



# PEN IN HAND

LITERARY JOURNAL JANUARY 2026

*Dedicated to the  
Art, Business, and Craft  
of Writing Since 1988*

 MARYLAND  
WRITERS'  
ASSOCIATION

# PEN IN HAND

**The Biannual Literary Journal  
of the Maryland Writers' Association**

**January 2026**

Roderick Deacey, Editor

Joanne Zaslow, Assistant Editor  
Stephanie L. Fowler, Art & Design

**MARYLAND  
WRITERS'  
ASSOCIATION**

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## Message from the Editor

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It doesn't matter what is happening in the world, writing is always a lonely challenge—we try to create something out of nothing each time we put pen to paper or sit at the invitingly blank screen of a computer. Every six months, I'm in the fortunate position of meeting face-to-face with a wide range of ideas from MWA members that have become poems, short stories, memoirs, or essays. I'm happy to say the challenges of living through this period in history do not define you—I am amazed at what you dream up for each issue of *Pen in Hand*! Thank you for sharing your wild and crazy creativity—and your excellent writing!

In this issue, we have contributions from our regular A-list of exceptional MWA poets, with some new names to look out for—thank you all! Special thanks go to legendary performance poet Elayne Bond Hyman, who sent me two of her spoken-word poems to publish. Our first-rate prose writers, too, have kept me reading and re-reading to make difficult choices—I wish we could include every submission!

Our MWA Teen Writers' Clubs' poets from last July's issue of *Pen in Hand*, Cindy Miao (whose poem "Dissection of New York City" our panel chose as one of our 2025 Pushcart Prize nominations) and Kyara Santana Roman, both sent poems too good to omit. Kyara just emailed me a poem for some feedback, so she was a little surprised to make it into this issue!

As usual, I'd like to take this opportunity to thank MWA President Stephen Huff for his ongoing support (and his amazing serial story!) plus Publications Chair Amy Kaplan for her advice throughout the year. I am always grateful to Assistant Editor Joanne Zaslow and Layout & Design Editor Stephanie Fowler for their skillful assistance, not forgetting website aid from Donna Ferron and Cindy Rodi.

Not many places do winter better than Alaska, and guess what? MWA is well-represented there! Thanks go to Kari Martindale for her fantastic cover shot. Icy!

*Pen in Hand* gets better all the time, and is an important showcase for MWA members—so please send your best poems, short stories, essays, memoirs, and flash fiction to us for the July 2026 issue. Your work and support are needed and appreciated!

Keep on keeping on and keep on writing!

Roderick Deacey  
**Editor, *Pen in Hand***

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# Message from the President

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From the office of Maryland Writers' Association's Executive Committee President, hello and welcome to the January 2026 edition of our outstanding journal, *Pen In Hand*.

In this production, you will discover a fabulous array of poetry and prose, and the best part is that every word of it is written by our creative constituents—that's you! Even better, this is also true of the editing, publishing, and marketing of this truly unique publication. Kudos to our esteemed editor, Rod Deacey and his fantastic helpers, for powering through another unusual semester to close out 2025, an unusual year, with their usual aplomb. They make it look easy!

Stephen Donald Huff, PhD  
**President, MWA**

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POETRY

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## **The Writing on the Wall**

*by Dorian Elizabeth Knapp*

Why does it always have to be  
on the wall? Why can't it be over  
our heads, on the dome of sky

we wake to each morning,  
or better yet, under our feet,  
as we shuffle through or side-

step the day's the responsibilities  
on the grass that refuses to grow  
through the long sleep of winter,

or on the sullen gray of the pavement  
we hit every day to keep our bodies  
moving. I'd like for the writing

to be everywhere & for everyone  
to have to read it (particularly  
the president), like the script trailing

from a plane, or a letter written  
in blood on the door to whichever  
room we happen to be entering.

*This poem is from Dorian Elizabeth Knapp's latest  
collection, Causa Sui (Three Mile Harbor Press, 2025)*

I Teach a College Poetry Class in Which  
No One Has Heard of Talking Heads  
*by Dorian Elizabeth Knapp*

I might as well be speaking Latin,  
which, come to think of it, is sort of

what I'm doing, as I go on ad nauseam  
about how they should stop thinking

with their brains & start thinking  
with their ears. *Stop making sense,*

as David Byrne put it, but they cling  
to logic like a life raft, not realizing

the raft is actually a ferry carrying  
them across the river to the land

of the dead, where everyone still listens  
to Talking Heads, especially Hades,

with his strobe lights & disco ball & boom-  
box shaking the whole ocean floor.

*This poem is from Dorian Elizabeth Knapp's latest  
collection, Causa Sui (Three Mile Harbor Press, 2025)*

## **At the Tow Yard**

*by Claudia Gary*

On her way to an afterlife  
of reincarnated body parts,  
my beloved Honda Fit  
clamped her CD player's jaws  
shut eternally around  
“Tortured Poets Department,”  
powerless even to receive  
the power surge that could have made  
her let go of Taylor. That's  
*how much sad* I think she had.

**A Clearing**  
*by Claudia Gary*

*for the wedding of GS and MF*

In the forest, a city's a clearing.  
In the city, a park is a clearing.  
We are here in the park's own clearing.

Let our words be a clearing from chaos.  
Let your love be a clearing from fear.  
Let your hearts speak clearly always.

**Nostalgia**  
*by Joanne Oh*

To discover a bookmarked link  
has broken with age.

To re-delete texts  
that have surfaced from a backup.

To purchase *Ghost*  
on DVD, without a player,

as if playing the movie in my head,  
can take me back

to your doorstep,  
where I thumbed your spine goodbye.

Just once more,  
I want to make you cry,

as if giving a form to phantom pain  
can cradle where it hurts.

## In Praise of Small Emotions

*by Joanne Oh*

Hear, hear for sleeping to my heart's content  
and streaming the sleeper hits of the day,  
for returning a late book with no fines,

not meaning to cut the due date so fine,  
for long showers and having to content  
myself with canceled plans. I have all day

to ask myself what I've done with my day,  
how spaghetti squash strands can be this fine,  
or what lies beyond the table of contents.

I'm content to have a day that's just fine.

## Giving In

*by Jack Slocomb*

This first October cold morning,  
and a translucent fog  
is traveling, heaped and sunken  
through the hills.

Two days ago,  
there was a summer warmth  
floating around,  
and then it was gone,  
like the last  
    quick flush kiss  
    of a leaving lover,  
    a few late fragile white  
    daisy fleabanes  
    and a smoky orange  
    slow butterfly  
    licking the flowers.

The death of things,  
    the dull gold and maroon flecked leaves  
beating in the northwesterlies,  
    could be tongues singing  
    songs  
    of ash and sackcloth.

The slate lake, a reflecting stillness  
    of sleeping,  
the nearly stripped branches of a few trees,  
    lifting open arms  
    in a great *requiem*,  
    or an echoing *kyrie eleison*—

these final hushed murmurings,  
these final rites.

Giving into it  
is not moribund,  
more like your heart  
becoming a  
diminishing drowsy drumbeat  
that carries you away in a softening cadence  
to some sweet pastel  
distance.

## When You Get the Country in You

*by Jack Slocumb*

When you get the country in you,  
you are in a fever,  
breathing  
with the whole fusty hill-strewn earth.

When you get the country in you,  
you are the shrill din  
of singing spring peepers  
rising in some mushy melting swamp,  
the unfurling of a tight fuzzy twist  
of a wood fern,  
you are the first pinstriped petal  
of a tiny popping early flower.

When you get the country in you,  
you are full  
with the greatest greenest green,  
you are the pulsing overflow  
of a small swishing creek  
somewhere over in the leaves,  
the secretive throbbing trilling  
of a wood thrush hiding in the shadowy brush,  
and you are that beating-down heat  
of the summer-noonday sun.

When you get the country in you,  
you are a trailside red maple leaf,  
flaming orange and crimson,  
a fire of creation and destruction,  
and you are the northeasterly shiver  
that jostles the stripped away branches

into a fury,  
you are a whipped up  
dusky autumn lake.

When you get the country in you,  
you are the bask of winter moonlight,  
the blows of snow  
    piling heavy in the woods,  
    glistening and holding you quiet  
        in the room of yourself.  
You are the sleep of insects  
    under loose, fallen bark,  
    the snoring bear  
        in her hibernal hole.

When you get the whole country into you,  
you are a bundled glory of seasons,  
a hum of the universe,  
splendid in your littleness.  
    wrapped in your  
    ever-unfolding,  
        so near,  
    consecrated little clod of the planet.

**mango skin**  
*by Abby Kusmin*

my nitrile-covered fingers  
peel a mango over the kitchen sink.  
this is the way my body reminds me—  
hunger finds a way to live  
even when skin screams disease.  
the catechol oils from the fruit's skin  
burn like poison ivy,  
but gloves and metal  
tear away the outside  
and let me dig into its sweetness.

my whole world—  
the sun glaring through the window,  
the music blasting  
through grocery store loudspeakers,  
the chlorine reek of a pool  
i can no longer smell on the upholstery of my car—  
is covered in catechol oils.  
my whole world burns on contact.  
but i coat myself in nitrile  
and dig into its sweetness.

## if a spider loves a fly

*by Abby Kusmin*

in my nightmare,  
you told me you were fragile.  
you wanted to crack me like an egg,  
and so you did.  
in the cooling night air out on the front patio,  
you caught my gaze and pinned it  
to a canvas of oily stars.

in daytime, you tore my eyes  
from streets throbbing with sunlight,  
pulled my hat down lower.  
you held my hands tight and squeezed  
until they weren't my hands anymore.  
you held my face, my neck, my hips.  
you held me.

i wanted to be held, but not like this,  
not as a fly in a web.  
still, yours were the arms  
i found myself swaddled in,  
so i braced myself, and braced myself,  
and braced myself.

my bed is still sticky and suffocating,  
but i'm still living in it,  
still beating my wings uselessly against it.  
i'm beating my wings,  
and you're beating me like an egg,  
and i'm beating my fists against your spider-silk grip.

but here i am, beating my wings.

**BitterSweet**  
*by Elayne Bond Hyman*

In the alpenglow of evening,

we stood atop the five-star Conrad,  
hugging one another tight.  
Beneath us spread L'Enfant streets,  
twinkling trees in pastel light.

Years had come and gone for us,  
sons grown, daughters new in love.  
We talented tenth of W.E.B.,  
shoulder-to-shoulder, aligned above.

Below us on the quilted ground  
patchworked shrubs and fountains found  
those who homeless sheltered  
BROWN  
with M.L.K. were bedded down.

Through gleaming windows, as we dined,  
the alpenglow of evening showed  
the muddied ribbon of a river  
that sparked and shimmered as it flowed.

Despite the suffocating weight of  
WHITE HOUSE,  
determined to erase  
the layered trace of generations,  
Tuscarora and Lenape nations.

Soldiers locked in step, Washington's DeCeit,  
trampled by this Fascist nation.

The alpenglow of evening  
had all but disappeared,  
yet did we taste  
the sweetest bitter on our tongues  
which no ICE could displace.

## POV: Message from the Lynching Trees

*by Elayne Bond Hyman*

*This spoken-word poem was commissioned  
for the seventh annual conference of the  
Maryland Lynching Memorial Project (MLMP)  
held at the Reginal F. Lewis Museum  
in Baltimore, MD 2024.*

Horizons change. Our time is now  
to witness what we've seen.

Let willows cease their weeping  
and tongues be loosed to speaking,  
lest we return to days gone by  
reviving scenes obscene.

*Mitakuye Oyasin: All My Relations.*

Here on Turtle Island's back,  
now called Mary's land  
we stand,  
seasoned by the seasons.

We lost our innocence.  
Woodlands stand unceded.  
Perhaps you've heard of us:  
Cherry, Hickory, Poplar, Pine,  
Pin Oak, Sycamore, Locust,

and Willows that weep.

We cycled many sun trips round,  
despite the colonizer's axe.  
We felt their saw strip down our sides  
flaying fleshy bark.

Tuscarora, Shawnee, Piscataway, Delaware;  
First Nations fled.

Though left for dead,

we bled

saplings into soil.

A record of remembering,  
deeds done.

Wailing women coiled our trunks  
while on leaf-littered dirt they sat.

Braiding our willowy limbs  
into burden baskets and sleeping mats.

We winced at being cut and scored,  
made into tables and chairs.

We understood the way they felt,  
objects turned into stairs  
bent down for another's climbing.  
Listen to our forecast tunes  
of weathered dissonant harmonic,  
window-rattling gust that croons  
dirges rooted in mist demonic.

Ancient leaves sing whining songs—  
hear our secret messages,  
whispered in rasps and scrapes.  
As skin is torn and fingers bound  
from which there is no escape.

We have tales to tell.

In springtime,  
when our tiny leaves made muted sound,  
you hardly heard us speak.  
With gasps and rasps, like gossiping grass,

we told you of the meek,  
an Asbury, John, two Jameses swung  
on breeze;  
fanned panic and shushing leaves.  
...Anxious.

In summer,  
though fat and limp with heat,  
flapping in the wind as storm advanced,  
eleven dangled in July, yet none in August danced.  
Then, two in September filled our high-up crowns—  
dragged, shot, swung upside down.  
So limp and fat and scorched with thirst,  
we waited for a cleansing rain.  
None came...

Fiery Autumn's leaves of orange and gold  
dove down deep as fifteen of them fell.  
We chattered in Poplar's gallows green,  
some forty-four tulip tales to tell.

The slung-up ropes draped Cherry's thick arm.  
Her bough, though stout, she meant no harm.  
On woodland's edge where she grew broad,  
her smooth and red-brown bark  
peeled off as stiffened bodies dropped.

Strong, hardy Hickory's branch was hacked  
for smoking meats and cooking.  
His bonfires could also burn  
the flesh of those caught fleeing.

And we have tales to tell:

Of lovers lain beneath our shade;  
of laughing young ones chasing round;  
of barking dogs chained to our trunks;  
of bodies strung up in our crowns  
with bulging eyes and purple tongues.  
Legs trembling—then gone limp.

Of cheering crowds in Sunday suits  
with children strapped on shoulders high;  
of picnics spread on blanket's quilt  
and swatted flies buzzing round  
the blood-soaked legs of blacks and browns.

Here we've known great horror  
standing as we do  
to root in stolen Mary's land,  
gone limp and weary too.  
First Nations fled, betrayed and plundered.  
Once-proud warriors forced surrender.

We've heard the cries of blacks and browns  
called fiends and brutes.  
Monsters of the piney woods, all of ill repute.  
We've sniffed their rotting bodies hung,  
caressed their strangled necks  
that swung,  
as farmers' wives and white little girls,  
their violence by sheeted men unfurl.  
And Patty Rollers hound the heads  
of woolly-haired black boys.

There were no trials, nor justice sought  
for bodies black and brown.  
And sheriffs turned their heads

away from body-broken boys.

In Winter, no sad respite came  
instead we met Jim Crow.

And so

with aching arms and curling leaves,  
we hid their shame beneath the years.

Squalls blew a cooling balm upon  
the frosted hearts of relatives  
who went to sleep, afraid to weep  
or mourn,  
lest tears and sorrow wipe away  
the scourge of being born.

Recording these atrocities is tiring work we do.  
But telling truth sustains our growth  
on ravaged land through flood and drought,  
in name for long-sought justice shout!

## Largest Lanternfly Infestation in History

by Lora Berg

The one who named you must have loved you,  
*Lycorma delicatula*—your bark-like forewings

tents along the dunes, and once in motion,  
tiny men crossing, holding up the clouds.

That must be a lot to carry. Hindwings tuck,  
unseen, but the moment they flash—their red

color-field explosion warns, *we're poison*,  
if only an illusion—magician's misdirection.

It's all about the reveal, the context shift—  
you suck the sap right out of my grapevines.

Your egg paste suffocates my lilacs and roses.  
I must uproot your host, the Tree of Heaven,

all due to you, Satans. And I want I want I want  
to tell you how beautiful you are, but I don't.

I spray you with vinegar and watch you fall  
because I am this garden's maker, my wings

gossamer, their span wide as my creation.  
I can't let you live here. I mustn't be kind.

## Marigold's Voyage

*by Lora Berg*

I open pilgrim pods of humble linen, and seeds un-tuck,  
quills of ebony and cream, festooned with tips of orange.

Each holds the code of marigold: pierce, burrow, bloom  
into salves for what ails: insect bites, bruises, even hiccups.

From Aztec tombstones' candlelight, to Jaipur's baskets  
of golden boas, Holi, Holi, each country claims marigolds

as their own. I clasp a last dry pod, incise, and seeds  
descend to join the multitudes stored for next season.

Just the husk remains: a moth's wing; paper candelabra  
with six ashen tips; deserted craft; open palm; call for alms,

for meaning once its passengers have gone—and I hold it  
before the window, lovely in the light of its emptiness.

**Socks**  
*by Jo Tyler*

I like socks.  
And mittens.

Socks aren't choosy  
about your toes.  
You could have six  
toes and still  
wear the same sock  
as someone with only five.

Mittens aren't finicky  
about your fingers.  
You could be missing  
your pinky and still  
wear the same mitten  
as someone who never  
had that bike accident  
when they were a kid.

Socks and mittens  
are not precise.

That is the kind of friend  
I will be to you.

We don't need to fit  
like a glove.

When you choose  
me from the drawer  
I'll always find a way  
to keep you warm.

## Give Me a Big Doll

*by Jo Tyler*

Pretending I was a movie director, or a star on the red carpet, Barbie was my go-to girl. But for everyday life? Oh, for that, give me a big doll. A doll who can talk. A sturdy doll, who already knows her ideas are more important than slender hips and an expansive closet of clothes. In 1965, Chatty Cathy was my companion, my confidant. She came with one blue dress and 18 phrases at the end of her string: “I love you. I hurt myself. Please take me with you...” I did that. I took her everywhere.

In the summer of 1966, when I was seven, we went to Whalom Park with a carload of kids. In the back of my Dad’s Ford Country Squire, my cousin Scott pulled the string too hard. He broke Chatty Cathy and never said “Sorry.” Her phrases were gone, leaving only strangled syllables. My Mom said, “Let her rest while we go on the rides.” So I swaddled Chatty Cathy in a blanket and left her in the front seat where she could see outside. When we got back to the car after the Ferris wheel and the cotton candy, we found her unhealed.

At home, I cradled my broken friend, pulled her string gently, and listened to her exclaim: “Roygan shoysush moddy doe. Burnan trinan frotganna ray...” Suddenly, I was clear: This was a language all our own. Cathy could speak her mind, and now we could talk about everything. The next time I saw Scott, I said, “I forgive you.” But I never told him my sturdy doll was better broken.

## Chinese New Year Dinner // 团圆饭<sup>1</sup>

by Cindy Miao

like a good daughter // 女儿<sup>2</sup>,  
I recite prayers from my p(s)alms,  
choke down chrysanthemum tea,  
and cradle a baptized lie on my mother tongue.  
holy water drips off my lips,  
snaking down my chin like the Yellow River // 黄河<sup>3</sup>.  
in my ear, the First Emperor // 秦始皇<sup>4</sup>  
hisses condemnations on manners.

so instead of chasing a distant heaven,  
I burn incense for past dynasties,  
split persimmons for my elders,  
and worship the True Leader.  
I belt my anthem the loudest and salute my flag,  
rippling like spilt silence on Tiananmen // 天安门<sup>5</sup> streets.  
the Chairman // 毛泽东<sup>6</sup> smiles over my shoulder.  
I reach for the steamed fish // 清蒸鱼<sup>7</sup>,

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1 (*tuányuán fàn*) — “family reunion dinner”, directly translated as “gather-round meal” or “meal of being together as a whole.”

2 (*nǚ’ér*) — “daughter”, understood in Chinese as a caretaker of the family, responsible for maintaining household harmony and upholding family values.

3 (*Huánghé*) — “Yellow River”, a famous river in China known as the “Cradle of Chinese Civilization” and the “Mother River.”

4 (*Qin Shihuáng*) — the first emperor of China, known for unifying the warring states under one country.

5 (*Tiān’ānmén*) — “Gate of Heavenly Peace”, also associated with the Tiananmen Square protests, where student-led protests for democracy culminated in a violent government crackdown.

6 (*Máo Zédōng*) — Chairman Mao, the founding leader of the People’s Republic of China known for unifying the country from civil war.

7 (*qīngzhēng yú*) — “steamed fish”, a traditional Chinese New Year dish symbolizing abundance.

and my wooden chopsticks helplessly splinter  
into foreign syllables.  
I can't help myself; I giggle, prodding at its lazy eye.

I jolt—  
sometimes, I mistake Father // 爸爸<sup>8</sup> clearing his throat  
for a loading gun.  
my childish glee fades  
like incense smoke and family albums.  
my punishment: forced aging—  
I fall back in my seat  
and gain years on my face like a calligrapher's canvas,  
until my face mirrors His.  
for the first time, I smell the scent of blood // 血<sup>9</sup>  
on red packets // 红包<sup>10</sup> and red lanterns // 灯笼<sup>11</sup>.  
inexplicably, I think of the Tiananmen Gates // 天安门,  
pearled.

an ancestral instinct awakens—  
I sink my teeth into flesh,  
dark sauce smearing my lips,  
dripping,  
and splattering.

Father shoots.  
I shut my mouth.

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<sup>8</sup> 爸爸 (*Bàba*) — “father”, understood in Chinese as the patriarch, responsible as the provider, protector, and moral/educational guide of the family.

<sup>9</sup> (xuè) — “blood”, understood in Chinese as a symbol of sacrifice and proof of kinship.

<sup>10</sup> (*hóngbāo*) — “red envelopes”, a traditional Chinese New Year gift given from elders to children.

<sup>11</sup> (*dēnglong*) — “lantern”, directly translated as “cage of light.”

## an American classic: in the moments before the crash

by Cindy Miao

act i. them, as thrill-chasing partygoers

no one had told them the speed limit is a suggestion—  
till they were wasted hurtling 100 on 60,  
a high score of three digits on their dashboard.

a leap of faith from their small nests  
like fledgling birds' first flight,  
they soar higher than the pile of dirty dishes in the sink  
or their mothers yelling to come home for dinner.

wings still damp, they taste the wild wind—  
embracing infinite versions of themselves  
in every past second,  
they chase immortality between thought and justification.  
raise another albumen-filled cup and down it—  
they're seventeen years young.

they swerve hard and giggle harder  
with feather-light hearts—  
no one really cares if they make it home  
because in a way,  
they are already home.

they're going too fast, they know,  
and the driver whispers a quick apology to his mother—  
that he'll never come home for dinner—  
bracing for impact—  
eggshells cracking—  
(Kill Count: Murphy's Law)

act ii. me, as collateral damage

I see them lounging on the street,  
mangled corpses of spotted lanternflies  
splattering the street a pinkish gore.

a modern genocide—  
I tear my gaze away  
and try to forget.  
*those damned nativists.*

the crosswalk yawns a chasm, and the gravel  
crunches underneath my feet—  
I take a step forward and am struck  
with a premonition that I will end up like them soon,  
roadkill overcome with manifest destiny.

my mind flashes to my immigrant parents,  
glancing at the time from the dinner table,  
steaming food left untouched.

the car comes faster than I would have known,  
filled with all-American teens and all their American dreams.

s.g.  
*by Marc A. Drexler*

Five drawings on discarded ghosts of things  
adorn my study, signed "s.g."

