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Matt Athanasiou, Dragin, Best in Show and The Dream Journal

The Blotter

MAGAZINE

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Front cover, "Ahem, well I, uh."

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"An interactive editorial on procrastination"

On the phone with a friend the other day talking about the stuff that makes us crazed individuals. And, as such things go, we were both supposed to be doing something else, (not the same thing, of course, but different something-elses for each of us. You know, just putting off the inevitable and the not-so.) Occasionally the click-hum of call waiting (rude) attempted to crash the house of cards of our conversation flow, as it has wont to do, but we didn't let it complete its assigned task. All in all, a terribly productive phone call, using the unit of measure that we do. But somehow, in the vast and confusing cosmos, a complete and mighty waste of time according to our spouses. How can that be? You're a procrastinator, mine told me, many years ago. I was and am, but how did she find out so quickly? In the intervening (interrupting, interrogating,) years, she has been a poster child for accomplishment, and I, once again, not-so. Why is that? I think a lot, it feels like work, when I reach a conclusion I believe that I have achieved something, but it reads as *whatevs*. I actually go to the gym so that weight loss (improved muscle mass, elimination of chicken-legs) counts as something. In a deep and mysterious way, I delude myself. (true, false – select only one). The only thing that counts is getting it done. We demand it of ourselves (sometimes, when we feel self-aware, after watching Oprah) and we demand (look longingly for, can't believe we'll find) it in our elected officials. I do get things done, on my own here in Stay At Home Dadland. Not as quickly as anyone (she, the boss, the Queen) would like. Not as well (within an error factor plus-minus of X) as some would prefer. Hence, this explanation of the concept. In a perfect world, no explanation is necessary.

And now, a personal anecdote to illustrate my point.

When I was younger, we learned what I call the "Bell Labs Lesson." Pop used to take his middle-schoolers on field trips to Bell Laboratories, just up the road from our house. Nice to have so many smart people around, and just imagine the tax dollars, eh? They gave tours of the facility – *look, here's a conference room. This is a coffee-pot. My, my – someone ought to give it a wash! And here's the very first solid-state transistor. Someone ought to give it a wash!* The long and short of it was that Pop saw Shockley napping at his desk and commented on it to the tour-guide who explained that the father of the transistor had his moment of inspiration during a conference room Z-fest, awoke and galloped off to his chalk board to scribble down important stuff, and therefore no one ever woke him up anymore for fear that they might interrupt another such lucid and potentially lucrative dream. True story (maybe, Hmm, I don't know, Garry, I'm calling bulls**t – select your top three.)

I hear that Sarah Palin made some dictionary with a word she said by accident (Oh, there you go again, Mr. Gorbachev!!!) Give me a break, will ya? Here at The Blotter, we think up new words every day.

Here's this week's laundry list:

Decrastination – the act of stopping putting off doing something because it has ceased needing being done altogether. Also what we call "a success

story.”

Concrastination – when you put off one thing and it causes the delay in other things that you don't want to do, either. A slippery slope of delay, if you will.

Recrastination – putting something off for so long that no one knows that you were ever going to do it, so you must re-engage the task so that you can once again put it off.

Discrastination – having problems delaying doing something. Obviously there are too many things not on your plate. Not to be confused with *Dyscrastination* – failing to not accomplish something, or actually doing things by accident. A serious disorder.

Eucrastination – successfully putting something off. Also, what they call hard work in in France.

Precrastination – the act of planning not to do something.

Proprecrastination – you can figure this one out for yourself, I'll bet. Aw, hell, I'll tell ya anyway. Putting off planning not to do something. This is an American art form as valid as Jazz or Abstract Expressionism.

Miscrastination – inadvertently not doing the wrong thing. A damned shame if there ever was one.

Anticrastination – rejecting out of hand the promise to do anything that cannot be put off. Again, not to be confused with *antecrastination*, which is the first seemingly unrelated part of a task that must be delayed before the entire project creeps to a halt. For example, not going to the cash machine, so that you can't buy bulbs from the hardware store to plant before the first hard freeze of winter. Any reason you can't buy bulbs with credit? Leave me alone, I'm thinking.

Accrastination – A meeting in which putting off work is discussed. Trust me, happens every day.

Excrastination – the appearance of doing hard work by making serious faces, once peculiar to holding a pencil and pad of paper and frowning mightily, now accomplished by rubbing one's eyes while staring at a blank computer or i-phone screen.

Cumulocrastination – the tone in your voice when you complain because someone has interrupted you while you are doing nothing. That slow-grinding up through the vocal gears to whining.

Post-crastination – that self-satisfied feeling you have for a job not well done.

That's all I got, use them wisely. And if you can think of any of your own, feel free to put them here: _____

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CAUTION

Poor February, always uncool, the short kid in school, playing the fool, the month that doesn't rhyme with remember or dismember.

“Children of Ash”

by Matt Athanasiou

The children always appeared the last week of June, the week they had died twenty years ago. Even Jane, seven during the horrific burning, had been frightened at their initial arrival, strange ashen beings romping around, but the fear faded with their continued appearance. There had been a time when the town welcomed their presence, but as years passed, Jane watched as fewer board games and books and paper and pencils were bought in preparation. And this year, against Jane’s and a few other’s wishes, the town decided that no arrangements would be made. She held her tongue and obeyed the order, only picking up a catalogue, so she could at least show pictures of impressive new toys and clothes.

Curiously, people had deserted the gravel road running through Maddox Place. The entire town, with Gacy’s Goods, the schoolhouse and church on one side and the nine homes on the other, seemed vacant. Jane looked at the Sears, Roebuck and Co. catalogue leaning against the bottom stair. Wind flipped pages back in crackles and snaps. She had fallen backwards onto the store steps, when the children had stormed into town on their black cloud.

Their arrival was always a sight. The horizon would darken and swell, gradually growing into a monstrous barrier that rippled the wheat fields like golden lakes, and then strike Maddox Place and disappear, leaving the ash children but no residue as dust storms did. Chances were slim, but people might have confused the cloud today for a dust storm and sought shelter—unlikely, but not unimaginable.

Jane worked her heel into the shoe that had slipped down, looking beyond the schoolhouse at the church facing her. She needed to get up and greet the children. Each year the black cloud set them inside the church, the site of their deaths, and they waited for the doors to be opened instead of running out like unwelcome hoodlums. They really were such good children, who only asked to be played with one week a year. Maybe they scuffled with a child of flesh or two, and they could be tiresome, always ready for fun and games, but it was a mere week.

