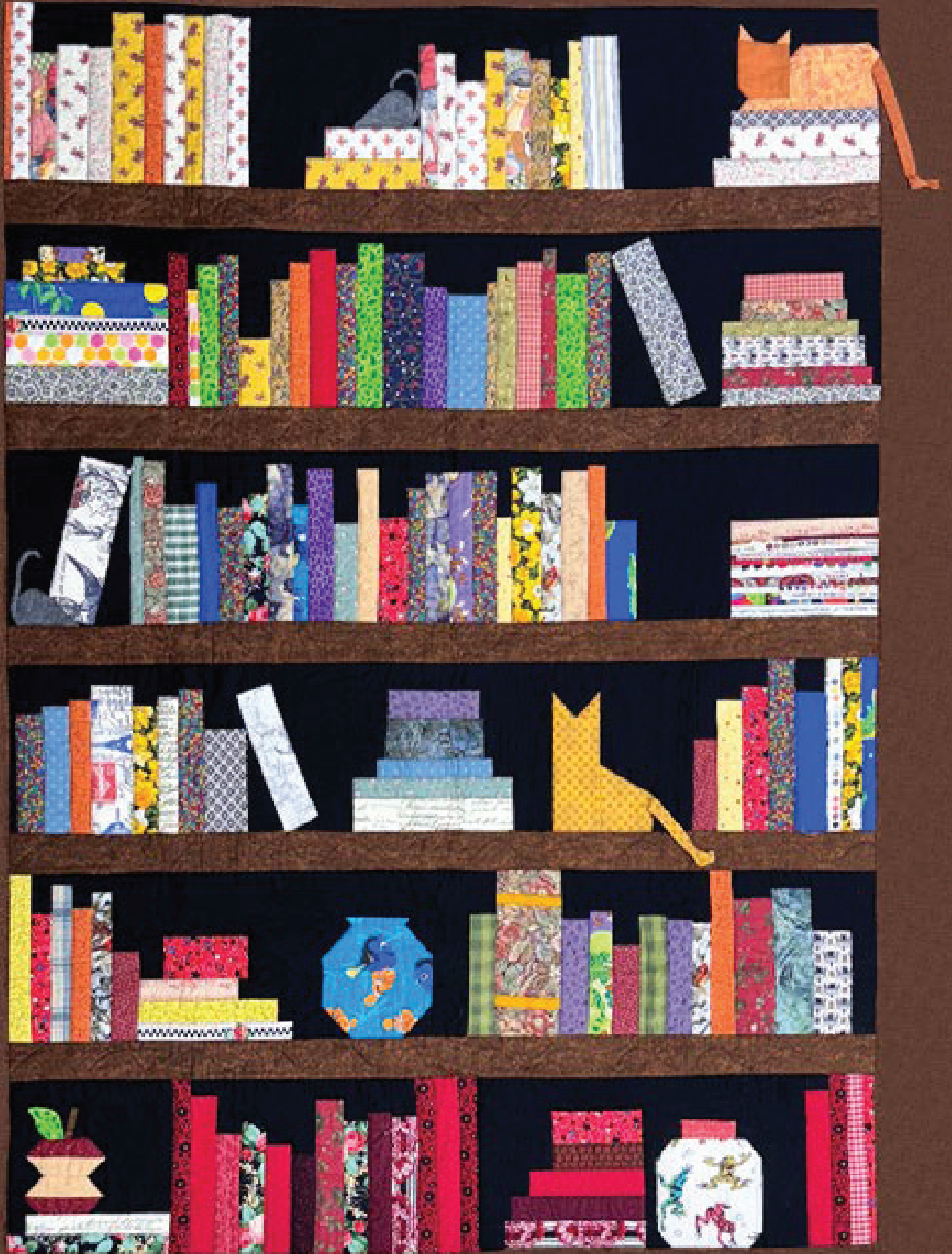


# *The Loyalhanna Review*

2024





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Ligonier Valley Writers presents the  
**2024** edition of its literary magazine,  
*The Loyalhanna Review.*

## From the Editor

It has been an honor to edit *The Loyalhanna Review* for the last twenty-one years. I have to thank the late Tina Thoburn for choosing me. I also need to thank Judith Gallagher, who encouraged me early on, worked endlessly, and taught me the finer points of publishing.

A small press editor needs organization, kindness, tact, and patience. This job can be challenging, frustrating, at times overwhelming, but valuing the art of the written word these last twenty-one years has made the work a labor of love.

Thank you to Ligonier Valley Writers members and faithful readers for sharing your stories, poems, and beautiful art, and for spreading the magazine far and wide. This year we attracted submissions from eight states, plus foreign countries: United Kingdom, Ireland, and the Czech Republic. The creativity of southwestern Pennsylvania still shines.

Thank you, Judith Gallagher, for your prowess and unwavering efforts, and you, Rebecca Dunn, for sharing your work ethic and creativity. Thank you to all who have donated to keep the *Loyalhanna* in print. The 2024 issue will be my last, but *The Loyalhanna Review* will continue as long as active members are generous with their time, talent, and treasure.

*Ruth McDonald, Editor-in-Chief*

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## Special Thanks to All Our 2024 Members, Contributors and Friends

Editorial Staff of the *Loyalhanna Review*, especially Judith Gallagher and Rebecca Dunn.

All Donors and Judges for the Flash Fiction and Student Poetry Contests.

Anita Staub, Randy Mollomo, and Linda Ciletti for their Contests, LR, Facebook and Web work.

Anonymous	Louisa and Ron Fordyce	Joanne L. McGough	Helen Sitler
Cricket Jean Baunoch	Judith Gallagher	Janice McLaughlin	Alicia Stankay
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Tamara DiBartola	Jan Kinney	Joe and Susan Potts	Michele Jones in
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These gifts were received as of July 9, 2024. Thank you for your generosity.

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# The Pontiac Sled of Death

© by Joe Potts

When I was a boy growing up in Pittsburgh, winters weren't the sissy affairs they are now.

Believe me, Old Man Winter had a wicked case of toxic masculinity back then. Winters plowed you under and left you for dead. Boy, were they fun!

A winter with wall-to-wall snow came after my family had moved from Lawrenceville to live with my granddad, my mother's father. He owned a patch of land in the village of Wildwood north of Pittsburgh. Coming from city living, I was thrilled to have vast fields, hills, and valleys to romp in.

---

*The hill had some bumpy areas for a Jack Rabbit roller coaster-like bounce.*

---

One cold and snowy January day, my cousin Larry and I decided to sled ride. Unfortunately, we didn't have sleds. Larry was always full of terrific ideas, though. He suggested we use his older brother's Pontiac trunk lid. Genius!

Larry was my first cousin, but we saw each other only sporadically until our move. Although our personalities were considerably different, we had hit it off from an early age.

Larry's family lived just down the path from Granddad's house. In fact, there was a cluster of homes owned by my mother's siblings. This was a stone's throw, even a young boy's stone's throw, from the house where my mother had grown up. That was common in those days.

Larry had five or eight assorted siblings—it was never clear to me exactly how many—most of whom were significantly older. One was a priest. He didn't visit much, which was just as well. Having a priest around all the time can be disconcerting to a youngster.

Of course, a nun can also be problematic. My mother had a relative who was a nun. Fortunately, she was safely tucked away in a convent.

Several of the older brothers liked to monkey with old cars and pretend they were hot rods.

Their house was surrounded by the carcasses of expired vehicles. The frame of the ancient Pontiac looked like the skeletal remains of a mastodon from the last ice age. The trunk lid lay forlornly on the ground beside it. We rescued it, recognizing the lid was the perfect sled, or toboggan, or some similar maiming instrument.

Plus, it would be easy to ride on, as there was no steering mechanism to distract from all the fun.

Larry and I tugged the makeshift sled up the steep hill near his house, no small accomplishment for two less than beefy nine-year-olds. Our boots weighed

almost as much as we did. A row of tall pines at the top of the hill provided a perfect place to launch from.

The hill was a superb toboggan track. It had solid, smooth snow cover and some bumpy areas for a Jack Rabbit roller coaster-like bounce. Nothing was at the bottom of the hill, except for a few mastodon derelicts.

Ah, the fresh scent of pine and old cars and icy danger. The wind-blown snow was stinging our faces. Was there ever a better day to be a kid? Like Olympic bobsledders, we pushed the trunk lid as hard as we could out of the gate between two trees. Then we jumped on it.

Zoom we go down the hill. Zoom, bump, zoom. Larry and I shriek as we rocket down the slope. Zoom, bumpity-bump, the Pontiac now starts a slow spin, and I'm looking up the hill where I've been. Zoom, bump, bang, there goes Larry off the side into the snow.

Zoom I go, bump, zoom, spin. I'm looking downhill again. And the Pontiac sled is heading right for the Pontiac body, like it wants to be reunited after all these years.

I lean to the left, hoping to coax the trunk lid away from its collision trajectory. It's not working. I lean more. Still not working. I lean as far as I can—and I fall off and roll several yards down the slope.

To its credit, the Pontiac ran straight and true, homing in on its former framework like a heat-seeking cruise missile. Ka-BANG! Pontiac body and Pontiac trunk lid, reunited after all those years. It didn't bounce off; it stayed smack up against that body like they were long-lost lovers. It was truly a beautiful sight.

Larry came running and slipping and sliding down the hill. "Woo-hoo!" he yelled. "That was great!" He came up beside me. "The best sled ride ever! Gold medal quality!"

"Yeah, it was terrific," I said. "Especially the part where it didn't end with me getting killed."

"I'll bet Rege Cordic will be talking about this on the radio tomorrow morning," Larry said optimistically.

---

*Zoom, bump, zoom.  
Larry and I shriek as we  
rocket down the slope.*

---

I thought Larry's mother might come out to investigate the crash and hoopla, but all remained calm. This was decades before the era of helicopter parents. In those days, the norm was submarine parents. They surfaced only for emergencies, such as busted craniums. For more minor transgressions,

they'd fire a torpedo across your bow as a warning.

Larry and I looked at the Pontiac sled, our frosty breath visible as we panted heavily from the excitement. "So, you wanna go again?" I said.

"You betcha," said Larry. "But this time, let's slick down the trunk lid with wax paper."

And we did. Like I said, Larry was full of really great ideas.

Shortly after this exploit, my parents presented me with a beautiful Flexible Flyer sled. That was unusual, as excess money was an unknown commodity in our house. I couldn't believe I owned the king of sleds. It was one of many times my parents showed an uncanny ability to come up with precisely the right gift at the right time, bless them.

I wondered if Larry's mother had alerted my mother to our shenanigans. Parents had a well-established clandestine network in those days to inform on misbehaving children. For all we knew, it may have involved Sputnik, transistor radios, and Santa Claus. Whatever the method, it was beyond the comprehension of kids everywhere. Suffice it to say I never rode a Pontiac trunk lid down a hill again.

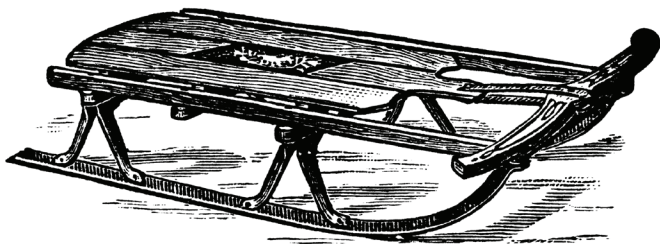
Larry and I had many other fun times before my family moved back to Pittsburgh. We saw each other only occasionally after that. As often happens, we went our separate ways as adults.

Through a quirk of social media, I became connected with his daughter recently. She was a niece I never knew I had. She told me Larry had passed away a few years ago.

