

THE AGORA

Volume 5, 2017



PLATO Participatory
Learning
And
Teaching
Organization

Where love of learning never gets old

THE AGORA

Volume 5, 2017



PLATO is a community of intellectually curious adults, typically 50 and over, which explores subjects of interest through member-led discussion groups, lectures, travel, and cultural activities.

PLATO Vision

PLATO, the Participatory Learning and Teaching Organization, promotes opportunities for intellectual and cultural enrichment for the senior community.

PLATO Mission

PLATO is a member-directed participatory learning-in-retirement organization committed to develop and provide learning, teaching, and social opportunities for its members in association with the University of Wisconsin–Madison, and to provide scholarship support for returning adult students or such other charitable purposes as the Board of Directors may determine.

***The Agora* Mission**

The Agora is a literary journal of arts and ideas created to share the artistic and scholarly talents of PLATO members in a periodic volume of original works of fiction, nonfiction (including scholarly articles), poetry, and visual arts. Of particular interest is material that has a distinct point of view and is inspired by broadly humanistic values and the liberal arts tradition. *The Agora* is a juried publication created in cooperation with the University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Continuing Studies.

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Dedication

The Agora Volume 5 is dedicated to Louise Fowler, PLATO's Office Coordinator, who provided many-faceted support for all stages in the production of both *The Agora* Volume 4, published in 2015, and this current volume, Volume 5. We are deeply indebted to Louise for her efficient and cheerful facilitation of each step of the way, from soliciting and processing submissions to the collation of entries into the final manuscript to its printing and distribution to PLATO members.

We also dedicate this volume to the authors and artists whose creative work is featured in this volume, as well as to all those who responded to our call for submissions whose work we were not able to include and to our fellow PLATO members whose support makes this literary and arts journal possible.

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A Moment's Observation: Studying Art—by Felicitus Ferington



Calcata Arch—by Teresa Mertens-Peliterri

The Sandbox in Autumn

by Barbara Carson

The plastic turtle sandbox squats
Among its nest of russet leaves.
It is as vivid as an emerald set in gold
Or a young man's Irish eyes.
It stares accusingly, like the eyes of a mother
Who has caught her child in a lie
Or a lover who feels he has been betrayed.
I should have, long before first frost
Emptied the sand and sold or given away
The outgrown shell
For the children are older now
And not inclined to play in sand.
Yet, there it stands, more albatross than keepsake
Like the ring from a broken engagement.
It is a thing out of season
Like thoughts of an old love
That appear on the back porch.

Thirtieth Anniversary

by Rose Ann Findlen

“Put us next to a window,” my husband says, “but in a quiet corner. I don’t do well with background noise.”

Tom heads for the men’s room as soon as we are seated.

“Drink before dinner?”

“Yes, a grapefruit negroni for me.” I say, admiring my newly done platinum nails. Nice. Subdued. Quietly understated and elegant. Through the window I watch teen-age couples going to a prom, the young men in long-sleeved tee-shirts contrasting trendily with their tuxedo jackets. Their dates teeter along on three-inch heels, their thin young legs wavering beneath sequined skirts hitting mid-thigh. Watching them, I shiver. I imagine the unseasonably cold spring night raising goosebumps on their bare shoulders and legs as they, fragile and unknowing, defy the chill.

As they walk, they giggle nervously, consulting their iPhones about where to find Overture Hall, the building looming immediately on their left. They meander from one edge of the sidewalk to the other, seeing only each other and their phones. One, staring intently at her phone, bumps into the grocery cart parked against the building across from my thick, heavy floor-to-ceiling window.

A woman sits on the concrete pavement beside the stuffed grocery cart. The cart tips and clatters to the sidewalk, spilling garbage bags of St. Vincent de Paul sweaters, a tattered duvet from someone’s move, a filthy sleeping bag.

“So sorry—my bad!” The girl shrugs disarmingly as she throws the duvet back into the capsized cart and runs awkwardly to catch up with her date who hasn’t yet noticed she isn’t there.

The woman’s leg sticks out straight from beneath the ripped final tier of the broomstick skirt spread unevenly around her, staking out the perimeters of her momentary home. Her purple sweater, blotched with grease and coffee, matches the bruised dry splotches on her gloveless hands. She cannot see me behind the one-way glass.

I lean closer to the window.

Where have I seen that pale face with a waterfall of auburn hair before? Why is the shape of her leg somehow familiar?

The basketball court in Monroe—our high school gym. That leg and face belong to Karen, the cheerleader I watched enviously from the stands as she leaped in the air, legs parallel to the floor, landing with a bounce and urging us to an adolescent roar. Karen. Karen the cheerleader.

I watch her through the thick plate glass, forgetting the plump cider-grilled scallop balanced on my appetizer fork. Tom, oblivious, swirls his glass, appraising the artistry of the rosemary sprig floating in his limoncello sour.

I could go out there. I could say, “Karen?” I could

reach my hand out to her and ask her if she’s cold. If she has a place to stay.

But I don’t. I can’t. The frostbitten fragility of her life frightens me. I am only a fingertip away from where she is. I might be her. She might turn out to be a problem I have no solutions for. She might have fleas.

I turn from the window. “Tom, did you get the tickets for the Thomas Hart Benton exhibit? It’s showing only in five museums in the country and we don’t want to miss it. We could stop at Glorioso’s to get anise extract for when I make biscotti.”

Belochki

by Allen Youngwood

A vintage, cornflower blue Volvo sedan moves along in noon-time traffic on Gorman Street.

Sunlight bounces off the polished hood.

From inside the car, the pleasant voice of an old man. “Almost there. Just a few more blocks.”

The distressed voice of a young woman with a Russian accent, thick and halting, replies. “Stop car, please. Stop car.”

The sedan turns a corner and stops at the curb alongside Tenney Park, next to a grove of trees in peak autumn color.

Richard, behind the wheel, turns to Victoria on the passenger side. He pushes his tweed touring cap up on his head. Victoria is in a fog, overwhelmed. Head bowed, she clutches a canvas travel bag with worn leather grips tightly to her body.

Richard adjusts his wire-rims down to the end of his nose. He peers at her over the top of the lenses. His face benevolent, sympathetic.

Victoria looks furtively at Richard; in anguish, on the verge of tears.

“You’re afraid, Victoria. It’s perfectly natural,” consoles Richard.

Victoria stares blankly out the side window. “So much...too different here.”

“Yes, I know. But believe me, everything will be fine. Liz and I are your sponsors, it is our job to make it so. You are not alone. You’ll see...Sure, it’ll take some time to adjust, but...”

Suddenly, Victoria straightens.

Her face brightens dramatically.

Amazed and delighted, she shrieks. “BELOCHKI!”

Victoria hurriedly unbuckles her seat belt.

Richard is startled. “What?”

Victoria jettisons her travel bag as she bolts from the car.

Runs into the park.

Looks up into the trees.

Waves her hands.

Jumps up and down.

Elated, Victoria charges back to Richard standing next to the car, the travel bag in his hands. “Belochki?” he asks.

Victoria is breathless from excitement. “Means, umm...squirrels. No belochki in Moscow.”

Richard is perplexed. “Oh? Why is...”

Urgently, in all earnestness. “You got nuts?”

Richard is mystified. “Pardon me?”

Victoria quickly scans the park and hustles off in the direction of a tall blond woman walking a doxie.

Richard notices a large, bearded man in a long-coat as he emerges from a pathway in the grove. The man carries a small paper shopping bag. He stops and slowly scans the trees.

Richard watches Victoria confront the dog-walker at a distance. Taken aback, the woman shakes

her head, reverses course and walks away. Victoria looks back toward Richard and sees the man. She takes off in a full sprint.

Victoria careens up to the man, breathless from exertion. “Got nuts?”

The man smiles. “Dah.” He holds open his paper sack. It is chock full of peanuts. “For belochki.”

Victoria SHRIEKS with delight.

The man laughs, long and deep. Victoria laughs along. Their eyes meet and hold. They smile. Their moment.

Richard is agape; in a trance at the improbability of it all. The spell remains unbroken by the buzz of his cell phone. He checks the number; holds the phone to his ear. A zen-like calm. “Hi honey... We’re down at the park...Everything is just fine. In fact, everything is, well...perfect.”

THE END



Chickadees on Sunflower—by Jim Albright

The Wonderment of Birds

by Lorna Kniaz

I awoke dreaming of birds 60 years ago.

I, 16, he, 19, in a warm summer's night,
ducking through unguarded doors of an aviary.
As we entered, there were squawks
and the whirr of wings of birds startled from sleep.
My memory imagines them flying loose,
lighted only by the glow of an EXIT sign.

Sounds of sleepy birds and our breathing.
We held each other or maybe only held hands,
new to love, alone together in the darkness,
bounded by birds.

Forty years later we watched small birds
wheeling in great knots, raveling and unraveling
in gray skeins guided by invisible radar,
over a square in Spain.
The evening sky and time obscured by
noiseless winged movement.

In a down-filled bed, we turned to each other.
With motions sanctified by time and instinct,
we nested in the warm embrace of feathers.

These are some of the memories I carry:

The sleepy chirps, the silent sweep of wings,
the warmth of a feathery bed, and
the wonderment of birds.

Forgiveness and a Burntout Match

by Judith Heilizer

I am walking toward the door at the end of a long, gloomy hall, known as the Psychiatric Unit of the Veterans Hospital. On the way to becoming a Clinical Psychologist I am serving the first day of a two year internship.

The triply locked door has shut behind us with an audible bang. We are instantly enveloped in the near palpable odor of sweat, spittle, urine and digestive gas. My supervisor, Dr. Joe Newman, walks behind me, “just in case.” I am not quite sure what that means. But his close presence causes my anxiety to escalate rather than to diminish.

On the other side of that door I had been outfitted with a belt, the comforting heaviness of keys dangling from my waist, magic wands these are, which will allow me to enter and to exit from this eerie realm at will or need. More sinister is my awareness that the locked doors are primarily designed to keep “them” in. For weeks after I will have nightmares about having lost my keys, the door standing wide open, wrinkled ribbons of crushed humanity spilling out into the world.

The unit selected for my initiation is called “the back ward.” It is the permanent home for warriors from the Second World War, the Korean Conflict, and Viet Nam. This building houses a harvest of men gleaned from the battle fields, their bodies and their souls irreparably rearranged, causing malfunctions not well tolerated in our well oiled world.

This ward is known to us insiders as: The Treatment Resistant or Terminal Ward, the burial place of hope for rebuilding sanity. Assignment to this ward will separate those of us students who can endure from those who cannot. I sometimes think that those of us who can have developed a self-protective lack of imagination.

This ward is the endpoint, the last car, the... “We are so sorry to have to tell you that we have done all we can for your loved one” unit. We, citizens from the other side of the door, are, of course, aware that we, collectively, have put these men there. But we soothe ourselves, albeit uneasily, by reassuring ourselves that not everyone cracks up in the service of his country.

The hall, cheerily named as the Day Room, is so dimly lit that it takes me a moment to discern the row of figures in fatigues with faces like pasty pies, plastered against the pockmarked, pea green walls. Some of the figures rock, scream, masturbate, roar with laughter, wail and stare, inward or out; others

have become so still, that only their shallow breathing gives them presence. Somehow they all seem to be part of a macabre polonaise of interchangeable, malfunctioning parts. These dancers belong to a troupe made up of leftovers of the human spirit after life has become undoable.

These men, their shredded souls wrapped in bodies worn thin and raw and ragged, scattered across a landscape of unspeakable despair, are the unrecognizable shards of those mighty, proud, golden young men who had conquered the enemy and had made us safe and in the process had irretrievably lost themselves.

I become aware that the atmosphere changes subtly as I pass between the rows of figures. The noise level seems to sink as I approach, then to elevate behind me. Some men just stop what they are doing, some stare, some crack jokes, some whistle, some become agitated, touching tiny remnants of a world so lost to them. Not many women pass this way, the promise of wildflowers in purgatory.

My anxiety escalates, precipitously, I speed up, my escape hatch, the door at the other end of the hall, within reach.

Suddenly I am startled by a faceless figure peeling itself soundlessly off the wall, blocking my path, while stretching out a hand toward me. Cradled in it lies a burntout match. My breath

catches, my heart breaks into a gallop, my legs feel detached. I cautiously step around him, which causes the man (defender of our democratic ideals, human values, and the best our country has to offer) to melt soundlessly back into the wall. Briefly relieved, I let out my tightly held breath and slide on. Just then Joe's hand on my shoulder whirls me around, yelling to me over the psychotic din: "What is the matter with you? Don't you accept gifts?" For a very small instant I think that he too has gone mad. Still, I turn haltingly toward the melted man in the wall and in a voice I do not recognize as my own, I find myself stammering: "I am so sorry, may I please have the present?" Without the briefest hesitation he opens his hand and holds it out to me. I take the match and looking into his vacant eyes, I say: "Thank you so very much." Then, in less than an instant he becomes barely visible as before.

This man had simply waited out my nearsightedness without accusation or demand. Yet in the dark lockup of his body and spirit, this messenger had illuminated my soul, uncluttered by the imprisonment which my judgment would have cast over his gift. This burntout match, as extinguished as the giver himself, held within itself a vision of perfection of the human spirit, of unconditional forgiveness for who we are and for who we might have been and infinite yearning for who we yet might become.

My Grandfather's Walking Stick

by Grethe Brix-J. Leer

On midsummer light nights in Denmark the sun stays up in the sky for so long that you wonder why it even bothers going down—and it barely does. It only dips below the horizon out there on the ocean, and then comes right up again. The birds, too, keep singing and singing, and wondering when it will be time to go to sleep. Finally around 11:30, nature gets very quiet and the world sleeps. But it can only be a light sleep, because in an hour and a half the sun rises again. The birds greet the new day with more jubilant singing, and you can't sleep anymore. And after all, who needs to sleep? You had enough of that during the dark winter when the sun was gone for months. Yet without that darkness you wouldn't fully appreciate the light. I have no words for this—only the poets. It has to be lived and experienced with your entire being. You have to be there.

Summers in my first young years were spent with my grandparents. They had a summer house on the ocean, about ten miles from their home. *Bedstefar*, my grandfather, sat tall and handsome in the driver's seat, proudly driving his black Model T Ford. And my grandmother sat next to him, smaller, soft, and pretty. Even though it was never spoken about, it was obvious to everyone that they loved each other very much. I was four or five, and basked in the warmth that emanated from them. I felt so fine and safe, in ways not always experienced with my own parents. I sat in the back seat, between my fun-loving Uncle Ernst and his new girlfriend who was shy and giggled a lot. He was not shy at all, and about midway to our destination he'd yell from the back, "I can smell the water! I can smell the ocean!" There wasn't a bit of ocean yet, but this was his buoyant expression of all our expectations of the unending summer day.

