



wisconsin  
**writers**  
association

# Creative Wisconsin Magazine

*Develop your craft. Discover resources. Expand your network. Build your audience.*

**September 2023**

## Calendar of Events

**75th  
anniversary**

**WWA Fall  
Conference**  
October 6-7,  
Waukesha

**Critique Groups**  
**Poetry: Sept 5-Nov  
14**  
**Nonfiction:  
Sept 5-Nov 14**  
**Fiction: Sept 7-Nov  
16**  
**Fiction 2.0: Oct 4-  
Nov 8**

*Find info on these and  
other contests and  
conferences on the Events  
and Calendar tabs on the web*

[www.wiwrite.org](http://www.wiwrite.org)



### **In this edition:**

#### **It's the Jade Ring edition!**

Find contest winners, news from our members and friends, our member spotlight on outgoing president Barry Wightman, upcoming conference news, book reviews, and your wonderful, thoughtful, hard work.

*Founded in 1948, the Wisconsin Writers Association is a creative community dedicated to the support of writers and authors. WWA sponsors and hosts year-round workshops and events throughout Wisconsin, offering discounts and exclusive resources.*

*We aim to share experiences and knowledge while encouraging our members in their pursuit of this most noble art.*

*Images in this edition are courtesy of Pixabay.com, Wikkimedia Commons, and the editor. Thank you.*

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## From the Editor

Lisa Lickel



“After years of refusal, I’ve grown a thick skin and attitude of *bring it on*,” TK Sheffield writes in her article on dealing with rejection (see An Encouraging Word).

It might have been my first conference for Wisconsin Regional Writers Association; it was spring, and in Madison. Monette Below-Reinhard was presenting a workshop and I was entranced by her bubbly, enthusiastic personality.

As I read through WWA history, I came across a 2013 newsletter, summer, which featured a column, “On My Mind.” Ten years can be a lifetime in the writing world. Many fads of writing styles, publishing models, even grammar, have changed since then. Monette’s words still resonate: “Take your time. Don’t be so anxious to be published. Don’t be anxious to say ‘I’m an author.’ Be a writer first. Pay your dues. Get some rejections. We at Wisconsin Writers Association are here to help. We’ll hold your hand. We’ll commiserate and say, ‘Yeah, that happened to me, too.’ Trust me, the end product, a good book ready to be published (however you do it) without errors, is worth it.”

In this issue we celebrate the authors who are well into their journey as well as those who write for the love of it; those who entered a prestigious contest maybe for the first time or the twentieth. There’s passion here, strongly voiced opinions, poignancy, vulnerability, our fragility across the pages like so many papercuts. Waiting seems to be a theme; suffering as we watch with loved ones in various stages of coming and going; waiting to find a place to feel comfortable, waiting for opportunity, willing the power to be noticed. We writers can’t be noticed if we never take the plunge of sending that query letter, entering that contest, joining that critique group.

Get rejected a few times, as Kerry and TK tell us in their essay, get up and dust yourself off, work hard at getting better in your craft, then go out and encourage someone else. Those are the principles on which WWA was founded—to encourage expression, appreciation for the arts and culture, and preservation of our lore.

As Barry says, yeah, baby, it’s gonna be great.

## From the new Secretary of WWA



### Greetings to all WWA members

from Fitchburg, Wisconsin, where I live with my three cats and my kitchen garden out back! I have been a member of WWA since 2021 and recently joined the WWA Board in

July 2023 as Secretary. It is my honor to serve in this capacity to support our members in their writing journey. It is my way of giving back to an organization that both inspires and validates my own writing journey and I look forward to being part of yours!

I have personally benefited from the rich array of WWA programs, conferences, and contests that have given me the tools and resources to understand the world of writing beyond the story. The recognition I received with an Honorable Mention for Nonfiction in the Jade Ring Writing Contest in 2021 was one of many opportunities that culminated in the release of my memoir *Crossing Borders: The Search for Dignity in Palestine* in May.

For me, connecting with other writers has been invaluable in sustaining my commitment to the craft. Throughout the pandemic and into the present, I have been meeting with WWA member writers Rebecca Krantz and Karen Milstein on Zoom which has been a motivating force to stay with the story. Writing can be a lonely process, so I encourage you to connect with other writers, listen to each other's stories, and take your writing to the next level.

I also encourage you to explore the rich offerings and incredible network of individuals in the WWA family in the spirit of WWA's motto: *Develop your craft. Discover resources. Expand your network. Build your audience.* I personally am looking forward to celebrating the 75th anniversary of WWA at this year's annual conference October 6-7 in Waukesha marking 75 Years of Success Stories. Wherever you are in your own writing journey, there is no better time than now to share your story. Story is how we connect our humanity across difference and divides. Never underestimate the power of words to change lives!

<https://christabruhn.com/>

## Around Wisconsin



SOUTHEAST WISCONSIN  
**Festival of Books**  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee at Waukesha

**November 3 -4, 2023**

<https://sewibookfest.com/>

### Driftless Writing

Learn more about Connect and Write sessions and First Friday Open Mics



<https://www.driftlesswritingcenter.org/events>

### Untitled Town

Features author events in northeast Wisconsin  
See the full schedule on

<https://www.facebook.com/untitledtown>



Write On, Door County

Discover **Classes and Events**

**Washington Island Literary Fest**

September 21-23

**10th Anniversary Gala: Sharing Our Stories**

October 26, 2023

<https://writeondoortown.org/calendar/>

### Shakerag Alley Center for the Arts

Check the **calendar** for readers events, Pathways to Publication and other workshops.



<https://shakeragalley.org/product-category/adult-workshops/voice-page-ws/>

**Did you know? Jade Ring winners also receive an overnight writer's retreat at Shake Rag alley and a public reading!**

Check the web for the latest workshops <https://herstryblg.com/>

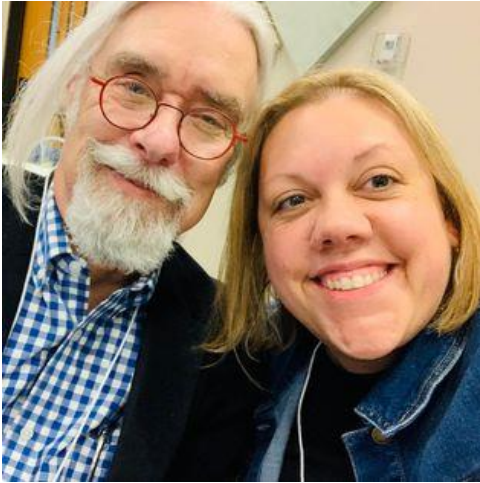


*Editor's Note: please send your news to [submit@wiwrite.org](mailto:submit@wiwrite.org) by February 15 for the next edition of Creative Wisconsin*

## Catch up with Outgoing President Barry Wightman

*And we mean “outgoing” in more ways than one...*

Christy Wopat, Onaslaska, Events Chair



*Barry And Christy, Lakefly, 2022*

### Get to Know Your President: the Infamous Barry Wightman

#### Top 3 Barry Wightman-isms:

- 3) ... (yep, just ellipses – everywhere, all the time)
- 2) Mind-blazing nugget of literary wisdom
- 1) It's gonna be great!

When you first meet our President, Barry Wightman, you won't be surprised that he is a phenomenal writer. You won't be surprised that he's a loving husband and father and grandfather. You won't be surprised that he can command a room just with the boom of his voice.

But there are some things that may surprise you!

Barry is a wannabe rock star. He has played guitar, keyboards, drums, sung harmonies and lead vocals in many a garage and smoky bar. He even has his long hair pulled into a ponytail to prove it. Some of his rather colorful band names over the decades were: Flammable Mouse, the Sugar Bear 5, the Blue Daddies, the Silvertones, the Outta State Plates.

Although he's been writing all his life, his career was in high-end tech. He says, "I worked for Network Systems Corporation in Minneapolis, but I was responsible for Asia. Through big distributors we sold very cool high-end data communications equipment to the largest companies in Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Australia, everywhere else. Pretty glamorous travel." He adds that he spent many days, hours on 747s, during which he read and wrote voraciously.

Besides writing, his passion is music—specifically rock 'n roll. He knows every album title, the cover art, and the hit songs of almost any rock band spanning several decades. He also has a heart for jazz, classical, alt-country, you name it.

Barry earned an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts in 2010. He tells me that "It was a golden age."

I had a chance to sit down with Barry and ask him to tell us a little more about the origins of his love for literature.

**CW:** *Can you pinpoint from where you developed a love for books?*

**BW:** My mom and dad were readers. They read to me, of course, but I noticed that they were always reading and so naturally it rubbed off. My first big writing project was in fourth grade. I wrote a funny story and people liked it. Then I decided then to start a "big" novel—a spy story set in Prague—my dad loved spy novels—so I got through maybe two pages before I stopped, but a love was born.

Oh, and my wonderful Aunt Jane sent me *Huck Finn* for my 11th birthday. That was a big deal.

**CW:** *Which writers would you consider the most influential for you?*

**BW:** Early on, Mark Twain, of course. Then J.D. Salinger, John LeCarré, Graham Greene, George Orwell. There are so many. Anthony Burgess' *Clockwork Orange*, and I love the work of Thomas Pynchon—crazy hipster postmodern stuff. David Foster Wallace. I got into British lit—Hardy, Dickens, Eliot, Joyce, Beckett, then Amis. This was all after



college, of course, all those years on airplanes. Poetry—the Beats, into all that. And always history, loved it, read and still read lots of it. But I truly could go on forever—the work that’s out there is phenomenal, life-changing stuff.



Barry in 2017 at Lakefly – in case we lose him

**CW:** We’ve read your debut novel, *Pepperland*. Can you tell us about your work-in-progress?

**BW:** I’m working on a crazy novel that takes place in Japan, China, Cambridge MA, and Silicon Valley, both past and present. It’s got a big dose of high-tech (ancient and modern) run through a love story and a wave of magical realism—what if inter-generational telepathy worked like WiFi?

**CW:** Maybe you’ll have more time to write now that you’re ending your WWA presidency? (Barry is stepping down this fall after FIVE years of endless hours devoted to our cause!)

**BW:** This is true. Hopefully so. I’ll still be on the board, though.

**CW:** Oh, one more thing, Barry. Who is your favorite WWA volunteer?

**BW:** ... I better not say.

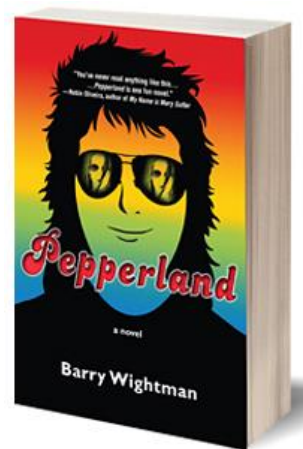
**CW:** Okay, fine. A different final question, then. What advice do you have for writers? Something to keep us going?

**BW:** Writers are readers. Read voraciously, and then read some more. Never give up. Every good sentence you write is a little success story. Dream it. Story, truth, and beauty, baby. You’re gonna be great

*Best wishes, Barry, as you transition from the Presidency. Thanks for all the work and time you’ve put into WWA, and will continue to do! – Ed.*

## Pepperland

Running Meter Press



The recessionary days of 1974. Chicago. Pepper Porter is on his improbable way to rock 'n roll stardom when his long-gone girlfriend reappears. Sooz, a subversively brilliant computer wizard, has come up with the algorithm that will

forever change the direction of computer communications, fuel the birth of the personal computer and the Internet.

Trouble is, she's on the lam from the FBI...

# The Jade Ring

## Writing Contest

### 2023 Jade Ring Report

Thank you again to our judges, contest manager Julia Nusbaum with help from Ken Humphrey.

The Jade Ring Writing Contest opened on March 6 and closed June 2, and 74 WWA members and non-members submitted entries.

Entry Fees in 2023:

Member submission, \$20; with critique, \$40

Non-member submission, \$30; with critique, \$50

Our judges:

Fiction: Christine Desmet

Poetry: Angie Trudell Vasquez

Nonfiction: David McGlynn

A total of 175 WWA member and non-members submitted entries were received, with 59 requests for critiques from our judges.

Fiction: 55 member and 19 non-member submissions were received.

There were 30 requested critiques.

Poetry: 43 members and 12 non-member entries were received. Entries could include up to 3 poems. There were 10 critique requests

Nonfiction: 33 members and 13 nonmember entries were received.

There were 19 critique requests.

*Please note: Due to a vetting error, no first place is awarded this year.*

The 2023 Prizes

*First prize* – Jade Ring plus \$250, or \$250 cash; one-week complementary writing retreat at Shake Rag Alley; publication in Creative Wisconsin Magazine.

*Second prize* - \$200 cash; publication in Creative Wisconsin Magazine.

*Third prize* - \$150 cash; publication in Creative Wisconsin Magazine.

*Honorable mention* (three in each category) – publication in Creative Wisconsin Magazine; one-year membership (or renewal) to WWA.

2023 Categories

*Fiction:* open to short story, flash, standalone novel excerpt, romance, mystery, humor, science fiction, fantasy, etc. Limit: 2,000 words.

*Nonfiction:* open to articles, essays, nostalgia, memoir, humor, self-help, etc. Limit: 2,000 words.

*Poetry:* open to any style or theme. Limit: Up to three poems per entry. No poem may be longer than one page. Pages may be single or double spaced.

The general guidelines have remained similar for the past few years. In 2021 WWA began using an online collector site to automate payments and uploading and sorting submissions. One entry per category per author; formatted in standard submitted in document format, no name could appear on the pages, fiction and nonfiction word counts appear on the page; text only.

*Congratulations to the following 2023 winners  
and placers! Read their entries...enter next year.*



*Jade Ring from 1977*

### Poetry

**First Place:** Susan Huebner, Mukwonago,  
“Variation on a Theme”

**Second Place:** Mary M Brown, Anderson, IN,  
“Another Aubade”

**Third Place:** Yvette Flaten, Eau Claire, “Fade to  
Black”

**Honorable Mentions:**

Tad Phippen Wentz, Port Washington, “At the  
Nursing Home”

Kathleen Van Demark, Kewaskum, “Postcards  
from Death”

Mike J Orlock, Sturgeon Bay, “Morphine-dipped  
Dreams”

### Non-fiction

**First Place:** no first place this year

**Second Place:** Nancy Jesse, Madison, “Waiting  
Room”

**Third Place:** Jeffrey Lewis, Madison, “The Night  
was Dark”

**Honorable Mentions:**

Prasannata Verma, Milwaukee, “Fugitive”

Lisa Poliak, Santa Monica, CA, “The Visible  
Woman”

James Bonilla, Winona, MN, “Learning Grace from  
Mrs. Reed”

### Fiction

**First Place:** Mary Beth Danielson, Waukesha,  
“How Crow Got Out of Jail”

**Second Place:** Bert Kreitlow, Waukesha,  
“Abandoned school”

**Third Place:** Brea Ruddy, Madison, “Shine On,  
My Light”

**Honorable Mentions:**

Robb Grindstaff, Osage Beach, MO, “Error:  
Memory File Corrupted”

Jo Ann Opsahl, Merrill, “Goose Girl”

Elizabeth Feil, Eleva, “Safe Haven”

1961 ANNUAL 1961  
JADE RING CONTEST

sponsored by  
WISCONSIN REGIONAL WRITERS ASSOCIATION, INC.

1. Any Wisconsin resident or WRWA member elsewhere may compete in one or all categories for the cash prizes EXCEPT first prize winners who will not be eligible for five years in their winning category. No person shall be awarded first prize in any one category more than twice.
2. First Prize: \$25.00 plus a Jade Ring — the traditional award established in 1949. Jade for these rings is especially cut by Dr. Ira Baldwin of the University of Wisconsin. Only one ring may go to a contestant at any time.
3. Second Prize: \$15.00.
4. Manuscripts must be original, unpublished material which has not been previously submitted to any WRWA contest; must be typewritten double-spaced on one side only of 8½ x 11" paper. Author must retain a carbon copy in case of loss of original. Do not send carbon copies as entries. All entries by the same author must be submitted at the same time.
5. Author's name and address must appear on upper left corner of first page, name and number on upper right corner of succeeding pages.
6. Contest closes June 1, 1961. Entries will then be sent to the respective judges. The judge is not obligated to make an award if no entry merits a prize in his opinion. When entries are returned from the judges, they will be referred to the editorial staff for possible publication in CREATIVE WISCONSIN which holds first rights as long as manuscripts are in the CW files. Those which include a self-addressed and stamped envelope will be returned.

CATEGORIES

ARTICLE (including biography)  
CREATIVE NON-FICTION (essays)  
SHORT STORY (not less than 1000 words nor more than 5000).  
POETRY  
DRAMA (Stage plays and TV scripts not to exceed one hour.)

MAIL ALL ENTRIES TO CREATIVE WISCONSIN —  
WRWA Contest, Hartland, Wisconsin



# JADE RING POETRY WINNERS AND PLACERS

Third place

## Fade to Black

Yvette Flaten, Eau Claire

First Place

### Variation on a Theme

Susan Huebner, Mukwonago

*Judge's comments: I love this prose poem, such crafted care and love for the characters who inhabit this poem including the young washer woman, just a great poem.*

The Japanese honor the art of Kintsugi, repairing objects that are flawed or broken. The old woman is not Japanese, nor has she heard this philosophy. But she knows the sleeves of her pajamas are attached by the thinnest of threads to the garment. They are her favorite pair, floral pattern, flannel, familiar. Her fingers always find them among the new nightgowns her daughters place in her bureau drawer. Though they understand their young children who cannot sleep without their loveys, they do not understand the old woman who remembers things: how to close a child's winter coat that has lost its buttons; how to fix an errant hem on a daughter's prom dress when needle and thread cannot be found and her escort is at the door.

The girl who picks up the laundry basket of soiled items each Saturday is also not Japanese. The old woman looks forward to the arrival of the blue plastic basket to her door every Monday. She buries her face in the fresh scent of the frayed bath towels stacked on top, and smiles. She knows she will find her pajamas, each sleeve folded with care, each safety pin still doing its job wash after wash, week after week. The girl is not her daughter. But the old woman knows she understands.

---

Susan Martell Huebner lives in Mukwonago, Wisconsin. Her literary novel *She Thought The Door Was Locked* was published by Cawing Crow Press and is available through Amazon. Finishing Line Press published her chapbook *Reality Changes With the Willy Nilly Wind*. See more of her work at [www.susanhuebner.com](http://www.susanhuebner.com)

Taking the dog out before dawn,  
I am stunned to stillness.  
Orion the Hunter is hanging above me  
brilliant in the inky sky.  
*Oh, Mom, I say aloud.*

He was our touchstone, our common  
ground, our locus, the last constellation  
she could see as her eyesight faded.

On clear winter nights, I'd point out Cassiopeia  
or Perseus, but it was Orion, tilting above our heads,  
that she could still find for herself, pointing up  
with her gloved hand.

Two decades later, it's me, now, pleating my brow,  
squinting up at Rigel and Betelgeuse, trying to bring  
them back to their diamond brilliance. Me, now,  
my macula no longer taking in clear imaging.

But this morning, I can see Orion as sharply  
as I could those wintery nights with my mom.  
I call out her name, speak it to the stars above,  
send my words into the frosty air, tiny particles  
of breath ascending.

If she is anywhere, she is there, with The Hunter,  
looking back at me, to see if I remember those  
nights under the communing blackness, our arms  
linked like girlfriends, tête-à-tête, knitted close  
in the crisp night.

*Yes, Mom, I remember.* My words lift on a wisp  
of wind that rises to meet my upturned face.  
The stars of Orion twinkle back a reply, as though  
she hears me. Yes, Mom, I remember, even as my  
own eyes start their fade to black.

---

Yvette Viets Flaten, Eau Claire, WI, writes fiction and poetry. Growing up in an Air Force family gave her the chance to experience the wider world at a very young age, teach her new languages, and appreciate all cultures. She loves reading, cooking, and, and.....wait for it.....travel.



*Second Place*

**Another Aubade**

Mary M Brown, Anderson IN

*Judge Angela Vasquez chose this piece “for its quiet intensity, columns like smoke, form and content, great last image.”*

You are awakened by a sound  
you do not recognize—not thump  
or rustle, nothing like birdsong  
dawn sometimes brings, not  
murmur or cough or whisper,  
nothing human or animal either  
though you sense by its rhythms  
it’s alive. The one lying next  
to you doesn’t hear it at all,  
his hearing aids carefully laid  
on the dresser, sleeps as they  
say like the dead, even as you  
rise, curious now, slip on your  
slippers and pad across your  
bedroom, tilting your head as  
you go.

And suddenly  
you know—not  
what the sound is (you’ll never  
know) but what you must do.  
What you see and smell is so  
much stronger than what you  
heard, any options are smoke  
and mirrors.

To get out and get  
him out are the only things your  
body knows—to call his name  
loud enough to rouse him.

Still, you are  
strangely calm, set on that one  
thing only—to move the both  
of you to the door (though you  
can’t see it through the haze)  
and the outdoor air.

Somehow  
he hears you call, and he too  
knows not to think about what  
you are leaving, what you might  
be losing—the house he built  
himself all those years ago, but  
takes himself matter-of-factly  
through the hall and toward  
the door which you are unlocking,  
both of you starting to cough  
just a little, neither of you saying  
anything at all, not “Oh, God,”  
not “Thank God,”

just walking  
through the door together, you  
in your nightgown and slippers  
holding the purse that you picked  
up from the table by the door, he  
in the pajamas one of the twins  
gave him for Christmas last year,  
feet bare on the dry winter grass.

## Honorable Mentions

### At the Nursing Home

Tad Phippen Wente, Port Washington

*...with appreciation to Dylan Thomas*

*Dennis the Menace* is on all of the televisions  
and all the residents' heads are bowed.

It is like a prayer.

In a line of wheelchairs  
they breathe a common breath,  
backs rise slightly, fall,  
asleep in a dream

of picket fences,  
of neighbor boys, of being that boy,  
that wife in her kitchen,  
that husband in his chair  
in his living room, reading the paper.

