

*It takes a bit of doing / Beating excitedly its life / The seventh day / for making  
guacamole. / And when, at last, time ends / In the shade of electron clouds. / Choosing  
to ignore the advice of counsel / I'll decide about tomorrow. / Old men speak in their old  
men voices, / but because they fear dreaming of being young. / I saw her across the  
room / As I left, so did the reflection of the girl across the room. / At 8:02, the bell rings  
insistently. / They leave boisterously. / The rattling yellow bus bounced down the  
gravel road as Old Henry jerked the steering wheel right and left, vainly trying to miss  
the biggest puddles. / I sat very still, hoping to be invisible, trying to sort out everything  
that had happened. / Alleys I used to walk every day - I am passing through them  
again today. / "Settle in a new place only to go elsewhere" sounds insane but that's  
how life has been for two decades in this city - become my friend... / Every day, soaring  
/ Checking the clock / My body brain beauty me. / In 1994, I celebrated Mother's  
Day for the first time as a mom. / Ariel is the little boy who made me his Tommy. / It  
starts with two green garden hoses. / Don't drink again. / Perhaps it was an experiment:  
to make something of nothing. / Since my father lives in a small town and business  
was good. / The sound, faraway, of children playing. / My experience was a tango. /  
This dance will go on, again. / Will my Faulkner was wrong. / Waiting in the wings  
for an opportunity to use my bow. / A knock on glass broke the silence like a pistol  
shot in a Carmelite monastery. / It wasn't going to be easy. / Her mother whispered to  
Goldie, / Goldie let him win. / Grief came to me / and as many springs / he meets me  
in the woods / of an ancient grace / With a handful of sweet rain / and the night  
rushes in / again. / Behind me / I watch the water / secure / with adamant locks  
/ It's blood and it's fire / and his mother. / Behind me / the sea. / You're watching  
me, With Light, all else be damned, / Dare we? / happiness, fragile / My Daddy has gone  
off to fight in the Big War. / I asked God to hurry up and bring my Daddy home right  
away so he can make everything better again. / There's two kind of folks as have met  
Jericho Dusk. "Call me Jake." / My grandson hugged his tablet to his chest and eyed the  
TV remote / Maybe they will find that one book / If I can have a dream / May God keep  
you safe and warm and love you as much as I do / then I went looking for my hat. /*

*Spring 2022*

# PULSE & ECHO

A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Prose

Danville, Illinois  
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ISBN: 978-1-66784-199-1

This issue was made possible, in part, by support from the Danville Public Library with program funding granted by the Danville Library Foundation.

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## PREFACE

### John Sanders Remembered

In the history of any small town, it may be enough to honor the legacy of one good man – so that we remember, so that we can teach as he taught, so that we might be inspired to see, in each other, the light he once saw in us.

That I can recall with vivid detail our conversations about Pasternak's use of metaphor fifty years ago will not surprise those who knew John Sanders: his positive and long-lasting influence upon students within and beyond classroom walls is widely known.

More compelling, that John's poetry three decades later so perfectly anchors our inaugural issue. We're grateful to his family for their permission to include selections from his 1990 collection of poetry, *You Can Be A Good Lover with a Pain in Your Heart*. John's poems are prayers to the creative spirit, illuminating with candor and grace why he writes, and why we read.

His preface reminds each reader that poetry is a gift freely given. "You will want to read these revelations for I think they are intensely human, and felt by us all."

In an era of uncertainty, this magazine offers an outstretched hand, each page an invitation: May you find, among these diverse writing styles and curious perspectives, a few words worth remembering.

Stuart  
Danville, Illinois  
Spring 2022

## DANVILLE'S VERMILION

John C. Sanders

It takes a bit of doing  
    to climb atop the banks  
        of the Vermilion  
You follow the trail  
    over the flood plane  
Or ride the train across  
    the tall wooden trestle  
And get off at  
    the Danville Junction  
    and walk west  
        to the Village Green

Danvillians like to call  
    Village Green  
        The Public Square  
Because that is what it was.  
    They would come to do  
Their business in the  
    more than ample stores  
Gathering to rub their shoulders  
    and clutch another's hands  
Or spit into the mud  
    of the good black earth  
Or to talk of the wars  
    exchange the gossip  
Renew the belonging of the  
    long Vermilion County

Grounding in its redness  
    Planting in its blackness  
But loving where they were  
    and making future plans  
For where they would be  
    sending a Cannon to D.C.  
Or Dancing and singing  
    and acting out  
Everyman's dream  
    or singing it

Danville is the heartbeat  
    of a nation  
The gateway to its prairie heart  
    beating excitedly its life

LEFT AND RIGHT BRAIN

John C. Sanders

I use the human form  
    to wrap my arms around  
To gain the passions  
    of two together into One.  
To give and to receive  
    from knowing the rhythms  
The earth has to teach  
    The Festival of Lights  
        in Danville  
        in San Francisco  
        now in Sedona  
Is more alive that way.  
    It is easy to place  
That gift beneath a candle  
    and see the Grace  
Of its reception  
    lighting every shadow.  
It is the male and female in me.  
How wonderful to know tenderness  
    in arms.

HE BROUGHT HIS DOG

John C. Sanders

Take a darkened Sunday evening  
and watch piano key hands  
With magic fingers emerge  
from French-cuffed sleeves.

Decide to look and listen  
words necessary for courage  
To face a wound of consent and pain  
zippering its way from leg to heart.

It was his eyes, and his belief  
in himself and his artistry  
That turned fear into understanding  
that is the battle you know.

## I HEAR A SCREAM (The Metaphor of Learning)

John C. Sanders

Oh, this has been a grand year  
Of chalk dust and walking around  
Feet that grow longer every season  
I peer out these aging eyeballs  
And thank the Seasons and the specialists,  
For the privilege now of living  
In the life and the lives of love.  
Today I received a candy cane  
From four who thanked me for my smiles  
I know that I'm an artist  
Oh, not in a grand painting way  
There IS a difference between me and Michelangelo  
But I do stand or sit or walk  
And brush the air in front of those  
Caught in my time rapture  
I catch and release the "scream"  
The specialness that is there.  
It is the metaphor of learning I create  
And I hear, sometimes yearn to hear  
The rumble of a chuckle, because...  
Because it is a MASTERPIECE that is emerging  
Call me a sculptor of many Davids  
But not from marble I work  
I work from soft and living flesh  
In unmatched natural beauty I work  
I hear the scream because that,  
That is the way I came,  
And my sons came, and...

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## THE SEVENTH DAY POEM

Wilbur Bolton

The seventh day poem  
disappeared suddenly  
before it was finished being written.  
As each line appeared on the monitor  
Its gravitational field  
caused it to collapse upon itself,  
forming a single pixel which exploded silently  
in the center of the screen.

I have been searching  
for the seventh day poem  
for the last several months.  
I have looked in all the usual places,  
between the sixth day poem  
and the eighth day poem,  
between inspiration and forgetting  
and it still wasn't there.

It showed up yesterday,  
quite unexpectedly  
during dinner with a friend,  
at a quiet Mexican restaurant.  
It rose from its resting place  
in a carton of avocados  
not yet ripe enough  
for making guacamole.

## WHEN TIME ENDS

Wilbur Bolton

And when, at last, time ends  
As eventually it must for all of us,  
What then will become  
Our last eternal vocation?

Will we be welcomed into  
The arms of a loving Savior  
Or will we be sent to some quiet place  
To spend countless millennia in self-reflection?

Will we lament the loss  
Of loved ones to whom we are lost;  
Of summer sunshine on our faces;  
Of snowflakes upon our tongues;  
Of good books and tender kisses?

Perhaps the best of all possible eternities  
Would be to wander in the space between the atoms,  
Stopping occasionally to rest  
In the shade of electron clouds.

## RECKLESS ABANDON

Wilbur Bolton

Choosing to ignore the advice of counsel  
And repeated admonitions from the woman I love  
Today, I will not be careful.

I will descend the stairs backwards on one leg  
Without holding on to the bannister.  
I will take more than the recommended dose of medication,  
and immediately drive to a construction site  
where I will operate heavy machinery.  
I will run with scissors, and I will not close the cover before striking.  
I will only look in one direction (up) before crossing the street.  
I will sit too close to the television,  
Ignoring emitted radiation and eyestrain.  
I will take all the wooden nickels I can get.  
At the end of the day, I will sleep loosely  
And welcome unsweetened dreams.

When this day of reckless abandon is over,  
If survival looks imminent,  
I'll decide about tomorrow.

OLDMEN  
Wilbur Bolton

Oldmen speak in their oldmen voices,  
Sentences measured, words carefully chosen,  
Not to ensure their wisdom is accurately conveyed,  
But because they often lose their thoughts midsentence.

Oldmen shuffle along at their oldmen pace,  
One foot carefully placed in front of the other,  
Not only to avoid falling down, but also because  
They have no place left to be in a hurry.

Oldmen move their oldmen bodies,  
Once straight, but now comprised of angles,  
Both acute and obtuse, whose vertices  
Snag repeatedly on the fabric of daily living.

Oldmen lie awake in their oldmen beds,  
They cannot find a restful position  
Not because they are not in need of sleep,  
But because they fear dreaming of being young.

## THE CROWDED ROOM

Julie Colby

I saw her across the room  
I've seen her everyday of my life.  
I've watched her grow from a little girl to a young woman  
But all that I know of her is her name.

I've been with her through happy times and sad.  
I've been with her when she has exploded in anger,  
I've been with her she has wanted to hurt and when she has wanted to heal,  
But all I know of her is her name.

I don't know if she can be trusted or whether she is capable of  
Loving or worthy of being loved.  
Though I know of her many faults, what are her true talents and assets that  
Make her special?  
I don't know if she's strong enough to handle  
Life's burdens...  
All I know is her name.

As I left, so did the reflection of the girl across the room.



Artist in Mirror, Danville Youth Center, 1971  
(Photographer Unknown)

## HOMEROOM, DAY ONE

Jane Creason

At 8:02, the bell rings insistently.  
We smile ruefully.  
They enter boisterously.

I say “No gum” three times, “This is Room 5” eight times,  
“No shoving” only once.  
A boy wearing a Cubs shirt asks, “Which chair?”  
I say, “The green one—fourth row.”  
I repeat, “The *fourth* row.” I pause. I repeat, “The *green* chair.”  
He says, “Oh, okay,” and grins.

Soon twenty seventh-graders are looking at me, trying to be nonchalant about  
their first day in junior high.

I pass out combination locks.  
They turn them right, left past zero, back right.  
Twelve open—eight don't.  
I explain again: turn right, left *past zero*, back right.  
Fifteen open—five don't.  
Dials move right and left once again.  
Nineteen open—Mary's doesn't.

I pass out schedules and room maps.  
We troop to the hall, find lockers, and slip on the locks.  
I point and say, “This way to science, that for math. . . . Come back if you have  
problems.”

Only four return.

At 10:34, I open Mary's locker.

At 11:25, I open Mary's locker.

I put my feet up as I eat my tuna salad.

After lunch, Gary returns because he can't find the music room.

Julie asks to borrow a pencil.

Ramon needs a Band-Aid.

T.J. is just plain lost.

At 3:07, the bell rings insistently.

We smile tiredly.

I open Mary's locker automatically.

She smiles gratefully.

They leave boisterously.

## WHEN THE WAR CAME (beginning chapters)

Jane S. Creason

Author's note:

In 1982, I attended a seed corn plot demonstration in northern Vermilion County. When I was talking to an elderly man I didn't know, he mentioned where he'd been raised. I realized it was close to where I'd grown up in a remodeled schoolhouse (I still live there).

I asked, "Did you know my dad, Mac Swengel?" His words chilled me. "I haven't seen your father since the night of the lynch mob." I knew what he was referring to—an event that had happened to my parents in 1943. The next time I visited my parents in California, where they'd moved in 1964, I asked Dad to tell me the whole story. "When the War Came to Hannah," my historical fiction novel, was inspired by their real life experience. The dedication reads:

*"To the Swengels and the Nakanes who lived their own version of this story."*

The rattling yellow bus bounced down the gravel road as Old Henry jerked the steering wheel right and left, vainly trying to miss the biggest puddles. The tops of the little kids' heads appeared and disappeared above the high-backed seats in the front. Their squeals blended with yells from the older boys in the back. Holding my lips tight, I struggled to keep the oatmeal, which Mama insisted I eat, in my queasy stomach.

The bus lurched to a stop in front of a small house with peeling white paint. Old Henry blew the horn, two short blasts followed by one long one. When no one appeared immediately, he honked again, pulled out a pocket watch on a braided leather strap, and held it up high.

"One, two, three," the little kids shouted in unison as the second hand moved.

At the count of fifteen, Johnny Crow walked out the door and down the sagging front steps. The little kids cheered, as they did every morning, and kept counting. Johnny sauntered across the muddy yard with that smile on his face that he thought was irresistible and I thought was obnoxious. At twenty-eight, with two seconds to spare, he stepped onto the bus.

"Morning," he said, grinning at us and ignoring Old Henry, who stared straight ahead.

As Johnny started down the aisle, he ran his fingers through his straw-colored hair, tipped up his square chin, and raised his arm like a boxer who'd won a match. The cheers got louder. Glaring at us in the wide rearview mirror above his head, Old Henry slid the watch back into his pocket and rammed the gearshift into first. The bus jumped forward.

Sitting alone, I stared out the dirty window, watching mile after mile of familiar fences and fields slip by. I knew every face of the flat Midwestern land as the weather and the seasons painted it. I'd watched the green of late summer change to the gold and bronze of fall and then to the shimmering white of freshly fallen snow. The ugly, dingy gray of a winter thaw that morning seemed to fit the unlucky date on the calendar. It was Friday, the thirteenth of February, 1942.

Suddenly, the bus dropped over the little incline near Red Fox Creek, squarely hitting three slush-filled holes at the bottom. Shrieks came from the front as small bodies bounced around like rag dolls. Several metal lunch pails crashed to the floor. Frantically, I grabbed for my satchel and missed. It landed on the muddy floor with a thud. Ignoring the chaos behind him, Old Henry turned on the wipers to clear the blobs of gray-brown slush from his windshield. I looked at my beautiful blue satchel all smeared with mud from the many feet that had walked across soggy yards and down rutted lanes.

"Lord, I hate this bus ride," I said to no one in particular as I unbuttoned my coat to get the freshly ironed hankie in my dress pocket.

Using the hankie to clean my satchel would mean trouble at home. Mama set great store in my being a dignified young lady, and somehow clean handkerchiefs and straight posture and correct grammar and a hundred more things that were very important to her had to be remembered by me. When she saw the dirt, she'd frown and say, "My stars, Joanna, what on earth did you do this time?"

Looking at the hankie, I hesitated. Then, despite the possible consequences, I wiped the mud off my satchel, folded the dirt to the inside, and stuffed the hankie back into my dress pocket.

Unbuckling the straps on the satchel, I peeked inside to check the valentines in their white envelopes. There were twenty-one small store-bought cards and four big ones I'd painstakingly made myself from shiny red paper and lacy white hearts. Two of those were for Gloria Van Holt and Betty Jean Jones, and the verses I'd composed for them were identical since they were both my best friends. The third valentine was for my eighth grade teacher, Miss Franklin. Reaching inside, I carefully pulled out the fourth big envelope and held it close. It was blank on the outside, but inside the fancy card I'd written,

*Roses are red, violets are blue.*

*You do not know, but I love you true.*

I hadn't signed it. I knew what I was going to do with that valentine.

My heart began to race, and my face was getting hot. Quickly, I slipped the envelope back into the satchel. Hoping to hide my cheeks, I hunched my shoulders and turned up my coat collar. Blushing was the curse

of my life. I blushed when I was mad or sad, embarrassed or excited, alone or in a group, and I blushed whenever I thought about Bill Elliott.

The bus careened around a corner and headed east toward town on the smoother concrete county road. I stared out the window, hoping my face would cool and wondering if my feet on the unheated floor would freeze with all the blood rushing to my face. It was three more miles to town with only the Isaacson twins to pick up. As usual, they were standing beside the road since Old Henry had left them twice when they'd missed his thirty-second deadline. With everyone aboard, we moved past the Steinbrawns' cattle herd, which was huddled together against the biting wind, and wound through a woods with shrinking, dirty snowdrifts beneath the leafless trees.

Then, without warning, Old Henry hit the brakes once, twice, a third time harder. I grabbed the seatback in front of me with one hand, tightened the grip on my satchel with the other, and begged my breakfast to stay in place. Two more lunch pails hit the floor. The little kids chattered excitedly and pressed their faces against the windows.

"How come you turned?" Johnny said to Old Henry as the bus headed north on Mill Pond Road. "No kids live up here."

Old Henry drove on.

"How come you turned?" Johnny said more loudly.

Johnny Crow, who seemed to believe that he was the leader of our eighth grade class and the entire school, wasn't used to being ignored. With all eyes on him, he rose and squared his broad shoulders.

"Why did you turn!" he demanded.

Old Henry said nothing.

I was beginning to enjoy the drama. However, before it could continue, Taylor Bensen, another boy in our class, broke the tension.

"I think I see someone standing by the mailbox at the old Herrin place, a girl, maybe," he said.

I strained to make out the figure through the grime on the window. When the bus stopped, all of us were quiet, our attention riveted on the door as it squeaked open.

"Is this the bus to Ten Oaks Elementary in Hannah?" a voice from outside said.

"Sit," Old Henry said.

I stared—everyone stared—as a tall, slender girl with the reddest curliest hair I'd ever seen climbed aboard.

She looked at us, then grinned. "I'm Gretchen Bocher," she said as she walked down the aisle and took the

seat across from me.

Since staring and raising eyebrows were silent activities, the rest of the ride was uncharacteristically quiet. Minutes later, Old Henry brought the bus to an abrupt stop in front of the two-story white frame schoolhouse and swung the door open.

“Out,” he said.

The little kids bounced down the steps and lined up on either side of the walk like spectators along a parade route. A new kid, especially a tall red-haired girl, was worth staring at some more.

Next came Gretchen. Pausing by Old Henry, she said, “Thank you for the ride, sir.”

Then looking calm and confident, as if unaware that dozens of eyes were on her, she climbed off the bus and strode toward the school’s red double doors. I was impressed since I would’ve been as shaky as jelly.

“Wonder which parent is the carrot?” Johnny said loudly from behind.

Snickers came from here and there as we trudged up the creaky wooden staircase. Once more my face was turning scarlet, but the blushing was for her. She, however, appeared to hear nothing. There was no embarrassed flush on her pale cheeks. She rounded the landing and climbed the last half-flight, stopping at the top only long enough to check the signs above the two doors. Fifth and sixth on the right, seventh and eighth on the left. She entered left.

