

Goldfinch

Literary Journal of Women Who Write, Inc.
Volume 23
2020-2021



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The Literary Journal of Women Who Write, Inc.

Volume 23, 2020-2021

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Published by

Women Who Write, Inc.

PO Box 652, Madison, NJ 07940

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Reckoning

Patrice Bavos

Reading Betsy Burr's book *Dancing with Whales—A Book of Encounters*, I am prompted to write my first sense of *wrong* after reading chapter "Mowing Down Mrs. Moody." The author suggests we delve into our psyches and note our first memory of injustice.

This is an old story in my family. One that I shared for decades after holiday dinners when my Mom, sometimes my Dad, and five sisters gathered at our large dining room table from our home on Carleton Road. These were fun and clamorous times. Friends and cousins came later in the evening to play cards and partake in the abundance of leftovers and scrumptious desserts. Our family moved into this fourteen-room house in 1975 to accommodate growing children, a variety of pets, visiting friends, and relatives.

My Aunt Roseanne came to live with us in 1965 when I was eight years old. She was my mother's glamorous and younger sister. She looked like a movie star to me. I don't know why she appeared one day, but sensed there was some kind of argument with my grandfather with whom she lived.

Aunt Roseanne was engaged to Uncle Bill. She took me to Martin's Jewelers where she chose her wedding ring. I loved that ring! It was a gold band full of tiny red stones that looked so elegant on her delicate fingers.

My sisters and I called him Uncle Bill even though they were not married and we barely knew him.

He was stationed at Naval Base San Diego and was coming to New Jersey to see his beloved.

One evening a dark, handsome man came to pick up Aunt Roseanne. Huh? Who's this? He was one of my father's friends. I had overheard a conversation between my mother and aunt that she wanted to go out. I put two and two together—she wanted a *man* to take her out.

The next day I questioned my mother relentlessly. "Why did Aunt Roseanne go out with that man?"

"You will not say anything to Uncle Bill, do you understand?"

Reckoning (cont'd)

Patrice Bavos

I did not understand. Even my dolls knew it was wrong. Uncle Bill was arriving that evening and the thought of my aunt seeing another man relentlessly occupied my thoughts.

Waiting for Uncle Bill that night was torture. I was so tired, but had to stay up and see him. You think that would have given my mother a clue I was up to something, even when I didn't know myself!

Half sleeping, I heard the front door open. I jumped up, tripped on the braided rug in front of the Dutch doors, and land on Uncle Bill.

"Uncle Bill, Aunt Roseanne went out with a man last night!"

After that, it was all a blur. However, I remember vividly what happened on the staircase the next day.

I guess everyone was out when my mother captured me as I was heading upstairs.

In an angry voice while turning me around, she yelled, "I told you NOT TO SAY ANYTHING TO UNCLE BILL, DIDN'T I?"

I guess my response was not to her liking. The next thing you know I was on my butt, shimmying backward one step at a time to get away from her! Conveniently on the stairs she grabbed a can of baby powder to further pummel me on my ascent upward.

An aluminum can no less, the pelts quickly dispersed clouds of powder everywhere! It was comical. Seized on the stairs with an angry mother while holding back laughter didn't make my situation any better.

I guessed it all worked out. The glamorous Aunt Roseanne and not-so-glamorous Uncle Bill married.

From afar, they seemed to have had a marvelous life.

For over fifty years my mother has denied this story.

"It never happened," she said with confidence. In later years she'd say, "Your memory's faulty." Time and time again, I

Reckoning (cont'd)

Patrice Bavos

would laughingly tell the story while she denied all of it. I have always sensed she will go to her grave with secrets and where truth was suspect.

Easter 2017, after a large holiday feast on a not-so-large table at my mother's new home, I retell the Aunt Roseanne/Uncle Bill story for posterity.

Demurely, among the clamoring and high laughter I hear, "It's true."

"What? What's true?"

"What you said."

I am in shock. I quickly raise my voice to let everyone know the truth is finally told. My gaping mouth still widening in disbelief attempts to redeem myself with this lusty crowd.

"Did you hear that; did you hear what Mommy said? After all these years she finally admits that it happened!"

