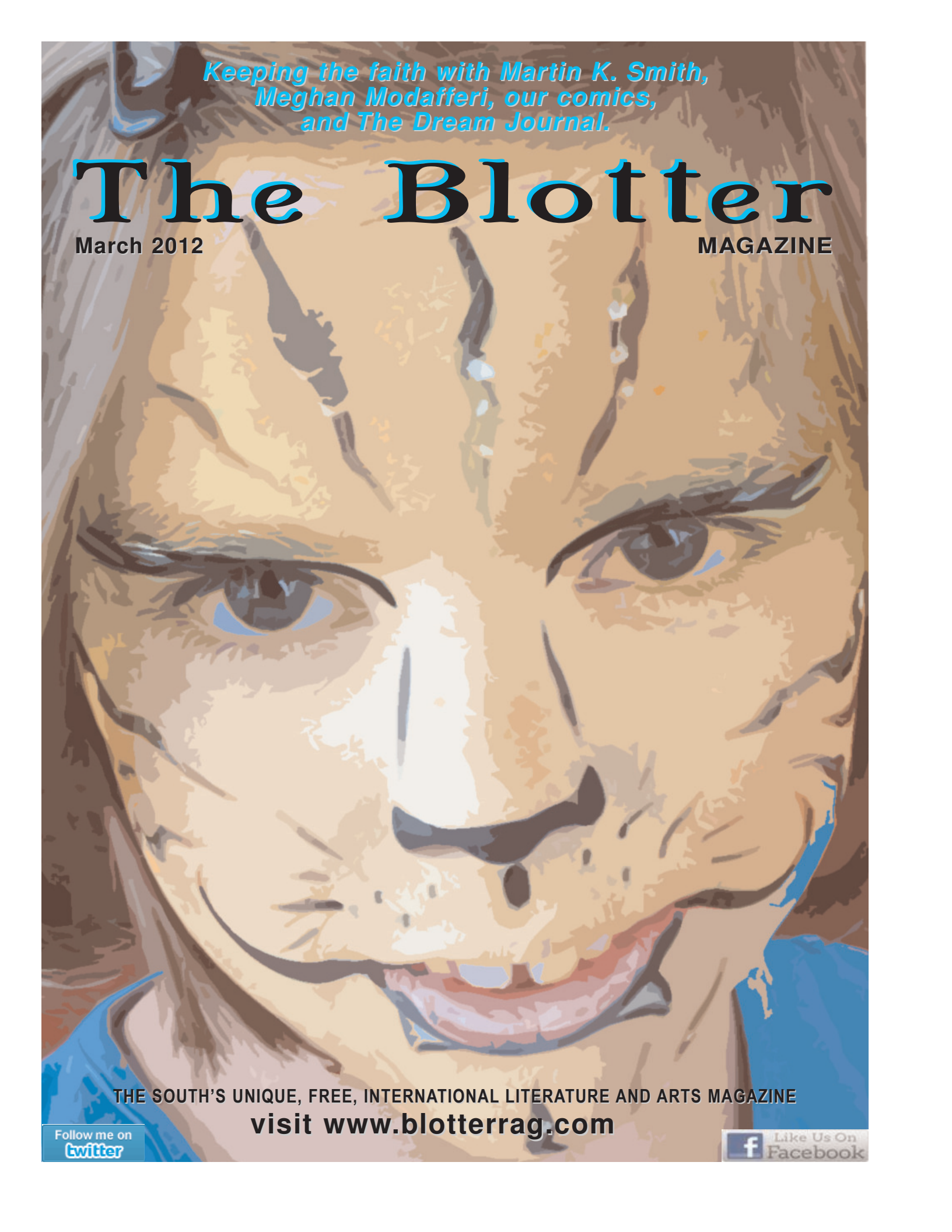




*Keeping the faith with Martin K. Smith,
Meghan Modafferi, our comics,
and The Dream Journal.*

The Blotter

March 2012

MAGAZINE

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 Richard Hess.....Programs Director
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Advertisers and Subscriptions 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

919.933.4720 (business hours only!
 you may call for information about
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Marketing & Public Relations Contact:

Marilyn Fontenot
 Marilyn_fontenot@yahoo.com
 919.240.4845

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"Just talk"

Pop and mom recently visited, driven up by my sister, and the hustle and bustle of family being all together made me nostalgic. We don't do family reunions, or vacations anymore. We should, but the logistics are too difficult. Perhaps this happens in your family, too. Everyone has one good reason not to be able to go, and a dozen reasons that they should just say yes, let's do it, and start planning. Life is expensive and complicated and full of the ridiculous details that wear us out, but it is also short and the end is irredeemably inevitable. I'm not trying to go maudlin on you, but regret is humankind's greatest invention, if measured by the vastness of its scope.

Anyhow, the visit reminded me that I need more talking time with my Dad. Some folks don't understand that; either they don't enjoy talking with their parents, or they don't get real joy in talking. I think that this may be because they always live in the present. Talking, for many people, is about last night's television, for sports scores, for trying to decipher the current ridiculousness in politics, the endless annoyance about work, fussing about the cost of things and whining about some pain that manifests itself when I do *this*, but feels better when I do *this*.

