

PEN IN HAND

LITERARY JOURNAL JULY 2025



*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

July 2025

Roderick Deacey, Editor

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

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Message from the Editor

Writing by real people has never been more important. As the AI movement insidiously permeates the written word wherever we find it—stories, articles, technical manuals, company reports, song lyrics, almost anything you may read on the Internet, and so on, and so on—it’s hard to see where we humans can still wave our flags. Will we be pushed aside in the name of progress?

Well, I want to reassure you! We can teach machines to ape us and copy our styles, plots, and structures, BUT there is a spark missing. The traces our creative human minds leave behind weave through our creations, and those imaginative leaps we make are a human ability that is hard to track or predict. Right now, I don’t think AI-produced writing can compete with our best work. But we can’t afford to be complacent! We have to take our craft to the highest level we can. MWA can help you!

Speaking of working on our craft, one of the most important initiatives that the Maryland Writers’ Association supports is our growing network of library-based Teen Writers’ Clubs. Helping aspiring young writers learn how to use words to express their feelings and tell their stories is critical work, and I encourage any MWA members who have time and the ability to run or help out a young writers’ group to reach out and become involved.

In recent years, I have edited all the poetry submissions to

Emerging Voices, MWA's annual young writers' anthology. This year, I came upon not one but two poems by teen writers that I felt were also worthy of inclusion in *Pen in Hand*. So please look for "Dissection of New York City" by Cindy Miao and "5 Hours and 15 Minutes" by Kyara Santana Roman in this issue to see how high our teen writers can fly!

As always, I'd like to thank MWA President Stephen Huff for his continued support (and his wonderful unfolding serial!) plus Publications Chair Amy Kaplan for her help and advice. I could not bring *Pen in Hand* to publication without the help of Assistant Editor Joanne Zaslow and Art & Design Editor Stephanie L. Fowler, not forgetting website help from Donna Ferron and new webmaster, Cindy Rodi. Assistant Editor and contributing poet Nicole Abuhmada is on hiatus for this issue.

Don't forget that *Pen in Hand* is an always-improving showcase for MWA members—so please send your best poems, short stories, essays, memoirs, and flash fiction to us for the January 2026 issue. I appreciate your support!

Please keep writing!

Roderick Deacey
Editor, *Pen in Hand*

Message from the President

As Executive President of Maryland Writers' Association, I welcome you to the July 2025 issue of *Pen in Hand*, our wonderful association's premier publication. The poetry, prose, short stories, and artwork you will enjoy herein are all drawn from the magnificent minds of Maryland-based artists like yourself. Each entertaining and insightful entry reaches your mind only after a thorough and conscientious review by our knowledgeable editors, which means each title represents a new byline in someone's growing portfolio. Best of all, it's good stuff! Whatever your tastes, I know you will find something you like. Read, experience, and enjoy!

Sometimes the loudest voice speaks with silence; we writers change our world for the better with our words and the white space that separates them.

Stephen Donald Huff, PhD
President, MWA

POETRY

Tenth Year: Tin
by Elizabeth Knapp

Darling, a decade spent with you
calls for something more elegant

than plain old tin, something precious
& memorable, like the lace train

of the lake where we said
our vows, that momentary

peninsula of happiness before
the clouds rolled in. But plain

& old is the new young & fabulous,
a solder to bind our frayed ends

together, the silver lining
in a garbage can. The beauty is

we can bend it however we like,
& it won't break in our hands.

Thirteenth Year: Lace

by Elizabeth Knapp

In anticipation of the lingerie you will gift me
in celebration of the day we said our vows,

for better or for worse & all that jazz,
I think you should know that my body

is not the same body you married,
now scarred & carrying the weight

of the years, split open & stitched back
together with something less like commitment

& more like survival, my body
that married your body & the knots we made

now woven into an intricate pattern,
delicate as the white veil I didn't wear,

or this antique tray I give to you now,
its lace set under glass for generations.

Façade
by Joanne Oh

Clean laundry smells damp
from weather good for washing
the building's face.

Ladybugs shelter
from the sun shower inside
my boots, under my feet.

Peeking out of mud,
a tree stump from a distance,
a pig's snout up close.

Sunblock fingerprints
cast a haze over the scene.
My memories glow.

Train Cinquains

by Joanne Oh

Open

sesame, she
commands. A child with palms
outstretched. Each stop, the doors open;
she smiles.

She smiles
at me, across
the aisle, as if I've seen
her secret, as if she picked me
to know.

To know
strangers and their
idiosyncrasies
and not know them at all. That's a
commute.

Commute
fares for a pass,
installments for lump sum,
time for memories of the child
I was.

I was
a child whose leg
got wedged between the train
and the platform—a gap that now
I see.

I see,
reflected in
the window, a stranger
scrolling on his phone, his browsing
patterns.

Patterns
of migration.
It turns out, all this time,
we've been on the same route, part of
a flock.

A flock
of pigeons flee—
but one, stuck in the train
coupler. Who knows the cause? Lack of
caution?

Caution:
Please mind the gap.
The doors do not open
like elevator doors. Do not
open—

?
for
Giacco-
metti
by
Lora
Berg

What
city
is
this
full
of
thin
men
casting
shadows
of
spider
limbs
on
gallery
walls
willow
stick
filaments
whittled
in
bronze
emptiness
the
loss
of

self
lost
selves
shadows
of
oneself
selfless
one
selfish
one
selfie
sylph
?

The Art Coach

by Lora Berg

I ask Lian, a patient with memory loss,
if she enjoyed the morning art class
where we'd just been together—
and she says, "I don't know. I wasn't there."

This absence of before takes me
by surprise, yet again, as if
I'd never heard of such a thing.

On a stroll by boutiques to the coffee shop,
I imagine punching holes in my past,
whiting out whole episodes—some pockets
more useful than others.

A scotty trots by, decked in
a neat plaid coat and velvet bow.

Where was I? I don't know.
Every gorgeous day, I either
make it such a day, or not.

Displaced
by Claudia Gary

“Sadness and disbelief pervade Los Angeles looking over the tragic remains of the devastating Palisades and Eaton fires. People have been wondering, how could this happen?

It already had, 64 years before....”

<https://ladailymirror.com/2025/01/13/mary-mallory-holly-wood-heights-1961-bel-air-fire-burns-450-homes/>

Fractured on the West Coast
I feel it here. Is this
gift or aberration?

No matter. Fractured last
century I feel it now.
Life slides over the present,

skews there into past,
here into future.
Yet the present moment

in its red-orange blaze
amplifies each sound
of hills that will erode,

houses that now flicker,
odors of charred wood
and melted pipes. The wind

that feeds this smoke will carry it
in all directions, into too
many children’s dreams.

Secco Pompelini

by Claudia Gary

Now that we've both agreed we're moving on
(as I had thought each time you didn't call),
I finish the strange wine you brought along

the first time: sour, sweet, a marathon
of flavor that soon fades. I drink it all,
these last few ounces, since we're moving on.

A sour sweetness settles on my tongue,
grapefruit and tonic cut with alcohol,
the strangeness of this wine you brought along.

Its misted bottle seems to be a song
of pleasure that turned hollow, clinical,
because we saw that we were moving on.

The future is a tonic; we're both strong,
though in each other's lives we're marginal.
I knew, and drank the wine you brought along.

But could we have been more? The time is wrong
to ask. Our lives may be more magical
now that we both agree we're moving on—
strange finish to the wine you brought along.

Presentiment
by Terri Simon

I dream of apocalypses,
dystopian futures,
alien invasions,
totalitarian governments.
I am part
of a small resistance cell.

sometimes these dreams start
as reunions, friends and family
coming together
to celebrate our secret lives
or special mutant powers—

but then things go horribly wrong,
have been wrong for years,
and those dreams always,
always end
with us running.

Afternoon at Pemaquid Point

by Terri Simon

The blue ocean turns green
just before it foams white
to climb the rocks.
The pod of ducks just beyond
rides the gentle waves, still.
A single boat moves
in the distance.
Further out, Monhegan
and Allen islands, silhouettes.

Beneath me, Maine granite,
a more comfortable seat
than the benches set out
near the lighthouse,
though my knees object
when I stand again.

The bell house, rebuilt
brick by brick after last winter's storm,
is open now, a cool place
out of the sun.
Photos show
where waves shoved boulders
to new perches.

The push and pull of nature,
our negotiations with it.
The silences between crashing waves
and the cry of seagulls.
The slight, salt tang
of the Atlantic.

This is where my soul lives,
what I must take with me
when I go.

July
by Jack Slocomb

July July July

Along the black snaking threads
of baking county back roads
the summer sumacs
are swelling out now
their frizzed fruits
in shades of burgundy
drooping like the drippings of hot candle wax
from the overhang of limbs

The ashy noon creek
in its tender riffing
dog-day shallows
casting up sun-sparklers
through the bankside
clustering thick of leaves

July

The festivals
of royal fireworks
and franks and potato salads
and honeyed lemonades

Those woven waving
solar-surged

unmowed
weedy fields
with their long stalks of blue vervain
and spiky purple crowns of cow thistles
the small gold-dimpled
oxeye daisies
little lacey green fronds of woundwort
and shooting
hot pink
petal-tongues of fireweed
all of one
deep exhale
of ascension
all breaking loose
all with their unbound
glory-songs

Freedom is always everywhere
always in some wild plant-laden expression
rising from sacred soil and sand
pebbles and nascent
upwelling liquids

July in the cherish of these Alleghenies
a month when you can catch
on to it
catch flame with it
know the germination of it
in your bones
have the courage
of these fulminating vegetations

and let them whip whip whip
you up into the still-full great gift
your liberty

July July July

Guests

by Jack Slocomb

The thundering gusts
sweep through the gray forest
this late March afternoon,
bend and creak the trunks of trees,
spend out their forces,
break and gather up
the loosened limbs and dead twigs,
and fling them down
to the crumble of leaves.

And the brumal, translucent lake
seems to fill the far reaches
of the tawdry world.
The pigeons launch and lift
like little dusky angels
into the blowing skies
from the worn-thin silvered
bridge railing.

And your car weaves
the narrow back road
that tracks
the broken, white rushing creek
that sluices through like some burly
dark liquid wind.

And if we are lucky,

we might come before certain holy incantations—
like this early spring
 billowing of air,
 the silent, resting, brooding pond,
 the lifting, electric, street-pigeon wings,
 shadowy fast-traveling waters—

And when we do, when we do,
 our breath is deep and sweet
 and we ken that we are only,
 in the long run of things,
 but their blessed, thankful
 guests—

and leave things just at that.

when loved ones are home during a storm

by Anita Nahal

i try to drink eight glasses of water each day. they say it's good for us. best is when loved ones are home during a storm. no worries, no strains, no tension, just cuddling with warm thoughts, hugs, and some oxytocin, which is underrated and overlooked. storms outside are better than those inside. i wouldn't want jellybeans running amok in my blood or wires plugged in wrong sockets in my brain or being thrashed around in depressed memories. a muddled confused state of protection is none in reality. have you ever stepped out when it's raining hard? when drops fall on dry skin and felt your heartbeats spin? or when the snow is fresh? and felt your feet slide in easy like in velvet boots? or jumped and played in tiny water puddles as children? thinking you were Gulliver on a mission? dreams and imaginations are water to our aspirations and blessed realities are stolen moments from time, no matter how much water we drink daily.

cougar dancer
by Anita Nahal

big heels are lying in my cupboards. or given away, reluctantly, to those younger with my foot size. youth is a magic realm i've lived in well. dancing even after my feet ached. dancing till it was time to go. dancing crazy even at home. platforms, stilettos, pumps were all my height negotiators. different colors and styles caught my eye. the higher heel the better. i even matched my bags and clothes with these main stars in my mode story. walking stridently on elevation. never compromising on fashion. but wait i ain't never compromised on fashion! my locks may be greying but ain't never meant for taming. shakespeare do you hear me? you may find me at a lower height. you may find my bones shrinking and curving. you may find my aches are here to stay. but I can carve out new ways to stand straight. like i've done all my life. altering clothes that did not fit.

Maternal Midnight Musings
(featuring Mary Oliver and Robert Frost)
by Joni Youse



*After Ruth Lozner's
Life Cycle 1.0
from a national juried exhibition
at The Delaplaine Arts Center,
Frederick, Md. May-July 2025.*

I need to ask you something
time is passing faster and I'm afraid
my thoughts will be carried away on the wind
in a direction none of us will know

did I ground you?
did I plant my roots deep enough?
did I use the right seed?
did I remind you to dance in the rain?
did I whisper to you that tears and fears mean growth?
did I tell you acorns are the most amazing creation
on the earth?
did I shout to you that bare branches are just as beautiful?
are you curious?
did I let you explore the ins and outs and ups and downs
before your clock started?
did I chain you down with damaged wings?
did I mention that artists and poets have perpetual clocks?

that there are “miles to go before I sleep”?
that “joy is not meant to be a crumb”?
did I tell you how proud I am that you left the nest?
did I mention that I am grateful
that your flights have been safe?
do you know that you always have a home in my arms?
most importantly, did I tell you enough times that I love
you?
if I didn't
is there still time?

We Live
by Joni Youse

We live in a world in which Perry Mason
smokes cigarettes
contemplating crime
we live in a world where 271 episodes of dead bodies
isn't enough
in which blood and guns
are allowed 52 minutes of airtime
but love is allowed none
Raymond Burr was given even less
yet Della Street had a single rose on her desk
in a stunning vase

Road Trip
by Fran Abrams

It's 7 a.m. on a Saturday
and two little girls
are curled up on my backseat

each with a pillow, a sure sign
we're leaving on a road trip.
The adults are filling my trunk

with suitcases and swim gear.
We're on our way to the beach.
Girls will sleep for the first

few hours of the trip
and it will feel shorter to them.
When they wake, we'll make a pit stop—

food for them, gas for me.
And then there will be two bouncy
children in the backseat asking,

“When will we get there?” I wish I had
a way to tell them I'm driving
as fast as it's legal to go.

Scolded by the Butter Churn

by Fran Abrams

Surely my butter tastes better than
that charlatan butter you buy

at the grocery store in a plastic tub.
Do you know where your butter comes from?

Without my permission, I have been retired
to a modern home where I sit in a corner

of the living room as ornamentation. I should
be living in a real farmhouse with cows

outside the door, a place where milk is gathered
from the cows, the cream separated and churned

inside me until it turns into farm-fresh butter.
Those are not just words printed on a label.

I'm telling you to save your hard-earned bread
for the creamy taste of my hand-churned butter.

blessing from a minor god
by Abby Kusmin

i was raised godless,
but when i was swallowed by pain
and all of the pills and all of the doctor's bills
couldn't soothe it,
i knelt behind my bedroom door and prayed.
it was mid-plea
that i heard the rumble of purring
on the other side of the door,
and opened it to find my roommate's cat
waiting there. i sat with him
in the dark hallway while my roommates
slept in the other room,
ran my hands over his sleek fur.
he arched his little head into my palm,
then bit me—only a nip, no blood.
he kept on purring, little menace,
and i thought maybe this
is what i meant to ask for,
maybe god has fur and teeth
and crawls into your lap while you cry
on the floor next to your room.

and everything in its place

by Abby Kusmin

you study the ink on your forearms,
read the tattooed script
and trace the stems and thorns
of your fading red roses
with your fingertips—
this body is yours
in a way that is more than incidental.

the wild, biologic rage
of not having something you don't want
to want takes over, like flames on a paper airplane,
leaving you burned out and flightless,
yelling impotently at the walls that watch
and the doors that remain shut
and the table that doesn't interfere.

you'd like something to be righteous about,
some sin to hate and punish,
but you only have the world—
the same traffic lights and motorcycle revs
and checkout counters as the week before,
as bright and loud and mundane as ever.

you know the only reason for your body
cannibalizing your patience
is your body,

the only reason for your body taking shard
after skinning shard to its thin skin
like road splatter on a gravel highway
is your body.

you'd kill for any sort of release,
but you don't have the energy to scream
or to touch yourself,
so you settle for striking your palm
against the steering wheel,
writhing in your seat like a rabid creature,
but with your foot still on the brake,
still keeping the car steady,
still waiting in your place.

Gaku's Garden

by Ellen Coffey

crocus spears break soil
bamboo gate swings open wide
his garden is awake

cherry blossoms fall
pink snow flutters to the ground—
how brief is beauty

inches from a pond
a blue dragonfly hovers
washed in August light

coloring flagstones
soft verdant moss paints pictures:
art beneath our feet

sheltered from the sun
swift koi swims in blue shadows
of a lily pad

a stray cat snoozes
nestled warm in Buddha's arms—
temple for all souls

High Tide at Ocean City, Maryland
by Susanne Wolf

In Ocean City, the roaring waves crash
against the passive shore in a mad dash.
You dart away, feet sinking in soft sand,
a spiral shell clutched tightly in your hand,
lest you lose your prize to the sea. You splash

through salt water, catching a fleeting flash
of gray and white feathers. Gull wings whoosh, lash-
ing through the air, webbed feet touch down on land
in Ocean City.

Together, your prints and the gull's leave hash
marks, soon to be erased by the tide. Bash
of spray slaps your back. Foamy fans span
out over the wide expanse of beach. And
you squeal in joy and fear, as the waves crash
in Ocean City.

**I Checked My Catholicism at the Door
and Never Came Back for It**

by Gabby Gilliam

It is overkill to say I felt
betrayed when the safety loop
of my faith fell slack.

My mother denied the signs
but bargained her way through
my confirmation with promises

it would be the last time
a priest's hands would place
that cardboard disk upon

my outstretched tongue
and I managed to swallow
it down one last time—

the scripted responses
the prayer-worn pews
the stale eucharist

the body of Christ dissolving
before I reached the door.

I Walk to the Pond to Clear My Head

by Gabby Gilliam

The glass-smooth surface
shudders, turns roosting finches
into angles of startled feathers.

Hum-colored and bitter,
pockets of daylight
drip from fluttering wings,

each bird's strangled
cry unearthed
like buried clues.

If only your gaslighting
came with a neon label
instead of this faint trail

of empty threats
and barbed accusations,
the ripple of each dismissal

distorting my reflection
until I'm too disoriented
to take flight

5 Hours and 15 Minutes

by Kyara Santana Roman

1 hour reading a book,
30 minutes making the perfect sandwich for lunch,
3 hours messing with my guitars,
45 minutes sitting on my balcony
looking at busy people and feathered birds.

That's how I spend my time this spring,
avoiding what I know I should face.
But 5 hours and 15 minutes can only get me so far.
I can't get the words "live your dream"
out of my head.

"Live your dream,"
a phrase that's made to inspire—
yet every minute, it haunts me.
How can I live my dream
if I don't know what that is?

The pressure of knowing I am growing up,
the weight of my future
feeling heavy on my shoulders.
It's a load that's heavy to carry.

I'm only 16.
Why do I suddenly need
to figure out the course of my life?

The thought of doing this today seems impossible,
so I'll distract myself again,
with 1 more hour spent finishing the book,
and 30 more minutes
making the perfect sandwich for dinner,
another 3 hours of messing with my same 2 guitars,
and 45 more minutes sitting on my balcony
looking at busy people and feathered birds.

Moved to Dance

by Jean Burgess

Tiny waves ripple toward the shore.
Along a patch of smooth pinkish sand,
I splash in the cool water's edge.
The setting sun paints broad strokes of coral, violet,
and azure across its canvas.
And so, it begins—
the waves my music,
the sky my brilliant backdrop,
the sandbar my stage.
Overcome by a burst of cosmic energy,
I merge with my surroundings.

What else can I do but dance...

and dance...

and dance?

Dissonance

by Pamela Mathison-Levitt

To heal from betrayal is to ponder
a great number of things that don't hold together.
We believe that loving someone means
we are to take great care of them.
But sometimes, we yell at people we love
for leaving hairs on the bathroom counter.
And sometimes, we find ourselves over happy hour
remembering only the hair debacles
and not the way our hands fit perfectly together,
or the way we know all the stories
we would be afraid for anyone else to hear,
or the feeling of our souls' knowing in a glance.
Afterwards, we might believe that to forgive and reconcile
means we have condoned an unpardonable act.
Yet, who among us has not thrown a stone at their lover,
over a lifetime, and regretted it?
I see the scrapes on my skin and the dents in yours
and we look at each other, dazed.
We drop the rocks to the ground
and tend to the wounds,
and swear to be better at this.
And somewhere in time and space,
the version of us who never picked up a rock
is holding hands instead.
Elsewhere, we lay in bloodied heaps
before we each depart the scene
for paths that never re-converge.
It cannot make sense to love someone
and cause them harm.
Yet, I think of 9/11, one month after our wedding day,
when all Americans woke up, thankful,

for strangers still alive
in the grocery store parking lots and on the subways,
for the neighbor who doesn't trim back his hedges,
and the nosy church lady who says passive-aggressive shit.
We were so happy to see them.
And I think about the pandemic,
when some of us were storing bodies in refrigerated trucks
and some were protesting masks.
Every day, the choice to love, to love, to love.
To love ourselves and walk away from the thrown stones.
To love others who hold the rocks.
To see the rocks and leave them in the dust
or gather them,
to build a shelter together.

The Real Purpose of a Diamond

by Pam Mathison-Levitt

after Thich Nhat Hanh's
The Diamond that Cuts through Illusion

Bodhisattvas would not distinguish
between my self and the betrayer's.
The self that was betrayed
has already died
and been resurrected
and has no form,
no container for suffering,
no endurance,
but the karma of the acts
is a rock to hurt someone's foot somewhere,
a person who was already stoned,
this person I buried,
this person I once loved,
with blood on their brow,
but no blood and no brow,
and no scar and no wound and no pain
that stretches out
beyond my body
to my children and their children and their children
and all whom they encounter
and none whom they encounter
and there are no subjects of this poem
and no form
except 3,000 chiliocosms of pain
and then forgiveness,
a process that happens
without me,
and despite me,

and because of me
and irrespective of me
as we all choose awareness
or not to be aware
and perpetuate the harm in ripples
that end somewhere
at the hand of Bodhisattvas.
Thank God for them,
for me,
for the end of suffering,
somewhere,
sometime,
never,
nowhere,
in this moment.

