

Garrett Arts
GARRETT COUNTY ARTS COUNCIL



Ginseng

2019-2020



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LETTER FROM THE LITERARY COMMITTEE CHAIR

Happy 2020 from the Garrett County Arts Council's Literary Committee!

We strive to celebrate and honor all artists in our community, and this is our offering of several of the imaginative and inventive authors of Garrett County.

Writers are courageous. Writers are heroes. It is a risk to be a writer. For many of us, the scariest part of writing is the risk of baring our soul, sharing our work, and having it critiqued. What a brave band of brothers and sisters we have in our authors!

"Safe" writing doesn't always challenge the writer or the reader. Think of the books, poems, or essays that have really stuck with you. Many are on the edge, exposing the writer's personal side, their individuality, their fantasies, private experiences, their challenges. Being honest on the page is often what makes great writing. The authors in this edition have spoken candidly and have looked beyond the mere gratification of "writing by the rules."

We hope you thoroughly enjoy this publication of *Ginseng* and will read it again and again. The writings are multi-layered and deserve several perusals. It is our honor to read and consider so many exquisite pieces for *Ginseng* each year. All are worthy and wondrous writings. Please continue to submit or consider submitting for the first time.

Be Brave!
We All Can Write!

Fondly,

Sue Lisantti
Literary Committee Chair

TABLE OF CONTENTS

COLLAPSE, Len Shindel.....	5
OUT, DAME NAME, Jack Spencer.....	6
THE STORMS AND FOGS OF OUR LIVES, Rose Gordy.....	7
OLD WHITE MEN, Jack Spencer.....	8
BIRTHDAY SUIT, Lori Stoll.....	10
THE INNER PET, Jack Spencer	11
KIDS, CROWS, AND A CHERRY TREE, Thomas Pessini.....	14
A VINE, Lori Stoll.....	15
4:04, Clay Frazee.....	16
VANISHING LADY, Ralph Blitz.....	17
IN DAD’S SLEEVES, Lori Stoll.....	21
KINDLING, Len Shindel.....	22
MY THRONE HAS BECOME A STRAIGHTJACKET, Samantha Roller.....	23
AT HIS REQUEST, Tom Dabney.....	24
FIRST SNOW, Samantha Roller.....	25
THAT FIRST CHRSTMAS TREE, Jack Spencer.....	26
PICTURE WINDOWS, Bob Newman	32
RUBY, Jack Spencer.....	36
A MAN STANDS ACCUSED , Lori Stoll.....	39
A SAD BUT SUSTAINING MEMORY, Rose Gordy.....	40
THE STEP NOT TAKEN, Mercedes Pellet.....	41
THE ANNIHILATION, Tom Dabney.....	45
STORY OF ERNIE, Bob Newman.....	46
A LIVING PAINTING, Lori Stoll.....	53
ASSASSIN, David Moran	54

COLLAPSE

LEN SHINDEL

Mothers pushing strollers,
fathers humping backpacks,
steer clear of the collapsed white pine,
sinuous roots
winding through cones and needles,
plunging onto their gravel path,

Swallow Falls State Park's sign,
vaunts the venerated hemlocks,
200,000 yearly visitors,
warning of slippery heights,
treacherous rapids.

But no plaque honors
this fallen hero,
its upended labyrinth,
sculpture ripped
skyward,
veins backing
a workingman's
once-powerful hands,
shallow, tangled,
thirsting for nutrients,
sustenance.

A ranger says trees,
are complicated things,
roots
sharing and competing,
branches beset by snow,
wind, rain,
vulnerable
as a workingman,
half-alive in dementia,
lonely,
naked,
nameless.

OUT, DAME NAME!

JACK SPENCER

Spells are for witches, spelling's for bees,
drilled in my head like a worm in Swiss cheese,
she's anchored her name like autumn on trees
and itches my brain like a cluster of fleas.

My shrink is a sphincter, but we can agree,
his cure is for me to pass her to thee,
so guess who she is, and I'll be set free,
but she'll get stuck in your head like a duct-tape disease.

Her handle is slick as a dervish in grease,
a lyrical name that's hard to release,
but you're in the game, so I'll give you a tease;
she played "hard luck dames" just like Bette D.

She bleached her hair blonde, but was bald as a breeze,
directed THE VIRGINIAN in sixty-three,
was double-framed into the Walk of Fame,
and though hailing from England, was Italy's flame.

A producer of movies, directed TV,
a hoarse-voiced canary with a libidinous ease,
she co-starred with Bogart and Edward G,
and, after this quiz, if I'm lucky she'll be,
a prisoner for you and a pardon for me.

THE STORMS AND FOGS OF OUR LIVES

ROSE GORDY

Rage inside.
Thundering pain.
Lightning flashes.
Storms flowing.

Where to turn and
Whom to trust?
How to reach
Surcease from distress?

All in the right time.
When the sky's blue returns.
When the thunder moves on.
When the lightning turns off.

When a New Day dawns
Inside us clear and calm.
And All's Right Again
In our realm.
But still like this morning,
The fogs of those days
Persist in enveloping us
Literally, and worse, figuratively.

In our hearts we fatefully face
these Proverbial Fogs
Wondering and wondering,
What do I do? How am I to be?

Then by the Hands of Grace,
They miraculously dissipate.
Then Clarity shines inside
And we see The Way!

OLD WHITE MEN

JACK SPENCER

There's only one group in America you can openly disparage without fearing repercussions, and that's Old White Men (OWM). Yesterday, I heard two TV commentators (white, liberal females) and two far-left politicians (old white women, one of whom has declared for the democratic presidential nomination) blame all the ills of our society on OWM. Being an OWM in my seventies, I probably have less right to respond to my accusers than did the defendants at the Nuremberg Trials. But at the risk of having the intemperate New Left Burn-A-Cross with a Hanging Effigy of an OWM on my lawn, I'll say what I think.

At first, I was bewildered why these speakers would be taking cheap shots at Joe Biden and Bernie Sanders, their fellow liberals. Then, I wondered what these women's relationships with their fathers were like, and why they were throwing their grandfathers under the bus. Next, it struck me as ironic that any liberal (which I once was) would stereotype one group to benefit another group. And finally, last night, it dawned on me that these articulate women were talking about me. I am the OWM! It is me who is wreaking havoc on our society; the misogyny, the racism, homophobia, the Great Depression, mad cow disease, etc. But surprisingly, since that moment of realization, I have been a changed man. I can't describe the emotional empowerment I felt. I thought I had only impacted a few people's lives. Prior to yesterday, I was just an isolated oaf who had spent fifty-four years working at various jobs, barely able to eke out a living, just an unimportant dude. I wasn't a woman, a black, a gay, or even a transgender wrestler. I know (somewhere in my soul) I should have felt sorry or, at least, had some twinge of remorse. But honestly, having all that power suddenly thrust upon me, I felt like a great conqueror, maybe a Genghis Khan or George Clooney. No, more like a Caesar and *Veni, Vidi, Vici*.

I won't deny it. Yes, it was I who owned all those plantations, and I've kept every sort of person in bondage for as long as I could, except, of course, other OWM. I forced kids to overdose on "meth." I invented AIDS as a form of homophobic retribution. I contrived Restless Leg Syndrome just to get even with my neurotic ex-girlfriend, Charlotte, for jilting me. I enticed women to reveal as much skin as American society could possibly tolerate. I also made a lot of other chauvinistic decisions, like whose land to covet, whose to steal, where to seek weapons of mass destruction, and who to allow into Studio

54. But, from Salem to McCarthy to Trump, I've always provided my shackled subjects with the finest witch hunts Cayman Island money could buy.

Please understand, while I dearly want to cling to my newfound power, I will negotiate. But what do the hungry masses want from me...besides socialism? I have no savings, and my income barely covers my monthly bills. I've given up my slaves, repealed the Jim Crow laws, allowed same-sex couples to marry, have bestowed upon women the vaunted privilege of dying in war, and I've even forgiven Rock Hudson.

Perhaps my victims would consider this opening offer. I will give up white privilege. I'll take a vow of silence; wear gloves and a camouflage bag over my head while in public. I will stare down at my feet in shame for being born a straight, white male. I will sell what few possessions I have, and then I'll divide the proceeds equally among the millions of survivors I have harmed. And finally, I will stand in the middle of town for two hours each Sunday waving a flag that insists, "All OWM must REPENT!" But wait! If you call in the next five minutes, in addition, as a special bonus gesture of repentance, once each month, for one hour, I will crawl up and down the road in front of my house lash my back with two books tied together like Soap-On-A-Rope ("Native Son" and "The Feminine Mystique").

BIRTHDAY SUIT

LORI STOLL

I was out for a walk on my usual lake trail
Enjoying the caw of the crows as they wailed.
And all as it should be this lovely fall day,
Brown leaves on the oaks, milkweed turning gray.
The maple, a glorious fiery redhead,
Eyed the blonde tree just past the neighbor's tool shed,
When a breeze shook the poplar like tiny gold bells
Pulling leaves down a circular cyclone from hell.
They fell in a blanket beneath the shocked tree
To be raked into laundry piles of the dry leaves.
The high branches shivered, now thin negligee'd,
Just a few leaves still covered the bud bits with shade.
A nearby old twisted trunk's modesty showed,
As it dropped a few leaves when the poplar disrobed.
A towering oak looked on, still fully dressed,
But spewed a few acorns in noted distress.
Why wait, asked the poplar, the weather's so fine!
Strip to your birthday suit! What are you, pine?

THE INNER PET

JACK SPENCER

From radio shows to internet prose, the Inner Pet grows.
“What hath God wrought?” It’s veiled and deep,
but it’s not comatose.
Tweets and twitters, neurotransmitters,
its once-muted voice is verbose.
Stress and frustration, tech-edification,
dopamine gratification.
Receptor sites, solo in flights,
self-induced elucidation.
Conflicted lives, the limbic thrives,
an amygdala coronation.
Gifts in the pits, the Eden snake spits,
a nebulous Santa Claus.
Prized and degraded, morally shaded,
paraded in camouflage.
Loved and despised, woeful and wise,
cloaked in disguise, vainglory denies
its lowest and loftiest lies.
Secretly flirty, minimally wordy, hidden and dirty,
though even Aunt Gertie’s apprised of its shrouded surprise.
To buy or to sell; “All’s well that ends well”;
no prisoner cell, no ticket to Hell, no one will tell,
at least, not in our blinded minds’ eyes.

