PEN IN HAND

The Biannual Literary Journal of the Maryland Writers’ Association

July 2020

Editor: Dr. Tapendu K. Basu
(Gandharva raja)
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*Pen In Hand* (PIH) is the official literary publication of the Maryland Writers’ Association, published biannually in January and July. Maryland Writers’ Association is dedicated to the art, business and craft of writing. Founded in 1988, MWA is a 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization.

Maryland Writers’ Association
3 Church Circle, No. 165
Annapolis, MD 21401
Website: www.marylandwriters.org

Donations are tax-deductible.

ISBN No. 9798656732239

Editor: Dr. Tapendu K. Basu

Design: Eileen Haavik McIntire

Cover Photo: Penny Knobel-Besa
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Guidelines

*Pen In Hand* is the official literary and art publication of the Maryland Writers’ Association. It is published biannually in January and July. Submission deadline for the next issue of *Pen In Hand* is November 30, 2020.

MWA members and young writers are encouraged to submit poetry, sci-fi, flash fiction, short stories, drama, mystery, memoirs, creative non-fiction, personal essays. Photographs/Art must relate to submitted articles.

Submit to peninhand@marylandwriters.org or tkbasu@verizon.net. Please follow the following submission guidelines:

- Use black type only
- Submit only in Times New Roman font
- Use font size 12 for the manuscript
- Leave 1-inch margin on top, bottom, left and right
- Place title of ‘story’ two double spaces below top of page.
- Center title
- One space below your title place your name
- Indent first line of each paragraph 1/2” inch
- Single space between period and new sentence
- In general, dialog should be double spaced and in quotation marks.
- Insert approximate word count at the end of your manuscript (except poetry).
- One double space below the end of your manuscript, include a brief Bio. The Bio should be limited to your literary works and interest, publications and awards.
- Art/photograph (Minimum 300 DPI) must be original. If not, permission to reprint must be obtained by submitter.
Message from the Editor

COLOR relates to nature: blue sky, yellow daffodils, white swan, pink rose, green grass; and to clothes: red bandana, orange sweater, black skirt, cordovan lace-ups; you could add myriad shades of lipstick to the list of your favorite colors.

COLOR was not intended to describe skin tones.

I can, with equal parts of equanimity and deep-rooted conviction, say that I am neither white nor black nor brown or cerulean blue, magenta red or burnt umber.

If there is a day of final judgment, scientific evidence notwithstanding, a person will be judged by what he/she contributed to nature and to living beings. A WRITER will be judged by the music of his/her words, the sagacity of his/her voice, the originality of his/her ideas.

To savor Nana we need to know Emile Zola was Parisian; for Death and the King's Horseman that Wole Soyinka was from Nigeria. On occasion even the author's origin is only of historical importance; the literary beauty of Siddhartha transcends the origin of Hermann Hesse who was German born, Swiss.

You get my point. It would make no difference whether the color of Emile, Wole and Hermann's skin was black, white, blue, scarlet or purple.

Words matter; how the words are strung like a necklace to tell a story, matter; paradoxically WORDS though colorful have no COLOR.

Dr. Tapendu K. Basu
Editor, Pen In Hand
Message from the President

René Descartes, a seventeenth century French philosopher, mathematician, and scientist, once said, “Cogito, ergo sum.” (“I think therefore I am.”) It is a statement that can’t be doubted, because the very act of thinking proves existence. I propose different theory: “I write, therefore I am a writer. As a writer, I strive to improve my craft and become a published author.”

MWA is an inclusive and diverse organization, made up of people from all walks of life. Including the newly formed Saint Mary’s/Calvert chapter, we have twelve chapters throughout Maryland. 2020 is proving to be a challenging year, but we have all learned to adapt, moving many meetings to electronic formats and organizing a free quarterly webinar series for our members. As we continue to grow, we strive to help all writers achieve their goals.

Happy writing to all.

Amy Kaplan, President
POETICS
Poetry and Poetics under the cloud of COVID 19-20

Poetry is an echo asking a shadow to dance.

(Carl Sandburg)

In the dark shadow of COVID 19-20, let us learn to dance to poetry. In poetry, there is love and loss, laughter and tears, death and revival just as in this devastating pandemic. Friends and family have shed tears for loved ones lost, and rejoiced when the near-dead walks back to life.

Having experienced the fear, the grief and loneliness, strum on your keyboard and make music; poetry is music.

Breathe in Experience, breathe out poetry. (Muriel Rukeyser)

Breathe out inspired poetry, undaunted by the ruthless vagary of this pandemic.

You may tread me in the very dirt, but still like dust I will rise.

(Maya Angelou)

As the corona virus rages though our blood and breath, and rips the fabric of our society, take solace in poetry that acclaims the indomitable human spirit.

The poetry of the earth is never dead. (John Keats)

Death can take my body; death cannot take my soul. Through death, I find love.
love knows not its depth until the hour of separation. (Kahlil Gibran)

Rain or shine, keep the chin high. Weather the storm.

*Let the rain kiss you
Let the rain beat upon your head with silver liquid drops
Let the rain sing you a lullaby.* (Langston Hughes)

And at the end, there is Hope - the thing with feathers. (Emily Dickinson)

Gandharva raja

**A Few Tips on Poetry Punctuation etc.**

*Poetry is the best words in the best order.*
(Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

Punctuations help the poet place the words in the proper rhythmic order. I am delighted to share with the many poets in Maryland Writers' Association, a few guidelines on punctuation etc. provided by Roderick Deacey, MWA member of the Frederick Chapter. (Ed.)

Here are a few general points to help you prepare your poems for wider consumption, to smooth the path of your words and thoughts directly into the mind of your reader.

You are the writer; you are in charge—so you can ignore some of these guidelines if you like but I would recommend that you give them consideration; one or two are mandatory. These unspoken rules are not merely my opinion but are based on overwhelming feedback from literary editors who deal with thousands of submissions a year!
1. Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Sylvia Plath and Seamus Heaney all had one thing in common – they capitalized the first letter of the first word in every line of their poems. Standard practice these days is NOT to do this; it’s distracting and doesn’t add anything to the poem. Editors prefer you to punctuate normally, as if the poem is prose, regardless of line breaks. (Note: Microsoft Word may capitalize automatically when you move to a new line but you can turn this function off, or simply replace unwanted capital letters with lower-case.) Check out recent issues of leading literary magazines such as Poetry or Poet Lore, printed or online, for examples.

2. This brings us to punctuation, which never goes out of date. The correct use of punctuation marks (periods, dashes, exclamation points, question marks, semicolons, etc.) helps the flow of words and makes the poem easier to read. As a writer, punctuation is one of the tools of your trade!

3. If you don’t want to use any punctuation, that’s fine. The W.S. Merwin no-punctuation approach (originated in 1913 by French-Italian-Polish poet Guillaume Apollinaire) is accepted by editors, although no punctuation at all puts a lot of pressure on the reader to make appropriate line breaks. It also puts more pressure on editors to decide if you know what you are doing! Note: Merwin’s format capitalizes only the first letter of the first word of the poem.

4. One thing that is NOT acceptable is SPORADIC punctuation, where you toss in an occasional comma every 5-10 lines or add a solitary period at the end of 25 lines of unpunctuated free verse. No half measures allowed – punctuate or don’t!

5. Other things that should always concern you are spelling, typos and consistent tenses of verbs. Don’t forget the one-or-the-other words like “it’s” and “its” or “your” and “you’re.” Finally,
remember that poems contain relatively few words, so please choose each word carefully – and make sure all words mean what you think they mean!

These guidelines should be followed for poems submitted to literary magazines.

**Bio: Roderick Deacey** has spent many years as a professional editor for News America Syndicate and for The Times of London Syndicate. For the last six years he has been a performing beat poet, presenting his poetry to audiences in the DC area with the help of a bass player and drummer. In 2019, he won the Frederick Arts Council Carl R. Butler Award for Literature.
POETRY
Elegy for My Eyebrows

By: Ellen Coffey

You were my facial punctuation marks.
Surprise expressed with an arching lift.
Sorrow in lowered countenance and
anger in a puckered pinch.
Puzzlement in a forehead furrowed.
Skepticism, a single elevated brow.
You were a wordless bellwether
of that which brews beneath.
Age and time have ravaged you.
You are an ancient cat,
all bones and patchy, colorless fur.
These days expression comes in words,
a threadbare substitute for what
you once perfectly portrayed.
Thank you for your silent favor,
like memories of my father’s smile,
how subtle but how grand you were.

Bio: Ellen Coffey is a Cumberland Chapter member of Maryland Writers' Association.
Here and In After Ovid’s Metamorphoses—
The Spells Fade

By Edna M. Troiano

I. Daphne
(Pursued by Apollo and determined to remain a virgin, Daphne fled and was rescued by being turned into a laurel tree.)
Limbs withered, brittle,
Skin scaly where bark morphed to psoriasis,
I move slowly, stiffly, gracelessly.

I recall the warmth of sun on laurel leaves,
the sensuous pleasure of summer rain.

And I recall buffeting storms,
endless frigid seasons,
painful, insidious ice on roots and bark.

But I am old, my memory dim.
I cannot recall if it was years or centuries.

