

The Loyalhanna Review

2017





Breezy Sunset © by Colleen Wakefield

Contents

Carolyn Holland , <i>Apple Blossoms (art)</i>	FC	Colleen Wakefield , <i>Field of Echinacea (art)</i>	16
Colleen Wakefield , <i>Breezy Sunset (art)</i>	IFC	Linda Ciletti , <i>Winds of Change</i>	17
Table of Contents	1	John Grey , <i>Seam</i>	18
From the Editor, Special Thanks	2	Sara Lee Anderson , <i>Low Light</i>	18
Marge Burke , <i>Pond Sundays</i>	3-4	Carolyn Cecil , <i>Never Let Me</i>	18
Ruth Ochos Webster , <i>The Interview</i>	4	Walt Peterson , <i>Hummin' Bird</i>	19-20
Nancy Clark , <i>First Impressions</i>	5-6	Sarah Henry ,	
Alicia Stankay , <i>Bridges</i>	7	<i>The Pennsylvania Lottery at Sheetz</i>	20
Robert Beveridge , <i>Jealous</i>	7	Candace Kubinec , <i>Word Weary</i>	20
Stephanie Malley , <i>Counting</i>	7	Cheryl Shively , <i>Hair Stories</i>	21
Stephanie Malley , <i>Skins</i>	7	Ruth Ochos Webster , <i>Baby Boomer's Lament</i>	21
Patricia Orendorff Smith , <i>Brother Tom</i>	8	Ruth Ochos Webster , <i>Perhaps</i>	21
Patricia Orendorff Smith , <i>Blue Spruce</i>	8	Gwen Wolfgang ,	
Joe Potts , <i>The Magic Childhood Closet</i>	9-10	<i>My Name Is Gwen and I Am a Volunteer</i>	22-23
Stephanie Malley , <i>Cerberus</i>	10	Alicia Stankay , <i>Transitions</i>	23
Karen Malena , <i>Love Notes from Dad</i>	11	Candace Kubinec , <i>Four Again</i>	23
John Grey , <i>Marilyn on the Wall</i>	11	Cheryl Shively , <i>Windmills</i>	24
Sally Witt , <i>Where God Works</i>	11	Christine Aikens-Wolfe , <i>Hubris/Crow Humor</i>	24
Laura Lovic-Lindsay , <i>OBX Anchor</i>	12	Tom Beck , <i>Reflections</i>	24
Laura Lovic-Lindsay ,		Art Credits.....	24
<i>Any Given Summer Night, 1980</i>	12	John Negich , <i>Night Walk</i>	25
Louise Vrable , <i>Lighting Up Ligonier (art)</i>	13	Robert Beveridge , <i>Auction House</i>	25
Candace Kubinec , <i>Morning Dew (art)</i>	13	Janice McLaughlin , <i>Whimsical Winter</i>	25
Carolyn Holland , <i>Permanently Vacated (art)</i>	14	Jim Busch , <i>Not So Famous Last Words</i>	26-27
Fabrice Poussin , <i>All Revealed (art)</i>	14	Laura Lovic-Lindsay , <i>At the End of It All</i>	27
Colleen Wakefield , <i>Aster and the Bee (art)</i>	14	LVW Calendar	28
Alicia Stankay , <i>Squirrel Thief (art)</i>	15	LVW Membership	28
Linda Ciletti , <i>Christmas Kitty (art)</i>	15	Phantom Detectives	28
Colleen Wakefield , <i>Bashful Anemone (art)</i>	15	Carolyn Holland , <i>Bubblemania (art)</i>	IBC
Colleen Wakefield , <i>Jeweled (art)</i>	16	Janice McLaughlin , <i>Deer on Deck (art)</i>	OBC

Ligonier Valley Writers presents
the 2017 edition of its literary magazine,
The Loyalhanna Review.

From the Editor

Ligonier Valley Writers has been educating and encouraging writers and entertaining the community continuously since 1989. Our 2017 student poetry contest received over 600 entries. The awards ceremony drew a large audience to Barnes & Noble and made students happy to receive cash prizes and see their work in print. Our members learned about playwriting from acclaimed author F.J. Hartland. Our flash fiction contest attracted national and international entries. Local winners entertained the public with their short stories about the number 13. Stan Gordon and Ed Kelemen headlined a day-long paranormal writing program. Boston author Randy Ross taught us the processes and pitfalls he experienced working with a brick-and-mortar publisher for his travel-humor book, *God Bless Cambodia*. Steve Cole, in from Chicago, read from *Citizen Cárdenas* and shared his experiences working with a self-publishing company. Because of the creativity of Greensburg Writers' Group and LVW, the third book of the Phantom Detectives series is selling briskly as an LVW fundraiser, and the fourth book, *Phantom Detectives at Risk*, is taking shape.

Next up is our annual picnic. Flash Fiction Contest winners will help our audience to celebrate Halloween. You can explore art and writing connections at Step into Art, a cooperative program with the Westmoreland Museum of American Art. The year culminates with our holiday party. If you enjoy good writing, food, fun, conversation, and camaraderie, join us for our picnic, our parties, or any of our Ligonier Valley Writers' readings or workshop events.

Ruth McDonald, Editor

Special Thanks to LVW Contributors and Friends

Editorial Staff of *The Loyalhanna Review*, especially Judith Gallagher

- Tom Beck
- Paul and Kathleen Brittain
- Marge Burke
- Jim and Glenda Busch
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Lauren Buches of Westmoreland Heritage

Westmoreland Museum of American Art

Pond Sundays

© by Marge Burke

It was a steamy hot Sunday afternoon, and I was headed to Barb's for some quiet reflection.

At least, we always tell ourselves that. Mostly we end up chatting like a bunch of magpies. But that does not detract from the fact that we are sitting under the shade of hundred-year old trees, beside a springhouse several yards away that was probably built as a blockhouse in the late 1700s. According to the stone fireplace mantel inside the main house, the hearth dates back to 1799, as does the original portion of the home.

The trees above us sway in the afternoon breeze, their leaves turning slightly white in anticipation of a storm. Thunder rumbles in the distance, but the sun shines from behind bright white clouds scattered across a deep-blue sky. There is a stream behind us and two fish ponds beside us. Thus the name: Pond Sundays.

It's very tranquil to sit on our canvas chairs, sip iced tea or lemonade, and nibble cherries or chips from paper cups. The farm dogs pace back and forth on the other side of the fence, hoping to be tossed a bite of blackberry muffin or be left free to run the fields. A family of ducks peruses the pond while two fish friends swim out of sight to stay in the cooler waters.

We're basically a bunch of writers, so our talk usually revolves around what we have written, tried to write, plan to write, or have read that someone else has written.

*"I tramped a path
to the blackberry bushes,"
Barb announced.*

"I tramped a path to the blackberry bushes," Barb announced as she set a box of snacks and drinks on an old round wooden cable spool that serves as a table. "Do you want to pick any?"

I looked at Teresa and she looked at me. We both brought long pants to slip on over our shorts, and she brought a little Tupperware container just in case.

"Sure," I said, standing to pull the slacks out of my bag. Teresa did the same, and then we were off to the fields.

"It's mowed part of the way," Barb explained, leading us back the old horse trail. "When we get to the hill, I have my machete with me."

Teresa and I exchanged startled looks. I didn't think we were going for bananas.

We chatted as we walked up the slight incline. Barb took a sudden left and started up the field. In the middle of the hill, almost hidden in the tall grass,

were brambles full of blackberry bushes. There were little tufts of them sticking up all over the field.

"I'll make sure a path is tramped for you to follow," she assured us. "Then you can just pick as much as you want and come back down whenever you're ready."

We nodded and worked our way to the bushes, avoiding the prickly jabs of the thorny branches.

"I think the last time I went berry picking," I said, stepping carefully through the tall, not-sure-what-was-in-there grass, "was with my grandma. She died in 1970. She used to tell us stories of picking blueberries in the pasture along the cow path. We had little tin pails with thin handles. They plunked when we dropped in the first berries. All of us kids wanted to pick at the same bush Gramma did, so we could hear her stories."

"My dad used to take us berry picking," Teresa said, plopping the black berries into her bowl. "We each had one of those five-quart ice cream buckets and we had a contest to see who could fill them the fastest."

That showed me the small but significant difference between going with Gramma and going with Dad. One generation of difference.

"Gramma's stories always seemed like ancient history to me. She was a child in the early 1900s, so they very nearly were." I pulled back a branch and found a gold mine of berries underneath. "Hey, look at this!"

"I've got the same thing over here," Teresa said, stepping around the jiggers to a different bush. "There are dozens on this one stem."

We pulled berries off silently, plopping an occasional one in our mouths.

"This is what you get when you let nature be itself," I said, marveling at the abundance of wild-growing berries in the middle of a hilly field. "No one planted these here; no one is tending them or spraying them or protecting them. They just ... grow."

"Probably some bird dropped a seed years ago, and this is the result. God sure knows how to grow a good garden." Teresa moved to the upper side of the bush. "Oh, wow."

I peered over her shoulder at the berry-laden branches. "Yum," I said, reaching over her. "These will taste good on my oatmeal in the morning."

"I'm putting mine in a fruit salad for lunch."

We both closed up our containers and started back down the hill. "Watch where you're walking," I advised. "The ground is uneven and we can't see through the weeds."

"Yes, don't go tumbling down the hill. It's too far to carry you back to the house."

"Oh, just hitch the dogs and drag me out," I said.

Then I tripped over a root. We both laughed.

The fresh, clean berries are sitting in a bowl in my fridge, waiting for morning--the ones I didn't eat while cleaning them, that is.

It was like going back in time, tramping back through the woods and up a trail waist deep in grass,

plucking the ripe, sweet berries from their prickly branches. Somehow, the next hour sitting around the pond, watching the dragonflies dance and the waterlilies float, seemed all the sweeter.

Thanks for sharing, Barb. ♦

Marge Burke, employed by Smail Automotive and Pinnacle Auto Sales, loves historical research and has been published in local magazines, newspapers, and anthologies. Her Civil War novel, *Letters to Mary*, is available at margeburke.com. Her hobbies include her flower garden, home, and six grandchildren.

The Interview

© by Ruth Ochos Webster



Firefly 1

I was meant to be famous.
Born to it.
Worked for it.
Lusted ...