I felt remorse for the years we had let slip by without seeing each other. I can still see his face in my mind, though. Although I have no photos from that era of my childhood, I can see the sparkling mischievous eyes, the zest for fun and life.

Thank you, Larry, for the good times. Without you, I never would have schussed down a snowy slope in world-record time on a customized Pontiac sled. ♦

**Joe Potts** has had humor articles in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and the *Tribune Review*. His SF-tinged fiction can be heard on the WAOB Audio Theatre (website, YouTube, podcast). He lives in Unity Township with his wife, Susan, and feline literary critics Sofia and Nefertiti.



## A World of Imagination

© by Stacy DiPasquale

Is it truly make believe  
To live in a world of our dreams?  
Where imagination has no bounds  
And we can be anything  
Regardless of age.  
Failure does not exist,  
As you can try again and again,  
Never giving up.  
There's a delicate line,  
A thin veil  
between imagination and reality.  
Where unicorns exist  
And you can be a ninja queen,  
Not a damsel in distress  
Held captive by a dragon  
That encompasses all your fears  
Make believe is not a fairytale,  
Life in perfection.  
Friends can still hurt you  
And lovers still leave  
But it's not the end.  
After all,  
You're a ninja queen  
With a unicorn by your side,  
Battling the dragons.

**Stacy DiPasquale** was honored to have her story "All Tied Up" in the *Phantom Detectives at Risk* compilation and poetry in a prior *Loyalhanna Review*. She is currently working on a book series inspired by her love of music and New Kids on the Block.

## A Walk with a Four-Year-Old

© by John Grey

"Don't touch it!" I shout at her as she runs ahead of me toward the dead sparrow on the sidewalk. "It's dead," I tell her as, in one motion, I pick her up in my arms, then set her down beyond the corpse, nudge the bird into the gutter with the side of my shoe. She moves forward begrudgingly, her head turned toward the body. "What's wrong with it?" she asks. "It's dead," I tell her. For the next block or so, I'm forced into inventing a look, a routine, for sparrow heaven. The dead ant she has no problem with. To her, all ants are dead anyhow. Same with the mice in the walls that, like Socrates, take their poison willingly. Then a squirrel diverts her attention. And a fluffy dog runs into view. She spreads her arms wide, flies toward them, one step at a time. Ahead, there's nothing but life.



(See John's bio on p. 25.)

# The Ligonier Mountain Pace Car

© by Joshua Penrod

Picture this: a hot July day in 1932. A Duesenberg convertible (let's imagine it bright red), piloted by Fred Duesenberg himself, thunders westbound on Route 30. He rides atop Pennsylvania's Appalachian Ridge near Boswell.

In those days, many car bodies were custom-built, and a Duesenberg could easily exceed twenty feet in length, longer than the biggest pick-up trucks on the road today. Indeed, this bright red machine is massive and impossible to miss.

Powering it is an 8-cylinder motor with nearly 300 supercharged horsepower. It could catapult this enormous vehicle at speeds over 100 miles per hour. The idling engine would be nearly silent and smooth and, when exercised, would give a surging rumble felt even through the perfect chassis. You press the gas, you could hear the whistling supercharger winding up to a shriek.

The car trades in the finest luxury and highest performance. The top is down. The warm evening sun pours in as the air whips by, this powerful machine, trekking from New York to Indianapolis on Lincoln's Highway, the only cross-state route in Pennsylvania.

When one encounters the Alleghenies, one sees only topography. It is impossible to ignore the switchbacks, hills, and valleys. Here, the hills hold history and coal, the valleys carry water, the woods guard the wildlife and other hidden places. To build, dig, and travel; these realities of human experience mark history, people, and land. Their shape and their resources gave the means to remake the world.

Creation and industry sprung from the Alleghenies and the foothills, supplying the steel and fuel for the automobile, which undertook its own accelerating evolution.

What started as upright boxes bouncing along on wooden wheels became long, low-slung pieces of rolling Art Deco sculpture. Cars now glittered with chrome and vibrant colors. The cars of the era appeared, in the words of Atlas Obscura, to have been driven "right out of *The Great Gatsby*."

Shining exhaust manifolds streamed from the sides of the engine cowlings, a body painted deep ocean blue or canary yellow or cherry red, matching spoked wheels with tires wide and tall.

One car might have hidden headlights, front fenders curved like rocks shaped and rounded smooth by flowing water. Another had custom trim and color. The cars were now Cars, the likes of which we had never seen before and would truly never see again.

The Duesenberg is, perhaps, the best symbol of the age, founded by first-generation Americans. Two German brothers with a yen for design and engineering prowess created them. Today, the few Duesenbergs still extant regularly fetch prices in the millions of dollars.

Duesenbergs represent the very peak of the possible at the height of heavy industry, before computers and cellphones. The Duesenberg car was the summit of a world of manual interfaces, a direct connection between human and machine.

Fred and August Duesenberg came to the United States in the 1880s as children, and the brothers entered the world of motorsport by wrenching on custom bicycles. By the mid-1910s, they were fully in the automobile business, more precisely in the *performance* automobile business.

They raced in the Indianapolis 500 early in their journey and had located their facilities near that legendary Brickyard racetrack. They used the same track for testing and design, their engines renowned for power and smoothness. After they fully consolidated themselves in the business, Duesenberg cars won the Indianapolis 500 several times in the 1920s, including an astonishing 1922 race where they claimed eight of the first ten finishes.

Most people, however, are not now and were not then racecar drivers. No matter. For passenger cars, the Duesenberg auto perfectly reflected the ambitions and vision of the Duesenberg *people*. The car was built with an eye toward both performance and comfort. One could drive beyond the edge of what was normally possible.

They were not cars of The People, but they were *for* all people. A Duesenberg was a car for the owner, of course, but also art for the onlooker. It is an example of the dawning recognition that a machine can be a work of art and possess the capacity to evoke mad desire.

This stands in stark contrast to the infamous Henry Ford, who never saw any reason to own a car painted any color besides black, or for any car different than his beloved, boxy Model T.

By contrast, the Duesenberg wasn't meant for everyone to drive, but it was a car for everyone to enjoy, just by seeing it. Such were the engineering and artistic possibilities the Duesenbergs created.

There is today (intermittently, when not knocked over or stolen), a highway marker along U.S. Route 30 near the top of the Pennsylvania mountains east of Ligonier. It is on the precipice of a curving, up-down challenge in the road and is both a warning for passing motorists and a marker of history.

The sign gestures toward the moment and spot where Fred Duesenberg lost control of his high-powered machine. The Appalachian Mountains, man, and machine found their way into tragic history.

According to local researcher Ray Wotkowski, Fred swerved to avoid a head-on collision with another car attempting to pass uphill. Fred lost control. The inevitable crash threw Fred and two hitchhikers from the car. While the hitchhikers

had only minor injuries, Fred had sustained more significant injuries, including a possible spinal contusion.

At first he was well on the road to recovery, but, like so many (still to this day), he contracted pneumonia while he was in the hospital and soon passed away, never again driving, designing, or building a car.

When one considers the conditions for this to occur, blending history and the natural world atop the Allegheny Ridge, one must consider the hills, the woods, the water. One must remember the fuel, the coal, and the steel. One must remember the railroads and then, of course, the automobile.

The factors that drew these elements together were also those that made the Duesenberg brothers come to the United States. One of them brought his own chapter to a conclusion in an area of striking natural beauty and deep industrial history.

Still, the remarkable story of Duesenberg automobiles and the Duesenberg brothers reaches us. It is undoubtedly tragic that Fred Duesenberg's life was cut short by such an accident; one wonders what

might have been. What we are left with is a legacy of brilliance and beauty.

The mountains of western Pennsylvania may have taken Fred Duesenberg, but it was only by virtue of the mountains and the people living among them that the Duesenbergs placed themselves in history at all. Now we still have this beauty today—in these hills, and in the museums.

The extraordinary human intervention between these ridges and Fred Duesenberg's ultimate fate passes by invisibly, which is perhaps for the best. And maybe even the perilous mountains are too. Once again, life and earth will change and something new will emerge, yet another new age in the endless cycle of endings and new beginnings. ♦

**Joshua Penrod** is a native of Johnstown and still makes his home nearby. He works for an international organization based in Washington, DC, representing a specialized area of the biomedical products industry. He holds a Ph.D. from Virginia Tech and is an adjunct professor at the University of Baltimore.

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## Days Gone By

© by Marge Burke

There are ten of us now, and we are like the Maternal Order of Cousins. We are the Skunk Hollow Girls, and our tendrils reach out from the little rural area of Home, Pennsylvania. We take ourselves and each other very seriously, and our support system runs very deep.

That is not to say that we are always serious. A few years ago we went by teams on a scavenger hunt at Linn Run. Some of the items on the list were very tricky, and Holly, or maybe Gwen, went head-first dumpster diving to retrieve what turned out to be the winning item.

That same year we awarded Gail a rubber snake for going above and beyond her duty as a devoted daughter when she played tug-of-war to pull a six-foot black snake out of her mother's dryer vent. She survived to tell about it, but the rest of us very nearly didn't.

---

*Holly went head-first  
dumpster diving to  
retrieve the winning item.*

---

We have had adventures together since we were born—literally—in every season and in various and sundry locations. Growing up we played house in the woods, swam in the cow ponds (often with the cows), skated on said ponds, hiked back to Rock Springs,

swung on grapevines in the woods, and played paper dolls on the stairs.

Uncle Wiggily and Rack-O were our favorite board games, but we played Monopoly for hours in Grama's dining room, taking over the table way past supertime.

Gail was usually in charge as we put on plays in the old garage or did gymnastics on the iron bar attached to the old maple tree in the yard. We loved playing house between the stone walls of the entrance to the basement.

One such time we had dinner set up for our "babies" when a little snake slithered out from among the rocks. As we ran screaming for Grama, she bolted out the door and leaned over to pick up a stick—but instead picked up the snake and started whapping the stick.

Yikes! The poor little snake went flying! We will never forget that; nor did we let her forget it.

Going camping meant lugging our gear a mile off the beaten path. It was all the more fun when the boys showed up and pulled out the tent pegs. Occasionally they were rewarded with a quick kiss by the fire—with a mouthful of s'mores.

Our bikes clocked more miles than Dad's car, but as we got older we cased the countryside in our own cars. We drove to Rural Valley for ice cream. We went to the Loop railroad bridge and tried to bravely walk across the high, narrow span. We chased after the boys, ate popcorn on the lawn at midnight, and spent

hours running through Grama's fairy-like flower gardens.

As we watched *Bugs Bunny*, *Hazel*, *Lawrence Welk*, *The Monkees*, and *The Road Runner* on TV, we laughed. We listened to Eddy Arnold, the Beach Boys, Buck Owens, Herman's Hermits, Patsy Cline—and we could understand the words.

We ran barefoot, helped churn the homemade ice cream out by the springhouse, waded in the creek, played hide and seek, and begged Uncle Edd for M&Ms he had tucked away in empty glass Alka-Seltzer tubes.

Special treats were Grama's homemade buns, popsicles made with Kool-Aid, and cinnamon buns from leftover dough. Sometimes Uncle Jim made root beer. Though it wasn't a favorite for me, it was an honor to be allowed to help.

All of this got me thinking. What, I ask you, are our kids and grandkids going to remember? What stories are they going to tell their children?

Will they take road trips to show their kids

vacation spots or summer cabins, or will they pull out their phones and show pictures of a music group or a video game that happened to be their favorite? Will they tell about sleepovers with friends in the backyard tent, or will they try to describe the graphics of their favorite Spiderman movie?