Arriving at the beach, we tumbled out of the car and opened the summer house doors wide to let in the fresh sea air. The sun was shining. It was shining all the time, and I wore shorts and went barefoot. It must have been raining sometimes, but I don't remember any days like that. On such a warm summer day, *Bedstefar* and I would venture out for a nature walk. We followed the narrow dirt trail, in and around the wooded area surrounding the summer house. He always carried a walking stick. He didn't really need it, but for him it was a symbol of dignity and confidence and it also served many purposes. If he saw something interesting on the ground, a stone, a branch, or a dead frog, he'd poke at it with his stick and show it to me. Or he'd lift the stick and point it in the direction of a small bird or a flock of

geese overhead. It was like a magic wand, and it opened my eyes and ears for new and exciting experiences. Along the path were living fences of climbing honeysuckle roses. He showed me how to gently take a cluster apart and taste the tiny sweetness from the flower. I never forgot that taste, or the fragrance that enveloped us as we walked through that sunlit path—the smell of summer, deeply tasted, inhaled and remembered. He'd poke at a stone and tell me it was millions of years old. "Older than you?" I'd ask. "Yes, much older than me," he replied. The interesting little black pellets on the ground looked like my favorite licorice. "No, no, don't touch those," he'd admonish; "they're the droppings of the wild hares that we occasionally see running around."

It was good to walk with him. I felt safe and loved. This was especially poignant, since my coming into this world had been totally unplanned. My birth-father was a German soldier stationed in Denmark in 1942, during the Second World War. I was an accident that wasn't supposed to have happened. All this caused a great deal of stress and bewilderment in my mother as well as my grandparents.

I, of course, knew nothing about any of this. I didn't know it might have been easier for them to turn their backs on this disgrace. I didn't know that they might have been able to avoid a lot of shame and finger pointing. After all, they lived in a small community in the borderland between Denmark and Germany, where they all knew each other. Instead, both my grandparents chose to embrace me whole-heartedly and stood up for me if necessary, which didn't happen too often because *Bedstefar* was actually the Mayor of that small town, and you certainly didn't say anything about such things to the Mayor—at least not to his face!

I was twelve when my grandfather died. I couldn't understand it. They told me he had

died. Where did he go? "To heaven," they said. I looked up; I saw the blue sky, but I didn't see him. They also said that he was inside the big coffin that stood in the garage, the coolest place on that hot summer day. I wondered about that. They were waiting for the priest to come to give him his last blessing and sing the traditional hymns while carrying the casket to the hearse. It was waiting outside, and drove the short distance to the church followed by all the villagers, who'd been standing in front of their houses and now, one by one, joined the slow dark-clad procession behind the coffin.

How could my grandfather, whom I loved so much, be in that coffin, which later was lowered into a dark hole in the ground surrounded by all the flowers the somber group of people gave him? Would he get flowers in heaven too? This was more than I could understand. Growing up on a farm in the country, I'd seen my share of dead animals; but this was different, and I missed him a lot.

The hearse arrived at the church, where all the people were sitting inside. Since I was the oldest child, my parents thought it would be appropriate for me to be at a funeral service for the first time. I knew it must be very sad for my mother to lose her father, but I don't recall seeing her cry. She looked perfectly stoic and strong, even if she must have been crying inside. Too much display of emotions was considered bad taste, regarded as weakness and frowned upon.

Inside the medieval stone church the somber mood echoed other funerals of fathers and mothers over the centuries. I did my best to keep my emotions to myself. It was hard, and I used all my determination to keep from crying. I felt like a statue, as heavy and thick as the stone walls. I stood up. I sat down. I bowed my head. I kneeled and prayed. I didn't dare open my

mouth to sing the hymns that I knew so well for fear that my stone statue would crumble.

Somehow, I made it through the service. I remember feeling numb but also curiously proud of myself. I hadn't embarrassed anyone. A kind neighbor in a rare display of empathy quietly patted me on my head. "Good girl," she said. I had been a "good girl." I was thankful for that, but I was also a child who had lost her best friend, and later, alone in my room, I could feel a sea of tears welling up inside, filling my body from my head to my toes, crying deeply from

a new place of sadness and loss I could not yet comprehend.

Last night, in a dream, I was as I am now, but driving the old Model T Ford down the road. On the seat next to me, I saw my *Bedstefar's* well-worn walking stick, the same one he carried on our walks sixty-five years ago. There it was. *Bedstefar* has been dead for many years, but I recognized the stick immediately; and I knew his spirit was with me in the dream, bringing hope, comfort and, yes, light into my life—at a moment when I needed him to be there once again to walk with me.



Maggie—by Diane Hughes

Ashes of the Hearth

by George Faunce

Log of cedar dwindling in the fire, end it now. Release yourself into the flames. Let your thoughts unfold like shadows oblong on the wall...and brood a bit, my dying friend, for both of us tonight. Settled by my chair, my aging dog succumbs to sleep, struggling in his fitful way with troubled dreams. His hind legs kick out once, and twice...then finally he sighs, slipping deeper into slumber on the carpet by my side.

A spray of sparks glitters in the hearth as you collapse, oh rueful cedar, down into the ashes that were once your heart. Seated here so close to you I nod a bit, drowsy in your care, fighting with a memory of my own. Imagining...*oh, this might sound strange...*but I thought that I just heard again...*her laughter*; the light, musical happiness that filled this home when she was here. Distant and lyrical, it echoes down the staircase from the bedroom that we shared.

But it is only chimes I hear tonight, isn't it...*not* laughter. Chimes swaying on the balcony, tingling in the gelid air. Yet how sweet, for that one instant, to have heard the sound, and thought again that she was here. *To have remembered...*

How many times did we two climb those stairs? How many times the held breath...the fast embrace, the whisperings of love. Her smooth warmth somehow weightless in my arms; so magical to me, too ethereal to be real, *and yet it was!* It held a truth all of its own and I won't...I can't...forget.

I watch your flames, diminished friend, and I think of her.
Log of cedar, so like you...remembering the forest...

Artistic Endeavors as Democratic Opportunities: Plumbing the Depths or Dabbling Toward Self-Expression

by Deborah Bissonnette

The creative impulse calls each person in her own way. Whatever is our motivating force, joy or sadness, ambition or interest, curiosity or talent, our attempts at self-expression, whether physical, visual, or verbal, teach us who we are.

Each of us is the curator of her own life. We are, sometimes consciously and more often unconsciously, assembling an exhibition, possibly for actual display to the public, possibly for posterity, and certainly for our own self-understanding. Even when we do not think of what we do as art, it often is. We may be cooking for our family. We may be keeping a garden, or taking photographs, singing in a choir, playing a musical instrument, telling stories to our grandchildren, or teaching a class. We may be offering our friendship, building a relationship, or raising a family. Our lives are our work of art.

We bring forth who we are in our creative actions. How are we to find meaning in life if we don't find out who we are and excavate our truths? No one can confer a diploma or a degree in authenticity, wisdom or integrity. Creativity has no barriers to entry, and no adherence to a creed is required.

Classes can show us a way, improve our performance and encourage our efforts. They can help us gain confidence and learn to share what we have to offer. They can foster reciprocal respect.

When we bring our offerings to a PLATO class, we are not seeking correction though sometimes it can be constructive and help make our work better. We are not seeking right answers. We are seeking recognition and understanding and the freedom to share who we truly are.

Those of us in PLATO are already in the midst of a lifetime of creating our legacy of self-expression. Some of us are just beginning to recognize ourselves as artists, some are just hitting our stride and some are already very accomplished. Whatever our artistic medium, we are at a stage in life when we no longer are required to hide behind our roles, our careers, our family expectations, our self-limitations.

Each person has her own unique perspective and experience. As we liberate our voice and express our particular take on life, we affirm and validate or sometimes come to question the truth of our revelations. Our personal style

may be humorous, spiritual, scientific or factual, even fantastical or surreal.

The greatest gift that we can give each other is our attention to these revelations. Just by our quiet respect or sincere admiration, open hearted laughter or simple empathy, we facilitate the birth of the artist that is trying to come forth. Often, we may also be inspired to deeper sharing and fuller humanity.

There are few venues for this kind of artistic growth. Welcoming spaces and groups, free of

stratification and judgment, are not easy to find. If it is our desire to encourage greater human growth and the actualization of our highest selves, forums like PLATO have great worth. There are no financial incentives, no resume requirements, or limits to our possibilities. We are simply the fellowship of the curious and the creative, the accomplished and the beginners, sharing what we love and what interests us with one another. I think there can be no more democratic opportunity for individual expression.

The Case of the Wealthy Widow

A Sherlock Holmes Parody

by Gerry Wettersten

“I say, Holmes. That’s an unusual sight on Baker Street,” I said from my vantage point by the window.

“Anything unusual in this neighborhood is likely to indicate a client.” He waved a languid hand through the smoke rising from his meerschaum. “Pray tell, what do you see? No, wait. I can deduce from the pounding hooves of two horses, not one, that a large conveyance is at our door. Since 221 Baker Street is not a commercial business or a manufactory, it will not be a delivery wagon, but a coach for passengers. Privately owned, or it would stop at a public terminus, not at our residence.”

By the time Holmes had played his little game of wits, the driver was assisting a portly lady to alight from the mud-spattered carriage. “Oh, and I neglected to mention that the owner of this equipage has come to London from the country. Any London-dweller would use a smaller, lighter vehicle to negotiate city streets.”

We heard Mrs. Hudson’s quick tread on the stairs and a heavier, slower one, followed by a rap at the door. The woman who entered our sitting room was of late middle age, with a worried expression, but my physician’s eye judged her health to be excellent. She wore a black silk dress and a black bonnet with a short black veil thrown back over it. Altogether appropriate attire for a woman widowed for several years.

She nodded pleasantly to me and held out a black-gloved hand to Holmes. “Mr. Sherlock Holmes?” He inclined his head in assent. “I apologize for arriving without an appointment, but my apprehension drives me to seek your advice. I am Mrs. Lavinia Becksworth. My late husband was Colonel August Becksworth of Somerset.”

Holmes is capable of gallantry, though he seldom exercises it. “Here, my lady, take this Chair. Watson, pour Mrs. Becksworth a cup of that excellent India Darjeeling Mrs. Hudson has just favored us with.”

Holmes sat and asked, “What is the matter you wish to consult me about?” Her cup rattled against the saucer as Mrs. Becksworth attempted to drink, then shoved it aside as beyond her capabilities. “My solicitor suggested I speak to you about a series of worrying recent events.”

We listened as she recounted the disturbing occurrences: the gas light in her bedroom turned on but not lit, a walking stick laid across the stair where she could have tripped and fallen, and evidence in the gardener's shed of arsenic removed from a container.

"Have you any enemies?" the detective enquired.

"I cannot think of any. There has been an occasional incompetent maid, or lazy gardener let go, but none recently. Mr. Holmes, I fear the danger is from one closer to my heart."

"Indeed." Holmes long fingers were steepled beneath his chin. "Your carriage and dress mark you as a woman of some wealth, hereby giving a motive to a black-hearted heir."

The good lady nodded, as she brought a black-edged handkerchief to her streaming eyes.

"Pray, name them for me."

They were three. Her late husband's nephew, Percy, who was a captain in the Horse Guards, and his sister, Beatrice Becksworth, a young lady of twenty-two. Also, Mrs. Becksworth's brother, Mortimer. He had made his home in Australia, but was presently in London on business.

Relating the facts seemed to calm the lady a little. Holmes accompanied her to the door with a warning. "I believe you to be in real danger. Take every precaution while I immediately investigate the situation."

The lady's coach had barely pulled away when Holmes reached for his cloak and hat, hanging by the door. "Watson, I shall be out the rest of the day. It is imperative to move quickly in this matter."

At breakfast the next day he shared the information gleaned from his enquires about Mrs. Becksworth's family. "Her brother does have substantial

holdings in Australia, raises sheep." He lifted his beaked nose with a sniff, as though the odor of sheep had permeated our rooms. "However, it's all mortgaged to the hilt. He's here trying to raise funds to prevent total ruin."

"Then, sad to say, he has a motive to murder his sister."

"He's not alone, Watson. The nephew is a notorious gambler. He's in such disgrace over debts that he could be cashiered out of the Horse Guards."

"It seems only the girl can be considered innocent of murderous intentions."

"Not so, Watson. Miss Becksworth came out in society five years ago, and no marriage proposals have yet come her way. I'm told she is a singularly unattractive girl, tall and large-boned with coarse features and, according to the gossip my brother Mycroft passed along, her manners are no more graceful than her person. Her only hope for avoiding spinsterhood lies in coming to the alter with a considerable inheritance."

"How will you discover which of them presents a danger to your client?"

"I am devising a plan now." Holmes thoughtfully buttered his toast. Our breakfast was interrupted by Mrs. Hudson bearing a note from Scotland Yard's Inspector Lestrade. "The messenger says it's urgent," she added.

"I'm too late," he exclaimed. "Mrs. Becksworth has been murdered. Lestrade urges us to join him at once at the Oxford Terrace Hotel."

A short time later we stood with the inspector in the sitting room of the victim's hotel suite. The elegant furnishings and dainty tea set were mocked by a horrid sight, Mrs. Becksworth lying on the Aubbuson carpet with one side of her

head a gruesome pulp and the fireplace poker, the bloody instrument of her death, beside her.

“Does anything strike you, Holmes?” the inspector inquired.

”It appears quite evident, but let me examine the scene more closely.” Holmes stood over the body, perhaps in silent apology for his failure to save her life. Then he carefully picked up the poker and looked at it. He prowled about the room, sniffing at two half-filled tea cups, studying chairs for indentations of recent occupancy, dropping his lean body down on hands and knees to examine the carpet. He rose to his feet.

“Yes, Lestrade, there should be no difficulty in naming the murderer. Can you arrange to have all the heirs assembled together in your office tomorrow? Watson and I will be present; just say we are associates of yours. And, very important, be sure the suspects are served tea.”

With that he gestured impatiently, “Come Watson. We shall return to Baker Street. I feel a desire to spend the afternoon with my violin.”