Most of all, I cannot recall why
I so desperately fled desire.

II. Galatea

(Pygmalion, a sculptor, fell in love with Galatea, the statue he had carved from ivory. Aphrodite, goddess of love, turned the statue to flesh, and Pygmalion married her.)

As I emerged, bit by bit, limb by limb, from ivory,
Pygmalion, awestruck by his own creation,
enamored, brought me gifts—ribbons, chocolates, trifles. 
It’s a heady experience, being adored.

Coming to life, morphing stone to flesh, 
fulfilled our desires. We lived in rapture. 
But life as a statue is poor preparation for life as a wife. 
Delight with my beauty was offset by 
inedible dinners, inept housekeeping, social awkwardness.

The spell faded, and I returned to stone. 
Now I stand in the corner of the foyer, 
a tribute to my husband’s skill, 
my sole role to be admired by guests.

My husband surely adores me still, my beauty cannot fade. 
Yet he spends every evening in his studio. 
What choice does he have? 
Sculpting is such a time-consuming art.

III. Arachne

(Arachne bragged that she was a greater weaver than the god-
dess Pallas Athena, so Athena challenged her to a contest. Infuri-
ated by her competitor’s success, Athena turned Arachne into a 
spider.)

Envious of my superior skill, vindictive, 
Athena turned me into a spider, 
thinking it a punishment.

The gods are fools, mystified by human nature. 
I spun flawless webs for my use only 
trapped prey for myself only, 
beyond the demands and expectations of others.
The cruelty was letting the curse fade,
letting me regain my human form,
subject to the demands, envy, and whims of others.

**Bio: Edna M. Troiano,** a Ph.D. in comparative literature, is
professor emerita of the College of Southern Maryland, where
she chaired the Department of Languages and Literature from
1986 to 2006. She coauthored two college rhetoric texts (*Write
to Know* and *The Contemporary Writer*) and co-edited an anthol-
ogy of Christmas literature (*The Roads from Bethlehem*). Her
most recent book is a biography of Josiah Henson published by
The History Press in 2019. Her articles, book reviews, essays,
and poems have been published in academic journals and popu-
lar magazines.

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**You Begin With The Dirt**

*By Jack Slocomb*

Push away the blotchy, crackling
fall leaves and aging summer grasses,
look at it,
and like an unruly earth eager child,
smear it on your finger
and smell the damp fustiness
of it,
search for ants and whatever other
tiny crawling bits of critters
you can find;
and once you have messed around
with the ground for a while,
go up a little higher,
into the scatter shot of scratchy
exuberant weeds,
scrubby bushes
and small trees
beginning to sweep
on up to the skies,
thorny locusts,
wild cherries and maples
with their cool shadows,
their splotchy deflections of sunlight
stirring with the breezes
and the summer leftovers
of small dirty white butterflies
skipping around in endless flitty incantations

And perhaps in a little flick of time
you may have an inkling
that they all conspire and play together,
none go it alone,
speak their own wild languages,
without the other

And then standing there
with all this,
you might know
in some small way
that you will want to
keep coming
back and back
to this ascending prayer -
and begin again with the
dirt

**Bio:** Jack Slocomb is a nature writer focusing on the Allegheny Mountains of Western Maryland and West Virginia. His poem recently was awarded Second Prize in a *Passager Magazine*
contest. He recently released his first collection of poetry, Native Tongue (Akinoga Press, Baltimore, Maryland). His works have been published by The Maryland Poetry Review, A Different Drummer, The Laurel Review, Ginseng, Allegany Magazine, The Highlands Voice, The Backbone Mountain Review, and The Cumberland Times-News. He is a member of the Maryland Writers' Association Cumberland Chapter.

We’re All Human

By Lori Joseph

Heroes and Heroines
Illustrious Pandemic Warriors
masked behind doors.

We see legendary figures
standing tall, through the window
and ask, Did they…

Serve our country
or go to war?

Rescue a family
from a fire or crash?

Donate an organ
to give life?

Work in a hospital
or nursing home?
Care for orphans
or the underprivileged?

This realness is far from a myth.

Maybe they stock shelves
and deliver goods.

Maybe they teach and coach,
or play music, perform.

Maybe they email, text and listen
maybe they place a much-needed call.

Maybe they paint and create
to remind us Art is alive and well.

Maybe they’re scientists and researchers
pilots and chemists.

Maybe they’re journalist and writers
ready to report the divine courage it
takes to be human.

**Bio:** Lori Joseph's book, *Embrace*, was released on May 2, 2020, on Amazon. Her work has been published in *JustBeU* magazine, and in a Nebraska Writers Guild poetry chapbook.
How easy it is for a Black life to be taken

By Anita Nahal

“I can’t breathe, I can’t breathe”
Eric Garner said. George Floyd said
Who is listening? Who is thinking? Who is cautioning?
Justice, injustice
Even roughed edged stones
cannot burst tears from those inhuman snatching eyes.
Inhuman strangleholds
That flesh in a clinch. That breath in a grip.
That blueness, that numbness of death
slowly inching. Snapped without a sanity thought.
How easy it is for a Black life to be taken.

What goes on in the mind of those pinning down innocents?
What goes on in the mind of those being pinned down?
Or being shot at
Or being pulled over. Or being arrested.
Being accosted. Being accused.
Being lynched
Burned, murdered
Choked, raped, extinguished.
How easy it is for a Black life to be taken.

I can hear their cries
Their sweat bursting on terrified faces
Their running footsteps
Their scary clothes rustling in the brittle wind
I can find no reason
Nor explanations, rationalizations
Accounts, excuses. None of the details matter.
as to what’s going on in the minds of those pinning down inno-
cents.
I don’t hear their imagined fear
Their tainted soul. Their body without a heart.
Their supercilious, crude beliefs
that arrogantly scream, “How easy it is for a Black life to be taken.”

“I’m just bird watching.”
“Just talking. Just breathing.”
“I’m just standing outside the bar.”
“I’m just jogging down the neighborhood where you stood your entitled ground.”
“I’m just driving in my own car”
“I’m just entering my own home,
Not showing any aggressive tone.
I did not nettle, ingratiate or fight
Provoke or impregnate, scuffle or rile.”
Why is it so easy a Black life to kill?
How easy it is for a Black life to be taken.

Castile, Floyd
Garner, Brown
Rice, Bland
Gray, Martin
Arbery, Taylor
Till.
Not just any names.
They were living. Someone’s loved ones. Living. Alive. Stolen.
Purloined.
How easy it is for a Black life to be taken.

Bio: Anita Nahal, Ph.D., CDP, member of Montgomery Chapter of MWA, teaches at the University of the District of Columbia. She writes poetry and short stories and was an Assistant Pro-
vost for International Program, Howard University, and Mellon Fellowship Program Administrator at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. She has authored seven books including two on poetry. Her works have appeared in Aberration Labyrinth, Confluence, Better Than Starbucks, Aaduna, River Poets Journal, Colere, Lapis Lazuli among others. Originally from New Delhi, India, Anita Nahal resides in USA.

**Turn Time Around**  
*By Ipatia Apostolides*

Turn the time around and look back  
Holding to the past, like an umbilical cord  
Not wanting to let go of the womb of time  
Too many memories pushing for attention  
Grasping hungry child  
Grubby hands and tears too loud to ignore  
Skipping rope in a school playground  
Later running so fast my lungs could explode  
Trying to escape a chasing dog  
Trying to escape angry black children  
Trying to escape from scary dreams  
Reading books, touring faraway lands  
Where no one can hurt me  
Where I felt safe  
Where love could be felt  
Even from a distance.  
Licking ice cream cones on a hot summer day  
Picnics in parks, running on grass to catch the ball  
Swimming in Huntington lake, catching a suntan  
Trips to Cedar Point each summer  
Ferris wheel, rides, cotton candy, movies
Watching the lights turn on
Amusement park closes at night.
Sleep comes easily
Tucked in my bed
Dreaming of faraway lands.

Bio: Ipatia Apostolides, Greek American author and poet, has published a poetry book and four novels: *Helena's Choice, The Greek Maiden, The English Lord, The Lion and the Nurse* and *Lipsi's Daughter*. She holds an MFA in Creative Writing from National Univ. She directs the Hellenic Writers' Group of Washington D.C.
MEMOIRS AND PERSONAL ESSAYS
Journey to the Water’s Edge

By Rania Gill

The sea spans the hazy horizon, its dimples etched by the touch of the sun. Above, milky tufts drift through the mirroring blue with the waning moon but a wispy brush stroke. A wide shore stretches out from the dunes where a cascade of long grassy spindles sways lazily in the breeze. Over the rounded mounds, across the sand to the water, is a lone set of footprints. They are mine. And the only shadows that remain here, are within my broken eyes.

In my hands, I carry a cracked hourglass, the burden of a disease robbing me of sight and sound. Memories follow me, drifting on the wind, of a young woman weeping for lost independence. Life, as I knew it, was slipping away. No matter the path, my inevitable fate hung on the horizon as raw as the copper moon. Steadily, while the tide sculpted the shore, sand drained from my grasp, grain by grain, my world shrank, piece by piece, and my steps drew closer to the water’s edge. The hovering moon has now become an unwanted and unyielding part of me. The years that stretch ahead balance those left behind; my children are still young enough that I caress their cheeks while they sleep. Here, all I can do is wait and watch the breaking waves close in as the last of the light and sound fade into a sliver, and then slip away: from sunshine, to twilight, to darkness and silence.