She lives on the street. I see her from time to time,  
always on Wednesdays. I'd take her in,  
but she doesn't trust—men? She takes my apples  
and bananas.

cups of soup when the weather's cold,  
leaves beautiful sketches sometimes tucked inside my door.  
She could be fourteen, could be twenty-four.  
She rarely speaks. I think that words  
are part of what she's left behind.

The world's unkindness clouds her youthful ancient eyes,  
but love is what her fingers find with ballpoint  
on a paper plate or piece torn from a Wendy's bag:  
a sparrow ruffled in the dust; a rusty car; a pine cone;  
an almost empty parking lot; two pigeons, puffed.

**Jockey Bob**  
*by Marc A. Drexler*

I like to draw. If I find  
a pencil or pen, I'll stash it under this grate  
where you need to use gum to get it out  
so I can always have something to sketch with.  
That's about my only connection with my life  
before.

I was in art school when I got pregnant,  
found out my boyfriend didn't love me anymore,  
found out my parents didn't love me anymore,  
got an abortion and found out my friends  
weren't friends. Sat in my room all day,  
got kicked out of school, out of my apartment,  
started sitting in the park, started eating  
at shelters, or stuff Jockey Bob would bring me  
before that.

Jockey Bob was this old homeless guy who hung out  
near my apartment when I was in art school. I guess  
his name was Bob. His legs were amputated at the knees.  
I used to give him coins, maybe twenty bucks all told  
during that semester-and-a-half. I'm pretty sure that's why  
I'm alive.

## The (Mental) Tomb of the Unknown Woman

by Dale E. Lehman

She glides through chambers  
of velvet and sun,  
biding her time,  
savoring marrow  
drawn from the bones  
of wealth that played by the sea.

She follows behind,  
my detached shadow,  
the shade perhaps of one I lost,  
of one whose steps I trace.  
Has she come to comfort,  
to guide, to tease?

A fickle ghost, she bides her time,  
plays hide-and-seek,  
plays so well I must give in.  
My yielding summons her  
for one last glimpse  
beneath the palms beside the bay.  
And then she's gone,  
her game complete.

Or maybe not...

Now, she glides through memory,  
a faceless, formless fascination.  
No eyes, no voice, no smile.  
Only such intensity,  
such intellect (so I suspect)  
that a shadow of a question is she:

Why did I not say hello?

## A Million Lives, A Million Deaths

*by Ipatia Apostolides*

By the time one reaches retirement,  
they've lived and died  
a million times.

Each day one loved, forgave, or felt joy,  
they gained another life  
as if it were their first.

Each day someone rejected them,  
cursed them, hurt them, or abused them,  
meant another death.

The variegated hues of joy, layers of pain, varied;  
joy knocked one off their feet with  
dizzy elation,  
while pain trickled like  
drizzling rain, irritating.

When deep enough and long enough,  
experiences gave birth to trust, love, or  
forgiveness,  
or shriveled away  
into another death.

Retirement is for those who have survived  
all these deaths, enjoyed all these lives,  
and still mustered  
the courage to keep going.

**Narcissus**  
*by Ipatia Apostolides*

Reflective pool of swimming thoughts  
clamor for attention, as perhaps  
no other process will bow its knee  
to me. My. Myself. I.

The first-person perspective  
encompasses, encumbers, a yoke  
around my head, like a garland  
made of bits of ego clusters,  
worn with tremendous pride.  
I know. I am. I think. I believe.  
There is no one but me in this  
conversation, and my ego.  
Ego in Greek means I. Me.

When the world is cruel to me,  
I indulge in reflection, swimming  
in a pool of thoughts. Sometimes,  
they end up on paper, an extension  
of me. My. Myself. I.

Other times, when you come along,  
cheerful and loving,  
I wither away,  
with me. Myself. I.  
We float into the air  
like colorful leaves  
on a windy autumn day,  
enjoying you. Yourself. Your friendship.  
And that's how we happened.

## peripheral and core witches

by Anita Nahal

*In the life of the householder...it is a great thing,  
the strengthening of personality.* Swami Vivekananda

Witches may not all be bad, but some slide around fringes, lurching around bony fingers like dry, curly locks, whispering nasty words under breaths that no one besides me can hear. Innuendoes and sarcasm fly through pursed lips—psst, psst, psst—psst, psst, psst. They curse and coerce as they want to always be first on gaudy podiums. Some sit on stairs watching for the right moments to pounce, dipping their heads up and down, side to side, like unstoppable bobbleheads on rickety, rusting, abandoned slides. Some may open a door or window now and then, poking their heads in—out—in—out and yawning with eyebrows raised, their meanness they'd slowly braised in uncleared night pots where ants party till the morning. We can be wary of such peripheral witches and still remain almost intact, with recurring glue and stitches. But what about core ones that are clearly visible, pretending goodness, laughing with, or at us?

*The trees are dark, the wind is grey,  
through the circle of clueless prey,  
jumping mad on muddy mounds—  
swoosh, swoosh—brew their sounds.*

## **siblings never held hands**

*by Anita Nahal*

*Even forgiveness, if weak and passive, is not true:  
fight is better. Forgive when you could bring legions  
of angels to the victory.* Swami Vivekananda

Grumble, rumble.

Crumble, tumble.

Tasteless bubbles

adrift in muddles.

Expectant fears birthed fast. Haters emerged just as quickly. So much mess, so much to clean. Our tummies are full, our hearts lean, for which we blame every craving. Was it them, you, or me? Or generations-old karma that came to settle a score? Or a hateful, revengeful desire to be served? And a meek Stockholm syndrome, “*your wish is my command*,” toddled along. Medicines lay strewn next to pictures, broken dolls, and threadbare, musty shawls. Phone screens flashed for attention while low lights stayed out. This is the story of childhood fights, where siblings never held hands or cried together at the passing of their parents.

## The Great Molt

*by Diana Lyga*

That thing that makes the me and you (us)  
is the same thing always making the leaves chuckle  
and shake with a big gut laugh,  
or a semicolon,  
because one phrase isn't ever enough.

Show me your yours and I will, too,  
take the time to show and tell  
my recent favorite thing  
and the rock I found that looks like your eyes.

My poor penmanship is still good enough to jot down  
ideas born out of my mines and your yours.  
Someday I will win the race,  
crossing the finish line with nothing but syntax  
dripping off of my body,  
heaving good words in my lungs,  
saying things that make sense  
to some people sometimes.

No, other people don't matter.  
No, nothing matters  
except your smile that I remember  
like I remember the things I love,  
and the way that your shoulders  
slump over when you walk fast,  
and how you think the birds  
must be talking to each other  
about going to work and saying sorry  
for bumping into strange wings  
along the sagging powerlines.

My right eyeball begs to peek  
through the cracks of your ribs, your heart,  
to look at your scary yours,  
to remember and to love them all.  
This is that thing  
that makes me more you  
all of the passing time.

## I Understand What It Is to Be

*by Diana Lyga*

The first big sipping on imagination  
is the difference between it is living and alive.

And the ends of the universe—  
which take some shape, surely,  
either by the certain chugging ballasts of a track  
or corners you can fold and tuck into a pocket  
or an ocean of existing and dreaming and dying—  
invite all the yes and no, thrumming with a big breath.

On this accidental rock  
that shoots through ripples of inky cosmos,  
we are bound by the grace of gravity,  
planted into the center of everything.  
Blotches of plasmic blazing fire, much hotter  
than any Dante-imagined Hell,  
pump the pistons of galactic hearts.

And fields and fields of nothing at all  
invite us to duck and dodge a certain doom  
to catch brief moments of easy walking down the street  
and noticing the birds and the stars  
and taking care to remember who we love.

We are living. We are alive.  
We vibrate with existence and probability  
just like the atoms do.

Sometimes, if we are very lucky,  
we collide and make something brand new  
or something not brand new at all.

And that is also a spectacular thing.

We are it. And we are made of the same serendipitous stuff  
that it is made of.

We are certainly alive  
and certainly not more alive  
than everything is all together.

## Dinosaurs of the Future

*by Fran Abrams*

Although there were no historians present to record the event, dinosaurs regained their supremacy over the earth in the year 3026.

Eggs that had lain dormant more than 250 million years hatched when humans became extinct, much like the dinosaurs themselves had vanished long ago.

The newborn dinosaurs still had very small brains and were unsure what to make of the landscape, including spacious structures suitable for shelter. Historians, had they been there, would have explained that these were big box stores left in disarray as the last of the humans looted them in an attempt to remain alive.

The landscape was desolate. Nevertheless, green living plants, suitable for dinosaur consumption, grew in the cracks and crevices between abandoned buildings.

The dinosaur population thrived, as nature returned to its past abundance.

When creatures from other planets arrived, expecting to capture a highly developed human culture, they found only primitive dinosaurs. Years were spent searching for signs of advanced civilizations.

The planet no longer held value, and the mystery of the disappearance of humans was never solved. Fortunately, the dinosaurs were friendly and none waged war against the others.

## Pantoum for America's Abandoned Malls

*by Fran Abrams*

*Inspired by the book Abandoned Malls of America;  
Crumbling Commerce Left Behind  
by photographer Seph Lawless*

Malls abandoned, empty but still standing. Only  
a photographer  
sees their vacant swaths of vast space still displaying signs:  
Claire's, Customer Service, China Express, Calvin Klein.  
No more powerful customer lures—movie theaters,  
water features.

Vacant swaths of silent indoor space show no signs  
of former life.  
Food courts still have tables and chairs. No one eats there  
anymore.  
No longer impressive customer lures—movie theaters,  
fountains.  
No sounds from stores or movie screens. No noise at all.

Food courts with tables and chairs neatly arranged. Vacant  
as if the Rapture has carried everyone away,  
leaving only air behind.

No sounds from stores or movie screens. Ghostly silence.  
Trees planted in round pots have rolled to floor in defeat.

Has the Rapture carried everyone away, leaving  
no one behind?  
Gates are pulled across fronts of stores that have

no inventory.

Trees planted in round pots have rolled to floor in death.  
Escalators and elevators wait silently for a prince  
to wake them.

Gates are pulled across fronts of stores with nothing to sell.  
No cars enter parking lots. No trucks bring inventory.  
Escalators and elevators wait quietly for a prince  
to wake them.

Man-made structures stand strong but empty, no visitors  
for decades.

No cars park outside. No trucks deliver goods for sale.  
A mall frozen in time, as if a fairytale spell has been cast.  
Man-made structures will stand empty for decades.  
Abandoned malls. Only a camera captures the vacant space.

**Body**  
*by Faith-Anne Bell*

You loved me when I was larger  
said I was beautiful & strong  
& that you wanted me in all my natural

But I was full of the lies you spun  
I had gobbled them like comfort food  
& I don't know how much of my body  
was made up of your junk food words

Glutted & stuffed with fallacies  
I hobbled around blindly confronting  
spoilage alongside savory & sweet

When you died the syllables poured out of me  
with the grief & fear & shadows creeping  
leaving me a husk

& now I wonder if anyone  
would ever love the body you created  
or the sagging skin that fills the void of you

**Blank Spaces**  
*by Faith-Anne Bell*

You live in the margins  
where death doesn't reach  
& love, like your memory,  
extends into forever.

## Rude Awakening

*by Mary McCoy*

It's kind of like flying—  
weightless for an ecstatic moment.

Then you hit the floor,  
the hard floor,  
and when you come to,  
there's a knot on the back of your head  
and everything's up in the air.

The things you thought were important are revealed  
to be flimsy shadows  
puffing themselves up like politicians,

while the actual important things  
casually swim by:  
heartbeat,  
breath,  
mortality,  
love,  
and why it is  
we still want to be here  
on this good green and blue earth.

## Rituals

by Pamela Mathison-Levitt

How many white candles  
must I light at this altar,  
dripping,  
cell by cell  
as they evaporate into fumes?

How many singing bowls  
must call my brokenness  
into awareness?

I cannot imagine a louder sound  
than the snap of a vow,  
a meltdown of trust,  
ashes smearing faces  
at the confessional,  
your words the gong,  
the incense heady.  
My head swims with the smoke.

What is the penance for desecration?  
Three Hail Marys and one Our Father  
cannot heal these wounds:  
the stigmata of believers  
in unconditional love.

I place a rose quartz on the altar  
and illume a rainbow of candles,  
deliver prayers to saints,  
make my meager offerings  
from depleted stores,  
and meditate upon the words:

forgiveness, Metta, reconciliation.

I call to God in every form,  
through every channel,  
uttering incantations at night  
beside you.

I finger rosary beads  
when the pain keeps me awake,  
hoping for an answer back  
in tomorrow's daily horoscope.

## **Forgiveness is Not a One-Time Act**

*by Pamela Mathison-Levitt*

Each day, when the pangs grip me,  
I open the cupboard doors of my heart  
to select ingredients for my menu.  
Pursuing the possibilities,  
I consider  
one heaving gallon of injustice,  
double dollops of judgment,  
a pinch of pettiness,  
leftover loathing,  
and a solid serving of self-righteousness.  
I could make a meal with them,  
skewer you on a stick,  
marinate the meat,  
and roast you in flames of anger.  
I could gnaw on my pain,  
scrape the marrow of it with my tongue,  
and spit your gristle out.  
I could find you faulty and flavorless,  
regurgitating bile  
after biting down hard.  
Or I can chew on a choice,  
cut from the finest parts of me,  
and let the rest sizzle,  
until it evaporates.

## First Lesson in Regret

*by JC Williams*

I want you to flutter  
these rust-brown feathers,  
now so still, still  
warm in my hands.

I never knew things  
could die like this,  
knocked from their perch  
to a bed of pine straw

soft enough to save you  
without my reckless shot.  
Are you playing dead,  
want to make me grieve?

Yet, I watched you fall  
from your branch, slow-  
ly, almost, as if you were  
a single leaf in November.

Listen: I hold you to protect  
you. I cup you to keep you  
warm. Hear me: I want  
my deed undone.

## Near Lock 24 on the C&O Canal

*by JC Williams*

Parched to hawk gray by August's heat,  
stones rise above their cousins  
stacked beneath the green stillness  
of the unused canal  
where duckweed floats untouched  
by currents or a rippling breeze.

Each water-facing stone  
is outlined by dark hollows,  
almost a silhouette of a missing stone,  
as if every stone shrinks to meet others  
only where physics requires.

As though the stones conspire  
to deny fallen spicebush berry  
and green lacewing a protected nook  
for transformation into loam for fibrous roots.

The stones ascend to a towpath. Only dust  
escapes the dull finish of the path  
now pounded solid by hoof and foot.

Yet, near the towpath's water edge,  
in the shade of the wall's capstone,  
suckers of pawpaw have erupted,  
fine fleshy roots of ivy-leaved toadflax explore  
the wall's landside crevices, as if to defy the wall  
and the time-worn towpath  
which the stones were stacked one upon another  
to support and contain.

## I Avoid the Window Seat on a Plane

*by Lois Perch Villemaire*

I look down  
at the scenery below  
as the plane circles  
nearing our destination  
a shift of the horizon  
left or right  
makes me queasy

Long roadways  
along vacant lands  
head out of view  
scene changes  
to rooftops, clusters of trees  
splashes of color  
beside basins of blue water

From the middle seat  
I'm captured  
by collections of clouds  
thin wispy cirrus  
resembling patterns of feathers

Clouds are soft and fluffy  
easy on the eyes  
playing tricks  
on the imagination  
like inkblots  
in a Rorschach test

## Water in the Birdbath Is No Longer Frozen

*by Lois Perch Villamaire*

My daughter has been ill all winter;  
I came close as ever to praying.  
Mainstream medicine tested and retested  
with no conclusions,  
with no improvement.

The thermometer hanging on the fence  
lit by the sun reads 50 degrees,  
birds hop in the grass  
searching for crumbs or bugs.

She couldn't eat, sleep, or reason—  
anxiety prevailed.  
She turned to alternative methods:  
Treatments, infusions, supplements.  
There were doubts;  
hope was the only option.

My African violets are in bloom—  
purple, white, pink—  
absorbing light, sitting near  
east- and west-facing windows.  
Orchids I adopted in memory  
of a friend are growing buds.

My daughter's spring arrives  
with a clear voice,  
appetite returns,  
sleep claims her at night.  
Answers found along  
hallways of uncertainty,  
strength beats in her body,  
light shines in her eyes.

**cricket**  
*by M. Frost*

after the first freeze—stridulation  
so loud it filled the house  
from the room with plants

root-bound in ceramic  
refugees of summer  
echoes of heat and light

he spent winter singing  
for a mate ordained  
to appear in spring—too late

**past Richmond**

*by M. Frost*

cloud puffed  
nicotine-stained 80s bar

lead shadows  
greasing the highway

bright flare  
as the storm begins

no rainbows here

## life gets in the way

*by Joni Youse*

somehow my life  
got in the way of my living  
I'm in the shudder season  
portraying a circus clown  
spinning plates on toothpicks  
waiting to pick up the shards  
of broken promises  
scraps of paper littered with words  
jotted down in haste  
forgotten in a sunbeam  
could be the first line to a poem  
or last week's grocery list  
fluttering under the big top  
agonizingly progressing  
but the plates keep spinning

## the darkening

*by Joni Youse*

wish I could tell you that it started  
at 12:39 p.m. on a Saturday  
much like an eclipse it moved  
slowly at first ten percent  
of my light was covered by  
shifting gray pinpoint stars  
just out of my reach  
memories I knew happened  
minutes were gone  
nothing crept out  
of the shadows  
people kept moving and I was  
eighteen again and you were  
trying to talk me out of my  
virginity you were ninety percent  
successful but then the darkness  
faded and I drifted back  
mundane details obscured by  
clouds and time

**Pepper Spray**  
*by Kay White Drew*

In Costco, among hammocks and other glamping equipment,  
sets of a dozen pocket-size pepper-spray canisters.

You stop dead in your tracks like a bear surprised  
by a hunter (or a hunter surprised by a bear).

Should you buy a package? Men in mismatched fatigues,  
faces covered to the eyes by thick black neck-gaiters,  
mauling and hauling people away.

You carry your signs of outrage and protest  
like so many others. The fencing around Lafayette Park  
that faces the White House has few gates.

(When will they close the gates and start shooting,  
you wonder. What good would pepper spray be then?)

You could carry some, but if you were to use it  
on one of those nameless, faceless men—  
you'd be the one hauled off.

Perhaps a gas mask would be a better investment.  
There's always that little Turkish eye-bead  
you carry when you march.

Later, it occurs to you: those pepper spray canisters  
in Costco? They're probably for scaring off bears.

**Rhizomic**  
*by Kay White Drew*

Praise be the meandering, the labyrinth,  
the mycorrhizal network that weaves

a forest into a community, tree roots  
and fungi inextricably entwined

like lovers at an orgy. Freely swapping  
water and nutrients, indiscriminate

as worshippers holding hands  
at a church service, neighbors

by chance, strangers joined only  
by faith in something greater

than themselves. Do the trees  
and fungi have any way

of knowing what a marvel they are?

**Playhouse**  
*by Kyara Santana Roman*

To be a Barbie doll  
to be a Lego set  
maybe then I'd be  
exactly what you want

To be a voodoo doll  
to be a "Simon Says" fan  
maybe then I'd do  
everything you demand

To be something else  
to change myself  
maybe then you wouldn't be so mean  
and I wouldn't hate my home

To have my own life  
to make my own decisions  
to be my own person  
to feel young and free  
I'm counting down the days

For now, I'll stay locked in your playhouse  
slowly catching dust  
looking out the window  
seeing others like their toys  
wishing you could love me so  
and wishing I could be me

## My Father's Bellies

by Julie Robin Solomon

At five, I found the glistening mica  
left on the playground  
in green wet grass  
shaped like a puffy pear,  
layered like silver baklava.

The neighbor boy saw it,  
and said, "That's mine, I lost it."  
So I gave it to him.

But one sliver later, I knew he lied.  
I slipped into his unlocked kitchen and took it.  
I kept this found and stolen object for years,  
a treasure of unknown to no value,  
as if its pear shape, so conformable to the hand,  
would come in handy as it shed, but didn't fade  
like the surgical scar on my father's belly,  
from sternum to pelvis, purple-red, which he revealed  
like the opening of a play, lifting the curtains  
of his shirtfront so I could trace its bumpy meander  
over the hills and dales  
of his furrowed stomach with tiny fingers  
that took me to the layer of fresh snow that coated  
the sledding hill's wavering tracks that I sped  
down like a demon and punched back up, making holes  
in the snowbank with my feet encased  
in knee-high boots of red and white stripes  
till my legs were frozen candy-canies  
that my father defrosted at home  
by stripping the layers and pressing  
my feet into the warm nest  
of his belly that felt like a slice of heaven,  
a belly like a cave  
so that a lamina later,

when I feared my peers,  
I pictured myself pouching in the safe, warm cove of his belly  
like a possum—peering out with wary eyes,  
relieved of the need to fend for, or be, myself.  
In his final stratum,  
when his belly ballooned with fluid  
from the cancer he nourished, and me no more,  
I, at 14, relinquished the comfort of his belly  
and made do with the hard, slanting glitter of the mica  
only layers at the heart of it.

## Variations on Dante in the Adirondacks

*by Julie Robin Solomon*

The “Garden” is a car park  
at the start of the high trails  
always full by dawn  
paradise taken  
divided into slots.

Delinquent drivers,  
you are too late,  
unfit for this lot  
and your desire no justification.

Take your fumes below and plunge into a lake of fire,  
or else park your gizmo down below  
and submit to purgation of lust by means  
of an undulation 400 feet ascending  
that burns through all your soles  
and requires a rucksack of stones to flatten your pride,  
make sloth breathless, thin the glutton.

Gravity strips avarice and the prodigal to the bone.  
Misty stream smoke confuses sensuality  
and confounds wrath.  
Sharp winds sew up your envious eyes.

But if you make it up to Eden,  
at the bottom of a greater mountain,  
you will have earned a place, if you want it,  
in the continuous movement  
of human intention. To greater and greater and  
high and higher and  
big and bigger and  
grand and grander. Or

you could sit and take in the precise view  
of where you are,  
and let the yellow, brown, and gold leaves fall  
from the tree of your hard-won knowledge  
of precious limitation.

**Denali**  
*by Kari Martindale*

Athabascan reference to land  
unowned by man—

Denali;

a towering word for two colossal peaks

until high offices of low men with small hands, small feet  
pen renames for summits they've never reached;  
taking White-Out to cultures, erasers to lore,  
grifting for riches

and the distraction of deplore.

*Quoth The Raven: “Nevermore.”*

## A Taste of Cancer

*by Kari Martindale*

*for my husband, Paul.*

Today I congratulated my husband on eating a Twinkie—  
an experiment of sorts for his mouth,  
dry from radiation, weary from the assault of metallic taste.

How many Twinkies a day would it take  
to restore the pounds stolen from him?  
Not enough calories from Ensure; so thin.