It is like a prayer

*because their tongues had forked no lightning  
they do not go gentle into that good night.*

The televisions fill with Robert Young's smile.

*Father Knows Best*

his good son, good daughters.

All the heads are bowed,  
sad to see their children grown  
and absent, unreachable.

A daughter wheels one elder  
to the window and tries to ask  
about the meal  
about the room  
about the sleep.

*Because their tongues had forked no lightning  
they do not go gentle into that good night*

or to the memory of good sons,  
the grandsons.

Good daughter.

Silent heads bow in prayer, in shame,  
in absence.

*Because their tongues had forked no lightning  
they*

*do not go gentle into that good night.*

The televisions dance commercials:  
white dentures, reverse mortgage,  
renew vision, resurrection,  
insurance, assurance,

    pills, the remedies *do not go gentle*

### Postcards from Death

Kathleen Van Demark, Kewaskum

*I get to...*

...watch the changing sky,  
clouds wispy or distinct, piled up  
or pebbled, a constant  
shape-shifting drama  
in sunned ombré blue.

...search for lady's slippers and  
jacks-in-the-pulpit hiding  
on forest floors, watch  
angel-white trillium  
fade and shrivel to  
death-pink.

...watch squirmy tent caterpillars  
strip trees naked, knowing  
that trees recover,  
and caterpillars  
are a gourmet treat  
for woodland beetles,  
bugs and birds.

...study an ancient snapping turtle,  
wrinkled leathery head  
nearly immobile,  
moving with painful  
awkward slowness, finding  
the path to her river home.

---

Kathy Van Demark has re-discovered her love for words and poetry after retiring from a career as a college mental health counselor. Kathy also enjoys creating fiber, bead and mixed media art, watching birds, walking with her dog and cuddling with her cat.

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Tad Phippen Wente, Port Washington, earned a M.A. in Creative Writing/English from UWM and gains motivation from Iowa's Summer Writing Festival. She experiments with poetry, fiction, memoir, hybrid, and is a member of Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets. Tad taught high school English, Journalism, and Creative Writing for 40 years, advised student publications, and helped found Étude High School, where teachers are like artists-in-residence.

Honorable Mention

## Morphine-dipped Dreams

Mike J Orlock, Sturgeon Bay

*She doesn't feel anything, I'm told.*  
It's what we hope happens  
end of journey  
locked in the penultimate moment.  
I watch my mother's eyes flicker  
underneath her closed lids  
while her fingers quiver atop the blankets,  
the sip of morphine-dipped delirium  
blocking the pain of dying  
as she prepares to slip from the edge of life  
into the eternity of sleep.

*She's dreaming, I'm assured.*  
I wonder what, if any, things  
she sees inching closer to the deep:  
Is it like a shadow in water  
that drinks the day remaining  
of all the colors that made her ninety-four years  
a shimmer of motion and delight,  
or is it just a whisper beckoning,  
soft as dusk inhaling light,  
like a purple gown raining round her  
as she wades into new night?

*It won't be long now, I know.*  
The heart will stop.  
The lungs will cease.  
Everything she ever was in this world  
will be left for others to define,  
make sense of, testify throughout time.  
The last things, though, that last  
dream screened within her mind,  
a gift from the sallow streams  
of blood made anodyne,  
is hers to hold to come the dark—  
  
such as a name set in stone,  
such as a flame reduced to spark.

---

Mike Orlock is a retired high school teacher living in Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin. Author of five books of verse, he served as the seventh Poet Laureate of Door County from 2021 to 2023.

## JADE RING WINNERS AND PLACERS IN NONFICTION

*Ed note: Due to a vetting error, there is no first place this year.*

Second Place

### Waiting Room

Nancy Jesse, Madison

*Judge's Comments: A harrowing story about living with leukemia for decades (nearly 40 years in this case). The author of this piece speaks of her and her husband's journey with warmth and insight and compassion – as much for her provider as for her own family.*

*In the middle of life, it happens that death comes to take man's measurements.*

Tomas Tranströmer

In 1984, I spent the biggest holiday of the summer in Chicago at the Hyde Park Holiday Inn, peering through a window as fireworks boomed and blossomed over Lake Michigan. That certainly was not the best viewing area in the city, but I wasn't there to celebrate the Fourth. In fact, I had failed to notice it was Independence Day until I heard the fireworks. I'd been in bed, trying to rest, trying not to worry, after I'd driven back from the University of Chicago Hospital where my husband, Paul, was receiving instructions on how to give himself shots of Interferon, his latest cancer drug.

Three months earlier, we'd learned of Paul's rare leukemia, hairy cell, which is usually an "old man's disease." Paul, in his thirties, had undergone a series of blood tests before elective surgery that revealed not only dangerously low levels of blood-clotting platelets, but too many immature white cells. Our family doctor, Tom Hyzer, suspected leukemia.

Assuming the worst, he performed a bone marrow extraction, a painful procedure that involves pulling out a thread of marrow with a long needle inserted in the back of the hipbone. His diagnosis was confirmed within a few days, and we began that long journey of looking death in the eye instead of sensing it somewhere in the distant, unknowable future.

Hairy cell is a chronic, slow-moving leukemia, not one of the vicious acute leukemias that can mow down children in months. Its name derives from the appearance of immature white blood cells that seem “hairy” under a microscope. These ineffectual hairy cells eventually crowd out mature white blood cells. The production of red blood cells is suppressed as well. This makes the disease stealthy, often asymptomatic, and difficult to diagnose. Paul’s only indicators of a problem were occasional large bruises from getting hit by a squash ball in his weekly matches, fatigue, and night sweats. Hairy cells suppress the immune system making one highly susceptible to infections, and they crowd out the platelets needed to clot blood. In 1984, when Paul was diagnosed, a toxic anti-cancer drug called pentostatin was the prescribed treatment, but it had grim side effects and a low rate of success. Even though the disease is rare, much research has been done on hairy cell leukemia, and today it’s considered treatable if not curable. Paul, a scientist, keeps careful records of the progress of his disease and the latest treatments. In the early days, though, we did not know its plodding nature, and we spent a lot of time in waiting rooms, places that brought out anxiety, fear, hope, and sometimes even laughter.

The closest clinic for hairy cell treatment is at the University of Chicago, a three-hour drive from Madison. During our first visit to the clinic, we waited most of the day to confer with and be examined by the oncologist, Dr. Harvey Golomb. Too nervous to read, we watched people, all of whom had done their share of looking death in the eye. This clinic is held once a month and all the patients have blood diseases, often Sickle Cell Anemia. Blood diseases deplete energy, so it is not unusual to see patients dozing, maybe even hear snoring. One day we watched a middle-aged daughter commandeer a gurney from a hallway, maneuver it into the waiting room and gently guide her mother to the flat surface so she could lie down as she waited for her doctor’s appointment.

As we waited, a kind couple from a suburb of Milwaukee spotted us as newcomers and assured us that this disease was not a typical cancer, that it allowed people to live a full life, that the treatment wasn’t so bad. Then they disappeared and we’ve never seen them again.

And they proved pretty much right. We are in the “waiting room,” but haven’t been “called in” yet. In 1989, we were poignantly reminded of that. When my father-in-law, who has the same name as my husband, died, we asked memorials to be sent to the Hairy Cell Leukemia Foundation. During the next month’s appointment, Harvey Golomb ran out of his office and lifted Paul to his feet. He danced around the room hugging Paul. Then he announced to the startled crowd: “We got all these memorials, and I thought this guy had died!” He suddenly stood still and looked Paul in the eye. “I was so upset because he’d looked so good at his last appointment. It’s like a miracle!”

It may be a miracle. But Paul’s long-term dance with death is also a function of excellent medical care, innovative scientists, and more than a bit of good luck. I did not know this in 1984, but the Interferon served as a mini Independence Day for us. We were given time to live our lives, fulfill some dreams, and give up on others.

We received another reprieve with the arrival of a new chemotherapy. By 1992, it became clear to Paul and Dr. Golomb that interferon would not fulfill its promise as the “cure” for hairy cell. Although Paul never suffered a cold during his eight years of injecting interferon in his thigh three times a week, his blood tests revealed that he wasn’t improving or even holding steady. The blood was again slowly clogging up with hairy cells. It was also wearying for Paul to feel as if he were coming down with the flu every other day, one of the side effects of interferon. As is so often true with cancer treatment, though, a new drug was proving successful in treating hairy cell in clinical trials at Scripps Institute in La Jolla, California.

Its daunting name, 2-chlorodeoxyadenosine, we soon abbreviated to 2CDA. Paul’s blood was still “too good” for him to be included in the trials, but Scripps was willing to share the drug and the protocol for administering it with the University of Wisconsin Hospital, a closer, more familiar setting. In fact, we could walk there. If it worked, we’d be saved Paul’s monthly drive to Chicago, a city that always seems



snarled in rush hour traffic. Even though we'd grown fond of Dr. Golomb and his staff, treatment in Madison was our best option.

In early August of 1992, we checked into the U.W. Hospital at 8:30 a.m. and waited restlessly until the chemotherapy finally arrived at 5 p.m. Paul was whisked away to another room where a nurse threaded a 23-inch-long tube up a vein. Then he was hooked up to the medicine in an IV bag on a metal pole, a contraption he'd be connected to for six days. He stayed in the hospital, where U.W. staff could monitor the effects of the treatment; Paul was only the second person in the state of Wisconsin to receive 2-CDA—once again, one of the first patients to try out a new chemotherapy.

During most of the week-long stay, he felt fine—riding an exercise bike, exploring the labyrinthian hospital, complaining about the food (a faulty blood pressure cuff had relegated him to a salt free diet for his hospital stay). But at the end of the six days, he felt achy and exhausted. His skin was flushed, and he didn't think he was well enough to come home. Dr. Walter Longo, a superb oncologist who had taken over Paul's care, told us 2-CDA kills most blood cells, red as well as white, so Paul's feeling terrible was a sign it was working. He reminded us that Paul's bone marrow was so flaky, so diseased, that it might take two doses to work for him. Because of the temporary depletion of his immune system, it was best for him to try to recuperate at home. But if he ran a fever of 101 or higher, he needed to check into the hospital, into the sterile ward with the bone marrow transplant patients.

The next week was the worst of Paul's life. Everything ached: muscles, bones, head. He felt nauseated and, at times, ran a fever of 101. We resisted returning to the hospital; Paul couldn't face the idea of a trip by car or ambulance. A week later he developed an eye infection and sore throat. I was so frightened I felt like a string ready to break. After a week, Paul returned to the hospital, on the sterile ward with the bone marrow transplant patients. For two days, I watched over him, fearing the worst. But then, he rallied, even one day going for a long walk on one of our favorite paths along Lake Mendota next to the hospital. His blood counts crept up. His sore throat turned into laryngitis. His normal color returned. By midweek, he came home. By the end of September, he

re-started his normal, healthy life: working, hanging out with friends, gardening, even traveling. Our two cats, Fred and Fiona, exiled to the basement during treatment, returned to our upstairs lives.

By the time the second treatment was necessary, seven years later, the U.W. had perfected its 2-CDA treatment; I was even allowed to watch as a nurse threaded the long tube through a vein while inserting a PICC line, a semi-permanent port. The medicine was in a fanny pack and could be administered at home, with Paul leading a somewhat normal life until the nasty side effects of muscle pain and acute fatigue set in. Anti-viral drugs kept away infection this time—as did the freezing temperatures of winter. To keep Paul safe when I came home from work, I'd immediately change my clothes, take a bath and gargle with hydrogen peroxide. In the evenings and on weekends, we watched *The Jewel* and *the Crown*, escaping to tropical India while we rode out the treatment. The cats were back in the basement. After four weeks, Paul felt well enough to go to the office one day a week and play his first game of squash.

So far, after over twenty years, there's been no third round of treatment. Sometimes I accompany Paul to his six-month check-ups. As usual, we spend a lot of time in the waiting room. A few times we've sat with men in orange jumpsuits and ankle manacles. On one visit I quizzed Dr. Longo about what I perceived as Paul's bad habits. I questioned if Paul should be traveling for work—how healthy is that for a man with leukemia? Dr. Longo calmly reassured me that Paul enjoys travel, and it seems to agree with him. Same response with my question about drinking wine regularly. When I suggested Paul could lose some weight, Dr. Longo replied: "Weight gain in our business is an excellent sign of health." I sighed and gave up any more attempts at a personal improvement plan for Paul.

In 2012, a friend gave me a book containing the collected poems of Swedish Nobel Laureate, Tomas Tranströmer. I found his title, *The Great Enigma*, an excellent description of his opaque and mysterious work. But one poem deeply resonates with me. It's entitled, "Black Postcard."

*In the middle of life, it happens that death comes  
to take man's measurements. The visit  
is forgotten and life goes on. But the suit  
is sewn on the quiet.*

Death visited us in 1984 to take Paul's measurements. Paul was thirty-nine. We haven't, though, forgotten the visit. We have heard the clicking of needles. At times too loudly. But, for now, we've put off that final fitting.

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Nancy Jesse grew up on a dairy farm in northwestern Wisconsin and taught high school English. Now retired, she lives in Madison with her husband, Paul.

### *Third Place*

## **The Night was Dark**

Jeffrey Lewis, Madison

*Judge's Comments: A lovely essay about the author's childhood in Tuskegee, Alabama, and subsequent move to St. Louis, Missouri. The writing here is wonderful: suffused with lush and lyrical detail that evoke the particularities of both time and place.*

The night was dark before it had lights. In my childhood, the dark of night came softly at the end of unhurried days in Tuskegee, Alabama, in the late 1950s and early 1960s. For children, the night extended the day. It was a time to grow our eyes, ears, and other senses needed for nighttime play, and throughout our lives as we made our way through the many dark days of racism and its arbitrary violence.

Tuskegee is located at the edge of fertile Black Belt soils in Macon County, Alabama. I spent my first six years of life there, playing outdoors year-round with other children among the pine, oak, elm, and magnolia trees common to the area. We played on the rims of gullies carved out by erosion and stabilized by large thickets of wild blackberries. There were creeks and hollows and pools of water after heavy rains that served as an unending source of joy and wonder. The creeks, woods, and surrounding farms were as much a part of our neighborhood as the many small houses owned by the Black people who lived here, many the first generation to own their homes.

Born in Tuskegee in August of 1956, my life began just thirty-five miles from where the Black people of Montgomery were nearing the end of a long and arduous boycott of the city's segregated buses. I did

not yet know what adults endured to create the worry-free experience of my early childhood, protecting me and other children from the menace of white racism that worked to stunt our worlds. I would not begin that lesson until I was almost nine, when my childhood world began to collide with the worlds of white people.

But as a young child in Alabama, what I remember is unending play and the exploration of a natural world bounded only by the hours of the day and the adults who called us in for dinner and for sleep. I remember digging into the wet, reddish clay that lined creek beds with brown bare hands and determination, excavating the clay, creating temporary landscapes later reclaimed by streams and rain. I remember how we searched shallow pools of water for tadpoles we ushered into jars to take home where, growing only to have tails with small legs, they perished in makeshift aquariums in our homes. I remember the steep slope of a ravine in deep summer, draped with a thicket of blackberry vines and fat berries, and how we scooted on our bellies along its upper slopes, suffering scratches from the thorny vines to collect plump, sweet berries further down the slope after those nearest the top were gone. I remember where we swung on vines that hung from tall trees in a wooded hollow, vines that carried us in a low arc over dark shallow pools of water formed in the woods after a night of heavy rain. And I remember the time when we dared to clamber over a fence of the small neighborhood farm to climb a lone tree only to spot a bull on the far side of the field. With urgent whispering and a rising fear that if we stayed too long, the bull might wander over to our tree and trap us there, we jumped down shrieking, a mixture of excitement and fear propelling us with all the speed we could muster, scrambling over the fence, our wild imaginations certain the bull was on our tails. Fearing this to be true, we raced blindly through bush and bramble, branches whipping our arms, legs, and faces until we reached the safety of our home where Jean, our patient if somewhat exasperated older cousin, calmed our fears and cared for our wounds. Sweets helped the healing. Our days were filled with delight, wonder and joy. We belonged to the place and to each other. We were never alone.

The night held a pleasure of its own. Outside the soft incandescent glows of lighted houses where

parents do what they do to prepare the house for night, children in our neighborhood would sometimes play. Some nights, after the sun had set and dinner was done, children played hide-n-go-seek. We chose someone to be “it” and they would lean against a tree or lamp post designated “home,” one arm folded at the elbow and their eyes and forehead pressed securely into the arm so that they could not easily peek, listening for the sounds of other children scampering to find safe hiding places while singing the familiar rhyme that served as the countdown to the start of the chase:

*“Last night, night befor’,  
twenty-four robbers at my door,  
I got up t’let ’em in,  
hit me on the head with a rollin’ pin!  
All hid?”*

“No!” came immediate shouts from the few children denied their preferred hiding spaces and scrambling for alternatives, making quick calculations about where the seeker might look first so as to be in position to race home safely. The rhyme began again.

The night was dark, but unevenly so. We used it to disguise our presence, hiding in the shadows of deeper darkness, working hard to still our breath, silence ourselves and make ourselves one with the darkness. But the seeker also belonged to the night. We all learned to concentrate on variations of darkness and the movements it held, the subtle foregrounded shadowy shapes against darker backdrops and a star-filled sky.

Sound became as important as sight, if not more so—a low rustling to our left and we’d freeze our own movements to listen more deeply for the movement of others. We cocked our heads to point an ear in the direction of listening. More stealth movements. Quick feet on gravel. We peered into the direction of our hearing, the fleeting sounds of deft movements fading into a background of silence. Then the tiny snap of a twig stepped on by mistake, a consternated sigh or groan. We sprang into action and the chase was on. We were skilled at our play, and we belonged to each other, to the place, and to the night.

One night after we were called into the lighted house that was my home, a grey jacket beckoned me, my older brother, and two older sisters to draw near. It hung innocently on the back of a chair and had a

pocket that held a bottle filled with something that now held our father, slumped in his chair, his cheek flush against the table, his torso rising and falling with each gentle snore as we watched. Time for another game, the bold dare to try and remove the pocketed bottle while his sleep was still heavy with alcohol. The mix of drink and the odor of sweat from hard work hung in the pungent air around him. We could not forget that though he slept, he was our father and a threat.

We made our plan, speaking with the sharp whispers learned in night play. A difference of opinion raised the volume of our voices and the oldest turned to issue a harsh glare, a sharp look with angered brow, to silence his younger siblings, quelling an excitement perched on the edge of fear. I was chosen, coerced to do the deed. Having received my instructions, I crawled on hands and knees up to the jacket, gingerly reached into the bottom left-hand pocket, and pulled out and held up the flat, smooth, glass bottle, still containing some of the caramel-colored liquid that captured my father and from which he could not yet escape. At that moment, we all froze and stared wide-eyed at one another with a newfound fear; we had no plan for our success. After the hesitation, there were more frantic whispers and gestures that made clear to me my instructions. I carefully returned the bottle to the pocket and crawled back to my siblings, and we withdrew while my father slept on, the mission ending in success and relief.

Not long after that that our mother gathered her five children, packed our clothes, and drove us north to St. Louis to live with our grandparents, leaving our father with his problems behind. Memory of the long drive from Tuskegee to St. Louis is now lost to me, but I have memories of crossing the Mississippi River, fuzzy images etched in shades of black and white. Steel-beamed bridges spanning the wide river carrying cars and trains. Dense clusters of brick and stone buildings, rising up from the waterfront where the river housed barges and large boats that carried freight and people up and down the river. The air was dense, choked with the smoke of trains and industry crowding the city’s riverfront.

In St. Louis, my mother and her five children, our grandparents, my mother’s sister, eighteen years her junior, and our Uncle Lem, who was my great-grandfather’s uncle, lived together for a brief time in a

two-bedroom apartment with an enclosed back porch that served as a bedroom for Uncle Lem. The ten of us, belonging to one another and spanning five generations of my family, lived on the second floor of the four-unit building in a small apartment on Palm Avenue in St. Louis, Missouri. Even there, we belonged to the dark.

It was 1962, and the night in the city still held darkness, free from the invasion of electronic screens or the piercing light of LEDs that now puncture dark of rooms at night. Even the domed cataract, the pollution-generated glow of city lights, had not yet fully formed. In my grandmother's neighborhood, the night still came with darkness. And at night, in small front yards and on porches, in the alleyways behind the two-story four-plex brick buildings that lined the street, and in the narrow gangways between them, we played hide-n-go-seek with other children of the neighborhood. They used the familiar rhymes and songs we had used in Alabama. The senses we developed in Alabama served us well in St. Louis and we soon learned that the children of Palm Avenue could see and hear just as we did. Although we had to learn the ways of this new terrain made of brick, asphalt, and concrete, the night was still welcoming and still our friend.

Eventually, my mother moved us to another part of the city on Etzel Avenue where we lived in a small apartment in which all the rooms were connected in a straight line, from back to front. At the rear of the apartment was a bedroom with a back door that opened onto a grassless, rock-hard dirt courtyard surrounded by the rear sides of other brick apartment buildings and local businesses.

Our mother allowed us to play outside during the day. In the back courtyard we scratched circles into the hard dirt to play marbles or played with small gangs of children on the asphalt playground at Cook Elementary School where I attended second grade. But our relationships with other children changed and now demanded toughness and the ability to fight. The night also changed. At night in our apartment, I was sometimes awakened by the sounds of rats scratching and clawing their way between hollow walls not built to block winter cold. Roaches scampered to find shadows when we turned on kitchen lights. We sometimes found ourselves alone at night when our mother worked late shifts or second jobs and we were

not to go outside. At the end of day, the, gathering twilight that once offered clues to finding friends in play now cautioned that it was time to go inside. The night became a closed space inside our small apartment where worrying adults warned us not to open doors or look outside, afraid what we might see, who might see us, and what might then happen. At night, shadows loomed out of the darkness, sharpening our senses in new ways with apprehension and fear.

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Jeffrey Lewis helps lead a small non-profit organization, Natural Circles of Support, which centers the voices of Black students and collaborates with school communities to create a supportive, successful school climate and culture for African American and other marginalized students. His essays and stories, contrary to pervasive polarizing rhetoric, carry the theme of "common ground."



