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Pen In Hand (PIH) is the official literary and art publication of the Maryland Writers’ Association, to be published biannually in January and July. Maryland Writers’ Association is dedicated to the art, business and craft of writing. Founded in 1988, MWA is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization.

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Contents

Guidelines, 6
Message from the Editor, 7
The President’s Message, 8
Conversation with Christian Koot, 10
Poetry, 15
  Images of My Partner’s Death - P. Van Slooten, 15
  The Glass Box - P. Van Slooten, 15
  ImMigration - Patti Ross, 18
  The Last Rose - James Fielder, 19
  Each Day is a River - September Lundeen, 20
  A Haiku - September Lundeen, 20
  A Serenade in South America - Michael Malloy, 21
Poetic Forms: Kwansaba, 22
  On Some Lonely Path - Andrew McDowell, 23
Short Stories/Flash Fiction, 24
  After the Box - Carol Bird, 24
  Tunnel Vision - Cynthia Burton Graham, 36
  A Dog and His Very Small Girl - T.J. Butler, 44
  Love Not Squandered - Eric W. Shoemaker, 52
  Ledger - C.B. Anslie, 69
  Ain’t No Place for Beauty - Tamar Anolic, 82
Memoirs/Personal Essays, 85
  His Name is Irrelevant - Anonymous, 85
  The Immigrant Experience - Charles Otis Heller, 87
  508 Wrightsville - James Brewster, 91
Drama, 97
  Badgley Mischka - Gandharva raja, 97
Art/Photograph, 102
  The Cold Shoulder - Penny Knobel-Besa, 103
Guidelines

*Pen In Hand* is the official literary and art publication of the Maryland Writers’ Association. It is published biannually in January and July.

Submission deadline for the next issue of *Pen In Hand* is May 31, 2019. MWA members and young writers are encouraged to submit poetry, sci-fi, flash fiction, short stories, drama, mystery, memoirs, creative non-fiction, personal essays, photographs/Art. Submit to peninhand@marylandwriters.org or tkbasu@verizon.net Please follow these submission guidelines:

- Use black type only
- Submit only in Times New Roman font
- Use font size 12 for the manuscript
- Leave 1 inch margin on top, bottom, left and right
- Place title two double spaces below top of page
- Center title
- One space below your title place your name
- Indent first line of each paragraph 1/2” inch
- Single space between period and new sentence
- In general, dialog should be double spaced and in quotation marks
- Insert approximate word count at the end of your manuscript (except poetry)
- One double space below the end of your manuscript, include a brief Bio. The Bio should be limited to your literary works and interest, publications and awards
- Art/photograph must be original. If not, permission to reprint must be obtained by submitter
Message from the Editor

“Finding the Way”…As an individual, ‘Finding the Way’ is learning to subdue one’s passion and improve all aspects of character that make a person wholesome and whole.

As a writer, to write better, to write often, to share thoughts and words with others, is ‘Finding the Way’.

As the Editor of Pen In Hand, encouraging MWA members to write, to improve the quality of the publication and to add new sections is ‘Finding the Way’. To that end, we have introduced ‘Poetic Forms’ in the present issue of PIH. I encourage our many talented poets to experiment and submit poems in ‘new’ poetic forms.

Experimentation is adventure; and adventure ‘Finds the Way’.

As Marylanders, keeping up with the rapid pace of progress—as citizens of our country and as world citizens—is ‘Finding the Way’.

The human race will soon be ‘aliens’ on Mars! To define the undefined Divine through Science, to travel the intergalactic path to the core of Creation, is ‘Finding the Way’.

Dr. Tapendu K. Basu

PS: I thank Penny Knobel-Besa for allowing me to use her stunning photograph “Finding the Way” for the cover of January 2019 Pen In Hand.
The President’s Message:  
FINDING YOUR WAY

At a workshop I attended, the leader handed out balloons to the participants and asked them to blow up the balloons as much as they could. Then he encouraged them to blow the balloons up even more. Finally, he asked them to hold up their balloons. As I looked around the room, I was amazed at the variation in size. Some balloons were small and some were large and the rest were all sizes in between; some were blown so big they popped. Each person had their own limit as to how far they would go.

What is your limit? Can you reach farther and farther still? What is the risk? Whatever you do, you make choices that place you somewhere on the continuum from safety to risk or comfort to discomfort.

I once interviewed an archaeologist who told me that he had wanted to be an archaeologist from a very young age. Everyone told him that he’d never get a job as an archaeologist. He became a stock broker instead, and he was miserable. He quit and went back to college to pursue archaeology.

“So how has it been?” I asked him.

He said, “I love the work, and I’ve never been without a job as an archaeologist.” He added that the reason for this is because he knew how to write, an important skill in a field depending on grants, reports, and articles.
Have your choices kept you from finding your way? The path to growth and opportunity is saying “Yes,” to taking a chance, to stretching beyond your reach, to facing a blank page and thinking, “Anything can happen on this page. Anything can be.”

So you say yes, you take the chance, you grow, you fail, you try again, and then, eventually, when you look back, you’ll know you found your way.

Don’t let these lines from a poem called “My Wage,” by Jessie B. Rittenhouse (1869–1948) apply to you:

\[
I \text{ worked for a menial’s hire,} \\
\text{Only to learn, dismayed,} \\
\text{That any wage I had asked of Life,} \\
\text{Life would have paid.}
\]

\textit{Eileen McIntire, President}
Conversation with Christian Koot
Chairman, History Department, Towson University

I discovered Christian J. Koot after reading his book, *A Biography of a Map in Motion: Augustine Herrman’s Chesapeake*. The book, published by NYU in 2018, was presented to me by my son knowing my interest in Maryland history. I met Professor Koot on January 7th, 2019, at his office in Towson University. The History Department is located on the fourth floor of the Liberal Arts Building overlooking a cluster of five-story buildings and walk paths separating them. Three words in bold blocks near the entrance to the department greet students and visitors.

CURIOSITY  CHALLENGE  JUDGMENT

Professor Christian Koot is a pleasant young man whose eyes light up when asked a question about Maryland
History. His easy-going manners belie the passion for his subject which was revealed early in the course of my conversation with him.

**Editor:** I get lost even with my GPS. The early settlers in Maryland, Virginia and Delaware must have used astronomy and memory to find their way till Augustine Herrman came along. In addition to that book you have authored *Empire at the Periphery: British Colonists, Anglo-Dutch Trade and the Development of the British Atlantic*, also published by NYU press. Tell us about this unusual cartographer, Augustine Herrman.

**Prof. Koot:** Most of the cartography in those days were confined to details of the land. Augustine excelled because he included waterways to his maps. Apart from land survey tools that prevailed then, Augustine Herrman (1621-1696) used his knowledge of geometry to design incredibly detailed and beautiful maps of land and the Chesapeake waterways. A Dutch trader, planter and a diplomat, Herrman was the liaison between the Dutch in New Amsterdam and Maryland colony. Under the employment of Cecil Calvert, he was rewarded with a massive plantation in Cecil County, *Bohemia Manor*.

**Editor:** Thank the Calverts for being ardent supporters of religious freedom. However they faced several insur-gencies and were never in total control of Maryland as they perhaps hoped to be given the Royal Charter given to Lord Baltimore by Charles I, King of England. Do you believe this was because of various religious factions or
as a protest against the feudal system Calverts proposed for the Colony?

**Prof. Koot:** Various religious factions played a role in limiting the Calvert authority. Fear of a Catholic “plot” played a role. Too, the people who came from Europe were rugged and adventurous folks who were difficult to control. Here we see the difference between theory and reality—total control was fiction.

**Editor:** Maryland is a ‘Blue State’ south of the Mason Dixon Line with the character of both the north and the south depending on which county in Maryland you live in. Any historical perspective on this?
**Prof Koot:** As it is said, Maryland is the northernmost of the Southern States and the southernmost of the Northern States. Maryland being an important tobacco grower/exporter the economics of tobacco and slave trade played an important role.

**Editor:** Switching gears here, Henry Ford would ‘give a tinker’s damn’ for history. No doubt you give history more importance. In practical terms what is the value of history?

**Prof. Koot:** A degree in history is not monetized in the way engineering is. However it is an essential entry point for many walks of life—diplomacy, global trade and multinational institutions being a few. History helps in understanding the basis of many problems that exist within and outside a country.

**Editor:** Playing word association with Maryland most would choose Poe over Cecil Calvert. Did the Calvert influence wane over time?

**Prof. Koot:** People’s interest has shifted from the early colonization to the American Revolution and the War of 1812.

**Editor:** Back to the maps—have you seen the maps?

**Prof. Koot:** Five of the originals exist today. I have seen them all including the one in the Library of Congress.
Editor: My high school history teacher began his lessons by writing on the blackboard:

the good, the true and the beautiful.

His lessons instilled in me my fascination for history. In the time that I have spent with you today, I can quite understand why Professor Koot has 13 ‘AWESOME’ evaluations from his students. To that I add one more on behalf of Maryland Writers’ Association.
Poetry

Images of My Partner’s Death
by P. Van Slooten

Blue numbers against a black screen
On a bench outside the hospital. Can’t see the blue sky
through a thick black haze.
They flutter up and down. Then stop.
A turkey vulture leaves the overflowing trash bin and
walks to me.
His eyes open wide, black pupils against fading blue
irises
I toss it my uneaten sandwich. It was all I had.
His chest flutters. Then stops.
He takes it. Then flies towards the parking lot. The hospi-
tal behind us.
I told him to let go.
He’s gone.

Glass Box
by P. Van Slooten

I often drive to a scenic park,
Any city, any state, just to be near
The water’s edge.
I ease the seat back,
Roll down the windows,
And feel the rhythm of life as it gently floats by.

A woman walks her husband, not close but near-by.
I feel like an intruder, but this is where I always park.
Rolling waves and children’s laughter ease through the windows.
A Midshipman jogs, his mind far away though his body is near.
A man with his young children looks; I look back.
My dark skin sets him on edge.

But high above, the clouds have no edge.
A duck walks to my door; no history to guide his actions by.
An old man with adult children looks; I look back.
I feel like an intruder, but this is where I always park.
The blackbird understands; his nest far away though he flies near.
A monarch butterfly soars playfully in and out my windows.

It’s starting to rain, should roll up the windows.
But it feels so damn nice, smells damp with a salty edge.
A woman runs to the shelter, five children running near.
A blonde girl gets wet, a middle-aged man passes her by.
He looks from her lean body to his car, wanting to take her to where it’s parked.
She keeps jogging and never once looks back.
The Midshipman returns, a future Marine doubling back.
I remember those days, the desert sand outside my Hum-
vee windows.
No safe road, no safe city, no safe place to park.
Distant machine gun fire, fighters giving chase overhead,
nerves on edge.
Take a deep breath, let it out, let history flow by.
Send enemy thoughts away, keep friendly thoughts near.

The drum of the rain stops. The air felt too close, too near.
The woman with the five children, the blonde girl, the middle-aged man, all are back.
They wave and smile to each other, calmer now with the sun hovering by.
The windshield is my barrier, the largest of all windows.
I wish I could leave the car and walk to the water’s edge.
But it says it’s safety glass, so I stay inside where I park.

So, I try to relax, nervous though it’s a beautiful public park.
I tell the Marine not to worry, don’t be on edge.
Unlike Iraq, there is safety here both inside and outside the glass box.

**BIO: P. Van Slooten** is a novelist and poet whose work has appeared in numerous local publications. He received the 2018 League of Innovation Award for Creative Non-fiction for his article titled, *A Transcendental Trip*. 
ImMigration

by Patti Ross

Crossing the green dusty land doesn’t look like the road to freedom I dreamed of. Its sand deep in my skin and under my toes eliminating the feel of anything good.

Hiding in a pitch black night exhausted no might for the dogs run, run, and run. Breathe, breathe don’t forget.

I’m man, I’m woman, I am a child, like a newborn busting through the womb and screaming to be heard, this a dream deferred.

Sprinting each cutting blade of grass, ignoring the blood that slides down draining my ankles, scars on my arms fresh from the night’s thorns, for a moment I thought of rose’s. The sweet smell of freedom.

My dream, your dream, from the ocean to the sea praying you can’t see me. Sweat rolls off like it does on the pig back home and the stench the same. A new life unnamed.

I run and hide and hide and run over the dead and I still smell sweet freedom through the scorched day and chilled night.
With bloody feet, dry mouth, face burnt and hands too hard to feel I arrive.
My country, 'tis of thee.

**BIO: Patti A. Ross** graduated from American University with a degree in Journalism. Having published several articles in the *Washington Times* and the *Rural America* newspaper's, Patti settled on a career in the corporate technology arena and raising her two daughters. Thirty years later she is sharing her voice as a Spoken word artist *little pi*, and working on her debut Chapbook. She is the current secretary for the Maryland Writers’ Association. You can follow her blog at https://littlepisuniverse.wordpress.com

**The Last Rose**

*by James Fielder*

The cold November dew
Lightly on petals rest,
As the last rose
Grasps another breath.

The rose wrapped
Tightly against the frost,
Glimpses of color fight
The chill of night.

The stem thick and stout,
And thorns to pierce winter’s veil,
The rose bush hibernates,
Winter's gale will pass.

Then, a stirring breeze
A warm sun's touch,
Awakens the rose
For another lasting blush.

**BIO:** James Fielder is the secretary of Education, Maryland. His poems have appeared in *Pen In Hand* and in a chapbook, *Unspoken Reflections.*

**Each Day is a River**

*by September Lundeen*

Morning is a brook splashing and racing over stones
Laughing, mixing water, sunshine and new ideas
Afternoon busily roars and churns the sand below
Evening is deep and calm
Dissolving at night into the sea…

**A Haiku**

*by September Lundeen*

Cold rain soaks dead leaves
No kids on the playground now
The swings sit empty

**BIO:** September Lundeen is a Charles County Chapter member. This is her first submission to a literary
magazine. The MWA, and guest speakers, have encouraged her to explore writing. She plans to take classes on poetry and creative writing.