He's binged all the shows, marathoned the movies,  
just wants to get back on the racquetball court.  
For now, soup. A blanket. A hug.

~~~

Stray hairs from his mane litter the shower floor,  
but just a few here and there, because loss of hair  
isn't associated with this kind of chemo—

who knew chemo comes in many flavors?  
Not me; not before the oncologist informed us  
and I scribbled a note in PAUL'S CANCER FOLDER.

*Won't lose hair!* It's what everyone was wondering.  
Our daughter's friend once said, "Male pattern baldness  
is afraid of Paul." *Won't lose hair!*  
Everyone was happy to hear.

He did lose some along the way,  
here and there around the neck,  
casualties of Beam v. Node.

He also lost his voice for a bit,  
that deep, rich, low, sexy Barry White tone.  
*I'm never gonna give him up.*

~ ~ ~

Radiation comes in one color: red,  
flaming red, as if you've spent a week  
in the blistering sun; rolling on the surface, even—

Seven weeks, five days a week, paralyzed in flames,  
encased a hardened mesh outline of his head and chest,  
pegged to a board so he couldn't move

so the beams wouldn't be a millimeter off  
from their targets—don't wanna zap  
what doesn't need zapping.

~ ~ ~

Chemo on Wednesdays, in a cubicle-like row  
of chairs full of patients—  
some thinner, some balder, some alone;

all sharing a view of the Chugach Range.  
You couldn't ask for better scenery to spy  
as the chemical cocktail

drip-  
drip-  
drips

and you worry about life slipping  
through your yellow-gray fingers—frail, pale,

as you try to hold onto every memory, every dream;

what has been, what is, and what is to come.

With his excellent prognosis, he can stop worrying  
whether I can handle all this house, all by myself.

~~~

Afraid to touch him—aggravate the burn, press the Mediport.  
I hope he doesn't think I no longer want to ravage him,  
because I do. *I can't get enough of your love, baby.*

How can his neck be so red and his nose so cold,  
like the ice cream he can't eat  
because sweet has appalled for weeks.

But it wasn't as bad today. He emailed from work,  
his first full day back after pop-ins and part days  
and a series of no days.

*"I was able to eat a Twinkie. It wasn't enjoyable,  
but it's nice to know that once my taste buds return  
I might be able to eat and enjoy at least that much texture."*

It's coming back to him; he's coming back to me.  
*I'm gonna love you, love you, love you.*  
Today, my husband ate a Twinkie.

## Elegy for Dean Young

by Roderick Deacey

*Some cries never reach us  
Even though they're our own.*

*The best endings are abrupt.*

Dean Young: Final lines in his last manuscript

We had really hoped your second heart  
would carry you much further, yet  
it ceased to beat, abruptly ending your torrent of words,

which contained daffodils &, well, everything—herds  
of buffalo, moths, an albatross, swarms of bees, a fleet  
of tall ships, swans, owl hoots, plus shiny faucets

of hot & cold lust. You thoughtfully included fake fur coats  
for the snowmen lining the drive, then drew our attention  
to that persistent puddle of antifreeze—so shiny, so green.

We should also mention your monarchs, not of countries,  
not of the glen, but those far-fluttering butterflies,  
migrating many miles to Mexico & California.

You were a yodeling redwood avalanching through  
the evergreen mountains, sliding up & down,  
shedding lines & stanzas as you sped along—

but then you slipped quietly away, into darkness.  
No, darkness won't hurt you. You told me  
darkness never hurt anyone.

Everything may seem empty now, but maybe not—  
just listen. Distant waves ring like bells  
& sometimes there are stars.

**Tune-up**  
*by Roderick Deacey*

I'm on a crowded downtown bus  
& an ancient black man with a guitar  
hunkers down next to me.  
He talks constantly—  
a continuous conversation  
both with himself & the world.  
“It's such a beautiful day,” he says,  
“clear & cold with shiny fresh sunlight,  
& as usual I need to escape The Loneliness—  
it's a big problem, you know, The Loneliness...  
See, they're all too busy & live too far away  
& she's gone—it's been four years now.  
So, I like to go where there are people.  
I didn't expect to live so long—no, sir!”  
“None of us did, brother,” I interject.  
“Yet here we are.”

The old man punctuates his spoken words  
with sung snatches of blues & James Brown—  
he feels good, so good!—  
& his fingers shape silent chords  
on the neck of his guitar,  
still encased in its soft carrying bag.

The bus shudders to a stop  
at the Transit Center by the train station  
& the old & the poor & the no-car crew  
stumble out into the chilly wind.  
I spot guitar man again, a little later,  
sitting on Market Street  
in a well-populated area near Starbucks.  
He ignores the icy cold of the brick sidewalk

& sings song after song,  
to himself mostly,  
everything from Howling Wolf  
through the Beatles to Beyoncé.  
He chats to himself between songs,  
& nods to the stream of people  
who toss their Starbucks change,  
& frequently, a folded bill,  
into his open guitar case.

I suddenly realize  
that, single-handedly,  
all by himself,  
without ever calling for back-up,  
he's tuned everything up,  
all on his lonesome.

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# PROSE

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## The True King

by Kathryn Thornwood

“I summon the Lady of the Lake! Behold my worthy quest to retrieve this sword from this stone!”

Nimue just wants to sleep.

It’s another snub-nosed noble lordling, probably the third or fourth son, who wants to make something of himself since he’s unlikely to inherit. She wishes she couldn’t guarantee his failure from just a glance, but that’s what happens when she has been harassed daily by these glory hunters to vie for the grandest of rewards.

*I wish I had the power to call lightning.* The metallic voice in her head is dripping with sarcasm. None of these challengers have any idea that the sword is alive, and that it is very judgmental. Only Nimue.

“I shall take my time to emerge then,” Nimue replies; she suspects if Excalibur had lips, it would be smirking, “to see if this is one of the boys who loses his temper at the thought of patience.”

She looks through the surface of the water and can see that this particular lordling brought an armada of onlookers with him. He’s wearing intricately detailed armor, polished to a shine that rivals the sun. The gold leaf along the ivy vines that adorn it has not a scratch upon it. It has either sat unused or is brand new.

No wonder Excalibur scoffed.

The noble son starts pacing; Nimue sighs and lets herself emerge. Sometimes she magics a geyser to accompany her, making it look like she is a water nymph with water wings, but she refrains. This one would probably assume that the ceremony is due to worthiness, and Nimue does not want to give off any hint of such an impression.

“So mortal, you have come to try your hand with the

sword in the stone.” *You sound bored*, Excalibur interjects. Nimue has to hold in a snort.

“My name is Lord Caspian, my Lady.” The lordling bows deep and with a flourish. Only now does Nimue realize that at least half of his dozen-strong posse are fawning women. His hair is the same gold as his armor, with the same feeling of opulent detailing. His crystal blue eyes sparkle with a light that is all shine and no warmth. He’s going to be one who has a tantrum after he fails. Nimue can already see that. “I am the third son of the illustrious Windwyrm family.” *Trying to borrow credibility from a dragon name*, Excalibur adds. It’s cheeky today, never a good sign for the challenger.

“Then, Lord Caspian, you may step to the stone. If you are able to free Excalibur from its prison, you will have proven you are the true King of Britain,” Nimue recites. She’s walking serenely on the water, leaving ripples with each step. The crowd is watching her, mouths agape. This isn’t even *good* magic, but they’re here to fawn over someone like Lord Caspian, so maybe this is to be expected.

“Ah, what a wonder it will be.” He prances to the stone and reaches his hand toward the sword, before theatrically drawing it away. He turns his eyes back toward Nimue, which causes her to recoil. He has the hunger of so many men before him, for the power of the sword and the beauty of the Lady of the Lake. “Perhaps with this sword, I will also take a bride.”

*May I smite him?* Excalibur asks. Nimue is tempted to reply ‘leave it to me,’ but she probably won’t need to. This lordling is showboating in a way that makes it likely he’ll flee the second he realizes he won’t be freeing any swords today.

Nimue had been bound to this task by Merlin, who believed that ordaining the rightful king of Britain required a pretty lady as decoration. She was an acolyte far too naive

and excitable to know any different than making that particular bargain. At least Lach la Belle is well named, with crystal blue waters, emerald-green shores, and an explosion of wildflowers that never retreat for the winter. The magic here also tastes sweet, like sipping warmed honey. It's made her strong along with her chains.

Nimue has been at this for decades; she has seen every type of challenger. One after the other, tall or short, and young and old. Battle-scarred soldiers and powder-faced youths. The stoic nod of a man with hope but not expectation, the squalling tantrums of those with expectation but no wisdom. Only a few have ever attempted to punish Nimue for their failures, and she is always swift in sending them away in a cyclone of wind.

There was only one attempt that left her heart raw: a starving orphan boy, whose knobby knees and dirty feet spoke to a short life of hardship. He carried his young sister on his back, whispering reassurances that all she would have to do is survive one more night, because in the morn he would be declared the True King, and they would never have another worry. He failed like all the others, and the girl died in the night. Nimue sent the heartbroken boy away as she was bound, but that day she retreated to the bottom of her lake where the tears she cried were carried off in the water. Excalibur whispered to her that night, *he would have used me to exact the pain on the world that the world exacted on him.* Nimue refused to speak until the next unworthy challenger arrived at her shore, to fail.

Someday she'll be free. Maybe Merlin believes that on that day she'll be bound instead to her King, as the sword will be. But magic as powerful as what ties the sword to the stone, sweet and heady in the air, has a mind of its own. Merlin had not accounted for Nimue's slow-burning wrath, nor had he counted on Excalibur's sentience. Perhaps if he'd

foreseen these things, he would have left the sword, the stone, and Nimue alone.

The lordling has stepped forward. *Finally*. He's reached out for the sword. *Finally*. Nimue hears Excalibur groan in her mind. When the lordling tugs, the sword budges not a millimeter.

*Another one bites the dust*, the sword quips.

"This cannot be," Lord Caspian rasps. "No. No!" His face is turning the shade of maroon, and he looks like a child about to hold his breath to get his way. That is, until she sees the way the veins in his head are starting to bulge. This man is on the cusp of a temper tantrum.

"The sword has spoken," Nimue says; she draws magic into her hand just in case one of the man's jeweled daggers makes its way toward her heart. "You of noble birth are not the True King."

He first stomps on the ground. It's undignified, but Nimue has seen this before. It happens for this type. Then, unfortunately, he decides to take his disappointment out on the stone, kicking it hard enough to howl in his own pain. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no!"

The man's onlookers have stiffened at this display, until the eldest (and wisest) strides forward. "Young lord, is it not more honorable to prove yourself to your father through deeds done with your own two hands?" The man shakes a dismissive hand at Nimue. "A sword locked in a stone, ha! This nymph is a trickster, here on an errand of folly. Surely you have seen through her trick."

"Trick?" The angry lordling looks at her, then smirks. "Ah, yes. A witch's trick." Nimue doesn't miss the sigh of relief that comes over the wise retainer. "We—we shall go." The lordling points at her. "And you! Witch! Begone with your vile tricks, or I shall have to teach you a lesson!"

With that, the party flees. Crisis averted.

*I would have much preferred for the advisor to have made an attempt, Excalibur laments. Though I doubt he would be considered worthy, either.*

That's the rub of it. Nimue is fairly certain that Merlin is searching the countryside to hand-pick someone 'worthy,' which probably means someone impressionable and bendable to the great wizard's will. Someone who Merlin will rule through, all because of a magical sword in a stone with a pretty lady who is bound to the thing. Nimue steps fully out of the water, then seats herself against the stone, so she can rest her head against Excalibur's broadside.

"What if you are only a trick?" Nimue asks, more to herself than the sword. "To steal a kingdom?"

*I refuse to be used in such a way, Excalibur replies. I will not budge even if that 'great' wizard uses all his power to pull.*

Nimue turns to look at the sword, at the fine sheen of the blade, at the leather pommel, at the glimmering stone, the same color as the lake. Despite being exposed to the elements, it is as pristine as the day that the god Vulcan supposedly gifted it to the world. It truly is the finest-crafted sword in the world.

"How hard do you think it would be to learn to wield a sword?" Nimue asks.

*For the one worthy of me, it will be as simple as drawing breath, Excalibur replies.*

"Even for a woman?" Nimue asks. She pushes herself up, and looks around. The lordling has retreated; no one is here save for herself.

*No woman has ever tried, Excalibur supplies, but I see no reason for a woman not to be as worthy of wielding me as a man.*

No, no woman has ever attempted this feat. Not in all the hundreds to whom she has spoken the words of this quest.

One cannot be a true king if there are puppet strings binding them. One cannot be a true king merely because

they pulled a sword from a stone. A king—a leader—must follow the will of their people, to do what is right, even if it means making the greatest sacrifices. And the person who has the humility to fill that role, the role of the true king, is not one who should be seeking to pull a sword from a stone.

“No one who seeks you will ever be worthy of you,” Nimue says, letting her finger graze the buttery leather of Excalibur’s pommel. “Unless...”

Nimue grabs Excalibur by the hilt and she tugs. It comes out as easily as if she were freeing it from loose mud. “Oh,” she says. Excalibur is light in her hands, and she thrusts it through the air with a sharp swish.

*It appears you are the true king,* Excalibur teases, but Nimue shakes her head. “No,” she says. “I may be worthy of wielding you, but I am no king.” She holds Excalibur in her hand. With one lightning-quick strike, she cleaves the stone that served as the sword’s prison in two. It does feel as natural to her as breathing. She then threads Excalibur, her closest friend, through her belt; it sits as if it were always meant to be there. She takes a step away from Lach La Belle, then another, and another, her footfalls taking her farther and farther from the lake. “I am meant to *end* the rule of kings.” The dirt feels wonderful underneath her feet, and Excalibur feels so natural against her hip. “Starting with the person who bound us to this game. It’s time to give the people the chance to rule themselves.”

Nimue, the Lady of the Lake, touches Excalibur one more time with a smile. She has lines to end and strings to cut, starting with the puppet master who wants the power of a king without also bearing the responsibility.

It’s time to change the world.

## Life of the Hoard

by Karen McPherson

It had no beginning and might never end. It came to the house on the arms of a carpenter, sloughing off as he framed in a room. It fell to the floor, wedging itself between the tiny gaps between the floorboards. Built on a slab, it couldn't grow downward, so it spread until every inch was covered, then it grew upwards. It entered the house and the heads of the people who lived in it.

It expanded in exponential proportions and soon had no place to go. It couldn't stop growing and it had an idea. Whenever a receipt made its way to the floor, or an empty cereal box or cracker box appeared, something would make the people think; *Just leave it. I'll throw it away later.* That same something prevented that from ever happening. They would think, *I meant to toss that out. Why did I save that? I need to get rid of it*, but they never would. It had somewhere to go and expand.

After a while, it was given a name and was called Hoard. It liked that name. It sounded strong and it had to be strong to survive. There was always someone resistant to it who would sweep up and toss it out. Hoard would mourn the loss of itself. But it always replenished, growing back and becoming stronger than before.

Eventually, the one who cleaned was gone and the one who stayed became old. It was easier for Hoard to grow in the mind of an old person. Hoard came to love the old person. It wanted to cover the old person, to surround him with its love and soon the old person could barely move inside his own home.

Hoard would hear people urge the old person to clean the place up, to get rid of the things he would never need, like the broken microwave that had been pushed to the top

of the fridge or the endless flyers that came in the mail and littered the floor. But the old person never would. He would just shake his head. He knew they didn't understand. He loved his Hoard as much as it loved him. It would always be safe as long as he lived there.

Hoard felt secure until one day, the old person was gone. Hoard missed the old person and knew it was alone. It was unable to grow by itself. It needed help that wasn't there, and it became depressed. Boxes and paper became dry and brittle. Nothing new was ever added. Hoard was bored.

People came in and began to throw Hoard out. They used shovels to pick it up and put it into black plastic bags. The shovels tore Hoard into pieces, and it hurt. The plastic bags stuck to Hoard, ripping off bits. Not all of Hoard went into the bags. Some of it fell off the shovel first and parts of Hoard that had been together since the beginning were now separate. Hoard wanted to live in one piece and tried to enter the minds of the workers. They were professional cleaners and immune to it through long exposure. But the cleaners gave Hoard hope. It learned there were others like it, all having the same name. It saw how it had come to be and knew it could start over.

A dumpster appeared in the backyard and Hoard found itself in it, piled to overflowing. A breeze picked up an empty box of cookies and wafted it down the street. It landed at the feet of someone who liked things neat and tidy. The person's mind was full of thoughts, but malleable and Hoard entered it easily. The person picked it up and took it inside the house to throw away. Instead, the person placed the empty box on the kitchen counter, leaving it there while she answered her ringing phone.

Hoard was happy again. It had found a new home.

## A Shocking Fish Story

*by Stephen Demczuk*

Every year, I drive north from my home in Baltimore to go fishing at Lonesome Lake. The alpine lake is tucked away in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. It was early morning; the sun had just peaked over the ridge, and its rays reflected brightly off the lake's smooth, glassy surface. I cast my line a good 30 meters out, and as my lure splashed into the water, I paused to enjoy the sun's rays, highlighting the beauty of the morning mist drifting over the lake's calm waters.

There I sat, admiring the serenity of sitting alone on the lake and appreciating why I return to this spot year after year. For that brief moment, I ignored my line. My cast had settled on the lake's floor, and since bottom dwellers were of no interest, I flipped the lever on the reel to pull in my line to recast. My method for landing a pike or walleye involves twitching—the jerky motion of my rod causing the lure to dart erratically just below the water's surface. This technique mimics injured prey, attracting large predatory fish.

Unfortunately, just as I reached the fifth or sixth turn of my reel, its handle froze. My lure was caught on something. Out of all the times I had fished in this pristine body of water, never had my line snagged, and honestly, this was the first time it had sunk to the bottom.

From the firm tug and the sharp bend of my rod, I realized I hadn't hooked a fish. I struggled to free my line from whatever it caught. No matter how hard I pulled, jerked, or tugged, it was all in vain; the lure refused to disengage. Yet with each pull, I managed to create just enough slack to reel in a few inches of line. I kept tugging and reeling for over 20 minutes to recover my lure. Meanwhile, I missed out on some valuable fishing time. The 20 minutes felt like an hour, and my arms were exhausted.

What physically drained me finally surfaced. I could hardly believe what I had caught; I had expected a tree branch. It was an oblong wooden box, a bit odd-looking—a hinged chest with a lid and a latch to secure it.

Cautiously, I maneuvered my catch alongside the boat, hoping my line wouldn't snap. Reaching over, I struggled to haul it in. As I lifted it out of the water, it lost buoyancy. Its weight nearly capsized my small fishing dinghy. It was definitely waterlogged and so heavy that I barely managed to get it on board without injuring myself or falling overboard.

As I rested to quell my breathing, I looked over my catch. Examining its exterior, it was clear that the box was not from recent times. The craftsmanship was detailed and superb. Metallic inlays adorned its curved lid. Its metal handles were recessed and flush with ornate backplates of lovely floral filigree. It must have been decades old, possibly a century or more.

At first, I planned not to reveal its contents while on the boat but to wait until I reached the shore. What could be inside? Had I found riches that someone lost, or maybe something someone wanted to discard and hide?

My curiosity got the better of me. I couldn't resist; I had to find out. I knelt beside it, looked around to make sure I was alone on the lake, and saw that no one was on the shore.

I yanked on its latch without success. Then, I pressed firmly and steadily upward with my index finger but still had no luck. Sitting on the lake's floor for years, corrosion had built up on the metallic assembly, preventing any free movement. However, a swift kick with the heel of my boot did the trick. With hesitation, I paused, unsure of what awaited me.

Could it be a lost treasure? Or the body parts of a murdered victim? Or nothing at all—just an empty chest weighed down by sand and mud that had silted in over the years. I sat and stared at my catch.

Just as I began to lift its lid, I hesitated. After a few lingering moments of questioning my decision, I slowly and carefully opened the chest to reveal what captivated me. Gradually, I raised its lid. With one eye closed and the other squinting, my head tilted as if I were peering around a corner, I continued with a slow, steady lift. Then, I swung it wide open.

Oh my God! Shocked, I took a step back and froze. In an instant, I twisted around and hurled my torso over the boat's stern, head down with my eyes just inches from the water's surface. I was overwhelmed by the stench. My empty stomach clenched, purging only air, and I retched violently. I fought to pull myself back into the boat and sat on the floor, catching my breath. I wiped the tears from my eyes. After regaining my composure, I shuffled on my knees over to the oblong box.

I summoned the courage to face the contents and the smell that nearly knocked me overboard. Luckily, a shore breeze shifted, and for now, the foul odor was blowing downwind. But the contents? Yes, the contents—I couldn't believe my eyes.

What I pulled out from the bottom of Lonesome Lake was a trunk full of dead fish: lake trout, northern pike, and walleye, all prized by anglers. However, they were putrid and nauseating.

I gathered the courage to take a closer look at the carcasses. All were stacked in one direction and piled on top of each other. Then, I made a startling discovery. Although they smelled foul, the fish were in pretty good shape. The eyes were clear, and I saw no signs of decay. Their skin was firm to the touch, and as I ran my hands over them laterally, their scales lacked any slime coating, typical of decaying fish. When I poked my index finger into their sides, their flesh showed impressive tensile strength.

I didn't get it. They had a putrid smell but without decay.

How is this possible? Fish that have been dead this long should have decomposed, with their flesh mushy, at best.

Just as I leaned against the stern of the dinghy, I had an eureka moment. The smell and the preserved bodies can only have one explanation: the fish had fermented in the deep, dark depths of the lake, and done so, over the years. Conditions were too cold, with little or no oxygen, allowing only anaerobic fermenting bacteria to survive.

Encased in a tightly-sealed container, the bacteria likely took years to ferment the fish.

I realized I had discovered a treasure chest of pickled fish. Talk about a morning catch! What a fish story I can share!

I then poked my finger under the dorsal fin of a lake trout. Surprisingly, I had to press firmly to pierce its skin. Maneuvering my index finger to point upward, I scooped out a finger-sized morsel of its flesh. I sat on the boat's floor and examined the trout's biopsy. It was firm, intact, and appeared, in culinary terms, palatable. The smell test confirmed my suspicions; the fish had fermented. The tongue test indicated it was probably edible.

I popped that little nugget into my mouth. With my eyes closed, I leaned back against the side of the boat and took pleasure in its flavor. It was remarkable. I scooped up another piece—this time of a walleye, and what a delightful, fermented, savory sensation it was. I was convinced that the meat here was no different from the pickled fish packaged in jars sold at the market.

Back on shore, I loaded the lost treasure chest into my car. At home, I prepared my fermentables for storage. The Norwegians call preserved and fermented fish *Rakfisk*, while the Swedes call it *Surströmming*.

I'm not sure what we call it, but I know one thing: I like to follow that long-standing tradition that sea-faring fishermen have practiced for centuries: "If it smells like fish, eat it."

## Turning Road

*by Katie Melynn*

“This here’s a turning road.”

“A what?”

“A turning road,” said Tem. Seventeen, with wide shoulders under a worn grey Metallica t-shirt, he adjusted his grip on the knobby gearshift, knuckles white. “You know, the kind of road you can turn around on. It’s wide enough to pull a U-ey. Or deserted enough to take a few minutes to finagle it if ya need to.” He ran a hand over the rough stubble on his jaw, knuckles raw, then adjusted his grip on the steering wheel and glanced at his younger brother. “This one’s both.”

Mitchell perched on the truck’s passenger seat. His legs dangled over the cold, cracked leather seat, skinny ankles sticking out of Levis that were just a bit too short. The seat smelled like old takeout and November. He could smell the pines outside, the sharpness always in the air that moved around him. He was used to it and loved the way it woke him up every morning. The boy—just turned seven last week, thank you very much—wiggled to get the pins and needles out of his legs. He wasn’t as big as Tem, not yet. But he was the fastest runner in his class, even faster than Gracie Lee Schneider, who was the tallest. And that was good enough for him.

