

<u>Acknowledgements</u>

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Arctic Plunge

by Lori Stoll

I considered the downsides. Cold, unbearable cold –

will stop your heart and pull the breath from your lungs

as you shiver uncontrollably while the Arctic wind pierces your skin.

But I wanted to be a "Cool Mom" as my Mother's Day sticker proclaimed and the setting was perfect –

a sunny and calm late afternoon not far from "Fourteenth of July" Glacier,

a massive wall of ice that dwarfs a zodiac boat to nothing but a speck.

I waited for the call in a colorfully-splotched tankini, ready and not really ready at all –

I donned a robe, took it off, put the Cool Mom sticker in a pocket, took it out,

and paced to the porthole overlooking a platform and ladder floating on the blue.

And then the box on the wall announced the final option, "We welcome those who want to plunge to the gangway."

I was sixth in line as Darlene stood dripping in her doorway, happy that she didn't lose her strapless suit.

I bobbed along to the peppy music and the director said, "You ARE a cool mom!" and funneled me to the platform.

Tethered at the waist, I smiled at the blurry blob of camera crew and jumped.

Ahhh, solitude.....quiet and cold and blue.....a cold and soft blueness –

a beautiful aqua shimmering as bright Arctic sunlight filtered through the seawater and a delicate cold salt water softness filled my mouth.

I felt the soft cold and blue, forgetting everything else, until a tug on the tether reminded me to swim.

I surfaced with a slow-motion swing of the hair and droplets flew in a sparkly wave.

"Ooh, wow!" I said. It was nice, fine, not scary at all.

"Interesting response," said the director. "We've heard all manner of swear words today!" It's the cold, apparently.

I hurried back to my room and warmed my tingly toes.

Autumn Glory

by Rhoda Trooboff

Along a modest country road two signs:

Grandma's Farm, Fresh Eggs for Sale.

Their arrows point to a narrow lane.

A regiment of tiny gnomes and a rooster

herald our arrival beneath a bright blue sky.

An aproned, kerchiefed woman approaches.

Some eggs? Give me just a minute.

Have a good look around. She slips

beyond an ecstasy of goldenrod and asters

to a door to her kitchen.

Through side-slant eyes a musky-smelling goat

mildly watches. More gnomes amiably gaze our way.

The solitary rooster crows again, his comb aflame.

Here's your eggs. And take these, too.

Physalis, they're called. Chinese lanterns.

A bliss of tangled orange paper pods reminds me

of my mother's long-forgotten garden.

Put 'em in a mason jar, they'll brighten winter's gloom.

Come spring throw 'em on a patch near a fence maybe.

They'll bloom again and be yours forever and ever.

Amen

Victoria

---- Captain Smith's Story --

by David Moran

Helen Pennington's tugboat company worked the Willamette River in Portland Oregon. She built the company patiently after her husband died, raising four children in the years between the two great wars. The second war turned Portland into a thriving seaport and Navy shipyard. I was the last of her Tugboat Captains. Afloat they called me Skipper.

Pennington tugs were indispensable to the Navy war effort, guiding capital ships up the river from the Pacific, well inland from the mouth of the Columbia, safe from the threat of expected Japanese attack. Business boomed during the war, firm contracts, high employment, plentiful workers, and skilled masters. Pennington Tugs dominated the Port.

Then came peace, and the long wait for men to return from the Pacific Theatre, Helen's boys and her son-in-law. One of the great casualties of peace was slowly closing the port. Helen could keep the business running but only in decline. Operating boats had to be put on the market. A potential buyer for our last Grand Queen, an eighty-foot triple-deck diesel-electric, arose in Canada, but would not close the purchase unless she was delivered to Victoria, BC. However the Queen was not officially rated for open ocean maritime transport. She was huge, and certainly capable of seaward passage from Portland up the coast to Victoria, but certification was an international issue and Helen could not get official transport approval.

There was one option left, smuggle the boat out of Portland, slip down the Willamette River in the middle of a moonless night, cross the treacherous Columbia bar before dawn and skirt north along the Washington coast to Canada. This illegal transit could not be made by a licensed crew ... it had to be done quietly and quickly by willing family. Helen chose me as skipper for the Queen's last voyage.

We sailed as the sun set, routine from all outward perspectives, contracted to pick up a log barge on the Washington slough, but when we reached the Columbia, instead of turning up river, we raced downstream with the surging river flow. I was the renegade grizzled old salt bribed out of retirement. Helen's son-in-law became chief of the engine room, and her two Navy sons worked the deck. Danny's mother and 'Grandma' Pennington did everything else.

And Danny? Well he was only a kid of five but keenly aware of all the plotting that took place around their family dining room table where they planned this journey. The details were etched solidly into his young memory.

Once underway, Danny was confined to the pilot house wearing a harness at the end of a line tied to the bridge helm so that he wouldn't disappear overboard. He lived and slept on the pilot house deck. Awake, he was my constant copilot and mate, marking positions and times on the charting table, checking on our course, listening to every command and hearing every issue that worried our voyage.

---- Danny's Story -----

I was thrilled by the motion of the tug. This was so much better than Mrs. Kay's First Grade. Every minute was an excitement ... surprising ... new ... from the assault of spray to the sweet aromas of rope, oil and tar. The noise of the diesel engine where my dad sweated shirtless with a huge oil can was overwhelming. The captain's pilot house only marginally quieter. In my harness, I could move and watch the whole boat by stretching my tether to every hatch and porthole on the bridge and then perch on the chart table. Captain Smith would sing sea-shanties and teach me how to tie fishing flies as we chugged down the Columbia toward Astoria. He trawled a couple of baited salmon lines behind the tug assuring fresh dinner prepared by my mother.

Gaining the open seas of the Pacific for the long transit along the Washington coast, a nightmare arose. We crossed the bar off Cape Disappointment and I logged the time on the chart as the Captain instructed. The crossing was a pitch-pole experience ... an unexpected storm had blown down from Alaska in the last few days. Long Pacific waves generated in Japan combined with the new storm seas as a complex wave front striking the coast and forcing the tug to roll beam-to-beam as we steamed north. The Queen was designed for slow high-power river duty, not trans-Pacific crossings. Hatches were all battened and waves of seawater roiled across the fore deck and surged aft along the gunnels before pounding the stern drains.

Seasickness struck everyone except for me and the Skipper. Lifelines ran between dogged hatches with the water a raging solid wavefront on deck. Captain Smith said we were also fighting a southerly longshore current that cut our forward speed below 5 knots. It often felt as if we were going backwards toward the Columbia.

The coast was invisible in continuous sweeping curtains of rain and crested sea-spray. We set course further out to sea to ensure that we would not ground on some invisible rocky neck or sandbar along the Washington coast. Two-hundred nautical miles lay ahead of us and the sea and the sky merged into one continuous void during the day or night. Captain Smith rested on the floor whenever one of the men could take the wheel, but I don't think that he ever slept, because his eyes would open with every swell. The Queen was in a life-or-death struggle with the sea.

Then suddenly, after our worst night, the storm blew itself out leaving only the heaving seas. Dawn broke and we searched in desperation for our position. How far out to sea had we blown? Where was Cape Flattery? How far North had we traveled? We had survived the storm, and Canada was within reach, but entering the Straits of Juan de Fuca brought little relief. The following seas pitched the tug and buried the bow in every wave, hurling cold sea water the full length of the boat. The bilge pumps worked continuously to keep the engine room from flooding. Slowly, slowly, we recovered.

After three days of stormy seas, Victoria welcomed us with rare sunshine, the city rising from the bay, beautiful, gracious, inviting us to make port peacefully along the wharf of the Old Empress Hotel that defined our entry into Canada.

Transfer of the Queen took place over dinner hosted by Grandma Pennington in royal style at the Empress, and we ferried to Vancouver for the train to Portland. But there was one last problem ... we weren't legally in Canada. Officials accepted Captain Smith's concocted story of being blown out to sea and having to make port in Canada, but he could not explain why he did not have a licensed crew. The Canadians confiscated his masters' papers and sent them to the US Coast Guard. His sailing days had at last come to an end.

It was in fact the sunset of an era, the death of an age of risk and commitment, of independence and action, and the end of the limitless drive human individuality could marshal to succeed. The Skipper's logbooks are all that remain of that voyage, fading memories, and some yellowed charts covered with the handwritten block-letter records of a five-year-old mariner.

Dorman Mill

by Heather Tobgetse

Next to the rainbow river

Behind the confining brick walls

And the boss's temper

You wove the beautiful fabrics

With care, hard work, dedication, and pride
Enough flowed from the machines
Enough made by your aging parents

On looms

And pay cash

For you to care for your aging parents

And pay cash

For your Studebaker

You wove these beautiful fabrics

You wove them into me

Footpath

by Ellen Coffey

Treading along a backland trail,

as autumn's first sting cuts to bone

and a weak tea sunrise breaks eastward.

Meandering path obeying the shape of wood and hill,

following close the river's inclination to lead the way

while yellow-brown leaves blow and settle into powdery dust.

Soon, this forest highway will harden with winter verglas

and only knowing natives will risk walking these byways,

until spring softened earth makes its contours clear again.

This day is for conjuring phantom footfalls,

creators of an ancient passage through forest and field

to hunt for food, to seek shelter, to go home.

Hard horned hooves and soft furred paws sketched its outlines,

soon followed by barefoot travelers and booted men

continuing to hew a line for others to follow.

Do they walk with me as our footprints mingle?

