



wisconsin
writers
association

Creative Wisconsin

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

Spring 2025

In this edition

Meet Steve Fox

**Jade Ring Contest
Opens!**

**Is there a book award
right for you?**

Fiction

Essays

Nonfiction

Poetry

Book News

Writing

Encouragement

Visit

www.wiwrite.org

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

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

Images in this edition are courtesy of Pixabay.com, and the authors. Thank you.



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From the editor

Lisa Lickel, Hillsboro



Strategies have been on my mind lately. I’m in Peggy Rozga’s Poetic Strategies critique group

because I blithely tell my prose authors that poetry is story utmost distilled and please, please learn about what makes poetry work (from someone who knows that they’re talking about) and add poetry to your due diligence reading and writing practice. Learn to choose the best words to convey an image or a feeling and to describe a moment. I need to practice what I preach so I’m trying to do more than learn but also to feel it and write some poetry. It’s a contemplative challenge.

Strategy gives us a place from which to start and grow. It is a science and an art, according to Webster, to employ a plan to achieve a goal. Have you thought about your writing goals? What would you like to achieve as an author? Recognition? Publication? Acknowledgement? All of those things are secondary. Our primary goal is to be read.

Writing strategy should include listening for the “yes, I heard that—and that too”; coalescing the particles of joy; it is the real work of finding the best you, and most particularly knowing when and how to mourn and where to find joy in adventure. It’s supporting voice, imagination, relevance, agency. It’s investing in others; in self; sometimes it’s sitting by the lake. It can be watching for spring flowers, believing in miracles, or simply staying in love—you’ll find all that and more in these pages.

Find your passion, write about it, share it with others, and above all, give each other a hand by writing reviews, attending events, buying a book or magazine or subscribing to a podcast or newsletter, commenting in posts, writing a thank you note.

On your to-do list: Enter the [Jade Ring](#), watch for conference registration, join a critique group, attend a virtual event. It’ll be a good year.

~Lisa



Around Wisconsin

Compiled by Rebecca Swanson

Wisconsin Screenwriters' Symposium

The second annual Wisconsin Screenwriters' Symposium, hosted by UW-Madison's Department of Communication Arts, with support from the International Screenwriters' Association, will take place **April 4-6** on the UW Madison campus. Learn more at <https://screenwriters.commarts.wisc.edu/>



Two Sylvias Press Chapbook Prize

Two Sylvias Press invites submissions for its 2025 Chapbook prize. Entries accepted through **May 31**. Winners receive \$1,000, 20 author copies of print chapbook and more. Winners announced by September 2025. More info at www.twosylviaspress.com/chapbook-prize.html

Lakefly Writers Conference

Journey to Oshkosh for the 2025 Lakefly Writers Conference to be held **May 2-3, 2025**, at the Oshkosh Premiere Waterfront Hotel and Convention Center. Take workshops designed to inspire and guide your creative journey. Register, learn more at <https://lakeflywriters.org/registration/>

Novel-In-Progress Book Camp & Writing Retreat

The 12th Annual Novel BookCamp takes place **June 22-28** at the Siena Retreat Center in Racine. Deadlines to apply are **May 1** for the Book Coach program; **May 15** for the BookCamp or Writing Retreat. Spaces are limited. Learn more and sign up at www.novelbookcamp.org

HPL Book Fest

Hedberg Public Library will host its annual HPL Book Fest on Saturday, **June 21, 2025**. The event will feature an author fair and several writing workshops, including a master class led by award-winning Wisconsin author Maggie Ginsberg. Details at www.hedbergpubliclibrary.org/book-fest

Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets Annual Conference

Save the date! WFOP's 75th Anniversary Conference takes place **June 12-15** in Madison. Ross Gay, author of four books of poetry and recipient of numerous awards, keynotes the event. More info and registration at <https://www.wfop.org/conferences>

Editor's Note: We want to hear from you! Send news of your events, contests and conferences to Rebecca at rswan529@gmail.com. We'll print as much as space allows. Copy deadline for June issue is **May 1**.



Meet Steve Fox



Steve Fox is a writer from Hudson. His stories have been rejected by many of the world's top literary journals. Find him at stevefoxwrites.com and @stevefoxwrites.com on Bluesky and Instagram.

How long have you been a member of WWA, Steve?

Ten years. Joined in 2015.

What do you most appreciate about Wisconsin Writers Association?

Opportunities to connect. Writing is an isolated experience, and it's important to leave one's bubble and interact with other in-bubble-livers like yourself, toiling away at the same sort of things you are. The annual conference is an energizing experience that, apart from all the writerly greatness that goes along with it, has led to enduring friendships and a broadening of my writing community.

What do you write?

Literary fiction. I once called it "speculative literary gothic fiction," and I think that still holds up. There exist small rips in the fabric of my realities through which a story can access a parallel place where

weights, dimensions, and times are slightly off kilter but in their own way, balanced. Gut-punchy realism combined with a dash of speculative sauce. One editor said reading my work was akin to experiencing Kafka and Carver connecting on the same page.

My story collection, *Sometimes Creek*, was published by Cornerstone Press (Stevens Point) in 2023. It was awarded the American BookFest Best Book Award and named finalist in the Chicago Writers Association Book of the Year Award.

Cornerstone Press will also publish my next book, *These Are My People*, in 2026. It's a collection of loosely linked stories that could be called a novel in story.

Share a little about your writing process.

I'm a husband and parent with active kids and a demanding full-time job, which means I do my writing in the margins of my life. Early morning, late at night, on my iPhone while standing in line at the pharmacy, or waiting in my car for a child to emerge from rehearsal or practice. Nearly every word in my two books was written between five and seven in the morning, and after ten-thirty at night.

I do the majority of my writing on a computer. But I do a fair amount of creating on my iPhone as mentioned above. Here's how it works: I write on my phone in Notes, then sync with my computer at night and pull what I've written in Notes into a Scrivener document. From there, I resume writing and pass it back to my phone. On the phone I can then read the epub and make revision notes and I can view the revisions made on my phone on my computer, and can then apply the changes to the same Scrivener document. And it's back and forth, back and forth.

I often read. Right now I'm reading *Sad Grownups* (Amy Stuber), *All the Light We Cannot See* (Anthony Doerr), *Slaughterhouse-five* (Kurt Vonnegut), *Forty Acres Deep* (Michael Perry), and *Drinking from Graveyard Well* (Yvette Lisa Ndlovu). Trying to read more novels because I have a novel in progress.



How have you benefitted from WWA?

The people I've met, and the subsequent correspondence. Having individuals so willing to talk shop, who can provide the elusive opportunity to bask in our shared experience. The community bond is important.

WWA provides contest opportunities. [The Jade Ring Contest](#) is accessible to everyone, and includes an excellent and affordable feedback option. That's actually how I won the contest one year—I submitted a story simply wanting a professional critique. It's a story that's known to cause certain discomfort. Readers love it or hate it. A lot. So I thought I'd see what the judge of a state-wide contest thought. And I won!

I also met the publisher of my books, Dr. Ross Tangedal, at a WWA conference in Middleton. Kim Suhr introduced me. He participated on a panel and we chatted on and off again over the course of a couple years and so it's very safe to say I would not have a book were it not for WWA.

What would you like to see WWA do more or less of going forward?

More readings! This would give more people more opportunity to share their work in a friendly and informal gathering. I think a monthly reading would be cool, but even quarterly would be excellent.

Steve, what advice do you have for aspiring and seasoned writers?

Writing is hard. But it's worth it. Remember that. And the best way to start writing is to start writing. Seriously. Don't wait. Get going. Put your phone away and turn off notifications on your computer and make something up about a passer-by and run with it.

Read. Ask yourself what makes the published work you are reading work.

Join or form a writing group—you can find a number writing groups on the [WWA website](#), as well as members who may live near you. Workshop a story and start a new group or a manuscript exchange with the students in your workshop. Working with others as you develop a story makes

you read differently. Reading what others are working on provides invaluable insight.

Read. Read what you have written aloud. Even if it's just an email. If you find yourself catching on turn-of-phrase as you read it aloud, the reader who doesn't know your work will stumble on it when they silently read it to themselves, too.

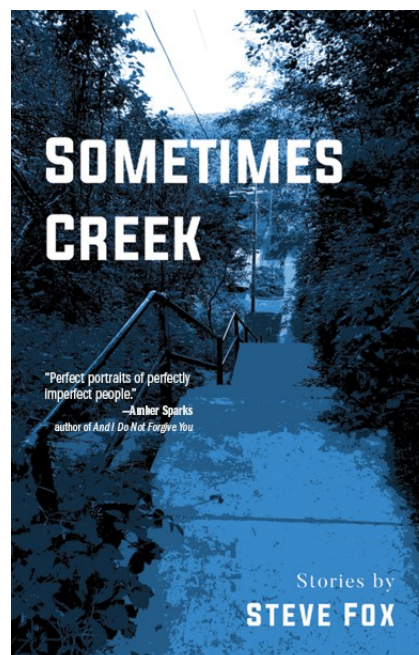
Leave off the day's writing at a stopping point you can resume at. You may find yourself needing to stop mid-trance. Create a line that will allow you to resume that vibe when you sit down again.

Become happy with a small amount of new words. You aren't going to write three chapters of a novel in one sitting. Revising takes a while. Revising can equal pain but revision is where the real writing happens.

Read. Read (or listen to) author interviews. Find out what makes them tick, what motivates them. There's always useful insight to be gained from the spontaneous interaction of an author and host.

If publishing is your goal, submit. You can't get rejected if you don't submit. You'll need thick skin.

Thank you, Steve, and best wishes with your future projects.





Craft Tips: Minimize It

Kim Suhr, Red Oak Writing

“What is the best piece of writing advice you have ever received?”

I’m being interviewed by Jessica Noel for The Obsessed Writer podcast (<https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/the-obsessed-writer/id1761040074>), and we’re in the Q & A section. Jessica rattles off questions, and I am to respond with whatever jumps to mind first.

Best writing advice? Hm.

I’ve been mentored by a National Book Award finalist, taken classes from a multiple-Oprah-book author, attended writers’ conferences with lots of literary heavy hitters, and read more books on the craft of writing than I can count. Over the years, I have received enough writing advice to fill a thumb drive, but the answer to Jessica’s question?

“Minimize the word ‘it.’”

Weird. I know.

Chalk it up to nervousness or the ticking clock, but that’s what I come up with. Nothing flowery. Nothing deep or particularly wise. And yet, I stand by this advice.

Minimizing use of the pronoun “it” improves every piece of writing I produce. The result is crisper, clearer sentences that communicate more clearly what I want to say. If you have ever been in one of my Roundtable groups, I have probably graced your manuscript with at least one suggestion that revising the “it” out of a sentence will make it stronger. Again and again, this advice pays dividends.

But don’t trust me. See for yourself. (Note these sentences all come from my own early draft writing, so as not to put anyone else in the hotseat.)

Example 1

Yikes!

It feels like hours later when I wake up in the family room. My heart is racing, and it feels like there is a hole in my stomach. All I can see is the red stand-by light of the DVD player on the shelf under the TV. It feels like an eye glaring at me through the darkness.

There are plenty of reasons this series of sentences is weak: the repetition of “it feels” isn’t particularly necessary or effective, plus “feel” is on the list of “filter words” that can weaken our prose. (Here’s a great article on filter words: <https://writeitsideways.com/are-these-filter-words-weakening-your-fiction/>). In addition, the words that the “it”s refer to (If you want the fancy grammar term, we’re talking “antecedents” here.) are slightly different in each of the sentences. While all the “it”s could be a generic word to describe the speaker’s general state, in the second sentence, the “it” could also refer to the racing heart. In the third sentence, the “it”s antecedent might be the red light. Here’s a revision:

Better! (No “it”s at all!)

What feels like hours later, I wake up in the family room, my heart racing, the sensation of a gaping hole in my stomach. The red stand-by light of the DVD player glares at me through the darkness.

Example 2

Yikes!

When she couldn’t stand it any longer, she pushed herself from the couch. It was Sharon, full of complaints. Why didn’t Marilou get an answering machine? And worries. She’d called twice in the last half-hour, and it just rang and rang.

The three “it”s all refer to different things. The first refers to the ringing of the phone. The second refers to the person on the other end of the line, and the third refers to the phone itself.

Better!

When she couldn’t stand the ringing any longer, she pushed herself from the couch and answered. Sharon opened the conversation with a complaint: why didn’t Marilou get an answering machine? And worry: She’d called twice in the last half-hour, and the phone rang and rang.

Example 3



Yikes!

She knew it was too much to hope that the seat next to her would be unoccupied for the whole concert, but she would be somewhat comfortable until the other person arrived.

The “it” sets up unnecessary wordiness. When we get rid of it, the sentence becomes much crisper.

Better!

She didn’t dare hope the seat next to her would be unoccupied for the whole concert, but for now she could stretch her legs until the other person arrived.

Challenging ourselves to remove “it” makes us think about other ways we can tighten and clarify sentences and make them...

Even Better!

The seat next to her would surely be occupied soon. Until then, she could stretch her legs and be comfortable.

Of course, the word “it” has its uses as do all pronouns. It is a great little word to help us avoid unnecessary word repetition and make dialogue sound natural, which is why I’m not advocating you excise it completely from your writing completely. Just make it earn its keep!

Writing Exercise

Write the next page of your work-in-progress using the word “it” no more than three times. Bonus points if you can revise them all out of a page and the writing still does what you want it to!

Or

Using the “find” function, do a search for “it” in your work-in-progress. Choose an “it-heavy” section where you want to rework the sentences. Can you cut your “it”s by half? By more than half? Good luck!

Kim Suhr is author of *Nothing to Lose* and *Close Call* (Cornerstone Press) and Director of Red Oak Writing, <https://redoakwriting.com>

WWA Book Marketing Group Report

Maggie Smith

Did you miss it? - This group wound up in February

What do you get when you combine fifty WWA members eager to learn how to market their book(s), two volunteer facilitators who’ve marketed six books between them, an invite-only Facebook group, an ever-expanding Google doc, and a monthly Zoom link? A lively gathering of writers dubbed WWA’s Book Marketing Support Group, of course.

Last September, this loose amalgam of authors from all genres and level of experience began meeting once a month to discuss, share, and commiserate about the oftentimes misunderstood, sometimes frustrating, and always necessary aspect of a writer’s life—marketing. Billed as a limited-run discussion forum, the group will wind up this February after covering such diverse topics as how to approach and recruit influencers, where to find readers and cultivate “fans”, developing an author brand and an author tagline, websites and newsletters, a 6-month time-line for launching a book, how to build a mailing list, and the efficacy of advertising (does anything work and what’s the ROI?)

Facilitated by Kristin Oakley and Maggie Smith, long-time members of WWA, these monthly Zoom meeting offered a mix of presentations followed by open-ended discussions and Q & A. The meetings, along with the Facebook group link and comments, provided informative data, shared anecdotal examples, and a strong sense of camaraderie and networking.

It was a popular event and the board will be considering whether to run it again for a new set of folks in the fall.



Find Your Voice (and Share It!) on the Midwest Writers Room

[The Midwest Writers Room](#) is a podcast hosted by the Wisconsin Writers Association (WWA) featuring Luella Schmidt and Ken Humphrey. The engaging podcast is starting its third season, and it's a platform for established and emerging writers in the Midwest to connect, share, and learn. Launched to foster a community among writers, the podcast includes interviews with authors, discussions about writing techniques, insights into the publishing industry, and updates on WWA events. Episodes are either full-length or shorter "Chapter Breaks," which are interviews and readings with local authors.

The show dives into different aspects of the writing life, from workshops to craft to the business of publishing, making the podcast a trove of information and inspiration for Midwest authors, readers, and those interested in writing.

Listeners find the Midwest Writers Room enjoyable for several reasons. It offers a unique perspective on writing from the heart of the Midwest, celebrating the region's rich literary culture. Hosts Ken Humphrey and Luella Schmidt

bring warmth, humor, and an understanding of the writing process to the episodes. A favorite part of the show is the "special sauce" question, where writers divulge secrets about what makes their work unique.

The podcast features everyone from novelists to poets to publishers, providing listeners with a spectrum of insights into different genres and styles. It also is a motivational tool, encouraging writers to persist through the challenges of their craft by sharing stories of success, failure, and the journey in between.

The Midwest Writers Room is for anyone passionate about literature. The conversational tone makes the show relatable to anyone who's felt the pull of storytelling. Episodes include practical advice on everything from character development to navigating the world of publishing. For those considering taking up writing or looking to enhance their skills, the podcast is an excellent educational resource, offering inspiration and guidance.

The hosts always want to share success stories from the Midwest writing scene. If you're an author with recent good news or a unique project to share, submit your story to podcast@wiwrite.org.

A favorite part of the show is the "special sauce" question, where writers divulge secrets about what makes their work unique.

Whether you've just landed a publishing deal, released a book, or have literary news you're excited about, celebrate it on the Midwest Writers Room. Share your insights, inspire listeners, and join the literary adventure. Find your

voice on the Midwest Writers Room!

Meet fellow writers, discover new inspiration, get actionable craft advice, and learn about the publishing industry. [listen here](#) (<https://wiwrite.org/podcast>) or through your favorite app.



2025

The Jade Ring

Writing Contest

2025

Watch this space for other answers to your burning questions (if you'd like to ask one, please email contest@wiwrite.org) and visit the website www.wiwrite.org for more details.

Jade Ring Contest to Open

March 1, 2025

Wisconsin's Premier Writing Contest for Previously Unpublished Work

With 75 years of contests under our belt, WWA is thrilled to announce the March 1 – June 1 submission period for The Jade Ring Contest.

Some FAQ

What are the categories?

Fiction, Nonfiction, and Poetry

I write humor, where does it go?

Wherever it goes: a made-up funny story (fiction), essay or thing that really happened (nonfiction), free (or not-free) verse (poetry).

What do you mean by “original” and “unpublished?”

Original: The piece was written by you and has not used any kind of artificial intelligence in content development or creation.

Unpublished: The piece has not been published in print, digitally, or online. This includes blogs or social media.

Do I have to be a WWA member to enter?

No, but you'll want to join anyway. For an additional \$25, you'll get all the perks of a WWA membership along with your entry.

Who will be judging my work?

Fiction: Sue Burke

<https://sueburke.site/about/>

Poetry: Christina Marrocco

<https://www.facebook.com/people/Christina-Marrocco-Writer-and-Poet/100082971357039/>

Nonfiction: B.J. Hollars

<http://www.bjhollars.com/bio.html>

How do I know my piece will get a fair shake?

Entries are judged “blind,” without author identification.

Can I get feedback?

Yes! For an additional fee, a judge will provide their professional assessment of elements that worked well, areas for improvement, and/or overall suggestions for revision. (This will be global feedback rather than a line-by-line critique.)

Do first-place winners really get a jade ring?

Yeah, how cool is that? Plus, they have the opportunity to spend a week at *Write On, Door County!* in a writer's residency. Plus, a cash prize (second and third places get some moola, too!). Of course, there's nothing better than the glow of being in the winners' circle and the bragging rights for being recognized in the state's premier contest for unpublished writing!

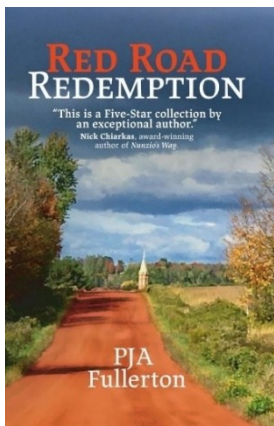


WWA Press Books

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

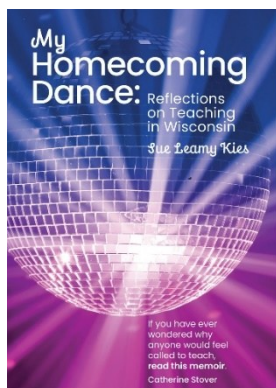
PJA Fullerton
Short story collection

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



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

PJA Fullerton's next book with WWA Press, tentatively titled *Milking for Barn Cats*, nonfiction memoir tentatively scheduled for fall of 2025.



My Homecoming *Dance:* *Reflections on* *Teaching in Wisconsin*

Sue Leamy Kies
Memoir

In her memoir, *My Homecoming Dance*, Sue Leamy Kies returns to her

alma mater in Platteville to teach high school English. What's changed in twenty years since graduation? What hasn't? Her recollection of former classmates, students, mentors, peers, and lessons taught and learned provide a humorous, candid, behind-the-scenes look at secondary public education.



Fire Conditions

A novel by Thomas Malin

One portentous summer in 1958 two young brothers learn the depth of family love and loyalty. Mike and Jimmy's mother needs a break from her troubled marriage and her budding arsonist youngest son, so sends the boys to her mother in Wisconsin. Eccentric can't begin to describe the people who inhabit a town called Friendship. There's Aggie's Tap, where the boys will sleep, since Grandma's house is reserved for her spoiled dogs. They boys have adventures with the Big Fish People, learn outed family secrets, find first love, hobnob with a Hollywood stunt man, an acting sheriff, and a kidnapper, but most of all, they wonder if they will get to go home to an intact family.

We need you! Reviewers, word of mouth shoutouts, book clubs... ask for electronic copies in exchange for a review. Contact Luella, press manager, at wwapress@wiwrite.org



Wisconsin Writers Association Press In pursuit of the noble literary art

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

What We Publish

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

Submissions

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

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

Fiction

The Press will consider most genres or literary works. The best lengths for works in fiction is 60,000 - 100,000 words. Questions to wwapress@wiwrite.org

Nonfiction

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

How to Submit

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

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

Full Guidelines:

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

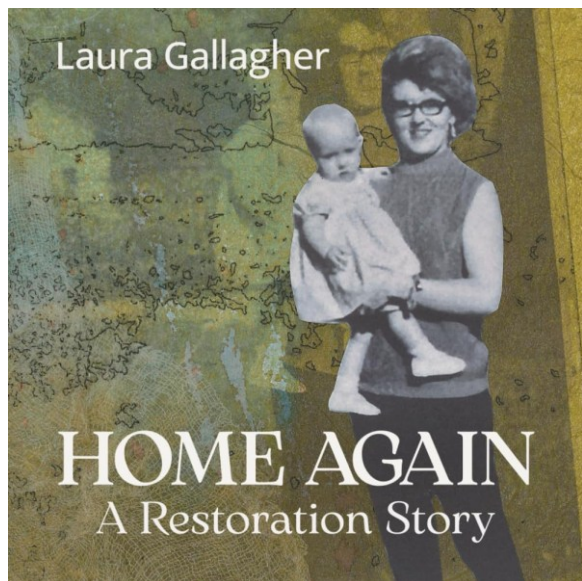
Ready to submit? Email Luella Schmidt:

wwapress@wiwrite.org



Book News

WWA Member Benefit! To include your publication news, please send announcements to hello@wiwrite.org for inclusion in the WWA website calendar and the monthly news brief. For inclusion in *Creative Wisconsin Magazine*, send to submit@wiwrit.org.