**A Serenade in South America**

*by Michael Malloy*

The full moon lights a glowing cloud,  
A breeze through the palms makes a shifting sound,  
An adobe house lies moonlit and quiet  
As an ardent shadow slips its gate.

The young lover, armed with guitar,  
Clears his throat, plays his first chord,  
And sings out his melody,  
“Heart of my life, hear me, sweet love.”

His song’s only answer is a blinking star.  
He pauses, then ventures once more,  
“I fly to you from afar  
And offer you all I have of love.”

A laugh he wins and an inviting wave.  
They whisper together at her door,  
Vows joining joy to soar  
And lift their hope to the stars.

**BIO:** Michael Malloy served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Paraguay and is writing a legal novel, *A Stranger to Justice.*
POETIC FORMS: Kwansaba

Kwansaba is an African American verse form of praise styled after the ‘first fruit principle’ which in Swahili is *matunda ya kwanza*. The form was created in 1995 by Eugene B. Redmond, Poet Laureate and professor of English at Southern Illinois University-East St. Louis in honor of the celebration of Kwanzaa, a 7-day celebration of African-American heritage, culture and principles. The poetic form adopts the number 7 from Kwanza's *Nguzo Saba* (7 principles).

The Kwanzaa celebration was introduced after the Watts riot by Dr. Maulana Karenga, an African-American educator and controversial figure born in 1941 at Parsonsburg, Maryland. The 7 principles of Kwanzaa are unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. Each day of the celebration focuses on one of the principles.

Kwansaba, a praise poem, is:
- A poem of seven lines
- Each line consists of seven words
- Each word containing not more than seven letters
Here is a Kwansaba poem:

**On Some Lonely Path**

*by Andrew McDowell*

Down one of those cobbled, narrow paths,
   Only the dim lamps lighten my way.
Out walking long after night has fallen,
The cricket’s chirp or an owl’s hooting.
However brief in silence I may ponder,
Imagine and reflect during this brief time,
   Being in a moment all to myself,
Feel not lonely on some lonely path.

**BIO:** **Andrew McDowell** is the author of the YA fantasy novel *Mystical Greenwood*. He writes poetry and creative non-fiction. He won second place in the creative nonfiction category of the Maryland Writers’ Association Literary Contest in 2015 for his essay about his experiences with Asperger syndrome. To learn more about his work, visit andrewmcdowellauthor.com.
Short Stories

After the Box

by Carol Bird

She made a big, annoying deal of stuffing her ratty bags under the seat across from mine. I just ignored her and looked at my phone. But, when I heard her start talking in that voice of hers, my head snapped up fast. It made me think of a rusty nail. She had an accent too, like some of the old women in Greek Town, but not exactly. Her sunken, black eyes flashed out of a face that looked acid-etched. Probably homeless. Usually, I mind my own business and just relax on the train ride after work, but something about this beat-up old woman made me curious, and I like a good story.

She said, “It wasn’t a box you know. Everyone has that wrong. It was a jar. Just a tall, clay jar with a big lid sealed tight with wax. There was nothing painted on the sides. No warning of any kind. It could have been filled with olive oil for all I knew.”

I had no idea what she was talking about. Sometimes these things get better as they go, but usually it’s just crazy talk, or a hard luck story to get some cash. I wanted to see which way this was going, so I just nodded.
She said, “That jar had been standing there in the corner of the storage room for as long as I can remember. When I asked my mother about it, she told me it was just some old junk and sent me off on an errand. My father told me, in no uncertain terms, that it was none of my business and not to touch it, ever.”

I decided to play along and said, “So of course you did, right?

The old lady looked at me for a moment then said, “I was about your age when it happened. And yes, what bright young person wouldn’t take a look? Was I supposed to be like an obedient little dog with no thoughts or feelings of my own? Not even worthy of an explanation about what the jar contained, or where it came from, or most of all, what was in the damn thing?”

I didn’t know what to say. Her father had warned her. But then again, who wouldn’t have been curious? Out the window, the train flashed by lighted ads posted on the tunnel walls. Then, the usual darkness resumed and I could see my own face reflected back at me. I looked away and the old woman continued.

“So yes, it’s true. I was the one who opened the jar. It was me. One afternoon when my parents were out, I slipped into the storage room. As always, there the jar stood, surrounded by all the unwanted, worn things from the household. It was so tall I remember I had to drag a wooden chair over to stand on so I could break the lid free from its thick, wax seal. The odd thing was, the moment I started peeling the wax off, I heard something rustling around inside.”
She had my full attention. How could something alive be inside? Was she conning me?

The old woman must have noticed the look on my face because she said, “Oh, I know what you’re thinking! I couldn’t figure it out either. How could something be living in a jar that had been standing sealed for the gods only knew how long, at least as long as I had been alive? Still, I reasoned, there must be an explanation. I couldn’t really see the bottom of the jar. Maybe there was a hole and insects had managed to slip in. The wax beneath my fingernails looked dirty and old but what did I know? Maybe somebody else had unsealed the jar just as I did, and mice entered before it was resealed. I imagined them trapped there in the dark and actually felt sorry for the little things. I still had those kinds of feelings to spare back then.”

For a second, I thought she was going to cry. I wondered if she would follow me if I changed seats. There was a limit to how much attention I was willing to give these kinds of people. She didn’t cry though, and started talking again so, I didn’t move. I still wanted to know what happened next.

“After I got some of the wax off, I was able to rock the jar’s big lid up enough to get my fingers under it and lift. As I did, I heard a pop and suddenly, the lid was easy to move - too easy. It slid off the rim before I could catch it, hit the ground, and cracked right down the middle. I froze, thinking someone in the house might have heard, but no one came.”

She stopped and smirked at me. “I bet you want to know what was in the jar, don’t you.”
I shrugged like I didn’t care one way or another. She said, “Shrug if you want, but I know you want to know - everybody does. Well, I did too, so I learned over and looked down into the jar as far as I could. It was dark inside, but there was enough light in the room that I could see the jar was empty. After all that, I was very disappointed.”

I asked, “So, what made the scratching noises then?”

“I wondered that too and leaned even further down so I could touch the very bottom of the jar. Right as I brushed my fingers against it, something sharp cut me. I jerked my hand back and saw a line of blood seep out of my fingertips and roll down my hand. The second drop fell into the jar, and immediately a blast of warm air blew my hair back. I almost fell off the chair and had to blink a few times to clear my eyes. When I looked around, nothing in the room had changed. The jar looked just as before. I looked at my hand again and, except for some wax under my fingernails and the little cuts on my fingers, everything seemed fine. By this time, I was getting a little bored with the whole thing. I couldn’t quite figure out where the blast of air had come from, but I reasoned that it could have been just a coincidence. A breeze had passed through the room while I had my head stuck in the jar. That was all. So, I fitted the broken lid back on as best I could, draped an old blanket over the top, and returned the chair I had stood on to its place. As I left the storeroom, I was careful to lock the door and I remember thinking the whole business had been a waste of time.”

I said it certainly seemed like it.
She looked straight at me then and said, “After the troubles began, I dearly wished it had been just a waste of time. It started with the crops dying wherever I stepped, as if my footfalls were poison. A trail of black tracks showed my every move. The rot spread first through all the fields of our farm. Next, it spread to the neighbor’s land and then onward across the entire town. That season’s harvest was pitiful and there was no way of denying the source of the disease. With winter came hunger.”

I looked at her skeptically but she wasn’t paying attention to me at all. I figured she just needed to tell her story so I didn’t comment.

“As I lay in my bed one night, I heard, for the first time, my parents arguing from the floor below. My father said, “That girl is a curse. It would be better for us all if she had never been born. I have half a mind to get rid of her myself.”

“To this day I can hear him say it, just exactly as he did in that horrible moment. My mother, bless her heart, wept and tried to defend me but, how could she? Everything he said was true. Over the next few weeks, as friends and neighbors turned against our family, his rage grew more intense. Finally, after sitting down to a meager dinner, he snapped. In one motion, he shot up from his seat and lifted his chair over his head, ready to crush me with it. Instead, his body hit the kitchen floor like a stone. His rage had burst his heart. A week after that, my mother followed him to the grave, killed by grief and shame, and I know not what else. Less than two months after I opened that jar, I was an orphan.”
Honestly, I didn’t think the jar had anything to do with it, but it seemed wrong to say so. Instead, I asked her what she did next.

“For a time, I was passed from relative to relative, but the pity and generosity of my clan soon dried up after it became apparent that misfortune followed me from house to house. After my newly pregnant cousin lost her baby, I was put out on the streets. I don’t have to tell you how that goes for a young woman do I? The men of the town had their way with me more times than I could count and I nearly died from the fevers of my poor body trying to fight off the infections they forced into me.”

I wanted to feel sorry for her, I really did, but when she said that, I couldn’t help scooting back a little. She saw it I guess, and gave me a contemptuous glance before continuing.

“Yes, I’ve seen that reaction before. Finally, I understood that I had to leave the town or die. With only a blanket and a jug of water, I began walking east. I passed the furthest edge of the farm fields bordering the town, and where the mountain began to rise, I spotted a low entrance to a cave. That became my home for many years.”

This time I believed her. She looked as if she might have lived in a cave. I asked how she survived.

“To this day, I myself don’t fully understand that. I do know something few have experienced, and few can survive without losing their minds. Do you know what that is?”

I told her I imagined it was hunger.

She shook her head. “No. Hunger is only of the body. Food can be found or grown or stolen. This starves
the spirit. It is absolute solitude.”

I thought about that for a second. I couldn’t ever recall being alone, unless I wanted to be. Maybe she was right. I asked, “What did you do all day?”

“At first, I tried to have some semblance of a life. I made my new home as comfortable as possible with a straw bed and firewood stacked away from the rain. I scavenged for food and learned to make clothes out of this and that. One entire wall of my cave was covered with scores of lines where I marked the passage of days, and then seasons. But, after a very long time, I realized there was no reason for it. What did time matter to me? Time fell away into nothing more than day and night, and the difference between summer’s heat and winter’s chill. I lived in a kind of dream and forgot even my own language. What did those strange sounds mean anyway, and why had I learned to make them? I could not recall. I have no idea how long I lived this way. It could have been twenty years; it could have been twenty thousand, who knows? I did come to know one terrible thing. No matter how I tried, I would not be allowed to die.”

I was skeptical again and gave her a doubting look. We both knew everybody dies.

She said, “Oh, I realize it’s hard to believe, but it’s true. Each full moon for many months, I climbed to the top of the mountain where I lived and sacrificed myself to every power I could conceive. I gave of myself until I could give no more. At last, I tried again and again to throw myself from the highest point, but each time something invisible held me back.”

I said, “Everybody dies. It just wasn’t your time.”
The old woman raised her brows. “Still don’t believe me, eh? Well, I have the scars to prove it.”

I watched as she held up both fists facing me then slowly opened her hands wide. It was like watching a sickening flower bloom. Her hands were pincers with just a thumb and a finger on each. There were jagged stumps where the rest of her fingers had been. I gasped before I could catch myself. I couldn’t even think about her feet. The old woman seemed pleased. I guess she had wanted a reaction before getting on with her story.

“No matter my sacrifice, nothing changed. Apparently, I was meant to suffer eternally, or so I thought at the time.”

This was too much. I said, “But why!? Why would that be?”

She said, “Let me ask you some questions. Suppose you didn’t have me to blame for all the troubles loose in the world. What would you do then? Blame yourself? I saw you turn away from your reflection in the darkness. Like you, few can bear to see the truth of what they are for more than a glance. Would you blame God? Who then could you turn to if it was God who beset you with evils? What heavenly reward could then await to make your suffering worthwhile? And how could you feel safe in your goodness? After all, Pandora was the bad one. She opened the jar. She deserves to suffer, not you. See how the universe is just? Even though you would have done exactly the same thing.”

I thought, so that is who she believes she is. I was beginning to wonder if she could be dangerous. Also, I didn’t like all these questions. She didn’t know me. I
asked, “Well, why you would hurt yourself then? Are you crazy?”

Pandora leaned forward and locked her eyes on mine. Her body swayed with the movement of the train and I could smell her breath. She said, “Let me tell you the rest of my story then you can decide.”

I leaned away from her and said, “Okay, go on. I get off in two more stops so…”

She said, “My stop is next. I’ll be quick. One warm day, I returned to my cave with an armful of kindling and there, shadowed in the darkness, lay a man in my bed. I was so startled I dropped everything. I remember the sound of the wood clattering down. I reached for a branch to use as a weapon and flattened against the cave wall, ready for the usual attack. Instead, the man moaned and rolled from side to side, clearly in pain. I heard him say something like, “Please help me” but he was difficult to understand. Nevertheless, I approached the bed very slowly. He remained motionless. When I drew close, I saw that he was wounded. He lay in a pool of blood seeping in waves from holes in his side and back. Whatever did it had passed straight through. I did the only thing I knew to do and held my torn blanket against his wounds in the hope that the bleeding would stop. After one last moan, he lay still; not dead, but unconscious.”

I said, “Were you able to save him?”

Pandora nodded. “Yes. He never grew strong, but he did live and became the love of my life, the only love of my life. I’m not saying he was a good man. He was far from it; always self-pitying and expecting me to serve him like a slave. But you know what? To me, he was as
a god. Anything was better than one moment more of unendurable loneliness. After we learned to communi-
cate in his strange language, my life seemed to resume. I woke from the long dream of timelessness that had pos-
sessed me. It was as if color had returned to the sky. He was a secretive man and though he noticed my mangled hands, said nothing. I returned the favor by asking noth-
ing of his past, or how he had come to me. I knew it could not be a good story because he was terrified that someone would discover him hidden away in my cave. I did not care. In his company, for the first time, I had mo-
ments of happiness.”

