

**Happy, happy! Edward H. Garcia, Pr. Rhonda Royal Hatton,
John Brantingham, Phil Julliano, and The Dream Journal**

The Blotter

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Magazine



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"The Pause Button"

Sometimes it feels like the future can't get here soon enough.

Lord, that sentence is full of flatulence, but I'm going to stick with it and explain myself a little bit.

We're going to be switching out the President of the country soon - and the election is a lot like changing a lightbulb in that it's become a joke with many different punchlines. In order that we keep as apolitical an atmosphere as you have grown accustomed to, let me explain that my point is that my oldest daughter is now weighing in on these shenanigans.

Political debate, and being sixteen: it's all new to her and she's got a fair bit of pent-up frustration. Saying what's on your mind, and no one shushes you? It changes everything. I must say that conversation in our house is much more animated, fresh, funny. If anything, what my child lacks in experience she makes up with youthful exuberance, and a reasonable handle on...reasoning. We talk a lot about logic, she and I. Fallacies. Epic failures when the talking heads go off-teleprompter. She listens - to the candidates and to the moderators, to the post-circus commentary that adults spout on the TV.

She turns and faces me.

Why do they say things like that?

I press pause.

This is a good question; a young person's question full of curiosity and perspicacity, and as such fearlessly flies in the face of my frequent rejection of "why" questions. What do I mean by this? Well, in a house with three young women (wife, daughter, daughter) and one lumpy old dude (yep truly) I have found that I get a lot of what I refer to as "why questions" - as in "Why did she do that?" The fullness of time has revealed to me that these "why" questions are ticking time-bombs, or at best short-fuse hand grenades that burst about a meter off the floor, or right about...well, you know. I try to leave them be and back away as quickly as possible. Sometimes I fail to escape.

Brief aside to you gentle readers: to answer "why" questions, you have to admit that people are often hateful, vindictive, vengeful, and just bad. If you answer every "why" question with such answers, you risk pushing your child into a corner, terrifying them. And this is not my goal.

I hold my tongue. I am, of course, the worst kind of male chauvinist because I know what male chauvinism is and still do not enough about it. Why do I think I am right so much of the time? What do I know about being a young woman growing up in America, or anywhere for that matter? But what can I be but a dad? My job is to dive on certain grenades before they explode. I know I'm not smarter than anybody else in my house. But I know what I know, have some experience in things going well and not-so-well. I trust empirical evidence, and yet sometimes must make leaps of faith. In other words, I am ignorant, and not proud of that fact.

And, anyway, this is a good moment. A teachable-moment, in the parlance of suburban soccer moms, lawnmower dads and basic cable TV. I know (or think I

do) that sometimes women ask questions they don't want answers to. Sometimes talking is just a way of releasing frustration with the way things are, or a method of acknowledging that things are the way they are. No male insight is required. So I hold my tongue and wait - to see where she wants to go with this. Pause button while she turns the puzzle of human behavior around in her head as if working a virtual Rubik's Cube and I do some of my own thinking:

A - How can I possibly do anything other than guess why people say the things they do, and therefore what makes my answer more valid than anyone else's?

Final analysis: I can't and nothing.

B - It's pretty cool that still she's even asking questions of me, and not just texting out into the real and utter void of social media, or bouncing interrogatories off her peers and contemporaries and getting answers. Not to be age-chauvinistic, but holy crap!

C - Like having a bite on an artificial lure with 6 pound test line and a hincty reel, I have to be as careful as I can be or I'll lose her. Probably not forever, but for now, which would suck greatly, because talking with her is marvelous.

She looks at me again and it's time to say something. I was going to explain my own opinion on the nature of entertainment and the 24 hour news cycle and the decline of investigative and long-form journalism and what a primary source is and what spin is and how people often don't know what is in their own best interests. Instead, I tell her that sometimes people are afraid for one reason or another and that other people who seek power or wealth will prey on that fear. She looks hard at me with something like a glare, like somehow something (the world) is my fault, which from her perspective it is (truth) and then she thinks some more and decides that I'm on her side (truth) and then she nods and turns back to the television. We watch some more, and I must tell you I know it is a cliché but I feel good about the future. My daughters are not to be trifled with. After she goes to bed I think a little bit more, to the flicker of the TV. In the spring, she will be taking APUSH (Advanced Placement U.S. History). This will be a very interesting semester, because I know a lot about the subject, and am going to have to shut up and listen a lot. Everyone has to deal with history in their own way, in order to come to grips with the present. Or the President.

How much fun is that going to be?

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CAUTION

*I think Mother Nature and God
are married.*

"Lost and Found in Albania"

by Edward H. Garcia

"What in-the-hell-am-I-doing?" I am Skyping with my graduate school buddy Vincent D'Amato. "You got me into this. It's your fault." Vince's placid, mustachioed face shows a hint of a smile. "I can see you think it's funny," I say.

"Well, it is. A little. You're not going to outer space. You're going to Albania. Don't worry, they'll take care of you. The Fulbright people will make sure. They always do.

"So you say." I am sitting outside the waiting room in the Toyota dealer in Tyler, Texas talking to someone in northern California, so I am trying to keep my voice down. Getting my Prius serviced was on my list of things to do before I left for Albania.

"You think Bulgaria's that differ-

ent?"

"At least I know someone who's *been* to Bulgaria."

"Yeah, me," Vince said, smiling broadly.

"OK, point taken, but nobody's ever been to Albania."

"Whatever," Vince says. I see him glance up and to his left where the clock must be. "You're just having that last minute panic. I had it the first time I went to Bulgaria alone. Whatever it is, it'll be over in four weeks, they pay the bills, you'll see a little more of the world, and you won't die. Anyway, I would love to go over this one more time, but I've got to walk the dog before supper, and Paula is even less patient with your drama than I am."