Every decade has a generation gap, and some gaps seem to stretch wider than others. But will our grandkids remember dragging beach towels to the creek, stepping on bees in their bare feet, hunting for litters of new kittens, and setting rabbit traps in the garden? Or will everything be electronic? What will they have to remember?

I'm not sure, to be honest, but I know one thing they will have had growing up. They will have had us. So it's up to us to pass on the legacy of days gone by and inspire them to create relationships and adventures to pass on. Leave a little bit of yourself behind. Plant a memory and then watch what happens! ♦

**Marge Burke** has been published numerous times in local magazines and newspapers. Her novels are *Letters to Mary*, set in the Civil War period, and *Fields of Blue*, set in the later 1770s. She volunteers at Hanna's Town, teaches Sunday school, and has five delightful grandchildren and one great-grandson.

## March Moments to Remember

© by Nancy A. Clark

*"Memory is a way of holding onto the things we love, the things we are, the things we never want to lose."*

That's an axiom I champion, an adage that elevates the reputation of those who hoard to the rank of the Keepers of Facts, Foibles, and Fantasies that define us.

My memory bank is cram-packed with gold nuggets that define those things I love and never want to lose, including the trace of that thing I "are" before becoming the thing I am.

Now that I'm getting a little long in the tooth, my path of *no* resistance leads to periods when moments to remember tumble through one of the rabbit holes in my cranial vault.

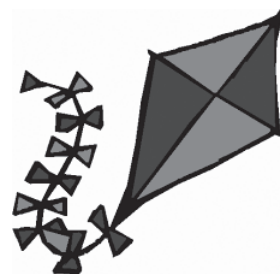
One such moment materialized recently when I turned over the February 2024 calendar page to welcome in the merry, merry month of March ... 1950.

From the dock of Lake Nostalgia, my eight-year-old eyes behold a stand of long-legged daffodils sparring with a brisk warm breeze ... sun-bleached bedsheets anchored to Mom's clothesline ... the hungry March wind kidnapping Dad's Pittsburgh Pirates baseball cap and depositing it on the backside of the Wilsons' coal-ash pile.

And I see my sister and me skipping down our long hill to Bill Steele's Store.

A subtle wrinkle in time distorts but never diminishes my vivid recall of visiting Bill Steele in his

store, where families in our small southwestern PA borough shop the shelves for Heinz tomato soup, Tip-Top bread, Ivory soap, Copenhagen chewin' tabacky and Planter's peanuts. In other words, everything from soup to nuts.



Bill Steele is—first and foremost—a meat-cutting magician who wields a butcher's knife as a wand. He will soil several aprons today hauling "whatever" from the walk-in freezer and cutting it to order before wrapping that chunk of whatever in brown paper. He'll secure the package with string pulled from a giant spool faster than toothless Tom Tyler can say "lickethy-sthplit"!

When he's not weighing baloney or chipping ham, Bill Steele (we never call him anything else!) wipes away smeared handprints from the glass door of the free-standing cooler where glass gallon jugs of Meadow Gold milk huddle next to tubs of butter and cottage cheese.

---

*He cheers with great gusto  
for every kite launched.*

---

He keeps a keen eye on a home-style freezer chest loaded with cherry and banana popsicles,

protecting his cache from those with designs to grab and go.

Covered jars of chocolate-covered raisins, caramels, sourballs, Mary Janes, Black Cows, and Bazooka Bubble Gum call our names and compete for our cash. Our peers plop down their pennies for sweet treats, but Sis and I clutch our coins and wait impatiently for word that the item of our heart's desire is "now available, for a limited time only, while supplies last."

Only Santa's weighted sleigh has more sway.

When the article we covet is in stock, we grab our pennies and hustle on down to Bill Steele's store and purchase four colorful, tissue-paper-thin, stick-framed kites at the inflated, piggy bank-crushing price of 10 cents each: tail not included.

"Why four kites?" you ask. History proves that our first two kites will, indubitably, succumb to pilot error, downdraft, or fatal encounter with a tall pine. That will leave us with only two kites to last the entire season.

*FLYDAY* is solely dependent on wind velocity, and when it is just right for a kite, Bill Steele joins the multitude wending our way to the highest hill

in town. He cheers with great gusto for every kite launched into the cloudless blue sky—the palette for the colorful tissue-paper flotilla. A sight to remember.

Bill Steele, his store, and my kite-flying days (may they all rest in peace) depict only a few inches of the tapestry that showcases my life ... a fabric woven from strands of laughter, tears, gratitude, failure, and success, all framed with the love of GOD, family, and friends.

The longer my tooth grows, the more memories there are to collect. And I have major concerns about cranial storage space. To clean house—purge the lesser memorable moments to make room for those moments waiting in the wings—would be to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

And as we all know, hoarders, especially those of us who collect precious memories, never, ever throw anything away! ♦

**Nancy Clark** and hubby Tom rejoice in 63-plus years of marriage, the company and support of dear friends, and the priceless love of a growing family—which now includes the blessing of six great-grandchildren. Life is good ... and they are grateful.

## What I Did on My Summer Vacation

© by Walt Peterson

When Christopher starts his topic sentence, *This summer we went to visit my dad ...* he stops, looks down at the paper, can't remember a darn thing. Then a picture of the waitress at the restaurant where he and Mom stopped for breakfast comes back—the funny way she wets the pencil with her lips before she writes their breakfast order.

Then, suddenly, he remembers his mom's voice that summer morning: *Don't dare ask when we are going to get there!* But on this trip his mom lets him sit beside the window so he can see the sunrise. The bus ride across half of Pennsylvania is long, but he doesn't mind. The motorcoach seats are big and stuffed like their living room chair, and there's the hum of the wheels on the interstate as they travel. And besides, they stop to eat at that restaurant.

When they finally get there, Mom almost jumps off the bus, runs up the steps and pushes the door marked Visitors' Entrance. It won't budge.

People from the bus pile up behind them. "Push the button, lady!" There's a little metal box with a red button beside the door. Inside, the man with the grey shirt and black baseball cap doesn't seem to notice or hear them.

They wait. After many minutes, the door clicks. Everybody passes through the metal detector like he's seen in prison movies. Mom signs a large book and the crowd behind starts to do the same.

The correction, officer in the grey shirt says, "Sit over there. When your man appears at the window

(motioning across the large waiting room), go to that door on the opposite side of the room and push the button."

Finally his dad appears at the window. Of course they have to wait again. Chris is excited when the inner door slides away. He likes that!

The next door doesn't have a button. His mom pushes and it swings open.

Inside the visitors' room, rows of stuffed chairs remind him of the movies, but the rows face each other. While they wait Chris reads the signs posted on all four sides of the huge room:

ONE KISS ON GREETING AND  
UPON LEAVING A QUICK EMBRACE

*Anyone violating this will receive class  
1 disciplinary action.*

*Department of Corrections 141*

Men come out. They are all dressed alike in brown clothes. His father comes out in the same brown PJ uniform with soft shoes like bedroom slippers.

His mother explained that Dad was being a good guy, taking the blame for something his friends did. He won't be home to watch the boy's baseball ball games for a while.

Chris misses the way his father fills a room with his presence like his mom fills the living room with her perfume. His dad's smell, the way his face felt like sandpaper, and the sinew and scars on his father's forearms: the boy tries not to think about that. But he

likes that his dad sticks up for friends.

Dad hugs Mom and Chris notices the shirt has DOC on the back, like the softball team his dad played for last summer in a “beer league,” as Dad called it. He gives the boy a bigger hug, lifting him off the ground. Chris doesn’t ask his dad when he’ll be coming home. He has orders from Mom about that question, too.

After a while, his mom and dad whisper to one another. This is his sign to get lost! He wants to explore this place, anyway. There are a lot of other big and little kids here, too. He wonders if his friends will make fun of him if he tells them about his dad and the visit to a place called SCI Rockview.

The room is mostly glass and the men in grey shirts and black pants are the guards, but they don’t have guns like he thought. Yet he’s glad the guards probably don’t know he was sent to Sister Principal’s office last year in fifth grade for giving Leo Sullivan a noogie on the playground.

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## *He will remember how the sun catches the many razor barbs.*

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He would never think of saying something untrue, but when he tells about his prison visit, he will give his guards guns. Besides, *who will know?*

The TV room has stuffed toys and picture books and little kids, but there’s nothing in there for him. Through the thick glass wall, he sees a play yard outside.

The yard is long, narrow, surrounded by a chain-link fence with coils of razor wire on the top. It reminds him of the picture above Sister Rose’s desk in fifth grade showing Jesus crowned with thorns. He thinks it is beautiful. He will remember how the sun catches the many razor barbs and sparkles off of the stainless wire.

Bigger boys play wiffle ball. At the other side are plastic slides and swings like at McDonald’s and a green turtle with sand in it. What if the bigger boys get a foul tip outside the fence or in the nest of razor wire? He decides he doesn’t want to go out and play with them.

His mother has brought a lot of dollar bills for lunch from the neon-lit vending machines in the visitors’ room. Dad calls this thing the Merry-Go-Round of Death. He calls the prison food poison. Still, Chris has fun watching candy bars, pies, and hamburgers spin, turn and fall down to an opening at the bottom of the machine.

When he and his mother leave the visitors’ block,

the summer sun is already behind the back of the guard tower. They’ll get home late tonight, and he won’t remember the sound of the interstate rolling under the wheels of the bus.

Now Sister Mary Appassionata has asked her new students to write an essay about their summer vacation. He licks the stub of his yellow lead pencil, laughs, and continues: *This summer we went to visit my dad at a place called Rockview.*

He doesn’t like writing essays very much, but Sister Mary App seems kind, her smile framed in white, her rosary beads clicking confidently as she walks down the aisles past her new sixth-grade writers.

When the class finishes writing, Sister asks for volunteers to read, and his hand shoots up on its own. What is he doing? Is he nuts! He hates to read in front of the class.

After he reads and sits down, he doesn’t know if Sister believes his story, but she remarks, “Christopher, you’re blessed with imagination. Your details and examples are so real. You are going to be one of our best writers.”

He’s surprised. He doesn’t know if he likes that or not, but he likes Sister’s attention and how the other boys ask him questions on the playground at lunch. He does fib about the grey uniformed guards having guns. His friends think he’s neat. And Agnes Brickner, who everybody says is the smartest girl in the school, stares at him after Sister’s comment.

Walking past Gargotta’s Groceries after school, Chris thinks of his essay and can’t wait to tell his mom. He wonders if his dad will be proud of him for this story when he and Mom visit the State Correctional Institute at Rockview again at the end of September. ♦

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## *When he tells about his prison visit, he will give his guards guns.*

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**Walt Peterson’s** book *Talking Smack to the Dead* came out in July 2022. “What I Did on My Summer Vacation” was a result of visiting SCI Rockview and realizing the massive number of children who are familiar with the inside of prisons in the U.S. This story won the 2023 Westmoreland Award.

# The Cool Kids' Table

© by Susan Potts

It has always amazed me how strong an impact high school years can have on individuals' feelings of worth or self-esteem. These emotions can linger long into adulthood. Most people attend high school for only three or four years. Why do the experiences during those few short years cause such a lasting impression?

For some people, high school days bring back happy and exciting memories of homecoming football games, cheerleading, or proms. Others experienced the camaraderie of joining academic clubs or the high school band. And some students enjoyed being seen sitting in the lunchroom with the popular prom kings and queens and fashionable rebels at the Cool Kids' table.

Alas, this wallweed (I did not qualify for the higher designation of wallflower) did not enjoy any of those experiences.

My high school years only emphasized the difficulties this introvert had with being friendly and approaching others (gasp!) in an attempt to broaden my acquaintance base. I had not yet developed the skill of being naturally friendly. I was too shy to say hi to any classmate I bumped into in the halls.