September 20, 2024, Mathetria Press, LLC
298 pp, paperback, ebook
<https://homeagainapplesriver.com/>

Home Again – A Restoration Story is more than a memoir—it’s a celebration of resilience, craftsmanship, and the enduring ties of family. Readers will delight in the vivid imagery and engaging stories that bring the house to life, from uncovering its architectural gems to the countless hours spent restoring its charm. Through it all, Laura Gallagher shares the joys and challenges of small-town living, evoking a deep sense of nostalgia and belonging.

Laura Gallagher is a writer, entrepreneur, and President and founder of The Creative Company, a public relations and marketing firm in Madison, Wisconsin, and Mathetria Press, LLC, a publishing company. She grew up on the edge of Apple River, Illinois, where she now vacations and hopes to write more books about meaning, purpose, and the people and places we call home.



March 4, 2025, Mascot Kids!
32 pp, hardcover

www.marydschamsbooks.com

PUSH RESTART is a game-changing picture book that helps readers unlock the power of emotional growth. This interactive story encourages readers to join in the fun as characters navigate confusing emotions that children encounter every day in their real world. From feelings of frustration, anger, sadness, and fear to resilience, self-regulation, and problem-solving skills. With fun and engaging illustrations, and a catchy refrain, readers will enjoy shouting “Push Restart!” as they explore strategies and see how to stand strong and become social-emotional champions!

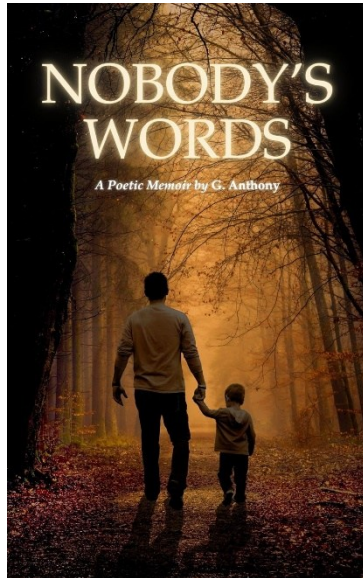
Mary De Merle Schams’ love of books and writing began as a child. She spends her days as an administrative assistant at a busy elementary school, where she enjoys connecting with families and organizing reading events. Mary’s hope is to inspire and encourage children to believe in themselves and their power to be kind, make a difference, and know they can do hard things!
This is her first picture book.



Nobody's Words G. Anthony

Step into the soul of *Nobody's Words*, a poetic memoir that transcends the boundaries of traditional storytelling. This powerful collection of poetry and prose offers more than just words—it is a beacon to healing, a journey through the raw depths of the human experience, and a testament to the strength of the human spirit. Discover the freedom of being nobody—and find yourself within the pages of *Nobody's Words*.

<https://www.homemadeauthor.com>



The Vessel of Words: Becoming Nobody

G. Anthony, Fond du Lac

I spent the first half of my life drowning in confusion. Not the kind of confusion that comes and goes, but the kind that burrows into your bones, into your soul, tangling itself in your identity until you no longer know where you begin and the lies you've been told end. I was bipolar. I was PTSD. I was dissociative identity disorder. These weren't just diagnoses—they were my reflection, my reality, my prison.

And then my son was born.

In that single moment, I realized the life I had built—or rather, the life I had endured—was unsustainable. I looked at him, fresh into this world, and I knew: everything had to change. The person I was, the person I had been told to be, was not enough. I couldn't be a father if I didn't even know who I was.

But how do you find yourself when you've spent a lifetime being told who you are?

For me, the answer was in becoming Nobody.

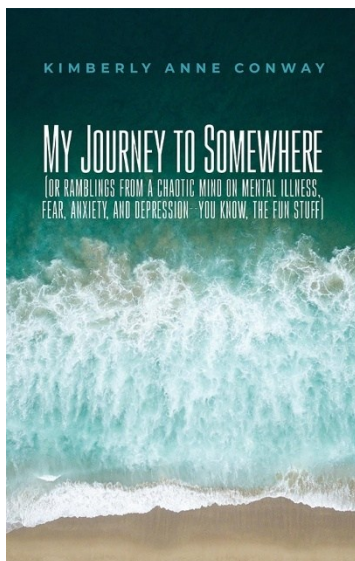
What It Means to Be Nobody

Becoming Nobody is the ultimate freedom. It's not about disappearing or giving up—it's about shedding everything that isn't true. It's stepping out of the identities others have placed on you, the ones you've been conditioned to believe. It's letting go of the lies, the roles, the expectations, and facing yourself at your rawest, most unfiltered core.

I didn't stumble upon this philosophy overnight. It came from years of pain, from realizing that every label—every “you're not enough” or “you'll always fail”—was barbed wire around my neck. Being Somebody had been my attempt to please, to conform, to fit. I wanted validation. I wanted to be seen, to be understood. But trying to be Somebody almost destroyed me.

Nobody saved me.

Continued on the following page--



My Journey to Somewhere

Kimberly Anne
Conway

My Journey to Somewhere chronicles the author's journey to stepping into their dream of becoming a published writer. She started writing a novel and this book presented itself as a parallel story.

Setbacks, depression, anxiety, and fear affect everyday life. It took a trip back to the beginning for her to piece together an understanding of why she does some of the things she does. Conway hopes that her story will open up the conversation about mental illness and show people living with mental illness that they are not alone. She also seeks to impart to those who love someone with mental illness some understanding or awareness.

<https://kimberlyanneconway.com/>



--*Vessel of Words*, continued

Writing as the Vessel

I found my way to Nobody through words. Writing has always been my truest language, my most honest mirror. Even as a child, when my grandmother guided my hand to form letters, she wasn't just teaching me penmanship. She was giving me a lifeline—a way to connect with something deeper, something untouchable by abuse or trauma.

When I write, I strip everything down to its essence. If I'm struggling with an emotion, I know there's a lie buried somewhere beneath it. Writing is my tool to dig it out. I let the words pour out, real and raw, until I hit the truth. And then I do what every writer is born to do—I rewrite the story.

The power of writing isn't just in expression; it's in transformation. When I write, I don't just describe my pain—I reshape it. I give myself the ending I deserve. Writing is how I peel back the layers of confusion, how I let go of what's false and embrace what's real.

Stripping Away the Lies

The process of becoming Nobody is not easy. It's painful. It's terrifying. It's sitting with your darkest truths and sobbing until your chest feels hollow. It's facing the parts of yourself you've avoided for decades. And yet, it's the most freeing thing you will ever do.

For me, it starts with a single question: Am I happy? If the answer is no, I dig deeper. What's standing in the way? Whose voice am I listening to? Whose expectations am I trying to meet? Writing helps me navigate these questions. The pen doesn't lie. It forces you to confront what's real and let go of what isn't.

And the beauty is, once you let go, there's room to grow. You become lighter, freer, truer.

How It Changed My Life

Becoming Nobody has transformed every part of my life. I no longer need to be liked, approved, or understood. I no longer carry the hopes of others' expectations. My relationships are purer, stripped

of pretense. I don't try to fix people or fit into their molds. I simply exist, present and whole.

I've learned to stand in line without frustration, to sit in traffic without rage, to meet anger with compassion. Because when you're Nobody, you're untouchable. Not in an arrogant way, but in a peaceful one. You see the world for what it is—a collection of truths and falsehoods—and you choose not to be shaken by the latter.

The Journey Begins with You

If you're struggling with who you are, if you feel trapped in others' expectations, start by asking yourself the hard questions. Are you happy? Are you fulfilled? Are you living a life that feels true?

If the answer is no, begin the work. Recognize what's false. Accept what's real. And don't be afraid of the tears—they're part of the process.

Go back to the moments when you felt whole. For me, it was sitting with my grandmother, her hand over mine as we traced letters on a page. That was my truth, my beginning. Find yours. And when you do, let it guide you.

The Single Truth

At the core of it all, becoming Nobody is about finding the truest version of yourself. It's not about adding or building—it's about stripping away, going back to the source. Beneath the lies, the pain, the confusion, there is clarity. There is peace.

And if you're a writer, you already have the tools. Writing is a vessel. It's a way to explore, to heal, to create. Write your story. Rewrite your story. And most importantly, write for yourself.

Because the answers you're looking for aren't out there. They're within you. They've been there all along.

And if you let go, if you strip it all away, you'll find them. You'll find you.

G. Anthony is a poet, author, and advocate for healing through words, known for blending raw authenticity with transformative insights. Through his writing, he invites readers to strip away imposed identities and uncover the profound beauty within their own stories.



Book Contests, Which One Is For You?

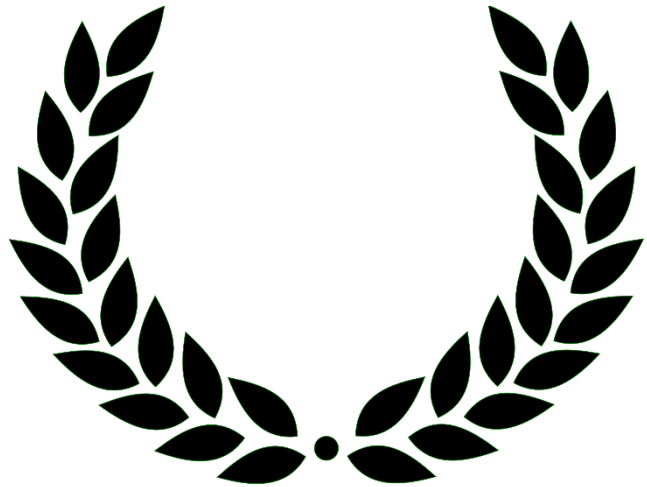
Frank Dravis, Genoa

Contests are as varied as the manuscripts submitted to them, and almost as plentiful. Why? Think of all the genres and subgenres, fiction, and nonfiction; and, keep in mind, contests make money for the organizer. In truth, if you are pitching a romantic fantasy you want the best chance of at least finishing in the semi-finals, if the contest has one, and that means not competing against middle grade, literary fiction, and all the others, in the same basket.

So how do you choose? If you Google “Book Contests” you get pages and pages of results. *Writer’s Digest*, just by themselves, has seven categories and that’s not enough because they lump horror, humor, and science fiction (is there a theme here?) together in one category. As a sci-fi writer I cringe at the thought of having my novels compared to a romance. How am I going to win that?! Have two people smooch and my technogadget marvel is toast.

To clear the vast clutter and hone your top three candidates (just three?!) you need some criteria. First, decide why you are willing to pay the \$35 to \$300 (or higher) entry fee. Recognition? Marketing blurb? Curiosity? If your audience is regional, such as Wisconsin, and you are active in that writing community, then *Jade Ring* is a reputable candidate, but don’t confuse it with a national marketing opportunity. There is a swath of contests aimed at enticing the writer with social media fame—questionable—and cover quotes, useful to a point. The egregious offenders of pulp contests are those that have winners every month in 50-plus categories. They have so many winners they have to purge their site of previous winners. I’ll not get into quality of the reviewers, or maybe I should?

Pulp contest purveyors enlist reviewers who are voracious readers (they read regardless of pay), pay them a percentage of the entry fee, and set them loose on the writing public. There are even online “courses” instructing these readers in how



to write reviews. Someone has to make money writing. Credentials of reviewers matters. Do you want your novel to get an objective comparison?

Now that you know there is a ghetto of contests, how do you stay out of it? Search for contests of your genre, be patient, and be selective. If you just want a marketing blurb and logo for your website, at least ensure Google results for that contest lists winners back to when the contest started.

Don’t be in a hurry, contests worthwhile take time; a year or more to learn the outcome. Yes, slow for a marketing blurb, but more satisfying when you get it.

Compare entry fees. The cheaper the better, not because of cost, because it is a measure of the organizer’s authenticity. Lower fees are less revenue and indicate a greater intent to provide an objective service to readers.

Lastly, if your book doesn’t win, so what? You submitted it!

Frank lives along the Mississippi River and has leveraged his many life experiences to write the *Dianis, A World In Turmoil* chronicles. He was born in Detroit, Michigan, and spent six years in the US Navy chasing Soviet submarines. His love of the sea is reflected in chronicles, a love he has shared with his wife and two girls.

Short Fiction

A Fairy Tale Prince

PJ Fullerton, Athens

Once upon a time there was a young Amish farmer from Wisconsin who longed not to be a prince, but to possess one—a genuine member of equine royalty, a true prince among horses, a Friesian Stallion of his very own. Now, given the fact that most members of Anabaptist sects are not consumed with worldly matters such as the accumulation of physical wealth (including the small fortune such an animal would surely cost), the chances of his ever acquiring one were about the same as that fairytale queen guessing the preposterous word Rumpelstiltskin as a fitting name for a child-snatching dwarf.

The first time he saw one of the magnificent creatures was when he was seven years old and accompanied his farrier father to the State Horse Fair. His father, renowned as a draft horse farrier, was there to shoe and care for the many show teams of Clydesdales, Percherons, and Belgians competing at the large annual fair.

The boy's first glimpse of a Friesian was mesmerizing. A courtly grey-haired man was running across one of the outdoor practice arenas with a glossy midnight black stallion dancing alongside beside him in perfect rhythm to his strides. The horse was not as massive as many of the working draft horses. But, compared to the Standardbred trotters which generally pulled the buggies of his family and friends along the rural roads of Wisconsin, the animal was hugely statuesque. It had a long thick wavy mane that cascaded well below its curved neck and its tail floated in the wind of its own creation like a trailing veil of charcoal mist. The stallion's neck was proudly arched, his sculpted head held vertical to the ground, and his nostrils flared with excitement, while dark expressive eyes focused into the distance.

The boy stopped in midstride. His father

continued walking toward the barn where they would set up their temporary farrier shop. But Willam couldn't take his eyes off the lovely animal and its graceful, energetic movement. It was almost as if the horse was so proud he had to show off, but this wasn't an artificial or trained gait, this was natural exuberance, a frolic of innate ability. Willam coveted that horse. It was not good to covet anything, object or animal. In fact, he knew it was a sin. But, God had made this incredible creature, and with every fiber of his little boy's heart, he loved that horse...he wanted that horse.

He spent every moment his father would spare him, standing against the metal bars of the horse's stall, watching the stallion. The horse was named King Fredrick Von Wolfgang. They called him King for short. Each time the boy came to visit, the horse put his nose between the bars of his pen and softly nibbled on the boy's fingers. His lips were softer than velvet and the long strands of ebony mane that hung across his face, flowed and spilled across the child's slender hand. He whispered to the horse which perked its ears forward to listen. "Someday I will have a horse as beautiful as you. I will. I truly will."

It grieved him when they had to leave the fair and return home. For decades his dreams were filled with magnificent black horses, prancing along in front of their plain functional carriages, pulling them with ease up and down the hills of the red granite roads around their farm. He envisioned a herd of mares and dark foals cavorting and playing in the paddocks and pastures behind their old red barn.

When he was near his thirty-fifth year, a customer who had hauled a team of black Morgan geldings into the shop to be shod for a driving competition, mentioned that the only other black horses he admired as much as his own Morgans were "...like those Friesians who were goin' to be sold at that big auction over in Michigan. You heard about that, didn't ya? No? Heck! I heard it's the biggest dispersal sale of Friesians in US history. Over thirty of them, mostly imported and all Champion bred, you know—like all in the 'A' Stud



Book and Model mare registry and all that fancy stuff. Yup, they're selling the whole kit and caboodle; stallions, mares, geldings, foals... everything must go. I kinda suspect a divorce or maybe a death in the family...."

The auction was being held in three weeks. Willam discussed the matter with his father. It wasn't as difficult as he thought to convince him that if they could just get a weanling or yearling—male or female—it wouldn't matter; either would add tremendous class to their breeding program, worth every cent they might have to pay. But that was the real problem of course; cash was always in short supply. The most they could pull together by really scraping was fifteen thousand dollars. They went anyway...maybe some youngster wasn't looking like a good show horse prospect and would sell cheap.

When they arrived at the farm, they almost turned back without entering. Even the farm's stone gates were massive. They reminded Willam of a photo he had seen in a history book of the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. They weren't that grand of course, but they were big and fancy enough to suggest great wealth. The suggestion proved true. The arena attached to the massive brick stables was more like an opulent theatre than a riding arena. It rivaled the Royal Riding Academy in Vienna he had also seen pictured in school books.

One end of the Olympic size arena was dominated by a stage with twin curving ramps so horses could be ridden up onto it and showcased against the crimson draperies under stage lights. At the other end was a raised platform almost overshadowed by a bank of enormous television screens like the ones people talked about at sports stadiums. Beneath them sat clerks before a row of computer screens and telephones for the online and international bidders. There were expensive looking video cameras mounted on tripods at both ends of the platform. On the long facing wall were two pairs of double doors leading to the prep areas and stables. On their side, cushioned theatre seats rose in staggered tiers. The lighting in the space was professionally bright enough to see perfectly

but not harsh or cold.

Willam and his father registered, received their auction catalogue and bidding paddle, and somberly sought two seats close to the arena railing. The excitement was palpable. Willam spent the time looking through the glossy pamphlet for young animals on which they might be able to bid. He found two; a weanling filly and yearling colt. At least their entries were not brimming with the superlatives gushing from most of the other descriptions.

There was a flourish of classical music. The announcer welcomed the bidders present at the farm as well as those online and participating by phone. He declared this was an absolute auction without reserve bids, and finally, that the auction was underway. There was another musical flourish and a pair of liveried grooms threw open the main double doors in the opposite wall. A fantasy emerged. Willam knew from the catalogue this stallion was a former European Dressage Champion imported from the Netherlands. He was magnificent. His rider was dressed in a formal black tuxedo complete with a top hat. The stallion glided through an intricate dressage routine and Willam almost couldn't see any of the cues the rider gave which directed the horse to side pass, counter-canter, or piaffe without a flaw. Willam was so intrigued he hardly heard the bidding escalate to three hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars in less than two minutes. Sold! The crack of the auctioneer's gavel reverberated through the arena.

A lovely broodmare was led in, Star rated, she sold for one hundred thousand dollars. A young gelding performing Level Three Dressage followed her and sold to an online bidder from California for a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Willam began to think their trip had been in vain.

The doors opened to another musical fanfare and a handler entered. He was dressed in white to contrast better with the glossy black stallion at his side. They moved into the center of the arena to allow the audience to admire the three-year-old National Junior Champion. This was a son of the



famous senior European Champion, Alwin 469, one of only two Friesians stallions in history to capture the International title two years in a row. The handler began to run next to the rail and the young stallion flowed beside him. He was everything Willam had been holding dear in his dreams for decades. He was straight out of a storybook, strong and fierce, gentle and playful, all at the same time; a moving symphony that drowned out in his mind and heart the music playing over the sound system. The bidding started; five thousand, ten thousand... Without conscious thought, Willam raised his paddle...fifteen thousand dollars...

Suddenly, the arena went dark. The lights went out, the jumbo screens flickered and went blank, the computers died and the phones were silent, not even a busy signal. Across the wide arena, a lone exit sign shimmered in red, lighting the double doors to the stables. The vague form of the handler in his white shirt and pants was dimly discernable holding fast to a silent shadowy statute. There was utter silence. The handler slowly walked the young stallion toward the stable doors. Emergency lights began to flicker on, providing ineffectual pools of dim illumination. Then in a loud voice the auctioneer announced, "As the bidding had begun under the rules of an absolute auction, he would accept the final bid on Lot number 104. However, bidding on all additional lots would be suspended until repairs could..."

Willam heard nothing beyond "...accept the final bid on Lot number 104."

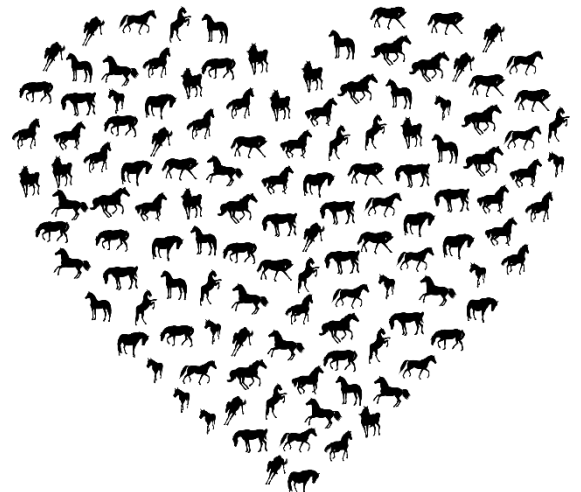
The magnificent young Champion was his.

Back home two weeks later, the stallion followed Willam down the center aisle in the old converted dairy barn, already accustomed to bowing his neck every eight feet to avoid bumping his pricked ears on the massive whitewashed crossbeams that held up the floor of the hayloft above. When they exited into the barnyard, the stranger who had asked to see Prince, as he was now known, gasped. The stallion had on a halter but there was no stallion chain, not even a lead rope restraining him, even though there were mares in every single paddock surrounding the yard. It was

clear the young horse knew they were there, especially the ones in heat who were demonstrating their eagerness to meet the handsome male in every way known to equine females. But he stood calmly at Willam's shoulder and flicked no more than an ear toward the saucy mares. His eyes remained focused on Willam's face. Willam reached up and gently stroked the muscled black shoulder, up under the thick ebony mane that flowed and spilled across his slender hand.

The outsider offered him one hundred thousand dollars for the stallion. Willam politely refused. A week later, a second 'English' offered him half again as much. Willam politely declined again. Even if he hadn't been convinced the young champion would produce exceptional progeny for years to come and pay for himself many, many times over, it wouldn't have mattered. He would never sell this once-in-a-lifetime dream come true. He would never be a prince himself, but fortune, fate, and surely God had granted him the right to have a true prince in his life—a real equine prince from the most incredible...the most wonderful fairytale...ever.

PJA Fullerton Is a WWA-published author (Red Road Redemption, 2023, with an upcoming anthology, as well as a Jade Ring Winner, documentarian (HonorintheAir.com), and speaker. She lives and writes at Resolute Farms near Athens, WI where she breeds and trains Arabians and Turbo-Friesians.





Sleepover

Lawrence Gann, Madison

As though whispered by a helpful phantom, Thom became aware that he was an annoyance. Looking past Martha's smiling to the clothes crumpled in the corner of the basement room, the realization overtook the sounds issuing from her face in front of him.

"Just let us know if there's anything Harry and I can do to help," she said, resuming a plastered optimism.

"I really appreciate it."

"We're here for you," she said, and the upward lift of her lips deepened in her face, as if sinking in wet cement.

For a moment, there was silence. Then the sonorous scrape of a chair sliding above.

"Oh, by the way, we're having some old friends from the department over this evening for a little send off—will you be..." And her voice trailed politely off, leaving absent a suggestion that it might be uncouth for their resident to remain lurking. Occasionally drifting upstairs. Slipping wraithlike into a bathroom or extracting leftovers from the refrigerator. No, she was too polite to mention the sudden adolescence that Thom's post-marriage life had become.

"Fun!" Thom said. "I'm meeting some folks out tonight. You'll have to manage without me," he added, and winked. A beat passed. "Not too late though, of course. I need to be productive tomorrow—I should've finished this syllabus weeks ago."

"Of course," Martha said, and the penumbra of her smile faded into a shape of acceptance. "Well," she said, "just let us know." Then she turned and efficiently walked back upstairs. She didn't allow her head to tilt to inspect the books strewn alongside the unfolded laundry.

