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### Writers' Craft Box

What this section is intended to do:  
Give writers suggested hints, resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you feel is most helpful and derive inspiration from it- most importantly, **HAVE FUN!**

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say you're doing an art project and you want to spice it up a bit. You reach into a seemingly bottomless box full of colorful art/craft supplies and choose only the things that speak to you. You take only what you need to feel that you've fully expressed yourself. Then, you go about doing your individual project adding just the right amount of everything you've chosen until you reach a product that suits you completely. So, this is on that concept. Reach in, find the things that inspire you, use the tools



"Arts and Crafts" N.M.B Copyright 2008

that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.

***Craft Box Contributor Bio:*** Azelina Flint is a British poet and academic. She is currently completing her PhD thesis: "Louisa May Alcott and Christina Rossetti: Male Individualism and the Identity of the Female Artist" at the University of East Anglia, funded by the AHRC Chase consortium. She has previously studied at London University (MA) and the University of Cambridge (MA), and is a literary fellow of Sincreis Arte and La Macina di San Cresci, Tuscany; Artigiana, Sicily; Can Serrat, Spain and La Muse, France. She specialises in Victorian literature and Transatlantic studies, with special research interests in feminism and gender, literary movements and communities inspired by Romanticism, individualism and selfhood, the influence of Dante, and ideologies of love and immortality. Her greatest influence was her father, William Connor Flint: a poet and theologian whose latest work will be posthumously published by the Vatican later in the year.

*Editor's Note: It wasn't until after this issue had taken on its central theme and had begun to form synchronistic sub-themes of its own that we realized how well a piece on this fascinating exhibition would work in the*

*Craft Box. We'd initially received the press release concerning the exhibition in July and this winter, extended the invitation to Ms. Flint to write this piece for us, which she graciously accepted. Here we include some of the wording from the release to give a glimpse into what this essay will cover:*

*["Poetry and Painting: From the Medieval Period to Today": a joint project with visual artist Luca Macchi, produced by the Association: Sincreisis D'a Spazio Arte in Empoli, Florence. Our themes are the symbol of the beloved muse in the work of Dante and the stilnovisti, the relationship between courtly love and modern courtship, and the identity of the female troubadour. This collection also examines the experience of young couples in love and so pays tribute to my great friends: Pippa and Andrew Simpson, Massimo and Anastasia Cantoni, Emma Scott and Martin Mottram. I have also been fortunate and privileged to work with two generous and talented translators in Francesco Amatulli and Sandra De Cecco. We look forward to performances of medieval dance, theatrical readings of Dante and inspired installations on the processes of the writer and painter today.]*

Singing with the "Sweet new school"—a summer exhibition in Florence.

Poet, Azelina Flint, discusses her Dante-inspired exhibition at the Sincreisis Associazione, Florence with the painter, Lucca Macchi.

by Azelina Flint

Dante's *Vita Nuova* was one of the first truly introspective pieces of literature and shares many characteristics with a modernist text. It is a memoir that records the development of the poet's love for Beatrice: a Florentine girl who he met at the age of nine. However, Dante does not set out to compose an autobiographical narrative, but instead records his internal experiences and the development of his understanding of love. The poet's perception of love often directly conflicts with that of Beatrice and he is continually frustrated by the fact that his intense personal experience is not universal and cannot be shared by either his audience, or the object of his affection. He is also aware that the intensity of his love, in part, derives from the fact that it is an idealisation within his own mind.

The narrative becomes a philosophical treatise that questions the purpose and definition of romantic love between a man and a woman. The *Vita Nuova* leads us to ask such questions as whether love at first sight can transcend mere physical attraction and whether love is dependent on our interactions with the other person, or whether its spiritual nature goes beyond the bounds of social interaction. It also encourages us to consider how definitions of love change over time and are dependent on the cultures in which we live. Dante even questions whether love must be, by nature, reciprocal. He also shows an awareness that the process of writing is an editorial one. He is conscious that the autobiographer is selective: recreating their life-narrative with a providential message in mind. This kind of double-consciousness where author and protagonist meet makes the *Vita Nuova* a highly innovative work.

I first came to the *Vita Nuova* through the work of the poet-painter, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Rossetti was drawn to both Dante's idealisation of the beloved and his belief that the narrative of the poet's life and the literary text were deeply intertwined. Rossetti shared Dante's view that the poet's work could prophesise his own future and consequently he never stopped composing his autobiographical sonnet sequence, *The House of Life*, until he died. For Rossetti, the idealisation of the female beloved led the male artist to aspire to both spiritual and aesthetic perfection and if he failed in this purpose the punishment was severe. Following the suicide of his wife, Elizabeth Siddal, by a laudanum overdose—a drug that Rossetti had introduced her to and which had caused the miscarriage of their child—the preoccupation of *The House of Life* became the existential torment of an artist who had failed in his vocation. Due to the destruction of the poet's beloved; his muse; and his artistic ideals, the poet is led to question whether he is worthy of love, artistry and even salvation.