Yes, I had my small circle of steadfast friends from grade school. But none of us had achieved entrance into any higher echelon of high school social life.

There was not a football captain, prom queen, cheerleader, or celebrated rogue among our ranks.

After those high school years, during the usual myriad life experiences of being an adult, this wallweed somehow managed to develop close and lasting friendships in spite of my introverted tendencies.

Over the years, my dear friends and I have kept in touch over coffee or a shared meal. As true friends do, we've talked about almost every life experience imaginable, from the joys of being a newlywed to the ups and downs of potty training our toddlers to watching those same kids grow up and marry. Many secrets were unearthed

as we friends shared memories of our pasts.

During these conversations, it was revealed that several of my friends had married their high school sweethearts. One had been a majorette. Several others were in their homecoming and prom courts. We even had a Christmas queen in our midst.

Most of my friends had been in National Honor Society. My beautiful free-spirit friend disclosed she had been suspended one semester for some minor transgression. Another reluctantly admitted to being the head cheerleader her senior year.

I was stunned. How could this be? For years I had been rubbing elbows with the elite, yet I had never known. This wallweed had somehow managed to become friends with the Cool Kids.

Then one day in church, I crossed paths with a high school classmate who had been one of the Cool Kids. We started to talk about our lives. Forty-plus years ago I had admired him from afar. But knowing my place in the hierarchy, I never had the courage to approach him.

At our next class reunion, we sat together during dinner, sharing the buffet meal. I told him how I had lacked the courage in high school to even say hi to him.

He was surprised. "I wish you had said hello to me in that hallway so long ago," he said.

It occurred to me that in my young mind, I had developed a caste system that was neither accurate nor fair. I had wrongly categorized my peers.

So now when I join my various friends for lunch, I gaze around the table at these wonderful friends I love and marvel at how blessed we all are. Wallweed and rebel and prom queen, we are all sitting together at the Cool Kids' table. ♦

(See Susan's bio on p. 28.)

## The Maintenance Blues

(Provide your own music)

© by Paul Turtzer

You've got plenty of possessions, clearly more than you can use  
I'll take a pot to piss in and avoid the maintenance blues  
Your yearly to-do list reads longer than *War and Peace*  
Having no tangible assets doesn't trouble me in the least  
By most accounts you're living the grand American dream  
I deliberately choose to avoid that imprisonment scheme  
Upkeep is surely vital or neglect will take its toll  
But the freedom to pursue ideals is better for my soul  
Taking care of business is what some folks do the best  
Dreamers woo serendipity, giving duty an overdue rest  
Accumulative desires can easily become a trap  
Many exhaust their time in labor; I prefer to nap  
Luxuries are nice and show you are successful  
I'll quest stories earned and a life that is eventful  
My bank account may be low but the upside seems genuinely bright  
You're burdened by obligations, with liability always in sight  
Moments are what we'll remember, not the shit we have possessed  
Owning a lovable wholeness is the sign of true success

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

## Someone's Birthday

© by D.S. Maolalai

my wife's at a party  
with nothing but  
strangers. my sister  
invited her—it sounds  
like it's hell.  
"someone's birthday"  
she texts me,  
"but I don't know  
whose. or might be  
that someone  
is going away."

and it doesn't matter—  
she makes herself comfortable  
wherever she is, like a dog  
walking circles and then lying down.  
she'll hand out spare cigarettes  
in some Cabra-paved  
garden, leaning back  
next to a drainpipe.  
offer to go on a beer run—  
whatever they need. at home  
with the dog I drink  
wine and type poems  
about her. she fits into them  
just as everywhere else.

**D.S. Maolalai** of Dublin, Ireland, has been nominated twelve times for BOTN, ten for the Pushcart and once for the Forward Prize, and has been released in three collections; *Love Is Breaking Plates in the Garden* (Encircle Press, 2016), *Sad Havoc Among the Birds* (Turas Press, 2019), and *Noble Rot* (Turas Press, 2022).

## Spring Clean

© by Candace Kubinec

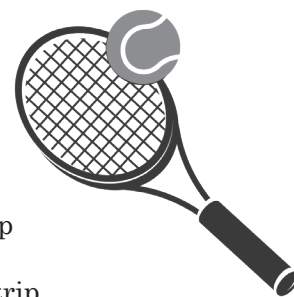
I'm letting go of all the bits and bobs  
that have accumulated in my heart—  
feelings that no longer fit or that pinch  
its soft places. I'm sweeping out the  
people and places that have gathered in  
corners like spiderwebs. I'm doing a spring  
clean in the basement chambers, going  
through boxed-up memories, keeping only  
the most precious and releasing the rest  
to be blown away by winds of change.

**Candace Kubinec** is a poet and photographer from Greensburg. She has been published in various journals and anthologies, including *The Loyalhanna Review*.

## Bohemian Groove

© by Paul Turtzer

An intuitive youth  
Quickly dismissed the Boy Scouts  
No use for merit badges  
Deemed it crucial to opt out  
Relished unstructured time  
Desired a singular voice  
Felt no pressing urgency  
To establish a career choice  
Forever an avid reader  
Yet school possessed little grip  
Distrust of religious dogma  
The fanatics embracing that trip  
Music a vital component



In accentuating the day  
Found quiet reflection  
The humble way to pray  
Devoted to an intimate circle  
Preferred a playful life  
Enjoyed various liaisons  
Was unhurried to acquire a wife  
Employment was necessary  
But resembled avocation  
To casual observers  
Was continuous vacation  
Perpetually indifferent  
To ambition and wealth  
Believed tennis and fly-fishing  
Better for one's health  
A transcendental evolution  
Still remains in play  
Rolling with life's flow  
Is truly the Bohemian way



**Paul Turtzer** is a retired tennis professional, an avid hiker, and a fly fisher. He resides in Ligonier with his wife, Ruth.

## Photograph

© by Kelly Ankney

Frozen in time  
details preserved, emotions captured  
smiles to tears; firsts to lasts;  
Forever a memory

**Kelly Ankney** lives in Ligonier with her husband, Steve. She teaches middle school, enjoys taking photographs, creating calendars, books, and journals with the photos.

# One True Love and Five Perfect Pickles

© by Jim Busch

*“There is no lonelier man in death ... than that man who has lived many years with a good wife and then outlived her. If two people love each other there can be no happy end to it.”*

—Ernest Hemingway in *Death in the Afternoon*

Just over three years ago, my wife said to me, “I keep getting worse every day.”

After more than a year of fighting pancreatic cancer and the complications of her treatments, this was one of the few times Glenda uttered any word of complaint. She was weak, heavily dosed with morphine, and sleeping a great deal. We could both see her slipping away from me.

She hadn’t stood on her own for over a month when the next day she got up on her feet about 11:00 in the morning. Moving slowly and shakily, she straightened up the living room, arranging the pillows on our couch. Glenda wanted to run the vacuum but our daughter, Rachael, wouldn’t let her.

I never knew anyone who loved her sweeper like my wife. For many years, we managed with secondhand vacuums that I picked up from the curb on garbage day and repaired.

Then one day I came home from work and found Glenda on our couch with packing material around her feet and a brand-new Oreck vacuum cleaner on her lap. She looked at me with pride and satisfaction on her face. “On TV they show this machine picking up a bowling ball!”

I smiled and said, “That’s good. I hate all those bowling balls cluttering up our carpets.”

She loved that sweeper, and I knew better than to even ask how much her shiny new bowling-ball remover cost.

With unsteady steps, Glenda walked to the kitchen and asked me, “Do you want a sandwich?”

I said I could fix it and Rachael offered to do it, but Glenda insisted. With great effort she went to the refrigerator and took out a package of ham, some American cheese, and a jar of pickles. She opened a loaf of Pepperidge Farm whole wheat bread and took out two slices.

Glenda needed Rachael’s help to get her grandmother’s heavy black cast-iron skillet onto the stove. She buttered the bread and turned on the gas, placing a slice in the pan. She followed this with a couple of slices of ham and two pieces of cheese.

Every slight motion made her grimace with pain. Flipping the sandwich with a spatula required a major effort. After moving the sandwich to a plate, she lifted the top slice and carefully placed five crisp sweet pickles, one in each corner plus one in the center of the sandwich.

Glenda tried to bring it to me, but this was too much. I went to the kitchen, took the plate,

and helped her back to her recliner. Completely exhausted, she collapsed into the chair, apologizing to Rachael for leaving the clean-up to her.

I sat there on the couch and looked at a perfect ham and cheese sandwich, toasted golden brown, just the way I like them with the perfect ratio of bread, meat, cheese, and pickles.

I thought of all the meals she had fixed me over the last five decades. The endless plates of Kraft mac and cheese when we were broke. The steak and lobster dinners on special occasions. The birthday dinners for our kids, the Thanksgiving turkeys, the Easter hams, and the New Year’s Day prime rib.

I remembered our Sunday dinners of hot dogs and marshmallows roasted in the fireplace when we lived in a small mountain cabin. I thought about all the meals we had shared and all the good times.

In a weak voice, Glenda said, “Your sandwich is getting cold.” I lifted it to my lips and took a bite. It was the best sandwich I ever tasted. I savored every bite as I looked at my wife, my best friend, the love of my life.

We both knew that this was the last sandwich she would ever fix me. The last meal she would ever prepare. It was delicious but hard to swallow with the lump in my throat.

Glenda knew she was coming to the end of the road. That night she spoke to each of us to say goodbye. She wanted to spend at least a part of her last day the way she had spent her life, caring for her home and her family. It was her last wish.

We have one of those kitschy cast-iron plaques reading, “Kissin’ don’t last but cookin’ do.” For us both the kissing and the cooking lasted for fifty years. I wish they could last for another fifty.

That night she fell asleep and never regained consciousness again. Her strong heart kept beating for several days. It just wouldn’t quit; it couldn’t bear to leave the family she loved behind.

Finally Glenda’s loving heart gave out. I was heartbroken but so glad she moved beyond the pain.

After Glenda’s diagnosis we talked about all our memories and our lives together. We agreed that the best way to describe our fifty years together was simply: “It’s been fun.” ♦

(See Jim’s bio on p. 28.)

## Benign

(See Michael’s bio on p. 28.)

© by Michael Comiskey

Bards have taught us that the fairest words are “I love you”—delightful words, it’s true. But the sweetest words I’ve ever heard, more fine than any valentine, are these: “It is benign.”



**Nesting House Wrens** © by *Tamara DiBartola*

## The Infinite Spiral

(See Nicole's bio on p. 28.)

© by *Nicole Bradley*

We start as an intention, a seed beneath a blanket of soil. Silent, unnoticed movement provides strength to push through winter's crust. Our grandmother's blood urging us to the surface like crocuses in early April, warming us like first daybreak.

We are born knowing the ache of our mother's bones, familiar with the calcified scars of ancient battles. Like oak trees that need not ask how they came to be, we accept the complexity of being a woman. Our Mother's tears are vernal pools that quench our thirst, our desire to transform ideas into flesh.

Heavy and dripping like midsummer, Motherhood arrives. Full-moon bellies brimming with new life cannot contain the intention to love. Bolted blossoms wane, releasing next year's seeds.

Mother becomes grandmother. Autumn soil, rich humus built from seasons of released attachments, softened by the determined footsteps of youth, invites us to enter the veil.

The daughters of the future become grandmothers of the past. All that we are is held between what was and what will be.

The spiral continues.