Pop and I don't talk much about the present – in fact we find it a terrible waste of our good time. We tell each other stories – mine all fiction and his all true. Or as true as fathers are able to deliver when tiny fictions make everything better in the same way that sugar sprinkled on oatmeal makes it delicious. I think it's just good story-telling. We revisit places and times we've been in before – that is, that he's been in before and which I am pleased to tag along and see. I like asking questions, too. I've learned over the years that metaphorically pulling a book off of the shelf, or poking a stick in the corner can turn up some entertaining details.

One of my favorite stories covers the period in Pop's life when he'd just graduated from high school, and gone directly into the Navy. It was 1944, and he was assigned a... well, hang on. I have this letter I wrote when I was wandering around in cyberspace one evening, and came upon the conductor of the Taipei Symphony Orchestra's blog-website.

Dear Maestro Fischer-Dieskau,

My father was 18 when he joined the US Navy, near the end of World War II. A raw recruit, just out of "boot camp" he was stationed in Virginia – as a "Seabee" (the slang term for construction battalion) he was trained by US Marines, and would eventually go to Guam. In the meantime (late 1944), he was assigned guard duty in a POW camp. Oddly enough, he made friends with

some of his assignees, veterans of the Afrika Korps, captured during the American offensive "Operation Torch" of 1943 and shipped back to the US.

Most sunny days, my father would take out a squad of prisoners to do farm work. This was a privilege – for to be able to do farm work meant that the boredom of prison life was broken, and the produce of the farm was shared with the camp inmates. Everyone understood that being well behaved meant that this privilege would continue, to benefit all involved. Sometimes, however, the men in his work squad, older than he and wiser, used to tease him and call him "Georgie," as in "don't shoot me, Georgie, with that M-1 rifle of yours." But they were always good sports about it.

One afternoon, they invited him to a concert scheduled for that evening. The prisoners had an "orchestra" made up of the musicians in the camp, using what instruments they had, could borrow, or "scrounge." Rarely were camp guards invited to such events, and although it was frowned on by the Marine authorities, it was not forbidden. My father attended the concert.

After the audience was seated that evening, but before the orchestra came out a young man was asked to take the makeshift stage. He stood before the audience and began singing, a simple German folk tune. He couldn't have been any older than my father was, as thin as a rail. But his baritone rang out, clear and sweet. My father sat spellbound as the young man entertained the group of prisoners. No one sang along, as one might have expected, for the songs were certainly well known, old favorites even. His voice was perfection, and no one risked spoiling that perfection.

Twenty years later, my father was at a record shop near the town in which I grew up. I couldn't have been more than eight years old. My father had recently purchased stereo equipment, with a very fine turntable. He had begun collecting albums of classical music from the Deutsche-Grammophon label, already known for its high-fidelity. Perusing a selection of recordings of vocal music he froze. There on the cover of one album was a familiar face. The face of the

continued on page 15

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CAUTION

*A wise man once told me
you can't make chicken
salad out of chicken crap.
Just wanted to share that.*

Excerpts from the novel *All Tomorrow's Parties*

by Martin K. Smith

Hymnody

Alice White was another member of “Gwyntarian,” Kent’s chapter of the Society for Creative Anachronisms. Her SCA name was “Morgiana of Balewood”. She was several years older, a graduate student, a theater major. She had dark eyes, and a faint smile of superior amusement. Her hair was raven-black, cut short but sleekly styled. She moved and spoke with the smoothness of complete self-assurance. She sang, in a dark crooning alto, random snatches of songs, for absolutely no reason except that she enjoyed it. (Penny heard her before she saw her, coming along the corridor outside the meeting room. “*Put the blame on Mame, boys; put the blame on Mame...*” She snapped her fingers in time, and didn’t look stupid doing so like any normal person would.) She

was taller than Trudy and Penny; thin but with a model’s physique; and liked to wear black. Tru seemed to find her utterly fascinating. Penny feared and distrusted her instantly, with an antipathy almost like static electricity in its sharpness.

Tru introduced them. Alice, she explained, was in Gwyntarian’s Musicians’ Guild, along with John and May. They were a choral group who performed all this neat medieval music, motets and things, at SCA gatherings. “I wish you were going to be here next month to hear them. We’re having this spring event, the ‘Feast of St. Aspidistra;’ there’ll be a tourney and a banquet and court, and the Guild’ll sing at the banquet. Penny’s a good singer,” she told Alice. “We used to go to each other’s churches all the time, and she always knew all about the

hymns; even the tune names and what those little numbers at the bottom meant.”

Alice smiled, and gave Penny’s hand, warily extended, a languid touch. “Delighted to meet you. You should come to one of our rehearsals, then. You could join us, even if you won’t be here for the event.” She had a sultry, purring voice, like a seductress in a film noir. She was wearing a pendant of some kind on a silver necklace. Penny noticed it, looked closer, and before she could stop herself blurted out “Is that a *pentagram*?”

“Oh yes. I’m Wiccan,” Alice freely admitted. “Oh dear – was that a look of alarm?”

Penny had been alarmed, but didn’t want to admit it. “No.”