And yet, even though my hearing and vision have dwindled, my creativity is still alive with vibrant color. In an awakening dawn, luminous streaks of brightening day stretch across my
imagination. I see it as surely as I feel the rhythm of the surf. All is not lost.

It is an unusual time to embark on my journey as a writer, but this is where I stand, with my heels dug in. Even as I make the final edits to my debut manuscript, the words swim and blur and fade while around me, the wash of the sea tumbles to a whisper. As my fingertips struggle to feel the words that I love, voices read back to me the stories that I weave. Hearing aids that once brought clarity, are now muffled; preparations for cochlear implants must begin. At my feet is the ever-present comfort of my faithful companion. His wagging tail and wet nose have replaced the cold metal of the white cane. My new beginning is a dark and quiet unknown. I won’t let it hinder my path. I can’t.

As the crashing waves fold and break, their roar surrounds me. My eyes close to the waning moon and I turn to the warmth of the sun. Grant me strength. Above, the seagulls cry. Wind flows under their wings and lifts them higher. Beneath me, the last of the fallen grains blend with the shore. As the undertow pulls against my feet, a soft breeze tugs at my hair and nudges me forward. The time has come. I reach out my hands, and wade into the sea.

**Bio: Rania Gill**, born sighted with a hearing impairment, is now deaf-blind from Usher Syndrome. Diagnosed at age nineteen, while she was a young single mother, she was determined to overcome her difficulties. Now a mother of three, she happily gets around with her guide dog. She visits her father's native India, is a proponent of women's voice in fiction. Rania is a member of the Frederick Chapter of MWA.
America’s Next Hit Show: A Pitch

By Alexander Spivery

A young, white man, get one of the Sprouses. He was just arrested for protesting. Give him that Asheville hipster look like he's in a love triangle with heroin and cigarettes, not southern but close to it. Spent a summer or two down south like every old black person from above the Mason-Dixon line. The racism sprinkled like powdered sugar, just enough to be a nuisance. Doesn’t have one black friend but lies about it. Occasionally he wishes he had just one. He wouldn’t let his friends, girlfriend specifically, know.

A young white woman, short hair, I guess you could call it a bob. She watches Louise Brooks and reminiscences on an America she only saw in black and white. A feminist in the classic sense. It’s not all inclusive. She’s quick to argue like she defends EVERY woman. If they were born a woman. She dates the white male, he needs a “strong” woman that will call him on his "bullshit." They argue over their political stances but know those arguments are just political, they don’t keep each other from loving.

Dark skinned woman, I’m sure you will make her lighter, but we can say the initial plan was to make her dark. Besties with the feminist, till the feminists needs to be checked, then its eye rolls and neck rolls, it can be like a catch phrase. Blacktwitter will hashtag something. America will wear the shirts as support. The crowd won’t notice it’s a strained friendship, not really a friendship at all, but if our main woman thinks she’s a friend the audience will. If the check is big enough or has the chance to
become big enough the actress won’t care. If she starts to we can make her character a little more feisty. She doesn’t think that’s enough? Find someone else like Aunt Viv. The audience may notice but they won’t care.

Dark man, keep him dark, a buc-, big, strong, strapping, thu- intimidating, stu- thinks a little different, from the hoo-, a poor neighborhood. Anger problems he can’t express without violence all though he seeks to be better. He can get the help he needs from who he least expects.

It’s an American hit
anyone with a mirror
sees the parts.
They hope for this show
to be real life.
It’s the formula the country loves.

**Bio: Alexander Spivery**, born in Baltimore, received his B.A. from Tusculum College. A member of the Howard County Chapter, he dabbles in poetry and non-fiction.
Forbidden Fruit

By Janet M. Ruck

My husband and I are high risk when it comes to hiking the Himalayas, solo skydiving and persevering in pandemics. As recent cancer survivors (and, some people might say, older than dirt), during this Coronavirus shutdown, we are prohibited from extreme sports, which includes entering a germ-filled grocery store. We remain indoors, sheltered in place, venturing outside only to put out garbage or pick up our mail. It is gratifying that our government pays trash collectors and mail carriers their worth as essential workers during this crisis. It keeps my husband and me safe and sound, out of harm’s and everyone else’s way.

Some would welcome our demise, but, as elders of the citizenry, we take our legacy with its resulting health issues very seriously. We are therefore hunkered. Down.

As the quarantine drags into its third month, it appears that the house in which we have raised two children, four retriever-mix dogs and a colony of black mold is emerging as a likely candidate to be our couple-coffin. So be it. We have accepted our fate, and we await the next round of imperatives and restrictions. Cancer, COVID, Confinement. Bring ‘em on!

Lucky for us, we have a devoted son who shops for our groceries. I have offered to order our provisions online and have them delivered, but Robert does not want us to be exposed to the perils of Instacart shoppers who likely will not wipe down items with Clorox as thoroughly as he. Or they may use recyclable bags, while they are coughing on our food, probably intentionally. He is determined to take on this challenge, as long as it lasts. Such a good boy!

Each week, I text Robert our grocery list complete with
eggs, cheese, juice, and sometimes double doses of peanut butter and jelly to make sure we’re stocked up on non-perishable items in case he gets pissed off at us and refuses to shop for us any longer. Germs or not. Virus or not.

Personal shoppers careening down grocery store aisles or not. I do not want to test the theory that the bonds between baby boomers and their millennial offspring can be tenuous, especially during a pandemic.

As the weeks drag on, I have noticed that we tread lightly when we request certain items. Sometimes I channel Oliver Twist. “Please, suh, may I have a carton of orange juice?” I feel myself asking when I pen my latest list. I know Robert disapproves. Today he said that drinking a glass of OJ is the same as downing a corrosive can of Coke. “I raised you on daily OJ, and now you’re questioning my parenting?” I reply, but only in my head.

Outwardly, I nod and say: “Perhaps you’re right. Maybe next time I won’t put it on the list.” Secretly I hope that there will be no next time, that we will be released from this confinement, this coffin-in-waiting because, and I cannot believe I am saying this, I yearn to do my own grocery shopping. Like so many tasks I took for granted, often loathed, I miss the rhythm of the boring life that tick-tock-ticked the metronome soundtrack of my senior citizen existence.

Perhaps we need a different tactic. Maybe buying from a business called Apple and Eve will smooth the rough terrain we have entered. Who can argue with a company whose narrative claims “Respecting nature, keeping it simple and bringing goodness to the table since 1975”? I ask Robert for two bottles of their nourishing liquid, making sure to request it by company name. I get none. Questioning Robert in a sing-song voice as nonchalantly as I can muster, I ask: “Oh, were they out of Apple and Eve juice?” His reply: “Sometimes I forget, sometimes I try to save people from diabetes.” His intent is clear. While Robert is our food supplier, juice is as forbidden as a
snake in the Garden of Eden.

Some edibles evoke extreme emotions. Cheese can bring us to tears. Robert believes that it is the scourge of food products, imbued with bacteria, salt and rennet, none of which sounds very appetizing, so how could it possibly taste so good? I dare not utter these musings out loud. Yet, ever hopeful, each week, I add cheese to the list, extra sharp cheddar our favorite, and get instead bland mild cheddar which Robert says is aged less time and therefore is not as unhealthy. “When did he become a cheese wizard?” I whimper into my pillow at night. Aloud, I say: “I didn’t know that cheese was so bad for you,” which launches him into a lecture about how my husband and I are killing ourselves with the wrong food, which really should be medicine, and he is glad that he has been there to break our cheese dependency. If we are trying to get our cancer-ridden bodies back into homeostasis, we are going about it the wrong way. I may have heard about the pitfalls of cheese before, but I will never admit it to him.

I realize that not only have we entered a phase in which our roles have reversed, but perhaps Robert is seeking payback for being our child. Too many hand-me downs from his older brother? Hamburger Helper on the menu too often? A parent questioning his status as a cheese prodigy? Suddenly my life as his mother parades before my eyes, and I squint away the procession.

I have long abandoned putting napkins on my shopping list. To Robert, they are the pinnacle of baby boomer waste, and so, week after week, I wash cloth napkins. “But wait,” I ask, but only in my mind. “Isn’t running the washing machine, and using water, electricity and soap as wasteful as disposing paper after one use?” He will never know my true feelings about paper napkins until I am free to leave this casket and cavort at Whole Foods, after therapy for agoraphobia, of course, where not only I will be besieged by germs, but also unleashed to indulge in
whatever my extravagant and wasteful heart desires. I am a cancer survivor, and I live in a tomb. I should be able to wipe my mouth with paper ever so salaciously and drown myself in cascades of sweet nectar while gorging on mounds of extra sharp Cracker Barrel if I damn well please!

Oops, did I say that out loud? Looks like peanut butter and jelly are our meals until this stay-at-home order ends.

Or perhaps we will subject ourselves to the indifferent yet nonjudgmental competence of Instacart shoppers. Maybe they will use recyclable bags, but there will undoubtedly be less baggage.