Many women have found both Dante and Rossetti's understanding of romantic love problematic, starting with Rossetti's own sister: Christina. In her sonnet sequence *Monna Innominata*, Christina Rossetti attempted to imagine the emotions of a female poet who had been idealised in the same way as Dante's Beatrice. Christina Rossetti felt that the idealisation of the female other led the male poet to disregard the independent identity of the beloved, as well as the beloved's desire to experience reciprocal love. Her famous poem "In An Artist's Studio", which is often read as a critique of her brother's understanding of the role of the artist, portrays the muse as a mere creation of the artist's mind who is trapped on his canvas. A common

criticism of both the *Stilnovisti* and the Pre-Raphaelites is that they had no real interest in the women they portrayed and that their love was, ultimately, narcissistic.

When I applied for a residency at the Sincretis Arte Associazione in Florence, I wanted to question whether the idealisation of the female object is truly disempowering for the female artist, or if it is rather an expression of every person's unique introspection and interiority. I wanted to explore whether the female artist actually shares in this introspection and if she, also, idealises the male other. I also wanted to consider whether the questions raised by Dante concerning the nature of romantic love are still relevant in the modern world.

The association suggested a joint exhibition with the painter, Luca Macchi, who is especially interested in the figure of the inspired artist in classical and renaissance art. Together, we formed an idea for a project that would portray the lover as an orphic figure who could dissipate the antithesis between lover and beloved, artist and muse, subject and object. I set about interviewing a variety of couples from different social, ethnic and religious backgrounds, many of which had never read Dante. I asked them such questions as "Do you believe in love at first sight and did you experience it? Do you think that you choose to love someone or do you fall in love involuntarily? Does knowledge precede love or does love precede knowledge? Do you have to know someone to love them, or does loving someone lead you to know them?" I received a vast array of different responses and reactions to the questions posed by Dante: proving that the issues he raises are still fresh and challenging.

The collaboration between Luca and I necessitated the involvement of a third artist: a literary translator. I was able to contact two highly skilled Italian friends of mine: Francesco Amatulli and Sandra De Cecco. My correspondence with these artists led to fascinating conversations about the interpretation of the written word. I discovered that certain idiomatic images and phrases had no literal correspondent in the Italian language. My translators and I had to explore the origins of various English and Italian colloquialisms in order to work out the best translation for the sentiment I had tried to convey. They required hermeneutical explanations for images I had chosen in my poetry, as well as a complete understanding of the events that had inspired it. Discovering their initial reactions and interpretations was eye-opening and enriched my understanding of the variety of responses an image can provoke. I also came to appreciate the

fact that the most deliberately allusive poetry must have a concrete foundation in actuality to produce the widest variety of responses in the reader.

Sandra and Francesco also had radically divergent literary styles. Francesco believes in preserving the musicality of a poem first: maintaining its general sentiment, scansion and rhythm above a literal translation. Sandra, on the other hand, went to a great deal of trouble to produce the most accurate rendering of my surreal imagery as possible. The result was that each translator captured a different aspect of my writing, which was beneficial to both Luca and my exhibition audience.

Luca's visual responses to my poetry were particularly preoccupied by the image of the eye. In my discussions about the idealisation of love; the interiority of the artist and the importance of reciprocity, the eye became a central symbol for communication, isolation, fantasy, and revelation. Luca's figures and images conveyed a variety of reactions and emotions within different relationships. His responses showed me that it is possible to condense the richest of philosophical questions into a symbol that is accessible to both literal narratives and personal experience. He also stressed the link between the sacred and secular: reminding us that many of the questions about the nature of erotic love are also relevant to religion and faith—a conclusion that Dante also came to when he made Beatrice the central figure of the *Paradiso*.

Luca, Francesco, Sandra and I unanimously immersed ourselves in the work of the *Stilnovisti*, assisted by the Association Director: Alessandra Scappini. We envisaged ourselves as an artistic circle like the *Dolce stil Nuovo*, or the Pre-Raphaelites. The Tuscan backdrop was a rich setting for recreating the world of Dante. My experience of the Palio di Siena horserace, which originated in the sixteenth-century, introduced me to the great Tuscan heraldic traditions and the pageantry of the medieval period. This inspired me to attempt to recreate the world of the courtly poet on the night of the exhibition. Alessandra Scappini organised for a medieval dance group to perform throughout the night, in-between readings of my work in both English and Italian, as well as the poems of Dante, Guinizelli, and Cavalcanti.