I found myself being glad for her and said, “Final-
ly!”

She nodded. “So I too thought. But like you, I had to be reminded of who I am. And reminded I was. In the tenth month of our happiness, my man began to sicken. He was unable to eat more than a bite here and there. He quickly became little more than a skeleton and was in the kind of pain that blots out everything, that cannot be avoided with any distraction. Within weeks, he took to our bed and I tore my hair out in frustration at hav-
ing nothing to give him to heal him or at least relieve his misery. He looked at me through clouded eyes, pleading without words. I knew what he was asking of me and yet, I was unable to act. I left him in his torture of pain and suspended myself in an agony of guilt and grief. So yes, until that moment I guess I was crazy. Squatting at the bottom of things, the very last thing to rise and fly away from me was the worst torment of all. I was enslaved, addicted and deluded by Hope. Hope that the gods would
be merciful, hope that the mountain would let me fall and
die, hope that the death sentence given to my only love
could be changed. How Hope has driven me and yet, to
what end? Lifetimes gone by with nothing to show for
any of it. It was Hope that had to die, not me.”

She continued. “You know what I did then? I car-
rried and dragged my Beloved to the top of the mountain
and rolled him over the edge. I heard a thud when he hit
the ground. He lay below burst open like a rotten melon.
The disease had consumed him entirely. I felt nothing.”

I shook my head, sorry for her even if she was crazy
and half of it was made up. The train began to slow. It
was making the long climb toward Pandora’s final stop.

She felt it too and said, “I’ll leave you with this.
After my man died, I finally knew what I wanted to do.
Not what I had to do, but what I was finally free to do
now that Hope in anybody or anything was gone. It came
to me that if someone had sealed all life’s troubles in a
jar once, then it could be done again. And that, my dear,
is what has brought me to you in this moment.”

I laughed a little and said, “I’m not sure it works
that way, but if it does, I wish you the very best of luck.
Either way, thanks for the story.”

She said, “No, thank you. And good luck to you as
well.”

I went back to looking at my phone while Pandora
noisily gathered up her plastic bags and looped a torn
purse over her shoulder. She moved to the middle of the
car and stood stooped and grey and swaying as the train
drew to a stop. The doors opened with a swoosh and I
glanced up to give her a final nod as the doors closed and
the warning for departure sounded.

A moment later, the train pulled away with a hard jerk. I looked around as the train steadied and noticed a leather satchel under the seat where Pandora had been. I wasn’t surprised she had forgotten it in all that mess. Compared to the other trash she had been carrying, it looked kind of important. I reached down and pulled the satchel out from under the seat and up onto my lap. A glance confirmed that I was now alone in the car.

The bag looked worn, but was of good quality. It had brass fittings at its edges and a striking clasp made of heavy, shining metal in the shape of a P. I assumed it was an initial and wondered if there was an address in the satchel. Maybe the old woman wasn’t homeless. You hear about that sometimes. Eccentric people who look like bums but secretly have a million dollars hidden in a mattress. Maybe the old woman would give me a reward if I returned the bag.

I twisted the clasp and pulled the top flap open. At that same moment, a strong breeze washed through the car as if the doors had been opened while the train was still in motion. I blinked a few times to clear my watering eyes. When I looked out the window, I was stunned to see the train accelerate past the platform at my stop. I scrambled to pull the emergency cord only to be jolted back into my seat as the car’s interior lights dimmed and the train sped deeper into the darkness of the tunnel.

**BIO: Carol Bird** is a resident of Crownsville, MD and member of MWA since 2016. She has a novella, *A Modest Inheritance*, currently available on Amazon.
Tunnel Vision

by Clynthia Burton Graham

It’s Wednesday. Outside on my balcony, cellphone in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other, I request an Uber to Penn Station. Burgeoning sunlight and muggy morning air produce an instant necklace of moistness around my neck. Soon the heat will be oppressive. After dressing, I stuff my knapsack with pens, pencils, note-pads and a camera, before cramming a sweater in too. My movements remind me of the burdened things I no longer do. The things devised by other’s versions of who I should be and how I should act, and I was a willing participant in my own disappearance.

Now, with assigned roles dismissed, I don’t set a bowl on the floor for four legs to surround. I don’t thaw anything for dinner. I don’t make the bed. Since beating cancer and divorce two years ago, I take this day of the week to breathe inside the swoop of a bird in flight, satisfied with the rhythm of my own heartbeat.

Cool air, soft leather seats and smooth jazz on the radio ensure I will give the driver an A+ rating. Our conversation is light, about the weather and the good old days. I listen more than talk, as we pass Greenmount Cemetery, on the Station North side. I am glad for the high stone walls blocking the sight of what lies behind them. Disintegrating bones buried under levels of dirt and grass are not unlike the encumbering things in my
life I have paved over and aim to keep in dormancy. Meditation, volunteering at the women’s homeless mission and my soul feeding Wednesdays keep past bitterness from entering my thoughts. I am a survivor and as such I am compelled to live in the now.

The driver maneuvers around the gigantic Baltimore City hallmark, Brodsky’s male/female sculpture fused by large red heart, to the front doors of the station. I smile. He smiles. We wish each other a good day. Simple. Easy. Bloodless.

Rush hour is over. Dangling briefcases, tailored suits, clicking high heels have gone to their nine to five jobs in DC. I used to be one of them, always running to catch something that was always fleeting. At fifty-six years old, I harbor none of the trappings of an uninspired life. No more beauty salon hair styles, only my natural graying locks. No make-up, leaving a light splattering of freckles to play across the bridge of my nose. I am free of societal prototypes dictating who I am, what I should look like or what I should do. I embrace my cloistered life with the zeal of a nun, sans the belief in an omnipresent father type being.

I saunter over to the ticket line in sync with the slowed pace of the almost empty station. Sifting through my knapsack for my wallet reminds me of how grateful I am at no longer being chained to my daily trips to The Daily Newspaper or the grimy, gritty stories of death and/or disillusionment that were invariably in every one of my assigned bylines. As a freelance writer and novelist, I write science fiction, creating worlds and characters that embody my quest to further identify the fallacies of
this world. The ones that make a child think come-true wishes, happy-ending-fairy tales, are sustainable realities.

A man wearing a cowboy hat asks me, with a nasally twang, if this is the line to buy tickets. After I say yes, he insipidly talks about returning home to Colorado and how beautiful it is there. I imagine him on a farm with a wife washing clothes at the same time she is holding a baby, then feeds the other children and does ten thousand other things that will surely lead to an early death by burden. I quickly move, when the man in the ticket booth says, “Next in line.”

My intolerance for the mundane began after seeing the severed lump from my right breast on a shiny silver tray. I stared at it through the haze of waning anesthesia. Blood was quickly drying around it. There was no pulsation. It, this piece of me, formed from the toxicities of a life I had allowed to build up, was no longer receiving my essence. The later declaration that the cancer had been plucked out, before it spread, left me with an immediate need to rid myself of all things sucking away a life I hadn’t claimed. I went from the doctor’s office to the lawyer’s office. A few months later, after a bitter dispute with my husband over my selfishness and ingratitude, I signed my divorce papers. I was free and eager to grab my life.

“The 440 Marc train to Washington, DC is now boarding at gate 10,” blares the disembodied voice, stirring movement through the corridors.

Loud cellphone conversations accompany me on my walk to the exit door. A man pleading for his wife to let
him come home. A woman barking orders at some underling at work because a project is late. A teenager, with earbuds plugged into his ears, cursing at losing a video game. Nothing of an exceptional nature. Just the incessant drone of the unenlightened.

When I enter the designated quiet car of the train, I go from desert temperatures to the Arctic tundra. The air conditioning is on full blast, as I suspected it would be, so I pull out a sweater, then grab my laptop. Leaning back into my seat, I think about my excursion to the Hirschhorn Museum’s newest art exhibit and lolling in the outside garden for lunch. After a week of revisions and a looming due date for my third book, I seek tranquil inspiration for a short piece on being a cancer survivor for a local magazine. I wait for the smooth progression of the train from the platform into the sunlight. “It is the journey that is important and not the destination,” I type and then type, “totally overused cliché”.

Near the end of the final underpass out of the station, advancing daylight flickers and creates rhythmic modulations of darkness and light. In a flash of the later, I see a hand wave from someone perched in an arched hollow in the tunnel wall. I strain my neck to look back, as the train moves slightly faster. A turn of a head and a shifting body give proof to what my eyes have seen.

When the train reaches the West Baltimore stop, I decide to tell the conductor about what I saw. I walk up to the uniformed woman with purple and black braids cascading down her back.

“Excuse me. I was just on the train to D.C. and saw a person inside of a wall in the tunnel,” I say. Her dull look
cues me to go on. “Perhaps the person is hurt or soon will be, being so close to the tracks.”

She assures me they will check into it, without giving me eye contact, in an unbothered tone full of “why should you care” attitude. Unsatisfied with her response, I get off the train and go to the other side of the outside station to wait for the next train back to Penn Station. As the train heading for Washington pulls off, I ask myself, what are you doing? Any answer I might have come up with dissipates inside the acceleration of the departing train.

When I arrive, about thirty minutes later, a security guard is pushing a wheelchair along the platform. I see a seated woman draped in so many colors I get dizzy. The guard stops outside of a black door that reads, “Personnel only.” He parks the chair and opens the door.

“Excuse me, is this the person who was in the train tunnel?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“Is it alright if I talk to her?”

“You can try. I think she is deaf or mute or something. “Anyway, I must call it in to the police and start a write up. It would be good to have someone out here with her,” he says, before walking through the door.

“Hello. My name is Malene. Are you alright?” I say, stooping down to eye level to discover a weathered woman beneath the head to toe covering.

“I’m always alright,” she says, in a voice like an ocean breeze cooling skin.

I stare at her smudged face and instinctively my reporter skills surface. A checklist, I devised during my
newspaper days and honed since working at the mission, runs through my head. Mental illness. Job loss. Death of a spouse. A war veteran. Abuse victim. In the middle of my mental gyrations, I almost scream out loud. Again, I ask myself, what are you doing? She is humming and looking up into the sky. In the silence between us, I surmise she has lost her mind. A sudden tinge of pride, that my trials hadn’t marooned me in a dark passageway, straightens my back and poises me to turn away, but I don’t.

“Why were you in the tunnel?”
“Resting.”
“That’s a dangerous place to rest.”
“The world is a dangerous place. That’s why we’re here, right? To help make it better.”
“Don’t you have a home?”
“I did once upon a time like fairy tales begin, but it ended as fairy tales do.”
“This doesn’t seem like a happy ending to me.”
“I move when I want to. I’m beholding to no one. Is there any happier state of being? I roam around touching people who have lost their way.”
“How did you lose your way? Was it drugs or alcohol or an abusive partner? Lost your job?”

The more I ask, the less I get and the more bizarre the less is. In the silence of my questioning and her response, the inner soles of my feet begin to itch, but I still can’t move. I want to check to see if wads of gum are attached to my shoes, but I know it’s me. I just don’t know why. Crazy is crazy and that’s it, I decide, as she looks up at a bird flying overhead. I think the very same bird I would
I had seen flying over the commons at The Smithsonian, if I’d minded my own business and kept to my Wednesday routine.

I squint my eyes as I watch her follow the bird’s movements. I look back at her when she says, “I know my way. It’s you who has lost your way.”

And then it happens. The bird circles lower and lower until it rests on the back of her extended hand. A silver bracelet peeks out from her sleeve. It shimmers under the intensity of the sun. Cursive writing is etched into it and I ask her what it says. She responds, “You cannot find peace by avoiding life.” I immediately remember, it is a quote from Virginia Woolf in the movie, The Hours.

She coos in unison with the flutter of the bird’s wings lightly brushing across her crinkled, worn skin. I ask no more questions. Instead, I listen, and my listening opens me to the sound of the train horn, distant, but comforting; the shuffle of feet boarding the next train, demanding, but alive; the words flowing from the mouth of the woman, hushed, but vital.

In the short time of her speaking to the bird and me, I feel the folly of my insular state. In what I thought was freeing myself, through actions that kept me arms-length away from people and their claims on me, I was really trapping myself. Just like the bird is as tethered to the limits of the sky, I am bound to the millions of souls around me. It became clear when the woman said, “while here in this life, reaching, twisting, and turning through our connections, we grow, we die, and we grow again. Together. One Spirit. Many vessels.”

A forgotten warmth spreads inside of me as she
touches my hand and encourages the bird to fly off with the gentle shake of her other hand. When the guard reemerges and begins to push her away. I immediately feel a sense of loss. I ask to take her picture. She agrees. I snap two shots with my cell phone before they move towards the station. Almost to the entrance door, the old woman turns back and says, “Shake the cold from your bones. Life is for living not just surviving. Dance with wolves. Husky your voice from howling at the moon on starlight nights, then teach others the rhythm of your song.”

I look at the pictures as she rolls away. Damn! I hit the swap button on my cellphone in my haste and now have two fragmented pictures of myself. I call out to the guard, “Where are you taking her?” I run after them, knowing I must follow.

**BIO: Clynthia Burton Graham,** MFA graduate from the Creative Writing and Publishing Arts Program at the University of Baltimore, has been published in *Pen In Hand, Persimmon Tree Literary Magazine, Pilcrow & Dagger, Academy of the Heart and Mind, daCunha Global, Auburn Avenue,* and others.
A Dog and His Very Small Girl

by T. J. Butler

ONE

The large brown dog lay in the sun. He raised his head to disturb a fly on his shoulder and to sniff the air. It carried the scent of green and growing things, the hint of a small prey animal in the distance, and the sweet and sticky aroma of the girl. His girl. He leaned over to lick beneath his tail, then slowly scratched behind his ear with a hind paw. He was waiting for his girl to return on the yellow bus, watching the shadows gradually lengthen, and sniffing for the rabbits and foxes who rarely entered the yard now that he was home. The dog put his head on his big brown paws, closed his eyes, and remembered meeting his girl for the first time.