**Bio: Janet M. Ruck** is a nonfiction writer of personal development and job search books. Her most recent publication *You Anew: A Guide for the Woman Who Is Ready to Create Her Best Life* is a self-directed journey which guides women age 50 and above in choosing their next steps for life satisfaction. Her website is www.youanewguide.com. Since cancer came into her life, she has been viewing the world through a humorous lens, and she likes what she sees.
Stand Easy

By James Burd Brewster

My grandparents bought a summer place on Lake Champlain in 1954, the year I was born. It was a gray, ranch-style, single-wall-construction “camp” raised up on cedar posts and stone pillars with a front porch protected by a hedge. Its sightline across RT 22 was an unobstructed vista of Lake Champlain and the Green Mountains from Brattleboro to Burlington. The camp was named “Corners” as it was at the corner of the entrance to the 50-year-old Crater Club community. Every summer, our family split August with my Uncle’s family. Our time was the last two weeks. We always drove home on Labor Day to be ready for the start of school on Tuesday.

Every summer, we summered there and loved that nothing changed from year to year. The deer head over the fireplace grew cobwebs, the toaster on the small shelf to the right was plugged into a socket screwed into the dangling light cord. We had to pull the string that turned on the light to get power to the toaster. My grandfather’s fishing poles and lures were propped in the corner and hung on the wall near his desk. My bed was one of the twin beds in the bedroom to the right of the bathroom and I slept under two quilts which cocooned me from the Autumn Adirondack air. The furniture on the porch was made when the house was built. My brothers and sisters and I could count on “Corners” to be a family touchstone. We knew what to anticipate and each year it delivered perfectly. Broken mugs were replaced, but not chipped ones.

In 1973, Mrs. Madden, the widow of Admiral Madden, announced she was selling her cabin. My parents bought it sight
unseen; not really unseen. They had walked by the place and knew the property. They loved the view it offered and valued its access to the waterfront, but they had never been inside. Mrs. Madden spent the summer readying the place and Labor Day weekend gave my parents the tour. Mom told me later, “When the tour was over, we were aghast. The floor plan was awful. We had no idea how we would fit a family of eight into a camp that had one bath, three and a half bedrooms, and no dining room.”

The master bedroom had no bath. The half bedroom was a twin bed in the alcove just outside the bathroom and next to the back door. Anyone going to the bathroom or entering the house went through this room. The two other bedrooms had a joining door and the route from the farther bedroom to the bathroom was through the nearer bedroom. The bathroom had a white, ceramic, single-basin, wall-mounted, sink like those seen in WWII barracks, a toilet of similar description, and a cast-iron, claw-foot tub. No shower. A larger room, it also contained the linen and quilt chest, shelves for towels, and a washer (no dryer – “that’s what clothes lines were for”). The circular “Dining Room Table” on the front porch, was 24” tall, and barely fit six. The antiquity of the kitchen and its appliances only added to the quandary.

It was, however, a beautiful place. The great room was two stories tall with a huge Adirondack stone fireplace making it feel like a lodge. The shelves on either side would come to hold boat models and sailing trophies. The front porch which faced East was screened against mosquitoes and had an unhindered view of the lake and the Vermont shore. The rising sun blinded us while the setting sun painted the Green Mountains yellow, amber, rose, and purple as it disappeared over the horizon behind the camp. A manicured cedar hedge bordered the front yard. Walk through the break in the hedge and across the dirt road and you were in a meadow that sloped down to the road and to the lake. Waiting on the shore below were the boat slide and a dinghy. A short row took you to the Cape Cod Knockabout riding at its mooring. For avid sailors, like my parents, the lake view and easy access to the
waterfront were a dream come true. The problem they faced that winter was how to take the nightmare out of the dream.

Dad spent September and October evenings at our dining room table working with large sheets of graph paper trying to figure out how to make the place work. He had measured the camp so he could reproduce the floor plan and then made scale sized furniture cutouts. He tried every configuration he could think of. It seemed every sleeping arrangement had the entire family walking in their pajamas through bedrooms or the great room to get to the bathroom. Mom and Dad with a bathless master bedroom were in the same boat. Katherine and Barbara in the outer bedroom were either walking through Jim and Dick’s inner bedroom or on the porch and through the front door and the great room to get there. Poor Margaret, in the half bedroom outside the bathroom door, was going to feel like a hall monitor. We all had to walk by her bed to use the bathroom and she would be able to hear our bathroom ministrations. Moving a wall, adding a doorway, or making a hallway seemed like good ideas but were nixed as they removed a bedroom. More importantly, how would eight people get in and out of the bathroom in the early morning rush. Putting a bathroom onto the master bedroom was a solution but prevented by Adirondack Park square footage rules. Could we partition the toilet from the sink so two could use the room at once? We’d have to move a window to do that. How about replacing the cast iron tub with a shower bath combo? Possible, if we moved the toilet. Each hopeful solution fell before a solid objection.

“Maybe we should just tear it down and rebuild,” Dad said to Mom one night at supper.

“Okay,” Mom said, “let’s see if that will work.”

Dad did his best to see if it would work, but again, Adirondack Park square footage rules constrained him. Any new structure could not have more square feet on the ground that the previous structure. He spent November drawing floor plans and
positioning scale furniture. The bedrooms were too small, the kitchen was improved, any dining room ate up floor space, the porch would disappear. Nothing fit, nothing worked, and nothing pleased Mom or Dad. Dad had not yet checked out construction costs but was confident they were unaffordable. One improvement we were able to make was to name the cabin. We named it “Stand Easy” after the order officers give enlisted men who are at attention, allowing them to take a more relaxed stance.

Then we had a break-through. One night during supper, when Dad was making some point about the cabin, Mom quietly said, “Why don’t we just try it one summer and see how it works out? By living in it, we will learn what needs to be changed and what does not.”

“Okay,” Dad said. And we did. . . and we didn’t change anything about the place for the next 30 years.

**Bio:** James Burd Brewster is author of the “Glad to do it!”, Pete & Petey, and Steve & Stevie picture book series which can be seen at: www.Gladttodoit.net. He is the Communications Chair for the Maryland Writers’ Association. His works have been published in *Pen-in-Hand* and *Connections*, the literary magazine of the College of Southern Maryland. He has presented his talk, “Writing and Publishing Your First Book” to writers’ groups in the Mid-Atlantic region.
Curls of gentle sea breeze lifted a ginkgo leaf from its nourishing umbilical cord. The fragile leaf spiraled through the brilliant blue sky, tumbled about, and rested far from its roots and siblings in an ebullient sunflower patch. All of nature and the denizens of Hiroshima were oblivious to the danger above and the reversal of fate that would unfold.

American weather planes departed Hiroshima’s airspace with excellent news. The sky above the pre-determined city-center target was clear. It was a magnificent day to destroy Japan’s unrelenting national pride and bring the country to her knees.

Soaring toward Hiroshima from the island of Tinian, the supercharged engines and spinning blades of three American Superfortress bombers propelled the top-secret squadron forward high above the swells of the azure Pacific Ocean. The sparkling surface and dancing white caps of the ocean—named Peaceful Sea by the Portuguese—hid remains of savage conflicts sunk deep in the salty graveyard.

Enola Gay, named after her commander’s mother, received and acknowledged orders to complete her mission—unleash Little Boy’s boundless power of enriched uranium, engineered to annihilate the unsuspecting city without distinguishing between soldiers and innocent boys and girls. Accompanied by scientific and photography planes, Enola Gay carried the fate of the world in her belly.

Enola Gay’s anxious crew readied Little Boy’s three meter armored steel cylinder, loaded gunpowder between its tail and projectile, and replaced dud plugs with those that ignite.
She reached her destination—ten thousand meters above Hiroshima—aimed her crosshairs at the Aioi Bridge, and dropped her four and one-half ton payload of mass destruction.

Little Boy plummeted through the sky.

At exactly forty-three seconds, deep inside Little Boy, an ignition launched a chain reaction that released the powerful energy of immeasurable small spinning atoms. The world’s first atomic bomb announced its birth one block east of its target, six hundred meters above the elegant copper dome of Hiroshima’s bustling Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall with a sky-piercing, blinding flash of light, streaking above Hiroshima’s exquisite sea, rippling rivers, mountains, and vulnerable neighborhoods teeming with humanity.

Boy exploded. His super-heated center—a bubble of extreme air pressure—freed a supercritical mass outward at over one thousand-four hundred kilometers per hour with an intensity equivalent to twenty thousand tons of TNT. Lethal invisible radiation released in the form of gamma and neutron rays. Shock waves of energy roared twice the force of gravity, collapsing buildings and reducing steel to shrapnel. Little Boy’s transcendent fireball consumed the sky, and searing heat—hot as the sun’s surface—built under the blast. Smoke snaked upward, forming a spectacular mushroom cloud eleven kilometers high against the cloudless sky.

