

*Love is in the air with John Brantingham,
Jeffrey Moses, Allison Whittenberg, the art of Mary Moses,
our comics and The Dream Journal.*

The Blotter

April 2012

MAGAZINE

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

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FRONT COVER and illumination on
 page 15 by Mary Moses. See center-
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The Blotter is a production of
 The Blotter Magazine, Inc.,
 Durham, NC.
 A 501 (c)3 non-profit
 ISSN 1549-0351
 www.blotterrag.com

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"Cross Words"

There's a great scene in the movie Apollo 13 – and although I'm not one who usually brings up film references to try and make a point, I am going to now so my statement will smack of speciousness and threaten the credibility of everything to follow – where the three astronauts trapped in a broken space ship are arguing about what happened and the actor playing mission commander Jim Lovell slightly raises his voice to tell the others that they're not going to go bouncing off the walls with this activity only to come back to the same place with the same concerns still unresolved. In other words, in his "maintain an even strain" line of thinking, there's no point to getting angry or frustrated or fussy or moody because they don't actually fix anything.

Each time I see this movie, I am frustrated and fussy about this scene, because I get it - I really do - but I think I disagree. When your spaceship is running out of oxygen, it's probably fairly important to stay on task, but generally speaking when people disagree about something, it's good to get the real reasons for disagreement out in the open, so that everyone involved can see and validate that disagreement, and perhaps work better together to resolve the real problems. Or, and this is a rather big *or*, the person bringing the disagreement forward and laying it on the table can see who in the group has no intention of doing their best to help them resolve their issues, because they just purely don't get along. I believe there's something to be gained by voicing one's opinion and the emotion behind it. And no, this is not appropriate when oxygen is running out, but how often does that happen?

But, you counter, people can't always discern your fine line between *OK to get grumpy about something* and an oxygen-running-out situation.

Good point.

Daughter: I hate you, Mom. Mother (calmly): Go to your room. Daughter doesn't go to room. Mother quietly tells daughter to go to room again. Daughter mumbles something under her breath, but goes to her room. Everyone heaves a mighty sigh of relief.

This is certainly one way of handling such a situation. But I cannot imagine a moment when it is appropriate to leave "I hate you" on the table without investigating what caused such destructive emotions. Alternatively, I've been told that "this is what children do. They are testing the situation of growing up and occasionally out of control emotions and one shouldn't give in to the *sturm und drang* of it. There is an age, I am told, where logic no longer works, where children are torn between wanting to please and wanting to anger their parents, just to see what happens. To Samson those pillars and bring the roof down on their own heads.

Do all parents understand this? Or do they bring that unruffleable – never explain, never complain – demeanor to every table, no matter what? And am I, therefore, suffering from some kind of Peter Pan (the character, not the peanut butter) syndrome? That situations that make me worry make me respond to that worry and that when I'm angry I'm angry, like a

ten year old kid? That seems possible, in the same way that a rumble in the distance seems like oncoming rain. Because there is a laundry list of issues that come along with the anger horseman which include Colonel Mustard with a candlestick in the library. When we open the Pandora's box of anger, it spills over us like sewage. It spills into the streets, melting and burning as it goes. Temper is a difficult function to manage; it tends to want to manage you. Me saying, "Hey, all I wanted is an argument," don't feed the bulldog.

So I've got something to chew on. People say things just to make other people think, get angry, lose their cool. Radio talk show hosts. Professional athletes. Candidates for public office. And if there's one thing useful we've learned from political leaders, our managers, our cultural icons, it's that when they do freak out and behave oddly, they are chopped down like park shade-trees with dutch elm disease. We toss famous people under the bus every day for behaving like we would, but are too embarrassed to admit we would. So we do need our astronauts, our steely-eyed missile men, to be as cool as frost on a February windshield. That's what they're paid to be. But isn't it just possible that we don't want our bankers to be like that. Not anymore. We want them to have some emotional skin in the game. Maybe we want people who see their co-workers doing something untoward to, well, get a little heated and step up to the potential offender and say something...uncool, like "don't do that." Alternatively, we want purveyors of news to be a tad less emotional and personal with the facts they're purveying.