“Wiccan’s a kind of pagan,” Tru said, trying to be helpful. “Not witches like a lot

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AUTHOR, *DESSERTS FROM AN HERB GARDEN*
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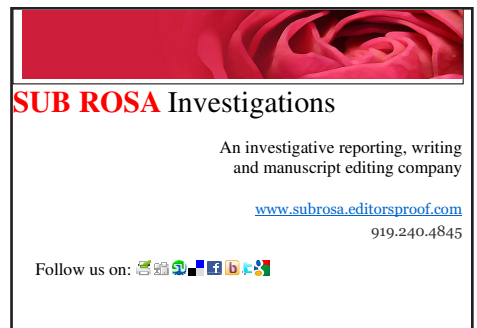
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of people think. It's like, Mother Earth-goddess worship. It's got some casting spells, she says, but they're all about focusing good energy."

"In Sunday school did they feed you all kinds of stories about Satan worship and Moonies? I'm truly sorry. Tru has told me about her youth group's Bible study on Cult Avoidance. How to Spot One a Mile Away. Poor dears. I wonder what they'd make of this lot?" She glanced toward the varied semi-medieval group half-filling the mundane meeting room. "Some of them would probably run screaming."

"Some of us would probably chase them, too," John said.

"Our parish priest in second grade was simply obsessed about cults. Father Holland. To hear him talk they were lurking at every edge of the playground, and it wasn't safe for us to go out unless guarded by a flying squadron of nuns; that is, if there'd been any left."

"Was it a flying squadron of nuns, or a squadron of flying nuns?" John asked. "Or both. Dealing with cults you need tactical air support as well as ground troops."

"All our nuns at school were *old*," May said. "We had this one nun who was, oh, about three hundred. She'd come out to ring the bell after recess, and she moved like a windup toy." She demonstrated, with jerky movements and creaking noises.

"But I can tell you're more enlightened than that," Alice told Penny. "Of course you are – you're a friend of Tru's. *You* can tell Gwyntarian's not a cult, can't you?"

Penny was still trying to figure out what Gwyntarian was and what Tru was doing there. Here was yet another bunch of people Tru knew but she didn't, talking inside jokes she wasn't in on, this time some weird clique of fantasy-nerd Tolkien-fan gamer types. She was trying in mounting bewilderment to find

the little-girl Trudy who'd once been her best friend, lost somewhere in this frantic excited whirlpool of new people and places and situations. She felt instantly certain that Alice could see her bewilderment and confusion and naiveté, and was mocking her. She replied sharply "I *don't* think so." And Alice smiled as if everything she thought about Penny had been confirmed.

"Oyez" aside, the meeting was not much different than any other club. There were reports from various committees – the Musicians' Guild, the Cooks' Guild, the Fighters' Guild – and from the "Seneschal" and "Exchequer" a.k.a. treasurer. Most of the discussions were on settling details of the St. Aspidistra event. There was a long and esoteric digression over the banquet menu, involving May, the Seneschal and several Cooks, on medieval authenticity versus modern practicality (and health codes). Penny murmured





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to Trudy, "How did you get into this?"

"The SCA?"

"Yes. I never knew you liked fantasy stuff."

"Gwyntarian did a demo at Ravenna High my senior year. They had the guys fighting in armor, and the Musicians' Guild sang. It was really interesting, and they were all really nice and friendly. And the women all had these great medieval gowns, with the gold embroidery and lace and stuff. I talked to Alice – that's how I met her – and she invited me to the meetings, so I started coming."

"Even before you were a

Kent student?"

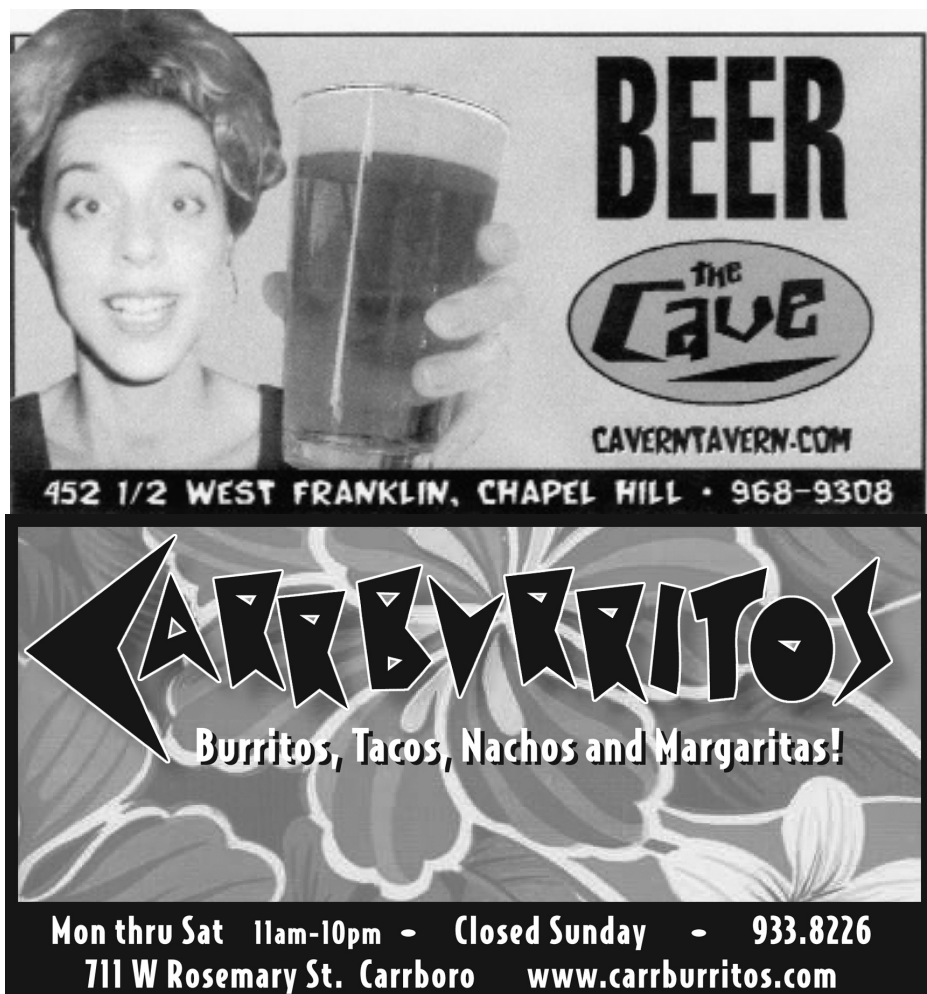
"Yes! It was *exciting* being on campus. I couldn't *wait* to be done with high school. They treat you like you're still twelve."