TWO

It was so long ago that it seemed to be forever when the large brown dog was no more than a little brown pup, and a very small girl had visited him on the farm where he was born. He’d been on top of a soft and fluffy pile of his brothers and sisters, a wiggling tangle of floppy ears and wagging tails, each with downy brown fur, some with white spots, and some with small pairs of black socks on each paw. The pup tumbled over the curious wet noses, each one sniffing so many familiar butts, and many small jaws full of tiny white puppy teeth that were
searching for the necks of their siblings to lick and nip.

From the top of the pile, the pup heard a strange and musical bark like tinkling bells, raised his head, and gazed into the smiling face of a very small girl with a tangle of blonde hair. The man she was with reached into the squirming pile of fur and tails, gently pulled the pup up and set him on the ground before the very small girl who delicately barked like tinkling bells again. She threw her arms around the pup’s neck and yelped excitedly, “He’s the one, Daddy!” The pup barked back.

“Oh!” thought the pup, “How sweet and sticky and delicious she smells!” He licked her face and tasted strawberries. The very small girl stumbled backward as the pup licked and licked. “I’m the one!” thought the pup. “Yes, I’m the one, and you are the one for me.” The man gently lifted the pup from the ground, placed him inside a large red truck, and the very small girl climbed in beside him. He barked softly at her again, this time a tiny yip that said, “I’m coming with you, and I will stay with you always.”

“Hello,” the very small girl whispered to the pup as she settled into her seat. “My name is Tillie. Your name is Levi, and you are mine.”

The pup who was now named Levi tilted his head, gazed into the girl’s blue eyes and thought, “I will be your pup, and you will be my girl.” Again, he thought, “I’m coming with you, and I will stay with you always.”

Levi licked the very small girl again, jumping up and down on the seat for another taste of strawberries. Again, he inhaled her sweet and sticky scent, tasted the strawberries on her cheeks, and again he jumped. He felt
dizzy with excitement and jumped once more! “You are my girl,” he breathed out with each strawberry sniff, but the very small girl yelped in a surprised pitch that meant hurt. Her face became wet and salty and Levi the pup was distressed. He tried to put his paws on her shoulders, tried to lick her face in the way of dogs who are checking on other dogs in the pack. “Are you hurt? What can I do?” The very small girl yelped louder! The woman in the front seat leaned toward the back and swept Levi onto the floor of the large red truck with her arm. “Stay,” the woman barked at Levi. He did not know the woman’s commanding bark, but the very small girl’s yelps and the strange bark of the woman made him sad. He did not understand, so he laid down on the floor, put his head on his little brown paws, and fell asleep.

Every day Levi told the very small girl he was hers. He jumped, he licked, and he hoped for the taste of strawberries. He breathed in her sweet and sticky scent, and he barked to tell her so many things! “I am yours,” he told the very small girl, always excited, always jumping on her, and almost always knocking her down. He remembered the puppy pile with his brothers and sisters, their flailing legs, their soft brown fur and floppy ears, their wagging tails. He loved his girl and what better way to show this love than by teaching her how to nip snouts and sniff butts in their own unique puppy pile? His very small girl howled and often barked when Levi made her into a puppy pile, and the man or the woman would scoop her up, bark the “No” at Levi, and hold the very small girl until she stopped howling.

Every afternoon the very small girl came home on a
noisy yellow bus smelling of acrid fumes that hurt Levi’s
nose. The yellow bus carried the wild yips and barks of
many other small girls and boys who belonged to other
dogs. Shortly after the bus drove away, the very small
girl would come into the yard with a wonderful round
object called Ball, and she would toss Ball to Levi. He
would chase it at top speed, pounce upon it in the grass
as soon as he could catch it, and he would try to fit Ball
inside his mouth. He wanted to press his tiny white
puppy teeth deep into Ball and chew and chew, but the
very small girl always ran through the grass and took
Ball from his paws. She’d turn away from him with Ball
in her hands and begin to run, and Levi would jump up
and give chase. Was he chasing Ball or was he chasing
his very own small girl?

There were so many things to figure out when the
very small girl had Ball. Levi loved Ball, he loved his
very small girl, and he loved this game; in the middle of
every chase, his girl would stop suddenly and throw Ball
in a new direction! Levi would bound after Ball, pounce
on Ball when he was close, and hope that this was the
time Ball would fit all the way into his mouth.

After Ball, Levi would tell the very small girl with
much excitement that he was hers. “I will teach you to
make a puppy pile because you are my girl,” he would
bark and jump up to put his paws on her shoulders. He
wanted to breathe in her sweet and sticky scent and to
lick her cheeks for the taste the strawberries. Levi was
growing in size with every day he spent with his very
small girl, and with Ball, and with the promise of soon
teaching his girl about the puppy pile. Every day it was
just a bit easier to lick and to sniff and to reach his paws up to the very small girl’s shoulders to inhale her scent and to lick her cheeks for the taste of strawberries. Levi’s very small girl would fall into the puppy pile, but she would howl in the way that said hurt and again, he would try to lick her face in the way of dogs who are checking on other dogs in the pack.

“My name is Levi, and I am yours,” he would yip and whine to the very small girl, and again and again, the man or the woman would scoop her up, bark “No” at Levi, and hold the very small girl in their arms until she stopped howling.

One afternoon in the long hours after breakfast, with many hours left before Ball, the man herded Levi into the large red truck. Levi curled up on the back seat, and the man drove as the sun moved across the sky. When the truck stopped, Levi raised his head and sniffed the air. It had been so long since he had smelled the farm where he was born or the puppies from his first puppy pile, but the faint and unmistakable scent of a familiar dog wafted through the truck’s open window.

The red truck stopped, and the man opened the door. Levi jumped down from the red truck and immediately saw one of his brothers with brown fur and black socks standing in the yard. “The puppy pile!” thought Levi as he galloped toward his brother. His brother sniffed Levi’s nose, and they quickly formed the yin and yang circle of two dogs sniffing butts in greeting. Levi raised his head to breathe in the air and the grass, and soon trotted over to investigate the fence. There were so many things to learn on this farm that everything seemed to be new
again! He knew his very small girl was not here, and as he sniffed and sniffed the newness, he did not notice the red truck drive away.

THREE

The long days passed for Levi and his brother and as they grew, they were soon too large and wise to fall into a puppy pile. What began on that first day with soft sniffing, peeing on everything, wagging tails, and nipping snouts soon progressed into loud and urgent barks and races. Levi’s brother would always commence the chase with a nip on Levi's neck, and they’d set off around the perimeter of the property at top speed with the wind in their fur, guarding against the ever-present and pungent menace of unknown wildlife. When Levi’s brother slowed his pace, carefully sniffing the wind and prowling for dangers from afar, Levi would return to his fenced patch of earth and grass. He would lie in the sun with his head on his growing brown paws and think of his very small girl. He remembered his yips to her on the day they met. “I will be your pup, and you will be my girl. I’m coming with you, and I will stay with you always.”

Levi’s girl had given him his name and said that he was hers. “I am yours,” he had barked at her over and over as he’d breathed in her sweet and sticky scent. In his new home on the farm where he was born, he’d laid in the sun, season after season, thinking of his girl. Levi was now too thoughtful for the rough and tumble of the puppy pile or his brother’s constant sniffing for unseen danger. “I am yours,” he would repeat to the very small girl as he closed his eyes, breathed deeply, and dreamed
of licking the taste of strawberry from her cheeks.

There was a man on the farm who brought Levi and his brother breakfast and dinner. He scratched Levi’s head and told him he was a good boy, but he did not have Ball, and he did not have a sweet and sticky scent. “Come!” the man would tell Levi, and he would hold out morsels that were more delicious than breakfast and dinner. Levi did not yet know “Come”, but the scent of the morsels would draw him closer to the man, who always said “good boy” when Levi came close and ate the morsels that he offered.

This man did not belong in the puppy pile, and Levi did not try to teach him about licking snouts and sniffing butts. No, this man was only words that meant morsels, and Levi learned the word Come. The next word Levi learned was Stay, which meant to stop and wait for the morsels. Come always followed Stay, and morels always followed Come, so Levi stayed, and he came, and he ate many delicious morsels. Every night he slept with his head on his paws, and every night he thought of his very small girl. “I am yours,” he would think as he drifted off in the sleep of dogs that miss their people who are far, far away.

FOUR

In Levi’s many long seasons on the farm, he had outgrown the puppy pile, become a good boy, learned Come and Stay, and figured out how to quietly escape his fenced-in patch of earth and grass. On a day when the sun was warm, and the wind carried the smell of small creatures on the other side of the fence, Levi heard the
doors of a truck slam. He raised his head and saw the very small girl tumbling out of the familiar red truck! He barked with joy, and his heart filled to overflowing with love.

He did not have the words to say, “You came back for me,” so he barked again, this time calling out, “My name is Levi, and I am yours!” He escaped from his patch of earth and grass, quickly trotted over to his girl who was now small, but no longer very small, and he did not think of the wriggling and jumping puppy pile as he pressed the length of his body against his small girl.

Levi breathed in the small girl's familiar sweet and sticky scent and gently leaned in close. “I am yours, and you have come back to me,” he softly whined as the proper words came to him. She threw her arms around his neck, just as she had done the day she said his name was Levi and told him that he was hers. His small girl yipped with the musical sound of tinkling bells, and he sniffed excitedly at her familiar tangle of blonde hair and her cheeks that still smelled of strawberries. He gazed up at her with his deep brown eyes, and sniffed, and thought to himself, "Here is my girl, my very own small girl."

Levi's small girl smelled like home, his home, and again he gazed up at her. “My name is Levi,” he thought, “and I waited for you. I am your dog, and you are my girl.” For the second time, Levi hopped into the large red truck and curled up on the seat next to his girl. “Ball,” he thought. “I remember Ball. Do you still have Ball? I am a good boy, and I know Come and Stay. Can I show you? Do you have morsels?”

Levi put his head on his large brown paws. The red
truck drove away from the farm where he was born, and the small girl stroked behind his ears. He knew he was the luckiest dog in the world to be going home with this girl, his very own small girl.

**BIO: T. J. Butler** is currently working on a collection of short stories. She is a lifestyle blogger, and a regular contributor to *Tiny House Magazine*. Her work has also appeared in magazines such as *SpinSheet, Upper Bay Boating*, and *SisterShip*, and in the literary journal *Anti-Heroin Chic*.

**Love Not Squandered**  
*by Eric W. Shoemaker*

Jeff checked into the Richmond Omni Hotel and then went to the bar for a quick drink. He hadn’t been in the city for years. After tomorrow’s presentation he planned to visit some of his special places. Over the top of his tumbler he saw two young women walk by. The tall lanky redhead drew his attention and the whiskey caught in his throat. It wasn’t HER, but the woman triggered deep memories. Damn, SHE was in his head again.

Her power over him still remained, even though they hadn’t spoken for over a decade. She was the woman he had loved beyond all measure, and lost. They last saw each other in August of 2002 when Gillian took a job out West. There wasn’t a day that she didn’t creep into his thoughts. He didn’t regret the decision he made.
Jeff and Gillian worked at the same business while going to college. Both had served in the military and were taking advantage of their educational benefits. He was a part-time graduate student who had just gone through a divorce. Gillian was an undergraduate and had recently walked out on a manipulative and emotionally abusive boyfriend. Both were vulnerable, Jeff more so, but he was focused on his job and emotionally distracted. They passed in hallways, but never shared any time.

One Friday evening Jeff attended a party put on by co-workers. Gillian was there and they were formerly introduced. Later, Gillian admitted to Jeff that she and her girlfriends had used the party to set a trap for him. Gillian had been interested in him for a while and had a plan. He had forgotten the kabuki dance associated with dating. His ex was not an aggressively sexual or sensual woman. Gillian was. In his mind, she was every man’s dream. In a matter of weeks they were inseparable.

He and Gillian lived together sharing love for good food, wine, the water, and special places along the Chesapeake Bay. It was a wonderful year. In August of 2000, Gillian matriculated into a full-time MBA program. Jeff continued to build his career. All went well until her job offers were all in the West. They talked and fought. The inevitable finally happened. She gave him an ultimatum about decisions he had to make if he wanted to be with her. He did not know how to respond. After an evening of silence, they broke up; she to pursue her career in the West, and he, his. Years passed and both built their lives apart. By September 2018, Jeff had married and divorced again.

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After concluding his conference appearance, Jeff went by the University bookstore to look for a souvenir T-shirt or coffee mug. While sorting through the rack of shirts his eye caught sight of a woman and his breath caught in his throat. It was HER! It was Gillian. His heart jumped in his chest. He stared at her. Gillian noticed Jeff. She paused and then directed a smile at him that signaled she was not going to pretend she didn’t see him.

Jeff collected himself, managed an awkward smile, and approached her.

“Hello Jeff,” Gillian said putting out her hand.

“Hello, yourself, Gillian” Jeff said. “I am so surprised to see you. What brings you here and to Richmond?” he said grasping her hand.

“Remember, I am an Alum of VCU too. I’m picking up a logo jacket for…ah, a friend of mine. I’m in town for my niece’s wedding this Saturday. Since my brother’s death she has had a hard time, now I think her life is turning around. You remember Ben don’t you?”

“Yes I do. I didn’t know he had died, I am so sorry.”

“Thank you. I can ask you the same question about your being in town.”

“I was invited to present at a Geographic Information System (GIS) conference, a bunch of software nerds, you know. I pulled it off this afternoon, it went well; I am flying back to Miami tomorrow.”

“Cool, you must have perfected that skill well beyond when we knew each other years ago. I remember you had a lot of trouble with GIS.”

“I did. Thanks for remembering.” Jeff was beginning to sense some awkwardness now that the usual pleasant-
ries had been exchanged.