Are they still searching for what is up ahead,

or are they now content to follow in my furrow?

Tomorrow my tracks will be buried by other travelers.

but there's comfort in knowing this footpath will remain -reminding us that we once walked before we rode.

For the Love of Animals

By Mercedes M. Pellet

This story wrote itself into a much longer narrative, thanks to the personality and charm of a Yorkshire Terrier grandly named Tesoro, who joined our family in 1992 as a gift from my husband. The Yorkie's name was the Spanish word for treasure, but we promptly shortened it to Tasi. We took him everywhere: to the office of our translation company, to our children's houses, to our vacations, and even on business trips. Little Tasi brightened our lives for twelve years until his death from cancer in 2004. The sorrow my husband and I experienced was beyond description: to us, Tasi had not been just a 10-pound dog with an adorable face; he was our sixth child.

We bought Tasi from a Virginia breeder after a puppy we had previously adopted during a visit to Garrett County unexpectedly died within a few days. We include this personal comment in the Story of HART because it was how we discovered Western Maryland, its stunning mountains, and its hard-working people!

A few years before, we had met a lovely couple in Montgomery County who invited us to visit their weekend house in Garrett County if we ever had the chance. The opportunity came after we had concluded a gigantic translation project. After months of endless workdays, we were beyond exhausted! We needed a mini vacation, so we decided to call our new acquaintances and ask them if we could take them up on their earlier invitation. They said, "Sure!" We packed our bags into the car and were off to Western Maryland!

Living as we did in Montgomery County, specifically in Montgomery Village, we were not accustomed to being surrounded by mountains. As we drove for four hours, we were enchanted by the beautiful mountains surrounding us, sharing with them the polychrome of lush vegetation and the cool weather on a summer evening. Our hosts at Deep Creek Lake were a lovely couple, Bob and Eileen Bagley, and, during a weekend that came and went much too fast, we shared many stories and even talked about the possibility of retiring in Garrett County. Michael and I could only imagine exchanging our supercharged work weeks for restful days paddling around the lake.

During our short visit, we met our hosts' adorable Yorkie, who sat on my lap as if we were old friends. On the return trip home, Michael and I discussed the possibility of adopting a dog — perhaps a Yorkie — now that our five children were all grown up. Unfortunately, our first adoption attempt ended in tears when the tiny puppy died two days after we took him home. We realized that we needed to research the process of adopting a puppy or a dog and, for a puppy, find a reputable breeder with good references. And so, we did. We adopted Tasi, who lived with us for 12 beautiful years!

We thought Tasi was one of the most intelligent dogs we had ever met, but to be fair, we had only had that one dog! He had a tremendous personality and refused to suffer fools gladly. For example, after living with Tasi for five years, we adopted Scout, an 80-lb spayed female who was a mixture of Rottweiler and Husky. Sadly, she was no longer wanted by her original owners. We bought size-appropriate chew bones for both, with Scout getting the 9-inch and Tasi the 1-inch rawhide. Tasi eyed both bones and picked the 9-inch, leaving the tiny bone for Scout. We laughed at his audacity, particularly since the bone weighed much more than he did. On a cautionary note, we thought hide bones were good for dogs then. That is until we found out how dangerous hide bones are for any dog.

But, not to get ahead of our story, Michael and I bought a home in Garrett County on the edge of Deep Creek Lake and retired there in 2004. Sadly, Tasi was unable to share the joy of our retirement because he died of cancer in early 2004. He was 12 years old. We mourned his death for a long time.

After a few months, the sorrow over Tasi's loss turned into curiosity to find out how other dogs and pets were treated in the U.S. Unfortunately, most pet owners are unaware of what happens to dogs and cats that are relinquished to county shelters — many times by the owners themselves — because there is scarce funding for the litters of dogs and cats at the local, county, and state levels. Many pets suffer terrible lives and deaths, unbeknownst to the local authorities, particularly in rural communities. The more I read about what happens to unwanted dogs and cats, the more I realized that nobody knows how many animals are actually being euthanized in the United States each year. The best we can come up with is an estimate, which ranges between seven and four million animals.

In the past eight years since the first section of the HART Center opened, those numbers have been reduced statistically but not actually because — other than large organizations, such as the HSUS, ASPCA, and Best Friends, it is difficult to collect data from animal shelters at the national level. The Shelter Animals Count, a nonprofit established in 2012, created a national database that allows all animal shelters to see consistent data across the United States. Private and public shelters must report their timely information to the website, which is available for contributing organizations and the general public. The Shelter Animals Count aims to track progress in animal welfare and save pets nationally but success depends on timely compliance by the reporting shelters.

However, to return to my story, after all my research, I concluded that I would not be able to become a veterinarian due to my age and obligations. Still, I could become a registered veterinary technician. It was not an easy path to follow due to the required anatomy and chemistry courses, but I prevailed. I completed my two internships, one at the leading veterinary clinic in Garrett County and the other at a large clinic in LaVale, MD. In May of 2006, I graduated from Pierpont Technical & Community College in Fairmont, West Virginia, passed my exam, and in August, became a Registered Veterinary Technician at the age of 61.

While attending Pierpont, I familiarized myself with the Garrett County community, the county shelter and its staff, the local veterinarians, the local humane society, and the process used to rescue the animals that had been relinquished to the county shelter. Through various contacts, I learned that the county shelter worked with two young women who had created a formal procedure to rescue animals. They had formed a nonprofit organization in 2003 and had named it "H.A.R.T.[1]. of Garrett County, Inc." Their names were Caroline Robison and Candy DeGiovanni. They had the initiative to create a process whereby the maximum number of animals could be rescued and taken to other communities where they would have a much better chance of being adopted. To accomplish this, they had to recruit volunteer drivers willing to use their cars to meet the receiving shelters in gas stations, midway points, or other final destinations. They also had to get up incredibly early to go to the county shelter, place all the kittens and dogs into individual cages, and attach the identifying information to each cage along with the animal's history.

I asked our dog's veterinarian about who was the person in charge of H.A.R.T. He wrote Caroline's name and telephone on a card and told me where she could usually be found: the county shelter.

I met Caroline in the Spring of 2006 when she was 38 years old, and I was in the final phase of my veterinary technician internship. Her youth and determination impressed me. She had a lovely smile and beautiful expressive eyes that lit up when talking about the deficiencies at the county shelter. She also was extremely kind to me and knowledgeable about animals. Even though she was only a volunteer, she had worked to establish lasting connections with the shelter staff and fully understood the limitations of our county. In pursuit of saving an animal's life, she would do whatever was necessary, including getting up at 4 a.m. to drive crated animals to other counties, establishing animal contacts throughout the region, purchasing medications, and finding other volunteers who could make the four or five-hour drive into more populated counties.

As time went on, I learned that Caroline had a Bachelor of Science degree in Equine Education, and, since graduating, she had worked in every aspect of animal care and welfare: She had been a veterinary technician, an animal control officer, a shelter manager, and a dedicated animal activist.

When I went to the county shelter to introduce myself to Caroline, she told me that she and Candy, whom I had not met, were about to present a shelter-improvement plan to the Garrett County Commissioners. They were in the process of writing a proposal that showed the local government how minimal improvements to the shelter could save many animal lives. I was impressed by their dedication and offered my help if it was necessary. I had been the Chief Financial Officer of our former translation company and was an expert in presenting proposals for new projects. We parted on that note but realizing how busy Caroline was, I thought it might be best to research other ways in which I could help rescue animals, if not in Garrett County, then in surrounding counties that had the same pressing need for animal rescue.

After obtaining my Registered Veterinary Technician license, I began to explore other possibilities. Since I did not hear from Caroline, I decided to create my own nonprofit to raise funds that could be used to assist rescue groups and animal-loving individuals in saving animal lives. While drafting the documents necessary to form a nonprofit, I received a call from Caroline. She asked if I could help them by creating a budget that would demonstrate to the Commissioners how the county shelter could be improved. I used their data and created a spreadsheet that showed how the shelter could be enhanced with minimal funding. I also met Candy before they were scheduled to meet with the Commissioners for the countywide budget meeting.

Some more time passed without any news, and, sadly, we learned that the county budget meeting would not yield any funds to improve the animal shelter. The county meeting did not even include H.A.R.T. or the county shelter on its agenda.

Michael and I became determined to make a difference in Western Maryland by contributing our business expertise, our dedication, and our love for animals —all animals. We were unsure how we would proceed but knew we could make a real difference to the animals and the community where we would live the rest of our lives.

Our next step would be to hold a meeting with Caroline and Candy and learn what we did not yet know: everything!

Honoring a Comrade in Arms

by Tom Dabney

One day I stood across from the funeral home and watched.

Eight parked their cars and pickups on the street.

They slowly emerged with white shirts, dark ties and slacks.

There was no spring in their step,

Just a slow steady gait to avoid possible falls.

Each reached back in and pulled a dark blue blazer out, It didn't fit well, but they all looked the same, with their American Legion lapel buttons and their Legion campaign caps.

They gathered behind one fellow's car trunk, Who handed out 7 M-14 rifles and 3 blank cartridges.

For some, the refrain of his DI may have echoed in his ear "This is my rifle, this is my gun",
As a scared 18-year-old in boot camp far from home.

Today, they would shoulder these rifles

To honor a Comrade who would never do so again.

They covered their hands with white gloves including the bugler, his horn all polished for the occasion.

They assembled on the lawn in a line

Distinctive by their postures-

No longer straight and slim -

But marked by stooped and injured backs

Waistlines that showed too many years of living.