So while I still think people who are more worried about perception than reality mess it up for those of us living in that reality, I'm torn between the reaction and the result. It may seem to be more important to remain cool for coolness sake, than bring the truth out in the open. It may be your fault we're running out of breathable oxygen and here's why: you're sighing too much and you didn't brush your teeth this morning. We may be afraid that if we are found to be wrong in the light of day, then that's worse than remaining calm and, *whoops*, dying of asphyxia.

Addendum: I've given up being angry for Lent. My family thinks this is funny, which while it is not at all my intent to make them laugh at my expense, is still a good thing, I guess.

Garry - chief@blotterrag.com



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CAUTION

Poetry is perfect words in perfect order. Comedy is perfect words said with perfect timing. Cursing is bad words in perfect order with perfect timing.

"The Sleeping Woman"

by John Brantingham

Harrison finds himself with three other forestry employees in the old man's living room on the third day of the fire. He's moving a piece by Brancusi. It's an oval sculpture of an egg-shaped face, lying on its side with its eyes closed as though the subject is a sleeping post-modern woman, and although it is the size of a milk crate, it is surprisingly heavy and nearly impossible to grip. Harrison finds that he constantly has to adjust and readjust his hands as they slip along the polished surface. The closer it comes to slipping out of his hands and crashing to the floor, the sweatier his palms become, and the sculpture becomes even more slippery.

"Please be careful," the old man says as he watches Harrison's palms fail to gain purchase. "Please, just let me stay here."

Of course, the old man could demand to stay in his

cabin. Mandatory evacuation notices are not as mandatory as the term implies. If the old man were to flatly refuse to leave his cabin even though the fire were blazing towards his mountain community, there would be little Harrison or anyone else could really do. No one here is going to tell the old man however, and to make sure he really will move, Harrison and two other employees offered to move his prized possession, an original Brancusi, purchased by the man's grandfather before anyone had any idea that the piece might be worth tens of millions of dollars.

It's worth more than that to the old man, of course. He has invested his favorite memories of his wife and friends and grandfather and father in it. He grew up in its shadow and learned about culture in relation to it. His wedding photos show him and his dead wife posing in front of it, and he has a photo of what appears to be his infant son stretching out to touch it. It seems to be talisman and relic to

the old man, and Harrison is forcing him to move it and leave.

And Harrison understands that no matter what he tells himself, no matter what kind of justification he develops, no matter how much he argues that it's all for the old man's own good, he is a bully. Using the power of his uniform and just a little trickery, he has forced a gray bearded gentleman who's gone a little soft around the edges of his mind to do something that he'd never do on his own.

True, it's Harrison's job to protect the man's life.

True, the Brancusi is a priceless sculpture that should be preserved.

But it's the man's life, and it's the man's sculpture.

And it seems that being a bully runs in Harrison's family. Three days ago, just as Harrison was becoming dimly aware that the fire was starting, he watched his son beat another boy with a baseball bat because the boy couldn't hit a curve ball. Harrison sat by as the entire series of events unfolded. There was his son in the outfield berating the boy for being clumsy. There was his son in the dugout continuing to pester the poor kid. There was his son walking slowly to the aluminum bats, selecting one care-

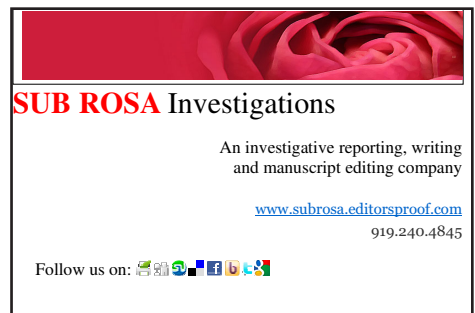


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fully, testing its weight. When the world's worst baseball player missed the first pitch, Stanley stood impassively. When he missed the second pitch, he just watched. When the boy missed the third pitch, Stanley walked over calmly and hit the poor kid with his bat.