After a short pause, Gillian asked, “How are you, Jeff?” Her tone of voice expressed genuine concern.

“I’m okay, Gillian; seems I like being married, but I’m not very good at it. Divorced again, no kids,” he said smiling and, as if to overwrite his marriage confession, quickly added, “You look great Gillian, still obviously working out and running,” trying to skip past a subject they had fought over before the breakup. “…Poor salesmanship…” he thought.

“Gillian, have you got plans for dinner?” he blurted out. “Maybe we can catch up a little more. Please say yes.”

Gillian seemed surprised by Jeff’s offer. She paused while sorting through a pile of jackets, and without looking up she replied, “That’s not possible; until the wedding it’s a kind of family reunion at my sister Clair’s house.”

Disappointed, he reached into shirt pocket for his business card. Handing it to her, “This is my cell number, if you change your mind, call or text me.”

They parted without a hug or handshake.

Gillian knew her family had no plans that evening. It was her better judgment that signaled not to accept Jeff’s dinner invitation. Then she remembered how boyishly pathetic he looked. What the heck, it was a free meal, and it was pizza night at Clair’s; not her favorite dinner dish. Gillian texted Jeff she was free for dinner and suggested a place special to both. He immediately responded.

“OK, ITS THE TOBACCO COMPANY RESTAURANT AT 8…” he texted back and added a smiley face.
Jeff remembered how the Shokhoe Slip restaurants had been among their favorite places in Richmond when they were together. He also remembered Gillian’s ultimatum he had chosen to ignore 15 years earlier. He was sure she had not forgotten that either.

***

Gillian took a sip from a cup of hot tea. Glancing out the window her thoughts played back their by-chance meeting, and what lay ahead tonight. Her thoughts went back to when she and Jeff were madly in love, how they devoured each other making love, and how often they laughed together. That was then. Her professional life was now at its peak. She was a city manager with a great retirement plan, but getting there the journey had not been simple.

***

The first challenge was to decide what to wear. Gillian had a closet full of smart conservative suits, but she was now over a thousand miles from her business trousseau. The clothes she brought for her nieces wedding consisted of two just above the knee length cocktail dresses and a floor length dress and matching heels. The rest were running clothes and very casual shorts and T-shirts like the outfit she was wearing when she ran into Jeff. She decided on the blue, V neck, short sleeve, pull-over botanical print cocktail dress she’d packed for the rehearsal dinner. In crafting her appearance Gillian was sensitive to the message it would or would not convey.

Glancing at her watch, Gillian noted it was 4:30. She had a few hours before meeting Jeff. Hurriedly Gillian changed into some running clothes and went out for a
run to think, and the secret she had been carrying.

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After confirming their date, Jeff opened his suitcase to inventory the choice of outfits he had for this reunion date with Gillian. His trip ensemble was planned around a single event and that event had passed along with the one outfit he brought. The suit Jeff had worn during the presentation had always reminded him of looking like a penguin. It especially did not meet his requirement for THIS evening. He wanted whatever he wore to be sporty, crisp and attractive. He realized he needed something else. He had at least three hours to come up with an outfit that would make him look like the most interesting man in the world. Grabbing the keys to his rental, he was out the door looking for the nearest mall.

***

Jeff walked the block from the Omni Hotel to The Tobacco Company Restaurant and purposely arrived early. Once inside, he went to the bar on the first-floor atrium and took a seat facing the door. He did not want to miss Gillian’s entrance, nor any time with her. He ordered an iced tea and waited. Reaching for the glass, Jeff noticed the white card stock label still attached to the right sleeve of his new blazer. Quickly he retrieved a small pen knife from his pocket and cleanly cut each of the 4 stitches and the label was gone. He did a visual of the newly acquired clothing netted on his trip to the mall - black dress shirt worn in an open collar, khaki trousers - for other telltale indicators. He was in the clear, grateful for an embarrassing moment avoided.

At 7:55, the restaurant hostess tapped Jeff’s shoul-
der. As he turned, she pointed to the second-floor tables that overlooked the bar and the first-floor atrium. Gillian stood by the second table, smiling and waving at him. She looked beautiful, her hair in a French braid, as he remembered she wore on special occasions. A smile came over his face. How did he miss her? He got up and waved back. They met on the second-floor landing and exchanged a friendly hug. It was a bit awkward, but, both thought it was a safe greeting; nothing that would portend anything beyond what it was.

Gillian was pleased. Part of her plan for the evening was her entrance; in this case, her non-entrance. She had the Uber driver drop her off at the restaurant a half hour early. She watched Jeff enter the restaurant and go to the bar. Then she people watched until just before she asked the hostess to let Jeff know she was there. She was a drama queen and knew she loved being unpredictable when the main attraction. She knew this was also a weakness but needed to feed something in her soul.

“You look beautiful,” Jeff said.

“Anything would have been better than the shorts, T-shirt, and ball cap you saw me in earlier today,” she demurred. “You look very handsome as a man in black. All this seems like yesterday; same set up, tables, and people enjoying each other’s company. I haven’t thought about the Tobacco Company for a long time.”

Theirs was a table for two, covered in white linen, silverware wrapped in matching napkins, and a small dinner table candle. The server handed each a menu and Jeff the wine list. “May I get you something from the bar?” she asked.
Jeff looked at Gillian, she at him.
“Are you still a Shiraz girl?” He asked. Gillian nodded.
“Give us a minute while we decide,” Jeff said to the young woman. She smiled and retreated from the table.
“Do they have something from Australia or Chile?” Gillian asked.
“Yes they do,” Jeff responded, showing Gillian the list.
“Ah, here’s one I recognize,” she said.
“Australian it is.”
Gillian ordered the wine and was tasked with the cork smelling and tasting ritual. Jeff was fascinated at its unfolding drama. Would she spit it on the floor? Would she delicately swallow the sip and smile? Awkward seconds passed, but with a smile she waived the server to pour the wine into their glasses. After the server left, Jeff held his glass and proposed a toast.
“Here’s to a lovely evening between old friends.” he said.
“Yes, old friends…” Gillian added.
Jeff tapped his glass against hers and took a drink of the wine. The wine went down easily. He opened his menu. He could feel the pleasant sensation of the wine begin to smooth over his nervousness. Gillian took a swallow of her wine, then a second, then drained her glass. Jeff refilled it which Gillian thanked with a smile and a nod.
Gillian’s plan for the evening was to clear the air. She hoped that would result in understanding versus more bad feelings or guilt focusing on who did what to whom.
She always found a couple glasses of wine to be helpful on these type occasions.

“As a transplanted easterner living in the high desert, seafood, that is, fresh affordable seafood like Chesapeake Bay oysters and crab, have been on my mind since I got here,” Gillian said scanning through the menu and taking another sip of her wine.

“I think we are both in luck. Tonight they have oysters, soft shells, and crab cakes on the menu,” Jeff said, draining his own glass. After refilling both glasses, he noticed they had gone through the bottle. Their server returned. He ordered a second bottle and gave her their dinner order.

“I would like a dozen oysters on the half shell for my appetizer and the crab cakes with the fried yellow tomato, grilled asparagus, and roasted butternut squash for my entrée…and blue cheese dressing on the side for my salad,” Gillian said with great gusto.

“I will have the oysters as well…and soft-shell crabs instead of the crab cakes; same dressing on my salad,” Jeff said with a smile, handing over the menus and wine list.

“Jeff, can we talk, really talk, about the years since we last saw each other?”

“Sure, I guess I have some questions for you too.”

Jeff was feeling the effects of the wine which he knew had always been their loosening agent for conversation and making love. He remembered that when they fought it was usually when there had been issues to discuss and after they consumed copious amounts of wine. He realized this possibility and hoped history would not repeat itself.
“You first,” Gillian said leaning slightly forward on her elbows, moving her wine glass in slow stationary circles by the stem with her thumbs and forefingers.

“Ok,” said Jeff. “When you left you agreed to, at least, exchange emails. After you left, there was dead silence. Nothing; I wrote you and emailed a month later trying to be pleasant and asked how things were going. As I recall, two days later an email came from you that did not have a subject or content. Then there was nothing. I think I emailed you once or twice more and later left a voicemail on your phone. I even contacted your sister Claire, but she never responded to me. After that, I assumed you did not want to talk to me and wanted me out of your life. After it all finally set in I felt hollowed out. But you have to know, Gillian, even after all the years we’ve been apart, even when I was married, my thoughts always returned to you.”

Jeff paused and wiped a tear from his cheek with his napkin. Gillian reached over and put her hand on his. Jeff felt the burden of consternation and guilt lighten, but remained silent, gazing at the flickering candle in the center of the table.

“Tell me about the woman you married,” she asked.

“She was you; I mean she had your same build, but a brunette. I met her in New York before I went to work out of the country. She loved to party. She was also divorced. We dated for a couple months and on Labor Day two years after we met, we took a trip to Las Vegas for the weekend. We got pretty loaded the last night there and, what the heck, decided to get married. And got married we did.”
The arrival of their oysters paused Jeff’s story. Their attention shifted to the delicacies that lay before them. With breaks for sips of wine and making sounds of delight it wasn’t until they finished and plates of empty shells were taken away that Jeff continued.

“After we got back from the weekend both of us decided getting married under the influence of alcohol was a mistake. We flew back to Las Vegas over the Columbus Day weekend and got a quickie divorce. That was 10 years ago. I’ve had off and on romances since then, but nothing serious.”

“What are you doing now? You said you were here to present at a conference.”

“I am retired, mostly. I bought back my active and reserve Army time combining it with my civil service was eligible for early retirement, and took it. I moved to my dream house in the Florida Keys. After a while, I got bored and began teaching with an on-line university in their School of Global Security. The conference I presented at today was co-sponsored by my university and the National Geospatial Agency. It’s a pretty good gig. I work wherever there is internet service.”

Their server reappeared and placed the salad course in front of them. Jeff and Gillian paused and began eating. Jeff seriously attacked his salad, but noticed Gillian did more pushing the salad around her plate than eating it.

“It’s been a long time Gillian, but I still remember when you have something on your mind.”

Gillian looked up and sighed.

“Jeff, I want to talk to you about what has been on
my mind for 15 years. John Stewart has been the man in my life for over 10 years. We never married. When we met, he was newly divorced; his children were grown and gone. We decided to never attempt marriage in the traditional sense. At first there was passion and excitement. He cooked wonderful gourmet meals for us, we travelled as a family. Then after his car accident two years ago our relationship changed. I know this sounds terrible. But being confined to a wheelchair and paralyzed from the waist down John became sullen, argumentative, and anal about everything. He now has to have 24-hour care. Lately, John expects me to report my every move while away from the house. However, despite our toxic relationship I feel a duty to him. I owe him a great deal, a very great deal.”

Jeff spoke up. “You should not have to live like that; didn’t you say he has grown children? Have you spoken with them about him? Wait, you mentioned a debt owed to him. It’s your house, you have a great career and live comfortably, what is the debt?”

“His son has offered to help get him into an assisted living facility. It’s time, but I don’t know if I am ready for that. Emotionally, he has aged well beyond his 60 plus years. My debt to him is not financial. It has to do with the support he gave to me during a very needy time in my life.” Gillian paused. She gulped the rest of the wine in her glass. After finishing it, Gillian’s gaze remained on her glass as she gripped the stem.

Jeff sat quietly to give her all the time she required. He felt he needed to do something to relieve the tension. He drained the remnants of his glass, quietly poured a
half a glass each, and waited. As if on cue, the server brought them their entrées. Gillian wiped her cheek and sat back in her chair surveying the crab cakes and vegetables. She repositioned her uneaten salad and then softly grasped his hand.

“Let’s enjoy this wonderful meal before it gets cold. When we are done, I will answer your questions about the phantom email and my debt to John, fair enough?” Jeff silently agreed by squeezing back and smiling.

Seeking to relieve the moment’s drama, he observed, “Your crab cakes make me wish I had ordered them instead. My soft shells really look good, but are a little small,” Jeff said as he pinched off a morsel of lightly sautéed butter and garlicky crab claw with the side of his fork and put it in his mouth. Simultaneously smiling and closing his eyes, “They are outrageous. I take it all back, smallish but excellent.”

With the last of her crab finished and a final swallow of wine, Gillian continued her story.

“If you would have noticed, the email that puzzled you was about 45 days after we last made love.”

With that, Jeff’s attention left his remaining food and focused on Gillian. His wine buzz suddenly vanished with anticipation of what may be coming next; especially when her premise was about the number of days since making love.

“I’ll jump to the end Jeff. I was pregnant.”

Although anticipating this revelation, Jeff sat transfixed on Gillian, stunned to silence. Then feeling it was his turn in the conversation…

“Pregnant, why didn’t you tell, me…what…?”
Gillian interrupted, “That was the mysterious email you got. I started to write about what to do, ask you what we should do, and about making a mutual decision. I then decided against it and then clicked “send” by mistake.”

Jeff’s gaze moved from Gillian to the table. Shaking his head as if to indicate “no, no,” reflecting the guilt about being absent in the life of a woman he loved, at a time when she needed him the most.

“I’ll jump to the end again, Jeff. I kept the baby. For the first couple of years my sister Clair helped me. You and I are parents of a very bright 15-year-old son. His name is Grant. He is named after my grandfather. The jacket I was looking for in the bookstore was for him.”

“Where is he now?”

“He’s at home taking care of John before and after school. That is where the debt comes in. John helped me raise Grant. He encouraged him to stay focused in school, was there with me when Grant went into puberty, he taught him to fish, hike, mountain bike, just enjoy the outdoors. Even now, after Grant also noticed John’s decline, he still remains close to him.”

Taking a gulp of his wine, Jeff laid his wrists on the table with his palms upright and asked, “Wow, why didn’t you complete that email, call me, reach out somehow?”

