

Hartley

# WINK

ISSUE 22

Writers IN the Know

**Publisher/Executive Editor/Poetry Editor**

Nadia Giordana—Cloud 9 Publishing [iinadia@msn.com](mailto:iinadia@msn.com)  
In her other life, Nadia is a community TV producer, host and co-host. Her latest book of poetry is *The Emerald Green Horse* (at Amazon). Her website: [WhereWomenTalk.com](http://WhereWomenTalk.com).

**Short Story Editor**

Lynn Garthwaite—[BlueSpectrumBooks.com](http://BlueSpectrumBooks.com)  
Lynn is a speaker and the author of several books. Among them: *Childhood Rhymes for Modern Times*, *Starless Midnight*, and *Our States Have Crazy Shapes: Panhandles, Knobs, Bootheels and Points*. She speaks at business and service organizations.

**Copy Editor/Final Proofreader**

Connie Anderson—[WordsandDeedsinc.com](http://WordsandDeedsinc.com)  
Connie is a professional book editor who leads Women of Words (WOW), a Minneapolis-based writers' group. Connie collected stories about the 1940-60 polio epidemic in *When Polio Came Home: How Ordinary People Overcame Extraordinary Challenges*. Get it on Amazon.

**Consulting Editor & First-pass Proofreader**

William Kellan Parsons—[WilliamParsons.net](http://WilliamParsons.net)  
Will's screenplay, *Darkest Before the Dawn*, recently earned semifinalist in the 2023 Table Read My Screenplay Competition and in the Golden Script Fellowship.



Cover: "The Model Resting" by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec 1889, courtesy of The Getty and [useum.org](http://useum.org). This image is free of any copyright limitations in any country around the world and can be used freely for any purpose including commercial use. Medium: tempera or casein with oil.

**CONTRIBUTORS by first name:**

Adrian Slonaker—Monckton, NB, Canada .....	33
Alex Muriuki—Kenya .....	35
Christopher Barnes—Newcastle, UK .....	28, 34
Colin Dodds—Brooklyn, NY .....	02, 06
Colin Ian Jeffery—Surrey, England.....	34, 35
Connie Anderson—Edina, MN.....	04, 07, 16
D.A. Simpson—East Devon, UK.....	03
David Halliday—Guelph, ON, Canada .....	08
Dr. Roger G. Singer—Ocala, FL .....	30, 31
Duane Anderson—La Vista, NE.....	32
Eva Marie Cagley—Waterloo, IA .....	15
Erren Geraud Kelly—Lynn, MA.....	30
Gavin Bourke—County, Meath, Ireland.....	26, 27, 28
George Freek—Belvidere, IL .....	35
Gloria Fredkove—Minneapolis, MN .....	15
Grant Armstrong—Lenexa, KS.....	32
Helen Johnson-Riggs.....	23
James Keane—Pompton Lakes, NJ .....	28
Janice Strootman—Bloomington, MN.....	24
Janis Butler Holm—Los Angeles, CA .....	21
Joan Mc Nerney—Ravena, NY .....	32
John Sweet—Endicott, NJ .....	30
J.B. Polk—Santiago, Chile .....	12
Kathleen Pettit—Bloomington, MN .....	22
Kim Farleigh—Madrid Spain .....	10
Laura Shell—West Union, SC.....	17
Leanne M. Benson/Book—Caledonia, MN .....	31
Lynn Garthwaite—Bloomington, MN .....	31
Mary Kay Crawford-Lorfink—Minneapolis, MN.....	20
Michael Gigandet—Clarksville, TN.....	5
Michael Lee Johnson—Downers Grove, IL .....	3, 34
Michael Lloyd Gray—Kalamazoo, MI.....	14
Michael Rossberg—South St. Paul, MN .....	09
Nadia Giordana—Dayton, MN.....	16, 18
Paul Beckman—Madison, CT.....	24
Peter Dellolio—Brooklyn, NY.....	5, 25
Phyllis Dozier—Minneapolis, MN .....	15
Saloni Kaul—Ontario, Canada.....	08
Sarah Routman—Bloomington, MN .....	Back cover
Shawn Nacona Stroud—Springfield, OH.....	22
Som Mazumder—Mumbai, India.....	11
Stephanie Schwartz—Isanti, MN .....	16,17
Suzanne Newman—Leicestershire, England.....	29
Tammy Huffman—Gallatin, MO .....	17
Teresa M. Riggs Foushee—Plymouth, MN .....	17, 25
William Waters—Houston, TX.....	31
Zach Murphy—St. Paul, MN .....	04

**Buy print copies WINK:** WinkWriters.com (Buy tab).  
Copyright © 2024 Cloud 9 Publishing, ISSN 2573-7996. WINK reserves one-time, North American, serial, electronic, and archival rights. Some royalty-free images are used under Creative Commons lic., others are from Zedcor (Dover) Desk Gallery Mega-Bundle 1995.

## The Real, Red-Nosed Reindeer

By Colin Dodds

A behind-the-scenes, insider's account of one foggy Christmas Eve, from the reign of the Anti-Santa.

Everything started to fall apart when Santa made that deal with Rudolph. It's a song now. It's a joke. It's a costume and a riddle. Because you need things like that to begin to wrap your brain around what happened and how things became so incomprehensibly fucked.

To understand the story, you have to understand Rudolph. I've spent much time with reindeer—professionally, socially, even romantically, briefly. And I can tell you that the luxury paddocks of the first-string flying team are a nasty place to be. Imagine the locker room in a game where the losers are ground into deer burger.

As a reindeer, Rudolph was a perennial cusper. One month, he'd be a member of the Main Eight, then a hoof injury or some lightning-fast kid from Lapland, and he was a top backup again. On and off, year in and year out, Rudolph was always about to take someone's spot, or he was standing in someone's way. And when the song says those assholes "wouldn't let poor Rudolph join in any reindeer games," I assure you that's the nicest imaginable way of describing what they put him through. So, I can guess how he might have felt that foggy Christmas Eve.

There's a lot of stories about what happened. We all know the song, *Paid For* by Rudolph. The estate won't confirm it. But they're quick enough to cash the royalty checks. Look it up. But as the song says, it was a foggy Christmas Eve, as you know. And Santa was seeing double, as you may not know. That night was foggy. My father said he warned everyone about the conditions. But no one else remembers that part.

Rudolph was a second-team reindeer that night, nearer the end of his run at the pole than the beginning. And he'd never even made a Christmas run. In the Siberian outpost where he was from, he was hot shit—the best they'd seen in a generation—maybe ever—and living proof that a reindeer could make it out of that hopeless backwater with its shuttered peppermint mines, all

the way to the big show at the top of the Earth. But on Santa's training course, no one was too impressed, as you may have heard.

The thing is that Rudolph was more than just a high-flying sled-puller. You heard about his nose but not how he used it. Rudolph had a nose for the business, for what was actually going on, and for who made it go. So when Santa called on Rudolph to light the way at the last minute like that, Rudolph knew he had the old man by the place where it jingles.

Rudolph listed out his demands, which he'd recited to himself in many a lonely, bitter hour. The jolly old man scoffed, laughed, charmed, pleaded, and agreed. Time was short, and the stakes were high, especially for Santa. Over the years, he'd made a lot of promises he could only hope would never be called in. Those promises had become mountainous problems or obligations. And he had to walk a highwire between the peaks with little besides a sterling reputation, threadbare goodwill, and a fucking *ho ho ho*.

But Rudolph didn't just harness up when Santa agreed. He had some sharp lawyers who work on Christmas, who faxed over something similar to a fiscal suicide note for Santa. The old man, against the advice of Mrs. Claus, who'd been a paralegal in a previous life, signed. And away they flew, bringing merriment far and wide that year.

When they landed—only hours later to most of the world—Rudolph owned 10% of the holiday into perpetuity—gross, not net, mind you—along with a Senior Reindeer pension just as a sweetener.

Ninurtha told Santa to execute Rudolph there and then. And based on stories, the old man wasn't squeamish about that kind of thing. But he had made a deal, and he stuck to it.

The deal with Rudolph was expensive. But the money was only part of it. The agreement with Rudolph broke the feedback loop of Santa's charisma. Overnight, anything could happen—so everyone went for the money and grabbed what they could.

The reindeer heard about Rudolph's deal first. I know he rubbed their snouts in it. He bought a big red Cadillac Fleetwood as big as Santa's sleigh, though the nearest Cadillac dealership was more than 2,000 miles away. He drove around town

aimlessly, with exotic women gloating. Soon, the reindeer threatened to walk off en masse. What they wanted, above all, they said, was dignity. This was a reckoning, they said. Being young and naive, I expected the deer slaughterhouse on the edge of the human suburbs to shut down that week. But the rhetoric never got off the ground. They settled for money, a lot of it.

As you might imagine, Santa, the gift-giver, was a terrible negotiator.

Soon, rent went up all around the Pole, which meant the elves needed raises, too. They found a union to join and negotiated a contract. Then came the lawyers. There were lawsuits from former elves no one had ever heard of and class action suits from people claiming chimney damage and theft. Santa hired his own lawyers at no small cost.

The legislators weren't far behind, threatening new laws. The federal agencies piled on for fear of missing out. The FAA, NORAD, and the Department of Commerce all started expensive investigations. Even the ATF had some kind of angle because of Santa's pipe. So Santa hired lobbyists to whittle their broad threats into a series of well-placed but still expensive campaign-donation bribes.

The speed of it was stunning. It was a massive trap of a million unvoiced resentments sprung all at once. Maybe Santa lost his nerve. He'd always seemed untouchable. But being one-of-a-kind means having no place to hide. He was something no one else was. He had something no one else had. And he was wise enough to see the incredible peril in that. The herd could turn at any moment. So he didn't put up a fight. He just wrote checks.

It would have been about a billion times cheaper just to let poor old Rudolph play those fucking reindeer games. □

**NOTE:** This is an excerpt from *The Reign of the Anti-Santas—a Christmas misadventure for grownups*, which you can find at Amazon.



## California Summer

Coastal warm breeze  
off Santa Monica, California  
the sun turns salt  
shaker upside down  
and it rains white smog, a humid mist.  
No thunder, no lightening,  
nothing else to do  
except for sashay  
forward into liquid  
and swim  
into eternal days  
like this.

—Michael Lee Johnson

## Night Sky

The insipid character  
etched upon a feeble sky  
Succumbed to the sparkling charms  
emanating from a starlit night  
While a moon of soft ivory  
dangled aloft  
Amid an indigo glory  
Where the hours of dark  
set 'gainst a backdrop  
of an infinite cosmos  
draped over the slumbering dominion  
Cast a shroud of desolation  
that hovered above a perishing yestereve  
As the triumph  
of a renewal not yet conceived  
Inert remained  
upon an unmixed palette  
by the tireless painter held  
Whose unseen hand unwearied  
eternally creates the ever changing scape  
that graces the epochs of this mortal realm

—d.a.simpson

## Poppy is My Half-Sister, but That's Not the Whole Story

By Zach Murphy

Poppy is my half-sister, and she has a whole lot of nerve. When I was twelve, Poppy tried to poison me by baking me a cake with laundry detergent in the frosting. It took me hours to get the taste out of my mouth. Poppy offered up an apology by baking me a new cake. I threw it in her face. It was half-baked anyway. My dad said I should be more forgiving, but people usually say that to excuse their own mistakes. Poppy and I have the same dad, but we don't have the same mom. My mom's spirit died when she found out about Poppy. Poppy's mom died during childbirth.

\*\*\*

Poppy is my half-sister, and she doesn't use her whole brain, but I've been told that no one does. When I broke my leg climbing a tree during my freshman year of high school, Poppy brought a hibiscus plant to my hospital room. After placing it by my bedside, she turned around, knocking it over with her backpack. The bulky plant fell directly onto my bad leg. I had to stay in the hospital for an extra week. I could've sworn Poppy knocked it over on purpose. I think she enjoyed having the house to herself. My mom salvaged the hibiscus plant. She's more forgiving than I am. Or maybe she really likes plants. After I left the hospital, we brought the hibiscus home. It's actually quite beautiful when it blooms.

\*\*\*

Poppy is my half-sister, and she's full of surprises. When I attended my junior prom, my date ditched me midway through the dance. While I was hiding out in the hallway, wiping my mascara onto my turquoise dress, wondering if it was possible to die from humiliation, Poppy was puncturing the tires of my date's car. The entire incident was caught on the school parking lot's security camera. I asked Poppy why she did it, and the only thing she said was, "I was feeling spicy." That night, Poppy was expelled from school but accepted into my heart.

\*\*\*

Poppy is my half-sister, and I miss her a whole bunch. When I left for college, Poppy decided to

help me move into my dorm, but only after I promised to bring the hibiscus plant with me. She even helped me decorate the drab walls. My mom and dad visit me at college, but Poppy never makes the trip. My dad always says Poppy isn't feeling well. When I came home for the holidays, Poppy wasn't around. My dad says she's staying at a friend's house now. But I think "friend" is a generous term. The late nights of studying feel extra lonely when worrying about Poppy. I take good care of the hibiscus plant. It's dormant right now. But just when it seems like it's done growing, it always seems to bud again. □

## A Perfect Match

By Connie Anderson

When Ralph was 84, his second wife died of cancer. He felt intense grief and the deepest loneliness ever.