The next morning we arrived at Scotland Yard to take unobtrusive seats in Lestrade’s office before the heirs straggled in. I was intensely interested in the appearance of the poor lady’s family members. The young officer was dashing, mustache waxed to fine points, and his uniform expertly tailored. He wore a black mourning band on his red tunic. His uncle also wore the badge of mourning on the sleeve of a rather rumpled tweed suit. His clean-shaven face showed evidence of an outdoor life; sun had reddened his skin and narrowed blue eyes to slits. Young Miss Becksworth was as unfortunate in appearance as we had heard, and her black dress did nothing to brighten a sallow complexion.

The inspector vaguely described us as his “associates.” He sent a constable out for tea,

and began to describe the circumstances of Mrs. Becksworth’s death. Holmes lounged back in his chair, eyes half-closed until the policeman returned with the tea tray. Then he slithered upright like a snake about to strike. He watched intently as the trio added milk or lemon, and sugar to their tea, stirred and brought the cups to their lips. Holmes started, and whispered under his breath, “Zounds! Unbelievable!”

I surveyed the group and saw only three of Her Majesty’s subjects drinking tea. Lestrade went on gathering information from each of the group as to where they could be reached in the next few days. He looked at Holmes, who made a dismissive gesture. The heirs were thanked for their attendance and left, a somber group.

“Well, Holmes, did you determine who the murderer is?” My eagerness was as intense as Lestrade’s.

“Yes, of course, but not the way I expected. Mrs. Becksworth was felled by a blow from the back and left side of her head. I’m sure you had determined that.” Lestrade was a little slow with his assenting nod. “Also, one of the tea cups on the table was turned as it would be for a left-handed drinker. Ergo—we look for the left-handed heir.”

“When the group took tea today,” here Holmes removed his pipe from his mouth and pointed its stem like a stylus at each chair, “Miss Becksworth, young Percy, and the brother each proved to be left-handed. It’s a nearly impossible coincidence.”

“Then we’re no nearer to the truth,” Lestrade protested.

“Oh yes, you see there was another determining clue. When I smelled the tea cups at the murder scene, the cup used by the left-handed drinker has a distinctive aroma. It was mustache wax, Royal Hussars brand, I believe. Captain Becksworth,

with his splendidly waxed facial hairs, is our killer. And, from what I've learned of his character, I believe he will break and confess very readily."

We left Scotland Yard and walked back toward Baker Street on a fine, sunny day. Holmes was silent for some blocks, although I saw his lips move

as if in calculation. "All three left-handed. Watson, do you know the chances of that happening?" Of course, I didn't. "It's one in eight thousand, seven hundred and fifty-three." He stopped. "This oyster house looks promising. Let us have lunch to commemorate such a rare event."

Reflections in a Side View Mirror

by Barbara Carson

We have spent three hours encased within this shell
The silence has ridden with us
An unwelcome passenger in the back seat.
My head is turned away.
You think I am watching the hillsides
Looking for glimpses of green.
Yet my eyes see my own reflection
Superimposed on the world we are leaving behind.
Treetops, not yet softened with leaves
Form a pattern of black sawgrass
On the bottom of the mirror.
Power lines slice across my throat
Leaving invisible scars
Their towers, built of giant erector sets
(toys we played with as children)
Recede in the distance.
But this is no time for nostalgia or reflection.

Only the clouds are constant
Heavy and pregnant and grey
They shade my left eye and the side of my face.
I am waiting for the rain to fall.



Still Life with Lemon—by Jim Albright

You're Alive!

by Daryl Sherman

My brother's imagination often got ME into trouble. Dennis was two year's older than I. He had an off-beat creative imagination that came up with great ideas—until we tried them out. I was too unimaginative—or too busy reading books—to come up with the ideas myself. Considering how so many of them turned out, that was probably a good thing.

We often ended up scraped, bruised, or bloody, but almost miraculously, none of us ever had a broken bone. This particular escapade, in some ways, was a lot more serious than most of the others. We were lucky it didn't end up a lot worse. Today I am appalled by our bad judgment, but not so much so that I can't laugh about it.

Mom was away grocery shopping when Dennis came up with his idea. Why years of experience hadn't taught me better I don't know. Just a slow learner, I guess. Dennis had a bow and was always shooting arrows at something. "Dennis, be careful with that bow, you are going to end up hurting someone with it!" she frequently told him, but it never seemed to slow him up. Anyway, that provided him the idea for our latest "scrape."

We fastened a broken arrow to my T-shirt so that it looked as if half an arrow's length was buried in my chest. We sprinkled a little ketchup around the arrow. When we saw the car down the road I lay down in a corner of the kitchen. My younger brother Randy squeezed into the space below the kitchen sink so he could see what happened. Dennis and my sister Janice made themselves scarce.

Mom came into the kitchen with a load of groceries calling upon us all to come and help carry them in. She saw me, and the groceries scattered as she fell to the floor in a dead faint. Randy was trapped in his hiding place. I jumped up, tore upstairs, ripped off the T-shirt, swiped off the ketchup stains from my chest, whipped on a clean T-shirt, and galloped back downstairs and into the kitchen.

"Mom, Mom, what's the matter? Are you all right?" The alarm in my voice was completely genuine.

Slowly Mom came around: "Daryl, you're alive!" she gasped.

"Of course I'm alive!" I cried with what I hoped was surprise and indignation in my voice. "What else should I be?"

“But I saw you on the floor, covered in blood, with an arrow in you!”

“You’re imagining things! Do I look like I have an arrow in me? Do you see any blood? Are *you* O.K.?”

“I’m alright now, I guess, but I saw you...there on the floor. It was so real.”

“How could you have seen me? You can see I’m fine, no blood, no wound.” I was desperate to make her believe she had been seeing things. Her eyes told her I seemed fine but the sight had been so real, so vivid—so shocking.

Meanwhile Randy was still trapped under the sink and unable to move a muscle lest she hear him. We got her up and around the corner, through the dining room and into an easy chair in the living room. Dennis and Jan were there now and we were making a lot of noise in our

exclamations so Randy could escape out the back door unheard. He came around the house and through the front door. He joined us, exclaiming, “What happened? What’s going on?”

Eventually we made her believe she had to have imagined it. After all, I was right in front of her and obviously healthy. Years later, when she *knew* it had been her imagination, we admitted what really had happened. It took her a while to learn the “new” events, the third, but finally true, version of what happened that day. We all knew that if we escaped punishment at the time she would never be able to punish us, no matter how much we deserved it. Right again. She was even able to laugh with us, while probably wondering what kind of psychological monsters she was raising.

Mom always claimed to have a weak heart but considering all she survived, I often doubt that was true.

Dispelling Gloominess

by Dan Baker

This is a story concerned with gloominess and chronic illness but it's not a gloomy story. By necessity it contains a modest sprinkling of maudlin content but only, and on this matter I'm firm, sufficient to infuse the account with a bit of that gritty realism so valued in contemporary storytelling. I'm concerned that the reader, like myself, may have an inclination to balk at the first hint of unpleasantness so I'll say right here at the onset that my story has a happy ending.

I suspect we all carry a vision of how our futures are likely to unfold. Being an emotionally labile sort, I had two. On sunnier days I anticipated enjoying sterling health into my golden years, happy as a clam, financially secure, maybe a grandchild or two. I'd meet a peaceful end at an advanced age, regretting nothing, and surrounded by a multitude of loved ones. On those other days I imagined an untimely and bleak demise, broke, drunk, and alone in a tawdry single occupancy motel on a frontage road outside of Toledo. Such has been my inclination towards extremes. As the years passed and catastrophe remained at bay, I began to trust more in the rosier scenario. My sense of entitlement to a placid old age seemed entirely reasonable. Hadn't I, for the most part, carried my own weight? I'd worked, paid taxes, voted, and on occasion put my shoulder to the collective community wheel. Admittedly there were questions regarding my conduct as a younger man, but I mean, fair is fair.

I lost confidence in the rosier scenario some years back and it's here that this account begins. After submitting to a lengthy period of medical inquiry my Neurologist told me I had Multiple Sclerosis. MS, he told me, was a chronic, progressive illness. They weren't sure what caused it, didn't know how to fix it, and couldn't predict where it would take me. And, to further dim any hopes I might have that these questions would be answered soon, I was disabused of my long held belief that Jerry Lewis pitched for this team.

I don't handle bad news very well. My grandmother, "Nanna" as I called her, now there was a gal that could take a punch! I recall as a youngster going into her basement with her to change a fuse. She walked into a low hanging water pipe and, POW!. It damn near knocked her out. She staggered backwards, shook the stars from her eyes and said, "Danny...every knock's a boost." I'm not of that mind. I'm not inclined to see a growth opportunity in bad news, nor have I had much success in turning life's lemons into lemonade. I'm

more inclined to catastrophize. How, I wondered, would my family and I live if I couldn't work? Was I destined to be parked in the back bedroom strapped into a wheelchair in adult diapers? And who, I wondered, other than those obliged by family connection or a feigned sense of loyalty, would want to hang around with some sorry gimp in a wheelchair? I recalled the morbid "Queen for a Day" television show that had fascinated me as a child. I could see myself tearfully recounting my sad story in hopes of garnering more applause than the other sad sacks and winning the desperately needed washer and dryer.

In time I subdued my panic. In truth, those MS lesions weren't causing me a lot of immediate problems and I'd always been an "immediate problem" kind of guy. Multiple Sclerosis, I convinced myself was hardly the worst thing that could befall the complacent boomer. It probably wasn't even in the upper tier of misfortunes. It wasn't likely, for instance, to kill me. I succeeded in doing with my MS what I've always done with bad news, unpleasantness, and my accumulated myriad of regrets. I banished it to the hinterlands of my psyche. Despite having made my livelihood in the "helping professions," I'm not particularly given to self reflection. I've dodged enough well deserved bullets in my time to believe that Socrates enthusiasm for the investigated life was better suited to those who'd behaved better.

As those of you familiar with the ubiquitous self help literature can attest, blanket denial appears to have its limits. As time went on my worsening symptoms exceeded my considerable capacity for denial. Dread began to leak into my daily awareness. I began to feel that I was losing control over my life and that I was destined to lose the qualities that had always defined me. A perusal of the literature on living with chronic illness did not offer much solace. The best candidates were said

to have ready reserves of will, courage, tenacity, and independence. These unfortunately had never been my strong suits. Many of the adjustments and adaptations the literature counseled me to make were practical in nature, others more of what we'd term psychological or existential. The more I ruminated over the many unknowns ahead the gloomier I became. As time went on I became something of a whiner.

In the echeloning of mood disorders, gloominess is pretty small potatoes. One isn't likely to "take to the bed" as is sometimes the case with full-blown depression. You're more likely to be up and about and making those around you miserable. Sullen, with just a hint of unfocused anger. I was wrested from this insufferable tendency by a series of events wholly unrelated to my own illness. My daughter, Janey, then 12, began to be plagued by a host of mysterious health issues that our HMO clinic seemed intent on minimizing. She was missing more school than she was attending and her mother and I were becoming increasingly worried. Our repeated trips to the clinic seemed to engender more irritation than help from the cost conscious folks at the HMO. Janey continued to get worse and we continued to push her medical providers for some direction. They assured us that her symptoms didn't suggest anything serious and would soon abate. Her symptoms didn't abate, she became weaker and weaker, and we became increasingly alarmed. When we persisted at the clinic, more adamantly now, the staff appeared to conclude that we were a dysfunctional family with a host of as yet unspecified emotional issues. Since they apparently had no idea what was wrong with Janey, and wanted very much for us to go away, they concluded that her problems must be psychosomatic in origin. They didn't actually share this bit of diagnostic acumen with us, but in a decidedly patronizing gesture

arranged for us to be seen by their staff Child Psychiatrist.

I'd had a good amount of involvement with the medical world by that time, almost all of it positive. My providers, almost to a person, had been a kind and helpful lot. I'd not encountered anything resembling "medical arrogance." But, even now, recalling the day we saw the Child Psychiatrist causes my skin to bristle. Janey was so ill by this time that her legs would buckle when she tried to stand. She was so weak that her voice was barely audible. On the day we visited the Child Psychiatrist, it was necessary for me to half carry her from the car to the clinic waiting room where I was able to locate a wheelchair. The Psychiatrist, a brusque middle aged woman, had obviously been briefed on our dubious emotional stability. She spent a few minutes listening impatiently to Janey's mother and myself and the remainder of the fifty minutes with Janey. Her conclusions: Janey's problems were psychological in origin, and her overly "enmeshed" parents were contributing mightily to her condition by "infantilizing" and "indulging" her. The prescribed treatment: Psychotherapy for all concerned. We were dutifully warned that the therapy would require the HMO's pre-authorization and, of course, the number of authorized visits would have to be limited and regularly revisited.

I carried Janey back out to the car feeling we were trapped in some kind of Orwellian nightmare. That experience dispelled any lingering confidence we had in our medical providers, and we began to cast about desperately for help. Somewhere Janey's mother got the name of a Pediatric Rheumatologist at the University Hospital. Dr. Sheldon Horowitz, or simply "God" as he's now known at our house, was touted as something of a giant in his field. Giants, of course, are very busy people. Perhaps sensing our desperation he agreed to see Janey.

Within an hour of our arrival he had arranged for her emergency hospitalization and had begun a massive infusion of medications. Janey lay in her hospital bed for a very long time, curled in the fetal position, unable to talk or take sustenance. The advanced state of her illness had left her teetering on the precipice of something really, really bad. Dr. Horowitz knew almost immediately that she had Systemic Lupus and that she was a desperately sick child.

The days and then weeks that I spent at the hospital changed me. I recall vividly the palpable fear that had engulfed me as I sat by Janey's bedside offering up prayers to a god I didn't believe in. If the benevolent forces at play in the universe could see fit to aid in Janey's recovery I would, I swore, strive to be a kinder and more generous human being and a force for good in the world. If, as I suspected, goodness didn't arise naturally in me, I promised that I would fake it. After an uncertain and torturous length of time Janey's condition stabilized and she slowly began to respond to treatment. It's doubtful that my celestial pleadings made the difference, but in such circumstances the prudent person wants to touch all the bases. The courage and grace Janey displayed over the following months is a story for another time and one that serves as a continuing inspiration to me.