Within two kilometers of the blast’s hypocenter, all

The famous Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall, aka A-Bomb Dome, taken by the author in 2018.
of Hiroshima was demolished. Seventy thousand people died instantly from blast injuries or were charred in death beyond recognition from thermal burns. Those closest to the blast carbonized and vanished, leaving behind only atomic human shadows, imprinted on concrete rubble for perpetuity. Survivors within four kilometers of the hypocenter suffered horrendous injuries. Naked, burned, blinded, and delirious, they fled to rivers clogged with corpses. Rivers beckoned as a tantalizing escape from the fires igniting and surrounding them in every direction.

A blazing inferno sucked in ground air and generated intense vortexes of wind and a firestorm. Tiny carbon particles, born by the gutting fires, danced aloft where they reached cooler air, morphing into a violent paso doble of thunderous inky clouds and radioactive rain. Huge, black and sticky raindrops fell in torrents over the land. People suffering from desperate thirst opened their mouths to the heavens and drank the deadly droplets—a gift of radioactive poison.

Death rained on the once graceful city of Hiroshima. The ginkgo leaf perished alongside the scorched and blackened sunflowers. Tens of thousands of innocent souls enjoying radiant health in the sunlit warmth of the early morning, departed life on earth.

Bio: Constance Hays Matsumoto, a native Marylander, lives in Parkton, Maryland. She is president-elect of Baltimore North MWA chapter. Picadon was inspired by her work-in-progress novel, based on the true stories of two American civilians of Japanese ancestry determined to live their birthright—the American dream. August 6, 2020 marks the 75th anniversary of Hiroshima’s destruction. The ever-present threat of nuclear war in our tumultuous and fraying political environment compels us to reflect on the risk of history repeating itself. Picadon is the Japanese name for atomic bomb—Pica (brilliant light); Don (boom).
The Only Way

By F. J. Talley

I know what’s behind that door, and I don’t want to go in. But I must. So much pain, so much suffering. I turned back toward the glow that warmed me and sighed. I had heard all the stories before, but never believed them. I’m not sure I do now.

Looking up and to the side, I still see what it looked like the last time, when Jacob left us, and the last few times I visited his room. I approached the door and wondered if I could hear anything. I pressed my ear toward the jamb.

“… your decision,” someone said. “Our work is over, and the decision now is yours. We cannot interfere with that, as you know.” A sob. Suzanne, I thought, always sniveling at the slightest thing. But then I reproved myself. Suzanne is also the sweetest sister I could imagine. Were it not for her, I would have become so much more bitter than I was. If only I had told her that earlier.

The shuffling continued as the inside door opened and closed. Did I want to hear this? I pulled back from the door and remembered our discussion about Jacob. “In a better place,” people kept telling me. “Just let him go,” said others. Couldn’t they understand that I wanted to be with him and not “be apart?” This is hard on both sides of the door.

As I pressed against the door, I found myself inside. The light painted the door in the same off-white glow I had seen before, but now I was inside, seeing Suzanne, Alan and Belle, sitting, and none of them talking to each other; each trying to make peace. I can imagine Suzanne saying, “But she’s been a part of me for so long,” or Alan saying that he wasn’t able to say goodbye. Belle was the practical one. I remembered what she
said when we lost Jacob, that she was so much more at peace afterwards. Nothing Belle said would make any difference with Alan or Suzanne, and truth be told, nothing either of them said would sway the others: they were all in their own worlds.

I stood there looking at all of them, pondering: what did I want? Was I the sister and woman I wanted to be? Did I do what I could for them as we all dealt with our own private demons? I wanted to impact people and for them to remember me when I was gone. They’re missing me and grieving: why don’t I feel better myself?

Maybe they’ll be better once it’s all over. I looked at my withered body and noticed that I felt no pain, I felt… strong? I had forgotten what it was like to move so easily, to twist and bend and just be able to do. I felt good.

I sensed the brush against my back and turned. Him. I didn’t know him, but it seems I do. He points toward the glow at my back. I look at it, then back at him.

“You don’t have to go with me.”

“I feel better than I have in a long time,” I said. “I think it’s time to go, except,”

“They’ll heal.” Did he read my mind or did he just know? “I want to help them.; help them understand, to be whole.”

“Touch them.”

“But,”

“Touch them.”

I walked—glided, really—to each of them: first Suzanne, then Alan, then Belle and tried to touch them. My hand passed through them, but each of them reacted, anyway. I stepped back, and they looked at each other, sharing nods and small smiles of acceptance before Belle walked to the inside door.

I turned to join Him and as we advanced through the door and toward the glow, I heard in the background the long insistent beep.

**Bio:** F. J. Talley writes primarily in the mystery and science fiction genres. His story *Thirteen* won the 2019 Gulf Coast Writers
Association prize for fiction. *By the River*, a short story was included in the Maryland Writers’ Association’s 30th Anniversary anthology. He is the vice-president elect of the new St. Mary’s Chapter.

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**The High School Reunion**

*By Joanne L. Zaslow*

I freshen my Facebook page with new photos and supplement my LinkedIn account to showcase my accomplishments. Leading up to my Maryland high school reunion, I also watch what I eat, smooth serums over my face, and shop for my perfect look. Former classmates, especially the men, should say “Wow.”

Event time, my husband, Roy, and I sign in under a chandelier that highlights gray hair (not mine; it was colored). We squint to reconcile faces with name badges.

Rob Jones walks in the front door. “Alice!” he shouts; then, “Guess who I saw last night? Your ol’ flame, Kirk! But I couldn’t talk him into coming tonight.”

“Too bad,” I say, forcing nonchalance while waving and climbing the stairs to the party room.

The room’s too small for a graduating class of a thousand. I snatch seats for Roy and me and “the girls”—Lauren, Diana, and Catherine—close friends since high school who have not yet arrived. Are they still coming? Who is here? What other ex-boyfriends might I target?

Rubbing my hands, I begin to work the room while Roy buys us drinks.

I look past aging’s extra pounds and wrinkles, recognizing no one, so converse with folks I’ve only known of. They talk about divorces, dying spouses, frequent moves, and job losses—sad stories, rehearsed; maybe they, too, have come with agendas.
A fallen classmates memorial includes a photo of Suzanne, our pompon squad captain and homecoming queen. Overcome by loss, I stare. Someone taps my shoulder… I start, spin around…and Roy proffers a beer. After a gulp, I smile my thanks and continue my tour of the room, watching the door for newcomers.

Two complete cycles around the floor, and I’m still not seeing any ex-beaus or even girlfriends I recognize, and no one has complimented me or requested my life story. I skip the fruit and cheese and return to the chandelier to peruse unclaimed name badges. When Roy asks where I’m going, I bark, “Downstairs.”

On the table, I see a promising badge. It’s for Jodi—as teens we’d spent untold hours talking on the phone. I’d heard she’d been living in Europe!

I run back upstairs, cheered. Now while I pace the party room, I glimpse periodically at the entrance.

When I recognize her despite her now-white hair, I run towards her, shouting, “Jodi! Jodi, I’m so happy to see you!” Jodi turns, looks, focuses, and screams, “Carol!”

“No,” I say, “It’s Alice.” After she shares photos of kids and grandkids, I ask Jodi where on earth she’s been living all these years.

“Arbutus; 37 years.”
Arbutus is 10 minutes from my home.

Enough.

Even among those with whom I’d once enjoyed some level of popularity, tonight I hadn’t been celebrated, sought out, noticed, or even remembered—I remained my new middle-aged self: invisible. “Let’s go,” I said.

It’s raining now, so, after dismissing Roy’s umbrella, I run to our car, scoot onto my car seat and say, “I’m hungry, but let’s just go home.” Roy complies, and we roll out of the parking lot in silence.

After a while, he says, “I’m sorry the reunion wasn’t what you hoped.”
Without responding, I smile and embrace even the rain. Roy still sees me.

**Bio: Joanne Zaslow** dedicated her career as a writer-editor-communications professional and manager to the U.S. government and nonprofit sectors. Today she freelances, serves as *MWA Newsletter* editor, and co-leads a teen-writers group. She also writes fiction and creative nonfiction and has been published in the *Utne Reader, 30 Ways to Love Maryland*, and other publications.

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**When I Have Fears**

*By Blair Pasalic*

“We discussed this last week,” Brett said. “The Secretary’s office really wants to be sure this press release reaches a young audience.” He smiled at Nancy from the head of the Public Affairs office conference table, but his face, reddening against the cool lavender of his shirt, belied his calm.

“No!” From her seat on the side of the conference table, Nancy’s gnarled pointer finger, an extension of her bony arm and wrinkled elbow, jabbed the air. Her eyes, precisely shadowed in grays and purples, glared over the rims of tortoise shell reading glasses at Brett’s boyish, freckled face. “We cannot use social media to release the Department of Education’s most important news of the year. We cannot hashtag student test results on Twitter. We could never, ever capture the nuances of a two-year study on education in the United States in the 110 characters allowed in a tweet.”

“280 characters,” mumbled a twenty-something in the background.

“Oh, that makes it much better,” Nancy said. She tossed her
gray-brown hair off her shoulders and rolled her eyes. Despite having quit smoking two decades ago, she still missed a cigarette at a moment like this. Something she could wave in their faces as she made her point. Something that would linger in the air for a moment longer than her words.