The door of Gacy’s Goods banged against the wall. “Miss Kelly,” William said. His footsteps clomped on the porch floorboards. “Hurt yourself? Here.” He hopped to the ground and grabbed her hands to pull her up.

She shook her head. “I’m alright.” His grip loosened, and she slid her fingers from his. Their fingertips skimmed and she almost paused. Then she sat straight and leaned forward, resting her forearms on her knees. “Settle,” she instructed herself. Dust floated by her legs from William’s shuffling. “See the black cloud?”

“Black cloud? Dirt?”

She tilted her head, watched him survey the land. Hair loosened from his ear and poked at his thick chin. A handsome man who ate well, he needed a shave; stubble spread from one ear to the next, underlining his nose.

He said, “I was buried beneath the counter reaching for a cola bottle. It rolled away faster than you running from my kisses.”

“I don’t need your rousing. Not the time for flirting.”

“Honest. Didn’t see a thing.”

She pointed at the church, mentally repeating, *Blind?* until she finally said it, albeit harsher than intended; she blamed it on sleep deprivation and repeated, *Settle*. Her hand gesture was aimed at the illusion of the smoking church windows. The ash children created this magic during their stay. A mild reminder of their muted screams bawling from the blazing building, how the church had flamed like a box of fire with them inside ages ago.

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"They're back," William said, nodding. "Always." He turned his attention to her and kneeled.

In his moon-gray eyes, she still saw the broomstick boy she had carried for nearly two miles from a rock pile in a distant field. She had been twelve, he ten, and he had wedged his toe among the stones while running. Stripes of blood across his forehead, his unconscious and sweaty body had glistened beautifully in her arms. It was a fairy tale flipped on its head, the maiden rescuing the prince. Every urge to kiss him was suppressed with the belief that people would catch her, even tucked away in the dense weeds. Mother had warned her and Catherine with stiff backhands about kissing boys.

"Think of proposing to me and I'll rap you." She stood. Her rudeness toward him had to persist. He was the one man who showed an interest in her. Mother's lessons were crude, but Jane understood the one about willful boys and their wants, the wants that would ruin her.

He picked up the catalogue and leafed through some of the pages. "Don't have to worry yourself." He tipped the corner of a page at his cheek. "Have the ache from when I last tried. Don't mean I ain't thinking of you when I'm alone."

Rosy cheeked, she snatched the catalogue from him.

His left brow arched. "My birthday's coming up. Couple pocket watches in there'd fit well in my trousers." He winked; she exhaled. Then, in a tone and face as flat as their town: "Catherine."

When he said nothing

more, Jane silently rehearsed the words before saying, "Want me to propose to her for you?"

"I should see Catherine."

Her shoulders slumped, but she caught herself and pressed the catalogue tight against her chest. Her eyes sidled to his left. She thought of Catherine crying last night, of William alone in his room. The first two syllables of Catherine escaped her lips, but the third was lost when she saw Reverend Lee running from the church. His tan fedora flipped off. She squinted and said, "The church burning?"

William turned. "Children always make it look so."

Flames clawed out of the open doorway; the children feared flames.

Jane took a step but he gingerly grabbed her arm. "Did Reverend Lee set a fire?" Her question tapered to avoid making accusations.

"They ain't running out." William's voice was distant, in wonder.

She started for the church.

"Jane."

She jogged up the road, loose shoes clapping her feet, and William's heavy footsteps trailing her. She shoved the waist-high gate open. It swung back unhurriedly and stuck. She moved along the elongated palisade shadow and onto the grass. By then, Reverend Lee and William were both calling her.

The catalogue spun toward

the bench, bounced off the seat, landed on the ground. "Get some water," she yelled at anyone listening. Flames reached around the lower left of the doorframe, easily avoidable. When no one responded to her command, she retold herself that the fire was tame, focusing on the children, and entered.

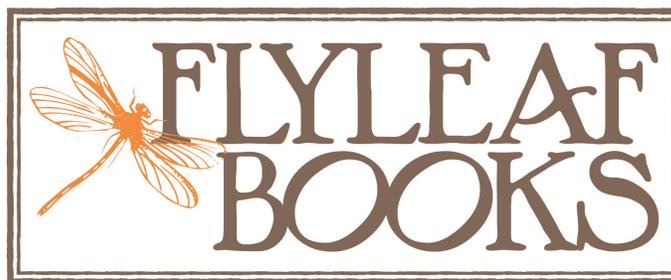
Some standing and some sitting on the stair separating the nave from the chancel, the children of ash waited. Other than shallow pits for eyes and mouths, their facial features were obscure but Jane felt their watch.

"Get out." She pointed towards the fire. The children were unmoved.

They were rarely this still, almost seemed unemotional toward their situation.

A quarter of the wall was flaming, wallpaper peeling, unwrapping like a gift. Jane grabbed a boy's arm. She had never heard them utter a breath, but this one sucked in air, making an inhuman guttural cry. Jane hunched forward, shoulders drew back, fingers stiffened and nearly disjointed. The child hid behind the pulpit.

Jane staggered outside. Most of Maddox Place had crowded near the metal palisade. *They're scared*, she thought, looking from face to face. "They're scared." She pointed into the church. "Water. Burning." She rushed past them and around the last house on that end of the road. She could have ran into the



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depths of the stirring wheat field and had to tell herself not to.

Catherine was in the back beneath the gnarled oak with Mrs. Lee. Sunlight speckled them between the leaves. Sheaves of wheat with sacks fastened over them were scattered around a threshing rock.

“Church’s burning,” Jane said, wrapping towels on her arms. “Help carry the tub over.” The bathwater was dirty. Soap spots floated from use that morning.

“Whole place flaming yet?” Catherine asked; Mrs. Lee looked at Jane questioningly too.

“Yet?” A towel slipped from Jane’s wrist. She wanted to say, “You want murder on you?” Instead she said, “Whole place? Didn’t you see the cloud? They won’t come out.”

“Saw the cloud,” Catherine said. “Have bad dreams about it.”

Jane wondered if Catherine was referring to her nightly groans and constant outhouse visits. Jane feared falling asleep in case her sister needed assistance. Summer flu, Catherine had said, a two weeklong summer flu. But if it was only nightmares, why lie about it?

William stomped around the corner. He stopped at the tub, face like a perspiring beet. He hunched over, hands on his knees. Between deep breaths he said, “Leave them.”