"You never wrote me about any of this."

"Oh, I *know*; and I'm *sorry*. I was so busy getting ready to graduate and start here, and plus with Mom and Larry fighting all the time; I had so much on my mind I didn't write anything to anybody."

After the meeting, Alice suggested drinks "down at the Rathskeller." John and May joined her, and Trudy blithely followed their invitation, leaving

Penny little choice but to go along. The Rathskeller was in the Student Center basement, its entrance in the fork of curving corridors that Y – ed off left and right. The left wall had fading murals that must have dated back to the Seventies, if not the Sixties: the Peter Max cartoon Beatles from *Yellow Submarine*; Jefferson Airplane and images from "White Rabbit;" Mae West with W.C. Fields. The club was a large dark room with wooden tables and chairs, a bar on the left, stage at the rear, and control booth in the back right corner. Penny had a ginger ale and Tru a diet Coke, while the others shared a pitcher



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of beer.

"Hymns," Alice said to Penny. She leaned forward, folded arms resting on the table, in a pose of friendliness. "Interesting. Why hymns?"

"Why hymns what?"

"What do you like about hymns? Instead of...oh, Bruce Springsteen, for instance. Or ABBA."

"I just like them." What could she say? They were beautiful. They were comforting. They were an expression of worship, a part of communion with God. She'd been listening to them ever since she was born, and maybe even before.

Springsteen was a yowling tomcat and ABBA had no more substance than cotton candy. "I like the music. I grew up my whole childhood listening to them. They're an important part of—" she'd almost said *my faith*, and flushed with embarrassment at the thought. "Of church for me." She was sounding like an idiot. Nobody had ever questioned her on this. Why should she even have to defend hymns?

"I have to confess I find some of them unnerving. Especially the Victorian ones. All that imagery of sacrificed lambs and 'being washed in the blood.' I once encountered one with the

charming line '*By the light of burning martyrs, Christ, your bloodied feet we track...*'"

May made a pained face. "Ow..."

"Do you know it?" Alice asked Penny.

"Once to Every Man and Nation.' It's not Victorian, it's from around 1909."

"That's the one. 'Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide.' And aside from the bloody-mindedness, I wondered, why only once? I'd prefer a God who's a bit more lenient with chances. A three-strikes policy, at least."

"I'm sorry if you're

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offended,” Penny said.

Tru came to Alice’s defense again, explaining how Alice was the receptionist at a womens’ health clinic in Akron that was often picketed by Fundamentalists. “They don’t bother me,” Alice said, waving a hand as though it held a cigarette holder. “They’re rather like the sideshow geeks in an old-time circus. Instead of the Wild Man from Borneo biting the heads off chickens, there’s the Wild Woman from Barberton with bloody pictures of fetuses. But I know most Christians aren’t like that. They’re nice people, like Trudy.”

John Overstead said brightly, “My favorite kind are the ones who go –” he chanted a verse of mock Latin, then whacked himself in the forehead with a notebook. It was such an odd act that Penny’s mind went blank and she couldn’t even begin to think of possible explanations. “Then there’s the Hittites, the Jebusites, the Amorites – as opposed to the *Amour*-ites, who’re Pepe Le Pew’s tribe; um, the Plebiscites, the Reaganites (boo, hiss!); the Trilobites, who’re more intelligent than the Reaganites; the Stalagtites, the Stalagmites; the Waka-Wakka-Waka-ites, whose patron saint is Fozzie Bear –”

Alice gave him an indulgent look. “Do stop hitting yourself, child, you’ll do damage.”

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“I did hear an echo that time,” he admitted.