What was it about this experience, the reader might reasonably ask, that dispelled my habitual gloominess. Two things I believe. First, I discovered much to my surprise that my gloominess was amenable to my will. Janey needed me to be a positive, upbeat support in her life and I, by god, was going to be one. Her extended recovery obliged me to feign cheerfulness for quite some time. Long enough I think, to interrupt my habitual, default inclination towards sullenness. What's more, I found that I often actually felt

upbeat. This seemed to affirm something I've long suspected but had managed to forget, i.e., that one's subjective feelings (mood) result from how one acts, not the inverse. Act cheerfully, feel cheerful. The second factor in dispelling my gloominess was the shift in perspective that occurred with the gap in my preoccupation with my own drama. In the past, friends would sometimes ask how I was doing with my illness. I'd glibly reply "Oh...you know...there's lots worse things that can befall a fella than MS." I'd imagined this struck an appropriately long-suffering note but I'm pretty sure that I never really believed it. The weeks that I spent at the Children's Hospital provided daily visceral proof of how true this was. It turns out there were worse things, far worse things. Watching my daughter and the other children at the hospital may not have entirely excised my tendency towards gloominess but it's made it far too embarrassing to indulge.

So, on the off chance that the reader, like myself, has been inclined towards obsessing over the

details of their own relatively small bucket of woes, permit me a suggestion. You might consider getting yourself up in the middle of the night and paying a visit to the parallel universe that exists in your community's Pediatric Intensive Care Unit. You'll likely encounter what I encountered as I wandered, terrified, around that surreal moonscape: exhausted, terrified parents, some looking as if they'd been camped out for weeks, standing a tireless vigil over their precious children. This, it dawned on me, was the not insignificant difference between imposed and self inflicted misery. If you react as I did, you'll likely be too busy counting your blessings to remember to mope. Should this encounter not fully turn things around for you I'd recommend that you commit yourself to a sustained campaign of cheerful, happy behavior. If you've forgotten what happy looks like, find someone who hasn't and do whatever they're doing. Feigning happiness will feel awkward and inauthentic at first, but persevere and I'm pretty sure you'll actually cheer up. If these suggestions don't wrest you from gloomy self absorption, you may simply not be wrest-able.



Barbara's Cat—Susan Young Hoffman

Identity

by Pauline Witte

Sitting at the edge of a meadow
in the safety of a bright day
we talked of loss.

He about the death of his wife.
I of parents and grandparents long gone.

He drives her car.
His new puppy chewed up her shoes.
He wonders why her friends don't call.
Who am I without her he asked?

Later that night when I look in the mirror, I see my mother's
hand pick up a comb.
In my bones I feel my grandpa's stooped walk.
I set my jaw, as determined as my father.
Who was I with them?
Who am I without them?

Larry's Waterfall

by Pete Weiler

Waterfalls are wonderful to behold whether they are big and majestic like Niagara or small ones you might encounter while hiking through a scenic glen. Who can resist the sight of water tumbling down a cliff, splashing into a pool below, and stirring up a misty spray at the bottom. Waterfalls can captivate the eye and relax the spirit. But this is not so true when the waterfall is in your bedroom.

One day Larry came back to his apartment and heard a noise coming from his bedroom. He looked in and was stunned to see a waterfall in the corner of the room. Water was falling from the ceiling onto the carpet below. It wasn't a big waterfall. The rate of water falling was about twice the rate of a bathtub faucet.

After gazing at the phenomenon for a moment, Larry ran to the kitchen. He grabbed the plastic trash bucket, dumped its contents onto the kitchen floor, and ran back to the bedroom to place the bucket under the falling water. Over the next couple of minutes the water flow diminished and finally stopped.

In the meantime, Larry called the building superintendent. Larry showed the super the water damaged ceiling, the soaked carpet, and the half full bucket of water. Then the super went to the apartment upstairs to find out what disaster up there had caused this. Fifteen minutes later he came back and told Larry that he could not find the cause. The floors up there were dry. There was no sign of water having overflowed a sink or tub. What is more, the bathroom was more than ten feet from the bedroom corner and the kitchen sink was even further away. The super said the cause was a mystery.

Larry was told that he would have to move into another apartment while they repaired the damage. They started by moving his bed, which was not under the waterfall, into an empty apartment. That night as he lay in the strange apartment, he thought about the unexplainable waterfall. It was a mystery; it even seemed like a miracle.

Now Larry was an indifferent Christian. He went to church only occasionally. Why would God show him a miracle? Was it a sign of some kind? What did this miraculously falling water mean? Then it occurred to him that it might mean that he was to be the new John the Baptist and should go about baptizing as many people as he could.

He did not sleep well that night, but by morning he had formulated a tentative plan. He would drive around the country with a cooler full of holy water and baptize anyone who wanted it. He would pour the water over their heads and say the words. He might even dunk their heads in the cooler. Larry would have liked to do full immersion baptisms, but he could not afford to buy a trailer and install a Jacuzzi in it.

The next day Larry went to Walmart and bought a big plastic cooler. As he was paying for it, the cashier said "That should hold plenty of beer for a tailgate at the Packers game this weekend." Larry replied, "Not beer. I am going to fill it with holy water." The cashier looked at him funny, but completed the checkout.

The cashier's words gave Larry an idea. He could drive up to Green Bay, and offer baptisms to the tailgaters in the Lambeau Stadium parking lot before the game. He was not enthusiastic about this, but it seemed like the signs were pointing him towards it.

The day before the game he was still trying to figure out where to get the holy water, when the super came by again. He told Larry that he had found the cause of the waterfall. Two months earlier they had installed new carpeting in the apartment above. Without knowing it at the time, they had pounded a nail into one of the pipes of the hot water heating system. This produced a tiny hole in the pipe, through which water gradually leaked into the space between the floor of that apartment and Larry's ceiling. Over time the pool of water grew until it was heavy enough to burst through, producing the waterfall.

Of course, Larry realized that the waterfall was not a miracle and that he did not have to become the new John the Baptist. He was very relieved that he did not have to try to baptize a bunch of half-drunk Packer fans.

The cooler did eventually get filled with beer.

An Italian Afternoon

By Gerry Wettersten

Our two weeks in Italy were drawing to a close. This morning we toured Sienna. Now we have some free time in San Gimignano. My sister and I sit outside a small café whose tables with pink umbrellas are a perfect spot for enjoying cappuccinos and watching life in the Piazza della Cisterna. The cistern, or town well, which is the centerpiece of the piazza, was enclosed in a stone wellhead in 1237. Spots of lichen speak of its great age.

We relax in the mild spring sunshine, talking about our tour of a 12th century Romanesque church. The interior is lavishly covered in frescoes. On the left wall familiar stories from the Old Testament, scenes from the life of Jesus on the right. What delighted us was the very real individual faces of the characters. It seemed the painters had just stepped outside and beckoned for a passerby to come in and serve as a model. This impression was heightened by the painted figures' costumes. The Queen of Sheba, Noah, Pontius Pilot all wore the dress of prosperous 14th century Italians. Overhead the deep blue ceiling was dotted with gold stars.

We had seen the small chapel of Santa Fina, one of the town's patron saints. I regaled Venita with what I had read about her legend. When Fina was in her early teens (I think her age is significant) walking home from mass, she accepted the gift of an orange from an admiring youth. This struck her as such a sin that she immediately confessed to her mother, then fell upon the kitchen table and prayed for forgiveness. She remained on that table, praying, for nine years! At which time God, probably muttering "enough already", lifted her up to heaven. A fresco in the chapel showing her ascension included the towers of San Gimignano in the background. The painting of her life on the opposite wall showed her lying on a slab on the floor, with a normal table in the foreground. I was relieved that her family had been practical enough to move her and rebuild the table. I had pictured them eating standing for nine years.

We laugh at the story and watch the life of the piazza. People live in the narrow stone buildings surrounding us, over street level shops and restaurants. I see a fourth story window open and a gray haired woman vigorously shake her dust cloth. The sun glows on the creamy stone façade of a hotel directly across from us, the Albergo Cisterna, two windows wide and five stories tall.

I daydream of staying here, leaning out of my window to watch the vibrant life of the town.

The Italians are eminently sensible people. The root of the words “sensible” and “sensuous” is, of course, “sense.” What strikes me about their society is the importance accorded the senses. They surround themselves with beauty. Good food and drink are valued. There is music and loud conversation. Broad gestures and close

touch abound. I saw two men having what, to my blue eyes, looked like a ferocious argument—then laughing and clapping each other on the back as they parted.

I think the Italians have got it right. I wish I could linger in that sliver of an inn on the Piazza della Cisterna.

She Is Seven

by Dawn Proctor

She is seven

She wants to play with my computer

She wants to choose her own clothes

She gets homesick at night

She hates having her hair brushed

She loves her Grandpa more than anyone

He plays Barbies the best

She is seven.

She wants her own bra

She wants her own phone

She wants a unicorn

She is seven

Her mother does not want her

Her daddy cannot take her

She has had eight homes

and four dogs

All lost

She is seven.



Patchwork Samples—by Margi Rice

A Western Wedding

by *Bill Ladewig*

It was a warm day with the wind blowing dirt devils in strange dervish dances in the distance. The stranger rode his horse in unison with the trot of the horse, first up and then down. He wore a white duster for protection from the dirt and wind. His hat was pulled low, protecting his sandy hair, and his hands were slender but strong as they controlled the gait of the gelding.

“Whoa, boy! There she is. We’re almost there,” he said to the horse as they crept to the top of a ridge and saw the outline of a small town in the distance, out in the afternoon sun. It was 1879, and the Arizona Territory was still lawless, with the law of the Colt the only recognized force in the land.

Riding in, the stranger looked around at the prosperous small town that depended on its location as a destination to feed the mining camps as its impetus for growth. The stores were full of goods—calico for the women, branding irons and saddleware for the rancher, and implements for the farmer. The streets were dirt, but the hitching posts were set out in an orderly manner.

The stranger stopped at a place called the Longbow Hotel and Gambling Emporium. He tied his horse to the rail, untied his ditty bag from the saddle and carried it into the lobby. Behind a long desk stood an elderly man with spectacles peering over his nose. “Howdy, stranger. What can I do for you?”

“Well, I’m looking for a room and a bath, and if you can tell me where the Wesley ranch is, I’d be mighty appreciative,” the stranger said.

“Well, both of them would be pretty easy. The ranch is about five miles out of town. Just take the right fork as you go out, and you can’t miss it. There’s a big “W” on the fence post out there. Rooms is two bucks a night, and a bath is two bits if you’re willing to share with some of the other lodgers, and it’s down in back. Fresh towels are on the floor, and when you’re done, just leave ‘em there. The Missus picks ‘em up at night and replaces ‘em every day. You must be here for the wedding.”

“Yep. Mary’s my cousin. Ain’t seen her in years, but Dad said I had to make it, and I’m looking forward to it. Here’s the money. I’m just looking to stay one night. I’ll stay at the ranch tomorrow, but I want to look presentable before I show up.”

The older man reached behind and pulled a key out of the slot. “Room 202. Best room in the house, Mr...?”

“Don’t know if I rightly said, but you can call me Mr. Wesley. Say, is that a poker room you’ve got attached to this place?”

“Yes, sir, Mr. Wesley. Best place west of the Mississippi. Go on in and enjoy yourself.”

“Don’t mind if I do, but I want to clean up first. I’ve been riding for a number of days from Texas. Is there a place I can put my horse up for the night?”

“Yes, sir. The livery stable is right down the street. I can have one of the young boys take him down for you if you’d like.”

“Nah, I’ll take care of my own horse. He takes care of me, and I take care of him.” With that, the stranger took the key and walked up the stairs to his room. Three hours later, the stranger was walking back down the stairs. His clothes were brushed down, and he wore a coat with cuts on the side that allowed access to the pair of fortyfives. He walked towards the entrance to the gambling emporium and rested his eyes on a table in the corner where three men played cards.

He slid his hand down to his gun and pulled it out to see how smoothly it lifted. “Excuse me, fellows. Do you mind if I get into this game?” he asked.

The oldest one of the group barely looked up from his hand. “You got money. Sit down. Five card stud. Five dollar stakes. No limit raise. If you don’t got the money, you lose. No IOU’s. I’m Clem. This ugly one is called Lefty because he never learned to use the proper hand. This other cayuse is called Bronco because he ain’t ever been tamed. What’s your handle?”

The stranger looked at Clem with a smile and said, “Well, I don’t usually ask a man his name, but I’ll answer to Tex. Just came up from El Paso for a kin’s wedding,” he said as he sat down.

“Oh, you’re here for Mary’s shindig, are you? The whole town is going to celebrate that one. Never thought old Tom would ever get that little gal to say yes. Must have got her in a weak moment,” said Clem.

The stranger sat down and looked at his cards. He was used to cards. In fact, he made his living playing cards and odds and ends. Clem looked up at him and glanced at his face. “You know, I’ve been to El Paso, and you sure do look familiar. We ever met?”

“Well, if we did, I’m sure one of us would remember it, but don’t think I recall you,” said the stranger.

The cards were shuffled and reshuffled. Each took turns winning with the stranger winning more than his share but still not as much as Bronco, who was the big winner. It was Bronco’s turn to deal, and he dealt the stranger a straight flush. The bets were laid down, and the stranger watched as Bronco turned up a royal flush.

“You know, Bronco, you’re one lucky man. In fact, I don’t think I’ve seen such luck from an honest dealer in my life,” said the stranger.

“Are you calling me a cheat?” said the cowboy. He pulled the chips towards him and glanced up towards the stranger.

“Nope, I’m just suggesting that the last ace seemed to me to have been at the bottom of the deck when you started to deal, and it ended up on the top.”

Bronco jumped up to his feet. Both hands were curved over his revolvers, and he glared at the stranger. The stranger was on his feet, his hands in an identical position. Lefty and Clem pulled their chairs to the side as the two men faced each other.

Clem looked over at the stranger and said, “Hey stranger, I don’t know about you, but I do have

to go to that wedding tomorrow. Mary would be awfully upset if there would be a killing on the day before her wedding.”

The stranger looked over at Clem and said softly, “I guess you’re right, Mister. Maybe I was mistaken. Sorry about that, Bronco. No offense. I think I’ll just go up to my room and get some sleep before the big day.” He looked directly at Bronco and said, “Besides, we can finish this card game tomorrow night after the wedding.” Smiling, he picked up his money, turned and walked away, never looking back.

Bronco reached down, picked up his drink and threw it down his throat. “That damn geezer is darn lucky that I was feeling charitable, or I would have put him in Boot Hill, that no-good Texan. They’re all hot air, and when you show ‘em the right end of a gun, they all back down.”