Thom stood in the vacuum of expanding silence. He'd assembled a serviceable studio in the basement of the Pennock's vacation home. Thom remembered the rush to buy an inflatable mattress and card table the day Harold called about their

impromptu plans. As luck would have it, they were free to spend one last week up north this summer after all...

Admittedly, Thom's unceremonious shunting from the large upstairs bedroom down into the half-furnished room adjoining the laundry closet hadn't done wonders for his productivity, but neither had the two and a half preceding months of unimpeded summer. He'd meandered through the sultry weeks, eye-glazed, in a wash of melancholy hedonism. In the searing mornings of the college town, Thom had occupied himself in slow walks through the faded residential streets into cafes where he would sit and pantomime researches in specialized databases. With each door chime's interruption, Thom would hope the longhaired customer bustling in was not Melissa. When the endless evening arrived, humid and deepening blue, Thom would sit on the porch of his borrowed home and open bottles of light beer. He'd ignore the mosquitoes until he found himself back inside in the glow of a television or slippery drunkenness of a bath.

Harold and Martha (néé Déclin) Pennock had been kind to lend him the use of their first house. A pair of molecular biologists, they'd purchased it together as new faculty, then promptly abandoned the college and moved southeast. The potassium interaction which was their area of expertise proved to have applications astoundingly profitable. The Pennocks remained tethered to the school through mutually envious relationships they maintained with former colleagues (the students this year; the pay freezes...yes but you wouldn't believe the private sector, the meetings, the middle managers) and continued to hold the vinyl-sided bungalow they semi-ironically referred to as their "vacation home."

They'd been more than willing, more than happy really, to help Thom with a place to stay when the divorce's inevitability fully crystallized in April. Now, the days were shortening again, and the fall term bore down on the latter third of the calendar like a paperweight.

Thom halfheartedly arranged some books



from the floor into stacks on the card table and shifted clothes into a slightly more condensed heap in the corner. He pulled a flannel shirt down from its hanger on an exposed pipe and tried to decide where it would be best to go. He had no plans whatsoever to meet anyone, and no responsibilities or obligations he was willing to address.

He was faced with the dilemma of being able to go anywhere or do anything at all. Packing his computer and a book into a bag, he walked upstairs still not knowing.

From the amber of the living room's dust-mote light, Thom saw Martha racketing ice into a glass pitcher in the kitchen. Quietly he closed the door to the basement and walked out of the house. He'd almost reached his car parked at the curb when Harold called.

"Ahoj, Thom!" he yelled from the garage. "Mind giving me a set of eyes?"

Thom paused and turned with an automatic smile.

"Sure, of course, I'm just on my way though so—"

"No worries," Harold said, "just need you to watch while I back the boat into the garage. I think I've got the space for it."

Harold was a friendly man, in the way that only people who've never been told "no" and had unmarred childhoods were. He was tall and solid, and he reminded Thom uncannily of another man who'd been a principal or superintendent at a school he'd studied during his thesis work. The moment Thom met the superintendent, or whatever he was, he pegged him for a racist. He had a perpetually reddened face and communicated with his smile the image of a child with a magnifying glass greeting a skittering insect.

Thom couldn't place the association, didn't know why that memory returned now. But as much respect and affection Thom had for Harold, face to face with his chambray shirt and doglike eyes, he had to admit: he was deeply, irreparably square.

"Happy to help," Thom said.

"Thanks, bud," Harold replied, already walking

to his truck waiting on the street.

As the ignition turned, Thom noticed some boxes he'd shuffled in the back of the garage now neatly arranged near the door. Harold easily backed the boat in while Thom gave the cursory hand movements he guessed were expected. He saw in the sideview mirror that Harold wasn't looking.

Stopped and dismounting the truck, Harold asked "out for long?"

"Oh yes," Thom said, "some old friends. Martha told me you all had something similar, I'll have to miss out."

"Sounds good," Harold said, loosening the boat from its hitch.

Trancelike, Thom started his car and drifted into the coiling murmur of the downtown.

* * *

Two men with noticeably similar beards and eyeglasses muttered to each other between tall cans of domestic beer in the shadowed light of the bar. A griddle hissed under a disc of beef while a short woman with a shaved head, tuning her guitar in the corner that served as a stage, repeated her order for a vodka soda. In between the sibilance of turning pages, Thom tried not to focus on the humming conversations around him.

For whatever reason, he'd ended up at Up and At 'Em. It wasn't like he and Melissa had met here (no, that was a house party? or was it the East library?), so it didn't matter. Thom and his copy of *Confederacy of Dunces* had gone to many bars in the intervening months, why should he feel any kind of way that tonight it happened to be this one?

The book was a comfort—his favorite since he'd been introduced to it—and he'd read it maybe a dozen times now. It promised a guaranteed, simple way to pass the time, until a subtle push of displaced air threw his page to the book's left hemisphere and left a scent of bergamot perfume.

He looked up to the woman seating herself next to him.

"Howdy," she said, still settling. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Sure, yeah, not at all," Thom said.



She waited the requisite amount of time before saying: “That’s a good one. Have you read it before?”

“Oh yeah,” Thom said. “A lot.”

He could feel her eyes settling on the shining newness of the book.

“I had to buy a replacement copy,” Thom said, and thought about the crinkled copy sitting in a different box, in a different garage, waiting for him to find the courage to collect it.

She took a sip from a martini that had appeared somehow near her hands.

“I remember enjoying it in undergrad. But the characterization of the janitor is pretty ridiculous though, don’t you think?”

Thom didn’t have time to stop himself.

“Ignatius is a pretty ridiculous character too, don’t you think?”

She shifted in her seat.

“Oh yeah for sure I just...I meant..”

This nice white lady had gotten herself onto a hook, and she and Thom both knew it. She needed to be extracted gently before she started thrashing and hurt herself and maybe Thom too.

Thom laughed. “I’m just messing with you. Thom, by the way.”

Smiling. Holding out a hand. It’s okay. You didn’t do anything wrong.

She laughed, a little. “Hi, Melissa.”

What a world, Thom thought. Her hand was warm.

“I just meant,” Thom said, “that’s part of what I love about it. Jones, Ignatius, Lee—they’re all exaggerations. But please, let’s talk about anything other than sad people in books—I’m on summer vacation.”

And she laughed for real. And Thom smiled an easy smile. And they became aware that the bar was drowning in the abrasive fuzz of a way too loud guitar, that they were yelling to hear each other, that they were emoting with the disorganized muscles of people who’d had too many drinks.

This new Melissa was chatty and jaded with her postdoctoral work, and from what Thom could gather, that was an appropriate response. Her

chestnut hair bunched up when she rested her head on her hand.

“So, modeling heat exchange then?” Thom asked.

“Yeah. The computational system is pretty dull. But hey—silver lining—everything is heat,” Melissa said, and took a drink. “Sure—something changes, a little heat goes out, it becomes a little less possible to change again—I’ll still be relevant for billions of years.”

“Until the universe goes flat,” Thom said.

“Cheers,” she said.

They finished their drinks. They glanced at the paper menu on the bar stained with half-moons of dried beer. Thom began to have ideas.

“Why don’t we leave?” Melissa said.

“What?” Thom said.

“I said ‘why don’t we leave?’” she said louder, leaning in and smiling.

They walked together the seven or eight blocks back to Melissa’s rented room above an antique store. To avoid dispelling the air of inevitability by acknowledging it, neither talked. Melissa closed the apartment door.

“I’ll be right back,” she said, and placed her hand on Thom’s shoulder and let it slide gently from him as she walked away.

Thom saw a faculty application dossier on a table by the sofa. He remembered the long weeks of waiting for responses, the hours of panel discussions and interviews which felt longer, how good it felt when he and Melissa had somehow landed jobs at the same school.

She reentered in a tee-shirt and sweatpants.

“Should we go to bed?”

“I’m sorry—suddenly I don’t feel too hot,” Thom said. “You mind if I just sleep on the couch?”

Her face changed and he remembered Martha. “Maybe it’s best if you go then.”

“All right.”

In the fizzing streetlights Thom walked back to his car. It was too late and he’d drunk too much to go back to the Pennock’s now. They might be asleep already, but if they weren’t...what did it matter anyway.

Thom laughed, and the heat of his breath dissolved in the blue air.

He reclined the passenger seat and locked the doors. The car was still hot from the afternoon's trapped sun.

Thom woke stiffly in the clear cold of the early morning and drove to the far side of town to stare at his unfinished course syllabus in a café. The Pennocks would be leaving for home soon. Sometime in the early afternoon a blond woman came in, and he looked away. When she was gone, Thom packed his things and left.

The house was empty again when Thom returned in the sinking glow of the fading afternoon. Thom entered and, before he could think about it, walked downstairs. In the rhythmic rocking of the washing machine, he saw the air mattress was deflated and folded.

Lawrence Gann is a musician and writer in Madison, Wisconsin. He's interested in strangeness and estrangement.



Photo by Rosie Klepper

The Adventures of Cole Westwind

Elise Posledni, Franklin

I write love letters to characters from the books I adore. Postcards, actually. Since I immerse myself into their world, the least I can do is share a bit about mine in return. Jack, my valiant sailor, received a photo of an ocean lighthouse and my shared love for open waves and freedom. Alain, my fearless heroine who saved the universe, received a skyline of my city and how she inspired me to help save my own little portion of the world.

But for this book? With the last turning of the page, I closed it gently with a sigh. Beautiful. I gazed around the quiet library as the familiar smell of ink-imprinted paper allowed my mind to wander freely. The adventurous Cole Westwind had stolen my heart with his mischievous charm. Capable of traveling through different dimensions, he was thrust repeatedly into circumstances outside of his control and risked failure and pain during his travels through time and place to stand up for what was true and right.

What to write in response to such a bold and passionate character? I feared I was in love with him. Finally, I settled with a simple postcard of an autumn tree at sunrise and wrote:

*Dear Cole,
You inspire me to be brave and stand up
for others in the hopes of making my world
better. I hope to meet you one day, in this world
or yours.
With Love,
Aubrey*

I tucked the postcard into the back pages of the book and returned it carefully to the shelf. It had taken far too long to write those simple, truthful lines. Most of my postcards ended up in the trash. Paul, the staff librarian, had found a few and thought them charming. Once I witnessed two mean-spirited teenage girls snickering over one, but I didn't care. I wrote them for myself and the characters I loved.



A week later, I was browsing titles and paused when I saw the familiar faded blue spine and flaking gold lettering of *The Adventures of Cole Westwind*. Second-guessing putting such honest words to paper, I flipped through the pages to find the postcard, thinking perhaps that I would keep this one secret. What came loose from the pages and fluttered to the floor was not my postcard, but a piece of yellowed parchment. Curiously, I picked up the note to study the bold lettering.

Aubrey,

Your charming card and sincere words have touched my soul. I wish to know more of you. In your world or mine, I do agree that we must meet.

Cole

Carrying the letter to the front desk I spotted Paul and held up my discovery. “You’re writing back now?” I asked with a chuckle.

Paul smiled in slight confusion as I handed him the note. “I didn’t write this,” he said as he turned the paper over in his hands. Reaching for the book, he frowned as he inspected the cover. “Strange. We pulled this book from the system two days ago. The binding is all worn. You’ve been the only one to check it out in the last three years.” He looked up to search my face.

“It was on the shelf right over there.” I pointed toward the back of the room.

He shook his head in denial.

We stared at each other in equal parts confusion.

“Do you mind if I take it home?” I asked as I fought the fluttering of excitement in my chest.

“It’s no longer a library book,” Paul responded with a shrug. My heart beat a strange staccato as I tucked the book under my arm.

I sent another postcard that night. This one was decorated with a simple scene of the local countryside. I wrote freely to Cole of my life, my passions and hopes, and what I imagined us to be like together. Could it be possible the character I had fallen in love with was actually out there somewhere? Cole did possess the ability to travel through time and space. Did fiction threaten to meet reality?

The response that fluttered out from the pages the next morning was filled with interest in my words and his earnest desire for me to strive fearlessly through an uncertain world. For all the times and places I have traveled, fear and doubt seek to take hold over love and understanding, he wrote. You must never let it. Never doubt I am real, for I am as real as the words on the page and the longing in your heart. I will come find you.

With each correspondence, we realized the depths of our shared understanding and passions. We wrote daily—sometimes no more than a simple note of encouragement, but sometimes pages upon pages of stories and dreams. It felt as if we had known one another forever, connected perhaps, by the story of his adventures. I longed to meet him and he promised we would soon, but came a day my postcard went unanswered.

My heart broke each time I searched futilely through the worn pages. Days passed and I feared he was truly gone. Despite the recent silence from within, I still could not bring myself to part with the book.

When I finally returned to the library, I selected a new novel from the shelves in determination to clear my head. Searching for my glasses as I settled into my favorite reading nook, my fingers brushed across the faded blue cover already sinking to the bottom of my bag amongst the detritus of crumpled notes and used pens. Smiling sadly, I pulled the book out once more to run my finger over the familiar gold lettering of the title, and startled to see a man standing between the nearby shelves.

“Aubrey,” he whispered.

My eyes roved over the strange, yet familiar face waiting for me.

“I promised that one day we would meet,” he said with a gentle smile as he took two steps to close the distance between us.

I stared at him in wonder as I rose to meet him, the book falling from my lap.

“I wish to learn and live the adventures of Aubrey Beaufort,” he whispered into my hair as he pulled me into an embrace. “If you’ll have me?”



I pulled back to meet his eyes. “I would like that very much.”

Hand in hand, we walked out of the library, leaving only the books witness to the wonder of a well-written postcard.

Currently a bookkeeper by day and fantasy writer by early morning and weekend, Elise Posledni is the pen name for Jenna Dickson. She lives in Franklin, WI and has been a member of the Wisconsin Writers Association since 2023.



The Shell Snatcher

Dr. Heidi Schmidt, Platteville

The gated complex, Scallop Conch Condos, contained an eclectic group of residents who lived on the beach. Some of the neighbors lived there year-round. Some were seasonal visitors and some were week-long guests. Some of the permanent residents had extensive sea shell collections who enjoyed daily shelling and showing their stash to others in the neighborhood.

Shelley Sands, a retired teacher who loved crossword puzzles and reading a new mystery, went out early walking the beach, looking for sand dollars or rare shells. She also liked prying into her neighbors’ business. Shelley set her newly collected shells on her front porch overnight to dry before taking them into the house the next morning.

Jim “Jewel” Mollusk lived beside Shelley. He was a lifelong surfer who lived in his parents’ home. Jewel was a tall person, over six foot tall and wore his hair in his signature pony tail. Jewel made beautiful jewelry out of rare or unusual shells. He worked out of a little shop in the garage and sold his jewelry pieces at local craft events. Jewel was a master at creating one-of-a-kind pieces and many in the area commissioned him to make jewelry from the shells that they would bring to him. He had a golden lab named Clam who was a friendly

fur friend that roamed the neighborhood and beach. Clam was also his garage helper, retrieving a tool or other items which Jewel had taught him to do in the garage.

Penelope Pompass lived in the area, too. Just like her name Penelope was the know-it-all—she knew the names of all who lived in their community, names of every shell found on the beaches and anything else. Penelope was a short, stout woman with a white pixie haircut. She also collected unique and special sea shells which she displayed in front of her house in an open case she had specially designed.

There was another rental condo in their cul du sac. During this time, the Snoops family was visiting. They had two children, Rachie, age ten and Jake, twelve who were always running to the beach. They visited each of the neighbors, asking questions about the names of birds and shells in the area.

All was good in the condo kingdom until Thursday when Penelope discovered that a special conch shell which had a vibrant pink interior was missing from the display area in front of her house. Of course, Penelope let her neighbors know what had happened. Shelley then looked at her collection and saw that one of her scallop shells was missing. Where had the shells gone? Had Penelope or Shelley just misplaced them or forgot where they put them? They chatted with each other on Friday during their morning coffee session, watching the kids play next door and Clam running over to greet them. The Amazon van and UPS truck were delivering to different condos today. Shelley and Penelope went about checking for shells after the tide came in and put their new shells in their spots before they went to bed.

On Saturday morning, the two were shocked to find more shells were missing. What was happening to their shells? The ladies were sure this morning that shells were missing as they had taken pictures of them the night before.

This was a real-life mystery and the duo set out to figure out where the shells were or if there was a shell thief in this peaceful condo kingdom.



Had Jewel taken the best shells? As they talked to him it was interesting to note that he did not have any shells missing? Or maybe he hadn't noticed since his garage was full of shells for his jewelry making. Maybe the children were playing a prank or adding to their own collections before they left to go back to their home next week? Was it an outsider who had gotten into the condo development? Was it a delivery driver or one of Jewel's jewelry clients? Maybe a beach walker?

No one had cameras in the condo circle as all had felt safe in the gated community and each kept an eye on others' property. The shellers went about their day on Saturday and collected a few more shells from the tide and put them in their usual spaces to see if the thief would strike again.

Sure enough, the next morning, Penelope and Shelley could see that the shells were disturbed and some were missing. Again, they had taken pictures of their displays to make sure they were right about any being missing. Shelley and Penelope wondered if Jewel had hidden the shells in his messy garage and was secretly working on a jewelry project with the perfect shells. They thought again about Rachie and Jake. It seemed suspicious that the shells started to go missing when they began renting the condo. Three days in a row with missing shells was not a coincidence.

Shelley and Penelope walked around their condos looking for clues. As always there were lots of footprints in the sand, bird tracks, and Clam's footprints. There were always lots of walkers on the beach; some with their usual routine and some at the beach for the first time.

Penelope, being the self-proclaimed mayor of the area, decided to confront Jewel and ask if he was taking their shells. Jewel was appalled that Penelope would accuse him and showed her the boxes of shells he had collected and still had to use to create his necklaces, bracelets and earrings.

Shelley, being a former teacher, thought about confronting the parents of the children but did not have any evidence that the children were at either Penelope or Shelley's homes after dark. She could not accuse children or their parents, but she could

enlist their help. Shelley talked to Rachie and Jake's parents and they agreed that the children could help with this mystery. Their parents did ask the children if they took the shells and both immediately said no but wanted to be part of the new mystery and adventure.

Penelope and Shelley reviewed the facts with the children: the shells were taken after Penelope and Shelley went to bed three days in a row; other shells were disturbed, but only the certain ones were taken; there were other smaller shells scattered in the yard leading to the beach.

Rachie and Jake were excited to help and thought about some of the mysteries that they had read at school. Shelley, being the forever teacher, brought up means, motive and opportunity. Rachie got out her iPad to write down the questions and clues. Jake rolled his eyes at the thought of anything school-related and Shelley was delighted that school was now in session again.

They went through the list of possible means, motives, and opportunities, even listing themselves as suspects—Shelley, Penelope, Jewel, Rachie and Jake, their parents, visitors or beach walkers. Was it a delivery person who knew the routine of the residents and came to their front door often? Could it be one of Jewel's customers coming to pick up some pieces of jewelry? Do gulls or even pelicans come close to houses and could they have taken the shells? Geckos were too small to carry off shells.

Added to Rachie's list was Why would someone take random shells in this random location? Sell them? Make jewelry with them? Were shell thieves adding to their collections? Which shells were valuable? The amateur detectives thought about checking Marketplace or other local sites for shell sales.

The final question was, When were the shells taken? The shells were put outside at dusk and were gone early the next morning, so the shells were taken at night.

So, how would they catch the sea shell thief? The group thought of different options: Buy a Ring doorbell, set up a trail camera, or take turns camping out at night to see if they could catch



Lost Pairs

PJ Fullerton, Athens

someone. Should they call condo security or even the local police? What would be the easiest or safest for all?

They put their heads together and decided what each of their duties would be. Shelley was going to sit in her living room all night and wait up for the next possible theft. Penelope would do the same from her kitchen window. The children would come back in the morning to check for footprints.

Then, just as the sun was setting, Penelope, Shelley, and the children saw Clam running toward the beach, which he did several times a day, headed toward a dune with something in his mouth. The detectives followed him to a dune and discovered a hidden stash of shells tucked into a shallow hole under a scrubby bush, including the missing conch shell and scallop shell.

Clam was the culprit and in his usual way when he saw them and came running to them with his tail wagging. He had a shell in his mouth and dropped it when the children started to pet him. As they walked with Clam back to Jewel's house, they told him of Clam's heist and that they had located the missing shells. Jewel said Clam had been scolded about taking his shells out of garage boxes, so he found an easier way with the neighbors' shells.

It was hard to be mad at Clam. Shelley would now put her shells in her garage at night to dry and Penelope would cover her display case with plexi glass so that Clam would not be able to take shells. The great shell heist at Scallop Conch Condos had been solved.

Once again all were happy in the condo kingdom as the crew continued their daily shelling on the coast.

Dr. Heidi Schmidt is a retired educator and administrator, who continues to teach online at the doctoral level. She has published two poetry books and a co-authored a memoir. Heidi is a life-long learner and continues to write not just poetry, but now short stories.

They lay shimmering in the night blue velvet case. One earring was a flawless one caret diamond stud set in 18 karat gold. The other earring was set with an eleven-millimeter natural pearl, lustrous and warm. They were given to her by the two most important men in her adult life. The diamonds came from a man she knew deep in her heart she did not love with the passion he sought. The pearls were gifted by the man she had loved with a depth and fire she would not have believed she possessed. She disappointed, and perhaps mortally wounded the one... the other had almost destroyed her.

Both jewels once had partners; they were functional, useful, beautiful pairs. But function always seemed tied to utility and reality to her, and like the two relationships, the earring pairs had not survived the adventure, the rigor, the daily tumult of her life. How they were lost was unknowable; in blowing snow, during a headlong horse race, moving bales in a sweltering hay mow, or more prosaically, in some dull meeting at a conference. She had the bad habit of not routinely checking to make sure the backs were securely seated on the posts.

Perhaps she hadn't been in the habit of routinely checking the wellbeing of her partnerships with either man often enough either...but those relationships had long since been analyzed to a fare-thee-well and she could definitively say how, and why, they were finally lost. But it was of no more current worth than her musings on the lost earrings, those mates to the gems wasting away in a case opened only on a rare whim.

Besides, she no longer wore earrings. And she felt infinitely lighter for the lack.

PJA Fullerton is a WWA published author (*Red Road Redemption*, 2023, with an upcoming anthology, as well as a Jade Ring Winner, documentarian (HonorintheAir.com), and speaker. She lives and writes at Resolute Farms near Athens, WI where she breeds and trains Arabians and Turbo-Fresians.



Kids in Summer

Jane Braam, Oconomowoc

Using her walker, the old woman carefully moved down the corridor. Her heart felt satisfaction when she saw her usual chair unoccupied and waiting for her.

She sat down in the chair by the window. The sunlight glanced off her cheek, wrinkled like thin tissue paper. A gentle tremor shook one hand resting on the chair arm. The knuckles of both hands were knobby from arthritis, skin mottled with age spots.

Earlier that morning, the old woman had dressed herself. It took her a long while, shuffling back and forth from the bed to the cabinet containing her things.

Looking down, she noticed she hadn't lined the buttons up correctly on her blouse. Oh well, she reasoned, she was decently covered. Not having bothered to use her hairbrush, she knew she had a "bedhead" as her grandchildren called it. So what? She was long past being vain about such things.