No one cared. To break the stream of frivolity for a slice of truth? Not with this crowd.

Another round of desserts piled onto our plates. I watched my mother sit happily with herself while her ducklings gathered around her.

I too sat happily, knowing my truth was finally given reckoning.

Adieu, My Craftsman Colonial

Diane T. Masucci

If I write, I will have to admit
That I've become attached to you
The tears flow,
The memories form.
They say
Writing a letter to the one you're grieving over will help.
Yet you are blind.
You have endured our footsteps as we pounded
Up and down the forty steps from basement to attic,
Through adolescence, litigation, mental illness, disability,
A tougher burden than most 104-year-olds.
Was it your good bones I fell in love with seventeen years ago?
Desperate for shelter, we went into debt to live under your roof
To educate our children
Yet, their paths took them elsewhere, into western wildernesses
To learn the lessons they needed.
How optimistic, then despairing I was.
Your grounds became the fertilizer
For growing potatoes, peppers, tomatoes,
And herbs
Marinated and sautéed,
In your hearth,
The heart of our home.
Your forbearance enabled us,
To expand and contract and forgive
Each other throughout these years.
You muffled the shouts, screams and tears,
Offering the refuge needed,
As we grew
Year by year,
Estranged and then together,
Under your roof.
And for that I am grateful.
Now we will dress you up
For the next family
Who we hope will love you
Fill in your cracks,
And dance in your foyer
With family and friends,
To laugh eat and dream inside your walls.

Under the Corona Sky

Ginny B. Nescott

Clasping her arms around herself, Nickie tilted her head up to the stars. The night wasn't cold. She'd just needed to be held, something that evaded her ever since the "Shelter in Place" order came.

Breathe. Just breathe.

The stars were thick with the hint of a heated spring breeze flowing over the deck, immersing her in the scent of outdoors, mint, and herbs she'd recently planted in the boxes. Alone in her apartment, Nickie had always been thankful that her deck overlooked the greenery of a town square. Every night when it wasn't raining or snowing, she would step onto the deck and turn to the stars.

Maybe it was something she learned from her mother. Maybe it was just filling her lungs with fresh air, after hearing yet another newscast painfully reminding her of COVID-19 tragedies. Maybe it was something else. When she was little and her mother was alive, she would look up to the stars and whisper her wishes.

Nickie gripped the deck rail and repeated the words aloud, "Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might—" *Breathe, Nickie.* "I wish I might have company to-night."

No one witnessed the tears that flowed.

Weeks back at the beginning of the shutdown, which felt like a lifetime ago, Nickie had been a lively supporter to friends, calling them and cheering them on. Their chats now changed to Zoom sessions and occasional Quarantini nights, laughing and drinking away their isolation. She researched dating during COVID, sharing and discussing the possibilities with her girlfriends.

"Why don't you try it too, Nickie?" Emily asked. "You could Zoom instead of going out."

"Me? Naw. I'm just helping all of you." Nickie shrugged and sipped her wine.

"C'mon. Let's all try and report back next week. Share the fails."

Under the Corona Sky (cont'd)

Ginny B. Nescott

“Or better yet, successes,” chimed in Liz. “Gawd, I would love to have hot conversation on the phone with some foreign-accented guy.”

“I’ll take any accent, including Jersey shore, if it meant I didn’t need BOB,” added another friend.

“Wait. Who’s Bob?” Nickie asked.

“You know—Best Orgasm Buddy. BOB. Mine’s blue and buzzes.”

They burst into giggles. The conversation sank further into the depths, leaving all five girlfriends in fits of laughter. It also left Nickie with just enough support for her to take matters into her own hands. She did so that night, her hands traveling where an imagined man’s hands would. They stopped short though. She looked at her purple toy and tossed it aside. Not even her BOB would help. She needed something real.

“They’re right.” She yanked off the covers, and with only a nightie on, stomped out onto her deck, and spoke to the stars. “Star light, star bright, first star I see tonight, I wish I may, I wish I might, have you work your magic tonight. Bring me a man. No, make it a man to love. That’s it—someone to care for, who would love me in return.” She stepped inside and turned back. “Thank you, stars. And no tricks please. A real man.”

She crawled back into bed, sleeping more heavily than she had in days.

