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LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

Greetings from the Garrett County Arts Council, Inc., and the Literary Committee!

In your hands is the culminating project of talented local writers who are compelled to tell their stories in order to reach out to the world, striving to make pathways toward common ground among all humans. Sounds lofty, but truly the writer is of such a mind and a passion. We invite you to read each and every piece, with all the differences in style and presentation an array of artistry from our very own local writers.

The Garrett County Arts Council Board of Directors is dedicated to promoting all area arts—visual, musical, theatrical, literary, culinary, and more. The written word is an important component of the arts, and we are so pleased to be able to celebrate it with this publication.

The selections for Ginseng are juried and chosen by the members of the literary committee. The responsibility in selection is taken seriously, and members work hard to choose the most effective, well-written entries for publishing. We thank all writers who submitted their writing for consideration. Your courage and artistry are appreciated, whether or not your pieces were accepted for printing.

We must apologize, however, for the long wait for this issue of Ginseng. A series of unfortunate events led to the delay, for which we are sorry. We do hope to move on with the next issue with more speed and efficiency! So writers, keep a lookout for the next deadline announcement!

As always, we thank you for writing, and we thank you for reading!

Sincerely, *Mary Sincell McEwen* President Garrett County Arts Council Board of Directors

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I HEAR THE LAKE

Eyes closed on the dock, can you hear it? Waves lap like a heart beat on rock. Thump-thump, does an echo repeat it? Thump-thump, roll the waves at the dock.

A motor boat passing before me pulls a cotton wake tail on the sea. The motor hum grows to a tumult as the waves crash in hard on the beach.

Clear water now back in its rhythm, I see crayfish below in the sand. Wave patterns fan out on the bottom like the lifelines that ripple my hand.

Thump-thump lap the waves on tree trunks that lean at lake's edge on the shore. Long shadows shimmer at sundown, reflecting the fading light's glare.

Cicadas sing in the distance. Somewhere, a dog bays at the moon. Leaves whisper in the treetops, In tune with the laugh of the loon.

A buzz in my ear reminds me it's time to go in and to sleep. Thump-thump, my heart, can you hear It? Eyes closed, the waves beat in my dreams.

Lori Stoll





we hart you tearnot anless you t Hough resubrunt. Your past is the past. Nothing will change it. for your own take. Les som it, and then bet tog

RECOVERY

The past is but a memory Yet in the mind's eye It sometimes haunts And rages at us in the late night, Drags us from our sleep, Leaves us tossing and turning On an emotionally swollen sea. We swim valiantly trying to get ashore Only to be pulled back by the current. Morning finally comes To rescue us For another day Now spent by the labors of the night.

Tom Dabney



MOTHER AND DAUGHTER STUFF

It was a different time like music came from a big flat vinyl circle. The full slip was essential like hats and white gloves for Sunday church. I never glimpsed you just wearing one. You were so modest in that stage of the getting dressed routine. We were more formal then. mothers and daughters. Your lingerie was stowed away in the second big drawer in your dresser, unmentionables. There were bits of lace and embroidered roses on some of the tops of creamy white synthetic fabric that kept you, a southern woman, proper beneath your dress or skirt. After you died, I could not throw them away. Stuffing them into a white plastic garbage bag I brought them home. Some nights now I am like a little girl playing dress up. Wearing them at night, here alone by myself, I feel glamorous. They are quite cool against my skin and when I catch a reflection of myself in the window or a mirror I see the slip of a smile, sometimes through tears.

Mikal McCartney

THAT TIME WHEN

We couldn't afford a dishwasher So we'd stack plates and bowls Two feet high like ceramic Jenga And listen in the night For the crash.

We were riding on the wheel well Of an ancient blue Ford tractor As the sun melted across the field And the diesel fumes hit our noses And you said we must be in a movie.

We forgot to get the cars inspected, And for two months We crept past the hospital, Tip-Toed behind the Dairy Queen, And called ourselves outlaws.

We made a fire out back And the smoke chased you Around and around and around Until I caught you and kissed you And kissed you and told you You were beautiful.

A.J. DeLauder





BREAD WITH SOUP

Carissa heard the soft knock from the back bedroom where she was needlessly changing the sheets on the bed. She poked her head around the corner and saw him framed in the glass of the door, head up but eyes downcast, hands buried in the pockets of his old canvas coat. As she moved to unlock the door she studied him; his eyes found hers but otherwise he was cut from stone, the recent death of his wife etched deeply in the lines on his face. She swung the door wide, then stepped forward without a word and wrapped her arms around him, her hands flat on his back.

"How are you," he murmured into her hair.

"Fine," she said into his chest, her arms light around his waist, "but I'm probably lying." She loosened her grip and he did the same, each pushing back slightly until they could see each other's face. "How are you?"

The corners of his mouth twitched, but the attempt at a smile died a quick death. "Fine, but I'm sure that I'm lying." His hands slid down her arms until his left found her right. "Feel like a walk?"

She glanced by him through the open door and saw low gray clouds behind wind-tossed bare branches. Without a word she stepped into a pair of low boots, shrugged into a coat she pulled from the hall tree, and stepped by him onto the porch. She waited until he pulled the door closed and then led him across the deck, down the flagstone path and onto the rocky shoreline. It was late in the fall and the water in the small lake was low. They turned left and walked slowly on the uneven surface, the wind whipping her gray hair back from her shoulders. They walked silently for twenty minutes or so, around the point and to the breast of the leaky old rock dam.

She took his hand and led him to a tree trunk sticking out of the brush, a place where she and her late husband Ben had always stopped to rest before turning for home. As they settled onto the damp wood she kept his hand, cradling it in her lap, and they sat quietly, sheltered from the wind. After twenty minutes he sighed, squeezed her hand and stood, pulled her up and they started back, neither having said a word. As they rounded the point he noticed her shivering and he stepped close behind her, blocking the wind from her body with his own as they walked slowly back to the old wooden dock beached on the shore. The house glowed through the trees, warm and inviting, and as he opened the door for her and followed her in he felt it wash over him, warming him for what seemed like the first time in months. She turned and took his hand again, eyes wide open. With his free hand he reached up and moved a windblown strand of hair back behind her ear, his fingers rough on her smooth face.

She smiled up at him. "Stay for a little bit?"

His head barely moved, a shake no one would have noticed but her. "Just wanted to make sure you were all right."

She reached up and touched his thin face. "Are you eating?"

"When I remember."

"Sounds familiar." She glanced towards the kitchen. "I could warm up some soup; maybe we could remind each other today."

He let his hand drop to her shoulder, then to his side. Without looking he reached back and pushed the door closed, the noise of the cold wind cut off like a sudden death. Inside the house only the soft tick of the ceiling fan could be heard as it spun high overhead. She walked behind him and put her hands on his shoulders, tapping lightly, and after a second's pause he ran the zipper down the front of his jacket and shrugged it off.

While she hung it on the hall tree beside hers, he untied his boots and stowed them on the rubber mat in the corner, then moved to the cabinet to the right of the sink where he knew that she kept her whiskey.

Without asking he poured two fingers for each of them, adding ice to both glasses and a splash of water to hers, then leaned back against the sink and watched as she moved around the kitchen.

"It's beef barley, if that's okay?"

"My favorite." He shrugged when she turned and raised an eyebrow in disbelief. "Mind if I cut some bread? I like bread with soup."

She reached to her left, pulled open a wide drawer and lifted a loaf of heavy bread onto the granite counter. "Cutting board's next to the microwave, and the bread knife's in the block."

He pulled a scarred hickory plank from the shelf, a long serrated blade from the knife block and cut off two thick slices. Mismatched Fiestaware dishes were to the left of the sink, stacked on an open shelf, and he pulled two bowls and three plates and brought them to the island. After putting the bread on one plate, he moved everything to where she was standing in front of the stove and stood next to her, watching as she silently stirred the soup.

"The kids coming in this weekend?"

She shook her head as she reached down and shut off the burner. "After four weekends in a row I told them that we all needed a weekend off.



I swear I could hear Carrie sigh with relief over the phone." She poured steaming soup into each bowl, then put the pot into the scarred farm sink to cool. They carried everything to the old plank table and sat down across from each other. He silently raised his glass and she did the same.

"To absent friends."

She touched the rim of her glass to his. "To good friends, who show up on cold days for hot soup."

They ate in silence, both grown used to the quiet, to living alone. When they finished he started to clear the table, but she took him by the hand and led him to the couch facing the dying fire and the windows looking out over the cold lake. She added two logs, closed the screen and gently pushed him down onto the couch, then sat next to him and rested

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her head against his shoulder, their hands again piled in her lap. Outside the wind picked up and rain streaked the glass, eventually replaced by sleet and then snow. After a few minutes she felt his shoulders slump and his breathing turn shallow and regular, and with just the slightest movement of her head she glanced up to see that he was asleep. She freed a hand from the pile and lifted an old throw from where she'd tossed it after sleeping on the couch the night before, pulling it across both of them. A few minutes later her eyes closed, and as the fire died and wet snow fell softly they slept, side by side under the ratty afghan.

When she woke hours later, well past midnight, the fire was out, everything outside was blanketed in white, and he was gone.

Bob Newman



GONE

Inez had a little pig Who followed her around, Around her legs, between her feet, All around the town.

One day, it seemed no time at all, Her pig was really fat. He'd lean against her hips so hard He'd almost knock her flat.