They waited, retelling stories of other times and quietly laughing In the Autumn sun.

Soon, the funeral assistant emerged and said it was time.

On the far left he called: "Tench Hut"

And their tired and worn bodies instinctively responded.

"Present Arms"

"Fire" and they did-three times

Slowly they returned their rifles to parade rest

And the mournful sounds of the bugle cut thru the fall air

And uttered the sound that put them to sleep in the night so long ago.

If Only For A Moment

by David Greene

If only for a moment

I knew your laugh; the quiet silliness brought on by your years of maturity.

If only for a moment

I saw your eyes; blue like the clear mountain sky after a refreshing rain.

If only for moment

I felt your long hair; running it through my fingers, allowing the sunlight to reflect its goldenness like a thousand and one mirrors.

If only for a moment

I knew your love; tender and hesitant like a fledgling bird venturing from its nest.

For only forever

I will remember how we lived and loved in those fleeting moments.

The Land My Papa Spoke Of

by Eleanor Stemple In Memory of my Father

This is not the land my papa spoke of

With honey on his lips and hope in his eyes

The land of possibilities

Peppered in blue skies

He fled generations of poverty

For foreign dirt, he fantasized cuisine

He crossed the waters of the home of his birth

To taste what he thought, "The American Dream" And though he pledged allegiance

To the red, white and blue

His enlistment to serve did not spare him

Of the hate that would ensue

Papa was a brown man

In a world of black and white

Some called him other words

When he was out of sight

But Papa always heard them

And tucked the anger away in his mind

He learned to tolerate ignorance

Tried to flourish with perseverance and time

I remember the agony

When promotions passed him by

Gone to others

Different in color

Though to his face

They'd lie

Papa put in the hours

The blood, sweat and tears

Did everything that everyone said

But never seen equal to his peers

He gave up his native tongue

To speak another man's word, heavy in accent still Falsely believing if he knew them all

He'd be accepted with good will

Oh, but the dreams of my Papa

Cost him so very much

America, once full of promise and hope

After years laid waste to rust
He was never rewarded his promised land
Only tokens for the sweat of his brow
Yet he died believing America still true
Oh woe, if he saw it now

Lost in Galway

by Michael McEwen

Foster. Rosemary. Is this Eyre or Station Rd? Cobblestone blocks washed in red stop lights bite at the boy's feet. They must get back to the community house.

Her insides are rising. She might be floating alongside the boy. Her feet slap the walk next to his as golden bugs waft around streetlights, vanishing in the light.

The music of the pub is gone now, but their ears have been buried. Arm in arm, they hear the whine of a siren somewhere far off.

She stuffs her other hand under his arm, like digging her fingers into warm bread. Voices and someone laughing roll through crooked streets.

Young men with shirts unbuttoned exposing hard stomachs are stomping past. One of them imitates the accent as he reads signs. The boy tightens his grip on her waist.

The boy points across a street. Slowly, her eyes follow, but catch on the muscled wrought iron gates of a church. The steeple vanishes into the sky.

"We gotta cross the bridge," he says again. "Remember? Sasha, we have to cross the bridge."

Sssaw-shhhuh. Her name sounds sloppy to her. Always like it fell from her mother's mouth in the hospital bed and they took it down without asking.

Her eyes are flicking back. For the first time the boy wonders if someone really did drop something in her drink. She has candy breath.

"Ow," she says without thinking it. She trips again. The boy lifts her to her feet, when he discovers the blood around her toenails. "Oh my god!" He guides her to a bench. "Jesus."

Surprise. He is surprised, she thinks. That was the word a therapist gave her in fifth grade. You surprised your teacher today, she'd said.

With the clean end of a tissue, the boy dabs at his friend's feet, cleaning them. Who can he call? The host family is asleep. It is nearly 3.

She held the boy's head as he bent between her knees. Trust comes as heat flooding her chest. Like love but easy. This is why they travel together.

Taking slow breaths, he sits up, his back on the cold bars of the bench. A cab is no good. He does not know the address. They are close to the bridge, he is sure.

A constellation, Orion? Amazing, Sasha thinks, but it is not winter. She is not seeing it. Are the stars wrong here? She can't remember. Nothing is fixed.

"Lean on me," he says, "like this."

A warm palm against her thigh. Suddenly, she tips over until her feet lift. She's in his arms.

There's no tension in the dead weight of her legs, and that worries him. He can do this. They must cross the bridge. Hold onto me, he says through his teeth.

Surprise, she thinks. Over time she had let the word replace anger and hurt. It opened the airlock and rid her body of heat.

"You have to help me," he says. "I know," comes quietly back. "Latch onto me!" Her arm swings up slowly. "Is it my fault?" "No," he says, "it's okay."

She floats, held under her shoulder and under her knees, watching the bitter black nervous system of tree branches glide in front of the stars.

He sees the bridge ahead. Sweat's rising under his hair. They need phone lights—the host said so. Shine your torch on the bridge so you don't get hit. No streetlights there.

He's telling her to take her phone out. Turn on the flashlight. She can do that. We're adventurers, she thinks.

He smells it first. The dizzying stink of weed. His jaw tightens and he slows, quieting his breath. "Wait," he says as she opens her phone for the light.

They pass beside a wall of bushes when he hears a voice. Short and ugly, so fast they almost miss it. "Sh!" the voice says.

He rolls his feet now, his shins stinging to the bone. Someone is walking carefully on the other side of the bush. A figure strolls into the light at the corner ahead.

She was surprised when her mother refused another drug test, she had told her grandparents. She had rehearsed it in her room. Surprised her mom didn't want custody.

"You better be doing right, mate," she hears a strange voice say. She blinks and looks to see a beard and pale skin so close to her. The stranger's hands are animated.

"Fuck off," her boy says, his voice vibrating against her. The stranger's palm is sweaty when it grabs her arm.

She flails, limbs twisting like so many coat hangers until she lands on her feet.

"Sasha!" Her boy yells. "He's my brother!" Sasha says with palms up.

"We're siblings," she insists, biting her cheek not to smile at the lie. She pats his chest and flexes her legs, trying not to let them fold under her.

The boy is still holding her under one arm, like a wet blanket on a clothesline. "She's my sister,"he affirms, struck with a sallow love that makes his legs weak.

The stranger looks between them, unable to hold eye contact. His hand raises, but he gives in and stumbles away. The two hold steady and remember how far they are from home.

"Can you walk?" "No," she finally says. He lifts her again. "Hold this phone light," he says. "I can't." "Sasha! Please!"

"We don't die like this," she says, shaking her head feebly against him. "We don't."

With a sigh, he jostles her wholly into his arms and walks as hard as he can. His calves scream, and he is sweating against her. They must get to the other side.

He drives his feet into the rising cobblestones that appear white when her light passes over them. The bridge rises over dark water. As they crest the peak of it, his legs numb to machines.

She's being jerked around. Not afraid. She is the bubble in the green liquid of a level, bobbing back and forth as her body tips and tosses along in the night.

He sits hard on the stone wall outside the cottage. "I can't. I can't carry you up the steps."

"You don't have to," she says. "We can sleep out here." He wants to cry. "Think about this sometime," she says. "When we're home, think about right here." And they sit a while.

At the door, they turn the lock, heads pounding, then walk in darkness to the guest room with the creaky locker and glowing alarm clock. They undress, taking turns in the bathroom.

"Do you want to sleep in the same bed?" She asks. "Is that wise?" "We can," she says.

On shaking arms, he lowers in beside her, his face buried in the soft sweetness of her hair, wondering if he troubles her the way she troubles him.

She lets his hand wrap her. She's not surprised. She tenses only a moment before she relaxes again. He sidles up until their bodies are flush, where they fall asleep.

Mast-Fruiting Truth

by Rhoda Trooboff

"All flourishing is mutual."

- Robin Wall Kimmerer. Braiding Sweetgrass.

Mast-fruiting trees like oaks and pecans make bumper crops – oodles of acorns, tons of nuts – in some years, but not most. Hungry foragers – ground hogs, squirrels, chipmunks, pie bakers – take their fill in the ordinary years, while the frugal trees reserve some unspent nourishment from the miracle of photosynthesis to send downward from their leaves through twigs, branches, and trunks to their roots for storage as starch. When their roots are sated, these mast-fruiting trees, whispering beyond human hearing, agree to release their laid-by stash. Through entwined roots secretly coded messages pass from tree to tree, grove to grove, across the landscape, across borders to spend their stored-up wealth on offspring. Upward from roots through trunks, branches, and twigs the messages move: It's time to use savings on extravagances of bud, blossom, and nut. Abundance will leave on the landscape generous fruiting beyond the appetites of ground dwellers and guarantee lives of future trees and grateful gatherers alike. The trees share with us a wise, deep truth: "We can starve together or feast together. If one fruits, we all fruit. All flourishing is mutual."

My Mother's Brother

by Toni Lolli

He taught me to hunt, fish, smoke and swear. I'm not talking about mundane cussing. I mean full-bore, straight-ahead, unadulterated profanity. He had an incredible ability to string obscene words together. I don't think he ever repeated the same pattern twice. But then, he had lots of practice. I think it was his way of shielding himself from life's disappointments. I also suspect it was hereditary.

He was a baker by trade, and, by necessity, carpenter, cabinet maker, furniture maker, plumber, mason, electrician and auto mechanic. There was nothing he couldn't do and do well. He was the craftsman of the family, always doing for other people - and then complaining about it.

