mother's call when we were trying to find someone to help us and now she dropped in regularly on Ralph to make sure he was all right...whether he answered the door or not. I still came down to visit and buy groceries but it was a relief to know that he was under Anna's watchful eye.

In mid-February 2011 my mother and Grandma went to Ralph's bungalow for a visit. When he didn't answer the door which was locked and couldn't be seen through the side windows which were closed they became concerned and asked Warren to remove one of the two glass panels next to the door. He did and my mom squeezed through the narrow opening. She found Ralph dead on his bedroom

floor, a meal he'd made that morning half-eaten on the table in the living room. When Grandma who was waiting outside heard the news she showed no emotion but instead frowned, turned her head away from the bungalow and gazed along the narrow courtyard at the busy street. My mother said Warren wept. After Ralph was taken away mom walked to the supermarket where he had shopped and informed the manager about Ralph's death. She was surprised when the manager called an impromptu meeting of the cashiers and check-out staff and told them about Ralph's passing. If they did not know him then they knew of him and that he was part of their neighborhood but now he was gone. The elderly gentleman dressed in a sombrero, pajama pants and

white beard would not stroll San Pedro's streets or ride its buses any longer.

We, including Anna Orozco, buried Ralph at the National Cemetery in Riverside on a sunny day in March. It just so happened that the funeral was on St. Patrick's Day which pleased me because Ralph had always mentioned holidays in his letters no matter how insignificant it was. I knew he would have liked being buried on one.

When I visited Ralph's bungalow for the last time I took one thing away with me. This was one of his sombreros which hangs on my wall now as I write this. Be at peace Uncle Ralph and know that your grand-niece loved you. Vaya con Dios. ❖

## 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@blotterrag.com](mailto:mermaid@blotterrag.com)

Dream: final part.

I then arrived at my parents' house, everything was gone from their front yard (grass, etc., was gone) - it had been converted into a sort of haunted yard, but this was real and everything here had an apocalyptic vibe as well. I did not go inside, there was an overhang at the front door. I went under it and there was a woman (who resembled and represented my mother, though she didn't speak... it was the body of my mother), a koala which sat on this woman's lap and a smaller animal which ran around on the ground - a pigeon flew into the overhang and landed on the tv (an owl was perched there) and I said "we need that" The koala grabbed the pigeon in order to give to the lady to kill - she began to wring its neck and I knew it was going to cry and scream so I began clapping and singing in order to drown out the noise of the pigeon; I did this, it seems, in protection of the owl and the smaller animal. The pigeon died and was to be used as food.

As I was writing this, I looked at the time 4:44 randomly. I had grabbed my phone to write this at 4:17, it is now 5:27...

Christopher - cyberspace

### The Pregnant Mare

or

The Guys  
in The Crate  
at The Joint



Garrison Somers

art by Susan Connors

On Amazon - of course....

Five Untitled Poems by Simon Perchik

These gravestones left stranded  
warped from sunrises and drift  
—they need paint, tides, a hull

that goes mouth to mouth  
the way seagulls come by  
just to nest and preen

though death is not like that  
it likes to stand and lean  
scattering its brilliant feathers

—look up when you open the can  
let it wobble, flow into you  
till wave after powerful wave

circles as face to face  
and your own loses itself  
already beginning to harden.

\*

You need more, two sinks  
stretching out as constant handfuls  
though each arm is lowered

by the darkness you keep at the bottom  
—a single cup suddenly harmless  
not moving —this rattle you hear

is every child's first toy  
already filled with side to side  
that's not the sound a small stone makes

trying to let go the other, stake out  
a cry all its own, fill it  
on your forehead without her.

\*

You collect grass the way each star  
Eats from your hand, trusts you  
To become a nest for the afternoons

Not yet at home in the air, named for nights  
That circle down, want to be night again  
Take root in your chest as the ripples

From the long stone fallen into the water  
Teaching it to darken, to stay  
Then smell from dirt then shadows

—side by side you dead pull the ground closer  
—with both arms need these whispers warm  
already the place to ask about you.

\*

And though this stone is small  
it has more than the usual interest  
in the dead, waits among tall grasses

and water holes, smells the way dirt  
still warms the afternoons  
that no longer have a place to stay

—you leave a nothing in the open  
letting it darken to remember  
where you buried the Earth

as if the sun could not be trusted  
to take back in its light  
and by yourself turn away.

\*

You read out loud the way this bed  
listens for the makeshift seam  
loosening each night down the middle

and though there is no sun  
you peel off page after page  
as if underneath what you hear

are her eyes closing –word by word  
louder and louder –you think it’s air  
that’s falling –everything in your hands

is too heavy, becomes a shadow, covers her  
with a single finger pointed at the ceiling light  
what’s no where on the pillow or closer.

## CONTRIBUTORS:

**Heather Smith** of Lancaster, CA is a clinical microbiologist and works in the microbiology laboratory at a hospital in California’s high desert region. She enjoys baking which pleases her co-workers greatly since they are the happy recipients of her efforts. She likes to read a great deal and is not particular about the subject, so long as it’s a good read. This is her first publication.

**Simon Perchik** of East Hampton, NY writes, “my poetry has appeared in Partisan Review, The Nation, The New Yorker and elsewhere.”



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The apparition of these faces in a crowd; Peter's on a tree, Jack below