And?

I burned brightly. I did. For a moment.

Your fifteen minutes of fame.

A mere instant. A flash.

What went wrong?

Fierce competition. Too much. Look around ...
Spark, flash, light.

They were just as talented?

Just as born to it?

Worked just as hard?

I suppose.



Firefly 2

I wanted fame. Once. Long ago. I was special.
You should have seen me glow.

I never heard of you. Never read about you.

Sorry you weren't successful.

But I did succeed.

You just said ...

I said ... I was.

For one glorious moment.

Held in the hand of a child.

We danced around the yard as if time were no obstruction.

Life no obstacle.

Spark, flash, light.

I was the fire, the light in her eyes.

And then ...

She set me free.

And that was enough?

That was enough.

Ruth Ochs Webster is a native of Kentucky now residing near Pittsburgh. She has been published in various journals, newspapers, and magazines. Ruth is currently writing a series of Civil War fiction and blogs regularly at www.ruthochswebster.com.

First Impressions

© by Nancy A. Clark

Mr. A. Eugene Kunselman stood at ease on the topmost of thirteen broad steps that separated the sidewalk along Fifth Street from the triple entry doors of Indiana Joint High School. With bare, beefy forearms crossed over his barrel-like chest, he oozed confidence from the stand-up ends of his stylish, greying crewcut to the high-gloss shine of his black wingtip shoes. The late-morning, mid-August sun was a scorcher, but no sweat bead glistened on his brow or upper lip. No wrinkle assaulted his clean-shaven face or pinstriped suit pants.

It was Orientation Day 1954, two full weeks before the first formal day of a new school year, and one of Mr. K.'s duties as a guidance counselor was to roll out the welcome mat for sixth-grade graduates crossing the threshold from the familiar environs of elementary school into the terrifying twilight zone known as junior high.

I was one of those 250-plus awkward, anxious neophytes in the crowd—a nervous nelly shot like a cannonball from the protective womb of a one-room/one-teacher country school, programmed to land in foreign halls of ivy. And while Mr. K. surveyed the murmuring sea of sweltering preteens, many of whom were teetering on the verge of hormone eruption, I sized him up from my vantage point three steps below him.

His military posture and terse self-introduction implied he might be one tough dude. Yet I detected a hint of compassion in the parentheses of his half-smile and a thread of whimsy in the weave of his red-and-black “Go, Indians!” necktie.

A nagging fear that I might not fit into this new arena enveloped me like the oppressive August humidity, but my first impression of Mr. A. Eugene Kunselman was a cool 10 out of 10.

My conviction of Mr. K.'s benevolence wavered a bit, however, when—during his two-hour orientation discourse—he recited *all* the school rules and regulations to us directly from the student handbook.

What remained of my initial perception evaporated like dew kissed by the morning sun when he read us the riot act, sparing no words to describe the chastisement for so minor an infraction as plastering a wad of chewing gum under a chair seat. “Do it and I’ll cook your goose and smear the fat on your permanent school record,” he promised. The threat shivered my timbers, and I vowed to heaven that his path and mine would never, ever cross.

Reconfigure first impression: 0 out of 10.

Fast forward two weeks: The vice principal dispatched 249-plus newbies to their assigned homerooms, and I alone sat before him, mute, in the cavernous, three-tiered auditorium. To block out the hundreds of empty seats around me, I fixated on the

voluminous burgundy velvet curtains hanging on both sides of the stage.

“You waiting for a streetcar, miss?” Mr. V.P.’s query was sour with sarcasm. He continued to scribble in a notebook, never raising his eyes to visually acknowledge me.

“No ssssir,” I stammered, struggling to hold back my tear-dam. “I’m waiting for m-m-m-my room assignment.”

“Last ... name?” he asked. An inaudible “*I don’t need this today*” hung in the space between his two words.

“Spell it,” he directed, and then shuffled papers until he found the sheet with last names that began with F.

“You’re not on the list,” he said, “so you don’t belong here.”

“Sorry, kid, but you don’t exist to us,” Mr. K said.

So much for fitting in. The verdict sucked the oxygen right out of my lungs and sent my racing heart plummeting to the floor, where it floundered like a fish out of water. But rather than deal with the potential of an unconscious kid, Mr. V.P. backpedaled.

“Maybe you can work this out with your guidance counselor,” he said, conspicuously relieved to pass the buck (or, in this case, the doe) on to another. He pushed back his folding chair, collected the papers strewn on the table top in front of him, and said, “That would be Mr. Kunselman.”

Mr. Kunselman. The name alone reproduced the same staggering impact as did a softball to my skull in the fifth grade. “Let’s go,” the V.P. commanded, motioning for me to walk the plank that led to the front lobby.

“Sorry, kid, but you don’t exist to us,” Mr. K. clipped from the far side of his massive mahogany desk. “Have no proof of who you are, where you came from, or if you were even born.”

No whimsy there.

There was a painful, pregnant pause before he peered over the top of his horn-rimmed glasses, pierced me with his steel-blue eyes, and plunged into a litany of questions.

“How did you get here? Why aren’t you registered? Where’s your birth certificate ... your sixth-grade report card ... your last teacher’s recommendation?”

I answered as best I could all the questions he put to me, but his rapid-fire interrogation smashed the snippet of dignity this eleven-year-old struggled to

maintain.

Re-re-configure first impression: 0 out of 10.

Perhaps he feared that my tears would stain his shiny desktop or I might combust into a fireball of histrionics. Whatever it was, Mr. K. eventually backed off his insinuations that this mess was entirely my fault.

“OK. OK,” he sighed. “Stop sniveling, and let’s see if we can legitimize you.”

Legitimize me?

“Report to me every morning,” he ordered. “Bring your lunch and something to read. You’ll be sitting in this office until we can figure out what to do with you.” And with that edict in place, he pointed to a hard wooden chair, handed me several older *Scholastic* magazines, and left the room.

*I detected a hint
of compassion in
the parentheses
of his half-smile.*

Re-re-re-configure first impression: 2 out of 10.

Day after dismal day, my mortification was on display to the 1,500 students, teachers, staff and visitors who passed through the lobby. Mr. K. lumbered into and out of *our* office several times a day to check on me or deliver a no-progress-yet report. Each afternoon, I boarded the school bus with a new list of questions or instructions for my infuriated parents.

Ensnared in that office, I became privy to some of the issues that hit the fan during Mr. K.’s workday, and I developed a modicum of sympathy for how my plight disrupted his routine.

I also became something of a staff pet and accepted with gratitude the courtesies and occasional treats the secretaries offered me. Their encouragement was especially fortifying when rumor and innuendo escalated among some in the school regarding “the illegitimate girl” camping out in Mr.

K.’s office. What hellacious offenses she must have committed to warrant detention so severe.

While I sniveled, waited, and read, Mr. K. persevered in his effort to legitimize me in that pre-Information Highway era. We could not have dreamed that, less than a half-century later, the problem could have been solved in only hours, if not minutes.

At dismissal on Day 7, Mr. K. waltzed into our office with whimsy in his step, a gleam in his eye, a student handbook in one hand, and a seventh-grade class schedule in the other. “Welcome to Indiana Joint High School,” he sang. And then he did something unthinkable in today’s culture. He hugged me.

Re-re-re-configure that first impression: 20 out of 10.

In a nutshell: clerical error. *All* requested information—including original birth certificate—had been received, confirmed, and mistakenly filed in a box headed for storage.

“It was entirely our fault,” Mr. K admitted, dripping with apologies to me and to my exasperated parents. Then, in a surprising move, he asked for a second chance to start anew.

“Don’t want your first impression of us to be a negative one.”

DUH!

Epilogue: Mr. Kunselman was my Main Man and unwavering champion throughout my high school career, but it was this initial chapter in our history—our First Impressions chapter—that laid the foundation for mutual trust and respect. I matured (a little), and Mr. K. aged (considerably) during those seven school days. I sniveled less, and he modeled more gray hair—each strand bearing my name.

It wasn’t my first experience in the art of giving and receiving second (or more) chances to make a good impression, but it was, at that point in my life, the most public and poignant one. Each happenstance that brought Mr. K and me together ratcheted my esteem for him to new heights. To this day, 63 years after our vexing first encounter, my re-re-re-re-re-configured First Impressions Score for the late Mr. A. Eugene Kunselman remains steadfast at “To Infinity and Beyond—out of 10.” ♦

Nancy Clark is the happy wife of Tom, mom and grandmother to three, and great-grandmother to one, with one on the way. She has a happy life writing, reading, baking, knitting, sewing, and sitting on the deck. She has a grateful heart for all her blessings.

*“Art is central to all our lives.
Children want to hear and tell stories,
to sing, to make music, to paint pictures.
~ Jeannette Winterson*

*“Art is food. You can’t eat it, but it feeds you.”
~ Bread and Puppet Theater*

*Some artists are born to explore limits,
others to cultivate roots.
~ Anonymous*

*“A work read at a young age and
forgotten leaves its seed in us.”
~ Italo Calvino*

Bridges

© by Alicia Stankay

Many constructions:
Wooden planks, colorful steel, shifting suspension
arc over rivers, streams, and deep ravines—
connections from this side to that.

They beckon me to continue the journey
Offering the promise of magical things.
I take my first step forward and hope
the brittle wood holds, my foot won't slip,
that the bridge proves sturdy and safe,
and the trail continues onto my destination.

Finally I smile and congratulate myself
for daring to go
beyond the bridge.

Alicia Stankay is a writer and nature photographer. She has published four books, and her stories and photos have appeared in the *Loyalhanna Review*. An exhibition of her photography is scheduled for October 2017 at the Merrick Art Gallery in New Brighton, PA.

Counting

© by Stephanie Malley

For years
I lived in a Mother Goose daze
buckling shoes shutting doors
picking up and laying straight
with singsong regularity.

Gradually
the rhyme changed—
one two they put on their own shoes
three four they shut the front door—
and suddenly they're off
to Grandmother's house
in a fairy tale forest where wolves roam.
At least the plots are familiar
and they can't stray too far from the path.

Soon
they will write their own stories
with characters I don't know
and endings I can't predict.
I count while I can *nine ten*
knowing my mother hen days
are numbered.