A few students from town were already in the room, hovering around the big valentine box we’d decorated with red paint and lace during the week. They stopped to stare. Ignoring them, Gretchen walked directly to Miss Franklin, her right hand outstretched.

“I’m Gretchen Bocher. I’m new, from Chicago most recently, California before that. I’m in the eighth grade. Where should I sit?” she said in a rush.

Miss Franklin’s look of surprise changed into a broad smile as they shook hands. “Well, Gretchen, welcome to our school. There’s an empty desk over there.”

The rest of us began to move around, though still keeping a close eye on Gretchen as she arranged the books for eighth grade in her desk. In the cloakroom, we hung up our coats and sweaters on the assigned hooks, lined up our galoshes below them, and shoved our lunch boxes, mittens, and scarves into wooden cubbyholes on the opposite wall. The smell of damp wool filled the small room.

Standing in the middle of the cloakroom, Johnny was solemnly shaking hands all around. “I’m Jonathan Alvin Crow, most recently from Hudson Crossing. I’m in the eighth grade,” he said in a tone mocking Gretchen’s.

Then Seth and Warren Isaacson, seventh graders, came in, and there was more handshaking going on than at a political rally.

Three other boys lined up and addressed an invisible Old Henry. "Thank you for the ride, sir," each one said in turn.

I ducked out of the cloakroom right before Miss Franklin and Gretchen entered it. My face was still burning. I was halfway to my desk when I remembered the muddy handkerchief in my pocket. Maybe I could rinse out the mud.

I dashed through the door, down the steps, and out into the sharp wind. The pump was a few steps from the sidewalk. There was a bit of water in the bucket beneath the spout. Shivering, I plunged my hands through the thin coat of ice on top and gave the hankie a good scrubbing. The dirty spots lightened considerably.

As I turned to go back into the schoolhouse, I saw Gloria and Betty Jean running across the schoolyard.

"Wait up, Joanna," Gloria yelled.

Betty Jean stopped and stared. "Are you crazy? Where's your coat?"

"I came outside to rinse out my hankie. It got muddy when I cleaned off my satchel. Old Henry was so wild this morning everything hit the floor. And you know what Mama says about me getting dirty."

"Let me see it," Betty Jean said.

"Maybe she won't notice," Gloria said as they examined the faint spots.

I shrugged. "I'm almost sorry I ever turned fourteen," I said. I was certain Mama's determination that I act properly had increased since my birthday in January.

"But at least you've got the satchel," Gloria said.

It was a gift from Grandma Grey, who seemed to know how to choose something special. It was the envy of the eighth grade girls, about the only thing I'd ever owned that anyone else wanted.

Overall, I was not the sort that inspired envy. So-so singing voice. So-so ball player, not picked first, not picked last. So-so artist, not outstanding like Betty Jean or awful like Johnny, who still drew trees resembling lollipops. A good student with a good vocabulary and good manners, which were Mama's doing. She'd gone to college a year, her one shining achievement, and if she could polish me up, I might become her second. But no one envied me for that.

I gave the hankie a final snap to shake out the last drops of water, then slid it into my pocket.

As we hurried toward the door, I said, "I have something to tell you. There's a new girl in eighth grade, from California. She rode the bus in. She has the reddest—"

The old iron bell on top of the school began to clang.

“I’ll tell you more later,” I shouted over the noise.

After we entered the classroom, Gloria and Betty Jean took a long look at Gretchen before heading for the cloakroom, where Johnny was still shaking hands. I heard “carrot” over and over as more town kids came in. I went directly to my desk.

“You aren’t amused,” a voice nearby said.

I looked up. Taylor was sitting at his desk in front of mine. He wasn’t smiling.

I’d known Taylor forever since the Bensens lived a mile from us. I didn’t think of him as a best friend like Gloria or Betty Jean since he was a boy, but he’d always had an uncanny way of knowing how I felt. Sometimes it could be annoying.

“Just because I’m not over there, trying to win an acting award like some clowns in this class, doesn’t mean I’m not amused,” I said, irritated.

“Touchy, Joanna.”

“If this is all so much fun, how come you got out of the cloakroom in record time today, too?”

Turning my back on Taylor, I scooped up all my valentines, except the special one, which I slipped into my other pocket, and walked to the red box. As I dropped the envelopes through the top slot, I noticed Gretchen looking at the books on the corner shelves. They were Miss Franklin’s own books, which she lent to any of us who wanted to read them. Few asked.

Then, with my heart thudding in my ears and my hands shaking, I walked back toward my desk. Pretending to sneeze, I stopped by Bill Elliott’s desk, pulled my hankie from my pocket—I hadn’t planned on it being wet—and dropped it. When I bent over to retrieve it, I quickly slipped the anonymous valentine inside the open front of his desk. As I stood up, I swiped my nose with the hankie, stuffed it back into my pocket, and nonchalantly looked around. The cloakroom was still crowded with handshakers. I didn’t think anyone had seen me, and I prayed no one could hear my heart, especially Taylor. There were some things he didn’t need to know.

The final bell was clanging when Bill rushed in. My heart pounded louder, and I wondered what shade of red my cheeks were. Bill took off his gray coat and quickly joined the other latecomers who were dropping their valentines into the box. I stared. He was tall with dark curls, deep blue eyes, and pale skin. I watched him walk to his seat, two rows over and one seat up from mine.

I’d adored Bill since the first day he’d walked into our seventh grade class over a year before. First, he’d been sweet on Gloria, and my heart had ached as he carried her books to and from school. Rosie Marconi was

next, then Doris Armstrong, Hazel Evans, Clara Janke, Patty O'Brien, Alice Kramer, and Agnes Fischer. Sometimes I despaired, certain I was the only girl Bill hadn't noticed.

Actually, there were several of us left. Betty Jean wasn't interested. She'd never cared about anyone except Karl Hoffmann. And Ida Jo Powers, no boy ever liked her. She was twice as big as any of us. She spit on her hands before she knocked the ball through the trees about every time she batted, and she could swear. There was Kathleen, number eight of the eleven Fitzhenry kids. Every day she came to school in the same yellow-flowered dress, clean and ironed on Monday, wrinkled and smelly by Friday. I anguished over why I was in such company.

I knew I didn't have shiny blonde hair like Gloria or natural curls like Clara or a tiny cute nose like Patty. But my thick brown hair was neatly braided, and Papa always said my dark eyelashes made my blue eyes shine. Surely, Bill had noticed me. True, the valentine in his desk was anonymous, but I hadn't tried to disguise my penmanship. He had to know how long I'd been waiting.

At eight o'clock, Miss Franklin stood up from her desk chair, and so did the class. There was immediate, reverent silence. We faced the flag with hands over our hearts and pledged in unison. Though the ceremony had been repeated by us every morning since we'd entered first grade, even the rowdiest of the boys stood with a straight back as we solemnly recited the pledge. Only two months before, the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor, and Americans were dying overseas.

In her quiet yet commanding way, Miss Franklin began class as usual with the news. That day the news was Gretchen.

"Would you stand and tell us a bit about yourself?" Miss Franklin said.

Gretchen didn't just stand. With utmost assurance, she walked to the front of the room and faced us.

"I'm Gretchen Fay Bocher," she said for the third time. "Like *rocker* but spelled with an *h*. My family and I live on Mill Pond Road. I have five-year-old twin sisters, Carla May and Roberta Kay, named after our uncles, Carl and Robert. I was named after my grandmothers, Gretchen Majors and Fay Bocher.

"I like to write and read, but I can't sing. I don't know anything about softball. We've always lived in a city, and I'd never even seen snow before we moved to Chicago.

"We left Los Angeles right before Christmas because my father lost his job. He wrote for a newspaper. When the Hearst chain bought that paper, my father was supposed to write hate stories that called the Japanese ugly names like Nips, mad dogs, and the yellow peril. After Pearl Harbor, people were becoming afraid of all Japanese, even the American citizens. My parents and some others in our church tried to help some of the Japanese in our

neighborhood. The paper fired him.”

Gretchen paused. I thought she was done, but she wasn't.

“We moved to Chicago to live with Grandma Bocher, but my father could get only part-time work with a paper there. It was Grandma's idea that we move down to her cousin's farm. The house had been empty since he died.”

Gretchen paused again, then smiled. “So that's how I got to Hannah,” she said and sat down.

Miss Franklin nodded. “That was quite a speech.” She turned to the class. “Do you have any questions?”

No one moved. Under Miss Franklin's direct gaze, no one, not even Johnny, dared to roll his eyes. A new student usually mumbled a name and maybe a place and sat down in a hurry. Gretchen was different.

\*

It was a wonder I got anything done that morning. Half the time I was watching Bill Elliott, and the other half I was watching Gretchen. I barely managed to study my spelling list before it was time for the test.

Finally, it happened. As Bill was putting away his spelling book, the envelope fell onto the floor. Holding my breath, I watched him out of the corner of my eye. He picked up the envelope, read the valentine inside quickly, and frowned. Glancing around to see if anyone was watching him, he stuffed it under his sweater.

I missed four spelling words for the first time that year.

The morning recess bell rang. Immediately, Bill walked over to the corner bookshelves. He glanced around once again. Then he pulled the crumpled envelope from beneath his sweater and shoved it between two books.

My heart was stifled. I felt as suffocated as my beautiful valentine on that shelf. When I turned away to hide my flaming face, I saw Gretchen looking at me.

\*

“Aren't you going out, Joanna?”

Gloria was standing by my desk, coat in hand. Betty Jean was already by the door with her arms folded, her foot tapping impatiently.

“No,” I said. “I'm going to work on my geography map instead. I'll go out at noon.”

“Come on,” Gloria said. “Johnny is quite a show today. He'll be out by the pump like always.”

“The only way he knows how to be funny is to make fun of someone else,” I said. “She'd have to be deaf and blind not to hear all this carrot stuff and see the handshaking.”

Eyeing me suspiciously, Gloria spoke in a tone decidedly not cheerful. “What's with you? You seem awful concerned about someone you don't even know.” She paused. “You looking for a new friend or something?”

“To tell the truth, I’m embarrassed. She must think we’re brainless. She’s so confident and proud.”

“Oh, pooh,” Gloria said. “You call it pride to announce to a room full of strangers that your father’s been fired? And since when have you cared if Johnny or anyone else is brainless? That girl is different. She’s not going to fit in here. You know that.”

“She’s been here only a few hours! How can I possibly know that already?” I said, my voice rising with my temper.

Ignoring my question, Gloria said, “Well, are you going out with us or not?”

I hesitated, and Gloria took that as no. With an angry flip of her blonde head, she turned and left, followed by a scowling Betty Jean. As I stared at the empty doorway, I had an uneasy feeling.

The old hot-water radiators along the wall were clanking and popping. A murmur of voices came from the sideboards where Miss Franklin was helping a small group of seventh graders with percentages. Suddenly, the pale February sun broke through the gray clouds. Sunshine flooded in the tall windows and streaked across the scarred wooden floor. It shone on the blackboard behind Miss Franklin’s big oak desk. I stared at the dust particles dancing in the shafts of light. I wasn’t getting my map done.

I slid off my bench seat and walked to the windows. The fifth and sixth graders were on the far walks down near the ball field, playing catch and chasing each other around. The seventh and eighth grade girls were pacing up and down the front sidewalk in clusters, all the girls except Gretchen.

She was standing by the pump, surrounded by Johnny and a bunch of the older boys. Only Taylor stood apart with his hands jammed in his pockets. Some of the boys were still shaking hands, but Johnny and the Isaacsons were in a semicircle leaning toward Gretchen. With their faces close to hers, they were pulling their eyes slanted. Gretchen stood motionless, her face sheet white.

A rush of anger surged all the way from my toes. I ran from the room, right past Miss Franklin. I hit every other step and burst through the doors below.

I could hear the chanting. “Jap lover. Jap lover. Jap lover.”

I raced up behind Johnny, grabbed his shoulders, and jerked him away from her.

“You moron!” I said, screaming. “Leave her alone!”

He whirled to face me, his fists doubled up. I took a quick step backward.

“What’s the problem out here?” Miss Franklin shouted from the doorway.

As Johnny stepped around me, he opened his hands, raised up his palms, and said, “Not a thing, Miss Franklin. Just getting acquainted with our new classmate.”

Miss Franklin frowned. "I think you'd better come inside now," she said to Johnny.

"Whatever you say," he said, smiling.

Shortly after the doors closed behind them, the clang of the bell ended recess. The crowd of boys at the pump parted, and Gretchen stepped from inside the circle. She and I walked side by side into the building. Neither of us said a word.

At noon I ate at my desk, barely tasting my cheese sandwich. No one talked to me. With my tin cup, I dipped a drink of water from the bucketful brought up from the pump by Old Henry. I left the room only long enough to dash to the restroom outside. The morning sunshine had been brief. A fine drizzle was falling, so everyone stayed inside for noon recess.

The townies who'd gone home for lunch returned about a quarter to one. The smell of wet wool filled the whole room as damp scarves, hats, and mittens steamed from the radiator tops. When Gloria and Betty Jean walked in, other kids surrounded them. There were glances at me, and Gretchen, who also sat alone at her desk, and inaudible words whispered behind cupped hands.

At precisely one o'clock, Miss Franklin rapped her desk with a ruler. As students moved to their seats, two notes dropped onto mine. Instantly, I covered them with my hand since note passing wasn't allowed. My heartbeat quickened.

After Miss Franklin began our history lesson, I slipped the notes behind my propped-up book and slowly unfolded each of them. The first one was written in red crayon.

*Roses are red, violets are blue,  
Your face is red, her hair is too.*

The second one was a crude drawing of two figures, one labeled Carrot Hair and the other Beet Face.

For the next forty-five minutes, I looked only at Miss Franklin. I concentrated on her blue eyes, straight nose, and lightly rouged cheeks. I stared at her brown hair that was pulled smoothly back into a low bun, at her white lacy collar and her navy suit. I willed my heart to slow and my face to cool.

When our history lesson ended, Miss Franklin moved to the seventh grade side of the room. We eighth graders silently worked on detailed maps of South America. I drew tiny, precise clusters of coffee beans. Using dark green, I shaded in the Amazon jungle and traced every curve of the rivers in blue. My eyes never left the map, but I felt certain that all other eyes were boring into my back.

At two forty-five, a knock on the door signaled the arrival of Mrs. Van Holt with the pink frosted cupcakes she always baked for the Valentine's Day parties at Ten Oaks. Several other mothers entered carrying small cups

of redhots and napkins printed with hearts. We slid our books and papers inside our desks as the refreshments were passed out. Then the mothers sat on folding chairs to watch the distribution of the valentines.

The bottom of the box was opened carefully, and all the valentines were dumped onto Miss Franklin's desk. Two boys and two girls, who'd been chosen earlier, passed them out. For the next half an hour, we opened and read valentines. It had always been fun, something warm and friendly we did every year. But I sat, silent and alone, wondering if the messages on my desk were from people who really cared about me at all.

I looked over at Gretchen. She was sitting straight and tall with her hands in her lap. Her desk was bare. She had no valentines, not even one. My heart pounding, I stood up, walked to the bookshelf, and retrieved the valentine hidden there. By the time I walked to Gretchen's desk, everyone was staring at me.

"I didn't make this for you," I said, "but I want you to have a valentine."

The room was as quiet as death, an appropriate figure of speech since I'd no doubt committed social suicide at Ten Oaks Elementary. Returning to my seat, I looked at no one. I had a much worse problem than a red face.

I was dangerously close to tears.

When the whispers began, I was positive they were all about me. With my hands folded tightly to stop their shaking, I stared at the alphabet cards tacked above the blackboard. M was a bit crooked. The corner of P was torn off. I didn't dare cry.

I looked at the first cards. A is for antelope. B is for bear. C is for cat. I was picturing the wood-block prints in the big colorful alphabet book Grandma Grey had given me for my fourth birthday. I loved that book.

D is for duck, a white duck standing in deep green vines. E is for elephant. F is for fox. G is for giraffe. H is for horse, an elegant black stallion with white feet and nose.

I wondered if the minute hand on the clock was moving.

Ibis, jaguar, kangaroo, lion, mouse.

I especially liked the print of the small white mouse nibbling on a golden head of wheat.

Newt, orangutan, pelican.

When the dismissal buzzer above the door finally sounded at three-thirty, I was on T is for turkey for the third time, and I'd managed not to shed a tear. Stuffing my valentines and arithmetic book into my satchel, I was the first to reach the cloakroom. I grabbed my coat off the hook, pulled on my galoshes, and fled the room without a thank you or a good-bye to anyone. The voices behind me faded as my feet pounded down the wooden staircase.

The little kids already on the bus were chattering loudly and fidgeting.

"Hi, Joanna," several said.

Since I didn't trust my voice, I only nodded, dropped onto my usual seat, and huddled against the bus window. Its coldness felt good against my burning face.

Within minutes, my classmates poured from the building. It was easy to spot Gloria's stylish red-plaid coat as she and Betty Jean moved off with the group who lived on the north side of town. Bill ran to catch up with them. I watched through a blur of tears that refused to be kept back any longer. They streamed down my cheeks as Bill disappeared from sight. The town kids had all the fun. They got to see each other all the time, and they even had telephones.

U is for unicorn. V is for vulture. W is for wolf.

The country kids were piling onto the bus. When Johnny Crow came down the aisle, he reached to pull off little kids' stocking caps. The hatless ones beamed. Attention from Johnny was important.

He didn't speak to me.

Gretchen, the last to climb aboard, spoke to Old Henry and smiled at the little kids in the front. When she got next to my seat, she stopped.

"I think you have a message here," she said, pointing.

On the seat lay another folded note. I considered brushing it off onto the muddy floor to be trampled into illegibility. Instead, I picked it up. Gretchen sat down next to me as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do, as if there were no other empty seats on the bus. Turning slightly away from her, I slowly unfolded the note. Inside a lopsided red heart in the unmistakable, left-handed, backward slant that his teachers had been trying to correct for years, Taylor had written, "I like what you did today."

Tears overflowed again. Hoping Gretchen wouldn't notice, I stared out the window and brushed off my cheeks.

Without warning, Old Henry shoved the gearshift into first, and the bus lurched forward. Squeals and yells surrounded us. Gretchen and I grabbed the seatback in front of us and held on. Old Henry was hitting all the potholes as he whipped around corners to leave town. When we got to the concrete county slab, I released my hold.

"The valentine's beautiful. Thank you," Gretchen said.

"That's okay. I made cards for my friends, Gloria and Betty Jean, and for Miss Franklin." I paused, then said in a rush, "And I had an extra one."

Gretchen looked at me. Feeling my cheeks getting hot again, I stared at my hands.

"He's cute, you know," she said, leaning toward me.

“Who?”

“The boy you made the valentine for.”

My cheeks went from hot to flaming. Gretchen put her hand to her mouth, but I heard the giggle.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “But your face is really red.”