*Current jade ring*



## Honorable Mentions

### Fugitive

Prasannata Verma, Milwaukee

For most of my life, I've been a fugitive. I haven't been running from the law, a gang, or a wayward family member.

I've been running from myself.

I grew up in the hot, sticky south, where my skin felt like it would melt into a puddle of chocolate ice cream, not far from an area called Frogtown. I'm not sure why it was called that, but it became famous when author Rick Bragg wrote about it. Then, all of a sudden, everyone knew about Frogtown, but that still didn't translate into a mass influx of residents in our sleepy Alabama town.

Of course, I have different memories and different experiences growing up there. I remember the Black lady with pigtails who wandered miles all over town on foot. Once when I was ten, I was standing next to my mom while she was pumping gas in our small station wagon at Young's gas station on the edge of town. All of a sudden, I felt someone tug on my braids. I spun around, and there she was, but she had already walked away from me. She turned and smiled at me as she walked. I'd spot her walking all over town, always on foot, and marveled at her ability to walk so much—and so fast. I also remember the Goat Man in town, but I never ran into him the same way. Eventually, they both disappeared, like ghosts, but I remember.

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I went to public school in rural Alabama, cheering at Friday pep rallies and eating rice and curry at home. Sometimes it felt like a cosmic mix-up, growing up as an Indian girl in the deep south. I didn't realize skin color was an issue until I realized it was an issue for other people. No matter what else I could change, my skin color was unchangeable. There was no skin-bleaching cream that would alter my appearance.

In middle school, one day I was sitting in the bleachers studying for my Spanish quiz. A couple of boys I didn't know were sitting a few rows behind me, and talking about me. They didn't know I could hear their conversation.

"I think she's Black."

"No, she's not Black. I think she's Hawaiian."

"What is she?"

To be honest, I had trouble answering that question myself.

I have always been perplexed when filling out forms that asked for my race. I don't belong in any category on the list. The closest group that fits is usually "Asian/Pacific Islander," and even that is annoying, because Asia is quite diverse. If a person who didn't know me simply looked at the "Asian/Pacific Islander" box checked on any form, they wouldn't know if I was from the Philippines, China, Indonesia, or Korea. Asians are all lumped into one category, one blob, with no distinction made for our unique identities. We don't have a defined country on these forms; we are one mass tied together because of geography.

Sometimes, I wanted to pronounce, "I'm American!" I went through phases when I rebelled against anything Indian, to the point I'd say, "I'm not Indian!" and friends and family would look at me in surprise and amusement, because that's not what my skin color conveyed to them. I felt like I was living in a land of in-between, in a country with no name, a liminal space, not fitting in anywhere.

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When it comes to my name, each week, I say and spell my name for numerous reasons, such as while on the phone for customer service, while meeting new people, or at a coffee shop. While growing up, I was often asked if I had a nickname. I did not, and for years I wondered if I should assign myself one, a short, cute one that everyone in America would know how to spell and pronounce. I desired a name that would arouse no questions about my identity and allow me to hide in a crowd.

Often at a coffee shop, I'll simply give in and call myself something simple, such as "Anna," because it's easier, especially when there is a line of people behind me. Yet there is always the inward struggle. I hear the voice of "traitor" when I use such nicknames from other Asian friends and to be proud of my name, to create awareness, to educate, and to normalize hearing foreign-sounding names. But other times, I'm simply tired, only wanting my coffee, and not draw any more attention to myself.

But there is no name for this in-between place, where I find myself reckoning with what to even call myself.

Even if I changed my name, that's where the matching would end. Like that matching card game I played as a child, where I'd turn over cards to find an exact pair, my life was a matching game of cards that turned up no match, as I couldn't find anyone like me, and kept losing. I felt like an anomaly; an outsider.

Our names are part of our identities, and go together with our selves like peanut butter and jelly, Batman and Robin, fries and ketchup, cereal and milk, light and shadow, joy and sorrow. But I lived in a strange confluence of circumstances where I wanted to run away from my own name.

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My sister and I were the only Indian students in our elementary school. Before school each morning, my mother divided my long hair into two sections, braiding my hair into two braids, weaving a red ribbon through the braids and then tying the braids into two loops, one on each side of my head, just as girls would do in India.

The problem was we weren't in India.

No one else wore their hair in braids like I did in my southern school. When I was in the 6th grade, I wanted to wear my hair down, because I was too old for ribbons and braids, and I wanted to look like everyone else. My hair, however, was not straight like most other Indian women—mine happens to be very naturally curly and hence, very tangly. I didn't know how to tame my naturally curly hair. In India, women used coconut oil on their hair, and I didn't want to be the only girl in school smelling like coconut oil or having oily hair, contributing to an already complex set of problems. I didn't know hair conditioner existed. Other kids called me names, such as "mophead," made fun of my hair, and bullied me. I didn't want to add coconut oil fuel to the fire. In this sense, I participated in the full American experience of middle school drama.

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My small southern school held beauty pageants. From 7th grade onwards, peers voted on each other to be included. Voted? Yes, it was a voted-in-by-peers-beauty-contest. We had a secret ballot system, and the results would be posted in the hallway. I'd nonchalantly saunter over to the posting each year,

review the names on the list, but I already knew the answer.

I felt unattractive—brown wasn't pretty—who chooses to be brown? I knew girls would "lay out" in the sun to get a tan, but they were choosing when they wanted to be brown. I couldn't choose. I imagined my life with blond hair, even seriously considering changing my hair color as a sort of qualitative, anecdotal, unscientific experiment, to compare my life before and after. If only I had the magic keys of blond hair and white skin, I thought I'd have more friends, and better friends, and my life would be easier. I wanted to erase the rejection I had experienced as a brown woman. I wanted to be white.

So I'd watch the pageants, attend as a spectator in the crowd, cheering for a friend or two. But it was years before I cast a vote of belonging for myself and my brown skin.

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For the majority of my childhood, I didn't know anyone like myself, that is, of Indian descent but raised in the U.S. Even today, the Indians I know have grown up in India, coming to the U.S. for college or a job. I know people like me do exist, but I have not had the privilege of growing up close to others who were like me, largely because of geography.

My parents came to the U.S. a few years after the 1965 Immigration Act, when the U.S. changed immigration law and did away with quotas that favored Northern and Western European immigrants. My parents were among the first wave of immigrants to arrive under the new act. Our family started off in New Jersey, and most folks ended up staying there or migrating to large cities and towns. Not many in the Indian Diaspora ended up in the deep south, especially in those days.

As of 2019, Asians comprised approximately 6 percent of the U.S. population, or roughly 20 million people. That number is expected to increase to 9 percent by 2060.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the U.S. is projected to become "minority white" by 2045.<sup>2</sup>

I wonder what it would have been like if I had another friend who looked like me at my school or who lived nearby, a friend who was from India, or at least from Asia, or at least knew what it felt like to be

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p25-1144.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2018/03/14/the-us-will-become-minority-white-in-2045-census-projects>).

different. Who knew the pain of not being white. Who knew and could understand the desire to run away from one's own self.

Young people in 2045 are more likely to have a different experience.

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I moved from Alabama to Milwaukee as an adult, a city that would later be labeled with the distinction of being called "the most segregated city in America." People would ask me, "Wasn't it racist in the South?" But when I would launch into my story of my experience in the South as well as the Midwest, others would share the hierarchical structures between Italian, Polish, German, and other European groups that existed in Milwaukee and how Italians were discriminated against. I heard stories of Western and Northern European struggles of identity formation and belonging. And while I understood these conflicts existed, another difference exists based not on language or culture or class divisions, but on skin color.

We all have stories of belonging and identity formation, and while it is a story still in progress, Milwaukee is the city where I would eventually stop running from myself. Who knew I'd be living in a place named "good land" by the Algonquians and "gathering place by the waters" by the Potawatomi, as it is indeed the place where I gathered myself.

Living most of my life in broken pieces meant I was only bringing slivered parts of me to any one place, which meant no one was seeing the real me, knowing the full me. I wasn't even fully seeing myself, pushing and denying my complete personhood and identity. I was fractured. The poem, "Journey," by Mary Oliver, ends this way:

*and there was a new voice  
which you slowly  
recognized as your own,  
that kept you company  
as you strode deeper and deeper  
into the world,  
determined to do  
the only thing you could do—  
determined to save  
the only life you could save.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Oliver, Mary. "The Journey." *Devotions*, Penguin Random House, 2017, pp. 349-350.)

The process of unbecoming, then becoming, was led by a voice I recognized: my own. I had always been running from her. I could only be complete when I reconciled with this identity I had left behind, the person who was not just part of me, she *was me*.

When you come face to face with your fugitive self, you embrace her, and when you find her, you find yourself. ~~~~~



*Honorable Mention*

## **The Visible Woman**

Lisa Poliak, Santa Monica CA

I'm a single, middle-aged woman living in Los Angeles, the youth-glorifying, celebrity-worshipping, beach-body capital of the United States. More specifically, in Santa Monica, where *Baywatch* was filmed. I'm surrounded by beautiful people with beautiful bodies. The prevailing narrative is that I'm now invisible to men: I've passed my prime and am no longer noticed out in the world.

The media tells me I should Netflix and chill ... alone, a bottle of wine my faithful companion. It seems every show on every streaming service portrays women over forty drinking as their primary form of pleasure. Drinking and, if single, done with men. Pamela Adlon's *Better Things* was one of the best TV shows in recent years, but a prevailing theme was that Adlon's character, Sam Fox, roughly my age, was done with dating, done with sex, done with men. Sam, a working actress, often commented on being invisible to men now that she was middle-aged. According to the narrative, men no longer saw her as sexual, and she accepted, and even embraced, this.

While the choice not to date is valid, it should be

a *choice*, not a societal dictate. I choose not to go gently into that good night of middle-aged celibacy, wine and girls' nights. Not that there's anything wrong with wine and girls' nights—I wholeheartedly enjoy both—but not at the exclusion of still being sexually attractive. In fact, I feel *more* seen by men now than I did when I was in my twenties or thirties, riddled with insecurities and trying to find my place in the world.

A male friend once said to me, "Confidence gets paid and confidence gets laid." Now, pushing fifty, I go into the world with a confidence I lacked when my face was unlined.

I haven't accepted society's message that I'm sexually invisible. I meet men out in the world, not on dating apps. I'm friendly, approachable, and unafraid to initiate a conversation.

Two months ago I adopted a dog, and since then the number of men I'm meeting has multiplied exponentially. A dog is a thousand times better than a dating app.

I named my dog Fofó, which means "cute" in Brazilian Portuguese. I'm studying Portuguese in preparation for a trip to Brazil I've dreamed of for decades. I'm finally going for my fiftieth birthday, solo.

Soon after I adopted Fofó, I took him out for a sunset walk on the beach path. We'd taken just a few steps when this disarmingly handsome man approached us.

"Can I pet your dog?" he asked, crouching to stroke Fofó's soft, golden coat. "What's his name?"

"Fofó," I replied.

"*Ele é muito Fofó,*" he responded in Portuguese, agreeing that Fofó is, indeed, very cute. Then he added, "I'm Brazilian."

He wasn't just incredibly attractive, friendly and a dog lover, he was *Brazilian*, incredibly attractive, friendly and a dog lover.

"Where in Brazil are you from?" I asked, hoping he now lived here. "I'm going in August."

"São Paulo. Where are you going?"

"Bahia. I've wanted to go there for so long. I love the music and culture."

"You will love it. I'm Adriano. What's your name?"

"Lisa," I said, "*Prazer,*" using one of the few Portuguese words I could confidently say.

"*Prazer, Lisa.*"

His smile was so radiant and his energy so warm,

I felt an immediate connection.

We started walking together.

"You're going to Venice?"

"Yes, I'm staying there."

"You're visiting LA?"

"Yes, I'm here for one month. Then I'm going to Hawaii for three weeks."

One month! That wasn't bad.

"You live in São Paulo?"

"No, I live in England. When I was in Brazil, I studied agronomy. Now I work at a winery in England." He gestured to the wine-bottle sized bag he was carrying. "I just came from visiting a winery in Malibu."

There was so much to unpack here. He was an *agronomist* who worked for a *winery*. As a lifetime gardener who takes great pleasure in growing my own vegetables and flowers, and a most-of-my-lifetime wine lover, these were two incredibly attractive attributes.

As we walked and talked, I noticed Adriano was limping slightly. People kept stopping to comment on how cute Fofó is, addressing Adriano and me as though we were a couple, saying things like, "You guys have a great night."

It felt so right, so natural. I told him about how I'd found Fofó after looking for a dog for almost three months and repeatedly seeing other dogs I wanted to adopt, only to get crushed when they fell through. Then Fofó, my dream dog, fell into my lap.

"When it's meant to be, it's easy," I said.

I believed this, yet so many things I wanted were difficult and eluded me.

"I'd like to believe that," he said, and I could see he was on the verge of tearing up.

Adriano told me he'd been through a lot of challenges recently. A bad breakup a year ago, then multiple injuries playing Division III soccer in England. He was currently on medical leave recovering from Achilles surgery.

"Well, you know what they say: nothing worth doing is easy. I think that's true too," I said. I believed this from my own experience, and saying it was easier than telling him about my own challenges.

We watched the sunset together and walked down the boardwalk until it was dark.

"So you'll be in LA for a month?"

"No, I've been here for a month. I'm going to



Hawaii the day after tomorrow.”

My heart sank, even though I knew it was silly.

“Oh, I misunderstood you.”

“But then I’m coming back to LA for another two weeks.”

I asked him about his plans for his last day here and invited him to come see my community garden.

Before we said goodbye, we exchanged numbers and Adriano gave me such a big, long hug, I didn’t want to let go.

We met at noon the next day and he was even more handsome than I remembered, wearing jeans, brown leather work boots, and a gray T-shirt.

We worked in my garden together, then walked back to Venice for lunch. As we headed toward the beach, Adriano stopped to look behind a low wall into someone’s yard, telling me that, walking to the garden, he’d found a baby hummingbird on the ramp in the driveway. He’d put it in this yard and wanted to check on it. He took out his phone and showed me a picture of the tiny hummingbird cupped in his big, tanned hand.

He rescued baby hummingbirds too? There were no words.

We had lunch at Fig Tree Café and sat at a wooden booth in the back corner of the patio, Fofo nestled between us, his head on my leg, his tail on Adriano’s. As we sipped Bloody Marys, I wished I didn’t have to leave for an appointment and that I’d met Adriano when he first got to LA instead of two days before he was leaving. At least he’d be back in three weeks. He told me they’d offered him a job at the winery in Malibu he’d visited the day before.

“But you know how it is when people are drinking wine and they start talking,” he said.

Still, with his career, he could relocate to California and easily find work should he ever want to. I thought but didn’t say this lest I sound overeager.

“Of course, I would have rather moved to California than England when I left Brazil,” he said.

It’s not too late, I thought.

I didn’t want to leave, but I had to. It would take me at least twenty minutes to walk home and another fifteen to drive to my appointment.

When the check came, Adriano paid it. “Go,” he said, “you don’t want to be late.”

I leaned over to hug him and he went in for the kiss, which I wasn’t expecting, and awkwardly got my

cheek instead. I turned my face toward his and our mouths met in a long, exquisite kiss. I had to force myself to pull away or I would never leave. I stood up, taking Fofo with me, but I was so flustered I knocked over a chair at the next table. I picked it up and turned to go when Fofo ran back to Adriano, knocking the same chair over. As I went back for Fofo, Adriano stood up and grabbed me and we started making out, his hand on my low back, my hand on the back of his head. It was perfect.

Finally he pulled away and told me again I had to go or I would be late. I hurried away, this time managing not to knock anything over in the process.

“Have a great time in Hawaii!” I called out.

For three weeks Adriano and I texted. I attempted to write messages in Portuguese to practice. I wasn’t sure what day he was coming back, but when it had been about three weeks, I texted asking him when he was returning.

He responded saying he’d reinjured his Achilles hiking in Maui and wouldn’t be coming back to LA after all. His message ended with “sorry” and an unhappy face.

My heart sank again.

I wrote back saying how sorry I was about his foot, and that he wasn’t coming back to LA. He’d have to come back another time, and now he had someone to host him.

Early the next morning he responded, telling me he was already on his way back to São Paulo.

Adriano and I have stayed in touch, and I hope we’ll see each other again one day, whether in LA, England or Brazil.

Timing *is* everything, but rather than dwell on the disappointment that I met this *maravilhoso* man and only got to spend one perfect day with him, I choose to focus on the fact that pushing fifty, walking my dog in jeans and a hoodie, I attracted a gorgeous, kind, multilingual man who cultivates vineyards professionally and is a great kisser.

I *am* seen. ~~~~~



*Early men's jade ring  
JL Kraft signed the interiors*

### *Honorable Mention*

## **Learning Grace from Mrs. Reed**

James Bonilla, Winona MN

In the summer of 1974, I was forced to leave my study abroad program in England when my eyesight worsened. Born with congenital cataracts, I only had light perception in my left eye and the limited vision in my right eye designated me legally blind. As our semester was drawing to an end, I'd landed a prestigious summer job at an adventure playground. Adventure playgrounds were the cutting edge of the New Adventure Play movement of the 1970s. It was in London's Chelsea neighborhood, a cool hip job in a cool hip place.

Earlier that spring, I'd noticed my eyesight dimming, and then the British Health Services eye specialist confirmed the worst. The cataract in my right eye had thickened dramatically to the point that supervising children would be unwise. My night vision and ability to recognize faces were further diminished to the point that I was reduced to trying to recognize voices before I could make out who people were visually.

Crestfallen, I returned to New York City where I stayed for two weeks with my mother and her new husband, John. Fortunately, Paul, one of my London housemates, had also returned to SUNY Cortland and invited me to live with him that summer before our junior semesters began. Confronting the prospect of a long, hot July and August in New York City with my mother, I immediately took him up on his offer.

Paul was holding down two jobs, one as a lifeguard, and the second working at the Cortland Nursing Home (CNH). The nursing home was hiring orderlies and I was soon riding my bike the five miles to do a night shift as an orderly. My job consisted mainly of assisting folks as they returned from dinner to get ready for bed. Most folks at CNH were in bed by eight, eight thirty at the latest. I was surprised at how little squeamishness I experienced emptying bedpans and helping elderly residents get undressed. Many proved grateful, and since I was the only male in our wing, some of the older ladies seemed to relish my attention. The all-female staff, mainly nurse's aides, were not only welcoming, but flirtatious in an innocent way. Since it was always the same twenty or thirty residents going to their same rooms, I quickly learned to recognize their voices. My playful energy and ability to lift heavier residents more than compensated for my limited eyesight.

After helping folks into bed, we'd turn down our wing's hallway lights and by 9:30 p.m. things would become very quiet. Our LPN was a young woman named Debbie. Over coffee we'd get to talking at the nurse's station and she'd orient me to the various characters who inhabited our wing. Debbie was about five years my senior and resembled Michelle Pfeiffer, minus the glamor.

My most challenging resident was a very old gentleman named George. George came to CNH after he suffered a major stroke that left him partially paralyzed and unable to speak. George rarely got visitors nor did he seem to welcome or like any of the staff. Unfortunately, George routinely became so severely constipated that he required a staff person to help him physically evacuate his bowels. Debbie tutored me in the finer points of the procedure so as not to hurt George, but nevertheless he always became agitated. Since he also resisted letting staff trim his fingernails, his were long and sharp as razors. He seemed to take perverse delight in digging those nails into the arm of whatever unfortunate staff person was assigned to him. Because George inflicted pain he soon became my least favorite resident.

"Damn, George, cut that out!" I'd mutter.

After being left with a bleeding forearm more than once, I developed some understanding into why some staff at other facilities might be accused of elder abuse. Debbie seemed to sense my annoyance. As she

bandaged my bleeding forearm in the coffee lounge, I vented my frustration to her.

Debbie said, "Imagine if you were left with no family to visit you. You can't speak, can't walk, and then on top of that, you suffer the physical pain of being so constipated it impacts your bowels."

There was no one else in the staff lounge at that moment. As I refilled my coffee cup, Debbie continued. "It can't do a lot for a person's dignity to have a stranger sticking a lubricated, gloved finger up your bare butt. I think George's scratching is his way of saying, 'Oh yeah fella, well I'm still alive enough to fight!'"

From that night on I made it a point to apologize to George beforehand, and I'd perform the uncomfortable procedure as quickly and gently as possible. George still scratched me, but I learned not to take it personally.

The resident of CNH I recall most was the elegant Mrs. Reed. She had one of only two private rooms in the entire facility. It was liberally decorated with framed photos of her husband as well as young people from all over the world. Unlike many residents who spent their entire day clad in bathrobes and baggy pajamas, Mrs. Reed always came to dinner wearing a clean blouse, fashionable slacks, and a string of pearls with matching earrings. Mrs. Reed didn't act superior to others, she was just well put together, and always had a kind word for staff.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Reed suffered from rectal cancer which in 1974 was often fatal. Unlike many of the female residents who seemed to relish having a man get them ready for bed, Mrs. Reed preferred a female. "James," she'd say, "a lady has to keep her dignity about her at all times, even if she is dying."

She often stayed up late into the night reading, her bedside lamp being the only illumination in the otherwise darkened room. When I'd notice her light on, and if I wasn't too busy, I'd gently knock on her partially open door to check in on her. I'd pull up a chair and we'd talk. This was a routine she came to appreciate. She'd been a high school teacher and happily married for forty years to a man she adored. The day of his retirement (he'd worked as a truck mechanic his entire life), he came home, walked up to their front door and promptly dropped dead from a massive heart attack.

"I never thought I'd survive that," she said.

Pausing to inhale, she continued, "But I had school and my students and thanks to them, I made it through, one day at a time. I worked well past retirement age, until this damn cancer wouldn't let me."