KIDS, CROWS, AND A CHERRY TREE

THOMAS PESSINI

Fort Nonsense was a Revolutionary War post constructed by Continental forces occupying Morristown, New Jersey, in 1778 by order of General Washington. Those soldiers building the fort provided its name; they felt it had no strategic value and the general had them construct it because the Morristonians complained about the troops' behavior the last time they had occupied the town. A flag pole, plank flooring of the main building, and three stone guard houses were all that remained in the summer of 1958. The old road that wound around the post was still passable for the most part and was not grown over yet.

There was this huge cherry tree in a small clearing just off the old dirt road blooming with red, ripe cherries. However, this tree was guarded by a zillion centurions – crows that refused to share their juicy treasures. It was a warm July day. A gentle wind moved through the tall grass, bending the reeds and creating continuous waves of green. Cherries were ripe throughout the twenty-foot tree but getting to them was going to be a battle.

Five of us arrived at the base of the “temple of cherries” around 10:00 a.m. All of a sudden, the sky above us turned black, and those leathery, flapping, squawking sentinels of the cherries attacked. They chased us down the trail past the old plank flooring of the fort – over the bank, down the hill to the asphalt road and cement sidewalks of the old residential section of town before they broke off their assault. We were furious. Imagine the humility of being chased out of the woods by birds. Now we were at war. The prize was those cherries.

Jimmy looked at me and said, “We’re coming back tomorrow with our sling shots.” We all nodded in agreement. “Yeah, our sling shots; that’ll fix those crows,” I said.

Two days later, Jimmy, Billy, my sister Barb, my brother Joey, and I marched up the road to that cherry tree. Let me tell you, before we could aim our sling shots, it was like were in the Alfred Hitchcock movie, *The Birds*. We turned and ran. Those crows swooped down on us, causing us to flail our arms and scream. Instantly, the crows flew away back toward the cherry tree.

We sat down near the old floor planking of the fort to analyze this development and came up with a plan. Our idea was to allow the crows about three days to relax and settle down; then we’d come back.

It was a clear, cool morning as the five of us walked single file along the old caisson road. It was a great day to put those crows in their place. You know that adage, “The best laid plans of mice and men...?” Each of us had a galvanized pail and a thick, hardy stick. We were going to take over that cherry tree.

As we approached the tree, we saw our friend Francis standing along the road. “I thought maybe you might need some help,” he said. We all nodded, then began screaming and banging our metal pails with our long, fat sticks. Sure enough, black, feathered wings took flight. They vacated that tree so fast, you’d have thought their tail feathers were on fire. We cheered and laughed, and then the cherry picking began.

Francis was the oldest (thirteen), so we lifted him up to the branch that hung lowest, around six feet from the ground. He then reached down, helped the rest of us up to those low-hanging branches – those juicy cherries were ours. The problem, we discovered, was that the cherries on the lower branches weren’t ripe enough to eat or pick, so we had to ascend toward the center of the tree or higher. As we climbed, it became clear that now we were at the mercy of the notorious cherry bandits. While we were climbing, those black, shining birds were hopping down toward us, and I am sure that as we were closing in on each other, those crows were laughing as they were preparing to attack, and for some dumb reason, we had left our pails and sticks on the ground.

There was only one thing to do and we did it. We went down that tree as if our tail feathers were on fire, and those crows were right behind us. We jumped to the ground and started to run up the incline to the caisson trail. The six of us turned around to see that those crows had taken over the entire tree. There was no question about it – those long beaked, blacked-eyed terrors of the cherry tree were laughing at us.

Barb shook her fist and shouted, “We’ll be back, and you can count on it!” No one said anything as we walked down the trail toward town. I guess all of us were lost in our own thoughts as to how to get at those cherries.

It was overcast the following morning. I placed my phone calls to everyone to meet at Fort Nonsense around eleven. By eleven-twenty, we all stood near the base of the tree surrounded by those zillion crows. Many were in a circle on the ground, while several more were perched on the lower branches of the tree staring at us. I felt like we were in a John Ford

western, and those birds were the Indians. Barb stepped toward the tree. The rest of us moved in that direction. Me, I thought all of us were about to become crow-bait, but the strangest thing happened. The crows suddenly flew up and took over the entire upper part of the tree.

For two summers, we shared the cherry tree that way. However, during the first week in July of '61, a severe storm swept Morristown. When we arrived at the tree a week later, we found the crows perched in surrounding trees and our "temple of the cherries" was lying on the ground. We just couldn't believe it. There were cherries, but not for human consumption; however, the crows could feast. I don't know what made me do it, but I climbed up on the tree and began throwing cherries into the small clearing. The rest of the guys joined in. We fed the crows for about an hour.

As we began to leave, it almost sounded as if several of the crows said, "Thank you!" When we started walking away down the old caisson trail, Francis stopped and turned around. He had a silly grin on his face. "You don't think George Washington showed up with his ax, do you?" We all looked at him for a minute or two then began to giggle.

A VINE

LORI STOLL

Flat heart-shaped leaves
which join as one
cling to the ivy I adore.
Flat heart-shaped leaves
upturn their eyes
to sky and birds which ever soar.
Their tendril tails
reach out to me,
like little children, running free
through meadow fields,
arms to the skies,
to catch and hold the butterflies.

4:04

CLAY FRAZEE

I woke up with a start. I've been having nightmares a lot since my boyfriend left me. I groaned as I turned to look at my alarm clock. The flashing LED lights read 4:04. I sat up in bed and rubbed my face, yawning. "Might as well get dressed," I thought.

I went to get a shower, and when I came back my clock still flashed 4:04. I could've sworn I took at least half an hour in the shower because my hair is so long. I shrugged and put on my Hello Kitty hoodie, some ripped jeans, and my tennis shoes. I went downstairs to get breakfast when I heard a low growl. I barely had time to turn as I was tackled by two big luminous eyes. I screamed and fell before I realized it was just my chubby cat, Felix.

"Felix, it's too early for this. Momma will get you breakfast in a minute, ok?" I put him down and went to the kitchen. The stove clock glowed as I walked past. I looked at it...It read 4:04 as well.

"Okay, what the hell?" I said out loud as I tapped the glass display on the stove, seeing if the dull green lights would flicker to the correct time. They didn't, of course. I sighed as I picked up my phone to check it. It flashed 4:04 before the screen turned bright blue. I dropped it as I felt a sudden electric zap. The screen cracked and flashed in pinks, reds, greens, and blues before turning totally black. I sat down at my couch and hesitantly turned the TV on. It, too, was just blue. I changed channels but it was all blue. I heard my cat growling. I looked over at him to see his hair standing up and seeming to glow. I walked closer as he began to hiss, and his fur began to turn into tiny squares, just like my phone when I dropped it. He turned to me, his head twitching and his eyes bright blue. I stood in horror as I watched my poor little kitty go from cute and cuddly to something from a *Silent Hill* game. He stood up on his back legs as his body grew to my height; his paws and legs grew longer and his claws were sharper. I heard the hissing grow louder and louder as his teeth and eyes glowed bright blue. He ran at me and grabbed my throat. I felt something warm and sticky stream onto my chest and neck...blood. I kicked and squirmed as his grip grew tighter and tighter.

I felt my body fly through the air and smash on the ground. I woke up in my bed screaming and panting. Felix, MY Felix curled at the foot of my bed, fast asleep. I rolled over and looked at the clock. My blood ran cold as I saw the flashing blue LEDs read 4:04.

VANISHING LADY

RALPH BLITZ

Gabriella, an elderly lady perhaps in her eighties, sat quietly on the old wooden bench in the women's lounge of the old train station. It was 1982. The station no longer serviced passenger trains, but played host to the visitors that would stop by to tour the station and to witness one of the ten coal trains that would go by on a daily basis. She sat there almost daily from sun-up to sundown. She seemed to talk to someone not visible to anyone else. Several people overheard her say, "They will be here tomorrow to replace the loose spikes." Just as certain as the sun would rise, the very next morning there were railroad maintenance men driving in spikes with hydraulic hammers. Volunteers who were at the station the day before and listening to her conversations said, "How did she know about the loose spikes and the maintenance men coming to repair them?"

Fifty years earlier: It was an era where people were grasping to understand the great Industrial Revolution, mechanized warfare, families struggling to make ends meet and men taking on the tasks of working long hours at low pay. It was a time when women were caring for families virtually by themselves, and men were working sixteen hours per day six days per week. Sunday was reserved for worship. The work was hard, often with unsafe working conditions. Railroad safety was in its infancy.

It was 1932: Gabriella and her husband Alexander lived about a quarter mile from the train station on Liberty Street. Gabriella's day started with her making coffee, fried eggs, and rye toast with butter. Alexander's shift started at 5:30 in the morning. He often worked at the station as an outside machinist, which meant he would fabricate everything made from metal and would at times ride a caboose that was attached to a maintenance railcar to where his craft was needed. Gabriella worried when he would report to train wrecks and help fabricate tools and equipment necessary to remove or repair the wreckage. The men used to joke about how they never had the time to repair the cracked tail light on the caboose. She worried most when the work involved a train wreck on a bridge or in a tunnel.

They looked forward to Alexander's time off. They had six children: five girls, ages five through eleven and one boy, age sixteen. Fly fishing in the local streams was best of all. Several of their neighbors worked with Alexander. It was a tight little community. The neighbors would often join Gabriella and Alexander for Christmas dinner. Christmas was the one and only day

Alexander was able to take off from work, without pay of course. Gabriella and Alexander were inseparable; it was as though they were on a never-ending honeymoon. It was not uncommon for Alexander to give Gabriella a kiss before departing for work.

One evening as Gabriella, Alexander and the children sat down for dinner, the church bells starting ringing repeatedly, indicating there was some kind of trouble or accident somewhere. It turned out two trains collided in a tunnel. One was carrying fuel oil and the other was carrying coal and fertilizer. The operation to remove the wreckage seemed to be going smoothly. There were no injuries, only a tangled mess of rail-cars and spilled oil, coal, and fertilizer. The wreck was at the entrance of a tunnel going through an isolated mountain with no particular name. There was nothing but trees and valleys, twenty miles in all directions.