The whole sequence was so lacking passion that it didn't seem real, and it took Harrison a moment to realize something out of the ordinary was happening. Clearly, in Stanley's mind, this was the logical sequence of events when a boy missed a ball.

And that was the shocking part of it all, how calm his son had been, how calculated. There were moment he seemed

agitated, but for the five minute before the attack, he simply considered what he was going to do.

But if Stanley's plan had been calculated, so was Harrison's. This old man would clearly not have moved his sleeping lady if he had a choice. Given a choice, he would probably let the house burn down around himself. After all, what is left for him on this earth?

Harrison and the two other men come out of the front door and onto the man's gravel driveway when one of the other employees says, "Ahh, AHH!"

The statue begins to slip in slow motion, and there's nothing the man can do to stop it from dropping to the ground. He

does his best to keep it from crashing though, adjusting and readjusting his hands so the piece is brought down as gently as possible.

"Please. This is a very important piece," the old man says.

But it does go down making a large bong when it's finally on the earth.

"Okay," Harrison says. "We take a break. Does anyone have a towel for our hands?"

The old man says, "Ah," staring down at the sleeping woman's head resting on his driveway. "I don't . . ." He walks back and forth once in nervous agitation. The smoke is a visible wall behind him eating the trees



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ten miles from here, and the man stares at that.

"Robert," Harrison says to one of the men, "Do you have something in your truck?"

"No," the old man says. "I will get you a towel." He disappears into his house, and the three men put their fists on their hips and stare at the sleeping woman.

And slowly, Harrison realizes that he is angry with the old man in the same way that Stanley had been angry with the clumsy boy. If the old man didn't want to leave, why didn't he assert his independence? Why put Harrison in the position of bully? And why didn't the old man have a plan for moving the piece? Shouldn't he have made some

kind of plan for its transportation years and years ago? And why didn't he hire someone to do this three days ago instead of forcing this outcome?

All of the questions course through Harrison in a matter of seconds until he kind of hates the old guy when he reappears. Harrison wipes his hands off and then cleans the bronze sleeping woman. The old man makes whiny guttural noises somewhere down at the base of his throat. He doesn't say anything, but he's pushing, always pushing Harrison. He's picking at Harrison, but not with words, so there is nothing Harrison can say back.

And Harrison understands that he wants to find an aluminum bat and beat the man. He wants to find the source of that throaty whimper and crush it.

When the three men go to pick up the sleeping woman again, the old man says, "Please, please, please."

Harrison turns to him and says, "Okay." It's meant to be calming, but it comes out harsher than Harrison expected it to as

though the word is a threat. Harrison supposes it is a threat in its own way.

The old man bristles and says, "You must be careful."

"We are being careful."

And when the three of them lift the statue, the old man stands between them and Harrison's truck, that sound starting up in his throat again.

"You're going to have to get out of the way," Harrison says.

But instead of moving out of the way, the man simply backs up, and he's still between the sleeping woman and the truck. And as the three of them get closer, he doesn't move. He just keeps saying, "Please, please" and backing up.

"I need you to get out of the way," Harrison says when he is four feet from the truck where they will lay the head of the sleeping woman. "Out of the way."

Maybe the old man is planning to move. Maybe he doesn't understand that he's in the way. Maybe Harrison should wait for a second or two or put down the sleeping woman or



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calmly discuss his ideas with the old man or bring the head back into the old man's house, but he's tired of that sound in the back of the man's throat and the incessant whining and all the rest of it, and the old man places a hand on Harrison's shoulder, so without thinking about what he's doing, Harrison body checks the old man out of the way.