The Great Depression must have had an affect on him. His parents were immigrants so he experienced discrimination. As soon as he was able, he, in turn, displayed prejudice and discrimination toward the next group of newcomers. It was a common trait among his siblings. I'm amazed most of my generation escaped the same path.

There was nothing he wouldn't do for you - whether he liked you or not. He'd often complain to others about the work but never refused as much as a hint of a request. Many times, I watched my mother try to pay him for his time and materials. He accepted nothing and they'd argue until he left our house, somehow offended she had made the offer. She, in turn, was angry because he would not accept payment. Each with the unshakable certainty the other was too bullheaded for their own good.

They were two of a kind. If you include all their siblings, they were eight of a kind. Most family gatherings I remember ended with bruised egos and hurt feelings. This was not an Ozzie and Harriet family. They would have eaten Ozzie and Harriet alive.

Through a lifetime of doing for others he never asked anyone for help. As he and I got older, I'd make it a point to stop in and see what he was up to. In late autumn I'd climb the 20-foot ladder and clean the gutters, then switch the tractor's mower deck for the snow blower. Come spring, it was time for bedding plants, the vegetable garden and lawn mower. He always grew too many vegetables and made the rounds, giving them away. Even this bounty became a burden, accompanied by his complaints.

He, his wife, Peg, and their daughter, Pat, made wedding cakes for every family member who ever married. There must have been 75 of them. They'd bake, decorate and deliver the cakes - then complain about the work. When it came time for my wedding, I asked him to enjoy the day as a guest but not to do the baking. I never knew if he interpreted this as a gift or an insult. I suspect the latter. I'm pretty sure it was a topic of discussion when I was absent.

Deer hunting season was a special time. I lived 300 miles away but I'd bring him to our home so we could spend the week together. Whatever costs were incurred, he made sure he paid the bill. The same was true when I'd take him to Maine for a few days of fishing. I used to think it was his way of saying thanks. Looking back, it seems more likely he didn't want to be beholden to anyone.

On reflection, I think he felt obligated to give and do things lest people talk about him in the way he talked about them. Maybe it was his way of deflecting anticipated bad-mouthing or a counter intuitive way of getting in the first punch. I don't know.

Nearly ninety years old, his eyesight failed and he was declared legally blind but, he continued running the power tools in his shop. He was a stubborn old bastard - but he kept all his fingers. When I visited, we'd sit in the wood shop and chain-smoke unfiltered Camel cigarettes. He smoked them for 80 years. Even after I quit the habit, he'd offer them from his ever-present pack and I'd smoke with him. Some families drink coffee together. We smoke.

I sometimes think I was his favorite nephew – a relative term if there ever was one – probably because we shared an interest in hunting, fishing and bird dogs. I'd tell him about the exploits of my dog and he'd tell me about his dogs from forty years ago. These were the few times I can remember him enjoying himself.

After we exhausted any talk of hunting and fishing, he'd begin his litany of complaints about one of his other nephews - the jerk-off du jour. Everyone took their turn in the barrel — and everyone expected it. Someone was either borrowing his truck and keeping it too long or borrowing tools and breaking them. Some, he claimed, showed him disrespect. You think the Mafia had a strict code and firm consequences for disrespect? They could learn a lot from my mother's family.

Pat was their only child, three years older than I am and an alcoholic. My uncle knew, yet for years he bought the gallons of vodka it took to keep her home-bound. I don't understand it. Maybe he didn't either. Her drinking led to a stroke and she was moved to a nursing home. Soon after, Pat's mother succumbed to Alzheimer's and was moved to a room next to their daughter's.

Late one autumn afternoon we sat in his workshop amidst the sawdust, machinery and blue cigarette smoke. Dust motes, floating downward through the slanted rays of yellow sunlight, had their immutable fall interrupted and took an involuntary ride on the rising plumes of cigarette smoke in spite of the laws of gravity.

"Just so you know," he said, "you're in my will and my guns and truck will go to you." Light reflected off his glasses, hiding any emotional clues his eyes might reveal. As was true for the rest of his family, emotions were to be avoided unless they burst forth uncontrolled.

"I'll take care of your stuff," I said. I n my heart I knew it would always be his stuff, and more - a connection to him after his passing. That was the only time we talked about it. I don't know why they chose to hide his pancreatic cancer from him, telling him it was something less critical. Maybe they didn't want him to give up too soon. He went down hill quickly. More than once his caregiver said he was unable to take my phone calls. His was not an easy departure.

Within twelve weeks of his diagnosis, he was gone; if not the proverbial blessing, at least the end of suffering. The state took action and, bequest or not, sold all his property as an offset against the expense of caring for his surviving wife and daughter. The one time he showed trust in others to do his final bidding, they screwed him – just as, throughout his life, he would have predicted.

How ironic, that a man with such little faith in others would trust the government to honor his final wishes. It almost seems fitting to have happened that way — the final insult to an unhappy life.

Following the funeral, my cousin, John, gathered the nephews. He was with our uncle when he passed and said he had the remains of our uncle's last pack of cigarettes. He handed them out and we smoked to our uncle's memory. Some families raise a glass in remembrance. My family gives burnt offerings.

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A New Beginning

by Heather Togbetse
Freshly washed clothes on the line
Coal stained shirts
And tiny hand-sewn dresses
Marked the beginning of a new life

The stone house brought better days

And a brighter outlook

Kitty playing in the yard

In Dilliner

With the ducks

And her imagination

Beautiful fabrics sewn into skirts

And blouses

And warm memories

You have wrapped us all in your warmth

You are woven into us.

Of Ice and Dreams

by Lori Stoll

The seas roll and swell and lap against the lower deck like waves on shore would be — a steady brush, and lap, and brush, then fizz as foam spreads from the rails.

Ice-crowned peaks rise fore and aft, above debris turned soft with melt where reindeer graze on tiny plants — soft mounds like moss that's freshly grown on tundra sloping to the fjord.

Sometimes the peaks seem tethered to the clouds that slowly sidle in or fog that spreads across the sky— a gray that cuts the peaks from view and yet can't quench the midnight sun.

How nice it feels with sea and ice as far as the eye can see while dreams of ever farther on keep calling out to me – be calm, be calm, be calm and come and see.

One Piece

by Len Shindel

"Headed back to Baltimore," I told my friend, an elder.

"Hope you come back in one piece," he blurted.

I thought about the non sequitur: his fear, my safety.

He could have asked,
What neighborhood will
you be visiting?"
"How are things there?"

But questions could be hard, uncomfortable for each of us.

I might scratch his skewed image, become lost in complexity, and nuance.

Into this void, I politely smile, uncomfortable, nevertheless.

I'll walk away, feeling weak, on my way toward the anguished, impolite,

City

resilient

Ι

Failed

То

Defend.

Persistence

by Ellen Coffey

Shepherds purse, velvet to the touch, with mouse-hair leaves. Mock strawberries. with tasteless, dwarfed fruit and slight, yellow flowers. White clover, its spiky, round blossoms, cocooning a pink center. Creeping Charlie, with orderly foliage, tooth edged and lacy. Dead nettle, purple, double-lipped blooms on stout green stems. They have fetching, fanciful, funny titles,

They are clever,
smarter than any
geraniums, begonias, or roses —
who need plant food,
water and careful coaxing
to last the long summer.

named by garden poets.

They are survivors who know how to hide from my eager weeders trowel.

Like feral felines — they can't be tamed and thrive in the oddest places.

Weeds are the dream child of a weary Mother Nature, for they persist.

Pie - A Memoir

by Annie Simcoe



When I was a very little girl, 5-6 years old, I spent a lot of time baking with my Gram. In those days she owned a restaurant. I would pick wild berries from the edge of her yard and we would bake them into pies.

Fast forward a few years. My mom was taking summer classes to finish her teaching degree. There was a thicket of black raspberries between my and my best friend's houses. We picked gallons of berries and naturally I wanted to bake pies. We were 12. Mom was an hour away. I don't know how exactly we called to ask permission, no cellphones in those days, but it was granted. We scoured her cookbooks, picked a recipe and baked pies. If anyone had come home mid-process, I probably would never have been allowed in a kitchen again. But by the time mom came home the kitchen was clean and there were two perfect pies. Since then, I have been required to bring pie to every family event I have attended.

I still use the pie crust recipe from the Silver Palate cook book. It calls for butter and Crisco. One day I may experiment with an all-butter recipe. Maybe not. I break most of the pie crust rules. I cut the fat into the flour with my fingers, I don't always refrigerate it before I roll it out. It always turns out. Berry pie is still my favorite but I bake apple or chicken pot pie more. There is a 100% chance I will forget to dot the pie with butter before I put the top crust on, and will have to slide the butter into the air vents. I could only have learned this trick from my gram. So maybe she also forgot to dot her pies with butter. I don't know for sure. I don't have memories baking with her past those very early days.

My gram turned 89 on Valentine's Day 2023. You would never believe that if you met her. She sold the restaurant after a year or two and went on to have a series of other businesses. As the oldest grandchild, I may be the only one who has memories of baking with her. I am grateful for the hours spent in my Gram's kitchen, and equally grateful that my mom let me have free rein over hers.

The Pursuit

by Tom Dabney

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It was late afternoon.

The sun, though low on the horizon,
Was still so bright a blocking hand was needed to see
What was hidden by its glare.

They walked on the storm-water impoundment bank Looking in the direction of the glowing sun-Three of them, maybe 10 or 11 years,
With their baseball caps on backwards,
Their jackets unzipped to allow the last breath of fall And the warmth of the setting sun, to touch them.