"You're right. I just wanted to bitch to somebody. You go on and walk and say hi to Paula—I bet she doesn't call it 'my drama.' She's much nicer than you. Ask her if she'd like to come along for company."

"Yes she is, but no, I'm not going to ask her. Listen, Skype me tomorrow or the next day if you're still worried. About the same time? But it's going to be fine."

I have not been fully honest with Vince about my anxieties. I'm not much of a foreign traveler, so I really am worried about all the practical stuff—sleeping on the plane, switching

planes in Milan, the language, all the languages. Will someone be there to meet his plane? All of that. But my real fears are of a different order. I'm pretty sure I'm going there as a fraud.

I wasn't lying when I accused Vince of having gotten me into this thing. A four-weeks Fulbright in a foreign country, a stipend, a healthy per diem, a complete escape from my complicated yet boring life. And there was the cachet of a Fulbright. Fulbright scholars have always been the guys I wasn't, the confident, adventurous ones. Vince told me I would just have to find a scholar at a university in some obscure country who was willing to work with me. You figure out some short course to team teach in English with the sponsor and you're home free. The "obscure country" part was based on competition. Everyone wanted to go to England or France or Italy, so it was better to start with a country the crowds weren't teeming to enter. Albania fit the bill.

I had a student from Albania. That's what gave me the idea. Albanians loved poetry, he told me. "They like Americans. Hillary Clinton is a big favorite." I wasn't sure what comfort I was supposed to take from the Hilary reference, but I let myself be encouraged, and when I found a professor at Tirana University who was interested in teaching a short course in Mexican-American Literature, I wrote the application, waited without a lot of hope or desire, and finally got my letter of acceptance. It was then that I began to wonder what I had gotten myself



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into. I am not an expert; I'm hardly a scholar. I *am* Mexican-American and I *have* produced "literature" on a modest scale, but I don't know if I can give the Albanian students what they expect.

At this point I feel the need to admit that these self doubts have led me to signing all the Fulbright applications and correspondence "Roberto Alvarez." That actually is the name on my birth certificate, but forever everyone has called me "Bob." I have always been pretty judgmental of the guys who Mexicanized it up to get ahead—the guy who all his life was Freddy is suddenly Federico and taking Spanish lessons on the sly. When it comes to that (and it always comes to that), my Spanish is ok, just ok. Before I went to school I spoke English and Spanish interchangeably—so I've been told. But when I went to parochial school and the nuns' rule was no Spanish, even on the playground, I grew up educated in English, with a pretty good accent and ear for Spanish but not much vocabulary beyond what a six year old knows. I can follow a Mexican soap opera and read some Neruda or Hinojosa with a dictionary close by, but if you speak to me in Spanish, I'm likely to answer in English.

I have no idea what the students of Tirana University do expect, and my contact at the University has been vague about details. I emailed Professor Uke Bogdani with questions about the class—where would it be held, when, what the students' English

is like, how many students, what level? After a delay, Uke wrote back, "Don't worry about the details. We'll work out everything when you get here." He didn't answer subsequent emails. I cringe a little when I sign emails "Roberto," but it feels like one of those comedies where the hero pretends to be something he isn't and has to brazen it out—except for the part about being funny. I have been vacillating between thinking it will be a fiasco and thinking it will be a different fiasco. There will be no class and no students, and I will have to explain it to the Fulbright people; there will be a full class of brilliant students who will see me for the fraud I am immediately and make my time Albania a living hell. I can't think of any other possibility.

It is midnight in the Tirana airport. It is nearly deserted. My flight landed around 11 p.m. local time—in body time, the next morning after a sleepless night. Or maybe it is yesterday noon body time. I am not think-

ing straight. I only know that I missed a connection in Milan, ran to catch a flight to Rome and a subsequent connection to Tirana, my luggage has not arrived, and no one is here to meet me. The Mother Theresa International Airport is built like a big gymnasium, clean and new, but more like an airport you'd find in a medium sized city like Raleigh or Santa Fe than the main airport for a whole country. Everyone is friendly enough but tend to look blankly at me when I ask questions. Maybe the day shift speaks English. I hope so because it looks like I will be here until morning. The baggage claim man has taken my name and made a copy of the claim check and written down the name of the hotel where I will be staying, but we couldn't communicate beyond signs, and I'm not sure if I will ever see my clothes again. The airport restaurant is closed, and the cleaning crew pretty much avoids eye contact.

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What in the hell am I doing?" repeats on an endless loop in my head. My ipod has long ago run down, my phone won't work until I'm back in Atlanta, my knees ache. I am on the point of asking directions the best I can and hitching a ride for the 17 kilometers into the city when a small man in his early fifties with a thick graying mustache appears in front of me. "Professor Alvarez?" he says and sticks out his hand. "I'm Uke Bogdani. Let's get the hell out of here." I could cry. Uke looks around for my bags. "They didn't make it." He shakes his head. "Let me talk to the agent," he says, rushing in the directions of the baggage claim. I follow unsteadily behind. I'm suddenly beyond tired. Uke speaks loudly in Albanian to the agent and seems satisfied that he will do what he has said. "You're lucky. They care more about what tourists think about them than natives. It's still a new thing. I didn't have to threaten or bribe. I just had to tell him you were an American."

On the way into town Uke drives fast and follows close to the cars ahead of him. I press the imaginary passenger-side brakes frequently. It is midnight, but traffic is heavy. The smell of car exhaust penetrates from the outside, and Uke's unfiltered cigarette smoke fills the inside. Uke lived for several years in the States, he tells me—in Iowa, studying translation. Now he is translating American and English works into Albanian—he has just fin-

ished *The Wasteland*. He is also translating classical Albanian texts into English. Maybe I can look at some of the manuscripts? He doesn't wait for an answer.