She focused on not raising her voice. Very young and witnessing crow’s-feet claw at Mother’s

temples while she yelled, Jane had resolved that it was unseemly. “William Gacy. You grab some towels and lift this tub if you ever want me speaking to you again.”

Catherine said. “You won’t. We talked about this. They’re destroying our town.”

William straightened his back. His eyes were either watery from sweating or verging on tears.

Jane refrained from saying, “Have your hair pulled back too tight, sister? Suffocating your brain?” She pinched her sides and said, “I will never look at you, William Gacy.”

Catherine kicked a sack of wheat at him as he gathered towels.

“Sorry.” He clenched one handle of the tub, Jane the other, and they lifted with their knees. Jane’s side angled down and spilled water on her navy dress, drenching her leg. “Sorry.”

They waddled the water through the line of people and the gate, receiving scowls but nothing more. Jane glanced at her porch where Father had smoked each evening. If he had been there, would he have frowned at her? No. He would have waved at his princess.

They set the tub on the doorstep; it was lighter by then, having spilled a spotty path behind them. Flames had overtaken an entire side of the doorframe. Jane wet her towel, went directly to the fiery interior and slapped at it.

Another minute and the fire would be above their heads, out of reach and out of control.

She caught William at a standstill staring at the children. “Boots melted to the carpet? Please.”

The two worked until the fire was contained to the blackened bottom half of the wall. Then they each dampened another towel, set those aside and lifted the tub. They stood at an angle from the doorway, within view of the townspeople. As they doused the flames, Jane was certain she heard a moan.

* * *

The children of ash were still inside the church. Jane stepped outside, dropped the towel she had wiped down the scorched wall with, and patted the left side of her head. Her black and prematurely gray hair had been singed and faintly reeked of sulfur.

People dispersed from the gate. The ones remaining had puzzled faces. Jane returned their confused expressions.

The town was close-knit, so Jane was glad most of the residents had stayed after the children’s murder. Father and Mother died from the dust storm five summers back, but she remembered Father preaching to her and Catherine about good family staying together like rungs of a ladder: *A man should be able to count on each step being there.* Good family allowed for a relative, such as Mother, to strike a child in anger. Hope lingered that this relative would change, just as Jane hoped Maddox Place would—the town could love the children again.

Reverend Lee sat on his house steps, facing the goods store. Had he started the fire?

Jane blinked away the thought of like father like son. Reverend Lee didn’t have to tread his father’s path, the man who had kidnapped and burned the twelve children with himself inside the church. Although the children returned as ashen beings, Reverend



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Lee's father never did. Perhaps that had been his judgment for killing the innocent or, Jane humored the idea, he had sacrificed himself for the children's eternal existence.

The children wandered out, an odd sight as they usually charged from the doorway after it opened. The girl child, the one with long ashen hair and an ashen dress, paused beside Jane, one arm across her chest and holding the other arm against her side. Jane tugged her hand from her own burned hair and offered it. Telling the children apart was difficult—even for the adults who were the actual parents—but everyone knew this girl had been Reverend Lee's.

Over her shoulder, Jane saw William sitting on the overturned tub. His head rested on his palms, which smushed his cheeks under his eyes and tightened his lips into an unpleasant smile.

The girl yanked Jane from the church and then sprinted toward her friends amusing themselves in the road. Dust kicked up around their mock-suffling, ash footprints marking their steps. The girl zipped through a boy of flesh, knocking him to his rump. This was typical. The ash children often playfully roughhoused or shadowed people during daily chores. Jane was never short with them but had seen people become snappy. She welcomed the company, the way they

seemed interested in sowing wheat or scrubbing floors—which could prick at her nerves as they left traces wherever they went. She usually swept up after the children each day—everyone else grumbled about having to do so—and reserved heavy cleaning for their departure.

She bunched the towels into a pile beside the bench. When William moved from the tub she would put them inside it and carry it back. Until then she would leave him to his thoughts.

William had said, again, that he thought about her while he was alone, and Jane's legs, again, warmed at that idea. Then she thought of Mother telling her that if she birthed children, she would become a mean hag: *See what children make you do?* Mother had said, strands of Jane's hair curled out of her fist. *Don't bed with a man. Don't marry. Children killed Reverend Lee's father.* Mother was saving her from turning into Mother. So, Jane had to neglect some of her courtesies around William.

As teenagers, when Jane had submitted her hand to his as they walked, her insides constricted, fingers burned, and she wanted to strike him, tell him that his thoughts were on impure manners, that he would take any girl. She had to fend off his advances with curt remarks—far better than vulgar and abusive words. She didn't need her

own children; she and the town shared the ash children, were parents without the traumatic birthing experience.

She rolled up the catalogue. Her heart skipped when she noticed the windows of the church, before remembering the smoke was deceptive. Then she walked behind the houses. At the edge of the field, the windmill cranked a few turns, offering a dull whine.

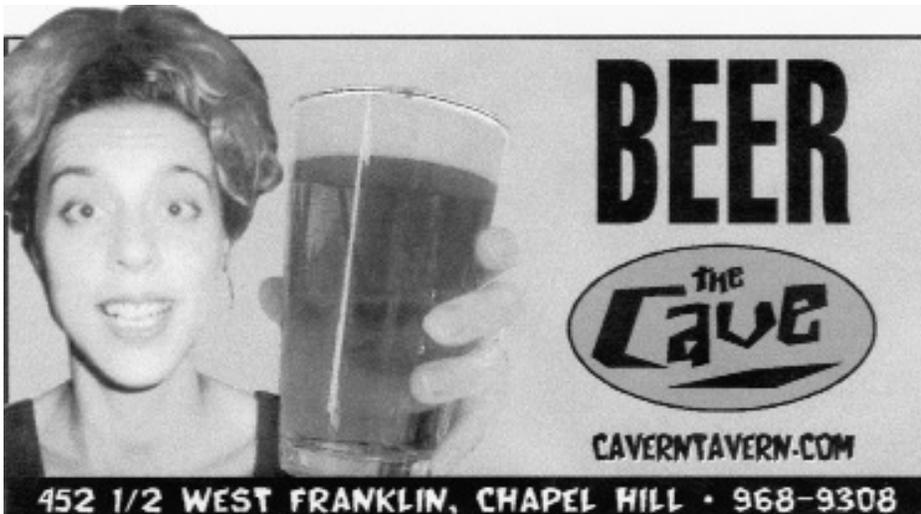
"Where's she?" Jane asked.