Stephanie Malley is a stay-at-home mother of four daughters and is a certified word nerd who enjoys writing poetry for both children and adults. In her family, it's not uncommon to consult the dictionary at the dinner table.

Jealous

© by Robert Beveridge

You take her fingers
into your mouth,
tongue flicks over them
a viper, pink and quick.

Never say
this did not excite you,
never say
your breath did not go ragged,
twin to hers and shiver
in delight.

Never say
you did not feel the pricks
of fingernails that raised
waning gibbous moons of blood
on palms.
Never say
you did not like it.

Robert Beveridge makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry just outside Cleveland, Ohio. He has recent/upcoming appearances in *Cake*, *Grub Street*, and *The Literary Hatchet*, among others.

Skeins

© by Stephanie Malley

All fall

I'm mesmerized

by compact skeins of geese

stitching the sky together, a pattern

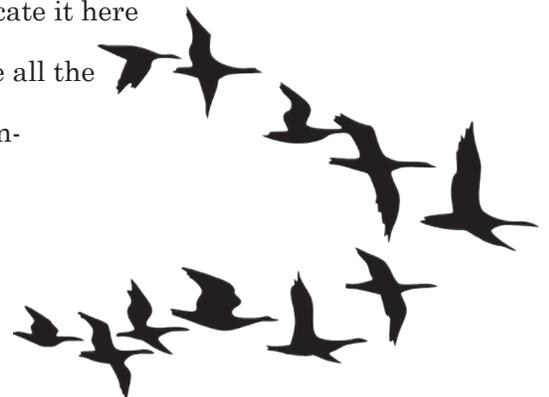
so simple and direct, unerring,

I can't duplicate it here

below, where all the

loose ends un-

ravel.



Brother Tom

© by Patricia Orendorff Smith

I remember my brother's birth as though it were yesterday. The day he was born he looked like the classic Gerber baby: tousled, light-colored hair. His smile reached a mile, curved at the corners with that classic drool.

His smile reached a mile.

As my father pursued his doctorate degree in music from Columbia University, he wrecked his car with all my sister's birthday presents inside. When the presents were stolen, Dad presented my sister with her own doll, my brother Tom. Mom had just delivered him in Newark, New Jersey, the first of the last half of twelve. We children grew like weeds, and with an ever-expanding family, Dad secured a position at Glenville State College in West Virginia.

When we seven children first discovered our new home set in the hills high above the town, Dad noticed the yard had lots of broken glass. Not a good thing for tiny bare feet. In the summers, we shed our shoes and spent the days romping in the grass, playing hide and seek, and swinging to the rhythms of childhood.

"Ouch, Dad, another piece of glass," we'd say.

When enough of us had cut our feet, Dad declared he would give a penny for each piece of glass we collected. I noticed Tom kept rounding the corner with pieces of glass. He collected a penny, then another. Tom was getting rich. As hard as I searched for glass, Tom found more. And he had quite a collection of different-colored shards of glass. This was getting out of hand. How could he find so many pieces in so many colors?

I decided to follow him. Out by an old garbage container Mom had used for burning, I noticed many different kinds of colored jars and pop bottles. Smack dab in the middle of the operation, Tom was smashing jars with a hammer. There was no limit to his supply. Tom would be a millionaire in no time.

Tom knew how to make something out of nothing.

Of course Tom got caught. But I think he formed his business world that day. He knew how to make something out of nothing. I chuckle when I think of how he sold newspapers when we moved to Indiana, Pennsylvania. If any papers were left, he simply entered the bars downtown and sold them to sodden customers. Tom sold anything, even St. Bernard's Holy Childhood Stamps to Jewish merchants in Indiana.

Best of all was his ice cream business venture. When he bought a half gallon of ice cream at White's Variety Store, he grabbed a big spoon and ate the contents as soon as he got in the door. With many kids watching and drooling, Tom sold portions for twenty-five cents or fifty cents until all the ice cream was paid for. His own treat was free. Sometimes he even made a profit!

Thank heaven the paint was water-soluble.

I marveled at my brother's industrious nature, except for the time Mom and Dad left me in charge while they went shopping. Tom refused to lift a hand at the housework. In a fit of rage I grabbed a bucket of white paint and threw it at him as he bolted up the stairs. Didn't even touch him, but I would be in deep trouble if Mom and Dad discovered the mess I had made. I had only minutes to clean it up. Thank heaven, the paint was water-soluble. He never told on me. I loved my brother for that decision! ♦

Patricia Orendorff Smith has published over 250 pieces in national, regional, and local publications.

Blue Spruce

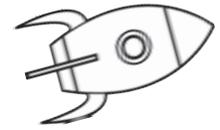
© by Patricia Orendorff Smith

Canada geese flock to the Blue Spruce pond, feathers flounce as they dive like bombers, crash land at the first hint of chill, and gossip like old women while chipmunks squeak and skitter between maples, oaks, and ferns. Leaves crunch beneath my Keds. Crackling embers' smoky aroma taunts and tickles my nostrils. Mallards quack, follow in flotillas single file. Nature is palpable, comes alive!



The Magic Childhood Closet

© by Joe Potts



When I was a young boy, I had a magic closet. Today's kids have iPhones and Playstations, but I had a closet filled with wonderful things. They have electronics, but I had rockets and ray guns.

After I finished kindergarten, we moved to a different neighborhood, across town. Previous owners of our new home had operated a corner store in the house. Corner grocery stores seemed to be on every other block in the 1950s in Pittsburgh, so it wasn't surprising to inhabit a former one. There was a corner store across the street from us, and two more within a few blocks.

The house was tall and innocuous looking. It was painted a drab, dark brown, with no visible hint of mystical properties. It sat near the top of 54th Street in Lawrenceville and had four levels.

The "store" level was above the basement, and we used it to store clutter. The front room held a piano and a few odds and ends. In the back room was a closet, which I called my magic closet, for it contained all of my toys.

And boys' toys in the 1950s were out of this world.

Most of my toys were in a large cardboard box. The box had started its life as a container for a washing machine or some such practical item, but when it was placed in the magic closet, it too became infused with magic.

Did I want to be Wyatt Earp? Root through the vast stash of toys. Here we go: a marshal's badge, a six-gun and holster, a cowboy hat. Load a roll of caps into the white-handled pistol, and watch out, Clanton gang, here I come.

How about a soldier in a makeshift bunker, holding off the evil Nazis? No problem. Rattle around in there, and here are my army rifle, a helmet, and a periscope. (I was unaware that soldiers didn't carry periscopes. They were one of the props I used to naively transform war into fun.)

Feel like playing ball? What kind? Here's a football, here's a baseball and glove—my bat's over there in the corner—and here's a nice, almost-new rubber ball. Yeah, take that rubber ball and go bounce it against the brick school building. Throw it low and practice snagging grounders, or throw it at an upward angle and run down fly balls.

I had my choice of several squirt guns. Pistols were great for general use, or getting a quick drink on the run, or seeing if you could shoot a fly out of the air, also on the run.

Fending off older sisters required the water Tommy gun. Once, one of my sisters demanded I cease all hostilities with threat of calling in the MPs (Military Parents) if I didn't. As a test of her resolve, I fired a small water blob onto the toe of her tennis

shoe. "You're in trouble now," she said in her Older Sister voice.

I was sure that this transgression was not sufficient to warrant punitive action. Wrong.

"Joey, did you shoot your sister?" asked my mom.

Geez, such a direct question. How do you slither around that? "Only in the toe, Mom. I barely even touched her." Surely mercy was called for when the offense was a misdemeanor and barely left a mark. "It'll dry off pretty fast," I said. Who could argue with such solid logic?

Mom didn't need to argue, though. This wasn't a courtroom; it was frontier justice, Mom-style. "You shouldn't shoot your sister anywhere, even in the toe. Go to your room until I call you," she said. And she topped off that verdict with the Mom coup de grace: the look of disappointment.

No laws of physics need apply.

Learning the rules of sibling engagement was a puzzling task for a small boy. But I knew I would be busted out pretty soon; my mother was tough but fair. And she had a soft spot for me.

Near the bottom of the box was the obligatory paddle ball, and a Frisbee, a Duncan Imperial yo-yo here, some cast-iron toy cars there, a Davy Crockett coonskin cap. What more could a boy want?

They were all terrific toys. But the magic closet held items even more wondrous: my tickets to the universe and all its wonders. For my magic closet held rockets and ray guns.

There were a variety of missiles and rockets in there. Some were for shooting down enemy jets or delivering bombs that the air-raid sirens warned us about on Monday mornings. But hidden near the bottom was the best: a functioning red rocket with four raked-back tailfins, voted the best toy of the year. It could fly higher than a telly pole, using simple household rocket fuel that Mom kept in her pantry. And next to it was the sleekest, most menacing green ray gun. All the best ray guns were green. With my rocket and my ray gun, the universe fell at my feet.

A rocketeer could swiftly thunder off to anywhere in space he wanted (no laws of physics need apply), with his trusty ray gun at his side. Ray guns were the weapon of choice for spacefarers. Just follow the rocket trail of Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon or Captain Video, and thrilling space adventures ensued.

This was long before Captain Kirk popularized the phaser and traveling at warp two. And certainly it was before Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan

Kenobi switched on their lightsabers, and Han Solo unholstered his blaster and made the jump to hyperspeed.

Ray guns were better than phasers or blasters, though. They looked so cool, all futuristic and pointy. Ray guns shot a continuous beam of energy that had no limit. Really big jobs sometimes required the large rifle-like ray gun, but any boy worth his salt could solve an interplanetary crisis with just his hand-held ray gun. It was often thankless, anonymous work, as an unwitting world didn't know it was being saved, but that's all in a day's work for a space ranger.

Our house was perfectly situated, with backdrops available to play any game the magic closet provided. Behind the house was Goat Hill, with both cliff-like walls and gentle slopes leading to its grassy plateau. Plenty of space to be Dodge City, or Normandy Beach, or a strange planet orbiting a distant star.

All the best ray guns were green.

Diagonally across the street was a city playground with a ballfield when it was time to be Mickey Mantle. Up the street from the playground was Clay Hill, with its red dirt, when a Martian landscape or Tombstone, Arizona, was the order of the day. Every day was like making a different adventure movie with me as the star. What a wonderful world I lived in.