"So how did you get interested in Mexican American literature?" I ask. Uke hesitates.

"I haven't yet. That's your job." Maybe this is going to be a third kind of fiasco, one as yet not imagined.

At the hotel, Uke leaves the car running, says a few words in Albanian to a very sleepy night clerk, and tells me, "He'll take care of you. There's breakfast in the morning. I'll be by at 9." From the hotel door, he calls back, "I need to get some sleep."

The desk clerk gives me a key and points up the staircase. "Baggage not here," I tell the clerk. "Coming from airport." I gesture holding a heavy suitcase. The clerk nods and says, "*Po, po.*" I'm not sure he understands, but I'm too tired to worry. I have a dimly worked out plan in case the luggage doesn't get here before I have to do something. It includes combing my hair with my splayed fingers and washing under my arms with whatever soap the hotel provides. I open my second floor room, flick the light switch and nothing happens. I consider walking down, but decide instead to throw myself on one of the two twin beds. The bedspread is rough against my cheek. I hug a pillow and am asleep almost immediately. I am still deeply

asleep when I begin to hear a ringing near my head. After a half dozen rings, I pick up the phone and hear the clerk's voice, "Baggage, baggage" with the accent on the second syllable—maybe he speaks French. Downstairs I find my bags and decide to ask the clerk about the lights. I try all of the languages I know even a little: "No lights, *luz, licht, lumiere, luce.*" The clerk is puzzled for a moment and then points to the light fixture above his desk. Why didn't I think of that? The clerk picks up a key and gestures slipping the card attached to the key into a slot. Then he turns the light off and on again. I repeat the gesture. The clerk says, "*Po, po.*" In the room, I find a slot by the door where the card fits. The lights come on.

I see that my room is quite large. In addition to the two twin beds on either side of a bedside table, there is another, smaller room with a double bed and little room to maneuver. To my right is a large square bathroom. In one corner is the wash basin, in another is a shower, no enclosure but a drain in the floor. On the wall opposite are a toilet and a bidet. Nothing about it feels familiar, but nothing is terrible, either. They haven't put me in the hotel where most of the American tourists stay—that would kill the per diem, so this will do. In the main room is what looks like a 15-inch black and white television. That will have to do, too. In ten minutes, in spite of the excitement of the new, I am undressed and asleep.

I am ready when Uke drives by the next morning. I thought I would be likely to oversleep, but I am up with sun as usual, even if the sun won't be up at home for another 12 hours. After a few perfunctory pleasantries about the room and my sleep, Uke says, "You're in luck." He lets that sink in for a moment. I wonder for a moment if Uke is going to tell me the whole course has been called off and I can go home. "You've caught the end of our



annual literary festival. Publishers come from all over the country to show their books, and people come from all over to buy books. You'll be impressed by the size of it for a small, poor country, though most of the books are bad." He drives on and speaks with a cigarette between his lips, "You're doing a reading tomorrow. Look." He hands me a card with a picture of me taken from the Fulbright application. It has my name in large letters, "Rouberto Alvarez," a number of incomprehensible words in Albanian and a date and time that indicates I will be doing something tomorrow night at 6 p.m.

"What? Reading what? I didn't know anything about this."

"Also, you're being interviewed by our public television, and there are articles in several of the papers about you, and I've set up—well, my cousin has set up the interviews with some of the other papers. He is sponsoring the festival and is a good man to know." I feel I haven't yet imagined the depth or breadth or height of the fiasco that awaits me.

I hold up the card and ask, "What does it say I am going to be reading?"

"It doesn't say, exactly. So you choose. I've translated the poem you sent in or you could read Eliot or some-

body else I've translated...But I would recommend your own poems." He reaches down next to his seat and pulls out a slender book and tosses it into my lap. "You should also read this because you're on a panel to discuss it tonight. It's my cousin's book, and I translated it. It's quick reading. Poems." There is a pounding in my head. "Luckily, the class doesn't start until next week, so you have some time." I say nothing.

Uke's cousin is some sort of minister of culture, and his office is in the same building where the literary festival is being held. It is a huge, colorful pyramid, designed by the daughter of the late dictator and her architect husband. It is at first sight an impressive monstrosity but on closer inspection is beginning to crumble around the edges. It reminds me of some of the ambitious buildings I've seen in Mexico. Perhaps, like the Mexicans, the Albanians are better with first impressions than with maintenance. Inside there are four floors of display areas filled with posters advertising books and tables covered with books published in Albania on display and for sale. The displays spill out of the main entrance to the pyramid, with more publishers showing their wares in tents. At one booth there is a huge photograph of Jim Belushi. I will be asked several times over the next few weeks about Jim Belushi. At another booth, there is an equally large photograph of me, with "Rouberto Alvarez" printed below a fuzzy likeness blown up from the same headshot.

Uke is relaxing at a table with twenty or so newspapers fanned out before him, smoking and sipping on a small cup of espresso. "These are all today's papers, just from Tirana," he says with what I detect for the first time might be pride. "One of them is in English." He fishes around the pile and picks up a copy of *Tirana Times*.

"All these are from today?" Uke nods.

"There are a couple of mentions of your reading. Sorry there aren't

more, but we just thought of it yesterday."

I look at the door across the room and imagine myself rushing toward it before anyone can stop me. Where would I go? For the moment I can't remember the name of my hotel or the name of the street. I sigh and settle back in my chair nursing the bitterest cup of coffee I've ever had. Uke is unaware of my aborted plan. "So how is this reading going to work?" I say finally.