Leaning her bottom against the rock, Mrs. Lee was alone, her head tipped back beneath the tree. "My Billy and his Mary Ann were gonna try. If those demons burned." Her chin rolled.

Mrs. Lee's son was three years older than Jane. He and Mary Ann had been married five years. Streamer lined tables and chairs were pulled outside for the wedding. Catherine had been a beautiful bridesmaid. Jane had been gorgeous too, wearing one of her sister's better dresses. She had had to imagine her feet chained to the chair so she would not run through the fields in the dress. The whole endeavor lacked the enchantment that she would have planned—the ash children would have been invited, making the family whole, the events majestic—but it had been pretty.

"They're family," Jane said, reminding Mrs. Lee the ashen girl was her daughter, Billy's sister. She viewed the children as having adopted all of the townspeople as guardians, even though Mother had said their situation was more akin to being jailed—the residents' punishment was spending eternity with tragedy swaying over their heads like an axe. As time slipped by, it felt like many of the townspeople had embraced Mother's view.

Mrs. Lee pushed herself away from the rock. "No family of mine. This town's children died in a fire. Those are Satan's spawn. Mary Ann has lost every child she's conceived because the Lee's are cursed



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on account of Reverend's father. Reverend complains about the man haunting him every day."

Jane wiped her palm on her dress, tapped the catalogue against her hip. Knowing a hasty question would start an argument, she quietly recited statements and then asked, "Why did you want me to carry the tub myself?" Did she need to hear the answer aloud? Her shadow had a jagged line sticking from its head like a broken arrow. She pulled her hair over her shoulder.

The skeletal thorn bushes—which no one claimed to have planted—bordering each house, shivered from a tepid breeze.

Mrs. Lee looked directly at Jane and shook her head. "Your sister's home." She walked toward the other end of the town, leaving sacks of wheat and chaff on the grass.

Jane almost yelled, "Don't leave the grain. Birds'll pick into it." Mrs. Lee went around the corner. The bushes rattled again. Jane crouched over a bag, but considered Mrs. Lee's reaction to her cleaning up after them. She patted her knees and stood. Mrs. Lee would return soon enough.

Jane walked two houses down and pulled the back door ajar. Across the yard, an ash child tackled a boy and then looked toward Jane and waved. Jane hesitated, thought it too far to shout for them to play nice, and wagged the catalogue. The children were more aggressive than when she was little.

Their two-story house was relatively small. The main hall, extending from the sash windows of the front entryway to the back, was dull and empty, the long table darkened in the middle of the room. Jane regarded the staircase. Catherine probably wasn't in her room. If anything—Jane looked toward the den.

Ash seeped through the cracks of the front windows and door. Two children formed, pursuing each other around the table. They shoved chairs and capered, rushed past her and blew through the back door.

Again the room was silent. She straightened the chairs and wiped away residue. They were so dirty sometimes. These children. They only wanted to play, not miss out on their younger years. Although Jane aged while they didn't, she had no problem playing tag and reading children's stories into her twenties. The entire week they stayed was like an extended festival—as long as people weren't yelling about the mess they made, and the creepy way they floated through crevices into rooms. The way they wordlessly gawked, left fingerprints and footprints on everything, such as the hallway floor.

She slammed a chair against the table and jumped. Someone would walk in and tell her to settle. Someone had seen. Not mad at the children, she would have said.

Simply stressed about discovering why everyone else really was. She hurried toward her parents' room.

Through the front windows she watched people converse while the children amused themselves. A boy of flesh was leaning against the porch scowling, arms across his chest, a dark handprint dirtied his cheek, nose and lips. The ash girl stretched a finger toward him, while an ashen boy yanked on her arm and stomped a foot. A gust of wind swept by, scattering ashes from their bodies. Mary Ann pulled away from a child who had seized her waist. Black marks streaked her white top.

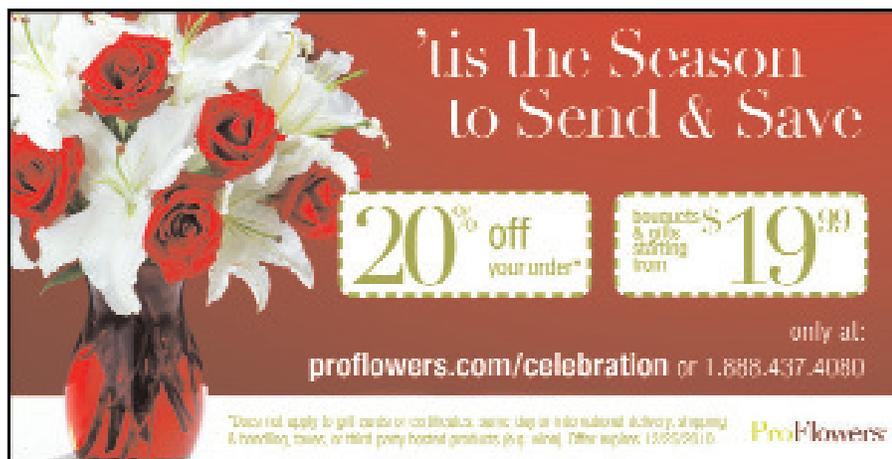
The residents had once held running games and planned classes for the children, hugged and walked with them, and the children had been fairly well behaved. But Jane had noticed the subtle differences over the years, how people gave the children less attention and how the children acted out against this. Didn't their arrival fill the void of their deaths?

Jane scrunched her face and thought, flesh or not, these children were Maddox Place's, and if no one else protected this family, Jane would. Twenty years the town had raised and taught them, whether people had enjoyed it or not. At least the children continued having fun and weren't causing serious trouble, especially after their earlier treatment today. Jane nodded at that.

Another chair scraped on the floor and she spun. Dust motes and ash floated in the vacant hall; the specs sparkled how fairies would, she imagined and turned back.

The card table was clean and the books were shelved, but cigarette odor lingered as if a game of rummy had been up and left in a hurry; Catherine had allowed William to eat supper with them last evening.

Her parents' door was closed but a drawer shut inside. She stood a moment, more weight on



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her back foot. The doorknob clicked. Barely lifting her feet, she scuttled back to the main hall. Her hip bashed against the corner of the table. Wincing, she sat and folded her hands, her entire thigh throbbing. The catalogue unrolled. Half of the pages curled upwards.

Catherine entered the room cupping her left shoulder with her right hand. Her orange woolen shawl draped over the shoulders of her gray dress.