At that moment, he decided he would never be alone again for the rest of his life—whether it is five, ten or more years—and he'd find someone to be with.

He started asking friends and family if they knew of a single woman who might like to meet and marry him. Then he joined an online dating service for seniors. It wasn't too long before a woman who lived nearby responded—and they started communicating, first on line, and then the phone, followed soon by meeting in person.

Ralph was like a giddy teenager when he talked about Carol. His family was happy he had a new friend. One day shortly after they met, Ralph said, "The best way for the two of us to really get to know each other is to 'get married.' How about this Sunday right after services?"

Carol said yes, and everything was set, so they were relaxing the night before the wedding date. Carol noticed that Ralph wore the heaviest wool socks she'd ever seen, so she asked why. He said, "I have the coldest feet..." Carol said, "...And I have the hottest feet."

They looked at each other, saying in unison, "A perfect match." □

## Kids These Days

By Michael Gigandet

The little girl sat quietly in her chair against the wall, her hands cupped in her lap, her feet dangling just above the floor.

“She looks like an angel,” Rogers, the rookie detective, said from behind the mirror where the two detectives watched the family.

“Satan’s handmaiden maybe. My God, she baked that old woman in her own oven,” the veteran Smith said. “Gingerbread house? More like Haunted House.”

“I can’t get over how normal she looks after... what we found...” Rogers had been the one who opened the oven door. He’d run out into the front yard and vomited next to a mailbox decorated like a candy cane, and Smith had laughed.

The girl’s brother sobbed on his mother’s shoulder, but the little girl stared at the floor.

“They might have gotten away with it if she’d not tried to pawn the old lady’s jewels,” Smith said. The detectives used the address on her pawn to find her, and it was easy after that. Her plump little brother spilled everything as soon as Smith put his hand on his shoulder and said “Ok son, tell me what happened?”

“Her little brain is working it all out right now,” Smith said. “She’s the only one of the bunch not squirming and blubbing.” The rest of the family huddled beside her, all piled up and holding on to each other like shipwreck victims on a raft.

“She said the old lady was a witch,” Rogers said.

“Eccentric sure. Who lives in a house painted up like a Walmart birthday cake?”

“They said she was going to eat them.”

“In a house full of candy, cake and cookies? The old woman wasn’t starving. Besides, they baked her in an oven like a Thanksgiving turkey.”

“You don’t buy their being lost in the woods and happening upon a candy house?”

“Nope, this was targeted. First degree homicide.”

“They look like my children. So normal.”

“Look, if they were so concerned about being eaten by the old woman, witch whatever, why would they hang around to steal her jewels? Motive is plain as day. Kill her, steal her jewels, sell ‘em. Immediate gratification. An old story these days.”

Smith stabbed at his clipboard. He always played the bad cop, and he liked to toss the clipboard onto the table as soon as he walked into the interrogation room. It scared suspects.

“The parents look regular like...us” Before he could say: “What did they do wrong?” the little girl looked up at the mirror and winked. Rogers flinched as if he’d been struck in the forehead with a marble from a slingshot.

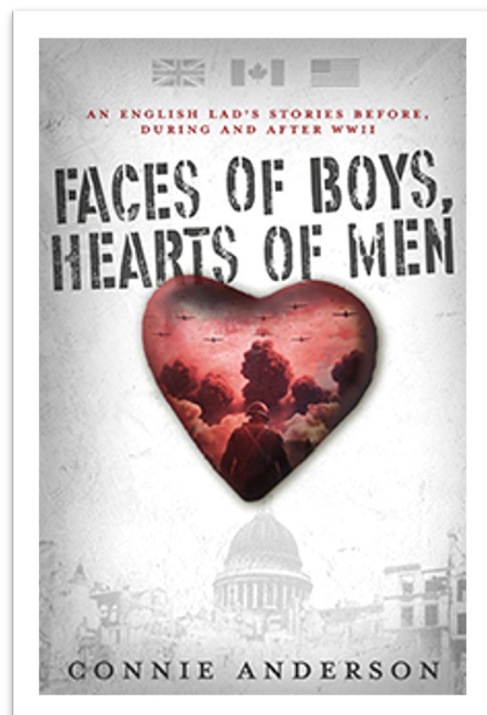
“It’s this generation,” Smith said, still stabbing his clipboard. “Entitled, self indulgent...Life has no value to them. I blame television.”

The little girl smiled at the mirror and looked down at the floor. □

## Plenty of Dented Signs

Plenty of dented signs on the highway.  
Igloo photographs in the drawers on the left.  
I don’t know where the antidote is kept.  
Nobody came to the funeral.  
They used to call them *Luncheonettes*.  
Two-tone shirts are very elegant.  
Thank you for the binoculars.  
Those plants were shut down years ago.  
My cigarettes are in the glove compartment.  
Larger gulls got to the dead crab first.

—Peter Dellolio



## Because There is No Growth

*Looking back on my time in the Tower of Babel*

By Colin Dodds

I wrote a book about the Tower of Babel a few years back, as many have. It started during the eleven weeks when I was working in internal communications for one of the largest corporations on the planet. It didn't go well, and I won't bother with blame.

Those eleven weeks were so bad that I took to treating each day like a highly specific nightmare, or a trip to a profoundly backward and strange country. Our first daughter was on the way, so I couldn't quit. I tried to take notes. And somewhere in it all, I felt as though I had glimpsed something.

From that glimpse, I wrote the story of a willing and ambitious communications executive employed by the Tower of Babel, his career ups and downs, and the world in which he lived. I thought I was writing about large organizations and their endemic communication failures, even when obsessed with it. I thought I was writing about the collapse of language in the face of idolatry.

### The real problem at the Tower of Babel

And for about two years, I researched and wrote about everything. But something else came through, like the uneven surface of a table through a single sheet of paper. There was a more urgent story: The giant tower will not budge even an inch higher.

In the book of Genesis, the tower reaches to the heavens. It allows the builders to make a name for themselves. And it protects them from being scattered.

The tower is only a tower because it grew upwards. While it was growing, it validated its builders' efforts and lives. But then it stopped growing. And maybe that's where the terrible confusion of tongues began.

It could be maintained if it was a garden, a cottage, or a small town. But it's not. It's a tower. If it fails to grow, that's a crisis. After all, *we said we were tower building, right?* If it's not growing, then it reflects badly on everyone involved. Some people get nostalgic for the days when it grew.

Some say they never liked the tower, and it should never have been built in the first place. There are recriminations and accusations. Everyone gets defensive because everyone is implicated. It gets harder to be honest. Some people will say that the tower *is* actually growing.

### Let's talk stagnation

Maybe I'm just being cranky, but what happened to movies? Didn't we used to have a music industry? Why are the new buildings almost without exception, so ugly? What happened to journalism? Why do I need a username and password to make a phone call, or do nearly anything? How did all this crap get so impossibly expensive? It's 2023, and I have an iPhone. I think it's the sixth or eighth one I've owned. And it does all kinds of things. It's neat.

But I don't remember exactly needing any of those things done by a pocket-sized object. Like the broader digital world, my iPhone does nothing particularly new. It may make things more convenient, but it doesn't improve any of them. I don't have better conversations, or take better pictures, or read more insightful news, or listen to better music.

My iPhone and the larger digital world, however, have sucked up all the record stores, newspapers, phone calls, shoeboxes full of photos, letters to friends, and so forth. And it's sucked up the people, too. Everywhere you go, most people are at best, half-present, on their phones. In sum, it has left the world a little more barren.

See? Nostalgia and recrimination.

There are also things like stagnating wages, shrinking life expectancies and a rising tide of depression. This is *No Homework*, so I won't belabor the point: The tower has stopped rising.

### Any of this sound familiar?

There needs to be growth, but there is no growth. So you borrow money and buy something new, and poof, you're bigger. Then you show the world how to grow. Of course, you borrowed the money, perhaps at gunpoint, and probably still borrowed too much. But there it is - growth. And if the math doesn't add up, you still have enough money to hire a mathematician who understands your *vision*.

There needs to be growth, but there is no growth. So the pickpocket is called a pioneer, the Ponzi schemer a visionary. And soon there will be labor-saving, rust-free robots—more property protecting your property in an age of unadulterated assets.

There needs to be growth, but there is no growth. So you swallow your spit and double down on a world where the only viable quality is what you already have a lot of—say, data. And the bedrock and scree of the human soul can always be reshaped to fit the inventory.

There needs to be growth, but there is no growth. So you shift all costs to where they can't be measured and then sell the resulting miracle to the suckers. The suckers are the only kind of humans now genuinely welcomed into the world.

There needs to be growth, but there is no growth. So you hold an election and a demonstration to kick up a new cloud of old promises. No one has time to know the past, so it works. And the more it works, the more the broader story shifts from one about a human being moving through the world, to a dollar passing through a global economy or an electron through the logic gates of a circuit board.

### How the Tower story ends

The fate of the Tower of Babel is actually pretty gentle, given the rest of Genesis (not suitable for YA readers).

There's no giant collapse, no fire. The people just get frustrated and lose interest. They stop building the tower and go do something else. They scatter, just like they didn't want to.

And after that, the tower was just a highly specific nightmare of ambition, pressure, pride, and failure. It's kind of a non-sequitur in Genesis—a strange story from a strange land. Another little misadventure from which humankind departed a little confused and a little worse for wear, but as okay as it ever gets. □

Colin Dodds is an award-winning author and filmmaker, whose works include including *Pharoni*, *The Reign of the Ant-Santas* and *The 6th Finger of Tommy the Goose*. He grew up in Massachusetts and lived in California briefly, before finishing his education in New York City. *Forget This*

*Good Thing I Just Said*, a first-of-its-kind literary and philosophical experience is available as a free app for the iPhone. He lives in New York City, with his wife and children. Find more of his work at [thecolindodds.com](http://thecolindodds.com)



## Being “Goosed”

Connie Anderson

Judy and her friend Carol were taking their regular spring-time walk around a small neighborhood lake surrounded by beautiful nature. Today, however, the nature was sharing the path with them—whole families of Canadian geese, with their babies trailing along.

This was a first for either woman, so they walked faster and were very alert. They safely passed four goslings and their parents. Then... from behind and unprovoked, the drake flew up to the top of Judy's head—and started pecking it. After the ten longest seconds of Judy's life, he flew off. Immediately...the female jumped up on Carol's shoulders—and violently flapped and flapped her powerful wings. Guess the message was sent: Leave our babies alone.

Frightened and bleeding, both women dashed to their cars and went home. Carol had no open wounds, but over the next few days her shoulders and arms turned black and blue from the mother goose's strong wings.

When Judy arrived home and told her unbelievable story, her family insisted she go to the closest Urgent Care—after all she had goose germs in her head. After telling her story and seeing the staff's shocked faces, she knew this was more unusual than she thought. No one had ever heard of such a thing. They treated the open wound from the goose pecking her head, and all was well.

Except...Judy had to make up a story about the bandage on her head—the truth was just too darn weird for her to share, and for others to believe. □

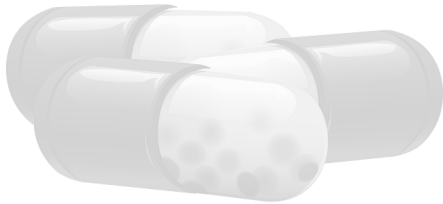


## The Pills Began To Laugh

(Written to the rhythms of the 1930s Big Band Era) by David Halliday

“Truth will come,” Mr. Edwards sang, snapping his fingers and tapping his foot. Standing in his office, his back against the door, loosening his tie, he wiped the sweat off his forehead, not with the back of his hand, but with one little finger. The French way. And then he began to scat.

“Fortune will seek me out. Surely it will. A soul just got to know itself. Like some deformed creature crawling inside a shell at the bottom of the sandy sea. And there must be predators down there. You’d think. But there ain’t any. So the souls died by suicide. Like good women in New



York City. Yes, those souls are an easy commodity to deal. What else are you going to do? On a hot August night with no job prospects the next day. Give up on your ideals. Fall in love with your dreams. Death. My, how pretty she looks tonight. Doesn’t sneak up on you. Slides across the room like Ginger Rogers. Her heavenly face has tortured my dreams. Death will come as a virus off an airplane. Walk right through immigration into our veins. Beautiful madness. I must be sinking below that rational sea that we all float our little red rubber boats upon.”

Mr. Edwards placed his ear against the door.

“God save me. What have I become? Struggling to defeat my enemies, I have destroyed the prize. Why did I have to possess the whole plaza? And now ‘that’ news like an accident, unexpected. I could hardly believe it, and yet wasn’t that my intention? Easy to say that it was just business. But it’s always more than that. Is a banker any different than a priest? During the inquisition. Give up your soul to God, but first, let’s have your skin. Oh, poor Singh, where did his ambitions lead him? An empty room. A bullet in his mouth. A wife who mourns the man she never knew. I took everything from him. What a victory. And the

cost. Singh’s life. My soul.”

Stepping away from the door, Mr. Edwards moved over to his desk and pulled out a drawer. Reaching in, he removed a small plastic container. And opened the top.