“I know.” I hesitated. “I’m famous for it.”

I reached into my satchel and pulled out the beet-face, carrot-hair note. Gretchen looked at it and grinned as she took a crumpled paper from her skirt pocket. Her note was identical.

“Oh, I can do better than that,” I said, handing her my second note.

“No, you can’t,” Gretchen said.

Her grin widened as she pulled out a second note. It was the same, except for the pronouns being reversed. Suddenly, she frowned.

“I’ve got a problem,” she said as she opened one of her books and removed the valentine from its envelope.

“What’s that?” I said, my heart beating faster again.

Pointing to the blank space below the verse, she said, “If we’re going to be friends, I need to know your name, especially if you’re going to ‘love me true’ like this says.”

My cheeks went from flaming to whatever color was redder than that.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I was just being funny. This is a beautiful valentine, and he’s a jerk for getting rid of it.”

“Joanna,” I said softly, staring at my hands again. “Joanna Elaine Grey.”

“Well, Joanna Elaine Grey,” she said, thrusting out her hand, “it’s nice to meet you, and I’m honored to have this valentine.”

“It’s nothing,” I said, shaking her hand. “The verse isn’t even any good. It should be ‘I love you truly.’ Miss Franklin’s a real fanatic about correct adverbs.”

“I think I see what your problem was.” Gretchen looked at the valentine and read, “Roses are red, violets are ‘bluely.’ You do not know, but I love you truly.”

We were both laughing when Johnny said loudly from the back of the bus, “My, but Carrot and her red-faced buddy are sure having a good time. You’d hardly know there’s a war going on.”

Everyone got quiet. Gretchen’s grin disappeared. Mine, too.

“What’s the story about him?” she said in a whisper, tipping her head toward Johnny.

“He thinks he’s a big shot. He used to be funny, liked to clown around and pull practical jokes.”

“But now?”

“He’s been different since his brother enlisted in the army last fall. Jeremiah’s stationed in Alaska.”

“Oh,” she said quietly.

Old Henry hit the brakes several times and swung onto Mill Pond Road without slowing much. We held on.

“I think I caused you some trouble today,” she said. “I’m sorry.”

For the first time, I looked Gretchen directly in the face, searching for hints of sarcasm, but her large gray-green eyes were serious.

“You’re sorry,” I said. “You’ve been ridiculed or ignored all day, and you’re apologizing to me. Gloria’s right. You are different.”

Gretchen looked away from me. Then she said, “I guess I’d better ask directly since I’m about home. Is it bad here to be different?”

No one had ever asked me a question quite like that before, so I had to think a bit before I answered. “I don’t know if it’s good or bad, and I can’t speak for anyone except me. But as far as I’m concerned, different is just different.”

Gretchen’s grin returned. “Thanks,” she said.

The bus turned into her lane and skidded to a stop beside the rusty mailbox. Gretchen stood up and walked down the aisle. At the door, she looked back and said to me, “Save me a seat Monday.” Then, with a quick wave and a smile at all of us, she was gone.

Old Henry backed the bus around, barely missing a water-filled ditch beside the road, and headed back south. “Yeah, Carrot’s going to need a seat Monday,” Johnny said, “Don’t forget.”

I sat very still, hoping to be invisible, trying to sort out everything that had happened.

#

## WHAT YOU SEEK IS SEEKING YOU (Rumi)

Sarita Jain

आगे बढ़ते कदमों से,  
कुछ लम्हें पीछे लौट आए,  
खट्टे मीठे कुछ कड़वे से,  
बिसरे क्रिस्से याद आए,  
मन थोड़ा हल्का, थोड़ा भारी सा हुआ,  
जो कभी रोज़ का रस्ता हुआ करती थी,  
शहर की उन्हीं गलियों से आज फिर गुजरना हुआ

चौक चौराहे नुक्कड़ रस्ते,  
मानो खोल के बाँहें मिलने आए,  
खुशी में संग कुछ तंज भी था,  
चलो देर से सही पर नज़र तो आए  
कुछ राहत ली, और ठहर वहीं कुछ वक्त गुजारा  
इधर उधर सब ओर निहारा,  
कितना कुछ वैसा ही था,  
और कितना कुछ था, बदल गया

फिर हल्की हल्की, गूँज सुनी,  
मानो आलम सारा बोल रहा,  
मैं धाम के तेरी सब यादें, बस यहीं रहा,  
मैं शहर तेरा, ना भूला तुझको,  
पर तू ही मुझको भूल गया

मैं व्याकुल और अभिभूत व्यथा,  
दिल का हाल रुआँसा था,  
बरसों से मन के भीतर,  
जो एक अधूरा हिस्सा था,  
वो आज है पूरा हुआ ।  
जो कभी रोज़ का रस्ता हुआ करती थी,  
जब शहर की उन्हीं गलियों से आज फिर गुजरना हुआ

Alleys I used to walk every day,  
Passing through them again today!  
Stepping forward as I am,  
Tons of memories floating around,  
They are sweet, bitter and are sour,  
Blooming in me like Mayflower.  
Feeling saddened, but happy in some way,  
While I am walking through them again today!

Irrked yet profoundly glad,  
One fine day, has come their lad!  
To embrace with love and warmth,  
Came running to me the boulevards.  
Overwhelmed with serenity, I stuck around,  
Wondering,  
how something is so evolved,  
yet something is just the same  
making the memories rewound!

*Cosmos appeared reverberating,  
Those sounds were deep and soaring,  
"I held on,  
I held on, to never forget you,  
I, your beloved city"  
Treasured all memories of you!  
But you forgot me,  
and I always remembered you!*

With aching heart and teary eyes,  
At long last, broken pieces allies!  
Feeling distraught yet complete in some way,  
While I am walking through them again today.  
Alleys I used to walk every day,  
I am passing through them again today!!

## ME & THIS CITY

Memoir with Poem

Sarita Jain

“Settle in a new place only to go off elsewhere” sounds insane but that’s how life has been for two decades. Though it’s been a pattern part, leaving the old shell and settling into a new one always brings agitation and discomfort. Living in a new house is as awkward as living with a stranger. Gradually, you forget the old as the new one becomes familiar.

In April 2020, when the whole world was shutting down because of Covid, we moved to this strange and smallish city that we never heard about before: Danville. Moving was not something new, we have lived in many cities, but this move was different. Unlike all the other places, we knew no one here.

Sometimes life hits you hard, and numerous dreadful chapters unfold from its book, one after another.

Being alone in a new city and hearing bad news from around the world - life was already distressing - and in the midst of all this, I lost my father. My family in India needed me but I was stuck - no hope of returning home. It seemed like my inner and outer peace would turn to madness.

When we go through terrible times, sometimes we begin to blame things around us for our own misery. I did exactly that. I blamed everyone and everything - yes, I blamed this city, too. (Poor Danville - it had nothing to do with my suffering and circumstances).

One evening while looking for some papers, I found my old diary. That was ecstasy, as if I found a lost part of myself! My writing engrossed me for a long time, and in my excitement, for the first time in years, I was compelled to write. It gave me a sense of tranquility.

That’s how things often begin: from dark situations.

Months passed. Covid restrictions eased.

My family decided to visit the local library. That first visit was amazing and soon, our library visits became so frequent that we called it our second home. Afterwards, we used every possible opportunity to explore the city and tried to be part of every event. The more we went out, the more we liked this place.

It's been two years in Danville, but sometimes I still find myself confused, wondering what makes someone say, I love or I hate this city (any city).

From my perspective, it's more about "reconciliation with self".

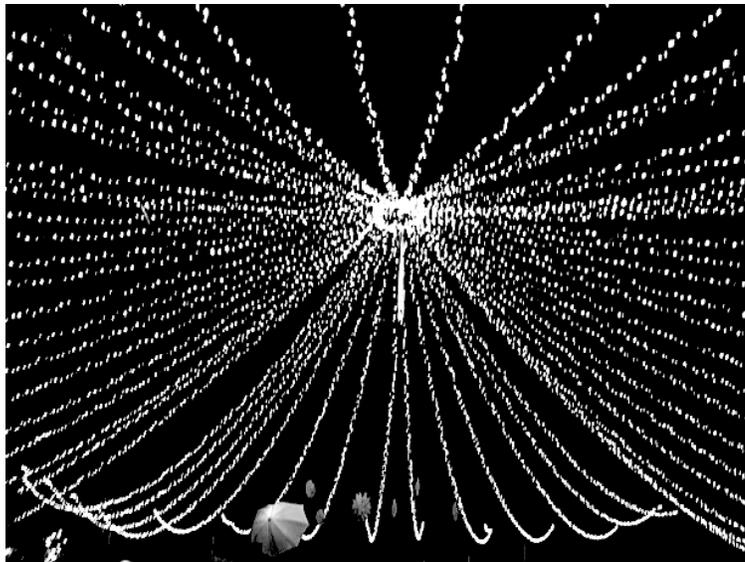
I gather my thoughts & narrate my feelings more effectively through poetry, so too with these lines about my journey, and how things have evolved...

Me, and this city,  
we are not aliens anymore,  
gradually, we started coming to terms  
with each other -  
empty paths and the slow pace life  
once made me restless, now they're soothing.  
Beautiful lakeside, river walk, the railway tracks,  
historic movie theater,  
they all look familiar.

Charm of blooming trees, everywhere in spring,  
rhythm of swaying cornfields in summer,  
rustles of colorful leaves while walking the streets during fall,  
and merry vibes of bright downtown in winter.

Each season is pleasant  
and, now I relish every time of the year.

I remember how downhearted I was  
when I moved here,  
but with rhyme and time  
this city has become my friend...



Danville's Festival of Trees, 2019

SMOKE RISES LIKE PRAYER

Holly Kleiss

Empty,  
Hollow bones

Narrow chest  
Feathers plucked

Made  
Safe haven, and comfort given

Fiery eyes  
Eltanin and Rastaban

Lusterless,  
As Boreas' cold wind.

Ark of past life,  
Memories arranged  
Silver coins for payment

Branches of harvest:  
Myrrh and aloe,  
Nest for fire

Day-herald —  
Sunlight catches  
Kindling on the mountaintop

Her single tear  
Sparks dry branches.  
Smoke rises like prayer.

In her burial,  
Fate prolongs,  
Head thrown back,  
Crying in agony

Yearning  
For renewal  
Her wings aflame,  
Years fall away

Joy rising,  
Ascending,  
Dancing through sparks  
Rejuvenated, howling

Twisting in air,  
Inferno below,  
New plumage grows.  
She turns to the sun,

Soaring.

NOTHING FEELS RIGHT

Kaileigh Oldham

*Checking.*

*Checking.*

*Checking.*

*Checking.*

*Checking.*

*Once more*

*for good measure.*

*Intrusive thoughts*

*breaking*

*through,*

*brain*

*buzzing,*

*dentists drilling.*

*Reading.*

*Reading.*

*Reading the same line*

*over*

*and over.*

*Ingesting every word carefully*

*in hopes*

*repetition*

*will increase my comprehension*

*by some small*

*degree.*

*As if I didn't catch it the first time?*

*I did.*

*Yet I must go back,*

*check again,  
make sure.*

*Reading takes so much more time than it used to.*

*Late  
again,  
always late.*

*My compulsions*

*consume time,  
more and more time.*

*Lock the door, count the pets*

*One,*

*Two,*

*Three.*

*Intrusive,  
this unwanted visitor  
running my car off the road,  
pounding down my door.*

*This back and forth method is madness  
back,*

*and forth.*

*Forced to repeat,*

*repeat,*

*repeat.*

*Nothing is right,  
it feels like*

*Acid*  
*ripping through my flesh and*

*Bones.*

*If I don't do this,*  
*this one*  
*thing,*

*everything will fall*

*apart.*

*Everything.*

*Chasing you out the door*  
*if I don't say*  
*"I love you"*

*I will never*

*never see you*

*again.*

*Ruminating brain,*

*spiraling,*

*buzzing, staring*

*at the*

*ceiling.*

*The back and forth of*  
*what I said*

*or didn't*

*say.*

*I'm ashamed,*

*2:30 am*

*ashamed,*

*picking at my feet*

*until they bleed,*

*until it hurts to walk.*

I long to stop,  
but never do.

OCD  
my unwanted visitor  
my private irony

promises control  
by stealing control from me.

My brain and body  
betray me.

## THE RIPPLE EFFECT

A Mother's Day Essay

Kimberly Padan

In 1994, I celebrated Mother's Day for the first time as a mom. I was just two months into my pregnancy and already wearing maternity clothes, though I really didn't yet need them. I was simply so excited about my new identity - as a *mom* - that I could not resist the urge to tell everyone about little Baby Padan.

In 1995, I celebrated Mother's Day for the first time as a grieving mom who lost her child at birth.

The full story of that single year is filled with many tears, and some joy. My husband and I wanted our baby; my pregnancy was intentional. We simply had no idea how many challenges we would face.

At the time I learned I was pregnant, I was working as a music therapist at Danville's United Samaritans Medical Center. At 14 weeks gestation, I underwent a routine ultrasound. Years ago, when I would share my story, I cringed as I recalled the outfit I was wearing, but in 2022, I chuckle at the adage, "Everything old is new again." I was wearing bright blue leggings and a long tunic tee shirt with a bold floral print, and I'd wear it again today if I still owned that outfit. It reflected my mood. I was going to see my baby for the first time. This called for bright colors and happy florals, and I wanted to make the day memorable. Despite the cold and sterile room, Bruce and I watched the ultrasound monitor with great joy. He held my hand and kissed me gently as we watched our little one move. The depth of his love for me was evident in his blue eyes, glistening with happy tears.

The following day, I brought my glossy 5x7 photo to work, showing off my baby's cute profile, sucking his thumb. The ooh's and aah's of my coworkers were a dream come true.

But later that day, the dream changed to nightmare, beginning with an expected phone call from the nurse. "Mrs. Padan, the doctor found some anomalies on the ultrasound. He wants you to see a specialist."

"Anomalies? What do you mean?" I asked. My voice was trembling.

The nurse could not tell me; the explanation must come from a medical doctor, but the “rule” seemed insensitive and confusing. Somehow, I convinced her to read a few words from the report. There was a reference to my baby’s abdomen, followed by that disturbing word: “anomaly.”

I shouldn’t have asked. The answer sent my mind into overdrive. My coworkers saw my mood change dramatically. I had to speak to the unit supervisor for permission to take a day off to see the specialist. I was nervous about approaching her and wondered how I could ask without bursting into tears. Yet, in that moment, her response was warm and compassionate. There was no need for my apprehension. This woman was also a mom; someone who understood the innate desire to protect one’s child. I felt as though I was in a locked room, with no way to reach my baby, and it was agonizing.

The following Monday, at the Indiana University Medical Center, I was assigned the on-call doctor because it was an emergency referral. After the scan, he said I was experiencing “amniotic band syndrome.” It is rare. There is no known cause. Because it occurred during my first trimester, it was very serious, so much so that the doctor stated words I never thought I would ever hear.

“You need to consider your options.”

To me, there were no options. While, at that time, I didn’t have many religious practices outside of Sunday Mass, I have always believed the Church’s teachings about the sanctity of human life.

As a disabled person myself, I was more than hurt; I was angered by the suggestion that I should terminate the pregnancy because my baby was also disabled. Yet my only thoughts were for my child, not the doctor’s blunt words. I did not have the energy, or the desire, to challenge his thinking, and I had no idea, in that moment, how to advocate for myself. I told him I was continuing my pregnancy but he seemed unconvinced and scheduled an appointment two weeks later. This would give me time to “think about it.”

In retrospect, I cannot blame a doctor who did not know the strength of my convictions.

My memory of the rest of the day is a blur. I remember that we stopped in Rockville Indiana before going home to see my mother-in-law and Bruce’s youngest brother, Chris.

I remember sitting on their couch, crying. I remember that Chris tried to console me. I remember speaking with my mom later that day by phone, but I do not remember how I broke the news to her. I only remember the shock, the sadness, the confusion and the worry. From that day forward, everything seemed forever changed, but through it all, one thing did not change: I was still a *mom*.

During the months that followed, numerous test results indicated that our baby would not live long after birth, if he made it that far, so Bruce and I wanted to treasure every moment. Like many dads, he'd place his hand on my abdomen, or get close enough talk to our baby. One afternoon, he took a photo of me sprawled out on our couch like a beached whale - I hated that picture, yet, loved him for taking it. The picture was part of our journey.

Some dear friends were also expecting a baby at the same time. Cathy and I had fun while our husbands took photos of us, some side-by-side, others back-to-back as we compared our baby bumps. Those photo-ops were silly and bittersweet. Cathy's pregnancy was progressing well with no anticipated problems, while mine continued with increasing concern. In fact, one day at work, my legs buckled suddenly. I collapsed to my knees and could not get back up until several nurses from the unit came to my aid.

At that point, upon instruction from my local doctor, my work hours were reduced. It happened again, in August - I could barely walk, and was becoming weaker with each passing day. For the sake of my health, as well as my baby's health, I was placed on disability. As I mentioned before, I have always been disabled, but I always found a way to adapt to my situation. I worked hard in school, I went to college to earn a degree for a career helping others as a music therapist. Was I suddenly so disabled that I could not work?

Yes. My life felt out of control, and I was frightened. Sometimes I wondered if I would ever recover.

In the midst of this deterioration of my body, I experienced one of the most incredible sensations of my motherhood - I was taking a nap, or trying to nap. It was a clear, warm August afternoon. The radiant summer sky, through our windows, filled the bedroom and it seemed that I would never fall asleep with such brightness. In retrospect, it was fortunate that I could not sleep because I felt a sudden, rapid ripple across my belly. Right to left. Then left to right.

"Bruce, honey! Come quick! The baby's moving!"

Pre-born babies typically move a lot, and mothers feel the movement as early as 16 weeks gestation, but most definitely feel movement by 22 weeks. I was 28 weeks along, and it was my first sensation of that movement. Between our baby's small size and my own neurologic weakness there were many things I could not feel. But this tickle was a gift that I will never forget.

There were many more doctor visits, more tests, and many prayers. Gabriel James Padan was stillborn on October 6, 1994. 7 weeks early, born just after midnight, he weighed only 2 pounds, 3.8 ounces, his body too frail to survive the birth process.

He was tiny but he had a big impact on our family. Gabriel was welcomed by two grandmas, two uncles, and one aunt - even church friends came to the hospital. We arranged to have the hospital chaplain baptize him immediately. We cannot know when the soul leaves the body, and I needed the beauty of baptism to commend my little one to God.

Two days later, on the eve of our first wedding anniversary, St. Paul's Church in Danville was filled, all for the funeral Mass of a boy who never took a breath. Family and friends came from as near as across the street and as far away as Florida. Gabriel was a part of their lives, too. Son, grandson, nephew, cousin. When someone says to me "I'm sorry that your baby did not live," I always correct them, because my son, in my womb, was alive for 33 weeks.