It was the one and only time I ever heard Mrs. Reed curse. Mrs. Reed had no children of her own, so she seemed to savor stories of my adventures in England and Europe. She'd loved traveling and one of her and her husband's favorite destinations was San Francisco. When I confessed I'd never been there she made me promise I'd go one day. It was mainly due to her enthusiasm that I'd choose San Francisco as my internship site the following summer.

As the fall set in, darkness came earlier and earlier, and riding my bicycle at night became trickier. Once or twice, as I'd pedaled home, the dark road would take an unexpected and unseen turn and I'd end up ass-over-teakettle lying in the bottom of a roadside ditch. Thanks to the resilience of a young man's body, I never suffered more than a scraped knee, elbow and bruised ego. However, I began to wonder if the check from CNH was worth the risk of riding in the darkness, trying not to be run over or breaking my neck.

During this period, Mrs. Reed was suffering a great deal from her worsening cancer. After many weeks, she finally allowed me to help "clean her up" when a bout of diarrhea would come upon her in the middle of the night. Embarrassed, she'd say "Old age can be very hard. I'm sorry to burden you with this." Oddly, taking care of her even under those conditions didn't faze me. "I consider it an honor that you let me be of service," I said. She simply smiled and nodded her head.

As her cancer progressed, her stools became more and more bloody, and her abdominal pain increased exponentially. Her fatigue and pain meds resulted in her often turning in early, and our conversations became fewer and further in between. Even as the cancer spread throughout her body, and despite her suffering, Mrs. Reed continued to dress for dinner until the week of Thanksgiving. By then she could no longer get out of bed, but whenever time allowed, I'd stop in and read short passages to her from whatever book she had on her night table, using my magnifying "coke bottle" glasses.

On a cold winter's night in early December, I clocked in for my night shift and found Debbie crying

softly in the staff room. We were both close to Mrs. Reed and we'd both sensed the end was near. Debbie looked up through her tears to tell me Mrs. Reed died quietly earlier that morning. The rest of our shift passed uneventfully, but one could sense that even the residents with dementia understood something had happened, even if they were unaware that Mrs. Reed had left us.

As our shift ended, it began to snow heavily and Debbie offered me a ride home. She wasn't quite ready to go home herself, she said, so we had tea and Entenmann's coffee cake sitting next to one another at the kitchen table in my student apartment. Married with two children, Debbie lingered over a second cup of tea. I began to wonder if our mutual attraction and shared grief might lead to something unexpected. Gazing at me she finally said, "I better go home. Mrs. Reed would prefer it that way." I was disappointed, but also a bit relieved as we hugged good-night and she left.

My fall semester would end shortly, and after Christmas break, I gave notice and never returned to CNH. But the kindness and grace of Mrs. Reed in the face of death never left me. The following summer of 1975 I began my college internship at San Francisco's Janet Pomeroy Recreation Center for the Handicapped. One night I was sitting with friends at a window booth at the famous Buena Vista Cafe on Fisherman's Wharf. As we watched the sun set over the Golden Gate Bridge, I raised my first-ever glass of Irish coffee and proposed a toast to her memory.

Over the clanging bells of the city's celebrated cable cars, I shouted, "To Mrs. Reed!"

"Who's Mrs. Reed?" one of my puzzled friends asked.

"A classy lady who taught me a whole lot about grace in the face of adversity."

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## JADE RING WINNERS AND PLACERS IN FICTION

*First Place*

### **How Crow Got Out of Jail**

Mary Beth Danielson, Waukesha

*Judge's comments: This entry is perfection in every way from plot to punctuation and took my breath away. Evocative prose deliver the reader into the soul of Crow in his jail and work-release environments. "I am an artist with a forklift," the character says. "I am in my story now." And "This poetry will fight endlessness." The story touches briefly on societal issues, too, such as how money works in the incarceration industry.*

Crow is standing at the third-floor window of the jail, staring through the wire mesh embedded in the glass. He's aware of the men behind him insulting each other casually, playing cards, talking about sports as their voices ricochet off concrete walls and floor. Crow misses prison where days unrolled more purposefully, where nearly everyone had a job, where there was outdoor time. He breathes in, steadies himself. He wills himself to watch the world outside this window.

There is always poetry if one pays attention. Watch whatever moves, no matter how slight or small. Describe it to oneself carefully. This poetry will fight endlessness. This poetry will sometimes build a moment worth being in.

Crow looks down. A burgundy Corvette crawls to the stoplight, stills itself like a jackrabbit hiding in a field. Silver cars converge at the intersection, quiet as coyotes sniffing the rabbit. A woman with brown hair glinting in morning light holds the hand of a child. Maybe she is the native woman walking through the prairie? Sunshine spears shadows on the pavement. The poem of what's outside him fights the longing that is in him, always, to be in someone else's story.

"Hey Crow, come and play D's hand. He's calling his mom."

Crow moves to the steel table bolted to the floor. These men are large, flushed with dull skin and



hungry eyes. They smell of stale clothes, stale food, scant soap. The air holds the rancid tang of steel and concrete embedded with the musk of incarcerated men. He decides that later he will tell himself a poem about what it's like below-decks on a pirate ship.

There were only a few months left of his sentence when they moved Crow from prison, where he had a life of sorts, to this mean and noisy jail. He knows, as inmates know, these last months came courtesy of some hunting or fishing trip of the sheriff, some random state and county politicians. County jail coming up in the red. No problem: transfer end-of-sentence state inmates to the jail, state will pay the inmate rent, voila, county budget solved in time for the next election. None of this is hard to understand, just follow the money. Poor people are the secret highway to money and power for people who already have money and power.

Crow plays the cards handed to him. Someday he will be out. He's thirty-four now. He knows more. Grief for lost time is the hole in which he will plant his life. He turns on the stool to glance out the window once more as a crow flaps past. He smiles. Crows know what's out there. Crows watch. Crows remember.

\*\*\*

A season later:

The last bus back to town arrives one hour and fourteen minutes after the end of Crow's shift at the warehouse. Other workers complain and they are right. If one has a family or another job, waiting so long is stupid. But Crow has none of that so he walks the quarter mile from the warehouse to the service station by the entrance to the expressway. He buys a Mountain Dew and a box of Little Debbie's and sits outside on the curb back where the trucks park.

When the bus finally comes, he climbs on and makes his way to a seat to watch as others from his and other warehouses along the expressway climb on and push towards the back.

Today he notices, as he has noticed before, that the woman from HR who interviewed him for this job is almost the last person on. She grabs a pole because there are no seats. Today he stares at her until he catches her eyes. He smiles then, because she has a nice face and also, because he can summon people with his attention. Secret powers of patient people.

He motions for her to edge through the line of standing people. She looks confused but makes her

way. When she's next to his seat he stands and motions for her to sit.

She starts to protest. "Oh, I'm fine. It's only twenty minutes back to town."

"But the longest twenty minutes of the day, right?"

She smiles at him and slides into the seat he's vacated. The Hispanic woman in the seat by the window watches, chuckles, and says nothing.

Crow talks. "The day you interviewed me you gave me something valuable. I owe you."

She furrows her forehead. "Lordy, those interviews are ten minutes long. What did I give you?"

"You asked if I had a criminal record and I said yeah, I'm a felon. Then you said there are no felons, only people who have made felony mistakes and that's part of their story but not their whole story. That surprised me. You asked me what I am besides a felon."

He continued. "I thought about that a lot. I was in a long time and now I'm out. I like to think about what I am beside a felon. You gave that thought to me and it has helped me."

She watches him as he speaks. He knows she is older than him, her face is written with the stories behind her, also.

She looks at him with curiosity. "So what are you besides a guy with a felony record?"

"Well, I'm a homeless guy who lives in the shelter but I have a job so I have hopes of moving on. I'm an artist with a forklift. I sometimes share my shelter lunch with people who have even less than me. And I'm a poet."

"Really?"

"Yep, want to hear a poem right now?"

"Sure."

"Okay. I learned this from this psychologist lady who taught some classes in prison about ways to have less stress. The trick is to watch what's going on. I'm not the kind of poet who writes things down. I just watch and say what I see until I feel okay and then that's the poem.

"So here goes..." He peers out the grimy bus window.

"The bus window is scratched but out there ten thousand cornstalks stand in the dim evening, shoulder to shoulder, soldiers against the dark. The moon is a low hanging nightlight over tired earth.

Inside this bus light flickers from the candles of people's faces."

He refocuses on her face.

She is quiet as she inclines her head slightly. "I didn't expect something so beautiful. And because you didn't write it down, I was the only one to hear it."

"Yeah. You work till 4:45 and run to the bus, don't you?"

She laughs, startled at the change of topic.

He pulls off his backpack and offers her an oatmeal creme pie.

She eats it.

\*\*\*

After that, each evening he saves a seat for her. The others don't mind; they know her because when they have questions she is helpful. She looks like the kind of person who should be working at a nicer job and have a car. She doesn't quite fit in but she treats them fairly so it's good that Crow is watching out for her a little.

\*\*\*

One Friday night he asks if he can escort her on a hot Saturday morning date to the library with maybe a chocolate milkshake and French fries afterwards? She laughs, "If I had the time and if I was not in the middle of a self-imposed ban on dating, I would say yes. But I have another job and on Saturdays I do it. And I don't date anyone."

"Never?"

"No."

"Can I ask why?"

"Pretty simple, actually. I used to be married and live in California. It wasn't a great marriage but I stuck with it until one day he left me. That's when I learned he had cleaned out my savings and left his bills. We divorced but I got half his debt. I decided I wouldn't date again till they are paid off. So ask me out again in two years."

"Can I just walk you home?"

He likes the wrinkles by her eyes as she smiles gently "No. I appreciate that you save me a seat and I like talking with you but it would be easy for me to lose my focus. I don't want to risk that."

He nodded his head ruefully. "I did eight years behind bars. I guess I know something about focusing on the day you are in."

\*\*\*

Time passed. He rented a studio apartment and began

living in the splendor of his own sleeping bag on his own floor. He found chairs in the alley. He bought groceries and Little Debbie's and a TV that worked fine with the antenna he bought at Goodwill.

He didn't mean to stalk, but the town wasn't that big and a single guy trying to not fall back into addiction or bad company has a lot of time to walk. It was snowing lightly the first evening he saw her, by herself, shoveling a driveway in a neighborhood not far from where he lived. He stopped a moment to watch and think.

"Evening, Wanda. I didn't know you lived so close to my new apartment. This is a nice house. If you have two shovels I would be glad to help."

She stood straight up, surprised to be addressed in the dim evening.

"Crow! Hi! Well, the other shovel is older than this one but I'll get it. Thank you. This is one of my extra jobs. I rent the upstairs apartment here. My landlady gives me credit off my rent each time I shovel or mow."

They finished in less than an hour. Crow admired the rose of her face glowing under her knit hat. "They say it's going to snow all night. Do you need to clear this again in the morning before work?"

She sighed. "Yep."

"I'll be over about five. Leave my shovel against the garage so I can start even if you aren't outside yet."

"Crow, you don't need to do this."

"Wanda, I don't have family. I grew up in Chicago. I never knew my dad other than he told my mom he was a Crow Indian, thus my name. My mom passed while I was in prison. I have some half-brothers but I don't even know where they are these days. I don't mean to pester so if you want me to stay away, I can do that. In the meantime, it feels good to have a person to do things for. I haven't had this is so long. Maybe ever."

She shook her head humorously. "I was determined to gather no people once I left California. But here I am anyways, with a friend."

They shoveled early in the morning and then ran for the bus like teenagers running for school. The day after that was long. When Wanda sat down next to him on the bus that evening, she closed her eyes and fell asleep. Her head leaned towards him so he turned his body to be more sheltering. He didn't put his arm around her because coworkers would see. It would be presumptuous.

## Abandoned School

Bert Kreitlow, Waukesha

*Judge's comments: Perfect execution and emotional heft. This story uses an inventive focus on plants and flowers to bring out our emotions on the last day for a rural Cherokee Strip school closing due to a drought and the refusal of the government to irrigate. On this final day, the teacher asked a student to "hoe the dew."*

*The dew was the only water left for flowers that had been planted and loved by students and the teacher for years.*

*Today, if you park your car at the old Cherokee school grounds and look eastward across the benchland as far as you can see gypsophila has pushed out the native plants and reigns supreme. --Charles C. Kerr, The Omak (Wash.) Chronicle, Sept. 7, 1961*

Mildred Randolph pulled the school's door shut and turned at the top step. A dry wind tugged at her hat. She clutched the wide brim, ran her hands down the chest of her gingham dress and placed them on her hips. As she looked out left to right one last time at the plantings, Mildred mumbled as a sigh. "Heavens."

Along the wrought iron fence at the front of the schoolyard, the daffodils and narcissus were past their early glory. The baby's breath and its dots of bright white were just coming on. The dogwood and rhododendrons have suffered in this cursed dry wind. If only Mildred had known when she and the children planted them that the promised irrigation would never arrive.

The buttercups looked fine. And to think that last month it only rained twice. In April's last two cloudless weeks Mildred arrived at the school with the sun just up while dew had not dried. She would pull the moisture from clumps of native bunchgrass with a hoe on to the buds of the buttercups. Sometimes one of the older pupils came early on their horse, Hinkley Ingram usually, and she asked him to hoe the dew. On this final day for the school the buttercups managed to bloom still, holding their own out there among the more hardy baby's breath and lupine. Buttercups were restrained but defiant, not unlike herself.

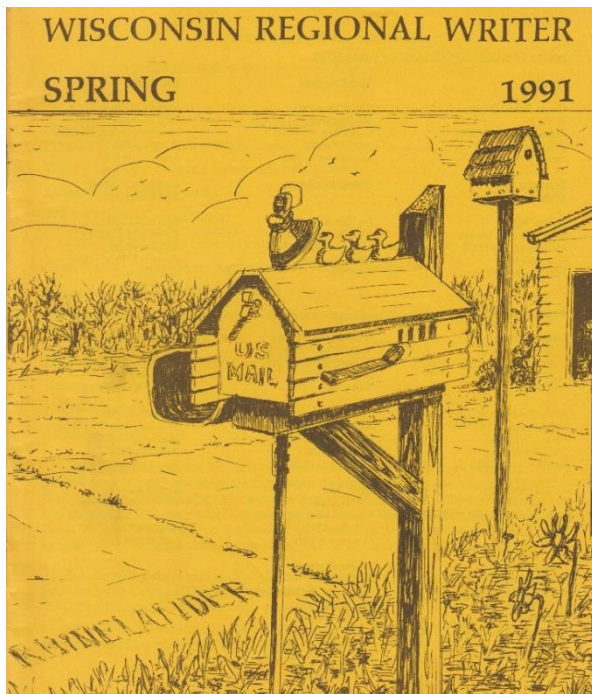
All those school days out here digging and weeding with her dozens of young ones would be no

But he smelled her hair. He felt the woman weight and warmth of her. One of her gloves fell on his knee.

He felt tears behind his eyes. This is all he ever wanted. He wanted to be in his own poem. He breathes in. "I am in this clanking submarine bus, gliding through this watery night, towards town's light. Someday, not yet, but someday I will kiss this woman. I am in my story now and I am also in hers."

For ten years Danielson was a weekly columnist for the *Racine Journal Times*. She continues to look for ways to write about justice, truth, beauty, and humor and because she writes, she finds them all. Her YA novel is *Becoming Esther*, by MB Danielson.

<https://www.marybethdanielson.com/>



*Libbie Nolan created many covers for WRWA featuring mailboxes. Staying in touch pre-internet days often meant waiting for the mail.*

more. Her urge was to take up that hoe kept back by the woodpile and destroy it all.

She lifted her face to the blank blue sky and closed her eyes. Was it all a waste?

Mildred strangled back the impulse to uproot the flowers and hack down the shrubs. It was most certainly a low impulse, fostered by spite, not at all Christian-like. By now she could recognize the source of the anger, a familiar companion in her life and as unwelcome as a taunt. It came over her in dark chapters like this when a promise made came to be betrayed.

Oh no. This was not the first time providence tested her and husband Wyatt. There was the time she destroyed her knee pushing their wagon across a creek only half the way from the last train depot in Coulee City to their new homestead in the Okanogan. Tested again when, after the second stillbirth, her womb went barren. In those days Mildred nurtured the spite and tended to it with bile.

Then, sometime in 1910 when she started teaching two years after the Cherokee Strip school was built, Mildred came to her senses. She was reading one day to them *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner* and looked out at those thirty charges of hers on their benches from six years of age to sixteen. It was if she saw them for the first time. These children were toiling to build a life here just as she was, all the while shouldering the same spiteful gloom of their parents that Mildred knew well and must from then on overcome.

She realized then her spirit, scars and all, was put in that schoolhouse to leaven those of the young ones. She found a verse in Ephesians and copied it down inside the cover of the school Bible. "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamor and evil-speaking be put away from you." So she devoted days after that to time outdoors and to working with plants. The ministrations of soil between fingers put them in the right mind to take better to their letters and numbers.

The children were gone now. Last class and picnic the day prior. From a high of thirty, the number of students had begun to dwindle after families learned last year the water would not come. Nineteen were left to say goodbye. Only half the acres the irrigation district had promised received any water from the new reservoir up in Conconully. The lucky ones were well-off, early settlers on Pogue flat. They were closer

to the diversion at Salmon Creek and their soil was not mere sand.

The betrayal of the reclamation board's promise of water, and thus the loss of Mildred and Wyatt's ranch and the settler children's school, would not tempt her long to sulk. Age had taught her to manage her unruly spirit. Why kill off the plantings? What good would that do?

Mildred came away from the door and walked with a limp along the pineboard front. Behind the border of whitewashed stones along the base of the school the antelope bitterbrush and lupine were holding their own as the June heat approached. Baby's breath stood among them along the border plantings, the forking stems already grown past her crippled knee in the long skirt. Most were tipped only with buds still hugged tight and the size of barley.

It would be a shame if the buds did not blossom. Like the settlers, Baby's Breath came here from somewhere else. Another settler family, the Pendergasts, came from Manitoba and the woman had been named Helen. She carried an assortment of flower seeds in a burlap bag. Once her garden and borders were planted and flourishing at their log home north of Riverside, Mrs. Pendergast had invited Mildred to collect seeds from them.

The bright, pungent-smelling plant at one side of her garden attracted Mildred. Looking from a distance like a rounded puff of fog, this *gypsophila paniculata* as botanists knew it was aptly named for the meager breath of an infant. Nothing special by themselves, the white, modest flowers complemented other blossoms in the schools' assemblage of plants. Helen told Mildred over tea that a congregation of Russian Mennonites had brought baby's breath to Canada. Mildred used that fact with her pupils. The plant with its deep tap root did not require much tending to, but if the children were working outside she often brought them to look upon them and learn from where they came. Mildred would teach there about Russia, its writers, composers, the earlier war with Napoleon and the current war that had recently brought down the Tsar.

Mildred untied her draft horse and mounted the two-wheel cart while lost in thought. Heaven only knows if the students she had tended to would germinate those seeds of knowledge. Neither does a living soul know if these plants will endure in the



midst of the drought and now abandonment. Mildred almost concluded that any hopes for her students' intelligence and character, like the blossoms and greenery planted on this barren flat above the river, was all a waste. But as the obedient Morgan horse started to clomp back to the ranch, Mildred held down her hat with a forearm and reminded herself to weed out from her spirit those sprouts of rancor.

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Bert Kreitlow is a former reporter and history professor. He lives in Waukesha.



*Judge's comments: Set in New York City, this follows the life of a homeless teen, Tara. Light becomes a metaphor for hope, protection, and even fear as the teen closes a cardboard box around her at night to keep out creeps wanting to harm her. Solid storytelling with an important message and excellent writing craft.*

For a moment the glow of the street lamp shining in from the hole in the corner of the box Tara was lying in turned dark.

"Shine on, my light," she whispered. "Shine on."

She tensed instinctively but relaxed as she heard the opening and closing bang of the dumpster lid next to her box. She pulled her backpack that was under her head a bit closer to her body and curled tighter into a ball. Her entire world she had left was in it. Even those things were dubious. Having been robbed at least three times in the eleven months since she had been told she was no longer welcome in her own home. Parental obligation over at sixteen. All because of the diary. The one place Tara thought she could divulge her secrets. Particularly her secret of love. Who she loved. Which made her a sinner. No longer worthy of her parent's name, home, or love. She was rejected in the most colossal and unfair way. By the very humans that created her exactly as she is.

Tara was from a small town in New Jersey. A suburb. With perfectly HOA manicured lawns, proper little girls and boys filing into the church where everyone knows everyone and being different is a sin.

Tara pushed the pain of this betrayal away immediately. Instead, she focused on her physical discomfort. These were easier distractions from the endless cycle of living on the streets. The constant ache of sleeping on cement. The cold which seeped into her, despite the thin sleeping bag someone had gifted to her. Most of all the hunger. It never went away completely. Not even after a meal. A reminder of her shrunken and empty belly always came swiftly back to nag her again soon. Most of these torments found her at night. Fear as well. Bad things happened in the dark. Especially to the most vulnerable of the unseen.

Just now, the street lamp light switched off and the city outside Tara's box comes to life. A cacophony of birds, cars, dogs, and people. When light starts filling up the dark corners, the unseen start to move. Survival depends on it.

Tara crawled out of the box and stretched her sore and cramped body. It was mid-June. Still a bit brisk at night, but warm enough that Tara could find treasured places to rest alone like this discarded box. Even if only until the garbage truck came. She quickly crumpled up the green sleeping bag and stuffed it into the smaller portable bag in her blue backpack. Double-checking that her bag was zipped tight, she pulled it on her back and started out of the alley. She constantly hiked her now too-big jeans as she walked. She was luckier than some. She still had decent tennis shoes. Although her spare pairs of socks had been stolen on the first night out here (socks might as well be gold in this world), she had fought hard to keep her shoes. She wasn't a survivor then. Not yet. Still, she was also lucky to have kept her black hooded sweatshirt and waterproof jacket which she never took off.

Tara's first stop was a public bathroom. Getting harder and harder to find in a post-pandemic world. Some restaurants open 24 hours still let her in. That was her stop today.

"Son of a..." Tara mumbled in the stall all too aware of what it meant to have a uterus no matter which gender you were.