Uke looks up. "First, of course, the actors will read. Then..."

"What actors?"

"Oh, I forgot you wouldn't know. All of our poetry readings are by actors—from the radio. We don't think poets are very good—very dramatic—interpreters of their words. Actors are better."

"So they'll read your translations of my poems and then what?"

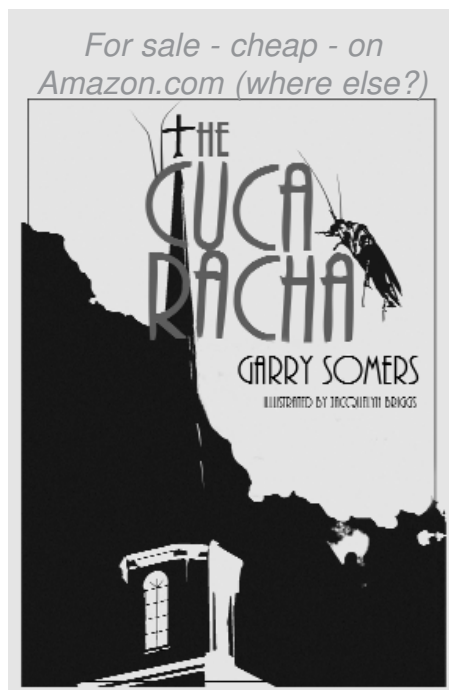
"Then you'll read the poems they did and maybe one or two new ones which I'll translate as you read—sentence by sentence—and then they will ask questions."

"They?"

"The audience. There probably won't be anything hard. I don't know. They might ask you who your favorite Albanian writer is or something equally innocuous." He takes another sip of coffee. His cigarette in the ashtray is about half ash. A slender plume of smoke rises into the room, joining the smoke from everyone else in the room who is smoking.

"So who is my favorite Albanian writer? Kadare?"

Uke doesn't look up from his papers. "He's a fraud."



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The Blotter

"Didn't he win the Man Booker?"

"Politics. He always pretended to be a dissident, but he was in bed with the government. That's how he survived. I shouldn't blame him. He did what he had to."

"So if not Kadare, then who?"

"Do you know Marinaj?" I shake my head. "They probably won't ask, but you could tell them that it's T. S. Eliot as translated by Uke Bogdani. You know, make a joke."

"Who's going to translate the questions and my answers? You?"

"No, they'll have some pretty girl from the ministry whose English isn't much better than your Albanian." He looks up and smiles. "Hey, don't worry. They just want to see an American in the flesh—an American poet. The actors will be great, and nobody much will know what you're saying."

"Somehow, I'm not calmed."

Uke shrugs and takes another sip of coffee. "You want to have lunch? We can go by my office—it'll be half yours. Almost half. A desk."

Uke's office is big and messy. There are a couple of desks and a table, all covered with books and sheaves of page proofs. Uke picks up a stack of papers and hands it to me, "Here, when you get a chance, let me know if it sounds like English. It's a classic Albanian folk tale."

"So, am I going to be on a panel about this, too?"

Uke hesitates and then grins. "Not until next year."

We go to a small restaurant just a few steps from the university. It doesn't seem to be a student hangout and there are certainly no tourists. Uke greets the waiter who gestures to an empty table. I look at the incomprehensible menu and search for a familiar word. "Biftek" stands out. In menus in Mexico that meant "beef steak." I have the sudden feeling I will be eating a lot of biftek for the next month. "That's beef steak, right?" I say pointing to the menu.

"Not exactly steak as in Iowa, but, yes, beef."

"Anything else good?"

"You could have tongue," Uke says pointing to an item below the biftek. I am pretty sure he is trying to tease the squeamish American.

"I haven't had tongue in years. My mother used to make it, and I've always loved it. I'll have the tongue." When it comes, it would do my mother proud—thinly sliced and lightly pan fried. Just like home.

We are back in Uke's office. He has shown me the desk I will use for the next month and cleared the top off into a large plastic bag. He indicates that I can do the same for the desk drawers. From the souvenirs and toiletries in the

drawers, the desk appears to have been used by a young woman, a graduate student I guess and pretty. The latter surmise is based on Uke's habitual leer in the presence of pretty young women. He tosses a couple of inch-thick paperback journals onto the desk. "I edit these and publish them when we can get the funds. Maybe the Fulbright people could help?" I shrug. "You know, poetry eats money."

"I know it doesn't make money."

"If only it were just that."

"What does it shit?"

He is silent for a moment. "More poetry," he says finally and grins. "And the new shit just eats more money."

"Uke, you are a great philosopher."

"Yes, I know."

By the time we are ready to leave for the festival, Uke has promised to translate and publish my stories, as many as I want.

Jet-lagged, sitting in the most smoke-free corner of the cousin's office, I sip an almost chewy espresso and start reading the poems I will have to be intelligent about tonight. I'm relieved to find them understandable and interesting. The writer is from the north, near Kosovo. He writes about bombs

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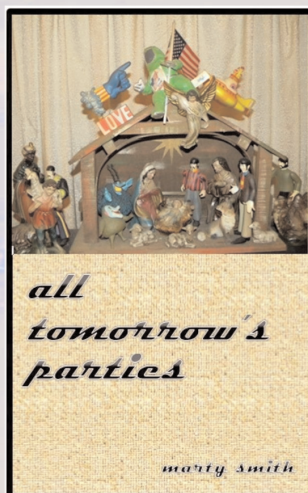
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falling and about abandoning a city as the enemy approaches. He writes about leaving the country by walking over the mountains after he was warned the state police were coming for him. About his mother visiting him in the hospital after he was shot down in the streets by political enemies. And amid all the bad old days of Albania is one poem which tells of a love he never thought would end and time that can't be retrieved. I have no experience with being shot down, but love's untimely ending I am very familiar with. I can talk about that.