I am sharing this story because I know many women struggle with the approach of Mother's Day. We struggle through social media posts about a first tooth or first word, with honor roll announcements and graduation celebrations. We want to support our friends and family with children, but our pain makes that difficult.

Pregnancy and infant loss are, sadly, common experiences, even in modern times. Many women carry to term but experience a stillbirth, as I did, or suffer the anguish of losing a child to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Many women have experienced pregnancy, but their children are not with them to make breakfast in bed. Their children are not with them to pick dandelions from the front yard.

I understand.

You are still a *mom*. Whether God has blessed you with other children or not, you are a *mom*. Every child conceived matters to us, and we miss them. Many people of faith find peace in the belief that our children are being cared for by our Lord and the many saints in Heaven. This faith is what has shaped me and lifted me time and time again.

Years before I was married, a friend said something that has impacted me to this day. She mentioned that she had nine children, but I only knew about the three children I saw with her at Mass each week. "Oh Kim, there are just three here now, but I had six miscarriages. Those kids are just waiting for us in heaven." In the many years since, I have spoken to many women who have lost a child and I encourage them by saying this:

Count all of your children. Born alive, stillborn, miscarried. Whatever their outcome, count your children. Boldly remind the world about every one of them.

Now, I realize also that there are women reading this who lost babies after the difficult choice of abortion. You are also mothers. As a woman of faith, I believe you and your children are also precious in the eyes of God. Many women may regret their decision and some struggle to express their grief because of the choice they made. I want to reassure you: countless people doubt decisions made in the past. Remember that you are not alone. And remember: no one should be bound by her past.

If you are a woman who is grieving a lost child, seek out resources in your community for support. Many of us have experienced the meandering path of grief and found restoration. Some might need to seek help again and again. That's okay. Grief is not linear. Healing rarely follows a smooth and predictable path. Some years on Mother's Day I cry all day. Other days, I remember the joy of that August ripple across my baby bump.

When I was young, I wanted to be a wife and mother. I am both. Bruce is the wonderful man who made me his wife. Gabriel is the little boy who made me his Mommy.

#



“Digital and Digital”  
Photograph by Max Fuery  
Selection from *The System is a Mirror*  
John Wiley & Sons, 2007

## VERMILION MEMORIALE

S. A. Robbins

Maybe every novelist wants to write poetry first, finds he can't, and then tries the short story, which is the most demanding form after poetry. And, failing at that, only then does he take up novel writing.

- -W. Faulkner, *Paris Review*, 1956

My poem "William Faulkner was Wrong" seems beyond repair:  
the lyric's derivative, the caesura's neither yawn nor gasp,  
and the cadence staggers like a drunk unable to walk a straight line  
toward a meaningless end-point before falling sadly down.

\*

The story "William Faulkner was Wrong" was conceptually intriguing: our narrator, named William Faulkner, prepares for his long-awaited interview conducted by the writer, William Faulkner. Then, minutes before their scheduled start, someone shouted, "Borges and Me!" then "Secret Sharer!" and the interview ended before any questions could be asked.

\*

His novel, once written, would become a portrait of the ineloquent place where he was born, its finest days long gone in the heart of the country, a small town in an unremarkable county, though with a most remarkable name – Vermilion: pastel-hue'd, shadow-rich, the cinnabar red of morning skies before a looming storm. Even then, he understood that color was mere corollary to place-names and their stories rooted just beneath the surface of this flat and frosted ground, as if those places were actual characters waiting for an introduction, and any subsequent opportunity to curtsy or bow.

THINKING OF GARDEN HOSES ON MY 40<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY

S. A. Robbins

It starts  
with two green garden hoses  
spindrifted alternately right, then left,  
their varying delicious attentions  
soaking the dark black earth.

When asked, the gardener says:  
It's not the quantity of water gardens thirst for  
but a pattern of tides  
mere water in motion,  
one hose, then another,  
sometimes both.

Gardens don't care  
which way the water flows,  
only that it goes far enough and long enough  
to quench a lifetime thirst,  
the thirst of this place,  
where one line ends and another begins,  
each hose saying:

Lift me up.  
Take a long cool drink.  
Fill your throat with these words  
and let them spill over.  
Know that I drink from the other end,  
Then drink again.

## CLEANING UP AFTER THE BIG BANG

S. A. Robbins

Perhaps it was an experiment: to make something of nothing. A little of this, a little of that, then slowly simmer. Easy task - until the Boom, and that blinding flash.

What a mess.

Rock & debris *everywhere*.

What to do?

First, we'll need water to quench those fires.

For that, we'll need emergency workers (lots of them), thousands of sweepers and builders and engineers (and don't forget cooks to feed them).

Those cooks will need vegetables and harvest wheat for biscuits, so we'll need farmers to grow them, and trucks to transport them.

We'll also need bankers and unions to track overtime. For that, we'll need time clocks, and clockmakers to fix them. Homes for their families, schools for their children,

See that woman on the beach, stacking flat rocks, one atop another? Have patience for her, and for hoarders, freemasons, gatherers all: they're simply putting everything back where it belongs.



Downtown Danville, circa 1959

## MANNEQUINS

S. A. Robbins

I was required to exchange  
chimeras of boundless grandeur  
for realities of little worth.  
- Mary Shelley, 1816

His father lived in a world of women, and business was good. Fashionable women – sullen, sophisticated – came downtown from their faraway suburban homes for a degree of glamour otherwise unavailable to them, and his father’s store was the place where it could be found.

When he was young, Sammy accompanied his father to the Store on Saturday mornings. While his father unpacked boxes and counted the store’s seasonal inventory, Sammy roamed the dressing rooms for straight pins and discarded hangers. On a good day, Sammy earned enough to buy an Orange Crush at lunchtime, but if he was lucky, his father lunched with him and bought sodas for them both.

He always paid for the sodas, even though Sammy knew where to kick the machine for free ones, because “business was business.”

“Remember that, Sam,” his father always said. “It’s a lesson best learned early.”

*Business is business*, Sammy repeated to himself.

His father drank soda straight from the bottle, and Sammy did, too, copying his father’s gestures, even the way he combed his hair with the fingers of his right hand, or cracked his knuckles at the end of the day. His

mother once admitted that their similarities frightened her sometimes, but Sammy enjoyed the comparison. It made him feel older, part of a larger world.

In the summers before air conditioning, the basement remained cool as night, and the older sales ladies arranged a semi-circle of chairs around the soda machine on their breaks to rub their feet and gossip about the wealthiest or the most ignorant customers. On a nearby folding table, there was with a coffee pot in a state of constant percolation, an area his father called “the employee lounge.” Upstairs, the ladies hovered adoringly around the stylish women who browsed the new season’s shoe displays or admired the latest cashmere arrivals, but in the basement, there was no pretense in their commentaries that were harsh, and often cruel.

“Did you see her in that skirt? She hasn’t been a size 6 since high school...”

“...and her perfume, oh my Lord, would someone put a clothespin on my nose...”

Sometimes Sammy hid behind the soda machine, unnoticed by the cluster of critics who condemned any woman younger or thinner or smarter than they thought themselves to be, and he was amused by their lopsided lipstick grins, their swollen ankles with support hose rolled down like schoolgirl bobby socks.

More often, however, on the busiest days, Sammy was alone in the basement’s extended string of rooms. Each one was lit by a single overhead bulb hanging from exposed wires that reached into the ceiling, dim illumination for the inventory stored downstairs: racks of velveteen A-lines, last month’s Valentine’s Day sweaters wrapped in cellophane, lamb’s wool coats with detachable fur collars. There were boxes of flannel nightgowns only popular between Thanksgiving and Easter, and black lace nightgowns that have a place in any season. Hanging in the dull, yellowish glare of the basement, there seemed to be more dresses than there were women in town to wear them.

Unlike the “employee lounge,” the second basement room in sequence held four desks covered by rows of olive-green ledgers that were dated on each spine like an accountant’s history of his family since they’d opened the store two generations before. Sammy found little of interest in the Ledger Room, except for the tall

wooden stepladder that leaned against the wall, its bottom step broken – in the yellow light, the ladder’s shadow could have been a silent bony doorman guarding the entrance to Sammy’s favorite basement room: an unlit, brick-walled storage room filled with dozens of mannequins in the shadows, his father’s collection of broken women.

Upstairs, they were clothed in pleated skirts and perfectly-pressed blouses with complimentary scarves, but in the basement, mannequins relaxed in a more natural manner, disconnected at the joints, positioned in such oblivious distraction that a stranger, upon seeing the storage room for the first time, might confuse it with a saloon in a matinee Western or a sorority of former beauty queens waiting for a parade.

Some were bald. Others had no head whatsoever.

There were several with a missing leg, or Venus de Milo’d shoulders, and surrounding the unpainted walls of the dark room were shelves of extra parts: boxes of unpaired feet, rows of de-wristed hands with cocked fingers poised for the bracelets they were destined to display on Mother’s Day, the Fourth of July, and any other holiday that inspired certain customers to purchase jewelry to accent that new outfit.

Sammy particularly liked the row of hands, each poised for their jeweled moments in the spotlight. For many years, he was convinced that his family must certainly be wealthy because of the sapphires, rubies and emeralds his father displayed in special cases. For this reason, he struggled to understand why his father always paid for their sodas, or worked so hard, even at night, struggled to comprehend why Business was Business.

Sometimes, he played a game on Saturdays, enacting a comical, three-dimensional version of the Bride of Frankenstein. From the various parts, Sammy pieced together near-complete bodies crowned by stiff auburn wigs, angling his re-visited Elsa Lanchesters into positions like those he’d seen in the dressing rooms above with one difference: his jigsaw companions never behaved rudely or pinched his cheek like certain matronly fattish customers that appeared only on Sale days, the ones who always clutched him to their girdled bosoms smelling of rosewater and sweat.

There were plenty of dressing rooms with louvered doors on special hinges that could swing in both directions and plenty of discarded hangers to be found in them, but Sammy's favorite upstairs section was the largest dressing room in the rear of the store, adjacent to the seamstress's office. With blue hair that matched her eyes, the seamstress was older and more cunning than the other sales ladies. Strapped to both of her wrists, like a carpenter's belt into which hammers and screwdrivers remained poised for easy reach, the seamstress wore red pincushions filled with all manner of pins, straight and safety, and an array of sewing needles prepped for the next hem to be hemmed. Tucked beneath each strap was a thin bar of Ivory Soap, used to mark each pleat and cuff.

Her design for the large dressing room was based upon her convictions about the insufficiency of any single mirror to support her craft. All of the other rooms had but one, while all four walls of the largest dressing room were entirely covered by immense floor-to-ceiling mirrors. Each mirror was tilted slightly at the top. Due to this angled position, those mirrors created an infinite number of reflected selves visible in every direction, a back-and-forth parade for anyone standing in the center of that room. This allowed the seamstress, needles between her teeth, to perform alterations with stunning efficiency because she could see every side of each sleeve and hem.

In the last few minutes before his father unlocked the front door and began their day, Sammy would stand in the center of that room, fascinated by the many versions of himself reflected in those mirrors, too many to count, turning as he turned. When he lifted an arm, an infinite number of upraised arms moving in unison.

Sometimes, he imagined that each self represented a different stage in his life, as if, from that central vantage point in the father's room of mirrors, he could wave to his younger self, or turn and greet himself as a college student. In the farthest reflection, at the end of the long ascending progression of selves, Sammy imagined himself as an old man.

There was one particular customer that even the seamstress refused to serve, even in that large room of mirrors. This woman, a long-limbed platinum blond, was one of the few customers Sammy tried to avoid, as well. She came from the north end of town in a pink Cadillac convertible parked directly in front of the store, and she

always smiled in a strange and possibly wicked manner whenever she touched his father's arm, or straightened his necktie. She rarely purchased anything, and seemed apparently content to spend hours viewing herself in the newest evening gown, or next season's long black skirts, slit on either side for moving to and fro.

"Just browsing, thanks," she would say, and the sales ladies scattered like mice escaping an alley cat with razor-sharp claws.

Browsing.

It was an odd word. Spoken by his mother, in the same tone of voice one might use to whisper vulgarities around children, there was shame implied in this customer's browsing, as if the term itself was profane. Later, he realized it was merely an impetuous kind of shopping without commitment, unpredictable except for the argument his mother and father would always have whenever Sammy returned home on Saturday with stories about a certain blond customer's hours of browsing without buying.

One evening, during the traditional dinnertime argument, his mother finally declared that Sammy had become too old for Saturdays among women undressing. When he heard her bedroom door slam against its frame, Sammy retreated to his room, waiting for his father to come upstairs and say Good Night. The evening air smelled sweet though an open window beside his bed, first drops of rain tapping on the sill.

When his father appeared in the doorway, Sammy apologized for causing trouble.

"Don't be sorry for growing up, Sam," his father said, adding, "there are some things in the world that can never be understood by wives, or mothers."

Silently in the dark, father and son listened to the muffled rain smacking through the summer screen. When his father stood toward the window and wiped the windowsill with his sleeve, in a boyishly transparent attempt to postpone his bedtime, Sammy asked for a bedtime story.

“Tell me a story I’ve never heard before, Poppa,” Sammy said when his father moved away from the window.

“Too late for bedtime stories,” his father observed, but in the dark, as raindrops sang against windowpanes, it seemed that neither was ready for sleep, not yet.

“...well, Sam, perhaps something your grandpa told us one night, when your aunt Zelma and I were kids trying to delay our bedtime,” his father said. Sammy knew his father was smiling, though he could only imagine the smile on his father’s silhouette.

Sammy wrapped himself in linen still cool from the earlier breeze. Of course, he was unaware that the story his father told him that night would become a bedtime story he would one day tell his own son, many years later, a story from the old country passed through generations in the gauzy shadows between dusk and dawn, becoming legend.

“Tell it just like Grandpa did,” Sammy whispered, and his father did just that.

Once or twice upon a time, a long, long time ago, before our ancestors came to the New World in overcrowded ships, before automobiles, before airplanes or telephones or baseball or comfortable beds to sleep on, there was a small village in Romania, circled all around by mountains that protected the villagers, and kept them safe for the outside world.

It was a time when even gypsies were welcome, because they were tinmiths and toymakers and musicians who filled the hillsides with songs they played on hand-made instruments that were so well made, people from nearby cities would travel many hours in horse-drawn wagons to purchase teapots and dolls and contraptions that moved when you turned a tiny brass key. And among the many skilled artisans in the village was a stonecutter known only as Babek.

Babek was famous throughout the region for his remarkably sculpted tombstones, decorated with fanciful shapes and swirling flourishes. Each of the stonecutter’s tombstones was unique, no two were the same, and they were so detailed that many days and nights were required many days to create. For this reason, none of

his fellow villagers could afford Babek's work, only the wealthiest families from surrounding towns could afford such an expense. Yet, those villagers benefitted from the stonecutter's reputation because the wealthy visitors, in their ornate carriages and velvet overcoats, who came for unique monuments to honor their dead, also purchased fine teapots, and clocks, and hinged cabinets before they returned to their faraway homes.

"Business is business," Sammy inserted from beneath his sheet still tucked beneath his chin.

His father chuckled to himself, then pretended to scold his son for interrupting. "Maybe I should stop there," he said.

"No, no, no" Sammy exclaimed, pleading for his father to continue. "What happened to Babek?" It was an irresistible question, one his father could only answer by continuing the story as his father once told to him.

No one will ever really know what happened, not exactly, because those were times of tumult throughout Eastern Europe, times of great strife when waves of persecution crossed Romania, and Babek's village was soon overcome by those waves of difficulty. You see, as Babek aged, he grew less interested in cutting tombstones for the wealthy and more interested in his own sculptures, not for business but for art.

Years passed, amidst waves of persecution that surrounded Eastern Europe. Eventually, those influences infected his fellow villagers. Babek's talents were no longer appreciated, and his art was slowly misunderstood, even criticized.

Eventually, Babek was blamed by many in the village for their economic woes. Some dismissed him as a charlatan, and others considered him sacrilegious, and yet, their contempt went almost unnoticed by Babek who seemed content to remain on his small plot of land, occupied by his odd, experimental sculptures, obsessed by a medieval stone cutter's secret.

Babek learned that there were spirits within all things and that it was possible, by chiseling to the very skin of what lived within the limestone of that region, to liberate the beings that were trapped inside – they could be freed from the stone. According to Babek, the arts were not merely homage to nature's beauty but rather, a secret method of liberation for the many spirits inside of wood and stone so that they could dance and

play and sing. Babek spent his remaining years in quiet isolation, dedicated to releasing those spirits so that they might live in playful mischief for the remainder of their days.

No one knows what happened to the stonecutter, but Romanian legend tells of fantastic creatures, goats with wings, lions with human legs, all of them oddly shaped and funny, chimeras and gargoyles. According to the legend, those stone creatures only pretended to be motionless. At night, it is said that those gargoyles would dance and sing among the trees, and sometimes, they played harmless pranks on the townspeople when they slept.

Those townspeople, because of so many other losses and sadness and misunderstandings, believed that Babek and his creatures were the reason for their struggles. Eventually, their anger became hatred, an irrational rage that drove some to march upon Babek's small farm in the hills. They whispered rumors about monsters that lived with the old man, monsters that frightened everyone, the cause of all the village's problems.

When Babek noticed the torches coming toward his road, legend says that he cast a spell to protect his many wondrous companions. It was an incantation that returned them to a stone-like state before Babek himself escaped into the hills. When the angry mob arrived at the farm, Babek could not be found and, the legend further explains that there were only a few unsold tombstones left behind.

Babek was never located again, though some believe he made his way through the mountains to the river that led to the sea, hiding among the many gypsy families escaping the pogroms and persecutions. They found their way by boat to begin their new lives in the New World where they lived the rest of their days as carpenters and blacksmiths and masons who were responsible for some of the era's most magnificent churches and temples.

All that is remains known about his creatures is conjecture, though many churches in Europe were known to welcome and protect refugees and, perched atop their ornate towers and steeples, there can be found, to this day, gargoyles of many shapes and sizes.

Sometimes, between dusk and dawn, one can still hear them singing in the breeze, sounding very much like children at play...

Just then, as his father leaned to kiss his son's forehead, Sammy's mother called out to them. Her clarion voice was audible through the doors and walls of their house: *Is Everything OK?*

*Yes, dear,* Sammy's father said from the door.

But instead of joining her, Sammy heard the telltale creak of old wood as his father descended the stairs, retreating to his re-upholstered chair for one more sip of whiskey. By the time television programming concluded for the day and the national anthem was broadcast by each of the three channels with the black-and-white Please Stand By diagram, his father was softly snoring in his chair as the rain drummed pitter-pat against their roof.