“And you really shouldn’t quote Python to the unprepared. She clearly has no idea what you’re about.”

“Start again,” John said in a bad British accent. He asked Penny if she’d seen *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, and began explaining. Apparently one of its “bits” was a parade of flagellant monks, who wandered through the action chanting Latin and in unison hitting themselves in the forehead with boards. She was baffled. She hardly ever watched *Monty Python* and didn’t understand why everybody thought it was so funny. She remembered the “Silly Walks” routine only because it had made her father and older brother laugh out loud together, where usually they were arguing.

“We shouldn’t make fun of peoples’ religions, especially guests,” Alice said, with a nod at Penny. “After all: the Church taught Aretha Franklin how to sing, so it can’t be all bad.” As she rose to get the pitcher refilled began murmuring another song. “... *We’re goin’ ridin’ on the freeway of love, in my pink Cadillac...*” (That song had gotten on Penny’s nerves from the minute she’d first heard it. She was horrified that a respected figure like Aretha Franklin would sing such a thing, and that MTV would play it. Couldn’t they tell what it was really *about*?) “Can we go now?”

she whispered tensely to Tru.

Once they were safely closed in the elevator, Penny released a furious breath. “Who does she think she is – Mata Hari?” Trudy stared at her. “She was laughing at us! Couldn’t you tell? The way she smirked? Saying ‘good little Christian girls’ like we’re a couple of retards.”

“She wasn’t *laughing* at us! She’s not like that, she’s not mean. She’s just dramatic. Duh! – she’s a drama *major*. Why would you think she was laughing?”

“I don’t understand why you like her so much.”

“Because she’s *nice*! Honestly, she is! She acts melodramatic; but when you know her better you’ll see. She’s smart, and she’s so funny! And she does all kinds of stuff for Gwyntarian, volunteer stuff and for other groups too. And she lived in New York City for a couple of years after graduating Princeton and actually *worked* as an actress. She was in some off-Broadway plays –”

“How far off?”

“And she’s *brave*! I couldn’t work where she does, with people yelling awful things at you every time you go outside. I can’t understand why you *don’t* like her.”

(*I was absolutely gut-level certain that Alice was an enemy,* Penny remembered. *Why? Because I was confused, out of my context, naïve, defensive, insulted,*

self-righteous, a prude, and under all that scared. Because I'd somehow gotten all the way to age nineteen without sufficient inoculations against irony and subtlety. And I was so frustrated that Tru was so oblivious. What a mess. Ground Control to Major Penny, your circuit's dead, et cetera.) The Center's plaza was empty and desolate that night, with the tall narrow library looming its lit windows up behind the empty fountain holding drifts of old snow, and a cold wind clanking the flagpoles' riggings like ghostly chains. They drove to Paul's dorm without speaking. He was absorbed in building a model for

one of his Friday classes, and Tru pitched in to help. They went up to the lounge so Paul's roommate could study. While the other two worked, Penny sat on a sofa by the empty fireplace and read a James Michener novel someone had left behind.

Party girl

Friday evening John called for her, just as she finished typing the notes from Trudy's classes. He escorted her aboard a Campus Bus, which bore them out Main Street to the stop for Alice's apartment. When the traffic permitted, they ran across

the four-lane road. The apartments sat behind a beer and wine store, a row of dumpy brick four-plexes with hip roofs and fake shutters. As they passed the store May came out, clutching a paper bag with two wine bottles. She juggled it clumsily while trying to wave hello. John gallantly relieved her of her burden and led them into the nearest building, up to the second floor.

Alice opened the door, smiling, in loose slacks and a grey sweater. She looked comfortable and content. Penny saw a long living room, and a party already well on: people sitting in sofa and chairs or on the floor, stand-



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ing with drinks in hand, or browsing through a bookcase. The stereo displays flickered red, yellow and green. The room was dim, with small candles in glass votaries on windowsill, stereo speakers, shelves and dinette table. Brighter light flowed from a kitchen at the rear. A string of Christmas lights also trailed from one post of the stereo shelves back into a dark hallway on the far wall, presumably leading guests to the bathroom.

"The Mystery Machine has arrived," May eagerly announced. "With wine!" "Wine," John confirmed in solemn voice, holding up the bag. Alice smiled at Penny. "I'm so glad you came. We need to talk, as soon as I get a chance." Penny consented to take a glass of wine (actually a plastic cup) from one of May's bottles, since she saw John uncork and pour it himself.