It's an odd sensation to wax eloquent about a poem and then wait while a pretty young woman translates my words into Albanian, how well I have no way of telling. When a response comes, I find myself glancing at Uke for reassurance. There is a certain amount of translating for my sake by Uke and another panelist who knows English, and it's awkward for them and for the audience but not for me. As the panel winds down, I have the sense of having dodged disaster. No one stood up and pointed a finger and yelled, "Fraud" in any language. Of course, there's still time.

Back at the hotel, exhausted, I switch on the little black and white. Maybe there will be a soccer game. I flip through several news and talk shows, a sexy music video channel and

a music channel with a middle-eastern sound and women singing in considerably more clothes. I switch to another channel and hear something familiar. It's an overwrought drama with Albanian subtitles, but the actors are speaking Spanish. I switch again and there is another drama, this one dubbed into Albanian, but I recognize

the genre—the Mexican *telenovela*. I switch back to the subtitled one and drift into sleep comforted by the drama of the beautiful servant girl hopelessly in love with the young ne'er do well son of the family her family has served for so many years and the poor young man who has loved her since they were children together and who would do any-

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The Blotter

thing to win her.

The next day I am not due at the festival until afternoon, so I tell Uke I will walk from my hotel—he doesn't argue. The side streets are narrow and clogged with parked cars. Maybe I'm looking in the wrong places, but I see no street signs at all, anywhere in Tirana. I try to picture the route we drove the day before—away from the hotel toward the huge central square with the mosque and the statue of Skanderbeg and then down a boulevard to the pyramid. Maybe it's the soap operas I fell asleep to last night, but I find that everyone and everything looks Mexican to me. I know that if I speak to almost anyone I run across in the streets of Tirana, they will at best look at me blankly, and yet I am almost convinced that if I spoke to them in Spanish, they would understand. The closely packed shops I pass have the charming shabbiness of a Mexican border town. Most shops have a portable generator outside on the sidewalk, ready to be cranked up when the periodic blackouts roll through. Later I will be in a coffee house full of smokers sipping espresso when the lights go out, and I won't detect any change in the murmur of conversations around me. I pass a young boy selling cigarettes on the street and a seller of cigarette lighter fluid refills from a sidewalk stand.

So it's not a border town on either side of Rio Grande, and yet there is that feeling. In one sense I have never been so far from home, but in another I *am*

home. Even the beggars in the park across from the pyramid are familiar; they just aren't selling Chicklets.

I consider walking into traffic and letting someone hit me. It would be easy; they all drive like Uke. I don't really want to die, so I consider getting lost and missing the reading. I walk along a dusty park with my eyes half closed, but beggars keep coming up and asking me for something—money I suppose. I am forced to keep my eyes open and my wits about me until I unwillingly arrive at the pyramid. On the way home that night, when it's too late to do me any good, I will get lost, forget the name of my hotel, and almost come to tears of panic. When I see the sign in the distance, I realize I have been walking all around it for hours.

I'm a little early for the reading and Uke is nowhere to be found. I have been counting on his presence to keep me safe from...I'm not sure what. I ask his cousin who assures me Uke will be around soon. And, by the way, the reading will be at least half an hour later than scheduled. Something about the actors.

I have time to go to the bathroom, and I need to go to the bathroom. My stomach has been rumbling all day—maybe it was the tongue. Maybe the coffee. It hits me that I must be very careful in the bathroom. I've chosen what I hope is the universal academic uniform: khakis, a Harris tweed jacket, and a madras tie. I remember when I

was a teenager, a girl described the music that would be played at a dance her school was putting on as "semi-classical danceable." That's pretty much what I'm going for in my wardrobe. The one problem is the khakis. They show dribbles or splashes which present as dribbles. I will walk into an arena of eager, sophisticated, literary Albanians, representing all Americans, all Mexican-Americans, all poets, and they will all look down and conclude that I am a dribbler. Will there be cameras? Will my humiliation be broadcast coast to coast? Will I even be able to go home?

I leave the bathroom safe and dry, after standing two feet away from the sink and bending at the waist and stretching out my arms to wash my hands. I'm glad I was alone in there. I find Uke smoking, sipping coffee and reading the newspapers. He holds the cigarette between the little finger and ring finger of his right hand. Very film noir. He also holds the coffee cup in that hand. I'm about to ask him if we can go take a look at the room where I will read when he utters a curse in Albanian, drops the cup of coffee, and flicks away the cigarette which apparently burned down to his fingers. I look down. The front of my pants is sprayed with suspicious drops of coffee. He examines his hand and looks at my pants. "Don't worry. It'll dry and no one will notice. Or they'll just think you're not very careful in the bathroom." He laughs as he returns to his

Best In Show Comic



by Phil Juliano

newspapers.

The room would hold maybe 75 people, but there can't be more than 25 in attendance. I wish none of them was there, and I'm disappointed at the size of the crowd. There is a tv camera set up at the back. Above the desk where I will sit is the huge poster of Rouberto Alvarez. His head is ten times larger than mine. Uke sits on one side of me and a different pretty blonde translator is on the other. "So, where did you learn English?" I ask. Her face registers no sign that she has understood me. I look at Uke. He shrugs. Now the actors come in. They are dressed casually—jeans and heels and tight tops for the women. Jeans and sweaters for the men. I realize I could have come in poet garb and avoided the dribble question.

Now I'm being introduced. I glance back at the poster of Rouberto. It's enormous. I've never seen anything so large. The introducer is the cousin and he does a fair job of translating for me as he speaks to the crowd in Albanian. I am a Fulbright Scholar (barely), a major poet (never), a college teacher of literature (at least that). He must also be talking about the next speaker, later that night, but he doesn't translate that part. I sense my audience wishes they had come to the later program.