“Now, Nancy,” Brett’s practiced, unflappable voice sounded an octave higher than usual. Brett. How old was he? Twenty-two? Twenty-three? Technically her boss, but just another in a long line of fresh-from-college political appointees without a clue on how to get things done in the federal government. Ignoring the print journalists’ phone calls. Blogging about where the Secretary ate lunch. Hiring eight new social media specialists that couldn’t write full sentences. Designing “infographics,” whatever those were. In short, making a mess of the Public Affairs office. Nancy steeled. She had outlasted them all; she would outlast Brett.

“You know this is part of the new outreach strategy,” Brett said in the same voice he used with visiting elementary school groups. “Twitter is our first, best option for getting out a press release like this.”

“Press release?” Nancy felt heat rising in her torso, up through her neck. She was flammable; Brett was the match. “Press release. You know what, Brett? You do what you want. And when school principals call, and when county commissioners call, and when members of Congress call to find out why they didn’t hear about these results, tell them to check Twitter. Tell them it’s the entry right below the one about Lindsay Lohan twerking.”

The room fell silent. Eight sets of eyes focused on Nancy. Eyes foreign to Nancy; eyes full of morbid fascination, amusement, and bewilderment. Eyes that had never seen an outburst like this in the workplace before. Fifteen years ago, the eyes around the conference table would have been full of admiration and respect for Nancy, the crusader. They would have sparkled with appreciation for the assertive woman who could articulate
what everyone else was too scared to say.

Nancy looked hard at Brett, who was struggling to find words. And then, without intention, Brett lit the fuse.

“It’s Miley Cyrus,” he said softly, almost to himself. “It’s Miley Cyrus who did the twerking.”

“Miley…. Miley Cyrus? Thank you for that Brett, you’re the progeny of Pulitzer,” Nancy felt herself crossing a new line, but didn’t stop herself. “Well then, I leave it to you and your illustrious colleagues to craft the best 280 characters you can. But for the love of God, Brett, don’t call it a press release. When it comes to a press release, you don’t know shit from Shinola.”

Nancy pushed back from the table, picked up her purse and steno pad, and tucked her pen behind her ear. She paused at the door.

“Actually, surprise me, Brett. Tell me, what is Shinola?”

No one said a word. Nancy nodded. She turned on her heels, walked straight back to her office, and slammed the door.

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The card had been sitting on Nancy’s desk for a week; a red, white, and blue-striped reminder of the passing of time. Medicare. She sat at her desk now, in front of the card. She opened her steno pad and started writing Medicare anagrams. Dear Mice. In the corner, her clock quietly ticked down the seconds, minutes, hours. Armed Ice. Her jaw clicked in concentration. Cried Me A... Her eyes wandered over her desk and accidentally caught the picture of Eileen. Nancy sighed. Eileen would have laughed at her outburst. Eileen would have said, “You can apologize in the morning; let’s go get a drink.” Eileen would have taken her to a poetry reading.

The sudden vibrations of Nancy’s cell phone startled her. How long had it been ringing? She rummaged through the pockets of her purse to find her phone. It was probably the doctor’s office again. “Just reminding you of your upcoming visit,” the
perky office manager would say, as if calling about a lunch date.

Just as it stopped buzzing, Nancy found her phone jammed sideways in the smallest pocket of her purse. That phone. Eileen had insisted she buy it. Nancy had rolled her eyes when the Verizon salesman automatically downloaded Twitter to her new device.

“I won’t use this feature,” Nancy had said, “Get rid of it.”

“Oh, Nancy, it’ll be fun!” Eileen had said. “The New York Times has a Twitter feed, you know.”

Nancy had reluctantly acquiesced. The two women had spent the rest of the afternoon learning how to tweet. They had laughed and drank wine. How could that have only been a year ago?

Nancy pulled the phone from her purse and pushed it to the farthest corner of her desk, not bothering to listen to the message. She looked around her sparsely decorated office.

“What am I still doing here, Eileen?” Nancy said aloud. She pushed back from the desk, picked up her purse and jacket, and opened the door to her office.

In the maze of cubicles outside, the pre-pubescent staff of Public Affairs were humming, pinging, and dinging their iPhones at full-throttle. And one of the Millennials, a particularly large one, was loitering in her doorway.

“Um, Mrs. Holbrooke? I’m Keatslin Moore?” A tall, busty blonde with Shirley Temple dimples and alien-sized blue eyes stared at Nancy, unblinking.

“I’m sorry; you said Katelyn?” Nancy asked, pulling on her jacket. She didn’t bother to extend her hand in greeting.

“Um, actually Keatslin? With an S?” As she smiled, her dimples stretched so far apart they faced opposite directions. What was she wearing? At least three blouses and some awful Southwestern-themed mini-skirt. A scarf so voluminous it swallowed her whole neck. And boots.

“I hope you sued your parents,” Nancy said briskly. She immediately felt sorry she said it.
Keatslin’s eyes widened. If she understood the insult, she didn’t show it.

“I’m like, named after this poet, Keats. John Keats?” Keatslin said.

Nancy looked up. “Yes; I am familiar with Keats. I wrote my graduate thesis on Keats.”

“Oh, that’s awesome,” Keatslin said. “Do you, like, have a favorite Keats poem?”


“Yeah!” Keatslin pawed delightedly at her giant neck scarf. “My parents like the one that goes, ‘A thing of beauty is a joy forever,’ because that’s what they thought when I was born.”

Nancy bit her lip and raised her eyebrows. She noticed her cell phone still sitting on the corner of her desk. Reaching for it, she bumped the picture of Eileen. The warm wooden frame slipped off her desk and clattered to the floor. Nancy bent down to pick up the picture, her knees resting on the carpet. She paused, staring at nothing, on the floor.

It was Keatslin’s fizzy drawl that interrupted. “But, I would have to say that, like, my favorite is, Bright star! Would I were steadfast as thou art?”

Nancy paused and shook her head like she was loosening water from her ears. She picked up the picture and set it back on the desk.

“That is a good one,” she squinted at Keatslin, “and why did you stop by my office, Keatslin?”

“Oh, so, Brett asked me to work on a press release that can go out with our tweet. And I’ve never done, like, an old-school press release before, so I was hoping we could work on it together?”

Nancy sat down hard on her desk. She opened her mouth, as if to say something, and then shut it again. She sat still for a moment. Something cool and surprising washed over her. Keats-
lin looked at her with a cocked head and a blank stare.

“I…,” began Nancy, “that sounds fine, Keatslin. How’s two o’clock?”

“Sure, that would be awesome.” Keatslin handed Nancy her business card. “I’m actually on the other side of the building, so you can just like, text or tweet me if anything changes?”

“Will do,” said Nancy. Keatslin started to walk out, and then turned abruptly.

“Oh, and it’s shoe polish?” Keatslin asked.

“Pardon?” asked Nancy.

“Shoe polish? Shinola is like, shoe polish, right?”

Nancy nodded, “It is.”

Keatslin’s smile stretched larger than ever.

“I Googled it!” she said. She gave a small wave. “See you soon!”

Nancy let out a long breath. One that felt like it could end in a laugh. She sat still for what seemed like an hour. Then she picked up her cell phone and signed into Twitter.

“@Keatslin,” she tweeted, “When I have fears that I may cease to be/then on the shore of the wide world I stand alone & think/till love & fame to nothingness do sink. #Keats.”

Nancy looked at the picture of Eileen and smiled softly.

**Bio: Blair Pasalic** is a member of the Annapolis Chapter of MWA. A longtime resident of Maryland and Washington, DC. Blair’s writing focuses on the people and places of the Mid-Atlantic region.
The Runner

By Suzanne Forest

When Jeannie was little she would lift herself up in her car seat and try to spot the place where the path ducked under the road and popped back up on the other side to wind off into the beckoning woods. Mommy and Daddy would take her out on that trail in the stroller so she could watch the squirrels racing up and down the trees in the shifting light and smell the life of the earth. In grade school she raced down the trails with her friends, following the sharp, chlorine tang of the pool.

In high school she rushed through the city’s quiet alter ego, through the woods and along the lakes that existed, pristine, mere yards from the sub-divisions and busy thoroughfares that were its outward face. She ran through the bright autumns of new beginnings, up to the podiums after competitions. Her lungs swelled and her heart pounded with the joy of exertion, of besting herself, of bathing in the rustling shadows of the leaves. She ran to college, to teammates who understood the flight of feet and heart and soul across the rolling landscape.

Jeannie ran with her babies through the pale green shoots of spring, pointing out the bunnies and sweet honeysuckle along the path. She passed the deer who gazed, unafraid, from the woods as if her very spirit were flying over the path and up to meet the red-tailed hawks of full summer, then sprinted into the brilliant, smoke-scented fall again until she arrived at winter and sank into the deep, sacred silence, drifting off to sleep.

She awoke to the scent of green shoots emerging from the earth and stood straight up in the sterile white room, ready to run again. She reached for the door but stopped at a voice behind her. A woman in nurse’s scrubs stood by her bed.
“Oh Miss Jeannie,” the nurse whispered and leaned over to stroke the white hair of an old woman. Then she pushed a button on the bedside table and said, “She’s gone. Someone should call the family.

Jeannie smiled and called back into the room, “I’m not gone. I’m free!” as she swung the door wide and ran out into the dawn.