She looked through her backpack. Exactly three pads left. Great. She would need to go to a shelter this week. The only place to get products needed one week a month.

Tara drank from the sink and then using water,

paper towels, and hand soap washed her shaved head and parts that stank the worse. Smell seemed to deter givers more than anything else.

A bang on the door made her jump. She quickly dressed and got out for the next person who she avoided looking at. Equal parts fear and shame. Her constant companions.

Tara had a few different options for food. Today she went a block and a half away from the fast-food restaurant. This was one of Tara's favorite places because it was on the way to work for many New Yorkers. They go here to buy coffee mostly but also for quick bites to eat.

If Tara could summarize New Yorkers in one word it would be moving. Mostly, just very busy people. Always on the move. They file into the huge buildings all around Tara like an ant army. Tara liked it. They are a well-oiled, no-nonsense, on-the-go kind of population. They can be surprisingly kind as well.

Some homeless depend on this charity. They line the street already sitting along the walls waiting to beg for change or food. With cardboard signs and empty food cans. Tara tried it a couple of times, but all it did was make her angry. Since she looked and smelled relatively clean, people mostly just judged or ignored her.

Occasionally she'd find half-eaten bagels, or partially full cups of coffee in the garbages. If she was really lucky someone would notice her. In a charitable way.

New York's kindness today was a woman in a suit that probably cost as much as a car who noticed Tara when she went into a coffee shop. She came out with a tray of drinks and a paper bag which Tara guessed to be full of pastries. Without a word, she handed one of the drinks to Tara.

"Thank you," she said.

The woman just nodded without so much as a smile and almost immediately flagged down a cab getting into it gracefully her loaded tray never moving.

Tara loved New York.

About an hour later, a man approached Tara.

"You hungry, kid?"

Always. She nodded without looking into his face.

He held out a tinfoil-wrapped something. It was warm in her cold hands and smelled like a breakfast burrito.

"Thank you," she said quietly.

He didn't leave, making her fear kick in.

"How long have you been out here?"

She shrugged.

"You can eat that. It's from the burrito place on the corner."

She hesitated a moment longer, but hunger won. She tore it open and took a huge bite. The flavors and spices burst her taste buds warming her further.

"I was homeless once," the man offered.

This caught her attention but in a distant way from the burrito. Nothing was more important than food.

"My parents kicked me out for being gay."

This time Tara stopped chewing mid-bite and studied his face. He had dark skin and eyes and wore expensive-looking clothes and shoes.

"Anyway, there's a group I run. For teens. Kind of a halfway community house to help you get on your feet and off the streets."

He handed her a brochure. An eclectic orange house was on the cover with kids all around the yard smiling at the camera. NYTHP was in capital letters on the top with New York Teen Homeless Project in a sentence below that.

"You can stop in anytime. The address is on the back. It's over on Third Street. Just ask for Nick. That's me."

He walked away then. Tara almost threw it in the garbage immediately. Skeptical was the least of it. The biggest rule on the street was trust no one.

Tara unfolded the brochure. Inside were words meant to draw her in. That much was obvious. Words stood out to her such as "safe," "comfortable" and "food." There was also one page dedicated to the rules, however, which surprised her.

She spent all day reading and rereading the brochure. One question came up again and again. What was the catch?

As the sun began to set, Tara's stomach growled. The burrito was the only thing she had eaten all day. She was given two bottles of water at least. She straggled back to her box alley. On the way, a short round man with an apron almost ran into her.

"Sorry," she muttered.

He tossed a paper bag in the garbage and shuffled to a back door.

She grabbed it quickly unzipped her backpack and shoved it in looking around for others that would

smell it as well.

Almost running now, she got back to her alley. Her box was still there. She practically dove into it and put it into position, the open side against the wall.

She opened her backpack and ripped out the bag. Opening it heaven reached her sense of smell and her mouth watered. There was just enough light to see three burger patties, a handful of lettuce, tomato, and onion slices. She quickly assembled a triple burger using the lettuce as bread and added as many onions and tomato slices as she could. She hadn't had such a fine meal in weeks. Maybe months. After a few bites, she burst into tears. Of gratefulness, exhaustion, and self-pity.

She ate only half of her feast. Then ate an extra couple of tomato slices for dessert before carefully wrapping the rest up in her backpack for breakfast. She licked her fingers clean and settled into a sleeping position hugging her backpack instead of laying on it so as not to damage the bag of heaven inside.

Tara cried again. But quiet tears. She thought about the brochure and wished she had some light to read it all again. She did not. Only the glow of the streetlight dimly lighting up the corner of her box. Like the nightlight in her former room. How her mom said, "Shine on, my light. Shine on," instead of goodnight. It made her smile sadly to think of it.

Tara fell into a troubled sleep.

It took her a full two days before she went to Third Street. She stopped to look at the orange house, but only briefly. The next day she did the same. Only this time two girls came tumbling out of it laughing and holding hands. They were goth. More importantly, they were happy. They noticed Tara across the street. They looked at each other and then crossed to her. She didn't run. Not yet.

"Hey! What's your name, kid?" the taller one asked.

"Tara."

"You coming to NYTHP?"

She used the acronym as a lisp word and both girls laughed making Tara laugh with them. It startled her. It had been so long since she laughed.

"So, you coming in or what?"

Tara shrugged.

"It's okay," the shorter girl said. "It's safe."

She seemed to understand that there were places that were not safe better than the taller girl.

"Come on," the shorter one encouraged her again. "We'll show you around and you can decide if you want to stay or not."

Tara followed them onto an orange porch that would change her life.

Years later, after a hard day's work as a mechanic, Tara came in the door of her and her wife's modest two-bedroom apartment.

They embraced and like most evenings were just happy to be together again after a long busy day.

As Tara was almost falling asleep, she took one more glance at the light in the corner of their bedroom ceiling. She had to dismiss or explain it many times to many partners. But after hearing her story, they never mentioned it again. The streetlight shone through a crack in the window shade now. Not from the corner of a box. Same for the sun. But weirdly, she had missed that light in the corner. Probably because it was the last box she had ever had to sleep in. That light filtering in was a symbol of better things to come. Great things. A great life. Where she could be herself and loved. Not one or the other. A life that gave her opportunities to help others find the same.

"Shine on, my light," she whispered. "Shine on."

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Brea Ruddy started writing at the age of fifteen; a memoir for her twin brother. Currently, she writes dystopian, children's fiction, and nonfiction self-help. Brea has a degree in digital marketing and owns a marketing company helping writers get their start at publishing. She enjoys making things from scratch, crocheting, and loves movies. Brea lives in Wisconsin with her two children, her fiancé, and their two cats.



## Honorable Mentions

### Error: Memory File Corrupted

Robb Grindstaff Osage Beach, MO

*Judge's comments: Fun, with excellent craft and the hard-to-capture thing called "voice," this is about a man organizing 25 years of family photos. We can all relate. The story builds to maybe an obvious ending for some readers, but I wanted to re-read this story because I enjoyed it so much.*

This project has stared at me for years, but now that I'm retired, I have no excuses. All these photos need to be organized into folders by date and location. Give each photo an actual name, like Rome1999-17 and Beijing2002-47. They already have names, of course. Names like IMG4067.

What good is that? Every photo needs a real name. Save them to the cloud and send links to the kids and grandkids. Share the memories.

IMG4067, I christen thee Bangkok2003-1.

I've wanted to do this for years. Never had time. Plus, it's nerve-racking. Open up each picture, figure out where and when it was taken. Then rename it and create a folder.

Should the folders be by country, with subfolders by year? Like a folder for Germany, a subfolder for 2009? Or folders by year, subfolders by country? That might work better. Some years, we went to more than one country. We went to Italy three times over ten years. Maybe all the Italy photos should be in one folder sorted by year.

This is why I've put this off.

There's still those shoeboxes of photos from before digital cameras. China and our first trip to Italy. That's hours of placing a picture on the scanner, punching in the right settings, making adjustments, scanning, naming, and saving. Then move to the next picture.

Maybe I should print them all out and sort them into stacks. Then I'll see how to organize them.

But that would burn up half the Amazon rainforest in paper and my entire 401(k) in printer ink.

That conversation would go well. "Hey kids,

guess what? I've saved all these photos for you. It's your inheritance now since I invested our life savings in cyan and magenta."

My wife on the Eiffel Tower, wind-whipped hair across her face. I love this shot. She hates it. She whined the whole time about the cold. "Why did we have to visit Paris in January?"

We got a great deal in the off-season, that's why. It's the City of Love, and love doesn't care what the temperature is.

Good thing the hair covered her face. She was probably scowling at me. I'd cropped out her hand so I could pretend she was enjoying the brisk air of Gay Paree instead of flipping me the bird.

At least once or twice a year, I announce to Cecily that I'm going to organize the twenty-five years of photos. Every time, she gives me that same scowl. "Yeah, sure you will."

I first made that promise when there were less than a decade's worth of pictures.

But now, I'm doing it. She'll be so proud.

We haven't traveled much the past few years, and I miss it. Well, I miss being somewhere. I do not miss the getting-there part. Get up at the butt-crack of dawn, load the car, haul suitcases through the airport. TSA taking x-ray photos of my wife, naked under her clothes. Stand in line for hours. Take off shoes and belt. Empty pockets. Put it all back on and walk miles to our gate. The moving walkway is always out of order if we're running late. And we're always running late.

CeCe can never be on time.

I like to leave early enough that if we have a flat, I can change the tire and still catch our flight. CeCe is like, "Why are we leaving three hours early when the airport is less than an hour away?"

Because TSA. Because they want you to check in two hours before your flight. The security line might be extra long. We might have a flat.

"How many people are flying to Paris this time of year anyway?" she asked.

"Why do you suddenly have to shave your legs ten minutes time to leave? We're going to France, after all. Your furry legs will fit right in."

There's that finger again.

Okay, I'm doing this. But I should refill my



coffee first. I'll need the energy.

"Hey, CeCe, can you bring me a cup of..." Oh never mind. This tedious work jangles my nerves. A second jolt of caffeine is probably not the best idea.

Maybe a little something to eat. Some biscuits and gravy would help soak up some of the adrenaline already coursing through my veins. I don't suppose...

I'll settle for a Pop-Tart. Trudge to the kitchen cabinet for a delicious pastry. Frosted strawberry. Look around for the microwave or the toaster oven, but she's rearranged the kitchen again, so I just head back to the office to eat them cold.

I should make a list. Write down all the folders I need, then create them. Then I can open each photo, rename it, and drop it into the appropriate container. Now, where'd I leave that legal pad?

"Mia, have you seen my legal pad?"

Oh crap. I hope CeCe didn't hear that. Why did I call her Mia? That makes no sense. Maybe reminiscing through all these photos fired some long dead neuron.

I've always been faithful to CeCe. Always the utmost devotion. But there was that one woman a few years ago, a nurse I think, that I had an inappropriate schoolboy crush on. Never acted on it. Never even considered it. Was ashamed that my stomach flipped every time she flashed that angelic smile. I've always wondered if CeCe noticed. Guilt still eats at me when I think she might have read my mind.

CeCe's voice echoes down the hall, but she isn't talking to me. Probably on the phone.

I'll make a list on a spreadsheet instead.

I completely forgot about this one. Australia. Where was that? Cairns, I think. 2004. We went scuba diving on the Great Barrier Reef then had lunch on the boat with the dive guide. Emilio or something like that. Italian. An Italian in Australia. Small world.

CeCe is so graceful in the water. I'm the klutz lugging fifteen pounds of underwater camera equipment. I always hope to get a good picture of a shark, while praying not to see one. I guess if you're sixty feet below the surface and wearing a wetsuit, no one will notice if you piss yourself.

Should I create a separate folder for all my dive photos? Australia, Thailand, Okinawa. Or do I create subfolders under each country for underwater shots? I'll create dive folders first, decide later if I want to move those folders inside other folders.

Who knew this was going to be so complicated? Maybe I knew. Maybe that's why I put it off so long. But I'm diving in now, so to speak.

Here's a sea turtle. And a moray eel. That boat wreck off the coast of the Philippines. The mast looks like a crucifix swarmed with thousands of these tiny fish—I forget what they're called, but they look electric. Flashing white and silver, turning neon yellow and fluorescent blue when I flip on the strobes for a picture. At a hundred feet deep, all the water above us filters out so much light the colors disappear, and the brilliance fades to black and white.

I remember it like it was yesterday. When was that? Two years ago, maybe? Yeah, I think that's right. 1998.

Now that our kids are older, we need to go again. Get them in the water so they can see it for themselves. They'll both graduate from high school in the next couple of years, then college, move out, get jobs. We should take them diving before they get too busy with their own lives. They're already pretty busy with baseball and volleyball and dance lessons.

Yeah, next summer, we'll take the kids diving. I'll leave the camera behind so I can focus on being with them. Well, I better get pix of them underwater. They'll want those memories documented.

This Pop-Tart is dry. Need some milk or something with it.

"CeCe!" Ah, she's still on the phone. She's right around the corner but can't hear me. Or ignoring me. Guess I'll get it myself.

She's always reorganizing the house, but how can one woman move an entire kitchen? Oh yeah, through this door. No, this is the bathroom. Never mind, a cup of water will do.

These photos always rattle me. So many. Now, where was I? Oh yeah, folders. Foldering. Folding. My clothes on the foot of the bed need to be put

away. CeCe always does the laundry but leaves mine for me to put in the dresser.

CeCe's words are muffled by the time they reach me. Another voice. Is someone here?

I'm being rude, sitting in my office rather than popping out to say hello to whoever stopped by. Maybe one of the neighbor moms has come to pick up our little ones for a play date. I hope they aren't staying here. I'll never get any work done with a bunch of ankle-biters running around.

I should go be social.

In the hallways just outside the office door, CeCe has that familiar smirk on her face. At least she didn't wave her famous finger at me in front of company.

Some neighbor I've never met. Maybe she's new, stopping by to introduce herself. Maybe in her twenties. Filipina, if I had to guess. Head to toe in blue scrubs that accentuate her black hair and eyes. An angelic smile.

I hold out my hand to greet her. "I'm Paul. And you are?"

CeCe jumps in to finish the introductions. "Dad, this is Mia."

CeCe and I call each other Mom and Dad in front of the kids, but it feels a bit awkward at the moment since the kids are at school. Or out playing. Or maybe at football practice and voice lessons.

"Hi, Mia. Welcome to our home."

CeCe and Mia exchange glances, like they're up to something.

"Oh, Mr. Paul, I know who you are," Mia says. "Is there something I can get for you?"

She sure made herself at home. And how does she know me?

"Oh no, just wanted to see who CeCe was talking to. Didn't mean to be rude."

"Oh, Mr. Paul, you're never rude."

Well, I try not to be rude, but this woman is a bit strange.

CeCe asks, "What are you working on in there, Dad?"

I tell her I'm finally organizing the laundry folders.

CeCe can't think of anything to say, which is really out of character for her. She glances at Mary

or Maria or whatever her name is.

"Why you doing that, Mr. Paul?"

"Oh, I've wanted to do this for years. I better get back to it."

"You go on ahead," she says. "I'll come check on you in a bit."

A little perturbing that this stranger wants to come look over my shoulder while I work.

That cup of coffee would hit the spot right now. "CeCe, is there any coffee left?"

"Dad, I'm not..." CeCe looks at the angel in blue again.

The neighbor shakes her head at my wife. They are definitely up to something.

CeCe glances down the hallway, then says she'll check on the coffee.

"He already had one cup," the girl says. "More than that makes him anxious. I'll brew some decaf."

She hasn't even told me her name but she's certainly made herself at home. Maybe CeCe is finally hiring some help around the house. I don't blame her one bit, not with the hours I put in at work, our boy still in diapers, and now a baby girl on the way.

I politely excuse myself.

As I turn back toward the office, CeCe tells the blue angel, "He doesn't remember me. Mom's been gone five years now."

I want to ask CeCe who doesn't remember her, but I don't want to get dragged back into their conversation. Besides, no one ever forgets CeCe.

And I have work to do. Now, where did I put my coffee?

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In addition to a career as a newspaper editor, publisher, and manager, Robb Grindstaff has written fiction most of his life. The newspaper biz has taken him and his family from Phoenix, Arizona, to small towns in North Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin, from seven years in Washington, D.C., to five years in Asia. The variety of places he's lived and visited serve as settings for the characters who invade his head.



*Honorable Mention*

## **Goose Girl**

Jo Ann Opsahl, Merrill

*Judge's comments: Excellent hook and setting! Set in Poland during war or its aftermath, a small girl is placed in a convent, but she's so tiny that the nuns can't figure out what chore to give her. Finally, she's given a stick to guide the geese. This warm-hearted, amusing entry needs editing for minor errors, but this is very fine storytelling.*

As a young girl, I lived in Poland. A chill runs down my spine when I think about the soldiers, although I only saw the soldiers at the depot the day we left Warsaw. Mother's hands trembled when she showed the soldiers our papers.

I try to remember my mother's face, but I'm unable to do so. What I do remember is the red babushka she wore the day she took me on the train. I also remember our neighborhood and small shops, but I never expected what happened the rest of that day.

Mother and I lived above Rozinski's bakery. Mother was sleeping when I smelled the bread baking. I walked down the steps and around to the front door. The sun was shining on Mr. Whiskers. He was sleeping in his window bed. Mr. Rozinski said, "Did you come to say good-bye to Mr. Whiskers?"

I loved Mr. Whiskers. He was my best friend. He purred a song for me when I scratched his neck. His job was to watch for mice at night.

Mr. Rozinski gave me a kolache. He said, "This is

for you to eat on your train ride."

I said, "I'm not going on a train ride."

I walked around the bakery to sit at the bottom of our stairs. I wanted to eat the kolache. Some birds landed on the path so I threw little pieces of the outside crust to them. I ate the middle. That's the best part.

When I went back to our room, Mother was folding my clothes. She said, "You will be moving away. You will not be living with me."

I cried and begged, "Please, I want to stay with you."

No matter what I said, or my promises to be good, Mother put my clothes in a flower sack. She said, "The nuns will take good care of you. Stop your fussing."

Mother and I walked to the depot. We walked fast. She had money for three tickets. I knew I wasn't coming back. Mother sat me next to a window. Soon the city shops and houses were gone. Only the farms and trees were out the window. It was a long ride before the train stopped.

The wind was cold. We walked up the high hill to the gate. Mother pulled the rope and the big bell rang. I saw a lady running, holding her head, and coming to meet us.

Sister Gudiessa listened to my mother say, "I must talk to Mother Superior."

Sister Gudiessa opened the gate, and took us down the walk to a big door. The walls were made of stones, and the hall was cold. I heard girls talking as we passed an open kitchen door. Sister led us to a closed door. Sister knocked, and then she led us to Mother Superior's desk. Mother said, "I have no more money, and I'm looking for a home for my girl. Julie is a good girl. Will you please help me? When I find work, I'll pay."

Mother Superior said, "She is so tiny. The girls here must work. What can she do?"

"She's a good girl. She washes and dries dishes, dusts and makes the bed."

"Our sinks are high. She is too short."

"Please take her. I can't take care of her without money. I'll pay when I find work."

I held my breath, biting my lip. I tried to stop the tears.

Mother Superior rang her bell, and Sister Gudiessa came back.

I was shivering when Sister Gudiessa took my

hand, and I heard Mother Superior say, "Find a bed for this child."

Sister squeezed my hand; put her other hand on my shoulder as we watched Mother walk away.

Mother Superior again said, "Find a bed for this child."

We walked to a large gray room with beds on the two long walls. Light from high windows above one wall was enough to find an unused bed.

"You wait here, and I'll get the bedding."

I sat on the straw mattress and listened to talking out in the hall.

I heard Mother Superior say, "Why did God send this little urchin to us?"

I thought, "What is urchin?"

"She's too small for work around here."

I didn't hear the whispering.

Sister Gudiessa came back with the sheets, pillow and blanket. "Every girl must make her bed. I'll show you how we make our beds. Every girl must also work. You will be our goose girl."

I was tired and hungry. At supper, a big girl helped me get on the table bench. I tried to eat the goose skins, porridge, and cabbage.

After night time prayers, I followed the older girls to find my bed. I covered my head with my pillow, and cried myself to sleep.

A big girl shook my shoulder to wake me. She helped me make my bed.

I dressed, and I followed the big girls to the long, high tables. I tried not to choke on the hulls in the oatmeal.

After breakfast, the girls were called together, and told their work for the day. I was given a long stick. Mother Superior pointed outside and said, "Take the geese to the field. Let them eat bugs and grass. Use your stick to keep them together. If a goose tries to pinch you, hit it with your stick. The bell will tell you to bring the geese back to their pen."

Every day, I put a bread crust in my apron pocket for lunch and led the geese to a field. One day when I walked down a path behind the geese, I found a matchbox. It was made of wood and the middle slid in and out. I took it home and played with it after prayers.

I needed a doll to sleep in the matchbox bed.

I found a piece of yarn and a twig and made a little

doll. I called her Laude. After I took the geese to the field, I pulled the matchbox from my pocket and woke up Laude. Each day we talked and watched the geese together.

I'm a grandma now. I could tell about coming to America, but the story I like to tell is how I became the goose girl.

I still wonder why my mother gave me away. It was a long time ago, and I've forgiven her.

---

Jo Ann Jones Opsahl is a retired elementary and art teacher. For twelve years, after retiring from teaching, she used nostalgia and humor to write a weekly column for *The Merrill Courier*. The column was called "In a Nut Shell."

*Honorable Mention*

## **Safe Haven**

Elizabeth Feil, Eleva

*Judge's comments: This is fast-paced fiction set in Wisconsin on the Interstate near Black River Falls during a snowstorm. Effective setting elements. A woman lawyer on her way to Madison gets a phone call from two young women who need help in dropping off a newborn baby under the "Safe Haven" law. The last page implies a great mystery might be unfolding; a big "uh oh" came to mind. The pages had a few technical errors and a last line that stepped outside the established tone.*

I learned only one thing from the public defender in La Crosse County, Wisconsin, when I took a job in his office after graduating from law school eight years ago. After work hours, don't pick up any call that comes in on your cell phone unless it is a judge or another attorney.

