

PEN IN HAND

LITERARY JOURNAL JANUARY 2022

Dr. Tapendu K. Basu
Editor



M MARYLAND
WRITERS'
ASSOCIATION

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

PEN IN HAND

The Biannual Literary Journal
of the Maryland Writers' Association

January 2022

Editor: Dr. Tapendu K. Basu
(Gandharva raja)

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ISBN 978-0-9820032-9-9 (print|paperback)

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

Maryland Writers' Association
3 Church Circle, No. 165
Annapolis, MD 21401

Editor: Dr. Tapendu K. Basu
Design: Eileen Haavik McIntire and Stephanie Fowler
Cover Image: Penny Knobel-Besa
Cover Design: Dr. Tapendu K. Basu and Stephanie Fowler

Dedication

To True Grit, Vision and Hope
which make all things possible

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Guidelines

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

Submission deadline for the next issue of *Pen In Hand* is May 30, 2022. 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: center name
- Indent first line of each paragraph 1/2" inch
- Single space between period and next sentence
- In general, dialog should be double spaced and in quotation marks

- Insert approximate word count at the end of your manuscript (except poetry): flash fiction 500-1000 words; short story word count 2000 to 3000 words
- One double space below the end of your manuscript, include a brief Bio with Chapter affiliation. 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.

For further guideline details refer to Maryland Writers' Association website.

Message from the Editor

The world is bravely fighting the Fourth Horse of Apocalypse, (Ezekiel's "sword, famine, wild beasts, and plague") menacingly depicted by Albrecht Durer in his series of 1498 woodwork. COVID rides like a winged horse, changes color and has killed millions. WHO names the mutants with letters of the Greek alphabet, the latest skipping a few to the newest Omicron, perhaps holding on to Xi to name a more virulent strain.

*O thou,
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed*

*The winged seeds, where they lie cold and low,
Each like a corpse within its grave, until
Thine azure sister of the Spring shall blow...*

(from *Ode to West Wind* by Percy Bysshe Shelly, 1819)

Yes, this fierce horseman will also pass us by, and we will triumph. Members of the MWA will ride the wings of muse and write poems, memoirs, fiction and drama. In my sixth year as editor of *Pen In Hand* I am delighted by the enthusiasm of our members, the force of their words, and the diversity of their voices.

Together we will welcome 2022:

Dr. Tapendu K Basu, **Editor, *Pen In Hand***

Message from the President

According to Roman mythology, Juno was the guardian deity of January. Conventional belief, however, attributes the month to Janus. As the god of beginnings and transitions, Janus presided over the beginning and ending of conflict, and hence war and peace. To me, that seem less depressing than Conquest, War, Hunger, and Death, the four horsemen of the Apocalypse.

So how does this relate to writing? Let this year begin your conquest to finish the draft you have been working on. Then wield your red pen and begin battle with edits. Allow your hunger for the finished piece guide you past the black whole of forgotten manuscripts to publication.

Amy Kaplan, **President**

POETRY

Memorial Day

by Karen Laugel

Choose
one of the fifty ways
to leave your lover.
Cancel all automatic renewals especially
GoDaddy.

Terminate your business partnerships leases
employer-employee obligations postage meter contract.

Sell your business even for a loss.

It will be
a gain.

Move out of your home. Take your
bicycle
books

photographs kayaks.

Tell your adult children where to find you.

Commute 300 miles on Amtrak every Friday night
to work a sixteen-hour shift in the ER until you find a better
job

in another state
closer to your grandchildren.

Move to that state.

A
state
of transformation.

Pay off your debts.
Pay off some of your children's debts. Be grateful.
Be lonely.
Be sad.
Be renewed.
Take long walks amongst the trees
feel the wind on your face
inhale clove and chocolate and honeysuckle. Hear the cacophony of birds and
tip your gaze to their flight.

Seek shelter under the crepe myrtle's canopy. Write poetry.

Karen Laugel, a pediatrician, and member of Montgomery Chapter of Maryland Writers' Association has published poetry and several works of non-fiction. Her work has appeared in *Pen In Hand*.

Patience is a Virtue

by Roderick Deacey

So, small granddaughter,
this morning we are not learning about
birds, or trees, or flowers, or the weather.
Instead, we are going to talk about waiting –
which is why we are making our way
to the wooden bench at the railway station,
where we can contemplate the empty platforms,
listen to the bees buzzing about
in the Black-Eyed Susans
and wait.

Waiting is an essential learned skill –
there will never be any time in your life
when you are not waiting
for something or somebody.
We'll start with some easy examples –
how about these?

waiting for the swimming pool to open
waiting for your mother to come collect you
waiting for your birthday to finally arrive
waiting to be old enough to go to school
waiting to be old enough to leave school
waiting to be old enough to leave home
waiting to be old enough to know better
waiting to catch that elusive fluttering bug of love
waiting for your prince to come
waiting for your prince to come home
waiting for your prince to come home from the war
waiting for the war to be over
waiting for your ship to come in
waiting for the other shoe to drop

waiting for the penny to drop
waiting to have your own children
waiting for payback, that bitch
waiting for your children to leave at last
waiting for your parents to leave at last
waiting to be free at last, free at last, thank God almighty...
waiting for freedom to be more than just some people
talking
waiting for freedom to be a little less lonely
waiting for Godot – or Jesus
waiting for the rising tide to float your boat
waiting to live a little, then a little more
waiting to sing “*Je ne regrette rien*”
waiting to be content with “now” not “when”
waiting to be too old to worry about the world
waiting to replay those best memories
waiting for that to be almost enough
waiting for the rough beast, slouching
waiting for the last dance, a final pirouette
waiting to sleep, perchance...

We'll discuss all these things
when we are sitting at the station –
and how some things are worth the wait,
while other things aren't worth a damn!
Or we could, of course,
wait –
until you are somewhat older.

Anyway, the station is a good place
to learn about waiting – did you know
they even have a special room for it?
And if we can simply wait for a while –
a heartbeat, a breath or two, a lifetime –
the train will come.

November Dog Day

by Roderick Deacey

Sunrise and sunset slide closer together,
words seem to matter less and less.
It's more the look and feel of things –
the autumnal smell of leaf mold under the trees.

Dark honeycombs of stratocumulus scud in –
as if someone has thrown down
a heavy Navajo blanket – a hand-woven evening
to envelop the Indian Summer afternoon.

All we see now are a few ancient stars
still wheeling across bruise-black skies
and a few fabled befeathered spirits
still wheeling across storm-swept Plains.

All we feel now is the chill fall wind,
carrying a faint taint of winter snow –
fueling us with an overwhelming desire
to gather firewood; feed our fire.

Roderick Deacey is a performing poet in the DC area, based in Frederick, MD. He is a member of the Frederick Chapter. In normal times, he regularly performs with a drummer and bass-player, presenting “neo-beat” poems inspired by the Beat Poets’ poetry and jazz forays of the nineteen-fifties. 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.

Half woman, Half empty

by Anita Nahal

Half woman, half empty. Or so they say. Meditating on top of the Himalayas. Proletariat, bourgeoisie, and Dalai Lamas from generations past congregate break bread. Other half is nurturing, soothing, preparing the planet for *Shangri-La*. A hefty, viscous, operose task. Driven by sheer power like *Jaegers* from *Pacific Rim*. Driven by wisdom marinated like mama's pickles in hot sun. Driven by aches and pains of sockets waning and unoiled. Driven by sounds. Tons and tons of sounds, even from ribbed, mocking, eerie lights inverted in René Magritte's *The Empire of Lights*. Sounds topsy turning the weighing scale. Rooms, streets, very air we inhale, replete with sounds. Sounds ticking. Sounds hiking. Sounds screeching. Sounds treading. Sounds hovering above dense snows or lying camouflaged among coral reefs. *Gala* lay unsuspecting as mis-matched nesting attackers poised for the kill. They weren't sweet. Would've been more than a bee sting. Susurrus of half woman, half empty, proletariat, bourgeoisie and Dalai Lamas, tries to soar. Words are seen coming out as letters from mouths only to slide back when hands hoist in caution. The *Elysium fields* are not as smooth or idyllic as most dream and clearly hierarchical. Need taming, some men say, like Shakespeare's shrew. Congregation ends. Half woman returns home to the other half, repeating confidently, "*She's not, they're not, I'm not, you're not, half empty. Still in the making till we pass into our next birth. A bit more made. We'll never know and begin again as half trying to be full.*" Why is becoming full a gendered thing? Blimey!

**Shangri-La*: A fictional, harmonious place first described by British author, James Hilton in his 1933 novel, *Lost Horizon*.
**Jaegers*: Building sized machines piloted by humans in the

2013 American Sci-fi movie, *Pacific Rim* * *The Empire of Lights*, 1954 painting by René François Ghislain Magritte * Salvador Dali's muse and lover. The poem was inspired by *Denise-Desires of Utopia* by the sculptor & painter Elizabeth 'Lish' Škec.

Anita Nahal, Ph.D., CDP teaches at the University of the District of Columbia. Anita has published books on poetry, flash fictions, children's books. Two of her books are included in a course on multiculturalism at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands. Originally from New Delhi, Anita is a member of the Montgomery Chapter.

Mainstay

(Constant Murmurs of an Obituary Writer)

by Dolores Hoffman

Slow down and you will hear the cliché of “Candles in the Wind”
spring to life with the flame of repetitive flickers
and wonder why you celebrate the familiar,
and not the fresh forgotten time of the only place you belong.

As for me I'll keep the comfortable place between
the echoes of memories
and the controlled fear of living.
The cool and natural piece of me,
the whole and productive,
I'm keeping it all.
The smell of cedar,
the gaslighting,
The consequences,
the hillbillies in frames,
the word-less people,
the goblets of wine,
the squirrels disparaging the Kentucky oaks.
Watch me now as I walk into the morgue for the fifth time
today,
renewing the frenzy that keeps

Dolores Hoffman has written for *South Jersey Mom Magazine* and *Northeast Metro Woman Magazine*. Her poem “Deep Roots” was published in *Poet's Choice* publication. She is a member of the Maryland Writers' Association Eastern Shore Chapter.

Write Pretty

by Zorina Exie

I'd like to write about pretty things,
images of beautiful leaves falling from trees
dancing in the wind
cold brisk air discoloring landscape
brownish-gray mounds of rocky dirt
blanketed with darling chilled sheets.
Crochet flakes

soon to be shoveled,
pissed on, trampled,
played with. Eaten.
Billowy snow sprinkles mounds of
corrosive salt pot-holing roads
for people to fall into.