Soon after, Sammy closed his eyes and, listening to the rain, fell into slumber. He slept to dreams of mannequins frolicking in the basement of the store, rhinestones liberated from the prongs of rings and bracelets. Then he dreamt of Babek, hair gone white with age, standing in the center of the mirrored dressing room and greeting his younger reflections. Each of his many selves waved when he waved, turned when he turned, and laughed when he laughed.

The stonecutter filled Sammy's dreams until morning's first light chased his dreams away. And yet, when he woke, just as he stretched out of bed to begin another day, he thought he heard an echo in the distance, barely audible: it was the sound, faraway, of children at play.

\*

COMPATIBLE LUNACIES  
(The Legend of Cupid & Psyche)

S. A. Robbins

Their ambivalence was a tango: she wanted to go away from the world and he wanted the world to go away.

It was a charming harmony, back in the days when people still touched as they danced, when laughter was a kind of song, and courtships happened on front porch swings.

But there were no more front porch swings. Everything that could go wrong between them was going wrong: She no longer heard the passing gentleness of his steps outside her window, and in the morning, his sonnets were only an eloquent but unwelcome ambush.

Theirs was a cynic's love story, like a printing error in a holy book, or a broken record skipping at your very favorite spot.

There was only one possible solution to their compatible lunacies, a childhood trick called The Imaginary Absence Game: two players pretend to be alone while thinking they are not - like Hide and Seek when nobody seeks so the game can go on forever, even when they go inside for supper, even as they lean toward sleep, they're still playing their game.

But as they sleep, or lay awake pretending to sleep, something timeless can be heard in the breeze, something in the breeze that says: whether you dream of hiding or not, and long after pretending gives way to growing up, this dance goes on, and on.

## WE NEVER SLEEP

S. A. Robbins

I don't know anything else.  
I don't enjoy anything else.  
I don't want to know or enjoy anything else.  
- -Dashiell Hammett

A knock on glass broke the silence like a pistol shot in a Carmelite nunnery, but Jones waited for the second before opening the door. Never seeming too eager for a new customer was one of the detective's rules.

If it wasn't a boring story, Hegel Jones would take the case. That was his only requirement. He didn't do this kind of work for big money. He sought curiosity, that's all, and a few curiosities kept his interest when lots of other middle-aged investigators bailed out, or took a bribe, or got themselves hurt.

He splashed some water on his face, and when the second knock came, he opened the office door. A small man with tired eyes wearing a brown overcoat two sizes too large introduced himself.

He said his name was Fantomas.

Then the man smiled and said he needed a good detective. Odd name. Thin smile.

"Everyone who comes through that door needs a good detective," Hegel shrugged. "I need a few good *clients*."

It wasn't a very glamorous story, Jones knew that much already. The man was ill at ease, out of rhythm, unsure how to go about the task of hiring a detective. Hegel appreciated the temporary discomfort, studied it.

"How long before we get started?" Fantomas asked.

There was a noticeable sincerity in the man's slight smile, and an adolescent quality to the position of his fisted hands pressed deep into his overcoat's pockets.

Any other detective who needed billable hours would've explained that the story started when the door opened. Instead, Jones gave the man an address, the old Woldford Hotel on the corner of Fifth Avenue and Lowry, and said he'd meet him in front of the hotel in fifteen minutes. When Fantomas turned to go, Hegel slid his arms into the flannel-lined jacket that hung near his office door and followed the man, a few shadowed steps behind. He learned a lot about prospective clients by observing them wait on unfamiliar street corners. The particular fellow, the man with insomniac eyes and an unbelievable name was writing in a small notebook, obviously a man who believed his thoughts were worth writing down.

Streetcars ambled past.

An old woman with support hose rolled around her ankles stepped from the Number 12 and perched herself on a nearby bench, waiting for her connection. A man in a bland raincoat was perched beside her, unfolding a newspaper with one hand as he lit a cigarette with the other. Cheap raincoat, expensive lighter. Hegel Jones appreciated the incongruity. Finally, the detective stepped from the alley shadows and crossed Fifth Avenue, nodded in his client's direction, then stepped through the side door of the hotel bar. Fantomas was smart enough to follow.

Hegel ordered two beers and waited for the usual vagueries and disclaimers. Most new clients asked the opening questions at least twice without listening to the answers, so he waited for the second repetition before giving a substantial response. Saved time.

“Have we started yet? Or are we waiting for something unpredictable in the case to present itself?”

The man’s boyish enthusiasm was in keeping with his new Brooks Brothers shirt – buttoned down, factory pressed – but he emphasized the word “case” reverently. Hegel liked that.

“We won’t have to wait long,” he said. He knew it was already behind them when they met on the street.

The bar in the basement of the Wolford Hotel was Hegel Jones’ preferred location to begin anything.

Smoke hung in the air like suspended fingerprints in a humid fog. Yellow tape crisscrossed the wall behind their booth along lines where the plaster was cracked and whenever a streetcar rumbled outside, tiny clouds of dust puffed from under the tape. With the exception of the bartender and the waitress who served their beers, Fantomas and Jones were the only people there. Or so it seemed.

“Still saving the world, Mr. Jones?” She winked at the detective as she placed two small napkins, then frosted mugs on top of them.

“...my second office,” the detective explained before Fantomas asked, “...it’s an easy spot for me to notice out-of-place things.” Hegel watched Fantomas stare at the waitress’ black skirt swishing on her way back to the mahogany bar.

He was still staring at the metronome of her skirt when, for no apparent reason, or rather, for no reason apparent to him, the detective bolted from the booth and disappeared outside. When he moved at all, Jones moved like an alley cat toward his next meal – one step from the booth and he was gone.

Alone in the odd-yet-generic hotel bar located in one of his least favorite neighborhoods, Fantomas finished his beer. Then he finished the detective’s beer. At this juncture, either Hegel Jones was coming back, or he wasn’t, and Fantomas lacked enough evidence to draw a conclusion. He pulled the notebook from his overcoat, paused thoughtfully, then wrote the following observation about the early stage of mystery stories:

Unlike the Detective who actively seeks to learn what he does not yet know, the Writer has few practical tools for his investigations, nothing but his or her Imagination. For this reason, the Writer is often confused by unpredictable behaviors and unexplained events, always in need of a governing principle to inform what is coming, what he should do, where he should go, and in the meanwhile, he can only write and wait because he does not yet know what comes next...

At that moment, Hegel Jones reappeared in the doorway of the Wolford Hotel bar, his dark figure surrounded by blinding light from the outside sun. He was perspiring, as if he'd been running, but he was not out of breath, and Fantomas noted the detective seemed to be in better physical condition than his wrinkled appearance indicated.

Fantomas asked, somewhat indirectly, what to do and where to go next, seeking guidance from a detective that didn't enjoy verbal gamesmanship. In fact, Hegel Jones despised unnecessary eloquence. Jones looked at the empty beer mugs, frowned, then asked the writer a question that startled him, plot already moving in a different direction as he looked up from the page he was writing.

"How long has that man been following you?" Hegel asked. His steel-gray eyes forced a small shiver that trickled down the writer's spine like a Zen proverb looking for a new home.

"What man?" Fantomas asked.

Hegel winced and groaned, simultaneously, as if they were two sides of the same behavioral coin. His client seemed to know even less about his own predicament than the detective. He waved to catch the attention of the waitress, pointed to the empty mugs, and slid back into the upholstered seat of their booth. The green Naugahyde cushion exhaled beneath him.

"Mr. Fantomas," Jones said, slowly, as one might speak to children or neighbors that haven't yet learned conversational English, "What is it, exactly, that you want me to do?"

There was a brief and awkward silence, like the empty space between two paragraphs or the empty seat between strangers on a bus, then Fantomas explained his reason for seeking the detective's assistance.

"I'm looking for the solution to the story that I'm writing," and when his client looked away, then back in the detective's direction, Hegel realized the man was serious. "I need you to solve this story for me, find the solution to my mystery..."

Something whispered to the detective, something imminent and off-key, something that concerned him the way he disliked comic books "To Be Continued" as a boy. It wasn't a boring story, Hegel knew that, but it wasn't going to be easy, either. He instructed Fantomas to meet him back at the office in sixty minutes, then he moved from the booth, moving fast, back into the sunlit street, working the sidewalk alone and alert.

Fantomas was writing again, and Hegel Jones was on a Case. Neither knew what to expect, that's just the kind of case it was.

One man turned the corner, the other turned the page.

It wasn't going to be easy.

\* \* \*

\*

## EVEN THE TREES

Kaighla Rises

Grief called me  
to the Autumn woods  
where only the young trees stand  
proud, still clinging  
to their lime leaves  
ill-prepared and unwilling  
(like me, like me!)  
to release their liquid sunlight  
and the ancient ones watch  
naked in the wisdom  
of a hundred winters  
and as many springs

ALL I BRING IS MY HEART  
Kaighla Rises

She meets me in the woods  
naked, unashamed  
We two, erstwhile foes  
find solace  
in the throes  
of an ancient grace

THIRST  
Kaighla Rises

With a thimbleful of sweet rain  
she grew a garden, overflowing  
Acres of joy, seeded from pain—  
a second Eden, ever-growing  
she and her garden, the twain  
stand open-mouthed in waiting  
as the light, ever-fading  
steals silent away, abating  
and the night rushes in  
again.

## RAIN SONG

Kaighla Rises

Bemused  
I watch the water dance  
downward, cascading rivulets  
of life-source slip  
(unharried, nonplussed)  
through solid rock  
Yet I break my bones  
beating on doors, secured  
with adamantíne locks

## DON'T CALL IT LOVE

Kaighla Rises

It's blood and it's fire  
that makes me stronger  
by melting me down  
to my core components  
and beating me  
into a more purposeful thing  
(a sharp and sturdy and fearsome thing)  
"Love" is too weak a word  
to describe the wild, all-consuming flame  
that erupted in me when  
I became his mother.

RUMI, STAND GUARD

Kaighla Rises

You're watching me, memorizing how  
I see me, how  
I speak Life to the girl  
(the one within)  
Thunder, I say, let it roll  
Come loud, strike fear  
Lightning muse, you  
Stand guard the wall  
Around your heart-home  
Brutal, stand, and none shall pass, who  
Carry ought but tidings, glad  
Thunder wild and lightning, mad  
And mark your mother's shadowfall  
With Light, all else be damned

## GOLDIE, CHIEF OF BELIEF

Angela Rossi

Her mother whispered to Goldie:  
God said: *Of all that there were and all that will be,  
nothing in the world is more precious as thee.*

A few years passed and Goldie grew big. She could run,  
sing and play as her big brothers did.

Her beauty was admired wherever she'd go.  
Her joyful heart would steal the show.

Nothing was impossible for Goldie to be.  
For she had the power of the kingdom, you see.

When dark clouds covered everything in sight.  
Goldie stood tall and would head towards the light.

One year the fog seemed never to clear  
She could not see herself, not even in a mirror.

The weight of the world was too much to carry.  
Everything felt heavy, lonely and scary.

One evening in her room, 20 past 7, Goldie's heart broke in half  
and she cried out to heaven.

*I can't take anymore! I can't find the light!  
I'm tired, I'm weary and I simply can't fight!*

Goldie hid in her room day after day.  
The bad feelings grew bigger and didn't go away.

The town of Belief watched Summer turn to Fall.  
*Be mindful what you plant they said, in harvest, it grows tall.*

In the stillness of Winter she could hear a small voice;  
*Fear not, I am with you, and you do have a choice.*

The air grew warm and the sun stayed up late  
Goldie's strides grew bigger as she stepped into faith.

As her eyes opened slowly, she was circled in light.  
The city of Belief formed weapons in the night.

The next morning came and she awoke with the dawn.  
There was light breaking through and she heard her life song.

*Beauty from ashes and never give up,  
You can't pour out to others with a half empty cup.*

So little by little and day by day, Goldie would listen to what her heart would say.

Deep down inside was a leader, a chief.  
Goldie just needed to step into belief.

She spent most of the days on the outside looking in  
But today she was ready. Goldie let herself win.

## FORBIDDEN

Carol Santos

Dare we?  
dare we even to look  
towards tomorrow  
when they've only just  
allowed us to have today?

May we  
trust in mankind  
to be kind  
or should we remain constantly  
on guard?

Your eyes  
shine, gazing into mine  
and you whisper  
"blue"  
it makes me smile

For we,  
we are a contrast in colors  
of pinks, blues, whites, reds  
and browns

Blended  
together creating a  
collage  
a variety of fragments  
in union

Not us  
we aren't begging anyone  
for anything  
but equal chance  
for love or

Whatever  
may occur between us  
when we are together  
when we laugh  
or cry

We hold  
outstretched in our hands  
happiness, fragile  
it would shatter if we should  
grab it

Because  
of this, we have no way  
to protect it  
from others' destructive  
hands

We wait  
breathless to see  
each minute's loveliness  
knowing that tomorrow  
it may be

Lost Forever



Untitled  
(Photograph by Dante Dellamore)

# THE ONLY DAMN TRUTH THERE IS

Matthew Stover

INTRODUCTION

AN HISTORICAL NOTE

Dictated by

P. Caleb Taverner, Esq.

ON ACCOUNT OF HE DON'T READ.

There's two kind of folks as have met Jericho Dusk: them as met the man, and them as only say they has. It's my fortune to be the first kind.

Can't say I knew him, understand, as I met him only the one time and this just before the start of the Luciferian Rebellion, when he weren't quite so infamous as he has come to be in the considerable span of years since. Not to say he were obscure in them days, nor anything resembling ordinary; it were only that near to everybody thought him mostly a legend, like Marek Vain and his sister Tamar and the rest of them folk as brought about the end of the Mage War and saved what was left of our sad world.

In them days, folk as knew he were real figured he were long dead, for he is known to have been a man of mature season even in the Mage War, and some eighty-odd years had passed since, and so it is a matter of some curiosity that at the time I made his brief acquaintance, he appeared as a man navigating the passage of his sixth decade, if one allowed that the creases on his face making him look ten or twenty years older were likely the products of wind and doom burn and the hard drink he certainly favored. I have it upon reputable authority that he appears unchanged to this very day.

It's right over there in that corner he were sitting, at that very table, though the table's been broke and fixed again some several times since he used it. This were my Uncle Jem's place

in them days, as I were still of a size to walk upright under a horse without losing my cap. Uncle Jem had put me to work slopping floors and mucking stalls by way of learning our trade.

Old Jericho mostly just kept himself lonesome at that table all day long, boots up and hat down, pistola and frogsticker on his belt, sipping straight corn from a mug as somehow never went empty. Near as I know, all he said that whole day long were to ask me iffen I'd heard tell of a doomcaster over to some steddee out west of here, and I told him I dint know what a doomcaster were esposed to be – nobody did, in them days – and anyway who's asking, and he told me flat out, and accourst I dint believe him, and said so. He just smiled and said I would, someday.

Guess he were right.

But anyways this crawler jockey off the Palark caravan heard him say his name and calt him a liar and he just kept smiling and went back to his sipping, and the driver who give him the lie wouldn't let it go and there developed a bit of ruckus which came to a stop with three hard men – the driver and a couple caravan hevies as were his pals – bleeding on the floor without Jericho even so much as skinned a blade, and himself gone off into the night, and I never did see him again. It's fair to say there's folk as know moren I ever will about what he did after.

There's some as debate how Jericho Dusk came to be how he is; I've heard educated men offer up a plenitude of persuasive explanations whose only commonality is the assertion that every other explanation is a damn lie. For my own part, I have always favored the simplest story, that it were the doing of God His Own Self.

The tale runs that God His Own Self come down to Marek and Tamar and Jericho at their lowest point in the depths of the Mage War, when it were just the three of them alone endeavoring to strike a peace between the battling Archmagi who'd already destroyed the Old World and were making fair to destroy what was left of the New. God says to the Three that He will gift them each with their fondest heart's desire.

Marek Vain, he asks to be an Archmage so great as to give him dominion over all the lands of the Earth. God says, "Now your words become My Own," which is why folk to this day pray to Marek as we once upon a time prayed to Jesus and His saints.

His sister Tamar, gentle soul as she were, asks only to bring a permanent end to the Mage War and save such as were left of the human race. God says, "Your words become My Own," which is why the Dominions of the Archmagi are but islands in the Doom Soul, so as to hinder the use of magery in any mischief they might contrive upon each other.

Then God asks Jericho the same, but old Jericho just sits on a rock with a flask in one hand, cigar in his mouth and pistola on his hip, and he don't have a lick to say.

Now God His Own Self, coming grumpy as He's less than accustomed to being left awaiting, commands Jericho again what he wants. And old Jericho only says, "Guess my friends got it covered." And God says, "Everybody wants something. Power. Riches. Love. Salvation. Name your heart's desire or go to your grave knowing you refused the freely offered gift of the Lord your God, and with that knowledge let your soul roast eternal in the fires of Hell."

"Can't scare me, old man," says Jericho. "Long as I got a drink, a smoke and a weapon, I'll probly live forever."

"Your words become My Own," says God His Own Self, which is why Jericho Dusk don't age a day in a year, and if you meet him he'll be armed, likely smoking and barely half sober, and he's scared of exactly nothing in this world nor the next one neither.

Now, you maybe think this version don't seem likely, and maybe it ain't so much. But I met the man and you dint, and I maybe know a thing here and there as you never even thought of, and maybe I ain't too shy to rear up on my hind legs and meet the eye of any swamp-bottom piss puddle like your own self and put my hand to God as it don't matter a lick iffen it happened that way or not.

When you drop hard right down on it, a good story's pretty much the only damn truth there is.

CHAPTER ONE:  
OLD MAN JAKE

The old man came out of the Doom Soul on foot.

Contrary to the general opinion of the folk of the Dominions, this was not wholly impossible, given a short enough timespan; the Residuum Desolation was in itself lethal only incrementally.

He might have wandered off a caravan some few days ago, if one had strayed disastrously far from its established route. He might have been lucky with water and luckier with doom count; he might have been hardy enough to eat sagewheat and spine apples, tough enough to fend off bloodrocs and dust gators and nightmare creatures of every imaginable configuration, and savvy enough to dodge crazed Lucy chewers and bands of Soul raiders.

So it was possible to survive for a few days. Even a week, maybe, if one used up a whole lifetime's supply of luck.

His face was sun and doom burned till it was creased and cracked as an old pair of boots, and his formerly black hair was shot through with the same silver that painted more thickly his beard. If you have a touch of Seeing and you were to catch him on a moonless midnight with only the glow of campfire embers between you, you might be able to trace the outline of an ancient magemark of obscure design upon his brow: an inverted triangle with a line bisecting its downward angle and terminating in the middle of the top side. Even then it's just a pale ghost image, like a tanned-over scar from childhood or the remnant of a bleached-out tattoo.