Then one day we moved away. We couldn't take the magic closet with us, of course. We moved to Mt. Washington, to a house and neighborhood I would come to love, but the house had no magic closet. Shortly after moving in, I asked my mother where my toy box was. "We didn't bring it," she said. "That was mostly junk anyway, and besides, you're getting too old for most of those toys."

"But Mom," I said, "my best stuff was in there." I felt my lip quiver. "My rockets. My ray guns ..."

My voice trailed off, and I was embarrassed, because I was surely too old to cry. I was hoping that she hadn't seen.

But moms always see. She put her arms around me and said, "It's okay, Joey. You'll be wanting different things now. You're growing up, and that's okay."

Was Mom right? Was there no magic because I was in the sixth grade, and the wonders of youth fade? Was I crossing a boundary from which there was no return? As time passed, I came to realize that the true magic of the closet wasn't in what it contained. It was in how it transformed me. All I had to do was believe.

Once I crossed the border, I stopped believing. I no longer had the ability to become anything I wanted. I was trapped in a plodding, pedestrian world of only prosaic possibilities. The magic had never been in the closet; it had been in me, and now it was dead.

Is the magic lost forever? I don't want to indulge in childish fantasies, but wouldn't it be magnificent to feel that simple belief in our possibilities again? What if we could brush aside each thought of "I'll never be able to do that," and replace it with "Watch out, there, Clanton gang, here comes someone to be reckoned with"?

I mentally visit that closet often these days. It's partly just sweet nostalgia, but it's also good for the soul. Although the closet was only a conduit, maybe that's the way to reclaim the magic. To become the magician once more.

Can we believe again? I don't know, but I believe I'm going to try. Who knows? Maybe Buck and Flash are out there, in trouble, praying for a rescue rocket to come, with a desperately needed space ranger and his menacing green ray gun. ♦

Joe Potts has had articles published in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the *Tribune Review*, and the *Laurel Mountain Post*. His fiction can be heard on WAOB Audio Theater. Joe's humor blog is at www.joepottszone.com. He lives in Harrison City.

Cerberus

© by *Stephanie Malley*

Depression follows at my heels like a three-headed dog
Each Western Pennsylvania fall, when thick gray clouds come,
Hunker down in the treetops, and stay and stay and stay.
Early on, still new to being shadowed, I was afraid
To stay alone with it; cried nights, knowing in the dim light of day
The dog would bare its teeth again. Many seasons later,
I've come to admire its dogged faithfulness (how it returns unbidden),
Come to welcome the familiar black bulk of it, a temporary stay
Against the shades of death. I've mastered fear. "Good dog,"
I say. "Come," I command, "my precious guard dog. Now stay."



(See Stephanie's bio on p. 7.)

Love Notes from Dad

© by Karen Malena

Mother keeps a basket near her kitchen table, spilling over with love letters and cards that Dad sent her through the years. We lost my father only four months ago, and these writings have become a beautiful link to his love for Mom.

Every so often when I'm visiting, Mom pulls out a crumpled page and asks in a shy, giggling, schoolgirl kind of way, "Did you ever see some of the notes your father wrote me?"

In her dementia, Mom doesn't realize that I've heard her read all the letters many times now. But to her, it's the first time. It's a way to reignite the passion she and Dad shared and makes her see herself as my father always saw her: the young beauty he once courted.

The ravages of aging are upon her: the thinning gray hair, bent body, and same sweatshirt stained with jelly from the previous day. Yet inside is the young woman, the one my father loved. ♦

Karen Malena comes from a close-knit Italian family, actively encourages new writers in her community, and is a compassionate animal lover. She is a member of a monthly writers' group, Pittsburgh East Scribes, and has written several novels. Find her at www.karenmalena.com.

Marilyn on the Wall

© by John Grey

On his wall
is pinned a reproduction
of the famous 1949
Marilyn Monroe calendar.

It's from long before he was born
and it's not up there
in pride of place
between a couple of football pennants
because he has a dying need
to know what day of the week
5/11/49 fell on.

No, here is where
beauty, sex, myth, and icon
all come together
in one delicious naked spread.

Like the big bang,
that might have only ever happened once.
So why shouldn't he
continue to get a bang out of it.

John Grey is an Australian poet and U.S. resident. He has recently been published in *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Stillwater Review*, and *Big Muddy Review*, with work upcoming in *Louisiana Review*, *Columbia Review*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*.

Where God Works

© by Sally Witt

God works
at the gas station convenience store
on the corner in our town,
and is grossly underpaid.

I didn't know to find God there
till one day,
unaware of how frazzled I was,
I exceeded the patience of the gas pump computer.

"See clerk," it ordered.
I met her inside, offering service.
She completed the transaction
unfazed by my lack of reality.

Even as my fingers still headed for the wrong
computer keys,
she handed me the calm I needed,
along with a receipt for gasoline only,
thus performing her miracle under the guise of
ordinary activity.

Do oil companies pay a living wage
to workers who hide divinity,
yet offer it without discrimination
to anyone who comes in frazzled off the street?



Sally Witt, CSJ is a sister of St. Joseph of Baden, PA. She lives in Ambridge.

OBX Anchor

© by *Laura Lovic-Lindsay*

You're on island time now, the grasses whisper. Cast off
all that is heavy: you've no need of it here. It is time
to mine the pale gold sands of beaches, time to breathe
the salt that cures the ills of body and mind, time to re-learn

the languages of gull and tern. The houses are trellised in roses,
the yards and gardens sentried by bushes cascading
with clusters of hydrangea, the very alleys lined in velvet
ivies. Every jetty-stone has lived a secret life, every oar embedded

with sweat and strain, every pier has held hope. Ireland
owns its greens, but Hatteras holds the patent on a thousand
shades of blue, etches them into your soul like a scrimshaw. The
ancient mother, Atlantia, sweeps her edges every day. Hush!

—catch the slow and gentle sweep of her broom upon the shores,
in rhythm with her heartbeat. Walk the roads of an evening and
catch the heartglow in every home as the winds comb your hair
with mother kisses. Anchor me here. Oh, anchor me here.

Laura Lovic-Lindsay was born and raised upon Enchanted Ground near the Allegheny River. See more of her work at *Gemini Magazine*, *Serealities.com*, *Fireside Fiction*, *Writers Weekly*, and *Brilliant Flash Fiction*.

Any Given Summer Night, 1980

© by *Laura Lovic-Lindsay*

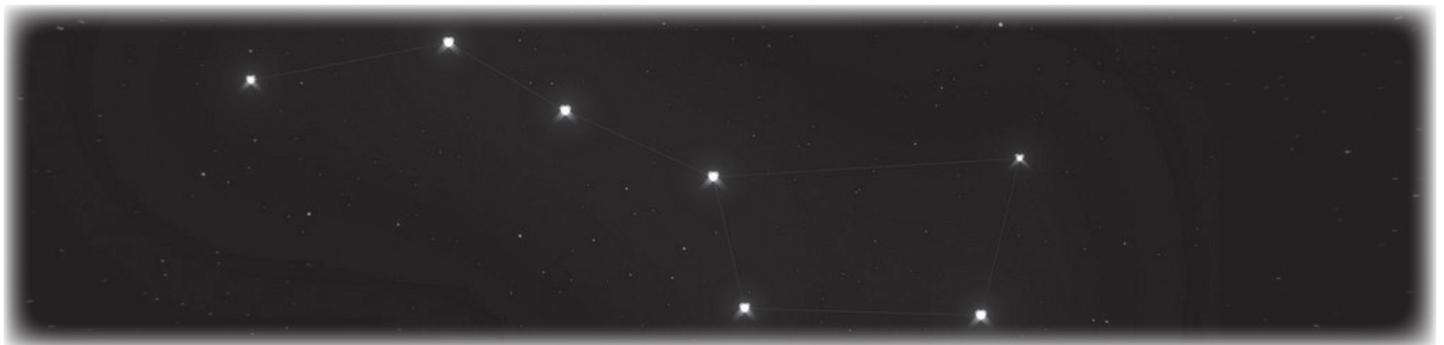
We lay soldier-style on our backs in the summer
dusk, debating bats or birds cross-hatching the skies
over us. None of us knew the true names of the star

clusters we pointed out. None of us knew that counting
crickets would tell how hot it was. Once, there was a time
when kids didn't go to sleep at night. Sisters ran the empty

streets in footraces, all adults home watching news,
clinking plates, or reading the paper. Brothers would sly
through backyards playing ninja, creeping on friends

and parents alike. They dared each other deeper into
the woods on moonless nights, biked down to the river
to echo at the village across the way, sneaked through

the cemetery to pop at young couples walking. They flipped
garbage cans over in the alleys and beat a rhythm for the town's
kids to follow deep into the hillsides, like cicadas awaiting.





Lighting Up Ligonier

© by Louise Vrable

Louise Vrable is a retired teacher who has explored various art forms all her life, from developing her own black-and-white photos to manipulating digital pictures to painting watercolors and more.

Candace Kubinec lives and dreams in western PA. She is a member of Pennwriters and Ligonier Valley Writers. Her fiction and poetry have been published in *The Loyalhanna Review* and her poetry in the anthology *The Official Poet's Guide to Peace*. She blogs at www.rhymeswithbug.com.

Morning Dew

© by Candace Kubinec





All Revealed © by *Fabrice Poussin*

Fabrice Poussin teaches French and English at Shorter University in Georgia. His work has appeared in *Kestrel*, *Symposium*, *The Chimes*, and dozens of other magazines. His photography has been published in *The Front Porch Review*, the *San Pedro River Review*, and more than 200 other publications.

Permanently Vacated © by *Carolyn Holland*

Carolyn Holland is both a writer and a photographer. Her historical novel-under-construction, *She Saw Her Promised Land*, is in its second draft. Her active trigger finger takes photos wherever she is situated.



Aster and the Bee © by *Colleen Wakefield* (See Colleen's bio on p. 16.)



Christmas Kitty © by *Linda Ciletti*

(See Linda's bio on p. 17.)

Alicia Stankay is a writer and nature photographer. She has published four books, and her stories and photos have appeared in *The Loyalhanna Review*. An exhibition of her photography is scheduled for October 2017 at the Merrick Art Gallery in New Brighton, PA.