In middle June, the pig stepped down To the river deep and wide. He waddled in, eyes straight ahead, And swam to the other side.

Inez walked that distant shore But never could explain. Her lovely, loving, smooth round pig Was never seen again.

Abby Arthur Johnson

MISTY MORNING

It was the dew and heavy mist— Filtering the full sun— Covering the leaf and petal surfaces With glistening droplets, Like sparkling diamonds made by the sun. From the dampness came a sweet aromatic Mixed with the scent of grass, wild flowers and corn. Nature's hidden power to enthrall Without violence or threat,

Simply being.

Tom Dabney

BIG CATS

below the swollen mudline linger shapes so old no lure awakens their hunger. they drift, knowing only the hum and friction of sludge against stones. they are carried in no particular pattern, moving in deep water suspension whiskers mixing with river grasses, hovering in primordial flows and low bottom directives born with their cold blood knowledge from other relatives who bore testimony to avoiding the hook

M.C. Pratt



THE CLIMB

These days, the night does not fall; It crashes the horizon dark.

Still. Throw a leg over the top tube Breathe steam on frigid fingers Squeeze the brakes, check the tires Pedal. Coast. Listen for brake rub.

Out. Moonlight shimmers on February's saturnine snow. At the old, cold pond, Black water trapped Screams beneath.

Start up Stemple. Bottom of the climb. The body warms, the jacket Peals back its zippered fangs, The gloves come off. page 20 | *GINSENG 2018*



Fight above the cow fields veined by rope thin paths, Labor through skeleton Sugar Maples, Where leaves like kaleidoscopic tears Fell on a swirling afternoon last October.

Churn beyond the stolid, squalid homes, Hiding out here on naked ridgebacks Where tomorrow's troubles already reign, West Virginia heavy, in furrowed brows And blue ink ledgers.

To finally crest and howl On a frozen night. Not all is freezing.

A.J. DeLauder

A TOAST OF KILBEGGAN (1757 Irish whiskey From the World's Oldest Distillery, Distilled, Matured and Bottled in Ireland)

Hey Dad of the Andrew McCartney Scottish/Irish clan, born in the verdant West Virginia hills with runs and creeks and occasionally a slow, muddy river. Where have you wandered "Daddy Boy"? We would gladly bring another jug of golden Irish whiskey to warm your evening porch side chat with all manner of creatures from honking, nipping fowl to gentle, soft eyed shepherd Jesse.

Your humble house stands empty. Starting down the sidewalk the gaslight you restored is still burning. Your eternal flame of depression era frugality, harnessing the bounty of nature, casting a soft glow through the windows to the shelves you built framing rows and rows of words, all bound and standing in straight lines, like World War II sailor boys off to only imagined far away foreign lands. Things still whisper your name up the hollow, missing your nurturing touch. Waiting for you to get your cane, find your glasses, put your tooth in, turn your hearing aid on. To look over the ocean of books and pause finding that familiar passage of poetry or text, marked in recent years with yellow post-it notes. With a gleam in your eye in anticipation of your favorite phrase or rhyme there, right there where you left it. Pointing your finger to guide the way reading aloud you begin.

Now that deserves a toast. Let's just have a wee bit of the Kilbeggan.

Mikal McCartney



A GRIEVING HEART

Easy to start, hard to stop. Stop after stop; harder to start.

Life has been start after start. Stopping has always gashed open my heart.

Maybe she's tarried down similar roads. Maybe she's carried a similar load.

Though grieving our parting, this thought I adopt; the new love she's starting, I hope never stops.

Jack W. Spencer, Jr.





SEA HOUSE

Seven sets of eyes have gazed out upon the sea through storms and gales, in blustery air and bold sun. Skin has festered, crawling away from bone receding into furrows of grey mounding around the sockets framing them in, crusty eye shadow piped around those dark holes by time, weather, and the work of looking outward, glazed to opacity now by salt, wind rain, heat, and age. Once those cataracts are reglazed with clear young lenses, the house will see again the reaches of oceans deep, new eyes marveling at the long view.

M.C. Pratt

THE LOST SUPPER A Short Play

Characters:

Grandma, Mid-70s Grandpa, Mid-70s

Lights come up on an old farmhouse kitchen. Outside the windows and good drapes, the dark quiet blanket of a November evening is falling. Grandma and Grandpa sit at their little kitchen table, which is set for three. Grandpa stares out, watching the movement of deer across the grey fields. After a brief moment, Grandma stands and angles for the stove.

Grandma: You put in the mashed potatoes? Grandpa: Been warming for twenty minutes. Let 'em be. (She opens the oven, tests them with a fork) Grandma: What'd you put them on? Grandpa: They're warming. Grandma: Well, he's not gonna eat cold mashed potatoes. (She shuts the oven and adjusts the knob) Grandpa: Don't need to be re-cooked. You're gonna burn 'em. Grandma: Oh, hush up. (She comes back to the table, looks at her watch) Grandma: What time did he say? Grandpa: Six. Grandma: What? Grandpa: SIX, I said. Grandma: Oh. That's what I thought. **Grandpa:** (quietly) Don't matter much, though. Grandma: I wish you wouldn't mutter all the time. Grandpa: Ain't muttering. Talking clear as the day. You just can't hear. (beat) Grandma: You don't suppose that car of his broke down, do you? Grandpa: No. **Grandma:** Wish we could buy him a new one. Grandpa: Where d'you suppose we'd get the money for that? (beat)

Grandma: I think we ought call again.

Grandpa: For goodness sakes. He'll be here when he gets here.

Grandma: But supposin' something did happen while he was driving. Oughtn't we call?

Grandpa: Ain't nothing happened. You're dreaming stuff up again. *(beat)*

Grandma: Wish he'd move out of that apartment. His mother said that roommate of his – Jeff or whatever — goes out a-drinking of a night. Gets into trouble.

Grandpa: They're young men.

Grandma: You don't suppose he's a-doing that, do you?

Grandpa: How should I know?

Grandma: But what if he is?

Grandpa: Let his mother take care of it.

Grandma: But if he's been a-drinking he can't be going to school, can he? He can't be doing his studying all jumped up like that.

Grandpa: I don't reckon so. But it ain't none of our business either way. *(beat)*

Grandma: I wish he'd call.

(*He rises, goes to the fridge, pulls out a large covered bowl of coleslaw*)

Grandma: Don't you get that out yet. It'll spoil.

Grandpa: For who?

Grandma: What'd you mean for who? For him.

Grandpa: I done worked up in the milking parlor all afternoon cleaning out the stalls.

Grandma: I want the food to be nice. Not spoilt.

(He sets the bowl on the table)

Grandpa: Will you let it be?

Grandma: There's no call for shouting.

- **Grandpa:** Squawking about. Can't never let it be. If you hadn't called him all day yesterday—
- Grandma: I wanted to know if he was coming!

Grandpa: Nag is what you done. Ain't no wonder.

Grandma: Go ahead and blame me. You just go right ahead then!

Grandpa: Who else is there to blame? Weren't me that called him up.

Grandma: That's right. It's all my fault! I care and it's all-!

(The phone on the wall rings. They look at it. It rings again.)



Grandma: You answer it. (He goes to the phone, picks it up. Grandma stands, expecting)
Grandpa: Hello?... Yes, food's on the table... No, that's – that's all right... Yeah... Yeah, that'd be fine, we'll be around... Uh huh. You too... Bye. (He hangs up the phone)
Grandpa: Well, might as well go ahead and eat.
Grandma: He's not a-coming at all? (He retakes his chair)
Grandpa: No. Not this week. (beat. Grandma sways)
Grandma: I... Think I might go on to bed.
Grandpa (with tenderness): You oughta eat something first. It's too early. (She shakes her head 'no' and starts. He catches her hand)
Grandpa: He said he's a-studying this evening.



Grandma: Do you believe him? Grandpa (sighing): I suppose. Grandma: Well... that makes one of us. (He kisses her hand) Grandpa: I'll be in directly. (She nods and exits. He begins serving himself. The autumn evening settles. Lights fade out)

End of Play

A.J. DeLauder

A LATE OCTOBER MORNING at the Boardwalk Plaza | Rehoboth, Delaware

On the edge of the boardwalk overlooking the Atlantic, the blue waters flow to the right just like at Deep Creek Lake where I live on a mountain. The key difference the pounding of the waves I hear here on the sand and the water of the ocean flowing as far out as I can see.

A windy chill this morning gushing raging waves swirling relentlessly to shore. Very few strolling the boardwalk. Those who do sport warm clothes and walk briskly on the otherwise deserted beach quite different from the way they would in warm weather. Only one man is out with his dog who's frolicking in and out of the cold water on the edge of the sand while the waves tumble "head over heels" under the early morning sunshine.

Looking far into the distant horizon in both directions on this clear day, I wonder what strange secrets lie way down below those rolling waters. In my imagination I ask the ocean to divulge what it's hiding. But all I hear in response is the whoosh of the waves and the whirl of the wind.

Rose Gordy page 30 | GINSENG 2018



RUNNING IN HER SLEEP

the dog dreams her day in sounds reserved for beach runs, flying through frothy water shaking from nose to tail digging sand, dashing back to waves, following gulls whose voices call all sailors back to the sea.