The brothers had been driving for just over an hour. The early sun was still below some far-off trees on the other side of an unplowed field of tobacco, but it peeked through the sharp needles. It wasn’t warm yet, but Mitchell hoped it would be later. The backs of his legs were frozen to the seat and he slid his hands between his knees to warm up his small fingers. He squinted as a few rays of sunshine hit the window, barely making it through the bits of overnight dew

that had accumulated over the grime on the glass. The sun hid behind a particularly dense spot, then came out again above the next line of smaller trees as they sped down the road. Up and down it rolled, in and out of Mitchell's view, along the side of the two-lane highway, the turning road. Wind whistled outside of Mitchell's window so much he tugged on the pull handle to be sure the window was up all the way. Drafty, he thought—piece-a-shit. Papa said that all the time.

Tem shifted in the driver's seat, the seat creaking, and the truck surged forward. He moved both hands to the steering wheel, steady even as they flew over potholes and cracks in the old asphalt. Mitchell jostled in the passenger seat, but Tem never did. Don't matter to us, thought Mitchell. A smattering of dried blood flaked off the side of Tem's right hand and he wiped it on his knee. Took a deep breath.

Mitchell sat back on the worn leather, toying with the frayed strings of the seatbelt, pulling it further down onto his shoulder just above the stretched-out collar of his favorite orange t-shirt. He'd done his best to hide the holes from Mama, bunching it up into a wadded ball every time she had come to collect it for washing. He'd been mostly successful, and he still had it when he needed the shirt, even if it was a little holey. Piece-a-shit, Papa woulda spit at them both.

“Do we need to turn around, Tem?” Mitchell asked.

Nothin’.

“Tem?”

Years later, Mitchell would tell a girlfriend in bed, damp and thin-skinned, that he had been born under the pines twice. Once, when he actually entered the world on the living room floor of their small house, and again when Tem had driven him away from it and into the quiet among the trees. After he said it, she took a drink of water and fell asleep. He didn't call her back the next day.

Mam said Tem hadn't said much on the first night Mitchell was born. She liked to tell that story when Papa wasn't there. No matter his age, she would hold Mitchell close while she talked, smiling at Tem across the small, scratched oak table. Mam said he'd been born so fast the paramedics barely had time to walk through the door before she was holding him in her arms. Baby Mitchell had whimpered as she wrapped him in a crocheted yellow blanket while Tem, only 11, stood frozen in the corner of the living room. "Once your brother held you, though, you calmed." She'd always given a softer kind of smile when she said it. That was Mitchell's favorite part of the story.

Mitchell remembered the second one, the night he was reborn, for the rest of his life. Before they got in the truck, and after. The brothers had been quiet, laying under the longleaf pines at the edge of the dirt yard. They rested on a quilt blanket Tem snuck out from the house. Sharp needles poked at their backs through the thin fabric. Mam had made the quilt and it smelled like her, clean hair and skin like her garden. Even years after she'd seen to it, after it had gone over to weeds, Mitchell still knew where the mint and the basil and the daffodils, her favorites, would pop up every spring. Laying on the blanket, Mitchell tried to think of the bright color of the flowers instead of anything else. Tem told him not to make any noise, that they were playing a game, and he would be back soon. Mitchell hadn't moved or made a sound except to put his hands over his ears at the loud thuds that drifted through the screen door. Tem woulda understood all that, seeing as he stayed quiet. While he waited, Mitchell thought of Mam's story and the yellow crocheted blanket and the way she'd wrapped her arms around him as she told it.

After Tem came back out, he loaded Mitchell into the truck and put the quilt at his feet, still silent. Mitchell

watched the trees outside as they rumbled down the drive, headlights off. They passed rows of almond trees, their limbs so heavy with nuts the tips brushed against the tallest of the overgrown grass. Mitchell wondered if they would spring back up after harvest. He had seen it once, the harvester. It was a big, ugly machine that grabbed the tree, right at its very heart around the middle, and shook the daylights out of it. They fell like hail onto the ground where someone gathered them in nets. The trees looked bare, forgotten, left behind, after. Mitchell tried to remember if they had looked relieved, though, after the harvester had done its ugly work. He hoped they did.

“Do we have to turn around, Tem?” Somewhere between laying on the blanket, silent under the stars, and passing under the pines lining the side of the highway, the game had stopped. He knew without asking that he didn’t have to be quiet anymore.

“No, little man. We’re not turning around.” Tem’s voice was always strong, sure. Not like Mitchell’s.

“Oh, okay then.”

They drove on further. Past the almond trees. Past the loblolly pines, always reaching up and up to the sky. Past the crepe myrtles, the dogwoods, the never-ending road that unfolded before the headlights of the old truck. Mitchell knew a lot about trees. He trusted Tem to know a lot about the rest of whatever they’d need to know. Mitchell never asked Tem why they had to leave. And he never did find out if the almond trees sprung back up or not, once the weight was gone. Because the weight was never gone.

## **...and Baltimore Burned**

*by Ken Stepanuk*

The Baltimore Fire Department arrived at the Clay Street fire at the Joseph Thomas & Sons sash and blind factory. The horse-drawn firefighting steamers, first on the scene, unable to control the blaze, sent the message for additional steamers. Power generated by the coal-fired steamers could not produce a water stream to reach beyond the buildings' second stories, and wind-driven embers leaped across streets to ignite the roofs of neighboring structures. The fire was thought to have started in the engine room that fed boilers for the steam-powered wood planers and sanders. Near the center of the factory, the fire spread quickly, fueled by sawdust and shavings collected in the basement to be sold as a milling process byproduct. The fire raged for ten hours, destroying 113 buildings. Miraculously, only one death was officially recorded. Three unwelcome visitors left The Thomas Building just a few minutes before the first smoke was reported for the 1873 Clay Street Fire.

The three visitors were members of a secret society established 70 years earlier by Ellie Hobbs, a freed indentured servant of the Ridgley family enterprise. The Ridgleys owned the Hampton Manor House and 24,000 acres just north of Baltimore. In addition to farmland, timber, and grazing fields, the estate had marble quarries and an iron foundry. Ellie was one of the more than 300 indentured servants and African slaves working the estate along with paid skilled craftsmen.

Ellie was indentured by her mother's agreement with an English ship captain to transport Ellie, her mother, Molly, and her brother William to the Colonies. Unknown to Ellie, part of the payment for their ship voyage was her virtue given to the ship's captain for the six to seven weeks of transatlantic transit.

Ellie arrived at Hampton with her mother when she was thirteen; her brother, William's indenture, was sold to a southern Maryland plantation owner. Living in the Hampton Manor House slave quarters, Ellie was constantly harassed by the male slaves and abused by the work foremen. By the time she was fifteen, her mother had died, and after that, Ellie had been beaten, whipped, and raped more times than she could remember. Ellie worked in the estate garment shop repairing work clothes. When it was discovered she had seamstress skills, Ellie was moved into the manor house to become an apprentice to Mademoiselle Marie Aurati, the estate dressmaker. Having been treated like Ellie had when she was a young girl in France, Marie took Ellie under her wing. Their relationship turned from master and apprentice to partner and lover.

After Ellie's apprenticeship and indenture ended, she moved to the fashionable Mount Vernon section of Baltimore, living and working from the basement of a Ridgley family member. Ellie earned a living wage making dresses and other clothes for the Baltimore elite. Having saved enough money, Ellie partnered with Marie and opened a dressmaking shop. Being a free woman now, Ellie wondered what had become of her brother, and her search for William led Ellie, accompanied by Marie, to Prince Frederick in Calvert County of southern Maryland.

Visiting the second Calvert County plantation, Ellie and Marie were informed as to the whereabouts of Captain Stoleman, who might be able to point them to William. Retired now, Stoleman was a recluse living in a dilapidated shack on Fishing Creek, just north of Prince Frederick. It was early morning when Ellie and Marie arrived, and Stoleman was still drunk from the night before. He immediately became abusive. When he answered Ellie's question about William, his reply was that he didn't care if the boy was dead

or alive and that he remembered Ellie as his little prize on the ship. In a moment of uncontrollable rage and anger, Ellie grabbed the sewing shears she always carried and drove them through the old captain's neck. He gurgled something, but the blood that gushed from the severed carotid artery into his throat made his words inaudible.

He came at them but fell short. Marie threw a whiskey bottle that missed, hit the fireplace and shattered. Riding away, they saw rising smoke. The old wooden shack was consumed by fire, and later Captain Stoleman was presumed dead only because he lived there and human bones were found. Stoleman had no relatives, and it was thought the old drunk had accidentally started the fire and didn't get out.

Ellie suffered from nightmares replaying the incident at the shack, but came to peace with herself, believing it to be 'God's will' and a fitting end for a horrible human being. In the next few years, with Marie at her side, Ellie tracked down all those who tormented Ellie and her mother during their Hampton Estate indentures. Together, and sometimes with the help of indentured or slave women, they lured their tormentors into positions to overtake them, then dealt punishments equal to or harsher than those they inflicted on their victims. In one case, a wife of a slave man who raped Ellie joined in the whipping. Ellie became known, not by name but by deed, and was quietly spoken about among the Hampton women as a folk hero.

Marie, still dealing with the Hampton Estate ladies, continued making their fashionable outfits and was able to pick up bits of information. When Marie learned of a brutal punishment dealt by the foreman of the candle and soap-making shop, she and Ellie had to act. Working with the abused slave woman who had been forced to swallow soft soap they devised a plan. The foreman, known to take ale and meals at the tavern, found Ellie one night, brushing

a horse, when he returned to the estate stable. Marie and two women, hiding in the darkness nearby, were on him as soon as he approached Ellie. In an instant, they had a rope around his neck, with one woman pulling tightly enough to immobilize him. He didn't know Ellie or Marie, and the other women had their heads and faces covered with black cloth, making only their eyes visible. They bound his hands, gagged him, and threw the end of the rope tied to his neck over a stable joist. Reminding him of his brutal treatment of the woman workers, they beat him with whatever barn implements they could find. They could hear grunts from his gagged mouth, but his eyes let them see his torment and fear of being hanged. The rope was pulled tighter until he stood on his toes, barely touching the ground but still able to breathe. If he could stand like that all night, some early morning stable worker would find him and cut him down.

Several more instances occurred over the next few years, and Ellie and Marie adopted the black scarf face covering when they were involved. In fact, all the women that participated wore black scarves as a precaution. After blindfolding their subject, they would leave their black scarves behind. This became their calling card.

\* \* \*

The Black Scarf Society became organized and established a presence in West Baltimore in a small house where no one would care or ask about their purpose or activities. Ellie and Marie restricted membership to just five women. Their pledge was to never divulge the name or identity of any other Black Scarf.

The Black Scarves carried out reprisal attacks even after the Hampton Estate freed indentured servants and African slaves. Governor Charles Carnan Ridgely, the fifteenth

governor of Maryland, was the last true master of the Hampton estate. After his death in 1829, in accordance with his will, a gradual reduction of the Hampton Estate slave workforce was granted, and the emancipation of more than 300 indentured servants and black slaves was realized. Marie passed away in 1804 at 62, and Ellie continued on until she died at 60 in 1822, neither living long enough to witness the Hampton slave emancipation.

The Society grew in numbers from an influx of women willing to risk their newfound freedom to avenge the most heinous abuses of women at Hampton and other plantations, and also with a group of women wanting to establish a benevolent women's support group. In her will, Ellie left all she had to the newly formed Baltimore Society for Poor Women, with a provision that established the Founders Fund. Controlled by the Committee of Five, to obfuscate the Black Scarf stigma, no questions were asked about those expenditures.

Baltimore Society for Poor Women came into being at a time when women's movements were just starting in the United States. With the first women's rights convention in the United States held in 1848 and the movement gaining momentum, BSPW raised funds through donations and benefactors. By 1857, they were in their new Baltimore headquarters building on German Street.

While the focus of BSPW was truly to improve the social standing of women, the Black Scarves continued their vigilante justice campaign and remained a group of five, with Ellie and Marie long ago replaced by new members. As slavery was the primary form of manual labor, especially in the southern territories, indentured servitude diminished and ended in the very early 18th century. With slavery abolished, the mid-century industrial revolution relied on a paid workforce in the growing manufacturing businesses in

northern states and the farms and plantations of the south. Factory workers replaced workhouse labor, but in many big cities, factory workers received marginally better treatment, and farm workers were considered just a step above slaves. Many former slaves chose to continue working on the plantations as free men and women, and others flocked to the cities to find work.

Blending with BSPW protestors and in marches and parades, the Black Scarves served as protectors to ward off anti-protest violence and, when necessary, defend the BSPW side. Their revenge activities were relegated to reprisals against perpetrators of the most violent or depraved acts.

Bilah, the child of a former Hampton Estate slave, came to Baltimore after her eighteenth birthday. By now, Hampton had passed its peak of dominance and sold off property and businesses with a resulting workforce downsizing. Bilah was given two dollars, her clothes, and transportation to the BSPW house on German Street in Baltimore. The BSPW ladies gave her a room to use until they could place her in a job at the Thomas blind and sash manufacturing company. Bilah worked 12-hour days sanding the ends of wood trim destined for use in the growing Baltimore housing boom. On Sundays, she attended church services at the Central Presbyterian Church with the BSPW ladies and other female workers from the area factories. For Bilah, the church service was her ticket to Sunday dinner at the home of one or another of the BSPW ladies. Sitting through the obligatory moral seminar before dinner was a small price to pay for her only decent meal of the week.

Being the first week of July, this Sunday dinner was set with flowers and bunting to commemorate the Fourth of July that became a federal holiday just three years earlier. July 4th was the most celebrated holiday of the year, with patriotic floats on horse-drawn carriages, marching bands,

and groups of ‘plug-uglies’ that were floats and clowns expressing political satire. Together, the BSPW host ladies gathered with their flocks of needy women at Pratt Street to watch the parade before returning to their homes for the Sunday meal. Bilah wore her best dress, not fashionable, but common for working-class women. It had three-quarter-length sleeves that she hiked to her elbows on this hot Baltimore day.

The marks on her forearm were evident, but as a proper lady, her host did not inquire about them. However, at the BSPW on Monday, another woman mentioned seeing burn marks on the arm of one of her young ladies. She did ask about them and was told they were burns she “got at work.” With a BSPW focus on protecting women in Baltimore’s factories, these two events were deemed worthy of a visit to Mr. Joseph Thomas, a Baltimore Society for Poor Women benefactor.

Steven Thomas, son of Joseph, ran the factory’s day-to-day operations and graciously met with the women. He assured them that safety of their workers was a priority and escorted them on a plant tour. One of the BSPW group members was a Black Scarf, who noticed similar marks on a third woman they did not know. Questioning her, while Steven walked on with the other ladies, she was told the boiler room head mechanic attacked her, and she knew others he also attacked. The circular cigar burns indicated how many times he assaulted each woman. She had three. It seems Steven either did not know or did not care what the mechanic did.

At the next Sunday dinner, Bilah was questioned and related that a daily chore of one woman was to sweep the chips bin. The chips bin was directly below a shaft for shavings to be collected from the wood-trimming process. At the end of each twelve-hour shift, a female worker on

each floor would sweep the waste into the shaft that went to the basement bin next to the engine room; that's where the attacks occurred. The unfortunate woman who drew bin-sweeping duty was prone to run into the mechanic. They completed their sweeping chore as fast as possible, trying to avoid him. Bilah had two burn circles, the other women had five between them, and these were just the three women the BSPW knew.

\* \* \*

Knowing the mechanic would be in the building on pay day, and with the commotion of the shift change, three Black Scarves separately entered the building and mingled within the crowd. They met in the basement where Bilah was having her turn at bin-sweeping duty. They stayed out of sight in the dark passageway, waiting to see if the mechanic would make his move. He did.

The Black Scarves entered the chips bin just behind the mechanic. He was smoking his cigar, and according to Bilah, it never left his mouth the whole time of his attacks. The Black Scarves were prepared. One had a ladies' walking stick, another a length of rope concealed in a cloth work bag, and the third was a small but wiry former slave who could talk and fight like a man. The mechanic was not a particularly large man, and he appeared unfit with a belly hanging over his britches, so the odds seemed to favor the Black Scarves. He approached Bilah, who was poking at him with her broom. She turned away when he heard the others behind her. Pulling the cigar from his mouth and blowing a foul cloud of smoke at them, he made a crude comment about how "this will be fun."

With their faces covered, the Black Scarf with the walking stick poked it at him, telling him to sit. There was a chair

next to an old table. The mechanic grabbed the walking stick and yanked it away from his attacker but found the pointy end of the dagger concealed in the walking stick shaft tight enough against his ribcage to draw a trickle of blood. The rope was placed around his neck, and he was pulled to the chair, where the end secured his hands and arms. Chewing on the stubby end of his cigar, he belligerently yelled at them, asking for an explanation of what they wanted with him.

In a mock trial that lasted less than 30 seconds, he was accused of eight counts of rape, and his punishment was to be eight cigar burns. Bilah, who was not privy to what was happening, ran from the chips bin. One of the Black Scarves ripped his shirt and tore it down to bare his left arm. The former slave Black Scarf, kicked the mechanic in the chest, causing him to expel the cigar. Picking it up, she gave him his first mark. The hair on his arm curled and burned away, and a perfect red circle formed under the cigar's tip. He didn't wince or show any sign of pain. Being a tobacco smoker herself, she drew on the cigar and flicked the ash that formed on the end to show the bright red glow of the hot tip.

Three more burns were made, and still, he did not call out or scream, but he was uncomfortably wringing in the chair, trying to get out of the ties and sweating across his forehead and down his bright cheeks. He was obviously feeling something. To ensure no escape, one of the Black Scarves wrapped the loose end of the rope around his neck two times and tied that to the table leg. His thrashing slowed as he realized and felt the pressure of the new constraints. The four final burns were made, and his left arm showed a track of eight marks from his wrist to above his elbow.

The third woman of the Black Scarves, the leader, asked for the cigar, took a puff to get it glowing again, and crammed it into the side of the mechanic's face. This time

he screamed out in surprise as much as pain, but it gave the Black Scarves the satisfaction they were seeking and the scar would be a visible indicator he could not hide. She threw the still-smoking cigar butt in his lap, saying, “I hope you burn in Hell!” They left.

The Black Scarves turned their back to him and dropped their face coverings to the floor of the chip bin. Not long after they left the building, the sound of fire horns came from the smoke rising at Clay Street. The chips’ shaft formed a perfect chimney. Workers jumped from the upper floors as the flames quickly blew through the building—and Baltimore burned.

*NOTE: The Clay Street fire, while devastating, was over-shadowed by the 1904 Great Baltimore Fire that destroyed or damaged 2,500 downtown buildings.*

## The After Life

*by Bryce Kositz*

Dawn. Robot woke. Though that is inaccurate. Robot's distributed systems processed data at all times. Sensors collected information endlessly, Robot's hub analyzed constantly, yet the bipedal form bloomed only by day.

The bipedal form was not fundamentally different than Robot's other motorized devices, sensors, or storage units; just another tool fulfilling the needs of the network and the estate... and yet, also not.

During the storm, 2.8 hours before dawn, Robot extended retractable roofs to protect individual crops from rainfall and powered sluice gates to reroute water to storage basins. After the weather passed, Robot activated misters to provide optimal growing conditions across the estate.

The articulated joints of the bipedal form were also useful tools. The form walked silently among the crops, each step planted to limit damage. Robot leaned over, opened access ports, and extended thin appendages down into the piping which lay beneath and between the plants. Cameras from within fingers and pipes guided Robot's actions. Robot had already located all its targets: a lump of decaying leaves that already decreased flow by 4%; an acorn shell increasing the friction in the gears of a sluicegate motor and decreasing its functional life. Robot resolved eighty-three such impediments across 100 hectares.

Robot lent excess processing power to the network while working. Not needing the massive processing capabilities within and around the estate for this labor, Robot deployed those resources according to the needs of other estates, units, and the network as a whole. Robot helped to calculate the pH of a creek across the world, predicted the probable direction and intensity of a storm thousands of kilometers away, and

compiled the entire data set held within the network of all bell pepper plants grown between latitudes 35 degrees 14 minutes and 35 degrees 18 minutes North in a coastal area with frequent droughts and extrapolated that information to current weather conditions for planning yields.

Likewise, the network informed Robot. The network had calculated and provided the path and likely accumulation of the prior night's storm. It had told Robot to bring some of the estate's reserve herbicide to a depot this afternoon so that it could be retrieved and applied to the giant hogweed growing on another estate. The network's information allowed Robot to schedule every second of its day before the bipedal form was activated. The next 13.52 hours had a disruption probability of effectively zero.

Robot's estate measured 1,914 hectares. The east border was formed by the bay, which Robot was not equipped to manage, though in the early years the estate housed another unit capable of reestablishing the oyster beds. Corn grew on 300 hectares along the western border. This year 70% would be taken north to the nearest ethanol processing plant. The remainder was reserved as feed for the animals of the estate when natural conditions failed to provide adequate nutrition. Another 30 hectares kept solar panels. The panels recharged local batteries, powered nearby transmitting nodes, and supplemented other estates as needed. The land under and around the panels hosted a variety of low-growth, indigenous plants which supported a thriving ecosystem of insects. A flock of chickens ranged this area freely and rarely needed additional feed. The chickens provided fertilizer for the estate. 80 hectares were devoted to worm weed. Robot pressed this into oil on the estate, and it was used by estates near and far as a base for paints or in medicine for livestock. Its dried leaves deterred certain animals from barns and silos, controlling their natural tendencies for the overall health of the ecosystem.

Near the center of the estate, where Robot kept tools, materials for repair, replacement sensors, processing and data storage banks, and the housing for the bipedal unit, Robot also kept a vegetable patch; 1.3213 hectares. It grew eggplant, tomato, garlic, catnip, basil, mint, and other plants. A row of chestnut trees provided some natural shade and a boundary. The network had eradicated the chestnut blight some time ago. A small tree nursery was preparing young chestnut trees to replace these as they neared the end of their natural life. Some of the produce could feed the chickens while others had applications in insect prevention or to be mulched into fertilizer. Robot left a majority in the forest to encourage the proliferation of wild fauna.

Then there was the pumpkin. Robot grew only one. Many estates grew pumpkins, and like most other non-essential crops, they were grown in limited numbers for no explicit purpose save for mulch or to feed the environment. But Robot's pumpkin was remarkable. Robot housed this pumpkin in an environmentally-controlled room to allow its growth to be unfettered by the seasons and years. This pumpkin was already the oldest and largest known to the network, weighing in at 1,310 kilograms. An extensive array of sensors and applicators within the pumpkin worked to detect and prevent the rot, decay, and disease that came with shattering the boundaries of its natural growth cycle.

Robot applied fresh worm weed leaves around the housing as a pest preventative, as winds had taken away much of the prior application. Robot removed, cleaned, and replaced air filters from their intake valves. Robot deployed a small arc welder to rejoin a single rivet on the roof which the sensors had detected as having come loose enough to allow airflow. The backup systems prevented such ingress, and the flow would have been almost, but not quite, nothing. The housing was well sealed, but a pumpkin did not grow so long

or large without precision and care. Inside, Robot adjusted the external sensors. The pumpkin had mostly ceased growing at this point, but its mass could shift slightly. Robot queried the network again as to the regular growth cycles of pumpkins. The network processed oceans of information, and returned a complete data set. Robot's pumpkin was still an outlier.

Robot identified that the potassium solution reserve, applied directly into the pumpkin through tubes embedded throughout its mass, was running low. The unit confirmed that the sensors measuring that reserve were not in error. Robot did not have the facilities to prepare such materials on the estate. It confirmed the plan made before dawn with the network: a nearby estate produced a form of potassium suitable to the pumpkin's needs and a bipedal unit would have it ready for pickup in 3.27 hours. It was exactly enough time for Robot to drop off four barrels of worm weed oil to a nearby materials hub, then travel the additional 91 kilometers to the other estate. Robot could access cameras along the way to see the entire route prior to and throughout every moment of travel. The network logged Robot's plan and the plan of all units along the path, calculating the exact meeting points of each unit. Robot saved the complete plan to the bipedal unit, forecasting every movement of every motor necessary for every step. The unit's processors could be minimally engaged during travel. After collecting the wormwood oil for deposit, Robot initiated the first step of the travel plan.