I find I want the audience to like my poetry very much. I've read before and people come up to you and say nice things, but not nice enough. They enjoyed it, but no one says he or she was touched to the core. I didn't kill them softly with my words. And that's when all of us speak the same language. The actors are all very dramatic. I try to figure out which of my poems they are reading. My poems are quiet and personal, but they sound like epics in Albanian. I recognize the poem about a wren from some Albanian version of my wren song, "tea-kettle, tea-kettle, tea-kettle tea." I scan the faces of the audience. They seem to be enjoying the performance, but does it have anything

to do with my poems? I have no idea.

When it is my turn to read, I try for something a little more Dylan Thomas than I usually do, trying to compete with the actors, but it sounds hollow and false to me and almost certainly incomprehensible to the audience. I finish with no sense at all whether anyone liked anything. The questions are mostly about my impressions of Albania. I tell them I have been in the country for 48 hours and that I am severely jet-lagged, but I'm impressed with their apparent devotion to the written world—twenty daily newspapers and an impressive festival like this one. Then a young man raises his hand at the back of the room and asks, in English, whether I think of myself as an American poet or a Mexican-American poet. I am absurdly grateful for the question. I tell him, speaking in English to someone who understands English, that I am both, but that he has made an astute observation. There is something Latino about the poetry, something unabashedly emotional. I tell him that my brother once told me that my poems were better translated into Spanish and they were in English. I tell him that my brother hadn't meant that as a compliment, but that perhaps I should have taken it as one. "Maybe my poems are better in Albanian than in English, but I can't tell. Maybe you could ask Uke." This is the first authentic interaction I've had all evening, and it cheers me up. Nobody asks about my favorite Albanian author, but I am ready with Uke's joke.

After the reading there is a general milling around but I'm left alone. Uke brings a man in his fifties to meet me and introduces him as the head of their national public radio and television—and a poet. He reaches into a coat pocket and pulls out a slender volume of his poems which he has autographed: "Mr. Rouberto Alvarez, with love" and his signature. It will not be the last time someone introduces himself by his day job and adds, "And a

poet."

The course Uke and I taught turned out fine. The students learned something about Mexican-American literature and so did I as I stayed one or two classes ahead of them. I worked hard, overspent my per diem, travelled to Macedonia one weekend, got flirted at by a couple of the older women in the class and flirted innocently back. I saw a couple of soccer games and cheered like a maniac for the home team when they were briefly in the lead. My ear never got attuned to Albanian — too old I guess, but I brushed up on my Spanish watching television. They were sorry to see me go, and I was sorry to go.

At the airport Uke said again that I should send him more of my poems and that he would translate them and his cousin would publish them. By then I had realized that it is Albanian hospitality to offer to publish someone's poetry, like the way they say in East Texas, "Y'all come see us." I am moved by the sincere generosity of the impulse, whether anything comes of it.

I have been practicing saying, "Une jam shqiptar"—I am an Albanian—in case I ever get to witness a reading of my poems again. I haven't yet figured out how I am going to work it in, but I'm tinkering with several possibilities. Sometimes late at night when I'm having trouble falling to sleep, I work on my speech. I don't have much more Albanian than those three words and "po," but something about the scene is comforting and I'm soon asleep. I've become a big fan of Albanian soccer. We haven't had much success in the European Cup, but I keep hoping. I find myself wanting to protest Albanian stereotypes in the media, indignant about all the loose talk about the Albanian Mafia. They think no one is going to notice when the villains are Albanian, not like the uproar if they make them Arabs or Latinos. I've been thinking about writing Jim Belushi and asking him if he's indignant, too. I bet he is. ♦

“Manna Manifested”

by Pastor Rhonda Royal Hatton

Manna - from heaven falling like rain - feeding his children - a wilderness thing
On the way to the promise His children won't sing -
in a strange land He's calling - a wilderness thing
Missing the meat from Egypt's red seas - praising the captor - a slavery disease
Manna - from heaven falling like rain - feeding his children - a wilderness thing

A 40 year trek - with shoes never failing - a 40 year trek with those not travelling
Those of the mind set “freedom” despise -
those who would rather experienced demise
In the chains of tradition - in the fetters of the past -
in the manacles of religion - in the shackles of last
Manna - from heaven falling like rain - feeding his children - a wilderness thing

Complainers and Drainers - Proud and Ungrateful -
Stunters and Fronters - to God they are hateful
Miracles seen and miraculous wrought - straying from the truth of the sacred once taught -
thus sacrifice and atonement was brought
The High Holy Priest - whose job was creating -
an archetype of the Messiah - no longer debating -

Moses
Was the stander in the gap frustrated -
for the sin that entered the camp created -
children of disobedience and those who doubted -
the love of the Father -
so the path to the promise was rerouted
Manna - from heaven falling like rain - freeing his children - no more a wilderness thing

For they cried for meat and Heaven did just that -
for those who would enter a land that was fat - flowing with milk and streaming with honey -
they would know not the bondages of Egypt or its money
For this generation would not be deterred by the giants they see -
for they are more motivated and freedom thirsty
They understood inheritance and - it - they are claiming - give me my mountain - don't have time for complaining
Their Fathers did die 21 miles from the promised land -
it is our birthright and we will *not* - not go in
Manna - from heaven falling like rain - freeing his children - no more a wilderness thing

We are the children who the Father bequested - we are the heritage of the legacy vested
To usward the Bread of Heaven did fall that the promise would be available to all
Those who fall in the line of Judeah and those who've been adopted by the Lion of Judah
Those who crave and thirst for the Truth -
and those children who descend from Boaz and Ruth
Those from the geneology of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob -
and those who like Rahab - desired of the flesh - did make up -