Alice seemed to be a popular hostess, whose attention was constantly sought. John had a funny story to tell her from one of his architecture classes. May had a verbose and digressive story to tell about goings-on up in "Cleftlands" (Cleveland's Society for Creative Anachronisms cell), involving personages named King Laurelen and Queen Ithriliel. An aggressive red-haired person from Cleftlands, introduced as "Grimdor Bearslayer", wanted to tell the same story from his own viewpoint, with

emendations and corrections to May's version. Each time he emended or corrected May she got flustered, and had to back-track several phases into her own version before she could get it started again. Then Alice had to leave them in their antiphonies: there was the mix tape in the stereo to be flipped, and new guests to greet at the door. Penny was left on her own, though occasionally John would semi-introduce her to someone in passing. A film-noir detective, she thought, would seize such a chance to slip away and search Alice's room; but a film-noir detective would know specifically what he was searching for, and would have a plausible alibi if caught. She looked over Alice's books instead: fantasies and fairy tales, including a bound set of the Narnia Chronicles; poetry, literature and plays; textbooks, studies of acting, and a biography of Lotte Lenya. The stereo console's record shelf held Chrissie Hynde and the Pretenders, Joan Jett, Patti Smith; Kate Bush and Laurie Anderson; Pink Floyd's

The Wall and REM's *Automatic For the People*; and several Broadway original-cast albums. There was food on the dinette table: a bowl of chocolate-chip cookies, a bunch of grapes, and a plate of crackers with some cheese spreads. The spreads looked nasty, so she ate a cracker by itself. It was as dry and tasteless as a communion wafer.

Alice stood beside her with a bottle, smiling, indicating her empty cup. "More wine?"

"No thanks."

She listened as John and one group of guests talked Monty Python, firing routines at each other with loud laughter and fake British accents; to May and another group talking SCA gossip as they passed a joint around (May offered it to her but she declined); and to a friend of Grimdor's named Dante, who demanded of her what she'd been taught in school, if anything, about the Kent State killings. He insisted that it was actually a plot by G. Gordon Liddy and the CIA, an attempt to provoke the Left to violence, so Nixon could



declare martial law and make himself president-for-life...

"Speaking of conspiracies," Alice murmured, appearing again at Penny's side. "Dante, you should talk to May. She grew up here in Kent, she remembers May 4th." May, hearing her name, turned a vague face towards them. When Dante asked her about May 4 she became instantly interested. She had her own passionate (and verbose) theories about the tragedy, and was only too glad to share them

"They'll be happy for hours," Alice said with a resigned smile. She went into the kitchen, gesturing for Penny to follow. "All these years, and some people are still bitter. 'The Truth Demands Justice!' – have you heard that yet? The rallying cry of Kent protesters ever since. And it's meaningless. It could apply to anything." She poured herself another measure of wine, and leaned back against the counter.

Penny was tense, her antipathy like a cat ready to hiss.

It didn't help that Alice had the look of a cat purring by an emptied bowl of cream. "I'm so glad you came tonight. I seem to have offended you somehow, and I hoped I could make amends."

"What about conspiracies?"

"Pardon?"

"You said, 'speaking of conspiracies.'"

"Oh yes. May had told me some tale of how I was supposedly plotting against you, or something like that. She's a dear, but coherence is not one of her spiritual gifts."

"So you're not."

"Not what?"

"Plotting."

"No, of course not."

"Good. Because, you know, if somebody calls me and tells me I'll be 'in danger' if I don't run home with my tail between my legs, it makes me wonder."

"Believe me, the only plotting I'd do would be to keep you *out* of danger. You and Trudy both. I like her; *and* I admire your determination to

help her. Helping her keep up with her classes."

"Well, you know, I guess helping friends is something good little Christian girls do."

"And pagans; and Jews, and Buddhists, and atheists; and even fundamentalists, when they can spare the time from waving bloody pictures in your face." She sighed. "The Truth Demands Justice. '*Hark, how the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own.*'" Her voice turned cynical as she quoted the text. Penny's hostility grew. *Who is she to quote hymns and use them against me?* "Does the Wiccan church have hymns?" she asked. "Speaking of hymns."

Alice closed her eyes, and her mouth set in a thin unhappy line. "Wicca isn't a church. It's a network of beliefs based on respect for life in all its forms. I'd gladly explain it to you sometime if I thought you had any interest at all. And no, we don't have hymns. We don't have hymnals, or churches with pews to hold the hymnals, or services to justify having churches. We meet out-

Best In Show



by Phil Juliano

The Blotter

doors whenever possible. And yes, sometimes we do chant chants, and perform certain rituals, which people whose minds are already suspicious might see as ‘casting spells,’ but which only *symbolize* – *only* symbolize, not magically cause – some good outcome, an answer to a question or a change in someone’s life. Not like the Catholic masses I grew up with, where we were required on pain of damnation to believe that the elements transubstantiated themselves into the actual body and blood of Jesus.” She held up her hands. “I’m starting to rave at you. I apologize. But someday I get just sick unto death of peoples’ hostility.” Penny said nothing. “I wish I knew how to convince you that I’m not your enemy, or Tru’s. The *last* thing I want is to see

either of you harmed. That’s why I wish you’d leave the case to the police. And yes, it would be safer, for both of you, if you did go home once Tru’s back from the hospital. The police might send you back themselves if they think you’re interfering with their investigation. That would be the least of your dangers. But I swear to you on all your hymns, I’m not one.” She drank, and was still for a moment. “If there were Wiccan hymns, they’d be whatever songs held some special meaning for a person. That marked some turning point in their life. And every person would have different ones. Janis Ian’s ‘At Seventeen.’ Dvorak’s *New World Symphony*. ‘I’m Still Here’ from *Follies*. Even ‘Puff the Magic Dragon.’”