M.C. Pratt



STRAUSS IN THE AFTERNOON

Nothing to carry and nowhere to go, she had Nobody fast at her side; she could swing Her arms wide, she could move with the waltz, She could push step step, push, now glide.

How she remembered as round she flew The spirals, the jumps on the three. Skating to Strauss, she knew the old turns; In memory, form, she was free.

Waltzing on ice in the afternoon, she was Part of a paradigm, with the Beauty, the longing, that lost world Endlessly moving in three-quarter time.

Abby Arthur Johnson

1998 1401

ACCENT

Truth or Dare On the neighbor girl's backyard trampoline, With the new girl from New Jersey.

Auburn hair played on alien shoulders. Pink fingernails and spaghetti straps. An exotic city tongue coiled pink behind rows Of benevolent braces. And those lips.

The girls laughed.

Truth.

Do you like him?

Continents shattered. Worlds exploded. Heaven waited seven minutes away. Dear God...

Sure. He's got a cute accent.

Images of cartoon hillbillies and cans of Copenhagen crawled out of dark places Chanting Redneck, Hey Redneck, Hey Redneck

Hey. What's wrong with you? Say something.

"Nothing," I said, careful to chew the g. Then lamely I fled, before the holes in The knees of my hand-me-down Wranglers Could betray me further.

That night, leafless in the shower, I scrubbed the day's dirt and sweat From my skin, and watched The ancient letters swirl Down the drain.

A.J. DeLauder page 34 | GINSENG 2018





HOLPING ON

They were driving along, having great fun, Mother and son on a ride. They were playing old games, singing old songs, Scanning the countryside.

The hills were green, the seeds were in, The cardinals on the wing; The calves were fat, gamboling free: It was Maryland in spring.

She said to Karl, her four-year-old pal, "I've already counted eight, Best fav'rites here, best fav'rites there — Look, over by that gate!"

He did not look, he sat so still, And he uttered not a word. She thought, Is he sick? But she tried again — "I see another herd."

He took a deep breath, folded his hands, And lifted up his brow: "Don't say 'best fav'rites' anymore, I just say cow."

The car raced on, the birds soared high, But her heart caught in her breast: "I'll say the old words for awhile, I still like them best."

Abby Arthur Johnson



ALLIUM TRICOCCUM TRIBUTE (A Rhymin' Poem)

When it's spring in West Virginy in the shade filled hillsides there, all the menfolk start a tremblin', like there's magic in the air! Not a rifle need be lifted, neither fur nor feather fly, just a cravin' for the flavor, and a keen ramp spottin' eye.

Put a flask in your coat pocket, carefully sharpen up the hoe, whistle up the sleeping coonhound, and a ramping we will go.

Now 'twas told in Californy, in the rush of mining gold, that a claim was fiercely guarded, 'gainst the chance of gettin' stoled. In the hills of Appalachia, your ramp patch is sacred lore, with its dark green stalks a peepin', heralding bounty evermore. Put the Jew's harp in your pocket, grab some biscuits and the hoe, play some old time country music, and a ramping we will go.

Give a kiss to your sweet woman, as you saunter out the door, cause once you eat your dinner, you'll be sleepin' on the floor! Put the cornbread in the skillet, peel the taters in the pan, get the brown beans on to boilin', don't forget to cook the ham. Clean the ramps and dice or slice 'em, the smell will make you heave and sway, fry 'em, boil 'em or sauté 'em, Eat 'em raw you're gonna pay.

Get a brown sack from the cellar sing precious memories soft and low, don't forget your mailpouch ' bacca and a ramping we will go.



Well the times they are a changin' and I read the other day, that the ramp was going yuppie, in some Washington café! Where they pureed and infused them, made some sushi and a tart, a gastronomical disaster, broke a West Virginy heart! Now they'll be flockin' to the ramp feeds, a crowdin' in the locals line, with their GapT's and their loafers, city slickers wantin' wine.

Put some gas in the fourwheeler, ford a creek that's nice and low, fill the flask with mountain thunder, and a ramping we will go. Thank God for West Virginy, an all the family clan so dear, livin' in those bootleg hollers, the pride of rugged mountaineers. We are followin' in the footsteps, forged by many that we love, if there's justice in ole glory, they'll be ramps in heav'n above!

Buckle up your hippy hoppers, come on Dad now don't be slow, tell some stories about the homeplace, as a ramping we will go.

Mikal McCartney



A FIERCE WOMAN OF THE NORTH

Crouching along the rows, Deerflies circling the red bandanna Wrapped around her hair, She spends the last days of July In the blueberry patch. She is waging war against Nature itself, Wanting to rescue the berries before They bleed into the warm sand. And she is a gambler, Risking all for the next row The riper berries on the fuller bush The perfect combination of Blue, green, and brown.

Abby Arthur Johnson

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SWEET OCTOBER

A trout in deep water moves with the lethargy of a soul gone old a body no longer charting its own course. Light from above filtered through a scrim of layered leaves rusty since their fall from the graces of summer's embrace, sluggishly floating toward the first kind frost of autumn.

M.C. Pratt



ONLINE PATING

Two prospecting hearts, adrift in the cold, amuck in bad luck and bad weather, fortuitously struck the same vein of gold (while panning DateHookup, I'm told), and decided to mine it together. It was rapture to rafters and (each morning after effusively juicing, mapping and yapping, happy-flaps clapping, and tingled toe-tapping) a love claim of sluicing and laughter.

And, now and again, he'll muse to back when she used to bring him homemade treats, three times a week, hot, steamy, and creamy. But now, it's slim pickin', a road-side chicken, and a side-dish of doggery, flea-bitten. She never explained the reason she changed, only that work had unmentionable tension, her elderly parents needed extra attention, and it wasn't an aversion to answering his calls, but her cheaply made cell phone, often disabled, she'd forgotten to charge, or, if out on the road, she'd left on her dining room table.

Then out went her plumbing, her lights, then her heat. She wouldn't be able to visit those weeks, and he chose not to question, for she was his queen, her esteemed reputation, self-reportedly pristine. But, he drove twice to see her, each time a surprise; two pickup trucks parked and two other guys. Crestfallen, he queried, "Is this what I fear? Sarah, I say, what's going on here?" She swore both were strangers, then made herself clear, "You're never to ever cross-examine me, Dear!" So, he posed no more questions, for she was his queen, her irreproachable honor, selfreportedly pristine.

What Buford does daily, Sarah seldom has doubts, but he dares never question her vague whereabouts, or he'll be the one labeled "argumentative" and "mean," and it's been counter-productive distressing his queen, her unsullied conscience, self-reportedly pristine. She says it's unseemly to mention this theme, but it's been more than three years since their lives were serene, and yet she will tell him, it's no reason to fret, that not one of her colleagues or friends has he met. And she won't go to movies, or auctions, the skating rink, or fish at the Lake, or, God forbid, to a pub for a drink (a low-brow activity she professes to hate). No dancing, no camping, or the theater to date. "Not yet," she will say, "but it's never too late," still secreting Buford like he was a fiend, unaware that today he vacated the scene.

His Subaru's gone, this note on his door, "I'm sorry, sweet Sarah, and forever more, I'll always be grateful that you were my queen, your scruples snow white, self-reportedly pristine. However, my dove, blue-eyed and blonde, Jake Caster found his love on Farmers Dot Com, and the photo he showed me, I'm sad to admit, in denim and plaid and mud-clad shoes, except for the outfit, looked exactly like you.

And Jake says it's fortuitous he happened to meet this gal who now brings him homemade treats, three times a week, hot, steamy, and creamy. And, easily eased from her Lucky Brand Jeans, she'll preen, then scream like a libido machine, while, amiss of the risk his Ms. could be shady, Jake contemplates maybe, from what he can glean, she's a virtuous lady, selfreportedly pristine.

Jack W. Spencer, Jr.

NIGHT WORK

It was a warm April evening The sun was heading to the next day Beyond a scattering of rising dark clouds

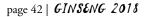
Silhouetted against the darkening sky, A red Case tractor Heading toward me With headlights lit, Pulling a three-point plow, Plowing up the ground behind Into clouds of golden dust.

I can barely see the farmer Yet I know he has seen those dark clouds too. He knows his ground must be open To breath in Spring and the Rain, that hopefully is coming.

The dust cloud rises Into the rays of the dying sun, Scattering the light in a burst, Enshrouding the farmer and his tractor Like a beatific vision.

His work has just begun.

Tom Dabney







TO THE ROSE BEARER OF MY DREAMS

One by one the roses bloomed, the first was beautiful and bright. it spread its glory all around, and faded with the edge of night.

In notes sublime the roses sang, melodic chords of pure delight, their promise of impending joy, a comfort to my thirsting sight.

No greater gift of magnitude, than simple beauty of god's grace, delivered by the hands of fate, could guarantee a smiling face.

The space they filled, a window ledge, apparent there for all to see, The room within my heart transformed, a secret longing finally free.

Mikal McCartney

COLORED GLASS

The school bus posed a special kind of threat for a shy and introverted child. That first steep step into the vehicle was a wrenching separation from the safety of love and nurturing into the raw and foreign unknown, filled with strangers and dreadful dark fears, unnamable. I did not want to leave the mother, who stood staunchly and probably embarrassedly every morning, handling the hysteric torrent of tears, flailing arms and stiff legged refusal to step up. Most days, I went. It must have been as wrenching for her, I now can see. Forcing a child in such distress must have sent her home with the worries of a hundred storms lasting 'til that bus returned, or the school called.