Clem pushed his chair back in and picked up his cards. “Yep, you showed him, Bronco. I do think I remember where I’ve seen him. Mary told me she had a cousin down in El Paso and when I was down there, I asked the people to point him out to me. He’s a Wesley on his mother’s side. He uses it as his middle name. Down there they call him John Wesley Hardin.” As he said the name, he looked up at Bronco whose face seemed to blanch at the name of the most famous gunslinger of the West.

“What did you say?” His voice quaked as he realized that he had just faced his death.

“You know, Bronco, if I was you, which I ain’t, and I’m not saying you’re scared, but I’d be thinking that I should be checking out some of those passes going over to New Mexico. I’d say that you probably got a day’s start.”

Bronco looked at him. “I ain’t scared of some big-named gun slick.”

“Ain’t saying you are, boy. But he supposedly killed twenty-four men. Some of them were lawmen, and the law doesn’t even want to touch him. You’re a smart man. Ain’t worth getting killed.”

Bronco reached down to get his chips. Clem reached over and grabbed his hand. “I don’t think I’d be taking those. If he comes back, I’ll give ‘em to him, indicate your apology and tell him that there’s no hard feelings. Maybe save your life.”

“Thanks, Clem. I won’t forget this.” With that, Bronco turned and stormed out of the room, bowling over two onlookers.

Lefty had been sitting silently watching this and listening. “So, that’s the famous John Wesley Hardin, and I met him.”

“Nah, ya fool. That’s not John Wesley Hardin. That’s some coward from Texas. You saw how he backed down. I just told that tale to Bronco so I could get my chips back. Besides, he was dealing from the bottom of the deck, and this’ll teach him a lesson.” He pulled the chips over to his side of the table and began counting up for the night.

Waiting for an Oil Change

by Pauline Witte

I went to the children's section of the waiting area.
No one was there. It was quiet.
Soon a man and his small boy walked in.
They spoke softly to one another
In another language,
Not English.

The boy began to play with the Legos.
He made a red, green, and yellow airplane.
He found a Lego man to fly it.
His father sat across the room
Punching the keys on his cell phone
With one finger.

The boy was sitting on one leg
His chin resting on the other bent knee.
Sometimes he sang to himself
In a sweet whisper.

But sometimes he said things.
Just two or three syllables.
His father responded in the same way.
They didn't even look up.
Just soft pats of sound touched the air
Giving each other complete reassurance.

A Golden Day in the Woods

by Franklynn Peterson

Just after moving back to Wisconsin, it seemed the height of outdoors-ship to spend a few days in the folks' North Woods cabin during deer hunting season. True, I won a Marksman's Medal in my ROTC class, but the only hunting I'd done in New York City were occasions when I had to find where I'd parked the darned car.

Day one in the woods arrived with a bone-busting shiver the likes of which no human should ever suffer, but suffer I did. I was clad in ear-muffled cap one size too large, that cut off half my vision, in an insulated coat so padded that I felt like a clown, with insulated waterproof high-boots that I'd never practiced wearing and by God I should have, and hunting gloves so clumsy as to give the deer all the advantages. I bottomed it off with blue jeans so thin I felt frozen from thigh to all the unmentionables. Off to the van we marched. Oh, yes, my sweet wife, who had never been in a Wisconsin hunting season nor North Woods winter, came along to get a taste of what frontier life must have been like. She had her own rifle and her spunk at the ready, and she had mastered both.

We no sooner got to the hunting spot we'd decided upon when it started to snow. This was a full-bore Wisconsin cover-'em-up-fast kind of snow. Most folks might cower from it, but not us. We stood firm on our Right to Bear Arms and silently waited for that big buck to move out of the woods and into our rifle sights.

Soon deep silence gave way to ghostly drum beats, but from where, we sure didn't know. It wasn't animal, at least not any large one. Vegetable? Possibly. Not mineral, surely. Cautiously we peered left, right, up, down, at each other. Suddenly both our mouths opened to realization: for the first time ever, we were hearing flake after flake after flake of pure white snow dropping onto still-green large leaves. Snow! Drumming! We savored nature's concert.

Suddenly we sensed that we had company. On tip-toes, no doubt, a large female deer had invaded our space. She was off-limits to hunters and seemed to sense that fact proudly as she foraged corn and soybeans left behind by harvesters. While we shivered in rhythm with the snowdrops, she just looked warm, occasionally eying us with quiet amusement.

When my wife announced, "Enough," we traipsed back to the van. She started it up and sat by its heaters, determined to stay there while Hell froze over or I

came to my senses. Lacking senses, I did decide that it was a little late in the day to go back to standing in a planted field. Better my luck, for sure, scouting a couple of game paths. I found where two crossed each other and looked so worn they were obviously busy. I was shivering as my hands turned numb and stiff. But a trampling set of game feet brought new life to this old woodsman.

Large game was carelessly approaching without concern for the noise he made. It was too noisy not to be a big buck. Forcing the icicles in my mittens to click the safety lever in my Winchester rifle to "off", I was ready to make it a great day of hunting. The big beast landed smack in the middle of where the game trails crossed. I stood upwind so he must have known I was some kind of human. He was no buck but a wolf. I expected

such a large wolf would take off running when he saw me or smelled my scent, but he just stared at me as if I was his first human. I stared right back and instinctively clicked the rifle's safety to "on."

"Dummy" I scolded myself immediately, "that's sure to scare him." But he seemed to know exactly what I'd done. I could see the muscles supporting his toughened grey fuzzy legs start to relax one by one. After about ten minutes, he tired of my beauty. The mighty tan and grey wolf friend trotted back down the trail, destination unknown. Instinctively, I waved as he left. I swear that he waved his head back a few times as he got up to speed. *Trust me!*

I shot no deer that day, but who needed a deer? I'd befriended a wolf, and his visitation gave me a very special view into life. If a life can be so beautiful and such an inspiration, who needs death?

Fish, Flowers, and Clocks

Fiction in a flash: Five stories of 55 words or less

by Lorna Kniaz

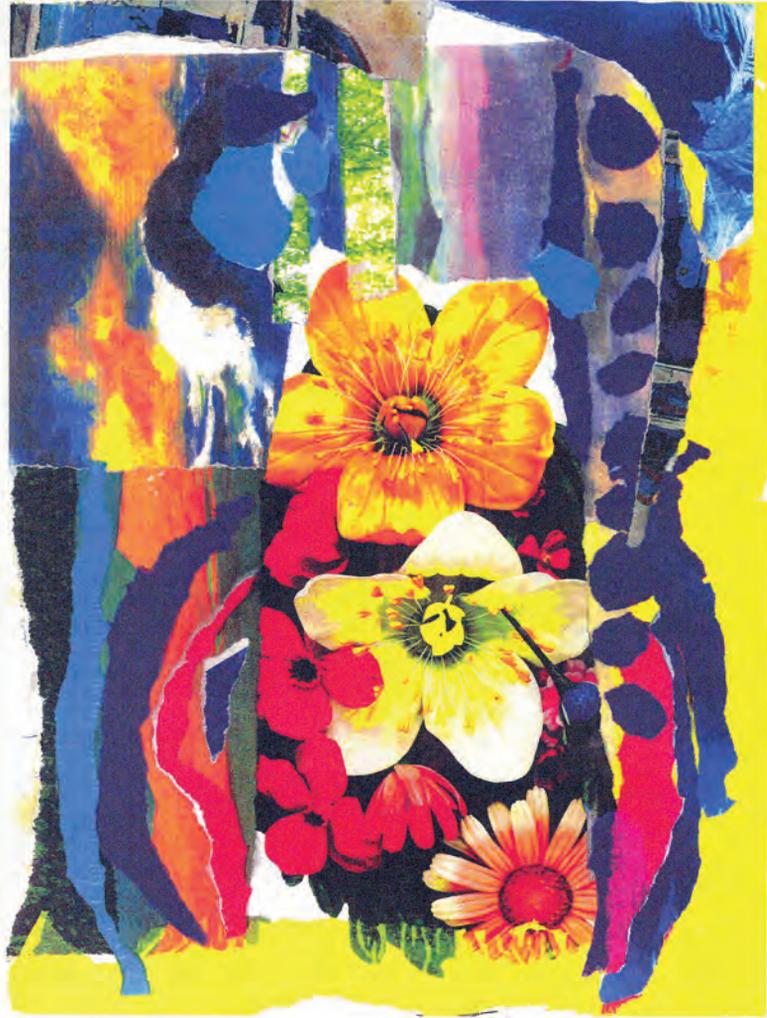
He only had to pick up flowers and change clothes. The boat clock showed it was early so he could stay longer. A school of fish passed; when he looked again he saw the hands hadn't moved. He was pretty sure his bride wouldn't wait at the altar for him. So he cast out again.

The goldfish floated upside down in the bowl. The flowers were near dead and the grandfather clock had run down. All in all, not an auspicious first visit to his prospective in-laws.

He wore fish and tails, clocks on his socks, spats and a flower on his lapel. He definitely was way, way too old for her.

His face was as round as a clock and he was built like a cod fish but his flowery words made her heart flutter.

She hummed as she arranged his flowers but he gave her the fish eye so she clocked him.



Night Garden—by Grethe Brix-J. Leer

Bankruptcy

by George Faunce

My parents went bankrupt in 1957, but with financial help from some relatives, were able to at least hold onto our home. In 1969 they went belly-up again, and this time lost the house for good. By then their four boys had found other places to stay. Oldest brother Skip had been drafted for the Viet Nam war. Denny, second oldest, was working as an electrical engineer in Pennsylvania. John, the youngest, was just out of high school and hanging out in Philadelphia with some questionable friends. I was newly married, returning to New Jersey from graduate school at the University of Iowa. My new bride Maggie and I were staying with friends while I searched (desperately) to find a teaching job.

The apartment Mom and Dad were renting didn't allow pets, so our family dog, Dusty, had nowhere to go. There were no volunteers willing to take Dusty in; he was old, a bit wild and too set in his ways. So on the day of their move, when Maggie and I came over to help with the packing, Dad pulled me aside.

Parry, I need you to take Dusty to the shelter—and put him down.

Kill him? Come on, Dad, are you serious!

No one will take him. We can't leave him here. So what are we going to do?

Isn't there somewhere he can go, at least for a while? What about Mom? You know how much she loves Dusty. He's been with us since he was a pup, Dad. He's one of us.

She can't handle this. It's got to be done while she's still packing, before she realizes he's gone. She'll get used to it. Listen, I need you to do this. Otherwise we won't be able to move! You know your mother; she'll hold onto him and refuse to let him go. Then what? Then what are we going to do?

Something had to be done, that was certain; but as usual Dad had waited until the last minute, then left the problem for someone else to handle. That was his pattern. With just hours to go before they had to vacate their home, however, I couldn't see any alternatives. Dusty was old, none of us could take him in, and we couldn't just let him loose in the streets to fend for himself. So...

Dusty jumped about in the back of Maggie's car as we drove to the shelter. He seemed curious and excited, happy to be with me again; thinking, I

imagined, that we were off on some new adventure. He would peer out the back window, then squeeze between the front seats and look up at me panting, as if asking, *Everything okay here, chief? Are we on a fun trip together? Are you going to sing me some more of your doo-wop songs?* He trusted me completely.

We got to the shelter and Maggie waited in the car as I took him in. They requested a donation for the ‘service to be rendered,’ so I gave them the three dollars and change I had left in my wallet. I knelt down to hug Dusty one last time as they snapped a leash onto his collar. He started to lick my hand. Tightening the leash, the worker pulled him toward the back door, his little claws slipping on the linoleum floor as he strained to look back at me. The other man at the desk told me that was it; I could leave. Amazing how quickly decisions like these are made in our lives. Quickly, callously. Irrevocably.

Numb, I walked out to the parking lot, slowing down with each step until I found myself just standing there, staring straight ahead at nothing. I turned and rushed back in, calling for them to stop. The man at the counter was startled, then got annoyed, saying, *Come on, pal, you don't need to do this. They've probably got it started right now anyway, so don't trouble yourself, okay? Go home.* (Home? Home had been my house on Harvard Avenue. Home had been my parents, my brothers, and our dog.)

I demanded to see Dusty—immediately. *What had I done?* Reluctantly, a bit angrily, he led me through to the back of the building. In a small concrete enclosure was what looked like a small dumpster. The man on duty there pried open its lid and fumes began to seep out. There was a wheezing sound like air escaping from a punctured lung. Donning a pair of gloves he reached in and pulled on something, lifting it up by the scruff of

its neck. It was Dusty, his eyes staring, but lifeless; his body stiff. His paws extended upward... toward where he had tried to claw his way through the lid.

The two men watched me warily for a reaction. I gave none. I just walked away. In the parking lot I burst into tears. Maggie looked at me aghast as I bent over the car, sobbing. She had accompanied me to this charnel ground for moral support, but now wondered just who this person was she had married. She had caught her first glimpse of *Parry*, the person I had been hiding from her and everyone else for some time now. And she didn't like what she saw.

Parry had been my childhood nickname, before I insisted that everyone call me by my first name, George. It was more than a nickname, though; Parry represented the child in me that had been so overwhelmed by the world. All my friends from college only knew me as George, but at home I would forever be Parry. Parry's re-entry into the light, however, would be as brief as Dusty's. Soon there would be only George again. George would be more capable of handling things like this as years went by; distasteful, immoral and ugly things that required a steadier hand, thicker skin and less reflection. Less compassion too. And always, less love. A bankruptcy, in its own way, of the soul.

When we got back to the house, Mom confronted me as I walked in. All in a rush, she asked, *Where's Dusty, Parry? WHERE'S DUSTY?* I looked around but Dad was nowhere to be found. *Dusty is dead, Mom. We had to put him down.* She pulled the apron up to her face and let out a soft whimper. She ran up the stairs into her bedroom of sixteen years, and shut the door.

Let's go further back now. As far back as we can, into the 1950s. We'll revisit our *first* bankruptcy, when we were still four boys in need of parenting. The mortgage company, frustrated by Dad's continual skipping of payments, decided to send a collection agent to our house one day to 'shake things up.'

The pounding on the door got our attention. Dusty barked a sharp warning and brothers Denny and John followed as I ran to answer. (Hey, it was something to do!) We told the agent that Dad wasn't in (which was true; he was at the Garden State Race Track). The agent peered over our heads suspiciously, like we were hiding a dead body under the sofa. Then he pulled a hammer out of his coat pocket. *How odd was that?* Then he pulled out a nail. And then...he began hammering a legal-looking document right into the side of our house! A piece of shingle split in half and dropped to the ground. I don't remember exactly what the notice said, but it no doubt announced 'Foreclosure,' 'Sheriff's Sale,' or something of that happy nature. Nevertheless, we were being disgraced in front of our neighbors; marked by Hawthorne's infamous *Scarlet Letter*. We had been branded the Hester Prynnes of Harvard Ave. The A on our doorframe proclaimed that we were *debt-owing adulterers*, which I had to explain to my little brother meant that we were having 'intercourse' with other people's money.