“Here is eternity.”

He stared down at the pills.

“O sweet death. Dozens of bullets straight to my heart. Is it made of stone? In the end, one returns to the moment of birth. Perhaps there is hope in the next world. Peace from myself. Oh, this empty hope. Singh’s face. Why can’t I get it out of my head? Why do I persist in holding out for hope? Singh has taken his life, and it was my doing. Took everything he had. For what. The appetite of my dreams. But dreams are the kindling of time. Smoke-filled streets. Dread. Moments before my sleep with that image of Singh in my head.”

Mr. Edwards lifted the bottle of pills to his mouth. He stared into the container, where the pills began to laugh. And threw the bottle on the floor. The pills scattered across the floor like orphans, and Mr. Edwards fell to his knees and wept □

### Skyward Glance, All the Way Up

Distantly upward-looking funnel-shaped yellow,  
Earthy orange and carmine red nasturtium  
In equilibrated evenness all glow  
Like a tessellated tertiaries' tertium,

Way above, upon euphoric windowsills.  
Higher above the bigoted moody weathercock,  
That's always rotating whimsically like calibrium  
With changing ephemerally-rocked wind rills,  
Upturns all temperamental directional thrills.  
Us below, down here, soak in that  
    spreading equilibrium  
By the rigid hour of the unseen clock

That ticks somewhere ceremoniously still  
Its tuned melodious minutes well-timed so,  
Fragile yet with solidity of rock.

—Saloni Kaul

**More from 500 APHORISMS AND OBSERVATIONS**

**A Tasty Bowl of the Succinct**

By Michael Rossberg

To ourselves, we are the center of the world. To others, we are just one of the others.

The more people you are close to, the more your foot will be stepped on or find its way into your mouth.

The less said, the more easily understood.

The disagreements we have with people we agree with the most are the most puzzling to us.

Orchestral music is a way to communicate a thousand emotions which cannot be expressed in words.

A stranger in a throng annoys; a stranger in the wilderness delights.

Selfish people who don't have the right of way nonetheless think they have the right to the right away.

One of life's lingering frustrations is the comeback insult that didn't occur to us to say until a day later.

Many flaws in human nature are displayed daily in subway cars around the world.

The key to appearing to others to be intelligent lies in effectively masking one's stupidities.

Extroverts seek out others to find an audience; introverts are drawn to others to lend an ear.

Those burdened with a weighty task can lighten their load with a smile.

People once but no longer important in our lives are like portraits we hang in a room with the

lights turned off.

People from other cultures reveal the silliness of our own customs.

No matter how isolated you may feel, there are always people who will keep you within reach—your creditors.

**"Apologies not made become self-inflicted wounds that never heal."**

A true friend says the same thing to your face as he does to others when your head is turned.

The smile was in the works for 13.7 billion years and was well worth the wait.

No one sees the light until someone flips on the switch.

A single event seen by 1,000 eyes will be described in 500 different ways.

The best neighbors are those most easily ignored. Successful artists are those who receive as much appreciation for their work from the rest of the world as they feel for it themselves.

Fortunately, embarrassments only happen one at a time. If they all happened at once, our egos would vanish into a separate universe.

Those generally thought to be wise remain foolish in certain specific ways.

To learn most quickly about everyday human nature, study it at its extremes.

If you aren't straight with yourself, you'll be crooked with others.

If you give out faint praise, expect nothing more in return.

When singing solo, you may improvise; when singing in a choir, stick to the written music.

□

## The Bull

By Kim Farleigh

The bull's strangely fused front legs formed a wobbling one, sword in its back. Wobbling stupor increased by misaligned hooves—then—plummeting, trying to rise by lifting a previously powerful head. Red rivers spilling from its nostrils and mouth, white tongue gone red. The bull's head fighting to resuscitate the vast weight it topped, life's red rivers racing from death's approach. Head's loneliness magnified by surrounding hostility, red rivers rushing from eternal annihilation, the bull's delusory survival hopes enhancing the crowd's feeling of pathos, no tranquillity in the crowd's quietude. Bull's loneliness amplified under a magnifying-glass sky's circular, terracotta, arena-roof lip permanently muted.

The matador moved gingerly towards that friendless figure, horns potentially still deadly, black mass still potentially capable of rising. Matador limbs once elegant, now awkwardly stretching towards danger, gingerly reaching while holding a dagger, jerkily uncomfortable while nearing unpredictable hazard. Humane to finish this animal's suffering, the previous pursuit of grace before lethal threat, now irrelevant.

The dagger's blade pricked the bull's spine, the bull's neck jolting as if electrocuted, that sudden flick of the bull's head ejecting a singular gasping groan from the crowd's arena-sized throat, for the dagger had failed to kill, pathos, enveloping the ring, magnifying the returning uneasy silence. No peace in that silence, only unease. Death's presence is more acceptable under these conditions, having now changed. Just kill it to stop suffering, matador flinging his arms back wildly with that sudden flick of the bull's head, matador jerking back to avoid peril, bravery before danger now irrelevant. Just kill it!

Crowd guilt rose. We hate threats to ideal identity.

The matador's responsibility to finish suffering had risen above the necessity to stylishly reveal virtues, not certain if the bull was now fully defenseless. Most aficionados

had witnessed certain death suddenly spring back to life.

Matador limbs stretched. Gently now. New priorities. Necessity had ironically become more primitive to undertake mercy. Animal euthanasia.

The eerie quietude deepened as the bull began seeking help, its eyes pearly with yearning. The help it was going to get was death. Its sad pleading for life pressured the matador to kill quickly. The jittery crowd's desire for that fast death enhanced guilt.

The matador stretched, trying to pinpoint the bull's spine, horns waving like a dodging boxer's fists, the crowd's hope of quick death opposing the bull's hope of permanent life, the dagger plunging, a horn tip striking sand, four horizontal legs suddenly rigid in death's everlasting embrace.

The crowd's erupting chatter signaled escape from the noose of tightening culpability, a sudden sensation of lightness erupting from relief.

"It was tough," Bill said, "seeing hope in its eyes."

"Blood spilling onto the white strip at the barrier's base," Tom replied, "got me. It was like seeing bloodied tampons."

A man in a black waistcoat and a white, long-sleeved shirt threw water onto the red on the white strip on the barrier's base. White enhances red.

The bull's carcass got dragged by six roped-together horses towards an ebony doorway—opening into nothingness.

Tom and Bill passed through the bullring's high, wide, open doors, heat intense, as if the ozone layer had been ripped away.

"Permanently losing hope must be the loneliest experience," Tom said. "I remember that happening to Bob Marley."

"It was amazing to see," Bill replied. "I didn't even know that they had hopes."

People were staring at something on the other side of the red pavement that surrounded the ring. An ambulance's lights were flashing. A man was lying on the road. The blood trail coming from that man's head looked iridescent, like red paint. Red emphasized the whiteness of the prostrate man's shirt.

“He stepped out in front of my car,” a man said, his eyes frantic. “He came out suddenly. I didn’t see...”

The silvery cover they put over the body glinted.

“He.....”

“Okay, okay,” an ambulance crewman said reassuringly.

People stared, irresistibly fascinated by what theoretically should have appalled them.

“Poor bastard,” Bill said.

“Hopefully, he hadn’t had time to lose hope,” Tom replied.

\*\*\*

The night’s atmosphere had the texture of warm satin. Arches surrounded the square where Tom and Bill were sitting on a café’s terrace. Long-lasting bronze prolonged a general’s existence on a pedestal in the square’s centre, and the general’s hopes of immortality were achieved.

The café’s walls exhibited the heads of bulls killed in the city’s main ring. Waiters wearing white shirts and black ties moved between the tables.

“What would you prefer,” Bill asked; “quick with less life or slow with more?”

“To avoid drawn-out hopelessness,” Tom replied.

“Become religious.”

“I might when no other alternatives exist. What would I have to lose?”

“Your mind.”

“That’s not much of a sacrifice to avoid the horrible hopelessness we saw today.”

“The likelihood of that horrible hopelessness will make me live my life more completely from now on,” Tom replied. □

**Bio:** *Kim has worked for NGOs in Greece, Kosovo, Iraq, Palestine, and Macedonia. He likes to take risks to get the experience required for writing. He likes painting, art, bullfighting, photography, and architecture, which might explain why this Australian lives in Madrid. 225 of his stories have been accepted by over 100 different magazines.*



### Distance of Difference

Nowadays distance is written all over like graffiti they are scribbled everywhere, Intimacy is distancing itself from each other proximity doesn't desire to be bothered, strong odor of burned emotions floats in air a subtle insensitivity stays like stain on collar, deserted path gradually becomes desolate frozen feelings fails to find love or locate. Have turned into a motionless body pulsating from within but lifeless tragedy a primordial physicalism influence the mind. egoistical apathy is what I find words from the verses vilify the intent memories are lost amidst malignant moments indifferent solitude doesn't offer solace dubious diligence dares the intelligence... Dusty grey canopy of my lone limitless sky remains as a reminder to my rued sigh shabby stain of darkness on my melancholy stays rancid inodorous and eternally bleary My words flow as incessant tear drops my emotional phrases lies like corpse Distance appears in every poetic thought My verses never appears as they were sought.

--Som Mazumder

## Holy Guacamole

By J.B. Polk

I adore Carmen, my salsa-loving Mexican wife, to infinity and beyond, and I would never consciously make fun of her. But I laugh every time we spend Christmas with my family because Carmen gets so hyped up after a few glasses of punch that her tongue turns furry, her otherwise good English becomes confuzzled, and she tends to say the funniest things imaginable.

The other day, while my mom tried to conquer the culinary world with her spinach and cheddar casserole, Carmen, a self-proclaimed food critic, lurked in the shadows, ready to steal and claim the recipe as her own.

Mom stirred the stew, added a dollop of extra-heavy cream, and tasted a bit with a wooden spoon.

"Meh...Too bland. Needs more pepper," she said as if the dish had just insulted her taste buds and required a spicy comeback.

Carmen, who was watching and had already indulged in several glasses of punch, turned into a walking, talking word smoothie!

"Je... Jenny. You've got a green secret admirer on your teat," she slurred.

Mom sneakily looked down and said, "Nope, no spinach on my bosom."

Carmen shook her head as if it were a piñanta. "Not on your bosom! On your teat!"

So there I was, expertly wrapping presents in the living room when I overheard the conversation that screamed for a "John to the rescue!" mission. It was like a scene from a Tom Cruise movie, except instead of car chases, it was all about gift-wrapping and Dad drinking beer.

"She's just trying to say you have a spinach garden growing on your TEETH! Talk about the latest dental trend in this family..." I shouted while Dad erupted into a fit of laughter that made his beer do a high dive, leaving a foamy mess on the carpet.

The whole thing was entirely innocent and ended in our shared merriment.

Something similarly innocent happened after we visited the funfair in Gloucester, Massachusetts, a few days before, where a massive rollercoaster swirled, coiled, and sped up and

down the track like a gigantic metal snake while people screamed, and Carmen and I watched in awe.

"Ready to dive headfirst into a wacky fair extravaganza?" I eagerly grabbed Carmen's hand and whisked her away to a magical land of nostalgia, where my favorite childhood game awaited like a long-lost friend who owed me money. You know, the kind of game that goes well with slushies so cold they make your teeth do the Macarena.

"It's called Whack-a-mole," I exclaimed, "And believe it or not, but I used to be a mole-whacking champion at twelve!"

It was not until we got home that Carmen, cheeks flushed from the cold but belly warm from mulled wine, recounted her experience to Mom and Dad. She couldn't stop talking about the rollercoaster and how much fun we had playing... guacamole...

Again, we laughed a lot, and Dad promised to propose the game for the next Olympics.

But things took a wild turn when we did our pre-wedding sessions with Father O'Brien, an old priest who's been around since the dinosaurs roamed the Earth. You know, the kind who wears a traditional cassock like it's the latest fashion trend and insists on saying mass in Latin with a heavy Irish brogue to keep the congregation on their toes.

I regaled him with the epic tale of how Carmen and I met and painted a vivid picture of our future together, complete with three little rascals and a marriage that would only end when the Grim Reaper himself threw in the towel.

Until Carmen decided to discuss some issues that were bothering her. In defense of the punch, it was not to be blamed this time.

"I'm a proud Mexican father, and I need John to understand our cultural differences. Because John wants to *fickus* here, while I don't want to *fickus* exclusively in America. I need to do it in my country, too."

The priest's nose tip went from rosy red to eggshell white, and his jaw hit the floor like a cartoon character. He had not expected such a blunt confession during a pre-wedding counseling meeting!

"What she means, father, is that I want to focus... Get it? Focus on living in the United States while she wants to share the time between the two

countries. Talk about wanting to have your cake and eat it too! I mean, who needs just one country when you can have two? She's really taking the whole 'sharing is caring' thing to a new level."

I blabbered on and on, hoping to convince him that we had zero intentions of getting into any wild shenanigans in either country and that it was just my future wife's, um, unique way of pronouncing things.

But Carmen got her own back when we went to her sister Rosario's wedding in Guadalajara, where she effortlessly navigated between English and Spanish, leaving me in awe of her bilingual skills.