Dissection of New York City

by Cindy Miao

Materials You'll Need

A city preserved in headlights:
layered with bright advertisements
of plastic faces and laced
with taxi horns/police sirens/
the occasional pigeon's coo.
The air is thick with bodies
mid-step.
Smoke exhales from vents
and chapped lips.

Dissection tray:
streets lined with faded crosswalks,
veined with the pulse
of the rumbling metro.

Dissection kit, including:

- A pair of eyes, flecked with the gold
that paves these streets
- The light laughter of a child fully grown
- Six steps stumbled backwards in surprise

Preparation

Walk with squeaky sneakers
into the looming tunnel

The dawn's early light
touches New York's horizon,
refracting through the glass city
and exploding—

Through the twilight's last gleaming—
Broad stripes and bright stars—
The perilous fight—
Our land—
Our home—

Wash your hands thoroughly
with soap and water.
From the skyline,
the city trudges on and weeps.

I'm Not One Who Loves to Travel

by Lois Perch Villemaire

Although I enjoy studying maps
I'm not adventurous,
finding pleasure inside my front door.
The allure of home is serene
like sleeping on my own pillow.

I care for houseplants with green leaves,
shades of pink blooms lined up
on tables near windows, reaching for sun.
I prune and water on Monday mornings.

Bookshelves crowded with favorites,
those I plan to read someday
sit untouched—instead, borrowing
the latest from the local library
where I volunteer on Friday mornings.
Skimming my fingers along spines
feels like the rise and fall of waves.

I'm fond of writing at the kitchen table
taking in views of the woods
behind our house with seasonal changes.
I'm sentimental—holding close
my mother's sterling silver spoon ring,
my father's penguin collection,
my grandmother's stacks of vintage sheet music.

Just Before the Wedding

by Lois Perch Villemaire

Catching my breath
in the crisp scented air,
seated in the front row
on white folding chairs.

We admire the view—
a gazebo decorated
with white roses
beside a weeping willow,
sparkling fountain lake,
horizon of pine trees.

Family and friends
filling up rows behind.
In a few moments
our grandson and his love
will appear to take vows.

March winds calm,
clouds part
to reveal blue skies.
Prayers answered,
sunlight warms our hearts.

Woman in the Orange Vest

by Julie Robin Solomon

she had no credentials or visa
she had insomnia
her nightmares were daylit
began at dawn when she donned
an orange vest that boosted
her visibility as she diverted traffic
from the construction crew
she safeguarded at the cost
of the obscurity she needed
to protect her person
in a country that eyed her at cross-
purposes

at dusk the ICE agent rampaged
through the crew
a roaring bull with strobe-like eyes
she saw being seen and before she knew
she'd stripped off the vest
and flicked it like a matador
flaunting her vulnerability
victorious in her taunting
disarming with the wit
of her twitchy hips
until she awakened into the evening
of her fluorescence
and was disappeared
realizing her essential evanescence

My Spring Coat
by Julie Robin Solomon

A thin layer of flannel herald of the season
me a lamb in wolf's clothing
steely wool against March winds
warm inside

no leaks resistant to April showers
dry as talc in pastel blue
with big buttons
that stop at nothing

no hopping no lunging just showing
a body going about its business
in the winds the rains
a coat for one season

of bees birds and resurrection.
a spring coat simple as pie
easy as an armchair smooth as fine wine
dyed-in-the-wool that will never depart

I surge inside and tag this coat a Taj Mahal of love
a coat that hugs me with empty sleeves
a sumptuary gift
from careless mother to thirsty daughter

I hoist it up on its hanger like a flag
and proclaim to the world
that amid troubles that wrap her inside her own eyeballs
my mother keeping with custom recalls she has a daughter

Sister

by Ipatia Apostolides

The family already knew—
everyone had tried to shield you from the inevitable,
giving you hope to last one more year,
to fight the battle one more day, one more hour,
one more minute.

As the clock ticked forward, you used to say,
“I made an arrangement with the cancer.”
That arrangement lasted sixteen years, as you danced,
sang, planted your gardens, laughed joyfully,
and attended chemo sessions.

The clock ticked forward—
your beautiful hair, once lustrous and curly,
became white and fine like a baby’s hair.
Kidney failure was overcome with dialysis,
and we thought there was hope, and so did you.

When your muscles weakened,
your skeleton peeked through.
You could no longer walk, yet you still didn’t give up hope.
You sat up in bed, sipping your soup obediently, like a child,
hoping to get your reward of leaving the hospital.

But when Covid hit suddenly, the doctors placed you
in isolation, just when you needed family the most.
We could not see your face, covered by tubing.
This was a new battle for your ravaged body to fight.
We asked plaintively, *“Why?”*

The time had come.

To leave us, dear loved one.

Those last days,
you kept your eyes shut,
unable or refusing to open them.
The once-healthy sister,
who ran in the Junior Olympics,
the beautician who styled hair,
the mother who raised three sons,
the wife who faithfully built a legacy,
was now in a coma.

Those around your bed voiced their fears, shouting,
“*Mama! Mama!*”
You *heard* them and responded with
tears trickling down your parched face,
determined to communicate one last time.
As you gave your last sigh, perhaps captured by angels
hovering around you, you rose to heights unimaginable.

And the pain that sits the most in my heart is that you *knew*
it was time to part, and that we knew all along,
but you were the last one to find out.

The Spring Storm
by Ipatia Apostolides

An angry wind, more powerful
than Hercules, blew with a mighty force
into our neighborhood—
uninvited terror.
They thought you were a tornado.

I was away on a trip, oblivious to your tempest
burrowing its frenzy through a narrow path
of destruction, like a sonic arrow.
I received information from a concerned neighbor.

When I arrived two days later,
I carefully drove around my neighborhood,
avoiding fallen branches, those bits and pieces of evidence
from your fury, ripped from their homes, pushed by the
storm
with ferocity, ease, and glee,
coating everything
with dust, twigs, and insanity.

As I made my way to my home,
the anxiety mounted.
A truck sat in front of a nearby property,
filled with tree stumps.
It drove away. Yet, how is it my front lawn
was untouched, except for a few strewn branches
that the wind had deposited? I walked gingerly
toward the back, my heart singing with gladness.
But all was not well.

The backyard told another story.

My precious pear trees,
two tall and sturdy beacons of life,
still wearing those delicate velvety blossoms
that promised sweet, succulent fruit for the summer,
had succumbed, like fallen soldiers,
to a mightier power.

Fallen and unable to rise.

Had you shuddered, wept, and yielded
to this merciless force?

Even if I had been there,
I could not have saved you.
I salute you, dear friends—my last goodbye.

Insert 25 Cents to Feel Something
by Diane Helentjaris



After Chris Combs'
Insert 25 Cents to Feel
Something *from a national*
juried exhibition at The
Delaplaine Arts Center,
Frederick, Md. May-July 2025

An ersatz distressed blue metal box,
coin slot,
viewing lens,
the promise of pep, pick up, pain relief for a quarter.

In thirty-one seconds, the artist scissors me out of today
and pastes me into the past.
I am three, watching a '30s Krazy Kat cartoon.
Krazy Kat, black and white, and racist all over.
I'm ashamed he was my favorite.

Intrigued, I repeat the reel and discover the artist
reflected in his electronic sculpture's lens—
along with his cat pictures.
Bony arms, T-shirt, against a backdrop
like the basement of a serial killer—
fluorescent lights, plastic bins on metal shelving,
shoving the tabby aside.

The artist.
He thinks his themes are surveillance, control,
algorithmic bias,

facial recognition, motion sensing.
He embraces and questions technology
or hopes he does.

But I see Crazy Kat
and the idea of buying feelings instead of earning them.
Like hiring an escort
rather than learning your girlfriend's middle name.
Or buying a bigger boat instead of listening to a bird.

I've heard the world repeats itself over and over,
as if God hits the repeat rinse button
on the washing machine
except the clothes never get any cleaner.

I'm fearful it's true.
Krazy Kat is coming back
through this electronic art sculpture.
Despots, oligarchs, autocrats are coming back, too,
and you know who and how.
I worry I won't live long enough
to catch the next cycle.
Am I ripe enough for reincarnation?

April 5, 2025
by Kay White Drew

We're like particles in a physics lab, a Brownian motion of bodies, this play of color, sound, form. Bright T-shirts, boldly lettered. Cardboard rectangles with their mottoes and memes. Roars of sound emanating from the densely packed nucleus in front of the podium. My friends and I are just electrons at the periphery, meandering and weaving as we chat and chant and cheer. The crowd's movement may look aimless, but, in truth, our medium—a common purpose—holds us together, embraces us like children enclosed in a neighborhood playground, making us one vivid, variegated whole.

Morphogenesis *by Kay White Drew*

Is it our biology, something in our genes
or chromosomes that makes us hate? Some
malfunction of morphogenesis, some structural
protein in our brain circuitry gone awry?

Other animals kill. Mainly for food,
sometimes out of malice. But they don't
try to wipe out whole tribes. No
wholesale slaughter. No systematic murder.

Auschwitz, Treblinka, Rwanda, Srebrenica.
And now Gaza, Sudan, and the disappeared—
not from Chile, Argentina, or Russia, but
from our own shores, in cargo planes

where flight attendants are told
to avert their eyes, ignore their captive
passengers. Animals don't other
each other. Only humans do.

Dear Grams, I wish I'd known you

by Kari Martindale

*This poem was written to
a painting by Lily Prigioniero*

I wish I'd known you before your fingers
could no longer operate the Singer in the attic;
before you were too old for bikinis,
before the pouch—

wish I could've helped you select all the pink,
sat next to you inking postcards to soldiers,
watched you dance, heard you sing, known you
when you were allowed
to be fun.

I wish I'd known *The Fun One* wasn't a role you'd rejected,
but one he'd relieved you of, then
self-nominated,
self-appointed,

selfish.

I wish I'd understood the sentence
of being born in that time;
wish I'd known you before your name
became *Wife*.

Executive Disorder

by Kari Martindale

Fewer eggs washed white for sale,
history books white-washed so pale
faces can breathe a sigh of relief
through the chaos and grief—
a Commander-in-Chief

hawking Cybertrucks out on the White House lawn
while teeing up the conditions for Martial Law.

Now he hangs trusted Allies out to dry with his hood
as tariffed goods drain pocketbooks
while Trump hoards wealth and foams at the mouth
for canals and glaciers and shipping routes,

as *we* make way for veterans in every line:
unemployment, VA hospitals, and suicide hotlines.
And coffins land on Dover's strip
while Donald grabs a wedge to chip;

an Administration full of rotten eggs
ignites the fuse to the powder keg;
while Donny plans his big birthday parade
a draft-dodger's charade, to a country betrayed
while secrets drip like cracked-egg yolk—
everyone can see it but some still cry "Hoax!"
and we all endure these treasonable lies
as fist-bump emojis darken the skies
while Four of "Five Eyes" see the egg on our faces
and question the dangers of sharing information;

while bigots share posts seeking millions of dollars

for racist slurs that a white woman Proudly hollers
at a tiny face that has too dark a color;

and white supremacy is revived with glee—
along with feigned morality
as Bathroom Police monitor stalls
and Trans soldiers and airmen take the fall

in the name of purity and modesty,
while children are violated by local clergy
whose congregations worship a sacrilegious dope
who cosplays the recently-departed Pope
as we wonder: Does *anyone* regret their vote?

And on eggshells we've all started to walk
as Brownshirted agents patrol the sidewalks—
they sneak and they stalk,
tasked to quell any talk
of genocide in op-eds or on campus lots.

Tattoos and brown faces
must be put in their places:
El Salvador bases without legal basis
while the White House posts a flurry of memes,
and Redhats thumbs-up this cruel regime
as migrants are crammed onto towers of beds,
no cushions of due process for resting their heads—

Don't settle into thinking *your* head won't be *next*.

Mai Tai Time
by Roderick Deacey

I don't remember why I went outside—
I could have had a reason; I forget.
I seek our supper from the salty tide,
but often there is nothing in my net.

Perhaps I had a reason to forget,
I'm not the great provider I once was,
for often, there is nothing in my net
except a tiny crab that waves its claws.

I'm not the great provider I once was,
I'm much too old to hunt or sow and reap.
The crab is here, still waving tiny claws,
but it's too small for us to cook and eat.

I got too old to hunt or sow or reap—
instead, I use my phone to order food.
Perhaps the crab's too small to cook and eat.
The Thai in town has curried crab—mmm good!

I tried to use my phone to order food—
the line was busy every time I tried.
The menu from our local Thai's TOO good!
We went without—and here I am, outside.

It's Summer Again, Charlie Brown!

by Roderick Deacey

*From "Summer," a relief woodblock, oil ink on paper
by Catherine Rubin, from a national juried exhibition
at The Delaplaine Arts Center, Frederick, Md.
May-July 2025*

Sumer is icumen in—

but we can't hear the cuckoos for cicadas!
This year's plague is red-eyed and stoned
from 17 years of munching tree roots underground.
Billy Collins banned them from poems
but they flew in anyway, lost in a mating haze.
They don't sing, but make their intolerable racket
with tymbals, vibrating membranes
on their hollow tum-tums.

Sticking with nature,
despite our summer birdwatching,
cameras and binoculars from Amazon at the ready,
we still haven't found the three billion birds we lost
sometime in the last 50 years or so.

Never mind, the boys of summer are here,
dancing on the green fields of yesteryear.
They're desperate to turn the clock back
to when baseball was America's national sport,
and everyone huddled around radios,
listening to the games.
Now the boys are swinging torpedoes for attention.

The climate change we're forbidden to mention

means that a hot summer day
is no longer 99 degrees in the shade,
but a scorching 115.
That's way too toasty
for the summer staple of young capitalists.
Your local lemonade stand is done for,
and so is Lucy's psychiatry booth—
too hot AND too sciency.

But never mind the heat—
the waves at the beach are crashing down as usual
and the sand is as yellow as ever.
Dunk yourself in the ocean—
ignore the sharks and jellyfish—
everything will be fine!

At least the county fairs are still with us
with their well-groomed pet cows and sheep,
power-washed pink pigs, and sweating horses and riders,
grunting, as they heave themselves
up and over the old hoof-pocked fences.

At the other end of the fairground,
the calliope plays the same music
that so charmed your great-grandma
and the merry-go-round's carved and painted ponies
go round and round and up and down,
taking you to a magical place
where skies are predictably an infinite blue

and the only cloud around
is trapped on a stick,
disappearing
one sweet bite at a time.



“Summer” by Catherine Rubin

PROSE

My Love Affair with Romance

by Carolyn Pippen

The book that started it all for me was *Outlander* by Diana Gabaldon. I now know this book and its innumerable sequels to be a genuine classic, one of the first modern romance novels from which so many themes, plot points, and classic lines readers are familiar with today have originated. Even now, I can tell you whether the author of the book I'm reading has read and loved *Outlander*, or at least absorbed it by osmosis, based on certain plot points or lines of dialogue.

I didn't know any of that at the time. An introverted middle schooler with an indiscriminate love of all books and far too much time on her hands, I simply pulled it from my stepmother's decorative bookshelf because it seemed interesting and grown-up, and I had nothing else to do.

Outlander is well over 500 pages, and I didn't have nearly the patience to read it front-to-back the first time. I flipped through it, eyes glazing past the large chunks of exposition, historical context, and landscape descriptions, looking for the pages of dialogue that signaled action and plot. I roughly pieced together the story—a woman visiting Scotland accidentally travels back in time, is taken in by a group of highlanders, is conveniently forced to marry the young and handsome clansman she's being flirting with, falls in love with said hero, and faces the challenges of both 18th century and married life alongside him.

I read and reread the love scenes, so much more detailed than the “fade to black” chapters of the YA novels I devoured or the romantic comedies I watched with my friends. I dog-eared the moments of emotional climax—Jamie's explosion of fear and anger after rescuing his new wife from an English prison, Claire deciding to stay in the past and abandon the life she had with her first husband, the two of them battling

the trauma of Jamie's assault to come out the other side, stronger, together. Even more than the sex, which felt so adult and forbidden at the time, the wild and poignant emotions of these moments were so much brighter than I had experienced in my own young and sheltered life.

I can't tell you how many times I read *Outlander*, or exactly when the story sunk its claws into me. Each read was slower and more detailed, and I absorbed more and more of the context even as Claire and Jamie's relationship began to imprint itself on my youthful understanding of love. It was passionate and dramatic, certainly, but also awkward and uncomfortable. There was pain and violence and trauma, all soothed—with no small effort—by unquestioning and unconditional love. They hurt each other and healed each other. It was a fairy tale, but one with enough mess that made it feel almost realistic, almost attainable. With no romantic prospects of my own to speak of, I was happy to let this story stand in the place of personal experience and embody the kind of love and life I wanted for myself, someday.

* * *

Eventually, I branched out and began to seek out any romance novel I could get my hands on. While none of them stacked up to the scale and grandeur I had found in my imagined Scottish highlands, I found the shorter works of Sandra Brown and Nora Roberts got the job done just fine.

At the time, my grandmother had floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in her living room that were filled to the brim with novels. Once I realized that every one of the hundreds of books I had ignored for so many years were romance, Grandma immediately became my unwitting smut dealer. I started by pulling one off the shelf while no one was looking, stashing it in one of the guest bedrooms down the hall, and

sneaking away as often as I could to return to it and read a few chapters at a time. Eventually, I got bolder and began slipping two or three into the backseat of our car while everyone was in the backyard, devouring them in secret at home, then reversing the heist to return the books and grab some more the next time we visited.

As I progressed through high school and obtained both my own funds and means of transportation, my reading habits became less covert, but no less voracious. I read about enemies who became lovers, fake relationships that became real, and jaded career women who became open to the possibility of love. I read about small towns on the Chesapeake, Irish castles steeped in magic and history, and beach resorts run by several generations of the same family. The stories were comfortingly predictable, and the characters were flawed but truly good in the ways that mattered.

As silly as it may feel now to admit, romance novels became the building blocks of my perspective, not just on love, but on life, the world, and my place in it. I was deeply optimistic, doggedly determined to view people and the world in the best light possible. Already uncertain about my views on religion, I held tightly to the idea of faith, believing in things that could not be seen or understood, and trusting in the eternal wisdom of fate and the universe.

I told my British Literature teacher that my long-term career goal was to move to a small town on the Chesapeake Bay and open a store that only sold books with happy endings. I took strength from his exasperated eyeroll, knowing the existence of such cynicism only confirmed the essential nature of my stubborn belief in magic. I enrolled at one of the country's most prestigious colleges to major in creative writing (God bless my parents' own blind faith), placing my wildest dreams far above any kind of pragmatism, even when it came to my education and career. I just knew that

a great life was waiting for me out there, filled with deep emotion and the kind of pain that only exists to be swept away by love and joy. And in that small town waited a man who would find me, challenge me, heal me, and love me until the end of time.

This unfailing faith in the future also acted as an excuse to disengage from the present. I didn't need to put myself out there or make connections with other people, because eventually, they would come to me. It was fine to only pine after the boys I liked from afar, because the right boy would see me by the wall and pull me onto the dance floor. And of course, none of this would happen until after I sorted out my hair, my glasses, my sense of fashion, and my overweight body, anyway.

The magic was coming for me. I just had to be patient.

* * *

Perhaps ironically, what started to change it all is that a boy eventually did pull me onto the dance floor. And for a while, it was magic. He left the girlfriend who didn't understand him the way I did and pushed me up against the wall and kissed me deeply. He sent flirty messages that shot electricity through my veins and showed me what being touched in the dark could feel like. He told me I was beautiful in a way that made me believe it, told me I deserved love and romance and good sex in a way that made me believe it. Until I didn't.

I probably put too much blame on this one man who had the unwitting misfortune of ushering me out of the dim and misty world of magic and into the harsh Kohl's dressing-room lights of reality. That experience proved that some pain doesn't exist only to be washed away by love; some pain is just pain. How could he have known that I didn't already

know that? Does it matter whether or not he did? In any case, it was a lesson learned quickly and well.

I took a more pragmatic approach to dating during this time. Living my life in an unassuming and covertly charming way, hoping someone would take notice and pull me forcefully into a relationship, just didn't seem to be working out. (Besides, once you figure out what that thing in that spot is and what it feels like when someone does the stuff to it, your patience with the passive search for love starts to dwindle.) Luckily, this was around the time online dating was sliding towards the acceptable side of the social zeitgeist, and I took full advantage. I paid my Match.com dues and went on so many first dates that bartenders started to recognize me. Where waiting and wishing had failed me, hard work and perseverance would conquer the day.

And while “conquer” may not be the right word, the “quantity over quality” approach to relationships certainly—erm—got the job done.

Match became Tinder became Bumble, and the next few years were an expedited crash course in mediocre relationships. Some were hilariously tragic one-night-only specials, some were desperately high hopes dashed by miscommunication and immaturity, and at least one was a genuine friendship doomed by really good dick and the misplaced emotional expectations that come along with it. It was all somehow both better and worse than I had imagined it would be.

What I didn't do during these years of relentless goal-setting and pragmatic strategizing was read. Having leapt into a career in education (a well-timed financial crisis gave me the excuse I needed not to pursue an unlikely and unstable career in the literary world), every moment not spent counting calories or serial dating were poured into my work. The space in my mind and heart where my imagination

used to live was taken up by professional development and intellectual growth. Who needed an imaginary world anyway, when I was out there soaking up the real world and racking up life experiences like video game points, leveling up every chance I got?

* * *

There is a population of people—fervent introverts who were lucky enough not to be touched by the ravages of the coronavirus—who may be too ashamed to tell you that those months of quarantine were among the best of our lives. Freed from the everyday stresses of my physical workspace, the guilt-laden moral pressure to attend the gym regularly, and the default assumption that a heavy percentage of my time should be spent at bars and coffee shops searching for the man who would complete me, I was gifted the time and space to reconsider where I was going and why (if) I even wanted to go there.