**Time to Rest** © by *Kelly Ankney* (bio on p. 11)



SAMA Gardens © by Kelly Ankney (bio on p. 11)



**Groundhog and His Shadow** © by Alicia Stankay (bio on p. 19)



**Jellyfish in Lamoine, Maine**

© by Carolyn Cornell Holland



**Vein Leaf**

© by Carolyn Cornell Holland

**Carolyn Cornell Holland** freelance writer for numerous newspapers and magazines, is rewriting/editing a historical novel-under-construction, *She Saw Her Promised Land*. Carolyn facilitates the Foothills Writers group at the Ligonier Library. For information email: [cchcreations@yahoo.com](mailto:cchcreations@yahoo.com). She lives in Ligonier, PA, with her husband, Monte. They have two children and three grandchildren.



*“Children see magic  
because they look for it.”*

*— Christopher Moore*

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*“We don’t stop playing  
because we grow old;  
we grow old because  
we stop playing.”*

*— George Bernard Shaw*

**Queen for a Day** © by Susan Potts (bio on p.28)



**Waiting for Santa** © by Susan Potts (bio on p.28)

# Annie, Tea, and Me

© by Sandra Edwards

For many years, I had the good fortune to spend two days and one night a week caring for two granddaughters. This started when the oldest was six months old and continued until she was 18. When her baby sister was born, she was named Anna Mae. We nicknamed her Annie.

I'd make dinner on Thursday evenings so their mom could work later in the city. It was always fun preparing their favorite dishes (and sometimes *not* so favorite). But they ate them regardless. Unknown to me, they had cookies hidden in a drawer to ward off their hunger should I fail to prepare a favorite dish!

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## *We went in search of chatter and chopsticks.*

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One particular night, Sadie was out of town on a school trip. And their mom had an overnight excursion due to work. Not wanting to cook for just the two of us, I asked Annie where she would like to go for dinner.

She immediately named Shanghai-Tokyo, a Chinese restaurant the family enjoyed located about 15 minutes away. So off we went in search of chatter and chopsticks.

The restaurant was small but nicely furnished with linen tablecloths, always impressive, and Chinese décor. To my surprise it was quite busy for a Thursday evening, which indicated to me that it was popular, with good food and fun. And so it was.

Since I am not a connoisseur of Chinese food, I asked Annie what she would recommend. She rattled off several dishes that she thought I might like. We also decided to order different entrees and share so we'd each have a taste. Her urgent request, however, was that we order bubble tea.

Now for those of you who have never heard of bubble tea (like me until that night), I'll describe it: This Taiwanese recipe is made with tea, milk, fruit, and fruit juices. Add tapioca pearls and shake vigorously. *That's* your bubble tea.

It can be served warm or cold. We chose warm. The cups were large, the tea vapors heavenly, and the added warmth made for a very pleasant dining experience.

While enjoying our tasty meal, Annie and I talked about school, her friends, her thoughts on a myriad of subjects and just old-fashioned girl talk that doesn't always happen with a grandma and a ten-year-old. I was able to pick her brain and get a handle on what she was thinking and where she thought she was going.

There was no rush, no schedule to keep, so the evening was long and pleasant. After dinner, we

found our way to the door. Much to our surprise, a storm was passing through.

The rain pelted us as we raced to the car. No coats on, of course, as the evening had been mild. We were drenched by the time we jumped in.

We had an errand to do at the nearby grocery. As we drove into the parking lot, the rain worsened. I could hardly see through the windshield. Again, no coat for either of us.

So I careened into the handicapped parking space nearest the door.

Annie cried out, "But we're not handicapped!" in the manner one uses when breaking the law for the first time. At age ten, she had always walked the straight and narrow.

I replied, "We are *tonight!*" And I grabbed the handicap placard I keep in the car for my 91-year old friend I drive weekly. We both started laughing and ran toward the door.

A quick purchase and back to the car, where we discovered the placard was missing. Also, I was positive I had locked the car, yet now it was unlocked. Had someone broken in for the handicap sign?

Annie watched out the back windshield the whole drive home. She felt certain the car behind us was following us. And wouldn't you know, it turned off at our exit, which deepened the mystery. The weather compounded our fear: a wicked night with torrential rain, thunder, and lightning.

When we pulled into the garage, we held our breath. No car behind us. Who!

Then we searched the car thoroughly. At last we found the missing sign under the dashboard. The Mystery was solved.

When I tell the story now, it's one of those "You had to be there!" moments. It doesn't sound half as scary or as adventurous as it really was.

But to this day, Annie and I laugh about our escapade. And bubble tea will always remind us of a special evening. It is labeled in my heart as the best \$38 I ever spent! ♦

(See Sandra's bio on p. 28.)

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## The End of Worries

© by Tamara DiBartola

If  
you knew  
The End  
of your story,  
would your worries  
Today  
be the same?

(See Tamara's  
bio on p. 28.)



## Sit

© by Jean Podralski

Birthday present Papasan chair  
bamboo curves support a green cushion  
he said I looked like a flower in a lily pad  
But I had laundry to do and dishes to wash  
Rarely did I settle into it.

Ergonomic chair for Christmas  
he and the saleslady saw the giddy smile as I sat,  
back aligned, feet tucked beneath,  
suspended it seemed  
how good for me and comfortable  
I didn't align my back, tuck, nor knit in it

To celebrate a full-time teaching job,  
black leather reclining office chair  
with matching footstool

I sat and assumed an Al Bundy pose  
he laughed  
rather than recline I sat at the computer  
writing lesson plans and creating tests

Big comfy maroon anniversary chair for two  
which complemented our couch  
we could sit side by side  
But the garden needed weeding and harvesting  
vegetables to can, cook, or freeze  
there was so little time for snuggling in together

Soft plum-colored recliner  
for my aching, arthritic bones  
with cushiness that fills the crevices  
of my knees, back, and arms

I open my eyes to see  
this man

through the years not just trying to make me happy  
but, ever so quietly, begging me  
to relax at his side

stay awhile  
to sit.

**Jean Podralski** loves to create and has been a florist, knitter, painter, baker, and middle-school English teacher—all the while writing poetry. Home is wherever she can hear the Pennsylvania peepers at dusk. Her poetry has appeared in the *Loyalhanna Review* and online at *The Mocking Heart Review*.

## Blueberry Muffins

© by Alicia Stankay



Never trust your dreams. I learned that the hard way when my latest dream became a recipe for disaster. I slept soundly as I usually do until I woke up early that morning, a vivid dream about finding Mr. Right dancing in my head.

Yeah, I know; it sounds silly. I can't explain it, but this dream was so real! There I was at work, filling fancy coffee, latte, and espresso orders all boring day long.

This isn't my dream job. It's a fill-in between being a medical assistant, which didn't work out due to my aversion to touching people, and what I'm studying for: personal trainer. (I know that doesn't make sense, but I'm looking for healthy, good-looking young men, and I won't mind touching them.)

Back to the dream. I got an order for black coffee and turned to the coffee urn to fill the cup, all the while thinking how odd it was to get a plain coffee order. When I handed it to the person across the counter, my fingers tingled, and I finally looked up. And there he was—Mr. Right!

"Thank you," he said in a deep bass voice. Sexy and polite. He smiled directly at me before slowly checking me out in my orange-and-white striped shirt as if I were wearing a slinky tight-fitting blouse. He then scanned the baked goods in the case under the counter. I assumed that was his way of extending our conversation. "Do you know what's in those muffins?"

I peered in the direction of his pointing finger and said, "They're blueberry muffins."

"I mean, what else is in them? You know, like what's the recipe?"

"Oh." I was in a quandary here because most people just ordered their sweets without any questions. They'd be real particular about having nonfat or soy milk in their lattes, but they ordered the muffins without a thought. Noticing that the line behind Mr. Right was getting long, I said, "I believe it's made with flour and sugar."

"Hmm," he said, staring at the case. "I don't usually eat sugar. What about that other muffin that has cinnamon on top?" He smiled at me again and I nearly swooned.

"Is there a problem here, Ms. Locke?" I jumped as Mr. Cupperspoon appeared.

"No, everything's fine. This gentleman is just deciding which muffin he wants to buy."

Mr. Cupperspoon's brow furrowed before he turned to Mr. Right. "I'm the manager. I can help you while Ms. Locke takes care of the other customers."

Mr. Right shrugged. "I'll just take the coffee." He dug in his pocket for the money as Mr. Cupperspoon stood and watched. After the manager turned away, Mr. Right winked at me. That's when I woke up, and I nearly cried in frustration.

Imagine my thrill when everything happened later that morning, just like I dreamed it. This time when I looked up, I saw Mr. Right and knew he'd only want black coffee and nothing sweet. He smiled at me and checked out my tight orange-and-white shirt before staring at the muffins and shaking his head.

The only difference was that he asked what time my shift was over, and he was waiting outside when I walked out the door at four o'clock. My cup runneth over, I thought.

He suggested we walk through the local park, and I would have agreed to anything he wanted to do. Well, I guess anything within reason. He motioned to a park bench half hidden by bushes, and my heart beat wildly. How exciting to be sitting here with a hunk who seemed totally absorbed by me.

I learned his name was Trent and he lived on the other side of town. He was a computer programmer, but he headed to the gym every chance he could get. Before I could relate the details of my possible career change, I noticed he seemed rather distracted. After he placed an arm around me, he leaned toward my chest, and I glanced nervously at the crowded children's playground nearby.

"What's that funny smell?" He sniffed a couple of times and then sneezed.

"Excuse me? What funny smell?"

"Are you wearing perfume? Do you know what's in that stuff?"

"It's not perfume," I said. "It's my favorite body lotion, lavender and lime."

"Was it animal tested?"

"I have no idea," I said, my excitement diminishing. "I buy it because I like the scent." I stared at his serious gray eyes, finely sculpted nose, and full lips, and my heart melted again. "I'll throw it out if it bothers you."

---

## *"Did he try to seduce you?"*

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He smiled. "Thanks. I'm allergic to scents." When he leaned closer again, I felt myself shifting toward him as if magnetized. He touched my face and gently rubbed his thumb across my cheek. I closed my eyes in anticipation of his kiss.

"What's that goop on your eyes?" he asked. Since I was lost in a dreamy daze, it took me a moment to understand his words. My eyes flew open. "What?"

"That black stuff all over your eyelashes. What's it made of?"

"Trent, are you going to kiss me or criticize my make-up?" Wasn't he supposed to be Mr. Right?

"I can't get comfortable when you don't even know what ingredients you're wearing on your face. And what about that peachy lipstick?"

"You don't like the color?" I asked. "How about ruby red or purple haze?"

He pulled a tissue from his shirt pocket and tilted my face toward him. When he tried to wipe away my

lipstick, I smacked his hand and jumped up. "Enough! What is wrong with you?"

His handsome features hardened. "I'm trying to save you from all that superficial make-up. When I saw you in the coffee shop, I knew you needed help."

"Help? I needed help?" I shouted shrilly.

"Ms. Locke, are you all right?" asked a quiet voice. Mr. Cupperspoon stood on the walkway.

I ran to his side, delighted to see someone normal, even if he was thirtyish, slightly balding, and a little pudgy. He glared at Trent. "You! I knew you would be trouble. What's going on here? Did he try to seduce you?" he asked, his voice raised in alarm.

"Yeah, I wish," I whispered, part of my brain still grasping onto the tail end of my dream. "I mean, I wish he'd go away."

"You heard the lady," Mr. Cupperspoon said, straightening himself up to his full five foot eight.

Trent stood up and look haughtily down on Mr. Cupperspoon from his superior height. "Don't worry, I had no intention of touching her," he said. "I was merely trying to stop her from corrupting her body. Since she has no interest in any of my help, I'll be on my way."

And with that, Mr. Right walked out of my life. Watching that man leave without a backward glance, I sighed in frustration . . . I mean, relief.