But I was driving through a snowstorm in the dark on my way to Madison on a Friday evening in January, and I couldn't take my eyes off the road to check the caller. So I just touched the screen on the dashboard and picked up the call without taking my eyes off the road.

"Hello." I never offer any information when I pick up a call. I wait to see who it is before I say anything more.



"Hello, is this Callie? I'm looking for Callie Wishart." The young woman's voice shook as though she was shivering uncontrollably.

As quickly as I could, and with my right eye only, I glanced at the display on the dashboard to see if I could tell who was calling me. She was either freezing or terrified.

Skottie Kay. I swerved to stay on the road. It had been eight years since I had dropped Skottie off at Nora's Shelter for Women in Duluth. She'd be twenty-five years old now. Some kinds of math come natural to me.

"This is Callie," I said. "But you're not Skottie Kay." I hadn't seen Skottie in eight years, but I had never let her completely out of my sight.

"No, I'm not. I'm Rosalee. Skottie said I should call you."

I took a deep breath. "How old are you, Rosalee?"

"Skottie said that was the first thing you'd ask. Almost eighteen. She said that's the same age she was when you drove her down to Illinois and then up to Duluth." Her voice wasn't shaking anymore.

The snowflakes were hitting the windshield in a swarm, and they were piling up at the edges of the windshield. I switched the fan to defrost. "So why did Skottie tell you to call me?"

"I had a baby on Wednesday." She spoke slowly, pushing the words out one at a time, even though it was clear she would have preferred to keep them in her mouth. "I want to use the Safe Haven law to give him up, and I want to give him to you." Her voice broke, the last word barely formed.

A car spun into the ditch in front of me, and I began to look for a green sign on the edge of the road that would tell me where the next exit was.

"Wait," I turned the defroster down a notch. "I didn't catch all that. Come again? You want to give your baby to who?"

"To you, Callie Wishart."

"The Safe Haven law does not allow you to give your baby to a specific person. It only allows you to surrender him to the police or a medical professional." I wanted to swallow, but I couldn't get the muscles in my throat to work together, and I couldn't take a hand off the steering wheel to get a drink from my coffee cup. "Why would you give your baby to me? I don't know you."

"I had him at Skottie's house. My family doesn't

even know that I was pregnant, and they don't know where I am. And they can't know. Ever."

Through the car speakers I heard a little snuffle and a whimper. A newborn.

"Ever." Rosalee spoke again. "Because I will kill myself then. But Skottie and me, we thought up this plan, and if it works, I don't have to do that. I can have a life. Quiet. Like everyone else."

Another whimper.

"But for it to work, he has to go to you." She was calm now, and the words flowed.

The exit sign for Camp Douglas was half covered in snow. I put my flashers on and hugged the shoulder.

"Why?" My mind was like the snow, thick and swirling.

"Because Skottie says you want to be a mother, and that you'll be a great one."

I smiled. Over the past eight years, Skottie had apparently not lost sight of me either.

"And because she says we can trust you if you promise there will be no genetic testing," Rosalee said.

"I don't understand. Genetic testing?" I frowned as I pumped the brakes on the exit ramp.

A cry of anguish from Rosalee.

"My baby's father—" She managed to say before she began to cry again. I heard Skottie's voice whispering in the background, soothing but with a steel frame underneath.

I pulled into a gas station parking lot, put the car in park and waited.

When Rosalee spoke again, she sounded exhausted. "My baby's father is someone in my family. That's all I'm going to say about it."

"But no doctor is going to do genetic testing unless something goes terribly wrong with the baby," I said, thinking out loud. "For instance, if sometime down the road the adoptive parents suspect that he had a serious genetic condition."

"Not that kind of genetic testing," Rosalee said. "That's not what I'm afraid of. I mean like 23andMe. What if his new parents want to know his ethnicity or something like that? Then they test him and the company puts the results in a giant database. It's out there forever. And if it is out there, someone might find it."

"The chances of that are really small," I reached for my cold coffee.

"It happens all the time! That's how they find

murderers." Rosalee's voice grew frantic. "Someone gets tested, just for fun, and the next thing you know, their results help the cops find a murderer!"

"Or a rapist," she said, very quietly.

"But, Rosalee, the chances of that are so small—"

"I can't take that chance!" Rosalee cried. "If anyone knew, that would be the end of me. It would be in the news. It would be on social media. That's what I'd be to everyone. I'd be that girl who was raped by her—" She stopped so short, I thought for an instant I had lost the call.

A snowplow went by the gas station, lights flashing.

"There's no secrets anymore," she said. "If this doesn't work, I will kill myself. I will. I already tried once. That's when Skottie and me came up with this plan."

"And how did you come to find Skottie?" I asked.

"She runs the women's shelter in Rice Lake. She let me move into her house, and she sort of told me what you did for her. How you put your career on the line to help her when she was my age."

I finished the last drops of my coffee, cold and bitter. "Skottie should have told you that the Safe Haven law does not allow you to choose who your son goes to."

"But Skottie says you live in a small town. Whitehall, she called it. And that you have lots of friends there. She says there is a hospital there where we could go."

"But the system is such a bureaucracy, no one can make any guarantees. You could tell them your wishes at the hospital, but that doesn't mean they'd be followed."

"I know." Rosalee sighed. "Skottie told me that too. But it gives me the best chance."

"And under Safe Haven, you only have 72 hours to surrender the baby. How many hours are you at now?"

"He was born just after midnight Wednesday morning."

The wipers swept back and forth across the windshield while I did more math. "Then your 72 hours are up at midnight tonight," I said.

"That's right," Rosalee said. "I meant to call you before now. But I just couldn't."

I looked at the display on the dashboard. "It's 5:30 right now, and I'm on my way to Madison, and it

is snowing like crazy. I can turn around right now, but I don't know how long it will take me to get to Whitehall."

"Oh no! I didn't think of that. I didn't think of snow!" Her voice rose. "It's not snowing here in Rice Lake."

I picked up my phone and googled how long it would take to drive from Camp Douglas to Whitehall. An hour and a half without any snow. Three to four hours, I guessed, in a blizzard.

"Callie? Where are you?" Skottie's voice came over the phone, so full of everything that you wanted to stop what you were doing and just listen to it.

"I'm in Camp Douglas. Heading east to the public defenders' convention in Madison. Only it is a blizzard here. The freeway's slowed to a crawl."

"I'm so sorry, Callie. We thought you'd be heading home to Whitehall and we could just meet you at the hospital."

"I'm turning around now." I said. "Let's plan on 9:00 at Tri-County Hospital." I pulled out of the parking lot, turned my flashers back on and headed west on the Interstate.

\*\*\*

Just north of Black River Falls the snowflakes shrank to little pellets and then disappeared altogether. There were just a few flakes of snow on the pavement when I pulled into Tri-County's parking lot at 8:55.

Under one of the parking lot lights, a white pickup truck idled with its headlights on. I parked my SUV next to it.

The headlights of the truck turned off and two women got out. I recognized Skottie right away. Motorcycle jacket and the same pixie haircut under her knit hat, although the blue of her hair was new. Rosalee was a tall, solid girl, with wild shoulder-length hair pulled back in a band. She wore a snorkel jacket and held a bundle in a Green Bay Packers' fleece blanket.

I touched her arm. "Remember, Rosalee, this might not work the way you want it to."

"That's OK. It's my best chance." She gave me a quivering smile, and a tear rolled down her cheek.

I wrapped my fingers around her wrist and stepped in front of her as she tried to walk toward the hospital's emergency entrance.

"I know how important it is to you to keep this secret." I looked into her eyes. "But if you don't tell

someone, how do you know the person who raped you won't do the same thing to someone else?"

She turned to Skottie. They looked at each other without speaking. The wind blew a corner of the Packer blanket up, and I saw dark eyes and a little turned-up nose.

"We know," Rosalee flipped the edge of the blanket back over the baby and tucked it in, "that he will not be doing this to anyone else. You will have to take our word for that."

One corner of Skottie's mouth rose. A fraction of a smile. She wiped the tear from Rosalee's cheek.

I let go of Rosalee's arm, and I walked with them toward the bright lights of the hospital's emergency entrance, pulling up the text of the Safe Haven law on my phone as we walked. I was going to make sure the emergency department staff did not intimidate Rosalee by asking questions that the law said she did not have to answer.

It was true. I wanted a baby. I had wanted one ever since I miscarried my own two years ago. But I wasn't thinking about that. I had a job to do. I would protect Rosalee. If I left the hospital at the end of the night with a baby boy, or if I got to take him home with me tomorrow, then so much the better.

I wondered if the hospital had a vending machine and if it served coffee.

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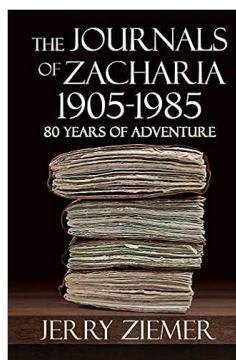
After earning her bachelor's degree in Education from the University of Wisconsin-Madison with a major in English, Elizabeth spent the next almost 40 years working in law, education and running a nonprofit. She's very excited to have just finished writing the novel she began almost 40 years ago and can't wait to start writing her next story.



## Book Shelf Reviews

A benefit of belonging to WWA is that members can request to have their books reviewed by a volunteer reviewer. If you have a book you wish to promote, please email Kathleen (K.M.) Waldvogel at [waldvogelkm@gmail.com](mailto:waldvogelkm@gmail.com) with your request. Although the request is not a guarantee of review, our volunteers try their best to accommodate.

Here is a sample of what some talented WWA members have published.



### ***The Journals of Zacharia 1905-1985***

By [Jerry Ziemer](#)

Reviewed by: [Gloria Johntel](#)

January 19, 2023

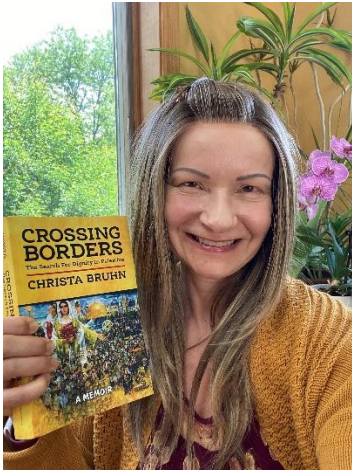
Black Rose Writing,  
253 Pages

***The Journals of Zacharia*** is a book told through journals and letters of the life of Zacharia Zabrinksi, the illegitimate son of a sea captain and a girl from Copper Harbor, a tiny town on the northernmost tip of Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Zacharia has a pretty honest way of looking at life despite the deception that shrouds his first eighteen years, and he is self-aware about the important things, making his story easy to follow and realistic. His story touches on a number of life aspects that are important and relevant to people all over—family, finding purpose, making the most out of bad situations, friendship, and love.

Read the Entire review at

<https://wiwrite.org/book-reviews/13237582>

## Member Books and News



Christa Bruhn with her book, *Crossing Borders: The Search for Dignity in Palestine*, which was released May 20, 2023 with Little Creek Press.

This journey of curiosity opens up a world of celebration and heartache over the ways in which the loss of Palestine has manifested in the lives of Palestinians and Israelis as they grow more and more separate in a land they both call home.

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Check out <https://wiwrite.org/WWA-calendar> For more author events and appearances and to add your event to the calendar.

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**AN EVENING WITH WISCONSIN WRITERS**

Donna Rewolinski: *NOVICE MYSTERY FRANCE*

Joy Ann Ribar: *Deep Dive Harvest*

Kim Suhr: *nothing to lose*

Mary Wimmer: *The Art of the Break*

**lion's tooth.** Thursday Sep 14 2023  
2421 South Kinnickinnic Ave, Milwaukee | LionsToothMKE.com 5:30PM | Free + open to the public

## WWA offers four virtual critique group series for Fall 2023

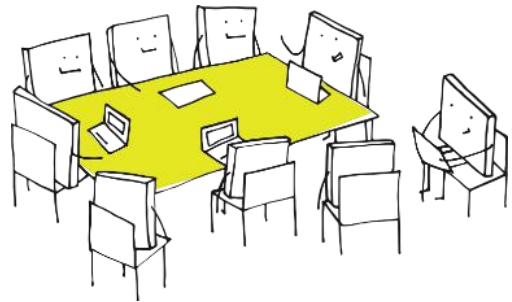
Each series consists of six bi-weekly Zoom sessions that last 1½ to 2 hours. The fee is \$150 for members and \$ for non-members. Check for availability. This is the current schedule:

**Strictly Fiction** with Laurie Scheer Sept-Nov  
Wednesdays 6 p.m. (Sold out)

**Poetry** with Marilyn Taylor Sept-Nov  
Tuesdays 10 a.m.

**Nonfiction** with Laurie Scheer Sept-Nov  
Thursdays 6 p.m.

**Fiction 2.0** with Lisa Lickel, October-November Weekly Wednesdays 10:00 a.m.





## Craft Tips

Kim Suhr



As I write this, student and teachers are in their first days of a new school year. My writing group, on the other hand, has met consistently through summer without hiatus. We aren't even at the beginning of a six-week series but smack-dab in the middle of one, and none of us have set foot in a classroom as students for a long, long time. Still, the room buzzes with the anticipation of a new start.

"I feel a whole new energy," says the poet.

"The days are getting shorter. The change is accelerating," says the short-story writer, not with a tone of wistfulness but of possibility.

It's that fresh-notebooks-new-box-of-crayons kind of feeling, and we're psyched.

I wish I could bottle this excitement. Keep it on the shelf for times when the writer's winter settles in, when our toes are frozen and we can see our breath and getting to the flow of words is like drilling an auger through thirteen inches of ice to drop in a lure to see if anything (anything!) will bite besides frost.

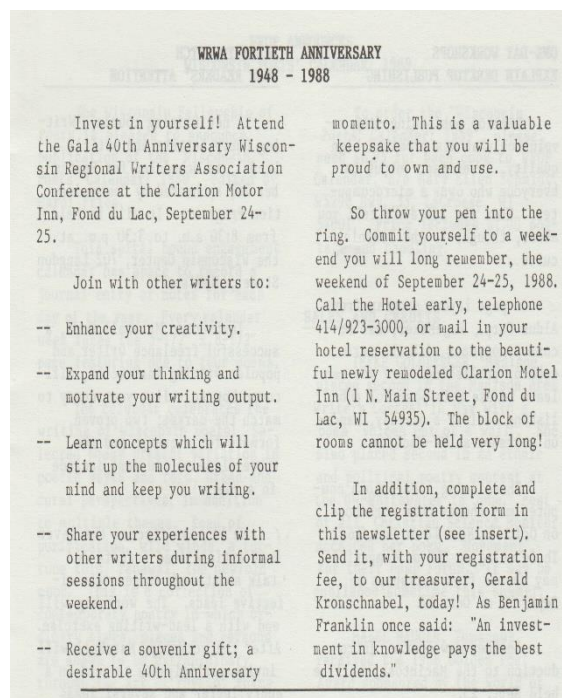
But then I remind myself that the timing of a new school year is as arbitrary as anything else. It could as easily start on January 1<sup>st</sup> or May 8<sup>th</sup> or whatever the day is when I am sitting down to write. Today will be the first time I write a sex scene, a political satire in verse, a story in future tense. Today, I'll take my first stab at unraveling that scribbled-up draft I wrote three days ago. Today, I have my friend, the blank page, and nothing but possibility.

Every day is the first day of something if we remind ourselves it is so.

*Editor's note: Send your prompt response for a future edition of Creative Wisconsin Magazine to [submit@wiwrite.org](mailto:submit@wiwrite.org)*

**Writing Prompt: Brainstorm a list of new beginnings and fresh starts—for you or for a character—and choose one to delve into deeply. Think about not only the sensory details that will make the experience come alive for your reader but also the emotional weight of this "first." What metaphors can you call upon to make the writing sing?**

Kim Suhr is author of *Nothing to Lose* (Cornerstone Press, 2018) and Director of Red Oak Writing, an organization supporting writers at all places on their writing journeys. She teaches Time to Write! a weekly online class, which provides an opportunity to spark creativity and write in community with others near and far. Her next collection of short stories, *Close Call*, is forthcoming in March 2024, also from Cornerstone Press.



## An Encouraging Word

### Rejection, Where is Thy Sting?

*How two Wisconsin authors channel rejection into novel-writing success*

T.K. Sheffield, MA, and Kerri Lukasavitz, MA

**T.K. Sheffield** advises writers not to self-reject after receiving negative news. *Patience and perseverance are keys to success.*

I visited my dentist recently and noticed he offered new treatments: Besides cleanings and cavity repair, my tooth doc offers Botox and fillers. He reasons that dentists are experts in injections, so they easily can do minor cosmetic procedures.

Made sense to me, and then I extrapolated the logic to writers: We're experts in putting words to

*Novelists could command an advice station like Lucy van Pelt's psychiatry booth. In addition to writing tips, authors could offer encouragement in overcoming disappointment.*

page. But, given the many "no, thanks—good luck!" messages we receive, novelists could offer advice à la Lucy van Pelt and her psychiatry booth. Along with writing tips, authors could

offer encouragement to overcome disappointment.

I acquired a master's degree in writing eleven years ago. Since then, I've penned mysteries, romantic comedies, a screenplay, and two children's books. Also, synopses, query letters, loglines, book descriptions, contest entries, sell sheets, and blog posts.

During that time, rejection was a devil on my shoulder. Countless agents, publishers, and contests denied my submissions. Sometimes on the *same* day. In a preemptive strike, preparing for the inevitable, I wrote my obituary and submitted it to the local newspaper. You guessed it: The acquiring editor responded with a cheerful denial. "It's not right for us,

but don't give up. Leave no stone unturned—keep digging for success!"

Okay, that's not true. But my most popular blog post on the Valerie Biel writing blog *was* about authors and writing one's obit. It doesn't count as full-on rejection, but it fits the theme, I think.

I persevere. Like Charlie Brown who optimistically, determinedly stares down the football while Lucy holds it, I believe there are publishers for my novels and readers to enjoy them.

After years of refusal, I've grown a thick skin and attitude of *bring it on*. I recall a story about Prince, the outrageously talented musician from Minneapolis. In 2007, when a producer told him rain would pour during the halftime Super Bowl concert, Prince asked, "Can you make it rain *harder*?"<sup>4</sup>

Talk about overcoming adversity!

Ray Bradbury experienced a "snowstorm" of rejections when he began writing. James Patterson's first book was turned down thirty times. Judy Blume had her share of disappointment. "It's about determination more than anything," she counsels.<sup>5</sup>

Her words struck a chord. *It's about staying positive and perfecting one's craft*. Benjamin Disraeli said the "key to success is constancy to purpose." The quest is as big as the prize, I believe. The improvement in skill while I toiled—without a literary agent, without polished manuscripts, without expertise in plotting and pace—was vital to my writing journey.

I'm a horseback rider. If one wants to learn how, there's no substitute for time in the saddle. It's the same for writing. The time I spent revising, listening, and attending conferences was worth it. *It was another master's degree, a trial by fire*. My manuscripts were rejected—torn apart by experts sometimes—but they deserved it.

I ignored my bruised ego and wrote and struggled until my work improved. I did not self-reject; I did the opposite. I created a personal philosophy and embraced it: *Patience and perseverance equal improvement*.

The novels I write now are sharper and funnier. I

<sup>4</sup> Kazmir, Dr. Munr. "Can You Make It Rain Harder?" *Medium*, 9 Feb. 2021

<sup>5</sup> NPR. "Judy Blume: Often Banned, but Widely Beloved." NPR, 28 Nov. 2011

edit faster. I create outlines with inciting incidents, beats, and twists. I summarize three-hundred-page manuscripts to a single page. I help other writers with loglines and plot development. I couldn't do that at the start of my writing journey, but I can now.

Finally, to quote the brilliant Erma Bombeck: "She who laughs... lasts." After enough rejection, one learns to take it not with a grain of salt—but with a packet of Chuckles candies.<sup>6</sup>

Rejection happens. It will happen tomorrow. And the day after that. And the day after that. My literary agent experiences rejection *on my behalf*. But, aspiring novelist, do not give up. Embrace the journey. Learn from mistakes. Write every day. Adopt a personal philosophy and believe it. Never forget that patience and perseverance equal tremendous, satisfying improvement—and that is the attitude that will boost your writing career.