“I can’t give you an answer that makes any sense, Jeff. I didn’t let you know because of my immaturity, my stubbornness I guess. It was a long time ago. I was young. When I gave you the ultimatum it no doubt telegraphed to you I wanted you only on my own terms. But,
I expected you to fight back; to fight for me with me. You never did that. After I left came revelation of my pregnancy and then Grant.”

“Gillian, I didn’t know what you wanted me to say, the times I tried to contact you, to draw out what you wanted me to do.”

“For me, our differences were trumped by the pregnancy. I believed up until yesterday morning when I saw you again, that if I had told you about my pregnancy or our son, it would sound like I wanted something from you. I don’t.”

“Our son is a fine young man and I have told him the truth about his father. I told him you were a good man. I told him I loved you and you had loved me, but we gave each other up before knowing I was pregnant with him. I softened the reason we broke up just in case...”

“In case our lives crossed again? God, Gillian so many precious years squandered.” Jeff said reaching across the table.

“Maybe...you know I like plans and plans need to be forward looking. I never stopped thinking of you, but the years got in the way, my career got in the way. In thinking about it, maybe we were meant to meet today. I don’t know, Jeff.” Gillian said grasping his hands, then letting go to wipe tears from her eyes.

Again, their conversation was interrupted by the server.

“Have you saved room for dessert?” she asked as she gestured towards a cart of cakes, and pies behind her. Gillian and Jeff, irritated by the interruption, quickly glanced at the cart and then the server.
“No, we have not,” Jeff said, forcing a smile. We will have two of your Irish Coffees with heavy cream and then the check. Thanks.”

Gillian smiled at Jeff. “You remembered,” she said.

Jeff smiled back. “I never forgot,” he said in a steady voice. He never forgot all special restaurant dates always ended with Irish coffee topped with a thick sweet cream. It was their special night cap.

Their table was cleared of glasses and plates and their coffee was served. Gillian picked up hers, took a sip, and smiled.

“Jeff, can you forgive me?” she asked.

“There is nothing to forgive.”

He took a sip of the sweet hot drink. He licked the sweet cream from his upper lip and took another sip. After his third sip, he asked, “Can I meet Grant?”

“I would like you to meet our son.”

“When…then?”

“Let me give that some thought. Remember, I still work and they expect me to show up every day.” Gillian said with a smile.

They finished their coffee and paid the check. Outside the restaurant they walked to the curb without further conversation. Jeff broke the silence. “This evening has been monumental, Gillian. I confess to plotting to get you to my room for the evening. I can’t help it, I am a male, and we fantasize a lot. But tonight is enough.”

“You have not changed Mr. Nash.”

“Fair enough, Gillian. Let me know when I can meet Grant, okay?”

The Uber driver arrived and stopped curbside directly
in front of them. Without a word, Gillian reached for the door handle, and paused. Turning back to Jeff she gave him a hug and whispered in his ear, “Our love was not squandered in Grant. Since he was a toddler, I’ve seen you in him and see more of you in him every day. I’ll be in touch.”

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Several days of silence ensued and Jeff worried maybe Gillian had got cold feet and wouldn’t call him back. His fears vanished at 10:30 pm two weeks after their dinner date. From the kitchen counter, his phone chimed a text arrival. He rushed to pick it up. His heart jumped when he saw it was from Gillian. Sweet God, thank you, he thought. The text read: GRANT LOOKS FORWARD TO MEETING YOU. CALL ME THIS SATURDAY BETWEEN NOON AND 2 PM YOUR TIME TO DISCUSS. G.

**BIO: Eric W. Shoemaker** is a member of the Charles County Chapter of the Maryland Writers’ Association. His genre is fiction and fantasy. He self-published a fantasy/vampire novel called *The Emperor of Carysfort Reef* in 2013. In the fall of 2017 he published *The Blue Tractor* in the College of Southern Maryland’s Connections Literary Magazine. His essay “License to Drive” was published in *Pen in Hand*, MWA’s Literary Journal in July 2018. During his many careers Eric has published over 20 articles; book reviews; conference presentations; and monographs.
As I stormed out of my boss's office, only one thing seems clear, I need to think. So, I slip out the fire escape door, down the stairs, and then head for the 7-Eleven. Maybe I have enough change for coffee. Fumbling in the front pocket of my jeans, I pull out a wadded up five-dollar bill, three quarters, and a penny. The penny slips between my fingers, dropping onto the sidewalk with a muted ping before rolling into the gutter. I don’t stop. Damn! Let it bring somebody else some luck cuz I sure as hell ain’t hav’n any!

When I reach the corner at the end of the first block, I cross the street without even breaking stride. A white stick figure on the traffic signal flashes at me. I don’t blame Bell; he doesn’t make the final decisions…but I sure as shit worked my ass off for the past month. Bell probably just wanted to see how much work he could squeeze outta me…he damn near squeezed me dry! It sucks! I stop in front of the store, yank the glass door open, and step inside.

Two old ladies are at the counter, one paying while the other chats up the cashier. Both have snacks and a paper. I make my way to the coffee stand and get my cup of Joe, even as my gaze bores holes into the back of one of the ladies. Well actually, into her coat. The wool is a deep shade of red. Looks kinda nice with her white hair. She’s a little wisp of a thing, not more than five feet tall.
At six feet two inches, I tower over her. Memories of my 
grandmother come to mind. This old gal smells of gar-
denias…I’m allergic to gardenias. I give a little cough, 
clearing my throat. Finally, they finish paying and totter 
towards the door of the shop. I step up to the cashier.

“What ya having?”

“Coffee,” I shoot back, my voice sounding scratchy. 
I’m still trying to wrap my head around a major disap-
pointment.

Arlyn and I have been working this story together for over 
three weeks. I worked my fingers to the bone, set up 
interviews, did the leg work, rechecked the facts, and 
pulled together the research evidence. I watch as the 
cashier rings up my purchase. Yes, Arlyn wrote copy, but so 
did I, and I proofed every dang bit of it!

The voice of the cashier interrupts: “$1.93.” I hold 
out a five to pay and push the spare change in my hand 
deep into my pocket. The cashier counts change from the 
fiver back at me. I shove that into the other pocket. Then 
I grab my steaming cup and move on.

I took the photos, but Arlyn got the byline. She got 
all the credit because it was her lead, initially. She had a 
connection in the mayor's office, which gave her a front 
row seat to the hearings on the new water and sewage 
treatment facility. I got the lowdown on the environmen-
tal issues: raw sewage leaking into groundwater due to 
aging pipes and infrastructure. She told Bell she had only 
called me in for photo support. Right! She was in over her 
head on the technical and legal stuff. But, upstairs 
decides all I should get is credit for the photos.

Then Bell lets fly, "The piece was impressive!"
So good, in fact, it got Arlyn a big promotion. They made her assistant managing editor of the paper. Now she has even more clout upstairs. I hear my boss’s voice telling me, "Look, she deals with the folks upstairs most of the time anyway...." Those lousy stinking SOBs! I should’ve told him that she’s been sleep’n with one of em for the past six months! But that would just sound like sour grapes; as if he couldn’t see for himself what’s pretty God damned obvious to everyone else around here! Meanwhile, I’m being shifted over to the North Laurel Section. Well, I refuse to report to her. I’ll only answer to Bell. Outside, I take a few swallows as I make my way back to the office. What a piece of work, I muse.

The Moss Building is a four-story brick and stone structure running for half a block down Main Street. The print shop, where in the "old days" the actual printing presses were housed, is in the basement of the building along with the photo labs, which occupy a far back corner. Executive offices monopolize the third floor. My work space is on two.

“Hi, Sax,” a skinny brunette calls, smiling coyly as she looks up from her desk behind the reception counter. I smile, ignoring the flutter of her over done eyelashes, and head for the elevator. No time to play honey.

My office is actually more of a cubicle, one of those small scooped out areas like the ones car salesmen use to make customers sweat. A black computer screen blinks at me from the desktop, which curves neatly around the side of the cubicle partition and along the back wall. A
speaker phone lies lost somewhere underneath a paper grave.

I set the coffee on the desk and slide out of my bomber jacket and drape it along the back of my chair. Then I plop down. Four years of college and three years of busting my ass gets me all this...$38,000 a year plus bennies, and deadlines; can’t forget the deadlines. A high-pitched ringing distracts me; I fumble around for the phone. “Saxby McKree,” I grumble into the receiver.

“Sax, I need you in on this meeting. Conference Room. NOW!” Bell’s baritone thunders.

“Right,” I bristle, slamming the phone down. Then I grab pen, pad, and cup, and I head out again.

The conference room is on level two at the opposite end of the building. As I enter, I toss the now empty cup into a trash bin. Around the sleek oblong conference table sit six of my closest colleagues. Bell stands at the head of the table, shirt collar open and sleeves rolled up; his carefully cultivated beer gut flops over his belt. There’s an empty spot on the right side of the room. I saunter over and slip into the chair, eyeing my fellow reporters. Some nod. Lindsey Smythers, who covers East Laurel, winks at me; photographer Troy Griffin gives me the thumbs up.

“Glad you could make it,” Gabe Bell drolls sarcastically. The sound of good-natured snickering ripples around the room.

“Yeah, me too,” I quip.

“We’re discussing coverage of this weekend’s Fall Fest. You might wanna plan on showing up, on time,
Saxby. Ok?” Gabe continues with his green eyes fixed on me.

“I’ll make a note of it,” I say. My voice is nonchalant. Open laughter breaks the tension.

“Mike, you take Saturday. Maggie, you’re covering Sunday; 5 p.m. is when McKree here takes over...on both nights!” Bell stresses the point. "The Fest is being held at Gude Park, just like last year’s, got it?” He peers over his spectacles at me. I nod and make notes on my pad.

“Everybody covers opening day, Friday. Questions?” he asks scanning our faces. “Troy will split photography with McKree.” He looks at me and says sarcastically, “So, bring a proper camera as backup for Troy, not just your cell phone.”

Clearing my throat, I say, “Done.”

Most of the time, Bell’s comments, biting as they might be, really don’t mean much. I blow them off. Today, however, they rub me wrong. I let my face show annoyance. Why do I feel caught, like I was having sex with a married woman?

“Ok, everybody, on Monday, McKree takes over the North Laurel Section." Applause. "We’re done here,” Bell announces. “Sax, you stay.” Chatter erupts as the room empties. I remain seated, staring down at my note pad.

“Look, Sax,” Gabe begins, “I did the best I could. I put in a good word for you. But upstairs didn’t go for it. Get over it, kid. You’ll get your shot.”

“When? When do I get my shot? How long will it take around here? You think it might happen before I get to be your age? Cuz, my legs just can’t compete with the
skirt brigade, ya know...”

“Oh, get off it! Arlyn’s as good as anyone, and she’s worked just as hard! You know it!”

“Do I?”

“What’s that supposed to mean? She has seniority! Check your attitude, or you’re outta here! You hear me?”

Bell is hot now; his face flushed. He seldom, if ever, threatens to fire anyone. I back off. “Alright, alright…but don’t I get something for all the extra hours I’ve put in? I need something to keep me going....”

“What do you want?”

“A bonus or maybe an all-expense paid trip to Cancun,” I tease. He chuckles.

“You’re on your own for Cancun; if I can get a little green for your wallet, you’ll get it,” he agrees. “Just remember, we’re struggling. Internet is killing the newspaper business. You know that.” He runs a hand over the back of his gray head as he waddles out of the room. I follow.

We make our way down the corridor. Gabe continues, “I understand. You got dreams, kid.”

No, Gabe, you can't even imagine the dreams I’ve got! I bite my tongue before the thought escapes my lips.

"Look, the job you did covering that kid’s murder… the funeral…it was noticed. Story touched a nerve with the boss; she’s good friends with the mayor’s wife.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Yeah…anyway, she agreed. The next opening that comes up, you’ll get first shot.”

“So, the North Laurel section's a consolation prize, and what exactly will be the next shot?” I can’t keep the
sarcasm out of my voice.

“Look, it’s the best I can do right now. You’re young; you have some experience under your belt now. You could go anywhere. I know you can handle pressure. And you’re good. I can get in touch with a few people…”

I nod my head, “Thanks,” I say. “One of these days I may take you up on it and dig myself out of this hole!”

“You do that! And, one more thing,” Gabe stops and turns to face me.

“What?”

“Attitude is exactly why you didn’t get this promotion! Some of the people upstairs think you have an attitude about women. You need to deal with it because you really are digging a hole for yourself here.”

“…Attitude?”

“Yeah, I couldn’t get them past it.”

“What do you mean?”

Gabe sighs, “Try actually caring about women, as people, for a change.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I look indignant.

“Think about it,” Gabe rumbles as he walks away.

Back at my desk, the conversation with Bell keeps replaying in my head. It’s 3:47 PM. What attitude towards women? I can’t imagine. Exactly what did Bell mean? What attitude? I like women as much as the next guy. I’ve even had a few female friends over the years. Granted, some were a little butch, and I didn’t hang with them after hours, but I’d say we were friends. It's getting so a guy can't say or do anything anymore, about anything! People have really gotta lighten up....
I park my boots on my desk, lean back in my chair, and close my eyes, forcing myself to focus on the relaxation technique my last girlfriend taught me. My last girlfriend… I had to get outta that mess. She was about to get serious on me. I refocus and deliberately tighten each muscle in my body, one at a time, and then relax it again. Breathing deeply, I push all thoughts from my conscious mind, as I slowly exhale, feeling the release of tension. Eventually, my blood pressure comes back down to normal. I don’t have a problem with women. I have a problem with Arlyn.

I must have dozed off, and when I wake up, it’s well after 5 p.m., way past quitting time.

As I leave work, my stomach rumbles, reminding me I haven’t eaten in a while.

Red Hot & Blue is at the opposite end of Main Street. At the bar are a couple of guys I used to play D&D with several years ago before adulting got serious. I head over to them as they wave hello and order a round of beers. To the bartender, I say, “Sam Adams.” He nods and moves off.