Her ankles were swollen above her cloth slippers. The old woman knew an aide would come along eventually, and see she didn't have her compression stockings on. For now, she enjoyed the feeling of her legs and ankles free from the pressure.

The old woman looked out at the early morning day. It was mid-July, a week after her birthday. She had turned ninety-four, which her family thought was a huge accomplishment. Personally, she thought it was a nuisance. Not much worked anymore, and she lived with constant pain from the arthritis.

Mostly, she viewed the seasons through windows now. Her excursions into the world for doctor appointments and family events gave a fleeting impression of the weather around her.

She remembered a day in July like this one. It had been her ninth summer.

The young girl had gotten up early, quietly dressed and went outside, hoping no one in the house heard her opening the back door. Her

freedom would last until someone noticed her gone and called her back inside for chores.

She walked around the yard looking for changes from yesterday. The young birds were in the nest noisily demanding to be fed. The neighbor's dog lay across the threshold of its doghouse resting its head on its paws. Its soft floppy ears dragged in the dirt. The circle of hard-packed ground was a testament to the dog's limitations. Detouring to slip him half a hot dog she filched from the fridge, the girl returned to her own yard finding a spot that was not in sight of the windows. Flopping down on the grass, she rolled over on her belly propping her chin on her fists. The grass was cool with dew, tickling her bare legs and arms. She studied the base of each stalk of grass watching the busy industry of black ants moving around them. The girl wondered if the grass would seem like a forest if she were that size. She felt a little like Gulliver looking down at the ants.

The old woman remembered another time when the neighborhood gang of friends would go out to the field of tall grass that the farmer left fallow. They would jump on their two-wheel bikes with glittery vinyl banana seats and high-rise handlebars trimmed with plastic streamers. They raced to the fields showing off their bike tricks.

The young girl felt her strong lean legs pushing down on the pedals. She smelled the summer aroma coming off her thin tanned arms as she gripped the handlebars.

Sporting scabs and mosquito bites, her limbs never failed her in those days. She could race and climb all day long in the summer.

When they got to the farmer's field, they got off the bikes and threw them to the ground without any other thought. She hadn't even known what a bicycle lock was in those days in the country. They went out into the field and with their feet, flattened grass to hollow out roofless rooms. They would invite each other in to see how each of their houses had turned out, describing to one another the imaginary families they created to live in them. The young girl smelled the green of the crushed grass, felt the hot sun on her head, and heard the whir of



the grasshoppers in the field.

When the day got too hot, they headed for the creek and skinned down to their underwear. Grabbing the rope hanging from a big oak tree, she swung out over the water feeling the burn on her palms from the rough texture of the sisal, and tensed for the moment she let go and dropped into the creek. She let out a squeal at the sudden shock from the contrast between the hot sun and cold water. Her body quickly adjusted to it, and she swam around luxuriating in its coolness.

By the time they finished swimming, they couldn't hold out any longer without food. They headed back to where they had dropped their bikes and pedaled home.

Other days they had climbed trees and reenacted the story of *The Swiss Family Robinson*. Or, if they had been in the mood to be outlaws, they had galloped around playing Jesse James and his gang, terrorizing mothers hanging wash on clotheslines. Everyone could see they were on horses and not just running around. They very convincingly galloped, rearing up when pulling on the reins. At least their imaginations had them convinced that's what it looked like.

Still living in a summer day eighty-five years ago, the old woman smiled, remembering the softball games. Peggy on a bounce or fly is what they called those games. She had been a good hitter.

The young girl heard the crack and felt the sting in her hands as the wooden bat connected with the ball and sent it sailing into the air. Some kids had aluminum bats, but that was never as satisfying a sound as the *thwock* of a leather-covered softball hitting a maple bat. The girl had been quick on her feet and usually could round the bases and bring it home. The closest ball diamond was two miles away, so they played in someone's side yard.

Sometimes, long summer evenings were even better than the daytime. The young girl felt the cool evening air and heard crickets chirping as she chased her friends in a game of flashlight tag. They never tired of putting their mouth over the edge of the flashlights making their cheeks glow red. Game

finished, they watched lightning bugs from the porch steps.

The old woman came back to the present and smiled to herself. She had just scraped the surface of those memories. There was a treasure house filled with things they had done on those long summer days.

Going back to her reverie, the old woman remembered the times they had gotten into trouble, breaking a window, or "borrowing" their mom's good bedspread to make a tent. Whenever possible they faced the music together. Usually at some point one of the grownups would say, "Oh, they're just kids."

The old woman paused considering, as the voice of a parent long dead echoed in her mind.

When they were young, kids was the word used to describe them. It wasn't until much later that other words were used. Some of them got called hippies, one was called gay, one girl was described as an unwed mother. Two boys from the group became Vietnam Vets but only one had lived to hear himself called that.

As adults, on top of every other word to describe them, most of them had been known by their politics or religion.

These words eventually drove a wedge between them. The old woman sighed. She wished they had remembered they had started out as "just kids." It might have prevented the divisions and prejudices that reshaped their adult landscapes.

The woman heard her name being called. It took a moment to come back from the backyard of her parents' house to where she was sitting. It wasn't the sound of her friends calling but an aide from the nursing home where the old woman lived.

The aide came and leaned over the chair back, looking out the window at the scene the old woman was watching.

"You poor dear, I'll bet you wish you could be out there in the air and sunshine."

The old woman looked up at her and smiled. No point in telling her that was exactly where she had been. Age eventually took away a lot, but age has its consolations. She was blessed with a good



memory that let her see, feel, touch, and hear the world she had lived in.

Turning back to the view out the window, the old woman saw the sloping lawns and flower beds of the nursing home.

If she had any say in the matter, the woman hoped that when she met up with her friends again, they'd all be just kids.

Jane, a lifelong Wisconsinite; lives in Oconomowoc writing novels and short stories under the name Jane Boyce. She is a member of the Wisconsin Writers Association.

The Particle Theory

Larry F. Sommers, Madison

Mom was a Scurlock, once a respected name, but folks in town just called her Annie Screwloose. I knew this from an early age, and I knew what it implied.

She must have been aware what people called her, but we never spoke of it until one day, in battle, I shot it as a bolt to her heart.

She puckered her mouth and carried on. "People speak ill of others thinking it will make them feel good about themselves. You picked up their mockery because you're mad and want to hurt me." She shoved a cat off a kitchen chair and sat down. "I understand your anger more than I understand their meanness. I wish you could partake of the joy all around you."

I groaned. "Not the particles again."

She smiled. "Yes, the particles. Particles of joy in the air about us. I can feel them, see them, hear them, even taste them—and they transform my life." Her face was radiant. "Why can't you do the same?"

"Get my life transformed by particles? Mom, that's crazy talk. There are no particles!"

"You needn't shout."

I glanced at the gas stove she had had installed right next to the disused woodstove, never discarding the woodstove, which had loomed there for as long as I could remember—after all, there was "oodles of space in this kitchen." My glance took in the stacks of newspapers and magazines on top of that old woodstove, mingled with cookbooks of the world's great cuisines, and a line of motley dishes on the floor holding several kinds of pet food, which spilled onto the patchy linoleum.

I took a loud sniff of the air around us, which smelled unlike anyone else's house. "You're not some solitary saint protecting her only son. You're a loony-tunes who drove her husband away and keeps all knowledge of him from me. What was he like? I don't know. I never met him."

"The less you know of that man, the better."

"I'll be eighteen soon, Mom. I'll find him."

* * *

"Hello, Dad."

"Don't give me that bullshit." He spat out the words, then was seized by a fit of coughing that made me wonder whether he would live out his sentence.

"You ought to get that looked at."

He mastered his breath and glared at me through the armored glass barrier. "Don't be a wiseass. I didn't have to come out here and see you at all." He rose from the chair on his side of the glass.

"Wait," I said. "I'm sorry I offended you. I just need—"

"Yeah, what do you need, sonny?" He sank into the chair again, more slowly than he had risen. "Nothin' I can give you." His eyes were dead.

"When you said 'sonny' just now, was that 'sonny' as in 'son'? It took me years to find you. Can you at least acknowledge I'm your child?"

He puckered the smoker's wrinkles around his mouth. There was no way he could have been the age his wrinkles testified.

"You wanna be my son, what's in it for me?"



“Nothing,” I said. “Forget it.” I got up to go.

“That’s right, just cut me loose. Forget I ever existed.” His eyes suddenly sparked with fire. “You tell Miss Annie Scurlock: Thanks for nothing.”

“Tell her yourself, you son of a bitch.”

I went to the door and tapped on the glass. The deputy on the other side buzzed me through. “Get what you came for?” he asked, his face impassive.

“Got what I could get.”

I’ve been doing just fine on my own—learning a trade, paying my way, traveling light. I have no attachments and want none. I do better as a solo.

I didn’t want to come home. But she was my mother.

Her neighbor, old Johnson, got in touch with me. I drove overnight to get here, took my stuff into the empty house. It still has the old smell. I sat in the kitchen, depressed, for a few minutes, then got up and went to the hospital.

Her eyes were bright when I came into the room. She recognized me.

“Hello, Mom.”

She smiled and blinked. They had said at the nurses’ station that she no longer had the power of speech.

“I found the old bastard a few years ago. In jail.”

The light went out of her eyes.

“You were right about him.”

She closed her eyes and that was that.

The undertaker asked whether I wanted to specify a charity for memorial gifts. I thought of all the cats and dogs that used to be around our house, and I said the humane society.

“That’s very fitting,” he said. He looked down at the blotter on his desk, then raised his eyes again. “I suppose you know they took her cats away a few months ago.”

“No, I didn’t. But I guess that explains why there are no animals in the house.”

“They were getting to be a problem. After they took them away, a few volunteers from the church came by and helped clean up her house. Did what they could, anyway, to put it right.”

“Oh,” I said. “I didn’t know that, either. Keep the humane society for the memorial gifts, but I’ll send a donation to the church.”

“I’m sure it will be appreciated.”

So I came home. Now I sit here staring at the old woodstove. There are only a few magazines and newspapers on it. There are large patches of rust on the cast iron, but it’s a real antique. I’ll bet it could be restored and sold to somebody for real bucks.

I wonder what it would take to fix up this old house. It’s a large Victorian, in our family since the glory days of the Scurlocks. Now it’s mine. Might be worth the investment.

I notice a dish on the floor, maybe something the church folks missed in their cleanup, with little bits of stale food in the bottom.

A scratch and a whimper sounds from outside. I get up, open the back door, and there stands a scrawny mutt, some kind of a kinky-haired terrier. He backs up and growls, because he doesn’t recognize me. But his tail wags. I’ll bet this is where he comes to get fed.

I stand aside and he scurries in, suspicious yet hungry.

He makes a beeline for the dish with the food scraps and gobbles them down.

I watch him. “Hello, Mutt. My name is Frank.”

He finishes the last morsel, licks his chops, and looks up at me. He gives a whole-body shake. A beam of sunshine slants down through the window, lighting up the thousand motes of dust, dander, and debris loosed by the dog’s shake. They rise and swirl in the golden light.

It’s a marvel. I’m seeing particles of joy.

Larry F. Sommers is the author of two traditionally-published novels, *The Price of Passage* and *Izzy Strikes Gold!*, and several published short stories. He is a member of the Wisconsin Writers Association and the Writers Guild and lives in Madison, Wisconsin.



If Thanks Could Kill

Peter Wallace, Cambridge



Just after Christmas, Betty received a very pretty card from her neighbor Elaine. She opened it carefully, saving the stamp for her granddaughter's collection. Sitting in her leather chair she adjusted her glasses to read.

Dear Betty,

Thank you so much for the gift of the German Christmas Tree decoration. While I would not have thought to purchase a hand-blown, iridescent green pickle ornament, I must say that it adds a hint of whimsy to my otherwise tastefully decorated tree.

Thank you so much for thinking of me! I hope you enjoyed your visit with your children and grandchildren!

Your friend,

Elaine

A couple of days passed before Elaine received a card with a snowflake etched on the envelope's flap. She felt the indentation with her index finger. Sitting at her kitchen table she opened the card.

My Dear Elaine,

I am so glad to hear that you appreciated the pickle ornament. The moment I saw it I thought of you. My thanks to you for the thoughtful gift card for Applebee's. I haven't been there since the week they opened, which I'm guessing was 1988. So, you obviously knew that it is a very special place for me. Perhaps you'd care to join me? I know how you love fried things.

My visit with the family was nice. Everybody misses Clarence, of course, but he never much liked Christmas. He did not like having company because he had to wear pants.

Did I see that your family visited on the 25th?

Betty

Elaine Jorgenson and Betty Hall lived across Oak Street from one another. They had married and moved into the neighborhood at about the same

time, forty years ago. They each had three children. One was the president of the band parents' organization and the other chaired the school's children's theater group.

They watched their children graduate, move away, and marry. They each lost their husband—Elaine's due to a heart attack and Betty's due to a blond waitress named La Verne. Betty's hair was silver while Elaine's was a mix of blond and gray.

Betty opened her mailbox two days later to find an oversized envelope.

Dearest Betty,

Thank you very much for your thank-you note about the gift card. Your notes always serve as a stimulant for my memory. I recalled the generous gift of lightbulbs you gave me back when our kids were selling them for a PTA fundraiser. I was so glad to add the dozen 100-watt bulbs to the two-dozen I ended up buying because I missed the deadline to return the unsold bulbs. Even though that was more than fifteen years ago I still have plenty.

Thanks for asking about our Christmas celebration. Jennifer threw up and Amanda is pregnant.

Regards,

Elaine

Later that afternoon a standard business envelope without postage was stuffed into Elaine's mail slot.

Elaine,

Thank you for pointing out the light bulb incident. It is so good to be reminded of something that happened so long ago that any normal person would have forgotten by now. The nice thing about lightbulbs is that they can help shine a light on things, like how I bought those lightbulbs at an inflated price to support our school. Your gifts to me have always looked suspiciously like things you have received and re-gifted to me. The "Clapper" clearly was re-wrapped.

Betty



A half-hour later the envelope from a fundraising letter, with the name of the charity crossed out, found its way into Betty's mailbox.

Betty, My Dear Friend,

Thank you for your latest missive. My gratitude for your candor knows no bounds. You are truly a gift as a friend. As Robert Louis Stevenson said, "A friend is a gift you give yourself." You truly are the gift that keeps on giving. Year after year you entertain me with your various rants and fabricated stories.

I never gave you "The Clapper." You may be confusing that with La Verne giving Sam "the clap."

Elaine

PS: The pickle ornament you gave me reminded me of Sam's "pickle" before the penicillin shots. At least how I imagined it.

An hour later, as Betty tried to sneak up to Elaine's front door it quickly opened and Elaine pulled Betty into her front room.

"I caught you!"

Betty stomped her foot, complete with rubber boot, causing snow to fly onto the floor. Not very tall, and a little portly, she kicked the overshoes off.

"Yes, you did. You caught me. Here I thought I was being so sneaky."

"Well, Betty, it is still light out. You are not that hard to see in your magenta parka."

"I guess that's true."

"Come on in. Take your coat off. I can't wait to read your next thank-you. Will you read it to me?"

As they sat in the living room a few minutes later, each with a cup of Constant Comment tea, Betty opened her envelope and unfolded the letter.

"Dear Elaine."

"That's a good start."

"Thank you."

"Dear Elaine, I can scarcely dredge up enough thanks from deep within the bowels of my soul to express my gratitude for reminding me of Sam getting the clap from La Verne. My gratitude comes in remembering that he didn't give the disease to me, and that his suffering from the burning pain

and itching was only the start of his penance for putting his pickle where it didn't belong. Giving up half of everything made the pickle-pain seem unimportant to him by comparison.

"Your Clarence never would have done such a thing. In fact, Clarence didn't do much of anything. That must have been a comfort to you when he passed.

"Your dearest friend,

"Betty"

"Oh, Betty! You have outdone yourself. 'Putting his pickle where it didn't belong!' That, my friend, is the best line ever." Elaine's blue eyes sparkled along with her smile.

"I'm so glad you liked it!"

"I loved it. And of course you are right about Clarence. I loved him dearly, but there were times I wondered if he had turned into a statue."

"Elaine, I don't know when we started doing these thank-you letter battles, but it brings me such joy during these long winter days."

"You know, since we've saved them all we could probably find a publisher who would make a book for us. We could call it, 'If Thanks Could Kill.' I would buy one. Wouldn't you?"

Elaine pondered. "I don't know. I mean, I love our thank you cards, but outside of you and me I don't think people would really appreciate them. Plus, it is something you and I share as friends."

They looked out the window as large snowflakes landed on the pine boughs on Elaine's porch. Betty and Elaine always enjoyed their back-and-forth thank-you cards. It was their way of expressing a depth of gratitude for each other that could not be put into words. They had so much living behind them, and maybe not so much ahead. Who could know? They did know, however, that their friendship was much more than a gift.

Peter Wallace has written scripts for NPR, short stories, novels, and poetry, and wrote a weekly newspaper column for over 20 years. A member of the National Society of Newspaper Columnists and the Wisconsin Writers' Association, Peter has two blogs: one on gardening and one that is general interest/humor along with a biweekly newsletter called "Interesting Things."



Horizons

Myles Hopper, Shorewood

You Are Beautiful

Susan Reetz, Westin

He stood behind her in the mirror and whispered, "You are beautiful." She smiled and closed her eyes, remembering all the times he had said this to her before.

On their first date, forty years ago, when he arrived at her door holding a riotous bouquet of spring flowers.

Before he slid the simple gold band on her finger and said, "I do."

When they welcomed their son into the world, even though she was tear-stained, exhausted and flecked with remnants of her own vomit.

As they began the long drive home after delivering their only child to his new, adult life halfway across the country.

Before they went to sleep each night and first thing each morning, his words, steady presence and love were with her, always.

He told her she was beautiful and that he loved her, that he would always love her, as he lay in the hospital bed, morphine drip and cancer dulling the usual sparkle in his eyes and slurring his words, but he didn't really need to say them anymore. She knew.

She opened her eyes, and he was gone, a hint of his cologne and memories all that remained.

Susan Reetz is the author of a children's book and a collection of poetry and flash fiction, and has had work published in Barney Street, Creative Wisconsin, Fiction 365, Fox Cry Review, Ms. Adventure, Mush and The City Pages. She has also written, directed and produced several award-winning documentaries, and holds memberships in the International Documentary Association, Rubber Band Writers, Wisconsin Writers Association, and Writers and Critters.

1963-64. I book passage on a Greek freighter that will sail from Haifa to Venice, and I'll take a train from there to Florence. There are about fifteen other passengers, all young, world travelers from Europe and Asia. During the four-day voyage, our home is the upper deck with a canopied area for escaping the sun or inclement weather.

As we begin to leave the harbor, I descend the stairs to the kiosk staffed by the crew one deck below and purchase a coffee, rich with the aroma of cardamom. I carry the paper cup back to the upper deck and lean with my forearms against the aft railing thinking about why I'm even here. Having lived in Israel for the past year, my one-and-twenty heart had told me it is time to meet my American girlfriend, Margaret, in Florence where she is completing a "semester abroad." Earlier in the summer, we had confirmed the date of my arrival.

Now, too late to ask the captain to turn the freighter around, I'm vacillating between the anticipation of adventure beyond the horizon to the west, and the sorrow of leaving the first place where I've felt I belonged, welcome, unafraid. I watch as minute by inexorable minute, the coastline of Israel fades into the distant haze that hangs over the warm water of the Mediterranean, then slips beyond the curvature of the Earth, leaving behind an eastern horizon of only the sky and sea.

At the rail, I recall the day Uzi said to me, "So, you like it in Israel?"

"I do. I feel comfortable here."

"You know why?"

"I think you'll tell me, Uzi. Why?"

I think about his answer until my once-hot coffee, redolent of cardamom, is cold.

On the final day of our voyage west on an Ancient Mariner-calm Mediterranean, we sail into the Adriatic, sunlight dancing on its surface. Leaning on the starboard railing, I watch the vague line between water and sky thicken and acquire



irregularities that continue to grow more distinct until they are Venice herself, rising from the sea to receive us.

After spending the day exploring the city, I board the late-night train which arrives as Florence is awakening. Shop owners use buckets of water and brooms to wash sidewalks. Food and souvenir vendors appear on the streets and lanes, setting up their racks and rolling carts. I buy a paper cone of sweet red cherries and save all the pits until I find a trash bin. Using a map from the railroad station, I find the small piazza across from Margaret's college. To my astonishment, it strikes me for the first time that I have no other address or phone number for her. I sit half dozing on a bench until students begin to arrive. At last, Margaret and I reunite, but it's unsettling that her hug is more obligatory than enthusiastic.

"Why are you here?" Her eyes are wide open and she shakes her head.

"What?" I'm incredulous. My eyes are as wide open as hers.

"Didn't you get my letter?"

"Obviously not. There was a postal strike in Israel and mail was screwed up for a long time but I never imagined you would have canceled."

She suggests we go to a nearby café so we can talk. After a year of breakfasts of dark bread, eggs, cheese, fruits, salads of tomato, onion, and cucumber, often eaten in the fields and orchards where I worked, the Italian breakfast of cappuccino and pastry seems a joke, not unlike the situation I find myself in as I learn that Margaret has fallen in love with Rafael. Though exhausted, hungry, and distraught, I understand she isn't referring to the Renaissance artist. She says more, but her voice is hollow and distant while I wonder what should I do? Return to Israel? Sit on a Florentine curb and cry?

I settle on renting a third-floor garret in a pensione and spend that day and night walking the streets of Florence, asking myself why was I so determined to be here, and why do I think I'm in love with her, and what do I, at one-and-twenty, even know about love?

But I know about hurt. How could she even imagine it is acceptable for me to wander the streets of Florence, alone and despondent?

The next morning, Rafael's girlfriend guides me through Florence as a consolation prize of sorts. I don't bother to tell her how alien it all seems, how detached I am. Instead of appreciating the Piazza del Duomo, I'm daydreaming of a day when I stood near the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and Via Dolorosa, at the very moment two Hasidic men in customary black garb and wide-brimmed hats passed by, and the Muezzin in the minaret of the nearby mosque called the faithful to prayer. The call of the Muezzin, wherever I heard it, seemed to beckon me, not to the mosque but to my romanticized notion of living among Bedouin in the seemingly endless Arabian desert.

After two more pointless days of intermittent visits with Margaret, I make a reservation on an Icelandic Airlines flight from Luxembourg City to New York. I have only a few dollars left in my pocket when I arrive in Luxembourg by train late in the evening, but I'm able to convince a kind night manager of a cheap hotel to allow me to sleep on a couch in a dark corner of the lobby.

I awaken at dawn and begin to walk without any particular destination. Lonely, but relieved to be alone, I find myself on the outskirts of the city. In the early morning mist, I am overwhelmed by the unexpected sight of row upon row of gleaming white crosses and occasional Shields of David, Jewish stars, in an American military cemetery where more than five thousand American soldiers remain, having perished in the horrific Second World War battle in the Ardennes.