I so much would like to write
about imagery—melted snow
soaking back into the earth
as if it were never there.
As if winter never froze summer over.
As if winter never stole Indian Summer.
Emerald verdure chill crisp rustic blush.

Lament earth's frosted rose.
Astoundingly gorgeous. Gone.
Frozen heart. We freeze.
Fingers iced until spring
flushing hot air into slush
Branches blush, yawn, cascading
another budding season, seeding succulents.

We celebrate warmth.
Family drives for ice cream.
Fingers chilled. Brain freeze!
Polar ice caps melting. Warming.
Cyclical seasons.

I so much want to write about beauty, birds, bees...
All I see is greed, the need and
the process in between.

Zorina Exie Frey is an author, essayist, screenwriter, and spoken word artist. She is the founder of *45Magazine*, Blog Editor for *South 85 Journal*, a publishing content writer, graphic designer, and video editor. She is also a contributor of *Chicken Soup for the Soul: I'm Speaking Now*. Zorina is an MFA Creative Writing Candidate at Converse University. She is member of MWA.

A Few Moments After My Grandfather's Funeral

by Lois Perch Villemaire

When I was 18, I stood at his gravesite,
staring at green lawns growing
mismatched stone memorials,
my head circling with thoughts
of never seeing him again.

As family wandered away,
I gazed at the rectangular patch
of overturned earth,
my first time experiencing loss
of a loved one.

The grass was damp from
early morning rain, trees wept,
my shoes stuck where I stood,
unable to move, unable to imagine
leaving this place,
breaking the connection.

Sunlight appeared as if invited
to this solemn ceremony,
throwing shadows across resting places
in a sightless, soundless community,
bound to remain together.

My uncle appeared beside me,
I felt the comfort of his arm
around my back,
his hand cupping my shoulder,
He softly said, Let's go.

My Mother Was a Rainbow

by Lois Perch Villemaire

My mother was not the type
for blazing red polish on salon-shaped nails.

She was vibrant raising five children,
showing off her colors every day.

Fresh-squeezed orange juice each morning,
stirring campfire stew as a Brownie Scout leader,

Warm summer days, driving the blue Chevy station wagon
to the cool swimming pool,

She encouraged us to hike on wooded trails
in lush green parks, collecting coffee-colored acorns,

Then she handed out stale crusts of bread to toss
to white-feathered ducks waddling by the lake.

Later in life with time on her hands,
she had manicures, her nails perfect in pinks,
silvers, peaches and cream.

Lois Perch Villemaire is a member of the Annapolis Chapter. Her stories, memoirs, flash, and poetry have been published in *Six Sentences*, *Trouvaille Review*, *FewerThan500*, *The Drabble*, *Pen In Hand*, and *Flora Fiction*. Her poems have been included in several anthologies published by *Truth Serum Press*, *Global Insides - the Vaccine*, and *American Writers Review 2021*. She was a finalist in the 2021 Prime Number Magazine Award for Poetry.

Quiet Creek Bridge *by David Stant*

A small town rests quietly on a river bank
With buildings rustic but well preserved
From its streets can be seen the waters winding between
mountains
Offering a small glimpse of the river's journey ahead
Across the river lie falling white waters
Surrounded by a dense forest of tall green trees

A quiet creek joins two equal in regret,
A small waterfall compensating for its meekness,
White waters molded by rocks beneath their stream
The untamed river running northeast to the city
Its currents changing without permission of the sun

The creek bridge is a place of peace
Possessing a magic that brings a hidden treasure
To be carried by the river's fast moving current

When the river, exhausted from its journey,
Carries with it a sparkling reflection of light
The flowing waters capture the beating heart of D.C.

David Stant, a member of the Frederick Chapter, has been published in *Maryland Bards Poetry Review 2020* and was selected for inclusion in the *Train River Summer 2021 Anthology*. His book, *Four Corners of Depression*, was published by J2B Publishing.

In Our Previous Lives We Owned a Bakery

by Lynne Viti

You made panettone in round paper collars,
elderflower celebration cakes, Bakewell tarts.
Sometimes when a shipment of sour Seville oranges
arrived by rail from faraway Spain
you put up jars of bitter marmalade for New Year's
with grapefruit, blood oranges, lemon in the mix.

We worked sixteen-hour days, left the children
with our mothers or mothers-in-law.
We gave cinnamon rolls and strong coffee to the cops
free of charge, to stay in their good graces
so they'd keep an eye on the shop midnight till dawn.
Sometimes we handed over fresh Anadama loaves
or cupcakes iced in pink buttercream.

The bank wouldn't lend to women in those days.
We borrowed from your uncles, paid interest.
Mornings, the smell of orange rinds and sugar
never ceased to intoxicate us.
I watched you lift the cheesecloth like a bedsheet,
tie its corners to fashion a jelly bag.

I worked the overnight poolish, adding flour, water
filling great crockery bowls with dough,
went to work on the cookies
while the bread dough began its first rise—
By nine, we were ready to flip the front door sign
to *Welcome, We're Open*.

All this I conjure up from your gift yesterday,
marmalade labelled *Courage 2021*.

When I open the squat Mason jar
these dreams of another life appear,
Another life, with other struggles, other triumphs,
perhaps no better, no worse than this one.

Lynne Viti, a lecturer emerita in the Writing Program at Wellesley College, was born and raised in Baltimore. She is the author of *Dancing at Lake Montebello: Poems* (Apprentice House Press, 2020) and two poetry chapbooks *Baltimore Girls* (2017) and *The Glamorganshire Bible* (2018), from Finishing Line Press. She blogs at lynneviti.wordpress.com.

Footpath
by Ellen Coffey

Treading along a backland trail,
 as autumn's first sting cuts to bone
 and a weak tea sunrise breaks eastward.
Meandering path obeying the shape of wood and hill,
 following close the river's inclination to lead the way
 while yellow-brown leaves blow and settle into powdery
 dust.
Soon, this forest highway will harden with winter verglas
 and only knowing natives will risk walking these byways,
 until spring softened earth makes its contours clear
 again.

This day is for conjuring phantom footfalls,
 creators of an ancient passage through forest and field
 to hunt for food, to seek shelter, to go home.
Hard horned hooves and soft furred paws sketched its outlines,
 soon followed by barefoot travelers and booted men
 continuing to hew a line for others to follow.
Do they walk with me as our footprints mingle?
 Are they still searching for what is up ahead,
 or are they now content to follow in my furrow?

Tomorrow my tracks will be buried by other travelers,
 but there's comfort in knowing this footpath will remain -
 reminding us that we once walked before we rode.

Ellen Coffey is the current president of the Cumberland Chapter of MWA. Her poems have appeared in *Pen In Hand Literary Journal*, *Backbone Mountain Review*, *Allegany Magazine*, *Maryland Bards*, and *Poets Choice*.

Eye Skin (Last Gleaming)

by J.D. Brayton

You will find freedom there under a blue rock
caked with red mud the hue of granddaddies blood
costume bile and lost whispers of a more real time when
the red glare lit the skies to assuage
an unfathomable fear
emboldened by controlling lightening
tasting powder and shaming daylight
because of dystopian black rude night
antecedent
rejoicing
flashing behind eye skin and awakening
nightmares beyond
hearts crushed by blue metal
a marching band
another war delivered
scrubbed clean by ghosts
flavored cotton-candy
talons of an eagle
tickling deft cymbals
post-hypnotic memorabilia
dreams never die.

J.D. Brayton is an author and poet residing in Silver Spring, MD. He has published four novels and has nearly completed an audiobook version of his historical fiction: *The Light Horse*. He belongs to the Montgomery Chapter.

MEMOIR & PERSONAL ESSAYS

What's a Lyric Essay?

by Frances Altman

You've heard of the lyric opera? The lyric theatre? The lyric song writer? So what is a lyric essay?

In September, One Maryland One Humanities selected *The Book of Delights* by Ross Gay as its annual recommendation. Gay is an award-winning Baltimore poet, essayist, teacher, and he writes lyric essays. In collaboration with the State's libraries he is acquainting readers and writers with this new form of blending poetry and essays. Although Gay's work matches the form for lyric essays, in his book he persistently describes his work as "essayettes."

According to Wikipedia a "Lyric Essay is a literary hybrid that combines elements of poetry, essay and memoir. It is a relatively new form of creative nonfiction."

"Composing a lyric essay is not that easy," said Gay in a recent virtual presentation. He set up an experiment back in 2016 to spend a year (from one birthday to another) spending thirty minutes each day writing an essayette. He also set criteria that he would write by hand. He would not attempt to write perfectly, but to witness what he saw and how he felt about it. He did not edit except to correct grammar—spelling and punctuation. The result brought him delight, he says, resulting in a selection of 121 pieces that ultimately became *The Book of Delight*.

In his essay "Writing by Hand," Gay writes "I decided that I'd write by hand, mostly with LePens, in smallish notebooks." He admits that in writing by hand he is not trying to achieve perfection. An entire essay may be written without a pause. It would appear that Gay found delight in writing by hand and that "the scratch-out" becomes its own archive—versus using the delete button when composing electronically.

“Thinking is writing.” He calls it a “weird path toward what you have come to know, which is called thinking, which is what writing is.”

In this hybrid style of combining poetry, prose and memories, Gay’s writing blends his observation of a topic with personal thoughts flowing (or rambling) along in a lengthy sentence. As his thinking and writing connect, he may include the names of friends, celebrities, brand names or a profanity. In length his pieces run from seven printed lines to two pages. His sentences are punctuated with commas so that they become “a conversation with one’s self.”

Reading from *Fireflies*: Just beyond the pear tree already wealthy with sun blushed fruit- lets is an alcove of trees, a dense black screen made by the walnuts and maples that is, for these lucky weeks, pierced by the lumen-tummied bugs, one of which landed on my neck earlier today, crawling down my arm to my hand, balancing itself when I brought it closer by throwing open the bifurcated cape its wings make. How common a creature it seems before its cylindrical torso, starts glowing, intermittently, at which point it is all of strangeness and beauty in one small body.

In October Lia Purpura, another Baltimore literary award recipient, presented “The Craft of Writing Lyric Essays” in a virtual presentation for the Baltimore County Library. Her approach to writing this form differs from Gay’s; the results are similar—lyrical prose.

She describes her experiences as “a journey of discovery.” She finds her inspiration and subject matter in the natural world by walking and the observation of the environment, people or actions. To her “the motions of my body through space and not focusing on discipline” is as important as sitting at a desk might be. For her, writing in such an easy rhythmic manner is like having a “conversation with myself and asking ‘where does this idea go?’”