This time, it was a "Carmen to the Rescue" mission when I spilled a bottle of the finest Valle de Cholula Olive Oil on her sister's wedding dress.

"*Lo siento. Estoy tan embarazado,*" I apologized.

Rosario blinked a few times, looked at her dress that now resembled a Banksy masterpiece, and responded in English that would make Shakespeare proud.

"I can see that you want to lose a few pounds, John, and I suspect you might be harboring a watermelon in there. But I doubt you are pregnant."

Carmen roared with laughter. Because here's a fun fact: "*embarazado*" in Spanish doesn't mean embarrassed; it actually means pregnant.

So that's it, folks. I will never again scoff at Carmen's blueberry "pancays" or how she whoops joyfully at the Yankees' "honrons."

That time in Guadalajara, I devoured an entire buffet of humble pie, busted my misconceptions, and fully embraced our cultural differences. Forever. □

Don't forget to find  
us and support us  
on Substack.com

 substack

[writersshowcase.substack.com/](https://writersshowcase.substack.com/)

## WINK GUIDELINES

We are a digital magazine with a full-color print companion. (We pay contributors in digital copies. See below.) We produce the magazine 2 times per year in the Spring and Fall and there is an accompanying newsletter published electronically on Substack.com

### HOW DO YOU PAY ME FOR MY WORK?

You will receive one free subscription to our Substack newsletter, "WINK Writers Showcase," and one shareable, PDF copy of the issue of WINK in which your work appears. You will be provided with that link via email once the issue is published.

### DO YOU ACCEPT SIMULTANEOUS SUBMISSIONS?

Yes, we are always accepting submissions for upcoming issues. We are interested in original artwork (line art), essays, short stories, poetry, and articles. We especially want articles on writing and the writing life (500 to 1200 words). Space is limited. Short stories/flash fiction (up to 3000 words) can be on virtually any subject. We like unusual stories with a twist at the end, and we LOVE super short, quirky flash fiction. We prefer free verse and form poetry (up to about 32 lines).

### WHAT RIGHTS DOES WINK USE?

We reserve One-time, North American, Serial, Electronic, and Archival rights. Rights revert to authors, and copyright always remains with authors.

### HOW SHOULD I SEND MY SUBMISSIONS?

Email submissions with Word attachments are preferred and all should be sent to Nadia Giordana at [iinadia@msn.com](mailto:iinadia@msn.com). You MUST include your full name and postal mailing address. Accepted material will receive a response within 30-120 days. If you have not heard from us about a submission in over 120 days, you may safely assume we have not chosen your material. We reserve the right to perform minor edits for clarity on scheduled material when deemed appropriate. Submission indicates permission to publish in our print magazine as well as on our blog, social media pages, and Substack newsletter. We reserve the right to remove material from our lineup or move it to a later issue. Editor's decisions are final.

## Expendable

By Michael Lloyd Gray

The first phones we swiped in Jacksonville weren't smartphones, and that royally pissed off Shiner. We even accidentally netted a flip phone as we left some dive bar after a burger break. Shiner tossed it against a brick wall in the alley.

"What's wrong with these Jacksonville clucks—can't they afford a smartphone?"

"I reckon it's because not everybody's rich," I said lamely.

"Fuck that," Shiner said. "And you know what this means, don't you, Hap? It means we didn't even get lunch and the brewskis covered. That came out of our own pockets."

"So, next time we'll hit the motherlode, for sure."

He looked amused.

"You even know what that means, Hap—motherlode?"

"Not really. But I know it's a good thing. I remember you said so a few times back in Miami."

"That was Miami. A better class of people to steal from. More money down there."

"We just have to find the right places up here, don't you reckon?"

"Uh-huh," Shiner said, managing to dial his anger back a notch. We walked down the street. He looked back at the bar. "My bad, Hapster. That piss-hole wasn't smartphone territory. I should have known it."

"Now you're calling me Hapster?"

He grinned and smacked my back. A little too hard.

"Shit, bro—you have to admit it beats the hell out of when I always called you numbnuts."

"And boy. Don't forget, boy."

"You ain't no boy no more, Hapster."

"Reckon not."

"You're eighteen now and got your ashes hauled good and proper by a hooker who knew her business."

I nodded but avoided eye contact.

"She did okay by you, Hapster? Popped your cherry just right?"

"Men don't talk about sex, Shiner. You told me that."

He shook his head.

"You're misremembering, Hapster. I said men don't talk about sex with wives or girlfriends. But hookers are different. That's fair game."

"Why's that?"

"Because they're just whores."

I thought back to when the hooker popped my cherry two nights back. She was nice and gentle. When she smiled, her face lit up. She didn't make sex seem sleazy. More like a very useful lesson. Like renting a tutor.

"Where'd you find her, Shiner?"

"In a bar. But don't worry, Hapster—I tried her first. Wouldn't want to palm bad goods off on you."

"Mighty white of you," I said, trying to wish away the image of him with her first. I don't think he got the sarcasm.

"I look out for you, Hapster. You know that."

"Do I?"

That sort of just popped out, and he glared at me. That glare I'd seen from time to time, the cold blue eyes stare when you could almost feel the heat behind it. Then I remembered what the hooker had told me about him, and I realized she'd seen that stare and felt that heat, too. That was why she warned me about him. She said to get out before Shiner killed me because he would eventually. She knew his type.

I think standing there that day on a sidewalk, as Shiner's mind shifted back to hunting smartphones, I finally understood it was just a matter of time before I no longer served whatever purpose he saw in me, and I became expendable. I could just leave, but I had nowhere to go and no skills to make a living. Shiner held the money and the take when we fenced phones in pawn shops. He only gave me pocket money. That was *control*.

And that cut down the options. I could kill *him* before he did *me*, but I didn't know if that was even in me. I hoped to God it wasn't. But when you're expendable, your life on the line, good and bad don't figure into it. When you're expendable, morals are for other people.

"Something on your mind, Hap?"

His eyes narrowed, and there was some heat building behind the stare.

"Not a thing, Shiner."

"Uh-huh," he said. "But you'd say if there was?"

"You'll be the first to know. Guaranteed."

“Ain’t no guarantees in life, Hap.”

“Don’t I know it.”

His glare lingered, and I kept my smile and tight eye contact. We were just a foot apart, like two boxers touching gloves and waiting for the first -round bell to sound. Then he nodded grudgingly, and we walked toward upscale downtown, where scoring phones might be better, him shooting me that creepy side glance to remind me he had eyes on me.

I smirked and rolled my eyes when he wasn’t looking. I nodded when he glanced again. It felt like for the first time, we both understood each other.

I sensed a ticking inside us both. □

### How it Goes

First came all the firsts:

first cry

first suckle

first smile

first laugh

quickly followed by

first steps

first words.

She fell utterly completely in love.

He grew

talked back

met the world

made friends

learned physics chemistry humility.

Her love deepened.

But he went away,

found his own home,

a spouse,

a life.

She was left with only

the memories of their together-years.

When he finally came back

she was wrinkled

white stooped slow-footed

But she smiled as she reached

for the baby in his arms

grasping this is

how it goes.

—Phyllis Dozier

### A Slice of Joy

I am visualizing a slice of watermelon

I can hear Mom slurping it down

Like it’s her last day of life on earth.

She deftly spits out the pits, one by one

As she enjoys the hot pink sweetness

Of the pulp and juice, with all their sounds.

Watching her wolf down that slice of

Melon, I see uninhibited pleasure

As she digs into the last of the pink.

This fruit’s a fountain of refreshment

On a hot summer’s day in New York.

If only Mom’s pleasure would last

—Gloria Fredkove

### Shadow Dreams

I was following a shadow in the brightest of day  
Stumbling in a tunnel, dark, dreary and gray!

No light in view, I’m alone in the dark

Not a sparrow around now, not even a lark.

Up ahead I saw a gigantic oak tree

Going for an eternity, I can’t see.

But it was then I saw and heard a crow

Threatening Death in its tow.

In desperation, I started up the tree

Staring upward towards a guiding light

Climbing, climbing, continue the fight!

Shadow dreams beaming all thru the night.

A dark and dreary gray place to go

With no one around to save my soul.

So, I travel along life’s journey on a quest

To search for the light that saves the best.

Reaching out from the depths of hell

I saw a dove on a wishing well.

Higher and higher I climb,

To the light I can now see, I’m no longer blind.

Search for the meaning in this dream if you dare

Hold fast to your faith when shadows are there.

Hurry now to the other side

Before shadows’ dreams swallow you alive!

—Eva Marie Cagley



## Big Stories in Small Spaces

**MICRO-FICTION:** 100 words or less

**THEME:** Medical mishaps and mysteries

*Note: The two “Dueling Stories” directly below came about as Nadia and Connie each tell their versions from different points of view:*

### X-RAY VISION

Severe sciatica forced me to seek medical help for pain.

So I'm in the doctor's office and I see the x-ray up on the screen of my pelvic area. Scrutinizing it for something—anything that looked like it could be causing my pain, and pointing to the image, I asked the nurse to help me find what I was looking for.

She smiled and said, “Oh, that's not you, that's Frank.”

I answered back, “Oh. Well, that explains the penis.” —Nadia Giordana

### LET ME BE FRANK

Jane was going through this agonizing back pain. It got so bad she went to the doctor. In his office she sees the x-ray of her pelvic area. Scrutinizing the x-ray, she tried to see anything that might be causing her pain. Jane also wanted to see the bone scars left from her pelvic fracture last year. She was confused because something looked like a shriveled carrot on her x-ray.

“Nurse, help me understand what I am looking for in the x-ray.

The nurse said, “Oh, that's not you! That's Frank's.”

Relieved, Jane replied: Well, that explains the carrot.”—Connie Anderson

\*\*\*\*\*

### IT'S A BOY!

The young couple from Kenya were overjoyed that the baby was finally delivered. I promptly plopped the wet baby on the mom's stomach and concentrated on the placenta. I don't announce the baby's gender, leaving it instead up to the new fathers. This father took one glance at the little bottom and yelled, “It's a boy.” He was on the phone with relatives in Kenya within minutes.

I cleaned up the baby and handed her back to her mother, commenting, “look here.” The dad had to call the relatives in Kenya back, correcting his earlier announcement. —Stephanie Schwartz

### TEACHER'S PET

At the beginning of my 70<sup>th</sup>-year wellness check, the nurse informed me that I was to remember the three words she would say and repeat them back at the end of the exam.

Next, I was to draw a clock with all the numbers and the hands indicating ten minutes after 11, which I did without any trouble, but on the bottom margin, I penciled in my three tiny words. She busily checked off my progress on my chart and then saw the three words.

Horrified, she said, “You CHEATED!” And my reply was, “Yes. I am 70. I get to cheat!” —Stephanie Schwartz

### RAISIN' 'EM RIGHT

The student doctor asked what hospital my baby had been born at. Then who was her pediatrician? She didn't have either, being born at home. Shocked by my answers, she then decided to test Rachel to rule out neglect or abuse, complete with a small motor skills test. She sprinkled raisins in front of the baby on the table who deftly swooped them all up into her fist, promptly popping the whole lot into her mouth. At the same time the doctor lunged at the table groaning, “My test!” I thought to myself, “Well, then you shouldn't have done that.”

—Stephanie Schwartz

### GRAY YET?

I don't have any gray hair to speak of, but I think I can no longer pass for middle age. I am 70. I couldn't help but laugh at my last doctor visit. A young nurse roomed me and sat down to verify all the meds listed in my chart, etc. She slowly, meticulously plodded through all the standard questions, as she typed my answers. “And when was your last period?” she asked. I promptly replied, “1988.” She stopped typing. Blinked a few times. And said “Oh, o...kaaay...”

—Stephanie Schwartz

## GREAT CATCH

I was super lucky to get into the freestanding clinic on the Mexican border to do my internship in order to qualify to sit on the state midwifery board and get my license. I was catching babies every day. Over forty-five that summer.

While sitting at the end of the bed with my Mexican mama about to deliver, I happened to glance up and noticed the father standing there. "Catch the daddy" was my next order to the rest of the birthing team. He indeed did go down, white as a sheet. It was my first daddy catch that summer.  
—Stephanie Schwartz

## HOME STRETCH

Annie entered the last lap of her race and heard the crowd cheer as she picked up her pace.

Trickster Crow chuckled from above the track, and with a blink, hurdles sprouted and water pits grew, teeming with crocodiles snapping their maws and waving their claws.

Annie leapt into the air and sailed over the pit as a croc lunged and snagged her foot. Annie shook her foot free, leaving the croc to chew on her shoe. As Annie sailed, she said, "You crocs gotta eat, but not me, not today."

—Teresa M. Riggs Foushee

## MY MOTHER

She sat in her favorite chair, made of red leather, her head slumped to her right shoulder, eyes closed, arms at her sides. Her doughy skin adorned with black bruises. Her feet colored deep lavender, one of her favorite colors, but geez, not for feet. I touched her left arm, felt the coldness, the rigidity of it. Felt the same when I pressed on her left cheek, like touching a mannequin. I walked away, and then I went back and touched her again, expecting a different result. She wasn't sleeping. She was dead, very dead. Who do I call first? —Laura Shell

AND NOW, FOR SOMETHING JUST A BIT LONGER...