He was less than tall without being actually short, and the shaggy dust-colored coat he

wore sagged from his square shoulders to well below his knees, and went some way toward concealing that he was built like a scarecrow made out of beef jerky and cordwood. Over that coat he wore slung a battered alloy canteen with the legend DUNT TOUCH scratched deep into both sides. On one hip rested a scabbard that held a huge knife, or small backsword, depending on your preference; its blade was three fingers wide and had a clip point sturdy as a spear. On his other hip rode a holster of age-blackened leather holding an antique striker pistol.

He looked old, buck mean, and dangerous, and was all three – except he was meaner than he looked, and more dangerous, and far, far older. Not to mention lucky and hardy and tough and savvy, and a good many other things besides. He considered himself to be, now as he stopped and stared at the black smear of luciferia shimmering in its own heat below the watchtowers of the Rock Steddee lucy camp on the horizon, just about every damn thing but smart.

Was he really going to do this?

Apparently he was, as he had made up his mind some weeks ago and had discovered nothing in the meantime to incline him to change it. And he did have a plan, for whatever it might be worth. His usual plan. He figured to walk into Rock Steddee and set about lying, cheating, stealing and hurting people until every last uppity fuck knuckle within reach settled down and did as they were told.

A twist of scrub lucy he stood on hissed at him and struck at his boot with its needle thorns. The tough leather turned the thorns aside, and he crushed the scrub beneath his heel. The sap leaking from the broken thorns sparked and kindled in the dry desert air, and he stepped away from the burning bush.

He stood and watched the flames for a moment, but if God had anything to say, He chose not to share.

A League of Reason patrol came for him before he reached the first stand of black lucy. Three of them, on broad sleek blizzards, trundled over a rise half a mile away, their trademark charcoal

armor splotching the yellow smear of the horizon.

The old man kept walking.

They fanned out as they came. A hundred yards out, one of them reined in and dismounted. He ground-tied his blizzard, pulled an arkay long gun out of a saddle scabbard and tucked it into the joint between his armor's chest and shoulder plates. The old man noted approvingly that the other two, as they continued to approach, stayed well clear of the first's line of fire. He always preferred to deal with professionals.

Professionals are predictable.

The oncoming Rationals reined in a short pistol-shot away. "Hey," one said in an unfriendly tone. "What in hell you doing out here?"

"Walking."

"I see that, you dumb shit. Where d'you think you're going?"

The old man raised a finger and angled it toward Rock Steddee.

"You think," the other Rational said with a snort.

"That's what he asked. What I think." Somewhere in that reply lurked an implicit *shithead*, but the old man was disinclined to say it out loud.

The first said, "And where in hell'd you come from, anyway?"

The old man jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the trackless waste of the Doom Soul.

"The hell you say."

The old man forbore to point out that he hadn't actually said.

"Well," the second one said. "I guess you're coming with us. Take off that gun belt. Nice and slow." His tone added *or we'll take it off your body*, an unnecessary admonition, considering the source; Rational orders are always backed by lethal force.

The old man took off the gun belt as directed: nice and slow.

"Keep both hands on the buckle. Bring it over here."

The old man swung wide around the blizzard's muzzle – even with its shock harness strapped securely around its face, the huge saurian might feel inclined to take a chunk out of

him – and offered his gun belt up with both hands. The Rational took it. “Where’d you get the pistola, old timer? Must be older’n you are.”

The old man shrugged. The weapon was pre-War; had he been any kind of normal person, it would have been a *lot* older than he was. But he wasn’t, and it wasn’t, and he didn’t feel any inclination to pop the lid on either of those age-related septic tanks, so he let the shrug stand as his whole response.

The Rational fumbled with the antique pistol until he managed to find the thumb release and pop the magazine out. He squinted at the chalky beige blocks of the caseless rounds inside. “Where’s a fella come by ammo for a piece like this?”

“Depends on the fella.”

The Rational waited for more on the subject, but in the right mood – or wrong one, depending which end of the conversation you’re on – the old man could be patient as a stone and not a great deal more verbal.

Eventually the Rational snorted and shook his head. “Well, ain’t you the chatty summabitch? What’s your name?”

“Folks call me Jake.”

“Didn’t ask what folks *call* you.”

The old man shrugged again. “Jericho.”

The first Rational laughed. “Your momma named you for Jericho Dusk? Ain’t that bad luck or something?”

“Seems to be,” the old man allowed. “Call me Jake.”

“The hell I will. C’mon, *Jericho*, we’re gonna see the boss.” He tilted his helmet toward the camp on the horizon. “Start walking.”

The old man started walking. As the Rationals brought their mounts around behind him, he allowed himself one fleeting half-nod of private satisfaction.

So far, so good.

There are a variety of explanations as to how Rock Steddee came by its name, the most obvious among them being that it might have been only a pale gesture toward humor; after all, within a few hundred miles around were Doom Soul steddees that went by Nicen and Notso and Keepit, and plenty more in that vein.

One more likely is that the steddee had been named after the sandstone escarpment on which it had been founded, and which had provided the primary building material for its initial scatter of permanent structures. The stone of that escarpment, the walls made from it, and the Boogie Crick ravine system it overlooked, all went a long way toward protecting its inhabitants from many of the more common hazards of the Soul.

It's also possible that Freddie Jefferson, who originally settled the spot with his beloved husband Johnny only a double handful of years out from the Mage War, found inspiration in the lyric of a legendary folk song of a couple-three centuries back, "When Johnny Strikes Up the Band." This is the story generally favored by the more sentimental of Rock Steddee's long-term residents, who traditionally join together to sing that number as a way of kicking off their occasional celebrations.

Most likely, though, is that Freddie didn't name the place himself, and that it came to be called Rock only later, after the Lords of the Dominions contrived to equip the steddee with a round dozen mage doors of its own, each one opened only by its mirroring door in each of the Dominions.

It had become useful, as the Dominions flourished, for the Archmagi who ruled them to have places to quietly banish miscreants too troublesome to be tolerated in polite society, but who might be inconvenient to simply murder. Doom Soul steddees were preferred for this usage, as the residuum toxicity, that had so poisoned the land as to make escape attempts generally lethal, also very effectively suppressed any dangerous mageries said miscreants might otherwise manifest. And it was a hundred miles off the nearest caravan route; for anyone other than, say, the old man, it was accessible only by the mage doors.

In this version, the settlement took its name from a legendary island institution that once

had stood in what had been known, before the Lacuna and the Mage War that followed, as San Francisco Bay.

Rock Steddee was not the only prison settlement in the Doom Soul – there always seem to be more inconvenient people than there are places to stash them – but it was the largest and most secure, and certainly the most profitable, because it spread across the bluffs downstream from what was, at the time, the largest and most fecund stand of wild luciferia so far discovered on the continent.

The entire steddee was organized in support of the transportee work gangs who were marched out into the ravines every morning and marched in again at night. As the League of Reason troopers who herded the transportees liked to say, there were two kinds of folks in Rock Steddee: People with guns, and people who cut Lucy.

It's worth noting that this (like most popular sayings) was not even notionally true; there were also cooks and cleaners, carpenters and wheelwrights and blizzard wranglers, a fair number of serfs tending the spray of truck gardens within walking distance, a master blacksmith and three apprentices, several working brewers, mess crew and personal valets for League of Reason officers, and of course whores of every gender and a bewildering variety of specialties.

None of these wore guns of their own, as possession of any variety of firearm in the steddee's environs was, on pain of death, restricted to Rationals alone. Even a bow and arrow could buy you a week in the pits, and if you were to be found with so much as a sling of David, there stood a better-than-even chance they'd use it to flog you till your back was bloody as a raw steak.

The blizzard troopers handed off the old man to a footpost squad on the outskirts of town. There was the usual amount of back-and-forth in low tones, a bit extra side-eye and a couple of snorts that he figured probably had to do with his name. He didn't mind. This name, like all the others he occasionally favored, was only a temporary convenience.

As a pair of foot troopers marched him through the settlement, the old man noted with detached interest some several changes since he'd last been there. He didn't bother to calculate

how many years might have actually passed since his most recent visit; time, like other aspects of reality, could be mildly uncertain in the Soul.

In addition to the familiar squared-off spread of hemp canvas wall-tents, the original sandstone structures had been supplemented by maybe a dozen cob longhouses that he guessed held bunks for new transportees, as well as a hundred or so similarly constructed small homes for the more prosperous long-term residents. Wood was precious, but two things Rock Steddee never ran short of were mud and shit.

The rest of Rock Steddee was much the same as he remembered, only bigger, newer and fancier. The lacy works downslope from the League of Reason strongpoint, though larger than he remembered, still belched the same stinking black smoke that could burn through the beak of a turkey vulture. There were still crates of denatured luciferia and barrels of its extracted oil stacked on pallets in the four mage-door plazas, waiting for pickup by the next Dominion crawler train to materialize through the massive arches. These pallets were attended by the usual clipboard-toting clerks and thick-shouldered loaders, but there were more of all of them. And there appeared to be a fire team of armored Rationals assigned to guard each plaza and its contents.

More impressively, the settlement now boasted several actual flagstone streets, including a shop-and-tavern-lined main drag bookended by the two huge stone watchtowers he had seen from the distance. The watchtowers provided vantages for snipers overlooking the ravine system and lacy swamps, as well as platforms for roof-mounted heavy weapons. He couldn't tell from the hulking silhouettes exactly what the fixed weapons might be; wide-angle sonics, he guessed, to deter bloodroc mobs and slaughterbat swarms, and probably blister beams to drive off ground prey large enough to attract dust gators and wild blizzards.

Row upon row of bright new stonework had doubled the volume of the cistern tower within the strongpoint's horseshoe curtain wall, and the creaky steam pump that had formerly drawn drinking water up the pipeline from the crick below had been replaced with a throbbing diesel. The barrack bastions – also recently expanded, judging by the fresh-cut look of the

stone – might now accommodate a full company or more.

Looked like the League had been expecting trouble for a while now, which the old man considered remarkably prescient, given how he had only just today arrived in town.

The troopers delivered him to one part of Rock Steddee that didn't seem to have changed at all: the inside of the League strongpoint's stockade. The old man reflected briefly on the numerous intervals in his long, long life spent in jails of one sort or another, and decided that this one was very possibly the nicest.

Certainly cleaner and better-smelling than the Mission District's Social Police lockup or the catfighter pens in Kirisch-Nar, for example. Not quite so well-appointed as the Riverdock vigilry in Purthin's Ford, but here at least he was unlikely to get his aged ass beaten to paste by a cheerfully sadistic superhero.

The plastered interior walls were smooth and white as linen paper, the rammed earth floor freshly groomed and spotless, and a hot breeze trickled through the slatted window blinds. A matched pair of troopers manned the platformed desk that faced the door. Exactly as the stockade had been on his most recent arrival. Though these all must have been replaced, repaired, and resurfaced in the years since, as the room showed no longer even the slightest reminder of the bullet holes, bloodstains, and general wreckage he had left behind on his most recent departure.

The desk troopers took charge of his gun belt and canteen – which he passed carefully to them by the strap, after pointing out the legend scratched into its sides – and they informed him he'd be enjoying their hospitality for the night.

They did not have to mention that come morning, he'd be scheduled for hanging within the week, and that afterward his stripped corpse would be fed to the blizzards in the League paddock. He knew how it worked. People who unexpectedly show up armed in Rock Steddee are presumed to be either infiltrators planning to extract a high-value transportee, or gangsters angling to carve off a piece of the Lucy trade.

And in this specific instance, they would not be entirely wrong on either count.

Which did not trouble him in the least. He was exactly where he wanted to be. After all, what's the easiest way to find somebody in a prison?

You make the guards get him for you.

The sergeant directing his official welcome – that is, his strip-down and cavity search – was also new since his last visit. Probably. The six hash marks on her chest armor proclaimed her a thirty-year veteran, so she could have been posted here already in those days, but he didn't recognize her, and she didn't seem to know him.

She introduced herself as Bragg – first name, apparently, Master Sergeant. She was bigger than the old man in every dimension and looked to be even meaner. Her scalp was shaved clean and polished till it shone like a walnut knob, and was likely every bit as hard. The dark half-moons of age and fatigue below her eyes were on the left joined to the crooked corner of her mouth by a jagged knife-scar, the kind you get when whoever's trying to kill you isn't too diligent about sharpening the nicks out of their blade, and the finger she stuck in his butt might as well have been the business end of her baton.

It was, inevitably, just then that she decided to strike up a conversation. "They tell me you're supposed to be Jericho Dusk."

As this was not a question, he didn't offer an answer.

Her baton-finger jammed deeper. "I'm talking to you."

The old man flinched, then sighed. "Yeah? I got distracted by you excavating my asshole."

She snorted, vacated his rectum, then turned to the pitcher basin beside her to wash her hands before pulling her gauntlet back on and buckling it to the vambrace around her thick forearm. She didn't invite him to dress himself. He didn't mind. Over the better part of two decades in his young manhood, he'd pursued a spectacular career as a particularly violent variety of porn star. Body modesty was as alien to his nature as pacifism.

"If you're really Jericho Dusk, you have some considerable years on you. What, a buck

thirty and change? One forty?”

“Feels like it, some days.”

“Got quite the physique for a fella that age.”

“Thanks.”

“More’n your share of scars, too. Even leaving out the whip marks.” She touched the three-inch white line on his back and frowned at the matching one on his front where a Household Knight had put a broadsword through his liver a long, long time ago. “This alone shoulda killed you. Bayonet?”

“Something like that.”

“How’d you live through it?”

“Luck, mostly.” And the kind of high-tech medical care that had vanished forever in the Lacuna, but he left that part out.

“Must have been some clever stitch-work, too. And from what I see, you probly shoulda lost that arm, and maybe this leg too. Lucky for damn sight sure. You must be hell on wheels at a card table.”

He shrugged. He didn’t gamble.

Not for money, anyway.

She pointed to another cluster. “And what are these here from?”

“Bullets. Couple of them, anyway. The rest are shrapnel.”

“You been shot with actual *bullets*?”

“They ain’t recent.”

“Who in hell gets shot with bullets these days?”

“Mostly people who piss me off.”

“Oh, sure. I almost forgot.” She ambled over to the front desk and took his pistol from one of the matched troopers. She weighed it in her hand admiringly. “This is surely a thing of beauty, I don’t mind saying. A classic. I only seen pictures before. Where’d you get it?”

“From a fella who didn’t need one anymore.”

“Like a gift?”

“More like an inheritance.”

She hefted it again and squinted down the sights. “Ever think you might sell it? Gotta be worth a bag to collectors in the Dominions. A *big* bag.”

“Don’t need money.” And he didn’t go into the Dominions, but he left that part out too.

“Says the man without one zinc penny.” She waved the pistol toward the pile of his clothes and possessions, which had already been searched in detail. “How about you tell me who you really are?”

“I’m thinking it’s a little late in the day for a story that long.” He was also thinking that for a guy who only a couple hours ago had been firmly resolved to lie like a stolen rug, he’d told already entirely too much truth.

His late father had subscribed to the philosopher’s leap of faith: the conviction that bald truth is somehow – mystically, maybe – innately superior to even the most useful falsehood. The old man, on the other hand, had no convictions at all in the usual sense of the word. His long life had taught him that principles are useful mostly because it’s easier to manipulate people who have them. What served him instead was purely esthetic inclination. Put simply, truth pleased him when he could tell it – a matter of taste, not conviction. And truth bid fair to get him exactly what he wanted right now, so why not keep it up? “I go by Jake.”

“So I hear. Short for Jericho, idnit?”

He shrugged.

“Jericho what?”

Another shrug. “Dusk.”

“Come on.”

It was as close to true as any of the dozens of other answers he might have offered. “People who know me, that’s how they know me.”

“Your real name. The one your parents gave you.”

“That ain’t real. They hadn’t even met me yet.”

She put the pistol back down on the desk behind her. Her gauntlet creaked as she made a fist. The riveted knuckle bands on that gauntlet showed considerable wear and tear, which presumably had resulted from sudden close contact with a significant number of unfortunate faces. “Don’t test me, old timer. You won’t like what comes after.”

This was usually true, though what usually came after did not strongly resemble the outcome she would be currently anticipating. He sighed. “Your folks name you Master Sergeant?”

She did not look amused. “Think real careful about what you say next.”

“Your idea is, some nice couple name of Dusk had a son fifty years before the Mage War and hung Jericho on him? As a joke, maybe? Come on yourself.”

“Why’d you pick it, then?”

“Ever read the Bible?”

“Not as much my momma thinks I should.”

“Let’s just say that once I hit town, folks got maybe a week till some asshole burns the place to the ground and salts the earth it stood on.”

“Jericho. Sure. And you’re this asshole?”

“Have been once or twice.”

She leaned back onto the front desk, folded her arms across her breastplate and nodded judiciously. “Well. I guess that makes sense about your *first* name.”

The old man sighed. “By sundown there was nothing left to do but kill everybody left over.”

She shook her head, wearing a disbelieving smile. “You are in the wrong place to be making threats, old timer, and I am the wrong sergeant to be making them to. Specially when you ain’t even wearing pants.”

“Just the short version of the story of my life.”

“Spect the long one’s another we ain’t got time for.”

She could have no idea how true that was. “Mind if I get dressed?”

“Soon as I get some pictures. My cappy likes pictures.”

“Of my dick?”

“Face, tattoos, identifying marks. You got a shit ton of identifying marks. Cappy’ll want them recorded.” She beckoned to one of the desk troopers, who pulled a hand imager out of a bottom drawer and passed it to her. “Stand against that wall.”

“Waste of time.”

“My cappy thinks otherwise.”

“You’ll see.” He sighed and leaned against the wall. “Have better luck with a pencil and sketch paper.”

“I ain’t artistic.” She steadied the imager with both hands. “Don’t move.”

The imager chimed. She pulled the plate cartridge out of its base and scowled at it. “What the hell? Is this thing busted? Parker!”

One of the deskies flinched at her tone, and had to swallow before he could answer. “Yeah, Top?”

“You play with this, you dumb shit?”

“Never, Top! I swear!” The trooper licked his lips. “I just keep it in the drawer. Honest!”

“It was fine yesterday.”

The old man said, “It’s fine now.”

She wheeled her scowl in his direction. “What would you know about it?”

“It’s an arkay imager,” the old man said patiently. “Residuokinesis gets weird around me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Weird how?”

“It mostly fails.”

“Bullshit.”

“Try another picture, if you want.”

“With a busted imager? What’ll that prove?”

The old man rubbed his eyes. Talking about this always seemed to raise a headache. He nodded toward her sidearm, the same matte charcoal as her armor. "What's on your belt there, a tangler?"

"Restraint pistol, if you need to know."

"You charge it yourself? Practice with it? Make sure it's working right?"

Her whole face clenched like a fist. "I am going to pretend you didn't just ask if I'm a pigfucking rook."