But she was wise. One day she said to me... "On your way on the bus this morning, look for something you've never seen before. Find something along your trip to look forward to seeing again tomorrow. Look out of your window and really concentrate, and before you know it you'll be back home at the end of the day." I was six. I did it, because she was the rock of my world, my friend, playmate and protector.

On the turn into my school, we passed a big white house with black shutters and big picture windows filled with colored glassware. The early sun caught those windows of color every morning, creating a magical spectral world. Something to look forward to; a constant in shimmering color. Later, another school and a long bus ride. This time, a paddock of horses, an adolescent passion. Still concentrating, holding the world at bay and riding away through imagination.

Windows changed, cars and drivers and then independence, less time to notice the things that stayed. Looking forward differently, with new confidence and anticipation. Many steps ahead from that yellow bus climb. Yet a steady voice still exhorting a brave countenance, a reminder to make the big steps, take them strongly, always looking outward, and noticing some sweet small thing for grounding or escape.

Colored glass. Silica and sand, metals and minerals; ephemeral until refined through fire, molded, tempered, living with molten ferocity until the final cooling. Long strong strides ahead until the looking forward becomes less ambitious, the big bus steps reduced to smaller shuffles toward another fearful unknown. When the colored glass mornings require more sun to



see the sparkle. Still, a voice whose sound has long become silent whispers a reminder to look forward again through the shimmer of sunlight for one more thing, just there, in the great forthcoming.

M.C. Pratt

IF I HADNT

If I hadn't been unemployed—

It was a perfect day for a bike ride, and since I'd foolishly quit my perfectly good job before finding another perfectly good job and had nothing else to do, I rolled down the driveway and headed out Mosser Road. East to Bittinger, south to Curt's Corner, west on Glendale Road to 219, and then home. A quick thirty-miler on a warm, sunny day when the alternative was to either sit at home and stare at the TV, or head to the bar and start drinking.

If I hadn't been riding my bike—

It cost nothing, which was a good thing since I had money going out every month but nothing coming in. And since I was still on a bike high from my ride to Maine the previous fall, it seemed like a great way to spend the day. I enjoyed the quiet, the solitude, the physicality of a three-hour ride, with nothing to look forward to at the end other than the endorphin buzz.

If I hadn't made a right instead of a left—

As I slowed at the intersection at Glendale and 219 I thought about turning left up the hill to Mayhew Road, then right for a slow pedal along Lake Shore Drive, day-dreaming of living in one of the million dollar houses, waking up every morning with the water just feet from my bedroom door. But it was a warm day for mid-June and I was already thinking about a cold beer at the end of a hot ride. So I rolled right through the stop sign and accelerated down the short hill, past Arrowhead and the Pizza Pub.

If I hadn't glanced to the right—

As I pedaled past the Pub I glanced at the lawn in front of the Honi Bar and the docks beyond, looking for a recognizable face or familiar boat, hoping to find someone to play with for the rest of the day. Still somewhat shy even in my late twenties, I wasn't the kind of person who could sit down, glance around, and strike up a conversation with a total stranger.

If I hadn't recognized a face-

Just a quick glance and I saw a tableful of girls about my age, two instantly recognizable. Thought about it for a split second and couldn't come up with a reason not to spend a sunny afternoon at an outdoor bar surrounded by pretty girls, so I turned around.

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If I hadn't stopped—

I rolled across the parking lot and onto the grass, hopped off and leaned my bike against the table next door. Said 'hi' to the people I knew and was introduced to the rest, but I only had eyes for the girl with shoulder-length brown hair and a shy smile. I'd seen her around, during the winter while playing volleyball, out at the bars once or twice, but I'd never gotten up the nerve to do anything about it. Found out that they were all teachers. It was the last day of school and they'd stopped to celebrate "no more kids" for the next ten weeks. One of the girls said the only thing that would make it better would be if they were out on the lake and, by the way, didn't I have a boat parked just down the road?

If I hadn't said "sure"—

I got back on my bike and rode five miles to McHenry, hid my bike behind the building, and drove the Century back. Made sure as I was loading them into the boat that the brown-haired girl ended up sitting right next to me. She asked so I told her a little about my bike trip, and it turned out that she'd just bought her first ten-speed and had no idea how to ride it. We made plans to meet a few days later for a quick ride so I could teach her about shifting and which brake lever stopped which wheel. As I dropped them off at the end of the day I talked to her last, making sure that I had her address and phone number.

If she hadn't hit me—

I pulled off to the side of the road and drifted to a stop, figuring we'd talk a little, see how she was doing. But just as I turned around to say something she plowed right into me. She'd looked down to see what gear she was in and lost track of where I was, and somehow managed to hit my two-inch-wide bike with her one-inch-wide front tire. She was embarrassed but unhurt, only a small scratch on her new bike as a memory of her first ride, but five minutes later we were laughing about it, and by the time we got back to her place we were friends.

If she hadn't gone on vacation with her boyfriend— I somehow managed to screw up the courage to ask her out, but she said that she was going out of town for a month, camping cross-country with her boyfriend. She promised to call when she got back so she could get another lesson on her bike, and then she was gone.



If her boyfriend hadn't been an idiot-

I marked the date on my calendar, and when the day came around I chickened out. Beat myself up for a week and finally called. She said that she'd been waiting for my call, since she'd misplaced my number and didn't know how to get in touch with me. We talked about her trip, but the only thing I heard was that, when they got back, she'd kicked her boyfriend to the curb. He'd been making empty promises for years and she finally got tired of it. I asked her out and she said "yes" to another bike lesson.

If I hadn't lied on my résumé—

An old roommate had a girlfriend who'd gotten her first job in pharmaceutical sales even while admitting that her only sales experience was helping her older sister sell Girl Scout cookies. And even though I'd done no such thing (no Girls Scouts in my family), I'd used it a few times in my cover letter, figuring that someone might appreciate the joke, and sure enough, later that afternoon I got a call for an interview that Friday morning. Which was also when our biking date was supposed to be. So I called and explained, and we put off the bike ride until Monday. Got to the interview, and what was supposed to be a twenty-minute "nice-to-meet-you-thanks-for-stopping-by"

turned into a three-hour interview, at the end of which the woman admitted that the only reason she'd called me was because she just had to talk to the guy who thought that putting the joke in his cover letter about selling Girl Scout cookies was a good idea. And then she hired me and told me that I started in Pittsburgh on Monday. The weekend was a blur of packing and moving and buying clothes that were more appropriate to corporate sales than bartending, in between having to call and break our first date for a second time. But she congratulated me on my new job, and we made a date to meet the next Friday evening, maybe go somewhere and do a little dancing.

If I hadn't run into my old girlfriend-

So, we finally got to the date part, and we were doing a lot of sitting and talking and very little dancing (I mean, really, have you seen me dance?) when my old girlfriend walked in. Saw us, got mad and asked me outside to talk. It was a very short, very loud talk and then I went back in and explained what in the hell was going on. But that just meant that we were both finally done and free to start something new. And when we walked to the car at the end of the night I hesitated before I opened the door for her, and kissed her. It was tentative at first, our lips barely touching, her eyes wide as she stared into mine. It lasted less than a minute, just a nice, long kiss, the kind of kiss that fourteen-year-olds share sitting on the swing on the front porch of her parents' house after a first date of ice skating and pizza with friends. No groping, no frantic tearing of clothes; just two people sharing a tentative first kiss.

Two years later we got married, and thirty years later we're still together, ready to retire and start the next chapter of our lives. And as I think back to what might have been, to all the things that had to happen in just the right order for us to meet that sunny June afternoon, to all the decisions that we each had to make for us to finally go out on our first date, you have to wonder how anyone manages to find the person that they're supposed to spend the rest of their life with. But I guess that's how it goes with most people, and all you can do is sit back and wonder about the magic of it all. About two people crashing into each other and being lucky enough to make it through the stumbles and bumbles and false starts, only to end up with the person that they were supposed to be with all along.

Bob Newman

FIRST DAYS FOR A LIFETIME

Life-transforming experiences happen when we least expect them. We often misunderstand their meaning until time and other events give them context. Our full understanding of them is what, in time, gives us wisdom.

My first day of school happened sixty years ago, when I was six years old in a country far away from where I am today. The day began when my aunt woke me up and dressed me hurriedly, without her usual patience and endearments. After a quick breakfast, my mother and I left the house, seated in the back seat of her friend's car to go somewhere. Nobody spoke, at least that I remember. Not even to explain the unaccustomed appearance of an automobile.

The car ride made me sleepy. I woke up when the car stopped. We had arrived at a building that had a massive door with a highly polished brass knocker. The door was slowly opened by a very tiny old lady, dressed in black and white and wearing a gingham apron. She spoke softly as she let us in into a large courtyard, full of other people. From there, we went into a room where I saw children that were being made to cry by other women, also dressed in black and white, and a man dressed in a white coat. I was terrified. I couldn't understand why we were there. I realized that the children were crying because the man was sticking a needle into their arms before passing them on to the women.

I was too young to even ask the right questions. My mother gave me to one of the women in black and white and, before I could turn around, she was gone. My last memory of my first day of school was being forcibly restrained by similarly dressed women as I cried "Mommy, Mommy! Don't go!" The white-coated man saw his opportunity and pricked my upper arm with the needle.