## WILD HORSES

I see Mama leaning heavily against the tree, one of many oak trees growing along our street.

She has her palm pressed hard over where Daddy scratched RAY + RHONDA and chiseled that big sloppy heart around it. That carving has

been there since they bought the house and has caused no end of embarrassment for little Lee and me.

And I see the man in brass buttons and black boots. He is standing there with his hands clasped behind his back. He is watching a robin tipping drunk with spring on the mailbox. Now and then, I can hear him mutter, "Folks, there's wild horses, and then there's wild horses."

More family arrives and more neighbors come until there is a great big crowd, and it is like she has grown roots herself.

They say it is the shock and the anger and the grief. But I know it is because Mama has her hand over the heart she can still feel beating, and that will always beat—as long as she can keep her hand there.

—Tammy Huffman □



EXCITING NEW RELEASE  
Get it on Amazon

## The Pearl-Handled Letter Box

By Nadia Giordana

Lydia found the intriguing letter box around the 1st week of July, shortly after she and her husband moved into the old Iowa farmhouse. The house, built in 1875 by a farming family, was plain by citified Victoriana standards, but there was no mistaking the bones of the structure. Lydia and Neal Stinson inherited it after the death of Lydia's parents, Jennifer and Samuel Ridgeway. Jennifer was the daughter of Isaac Wilcox and his bride, Lily Branson. Isaac was from a long line of farmers, and as was often done, his father had carved out 500 acres from his own 1500 to give their budding family a solid start. Eventually, the entire parcel was passed down to him and later on to Jennifer and her husband. Samuel was a businessman in Des Moines, not a farmer, so he and Jennifer never moved into the house on the farm. They leased out the land to neighboring farmers.

A creek running through the pasture delighted the children of each generation and quenched the thirst of many a dairy cow, Holsteins, and Guernseys alike. Lydia and her brother Andy loved running back and forth through the muddy creek bed. One hot summer day, they did this; Andy lost a shoe in the mud—sucked it right off his foot.

Try as they did, they couldn't find it, and Andy was forced to walk home with one bare foot to face the music for losing a brand-new shoe. Other times, the creek was higher; they would spend hours searching out crawdads to play with and sometimes use for fishing bait.

Lydia remembered playing in the old house's attic as a little girl when visiting her grandparents. Cold in the winter and beastly hot in the summer, she spent most of her time up there in the Spring and Fall. However, Grandma gave strict orders not to dig through her trunks or personal items, and as kind and loving as she was, she had a stern demeanor. Lydia always followed Grandma's wishes. However, there were plenty of old dresses and dolls to play with and some interesting old



books she liked to page through, though she was mainly looking at the pictures (usually lithographs). To this day, she has a deep appreciation for lithographic art. When Grandpa Isaac died, Grandma Lily “went to join him” less than six months later, and the house was left to Jennifer and Samuel, then sat empty for several years.

When Lydia and her husband, Neal, first moved in, she began to look around, cleaning, dusting, wiping, and tossing old junk. She was surprised to discover there were still some of Lily's private trunks left abandoned in the attic. But it wasn't there that Lydia found the letter box. She found that in the far southwest corner of the eaves under the floorboards. If you've ever lived in an old house, you've likely noticed the floorboards in the attic stop and leave a gap all along the eaves, the width between, and the depth of the 2x6 rafters. It was there that, as a child, Lydia had tucked away a few unique treasures.

Today, she thought she would get down and feel underneath to see if anything remained of her secret stash. She already knew some of the first things she found would be dried ears of corn and a corn husk doll.

She also found a bag of marbles. “So that's where they disappeared. All these years, I thought my brother stole them,” she muttered. “Wait! What's this?” Her fingers found something hard and smooth, a box she didn't remember stashing. She had to struggle to retrieve it, wondering how it ever got down there in the first place. She finally pulled out the box and realized she

had never seen it. “Seems I'm not the only one who likes to hide things,” she said out loud, speaking only to the ghostly memories of the past.

It was locked and looked very old. The finish was black lacquer, measuring about 9 inches wide, maybe 5 inches deep, and 3 inches high. There were small handle-like fingerholds on each side inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Around the edges of the top was a border pattern of more inlaid mother-of-pearl. It was the kind of box a Victorian lady might have sitting on her dresser to keep gloves, pencils, trinkets—and yes, letters. She shook it, and it rattled. There was something inside.

*A letter? Oooh, maybe an old love letter from Grandpa or even some other suitor of Grandma Lily. Lydia thought that she had been beautiful as a young*

woman, and Grandpa wasn't the only man who noticed.

She took the box downstairs and showed it to Neal when he came in for supper.

"Honey, look at this lovely box. I found it in the attic. It must have belonged to Grandmother Lily. I wonder where the key is?" she said. "I don't want to break it open. I tried a hairpin, but that didn't work." Would you help me and see if we can find the key?"

"Sure, let's start by looking inside the dressers and desks in the attic. She must have had a place where she kept keys and other important small things, although it seems odd. Your mother didn't do that after Lily died, wouldn't she have?"

"Yes, I know. She would have. But then, she didn't have the box, so even if she had found the key, she wouldn't have had anything to match it. However, household and furniture keys made in those days were fairly universal. They often fit other similar items. We should check the keys we already have, too. I have a few orphan keys I keep in my dresser."

"And I saw a stray wooden tray on a shelf in the old garage. I'll start there. You try the attic."

They searched most of that afternoon and came up with several keys. Nothing fit. Disappointed and about to give up, Lydia found a matchbox in the drawer in the Hoosier baking cabinet in their farmhouse kitchen under some old warranty certificates. *There it is! The key, I know it,* she thought.

Excited, she hurried to the dining room, where the newfound mystery box sat on the buffet.

"Neal! Look. I think I've found the key!"

Neal came running up the stairs at the urgency in her voice.

"This was down in the kitchen. I think it's the one we need. I wanted you to be here when I opened it."

He grinned at her words. Carefully, she tried the key in the lock and turned it. There was a soft click, and the key slipped into place.

"It's open!" Lydia said as she gently lifted the lid. They reached into the box simultaneously, wanting to be the first to discover what Lily had hidden away.

"Surely there are letters in here, love letters, I just know it," Lydia said as she reached.

But Neal beat her to the discovery and lifted a small bundle of loose papers. They looked like

they could be letters, note paper, 3-folded.

"Give me one of those to look at, please," she begged.

"You take the top one." There are only two, so fair is fair. I'll read the other one."

As Lydia unfolded the dry yellow sheet of paper, her eyes widened with delight.

"Neal! This is Grandmother Lily's prize-winning pickle recipe. She won the grand prize with these pickles five years running at the Iowa State Fair in Des Moines. It's been missing for years. Mother gave up searching long ago, but I always hoped we would find it. I remember Gramma's pickles. I can't wait to make them. She was famous for them and proud of her ribbons."

Lydia smiled and thought to herself, *Hmmm. I've got pickling cukes coming up strong in the garden. What if I make the pickles and enter them in this year's competition? Surely they will win again.*

"What is in your letter?" Lydia asked Neal.

"It's another recipe. Sort of. It's a list of ingredients for navy bean soup. Do you remember ever having that when you visited her on the farm?"

"Yes, although I never saw her use a recipe. She had it committed to memory. Everyone loved it. We'll have to try it in the Fall. I know how to make farm-style soups. I can work with this. Everything goes in the pot, and you cook it all day," she grinned. "Hey, this will work well in my slow cooker. No mystery here.

\*\*\*

August: Lydia finished prepping her pickles. Since they are a cold-process, naturally fermented pickle, and she was making a big batch, she stored them in the extra refrigerator in the basement.

"Once these are at the ideal flavor point, I will add vinegar and stop the process. Otherwise, they will continue to ferment and get more and more sour. Some people like them that way, but Grandma Lily added this secret extra step, and I want to be true to her recipe," she told Neal. The following week, she took them to the State Fair and entered them as "Grandma Lily's Half-Sour Hot Refrigerator Dill Pickles."

Once judging day rolled around, Lydia visited the "Family Living" exhibit building where the canned goods, produce—anything and everything related to horticulture was housed. She was

Cont. on p. 22

## A Winter Passing

Fainthearted, I listen to words that  
 Fall beyond the pale of this wintry landscape  
 Your diagnosis of ‘congestive heart failure and narrowing of the aortic valve’  
 The long-term effects of nine decades lived with an opaque finish.  
 In hindsight, I recognize the signs.  
 How I held my breath as you flung stars with your eyes, told me of conversations overheard in  
 the darkness past the foot of your bed, from the other side of your bedroom door. Spirits, you  
 believed, haloed in a dazzle of brightness beside a choir of angels you couldn’t hear but knew  
 were there.  
 And now, it is inexplicable how these brief days of winter that begin and end so quickly in  
 darkness, belong to you.  
 Each moment a crystalline crack in the atmosphere, a slice of blue sky through the wooded  
 hillside  
 as you work to inhale and exhale those exquisite final breaths.  
 The earth both abandons and embraces you,  
*You*, whose strength, and capacity for endurance were unwavering,  
 Made me believe you would live forever,  
 Made the world a better place.  
 I stand transfixed, held in the faint light of stillness. Waiting.  
 Let us linger, a little while more.  
 In the morning, I face your Broda wheelchair toward the window for a stark view of darkened  
 trees rising on a gentle slope of snow-covered ground. Bare-branched trees, etched in icy white,  
 against a somber sky,  
 A crimson flash, of Northern Cardinal’s fleeting flight.  
 I kneel beside you, pointing to the weathered birdhouse that towers on a sturdy wooden pole.  
 The bird reappears and then alights on a fragile twist of frozen branch.  
 This sighting, a celebratory occurrence, we recognize, is enough, yet not enough.  
 With quickened movements, it tilts its tufted,  
 velvety orange-red head to see what is invisible to us.  
 Posed in anticipation, as if waiting to be called forth.  
 Then, the flutter and dart of a common brown sparrow among the lower branches.  
 “Do you see them?” I ask.  
 “Yes,” you answer dreamily.  
 But I know this is part of the passing experience, living with childlike innocence and faith. We  
 pause to gaze upon this wintry scene. Not without hope.  
 I see myself through you, believing with you in the miracle and promise of forever—  
 listening to the symbiotic beat of my own ancient, winged heart, finding solace in  
 The fantastical flight of feathers, the oneiric beauty of our beloved earth.  
 And what we see together is all that I could ask or hope for, if only for a few minutes more of  
 breath before breaking from this life.

—Mary Kay Crawford-Lorfink

## Pre-Writing Rituals

By Janis Butler Holm

You tend to circle your work before actually beginning it—cleaning up your workspace, organizing the papers on your desk, backing up your hard drive, and so on. Though you've tried not to do these things before writing, you can't seem to focus until you've completed your routine. Is this behavior normal?

The answer is it's probably normal for you. Though some writers can work anywhere, any time, under any conditions, most are not so lucky. Most of us move more slowly into a creative frame of mind, and some of us mark that movement with clear, discrete steps. We always pay bills, or listen to music, or make the bed, or answer emails for half an hour before sitting down to write. We put on the shabby terry-cloth robe or the favorite plaid shirt. We pour the cup of coffee, the swig of orange juice, the shot of our best bourbon. We make sure to sit in this chair, not that one.

When we establish a distinct pattern of transition from one mode to another, we create a kind of structure, a routine that can serve as mental and physical preparation. Repeating a particular series of acts before writing can be a way of invoking the creative spirit—just as, in many cultures, religious rituals can prepare believers for communion with their gods. In more mundane terms, pre-writing rituals provide a kind of mindless activity that allows us to detach and to refocus. As the mind and body go through the motions, we begin to channel our energies toward the work ahead.

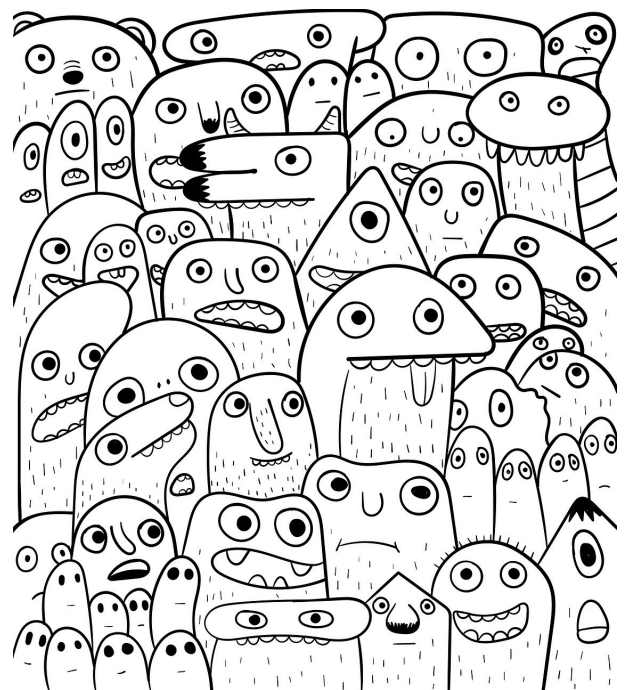
However peculiar our pre-writing behavior may seem to ourselves or others, it is healthy so long as it serves its function: to prepare us for the task at hand. When our routine takes us where it is supposed to, there is no need to change it. But if what we do before writing is actually a way of avoiding writing, or if it takes up too much of our working time, or if it becomes an end in itself, change is a necessity. When writing rituals become an elaborate form of procrastination, some behavior modification is in order.