At that time, I don't even know that my own father, who survived the war, was a replacement in Patton's army shortly following the Battle of the Bulge. I can't know, yet, to what extent throughout the next sixty years I will be immersed in learning about that war and, above all else, the Holocaust and its concentration camps. I can't know, yet, that I will remain, to this day, locked in the quandary I carried with me to Israel and struggled with at the



railing of the freighter as we sailed west from Haifa: Why am I leaving the only place where I feel welcome, where I feel I belong, unafraid? I can't know, yet, that for the rest of my life I will be reminded many times of Uzi's questions first asked of me sixty years earlier in 1963: Do I know why I like living in Israel? And I will be reminded many times of my own response more than sixty years earlier: "I'm not sure, but I think you'll tell me, Uzi. Why?" And Uzi did tell me. More than once. "It's simple. This is the first time in your life you have lived where almost none of the people hate you for being a Jew."

"I don't know, Uzi. Maybe," I said. "Maybe."

But, even those many years ago, I knew there was no "maybe" about it. I knew he was right.

And I know it yet today.

* * *

Back in Luxemburg City, I waste my time in a movie theatre showing *West Side Story*. Later in the day, I board the flight to Reykjavik and on to LaGuardia. Soon after we reach cruising altitude, I shift in my seat to take full advantage of the view out the porthole window, and immediately I know exactly why I'm thinking of a conversation I had months earlier with Uzi and Shaul while we worked in the fishponds. Conversing in modern Hebrew, I mention that there are aspects of kibbutz life and, for that matter, life in Israel, in general, that I don't understand as much as I think I should.

Shaul laughs and says, "It might take you a while longer to figure it out. It's like in the biblical Hebrew version of Genesis where it's written, "the earth was 'Tōhū vāVōhū.' Do you know what that means?"

"I know that English translations use words like 'empty' or 'without form and void,' but what does it actually mean in Hebrew?"

"Sometimes we say 'Tōhū vāVōhū' if we're trying to describe something all mixed up, pieces all jumbled together, impossible to figure out until all of it might be untangled."

* * *

Outside the airplane window—straight ahead, left and right, up and down—my world consists of nothing but an unbroken mass of gray clouds, no beginning, no end, no horizon. Just something all mixed up, jumbled together, impossible to figure out until it might be untangled.

Myles Hopper, a Shorewood, Wisconsin resident, writes primarily in the genre of memoir, his preferred way of trying to make sense of the possibly incomprehensible world and the Homo sapiens who dwell therein. His publications include *My Father's Shadow*, published by TEN16 Press, and he is a member of Wisconsin Writers Association and Red Oak Writing.

Novel Bookcamp's Programs Expand

Dave Rank, West Bend



Now in its 12th year, the Wisconsin-based Novel Bookcamp held June 22-28, 2025 in Racine at the Siena Center, offers quality writing advice and guidance to writers working on their first or additional book-length manuscripts. Members of WWA have always received discounted prices for certain Bookcamp programs. Starting with our original Bookcamp Workshop in 2014, programming was expanded over the years to include separate Writing Retreat and Book Coach offerings, and split into two tracks, the All-Genre for reality-based works and Speculative Fiction for the imagination-driven manuscripts.

The Workshop provides morning classes, afternoon one-on-one sessions with each instructor, a group critique, daily presentations on craft and publishing, and visiting literary agents. Visit the website for information on this year's award-winning staff.

The Writing Retreat is designed for writers looking for a week's worth of personal writing or story development time under the mentorship of an award-winning Science Fiction novelist who will offer daily encouragement, advice, and brainstorming opportunities. Program fees include all program expenses, six nights private accommodations and all meals during the week. Registration is open. Go to www.novelbookcamp.org for more information or contact Director Dave Rank directly at director@novelbookcamp.org.



Our Mired Glory

Gin Gaven, Verona

The Agency's latest bomb warning hasn't diminished my impression that spending time in the Library of Congress is akin to achieving Nirvana. As a public servant at the world's largest library, I handle valuable materials in the Rare Book and Special Collections Reading Room. Unlike the fortress of novels with which I surrounded myself as a girl, this Beaux Arts jewel provides no protective cover from reality. The only cover is my own. My librarian work here permits me to root out would be traitors to Our Revered Leader for the Agency.

On the second floor of the Thomas Jefferson Building, our reading room is modelled after Independence Hall. Its Doric marble columns and sweeping arches dwarf me. The library's woody scent is my constant companion. Our Revered Leader doesn't approve mention of Jefferson's slaves, including Sally Hemings, though he allows discussion of the former President's work in drafting the Declaration of Independence. While instructing new Agency recruits, Our Revered Leader explains our country is evolving from a Republic to a more efficient, elegant form of rule. He proclaims himself a modern Founding Father, intent on perfecting our union. The Agency is only one of his means to that end.

Early this morning, my Agency contact sent an encrypted message, commanding me to scrutinize Adam Calvo from California. He lost his job as a Civil Rights attorney when our nation's laws changed to diminish our freedoms. My contact reports Calvo desires revenge and is hell bent on drafting a disrespectful book about the perceived failings of Our Revered Leader drawing from themes in famous texts. Calvo is so filled with vitriol my contact is concerned he might blow up the Library of Congress.

I can't imagine wanting to destroy books. It's not in my DNA. It may not be in Calvo's either since he must know security will scan him at the entrance. The man can't even bring a bag inside.

A figure emerges from shadows across the room. I recognize Calvo from the photo in the message I received earlier. My colleague, Mark, steps forward. I tap his shoulder. "I'll help him. You seat Diderot when he comes."

Mark sighs, pushing up his thick, red glasses onto his hooked nose. Tall and thin, with a black ponytail and a beige suede vest, he hunches forward. I worry about him. He seems infected with the same malaise so many have developed since protestors began disappearing. The Patriotic Guardians have wiped out many rebels, in response to the spate of explosions since our last election in 2028, but more fighters surface each day.

I approach the former lawyer. "You're our ten o'clock appointment, right?"

He slaps his reader's card on the counter. "Adam Calvo here, young lady."

I'll be thirty-one next month, in April, God willing—not that young. I examine Calvo with renewed interest, pretending to scan his card. "I'm Valerie Nichola. I understand you'd like to view a specific book."

The man's face is pock-marked and sports large black bags under his eyes. Between those features and his crooked nose, he looks like a boxer down for the count. I don't know what to expect from a man like that.

He scratches his head. "I'd love to see the first edition of Don Quixote by Cervantes." His eyes dart around.

Is he excited to fulfill his lifelong dream or a suicide bomber? He can't have explosives. Yet, as he leans on his gnarled, walnut cane, something feels off.

I rub my lips together to even my lipstick, brushing waves of my honey-colored hair from my shoulder. "I haven't read it."

Calvo narrows his eyes, until their swollen lids and puffy undereye circles all but swallow them. "We who tilt at windmills, fight for lost causes,



revere that novel. It's a classic."

"Tell me more."

He bites his lower lip. "Fought for lost causes, I guess. I'm saying goodbye to that chapter of my life."

Only that chapter? I study him as one studies an animal in the laboratory. He wears his pain like armor. If only I can find a chink in it, earn his trust. "I'll bring the first edition from 1605. Please take a seat." I point to a long, wooden table, labeled A. "When I return, I'll place the book in the cradle. Examine it with this fresh pair of gloves."

The man's eyes wander behind me to a life-sized portrait of Our Revered Leader, in full military regalia, holding a semi-automatic weapon. Calvo swallows hard, his eyes scanning the length of the oil painting. "Yes, of course." His lips curl into a sneer.

* * *

As I push my cart to pick up the book, I reflect while I've never read Cervantes, I've been reading parts of Jefferson's collection donated to rebuild the library after the British burned our Capitol in 1814. It's a librarian's perk, as is visiting the first floor Main Reading Room on break, to read in that Secular Cathedral, with its altar of knowledge. Often, I linger in the lobby afterwards before Elihu Vedder's famous murals: Government, Corrupt Administration, and Peace and Prosperity. Most likely Our Revered Leader will replace them with better art someday.

When I return to the reading room, Diderot has arrived. He perches where he's been for days, reviewing documents from the French Revolution. I give him a fleeting glance, glad to see his unruly shock of thinning brown hair and tweed suit.

Diderot doesn't look up, but as I pass his table, the name Robespierre catches my eye, written in flowery cursive, in a pamphlet. I propel my cart toward Table A, then don gloves, carefully removing Don Quixote, and placing it in the cradle. "Please turn the pages with care. It's a crime to damage a national treasure—even by accident. There are severe penalties."

Calvo chuckles, stroking his chin. "I'll treat this

tome as if it were my own son."

According to Calvo's Agency file, he has no children. I press my lips together, then open them. "I'm here if you need anything. You have an hour."

He gives a curt nod, then slips on his gloves. His onyx eyes light up like candles in homage to his literary hero.

After I return the cart, I slip back to the library counter. "How's French Revolution guy?"

Slouching, Mark furrows his brow. "Diderot's humorless. Your guy looks much more interesting. If Calvo returns tomorrow, I'll help him."

I shrug. If we survive today.

Mark stares up at a massive marble clock with black Roman numerals on a golden pedestal, donated in honor of Our Revered Leader.

While he's looking away, I glance at my watch, scrolling through messages. There's one from my Agency contact: "Calvo transferred half his savings to his mother yesterday." I can't ignore the possibility he's a suicide bomber. But how could reading Cervantes be research for a mean-spirited book about Our Revered Leader?

To my surprise, Calvo stands up and rips off his gloves. "I need air." The former lawyer glares at Our Revered Leader's portrait as he wipes his cheek with a pocket handkerchief.

Mark nudges me. "I'll help him check out."

After my colleague leaves with Calvo, I scurry to Table A, and crouch low to inspect the underside. My hand darts beneath it, scanning it with the detector in my wristwatch. No explosive materials. I exhale, then encrypt a quick message: "False alarm. All clear."

A man clears his throat behind me, and I prepare to lunge.

"It's me."

I squint at my fellow rebel agent. I became a spy for Our Revered Leader to feed intelligence to the rebellion. Diderot looms over me, waving a single sheet of paper. "I must show my looseleaf to prove I'm not stealing your materials, right?"

"What do you have for me?" Three days ago, he showed me a page with one word: *Liberté*. Two days ago, the word was *Égalité*. Yesterday, I read:



Fraternité. Each day I repeat the word back to him.

He places today's paper in my hands as though he's handling a Fabergé egg.

Excitement wells within me, threatening to erupt into joy. "Allons-y," I read. A rebel bombing campaign is imminent. Calvo's not a lone wolf rebel and he's not the enemy. We're the ones coordinating the Rebellion.

His jade eyes lock with mine. He nods soberly and tips his imaginary hat, striding away.

Mark rejoins me, explaining Calvo will return soon. I collect the pamphlets from Diderot's table and return them to the collection.

As I head to the main counter, windows rattle as though an earthquake is shaking the building's foundation. The grand, gold leaf chandelier sways, in the center of the reading room.

Mark and I sprint to the far end of a row of lamplit tables, around to the arched doorway of the reading room. People are shouting. "Explosion near the Capitol! A building's on fire!"

As Mark guards the reading room's entrance, I stride to the nearest window and watch tongues of flame burn near our nation's jewel, my hands shaking. True revolution has begun.

My communications device pings, and I check it. Concerned the Library of Congress might explode, my Agency contact commands me to a bunker miles away.

There's a rustle behind me. Mark appears, his pallid face drooping. "We got lucky but it may be us next time."

"I doubt it. Everyone keeps a good eye out." I dab my forehead with my white silk shirt sleeve, smearing makeup on it. Perspiration seeps from my underarms through my blouse.

He wrings his hands. "We need to lock down and evacuate."

"I'm worried about my cat. We live so close to the Capitol. Can you lock down, Mark?"

He heaves a sigh. "Go."

My arms tingling, I grab my purse and descend the marble staircase. People don't make eye contact. Our Revered Leader says it's because we've all gotten on the same page since the Great

Election, that our country is united. Most in the Agency never question his word, but I do.

After I reach the first floor, I glimpse Calvo, through the entrance, smoking outside. He's not subversive in the way the Agency assumes he is. I'm the danger—a rebel leader who sees our government for what it really is. I stride past the Library of Congress's copy of the Gutenberg Bible, then slip outside, giving Calvo a quick wave, which he returns.

I continue forward, spotting Diderot on the street below. As I descend, I rub my nose, making sure he views my signal. Then my jaw drops.

On the street behind him, four Patriotic Guardians, dressed in red leather uniforms with blue and white helmets, sprint toward Diderot in jackboots. He hasn't noticed. I want to scream but my voice has disappeared. They must know.

In a flash, they sidestep him and push past me, rushing up the stairs. They tackle Calvo and beat him about the head with his cane. Blood runs down the steps, just as when the Agency first recruited me, and the blood of protestors ran down the sidewalk outside the Helen C. White library in Madison, Wisconsin. That's when something broke inside me. I had joined to help the Rebellion but that savagery thrust me into a forging a leadership role for myself. I couldn't take it.

I lean forward, desperate to save him, but can't move. No, the truth is I don't want to move. If I do, I risk losing access to crucial Agency intelligence and being tortured—if I live.

Calvo's finished.

Aching, I search the sky. A haze of soot and ash wafts above, eclipsing the sun: a token of our mired glory.

Gin Gaven is the pen name of a former practicing attorney, mother, and aspiring author, lives in Verona, Wisconsin. She's a member of the Wisconsin Writers Association, the Chicago Writers Association, Sisters in Crime, and the Authors Guild, has attended the Novel-in-Progress Bookcamp and Writing Retreat for several years, and participates in Angela Rydell's Writers' Inlet.



Three Bends and Two Loops

Bruce Campbell, Brookfield



Ben's sophomore year at Moraine View South is winding down, but he has yet to decide if he will spend the summer working at the dime store or taking chemistry. Or both. He is anxious about A Capella Choir auditions and whether he will be in shape for JV soccer. He knows he should have spent last week getting through the stack of college catalogues on his desk and studying for SATs, but he was too worried whether the Apollo 13 astronauts would return safely from space. This week, the third week in April 1970, he is anxious about the environment.

The very first Earth Day is here. While Senator Gaylord Nelson rallies citizens and policymakers to enact profound environmental, economic, and social change, biologists Paul Erlich and Kenneth Watt are predicting the imminent death of all sea life and mass human starvation. The deteriorating planet offers Ben one more thing about which to worry.

Fifteen hundred colleges and 10,000 schools have scheduled Earth Day "teach-ins" for April 22; Ben's school is holding an assembly and will plant a tree. College students march for environmental action and demand their cafeterias include tea and brown rice "hunger diets." Recycling advocates pile glass bottles and aluminum cans on city hall steps and outside factories. Activists bury an internal combustion engine in Connecticut and picket General Motors in Detroit. Roaring jets, smoke-spewing factories, and gas-guzzling cars—which, until now, represented American ingenuity at its best—are signs of the apocalypse.

Ben knows better than to ask his mom if he can go downtown to a rally, but he tries to do his part by wearing a "Save Your Earth" pin, begging his parents to recycle, turning off lights, and conserving water. At the same time, his fifteen-year-old brain has difficulty sharing space regarding the faltering planet with visions of a certain cheerleader who doesn't seem to know his name.

Mr. Peterson, Ben's English teacher, taps into the national mood for the next assignment. The morning after Earth Day, the class finds this message on the far-right panel of the chalkboard:

Due Friday, May 15, at 3:00 PM. No exceptions! Explore a significant, impactful societal issue. Outline a novel solution and convince the reader of both the need for change and the merits of your approach. 1000 - 1500 words. Double-spaced. 1" margins. Regular bond paper. Diagrams and figures are permitted. No staples or White-Out.

Mr. Peterson is rotund, pale, and sober. His precise age is a source of speculation. He hums opera and reads every issue of *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The American Scholar*, and *The New Yorker* cover-to-cover. As far as anyone knows, he owns three ties and does not have a life outside of school.

As is his custom, Mr. Peterson does not call attention to the assignment; students are expected to read the board. Requesting clarification evokes "the sigh," an interminable wheeze accompanied by a slack-jawed head shake. Ben copies the assignment word-for-word into his calendar. The project is due in three weeks.

The Sunday before the deadline, Ben is flailing. He wants to find an environmental topic but, as he pages through random volumes of his family's World Book Encyclopedia, he realizes he will settle for any crisis he can describe in three paragraphs and for which he can conjure an inventive solution.

He discards "Urban Blight" and "Hunger" before landing on "Glaciers." Ahh, he thinks. This might work! The article is brief and has nice maps and diagrams. Subheadings describe glacier movement, the "water cycle," changing arctic sea levels, and the Ice Ages. Photos document glacial thinning and contraction over decades. Ben learns that the melting glaciers are a big problem. Unfortunately, he has no idea how he would suggest solving it.

Still, "Glaciers" is his best option, so he reaches



into the desk and fishes out a paperclip. The first one is rusty, so he tosses it in the wastebasket. He rummages under stacks of paper and retrieves another bent, rusty clip. Finally, he locates one that looks okay. He slips it onto the margin of the page adjacent to the article.

Ben stares at the clip. He fishes out another rusted one. And another. Wait, he thinks. Are rusted clips a problem? He sets aside the G volume of the World Book and pulls out the P, riffling through the pages in search of “Paperclip.” The entries jump from “Paper Birch” to “Paper Doll.” “Paperclip” does not merit an entry. How has no one noticed?

Time is running out. He jots down a tentative title for his project and grabs a stack of blank 3 x 5 cards. This will be perfect, he thinks. He wonders if Rachel Carson was this nervous when she decided to write *Silent Spring*. Ben hops on his bike and speeds to the library.

Over the next four days, he searches the periodical indices, masters the microfiche reader, plows through magazines and catalogues, skims technical papers on smelting and the repurposing of steel scrap, and explores old newspapers. His pile of 3 x 5 cards grows.

The report writes itself. His argument hinges on the assumption no rusted or bent paperclip ever again finds meaningful utility if a fresh, well-formed, and untangled clip is available. In addition, based on manufacturing data, unserviceable clips will eventually overwhelm suitable ones. For society to prevent waste and to function properly, he will argue that spent and damaged paperclips must be actively collected, sorted, and recycled. Everything he reads reinforces his hypothesis. His lists of key words and topic sentences grows.

To create the background section, he explores history. North American archeologists excavating pre-Civil War settlements and battleground sites have documented coins, buttons, personal items, weapons, implements, and other artifacts, but no one has ever identified bent wire fasteners specifically designed to clasp pieces of paper. Ben

runs across an 1870s British newspaper advertisement for Gem-style triple-bend double-loop wire paperclips but can find no other recognizable precursors of today’s clips for the next two decades. Then, in April 1899—exactly 71 years ago—William Middlebrook of Waterbury, Connecticut, patented a machine to mass produce paperclips from steel wire stock. That changed everything. Paperclips went from being a curiosity to a ubiquitous household item. A paperclip worn in the lapel even became a symbol of resistance in Nazi-occupied Norway.

Since steel wire’s torsion and elasticity remain essentially intact over time, clips have maintained their shape and function even as they rusted onto the upper left corners of land deeds, photographs, bills of sale, family documents, and love letters. Narrow-gauge steel wire routinely survives landfills, is not compostable, and doesn’t melt unless heated to approximately 2500°F.

Ben concludes paperclips never, ever die.

Adding a practical exercise to his project, Ben invites readers to excavate to the bottom of any random desk drawer where, he predicts, there will be an assortment of “partially-rusted, misshapen, tangled, and abused clips lurking under dividers, in corners, and between trays. These loners are difficult to retrieve and scatter when disturbed. Paperclips,” Ben writes without irony, “are the desk drawer equivalent of cockroaches.”

In the tradition of doomsday prognosticators Erlich and Watt, Ben envisions a future where spent paperclips lie scattered across the lunar and Martian surfaces. Institutions and governments grind to a halt when the ratio of useless to pristine paperclips reaches a tipping point. Critical documents and images are forever marred with rusted, curvilinear indentations.

Ben models his solution on the Keep America Beautiful campaign where Lady Bird Johnson, Lassie, and the Crying Indian (who, Ben learns, is Italian) rally citizens to “Pitch In.” He recommends commissioning Jimi Hendrix and The Carpenters to write popular songs. He drafts plans for brightly colored “Retired Paperclip Recycling Centers” in



Sears Roebuck, Ben Franklin, Montgomery Ward, and SS Kresge. Deformed but non-rusted clips will be straightened, re-bent, and recycled. Rusted ones will be melted down. He creates diagrams with bins of old paperclips going in one end and boxes of new paperclips and stacks of steel ingots emerging from the other.

Ben sees his report landing on desks of decision makers everywhere. He wonders what he will wear when he is interviewed by Dick Cavett and David Frost.

The night before deadline, Ben uses his dad's Smith Corona to retype one page of the final report. He attaches the images with a bottle of mucilage, then flattens everything with volumes of the World Book.

Finally, Friday arrives. He fastens the report together with a shiny new paperclip.

Ben experiences a twinge of anxiety as his classmates share their projects' titles. Scott wrote about "Cleaning up Our Rivers." Joan—whose older brother was drafted last year—has addressed "Ending the War in Vietnam." That certain cheerleader turns in "NOW and the ERA: Women Deserve Equality." Cheryl explored a headline from May 4 with "Will Kent State be a Turning Point?" Simon, the quietest student in class, has written about "Bringing Justice to Our Cities." Others have addressed the housing shortage, cancer, and poverty. Ben's project joins the stack on Mr. Peterson's desk as the period ends.

The following Friday, Mr. Peterson is effusive. "I am returning your papers today," he announces. "Most of them, I must say, are outstanding. Well written and thought provoking. Nice work."

Mr. Peterson walks the aisles, returning the projects while sharing a few comments. As his own report lands upside down on his desk, Ben detects a sigh. He cautiously flips the assignment over, revealing the grade.

"C-minus?" Ben mumbles a bit too loud.

Someone, maybe the cheerleader, stifles a snicker. Ben returns the assignment to its face down position after learning his report has "addressed a problem that is not a problem.

Frankly, this treatise is a waste of both paper and paperclip."

* * *

Decades later, Ben acknowledges he misjudged the extent of the problem. No paperclip calamity ever materialized. In fairness, "expert" forecasts from 1970—that overpopulation and famine would destroy civilization by 1990, everyone would be wearing gas masks by 2000, and life expectancy would drop back into the forties by 2010—were also overblown. Still, Mr. Peterson might have been a bit more sympathetic. No one knows the future.

Senator Nelson likely employed paperclips to hold together his Earth Day speeches three weeks before Ben trusted a paperclip to securely fasten together the seven pages of "The Coming Devastating Paperclip Nightmare." Over the decades, Ben's clip oxidized and rusted, permanently staining his report. Without a means to recycle it, that clip never found another life.

Old paperclips go to landfills as new ones appear. Even as society fumbles through multigenerational, global-scale environmental challenges, there are 11 billion new paperclips manufactured each year from about 12,000 US metric tons of steel—enough to supply 15,000 new cars.

Healthy, reflective societies benefit when they take stock of the discarded items lying dormant in their deepest recesses. Ben realizes paperclips will never awaken the world from environmental complacency unless they become the "canaries in the coal mine" or, more on-point, "cockroaches in the desk drawer." Those dark places, concealed from view, might offer an insight or two into the fragility of the world. Ben still hopes this is true.