And those who like - some don't like - did shake up -
And those who like David with foreigners did take up -
And those who like Paul did fake up and trick up and flip up and set up the saints for the slaughter
and those who like Jarius did just want his daughter - to live!
And those who were blind called out to Rabbonai -
recognizing the Meat from Heaven from no natural eye
And those like the woman - who met Heaven at the well -
who experienced a rainstorm - but in her soul it fell -
She experienced a transforming internal feast -
for she encountered the One and only - soul quenching Priest
Manifested Manna from the throne room on High - did bequeath -
For it was in the Holy of Holies it happened -
atonement -
but the tabernacle was a flesh sacrificed -
and the results -
a people of undeserving plight -
did receive Grace -
and opportunity to take their rightful place
In the land of the promise - unmerited seating in heavenly spaces -
unearned privileges because of the faces - that the High Priest saw -
generations of people who God has called
To eat from the table where He is the Meat - the Bread and the wine -
to sit in a place where He is the seat - of mercy

Manna - from heaven -
He fell like rain -
quenching the thirst of his children -
again and again -
freedom is ours -
this is a Redemptive thing!

- September 2015 Celebration Ministries, Durham, North Carolina

"Jack Daniel"

by John Brantingham

In the morning, Jason walks out on his street to find that everyone has evacuated except for Susan and him. For now, the wind has shifted, so no smoke blows through the pine trees or their street. It's a clear day, and the forest seems as it always does except that when Jason walks down to the neighbors, their cars are gone and their houses feel empty. The next door neighbor left all his windows open and the radio blaring the Beatles, probably an attempt to trick looters into thinking someone's home. Only, it doesn't feel as if anyone is there. It feels like the end of the world, as if humanity has left Jason and Susan behind to sort out the earth.

When Susan comes outside to look at the world with him, he smiles at her and says, "I'm sorry about last night. You were right. You should take the dog." He feels big saying it. Anyway, she loves Bo in a way he never did.

This is the point when she could say that she told him so. Instead she says, "I don't want you to be lonely." She tilts her head at him the way she used to back when they first bought this house. "I want you to come with me, at least for this week. You and I and Bo could get a room."

Jason laughs quietly. "No."

"You're not going to sit alone in some motel room brooding, drinking, and watching the fire burn down the forest on the news."

"I'll be all right. Artie's waiting for you. It's time you went to him." It's good, this feeling of beneficence.

"I'm not going to let you start drinking again."

Sitting there in a motel room chair, his feet propped up, the televi-

sion on, taking that first sip of bourbon, it's been all that he's thought about. Maybe he'll watch aerial shots of his house being swallowed by flames. What does it matter any more? Only the sip that matters now.

At a crashing sound, Susan's head snaps up. "Did you hear that?" she asks.

They come around the corner of the house to see the bear they named Jack Daniel when he wandered through during their first dinner party. They and all their friends toasted his health, laughing and cheering him on. He passes by every once in a while, and now, he stands on his hind legs at the apple tree and reaches for that first piece of fruit.

"Hey," Jason yells.

The bear turns to him, and Jason's about to chase him off, but Susan places a hand on his shoulder. "Come on," she says. "What does it matter?"

So Jason doesn't yell again. He watches as the bear turns and starts to swat at the fruit. The tree, which is six years old now, which is ten feet tall now, which is heavy with fruit now, becomes the bear's chew toy over the next twelve minutes. Jack, who they have chased off these last six years, lives out his fantasy of sweetness. He gorges himself on the tree, eating the bottom fruit first, and when he cannot stretch long enough to reach the top, he places a palm on the trunk and snaps it in half.

In two days, Jason thinks, this will all be gone. The tree, the house, the forest, even Jack Daniel. All dead, all burned, so he pops into the house, goes into the freezer and pulls out salmon, tilapia, and shrimp. Susan's weeping when he gets back with her, weeping uncontrollably and not both-

ering to cover her face as she watches the bear, so he hands her some of the packages and takes out a salmon filet himself. He tosses it to the bear, and it lands at Jack's feet, and Susan tosses hers, too.

Jack Daniel watches them a moment and then seems to bow to them and all they have been here as he bends down to accept the final gifts they have to offer. ❖