The sands of time have hidden many other – perhaps even more significant – events from my memory but, six decades later, I still vividly remember my first day of school. The women dressed in black and white were nuns, the place behind the heavy door was a boarding school, and the man in white was a doctor who was vaccinating the children against smallpox.

Unfortunately, there had been an outbreak in the city and, unbeknownst to all, I had already been exposed to smallpox. I cannot remember anything after the first day of school because I became very ill with a milder version of the disease and was in bed for the first two months of the school year. My face was mildly scarred from the pox but my first day of school left a permanent imprint in my mind and in my heart.

As a young adult, I heard the explanations of various family members about why it had been necessary to put me in boarding school: contested divorce, uncertain custody, young love turned into bitter hatred... Unnecessary explanations barely understood. The memory of my first day of school was hidden behind experiences both great and forgettable, happy and sad times, marriage, children, career... the mileposts of a life well lived. Until... one beautiful spring day...

One of my close friends needed a ride to a place where she volunteered a couple of times a month. We both had teenage children and I deeply admired her commitment to being a volunteer and having available time. She explained to me that she volunteered at the local animal shelter because there was never enough in the budget to pay for a full staff. I had never owned a dog or a cat, so I was happy to help out by being her driver. Once there, however, I became curious about her duties – and had over an hour to kill.

Our arrival coincided with the unloading of cages by the animal control officer, who had just finished picking up stray dogs and cats. After unloading the cat crates, he reached into the back of the van to bring out a large dog cage. I had moved closer to the van to see what he was doing and saw that he was straining to pull out a heavy wire cage, which contained a snarling, lunging dog. All I could see from where I stood were his furious eyes and bared teeth.

The driver and one of the kennel assistants carried the cage out and put it inside a dog kennel and left it there. The occupant of the cage continued banging against the sides and growling. Even his huffing sounded threatening. Since nobody said anything, I stayed to watch the heaving crate until my friend stopped by to tie a red ribbon around one of the chain links of the kennel door. When I asked her what the ribbon meant, she lowered her eyes and just shook her head and left.

I was 36 years old at the time, dressed in a suit and high heels for an appointment I have now forgotten. I sat on the dirty concrete floor outside the dog's kennel and began to feel the warmth of tears running down my face. I did not stop for a while, making enough noise that the dog inside stopped smashing against the cage door. I started speaking in a normal voice, occasionally interrupted by sobs, and explained to him what I thought was happening to him.

"I'm sorry, big guy. I get it. It really sucks to not know why you were brought here, a place you do not know, with complete strangers treating you roughly. I don't know why you are here or what you did to have your family, if you had one, leave you. Who knows? People are weird sometimes. They have troubles of their own and think you don't need to be told what's going on because you won't understand it anyway. But, if you act all crazy and angry, nobody's going to pay attention to you because they think you are bad."

I told him many other things, continuing to speak while he adjusted himself inside the crate and was quiet. I spoke to him for an hour or so until my friend finally came back and was surprised to see me still sitting on the floor. She said, "Sorry it took so long! We can go now. Thanks for waiting."

When she gave me a hand to help me get up, I said: "Can you stop them from euthanizing this dog? Do you have any pull as a volunteer?"

"Pull? No. On the other hand, the shelter staff really hates to put down an animal, if there is even a small chance. Sadly, this guy is a little crazy and they can't accept the liability of him attacking somebody."

"Can you take him out of the crate? What kind of dog is he?" I asked, fully aware that I knew nothing about any animal.

She replied, "No. You have to be trained to take the dogs out, especially problem dogs. We'd have to ask the shelter manager. And this dog is a pit mix."

"Pit mix? What does that mean?"

"Pitbull mix. You know, the dogs used for dog fighting. We get many of them. They've either been trained to fight or are used as bait dogs, and they can be unpredictable. Sad thing is they used be called 'children's nannies' and because of their strength and loyalty, they've been turned into weapons."

"That's horrible! I didn't know..." I said, not fully understanding what she was saying. But then I asked, "Do you think the manager will let him out if you ask?"

She left to find her manager and I continued my monologue with the "pit mix" dog.

When the manager came, she entered the kennel with a pole that had a noose at the end and, in less time than it takes to tell it, she had the dog out. When he came out of the cage but still inside the kennel, he came to where I was now standing and watched me. I put the palm of my hand on the wire door and he came to smell it. The manager looked at my friend, released the dog from the noose, and walked out. Before she walked away, she untied the red ribbon.

I learned later that he was a pitbull mix, abandoned on the highway in the night, about four years old, unneutered, and found with a gash on his right rear leg. Nobody claimed him or had heard anything about him prior to being picked up by animal control. After that first day, I went to visit him every day for a week and talked to him about my children, my husband, and anything else I could think of. Just as on the first day, he listened attentively to every word I spoke. On the fifth day, the shelter manager asked me if I would be interested in adopting him since nobody else had shown any interest.

When I answered honestly that I didn't know anything about animals, she looked at me strangely but said: "We will hold him another five days. That's all I can do."

I used those five days wisely. I met with dog trainers and read everything I could find about pitbulls, adopting rescued animals, dogs with children (my youngest was 10 years old), liability, breed-specific legislation, and some really crazy ideas about pitbulls and their equally crazy owners. My family thought I had lost my mind and, to be honest, so did I.

In my mind, I called the dog Ben for "Beneficent," which means "resulting in good." Then, I broke the news to my husband and three sons by saying, "Would you like to come to the shelter and meet Ben? I think I'd like to adopt him." They looked at me as if I had said that I wanted to become a Martian. But, to their credit, we all went to the shelter together. I had never taken Ben out of his kennel. All I had ever done was talk to him through the steel wire barrier.

I was very apprehensive. Not about Ben; about my family and their reaction. Ben was brought to us in a small courtyard and he came straight to me and sat on his haunches. This was the first time that I was with the 60-pound dog without any barrier between us. I was not afraid. However, I was not sure what my family's reaction would be so I just kept my eyes on Ben. The kids thought he was great and my husband, the only previous pet owner in the family, kept up an encouraging pitter-patter.

But while the kids played with Ben, my husband looked back at me and asked: "Why? Why this dog?"

I had to answer truthfully to him and to myself.

"Empathy. I knew exactly what Ben was feeling when he was brought in that first day. When I was a child, I lived through exactly the same experience. All I remember was being terrified. I do not know much about dogs, or any animal, but I knew when I saw his reaction that he felt afraid, betrayed, and terribly alone. He desperately needed someone to trust. I think empathy is the ability to understand the feelings of another living being. I felt in my heart what Ben was feeling and reached out to his fear, not his anger."

Ben lived with our family for eight wonderful years. He and I remained close for the rest of his life. When it was his time to leave us, we all mourned his death and rejoiced in the many memories he left with us. I will never forget Ben because, through him, I forgave my mother.

Mercedes M. Pellet



I WAS NINE

Just after bedtime, 9 o'clock, my Dad picked up the phone. His face was white as was the ghost – Grandma, he said, was gone.

Her heart was weak for many years before her final fall. She'd rest beside the window, there, above the garden wall.

The ironing board could not withstand her weight upon it so. She crumpled to her knees and lay, disheveled on the floor.

It was a massive stroke, they said, that took my Grandma down. Hot iron burn upon her cheek, still in her dressing gown.

My Dad and Grandpa brought her home, from Yuma to Eau Claire. With friends and family nearby she slowly languished there.

My sis and I were not allowed to see her in that way, but went along with Dad to say goodbye the final day.

The dressing gown's been laid to rest with others, all aligned. A granite stone records the date, that day when I was nine.

Lori Stoll

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CANPLES

Been in more bar fights than most "bar fighters." Been incarcerated a few times, the worst time being when I missed my wife and found out she wasn't missing me. Been to church four times, three for funerals and once to watch my ex-wife convert to Catholicism after someone made an anonymous phone call to her Mormon boyfriend's unsuspecting spouse.

Camped for days, even weeks, by myself on many a hunt. A small tent, a canopy of darkness punctured by campfire, where, in the deepest night, I'd wrestle with those ever-haunting, foster-home flashbacks.

As a kid, each morning, I'd awaken from a troubled sleep. Bet some teachers wished I hadn't...and probably a few pseudo-guardians, too, whose Healing Rods, dosed PRN, prescribed to cure the Mortal Sin of asking "Why?" may well have made my illness worse.



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A lot of "extra jobs" (ditch digger, mason-tender, bar-tender, dish washer, stock boy, etc.), but got Master degreed at fifty. Made it to sixty-five in 2012. Kept working to afford health insurance... plus, a couple of old, viscid habits.

Men tend to tire of me because I have vacillating values (in vaporous grays), dabble in poetry, and dicker on the prices of old dishes at yard sales. And women...danged if I know, really, but I find every woman fascinating and inherently scrumptious. It is, I believe, the naked passion they express in their stories.

Bow Season in West Virginia, bear and deer, and I'm sitting in my camper miles from anyone. Just a bit ago, my candle burned out, and, being candle-crazy, I said a few expletives, got an eerie chill, then remembered I have lots of candles bought dirt-cheap at yard sales.

I slip outside to pee in the woods, listen to the wind knocking the last of the rain drops from the trees, then go back inside my camper. My camper is "used," but down-right cozy. Yes sir, I'm one lucky hunter, no more camping in tents for me.