"All right, then." He slapped his bare chest over his heart. "Gimme a burst."

"Think again, old timer. A holdshot's no spring shower."

"If it'll make you feel better, I can jump you and smack you one."

She shook her head and sighed as though she already mildly regretted what she was about to do. "Don't trouble yourself."

She pulled the arkay pistol like an old pro, smooth and not too fast, no wasted motion, and the crackle of blue energy that lanced from its emitter lit up the room like summer lightning. The arc terminated at the old man's bare chest and splintered into a cascade of sparks crawling over his skin, which on any ordinary person would trigger every voluntary motor nerve to lock their skeletal muscles into convulsive spasm and topple them like a shoved-over tombstone, leaving them rigid on the floor in spastic paralysis until exhaustion snuffed their consciousness.

As he only superficially resembled an ordinary person, the old man's entire reaction was sigh not unlike hers: long and slow and apologetic.

The sergeant could only gape and murmur, "Son of a *bitch*."

"Okay if I get dressed now?"

"Uh, Top?" the other deskie said hesitantly. "They did say he come out the Soul. On foot. Like as he were only on a Sunday walk. And he don't look even doomsick."

"This ain't possible. None of it. At all."

"Why do you think my pistol's mechanical?" the old man said. "A fashion thing?"

"You have begun to try my patience, old man."

“Maybe . . .” the old man said, as casually as he could manage, because alerting the League of Reason to the presence of a doomcaster in these parts would be an inescapably catastrophic idea, even if he could convince them there existed such a creature in the first place. “Maybe you should check with your arkaynist.”

She snorted. “And after that, I can get tongued by Marek Vain. An arkaynist, for shit’s sake. Where do you think you are right now?”

“Uh, Top?” the first deskie interjected. “What about whasisname – the monkey boy?”

“The what now?”

“You know, that foreign kid with the hair, at the Lucy works. The punkinhead. Ain’t he like a washout from some Guild school or something?”

Her face cleared. “Penwick.”

“That’s him.”

“Go get him. Bring him here.”

“I’ll send a detail –”

“Listen to what I said.”

The deskie opened his mouth to respond, then registered the glare in her stare and thought better of it. His mouth still hung open as he cleared the door.

*Penwick*, the old man repeated silently. At least now he had a name.

The sergeant turned back to the old man. “What’s he gonna tell me when he gets here?”

“Guess we’ll find out together.”

“Who are you? Straight now. Who are you really?”

For the first time that day, the old man straight-up smiled.

“Call me Jake.”

\* \* \*

## THE TOOTH FAIRY

Robert L. Switzer

My Daddy has gone off to fight in the Big War. He's a sailor. We have a star for him in our front window. He's been gone a long, long time. I don't even remember when he went away. I will know what he looks like when he comes home, because we have a big picture of him on our living room table. He's wearing his dark blue sailor suit and a round white hat on his head. He's grinning at me like he's not afraid of anything. I like to look at the picture. My Mommy bought me a sailor suit like Daddy's, and I wear it to church. I like to wear it because people say I look cute and my Daddy would be proud of me. Every night I get down on my knees by my bed before I go to sleep and I ask God to please, please bring my Daddy home safe to me.

Homer Wilson says my Daddy can't come home until we kill all the Japs. Homer is a big boy who lives down the block. He finished third grade already and he knows a lot. He says the Japs are really mean and they are killing our men. He said they might kill my Daddy, and I cried and I hit him and ran home.

My Mommy said not to listen to Homer, that he was being cruel. I wish my Mommy was around more, but she has to work in a factory making stuff for the Big War. She goes off in the morning with a lunch pail when it's just getting light and comes back at suppertime. We hurry over to Grandma's house in the morning and I stay with her all day, because it's summer and there's no school. Grandma feels nice and soft to hug, but she doesn't like to play with trains or toy soldiers. Her house smells like cinnamon buns and furniture polish. There's no toys at Grandma's house, so Mommy and I always bring some along. Grandma doesn't want me to run around hitting things with sticks. And I'm not supposed to dig in the sand pile next door where they started to build a house and then quit when the War started. She is kind of sad all the time. She says she just wants the War to be over and her son back.

But she is teaching me Mother Goose rhymes and how to read books and add numbers. Mommy says I'll be happier in the fall when I can go to second grade with the big kids like Homer and I won't have to stay with Grandma all day.

A while ago I had a loose tooth for a week. It was right in the front, and it kept wiggling around when I touched it with my tongue. Grandma said it was one of my baby teeth and it was going to fall out and a new one would grow in its place. She tried to hold me in her lap and pull it out with her fingers, but I wriggled free and ran away. I was afraid it would hurt, so I just kept it in my mouth. But it got looser and looser. One day when I was eating a sandwich, it came out in my mouth. There was some blood on the bread, but it didn't hurt much. It sure felt funny to have a big empty place between my teeth, and my tongue kept going there.

Grandma and Mommy said I should be sure to save the tooth and put it under my pillow when I went to bed so the Tooth Fairy could get it. I wanted to keep it in my box of Special Treasures, but Mommy said the Tooth Fairy would give me a reward for it. So that night, after I asked God to bring my Daddy home safe, I put the tooth under my pillow, and, sure enough, when I woke up in the morning the tooth was gone, and there was a beautiful new shiny dime! The Tooth Fairy must have come and taken the tooth and left the dime while I was asleep.

When Mommy comes home from work, we go home and Mommy makes supper. She's pretty tired at night, but she reads to me and listens to my Mother Goose rhymes and plays games with me. Once in a while there's a letter from Daddy. It comes in a special envelop with red and white stripes on it, and it's written on real thin paper. Daddy always puts in a letter just for me, and Mommy reads it to me. Sometimes he draws pictures of ships and islands and fish that he sees. One time Mommy's letter had some black marks on it. Mommy said the Navy censors did that so the Japs wouldn't know where Daddy was. Mommy reads her letter to herself. Sometimes she laughs and sometimes she cries a little.

Once in a while, Johnny P. comes over to visit Mommy and me in the evening. Johnny works in the factory with Mommy. I don't know whether I like Johnny or not. He always brings me candy, and candy is really, really hard to get, but he smokes a lot when he's here and he smells like cigarettes. He sits close to my Mommy and he's always saying, "Isn't it time for you to go to bed yet, kid?"

The next time I had a loose tooth and I was wiggling it around with my tongue, I told Homer that I was going to save it and put it under my pillow for the Tooth Fairy. Homer laughed at me and said there wasn't any such thing as fairies. So I got to thinking, if there wasn't any Tooth Fairy, how did my tooth get turned into that flat shiny dime? I thought maybe the weight of my head on the pillow smashed the tooth flat and squeezed it into the silver dime. That seemed like a good idea to me, but I didn't tell Homer, because he makes me mad when he laughs at me, just because he's nine and he's going to be in the fourth grade already. So when the tooth came out, I put it under the pillow again. But in the morning there were two nickels instead of a dime! I couldn't figure that out. I guess the Tooth Fairy could give me whatever she wants, but I didn't see how my tooth could get smashed into two nickels by my head on the pillow. Then I thought of the answer. If you squeeze down really hard on a rock, sometimes it breaks into pieces. So maybe my tooth broke in two under my head and then the two pieces got squeezed flat. I asked Mommy about it, and she said the Tooth Fairy was magic and she could do anything and I shouldn't worry my little head about it.

One night Johnny P. was here sitting on the sofa with Mommy. The smoke from his cigarette was making white curly wisps in the air, kind of floating around in layers like little clouds. I started running around hitting the clouds with my hand, so they jumped around and got broken up. I guess I got too close to Johnny's cigarette because I brushed my hand against the end of it and I got burned. It hurt a lot and I cried and Johnny got mad. "You gotta be more careful, kid. Cigarettes ain't toys." Mommy took me to the kitchen and put a cold washcloth on my hand, and then we went into my bedroom and put on my pajamas. I said my prayers and asked God to bring my Daddy home safe like I always do. When I got in bed, I said to Mommy, "I don't like Johnny. Hows come he doesn't have to go off to the

Big War and fight the Japs like Daddy?” “He’s 4-F.” she said. “That means he’s got some health problem so he can’t be a soldier or a sailor. But he works making guns for the soldiers just like I do.” “Well, I wish he didn’t come around. I want my Daddy back.” “Now, honey, he just keeps me company while your Daddy’s away,” Mommy said.

Then, after a minute, she said, “Listen, I don’t want you to talk to people about Johnny. It’s none of their business, and they might get the wrong idea. It’s just our secret, OK?” She hugged me close and I said OK.

I got another loose tooth and when it came out, I really wondered what the Tooth Fairy was going to do this time, or if my idea about the tooth getting smashed flat was right. So after my prayers I put it under my pillow, right in the middle where my head would be on top of it. In the morning when it was just getting light, I woke up early, and I peeked under the pillow. The tooth was still there and it looked just like it did the night before! It wasn’t even a tiny bit flatter. I thought for sure it would be mostly turned into a dime by morning, but it wasn’t. I couldn’t go back to sleep, I was thinking so hard about it. Then I heard some noise outside my bedroom door. Maybe it really was the Tooth Fairy. I pretended to be asleep, but I peeked a little bit to see who it was. It was my Mommy. She sneaked into my room. She was still wearing her nightgown. She lifted up my pillow real slow and took the tooth and put a dime under the pillow. So that was the answer: Mommy was pretending to be the Tooth Fairy! Everything made sense. Even the time the tooth turned into two nickels; Mommy must not have had a dime that morning. But, you know what? I’m glad it was my Mommy. But I never told her that I had figured it out.

The next time I lost a tooth, I put it under my pillow again. I pretended that the Tooth Fairy would come and take it and give me a dime. (I knew it was really my Mommy).

But when I woke up, the tooth was still there. I waited and waited for Mommy to come into my bedroom and take the tooth, but she didn't come. I wondered where she was, so I got up and went looking for her. I found her in the kitchen with my Grandma. They were both sitting at the table whispering and crying. When they saw me, Mommy hugged me really hard and cried a lot. But she wouldn't tell me why she was crying. I wish I knew what's wrong. I ran into my bedroom and I got down on my knees beside my bed and I asked God to hurry up and bring my Daddy home right away so he can make everything better again.

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Part of the "Storybooks" bronze sculpture by George W. Lundgren  
(gift to the Library in honor of Sybil Stern Mervis)

THAT ONE BOOK  
An essay about reading and belonging  
Victoria L. Williams

My grandson hugged his tablet to his chest and eyed the TV remote, his face scrunched into a frown as he considered what I'd said.

My reply to his request to extend his tablet time beyond the daily hour allotted was true. When I was his age, there were no computers, tablets, cellphones, electronic games, or TV remotes, not even handheld calculators. We had four TV channels, all in black and white. Programs for kids aired mostly on Saturday morning, with a few during prime time appropriate for them to watch. *Leave it to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* were about families. *Lassie* was about a brave dog. *The Adventures of Superman* wasn't animated. *Sesame Street* didn't start until I was fourteen.

"Then what did you *do*?" he asked.

"I played with my sister and brothers and kids from our neighborhood, outside when the weather was nice. We also read books—a lot of books."

He eyed the window; it was dark outside. His brother wasn't with us, and we'd already read a book so that he could show me how his reading skills had improved in second grade. Accepting my denial of his request and wanting to change the subject, he asked for the best distraction and cure-all at Grandma's house, a snack.

Growing up, I don't remember a dull moment. That was partially because my three siblings and I were born in a five-year span, but we had books to entertain us. My mother and grandmother read to us almost from birth. I still have several beautifully illustrated books from my childhood, such as *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and *Mother Goose*. Books occupied us as well as anything might keep four small but very energetic children out of mischief for any length of time. Stories let us explore new and interesting places. They transported us to times past and future. Real people and fictional characters

with hopes, dreams, and feelings like ours suggested answers and solutions to our questions and problems.

Our family celebrated reading, considered it necessary for a successful life. Besides a variety of other reading material, our house had textbooks strewn around as first Dad and then Mom attended college.

A photo of three-year-old me engrossed in one of Dad's engineering textbooks while holding it upside down supplied amusement for years. It was full of diagrams, and when I was eight, I tired of being taunted every time someone came across that picture in the album. I pulled the book from the shelf and claimed I had been studying the basic shapes I was learning then. I turned to circles, squares, triangles, and rectangles and held them up to prove that they looked the same no matter which way I held the page. No one could dispute that, and the focus shifted to the words my five-year-old brother mispronounced.

"Wonderwear" came to mind when my grandsons introduced me to the Captain Underpants book series. They thought "wonderwear" was so funny that it's become a superhero battle cry when clad only in underwear—chest out, hands on hips, sometimes with a towel or blanket as a cape, shouted out with fervor, and always followed by uproarious laughter.

My mother went to the library periodically while we visited our grandmother and came back with a stack of books we anticipated like a visit from Santa. In fact, we did get books from Santa, the Easter Bunny, and on other occasions throughout the year.

My sister and I began playing school before we could read. We took turns holding up a book to our brothers and reciting the story from memory as best we could or making one up to go with the pictures. She wanted to learn the words, later choosing to give the gift of reading to others by becoming a teacher. I wanted to create stories and am still working on that.

Our elementary school had a well-stocked library we used to supplement our public library supply. What would we do during summer break if we ran out of books and couldn't play outside? As luck would have it, the bookmobile added the end of our street to their route. The selection was limited but always different, and we could request books for the librarian to bring the next time. Soon, a

neighborhood race developed to see who could get in line first, adding a challenge to what was already the highlight of the week.

When summer ended, a door didn't just close—I felt as if it slammed in my face. The bookmobile only ran during the summer, and the school library's collection was comparatively stagnant. However, what opened in that door's stead was more than an entry to another place. It was a portal to another world as endless as one's imagination and curiosity. Over half a century later, the memory of discovering that world shortly after I started third grade still fills me with unbridled joy.

Cars didn't have seat belts and child safety seats were in the development stage in the 1960s. We piled into the back seat unrestrained where we played, fought, bounced around, kicked the back of Mom's seat, and tumbled into the rear part of the station wagon and back—likely why neither of our parents ventured out alone with all four of us often. We whooped, hollered, laughed, and cried, despite Mom's warnings that if she had to pull the car over, we'd be sorry. I imagine she issued that threat more than once during the ten-minute trip, but we arrived unscathed.

Our destination was an imposing stone building in the heart of downtown Decatur, IL. We stood on the walkway out front looking up, awed that this two-story structure, so big that it required four columns to support the entry overhang, was filled with books. *Free books*, according to "FREE PUBLIC LIBRARY" chiseled into the stone across the top. The lampposts on either side of us symbolized enlightenment. The wide stairs leading up to the building signified an elevation to learning.

Recalling Mom's stern speech to four children ages six through ten that we must be quiet or the librarian would ask us to leave, still makes me chuckle. Knowing how impossible that was, she allowed us a few minutes of frolic. My siblings and I joined hands and danced around the columns, singing *Ring around the Rosie*.

Then we ran and skipped back and forth on the broad porch—making sure we didn't step on a crack, of course—until we'd spent enough energy that we might actually be quiet for as much as a full minute.



In In the foyer there was an impressive four-foot square, cast-bronze plaque that read:

THE PEOPLE OF DECATUR ACKNOWLEDGE  
WITH GRATITUDE THE GENEROSITY  
OF ANDREW CARNEGIE WHOSE GIFT  
ENABLED THEM TO ERECT THIS BUILDING.

The lion's head and water fountain below it attracted our attention first. Suddenly very thirsty, we jostled each other for a drink while Mom explained that Mr. Carnegie, who believed in self-education, had donated money to build the library.

After that, I don't remember if we were all quiet; I only know that I was. We entered the main room, and a friendly woman at the reception desk greeted us. Behind her, shelf upon shelf loaded with books towered over me and stretched farther than I could see. I was overwhelmed and rendered speechless, especially since that was just one section of the first floor.

When we reached the books appropriate for my age group, the shelves were low enough that I could reach them all. I strolled up and down the aisles, running my fingers across the spines and reading the titles. How would I ever decide? I finally settled on the maximum number I could take with the help of another nice lady and Mom's promise that we would return *if* we behaved for the rest of our stay.

I never thought to ask about the significance of the lion's head, but writing this made me wonder. Researching Andrew Carnegie didn't uncover a connection. I discovered that Mr. Carnegie made almost 1,700 libraries possible in U.S. cities between 1886 and 1923. Approximately 750 of them still exist, and some 350 others have a new purpose. The city razed the old Decatur library building, despite widespread community opposition, after the current location opened in 1972. The old Danville, IL library, another impressive Carnegie structure, is now the Vermilion County War Museum.

I knew the plaque sat in the entryway of the new Decatur library, so I posed my question to the staff through the library website. They promptly replied that the lion's head was part of the drinking fountain. It no longer exists, and its significance is unknown. So while things invariably change, I found the library staff as friendly, efficient, and helpful as always.

Winnie the Pooh had made me happy. Bambi had made me sad. At the public library, *Stone Soup* introduced me to philosophy. Laura Ingalls Wilder made me grateful that I'd never been hungry and for the modern conveniences of the time. Nancy Drew made me realize the value of investigation, because things weren't always as they first appeared.

After reading the entire Hardy Boys series, my brothers turned their attention to comic books. My family laughed for years about our vacation to Washington, D.C. in 1968 when I was thirteen. Mom laid out items for each of us and trusted us to pack them into our own bag. When we arrived, my twelve-year-old brother opened his suitcase to reveal that it contained only socks, underwear, and stacks of comic books. I should clarify that my mother did not laugh then; it was several years before she found anything amusing about that incident.

Believe it or not, things so much worse happened that a lack of clothing was the least of our worries. When Dad tried to retrieve our car from the hotel parking garage, someone had stolen it. As dreadful as that was, comic books eventually allowed us to look past the trauma and find some humor.

High school required reading in the late 1960s and early 1970s included such classics as *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Lord of the Flies*, *Animal Farm*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *The Great Gatsby*, and the works of Mark Twain and Shakespeare. Doing a thorough analysis and discussing the meaning and implications of a book with others brought a new perspective to reading and introduced me to societal and political issues I'd not considered in depth.

Besides books assigned to the entire class, the school had an approved list students were to select from and report on independently. The only book available on the day I searched the library was not my first choice. But, as fate would have it, that one book triggered my interest in history, reawakened my desire to create stories, and begat the dream of writing a historical fiction novel that good someday. Fifty years later, *Gone with the Wind* is still my favorite book.

I also read *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *All Quiet on the Western Front*. They weren't easy to read, but they introduced me to the atrocities of war and helped me understand the Vietnam War protests I encountered when I moved onto the Urbana-Champaign campus of the University of Illinois in January 1973.