The Dream Journal

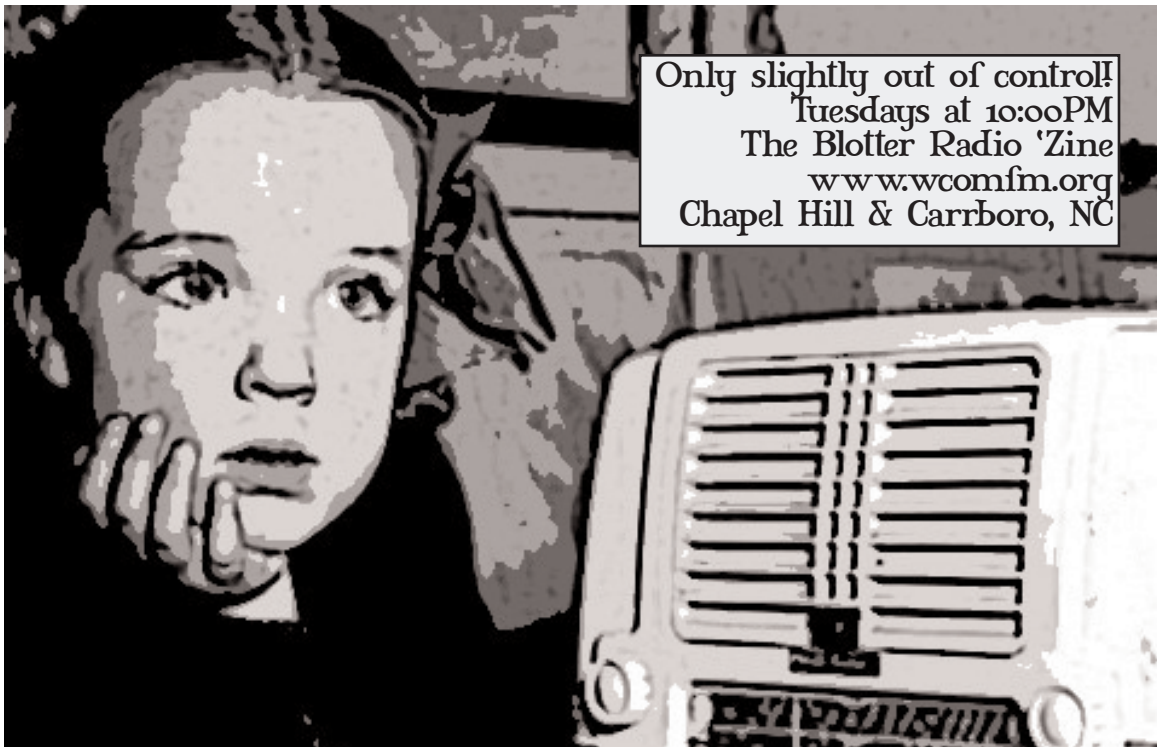
real dreams, real weird

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

She lets me hold her face, like someone might before kissing, but we have not seen each other in twenty five years and kissing is a familiar thing, too familiar for us. Still, my hands cup her face in a way that shows that muscle memory is long, can overcome much. It does not matter that she has changed, that I have changed. My hands hold her face, then move to pull her closer. It is something that can only happen in a dream. If this were real-life, she would be tense, uncomfortable with my unrequested attention. We will never be together again, not as a couple - that strange word that has so much meaning when you are young but seems silly now - a couple of what? Two cups on a shelf? What? I think that when you get older you are one, not a pair of anything. That's how it works well, if it works at all.

The man - cyberspace



CONTRIBUTORS:

Edward H. Garcia of Murchison, TX writes, "I am retired from teaching composition, literature, and creative writing in the Dallas County Community College District. I have an undergraduate degree and a doctorate from the University of Texas at Austin and a Master's from the Ohio State University. I have published reviews, articles, stories and poems in *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Texas Observer*, *The Texas Humanist*, *Pawn Review*, *Texas Books in Review*, *Tex!*, *County Line Magazine*, *Bewildering Stories*, *The Innisfree Poetry Journal*, *Rio Grande Review*, *Amarillo Bay Literary Magazine*, *The Avalon Literary Review*, and *Southwest Historical Quarterly*. I am represented in *Texas in Poetry 2*, *Texas Short Stories 2*, *Literary Dallas*, and in two anthologies of writing by DCCCD faculty and staff, *Out of Dallas* and *Voices from Within*. Some of my poems have been translated into Albanian and published in an anthology of American poetry: *Poezia: bashkekohore amerikane*. I live on the upper east side of Texas with my wife Rica.

Ed. Note: I met **Pastor Rhonda Royal Hatton** at a church service in Chapel Hill, NC, last summer. She read this spoken-word piece to our congregation and it shook me to the core. I am usually nervous placing "spiritual" writing on our pages, but recently it occurs to me that all writers find their work spiritual, if to nobody else than themselves. When I was introduced to her, she immediately gave me a hug. Anyone that open with their love and affection for strangers deserves to be heard, and is teaching the rest of us something rather important.

John Brantingham of Upland, CA has graced The Blotter Magazine before, with his story "Fish Drop." His work has also been featured on Garrison Keillor's *Writer's Almanac*, and he has had hundreds of poems and stories published in magazines in the United States and the United Kingdom. His newest poetry collection, *The Green of Sunset*, is from Moon Tide Press. I am the writer-in-residence at the dA Center for the Arts

Phil Juliano of Minneapolis, MN is a good Blotterfriend. Follow his adventures on

THE WORLDS OF M. C. ESCHER

NATURE, SCIENCE, AND IMAGINATION

East Building, Meymandi Exhibition Gallery

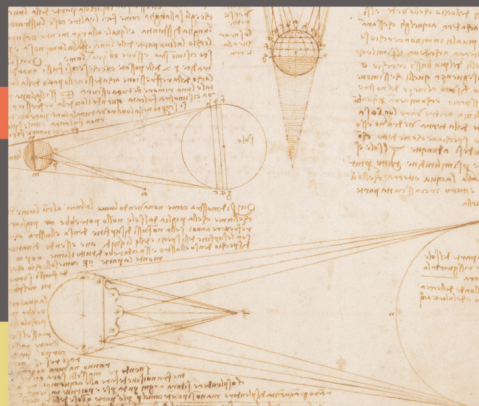
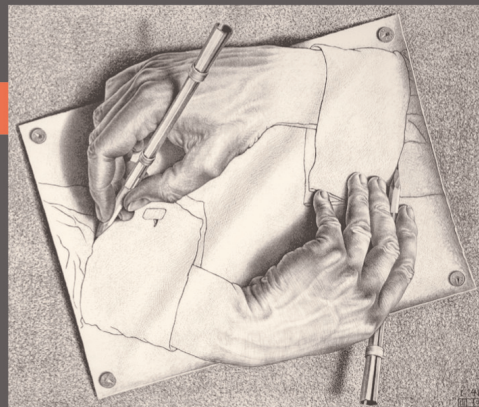
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