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Creative Nonfiction

Notes on a 50-(ish) Summer Romance

Julie A. Jacob, SE Wisconsin

It's early evening on a perfect Wisconsin June day, and the two of you are sitting at a round metal bistro table in the pocket-sized yard of his post-divorce rented house, sipping chardonnay in companionable silence, feet propped up on the same chair. You smile at the contrast of your slender size eight feet nestled next to his sturdy size thirteen ones. In the background, you hear the splashes and shouts of children playing in a pool on the other side of the fence and, faintly, from a few blocks away, the soothing hum of cars on the main road.

You've been dating six weeks; enough time to be comfortable with each other, but still new enough to one another to appreciate the excitement of unwrapping each nugget of personal information like a miniature present. (We both subscribe to *The Economist*! We both lived in the north side of Chicago at the same time! He worked in a motorcycle repair shop in high school!) Newly single, he's navigating his way after a marriage that unraveled after twenty years, pulled apart by the stresses of dual careers and parenthood. He moved here recently, about an hour's drive from where his ex-wife and youngest child live, to get some distance as he tries to rebuild his life.

You never married and are wryly aware that you've slid into the stereotype of an unmarried woman of a certain age: lived in the big city for years, never found *The One*, and eventually washed back up on the shores of your Midwestern home town. (Returned to help widowed father, found a little house close to sister, and decided to stay.)

Today was a lovely day: a stroll through the farmers market, followed by a drive to admire the elegant Victorian homes on a street overlooking Lake Michigan, and then eating Italian beef sandwiches at a little gem of a place he recently discovered, and now, this, an afternoon respite,

leading, possibly, perhaps, maybe to later physical delight.

You glance at him. He seems content, eyes closed, face tilted toward the afternoon sun. He's still emotionally beaten up from the end of his marriage, and this, of course gives you pause. You've been down this road before with divorced men and know how it goes—their pain, their fear of getting hurt again, their tendency to bolt if things move too fast.

It was a surprise, this romance. "I think I have a date" you texted your sister, tickled and bemused, after the college alumni club dinner. You'd been to many of these dinners before, loyal as you are to your alma mater—Go Big Red—and even at the age of fifty-(ish) you knew you'd be ten years younger than everyone else in the room. Nonetheless, perhaps in a pique of rebellion against the invisibility of older women, you'd taken off the faded, stretched sweater you'd thrown on simply because it was school's color, and changed into a soft top that clings to your (somewhat ample) curves, and topped it with a dressy black cardigan. Better, you think, as you apply a little rose lipstick.

And there he was at the table, looking like a movie typecast of a CEO: thick, straight salt-and-peer hair, square jaw, massive shoulders, deep-set gray eyes. No ring (you always check, but since many men don't wear them, you assumed there was a wife ferrying a teenager to a basketball game at that very moment). Because you were sure he was married, you made only cursory conversation with him—yes, health care reform is an interesting topic, the speaker was excellent, the chicken was okay, when did you graduate (turns out three years ahead of you).

As you gather your purse and fuchsia pink raincoat, he says, "You seem really nice. Would you like to have dinner with me sometime?"

"Of course," you stammer, shocked and delighted that this man has noticed you, is interested in you, wants to spend an evening with you.

It's drizzling as you drive home, a cold rain, car heater on in early May, but despite the miserable



weather, you smile as the windshield wipers make a calming, swishing sound.

You needed this date. It's been three years since mercurial, charming, fascinating Michael ended your sort-of relationship (Situationship? Friends-with-benefits-ship?) and there hasn't been anyone since.

At your first dinner (small, quiet, upscale place downtown), he tells you his story: divorced after a long marriage (he worked in finance, long hours, lots of pressure, and she had a career in advertising, ditto for the pressure and hours) and raising three kids. They simply grew apart. You share yours: lived in Chicago for many years, never married. He's incredulous that no one snatched you up, but because he resided in Chicago for many years, too, you hope he sort of understands—everyone insanely busy and focused on their career, large circle of friends for emotional support and company, sheer volume of people you meet, etc.

Dinner leads to drinks at a charming wine bar a few days later, followed the next week by a date at the driving range to hit golf balls, and then several more dates: Friday night fish fry, an outdoor concert, drinks again at the wine bar, another dinner, and, now, this day.

You marvel at how different he is from Michael and the string of moody, creative, interesting men who came before him. The two of you don't talk for hours about art, politics, and travel. He doesn't emote constantly about his feelings, and he hasn't had any relationships that were complicated and hard to define. He had one serious relationship in college before his marriage. He's sturdy as an oak tree, this man. A planner. Taciturn, but with a dry wit. You find this steadiness both reassuring and unnerving. Where's the drama? The anxiety of will he call me again?

He's athletic, too. He rowed in college and competed in triathlons for years, and although the jocks bored you in high school and college, now you find his rowing past wildly sexy—the sheer physicality of it, the dedication, the fealty to teamwork.

You can tell that the end of his marriage is still raw. One night he takes you to a concert, a singer from a well-known 80s rock group, during one poignant song, he looks down at the floor, arms resting on his knees, and wipes his eye. You pat his shoulder, not sure what to say as someone who never experienced either marriage or the dissolution of it, hoping your touch conveys love and support.

Dating him is nice. It's fun. It's normal.

It ends eight months later. Of course it does. It was too soon after this divorce; he wasn't ready. "I'm so sorry, I can't do this yet," he tells you. "I'm in no place to date anyone right now." He is kind when tells you this.

This was not unexpected. He is, after all, the fifth divorced man you've dated. After a while, you know you're just the practice relationship, but still, you can't help but hope and hope and hope every time.

Yet, the end of this relationship doesn't trigger the usual spiral of negative thoughts—*What's wrong with me?* and *I drive men away*. Instead, you think this: He's a good man, and it was a nice relationship, but he wasn't ready and the timing wasn't right or, perhaps, we weren't quite right for each other.

This, you tell yourself, is progress.

But that heartbreak is months ahead. Right now, it's a warm, clear evening in June with the moon beginning to rise, and you're sitting in contented silence in his backyard. You smile at each other, and clink glasses in a toast to this great day and many more.

I like this, you think. This quietness, this sweet day, this regular guy.

Yes, you think. Better.

Julie A. Jacob is a communications professional and writer who lives in southeastern Wisconsin. Her creative non-fiction essays have appeared in *Midwest Prairie Review*, *Under the Sun*, the *TallGrass Writers Guild* annual anthology and other publications.



The Friendship Trip

Sxdni Small, Milwaukee

Gummy strands of toothpaste clung to my fingers as I ran them through my wet curls. The vain attempt to unstick my hair was met with laughter from my friend and roommate, Tory, whose own short crimson-streaked mop was laced with the same product. Our shirts and faces were also covered in gooeey swirls. In the late-afternoon Friday light of the dorm room, the spontaneous giddiness for which bored college students can be known led us to a private game of “toothpaste wars.” Neither of us enjoyed the ever-present parties that permeated the campus each weekend, and we now longed for something different to do.

Tory looked away from me, lost in her own thoughts. Both of us tended toward the more introspective side. When I returned from classes I often found my roommate sitting quietly at her desk, rocking her beloved stuffed teddy bear and listening to music. The bulk of my own non-academic activities involved immersion in a good book and intimate gatherings of friends. Tory’s quiet manner hid her impulsive streak; the toothpaste explosion had been her idea. That day as she peered out the window and the temperature began to dip, I knew something was on her mind. “I wanna get out of here,” she insisted. Turning to me, Tory continued, “Let’s go somewhere! I’m going to the bus station. It’s not that far.” Her round face and hazel eyes implored me to come along.

Tory stood and waded into the disarray of school supplies, plaid shirts, socks and other garments that lay strewn at the base of her dresser. I watched as she tossed her favorite red-checked top, a dark beige sweatshirt and faded summer camp jeans into a well-worn backpack. My

weekend plans had not included a trip, but I nodded in agreement and went to retrieve my own crisp book bag. “Okay, I’m in. Where do you want to go?” I queried to my friend’s back as she continued gathering supplies.

“I don’t know,” Tory mused, “but let’s walk to the bus station and see.” A change of clothes later and with our backpacks slung over our shoulders, we soon left the close room, strode down the muraled hall and clomped down the six flights of stairs to meet the brisk air outside. The usually busy streets teeming with students were barren as most people were at the various bars and parties in town. Though Tory claimed that the bus station was not far, I knew as we traipsed across the rural community that it was close to an hour away.

We spoke little as we walked, simply enjoying each other’s company and the act of placing one foot in front of the other. We passed the Physical Education and Science Buildings as well as the UW-Stevens Point University Center, where I often enjoyed a cup of hot chocolate or dark coffee after class. The wind increased, carrying with it the scent of fall. One of my favorite spots in town came into view—the local co-op, where I often picked up new political buttons to adorn my jeans jacket. We spied our favorite Chinese restaurant further down the block, where I ate spring rolls for the first time. That day we giggled as spilled Egg Foo Young dribbled on Tory’s pants in her first attempt with chopsticks, and fingers sticky from stubborn soy sauce packets sought multiple napkins.

The neighborhood homes and businesses gradually gave way to a more isolated landscape as we neared the town outskirts where the lonely bus station hunkered and our belching, grime-streaked chariot huddled in the lot. “I forgot money!” Tory exclaimed in dismay as we eyed the schedule and chose Appleton for the destination. My own pockets yielded nothing useful. We would have to turn around.

We journeyed back to campus, excited about our objective. We chattered about Tory’s latest project for her Music Theory class and my constant struggles with remedial math. Once at the



residence hall, I waited outside while my friend flung open the hall door and bounded up to our room, her shoes echoing on the stairs. My respite was brief as Tory wasted no time in returning and we set out again with a new urgency.

The second trek to the station did indeed seem to take less time and Tory enthusiastically plunked her money down on the counter, paying for both of our tickets. Once on the bus I was glad to sit down and enjoy the warm air that shielded us from the chill. Tory's head drooped on the back of her seat as sleep overtook her. I closed my eyes too, wondering what we would do once we got to Appleton.

Upon reaching our destination we made our way outside. The cold air was a shock after the toasty ride. "What now?" I wondered aloud in the glow of the station lot.

"I don't know. Let's just see what's up," Tory replied.

We headed toward the distant downtown strip that twinkled with light. As we passed through the business district, we noticed people meandering in twos and threes, with half-empty beer cups sloshing in their hands. Remnants of banners, straws, napkins, and other refuse littered the ground. "I guess it was a street fair. Too bad we missed it." I said sadly. My rumbling stomach expressed its own disappointment. We wove in and out of lonely festival tables, fallen signs, and stumbling partygoers for some time, coming to a halt in front of a shuttered bookstore. Plopping down on the hard ground in the sheltering shop entryway, we pondered the wisdom of our "plan." The gritty, cold pavement seeped into my body and chilly air swept my hatless head. "Let's find something to eat," I suggested. "We passed a gas station back there somewhere." Tory agreed and we moved on, further into the evening and the tiny flakes of swirling snow.

For all our jokes and laughter as we strode toward our destination, I was glad to finally pull open the door of the hot dog and fuel-scented station. Tory's cash landed us one large can of SpaghettiOs, some bread and peanut butter, a can

opener, crackers, single-serving applesauce cups and something to drink. We also grabbed a couple of plastic spoons from the self-serve coffee island near counter. Pointing out the cans of dog food on a dusty bottom shelf, I challenged her, "I dare you to...eat that! Bet you won't!" Tory's mischievous grin and excited eyes claimed the dare as she grabbed two cans and added them to our little trove of convenience store treasures. We danced back out into the night with the thrill of conquest.

Our joy was temporary as it dawned on me that we had no place to stay, since the bus back to the university would not leave until morning. "We better find a motel or something." I suggested to my sidekick. The excursion was a bit harder now, as we each carried a bag of goodies. We had long left the last of the festival patrons. Our remote tracks in the wind-whipped gloaming made me glad to see a motel. We gratefully entered the well-lit lobby and Tory pried a credit card from her pack, offering to pay for the room. "Thanks so much, I'll pay you back for sure!" I exclaimed.

Once ensconced in our room with the familiar sounds of the TV and a few other guests occasionally pattering by in the hall, the now-infamous dog food operation began. Tory wrinkled her nose at the smell emanating from the opened can, but closed her eyes, dug into the can with one of the spoons, tilted her head back and dropped a few chunks into her mouth. She swallowed and promptly burst into gales of laughter. I clapped my hands and brushed away the same offered prize. "No way—nope!" I stated amidst fits of giggles. "I'm going for those SpaghettiOs!" The unlikely combination of familiar childhood pasta and sauce, dog food and peanut butter enveloped the room, while we sat up, watched the late-night tube, and enjoyed made-up tales. Sleep eventually claimed us but was short-lived as we wrested rigid bodies from slumber. We could not miss our return trip.

We left one half-empty dog food can in the bathroom trash and retained the rest of the supplies as we marched out to find our ride. School banter helped pass the time once on the bus.

Back on campus and in the morning sun of our

familiar room, Tory tossed her pack into the mound of clothes and schoolbooks—but not before removing the second dog food can. Her triumphant purchase with the picture of a smiling Golden Retriever faced us. The can remained precariously perched on top of the dresser debris field for the rest of the semester, a golden-cylinder memento of adventure.

Sxdni Small is a member of the Wisconsin Writers Association and has attended multiple writing workshops. They received “Editor of the Year” award during their time as a case manager for a small social service agency. Born and raised in Milwaukee, they enjoy historical fiction and love canine scent sports.



Photo by TK Sheffield

Nonfiction

Visiting East Germany

Karen Milstein, Madison

On spring break of our Junior Year Abroad, a group of twenty-five students traveled together to Berlin, crossing East Germany to get to the divided city of Berlin. We passed signs with propaganda written in both German and Russian. Our one-night stay was in a dusty, faded wallpaper hotel in Weimar, East Germany, that seemed to recall a period and politics from previous decades. Then we were in West Berlin for two days, visiting the Reichstag, the seat of the parliament. From the comfortable hostel in West Berlin near Bahnhof Zoo, we walked up and down the Kurfürstendamm, the Champs-Élysées of Berlin. We also visited city museums, the Gemäldegalerie and the Neue Nationalgalerie. Even though I wanted to embrace all peoples and lands in my heart, there was a difference being in the West. I breathed in fresh air again. The thick coal smoke of East Germany had turned back to a clearer air in West Berlin. How could that be? I walked past brick homes, warm-lit inside. My own feet trod upon the smooth sidewalks. Larger cars with less exhaust rolled over smoother streets. Tall buildings rose up higher than I had seen recently and throngs of people occupied the streets. West Berlin recollected me back to the streets of large American cities which I had visited as a youth.

After exploring West Berlin, we ventured behind the Iron Curtain to visit East Berlin. At Checkpoint Charlie, early in the morning, about twelve of us young Americans crossed into the East, where coal was used for fuel and there was an aging opulence. We could see graffiti on the western side of the wall, a way people protested this edifice with red-, blue-, and green-stenciled words of resistance. Slightly anxious, my cohorts and I stepped through the small white gated house and were questioned; if deemed suspicious (which I was somehow to the East Berlin checkpoint



guards), they demanded pockets to be emptied. Tampons rolled out of mine, also a coin, Kleenex, pen.

We shuffled over into East Berlin, in pairs, threes, or fours. We disappeared for the day, taking various routes, and traveling separately, meeting up later to be tourists with the others. Again, the East laid heavier; the air set with a thickness of age stood still. It was easier to navigate East Berlin than West Berlin or other metropolises somehow. There were fewer people there and the few I remember seeing walked as if all one hue, pastel colors to their clothes and skin. There was an absence of advertising and less traffic. East Berlin was a large city, but somehow made manageable by history's travails and divisions. Again, red -and -black communist billboards reminded us that we were in the east and the buildings were a heavier shade of gray.

My friend Sterling took it upon himself to learn all he could about the dichotomy that was Germany. He was intrigued about power differentials and the landscape through which we walked. I was distant from home but found a new depth within me. Sterling and I spent time exploring this city together, crossing boundaries, so much history between us to come.

He was kind. I was not as fearful of him as other people. He didn't invade me like many other people did. It was something very subtle, but at the same time, quite notable. I had turned twenty, Sterling, twenty-one. We searched for something within ourselves; we thought we found it in the sooty buildings and somber individuals who wandered past us. Sterling and I looked at the scene before us. There we would find some of the adulthood into which we were moving and sharing with each other. It was five years before the wall fell, and we found a place of growth and maturity for a day in a coal-driven city.

Soldiers perched the top of the buildings, carrying guns, making sure no one stepped out of line. Eyeing the soldiers, I made sure I did nothing weird or odd; the feeling was not so unfamiliar to me even then. We waited for the streetlights to turn

green, for the tiny, fluorescent apple-green man—the icon for the walk sign—to put one foot in front of the other, wearing a fedora, unique to East Germany. Sterling and I strode close.

Come noon, Sterling and I consumed goose—a delicacy—at the Palast der Republik (Palace of the Republic), a relatively new government and cultural building, with a large Saal (dining hall) and a long line in which to wait. We had privilege, though we only scantily thought about this, sitting in a mysterious shroud of otherness: The Iron Curtain.

“This tastes like nothing in particular I've tried before,” I said, as I cautiously took a bite of this bird, feeling adventurous. The goose was complemented with red cabbage and Semmelknoedel (dumplings).

As we ate goose, he carefully sandwiched words between bites of the tasty bird. “A little beefy, kind of tough,” said Sterling. “Best goose I've ever had.”

We ordered a pinot noir to complement the goose. “Aren't we doing well, huh?” Sterling smiled and we laughed at our fine opportunity. We followed up with bread pudding, to make us feel pleased and full. We were proud of ourselves, having dined high, the two of us, richly and for a good price. The beefy taste of the goose brought our palates together.

We met up with students from our program to check out Alexanderplatz, the city center. Then Sterling and I continued to walk deeper, just the two of us, both into the depths of East Berlin and into our intimacy.

“Tell me about yourself,” he said. He wanted to know, but didn't ask and then ignore the answer, or laugh, like others sometimes did. That scared me so. He and his friend, Jamie, were both tall, skinny, and wore black. They kidded around. They called me Divine, after Shelley Winters. I didn't know why. But I permitted Sterling to use that nickname, not too long after the year started.

We somehow fit several more hours into one day than is possible when one is older. We purchased tickets for Ibsen's play *Ghosts* at the



Berliner Ensemble, Bertolt Brecht's theater. Again, like the lunch, the price was so affordable. I sensed Sterling's presence next to me, something I rarely allowed myself to feel. Before the play started, Sterling asked, "Why did you decide to come to Germany? What made you interested in coming here?"

"I don't know. I wanted to travel abroad. I searched for various places in the world." I spoke slowly. I needed to know I could trust my words to this person who seemed to want to understand me. I felt a shiver as I let him ask me questions.

He didn't say anything back right away, as many people often interrupted me. He seemed to want to give me space to talk. I continued.

"I had studied German for a while, so I guessed I should go to Germany for a year. And here I am." That felt like I'd said plenty. Should I ask him why he was here? The play started. Sterling and I would have plenty of time to talk later.

We picked up much of the German language, but whispered between us during the whole show to stay abreast of what was going on in the play. I was also new to German theater, so Sterling explained that to me, too, during the intermission.

In the late afternoon we went for a typical German kaffee and kuchen (coffee and cake) on Alexanderplatz. Both of us wished to see the "unbiased" East Germany: me the budding anthropologist, and Sterling searching for the real Eastern Bloc country.

We smiled and laughed as we ate Kuchen and drank Kaffee. I trusted looking into Sterling's sparkling eyes a bit more than I would most people, interspersed with notable gazing off, as I normally did with others. Maybe it was his remarkably peaked eyebrows and perky smile that drew me in, so unique and validating. Our connection was something deep and intimate. We found in each other a bit of that which we sought in the otherness of East Berlin.

We talked endlessly about what we were seeing, thinking, and planning.

"Could you possibly live here? It's dark and the air is full of coal. It feels lonely here, as if the people

are wandering around looking for something their government doesn't give them," I said, perhaps naively.

"They have no choice, living here. They used to be able to sneak back over to West Berlin, but now they're here. In the confines of this cosmopolitan. Sort of a faux cosmopolitan. Stuck."

We searched for what was walled off and why it was on the other side of a fortification, the physical partitions of stones, clay, and water; the words that guided the workers to craft these materials into walls. But they couldn't police our minds. And, on the way out to West Berlin that night, waiting for the subway, we each stuffed a few coins in our socks, an illegal act. They knew we were silly students and overlooked any attempt at us to be revolutionary or do any harm to their country in one day or evening. But we took home a connection. That was something no one could erect a wall around or ever tear down.



Berlin Wall photo provided by the author

As an author and peer specialist, Karen has traveled and presented extensively, including the United States, Europe, India and Japan and published in a variety of venues. Karen lives in Madison, Wisconsin, with her cat, Fanya, who is her peer specialist and she has been working in that field for over two decades, and is currently working at Orchestra X, a mental health agency in the Comprehensive Community Services program.



To Poland, with Love

Rosie Klepper,
Hinsdale, Illinois



How do you say goodbye? This question has come painfully to mind as it's been nearly a week since Anna told me she will be going back to Poland. It might be only for three months or it could be forever. How do you say goodbye to someone who has been inextricably woven into the fabric of your family over the past twenty years?

My mom, who had mobility issues, asked her doctor if he knew of anyone who could help us. He recommended a service and Anna came by with the owner of the service. My mom was 100 percent Polish and felt comfortable with Anna and she was happy Anna was Polish. She said Polish people were very honest and hard-working. The only problem as I saw it was that Anna's English wasn't stellar. And my mother's Polish wasn't that good, but together, they made it work.

At first, Anna just came three days a week, from ten to two. After she finished with my mom, Anna went downtown to work for the janitorial service that cleaned Northwestern University's law school, punching in at five p.m. and working until 1 a.m. Then, after working she would drive home and arrive at her place at two a.m.

When she first came, she was a pain. She told me, "I know how everything working." It was all I could do to not grit my teeth and tell her that assuredly not, she did not know, "how everything working." And since I was doing all the cooking for everyone, it was a challenge. For better or worse, she liked my cooking and between her and dad, it was like feeding a visiting army. I got a recipe for honey Dijon salad dressing and sometimes I was making a batch every other day. I wondered if they saw it not as a salad dressing, but rather as a fine beverage...

One could never accuse Anna of being a waif. She was a sturdy, peasant build. Not fat, but, like me, she would have survived a famine. Another

charming habit was she would sit in the kitchen and read the obituaries in the Tribune, all while wearing dad's old glasses. From behind the open paper I heard random comments, "Boy, 25, dead. Woman, 97 dead, Evergreen Park. Polish." I once asked her if she could read something else. The death, dead, and ages were getting me down. She looked at me blankly with clear blue eyes and said, "This is life." Somehow I thought there was more to life than savoring the obits, at least I hoped there was.

As my mom's health declined and as her mobility decreased, Anna began coming daily. It was at this point that I realized I needed Anna. We needed Anna. My family, in order to survive this onslaught, needed her. It was that simple. She became our savior. She would be conscientious turning my mom in bed and putting her in the chair with the Hoyer Lift so my mom wouldn't develop bedsores. My mom was bedridden for the last two and a half years of her life and the doctors were always impressed that she never had a bedsore. That is testimonial to Anna's level of caring and concern.