The three men carrying the head watch impassively as the man stumbles backwards, his hands wind-milling and reaching for something to hold. When he finally goes down, they turn to the task at hand and lift the head onto the blankets and towels waiting for it. The other men go to the job of strapping it down, but Harrison offers his hand to the old man.

The old man looks like he might refuse for a moment, but in the end, he takes Harrison's help, and Harrison lifts his surprisingly light frame.

"What?" the old man asks.

Harrison waits for the old man to finish the sentence, but he's angry beyond words. He's glaring at Harrison. "What's wrong?"

"Unload the truck. I'm not leaving."

Harrison looks at the sleeping woman's head. It's beautiful. Perfectly smooth, perfectly calm. She sleeps quietly despite the fire looming, despite Harrison's annoyance or the old man's pique. "No," Harrison says. "There are people who need us on this mountain, and we've

wasted enough time on you. Either stay here or get in my truck. I have things to do."

A bully, Harrison reflects as the old man climbs into the truck, is just someone with more power who is willing to use that power for his own needs. He is a bully as is his son, and if he were a good man, he would have taken the old man's noises in good humor. So he's not a good person. If he were a good person, he'd be as calm as the sleeping woman. If he were a good person, he would be as smooth as she is without worry, without care, but he is just Harrison, and he exists some place between the sleeping woman and the young boy with the aluminum bat on a frustratingly hot April afternoon.

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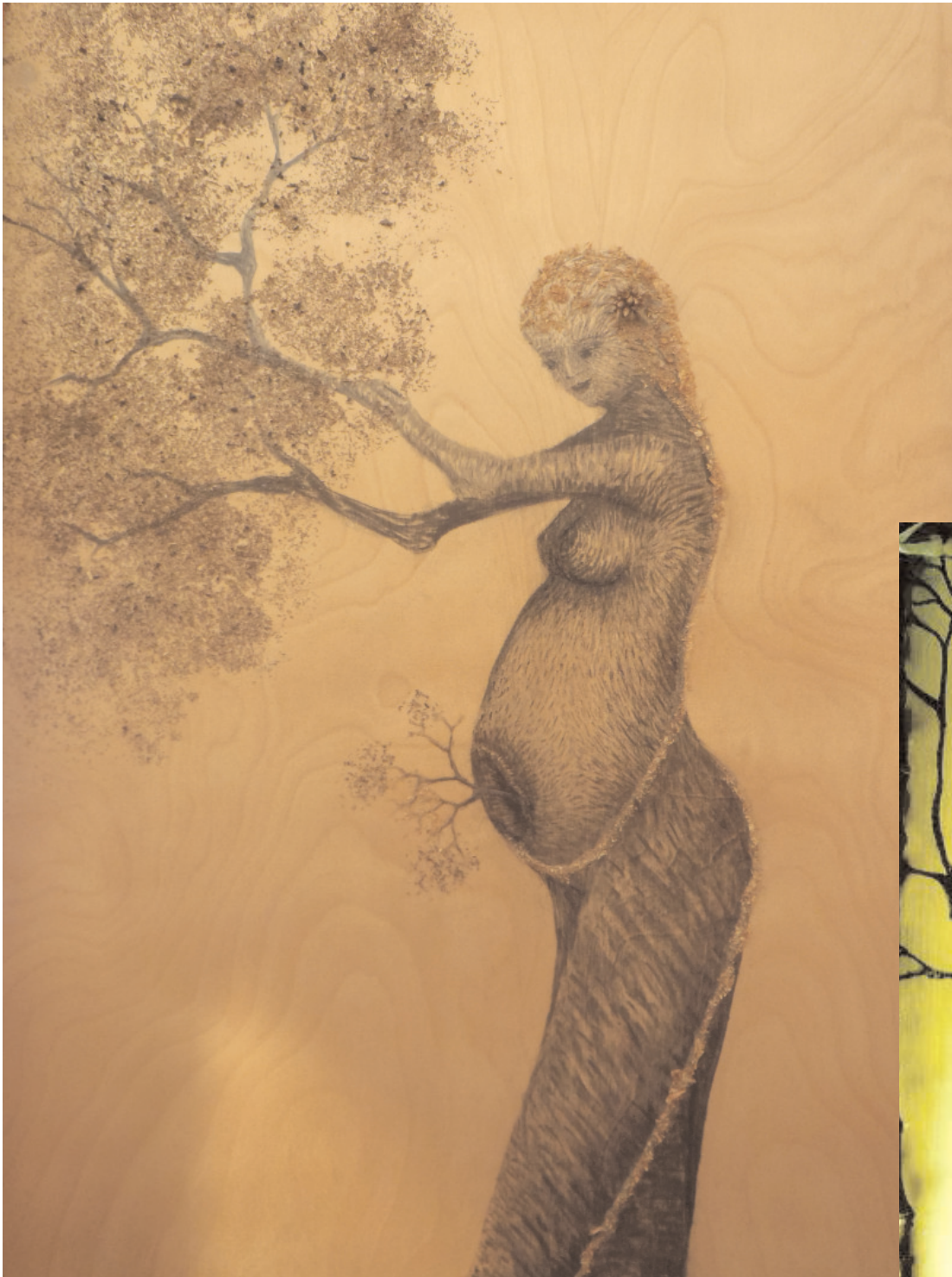
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Surely there was something in last night's dinner that brought this on – when I woke I must have been trying to hide or flee because my shoulder was pinned against my ear and ached (as well it would). Outside, the rain beat against the side of my house and the gutters overflowed – damned leaves? Dammed leaves? The noise and pain and the un-toothbrushable-away taste in my mouth set a stage for my tired brain.