Someone patted my arm, and I turned around to see Mr. Cupperspoon.

"Thank you," I said, looking into a pair of sympathetic eyes. Tears formed and I wanted to run away.

"Lisa. May I call you Lisa?" he asked, and I heard hope and longing in his voice.

Surprised, I said, "Yes, of course, Mr. Cupperspoon."

"Theodore," he murmured. "Or rather, Ted."

When I nodded, he hesitated before finally saying, "I've wanted to ask you if you'd like to become my assistant manager."

Now I stopped staring after Trent and studied Mr. Cupperspoon's . . . er, Ted's face. Those soft brown eyes, his round nose, and quivering mouth all concentrated beseechingly on me. He looked like he really cared about me, about my feelings.

I reached out to hold his hand, deciding "assistant manager" was the step before becoming his wife. "That's a wonderful idea." He squeezed my hand and we walked toward our destiny together.

"Just for the record, Ted, in case some other fool ever asks. What exactly is in that recipe for blueberry muffins?" ♦

**Alicia Stankay** looks forward to the publication of her ninth book (her fourth Stonecliff Mystery) this fall. When not writing, she finds joy in hiking with her husband and taking photos of rocky trails, colorful butterflies, amazing sunsets, bright flowers, and creeks with miniature waterfalls.

# Dragons and Unicorns

© by Janice McLaughlin

Once there were dragons in stories old  
Once there were unicorns with horns of gold  
We all believed when the world was young  
Legends were told and songs were sung.

Why can't I live there in that time?  
When the world was fresh, inspired, sublime.  
Then there were Kings and Knights so bold  
Their magnificent stories still are told.

Dragons were honored, respected, and feared  
How could they suddenly have disappeared?  
Unicorns also existed there in that past  
With palaces, lakes, and forests vast.

Did we stop believing in their power?  
Did they all vanish in that hour?  
I want to believe they still exist  
Somewhere out there, bewitchingly, in the mist.

Hidden within fairy tales of old  
To be resurrected, new stories told.  
If we again believe, can that belief make them real?  
Will they be resurrected and be revealed?

Sunrises golden, awesome sunsets of red  
I see that splendor in my head  
I want to go back, to be reborn  
When there were dragons and unicorns.

(See Janice's bio on p. 28.)



# The Lovers

© by Robert Beveridge

He is down to his final twenty dollars  
and a keno ticket costs fifteen. One  
last shot of bourbon, well, and one  
more keno ticket. The card sits  
before him, black, the pencil a taunt.  
What numbers will you waste your  
last money on? He always had a head  
for them, an old girlfriend said. He  
remembers her birthday, March 4,  
1972. And there he is, pencil in hand,  
tongue cocked, and 3, 4, and 72  
blacked as well as the bubbles  
on the Iowa Test in third grade.  
He thinks about the woman he lost  
his virginity to in middle school, and  
7, 21, and 69 go down. His senior  
prom date. His first wife. He asks  
his waitress her birthday. 12, 24, 86.  
He sets down the pencil, wishes her  
a happy birthday, and looks up  
at the screen. Somehow, this 428  
trillion to one shot just feels right.

(See Robert's  
bio on p. 28.)

# If Poets Were Rock Stars

© by Jean Podralski

Would I wear long black elegant orchestra dresses or flashy thigh-high Taylor Swift style sparkling outfits?  
Would I read standing still and quiet and calm or stride about the stage, arms flailing?  
Would I move choreographed with backup dancers?

Yes, I would be the freestyle poet star  
Rolling in the dough

Starring in my own poem videos—starting the first Poetry Only Channel.

Crowds would recite poems that I wrote, saying them in unison with me

The paparazzi would harass my previous students to get a nugget on me

Cameras would click as I exited my pine-green Subaru Forrester

I would have to go to court over tabloid lies about my hard-knitting ways and yarn obsession

Jimmy Fallon and Stephen Colbert would fight over me for a late-night guest

I would travel from city to city on my own private jet

My entourage and me: wild tea drinkers, with a must-have list of dark chocolate, cookies, and crunchy snacks

The NFL would invite me to come read my poetry at Super Bowl halftime

I'd have a signature perfume of peaches, almond, and dark chocolate

I could sell cashmere sweaters and bubbly Lambic Peche

Oprah would come to my home

I would walk her by the purple bearded iris garden

We'd pick blueberries in June

I'd show her the stash of tablets exposing my old-school pencil ways

if only poets were rock stars, I would be

(See Jean's bio on p. 18.)

# Strop

© by Nick Young

It was a fitting name, Rolling Vistas, situated on the edge of a picturesque town near the sprawling Shawnee National Forest. Set on the crest of a hillside, surrounded by verdant timberland and a meandering brook, it bespoke serenity.

And by reputation, it was the finest assisted-living center in all of southern Illinois. It numbered among its one hundred-odd residents the parents and grandparents of some of the area's oldest and most well-to-do families. And of those who called it home, none was held in greater esteem than the Reverend T. Randall Buford.

At eighty-two, Rev. Buford had resided at Rolling Vistas for three years, thanks to the generosity of the congregation at the First Bible Church of the Redeemer. For more than forty years he had been the shepherd of the flock, baptizing newborns and converts in the blood of Jesus and ushering those who passed into the Kingdom of Glory.

In between, he spent each Sabbath inveighing against the predations of Satan and, with his wife of many years, raising up foster children. By way of repayment, the members of the church, many of significant means, made regular contributions to see to his care at Rolling Vistas.

Once a man of imposing physical presence and a powerful baritone voice, Rev. Buford now spent his days wheelchair-bound in a netherworld of silent, partially blind immobility as a result of a series of strokes. The thunderous pronouncements of tribulation and hellfire had been quelled. All that remained of his former robustness were facial tics and the flickering of his rheumy eyes.

To be sure, the old preacher was accorded sensitive care by a staff that included several members of his former congregation. And he did not lack for attention from the outside. Though he had no living family, a regular stream of well-wishers to his sunny, spacious room added variety and the warmth of human contact to his days.

One of those who began coming introduced himself to the staff as Mike Taylor. When he was an eight-year-old orphan in 1956, he explained, the Rev. Buford had taken him in.

"The reverend and Mrs. Buford couldn't have been more generous, raised me up as a Bible-believing Christian with the right values, and it changed the course of my life," he'd said on that first visit.

"My line of work has kept me abroad for many years, so I had no idea the reverend had fallen on hard times. But by the grace of the Savior, when I returned a few weeks ago I learned of his plight. And now, with the Lord's help, I hope to repay Rev. Buford's kindness."

So, Mike Taylor became a regular Sunday afternoon caller, with small gifts for the reverend's

caregivers and fresh flowers for his room. And he always brought with him a leatherbound Bible from which he patiently read passages for Rev. Buford.

Despite his physical infirmities, the old gentlemen retained enough lucidity to understand what was going on around him and react with his eyes. Mike Taylor's visits proved to be a balm, as the younger man spoke soothingly, laughed easily, and never failed to end their time together with a quiet prayer or two.

In September, the day of the autumnal equinox, a day with the sunlight aslant bringing warmth leavened by a gentle westerly breeze, Mike Taylor arrived for his afternoon visit with a request.

"The Lord has graced us with such a beautiful day," he said to Rev. Buford's nurse, Ann Davis, "that I was hoping it would be all right if I took the reverend out to the pond."

Normally a staff member was required to accompany residents and guests outside the main building, but Mike Taylor had shown himself to be such a thoughtful, attentive visitor that there was no objection.

"Spend as much time together as you'd like," Nurse Davis replied with a smile.

Rev. Buford's eyes registered how pleased he was to see his visitor, who told him cheerfully of his plan to spend the afternoon outdoors.

The pond, which lay a short distance from the east wing of the main residence, was kidney-shaped, its water kept fresh by a central aerator that acted as a calming fountain. Like the rest of the grounds, it was meticulously landscaped with rocks and plantings.

The whole area was bordered on three sides by beautiful maples and oaks displaying the first blushes of fall color.

Mike Taylor slowly wheeled Rev. Buford down a winding walkway through the trees to a park bench in a shaded spot. As the old gentleman was turned to face the pond, a cool zephyr rose, ruffling his snow-white hair.

"The goodness of God's creation," Mike Taylor said as he removed his shoulder bag and placed it on the bench. He sat down and stretched, allowing the perfection of the day to wash over him.

One of the other nurses waved to him as she helped an elderly resident to a bench on the opposite side of the pond. Clusters of clouds billowed above, ivory against the dazzling azure of the mid-afternoon sky.

After several minutes sitting in silence, Mike Taylor folded back the leather flap of his bag, removed his Bible, and opened it carefully to one of the book's red ribbon markers. He cleared his throat and read:

*"Discipline your children, and they will give*

*you peace of mind and will make your heart glad.”*  
*You remember that passage, don’t you, Reverend?*  
Proverbs 29:17. And surely you recall Proverbs 29:15:  
*‘The rod and reproof give wisdom, but a child left to himself brings shame.’* And still in Proverbs: *‘Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.’* Chapter 22, Verse 15.”

As he read, Mike Taylor’s voice began to rise with his emotions. “And just one more I’m certain you know,” he continued: *‘Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod, he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his soul from Sheol.’* Proverbs again, Reverend, Chapter 23, Verses 13-14. You recall them all? You should, because you repeated them over and over again to me when I was living at your house. And I brought with me something else you should remember from those days.”

He reached inside his bag and withdrew a length of tanned leather, about three inches wide and eighteen inches long, with a metal clip sewn into one end. He laid the strip across Rev. Buford’s lap.

The preacher’s eyes flicked downward, and a corner of his mouth twitched once.

“Surely you haven’t forgotten what this is—a barber’s strop? Yes. It’s quite similar to the one you kept in your basement, the one *you used on me.*”

He turned to look Rev. Buford full in the face, his voice dropping. “You see, Reverend, I’m not Mike Taylor at all. He died five years ago. Cancer, I believe. Tiny little town out in Nebraska, as I recall. I’ve simply borrowed his name, that of a righteous, God-fearing man. It’s not that difficult. Wear a smile and mouth all the pieties. That’s the way, isn’t it, Reverend? But if I’m not Mike Taylor, then who am I?”

He bored in on the old man’s eyes, clouded, swimming. “I am Bill Collins—little Billy? Do you remember little Billy, Reverend? And the strop?”

The preacher’s face twitched again, and he blinked rapidly several times.

“Yes, you remember,” Bill Collins’s lips tightened derisively. “And so do I. The basement, the awful choking rankness of it ... the terrifying shadows ... your voice, hoarse from calling down the wrath of God upon the recalcitrant child. But most of all, *Reverend*, I will never forget every time you raised the strop high above your head and brought it down, every blow you landed across my back.”

He was fighting against an upwelling of anger that was burning through his chest. “The scars remain; they always will. And you, locked inside your mute prison, does it thrill you still how much sheer pleasure you took in stropping the back of a nine-year-old boy because he resisted you?”

Reverend Buford’s face was becoming more animated. Bill Collins leaned closer, eyes narrowing. “You miserable, cruel bastard. You did your damndest to break me, but here I am.”

He stood and arched his back, stepping into the sun and letting it splash on his face, allowing the gentle breeze to flow around him. After a long moment, he turned once again to look at the preacher.

“So what should I do, Rev. Buford, to repay a man such as yourself, a man who had such a profound impact on me?”

He began walking slowly around the preacher. “Here’s my plan: I will continue my visits, charming the staff as Mike Taylor, always putting them at ease. And one day when I come, it might be on a Sunday or another day. Perhaps in the morning or the afternoon or even at night—you will never be certain—I will bring with me a tiny vial and a syringe, and in the vial will be a deadly toxin, and I will inject you with it. The tiniest pinprick, that’s all. You will hardly feel the needle. And for a few minutes, while we say our final prayer together and I leave, you won’t notice any change.”