**Kerri Lukasavitz, MA**, *endured two years of rejection and threw her manuscript in a drawer and ignored it for a year. Then, on a whim, she attended a conference and pitched it to success.*

~~~~~

Like many authors battered by continual rejection of a manuscript, L. M. Montgomery gave up. She placed the worn *Anne of Green Gables* manuscript in a hat box. After it languished in a freezing attic for nearly a year, Maud, as she was known to her familiars, decided to give it one more shot, sending it to Boston publisher L. C. Page ... " —Nava Atlas, from *The Literary Ladies: Guide to the Writing Life*<sup>7</sup>

Imagine pouring your heart into a new manuscript—loving it, tending to it daily, having expectations of the story being well-received once it found its way into the hands of the perfect agent or publisher, and being proud of your completed creation, ready to share it with the world, dreaming of its success. Exciting, isn't it? Now imagine this same manuscript beaten down by two years of rejections despite your best efforts to find a compatible agent. Two years of "It doesn't fit

into our lineup..." Two years of fresh hope each time the manuscript is submitted to a new publisher only to have that hope crushed when it's rejected within fifteen minutes of the submittal, even though they said it could take up to three months to get back to you. Two years of unrelenting rejection after rejection, with a final, peaking moment of five "not for us" in the same afternoon— all received within an hour and a half window. Now how would you feel? Would you keep writing or give up?

*Two years of unrelenting rejection after rejection, with a final, peaking moment of five "not for us" in the same afternoon – all received within an hour and a half window. Now how would you feel? Would you keep writing or give up?*

Like L. M. Montgomery, the author of *Anne of Green Gables*, I gave up submitting work for a year. The paragraph above was my experience with my first, middle-grade novel manuscript—started nearly thirteen years ago, during my second semester in graduate school and completed within a year of graduating. I had such high hopes when I finished it. I was sure it would be picked up right away, which almost happened. I pitched the (unfinished) novel to a Chicago agent at a writing conference shortly after school had ended, and she said they loved children's horse stories. I was to send the first five chapters to her, which I also did. When I didn't hear back from her after the allotted time, I followed up with an email, then another one two weeks later, and the final one three weeks after the second one. I soon learned the "no response" was actually the new rejection. It felt awful. My (finally completed) manuscript and all of the work I had put into it equaled nothing.

After those two years of trying unsuccessfully to land an agent or publisher for my first novel, I was ready to quit. The agency research was relentless. The rejections hurt. I felt bad for the story, so I tossed the flash drive into the shadows of a desk drawer and went on with my life as an interior designer, never wanting to feel the depth of that disappointment

<sup>6</sup> "Forever, Erma: Best-Loved Writing From America's Favorite Humorist," *Open Road Media*, p. 46, 2013

<sup>7</sup> Atlas, Nava. *The Literary Ladies: Guide to the Writing Life*. South Portland, Maine: Sellers Publishing, Inc., 2011.

again.

A year later and on a whim, I attended a writing conference and met a hybrid publisher presenting a breakout session on publishing opportunities. As attendees, we were invited to submit our work if it fell within their publishing perimeters. I hesitated to submit the beat-up manuscript. Did I want to go through yet another possible rejection? It took me over two weeks to decide to submit the work. Within twelve hours, they responded. They said they loved the horse story and wanted to publish it. So began my career as an author, now with writing awards, a growing collection of short- and long-form writings, and a middle-grade horse-book series to show for my efforts at staying the course.

By its very nature, writing (and anything creative) is subjective and open to criticism from qualified and not-so-qualified critics—we all have opinions. Rejections are a part of the journey toward publication no matter who you are. I have former classmates and writing friends who have completed serious bodies of work but refuse to send out any of it because they are afraid of receiving rejections. Instead, they hide behind “It needs more editing, more work, more something...” I would wager the work doesn’t need it. Instead, I would encourage them to gather up courage and submit the work to see what happens. Many famous writers, such as Charles Dickens, Stephen King, J. K. Rowling, E. B. White, and Jane Austen (whose father wrote a letter to submit three of her novels to a publisher only to have his letter returned unopened and unanswered) all suffered from repeated writing rejections. Imagine all of the stories and encouragement they could offer fledgling writers. Rejections will happen to all of us at some point in our careers, even when we are seasoned writers. It comes with the territory.

In *The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*, author Julia Cameron writes: “Like the career of any athlete, an artist’s life will have its injuries. These go with the game. The trick is to

survive them, to learn how to let yourself heal. Just as a player who ignores a sore muscle may tear it further, an artist who buries his pain over losses will ultimately cripple himself into silence.”<sup>8</sup>

Avoid that silence. First, you will want to acknowledge and feel your losses, then build up resilience to future disappointments by moving on. What makes authors famous is their determination to keep going in spite of the setbacks. As I also learned, the work could be edited and resubmitted as many times as it would take until an agent or a publisher said, “Yes, I like this.”

You are a writer with something to say. Make sure it gets read, heard.

Don’t give up because someone said no. Keep submitting the work. And while you are at it, work on something new. Nothing seems to

*Don’t give up because someone said no. Keep submitting the work. And while you are at it, work on something new.*

perk up a writer better than having fresh characters and plots to create or having a nonfiction piece ready to submit to periodicals. You will get over the rejections, so have something new to send out. And, you will eventually find the person who says yes.

*T.K. Sheffield and Kerri Lukasavitz are available for podcasts, interviews, and writer events discussing the art of overcoming rejection. Contact them via their websites (below).*

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T.K. Sheffield writes books for readers who want to laugh and escape. Her debut mystery, *Model Suspect*, will be released in November and earned an RWA Daphne du Maurier honorable mention. TK has BA from UW-Madison, an MA from Mount Mary University, and is represented by The Seymour Agency. Learn more at <https://tksheffieldwriter.com>

Kerri Lukasavitz is the award-winning author of the middle grade Oak Lane Stable Novel Series—books inspired from her lifelong passion for horses. *Ghost Horse at Oak Lane Stable* (Book 4) will be released in October. She has a BFA from MIAD and a MA from Mount Mary University. Learn more at: <http://www.kerrilukasavitz.com>

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<sup>8</sup> Cameron, Julia. *The Artist’s Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*. New York, New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/The Penguin Group, 1992, 2002.



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the  
Date!**

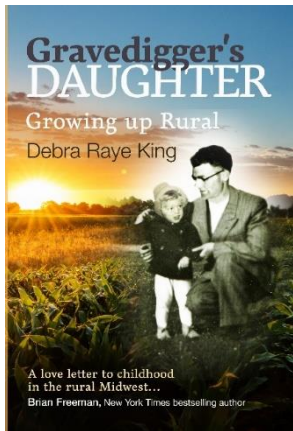


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association

[wiwrite.org](http://wiwrite.org)

## WWA Press

[www.wiwrite.org/WWA-Press](http://www.wiwrite.org/WWA-Press)



### ***Gravedigger's Daughter*** – ***Growing up Rural***

Debra Raye King

Memoir

November 1, 2022

WWA Press

Available in hardcover,  
paperback & ebook

***Gravedigger's Daughter – Growing up Rural*** is a collection of short stories and essays based on actual events in the 1950-1970s in northern west-central Wisconsin. Little Elk Creek is a tightly knit community of Norwegian immigrant farm families who assist one another at harvest time and share their skills so all could succeed.

**Debra Raye King** shares her remembrances from an era when her father was the local gravedigger at the local church cemetery and it wasn't unusual for a daughter to help shovel. Moms were mostly homemakers, dads wage earners, and the children attended Farmers Union Camp, 4H, and the Luther League when not in school or helping with chores.

Experience the grit, heartache, joy, and innocence of growing up rural with these tales of one family farm in Wisconsin.

**We need you!** Reviewers, word of mouth shoutouts, book clubs... ask for electronic copies in exchange for a review. Contact

Lisa, press manager, at

[submit@wiwrite.org](mailto:submit@wiwrite.org)

### ***Red Road Redemption*** ***Country Tales from the*** ***Heart of Wisconsin***

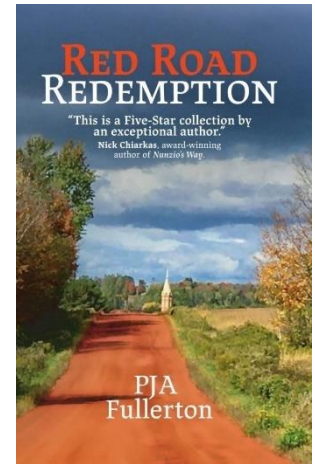
PJA Fullerton

Short story collection

April 25, 2023

WWA Press

Available in hardcover,  
paperback & ebook



The iconic red gravel roads of Marathon County lead past idyllic farms and fields, across tall rolling hills and through forests of majestic white pines and ancient maples.

These stories are about the lives lived beside those roads; roads that may guide you to an Amish harness maker's shop, a local tavern, or a country church and its quiet cemetery. Roads which often lead to unexpected adventures for man and beast; that connect, but can also divide neighbors, and for some, can become rare paths leading to the redemption of dignity and spirit.

**Red Road Redemption** is more than just a captivating collection of short stories. They are tied together with love, humor, and heartbreaking moments that pull the reader in and circles back with a powerful "aha" ending that ties the entire collection together. Throughout, you are in the hands of an extraordinary storyteller. -Nick Chiarkas, award-winning author of *Weepers* and *Nunzio's Way*

**Pamela Fullerton** presents stories set in the heart of rural Wisconsin. These are the tales shared over the paddock fence by older, and much wiser, neighbors. They are funny or tragic stories that both fascinate and precisely capture a way of life that was becoming extinct, even as it was being lived.

### **Coming in June, 2024:**

***My Homecoming Dance*** by Sue Leamy Kies, a memoir of teaching public school in Wisconsin



## **Wisconsin Writers Association Press** **In pursuit of the noble literary art**

The Wisconsin Writers Association Press aids WWA member authors in following through with our organization goals to help writers learn, grow, and publish in the literary field. The Wisconsin Writers Association Press exists specifically for Wisconsin Writers who tell Wisconsin-themed stories and provides a publishing platform currently unavailable to Wisconsin writers.

### **What We Publish**

WWA Press welcomes original material of good quality that celebrates and explores all walks of life and for all ages, be it historical, fictional, nonfiction, lyrical, or speculative. Family friendly, please.

### **Submissions**

In 2023 we are open to non-WWA members. Authors should submit samples of new, original work in English that is complete. The work should be tied to Wisconsin in some way.

*Material published by the WWA Press will not be eligible for the Jade Ring or any other WWA contests.*

### **Fiction**

The Press will consider most genres or literary works. The best lengths for works in fiction is 60,000 - 100,000 words. If you have specific questions about your genre, please ask before submitting. Questions to [submit@wiwrite.org](mailto:submit@wiwrite.org)

### **Nonfiction**

The Press will consider work in all areas that focus on promoting Wisconsin life, culture, history, biography, poetry, essays, or combinations thereof. Full-length work of 40,000 - 80,000 words is preferred. Collections of poetry and essays or children's books will be considered on a case basis.

### **How to Submit**

Authors should submit a one-page cover letter which includes the following information and attach the first 50 pages of your manuscript.

- Author name/pen name
- 200-word author bio (third person)
- How are you involved with WWA?
- Title
- Word count
- Genre
- Audience
- 10 keywords
- 50 word summary
- 450 word sample back cover blurb
- 1000 word complete synopsis
- Sales contacts and promotional ideas (Minimum of 10)
- Endorsers or writers of foreword/afterword ideas and contact information *if applicable*
- Know that you can provide the names and contact information of at least 5 reviewers who can review your book at the time of publication or soon after.
- Previous publications (if any).

Full Guidelines: <http://www.wiwrite.org/WWA-Press>

Ready to submit? Email: [submit@wiwrite.org](mailto:submit@wiwrite.org)

# NOSTALGIA

## Pearls from Nana

Victoria Lynn Smith, Superior

*Dear Nana,*

Remember how you always said, “The early bird gets the worm.” And I would answer back, “I don’t like worms” because I wanted to sleep until noon. I thought you’d like to know that now I rarely sleep past six a.m.

Remember how you always said, “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.” And I would answer back, “I don’t care” because I wanted to watch the late movie on TV. I thought you’d like to know that now I usually fall asleep before ten p.m.

Remember how you always said, “You can win more flies with honey than vinegar” when I was spitting mad and wanted to tell someone off. And I would answer back, “Vinegar is what she deserves” because I desired payback. I thought you’d like to know that now I believe honey is a better tonic.

Remember how you always said, “Turn the other cheek.” And I would answer back, “If I do, someone will just slap the other one” because I was hurt and didn’t want to forgive. I thought you’d like to know that now I try to practice the other-cheek philosophy.

Remember how you always said, “A penny saved is a penny earned.” You were a widow scrapping by on a waitress’s earnings. But I wanted things, so once I badgered you into buying me a troll doll and another time a delivery pizza that you couldn’t afford. I thought you’d like to know I’m sorry, and that fifty years later I still have the doll. And the pizza didn’t taste good that night because I regretted my behavior before it was delivered. Best of all, I became good at saving money. You’d be proud.

Remember how you always said, “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all.” That

was good advice. And I thought you’d like to know that after years of practice, I’ve gotten better. I could be such a wiseass when I was a teenager.

Remember how you always said, “Never trust a man who doesn’t like animals.” I embraced that advice. Some of the men I dated weren’t the best, but they all loved animals. My husband loves dogs. We have two. And he is the best.

Remember how you always said, “Silence speaks volumes.” I didn’t understand what that meant, but I never asked you to explain because I wanted you to think I was smart. I thought you’d like to know that now I get it. But I also know you didn’t mean that I should always be silent because you spoke up when it mattered.

Remember how you always said, “Wear clean underwear every day in case you get in an accident.” I never answered back because it made sense. As I got older, I discovered that piece of wisdom was a great source of comedic mockery. But I thought you’d like to know that it’s still stellar advice. And I bet the mocking comedians change their underwear every day because their mother or nana told them to.

*With love,*

Your granddaughter who is wiser because you always took the time to say . . .

---

Victoria Lynn Smith, a fiction and nonfiction writer, lives in northern Wisconsin. She is a member of Wisconsin Writers Association, Write On, Door County, and Lake Superior Writers.

*Ed. Note: in 1993, Nostalgia was an official, popular category in the annual Jade Ring competition and always had lots of submissions. Nostalgia: yearning for the good old days, remembrance of things longed for, sentimental... Do you have a favorite sentimental story to share? Send it to [submit@wiwrite.org](mailto:submit@wiwrite.org).*



# POETRY

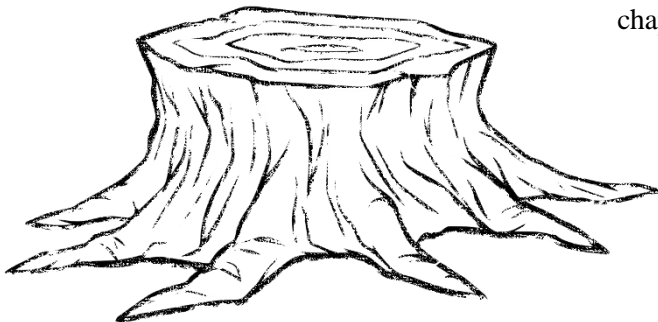
## Goals

Sara Sarna, Oconomowoc

The oak had 153 rings  
by the time we knew  
it couldn't manage another.  
Take it down before it falls.  
Reasonable. Sad.  
I hope they leave the stump,  
a way the tree can say,  
"I was here.  
This is where I stood  
as your generations came and went.  
Part of me will always remain,  
even after what you see  
crumbles. I was here."  
I dream of deserving  
to say the same thing,  
dream of it mattering.  
I was here.

---

Sara Sarna is a poet and actor in southeastern Wisconsin. Her work has appeared in print and online and has been heard from radio and stage. She is a member of WWA and WFOP.



## Hearthstone; or, When Hestia Burned out in Appleton

Emily Bowles, Appleton

Here it is  
a Museum, a place full of  
  
Electricity,  
a power—beyond me,  
  
alighting. &  
little alters everywhere...  
  
little altars, I mean,  
sparkling with  
  
such burning that  
incenses me:  
  
flick the switch and see how Little  
alters everything.

---

*On September 30, 1882, Hearthstone House in Appleton, WI became the first residence in the US powered by a centrally located hydroelectric station using the Edison system.*

---

Emily Bowles is a grant writer and victim advocate in Appleton, Wisconsin whose poetry has appeared in *Bramble*, the *Midwest Review*, and other journals. Her chapbooks, both published by Finishing Line Press, explore what happens when silenced women find their voices.

## Red Canoe

Sara Sarna, Oconomowoc

There is a red canoe leaning against the old corn crib. Wild raspberry vines try desperately to bind it to the land. They seem not as interested in the old steel hoop, useful only on dry ground, never freed to rivers and lakes. Thorny vines in blossom disguise, eyes on a prize of no use to them. Soon enough their effort must be put to bearing fruit, and it will be the one rescuing the canoe who will win the day, water bound and raspberry-sated.

---

Sara Sarna is a poet and actor in southeastern Wisconsin. Her work has appeared in print and online and has been heard from radio and stage. She is a member of WWA and WFOP.



## Elegy for Mari

Rebecca Swanson, Spooner

Voice velvet. Dance fluid.  
When you lifted an eyebrow,  
the audience roared.

When you kissed your leading man,  
I knew your secret longing.

You wore that Ginger Rogers gown  
replete with ostrich feathers,  
glitter and translucence,  
and those rhinestone-encrusted shoes  
that winked at an audience entranced.

I returned your wave and blew a kiss  
as you ascended the stairway to Paradise.

Brava!

---

Rebecca H. Swanson worked for 30 years leading communications in the arenas of health care, insurance, higher education, the arts and membership associations in the Twin Cities and Chicago. She is a member of Wisconsin Writer's Association and lives in Northwest Wisconsin, where she devotes time to writing across genres and various volunteer efforts.



## SHORT FICTION

### Grady and Irene

Jan Wilberg, Whitefish Bay

### My Maternal Gardener

Anne Gernetzke

You planted me, a nameless seed,  
in dark, fertile soil.  
Patiently, you waited weeks  
for some sign of life.

When I displayed my shoots,  
you shared your sustenance.  
If I grew exhausted,  
you laid me in the light.

While my stem grew tall  
and my leaves evolved,  
you protected me  
from the wicked weeds.

With every passing season,  
you taught me how to thrive  
and pruned my tender leaves  
with steady, slender shears.

Today, I outgrew my home  
and must be transplanted.  
Do not fear, dear gardener,  
your daughter is ready to flower.

---

Anne Gernetzke is a sophomore at UW-Whitewater. She is majoring in Creative Writing and enjoys writing poetry and memoirs.

Grady was an Alaskan Husky born and raised at a sled dog kennel in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Initially trained for the legendary Iditarod sled dog race, Grady ran lesser races in the Midwest and then pulled sleds full of tourists through the north woods. Then, when he was eight, he seemed to lose his zest for pulling and the kennel owners put him up for adoption.

Scrolling through Facebook one afternoon, Irene zeroed in on Grady's picture. Of the ten dogs being retired, he was the one. Underneath his photo read, "Grady is the happiest dog we've ever known." Irene wanted a happy dog. With her kids grown and gone, her husband Frank traveling much of the time for his business, a happy dog could enliven her, maybe make her happy. Two weeks later, she brought Grady to his new home on Lake Superior.

Irene loved Grady right away. He was so handsome, tall with long legs, big sled dog feet, and a high bushy tail. His coat was white with red and brown patches, his face wolflike with a bronze mask, brown eyes with tiny gold lashes. That he was beautiful was one reason Irene loved him but Grady was also confident, calm, and gentle, taking treats from her fingers like a jeweler picking up rare diamonds with padded tongs.

When she took him for walks on the beach, he would pull hard as if still attached to a sled. "Don't let him loose," the kennel owner told her, "until he knows you're his people. Too soon, and he'll be running back to us." So Irene kept him on a leash all that first summer and winter and then the next summer, she unsnapped the lead and he took off running down the beach but stopped right away when she called his name. When he stopped for her, Irene would pet Grady's head and kiss him on his wolfie cheeks. And he would seem to her wild and tame at the same time.

In the three years since Irene had adopted Grady,

she learned by accident that he would obey two commands instantly. The first was *WAIT!* And the second was *THIS WAY!* Grady stopped mid-stride when he heard *WAIT!* And he looked back on *THIS WAY!* to see where she was pointing and then hurtled himself in that direction. That Grady did these things, responded to her in this way, made her feel accomplished and wise, capable and sure of herself. Grady would never run away, she knew that. She had become his people.

Irene used these commands on the Lake Superior beach in front of her house when Grady would run hard over the rocks and sand, more for the joy of it than for any reason. He never chased birds or balls. He ran because it was what he remembered. And then he would stop and turn back, his tail high and wagging, his mouth open, panting, as if waiting for a piece of frozen fish before starting to run again. The two of them spent hours on the beach. Frank was gone now, almost all the time, opening a new office for his company in Brussels. A weekly Facetime call was what had become of their marriage. Now she was just a woman with a dog and a lake, always the lake.

That August day on the beach was like most except the water was high and roiling. The cool wind out of the northwest reminded Irene of the winter storms that buffeted the beach, creating ten-foot-high ice walls at the shore. It was late summer now but those times weren't far off. Lake Superior always had winter in its pocket.

Grady ran ahead, far ahead, and she saw him stop at the water for a drink. The heavy wave startled him and he jumped back, trotting down the beach to where the waves were lower. He waded in again, this time up to his chest. Irene had never seen him go that far into the water and she puzzled over what would have drawn him there. A dead fish maybe? Lake Superior wasn't like that, though. It was clean and clear. But the lake was different today, alien, emitting something, a scent, a taste, something wild that pulled her dog into the water. While she thought this, the wave hit, knocking Grady off his feet. The next wave sucked him under.

"Grady! GRADY!"

His head erupted from the water. His front paws

flailed in the air like he was trying to climb a ladder. Was he standing on his back feet? Maybe. He was five feet tall when he stood on his back feet and reached for something in the kitchen. She could look him right in the eye when she told him to get down and leave the dinner leftovers alone. But she'd never seen him in the water before, didn't know if he could stand or if he could swim, but all dogs could swim, she thought, it's reflex. Or instinct. Whatever it is will kick in.

She ran down the beach. "GRADY! GRADY!"

The stones and the sand made running hard and slow. Her sneakered feet sank and slid, like running in mud, and soon, her breathing turned sharp and painful, like when she was a kid playing tag in the neighborhood and her sides would ache like they'd been hammered with a mallet.

"GRADY! *WAIT!*" She yelled this and knew it was foolish. The wave was taking him. He was already ten, maybe fifteen feet from the shore. His head bobbed under the water, then atop the wave, like a surfer who'd lost his board and was at the mercy of the sea and his own ability to swim. But there is no swimming against a riptide and that's what she knew this was. Nothing else could suck a seventy-pound dog right off the shore.

"GRADY! GRADY!" She yelled so loud and so hard that her throat felt split open. Grady was going to drown. She stretched out her arms and screamed again. "GRADY!" His head popped up and then quickly disappeared. He was weakening. She could feel his weakening and now he was further out, maybe thirty feet. He was going to be gone, gone to her.

*THIS WAY! THIS WAY!* She remembered *THIS WAY!* She needed to show him the way to go. She remembered from the news that someone caught in a riptide should swim sideways, parallel to the shore. A person couldn't fight a riptide, the only way to survive was to leave its clutches. But how to tell him? Grady wasn't looking at the shore anymore, just bobbing up and down, trancelike. Would he even be able to hear her?