Gabriella spoke to her son Ronald and told him of the dream she had. In the dream, Alexander and all of the other workmen would face the worse explosion ever to hit the area. Ronald said, "I was told it was just another routine train wreck to clear; the men know what they are doing and they have already been on site for twelve hours." She thought about the wonderful life they had - the many years of struggling and the lean Christmases. It was not unusual for her to sit at the station on Liberty Street waiting for his return. She would bring a couple sandwiches of roast beef just for him. Sometimes, when she knew the time Alexander was returning to the station, she would sit on that old wooden bench totally oblivious of people coming and going and children staring at her. She carried her needlepoint with her and made some beautiful scenes of deer and snow with a background of rolling mountains. Other scenes would entail fishing from a canoe, which was one of Alexander's favorites. When the workload was light and only routine inspections were taking place, the men were allowed to take their wives on short runs in the caboose. They would set up a make-shift table from sawhorses next to a stream, have a little fried chicken, sandwiches and coffee. When break-time was over a train whistle would sound three short bursts indicating it was time to board the caboose.

As Gabriella went on this day and sat on the old wooden bench to do a little needlepoint and await Alexander's return, she felt a slight rumble beneath her feet which became more pronounced with every passing second. Suddenly everyone felt it. The B&O train station shook for three minutes, as if there was an earthquake. Chandeliers, pictures, book shelves and everything not bolted or nailed down crashed to the floor. It was four

hours before word came that an explosion had occurred.

The only thing officials of the railroad and the police knew was that the entire mountain was stripped of all trees. It was as though a volcano appeared out of nowhere and just knocked down everything above ground level within two miles in all directions of the tunnel. Everything that was metal was twisted or melted, included the rail-cars and the tracks.

The danger of static electrical discharge was well known by most safety engineers. Explosions of fertilizer and oil heated by burning coal was always considered a possibility. It was two years before the engineers were able to piece together the events that took place. The report read, "The oil had spilled and it was being cleaned up. It was most likely the pulling of rail-cars apart that produced the static discharge resulting in just the spark needed to ignite the oil-soaked fertilizer and coal and eventually causing the explosion."

Gabriella remained brave and strong through the ordeal, coping with the facts that her husband and the other men that worked with him would never return. There were no remains to view or bodies to bury. After a year passed, she once again visited the old station on a regular basis. She felt close to him, just being there. Gabriella would tell her story to anyone who had a couple minutes to spare as she sat on the old wooden bench doing her needlepoint. It brought little solace when she was told Alexander did not suffer and never felt a thing. She shared with many people her belief that when such an occurrence takes place, the human soul remains behind, looking for familiar places or people with which to communicate.

Present Day: It is winter. The old station has not seen a passenger train stop to board anyone in the last fifty years, yet there is plenty of activity - activity that is not particularly welcomed by most people. Chills ran through those who hear stories told by the volunteers who work at the old train station museum.

The stories are of unseen guests that wander through the rooms and up and down stairs that lead only to storage bins and book shelves. There are whispers of footsteps on the second floor. When these tales are investigated, it is determined no one has been there. Several times the volunteers sit in wonder as a door wedged tightly to the floor is tugged along the floor by no one visible, until it was shut tight. Tools laid in their proper place are often scattered about as workmen return from lunch. These

are no singular events, but regular occurrences. There is one particular story about an elderly lady sitting on the old wooden bench in the women's lounge. The vision of her disappeared as fast as it materialized. There was, however, a needlepoint scene of a large canoe holding two adults and six children fishing with a background of rolling mountains behind them left on the bench.

IN DAD'S SLEEVES

LORI STOLL

Short sleeved with gray stripes,
From Dad's post-sailor days,
It billowed below my black plastic "Coke bottle" frames,
Always a little crooked on the nose.
Dark and nondescript, it hid the five-foot "brain"
Shivering in Dad's old shirt,
Breasts obscured by wrinkled stripes,
Cute enough for pimply and muscle-bound jocks
Or blending in with Art class druggies!
Dad's old shirt was stained and torn –
But that didn't matter to me!
He stopped using it before he was diagnosed,
Back when his freckled arms were strong,
Before the copper band someone told him
Would stop the pain.
Apparently, I looked ragged in the old shirt;
They blamed it on my awful boyfriend.
Dad, you were vibrant then,
Before your hair turned white.
And then your blood did too.
I wandered through memories of you
In the striped shirt, handkerchief in hand.
Translucent skin shining on your belly and calves –
No spot of mine was ever so bright!
Mischievous, you tugged gently –
And Mom's curly tuft never lay flat!
Calling us with reveille on the bugle –
From the front porch!
I'd come now, if you would play it again.
Dad, you left us too soon,
I'd hardly finished with your old striped shirt.

KINDLING

LEN SHINDEL

A few sad, small logs,
buoyed by a thicket of kindling,
final remains of the regal maple
welcoming us at the driveway's crest,
so many mountain weekends ago.
Wheeling the wood
from under the deck
to the fire pit,
proud of my preparation
against predicted showers,
I tented the kindling atop
crinkled pages of the
New York Times.
I snapped some small branches
over my leg,
gently placing them atop
reddening coils of brush,
then the small logs
I should have split
just one more time.
The fire failed.
I repeated
my steps,
tripling the kindling.
An hour later,
fire now burning smoothly,
easing dusk's dampness,
I drew on my cigar
recalling other days,
hasteful, impatient
when I dishonored
the essential
gathering of kindling,
the harder
splitting,
leaving so many logs of challenge
laughing at my failures.

MY THRONE HAS BECOME A STRAIGHTJACKET

SAMANTHA ROLLER

My Throne has become a Straightjacket
Its ropes morphing into vines
that thickly wrap around my boldly shining soul orb
Squelching the aspiration to dream
What once was golden, beaming brightly as a beacon of hope
Is now tarnished, dull and brow-beaten
“Heavy is the head that wears the crown...”
Indeed, a quote I hear, see and feel too often
In the trenches
The stench of the raw and festering existence we all now trudge through
Like the walking dead, rotting toward an end of unfulfilled ambitions
The mentally diseased and sickly king gazes over all of his possessions
Taking stock of the irreparable devastation his short reign has ravaged,
and smiles
Exposing the gaps in his teeth where lies live and ooze forth
The wasteland of learning has become the junkyard of our nightmares
Our shamen, caught in glowing green radioactive quicksand,
stumble, struggle, tremble, howl in frustration
Beating their fists against bulletproof doors
Uttering demands of necessity
That fall on soundproof ears
Exhaustion is evident in every facet of our reality
(and on the faces of the downtrodden, the tyrannized)
We can no longer stand on what is broken
The rubble at our feet is too far gone to be repaired
Too much time has been lost to mend the cankers of our mind
We can no longer ignore what is wrong, corrupt
And the only words we yearn to hear,
in the surrounding graveyard of shattered promises,
Is that we’ve made a difference.

AT HIS REQUEST TOM DABNEY

He was cremated, and
No further remembrance is planned.

At least when burial
Was the final departure,
Someone had to accompany us
To the final end.
Digging a hole
Placing us in final repose.
Lowering us in
With some dignity,
If not concern.
We would then forever occupy
This space upon the globe
Marked by a plaque or stone
With Name, arrival- departure dates
spelled out
For perfect strangers to look upon-
Wondering if
We wandered, as they do now,
Giving your existence
A cursory recall.

Instead he disappeared
In a puff of smoke,
Floating off into the forever with the
passing wind.

FIRST SNOW

SAMANTHA ROLLER

Snowflakes tumble to the ground,
The air is muffled with that full sound,
Of frost and wispy breaths that puff into crystalline clouds,
The blanket of white/blue beauty lies perfectly,
Covering and obscuring the impurities of life,
That crowd our brains, our sanity,
Sometimes it's easier to dwell on misery,
The impure ambitions of others' minds,
But here, out in the overcast eve of first snow,
The Wind casts around for leftover leaves to blow,
The wound of forgiveness lingers on,
Stumbling through the midnight stroll,
In hiking boots that never quite warm the soul,
Leaching our desire to make it home.

THAT FIRST CHRISTMAS TREE

JACK SPENCER

“I can’t see no sense in even messin’ with it,” says the old man. After a few minutes the old man adds, “Don’t need none this year, too much bother anyway.”

As the night wears on, the old woman speaks. “They’re sellin’ for two dollars in town...if you would want one. I’ve got two extra dollars in the jar. We wouldn’t miss it.”

Although he knows the answer, the old man asks, “That danged TV’s still on the blink, ain’t it?”

She responds, anyway, “Didn’t Mr. Moore tell you when he sold you the heifer last spring that he would help you get the antenna back up on the roof?”

The old man snaps, “I don’t want no help from Mr. Money Bags. I’d rather do without.”

Again there is silence. The old woman chews on the corner of her mouth, then remarks, “About that two dollars, it’s not that much, and I’d put up with the bother and all, and I was really kinda hoping...”

The old man breaks in abruptly, “Lookie here now. I’ve already spoken my mind and I’ll not argy about it. Things have changed now. I don’t know, they’ve just changed. It’s just somethin’ I don’t wish to chaw on.”

The old woman inquires, “Well, what about the boy?”

The old man fires back, “Well, what about the boy?”

The old woman’s tone is matter-of-fact, “Doesn’t he deserve one?” The old man’s face stiffens and his eyes narrow. He bellows, “Don’t I feed and clothe the boy? I don’t see why he can’t git up on the hill and look for one hisself, like I had to do when I was a kid. I’m going down to tend the furnace and then I’m going to bed.” As he shuffles from the room, he mumbles, “No one appreciates nothin’, no, nothin’s ever appreciated.” The furnace grates rattle and the bedroom door bangs.

In his attic bed, the eleven-year old boy presses his hands against his eyes to hold back the tears. Knowing he is the cause of their arguing is painful, and being a burden to them is a burden to him. He feels he doesn't deserve the food and clothing, and he is convinced that he is the cause of their long periods of harsh silence. Talking to the old man and the old women has been nearly impossible for the boy. He thinks, How odd, so much to say and so little said. I wish I could do something to show them how thankful I am. And too, he agrees with the old man; Why should they get me one? Isn't it about time I give something back? Perhaps he can do something to turn things around a little bit, to lighten their burden, to make the old woman proud, and the old man...well, he's kind of hard to read, but maybe a smile, or a couple nice words. The boy entertains himself with such thoughts until they develop into a plan.

In the frigid darkness of the morning the boy stands at the top of the backyard double-checking his provisions. Four lengths of yellow hay baling twine are stuffed into the left front pocket of his jeans. In his right front pocket is a handful of lemon hardtack. The Barlow penknife that his brother sent him from the training school forms a lump in his back, left jean pocket, and two packs of matches enclosed in tinfoil are tucked in his other back pocket. He has planned well for this journey, and with the old man's hatchet tied to his waist, he heads up through the tall, frost-glazed grass of Mr. Moore's field toward the high mountain that looms beyond, barely visible against the dim horizon.