Jane focused on the pulse in her hip and tried forcing herself to lock eyes with Catherine—Mother had always told her to stare at her feet when in trouble; Catherine said that was weak. Pangs numbed her leg, and she counted each beat, but Catherine's eyes were sharp as beaks and pecked as Mother's had. Jane looked away, and wished for a great mountain to appear that she could command to open and tuck herself away in. She glanced back at Catherine and her thoughts frayed like taut cords, and she forgot the name of the fairy tale mountain that robbers had stowed riches in.

Catherine asked, "Were you in the den?"

"Simeli," Jane practically said, thinking she had remembered the name. She regrouped and, afraid

the name would blurt out regardless, she shook her head.

Catherine seated herself at the edge of the table and began thumbing through the catalogue. She paused on a page and pursed her lips, then closed it and examined the white, suburban house on the cover. "This. Just knowing its there, possible, feels good. Almost makes Maddox Place bearable."

Jane imagined Catherine carrying her luggage to another town, another home, and slouched. An interruption, someone walking in, even the children terrorizing the room was welcome.

Catherine stroked a thumb over the cover.

Jane considered her words twice, and then said, "The children could've burned."

"The children are burned."

Jane noticed an ash trail on the table. "They would have died."

Catherine pounded the butt of her fist down. "You can't kill what's dead, Jane."

Jane looked into the kitchen, wondered whose turn it was to begin dinner, then at the dark trail. Dirty children. Trouble. There was ash under her fingernails.

"Listening to me?"

Catherine clenched Jane's chin with

two fingers. "They're already dead. You can only hope they'll go away."

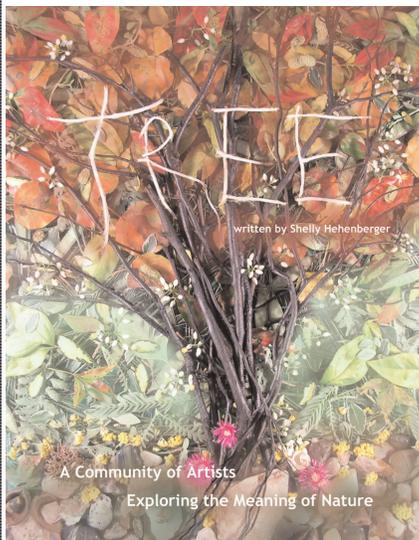
Jane glanced at the ceiling and bare walls and windows, blinking, holding her eyes shut longer than normal. Catherine had grabbed her like this before.

The morning had been drab, yet the sickle in Jane's grasp shimmered in the shadows. Days before, around Catherine's tenth birthday, her sister had said she wanted to marry a prince and build a castle in distant lands, miles and miles from any wheat field. Jane immediately recalled Sleeping Beauty and Snow White, women of comeliness like her sister, who fell in love with a handsome prince after a deep slumber. Without telling Catherine, fore the beauties had been caught off guard, Jane would put her sister to sleep for a long, long time.

Now Jane had never encountered an enchanted apple, nor a spindle for Catherine to prick her finger on, but she did have Father's reaping sickle, and if anyone was magical it was surely him. His large, stone-like hands had helped build the school and also rebuild the church after the fire.

So, the following morning, Jane crept to her sister's bed and lift-

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ed Catherine's pajama leg. She steadied the blade with both hands. A bead of red drew where the tip broke the skin. Catherine awakened. There was some hesitation, but it all must have pieced together real fast, because she had Jane by the chin within seconds. Clenching the sickle, Jane hoped eternal rest—only to be broken by a prince—would happen for her sister soon. Pallid, eyes wide as skipping-stones, Catherine demanded that Jane explain herself, demanded, as Mother had, that she look at her feet. Jane told her and received five fingers across the cheek. Tears were immediate. Then Jane accidentally called Catherine Mother and was slapped twice more. Catherine commanded Jane to look at her and struck her again.

Catherine's fingers had been less bony then, and now Jane had to clench her teeth as to not whine. Catherine gave Jane's chin another squeeze, but it wasn't until her following statement that Jane peered back into her eyes. "I'm carrying a child."

Jane bit the inside of her cheek, remembered Mother hitting her for walking shoulder to shoulder with William. She should hit Catherine's shoulder. Her sister had always been the willful child. She was worse than the girl from that story, the one who wouldn't stay buried, who didn't want to accept what was good for her. Mother could never get a lesson through to Catherine.

Catherine pushed Jane's

head back. "Hear me? I'm pregnant with William's child."

A copper taste filled Jane's mouth. Her eyes closed and reopened after seeing the red bead trickle down Catherine's calf. Catherine released her chin.

On the store porch, William was showing the children how to blow into an empty cola bottle. He had lied that morning about chasing a bottle. They both knew they had shared their first soda together. The parents had pitched in after church and bought some for the children. She and William sipped theirs at the cross of his father's grave. The man died of birth troubles in the home, suffered a heart attack hollering about his wife ruining the bed sheets. The epitaph William's mother had painted on the cross read, *Fair Trade*.

"Say something," Catherine said.

William handed the bottle to an ash child. He rolled up his shirtsleeves and crossed his arms. He had flirted with her today, knowing what he had done with Catherine. He was a willful boy, Catherine a willful girl.

"Strike me if you want," Catherine said. "Hit me hard. What are you thinking?"

Jane remembered her fingertips scraping William's. Of everything that crossed her mind, of every abusive action she considered and shunned, she said, "How did it feel?"

Catherine snaked her tongue between her lips as if wetting

them.

Jane contemplated apologizing, sickness wedged in her throat from her abruptness. Pictures of Catherine, William and her stilled in her mind as she searched for signs she may have missed between the two, but none of the images held. The strongest memory was a dimmed still of her, a teenager, reaching for an ash child while playing tag. Catherine and William were sitting on a threshing rock, and Jane was looking at them rather than the child.

Catherine said, "Feel?" She repeated the word and stepped around the corner of the table and hugged Jane's head to her stomach. Mother would have rammed Catherine's gut into the table. Or shoved her down as Mother had when Catherine emptied the tub before Mother's bath; Father and Jane watched from the field and proceeded reaping.

"Tell me if you're mad," Catherine said. "I want you to be. Yell at me."

Jane pictured William alone and thinking of her, then she pictured the sickle and the slap, then the children cowering near the pulpit. These people, this town, thought only of themselves.

"Do this." Catherine flattened her fingers on the floor. "Stomp it. You go ahead."