We used to play football in one of the town parks – the grass was thick then like a meadow and people didn't walk their dogs there or throw bottles against the fence posts. There was never enough equipment, so like Little Rascals we shared shoulder pads, helmets, pants and cleats so that everyone could protect at least one part of their body. We didn't worry about contusions or sprains, and a concussion was the sound made by two young boys running into each other as hard as they were able. And if it rained, well, if it rained all the better because the ground became softer.

It was something we did when somehow, magically, Labor Day caused the weather to change – the sun not quite as warm and welcoming, the tee-shirt we wore the day before no longer enough protection from the first breezes of fall. So we put away the baseball bats and caps and found the flat leather football and went searching for a pump – or worse, the rubber-patch kit. We had little money back then, so we had mad-skills; could repair things, make them work, and use them again. A football wasn't trashed until it lost any ability to fly through the air in a semi-spiral, 'til it couldn't take a kick off a two-sticks-jammed-in-the-ground tee.

And we could run! Like wind can blow leaves, we were the way children should be and so rarely are nowadays, fast and sly able to stay just out of reach or change direction on a feather's whim when speed wasn't enough. It seemed a gift at the time, to be able to run like that, for play after play without needing a rest or a sip of water. And we had our heroes, those rarities among our ranks who were a step faster, a blink quicker. The game went on.

They weren't bullies, not in the true sense of bullies – boys looking for a fight anywhere with anyone smaller than them. They were teenagers, they had cars and we were in a place they wanted to be. So they drove up in their panoply of cars, parking nose-in so that they would be able to turn on the lights when daylight failed. They started throwing their own footballs around – they had more than one! – and when they were interrupting our plays with their own, we knew it was over, but not before we did what young boys did back then, we disrespected our elders. Called them names under our breath. Scuffed the muddy ground. And, when one of the shiny teenaged footballs came our way, we snatched it and made one last dash for an end zone. It's a funny thing, how you're never quite as tired as you thought you were. Flipped the ball to our fleetest of feet. Turned on some Every Man For Himself button, although we all wanted everyone to get away. Did they recognize us, helmeted and covered in mud? Maybe not. Would we really have kept the ball if we could have gotten away with it? Maybe not.