He smiled. “But gradually the pain will begin, and it will intensify, and there will be nothing you can do to stop it. And more time will pass, only minutes, before your heart stops beating. But before it does, the agony will be excruciating; and, if you could, you would beg for release. You will experience Hell here and now before your rotten soul is sent there when you die.”

Bill Collins stopped directly behind the preacher and, smiling, leaned in close to his left ear, patting the old gentleman’s shoulder reassuringly. “But it won’t be today, Reverend. It won’t be today. Now, shall we pray?” ♦

(See Nick’s bio on p. 28.)

## Calla Lily

© by Sally Witt

The afternoon of Holy Saturday  
we place a purple calla lily  
on a stand beside our television.  
We watch the news:

workers are killed in Gaza  
as they try to stem starvation;

Ukraine bleeds for its heritage  
while it curbs destruction’s spread  
beyond its borders;

Haitians left to mad aggression;  
all promises to Sudan are broken;

no shelter waits for migrants  
seeking safety.

On its stand beside the television,  
the calla lily weeps.

*\*It is not unusual for calla lilies to “weep”  
in the course of growing.*

(See Sally’s bio on p. 28.)

# Don't Touch That Dial

© by Rod Cross



Did you ever think about someone who has led a long and interesting life and wonder what changes they've seen during their lives? From Model Ts to Teslas, biplanes to Mars rovers, steam locomotives to bullet trains.

My wife, Judy, and I love to listen to the radio. It provides the background music of our daily lives together. So, I got to thinking about the radios that have followed me in my life.

I was born when Dad was going to radio/TV repair school in Cleveland after the war. I grew up with vacuum tubes to play with.

My parents listened to the radio, but it was theirs. They chose the stations and the volume. Sarah Vaughan, Patti Page, and Perry Como provided the background music of their lives as my sister and I grew up in an optimistic postwar suburban home.

The first radio that I could call my own was a Rocket Crystal Radio. Finally, a sound that I could choose. A crystal radio needed no power source. Radio waves were always in the air, and a sliding antenna that came out of the end of the rocket slid over an early diode. All I needed to do was ground the unit, put in the pathetically weak earphone, and slide and search for a local station.

Hard to imagine now, but it was like electronic magic. Dad gave me a copper rod that I used as a tent stake and the grounding connection. Now I had it all: my own place, a pup tent that stayed up all summer, and my own sound system.

As I got older the transistor radio replaced the Rocket Radio, which made it possible to listen to the radio anywhere, not just tethered to a copper tent stake. Music was at the Rainbow Gardens and Renzi swimming pools.

They received only AM, but that was good enough. We had Terry Lee's "Music for Young Lovers" on McKeesport's WIXZ, Mad Mike on WZUM, and the "platter pushin' papa" Porkey Chedwick on WAMO.

It wasn't until I went away to college that I was introduced to the better sound quality and the definitely newer type of music played on WDVE from Pittsburgh, an FM radio station. I could actually listen to new rock music without buying a record collection, which I couldn't afford anyway. FM radio was my new gateway to listening pleasure and a new culture that was seething beneath it.

Unfortunately, my old 1957 Oldsmobile 88, not the classier Rocket 88, had only an AM radio. But along came the FM tuner that could be added to the AM system, along with some added decibel power of more speakers.

A leisurely cruise in the 88 was now like a movable concert series. I listened to the Who, the Byrds, and Bob Dylan warning that "the times they are a changin'." They certainly were. Veterans coming

back from Southeast Asia brought tuners and walls of speakers for an as-yet unheard-of sound quality.

My radio history marks time. In my father-in-law's garage is a tuner with an 8-track built in. That was the first material possession I ever bought with monthly payments. I bought it from Montgomery Ward when I started the job in 1974 that I would retire from in 2014. It still works.

I didn't buy into the boom-box era, but it did unleash even better portable ways to listen to the radio. And to annoy the citizenry along the way.

So where am I with radios these days? I've probably missed a few technical leaps and bounds. I do not jog with earbuds in my ears, one of which doesn't work so well anymore. Stereo is fading in the distance for me.

We do like to stream our favorite public-supported, commercial-free stations for eclectic and interesting music mixes. We link them to our Bose Bluetooth brick receiver, whose sound quality and volume would have shaken my pup tent walls.

Streaming also changes how we listen to the radio on long road trips. The passenger's job used to be to fiddle with the radio to find the next station after driving out of range of the last one. We chased megahertz to megahertz into the horizon. Now select a station on the phone, connect to Bluetooth, and think about what adventures the horizon will bring.

I do look forward to what technology will bring to the simple pleasure of listening to great music without buying 8-tracks, cassettes, albums, or CDs. I give the music industry credit for selling the same music collections, over and over.

As they used to say, "Don't touch that dial." ♦

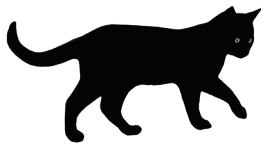
(See Rod's bio on p. 28.)

## The Holstein Ragamuffin Chorus

© by Robert Beveridge

Whispers come not on the wind, but on the yowls of cats outside the window, the ones who want in to get the lamb shank that's been in the oven all day. They've been outside since high noon, and there is nothing of harmony in their song. Still, you find it in yourself to admire their persistence, the single-minded dedication to the performance they hope will win them eight and a half pounds of meat, the associated vegetables, a pan jus that just begs to be turned into the richest gravy this side of Permian.

(See Robert's bio on p. 28.)



# An Old Man at the Door

© by John R. Morrow

Thanks for seeing me, Father. My name is Oliver Parker. I need your wisdom and spiritual counsel regarding a matter that leaves me no rest.

I moved from the country to the city some time ago to be closer to work. I moved into a dingy walk-up in Brooklyn, and even though the subway into Manhattan was only a block away, the daily grind of long days often left me exhausted.

A few days after I moved in, I heard a knocking on my door. I was expecting a package from UPS, so I opened it. There stood an old man who looked as though he had just come from a hobo camp. He was holding my package. He said it had come that morning and he took it in for safekeeping because some of the tenants' things had been stolen lately.

I thanked him and started to close the door, but he wasn't ready to leave. He said his apartment was next to mine and we could look out for one another. Well, the last thing I needed was someone looking out for me and someone for me to look out for.

I thanked him again and started to close the door. He stood there. I thanked him for the third time and almost had to push him out. He looked hurt, but I was in no mood to entertain someone I didn't know and had no desire to learn about.

The next day was especially exhausting, and I came to my little flat, beat. I had just poured myself a glass of wine and was getting settled in my lounge when I heard knocking. I muttered a few unsavory words but felt compelled to be civil. There was the old man again. He said he was just checking on me, hoping I was okay. I thanked him and was closing the door when he asked could I lend him some sugar. He was making something, I don't remember what, and had just run out.

Well, how can you turn away a hobo who wants some sugar? It was so comical, really. Sugar? I almost laughed when I spooned some into a bowl. He thanked me and said I could come over later and share whatever he was making. That was the last thing I wanted to do. I thanked him and said good night. He looked very lonely and sad. At least this time he let me show him out.

---

## *I uttered a few unsavory words.*

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Just about every day after the sugar incident I was not home more than fifteen minutes when the old man showed up. Even when I said I was busy, he wouldn't take the hint. He almost forced himself in, sat down, and began talking.

He talked about everything and nothing—the weather, our neighbors, corrupt politicians, grocery

prices going up, gangs roaming the streets, nothing worth watching on TV. All doom and gloom, nothing positive. And virtually every time he came, he asked some favor.

It quickly became obvious that the old man had an empty life with no meaning. He said he was still mourning his wife's death of ten years ago and had no family or friends. I tried to be more civil and actually started feeling sorry for him. His flat was his whole world, and it was suffocating him.

But when he began telling me his life's story, I must confess I only half-listened. I was in mourning, also. My wife died just over a year ago. After ten years, the old man should have moved on by now. He was getting on my nerves. He began to wear me down with his constant complaining and petty interests. He was like a stuck record, unaware that he had already said the same thing many times.

It got worse. Day after tiring day was like this. I tried to tune him out. I would find some chore needing attention in the kitchen, but he would keep babbling on. Even when he'd finally leave, I could still hear his high, whiny voice.

The situation became maddening—I couldn't take it any more. Evil thoughts began invading my mind. I had to get rid of this pest. That was what he had become, a pest to be exterminated. I couldn't believe I was having such thoughts—they scared me!—and I assured myself that I would never do the old man any harm.

I had a cat, a tom that adopted me one day. I named him Lucifer. He and I became very close, and he seemed to read my moods. He knew when I wanted his company and when I wanted to be alone. When he curled up in my lap, his soft purring soothed my jangled nerves. When he was hunched down on his perch across the room, I knew he was watching me.

It was uncanny, almost frightening; he was reading my thoughts. He knew how much I wanted to be free of this old man who had intruded on our solitude. I got the feeling that he wanted to be rid of the old fellow too, and this upset me even more.

The last time I saw the old man alive, he said he was going down to the corner deli to get some pastrami. Did I want some? I was more abrupt than usual saying no. As I began to close the door on him, Lucifer darted out. I cursed the old man as I tried to catch my cat.

I was horrified to see the old man tumble down the stairs like a rag doll and crash at the bottom.

Mrs. Derkowitz and other tenants came out of their flats at the commotion. I rushed down and knew immediately the old man was dead. "Who was he?" everyone wanted to know. Someone said he lived upstairs. They asked me if I knew him.

Guilt and shame made me feel faint to admit that to me, he was just a lonely old man. Why would I want to know his name? Lucifer and I hung around until the police and medics came and took the old man to the morgue. When I went back upstairs, Lucifer rubbed my legs, looking up at me as he often did, asking me to rub his ears in appreciation.

I asked the landlord what he knew of the old fellow. He said his name was Mateo Ramos, but that was all he knew. The police couldn't tell me anything I didn't already know. A few of us attended a pitiful funeral led by the local priest and watched him being lowered into a pauper's grave.

A heavy sadness, shame, and guilt have nearly paralyzed me since then. I still see the old man lying at the foot of the stairs. Many evenings I hear knocking and open the door, only to find an empty hall. Many nights I dream of the old man, so sad and pleading, and of me laughing and turning him away. Many days I can't eat or sleep, and my work

has suffered.

I confess I wanted the old man out of my life, but I wished him no harm—I didn't wish his death! It was little comfort to learn that the coroner declared the old man's death accidental.

The final irony is that the old man left me all his belongings plus \$150, the sum total of all his worldly goods. His brief will said that I had been so good to him when no one else was—yet I never cared enough to even ask him his name! My shame is even greater.

I moved here hoping to escape unsettling memories and find relief, but I haven't. I've taken to drinking to blot out that terrible picture of him lying dead at the foot of the stairs, but nothing has helped. I shall live with that terrible image the rest of my life. I can only pray that wherever the old man is, he can find it in his heart to forgive me.

So tell me, Father: The question torments me. Did Lucifer kill the old man, or did I? ♦

**John Morrow** is a retired Presbyterian pastor living in the Bear Rocks community. He is the author of *Aisling*, the story of two young girls bringing justice and racial harmony to their small Southern town. He enjoys writing flash fiction; several of his works have been published in *Mature Living*.

## The Best Money I Ever Spent

© by Keith Neill

I was a couch potato and knew I needed to begin exercising. I don't know what prompted me to buy a bicycle instead of a gym membership, but it was the best money I ever spent.

Riding local roads was not enough, so I found groups that had rides of up to 100 miles. I linked up with friends who also rode, and ride we did.