Squirrel Thief © by *Alicia Stankay*



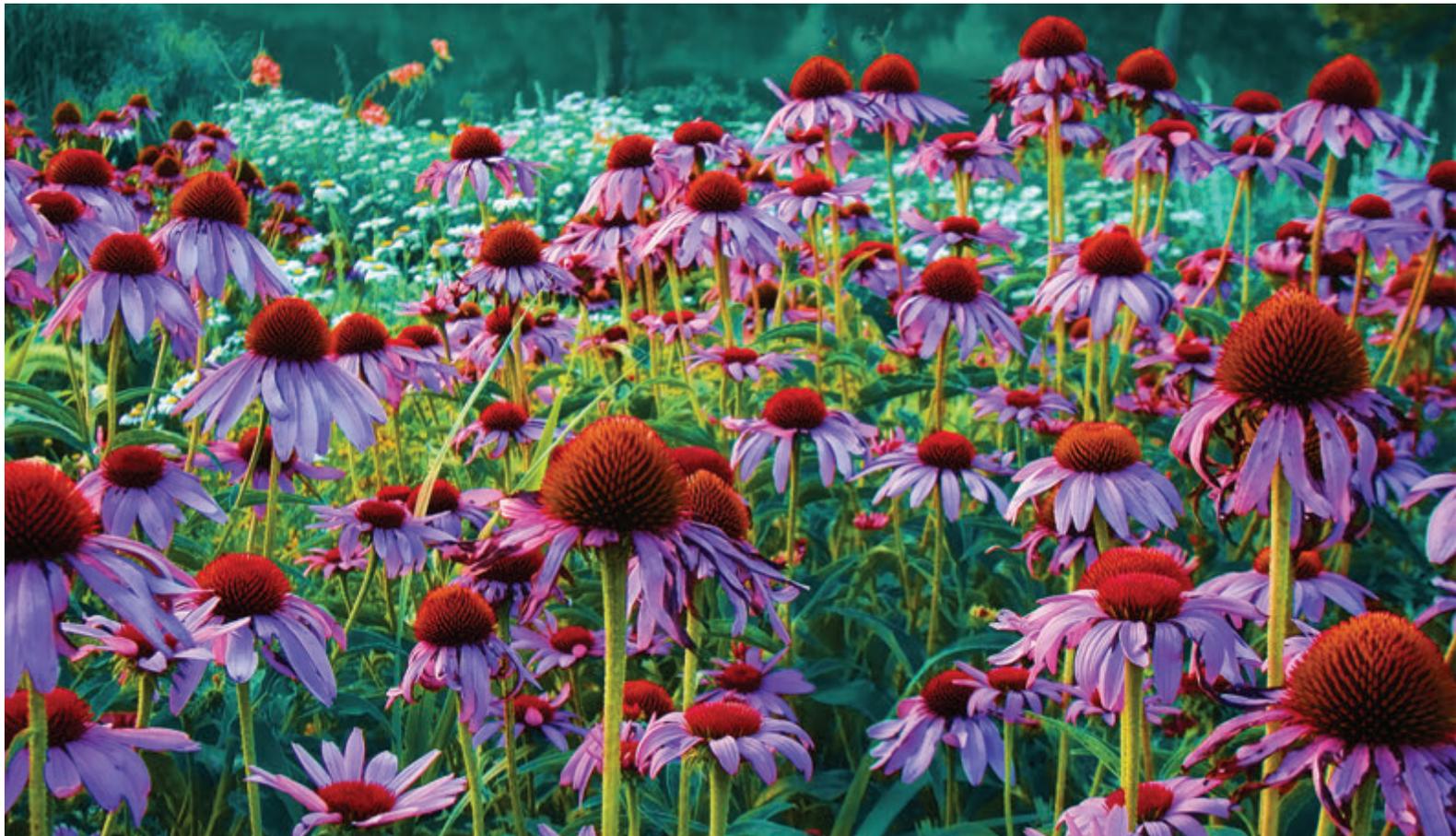
Bashful Anemone © by *Colleen Wakefield* (See Colleen's bio on p. 16.)



Jeweled © by Colleen Wakefield

Field of Echinacea © by Colleen Wakefield

Colleen Wakefield says her camera is her best friend, and she takes it with her everywhere. She is a master gardener with a jungle of flowers in her front yard, which makes for some good photos. She was previously published in *The Loyalhanna Review* in 2014.



Winds of Change: A Faerie's Tale

© by Linda Ciletti

I heard it on the winds of change
For the winds of change forever blow,
Sometimes soft as a downy seed
Whispering words of kindness and joy,
Sometimes blustery and sharp
Its message barbed and painfully dark.

I am well attuned to the mood of the wind
For Fae hear its song and know its dance
And revel in its wistful ways.
On fluttering wings they join its path
With song and dance and merry words
So every thought is wondrously heard.

But this wind blows ill-spoken words,
Words that weigh upon my heart
Their message neither joy nor pain
But gray and dank as a sunless day
With heavy clouds that threaten rain.
Creeping words, a shadowed thief
Stealing joy and peace and calm
An empty void left in their wake.

Bards have no use, the words did say
Then hurried past with quiet speed
That I barely heard them in their haste.
But their heaviness was painfully felt
They stole my flight, they stole my song
And pressed upon my heart so long
That I could scarcely find my breath
And I spiraled down with loss of flight
And struck the ground, my magic lost.

A single question came to mind:
Who dared to say such wounding words?
To set them loose upon the wind
To carry forth throughout the land
And taint the magic from within.
For nothing spoken is ever lost
But carries on the winds of change
Until such words do find their place,
Dark or light it matters not.



No use? The thought raced through my mind
A thought that caused me endless dread.
Did words no longer have a place?
I closed my eyes and searched my heart
And visualized the world I knew
Of fae and drow and elven clan
Of dragons, pixies, humans too.

Why does the bold and valiant knight
Wield his sword in endless fight
If not for hope of peace and joy
For right of merriment, of song
And dance and tales of days of old?

And when the knight returns to home
His spirit dark with all he's known
His body broken, hope but lost,
Is it not song and tale that mends
And lifts a dark and broken soul
And gives him strength to fight again?

When peasants work from dawn to dusk
Worn and torn and feeling low
Is it not words that lift their hearts
In song or tale or rhyme oft told,
In minstrel tunes that fill the air
And set down-trodden souls to glow
And lay aside their daily woe?

Nay, there is not a spoken word
That does not carry on the air
Be it merry or be it dark
With hateful barbs and sharp-edged blades
Hastily spoken out in rage.
Words travel on the winds of change
Until bards pluck them from the air
And write them down to song or rhyme
And speak them out in telling tales.

Were there not bards to take these words
And clear the air of all that's said
There'd be no song, there'd be no rhyme
Nor tales of valor, pain or love
Nor minstrels' tunes to lift the soul.
Hearts would darken, hearts would die
Wondrous words forever lost
With not another place to go
For the winds of change forever blow.

Linda Ciletti is an award-winning author of medieval, time travel, and fantasy romantic adventure novels: *Draegon's Lair*, *Lady Quest*, *Knight Stalker*, *Dream of the Archer*, and *Faerie Dust*. Her horror short story, "The Hunger," is included in *The Wicked's* anthology. She is a poet, photographer, and book-cover artist.

Seam

© by John Grey

Two smiles emerge refreshed from a sip
of Bordeaux Red.
There are no clouds in either glass,
nor in our heads.
The sky is melting into the sea.
A bell rings in darkness, steady and strong.
The fading sun honeys the cheeks
of the ones for whom it rang.

The sea is on its way to being merely sound:
its crash, convulsion, at water's edge,
the salt it sprays on wind
that tosses the tops of palm trees.
Like a musical song without libretto,
there are no down, prosaic moments.
The warm of wine, each other,
rises within like an octatonic scale.

I am both amazed and appreciative
that the ordinary swill of life
can still back off,
allow moments like this:
at the seam of day and night,
land and sea, thirst and succor,
and hands stretched
across a table.
It feels like time's been filtered.
And how beautifully
the strain is showing.

(See John's bio on p. 11.)

Never Let Me

© by Carolyn Cecil

never let me see you dance
or pet the cat with your guitar hands
or show me your naked chest
or let me see the way you move up the stairs

never let me speak your name
or imagine your happiness

Carolyn Cecil's book *Taken Away* was published by the Broadkill Press, and her poems appear in several reviews: *Broadkill*, *Backbone Mountain*, *Free State*, *Loyalhanna*, and *Gunpowder Review*. A resident of Baltimore, Maryland, she is a member of Ligonier Valley Writers and the Burlington Writers Workshop.

Low Light

© by Sara Lee Anderson

You look good tonight in the low light
And in the bright lights behind you;
With the glitter in your hair and
The echo in my ears
From the feedback screaming
One two, one two.

But you look better in the soft light
Against the green walls by your bed,
And the sheets that fit too big
Bunch up at your pillow;
Across your shoulders;
Around your head.

There's the TV buzzing softly,
And then a clamor two floors down.
I search your face for some concession
A gentle stirring,
An impassive frown.

You look dauntless in the moonlight,
No more stirring; no more sound
Just the steady flow of blood and breath,
Your arms and legs abound.

Cups of coffee in the dawn light,
Rain clouds move and choke the sun
Morning quarrels, fussy neighbors,
There are words fresh on your tongue

I can read you by your fingers
Gently tapping on your mug,
Children scream
And scare the dog next door,
You forget;
You force a shrug.

You belong to me in the twilight
When you're tired,
But just can't sleep
And the green walls in your bedroom
Hold up secrets vast and deep.

There's a song here every evening
It's been building in your chest.
And the steady flow of blood and breath
Can come out;
You can rest.

Sara Anderson is a Johnstown native and has been writing for most of her life. She enjoys hiking, stargazing, and making friends with every dog she sees.

Hummin' Bird

© by Walt Peterson

"Welcome to the Dew Drop Inn, Monroe!"

"What's on your mind, Earl?"

"Well, Monroe, we was all sittin' here and saw sheriff's cars and an ATF go down the lane to your house. Then they all came back up a little while later, and now here you are."

"Earl, that all you got to do is spy out the window of the Dew Drop in the middle of the day?"

"You're here, Monroe."

"Yeah, but apparently I'm the only one who's thirsty. Look here, you buy me a beer, and I'll tell you the story."

"If your story is good!"