The first thing I noticed was that, aside from the obnoxious and overwhelming desire to hump anything that moved for the two days every month that my body demanded a sperm deposit, I did not miss dating in the least. I did not miss the awkward conversations, the repetitive interrogations, the clumsy innuendos, the “so what are you looking for?”s and the “why are you still single?”s and the “do you happen to have a picture of your whole body?”s. I certainly didn’t miss the sub-par sex, nor the super-par sex that inevitably led to swift and brutal emotional disappointment.

I was finally forced to acknowledge how let down I truly was by the entire endeavor, and if the alternative was spending my life in my pajamas drinking boxed wine and bingeing *The West Wing* with my dog curled up at my feet, then was that really any kind of punishment at all?

Of course, after Barlet returned to his farm in New Hampshire and the Bota Box was empty, I joined the ranks of upper-middle-class millennial women jonesing from the sudden withdrawal of overwork and delved into the world of hobbies. I didn't learn the art of sourdough, but I did knit a scarf, paint several of my walls, and buy a used keyboard off Craigslist. Most importantly, I signed up for the Book of the Month club and set an intention to begin reading again for pleasure—a hobby I vaguely remembered to have been enjoyable in a former life.

Along with my mother and a group of similarly intellectually curious friends, I reacquainted myself with the written word. I rarely touched novels—and certainly no romances, heaven forbid—as I wanted to be challenged, to learn something new and interesting that might help me to evolve into a better version of myself. Every book had a purpose, and a successful reading experience was one in which some piece of the work embedded itself into my ever-refining identity.

Glennon Doyle taught me to trust my Knowing. CJ Hauser taught me to love my own story. Jess Zimmerman taught me about the joy of being a monster. Tara Mohr taught me how to make big, fast, and true decisions. Lulu Miller taught me to break the mold inside which my worldview had developed. Samantha Irby taught me the intellectual value of laughter. Laura Thomas taught me to eat whatever the fuck I want.

Over time, these books began replacing the voices in my head that had been telling me where to go, regardless of whether I cared about the destination or would have any kind of fun getting there. I quit my job—again. I threw away my bathroom scale. I found a new therapist and started taking Lexapro. I redownloaded the Duolingo app and spent a week exploring Barcelona on my own. I founded a

consulting company that almost immediately went down in a blaze of glory. I packed up my life and moved to a city on the Chesapeake. I signed up for an improv class. I began to write again.

Piece by piece, these women and their words started to rebuild a version of me I recognized, a version I not only admired but truly enjoyed. I was on my way back to myself.

* * *

Around the same time I fled to the Bay, a dear friend of mine made a big move of her own, enrolling in a graduate program at the University of Edinburgh. Not one to pass up free lodgings in a beautiful city, I immediately planned a trip to visit her the following spring.

Every once in a while, there will be an experience or a place or a moment that...try as I might, I can't find the right term for it. Takes my breath away? Speaks to my soul? Brings me deep joy? None of those feel right, or enough. But I think you know what I'm talking about. Those moments when you know you're where you're supposed to be, experiencing something that pushes you toward a better, more joyful, truer version of your own life.

Sitting on a hill overlooking the Parthenon and the Nashville skyline on a summer night. Seeing the GooGoo Dolls perform live decades after their songs dominated the radio. Sailing across the inner harbor in Baltimore. Sitting in front of a bonfire next to a boy I like, who I think likes me, too. I don't always recognize these moments when I have them, but I always remember them and how they made me feel. Like I've done something deeply right, like this is what life is all about, like true peace.

My trip to Scotland was ten days straight of such perfect moments. I walked up and down the Royal Mile of Edinburgh,

listening to the bagpipes and sipping on scotch in a misting rain that was somehow more romantic than dampening. I sat on the back porch of a cottage in the highlands and watched the northern lights. I floated across Loch Katrine and saw the mountains that inspired Schubert to write “Ave Maria.” And though I never would have admitted it out loud, the ghosts and Claire and Jamie Fraser were with me throughout. Even though I’d never set foot in Scotland before, my heart recognized it as the place I learned what love could be, for those brave enough to dream.

I had spent the last few months wondering if romantic notions had a place in my life, and the universe responded by grabbing my soul by the balls and yelling STOP. LOOK. THIS. It felt like relief, like permission, like maybe magic and reality weren’t so irreconcilable after all. I all but heard the turn of the key, and a part of myself I had locked away for 20 years stepped back into the sun, yawning joyfully and stretching her arms towards the sky. She took a deep breath, and my shoulders dropped.

For the first time in my adult life, I ended a trip not fully ready to return home, the allure of the Scottish countryside stronger—though just barely—than that of my couch back in Baltimore. But I fought the jet lag and ordered the groceries and walked the dog, glaring resentfully at the skyscraper that wasn’t a castle and the bay that wasn’t a loch. But it’s been a few months now, and I can still hear the bagpipes, see the misty gray skies, feel that shimmering warmth somewhere deep in my chest.

I don’t know what all of this means for me moving forward. I don’t yet know how to let myself indulge in multi-hour flights of fancy while acknowledging those impulses as a symptom of neurodivergence. I don’t know how to be an independent, self-assured woman and admit that I long for a handsome man to sweep me off my feet. I don’t know how to

keep one foot in the world my imagination creates and the other in this vibrant, challenging, imperfect reality of which I still have so much to explore. But I know I'm ready to try, and I think that might just be enough.

A Bow-Tied Snowman Makes for Good Business

by Stephen Demczuk

I own and operate La Shoppe de Cravate. You got it! It's a store that specializes in ties and everything related to them. As you might expect, my business has struggled lately. Ties, neckties, bow ties, turtlenecks, and even scarves—anything worn around or near the neck—is no longer in vogue.

This past winter was snowy, and the forecast suggested the snow would continue into late spring. Even for a New England town in northern Vermont, this was unusual.

Well, the snow kept piling up. Day after day, it just kept snowing. I shoveled the frozen white stuff seemingly every day. I was getting tired of merely pushing it to the side. One day, I had a brilliant idea, which happens every so often. I decided to make a snowman. A big, fat, jolly snowman. I positioned him in front of the entrance to the shop. For his nose, I inserted a carrot, buttons for his eyes, and Twizzlers for his rosy-red lips.

I found a 4X-sized vest at a flea market and wrapped it around his plump chest. My store supplied a big, bright red bow tie, making my snowman look spiffy. I named him Herman. Herman had a wonderful, pleasant look and was quite snappy in appearance. His bow tie stood out, and he was attractive. Admittedly, I was the proud, doting papa of a snowman and had done a fine job sculpting Herman.

The townsfolk also seemed to like my Herman. He became the talk of the town. Foot traffic increased around and inside my store—sales did, too.

It continued to snow, keeping Herman both physically fit and overweight.

But guess what? Herman got a mate. A deep, late-winter's snow gave birth to Alice. She was positioned opposite Herman on the other side of the store's entrance.

Alice sported a bow tie made of bright-colored flowers and a red scarf. She wore a mop for a hairpiece. Several strings of colorful Mardi Gras beads were draped around her neck, and a pink, flowery brooch was pinned to her upper chest. Red rubber bands served as her earrings.

They were the guardians of the cravats. Herman held a shovel, and Alice a broom. With pleasant smiles, they greeted all passersby. Selfies were taken with Alice and Herman, and store traffic picked up even more. Sales continued to increase. People in town once again wore ties and bow ties. I purchased additional inventory, and sales kept growing.

I was amazed by what a snowman and snowwoman could do for business. But all good things eventually come to an end. Temperatures climbed, and with the sunny skies, spring arrived. The warm days of spring came in strong and, all too soon, Herman and Alice became wet memories, running along the sidewalk and into the street.

Store traffic slowed, along with sales, and business returned to normal once again. However, if I learned one thing from all this, it was that selling ties and bow ties has become seasonal.

New Mien Girl

by Jon Ketzner

*This work is an expansion of a writer's prompt
from MWA's Notable Maryland Author Program*

Donna enjoyed first day at a new school, in this case, Parkton Junior High School. A military brat, she knew the drill.

She drifted to the desk beside the cutest boy in class. Then, her most impish smile.

Introducing herself, Donna rose.

“Hi, I’m Donna Murl. I’m fourteen, funny, loyal, and nice.”

She faced the girl she’d identified as queen-bee.

“I can be fierce. My advice: get to know the funny, loyal, nice Donna.”

Donna sat.

“I love first days.”

CHAPTER I: FIRST DAY

Maryland assigned eighth graders to homerooms matching the relative brainpan sizes of students. Donna was placed in 8A, the smart kids.

Schooldays comprised 50-minute classes, unfortunately called “periods” in a school of pubescent smartasses. Before lunch, Donna attended algebra, French, and science classes, sitting always near that cutest boy, Dave Somebody.

Lunch fell in a tumultuous cafeteria, that reeked of lousy food and had terrible acoustics. The queen-bee (named MaryLou, naturally) reigned at the table’s end, beside David Somebody. Nice, nerdy Cindy sat to Donna’s left. To her right plopped, determinedly, a strange duck, Larry Lessard.

Donna grasped in just three class-sharings that Lessard

was a moron. He dressed okay, standard Joe College garb. He wore a snarky smugness like a bad haircut. Even teachers seemed repelled by Larry Lessard. “Hi, new girl, gotta name?”

“Were you asleep in homeroom?”

“I was reading.”

“I’m Donna.”

“I’m Lawrence Lessard. People call me Larry. I don’t like it.”

“Larry. You’ll have to earn Lawrence with me.”

“Crap, you’re snobby like those other cute girls, aren’t you? I was hoping not.”

“We’ll see, Larry.”

Lessard brought lunch in a paper bag. Cafeteria food lay beneath him. To be fair, beneath all primates. Larry went to fetch milk from the hairnet ladies.

Then: The Incident.

As Larry disappeared, a stocky brute, Guy Somebody, leveraging his big paw and formidable upper-body strength, pounded Lessard’s bag lunch hand-rag flat. An impressive display of strength, determination, and social commentary.

Returning, Larry surveyed the affrontery and flew, no better word, to Vice-Principal Carl Darnaby, the professional educator charged with keeping cafeteria tumult below riot level. Darnaby cast cold eyes at table 8A, the smart kids. Under Darnaby’s menacing regard, Guy maintained the countenance of St. Teresa of Avila.

Darnaby denied the 8A table post-lunch activity and initiated an investigation. Lessard named proximate suspects. Donna made the list.

Mr. Darnaby summoned each suspect, individually, to face interrogation in his office. Donna testified last. Darnaby, a 54 husky who comically wore 38 regular sport coats, perched precariously on his desk.

“Sit down, Murl. You’re involved in this incident on your first day. We expected more from you.”

Donna's father was a Marine Military Police Officer. She'd been interrogated for mischief by an expert. Carl Darnaby was no expert.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Darnaby, have you a question?"

Darnaby curled his lip, more comic relief.

"Did you destroy Lawrence Lessard's lunch? Or tell me who did."

Donna shrugged.

"Sir, today's my first day. I didn't destroy Larry's lunch. His bag had an apple. I'm strong but I'm not apple-squashing strong."

"Who then? Was it Hall? Say Hall did it."

"Sir, I'd been here four hours. The only person's name I'm sure of is Larry Lessard. Because he's...special. I certainly can't just spit out some name."

"You damn juvenile delinquents. Somebody better spit out a name. I'm giving you all two weeks' detention. Nobody spits out a name by then—two more weeks."

"Sir, my father's a colonel, a United States Marines Military Police Officer. He golfs with the governor. He's proud and protective. When he hears I received two weeks' detention my first day, I'm sure he'll be stopping by tomorrow."

"Let him. I'm the colonel here."

"When he hears you called me a juvenile delinquent, he'll probably stop by your house tonight."

Carl Darnaby sneered at Donna Murl. He pursed his lips impatiently.

"Get back to class, Murl."

"Thank you, sir. Where's the art hall?"

The Incident remained unsolved. Nobody received detention. Larry Lessard shortly moved to Florida.

CHAPTER II: "DON'T TOUCH ME!"

Next day, chilliness forced post-lunch activity into the gym. Kids occupied bleachers, some shot basketballs. Donna sat with Cindy and a pretty girl, Marcie.

MaryLou reigned, at the far bleachers, over her court of sycophants. Donna ignored them. Guy, cute Dave, and a third boy appeared before Donna. She smiled.

"Hello, boys."

Guy led. The others seemed neither intimidated nor uncomfortable around the bigger boy.

"Hello Donna Murl. We haven't met. I'm Guy Hall."

"Hi. I'm Dave Greenslit."

"I'm Benny Wagner."

Donna goofed. Benny Wagner was the one. MaryLou could have Dave.

"Shouldn't you cool guys be with MaryLou? I could get into trouble with the boss."

Guy laughed. He sat beside Donna. An impressed Marcie scooted to accommodate his big-boyness.

"My aunt works in the office. Darnaby doesn't even realize that. She told my mom about Lessard's lunch. How the new girl kneecapped Darnaby, saved my ass. The other kids stood up, but you could've rolled over on me. You're cool, Donna Murl."

"I think I lost my shot with Larry."

The boys laughed and returned to playing HORSE. Marcie punched Donna's leg.

"You! Second day and you're already cool to the coolest boys in class. I like Guy. Lots. He could be a bully, but really, he's sweet."

"He was a bully to Lessard's lunch yesterday."

"That doesn't count. Gross Larry Lessard. That lunch was luckier getting squished by big Guy than ending up in

Lessard. Speaking of big, here comes Dot.”

A butterball wanna-be from MaryLou’s court bee-lined toward Donna, Cindy, and Marcie. Dropping anchor in front of Donna.

“Hello. You’re Dot. Glad to meet you. You’re not in 8A. I’m Donna.”

Taken aback by Donna’s greeting, Dot seemed knocked akilter. She recovered.

“Not glad to meet you. Gimme your lunch money or you won’t like what happens after school.”

Donna grinned, perplexed.

“What did you say?”

“Give ME your lunch money.”

Donna stood. She towered over Dot.

“Dot. It’s after lunch. We ate lunch, remember? You should’ve robbed me before lunch. Not that you would’ve gotten it. But that’s how it works.”

Donna started toward MaryLou and her posse.

“C’mon Dot, let’s go see the queen.”

Cindy and Marcie fell in behind Donna and Dot. MaryLou had not expected this confrontation. She smiled at the approaching group, but her eyes flickered uncertainly.

“MaryLou. We’ve not met. I’m Donna Murl.”

“Don’t want to meet you, Donna Mule.”

Her troops laughed with MaryLou.

“Murl, bitch. Next time you send Lunchpail here to steal my money, I’m going to wipe the floor with her. Then I’m looking for you to kick out your front teeth. Take care.”

During the remainder of the school day, Donna met her new classmates. A reputation for “kneecapping” both Mr. Darnaby and MaryLou in her first two days gave her quick hall cred.

After school, Donna checked on intramural sports for eighth-grade girls.

In the gym, six 8A classmates played three-on-three,

half-court basketball. Marcie played and was good. The best player, and leader, was MaryLou. She impressed Donna.

The other practicing homerooms all fielded more than six players. The 8A team needed depth. Donna wondered if the MaryLou dynamic caused their short team. She'd ask Marcie.

Despite few numbers, 8A played well. MaryLou captained great. She was a fine dribbler but did not ball-hog.

Donna shrugged.

"Maybe I'm wrong about MaryLou."

Donna spent another hour touring Parkton. Getting her bearings.

As Donna started the short walk home in the fading daylight, she noticed a few elderly ninth graders drove to school. They parked on the street. Not every kid at Parkton Junior was 8A material.

Donna's folks bought a home in Cider Mill, an area separated from Parkton Junior by Triple Rock Park, a respite from suburban sprawl, with walking trails, ballfields, picnic tables, and a clear creek.

Donna and her older brother Kirk had not yet explored the park.

Donna kept to the sidewalk abutting the street frontage of Triple Rock Park. Typically, only wood noises came from the park. This day she heard males laughing and loud, taunting voices. And she heard MaryLou.

"Stop. Don't. Leave me alone"

Donna started down a path. She retrieved a sturdy branch, someone's improvised walking stick dropped at the trailhead. Fifty yards in, she saw three jerks, about Kirk's age of seventeen, surrounding a distraught MaryLou. They shoved her, groping and touching her.

"Stop it. Don't touch me. Leave me alone."

MaryLou sobbed.

Her three assailants dressed like greasers, with fifty-ish,

duck-tail haircuts. Denim-clad, toe-booted cretins.

Donna stealthily stepped behind the nearest thug, the biggest, and whacked the back of his jeaned thighs with her cudgel. He dropped to his knees.

“Goddamnit. What the eff was that?”

Donna dashed around the wounded scumbag, grabbed MaryLou and started backing them both from Triple Rock.

The two thug wingmen seemed uncertain tactically, as their leader tried to regain his feet.

“Grab those bitches. We’ll double our pleasure.”

Donna, in full Marine daughter warrior mode, raised her weapon.

“You jackasses back off. You’d better like hospital food.”

The lead punk stepped forward with a noticeable limp.

“We’re going to eat alright. Two Parkton bitches on the menu.”

Donna and MaryLou backed up the trail, toward the street. Once there, they’d run. Donna held her staff bojutsu high, not baseball-bat style. She’d been around martial arts her entire life.

“You two honeys ain’t leaving. You’re coming to a party.”

“Can we come too?”

Five sets of eyes peered up trail. Two men, one young, one older, removed windbreakers. Both wore olive green Marine tees. Those T-shirts strained, containing granite pecs and washboard abs.

Donna grinned as the greasers bolted through the woods.

“Hi, Daddy.”

CHAPTER III: ML

Colonel John Murl and his son, Kirk, rezipped their windbreakers. Donna gave her father an account, assured him she was fine. Colonel Murl stooped, peering into Donna’s

eyes. He saw she was okay, smiled, kissed her forehead.

MaryLou, on a bench at the trailhead, quietly wept.

Colonel Murl knelt before MaryLou, lifted her chin.

“MaryLou. You’re safe. What happened? I’m a policeman.”

MaryLou looked at Donna’s dad and the other man, boy, clearly Donna’s brother. And drop-dead gorgeous. She smiled for the first time. Kirk winked.

“Hello, MaryLou. Like the song. You’re safe now. Tell my dad what happened.”

“I’m walking home from basketball practice. I live in Cider Mill, too. That car pulls up, and those creeps jump out and drag me into the park. They start pushing, pinching, groping, and touching me.”

MaryLou bubbled again. Colonel Murl offered his handkerchief.

“That’s their car?”

“Yes, Mr. Murl.”

“Donna, get that license plate number. Kirk, use your Swiss knife. Flatten the tires. Don’t puncture, though Hell knows those bastards deserve it. Drain ‘em with the valve stem.”

Donna scribbled the license info, noted that the window had Hamilton High decals.

MaryLou recovered. She smiled at Kirk, not her 1,500-candlepower blazer, but close.

“We’ll take you home, MaryLou. Can you walk? Should we get the car?”

“I’ll walk, Mr. Murl. How did you know we needed you?”

“Donna wasn’t home, so Kirk and I took a stroll. We guessed she’d stayed after to play ball or something. Nice afternoon...evening...for a walk. “

Kirk smiled at Donna.

“Lucky, we got here in time to save those jerks’ lives. I mean ‘jackasses.’ We’ll have to fix that when we tell Mom about this adventure. You would’ve killed those jackasses.”

Donna punched Kirk in the gut.

“Lotta jackasses around here.”

MaryLou lived close to the Murls. A lumpy, sullen teenage boy opened the door. He recognized Kirk.

“Hey, you’re the new guy.”

MaryLou introduced her brother Phil Lancaster. Colonel Murl wanted to speak to her parents. She shrugged.

“My mom passed about five years ago. Leukemia. Dad’s probably at the Emerald Inn drinking his dinner. Phil and I’ll go later, get a cheesesteak or something, bring my father home. Sorry.”

John Murl nodded.

“I’ll catch him soon. I’ll talk to the police. They’ll easily find those bastards. Since nobody was really hurt, they probably won’t file charges. The police’ll make sure they don’t come around anymore. You’ll be fine.”

“Thank you, Mr. Murl. And Kirk.”

MaryLou faced Donna.

“Thanks, Donna. I’ve been a bitch. I didn’t think you could knock my teeth out. Now I know you could. Easy. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, MaryLou Lancaster.”

* * *

Next morning, Donna smiled at MaryLou. MaryLou returned the smile. Their eye contact lingered a beat.

Donna sat in front of a feverishly writing boy.

“Hello, Benny Wagner.”

The boy grinned.

“Hello, Donna, slayer of Darnaby’s and snob girls.”

“What are you doing, Wags?”

“Wags, you say. Okay. I’m writing a spy story. I need a

password so my hero can identify his contact in Amsterdam. Got one?"

"How about... 'my uncle is sick' and the contact says, 'but the road is green?'"

"Excellent, Slayer... it's in."

Donna returned to her desk beside David Greenslit, the second cutest boy in 8A.

At lunch, Donna sat with Cindy and Marcie. MaryLou ate down table with her troops. Guy, David, and Benny joined Donna's trio.

"Marcie, what's with the intramural basketball thingy? I watched you practice yesterday. You looked good."

"We're good. MaryLou's very good. Rest of us are clunky."

"Not true. You knew what you were doing."

"Thanks. We've only six girls, five sometimes if Eileen bails. Once we played with just four."

"That's tough, Marcie."

"We usually win. We never beat 8D. We play them today. If we win, which won't happen, we'll play them again tomorrow for the championship. If they win, they're the champs again."

"Who picked the team?"

"Oh, any girl in 8A can play. Most girls don't want to. They want to cheerlead in high school."

"Do you have uniforms?"

"Nah, we wear a red or white bib over our gym suit."

"I'll watch your game today."

"Having a fan would be nice."

After school, Donna sat in the bleachers. The 8A team had just five players. The 8D team, ten players.