**Bio:** Suzanne Forest writes flash fiction, and is working on a novel. She lives in Columbia,

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**The Wolf – A bedtime story**  
*By Bonnie Woolston*

**Setting:**
Libby and her four children are settling down for the night on their pallet in the stinking belly of a pitching ship, seven insufferable weeks into their crossing of the Atlantic. Catholic refugees from Oliver Cromwell’s parliament, Libby and Thomas had paid good money to escape the fires stoked by Catholic bodies throughout their homeland. Although Maryland was their intended destination, Thomas had to leave the ship for a few days when it reached Virginia to testify before the governor as to the particulars of a beating onboard their ship. While they wait for his return, Libby uses this evening’s story to remind her children of the family love and countryside charm from which they hailed – and to which, she knew, they’d never return.

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It had taken a whole, long day, from early in the morning until late at night, to get from London out to the farm in the Hampshire countryside. You were all sound asleep when we
pulled up in front of the house. Grandpa John came out to the wagon to help us unload, beginning with you sleepyheads. First, he carried in Judith, then he came back for you, Tommy, but you woke up when Grandpa lifted you out of the wagon.

“Hey, Tommy, my boy” Grandpa said to you. “Are you awake enough to go to the barn with me for a few minutes? We have a visitor I’m pretty sure you’d like to meet.”

So Grandpa put you down and the two of you headed off for the barn together. Your dad and I finished unloading the wagon and took the horses into the barn to bed them down. When we got inside, it was so quiet we didn’t know where you were.

As we started to rub down Old Jane we heard you laugh – a whispery kind of giggle – and we heard another sound though we couldn’t make out what it was – not a bark like a pup or a mew like a kitten – more like a snarly kind of wail. Your dad and I made our way to the lambs’ pen in the back of the barn. It was empty because the lambs were big enough to go with their mothers out on the heath. You and Grandpa were sitting on fresh straw right in the middle of the pen with a blanket between and a milk bucket next to you. Dad and I tiptoed into the pen. We could hardly believe what we saw! There, cuddled up in your lap, sucking on a milk rag, was . . .

“A baby wolf!” Tommy cried out as loudly as a whisper allows, slapping his hands over his mouth in the next instant. He always got to insert this part of the story and had trouble containing himself until it was his turn to do so – but he knew he had to say it quietly because the younger two were usually asleep by this point. Libby tousled his curly head and continued.

Dad and I sat down with you and Grandpa told us how he’d found the baby wolf. He’d been out counting his sheep that day in the high meadow – the one that runs above the Whitewater. On the highest part of the hill over the sharp bend in the river, Grandpa found half of a sheep’s carcass. He knew a wolf had done the killing but he couldn’t figure out why part of the sheep was left, just lying out in the open for anyone to find – that was
very unlike a wolf, he told us. He could also tell the kill wasn’t fresh, maybe even as old as yesterday. Grandpa told us he had his sturdy walking staff and was watching about very warily in case the wolf was lurking nearby. All of a sudden, Grandpa heard a little sound – just like we heard when we first came into the barn – a little, lonesome, fearsome sound. Grandpa followed the sound and found the baby wolf tucked away under the craggy roots of one of the oldest oak trees in the heath. Now he was truly on alert for the mother because he knew there was a firm and fast rule among mother wolves and that is that they never, ever, for any reason leave their pups alone for long.

Libby felt both Judith and Tommy drawing their bodies a little nearer to hers, as they always did, when she began summoning the lupine presence.

Grandpa told us how he’d climbed up into the old oak tree – he’d about finished counting his sheep and he had a couple of hours before he had to milk the cow. Grandpa had grown a soft spot in his heart for the poor little wolf. The way the baby was carrying on, Grandpa figured he’d been under those roots for a good long time without his mother. Grandpa didn’t think the pup would make it through the night if he left him out there in that state, what with making such a racket. Something was bound to hear him and, well, it wouldn’t be pleasant. So Grandpa climbed the tree and waited. He knew if the wolf returned she’d know he was there – she might lay aside for a little while, trying to measure what she should do – but the way her baby was crying, he knew eventually she’d make a grab for the pup whether he was up in the tree or not. So he sat. And he sat, very still.

By the time the sun was sitting low on the chalky cliffs of the down he knew that mama wolf wasn’t likely coming back. Nonetheless, he knew it would be pretty risky for him to take that baby wolf in his arms and walk the half hour it would take to get back to the farm. But, Grandpa said, “Sometimes you just have to do what you have to do,” – so that’s what Grandpa did. That little wolf wiggled and hollered the whole way back to the
farm, but they made it. He still wasn’t very happy now that he was in the lambs’ pen, but he was warm and fed, and safe, even if he didn’t know it.

Tommy, you said to me, “I wouldn’t be happy either, Mama, if I was some place strange and I didn’t know where you were, even if someone else was taking care of me.” With that, we told the little wolf goodnight and all went to sleep ourselves in Grandma and Grandpa’s big feather beds.

The next morning Tommy got to introduce Judith, Cezar and Beth to the baby wolf. You fed him some more with the milk rag and changed his straw. You had to steer clear of his sharp little teeth, though. You might have liked him, but he wasn’t at all sure about you! For three more days, you took care of him and even got to play tug-of-war with him a few times.

Libby took a quiet breath.

Then, on the evening of the little wolf’s fourth night with us, Grandpa and you and I were in the barn finishing up the supper time chores. The dusty air was sparkling as the setting sun filtered through the slats in the side of the barn. We were in deep shadow inside, but the farmyard outside was still bright with light. I heard her before I saw her. She was standing in the barn door, like a lean black ghost, stock still, the hair on the back of her neck standing straight up and the lowest, most menacing growl I’ve ever heard was rumbling out of her throat. She stared at us, and we stared at her. For a minute no one moved; you and I were halfway to the back of the barn just a few steps from the ladder to the loft; Grandpa was a little in front of us; the pup was way in the back. He must have smelled his mother because he set up a ruckus that Grandma heard inside the house. She stepped out onto the porch, and the wolf was trapped. Her growl got twice as loud and she curled her lips back to show us her humongous teeth. She turned her rear end sideways so she could catch Grandma in the side of her eye. Grandpa knew the wolf would not allow the present situation to last much longer; she would make something happen.
“Katherine, step back inside the door,” Grandpa ordered, his voice as firm as I’d ever heard it, and his body as still as the wolf’s. “Libby, don’t turn your head. Keep eye contact with her as long as you can, but take Tommy by the hand and walk steady-like to the ladder. Send the lad up ahead, then turn and climb up yourself. Do not move once you get up there. Tommy, do exactly as I just said. Do not say a word and do not make any quick moves. It’s very important Tommy – do not say a single, solitary word.” And, Tommy, you saved our lives by doing exactly what Grandpa told you to do. I reached behind myself and took your hand – I’m afraid I probably squeezed it a little tightly – but we walked tall and straight to the ladder; you climbed up and I followed you.

“What did Grandpa do then, Mama?” Tommy asked on cue. Libby went on, her voice even softer than usual.

Grandpa started talking to the wolf. He locked his eyes on hers and said, “Good evening, Mother Wolf. I assume you’ve come for your son. We’ve tried to take good care of him for you. I see it looks like you may have hurt your leg – caught in a trap perhaps? I know you don’t want to come into the barn because you can see if you do we could corner you in here – I assure you we have no intention of doing that. But, since you can’t understand a word of what I’m saying, you have no way of knowing that. I’m going to follow my family up that ladder now, and I’m supposing that you’re going to have a greater need to get your son out of here than you’ll have to pick a fight with us. You see, I’m moving back toward the ladder now.”

With every step that Grandpa took, the wolf growled a little louder and bared her teeth a little broader. As Grandpa reached his right hand out to take hold of the ladder rail, she tossed her head and made a half-hearted leap in his direction. “I can see you’re bluffing, Mother Wolf. That gives me courage to turn now and climb this ladder. Take your boy and God speed to both of you.” With that, Grandpa turned and climbed the six rungs to the hayloft. The second his foot left the top rung, the wolf sprang
into the barn. She raced right under us to the back of the barn, grabbed her pup by the nape of his neck, and was gone as fast as she’d come in. The only way we even knew she’d been there was that we could hear the pup’s bawling for quite a little bit. Whether it was from joy or pain or a combination of both, we never knew for sure.

You turned to me when the last of the pup sounds were gone and said, “But Mama, I would have taken good care of him.” And Grandpa said to you, “Son, he wouldn’t have made it away from his own, no matter how well you took care of him. That’s just nature’s way; folks have to be with their own – folks with folks, family with family, just like wolves have to be with wolves, pack with pack. That little wolf couldn’t have stayed long with us any more than you could go live with a wolf pack. Now – let’s have some supper. I believe Grandma’s going to be pretty happy to see us tonight!” And with that we all climbed down the ladder and went in to give our family a great big hug.

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Libby brushed back the hair clinging to the sweaty foreheads of her four sleeping children. Judith and Tommy had drifted away with the last words of the story.