"Story's good. Tell you what, I'm thirsty right now, Earl. You spot me one to start, and if my story ain't the damndest thing you ever heard, then I'll buy this whole redneck bar a drink. If everybody decides it's good, you buy."

"You're on, brother!"

"Last couple of days when Nadine and me woke up there was this buzzing outside our bedroom window. Didn't hear the birds at all. I went outside to proceed on the acid-dipping project of Colby's Chevy frame he left me."

"Colby, God rest that boy, you mean you are still pissing on that metal hopin' to rust 20 pounds off that frame and be Street Stock Champion at Dog Hollow?" Earl asked.

"That was my daddy's formula for success when I was growin' up, but when I asked Nadine if we could make it a family project, she just gave me her hairy-eyeball stare. However, she didn't say I couldn't relieve myself in my own backyard. Know what I mean, Earl?"

*You buy me a beer,
and I'll tell you the story.*

"That Nadine is as good a woman as you'll ever find. What about the sheriff's cars and such?"

"Yeah, they was there, Earl. And if you stop interrupting the flow of my narrative, I will get to the most amazing part."

"Proceed."

"Well, it looked like a little bird with wings beating wildly, but when it came close to me, I saw it was a machine. One of them little surveillance drone things they call a hummin' bird."

"Ha, and it wanted a peek at your pecker?"

"Don't interrupt, Earl. It was supposed to be snoopin' old man Hopson's place. You heard about his kid, Junior, back from Iraq? Someone dropped a plate behind him at IHOP and he flipped. The manager said the kid hid behind the counter for half an hour.

He left this place a high school football star."

Monroe shook his head and continued, "Old man Hopson's been growin' Mary Jane to help the kid and supplement medical treatment. I decided next time I went out to my acid-dip project, I'd take a little surprise for that hummin' bird."

"Wait a minute! That wasn't no hummingbird. That was a homobird!"

"Earl, man, you are a homofobobird. Let me proceed to get the bar a drink from you. It took me two rounds."

*We got to get us
some drones.*

"You blew that sucker out of the air, yeah!"

"It was coming at my you-know-what. I whipped out my Smith & Wesson M and P Special; it stopped. I just let him have it. I prefer to think of it like the ducks you claim you shot down at Dog Hollow swamp."

"How was it like them ducks, Monroe?"

"Earl, the whole community was sayin' them ducks was the worst case of mass suicide people ever saw. That hummin' bird had a death wish like them ducks. Poor thing sure was stupid."

"Two shots?"

"Earl, I was havin' a bad day. Besides, my ... Never mind. Nadine come out from bed, then Mr. Hopson and his boy came over. We was all laughin' pickin' up the pieces, except Junior."

Monroe laughed. "Then the sheriff's cars came, and the ATF man showed up. Thought he was a badass, but the boys asked him did he want another meth lab and reminded him of the city drug dealer they found for him cut up and burnt in a barrel on the back road to the dam. We don't want none of that ghetto shit here."

"It is here!" Earl declared.

"Not right here. Not right now, long as I got *The Grace of God* with me."

"You don't even go to church, Monroe."

"My pappy did, and I got his 30/30, Earl."

"If your daddy went to church, it was to get some sleep during Reverend Brother Elroy's sermons. Your house was crazier than Colby's, especially on Sunday mornings."

"I'm sorry. Now you're off the subject, again. They all agreed it was self-defense: assault on Mr. Wood Pecker."

"Hey, what kind of man would kill another with a video game? I hear they get a military medal for it, like Hopson's boy deserves. It's shootin' fish in a

barrel. That guy'd puke and shit hissself if he had to shoot and gut a deer like my daughter did this past season when she got her first."

"I have to admit, your little Ree is a crack shot. Must come from your wife's side of the family, though."

"I appreciate it, Monroe. You send in your NRA dues yet?"

"Earl, I scraped my sticker off the rear window on the pickup right after Colby passed. You think Mr. LaPierre is all for us?"

"You becomin' one of them Eastern liberals?"

"Naw, just that guns don't work as good for me, now."

"Yeah, you *are* becomin' a liberal. I didn't notice, you still got a gun rack in your pickup?"

"Earl, I'm gonna write to the President. He got a pile of them little drones. I'm gonna ask for his personal permission. We got to get us some drones. Now, you gonna quit flappin' your jaw and buy the patrons of this august 'stablishment a beer or not?"

"I certainly will, and I promise another round next week, too. Show up with that letter to the president, and we'll see if Monroe's writin's good as his talkin'." ♦

Walt Peterson is a writer and teacher from Pittsburgh. He has won the Acorn-Rukeyser Award for Poetry and the Gribble Publishing Award for short fiction. He currently has work in the *Wise-Ass Poetry Anthology* and short fiction online in *Uppagus*.

The Pennsylvania Lottery at Sheetz

© by Sarah Henry

If I can lose,
I can win.

MTOs are my fondest
heart's desire, with
grainy ciabatta bread,
mozzarella and pesto.
Down the hatch.
Iced lattes are made for
mild summer days like
this. Their soy milk
costs forty cents more
than skim milk with
it's weak character
development.
Building blocks of pizza
and Brawny Man dinners
attract the hungry
eyes of poets.

I would like to buy
a successful hotdog
or two to eat out
in my car.
The microwave at Sheetz
beeps on a dime.
I don't even own a microwave.
Nothing spells depression
like a woman who lives
alone and nukes her
Lean Cuisine.
I prefer to come here
instead to buy my
food and lottery
tickets. So far,
I haven't hit
the Pick 5
and the state has
always won.



Sarah Henry lives in Greensburg, where she is a former employee of the *Tribune Review*. Her poems have appeared in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the *Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, *The Loyalhanna Review*, and elsewhere.

Word Weary

© by Candace Kubinec

this poem is a little
stained
strained and
stretched
across the page
it's been reworked
reformed
reimagined
rolled up
ironed out
let out-taken in
unraveled
stitched together
crinkled in my pocket
erased and re-
scribbled
in crayon
this poem is
just
worn
out

(See Candace's bio on p. 13.)

Hair Stories

© by Cheryl Shively

The hairs on my head are growing thinner,
Not just from aging,
Though that cannot be denied.
Their normal life on my head is brief
As the daily sweeping of the floor will attest.
The thought of the hairs of my being
That I have left
In all the various places I have traveled ...
I followed the drift
Of a hair to the floor,
The golden glimmer of it
Dimmed in the dust
Lost forever to me
But perhaps not to eternity.
Swept outside, off the porch,
For the breeze to grasp
Caught in the claw of a bird
To be dropped in the next county.
On a visit to sisters
In another state
It flows from my brush
To float on a wave of the sea
To land next on a coconut palm
Eventually to become fish food
On some tropical isle.
Vacations to far places
Other oceans, other mountains,
To become part of the threads in a carpet
That, in time, will travel continents ...
I stir as the sun shines my eye blind.
I come to an abrupt conclusion.
My hair is more well-traveled than I.

(See Cheryl's bio on p. 24.)

Baby Boomer's Lament

© by Ruth Ochs Webster

Children of the 20th century,
I loved you.

Children of fury,
Children of flowers,
Children consumed
with disillusion.

Children ripe with hope,
fraught with fear.

Metaphysical children,
cliched,
Anacreontic,
idealistic.

Dead children—
in race wars,
in jungles,
from repression,
from within.

Wrap the children in the garments of age.
Baby-boomer them with hype.

Pretend they made a difference.
Defend, pretend.

Children of the 21st century,
I love you—

Arise.

(See Ruth's bio on p. 4.)

Perhaps

© by Ruth Ochs Webster

There are no indigo buntings here, no rose-breasted grosbeaks, no scarlet tanagers or bobolinks. Only robins here, a cardinal, house sparrows, an occasional chickadee. Mourning doves coo their sad plaintive and are mistaken for owls.

There are no owls here. Owls are of forest and farm.

This is the world of the backyard birds. Common birds, like the common folk they serve. Birds adapting and surviving in smaller spaces, more crowded places than they probably deserve.

A patch of grass, a small brick house, the life of silent desperation. Perhaps. Fenced in by highways. Governments. Walls. Perhaps.

And yet ... the birds fly, and sing as in Camelot, from morning 'til night and then morning 'til night again.

We sit under the shade of a neighbor's tree that knows not the meaning of boundary. Its towering branches bond us across fences. Yard to yard. Life to life.

The backyard birds have never known the forest, only patches of woods, shrubs, and flowers. And yet they sing, they feed, they nest and bear young. As do we, who work, rock babies, laugh, drink beer, dine, mourn, hurt, and send our young into life.

Sometimes one settles for less.

Perhaps less is more. ♦ (See Ruth's bio on p. 4.)

My Name Is Gwen, and I Am a Volunteer

© by Gwen Wolfgang

I was not born a volunteer. As a child, I did my best to keep a low profile. When the teacher asked for volunteers to come to the blackboard, I was never among those eager students waving their extended arms and chanting, "Ooh, ooh, ooh!" You would have found me sliding down in my seat trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. Being the smallest pupil in my class made it easier to disappear until the threat of math at the board passed.

As a third grader, I carried my ballet doll to school for three days before I volunteered to share her jointed feet with my friends during show and tell.

Even in high school, I was able to control the urge to volunteer. I was willing to do whatever was asked of me to the best of my ability, but I always waited to be asked.

Before I knew it, I was PTA president.

My first dose of volunteering was the year my oldest son began kindergarten. Each November, the kindergarten classes celebrated together with a Thanksgiving feast. When my son brought home the parent volunteer sign-up sheet, I signed my name and the die was cast.

I had expected to run to Murphy Mart and pick up some cute little turkey-in-Pilgrim-hats plates and matching napkins. Surely that would be my contribution to the feast. Then Jonathan brought home my assignment. I would be providing all of the pumpkin pies!

I had consumed my share of pumpkin pies, but I had never baked one. I didn't even fully understand where pumpkin pies came from. But I was too proud to admit that to the teachers, so I bought a pan suitable to make tiny pies and baked five dozen individual, bite-size pumpkin treats. It was a lot of work but the finished product was pretty impressive.

The next day, Jonathan and I arrived at school with our tray of miniature pumpkin pies. While there, I confessed that these creations were my maiden voyage into the world of culinary delights. I asked if I had been given this challenging assignment because I looked domestic. If not, what had inspired the teacher to give me such an aggressive duty? That was when Mrs. Blair told me that they only request homemade items from the parents of the "clean children."