Not exactly Hemmingway stalking lions in Africa, but the rain has stopped, and tomorrow will be a good day to hunt.

It's after midnight, the alarm is set, and, for no good reason, I can't sleep. It's not like I fear sleep, that sleep might resurrect those jawclenching, pain-inflicting backwoods Bogey Beings. Bogey Beings...you know...spooky, imaginary entities; grim-faced ghosts who emanate from the unmarked graves of anguished, shallow-buried, childhood memories.

To fear Bogey Beings would be silly. And, besides, I enjoy this scribbling on paper towels. Reckon I'll light another candle. Magnolia...or pine scented?

Jack W. Spencer, Jr.

A WISCONSIN DAWN

Between night and early day Fog veiled the landscape. Save for the road and for the car, There was no line or shape

As they streaked south on 53 Toward Black River Falls. Carefully, he looked straight on. He saw nothing at all,

Or so she thought, as carelessly She looked off to the right. Then suddenly, the fog thinned, And early morning light

Revealed the outlines of a barn, An instant flare of red Upon a cirrus haze. The mist Slid shut as on they sped.

She alone had seen that flare, No one could come again. No one could know the color of The place where she had been.

Abby Arthur Johnson

THE GUARDIAN

The room she sits in is a pristine white. However, in reality it is truly oppressive. It would only appear faultless from an outsider's point of view. At a glance it is just a living room. Decorated simply, with a plush cream-colored couch, dark stained end tables with minimalist lamps resting unassumingly on top - all of these items facing in the same direction. Facing toward the one huge window that overtakes everything in the room. Each item modern, yet unobtrusive on purpose, so as not to take away from the seemingly grand view the window provides.

She sits on the couch, dressed in a pale blue nightgown, staring out the window, but not seeing the vivid view below. The truth is, she hates the view, hates this situation, this existence. Even more, she hates the fact that she's too much of a coward to do anything about what has become her "lot in life." Hearing the key turn in the front door's lock causes the muscles in the back of her neck to tense and her heart to race, but she doesn't move from her seated position on the couch – there is no need to. It won't change anything or prevent what is to come. The door opens silently, as it does every day at four o'clock in the afternoon, with a sigh of air that sounds like death creeping into the room. She cringes inwardly at the draft of air as it touches the back of her exposed neck and involuntarily shudders at the presence behind her.

"Gwen," he whispers, as his hands slip silkily around her neck. It takes all of her concentration not to recoil from his touch. Tilting her head slightly, he bends down and lightly caresses her neck with his lips. Dragging his nose slowly up her throat, he mistakes her accelerated heart rate for excitement instead of fear.

"Oh, Gwen," he breathes with desire.

"My love," she responds unwillingly.

And thus begins their dance. He chuckles lightly, still misreading her fear for anticipation. As he walks from behind the couch and into her view, Gwen closes her eyes, unable to bring herself to look at his surreal, otherworldly perfection. A suit – he always wore a suit, today happens to be cream with a brilliant cobalt blue shirt that accents his black hair, light skin, and bottomless midnight-blue eyes. Flinching at his light, sudden touch, she finally faces defeat and looks up at Thomas.

"How are you today, my pet?"

His smile would be infectious if it weren't so insincere-looking.

"The same as yesterday, and the day before."

"Do you truly hate it here, Gwen?"

The fingers of his right hand are now playing with the drawstring at the neck of her pale blue nightgown.

"I do not like being a prisoner in my own home, Thomas. I need some freedom."

"Yes my love, I know this. But you also know that I cannot, in good conscience, allow you to leave home. Not yet at any rate. I promise it will get easier."

"When, Thomas? I am at my wits' end."

"I know. Come to me, I will help you forget your caged existence." Smiling lightly for the first time in days, Gwen relaxes a smidge. Thomas is in a good mood tonight, which means he will be kind. Lifting her gently from the couch, Thomas carries her into the bedroom. As he places her on the bed, his hands deftly remove her nightgown and take the black rubber band out of her auburn hair.

Lying next to Thomas after sex is Gwen's favorite time of day – regardless of when it occurs. It's the time when he's most vulnerable and makes promises that he doesn't intend to keep. And although Gwen knows this, she also knows that he desperately wants to keep all of the empty promises he makes. And this is why she stays. This is why she goes along with all his rules, even though they are unnecessary and smothering. Fingers trailing down her back bring Gwen back to the happiest she's felt in days. She quivers as Thomas drags his fingers over her hips and then doubles back to linger at her stomach before tracing her arm and kissing her neck.

"When do you think I'll be ready?" she whispers.

"Soon, my love; I can feel it will be soon."

"So, maybe next week soon?"

"You know that I can't pinpoint the exact moment," he chuckles lightly at her impatience.

For mere seconds, Thomas is glad that Gwen's back is to him. He winces suddenly; remembering acutely his own "Transition," and empathizes with what Gwen is feeling completely. It fills his heart with such a rush of recollection that it brings tears to his eyes. The bottom line is he loves Gwen dearly, and won't let her go through this alone. But he won't let her hurt herself or anyone else either. As much as she hates this right now, it could be worse. As much as he hates this and hates being cruel to her, he must, for her own sake. Gwen doesn't realize it now, but she has too much potential as a "Guardian" to give it all up now. And he won't let her – because of her potential and, because he loves her.

Wiping tears from his eyes, he asks,

"Are you hungry?"

"Famished," he can tell she's smiling because he can hear it in her voice.

Silently, Thomas reaches down, catches her face and turns it toward him. Kissing her, he reluctantly draws back to see her beautiful face and caresses it with both hands. Relinquishing his favorite place on Earth, and on any other planet for that matter, he climbs out of bed and slips into the kitchen.

The next day finds Gwen lounging restlessly on the cream-colored couch, the grand view below completely ignored. Gwen is in a state over a dream she had the night before. Analyzing it for the millionth time, it still doesn't make sense.

She was standing on a plateau. Surrounding her was an Eden of nature and an easy breeze that gently enveloped her whole body in warmth. Circling her were beautiful birds of every kind and color. Their flight created the warm breeze as the tips of their wings kissed her bare skin as they passed. Closing her eyes she felt compelled to join the birds in their flight, but as Gwen took a step off of the flat rocky surface, she plummeted toward the dark, jagged rock face below.

Opening her eyes, Gwen still finds no solace in her chaotic thoughts. Even more painful than the dream and its elusive message was Thomas' reaction as she woke up sobbing in confusion. He had simply held her to him, like a child who had fallen and skinned her knees, whispering consistent murmurings of hope, that everything would be OK – at least eventually.

Sitting up suddenly on the couch, Gwen feels a sharp pain in her upper back. The sensation is so overpowering it causes her to cry out in anger and disbelief. Scanning the room for a clock, she momentarily forgets that there isn't one, another silly rule of Thomas'. As the pain subsides, Gwen gently smoothes her hands over her face, wiping with it the involuntary tears that have sprung up, inspired by her dream and sudden pain. Gwen realizes belatedly that she no longer recognizes the mind within herself. A soft

humming is causing her vision to become blindingly white and shimmery at the edges. The whole room seems to dance and sparkle, and Gwen feels compelled to stand before the view of the gigantic window.

Giddy with relief, Gwen stares openly amazed at all of the freedom on the other side of the glass. As the sun begins to slant down over the buildings, she realizes she's missed four o'clock. The humming has since died down, but an incessant knocking from the front door has taken its place. Completely diverted from her mental impulse to break the huge window, Gwen turns for the front door, afraid of herself, the feelings she's having, and of being alone.

"Gwen!" Thomas roars in front of the apartment door. She had never forgotten one of the rules before. In a blind panic he continues to beat two-fisted on the door, but to no avail. The view had finally captured Gwen. Which meant if he couldn't get through to her, if she didn't hear him and let him in, she would "Transition" alone. He had not wanted this for her. It was scary enough, feeling like you were losing yourself, but to go through it alone like he had...He shook his head, still pummeling the door to which his key refuses to work.

"Gwen!" he yells desperately again.

From the other side of the door, Gwen stands transfixed, knowing she should open the door this time. She can't quite remember why she was afraid to open the door in the first place...but the humming in her head is becoming painful and distracts her from completing her mission of opening the door. Instead the window subconsciously calls to her in a seductive suggestion of freedom. All she has to do is break the glass, freedom is at her fingertips if she were only brave enough to reach out and grasp it. But beyond Gwen's desire for freedom, she feels as if something is missing – that someone should be here for this, that she should be sharing her newfound freedom with someone. Again a violent pounding comes from the front door. Curious, Gwen walks back toward it, momentarily forgetting the awful hum that is taking over her mind.

"Gwen, please! It's me, Thomas! You have to open the door or else I can't come with you! Please, Gwen, just open the door!" The voice sounds strangely familiar to Gwen as she reaches for the doorknob. Easily distracted, she notices that it is no ordinary knob. It is intricate and ornate, made of a bronze-colored metal, shaped into the head of a lion in a silent roar. In the center of his jaws reveals an old-fashioned looking keyhole. Bending down to peer through the keyhole, a wave of nostalgia washes over Gwen, reminding her of Christmases as a child.