A specter of Mother stomped it for her, while she imagined waving the catalogue at Catherine and making some grand point. Then she realized that, had

Best In Show



by Phil Juliano

she let the church be today, she wouldn't have learned of her sister's pregnancy, of William's deception. The ash children were becoming somewhat frustrating. Like the time one of them peeked in on her using the privy. And there was always a lot of hollering when they tried pulling parents away from their flesh children. Billy had even punched one of them, his fist bursting ash. What if the ash children were preventing Mary Ann from conceiving a child? Would Catherine be able to keep hers? Babies had been born after the massacre, but maybe this was a recent restriction, the children angered at the town's treatment of them. If Catherine and William knew about Billy and Mary Ann's trouble, how could they risk another child's life?

Catherine took Jane in her arms again. "Reverend Lee's so sorry. Ready to make amends for his father. And we are willing. Everyone loved the children. We did. But we cannot care for them." She rocked back and forth, her fingers catching in strands of Jane's charred hair; Jane made a pucker-noise rather than saying quit it. "We can't live as prisoners another day. I'm sorry I kept it secret from you, but we all agreed it was best. No one is certain burning them in the church will work. Reverend believes the town needs a church, but he agreed to sacrifice it. We can rebuild when they are gone. Ash can burn. We figure the children can too then. Why should we be tormented for sins we never committed?"

"Wanted to tell you so bad. Told the others that you wouldn't fight. You don't. Not even when it's good for you. But they all see what the children mean to you. The year we thought they came a day late, you pretended to be sick, as I've been doing. But I could see past your lying. You've never been able to see past anyone else's, no matter how unbelievable."

The year the town had its days mixed up, Jane had vomited and was bedridden for a day, and she remembered being awful sick. She considered herself incapable of feigning a hoarse voice, the stomach pains and frequent outhouse trips.

Catherine sniffled. "Should have known not everyone would be devoted to the plan. I couldn't even stop you today. You were crying. Your cheeks were like apples. And remembering how those children died." She broke off; Catherine *had* buried her face in Father's lap that tragic night. Then she said, "But they must go. William shouldn't have helped you, but I should have known. Been prepared to know. He won't defy you."

"What?" Jane whispered, hardly audible.

"We will try again tomorrow. I know it upsets you, but I won't lose this baby like the Lee's. Can I rely on you?"

Jane wanted to ask how her sister knew the child would die, but that seemed a dumb question. She suspected she would know if something lived inside of her. She said, "Family is important."

Catherine leaned back. She looked from eye to eye, then pulled Jane close again. "You're too good. You are. But if you're upset, holler. I didn't plan this. If you had gotten with William this wouldn't be happening to me. You just needed to make the decision everyone knew you should. Needed to make a decision as you do now."

A sharp wind made the house moan. A man's voice outside shouted for something to stop that instant, and a metal bucket clattered in the road. Jane did not want the children to leave, but she did not want the town in distress, as they claimed they were.

She feared the answer but had to ask. Fair was fair. "If you were like them, would you say fire is an appropriate end?"

Catherine seemed to shiver. She cupped her hand around the back of Jane's head and sighed. "We all need to rest."

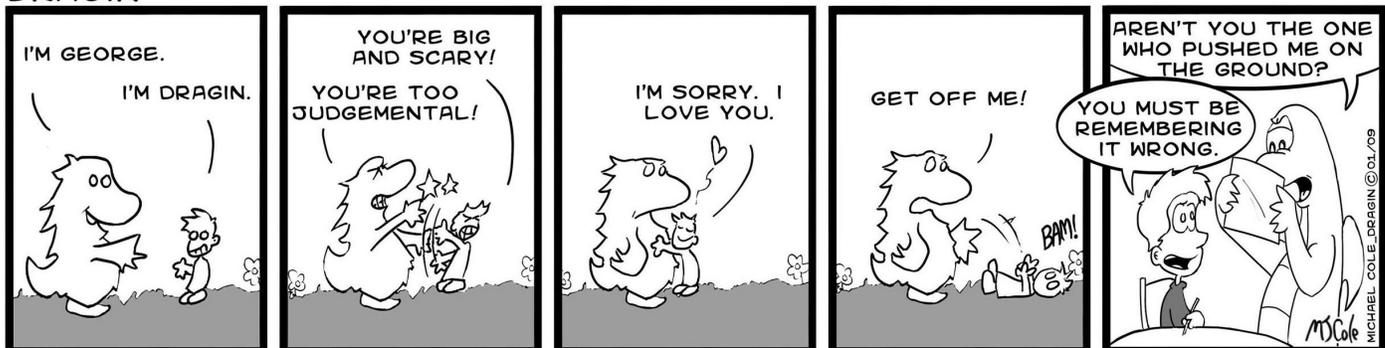
The words did not ease Jane.

* * *

Night was beginning as the morning had ended—with a fire. Maddox Place, at least the church, seemed cursed to smolder into nothingness. Smoke scaled the interior church walls and flames hung from the doorway. Curling silhouettes swayed outside the windows. For all the peril that surrounded them, people merely walked to the exit, spoke calmly about saving the flesh children. Jane and the children of ash stood by the pulpit. No one listened to her shouts. She was not

DRAGIN

by Michael Cole



The Blotter

leaving without the ash children. It was not suicide. She had not started this fire.

William continued shepherding people out, and Catherine came back for her, seized her elbow, told her to get moving. Jane freed her arm.

The smoke knocked on her lungs, but she managed to say, "We can get them out. They're family." Like earlier, they looked somewhat indifferent about their situation.

Catherine said, "You're my family. We're leaving."

"They're alive." She swiped her hand over a child's head and rubbed her sooty fingertips in Catherine's face. "It's real."

Catherine practically growled. "Quit your nonsense. You said I could count on you."

Jane left her conversation with Father in the schoolhouse that afternoon unmentioned. Catherine had not believed Father spoke to her before and would not now. Instead, she showed Catherine her fingertips again. "They leave marks."

"Ladies," William yelled. "I'm not one for being cooked."

Wood and fire crackled; the place was a stove—the three of them sweating and coughing.

Catherine mouthed Jane's words and squinted. "You need to straighten out. This isn't your storybook. I could lose my child."

Yours and William's, Jane nearly said. She looked at Catherine's stomach.

Catherine grabbed Jane's

hand and held it to her belly. "This is life. You and I, this town. Those things are not."

Jane's fingers tensed like a talon and Catherine winced. Black lines stained her sister's dress. She lifted her hand, fingers dangling, as if it were some foreign object.

"That hurt." Catherine held her stomach. "See what they're doing? You're hurting me."