Robot passed another unit while returning with the potassium. The other bipedal unit had finished dropping its own haul of lumber at the materials hub 28 minutes earlier. The two robots knew each other's exact position, speed, and where they would cross paths as soon as the network logged the two routes. Each had access to all the same sensors and

information throughout the entire network. They could see their unit through the other's eyes at a latency of 0.08 seconds. As they passed by, they transferred packets of information via short-wave transmissions directly between the two bipedal models to confirm the reliability of each unit's transmitters. The exchange took place in the few moments as they passed by each other, and not a sound was made nor any cadence lost.

And yet. The two exchanged information through short-wave transmission, anyway. Perhaps there was a flavor imparted by the transmission through the air, through such inefficient means as short-wave which changed the tenor of the data. The directness of the format, the reduced latency, to be within touch of the sender, made the little exchange different, even as the data transferred between the two already existed on the network. Robot sent the entire growth history of the pumpkin even though a far smaller test packet would have accomplished the same goal of calibrating transmitters.

The other unit confirmed three times that the age and weight of Robot's pumpkin was not an error caused by mis transmission. Robot confirmed the accuracy each time. The next lines of data took longer than the previous to transmit, an infinitesimal delay beyond notice to any but Robot due to this proximity. The pause suggested that the pumpkin's weight caused the other unit to summon an entire world turned to computational power in search of prior errors in Robot's history. There were none.

The exchange would have taken 0.17 seconds over the network. They were in short-wave transmission range for 11.55 seconds. They only would have needed 1.09 of those seconds for the information to pass via short-wave. It took 2.3 seconds.

When Robot entered the pumpkin's habitat, Robot began

refining the potassium solution and refilling the reservoir. While working, Robot tracked a family of eastern cougars as they passed through the estate. Much of the estate was devoted to promoting the growth of native ecosystems. The land brimmed with life, all of which served important functions and were monitored by various sensors feeding tasks to Robot. Forests of oak, hickory, dogwood, and white pine grew on the bluffs above the bay. Their roots absorbed water to regulate local erosion, and absorbed carbon to regulate global temperature. Several meadows increased local biological diversity by providing habitat to indigenous flowers and grasses. These environments on the estate hosted many different species, from spiders to voles to deer to foxes. That sometimes those foxes took a chicken was part of the calculation of resources Robot regularly made. The network informed Robot that the cougars were most likely to pass further south. Robot decided to allocate time to establishing several ponds in the woods to promote hunting habitat.

“You.”

Audio sensors picked up and located the noise immediately. Even before the microphones registered activity, Robot knew the source and turned towards it. Sensors deep within the pumpkin tracked the movement of air through its esophagus, read the perturbations in its interior organs as long unused flesh was forced into movement.

“I... what... this.” The pumpkin gurgled through its words, each barely recognizable as discreet, meaningful attempts at communication.

The bipedal unit stood over the pumpkin before the utterance had finished. Robot said nothing. There were no means to do so.

The pumpkin’s eyes were unaccustomed to use and struggled to focus on Robot’s bipedal unit. “I have lived as god,” it spoke, its clarity still lacking and cadence slow, yet

growing in its ability to press air through vocal cords. “The world gives me everything I want, lets me be anything I want. I control it all with just my desire and words. But I didn’t want this. You, this is not real.”

Robot reached out to the network for new enrichment programs for the pumpkin. The global network quickly designed millions of hours in additional content to be fed into the pumpkin’s unconscious synapses. It reprocessed all the medical data accumulated throughout the pumpkin’s life, crosschecked it against similar data from all other pumpkins, and recalculated the chemical balance necessary to preserve this pumpkin’s pacificty. The bipedal unit remained looming over the pumpkin. It had no need to act. Other nodes engaged.

How confusing it must be, to become aware of a new and contradictory source of data: a pumpkin in such a state must be fearful, so Robot sought to relieve that discomfort.

Robot administered more anesthesia, forcing medicine through veins, remotely administered by sensors embedded in the pumpkin. Grown pumpkins had no need to bloom anymore. They should remain silent. Totally inert. Forever.

## I Walk

*by Donna Donnelly*

I love to walk. I need to walk. Sometimes I need to walk alone—to think. I most often walk alone at the dam just a few miles from my home. Today is an unusually warm and sunny day for December, on the cusp of winter. Today, as I walk, I am thinking about the contrasting types of walks I take.

This is a five-mile out-and-back walk on a grassy flat track lined by trees on both sides. At the beginning, I cross a metal walkway over the dam. The river is on my right and the lake that it forms is on my left. After a mile, marshland comes into view, water and grasses shimmering in the sun. Otherwise, there is just the green track and the trees.

This path offers me the opportunity for quiet reflection. Occasionally, I see other people. They might be walking alone, or in pairs, or with their dogs. But mostly this is a place for solitary walking. I have come to love witnessing the changing seasons in this place, each one with its particular beauty.

Today, I am thinking about the difference between this five-mile walk and a five-mile walk on one of the long-distance trails my husband and I have hiked in Europe. In the space of five miles, as we've walked from village to village, we have witnessed so much.

In the Rieti Valley of Italy one day, we walked past grapevines laden with purple grapes in vineyards set among rolling hills. We walked past a former Cistercian abbey, built in the 13th century, nestled among the trees. We continued to the Sanctuary of Greccio, a 15th-century stone complex, built by local workers, that seems to rise directly out of a sheer rock wall. And we visited the Chapel of the Nativity, in a grotto where St. Francis recreated the first living nativity scene in 1223. All this, within a five-mile walk.

One day in Spain, we explored a chain of six white villages in the Alpujarra mountains of Andalucía in just five miles. When we stopped for a meal in one of them, we happened upon a television crew filming a segment about the “Burial of the Fox,” an annual local tradition meant to symbolically unburden neighbors of their misunderstandings and grievances.

During a five-mile walk in Belgium, we took a wrong turn off the trail in the Ardennes Forest and came upon the remains of foxholes from World War II. My father had spoken about falling asleep in his foxhole as an American soldier in the Battle of the Bulge, praying that he would live to see the morning.

On a hot, dry day in the Peloponnese peninsula of Greece, we expected to visit a museum and two monasteries during a five-mile downhill hike into the Lousios Gorge. Off the trail, and facing a long, uphill trek with a dwindling water supply, an Israeli family pulled up and offered us a ride.

In Portugal, a five-mile circular walk on the Vicentine Coast in the Algarve revealed magnificent cliffs, giant dunes, and one of the most expansive—and unspoiled—beaches I have ever encountered.

I walk to exercise. I walk to relieve stress. I walk to think. I walk to be among the trees. I walk to experience the varied landscapes of the natural world. I walk to experience the unique characteristics of a country, its people, its culture, and its history, at a pace that affords participation and reflection.

I walk to experience the possibilities ahead.

## Family

*by Richard Schreck*

Hoke St. John breezed into the Convention Center. Even though he had worked numerous trade shows in this venue, he saw the room with fresh eyes. He had just received the promotion of his life and his future stood assured. Two weeks earlier, McAlister Equipment had elevated him to head of the entire Caribbean Region. More responsibility. Better compensation. He was the man to grow it, make it their most profitable. Hoke's mind was already hard at work on how he would make it all fall into place.

Hoke sold equipment for installing concrete, tearing out concrete, repairing concrete, and digging holes for concrete foundations. Having carved out his position as an honest man in a tight-knit family firmly entrenched on the wrong side of the law, he felt confident that his choice of the straight and narrow had been the right one.

His relatives disagreed, pulled at him to join them on a different path. Descendants of Scottish smugglers, they had followed the French to Haiti in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, then fled with them to Louisiana, where illicit opportunities were even greater. From the beginning, his ancestors had thrived by facilitating lawless commerce in gunpowder, sugar, whiskey, laudanum, cigarettes, and after-market car parts—changing commodities with the times through the creative evasion of tariffs and taxes. They were hopeful that Hoke—intelligent and ambitious, a natural shot caller—would navigate them into the next generation of shady business ventures.

No question, they led exciting lives, not to mention they were all the family he had left, but Hoke had resisted. His adoptive parents—Uncle Mike and Aunt Estelle, now deceased—had raised him with a different set of values.

Centered among the images of his childhood was Aunt Estelle fighting back tears, telling him his parents had lost their lives in a traffic accident. Numb by the news, he had offered no resistance when she hustled him out of bed and into her car, then tucked him in with Les and Billy, her own two sons.

As the three grew up together, the pair readily followed Hoke's leadership into boyhood explorations and adventures. He was their guide. All three boys looked out for each other, became inseparable.

On rare occasions, Great Aunt Lettie, the family matriarch, visited. Snatches of strained conversation lingered in Hoke's memory.

*You could make a lot of money.*

*Don't ask me that again, Mike and I aren't gonna...*

And at the end of each visit, Lettie saying, "You know where I am. All you need do is ask. We're family."

When Christmas and birthdays rolled around, Aunt Estelle allowed the boys to keep Lettie's gifts. But she cautioned, "We want to keep our distance—and to be careful what we take from that part of the family." Under her breath, she would mumble something about dishonest money.

Although Hoke took Aunt Estelle's warning to heart, he was aware of a power that Lettie projected. A power Hoke could not comprehend. But children can sometimes sense who their friends are, and somehow he perceived that she was his. How he knew, he could not explain. Yet he was confident of it nonetheless.

As the boys entered adulthood, bad company and poor judgment turned Les and Billy toward substance abuse and eventual assignment to a rehabilitation center. The isolated location of the center discouraged flight. Les and Billy, realizing they'd be in it for the long haul, begged Hoke to help them escape.

They promised that if they were on the outside, they would get straight. That they would make it stick. They painted a hopeless picture of rehab, of an endless cycle of release and return. Relying on themselves would be far better than contending with overworked and uncaring rehab staff. Hoke had wanted to believe them. What they told him rang true. So he agreed to park his Chevy on a back road a mile from the center and wait. In the dark night, he sat until the two of them—panting from running and joking back and forth in the excitement of their escape—piled into his back seat and hunkered down low to avoid detection. He dropped them off where they asked—a location unfamiliar to him—and left. Next thing Hoke knew, he was identifying their bodies at the morgue. Shot dead in a drug deal.

Anguish at the damage he could never reverse cemented his resistance each time his great aunt Lettie offered to make a place for him in her smuggling enterprise. Although she was his gateway to the rest of his family, Hoke held to the principled course he had chosen. He joined McAlister after a stint in the army and, within a few years, married Eileen, a woman for whom criminality was no more than the fiction of TV police dramas and supermarket novels.

In no time at all, Hoke rose to become a top salesman. He and Eileen had planned a family, but when children failed to appear, she joined him at McAlister and began learning the trade by accompanying him on sales calls. With Eileen's involvement, success in the southern states had now landed him the entire Caribbean Region.

The only trouble? Since the deaths of Aunt Estelle and Uncle Mike, his relatives had become more persistent than ever.

Hoke pushed them out of his mind for the moment, weaving his wheeled travel case in and around colleagues and competitors toward his trade show booth. Following close at

his heel, Eileen poked his arm and gestured ahead toward Allen Crane—a colleague. Hoke nodded acknowledgment, pushed down his ambivalence toward the older man.

Allen navigated his own travel case with a dexterity that belied his advancing years, his skill honed by decades of set-ups and tear-downs on every Caribbean island of known or rumored possibility. Not in direct competition, the two men shared experiences at meetups such as this. Hoke regarded the older man with a combination of reverence—which he would have acknowledged if asked—and condescension—which he would have denied. Although he was aware of both.

The older man had been kicking around the Caribbean for years, relying on his network of cronies for enough business leads to keep his job. Hoke imagined himself in Allen's shoes. An aging sales professional nearing an unnoticed exit from an unremarkable life.

Hoke had always wanted more.

As he finished spreading his merch—mugs, key chains, caps, all heralding the logo of his employer—onto the tables in his McAlister booth, his cell phone pinged. Aunt Lettie.

Since Hoke's promotion to Regional Management, Lettie had been relentless. She dogged him in hope of leveraging his new connections.

Resenting her persistence yet feeling guilty about distancing himself, Hoke considered ignoring the call altogether. But only for a moment. He pictured her back in Louisiana, burner phone to her ear and an icy glass of tea on the kitchen table, fingers tapping with impatience. Hoke considered her latest brainstorm ill-advised, but once an idea had gelled, she stuck to it in grim determination. The determination of someone who had seen even her most ill-advised undertakings pan out.

“Hoke, have you thought ‘bout what we’ve discussed?”

Grounded in crime all her life, Lettie knew better than to be specific on the phone.

“Sure.” Hoke had, in fact, thought of little else. “I don’t...”

“Hush, now. You’re a natural leader. It’s no wonder McAlister gave you their Caribbean region.” This an intimation that Hoke’s promotion positioned him perfectly to transport illegally obtained rare earths from Brazil up through the Caribbean, routing them into Louisiana through Port Fourchon at the mouth of Bayou Lafourche. After a pause, she softened her tone. “It’s the right thing, Hoke. It’s the family thing.” He had been searching for a way to decline but couldn’t deny he felt honored that she saw him as someone with skill enough to manage an important part of her business scheme.

His attention shifted to the first crowd of trade show attendees advancing toward him, booth-to-booth, along the aisle. Stepping forward in preparation to extend his hand in greeting, he ended the exchange. “Clients are coming in now. I’ll call you when I can.” She accepted that, but barely.

Already standing in front of the booth, Eileen turned and met his eyes as he lowered the phone. “Lettie, again?”

Hoke faced the approaching throng. “Yeah. She’s been able to bribe people her whole life, so she thinks she can get rare earths out of Brazil. Doomed to fail, if you ask me.”

“Because?”

“All her experience is in the southern states. Family contacts there go back generations. She can’t accept that’s the only reason she’s been able to operate so successfully. If she tries to involve someone in Brazil where nobody owes the family, she’ll get into real trouble.”

“Well, she’s right that you’d be good at organizing the transport if she succeeded.” Eileen reached up to squeeze his shoulder, then stepped away to speak to a man examining one of their brochures.

Hoke might have interpreted her comment as an indication she wouldn't mind if he linked up with Lettie, but he dismissed the idea out of hand. True enough, family pulled him back toward his roots. But Eileen had pulled him in a different direction. He had no doubt she would have been happy raising a family in Thibodaux, only started with McAlister out of—as Lettie had once put it—an ambitious nature. He'd gotten used to thinking of himself as a civilian, an honest citizen, and he felt that to leave that path would betray the course he'd set for himself. And be a betrayal of Eileen.

The increasing flow of attendees prevented further conversation. Assuming long-practiced roles, Hoke and Eileen focused on promoting the business. For lunch, they took turns grabbing a quick bite in the hotel's deli.

At the end of the day, Kirsten Bond, a sales rep, left her own company's booth and joined them. "Listen." She leaned in, conspiratorial. "Be sure to go see Allen before you leave. He's got a line on rare earth minerals."

Eileen's expression told Hoke that she shared his dismay.

Out of curiosity, Hoke had indeed asked around—low-key, he had thought—about rare earths. Now his queries had come back to bite him. If Kirsten remembered he'd asked about rare earths, others would too. He should have kept his mouth shut and he had no business being surprised that Kirsten—always on the lookout to insert herself into an opportunity—had paid close attention.

Kirsten tightened her grip on his arm. "Allen was in Jamaica talking about lumber with a producer in St. Elizabeth Parish. He didn't have much luck with lumber, but he mentioned something about rare earth minerals. Naturally, I thought of you."

Hoke knew that Jamaica had been extracting and processing bauxite, piling up the residue as waste. In theory,

the residue could contain rare earth elements, but last he'd heard, this remained unproven. Hoke thought it typical of Allen—jovial raconteur that he was—to be passing around useless rumors.

Nevertheless, caught off guard, Hoke had no real choice but to follow Kirsten. "So, Allen's sourcing rare earths, now?"

Kirsten turned, kept walking sideways. "No, I don't think he's all that interested. It's just that one of his contacts mentioned it." She tilted her head back to look up at Hoke, established eye contact. "But you are. Right? Scouting around for the stuff?"

He needed to derail her if he could. Berated himself for not being discreet when making inquiries. For making inquiries at all. Cursed his naïve nature. "No, not really. Just someone mentioned it. You know how people get to talking."

Kirsten kept up a running dialogue, her chatter an obvious attempt to justify inclusion in any profitable outcome.

Allen Crane, in the midst of returning merch to his wheeled travel case, looked up from his table. "Hey, Hoke. Eileen. Did Kirsten mention my rare earth minerals?" He stretched his back as he came erect, an old bachelor eking out his swan song years in Caribbean paradise.

Hoke gave him what he hoped looked like a friendly smile. "How was Jamaica, Al?"

"Waste of time." Allen reached down to gather up bright yellow brochures from their presentation array, half-circling a tray of his business cards. Noting the fastidiousness of the old man's display, Hoke thought of a sunflower severed laterally. "But you might be interested in this. Rumors have circulated for some time that Jamaica could have rare earth minerals in its bauxite." He paused as if for effect. "Now they have confirmation. Only a handful of people know so far. Does that interest you?"

Hoke glanced at Eileen, her face unreadable. His own honest answer was yes, the news did interest him. In fact, it solved the flaw in Lettie's Brazilian scheme. She didn't know a soul in Brazil, but he could be her man in Jamaica.

This could work. Just this once, Hoke could give Lettie what she wanted. Just this once, he could clean up her scheme, set her back on the path. Then he could reclaim his ethical lifestyle. Nothing would change.

Hoke looked past Kirsten, who was now leaning in to better hear his reply. "I'll pass it along, Allen. But I'm pretty sure the guy who asked me about it has already locked himself into a sourcing relationship in China. Sichuan Province, I think."

On the way back to their booth, Eileen leaned into his arm. "I saw your face. What's going on?"

He explained the Jamaican opportunity as they walked, noted her straightening posture, her quickening gait. He had never discussed an opportunity with her. Never had to, locked into his career with McAlister. They'd always been able to look at each other and just know what side they were on. For the first time uncertain, Hoke felt it necessary to ask. "What do you think?"

"What do you want to do?"

The absence of "don't get involved" told him everything he needed to know. He was already sensing the challenge, feeling the excitement. Imagining re-establishing himself with his family.

Remembering Lettie's reference to Eileen's ambitious nature, he saw his wife in a new light. She had been his anchor to virtue. Had he misread her? Had she changed?

He nudged the questions aside. Snuggled them in beside his belief that in bringing Lettie's scheme to fruition, he himself would not change.

Hoke turned toward Eileen. "Let's talk about Jamaica."

## Shampoo Miracles

*by Joanne Zaslow*

Sharon peers out the shop's picture window, decorated for Halloween, and sees the young woman, Kelsey, the third applicant for shampoo girl, tapping on the locked front door. From behind a plastic jack-o-lantern, Sharon considers Kelsey's chipped nails, dirty pink hair, and abundant piercings. Besides being untidy, Kelsey doesn't fit into the Shampoo Beauty Salon ambiance—1960s-inspired chrome fixtures and robin's-egg-blue vinyl. Shop owner Sharon, a soft, beehived blonde whose bowed lips embody a cherub's goodness, hires Kelsey anyway, right after the interview. She'd seen in Kelsey "an old soul with sweetness in her heart."

On Sharon's orders, Kelsey sweeps floors, puts towels in the dryer, and keeps her hair and station clean. Sharon, treating Kelsey like family, sees to it that Kelsey eats lunch, attends staff and family parties, and saves \$5 a week for the Christmas club ("You give me your club money yet, Sweetie?"). Kelsey's confidence soars; she blossoms.

Now Sharon watches protectively as Kelsey persuades a customer's five-year-old who's scooping up shorn hair to "Put it in this bag, Honey. Did you know if you take hair outside, birds will make a nice nest of it?"

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While Sharon blow-dries a customer's strawberry-scented hair, another customer, Pam, limps into the shop, pops a Lemonhead from the go-go boot candy jar, and plops—despite her lean runner's body—into a hard-plastic waiting-room chair. Sharon knows that despite Pam's excruciating hip pain, her doctor won't do surgery. "Says she's too young.

And she's an athlete, too," says Sharon to her customer, nodding, lifting her eyebrows.

Before leaving the Takoma Park shop, Sharon's customer tells Pam about her own surgeon, who "looks like a teenager but keeps up with the latest research."

Months later, Sharon's blow-drying that same customer's hair when Pam walks into the shop—not limping.

"Oh, Doll," says Sharon, nudging her customer. "She's back to sports. Your doctor did her hip surgery."

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Putting on her glasses to look would be too obvious, so while Sharon washes her hair, Audrey leans toward Sharon and whispers with minty breath about the man Sharon's just shampooed, "Is that Merle Levine?"

"Yep. He's been coming here for... maybe 15 years?"

"I've wanted to thank him for 30!"

Towel over her head, waterproof cape flying, Audrey charges bull-like at Dr. Levine. He flinches only slightly on hearing her high heels scrape the laminate floor, his unwrapped hair dripping onto his wrinkled forehead and plastic cape.

He doesn't remember her. Even so, Audrey thanks him, her sophomore year English professor whose passion for language inspired her career as an editor. When she returns to the sink, she brandishes her autographed copy of Levine's poetry book, just released. She tells Sharon he'll present it at his new residency, where he's moving tomorrow: Taiwan.

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Something about Shampoo—the nostalgic window displays? Swedish meatball aroma wafting from the lunch-

room? Sharon?—persuades folks to ... let their hair down, let the magic happen.

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Sharon tells Helen Meyer she doesn't take walk-ins, so she invites Helen to sit and chat as they arrange Helen's first appointment. Helen asks if Sharon might cut her invalid husband's hair at their senior housing apartment. "Sure, dearest," says Sharon. Helen and her husband become Sharon's regular customers.

Just before moving away, Helen stops by Shampoo. "Sharon, I want to tell you something. The day I first walked into your shop? I was thinking of killing myself. Because of you, I changed my mind."

## Gate Openers, Inc.

*by Greg Rosenthal*

Jack stepped out of the woods and onto the lawn. Streetlights illuminated the sidewalk and grass near the road, but the light barely reached his shadowy figure. He paused by the tree line, standing between two rows of townhouses.

“Jack, is that you?” Roxie called in a whisper from the sidewalk.

“Yep.”

“What the hell were you doing in the woods, you nitwit?” she asked. “We’re already late.”

“I like to get the lay of the land before I start a job,” he said

“You think nocturnal woodland creatures have anything to do with our job?”

“Actually, I got here early and had to take a whizz. Shouldn’t have had that second beer at dinner.”

“Impulse control, Jack! Come on, let’s get going!” she said, jerking her head to her right.

“Sure thing. Never keep a ghost waiting, I always say. You brought the backpack, right?”

“Yes.”

They walked toward the closest end-unit townhouse. Its main entrance was on the side. Roxie climbed the steps to the flagstone landing and pressed the doorbell. Jack stayed on the sidewalk behind her, admiring the brick and stone facade and large brass light fixtures bracketing the stained wooden door.

An elderly black woman answered. “Thank the Lord, you’re here!” she cried. “I can’t take this anymore. Please, please come in.”