When we got home that day, I sat my children down and explained to them why they would no longer be required to bathe, brush their teeth, or wash their hair. I was excited about all the free

time I would have now that I would no longer be doing laundry. But it was too late. On snack day, I was constructing tiny wagons of stuffed celery with carrot-slice wheels for the whole kindergarten class. I had already slipped into the inescapable world of volunteerism.

It wasn't long before I was directing Bible school, working in the library, baking for bake sales, and serving as the devotion committee chair for PTA. And it only escalated from there. Before I knew it, I was PTA president. One year I decided to make a gift for every one of my PTA volunteers. I can say from experience that it takes a lot of effort to make 30 tiny jars of homemade raspberry jelly with decorative Christmas lids!

Still, I never learned my lesson. My life became one challenge after another. They had one thing in common. I was paid only in endorphins.

I have learned one thing. When someone says, "If we don't get a volunteer tonight, we will have to disband the organization, and little children all over the world will suffer from its demise," it is usually not true. When I hear those words, I sit on my hands to keep from raising them. But it isn't easy to do!

Church has always been a prime volunteer location. I teach a women's Bible study on Monday nights. We are currently looking at the grown-up lessons we can learn by studying the stories we were taught as children. I play piano for the morning service once a month, bake the communion bread, write communion meditations for my husband, and compose programs for holidays.

For years I have volunteered for retreats at our church camp near Ohiopyle. Last year I did not accept a job. I felt like a slacker as I sneaked into my cabin with nothing but a sleeping bag and a change

I was paid only in endorphins.

of clothes. Withdrawal symptoms made it hard not to micro-manage and think up jobs to do the next year. This year I am teaching a workshop and doing a devotion experience, which takes much more work than anticipated.

One Thursday a month I volunteer as a nurse for Sheep Inc., a free clinic for people without insurance. It is a ministry of the Monroeville Assembly of God Church. It started when a friend used their services and was impressed by their kindness and efficiency. I had recently retired from work that involved a

paycheck, so she thought I might enjoy serving at the clinic. That was six years ago. I now am a clinic supervisor and provide follow-up services, procedure development, and patient education. Most recently I volunteered to help with the basket drawing at our annual spaghetti dinner.

I have enjoyed working with the residents at Easy Living in memory and Name That Tune activities. Changes in procedure brought an end to my role as a volunteer instructor for the American Red Cross. I miss the satisfaction of sharing life-saving information.

Recently I learned that volunteerism is contagious! My husband planned to attend his last

retirement club meeting. He came home three hours later carrying two very large red bags. Someone had said, "If we don't get a volunteer treasurer tonight, we will have to disband the organization, and little children all over the world will suffer from its demise." And he fell for it. At least I'll have someone to room with if we go into volunteer rehab.

I joke about volunteering, but our world would be a sad place without those who share their time and talents with others. They bring ideas, compassion, smiles, and baked goods to a world that can always use a dollop of extra sweetness. Volunteers are love in action. ♦

Gwen Wolfgang is enjoying retirement after 25 years of school nursing for Hempfield. Her days are now filled with good times with her husband, John, and writing with the New Stanton Writers' Workshop. In her spare time, she volunteers.

Transitions

© by *Alicia Stankay*

I've done this before when my children were young
so it shouldn't be hard, I tell myself.

The sense of loss will ease.

The world isn't complete at five years old.

But still my heart cracks a little
to see my granddaughter off to kindergarten.

I know her love of reading and puzzles
and how she fills pages with drawings.
She gives me designs of hearts and flowers,
curly-tailed cats and crayon-bright rainbows
all with the words "I love you"
printed in neat capital letters.

Her eyes now bright with anticipation,
she'll talk of her first school bus ride
and tell exciting stories about her new friends
as she shares her recent adventures,
her life beginning another chapter.

I'm happy to see her eagerness for
more learning and experiences,
even as sadness tinges my thoughts
that our relationship will change.

Then she steps off the bus
and runs into my waiting arms,
exclaiming, "Grandma!"
as her joy and mine intermingle.

And for a little while longer
she's still the preschooler
who loves her Grandma
unconditionally.

(See Alicia's bio on p. 7.)

Four Again

© by *Candace Kubinec*

If only we were four
again

I'd give you the last
cherry popsicle
and let you jump in
the pool first

If only we were four
again

I'd share my hot dog
with you
and even put ketchup
on it because that's
how you like it

If only we were four
again

I would hold your hand
and give you big hugs
and cry when you had
to go home

Maybe
just for today
we could be four
again



(See Candace's bio on p. 13.)

Windmills

© by Cheryl Shively

Ancient and alien
At the same time
Sentinels on
Mountains and ridge tops
Blades whirling
Coaxing power from air.

Immune to the controversy
That surrounds them
They continue to
Probe the atmosphere.

Cheryl Shively has been writing poems and stories for herself ever since she learned to write. She sees poetry everywhere and in everything. She is now writing seriously since her retirement.

Reflections

© by Thomas Beck

I stare into the still, glassy pond,
Bright stars and full-faced moon float in its ink.
Each sparkle reflects on smooth glossy surface.
Moonlight sends roots into the murky depths.
They weaken and fade, seeking bottom.
Sooty darkness surrounds.

I gaze at the black sky overhead.
The bright stars and full moon hang on dark hooks.
Each twinkle must escape night's strong, chilling
grasp.
Beams of soft moonlight send ladders to climb,
Fragile, milky rungs extend earthward,
Night's illusion of stairs.

I peer down the deep well of my soul,
Bright thoughts and memories shine in the gloom,
Softly shift, flickering from times long ago.
Faith and hope still live, sending new green shoots,
Fragile links from past to the present,
Reminisce and promise.

Tom Beck is a retired registered nurse trying to write full time. He has written four books, poems, novels, and a play and now hopes to have the courage and perseverance to have some of his writings published.

Hubris / Crow Humor

© by Christine Aikens-Wolfe

Up early with the sun, in Frick Park,
I chase the early morning hours, solo,
intent on my usual mission

to contemplate, experience
the world's earth—
hungry as fox for geese,
eager as forager for truffles.

I find only the intelligent crow.

Crows, more family oriented than humans, brighter,
confer each morning
with their battalion before they fan out

to balance on traffic lights

at intermittent intersections
rocking and laughing
at rush hour traffic.

Christine Aikens-Wolfe won awards at WAHF and has been published in *Blast Furnace*, *City Paper*, *Loyalhanna Review*, *Poetry Magazine*, *Sonnetto Poesia*, and in anthologies, including *On Broken Stones*, *Fission of Form*, *Phoenix Rising from Ashes*, and the upcoming *Love and Madness*.

Art Credits

Front Cover:

Apple Blossoms © by **Carolyn Holland**
(See Carolyn's bio on p. 14.)

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Breezy Sunset © by **Colleen Wakefield**
(See Colleen's bio on p. 16.)

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Bubblemania © by **Carolyn Holland**
(See Carolyn's bio on p. 14.)

Back Cover:

Deer on Deck © by **Janice McLaughlin**
(See Janice's bio on p. 25.)

Night Walk

© by John Negich

The crusted snow cracks under each cautious step
As I descend slowly through the hardwood forest
Darkness is closing in quickly as I walk into the wind
Each exhaled breath steams and blows back into my face
I can sense ice particles forming on my moustache

From a long distance away a lone coyote calls out
The full moon shines its light on the white expanse of snow
Beech and cherry trees squeak and cast long and dark shadows
They sway eerily with every gust of the northerly wind
And the surface of the snow sparkles like fireflies

Bear tracks in the snow heading up to the ridge line
How long had it been, I wonder, since it had passed this way
Darkness deepens as clouds drift in front of the moon
I skirt the big rocks and navigate through the red brush thicket
A faint sound of a fast-running brook rings in my ear

My fingers and toes are feeling the bite of the cold winter night
When I finally reach the long flat land of Chapel Creek Valley
I welcome the familiar smell of chimney smoke to my nose
And the dim light in the window that shines in the darkness
From the primitive two-room cabin set deep in the hollow

I smile, knowing I will soon be embraced by the warmth

Auction House

© by Robert Beveridge

silent gavels stare
out over the walnut-
panelled room. The benches
resemble pews. In each
rests a number of ping-pong
paddles, white numbered
faces, red rubber grips.

The pulpit stands empty,
waits for the fastest preacher
in America to come deliver
another sermon on capital.

(See Robert's bio on p. 7.)



John Negich is 69 years old and an ardent outdoorsman as well as an environmentalist. His work is based on his life experiences, friendships, and encounters. The people, places, and feelings depicted in his work have touched his life deeply.

Whimsical Winter

© by Janice McLaughlin

I begin my journey as simple, unpretentious drops of frozen rain,
exquisitely etching frosty ferns upon your window pane.
Glittering in the moon and stars, in the frozen night;
glistening, glimmering, sparkling—bathing the land in light.
Lulling you to sleep in a world of brown, waking you to a world a gleam;
forming ice crystals edged in lace, bordering the flowing stream.
Blowing across your dreams, wind tangling in your hair;
watching the breaking dawn and breathing life into the air.
I am draped in a feathery boa, frozen in time and space;
luring you back to childhood, you awake with rapture on your face.

I am a gossamer flake of winter snow on cold and driven wind,
answering a skier's prayer for a stunning snowy weekend.
Tumbling, dancing, and spinning, finding my way to earth,
playing snowy games with all who dare, inspiring glee and mirth.
Drifting in rows of purest white, piling deep before your door;
inhabiting this year's snowman, but existing nevermore.
Singing the music of the wind, composed magically into song;
tiptoeing in with volume low or blaring in loud and strong.
I am the icy lips of the wind, whispering secrets so intense;
guarded, mysterious, intimate—tinged with excitement and suspense.

Janice McLaughlin loves poetry, photography, music, reading, movies, and spending time with friends. She has published six books of poetry, three of a series of children's books titled *Little Bug Adventures*, and a book written by her cat, Sir K. Harlequin.