The next day, Nickie went against all dating and selfie advice. No Instagram filters. No head tilted upward with a slimming pose. No flawless makeup and perfect lighting. Fearlessly, she posted a less-than-flattering picture of herself on the dating app and left the message, “This is the real me in the morning. I’m looking for a real guy to talk with before I go crazy, locked up in my apartment. We all work remotely now. Who says we can’t talk and play, too?”

Replies came in. She expected a few lewd comments, but the level of replies was disheartening as a dozen dick pics pinged in

Under the Corona Sky (cont'd)

Ginny B. Nescott

on her phone, some with comments. "Play with this." "Messy hair? I'll mess it really good for you when you go downtown on my—" The comments made her cringe.

With her finger ready to delete the app, one last message pic came in of a friendly-faced man. His hair was dark, sticking out in random directions, and his chin covered with prickles of a few days without shaving. The best part, he was holding up an equally scruffy dog. The message? "Bed head competition is on over here. Who's the winner of cutest scruff?" He left a private text request on the app.

Nickie took a chance and texted him, "Not sure. Maybe the dog?"

"No fair. Sebastian always looks like that. I put in two days' effort in sweatpants and no shaving to get this look."

"Only two days?"

"Okay. Three, but I have to shave it off for a Zoom meeting at two. Keeping the sweatpants on though."

Giggling, Nickie typed in the text, "Too bad. I was hoping you'd take them off." The second she pressed send, her face flushed red. *What did I just type!*

The reply came back. "Grin. I think this play/talk thing sounds very interesting. How about a talk/date after work hours? Heading to a very cold shower now. Are you in?"

Nickie's eyebrows shot up. "The shower?"

"The talk/date. But hey, the shower too."

"How about seven, post shower?" She offered.

"You're on. I'll bring the towels."

"Skip the towels."

"You're definitely on. See you at seven."

"Not what I—" He clicked off the app before she could clarify. The call that night was the banter she'd hope it would be. They even shared cell phone numbers. She tucked under blankets that night feeling lighter than she had in weeks.

Under the Corona Sky (cont'd)

Ginny B. Nescott

Talking to Cal became her salve. The nights sparkled even on starless evenings. The days quickened, especially when Cal assured her, “When this whole COVID thing is over I’m going to take you out on a proper date. Better yet—an improper one.” Heated shivers rolled through Nickie at that.

Days rolled to nearly a month.

“Here Cal. It’s Nickie again. Charge your iPhone and stop using mine.”

“Sorry Bro.” Cal growled before taking the phone.

“You heard him, Caveman. Charge your phone.”

“Okay, okay. What I really should do is fill my car with gas and drive straight to you.” The call continued with a blush-producing descriptive of what he would do, were she in his arms. They both knew he wouldn’t since he was working late in the pharmaceutical lab more and more frequently.

Then came the midday text. He was flying to a COVID-ridden area. He’d call in a couple of days. “Don’t worry Princess. I’ll cover every inch of myself with plastic protection.” It followed with, “Kinky, huh?”

A week later Nickie’s spirits faltered. She admitted so on the Quarantini Zoom session with her friends. “He hasn’t called, and I can’t reach him. I know there’s security protocol but still—”

“Didn’t this happen before? He disappeared when his cell ran out of batteries?”

“Yes,” Liz chimed in. “You had to call Sebastian instead.”

“Sebastian?” Nickie laughed. “No. That’s the dog. Rob’s the roommate.”

“Well call him and see if he heard anything from Cal.”

She did just that only to learn he couldn’t reach Cal either. “Hey, Nickie, I have to walk the beast. Try not to worry. With his hours, he goes MIA sometimes.” Sebastian barked in the background. “Gotta go. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

The strange thing was that Rob did call. And the following nights after that. He encouraged Nickie to go for more walks and

Under the Corona Sky (cont'd)

Ginny B. Nescott

would join her, though miles away, walking Sebastian. Late one evening a video chat came on.

“Hey there Nicks.”

“Hi Rob. Oh, I see Sebastian wagging.”

“Yeah. He’s unloaded. It was a two-bag walk tonight.”