But the children had adopted Jane. They adopted the town. She was not becoming Mother. She was protecting the children. That was all.

William hurried over and told them the doorway would give soon. "We're leaving." And, his voice sterner than he had ever used with Jane: "The children won't come through the fire. Accept that. None of us die tonight."

She glanced at the streaks on Catherine's stomach, thought about the life inside, thought but did not say, *You're killing me*. "Don't make me leave them."

She reached for a child but was yanked away. A sliver of pain shot through her arm. She held her shoulder as William hurried toward the door with her slung over his. She called the ash children, begged them to follow, said the fire was harmless, but there they stood, not indifferent as she had believed. They were alone, confused, scared. They were children.

The heat near the door smothered Jane's legs, arms and the nape of her neck, burning away her

perspiration. She tried pushing herself from William.

"I know a worm turns when trodden on, but lugging you through this is hard enough without your wiggling."

They passed through the doorway, flames raining on them. Catherine chased them and leaped out, smoke tailing her. William halted at the bench and set Jane on her feet, and Catherine patted down Jane's head. But Jane tore away and ran back. William caught her, wrapped his arms around her waist and hugged her against his chest. The entire face of the church glowed.

William repeated her name, again and again. "You're hurt. Ain't a fool." He wrapped a leg around hers and planted his foot. A bit softer but serious: "Wish it had been you. Even while I was with her. All you needed was to kiss me, let me know."

She threw her weight forward, but he caught his balance and squeezed her.

"Couldn't wait no longer. I need a family. Hear me?" His breath was hot in her ear.

"They're burning," she said, a heavy pause between the words.

William kept talking. "Wanted you. Want you—but we ain't keeping our youth. Those demons are going. For good. Won't be back to plague us more."

She writhed.

"I helped you carry the tub."

"You did," she said, crying. She wanted to hold back her thank you but said it. He was willful and should have been told.

Her stomach seared under

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his arms, and she yelled for him to let go. He was Catherine's, so he better start wishing he was with her. Without thinking, she dug her nails into his arms. She had been leaning forward, so when his grasp opened, she dove to her knees, one skidding on the grass, the other on the gravel walkway. A shoe slid off. Tiny rocks bit into her leg and palm. She was about to stand when Billy stepped in front of the doorway, a sheaf of wheat held across his waist. Darkness obscured his front, but firelight traced around him.

"Step on me," Jane said. "I won't give. But save the children."

Billy stood over her, his shivering shadow stretched over her knees. He pressed the sheaf against the fiery wall and then chucked it inside. Thick smoke swallowed it. Jane was sobbing and reaching at nothing. Something collapsed and sparks sprayed in the doorway. She wailed, screamed for her darlings, her sweeties, tears running into her mouth. She clutched gravel and grass. As she had thought in the schoolhouse that evening, she thought now: How could they hurt children who feared candlelight?

The children had been seated at their tables when she entered the school. At the head of the room, she lit the two candles on each side of the blackboard. She asked why they came back year after year, what they wanted from Maddox Place, and it took her moving the teacher's desk for a boy to approach the front

without nearing the candles. On the blackboard he wrote, "PLAY," in large, curvy letters with his finger. She read it aloud, and the child responded by patting the word until the "L" and part of the "A" were indistinguishable, and then went to his seat.

At a loss for words, she shook a match free from the box and struck it. Chairs overturned and tables shifted as the children huddled by the door. Afraid of a flickering flame—such children, just children.

"What should I do?" she had asked the room.

Mother would have killed them. She detested them, and Jane was positive Mother had garnered the worst of her cruelties after the church fire, as if angered that everyone had become mothers without suffering through labor as she had. Mother became more violent, and Jane tried leading by example, never refuted her, but Catherine had adopted the rancorous personality. Catherine had once spit in Mother's shoes, and Mother caught her, yanked her by the hair, threatened to bash her teeth on the windowsill. Father intervened but that enraged Mother. How could Father allow his daughters to be hooligans? He had to accept responsibility, so Mother said either he slapped his daughter a smart one, or she used the windowsill. That was the only day Jane had seen Father misty-eyed. The clap his palm made on Catherine's cheek echoed through the kitchen. Jane heard that slap at his funeral and bit her tongue until it bled for remembering a king that way. At Mother's funeral days later, she thought as little as possible.

Jane leaned her head on Father's hip as she sat on the teacher's desk. He stroked her cheek. The placidness of his voice was like a pillow.

"It's a tough one, princess," he said. "You pick one side and you'll do the other a disservice. People remember that type of

thing."

She clasped her fingertips over his pant pocket. "I can't choose."

"Suspect you talking your sister and the others out of harming the children will be a waste. They're fairly unshakeable. Suppose all I can offer is this: they say the ash children ain't real, but the way I learned was anything that's real leaves a trail, and anything that's not, don't.

"You remember that. And remember that both the children and the town have suffered. Town never chose to live in another's shadow, never chose to light up that church all those years ago, and the children never chose to die, princess."

Jane opened her mouth but Father said no. Her life was too precious, and that, if she reflected on it, Reverend Lee's father had perished afterwards. Could she ever make that choice anyway, he asked her. The flame nipped her finger and she dropped the match. Father vanished.

"Will you listen to me, one of your mothers?" she asked the room. "Will you stay buried? Isn't it time?"

The children were unresponsive, and Jane would not accept the first reason that occurred to her about why—the entire town, her included, was their parents. She furrowed a path through a patch of ash with her nail, then another. Father was a wise man.

She held out her palms now, still kneeled in front of the church, showing the ash on them in the firelight. "They're real. They leave trails."

No one responded.

How had Father explained it so clearly?

Billy walked beside her. The fire rolled on and on. The gabled roof was flaming and the front peak gave. Embers and heat waved outwards. Jane rocked back and forth, hands supine.

"This didn't happen soon

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enough,” Billy said. “I’d have told you about tonight, let you watch me do what was necessary. Teach you something. The others thought your knowing would cause trouble, devised this whole town meeting to get you to bring the demons into the church. Couldn’t have you suspecting nothing. Whole town came and knew.”

Jane pictured William and Catherine alone, the life they had concealed from her, the burning this morning, the burning tonight. She was buckling under the weight of this willful town.

“Never soon enough,” Billy said.

Smash his teeth against the windowsill. Knock him to the dirt. Shove him in the church. More of the roof groaned and gave, and Jane’s hands dropped to her lap.