Her parents had always hidden all the Christmas gifts in one room under lock and key, due to Gwen's younger sister, Sadie, who had found and unwrapped every present when she was four. Just as quickly as that memory flashed before her, others began invading her mind – her twelfth birthday at the bowling alley, learning to drive with her father, going on a date with a cute boy, going to the prom, going to a party with her friends and never making it home...Never making it home...because she died that night. The flash of red and blue lights filters through her memory. The sound of sirens, the worried voices of strangers, the silence of her friends. The night she met Thomas. Thomas. Turning the knob slowly she hears the latch click before opening the door.

Hearing the latch in the door is music to Thomas' ears. Leaping forward he opens the door the rest of the way to find Gwen collapsed on the floor. A pool of blood surrounds her and has stained the back of her light blue nightgown. Lifting her into his lap he removes the nightgown to inspect her closely. Caressing her face he says,

"Gwen, it's all right. I'm here now. Don't fight it. It will only hurt more if you don't let it happen naturally."

The glazed look of agony on her face forces him into action. As gently as he can, he takes her to the bathroom. With one hand he lays towels down on the floor and carefully places her on them. Gwen mumbles some incoherent sounds as she makes impact with the toweled floor. Immediately, Thomas turns her over to inspect her back. Using a damp washcloth he can finally see past all the blood. Two perfectly round lumps are protruding from Gwen's back. Having grown so quickly the skin surrounding them is raw with gore. Upon closer inspection, Thomas realizes that the torn skin is in the process of healing itself, just as it should.

Flashes of color, swirls of light—that is the world Gwen finds herself in. Opening her eyes, she cautiously looks about her, waiting for the pain to start, but only ends up feeling a gentle warm breeze. As the specks of color come into focus, Gwen realizes they are the birds from her dream. They are even more glorious now than they were the first time she dreamt them. Her longing to fly with them is so strong it's almost painful. Closing her eyes once again, Gwen tries again to join her feathered companions.

"Gwen, it's all right, I'm here. Just try to relax, you'll be fine, I

promise," Thomas says soothingly into her ear, while trying to keep her from flailing and hurting herself.

"It was just a bad dream, just be still with me." Something wet and warm suddenly touches her face. Flinching from fear of more pain causes her whole body to tremble. At this moment all she feels is pain. Dying would be better than this.

"It wasn't a bad dream, Thomas," Gwen stutters through gritted teeth, "I wish to go back to the dream. Anything is better than this."

"Yes, but you knew from the beginning the 'Transition" would be difficult, and you also knew that there would be the risk of not being able to fully 'Transition.' Remember that becoming a 'Guardian' was your choice."

"Yes, because it was my only option at the time."

"Hmmm...I seem to remember Him giving you another option."

"It was the best option to pick."

"I'll say. But you are, whether you'll admit it or not, destined to be great at guarding souls."

At that moment a lightning bolt throb of pain coursed through Gwen's body. At that point her body seized agony. All Gwen could focus on was sustaining her breathing long enough to survive.

As the pain receded, Gwen was able to focus on other things. She could hear Thomas in the background now coaxing her through the worst of it. The worst of it being those meddlesome bumps on her back. They just kept growing. That's when the pain was the worst, when the lumps decided to have a growth spurt. Gwen had no idea what they were, but Thomas said everything was going according to plan – only that the "Transition" was happening a little ahead of schedule.

"You're almost ready, Gwen. Just a little longer," she heard Thomas say before she fell asleep.

The next time Gwen is conscious of anything, the first detail she notices is the spongy feeling that cloaks her entire body. It's almost as if she has been spread too thin; all of her joints and limbs feel relaxed, jello-y, and yet strangely rejuvenated. Opening her eyes, Gwen slowly begins to focus on the silky whiteness that surrounds her. She can hear Thomas breathing, waiting somewhere beyond the white glow. Reaching out, her fingers gingerly touch one white tuft then another. In dumbfounded amazement, Gwen finally recognizes the soft whiteness. Feathers; curling all about her. Sitting up slowly, Gwen feels the feathers fall away, revealing her naked body to the familiar world of her bedroom. Thomas is smiling beside her and tenderly reaches out to take her hand. On contact the chemistry she feels for him is electric and takes her breath away. The look he's giving her right now says that he feels the same.

"Gwen, you are absolutely magnificent," Thomas comments with awe thick in his voice.

Blushing at the complement, Gwen looks down at herself for the first time. At first glance nothing has dramatically changed, except for the fact that her body might appear more willowy, although her frame is still petite and curvy as it has always been. For some reason though, Gwen feels more solid, not heavier, but like there's more of her than she ever realized.

"Come here, my love, you need to truly see yourself." Moving carefully to the edge of the bed Gwen senses something following her, but when she turns as she stands, there's nothing behind her. Chuckling lightly, Thomas walks toward her and embraces her, then gently guides her to the full-length mirror that normally hangs forgotten behind the bedroom door. Once in front of it, Gwen completely recognizes herself, all but for the white feathers peeking out over her shoulders. Thoughtlessly grabbing hold of one, Gwen tugs it forward to see it better. She stops abruptly when she feels a sharp twinge in her shoulder.

"Thomas, what are these feathers following me around for?" Throwing his head back, Thomas roars with uncontained laughter that echoes as Gwen looks up at him in confusion.

"Darling, they aren't following you, they are a part of you now. You've fully 'Transitioned,' Gwen. You're a Guardian Angel."

"I'm sorry, did you just say I'm an 'Angel'?"

"Just look for yourself."

Wordlessly turning back to the mirror, Gwen reaches carefully behind her to touch the wings her body has grown. As if on cue, she rotates to get a better look, finally understanding the knobs that grew so ruthlessly out of her back.

"Do they work?"

"Of course. You just have to practice a little before you go jumping off buildings."

"How do I make them move?" she asks, excitement creeping into her voice.

"They are your wings, Gwen, tell them what you want."

As she thought about what she wanted, Gwen was surprised to find that it had nothing to do with her wings, but everything to do with her heart. While standing before the full-length mirror, mulling over all the events that led her here, the vast view of freedom called to her from the other room. Standing with her fingertips pressed against the glass, Gwen acknowledges Thomas' silent approach with,

"I want to make the wrongs I've done right. I should never have gotten in that car..." her voice catches in her throat.

"And now you'll have that chance," Thomas says as he takes her into his arms.

As Gwen embraces Thomas, everything seems right with the world except for one thing.

"Why are your wing-feathers black?" she asks, a bit dejected by their beauty.

"Because I am a male angel. That is the distinction between us – female angels represent purity and peace, while males represent the hard truth and justice."

"They're so beautiful," Gwen says, as she gently traces her left index finger over one of his wing-feathers. Thomas shudders slightly at her touch.

"You even more so," he whispers into Gwen's ear.

"Thank you, Thomas. I surely would not have made it through my 'Transition' so smoothly without you."

"No need to be so formal about it," he chuckles, and proceeds to kiss her neck with reckless abandon.

"Am I still allowed to love you?"

Leaning back to look at Gwen's face, a wicked smile slowly spreads across his face.

"You tell me," he quips, as he draws her close for yet another passionate kiss.

The next morning finds Gwen and Thomas in each other's arms. Sitting up wide-awake, Gwen checks to make sure that everything she remembers from yesterday isn't just a dream.

"I didn't know there was such a thing as a vain angel," Thomas teases.

"I was only making sure they were still there, I promise!"

"Don't be alarmed, I was only joking. Come, let's go flying, I believe you are ready."

The excitement in her eyes is hardly concealed. Thomas can't help but laugh at Gwen's barely contained enthusiasm.

Standing side by side in front of the huge window Thomas asks,

"Would you like to do the honors?"

He gestures at the glass between them and freedom with an upturned hand. "Aren't we coming back?"

"I thought you didn't like it here?"

"Well, I..."

"Don't worry, there are much more impressive views where we're going."

"Really? More grand than this?"

"Uh-huh. Just wait till you see it. Come on," he says, taking her hand, "Let's get out of here."

Smiling her first true smile, Gwen lifts her empty hand and taps decisively on the glass. At first it seems as if nothing is happening, but a small crack spiders slowly across the window. With another precise tap the glass crumbles away from the building, shoving sun-kissed wind in both their faces. Closing her eyes, Gwen remembers her dream and her birds.

"Colorful birds?" Thomas inquires.

Eyes snapping open with shock, she nods her head.

"Always with the colorful birds," he mumbles, shaking his head with a small grin.

At once Gwen smiles, understanding that Thomas has shared her dream during his "Transition." Suddenly impatient to try out her new wings, she steps carefully out onto the window ledge. Ruffling her feathers and stretching out her wings, the mechanics of flying click into place. Holding onto each other's hands they both step off the window ledge to join the birds from their dream.

Samantha Roller



FRANKENSTEIN

Our break-ups would typically occur after I'd find out that the special woman I'd been dating had been lying to me. Her fabrications were usually (seemingly always) designed to obscure her "involvement" with another man. Back then, the strategy I used to employ for dealing with infidelity went like this: First, I'd take an objective perspective on the betrayal, such as, "It's not her fault that she's more attracted to another man" or, "It's better to happen now than five years down the road."

Next, I'd convince myself that she wasn't (for example) the most creative, compassionate, or conversational woman I'd ever dated. And lastly, I'd consider the silver linings of breaking up, like, "I'm a free-agent now; I can spend more time fishing...and (thank goodness) there are plenty of honest fish in the sea."