“TMI”

“Right. You’re telling me. Anyway, I uh—” Rob’s expression darkened. “I heard from Cal. He uh—had COVID.”

“Oh no.” Nickie’s heart raced. “Is he okay? Was he in isolation?”

Rob didn’t answer and turned away, drawing in a breath.

“It’s worse isn’t it?”

“Nickie, Nick.” He paused. “I don’t know how to say this, but he’s moved on.”

“Moved on?” Nickie collapsed onto her sofa. “He’s . . . dead?”

“What? No! No.” His breath quickened as did his words. “He does this. He crashes with people, and moves on, leaving others to pick up the pieces. Namely me.”

“What?” Her voice was barely audible.

“He’s out west coast. He took a new job and a blonde. He left me with his dog and a lease I’m not going to renew.”

“But I thought Sebastian was your sweet scruffers. You were always walking him.”

“He is now.” Rob petted Sebastian before looking up. “I know you must be—” He shrugged, wordless.

“Numb.” Nickie answered. “I’m numb and dumb.”

Rob took a beat and then smiled. He had a kind, sincere smile that spread across his whole face. “I always thought of you more as Snow White than one of the dwarves, but okay.”

“They weren’t dwarves.”

“What about goofy?” He grinned into the camera.

“Dopey.”

“Who you calling dopey?”

And there. At that moment when her heart was supposed to break, it filled. She found herself smiling.

Under the Corona Sky (cont'd)

Ginny B. Nescott

The fall came early but nature was kind enough to paint the leaves before the heavy winds came, whistling and rattling windows. Nickie heard a dog bark in the distance but ignored it, instead finishing her report. She and Rob, who she dubbed her secret “Bob” to her girlfriends, called minutes before her deadline.

“Can’t talk now, you handsome lug.”

“Don’t call Sebastian a lug.”

“I mean it. Call back in half an hour. I have people to call. Reports to send.”

“Okay but first, tell me you’re not allergic to dogs.”

“I am not allergic to dogs. Love them. Now shoo, Rob.” She hung up before there were any further objections.

Exactly a half an hour later, a knock came at her door. She grabbed her mask and opened the door a crack. “I didn’t order anything today, whoever you are.”

“I know but I came anyway. Surprise.” Sebastian bolted into her apartment, leaving Rob shivering in the hall, holding wind-blown broken flowers. “Care for some company?”

Nickie’s jaw dropped, hidden in her mask. She didn’t move.

“I quarantined for two weeks and tested to be sure. I’m clean. So’s he—sorta.”

“How? Why? When?”

“Before you ask anything more, Nickie Sherlock, since I was changing apartments anyway—I thought—why not move close to you?” His eyes shined hope and something more.

Without another thought, Nickie leapt up and grabbed him, pulling him into a lung-emptying hug. She let out a long breath, looked out to the stars, and swore she saw one twinkle. Or was it just a gust of wind?

Last Leaf

Donna Piken

Last Leaf

withered
dried up
paper thin

brittle
aged
hanging in

stubborn
treMbling
h

o
l
d
i
n
g
o n

defiant
marcescent
m a r a t h o n

The Queen's Consort

Judith Tilden

London, 1543

On a bright morning in early April, Alice Hibbid sat at a worktable in her husband's lute shop, carving a center rosette for a newly constructed lute. Humming as she worked, she was startled out of her reverie when the bell on the front door of the shop jangled. She rose from her bench as the door opened and a young man walked in carrying a large musical instrument that looked like a giant violin.

"What can I do for you, sir?" she asked.

"I speak with the lute maker. 'Tis urgent," the man said in a heavily accented voice.

Before Alice could call out to Thomas or her father, Thomas appeared, having heard the bell from the other room.

"Yes? How may I help you?"

"My instrument is broken. You fix?"

Thomas's brow wrinkled in a look of bewilderment as he examined the strange instrument. "I have not seen one like this before. What is it?"

"Is called viola da gamba."

"By your accent, I think you must be from Italy. Is that true? I have heard of instruments called viols, but I have not seen one before. Tell me, how do you play it?"

"Is true, I am Italian. I show you how to play." He sat down on a nearby bench, and held the instrument so that the neck was over his left shoulder and the big, fat belly rested between his knees. "Is played with a bow, like a fiddle," he explained, pantomiming the movement with his right arm.