The collection agent turned and started to walk away with a swagger. Big brother Skip, only fourteen at the time, pushed past us and opened the screen door. Reaching out, he ripped the notice off the siding before the guy had cleared our (grassless) front yard. *Whoaaa!* The big bruiser turned around. He pushed the brim of his fedora up on his forehead so we could more clearly glimpse his displeasure. He took a wide stance and squared his shoulders.

In response, Skip stepped onto the stoop. He let the screen door go and it slammed with a *smack!* John, Denny, and I pressed our noses into the screen, pushing it out further. Dusty growled softly, his paws on the windowsill as he stood tippy-toed on his hind legs beside us, snout against screen. Matching the adult's stare, Skip began crushing the notice slowly in his fist until it was a little wad. He tossed it in the man's direction. The balled-up notice proclaiming our imminent demise hit the dirt and rolled rather tepidly between the guy's legs, coming to a stop at last...*right below his balls.*

For a second everyone froze; John, me, Denny, Dusty (in mid-woof). Skip and the agent remained locked in a staring contest, as the neighbors eased out on their porches to enjoy the spectacle. No one moved. A Harvard Avenue tableau had been formed; an image suitable for painting by Norman Rockwell, perhaps to be titled, *Home for the Holidays.*

Then the agent turned...and walked away. *Just like that.* The show was over without the grand finale. But it was a class act for John, me, Denny, and Dusty to have witnessed. Our older brother had gone Hollywood on us. I admit he didn't then turn and rip the nail out of the wall with his teeth. That would have been a modern film version where only super powers, spandex pants, and CGI can hold a Millennial's attention. But back in the 1950s Skip's feat was enough in itself. There was pristine power in it. Even Dusty seemed impressed. He sat down at Skip's feet when he came back in, placed a paw on top of his sneaker—and began to chew contentedly on his shoelaces.

Funny how bankruptcies can sometimes pull a family together like that. Usually, they just tear them apart.

Gilbert

by Jo Ann Carr

As we entered *Little's Laundromat and Dri-Clean* a faint earthy odor underlay the usual perfume of bleach and dry cleaning solvent wafting out the door. We five youngest Daly girls took our places in the line of children eagerly anticipating the moment when Mrs. Little would reach into the crates beside her and place a soft, pastel bundle into our hands.

Reaching carefully into the crates, Mrs. Little selected a different color of chick for each of us. Mine was pink, Maureen's was green, Sara's was blue, Chris's was orange, and Brenda's chick was the most beautiful shade of pale purple we had ever seen. As he nestled in her hands, Brenda whispered, "His name is Gilbert."

With our chirping rainbow of Easter Chicks lovingly cradled in our hands we scurried home to show Mom our treasures. As soon as Dad came home from work we grabbed his hands and led him to our beautiful chicks in their banana box home. We promised Dad we would change the shredded newspapers in their box each day and make sure they always had fresh water. Dad reminded us that baby chicks also needed to eat and we rushed outside to find weeds and worms for them. Satisfied that we had done all we could for our chicks, we reluctantly went in for our own dinner.

Early the next morning I went over to our neighbor's house to see their chicks. Madonna, her sister Rita, and I were in the shed in their back yard gazing lovingly at their chicks when the girls' brother, Pat, noisily barged in. As soon as he saw three girls cooing over the chicks he left in disgust, forgetting to close the shed door behind him.

A snarling bundle of low-legged fur came charging into the shed. Rocky grabbed the chicks in his mouth. We screamed as a shower of pink, orange, blue, and green feathers descended upon us. At the sound of our screams, Mrs. Clifford dashed out of the house. When she saw the carnage before her she quickly ran back inside and emerged a moment later flinging cold, slimy, flopping hot dogs toward Rocky in a vain attempt to distract him from his kill. Rocky glanced at her dismissively and went back to consuming his prey. Only when all four chicks were dead did Rocky happily turn to gulping down the hot dogs.

As Madonna and Rita hovered in shock and grief over the multicolored pile of bloody feathers, I slowly and sadly returned home. I vowed that we would take even better care of our chicks and they would never meet such a violent fate.

Over the next few weeks, our chicks continued to thrive. By mid-May they were ready to move outdoors. Dad helped us buy some chicken wire from Ace Hardware, and we constructed a pen in the corner of the house next to Mom and Dad's bedroom window.

One by one, our lovely chicks began disappearing or dying. Some mornings we came outside to find a chick missing and we would determinedly reinforce the chicken wire fencing. On other mornings the surviving chicks would be happily pecking away at the floor of their pen while a dead chicken with closed eyes and splayed legs lay in their midst. We lovingly buried these dear departed chickens under the bushes lining the alley. Finally only the regal Gilbert remained.

On a Saturday morning in late summer, Mom told us that it was time for Gilbert to live with other chickens. The next day we drove to our Great-Uncle Al's farm where we left Gilbert happily cavorting with his new chicken friends.

Over the remaining summer and early fall, we continued to visit Gilbert when we would make the trip to Uncle Al's farm. After Sunday Mass we'd ask Uncle Al and Aunt Louise how Gilbert was doing. With his customary gentle twinkle in his eye, Al would reply, "Your chicken is fine and dandy."

One early winter morning, Mom answered a knock on the front door. There stood Uncle Al with a package wrapped in white paper in his hands. "Morning, Julie, I was culling the chickens and thought it was time for that scrawny one of yours to be harvested."

With our mouths agape, we watched in disbelief as Mom took the package from Uncle Al and placed our white shrouded Gilbert in the refrigerator. We hovered upstairs in shock and grief as Mom prepared Gilbert for his final resting

place. When it was time for dinner we solemnly trudged downstairs. With downcast eyes, the four youngest girls slid onto the bench on the far side of the table.

After thanking God for the bounty he had bestowed upon us, Dad reached for the steaming bowl before him and plopped a big serving of Gilbert and dumplings on his plate. He passed the bowl to Sue, who reached for the serving spoon. Just then a quiet sob of grief escaped from Brenda's quivering mouth.

Without dipping into the bowl, Sue put down the serving spoon and passed the bowl to Mary. At fifteen, Mary was usually beyond our childish ways, but with an exasperated sigh she passed the bowl to Mike. A bit confused by the lack of food on his sisters' plates, Mike attempted to pass the bowl to me but I refused to lay my hands on Gilbert's oval coffin. Mom took the bowl from Mike and spooned some Gilbert and dumplings on her plate. Mom was turning to serve Brenda her evening meal when all four girls on the bench burst into wails of mourning.

Very gently, Mom put down the serving dish and spoon as Dad quietly said, "You girls can be excused." Forlornly we trudged back upstairs and cried ourselves to sleep.

Mom and Dad did the dishes that night. When we came down for breakfast the next morning there was no leftover Gilbert haunting the refrigerator.

Since that day over fifty years ago I have never allowed a morsel of chicken and dumplings to pass my lips, even during the annual trips with my in-laws to their favorite country style all-you-can eat restaurant. As they passed veritable cauldrons of steaming chicken and dumplings around the table I would sit, in silent, loyal tribute to Gilbert, and enjoy my Caesar salad.



Adam—by Donald Tubesing

Folk Tale

By Gundega Korsts

There came the day when the Queen gave birth again, to a little girl. The first child had been born into the springtime, into smiles and roses. The second child was born into the summer, plump with early fruits. This third child was born into the winter, and though the sun shone on the mountains, the snow was cold and the Queen's milk was thin and cold and the child did not thrive.

The Lady Mother smiled at the cold and wept in the night, but the child did not thrive. Her nimble fingers formed threads out of rags, and flowers out of threads, but threads do not feed and the child grew weaker and closer to death.

The Learned Doctors advised the Queen, "Let go this weakest child and save your strength for the living." The Ladies of the Court said, "Put the child in a pretty basket and leave her in the courtyard. Go back to your summer palace. God will send a passing pedlar to take her in. She will have a brave new life, with ribbons and trinkets." But the Queen still smiled at the cold, stiffly, and wept in the night, long, and the two sisters stood by, silent and waiting.

At last, on a bright blue day, three Wanderers came to the Castle. The King and Queen welcomed them to a feast of cold water and warm laughter, breaking bread with broken hearts. "Our spring child grows silent and our summer child grows thin, for this winter child grows not at all, though food we have again, and warmth returns with each day's sun." At this, for love of the Queen, each of the three looked on the child and blessed her.

The first Wanderer said, "I wish you life and strength." But the hard work of dying needs much strength, and the child still grew weaker.

The second Wanderer stepped up and said, "I wish you life and joy." But there is joy in the evening as there is joy in the morning, and the child grew still weaker.

The third Wanderer looked last of all at the strong and joyful dying child and said, "I wish you life and hope." And the child looked up and returned to life.

Where some I know were raised Jewish and some were raised Lutheran or Catholic or Quaker, I, my dear friends, grew up Folk Tale.

It happens that in 1945, the year I was born into war and then starved and near dying in the first months of no longer war, three bishops passed through our refugee camp in Hanau, Germany, and, along their way, blessed me, the dying child (who, as you see, did not die).

My sister Līga was born in a Latvian May; my sister Anda, in a Latvian July; and I, in a snowy Thuringian February. In 1936 and 1942 and 1945.

My mother saw us through that year, though many told her she could not possibly save all three children, that holding on to a starveling newborn would risk the lives of the two as yet still on their feet. The week I was born, one woman even assured my mother that if I were left behind under a lid some Russian soldier would be sure to find me and bring me to a good home.

I have still a baby bib that my mother embroidered with a cheerful springtime scene of pussywillows, fresh grass, and a warm, welcoming house. I have held in my hands a checker-patterned diaper, hand-knit from sacking unraveled.

I had often thought of my three seemingly magical bishops, but only today did I think to wonder what exactly were my three blessings.

My answer arrived, of course, as folk tale.

A List Maker's Psalm of Discipline

by Donald Tubesing

Hear ye, all you tasks, ideas, obligations, and interests that plague me.
I created you. I gave you life.

You surround me and scream for attention,
Jumping up and down shouting “ME, ME, ME.”
You look foolish, begging like that.

It sickens me.
The din of your cacophony plagues me.
I am annoyed by your self-centered whining.
My soul is ill from the day and night of your incessant noise.
Your arrogance leads you astray.
Your demand that I notice you daily, tires me.

Listen up now as I set down guidelines for you all.
You will be wise to accept these dictates as binding.
Mark my word, you will heed these instructions or be eliminated.

My imagination dreamed you into existence.
You are merely a possibility, not reality.
You live on my list only as a convenience to me.
I keep you as one among many options I may call on each morning
to create an interesting day for myself.
Whether or not I ever activate you is a matter entirely of my choosing.

Until then, do not approach me without invitation.
Shut up! Back off! Sit quietly! Wait your turn!
Yes, I know I am shouting. Listen up!
This is important for your future.

Yesterday I purchased a four pack of permanent black ink markers—
the kind that put fear of death into any list dweller pushing for special attention.
Be forewarned, none of you ever survives extinction by Sharpie.

Ah, how I yearn to spend quality time with you.
But alas, if that moment never arrives,
we shall both pass away together—unfinished.

So be it.



Chinese Boatman—by Peggy Wireman

The Small World of PLATO

By Meg Skinner

PLATO makes the world smaller. This was demonstrated to me on my first day of Reminiscence Writing with Judy Havens in the fall of 2014. I was joining a class that had been meeting continuously for several years, so Judy suggested that we introduce ourselves and tell what we wanted to write about. As a newbie, I said I wanted to write about the three years and several summers I had spent in Nigeria, because Nigeria had been receiving a lot of bad press of late, what with the atrocities of Boko Haram, Ebola, and internet scams.

When the circle came round to one of the “old timers”, then 91 year old Dr. Frank Springer offered that he had been born and raised in Elmwood, Wisconsin, and except for his time in Med School at UW Madison, and two years in the US Navy in China, he had practiced medicine in Elmwood and environs, and mostly wrote about his patients. Continuing members agreed that he had some great stories to relate.

When the class took a break, I asked Dr. Springer when and where was he in China. His reply was that he was the medical officer on four destroyers based in the port of Tsingtao, from 1947 to October of 1948, when Mao overtook the port city and ordered the US Navy out of Chinese waters.

I did some quick calculations, and asked him if he had happened to run across a Dr. Hugh Skinner, my father-in-law. “Why yes,” he said excitedly, “I gave him penicillin.” He described the scene, when the officer on deck came to him in the Sick Bay and said there was someone there to see him. “What does he want?” he asked. “I don’t know,” replied the officer. “Well, send him down,” said Dr. Springer, expecting someone of Chinese origin.

But he was surprised when in walked a balding, blue-eyed Scotsman, asking if by chance he had any penicillin to share, as he was desperately in need for the many malnourished and injured patients who were flooding into Tsingtao from the north and south, both of which had been taken over by Mao. Only the capitol, Beijing, and the port city of Tsingtao were still in the hands of the Kuomintang, and their followers were desperate to get out of the mainland to Taiwan by way of the port. I was a child in those days, and if I didn’t finish everything on my plate, I was admonished to “think of the starving Chinese.” The starving Chinese were pouring into Dr. Skinner’s clinic, and he had run out of vital supplies, which were hard to come by due to the civil war.

Dr. Springer, however, was well supplied by the Navy: "After all, I was only treating sore throats and gonorrhea among the sailors," he told me that first day, and so he willingly gave Dr. Skinner penicillin from his dispensary on that ship. Dr. Skinner, in turn, invited him to see something of the city, as he had been there since January and spoke Mandarin fluently. Among other things, they priced penicillin on the Black Market, where an astronomical price was asked for what Dr. Springer had just given Dr. Skinner.

Dr. Skinner invited Dr. Springer to visit his clinic, a practice he had taken over from a German doctor who had seen the writing on the wall and gone home to West Germany. Tsingtao had once had a German enclave under a League of Nations mandate, and the Germans taught the Chinese how to brew beer. To this day, most Chinese beer one encounters in the US is likely to be Tsingtao beer. Dr. Springer, fresh out of Medical School with only one year of residency under his belt, was eager for medical case studies other than the mundane complaints of the sailors, and so asked if he could return to observe the clinic in operation when he was next in port and had some spare time.