By daybreak, the boy is standing on the railroad tracks that wind around the base of the high mountain. He faces an army of signs that have been tacked to the trees along the railroad tracks in both directions: "No Trespassing Under Penalty of the Law...Prosecuted to the Fullest Extent of the Law...Harlan Moore" He decides to turn left and walk the railroad tracks, to trek until there are no more signs.

It is a couple of miles and mid-morning before the signs mercifully end. The boy's heart drops a peg when he sees that the posters end at The Big Rocks. He knows from hearing the older folks talk that The Big Rocks stretch wide and extend halfway up the mountain. He also knows that there are dangers here. Slip in The Big Rocks and you could find yourself wedged in a hole over your head, maybe sprain an ankle, or even break a leg. Poisonous snakes, black bears, and wildcats make their homes in The Big Rocks. A cougar was sighted here a couple of weeks ago. As the boy climbs up and

over the first boulder, he repeats over and over, “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”

Grasping, slipping, clawing, the boy fights his way up through the twisting laurel, precariously loose rocks, and massive boulders. With scraped knees and stiffened hands, he manages to make his way through The Big Rocks by noon. Shivering, but feeling confident, he scales the last tall boulder and gazes upward. Then he spots it, a solitary green tree silhouetted atop the next ridgeline. But it’s still a long way off. Resting momentarily to let the grouse-drumming of his heart settle, he is soon scrambling down the back side of The Big Rocks and up toward the green form in the far distance. While crossing through a tract of heavy timber, he notices that the air is not warming. But he pushes onward with thoughts of the old man and the old woman swirling in his head.

The big timber ends, but now the vegetation grows thick with thorny green-briers, crooked, ugly locusts, and head-high, sticker-covered wiry shoots. The tangle of pesky briers snag his ears and hat. After a grueling struggle, the boy finally breaks free of the thickets. Pulling his hat back onto his head, he looks around to get his bearings, and there it is...directly in front of him, standing alone, perfectly erect and full of green. It is as though he was drawn to it by a magnet, like it had been waiting here for him.

By the time the boy eats his lunch of hardtack and ties the baling twine around the trunk of the felled green of the crest, the sun is descending. He is filled with such contentment that neither the long trip back nor the fact that the sky is developing a strange, dull appearance can tarnish the luster that surrounds his bright green treasure. He plunges back down into the thicket and then up toward the big timber, smiling and tugging.

When the boy exits the big timber, it begins to snow. The thickening flurries hide the sun and now the boy must crawl around and over many of the rocks which have become treacherously slick. His green bundle follows obediently, some loosened green needles sprinkling behind. Everything else is forced from his mind as he concentrates on the placement of his hands and knees. As the temperature continues to drop, he tells himself to keep moving to stay warm, but only as fast as safety will allow. He slips, trips, and falls numerous times, but who cares about a few bruises. He keeps going with teeth chattering and extremities numbing until, at last, he sees the twin ribbons of the railroad tracks below. He stands up, takes a deep breath, looks skyward and speaks aloud, “Thank you, God. Thank you. Thank you,”

and then he painstakingly works his way down through the last of The Big Rocks. He is soon between the steel rails and marching homeward, dragging his faithful, bouncing bundle of green, a few delicate needles falling with each step.

For the umpteenth time, the boy switches the twine from one hand to the other as he cuts through the thick, gray, freezing, polka-dotted air. It will be a long walk, but it will be a good time to think. He thinks about the old man and Mr. Moore, No wonder he calls him Mr. Money Bags. Why, he's got so much property I'll bet he's got a million of these, not as good as mine and not as pretty as mine, but so many he don't know what to do with them.

The boy's thoughts travel along these lines until it begins to grow quite dark and he remembers that he forgot to leave a note explaining his journey. At first, his forgetfulness startles him, but then he recalls what happened this past summer when he ran away to a school buddy's home. His friend's parents didn't seem to understand what he was saying about silence being painful, but he probably didn't explain it right. The friend's parents made a phone call and, a few days later, the old man and the old woman came and got him. Anyway, no one spoke a word about the incident, so they're probably not worried now. After all, it's not like he is one of their real kids.

The snow is ankle-deep as the boy turns right, crosses the barbed wire fence, and heads into the thick apple thorns that separate the railroad tracks from Mr. Moore's field. He blindly thrashes through the squat, sharp, slicing brambles until he falls, scratched and tattered, into the openness of the downhill pasture. He is exhausted. But seeing the far away house lights makes the final leg of his journey endurable. With stiffened, heavy legs he finally plods into the back yard and pauses. I'll take 'er around front so I won't drag snow through the whole house. That way we can put 'er right into the living room. I hope she's not too tall. That's okay, we can trim 'er down.

By this time the boy is bursting with glee, and yet he knows it isn't proper to show too much pride. He knows the old man hates showing off. That's what rich folks do. No, I think it will better to keep a straight face. That's the way we'll do 'er. The boy has just about everything figured out, except for one thing, one dreadful detail.

When the boy reaches the front of the house beneath the illumination of the front porch light, he releases his twine and vigorously rubs his hands together to restore some feeling. Before he makes his surprise announcement to the old man and old woman, he wants to take a little time to feel the satisfaction of a job well done, to inspect every inch of his prize, to feel good about himself, a feeling that had long abandoned him. As he sits down, the headlights of a slow-moving tractor can be seen at the curve of the road that passes in front of the house.

The boy turns for one more look at his prize as the whirring of the low-gearred tractor draws closer. When his eyes settle on the object of his swollen pride, he is mortified. His face contorts into a silent scream. His feet draw up and his hands jerk back as if being attacked by a snarling grizzly bear. His lovely, elegant, green trophy has been transformed into a grotesque, deathly, spiny skeleton; just a few green splotches amidst a gray pile of naked branches. What evil spell has been so cruelly cast? All the boy's senses are frozen.

The tractor gears down as it draws nearer. Attached behind the tractor is a long, wooden-sided wagon. The boy tries to regain his composure, but he is in shock and anguish, shattered by his crushing loss. The tears flow down, and there is nothing he can do about it. It will be so embarrassing if company sees him crying, but he doesn't have the heart or energy to get up.

The tractor stops. Mr. Moore climbs down from his tractor and begins to inspect his huge wagon-load of evergreens. It is secure. He jiggles the sign that reads, "XMAS TREES - \$1.50 EACH." It is also secure. Then, Mr. Moore begins to ease his way up through the snow toward the house. The boy lowers his head to hide his swelling eyes, his wet, crimson face, the criss-cross of scratches and welts, and his bitter disappointment.

When Mr. Moore enters the lighted area of the yard, he calls out, "Hello there, young fella. Have you folks bought your..." Mr. Moore's head tilts curiously. At that same moment, he sees the boy's face and spots the heap of stripped branches, mostly bare and bleak, and the baling twine leading over to the boy's bewildered, slumping figure. "Well, I'll be dagged! You sure got yerself a real catch there, son. I'll bet there ain't another one of them hemlock species three miles a here. I'd like to ask you where you found 'er, but I reckon it's a secret. Yessir, that's a dandy, one of the finest I've ever seen. My pappy used to know where to find 'em. He used to put 'em in the front yard and string them white lights round 'em. Shur made it purdy. Haven't seen

one since my pappy passed away. Never could figger out his trick fer getting rid of all them needles. And I don't reckon you'll give up that secret neither. I shur wish I could find me one."

Mr. Moore turns back toward his wagon, hesitates, then turns back toward the boy, "Young fella, I don't reckon you'd consider sellin' that collector's item for five dollars, would ya?" Surprised, the boy looks up at Mr. Moore and sputters, "Mr. Moore, you don't understand..." Mr. Moore counters, "Okay, okay. I'm going to make my final offer. Five dollars and I'll throw in my biggest and best spruce I got on my cart for that hemlock. I'll go bring 'er up here so's you can look 'er over before you give me your final answer." Mr. Moore heads back down toward the wagon with the boy in his footsteps dragging along his "collector's item."

The exchange is made. Mr. Moore gets back on his tractor and then turns to the boy, "Young fella?" The boy answers, "Yes sir?" Mr. Moore asks, "Out of curiosity, lessen it's a secret, where did that first Christmas tree come from?" The boy, who had just studied about Christmas trees in school, is quick with his answer, "In 1561 near Alcase, that's near Germany, some big shot, I mean some rich man put up a sign that said no burghers...I forget what they were...were to get any bushes for Christmas taller than eight shoes high. That's the first recorded document about Christmas trees."

Mr. Moore smiles broadly, "That's very interesting, young man, but I mean the one on my cart, the beauty I just traded for." The boy looks up at Mr. Moore and points toward the big mountain, "Way up there, way back on that hill behind The Big Rocks. But it's no secret, Mr. Moore, honest. It was there all by itself. It was kinda...like somebody just left it there and forgot all about it."

Mr. Moore nods, "Yeah, I know just what you mean. Very rare, very rare indeed." Mr. Moore starts his tractor and bids farewell, "Have a Merry Christmas, young man." The young man waves goodbye and shouts, "Merry Christmas, Mr. Moore!"

PICTURE WINDOWS

BOB NEWMAN

He hid the bread and the apples in his pocket, glanced around, saw nothing else worthwhile taking and hurried away, shoulders hunched, head down but eyes scanning, always scanning. Behind him the alley was dark, a subtle mixture of grays and blacks, feeble light leaking in from both ends barely illuminating the dumpsters and garbage cans lining each side. He stopped at the end and inched an eye around the dirty brick, saw nothing that screamed “danger” in his mind and stepped out, hurrying towards home.

It was the old part of the city, the houses stacked hard up against each other and close to the street, only three short steps from the sidewalk to the front doors. He stayed close to the wall, the left shoulder of his coat rubbing against the brick, instantly ready to dart into a window well or turn and run at the first sign of trouble. But as he quick-walked down the uneven sidewalk he stole glances, at the windows on the other side of the street.

It was a route that he knew well, one he took several times a week, and the people were familiar to him on the other side of those windows. At the end of the block he saw a mother and her child, a girl about his age with long brown hair in a braid hanging down the middle of her back. They sat at the small table in their kitchen, heads bent low, probably doing homework, or maybe working on a puzzle. He liked puzzles, remembered when he and his mother had worked them, his small fingers clumsy with the pieces, his mind seeing only the colors while his mother concentrated on the shapes. They hadn’t worked a puzzle in a long time, no place really to do one anymore, but that was all right. Mostly his mother told him stories now, a new one every night as she held him as he drifted off to sleep. The girl looked up, a question on her face, and she was rewarded with a smile as the mother touched the top of the girl’s head with her hand. The boy dropped his eyes and hurried away.