"Oh, my," thought Donna.

The game featured missed shots and jump balls. A gym teacher reffed. The first quarter score tied at 8-8. MaryLou scored six points, Marcie two. An 8A girl, Teresa, twisted her ankle as the clock buzzed.

Teresa was out. Donna did the math. She hustled to the locker room and changed into her gym suit.

The four remaining 8A girls squared off against five from 8D. Donna shouted.

“Whoa. I’m here.”

Donna guarded the unattended 8D player. The gym teacher nodded.

“Good girl, Murl.”

MaryLou mouthed “Thank you.”

Donna played co-ed basketball against military kids, and one-on-one against her huge brother. Kirk joked she played “kung-fu ball” because of her aggressive style.

MaryLou won the jump. The ball came to Donna, who dribbled down the court. Donna passed MaryLou the ball and picked MaryLou’s defender. MaryLou, open, popped a two-handed set shot.

At halftime, 8A led 20-19. Both MaryLou and Donna scored six in the second quarter. By the end of the third quarter, 8D took the lead 30-27.

In the fourth quarter, the teams traded three baskets. With one minute remaining, 8A controlled the ball. Marcie sank a shot, making the score 36-35, favor of 8D.

Donna had watched the 8D team inbound, knew their tendency. She intercepted the inbound pass. Both teams regrouped under the 8D basket. Donna controlled the ball with her back to the net, blocked by her defender.

With seconds remaining, Donna yelled.

“ML, break.”

MaryLou broke through the key. Donna, without looking, reversed bounced passed the ball through her defender’s legs. MaryLou smoothly received the pass and made a lay-up.

Buzzer. Final score, 8A-37, 8D-36. See you tomorrow 8D.

The 8A girls hugged. Miss Grice, the ref, congratulated the team on a fine game.

Marylou hugged Donna, cocked an eyebrow.

“ML?”

“You love it.”

“I kinda love it. ‘MaryLou’ is such a cliché.”

Kirk stood at the gym door, applauding and smiling.

“Murl the Pearl, nice pass.”

Donna winked at ML.

“Our bodyguard is here.”

EPILOGUE

Donna and ML became excellent friends. ML loved that Donna’s deadpan confidence far out-cooled queen-beeing.

In high school, ML had Donna’s back. She knew Donna had hers. To ML’s frustration, Kirk treated her like another kid sister. ML became a star athlete at Parktown High, All-County in basketball and lacrosse.

Late in the summer before their senior year, ML and Donna played the Avalon Hill game “Midway” with Kirk, who was home from the Naval Academy.

Afterward, Kirk wanted to walk to Triple Rock Park.

Donna demurred.

“You guys go. I’m hopping in the shower.”

Donna winked at Kirk.

Walking through the park, ML told Kirk that her brother dropped out of Maryland and was goofing off, getting fat. Her dad, though, was well, dating a nice woman.

“That’s great, ML. About your dad, I mean.”

“Thanks, Kirk.”

“So, ML, you and Donna are soon seniors. Do you need a date for the senior prom or the Christmas dance or the Army-Navy game? I could take you.”

ML stared into Kirk’s grin.

“Are you asking for a date?”

“Here’s the thing...I want you as my date to my Second-Class Ring Dance next May. I thought we should have a practice date, or ten, before then.”

“You’re asking me to the Naval Academy Ring Dance?”

“If you want to go.”

ML shook her head, eyes moistening.

“I’ve dreamed of this since you, your father, and Donna rescued my eighth-grade ass right over there. I don’t know what to say.”

“Easy! Say yes.”

“Yes.”

Kirk grinned and kissed ML, not like a little sister is supposed to be kissed. They broke apart smiling.

“Did Donna know you were going to ask me out? Is that why she suddenly needed a shower?”

“Maybe...you’re very pretty, you know.”

* * *

Oh...8A crushed 8D in the championship game.

Peculiarly Pink
by Greg Rosenthal

This is a drabble, a form of micro-fiction that is exactly 100 words and must contain characters, a setting, and a plot with conflict and resolution.

“Hey, Pinkleplum, you’re the pinkest octopus I’ve ever seen in the whole South Pacific,” mocked Prickly the pufferfish. “I’m shocked that a predator hasn’t gotten you yet!”

“Predators? Prickly, I eat predators for snacks,” said Pinkleplum. “Try and chase me, and I’ll show you my trick!”

Pinkleplum squirted off. Prickly swished his fins madly in pursuit. He followed Pinkleplum into a deep and narrow cave. A pink hue—the same as Pinkleplum’s skin—coated the interior.

“Where are you?” Prickly called.

No answer.

Suddenly, a cloud of pink ink enveloped Prickly. Tentacles soon surrounded him, pulling him into the octopus’s hungry mouth.

The Last Supper

by Donna R. Ferron

*now i lay me down to sleep
i pray the lord my soul to keep*

#

It was time for lunch. Today, like yesterday, could be the last day that Payne would prepare a meal for her dying husband.

Rick had last eaten solid food a month ago; a few bites before lifting his hand to stop hers from putting the fork to his mouth again. His long fingers, once able to lovingly stroke her cheek before sliding around and under her hair to grip her neck and pull her into a kiss, became fragile, the skin nearly transparent, the weight of the bones seemingly weighing them down, so he was barely able to lift them from where they rested on the blanket.

After a few bits of steak, he had slowly moved his head from side to side, his grey eyes boring into hers. Several teeth had come loose before he gave up. He watched the plate as Payne set it aside on the table next to the rented hospital bed. She cupped her hand, placed it lightly under his bottom lip. He looked up at her; sadness, frustration, and grief swam in his tears. She smiled gently.

“Come on.”

Rick had used his tongue to push the first, then the second tooth through his lips. Each tooth hung briefly, stuck to his lip by saliva as if reluctant to separate itself from its rightful place or possibly saying its last goodbye, before falling into her hand. The piece of steak followed. A week later, his remaining teeth could no longer be counted on to do the one job they had.

She then began feeding him soft foods like applesauce and yogurt. By then, he could only turn his head, barely, when

he had enough. Today, though, his cancer had progressed so that he only took in the drugs used to keep him comfortable. A “comfort package,” the hospice nurse said it was called. The prochlorperazine helped his nausea, the lorazepam kept him calm, and the morphine eased the pain. She gave him lorazepam when he became anxious, but stopped when he no longer recognized her or his surroundings.

On her way to the kitchen Payne paused and turned her head to look at the far wall of the living room. Her mother Viola’s high school senior portrait hung above Viola’s piano. Her mother had first walked down the aisle when she married Payne’s father, because she played either the organ or piano for graduations, ceremonies, church services, and weddings. Payne didn’t play piano, but two years after her mother’s death, still kept it tuned.

The Black church had been an important part of her family history. But like a once-vivid painting unprotected from the sunlight, religion faded over the generations until it all but disappeared, except as an academic exercise. Her great-grandfather, a bishop, had been in charge of some 500 churches on the east coast; his wife comfortably assumed the life of one married to church royalty. Her grandfather, a deacon, attended church mostly to scope out the women in the congregation; his wife, who would become a victim of early dementia, sat blindly in the pews each Sunday—silent acceptance of the second family her husband kept in the row house across the street. Her mother played the piano and organ each Sunday until she married and moved out of the city; her father later helped her retrieve his alcoholic father-in-law when he tried to board an airplane without a ticket and offered support when she had to move his mother-in-law into a nursing home. Payne remembered when she stopped praying. She was 15 years old and had been in bed one summer night when she decided that religion was a

crutch that she didn't need. Except for funerals, she rarely stepped foot in a church after that point.

Her parents didn't quite make their 50th wedding anniversary before her father's cancer diagnosis. Viola fulfilled her promise to take care of her husband in this house that they had built together. The house was more his dream than hers. Viola's heart remained in South Philadelphia, where they had both grown up. As a young bride of 21, Viola's grandmother had advised her to buy a fixer-upper house to keep her husband from getting bored, and then to move every eight years to another house he could restore. Three houses later, she hadn't planned on him planting his feet into the soil of a wooded lot in the middle of the country...and refusing to budge. He died 30 years later in the same bedroom where Payne would become her mother's primary caregiver after she entered hospice, and where she and Rick would then sleep for their remaining time together. Rick now slept in the rented hospital bed in that bedroom. Like her father. Then like her mother.

Payne walked across the hardwood floor of the living room to the piano. She moved aside a pile of music, from the challenging notes of Chopin to *66 Great Love Songs*, to sit on the bare wood bench and stare up at a black-and-white photograph. Her mother's teenage eyes looked off into her future with a dreamy half smile, the obligatory pearls around her throat, the black V-neck top, and the same hairstyle she'd have throughout her life.

Payne looked at her own high school senior picture to the right of her mother's. Her picture was smaller and in color. The photographer had touched up the discoloration on her cheek that her makeup didn't completely hide. She remembered how her mother had to bribe her to get the pictures taken. After being the only black student in the rural school district, Payne just wanted out. She had not been

interested in reminders and never attended the reunions. She also wore pearls above a black V-neck. That, at least, never changed, but her future was going to be quite different.

To the left of her mother was Payne's niece's picture, now in her 20s and starting out on her own path. Payne shook her head. More than 40 years later, high school graduates were still wearing those same costumes. Payne and Rick had chosen not to have children. She didn't regret the decision, and had thought hard about how to deal with her own death when that time came. She was resolved.

She looked back at the larger of the three pictures. Her eyes filled with tears and memories.

"I eventually realized just how bad a cook you were, Mom."

You didn't starve. She imagined her mother replying with her typical eyeroll.

Her mother's cooking was, in fact, not terrible, just mediocre. Payne, on the other hand, loved to cook, as long as it wasn't expected of her. She started baking bread in high school. It didn't take long to discover how much the kneading process calmed her. How her anxiety receded, and the answers usually fell into place as she leaned her weight into the dough, folded the dough over on itself, leaned into it, and folded it again and again until it was smooth and ready to be formed into a ball to rise. The more upset Payne was, the more loaves covered the kitchen table. One day, her parents came home to find bread on every flat surface.

"Uh-oh. What happened?" Her father had asked, smelling the yeasty air as soon as they walked through the front door. He entered the kitchen, his eyes widening at the quantity.

#

It had been a long time since Payne had gone on a bread-

baking frenzy, but last week the hospice nurse pointed out the darkness creeping up Rick's legs and fingers. His body was shutting down, beginning at the points farthest from his weakening heart.

"He probably has less than a week," the nurse said quietly. "Would you like me to ask the chaplain to come by?"

"No." She remembered her manners. "Thank you."

She gave all but one loaf to her neighbors.

Now, still sitting on the piano bench, Payne thought of the first and last time Rick had made a meal. She had sat in his townhouse kitchen soon after they'd met and watched, inwardly cringing, as he opened a can of asparagus. From that point on, she cooked their meals.

"I'm a consumer not a producer," he would tell her throughout their decades together. She was happy with that, as long as he didn't expect her to have a meal on the table every night. Rick always expressed his gratitude for what was set in front of him. She was happy to do it as long as it didn't become a chore.

"Your love on a plate," he had told her each time she set a plate in front of him. He even said it one Valentine's Day, when she attempted *Spezzatino di Manzo al Cioccolato*. Beef. Check. Dark chocolate. Check. Together? It was either beyond her skill level, or her palate wasn't as sophisticated as she thought.

Payne's mother once told her that she had learned to cook so the family wouldn't starve. Her mother quickly discovered that her husband had only one dish, what they called "shit on a shingle" in the military: creamed chipped beef over toast. Her father expanded his culinary repertoire by learning how to make browned ground beef spooned over mashed potatoes. Rick learned how to remove the shells from hard-boiled eggs like a champ.

#

Payne vaguely remembered her grandmother but knew that she had suffered from Alzheimer's, back when it was first discovered as a form of dementia.

"Mom, I wish I had asked you if you had any regrets about the way you took care of Grandmom and Grandpop." She shifted on the bench, glanced up at the photo and then looked out the window and across the front lawn. Leaves fell like snow, as new spring growth pushed out the old.

"From what you told me, the past few years and the documents I found in your papers after you died, I think you did the best that you could with an alcoholic father and a mother with Alzheimer's."

You wouldn't remember when your grandmother lived with us. I tried to keep her at our house, but one day I came home early from work and discovered her bent over you, holding a pillow to your head. I had to take her away. Payne thought of that conversation while she sat on her mother's piano bench. At the time, it was a shock.

"I hope I did OK by you. I tried to make sure you were comfortable. I followed the checklist you gave me." The checklist had let her know who to call, what agency to notify, what bills to pay, and everything Payne needed to do. She felt fortunate that her mother's mind remained sharp until death began closing in, to the world around her, to her daughter. She looked through the glass at her mother, and into the more recent past.

#

"I can go get Kevin and take him up to see your mother."

"What?"

"I think she'll like that."

“Kevin can’t get up the stairs. His legs...”

“I’ll get him up the stairs.”

“Maybe seeing Kevin will help.” Ed, her neighbor, had buttoned the last button and shoved his hands into the pockets of his faded work jacket.

Seeing Kevin could cause her mother’s heart to give out and—her mind refused to bring the word die to the surface. Her mother was in hospice care. Payne wasn’t ready to let go. She certainly didn’t want Kevin to be the cause.

She turned her back on Ed, looked at the two-story house, then down towards the pond where, as a child, she’d skated across bumpy, frozen water. She ticked off memories.

Puppies.

Babies.

Weddings.

Breakups.

Deaths.

Memorials.

She stared at the rhododendron below her mother’s bedroom window, faded pink petals scattered on the concrete walkway. Her brother, a 60-year-old alcoholic, who could barely walk due to his own poor choices, had been the shining star of the family. The adventurer caused awe and breathless anticipation among the cousins who eagerly awaited news after he left his East Coast college, like John Williams’ character William Andrews in *Butcher’s Crossing*. Like Andrews, he headed west, hitchhiking beyond Colorado to Alaska, to search for...something. Unlike Andrews, the mists of mental illness gradually extinguished the starlight. Inspiration died in the bottle. Her brother now lived less than 20 minutes away and had yet to visit their dying mother.

Viola had listened to the commotion on the stairs, the muffled sound of a heavy foot landing on the bare oak. She heard grunts and deep breaths.

Viola's eyelids drifted shut. She was so tired. When she opened her eyes again, she saw the woman—*who was she?*—the woman who bathed her. She looked familiar. The woman stood in the bedroom doorway, looking out into the long hallway. She tried to lift her hand to gesture her closer, but it fell back onto the metal bedrail. That tiny motion exhausted her. She closed her eyes again.

She heard the woman move into the bedroom and stop at the bottom of the bed. She felt gentle strokes on her feet and opened her eyes. *Payne*, she remembered. *I stroked her like this when she was a baby. She was so soft.*

Her eyes widened as Ed led Kevin, a baby camel, into the room. She looked at the man who grinned, tired from half-lifting the animal up the stairs. She shifted her gaze, watched Kevin walk awkwardly towards the bed. Her lips lifted on the side not paralyzed by the stroke, and she looked at Kevin's soft brown eyes below long, dark eyelashes. She heard the clop of hooves on the hardwood floor; awkward movements propelled him forward until the man stopped him at the bedside and stepped back.

Viola smiled as Kevin bowed his head, gently laying his muzzle on the bedspread next to her hand. She lifted her nearest two fingers and stroked the soft nose, then closed her eyes.

#

Now, Payne followed almost the same instructions for her husband. They had no children to pass the checklist to.

The sounds of first one, then another Amish buggy driving up the road, made her glance at her watch. This time in the afternoon, the buggies drove past the house on their way to pick up the children from the school at the end of the road. She'd been sitting on the piano bench longer than she thought. She needed to make lunch.

#

She chopped onions and carrots on the cherry wood cutting board; opened a can of tuna that she turned upside down over the sink; watched the oil drain, trying not to turn the image into something other than oil draining down the sink. Rick's medication sat nearby on the counter. She stared at the bottles, her heart breaking, while, at the same time, her mind withdrew. She reached out her hand to bring the bottles closer. She tore off a handful of parsley from the windowsill container to chop before mixing all the ingredients in a glass bowl. Opening the bread box, she pulled out the half loaf and cut off two slices to put into the toaster. After the bread toasted, she made a sandwich with the tuna mixture.

In the bedroom, Rick lay unresponsive in the bed. His beautiful grey eyes closed, his once strong lungs laboring to push his last breaths through his open mouth. She used the bed's remote control to lift his upper body and the syringe to get the medication into his mouth, waiting to see the involuntary movement of his throat swallow the liquid.

She laid a hand on his forehead and stroked her fingers gently through the tufts of hair. His now wispy grey hair had been thick, curly, and black until he went prematurely grey in his 20s. He always said that when he looked in the mirror, he saw that dark curly hair, long after it had turned.

Once Payne was sure that all the liquid medication had gone down his throat, she sat and put the plated sandwich on her lap to watch her husband while she ate. She finished the first half—the taste of the fish and herbs not quite masking the bitterness—when the drowsiness began to flow through her. After a couple more bites, she stopped struggling to keep her eyelids open. The midday sun lit the room through the open curtains until there was nothing but darkness.

#

*if i should die before i wake
i pray the lord my soul to take*

This Is Not a Date

by Susanne Wolf

Jesse was driving Miranda back to her house in his blue Toyota Camry.

Jesse was Miranda's lab partner. The only time they ever met outside of class was to study for a test or work on a project. The two of them had spent the last few hours in the library finishing up their element report. They had picked plutonium, since *Back to the Future* was Jesse's favorite movie (and Miranda's favorite as well). And that was the first and only personal thing Miranda had learned about Jesse in the past few months.

That was going to change. But Miranda had to be subtle. Even though Jesse had never outright said it, she knew the last thing he wanted was a girlfriend.

Miranda could understand why—between Computer Club, Science Club, the quiz bowl team, and school, he didn't really have the time. Plus, his parents kept comparing him to his big brother Dante, who was a shoo-in for valedictorian and got into all the Ivy League schools as well as MIT.

So, Jesse was under a lot of pressure to be the best at everything.

Which was exactly why Miranda had to ask him out. He deserved to have some fun once in a while.

"Jesse, can I ask you something?"

"You can."

"You don't have to say 'yes,' you can say 'no.' I would totally understand if you said 'no.' In fact, I would expect it."

"Miranda." Jesse held a hand up to halt her rambling. "Just tell me what the question is, and I'll decide how I want to answer it."

"Okay." Miranda took a deep breath, then took the plunge. "Well, not to pry, or anything, but are you doing anything Saturday night?"

“No. Not really.”

That was a rhetorical question. Because Jesse never went out on the weekends, not even with friends. As far as Miranda knew, he didn't have any. Since the last census, Jesseville was a population of 1.

“What a coincidence, I'm not doing anything either. Hey!” Miranda snapped her fingers and looked to the stars, as if she had just made a major breakthrough that would win her the Nobel Prize. “Since you're not doing anything Saturday night, and *I'm* not doing anything Saturday night, maybe we could do something together.”

“Wait...” Jesse glared at Miranda over the steering wheel, his green eyes a pair of lasers. He had figured it out. Well, you didn't have to get on the honor roll every semester since the sixth grade to know where this conversation was headed. “You're asking me out on a date, aren't you?”

Miranda shook her head violently, her long midnight black hair whipping across her face. “No, no, no. This is not a date. I was just thinking we could have dinner at Olive Garden, catch a movie, maybe get ice cream afterwards....”

“Yes. Definitely, a date.”

Typical Jesse. Always had to be right.

“No, no, no. This is not a date. Okay, fine,” Miranda huffed, crossing her arms and slumping in her seat. “If you want it to be a date, then it's a date.”

Jesse slapped his forehead hard. He had been sucked into the black hole of Miranda's deception. “I didn't want it to be a date,” he groaned. “*You're* the one who asked *me* out.”

“No, no, no. *I* just wanted to hang out. *You're* the one who put the 'date' label on it. So...” Miranda turned to Jesse, flashing a smile as wide as the Milky Way. “What time are we going on this date, anyway?”

“What?” Jesse's face was redder than the “Red Planet.”
“Oh, I don't know, 6:30?”

“Can you make it 7?”

“Fine. 7. Whatever.”

“Cool. See you at 7 on Saturday.”

By that time, they had reached Miranda’s house. Miranda hopped out of the car and dashed up the driveway, leaving Jesse to wonder what the heck had just happened. There were some things even science couldn’t explain.

Heaven After—a Eulogy

by Joanne Zaslou

Ruthie watched as a six-foot-tall, comfortably-shaped male suddenly materialized next to her friend Angie. He wore a cream-colored lightweight business suit and a red and blue striped tie. With hands on hips, nodding her Brillo pad hair, Ruthie quipped, “Jim, you’ve come a bit later than we expected.”

Jim laughed—he was late. He’d been on Earth longer than the other three in attendance—his wife, Angie, and his daughter’s in-laws, Ruthie and Albert. Also, adhering to the Greek Orthodox tradition, he’d anticipated being raised permanently from Earth directly after his memorial service. That should have occurred 40 days after he’d “fallen asleep.” In Jim’s case, his soul had wandered the Earth, revisiting places he’d lived, for an extra ten days before arriving here, wherever “here” was.

“Yes, well, figures the kids would wait extra time for my sendoff. More convenient for them,” Jim said as he looked around. His surroundings were pink and fluffy like mineral wool insulation and smelled of vanilla and cinnamon—was it baklava?—making him wistful.

“Oh, come on, Jim. You did the same with mine,” said Angie. “That was life, and I got over it; you will too.” She clutched her husband’s hand, infatuated afresh as her soft brown eyes locked with his hazel eyes. “We’re all here now, or will be eventually.”

“I haven’t seen anyone else,” said Jim. I came straight to you, Angie.”

“Aww. I’ve missed you, too. And you’ll see the others shortly.”

“Yep. Come on, Cuz,” said Albert, reverting to the slang of his youth. “Let’s take a little tour,” he started to twirl his forefinger, but stopped midway. “Just a sec.”