Somebody hurried in and

asked about glasses. Alice directed him to an upper cabinet beside her. The door had one hinge loose, and she reached up to adjust it. “Terry Garfield built these apartments, did you know?” she asked Penny. “It shows, in every leak and crack. You know that he’s a contractor and that his brother’s a building inspector. I’m sure you’ve heard the phrase ‘conflict of interest.’” “You used to work for him, I know. I heard a building of his burned down while you were in it.”

“Child, I almost burned down *with* it. John was there that night. We were lucky to get out alive. Nobody knew anything was wrong until smoke started pouring out of the ceiling. Oh, by the way: Terry had the place insured for a hundred grand. Yes, I did work for him; and it was an experience. Phones thrown at people, holes punched in walls. It’s too bad his ex-wife’s moved to Chicago; I’d have you meet her.”

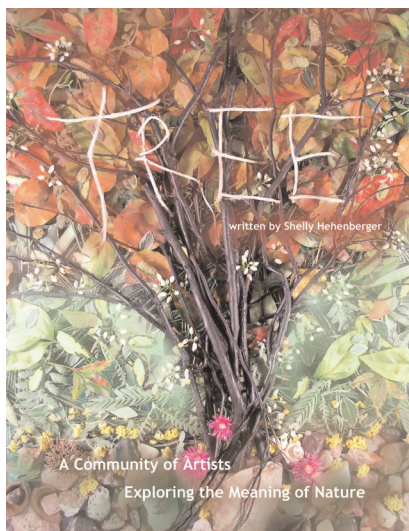
Just then Alice was seized by another arrival of guests, one of whom carried a six-pack of something called Golden Goebels. They were in the midst of a lively debate, which they called on her to moderate, on “what’s the worst beer you ever drank,” with the Goebels supporter claiming it tasted best when smuggled into midnight showings of *Rocky Horror*. May and Dante had switched conspir-

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acies, from Kent State to nuclear-plant meltdowns. The wine had made Penny lightheaded. She reached for her cup and found it had been filled again. Had Alice done this to her? She began pouring it out at the sink. Grimdor saw, and yelled at her. "What are you doing?? Don't waste good wine! If you don't want it – here." He grabbed the cup from her and poured it into his own, shaking his head in disgust. The mix tape had run out. People were calling "Alice! Music, music!" "Yes, yes; music," Alice called back, putting in another tape. "Listen to this."

There was a jangle of raunchy guitars and a frantic saxophone, like the soundtrack for a cheap drag-race movie. Mens' voices shouted "*Hey Mimi!*" A woman shrieked, then began moaning "*Ooh yeah*" and "*Oh daddy*" over the music, while the men shouted "*Ooff!*" Alice, with her fists in the air, did some kind of wild shimmy-twist. "What *is* this?" Grimdor demanded. "The Sinnin' Saints," Alice answered. "From North Carolina! Can you imagine? Senator Helms must have been asleep at his post."

Others began to dance, inspired by Alice's lead. Penny felt the floor tremble. The apartment was crowded and hot and filling with cigarette smoke, wine fumes and the harsh smell of pot. She was being yelled at for not drinking. Alice was refusing to

take her seriously, telling her to go home like a good little Christian girl, condescending to her. ("Puff the Magic Dragon" a *hymn*??) She wondered if the building might collapse; or if the police would raid them. She could imagine the sound of booted feet thundering up the stairs, the door bashed in, drawn guns and stabbing flashlights, panic and screams and angry shouted commands. There was no other exit. She'd never smoked pot. But she might test positive for it just from breathing in here. A drug charge would ruin her acceptance chances at any good law school. She pushed her way out of the kitchen, past the dancers, past another joint going round, to where John was telling someone about his minister father's reaction to *Life of Brian*. When she told him she wanted to leave he made a sad-child face, but pulled out his bus schedule. Then she noticed something she hadn't seen earlier. On a table in a corner, with three votives of its own, was an arrangement of objects. There was a framed picture of the Indian goddess with all the arms, dancing in a ring of fire; and on or around it things like a lei, a string of beads, a piece of quartz, a fragment of antler. There were three photographs at the bottom: one of Mae West, one of "Mrs. Thurston Howell" from *Gilligan's Island*, and one – She did a double take. Was that

Tru??

She looked closer. No; but it was a girl of Tru's age. Her clothes and hairstyle were from the late Sixties, and her pose, against a silvery backdrop, was the kind one used to get in old-fashioned studio portraits, like from Sears. "What is this?" she asked John.

"That's her household altar," he answered, as if it was the most ordinary thing in the world.

"What's it for?"

"Don't know. All the bits have their own meaning; but you'd have to ask her."

He explained that he wanted to stay at the party, but would see her safely onto the bus. She watched as he went to tell Alice of his errand. Alice looked her way. Through the dimness and smoke and crowd of silhouettes, what had been Alice's expression – resignation, anger, determination? The last thing Penny saw as John pulled the door shut was the photograph of the unknown girl.



"Exchange"

by Meghan Modafferi

He felt her eyes boring into him even as he averted contact. She expected answers, answers, answers, all the time and he just couldn't find the words.

"I don't think in words," he sputtered at her barrage of eye darts.

"I want to be able to tell you."