He turned and crossed the street, and across the way in the second apartment from the corner were the newlyweds. He was tall with dark hair and skin, she was small with bright eyes and a ready smile. In the months since they’d moved in he’d never seen them more than a few feet from each other, as if it were physically impossible for them to be more than an arm’s reach away. As he thought that the man looked up from his book, glanced at his wife in the chair next to him and smiled. And even though she couldn’t have seen it, being off to the side and at a slight angle, a few seconds later her head lifted, she glanced over her shoulder, saw him looking at her and smiled back. She put down the magazine that she’d been reading, stood and walked around the end of the sofa, pulled the book from his hands,

dropped it on the table and eased down into his lap, where she laid her head against his chest, tucked up under his chin, her arms around his neck. He smiled and kissed the top of her head and as the boy walked away he knew, from times he'd watched them before, that they'd stay like that until they started to drowse, and then he'd pick her up and carry her to the back of the apartment, to their bed.

Further down the block a familiar window was dark. An old man lived there, so old that what little hair he had left was fine and white, he walked with a bent back and there was so little left of him that his clothes hung as if he were made up of little more than wire covered in tissue paper. He rarely left his apartment, and the boy imagined that as old as he was he probably didn't have many friends or family members left. Most nights he sat in a chair in the corner of his small living room staring, an old television flickering across from him, but the boy could tell that he wasn't watching it, that it was on just to keep him company, to add some sound and light to an otherwise empty life. He hoped that everything was all right, that he'd been invited out by an old friend or a grandchild in town for a visit, or maybe he'd just gone to bed early, but he'd remember to check on him for the next couple of days, maybe toss a few pebbles at the window, make sure that he was okay.

A car turned the corner and he automatically ducked down behind a set of steps, closing his eyes tight against the glare. It came down the street slowly, its windows open even though it was a cool night, the static and chatter of the radio spilling out, the two men in blue scanning each side of the street, looking for anything out of the ordinary on an otherwise ordinary night. From above him through a partially open window the boy could hear a baseball game on the radio, a man muttering along with the broadcast. It was something that he did when his wife was out, when he had the place to himself to curse and complain and occasionally shout over the announcer. He was in his fifties with a big belly and a red nose, a beer bottle never far from his hand. The boy had played baseball for one season, remembered the feel of the glove on his hand, the heat of the sun on the back of his neck, the smell of the grass, the dust hanging in the air on a still afternoon, the cheering of his parents when his bat found the ball and he took off. But then his dad had gone away, his mother didn't have time to take him to practice anymore, and that, as his dad used to say, was that. He thought about that glove, remembered packing it in a box when they'd moved out of the house, but he hadn't seen that box in a long time. He hoped that, somewhere, some other kid was wearing that glove now. It was a good glove, and it would be a shame if it never got to be used again.

Two blocks down he stopped under the street light and scanned all four ways. Back the way he'd come the police car had stopped, its red and blue lights flickering off wood and glass and brick, the men out and talking to a woman standing at the top of a set of steps. Off to the right the street was empty, nothing down that way but vacant warehouses and weed-filled parking lots. To the left were closed storefronts, the owners and workers long gone, metal shutters shut tight, gates pulled down over glass display windows and locked before they hurried away to places nicer and safer after dark.

As he crossed the street he imagined the places where all those people lived, pictured seeing them through their windows, clean and light and warm, with family waiting for them when they walked in the door, dinner ready, children ready for story time or maybe, if they'd been good in school that day, a quick trip back out to get ice cream. It was something that he and his parents used to do, before. Now it was just the two of them and there wasn't money for ice cream, hadn't been for a while. But that was all right, they still had each other.

He thought about the other people he saw through clean and dirty glass; the banker and his wife who liked to dance in the living room after dinner, the young woman who studied every night at the dining room table, a woman in her seventies who spent her evenings knitting, a cat on top of the couch behind her neck, an apartment at the end of the block crammed full with four boys who were always pushing or hitting or yelling at each other, their mother occasionally separating them but mostly just smiling and ignoring them, knowing that it was just pent-up energy, that as soon as the weather turned they'd be outside until they ran themselves sleepy before dragging themselves home to her.

He came to the short set of steps, glanced around, saw nothing and scrambled down into the dark. He heard her call his name softly, and he crept forward until he saw her bundled in the shadows, her back against the wall, only her face peeking out from underneath blankets and cardboard. She smiled, and that warmed him through his threadbare clothes. She lifted the blanket and he dropped in beside her, the warmth of her body feeling like home to him, and he pulled the soft brown apples and the crust of bread from his pocket and showed

them to her, and she smiled again and told him what a good son he was. And as they shared their dinner she told him a story, about a boy in a far away land who fought dragons and rescued damsels in distress, and then rode home on his stallion to a beautiful castle high in the mountains, where his parents welcomed him home with hugs and kisses, where there was always more than enough food and a soft warm bed for him to sleep in and he was never afraid, even of dragons. And as he drifted off to sleep, curled tight against his mother's thin body, he thought about that place, and wondered if, for some people, it wasn't all that far away, but just down the block, just on the other side of the windows he walked past every night.

RUBY

JACK SPENCER

They say that when people have a near-death experience, their whole life instantaneously passes before their eyes. On the first morning of my retirement, something comparable happened to me. Waking in the near-darkness, there was this long, illuminated parade of people floating around me, hundreds in single-file, like at a funeral, but frozen in posed states and all circling like a myriad of revolving wax museum figures. Most of these figures were replications of former friends. Several were deceased, and some I barely recognized, but I instinctively knew that each of them had played some role in my life. This procession of specters may have lasted for two or three explosive seconds, or it could have been much longer. Time seemed inconsequential.

None of my visitors looked directly at me, and I didn't feel like they had come to judge me. In fact, oddly, they seemed to be both aware and unaware of my presence. I viewed them from a different perspective than I had in real life, which evoked different emotions than when I had known them. Though this experience was totally mind-consuming, for the point I want to make, I'm going to skip some profound details as well as my own conjecture as to why this might be happening.

I've never seen a ghost, but I've met people who swear they've been visited by them. I've always said that if a ghost did visit me, that I would engage, ask questions, and try to touch it. However, I had no desire to interact with this merry-go-round of spirits because I knew they weren't real. They were being internally generated, but I also sensed that, as with dreams, they might have some important life-lesson to teach me. I didn't focus, specifically, on any one of these phantom images (I was mesmerized), and they eventually dissipated, with one exception. One image inexplicably remained. Had it not been for this one rebel image, I could have dismissed this experience as a trance or a hypnopompic dream state. Unfortunately, I remember very little about Ruby, even though I keep having this one persistent, recurring vision of her from long ago. But I have no idea what I am supposed to be learning...if anything.

In elementary school, it was important to me where I sat, and our teachers would periodically change our seating arrangement. I rarely did homework, had negligible social skills, and often wore poorly fitting, hand-me-down clothes. So, being self-conscious, I preferred to stay to myself, relatively

unnoticed near the back of the classroom. One day, to my chagrin (I must have broken some rule), Mrs. Poland reassigned me to a desk in the front row, and to my further dismay, she sat me next to the bony-bodied, smell-bound, most socially isolated girl in the fifth grade, the poorest of poor Raggedy Anns, the soiled and soapless, ebony-elbowed Ruby Weaver.

Extremely introverted, Ruby was titmouse-quiet and would, most often, be sitting transfixed, staring down at her desk. I can't imagine how she passed the fifth grade, because, as I recall, she never provided a single answer to any of Mrs. Poland's questions. Occasionally, Ruby would turn to me like she was going to say something, but I would refuse to look at her because, too frequently, she would have these thick, greenish-gray, bulbous mucous-bubbles pulsing from her nostrils. So, each morning, instead of trying to get to know her, I'd angle my desk away from her.

One morning, Ruby was garbed in peculiar apparel, and she was sitting with an unusually erect posture, chin up, her white-gloved hands demurely clasping a small, white purse in her lap. I think she even softly mouthed, "Good morning." She was wearing a white, floor-length satin gown with frilled lace attached to its shoulder straps and around its hemline. The gown had a modest bustline, though Ruby was quite "bust-less." On her feet were a pair of over-sized, white shoes with two-inch heels. Each piece of her outfit had irregularly applied dark streaks, as though lightly dragged through a coal bin. I assumed the gown was a hand-me-down, perhaps a party dress from an older and larger relative. The gown's shoulder straps would slide awkwardly off Ruby's shoulders, and Ruby would gracefully ease them back in place as though with some recently borrowed, almost regal, self-confidence.

Mrs. Poland, seemingly, did not take notice of Ruby's bizarre attire, nor did anyone else; but then, it was customary for everyone to consider Ruby's presence and absence with equal disregard. A portion of Ruby's safety-pinned, frilled hemline had come undone and was sagging, perhaps from being snagged on her shoes. I don't remember seeing Ruby walk that day, but when navigating, sadly, those high-heels were so roomy that she surely had to scoot them along to keep her rail-thin feet from sliding out.

That is my only substantive memory of Ruby. Had it not been for that ensemble, I doubt that I would remember Ruby at all. I have no other recollections of sharing later classes, school-related activities, nor any mention about her from anyone. Maybe she moved away. It's like she just vanished.

The following is not my memory. Rather, it's the visiting vision that won't go away: It is the afternoon of that same day, and it feels like we have just returned from the playground. Ruby's gloves, purse, and shoes are missing, and she is sitting with her unwashed, bare feet snuggled under her desk. Her gown's entire hemline appears to have been violently torn away, and the lower front half of her gown is in tattered shreds, exposing her pigeon-boned frail legs. Slumped over, head bowed, Ruby is once again peering down at her desk, her hands cupped around her eyes, apparently oblivious that both drifting gown straps have abandoned her shoulders.

Ruby has been sitting like this, projecting from my mind, for a month. I can't say she's inordinately interfering with my life because when I'm around friends, she stays camped in my unconscious mind. But when I'm alone, her bedraggled image will suddenly (without my volition) appear, at times, as brazen as a billboard. Other times, she'll linger vaguely in my peripheral vision, which is more tolerable, but as irritating as those intrusive, catchy tunes that get stuck in your head. I'm not as worried about the possible pathology of this delirium as much as I'm confounded as to why Ruby is pestering me. I keep wondering what she wants, which is crazy because I know she's not real.