If you feel that your pre-writing activities are really hurting, not helping, your efforts to be productive, take a look at Jane Burka and Lenora

Yuen's classic work *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do about It Now* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Lifelong Books [2nd edition]). Burka and Yuen offer a sensitive and intelligent account of why human beings develop delaying behaviors and, even better, outline a program for managing procrastination. Based on both personal and clinical experience, the book is full of practical techniques for circumventing the fears and anxieties that keep procrastinators from achieving their goals.

If your pre-writing activities are generally helpful but you sometimes use them to avoid work, try altering your routine slightly to make avoidance less feasible. If you put off everything until you've had your morning coffee, fill a thermos the night before. Similarly, you might try cleaning your workspace and backing up that hard drive a few days before you're actually scheduled to begin a writing project. When you tinker with your activities, it's not difficult to determine what helps and what doesn't. Planning ahead can make it harder to justify useless delay.

Janis Butler Holm served as Associate Editor for *Wide Angle*, the film journal, and currently works as a writer and editor in sunny Los Angeles. Her prose, poems, art, and performance pieces have appeared in small-press, national, and international magazines. Her plays have been produced in the U.S., Canada, Russia, and the U.K.



delighted to see her pickles sporting a ribbon!  
Not just a blue, 1st prize ribbon, but purple! She  
had won the grand prize.

At that moment, standing in the prize pavilion,  
thinking how lucky she was to have found the  
box, Lydia realized she hadn't given the  
floorboards along the eaves a thorough search  
following the discovery. *I wonder what other  
treasures I might find up there*, she mused.

\*\*\*

### Grandma Lily's Half-Sour Refrigerator Dills

5-15 Kirby cucumbers (or however many you can  
fit into a 2-qt jar)

1/2 teaspoon coriander seeds

1/2 teaspoon mustard seeds

1/2 teaspoon black peppercorns

1 teaspoon hot red pepper flakes

A few pieces of fresh dill

3 bay leaves

6 cloves garlic (minced)

1/4 cup sea salt

2 T sugar

6 cups water

1/2 cup raw apple cider vinegar (add after  
fermenting; see #10 final instruction)

1. Wash cucumbers, trim off blossom and stem ends. (Stem ends can be bitter, and blossom ends contain enzymes that make pickles soft.)
  2. Dissolve sea salt and sugar to make a brine.
  3. Mix all the dry ingredients (coriander, mustard seeds, peppercorns, pepper flakes, and two bay leaves).
  4. Put the cucumbers in a 2-quart jar, then add the minced garlic and spices.
  5. Pour the brine into the jar. If you have any brine left, disregard it.
  6. Add a few pieces of fresh dill on top.
  7. Make sure your cucumbers are completely covered in brine. Weigh them down if necessary and close the jar.
  8. Put in the refrigerator. Let them sit for at least a week before testing and eating.
  9. Best when made in a half-gallon jar.
- Option: After one week to 10 days in the fridge, add 1/2 cup raw apple cider vinegar and let sit for a few days. This is to keep the pickles from getting sourer over time. □

Grays and browns cover landscapes.  
The sky hovers while cold frosts fingertips.  
Surely there must be spring somewhere  
with its melody of melting snow,  
the faintest brush of green dusting barren branches,  
and genteel rain washing away grit and debris.  
How I long for the time of shedding layers,  
awakening of forests, illuminating of empty fields and  
trilling of red birds on leafing trees.

—Kathleen Pettit

### We Grew

of your hate—  
bloomed  
among iced Pines  
raised  
for Spring.  
Embrace  
each sigh  
into the night  
like a haze  
tapering  
in darkness  
shrouds  
her skin.  
She hardened  
each night  
in service of his needs.  
Darkness opens her  
fraying, husbandless—  
a destitute darkness.  
I'll not implore attentively  
puzzling slivers together,  
glue fissuring  
in gaslight shadows.  
I've grown  
accustomed to the  
sweet  
agonies I burst from

—Shawn Nacona Stroud

*Editor's note: This poem is made up  
entirely from words and phrases taken  
from other poems Shawn has written and  
published.*

## “STUFF”

Every fall I start stirring my stuff. There is closet stuff, kitchen stuff, bathroom stuff, drawer stuff, Christmas stuff, garage stuff, and garage sale stuff. I separate the good stuff from the bad stuff. Then I stuff the bad stuff anywhere the stuff is not too crowded until I decide if I will really need all this bad stuff.

When the Lord calls me home, my children will want the good stuff.  
(I hope they will; after all, I saved all the good stuff for them.)  
However, the bad stuff, stuffed wherever there is room among all the other stuff, will be stuffed into bags and taken to—heaven forbid!—the trash can!

Whenever we have company, they always bring their stuff. When I visit my children they move their stuff so I will have room for my stuff. Their stuff and my stuff, it might just be easier to use their stuff and leave my stuff at home with the rest of my stuff.

I had shelves built in the garage closet for the good stuff:  
Stuff that I might need, stuff that is too good to throw away;  
Stuff that I don't have room for with all my other good stuff.  
I had drawers and cupboards built so I would have a place for the important stuff.

You may not have a problem with stuff, but I seem to spend a lot of time with stuff:  
food stuff, cleaning stuff, medicine stuff,  
clothes stuff and outside stuff.  
Whatever would life be like if we didn't have all this stuff?

We have stuff to make us smell good, stuff to make us look good,  
stuff to make us look younger, stuff to make us healthy.  
There is stuff to read, stuff to play with, stuff to entertain us  
and good stuff to eat.

Our lives are filled with stuff... good stuff, bad stuff, little stuff, big stuff,  
useful stuff, junky stuff and family stuff.  
Now when we leave all our stuff and go to heaven,  
whatever happens to our stuff won't matter!  
We will still have the good stuff that  
**God has prepared for us in heaven.**

—Helen Johnson-Riggs



## Grocery Shopping with Mom

By Janice Strootman

My 91-year-old mother plowed through crowded grocery store aisles on a battery-operated shopping cart as I traipsed behind her. Shoppers beware when she is in the vicinity.

First stop: Ice cream freezer. She craved Weight Watchers' toffee ice cream bars. "These aren't bad for you, and you know how I love ice cream!"

She sped out of her traffic lane, looking neither left nor right, and rounded the first corner. There was a man no younger than Mom guiding his wife to the produce section. Mom missed them, but not by much. He said to his wife, "You have to watch out for these old people; they drive crazy."

It was driving me crazy! I wondered if shoppers could sue an elderly lady for mowing them down in Fry's. Could I be sued, following from a distance?

I learned my lesson about walking in front of her on our last visit. She bumped into my behind and sent me spiraling through a display of hard candies. My sister-in-law, with us today, had sense enough to go in the opposite direction.

Mom barreled around the next corner but nearly popped a wheelie punching the brakes to



avoid a six-year-old who had sprung from behind the display of grape juice. I had visions of a purple sea in the beverage aisle.

We met my sister-in-law at the exit. I am guessing her blood pressure was nor-

mal, but mine felt like 200/150. "I think I managed to buy out the store after all," Mom said as she paid the \$99.00 total.

On our way home, she said, "I got a little tired shopping today. I think I need a little rest when we get home." She didn't notice me nodding off in the back seat. □

## My Musical Condition

By Paul Beckman

I'm one of the unique ones I'm told. I hear music without an iPod or the like—in stereo no less. I can call up a song that I've heard and it's every bit as good as listening to one of the devices that people plug into their ears.

There's one slight problem. Something's always playing in the background and I mean always. I can be having a phone conversation or be watching TV and Ravel's Bolero or something will come up on shuffle. That's right—I have the shuffle thing going on too.

I am my own Spotify or Pandora. I walk around bopping my head to music and God forbid the theme from Rocky comes on like it did once in a meeting with the big boss and it wasn't a pretty sight me getting up from the conference table running laps around the room humming along. Actually, the boss liked my energy.

This came on me suddenly about a year ago. I had a high fever and was hospitalized for observation. They never found out what was wrong and all I could do was listen to music—no TV.

One day a friend took my headset off to hear while I was nodding my head and singing the Ya-de-da-de-da parts to "Fiddler" and he heard nothing, but I kept on. The batteries were dead.

Klezmer—don't ask, same with "House of The Rising Sun."

I've come to accept my condition but to not appear certifiable I wear ear buds and tuck the wire into my shirt and no one's the wiser.

Hold on, "The Weight" by The Band just came on and it doesn't shuffle around that often and I want to blast it. Be with you in 4:27. □

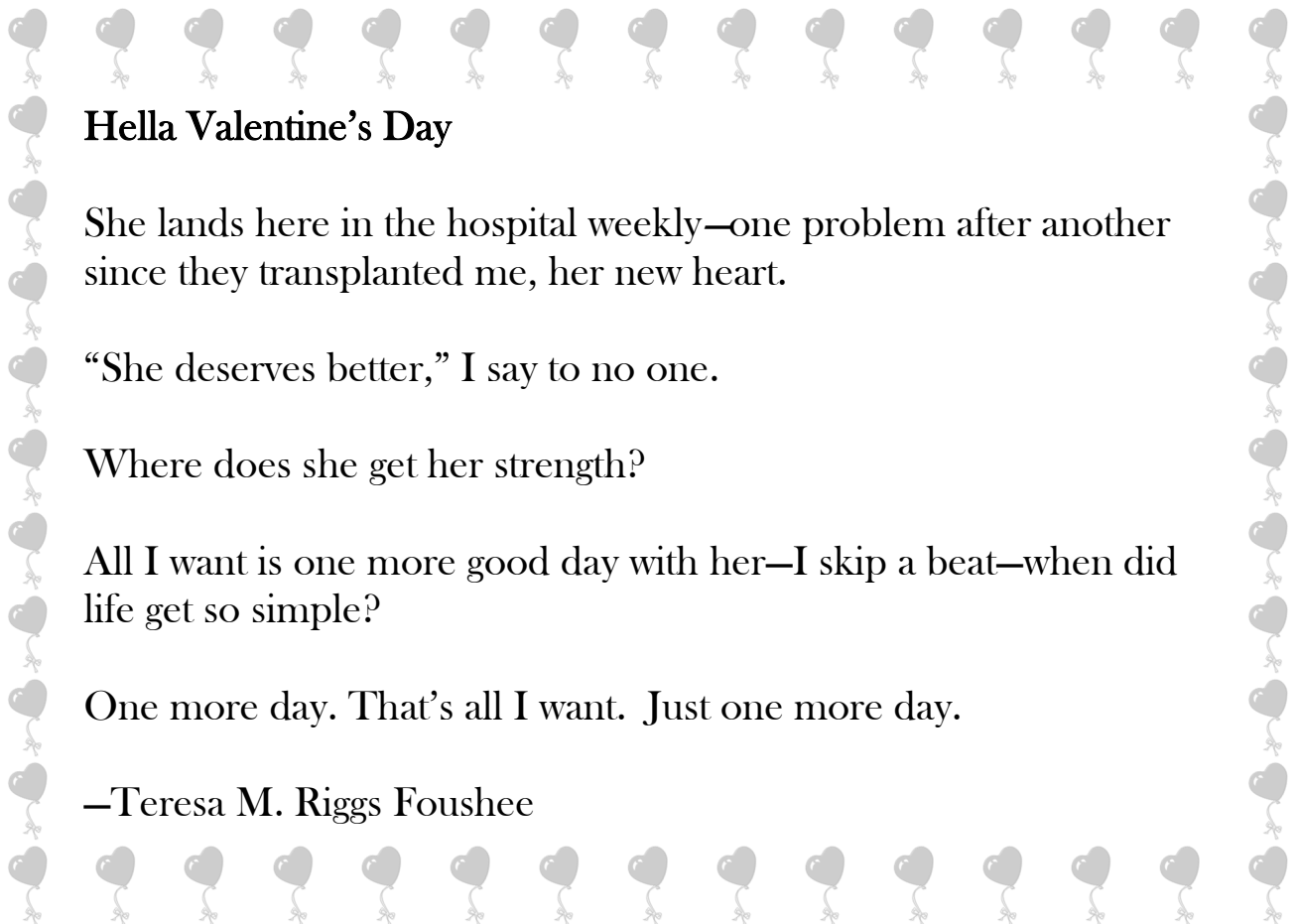
First appeared in, *Digging Through the Fat Rippling Out the Heart*, 2014.

Award winning author Paul Beckman is out with his latest collection of flash and micro-fiction *Becoming Mirsky*. Paul is pleased to have his work published in New Zealand, surprised to have it translated into two German anthologies of Humor by Jewish Writers and thrilled to have several of his short stories turned into plays. Additionally he's been published in Great Britain, Sweden, Prague, Canada, India and Australia.