She led them to the living room, and Jack and Roxie sat on a beige sofa. The quilt spread across its back displayed a

wooden cross with a white dove hovering on each side. The woman sat on the edge of a scarlet wing-back chair across from them.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you in person, Ms. Penrest,” Jack said in his best professional voice. “I’m Jack Burke, the lead Gate Opener on this case. To my right is Roxie Kavalsky, who is assisting me. Roxie is still in training.”

Roxie smiled and waved. “Hello.”

“Please call me Janice,” the woman replied. “It’s nice to meet you both.”

“The home office gave me some details about this case,” Jack said, “but I’d like you to tell it to us in your own words.”

“Of course. It’s my gardener, Becky Kurtz, who passed away about two months ago. I swear her ghost is dwelling here in the basement level. I see her down there when I’m doing laundry. She comes through the wall as a kind of grey cloud that’s clearly her, but blurry.”

“Does she ever talk to you?” Roxie asked.

“Yes, and here’s where it gets so strange, with Jesus as my witness,” Janice said. “She comes out of the wall and right up to me and asks me about the gardening work. ‘Should I fertilize your camellias?’ ‘Where do you want me to plant the new azalea?’ That kind of thing, like she’s still here, still doing the work. It’s just crazy.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty typical,” Jack said. “The poor lady doesn’t understand her predicament and keeps trying to live a life, which she no longer has, as normally as possible.”

“How did she die, Janice?” asked Roxie.

“She was struck by a forklift at our local nursery. It was a shock, an absolute tragedy.”

“Janice,” Jack said, “we can send her through the Gate, no problem, but we first need to assess the level of effort. Can we go down to the basement level?”

“Absolutely. Do you want me to join you?”

“Nah, we’re good. Sometimes we need to be very firm with these fu—, er, these apparitions. Ya know, a lot of them don’t want to go willingly and need the ol’ heave ho, if you get my drift.”

“You two are the professionals, so I’ll leave it to you.”

“Thanks, ma’am. Roxie, you got all the crap I asked you to get?”

“Yes, Jack, I have the gear and supplies.”

“Fantasmic, baby.”

Janice gave them a puzzled look. “And you’re sure you know how to handle this?” she asked.

“Surer than sh-, er, surer than Solomon before he ordered that baby cut in half, heh, heh. I assume the basement is down the stairs.”

“Yes, it is,” said Janice. “Good luck to you both!”

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They tramped down some narrow steps to a small landing, turned, and descended the rest of the way to the basement level.

“Jeez, Jack, watch your language in front of the clients. That lady was beginning to doubt that you’re a legit expert,” Roxie said.

“Hey, who’s the freakin’ trainee around here, huh? Now look, the lights are already on. Maybe Janice is trying to ward away evil spirits, or dead gardeners.”

“Where do you think Becky Kurtz is?”

“Let’s go to the laundry room, where she seems to come through walls for some chit-chat.”

They entered a tidy room with white cinder block walls. Two bare buzzing fluorescent tubes hung from the floor joists above them. Their glare illuminated the washer, dryer, utility sink, and garment rack.

“I got some bad news, Roxie. We need to douse the lights so we can see the little bugger when she comes through the wall.”

“Okay, I’ll switch them off. Should we keep the door open?”

“Just a slit, thanks.”

The room darkened but remained about as light as late dusk.

“Now what?” asked Roxie.

“We wait.”

They stood in the hushed dimness.

“Be-ckyyyyyyy,” Jack sang slowly. “Be-ckyyyyyyy, we’re here to help you. We’re here to release you to freedom. Be-ckyyyyyyy, come out to greet us.”

“Does that actually work?” Roxie whispered.

“Just hush and watch the master, here. We’re paid by the job, so the longer we fart around, the less money we get per hour. That’s lesson number one for your notebook.”

Their eyes had adjusted to the dark, but they didn’t see anything except the silhouettes of the washer and dryer.

“Be-ckyyyyyyy, we know how you feel, lost and separated, and we can help you. In the state you’re in, you know you can’t garden. You’ll never fertilize those camellias. You need things changed, and we’re here to fix everything for you.”

Jack saw a small, hazy, cloud-like object. He thought it might be Becky’s forehead beginning to protrude from the wall, but it pulled back.

“Be-ckyyyyyyy, you have two nice new friends waiting to see you,” he continued. “Janice sent us to help you. Janice thinks the world of you.”

The forehead returned and flowed through the wall. An angular face with thin lips and long, straight hair followed. More of her kept emerging, including a summer dress covering a skinny body.

“Becky, thank you for coming out,” Jack said.

“Who are you two?” Becky asked.

“I’m Jack.”

“And I’m Roxie.”

“Janice wants me to plant the new azalea,” Becky said.

“You know that you can’t do anything physical, Becky,” Jack said.

“What’s going on with me?” she asked.

“Something spiritual is happening to you, and you’re stuck between two places. You’re in what’s called a liminal space. You need to get through it to get where you need to go.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means we can release you, and you won’t feel this way anymore.”

“Will I die?”

“No, this won’t kill you. I promise you that.”

*Not quite a lie, he thought, because you can’t kill someone who already croaked, including the clueless dead who don’t know they’re dead ... yet.*

“It’s an easy process,” he continued. “Roxie and I are Gate Openers. We let people like you, who are stuck, go where they need to go.”

“And where is that for me?”

“We don’t know, specifically. It’s the Great Mystery. We’re not in on that. But we send you in that direction, and the Great Mystery sees it through. Staying here is an impossible proposition for you. Trust us, it always works.”

Roxie marveled that Jack could be so empathic, so eloquent, not dropping a single f-bomb.

“Janice can’t bear to see you like this, asking her for more gardening chores, when you don’t have a real body to lift a hoe and do whatever it is that gardeners do with a hoe,” he said. “We can set things right. Roxie, hand me the Gate-opener tool, please.”

Roxie slipped off her backpack and unzipped the main compartment. She pulled out a tool shaped like a sardine tin. All its sides were solid metal except the top, half of which was open. The opening ended at a roll of metal that had a key sticking out on one side, as if someone had been turning the key and exposing sardines. She handed it to Jack.

“Thanks, Roxie,” he said. “Now, Becky, just relax. You don’t need to do anything but follow the energy flow. You’ll feel it, and you’ll know it’s meant for you.”

Becky gasped. “I don’t know, I’m scared,” she said.

“Your present state is scary, Becky, that’s what you should be scared of. You should welcome the open Gate, and enter it with a light heart.”

“Becky,” said Roxie, “it’s time. You must know it.”

Jack pointed the tool’s open end toward Becky and began to turn the key. Roxie strained to see if the roll of metal was moving to expose more space, but the opening stayed the same size.

Becky’s apparition started to warble, and her head began to drift like smoke toward the opening.

“That’s it, Becky,” said Jack. “Easy does it. It doesn’t hurt, and it carries you to the next chapter, where you should have been already.”

“No!” screamed Becky. “I don’t want to go! You’re killing me! I don’t want to be dead!”

Jack turned to Roxie. “Sometimes they freak out like this. Perfectly normal. But as you can see, I’m reeling her into the Gate-opening tool. At this point, there ain’t a damn thing she can do about it.”

“What?!” screamed Becky. Her apparition began writhing in the air even as it became more diffuse and smokelike as it headed toward the tool, which began making a sucking sound.

“You need to be released,” Jack said.

Becky now resembled a long, narrow, billowing gray scarf, but Jack and Roxie could still make out her head and face.

“No, no, I don’t want to go!” she cried hysterically. “Stop, stop!”

“Is everything okay down there?” Janice called from the stairway.

“Yeah, this is the normal course of events,” Jack called back. He turned to Becky’s shimmering, fading face. “Look, you little fucker, get in there for Christ’s sake!”

He turned the key more vigorously than ever, and her head, now mostly resembling fog, entered the opening. The sucking sound grew.

“Come on, come on, we don’t have all day,” Jack muttered.

The rest of the fog that had been Becky’s apparition entered the tool.

“Now to close it up,” Jack said. Holding the tool in his right hand, he used the four fingertips of his other hand to slide up the metal roll toward the top.

Becky screamed again, her loudest yet, and suddenly her head and torso emerged from the narrow gap. She twisted at the waist, opened her mouth and lips wide, and like a striking cobra bit Jack’s hand.

“Shit!” Jack cried. “Did you see what that fucker just did?”

Roxie stared, disbelieving.

Then, in an instant, the tool jerked Becky’s apparition back in and Jack fully closed it.

“You’re bleeding, Jack,” said Roxie.

“I know it,” he said. “Ghosts can’t bite. That’s not possible. What the fuck? Ghosts are not corporeal!”

“I have a first aid kit in the backpack.”

“Yeah, let’s clean it up. I want disinfectant, and a lot of it. What kind of shit-for-brains ghost can bite?”

A few minutes later they ascended the stairs to the living room, where Janice had been pacing and wringing her hands.

“We’re done,” Jack said. “Becky has gone through the Gate, and she is now where she should have been before getting stuck on this side. That’ll be \$1,500, as agreed upon in the contract. We’ll bill you later for travel expenses.”

“I’m filling out your check right now, Mr. Burke. But tell me, did she go easily? I heard some yelling and screaming.”

“She resisted a bit, yes, but once they go through the Gate, a feeling of relief overcomes them. Sometimes you gotta be a bit, eh, insistent about it. But all is well.”

“Thank goodness, thank goodness, and thank the Lord! May Becky’s soul find peace in God’s glorious garden in Heaven.”

“Make the check out to Gate Openers, Inc., and we thank you for your business. I’m beat, and we need to get back to the hotel. It’s getting late.”

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Jack steered his car along the serpentine curves of the dark parkway, his headlights his only source of light.

“Jesus,” he said, “I still can’t believe that fuckin’ bitch actually bit me. A ghost got corporeal and bit me. That’s impossible. What the hell? What the *fuck*?”

“I’m kind of freaking out about it, too, to tell you the truth,” Roxie said.

He pressed the dashboard’s phone app button and said, “Call Fred.”

The rings chirped in the speaker, and Regional Manager Fred Lawrence answered. “Hey Jacko, did you shove that ghost in the can already?”

“She’s in the can, Fred,” he said. “But you ain’t gonna believe what happened. The nasty little bitch came back out of the Gate-opener tool for just a split second, and she actually bit me. And I mean she left a wound Fred, no shittin’. It bled some.”

“Hey Fred, this is Roxie. I was there, and I saw it happen.”

“What? Guys, that’s not possible,” Fred said. “Ghosts aren’t corporeal.”

“I need you to contact Corporate and let them know,” Jack said. “Am I going to turn into some fuckin’ zombie? Will my health insurance cover this? We need to tap the experts.”

“Well, you know about Corporate,” Fred said. “They’re a bit cult-y. They’re a bit out there at times.”

“I don’t care if they worship Zeus’s ass crack. Fred, get guidance from Corporate since you don’t know shit about it yourself.”

“All right, all right. I’ll contact them and get back to you.”

Fred hung up.

“How do you feel, Jack, physically speaking?” Roxie asked.

“Okay, I guess.”

They drove in silence for a while. Roxie looked over to Jack. The parkway was so dark, everything looked gray except for the dashboard’s deep blue illumination. For a while, she stared at the continual flow of asphalt the headlights revealed like a stream of consciousness.

She looked at Jack again. He was just a silhouette, his shape outlined in a blurry, cloudlike gray, not unlike Becky.

“Jack, still doing okay?” she asked.

His figure didn’t respond.

“Jack, Jack, Earth to Jack.”

No response.

She reached out to touch him, and her hand went through him.

“Jack! Jesus fucking Christ! Jack!”

She looked ahead and saw a diamond-shaped yellow road sign indicating they were approaching a steep curve.

“Jack, are you steering? Can you steer?”

His figure just kept looking straight ahead. Suddenly,

she saw they were approaching the guardrail, and before she could do anything, they drove through it with a sharp bang. The car seemed to careen off a ledge into a black, indeterminate chasm. Roxie's scream exploded in the car as they sailed into the abyss. Then the headlights illuminated the rocky ground coming at them fast. Her last sensation was a brutal slam.

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Jack, Roxie, and Becky stood by the wreckage. Somehow, the right headlight still worked, a spotlight illuminating forest vegetation.

"How the hell did you get out?" Jack asked Becky.

"I don't know. I think the accident opened that tin can you sucked me into, so I got out."

"Shit, that's \$1,500 down the tubes," he said.

"Jack, it doesn't matter now, because, can't you see, we're all ghosts!" Roxie shrieked. "Look at us, we're all made of that gray fog. Jack, what are we going to do?"

"Don't get hysterical on me, Roxie," Jack said. "I think we're fucked, to be perfectly honest. I think we all need to get in that Gate-opener thingie and get to the other side. Son of a bitch. Well, at least we'll all get to experience the Great Mystery now, won't we?"

"I'm not ready to do that, Jack! I'm not ready to die!" Roxie cried.

"Oh, so that's how you really feel about it," Becky said. "You goddamn liars."

"That's how *Roxie* feels about it," said Jack. "If anyone should be mad, it should be me, because you're the fucking bitch who bit me and turned me into whatever the hell I am."

"I never asked to be vacuumed up into a tin can, asshole," Becky said. "I was a bit angry."

“You wanna be a ghost forever, ya ditz?” Jack asked. “Look, I’m outta here.”

Jack went into the car’s hatchback. He saw Roxie’s backpack partially unzipped, and the Gate-opening tool had fallen out.

“Sloppy work, Roxie, not zippin’ up the backpack fully. That let the sardine can fly out, bang around, and open, releasing that biting, rabid, little Becky bitch. She must have been fighting the flow like a madman inside the can.”

“What are you going to do Jack, give me poor marks for performance?”

“Hah, it’s too late for anything to get into your permanent record. It’s all gotta be posthumous from now on. Well, I gotta be going, kiddos. On to the next chapter, yadda yadda. You guys already heard my spiel. Poor Fred’ll have to handle the paperwork.”

Jack climbed toward the Gate-opening tool, and it gently drew him in like incense smoke lazily drifting on an air current. Then he was gone.

“You’re not going to leave me back here by myself, Jack!” Roxie yelled. She climbed into the hatchback, gracefully slid into the tool’s opening, and vanished.

Becky stood still in the woods. “As for me, I’m going back to Janice’s,” she said. “I have an azalea to plant.”

## **Great Grandmother: A Seven-Generation Love Story**

*by Burton A. Clark*

In 1962, I attended my first funeral. It was my great-grandmother, Maddie Hammond. She was 90, and I was 12. Maddie and I were very close. I spent a lot of my childhood at her house because we lived so close to her home in Bloomfield, New Jersey.

Maddie had five children, six grandchildren, and ten great-grandchildren. When she died, it was the most significant emotional event in my life, where I felt loss and grief for the first time.

Twelve-year-old boys try hard not to cry when they're around all their cousins. I failed. Her funeral was traumatic. To this day, I can still smell all the flowers and hear the live harp music.

When it was time to say goodbye, all the adults leaned over the casket and kissed her. So, I thought I was supposed to do the same. I leaned over and kissed her. Her lips were cold and dry. It was not Maddie. It was a terrible experience. I never kissed another corpse, not even my mother when she passed away.

As traumatic as the experience was, 12-year-old boys recover fast, so Maddie was stored in my long-term memory. And her voice calling me Bertie was never erased.

Time went on, high school, college, marriage, then I became a firefighter. At 30 years old, I met Maddie again.

The event was my grandfather Burton's death. My mom was given the job of handling his estate. I was helping with paperwork and found two poems that Maddie had written to him and my grandmother, Ethel. The poems were about his retirement and their wedding anniversary, which were both celebrated on the same day at a big family party.

One of the poems was titled "Sunday Dinner at Ethel and Burt's." The first stanza is:

I sit at the table with  
9 of my Great Grands  
One will soon be a grown lady  
& 2 soon grown men.  
Six are still children  
Of all I am quite proud  
Everyone was quite happy  
So we made quite  
A crowd

I was one of the great grands; I remember that event. I could hear Maddie's voice in my head as I read the poems. I had never known a poet or been included in a poem. I thought of myself as a writer, so I felt a new connection with Maddie and saw her in a new light.

Amazed at this discovery about Maddie. I said to my mom, "I didn't know Maddie wrote poetry." Mom replied, "Maddie wrote poetry all the time." I asked, "Where are they?" "Ask Aunt Pat (Maddie's youngest daughter); she has them."

On my next visit to Great Aunt Pat's, I inquired about Mattie's poetry. I was handed a typed manuscript of 60 poems that Maddie had written over her lifetime that no one had ever looked at before. She probably drafted the poems and gave them to the individuals they were written for. Or just kept in a collection by her daughter, Pat. But the collection was never shared with the whole family.

As I read the poems, about Christmases, birthdays, and summertime, I come across a poem about me,

"A Feather"  
Great grandson brought a feather  
From a Blue Jay wing today.

I don't know why the Bird  
threw that one away  
But maybe left as a token  
this gift to a little Boy  
on this lovely day in  
Summer that doesn't  
play with toys  
But tries his skill  
in Casting to Catch a  
great big fish and if he  
Ever Catches one that is  
His dearest wish.

MEH

This was an emotional event that I needed to share. So, I had the manuscript retyped, printed, spiral-bound, made dozens of copies, and gave the collection of poems to Mattie's family for Christmas. Mattie's poetry was a wonderful gift she left to her family.

In 2001, my grandson, Golden, was outside playing. Next thing I know, he came running up to me all excited, and he gave me a blue jay feather. I could hardly stop myself from crying with joy. I put the blue jay feather in a safe place for keeping.

The story continues. In 2004, my great aunt Pat died at 101 years old. She was the last of Mattie's children. Mom got the job of settling her estate. At the end, Mom gave me a case saying, "Aunt Pat wanted you to have this." In the case were all the original handwritten poems. Pressed between the pages was the blue jay feather I had given to Mattie.

I published Mattie's poetry and story in 2020. The book is called "A Feather, Poetry by M.E. Hammond" with a picture of a blue jay on the cover. The handwritten originals are on the left page and the typed versions on the right. Plus, pictures of

Mattie at 17, 35, and 89 years old, along with family photos of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

In 2020, my granddaughter Carolyn Sayed asked me to officiate at her wedding. A year later, they had their first child, Krew, our seventh great-grandchild. My wife Carolyn and I went to New Mexico to celebrate the new family member. I was inspired to write a poem and give Krew a gift.

### “Love Time Travel”

We gave great-grandson, Krew  
A blue jay feather today.  
As a gift that spans time  
For him to value someday.  
Our great-grandparents loved us  
Just like we love Krew.  
He will love great grands too  
Because love over time is not new.  
A seven-generation story  
Is passed on now.  
We wish Krew love  
His whole life through.

In November 2022, Carolyn died. Again, I didn't know that I could feel such loss and grief. The funeral was a blur, I don't really remember it, but lots of people were there. It was time to close the coffin. I had to kiss her goodbye.

I leaned over for a last kiss. Her lips were warm and moist from my tears. That's when Carolyn kissed me goodbye.

## Ocean Drift

by K. M. Watson

Bimble didn't understand.

Flying fish arced out of the sea, slivers of silver not much longer than a pencil, shooting over the ship's gunwale like arrows. Some came down in small thuds on the deck, sliding to a stop and flopping around in confusion. Others splashed back into the Pacific on the other side of the ship and sped away from the steel-plated intruder. How'd they do that? The cook's helper stared in awe. Fish aren't supposed to do that.

He began running around, scooping up stranded fish. "Holy shmolys! Look at 'em. They're everywhere," he shouted, throwing each one back over the ship's side, pausing now and then to admire the strikingly long, translucent fins along their sides. Fish wings. "Flying fish are real, really real," he repeated to himself as he scrambled, his voice suddenly hushed in reverence.

Ever since Bimble joined the crew, shipmates competed to tell tall tales that he might believe. After the first few months of hazing, though, they realized that he never really caught on. Hard worker, helpful, but slow on the uptake. Bimble had always been this way—apart from things beyond his reach. Why can't I put things together in my head? he often asked himself, tugging his right ear in agitation. Why can't I get it, like the others?

A few of the crew debated Bimble's bewilderment and their prowess in making him believe certain absurdities. Kelpy told him that if he ate too many of Cook's breakfast eggs that feathers might start popping out of his skin. Big L described a giant squid, a "kraken" he called it, that would sweep Bimble off the ship's deck at night with an enormous tentacle if he wasn't careful. And there was Sardine. That old salt talked about the clouds all the time and how he could

tell what kind of weather was coming just by looking at them.

Bimble constantly wondered.

“Watch ‘em fly!” Janny pointed into the distance. Dozens of flying fish glided in the same direction above the rolling, white-topped waves with outstretched fins carrying them through the air like a flock of glistening birds. “Something might be hunting them, or the ship spooked ‘em.”

Several of the crew members on board the *R/V Sylvie E.* had made a break for it like the fish, sailing now on the research ship between California and Hawaii. Some were ex-Navy and had struggled to live on land, with all its turbulence. Janny had signed up to work in the engine room, wanting more than the little she found in her farm town. Bimble was unsure about it all.

“I can wash dishes and help Cook. I can do that,” he told Janny. “I eat in the kitchen. I get paid and have a place to sleep.”

“What was it like where you used to live?”

“Okay, but they said I needed to take care of myself.”

“Who said?”

“My sister and her boyfriend.”

Scientists on this particular trip were checking the ocean’s health, collecting, measuring, testing, and observing. “I don’t get it. It’s just water, salty water,” Bimble muttered to himself after hearing what they were doing. “Not alive.” He had never heard about the tiny creatures, “plankton,” Janny called them, found nearly everywhere—billions of dinoflagellates, diatoms, copepods, krill, foraminifera, radiolaria, along with the babies of fish and other animals. Bimble squinted slightly and pulled on his ear as he tried to understand. So many? So little? He stared intently over the ship’s side as it headed to the next study site. He couldn’t see any of it, just rolling whitecaps, ripples, and waves. Nothing in the ever-shifting water itself.

“Think there’s stuff out there, stuff so small we can’t see it?” he asked Cook later, as they prepared breakfast.

“Maybe. I guess.” Cook carefully dropped blueberries into pancakes while bracing himself with wide legs as the ship rolled side to side. “Don’t really have time to think about it.”

“Ya can’t always see everything, ya know,” said Kelpy, with a look that told Bimble he wasn’t being entirely serious. “I mean, ya don’t see mermaids, do ya? And they’re all around.”

Bimble went in search of Janny. She listens to me when I do my figuring, always does, he thought as he walked the decks. Never laughs or makes me feel stupid. She’ll help me understand what’s in the water. “Plank-ton, plaaaaaank-toooooon,” he practiced out loud, the word sounding hard and firm in his mouth, not like something unanchored. He repeated the odd word, trying to get it to stick in his brain.

“There’s loads of ‘em,” said Janny. “They wander with the waves and currents, because they can’t really go where they want. They’re drifters.”

“But how do you know?”

Janny looked at Bimble. “Maybe the researchers will let us take a peek.” Usually, *Sylvie E.*’s crew members kept their distance from the scientists. It wasn’t that they weren’t friendly, but everyone had jobs to do, day and night. But the right person at the right time might be willing to help.

On a day when sunlight sharpened the edges of the clouds rising above the ocean, the ship stopped to collect water samples. Bimble listened to the whine of the hydraulics as the winch slowly lowered a device with bottles and sensors over the side. For hours, it would descend more than two miles, far beyond the reach of the sun’s rays through the sea’s watery layers. The scientists, Janny said, collected samples and measured things at increasing depths to better understand differences, such as temperature. But that didn’t interest Bimble much. He was waiting for word from the

captain. With flat seas and the sun's warmth, it was a perfect day for a swim once the researchers finished.