Joey C. - cyberspace

"Mary's Parable"

by Jeffrey Moses

She believes in dreams and things unseen
 Elves and fairies dancing in the moon's blue hue
 While saints rant their chants
 In a line like ants are her thoughts of self

Can't touch the truth
 Only thoughts and words and flying miracle birds
 And birth and death the way an oak feeds itself
 And seeds of weeds that have no needs
 Their thorns as proof enough

And in every drop there is a billion more
 A billion miles and a billion souls reaching
 Joining hands; their weight overcomes them
 Crashing down the cyclical throat of time

Yes, they tried to fly
 Shot down by their father's words
 Ringing is the rhyme of time

And they splash into her skyward eye
 Like a tear coming home
 The miracle truth blurring a vision of self
 But there must be something more clearly defined
 There must be a miracle enough

Oh, beautiful lass, can't you see the Christ there before you
 Is the faith that you seek hiding behind the miracle proof
 Like the forest behind the trees

In the lie that is time your answer lies
 That drop will fall no matter its mind
 No matter its beliefs, its sins or its crimes
 Into the unflinching eye of the beholder

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by Phil Juliano



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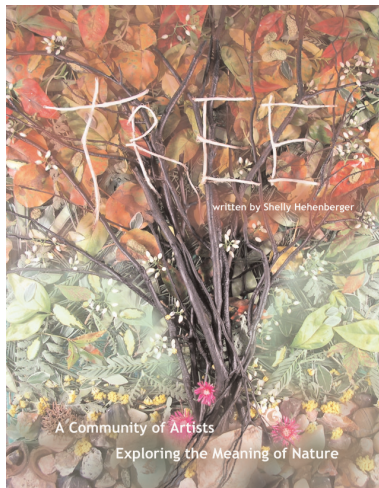
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The balance of bliss is pain
The balance of pain is enlightenment
The balance of enlightenment is more enlightenment
The balance of more enlightenment is transcendence
The balance of transcendence is alienation
The balance of alienation is bliss

"Narrative"

Though they are numerous
I will grant your wishes
I am your angel
Though my wings are heavy