This approach worked like magic...for a while...until I realized that I'd been through these same mental exercises a half-dozen times. I started thinking, "It must be me. What's wrong with me?" But, these girlfriends would never tell me what was wrong with me before they'd start having affairs with other men. I'd be thinking, "Everything is peachy," and then, POW! I'd find out our relationship was built on cardboard pilings. And, worse, when confronted with their mistruths, they'd never explain anything. They'd just get angry at me for inquiring about these other men.

But, what bothered me most was how it shook my sense of reality. They'd tell me I didn't see what I saw, what my friends saw, or what she and I both saw. Apparently, either the relationship I saw never actually existed, or it had simply vanished. Poof! Gone! I was left with nothing but stuttering



misstatements, feigned indignation, and a bucket of jumbled feelings. There's no point in getting riled up. A woman is free to pursue any man she chooses. I can't blame her if that man isn't me. So now, instead of meekly rationalizing, I write. I'll dig up some "old bones" and, in a wistful frenzy, start suturing away; attaching new flesh, recreating the mindset of her reminiscent being. Her most identifiable features, those unique traits that made her special-and not so special-will soon be pulsing through her subtly augmented, black, printed veins. In simulated setting and garb, she'll be the manifest star in the tale of our acquaintance. A poem or story will spontaneously come to me. It will rise from the ashes faster than I can type it, and, if I sculpt her well, I'll send her off to audition for publishers. Once successful, she'll return, and on that day, Rectification Day, she'll be waiting for me; sitting there quietly on my front porch. I'll welcome her back, and, reunited now, I'll feel ecstatic, like some "mad scientist" who's infused life into an exhumed corpse, renamed his entity (let's say) "Pasha," and then had Pasha cryogenically frozen, to be thawed out at his whim.

My Word-Creature will have preserved my own Pasha by transforming her ghostly, ethereal memory into a solid, immortal, life-like replication, a neatly wrapped present, a somewhat fanciful, but foreverfaithful girlfriend-facsimile, a gift I can share...or unwrap for myself... whenever, if ever, I please.

Jack W. Spencer, Jr.

MEET THE WRTIERS

Tom Dabney

Tom Dabney has practiced law locally for more than 40 years. He has three daughters and three grandchildren. He loves Garrett County because of its beauty and its people. He 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. This is his second publication of his work in Ginseng.

A.J. DeLauder

A.J. DeLauder is a West Virginia based playwright, actor, and teacher. His plays have been selected, produced, and/or developed with the Barter's Festival of Appalachian Plays and Playwrights, The Baltimore Playwrights Festival, Pocahontas County Drama Workshop, M.T. Pockets, New Hampshire Institute of Art, The Eddy Theatre Company, Renaissance House, Theatre Arlington, Theatre on the Lake, Our Town Theater, and a world premiere with Lab Theater Projects of Tampa, Fla., in 2018. He is a winner of the 2016 AACT NewPlayFest. His first play, Gracefully Ending, is published by Dramatic Publishing. He is a co-founder of the Old Red Barn (O.R.B.) Play Reading Series. He is a Member of the Dramatists Guild and WV Writers Inc. and received his MFA from the New Hampshire Institute of Art.

Rose Gordy

A resident of Garrett County living one road from the top of a mountain above Deep Creek Lake, Rose Gordy has published two collections of short stories, two novels, a collection of poetry and her account of the nearly thirteen years she lived as a nun, The Green That Never Died, now in the archives of Notre Dame University in Indiana. Her recent book, They Traveled West, is a collection of poetry about her Hungarian ancestors and family. Rose is currently completing her next book on dream poetry and facilitating monthly Dream Workshops at Smoke n Mirrors in Oakland.

Abby Arthur Johnson

Abby Johnson is a retired professor from Georgetown University and currently owns a second home in Sky Valley. She came to Garrett County in the fall of 1999 and has so enjoyed spending a good part of every year up here. As an academic, she taught courses in literature and cultural studies. At the same time, however, she wrote and published poetry based on her experiences as a daughter, wife, mother, traveler, and times spent living abroad. Her selected Ginseng submissions reflect some of her memories of having fulfilled all those roles.

Mikal McCartney

Mikal McCartney was born in Virginia but grew up in the Appalachian Mountains in a small West Virginia town where kids hustled home at the chime of the 6 p.m. church bells. Growing up with modest means, her family read books, mostly from the public library. Her mother was a librarian for 35 years and her dad could recite poetry that he learned when participating in childhood Christmas plays. Their home was infused with books and the love of reading. In college Mikal studied journalism and English literature, earning a B.A. and later master's degree in education. She settled in Oakland after graduation from college and taught school, worked for Garrett County Memorial Hospital and Community Action. In 2000 Mikal slid off the mountain to Annapolis where she has enjoyed working and living in the heart of a beautiful downtown. She knew that she would return to Oakland and four years ago she was lucky enough to buy a charming home on Second Street that called her name. Mikal has two wonderful children with wonderful spouses, two awesome grandsons, a great family, cherished friends, a stubborn dog, a spoiled grand-dog, and the beauty of the mountains.

Bob Newman

A resident of Garrett County for over forty years, Bob Newman says he wrote "typical teenage angst crap" in his teens and twenties, and "thought better of it for thirty years" before coming back to writing later in life as something interesting to do in retirement. Although he spends most of his time writing long form, Bob appreciates short stories and essays, as he believes they teach discipline and he says they "remind me to get to the damn point." Bob and his wife Kathy have recently moved to the Swanton area, where they are finishing their new home.

Mercedes Pellet

Mercedes Pellet has been living in Garrett County since 1993. She and her husband came one weekend to visit friends at the lake and fell in love with the mountain community. At the time, they owned a business in Montgomery County, Maryland, which provided translations in over 60 languages to U.S. businesses, so they only came during weekends and vacations. By profession, Mercedes is a translator. Her native language is Spanish but, having immigrated to the U.S. when she was 12, Mercedes translates from and into English, Portuguese, and French. In 2006, they sold the business and retired here. Since she was born in the mountains of Colombia, Mercedes felt at home in the beautiful mountains of Western Maryland. After retiring, they joined HART for Animals where they have been instrumental in raising the funds and managing the construction of the HART Animal Center.

M.C. (Maggie) Pratt

Maggie is a long-time resident of both Garrett and Allegany counties, and has worked for years in both as an artist and teacher. She is a member in good standing of the Garrett County Arts Council Board of Directors. Maggie currently works as an independent artist, writer, and teacher, as an individual and a member of the Maryland State Art Council's artist in residence roster. As a member of the Mid Atlantic Teaching Artists group, Maggie is an advocate for teaching artists within our state. Most recently she completed an artist in residence position with the Wildacres Retreat Center, Little Switzerland, N.C., where she worked on paintings and writing in community with two other creatives.

Samantha Roller

Samantha Roller had been a resident in Accident, Maryland, for four years. She has been a writer and lover of the arts from a young age, and has recently begun seeking out venues for publication. While writing has always been her first artistic love, music has also been a big part of her life after moving to Garrett County. She has performed at multiple open mic nights in the Oakland and Alpine Lake areas, as well as having her first semi-professional gig at the Preston County Performing Arts Center in Kingwood, West Virginia, in May 2017. After joining the ranks as librarian for Northern Garrett High, Sam began a literary art magazine as a creative outlet for her students. 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.

Jack W. Spencer, Jr.

Jack has lived in Garrett County for fifteen years. Now old, fat, forgetful, and gray, his passion is still hunting. These days (his gun, better used as a crutch), he totters through the forest bagging more snacks than game. Jack has a wonderful, world-traveling son, Jack III, who hunts and fishes with him, but who is increasingly aware that Dad could easily get lost or fall from the boat. Son, Jack III has an engaging, mild-dispositioned, multi-talented wife, Terri, and an adorable, nine-year-old daughter, Maddi, who probably wonders if Granddad's house is a junk shop. Affixed amid the clutter, the only decorations worth dusting are Maddi's paintings and drawings.

Lori Stoll

Lori has lived at Deep Creek Lake, Garrett County, since 2007. She recently retired from a long career in engineering business development to focus on writing and the arts. She is working on two books – a collection of poetry and a memoir – and creative nonfiction essays. Her essay titled "The Next 47 Years" is pending publication in the spring. Lori also dabbles in watercolor painting. She is an active member of GCAC, including participation in the writers' group, and volunteers her time for GCAC and Our Town Theatre. Lori is also on the Board of Directors and serves as corporate secretary for The Reading Station, a new 501(c)(3) nonprofit which provides reading instruction to improve literacy among children and adults in Garrett County. She 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.





MEET THE PHOTOGRAPHER

Penny Knobel-Besa

Penny Knobel-Besa is a fine arts photographer, playwright, and director. In the past she was named Maryland Photographer of the Year, received a national award from the Big Sisters-Big Brothers and has exhibited in Vienna, Austria, New Orleans, LA, and Gilchrist Museum in Cumberland, MD. In 2018 she was the photographer for the Maryland Writers Association August Journal and in 2012 for the literary journal, "Backbone Mountain".

She's a theatre graduate of Towson University, Master from University of Baltimore, with post graduate theatre studies at Yale University and writing at Johns Hopkins. As a playwright/director in 1993-95, she produced a musical, "Under Your Pillow" Off-Broadway in New York. She moved the theatre company she founded in Baltimore, "Maryland Theatre Arts Company," to Cumberland, Maryland, where it continues.