“Hey, man! Good to see you!” Paul Brewster shakes my hand. “It must be a year or more since you’ve been around.”

“Yeah!” Greg Jenkins echoes, grabbing my hand as soon as Paul lets it go.

“Actually, it’s been about two.” I agree with a wry grin. “What are you two doing here? This isn’t your usual spot.”

“Ahh!” Paul says, shrugging a pair of scrawny shoul-
ders. “Greg got married last spring. His wife, Kit, waitresses here. We’re just waiting for her to get off work; we came to pick her up.”


Nodding, I say, “Yeah. Let’s not go there tonight.” The scowl on my face underscores the point.

They chuckle and lift their bottles. We all say, “Cheers!” and take a few swigs.

By the time we finish the round, Kit saunters up. She’s large and busty with dark eyes. She’s tall for a woman. I guess she’s probably close to my own age, mid-twenties. Kit’s expression tells me she’s the take charge kind.

No messing with this bitch.

She scans me up and down. “Let’s go!” she says. Her command, saturated with contempt, is directed at Greg. Paul cocks a bushy eyebrow at me, grits his teeth, but manages a grin. Lifting his chin, he squares his shoulders—pulling himself up to his full seven feet. I see in his eyes how glad he is that Kit isn’t his wife. Short, stocky Greg, on the other hand, snaps to.

“Sure thing, babe!”

We set our empty bottles on the bar and flag down the bartender. Paul pays the tab.

“Thanks for the beer,” I call after them. “Owe ya one.”

“Bring it to game night,” Paul calls back, “second and third Fridays of the month. Like always. Greg’s
house. You know the way.”

I just smile as I think, Oh no! Not me! Bitch like that’ll suck all the fun outta the game. I don’t roll with bitches. The realization surprises me. I watch till they’re gone and then head towards the hostess station to order take out.

Early Monday morning, I swing by Arlyn’s new space, flash her a grin, and offer a thumbs up as I pass by her door. In the split second it took to shift my gaze back to the hallway, Bell appears outta nowhere, coming from the opposite direction. Nodding, he says, “Morning!” I keep walking.

Later my publisher, Ella Moss, wants to see me in her office. Her domain takes up a good chunk of the third floor, which is where I now stand nervously shifting my weight from one foot to the other while adjusting my tie— something I seldom wear. The clean line of my freshly pressed khakis and blue cotton shirt make me look neat, if not entirely professional, or at least that’s my hope.

While working for the paper, I’ve had few opportunities to see, let alone, interact with Ella Moss. My mind quickly runs through what little I know about her: She’s a widow. Michael Moss, her husband of 20 odd years, died unexpectedly about five years ago. Rumor had it; he’d been killed in a sky diving accident. Anyhow, they started this paper together maybe ten years ago. After his death, Ella decided to run the place herself. The Mosses have money and deep roots in the Baltimore-Washington metropolitan area. There’s a daughter in there some-
where, I think. The sound of a door opening demands my attention as her assistant ushers me into her office. Life’s a game, I muse, and this game’s on….

Ella Moss is a very well put together package sitting behind a modern style teak desk. She rises as I enter the room and steps around her desk to greet me. In that instant, I realize I have seriously underestimated how interesting a woman of her age can be. Reaching out, I shake her extended hand with its long, tapered, perfectly manicured nails.

“Ms. Moss,” I say, the words gliding off my tongue as I smile.

Ella is professionally dressed in a gray wool pantsuit. Her pearl stud earrings and a solitary pearl necklace are the only nod to femininity.

“Mr. McKree, it’s good to see you!” she says, her tone, gracious. “Thank you for making time in your busy schedule.” She smiles, meeting my eyes with a pair of dark brown ones. Ella is medium height for a woman and slender, with classic features. “Please sit down,” she says motioning towards a small sitting area at the other end of the room. I take a seat on a brown leather sofa, while she settles into a chair across from me. My eyes scan the room.

She continues, “I wanted to personally congratulate you on transitioning to the North Laurel Section, quite a remarkable achievement for someone who has only just begun their career.” She pauses.

“Thank you, ma’am,” I say and give a polite nod, as my gaze catches a photo hanging on the wall just behind her.
“I very much appreciate all your hard work and dedication to the Ledger. A bonus should appear in your next paycheck.”

“Thank you again, ma’am.” I continue to stare at the photo of a stunningly youthful Ella Moss arm in arm with Katharine Graham outside of the Washington Post building in downtown D.C.

“She was quite a woman,” I remark.

Ella tracks my gaze, turning in her seat. “Oh, yes. I was just an intern then. Katharine took an interest in me and became my mentor. She was very special.”

“I’ll say,” My voice is low.

Turning back to me, she says, “We shared a commitment to a free press and the right of the people to know. It runs deep in me, Mr. McKree. There is tremendous power in words, most expressly the written word.”

I let my gray eyes come back to rest on Ella with new insight into her family’s deep roots in the area and a much deeper appreciation for my publisher. I take in the blonde highlights running through her stylishly short dark hair and then grow self-conscious about the unruly mop of dark curls covering my own head. Her face holds few traces of age; in fact, it’s hard to believe she is a day over forty.

Her voice fills with intensity. “All over the world, the print news is in a battle for survival. The Internet is swallowing everything in its path. But I believe there is still a place for print news. This is a battle we must win. Don’t you agree?”

A dose of stark, cold reality dawns as I realize this is no game. In that instant, something within me, some
deep-seated restlessness grows still. Recognition of the truth strengthens my resolve. I unequivocally concur, “We must.”

Her voice is more relaxed, “Gabe tells me you are one of the most talented reporters he has ever worked with. He believes you have great potential.”

“Well, em,” I shift in my seat uncomfortably. “I appreciate his confidence in me.”

Pointedly, she says, “Mr. McKree, you know Lars Nessan, our managing editor?”

I nod.

“Lars will be retiring come summer. I do hate to lose good people, but Lars really feels it is time for him to step down.” She sighs. “Anyway, Gabe Bell will be taking over Lars’ position, which means there will likely need to be some other personnel changes as well.” She pauses.

“Hmm.”

She continues, “I believe strongly in the mission of the Ledger. In our business, commitment is key, now more than ever.”

“I understand.”

She adds, “While I can’t promise anything, I favor promoting from within an organization.” She waits a moment, focusing on my face, “I’m sure you understand?”

“I believe I do. Thank you for sharing that information with me, Ms. Moss. I will keep it in mind.”

“Good. Good. You do that.” Rising, she offers a hand, “Well, thank you, again, for coming. I’m so glad we had this opportunity to chat.”

I exit, fully aware that while I got what I’d asked for,
Ella Moss had clearly out maneuvered me. Heading back to my space, I wonder, am I losing it? Since when did acting grown up seem so normal?

**BIO: Carol Baldwin**, pen name **CB Anslie**, has been writing non-fiction her entire career. She is currently an academic writing tutor at Howard Community College. Several of her poems and short stories have appeared in *The Muse*, the literary & arts journal of Howard Community College. *Flashback*, a short story, was published in *Pen In Hand*.

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**Flash Fiction**

**Ain’t No Place for Beauty**

*by Tamar Anolic*

U.S. Marshal L.S. Quinn shivered as the wind whipped through his long black hair. He wrapped his coat tighter around himself. Quinn rode his horse out in front of the Marshals’ wagon full of prisoners, but he still saw the wagon’s movement out of the corner of his eye. The spring’s rains had amplified the melting snow, and the ground was so soft that the mules pulling the wagon were having trouble with their own hoofs, let alone the heavy load they pulled.

Next to Quinn, U.S. Marshal Jake Granter rode
silently. Jake’s eyes were resolutely on the road ahead of them, but Quinn felt his insides quiver. Then Quinn felt as though the talons of an eagle were digging into his back. He turned around to look at the prisoners behind him. Both eyes of the Cheyenne warrior they had captured bore into him like black embers of a dying fire. A wound on his face, made with the butt of a rifle, was purple and red. The wound was still open, and blood and puss ran down the warrior’s face.

The sun disappeared behind the clouds, taking with it any warmth that the early spring morning may have held.

Quinn looked at Jake. “Maybe we should get him some medical attention,” he said. “That wound is an ugly one.”

“This ain’t no place for beauty, Quinn,” Jake replied. “He killed two soldiers.”

“The Army is hostile to the Indians, and those soldiers were on Cheyenne land.”

Jake shrugged as the convoy continued moving forward. “We only bring in the prisoners,” he said. “Disputes like the one you’re talking about are for the courts to settle.”

“Courts that favor one side of the dispute.”

Finally, Jake turned and looked at Quinn. His brown eyes fixed on Quinn’s steel gray ones. “You’ve only been a marshal for six months, Quinn,” Jake said. “But eventually, you’ll have to learn that we aren’t the ones that make the law. We just enforce it.”

Quinn clenched his teeth and stared forward again. Much as he tried, he could not shut out the memories of his hunger from those six months earlier, nor his fear of
the impending winter. I was driven away from my own home on the high plains and east towards civilization and paying jobs, he thought.

Next to Quinn, Jake continued speaking. “All of this has only been increasing in the six years since the War Between the States ended,” he said, gesturing to the wagon of prisoners behind them. “And it’ll only get worse as settlers continue moving west. We Marshals will get called on more and more.”

Quinn frowned. “Maybe this whole country isn’t a place for beauty,” he said.

“All of man-made beauty, that’s for sure,” Jake agreed. “It’s just the land that’s beautiful, especially out west.”

Quinn’s frown abated. “That’s certainly true,” he said. “At least those westward settlers have that much to look forward to.”

**BIO: Tamar Anolic**’s short stories have been published or are forthcoming in *The Copperfield Review, The Sandy River Review, The Helix, Foliate Oak, and Evening Street Review*. Her books include *The Russian Riddle*, a nonfiction biography, and the novels *Through the Fire: An Alternate Life of Prince Konstantin of Russia, Triumph of a Tsar*, and *The Last Battle*. 
His name is irrelevant. He doesn’t deserve recognition for the crimes he commits against women. There wasn’t an instant revelation in his heart after he tried to make me his victim. Yes, he only tried. Because I am not his victim. I am not a scared little girl squirreling away from the world, cowering in shame and sorrow. I am a survivor.

This is my story. He might be a part of it, it might have lit the fire, but the fire he lit is me. He doesn’t deserve recognition.

I’ve made the difficult choices. The ones no adult should have to make. And I made them as a teen. I do not say this to toot my own horn. To seek exaltation for choices I had to make. I made these choices because I was forced to. I had no other option. Life presented a circumstance, I chose the selfish reason. I made the choice. I survived it.

And you can too.
Your story may be worse than mine, in fact, it probably is. But I’m here to tell you it gets better. It does. Somehow, some way, you grow. You might have started out as a broken and battered caterpillar. Your chrysalis may have been violated while you were still young and vulnerable, but somehow you make it out better. You are a survivor. You are a beautiful butterfly and you will soar.

We live in a rough time. Sexual assault survivors are questioned why.

We want to know why too.
Why did you choose me?
Why my career?
Why my innocence?
Why my youth?

I was young, seventeen, when my cocoon was broken into. You may have been younger, you may have been older. The violation was traumatizing for you regardless of your age.

I was assaulted by a man I called friend. And he was a man. I didn’t know how much older he was for years. Ten years older. I was seventeen, he was twenty-seven; a monster.

We both worked at the local burger place. He flipped them, I rang them up. He was everything I needed when I needed him to be something. I wanted an out. To rebel against my overbearing mother.

I thought he was kind. Until we were alone. Then I discovered the truth.

Do you know what it’s like to be threatened if you say no? To fight it, I would be hurt. To accept it, repulsed.

He took advantage. He was a monster.
He will always be a monster.
But he is not my monster.
Because I am not the victim. I am the survivor.
You question women, asking why they keep their silence.
We have our reasons. Some are ashamed, some scared.
But my reason? My reason is to protect.
He is a monster. He changed my life. He gave me the greatest gift I’ve ever had.
He gave me strength through the dark times. He gave me my reason for silence. He gave me pain, he gave me joy. He gave me angst and peace. He gave my light and dark. Fear and victory. Doubt and confidence. Hate I overcame, pain I endured. Strength. Growth.
And love. Endless love.
A sweet, bundle. A tiny wriggling girl.
When you question the survivor for her silence.
Think of who she protects.

The Immigrant Experience
by Charles Ota Heller

“Goddamn immigrant freak!” snarled the high school football coach, after watching me, a 15-year-old kid, kick field goals from the 30-yard line. He dismissed me from the team because, as a recent soccer-playing refugee from Europe, I kicked the ball with my instep. In 1951, Americans booted the ball “straight-on,” with their toes.
The little man was not about to let an immigrant freak contaminate his locker room with European customs. Perhaps not as devastating as being called a rapist or a criminal by a presidential candidate, the coach’s insult nevertheless stung and reminded me that I would have to work harder and think smarter than the natives, while conforming to their ways.

Like most refugees, my parents and I came to America penniless, frightened, and with great expectations. Less than three years after the end of WWII, during which we had lost 25 family members, the government of Czechoslovakia was taken over by the Communists. Like today’s terrorized refugees, my parents were faced with a choice: stay and face the loss of freedom, imprisonment, or even death—or flee. To a person fortunate enough to have been born in America, the choice may seem clear. It isn’t. It takes an enormous amount of fortitude to leave behind one’s material possessions, relatives, friends, language, a way of life, and to start from nothing.

We escaped across the border with all our worldly possessions in three suitcases. Due to my father’s wartime service in the British army, we could have gone immediately to any United Kingdom country. Instead, my parents chose suffering in refugee camps, in hopes of receiving visas to the United States.