Libby reached out to the empty space where Tom usually slept. Her gut convulsed as her mind spun with the vision of the she-wolf writhing in a death spasm while the starving pup shivered beneath the gnarled roots of the oak tree, watching his mother’s agony, unable to beseech her back to feeding him. Grandpa John was a compassionate man, but he hadn’t kept his family and his sheep healthy by being ignorant of other predators’ ways. The next morning he told Katherine and Libby what he’d done during the night, after the rest of the family was asleep. The wolf had stalked Libby’s nights ever since.

John reminded them that once the injured wolf had safely entered man’s den, there was no guarantee she would not return
for an easy kill. And so, he had gone to his barn and retrieved the bottle of poison farmers stash away for just such unpleasant moments. He’d made his way back to the carcass, praying that the wolf was not there. He knew, injured as she was, that she would return to her earlier kill to feed herself for the next few days. Fortune was on his side, not the wolf’s. As he spread his poison over the odiferous innards, he’d told her he knew she’d do the same if a predator had found her den. He told her the only reason he’d let her escape in the first place was because his grandson was watching. As he sat back on his haunches, he’d said a prayer that the wolf’s death would be swift and her suffering short. He promised her he’d check back in a couple of days and, if her pup was still alive, he’d take him as he’d originally intended, letting him rat in the barn until he’d learned to kill on his own, then take him far away where he’d have a chance to make it in the wild.

Libby knew her father-in-law had done what any good farmer had to do, and she blessed his faithful heart for going back for the pup. She’d known the chances were slim of the pup surviving the suckling he would surely do at his dying mother’s teats, but the man had kept his promise to return. The pup of course was dead, nestled under his mother’s foreleg. Libby wound her body tighter round her children’s peaceful forms and wished for Tom. It was always harder for her to banish the wolf when she was alone with it.

“I wonder if I’ll ever tell my children the rest of the story?” was her last thought as sleep finally silenced her fear.

Bio: Bonnie Mattingly Woolston: In 1664, the first family of Mattinglys came from England to settle in Maryland in the earliest days of the colony. Bonnie was born a Mattingly. When she was in her mid-twenties she learned that she had inherited a debilitating neurological disease. After she retired, she gathered a family genealogy of 4,000 names. She has tracked the family ailment, ALS Type 4, back to a person born in the 1750s. One of my grandchildren has ALS 4. A cluster of 30 families in Mary-
land are under the care of NIH. She wanted to discover how Libby survived and successfully raised all four children to become landowners, and the forbearers of herself and her children. And so she began writing a book called *Mattingly’s Hope*. This bedtime story, “The Wolf,” is a passage from that book. Bonnie is a member of the South Baltimore Chapter.
YOUNG ADULT
Figures in the Night

By Julia McCormack

A lone man stands amongst friends
    —their nightly meeting
Sparse conversation floats in air
Grass and moss squelch under the man’s feet
Each time, grating metal tells them that he has arrived
Colors have faded away under the gray mist of night
    The soft chirping of crickets eases the shadows
He sits down and looks at his friends
    They lie still in rows
    Each marked by those who knew them
He greets everyone slowly, respectfully
The wind brushes warm air across his stubbled face
    “Ah”, he says, “I am glad to see you too”
    Everything settles to the hush of nature
    The man walks to and fro
    Comforting them with his presence
He converses quietly with his companions
    Who are content to listen
    Slowly, color starts to seep in
The man walks his last and bids a farewell
    They too rasp goodbye as he departs
    All are grateful for company

(Based on print Behind the Gare-Saint Lazare
    by Henri Cartier-Bresson)
Guernica

By Julia McCormack

All is dull and numb compared to the horror, shock, and pain
When the world breaks apart there is little light
There may be times and places where light shines through
But it is quelled by the grim darkness of truth and fact
No one goes willingly into the dark
It takes you screaming and fighting
But once it swallows you
There is nothing but dismembered life
In a land without living

Sudoku

By Julia McCormack

Numbers and lines form a puzzle
They follow rules
I count rapidly in my head
A pattern frantically circling
They are cushy, permanent
Lines form symmetrical squares
Variation within conformity
A secret code to solve before it’s too late
Ecstasy overwhelms with each discovery
Hopping around testing, calculating, scanning
A break from the outside
A simplified world
one objective with smaller achievable goals
Logic rules without the need for proof
They draw you into the maze from above
Space means an opportunity
Numbers may befuddle, but clarity will always surface
Endless pattern “1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9”

Bio: Julia Q. McCormack is a 16-year-old from Silver Spring. In the upcoming school year 2020-2021, she will be a junior at Sidwell Friends School in Washington, D.C.. An avid reader, she writes poetry, short stories and complex riddles. In 2019 Julia earned a silver medal in the annual National Medusa Mythology Exam. This year she won the Bronze in the 2020 contest. In 2020, she earned a Bronze medal in the National Mythology Exam. Julia is in her high school Crew team and enjoys wrestling. Her writings have been published in InLight and in Pen In Hand. Julia hopes to be a professor of classical literature or mathematics one day.
DRAMA
The Apple of My Eyes
A Play in One Act

By Gandharva raja

(Dr. Madden’s Consultation Room: a den. A mahogany desk occupies the center of the den. On the left front of the desk sits a monkey lamp—a monkey balanced on a globe holding a glowing apple. Dr. Madden is seen leaning back in a leather executive chair, his left hand tucked Napoleon-like in his vest, while the right hand rests on the desk, fingers strumming it sporadically. On a credenza against the back wall behind the desk, there is a single bound volume: The Complete Sherlock Holmes. The wall behind the credenza displays framed diplomas attesting to Dr. Madden’s Freudian brilliance.

Alicia, the patient, rests comfortably on a leather chaise lounge at the right side of the desk. Her legs crossed, her hands are clasped and held against her pregnant belly. She faces the monkey lamp as she speaks.)

Alicia:  (Avoiding Dr. Madden's eyes, which are fixed on her) Every night, I dream I am about to eat my baby. Each time I attempt to take a bite, my baby, turns into a juicy red apple.

Madden:  She is going to be the apple of your eyes, Alicia. Rest easy. This is hardly a complex matter that needs psycho-analysis. The couch is comfortable is it not? So my patients tell me.

Alicia:  O yes, it is. But that’s not all. I can’t bite on an apple anymore. Each time I pick up an apple, I see my baby within the apple.

Madden:  We call that somatization of love. Nothing unhealthy,
Alicia...

Alicia: Doctor Madden! An apple a day is okay, but a baby a day?

Madden: It is the fruit of your love…

Alicia: I can't bite the fruit of my love. Help me, Dr. Madden.

Madden: Oh No. It is not to be devoured in the gastronomic sense, Look at the apple. Ruminate on it. *(Tosses her a red delicious apple)* Analyze the apple, the situation.

Alicia: The apple is to be analyzed on the couch! Did you change your mind, Dr. Madden?

Madden: I confess to a small bite-sized change of mind. The apple needs analysis, not its holder. Biting an apple is not abhorrent or cannibalistic. The apple comes between you and the baby you are carrying. Another desire, another doubt. Is it not so, Alicia?

Alicia: Jonathan loves Andrea. She is now three. I know he does. He buys Andrea Barbies, takes her to Build-A Bear. *(Pause)* He plays with her whenever he gets a chance (a longer pause) as though she was his own.

Madden: Andrea is not Jonathan’s but the one due soon is his. Has Jonathan asked you to marry him?

Alicia: He is comfortable with our arrangement, our committed relationship you know what I mean—living together. We have been together for two years.

Madden: And you, you too are comfortable?

Alicia: Jonathan and I go to the ballgames. We enjoy watching movies together. On the weekends we hold hands as we stroll in the park.

Madden: And Andrea?

Alicia: We take her along. Jonathan wouldn’t dream of going to the park without Andrea. *(As an afterthought)* A few months ago, he did talk about marriage—after we have our kid.

Madden: That’s when the dreams began?

Alicia: I guess so. *(after a pause)* Yes. *(softly)*

Madden: Next time he asks…
Alicia: Should I say yes?
Madden: Are you afraid?
Alicia: That he may not ask or to say yes if he asks?
Madden: Are you?
Alicia: I am not sure.
Madden: Whether… (His finger strumming picks up tempo.)
Whether...
Alicia: Whether it is for me or for the baby.

(A faint smile appears on Dr. Madden’s face. He stops strumming his fingers on the desktop. He rises from his chair. Alicia too rises and walks across to the monkey lamp. She strokes the glowing apple in the monkey’s hand lovingly.)

Alicia: An apple a day. Thanks, Dr. Madden.

BIO: Gandharva raja is the pen name of Dr. Tapendu K. Basu. He is a member of the Academy of American Poets, Maryland Historical Society and Maryland Writers' Association and Mystery Writers of America. He is the editor of Pen In Hand, MWA's biannual literary magazine. His publications include Hoofbeats, A Song of You: A Poetic History of the United States; August 29: How Kabir H. Jain Became a Deity; Epic Mahabharata: A Twenty-first Century Retelling; and The Last Day of Ramadan. His historical/romance parallel novel I, Kanishka awaits publication. In 2017, The Nisha Trilogy was produced as a Bengali movie, Tadanto in Tollywood, Kolkata. Satiric Verses: The American Century was published in 2019. During the COVID isolation he is completing his three-part detective novel.