Purpura feels this approach frees her from many of the disciplines successful writers suggest are essential to writing such as keeping a regular writing time or a specific setting. She does carry a notebook in her back pocket, and jots down phrasings or feelings, observations or memories as they might come to mind. They may not be used immediately but stored away for inspiration or future usage. Her recent essays are in *All the Fierce Tethers*.

Both writers admire the writing of Gerald Stern, poet and essayist who has received multiple literary awards. His writings are prominently supported by the Poetry Foundation.

Stern, now 95, has been called an “American original” and a “post-nuclear multicultural Walt Whitman.” He is considered the reigning Dean of the hybrid creation. Literary critics have praised his work, remarking that Stern’s essays could just as easily have been poems.

“They concentrate on imaging and moving loosely in and out of a subject rather than telling a story.” (*Poetry Magazine*).

Traditionalists for years have labeled such wild composition forms as “free form” or “high form” writing. Google says “Its name has many variations, but it is essentially the same – writing without thinking about it. The idea is that you just put pen to paper and begin to write, not editing any of what you put down, just allowing to flow and ebb as your thoughts flow and ebb.” It’s now obvious that literary proponents have changed their opinions and agree with Gay that “thinking is writing.”

Despite this acceptance, Perdue Owl Lab goes so far as to caution college instructors to teach this new form of writing only to poetry students of intermediate and advanced levels. English teachers frown with its compound-complex sentence construction, but urge dividing with commas. Walden University’s Writing Center concedes that such

writing “does add variety to a sentence.” It’s breaking the rules but it’s also being accepted.

Consider this tip when you have written your lyric essay: Target your audience and be selective. A lyric essay may not be suitable for a college scholarship essay submission but it is bringing smiles and acceptance from literary magazine editors and publishers. And it’s here to stay.

Frances Altman’s writing over fifty years has ranged from reporting for *The Chicago Sun Times* to writing juvenile books. She taught at Virginia Commonwealth University. Frances received awards from National Federation of Press Women and League of American Pen Women, and MWA’s KidLit Summer Reading Program. She wrote *Mister Umbrella Man* for middle graders. She is a member of the Baltimore North Chapter.

FLASH FICTION & SHORT STORIES

A Corvid Laments

by Michael Norton

“As a crow, I think it would have been nice if they had included some instructions on how they expected me to behave at their wedding. We don’t do these sorts of things, you know. I don’t want to make a scene or somehow inadvertently ruin what I understand is their big day.

I love them both. They’re one of those couples that always seems to be wearing the same color: she in blue wool, he in blue baseball cap. Something about their love makes me terribly homesick for the way things used to be. But I can’t go back. That’s what they told me anyway. Irreversible science and all.

There is no dread quite like the dread of becoming, out of the blue, without any warning, a wedding invitee. Hints should be dropped well in advance. The couple has been together for years and years. Why now? And why a wedding so far away? The body needs time to adjust to news like that. We’re all like those deep-sea divers in that way. The ones I’ve read about in their bulking suits and diving bells, afraid of the bends, of the errant gas bubbles, you know? We all need time to properly pressurize.

That’s the issue, isn’t it? The immense pressure of the matrimonial proceedings. My first thought after the stab of dread and the brief flare of joy for my two dear friends was what should I wear to a wedding? What’s appropriate? During official ceremonials, they costume me in a handsome leather vest, a stately hat, and, if there is time, gold foil delicately woven into my wing feathers. At home, I don’t wear anything at all, save for on occasion when I drape the perfect silvery necklace around my neck and lose myself in the bathroom mirror. I envy my hollow-boned brethren who can look into a mirror and not see themselves, who

gaze into the glass and see only another bird, a different bird, pretty bird, or else a new adversary, a challenger, the Other, you know?

They gave me a studio apartment. They didn't really know where else to put me. The zoo was straight out of the question. I remember just lingering in the entryway, reading and re-reading the invitation. *You Are Cordially Invited...* It was a shock to the system.

As you can see, I settled on wearing my ceremonial hat. A top hat on a human might be overly formal, with too much a sense of the former, of the dead past, and a bit eccentric because of that, a showy piece, especially for this couple who, excluding this whole destination ordeal, is actually quite reserved, quite low-key. But a top hat on me looks nice, I think. It says: I understand the custom of clothing but I also have nothing to hide, no part of my body that would give me pause, embarrassment, or shame to show.

Once this humble outfit was concocted, I realized in horror that another, greater decision loomed. What should I get them? And should I send it in advance, damn the postage cost, which must be, quite literally, astronomical? I had a vague notion that I ought to get them something blue, but I'm woefully ignorant when it comes to the rules of wedding gifts. Friend, never take for granted the terrific freedom you have having hands. I dream of having hands every night. That's hyperbole. I usually don't remember my dreams and when I do they are just shiny shapes and updrafts and a simpler time when a worm in the morning meant sunshine all day. But, I know, beneath all that, I'm dreaming of hands, of holding, and perhaps even of being held. I'm not coming onto you; don't fear, stranger. I'm not attracted to humans in the least, and if you're attracted to crows, well, you better just keep that to yourself or this will be a rather uncomfortable flight.

I'm teasing you; I'm digressing.

If I had to bring the gift, I would have had to hold it in my mouth, preventing me from speaking. Getting by without hands is a challenge, but getting by without speaking, especially in a spaceport, what with all those questions? Impossible! Strapping a gift to my back with thin strips of leather was a consideration quickly abandoned. I'd look ridiculous. And anyway, the gift would have to be so small to comfortably sit on my back that it might be viewed as underwhelming or even offensive. I understand the practice of gift-giving, you know. It's something we do too. But I didn't think that the couple would enjoy receiving a shimmery coat button. It would just sit on the gift table until some good Samaritan picked it up and brought it to lost and found, thinking they were being heroic by returning a lost button.

My solution, though an imperfect one, is to tell the couple a secret of the crows. I haven't decided which one yet; we have about a dozen or so. I don't mean to tease you, but I can't tell it now. You understand, of course. But, please be honest with me: do you think that that will be a good gift? Or is it lazy and arrogant and odd? Be honest in the way only a stranger can be honest."

The man sat next to the crow in silence, and the in-flight movie played softly in the background, built into the seats and into the ceiling, a sour romance, and the heat was set to some imagined balance between what everyone wanted but which ended up being merely too warm. The man sweated; the crow fanned its wings as if slowly stirring the soupy air, heavy with the technicolor soot of the in-flight movie, which no one was watching. The man didn't know how to answer the bird in the stately hat. He felt terribly inadequate to give advice on either wedding gifts or the hidden wisdom of the crows.

The passenger cabin of the commercial moon ferry was overly spacious; it tried hard to hide the crushing emptiness of space. Colored lights painted silly shadows across the cabin walls, and the in-flight movie wasn't really that bad.

The man was going to the Moon to visit his aging father who had retired there.

"I want to live the time I have left weightlessly," was the only explanation the father gave to his son, and now the son was hurtling toward the Moon sitting next to an elegant crow.

"I think that sounds like a lovely gift," the man finally said.

The crow nodded its head, the strange lights of the moon ferry cabin catching and refracting off its blue-black beak like an obsidian mirror. The nod looked like a smile.

"Thank you," the bird said, "that's exactly what I needed to hear."

Michael Norton is a fabulist and playwright. He is a member of the Montgomery County Chapter.

Crossing Negev to the Sea, Summer of '72

by Stephen M. Berberich

Shoshana said no way. She would not risk crossing the Negev Desert and begged me not to go simply for snorkeling.

Instead, I hitched alone to the bus terminal in north Jerusalem. I took only a change of t-shirt, swimming suit and towel rolled into my down sleeping bag. I brought a paperback but saved it for the beach. The bumpy bus ride into a sea of dust would tempt motion sickness, especially in sweltering heat with no AC.

My first adventure all summer without my hitchhiking companion was exciting fun, at first. Shoshana though was indeed wise not to come along and get frightened to death. Halfway to the roughneck border town of Eilat on the Red Sea, hours into the ride, the Israeli bus, circa 1957 or so, sputtered to a dead stop. The driver radioed in Arabic for help and walked off into the nothingness of dirt, rocks, and scattered scrubby bushes.

I was more than alone on a full bus of passengers. I tried talking to a German man next to me who knew English. He was not interested. Have faith, I thought as I dozed off dreaming of snorkeling the tropical waters off Eilat's beach. But then I was rudely awakened in fear of my life by shouting soldiers arriving in an armed jeep. They brought a second bus. The German man pointed to the soldiers and said simply, "Friendly, ya?" They were Israeli soldiers and we all would still be safe for the moment.

Trying to 'chill out' while riding in the second sweltering bus, I captured my dream into a rhyme as Shoshana might have written it:

Eight hours to Eilat
To the sea through desert sand.

Asleep when broken down bus stopped.
I woke next to a young German man.

“Been to Frankfort?” he sounded rude.
“No, you wouldn’t. Good grief.”
Just another hippie seeking solitude
On his own coral reef.

He’d had it with flower girls.
Couldn’t stand the pain.
Now he’s off to see the world.
They made him too insane.

He told me how his life was going.
And all he’d been through
What 70’s Israeli kids were doing.
He said German kids do it too.

I’ll float a while to relax me
And see what’s all the rave.
Jerusalem friends, ‘Ya just got to see
What’s under the tropical waves.’

He told me about the dazzling fish
The splendor of it all.
Even said he’d get me what I wished
Flippers, mask, and snorkel ball.

“Ya. Unt I take you to das fish bar
for girls, freaks, and beer.
They all hang out there.
It is nothing to fear”

I then slipped back in time
With a stumble and a trip.
Eilat’s beach of mystics, muses rhyme
Good God, nowhere to sit.

Hear the guitar strummer fool
His Jethro Tull is tired, overworked.
Freak scene, stoned heads rule.
And that Joni Mitchel girl such a flirt.

They spread out a world map
On the beach picnic table.
She circled her houses at
L.A. and Coral Gables.

She bent down on purpose
To show me her tits.
I almost threw up my beer.
Damn, these hippies give me the fits.

Where's that shy German man?
Oh, he's sitting right there.
Seems the real deal so tall and tanned
With the beard and long hair.

I bet the coral reef is quite a sight.
Did he say it loud, or let it slip?
Yea, yea the Red Sea's blue alright.
Think I'll take that dip.

And so it was, silly as Shoshana's cute rhyming was all
summer long. I could almost already hear the girl laughing.
I missed her.

S. M. Berberich, a journalist, published the paranormal novel *Night at the Belvedere* followed by four more novels. A short story, *Hero to Homeless*, was published in *Connections*. *Travis Hunter* is a novel about PTSD and collateral suffering from war. Stephen is a member of Charles County Chapter.

Glen Riddle Reckoning –A Fictional Viewpoint

by Bob Faszczewski

Here I sit, rotting away in the Worcester County Jail. Why? Just for trying to turn my miserable life around and survive while doing it.

My tale—I am the great nephew of Louis Feustal, who trained Man O’War, still a century after easily winning the Preakness and the Belmont Stakes, recognized as the greatest thoroughbred of all times.

Uncle Louis groomed his horsemanship reputation on Samuel Riddle’s Glen Riddle Farm, only a few short miles from the Snow Hill, Md. jail where I currently cool my heels everyday since my “capture” only a week ago from the abandoned hovel where my quickly becoming worthless life has left me.

What’s the charge? Illegal hunting in a residential area—the only evidence—a deer skin hanging on the wall of the shack which currently provides my “residence.” The only “proof” about its origins have come from the vicious gossip of one of the nobodys living in one of the ostentatious mcmansions that have replaced the natural beauty of one of the most famous racing training grounds in the world.

Back in the 20s, when Mr. Samuel reigned over the real Glen Riddle, no one questioned his right or the right of those who worked so hard for him to take care of the vast expanse of the farm and the animals that roamed so freely around every inch of the estate.

Now, those who preyed upon the misfortunes of time that caused that majestic farm to crumble after its abandonment and chased many of nature’s creatures from that glorious land, want to prevent an unfortunate soul from reliving the memories of the past so he can go silently to his final reward.

I’m not even stopping them from enjoying their “luxury

homes” or even pushing for their expansion to other parts of Glen Riddle. I just want to capture the few joys I have left a few miles from the sacred soil where the hooves of the finest horseflesh in the annals of the world wrote a large part of my family’s history.

Don’t these ingrates know that the exploits of Uncle Louis and his brothers, like my great grandfather, captured the hearts and imaginations of Marylanders throughout the state and a host of Maryland wannabees from all around the USA and throughout the world?

Of course the little perfect world of Glen Riddle began to crumble when Uncle Louis and Mr. Samuel parted ways shortly after my uncle re-wrote the annals of racing history with Man O’War.

Uncle Louis, however, didn’t let the falling out completely destroy his life. He continued to build his racing credentials elsewhere even when the big jewel in Mr. Samuel’s crown began to lose its glitter for him.

The “straw broke the camel’s back” when Mr. Samuel died. The later owners apparently had no use for the great heritage of the farm and abandoned it. The Riddle mansion and the barns where the boys in the Feustel clan spent so many fun-filled afternoons burned to the ground in 1969.

The hard times continued until 2004 when the new owners decided fancified townhomes had more importance than history for the future of the famed property. Sure, the homes looked nice for those trying to escape the city so they could party every weekend with their new-found rural allies. Also, just because the new inhabitants paid some lip service to Glen Riddle’s legacy it just wasn’t the same.

My personal life also kind of followed the Glen Riddle Farm into ruin—with a triumphant Man O’War finish nowhere in sight.

I also played at high stakes gambling like many in the

horseracing game--only I parlayed my chips on Wall Street rather than on racing. My horses on "The Street" came in dead last and I never crossed the financial finish line.

My wife, who had spoiled herself on the high life, ran away with a slick operator whose fortune came on the heels of a number of illegal deals for which he never paid the price.

The bills just kept stacking up like horseflies on the back of a cheap nag until I found myself bankrupt and homeless.

Five years ago I returned to the Eastern Shore and the environs of Ocean City, where it all started for my family, thinking I could bring back the old Glen Riddle magic.

The magic had completely disappeared and I found myself living in an abandoned shed in a rundown area within shouting distance of Maryland's former citadel to the glory of the running of the thoroughbreds.

I believed my continued meager existence could revive, if only by living in the vicinity of past greatness, a life of one with nature as I turned the final page in my sorry chronicle.

Now I find myself being uprooted again and crowded out by a new generation of carpetbaggers who have no idea of the way they have violated sacred ground that built the foundation that led to Ocean City's fame as a premier resort.

They have permanently tarnished one of the shining jewels of the Eastern Shore and of America, and I don't know if the sacrifice of my life and what's left of my reputation will reverse this course.

Perhaps these meanderings of a bitter, and perhaps mentally-challenged, old man will go for naught, but maybe someone will come along with the imagination and wherewithal to revive the dream of the 2020s to the dreams that incubated the wonder world of the 1920s.

Bob Faszczewski is a member of the Eastern Shore Chapter of the Maryland Writers' Association. In addition to his recently published collection of science fiction stories, *Taming the Timeline*, Bob has published several short stories including *Bloodstains on the Ledger* and *The Turkonians Are Coming*.

The Vampire Boy Who Did Not Believe in Baseball

by John W. Harding

In a distant, unknown valley—so hidden from the world that not even power companies had discovered it—lived a vampire boy named Russell who had never heard of baseball.

Russell, like all vampires, slept during the daylight hours, and since there was no electricity for outdoor lights, all baseball games were called at dusk. Russell had existed through the changing of many moons without ever once hearing the word “baseball.”

When the last slice of sun dropped like a teabag into the mountain tops all the candles would be lit so that spiders could spin their webs. Russell would then join his family in the castle parlor before they went flying off to work.

Russell did not really want to know what his father and the other adults did in town. But it bothered him that he was not considered an equal. “Papa, the almanac says tonight there will be a full moon. Can I go with you and see what you do?”

Russell’s father was one of the undead, but he was not aging well. He had trouble keeping his hair slicked back, for one thing, and even his cape didn’t hang with the panache it had in the old home movies.

“In time, my son,” answered the father. “You must gain more experience first.”

It was the usual brush-off. How did he expect Russell to gain experience if he was never permitted to come along?

“Just stay here and feed the children. Clean up the bat droppings and tend to your studies. We will discuss this later.”

But this night everything felt different somehow. Russell knew he must do something if he wished anything to change. When the castle was silent and the wolves were

fed, he strapped on his black cape and climbed out on the window ledge.

“So, I cannot go into town with them,” he muttered to the cobwebs. “But Papa didn’t say I couldn’t go off into the northern woods.”

And with a rustling of the window sash, Russell was gone.

The moon hung close and bright above him tonight. Way below began a straggling forest, the lonely trees casting long, finger-like shadows that seemed to wag at him and warn him to go no farther. But Russell was determined to prove his father wrong.

He glided over the dark forest. Off in the distance were the tiny glowing windows of forest cabins. The hillside dwellers would be there behind their locked doors, staying safe and warm by their fireplaces.

A wide gap opened in the tree tops and Russell saw something on the ground he had never seen before. Sketched out in the flat dirt was the chalk outline of a plot roughly the shape of a large meat cleaver. If any crop was planted there it was not being irrigated.

Russell circled around again and again, daring to drop a bit closer each time. At each point of the cleaver he saw a burlap-colored cushion. Where a handle should have been were two squares backed by a chain-link fence.

It did not seem safe to fly any lower. Perhaps it was some sort of vampire trap set by the hillsiders. So Russell decided it best to return to his castle until someone could explain what he found.

“It’s called a diamond,” said Russell’s Uncle Linus, who had overslept and was only now deciding on which cape to wear into town. “There was nothing like it when I was your age. I’d say they’ve only happened along in the last decade or so.”

“Such a big diamond—it must be worth a lot of gold,” said Russell.

“It’s not that type of diamond.”

“What use is it?”

“If I wanted to guess, I’d say it’s a human game.”

A human game? marveled Russell. Since when did humans play games, or have fun, or do anything but shriek and run in terror at sundown when they saw his relatives spraying from the top balcony window?

Russell loved his family, but he was not proud that they made the village boys and girls all tremble and run away. It bothered him to see how they feared getting caught outside when night swept the valley.

All the next day, Russell was so eager to have another look at the strange diamond that he could hardly wait for dark. Luckily, the season was changing and night settled swiftly. It must have caught the villagers by surprise, too, because they had dropped what they were doing and went scurrying hither and yon.

Russell saw the diamond was deserted and felt it was safe for him to land.

All over the field lay the most curious array of items. There were fat sticks as tall as Russell himself, and large oven mitts with webbings made of leather. Russell wandered back toward the chain-link fence and picked up a scary face mask with a wire grid that covered the mouth.

“Give me a hand, will you?” came a voice from the dark.

Russell jumped and his impulse was to take to the sky. But the calm, matter-of-fact tone of the voice was not threatening at all. In truth, Russell was too curious to leave.

“A hand with what?” he asked.

“Packing up all this stuff,” came the reply.

“Who’s it belong to?”

“That will have to be sorted out tomorrow, won’t it?” A

young human boy could be seen in the murk, picking up discarded items and shoving them into a long canvas sack. "They don't deserve it, though, if you ask me—not if this is the way they treat their things."

He was about Russell's height, only rounder at the belly and stuffed into a hand-knit sweater and a visored cap.

"I have some time to waste, if you're asking for help."

"You daft?" blurted the stranger, clearly appalled. "This can hardly be construed as a waste of time."

"What is all this stuff?"

"The stuff of dreams is what it is, make no mistake. It's gear. For the game."

"What do you call this game?"

The chubby boy stopped to gaze at Russell and his face screwed up. "You new here?"

"Sort of."

"Come closer. I can't make you out."

"I see you fine."

"Charles is my name. Charles Avery Lindenauer."

"I'm Russell."

"Here, catch," barked the boy, and with a flick of his wrist came a stitched ball the size of an apple. It struck the front of Russell's cape and slipped down through its folds to land with a thud at his feet.

"I thought you saw me fine," said Charles.

"Why'd you throw that at me?"

"I pitch, you catch. Get it? Or you pitch and I catch. Toss it back."

"Why?"

"Why? No why. It's baseball."

The word had a nice sound to it. But Russell was feeling annoyed. Clearly this Charles Avery Lindenauer had a rather lofty opinion of himself.

He watched the boy shrug and go back to scooping up

the scattered items.

“Where’s the other players?”

“Aw, they’re just a lot of superstitious ninnies. All they talk about is witches and ghosts and vampires.”

“That doesn’t scare you?”

“Foolishness and nonsense.”

“That’s most enlightened, Charles. What’s your part in this game?”

“I’m a centerfielder. At least, that’s what I’m hoping. At the moment, I don’t measure up. That’s what they say. Next year, though. Till then I’m just trying to be the best bat boy I can be.”

“Me too,” said Russell.

“Toss me that catcher’s mask, will you?”

“This thing?”

“That’s right.”

“Why must the catcher wear a mask?”

“You want him taking a tip to the noggin? That’s a pretty hard ball you just dropped, if you didn’t notice.”

“That’s why he also wears the oven mitt?”

“Catcher’s mitt,” corrected Charles. “But, yeah.”

“This catcher must be a special person.”

“That’s for sure.”

“Where do you catchers come from?”

“That’s just part of the great mystery of baseball, my friend. One day a fellow shows up and puts on the mask. And if you’re lucky, your team has got itself a catcher.”

“Interesting. What’s the meaning of these white lines?”

“That’s our infield. ... I mean, it’s not Ebbetts Field or Yankee St. But it gets the job done.”

“Someone told me it’s known as a diamond.”

“Same diff. ... Man, you sure you didn’t just drop in from another planet?”

Russell did not enjoy being made to feel inferior by

someone no taller than he was. Charles was having fun at his expense, making out it was his fault for not understanding.

"You're just making all this up," responded the vampire boy. "Admit it. Masks and sticks and a few meaningless lines in the dirt —"

"Wait a minute, hold on," interrupted Charles. "Sticks? I'm starting to get the idea you really never played baseball."

"So you say."

"Listen, pal, baseball's the greatest thing in life. I mean, it's the ultimate. There's nothing better, understand? Picture this. You got two teams, nine players on each team, and each one chooses a pitcher and assigns positions like first base and center field, and if you're the umpire, you yell 'Batter up!' and the excitement begins."

"What did you say about a vampire?"

"Umpire, dummy. He calls the plays and makes sure everyone follows the rules."

"Go ahead and pull my leg. See what it gets you."

It suddenly grew very quiet on the field. Russell never really believed the young human was pulling his leg. He didn't seem to be deriving any pleasure from Russell's gullibility. In fact, the chubby boy appeared to look on him with pity.

"You never played baseball, so how could you know?" said Charles. He shook his head until a smile broke through. "Hey! How about I round up the fellows tomorrow, and you come by and give it a try?"

"Tomorrow? What time?"

"Right after school. Three-thirty's good. Straight on till dark."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Sure you can."

"No, I can't. It's not possible."

"What have you got to do that's better than baseball? I

tell you, this will change your outlook on being alive. You'll be looking at things in a whole new light."

Russell liked the idea of looking at things in a new way. The thought of spending eternity in a castle with just his family night after night, doing the same lame things, telling the same jokes, cleaning up the usual piles of bat droppings—it was all so dreary and pointless. And then there was the matter of the guilt he felt for making the villagers cower in fear.

"How do I know you're telling me the truth?"

Charles looked into his canvas sack and rummaged around a minute before pulling out a padded glove. "You see this?"

"That mitt," said Russell. "What about it?"

"This is not any mitt. It's very special. Goose Goslin used this very model to clinch the 1919 pennant for the Valkyries. Snatched a high fly out of the sun when it was on its way over the stadium wall. It's like he flew up in the air. That's how he got the name 'Goose.' I tell you, it was nothing short of a miracle."

"A miracle? May I hold it?"

"Sure, take it. Feel the power?"

"It's soft. Good dead skin. I sense its ancestors and its strength."

"Take it home. Go on. We got others. Just bring it back with you when you come."

Russell tucked the Goslin glove under his shirt and hurried away before Charles could change his mind. Indeed, the vampire boy was so excited about his treasure that he completely forgot himself. It wasn't until he had left the diamond and was on the edge of the dark woods that he remembered he could fly.

. . .

One family legend at the castle had long obsessed Russell. An ancestor from centuries before was known to have magically transformed himself back into a mortal human being. He no longer had to go flying through the night in search of sustenance. He did not have to bite the necks of silly ladies and careless men who left their bed chambers unsecured.

Russell's reformed ancestor was actually able to walk in sunlight again. He mixed with villagers and was said to have found love with a living woman and eventually sired six healthy human children.

Could the Goslin mitt contain the magic to help Russell make such a transformation? Could it reverse his condition and allow him to escape the fate of being a "child of the night" till the end of days?

As he glided on into the winds Russell thrust his hand inside the glove to feel its warmth. He stretched his arm out high toward the moon and imagined catching that lunar orb in his leathered palm. This miracle glove made Russell think it was possible to play baseball in the stars.

Back in his own room, Russell put aside his usual hobbies to concentrate on unlocking the secret of the glove's power. He lit candles around it like a shrine, and babbled incantations over it that he found written in the *Roget Book of Spells*.

Too excited to sleep, Russell sat watching his glove until he heard his father and cousins returning, then reluctantly closed the lid on himself. He would not be transformed that night, so, sadly, there would be no baseball for him the next afternoon. Sorry, Charles.

Through the whole next day and beyond, Russell returned often to the problem of unleashing the magic of the glove. He tried incantations, coatings, rubbings, chants,

crystals—nothing worked. In desperation he lit small fires around the webbed fingers and bathed the cowhide palm in rare white eagle's blood.

By the third night Russell might have been ready to fly into a rage but he didn't have to. He was already there. The magical mitt was just another myth, a sham. Everything Charles had told him about baseball had to be a hoax as well.

He gathered up matches and paper and when the castle was dark and deserted, Russell headed out one last time to visit the baseball diamond.

With a bushy bough snapped from the top of a tree, Russell began by wiping out the chalk lines in the dirt. In a storage chest he found the canvas sack full of baseball gear and built a bonfire by the chain-link fence. When the flames reached high enough he heaved the sack into the middle of the sticks and watched the canvas turn brown and blister.

"Holy moley!" cried a voice. Charles came running out from the darkness, struggling with his belt buckle. "What happened?"

"See the result of your lies."

"Are you crazy? What lies?"

"The Goslin glove—it was not magical. It couldn't cure anything. It didn't hold special powers, not at all. And your fanciful stories! If there is a thing known as baseball it is not what you say it is."

"What happened to you? We waited for you, pal. We all hoped you would join the team, experience it for yourself."

"I don't believe there are teams or catchers or umpires. If there are any games, you make up the rules as you go. It's all a web of lies designed to hoodwink the weak-minded. Measures need to be taken to stop you from preying on others."

"Listen, Russell. I don't know what you expected. These things you threw in the fire—they aren't baseball. They're

just the ... trappings. Baseball is bigger than that. You can't burn it. You haven't stopped anything."

For Russell, it was the last insult. In a flash he was holding Charles by the head, bending his neck in such a way that the red reflections of the bonfire danced up and down his pale, exposed flesh. Luckily at that moment a cloud passed in front of the moon, preventing innocent eyes from witnessing what happened next.

Russell sat for a half-hour or more with the body of his peer and countryman lying at his knees. He knew that he had turned a page. He no longer felt belittled or demoralized. He welcomed the inner glow of vindication. It was the transformation he had been seeking all along.

He returned to the castle just as his father and Uncle Linus and the others of his clan were getting in. His father came to give him a hug and took a long, hard look in Russell's face, as if he could see the change that had taken place.

"Russell, I have been thinking things over. It is time for you to join us on our forages after all," he said.

"Thank you, Father. What made you change your mind?"

"You worried me, my boy. I admit it. I could see you entertained false hopes. I waited to see a sign that you accepted your part in the natural order. I think you are ready now."

"I used to feel bad about what we do. I don't remember why exactly. But I've come to see there's nothing out there for me, Father. It would be foolish to look for anything to change."

Russell's eyes lifted and his lips parted in a smile that showed a fresh rosiness to his gums and just a trace of his pink-stained fangs.

"Tomorrow, my son, we go together, right after ..." His words stopped and he waited to see if Russell would take the bait.

“After what, Father?”

“Right after you have fed the wolves and swept up the bat droppings, of course.” And then they chuckled together and went off to tell the others.

John W. Harding left a 25-year career in journalism as a critic and arts editor with *Patuxent Publishing* and the *Tribune Co.* to write a series of novels about milestones in early filmmaking. *The Designated Virgin* and *The Ben-Hur Murders* were published by Pulp Hero Press. His latest novel is *Cast Aside: With Bushman at the Unmaking of ‘Ben-Hur in Italy*, which dramatizes MGM’s deadly debacle while on location in Mussolini’s Rome. He is a member of the Howard County Chapter.

The Battle of Frulingskirche

by David C. Reichenbaugh

It was a few hours after the start of D-Day, June 6th, 1944. To the two soldiers huddling in the mud, scared, muddy and hungry it seemed as if it had been at least a week. The passage of time has no real meaning when you are isolated, alone, and in fear of being killed or captured by an enemy that you had never seen before. You saw the films during training, and you heard the stories drilled into your head by drill sergeants, but this was different. This was not basic training, this was the real deal, war.

The two US Paratroopers lay huddled in the mud of a fox hole that had been blasted out of the ground sometime in the last few days by either German 88's or the big Navel guns from one of the ships of the Allied Armada that lay in wait off the Normandy Coast. Either way, the hole was a temporary sanctuary from the violence and chaos that surrounded them. The two Paratroopers assigned to the 101st Airborne Division were separated from the rest of their stick. They had to jump early before they were over their intended drop zone. There was no choice, either jump or die, because the engines of their Douglas C-47 Sky train were on fire and was moments away from becoming a complete ball of flame.

The Paratroopers were not sure where they were. A few hundred yards to their rear over a medium sized stream and through a patch of woods, lay several houses and farms. They had seen a small wooden sign that hung loosely and at an odd angle from the remains of an old stone fence, FRULINGSKIRCE. They both assumed that was the name of the little village they had found themselves in. Their mission had been to join the thousands of other Paratroopers who had been dropped during the night of June 6th and capture the crossroads of Cherbourg to prevent the Germans from

moving their armor to reinforce the Troops currently under siege from the beach heads of Normandy. It was a difficult mission for lightly armed Paratroopers. All they had to do was delay the German reinforcements long enough for the allies to gain a toe hold and consolidate their positions.

That was the original plan. For these two disoriented Paratroopers that mission was currently out of the question. That mission ended the moment both engines caught on fire, and they had to jump early. In the confusion they did not know if any of the other paratroopers in their stick had survived the jump. It was a mad scramble just to get out of the plane and try to save themselves.

There was a small road that ran thru the little village so they both concluded they would do their very best to prevent a German advance through the little village. They were supposed to start their war in the fields around Cherbourg. Since that was no longer an option, Frulingskirche was as good a place as anywhere else. They did not have a clue, since more than half of their equipment was scattered over Normandy, which direction they should go to even attempt to find Cherbourg or the American battle lines.

The sun was now low on the horizon as they had spent the day very carefully picking their way through and around the small village. They had heard the frequent and sometimes frenzy of small arm fire that seemed to be all around them. They had yet to see the enemy, the Germans, or the Jerries, as their British friends liked to call them. The heavy thump of the big guns from the Allied navy shook the ground. They could also hear the return thump of the German 88's trying to answer the allied onslaught of heavy artillery. They seemed to be exactly in the middle between the big guns of both sides. The little village they had found themselves in appeared to have been abandoned. They had not seen a single human being. There were a few cows and

chickens wandering around the barn yards. They had no idea where the inhabitants of this small village were but figured that when the big guns started pounding away, they had taken refuge in basements or simply left, leaving the cattle and small animals to fend for themselves.

The two men, Dave and Tom took stock of what they had to defend themselves with and prevent an enemy advance. Dave had a mortar, a ruck sack filled with mortar rounds, and his Garand standard issued rifle with plenty of ammo in pouches that were attached to his web belt. Tom was armed with a Garand rifle, plenty of ammo and had 5 or 6 pineapple grenades hanging off his web gear.

They peered over the edge of their fox hole exposing only the tops of their webbed helmets and their eyes. Dave had done his best to camouflage himself by sticking some freshly broken small branches out of the webbing of his helmet and covering his face with a thick coating of mud. Dave observed a field in front of them. The field which was nothing, but tall weeds and grass stretched out at least 500 yards to their left and to their right. It was another 250 yards across and ended at a stone fence row covered in crab apple bushes, thorns and a tangle of tall trees and wild grape vines.

To their rear was the small meandering stream, a patch of woods, and a group of houses with small barns and sheds. The road passed through the middle of all of it. They had come to the mutual decision that since the sun was setting low on the horizon to their front, they would defend in that direction first. They both were keenly aware that since they had dropped out of the sky into the middle of France they were surrounded by both potential enemy and civilians, they would have to keep their heads on a swivel and expect enemy contact from any direction.

Dave set up his M2 Mortar with the four-foot-long tube facing towards the open fields and thicket that lay beyond.

The mortar, bipod, and base plate together was a little over 100 pounds. He had another 25 pounds of mortar rounds in his ruck sack. How he had survived the jump with all of that strapped to him including his rifle and ammunition like an anchor was a minor miracle. The problem was that the detachable sight for the mortar had been dislodged during the jump and was somewhere within about a square mile of their fox hole. The best he could do when the time came was to use his best guess at distance and elevation and hopefully land his rounds somewhere close to the target.

The two Troopers had only been in their newly found refuge a few minutes when they first heard the rumble and the clanging of metal on metal. There was no doubt in their minds that the clanging and banging and the sounds of a diesel engine they heard coming in their direction from beyond the field in front of them was attached to armor and most likely a German tank. There was no way that it could be anything else.

The sound was coming from just beyond the tree and thicket line across the field. Within a few minutes they heard the chatter of an unknown number of men that seemed to be moving in concert with the armor. The voices were indistinguishable but were clearly speaking German. They both knew that in less than five minutes they would be in for the fight of their lives and the odds were clearly stacked against them.

David laid out his mortar shells in the bottom of their hole next to the mortar tube where he could get to them in a hurry. With no sight he angled the tube using his best guess. He was hoping to be able to land his rounds right on the tree line where he expected the tank to appear. The ground began to tremble, Dave noticed that the loose dirt at the top of their fox hole was shaking slightly. Grains of dirt were sliding down the edges towards the bottom of their hole.

Dave peeked over the edge of the fox hole and saw the thick brush move, then part, as a huge panzer came thru the brush stopping with only the front of the tank and the long tank barrel sticking out. Dave wondered if Tom was as scared as he was.

Dave could see the German Tanker sticking out of the top of the turret. He had a pair of field binoculars and was obviously looking across the field in front of him scanning the wood line where he and Tom were hiding. Whatever their odds of survival were before the tank showed up just got a whole lot worse.

Dave made a quick calculated best guess adjustment of the angle on the mortar tube then dropped the first mortar round down the barrel. He heard the distinct thump of the mortar round leaving the tube, followed a few seconds later by the explosion when the shell hit. Dave peeked over the dirt and saw that his round landed about ten feet in front of the tank showering it in a cloud of flying dirt.

"No good" he thought as he quickly adjusted the barrel. In an instant the sound of heavy small arms fire began raining in on the tree line where Dave and Tom were hiding. The bullets could be heard impacting trees and tearing up dirt to their front, sides, and rear. It was clear the Germans had not zeroed in on their exact location yet. The voices they heard earlier became frantic shouts. It was likely that the German foot soldiers accompanying the tank were diving for cover and returning fire blindly in their direction.

The tank was slow to respond to the surprise mortar round landing to their front. Dave dropped a second mortar round down the tube followed by a third as soon as he heard the thump of the second round leaving the tube. He heard both rounds as they hit and heard that screech and clang of the round hitting steel. Knowing he had just gotten extremely lucky he peeked over the top of the hole and saw that the left

tread of the tank had been ripped apart rendering the tank unable to move. The second round must have hit the back somewhere near the engine because a thick cloud of smoke had begun to rise. He saw the German tanker jump from the top of the turret followed by at least two other soldiers that wanted to get out of that burning tank as soon as they could.

The German infantry following the tank must have seen the puffs of smoke that had come out of the end of the mortar tube when it had been fired the second and third time. Suddenly, the small arms fire dramatically increased and bullets were tearing into the dirt and trees all around them. Tom had opened up on the Germans with his rifle and screamed "We got to get out of this hole, or we are dead. You go right I will go left."

Tom leaped from the hole still firing at the onrushing Germans as he zigged and zagged around trees. Dave Gathered his mortar tube as he scooped the remaining mortar rounds back into the ruck sack, threw it over his shoulder and leaped from the safety of their fox hole that was now under heavy fire. Wood splinters and dirt hit him in the face as he leaped out of the hole. He ran as hard as he could carrying his heavy load for about twenty yards as the dirt flew up at his heels from the impact of incoming small arms and light machine gun fire. The roar was deafening. Dave saw the next hole and jumped face first for the safety that he was hoping the bottom of that hole might provide. He was rewarded with a face full of mud and water that had collected at the bottom of the shell hole.

Dave rolled over and began to quickly set up the mortar. It did not matter where the rounds would land. He did not have time to try and aim. He just needed to return fire on the advancing enemy before it was too late.

Just as Dave rolled the first mortar round down the tube and heard that familiar thump, he heard a loud bell ringing

coming from the farmhouse several hundred yards to the rear. He heard the booming and familiar voice of his mother.

"Tom, David, Dinner is ready. Get your dad off the tractor. He can't hear me over the motor."

Tom stood up from behind a tree and looked over at Dave. He began to laugh. You know that belly laugh that comes, all the way from your toes. The laugh that is reserved for big brothers who are making fun of their little brothers.

"You are covered with mud from your head to your toes and mom is going to skin your hide when she sees you" "Head for the house I will go get dad off the tractor (tank)".

Tom ran out into the field heading for dad who was smoking his pipe as he brush hogged the long grass around the edges of the field.

Dave looked at himself knowing he was about to get a butt chewing by mom for the current state that his clothing was in. His face was covered in mud, his pants and shirt were covered in mud, and he was dripping wet from the water in the bottom of the hole. He thought to himself

"War is hell".

Dave picked up the 4-foot piece of steel well casing he was using for his mortar and dumped out the remaining apples he was using for mortars from his GI Joe Action authentic ruck sack and headed for home as quickly as his little legs and the load of the steel pipe over his shoulder would allow. He expect'sed to get yelled at, but it was ok he was happy. He had a chance to play army with his big brother and he had plenty of time to get cleaned up, eat dinner, and watch the next episode of Combat staring Vic Morrow as Sgt. Chip Saunders. After all, he needed to get some fresh ideas for his next mission.

He sure hoped that mom would let him have a piece of that apple pie he had smelled baking in the oven when he had gotten home from school.

David Reichenbaugh retired after 23 years' service with the Maryland State Police as a Lieutenant and Barrack Commander in Cumberland Maryland. His first book, *In Pursuit, The Hunt for the Beltway Snipers* was published by Fore Edge Books in 2018. He contributes to *Homeland Security Today* as a guest columnist. He is a member of the Cumberland Chapter.

Ninety Steps

by Tamar Anolic

“One, two, three, four...” Ilya Ivanovich Agafonov counted as he ascended.

Right behind him, Evgeny Dmitrievich Chugunov groaned as his milk pail knocked against his knee with every step he took. “Must you always count the stairs as we go to the attic?”

Ilya whirled around and leaned down towards his friend. “Yes! There are ninety steps up to the attic of this blasted palace, and how many times do you think the Tsar has climbed them?”

“It’s the Winter Palace, not the Blasted Palace.”

Ilya turned and continued walking. “Five, six, seven.” He shook his head. “You didn’t even answer my question.”

“Which question?”

“How many times do you think Tsar Nicholas I has climbed these stairs?”

“Probably never,” Evgeny admitted. “But I’ll bet anything the Tsarevich has- especially when he was a young boy.”

“Ah, yes, the future Alexander II, on whom everyone’s hopes are pinned.”

Evgeny frowned. “What do you mean?” he asked, just as he began to feel winded from climbing.

“Haven’t you heard, Evgeny? Everyone is just waiting for Alexander to become tsar, so that he can extricate us from this damn war with the Turks!”

“Careful, Ilya. These walls have ears.”

Ilya shook his head. “Not these walls, which the Tsar has never seen.”

“The Tsar has his secret police to cover the distance from which his ears cannot hear.”

Ilya turned to face his friend again, and both of them

stopped walking. "Evgeny, do you see how narrow this staircase is? Don't you think we would have noticed if we had passed an imperial policeman?"

Evgeny pointed his chin upwards. "Maybe there's one at the top of the stairs, listening to everything we're saying."

"Don't you think we would have noticed that too?"

"How? This staircase is so long, it might take us to heaven."

Ilya shook his head and kept walking.

"What step are we on now?" Evgeny asked a minute later.

"Number thirty-eight."