The exhibition space was an intimate one and we were able to recreate the atmosphere of a meeting of courtly poets. We attempted to approach the night as a means of sharing experiences about love as a crucible for

philosophical and theological discussion. The *Stilnovisti* perceived themselves as an elite circle who spoke for those who recognised the refined value of romantic love. Their poetry was shared only with those who could enter into it, accompanied by the lute and expressed in song and dance. Surrounded by Luca's paintings we created a space where the visual and audio could come together in a way that allowed the audience and artist to collaborate in the expression of their emotions. Luca's work functioned in a similar way to Giotto's frescos in the Scrovegni Chapel, Padua. They were a response to the physicality of the moment that is expressed in poetry in a uniquely visceral way. Presented alongside prints of my poems, they immersed the reader in the visual landscape that I had created.

Dressed in a Pre-Raphaelite dress that was, in itself, modelled on the costume of medieval Florence with laurel leaves entwined in my hair, I felt that I had truly become a courtly poet. My Italian audience entered into the night in a way that an English audience could not because they believed in the idealisation of love and the importance of expressing it. I shall never forget the words of an elderly Professor of Philosophy: "One of the most important things that Dante revealed to us was the music of the spheres. What we really mean by the music of the spheres is that the entire universe operates on a beautiful interconnected rhythm that is born into each of us and which each of us strives to express. Women are more deeply in tune with this rhythm than men because only women understand what it is to bring a new life into the world, only women can truly comprehend the beauty of love in its entirety. This is the truth you express in your poetry."

For me, this is the reality of the vision of womanhood expressed by both the *Stilnovisti* and the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood. These men paid tribute to the wisdom and depth that is contained in the female beloved. They felt that female experience was both sacred and inaccessible, and yet they were called to celebrate it. This is expressed in such paintings as Rossetti's *Giotto Painting the Portrait of Dante* where Dante is caught in a moment where he is transfixed at the sight of Beatrice passing him in the street. The courtly poet does not deny the experience of the other person: they long to share in it, while acknowledging that this is also impossible. Their predicament is extremely modern: it is that of a divided self.

My time in Italy gave birth to a memoir: *Visions of the Angel-Woman: A Female Troubadour in search of the Dream of Dante*. As well as discussing my personal experiences, it also records the conversations that I had with the men and women who inspired my poems on courtly love in the modern

world. It follows the structure of the *Vita Nuova* where poems are accompanied by biographical commentary that outlines their conceptual contexts and the events that inspired them. What became apparent to me is that the experience of the female love-poet is paradigmatic to that of the male courtly lover because women, also, idealise both the male object and the experience of love. This, perhaps, is a reality that history has failed to grasp.

My time in Italy also affirmed my belief in the prophetic power of the written word that was shared by both Dante and Rossetti. When my poet-father, William Connor Flint, died tragically and unexpectedly before I came home, I was reminded that it was this man who taught me everything I knew about love. Reading my poems back, I felt that I had somehow connected with the events of the future in my lines to a friend who had lost her own father, in my expression of the grief of a woman who could not be united with the man she loved due to a serious illness. I was reminded also of the deaths of Beatrice and Elizabeth Siddal, which disrupt both the *Vita Nuova* and *The House of Life*. My own narrative had also been interrupted by the death of the person who I loved the most in the world. My absence at the event drew me into a deeper understanding of Rossetti's guilt and heartbreak, while the great faith of my father: in God, in love, and in the beauty of art and poetry allowed me to share in the hope that closes the *Vita Nuova*. It is the hope of a poet that looks forward to the spiritual and artistic vision of the *Divine Comedy*: a work that draws all who love deeper into the music of the spheres.



"Writing Space" DB 2014

### What's On Your Desk

by Denise Bouchard (*see About Us page for staff bio*)

What elements go into creating the perfect writing area, what rituals commence writing? I've often asked my interviewees, "What does your writing space look like?"

Alexandra Stoddard has a view and a breeze off the water in Stonington borough. Her writing room has wide plank wood floors and her glass cabinets and walls are filled with paintings from friend and artist Roger Muhl. Her drawers are perfectly fitted to hold her index cards and on her desks are many treasures from her European travels, and when in season, fresh hydrangeas.

Jane Webster, whom I interviewed for *At My French Table*, sips champagne at a desk in one of the lovely rooms in her chateau where she creates her gorgeous books about her life in Normandy.

On a behind-the-scenes tour of Disneyworld, the animation artists were surrounded by bright primary colors and drawings of whimsical characters.