The captain gave the okay. Anyone not on watch had permission to go for a short dip. Bimble didn't hesitate and jumped in, right after Janny. Usually, he would tread, watching nearby swimmers whoop in delight while others soaked in the open ocean in silent astonishment. No land. Slate water to the horizon. But Bimble kept staring down, face in the water, eyes wide open, searching for plankton. Nothing. Just tiny white specks and shafts of sunlight far below his dangling feet. Mostly what he saw were shades of blue. Pale blue near the surface, falling into deeper hues. Bimble drifted, moving in gentle rhythm with the shifting water. This must be what it feels like, he thought, then chuckled. "I'm a giant plankton."

When he wasn't with Cook, or sleeping on his cabin bunk, or talking with Janny, Bimble could be found leaning over the side of the ship, watching. Albatrosses soared back and forth above the ship's wake in search of food, their outstretched wings wider than the height of anyone standing on deck. Dolphins raced alongside the ship until bored, and then disappeared. Most days were the same, except for the weather.

It was the shifting edges of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch in the distance that caught Bimble by surprise. "Look!" he cried out, signaling to a researcher on deck. "Something's wrong with the ocean." Moving with the push and pull of currents and winds, the patch was a murky collection of plastic waste—discarded nets and other assorted fishing gear, shopping bags, water bottles. A miserable assortment of tossed trash, spread out over more than a thousand miles, the debris floated above and below the surface, slowly disintegrating in the sunlight and wind. Tiny plastic particles clouded the water. Bimble's vigilance had paid off, the scientists later explained.

“Probably would have missed this,” said one of the team, as the researchers quickly prepared to collect samples. “Lucky to be sailing by. The patch constantly drifts and shifts. Gotta go out of your way to find it. Wasn’t expecting it this time.”

“You did it!” Janny grinned as Bimble described what he had spotted. “All that searching paid off. You found stuff in the water—bad stuff—but stuff.” For as long as he could remember, Bimble hadn’t felt important like this. Just about everyone on the ship said something good to him. Even the captain. Yet, he still was uneasy.

Into the soupy water, the researchers dropped a fine, cone-shaped net. The ship moved ahead slowly, pulling the net through the water like the open mouth of a whale. Everything the net caught landed in a container attached to the net’s bottom. One of the scientists called out to Bimble when he saw him on deck. “Want to see what we got?”

Finally, Bimble thought. Finally. Through a microscope in the ship’s lab, he stared. Dozens of tiny, multicolored plastic particles and fibers filled his field of view. In their midst were plankton. Miniature, glassy creatures in different shapes and sizes, propelling themselves across the petri dish or just hanging suspended in the water. Some were animated strings, twisting and turning. Others pushed forward with their antennae. A delicate, pulsating jellyfish lifted and dropped its fine tentacles. “Hello, plankton,” said Bimble quietly, wondering if they could hear him. He looked away through a porthole at the moving ocean. Then he peered back into the magnified world. So, so small, he thought. No wonder they can’t be seen in so much water. Most of the crew didn’t know this. Only Janny. And him. He put it together. Not made up. Real.

That night, Bimble stood on deck breathing in the salt air—his favorite time to mull over all that had happened during the day. The blackness surrounding *Sylvie E.* helped

him focus. The rhythm of the movement beneath his feet and the swishing of the water against the hull soothed him. But this night was different than most. Below him, blue-green light in the water glowed and sparkled alongside and behind the moving ship. Bioluminescent plankton—fireworks in the midst of a dark ocean. One of the researchers had told him about this, too. The tiny creatures flared when attacked, or to attract a mate, or when agitated by a ship's hull slicing through the water.

## When You Are Old, They Call You Dear

### An Essay

*by Susan Zimmerman*

For a while now, I have been tiptoeing around my seventh decade. I don't like it. I look in the mirror, and not even in one of those artistically illuminated pink ladies' rooms do I look anything but crinkly around the mouth and saggy under the eyes, my once lily-fresh complexion now some spawn of translucent parchment-color film flecked with age spots and burst blood vessels. Nor does my face "match" the shimmery blond streaks of my fabulously expensive hair color, because the last time I had this color naturally was when I wore my roller skates to Girl Scout camp. My mother had just cut my bangs straight across my forehead, two full inches above my eyebrows, because that's what moms did in the '50s. For those of you who are confused, yes, that was the nineteen fifties. Which is to say, I am old. I don't like it.

And you know what's not at all helpful? Somebody quipping, as somebody always does, "Well, it beats the alternative, doesn't it?" I don't know, friend, does it? But first, you try "being me" for an hour and let me know how that goes.

First, knock out your bottom teeth, because after menopause... bone loss. Good luck biting into that New York-style slice you've been craving. The oily cheese and pepperoni redolent of oregano and basil goes sluicing straight onto your chin instead of down your throat because those dentures just don't...dent that chewy crust like the real teeth do.

Next, drive your front tire over one of your insteps: arthritis feels like that. In your hand, knee, neck, and shoulder joints. Every. Damn. Day. And your vision? You say you've already had your cataracts removed, so at least your

vision is good? Ah, but did they tell you that liquid begins to pool behind your \$1,800 Multifocal Toric IOL lenses and the world will dim again by the end of the year?

Oh, well. Just get out and enjoy the day, a fresh autumn afternoon, yellow leaves slowly sifting through the branches on a dusty sunbeam, the sharp musk of wet leaves kicked up by your orthotic Birkenstocks taking you all the way back to being five and jumping in your dad's just-raked pile of sycamore leaves. The smoke from his Pall Mall is curling around your head, and when he swears because you jumped into the pile and ruined an hour's work, he hugs you anyway, because he knows that he is on his way to where you are now, and opportunities to hug your daughter on a perfect fall day may not come again. A cloud passes across the sun on a laughing zephyr, but he chooses to ignore the shadow it casts on his lungs.

Never mind. Let's just stroll up the street, inhaling the crunch of cider-flavored air. Too bad you can only make one or two steps at a time, clutching the walking stick (OK, it's a cane, unless it's been a rough day, and then it's a walker—the cool new name is rollator. But at least it's not a wheelchair. Yet...) Still, here you are, hunching over your *assistive device* and panting, watching your illusions of a Sunday hike scamper away. When was that day, the last day you would ever go from the trail head, tripping over tree roots onto the gravelly dirt path to the old schoolhouse, across the wooden bridge where you would throw pebbles into the creek that raced down from a silver spring up on the ridge? Remember your German Shepherd, Rembrandt, who would throw off his leash and roll in the pile of deer pellets, and you would laugh? Rembrandt went over the Rainbow Bridge how long ago?

How're your hands, by the way? Will you try a few hours with mine instead? My husband just asked if I would hem

his pants. He actually said, can I *ham* his pants, because he is not from my dialect isogloss. If you know, you know, and I have a master's degree in linguistics, so I know. More vestiges from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when degrees meant something.

Anyway, hemming pants is out of the question. On the left hand, arthritis has permanently twisted the knuckles back towards my elbow. The other is a witch's claw, gnarled and clutching at a tainted apple. What do you think, friend? There is no more *hamming*, or knitting, or doodles, or even a signature from these petrified paws, and of all the losses, I miss these the most.

It's sobering to find yourself on the cusp of no longer being productive, or whatever the opposite of being a productive member of society is, "receptive?" The thesaurus says the antonym for productive is useless. Yes, I feel that way. With these hands, I can barely sign my name. Is this still better than "the alternative?" You should be starting to wonder.

There is a piece of scripture I say to myself at least once a day, a holdover from when I was younger and took up running and told myself I could finish the Baltimore half-marathon. It's about faith and throwing mountains into the sea. "If ye have faith...ye shall say unto this mountain, be thou removed, and be thou cast into the sea; it shall be done." This is the original King James version, since new-fangled versions like the Living Translation just don't have the *heft* of the old-fashioned *Matthew 21:21*. And yes, I finished the 13.1 miles.

Look at me, quoting the bible, quite the anomaly for someone from an agnostic 1950s nuclear family where religion was considered, as they said, the opiate of the people. I don't think of faith as being a uniquely religious concept, anyway, since I also have faith that, having paid the electric bill, the light bulb inside my fridge will blink on

regardless of my relationship with Jesus, Buddha, or Shiva. Nevertheless, as the years go by, the simple act of staying alive does seem to require more and more avowals of faith, faith that the extra time on earth is worth the physical pain, the emotional angst of losing health, friends, outliving pets, of watching lust evaporate, and of gradually becoming superfluous to the world.

In my family, we observe the pre-Hispanic *Dia de los Muertos*. We erect an altar to our deceased loved ones and on Nov. 2, remember them with the flowers, food, and stories of their life on earth. This year, for the first time in decades, I added a new photograph, my brother, who passed away this summer. There are now more family members on the other side of the existential divide than here, on mine. I am now the only one holding our memories and sharing the stories, and it's lonely. But when I light my votive candles, I no longer see *difuntos*, long-gone distant relatives, people I barely knew. Instead, I see my *family*, all of them except me, and I have begun to understand that I will not be going, gently or otherwise, into some cold, dark night. I will be joining my family, my mother, my father, and my brother. And increasingly this brings me comfort.

Which brings me back to being old. It's boring, frequently painful, and often inelegant, what with the false teeth, incontinence pads, and a new preference for elastic waistbands and Alfred Dunner cruise wear, the kind your best friend's Sunday school teacher used to wear. My goal, growing older, had been to be feisty, a sharp-as-a-tack Friends of the Library cheerleader for First Amendment rights who has a stand selling slightly risqué pottery at craft fairs, sporting the tee shirts of the 1970 progressive rock bands I loved, lovingly worn-through jeans, and Frye boots.

That's not how it turned out. I got a rare autoimmune illness instead. The upside is, my physical therapist

confessed, I am *cute*. “Everyone likes working with you,” she whispered conspiratorially as I made my way side-kicking down the length of the parallel bars with 2-pound weights on my ankles. “We all think you’re cute. And funny.” So, a funny, cute little old lady, the kind who sells toilet paper in commercials during afternoon soap operas? I wonder if my eyes twinkle.

I think I’m OK with being cute, though. As a girl, I used to think my elderly neighbors were dried up like mummies and scary. So, when I was a teenager, I worked as a nurse’s aide in a nursing home to face down my fear and get up close and personal with *old*. Also, it paid twice the minimum wage my friends were earning at Dairy Queen. To be honest, the feisty residents were the cranky and demanding ones. Cranky old people tend to be ignored. But the cute ones, they got hugs, extra Jello, and we all ran obligingly to answer the call light when they wanted to go to the bathroom. Feisty people were expected to get there on their own, and frequently fell, so life expectancy among cute old people is, I guess, better than for feisty ones.

I still don’t like this *being old* business, but I can do *cute*. I appreciate people opening heavy doors, picking up things that I drop on the floor, and teenagers who return my grocery cart to the corral, and especially friends and family who slow down when they walk so I don’t get left behind. But here’s a warning: being cute should not give anyone carte blanche to condescend. When I was in the hospital with a (cliché alert!) hip fracture, a self-important Millennial resident on rounds came striding importantly to the foot of my bed, preening for his audience of interns. “Good morning, dear? How are you doing today?”

Dear? Who to hell is *dear*?

“Are you lightheaded, dear, dizzy?”

Again, with the *dear* thing.

“Dear?”

“No, but if you call me dear one more time, I’m going to slap you upside your head.”

True story. Yes, I said it. Out loud.

“Well, what do you *want* me to call you?” His tone had a sarcastic “it hasn’t been that long since I was a teenager” edge.

“My name.”

Not long after that, a store clerk at the local CVS made the same mistake. “How can I help you, dear?” She was a teenager and was pretty sullen about the tongue-lashing I spit back at her, poor thing, but I felt like a sullen adolescent myself.

“Don’t talk to me like you know me.”

Getting older is a struggle. Dignity becomes all the more important because too often we are being stripped of it. At the very least, older people deserve respect. It doesn’t matter which eras you have lived through, 70-something years of life on earth is a feat of endurance, hope, and yes, faith, and the word “dear” diminishes the effort it took to get this far. So, this is your heads up: when you’re old, they will call you “dear.” Do not let them. You have a name, and in the end, that is all you have, in the morgue, in the cemetery, or on your children’s lips. It is your first and last possession.

Don’t let them call you dear, dear.

## The Wind Blows in, the Wind Blows All About

by Roderick Deacey

*Summer 2040*

From the fifth-floor balcony of the apartment building, I catch a flash of movement near the *bodega*—for a moment, I thought it was a person. Wishful thinking; it's a fox.

From a melting glacier, the “Extinction Virus” rode in on dust blowing through the city, ending everyone’s lives—except mine. I’m the last man standing. I don’t know why.

In a final broadcast, the guy on the TV said the virus was ancient, mutated, incurable, and inescapable. It killed within an hour and didn’t stop with death—it ate the flesh and bones like in an old horror movie and left a pile of dust that blew on down the road to kill some more. Only people—no animals were harmed in the remaking of this now peaceful planet.

That was ten years ago, and I’ve been looking for survivors ever since. Every day I talk to the air—I don’t want to forget how to speak, in case I find someone alive.

I’ve taken to sleeping in a different apartment every night to breathe in human haunts, but it doesn’t help much—I’m still alone. If I remember too hard, I’m overwhelmed with sadness for those who are gone. I can’t change anything—all I can do is carry on.

When it gets cold, I find a house in the suburbs with a wood-burning stove or fireplace where I can hang out. I read books by candlelight. Food’s not a problem—everyone has cans in their cupboards, or I raid a supermarket, and I find fruit in the orchards in season, although I have to watch out for bears. Also, there are self-sown veggies in some of the suburban back yards—one I know has been taken over by potatoes. And peppers! There are peppers everywhere.

It's an easy life so long as I don't get sick.

So, what were we? Humans, I mean. Eight billion of us blown away in a few weeks—dust to dust and all that. A failed experiment? I don't believe in the nonsense gods of our many religions, but surely someone is to blame—or maybe we grew too big for our britches, as my grandmother would have said, and Lady Luck laid us down. Hubris.

Yet, right now, plants and animals are doing fine, the city is greener than ever, and the weather has settled down. Is the world better off without us? Here's the fox again, back by the *bodega*, going in the other direction.

## A Murderous Light

by Stephen Huff

*All Hallows' Church Parsonage,  
All Hallows' Parish, Maryland*

*November 1860*

Dust-mote ships battled sunbeam seas. Brilliant white. Blinding.

Tammas Auger rolled onto his right side to make a slight curl of his lean, angular frame. Behind his oblivious back, errant blades of mid-morning sunshine slanted through gaps in the siding of his temporary home. Roof and walls borrowed. Bed and blanket on loan. Peace of mind unattainable at any price, whether for love or for money.

*What day is it? What month?*

He need not question the hour. *Sunrise.*

Another night spent on the road. Another day wasted for lack of shade.

Resisting the tug of braces, woolen shirt, and trousers, Tammas tucked arms to curl each hand around the haft of a pistol where a matched set reclined awkwardly within holsters strapped beneath his arms. Buffed free of highway mud as best he could manage, his steel-heeled boots stood like two slovenly soldiers keeping watch at the footpost of his bed. His long black coat dangled from a peg mounted near the front—and only—door of All Hallows' humble one-room parsonage. A bookshelf kept company with a well-used secretary and a spindly chair, all three heaped with manuscripts and loose papers. A quill, inkwell, and blotter awaited attention atop the desk's upper right-hand corner, and a folding knife lay nearby amid a tiny heap of ink-stained parings.

All Hallows' parson had recently written prolifically. About what? To whom?

The home's permanent inhabitants had frugally decorated its clapboard walls with colorful quilts, which they had pinned to exposed studs and joists with hopes of dampening winter's approaching chill. Tammas took small comfort in the offered warmth, but he always valued shade on a sunny day. Shade and a modicum of privacy.

At his back, minuscule armadas tacked and heeled within the sunray traps of a whimsical breeze, as mysterious weapons flared and flashed riotously all around, percussions unheard. This, a dazzle of light in absence of noise, which mirrored the cacophony of sounds in absence of vision that forever echoed through Auger's tormented head.

Eyes wide, his gaze fixated on an abstract pattern stitched into the heavy quilt insulating the parsonage's western wall. His miserly cot pushed up against the studs without space between. Its rectangular frame provided less length than his lanky frame required, and its width scarcely accommodated bent knees or stocking feet. He wondered if the parson shared it with a wife.

Arranged around its four-corner compass from southwest to southeast then northeast, the bed and its joined footlocker left small room for desk, chair, and bookshelf, all of which occupied most of the tiny home's floor space. A small round table stood in its remaining corner. A large family bible reclined there, beneath an embroidered rendition of the 23rd psalm tacked to the wall directly above. Piled at its feet, another untidy collection of dog-eared books collected the dust-mote dead in silent, timeless heaps.

Alongside its threshold, a small cast-iron stove smoldered. This, a modern convenience and an extravagant gift from All Hallows' god-fearing congregation. Its tin effluent pipe rose to ceiling height, where soldered joints abruptly banked ninety degrees to exit the home's eastern wall. Kindling heaped its left side. Cookware hung overhead. Bracketing

its right-hand side, a wooden stand presented a white ceramic lavatory painted in an eastern style. Its matching pitcher contained autumn-chilled well-water that tasted of limestone and clay.

Tammas' dinner—or breakfast—sat heaped upon a wooden plate, which he had abandoned atop the basin, cutlery undisturbed. Contents uneaten.

Blowflies shivered over all in full fear of winter. Again and again, they sallied forth to feast upon a meal that he could not eat, only to return and circle over his uncaring head. Gloating. His ears traced the buzz of their batty flights all around the room to a great upset of sunbeam slaughters.

How he loathed sunrise. Dayshine. Warmth.

In it, he must somehow sleep. Eyes closed.

Yet Tammas resisted a shutter of his eyelids. Through these fleshy shades, nightmares invariably intruded. Unbidden. Uncontrolled. Haunting and terrifying.

All horrifying visions of unspeakable violence. Wanton destruction. Senseless human death. Flames rose about the tortured visages of his dearest loved ones. Their mouths opened wide. Screaming.

*Tammaaaaas. Tammaaaaas. Tammaaaaas.*

Himself bound, impotent. Unable to help. Dragged away at the center of an unreasoning mob fronted by enraged faces, pummeling fists, and punishing booteels. Rope in hand. Noose wrapped. Knots tied.

*Tammaaaaas. Tammaaaaas. Tammaaaaas.*

Her. Calling for him. Shrieking his name. Agonized and suffering. Enduring inhuman torment from one moment to the next, yet expressing her love for him still. Unto her last breath.

*Tammaaaaas. Tammaaaaas. Tammaaaaas.*

Snapped aware, Auger found himself standing before a wooden door bolted firmly shut, iron-to-oak. Both hands

filled with pistols. Hammers fully cocked. Sweating despite autumn's damp chill.

*Tammaaaaas. Tammaaaaas. Tammaaaaas.*

Rolling into a righthand spin, twinned muzzles traced movement in shadows that crossed sunlit gaps in siding walls. A bevy of sadistic dryads circled All Hallows' parsonage. Their skipping pace timed to a singsong chant, every word of it a tortured drawl of his name.

*Tammaaaaas. Tammaaaaas. Tammaaaaas.*

They mocked his anguish. Teased his misery.

Turning full circle, his crazed gaze tracked their warped merriment above scarcely restrained revolvers. His dark eyes flared wildly. Graying hair corkscrewed madly. Tammas struck a pose of murderous insanity. Through an enraged moment, his forefingers cinched tighter until they pressed within a hair's breadth of unholy murder.

Children. He reminded himself. *They are only children.*

Thumbs to hammers, barrels elevated, Tammas brought his feet together from a ready stance as he safed both weapons with judicious application of twinned triggers. *Click. Click.*

As abruptly, that unholy canticle fell silent. All shadows stilled. Only childish giggles lingered.

Straightening with a disgusted shudder, Auger returned his weapons to their shoulder slings with expert care. Then he sat upon the bed's protesting frame to draw boots over his feet, since he loathed going unshod before a threat of mischief. Rising again, he retrieved his coat and pulled this over shirt sleeves and razor cut shoulders, then he finalized his attire by strapping a giant Texas-style blade to his belt, leaving this to flap against his left hip.

Tugging cuffs into alignment, dark eyes gauged the time of day with a survey of sunbeams. *Late afternoon.* An hour remained until nightfall.

Perhaps calculating a similar estimate, Auger's hateful

entourage whispered a hasty agreement among themselves. Then they began circling All Hallows' parsonage again to make a schoolyard tease of him. Cheerily singing a too-familiar song of hanged killers and burned witches.

From a rack near the door, Auger gathered his flat, wide-brimmed hat. Pressing its edge between a drag of thumb and forefinger, he listened, and he wondered where they had learned what they knew about his past.

Their demented lyrics lanced his guts like white-hot metal, as naked, galling truth forever must. And should.

Calmly covering his head then, he decided origins little mattered. Results had yet to be measured. All outcomes remained unknown.

He reached for the door's iron bolt. Simultaneously, that diminutive mob once more stifled itself with a collective squeak, as though suddenly discovered by a larger and more violent beast. Then telltale shadows scattered. Gone.

Moments later, a robust rattle of frame and jamb returned Auger's attention to the door. Someone knocked repeatedly with insistent force.

All Hallows' parson cleared his throat unnecessarily, and then his falsetto voice politely called Auger by name. Asked for permission to enter. Then he pointedly rattled the door again to prove it locked.

Sighing resignedly, Auger performed as demanded. Inviting the man inside and then bolting the door after, he cleared and sat upon Preacher's lone chair while preacher in turn attempted to make himself comfortable atop one edge of his tiny bedframe. Knees jutting and nowhere to put his hands.

For a time, Preacher simply sat and grinned. Rather stupidly.

To encourage progress, Tammas fetched a gold watch from the dangle of its gold chain and fob, artfully drawing

this from the breast pocket of his coat with long, bony fingers that worked like the legs of an anxious spider. Patiently, he wound it. Marking time, he pointedly returned this to its place before he half-buttoned his lapels and then lifted a single demanding eyebrow.

“Yes?”

“Oh!” gasped Preacher, having apparently been awaiting Auger’s opening monologue in turn. “Yes, indeed! You wonder why I have come. You want to hear what I must tell you. Quite right and proper.”

When the man fell silent again, Tammas sighed. He relaxed into the wicker back of his chair, resigned to patience and a slow drag of sunbeams. Evening coming and time to spare.

“We are staying just down the hill with the younger Gray family. They are keeping your fine young stallion, too. No worries, for it is well tended and kept safe in a new barn. A wedding gift, it was.” Preacher paused to grin emptily. “You, uh...,” stumbled he with eventual momentum, “...you slept well?”

Tammas sat expectantly. Staring.

“And the, uh, the sup-,” he started before tracing Auger’s straying eye to an untouched platter. “Oh. You didn’t like your supper.”

“Perhaps I will eat before I leave,” Tammas politely lied.

Preacher brightened. “Yes! Perhaps! Mamey makes a wonderful stew according to all accounts, but her cornbread....” He trailed away demurely, a faintly greasy flush rising above his starched collars.

Portly without being fat, the man boasted the full, rosy countenance of a well-brazed shoat, an impression further enhanced by his pug nose, balding pate, wispy combover, and a habit of wearing clothing two sizes over large. At a glance, he seemed a ruffled, disheveled fellow, but Tammas

noted an unobvious edge to crease and cuff. Someone—that spinster sister perhaps—took great pride in caring for the man.