Albert lifted a gossamer curtain of light and looked down at his daughter-in-law, Joanne, wiping a window with crumpled newspaper. Her sister, Dianne, held up the shade. Albert thought, *That's right, that's right...now lift the shade, dust the windowsill real smooth. Like that.*

"I taught her that," said Albert, smiling at the other three souls.

"You should be very proud," said Angie, the window cleaners' mother.

"I am," said Albert, now smirking as he batted the curtain back into place. Cloud fragments and dust particles floated.

"Let's go," said Albert. "Maybe Jim will learn somethin'."

They all walked a few steps together. Then Jim stalled, let go of Angie's hand. "Hang on a minute. Could she hear you? More importantly, do you do anything here besides check up on my daughters to see if they're cleaning the windows properly?"

Ruthie guffawed. "I've always loved your dry sense of humor, Jim. No, they can't hear us. Of course, we do more. But for now, we'll do our regular rounds to see our kids and their families on Earth. It feels good to watch them doing things we know we taught them—even window washing. We made a good contribution to humanity. Know what I mean?"

"Kind of," said Jim. "But are all our remembered contributions so trivial?"

"Trivial?" asked Albert, taken aback. "Anything we do that makes the world better or someone happier or healthier or nicer or helps them do more in their life is a genuine contribution. I appreciate seeing what effect I had, even when I wasn't thinking about it. It's rewarding. Makes me feel I led a good life."

Jim harrumphed and said, "I was hoping the kids would recall, and then maybe even imitate, some of our more

ambitious accomplishments. You know, Albert, like when you got that honest judge elected and I reconstructed parts of the Pentagon after it caught fire? Or maybe like you, they could redirect the lives of troubled boys to more promising paths. Or like me, they could teach as their second career! My mom—is she here?” Jim asked, looking around. “She could be proud. Will my kids? Will our kids get that we contributed *meaningfully to the world* so they’d remember us?”

“Tell you what. While we’re here, we can see if how we led our lives plays out in how the kids lead theirs,” said Albert.

“And we can see this because we’re in Heaven?” asked Jim.

“Not quite Heaven. Close, though,” said Albert, running his fingers through his once-black, now silver and still glossy, pompadour. “We’re on the level before Heaven, where we wait on confirmation for that final destination.”

“How long does that take?”

“Well...Earth time doesn’t mean anything here, and—”

Just then, through another curtain of light—one of infinite cloud scrimms that peppered their space, letting them easily view Earth—Jim spotted his son about to straddle a motorcycle. Moving closer, his chest pounding like a lopsided jackhammer, Jim shouted, “Stupid, stu—” but ceased when at another scrim, he caught sight of flames licking the 8020 apartment building, his last home on Earth. Jim’s friend Margaret, wheelchaired, was gawking at, but unable to walk down a staircase.

“Oh, damn!” Jim yelled, stomping and waving his arms frantically, “Do you see an elevator with a battery-operated power supply? No, dammit, because building management ignored my letters begging them to implement a system so everyone could escape a fire! I need to do something now! Help! Albert, you’ve been here the longest, what can I do?!”

“Nothing,” Albert said evenly, “What you can do is... nothing.”

Jim shuddered; his jaw went slack. He stared at Albert, his eyes widening. “Nothing? Are you crazy?”

“No, I’m not,” Albert said calmly.

“Tell me!”

As the others looked on, Jim complied when Albert told him to act like he was taking a deep breath. “Jim, you’ll pick up a lot here before you’re judged ready to move on. This is your first lesson: You’re no longer on Earth, and you can no longer do anything for Earth. You’ll come to accept that.”

“You’re saying I can’t do anything to help?” Jim croaked.

“You can observe. That’s it.”

“Observe. Observe? The role I was last relegated to on Earth?” Jim bellowed. “Does that mean Margaret will join us here now?!”

The four of them veered their attention to the apartment fire scrim and saw three burly firefighters, the woman leading, rushing up the steps toward Margaret. The woman lifted Margaret like a pile of fireplace logs, descended a few steps, and handed her down to the next firefighter, who then carried her to the next, like a bucket brigade, until the last firefighter brought Margaret to safety.

“Oh, damn,” Jim muttered, let his shoulders drop, but then immediately spun back around to see about his son, James, who was now pulling into a used-vehicle dealership. Jim watched as James tossed the Honda Rebel keys to the manager, laughing. “Thanks, Frank, but a motorcycle’s not my style, and I’ll be darned if I’ll let my kid—”

“Ha,” said Jim, “I’m glad those would-be disasters were averted. But you’re telling me if I see anyone about to make a mistake that could harm them or others, I can’t prevent it. Can I fix it after?”

“Nope. And, soon enough, you’ll appreciate that. Then, you’ll relax, like you never could on Earth. Look at Angie.”

Jim conceded that Angie, who’d always balled her hands

into fists and stood like a warrior guarding her village, was now peaceful as a matron wading in a club swimming pool.

“I see a problem with this,” said Jim. “Of course, I want to go to Heaven, but I still have the urge to help and to solve problems. I’m a civil engineer! It’s who I am. Was? I can’t just stop. It’s what I did to earn my existence and be remembered.”

“Jim,” said Albert, “You don’t have to work to exist anymore. Understand? No hunting for water, food, shelter, safety, employment, love—”

“No, no, Albert. To me, earning my existence means continually doing something useful to be worthy of being. Why do I feel like that?”

“Maybe you decided you had to pay back the universe for your good luck despite the earlier bad luck your family had before you were born.”

“How’s that now?”

“Ehhh, some theory that people carry experiences in their DNA along with their hair color. Epi, epi?”

“Epigenetic marks,” said Ruthie, who’d been an avid reader.

“I don’t know what that is,” Albert admitted. “Anyway, from your past we know that before you were born, Ottoman Turks set fire to your mom’s village, driving her family and the rest of the Greeks out of Phocaea. We also know you stopped your father from shooting himself in the head. In life, you experienced more trials; everyone does. Maybe that’s why one of your urges is to pay back, which you did, partially through your civil engineering work.”

“I get it,” said Jim.

“After some training, you won’t sense it’s your job to fix every bad thing you see to make you worthy of being. You’ll get past the need to earn your existence.”

“Wow. Sounds like Heaven.”

“It will be Heaven. So, you ready to walk now?”

“Not quite.” Jim cleared his throat. “I do have another question. About all that good work I did, even though I did it because I was driven to?”

“Yes?”

“I’ll still be remembered because of it, right?”

“Hmmm,” said Albert. Let’s say most will appreciate what you created and what you fixed.”

“Go on,” said Jim.

Ruthie chimed in, “Your good work, while they value it, becomes part of their lives people take for granted once it’s done. Consider the folks who built the Chesapeake Bay Bridge. An amazing feat. But when we crossed it, how often did we think of the ones who designed it or poured the concrete or risked their lives laying the bars? We didn’t. We just used the bridge.”

“So that it was *my* work—my bridges, hospitals, problem-solving, article writing,” Jim held up his fingers, counting, “soldiering, teaching, managing, earthquake and construction engineering—and that I often put that work before everything else—didn’t matter? My family, coworkers, students won’t remember me for my projects...even though I worked so hard, Angie used to parade my framed certificates and plaques in front of them?”

“I thought you hated that,” said Angie.

“I pretended to,” Jim whispered back. “So, Albert, in short, what you’re saying is people won’t remember me,” Jim said with finality.

“Jim. Listen. They’ll remember you. But your work’s not how they’ll remember you.”

“How then?”

“They’ll remember you for *who you were*, your ‘essence,’” Albert said, gesturing air quotes.

“My essence? What the heck is that? My body odor?”

“Haha. No. It’s your spirit,” said Ruthie.

“Your core being,” added Angie.

“The urges you were born with,” continued Albert. “In your case, they include the one we’ve been talking about—paying back—by fixing, helping, trying always to be useful. You have others too—your curiosity, sense of humor, tendency to care about humanity, desire to learn and teach. These compulsions work together to form your essence.”

“Your spirit, the real you,” said Ruthie, “directed you to search for work—civil engineering—that allowed you to satisfy many of its yearnings. At the same time, your spirit was shaped by your life—your Greek American culture, poverty in South Carolina, your wife and kids and grandkids, living in Baltimore, your first boss, earthquake sites you visited—whatever and whoever you encountered.”

“Can you give me a ‘for instance’ of how that worked?”

“I can,” said Angie. “The way you behave is a byproduct of your longings and that includes the way you treat people. Whenever someone had a problem or needed help, you had the desire to listen and to assist, and that desire glowed. You called it ‘reaching out a hand.’ Whether associates needed to make a career decision or find a place to sleep, your curiosity drove you to discover what they needed by asking the right questions. Asking the right questions was such a valuable tool to solve problems, you even brought it to your family and students and later wrote about it so others would understand its power,” said Angie.

“With you,” she continued, “people felt heard, safe, respected, encouraged. They felt love. And how you made them feel is how they’ll remember you.”

“Yeah,” said Albert. “And as you nurtured your urges, your essence flourished. You moved closer to the ideal you until you became the best version of yourself on Earth.”

“Did you hear that, Angie?” Jim said, raising an eyebrow. “I’m my best version.”

“You’re closer anyway,” said Angie.

Elbowing Angie gently, Jim declared, “I’ve heard it said that the older a person gets, the more they become who they’ve always been. Maybe that’s referring to our core being. I have a core being from the beginning and choose what I do based on it. It matures as I grow older with more exposure to life. My choices make my original essence a stronger version of itself. I followed the path of my core being, and I’m a different person from the time I began life on Earth to the time I exited only because my essence is a stronger version of the original. So, I’ve become who I’ve always been.”

“You’ve got it,” said Albert.

“What if someone has an evil essence? Aren’t they inclined to embrace evil unless they encounter positive forces in life that drive them toward good and a permanent change to their spirit? You add new data to the brain and—”

“Jim! We don’t have to consider evil here. That’s a question for you to take up with your Maker when you get to Heaven.”

“Yeah, but you have a ways to go,” said Ruthie. “You’re still problem-solving.”

The others laughed.

Jim said, “Thanks for the introduction, everyone. I’m finally ready to go on our rounds. Will you all still escort me?”

Everything in Its Place

by F. J. Talley

“Everything in its place,” she said, almost to herself. “Everything in its place; nothing scattered, and nothing wasted.” She exhaled. *So much better that way*, she thought. If only other people would understand that.

She continued getting dressed. Nothing fancy today, she thought. Just a regular dress and hose, or perhaps a skirt. She knew exactly where to go for each outfit and placed them on hooks on the side of her closet. Which one?

She looked toward the table by the window. If only that meant Mrs. Walters would put her things in their places, instead of placing them with Mr. Scott down the street. Such a nasty, mean woman, she thought, who should be in her own place. That would be much better.

The blouse with the Peter Pan collar and the skirt will do nicely. And certainly do much better than the low collars of that slut, Ms. Ambrose. She will never do for the long haul so long as she puts everything out for the whole world to see every day. “Put them back in,” I always say, but no one ever pays attention. Putting on her hose—just right as always—she then opened the blouse and put it on, carefully buttoning each button just so. She sighed. “I do so wish Ms. Peters would be the boss. She is much more reasonable as a manager than Mr. Platts; he is just so angry all the time. I do so wish someone would do something about that.”

Placing the skirt over her head, she buttoned and zippered, then smoothed down her clothing, carefully avoiding messing up her hair. She selected the proper shoes from her closet, then replaced the dress she had taken out earlier, closing the closet door. “Back in place,” she thought.

She checked the time, then moved to the mantelpiece and took a small fashion doll off the mantelpiece and put

a sweater on it, then replaced it. Two others—one male and one female—she moved to opposite sides of the mantel. Finally, she took the last doll, another male, and placed it on the table by the window, next to a model car that her nephew had made for her.

“If only,” she thought. Then she moved to the door, turned off the light, and left her bedroom. *Mustn't be late.*

At that moment, Mr. Platts stepped off the curb by his office, directly into the path of an oncoming car.

High Time

by A. L. Kaplan

Each icy gust made my already numb body shiver. I'd long since lost track of how long I'd been hanging here on this cliff, legs swinging. Fleeting thoughts tumbled through my mind, like wondering if I'd turned the teapot off this morning. So did the fact that eating an egg-and-sausage burrito before heading out wasn't such a good idea.

It's all Roy Rogers' fault that I'm in this predicament. My best friend's Saint Bernard, Roy Rogers, not the old country and western singer, TV personality, or even the fast-food joint. Bella chose that name because he was big enough to ride, even as a puppy. I still think he should have been called Trigger, after the horse, but Bella didn't want any reminders of her brother's death in a drive-by.

Bella asked me to watch her precious baby. He's a major sweetheart, so of course the answer was yes. I opened the door to her house and slid in sideways, like I usually do, careful to keep the space wide enough for only my slim figure to squeeze inside. Roy greeted me with an enthusiastic kiss on my cheek that covered me in drool and nearly knocked me over. At least he didn't jump up on my shoulders with those massive paws like he used to do. I'm barely five feet. Bella put the kibosh on that behavior quickly. After all, when you have a fifty-pound pup that's going to be two hundred, you don't want him to get comfortable jumping on people, especially if you want help with pet sitting. I had a similar aha moment with my first pet who started to tell me she needed to go out by jumping into my lap. A ninety-pound lap dog wasn't my plan, so we made some training changes.

After stumbling back a few steps, I gave Roy a good scratch behind each ear and tried to avoid the big gobs of ick hanging from his jowls. Within minutes, he was on his

back, tail flopping wildly as I rubbed his belly. For a big fella, he sure did an excellent impression of a marshmallow. I stood and quickly moved away so I wouldn't get clobbered as Roy scrambled to his feet and dashed to the kitchen. A quick survey told me several things. One, he must have been very thirsty because his water dish and the gallon bottle that filled it were empty. And two, six am wasn't early enough to get here today. A puddle the size of Lake Ontario covered the family room floor. I mean, I've seen smaller floods after a hurricane. Not that it bothered Roy as he enthusiastically tramped through the disaster area on the way to the back door, spattering waves of urine against everything in sight.

I didn't notice any stench or signs of other evacuations, thank God, and didn't want to risk further damage to my friend's home, so after gingerly stepping through the mess, I opened the slider so Roy could do the remains of his business outside. He bolted through the gap before it was completely opened, knocking the glass door off its track again (Bella and I have both become adept at popping it back in.) and took off through the lawn. With an acre to explore, I figured he'd be okay for a while. Besides, Bella had a six-foot wooden privacy fence surrounding her backyard, a necessity when you have an enthusiastic and energetic behemoth for a pet.

That left me inside, standing in a puddle, wondering where to start. Wet paw prints were tracked through every inch of the floor. There was even a large soggy spot on the couch. You know, the one HE'S NOT SUPPOSED TO BE ON. Well, it wasn't going to get cleaned with me just staring at it.

An hour later, after I'd scrubbed the couch and mopped the floor, I shoved the last of the sopping towels into the washing machine. All that was left was to hose down the beast. He'd just have to drip dry, since there wasn't anything left in the house to do the job. I'd have to deal with brushing the tangles later.

It didn't take long to gather the shampoo and step

outside. There were just two problems. The food I'd set out before beginning my monumental cleanup was still sitting in the dish and there was no sign of Roy. He loved to eat. In fact, in the four years since Bella got him, Roy'd already had three surgeries to remove rocks, coins, gloves, socks, and even a four-foot woolen scarf from his gut. There had to be something seriously wrong for him not to eat his kibble.

"Roy! Here boy."

Yelling at the top of my lungs was met with silence. All sorts of horrible thoughts ran through my mind. Maybe he tried to eat a toad, again, and was lying half-dead somewhere. A quick check on the gates to either side of the house showed both were closed and locked, but still no dog. That left the gate way back behind the grove of dense trees. My legs moved faster than I thought they could as I raced through the yard.

I skidded to a halt, heart thudding so hard it hurt. The back gate was tightly closed. Unfortunately, a large tree lay sprawled across the fence, its huge trunk and limbs flattening three sections. Hoof marks in the mud and deer pellets told the rest of the story. Not to mention a set of great big paw prints heading into the wilds of Catoctin Park.

Great. This day was getting better by the minute. I muttered some choice words and took off down the recently dug up path. The mud quickly gave way to gravel and then impenetrable brush. At least to a human. Not only was this a dead end, it occurred to me that when I did catch up to that miscreant, I had no way to bring him back. There was also a definite chill in the air.

Back I trudged to the house to collect my jacket, a leash, some treats, and a few jumbo-sized poop bags just in case. Then I attempted to pick up the trail where I'd lost it. I'm not much of a tracker, but Roy wasn't as careful as the deer. A closer inspection of the brush revealed a swath of broken

branches and tufts of dark fur.

Calling every few minutes, I wove my way through every briar patch in the state of Maryland and mounds of poison ivy. I had to find Roy before he got bit by a snake or wandered out of the park and got hit by a car.

Several loud woofs in the distance pulled my attention from the latest bunch of thorns shredding my jeans. Arms stinging from the assorted scrapes I'd accumulated, I managed to extract myself and took off, calling for Roy as I ran.

Up ahead, branches snapped. Flashes of white and brown occasionally popped into view. I was on his trail. At least I hoped so. There was still a chance I was chasing a deer instead of a giant lumbering canine, but the occasional excited whimper gave me hope. Either way, if it was Roy, he wasn't listening to me. That dog had his heart set on playing with deer and smothering them in love. The big lug was clumsy, but didn't have a mean bone in his body.

Eager to finally end this chase, I didn't pay as close attention as I probably should have. There was fur and light ahead. Onward I charged. I realized my mistake as soon as I burst out of the bushes and saw—nothing but sky.

You know those cartoons when the coyote runs in place in mid-air before plunging into the canyon? That's what it felt like. My feet kept going, not registering that there was nothing under them. The rest of me somehow managed to twist around and grab one of the rapidly retreating branches. Being a scraggly thing, it broke of course, but it slowed me enough to close my fists on a root sticking out of the cliffside.

It's amazing what goes through your mind when you know you are about to die. Like that damned teapot and all the bills sitting in a stack on the kitchen table that I still needed to pay. Or wondering who was going to want the art I'd collected or my classic Battlestar Galactica trading cards.

Somehow, I managed to halt my downward decent by

clinging to that root, leaving my feet swinging over a lot of nothingness with a cold wind reminding me of my cuts and scrapes. A few attempts at climbing up only succeeded in covering me in dirt and loosening my lifeline. There was simply no way I could do it without help. I didn't dare look down. Last time I did that was at the top of a high diving board in camp. It took the lifeguard an hour to talk me off it. That meant climbing down wasn't an option either.

So now you know how I came to be hanging from a cliff. I'm sure you'd all agree that the fault lies with that big animal, my former friend named Roy. When they find my body sometime next year, because I'm sure: a) I'm going to fall any minute, and b) No one will know where to look for my body until then, make sure Roy knows what a bad boy he's been.

"Woof."

"Roy?"

A big gob of drool landed in my eye as I looked up. Even if I could unclasp my fingers, there was no way I was letting go of the root to clear my vision. All I could do was blink and attempt to rub my face on my shoulder.

"About time you showed up."

Roy's head tilted to the side and I heard his tail flop repeatedly. Those goofy brown eyes stared at me.

"You going to help?"

As tired and annoyed as I was, not to mention scared, keeping the growl out of my voice was impossible. With a small whimper, Roy crouched on the edge and tried to grab me. All he managed was to drip more slobber on my head. Damn. The last thing I needed was for him to fall. That would break poor Bella's heart, even if it was her dog's fault. Besides, he'd probably knock me down with him and I had no desire to hasten my death.

"Get some help, you stupid dog."

With one last whine, Roy scrambled back, knocking a

shower of dirt over me. By some miracle, none of it got in my eyes, but the grit glued itself to every wet surface, including my freshly-washed hair.

“Roy?”

I know I told him to get help, but the sudden absence of his bulk left me even more dejected than before he found me. There was also no way to know if he’d actually gone for help or was off chasing a butterfly. Or more likely, a squirrel.

A sudden tug on my right foot elicited a startled yelp. Teeth pressed against my ankle. I tightened my already cramped grip and screamed. A bear must have climbed up, or a mountain lion. Either way, something was trying to eat me or pull me to my death and then eat me. Desperate screams and curses burst from my mouth. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I was positive that the next chomp would tear into my flesh and rip the limb from my body. This couldn’t be the end. I didn’t want to die like this.

With one last pull the root I clung to snapped. Once again, I was flying through the air. This time, into the mouth of a beast. Maybe even a pack of coyotes. Any minute now I’d be torn to shreds and consumed.

I thought falling to your death made time go slower but the ground came faster than I expected. My head collided with a surprisingly soft lump before flopping onto something hard. A slobbery tongue swiped across my face just as air rushed back into my lungs. After opening my tightly clamped eyes, I stared up at Roy’s bulk. Behind him stood an eight-foot rocky outcropping.

All that time I’d been only a few feet above the ground. After carefully peeling my fingers from the branch, they remained curled and painful. It didn’t matter. I threw my arms around Roy and hugged him as tightly as I could. All was forgiven after my brush with death.

“Good dog, Roy. Good dog.”

Just Big Brother Stuff

by K.A. Murray

Every year on Christmas Eve, I book a room in a hotel ten minutes from my parents' house in suburban Maryland. It's been my routine for a while now, which is why it was unusual that I forgot this year.

Delilah and I were 20 minutes into our drive down I-95 when I realized it, so it became her job to frantically look online to see if any hotels had availability for that night.

"I don't get it," she said as she scrolled and clicked. "Is it so bad with your parents that you can't stay over there for one night?"

The relationship was pretty new—we'd met in grad school four months ago—so we hadn't yet shared the ins and outs of our family dynamics. She was coming home with me for Christmas because her parents were flying to Australia "to be with family" for the holiday, and, happy as I was to be bringing her home to meet my family, I didn't know why she wasn't going with them. This girl was special, though; I knew that already. So I didn't ask too many questions. I couldn't wait to introduce her to Mom, Dad, Thomas—and Lauren.