In fact, Dr. Springer did have important duties other than treating seasick sailors. As they plied the China Sea, he participated in the radiation survey of the survivors of Nagasaki. On another occasion he administered small pox vaccinations after an outbreak at a Leper Colony west of Beijing.

Dr. Skinner, on the other hand, had been doing surgery and practicing medicine in China since 1905, mainly in the British concession of Hankow, now part of metropolitan Wuhan. There he had treated the wounded from the 10/10/1911 uprising by the Nationalists, which is celebrated as the National Independence Day of Taiwan. He married an English woman, Winifred Beney, in 1909, and they had a daughter, Jennifer, in 1915 and

a son, Neil, in 1921. Neil had little recollection of his father from those early years, because his father was so often at his hospital, or in the pathology lab he used in a nearby Catholic hospital.

Both children were sent back to England for schooling in 1928, at a time when Sino-Japanese tensions were heating up. Although during times of unrest in China their mother went back and forth to London via the Orient Express, or a P & O steamer, Neil saw his father only once between 1928 and 1953. His father had come to Neil's "public" Shrewsbury School for an awards assembly during which Neil was to be honored, and, in Neil's recollection, spent the visit badgering his schoolmasters about the progress he was or wasn't making, ignoring the opportunity to re-bond with his son.

In the intervening years Neil had met, as adults, several Chinese and Americans who had been delivered by his father in Hankow, most notably the children's author Jean Fritz, whose book *Homesick*, describing her childhood in Hankow, won the National Book Award. The sequel, *China Homecoming*, relates a story told by her father about her own birth, and the esteem her mother held for Dr. Skinner. But other than his father's proactive removal of Neil's tonsils and adenoids, leaving him "a nasal cripple", Neil had little direct knowledge of his father as a practicing physician, that is, until Dr. Frank Springer appeared in our lives via PLATO.

After that initial meeting, I arranged to bring Dr. Springer to Capitol Lakes Terraces, where my husband Neil, then 92, was resident. I brought along the scrapbook that Dr. Skinner had kept of his days in Tsingtao. Dr. Springer, whose memory was still very much intact, recalled how when shadowing him in his clinic, Dr. Skinner would summon him to his side to observe something he thought would be new to him. For example, he

distinctly remembered when Dr. Skinner called him over to observe a young Chinese girl he was treating for rickets. He placed his hand over the girl's scalp and pressed in—and the bones were so soft, her skull dented in. This was not something he had seen in Medical School, or probably ever saw in his subsequent practice in Elmwood.

Dr. Springer related how sorry he was to be ordered out of Tsingtao without bidding farewell to his mentor, and how often he had wondered if Dr. Skinner got out alive after Mao took over. “He was the dedicated doctor I wanted to be” said Dr. Springer, “and for years I asked anyone I met from China if they knew what happened to him.”

For his part, Neil was delighted to hear, at age 92, a good report of his father from a fellow practitioner, and was able to fill Dr. Springer in on what happened to Dr. Skinner both before and after 1947-48. Dr. Skinner had been taken prisoner of war by the Japanese the day after Pearl Harbor, under circumstances not unlike those portrayed by the Scots doctor in the movie *Empire of the Sun*. On his release he was taken on the Swedish ship the *Grypsholm*, exchanged for a Japanese prisoner, and unceremoniously left in Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) Mozambique. From there he made his way to Durban, South Africa, to earn enough money for his passage back to China. On his return to Hankow, he found the Americans had bombed the hospital

where his lab was located, so he practiced in the Nationalist capitol of Chongqing, until that was taken over by Mao. At that point, Dr. Stinger filled in as Acting Medical Examiner of Hong Kong for a year, then took over the German doctor's practice in Tsingtao, where he met Dr. Springer in 1947.

In fact, Neil related, his father stayed on in Tsingtao until 1950, when the new Chinese Communist Government tried to limit his practice to the dwindling expatriate community. That was not why he had gone to China in the first place—he went to treat anyone who needed his services—so after roughly 45 years of practicing medicine, he left penniless for New Zealand, where he was born. There he was offered two *locum tenens* practices, one in the salubrious North Island, and the other in the far South Island, next stop Antarctica, where he developed Parkinson's disease, not the best diagnosis for a practicing surgeon. New Zealand allowed him to qualify for their equivalent of social security, even though he spent little time working there. And so he died peacefully in Auckland, the city where he was born, having spent 70 of his 79 years in either Scotland or China.

His son, my husband, passed away in March, 2015, at age 93. The highlight of his last year was hearing good things about the father he barely knew, a result of the small world of PLATO.



Chinese Temple—by Peggy Wireman

Mr. Banks and Fury

by Bill Eisinger

When we opened the barn door, I heard a whinny. “Look, she’s standing at the gate to her stall.” My older brother Jimmy and I walked slowly toward our filly. We walked quietly; didn’t want to spook her. Dad bought her last month at a cheap price because she was a mustang straight off the open range. When she was delivered to our farm you never saw a worse looking filly. She was frightened as a trapped wild animal and shivered with a fever. Her palomino coat was shaggy and matted with manure. Only two lonely boys in the 1950s could have fallen in love with such a godforsaken beast. However, during the past weeks, we had nursed her back to health and managed to clean off the worst of the manure on her coat. Although she was still wild at heart, for the first time in the month she didn’t run away from us when we cautiously approached her stall.

“Here girl.” I reached out my hand with a few oat seeds on my palm. “Look, she’s actually eating out of my hand.” I was so excited I raced back to get more oats.

School would soon be out and Jimmy and I could devote ourselves to taming this wild range horse. We had recently moved to this isolated small farm and I had just turned ten years old. Jimmy was tall, thin and blond; he favored Dad’s German side of the family. I was small, fine boned. and dark like my Mom’s family. The transition to farm life was hard for me. I missed my town friends; we would play together after school and on weekends. Here on the farm there were no neighbor kids to come over and play. In addition, Dad had Jimmy and me doing really hard work fixing up the dilapidated barn and preparing the long abandoned fields for crops. Because of health issues, Dad had given up his good paying salesman job in the city and now worked long hours as a menial factory worker. We had little money and Mom and Dad often argued about bank notes that were due. This family conflict really upset Jimmy and me. During these troubled times we both needed a focus in our lives and this scrawny filly became the symbol of our hope for better times.

We knew that if we tried to enter the stall she would run from us. So after we spread fresh straw, Jimmy tried to brush her by reaching between the boards on the stall while I distracted her with handfuls of oats. “Here girl, we just want to brush you.” Jimmy fought to brush and comb her shaggy coat. “Look at all the old hair that comes off her.” The dark brown bristles of the brush were clogged with dull whitish horse hair. It took Jimmy a full half

hour to complete the brushing because the colt kept moving away from his extended arms. "Oh, look at this." Even in the dark barn I could see scars on her skin from old horse kicks and bites. She had had a hard life on the open range in Colorado. We both sighed, "Oh, you poor thing."

The next morning at breakfast Jimmy made a bold statement to Mom, "We're going to take the horse out for some exercise."

"Jimmy, that filly's pretty wild. She'll run away for you. You could be hurt." After a pause, Mom said, "Your dad wouldn't like it. Why not wait until Saturday when he can help you?"

Jimmy's face turned red as he clinched his jaw, "No, we're taking the filly out this morning!" Despite Mom's protests, we headed out to the barn.

Jimmy tied two ropes firmly to the filly's halter. "Now Billy, you hold this rope on this side, and I'll hold another rope on the other side." Although Jimmy's voice sounded authoritative, I could see that he was scared to death.

Surprisingly, we had little trouble guiding the filly out of her stall and through the barn door. However, the bright light and outdoor sounds spooked her. "Easy now!" Jimmy tried to make his voice sound very calm and in control.

"I can't hold on any more." My hands burned as the rope slipped through my grip and my arms ached with the constant battle as the filly tried to break free.

Quick as a shot, the horse spun around and I went flying and lost my grip on my rope. Poor Jimmy was trying to control her all by himself.

"Howdy, boys, can I give ya a hand?" An honest-to-God cowboy was standing before us complete with boots and a ten gallon hat! "I live just across yonder and I've been a watching you boys. Can

I help ya?" With one smooth gesture, he reached for the halter and began to stroke the filly, "Easy girl. You're gonna be fine." In an instant the filly was calm and began to breathe normally. "The name is Banks and I hail from Oklahoma. I rode herd on a big ranch out there. Now I drive a danged truck." His weathered face had a distant look as he gazed over the confined Midwest farmland. "I sure do miss the open range."

By this time Mom had come out from the house. "Howdy, ma'am, the name is Banks. I bunk in that house over yonder. I were a cowhand back in Oklahoma. I were just giving your boys a hand with their filly." He tipped his hat to Mother and flashed a broad smile on his sunburnt face, "It's a pleasure to meet you, Ma'am."

Mom blushed, "Thanks for helping my boys." With Dad gone so much of the time, she had her hands full trying to keep house and raise us boys.

"If I might, I'd like to show your boys a gentle way to break horses. It's worked real good for me." He had a bright twinkle in his deep blue eyes.

"Oh, I guess that'd be OK." Mom smiled at us, "Excuse me, but I have a cake in the oven." Mom nodded to Mr. Banks then hurried back to the house.

Banks ran his hands over the filly and examined her carefully, "This here's a fine horse for you boys. She's a bit on the small side, but that's just what you boys need. Small horses make good cutters. I had me a horse no more than 14 hands that was the best danged rodeo horse I ever rode."

"Now, let me learn you some things about horses." He placed his hand firmly on the horse's shoulder, "Never touch a horse lightly. They'll think that you're a fly and will try to knock you off. A firm hand's the thing." Jimmy and I were fascinated by what he said and his authentic Western drawl; he was a real cowboy. We both

tried petting the filly. She seemed so relaxed when we firmly stroked her.

“Now you need to check her hooves regular.” He ran his hand from the shoulder down to the filly’s foot. “Slide your hand down like I do. If you just take and grab her foot, she’ll kick.” In a smooth, confident move, he raised the hoof and examined the bottom. “Now this here’s the ‘frog’; you’ve got to keep it clean.” He expertly used his knife to clear the mud and manure from the tender inner part of the bottom of her hoof. “Feel it with your bare hand. If it’s warm, it’s probably infected. The thing to do is to clean it real good then douse it with turpentine.”

Jimmy and I just listened and stared blank faced. He just knew everything about horses.

Banks dropped the foot and looked us in the eye. “Now I want you to practice leading the filly. First you look the horse in the eye and let her know who’s boss. Then you give the halter a firm tug and start to walk. If you’re scared the filly will know it and try to run off.” He handed the lead rope to Jimmy.

He was so short that he had to pull the horse’s head down to his eye level. “Now look, I’m in charge.” The filly snorted and gave its head a shake.

Jimmy reluctantly jerked the lead rope and began to walk. The filly balked and Jimmy began to pull with all his might. “I’m just not strong enough!”

“Now look boy, you ain’t gonna control no horse with your muscles; you control her with your mind. Show the filly who’s boss and it’ll do anything you want.” Banks put his arm on Jimmy’s shoulder. “Just look the horse in its eye and give the rope one strong tug.”

In his deepest voice, “Come on horse!” Jimmy tugged the halter rope and began to walk. I was amazed to see that the filly followed.

After Jimmy had led her around for several minutes, Banks said, “Well boys, I’ve got to go. I’ll see you same time tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Mr. Banks.” That night we regaled Mom and Dad with every detail of our time with our hero, Mr. Banks.

The next afternoon Jimmy and I were able to lead the filly out to the pasture by ourselves. We were so proud.

We looked up and saw Banks walking across the field toward us, “Howdy boys, I want you to look at these here booklets. This Rarey guy wrote these here books and has figured out how to break a horse without hurting it. It makes me so blamed mad when I see a horse be whipped. It don’t do no good. Now Rarey says that a horse can be trained with kindness and I believe every word.” He opened one of the beige covered booklets he had inside his shirt, “Look at this here picture. You use that rope to hobble the horse’s front leg. That way the horse can’t run away when you first put a saddle on him.”

Banks reached into a burlap bag he carried and pulled out a long leather strap and some rope. “Now, we are going to fit up the filly just like that picture.” He gently slapped the broad strap across the back of the filly. She didn’t like the feel of something on her back and swung her head around to pull the strap off with her teeth. “Easy girl.” Banks grabbed the halter and jerked it smartly.

The filly stopped fretting as Banks rubbed her ears, “Be a good girl.” He paused for a moment then said, “You boys always watch a horse’s ears. If they lay their ears back they’re gonna bite or kick you.”

After a few minutes, Banks reached under the filly and buckled the strap; she didn’t seem to

mind at all; we noted that her ears were relaxed and pointing forward. He then reached down and tied a rope around the left front leg just above her hoof. Slowly he lifted the hoof and the filly shifted her weight to compensate.

Banks pulled an old red saddle blanket from his bag and showed it to the filly, "It's gonna be alright." He slowly raised the blanket and firmly placed on the her back. The filly tried to bolt but soon realized that she couldn't run on three legs. However, she kicked her back feet to try to buck the blanket off. "Easy girl." He soothed her as he ran his hand over her shoulder. After a few minutes, the filly calmed down and began to breathe normally.

"That's enough for today boys." He pulled off the blanket and loosened the strap and rope. "I'll come with my saddle tomorrow. You read them booklets tonight."

"Oh, Mr. Banks thank you so much." Jimmy and I began to walk the filly toward our barn.

"We'll be riding her in no time. Isn't Mr. Banks great?" Jimmy let me lead the filly into the barn.

"We need to think of a name for the horse." Jimmy looked off in the distance as he concentrated.

"What about Trigger? Just like Roy Rogers' horse. It's a palomino too." I loved the beautiful horse we had seen in so many cowboy movies.

"No, no, every palomino is called Trigger. Oh, I know: Let's call her Fury. That was the name of the hero's horse in my favorite cowboy TV show." Jimmy loved horses even more than I.

The next day, when Mr. Banks came to meet us he was carrying an old western saddle. "Howdy boys, this here's my old saddle, I bought her in Laramie right after the War. It's a good one, a Herford, but needs to be cleaned up."

"Wow, it's great." It was the biggest and fanciest saddle we had ever seen. It was dark brown with a high pommel and a broad horn. The cantle had lots of rawhide straps to hold your bed roll. The wooden stirrups had leather covers.

"It just needs some saddle soap and it'll look like new." He held up a fancy bridle and another piece of tack I didn't recognize. "This here's a martingale; it keeps the horse from banging its head in your face when you ride. He held up a leather strap with lead and a metal snap. "This snaps to the bridle so the head can't come up too much."