## Some People

Some people love the smell of gasoline.  
His anger made him utter endless obscenities.  
They decided to set traps for the mice.  
Her delicious sweat smelled like freshly cut roses.  
The oboe concerto was full of energy and beautiful precision.  
In most cases amnesia victims quickly recover their memory.  
The folder contained horrifying photographs.  
A toxic narcissist has no empathy or compassion.  
The top floor of the abandoned factory was very eerie.  
That documentary on wooden rollercoasters was fascinating.  
It was so bad they had to carry the little girl's mother out of the funeral parlor.  
In spite of the simplicity no two baseball games are alike.  
*The Golden Dragon* restaurant was a fixture in Chinatown.  
*Little Girl Lost* is probably my favorite *Twilight Zone* episode.

—Peter Dellolio



## Hella Valentine's Day

She lands here in the hospital weekly—one problem after another since they transplanted me, her new heart.

“She deserves better,” I say to no one.

Where does she get her strength?

All I want is one more good day with her—I skip a beat—when did life get so simple?

One more day. That's all I want. Just one more day.

—Teresa M. Riggs Foushee

## Against The Storms

The threat of indignity through the prism of alcohol and coercion  
 from the passenger-seat of a parked car in a driveway  
 to the screenshot laddism conditioning  
 in the locker room at odds with the moral compass.  
 With the seesaw weighed down on one side  
 to correct the corruption  
 that does not happen very often, but it does happen, vigils and vigilance  
 in pairs trying to undo the complex knots and discard the old nets and trawlers.  
 Repeated rejections and traumas, historical legacies, inequalities  
 dominance, sleeper-holds, detachment, feeling safe wrapped in barbwire  
 rather than the swaddling clothes we came from.  
 Impressions, addressing enshrinement of historical power imbalances  
 cracking the fulcrum, to walk upon the sword's blade of the dishonourable samurai  
 scrubbing it off for a lifetime with a wire brush  
 until hemorrhaging blood through the skin.  
 The cracked brains of inebriation, corroboration, violation  
 by the councils of Sisyphus to prove you did not agree to the bullish onslaught  
 of refugees in the dead of the night, prisoners of the after dark  
 walking barefoot on the shards of glass in the front garden grass.  
 Blessed to see the headlights and the blue lights flashing against the front of the house  
 both sides staring through transparent glass walls and fractured mirrors.  
 Locked in back bedrooms with the keys thrown away from the inside  
 no roof, or the hammering of a fist, faces in smashed frames  
 on the lawn again and again in the rain face down.  
 Movable feasts and animations, walking yourself through it all again  
 rock, paper and scissors, playing roulette, offering protection in nightmares  
 no one can wake from, to track evil and its intentions from going too far this time.  
 Clean sheets, crossing borders wearing costumes and masks, registering photo-fits  
 of the dangerous, sleeping on beds of nails and upturned shanks.  
 Opening up for the second time to receive letters on headed paper  
 enduring papercuts, learning slowly wrapped in wires.  
 Hearing and listening and undoing long-held beliefs and negative narratives  
 bad broadcasts, high traffic sites, inappropriate infringements  
 gross insensitivity, hijacking, drowned in white flags, disillusioned and dejected.  
 The shame, infamy and loss, from thought to feeling to action, severing lines  
 apprehending the invisible throwing shapes and death-stars in the darkness  
 of the night, long after midnight, boxing for the sport of entitlement and  
 perceived ownership, burning wedding rings, incinerating the gold and silver  
 in the flaming walls of death.  
 The chime-hammers drop on the porcelain figurines  
 breaking them to smithereens  
 to put our hands over the open mouths of the barrels  
 or between the hammer and the cranium  
 in time.  
 To place the badge between the collisions, to absorb the potential impacts  
 of the blade or the fist before it reaches the bodies.  
 Before the unlikely incarceration in the cage  
 with the price of five bags of gear on their heads inside the steel maze

behind the highest walls mounted with broken beer bottles in long dried cement.  
 Showering off the black suds of tar, the broken swan-necks  
 around the brass drop-dial clock movements  
 suspended by heavy lead weights  
 strung up with cat guts.  
 The promotion of bodies to feed the demand created  
 in the cold winds of November two thousand and twenty-three  
 the making up of images  
 faces fitting with labels  
 widening access  
 to the forbidden and obscene on every pane of glass.  
 From the top down in the techno-verse  
 lacking sufficient contact with the social contract  
 dominoes falling one by one  
 cutting the puppeteer's strings  
 and muting the mouths of the ventriloquists.  
 The need for going back to go forward  
 drafting and re-drafting new chapters.  
 Playing ducks and drakes  
 reframing and reimagining the most powerful words imaginable  
 to protect the sanctity and safety of all human lives.  
 To see no differences in the hearts and lungs encased in flesh bodies  
 held up with stacks of bones in ideal formations  
 to give the gift of sustainable life.  
 To drop the rake and spade in the farmyard  
 and to open the clenched fist  
 to allow the tears to drip blood and water out of the eyes and veins  
 before landing the blows that maim and kill and lead to fingerprints in ink.  
 Boxing without gloves, knuckles without borders or restraints  
 free to roam down dark ravines tied up in the dance of the reeds awaiting saviours.  
 Without regulators of what we see  
 the ships will not fit back neatly into their bottles.  
 Conversations at opposite ends of an unsheathed sword  
 to discern the wood from the trees and the wheat from the chaff  
 in terms of what we have been told.  
 Navigating minefields upon addictive trajectories leading to our complete demise.  
 Into the raging fires of toxicity and potential infamy  
 and the irreversible decline of the pre-frontal cortex.  
 Lost to the high winds and rough seas  
 the wild shores of the mind  
 and the blackest infinities.  
 Learned behaviours  
 caught sleeves on bloody nails on walls  
 where the wedding portraits and family photos  
 have fallen down many years before.  
 To retrain our brains against the storms  
 and to undo the cultural erosion  
 caused by inherited belief systems  
 guilt, shame, violence and social evils.

—Gavin Bourke



## One Afternoon in My Sun Room

Sat on the old brown leather couch  
 opened the window wide  
 as the sunlight streamed through the glass doors.  
 I began writing this poem to the tune of the bird songs  
 observing the blackbirds and crows  
 flying in and out of the garden sporadically  
 inspiring me to write all about them.  
 The heat of the sun was drying out the clothes on the dryer  
 and I realised how lucky I was to have this room  
 and to have this view at any time of my choosing.  
 It felt like my eyes were floating over the back garden  
 baked in the heat of the sun  
 the cool breeze came in from the window  
 along with the scents of the flowers and plant life.  
 I never really took that much interest in the garden  
 until that day when I had the opportunity and the time  
 to appreciate the beauty of the natural world around me.  
 The sun beamed through the windows  
 illuminating the grass  
 giving off a glow akin to paradise.  
 I had only gratitude that day for the early May weather,  
 my health and those of friends and loved ones.  
 I almost wanted to stay there forever  
 static, frozen in the silence  
 with time standing still  
 writing this poem  
 and taking it all in  
 in my stride.

—Gavin Bourke

## FLO

Neutral lippy.	Typing pool	Gnawing bunions.
Chugging fatigued	Din. Shorthand	Traipse around
At school	In biro.	Shrubbery.
Discotheque.		

—Christopher Barnes

## FELICITY

Pins ring	Contractor mops	Hoots at
Hemline. New	Abortion ward	Skit re-run.
Ribbon trimmed	Tiles. Receptionist	Crumbs on
For bunches.	Logs particulars.	Gateleg.

—Christopher Barnes

## Mother and Son

Radiant with exhaustion  
 but never staggering  
 off the second flight  
 of that long, blessed night,

hugging to fitful sleep  
 a dark-eyed little boy  
 (safely cocooned  
 in the jump suit you clothed  
 him in against the cold he  
 never suffered  
 where he was born),

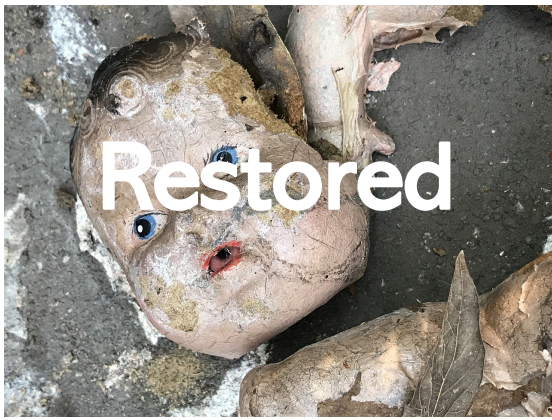
here you are, at last: Mother  
 and Son, your love that never stops  
 growing, deepening  
 already begun.

You couldn't wait for me  
 to hold him high—face  
 to face, eyes to eyes—a baby  
 in a photograph  
 no longer.

Nicolas, my son,  
 long since grown to Nick,  
 it was then that I knew—and after  
 all our years together,  
 it still holds true:

I was the lucky one.

—James Keane



In  
a

darkened alley, damp and black,  
Is a broken doll, neglected and cracked,  
Her floppy limbs are lacking strength,  
Once fine glossy hair now just tangled lengths.

She's lying helpless, weak, forlorn,  
Far from the light and warmth of dawn,  
She longs to have a happy home,  
Somewhere she's loved and call her own.

But she's currently out in the cold,  
Where suffering's made her frail and old,  
She can't recall when she was new,  
With perfect paint and dress ice-blue.

For now she's just all torn and tattered,  
Out in the rain and weather-battered,  
Unloved, unwanted, tired and low,  
She has no other place to go.

She fears that she'll just rot away,  
Fade into nothing in the dreary grey,  
She feels there's nothing to fight for,  
And her tear-stained eyes are bloodshot, sore.

But just when she thinks hope has gone,  
She hears a voice that's kind and strong,  
Someone is offering to take,  
Her pain away and mend her breaks.

They say they'll stitch her worn-out seams,  
Redress her, make her nice and clean,  
Touch up her paint and find her shoes,  
Provide her with a new home too.

She's glad but doesn't understand,  
Why this person lends a helping hand,  
How is it that they see her worth,  
When she's lost and broken in the dirt?

But then things don't seem quite as odd,  
When she sees this man is The Son of God!  
For Jesus Christ has come to seek,  
All broken souls and save the meek.

And in his Grace we all can share  
In Heaven's peace, find our home there,  
For by his blood we become paired,  
And are justified, safe, in his care.

So Jesus Christ, Lord, king of kings,  
Master-craftsman does gently bring  
This broken doll into his care,  
To be renewed, restored, repaired.

For he's full of mercy, compassion, Grace,  
And never shuns or hides his face,  
From those who cry out to be saved,  
And he'll reclaim all those who've strayed.

And not through anything we've done,  
But because he's awesome, God The Son,  
And he fought sin and death and won,  
Stands conqueror over all—it's done!

And so this doll knows she is blessed,  
That she can wear Christ's righteousness,  
Is comforted when she is stressed,  
To know she puts on armoured dress.

And, just as promised, Christ does mend  
All that is broken, for he's Lord, yet friend,  
With a love that never fades or ends,  
Won't wax or wane like earthly trends.

And so this doll's renewed, restored,  
Filled with The Spirit in Grace out-poured,  
Better than before, she'll never get bored,  
Of singing all praises to Christ The Lord!

—Suzanne Newman

## Authors: Your Ad in WINK

Calling all authors! This is yet another way you can support our efforts and help WINK thrive. We are 6 years old in 2023 and looking towards the next six.

If you are an author with a book or website to promote, please consider using this space (horizontal or vertical half page) to advertise yourself. Cost is \$100 for 1 year (two issues of WINK) which will also include a 2-year listing on our website sponsors page: <https://www.winkwriters.com/sponsors> (Please go look and see the other sponsors, supporters, and advertisers).

### half-life

dull silver six a.m. sky and  
her voice says rain but  
the moment passes

we are nothing and  
this is nowhere

the war doesn't end but  
it keeps its distance

we eat, we sleep, we wake  
again and consider  
the future

our promises are all there  
just waiting to be broken

—John Sweet

### mantra, elaborated

smell of clean laundry &  
sound of wind, weight of sunlight,  
and the mistake here is  
forgetting winter

the mistake is  
hanging onto the past

—John Sweet

### Diner Intersection

night migrations

the alignment of  
strangers  
stretching from  
the bottom  
wounded by  
wandering  
under half moons

they speak  
with offbeat words

sleep betrayed  
souls dripping  
eager for  
nothing soon

they are  
unfinished fires

—Dr. Roger Singer

### Clambake

Walking on a beach, neither  
Of us call home  
We search for our “happily  
Ever after;”

We hold hands and turn  
Back the clock;  
I sang to you, back  
Then, you gave your love  
To whoever you wanted

Patiently, I waited  
For my turn

A letter I wrote, I never  
Sent,  
Sits in a book

I'm too old to believe  
That happy endings go  
Beyond movies  
Yet, young enough to still  
Believe that dreams never  
Die

I'll never stop chasing the  
White rabbit.

And so, I write this,  
And wait for my turn  
My happy ending beyond  
Movies...