The cry she had heard in the church that day, the inhuman guttural cry, erupted in a choir. Her shoulders twisted. People crouched and plugged their ears; the gravel wedged in Jane’s palm needled the side of her head as she covered her own. Billy stumbled over her knees, and landed on his side.

Thick black clouds, darker than the night, descended on Billy from the smoke, pushing back Jane and everyone near. The children formed around him in a semicircle. He sat up and kicked himself away from them.

“You died. Leave us.” He scooted back further, and the children stepped toward him.

Jane choked back a sob. The children were alive. They were alive and had gone around the fire. They had listened to her. They overcame their fear.

Billy got a knee under himself to stand, but an ash child latched onto his outstretched leg. Another child lunged for his arm, and the girl ran behind him and wrapped her arms around his neck, as if hugging him—but his sister wasn’t hugging him.

“I want my own family.” A

child locked his fingers around Billy’s open mouth.

Jane felt like she should say something, as though she had the power to stop them. But the rung that she was still felt bent. She thought about her words, thought about the children overcoming their fears, and then said exactly what she wanted. “Children.”

They dragged him back toward the church. He yelled and people moved for him, but a pall of ash blanketed the residents, caking their eyes. Jane wiped hers, and through a haze watched the children pull Billy over the shards of wood and embers and into the fire.

There were screams and Mary Ann and Mrs. Lee ran to where Billy had fallen. Reverend Lee stopped beside Jane, head hung. Smoke billowed from the doorway.

“Forgive me,” Reverend Lee whispered. “I wanted no part. I could not finish it this morning, could not choose to end my daughter no more than I could my son. Now they are both dead.”

Jane wanted to reach out and touch him. They were a good family who allowed for relatives to strike each other in anger, as long as they hoped the relatives would change and helped them. The children didn’t know better. They could have settled things more mannerly with Billy, but they had plenty of time to learn that, and Jane had the patience to teach them, because, as she had told Catherine, *Family is important.*

Reverend Lee wiped a hand down his face and sniffed.

Reassuring words seemed necessary—though she had buckled, she was not broken—and the best Jane could conjure up was: “We’re all parts of the ladder.” A corner of the church caved in, a crackling and snapping ruckus. She pressed on her seared hair, then laced her fingers together.

The children came out of the building, skipping and pushing past the flames. They were not fad-

ing. They were not going anywhere. The ash children were a gift, perhaps from Reverend Lee’s father, and rejecting them was like spitting in his father’s shoes. Maybe the town would begin appreciating them. William and Catherine, whether their child survived or not, might even recognize another life here was unneeded. The town had each other and the ash children, more than enough family to live happily.

The sails of the windmill groaned, and the wind thrust heat over the crowd. Rain was coming. Not soon enough to extinguish the fire, but soon enough to give crops new life. Thunder and lightning would follow the wind; Jane could feel that magic spark in the air. Maddox Place would be fine, she told herself, and wanted the residents to see this too. She had been wrong. Even if the entire place burned, the town and its history would not smolder into nothingness—that was impossible. Everything would merely turn to ash.



CONTRIBUTORS

After a yearlong stint of teaching in rural South Korea, **Matt Athanasiou** currently resides in Chicago. His stories and poetry have been accepted by *Danse Macabre*, *Frightening Fables* and *Freaky Fairy Tales*, *Menda City Review*, *MicroHorror*, *AlienSkin Magazine* and *StarShipSofa*.

Phil Juliano and **Michael Cole** are coming outside in the snow, getting fresh air, letting the sun reach down, providing them with good-old vitamin D, so important, we are told, for building strong bones.

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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

Braces work with subtle pressure, and little by little, teeth move. Time, as they say, takes time. Once we would sit and play all morning in the middle of the living room floor, as happy as clams, doing nothing more than dressing up Beauty and the Beast Barbie, undressing her, and dressing her up again. A slow, southern lunch. Potato salad and ham-roll-ups. Now it is all an endless sprint - to school, to work, to "activities." Pop-quiz: What is the most abundant rock in the continental crust? Did we cover that?

I still imagine myself late for school, running uphill in Keds as fast as I can, wearing gabardine pants and button-down Madras. Hurry and fill in the test answers. We're late, where is your lunch? Don't walk! Mom saying, "I can't imagine what you were thinking? Why didn't you hurry?" We want that happy Orthodontics smile, but nothing more unpleasant than a weekend of discomfort. Will I be taller tomorrow? Will you still love me tomorrow?

Spoilt, I am standing in thigh-deep snow-melt trying to get a steel-head to nibble that damselfly. Come on, come on!

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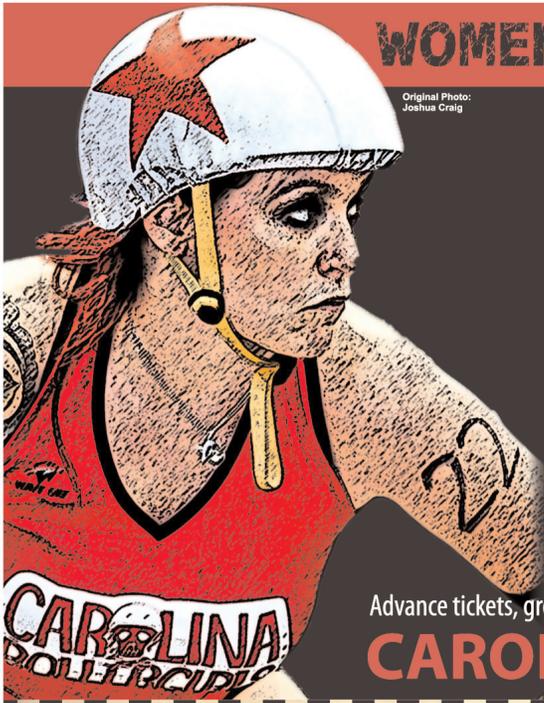
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Final Tidbits: Foolishly, I went outside in one of the early snowfalls, and went down Mailbox Hill on a lime-green toboggan. The powdery snow flew into my face and mouth, and up under my coat. It brought back terrific memories of a hill back home, sprinkled with boulders, that we used to sled when we had no idea about concussion, helmets or medical deductables. Good times, good times. While you're mulling that over, check out www.paintbrushforest.com, where The Blotter is pushing out its first book!! Consider pre-ordering a copy, or making a donation to The Blotter (www.blotterrag.com). Don't let that money go to some hyper-national corporation full of dangerous greedheads! And visit your local independent bookstore, they have hot cocoa!

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