As young boys are wont to do
They were pushing and punching each other
As they walked toward town.

Then

they abruptly stopped.

Gazing upward with their hands
Blocking the western sun.
Furtively searching for the wop-wop- wop sound
Somewhere above them.

Then they found the sound above them.

And they stopped- totally mesmerized.

Their faces showed a sense of wonderment,

Not unlike when biplanes crossed the prairies

Passing over farm boys behind horse-drawn plows or

Boys with bikes leaning

Against chain link fences with NO TRESPASSING signs, while

Sleek fighter jets raced down the runway beyond the fence
but not beyond their dreams.

This afternoon I saw that wonderment in their faces, Which will always ensure the pursuit by youth of Adventure and the unknown.

Quality Hill by Heather Togbetse

Mary Jane was her name
A Black mammy

Working for the local minister and his family
You walked with her along the sidewalks of racism
You walked in your own strength as a child
Who, even then, somehow knew the truth
And the difference between right and wrong
You shared cookies out the back door
And together you shared moments important enough
To recall and retell as an old woman
Mary Jane was woven into you
Mary Jane is woven into me

Reckless Roostering

by Cassandra Wolfe

What began as a foray into some innocent backyard birding has turned into a full out flock of feathered fellas. There are not one nor two but a total of four roosters residing in my chicken coop. They almost outnumber the lovely ladies whom they so brutally adore.

It started with Phobos. I heard his yodel early on in his chick days, a strangled cry for attention muted only by his demure stature. A few days later, a second warbling started to follow Phobos's morning prayers. The fluffy chick who started as Ivy was quickly dubbed 'Ivan'. The precisely laid chicken plans did not account for roosters, not even one of them. How would I cope with two?

The following summer, three more eggs hatched, and wouldn't you know it – two of those chicks dressed themselves handsomely in rooster digs and let loose their magnificent crows as soon as their windpipes caught up with their tail feathers. They are affectionately referred to as Rooster #3 and Rooster #4.

This morning, I crept out of my bedroom under the cloak of darkness hoping to steal a few moments to myself before the sun began its assault on my senses. At 5:35 am when the sky was still pitch black, it started. The roosters raised their heads and let loose their gallant songs, ushering in the morning. This crooning continued for another 73 minutes until my beloved darkness was completely scared away and the light of morning flooded the sky.

The darkness was my excuse to sit and soak in the start of the day. A time to relish the endless possibilities that might lay ahead and listen for the whispers of inspiration to stir the silence into action. Instead, the light is slapping me in the face denying me the opportunity to retreat under the covers and bury my head for another three hours. I have a feeling that if I even attempted that, the chicken quartet would belt out their greatest hits once again.

I know this next part may be a little hard for the rumpus roosters to wrap their spurs around. However, I think it should be brought to their attention that they are all being extremely reckless with their roostering licenses. While they are still quite young and inexperienced and have been denied the influence of a suitable role mode, I should think they might be open to burying their cute little combs into a pile of pine shavings when the first streaks of daybreak dance across the night sky. I'm not asking for much, maybe just an extra twenty minutes or so before they break out their siren-esque serenade each morning.

I haven't yet scoured Amazon for a rooster training device which might consist of some kind of beak muzzle that releases when the sun breaks the horizon. If it is out there, I guarantee that I can find it. I'm also very open to bribery. Perhaps some extra stinky freeze-dried fly larvae treats or a surplus of squiggly meal worms would convince the melodious foursome to hold off for a few moments longer each morning.

Maybe they would sleep a little sounder and a little longer if they each had their own personal handknit rooster robe. I imagine it would allow them to snuggle down into a safe, warm space where they could let their subconscious drift off into the sweetest Phasianidae dreams. If they had personal downy pillows and coordinating eye masks, they could really stave off the first inkling of dawn until they achieved a luxurious length of shut eye. Think of the song that would burst forth from a truly well-rested rooster!

I am grateful for all four of these fowl, even in their elevated testosterone state. They each possess the right amount of attitude and sass to keep everyone in line. I would not want them any less sleek or handsome. They keep their crimson combs a divine shade that I wish I could replicate on the tomatoes in my garden. They are always well groomed and full of energy for any social situation that might come their way. The crows they offer up each morning are the manliest of the manliest. The sounds coming out of each of their pointy beaks could not be more pleasing, they would just be more enjoyable if they sang them a little later in the morning.

I am hopeful that at least one of the four will hear my pleas and take my suggestions into consideration. In the meantime, I'm going to sit in a windowless room and make a renewed attempt to simulate the start of my day again. It'll be just me and my audiologist-approved earplugs enjoying a sensory deprived state while the raucous bunch of goons in the coop carry on like their heads depend upon it!

The Rescue

by Eleanor Stemple

You needed a home

We reluctantly said "ok"

And from the moment we met We could not look away

Your eyes spoke of stories We gradually came to know In each tugging walk

With every exuberant hello Slowly you let us in

Over time our bond grew You filled an emptiness

We were a family made new Yet time is such a bastard A true knife that severs

A theft of our hope

That you'd be here forever But boy did you try

Time and again

To rally, To fight

To remain until the end

When your spirit pushed Your body finally said "no" Regardless of desire

It was time to let you go

The rainbow bridge calling Our last walk to take you home Thank you dear Nico

For never leaving us alone We'll always listen

For your paws on the floor We'll always long

For your greeting at the door Your space on the sofa

Your place on our bed

The milieu of your spirit

Will linger in our heads

The joy that you gave us The love that remains

We homed a rescue

And it was our lives he changed

Sawdust and Rail Bourbon

by Bob Newman

I push through the door and the place is ankle deep in sawdust and rail bourbon.

I see her as soon as I step into the room, her head coming around at the sound of the door closing, her eyes running up my body, from my dusty boots to my shaved head. I look away, not ready to talk to her yet, see the bartender stand up from behind the bar with a bucketful of ice and head his way. He looks up at the sound of my boots on the scarred wooden floor and immediately dismisses me as just another penniless drifter looking to scam him out of a free drink and a hot meal.

"Avery around?"

He glances at my face as the ice clatters into the sink, shaking his head before the last syllable escapes my mouth.

"Nope. Hasn't been around in days."

"I heard this is his favorite place."

"He's around enough, but you'll have to ask him if he likes some other place better." He drops the bucket on the floor and kicks it under the bar, then lays both hands flat as he stares at me. The inner corner of his right eye twitches, and that's when I know that he's lying.

"Might wait around, on the chance he wanders in."

"Ain't no bus station, you want to stay here you have to buy something."

I pull a thin wallet from my hip pocket, pull out a bill and flip it on the bar. "Imp and an Iron."

He snorts as he turns. "Like anybody still drinks that swill. Old Crow do ya?" I drop onto the stool. "Six a one."

Thirty seconds later he slides a light shot and an overflowing beer in front of me and I nod my thanks as he gathers up my Hamilton. Haven't had a drink in a week, but not because I was on the wagon; it was either drink or food, and if I get any skinnier my belt will have to do double duty, holding my pants up with one end while the other is nailed to the floor to keep me from blowing away in a puff of wind.

I sniff the whiskey, then take in half, the harsh burn like a face slap of cold water from a mountain stream in early April. The beer, barely more palatable than the cheap whiskey, hits my empty stomach seconds later, mitigating the cramping from the liquor only slightly as I feel a shudder pass through me. I see the bartender smile at my discomfort; no worries, I'd do the same in his shoes.

I swivel a one-eighty and scan faces, most still looking at me, but other than the girl I see no one but strangers. Two men playing penny ante in the corner with a deck of cards so old and worn they're almost translucent. A four top by the jukebox, two couples out on date night, all of them sipping beer, none of them talking. A lone man at the end of the bar looking for life's secrets in the bottom of his beer bottle. And the girl, her phone to her ear as she presses hard up against a tall man in a dirty wife-beater and a baseball cap, the logo so caked with grease it could be advertising anything from the local triple-A baseball team to the nearby whorehouse. When she sees me looking at her she mouths one word, then drops the phone from the side of her face and slides it into the back pocket of her skin tight jeans.

I hear ringing and turn to see the bartender with an old black phone in his hand, his eyes on me. He mutters, shakes his head, mutters again and then hangs the phone in its cradle. I lift an eyebrow but he turns away, which is fine because I already know who he was talking to and what's about to happen.

I finish the shot, chase it with all but a swallow of beer and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, my eyes never leaving the mirror over the backbar. From the periphery I see the bartender push a curtain aside and walk out of sight, probably to get out of the line of fire, which is nothing more or less than I expect. One of the four top gets up and pumps quarters into the jukebox and a few seconds later Sinatra starts to croon, singing that it was a very good year, which I would respectfully disagree with but what the hell do I know, I'm sitting in a neighborhood dive drinking my dinner while I wait for a man with a gun.

Five minutes pass, something I track with the sweep of the second hand on the clock I can see high in the corner of the mirror, then the door opens slowly and a man pauses in the backlit frame. Every head in the place swivels to see who it is, and then as one they stand and follow the bartender through the curtain.

Everyone but the girl, who jerks her hand free as her date tries to pull her behind the bar to safety.

He glances at the girl but walks over to me, stopping off my left shoulder, his right hand buried deep in the pocket of his coat, the outline of a pistol pushing through the light cotton. I smile at his reflection and nod at the seat beside me.

"Billy." It comes out like a curse.

I haven't heard anyone say my name, my true name, in months, and it sounds strange, unfamiliar. In the mirror I see the girl stand and walk over to the jukebox as Sinatra sings of the dregs of his life, his time winding down, and I wonder if mine is about to do the same.