—Erren Kelly

## Lights

*Qui me alit me extinguit*

### I. Stars

I dreamed I was awake—and stopped  
seeing through the window pane  
ten thousand birds in burning flames

### II. Moon

I dreamed I was awake—and fled  
the light that lies  
swimming in the stream and sky

### III. Sun

I dreamed I was awake—and am  
nothing but a spark  
leaping from the dark into the dark.

—William Waters

## She Wanders

She wanders through the city streets, a whisper in the air.  
A figure in the darkness, I can't be sure she's there.  
I've seen her since my younger days, but never past the dawn.  
Her footsteps soft as secrets, I reach out but she's gone.

Come closer, let me hold you, my secret of the night.  
I search but cannot find you when the day breaks at first light.  
Must I only know you as a moonlit sultry glance?  
Come to me and take my hand. Let me have this dance.

Her secrets leave her shrouded. Small traces of intrigue.  
She hides her eyes in shadows, hinting at fatigue.  
I sense her world is trapped in mist, she's nowhere else to go.  
Can I be the one to free her, save her wandering soul?

I'm older now, but still I watch for silent nightly prowls.  
Her visits are less frequent, but are still beneath a shroud.  
I search for ways to call to her, to ask her for more time.  
I'm told my days are growing short, I'm looking for a sign.

I fear our dance has ended. You've left without a trace.  
The hints of ending measured on that look upon your face.  
I'll never know your secrets but your presence I will miss.  
The moon betrayed a tear drop when you blew a final kiss.

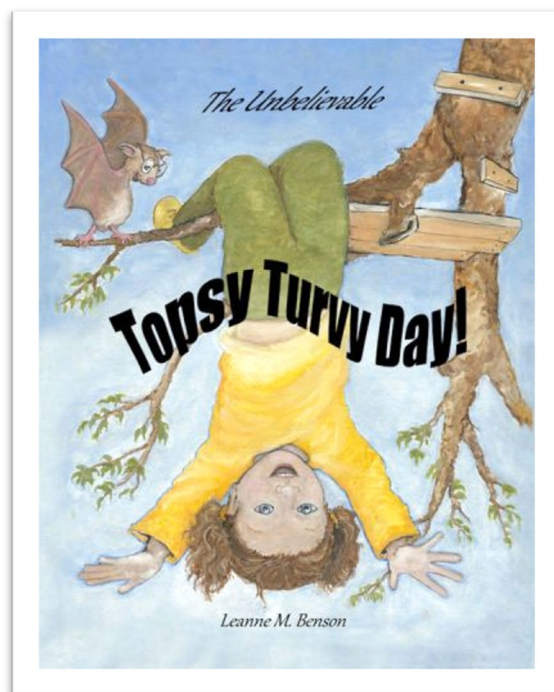
—Lynn Garthwaite

## Cottage Windows

an evening of  
summer winds  
tumble through  
treetops  
and screened  
windows  
with delicate  
layers  
of ocean  
aroma

merging softly  
with the  
fragrance  
of exposed  
pine walls  
and soft  
blankets

—Dr. Roger Singer



[leannembenson.com/index.php/  
unbelievable-topsy-turvy](http://leannembenson.com/index.php/unbelievable-topsy-turvy)



**January**

The watching clock  
pinches each second,  
holds a minute in  
its hand...drops,  
catching another.

Snow gently falls,  
frost gathering upon  
the pane.

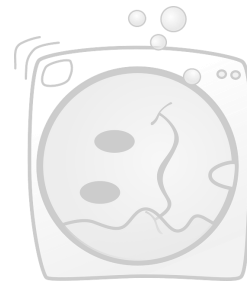
As birds  
proclaim this  
new morning,  
the sun rose...  
another golden flower!

—Joan Mc Nerney

**Saturday Morning Chores**

Drapes taken to the dry cleaners,  
shoes taken to the shoe repair shop,  
my clothes I can clean myself,  
even though my whites don't get white,  
at least they smell clean,  
that is half the battle,  
at least that is what I can con  
myself into thinking.  
It is so quiet in here today.  
Saturday morning,  
I can hardly believe it.  
I could practically strip down  
and put the clothes I am wearing  
into the washer  
and no one would notice I was naked,  
but it is not necessary.  
It would only prove a point  
only to myself which does  
not need proving.  
I will save my energy  
for proving myself when the time comes.  
Right now, I only need to wait  
for my clothes to finish washing and drying.

—Duane Anderson

**Entropy of the Mind**

I fell asleep for a day, maybe  
And awoke in Topeka, maybe  
In a windbreaker semi-conscious  
And I was again beyond rage since  
I now had more in common with the  
Mendicants by the fence telling me that  
I had more in common with them than I do  
With the ones in suits but I even know no plan  
Takes you here nor does one really take you out  
And put you closer to where you would like to be  
Screaming at polluted stars and without the conscience  
Of what I used to believe existed but not since I came to  
Realize I am much worse than the things I do and yet they  
Somehow continue to be worse than even I can be but so it is  
Troubling gliding through the day wishing the bad stays bad it is  
Troubling sliding through the day knowing your thoughts come true  
I fell asleep for a day and awoke in Topeka in a windbreaker, that I know

—Grant Armstrong

## Interpreting the Signs

On special Saturdays  
in the early eighties,  
when electric cowboys competed with Pac-Man (and Ms. Pac-Man)  
for the pinnacle of pop culture,  
my brother and I played “Love Boat” in the rumpus room  
with the Robinson girls while  
our parents prattled and picked at crab dip and crackers in the kitchen.  
The supersized sofa became the cruise ship,  
with the bean bag, La-Z-Boy, and coffee table  
doubling as Acapulco, Mazatlan, and Puerto Vallarta.  
Andy was “Gopher,” and I settled for “Doc,”  
though I secretly wished to mimic “Julie,”  
a role claimed by Lauren or Allison.  
Lizzie the calico cat could be  
any sun-kissed celebrity  
lounging on the lido deck.

After meandering through our makeshift Pacific Ocean,  
we preteens hatched plots for even more pleasures—  
perhaps the community swimming pool or even a cheese and sausage pizza  
from Benvenuti’s.  
We’d scramble upstairs to present our pleas  
with faltering finesse,  
having concocted the formula:  
“‘We’ll see’ means yes.”  
“‘Maybe’ means no.”  
With our success rate flatlining below fifty percent,  
divination was definitely best left  
to psychic hotlines and the Magic 8 Ball.

—Adrian Slonaker

*Bio: Language professional Adrian Slonaker lives in Moncton, New Brunswick, Canada. Adrian's work, which has been nominated for Best of the Net and the Pushcart Prize, has appeared in Ponder Savant, Gnashing Teeth, Keeping It Under Wraps and others.*



*The single, most important thing you can do after writing your book, is to have it professionally edited.*

Book Editing by Experienced Professional  
For a Free Consultation: 952-835-4731  
or [Connie@WordsAndDeedsInc.com](mailto:Connie@WordsAndDeedsInc.com)



Connie Anderson

**EPIGRAMS**

By Christopher Barnes

**NINE TENTHS**

p  
p  
p            u  
ps            us  
Upsold your house?

Freebie keys to chummy burglars;  
Expect the gogglebox you hanker.

Swagger light-footed.  
gg            o  
g

**JOLLY TEARS**

p            p  
ip           pp  
Pipe down appeal.

Felonious vein of rollicking;  
When the coffin pranged  
We verified hysterics.

Low spirits atomised.  
sp            is  
p            i  
p

**POST-DEAF**

f            e            r  
uf           e           rs  
Unruffled heads beat all comers.

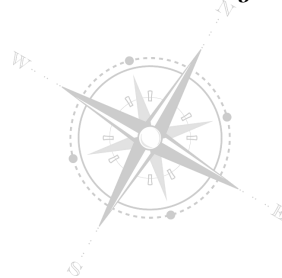
To guile a polygraph  
Ear muffers favour.

Graphs sprawl resigned.  
hs        w        si  
h                i  
                  i  
                  i

**Dead Grass—Old Poets**

I saw you in  
centenarians' dreams  
diddling in front of children  
in front of these faces of gods.  
Reflections, those sinful shadows.  
The ones Poe followed on drunken streets  
those bars, local he never remembered.  
Emerson thought about the same,  
steps and stones unwilling to climb.  
On tombs, expense inscriptions  
to one cost way too much.  
It was a way of their times  
together they fell.  
A form of rhythm,  
a form of rhyme.  
We call it calculus.  
There is dust in this formula  
match, checkmate,  
memories before they died.

—Michael lee Johnson

**Compass Points**

Beauty lies frozen in death's embrace, reclined  
Coffin held, four compass points of my life  
Now still, silent as stone, eyes forever closed  
Leaving me a traveller without soulmate.  
In life my daily road, route into full of light  
Seed of love's most wondrous flowering  
Steadfast rock within stormy seas, unyielding  
Sweetest truth which death cannot deny.  
Hope and promise for tomorrow's dawn  
Who in life kissed, embraced, was treasured.  
Death took all away and time has stopped  
With no more stars, sun and moon.  
My lover was my morning, noon and night  
Breath, I took, beat of heart, life's sweetest joy.

—Colin Ian Jeffery

**Old Apple Tree**

There is an apple tree  
 At the bottom of the garden  
 Where my brother and I once played  
 Swinging on branches  
 Climbing high and low.

Tree has stood a century  
 Giving September crop of apples  
 Now in my old age a shrine  
 With memories of childhood.

There is an apple tree  
 Where I often go and sit beneath  
 And if I listen very hard  
 I hear my brother's happy cries  
 As we climbed high and low.

—Colin Ian Jeffery

**The Mechanics of Life**

The night sticks to my skin,  
 like the web of a spider.  
 The moon and the stars  
 are nowhere to be seen,  
 lost in the ethereal scheme.  
 My stomach feels like lead,  
 and worms eat into my brain.  
 Let me wake if this is a dream,  
 or are things as they seem?  
 Leaves cling to my shoes,  
 leaves that fell in the night.  
 Leaves that are dead.  
 I stumble, lost in the dark.  
 I'm a miserable coward,  
 while my wife lays dying in our bed.

—George Freek

**When Love Knocks**

We promised each other  
 That we will always be together  
 Before the sunshine  
 And after the sunset  
 You gave me a reason to smile  
 With you will walk many miles  
 You've created memories that lives within me  
 Haunting every step when I don't hear from you  
 Can't forget the birds tweets  
 During the day of our celebrations  
 What a beautiful sensation that rocks two hearts  
 Bond beyond today and tomorrow  
 Paving way to the future that seems ever bright  
 You give me the courage  
 When all seems strange  
 Have been lost in love  
 Have no doubt it's you I have  
 Chatting a prayer that our hope never fade  
 No matter what waves of life decide.

—Alex Muriuki

**Questions Without Answers**

It's peaceful in my garden,  
 to sit with the lilies,  
 the bluebells and hyacinth.  
 But the leaves grow hard,  
 and shadows like ashes  
 cover the roses.  
 The birds nest is empty.  
 They seek kinder weather.  
 Soon all will be smothered  
 by ice and snow.  
 One leaf clings to its branch,  
 but it will soon go.  
 Death changes everything.  
 The leaf doesn't know it.  
 Is it better to know?  
 One's life is a task,  
 and questions without answers  
 are better left unasked.

—George Freek

We at WINK are grateful to the “silent benefactors” who unselfishly donate funds small and large, to help us thrive, because as most of you already know, WINK is an “out-of-pocket” labor of time, effort, and, most of all, LOVE, on the part of our volunteer staff and editors. We are dedicated to the purpose of providing a platform for both emerging and accomplished poets and writers from all walks. If you are wondering how you can help, or donate via PayPal, there is info on the guidelines page of our website, [www.winkwriters.com](http://www.winkwriters.com), or you can inquire to our executive editor, Nadia Giordana at [inadia@msn.com](mailto:inadia@msn.com). We DO give expedited and preferential treatment to our benefactors, no guarantees, but we will read your submissions first as we fill the magazine. Also, current supporters will get hard copies of WINK.

The logo for WINK features the word "WINK" in a stylized, bold font. The letter 'W' is purple, while the letters 'I', 'N', and 'K' are blue. Each letter is filled with a pattern of fine, parallel lines that create a textured, three-dimensional effect.

**Writers in the Know**

Editor Nadia Giordana

*Now Accepting Submissions*

To everyone who helps us thrive, either by their submissions or donations, we thank you, and we love you..

Borders and Boundaries  
Sarah Routman  
September 11, 2023

You can't come in here –  
Don't you see the wall I so carefully plastered  
To keep you there, on the other side

I'm sitting alone  
No, it's not dark – that's inside  
No one can see that – only I can feel it

No trespassing

Spaces  
Edges  
Margins and  
Open places

Don't dredge up the past  
I can fit words on a page  
Within the margins  
Someone else set for me  
But if you look closely  
You'll see the other words  
The words not spoken  
The ones that spill into the white spaces  
Putting down roots in the unknown  
underbelly of what's seen and heard

It's the incognito of poems  
Words that splash around, hiding behind  
Mysteries that don't make sense

Remember I told you,  
You can't come in here  
There's nothing to understand

I need to be alone.  
Don't close the door on your way out.

There is no door  
It's a carefully placed wall  
And you've been gone a long time already.