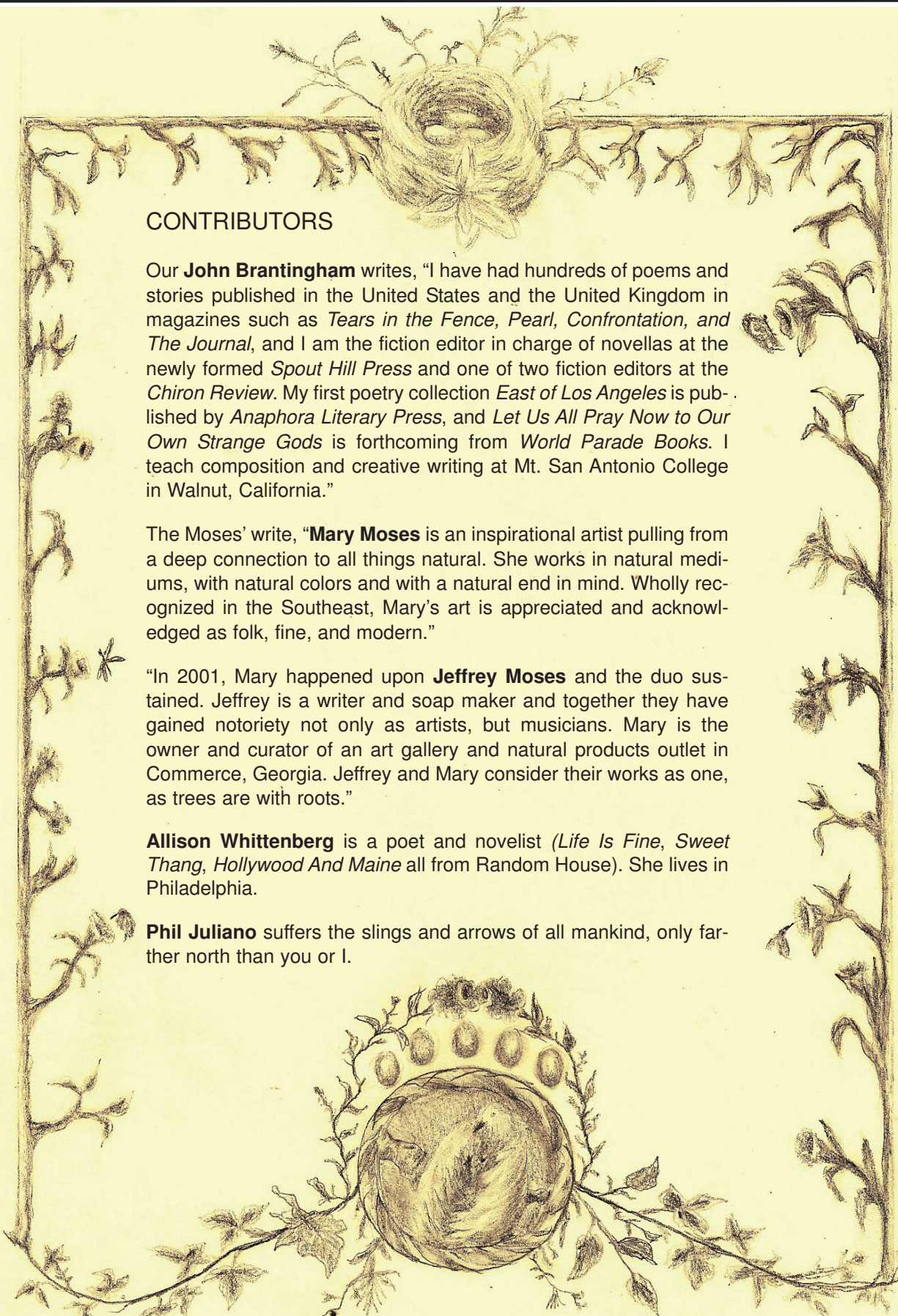
"Fragments"

I tell myself
Don't
remind Me
you are gone

Lies are good

But then I want to see you as
If
You are
But you're not

Truth is bad



CONTRIBUTORS

Our **John Brantingham** writes, "I have had hundreds of poems and stories published in the United States and the United Kingdom in magazines such as *Tears in the Fence*, *Pearl*, *Confrontation*, and *The Journal*, and I am the fiction editor in charge of novellas at the newly formed *Spout Hill Press* and one of two fiction editors at the *Chiron Review*. My first poetry collection *East of Los Angeles* is published by *Anaphora Literary Press*, and *Let Us All Pray Now to Our Own Strange Gods* is forthcoming from *World Parade Books*. I teach composition and creative writing at Mt. San Antonio College in Walnut, California."

The Moses' write, "**Mary Moses** is an inspirational artist pulling from a deep connection to all things natural. She works in natural mediums, with natural colors and with a natural end in mind. Wholly recognized in the Southeast, Mary's art is appreciated and acknowledged as folk, fine, and modern."

"In 2001, Mary happened upon **Jeffrey Moses** and the duo sustained. Jeffrey is a writer and soap maker and together they have gained notoriety not only as artists, but musicians. Mary is the owner and curator of an art gallery and natural products outlet in Commerce, Georgia. Jeffrey and Mary consider their works as one, as trees are with roots."

Allison Whittenberg is a poet and novelist (*Life Is Fine*, *Sweet Thang*, *Hollywood And Maine* all from Random House). She lives in Philadelphia.

Phil Juliano suffers the slings and arrows of all mankind, only farther north than you or I.

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