"No, I love my folks," I said. "We'll stay there Christmas night, and the 26th—it's just Christmas Eve we need it. Well, I need it. You can crash on my parents' couch."

When I glanced over at the passenger seat, Delilah was staring at me, her forehead wrinkled in confusion.

"I'm not staying at your parents' house without you, Matthew," she said. "That would be so weird. I'll crash at the hotel with you."

I hesitated. "I'm—I'm not sure if you can."

"Matthew, what the hell?"

It was a valid question. There was a lot we needed to

discuss, and we had only about two and a half hours until we'd be in Towson.

"I'm thinking it's time," I said, "that I tell you about what happened to Lauren."

* * *

It all started when I was 16 and wanted a little extra pocket money. If I had known what was coming, I don't know if I would've made the same decisions, but that's been water under the bridge for a long time now.

"There are some job openings at the mall," my mother told me one day in early November.

There was something about her face just then—a twinkle in her eyes and a half-smile.

"What kind of job?" I said, narrowing my eyes at her.

She'd been at the mall that day doing some early Christmas shopping. "They're hiring for mall Santas," she said. "I saw a flier outside Macy's."

"Ma!"

"I know, but—"

"I'm not an old man!"

"Well, I know that," my mom said calmly, "but you've got the perfect physique for it, and—"

"Rude, Ma. That's rude." It was, but I laughed anyway, because it was true. I was tall, like my dad, with a round belly and rosy cheeks. When I hung with school friends, I was often mistaken for someone's dad.

"You know you'd be great at it," she said. "You're great with Lauren and Thomas."

That was how it happened, how my mom convinced me to become a seasonal mall Santa, a decision that would alter the course of my Christmases for the rest of my life.

* * *

“That’s adorable!” The story was helping. Delilah was laughing, and definitely less annoyed than she’d been a few minutes earlier. “But why?”

“The story’s just getting started,” I explained.

* * *

I got the job, and Mom was right—I was great at it. It was excellent pay, and I spent every weekend, Saturdays and Sundays, being a mall Santa. The beard was itchy, but other than that, I had no complaints. Our family loved Christmas; my mother was the master of creating Christmas magic, and Thomas and Lauren loved to stay up as late as they could on Christmas Eve to look for Santa flying through the sky. Being adored by small kids, getting to listen to their Christmas wishes, which were often hilarious—it was a blast.

Everything was going great.

The part that happened next, the part when everything got screwed up? That was totally Mom’s fault.

“What did your mom do wrong?” Delilah had shifted around in her seat so that she was leaning against the passenger door. She had abandoned her task, I noticed. Her phone was resting in the coffee cup holder.

“She went shopping,” I said, shaking my head.

* * *

I couldn’t even believe it when I spotted them across the crowd. Mom, holding tightly to Lauren and Thomas’s hands, was winding through the throngs of people toward Macy’s. With me dressed in a Santa suit, on full display, in the middle of a faux Christmas village.

When I asked her about it later, she blamed holiday chaos. “I’d forgotten the teacher gifts,” she had told me, her eyes streaming with tears. “I didn’t even think about you, about Lauren.”

Things like this—people dressed up in costume—were always triggering for Lauren. We kept our front porch light off on Halloween and put her to bed early, because the sight of the costumes alarmed her. “Is she really a witch?” she had hollered in first grade, when she saw one of her classroom teachers dressed up. She had run away and hidden in a bathroom stall. They had to call Mom up to the school to coax her out.

Any costume would upset her, but this? Me, in a Santa suit? Lauren and Thomas were both believers who loved believing. This was not going to go well.

I had a kid sitting on my lap when I spotted them, and my entire body tensed up. I smiled for the photographer, digging my fingernails into my leg to keep calm. I looked around; the line of kids and parents looped around my Santa chair, and a row of ten-foot-tall Christmas trees stood behind me. Trying to get away would cause a commotion and attract attention. I had to just keep doing what I was doing, and hope—

“AHHHHHHH!”

I cringed, scooting the little kid off my lap and jumping to my feet. That scream was Lauren’s, and anytime I heard that scream, it meant my parents needed my help.

* * *

“She was scared?” Delilah asked.

I considered this.

Had Lauren been scared?

It wasn’t as simple as that. For Lauren, it was like—sometimes things just didn’t compute, didn’t make sense. Those were the moments when she would implode.

* * *

When I got to Mom, the crowd around had cleared away, leaving my mother wrestling my sister to the ground.

When Lauren lost control, she was wild and insanely strong. She scratched at Mom's face, over and over; I saw a smear of red on her cheek.

"Thomas, go sit right there," I yelled, pointing to a spot on the floor about six feet away. I needed him close so he wouldn't get lost—he was nine years old at the time—but not so close that he'd get hurt.

With Thomas situated, seated and clutching my mom's purse, I reached my hands out in front of me as a shield and moved closer to my mother and sister. Lauren was shrieking something, over and over, and when I got closer I realized it was my name. "Matthew! Matthew! Matthew! Matthew!"

My heart was pounding in my chest. I met my mother's eyes; she was about to start crying. I knew she was scared. She told me how much she worried about Lauren having an episode in public. She didn't want anyone to think she was dangerous, because she wasn't. Lauren just got overwhelmed.

I pointed toward Lauren's legs, and I grabbed my sister's arms while my mother wrapped herself around Lauren's lower half. Mom, Dad, and I had learned how to do this a few years back when we realized we needed a safe way to restrain her momentarily when she was physically out of control.

"Shh, Lauren, shh," I whispered in her ear. She was still thrashing, but it was slowing down; my voice did typically have a calming effect for her. "Shh, Lauren, shh."

I must have repeated it 20 times before she became still.

"Do you need assistance, ma'am?"

A uniformed mall security guard was standing near Mom,

evaluating the situation and looking unsure of whether he should step in to help us or not.

“Lauren, we can go home and I can explain everything, okay?” I said quietly to my sister.

She nodded. Her face was bright red and she was sweating profusely. Thomas crept forward with a water bottle from Mom’s purse. He opened it for her, and I held it steady so she could drink.

“We’re okay, sir,” my mom said briskly to the security guard, standing up. “We were just about to head home.”

* * *

“You know, if you don’t get back to the hotel search, I’m going to end up sleeping in my car,” I said jokingly to Delilah.

We were stuck in traffic in Delaware, at a standstill, which gave me the chance to watch her face.

Delilah is gorgeous; by far the most beautiful woman who’s ever agreed to go out with me. When she laughs, it lights up her entire face.

But right now, she’s not laughing. Her face is scrunched up in concentration.

“You told me about Lauren, didn’t you?” she asked me.

“A little,” I said.

“She’s younger than you?”

“By five minutes.”

Delilah looked at me, her eyes wide. “She’s—”

“—my twin sister,” I finished.

* * *

It wasn’t until Lauren and I started kindergarten that it became evident that something was different about the way Lauren experienced the world.

She was smart; she taught herself to read before we ever set foot in a school. But she couldn't seem to process even the slightest change in our routine. Once we had to eat lunch in the classroom because the cafeteria was closed for a special event, and Lauren wailed and howled at the top of her lungs and wouldn't eat a bite. When we had a substitute teacher, she stood at the door of the classroom, paralyzed, until I came over and coaxed her inside.

There were other things that were hard for Lauren, too. She needed things to be as they were, and she couldn't seem to tolerate the concept of pretending. A little girl in our class wore a T-shirt that said *Princess* across the front and Lauren bluntly told her that she was not a princess and could she kindly change her shirt. I went to our teacher, Ms. Mahoney, that day and asked her to change the little girl to a different table in the room.

"Matthew, you don't have to worry about that," Ms. Mahoney had said. She switched the seats promptly, and every time Lauren piped up again—"*But she's not a princess!*"—Ms. Mahoney would shush her gently.

At the school's recommendation, Mom and Dad took Lauren to some specialists, and it was helpful. They learned about other kids like Lauren, and they learned some strategies that worked for helping her deal with the world. I heard a lot of diagnostic terms get thrown around referring to Lauren. The word 'autistic' was probably used the most, and she had a mild intellectual disability, which for everyday purposes meant that she functioned at a much younger social, emotional, and developmental level than her actual calendar age. For me, though, she was always just my sister, my twin; someone who sometimes drove me mad with her inflexibility and antics, and other times made me feel like the luckiest kid in the universe.

* * *

When we got home from the mall that day, Mom sent Thomas upstairs to play video games, and she and I sat on the couch with Lauren.

It was the Santa suit that was the issue. I hadn't told Lauren about my job, because she loved Christmas and Santa, and I didn't want to ruin the magic for her. Lauren disliked pretend, but for her, Santa was never pretend. There was a Santa, she was certain, and there was nothing fanciful or costume-related about it at all.

That was why seeing *me* in a Santa suit had messed her up. When Lauren processed something she didn't understand, if it was an emotional thing for her, she'd break down. She'd struggle until things made sense again.

That was our job that afternoon, to help things make sense again.

I thought quickly.

"I'm a helper," I explained to my sister. Lauren was tall like me, but her long red hair was straight and she had a default expression that was more pensive than jolly. "I'm one of Santa's helpers. And my job is to be at the Mall and listen to kids' wishes and send a note to Santa about them."

She looked at me and shook her head. "That's not true."

I looked at my mother, who closed her eyes and leaned back, waiting to hear what Lauren would say next.

"You would never lie or pretend or wear a Santa costume if you were a helper, Matthew," Lauren said, her voice sounding strong and confident.

"No, I would—"

"*You* are Santa."

My sister was looking only at me. I looked at my mother, willing her to help me. She shrugged her shoulders and nodded her head.

“You are,” Lauren said firmly. “I should have known it before. You’re the best guy in the world, Matthew.” She wrapped her arms around me in a hug.

Mom and I didn’t disagree with her, and there were no more tantrums that day.

* * *

“You didn’t think it through, though,” Delilah said, laughing. “We did not.”

* * *

When Christmas Eve morning arrived, Lauren looked at me over the breakfast table in surprise, her eyes wide. “Don’t you need to *go*?” she whispered; a stage whisper, loud enough for Mom and Dad to hear too.

When I tell people this story, they don’t understand this part. They think we should just have told her. We weren’t at the mall, she was home, safe and sound, with her family, and she was 16 years old. She’d have to find out sometime, right?

But I looked around the house, impeccably decorated, Santas on every wall, lights strung through every room, my mom with the happy glow of a parent who delights in the giving of all the things at Christmastime and, you know, it just didn’t seem like the time.

“Yup,” I told my sister, who squealed with delight. “I’ll see you tomorrow, though.” I wrapped her in a hug.

“Where are you going to go?” my mom whispered to me at the front door.

“You tell me, Ma,” I said, slipping into my winter coat. “This whole thing is your fault.”

She smacked me on the arm. “Go to Nana’s,” she said, “I’ll tell her you’re on the way.”

I walked the five blocks to my grandmother's house. The next morning, I arrived at my own house and pretended to be exhausted from a night of magic, and Lauren's eyes were filled with delight.

* * *

"My nana passed away a couple of years later," I explained to Delilah as we pulled into a rest area about a half-hour from my parents' house. "That's why I do the hotel. It's not bad, really. Of course, I'd rather be home with my family, but I usually watch some Christmas movies; my mom has food delivered. I'm used to it now."

I put the car in park. We needed a bathroom break, and then we either needed to find a hotel or start calling some of my high school buddies to find someplace to crash.

It was worth it. That was the part I didn't say out loud.

Nothing in my life has ever made me happier than making my sister smile.

I had a feeling that this whole charade might end someday. Lauren's an adult now, and while she still lives at home with Mom and Dad, she's out and about in the world, working a job, taking classes. There will be a day when something will slip, and she'll know the truth about Santa Claus and me. That day will be incredibly difficult, I think, and it'll be hard for her to process. I truly hope it doesn't come anytime soon.

There have been moments when I have wished for things to be different. For things to be easier for Lauren. To have a twin sister that I joked around with casually, and not someone I have to be so protective of.

I never wish for any of that at Christmastime, though.

"It's just big brother stuff," I said finally. "You'll see, tomorrow. It's worth it when you see Lauren's face when I get home."

It's quiet for so long that I turn to look at Delilah, who is staring at me, her face unreadable. I get worried for a moment that she thinks we're all nuts, that she won't want to go along with our plans.

"Just big brother stuff," she repeats. "Matthew, I—"

She doesn't seem to be able to get any more words out, and I realize that her eyes are filling with tears. I breathe a sigh of relief.

"It's okay," I say solemnly to Delilah, leaning closer to her. "It's a big deal, learning that your boyfriend is Santa Claus."

She kisses me on the cheek, smiling, and I smile back. This girl is special.

I couldn't wait to introduce her to my sister.

Looking for a Date in 1958

by David Hoffman

We had moved to Greater Boston from a small rural town in coastal Connecticut. Entering the ninth grade in a new school, I felt peer pressure to claim that I had been out on a date or had a girlfriend.

I started by shyly calling female classmates whom I either fancied or felt were friendly, reading an invitation I had pre-written on a piece of paper, and doing my best not to stammer. “Hello, this is Dave, would, oh, would you like to see a movie with me on Saturday?”

Typically, the reply was, “Let me check with my mother; are you a Catholic?”

“No, I’m a Unitarian.”

“Sorry, Mom says no.”

After half a dozen phone calls, I finally received an affirmative response from Ella, a tall, soft-skinned, blue-eyed girl with honey-colored hair, who was a Protestant.

I was delighted by her acceptance, but quickly became despondent when my penny-pinching dad insisted, “No sense in wasting money on a movie theater when the public library is offering a free educational movie about life in the Arctic.” Dad was a graduate student on a limited budget.

Dad chauffeured us to the library in his green 1950 Chevy Carryall, the precursor to the Chevy Suburban. The back seats had been temporarily removed for transporting furniture, and in place were two upside-down wooden tool buckets, perhaps becoming the first “bucket seats” to exist. When we arrived at Ella’s home her parents were cordial but couldn’t help displaying bemused glances upon viewing Dad’s rather unconventional vehicle. Her father was a wholesale produce seller and drove a slick new 1958 pink and gray Chevy sedan. Ella may have inwardly cringed

upon boarding the green contraption with the overturned wooden tool buckets for seating but remained gracious. We sat through the uninspiring educational movie uneventfully. There wasn't any offering of ice cream after the movie by my father at the local ice cream parlor as was customary for many teen dates, only slurps of water from two paper cups at the library drinking fountain. When I attempted calling Ella again for another movie date, she politely declined due to a "previous commitment."

I was now craving the status of claiming to have a girlfriend. Fortunately, my aunt in Pennsylvania agreed to provide me with a fresh wallet-sized photo of an attractive red-haired neighbor girl whom I had met a year ago. I inserted it in my wallet and readily began displaying the "girlfriend photo" to classmates.

Eventually, the question arose, "Where does your girlfriend live? Why haven't we ever seen her with you?"

Being honest, I admitted she did not reside in Massachusetts but in Pennsylvania.

"So, how often do you see her? When was the last time?"

"One year ago, but I hope to see her this summer."

After that, several of the guys came to refer to my wallet photo as "sleeping beauty," at which point I ceased to exhibit it.

Even on their meager budget, my parents became concerned about the development of my social skills, so enrolled me in a low-budget school of dance, which many of my classmates were already attending. The Morton School of Dance consisted of an elderly, but highly dedicated grande dame, Mrs. Elaine Crumpton Morton, and her 40-year-old bachelor son, Randolph, an overweight Clark Gable—tall, commanding brown eyes, a thin mustache, and dark brown hair slicked back with an overdose of hair tonic. He was always attired in a suit and striped tie, with highly-polished

black leather shoes that reflected like mini mirrors.

We all attempted to learn the foxtrot, the waltz, the cha-cha, the tango, the rhumba, the mambo, and the lindy hop. All of the boys were seated on one side of the room and all the girls on the opposite. The guys had to walk across and properly introduce themselves and ask for the dance with a bow, usually being returned with a curtsy, but sometimes a curt curtsy depending upon the solicitor.

Other times, it started with a circle of boys moving clockwise on the outside and an inner circle of girls moving counterclockwise to a polka. The moment the music stopped, whoever was opposite you became your partner. The latter method of partner selection was less daunting and preferable to many, including me.

Big Arnold and Tall Albert, two of the least mature and most boisterous guys, much like overgrown puppy dogs, would shout “scaredy-cat, scaredy-cat” whenever girls would shyly back away, shunning them as potential dance partners.

Proper coat-and-tie attire was required. Guys were not allowed to take their sports coats off no matter how hot it became, or they would be cautioned by Randolph, “It is improper to disrobe in public.”

I was quick to find out that if I didn’t get the dancing steps right, suddenly the old lady would be dancing with me. My partner would sit patiently waiting as the old lady publicly corrected me. Worse yet, was when the old lady was already occupied and I got her huge son Randolph as the teacher, playing the role of the female partner while towering over me.

When the old lady and her son were otherwise occupied, some guys simply hid out in the basement washroom or snuck out the side door, nursing cigarettes.

Big Arnold and Tall Albert did not even try to coordinate their dancing steps with their petite partners. Rather, they

swept their partners up off the dance floor, giving themselves the liberty of taking whatever steps they chose. Sometimes they swept the floor with their partner's toes like a broom, much to the amusement of others. And sometimes they left rubber, kicking deliberate scuff marks on the floor to raucous or faster songs like "Rocka Conga" or "Mr. Lee."

I was fortunate whenever I partnered with Rose, a sweet small, docile girl from my homeroom, with long light brown hair. She was a natural dancer and always kindly and discreetly guided me through the steps, sparing me any intervention from the old lady or her big son.

By the end of the school year, things were looking up for me. In a wrestling match, I had defeated a tall, arrogant classmate on the basketball team who had been constantly belittling me. With minimal effort and to the amazement of the onlookers, I quickly flipped him to the pad and held him struggling and kicking in a securely pinned position, akin to a small lion with a downed giraffe. In a second match, he suffered the same fate.

Blue-eyed Ella, who had remained indifferent to me after the failed date, cozied up to me following my wrestling victory. Later the following day, after math class, Ella wanted to know if I'd like to go as her date to the Sadie Hawkins school dance. I cordially smiled and politely responded with minimal emotion, "Thanks, but I have already been invited."

The day before, I had received a neatly printed note on flowered stationery in my homeroom desk drawer from sweet little Rose, my sometimes dancing-school partner. I replied in the affirmative on the bottom of her note and quickly jammed it into her desk drawer before she entered the homeroom. When she retrieved my response, her face became red as a beet. When I glanced in her direction, her expression metamorphosed into a subdued, coy smile.

Humanality

by *Elisabeth Lang*

Hurrying down K Street to meet a rarely-seen friend for lunch, I wanted to smile. Not only was I taking a break from my overloaded desk job, but here I was, walking outside on January 2nd. Starting the new year with exercise was solid proof I would finally shed the excess weight and tone up my flabby muscles, which still faintly remembered how to hike and run in 5k races.

During my turn at the cafe's counter, though, "Chicken parm sub, please," falls out of my mouth instead of copying my friend's Greek salad order. But when the first bite of the cheesy, crispy goodness floods my senses, I know I made the right decision. A fast walk back to the office will burn those pesky calories away.

Two blocks away from my office, I pick up my pace along the broken sidewalk. Cars zip by in the windy sunshine. I can't be late for the one o'clock meeting in the seventh-floor conference room.

I blink, and suddenly I'm flying. I don't feel my feet, but my face is now aimed straight towards a jutting edge of the sidewalk. Hurtling downward, I arch my back in a last-ditch effort to save my white teeth from smashing against the gray cement. I know this is going to hurt.

My chest skids to a stop against the gritty cement. Everything and nothing hurts. My teeth aren't broken, but that's all I know. Frozen, my back rigid, I'm unable to take stock of the individual hurts until the shock fades enough for my body to relax into the pain. My chin and body sink fully to embrace the ground even as pain from my left knee and right arm increases. I turn my head and let my cheek rest against the sidewalk.

Pairs of shoes pass me. One set. Then another, in front of my sideways gaze.

Breathing deeply, I moan as I roll onto my left side, dragging my right arm against my body. The throb in my knee can't be ignored. I lean my head against a wire fence that guards the empty, trash-blown lot next to the sidewalk. Prone, I gaze at the tires of the fast-moving cars.

A set of legs wearing black, worn-out sneakers with missing laces stops a few feet away.

"Are you okay?" A homeless man with full bags in each hand has stopped, but I'm having trouble focusing and let my eyes drop to street level again.

Setting the bags down on the sidewalk, he steps closer and leans over, his brown eyes staring into mine. "Are you okay?"

I blink slowly. "I fell."

Now another person stops but stands too far away for me to hear. The homeless man translates. "She can call an ambulance for you," he repeats.

I push myself up into a sitting position with my good arm. "No, I don't want one. My work is close and has a clinic." I'm not clear why, but a fear of being alone in an overcrowded, understaffed hospital overwhelms me. I want to go back to work, where they know me.

I try to figure out how to stand up with a bad arm on one side and a bad knee on the other.

"Can I help you?" the kind man asks.

I nod, so grateful someone will be there if I fall again. His hand supports my good elbow as I awkwardly stand. He steadies the back of my arm until I stop swaying. I watch him pick up my scratched phone from the ground. He waits patiently until I can return the phone to my front pocket.

The woman offers again to call an ambulance, but I shake my head. I point with my good arm to my building, a block away.

"I'm just there. I can walk by myself." And I'll be real-life testing some of the safety protocols I helped write.

I hobble forward, trying to keep the weight off my bad leg. The homeless man gathers his various bags and bunches them in one hand. He walks next to me, letting me set the pace. I'm grateful he stays close as we begin a slow procession down the street. Despite the traffic, I can hear the quiet shuffle of his shoes against the sidewalk and the woman's trailing behind.

"You need a soft pillow for that head. Helps. Make sure you get a really soft one," he murmurs as we cross the final intersection together. Tells me when he's hurt his head, a soft pillow really helps.