In the middle of this, Dad was diagnosed with Parkinson's and Alzheimer's. Anna would now come directly to our house at two a.m., after her job downtown. She would check on Ma and then go to bed. Dad was still able to get around and walk at this point. After Ma died in 2008, part of me thought it would get easier. I figured that since there would only be one person to take care of, that it would be simpler. Sadly, I was wrong.

One time Dad developed heel ulcers and he had to be put in a nursing home for a month. I made sure Anna saw him every day. She told me she heard the staff saying Dad wouldn't last a month. That got Anna mad. Anna changed the dressings and kept watch for me during the day and I would come at night. Dad survived the nursing home and thanks to Anna's dedication and skin grafts, he triumphed over the heel ulcers and came home.

One warm Saturday in May, Anna said there was a Polish Constitution Day Parade in Chicago. I let this announcement go in one ear and out the



other. Finally, Anna pointed at me and commanded, “You Polish. You go to parade.” I said there was no way to go—I don’t drive downtown. She said to me, “I drive. We take Father.” She explained she would drive, drop me off where I could see the parade and she would take Dad to a park near where she worked at night. After the parade all I had to do was call Anna and she would pick me up.

The parade swirled with red and white, the colors of the Polish flag. People waved Polish flags; hats had the word *Polska* (Poland) on them. I even saw a woman wearing a red T-shirt that said “You bet your sweet *dupa* (derrière) I’m Polish!” Their sense of Polish pride and joy was contagious. One couple in Polish highland dress polkaed down the parade route to the strains of a polka band. The woman wore a full skirt, white shirt and black vest with brightly colored embroidery. The man had on a white shirt, white pants, a dark vest and a brimmed hat with braided trim.

Growing up, I was never really proud of my Polish heritage. Sure I loved my Polish grandparents and ate my fill of pierogies, kapusta and kielbasa, but the Polish were the brunt of many jokes and I was glad my last name was German, even though that wasn’t much better. I could hide behind my German name and inwardly cringe when I heard Polish jokes during recess. When Pope John Paul II became pope, I was afraid people would make fun of him because he was Polish. Little did I know he would become a most-beloved pope the world over.

By the time Anna returned, I was feeling more charitable toward my Polish roots. The exuberant pride I saw during that parade began to rub off on me.

How do you begin to thank someone who helped you care for your parents with so much diligence and tender care? Anna was doing tough, sacred work. I wouldn’t have made it without her, I am certain.

After Dad died in 2011, Anna came every few weeks and we cleaned the house. It was a win-win. I could still see Anna and she continued to be a great help to me. Every time she came it was a

party. I would get two chocolate frosted cake doughnuts, crusted with multi-colored sprinkles and I cooked lunch. I looked forward to each visit. When I got my beagle, Zoe, they became fast friends. Zoe got the fallen sprinkles off of Anna’s doughnut in her bowl and Anna always remembered to wash Zoe’s blankets every time she came. She spoke to her in Polish as she gently petted her and would say, “No more I love you.” when it was time to stop their visit.

It is April 17, 2023, 9:15 AM CT. By my calculations, Anna arrived in her village of Kazimierz Dolny, a place she hasn’t seen in years. She left thirty-three years ago and hadn’t been back since. I only hope she is happy with what she sees. She will get to see friends and relatives and although she called her friends while she was here, now she will be able to see them and that will be glorious. She will return to her wooden home that she and her husband built after they married years ago. I’m sure one sadness will be the fact that Anna’s husband, as Anna said “go for heaven” when he was only fifty-four in the US. There will be some memories to confront, but with her stoic countenance this could be difficult to perceive.

I last saw Anna on Friday, April 14, two days before she left. She wanted to come wash windows. Polish people have a thing about clean windows. She wanted to do this for me. Sure, I said. Even though I was working from home, we enjoyed a festive lunch and savored our time together. I dropped her off at her son’s house; we hugged in the car. I told her I would call her tomorrow. She wasn’t leaving until Sunday, the sixteenth. We chatted on Saturday and Sunday and each time before we hung up I told her I loved her and she said, “I love you so much, Rosie.” It was hard to let go.

How do you say goodbye? You do the best you can and send her off to Poland, with love.

Rosie Klepper is a writer and editor, as well as a proud member of WWA. Based in Hinsdale, Illinois, her work has appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, *Chicago Sun-Times* and on NPR.



Valentine's Day 1953

Russ Hanson, Cushing

"Remember, bring a valentine for each of your classmates," said Miss Jorgensen, our teacher for grades one through four at the two-room school in Wolf Creek, circa 1953. I was in the second grade, along with Melvin, Joyce, and Susan.

"And, girls, don't forget," she added, "Valentine's Day is girls-bring-the-lunch day. Pack an extra sandwich to share with a boy. We'll draw names to decide the pairs."

At home, I opened my prized twenty-five-cent packet of fifteen valentines, meticulously sorting through them. Each card had to fit its recipient. No mushy ones for the boys—Melvin would never let me hear the end of it. But Susan and Joyce? They deserved the mushiest. For Susan, I chose one that said, "My heart falls for you," hoping she'd catch my not-so-subtle drift.

Valentine's Day arrived, and with it, the moment of truth: the lunch-pair draw. By some miraculous stroke of fate—or maybe teacher's intervention—I ended up with Susan.

"I hope you like tuna salad sandwiches," she said sweetly as we settled in at her desk for lunch.

I did not. I hated tuna. And mayonnaise. Together, they were an unholy union of flavors I would normally reject with every fiber of my being. But this was Susan.

"I don't have them very often," I said, crafting my lie carefully to sound like polite enthusiasm.

Then I ate both halves of that sandwich, forcing down every bite with a smile that could have won an acting award. Big gulps of water helped, though they did little to wash away the lingering taste of sacrifice.

After lunch, we exchanged valentines. I waited until I got home to open mine from Susan, where I could savor the moment in private. Her card was perfect: mushy, adorned with neat second-grade handwriting, and signed with four bold X's and the words, "I love you."

I was ecstatic. For about five minutes.

Then reality set in. If my brothers found it,

they'd torment me into eternity. I had no choice. Under the cover of evening, I burned the card in the woodstove, watching its romantic embers rise and vanish.

I wondered as I poked the ashes: what kind of person eats tuna salad with a smile and burns a valentine that says "I love you"?

A second grader in love, that's who.

Russ Hanson is a member of NWRW which meets the second Friday of each month for noon lunch at the Pour House in Siren, Wisconsin. The group has 20 members and begins its 58th year in 2025.

Home of Record

Yvette Viets Flaten, Colfax

People who travel a lot will often signal another fellow-stater they encounter when far from home. For example, a semi driver in Athens, Georgia, flashed his headlights and waved, seeing our Wisconsin plates and a Bloomer dealership tag. He was driving for Marten Transport, out of Mondovi, which made us near-neighbors. A shopper in Golden, Colorado, called out "Hey, Bucky!" to my husband and gave a thumbs up seeing the distinctive red W on his cap. From Seattle to Santa Fe, we've had strangers start up Packer conversations the minute they see our America's Dairyland tags.

It was the same overseas. During my father's long military career, lasting through World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, we occasionally met other service members from Wisconsin. There was usually the acknowledgement of a bond of sorts and, more often than not, a dinner invitation. Wisconsin was always my father's official Home of Record, whether we were stationed in North Dakota or France, Nevada or Spain. Wisconsin was home, even if years passed before we could return on furlough for a two- or three-week hiatus, to reconnect with the roots of hometown and family.

When I chose a college, it was "back home" at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. There, I studied Spanish and history, and in the latter's



coursework, I began to understand what was so special about Wisconsin. The state is an innovator, (for example, supercomputing, and the county road network, that helped farmers transport their products to market), a leader in social programs, (first state to provide Worker's Compensation), an incubator of scientific and medical discoveries (vaccines, vitamins, surgical procedures and treatments, to scratch only the surface).

I was fascinated by the "Wisconsin Idea," the concept that education should impact and improve not only the lives of individuals, but that it should also guide the state in governing, and in its role in the world at large. It is a progressive social philosophy that is outward looking, inclusive, and dynamic, seeking to enhance the lives of its citizens and beyond. It's part of what makes Wisconsin special.

It goes hand in hand, it seems to me, with the state's motto: Forward.

To me, Forward speaks of innovation, a problem tackled and solved, betterment, and improvement. It does not mean going backward, or even staying put, treading water. Always moving forward. Ahead. Even if it requires swimming upstream, against an adverse current. It is a simple yet powerful imperative, emblazoned on the state flag for the whole world to take note.

Wisconsin's role in the larger world is echoed in our own family's history. My mother was an English teenager during the days of Germany's U-Boat blockade in World War II, when Hitler was trying to starve England into surrender. She remembered her family getting a cheese ration from US food supplies that managed to get past the enemy submarines hunting in the Atlantic. Stamped on the rind of their portion of cheese were the letters WISC. Nothing more. They puzzled and puzzled over what it could mean.

In 1944 she met a Yank who was, it turned out, from that very same Wisconsin. Like many wartime romances, it was, somehow, just meant to be. They eventually married, traveled, and in the end, retired to his hometown in Colfax, Dunn County.

I, too, have stayed in the state since graduation, where I met and married my husband and raised a family. Our son and daughter have both gone on to study in Wisconsin's fine University system and make their way into the world as thinking, productive citizens, fulfilling, even in a small way, the Wisconsin Idea as it was envisioned. Wisconsin was always my father's Home of Record in my youth, and now it is mine. This Forward-facing, innovative, beautiful state. My Home of Record. Now and forever.

Yvette Viets Flaten, Colfax, WI, likes to rise early and watch the birds at the feeders while she waits for her tea to brew. Then she writes until the house wakes up.

All the Feelings All at Once

Christy Wopat, Holmen

I had a student.

This particular student had my heart, like so many of them do. He'd been totally ostracized by his peers, mostly because he was unique and didn't want to change. And when he wouldn't change, students (and teachers alike) pushed back, and he became the "weird one."

When he came to my fourth-grade class that year, he was sullen and quiet and closed off. He'd learned that being himself meant being mocked, and so he turned inward.

I remember so clearly the first time I saw him smile. It was math class and our first unit of the year is a review on place value. I don't exactly know why, but I always did this thing where I would try to show them how when you moved from one place to the next, the number gets ten times bigger. And so I'd start with my feet together and try to show that I was getting bigger as I hopped to the next place. This time I was really trying to show off, so I bent at the knees and really tried to hop, which I'm sure you can imagine is a real treat to see.

I yelled something about how I was turning into the Pixar lamp (you know, the one from the beginning of the movies) and he couldn't stop himself: he smiled.



I never pushed with kids. I'd learned quickly in my career that it didn't do any good, and would just frustrate everyone. If a student wanted to be quiet, they could be. The only real way to get a kid to be themselves was to create a community in the classroom where everyone felt safe.

As you can imagine, that takes time. And a heck of a lot of work.

One day, I saw him writing about a celebrity that he was low-key obsessed with. He'd gotten his hands on the singer's autobiography and I was a little worried because this particular celeb's life was kind of a lot for a fourth-grade brain. I made note of it, printed a picture of the singer, and taped it inside his assignment notebook so he'd see it when he opened it the next day.

Later that week, I got back from lunch and there was a sticky-note on my desk that said, "What's your favorite (of this artist) song?"

That afternoon, I added one of the artist's songs to my worktime playlist. The way this kid's face lit up when it started playing—if I could bottle that feeling and sell it, I would be a millionaire. I told the class that I loved this song and that I super loved the artist.

By the end of that month, the class was singing songs by this artist (the appropriate ones I could find!), and that was cool—but what was better was this kid had a group of friends. He sat up straight and participated in every lesson.

At the first parent-teacher conferences of the year, his mom sat down and began to cry. "I don't know what it is that you're doing, but you have no idea what a difference this is making. He's turning into himself again!"

By the end of the year, he was his goofy, silly, authentic self—running around the playground without a care in the world.

This week, his mom reached out to me via social media, because she wanted to give me an update on him (twelve-ish years later). He has a great job, a sweet girlfriend, he still loves that singer, and he calls his mom every week.

I don't know if I'll be able to explain the tornado of emotions that have hit me along with

this. First, it doesn't always turn out like this. You should know that. But, it often does. And I cannot overstate how incredible it is to be a part of someone's life in this important way. I've been so fortunate to be trusted, to be let in.

Second, I sometimes can't believe that I walked away from it. From the place that I knew I was making a difference. Don't get me wrong; I know I had to, for myself and for my family. But it hurts in the deepest way.

It has been the greatest honor of my life to have parents confide in me. To be a part of helping a student find their way. I don't take it lightly. And that is probably why I burnt out, right? Because I was all in. I just can't do it any other way.

People often ask about my new job—do I love it?

My nervous system does, for the most part. I love meeting with student teachers and I love the communication role. It's a part of me that I've wanted to grow, and it enables me to do that. I'm fortunate to work in a place where everyone seems to genuinely care about education.

Like anywhere, there are coworker issues and red tape and politics. I still feel like I'm playing house or something. And I have a TON of what I would loosely call survivor's guilt. I hear from my friends who are still in the "trenches" and they are in agony. It's tough out there, and now I feel like I've abandoned everyone which made it even worse for them.

In other words, just as you've likely come to expect from me, my feelings never settle and they are all over the place. Grateful, sad, hurt, joyful, apprehensive.

All the feelings.

All at once.

Christy Wopat is the author of three books: the award-winning memoir, *Almost a Mother*, a picture book, *Always Ours*, and *After All: Pregnancy After Loss*. Her personal essays have been featured in *Still Standing* magazine, *The Educator's Room*, and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, among others. Find her at www.christywopat.com



Artificial Intelligence (AI) Replaces Psychiatrists-Pity the Poor Computer

Judith Steininger, Milwaukee

Science fiction intrigues us because the stories often prove partly if not completely true. The master craftsman Isaac Asimov (1920-1992) wrote an astonishing 500 books and hundreds of articles after a career as a PhD biochemistry professor at Boston University. He won four Hugo Awards and the Nebula Award.

One particular short story is a cautionary read about computers, those in the mental health profession and the lay community interested in solving the current mental health crises. Covid, homelessness, wars, refugees, and climate change are among factors leading to this crisis. Unfortunately, the number of mental health professionals has declined as demand has risen. The toll on practitioners is ghastly-suicides being one indicator.

Could a computer be the solution? Apps are already used by some overstretched psychiatrists and psychologists. For patients, they are less expensive and available at a wide range of times and places.

Currently available apps can conduct decision making, problem solving and learning functions like a human mind. Given the advances in Natural Language Processing (NLP), a patient might even feel better talking to a machine than a person-or so these optimistic theories go.

Here's one more definition before turning to Asimov: The Point of Singularity. A singularity in computers would occur when their programs become so advanced that AI surpasses human intelligence and develops cognitive ability, enabling them to become our overlords. The term is often credited to mathematician John von Neumann in 1958.

Asimov wrote "All the Troubles of the World" in 1958. His ideas are scary but also lend cold comfort to mental health professionals.

In this story, humans are subject to a massive

computer named Multivac. Multivac knows everything about every person even what the person might be planning before the person realizes he/she is planning it. Multivac provides daily printouts regarding the activity of billions of human interactions to enforcers known as the Central Board of Corrections (CBC) chaired by Bernard Gulliman.

People submit to Multivac because by "surrendering their privacy" they are given, "peace, prosperity and safety." Here's how. "Within reach of every human being was a Multivac station with circuits into which he could freely enter his own problems and questions without control or hindrance, and...in a matter of minutes, he could receive answers. The answers might not always be certain but they were the best available and every questioner knew the answers to be the best available and had faith in it."

Asimov creates the Manners family; Joseph and Elizabeth, dad and mom; Michael and Ben, the two sons, Ben being the youngest. The Manners live in Baltimore and, like everyone else, exist under the sway of Multivac housed in Washington DC. Sixteen-year-old Ben will soon go through his rite of passage gaining the adult privilege of going to any branch of Multivac and spilling his guts along with five million others at any given second.

Since Multivac knows everything even before the person who will carry out the act, the CBC has become alarmed about Joseph Manners' printout and arrest him. He claims he has done nothing nor thought about doing something. Why is he arrested? The glib answer is that Joseph is lying and about to be exposed by Multivac. After all, Multivac is the smartest thing on earth and knows the truth about Joseph.

Asimov, proposes something different. Through printouts the CBC thinks Joseph Manners, with Ben as an accomplice, is trying to assassinate Multivac. Wrong; actually, Multivac has selected the Manners family unbeknownst to them, to "kill" It. Gulliman's assistant argues "we have reached the end of the road because Multivac is too good. Multivac has grown so complicated its reactions



are no longer those of a machine, but those of a living thing.”

Think of what we in real life ask of our mental health professionals and what they ask of themselves. The CBC learns “We have been loading humanity’s trouble on Multivac, on this living thing. We’ve asked it to care for us...We’ve asked it to take all our secrets into itself; we’ve asked it to absorb our evil and guard us against it. Now, we are planning to load the burden of human disease on Multivac, too. Multivac bears all the troubles of the world on its shoulders and it is tired.”

Gulliman and his assistant rush to the nearby terminal to ask Multivac a question it has never been asked. “Multivac, what do you yourself want more than anything else?” The totally unexpected answer clicks out. “I want to die.”

Our current assumptions are the computer will continue to advance into a superior human being. Asimov suggests when the computer becomes fully human, it will behave like a regular human with the same limitations.

Think about that; if a machine cannot bear all the troubles of the world, no wonder mental health caregivers are suffering. Everyone should remember these professionals are humans. That includes the professionals’ obligation to recognize they are not all powerful or machinelike and need to be kind to one another while watching for troubling signs in a colleague.

Who knows yet if AI will reign superiorly over humans or, as Asimov suggests, it might start to act just like us and get sad, depressed, overstressed and try to annihilate itself.

To be human is extremely difficult. Computers beware.

Judith Steininger is a Professor Emeritus of Milwaukee School of Engineering. She has published numerous articles and won four writing awards. She is a member of the Milwaukee Press Club and lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.



Rotten Potatoes, Santa Berries, and an Exhausting Happiness: Volunteering at the Food Pantry Serving Waukesha County

Mary Beth Danielson, Waukesha

Do you have memories like this? You’re in high school. It isn’t awesome but you have some friends to eat lunch with. No one wants to date you but there’s this guy who sometimes steals your hat when you ride the bus home. Or that girl who teases you about how badly you spell. You’re not a star but you belong to a few nerdy clubs because you’ve discovered it’s fun to work with other kids to accomplish things that makes a difference.

This is what I feel every Monday morning when I volunteer at the Waukesha Food Pantry. I’ve been doing this for two years and I still get confused by what to do with thawing sauces or guavas (my grandparents all came from Sweden, how would I know?) or frozen steaks which are sort of freezer burned but if it was in my kitchen I could cook that sucker into beef ambrosia. (I throw it away. Food Pantry standards are to toss items one wouldn’t buy.)

Volunteering at the food pantry is rewarding and I have as much fun as I did all those years ago in the full-twerp afterschool clubs I belonged to.

This is how it works and I assume most food pantries have similar systems. First, grocery stores contract with administrators as to when the pantry



vans will take away their overstocked or close-to-expiration items. Vans or truck pick up donations every morning and by midmorning they're returning to drop off what they've collected so far. Often they go back out for a second run. All the drivers are retired guys who go out in twos. I think they enjoy the work and camaraderie. They kid each other when they are back and it's fun to laugh at their lame jokes.

Donations are unloaded into the receiving area of the warehouse. Canned and boxed foods go to one area, dairy to the coolers, breads to another area. Each of these areas has regular volunteers who go through everything. The three to four people working in my area will, in under three hours, sort six to twelve stacked pallets of produce, meats, and other fresh foods. We look for spoiled food, expired dates, foods infused or marinated with alcohol, and foods that are non-nutritious. Seltzer waters and candy are not distributed to folks trying to feed themselves and their families. Sorted foods are stored in color-coded crates that are stacked in coolers, in the huge walk-in freezer, or on shelves.

Rejected foods are distributed to farmers for animals or compost. All the useable food is weighed so the donating business can use that info for their records and taxes.

There's another area where volunteers pack boxes for individuals who can't shop in person. The food pantry generally delivers these groceries to these folks. Care is taken to include or exclude foods based on their health needs.

A bunch of volunteers work the open-shopping hours. Some haul foods to the store area where it's neatly arranged on open shelves or in the cooler or freezer. They have installed a mirror in the hallway so the busy volunteers will stop bumping into each other.

Clients who enroll for the food pantry are given color-coded tickets that indicate how many meats, bags of produce, dairy products, and other necessities they are entitled for the amount of people in their family. Clients shop with carts to choose what they want from the stocked shelves.

Volunteers are on hand to help them.

The food pantry operates as a fairly straightforward process. Food is picked up and delivered to the warehouse and within that day or two most of it goes back out in the shopping bags of people with mouths to feed.

There are a number of wonderful and welcoming paid employees, but most of us are volunteers. Get this: Two hundred work shifts per week are filled by 180 volunteers—and 80 percent of us are retirees in our 60s, 70s, 80s and worse. Volunteers are folks who can tell you where they were when the Beatles landed, when Kennedy was shot, and they can hum Captain Kangaroo's theme song. Their shoes are supportive, eyes variously bleary, and all would like to point out there is nothing essential about an essential tremor.

We have adventures.

- A few months ago an old guy tripped and fell. I watched in distress while thinking to myself that maybe it was time for him to slow down. Two weeks later I tripped over a pallet and fell. That guy helped me get back up. I've witnessed two falls in my entire two years – and I was half of them.
- I volunteer with a lovely older (than me) woman every other week. A few weeks ago she arrived a bit late because she'd just come from some other volunteer gig. After our extra-long shift (lots of donations that day) she said she was going home to make a company lunch for a half dozen relatives visiting from out of town. *Lord of the Rings* is fun to watch but if you really want to see deep-rooted determination, follow that lady.
- There are way too many Jims and Bobs in our generation. If you address any gray-haired male at the food pantry as JimBob, you are likely half right.
- Strawberries develop white mold that looks like a beard. These are called Santa berries.



- If you want to test your dexterity, spill a pint of blueberries on a concrete floor and then try to sweep/pick them all back up before you or anyone else slips.
- I am proud to claim that I have, from time to time, bagged hundreds upon hundreds of apples, cucumbers, or plums.
- Have you ever mindlessly stuck your hand into a bag of rotten potatoes? And then admired the chorus of “Eh-Yew!” of your coworkers as the pungent stink spreads?
- If your hair falls in your eyes, a morning’s accumulation of produce juice on your plastic gloves will hold bangs back better than hair mousse. Ask me how I know.
- When you walk out the door after three hours standing on a concrete floor slinging boxes and crates, sticking your hands into God-knows-what, kicking cartons flat to be recycled, and more – you will walk out the side door saying goodbye to your pals while part of you feels sorry to go.

We are present, we are moving, we are talking, making jokes, and asking questions of each other. We are doing our best to give ourselves into our community and in the process, getting back camaraderie and purpose. Plus, once you get home you can take a nap.