“America is a land of opportunity,” my father explained to me. “Only there will you be able to become whatever you wish, as long as you work hard. It’s a land of immigrants. That’s what makes America unique in the world—and great.”
I spoke two words of English when we arrived in the summer of 1949: “sank you.” Three months later, I was the only immigrant in the eighth grade of Alexander Hamilton school in Morristown, New Jersey. Because the Nazis had not permitted me to attend school during the war, and since we had spent the past 15 months in refugee camps, I had a total of two-and-a-half years of formal schooling, compared to my classmates’ eight or nine years.

However, I do not recall ever feeling sorry for myself, or even of considering myself inferior or inadequate. My father had spent more than five years fighting the Nazis, while my mother had suffered in a slave labor camp. After the war, they had a mere two-and-a-half years to recover our family’s properties and to enjoy freedom. When the Communists came, they gave up everything—their material possessions, their citizenship, their friends, their culture—in order to accept America’s invitation to live in peace and to give their son, me, the opportunity to chase the proverbial American Dream. I could not disappoint them.

Fast-forwarding to today, a movement to diminish America’s greatness seems to be gaining momentum. Politicians and their cheering followers insult immigrants and work to shut our nation’s doors to them. They claim that we have too many of our own problems to be able to absorb thousands of refugees. The latter, they say, would take the jobs that should go to Americans. To be sure, we have problems: income inequality, poverty, guns, crime. But blaming these on immigrants is reminiscent of Hitler blaming Germany’s troubles on the Jews.
My father did not take anyone’s job. Once the owner and CEO of a major Czech company, he began life here as a lowly pattern-cutter, a job no one wanted. My educated and sophisticated mother did not steal the job of a native when she started as a cleaning lady and later progressed to that of a seamstress in a brassiere factory. Both took advantage of America’s generosity and liberalism: when they retired, my dad was one of the top executives at the world’s largest sportswear manufacturer and Mother was an associate scientist at a large pharmaceutical company.

I took no one’s job. I earned three degrees in engineering and, as an entrepreneur, I built companies that employed many people. As a venture capitalist, I helped others start and grow businesses that produced hundreds of jobs. I am not unique—not by any stretch. Immigrants are twice as likely as native-born to start new businesses. And 40% of Fortune 500 companies were formed by immigrants or their children.

Immigrants are not a burden. We pay more in taxes than we ever claim in benefits. We start new companies and thus create jobs for others. We enlarge the labor force and increase consumer demand. Those among us who are less educated and less skilled tend to work jobs that natives don’t want to take on.

I can only hope that voices of enlightened Americans—those who not only understand the economic benefits of immigration, but who believe that taking in human beings in distress is what this country has always done—will drown out the insults and bravado of the haters and birthers. That is the America about which
I dreamed as a 12-year-old in a refugee camp. That is the nation which allowed me to chase, and realize, the American Dream. That is the America I wish for my grandchildren.

**BIO: Charles Ota Heller** is the author of *Prague: My long Journey Home; Name Droppings: Close Encounters with the Famous and Near-famous; Ready, Fire, Aim! An Immigrant’s Tales of Entrepreneurial Terror*. Currently, he is working on a coming-to-America memoir, *Cowboy from Prague*. He lives in Annapolis, Maryland, with his wife Sue.

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**508 Wrightsville**  
*by James Brewster*

Emily and I had gone at it again and I had left her sitting on the bed, fuming and furious. I had clearly indicated that she was stupid and she had told me she couldn’t trust my decisions because I was not wise. Downstairs in the den, I replayed in my mind why I was right and reviewed every stupid thing she had ever done since we were married. This was not the first time we’d done this in our years of marriage, but tonight, if a lawyer had been handy with divorce papers, I just might have signed them.

As I whined to God about Emily, I realized I sounded just like Adam in the Garden of Eden when he complained to God, “The woman YOU (my emphasis) put
here with me. . .” In Adam’s case, he had a valid point. He was not responsible for his choice of bride. God created the selection and told Adam she was his. His initial, “Wow!” stated as (bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh) soon turned into whining after eating the apple. However, Adam knew without a doubt that it was God’s plan that they be together.

The first husband and I had several things in common. We both whined about the woman that God gave us. My initial “Wow!” upon meeting Emily turned into whining sometime after our wedding. Unlike Adam, I could suck my thumb and think I could have married my high school sweetheart, but like Adam, there was no doubt in my mind that God arranged our meeting and meant for Emily and me to be together.

The divine path to our meeting began in early 1979 in Wilmington, NC, where I was a new Ensign stationed on the Coast Guard Cutter Northwind. My fiancée and I had decided to attend a charismatic church. With address in hand we turned east onto Wrightsville Ave, driving slowly, looking for 508 and the church at that location. We noticed and passed a big Baptist church on the right. Street numbers were even on the left side. We counted 500, 502, 504, and 506, passed a vacant lot, and drove through an intersection. After the intersection, the numbers continued climbing . . . 510, 512, etc. No number 508.

“Turn around and go back,” my fiancée said. I did and the pattern reversed. 512, 510, an intersection, the vacant lot, 506, 504, 502 . . .

“It’s got to be here,” I said. “I know the address is
correct.” I turned east again with the same results. Retracing the route didn’t change the situation. It was now 11:05 by the car clock. “It’s after 11:00,” I said. “Let’s go to the church we passed back there.”

We did.

My fiancée and I did not get married and she moved back home. I continued to attend the Baptist church. Several months later, the Youth Ministries Pastor stopped me after a Sunday service and invited me to the church’s Career and Singles event the following Saturday. When my date and I arrived at the event, we were met at the door by a college-age woman who said, “Hi,” handed each of us a sheet of paper, and explained it was an ice-breaker exercise so people could get to know each other. She was wearing a Khaki outfit, had green eyes, and introduced herself as Emily. I had never met an Emily before and immediately liked her name.

Her green eyes captivated me and I looked at her whenever I could. Turns out she couldn't keep her eyes off me either. We sat at separate tables for the ice-breaker and Bible study, but I looked up constantly at her and noticed she kept looking up at me. During volleyball, I made sure I was on the opposite team so I could keep looking at her. When the event ended, I took my date home and returned to my ship. Through a shipmate’s girlfriend, I got Emily’s number and called that night. She answered on the first ring and agreed to meet me for church the next day. I tossed and turned all night repeating her name. We sat together in church and went to a park that afternoon. She plucked an Azalea blossom,
stuck it behind her ear, and I was hooked. In June of the next year, we married.

While this recounting of our meeting and marriage has a certain “Hallmark Movie” ring to it, there is nothing in it to indicate it was divinely ordained until you hear, as Paul Harvey says, “. . . the rest of the story.”

When Emily and I return to Wilmington to see family, I usually drive Wrightsville Ave and we count the street numbers looking for number 508. The even numbers follow their expected pattern, 500, 502, 504, and 506, a church at 508, an intersection, and after the intersection, the numbers continue to climb 510, 512, etc. When I retrace the route, the pattern holds true; 512, 510, an intersection, a church at 508, then 506, 504, 502. . . Every time, we find a church at #508.

The church that we find at 508 and was a “vacant lot” when I went looking for it in 1979, had been built well before 1979, was standing that day, and is still very visible and operating today. This is the most significant of the proofs we have that God arranged our meeting and meant for Emily and I to be together. The second is that we noticed and attended the Baptist church. Third is that the Youth Ministries Pastor purposely played matchmaker in inviting me to the Career and Singles event. He and his wife wanted Emily and I to meet and knew, with Emily as his helper, our meeting would be casual and natural. Fourth is that Emily does not have and never has had green eyes. However, the most important divine proof is number five when, at midnight, I impetuously placed my call to Emily. She was just returning home and caught the phone on the first ring. I shudder to think
how it would have gone if I had wakened her hard-working Southern Baptist father . . .

So, like Adam, there was no doubt in my mind that God meant for Emily and me to be together.

As I thought on Adam’s complaint, I noticed that there was an important seed of comfort in his sentence. When he doubted God’s wisdom in their union and feared for the future of his marriage, he could take comfort from the knowledge that God created their union and therefore was interested in it surviving. He could have hope for his future.

As I repeated Adam’s whine, I too knew there was an important seed of comfort in the sentence. I also could take comfort from the knowledge that God created our union and therefore was interested in it surviving. I could have hope for our future.

I took a deep breath and did what I do every time I leave Emily sitting on the bed, fuming and furious. I recited the catechism of the miracles that brought us together:

1) The church at 508 Wrightsville existed, but was hidden,
2) We noticed and attended the Baptist church,
3) The Youth Ministries Pastor planned for Emily and I to meet;
4) Emily has never had green eyes - ever;
5) Emily was just coming in the door at midnight, when I phoned.

So, even if a lawyer had been in the den with divorce papers I would not have signed them. I clearly knew that
God called us to be together, so we had better work this out.

We always do.

**BIO: James Burd Brewster** is the author of *Uncle Rocky, Fireman, Officer Jack,* and *EMT Morales* series of children’s picture books. Jim has been published in *Pen-In-Hand* and the College of Southern Maryland’s literary magazine, *Connections.* He is the Communications Chair for the Maryland Writers’ Association. His current project is to republish *The Personal Recollections of Private John Henry Cammack,* the recounting of the service of his grandfather’s grandfather in the Civil War.
(On a lacquered Chinese desk placed against the far wall of the den is a lit Tiffany lamp. It is evening. Two loveseats, placed parallel to the sidewalls, face each other between them a rectangular coffee table. Donald, a man in his early forties, is seated on the loveseat to the left. Blades of grass are stuck in the folds of his trouser cuffs and at the bottom of his glossy black leather shoes. On the opposite sofa sits his wife Debbie, a few years younger than him. She is seen doing her nails. A large elegant handbag is visible at her feet. The medium sized TV on a side table is tuned to CNN.)

**Donald:** *Looking over the top of the New York Times he has been reading* There is a rabbit in our yard. I was chasing it before I came in.

**Debbie:** I suppose that chase will be on the ten o’clock news? Should I switch to WBAL?

**Donald:** Won’t make it! It is not #MeToo news.

**Debbie:** That’s a relief. Ha! Ha!
Donald: Ha! Ha! what! It was quite a chase, but news of drones flying into attics with the neighbors’ pajamas will chase my rabbit off the newsworthy list.

Debbie: So what about the rabbit? Did you out-rabbit the rabbit?

Donald: Did you know that a drone can be as small as a camera and as large as a 707? The drone operators wiggle the control sticks all day long! Do they get time to do their nails on their lunch break? *(Hiding behind the New York Times)*

Debbie: Now you have me really curious.

Donald: *(Sitting up straight and slamming the Newspaper on the coffee table)* He is dead!

Debbie: *(Alarmed)* Who is dead?

Donald: I don’t know what to do with him.

Debbie: *(With a sigh of relief)* Oh! Bury him.

Donald: With all the pesticides I fed him? Should I give him a citric acid shower first?

Debbie: Much good that will do him.

Donald: Not the rabbit, but the future generation of men poisoned by the toxins trickling into the ground water—doesn’t that bother you? Men could be born with meager sperm counts.

Debbie: That reminds me, I need a perm.

Donald: A permanent solution to pollution!

Debbie: Back to the rabbit…

Donald: Back and forth. I think after his shower I will
zip him in a spare Badgley Mischka bag like the one lying at your feet. Then I will bury both.

**Debbie:** *(Picking up the handbag and holding it against her chest with mock apprehension.)* You wish to bury Capitalism? Donald! Don’t you dare!

**Donald:** A rumpus over a corpus? By the way, is the rabbit the mascot for our democracy? No, I won’t bury capital. *(Reaching for one on the coffee table) I love my truffles.*

**Debbie:** There is no need for truculence. Don’t be a spoil sport! Don’t fight over my Badgley Mischka!

**Donald:** I am spoiling for a fight. No, I do not have to fight for the spoil. I have enough Capitalist moolah to buy a Mullah! Did you hear of the economist who told the businessman in a New York restaurant that he is dead set against the income gap between the served and the server? Another French Revolution is brewing!

**Debbie:** Are you into French Literature? Stop reading Thomas Picketty! Picketty wants to pick my Badgley Mischka. *(Caresses her handbag fondly)* I refuse to pay my hairdresser the meager amount I pay the maid.

**Donald:** That’s a ma-i-denning thought.

**Debbie:** Consider Donald, there is beauty in being and beauty in the eye of the beholder.

**Donald:** Does a beautiful woman truly need a Badgley Mischka to make her more beautiful?

**Debbie:** *(Ignoring his remark)* Likewise there are emo-
tional needs and existential needs. I would die without my… *(Clutches her handbag tightly)*

**Donald:** I get it! That bag is an existential need. *(Long pause...he remembers something)* The rabbit in our yard no longer exists. My rabbit is dead!

**Debbie:** And you wish to bury your dead rabbit in my Badgley Mischka! Will you consider a Louis Vuitton?

**Donald:** It is considerably more expensive and just as unnecessary.

**Debbie:** They are necessary capitalist accessories.

**Donald:** V is for a Vuitton to sit on! And ponder on democracy and a dead rabbit.

*(Donald walks over and gestures as though he will grab the Badgley Mischka. Debbie looks at him with mock threat.)*

**Donald:** It says in this nouveau about-face buttoned-down journal here *(Pointing to an article in the NY Times)* that fur is back in vogue…that dead rabbit could be useful.

**BIO:** **Gandharva raja, aka Dr. Tapendu K Basu,** is a member of the American Academy of Poets. He is the author of August 29: *How Kabir H. Jain Became a Deity; Epic Mahabharata: A Twentieth Century Retelling;* and *Hoofbeats: A Poetic History of the United States.* His novel *The Nisha Trilogy* was produced as a Bengali
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ART/PHOTOGRAPH

THE COLD SHOULDER

Photograph by Penny Knobel-Besa who as a playwright/director founded Maryland Theatre Arts Company in 1978. She has written and filmed several short independent films. An acclaimed “MD Photographer of the Year”, Penny is a member of the Baltimore Chapter.
ANNUAL CONFERENCE - March 29 - 31, BWI Marriott

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