After writing the above account, I had a comforting realization. Ruby's vision did not materialize externally one time while I was writing about her, even though I was alone, except for my two sleeping cats, Bella and Lu. And, as of this moment, eight hours later, I am unable to invoke Ruby's apparitional presence, even though I've been trying. Apparently, the cure was in the telling of the story.

Immediately after writing the last sentence in the above account (at that precise moment), both Bella and Lu sat up and hissed, suddenly startled, with ears cocked back and tails puffed, and then they both began staring wild-eyed at the front door. After they had gazed intently for several seconds, they both lay down again and resumed sleeping. Whatever awoke them could not have been Ruby's spirit leaving, I was certain, because I was convinced all along that no one, except me, could see her. My "vision" of Ruby was just an internally-generated, self-projected mirage. And besides, a ghost wouldn't have to exit through the front door. So, is (or was) Ruby just a figment of my imagination? After pondering my cats' transient and mysterious arousal, I'm not so certain.

A MAN STANDS ACCUSED

LORI STOLL

A man looked at a car.
He now stands accused:
attempted theft, the crime unfulfilled.
Two paths are before us.
The choice is near.
The man looked in the window.
To the right, white light filters through
and green leaves waver on the branch.
To the left, darkness dims the choice
and red leaves mark the coming fall.
Which path did he take?
The man touched the door.
Tall dark lines lean over the mossy trail.
White noise rustles overhead
as oak leaves jostle in the wind.
Piped static blocks other sound
as the judge speaks to counsel.
A man stands accused.
The evidence is slim.
He looked at a car and touched the door.
They were watching, and
they chased him down the road.
Is he guilty? Are they?
Two friends in a canoe
paddle toward the light.
A motorboat passes by;
the canoe overturns in the waves.
A man watches from shore.
Is he guilty? Are they?
Left, or right? Dark, or light?
The jury must decide.
A cloud occludes the sun
and both paths are in shadow.
He touched the door
and looked in the window.

A SAD BUT SUSTAINING MEMORY ROSE GORDY

It's 27 degrees outside
my Mountain Woman's cave
overlooking Deep Creek lake
three days before Spring 2019
as the early morning clouds
flow from the left to the right
toward the bright sun
reminding me
that Life moves on
through the blue skies
of this fine morning
to the dark skies
of the cold night to come.
All such things a metaphor
for the Sunrises and Sunsets
of our precious lives.
The invariable flow
from Light to Darkness.
From Spring to Winter.
From Birth to Death.
And I'm solemnly noting
that this September 20th
will mark ten years
since my husband's death.
As I walked up into our house
shortly after Ed left us
that sad Saturday evening,
I heard these words of solace,
"He's at Peace.
He's at Peace.
He's at Peace.
And would want us
to be at Peace as well."
Words that have and will sustain me
through this decade and beyond.

THE STEP NOT TAKEN

MERCEDES PELLET

Most of us see life as a one-way journey, one that begins the day we are born and ends with our last breath. Depending on our genes and early upbringing, we all manage to complicate the journey unnecessarily with conflicts, religious beliefs, feelings, hopes, dreams and fears. This is a simple story about what was and what could have been. As the mother of two, a boy and a girl, I thought I knew it all! I knew everybody's schedule, and who was allergic to dust and which child needed a little help and which one needed a firmer hand. I thought I ran my house well and had everything completely under control. Until the day I didn't. That day began like every other day. The kids ate breakfast, teased each other, and ran out to catch their school buses. Their dad had an appointment downtown and left early to beat the traffic.

It was a sunny day in May. The flowers outside had begun to show their joyful colors and were happy to share their secrets with the sun. I ran upstairs to get ready for my late morning meeting. And then I saw that Ryan had forgotten his briefcase on the bed. Surprised, I picked it up by the handle without noticing that it was open and flung the contents across the room. That was five minutes before my world ended.

I picked up the typed papers and, in between them, saw a light blue envelope addressed to Ryan at his office. The delicate handwriting surprised me but it didn't stop me from pulling out the letter and reading it:

"Dearest Ryan,

What a wonderful evening we had in San Francisco! I enjoyed the restaurant tremendously and our romantic interlude later. I am hoping that we can enjoy a repeat evening the next time you come to the West Coast.

It seems incredible that what began as a case of mistaken identity has resulted in discovering a charming, intelligent man – someone with whom I can share the rest of my life!

No pressure here, just delightedly waiting until I can be with you again!

Much love, Ingrid"

I dropped to the floor, crumbling the letter in my hand. I wasn't crying. I couldn't even breathe I struggled to get up and the mirror showed me a pale ghost. I looked like Edvard Munch's painting, *The Scream*. Then, I heard the door slam shut and Ryan's footsteps on the stairs.

Before he came into our bedroom, he yelled, "I forgot my briefcase!"

When he saw me clutching the letter, he also looked like *The Scream*. He didn't speak; he didn't try to explain. I spoke very quietly. I said, "Remember how we promised each other that we would always be honest and fair with one another? I thought you were my best friend..."

Ryan tried to grab my arm but I pulled away angrily. Tears were clouding my vision and I had difficulty saying: "I want you out of our house by the time I get home tonight. I wish you lots of luck with Ingrid!" He tried to speak but I couldn't let him speak. On shaky legs, I made my way to the bathroom, where I hugged the toilet and dry-sobbed until my throat ached. When I came out of the bathroom, Ryan was gone and had taken his briefcase. The letter, however, was still crumpled under the bed.

After exhausting my anger, I began the incredible sorrow of accepting the betrayal of someone I loved so deeply. I thought about the kids, our kids. The boy, at 15, was very close to his dad in temperament: serious, quiet, funny and kind, very kind. The girl, at 13, was a child one day and a woman the next. At the awkward teen stage, they were both still convinced that the center of their universe was their family and nothing would ever change that.

Thinking of our children renewed the sting of reading Ingrid's letter. Was she his lover? Were they having an affair? How long had this been going? I had to go to work. I could not dwell on the multiple implications of the letter and Ryan's reaction, as well as my own.

There was no time to ponder on why my life and the lives of my children were falling apart. I washed my face with cold water and put my makeup on so I could go to work. I was the vice president for a financial firm. I was accustomed to 'pulling it together'— no matter what.

When I got home late afternoon, I saw that Ryan was already there but the kids were still at after-school activities. Ryan and I were alone in the house.

Absolute sorrow engenders its own physical pain. My body ached, my throat was dry and my head had a slight buzz when I moved. Throughout the day, I had thought randomly about calling an attorney, checking in with my mother, and trying to remember the advice of one of our friends who had gone through a traumatic divorce five years ago. I took no action, however. I went about the business day as I did every day.

It was a different matter now that we were both home. Through the buzzing in my ears, I could hear Ryan upstairs opening and closing the drawers of his dresser. For a moment, I felt sorry for him, for our children... and for me. I knew, however, that I had to speak to Ryan now, before the kids got home.

I went to the stairs and tried to rearrange my face as I began to climb the first step. I did not want Ryan to see my reddened eyes or my haggard cheeks. I said to myself the same thing I say when facing any challenge, "I can do this. I can do this."

On the second step, I asked myself why? Why did Ryan do this? But, on the third step, I began to remember pieces of conversations we had at random times. I remembered the day that Ryan didn't get the promotion he had expected. I was on my way to take the kids to the orthodontist to have their braces adjusted and I had said to him: "It's going to be OK, honey. Maybe next time!"

On the fourth step, I recalled the many times he had said to me, "Maybe we could go on a date night just the two of us." I had multiple variations of "It's a school night. I don't want to leave the kids on their own."

On the fifth step, I thought, with some embarrassment, about the many nights I was too tired to do more than give Ryan a chaste kiss on the cheek, in spite of his amorous hints.

On the sixth, I thought with chagrin about how proud I had always been of the efficiency with which I ran my household: menus, calendars, task boards... Perhaps I had become what somebody had once warned me about, "Don't get so busy making a living that you forget to have a life."

On the seventh step, I remembered what I had replied when I heard that cautionary advice: "I have a life! The kids and I have a great life!"

On the eighth step, my anger and my desire to hurt Ryan were mocked by my internal voice saying, “Yes. YOU have a great life but what about Ryan?”

There were two steps left on the stairs. I took the ninth step very slowly, while I reflected on the decision I would have to make. A decision that would change all our lives forever.

On the tenth and last step, I repeated to myself words that I had read somewhere: “We all carry within ourselves the seeds of our own destruction.”

When I entered the room, I saw that Ryan’s opening and closing of drawers had yielded only a few pairs of socks and some underwear in a small suitcase. He was sitting on the bed with his head in his hands. When he heard me come in, he looked up and I saw the he was crying. All I could say was, “Why?”

And he answered, “Because I felt so alone. I’m sorry! I didn’t sleep with Ingrid, I swear it on our children. We didn’t have sex. I really enjoyed talking to her. That was all. To tell the truth, I think she wanted it to be more than just talking... but I...”

I then did the most adult thing I have ever done in my entire life. I answered, “I understand. I understand.”

Ryan hugged me and we stood still with our arms around each other. Then, we heard the street door open and our daughter say, “Mom! Dad! Guess what great thing happened today...”

THE ANNIHILATION

TOM DABNEY

Words roll out
Crashing head long into each other.
Which are the stronger?
Which are the more meaningful,
Insightful, expressive?
Which are the most emotion ridden?
Which are the parry
And which are the thrust?
Which are the healers?
And which are the destroyers?
Do we, or can we, stop long enough
To send in the medics to assess the injuries?
Can we step back physically and emotionally
To allow space and silence to be a balm?
Can we step back and feel what we have done?
Or is self-righteousness the only survivor?

THE STORY OF ERNIE

BOB NEWMAN

The phone by her right elbow buzzed and God sighed as she looked down in annoyance, pulled the readers from the bridge of her nose, jabbed the intercom button and said, “Gloria, did I stutter when I told you to hold my calls?”

“Sorry, your Excellence, I know you like your quiet time in the mornings, but he just keeps showing up and bugging me and he won’t take no for an answer.”

God rubbed her tired eyes and threw her glasses on the desk, one lens popping out of the cheap plastic frame, rolling over the edge and onto the floor. Damn it, she thought to herself, I really need to buy some decent glasses instead of those cheap pieces of crap over at the Dollar General. She picked up the frames, dropped them in the overflowing wastebasket, closed the file on her laptop and jabbed at the phone again. “Is he out there right now?”