Not So Famous Last Words

© by Jim Busch

“Sounds good! We’ll kick General Tso’s ass, brother!” hardly qualify as famous last words. But they were the last words of my best friend, Tony Campolo. Tony and I worked together for almost 30 years. He managed the Sears sporting-goods department and I worked in hardware. We shared innumerable brown-bag lunches in the store’s break room. His sparkling conversation brightened up the dreary room and made me look forward to lunchtime.

I may be labeling myself as a crotchety old coot by saying this, but I fear good conversation that bridges the gap between two or more active minds is a dying art. Most of our co-workers exhausted their limited vocabularies gossiping about each other, complaining about our bosses, and discussing inane television shows, from *Gilligan’s Island* to whoever was voted off the island.

Tony and I preferred to talk about ideas. We discussed current events, history, and art, which we both enjoyed. In more than three decades, I never heard Tony say an unkind word about another person, complain about his wife, or refuse to accept responsibility for his failings. He was a good man, and I will always miss him.

I wish I could’ve said goodbye.

Tony and I were forced into early retirement by the sea change in retailing brought on by the expansion of Wal-Mart and online sales. I lost contact with most of the people I worked with, but Tony and I continued to meet for lunch every few weeks. The only people who enjoyed this more than we did were our wives, who liked having us out of the house and out of their hair.

At Sears our conversations were limited to our allotted hour for lunch, but as retired gentlemen of leisure, we could talk for hours. We would meet at a local restaurant and occupy a booth until the waitstaff grew tired of topping off our coffees.

We last met at La Hacienda for burritos and enchiladas. As usual, we had a long and wide-ranging discussion. We talked about our favorite films and the new administration and made plans to take in the latest exhibit at the Carnegie. At 3:00 p.m., we shook hands in the parking lot and parted.

I told Tony, “Next time it’s my turn to buy. What do you think about the Hunan Buffet?”

Tony smiled and said, “Sounds good! We’ll kick General Tso’s ass, brother.” He climbed into his pickup and drove off. I had no idea that I would never see my friend again.

Mike, Tony’s son, called my house that evening to tell me that his mother found his dad slumped over the wheel of his truck in the driveway about 4:00 p.m. She called 911, but there was nothing the EMTs could do. Apparently a massive stroke had killed him instantly when he got home from our lunch.

I was forgetting everything that went unsaid between us.

After the funeral I talked to Tony’s wife, Julie. She said, “At least it was quick and painless. The doctor at the ER told me he never knew what happened. I suppose that made it easy on him, but it’s damned hard for his family. I wish I could’ve said goodbye.”

Tony’s death hit me hard. We had known each other for so long that I couldn’t imagine not seeing him again. It somehow didn’t seem right that after all our conversations, the last thing he said to me was so trivial. Such a wise man should have gone out with something clever on his lips.

Something noble like Thoreau, who when asked if he had made peace with his Creator answered, “I wasn’t aware we had quarreled.” Or witty like Oscar Wilde, who said on his deathbed, “Either this wallpaper goes or I do!” But the last thing my best friend said to me was a lame joke about Chinese food.

I’ve arrived at a point in life where I’m well acquainted with death. It’s becoming increasingly difficult to pretend that the grim reaper isn’t waiting for me around every corner. As the old joke goes, “At my age I don’t buy green bananas.”

When a friend dies, it’s a bit like waiting in God’s bakeshop with a numbered ticket in your hand, and they’ve just called another person to the counter, so you know it won’t be long until your number is up. All we can hope for is to go quickly, cleanly, and with a minimum of pain.

Tony certainly hit the mortality trifecta on that account. I’m glad he didn’t end up in a sterile room with wires and tubes sticking out of every orifice, but his last words still bugged me. I guess I’ve read too many great books and watched too many old movies. The hero of the story is supposed to go out with “Tis a far, far better thing I do ...” or words to that effect. Somehow Tony’s heroic last line ended up on life’s cutting-room floor.

After Tony’s death, I started to give some serious thought to my own parting remarks. The problem is that, like Tony, I may not know when the universe is about to flip my switch to the off position.

I considered writing out last words to be read out after my demise. I would carry them on a laminated card in my wallet. But I realized the card could easily be lost when the EMTs were trying to revive me or even worse, completely ignored by my family in their grief. Briefly I considered having the epitaph tattooed on my chest, but that would be hard to explain to my long-suffering wife.

After giving it some thought, I realized that these written epilogues presented another serious problem: They are static, carved in stone so to speak, while our relationships are constantly evolving.

I was almost resigned to the fact that my famous last words were likely to be something like, "I'm not a total idiot; I'll remember to get the eggs and milk." Then it hit me! By obsessing over Tony's last words, I was forgetting all the great conversations we had over three decades of friendship. I was also forgetting everything that went unsaid between us. His friendly handshake and smile before he got into his truck carried more meaning for me than any novelist or scriptwriter could write into the most dramatic final scene.

Like Tony, none of us knows when our final moment will come. Once I embraced this fact, I understood the secret to making my last words memorable and meaningful. We should use our words to help others see the beauty of life, to show them that we care about them and are there for them. If we succeed, when we are gone, people will smile when they remember us.

*As retired gentlemen
of leisure, we could
talk for hours.*

I'm smiling right now as I kick General Tso's ass at the Hunan Buffet and remember my good friend Tony. ♦

Jim Busch is retired from the newspaper industry. He is a freelance writer and public speaker who writes several monthly columns. Jim lives in White Oak with his wife and proofreader, Glenda.

At the End of It All

© by *Laura Lovic-Lindsay*

God announced a pot-luck bonfire in the Garden and invited Eve and Adam. Eve brought caramelized scallions over foraged mushrooms. Adam brought beef jerky. God, of course, brought

shrimp scampi and crème brûlée. A bowl full of fruit lay on the table, too, but each denied having put it there. God sang into Eve and Adam all the songs that ever would be. Dipped

beeswax candles with them. Took them for rides in his Rolls-Royce. He washed the dishes while they sang back to him all the songs. He told them about the children they would have, and the children they

would have, all down to today. Warned them about nightswimming and rip tides. Taught Adam to change a flat tire—just in case—and how to comb a chestnut grove. Made Eve recite the periodic table

again and again until she also knew it backwards. Sometimes he spoke in silly accents to make them laugh. God built the bonfire at dusk, and offered them roasted figs stuffed with Gorgonzola, bacon-wrapped.

He told them ghost stories until they fell asleep together, cuddled near smoky embers. He opened poetry and poured it over them before he left for the night. He kicked stones into grates, whistling all the way home.



(See Laura's bio on p. 12.)

Ligonier Valley Writers Calendar of Events

— 2017 —

- **August 15.** Deadline for submissions to Flash Fiction Contest. Cash prizes and readings of the winning entries. The topic this year is haunted objects. Check the LVW website for guidelines.
- **September 10, 3:00-5:00 p.m.** Annual Ligonier Valley Writers potluck picnic. St. Michael's Church, Rector. Attendees are invited to read from their work in progress.
- **Fall, date TBA:** Workshop on writing a credo (an Edward R. Murrow-style "What I believe"), taught by Jim Busch. Details TBA.
- **October.** Readings of the winning Flash Fiction stories at local venues. Details TBA.
- **November 4, 1:00-4:00 p.m.** art and writing workshop, at Westmoreland Museum of American Art, Greensburg. \$20 for members, nonmembers \$25. Reservations required.
- **December 3, 3:00-5:00 p.m.** Annual LVW Christmas Party. St. Michael's Church, Rector.
-

— 2018 —

- **January 2018.** Dues are due for 2018. \$30 per year; you can download a membership application from LVWonline.org. Benefits include free admission to most LVW events.

- **January 2018.** Call for Student Poetry Contest entries for students in grades 4-12. Cash prizes in 30 categories, no entry fee, and an awards ceremony and booklet of all the winning poems.
- **March 11.** Deadline for Student Poetry Contest.
- **April, date TBA, 4:00-5:00 pm.** Student Poetry Awards Ceremony at Barnes & Noble. The winning poets in grades 4-12 will read their work to the audience. LVW will have a bookfair at B&N.
- **May 1.** *Loyalhanna Review* submission deadline. (Reading period is February 1-May 1.)
- **July, date TBA, 7:00-9:00 p.m.** *Loyalhanna Review* publication party. Wine, hors d'oeuvres, readings, and camaraderie.
- **August 15.** Deadline for submissions to Flash Fiction Contest. Cash prizes and readings of the winning entries.
- **September, date TBA, 3:00-5:00 p.m.** Annual LVW potluck picnic. St. Michael's Church, Rector.
- **October.** Readings of the winning Flash Fiction stories at local venues. Details TBA.
- **December 2, 3:00-5:00 p.m.** Annual LVW Christmas Party. St. Michael's Church, Rector.

Please check www.LVWonline.org for the latest info. If you have questions, email jgallagher@LVWonline.org.

Come Join Us in LVW

Ligonier Valley Writers is a nonprofit group serving writers and readers throughout western Pennsylvania. Membership provides practical tools and creative inspiration for everyone interested in writing, whether you are published, prepublished, or a dedicated reader.

Membership is only \$30 a year and provides discounts to most LVW events. You can download a membership application at LVWonline.org. If you'd like to get on our Members & Friends list to be notified of upcoming events, send your email address to jgallagher@LVWonline.org.

The Return of the Phantom Detectives

Phantom Detectives on Vacation is the third collection of short stories in the Phantom Detectives series. Each collection is published by the Greensburg Writers' Group, as a fundraiser for LVW.

The collection features seasoned Detective Brendan Manelli, whose search for justice is aided by the Sleuths and Serpents Writing Group, an eclectic band of authors who meet behind a red door in the archives of a fictional town library. How do they solve the unsolvable? It's simple—they don't. They all have ghostly advisors to help them solve cases. Each writer from the Sleuths and Serpents is inspired by

a different paranormal sidekick who abets them in their quest for answers, although somehow there is still a lot of legwork involved.

Phantom Detectives on Vacation is the third standalone anthology created by the Greensburg Writers' Group, featuring stories by Ronald J. Shafer, Barb Miller, Judith Gallagher, M. A. Mogus, Michele Jones, Marge Burke, and Thomas Beck, a poem by Barb Holliday, and an introduction by Ed Kelemen.

Members of the Greensburg Writers' Group are already working on their stories for the fourth volume, *Phantom Detectives at Risk*, out in 2018.





Deer on Deck © by Janice McLaughlin