I noticed that most of the bridle and martingale straps had many fancy shiny cylinders wrapping around them.

"They call this 'silver mounting'." Banks pointed to the shiny parts. "But it's just aluminum."

Jimmy's eyes were big as saucers, "I've never seen anything so pretty."

"So, do you boys have a name for this filly yet?" Banks gave us a big grin.

"We're gonna call her Fury. Just like the cowboy horse." Jimmy was so proud of the name he chose.

"That's a fine name for a filly." Banks used the chest strap and rope to hobble our horse before he put on the blanket, saddle, and bridle. He carefully tightened the cinch around her belly. "Now, I'm going to ride her first. She may buck around some, but she can't hurt me. You boys stay clear."

The old man gracefully swung up into the saddle. "Steady Fury!" The filly fought the hobble, but wasn't able to move much. She just kicked up her back legs several times. Banks looked perfectly calm through the bucking.

After a minute Banks swung out of the saddle and stood by our filly. "Now Fury was born on the

open range. She'll always have a bit of a wild streak. So every time when you first get on her she'll give you a few good bucks." He nodded his head reassuringly as he said, "She'll always bucks in the same way; you can learn to ride them out."

Jimmy and I were still frightened by all the bucking. "I don't know if I want to try to ride Fury. All that bucking was pretty scary." Jimmy was white as a sheet.

"Now don't you boys go worrying. Fury will take to her saddle in a week or two." He gave us a reassuring slap on our shoulders. "We'll do this again tomorrow."

That night at the dinner table Mom and Dad were talking. "Russ, our new neighbor, Mr. Banks, offered to sell his saddle to the boys for \$50. He seems like an honest man and he's been real good to the boys."

"Freedra, you know we've another bank note due at the end of the month. There's no way we're buying that saddle." Dad was red in the face and breathing hard. His life seemed to be just one financial crisis after another.

"Russ, calm down. I'll talk to Barbara tomorrow." Once again Mother was trying to restore peace in the house.

We didn't see much of our sister, Barbara, in those days. She was 9 years older than I and was run ragged trying to go to the local college while keeping her full time job at the local newspaper. However, when she was home, she was always nice to us boys.

There was excitement in her voice when Mother called up to us the next morning, "Wake up boys. I've good news for you! Your sister has agreed to give you the \$50 to buy the saddle." Barbara came through for us once again.

Over the next few weeks Mr. Banks helped us with Fury several days a week. During this time, I noticed that he was very short of breath after even minor exertions. I also noticed him wince badly when he bent over to pick something up. However, none of this really registered with me. Mr. Banks was my hero; that's all I could see.

Eventually, Jimmy learned to handle Fury's initial bucks. He only fell off once, but was brave enough to get right back on. "It's your turn, Billy." Mr. Banks was shortening the stirrup straps to fit my short legs.

I didn't know what to do. Yes, I really wanted to ride Fury, but was scared to death that I'd be thrown off. I took a deep breath and begged Mr. Banks, "Please hold on to the bridle while I'm up there." Although Fury was very small by horse standards, sitting there in that huge saddle made me feel like I was sitting on the peak of the barn roof.

"Remember to show the filly you're the boss." Mr. Banks gave me a stern look.

"OK Fury, we're going to walk." Even to me my voice seemed high and screechy.

Banks gave a subtle yank to the bridle and Fury began to walk. "She's gentle as a kitten with you."

My chest ached until I realized that I was holding my breath. I took a deep breath and began to relax. I was terrified again when I looked to my left and no one was there. "Mr. Banks, you promised that you'd hold the bridle while I rode!"

From 30 feet behind me I heard, "You're doing fine by yourself."

The next day when Mr. Banks came walking across the field to meet us he was carrying a heavy bag. "Boys, I've got some stuff for you." He reached into the bag and pulled out a bright

red shirt. "I wore this here fancy shirt when I used to ride in the rodeo." With a proud look on his face he handed the shiny satin shirt to Jimmy.

"Oh, thanks. It looks like a shirt that a movie star cowboy would wear." Jimmy was all smiles.

Banks pulled out the Western boots he usually wore, "You'll grow into these one day." He handed the bag and the rest of its contents to me. "The rest of the horse training books and some other stuff." We could see that his eyes were tearing up.

"Thank you Mr. Banks, but why are you giving us all your stuff?" I could see that Jimmy sensed something was wrong.

Banks looked off in the distance. He cleared his throat, "Well boys, it's time I was moving on. An old cow poke like me can't be tied down too long. I'm heading back to Oklahoma in the morning." He was clearly overcome by emotion, "You say goodbye to your mom. She's a fine woman." He shook our hands like we were grown men and turned to walk away.

For the first time I could see that he was really an old man; he was hunched over and walked with a limp. His hard years on the range had caught up with him. This trip home to Oklahoma would be his last.

A Poem Comes

by Susan Vergeront

You can't make a poem happen.

It comes on its own

like the fog

On little cat feet.

It creeps upon you

and overtakes you

and tugs and nudges

until you let it out;

and then, pleased with itself

it slips away unnoticed

and only comes again

when it fancies.

Packing

by Susan Vergeront

Packing up my broken life,

some goes here,

some goes there.

Every now and then

I stop to touch, to hug

a piece of my life

that is gone forever.



Reflections at Water's Edge—by Julie Pretell

Contributors

Jim Albright was born and raised in Wisconsin and returned here after retiring. He is an engineer by degree and spent his working career in industry, all the while pursuing his love of painting. Some of his works may be viewed at his web site: www.jimalbrightart.com.

Dan Baker's favorite writing spot is Washington Island, where he and his wife have a home-away-from-home cabin. There he keeps working on a sentimental comedic memoir, with strong support from his wife for overcoming the inherent laziness that tends to direct him towards the island coffee shops.

Deborah Bissonnette expresses her creativity in many ways: cooking, gardening, watercolor, calligraphy, and writing essays and poetry. She loves creating community by volunteering to support local libraries, being a Hospice volunteer, bringing art into classrooms, and co-facilitating the PLATO class, *Celebrating the Poetic Voice in Your Life*, with Barbara Carson.

Grethe Brix-J. Leer has been writing for most of her life and has exhibited her art work widely in her native Denmark and in America. She taught memoir writing and art to older adults in Chicago for several years, and currently coordinates a women's writing class for PLATO, *Women's Journeys toward Self Discovery*.

Jo Ann Carr composed "Gilbert" as part of a memoir writing class taken after her retirement from the UW-Madison School of Education. Her next writing project will be substantially different, as she is completing research on the writings of Wisconsin women during the Civil War.

Barbara Carson began writing poetry in high school and was encouraged to continue when she had several pieces published. She finds she is more prolific when receiving critique and feedback in courses taken over the years and at PLATO. Barbara co-coordinates the PLATO class, *Celebrating the Poetic Voice in Your Life*, with Deborah Bissonnette.

Bill Eisinger was born on a farm in central Ohio. In college he took a keen interest in plant biology and was a professor at Santa Clara University for nearly 40 years. He and his wife moved to Wisconsin six years ago, at which time he became an active member of PLATO.

George Faunce finds his past career no longer defines him; it is just a faint memory. What sums him up now, he's come to realize, is his feet. He is a walker; it's what he does best. His wife (a.k.a. 'Walks Far Woman') and he walk the city, suburbs, or woods every day.

Felicitus Ferington has always enjoyed making pictures, as a child on the farm, as a nurse in different countries, and as she interacts with flowers, animals, and people. She notes that photographing is a part of living, that it is a privilege to capture the essence of a situation. Such is her effort for *The Agora*.

Rose Ann Findlen started her career as a college professor of English at Northwest Missouri State University, and then moved into higher education administration in community colleges in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Since retirement she has turned back to writing, her childhood passion, and is the author of three books.

Judith Heilizer is a clinical psychologist in private practice, and a grandparent many times over. She began to write as a young child and has continued to find delight in writing poetry and observational essays on life and its many hues and shapes.

Susan Young Hoffman, a retired reading specialist, spends time promoting literacy, tutoring at her local school, and gardening. She recently published *Henry's Birthday Week*, a children's picture book. Her work in acrylic and watercolor ranges from abstract art to realistic portraits.

Diane Hughes originally studied American History, then pursued a professional career in administrative services for mission-driven organizations. 'Artmaking' is her spiritual practice, through which she uses a variety of media to explore the human form and connections to nature. Diane coordinates the PLATO course, Exploring Creativity.

Lorna Kniaz notes that poetry has become an early in the morning obsession. Writing the words down is the only antidote. Thankfully, *The Agora* is there to receive them. Hopefully, the readers enjoy the trip.

Gundega Korsts' third language is English, which is probably what made her so good at science editing, the career she discovered while not finishing her PhD in Classical Greek and Indo-European Linguistics. The longer she lives, the more she relishes her inheritance of love, laughter, sorrow, and work.

William Ladewig is a former gandy dancer, Division One football player, Army Captain, attorney, publisher, author, and Jade Ring winner. He is married to the author and scholar, Paula Dail. They live in Wyoming Valley with their dog, Tennessee Ernie Beagle. More of his work can be seen at www.writingladllc.com

Teresa Mertens-Pellitteri considers herself fortunate in retirement to be able to combine two life-long passions: photography and travel. She has held past positions as a human resources manager, librarian, and street line painter. Her interests include energy healing, crystals, and genealogy. Teresa enjoys life in Madison with her family.

Franklynn Peterson left for N. Y. in 1960 with a degree in Sociology, bound to change the world. He soon found two syndicates eager to buy his articles and photos of Southern civil rights struggles. Afterwards, he did articles for major magazines and wrote 22 published books (often with Judi K.-Turkel.)

Julie Pretell has maintained an interest in art throughout her career as an immunology researcher and practicing hematopathologist. Her early work was in life drawing and acrylic and oil painting, but after retirement she received a degree in Visual Communications and Media Design and became more focused on photography and digital imagery.

Dawn Proctor is retired from her career as Director of Development for Olbrich Botanical Gardens in Madison and proud to be a new resident of Fitchburg. She writes poetry and non-fiction and has received the prestigious Jade Ring Award from the Wisconsin Writer's Association.

Margi Rice began painting watercolors in the '60s, soon discovered acrylics, and ever since has enjoyed playing with color. Each year she creates her own unique Christmas cards. Margi attends the PLATO Exploring Creativity course, and has exhibited her work in several forums, including the Artful Affair at the Madison Senior Center.

Will Roberts is a retired public school art teacher and past chair of the WEA Insurance Trust. In addition to acrylic painting, his interests include rescue dogs, cooking, and hiking the 1200 miles of the Ice Age Trail. His hiking experiences, bonsai interest, and life long love of the natural environment drive the content of his art.

Daryl Sherman is an independent photography professional, and with Kathryn Lederhause has won many awards, including from the Anderson Arts Center in Kenosha and the Madison Arts Guild. Daryl also is a writer, with authorship in both professional and creative genres.

Margaret “Meg” Skinner received her MA in Ibero-American Studies and PhD in African Languages and Literature from UW–Madison. She has taught English as a Second Language in Mexico, Nigeria, China, and Madison, and had a 15-year career as an international student advisor at UW–Madison and Edgewood College.

Judith Sokolow grew up in southern Wisconsin. She earned a degree in Social work at UW–Madison, and then for 29 years worked as a nursing assistant in the Madison Metropolitan School District. Her husband’s ethnic heritage inspired an interest in Ukrainian culture; she has been painting Ukrainian eggs for 40 years.

Donald Tubesing is the author of 20 books on stress management, co-founder of two award-winning publishing companies, and past president of the Independent Book Publishing Association. Passionate about stone carving, he is founder of Michelangelo’s Workshop, a not-for-profit initiative for teaching unemployed and underemployed veterans the art and craft of sculpting stone.

Susan Vergeront is a retired Presbyterian minister and a former Representative to the Wisconsin State Assembly. She has been writing poetry

most of her life but credits Lewis Bosworth’s PLATO class for her renewed interest. She writes for whimsy and for emotional release. “Packing Up” was written during her divorce.

Pete Weiler has a PhD. in physics from the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He had a 34-year career with the UW–Madison Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies, where he developed software for scientific research and did related consulting. The story included here is his first published work of fiction.

Gerry Wettersten’s love of reading and the English language led naturally to writing. She was co-founder and leader of a writing group in her coastal Texas town before moving to Madison to be near her daughter and granddaughter. She has found Madison to be a perfect fit.

Peggy Wireman, who holds a Ph.D. in sociology, is a consultant, world traveler, and political activist. She has published books on museums, social policy, and community (see her websites: www.museums-economicdevelopment.com and www.connectingdots.us.) The pictures here were taken in China at a temple in Dali and on the Lee River.

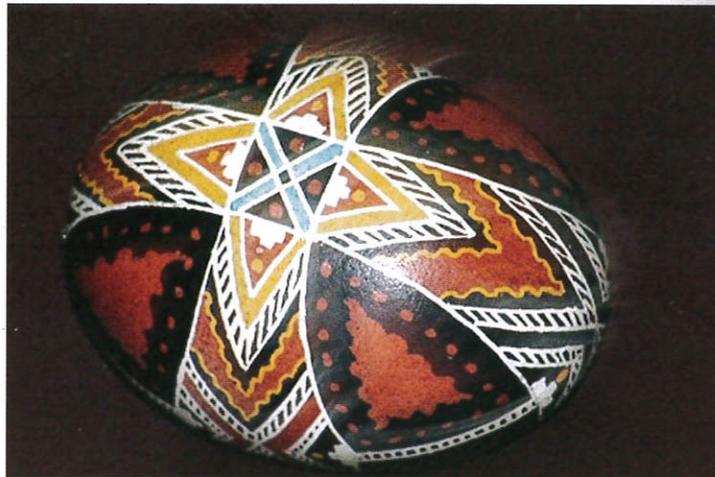
Pauline Witte grew up in rural Central Wisconsin and tries to reflect the beauty and serenity of that life in her poems. Pauline was a high school English teacher and reading specialist and taught reading methods at the college level. In retirement she spends a great deal of time gardening and hiking the Ice Age Trail with her dogs.

Allen Youngwood hails from La Crosse, Wisconsin. After a long career in infrastructure planning and environmental studies, he took up creative writing, in particular, screenwriting. Much like a blunt instrument, the rigors of getting his scripts produced persuaded him to recast them as short stories and flash fiction.

Ordering Information

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