She tried to find the edge, the seam between the wild lake water and the killer water. She remembered to watch how the waves broke and stepped just to the side. It was hard to see, so risky but there was no



choice now. She would wade out and call Grady from the side, call *THIS WAY!* and hope he could hear and swim toward her.

Even though it was August and the sun had been hotter every day for a week, the lake was frigid. In seconds, her ankles ached from the cold. The waves hit harder the deeper she went. Smacked her thighs and then her belly as she walked further and further away from the shore. Soon the waves were hitting her chest but she was still too far away from Grady to get his attention. She started swimming. She swam breaststroke, putting her head down into the waves, and coming up afterward out of breath and panicked. Out of the corner of her eye she could see Grady, just the top of his head now. He was getting weaker.

Finally, she was parallel to her dog. She kicked her legs to push herself high out of the water and yelled "*THIS WAY! THIS WAY!*" She treaded water in the thick wave and pointed to the shore. "*THIS WAY! THIS WAY!*"

He came. Grady's head came closer and closer. He was swimming, paddling toward her, toward the shore, and soon he passed her and headed to shallow water. He'd gotten himself out of the riptide. She could see him getting his footing and climbing up on the sandy beach. He turned then and looked back at her. His tail was wagging. He was panting, that smiling look he always had when he ran far ahead on the beach. He was happy.

She gasped. Tried to settle herself for the swim back to shore. It looked far, farther than she'd thought coming out. But it would get easier as the water got shallower. She just needed to stop treading water and stretch herself out to swim. She leaned forward and kicked a strong frog kick and then the wave hit her hard in the back of her head. She went under. Bubbles from the wave surrounded her. Frothy, the water was frothy, but hard like a car door slamming shut.

Her T-shirt filled with water and ballooned around her face. The surprise of it made her yell out but she was still under water so her shout filled her mouth. She coughed, choking, her hands reaching for the surface. And then she felt the air, she went toward the air, and she emerged from beneath the wave to be on her back rocking, the next wave coming any

minute, she could feel it gathering, building.

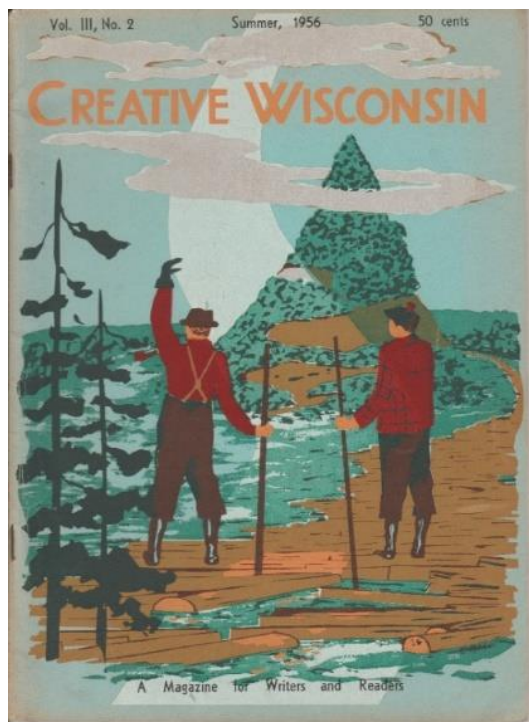
She rested. Counted on her fingers. Touched her thumb to each finger. 1 - 2 - 3 - 4. First her right hand and then her left. Counted. 1 - 2 - 3 - 4. She learned this in meditation. She breathed in through her nose and out through her mouth. She needed to calm herself before starting out. Rid herself of the panic. So she counted and whispered to herself *This Way!* until the water had quieted and she was alone in the lake, floating.

Her eyes closed, Irene rocked on waves that had become gentle, mother-like. She could die now, fold into this water, sink into this lake, her beloved place. But Grady! She turned her head toward the beach. She saw him up on all fours, looking at her, taking steps toward the water, backing up and coming toward her again.

"GRADY! WAIT! WAIT!"

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Jan Wilberg writes short fiction and essays, publishing a daily blog called Red's Wrap since 2010. She is a member of Wisconsin Writers Association and a longtime member of the Red Oak Writing Community.



*Erma Graeber painted many covers for editions in the 1950s and 60s*



## The Seen and Unseen

Lilia Marotta, Ridgewood, NJ

Just north of the Illinois border in the town of Kenosha, stands the Simmons Library. With the great waters of Lake Michigan as its backdrop, the Neoclassical structure is stately in its cool beige tone. It is home to thousands of books new and old, most on display and some tucked away in throughout the library's multiple levels. People visit from local neighborhoods: adults looking for books, teens scouring the internet, parents attending workshops and children playing with puzzles and puppets in the library's lower level. The little ones left safely unattended in the charming basement decorated with lime green walls and pictures of animals reading books on the walls. They were the ones rarely so involved in a book or on a quest for one, that they could not acknowledge those around them. At times pulling books from the shelves then leaving them on the floor after barely a glance at its contents, these youngsters displayed an energy rarely seen in the upper levels of the library. The vigilant librarian floated around, shelving books or assisting some with their requests.

Catherine enjoyed hearing their cheerful voices read or catching the light flicker in their eyes when they discovered a book they liked. Most of the children didn't seem to notice her when she'd ask them to treat a book gentler or leave her area a bit neater. They looked around, searching as if they heard something they couldn't quite catch, pausing, and then walking away.

Although she had not been given the opportunity to have children of her own, Catherine adored them. Her friend Gilbert couldn't understand why she spent

her day around the kids rather than upstairs with the others. Gilbert with his barbel mustache and crewcut hair always seemed wiser than his years. She explained that it was in a woman's nature to want to nurture children, and she enjoyed observing them mature as she had with him in the earlier years.

Today was especially important for her to be in the children's area, Ruby came each Wednesday at four p.m. Her mother had a meeting in one of the rooms and Ruby came down to the children's section to chat. Ruby, with her big brown eyes, braided hair and knowing smile seemed well beyond her nine years of age. The first day they met, Catherine knew that Ruby was special. She had approached Catherine and asked about her dress. At first Catherine had been taken aback, a child so bold to approach an adult, but she smiled as she explained details about her seamstress that custom made her ruffled, mauve skirt and white blouse. Catherine was not accustomed to children speaking to her, let alone asking about her clothing. She asked Ruby what she called the style of clothing the children were wearing now. Ruby said they were called leggings and T-shirts. She explained to Catherine that girls "don't need to wear dresses or hats anymore," as evidenced by all the surrounding girls in the room. She told Catherine that her dress reminded Ruby of a picture she had at home of her Great-grandma Ester.

Most Wednesdays, they spent much of the time talking about Ruby's favorite books and then, after some time, about her family. Ruby had a lot to say and confided in Catherine. And Catherine enjoyed their time together.

This Wednesday, as Catherine straightened the books in the shelves, she noticed Ruby treading heavily as she came down the stairs. It seemed as if she carried a load of books on her shoulders. She sagged onto the center bench like a bag of rice, eyes fixated on the tessellated carpeting.

Catherine carefully walked over and gently sat at the edge of the bench, waiting.

When Ruby didn't speak, Catherine straightened her skirt and asked, "Not looking forward to our chats today, are you?"

"Nah, dat's not it. I didn't want to tell you, but

today's my last day here. My mom and pops are splitting up and we're going to be moving to Chicago with my grandma this summer," she said quietly.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Ruby. Are you sad?" Catherine tilted her head towards Ruby. The child seemed so small and frail, her shoulders sagging further.

"Yeah, but I won't miss anyone at school or my dad yelling. I guess I can read and draw anywhere." She shrugged. "But, I will miss you."

Catherine turned to hide her eyes, "You'll make new friends."

"When I grow up, I'm never getting married!" Ruby's caramel eyes, still fixed on the carpet, were brimming with tears.

"Well, that's disappointing." Catherine smirked.

"Are you married?" Ruby questioned.

"Yes, I am," Catherine tilted her head slightly towards Ruby.

"Do you have kids and a house?" Ruby's eyes opened wider.

"No, Dear, this is my home," she hesitates, "maybe one day I will show you my chambers."

"Chambers? That's weird," Ruby declared, then giggled.

"Silly, it's my room. Come, I will show you. No time to waste here." Catherine stood, turned, and waited.

Ruby shrugged and followed Catherine. They walked up the stairwell to the main floor, through the rotunda with its Italian marble floors, past the octagonal circulation desk where the clerk was busy with customers and then quietly proceeded up the spiral staircase. The stairs were narrow and seemed more triangular than spiral. Once on the landing, Catherine reached a door and encouraged Ruby to open it.

"Is this an attic?" Ruby inquired.

"Not quite," Catherine stated.

Inside the room a man with suspenders at a desk turned towards Catherine and spat out, "You should not bring the child here."

"Is this a costume party?" Ruby asked with a quizzical expression.

Catherine looked back at Ruby and gave little laugh. "This is Gilbert. His father built this library and

he worries greatly that anyone should know we are here, but he has no need. Isn't that right, Ruby?"

Ruby nodded and whispered, "No one would believe me anyway."

Catherine stepped on the bottom rung of a rolling ladder that leaned against the wall of old books. Reaching for something slightly out of her reach.

Ruby tilted her head up towards her and gave small grin.

A gray-haired man with a black jacket and a younger woman that looked like a librarian exchanged looks. One of them asked Catherine, "Can she see us, too?"

Ruby crinkled her eyebrows, but before she could answer, Catherine handed her a book.

"Here it is! I want you to have this. It is one of my favorite books and I hope that one day you too will find your Mr. Darcy. Come see me once you do, will you?"

Ruby looked at the book's small print and insurmountable pages and thanked Catherine.

"Now run along, your mother may will be looking for you." She gave Ruby a slight shove towards the door and a wave of the hand.

As Ruby started down the spiral staircase, the book looking heavy in her small hand. She looked back towards Catherine and gave a half grin.

"Books can sometimes be as comforting as friends, you know," Catherine called out.

Years later, Ruby was in her apartment in Chicago when a childhood friend called her. They spoke for a while reminiscing about old friends and Ruby's upcoming wedding. Then her friend mentioned the Simmons library was undergoing renovations. Ruby hadn't thought of the library in years and it brought back a flood of memories, specifically of Catherine. The timing of it seemed impeccable and she decided that she needed to go there right away.

She drove the hour and a half, telling herself that her mother was right and that Catherine was a librarian and must have retired. Still, Ruby found the timing of the information about the renovation too coincidental. How could she hear about the library days before she was to be married? She recalled the memory of the book that Catherine handed her after

she had sworn she would never marry.

Ruby parked the car in front of the library, climbed the steps and opened the bronze doors into the foyer. She stepped under the archway into the rotunda. She had forgotten how majestic this library seemed with the tall columns and Italian marble. The detailed pattern in the flooring that made her shoes sound fancy when she was a child. She headed through the doorway on the right to check the children's section downstairs. When she walked down, she noticed most of the shelves had been rearranged since she was last there. Ruby asked the librarian for Catherine, but she had never heard of her although she'd been there for years. Ruby walked around and saw the play area filled with kids playing and reading, which made her smile. She headed back up the stairs and passed the circulation desk. The librarian was not there, she was probably helping someone find a book. Ruby started up the spiral staircase to the storage room. The steps were much narrower than she remembered as a child.

At the door, she hesitated before turning the knob. It was locked. Ruby scoffed and shook her head. As she started to retrace her steps downstairs, she heard a click from the other side of the door. She looked at the knob and tried it again. Unlocked. She slowly opened the door and there was Catherine exactly as Ruby remembered.

"I hoped I'd see you again, Ruby." There she was, wearing the same white blouse and mauve long skirt with ruffles as before. The only one who had truly seen Ruby at nine years of age.

Ruby had so many questions for Catherine, but in the end, she told Catherine about her upcoming marriage and thanked her for seeing her when no one else did. At that, Catherine laughed.

The Simmons Public Library stands boldly encapsulating more than books, it holds memories and deep rooted history. The history of a man that built the library in memory of his son, a woman who may have worked there and all those who have come and gone after, in the pursuit of knowledge, resources or comfort. The comfort that only comes from books.

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Lilia Marotta currently lives in New Jersey, however was born and raised in the Midwest. She has always loved writing and only now is brave enough to do it. She loves spending time with her three kids and dog.



## Chickadees Take Flight

Chris Marcotte,  
Deer Lake, MN

I bit into a blueberry and savored the tartness. Like most mid-July days in northern Minnesota, the sun had warmed the wild berries just enough so that they tasted as if they had been baked into a muffin. I carried the bowl of fruit out to the deck, along with what was left of my coffee and the bag that contained what I'd bought in town.

Today was my mom's eighty-second birthday. The first one I'd spend without her.

Mom's death three months ago was unexpected. Our last conversation had been typical. I shared the antics of my three-year-old grandson, and she shared her observations of spring birds in her yard. Her fatal stroke occurred later that evening as she got ready for bed.

Two steps forward, one step back. That's how it's been since Mom died. The pandemic added another layer to the already cumbersome labyrinth of probate court. The responsibilities of managing her affairs have overwhelmed me. Some days, I have cried more tears of frustration than grief. The person I usually turned to, was no longer there.

I watched loon parents, each with a fuzzy baby on their backs, glide by on the smooth as glass lake without making a sound. Mom would be thrilled to know two hatched this year. I hoped they would both mature past the chance of being snatched by a predator. Some find the call of the loons haunting, but to Mom and me, it feels like being called home.

What I had struggled with the most since Mom's



death was that I had not yet had a sign. Not a whisper, nor dream, nor unusual sighting of a woodland creature that hinted my mom was at peace. How long did a person hover before they settled in the place they were meant to be?

At Christmas, my mom had confided in me that she was going to forgive those who had played a significant, albeit meddlesome role in her life's journey. I assumed this might be the obstacle that kept her from crossing over. But I was sure I would have seen *some indication* of mom's well-being by now.

I planned to spend the day doing things she enjoyed. Early this morning I got coffee and sorted through the mail. There was always something for her. She was a generous advocate, but I had no idea how many organizations she was involved in until her mail came to me. Today there was a newsletter from the National Conservatory and a request to renew membership from Amnesty International. I teared up, but also smiled. I was glad my sisters and I all had a piece of her "giving back" philosophy.

My second stop was the crystal shop Mom loved and went to whenever she came to visit. I wandered through the displays of colored beads, clothing, and crystals. I searched for something to connect me to her. I looked over the beads and amulets until I found a copper feather. It was etched with intricate strands and barbs like a real one. I held it in my palm, and it fit.

I chose the feather because it represented a recent writing triumph. I had written a challenging personal essay. One my mom had encouraged me to finish when I wanted to give up. The feather had nothing to do with what I had written but putting my life-changing experience on paper had released me.

Now, as Mom would do, I'd spend the rest of the day on the deck. I'd nibble on blueberries and drink coffee. I'd watch the squirrels and entice the chipmunks with peanuts. Maybe I'd read and perhaps even write. I hadn't been able to concentrate long enough to write since Mom's death. I opened the paper bag, and breathed in the scent of bergamot, white sage, and lavender. Although I had bought no oils, the bag held the essence of the crystal shop and reminded me of Mom's hugs.

Tears gathered, and I let them flow. As we'd grown older, we had become closer. I missed her.

I wiped my eyes and looked toward the sun between the dancing maple leaves. Mom was a spiritual being and gathered strength from the celestial bodies. I have always appreciated the moon, but since her passing the sun has also provided me comfort. I withdrew my feather. It was small enough to have belonged to the goldfinches that frequented the feeders. "Happy Birthday, Mom."

In the bay I saw a great blue heron stand as still and regal as a statue, its eyes focused on fish darting below the surface. Across the lake an eagle called, and the loons responded with a warning cry. Mom loved the wildlife and to be near the water.

Two chickadees splashed playfully in the birdbath. I had bought it on a memorable "girls' weekend" with my mom and sisters. I chose it because of the delicate ceramic bird perched on the rim.

Baths over, the little birds sat on the edge of the bowl to dry. Their preening complete, the pair flew and dipped back over the birdbath several times. They settled on the side again and then I watched in astonishment as a bird emerged from the earthenware one. Its wings fluttered tentatively and then it joined the pair.

The trio of chickadees circled once above me before taking to the sky. My gaze followed them until they were out of sight.

In that wonderous moment I *knew that Mom was at peace.*

The ceramic bird is still perched on the birdbath, but something mystical occurred. I realized that Mom knew she needed to send me a message that was just a bit more unique than an ordinary woodland creature. And it worked. I knew she was at peace.

I have never questioned the third chickadee's appearance and I love that the copper feather dangles from my keychain, where I hold it nearly every day.

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Chris Marcotte writes historical fiction and nonfiction. She writes a column for the local newspaper, is working on multiple writing projects, and has had her work published in several regional journals. She is a member of WWA, Lake Superior Writers, and Lakes Area Writers Alliance (Brainerd, MN)



## Waiting in Wigan

Rebecca Swanson, Spooner

*While waiting for a connecting train to Liverpool from a small village in England in the late '90s, I observed a young man, about fifteen years old, who had multiple physical challenges. His calmness and power of observation made me wonder what he thought of the people around him, inspiring this short-short story.*

The travelers must be American. I can tell from their satchels. We've nothing so fine or fancy here in Wigan.

I twitch and start as usual but they don't seem to notice. The Man is large and blond with an easy way about him. The Lady keeps talking about this and that. She pulls out a large, round mirror and does her eyes up with pencil and brown powder. She brushes her brown hair.

An overhead voice calls out the next train departure. The Man says, "Did you understand that?" The Lady replies in a dotty English accent, "Liverpool Lime Street platform one," very proud of herself for making out our northern accent.

The Man leaves, comes back with a Coke from a machine next to the toilets. The Lady takes an orange soda from her bag, pops it open and takes a tiny sip. Suddenly, she looks at me. "Would you like one?" she says. I say, "Yes, ta."

She pulls another bottle from her bag and hands it to me. I open it and swallow. The fizz and sugar taste good. There was no breakfast at Mum's this morning, and dinner with Da is two hours away. My stomach isn't quite so empty now. The Man says, "I like it when

people take things so readily." He is smiling a very satisfied smile.

The Lady is writing in a little notebook. She looks out the waiting room door every few minutes. With the weather so fine most everyone else is waiting outside. I always wait inside. I seem to bother people who wait on the platform. The Americans don't know any better. They watch the people outside and their bags intensely, like the bags might grow legs and walk away.

The breeze outside cuddles the treetops. The leaves aren't as brilliant green anymore. Some are yellow now. I'm glad I know my colors. The blue of the Lady's bags is very bright, brighter than the sky on its bluest day.

St. Edmund's church bells start ringing. I wonder if the Americans notice or just pretend not to hear them. I listen to the bells. It makes me happy. I hear them every Sunday when I wait for the train to Preston.

It's time to move out to the platform. I hurry out first so I can watch the Man's and Lady's faces as they come out, carrying their bags, hoping they're in the right place. I see the Lady's eyes move past the platform over to our town. She looks at the Poole's Café sign, established 1847, posted on the side of the peaked brick building. I wonder if she thinks it's old. It's not. Our church is two hundred years older than that.

A loud whistle blows. The Man and the Lady with all their bags step closer to the edge of the platform. We're done waiting in Wigan now. Here's the train.

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Rebecca H. Swanson worked for 30 years leading communications in the arenas of health care, insurance, higher education, the arts and membership associations in the Twin Cities and Chicago. She is a member of Wisconsin Writer's Association and lives in Northwest Wisconsin, where she devotes time to writing across genres and various volunteer efforts.

## Indulge me for a few minutes

### A historic perspective of Wisconsin Writers Association

Lisa Lickel, Yuba

“During the first year and half of existence, the Association has had but one objective—the stimulation and encouragement of creative endeavor among rural people—”  
—report on the Advisory Board meeting of January 1950 by Eward L. Kamarck

No writer should ever consider history negatively. It's like saying you don't like to read but you want to write. That's one reason for the existence of words like oxymoron. History is a continuously growing foundation for moving forward; it's the research you do to create your story. It's breakfast; it's the first word you read of this article. If you've been deluding yourself that you don't like history or think no one else likes it, grow up and get over it already.

For example, at that 1950 board meeting, it was determined that enough interest in the association (a thousand—1,000—entries were received in the Jade Ring contest), that they devised a working pattern for future growth. This is where our Wisconsin Writers Association of today was birthed. The process included financial independence from the University of Wisconsin, making an effort to publish more material by the membership, promoting writing clubs, and providing information on markets.

We stand on the shoulders of those men and women who met with Professor Robert Gard in 1948 with the desire to not only learn more about storytelling, but to keep on learning and help others do the same.

“Rural” was never meant exclusively for farm folk, and generally not taken that way as the many members from larger cities such as Milwaukee, Janesville, Wausau, Eau Claire, Rhinelander, and Madison testify. WRWA always meant to serve people who don't have ready access to higher education. When the Association changed the “R” in the name to Wisconsin Regional Writers, the state was divided

into ten zones with liaison representative on the board of directors from each area of the state who would support and encourage writing clubs in their region and make sure they were aware of statewide activities. Several still-active writing organizations rose from that structure.

Fifty years later the technology age began to shift the way we communicate, learn, and share our understanding of our environment. The Association again adapted and simplified the name to Wisconsin Regional Writers' Association, and eventually Wisconsin Writers Association. Internet and email replaced a great deal of paper mail, and records. The Association has waxed and waned over the years as all mostly-volunteer organizations do. Today WWA is still governed by an active volunteer Board of Directors with a paid Operations Manager to oversee that pesky technology. We have an uninterrupted prestigious annual contest in the Jade Ring, contest for young writers, a literary magazine, newsletter, and a publishing unit, as well as avenues of service both voluntary and paid to work with each other. Local writing clubs and critique groups are still active, and many of our members publish well.

“Toward a Creative Interpretation of the State and Region” was the proud motto printed on every WWA newsletter for years. I'd say we've held the light for stimulating and encouraging writing—storytelling—in all seasons of life and change pretty well for the past 75 years, wouldn't you agree?

“Here is rural Wisconsin—the land, the people, the wind, the rain, the faiths.  
This is Wisconsin in terms of people who live on the land and love it...people who understand the true meaning of the seasons.”  
Foreword, Pen and Plow, July 1949

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