I was a seventeen-year-old from a mid-sized Midwest City unaffected by the war and didn't even know it had been going on since 1961. Students marched, held rallies, and organized sit-ins. I listened and read the literature they handed out all over campus and wanted to know more. Not a problem, because the UIUC library was one of the largest academic libraries in the country.

Besides offering a seemingly infinite repository of information, the Undergraduate Library encouraged something my high school and hometown public library did not—socialization. Over 92,000 square feet, it provided ample space for group gatherings as well as quiet areas to study. It was a community, both an academic and social environment, and I learned as much from the diverse mix of students I met there as from the wealth of information.

While I was a student, the UIUC library was on course to become the first major research library in the country to have an online catalog, a goal achieved in 1978. A statewide, computer-linked library network was also in the works. At its peak in the 1980s, it was the most extensive in the country, connecting 2,400 libraries of all types.

Despite those efforts, everyone's attention focused on PLATO, the first computer-based education system in the world. Developed at the U of I in the early 1960s, many of my professors used the system to post supplemental reading that students could access on terminals at the library. No updated textbook to publish or copies to make and hand out—progress.

Imagining what computers could mean in the future charged the campus atmosphere with excitement. It took almost two decades for the Internet to become widely available to the public, but we all know how the computer age has affected our everyday lives.

I'd hoped to pursue a career as a writer in college, but my parents encouraged me to pursue something more profitable. I settled for classes such as Rhetoric and Business and Technical Writing and ended up in management. For decades, I wrote business communications, informative articles,

policies, procedures, grant applications, and edited technical documents. Pretty dry stuff. The opposite of creative writing.

Starting a family on top of a demanding job left little time to read for pleasure, but my daughter loved books and would sit with anyone who would read to her for hours, usually outlasting whoever that was. *Goodnight Moon* still soothed me like it had when I was a child. *The Little Engine That Could* still filled me with determination. The *Cat in the Hat* was just as fun.

My daughter was still in a stroller when we took our first trip to the Champaign Public Library. With access to the U of I library and books friends and family gave or loaned us, I hadn't visited the public library in the decade I'd lived in Champaign. It looked so much like the Decatur library I couldn't help but have the same feeling that I was about to enter some place mystical and magical. I knew that in that building, I could find an instantaneous escape from a hectic work and home life. I could again explore exotic, faraway places or step into the shoes of a heroine or a woman with an extraordinary talent or quality I admired—at least every once in a while.

First, we went to the children's section where I promised my daughter that I would find books with strong female characters. Girls who could do and be anything. We read popular books of the time and many I'd read as a child and young girl. I consider my daughter my greatest success and give a lot of credit to a long list of authors.

In 2001 my daughter, then a student at the U of I, read *The Other Boleyn Girl* by Philippa Gregory. Knowing how I liked *Gone with the Wind* and history, she recommended it. Reading that book was as if I'd grabbed the gurney and given my love of historical fiction CPR and a couple of jolts with an AED. I read all thirty of her books for adults, even the early and obscure publications that had to be ordered from other locations in the library system.

Not a science fiction fan, the *Outlander* series was also historical fiction, so I yielded to the hype. After the first book, I got on the library's waiting list for the subsequent installments as soon as possible. Next, I read the *Hunger Games* series and had to admit that I shouldn't disregard science fiction or any other genre.

After that, I moved on to the works of another internationally acclaimed historical fiction writer, Sharon Kay Penman. I discovered her books quite by accident at the library while searching for another book by an author with a similar last name.

Then, just when I thought I'd never be a grandma, I had two grandsons. I retired a little early and took care of them several days a week, one after the other, until they started preschool. As you might suspect, I spent a lot of time reading to them. I read them new books and many of those read to me and that I'd read to my daughter—the classics, enjoyed by generations, because their message is invaluable, timeless, and presented in a way that captures the reader's attention.

I also took my grandsons to great programs offered by the library. My first grandson wasn't yet a year old when I took him to Books for Babies. I'd visited the library many times over the years, but I hadn't been in the children's section for over two decades. What a pleasant surprise to discover that it had blossomed into a veritable indoor playground. Vivid colors and interesting murals adorned the walls. Children and adults lounged in comfy furniture scattered about. There were mechanical toys, puzzles, games, statues, and other works of age-appropriate art surrounding an impressive collection of books.

Both my grandsons love the library so much that the five-year-old begged to go there, rather than the swimming pool, even though it was the last day of the pool season. We did go to the pool, and while he enjoyed it, I only got him there by promising a trip to the library the next day.

In 2018, with both grandsons in preschool full-time, I suddenly found myself with so much free time I contemplated my bucket list. Publishing a novel was still at the top, and if I was ever going to realize that dream, it was time. Easier said than done. I dug deep to recall what about *Gone with the Wind* had so impassioned me all those years ago and developed a story also set in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The research required an enormous amount of reading, but I loved it, sometimes getting off track because something caught my interest, even though it wasn't relevant to my story.

After finishing a manuscript, I connected with an editor. That was definitely a “the more you know, the more you don't know” experience. She suggested I read certain novels and focus on what the author did particularly well. Wanting to speed up that process, I read on the treadmill rather than watch TV. I was still reading paper books and devised a clip and rubber band system that sort of worked. My

fellow gym buffs got a kick out of “my originality” and asked why I didn’t get a Kindle or Nook. I knew about them and that my library loaned eBooks, but I’d resisted, unable to imagine anything other than the feel of a book with a cover and pages to turn in my hand. Full disclosure, I sometimes skip ahead and peek at a book’s ending. I also page back to review a cast of characters, family tree, or map, and I didn’t think that could be as easy with an eBook.

I asked around about eReaders, and a relative gave me a used Kindle Fire. Try as I might, I couldn’t come up with a valid excuse not to give it a go. It was revolutionary. Life changing. At first, I only read my Kindle at the gym, and yes, it was so much easier. But letting go of paper books was like denouncing a lifelong friend simply because I’d made a new one, and for months, I was reading two books at the same time.

However, the Kindle was slowly winning me over. It fit in my purse and was soon my constant companion. You never know how long you’ll be stuck in a waiting room or in your car, delayed by a train. And while the physical book was no less my friend, eBooks were more accessible—no trip to the library required, an endless repository at my fingertips, and truly a blessing during a pandemic.

Libraries have enhanced their selection of eBooks by adding access through apps. When I recently discovered that I can access the Illinois Digital Library through my online account, I felt like I’d hit the lottery. Deciding what to read next takes me back to my first library experience, except now, I scroll through page after page of titles on my laptop rather than run my fingers over rows of spines. I still get the same thrill, although the older I get, the more I regret I can never read every book on my wish list. So many books, so little time.

I applaud libraries for their exemplary response to technological advancements and the needs and desires of the public. By expanding and updating inventory, they’ve continued to provide free and open access to a broad range of materials and services to people of all ages and backgrounds. Besides reading material, many libraries loan music, movies, Chromebooks, iPads, eReaders, and video games. Computers are available on site for public access to the Internet, and many provide a hotspot.

I haven’t mentioned audiobooks, even though I see an enormous selection when I browse the library catalog. Many people I know now favor them over paper or digital books. I confess I haven’t

explored those yet because again, I'm reluctant to give up holding something tangible in my hand. I imagine that someday, though, I'll be ready for a new friend. And just maybe, that first audiobook will be one I penned.

When I started writing, I didn't think I'd have time to read about anything other than crafting a novel, but I read more—a lot more, making note of what I did and didn't like about an author's style. Finally, I felt I'd read enough and wanted to connect with other writers. I thought that would be easy in a town with a major university and a community college. I was wrong.

I was about to give up when the Champaign library posted notice of a group hosted by the Danville Public Library. While that is only 45 minutes from my home, the DPL Writer's Group met via Zoom. Perfect.

Through the DPL's Writer's Group, I have connected with published authors of novels, children's books, essays, stories, poems, and articles, and other writers hoping to get their works out into the world. While the group is diverse and interested in a variety of topics and genres, we all share the commonality of authorship—a love of the written word. Group members and an occasional guest speaker have shared experiences and ideas. We've had presentations relevant to writing, and I have found inspiration and motivation when I couldn't find it elsewhere.

*Pulse & Echo* is the brainchild of The DPL Writer's Group and would not be possible without the support of the Danville Public Library and Foundation. The opportunity to share how books and libraries have enhanced my life has made me realize how privileged I am in that regard, but no more than everyone deserves. If this publication inspires anyone to take advantage of the resources their local library offers, submit their work for publication in a future edition, or join the DPL Writer's Group, then the effort has been well worth it. If it motivates someone to introduce a child to the treasure trove in his or her local library—for free—even better.

Maybe they will find *that one book* to inspire their life's dream as well as the tools to achieve it.

## IF I CAN HAVE A DREAM

Robert Wilson

If I can have a dream that I know someday will come true; then I will have a dream of you, just you, and only you.

For you see, you are the only one that I feel really understands; you're there to hold me, love me, kiss me, even just hold my hand.

When I squeeze you, I can feel the love pounding from your heart; I read your letters that bring us close when we are so far apart.

I pray at night that you'll be there in the morning when I open my eyes; only to awaken in my bed and find you farther than I realize.

I look up at your picture which reminds me of the love we both know; get up and praise God that you can make me feel so good when I'm down, so low.

When we're together it is like two birds drifting alone in the sky; if I can have a dream that I know would not be a lie.

Someday I know that there will be no need for dreams; because we will be together as one and who could ask for more.

I love you so very much I long to hold and squeeze you tight; to hug you, kiss you and love you all through the night.

When either of us is troubled and has something heavy on their heart, it is comforting to know that the other one is there to fill the gapping part.

I end this poem with a very pleasant thought in mind for you: May God keep you safe and warm and love you as much as I do.

## OUTSIDE THE LIBRARY, I LOST MY HAT

Karl Witsman

I saw Trish again today. She almost saw me at the same time, and I sneaked a curious look into her eyes. I thought that I saw a brilliant flash of light, or was it just that I felt a flush of heat?

I don't know, I might never know.

Anyway, I felt springtime through the folds of my winter clothing. I threw my arms up; it was amazing how easily I doffed my winter coat. I tossed away my gloves and knocked the snow from my boots. I launched my hat high over the library, and the hat sailed up and up until it could be seen no more.

The snow melted before Trish's dark brown eyes, the grass began to spring up, green, full and lush.

The birds sang out (where had they been hiding?) as did the people in the street around us. A sound like a thousand violins filled the atmosphere until the weight of the din almost crushed everyone.

Suddenly, the weight disappeared, but the music still swelled to a tremendous crescendo and the people began to cry out the words to an old song, *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*. I could feel my heart beating madly for Trish, I could almost feel her heart beating in unison with mine, in tempo with the music.

My whole body felt like a piece of steel in the proximity of a magnet. I was pulled toward her, my arms out-stretched to my sides, prepared to give to her the warmest embrace she had ever received. Just to touch her hand would have been enough. I was ready to give up everything for her.

Then she looked away, and I went looking for my hat.

~ AFTER WORDS ~

Each writer has, upon publication, a list of significant individuals to acknowledge - for lessons and nourishment, for faith and patience - our list begins here:

With sincere appreciation to Bruce Weigl and Scott Russell Sanders - two highly accomplished Mid-western writers and exceptional teachers - for the generosity and wisdom of their creative counsel.

And, for their steadfast encouragements, our thanks to Linda Bolton and Jennifer Hess - two community leaders with unique sensibilities - as we diligently worked to fulfill the *Pulse & Echo* mission.

We are also profoundly grateful to Judith Sanders for permission to republish her husband John's poems, originally published in 1990. His book, *You Can Be a Good Lover with a Pain in Your Heart*, was published, in part, to support the John C. Sanders Scholarship Fund at Danville High School.

We also appreciate two of the many national organizations dedicated to the welfare of literature, for their recognition and for the many services they provide to writers around the world: the Community of Literary Magazines & Presses, and Poets & Writers, Inc. Finally, we would like to thank the publishing team at BookBaby, Inc. for their expertise and diligence on our behalf.

## CONTRIBUTOR'S NOTES

### WILBUR BOLTON

Wilbur is a lifelong Danville resident and District 118 teacher (Northeast Elementary) for eighteen years. He earned a BS in Education from Eastern Illinois University and a Master's in Education from Olivet Nazarene University. These are Wilbur's first publications.

### JULIE COLBY

Julie writes: "Over the years, my creative pursuits include writing, jewelry making, photography, drawing, music and painting, along with many community arts initiatives, among them the Danville Art League, Arts in the Park and conservation efforts through the Vermilion County Conservation District Foundation. This is Julie's first published poem.

### JANE S. CREASON

Jane is a life-long resident of Vermilion County, and a graduate of Oakwood High School and the University of Illinois. She began her 25-year teaching career at Danville High School in 1963, and then, Danville Area Community College, retiring in 2019. She lives in Fithian with her husband, Don, in a schoolhouse that her parents bought during World War II. Jane has written three young adult novels: *When the War Came to Hannah*, *The Heron Stayed*, and its sequel *All the Right Pieces*. She is currently working on a memoir.

### SARITA JAIN

Sarita writes in her native language, Hindi, then translates her poetry into English. She moved to Danville with her husband and their two sons during the Covid lockdown, and during that time, the Library became "a second home." Her bi-lingual contribution and memoir in this issue are her first publications.

### DANTE DELLAMORE

Dante lives in Danville, and many of his "dark" images can be viewed on Facebook where he describes himself as a "Random Photographer, Father, and Explorer."

#### HOLLY KLEISS

Holly leads the Danville Public Library Writers Group, and lives in nearby Homer. This is her first publication.

#### KAILEIGH OLDHAM

Kaileigh received her B.A. in Creative Writing and Fine Arts from Western Michigan University, then pursued a Masters in Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She is now the Teen Librarian at the Danville Public Library. This is her first publication.

#### KIMBERLY PADAN

Kim (Gabriel's mom, Bruce's wife) moved to Danville for a 6-month music therapy internship in 1988, and never left. In addition to Gabriel, she and her husband Bruce have been foster parents to 41 Vermilion County children. Kim is a frequent contributor for *The Catholic Post*, the newspaper of the Catholic Diocese of Peoria, and also the quarterly magazine, *Catholic Woman*, a publication of the National Council of Catholic Women. Her personal blog, [gabrielsmom.com](http://gabrielsmom.com), concerns prayer, living with a disability, and enjoying nature.

#### KAIGHLA RISES (Kaighla White)

Kaighla is a poet and storyteller, born and raised in Westville, Illinois. She is the author of four books and is currently writing for fifth. Her work has also been published in various magazines, including *American Road Magazine* and *Al-Jumuah*. Kaighla holds a BA in English Language & Literature from Southern New Hampshire University.

#### S. A. ROBBINS

Stuart studied Creative Writing at Oberlin College and earned his Master's Degree in Fine Arts and Creative Writing from Warren Wilson College. After 40+ years in Oakland, California (where his son is a student at Hastings Law School) he returned to Danville in 2019. Stuart's collection of short stories about Silicon Valley, *The System is a Mirror*, was published in 2007 (John Wiley & Sons) and his collection of poetry, *Odd Man Out*, was published earlier this year. His stories, poems, and essays have appeared in numerous anthologies & small press magazines; his interview with Carl Erskine (Danville Dodgers, 1947) is part of an upcoming PBS documentary about Carl's life, premiering in August. Member of the Danville Public Library Writers Group, Stuart is the founding editor of *Pulse & Echo*.

#### ANGELA ROSSI

Angela is a photographer and owner of Rossi Photo Studios in Danville. She uses photography, as she says, "...not only to view the world but to give others a tangible piece of their lives to revisit." Her daughter was born in 2017. This is her first published poem.

#### JOHN C. SANDERS

Any list of favorite DHS teachers will always include John Sanders, chair of the English Department in the '70s, Fulbright Scholar, Coe Fellow, and recognized as a Master Teacher by the State of Illinois. Selections from his 1990 collection of poetry, *You Can Be A Good Lover with a Pain in Your Heart*, are reprinted herein with permission of his wife, Judith A. Sanders, who lives in Omaha.

#### CAROL McCULLOUGH SANTOS

Carol came to Danville as a VISTA volunteer in 1966-67. The house in which she lived was on the lower portion of South Washington Street near the river.

#### ROBERT SWITZER

Robert L. Switzer is Professor Emeritus of Biochemistry at the University of Illinois. He is the author of the memoir "A Family Farm" (2012) and the novel "The Lady Professor" (2017) and a long-time member of Champaign-Urbana's Red Herring Fiction Workshop. His wife, an artist, was a member of the Danville Art league, and Robert spent many interesting hours in the Federal Courthouse in Danville as a prospective juror.

#### MATTHEW WOODBRIDGE STOVER

Matthew is an American fantasy and science fiction novelist, best known for his four *Star Wars* novels, including the novelization of *Episode III – Revenge of the Sith*. He has written screenplays as well as several fantasy novels, and four science-fiction/fantasy hybrid stories featuring the hero, Caine: *Heroes Die*, *Blade of Tyshalle*, *Cane Black Knife* and *Caine's Law*. The chapters in this issue are from his forthcoming addition to the Caine series, *Doomcaster*. Matthew is a lifelong Danville resident, and member of the Danville Public Library Writers Group.

#### VICTORIA L. WILLIAMS

Vicki was born and raised in Decatur, IL. She obtained a B.S. degree from the University of Illinois in Champaign where she lives with her husband Larry. While working in various managerial positions, she wrote technical documents, manuals and articles in publications for seniors. After ten years as a Senior Quality Engineer, Vicki retired in 2018, and is currently working on a series of historical fiction novels about Illinois in the 1800s.

#### R. Wilson/C. C. WILLS

C. C. Wills lives in the country just south of Danville. He retired from Kraft Foods after 35 years, and moved to Danville with his family in 2002. Wills started as a self-published author through Friesen Press. *Treasure in the Shawnee Hills* was his first, followed by two sequels, *Shawnee: The Adventure Continues* and the third book of his trilogy *A Cherokee Wish*.

#### KARL WITSMAN

Author of *Shape Up Your Memory*, *American Salesman*, 1986, *No More Mr. WhatsHisName*, COMPUTE magazine, August, 1993, *Reach Out and Write*, Editor of *I/O Port*, The Writers Newsletter. Two of his plays have been performed during the local Arts in the Park festival. He has lived in and around Danville his entire life.

IN MEMORIAM

We end the issue as we began:  
“In a small town, it might be enough...”  
to honor one good woman:  
for her steadfast service to the community,  
for her candor, tenacity, and faith.  
This magazine exists, in part,  
because of her constant encouragements  
to write, to publish, to serve.



LINDA BOLTON (1948-2022)

PULSE & ECHO  
A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Prose



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Buildings change, but the pulse of writers' words,  
and readers of all ages nourished by them,  
will always echo through the aisles...



This issue is made possible, in part,  
by support received from the  
*Danville Public Library*  
and the  
*Danville Library Foundation.*