“Yes, Elohim.”

“Is Michael in yet?”

“Yes, Abba, I saw him in the hallway just a minute ago.”

“Fine, send him in, but find Michael and tell him to get his ass in my office pronto.”

“Yes, Ma’am, right away, Ma’am.”

God took a sip from her mug, made a face at the taste of cold coffee and turned to the Chippendale credenza behind her desk for a refill. As she was pouring her special Hawaiian/Venezuelan blend that she had Gabriel go down to Earth and fetch for her once a month she heard the door open behind her. She turned to see a man in his early twenties with greasy, unkempt hair walk into her office dressed in ripped jeans, brand new Air Jordans with the shoelaces untied and flapping around his feet and a T-shirt that read “Get rich or die tryin’.” He walked across the office and dropped down into one of the chairs facing God’s desk, a beautiful White Oak piece handcraft-

by Gustav Stickley that he'd presented to her when he'd risen to heaven almost a hundred years before. As Ernie leaned the chair back on two feet it cracked ominously. God shot him a warning look, and he let it fall forward and crossed his legs.

"Mornin', my Lord, how's it hanging?"

God turned and looked at her nephew. "Ernie, what did I say about dropping by without an appointment?"

"I know, I know," Ernie said, waving a hand as if shooing away an annoying bug, "but I just need a minute." He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, his dirty hair falling forward over his face. "You know, you really need to get someone new out front," he said, jabbing a thumb back over his shoulder. "You need to project a certain image, especially with the younger crowd, and having somebody who's, like, three hundred years old just isn't cutting it." He leaned forward a little further and dropped his voice by half. "Plus, she can be a royal bitch sometimes."

God stirred in some Indian honey that Mother Teresa had carried in just for her and sat back down. "Ernie, Mrs. O'Doherty has been with me for a millennium, and she's only doing her job. And if she's rude to you, I have to think that it's because you've been rude to her first."

"Look, I want what I want when I want it, and if people get in the way of that, I guess I can be a little short sometimes." God shot him a look, and he leaned back and spread his hands, palms up. "Fine, fine, I'll apologize on my way out if it'll make you happy."

"It will, and from now on, if you want to see me, call first and make an appointment, just like everyone else."

"Jeez, Your Holiness, I thought being family counted for something around here. What crawled up your butt this morning?"

"It's end of the year review time, and everyone's a little on edge." God took a sip of the coffee, sighed and leaned back. "How's your mother?"

Ernie waved a hand dismissively. "Sheila? Still working the buffet line over at the Golden Corral." He shook his head like he was talking to a slow-witted child. "Why you let her work there I have no idea. I mean, she's your

mother's cousin, and you can't find her a better job than refilling serving dishes and busing tables?"

God sipped her coffee and smiled at the combination of tart and sweet. "She likes it there, likes the other employees and the regulars, so who am I to tell her what to do?"

"You're God, for Christ's sake." God shot him a look and Ernie held up a supplicating hand. "Sorry, I know how you feel about taking your Son's name in vain, but everybody does it so often I don't understand why you even care anymore."

"It's the principle of the thing, Ernie. He went down and died for the sins of all mankind; the least you and everyone else can do is show him a little respect."

"And I would, if he didn't spend eighteen hours a day swigging Tequila and banging anything that moves at that beach house you set him up in over in Heaven's version of South Beach."

"Yes, well, he's still got a little PTSD after dying on the cross and I don't want to rush him back too soon."

Too soon," Ernie said, sitting forward, his hands flailing in front of his face, "it's been two thousand years, for Chr..." He caught himself and held a hand up again. "Sorry, it just pisses me off that he gets to sit around all day with a couple of girls in his lap while I have to punch the nine to five."

God put her Royal Copenhagen china cup down on the whale skin desk blotter, centering it perfectly between Alexander Hamilton's pen and ink set that he'd used to sign the Declaration of Independence and a special edition bible that Guttenberg himself had presented to her when he came on board six hundred years ago.

"Ernie, I'd hardly call managing the hippest nightclub in Heavenly New York punching a time clock. From what I hear, all you do is sleep all day, roll into the club around midnight, drink the wine cellar dry of Dom Perignon and Louis Roederer champagne and spend all your time harassing the waitresses." God leaned forward, her hands folded on the desktop, her knuckles white. "I'm getting reports of sexual harassment from the girls and the other managers, and it has to stop. Don't think you can get away with

treating the employees like your personal harem just because you're my nephew."

"Hey," Ernie said, his face getting red, his hands gripping the arms of the chair, "if they're going to dress like that, they can't be surprised when people get a little handsy."

"Ernie, they dress like that because you make them dress like that or you fire them. These are all good girls just trying to have a little fun in the afterlife, and they shouldn't be treated like that. Knock it off, or I swear to me that I'll come down there and straighten things out myself."

All right, all right," Ernie said, dropping back in the chair, his hands relaxing, "I'll play nice with the hired help. Jeez, you don't have to go and get all high and mighty on me." He ran a finger back and forth under his nose, then wiped it on his jeans. "Listen, I didn't stop by just so you could bust my chops. I got this idea."

God closed her eyes, a tired sigh running out of her mouth. Ernie was always coming up with harebrained ideas, and the next one that amounted to anything would be the first. "Ernie."

"No, no," Ernie said, jerking forward in his chair, his eyes wide, his breathing coming hard and fast, "this one can't miss."

God studied him, wondering what he was high on this time. "Ernie, I really have a lot of work to do. Why don't you put it all down in an email and send it to me, and I'll take a look at it when I have a chance."

"No, no, this one can't miss, but it's time sensitive. We need to talk about it today."

A soft knock sounded at the door. A man in his early forties dressed in a beautiful charcoal Savoy Row suit came in and closed the door behind him, then walked over and stood just behind and to the right of Ernie, his hands folded casually in front of him. A quick nod passed between God and him.

Ernie looked up and over his shoulder. "Hey, Mike, how you doing? Long time, no see."

The Archangel Michael looked down at him, a small smile forcing its way

onto his thin lips. “Ernie.” His eyes tracked away and found a spot just over God’s right shoulder, at the spot on the credenza where Muhammed’s personal Koran rested on a beautifully carved elephant ivory book stand. It was one of God’s most prized possessions, something that Michael had rescued from Medina just after Muhammed had been poisoned.

“Still as chatty as ever, I see,” Ernie muttered, shaking his head. There had been bad blood between them for thousands of years, ever since Michael and Ernie had taken opposite sides on the banishment of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Ernie had wanted to let the whole “eating the forbidden Apple from the Tree of Knowledge” thing slide, figuring that maybe he’d be able to hold it over Eve later on, maybe blackmail her for a quick roll between the satin sheets. Michael recognized him for the slimy little weasel that he was, even thought that maybe Ernie had actually played the part of the serpent that day and then blamed the whole thing on Satan.

“Anyway,” he said, “listen, G,” – when he wanted something he always called God “G” because he thought that it made him sound cool but really it made him sound like a poser and it was really starting to piss God off – “listen, G, I’ve got this idea that I want to run by you that, if we do it just right, could make us both a lot of cash.”

“Ernie,” God said, picking up her cup and raising it to her lips, “how many times do have to explain it to you; we’re in Heaven, where all your wants and needs are anticipated, and every day is bliss and happiness. Cash is useless.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, Your Eminence. I don’t care where you are, cash makes the world go round, cash is king.” God shot him the stinkeye and he held his hands up in supplication. “Sorry, it’s just an expression, I know that you’re the king of all, sorry. But even when everything is free, there are still doors that open and things that magically come your way by greasing a palm or slipping an envelope stuffed with Benjamins under the table.” He stood and started to pace back and forth. “And this idea is killer, so killer that I can’t believe no one thought of it before.”

The cup stopped just in front of God’s lips, one eyebrow rising like someone had put a hook through it and was lifting it with an invisible line. “Have you forgotten who you’re talking to, Ernie? I’m omnipotent; I see all and know all. There’s nothing that I haven’t thought of.”

Ernie stopped pacing and leaned down, his two palms flat on God's desk. "Yea, yea, you're Yahweh, the Divine Warrior and the Creator of the Cosmos. But not everyone gets floor seats at the Laker's games and the primo table at La Grenouille. For those of us who aren't the King of Kings, a short stack of dead presidents makes people one hell of a lot friendlier." He smiled and winked. "Especially the ladies, if you know what I mean."

God slowly lowered her cup to the desk, then stared pointedly at Ernie's hands. Ernie pulled them up like the desk was on fire, then used his sleeve to try and wipe away the sweaty prints he'd left behind, succeeding only in smearing them all over the desktop. God cleared her throat and Ernie stepped back, running into Michael, who'd silently stepped up behind him.

"Whoa, Mike, maybe you need to start wearing a bell or somethin'," he said as he stumbled. He'd grabbed Michael's arm to keep from falling, and the Archangel stared pointedly at his sleeve until Ernie removed his hand. "Nice suit, Mike," Ernie said as he tried to smooth the wrinkles out of the sleeve. "How many teenage girls in Sri Lanka went blind weaving that fabric?"

Michael glanced over Ernie's shoulder and saw God give him a slight nod, at which point he brought his knee up and slammed it into Ernie's groin. Ernie bent forward, a loud grunt popping out of his mouth just as Michael took his hair in one hand and the back of his shirt in the other and launched him over the chair. He came down face first, his nose breaking with a loud crack, slid across the polished marble and bounced head first off the door. Michael floated up and over the chair, hovered over Ernie for second, then dropped onto his back like the proverbial ton of bricks. All the air rushed out of Ernie's lungs in one big whoosh, and even from across the office God could hear several of his ribs break. Michael looked at God, who nodded, then stepped off Ernie's back and stood to the side, his arms folded casually in front of him.

God stood, came around the desk and stopped by Ernie's head. With the toe of one of her Manalo's she nudged his head until he was looking up at her, then slowly and carefully lowered herself down, smoothing her robe around her knees so the little pervert couldn't look up it. "Ernie, I've tried and I've tried but, even after all these millennia, I just don't seem to be getting through to you. So let me spell it out to you in a way that even your little pea brain can understand. You don't come around here anymore, ever. If we see each other in the hallway, avert your eyes like I'm Lucifer himself. If we run into each other at the family reunion, pretend that I don't exist. If

I happen to be in a restaurant when you walk in, walk right back out. We don't speak, we don't socialize, we don't so much as breathe the same air." God reached down, grabbed a handful of his hair and twisted his head back at a painful angle, then leaned forward until their eyes were only inches apart. "You don't exist to me anymore, and if you ever come to me with another one of your pathetic, hairbrained, get rich quick schemes, I'm going to personally carry your sorry ass to the express elevator out in the hallway, shove you in it and send you on a one-way trip to H E double hockey sticks, where you can say hello to your uncle Frank."