"Least you could do is sit with me, Avery, maybe share a drink."

Ignoring the stool he walks around the bar, lifts a bottle from the top shelf and puts it on the bar along with two clean glasses, then comes back around as Doris Day begins to whisper, asking her mother if she'll be pretty, if she'll be rich.

He straddles the stool two to my left, facing me, then nods at the bottle. I pour two fingers and slide a glass to him, then half a glass for me, cradling mine like it's the last thing I'll ever hold.

"Pretty stupid, coming back here."

I shrug and sip, this a much more pleasant burn.

"No stupider than running to begin with. How's Mom?"

"Asks after you every day, which is really starting to get on my nerves."

"Yea, she can be a dog with a bone, that woman." Another sip, and I can already feel it rounding off the sharp corners in my brain, which is a good thing, they've been poking at me for a long time and I'm tired of it.

"Since you're here and not in a cell, I'm quessing nothing's changed."

He sips and shakes his head. "Cops know all they need to know, all there is to know."

"Even if what they know is lies?"

He smiles, the first I can recall on my brother's face in as long as I can remember. "You got a different truth to tell?"

"Only one truth."

"Says who?"

"Says the guy who knows what his brother did."

"Not the story being told around here," he says, then downs his whiskey and slams the glass to the bar. "The story goes that you were there, just you. Found your gun on the floor, your prints on the grip, your bullet inside him." Another shake. "Like I said, all there is to know."

"Sounds bad." I take the smallest sip of whiskey, marvel at the smoothness, the notes of caramel with just hint of oak. Might have to invest in a bottle if I live through the next five minutes. I ease the glass to the bar and spin it slowly. "Unless there was another witness, somebody who had the good sense to duck out of sight at the sound of you coming up the stairs."

He snorts as he reaches for the bottle and pours another inch. "Wasn't nobody else there, brother; I looked."

"Especially me," I say, turning and looking at him full face. "But then how do I know that you offered him money to run, and he laughed in your face. Or that you told him she wasn't worth it, and he said that nothing in the world was worth more." I pick up my glass and stare at the amber liquid, then back up at him. "And that when you pulled your gun," I hold up my hand, "excuse me, my gun, he laughed again and said a little pissant like you didn't have the guts to shoot a man, least not unless he had his back to you."

Avery slides off the stool and stands, stretching out his back, his hand flexing in his jacket pocket. "Guess he was wrong about that. But then he was wrong about a lot. Like thinking that he could take up with my wife and I wouldn't care."

"Ex-wife."

"I'm the one who decides what belongs to me and what doesn't," his voice loud in the almost empty room, like by shouting he'll have a better chance of convincing himself that he's right. "Just like I decide who I call family. And you stopped being my brother the night I came to you asking where she and that worthless piece of shit I shot were, and you hid them from me."

"And so now you've lost Lily, and you're about to kill your brother. Who's next? Gonna shoot Mom when you get home, so you don't have to care about anybody anymore but yourself?"

"Not one of you ever cared about me, so what difference would it make?" He shouts as he squares himself to me, his fingers curling in his pocket. "I'm tired of people judging me. And given everything I've had to do in my life I think I've earned that, brother."

I look at him and smile; his head rocks back an inch, like I'd slapped him, and as I see a flash of indecision on his face I bring my glass up and splash fifty dollars of whiskey in his eyes. He swipes at his face with one hand as the other pulls his gun free from his pocket, but before he can aim it I swing my leg up, my boot kicking his hand, the gun spinning away. He dives for it but I'm right there with him, landing on his back, four hands scrabbling for the gun. He hooks the trigger guard with a finger and pulls it to him while trying to roll over, but I pin him and his gun hand to the floor, my eyes never leaving the barrel.

A quick elbow to the jaw stuns me and I feel my hold on his hand slip, the gun disappearing below his body. I punch him twice in the back of the head, his head rebounding off the floor, then he shouts and bucks me off. But I still have hold of his gun hand, which I can feel is inching ever so slowly around in my direction down by his hip. I wrap both hands around his and twist, hoping to either wrench the gun free or do some major damage to his wrist, and as I do I hear him grunt in pain and something shifts underneath him.

The gunshot is like a thunderclap, the sound orbiting the room, the three of us frozen like figures in a Madam Tussauds' tableau, the powder smoke a small cloud encircling us. Then his pants leg starts to run red front and back, the fabric around the exit wound smoking from the heat of the bullet. And as I roll off him he looks down and stares at his life jetting out of him. He opens his mouth, maybe to scream, maybe to curse, but in the end does neither. Instead he struggles up and ineffectively tries to staunch the flow of blood. His face turns white, top to bottom like the sand draining away in an hourglass. He rubs at his leg, pressing on the wound, blood spurting through his fingers, then he says "Billy" and topples sideway, his shoulder slamming into the filthy floor, his face a second after.

I catch movement and see the bartender peeking through the curtain, the black phone pressed against the side of his face, his lips moving, but I can't hear what he's saying, my ears ringing from the proximate gunshot. On the floor Avery's left arm pushes out, his hand closing the distance between us, but inches from my boot it stops, his fingers spasming, then going still.

Lily walks over, eyeing his body as she passes, then kneels next to me.

And as we listen to the sirens, still blocks away but getting closer by the second, she grips my arm as she looks down at him.

"I loved him once."

I pull from her grip, climb back up to the bar and down another shot as the first police car slides to a stop out front. "You were always a better person than me."

Smokey Hollow

by Heather Togbetse

In a brown suit With a corsage of yellow roses You wed Mr. Grant King Under a blanket of pain from your mother's death And the strain of caring for your ailing father Joy arrived with the name Catherine Despite the fulfillment of motherhood It was all too much to bear Who will help me? None of us can. My husband is away. None of us can. Father has dementia. None of us can. But I have a child. None of us can. A family divided With flying fists and a lug wrench When your father was sent to Nelly's Then they desecrated your home With paint and flour and loathing

Your heartache is woven into me

The Stump by Heather Togbetse

From an age I do not recall
In a place I can't remember
You began inspiring me with your stories
These stories, all woven together, were

Your life

Your experiences

Your truth

As a small child

You heard people tell of the slaves

The huge auction stump somewhere in Parsons

Where families - mothers and fathers and children

Were torn apart

At the hands of the highest bidder

You never knew where they came from

Or what became of them

But were left to imagine the darkness

Sewn from that old dead stump

The threads of their flour sack dresses

And tears

Were woven into you

And this thread was woven into me

Suitcases

by Lori Stoll

A few of these

a few of those

it mightn't rain

and dasn't snow

so in with this

and out with that

oh, how I wish

these things laid flat!

And now it's done

the belly's full

I'll cinch the waist

a notch or two

and tag the top

in case, you see,

the case is missing

from the track

when I arrive

to take it back.

It's happened once

or twice to me,

an inconvenient

place to be

when all you need

for a week or three

is in the case

you wish to see.

A simple thing
a suitcase seems,
a box we fill
with stuff of dreams
or stuff to wear
when with our Dream
or dreams to see
and feel and be
before the sights
no more we see
as we on earth
our cases close
because some dreams
outlive our hopes.

THE SYMPHONY

by David Greene

The symphony carries the listener

along the misty aisles of an ancient European river, and my mind slips back to a walk I once took with you along a stream long-forgotten.

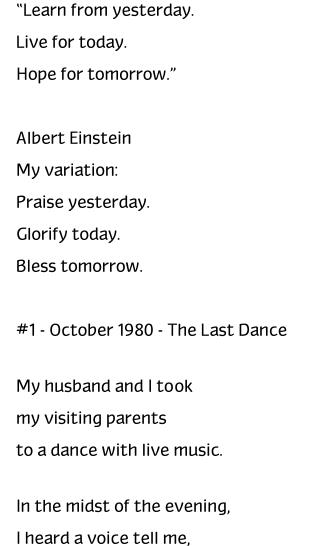
I think about the day we fell in love.

We had it all that day, nothing could have spoiled it.

But then you went away, and only the symphony was left to carry the tune.

Three Life Moments

by Rose Gordy



So we danced a waltz and then Dad said, "That was nice."

You might not have

many more chances."

"You should ask Dad to dance.

A few days after my parents left, my mom called to say she had found Dad not asleep in his chair, but dead.

Because I listened to my inner self, I, his oldest daughter and child, enjoyed the last dance with him. #2 - July 2001 - The Last Call

I phoned my mom
who was in a PA hospital
from a workshop in New York
that I was attending.

When I told her
I could see the Hudson River,
she asked me to describe it.

The next morning she flowed down a different waterway to her death.

#3 - September 2009 - The Last Touch

My three sons and I had to go
to a funeral home
to identify my husband, their father,
laid out in his coffin
in a small windowless room.
I went over to touch his forehead
as a Goodbye Gesture.
Then I jumped back screaming
startling my sons.
I'd never touched a dead body.
It was like boiling ice.

Time Now

by Rhoda Trooboff

"There is still that singular perfection, and it's perfect in part because it seemed, at the time, so clearly to promise more. Now she knows: That was the moment, right then. There has been no other." -- Michael Cunningham. The Hours.

The last afternoon of daylight savings time we walk at Swallow Falls. The hour seems right. There are others here, too, come at this moment to see the centuries-old hemlocks tall, still and silent, and sunlight glinting sidelong onto fallen leaves, an amber perfection. We watch the rush of water falling clearly through the ever-changing, changeless gorge and savor scents of pine and loamy earth and know that time isn't what we spend, waste or lose, pass, make or save. It is the singular perfect promise of the ever-present now.