I met my soulmate bicyclist and we have traveled with our bicycles in the United States, Canada, Europe, and Asia. Some years we have ridden over 3,000 miles. We had some of the best times of our lives.

Now 45 years later, at the age of 80, we continue to ride. The original bicycle purchase led us to move to a house along a bicycle trail. We hope to ride this trail as long as our health allows.

If I had not gotten a bicycle when I was 35, I might have been a couch potato forever. Oh, and by the way, now I have a gym membership, too.

**Keith Neill** is a retired high school teacher. He continues to write and spends time bicycling and teaching English as a Second Language (ESL). He also follows the school and sporting events of his grandchildren.



## Skagit

© by John Grey



A bald eagle drops down from gray February sky, skims the river's surface.

It tucks wings, lowers and spreads its legs, and with one mighty swoop of a talon wrenches a spawned salmon from the waters, soars up to a nearby treetop where it celebrates its catch with a high-pitched triumphant cry.

Hikers watch from the rocks above. No one is taking the salmon's side.

**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *New World Writing*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *Lost Pilots*. Latest books, *Between Two Fires*, *Covert*, and *Memory Outside the Head* are available through Amazon. Work is upcoming in *California Quarterly*, *Seventh Quarry*, *La Presa* and *Doubly Mad*.

## Join Us at LVW

Ligonier Valley Writers is an all-volunteer nonprofit that has served writers and readers throughout western Pennsylvania since 1986. To join LVW and receive discounts on events, download a membership application and mail it to LVW, PO Box B, Ligonier, PA 15658. Dues are still only \$30 per year.

For details on events as they become available, visit [LVWonline.org](http://LVWonline.org). You can also email [jgallagher@LHTOT.com](mailto:jgallagher@LHTOT.com) to get on LVW's Members & Friends email list.

There's still time to enter the **Flash Fiction Contest**. The deadline's August 15. This year's topic is mythological birds. Readings of the six winning stories will be performed shortly before Halloween. Three cash prizes plus three Honorable Mentions, no entry fee, and publication at LVW's website.

You can read winning flash fiction and student poetry from past years, as well as past *Loyalhanna Reviews*, at [LVWonline.org](http://LVWonline.org). You can also read all 30 of the 2024 student poems that won prizes and see photos of the poets at the website and LVW's Facebook page.

## LVW Calendar 2024

- **July 20, 7:00-9:00 p.m.** *Loyalhanna Review* publication party.
- **August 11, 3:00-5:00 p.m.** Annual LVW picnic. John and Sukey Jamison have generously invited LVW to hold our annual potluck picnic and readings at their farm near Crabtree.
- **August 15.** Deadline for Flash Fiction Contest submissions. This year's topic is mythological birds. (Think thunderbirds and phoenixes.)
- **September 15.** Workshop on Freelance Writing for Fun and Profit, led by Jim Busch. St. Michael's of the Valley Church, Rector.
- **October (dates TBA).** Readings of the winning Flash Fiction stories at local venues.
- **December 8, 3:00-5:00 p.m.** Annual LVW holiday party. St. Michael's of the Valley Church, Rector.

Please check [www.LVWonline.org](http://www.LVWonline.org) or the LVW Facebook page for the latest information about events, contests, and publications.

## Student Poetry Awards 2024

Ligonier Valley Writers has sponsored the Student Poetry Contest for grades 4-12 since 1991, even throughout the pandemic. The contest judges award first, second, and third cash prizes in each of nine categories. They also identify a Best of the Best poem in each grade grouping (grades 4-6, 7-9, and 10-12).

At the awards ceremony at the Greensburg Barnes & Noble, the student poets received their prizes and read their winning poems to an appreciative audience.

On these two pages, we reprint those three best of the best poems.

You can see the list of all the winners, read the other winning poems, and see photos of the student poets at both [www.LVWonline.org](http://www.LVWonline.org) and LVW's Facebook page.

Six students won two awards each this year: Linda Kong of North Allegheny High; Kasia Ewing of Derry Area High; Grant Einodshofer and Elle Lauder, both of Belle Vernon Area Middle School; Van Bobby of Eagle View Elementary; and Sophia Baker of Grandview Elementary in Derry.

Teacher Carol Aten Frow of Belle Vernon Middle School has the most winning class: four students who wrote six prizewinning poems. Jennifer Boyd of Norwin High has four winning students whose poems would be assets in any literary journal. Kate Bobby is both a teacher and the mother of three poets who among them won four prizes.

Several teachers have students who won two awards for their schools: Kelly Ankney of Ligonier Valley Middle School, Jennifer Welty of Grandview Elementary, JoEllen Harr of Derry Area High, Janellen Lombardi of North Allegheny High, Jill Keresztury of the Woodland Hills School District (both Turtle Creek Elementary and Edgewood Elementary STEAM Academies).

Teachers whose students won one award each are Jaime Gacek of West Hempfield, Kim Swaney of Albert Gallatin High, Jonelle Dongilla of Indiana Area Junior High, and Katie Bell-Fawcett of Jeannette Senior High.

Congratulations to all of the winners! And our thanks to all of the students who entered, the contest sponsors, and the teachers who encouraged their students to participate.

### John L. Naccarato Memorial Award

*Sponsored by Michele Jones*

*These are the top three winners of  
the LVW's 33rd Annual Student  
Poetry Contest.*

*Congratulations to them  
and to all the winners.*

*The Best of the Best in Grades 4-6*

## **My Weekly Animals**

© by *Rosalita Bobby*

*Eagle View Elementary School, Grade 4*

On Monday I am a sloth,  
Barely awake and slow.  
School is clogging my brain  
with so many things to know.

Tuesday, I become a donkey.  
I start the day off kicking.  
As stubborn as my brain can be,  
Some of the knowledge is sticking.

By Wednesday, I am a tiger,  
Ready to pounce on my tasks.  
I am giving my full attention  
To questions my teacher asks.

Thursday, I become a hawk  
Circling up in the skies.  
Keep pushing through at school  
With the weekend as my prize.

On Friday, I am finally a pug,  
Not worried about a thing.  
Playful and excited in class,  
Waiting for the bell to ring

*The Best of the Best in Grades 7-9*

## **Mechanical Symphony**

© by *Ryan Ouellette*

*Jeannette Senior High School, Grade 9*

In metal grace, a sleek machine of might;  
Its engine hums with power, deep and strong.  
On asphalt canvas, speed becomes a song—  
A dance of wheels, in rhythm, takes its flight.  
Through winding roads, it weaves with artful skill;  
Each curve that's traced, a lover's sweet embrace.  
A symphony of gears, a thrilling chase;  
The open road, a canvas to fulfill.  
The sun reflects upon its polished hood  
As rubber kisses pavement, swift and sure.  
A journey crafted, memories endure;  
In every mile, a tale yet to be seen.  
Oh, car of dreams, with power and with grace,  
You paint the roads with stories interlaced.

*The Best of the Best in Grades 10-12*

## **Bridge to Nowhere**

© by *Linda Kong*

*North Allegheny Senior High School, Grade 11*

“On Dec. 12, 1964, Frederick Williams, a 21-year-old chemistry major at the University of Pittsburgh, drove his aunt's station wagon past the bridge's wooden barricades, raced off the end of the bridge, and landed upside-down, but unhurt, on the other side, 190 feet away at the north bank of the Allegheny River.”  
—*Pittsburgh Magazine*

Look, I've never been like this before, but I love this world too much to leave  
without saying I love you as we ride in the back of a pickup barreling towards the horizon.  
My heart and throat knotted like hair I haven't brushed in a week as we watch sunset  
on the highway, the wind throwing your jacket into a cape like we could take on  
the world. I'll eat my last meal in your apartment with you, I'll watch the city throb  
outside the window with you, I'll put on my sneakers and follow you into the last road trip  
I'll ever take. I'll say yes when you confess your love for me even though I've never loved  
like you do. I'll keep the paper cranes you fold for me in a little cabinet, save the flames  
from my birthday candles, collect dandelion seeds to one day set free. We are in the back  
of a pickup and I will fold the one-thousandth paper crane, I'll light a candle despite  
the raging wind blowing past, I'll reach into my pocket and clench the seeds  
in my fist. I'll say *I love you* because this is where the highway ends:

Crane falls, candle drowns, palm opens, seeds fly.  
I make my last wish. The wheels find sky.

# Author and Artist Bios

**Robert Beveridge** (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry on unceded Mingo land (Akron, OH). He published his first poem in a non-vanity/non-school publication in November 1988, and it's been all downhill since. He has recent or upcoming appearances in *Daikaijuzine*, *Siren's Call*, and *Big Windows Review*, among others.

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**Nicole Bradley** enjoys spending time with her two-legged and four-legged children at their home in the Laurel Highlands. She derives inspiration from her time spent in nature observing the cycles of life.

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**Jim Busch** is a freelance writer who contributes to several local newspapers and writes a monthly nature column in the *Mon Valley Independent*. He is the primary author of *The Corona Diaries*, published by Point Park University's McKeesport Community Newsroom. Jim lives in White Oak.

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In 2024, **Michael Comiskey** published his debut volume of 53 poems titled *South of Pittsburgh: Poems from Northern Appalachia*. Much of his poetry is traditional and/or Appalachian. His poems have won prizes from the Pennsylvania Poetry Society and from *The Lyric* magazine. He lives in Connellsville.

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**Tamara DiBartola** uses various art forms to bring her creativity to life. She believes art offers therapeutic qualities and hopes to make a positive contribution through her artistry. Her pieces have appeared in the *Loyalhanna Review*, Westmoreland Art Nationals, Latrobe Art Center, Latrobe Area Hospital, and Southern Alleghenies Art Museum.

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**Rod Cross** lives in Bear Rocks and belongs to the New Stanton Memoir Writers and Ligonier Valley Writers. He is an avid fly fisher, motorcyclist, and educator guide at Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater. He lives with his wife, Judy, and the dream to be a writer.

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**Sandra Edwards** has always been an avid reader and lover of words. She enjoyed leaving notes for family in lunchboxes or under pillows. In her correspondence with loved ones, friends have cherished her recall of memories.

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**Janice McLaughlin** designs book covers and greeting cards. She's working on her tenth children's book with a companion coloring/ activity book. Recent poetry publication: *Darkness Falls*. Working on *Reflections*. She loves research and learning and believes that as long as you are learning and doing, you are alive.

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**Susan Potts** is a retired secretary who enjoys spending time with her family and friends. Her stories and photographs have been published in the *Loyalhanna Review*. Her hobbies include genealogy and photography. She lives in Unity Township with her husband, Joe, and therapy cats Sofia and Nefertiti.

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**Louise Vrable** is a retired teacher who has explored various art forms all her life, from manipulating digital photos to painting, using multiple media, making quilts and more.

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**Sally Witt** is a Sister of St. Joseph of Baden, PA, living in Ambridge. Her first poetry chapbook, *Claiming Light and Darkness*, (Finishing Line Press), came out in spring 2024.

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**Nick Young** is a retired award-winning CBS News Correspondent. His writing has appeared in more than thirty publications, including the *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *The Garland Lake Review*, *The Remington Review*, *The San Antonio Review*, *The Best of CaféLit II*, and Vols. I and II of the *Writer Shed Stories* anthologies. His first novel, *Deadline*, was published last September. He lives outside Chicago.

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*“I always keep two books  
in my pocket, one to read,  
one to write in.”*

— *Henri Matisse*

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*“Creativity is intelligence  
Having Fun.”*

— *Albert Einstein*

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Amazing Sunset © by Alicia Stankay





Red Chrysanthemums © by Alicia Stankay