Alice was intrigued. The body of the viol was shaped like an oversized guitar and the neck, although fretted like a lute, was straight instead of bent.

"I have heard that the King has viols in his consorts," Thomas commented.

"Is true. I am of the Queen's consort," the man said proudly, referring to the new queen, Katherine Parr. "But see, the neck is broken. You fix?"

The Queen's Consort (cont'd)

Judith Tilden

Thomas inspected the viol more closely. There was a wide crack running the whole length of the neck.

"The crack is too big to be reglued. I would need to make a new one."

"You can do that?"

"Aye. I have not made a neck for a viol, but I can use this broken one as a model. It should not be too difficult."

"You make it soon?"

Thomas paused, then nodded his head. "Come back in three days' time."

"*Grazie*." The man touched his hat and started out the door, but then turned back. "My name, it is Alberto."

"I am Thomas."

"*Grazie*, Thomas."

When Alberto returned three days later, he was delighted with his repaired instrument.

"See? I have my bow. I play for you."

Seating himself on a bench, Alberto ran his fingers up and down the viol's neck, then tuned the strings. When he was satisfied with the pitches, he began gliding the bow over the strings, producing a rich, mellow sound that cohered into a pleasing melody.

Alice's father came from the back room to listen along with Thomas and Alice. By the time Alberto had finished, the small audience of three in the shop had enlarged to include a crowd that was gathered on the street outside the opened shop window. When everyone applauded, Alberto rose, grinning and bowing to them.

"What kind of an instrument is that?" someone on the street asked.

"Thomas, will you make one for me?" asked another.

"A smaller one for my boy?" inquired a third.

"I can try," Thomas responded, "but I need to hear and see more viols before I can make them."

"You come listen to the Queen's consort of viols," Alberto said.

The Queen's Consort (cont'd)

Judith Tilden

"How can I do that?"

"I ask her to send you invitation—for all three of you," Alberto said, indicating Alice and her father.

They did not expect anything from Alberto's promise, but several weeks later they received a royal invitation from Queen Katherine to attend a musical soiree at Greenwich Palace on the following Sunday.

"Oh, Tom, an invitation to the palace!" Alice felt giddy as her heart pulsed with excitement. Then she paused, frowning. "But—I have naught to wear—"

Thomas raised his eyebrows. "Surely you must have something. Might you not wear the gown you had made for your wedding? 'Tis quite beautiful."

"Nay, my waist has already begun to thicken with the baby. It would be too tight I fear."

"Might it be altered?"

"I know not. I shall take it to Mistress Wilkins to see what she can do."

When Alice showed the gown to the seamstress, the woman assured her that she could alter it. "It will not need much adjustment, Alice. You are still quite thin."

On the morning of the concert Alice treated herself to a bath. Shooing her father and husband from the kitchen, she filled the wooden bathtub with hot water and added dried rose petals for fragrance. After soaking and relaxing in the water for several minutes, she scrubbed her body and washed her hair with a small piece of perfumed soap. As she ran the fragment of lavender-scented soap over her skin, she thought of her mother, who had passed away when Alice was a young girl. The soap had belonged to Mother and had been given to her by Father on their wedding day. Unlike the soap that Alice usually washed with, she treasured this piece and rarely used it, wanting it to last forever. In fact, the last time she had used it was a year ago, on her own wedding day.

The Queen's Consort (cont'd)

Judith Tilden

Stepping from the tub, she dried herself and donned an under-shirt, then stood out in the sunlight at the back of the house and brushed her long, straight, sand-colored hair until it dried as soft and smooth as silken threads.

A fine mist washed over the bow of the boat as Alice, Thomas, and Alice's father James, traveled the River Thames to Greenwich. As her body rocked to the motion of the boat hitting the waves, Alice noticed a dreamy, faraway look in her husband's eyes.

"What are you thinking of, Tom?"

"The last time I made this voyage, I was a student at St. Paul's Grammar School. We traveled to Greenwich to perform a play for the King."

"Truly? I did not know that."

He turned to look at her and smiled. "No? I still have much to tell you, then." He told her about that long ago day at Greenwich where he watched a royal tournament, ate dinner in a huge banquet hall, and performed before King Henry.