I have read that Stephen King likes to write at his rustic desk in the corner of an empty room so as not to disrupt his train of thought.

Recently, I interviewed Joan Anderson, author of *A Year By the Sea*, and in researching her site for the interview I came across her blog called "Unfinished Thoughts". In it, she had a post of what was on her desk that inspired not only her writing but also spoke to her soul and sustained her. Joan's elements were very simple and spare, much like the way she lives her life, as though at any moment she might up and leave for another nest and carry her treasured belongings away in a satchel.

The items themselves, however, each spoke deeply. She has a vase of a torso of a woman which broke into many pieces which she then glued back together of which she says, "symbolizes all women who carry so much and feel so wounded and yet our spirit somehow glues us back together". She has a photo of an empty bench taken on Iona where she conducts her workshops for women. Carved into the bench are the words, "Sit here and feel the peace of Iona." On the window sill, she has a candle holder with the words carved into it, "I am enough."

She then asks, "What do you surround yourself with?" I loved that Joan asked that question. It caused me to really look as if for the first time at what was in my sacred space and how I had unwittingly filled it. I knew it had an energy because the friends and family that come into my workspace don't want to leave. It surprised me to learn that my spirit lives there.

It was summertime and on my antique cherry wood writing desk from which I have a seasonally changing view of a tree nursery across the street, was a picture of Faye Dunaway as Bonnie Parker of "Bonnie and Clyde" fame. In it, she has on only a slip, a necklace, and she gracefully holds a man's fedora on her head. She looks beautiful, rebellious and strong. I suppose there must be a rebel in me somewhere for I loved Bonnie's spirit in the movie, though not the path she chose. Also, Bonnie was a poet, a romantic and very feminine, even when she tried to look tough. She

reminds me of the quote by Isadora Duncan, “You were once wild here. Don’t let them tame you.”

My desk also holds a rare seashell from Cape Cod, so perfect in its natural beauty, it might be painted. There is a latticed, porcelain green jade pen holder from China, given to me on my 40th birthday from massage therapists who came from the province where the jade is unearthed. A book of paintings from the Jane Seymour interview. Pictures of my parents—now passed on. Nagchampa incense burns in a silver genie lamp. A day calendar containing the most amazing pictures taken of exotic places from around the world paired with uplifting quotes by Hay House.

Surrounding my desk to further inspire me is my Bose stereo system, a gift from my husband last Valentine’s Day. It graces my bookcases filled with authors, many of whom have now become friends. On the other side is a bamboo shelving unit with candles, collaged albums and maps of my manuscript, angels looking down on me, tarot cards and a clock found in an antique store that looks to be from a far-off, exotic place that beats in time with my heart.

I hope you’ve enjoyed spending time with me in my office.

In the coming months, I plan to start a blog that captures and shares my thoughts, encouraging discussion within our writing community. Look out for updates! The first post will be about this topic and what I really want to know is, what’s on *your* desk?



"Marisol's Dream" by Patti Dietrick; <https://www.flickr.com/photos/pattidietrick/>

*About this image: "Marisol had been having dreams about being a crow, she couldn't see herself but she could feel her feathers, ripped and torn as she sat on a branch of a tall tree, bare branches everywhere...among hundreds of other trees. She could feel the wind blow through her... Marisol asked me to try and capture her dream." —PD*

## Of Crows and Candor

by Nicole M. Bouchard (*see About Us page for staff bio*)

When I was initially drawn to the above image, I wasn't consciously aware that the symbol of the crow had kept appearing in varied forms to me. It was through this image that I was able to focus in on its meaning. When I attempted to express my thoughts about it in writing, they were coming out in the verses of a poem which I've begun, the personal meaning of the symbol surprising. In stripping away pre-conceived notions or typical connotations associated with the image through writing, my mind was cleared for the discovery of its purpose.

Rather than featuring the image in Writers' Challenge, I decided to put it here as an invitation to delve deep and see what individual meanings it conjurs for you. As you're writing, let the response come naturally with no other purpose than responding truthfully to whatever thoughts or emotions arise. We will have other opportunities in the coming months for challenges and prizes on our blog, yet it seemed important that this visual prompt was not perceived in the spirit of competition, but instead, a private catalyst for introspection. I know that as a writer and editor, the idea of a work being in a public forum can affect the way a message is delivered. In this winter/spring period of gestation, let this exercise come to you as it will, in the way and form that you need it to.

If birds are universally seen as messengers, contemplate what message this image might convey.

Should you wish to, feel free to write in via the e-address below about your process in responding to this prompt and let us know what you thought of it. Happy discovering!

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