Reaching my building, I'm faced with the choice of climbing the broad steps or walking the longer ramp to the entranceway. Indecisive, I feel my knee throbbing.

I turn towards my good Samaritans. "This is where I work. I'll be okay," but the woman hurries away before I finish speaking.

I expect the homeless man will leave now, too. Instead, he accompanies me up the painful climb to the locked glass vestibule. Reaching the top step, I squint in the bright sunlight as my eyes snag on our shared reflection in the glass. My mouth opens, but I don't get a chance to thank him, though, because he disappears as a security guard comes bustling forward.

A week later, my arm is in a sling and I'm still recovering from a concussion. I share with my sister Julia that I'm so grateful to the man who stopped first.

"I wish there were a better way to say he helped when other people didn't, because I think it's harder to do when you're homeless. He was kind and humble. Is humanness a word?"

"No, but should be," Julia said. She rattled off a bunch of nonsense words, making me laugh.

"Stop, it only hurts when I laugh," only half-joking, as

I let my eyes drift close, leaning my head against my soft pillow to stop the start of a headache.

“Wait, I got it,” Julia said. “Human and humble—he had humanity.”

“Humanity,” I repeated, adjusting my sling. “A word in his honor. I like it.”

The Transported

by W. T. Polk

Micah broke into a sweat as the temperature rose from the thrusters' outflow. *Just land already!* The supply drone hovered for a few more seconds before settling onto the asteroid's crust fifty meters from the living container as the thrusters shut down. He sighed in relief as the container's temperature receded to its usual 308 Kelvin, albeit not nearly as quickly as it had risen. He watched the display as an arm extended out from the craft, then the container rocked as the arm locked onto the adjoining ore car. The coupling released, and the ore car slowly retreated into the supply craft.

Micah paced the perimeter of the living container. Ten steps along a barren gray wall, then left. Six steps past the bunk. Left again, ten steps passing the food storage and maintenance station. Left again, and six steps to the display.

Nothing yet. Ten steps, turn left. Six steps, turn left. Ten steps, turn left. Six steps. Turn left and start again.

After 15 minutes, the arm extended from the supply craft once again. The container rocked as the new ore car coupled to the living container, and the arm disappeared. The supply drone's thrusters restarted, and the inevitable temperature fluctuations began anew.

The supply craft had disappeared before the display provided the analysis:

Platinum Group Metals:	18.07 percent
Iron Ore:	80.10 percent
Silicates:	1.78 percent
Total weight:	15.7 tonnes

Micah pumped his fist, then sank into the seat back with a deep sigh. *18.07 percent! That should bring a nice return!* The

screen faded to black, then the supply list appeared.

Spare Parts:	replacement claw (15) 25mm drill bits (2) rocksaw blades
Explosives:	(90) nitroglycerin sticks
Foodstuffs:	140 kilos

His jaw dropped and he shot upright. He leaned forward until his face was only a few centimeters from the screen, then he placed his head in his hands and his body sagged. *I got 145 kilos for the last shipment, and it was only 17.65%. This makes no sense! It took nearly a hundred days to fill that ore container...*

Micah dragged himself off the chair and headed to the airlock, shaking his head. He suited up—pants, boots, pullover, and helmet. After securing the seals and checking for leaks, he opened the airlock. It took an hour to manhandle the four large bundles into the airlock.

He fidgeted as the airlock's environment equalized with the living quarters. *Three-quarters of an atmosphere, 15 percent oxygen, and 308 degrees Kelvin. Finally!* He shed the space suit, opened the door to the living container and began carrying in the gear.

Pouches of textured vegetable protein soon refilled the empty top shelf, full spice containers were filed on a pull-out drawer, and the Julia's carbohydrate bins of flour, rice, and beans were replenished. Once the food was stored and organized, he unpacked the bag of overalls and underwear, along with the carton of spare parts.

Micah measured 90 grams of textured vegetable protein into the Julia. *Can't do this every day, but after a two-day fast, I need it.* Turning to the display, he selected rice as the carbohydrate and curry as the spice. It was only 60 seconds

before dinner emerged, but the seconds crawled by as he anticipated his first meal in two days and first protein in a week. Once the plate was returned to the cleaner/storage rack, he fell into his sleep sack and sank into a restless sleep.

#

Three days had passed after the visit from the supply drone, days devoted to installing new tooling and catching up on production, when the apparition appeared on the horizon. Backlit by the sun, a bipedal figure strode purposefully across the asteroid's surface. *That can't be. Life can't exist on this rock.* Micah sat still and tried to will his respiration rate into the safe zone. *That looks like a Corporation space suit.*

The figure continued to approach, then stopped when it was about 30 meters from his mining rig. It gestured, one glove at helmet level, moving side-to-side. *It's waving. What the hell?* The figure paused, then waved again. Micah raised one glove and responded in kind.

The figure gestured towards the living container. Micah shook his head from side to side, but the figure persisted. Finally, he dismounted from the mining rig and walked back to his container. He opened the portal, then entered. The airlock was barely big enough for one, so he closed the airlock. Once the pressure had equalized, he shed his suit and moved into the container. Moving to the controls, he opened the airlock for the mysterious figure and watched through the porthole as the newcomer shed their spacesuit.

When the airlock door opened, Micah was face-to-face with another human for the first time since transportation. And not just a human. *A woman.* A tangle of black hair cascaded past olive cheekbones, continuing another six inches past her shoulder. The Corporation mining uniform

hung limply from her petite frame, but there were a few hints of a figure.

“Strong silent type, huh?”

It took a moment to make his mouth form words. “Who? ...Who are you?”

“My name is Helena. Helena Chan. They dumped me on this rock nine months ago. How long have you been here?”

“Micah Bountiful.” He shrugged. “Well, I just made my 26th exchange.” He was silent for a moment, then continued, “I was transported in 2156.”

Helena’s mouth crinkled into a smile and her narrow eyes twinkled. “Bountiful? That’s rich!” After chuckling to herself, she continued, “You’ve been here a little more than six Earth years. I bet that’s a record. What’s your secret?”

“I still want to live. More than anything.” He waited a moment, but she did not speak. “How’d you find me?”

“Those bastards mean for us to die alone out here—without a trace. I don’t intend to give them the satisfaction, so I fabricated beacons from spare parts for the mining rig’s quantum locator and attached them to each ore container the supply drone collected. I was hoping that the container would get assigned to another miner on this asteroid and provide me with a location. The first two were assigned to miners on other rocks in the belt, the third time was the charm. It only took four hours to walk from my container.”

“I have no idea what any of that means. I managed a call center before I accepted transportation.”

“Beats hanging. Who’d you kill?”

“They convicted me of killing my graduate advisor. I didn’t do it. It was a sham.”

“Of course, it was a sham. They need miners, you’re a big guy, and I bet you were reasonably fit. Wait. Graduate advisor?”

“Classical literature, after work. Just working on my thesis.”

The black mane shook in apparent disbelief. “How would that make you a more productive employee? And your prof was a complete drain on society. Sounds like the murder and conviction were a win-win for the Corporation.”

He shrugged. “I did my job. I thought that was enough. What about you? Who’d they say you killed? Did you do it?”

“They said I killed my husband and my best friend.” She paused for a second, then a quiet smile emerged. “Hell yeah, I did it. I came home early from a business trip to surprise my husband. He was surprised, all right.” The smile disappeared. “They were *in our bed*. Promises matter. They matter to me, anyway.”

Both sat very still for a few minutes.

“Hungry? I program a mean beef and bean chili.”

“Famished, but is there another option? Bean chili does unmannerly things to me.”

Micah’s mouth fell open again, then he shook his head slowly. “Me too, actually. After six years alone... beef stew?”

“That works.”

Micah began programming the Julia. “You first. One bowl and one spoon. One chair, too, but I can sit on the carb bins.”

“I don’t mind sharing, as long as that is okay with you.”

Two shared bowls of stew later, Micah suddenly winced and raised a hand to his temple. Helena pushed back from the table. “That’s my sign to head out. Oxygen level is falling fast—the environmental unit can’t support two humans. Hell, it is marginal for one—like an Arizona summer but in the thin air of the Rockies. It will rebound once I get back in my suit.”

Micah managed a nod.

“I am about two weeks from filling my ore car. When I get my empty, I will relocate to that flat spot 400 meters away. Then it will be my turn to make dinner. And you can read me some of that literature stuff you have been writing from

memory.” She gave him a hug and headed for the external airlock to suit up.

The low-oxygen headache got worse before it got better, but an hour after Helena left he could think clearly once more. And once he could think clearly, the only thing he could think about was Helena Chan. *Olive skin tones, big dark eyes, a petite nose, and a luxurious riot of jet-black hair with a hint of curls. And that smile! A little frightening when she smiled and admitted killing them, though...* He wondered if she would really return. *She would never be with a man like me on Earth. But we aren't on Earth. It's me or being alone.*

#

Twelve days later, his agonizing wait came to a merciful end. A new apparition appeared on the horizon. A living container, supporting an ore car and mining rig on opposite sides, headed slowly towards Micah. A few hundred yards short of his own container, it turned to face the solar shielding wall towards the sun. As the eight tires ground to a halt on the plateau, Micah realized that additional machinery was being towed along.

Micah stopped short just two steps into Helena's living container. The sleeping pad lay on the floor underneath the missing fold-out bunk, and tools were piled on the floor where the workbench should be. The spare parts for the mining rig were conspicuously absent. “I guess that explains the how for the apparatus you towed in behind the ore car. I'm still wondering *what*, though.”

“Micah, I am 45 kilos soaking wet. Operating the rig is as much as I can handle; dragging the ore back to the container is more than I can handle. I figured out pretty quickly that I needed some mechanical advantage, so I built an ore shuttle. With it doing the dirty work, I can fill an ore car in two months.”

Micah's jaw sagged, then he shook his head. "That takes me three months, and I am nearly a hundred kilos. Brains always beat brawn. Too bad my brain does literature."

She smiled. "My brains, your brawn. We'll be fine, baby."
She just called me baby.

#

The supply drone had returned twice before Helena announced she was moving in. "I am tired of sleeping in separate containers. I want us to be together whenever we aren't mining, not just for meals and a quick fuck."

Micah chose his words carefully. "I want that too. More than anything! But... those low oxygen headaches... I don't see how..."

"Oh, ye of little faith! You are looking at the girl who built an ore shuttle from a sleeping bunk, a workbench, and some replacement parts for the digger. What do you think I've been doing in my container while you are recreating the classics? I'll tell you—I've been figuring out how to piggyback my environmental unit onto your container. That will give us enough oxygen for two."

#

Micah yawned, and rolled over to see Helena sitting up with a distant look in her eyes. "What do you say we roll over and spend the day on the sleeping mat? With two ore shuttles, we're earning rations at a faster pace than we can consume them. The spare living container has a hundred days of food, and a small stockpile of spare parts for the mining rigs. What do you say we give ourselves a break?"

She shook her head at him and placed her hands on her hips. "What if the drones quit coming? What if one of us

gets sick or injured? We shouldn't slow down until we are bursting at the seams."

"Why would the drones stop coming?"

"Do you really think they've stopped having wars just because they launched some murderous miners into space? Do you think we will be the priority if war breaks out? What if they find another asteroid belt where the yields are better?"

Micah made a sour face, but rose from the sleeping mats. He walked the six steps to the Julia and summoned oatmeal.

"What is actually bothering you Micah?"

"Why did you attach a sensor to the ore car last week?"

"If other miners are placed on this rock, I want to know about it. When they reuse that ore car, if it goes to a miner somewhere on this rock, I will know..."

Micah sighed. "Are you unhappy with me?"

Helena's mouth gaped, then her eyes rolled. "Is that why you've been acting so weird lately? You don't have to worry, baby." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and looked into his eyes. "You are my soulmate, and not just because we share this rock. You'd have been my soulmate on Earth if we could have found each other. Where else would I find someone that can recite Burns and Shakespeare to me? Where would you find someone to build you an ore shuttle? We were destined for each other."

Micah chewed his lip, but nodded tentatively. "I can't—can't help but worry."

Helena's face turned serious. "Would it help if we got married? I've been waiting for you to ask, but that is pretty old-fashioned of me. I'm willing to commit to you. How about it, my rememberer of classics?"

#

Micah was insistent. "This is the third day in a row that you've skipped breakfast. You need to eat!"

“I just don’t feel like it. Besides, I had a big dinner.”

“Let me check you with the Theranometer. I insist!”

Helena sighed, then offered her index finger. Micah drew a single drop of blood, then waited.

“Diagnosis is space sickness. You stay home today and rest.”

Helena laid her head in Micah’s lap. “You win. Before you head for the mining site, please tell me a poem. Maybe that Burns thing?”

“My love is like a red, red rose that’s newly sprung in June...”

#

The chills came on suddenly. Micah wanted to stand, but couldn’t. “Honey, I don’t feel too good. My arms and legs are kind of numb. I’m cold. Could you get the Theranometer?”

Instead of heading for the supply cabinet, Helena knelt down by his chair and said, “I have good news, Micah. I’m pregnant. We’re going to have a baby!”

Micah could feel sweat bead on his forehead, but he couldn’t move his arms to wipe it. “That’s great news, but...”

Helena continued, “I wanted to tell you earlier, but I needed to be sure I got past the danger point. I’m at 14 weeks!”

“That’s great, but my arms...”

“Unfortunately, the two environmental units cannot provide enough oxygen for three of us. I was hoping we would locate another miner and take their environmental unit, but no such luck. Since our environmental units can’t support the three of us, one of us would eventually be forced to choose. I wanted to wait, just in case, and I know you want to live. More than anything—”

Helena paused and bit her lip before continuing, “I couldn’t take that chance. Now that I am past the morning

sickness, I will be showing soon. I decided to choose now, and I chose the baby. Don't think it means I don't love you. I do, but I have to provide for our baby."

Micah's tongue felt thick, and his own words sounded distant. "But we promised—"

"Till death do us part, my love. I kept my promise."

All Hallows Parrish

by Stephen Huff

*All Hallows' Church,
All Hallows' Parrish, Maryland
November 1860*

Nightfall's half-moon having long since declined into its western grave, Tammás Auger accepted a determined brightening of his eastern horizon with grim expectation. Despite an overhead sprawl of Maryland's wilds, he knew that faraway end of the world would soon bleed crimson with a chill light that little warmed and rarely cheered. His steaming breath told him so, as it whispered fall's unkind regard or wheezed winter's cruel animus into dense clouds that momentarily boiled at his back before dissolving to nothing. Nose and ears burning coldly.

Trailing slack reins, he had walked his borrowed mount, Nuckelavee, from South River's lower ferry along Solomons Island Road's twisted course as it alternately climbed or plunged across the clay ridgelines of an ancient seabed. Now drained to the shores of Chesapeake Bay, the ruts and potholes of his crooked path drifted ankle-deep with rustling leaves, while withered vine, creeper, and bough pressed close, so the roadbed cut a forest-draped cavern through all.

Nuckelavee snorted anxiously. Auger's stiffening spine signaled agreement.

Somebody—or some *things*—had been trailing them since their ford of Glebe Creek hours earlier. After passage of countless miles, here the old post road provided scarcely more than a footpath between overgrown hedgerows and a web of wildlife trails that paralleled its run, so their mischievous forays sometimes passed within reach.

Despite the sporadic betrayal of rustling twig or leaf,

Tammas never managed to lay eyes upon his stealthy admirers. Yet in turn, he suspected they could easily watch him.

Mister Nightshade. Struck from black iron upon a demonic forge and Satan's gritty palm working the hammer, Tammas stood tall and straight, his flat-brimmed hat, coat, and trousers cut from breezy wool while rugged steel-heeled boots glinted scarce starlight with a miserly sparkle. Angular and severe, the man's face fashioned unreadable sign from bristling brow, darkly gleaming eyes, a crooked nose too many times broken, and thinly pressed lips that could not slant a genuine smile. Odd twists of his torso sometimes revealed hints of a gold watch, chain and fob, while a twinned brace of pistols swung easily from holsters strapped beneath both arms, one jostling for space above a giant knife strung from his broad leather belt.

As black, fierce and wicked, Auger's spirited stallion stomped sulkily along after. All the hobbles of an unexpected night-run having hours previously snapped loose from its powerful limbs, the animal strained for mounted haste, which Tammas denied. For now.

Nuckelavee. Sea demon borne upon an ill tide.

Auger, that illness. Come to cure via cull, and relief from his unwholesome remedies as unknown as mercy and regret.

His perked ears tracking movement at both his right and left elbow, Tammas pondered the haft of pistol and blade, and then quickly discarded use of such tactics. A definite lightness of footfall and scarcity of shudder among leaf-scattering boughs spoke of small weight and slight stature.

Women, maybe. Children, more likely.

Perhaps naughty farm boys gone absent from morning duties to spy upon the grim devil bound for Friendship along this forgotten way. Perhaps. Yet Auger thought not, though he sometimes heard these strange, unseen sprites snigger

most mischievously.

Theirs seemed a deranged sort of merriment. Of the kind that too often and too easily yielded to teasing and then torment. Fools hung and witches burned before such prankish delight. Tammias well knew.

So informed, he monitored his flanks with a side-eye, and he pondered the nature of this latest bedevilment with a stoic sense of resignation. Although his journey south from Annapolis had passed rapidly from enigmatic to bizarre, here he encountered a stranger draft of odd.

Yet he refused to question the nature of a mad populous that would bless the midnight errands of their wayward children, and then send them off as proxies to wage a demonic shadow war. Against a monster.

Such tactics he too well knew from vast experience with human bloodletting. An evil sort of arbitrage, those demented people would sacrifice their own progeny to draw their hated enemy into hasty and thoughtless reaction. Spooked, they might entice him to murder a child. Careless, he might allow one close enough to murder him instead. Either way, their unholy strategy proscribed suffering for both, and a noose, knife or bullet for Tammias Auger.

He would have none of it. Rather, he chose to climb Solomons Island Road toward its intersection with the Brick Church and South River Club cutoffs where they crossed at the top of its next low summit. There, the tangled Maryland forest opened wide to reveal a crimson wash of pre-dawn sunshine that spread brilliantly across endless rows of freshly scythed cornstalks.

Standing in silhouette beneath one sprawling willow, a single brick building awaited him. Silently hanging, its bronze bell kept vigil from its freestanding tower. This open structure dominated its northern courtyard, while a garden of stones surrounded its southwestern flank, each a

memorial graven with names and dates. Born and died.

As he once more climbed to a level roadbed, a trio of diminutive shades at last trampled free of the forest's edge perhaps fifty paces ahead. At the center of the lane, they huddled together to make an obvious fanfare of backhanded whispering punctuated by malicious giggles. Standing as they did atop that backlit highpoint, Tammas noted a stomp of bare feet and an absence of coats, though morning's dampened chill steamed their breath. Too, their oddly misshapen heads betrayed a presence of strange headcovers.

Masks, he thought. Of a style that he had previously encountered, so he better understood their origin, all doubts dispelled.

For the glare of sunlight rising behind them, Tammas could not discern individual features, but their stature and bearing outwardly disguised these figures as childish pranksters. Then again, Tammas thought they might be dwarves pretending to be children, since their mannerisms and the intensity of their regard hinted at a wiser and more dangerous age.

Ingenué assassins, perhaps. Killers disguised by pigtails and short pants.

Though leery, Tammas neither stopped nor slowed his pace. Rather, he approached while leading his horse with cool confidence and an apparently casual air. Arms and hands hung easily. Weapons at rest.

Then another gaggle of diminutive shadow-bound admirers pushed through the brambles behind him, where they collected amid tortuous ruts and pothole craters, their oversized heads knocked together in a hushed whisper. When his head turned to mark their arrival, these impish forms boldly teased him.

Moving forward without pause, those leading shades receded before him while his trailers followed, their features

concealed by a lower darkness. Nuckelavee snorted anxiously, and again his impatient hoofbeats encouraged Tammas to mount and ride. An urge that Tammas yet resisted.

As Nuckelavee peaked the grade, these diminutive creatures began singing a wicked song that rhymed the fate of hanged men and immolated women. Although their shrill chorus mocked his very thoughts but moments earlier, Tammas refused to question the providence of such eerie coincidence. Since his arteries and veins stirred with the same black stuff that pulsed the vessels of all earthly demons.

Hing, hang, hung! See what the hangman swung!

Hang, hung, hing! Look at the bad man swing!

Hung, hing, hang! 'Til bones the rotter swang!

This, a schoolyard taunt favored by sadists and bullies of a higher caste. Always directed against lesser folk, and not every hanged man an adulterer, thief or killer. Not every burned woman a witch. As Auger too well knew.

Swing, swang, swung! Which witch has Mather hung?

Swang, swung, swing! Striker and match they sing!

Swung, swing, swang! 'Til bones her ashes hang!

In a scatter, they fled with a final peal of sadistic laughter. Wisely so.

Watching them tumble into the fade of night, Auger's teeth grinded together. His icy heart worked painfully until he felt each throb echo from the tips of his fingers and toes. With its next lumpish turn, autumn's first chill rapidly faded and his frosted breath next steamed infernal.

Too well he knew their kind. Their kin. Their way.

Poisoned ground. Poisoned seed. Poisoned tree. Poisoned fruit.

For every rotten fall, a clutching hand, willing mouth, and empty gullet. Despite its vague reek, Tammas knew treachery's sickly sweet could easily lure an eager tongue. Those unknown to higher tastes inevitably took delight. Too

easily succumbed to the poison of occasional flavor.

Himself included. A dead man walking.

Despite all the torment promised in that shining curse, the dawn, his weary body momentarily stiffened to snap reins, mount and give chase. Firearms held high. Both hammers thrice cocked and murderously ready.

Then *her* voice graced his being. Soothing. Calming.

Balm in an unforgettable whisper. Salve from a forever dream.

The blinding glare of an unreasoning rage gradually yielded to clearer vision. Calm derived from slow, deep breathing. Discipline forged with a vengeful will, purpose returned.

Tammas, he heard her hush from an unbearable distance, *thou art beloved*.