Tiny Moments of Joy

by Bob Newman

As the garage door rumbled shut he sat stone-faced, the confrontation at work replaying in his mind. It was stupid, really, and he never should have let it get to the point of the two of them standing toe-to-toe, screaming at each other. He'd smoothed it over before end of shift, apologizing and promising not to let it happen again, but screaming at your boss was never a good thing, especially when he was right and you were wrong, wrong, wrong. But Harold was a good guy who'd stood beside him at Maggie's funeral, and they'd be fine, at least as long as he stopped acting like an ass every time he got mad.

The problem was, lately he got mad a lot.

He knew it was grief, that he was converting his sadness over losing Maggie to anger, lashing out at any and everyone who crossed his path, but knowing what the problem was and changing his behavior were two different things. Outside of work, he was fine. He came home, ate when he remembered, drank enough beer to fall asleep, then got up and did it all again. It was just at work, where he had to manage all the different personalities of the men who worked for him and the bosses he worked for, that he couldn't seem to get a handle on. Harold had suggested that he talk to someone, a friend, someone in his family, but the problem was that he wasn't close to anyone in his family, and his best friend had died last year. And now Maggie was gone, and he had no one. He was sitting in his recliner, staring sightlessly at a meaningless baseball game, the sound muted, a beer in his hand, when he heard light footsteps on the front porch. When he turned around he saw Carissa standing by the front door, a covered dish in her hand. She waved a hand, wearing half a smile, the soft breeze lifting her fine hair from her shoulders and across her face. He put the beer on the floor next to his chair and levered himself up, walked across the room and slid the screen door open.

"Hi."

She looked up at sad eyes in a thin face."I had the grand-kids for the weekend, I have enough leftovers to feed a small army and I remembered how much you liked my vegetable soup." She held the dish up."I figured I'd clutter up your refrigerator instead of mine."

He stared down at her, his eyes brimming, both from her kindness and the memories of the people they'd both lost. He reached out and lifted the dish from her hands. "My favorite."

He stepped back and she stepped inside, sliding the door shut behind her. "That's nice of you to say, even though I know it isn't the truth."She looked up at him. "Maggie told me you were a chili man."

He tilted his head. "Can't go wrong with a good bowl of spicy chili."

They stood silently, never comfortable making small talk without their respective spouses around to fill the awkward silences. Carissa glanced into the kitchen, a single cereal bowl upside down in the drying rack.

"Have you eaten?"

A slight head shake. "Hadn't gotten around to it yet."

Her eyes found his, and they stared at each other until it got uncomfortable. "Well I haven't, either. If it's all right with you, why don't we heat up the soup? God knows I could use some adult company for a change."

The corners of his mouth twitched. "Probably beats eating over the sink."

A real smile fought its way onto her face. "So then I'm not the only one."

In the kitchen he pulled a pot from one of the lower cabinets and put it on the stove, then peeled the plastic wrap off the dish and spooned in the soup. While he stirred she found bowls and silverware and arranged them on the small kitchen table where he and Maggie had eaten most of their meals. After a few minutes he poured steaming soup into the bowls and dropped the hot pot in the sink to cool.

"What would you like to drink?"

She lifted the beer from beside his chair and put it on the table. "Any more of this?"

He pulled a beer from the fridge, poured it into a tall glass and carried it to the table, where she sat waiting for him.

"Thanks," she said when he put the beer next to her right hand. "Is this going to be enough for you?"

"Don't seem to have much of an appetite lately."

Her eyes roamed his gaunt face. "I know what you mean. If I get any thinner I'm going to have to start shopping for suspenders to hold my pants up."

His eyes traveled down what he could see of her body. "If you get any thinner, you're going to be a ghost."

She reached out and gently touched the back of his hand. "You're looking a little 'Casper-like' yourself. Maybe eat a couple of greasy cheeseburgers." She gestured down at the soup. "And a vegetable once in a while probably wouldn't hurt, either."

He stared at her hand, then ever so slowly turned his over and lightly wrapped his fingers around it. "Beer counts as a vegetable, doesn't it?"

Her smile touched her eyes for the first time. "Only if potato chips count, too."

It wasn't exactly a smile, but as she watched his jaw unclench and his face relax she saw the first glimpse, since Maggie's death, of the man she'd known almost thirty years. He pulled his hand free and they ate in silence, the wind in the trees and the birds at the feeder the only sound.

As they washed the dishes she asked about the birds because she knew Maggie loved them and she thought that it might be nice for him to think about her in a good way for a change. That got Dennis talking about Maggie's favorite hiking trail in the park, and five minutes later they were crawling into his truck and heading for the trail head.

It was an easy two-mile hike to the top, the setting sun warm on their backs as they crested and came to the lookout. Hawks and turkey vultures flew at eye level, hunting the meadows below for food, alive and dead. Dennis stood as still as the trees around them, hands deep in the pockets of his jeans, Carissa close enough to feel the heat coming off his body, careful not to touch him.

"Are you over it?"

Carissa looked up at his profile, not sure she'd heard correctly. "What?"

"Have you moved on? That's what everybody asks and everybody says; you have to get over it and move on. But what actually happens is everyone else moves on but you. They're polite and sorry for you, but after the funeral their lives go back to what they were before. It wasn't their wife that died, it isn't their house that's cold and empty when they get home from work, it isn't their plans that got blown away when cancer grew in her belly and ate her up from the inside out." He looked down at her and the tension was back in his face, his mouth a down-turned slash, his eyes narrow slits.

"No," she said as she turned to face him, "I'm not over it.I'll never be 'over' it. He was the love of my life, the man I raised children with, the man I planned to grow old with." Her face became a mirror image of his. "People say, 'It's been a year, it's time to get back out there, meet people, maybe date a little'. Like you can attach some arbitrary day count to how long you should grieve for the person who shared your life for three decades. The depression is so bad I can barely function, get through a normal day, let alone manufacture an artificial smile and pretend that I give a shit about how someone else's day went." She balled her fists, brought them up to shoulder height and shook them as she squeezed her eyes shut. Dennis' eyes widened a bit but he remained rooted next to her, and after a few seconds she opened her hands, stepped forward and wrapped her arms around his waist. "So, to recap, apparently I'm not over it."

His hands settled lightly on her shoulders. "So then I'm not the only one." He felt her relax into him, her head against his chest. "For a minute there I thought I was going to wake up with a new bruise in the morning." She tapped him lightly on the back with her knuckles. "Like I could do any serious damage to you." She tightened her arms momentarily, then pushed away from him. "But I've realized, since Ben died, that I can't focus on just the negatives. There were plenty of happy moments in our lives; falling in love, raising the kids, building the business, becoming empty nesters. And when sadness and sorrow start to overwhelm me, I calm myself and focus on one of those tiny moments of joy. Like yesterday, I was cleaning out some drawers in our desk and I came across some old pictures from when the kids were little. And as I stared at them I started to cry, thinking about how much Ben is missing, watching the grand-kids grow up. But then I thought about all the happy times we had back then, living in our first house, a tiny little thing with all the kids stuffed into one bedroom, with no money and a car that started about half of the time. But every Friday night was homemade pizza night and a movie, with all of us piled onto the couch, the kids usually falling asleep halfway through whatever terrible Disney movie was popular at the time. And Ben and I would carry the kids to bed and tuck them in, then," she said, a smile growing on her face, "we'd usually go back out and finish the stupid movie because you had to see how everything turned out, you know?"

She lightly grabbed the front of his shirt with her thumb and a single finger. "You have to focus on the joy, not the sorrow. And now, every time I think about him and get a little sad, I use that moment and turn it around and think of a tiny moment of joy, a moment of love and laughter and simple happiness."

She dropped her hand and stepped back, staring into his eyes. "It's been over a year since Ben died and you just got a good example of how I'm coping, so I can't even imagine how you must be feeling," she said. "But I have my sister and my kids to talk to. Who do you talk to, Dennis? Are you seeing someone?" His eyes widened, and she touched him on the arm. "I didn't mean it that way. I mean, is there someone that you can talk to, a friend at work, maybe a grief counselor or some other kind of professional that can help you deal with this?"

He shoved his hands back into his pockets and turned his head, pretending to take in the view. "Never been much of a talker."

She shook her head, then turned and lightly slid her hand under and around his arm. She felt him stiffen momentarily, then flex his arm, pressing her hand against his side.

"Then how about we do this? Since we're both pretending to be functioning adults, even though we both know that we're not, and since there aren't many surprises left between us after thirty years, why don't we try talking to each other." She bumped his shoulder with the side of her head. "Who knows, one of us might even be able to get out three sentences in a row without having to pause for five minutes, trying to come up with something to say."

"I'll be putting my money on you for that."

She glanced up and saw his eyes cut to her, then quickly away. "And if that's the way it turns out, then your job is going to be to tell me to shut the hell up when I start running my mouth non-stop." She squeezed his arm, and his eyes cut back and stayed. "Deal?"

"I'll just distract you by asking about the grand-kids."

She laughed. "Well then I'll never shut up."

He shook his head, the tension flowing away from his face, a ghost of a smile playing across his lips, then they both turned to the view of the valley stretching away from them, hawks and vultures and an eagle up high riding the late day thermals, hunting, always hunting. They stayed like that until the sun turned orange low on the horizon behind them, then hiked back down to the truck. It was full dark when they pulled back into his driveway, and just before she dropped to the ground Carissa leaned across and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

He was still sitting there, memories of thirty years of friendship flooding his brain, but now both of them alone, long after her car disappeared down the driveway.