"Then try," Ariadne snapped.

Letters swam around in his brain like a powerball lottery wheel. They jumbled and mixed and blurred and never stayed still for long enough for him to read them at all. He felt so out of control of the linguistics within his own mind. But outside the realm of language, the balls bounced in exact, precise, complex rhythms, falling and re-emerging on and into different surfaces, creating different pitches, exquisite harmonies, and he imagined how easy it would be if only she could hear.

"I don't want to do this again," she exhaled. "Nobody has the words, okay? You're more conscious of the fact that your words can't accurately represent the whole of reality, but that doesn't mean you can stop trying. It doesn't make you any different from anyone else and I don't need you to be eloquent. I just need you to talk to me." Then gently, "Please talk to me."

In his mind, a dramatic piano solo answered her and a blues singer scatted her name over and over. In his mind, delicate female voices sang in soft dissonance the texture of her hair. In his mind, dexterous fingers picked guitar strings with the enthusiasm of his love while a distant, but steady drum rallied love's fight in him. And he imagined how easy it would be if only she could hear.

And she was still talking and he wanted to listen and he wanted to fight and he wanted to love her and he wanted to hate her and he wanted, most of all, to stop watching her leave. But with each turn of her lip, he heard a different pitch, and the harmonies multiplied in front of him until he imagined that she must be the missing ninth note of an octave. And as she tapped her nails against the countertop impatiently, he marveled at the skill of the violin strings which they had become. And the women in her hairline sang the funeral march of her forehead.

Her competing orchestra complete, she turned to leave. And in response, he shouted at her for her lack of understanding. And in response, his desperation gave spontaneous voice to every loving word she had ever wanted to hear. And in response, he said nothing, and closed his eyes, and imagined she did not leave.



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

I'm back in school - not in my underpants: that is I'm wearing underpants but not to the exclusion of everything else. It's Friday and there's a dance at one of the local watering holes and I make my way there to find that the band is old friends of mine. But while I've aged, they are the late-teenagers we once were, immortal and endlessly full of energy. They sing and play, I don't know what, Rocking some variant of Casbah I don't recognize. The bar-crowd grows and makes the room warm and the music takes on a new cacophonous life of sound and taste and vision - form and light and dark clashing with one another. Finally, when I am ready to go, one of my friends sees me in the mass of people and calls me up to join them in one more song. I am nervous and embarrassed but not so much that I won't go up. This is too good to let false modesty play any part. I want to sing with my old friends. The beat roils up out of the background noise and I am captivated and transported and silly.

Peter D. - cyberspace

(continued from page 3")

young man he had heard back in the POW camp in Virginia. The name on the album was Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau: your father. He bought the album and brought it home and played it for the family, and told us the story of how he was one of a small handful of Americans who had heard this incredible singer when he was just a young man, a boy really.

My father sings too – when he was younger he was in the Charleston, SC Symphony Singers Guild. It's nice to be proud of one's father, isn't it?

Regards,

I'm going to stop typing now, and call Pop. See if he needs me to send him some Hoji-cha and just let him tell me what's happening right now. Try it yourself. Call your folks, say hi. Just listen, is all. I highly recommend it.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com

Final

Tiddbits: Follow us on Twitter @blotterrag - that's where we tell you about art and music and other stuff goin' on near you. Or not near you, but near where you wish you were. There are still a few days to get your contest entry to us. Type faster! Buy a copy of *Tree*, published by PencilPoint Mountain (www.pencilpointmountain.com), an imprint of The Blotter Magazine, Inc. What is an imprint? Like witness protection for publishers. Make a donation to The Blotter (www.blotterrag.com). Did I say that already? Sorry. Buy a Blotter t-shirt while you're there. Visit your local independent bookstore, tirelessly bringing you words in sentences on fancy paper in protective covers with neat art! Stop spinning in circles, asking, "I dunno, what do you want to do?" Open a book, turn on some tunes and argue about something with a friend. Got it? Good!

CONTRIBUTORS

Marty Smith was born in 1959 and raised in Suburbia (Washington, D.C. followed by Omaha, Nebraska); studied architecture at Kent State University in Ohio; and migrated to North Carolina immediately afterwards. He worked as an architects' draftsman for fifteen years, with intervals as a movie-theater projectionist, census clerk and toy-store salesman. In the meantime he followed his hobbies of reading, writing, hanging out at Chapel Hill live-music venues, volunteer DJ-ing at a college radio station, publishing *The Blotter*, and concocting bad puns. He and his husband Robin can regularly be found at the Cave in Chapel Hill, or at St. John's Metropolitan Community Church in Raleigh, sometimes within the same 24-hour period.

Everybody needs to thank our **Meghan Modafferi** for the help she's provided over the past year and a half as editorial intern on TB. She's a good sport, organized, and a pretty fair country writer, too. She's finishing up her undergrad work at UNC-CH and her plan is to teach in Prague. Well, holy crap - apparently I made a wrong turn back in the 19 sumpin-or-others. I didn't know that was even an option!! Anyhow, we'll miss her and *bon chance!*

While **Phil Juliano** is our cartoonist, he's also back up quarterback for the Vikings. But then, aren't we all?

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