Hearing, he remembered, and he *believed*. As he believed nothing else.

Swallowing an unpalatable resolve with a heave of razor-cut shoulders, Tammas numbly led Nuckelavee forward into an all-but-forgotten land of living people, extant places and tangible things. Mortal objects. Immortal toil.

Where his path crossed Brick Church Road, the silhouette of this namesake marked sunrise at the trampled crux of a four-way intersection, itself occupying the southwestern, top-right-handed notch and himself descending from the north. There, just shy of its join, Auger stood amid a scatter of tiny footprints cast in mud and animal dung. These traced a dimly-lit trail between rows of scythed cornstalks that surrounded the distant church's tombstone galleries.

As he pondered prankish enigmas, echoes of a rattled wooden bolt and screaming iron hinges drew his attention. All Hallows' congregation emerged in entourage from their church's front doorway. Whispering softly, these specters shuffled along together with all the hesitance of condemned

felons, their gallows awaiting at the end of a short walk.

Perhaps ten of them. No. Thirteen. Mostly women. A handful of men.

At the left-handed sweep of his vision, Auger discovered a second mob moving like dark clots before the crimson hemorrhage of morning's unwelcome nativity. Less cohesive yet bolder, these human-shaped phantoms ascended from the intersection's eastern arm, this being South River Club Road, an exaggerated aboriginal foottrail that eventually terminated on the bay's distant shore.

Marking time by passage of heartbeat and hoof fall, Tammas plotted their simultaneous arrival before the gates of All Hallows Church. Perhaps calculating this same result, the South River congregation soon hastened its collective pace to seize preemptive control of the crossroads.

Improving daylight then revealed shadowed outlines of farm implements wielded as weapons, and Tammas noted a presence of masks there, too. As before, these people wore antiquated clothing cut in a stilted, fleshless style bound together by crude brass buckles and wide leather belts. They collected across Solomons Island Road in a surly idle.

Being its only traveler, Auger understood himself to be the intended object of their barricade. Once more he resisted Nuckelavee's insistent snorts, though the animal's head tossed to accuse him of grossest stupidity.

Without protesting his innocence in this matter, Tammas coolly eyed All Hallows' frustrated approach, from which a lone male figure emerged as its leader. This man's sunrise silhouette motioned for pause, and his comrades shambled into an according order behind him. Both parties ignored one another but turned to confront the highway's lone nighttime rider instead.

Tammas neared without breaking pace. His mount reluctantly stamped itself still when he ultimately stopped

several yards from both opposing lines, and the beast's fierce snorts spoke of outraged protests. Nuckelavee strained to rear over perceived foes, his steel-shod hooves striking violently downward to crush skulls and scatter brains.

A soothing hand calmed his animal's warlike demeanor as a nervous titter passed among his strange hosts. Casting a timely eye eastward, Tammias reminded of the hour to encourage progress.

Apparently fearless, All Hallows' congregation turned toward the roadway and then surged forward as a single force. Though aggressive, these people wielded neither weapon nor tool, and none raised a threatening hand or insulting voice. Rather, demonstrating unknown ability, they pushed their opposition away from the crossroads' center, their obvious threat applied in a manner that had not been visibly apparent to Tammias Auger.

Though they bristled angrily and their weapons expressed homicidal loathing, the South River mob yielded ground without obvious retaliation. Step by backward step, these threatening specters returned to Club House Road where they stirred a frustrated mangle. Grumbling.

Now All Hallows' leader turned to confront Tammias and Nuckelavee. A sweep of his left arm invited his guests to approach the churchyard gate. Enter and pass beyond.

Tammias resisted. Again, the stranger invited with anxious insistence. His people collected at his side to clear the gateway and further encourage Auger's choice.

Before he could comply or deny, a flurry of movement and sound drew all eyes. Skittering raucously through the graveyard's cantered monuments, they watched a dozen childish sprites cavort among the dead. Alternating the refrains of their wicked song with smatters of cruel laughter, like a plague of rabid vermin they irreverently trampled ancestral tombs to press through the rails of a wooden fence,

which they purposely toppled while tumbling into highway ruts.

Traversing Solomons Island Road behind the congregation's twisting backs, that gaggle of feral youth picked through rows of withered cornstalks until they joined ranks with the armed South River mob. Auger's gaze narrowed around angrily squinted eyes. Though their allegiance failed to surprise him, he could not happily countenance the intentional spoilage of so many young lives. Like the legs of an anxious spider, the fingers of his free right hand writhed against an empty palm.

Pontificating by shielding his brow behind his own right hand, Preacher monitored a threat of sunrise, and then he cocked his head to emphasize his offer, saying, "Come, friend. We have prepared a sanctified chamber for you. You will rest behind drawn shutters and a barred door. We have provided a bed and blanket. Fresh water. Sustenance. Blessed peace." His pleasant, mildly effeminate voice soothed and calmed, as intended.

A slender woman parted from her kin to stand behind his left shoulder. His wife, perhaps. Or an older sister. A spinster cousin. Without smiling or scowling but with an unnervingly emotionless expression, she added, "Our menfolk will tend your mount with expert care. He will be ready come dusk."

"When you must depart," resentfully asserted an unknown third.

"As you have already tarried too long," added a begrudging fourth.

Preacher's countenance flexed shamefully to note this utterance, but he offered neither rebuke nor condemnation. Tammas refused offense.

"Will your church harbor condemned murderers now, Jonathan Locke?" protested South River, speaking with the

bass, gruff voice of a single man.

“Aye,” chimed a second South River shade, also male, “we know this one. Goodly Virginians hanged him last year outside Richmond. A damned killer!”

“A warlock! Sire of witches!”

“Nonsensical rumors! Patent falsehoods!” protested All Hallows. “You clearly see the man—the actual living man—standing before us. He has neither been condemned nor hanged.”

“We know his name. His face, too,” asserted the first voice, apparently South River’s headman, “having read of his crimes beneath an etching of his likeness as printed in the Weekly Examiner last October. We know you receive the same news.”

“A gossip’s rag authored by hatemongers and slaveholders,” rebutted Preacher. “With such a poisoned tongue, next you may quote a Satanic psalm or curse the name of your savior.”

“Judas!” raged South River.

“Deceivers!” rejoined All Hallows.

Though the first group swelled violently, some inscrutable purpose stayed their murderous riot. For now. Instead, they stood a frustrated and resentful watch as Preacher drew their hated foe toward the brick bound sanctuary of All Hallows’ Church, his brooding congregation following unhappily. While tendering many backward glances fraught with worry.

As a trundle of heavy feet and spiteful stares, South River followed Brick Church Road westward along the split-rail fence. None dared to cross over to hallowed ground, yet neither would they depart while they yet kept hope for blooded battle with a detested enemy.

Keeping that deranged lot in the side of his eye once he passed through their churchyard gate, Tammasthoughtlessly

turned toward the most obvious doorway. Whereupon someone quickly placed a guiding hand beneath his right elbow to steer his errant wandering without physically contacting his person.

Apologetically, Preacher led him aside, saying, "Please accept our regrets, Mister Auger, but we cannot welcome you inside our house of worship. We know you understand why."

"His very footsteps leave a blasphemous taint," protested the same begrudging voice that had earlier encouraged Auger's quick departure. "We have drawn lots to choose one evil over another!"

"Portentous times!"

Calling from the near distance, South River caustically added, "Death to traitors and necromancers!"

"Apostate abolitionists!" call another.

"Demonic filth!" brayed All Hallows in collective rebuttal.

Shooing his flock hastily around his church's northern wall to follow a stone pathway between the piers of its bell tower, Preacher admonished unseemly speech and unchristianly behavior. Beneath a wagging finger he breathlessly quoted the scripture until All Hallows' heeled and followed quietly.

In turn, South River's mob dogged them from the distance without further heckling. Clearly, nothing more needed to be said since their despondent glares promised all.

Behind the chapel and beyond several concentric arcs of east-facing markers, a small wooden hut occupied the apron of the churchyard's descending western grade. Covered by bristling cornstalk stumps, this steepening slope thereafter plunged the westbound Brick Church Road into an expanse of malarial bogs and quagmire swamps. An omnipresent stench of death rose from its muddy bottoms, while rising

sunlight made no impression upon its shadows.

As they neared their parsonage's open doorway, a new trample of nimble footsteps disturbed All Hallows' congregation when a swarm of feral children poured between them, their arms, hands and fingers rifling through pockets and purses with the thorough cunning of seasoned thieves. Auger immediately felt a tug against the haft of his huge hunting knife, which threatened to pull away from the shelter of his coattail, which also drew low with the press of a slender arm thrust deeply into its exterior pocket. *Where Miss Molly had so recently stashed her forgotten talisman.*

Without dropping Nuckelavee's slack reins, Tammas snatched offending appendages into firm grips that savagely crushed muscle, tendon and bone, promptly eliciting resultant squeals from both wounded children. Each fell away to writhe upon the ground and groan wretchedly through gritted teeth. Then that gang of stunted criminals flowed away as quickly as it arrived.

Spinning, Auger watched them scamper through the overgrown fence while dragging their wounded in a stumble. Recalling recent promises of salvation owed to a local widow woman, he marveled, "Which bear the Goodbody name?"

Turning to confront Tammas with pale face and boggled wit, Preacher softly replied, "They *all* belong to Molly Goodbody."

(to be continued)

Editor's Note: Previous installments of this story appeared in earlier issues of Pen in Hand, the most recent being "Solomons Island Way." Following the tradition of Charles Dickens, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, and other well-known authors of Victorian times, Stephen Huff promises further episodes of this tall tale in future issues of Pen in Hand.

POET AND WRITER BIOGRAPHIES

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 chapbooks, *The Poet Who Loves Pythagoras* (April 2023) and *Arranging Words* (October 2023). Her fourth book of poetry, *Traveling on the Number Nine Bus*, will be 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)

Ipatia Apostolides holds a PhD in leadership, specializing in English, an MFA in creative writing, and a BA in biology. She has published four novels and a poetry book under the pen name Patty Apostolides and has published poetry in several journals. She currently teaches English online at a university.

Lora Berg writes with a light touch from her home in Maryland. She is the author of *The Mermaid Wakes* (Macmillan Caribbean) 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.

Jean Burgess is an author, playwright, and editor. She writes both nonfiction and fiction, enjoys speaking, and volunteers with a Teen Writing Club. Her debut fiction, *That Summer She Found Her Voice: A Retro Novel*, was published by Apprentice House Press in 2024. Burgess holds an MA in theatre from

Northwestern University and a PhD in educational theatre from New York University.

Ellen Coffey: Poetry has always been Coffey's preferred form of expression. Her poems have been published in numerous literary arts magazines, including *Pen in Hand*, *Backbone Mountain Review*, *Allegany Magazine*, *Poets Choice*, and several other publications. She is also the current president of the Cumberland Chapter of the Maryland Writers' Association.

Roderick Deacey is a performing poet, reading with bass player and drummer to emulate the Beat Poets' poetry and 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 2020 Mid-Atlantic Song Contest held by the Songwriters Association of Washington, followed by the Silver Award in 2022 and the Gold Award again in 2023. He is a Pushcart Prize nominee and his contemporary poems appear regularly in literary journals.

Stephen Demczuk earned a PhD in biochemistry and molecular biology. After ten years of research in Europe, he founded Beer Around the World, Europe's first beer-of-the-month club, and Baltimore's RavenBeer, an award-winning beer marketed after the stories and poems of Edgar Allan Poe. Demczuk is a board member of Baltimore's Poe House and Museum and the National Edgar Allan Poe Theatre. His goal is to hike the 46 High Peaks in the Adirondack Mountains. At this writing, he's at 39.

Kay White Drew (a.k.a. Katherine White, MD) is a retired neonatologist and author of the 2024 memoir *Stress Test* (Apprentice House Press). Her essays, poems, and stories appear

in *Pen in Hand*, *Bay to Ocean Journal*, *New Verse News*, *Gargoyle*, *Loch Raven Review*, and others. She has a short story forthcoming in the Washington Writers' Publishing House anthology, *America's Future*. She lives in Rockville, Maryland, with her husband and enjoys nature, road trips, and reading.

Donna Ferron's publishing credits include newspaper and magazine articles. She recently completed the Stanford Certificate Program in Novel Writing and has a novel in progress.

Claudia Gary teaches workshops on villanelle, sonnet, natural meter, persona poems, poetry vs. trauma, etc., at The Writer's Center (writer.org), currently via Zoom. Author of *Humor Me* (2006) and several chapbooks, most recently *Genetic Revisionism*, she is also a health science writer, visual artist, and composer of tonal chamber music and art songs. Her chapbooks are available via the email address at pw.org/content/claudia_gary. Her 2022 article on setting poems to music is online at <https://straightlabyrinth.info/conference.html>.

Gabby Gilliam is a writer, an aspiring teacher, and a mom. She lives in the DC metro area with her son. She is a founding member of Old Scratch Short Form Collective. Her first chapbook, *No Ocean Spit Me Out*, was released in June 2024 from Old Scratch Press. Her poetry and fiction have appeared online and in multiple anthologies. You can find her online at gabbygilliam.com or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/GabbyGilliamAuthor.

Diane Helentjaris has enjoyed writing poetry since her Ohio childhood and has been published in anthologies and in her chapbook *Diaspora*. She wrote *The Indenture of Ivy O'Neil*, which won the MWA 2024 Novel Competition in the

history and romance category. Her latest book is a biography, *I Ain't Afraid—The World of Lulu Bell Parr, Wild West Cowgirl*.

David Hoffman is an emeritus US Geological Survey wild-life biologist/ ecotoxicologist and retired adjunct professor. He is the author of books, book chapters, and reviews. His *Handbook of Ecotoxicology* was a bestseller for CRC Press. His short stories appear in the *Bay to Ocean Journal*, *Pen in Hand*, and the *Journal of the Florence Griswold Museum of Art*. He lives in Bivalve, Maryland, and enjoys distance swimming, birding, cooking, homebrewing, walking with his dog, and feeding nine feral cats.

Stephen Huff was born in Texas and currently resides in Chesapeake Beach, Maryland. He is the author of novels, short stories, and poetry. He is also a published scientist with expertise in bioinformatics (computational biology) and machine learning. He is the president of the Maryland Writers' Association. Message him at Stephen@StephenHuff.com.

A.L. Kaplan is the author of the novel *Star Touched* and several short stories, including "Hummingbird." Her most recent publication is *Mark of the Goddess*, which includes original illustrations. Kaplan is a member of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Writers Association, is the past president of the Maryland Writers' Association, and holds an MFA in sculpture from the Maryland Institute College of Art. When not writing, she delves into other art forms, including photography, drawing, costuming, and creating book covers.

Jon Ketzner wrote *Hillbilly Anthology* (2023), *Where's That Bastard Owen* (2024), and *Bad Consequence* (2025), published by J2B. His work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Washington Post*, *Baltimore Sun*, and *Cumberland Times-News*. He lived in

Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, before moving to Cumberland in 1990. As a retired actuary, he enjoys the outdoors, writing, and reading. Influences: Henry Fielding, Joseph Heller, and Gregory McDonald.

Elizabeth Knapp is the author of three poetry collections: *Requiem with an Amulet in Its Beak* (2019), winner of the Jean Feldman Poetry Prize; *The Spite House* (2011), winner of the De Novo Poetry Prize; and the forthcoming *Causa Sui* (2025), winner of the Three Mile Harbor Book Award. She is the founding director of the Low-Residency MFA in Creative Writing at Hood College and lives in Maryland with her family.

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.

Elisabeth Lang is a sci-fi/fantasy writer living in Maryland after relocating five times. A member of the Maryland Writers' Association, the WOW Writing Group, she is also NPR's Assistant Treasurer. Her short story "Drace" was published in *Pen in Hand*, as was a flash-fiction piece.

Kari Martindale is a poet, spoken word artist, and teaching artist who has read at arts guilds across Maryland and performed at the White House. She has been published in a number of literary journals and anthologies, has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, and received honorable mention in the 2024 annual *Writer's Digest* Writing Competition. Martindale recently moved to Alaska but remains on the board of Maryland Writers' Association. She holds an MA in linguistics from George Mason University.

Pamela Mathison-Levitt is a chronically ill, disabled poet and homeschool mother living in the DMV. Her work often explores chronic illness, relationships, and mental health. Her work has been published in or is forthcoming in the following publications: *Exposed Brick Literary Magazine*, *Mid-Atlantic Review*, *Literary Mama blog*, *Emerald Coast Review*, *The Anthology for Appalachian Writers*, and the *Mighty*. You can find her work on Instagram @pmmlevitt or Facebook at Lines and Branches.

Cindy Miao is a poet and student at the Holton-Arms School in Bethesda, Maryland. Nationally recognized by the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, her work appears in *Emerging Voices* (Volumes 7–10) and *Pen in Hand*. She serves as vice president of the Potomac Teen Writers' Club and as the Arts & Entertainment editor for her school newspaper, *Scribbler*. When she's not studying or writing, Miao enjoys watching improv shows and discovering new hiking trails.

K.A. Murray is a writer, therapist, and mom living in Baltimore County, Maryland, with her wife and three young sons. K.A. has written numerous short stories featured on the website Reedsy, one of which was published in the magazine *Prompted*. She is currently querying her first novel and loves to use her knowledge of psychology and mental health in her fiction.

Anita Nahal is a professor, poet, children's book writer, novelist, and short-film maker. Nominated twice for the Pushcart Prize (2022, 2023); finalist, Tagore Literary Prize, 2023, for her poetry book, *Kisses at the espresso bar*, Nahal won the Nissim Prize in Literature for 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 three-minute very short film, “Clubs my sinful dance muse,” won the best super short film at the Five Continents International Film Festival, Venezuela, 2024. Nahal has one novel, five poetry collections, four for children, and five edited anthologies published. Her latest poetry book, *Animals-prose poems on sentiency, decency and indecency*, was released by Kelsay in May 2025. A Fulbright and NEH scholar, Nahal teaches at a university in Washington, DC (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 BA in writing seminars from Johns Hopkins University, where she received the 2019 Chaffee Writing Prize and the H. Lee Kanter Woodrow Wilson Research Fellowship.

Carolyn Phippen is a writer and educator based in Baltimore, Maryland, where she works for the CollegeBound Foundation supporting students on their paths to and through college. She holds a bachelor’s degree in creative writing and a master’s degree in education policy from Vanderbilt University. Her Substack blog, called *The Long Game*, discusses sustainability, empowerment, and joy in education, and her essays explore issues of identity, neurodivergence, humor, and the millennial female experience.

W.T. Polk is a retired civil servant with numerous technical publications but a latecomer to the world of fiction. After breaking his knee the week before COVID shut down the world, he began writing his first novel. Dissatisfied with the result, he has been honing his craft ever since through creative writing classes and participation in a local critique

group. He is currently working on a murder mystery novel set in early Tudor England.

Kyara Santana Roman lives in Frederick, Maryland, and attends Oakdale High School. She is a rising senior and is a member of the Maryland Writers' Association Middletown Teen Writing Club. Roman has always loved giving life to her imagination through writing, and she has recently begun to express her emotions through poetry. Roman hopes to attend a good college and continue writing in the process.

Greg Rosenthal, a recent retiree, worked in communications for the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) for decades, publishing professional articles and blog posts via 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 Cooperative*, *MuddyUm*, *House of Haiku*, and *No Crime in Rhymin'*. His book, *Tactical Writing Guide*, is on sale on Amazon.com.

Terri Simon's chapbooks are *Ringing the Bell* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, 2021) and *Ghosts of My Own Choosing* (Flutter Press, 2017). Her work appears in *The Avenue*, *Third Wednesday*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *Slant*, *Pen in Hand*, and other journals. She is a founding member of the EC Poetry and Prose writing collective and began Fallen Tree Press in 2022 (<http://www.terricsimon.com>).

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 liter-

ary 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, Maryland. She writes poetry and is working on a family memoir.

F. J. Talley writes both mystery and science fiction novels in addition to short fiction. A lifelong educator, he has published two novels in the Flight of the Raven science fiction series: *Twin Worlds* and *Desert Son*. In addition, he is the author of *Take Hart* and *Hard Look Back*, two novels in the Stephanie Hart mystery series. He has also contributed short fiction to several anthologies in a variety of genres.

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 *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Spillwords*, *Third Street Review*, and anthologies, including *I Am My Father's Daughter*. Her chapbook, *Eyes at the Edge of the Woods* (Bottlecap Press), was published in June 2024. She won *Pen in Hand's* Haiku Challenge in 2023. Villemaire is a contributing writer to *The Ethel* from AARP. She researches family history, volunteers at the library, and propagates African violets.

Susanne Wolf was first published at age 12, when she won an honorable mention for fiction in the Baltimore County Middle School Writing Contest. While attending York College of Pennsylvania, she won first and second place for poetry in the 2009 Bob Hoffman Writing Contest. Recently, Wolf had her short story, "The Reluctant Lady," published in the anthology *Camelot 13*. When not writing, Wolf enjoys playing Magic: the Gathering, reading manga and light novels, and watching anime.

Joni Youse is a poet and Frederick County resident. Her poetry has appeared in *Pen in Hand*, 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*. Joni Youse enjoys colder weather, northern mountains, and collecting vintage paperback books.

Joanne Zaslow dedicated her career as a writer-editor-communications professional to the US government and non-profit sectors. She has a master’s degree in professional writing. Today, she serves as the Maryland Writers’ Association newsletter editor and runs a book club she founded years ago. She writes fiction and creative nonfiction and has been published in *The Urbanite*, *The Utne Reader*, *30 Ways to Love Maryland*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Pen in Hand*, Maryland Historical Society, and in other publications.



These works of art were featured in a national juried exhibition at The Delaplaine Arts Center in Frederick, Maryland, May-July 2025. They inspired ekphrastic poems, which can be found within.

Top Left: “Insert 25 Cents to Feel Something”
by Chris Combs

Top Right: “Life Cycle 1.0” *by Ruth Lozner*

Bottom Right: “Summer” *by Catherine Rubin*



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