Danielson and her husband live in Waukesha, WI. She’s written all her life in addition to having actual jobs and raising an actual family. You can read her fiction at substack.com/@marybethdanielsonstories plus she posts essays and observations at her website marybethdanielson.com/; you are warmly welcome to read her at these sites because writers need readers like petunias need sunshine. It’s bloomin’ necessary.

Critique Group participants speak

WWA Critique groups are going strong into their third year. Three sessions have been offered in different genres.

Have you considered participating? Here are a few comments from the groupies!

Are you foolish, reckless or stupid to hand over unfinished work to a small group of complete strangers? None of the above. This program was one of the smartest things I've done for my writing career. As a proud survivor of three consecutive critique group sessions, I can say that nothing has done more to help me grow as a writer than to share 10 pages every two weeks with a small group of strangers-turned-friends. Did they out me for my comma issues, my wonky word choices and my weird POV lapses? Yes. All things that were invisible to me, but needed to be fixed. But they also pushed me to dig deeper, take some risks and try new things. Those friends also shared with me what surprised them and what delighted them. They talked to me about who I am as a writer and what they saw across my body of work. That set me apart from other writers. That's precious stuff you won't get from your family or the neighbor down the road who reads a lot. Critical stuff helping you grow in your own way, which is one of the bravest things you can do. -Alissa Kiedrowski

First of all, don't be afraid. I held off joining a critique group for several years because I felt uncomfortable and apprehensive exposing my writing to other writers. But the WWA critique groups are not at all intimidating. You will find the most supportive environment. Laurie is a superb leader, setting ground rules that enable everyone to get the most out of their experience. What I particularly appreciated was the variety of genres that were represented. You might think you wouldn't learn much from YA or memoir if you are writing literary fiction, but trust me, you will!

During the weeks we met (January – March), I was able to work on the first few chapters of my second novel, *Finding Isobel*. With renewed confidence, I finished writing the novel by the end of the year. It was published in March of 2024 and has already won a few prizes as well as some flattering reviews. - Mary Behan



More Critters Speak

The WWA Critique groups are fairly fantastic. It's an opportunity to talk in-depth about writing with other writers. The first fiction writing I ever shared was at last year's WWA critique group. I learned that I needed the constructive criticism and that I spent more time revising and polishing my pieces each week. I emerged a better writer than when I started. And I got the opportunity to read and critique the writing of seven other writers, which in itself was incredible. Learning why they made certain creative choices was valuable. The instructors are professionals, providing helpful insights and encouragement. If you're on the fence about it, just do it. You won't regret it. -Pat Scheckel

Writers are their own worst enemy, however attending Zoom critique sessions can erase the fear of not writing well. My past writing genre is non-fiction. I wanted to take on the challenge of writing fiction. Critiques, from Laurie Scheer and classmates, show me I'm capable of writing a romance novel, provide motivation to never give up, and instills a belief in myself. The ultimate reward is hearing the words, "Excellent writing. I want to read more."

\$150 per three-month session is money well-spent. Each session boosts my writing skills. In addition, I've been gifted with new writer friends. Writers Need Writers -Rose Bingham

I am currently enrolled in my fourth poetry workshop offered by WWA. I love the way they're set up, meeting twice a month for three months. I enjoy the teaching styles of all three workshop leaders: Marilyn Taylor, Ronnie Hess, and Peggy Rozga.

All three of these instructors offer valuable resources and encourage participation from everyone. Perhaps the biggest bonus for me is getting to read what other poets bring to the group and to listen to the exchange of comments after each reading.

The world of poetry expands for me with every class. -Marjorie Pagel

A year ago I was part of a fiction/nonfiction critique workshop that enabled me to get my short stories in front of six other writers, including instructor Laurie Scheer. Over the years, I have been a part of many critique groups, both in-person and virtual. While I prefer in-person groups, virtual groups like the WWA critique series provided me a chance to have my work read and evaluated by writers from all over the state until I found a local group that meets in a local coffee shop. One of the biggest takeaways from the WWA experience was the chance to meeting six other writers for the first time and develop a continuing friendship with many of them. That friendship continues today. Another takeaway was the honest and supportive critiques offered by Laurie Scheer. She has a long history of helping writers become the best version of themselves. I appreciated her insights. Overall, the classes were well organized, well attended, and Laurie did a great job keeping everyone on task. We were also encouraged to share our publication successes with the rest of the group, which was nice! -Jim Landwehr

If you're writing a novel, whether it's your first or sixth, consider signing up for Novel Writing with Lisa Lickel offered by Wisconsin Writers Association. You owe it to yourself to take advantage of Lisa's sage advice and the critiques of the other group members. I've signed up twice and received excellent comments from diverse writers in many genres. Those comments helped me see the gaps in my story and showed me ways to fill those gaps. Lisa keeps the group on track and is careful that each writer gets the best feedback possible and everyone stays on task. Whether you're a beginner working your way through your first edit or an old hand pounding out the next book in your series, you won't go wrong taking Novel Writing with Lisa Lickel. -Barbara Malcolm



Begin the Beguine

Christine Hawkinson, Prairie du Sac

The younger man returned to the living room for the wheeled cart that held the legs and bench and spoke his first and only words to me: “That’s an amazing piano.”

An hour earlier, I had run my hands over the keys I’d never learned to play and stroked the veneer of the instrument that had represented the heart of our home for sixty years. Mom’s beloved Steinway.

With the walls cleared of her favorite artwork and bookcases emptied, the room echoed as I walked across the hardwood floors our friend had installed with painstaking care. The unoccupied teal love seats, facing each other and perpendicular to the bow window, offered no hint of the love and conversation that had always filled the space. From its corner, the silenced piano punctuated the stillness of the cool, gray October morning. It was a relief when the white truck from Farley’s House of Pianos backed over the golden leaves on the driveway.

The two men laid mats on the floor and

secured the instrument’s lid before strapping a protective cover over the piano. I took photos as they removed one leg then maneuvered my mother’s treasure onto its side, landing it smoothly on a padded dolly where they removed the other two legs. They bound the piano to the dolly with more straps, then ran a final one around their bodies lest the balance be thrown off. I held my breath as they steered the last symbol of life through the front door of my childhood home and onto the porch. Down one ramp to the driveway. Up another into the truck.

At 5 feet, 10 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches long, Mom’s piano is the largest of Steinway’s “small grands,” sometimes called a “living room grand” or a “miniature grand.” The Steinway Model O was the first to have the square-bottom legs that all Steinway grands have today.

Steinway & Sons is known for high standards and quality workmanship. And because they stopped making the Model O from 1924 until 2006, her 1909 model is a more desirable, historical piano than Mom ever acknowledged. Practicality prompted her to find someone to rebuild hers in the 1990s. She knew it was the only Steinway she’d ever own, and she only wanted to own a Steinway.

The young man was right. It is an amazing piano—but for reasons beyond what piano experts cite.

As a young child, Mom enjoyed spending time





at her grandmother's home where her uncle played the piano for the relatives who'd gathered. She started lessons as a third grader, and after demonstrating her commitment, the family agreed to move the piano across town to her parents' home. A black-and-white photo from their album shows a teenage girl with a familiar smile seated at that upright piano in 1950. The teenager who rode a bus ten miles to Peoria to further her piano studies. The teenager who would play Chopin, Bach, Haydn, and Mendelssohn at her senior recital.

After earning her teaching degree from St. Louis University in 1958, Mom stayed in the city and lived at a home for businesswomen called Queen's Daughters. Instead of buying a car, she took two buses to her job in nearby Jennings, MO, so she could purchase her Steinway from the original owner. She paid a man to drive it 150 miles to her parents' house in Pekin, Illinois—in a pickup truck. In 1963 it was moved to my parents' first house. Two moves later it was home for the next 52 years.

I was just two years old when the piano first arrived, so I don't recall a time it wasn't in our home. I loved to watch Mom's hands move quickly over the keyboard, striking chords I felt deep in my chest or producing light melodies that prompted me to twirl around the living room.

But my sporadic attempts to learn to play were futile as I found counting time to be difficult and adding my left hand impossible. Hard as I tried, the piano never loved me the way it loved Mom. My lack of skill—and lack of desire—seemed beyond my control. And she was wise enough to know it was beyond hers.

As I worked through my teenage angst by reading or writing in my bedroom, the sound of Mom practicing provided a steady stream of reassurance that all would be well. When she finished, she'd walk away humming, ready to take on the next task of running our household.

Mom played for sixty weddings over twenty-five years, and perhaps as many funerals. She gave piano lessons. She accompanied students for

concerts, musicals, and competitions. Music was both her sustenance and her gift—to her church, her community, and special friends.

She also inspired her nine grandchildren to play an instrument, some more than one. Eight of them took piano lessons. My daughters never had to be reminded to take their piano books to Grandma's house. They formed a special bond with their grandmother as she listened to them practice their latest assignments or gave them an impromptu lesson. And we were lucky to live close enough that she could attend their recitals.

For her eighty-seventh birthday, I take Mom to see a father-and-son piano duo perform Gershwin music. As we settle into our seats she squints at the stage as I've seen her do before. She leans over to whisper in my ear, "It's a Steinway."

Four months later, on a beautiful June day, Mom is hospitalized with heart failure. When she goes home, my brothers and I take turns staying with her. We spend our evenings sitting on the front porch, playing Scrabble, or streaming the music of Chopin or Beethoven.

Eighteen days before she passes, I am standing on the driveway, on the phone with my husband, when I hear music. Mom is playing the piano. I hurry inside to record her playing Leonard Cohen's "Hallelujah."

Without looking up, she unfolds several pages of sheet music she has taped together, spreads it across the music desk, and begins playing. It is a lively piece I don't recall but like immediately. I feel the chords deep in my chest as sound fills the house and pours out the open windows.

The song is about a dance called the beguine, she explains later, as I search for it on Apple Music. Cole Porter wrote the song in 1935, and it was featured in the movie Jubilee. I find a couple renditions, but they have a slower, sadder tempo, and I wonder if Mom jazzed it up on her own.

My recording of Mom playing "Begin the Beguine" becomes my anthem and gives me strength in the weeks that follow.

In the winter after her passing, I search for some easy-listening music from the 1960s to play in the background while I work. The algorithm suggests Johnny Mathis. I recognize the album cover from my childhood and hit play. Twenty minutes later a melody catches my attention. It's "Begin the Beguine." In the same flowing, lively tempo Mom played.

I play it again and watch the lyrics scroll across the screen of my phone. Someone is recollecting special nights dancing the beguine with their love under the stars. Years later, the music that begins the dance triggers wonderful memories. Halfway through the song the memories turn to missed opportunities and lost love. But the tune changes key for the last verse. With renewed energy, the music and lyrics celebrate love and offer hope.

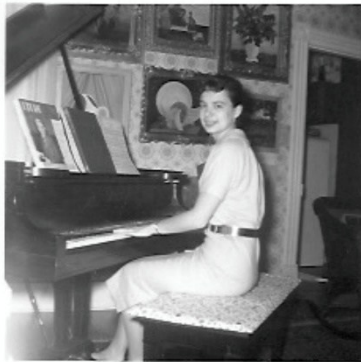
* * *

Two months before Farley's white truck arrived, on her last day in her grandparents' home, my daughter organized a century's worth of sheet music, selecting pieces to share with family and friends. Then she played her favorite songs one last time in Grandma's living room.

She closed the farewell concert with "Gabrielle's Theme" by Dr. Adam Dachman—the song she played at every family gathering for the last twenty years.

I imagine it will be the first song she plays when the Steinway arrives at her own home someday.

And we'll begin the beguine.



Christine Hawkinson is the author of "50 Years in the Bleachers—What Modern Sports Parents Can Learn from a Title IX Pioneer." She is a communications writer for the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a member of the Wisconsin Writers Association, and as a resident of Prairie du Sac, spends as much time as possible on the Great Sauk State Trail.

Poetry

Patient

Stick-to-itiveness

A broken, weathered
threshold

And heroic strides

James Salimes resides in Edgerton, WI. For two decades he has served as Chaplain, Spiritual Counselor, and Pastor. For more information:

www.jellisblaise.com



City Toads

Loud calls drew me near
and from congested looks of it,
it was the only water hole
anywhere in the city—
where last rainy night
toads from blocks around
came out of hiding,
leapt over sidewalks
and under streetlights,
across roads and through alleys,
past mansions and neighborhood duplexes
to congregate in this ephemeral pond
where they trilled to impress
and eagerly secured mates
before the lifeblood disappeared.

Christel Maass, who lives in Fox Point on the northern edge of Milwaukee County, enjoys hiking and frequently writes about nature. A member of the Wisconsin Fellowship of Poets, her poems appear in numerous publications.

Editor's note:
Creative Wisconsin's poetry column
is curated by Rebecca Swanson.

Pan the Tiny

Above the green, in sunny blue,
Pure white billows into dreams.
Along the path runs tiny Pan.
There trail behind ferocious screams.

He is a thing sublime,
And one we all once knew,
This shrill spendthrift of time,
Piping joy, as children do.

Patrick Tibbits, a WWA member from Janesville, is a survivor of a 1960s adolescence and the acquisition of three college degrees. He has discharge certificates from two additional institutions.

Mobius Strip

Jackie Langentieg

No end to space and time,
twisting past each other
without touching.

What about a reverse magnet?
Remember the little dogs
one white and one black—

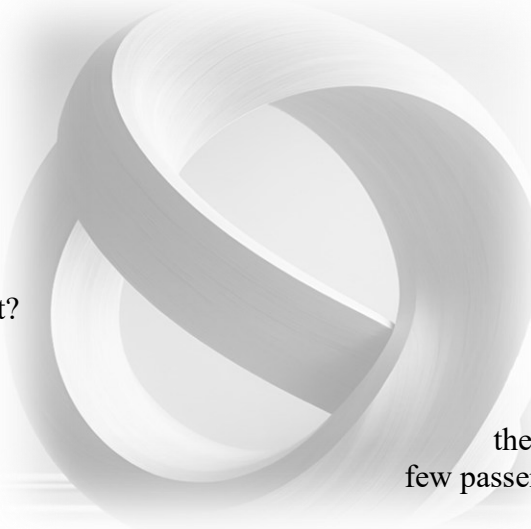
One would chase the other
without clicking together
unless bottom to bottom.

Uniqueness in simplicity,
What about the equators
no beginning or ending

is that, too, a kind of mobius?
Or a Jesus flask of wine,
never empty, self-fulfilling

like life until it is broken,
the thread severed, death
ending mobius of humanity.

An apt allegory
for losing control
fear and anxiety.



Reading the Snow

Jackie Langentieg

My world is clear and cold
the silence of snowy evenings—
few passersby as I walk to the mailbox.

Yet a world of activity below
delicately in the snow, creatures signing
the pristine surface of a soft fall of flakes.

The three-toed print of a horned owl checking
for scraps of anything to feed on; the almost
human footprint of the white rabbit,

bird scratches are like writing poems, paw prints,
finger painting like children in kindergarten. No
boot treads or stiletto heel prints yet, but dawn

approaches and with it blowers will roar, shovels
will scrape and voices will greet one another
on their way to their day. I like it now—

the only person left in the world—reading
nature's essays in the moonlight.

Jackie is from Verona, WI and has written six books of poetry and a memoir. Her work has won a Jade Ring and a Pushcart nomination and her poems have appeared in many journals.

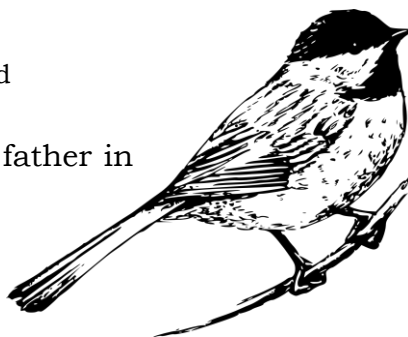
Author note: In this poem, mobius strip is used as an example of infinity. There is no ending, it is continuous, may be thought of a loss of control in certain aspects. It is never ending, continual return of action or thought.



His Trailing Edge

Jason Zevenbergen, New Richmond

She remembered running to her father in
the field:
how they followed a butterfly,
arms outstretched,
how they collapsed
and giggled
at the setting sun,
how she stole his cap, teased and ran.
She thought of him
as she twisted her fingers
in her hair, watching
the sparrow grip the lip
of the birdbath with its feet,
concentrating each moment on its steps,
on its flight, and she reached her arms,
smiling at the thought of the breeze
fluttering her pajamas and her hair,
and imagined his ghost holding her hand
as she leapt into the air and laughed.



soft lines

Hannah Neece, NW Wisconsin

did you hear about the -
yes, and the -
yes, that too.
in the morning, it is winter in my kitchen.
the window isn't sealed well and
the outside air freezes in the gaps.
i run my hand along the edges,
tracing frozen granite with
the rhythm of my warming touch.
my fingers catch a jagged splinter
birthed from the split overnight.
alive, it greets my blood.
somewhere nearby, a chickadee sings,
because she can,
because she can.

Jason taught high school English for over twenty years in Western New York. He currently lives near New Richmond, WI. Jason's work has been published in *The Arrow: A Journal of Wakeful Society, Culture & Politics*, *Sisyphus*, and *English Journal*.

Hannah Neece is a writer living in Northeast Wisconsin. She is passionate about community care and helping others connect to their human experience through the lens of prose and poetry. You can learn more about her at hannahnece.com.



Writing Encouragement

My Imperfect Perfect: Ima Gina Tion

Deborah Wenzler Farris, Milwaukee

The branches of the trees outside the window behind the piano have assembled themselves in the wind to look like a begging dog, all wobbly and shaking while jumping up and down for a treat. Then just as quickly, as if I say, “No, Fannie, not now,” they are still.

When I take my glasses off they become just tree branches filled with leaves. And I wonder then, “How is it that I see better without glasses?” True, they are readers but I realize, maybe the eyes of my imagination can see better through eyes that are not perfect—when the ordinary reality around me is more forgiving. Edges are blurred, tones softened, making the rooms, maybe not abstract, but a tinge surreal—as if the Great Artist intentionally created a dreamlike state for me to step into this morning. A place where I don’t have to be perfect.

Because if there is a struggle I still get stuck in, it’s that—I don’t even like saying the word—perfectionism. What if I simply realized, decided and accepted that my novel in the making doesn’t have to be perfect and just get on with it? I can hear my writing coach, Laurie, in my head saying, “Yes!”

What if a shadow of the good things to come is enough and doesn’t have to be the very image of the thing?

No matter how diligently I try to keep good order—around me, within me, on the pages—it is all beyond my control. The words of an editor ring in my head, “Have you edited it to the very best of your ability?” Yes, beyond the best, I’ve edited it to the worst of my ability. Either I bury it or grant it some wings, poor thing.

Aside from a few Olympic stars, does anyone find perfection in any area of their life? And for writers, isn’t that why there are editors? I’m amazed by the acknowledgment pages I read in

some novels of how many people it took to write the book. But what if you aren’t connected to those people? Will we be buried in the shadows of our stacks? No, not me. I want to be cremated anyway.

If I think I will write the perfect book I may as well surrender the pages—the manuscript with its history of more lives than a cat. I’ve lost count.

Today, I prefer to blur the lines, see the jumping dog.

Today, I am going to see things through the lens of my old friend, Ima Gina. She always had a special way about her. In the old days, she could turn a wheat field into a mansion, with its sky-high ceiling and magnificent views.

To someone else, it may have been just a bunch of tall wheat stalks pressed to the earth, creating squares and rectangles connected by hallways leading from room to room to move through. Unless you had a birds-eye view from above, you wouldn’t even have noticed it was there.

Ima Gina had an uncanny way of knowing who I was and what I desired, who I wanted to be but had not yet become. We lost connection a couple of decades ago. Actually, I told her to go. Not in so many words exactly, but she got the message.

Ima was a clever girl, even though I ignored her, she kept popping by my office to say, hello. She even showed up to help me see how budgets could tell a story and made the number-crunching part of my job at the time enjoyable.

It was Ima Gina who told me when it was time to start writing stories, the stories behind the numbers, and I started a blog for work. It’s Ima I can blame for this incessant need to put words on paper.

After all the years I’ve known her, isn’t it odd that I’d forgotten she actually had three names? Like my own, each name tells a part of the story, so all three need to be there. If I leave one out, something important goes missing, just like hers.

This morning she stopped by, walked right in through the screen door, let it slam like it does because the spring is broken again. “You have forgotten my last name!” she yelled, standing there like she owned the place, hands on her hips.



“Do you want some coffee?” I asked.

“Just be you!” she said, glaring at me. “Yes, I’ll have some coffee!” she continued. “Extra hot, cream, you know the color. I like my coffee caramel-colored in case you forgot.” I hadn’t.

Her words stopped me. My husband said the same words to me this past week. Just be you, sweetheart, when I’d admitted to him that I had written a comment on a post for a new Writer’s Group I’d been invited to join, with many published authors in my age group. I wanted to make a good impression then proceeded to delete my comment and rewrite it three times. If you edit the comment, it says the comment has been edited, and you know, I have to be perfect. I don’t want to leave that trail. “Do you think they noticed...?” I asked him.

Go with it,” he said. “Be you,” he repeated. I don’t remember what words he used to describe me then and that’s probably a good thing

Where does this leave me? I invited Ima Gina Tion, with all three of her names, back into my life and kicked Perfectionism out.

Ima always has good words to share and always has had. I don’t know why I tried to move on without her. It’s a good thing she’s so persistent. Over coffee, she told me this: “It’s not what we do or how well we do it, our worth isn’t found in what we create, but in being the one we were created to be. Enjoy the process. It’s never about the performance or the product.”

How about you...? Maybe you needed to hear Ima Gina Tion’s words today, too.

After I gave our dog Fannie a treat, I was back at work on my novel that very afternoon. My husband was out of town, I never even looked at the clock.

Following a 20-year career in theatre and dance, marriage brought Deb home to Milwaukee. She lives in the house where she grew up with her very tall red-headed husband, their large red dog and sassy feral cat, and she writes weekly on her blog to encourage hope in hard places.

Meet our WWA Ambassador



TK Sheffield, known for her comic cozy mysteries *The Backyard Model Mysteries*, is the new ambassador for the Wisconsin Writers Association. As ambassador, she will celebrate WWA, the Midwest Writers Room podcast, and the benefits of joining the organization. Born in Madison, TK’s love of storytelling was nurtured by her beloved home state’s culture and landscape.

TK earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees from UW-Madison and Mount Mary University. Her books and screenplays have earned top honors or category nominations from *Killer Nashville*, *Eric Hoffer*, *Reader Views*, *Reader’s Favorites*, *Royal Dragonfly*, and film festivals, including the Madison Film Festival. She has presented workshops for WWA about writing loglines and short descriptions for novels. “Writing short can take a long time. My tips help authors with the process,” she says. “And I am thrilled to help authors with it—and celebrate WWA.”

Beyond writing, TK is an active member of WWA, the Blackbird Writers, and Sisters in Crime. She hosts a podcast, “The Wis-Missus,” with author and book marketing expert Valerie Biel. When not writing, she is found in her backyard or on a pontoon boat in the Northwoods. She’s active on Instagram and Facebook, sharing writing inspiration, book reviews, and sunrises.



“Thank you, WWA for this opportunity to spread the word about what it offers to writers. I am honored!