"Were you anxious?"

"Oh, aye. But the King was pleased with our performance and applauded with much enthusiasm. What I remember most about him was that he was taller than everyone else, and thin at the waist with broad shoulders, like a well-toned athlete. He seemed a god-like giant to me."

At the palace, Alice, Thomas, and James were led into a large room set up with cushioned benches where they joined an audience of several dozen people to hear the Queen's viol consort in performance. Dressed in a gown of silver damask, with a pendant of pale rubies and diamonds falling from her slender neck, the gracious Queen made the three commoners feel comfortable immediately.

The Queen's Consort (cont'd)

Judith Tilden

"I am so grateful to you for repairing Alberto's viol, Master Hibbid. We were quite concerned because there are no viol makers in London, but I can see that you did an excellent job."

"I only hope that it sounds as good as it did before, your Highness," Thomas responded.

"Oh, I am sure it will sound even better."

Alice was surprised that the Queen was not a tall woman. She was only an inch or two taller than petite Princess Mary, who was also present. The Princess, wearing a gown of crimson damask embroidered in gold, still had the porcelain skin and bright auburn hair of an earlier time, but Alice thought the young woman's gray eyes reflected the stress and sorrow of the many years when she had been an outcast from court.

The musicians entered the chamber and, taking their seats, began to tune their instruments. The range of the viols intrigued Alice. Some were small in size, similar to violins or fiddles, while others, like Alberto's, were so large they almost eclipsed their performers. All of the viols were held with their bellies between the legs and the fingerboards leaning against the left shoulder. As the musicians finished tuning, the audience halted their hushed conversations in anticipation.

Just then, the double doors of the chamber opened and several people entered. Alice caught her breath as she watched two servants accompany King Henry into the room.

The King was indeed a giant, taller than either servant, but twice as broad as the two of them together. His red, velvet coat was cut like a monk's frock, a loose garment that was fitted close at the shoulders and widened like a tent as it descended to mid-calf. It was decorated at the neck and sleeves with gold braid embedded with diamonds, rubies, and pearls. Pudgy fingers grasped a wooden staff with a finial carved and gilded in the shape of a dragon's head. Although bright and alert, his eyes were mere slits sunken in the bloated flesh of his face. With the aid of the walking staff and his servants, the royal monarch waddled to the special, wider-than-normal chair that had been set up for him.

A heavy silence persisted until Henry was settled, then he tapped his staff on the floor three times, and the concert began.

Jelly Shoes

Dana Punzo

Clear weave of plastic straps
Display red and blue checkered socks
Fastened with silver buckles

Invisible soles appear to glide on air
Fly her to the fourth grade classroom

Seated at a desk pencil in hand
Jelly shoes rock back and forth
Scuffing a rhythm on the floor
She jots down the title to a poem
Called, "Walking in my Shoes."

Never Wake Up in a Morgue

Doris Parmett

I don't recommend waking up in a morgue. The shock can kill you. Luckily, I wasn't aware of my surroundings when I first awoke, which probably saved me from a fatal heart attack. I knew I was butt naked beneath a thin sheet, stuck on an icy table. I couldn't understand why I was freezing cold, sore all over, why my mouth felt numb, why I had a boulder-sized headache.

When I tried forcing my eyes open, my right eye refused to cooperate. Several energy spurts later, I managed to crack open the left and squinted up into a pair of stunned blue eyes.

"Holy shit!"

Normally that's not a polite greeting, but even I knew that something was definitely wrong. For starters, I didn't speak baritone. Furthermore, Baritone suddenly elected himself my cheering coach and started yapping.

"Good girl. Oh, yeah, good girl. Come on, baby. Keep up the good work. Breathe. That's right. In and out. Nice and steady. Breathe for Papa. Papa's proud of you. Breathe, baby."

How could I refuse such a fatherly wish? I breathed. In and out. Inhale, exhale. I gave him my all. Anything to get rewarded with a blanket.

"You're really not dead!" Baritone exclaimed with the exuberance common when saying, "Hot damn!"