"Frank, as in your husband Frank?" Ernie's eyes tracked back and forth as his addled brain tried to process even simple information. "I thought he was in D.C.?"

God smiled down on him, a faint yellow glow surrounding her head. "Same thing."

A LIVING PAINTING

LORI STOLL

I saw a painting in the woods –
light streaming from above,
all else in shadow.
The light illuminated an image
as if a buck reclined on stage,
antlers entwined with the brush,
and legs outstretched,
reaching to touch my hand.
The sky was pale, pale blue.
A brilliant cloud arched tree to tree,
its wispy edges slowly moving by.
Or was it we, on earth, who moved
and the cloud was still as a chapel dome?
I reached to touch the moving picture,
connecting across space and time –
to Adam's hand – for life and humanity.
As the sun dropped behind the mountain,
dusk fell on the play of light and
the buck image slipped away
without a sound.
At woods' edge, wild ginger flourished,
bright green from yesterday's nourishing rains,
alone in color against the dark shadows
of the setting sun.

ASSASSIN

DAVID MORAN

Pablo Picasso is dead. Too many I have known are dead, their memories standing here facing the stark painting of one of Francisco Franco's accountable atrocities? German bombing runs from the North laid smoking waste to an invisible village. Now they are dead. Franco rode into town the next day as the victor. Picasso was halfway through his dark period, now he is dead. Franco is dead. The German bombers are dead. They are all dead, but in New York *Guernica* lives on the wall, with me. And I am here, early, one of the first tickets through the revolving door of the Metropolitan, side-stepping cardboard homeless to escape a cold windy rain.

MOMA is today's contact drop. I always choose museums. I have always chosen museums. Harvard as an undergraduate, Boston, later, as a graduate, Washington, now New York. Standing. Always standing, looking disinterested in everything except the paintings. Waiting for the inevitable. Waiting, always waiting for what I know will someday come.

The Cold War is almost over, but we are too dim-witted to anticipate the future. The past is so much easier to predict. Picasso knew how to do that. I am just an observer.

I move back, taking slow shuffling steps, each foot a fall from grace, anticipating the oak bench with the uncomfortable slatted seat. I know where it is, how many steps, back from *Guernica*, counting until my legs feel the wood. Sitting is so much easier than standing at war.

The Spanish Civil War spreads out before me. Who called it "civil," I can't help wondering for the too-many'ith time. Always my same thoughts, nothing new, nothing creative.

Gently I feel the suppressor muzzle pressing my back, I know the gloved hand, I sense the padding, it had to come this way. There are no words, the future is suddenly predictable, the past irrelevant. No sound will carry into this empty vault. There will be no screaming images on this side of *Guernica*. Don't they know this is really a church?

I wonder ... how I will be found. Sleeping on a bench? Just another head bowed toward *Guernica*?

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Ralph Edward Biltz

Ralph was born in Baltimore City on July 13, 1944. Ralph moved to Glen Burnie, Maryland in 1955 where he then graduated from Glen Burnie High School in 1963. Working in construction until 1965 Ralph then decided to work at Kop-Flex Inc and Emerson electric as a Machinist, full time Union Representative, foreman and safety engineer until he retired in 2006. Ralph organized and directed Engineering Internships with U.M.B.C. and U.M.C.P.; He arranged for and directed 11 employees toward receiving their GED on company time, all eleven graduated. In his free time Ralph worked with Associates and Arts and Sciences from Catonsville Community College; Ralph also taught CPR/First Aid at Community Colleges of Baltimore County. Some of Ralph's personal accomplishments include being president of Green Haven Community Association in Anne Arundel County and being president of Harbor Community Association in Garrett County. In his free time Ralph volunteers at Oakland B&O Museum as well as at Oakland Green and Clean Committee. Ralph enjoys fishing, writing short stories, and poetry, but his greatest accomplishment is being a loving husband of 51 years with two daughters, five grandchildren, one dog and one cat.

Tom Dabney

Tom has practiced law in Garrett County for more than 40 years. He has three daughters and three grandchildren. He loves Garrett County because of its beauty and its people. Tom enjoys running, cycling, motorcycling, cross country skiing, gardening, and writing. His material comes from going about the county. It is a constant source of inspiration.

Clay Frazee

Clay Frazee has been a resident in Friendsville, Maryland, for as long as he can remember. He is an artist and has always loved the art of music and written word. For the 2019 school year, Clay joined his school's literary art magazine, as an art editor. He has submitted artwork and poems in the past, however, he has turned his attention to short stories of the strange and creepy variety. Reading has always been one of his favorite pastimes, along with art and music. He has performed at the Tournament of Bands the past four years as a mallet percussionist in the high school marching band. After

meeting his high school librarian, Samantha Roller, Clay's passion for the arts truly took off. He recently participated in a new program through the Northern High School Library called the Husky Howlers, which is a leadership program that provides opportunities for students to showcase an interest of theirs in lesson form. Clay created and presented his art-based lesson via slideshow on how to draw expressions, hair, and faces for a few of his fellow students. He is currently working on two more stories for the literary art magazine and hopes to write a collection of short stories from all genres.

Rose Gordy

Rose Gordy has worn many hats, including Sister of Mercy, dream workshop facilitator, speech coach, Mother and secondary English teacher. She currently spends her time at home in the mountains of Maryland in Garrett County. Despite all the changes and challenges of her life, she has continued to dream and to write. In many ways, the process of writing has been her solace and salvation, helping her not only to survive, but to thrive.

David Moran

David Moran is an Adjunct Professor at West Virginia University, and the former Publisher of "American Scientist" and "Chronicle of the New Researcher" for the Scientific Research Society. He has also served as Professor, United States Naval Academy; and Professor (Adjunct) George Washington University. He was educated at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Harvard, and the Federal Executive Institute, and is the author of two books: "Fifty Years of Hydraulic Research" Iowa Press; and, "All Mountaineers Are Libertarians," McClain Press. His current and recent volunteer, civic and community service activities include: Treasurer, BoD, Garrett College Foundation; Secretary, BoD, Community Trust Foundation, Garrett County; Founder, Literacy Fund of Community Trust Foundation (Endowed); Tucker Community Foundation; Volunteer WV Read-Aloud Program; President, Garrett County Mountain Pride Cooperative; Founder, Crimson Shamrock Literacy Fund (Endowed).

Bob Newman

A resident of Garrett County for over forty years, Bob came to writing late in life as something interesting to do when he retired. Although Bob spends most of my time writing long form, he enjoys short stories and essays, as they teach him discipline and remind him to get to the damn point. Bob

and his wife Kathy recently moved to the Swanton area, where they are finishing their new house.

Mercedes Pellet

Mercedes Pellet considers herself extremely fortunate in having found Garrett County and being able to call it her permanent home. She is currently the development director for HART for Animals, a job that she performs as a volunteer, driven by the love for the animals and for the people who care about them. In that capacity, she writes every day during the process of applying for grants and explaining the HART story to multiple foundations. She was very proud to have been inducted into the Garrett County Women's Hall of Fame in 2016 for her work in helping to create a community facility for the county. She and her husband Michael continue to work full-time for HART and consider their Garrett County home here as the perfect 'retirement' place for them.

Samantha Roller

Samantha Roller has been a resident in Accident, Maryland, going on five years. She has been a writer and lover of the arts from a young age, and made her publishing debut in *Ginseng* in 2018. While writing has always been her first artistic love, music has also been a big part of her life after joining the Garrett County community. She has performed at multiple open mic nights in the Oakland and Alpine Lake areas, as well as following up with a second semi-professional gig at the Preston County Performing Arts Center, in Kingwood, West Virginia, in May 2019. After joining the ranks as Teacher Librarian for Northern Garrett High School, Sam began a literary art magazine as a creative outlet for her students. It is now in its fourth year of publication and going strong. She became a member of the Garrett County Arts Council during the 2016/2017 school year as a way to further share her passion for writing (and all facets of the arts) with others.

Len Shindel

Len Shindel began working at Bethlehem Steel's Sparrows Point, Maryland, plant in 1973, where he was a union activist and elected representative in local unions of the United Steelworkers, frequently publishing newsletters about issues confronting his co-workers. His nonfiction and poetry have been published in the "Other Voices" section of the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, *The Pearl*, *The Mill Hunk Herald*, *Pig Iron*, *Labor Notes*, *Ginseng* and other publications. After leaving Sparrows Point in 2002, Len, a father of

three and grandfather of seven, began working as a communication special Labor Communications Association frequently rewarded his writing. He retired in 2015, joining his wife, Maxine, in wondrous Garrett County. Len is currently collecting oral histories about the eight-month-long 1970 Garrett County Roads Department strike, planning to publish a pamphlet during the conflict's 50th anniversary. Len enjoys cross-country skiing, biking, hiking, fly-fishing and fighting for a more peaceful, sustainable and safe world for his grandchildren and their generation. Visit Len's blog, "This Old Anvil," published by the Baltimore Post-Examiner. Thanks for supporting the Garrett County Arts Council!

Jack Spencer

Jack Spencer was born on December 18, 1947, in Baltimore and retired on October 01, 2018, in Oakland. He was employed as a therapist for twenty years, and he has also worked as a high school teacher and a carpenter. He used to think he was a "liberal" because he thought being liberal meant being in favor of equal rights and free speech. Now he thinks of himself as fiscally conservative and politically confused. He likes to hunt, fish, camp, and, on occasion, write a poem or short story.

Lori Stoll

Lori retired from a long career in engineering business development in 2017 to focus on writing and the arts. A resident of Deep Creek Lake in Garrett County since 2007, Lori is an active member of Garrett County Arts Council, including participation in the writers' group. Two of her poems were published in GCAC's *Ginseng* 2018 publication. She volunteers her time for GCAC and Our Town Theatre's Backstage Costume Shop, and for the Garrett County unit of Maryland Responds Medical Reserve Corps. Lori holds bachelor's and master's degrees in Chemical Engineering and an MBA in global business management. She studied watercolor painting with Lady Jill Mueller in California and Scotland, and introductory acting and directing with the Shakespeare Theater Company in Washington, D.C.