What It Could Have Been

by Rose Gordy

Many people say
they don't remember
their dreams at night.
But the reality is
we certainly recall
our Waking Dreams
and Waking Nightmares.

Waking Dream: A notable experience which a person has while awake that has qualities of a sleeping dream. The dreamer may realize that what happened is of consequence and potentially instructive in his or her search for meaning in life.

My key experience was this: I was in my early 30's Iiving in Silver Spring visiting a friend in Northern VA.

The last thing she said to me when I was about to leave after a pleasant dinner was, "Will you be able to find your way back home?"
I answered simply, "Sure."

However, as Fate would have it, when I got to a certain red light, I didn't know which way to turn. So I sat through one light cycle and then drove forward.

When I did, it was as though the first police car flowed out of the sky in front of my car and the second flowed behind it trapping me in their clutches.

The policeman in the first car came to my window and asked if I had been drinking. I answered politely, "I had a glass of wine at dinner four hours ago." Then he flashed his light throughout my car.

After I told him I just couldn't decide which way to turn, he shape-shifted on the spot from an official policeman to a kind gentleman promising, "Follow me and I'll get you where you need to go."

If these two men had been up to no good, I wouldn't be sharing this harrowing experience.

It certainly was a Waking Dream.
Fortunately not a Waking Nightmare.

WHO WILL COME...?

by Tom Dabney

The earth is covered with wasted space.

Thousands of acres dot the earth.

With well cared for, and not so cared for,

Lands devoid of life,

Except growing grass and a few trespassing trees.

They are filled with paved roads, inanimate granite, stone and metal plates,

Demarking the remains of the largely unknown

And, even if known, mostly forgotten.

They were rich and poor, men and women, children and infants,

Husbands and wives, and even lovers.

The successful and not so,

Contributors to their families, friends or society,

But still, dead.

We pass them sometimes stretching along the roadside

Sometimes barely noticed but for the overgrowth and abandoned gates.

The symmetry of the lines of markers, or their disarray, brought on by deserted time ls the only thing remarkable.

But still, to what avail?

When you and I are gone,

With our collective memories,

Who will come to mourn or even remember?

Better they should be blowing in the wind,

Ashes to ashes,

Then taking space they cannot use

From those who could.

Meet the Authors

<u>Ellen Coffey:</u> Lives in Cumberland, Maryland with her cattle dog, Gertie. She is the current president of the Cumberland Chapter of the Maryland Writers Association. Her poems have appeared in Pen In Hand Literary Journal, Allegany Magazine, Backbone Mountain Review, and several other literary arts publications. Her first book of Poetry, "Every Day a Last Dance," was published last summer. Garrett County is her favorite get-away place in Western Maryland.

<u>Tom Dabney:</u> Is a retired local attorney who enjoys running, motorcycling, hiking, and cycling. He writes when the mood strikes him. He is involved with the drug free community and programs to assist women with substance use disorder, in and out of jail. He enjoys volunteering at local events. He is working to improve childcare in the county and assists in making affordable housing a reality.

Rose Gordy: Has worn many hats, including Sister of Mercy, speech and debate coach, secondary English teacher and dream workshop facilitator. She spent twelve years of her early life as a nun effectively cut off from the world. In spite of the conditions within the Church, she managed to leave and make a life for herself including getting married and having children. Through her experiences in the convent as well as decades of teaching in the classroom, she has woven compelling stories and poems honoring the lives lost and changed forever by adversity. 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.

<u>David Greene:</u> I have spent my life as a professional photographer in addition to many other facets of the art world. I have exhibited several shows at the GCAC gallery, photography and acrylic painting. The poems I have submitted were written at a very emotional time in my life and I hope that they will give you some insight into my makeup.

Meet the Authors Continued

<u>Tony Lolli:</u> Is a fly fishing guide, by day (Facebook: Maryland Mountains Fly Fishing) with more than 40 years experience. His adopted rivers, since coming here after 20 years in Vermont, are the Casselman, Savage, Youghiogheny and North Branch of the Potomac. He is also a freelance writer with several publications in Vermont regional magazines. He also writes fishing columns and articles for magazines. Many of his books are available on Amazon under his name. Creative nonfiction is Lolli's writing preference: the telling of personal events in an interesting, unusual way. A lifetime of experiences makes for an unending supply of topics from Vietnam to college days, to divorces, to years working in higher education. The list of possibilities often seems overwhelming.

<u>Michael McEwen:</u> A native of Garrett County and son to two writers, Michael McEwen has been a storyteller and performer all his life. Michael earned his B.S. in Literature from Towson University in 2018 and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of Kentucky in 2021. His work has appeared in Yemassee magazine and previously in Ginseng Literary journal. His stories have been a finalist for the Robert Day Award for Fiction.

<u>David Moran:</u> is Adjunct Professor, WVU, and former Publisher of "American Scientist" and "Chronicle of the New Researcher." He has also served as Professor, USNA, and Professor, George Washington U. He was educated at MIT, Harvard U, Federal Executive Institute, U lowa, and authored three books "Voices from the Cosmos," Fifty Years of Hydrodynamics," and "All Mountaineers Are Libertarians."

<u>Bob Newman:</u> A resident of Garrett County for over forty years, I came to writing late in life as something interesting to do when I retired. Although I spend most of my time writing long form, I enjoy short stories and essays as they teach me discipline and remind me to get to the damn point. I've recently moved to the Swanton area, where Kathy and I are finishing our new house.

Mercedes Pellet: In my previous submission to Ginseng, I wrote, "I found my retirement paradise in the mountains of Garrett County." After selling our translation company, my husband and I moved to Garrett County in 2004. In 2006, we joined the original founders of H.A.R.T. and had the pleasure of being active participants in the growth of HART for Animals, Inc. in various capacities. I am a professional translator, a published author, and the former Chief Financial Officer of our company. With a lifetime love of languages, I greatly appreciate the opportunity to contribute to the Ginseng as an author and a dedicated animal lover. My contribution this year is the first chapter in what will become "The Story of HART for Animals." As co-founders of HART, we love our home and the people of our mountain community.

Meet the Authors Continued

Len Shindel: Is a retired steelworker who worked for 30 years at the former Bethlehem Steel mill at Sparrows Point, Md. for 30 years. Upon Bethlehem's bankruptcy in 2001, Shindel was hired by the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers in Wash., D.C. where he worked as a writer, winning awards from the International Labor Communications Association. Since retiring to Garrett County in 2015 with his wife, Maxine, he led successful efforts to win a historic road marker commemorating the 1970 Garrett County Roads Workers Strike. He is writing a book about the conflict and the subsequent decade. He has also been active in the Garrett Workforce Housing Alliance. "It is an honor to join other writers whose works are published in Ginseng," says Shindel, a grandfather of seven, who says he enjoys cycling, hiking and cross country skiing "when his aging knees allow."

Annie Simcoe: Is a mixed media paper artist living and working in the mountains of Garrett County, Maryland. Annie creates one-of-a-kind papers by hand using materials she grows or gathers. Drawing inspiration from life in the Allegheny Mountains, life events, and memories, she then uses these papers for her "quilted collages" which are layers of paper "drawn" on with needle and thread. One of Annie's most recent bodies of work is a visual memoir of her family's heritage rooted in the kitchen.

<u>Eleanor Stemple:</u> I have lived here with my husband and children for 5 years. While I enjoy writing, my passion lies in my love for Christ, my husband and children.

Lori Stoll: A resident of Deep Creek Lake in Garrett County since 2007, Lori is an active member and volunteer for the Garrett County Arts Council, Our Town Theatre (where she also serves on the Board of Directors), and the Garrett Lakes Arts Festival. Several of her poems were published in GCAC's Ginseng 2018, 2019, and 2022 publications and her play "Nothin' but a Muffin" was read aloud at Oakland A&E District's Play Bake event in 2022. Lori also volunteered with the Garrett County unit of Maryland Responds Medical Reserve Corps assisting with COVID-19 testing and vaccination clinics. Lori retired from a career in engineering business development in 2017. She holds bachelor's and master's degrees in Chemical Engineering and an MBA in global business management.

Meet the Authors Continued

Heather Togbetse: Though I live and work in Allegany County, most of my memories were made in Oakland, Maryland. I became an art educator in 2004, taught for 12 years, and then decided to follow my dream to become an art therapist. Storytelling is in my DNA. It shows up in my artwork in the form of brushstrokes and stitches and words. The poems I am submitting are companion pieces to large fabric works of art that tell the story of my grandmother's life in Appalachia. This series, "Woven Into Me," lead me to better understand my grandparents, as well as myself. Generations of love and loss and triumph are woven into all of us.

Rhoda Trooboff: Is a a writer, children's book publisher, and retired high school English teacher. She and her family have had a home on the shore of Deep Creek Lake since the mid-1970s.

<u>Cassandra Wolfe:</u> I've been obsessed with the writing spirit for years mostly dabbling in nonsense poems and the occasional kids story. I've managed to complete one novel during Nanowrimo and have outlined several more that are waiting to be brought into existence. I live in Accident, MD way up on the hill with a fabulous view of rolling hills, mountains and endless skies. I'm married with two kids. We also share our home with lots of dogs, cats, and a few barnyard birds. I'm hoping to one day retire from my engineering 'career' and let writing be my full-time job.