"Yeth, yeth," I whistled, caught up in the moment, and then I noticed another man wearing a white lab coat. White Coat quickly made the sign of the cross. Unlike Baritone, I had rendered him speechless.

Baritone spoke to White Coat. "Bob, call Dr. Troy. Tell him the body he sent just woke up. That should get him here fast. Find out which EMS brought her here and get them over too. Phone the coroner. Tell him he's late for our appointment."

Baritone switched his focus back to me. "Concentrate on breathing while I massage you, get some warmth into your bones. Incidentally, I'm Detective Tom Calhoun. It's safe to say you made my day."

Good manners dictated I introduce myself. I opened my mouth only to hear my instructor say, "Not now. Don't waste needless

Never Wake Up in a Morgue (cont'd)

Doris Parmett

energy. Just keep on breathing. Don't break the rhythm. I can't tell you how glad I am that you're alive."

My sentiments exactly.

In my condition, I admit to being a tad slow. The word *detective* finally registered. Which raised the question, what does a detective have to do with me? At the moment, I was too ice-brained to consider the implications.

My sense of smell kicked in, registering a sweet scent mixed with the sickening stench of formaldehyde. I haven't the foggiest idea how I recognized formaldehyde's offensive odor, but I did. As massage parlors ranked, this iceberg was the worst, but I was in no position to argue. I was too enthralled by my masseuse's masterful technique as he jumpstarted my near frozen body circuits. After a while I glanced upward. With my good eye, I noted a large ceiling mirror above me. Looking was a big mistake. I checked out the room and then wished I hadn't. It wasn't private, not even semiprivate.

More like a ward.

A weird ward.

Four others lay on similar tables. Like me, they were draped with a thin sheet except for their feet, which stuck out. Each wore a big toe tag. Shifting my gaze directly upward, I checked my toes. One was tagged. Tagged?

While I pondered this, I looked up again. In the overhead mirror's reflection, I noticed catch drains attached to the sides of my table. I checked out the other tables via the handy ceiling mirror. Sure enough, each table had catch drains. To catch what? I also saw a scale standing next to my table, above which hung a large florescent lamp and a microphone.

Right then I experienced my first tsunami-sized panic wave. Not by the wildest stretch of imagination could I mistake this room for a suite at the Waldorf. A zillion questions raced through my mind. Questions demanding immediate answers.

"Wash ith theeth flasch?" I asked.

My obvious fright drew a speedy reply.

"The morgue," Detective Calhoun said.

Never Wake Up in a Morgue (cont'd)

Doris Parmett

The detective dished it straight. Someone had dumped me off in the morgue. My stiff companions couldn't care less, but I sure did. I was on an autopsy table—a macabre receiving line—waiting my turn! Only I wasn't ready to be sliced and diced. Shock screamed through my system, slivering to my toes, which thanks to Calhoun's vigorous ministrations, tingled.

Time for talk was over. Even if I got arrested for indecent exposure, I wanted to be outside where people were mostly vertical. And mostly moving! My left eye, I knew, showed stark fear. I began to thrash around. Calhoun restrained me. Swearing he wasn't moonlighting as a coroner, he said he was saving me. He rattled on about the sanctity of life. Trust me, I didn't need any reminding. He swore he cherished life. He confessed that while he didn't attend church as religiously as the rest of his family, he would seriously reconsider faithfully attending Sunday Mass.

I wanted to tell him I'd hear his confession some other time. When we both had on all our clothes. Now I had places to go. Faraway places. I tried to speak again, and I realized every time I spoke, I made weird sounds. Sending my tongue on an arcing search of my mouth, I discovered why. Some maniac had stolen my two front uppers!

“Wheth's mah thew fron theeth?”

Although this question might not top the hierarchy of my troubles, I wasn't thinking sequentially. I focused on my missing two front teeth. Over the years I'd grown very much attached to them and wanted my tangible assets returned.

Calhoun's magic fingers didn't stop. “Missing your two front teeth is the least of your problems. Please lie still.”

Where could I go? I hurt. I was naked beneath the thin sheet. I hadn't a clue how I landed here or who had undressed me. First things first. I grabbed his hand.

“Amm feethin'. Coveh me.”

“Right.”

I felt proud of my communication skills especially as it produced desired results. