

THE AGORA

Volume 3, 2013



PLATO

Participatory Learning and Teaching Organization

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PLATO Mission

PLATO is a member-directed and participatory learning-in-retirement organization committed to developing, offering and promoting opportunities for intellectual and cultural enrichment for its members, and to providing scholarship support for adult students with significant financial needs enrolled in post-secondary education courses, or such other charitable purposes as the Board of Directors may determine.

***The Agora* Mission**

The Agora is a juried publication of PLATO, the Participatory Learning and Teaching Organization associated with the University of Wisconsin–Madison’s Division of Continuing Studies. The journal seeks to share the creative talents of its members by publishing their literary and artistic contributions in a periodic volume of original works, including poetry, short fiction, nonfiction and pictorial and photographic art. Of particular interest is material that has a distinct point of view and is inspired by broadly humanistic values and the liberal arts tradition.

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THE AGORA

Volume 3, 2013

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Dedication

The Agora Volume 3 is dedicated to Fred Ross whose inspiration motivated Vaunceil Kruse to assume the challenging role of first editor and the shaper of his vision. Also dedicated to all members of PLATO, who enrich and enhance the lives of their fellow members and whose support made this literary magazine possible.

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Four, by Susan Hoffman

My Big Brother's Bedroom

by Kenneth Richardson

What do you do when an older brother tells you his bedroom is “off limits”? Easy. When he’s not there, you sneak in. And what a room it is, showing the personality of a high-testosterone, hard-charging high school senior who is interested in baseball, cars, airplanes and girls. But not necessarily in that order.

At first you see a small bedroom with a mahogany twin bed (the other one is in my room), matching dresser and a medium-sized bookcase with vertical slats for the sides and back. A radio on the top shelf of the bookcase is within easy reach of the bed. Although we live in Hartsdale, New York, Don roots for the St. Louis Cardinals. Since New York City has three teams, why would he prefer one halfway across the country? I never asked. He would listen to night games when the Cardinals visited the Dodgers or New York Giants.

On the second shelf a well-worn infielder’s glove, soft and pliable with neat’s-foot oil, holds a scuffed baseball. Next to it rests a bedraggled baseball cap. On the floor is a pair of baseball shoes with dirt-encrusted spikes and a sweaty uniform with lingering locker room fragrance.

In the early evening on Saturdays, some auto mechanics clothes, stained with oil and smelling faintly of gasoline, might be dumped next to them. After his part-time job, my brother is in a hurry to shower and go out on a date.

A chair and desk complete the furniture. The room may not seem that different from other bedrooms until you look up and see several airplanes, mostly World War II models, suspended from the ceiling with fishing line.

I recall a B-17 Flying Fortress and a B-24 Liberator. Escorting these bombers might have been a few dependable fighters, such as a P-51 Mustang and a P-47 Thunderbolt.

Two other noteworthy aircraft seemingly flew in the opposite direction: the P-38 Lockheed Lightning with a twin tail-boom and the Navy F4U Corsair of gull-wing design, the first American fighter to exceed 400 miles per hour.

On one of the walls was a framed, full-color photograph of a Martin Mariner patrol bomber (PBM) lifting off of water with the help of JATO (Jet Assisted Take Off). This heavy plane (gross weight: 60,300 lbs), which could take off from land or water, often needed extra thrust to get it airborne as quickly as possible. An engineering major in college, Don qualified for the Navy's Air Cadet Program and flew PBMs during the Korean War.

All of the models were finished except one, a glider with tissue paper glued tightly on balsa wood wings. The fuselage was bare. Don never returned to complete it since he died in a PBM crash while on Korean patrol in August 1952. The reason: a defective altimeter, we were told by a Navy spokesman. None of the crew saw the mountain they flew into that moonless night.

A few weeks later Don was buried in a Hartsdale cemetery by my parents, my younger brother, me, other family members, friends, and a Navy honor guard firing rifles.

For weeks, maybe months after my brother's funeral, my dad would take long walks after work and on weekends in the woods and fields near our house in all kinds of weather. He would return sweaty, exhausted, shoes muddy, sometimes clothes dripping wet. Sixty years ago, grief counseling was little-known; you handled death as best you could.

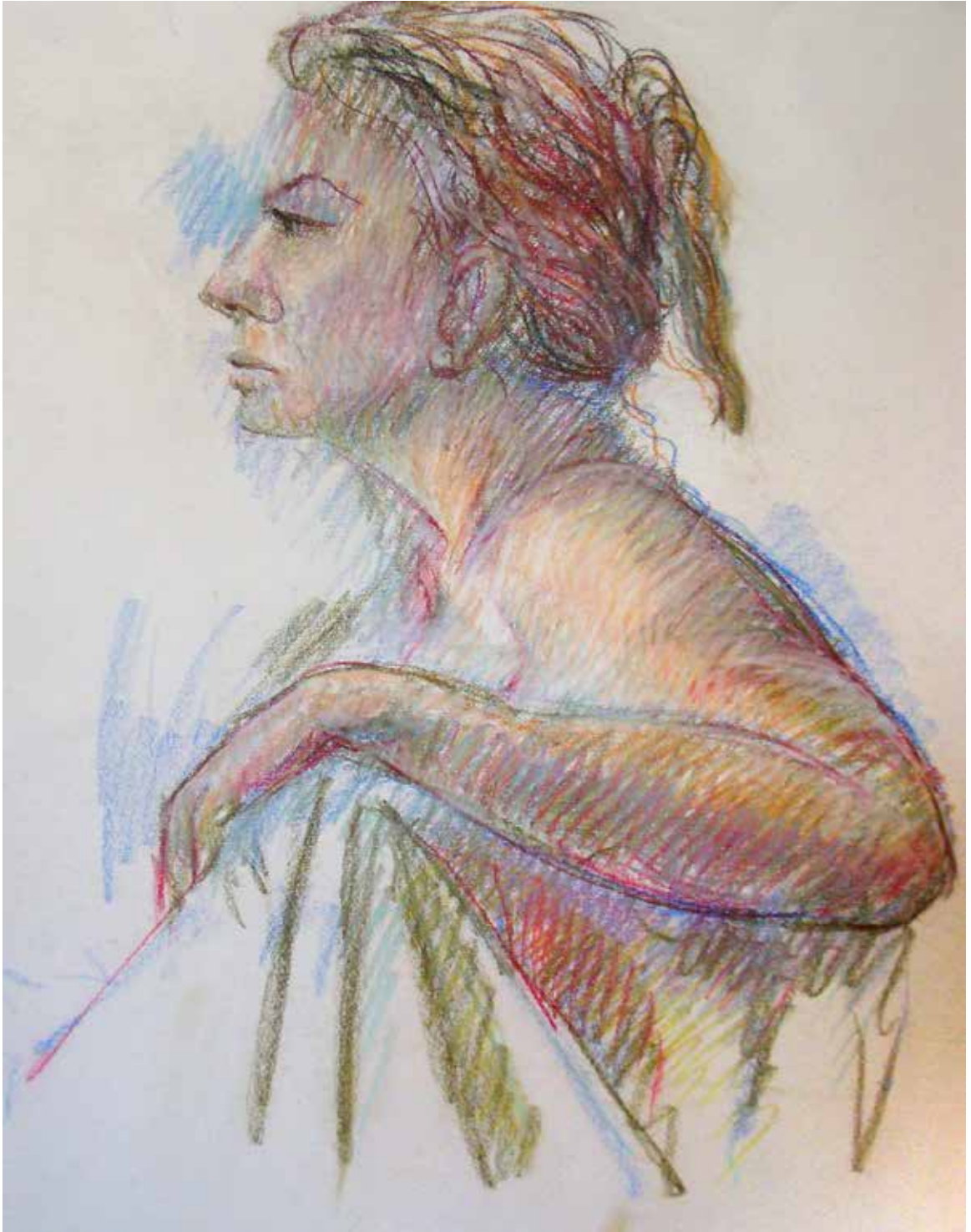
Mom chose to grieve behind the closed door of my big brother's bedroom a few times each day, perhaps hugging framed pictures of Don in his Navy uniform or looking at group photos of the baseball teams. Maybe she reread his letters from Japan, perhaps slowly tracing his handwriting with her fingertips, touching what he had written. Or maybe Mom just sat, alone, on his bed, looking around his room, remembering moments of his childhood. My guess is that somehow she was trying to hold Don very close to her for as long as possible before finally realizing, as weeks became months, that it was time for dad to get a stepladder from the cellar and, together, they took down the planes that flew beneath the ceiling of his room.

When

by David Berger

What I said or did
To him, to her—
Or worse,
Didn't say or do—
Can come to mind
At any quiet time
Or place.

“Oh, I know you,”
I say
To my done or undone thing
When it comes
As it has
And does
And will.



Portrait Head, by Mary Morgan

The Woman in the Chair

by Joanne Lee Storlie

The ascent was not too difficult at first, though why she should be at this strange place, stepping carefully over loose gravel and around larger stones, she did not know. All she knew was that she had to continue her climb up the increasingly steep grade ahead, which appeared to narrow into a path that disappeared between sheer, towering walls of gray granite. She looked around for others who might be traveling the same way or who, better yet, were returning from the place she was intent upon reaching, bearing maps, perhaps, to make the journey easier or advice regarding landmarks and pitfalls that lie ahead. But none were there. She was quite alone. And cold.

The wind was picking up, bringing with it subtle hints of approaching rain. She was dressed in a sheer nightgown, the one she had shopped hurriedly for the week before, chosen because it complimented in style and color her slender but mature body and her light brown hair, cut and curled in a short style that suited her still youthful face.

Why, she wondered, was she out on an evening like this, in a place so foreign and ominous, on a journey to an unknown destination? So occupied was she with the task before her, it never occurred to her that she could turn back—return to wherever it was she had come from. Indeed, so great was her compulsion to go on that past and future were obscured from thought and the here and now all that existed.

She stumbled and fell, and rising, brushed cinders from her knees and hands. It was then she noticed that she wore sturdy leather boots with catgut laces and thick, rubber soles, deeply etched for gripping. She'd never seen them before and wondered, briefly, where they had come from and why she was wearing them. Had she known that an arduous trek lay ahead? And if so, why hadn't she worn other protective garments as well?

She reached the narrow walled-in pathway just as a chilling rain began. Driven by strong gusts of wind, it assailed her exposed flesh like hordes of hungry insects. Dark and forbidding as the path ahead appeared, the rugged and towering walls offered temporary shelter from the sleet, and she slipped hurriedly between them.

She immediately faced a sharp incline and found climbing as much hindered as helped by her footwear. Needing both hands to feel her way forward in the darkness and to grip whatever she could to pull herself up, her long gown continually caught underfoot, frequently halting progress and occasionally causing her to lose ground.

Thwarted in her ascent and unwilling to give up, she was just beginning to panic when distant but approaching voices cut through her desperation and lifted her from her task to...

Darkness.

“Who’s got the key?” a woman’s shrill voice demanded.

“I gave them to Cal,” came a slurred reply.

“I’ll get some ice while you party-animals find it,” another chided.

“Here’s the little bugger.”

Raucous laughter and coarse conversation accompanied the stumbling entry of a small, inebriated group of travelers into the room across the hall.

Meg lay quietly, striving to orient herself. Taking deep breaths to calm her racing heart, she slowly opened her eyes. The dim, pinkish light of a halogen lamp filtered through a narrow gap between the inn’s partially closed drapes, bringing into focus innocuous pieces of bland, motel furniture and unmatched suitcases. Remembering where she was and happy to be snatched from the clutches of a frightening, puzzling dream, she sent silent thanks to her noisy, inconsiderate rescuers and willed her body to relax.

Careful not to awaken her lover, she reached over to touch, ever so lightly, the firm smooth skin of his broad shoulder. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw his handsome profile, outlined against the window and, as always, felt gratitude and wonder.

How many months had it been now since they had fallen in love? Twenty? Twenty-four? And in that time, how often had they had the pleasure of spending an entire night together—in comfortable secure surroundings, replete with an oversized bed that brought a measure of normality and the luxury of greater abandon? Eight? Possibly ten?

She moved closer to him and stretched herself against his side, feeling the warmth of his naked body melt the last of the chill she brought with her from her nebulous, nocturnal journey. Her senses, sharpened by her vivid and disturbing dream, became keenly aware of his rhythmic breathing and the lingering, familiar smell of his pipe tobacco, and she felt reassured. Burrowing into him like a suckling animal, she sighed contently and recalled their evening together.

As usual, he had arrived first. The room was always reserved in his name since he had a legitimate reason for being there. For the past two years he had traveled frequently to this city to meet with the co-author of a textbook series they were writing. Although the books were now published, they still met to plan marketing strategies. His wife never questioned his need to spend an occasional weekend away.

She had arrived around eight, delayed by heavy traffic and winter roads. Never wishing to appear over-eager to begin her trip, she had left work at the usual time and stopped home to pick up her suitcase, oversee dinner and make sure her husband and teenage daughter, the youngest of their four children and the only one yet living at home, would comfortably survive the weekend without her. During the past two years, they had become accustomed to her infrequent, out-of-town “shopping trips,” an indulgence she had never before permitted herself and one that they cheerfully, never grudgingly, granted.

Rather than ask for his room number at the desk where suspicious eyebrows might be raised, she always waited in the lobby for him to get her. At first, this added to the excitement and romance of their affair. But one time, when the wait was unusually long, she worried herself into a frenzied state by imagining that his wife or one of his children might have accompanied him at the last minute, leaving him no time to contact her. By the time he did appear with no excuse except that he was busy unpacking and making phone calls, her mouth had become dry and her muscles tense with the effort of contriving a believable story to explain her presence to a surprised family member. After they were safely settled in their room, she had excused herself to take a walk—a practice common for her when stress levels became elevated—to work out of her system the adrenalin that fear had injected there.

The walk over crowded sidewalks near busy downtown thoroughfares had brought to mind a number of things she found herself unwillingly

categorizing in varying degrees of positive and negative. Had she been able to simply look at recent episodes in her life without such judgments, her steps might have been less militant. As she deliberately jabbed each of her heels into the unyielding surface beneath her, she imagined the walkway to be a shock absorber for the cares and concerns of those who traversed upon it—thoughtfully and purposely provided by the taxpayers of the city—and felt the painful memories that surfaced somewhat drained from her body.

How long had she been playing this game of evaluation? The answer was simple. Ever since there was something to compare what *was* normal and routine to something that *was not*. Normal was abandoning childhood dreams to marry at age eighteen the first man she had ever known, bring four children into the world by the time she was thirty and become a stay-at-home mom. Normal was living in a blue-collar neighborhood on a very limited income and pinching pennies to buy necessities. Normal was trying to find fulfillment in marriage, housewifery, motherhood and childcare and failing miserably. Normal was discovering shortly after the wedding that the person she married did not share her deepest passions and interests and had few of the communication skills necessary for successful co-habitation. Normal was electing to stay in a marriage until the youngest child was old enough to understand the vagaries of life and escape the scars of divorce that younger children often experience and retain for life. She chose, she thought, a harder task—that of juggling two worlds until life itself demanded a permanent solution.

She was sure she had no guilt regarding the affair itself. Her long search for “absolutes” in life had led her down many paths—at times into serious and extended explorations of metaphysics, world religions, philosophy and psychology on her own and at other intervals into group experiences and coursework that dealt with self-discovery. For her, all of these quests had added up to a certainty that when reverence and respect are present, and no advantage sought or taken, love is never wrong. It simply IS—a non-judgmental, creative force that permeates, undergirds, IS everything. Indeed, she had convinced herself that sharing a part of their separate lives in no way jeopardized the relationship each had with their spouse and that their love for each other had, in fact, improved the quality of stale, functional marriages, held together by mutual consent “for the sake of the children.” She was equally convinced that their love was a gift from the Powers That Be—given when despair threatened to diminish any hope for a more fulfilling life. Had it not started innocently? A chance meeting. The discovery of common interests. Mutual respect and admiration. Surely, it was meant to be.

No, it wasn't the affair that compelled her to stalk the street as she was now doing or to pace the floors of her home on occasions when sleep wouldn't come. It was the harsh judgment society would place upon her behavior and the lies such behavior required—the “white” lies of commission and their silent deadly variation, lies of omission, which she always knew were the worst and felt most keenly. The former were, she believed, quite innocuous. “I just need to get away by myself for awhile.” “I have to work late tonight.” “It was a wrong number.” But the latter? “I love someone else”?

Two hours later, the heels of her new shoes had paid the price of her renewed peace of mind, and she reentered their motel room with profuse apologies for worrying him. To his inquiries about what caused her abrupt departure, she vaguely mentioned a long day at work and difficult traffic and promised to talk about it later. Why burden him with her uncertainties? They spent the remainder of the evening wrapped in the protective, exclusive cocoon they had woven for themselves—a place they claimed for their own.

Meg drew in a deep breath, willing the bitter-sweet memories that had earlier crowded her mind to relent, and drifted back into an uneasy sleep...

She reached the top of the mountain where a small, relatively level area, defined by a sheer drop on all sides, was revealed in the retreating lightning. The rain had stopped, but the unrelenting wind continued. At the opposite end of the small platform, a fully-clothed, masculine figure stood, his collar turned up against the wind, his gaze directed away from her. He held a pipe to his lips, and his stance was aloof, suggesting to her that he was not a stranger to these heights. She shivered in her tattered gown and scuffed boots and was just attempting to call out to him against the wind when she saw...it.

It first it was but a shadow between them, barely discernible through the after-image of the lightning. But as she approached, the shadow took form and there, balanced on a cant, was a chair—a huge, grotesque caricature of a chair, solidly formed of heavy metal but distorted and unnatural in some way. Unable to categorize or define what she perceived, she moved closer, and

what she beheld drew an involuntary gasp from her. The chair was supported by wheels—huge, cumbersome wheels—and strapped within the seat was a woman who somewhat resembled her. She, too, trembled in bedclothes that provided little protection from the howling elements although hers were ornate and made of white satin and lace and covered her from head to toe. Her face was turned away from Meg and toward the man, her arms raised in a gesture of supplication, her upturned palms beckoning imploringly to him.

Meg stepped closer to see the woman's face and was no more than a foot away when the chair suddenly lurched forward. The sickening sound of brakes locked in a deadly duel with gravity and acceleration filled the air. Instinctively, she grabbed the handles at the back of the chair to pull it to safe ground, but no surface provided a footing or offered a hold. The soles of her boots disintegrated as she jabbed them again and again against the impermeable, unyielding ground.

The seated woman made no attempt to assist or resist Meg's efforts. Her neutrality seemed purposeful and imposed an immense burden. For a few moments, Meg held her ground. But soon the cold of the metal handles penetrated her hands and loosened her grip. In desperation, she threw her arms, one at a time, around the back of the chair and jammed her knees into the frame, her feet extended backward to form a wedge of resistance. Dragging her feet, she attempted to oppose the approaching disaster by adding her full weight to that of the chair. The backrest of the seat, braced by a triangular

arrangement of metal bars, crushed into her chest, the upper angle wedging under her breastbone and the other points piercing her sides beneath her ribs. Pain seared through shoulders that were stretched beyond endurance, and friction destroyed flesh wherever two opposing forces met. As the chair moved slowly but inexorably forward, blood marked the surrendered ground. Anguish coursed through her when she realized that she could no longer hold the overwhelming weight and save its silent, immobile occupant. And utter despair engulfed her when she realized she couldn't let go to save herself. "Who are you?" she beseeched her oppressive, unsought burden. "Why are you here? What do you want of me? Please help me. Help us both!"

Meg woke with a cry still clutching the phantom chair—still feeling its metal brace press its form into her chest. Her lover, startled awake, bolted upright and reached for her. Gathering her into his arms, he rocked her fervently, seeking to coax from her the terror that gripped her. "A woman," she sobbed against him, "in a wheelchair... falling...down the mountain... so heavy... can't hold on...can't let go..." Her body convulsed, as she locked her arms around his neck, still engaged in the life and death struggle. Then suddenly it slackened, as if she'd conceded the fight and accepted defeat. Exhausted, she asked in a weak, tremulous voice, "Who is she, Paul—the woman in the chair?"

Paul, in a hoarse, unsteady voice and halting words, answered, "Meg, my darling, my exquisite agony, we both know who she is."

The Adventures of Fredrich Barbarosa

by Evelyn Rueckert

Our long-haired red dachshund was registered with the AKC as Fredrich Barbarossa the 7th, but because he had a white mark on his powerful chest we called him Fleck. He was a loving pet so we forgave him when he nipped the mailman, and when the dogcatcher caught him twice in one week. Shortly before we were to leave for Russia he developed a spinal disease common to his breed. I couldn't bear to have the little dog put to sleep, so the vet stitched him up and Fleck accompanied us to Leningrad. The tranquilizer we gave him at the beginning of the trip wore off before we left JFK. At the airport in Paris he was carefully transferred to an SAS plane, but when we debarked for a short stop in Stockholm I heard a plaintive bark from the cargo hold. Oddly enough, as they examined his papers the Russian customs officials never glanced into the kennel at the animal's disfigured spine.

The little dog enjoyed Leningrad's pungent city smells as he poked a curious nose through the ironwork along the beautiful canals. Russians love dogs almost as much as they do children and I sometimes saw exotic breeds like Borzois and Wolfhounds being led along the Nevsky Propekt. Fleck hated the big white poodle named "Dagmar" who lived in an apartment above us and whenever her owners encountered us in the hall they would tighten their dog's leash and cast pained expressions our way. We never understood how they kept that dog so clean!

Once two drunken men who thought it was funny, threatened to kick my dog off the sidewalk. Whereupon, not for the only time during my Russian experience, something snapped and I shouted every profanity I had ever learned from the sailors in Norfolk! Stung by cadences familiar in any culture, they slunk away; but one came to pity all the drunken people. In the course of my ceaseless search for food I once tied Fleck to a tree outside the bread store. Having selected bread from grubby bins I was standing in the puddles made by melting snow, struggling to make myself understood by the cashier,

when I glanced through the window and saw a drunk harmlessly attempting to pet Fleck, who misunderstood. Despite his alcohol-slowed reflexes, the man managed to escape the dog's sharp teeth.

We lived a block off the crowded Nevsky Prospekt and the little animal always balked at being led in that direction. After our son foolishly walked him to the boulevard without a leash the dog disappeared into the crowd. When our son came crying home he found Fleck sitting in front of the door to the second floor apartment. His instincts were right, but we lived on the third floor!

Each time there was a knock at the door, the little dachshund would race down the hallway, barking as he slid on the parquet floor. However, one evening when the children and I were alone and someone pounded on our door, Fleck never made a sound. He was seemingly as bemused as when he discovered a snake in our Washington garage. Not that he wasn't brave. He once cowed a German shepherd at the vet's office, causing the big dog to tremble with fear.

On our drives to the Consulate's country dacha Fleck's nose would twitch as we approached the woods and water of the Gulf of Finland. In the

summer he disappeared for hours into the surrounding forest, but he always returned, unable to tell us about the wood sprites he encountered there. In winter, because the snow was so deep one of us carried the low slung pet from the car to the house. He hated the red rubber boots he had to wear when we walked him on the city's icy streets.

Our pet caused several social catastrophes. The afternoon before one Leningrad party I had to place a hasty food order because Fleck had discovered a package behind the half-open refrigerator door. Unable to resist he ate an entire kilo of filet mignon! Our guests left their wraps in a bedroom off the hallway and on one occasion after the Finnish Consul had enthusiastically described how he had bought his beautiful fur chapka in China, all conversation stopped when, wagging his tail, Fleck walked proudly in with the hat in his jaws.

Despite our sometimes risky adventures we all came home safely and when Fleck was twelve years old he spent his last hours sniffing the summer breeze in our garden. In a tearful ceremony his little family buried his ashes there. Today our son speaks the language fluently but the first Russian words we learned upon arriving in Leningrad were "horochiya sobaka"—wonderful dog.

The Ninth Street Bridge

by George Faunce

Imagine that.

The Atlantic Ocean was only *sixty* miles from our home in South Jersey. Driving at almost 50 miles per hour (a heady speed for us in the 1950s), our family car could reach the *sweet spot* in an hour and a half. The sweet spot was where the first traces of sea air began to filter through the windows. It signaled we were almost there.

The last stretch of this pilgrimage involved a formidable challenge: the crossing of the Ninth Street Bridge. It was a narrow band of earth—an isthmus with a drawbridge—spanning two and a half miles from the mainland of southern New Jersey across the bay to Ocean City. The bridge stopped traffic continually throughout the day, slowly raising its two huge, metallic arms to allow sailboats access to and from the sea.

It became a perpetual nightmare to shore visitors, with its flashing lights and annoying bells heralding each new delay. Drivers would break into a cold sweat as they approached the bridge, fearing to hear the very first clang of its accursed bell. The many that got caught would quickly go from cold sweat to physical and spiritual meltdown in the stultifying heat of their cars. Autos backed up for miles waiting for the bridge to reset itself, and often had to be rerouted when the drawbridge decided to get stuck in the up position, a not infrequent occurrence.

The bridge had become, in essence, its own troll. It stood as a final, obstreperous barrier, mocking all who would dare aspire to reach the sea. Each time we headed to the shore, we crossed our fingers hoping that the bridge would spare us, letting our puny vehicle pass without opening its maw and waiting instead for bigger game.

Mom and dad had jammed all four of their sons (Skip, Den, John and me) into the rear seat of the car. There were no seat belts in the 1950's, so we were free to frolic around like monkeys back there. We were approaching an *ocean*, after all! To our fevered brains this was a huge enterprise to comprehend, something almost spiritual in import which required from us a response of equal kind.

So we played a game.

As the Ninth Street Bridge approached we each took a deep breath, determined to hold it all the way across the bridge and isthmus until we reached Ocean City. Whoever held his breath the longest won the game. Because we were serious about this ritual, our rules also stipulated that if one *couldn't* hold his breath the whole way across he would also **DIE!** This meant that even the winner might end up being a loser—which showed we had a keen grasp for young tykes of how life can so frequently unfold.

Alas, always, *always* the bridge proved to be too far and technically (by game standards) all four of us were destined to “die” before our clanking, sputtering Oldsmobile reached the other side. Such a loss. Such a sad, sad loss. Four little monkeys dead upon arrival, swallowed in one tasty lump by a troll called the Ninth Street Bridge.

It was worth it all, however—the long, tedious drive in a hot, crowded car, the treacherous bridge—just to get to the beach and spend the day riding the waves.

I remember Ocean City's weather-beaten boardwalk. Most of its two-plus miles of timber were planks gone grey from endless battles with wind, rain and sea. In patches, though, there were pale white replacement boards so young with sap they strained at their nails. Beyond the boardwalk lay a thin strip of beach being eaten away endlessly by the tides.

Let me take you back there now...

We're on the beach, our feet burning with each step through the hot sand. It is July, 1953. Older brothers Skip and Denis are hanging onto the beach umbrella, rocking its aluminum pole back and forth to wedge it deeper into the sand. Its canvas top is a faded iris of green and white stripes. Below it go the army blankets, dark green and mud brown, that dad brought home from the war, and on the blankets go the cooler packed with food and a thermos of pink lemonade. The seagulls and sandpipers that followed us in from the bridge begin to land around us like an entourage, demanding to be fed. Younger brother John and I work to smooth the sand off the edges of the blankets. All the time we're eyeing the waves, judging their strength...their danger...their majesty.

Thousands of people share these three miles of beachfront between boardwalk and sea with us. Swimmers by the hundreds will stagger out of the ocean throughout the day and wander the beach hopelessly lost, searching for their blankets. Not only does the powerful undertow pull swimmers tens of yards down the shoreline from where they entered, but it is a dizzying maze they see when they re-emerge: a poppy field of beach chairs, coolers, rafts, bags, blankets and rainbow-colored umbrellas. Endless human bodies of pink, white and various shades of brown sprawl before them, fanning themselves, snoring, making sand castles, throwing beach balls, slathering on suntan lotion, screaming at their kids, fighting off seagulls, flexing their muscles or sashaying about as though they were the “Girls from Ipanema.”

It had been a struggle to get the four of us ready to go this morning and dad made quite a scene, threatening to change his mind because we couldn't get ourselves organized (and, yes, because brother Denis and I were once again pushing and shoving each other, getting ready for our daily set-to, something you could set your clock by). But finally dad relented and now here we are just seconds away from hitting the waves. We are determined to body-surf all morning. Then we will take a break to eat our liverwurst and mustard sandwiches on Wonder bread and guzzle the pink lemonade in plastic cups, before running madly back into the water again to 'take on' the whole Atlantic Ocean. The *Pure Immensity* that it is.

Okay, stay with me. We're entering the ocean. Very...very...very...cold. ! It's best to do this quickly. Just run as fast as you can and dive in! Yes!!!

Stealthily we start inching out further than the life guards want us to, treading water by kicking our little, goose-bumped legs. The guards will whistle us back in a few times this morning, and get annoyed with the lot of us for sneaking out yet again. But you *have* to go out as far as you can if you want some separation from the mindless crowd mulling about near the shore. Here is where you catch the big waves and ride them at supersonic speed all the way to the shore (barring, of course, collision with unsuspecting waders, also known as "collateral damage"). Sometimes mom, who likes to float on her back in shallow water, is among the wounded when the four of us come crashing in.

Here we wait, shivering in the icy grey sea, bobbing up and down like corks. We keep squinting to see the beach and boardwalk. Both seem so very far away now. The whole shore seems to rise up and dip down in mesmerizing rhythm with our own movement in the waves. It's as though nothing on the earth holds permanent anymore, nothing is ever at rest. All around us is perpetual undulation of earth and sea.

This is a fundamental principle of Zen, I am told: that life is pure groundlessness, and that all things are impermanent. What we're doing here is surely something the old monks would appreciate: a day at the beach riding the waves and drinking pink lemonade in plastic cups in a world of constant flux.

I am shivering now. The suspense is as palpable as the goose bumps on my skin and the uncontrollable chattering of my teeth. This endless waiting for the next big wave builds tension.

(Up and down we bob...*up and down.*) (The boardwalk and beach roll in unison, *up and down...up and down.*) Where is that power hiding? Where is the monster wave, the Big Kahuna?

The ocean seems so innocent at this moment. Almost placid, as though it is taking a nap. We know, however, that it is only pretending, acting sedate while it plots to catch us by surprise. We know this, of course, from years of experience; the ocean is always just a ripple away from "losing it." So...which subtle lift in the water-scape behind us is suddenly going to congeal into an argument and rise up like Godzilla in Tokyo Bay?!

It's almost as though we're being...watched...

(Up...and down)

(Up...and down.)

We're being *toyed* with by something ancient and brooding. It's out there and it's coming in, but... when?

(Up and down...up and...)

WHOA! Did you feel that?!

Is it here?!

No...

...hold on...No...I'm sorry...false alarm...

...and yet...

wait...oh yes...

this has got to be it...this is it...whoa, whoa, *whoaaa!*

An immense, round-shouldered wave suddenly rears **UP** behind us out of nowhere!

With silent ease it lifts us with it as it swells to a terrifying peak. We are in the front boxcar of an ocean roller coaster tipping over the edge of the world. Aaaaaand **WHOOooooosh!**

Down it explodes, in a furious, frothing, head-long rush toward the beach!

Our wee frames, pointed helplessly like shuttlecocks, are trapped firmly in its grip as we fly along. Bathers in our path frantically dive sideways left and right, as we are drilled toward them, their mouths forming the elongated *O* of a silent scream.

Just as we near the edge of land the wave swoops up one last time like the bottom curve of a water slide and we are taken back high into the air. Then we are slammed down upon the shore's edge with a *Crrrash!*

Still not finished, the wave proceeds to push us up the beach a few...feet...more, wedging us into the loose, damp sand at the very point where the hot granules meet the wet. Having thus deposited us like broken clam shells for the gulls, it snorts disdainfully, turns its back and vanishes once again into the PURE IMMENSITY stretching beyond.

We lie on the sand for a moment in shrinking puddles, dazed and coughing. Stinging salt water bubbles from our noses. Then, as the tide retreats, even this thin film of sea is stripped away from our bodies like the last drops of a soft drink sucked through a straw. It is time for the police to draw the chalk lines around our wee remains and put up the crime scene tape.

Heavens, what a dénouement.

Up, corpses, up! We're heading back in!

Years later, in 1998, I once again found myself sitting in a car approaching the Ninth Street Bridge. This time, however, I was the driver and oldest brother Skip was my passenger. It was winter. We were there no longer to ride the waves, but to visit our father. Dad was living alone on Fifth Street in Ocean City in a senior housing apartment. Mom had died in 1994 and dad had chosen to live out his final days by the sea. Being in his eighties though, he needed regular checking-on. Brothers Denis and John had moved west decades earlier; Den to California, John, eventually, to Oregon. But Skip and I were still Jersey boys, and we were doing another shore pilgrimage on this day.

As we drove the last mile across the Ninth Street Bridge, I sensed again the presence of grey seagulls swirling in the sky at the edge of my vision, and remembered the childhood game all four of us used to play. Skip suddenly grabbed my arm and asked in a shaky voice for me to pull over. Quickly! I guided the car as fast as I could onto a shoulder of the isthmus. Skip sat beside me dizzy now, ready to pass out.

As kids we had *always* gotten dizzy on that bridge, holding our breath. All the old Hollywood movies had taught us one had to pay a steep price to climb the Matterhorn, to discover Shangri-La, to defend the Alamo, to champion Camelot, or to elude the Troll and reach the Ocean City peninsula. And of course we each ultimately succumbed and let our breath out in long, wheezing sounds like punctured balloons. It was all great fun back then, our young bodies and young lungs only playing at being overwhelmed by life.

Now, it was no longer a game, but the onslaught of time and diminishment; it marked the beginning of the undertow that slowly, or abruptly, takes all of us out to the sea. Skip was being ravaged by diabetes and his blood sugar had crashed, ironically enough, halfway across the infamous old bridge. In the years soon to come Skip would lose the ability to drive a car and would find himself confined for the most part to a wheelchair. In July of 2003, funeral services for our dad would be held in Ocean City; all four of his sons, the former “backseat Oldsmobile monkeys,” would once again cross the Ninth Street Bridge to attend his final viewing.

But on *this* day in 1998, as Skip ate a candy bar and tried to regain equilibrium, I sat beside him in the car realizing how it had been more than four decades—*forty long years*—since we boys had played the game of hold-your-breath on the bridge. Over four decades later and *still* we couldn’t make it the full distance from mainland to shore. The Ninth Street Bridge, I realized, would forever be a “bridge too far” for us.

Note: The Ninth Street Bridge was finally marked for demolition in 2011 and replaced just this past year with a super causeway, its spans high enough to let boats pass underneath without disruption of traffic. The much maligned bridge of old had taught generations of adults and their children the meaning of patience (if not utter desperation). Now it is suddenly being eulogized in local newspapers by people grown nostalgic for the days gone by. We who no longer ride the waves with much grace or hold our breath except in traffic, find ourselves somehow... *missing*...the old, cranky troll.

Imagine that.

Men on Scaffolding

by George Faunce

Men on scaffolding.

One is holding brush and paint, re-coloring a wall,
high up in an atrium, above a marble floor; AND...

One is rubbing rag and squeegee on the corporate glass,
strung above the city at the 37th floor; AND...

One is bound by handcuffs, with a noose around his neck,
on a platform where he stands alone
before some witnesses.

Men on scaffolding.

All three already in extreme;
in air too rarified for them, a place they shouldn't be,
defying laws of gravity by artificial means;
for which they'll make amends, someday.

*In a gust of city wind, perhaps, the scaffold tilts and sways;
its pulley cable splits apart, the wires giving way.
The painter reaches out too far, and slips when twisting back.
The trap door underneath the noose drops open with a snap...*

And all the men on scaffolding
come home at last.



Rose, by Kenneth Richardson

Social Graces

by Richard Radtke

Three events punctuated the routine of 1948, my tenth summer. President Truman came to town on his special train. Babe Ruth died, putting an end to the notion of immortality. And I had a dinner date with an older woman.

In a picture out of memory, I stand before the bedroom mirror, feeling the rise and fall of my own breath. In the yard, a lawn mower clicks as somebody else's father tends to chores. My own father is long gone. The boy in the mirror tends to the knot in his plaid tie. As I struggle with my cowlick, my mother hums along with the radio. Each evening the music from our Crosley drifts across the kitchen while she irons.

"My young man," she says when she comes to fetch me. We step out into the back hallway where I wait while she locks the door with a long shiny key.

We arrive at the restaurant as the light behind the Kegel's Inn sign comes alive. My mother points to it as though it has been lighted in our honor. Inside, a round man with a foreign accent leads us to a table in the dining room. "Enjoy, Missus." He holds the chair for my mother. I wonder if she has been here with other men. A sweet secret smell hangs like sugar in the air, crabapples or corn just boiled in a pot on the stove.

Now a large woman in a frilly apron comes to our table carrying two large menus. I open the card and find lists of strangely-named food: beef rouladen, wienerschnitzel, spaetzle. No mention of the magic word: hamburger.

"Ground sirloin," my mother says. She smiles, sips her ice water, winks.

Before me is a collection of knives, forks and spoons that would shame our kitchen silverware drawer. As I try to figure out the uses of all this hardware, the waitress returns, carrying a basket of rolls. She places it on the table, removes a pad and pencil from her apron pocket, and asks: "Ready to order, Ma'am?"

I hide my hands under the table, elbows close to my body. My fingers play with the edge of the starched white tablecloth. Grandma Felkner says people who put their elbows on the table marry crazy people.

“We’re ready,” my mother says. The center of attention shifts to me. It is like giving a talk in school. Heat rises under my collar as I point to the ground sirloin and mumble the name. Laughter and low voices seep from the connecting bar room. A beery odor mixes with the crabapple smell. My stomach rumbles.

“The silverware has a particular use,” my mother says. “Begin at the outside and work your way toward the center. This fork is for salad. The big spoon on the other side is for soup. The smaller one is for coffee.”

My Pepsi comes in a glass filled with ice cubes. And the hamburger—with a bun the size of a catcher’s mitt—is big as a kitchen clock, lounging over a large leaf of lettuce and surrounded by deep red tomatoes and a green pickle. Now, nearly every table in the room has been claimed by people talking, waving, calling to one of the three waitresses who are running like relay racers under enormous trays of food.

“People eat late here,” I say. We usually eat early so that I can get back outside for a quick game of baseball or kick the can. The light fades until mothers appear like ghosts behind screen doors, calling kids inside for a bath and bed.

My mother asks for the check, then beckons to me. She leans forward, both her hands under the table. I slip my own hands under the tablecloth to meet hers. “Here,” she says, placing a wad of money into my hand. “The gentleman takes care of the bill.”

I withdraw my hands and count a five-dollar bill and five singles.

“Take the check from the waitress,” she says. “Make sure it is correct. Then leave your money on the table. She’ll bring back your change.” It happens exactly as she said it would. The bill lists the food we ordered, soup to dessert. Seven dollars and sixty-five cents. This is why we eat supper at home. When the waitress brings the change my mother whispers: “Now leave a tip. The bill was seven sixty-five,” she explains. “Leave at least ten percent of that. Fifteen percent if the service was very good.”

I’ll need pencil and paper to figure this out. Percent? We’ve only just begun to study percent at school. “Move the decimal point,” she says. “Ten percent of seven sixty-five is seventy-six cents. It’s simple.”

Five minutes later we step outside into the fading light of dusk. “Thank you for dinner, sir,” she jokes. “It was a delightful evening.”

Babe Ruth died that summer. And President Truman came to town on his special train. But for me, the event of the season was my dinner with an older woman.

Mother's Day

by William G. Ladewig

The sun flashed into my face off the silver wing as the plane began to circle and find its runway. I glanced over at my fellow passenger, who was oblivious to the process and sat slumped over with his mouth slightly open, drool sliding out. I probably should have been courteous and awakened him, but if he was like me, he probably preferred not being awake for landings.

I looked out the window at the Wisconsin countryside and recognized the clock on the Allen Bradley building and the bridge going into downtown Milwaukee. Things hadn't changed in the last ten years since I had been here. I had grown up in the suburbs about fifty miles away. A place they called Allenton, but should have been called "Dullsville." It had a school, a church, two gas stations and a grocery store. It had a park where the firemen came to drink beer and throw horseshoes. I hated it. I knew that when I got out of school I would never live there. Besides that, Dad was there then. What a bastard. Mom tried to protect us girls, but when he got drunk, he would do what he wanted. No, it wasn't that "sexual abuse" you read about in the papers. It was old-fashioned German "meanness," with no understanding of what needs young girls had. He was okay when he was sober, but that was only before seven o'clock every night. He would go to work in the factory in West Bend, come home every evening, start with one beer, and then the yelling would begin, "Girls, bring me another one." If we weren't fast enough, we would feel the hand of Thor. More than once, Mom tried to control him, only to get the brunt of his temper.

I went to nursing school at Oshkosh. I paid my own way by taking out loans and working as an aide at a local nursing home. Upon graduation, I moved out and went to New York. I never looked back. Dad was dead three months later. I came back for the funeral but hadn't been back since.

The landing was smooth. I got the big lug next to me moving with a poke in his ribs and we were quickly on our way. I saw my sisters, Kathy and Elaine, waiting for me at the end of the corridor. No big sign like in the movies, just big smiles. Ten years was a long time. I put my arms out and we hugged, like only sisters can do. The tears welled in my eyes and were flowing like a gusher, before I noticed the others had them too. We did the mandatory, "How are you's?" and then went arm in arm down the hallway to get my luggage. We made a quick exit to the car and left the parking structure, with Elaine driving.

"How bad is it, Kathy?" I asked, from the front seat, to my sister sitting in the back.

"It's not good. She was in a lot of pain for awhile and then the doctor started to give her morphine. That seemed to help, but she seems to be getting worse. She's competent sometimes and then other times she just doesn't seem to be registering."

I nodded, thinking of all the cancer patients that I had taken care of during the years. I thought of the emaciated look because they couldn't keep their food down and how just an ice cube could help the soreness of their throats. "Does she know that I'm coming?" I asked.

Elaine looked over at me as she answered and swerved past a slow-going SUV in her way. "You know, she's the one who asked us to get you. She said it was time. I guess she thought you should see her at least once before she died, and it has been too long."

She was right, of course. Why had I stayed away so long? Dad was dead. Mom had never done anything to me. Maybe that was the reason. Mom had never done anything! Memories can be awfully powerful when they affect your life like mine had. I wasn't married. In fact I rarely dated. The idea of being with a man for the rest of my life filled me with loathing. Not the sex part, nor having kids. I knew I still wanted that, but I wasn't going to give up control of my life to another human being, and certainly not to a man.

The house was just like every other house on the block. It hadn't changed in years. Kathy's husband kept it up. They had lived with Mom and taken care of her for the last five years. I sent money on a monthly basis to help care for Mom, but I knew that they had borne the brunt of living with her. They had three kids and I imagined that they had been a handful for Mom to put up with as she had gotten older. There they were by the garage waiting for me in anticipation. One of the boys had a basketball in his hands and it looked like they had been having a game. Elaine's husband, Dan, was sitting by the picnic table drinking a beer.

I was introduced to my nephews and my niece by way of Elaine, and in the living room I got out the souvenirs I had brought from New York. There's something about a t-shirt with an apple on it that kids like. They quickly pulled them on over their own shirts and were back in the driveway for a game of "horse."

Kathy and I went up to see Mom. She was in the guest room. Kathy had taken over the big bedroom for the kids. She just had a sheet on her and she looked so fragile, thin, emaciated and brittle, just like every one of my patients.

“Hi Mom!” I said as I put her hand in mine. She looked up at me, as if she recognized me, and squeezed my hand. “You remember?” She shut her eyes, as if the effort to look at me and to recognize me was too much.

“I remember, Mom. I came back. I love you, Mom. I wouldn’t stay away.” I bent down and gave her a kiss on her forehead.

I joined the family in the living room and soon we were catching up on our lives. Kathy prepared dinner, and after a pot roast that reminded me so much of Mom’s cooking, we left the dining room table and sat down. We then proceeded to demolish three bottles of wine and a lifetime of memories.

“When are you going back?” Kathy asked.

“I have a reservation for tomorrow evening. I have to be back for my evening shift on Sunday night” I said, thinking about our telephone conversation three weeks ago and my phone conver-

sation with Mom. I wished it didn’t have to be like this, but I really didn’t think I’d be able to stand it here any longer. “Memories, you know,” saying it to no one in particular.

The next morning flew by as I walked to church with the kids and went by the only grocery store in town, an IGA. Were there any more of these in the country?

Sunday afternoon came fast and it was time to leave. Kathy and I were in the upstairs bedroom and she came and hugged me, squeezing me, and in a blurted sound thanked me.

I got my purse and went into Mom’s bedroom to say good-by. She was there and I could see the grimace on her face, a sort of rictus that came from pain. She was struggling with her cancer. There was no hope. It was only a question of time. I bent down and kissed her. “Good-by Mom, I remembered.”

I pulled the needle out of my purse. I found her vein and tried to be gentle. She had suffered so much already. She had made me promise. I talked to my sisters and they agreed that I was the logical one to do it. I just never thought that I would give her the “gift of peace” on Mother’s Day.



Reverie, by John Hoffman

Incarnations

by Norman Leer

“...it was clear that the full, embodied disclosure of God to men and women was not only multiple in time and place, but potentially infinite.”

—Diana L. Eck

Encountering God: A Spiritual Journey from Bozeman to Banaras. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993. p. 82

1

The rain keeps being
gray. The trees are skeletons
of sky. On the beach
we find a dried plant, a thousand
years old, bones of some extinguished
animal, hardened into dust.

It is summer. No one sits
outside the shops. In the light
my face darkens like a fossil,
dangles like old string.

2

There are so many greens.
Each leaf is a line of music;
deep notes warm to yellow
in the sun, then disappear
again in silent shadows.
Each color focuses a moment,
gives it shape and weight
and transience. The leaves bend
and blur, violins and cellos
coalescing, aching, and then gone.

3

This is silver you can see through,
more a film, or nothing.

Light suspended, yellow spreading
from a sun that is not there

yet. If you could see your eye
seeing, it would look like this.

4

The petals of the ocean
are light and darker blue

and fall off in the sun. A burst
of berry is elusive, the whisper

of a flower where you have to be
up close, inside the louder wind.

5

Ice cream inside colored ice,
surprising double sweetness.

The orange sky runs down
the outside of a warm glass.

6

Your shirt waved to me
from the bus window, leaving

purple pollen on my hands.
Residue of lavender, softly fragrant

in the humming of the garden,
gaily indicating your return.

7

In the pipe tobacco light
of *Far's* apartment, he takes out
two sepia photographs, you
at age one, smiling through
thinning finger stains, himself
around twenty, a small town
handsomeness, impossibly clear
and unknowing. Four clocks,
wooden on the wall, dispute time,
their sound brown like old pictures.

8

On windy days, the sea
turns cobalt blue; heavy
waves compress the water.
White caps flutter in the air.
A gull rises from the liquid
flock, carrying the sun.

9

The sleeping town is slate
gray, a place you pass
through on a train
without seeing it. There is
only your own waking and
a few faint lights of something
else. Across the water,
the first sun is thin yellow,
too transparent for the town
that is only passing by.

10

From a chalk and feathered
Danish church, the organ
lifts the gray sun softly,
feeds it, and flies quietly away.

11

We could only stare: the lines
of lavender and teal as solid
as a painted wall. They hung there
for an hour, as if the sky were like this
all the time. Above us, swirls of red
billowed like Giacometti birds, all
bodied in the air so I could touch them.
I felt the colors in your hand.
The wind was purple, turning dark;
late that night it rained.

12

The beauty of gray days
is that there is very little
separation. The sea looks
like the shore; the shore looks
like the sky. If there is a fog,
there are no lines between them.
God could be the color of gray
days, the birds and trees
shadows of shadows, the world quiet,
incomprehensible, just happening.

13

They are pieces of sky,
the red *hyben* berries dotting
the beach. They hang between
the sand and khaki grass
like tiny stars, focusing the yellow
and the dark blue spaces of the sea.

14

The wet clouds over the water
are streaked with yellow green
like a painting turned inside out.
Only the background colors show,
residues of all the evenings when
the ripe sky hung like overflowing fruit.

15

A patch of rust surprises
in the sand. The dark red
gathers in the cobalt of the sea.
So many shades of green
stick up here and there; it is
impossible to pray to just one name.

16

The sand shifts and balances:
layers of beige, wind-walked,
spotted with worn stones, some
as yellow as an all-day rain.
The rubbed brown grasses are old
linen. Red bursts of berries
weave between the reeds and sky.
The wider blues contain and free
the shore, the air alive,
all the incarnations of itself.

The Goat That Got Their Goat!

by Ellen Maurer

In 1917, my dad, Frank, was one of 11 children, growing up on a Pennsylvania farm. One of the family's animals was a big white billy goat that often got loose and was in trouble. They had to watch him when they did laundry because he pulled the clothes off the line. Once he got very sick from drinking a bucket of whitewash he thought was milk!

One warm spring day, Frank's mother, Jennie, and his sisters were doing the seasonal housecleaning. They had the carpets hung over the clotheslines and were beating them to remove the dust. Some of the girls were doing wash; others had the screens outside and were cleaning them. The windows were open, and they were airing out the house. In the midst of all the activity, Jennie noticed movement in one of the upstairs windows. She looked up and was horrified to see the goat standing on the bed eating the curtains!

Another time, when Frank was six, he got into trouble. Attached to the family's main farmhouse was a back porch with a covered walkway connected to the summer kitchen, where they did canning and baking in the summer to keep from heating up the house. There was no electricity for fans and air conditioning had not been invented yet. The summer kitchen had a big table where they set pies and cakes to cool. That day, Frank's mother had baked a batch of big sugar jumble cookies and spread them out to cool on the table.

In the evening as the family finished eating supper, Jennie sent one of the girls out to the summer kitchen to get some cookies for dessert. She came running back to report that someone had taken a bite out of almost every cookie! Frank's dad was really angry at the waste and accused the boys most likely of an age to have pulled this prank—Frank and Stanley. They said they didn't do it, but somebody had. Their dad didn't believe them and spanked them anyway.

After things calmed down, Jennie went out to see if she could salvage some of the cookies for dessert. When she got to the summer kitchen, there was the billy goat with his feet on the table, taking a second bite out of the cookies! Frank's dad felt bad, but the deed was done—he had already spanked the boys.

In the muddy spring, Frank and Stanley thought they'd get even with that rascally billy goat. They tied him up to the t-bar handle of their wooden coaster wagon, got in, and used a little switch to drive him through a big deep mud hole. They wanted to see him get bogged down in the mire. With the switch, he went along at a good clip until he got to the mud hole. Then he took a flying leap, overturned the wagon, and dunked the boys in the deepest part. The goat won! That was a joke that backfired!

Another time, Frank's older brother, Alvin, who was in his early 30s had come home for a visit in his new 1934, two-door Pontiac that he was very proud of. It had a big long hood that he had all shined up to a high gloss. Everyone admired his car before they went in to dinner and a good visit.

Later, when they opened the door to go outside, everyone was shocked to see that Alvin's beautiful car was deeply scratched and skinned up. And there on the shiny hood proudly stood the big white billy goat!

Now, we're not sure who did it, but all of a sudden, there was a huge, "Boom!" Someone shot that billy goat right off the hood, and that was the end of him!

O Give Me a Word: The Disciplined Life

by Marnie Schulenburg

8:10 a.m. Plop your butt down in the office chair. Hover over the keyboard. What shall you write for your group? You gaze out the window, chin tipped thoughtfully, and think: better walk that dog first; it looks like rain.

8:17. Just a little sprinkle out here and luckily, you wore a hooded jacket. Keep going, then. The knee is better, the dog is surging out strong at the end of the leash. Take a little more time, why not, never been down this street.

9:20. Well, a girl's gotta eat. You'll think of something to write while you cut up this banana and add some yogurt and sprinkle in some nuts and a little of that ground-up flaxseed that's supposed to be good for something that might ail you.

9:25. Big grinding noise up the street, what's up with that? You wander over to the window with your yogurt gamush and watch as the Luck family loses most of their diseased maple. They're having the whole thing taken down. Wow.

You eat slowly, smiling to see four rabbits in your garden. Your husband actually believes his 'liquid fence' spray is working and you're not going to tell him otherwise. Someone hollers and your attention is drawn back to the tree. It took over fifty years to grow that high and spread that wide, you calculate. Maybe five hours to bring it down? There's something profound in that thought. Some stirring nugget you can tease out for your group. It shouldn't take too long. You look at your watch. Just past 9:30. Hey, plenty of time. Time enough for the crossword puzzle.

10:18. Done with the puzzle, except for the upper-right section, which would be filled in if you knew a word for "Gothic arch." Your best buddy-o Chris would know. You could email her.

Anyway, better check out the refrigerator contents before you get back to the computer. The way the sky looks, and the sting of cold in the air, it's a certainty you won't be able to bike to Hannah's for your meeting. So it's logical to plan a grocery stop afterwards and to make out a list now. That way, you don't have to interrupt your writing once you're downstairs in your office.

You catch an odor of something foul in the refrigerator. The best thing would be to roust it out immediately. Trash pick-up is on Friday; what if you forget and have to live with that stink for another week and a half?

11:20. There! How nice to have that refrigerator clean again. A slow leak from the milk carton left one of those stubborn gray patches on the glass shelf, which required some vinegar to scrub free, and as long as the vinegar is out, why not decalcify the coffee maker? There's nothing worse in the morning when you're raring to get to your writing and you have to wait for the last drip drip of the coffee.

11:35. Look at that struggling cuticle on your injured finger. You were supposed to be tending to that at least once a day. Okay, you need your glasses for that, and the cuticle pusher-backer. What is that little dealie called, anyway? Maybe you should just look it up, along with the word for "Gothic arch."

No. That would be cheating. Consulting with your friend long-distance, however, is not cheating. It's teamwork. That will require hustling back downstairs to your office and the computer, steps in the right direction.

11:38. Back in your office and good to go. You don't believe in The Muse—what you believe in, as a writer of some experience, is discipline! You will not allow yourself that teamwork email until you've written something. Again: butt planted in chair, hands hovering over the keyboard.

Cool! There go the wild turkeys stepping single-file across your backyard. There used to be nine, now it's down to four. Either they've split up by gender, or the coyotes are tougher than you think. It's been fun to watch them grow. Why do they walk in a line like that, you wonder? You drift outside in the mild drizzle with a cup of coffee, shadowing the turkeys cautiously through the grass. It'll just take a minute, this extended observation, and it's a writerly minute, after all; you're interested in their peculiar gait. There's a perfect word for how these turkeys are moving but you can't quite find it. A poem! Perhaps you could write a poem about turkeys and wildness and civilization and birth and death. Okay, this is good, you like it, you've even got a title: "Get in Line to Die." Or not. Isn't that somewhat shallow? Misleading, if what you're after is the existential dilemma of it all?

12:35. Well, that took longer than you thought it would. Your socks were wet, you had to change them. The coffee had cooled, that meant another trip upstairs. Really, it takes no time at all to cruise through your email and decide what needs answering and what can wait. And whoops, you find a message from an agent and how interesting that it barely interests you.

Broom

by Paula Novotnak

Webs of dementia spun thick and sticky
and now a stroke.

Her jaw's slack,
mouth gaping. The skin yellows,
taut over the bones of her face.

Her tongue is thick;
she slurs. Her left side curls
like a stiff fetus or, cramped,
clasps an empty memory.

Her thoughts, once a school of fish,
are reduced now to one or two,
pale and flabby, bobbing belly-up
on the lapping waves of her fear.

A mess of confusion eclipses the light. As a child
on the farm she was lively and quick.
She was bright, intelligent.

When I look in the mirror
I see her face. I admit, sometimes it
scares me

or if not that
recalls the quickening hand
sweeping across the face of time.

What can it matter now if you grab just one more fast minute to email Chris about solutions for the word “arch”? She’s a crossword nut and her Seattle paper gets the same syndicated puzzle. She’ll have figured it out by now.

12:45. Your notes from yesterday’s church council session are sitting right there on your desk. Often you wait an entire week before writing them up as minutes. You figure, do it now, while it’s all fresh in your mind, and think of the time it will save.

1:20. You’re sure that poets don’t use computers for the first draft. That’s why you settle at the window seat, arranging pillows behind you, yellow pad on your knees. The neighbor’s cat streaks across your peripheral vision. They call it Carrot. Carrot the Killer is more like it. You’re convinced that the cardinal nest outside your office window has been empty for days because the mama cardinal was stalked and eaten by that horrid orange cat.

Okay, you think. Concentrate here. Stalking turkeys, stalking cat, circle of death... wasn’t that close to the theme of this poem you’ve chosen to

write? You check your watch. You’ve got—oh my gosh. Only an hour before you need to leave for your writer’s group and what have you to share? Zero, zip, nada!

1:35. Your e-mail goes *ding!* dissolving your artistic focus on the blank blank page. You might as well check, maybe it’s Chris with an answer to “Gothic arch.”

It isn’t. Someone named Gloria wants to increase the size of your penis. You don’t own one of those.

Hell, you’ll check out the options for “arch” yourself in your crossword puzzle dictionary. You find that one of them—h-a-n-c-e—can’t even be found in Webster’s. Here’s another, though, with the right number of letters.

You are, in this bright and shining moment, seized by a courageous impulse. You will live large. The word “ogive” looks right to you. Using pen—not pencil—you inscribe each letter in its little square—O-G-I-V-E. You stand back. There, you think. You’ve written something. Not too creative. Not a story. But a word. A beginning.



Swimming with Stingrays, by Julie Richardson

Twisting in the Wind

by Wil Selbrede

I glance at the young man standing next to the blonde in the back. So far during the tour, not a hint of recognition from Omar. Maybe it's my tinted glasses, or the twenty pounds I gained since I stopped working out. It's been five, no, six years since—

“What does it say on the banner up there?” asks the blonde, pointing to the painting in the center of the ceiling. Electrical impulses shoot through my brain's central processing unit. Should I pretend I can't read it? No, too dangerous. I decide to guts it out. “*Doctrina vincit omnia*—knowledge conquers all.” My eyes are on Omar as I translate.

“Is that Latin?” asks the blonde.

“Yes,” I respond. Omar's body language is noncommittal. So far, so good.

The blonde persists. “Will you read me the others, please?”

I could fake ignorance, pretending I really know only a smattering of Latin and only had the one saying memorized. But word might get back to the boss somehow. Omar's father, standing next to him in the small group, is watching me carefully. He might casually mention something to the big boss. That could raise embarrassing questions.

Vijay Verma is not to be taken lightly. A Washington power, a major financial contributor on both sides of the aisle. Big man in Pennsylvania owns half a dozen nursing homes; is spending big bucks lobbying Congress for favorable treatment in the tax package going through the House Ways and Means Committee. He got his congressman to set up this special tour of the Library of Congress, and the Librarian stuck me with the job, as usual. Just one of the crap jobs dumped on the newest member of the staff.

I hesitate a moment, then guts it again, smoothly translating the Latin and explaining the symbolism of the paintings, then hurry through the condensed version of my standard lecture on this splendid suite of rooms, normally off-limits to the great unwashed. “*This room was the office of the Librarian of Congress from the time of construction of the Thomas Jefferson Building in 1897 until the James Madison Building next door was built in 1980. The paneling and trim are American oak. The ceiling paintings are by some of the fifty or so artists that worked on the magnificent Great Hall, the Public Reading Room and throughout the building...*” I hurry on, anxious to get away.

Then my hands get sweaty as I remember: the next room, the last and best on the VIP tour, is the old Congressional Reading Room, with another dozen paintings on the ceiling and another dozen Latin phrases to translate, if someone asks. I'm sure not going to volunteer. I steer the group through the suite's small kitchen, point out the narrow circular stairway leading to the balcony lined with empty book shelves that surrounds two sides of the office. I ease toward the door. "This about wraps up the Librarian's Office. Any questions?" Omar stirs, starts to open his mouth, changes his mind, shakes his head, and gives me a look that makes my toes curl with the memory of the past.

I lock the door behind me and lead my entourage through the Great Hall corridors, snaking our way around a large tour group huddled around one of our regular docents. I pause briefly as we pass our new William Tyndale exhibit on the English Bible, urging my guests to come back for a good look after our VIP tour, then I unlock the door to the hall leading to the old Congressional Reading Room. Omar's mother, resplendent in a crimson sari and a cascade of gold jewelry enters first, and I have a chance to read her eyes as she passes me. Good, no recognition. My mind raced back to my years of teaching in Philly. An uncompromising lady, quiet but exceptionally tough in our few meetings at Phelps. Upper crust Brahmin from Calcutta, doctorate in something or other.

"This room was known as the Congressional Reading Room until a few years ago. It was a place where members of Congress could conduct personal research. Now the room is called the Congressional Retreat and is used mainly for receptions and public relations functions by members of Congress..." The group listens impassively to my lecture, flowing slowly, like mindless sheep, through the huge

room as I point out the exquisite murals over the fireplaces at each end, the rich mahogany paneling, the ancient tapestries on the long wall opposite the windows and finally, the ceiling paintings, done in the same Italian Renaissance tradition as those in the Librarian's office. It is my favorite room in the Library of Congress complex, a room that exudes the subdued elegance and quiet power of the exclusive men's club it once was. I glance at my watch. "This completes our special tour. If you have any questions before we—

"Yes," said the blonde, pointing upward. "What does the Latin say?"

With controlled haste, I walk down the middle of the room, rapidly translating. Before there can be another question, I tap my watch. "I'm afraid I have other duties to perform at this time. It has been a pleasure to have you with us today." The last to leave is Omar, who walks by, then turns and burns me with his eyes. "Nice translations," he says quietly, "You haven't lost your touch." He turns on one heel. My stomach is churning as he walks away.

The next afternoon I'm sitting in my loft apartment, cleaning my fly rod and sorting my tackle box, getting ready for my usual Sunday morning trip on the Harley to the Blue Ridge Mountains and my favorite trout stream. I hear the ancient freight elevator rattle to a stop and, a moment later, my bell. My gut tells me who's there. I don't get many visitors. "Omar?" I unlock the door.

"Hello...Blair. May I still call you that? It's been a while, hasn't it."

I suck in a breath as I stare into those familiar dark eyes and hear my first name roll from his lips. His modulated baritone sweeps the dust from the closet of my memory "A while, Omar." I fight for time with a question, my heart beating rapidly. "How did you find me?"

He shrugs. "Fairly simple. I just had to make one phone call from Dad's office. You can get anything you want in Washington if you have the right connections. And my father has the best."

"I thought at first you might not recognize me. If it hadn't been for that skinny blonde girl, maybe you wouldn't."

Omar sinks into my overstuffed couch and props his feet on the glass and wrought iron coffee table. "Maybe, maybe not. I was about to volunteer my own translation when you spoke up. When I heard your perfect Latin, I looked more closely." He glances around the loft. "Impressive." He points to the rod in my hand. "Still into fishing, I see." During spring break, when his parents were in Europe and the Mayflies were hatching, we took his mother's Porsche to Glencove Creek and I taught him to fly cast. And other things...

"The blonde yours?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Works in my father's Philadelphia office. Public relations, I think." Omar removes his Gucci's from my coffee table, waves his arm around the room. "The paintings—they look like van Gogh. Your work? I remember you liked him a lot."

"Yes they are, and thanks. I try. He's my inspiration." I bring out my favorite dry sherry and pour each of us a stiff glass. I offer a silent salute with my glass. Anger at the old hurt starts in my gut and gets to my throat. "So why are you here, Omar, to finger me again to the authorities?"

He takes a long swallow and lets out a deep breath through pursed lips. "To clear up the incident at school, Blair, if I can."

My mind flashes back to Phelps Hall, this boys-only prep school in a posh section of

Philadelphia where I spent nine years teaching Latin and Greek to spoiled rich kids. A career I loved. Down the tube, because of him. I swallow hard and shrug. "I got over it. It's history. Why can't you leave it alone?"

Omar looks uncomfortable for the first time. "What do you do at the Library of Congress?" he asks, glancing away.

I play his game: "What do you think, young lover?"

He ignores the dart to the heart. "Something to do with Latin and Greek, I suppose."

"More or less. I'm staff assistant to the chief archivist for ancient books and documents." I set my empty glass down, fighting the anger in my breast. "I couldn't get a job teaching anymore, you know. I sort of like it. It's a living anyway. Doing VIP tours is just one of my tacky tasks."

Omar looks shocked. He compliments me with a moment of silence before he responds. "I didn't know. Really I didn't. When they kicked you out of Phelps I thought you'd land another teaching job somewhere, no sweat. You're a great teacher. Made Latin and Greek come alive. All the kids loved you."

"Except you, Omar."

"I loved you too."

The accusation wells from deep inside. "So why did you attack me?"

The scene flashes before my eyes. A Friday afternoon, halls clangorous with students hurrying to catch their buses. Omar and I alone in my office. Omar bolting out the door screaming, "Blair hit me! HIT me!" Omar running to the Headmaster's office, I stupidly following. Closed doors, an angry looking swelling on his left forearm, confusion, accusation, denial, administrative leave. Soon after, my dismissal.

Omar drains his glass and politely motions for a second. I pour. "Thanks. I'm going to need this." He drains the glass and leans forward. "Blair, she put me up to it."

"She?"

"Gita. My mother. She knows everything."

My stomach turns. "About us?" My response seems so stupid.

"Yes. The fishing trip, the tent, making love the first time, all the times, everything. Mother overheard some of the kids at my birthday party teasing me about how much time I was spending in your office. I told her you were just helping me with my Latin. She didn't believe it. She kept pushing me and pushing me until I... She's an unyielding woman, hides behind my father but always gets her way. When I told her about us, she made me set you up. Said I would no longer be her child if I didn't."

"The welt on your arm?"

"I pulled up my sleeve and hit it a couple times with the pointer from my home room, just before I went into your office that day."

I sit down, head spinning. Anger and guilt took turns overwhelming me. "I loved you, you know. But I knew it was wrong. I've been lighting candles ever since to ease the pain. I suppose I should be grateful she didn't go straight to the police. Why didn't she?"

"Family pride. Didn't want the stigma, didn't want anything about it in the papers. She just wanted you out of there, and fast. My mother is good at working behind the scenes. Don't think she ever told my father. I never asked her and he never said anything to me."

"Omar, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm sorry about everything. I led you on. I wanted you. I seduced you, I know that. You were a good kid, a damn good-looking, decent kid—"

"Blair," he interrupts, his olive skin glowing with sweat, "When I recognized you this afternoon I didn't know what to do. I hadn't thought about you for a long time. I still don't have all the answers, but I decided I had to tell you what really happened. So you would know the truth about what I did."

"It hurt for a long while, Omar. I'm glad you told me."

"Blair, so you know I'm not making this up, I want you to know I am in my senior year at Yale and," he pauses, "even my mother doesn't know this. After you, I found out who I really am. I have a lover. He's a grad student at Yale and he's incredible. I'm sorry I got you fired. I really am."

I stand up and lead him to the door. "You left me twisting in the wind, but I guess I deserved it. What I did was wrong, and I've been paying for it ever since, in many ways." I wave my arm around the room. "It's lonely here, most of the time."

Omar points to the Harley parked in the corner, with my name on the saddlebags. "How did a beautiful lady like you take up motorcycles and fishing?"

"My father wanted a boy," I reply, as I escort him firmly to the door.

The whine of the descending elevator grows fainter. I pour another glass of sherry and lean out the open window, letting the gentle afternoon breeze stroke my pulsing temples as I watch him emerge onto the street, nine floors below.

Saint Pete-R

by Enid Simon

“Hi, St. Pete! How’s the welcoming committee doing?” Margalissa teetered on the edge of her small cloud and peered upward.

The large entity in front of her spread his wings to their impressively full width, let them drop with a feathered thud and sighed.

“A) I am not a committee, B) I don’t welcome everyone, and C) I’ve asked you before, Margalissa, to not call me by that diminutive name. I feel that it diminishes me and my responsibilities.”

“Oh my goodness, St. Pete! I never thought of it that way. I’d always wished that I had a short name, like Pat or Jane. Instead I was given a moniker that came from both grandmothers, and I never knew either Margaret or Melissa. At least I gave you the right rank, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did and I suppose that I should thank you for that. You should—well, you shouldn’t—hear what some of the unwelcomed humans call me. By the way, both of your grandmothers are here and I’m sure that they would be happy to have a visit from you.”

“That would be a nice thing to do, wouldn’t it? In the meantime, is there anything I can do to help you, St. Pete?”

Margalissa tried to anchor her sandals more firmly to her cloud, but she only succeeded in making it rain in Toledo.

“Thank you for the offer, Margalissa, but I doubt that you could handle any of the jobs I have to do,” Saint Peter sighed. “I really need one of the apostles, but they have their own duties, so I guess that I should just get on with it.”

“Well, since I can’t be of any help, may I have your permission to visit Earth for a short time?” This time Margalissa tried to dig her toe into the cloud, but the shift of her stance simply changed the rain to sleet and so she quit squirming.

Saint Peter responded in an absent-minded way. “Yes, I suppose it won’t do any harm. You do remember all of the rules about not interfering, don’t you?”

Margalissa nodded. The tired saint bobbed his head and she instantly found herself fluttering above a familiar house.

Before she left the Earth for eternity, Margalissa had signed an organ donation form, and the recipient of her liver was the woman who lived in that house. The woman, whose name was Vivian, was now in her fifties and had

recently welcomed another granddaughter into her family. At least it was recent so far as Margalissa was concerned. Angela was now almost four years old and was already, in Margalissa's opinion, displaying a high degree of intelligence. Vivian daily thanked all the saints and apostles for Margalissa's generosity, and she was teaching Angela to do the same, even though the child as yet had no idea what a liver was.

Margalissa very much enjoyed visiting Vivian and her friends and family. Every time their thanks and prayers went wafting by her she felt a warm, sort of golden glow, and she had noticed that when little Angela's prayer went by, she also felt a surge of love and pride the likes of which she'd never felt before.

BUT—pride is a sin, isn't it? One of the Seven Deadlies?

"Oh boy!" thought Margalissa. "I'd better talk to St. Pete right away."

The next instant she found herself face-to-face with that saint and he didn't look at all happy with her.

"Yes, pride is one of the 'biggies'" he said. "I agree with you that Angela is a somewhat remarkable little human, but she doesn't belong to you and you can't go strutting around heaven, OR Earth, praising her. So just settle down on your cloud and concentrate on singing praises for a heavenly being."

"Um, Pete -r," came a new voice from a cloud that had just arrived on the scene. "If I might make a suggestion?"

Margalissa turned toward the newcomer and immediately knew he was the Apostle Mark. "Oh yes, please do," she exclaimed. "I'm sure anything you suggest would be welcome."

St. Peter harrumphed slightly, but gave a go-ahead nod to Mark.

"Perhaps," Mark spoke directly to Peter this time, "she could give blessings to the child instead of having pride in her?"

"Hummmm." St. Peter rubbed his jaw for a moment and then looked at Margalissa. "Do you think you could handle that?"

"I will certainly try. Will there be any limits to the blessings?"

"They should include other humans and not benefit just Angela," said Mark.

"And," added St. Peter, "those blessings must appear to be natural happenings. No winning of the lottery. Understood?"

"Oh yes! Thank you, thank you! I'll ask both of you to OK any blessings I have in mind, and I'll appreciate any and all suggestions either of you might have."

Margalissa floated away, bouncing from cloud to cloud, higher and higher until St. Peter observed to St. Mark that she really was learning how to use her wings, which many humans never got the knack of doing.

For many of the earthly years that followed Angela led a full and active life. She made friends easily and often chose to befriend people that others shunned. Throughout her life she gave freely of her time, energy, money, love and ideas. Not only her family and friends benefitted, so did strangers and the community at large. When she was interviewed for a local newspaper, the interviewer asked how she happened to have so many ideas and somehow managed to carry them to fruition. Her reply was: "They simply popped into my head and everyone I knew helped me turn them into something good."

Somewhere up above, on her cloud, Margalissa beamed with joy.



Prelude to Daybreak, by Gail McCoy

42° North

by Paula Novotnak

I dream the mystery of a slow eclipse,
the lunar embrace in a southern sky,
the release,
the last lift of feet dripping marsh water,
before drifts whiten the shoreline,
long wings carrying you, shy creature,
across the smoky disk of the moon.

Mrs. Switalski's Fat Tuesday Prune Paczki Crisis

by Richard Radtke

While Stella the hairdresser clips at strands of salt-and-pepper hair, Mrs. Knutowski scans the pages of *Movie Star News*. “Rock Hudson and Doris Day are said to be having an affair,” she says.

Mrs. Switalski blanches. “Not Doris Day. She is a good girl. I can’t believe she would do such a thing.”

“Ha!” says Mrs. Knutowski. “Have you taken a good look at Rock Hudson? He’s enough to turn any girl’s head.”

The conversation at Pearl’s Isle of Beauty Salon on Milwaukee’s south side moves like a freight ship plunging through the waves of Lake Michigan. Mrs. Knutowski and Mrs. Switalski agree to disagree on the state of Doris Day’s morals, and the discussion moves on to health: there is talk of another polio epidemic this summer of 1953. Mrs. Roggenbach from Hayes Avenue has developed a goiter. The Semrow twins are afflicted with inner ear disturbances.

“The Schultz woman from down by St. Jacobi’s had a bowel obstruction and had to be taken to the emergency,” Mrs. Holzer announces as she waits for her perm to set. “It’s a tragedy.”

“Your bowel obstructions will affect your Lutherans,” Mrs. Osewski says knowingly. “Something in their diet, I believe.”

“I didn’t know that,” Mrs. Holzer says, furrowing her brow as she reflects upon the information.

The group has already covered prospects for the spring planting season and whether it is too early to begin potting annual seedlings—pansies, petunias, impatiens. They have also discussed last night’s John Cameron Swayze news broadcast, which featured a report on the awful killing in Ohio where Doctor Sam Sheppard has been accused of killing his wife. And they found the *I Love Lucy* show particularly funny this week. The ladies are gathered for the regular ad hoc Thursday wash and set at Pearl’s, situated on the corner of 8th Street and Lincoln Avenue.

Preparations are in progress for the Lenten season and the Fat Tuesday feast day preceding it. Tomorrow the ladies will begin their shopping. They will

go to Malanchek's Market or the new Krambo's supermarket downstairs in Hills Department Store to purchase egg noodles, rye and wheat flour, herring, cabbage, staples needed for Tuesday's dinner. The meat they will purchase later at Malanchek's or at butcher Stankowski's.

"What a simply awful word to use for a feast day," Mrs. Switalski says. "Fat Tuesday indeed. Which of the popes decided to call it Fat Tuesday?"

"It wasn't the popes," Mrs. Jaeckle says. "It was the French. When they took over New Orleans. It's Creole."

"I disagree," says Mrs. Knutowski, who always thinks she knows better than anybody. "It is called Fat Tuesday because that is the day we need to use up the fat in the house before Lent. Most places it's held on *Źłusty czwartek*, but here in the Midwest it's Fat Tuesday." She crooks her neck backward like a plump goose, pleased to have set matters straight.

"And what will you be having for dinner on Tuesday, Mrs. Knutowski?" The inquirer is Mrs. Baltes, who comes in only to have her nails done. Mrs. Baltes is the subject of much speculation by the others in the group, because she works nearly full time at the legal offices of Attorney John Zastrow down by 13th Street. Mrs. Baltes fashions herself as what they call a liberated woman. The ladies at Pearl's Isle of Beauty think otherwise.

Mrs. Knutowski squares her shoulders. "I will be preparing roasted duck, using my mother's famous recipe. Also boiled red potatoes, green beans and *czarnina*. My Emil says mine is the best *czarnina* he has ever tasted. He says he thinks he died and went to heaven."

Around the room eyebrows are raised in incredulity at this wanton boastfulness, but Mrs. Knutowski does not notice the reaction. Her thoughts are centered on menu planning. "Then for dessert, of course, the prune *paczkis*. It is a tradition in our house."

As it is in the houses of each of the women gathered at the beauty parlor. Without *paczkis* it would not be Fat Tuesday on the south side. *Paczkis* are a staple of the Lenten Eve meal.

"And where do you get your *paczkis* Mrs. Knutowski?" Mrs. Holzer asks. "Down by National Bakers?" There is a pregnant pause while Mrs. Knutowski contemplates her reply.

"Oh no," Mrs. Knutowski answers haughtily. "I make my own. From scratch."

"Is that a fact?" Mrs. Jaeckle queries. "Even the prune?"

"Of course even the prune. The prune is what makes it." Now Mrs. Knutowski launches into a description of the ingredients in her very famous doughnuts: sweet cream, yeast, egg yolk, butter, flour and sugar. Then the prunes, pureed into a fine consistency to tempt the taste buds of even the harshest critic. She leaves out the secret ingredient in her filling—rum—which lends a special edge to the taste.

As she ducks her head under the dryer at the far side of the room, Mrs. Switalski blocks out the banter with a troubled heart. At one time she too made her own *paczkis*, but no more. Her arthritis has made it impossible to work the dough. Now she stands in line with the other wives at National Bakers to purchase a box of one dozen doughnuts on the morning of Fat Tuesday. Her spirit and her skills in the kitchen have not faded,

but her body has begun to fail her. Once she was the best baker on the south side. Now she struggles to get pierogi filled with sauerkraut and mushrooms onto the table.

Mrs. Switalski also has an issue with her husband to contend with. She learned that last week, in her absence from the beauty parlor, Mrs. Knutowski made rude comments about Mr. Switalski flirting with the waitress at the VFW during the Friday fish fry. Said she saw him pinch the waitress as she passed with a tray full of cod and French fries. True or not, it was a terrible thing to say in front of all the ladies. From under the dome of her dryer, Mrs. Switalski gives the sanctimonious Mrs. Knutowski the evil eye.

“I don’t believe in all that baking,” says the liberated Mrs. Baltes. “I don’t have the time. And the paczkis from National Bakers are as good as you can make up at home. Maybe better.”

A hush falls over the shop, as if Mrs. Baltes has just broken wind. All heads turn toward the speaker. Even Mrs. Switalski flips the hood of her drier up to find out what she has missed. Mrs. Baltes has spoken the unutterable, suggesting that store-bought baked goods are the equal of home-made.

Mrs. Osewski quickly changes the subject before a full-fledged conflagration breaks out in Pearl’s Isle of Beauty. “Bill Carlson on the TV thinks we’re going to have snow for the weekend,” she says. Mrs. Osewski is the peacemaker in the group, always going out of her way to avoid confrontation, and also to say a rose novena for anyone with trouble in their lives.

Mrs. Switalski, unaware of Mrs. Baltes’ gaffe, joins in the discussion of the weather. “Yes,” she

says, “two to four inches, I hear.” Mrs. Switalski has enough to worry about with her health problems and the behavior of her husband.

But the deflection does not hold. “And you, Mrs. Switalski,” Mrs. Jaeckle asks, “do you make your own paczkis for the holiday?”

The blood rises through Mrs. Switalski’s neck and up into her face. Her reputation as the most accomplished baker on the south side is at stake, and Mrs. Jaeckle’s question strikes her like a gloved hand challenging her to a duel.

“Yes,” she lies, unaware of the conversation that led to this query. “I have always made my own paczkis. What would Fat Tuesday be without home-made paczkis?” With that, she pulls the dryer hood back over her head and retreats into self-imposed exile.

In the confessional at St. Josaphat’s Mrs. Switalski makes the sign of the cross. On the other side of the screen sits Father Novak, the acolyte priest. Mrs. Switalski wishes it was Monsignor Kozminski who was taking her confession, for he has much more experience in matters of sin and has known about her own transgressions since childhood. Father Novak, on the other hand, is so very handsome that it is difficult to talk about sin in his presence. And, Mrs. Switalski has noted, Father Novak blushes easily during Bible study sessions when certain subjects of personal intimacy come up. Monsignor Kozminski, on the other hand, often retreats into mild dozing while hearing confession, awaking only when the parishioner raps on the wall of the confessional with a knuckle. And with Monsignor Kozminski, the concept of anonymity between sinner and confessor has long passed into history, for with his ladies of faith voices, even scents, are immediately recognizable by both parties.

"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit," Mrs. Switalski says. "Amen. Bless me father, for I have sinned."

"How long has it been since your last confession," the young priest asks from the other side of the booth.

And so Mrs. Switalski's confession begins. "I felt anger in my heart for Mrs. Knutowski, who accused my husband of pinching the waitress at the VFW. I wished that she would suffer the agony of a gall bladder attack." Mrs. Switalski pauses.

"Please go on, my child," Father Novak says. Mrs. Switalski cannot help but consider how odd it is that such a young man should be calling a mature lady like herself *my child*. She pushes the distraction from her mind and continues.

"I was so angry that I forgot Mrs. Knutowski has already had her gall bladder out. I don't know how I could have forgotten, because she brings it up every week at the beauty parlor, her gall bladder surgery."

"Enough of Mrs. Knutowski's gall bladder. What else?"

"I opened an account for myself at the Building and Loan without my husband's knowing about it. If he is going about pinching waitresses at the VFW I want to become a liberated woman."

"You must tell him about it immediately," Father Novak says. "A wife has a duty of obedience."

"And what about a husband's duty of faithfulness, to stop flirting with the waitresses at the VFW?"

"That is not our concern here," the reply comes from the other side of the screen. Mrs. Switalski

thinks she detects the sweet odor of alcohol wafting through the partition. "Here we are concerned with the state of *your* soul," Father Novak admonishes. "What else?"

Mrs. Switalski hesitates. Then she says, "I lied to the ladies at the beauty parlor. I told them I make my own paczkis for Fat Tuesday."

"And why did you lie to your friends?"

"They are not my friends, except for Mrs. Osewski. I lied because I was ashamed that I can no longer make my own paczkis. It's my arthritis. I will need to get store-bought this year."

"A lie, certainly, but not a mortal sin. You can make things right, by admitting your sin to those you have deceived."

"Must I? Couldn't I say Our Fathers and Hail Marys instead?"

"You must do both." With that, the young priest assigns her a penance.

Mrs. Switalski responds: "Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

"God, the Father of mercies," Father Novak drones, reciting the absolution as though it is a disagreeable chore. "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

"Amen," Mrs. Switalski responds, and rises to leave the confessional. Despite the blessing, she does not feel relieved. She has sinned, of that she is sure. But she cannot help feeling justified in her wrath toward her husband, and especially toward Mrs. Knutowski. On her way out of the basilica she nearly bumps into that very person, who is just entering to make her own confession.

Mrs. Switalski gives a curt nod, and speculates whether Mrs. Knutowski will own up to rumor mongering during her session with Father Novak.

On the walk home, the doubts continue. Mrs. Switalski doesn't know who to be more upset with: her husband, *if* he did the pinching, or Mrs. Knutowski for spreading the rumor. All this on top of her arthritis. And, she wonders, why does the act of confession require the intervention of a priest to relay her sins to the Almighty? Would it not be possible for her to confess her wrongdoing directly to heaven, and avoid the middle man? The moment the thought enters her mind she realizes that it constitutes yet another sin.

On Tuesday morning Mrs. Switalski fastens her babushka under her chin and steps out into the windy late February weather to go down by National Bakers to purchase paczkis. The line stretches out onto 16th Street as a twenty-mile-an-hour wind bears down on the shivering customers. The neighborhood wives stand like statues, awaiting their turn to buy dessert for the evening meal. Mrs. Switalski turns the collar of her car coat up and pulls her head into the protective rabbit fur like a turtle.

As she approaches the door she sees Mrs. Baltes standing several places ahead, but she does not call out to her fellow patron of Pearl's Isle of Beauty. She hopes the legal secretary will not notice her, in view of her earlier comments about making her paczkis from scratch. Mrs. Switalski pulls her head further into the protective cover of her fur collar.

Then something strange happens. Near the door to the bakery stands a woman wearing a car coat much like her own, and covering her eyes with sunglasses. Only a blind person would wear sunglasses on such a dreary winter day, Mrs. Switalski notes. As she ruminates over this anomaly, a mighty gust of wind swirls around the doorway to the bakery, and takes the hair right off the head of the woman with the sunglasses. There is a screech, and the woman bolts from the doorway to retrieve a wig that has blown out into 16th Street. "My hair!" she bellows. "My beautiful hair!"

Like a bolt of lightning out of the blue, Mrs. Switalski recognizes the voice. It is the same voice that instructed the ladies at Pearl's in the history and significance of paczki-baking, the same voice that complains about the pain involved in gall bladder surgery.

Mrs. Knutowski recovers her hairpiece and brushes it off, then resumes her place in line, muttering about the lack of indoor waiting space at National Bakers. As Mrs. Switalski nears the door of the bakery, the disguised buyer of store-bought paczkis reappears, her wig arranged lopsided atop her head, her sunglasses cocked at a rakish angle, and two boxes of paczkis in her arms. Mrs. Switalski backs into the line and pulls her collar higher. She says nothing. The Fat Tuesday holiday has been redeemed, and she looks forward to a pleasant meal with her mister. Some women may be inclined to play fast and loose with the truth, she concludes. Others, like Mrs. Baltes and herself, are liberated women.



Imaginary Landscape, by Mary Morgan

Serious Fun: Some Danish Jazz Impressions

by Norman Leer

The summer of 2010 was warmer than usual in Denmark. This might have been because of global warming since much of the U.S. and Europe saw similar temperatures, or it could have been the atmosphere registering all the hot sounds coming from the small coastal town of Juelsminde, where the series of Sunday afternoon concerts at *På Havnen* has now become the “*Juelsminde Jazzfestival*.” Each week for eight consecutive Sunday afternoons, *På Havnen*, the harbor café run by Johnny Valentin features three hours of live traditional jazz, with an occasional small swing combo. The bands are mostly from central or southern Jutland; Juelsminde is on the east coast, south of Århus, Denmark’s second largest city, which is one hour away. All are worth hearing. In recent years, the bands have crystallized, each developing and refining its own style and voice. In 2005, Johnny Valentin told me the musicians were interchangeable, and moved almost randomly between the different bands. Now, while two have some players in common, each group has evolved a distinct identity; the musicians know each other and work creatively together, and several bands have issued their own CDs.

I was lucky to hear five concerts that summer. My wife and I were again visiting her Danish family, and were as always enjoying the busy idyllic harbor, the clean natural beaches, small shops and cafes of this indigenous fishing village which has reinvented itself as a green tourist destination. Johnny Valentin’s efforts have been a significant part of this transformation. *På Havnen* (which means “by the harbor”) occupies a former restaurant space, but has added to good traditional Danish food a mix of jazz and other community events and a welcoming informal atmosphere. Johnny is himself a clarinet player, who began to hear and like traditional jazz while he was living in the nearby city of Horsens. His providing a venue for the music has pulled together a jazz culture that was already quite active in the surrounding area. It’s not uncommon to find a New Orleans style band playing “Canal St. Blues” on the pedestrian streets of neighboring towns, and one of these, Silkeborg, has a Riverboat Festival in late June which also attracts many local bands and their fans.

Denmark has had an active jazz scene since the early 1940’s, when a Fats Waller influenced pianist named Leo Mathiesen led a popular big band. Mathiesen was a combination of Harlem stride pianist and showman. He shared the nickname, “The Lion,” with another stride player, Willie “The Lion” Smith. During the 1950’s, a sailor by the name of Arne “Bue”

Jensen visited New Orleans. When he returned to Denmark, he played for a while with the Bohana Jazz Band, and then formed his own group, Papa Bue's Viking Jazz Band. By this time, New Orleans or "trad" jazz had become popular in England through the bands of Chris Barber and Ken Colyer. With Papa Bue on trombone, Finn Otto Hansen on trumpet and Jørgen Svare on clarinet, the Vikings carried on the tradition, playing in a moving lyrical style that was drenched in the blues and spirituals of the original. But they also added something new, New Orleans style arrangements of Danish and German songs such as "*Nyboders Pris*" and "*Schlaf, Mein Prinzen*." Both became hits, but also showed high musical creativity.

Denmark also developed a modern jazz culture, at first with violinist Sven Asmussen and later with bassist Niels Henning Ørsted Pedersen and the avant-garde Palle Mikkelborg. The country also attracted many American jazzmen, who were drawn by knowledgeable and appreciative audiences and an atmosphere free of racism. Tenor sax player Ben Webster was a regular at the *Montmartre jazzhus* in Copenhagen, where he often played with Ørsted Pedersen, as did pianist Kenny Drew. Webster is buried in Denmark, as is violinist Stuff Smith. I've visited his grave at Klakring Church, which is just outside of Juelsminde.

Now, the concerts at *På Havn* have given jazz a steady visibility over most of the summer. The Danes, stoic about their long and rainy winters, worship their summers and love their jazz. The atmosphere on the restaurant's terrace is very special. The bands occupy a stage that is also the steps to an indoor dining room, where a jazz buffet is laid out for customers. The audience outside is seated close to the musicians, and this intimacy is reinforced during breaks, when the

players often join various table groups for a sandwich and a beer. Dogs and children sit with their families and sometimes wander across the stage. Next to the band is a small bar area, where Johnny dispenses generous glasses of Tuborg *øl* or an occasional *vin*. There's no cover charge; you can sit for the entire afternoon over a glass or two, or you can enjoy the buffet lunch. Many of the people in the audience are regulars, coming each week to hear the music. They either know each other or become new friends, linked by their interest in the music. They are mostly Danes, with a few Germans and an occasional American, either an expatriate or a visitor like me. The atmosphere is warm and easygoing—plenty of fun; but at the same time there's a seriousness about the music. This interest and knowledge are in fact so strong that the locals have formed a Basin Street Jazz Club, currently chaired by Tom Laursen, which has over one hundred and eighty paid members and sponsors other concerts and programs during the year (disclosure of interest: I've been given a lifetime honorary membership).

It's this combination of seriousness and fun that struck me that summer. I can't think of any small town in America where the interest in and knowledge of traditional jazz are so active and involve so many people. New Orleans, of course, has Preservation Hall, the Palm Court Café and the Hogan Archives at Tulane. But you'd expect nothing less of The Big Easy, Louis Armstrong's birthplace and the first focal point of jazz. Denmark and Juelsminde in particular are fast becoming another worldwide focal point for classic jazz activity. Copenhagen and Århus both have excellent jazz festivals which used to feature all styles. I remember hearing both Papa Bue and John Lewis of the Modern Jazz Quartet on the streets of Copenhagen. But lately these festivals have focused more on avant-garde and fusion jazz, and you have to go three hours west by

train to Juelsminde to find the older styles done with a unique Danish twist. I hope more people will come and listen.

In his commentary for the autobiographical *Hot Man*, Art Hodes' co-writer and editor Chadwick Hansen, writes that Hodes made his first trip to Europe in 1970. A major stop was Denmark, where Hodes recorded four band sides and one trio arrangement with Papa Bue's Viking Jazz Band (two of these have recently been reissued in a Papa Bue 80th birthday commemorative set by Storyville Records), as well as a solo album with Papa Bue's bass player, Jens Sóland. Hodes himself writes about the large crowds he later drew at concerts in Germany:

That evening we had an equally large crowd. I keep asking myself why. Is it because Europeans have a love for American jazz and we haven't? It would seem so. They buy the recordings, and when an American jazzman comes to their land, they flock to hear him. Many are well informed of our jazz heritage. The best jazz discographies come from abroad. It's like we have the music and don't value it, and they value it and pursue it.

(Hodes and Hansen. *Hot Man*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1992. P. 103)

I thought of Art Hodes on our last Sunday, as I heard one of the bands, Dixieland Jubilees, journey deep inside "See See Rider," the blues-laden sounds driven by the piano of Jens Petersen. I was a little sad about leaving in a few days, and suddenly everything the blues can stir up swelled inside my throat, and the music seemed for a moment to be just for me. I felt grateful. This band has a driving bite; the interplay between Ole Kirk on trumpet, Freddie Bang on trombone, Bent Østergaard on clarinet and sax and the rhythm section lit by drummer Kim Kjær is full of sparks and surprises. But it's clear that ev-

eryone knows where the music comes from and can paint with a wide palette of emotional colors.

All the bands are very good, but along with Dixieland Jubilees two others stand out for me personally: the Lake City Jazz Band and the Tuxedo New Orleans Jazz Band. Their names tell the story. While Dixieland Jubilees strives for a blend of Chicago style and swing reminiscent of the New York bands of the 'forties, the Lake City band is clearly inspired by King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band, the Armstrong Hot Fives and Sevens and other Chicago bands of the 'twenties, and the Tuxedo Band looks back to Papa Celestin's and other classic Crescent City groups. The last two bands share two musicians. Poul Christensen plays trombone with the Lake City Band and tuba (called a sousaphone in Denmark) with the Tuxedo. Christensen was, I believe, also involved with an earlier Danish group, the Jutlandia Jazz Band. Stig Fisker does banjo, guitar and vocal duties with both the Lake City and the Tuxedo groups, and is an organizing force on the local jazz scene in general. He told me he would also like to play trumpet with a modern jazz group.

The Lake City Band has a strong ensemble sound and builds on both short 'twenties-style breaks and longer solos. The repertoire on their CD features numbers such as "Black and Blue," "Mama's Gone Goodbye" and the later Sidney Bechet showpiece "*Petite Fleur*." The Tuxedo's repertoire can overlap on some numbers, but the band is also strong on spirituals, with clarinetist Leif Bjórnó gliding soulfully through "In the Sweet Bye and Bye" or "Over in the Gloryland," and touching deep layers of communal sadness and hope.

If space allowed, I'd mention all the musicians I heard, sitting on the *På Havnen* terrace. They know their sources and are serious about their art. When I asked Stig Fisker about his, I'd expected him to mention Bjarne "Liller" Petersen, the popular and slightly raucous banjo player and singer with Papa Bue's Viking Jazz Band. But instead the first name he brought up was Johnny St. Cyr. Drummer Kim Kjær lists Ray Baduc as an influence, and trumpeter Ole Kirk writes in Dixieland Jubilees' flyer that he's played with Alton Purnell. The entire band has collaborated with New Orleans trumpeter Wendell Brunious.

Another indication of this seriousness is that none of the bands are simply imitating other musicians or their recordings. Certainly, the clarinetists will do the standard Alphonse Picou solo on "High Society" and the bands incorporate other solos that are almost part of jazz folklore. But I often sensed new solos and dialogues being created on the spot. Improvisation is central to jazz, and there was the tangible excitement of the best live sessions, with the musicians hearing each other and the audience listening to all of them. At the same time, both musicians and audience were sipping their beers and watching the changing light and swirling seagulls on a Danish summer afternoon.

I've begun to sense this mix of seriousness and fun as essential to an elusive Danish national character. Cultural generalizations are too easy, but the Danes have certainly demonstrated their deeper values by developing one of the most effective social democracies in the world, and also by their strong resistance during World War II, when they saved most of their Jews and other targeted groups from extermination by the Nazis. At the same time, the Danes view conflict with a lovely irony. There's a story that if there was a war and it started raining, the Danes would stop the battle and go in for a cup of strong coffee or a beer. I hope I'd join them.

Behind all the serious fun at *På Havnen* is the owner, Johnny Valentin. You'll find him usually behind the tiny outdoor bar, serving drinks and talking with customers. Sometimes he wanders between the tables, bringing orders, and here again he usually stops to chat or wave to someone. He often sports a wide brimmed sun hat, and a summer outfit that's almost Danish tradition: knickers-length shorts and a light shirt. If the weather gets cool or rainy, as it often does, you simply add a sweater or a vest. After all, it's still summer, at least for two short months. And there's great jazz to listen to, so why get too concerned about a little wind or rain.

Sundays in Garfield Park

by Judith Zukerman

On Garfield Park lagoon
Dad and I glide and glide,
arms linked and crossed.
His black skates know what to do,
mine wobble. His firm hold
keeps us whirling on the ice,
under the arch, where in summer

we row, my sister and I
taking turns paddling our rented boat
under the bridge, dipping oars in the water.
We glide from one lagoon to another,
pulling hard to stay away from shore.
We twirl at the water's edge not stuck in mud
chanting, "Yo, oh, heave, ho."

Sunset Sunrise

by William G. Ladewig

He was watching her like a panther waiting to pounce when she was alone. There—the heavy set one was walking away, probably to get an early start on lunch. He was ready, and he decided to make his move.

“Christ, you’re old,” he said to the white-haired woman sitting in the lounge chair strategically placed in the shade to shelter the occupant from the glare of the Florida sun.

“So, you think that you’re some spring chicken? The nurses tell me that you voted for FDR and you’re proud of it. It’s your kind of people that screwed this country up to begin with. Irv, my husband, used to say that the damn Democrats started this whole country down a path to hell in a hand basket,” replied the lady and an easy grin lit up her face.

She was dressed in a long white sun dress, v-cut in the front flowing to her knees, encapsulating skin that had spent a life time in sun worship and was now shriveling up. On her head she wore a broad-rimmed sun bonnet, set off with a red ribbon that coordinated her outfit down to her slippers. Even at her age, she knew the importance of style. She looked at him through her tinted sunglasses and said, “Why don’t you get out of the sun? Pull up a chair and sit down? You must be tired from watching me all morning.”

He walked over and pulled a chair up beside her, just within the protection of the shade. “What makes you think I was looking at you? Maybe I was looking at someone else!” he said, puzzled by the fact that she knew who he was.

“Right! I’m old, but I’m not senile yet, at least not like you. Do you want some water?” she asked as she pointed to the silver carafe on the table.

The man was wearing Bermuda shorts and a polo shirt—white with red stripes that stretched over his stomach, showing it was a size too small or that it remembered him when he was younger. White hair topped a narrow face highlighted by a sharp nose supporting bright blue eyes. At seventy-two, he was past his prime and going towards the downward side, and he knew it.

“You are the best looking thing here, you know. Most of these women look like they’ve been forgetting there’s a salad bar.”

“Are you married?” she asked.

“No. My Carol died about four years ago. She had breast cancer. Put up a good fight and then she just gave in. I always thought she would have fought

to the end, but she just quit. I had problems figuring out why, but I guess I know now. What about you? Married? Involved with anyone?"

"Move your chair a little to the right, will you? You're getting in the sun. It's not good for you. And who needs a man now?"

He laughed and moved the chair, following the shade. "Well, are you?"

"Irv died last year. Cancer of the lungs. I told him that he should never have started those cancer sticks, but he didn't listen. Never did listen to me. The kids got him to quit about six months before they told him that he had the cancer, but by then it was too late. He started up again after they told him that he was going to die. He said it couldn't hurt him now anyway. Irv had a great sense of humor. After him, who wanted anybody else? He was the best!"

"I'm seventy-two. Too damn young or maybe too damn old. I always thought my wife and I would be married forever, and if anyone would go, it would be me. I never should have started smoking myself, but during the war you did anything to break the monotony, and I got hooked. Now, well, it was my own damn fault. I guess I understand why Carol felt the way she did. How long do you have?"

"The doctor says that I have about six months, but I say I have until it's over, and I kinda of like staying around. What about you? You look good. You still have your hair. You look awful healthy to be here."

"Yeah, I told 'em that I didn't want to go through all that chemo and stuff. The kids told me that I was crazy, but I told 'em I wanted quality, not quantity, and I've had a good run. I'm not going to get beaten down like my wife did. They say I can go anytime, but if I'm lucky, I might last

nine months. I told the kids that we couldn't afford this assisted living hospice place, but they insisted. Said they didn't want my money but wanted me to be happy. Happy! Waiting to die! Florida: death's anteroom. Here we are, standing in line, waiting for our turn. Carol and I used to come down here in the winter and snowbird it. Had a lot of friends then...after Carol, they all drifted away. Some died. Some went back up north to be with their kids."

"Irv was in the building trades. What about you?" She asked as she turned on her side to look directly at him.

"I had a little factory. I made gaskets for the auto industry. Made good money. Let me have the best doctors tell me what I didn't want to hear. Now the kids will be taken care of and I won't be a burden to them. I guess that's okay. Tell me, does it upset you that you know?"

"Oh, it did at first but you get used to it, like everything else. Nobody guarantees how long you get. The hard part is getting to know people here and then not seeing them one day."

"Well, I'm new here and don't have any friends. Do you want to go to lunch with me?" he asked as he stood up.

She looked over at him and smiled and began to swing her legs off the side of the chair. "Bring me that walker and lend me a hand, and we'll go in. I'll introduce you to the gang."

He looked down at her, smiled and said, "Thank you. You know you are the prettiest thing here. I think that this could be the start of a beautiful friendship."

She leaned against his shoulder, smiled and said, "Get on, you sweet talker. Say, you wouldn't be Jewish, would you?"



Deeply Rooted Visions, by Gail McCoy

Stone Talk

by Lorna Kniaz

The stones whisper as I pass:

“I loved teaching.”

“I left small children.”

“It always rained.”

“I was alone for 20 years before I could join him.”

“Tell me about the marriages, divorces and my new grandchildren.”

“Come again; no one comes to visit me anymore.”

“None remembers that I always kept an immaculate house.”

“I loved flowers and music.”

“I wish I had spent more time with my family.”

“I held high office and made a lot of money.”

“Life is a joy.”

And: “Come lie with me and warm my bed again.”

Monsters by the Bed

by George Faunce

When you were young
MONSTERS crawled about beneath your bed!
They never got their claws on you, because you stayed awake.
(And never slept.)

You made bad choices as you grew,
and let some “**monsters**” into bed with you.
They tortured you, making love...then making waste.
And you never, never slept.

Now too old, too sick to move,
still tethered to your bed, you watch the monsters brood.
They peer at you with clipboards now, a furtive, sideways glance.
Inserting needles, attaching tubes,
...and whispering...
That now, at last
you'll sleep.

Saying Goodbye

by Wil Selbrede

“When a farm is sold for whatever reason, a part of the family is sold as well...”

— Jerry Apps

Rural Wisdom

Woodruff WI: Amherst Press, 1997. p. 17

The old woman climbed wearily up the concrete steps leading from the storm cellar, straining to carry a large cardboard box of Mason jars. As she reached the top she set the box down and turned her back to the brisk March wind to catch her breath. “Henry!” she shouted. A tall, spare man emerged from the tool shed on the other side of the farmyard, also carrying a large box. “Henry!” she shouted again, “Can you help me with this box of jars? It’s more’n a body can handle in this wind.”

“In a minute, Martha, soon as I get this dang box of tools on the truck.” Buffeted by the wind, he walked heavily to the old farm truck parked in the gravel drive. The springs shuddered as he heaved the box of tools onto the truck bed and shoved it back against the packed furniture. By habit rather than necessity, he pulled a red bandanna from the back pocket of his overalls, wiped his face and turned toward the waiting Martha. “Ma, what in the tarnation do you want with those old Mason jars? Taint like you’re gonna have to cook for threshing crews anymore! That little house doesn’t have hardly any storage space.”

“Well tell me this, then, Pa,” Martha replied, arms akimbo, her round face flushed. “Just what in tarnation are YOU going to do with all those wrenches and things you just brought up from the tool shed? I don’t recall that our school teacher daughter and that insurance salesman husband of hers are going to have any farm machinery sitting around their yard just waiting for you to fix!”

Henry looked down at his large, work-worn hands. “I don’t know, Ma, just seems like I’m losing a child, not having tools in my hands. I—I figured I’d see if I could maybe find some machinery repair outfit there in the city that could use some help.” He flexed his strong fingers. “Doesn’t seem right, not having anything to do with my hands.”

“Same here, Pa,” Martha replied ruefully. “I been cannin’ since I was knee high to a grasshopper. It’s a small kitchen in our new place, I know. But cannin’ don’t take up much room, long as you got a pressure cooker hooked up.” She added brightly, “Sarah says there’s a farmer’s market down in an old part of the city. She tol’ me farmers from all over bring fresh picked fruit and vegetables from early spring ‘til the parsnips are ready when the snow flies.” She buried her face in her apron as she added through her sniffles, “Leaving the farm after all these years, it’s just like when we lost young Henry to that flu.”

Henry bent down awkwardly and put his arms around Martha’s stout waist as he kissed her gray hair. “Now, Ma, let’s not go through that again. You know we tried hard to keep the place up, but when Ralph went off to that General Motors automotive engineering college two years ago, I couldn’t do the farming anymore, even with what hired help I could get.”

“Well, it seems to me that boy could have stayed here and worked the farm in our old age, like oldest sons are supposed to do!”

“Now Ma, it’s 1948 and the war is over and most of the young farm boys who weren’t killed fighting Hitler and that Japanese Emperor, Hiro—Hiro—something, they’re going to college on the GI Bill, not coming back to the farms. Ralph’s been a good son. When I got his deferment from

the draft after he finished high school, he was pretty mad but he stuck right here despite all, and farmed the whole four years, even though he wanted to fight.”

Henry gently turned her toward the barnyard and pointed toward the buildings, then a distant hill. “Time to say goodbye to our farm animals—and my kin.” His eyes reddened and he quickly brushed the back of his hand across his nose as he added, “Come, Martha, walk with me to the hill, one more time.

Slowly, bracing against the sharp gusts of wind, they toured each of the buildings surrounding the barnyard. Henry took a last, longing look into the dark interior of the tool shed, then led Martha through the maze of farm equipment in and around the building, stopping to stroke the seat of the harrow and run his fingers along the cylinder block on the huge tractor. Silently, he led the way to the adjacent hen house, where the last few hens and a lonely rooster pecked dutifully at a barren patch of black earth. Martha broke free of Henry’s grasp long enough to fill a metal basin from a nearby sack of cracked corn and threw it on the ground to the fluttering birds. “Can’t stand hungry chickens,” she said, “seems like they’re hungry all the time. Hope that new hired man remembers to take care of them when—when we go.” Tears came again.

“He’s a good man, Martha. He’ll do what’s needed, don’t you worry. Besides, the new owners will be here in two days. John and Elvira are good people and good farmers. They’ll do right by the animals; don’t you fret about it none.” He led the sniffling Martha into the barn, where a long row of Holstein cows were lying down in their stanchions, patiently chewing their cud as they awaited the next milking. One wearing a bell around her neck stood up when she saw Henry. Henry patted her head, carefully avoiding the moist nose she tossed in his direction. “Tess, you old bell cow, you be good now and remember to bring the herd back from pasture at milking time, you hear?”

A loud whinny greeted them as they approached the horse stalls at the end of the barn. A huge gray Percheron raised its head from its oat bin, still munching the last few kernels. Henry reached over and affectionately patted its velvety nose. “Sam, you be good to your new owner. He’s going to need you for some plowing chores, so he’ll be keeping you around for a spell—at least I hope so,” he added under his breath. He abruptly steered Martha out the back door. “I want to go up on the hill to say goodbye to my kin.”

Martha was shivering from the cold wind as they left the comparative shelter of the barnyard and walked up the familiar path toward the small cemetery on the wooded hill at the back of the farm, walked past the corn fields with the disked

stalks of last year’s crop starting to disintegrate into mulch for the soil; past the big pasture, a hint of green peeking from underneath its short brown grass and the young branches on the weeping willows along the meandering creek already showing a tinge of yellow.

Henry glanced from side to side as they walked, unable to speak. He removed his jacket and carefully draped it around Martha’s shoulders as they approached the hill. The tall oak trees were reluctantly giving up last year’s leaves to the persistent wind. Henry put his arm around Martha as they stood looking down at the ancient tombstones marking the few graves in the clearing at the center of the hill. “John and I shook hands about the cemetery,” Henry said gruffly. “He allowed as how it was sacred and promised to take care of Pa and Ma and their kinfolk here.” He pointed to a small stone at the very back. “That’s Great-grandpa Amos. He got this farm from the government right after the Civil War, for being a soldier.”

Martha nodded. She had heard the story many times. She pulled the jacket closer around her. “Henry, its best we be going now. It’s a long drive to the city. We can come back again, come summer.”

Henry stared down at the stones for a long time, and breathed a deep sigh. “Yes, Ma, it’s best.” They turned and walked down the path, never looking back.

John

by Rita Hack Rausch

He was one of those children who turned his parents' hair white in their forties. Curious, an explorer, independent, an experimenter, that little boy was an inch away from disaster from the time he could move.

He was just crawling when he maneuvered the long flight of steps in their old Milwaukee house—the kind that rises steeply, pauses at a platform, turns, then continues up five more steps. A chair lay sidewise at the bottom? A bench or chest moved to block his adventure? John nudged the impediment aside, crawled through the legs or pulled himself up and over.

This day, he quickly climbed the steps to the top, rested on the platform then moved up the last five. He swiveled his little bottom around and smiled his success. AAHH, he bellowed as he started back down to try again, headfirst. The bump and rumble brought Mom running. There lay her baby, chin trembling but not a tear. She watched as he sat, looked up the stairs, took a breath and tackled them again. She climbed softly avoiding the squeaky step, watching John in the reflection of the window. He sat at the top of the steps, looked down at the offending stairs and pondered. It took just a minute before he turned on to his tummy and slid down feet first. Safely at the bottom, he sat, slapped the floor with his hand and laughed out loud.

He was about eight when he was disciplined (not for the first time) and decided it was time to leave. He stopped in the kitchen to tell his mother he was running away from home. She said that made her very sad, she would miss him. Would he like to take a lunch with him? “Well, ok,” he muttered. She made his favorite sandwich, peanut butter with mayonnaise on white bread, and packed it in a used paper bag with two cookies and a small apple. Off he went down the long city block. Mom watched him from the bay window keeping well inside the curtain in case he turned back to see the last of his boyhood home.

At the end of the street, he stopped. Stood there for minutes. He wasn't allowed to cross the street. He sat on the curb, opened his lunch and ate. It was a full hour before he folded the paper bag, stood up and turned toward home. Mom hurried to a chair far from the window and picked up a book. As John opened the back door, she went to him, hugged him and told him how pleased she was to see him back. Embarrassed, he glanced down at the family pet dancing around his feet and said gruffly, “still got the same old dog, I see.”

In the multi-ethnic neighborhood in which they lived—Greek, Italian, Polish, German, Irish and motley mixtures—boys were allowed to roam freely during the summer and found ways to entertain themselves. One game they played was Dare. They ran along the rails on the Wells St. viaduct and waited for the train. The one who could stay on the viaduct the longest won. John never lost a dare. This day, he was past the center when the train was sighted. The boys turned to run back but John was not going to make it. “JOOHHNNN! RUUUNNNN!” shrieked his brothers and buddies. Desperate, John leaped over the railing and clung to the metal super structure high over the valley below. The train went by, swaying the long bridge. His cohorts raced back to help unclench his hands and lift him over the rail. John still had not lost a dare.

He turned seventeen just weeks before the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. His future was in the navy and he tried to convince his parents to sign permission for him to join. “Not until you’ve finished high school,” they told him. The day after graduation, he enlisted, went through boot camp at Great Lakes Naval Training Station and then on to San Diego, assigned to a destroyer and shipped out to the Pacific theater. A 17-year-old seaman on a destroyer—that small, fast ship designed to seek out the enemy and to defend carriers, supply

ships and others in the convoy—headed toward an enemy that was better trained and better equipped.

Years later, after I had married his younger brother, John told me, ruefully, that after having two destroyers shot out from under him, he thought he would be safer under the water so he joined the submarine service. Their days were spent in this coffin-like vessel filled with the smell of unwashed, sweating male bodies, food spoiling, oil and fuel, only coming up to periscope level when their radar located an enemy ship, torpedoes ready. Fire One! Fire Two! Sometimes surfacing for that treasured breath of fresh air and to recharge batteries. Diving to 800 feet at the sight of the enemy, as deep as the vessel could go without rupturing seams, listening for the sonar above: ping ping Ping Ping PING PING PING! No one made a sound. No one moved, No one breathed. Depth charges exploding so near, sailors became missiles thrown against walls and floor of the vessel. PING Ping ping ping... His mother said he was an emotional wreck when he returned from the Pacific. Today it would be called PTSD. It was called battle fatigue then.

John retired from the navy as a Lt. Commander, managed a hotel and lived a long life. His wife said, although the events were less and less frequent, she would still in later years be startled awake as John screamed in his sleep, “DIVE DIVE DIVE!”



Black Swallowtail, by Susan Hoffman

Collecting Trips

by April Hoffman

Dad's job as a herpetologist required that he amass large collections of dead reptiles and amphibians. This meant that every pleasant weekend my parents and I went on collecting trips. Which direction we drove depended on where Dad thought he could find the specimens he needed.

Before each trip we loaded the car with snake sticks, which resembled hoes but had a flat hook on the end, and long canvas snake bags. We also took jars of alcohol or formaldehyde. We used these to kill and then preserve the specimens.

During the ride, Dad drove and Mom did needlework. I either stood between them to stare at the road ahead, or tucked myself on top of the back seat under the rear window to watch the trip in reverse. Seat belts hadn't been invented in the '40's. No one worried much about safety.

We would drive until Dad saw a place where he thought we might find the desired animals. If his search was for snakes, this would be a woods or pasture. When Dad spied an area that had large flat stones he would stop the car and all three of us would grab a snake bag and a snake stick. Then we scattered in three different directions. This allowed us to cover more territory. We never considered that we were trespassing, but freely climbed over and under farmers' fences.

The pastures and woods we rambled teemed with wildlife. I would spend the day watching butterflies and dragonflies, chasing fence lizards and looking for box turtles, which I knew how to sex. A male box turtle had red eyes, a female had brown. If there was a creek, there would be schools of minnows to watch and crayfish, which we called "crawdads." In the woods I might find walking sticks or fabulous moths camouflaged on the bark of trees.

Sometimes we discovered the remains of abandoned farmhouses. These were easy to spot because of the orange tiger lilies blooming nearby. Years ago, some farm woman, hungry for beauty, had planted them. Nearby we might find rusted parts of old farm machinery, loose bricks, maybe even an antique china doll's head, pitted with years of grime.

Once in a woods I stumbled upon an abandoned house site. All that remained was a square pit filled with weeds. When I jumped down to investigate, I discovered an emaciated raccoon. Although weak, he struggled valiantly to claw at me. I climbed out of the pit and raced to find my parents. They quickly followed me back. Dad explained that the raccoon had fallen into the remains of this cellar and couldn't climb up the steep concrete walls to escape. Because the pit didn't have enough food or water, the 'coon was starving and dehydrated.

We scoured the woods for berries and bugs. We brought him frogs and minnows. We tore the legs off of grasshoppers so he could easily catch and eat them. Ravenous, he devoured everything we offered. When Dad filled his straw hat with water and placed it near him, the raccoon drank it faster than the water could seep out.

The problem then became how to get him out of the pit. Because the scrawny captive didn't realize our motives were pure, he tried to bite us each time we approached. Dad finally carried him out by using folded snake bags. Terrified, the raccoon weakly lumbered off, periodically turning around to snarl at us.

In my search for snakes, I'd run to flat rocks that might be hiding one from the sun's heat. I'd snag the edge of the rock with the hook of my snake stick to pry it up. If it was a small, harmless snake, I'd grab it and stuff it deep down in my snake bag. Then I'd tie a knot at the top of the bag and meander to the next rock.

If the snake was big enough that its bite would hurt, I'd gently place the flat hook of my snake stick on top of its head to pin it down. Then I

would lean over and pinch my fingers tight behind its jaws. Doing this insured that the snake couldn't whip around and bite me when I picked it up. If it was a rattlesnake, I would run and try to find Dad before it slithered away. At the end of the day, we put the animals Dad wanted to keep in the jars of alcohol, where I'd watch them thrash around until they died.

My favorites were hog-nosed snakes. They scare away predators by looking like rattlesnakes. And if their appearance doesn't work, they hiss, making a sound like rattles shaking. If that doesn't work, they poop and roll around until it covers their bodies. If all of those tricks fail, they flip onto their backs, open their mouths and play dead. One thing they will never do is bite. I loved finding them even though they sometimes pooped all over me. They were the best snakes because Dad had no use for them. After playing with them I could set them free.

On one trip when I was seven or eight, Dad skidded the car to a fast stop, yelling, "Two corn snakes on the road ahead!" I assumed he meant for me to get them, so I bolted out of the back seat and tore after them. I grabbed the first one, then hightailed it across the road and got the second. I returned to the car out of breath, a snake dangling from each hand. With two writhing snakes to control, it was a moment before I looked up from the back seat. When I did, I saw that Mom and Dad were both turned around staring at me open mouthed. While chasing down the snakes I had been on automatic, not realizing what an impressive feat I'd accomplished. I spent the entire trip home basking in glory.

Goodnight, Irene

by Kenneth Richardson

Hello Irene, even now,
this very hour,
it is difficult to accept
that you have left us.

Your quick wit silenced.

Your iron resolve,
rusting slowly several years,
had gradually impaired
your heart, your knees,
your eyes, your hearing,
yet not your spirit...

nor your love of family
across the generations,
reaching back for reunion
with your Mother,
taken from you so abruptly,
as you have left us.

Yet, looking forward,
ever forward,
uncomplaining,
and now waiting
in some distant place
as the rest of us gather
to honor and remember
one who moved with grace,
and taught us
patience, patience, patience
and, most of all, love.

Goodnight, Irene, goodnight.

Contributors

Dave Berger was an ad agency research director in Chicago. In 1994 he and Barbara came to Madison, where she is an active piano player, he's had many of his plays produced, and he paddles his kayak on Lake Wingra. They baby-sit their twin three-year-old granddaughters in Lodi every Wednesday.

George Faunce spent the first 60 years of his life close to the Jersey shore, riding its waves with joy every summer. Today he prefers to ride the waves at Camp Randall stadium, on cold autumn afternoons with thousands of Badgers by his side.

April Hoffman retired as Madison's Randall Elementary School librarian eleven years ago. She and her husband, John, enjoy viewing art, traveling and socializing. Three of her memoirs were published online by *Madison Magazine* this spring. She thanks the editors of *The Agora* for selecting her essays for publication.

John Hoffman has taken many photography workshops both in the U.S. and abroad. His photos have appeared in a variety of publications and exhibits. This photo is of his granddaughter, Cheyenne Hoffman.

Susan Y. Hoffman, a retired reading specialist, spends time promoting literacy, pretending to be an artist, and gardening—with an eye toward attracting butterflies. Her work in acrylic and oil paints has ranged from abstract art to realistic portraits.

Lorna Kniaz Words are music, swirling in my head, arranging themselves in temp, chords and keys. Set in type, they no longer belong to me. It's too late to change horses and gallop in a different direction. So, words will keep dancing and singing.

Bill Ladewig is a former gandy dancer, Boston College football player, infantry captain, publisher, award-winning writer and retired trial attorney. In 2008 he won the Wisconsin Regional Writers Association Jade Ring. He lives in Spring Green with his wife, award-winning writer Paula Dáil, and their trusty companion Tennessee Ernie Beagle.

Norman Leer is a professor emeritus of English at Roosevelt University in Chicago. He has published three books of poetry and has completed a new collection *All the Colors Happening*. Many of his articles and poems have appeared in journals. In 1990, he received the Illinois Significant Poets Award. Norm also enjoys long walks with his artist wife Grethe and listening to his many CDs.

Ellen Maurer retired from the University of Wisconsin–Madison as senior university relations specialist in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences. She leads PLATO’s morning Reminiscence Writing Group. She and her husband, Ken Pippert, enjoy a little lake cottage in northern Wisconsin where they canoe, hike, bike and geocache.

Gail McCoy creates collages and watercolor paintings. Her work provides a means of introspection as well as being grounded in the powerful and universal experience of nature. She is represented at Grace Chosy Gallery, Madison and High Street Gallery in Mineral Point. She is on the board of Wisconsin Regional Artist Association and a member of Wisconsin Visual Artists.

Mary Morgan remembers that art was an early and persistent interest her family encouraged. She earned a MFA from the UW-Madison. Mary had a long career as an art teacher at many levels. Her other interests include reading, nature and great conversations.

Paula Novotnak is a poet, teacher of creative writing and professional astrologer. In writing “Broom” and “42° North” she used a process she created for her “Writing from Center” classes in which the writer draws five words, unseen and at random, then composes a piece that includes these words.

Dick Radtke’s work has appeared in a number of regional publications including the *Wisconsin Academy Review*, *East of the Web*, *Prime Times* and *Julien’s Journal*. Author of six comic mystery novels and two short story collections, he has earned a number of writing awards, including the Jade Ring Award for fiction.

Rita Hack Rausch has been a high school teacher, dietitian, UW Agriculture Extension Agent and business owner. She has a couple of graduate degrees and lists four pages of continuing education classes (including business and law). A mom of five, she’s been married 46 years to the same man.

Julie Richardson “captured” the stingray while swimming off the Cayman Islands with husband Ken Richardson. She also enjoys capturing the expressions of grandchildren, using photos to create photo essays. In a previous life she was a medical librarian at Hartford Hospital in Connecticut and at Wake Forest School of Medicine, Winston-Salem, NC.

Ken Richardson has written a lot of “stuff” during the past half century—term papers, blue books, news releases, features, annual reports, propaganda, AV scripts, poems, short stories, shopping lists, mortgage checks and Submissions cover sheets for *The Agora*.

Evelyn Rueckert was born in Norfolk, VA. After entering the U.S. State Department’s Foreign Service in 1954 as a code clerk and secretary, she served in Istanbul, Bonn and Washington. Following her marriage, she accompanied her husband to postings in Basel, Edinburgh, Stuttgart, Prague, Leningrad and Antwerp.

Marnie Schulenburg is a Wisconsin native who applied her journalism degree to newspaper/ TV reporting and magazine editing, followed by a career jump into medical device marketing and consulting. She’s written two books, a mystery and a novel about the politics of cancer research.

Wil Selbrede graduated from high school in 1943 and immediately volunteered for the military, serving mostly in the Pacific Theater. He obtained a BS in economics at the UW-Madison. After a career in factory management he retired, bought his first computer and began serious writing—memoirs, essays, poetry, mostly short stories—and the creative beat continues.

Enid Simon grew up on a farm in northern Wisconsin and has lived in the state all of her life. Degrees from UW-Madison resulted in her spending 35-plus years on the staff of the Engineering Library on the Madison campus. “I love to read and write, but the writing takes a lot longer.”

Joanne Lee Storlie summarizes her life as “one long Search for Meaning and Truth.” She spent 20 years as a stay-at-home mom (“a very tough school”) and 14 years each in banking and as a university physics department secretary. Her writings include a Study Guide for the PLATO course she led. Interests include psychology, parapsychology, philosophy and spirituality.

Judith Zukerman, Chicago native and long-time Madison resident has recent work published in *Jewish Women’s Literary Annual* Volume 9, N.Y.C., May 30, 2013, *Midwest Prairie Review*, April 2013, and Wisconsin Poets Calendars 2013 and 2014. She is the author of *Amsterdam Days, a journey through poetry*.

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