Evgeny groaned and leaned against the wall. "We're never going to make it."

"If we don't, the Tsar will send a policeman after us."

"For what? We're just a couple of footmen."

Ilya turned around once more and rattled his milk pail. "They wouldn't be coming for us, they'll be coming for the milk that the Tsar needs to complete his breakfast table."

Evgeny winced and began moving again. Together, the two men continued walking up the stairs. "Who even keeps cows in his attic when he can afford barns?" Evgeny wondered.

"Barns? In the middle of St. Petersburg? No way. Besides, this is the Tsar we're talking about. Why use a barn when you can use your own attic?"

"What step are we on now?"

Ilya climbed a few more of them before responding. "Number 65. See, we're almost there."

"You have a different definition of almost than I do."

"Keep talking. We'll be there before you know it."

"You keep talking."

"I can smell the cows."

Most of Evgeny's breaths were coming in gasps now, but he managed one longer one, and the scent of dung and

outdoor animals reached his nose. He shook his head. "The Tsar really shouldn't have farm animals in a palace."

"Perhaps Alexander will change things once he becomes tsar," Ilya said, and he, too, was breathing as hard as Evgeny was. "I feel bad for the maids that the Empress forces to live up here."

"Most of them are poor orphans who wouldn't even have a place to live otherwise."

"They could probably still find a place that's cleaner than a barn." Ilya reached the top step and slammed his right foot down on it. "Step number 90!" he crowed. "I told you we'd make it."

Just beyond the door, two cows mooed, and Evgeny shook his head. "Let's milk those cows and be done with this," he gasped. "We still have to get back down."

Tamar Anolic's first published book was *The Russian Riddle*, a nonfiction biography of the Grand Duke Sergei. She has published three novels about the Romanovs: *Triumph of a Tsar*, *Through the Fire*, and *The Imperial Spy*. Her short stories about the Romanovs were published in *The Copperfield Review* and *The Helix*. In June 2019, she presented at the Historical Novel Society of North America's biennial conference, and the annual conference of Historical Writers of America. *Ninety Steps* is a chapter in her short story collection for which she travelled to Russia for research. She is a member of the Montgomery County Chapter.

The Belt of Orion, the Hunter

by Michael Curley

“Ladies and gentlemen, please find a seat. We’re about to begin,” Rylee Kennedy announced to the capacity crowd in the conference hall in the Center for Astrophysical Sciences in the Dorsey Center at the Johns Hopkins University.

When the din of the crowd had quieted somewhat, Rylee held up her cellphone and said into the microphone: “Ladies and gentlemen, would you please take these out of your pockets or purses...” She waved her phone around for the audience to see. “And please turn them off, or as Dr. Noah Joshua would say: ‘Please put your Phasers on “stun”.’” There were plenty of Dorsey Center people in the audience who knew Noah Joshua, so there was an audible wave of laughter at Rylee’s remark. Rylee’s academic advisor, Professor John Boland, was in the front row facing her. He was a good friend of Dr. Noah Joshua and grinned in recognition. When he caught her eye, Rylee winked at him and smiled.

“As you know, we have a very important announcement today. My name is Rylee Kennedy. I am a graduate student here at the Dorsey Center and will be going through the announcement this afternoon. But first a few words from the person you all came to see, our founder – and funder – Dr. Noah Joshua.”

About three-quarters of the over nine hundred people in the conference hall were working members of the national press corps. They all knew Noah Joshua by reputation as a billionaire scientist with a strong interest in two major fields: climate change and space exploration. They came today specially to see him and, perhaps, have the chance to meet him, talk to him, or even question him. The fact that Hopkins was going to make some sort of announcement, was purely incidental as far as they were concerned.

Noah Joshua smiled, looking out over the crowd. “Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen. Let me add my welcome to the Deep Space Observation Program here at the Dorsey Center.”

“I am honored to be able to support this important scientific effort. And I am honored to be able to work, wherever I can help, with these outstanding and dedicated scientists who manage this program.

“And I am proud to share this podium today with Ms. Rylee Kennedy,” Dr. Joshua said, gesturing toward Rylee, “whose great work is the reason why we are all here this afternoon.

“As you may know from some of the reports that the Deep Space Observation Program has published, there are over 10 billion pieces of real estate in this universe. There are stars, planets, asteroids, black holes, supernovas, and many more categories of matter populating the skies. We need to learn about them. Our ancestors in ancient Rome noticed that we here on Earth were spinning around a giant fireball and that we had a few neighbors up in the sky that were doing the same thing. They named our neighboring planets after some of their favorite gods.”

“Now we can see or detect literally billions of objects in the universe and we need to learn about them, just as the Romans did. It is one of those objects that we are here today to learn about. So, without taking up any more of your time, let me turn the microphone back to the person who made the discovery that we are here to talk about today, Rylee Kennedy.”

Dr. Joshua offered Rylee his hand as he motioned for her to come back to the microphone. Rylee shook his hand, smiled, took her place in front of the mic, and smiled again at the large crowd. She then gave a description of the Deep Space Observation Program. How it began. Dr. Noah Joshua’s

role both as funder and founder of the program and, most importantly, what exactly the program did – that it looked, through space telescopes and radar devices into the far corners of the universe, and, that it used sophisticated audio devices to listen to the noise and radio signals that were generated by the planets, stars, and other bodies throughout the universe, as well.

Rylee said a few more words about the vastness of the universe, but then she stopped. She told the crowd that they were not invited to hear about phenomena that were billions of light years away. “We have something to announce about one of our neighbors – relatively speaking. One of our favorite neighbors, as a matter of fact. We invited you here to tell you about something we have discovered in the constellation Orion.”

With that, Rylee pushed a button on the podium that brought down an overhead screen projecting a group of stars. “Here he is: our friend and neighbor, Orion the Hunter, followed by his two hunting dogs, whom we have pitiful names for: Canis Major, the big dog, and Canis Minor, the little dog. A ripple of laughter rolled through the crowd. Rylee pushed the button again. This time a drawing linked the stars that made up the shield and the belt and the other regalia of Orion the Hunter. “Here is a picture I’m sure most of you have seen before,” she said. Now, keep your eye on the middle of the picture – on Orion’s belt.”

Rylee pushed the button again and this time a bright green light appeared on the belt of Orion. “This, ladies and gentlemen, is why we asked you here today.

“I told you a few minutes ago about all of the phenomena we keep track of here at the Deep Space Observation Program. I want to emphasize to you that none of these phenomena are new. A supernova sounds the same whether it is a billion light years away in one part of the galaxy or 10

billion light years away in the opposite part of the galaxy. Same is true about black holes, meteorite crashes, and all of the other phenomena. They all sound like each other. No matter where they come from. We know what all of these natural phenomena sound like.

“But, 56 days ago, we heard something new. We heard something entirely different coming from the region of the Constellation Orion where you see the green light on the screen. We heard a signal that we have never heard before. Very unusual for our program. So, we did what we always do. We fed the signal into our computer and compared it with all of the millions of other signals that we have captured. The answer: absolutely nothing. Our equipment had never detected such a signal before.

“So, we did more studies on the signal. We researched what natural process could possibly be causing this. We searched and searched.

“A few days later, our system detected another signal coming from the same source. We couldn’t identify this one either. Again, there was apparently no natural phenomenon that could cause it. And the second signal was different from the first.

“Two days later, it happened again. Another – different - signal from the Belt of Orion with no known source. A signal that was sent 250 years ago, that just reached Earth.

“This has been happening ever since the first signal arrived 56 days ago. Every few days we hear it. It doesn’t occur regularly. Some days the signal is there; some days, it isn’t. I want you to hear this signal. I want you to hear what we have been hearing for the last 56 days.”

At this, Rylee pushed another button on the podium, took a deep breath, and then stepped back from the microphone.

A high-pitched, repetitive, beeping sound was heard throughout the auditorium.

“Sounds almost like Morse code, doesn’t it?” Noah Joshua said softly to Dr. Boland

“What we have realized, after checking it against all of the billions of radio signals in the universe that are caused by natural phenomena, is that the signal from Orion is not coming from a natural phenomenon. No, the signal you have just been listening to was generated by an intelligent being – an intelligent being that lives on a planet near a star in the belt of Orion the Hunter.”

There was absolute and total dead silence in the conference room.

. . .

“I hope you enjoyed today’s announcement and presentation.” Rylee said lamely as most of the crowd jumped up and raced for the door.

The few remaining reporters had their hands up or were standing, yelling questions. Rylee spent the next half hour repeating what she had said about the Hopkins computers’ checking the signals against all of the billions of signals they had previously heard. She repeated a dozen times that the analysis indicated the signals were not some random natural event, rather they were being intentionally sent by an intelligent being.

“Who could it be?” three of the reporters yelled at the same time. Rylee just shook her head. “We have absolutely no idea.”

As the last of crowd was finally making for the doors, Rylee jumped off the stage and ran over to Dr. Boland.

“Professor, could I talk to you for a minute?” She glanced around, “In private?”

“Sure Rylee. That was an amazing announcement – truly amazing. And you did a super job. What’s on your mind?”

“Professor, something concerns me. I told Dr. Joshua as soon as the computer analyzed the first batch of signals. I told him that the computer believed they were coming from an intelligent source.”

“Yes.”

“Well, Dr. Joshua asked me to make a copy of every one of those signals we received and send it to him immediately – as soon as we received it. He said he wanted to go over the signals with you.”

“Well, that’s a little strange, Rylee. Go over a raw radio signal. But what of it?” Dr. Boland said.

“Dr. Boland, I thought it was strange too. At the time I told him, we had only received one signal.”

“So?”

“So how did he know there would be more? And, what was he going to talk to you about? Raw radio signals?”

“Rylee, I don’t think you should let this little incident upset you. There has to be some simple, logical explanation to why Dr. Joshua wanted the tapes. Noah can act a little strange at times.

“Look, Rylee, the stars in Orion’s Belt are about 250 light years away. That means that the ‘intelligent being’ sending those ‘messages’ did so 250 years ago. Can’t be of much use nowadays to Noah Joshua or anyone else.”

“I don’t know, sir. For some reason, this really bothers me.”

“Rylee, don’t let it. Don’t let it affect you. Let me give you a little bit of professional advice – advice about your profession – that is, the one you want to have.” He paused.

“Rylee, talking about a distinguished scholar like Dr. Joshua exhibiting strange behavior will not be good for Rylee Kennedy’s career. Understand me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ok. Glad you’re good with that advice. You did a great

job here today. Much to your credit. Let's keep it that way."