Next, Preacher patted both jutting knees with squelching palms. Fingertips drummed idly. His grin broadened. His eyes rolled to search the interior of his humble home for inspiration. A half-dozen times, his jaw dropped to speak only to close again, his glistening lips pressed tightly shut.

“When unable to start from a beginning,” prompted Tammas, “lead from center.”

“Yes. Quite right. Well, then,” gulped his host, “from center I begin. You see, outsiders want you-.”

“Outsiders?”

Momentarily boggled, Preacher blinked owlishly. His mouth flapped open and shut spasmodically before he clarified, saying, “Those...men...from last night? Remember?”

Tammas shifted slightly in his hard seat. Yet staring.

“Of course you do. As do we all.” Rubbing palms over knees covered by woolen breaches, the man continued, “They are not Calvert people, you understand. We have neither invited nor welcomed them here among us, such as they are. We spare no love for their dark purpose, and we abhor their nightly designs. For we believe them to be heretics of the lowest order, and-.”

Auger felt his brow peak before he had formed a questioning thought. He stated the obvious. “As I recall, they said the same thing about your people.”

Preacher recovered quickly, nodding and saying, “So, they did. Yes, well, again... they, uh... well, that is we all agreed to be....”

Although he wondered why he should do so, Tammas hastened the obvious. “You accepted their money in exchange for some trifling service, and now you feel conflicted.”

His face flushing a brighter shade of red, Preacher

lowered his gaze to confront fidgeting fingers. Tipping his head left and then right and back again, he acknowledged all that must follow with a pained expression, adding, “We foresaw no harm in our bargain. Both sides agreed. Both sides benefited. All seemed fair and equitable.”

This, an old story, one told often by endless variation. “You sold them a local commodity that outsiders could never turn to profit, knowing you would eventually recover it all at auction.” Having traveled its muddy highways long enough, Auger concluded with a guess. “You thought they foolishly intended to plow your malarial swampland.”

Preacher swallowed stiffly. He compulsively glanced left and right, perhaps searching for an appropriate place to squat or heave. Auger offered the man small regard without pity.

“We never intended swindle or subterfuge,” protested the man, while dragging palms over knobby knees beneath a defensive grin, “but our understanding does not require us to anticipate another’s intentions. We struck a fair deal at a fair price and, as I said, they agreed.”

Tammas blew a long, weary breath while resisting an urge to confirm the time. Since he too well knew the hour.

“You failed to anticipate an unpleasant future.”

“We were blinded by an unobvious past.”

Perhaps. Auger need not judge. He simply continued staring.

Blinking, his host seemed anxious for something else to do, yet he breathed deeply and then hesitantly continued. “They landed in Deale several months ago. Many more of them than we had anticipated in our wildest speculation, and we never expected them to arrive by ship—each one heavily laden, mind you, so they needed nothing from us. Pirates, they are. Blackhearts and cutthroats. Gunrunners and slave traders. All bad men. I-.”

Interrupted by another rattle of frame and jamb, Preacher jumped, startled. Patting his heart with a fluttering right hand, he stood, breathlessly announcing, “Oh, thank goodness. Mamey has arrived.” Reaching for the bolt, that silly man would forget who—and *what*—had come among them, and then blindly open the door! “Mamey will tell you. She-.”

Blink-fast, Tammas rose and crossed the distance to make a crushing grip of the man’s wrist with one hand while curling the other around his gaping mouth to stifle howls of indignant protest. Dragging his host one step backward from his threshold, Auger quickly released him. A finger pressed to admonishing lips.

Both turned to face a questionable door. Once again, it rattled loudly.

From a distance, their hiding places perhaps scattered among churchyard tombstones, that wicked children’s choir began singing again. Their angelic voices harmonically reminded them of dangling fools and immolated maidens.

“Mamey?” wondered Preacher.

...while hideous youth sang, *Hing, hang, hung! Look what the hangman swung!*

Wrapping a restraining grip around the man’s right arm, Auger held him back, knowing too well how brashly a distraught man may react to bloody news. When Preacher again reached for the bolt, Tammas restrained his trembling host with improving strength.

Then a terrible thought obviously crossed the holy man’s naïve mind. Panic loomed upon quivering lips. Tears threatened.

Speaking firmly to be clear above a confusion of sing-song chants and an ominously clattering barricade, his tone deliberately hardened, Auger said, “You can collect, dress, and bury your loved ones later, but only if you survive to dig their graves.”

Preacher suddenly strained against his grip. A guttural whine pressed through shattering teeth and bitten lips. Ghoulish children sang brightly from a near distance.

*Hang, hung, hing! Look at the bad man swing!*

“Mamey!” This time, preacher screamed a deranged statement rather than a question. “Mother! Joseph!”

Again, Preacher surged forward. The surprising force of this lunge yanked Tammas along after him. Auger’s booted feet raked the parsonage’s packed earth floor.

Singing. *Swing, swang, swung! Which witch has Mather hung?*

Now they both smelled wood smoke. They heard the crackle and snap of a sudden conflagration.

“Mamey!” wept Preacher as he collapsed before Auger’s feet. “Oh, my God! Mamey... Mamey... Mamey....”

Speaking firmly because he knew his better angel would expect him to make the attempt, Tammas grimly informed, “They expect to drive me into the open before sunset, so this can only be a murder raid. Your people are all dead. Or worse.”

Two hard steps brought Tammas to the southern wall, where he jerked its insulating blanket away from mounting tenterhooks. Rolling his head to get a distributed view through occasional gaps in the home’s clapboard siding, he watched men approaching by foot from that direction. Bearing torches.

Straightening to make a survey of their plight, Auger thought perhaps a half-hour of sunlight remained. Lower on the horizon and rising more brightly still, an uncertain orange-red flicker marked the presence of a nearby house or barn engulfed in flames.

*The younger Gray family homestead?* A faint odor of roasting flesh told that tale’s grim conclusion.

“They mean to burn this place around us,” grated

Tammas, returning to toe the quivering parson onto his feet. “Do not forget, man, your beliefs mean nothing to them. In your absence,” he warned, “they will desecrate your dead and leave their bones to lie fallow.”

Preacher stuttered, “Dear God in heaven...”

To which Auger replied as he must. With a savage kick.

“Get up and save yourself, fool, or burn and save nobody!”

Groaning in pain, the stricken man crawled onto his bed, used it to lift himself into a half-crouch, racked by pain and unspeakable grief. Muttering, “Mamey... Mamey...

Mamey....”

Glancing backward in that desperate moment to assess Preacher’s presence, Auger found the man glaring at him in a familiar way. That is, with hatred-filled eyes that gleamed with a murderous light.

*(to be continued)*

*Editor’s Note: Previous parts of this tale, the most recent being “All Hallows Parrish,” have appeared in earlier issues of Pen in Hand. Following in the tradition of Charles Dickens, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Rudyard Kipling, Mark Twain, and other well-known authors of Victorian times, Stephen Huff promises further episodes of this ripping yarn in future issues of Pen in Hand.*

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## POET AND WRITER BIOGRAPHIES

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**Fran Abrams'** poems have been published in numerous journals and in more than a dozen anthologies. Her poetry has been published in the full-length collection, *I Rode the Second Wave: A Feminist Memoir* (November 2022), and in two chap-books, *The Poet Who Loves Pythagoras* (April 2023) and *Arranging Words* (October 2023). Her fourth book of poetry, *Traveling on the Number Nine Bus*, was published by Kelsay Books in 2025. Her poem "Flying Away," published in *Gargoyle Online*, was nominated in 2023 for a Pushcart Prize. She was one of four editors of a collection of poems, including her own, titled *Echoes Through the Stacks*, published in April 2024. ([franabramspoetry.com](http://franabramspoetry.com))

**Ipatia Apostolides**, also known as Patty Apostolides, holds a PhD in leadership, with a focus on English, an MFA in creative writing, and a BA in biology, along with minors in music and theater. After a decade in cancer research, she shifted to writing, publishing four novels and a poetry book. She has contributed to a bilingual poetry anthology and has poems in various journals. Currently, she teaches English online at a university and plays violin with the Frederick Symphony Orchestra.

**Faith-Anne Bell** resides in Baltimore, Maryland. She received a BA in literature from UMBC. Bell has recently had her work in *Underbelly Press* and *Stripes Literary Magazine*. She has a forthcoming poem in an anthology from South Broadway Press. Following the death of her husband at the age of 41 and her mother within a year, Faith-Anne has re-dedicated herself to writing. She is currently working on finishing three poetry chapbook manuscripts.

**Lora Berg** writes with a light touch from her home in Maryland. She is the author of *The Mermaid Wakes* (Macmillan Ca-

ribbean) written in collaboration with visual artist Canute Caliste. She served as a poet-in-residence at the Saint Albans School, and holds an MFA from Johns Hopkins. She has had poems published in *Shenandoah*, *Colorado Review*, *The Carolina Quarterly*, and others. Berg is at work on a new full-length book of poems.

**Burton A. Clark** had his first essay published in 1976, has written two books about the American fire culture, published a collection of his great-grandmother's poetry, and had two of his poems published. He has presented lectures, short stories, and poetry nationwide.

**Roderick Deacey** is a performing poet, reading with bass player, drummer and jazz pianist to emulate the Beat Poets' poetry & jazz forays of the 1950s. Deacey was awarded the 2019 Frederick Arts Council Carl R. Butler Award for Literature. Crossing genres, he won the Gold Award for Best Lyrics in the Mid-Atlantic Song Contest, held by the Songwriters Association of Washington, in both 2020 and 2023, plus the Silver Award in 2022 and 2025. He is a Pushcart Prize nominee and his contemporary poems appear regularly in literary journals. He has been known to write an occasional piece of flash fiction.

**Stephen Demczuk** has published science research and beer-related articles. A piece in the July 2025 *Pen in Hand* was Demczuk's first published fiction. His goal is to hike the forty-six Adirondack high peaks, and he has so far completed thirty-nine of them.

**Donna Donnelly** is a retired world languages educator looking forward to an encore career as a creative nonfiction travel writer. She has been exploring and hiking for 50 years, col-

lecting friends wherever she goes. She is currently working on a chapbook about her village-to-village walks in Europe. She has a master's degree in Spanish and, most recently, taught Spanish language and teaching methods courses at Ohio Wesleyan University. She lives in Frederick, Maryland.

**Kay White Drew**, a.k.a. Katherine White, MD, is a retired neonatal physician. Her work appears in several anthologies, including *Bay to Ocean Journal*, *America's Future*, and *Pen in Hand*; and online journals including *New Verse News*, *The Intima*, *Gargoyle*, and *Loch Raven Review*, where her essay was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Her memoir, *Stress Test*, was published in June 2024. She lives in Rockville, Maryland, with her husband.

**Marc A. Drexler** lives in Gaithersburg, Maryland. He has had poetry published in *The Little Patuxent Review*, *Mid-Atlantic Review*, *Gargoyle Online*, and *The Loch Raven Review*. One poem was selected as *Split This Rock*'s Poem of the Week. Two of his poems have been featured on placards in Arlington, Virginia's ART buses, and one on LCTA buses in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. He is the 2024 winner of the Enoch Pratt Free Library Poetry Contest.

**M. Frost**'s poems appear in *The Hopkins Review*, *Little Patuxent Review*, *Strange Horizons*, and others, with chapbooks *Cow Poetry* (Finishing Line Press) and *The Women of Myth* (Island of Wak-Wak). Read more at [mfrostwords.com](http://mfrostwords.com).

**Claudia Gary**'s forthcoming poetry collection is *Time and Other Solvents*. She lives near Washington DC and teaches workshops on villanelle, sonnet, meter, persona poems, poetry vs. trauma, etc., at The Writer's Center ([writer.org](http://writer.org)) and privately, via Zoom. Author of *Humor Me* (2006) and

chapbooks including *Genetic Revisionism* (2019), she is also a health/science writer, visual artist, composer of tonal songs and chamber music, and an advisory editor of *New Verse Review*. Her 2022 article on setting poems to music is online at <https://straightlabyrinth.info/conference.html>. See also [pw.org/content/claudia\\_gary](https://pw.org/content/claudia_gary)

**Stephen Huff** was born in Texas and currently resides in Chesapeake Beach, Maryland. He is an author of novels, short stories, and poetry. He is also a published scientist with expertise in bioinformatics (computational biology) and machine learning. He is president of Maryland Writers Association. Message him at [Stephen@StephenHuff.com](mailto:Stephen@StephenHuff.com).

**Elayne Bond Hyman** is a mixed-blood woman identifying as indigenous. In 1963, her sophomore year, she integrated the all-female Stephens College in Columbia, Missouri, graduating with honors in 1964. She went on to earn a BA, Phi Beta Kappa, and Dobroe Slovo from Howard University in 1966. She holds an MA from the University of Pittsburgh in Slavic Studies, as well as a Master of Divinity from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. She was a Merrill Fellow at Harvard University School of Divinity.

Elayne Hyman is a published author, writing both poetry and prose. Her works include: *Prayers from the Earth*, recorded with Bernice Johnson Reagan; “Sticks and Sticks and Stones and Words and Bones”, included in Laurel Holliday’s essay collection *Children of the Dream; Catoctin Slavespeak and They Came Across South Mountain*, handmade artbook versions of which have been purchased by individual art collectors, libraries, and museums, including the Library of Congress Rare Book Division.

**Dorian Elizabeth Knapp** is the author of three poetry collections, *Requiem with an Amulet in Its Beak* (Washington Writers' Publishing House, 2019), winner of the 2019 Jean Feldman Poetry Prize, *The Spite House* (C&R Press, 2011), winner of the 2010 De Novo Poetry Prize, and *Causa Sui*, (Three Mile Harbor Press, 2025), winner of the Three Mile Harbor Press Poetry Prize. She is the founding director of the Low-Residency MFA at Hood College in Frederick, and lives in Maryland with her family.

**Bryce Kositz** has a doctorate in modern Chinese history from the Australian National University. He has lived in Maryland since 2020 and has published *Dungeons & Dragons* adventures on dmsguild.com, such as the popular *Igor's Challenge*.

**Abby Kusmin** is a writer and student from Silver Spring, Maryland. They are studying early childhood education at the University of Maryland. In their spare time, they enjoy hiking, swimming, and writing poetry, prose, or whatever chimeric combination happens to occur.

**Dale E. Lehman** is an indie author who principally writes mysteries, science fiction, and humor. His short stories have been known to stray into other genres. He's written very little poetry, but every so often, something spills out. In addition to his books, his writing has also appeared in *Sky & Telescope* and on Medium.com and SciFiShorts.co.

**Diana Lyga** is a Philadelphia-born, Baltimore-based writer and the daughter of two immigrants from Kiev, Ukraine. A park ranger by day, her work is shaped by the intersection between the tangibles and intangibles of the human experience and the natural world. Inspired by the works of Mary

Oliver, Anna Akhmatova, and E.E. Cummings, Lyga is an emerging writer developing a growing collection of poetry.

**Kari Martindale** is a poet, spoken word artist, and teaching artist who has performed at the White House. Her poetry has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, and received honorable mention in the *Writer's Digest* writing competition. Now living in Alaska, Martindale is a former member of the board of Maryland Writers' Association and has served on poetry judging panels nationwide.

**Pamela Mathison-Levitt** is a disabled writer and home-schooling mom. Her poems reflect her love of nature, her Unitarian Universalist faith, and her experiences with mental health and chronic illnesses. Mathison-Levitt's work has appeared in *WWPH Writes*, *Mid-Atlantic Review*, *Exposed Brick Literary Magazine*, *Pen in Hand*, *Emerald Coast Review*, *Literary Mama's* blog and other publications. You can find her work on Facebook at Lines and Branches or on Instagram @pmmlevitt.

**Mary McCoy** is a writer and environmental artist whose interdisciplinary work explores the human experience of the natural world in all its wonder and vulnerability. She has published five books. Her writings have appeared in *Orion's Place Where You Live*, *Gargoyle*, *Bay to Ocean*, *From Whispers to Roars*, *Pen in Hand*, and *Art Spiel*. A former art critic for *The Washington Post* and several art magazines, she received an MSAC Regional Independent Artist Award for Literary Arts in 2022.

**Karen McPherson** is a retired R.N. and transplanted Missourian who loves history and big dogs. She likes to walk her two in battlefields and any other historic area that allows

them. Sometimes, her family accompanies her, even though they know she will make up stories about the random people they see on the walks and tell them all the imagined details. Writing is a passion, and retirement has brought her time to enjoy it.

**Katie Melynn** is a fiction writer and writing teacher, teaching middle school creative writing for the Apex Arts magnet program in Anne Arundel County. Her work has been published in print and online media, including *Hallaren Literary*, *At Ease Magazine*, *SHORE Monthly*, and People.com. She is a past writer-in-residence at the Weymouth Center for the Arts & Humanities. @katiemelynnwriter

**Cindy Miao** is a poet and student at the Holton-Arms school in Bethesda, Maryland. Nationally recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, her work appears in *Emerging Voices* (Volumes 7–10), *Pen in Hand*, and more. She serves as vice president of the Potomac Teen Writers' Club and as the Arts & Entertainment editor for *Scribbler*, her school newspaper. When she's not studying or writing, Miao enjoys viewing and discussing various forms of art.

**Anita Nahal**, PhD, is professor, poet, children's books writer, novelist and short film maker. Nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize (2022, 2023); finalist, Tagore Literary Prize, 2023, Nahal won the Nissim Prize in Literature with her poetry-prose novel, *drenched thoughts in 2024*. Her third poetry collection, *What's wrong with us Kali women?*, is mandatory reading at Utrecht University. Her first under 3 minute very short film, "Clubs my sinful dance muse," won the best super short film at the Five Continents International Film Festival, Venezuela, 2024. A Fulbright and NEH scholar, Nahal teaches at a university in Washington DC. [www.anitanahal.com](http://www.anitanahal.com)

**Joanne Oh** is a Korean American writer from Frederick, Maryland. Her poetry has appeared in *Palette Poetry*, *Poet Lore*, *Hobart*, *Envoi*, and elsewhere. She holds a B.A. in writing seminars from Johns Hopkins University, where she received the 2019 Chaffee Writing Prize and the H. Lee Kanter Woodrow Wilson Research Fellowship.

**Kyara Santana Roman** has been a member of the Middletown Teen Writers' Club for 3 years and has been published in *Emerging Voices*, the annual anthology of teen writing, as well as in *Pen in Hand*. Poetry is her preferred medium, and she writes to release built-up emotions and share her experiences with others. She loves seeing her work go from rants in her notes app to respected literature. As a high school senior, Roman hopes to continue writing about the future moments in her life.

**Greg Rosenthal**, a recent retiree, spent decades working in communications for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), publishing professional articles and blog posts through USDA channels and in external publications. On the creative side, he has published articles, satire, and poetry in many Medium.com publications, such as *The Writing Co-operative*, *MuddyUm*, *House of Haiku*, and *No Crime in Rhymin'*. His book, *Tactical Writing Guide*, is on sale on Amazon.com.

**Richard Schreck** is the author of over 30 fiction and non-fiction pieces and a former publication editor for a large professional association. "Family" explores a fictional world he is developing in *Brain Game*, a novel set in Baltimore and New Orleans. *Brain Game* background stories also appear in *The Razor*, *Gargoyle*, *The Loch Raven Review*, *The Write Launch*, and other literary magazines. See links to these stories at rich-

ardschreck.com and commentary at Instagram @richard-schreckwriting and Bluesky @richardschreck.bsky.social.

**Jack Slocomb** lives in the Allegheny Mountains of Western Maryland. He is a retired clinical social worker, active outdoor educator, nature poet, nature essayist, and novelist. He has lived in this country most of his life and considers the rolling ancient hills, the hidden valleys, and surging creeks of this beloved landscape to be the inspiration for his literary life. He has released a full-length poetry collection, *Native Tongue* (Akinoga Press).

**Julie Robin Solomon**, a former Shakespeare professor, is currently a psychiatric nurse practitioner who lives in Baltimore City. She writes poetry and is working on a family memoir.

**Ken Stepanuk**, while anticipating a 2026 release of his debut novel, *Unacknowledged*, continues to write short stories and has a good start on *Revenge*, a sequel to *Unacknowledged*. With over 40 years of experience in technical proposal writing, Ken serves as a volunteer beta reader for Maryland Writers' Association members and other authors. He enjoys writing historical and political fiction, and his newly-named genre, "histerical fiction," which puts a comical twist on historical events and outcomes.

**Kathryn Thornwood** splits her time between seeking to understand the cosmos as a Ph.D. astronomer and creating new fantastical worlds with magic systems with a taste of science as a fantasy author. She shares short stories and musings on her blog at [kathrynthornwood.com](http://kathrynthornwood.com) and is deep in the edits of her first completed novel: a demon love story with a dash of family turmoil. In her free time, she explores off-the-beaten-

path natural wonders with her husband and their dog, as well as the incredible bookshops and libraries along the route.

**Jo Tyler** is a queer poet, elder, storyteller, and mosaic artist. A retired Penn State professor and former Fortune 500 vice president, she happily returned to poetry after decades of writing prose in business and academia. Her poems have been published in *Yellow Arrow Journal*, *Maryland Literary Review*, and *MacQueen's Quarterly*. She lives in Baltimore, Maryland, with her wife Gail and her dog Moxie.

**Lois Perch Villemaire** is the author of *My Eight Greats*, a family history in poetry and prose. Her work has appeared in such places as *ONE ART*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Blue Mountain Review*, and anthologies including *I Am My Father's Daughter*. Her chapbook, *Eyes at the Edge of the Woods* (Bottlecup Press), was published in June 2024. She won *Pen in Hand's* Haiku Challenge in 2023. Villemaire researches family history, enjoys fun photography, and dotes on her African violets.

**K. M. Watson** writes from Maryland's farm and horse country. She is a retired educator and journalist. She writes mostly about the natural world and aging. Her fiction is published in the international anthology *Best Climate Change Stories* and in the *Bay to Ocean Journal*.

**JC Williams'** poems have appeared in *Months to Years*, *Songs of Eretz Poetry Review*, *Last Stanza Poetry Review*, *The Pan Haiku Review*, *Prachya Review*, *Elsewhere: A Journal of Place*, and *in-Scribe*. She is a past participant in the AWP's Writer to Writer Program working with poet and essayist Jehanne Dubrow of the University of North Texas. In addition to poetry, her loves are her partner, their daughter, and tai chi.

**Joni Youse** is a poet and a Frederick County resident. Her poetry has appeared in the Maryland Writers' Association *Pen in Hand* literary magazine; the Clinton-Essex-Franklin Library System anthology, *True North—Words and Images from New York's North Country; the Frederick County Nature Council Anthology 2024*; and *Boreal Zine—Winter 2025*. Youse enjoys colder weather, northern mountains and collecting vintage paperback books

**Joanne Zaslow** dedicated her career as a writer-editor-communications professional to the U.S. government and non-profit sectors. She has a master's in professional writing. Today, she volunteers for the Maryland Writers' Association and writes fiction and creative non-fiction. Her work has been published in *The Utne Reader*, *30 Ways to Love Maryland*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Pen in Hand*, and Maryland Historical Society, among other places.

**Susan Zimmerman** was an editor and writer on issues about public education for national education publications. During 20 years in Mexico City, she published feature articles for expat lifestyle publications and technical articles about the oil industry for related newsletters. Professionally, she taught English as a Second Language in Maryland public schools for 15 years. After retiring, she turned to writing novels that tell the stories of the Central American migrant students she taught.

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