. . .

"Noah, we need to talk." Professor Boland said catching Noah Joshua in the Hall at the Dorsey Center.

"First, why didn't you tell me about the signals. And second, what have you been telling Rylee? You've got her quite upset."

"Rylee is fine. But I had a hunch she might be curious about my interest in the signals."

"Yes, indeed, she's suspicious of you."

"What's Rylee going to think? She's a smart young woman. Suspicious about what? Rylee knows it takes signals 250 years to get here from the Belt of Orion. What could she possibly 'suspect'?" Noah said making quotation marks in the air. "What could anyone do with signals that are 250 years old?"

"Yes, I could see by the lack of expression on her face that she didn't know anything about our secret Instantaneous Interstellar Communication System, our IICS."

"No, she certainly does not!" Noah said emphatically.

"So, what about my first question when we began this conversation? Why didn't you tell me about the signals?"

"I didn't want to tell you about the signals until I had some good news for you."

"Good news! What good news."

"Actually, you are asking me at the right time. Today's signal that Rylee forwarded to me brought good news from our friends on the Belt of Orion."

"What's the good news?"

"The good news is that our friends are coming here as we have hoped."

"They are! Really!" Dr. Boland said beaming.

“Yes,” Noah said. “Our friends from the Belt of Orion will be joining us here on Earth right after our new year in January of 2022.”

Michael Curley, a lawyer specializing in environmental & energy law and finance, has written six books and over fifty articles on those subjects. He has worked in forty-two countries and has taught at the Johns Hopkins University, New York University, George Washington University, Wake Forest University, and the Vermont Law School. He has written three novels and four short stories. He is a member of the North Baltimore Chapter.

Murder in Medway

by Diane Helentjaris

Gingham apron strings from a ten-year-old girl's 4-H project tie to a murder in the early 1960s. My apron.

The location of the killing feels surreal — Medway, Ohio, my hometown. Truth be told, Medway is not a town — only an unincorporated cluster of houses out in the country, surrounded by cornfields, farms, and the occasional apple orchard. Barely meriting a zip code, there are no stoplights in Medway. The clicking rumble of tractors cuts through silence. The stink of hogs and skunks perfume the air. A tranquil setting, the greatest risk for the inhabitants would appear to be death from boredom.

Summers in southwestern Ohio are hot. Worse than that, they are humid. Medway's in the steamy drainage basin of the Mad River, a tributary of the Little Miami River which in turn drains into the Ohio River which, in its turn, feeds the mighty Mississippi.

No one's home was air conditioned in Medway in the 1960s. Bath towels were never used more than once as mildew bloomed in the blink of an eye. People slept poorly in the summer. Room fans, ceiling fans, attic fans, and open windows could not conquer the heat. Most people were too conservative to sleep naked.

My family lived in a pink and white ranch house on the outskirts of Medway. Chalfont was the high falutin' name given to the development of about thirty single level ranch houses stretching between our road, Gerlaugh, and the Lower Valley Pike. The country road in front of our house was full of speeders so bicycling was out. There was no sidewalk, so skating was out. A polio epidemic years earlier led my parents to fear nearby Crystal Lakes, so swimming at the lake was out. There were few girls my age nearby. What

there was to do was Girl Scouts and church. Then, a well-meaning parent started a 4-H club.

The coral and white gingham cotton was a smart choice for my first effort with machine sewing. The old Singer sewing machine only sewed in two directions, forward and backwards, and made buttonholes with great exertion. The checks made it easy to stitch in a straight line as I made the few seams required for the apron. Thankfully, the pattern did not call for a buttonhole. My mother was calm and clear. She made sure I did things in the right way.

The apron was a project for our 4-H Club. Our club was coed. Women's lib was years away. The girls sewed and the two or three boys raised pigeons as their projects. Pigeons. Harmless but often unloved birds.

I was more familiar with the boys than other girls were as our house was across the street from the baseball diamonds and I had three younger brothers. I earned a dollar a game to keep score for the youngest boys' teams and spent hours at the ball diamonds. My mother volunteered in the snack bar. My brothers, suited up in heavy cotton outfits, played ball.

A red-headed boy in our 4-H club was not the most graceful athlete. His father, a confident friendly man and stocky like his son, was an umpire. When the red head was up to bat, he'd look back at his dad standing behind him and his face would fall into total adoration. His father gave him confidence. Hit or miss, this man clearly loved his boy and was there for him.

One summer evening after supper, I stood in our unfenced back yard at the property line. I was talking with one of the neighbor boys. A year or two younger than me, we chatted about whatever pre-teens talk about. A loud noise split through the sweltering humidity. We figured it was a backfire, looked at each other, then went on talking. In our world, we had nothing to fear. Sirens blared from the houses

south of us, the houses in Chalfont, the house where the redhaired boy lived with his umpire father.

Their neighbor, an old man, had shot my friend's dad. The old man, seeking relief from the heat, had been sitting in his yard. My 4-H buddy's pigeons flew over his property and, in the crankiness of the overheated, the elderly man raised a fuss. The redhaired boy's father and the aged man disputed this — and not for the first time — until the old man took out a gun and killed my friend's dad. Our all-American midwestern wholesome life fell apart in my first exposure to deadly violence.

With midwestern reserve, my parents never questioned the possible effects this shooting might have on us, their children. My mother did speak often of the grief of the boy's mother.

The boy was left without his mooring. Riding the bus home from school, just before we turned off Lower Valley Road to go into Chalfont, I'd see his mother kneeling on her husband's grave in the Mennonite church's graveyard, crying inconsolably. I believe she wanted to get her tears out before my friend came home from school.

The old man never went to trial. He had heart disease and found a lawyer to argue that the trial would be unfair to him, given his precarious health.

I'd walk through Chalfont to visit friends. As I went by his brick rancher with its small, high-up bedroom windows, I'd think about him and what he had done to my friend. And I would think my own murderous thoughts there in the bland middleclass middle American neighborhood lost in a sea of cornfield.

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DRAMA & ONE ACT PLAYS

Coriander and Parsley

by Dr. Tapendu K. Basu

(The den is converted to a small herb garden on a porch. Sybil, in her late fifties, is bent over several pots of growing herbs. She holds a pruning shear. Her husband, Basil, also in his late fifties, stands beside her holding a wicker basket. An entry door to a room is on the right side of the herb garden. Beside the door is a small utility table.)

Sybil: Disaster strikes! The lacewings are chewing on the dill.

Basil: Disaster or not I don't want minoxidil. Rogaine gave me headaches and nightmares.

Sybil: Of course not, honey. I love your baldness. *(Chops off a twig from the dill plant)*

Basil: That is the kindest cut of all!

Sybil: *(Hands him a small pruning scissor)* Snip off the leaf tips, dear...not the dill, the chives.

Basil: Hives? I have no hives. *(Checks his arms)*

Sybil: Examine your head while you are at it. A good slug of St. John's Wort will fix you. *(Giggles as she continues to collect her herb cuttings)*

Basil: I prefer chamomile myself—gentle and soothing.

Sybil: O dear! And I am not?

Basil: You are all tied up in knots.

Sybil: Me in knots? That's horseradish!

Basil: (*Pointing to a plant*) Rubbish? Now is that fenugreek?

Sybil: Good, dear! You can do without St. John's. Next to it is oregano, known to botanists as *Origanum Heracleoticum*.

Basil: Fenugreek's Latin cousin I guess.

Sybil: And there next to Oregano is the common sage.

Basil: I know. *Salvia Officinalis*! Divine and psychedelic.

Sybil: Don't you dare smoke them. Or their cousin Cannabis...

Basil: Leaves and flowers? It is legal in Colorado ...

Sybil: but not in USA... *Salvia Officinalis*! You are a show off!

Basil: We could move to Uruguay! It is officially celebrated there.

Sybil: There, here, everywhere.

Basil: Rosie is prettier, Sylvia is sweet.

Sybil: Watch your mouth, Basil. *Salvia* and Rosemary. And watch your steps! Be careful around the pots. (*Raising her voice*) You are stepping on thyme.

Basil: Time for pot? (*Sybil points her shear at him playfully*) It is time—time to be civil.

Sybil: Yes, a civil Basil.

(Her basket loaded with herbs, Sybil walks towards the door on the right—Basil follows, wiping his shoes conspicuously against a mat. Sybil places the basket on the table.)

Basil: You noticed dear, that I wiped my feet.

Sybil: Very Sybilized.

Basil: I have read that civilized Chinese men discovered that the shape of a plant revealed its medicinal usefulness.

Sybil: Oh?

Basil: O is for oregano. two lips, two pistils...My mistake... sorry I just described the Chinese Lantern. The shape of the lantern suggests its usefulness in problems of the urinary bladder. And ginger...

Sybil: And ginger?

Basil: Very useful after gynecologic surgery...cures nausea... ask Sloan-Kettering.

Sybil: Ginger! That's an herb?

Basil: No, but Pu Gong Ying is. That's our dandelion, also known as piss-a-bed. It is a good diuretic.

Sybil: Its shape suggests it? Looks more like hair in need of a comb. You are reading *Herbs A to Z* are you?

Basil: Y you ask? Why is not yohimbine used more often?

Sybil: Because it messes with the mistletoe?

(Sybil goes over and kisses Basil on the cheek.)

Sybil: Get ready for dinner, honey. Tonight's menu—skullcap cooked in fish oil, garnished with coriander and parsley.

(Basil pretends to take off his shirt and circles around Sybil as if in a daze.)

Basil: Mad dog skull cap! And so he meandered through the night and made neighbors wonder why a professor of renown would walk naked past midnight and disturb the quiet neighborhood dressed so sparsely.

Dr. Tapendu K. Basu (Pen name Gandharva raja) is a member of the Academy of American Poets, Maryland Historical Society, Maryland Writers' Association and Mystery Writers of America. 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*. In 2017, *The Nisha Trilogy* was produced as a Bengali movie, *Tadanto* in Tollywood, Kolkata. *Satiric Verses: The American Century* was published in 2019. His historical/romance parallel novel *The Author and The Emperor* was published in 2021. *Murder at the Fountain and Other Crimes* awaits publication. He is the editor of *Pen In Hand*, MWA's biannual literary magazine.

Pen In Hand is the official literary publication of the Maryland Writers' Association. Published biannually in January and July, this journal features MWA members across the state and submissions from nearly every genre: poetry, sci-fi, flash fiction, short stories, drama, mystery, memoirs, creative non-fiction, and personal essays.

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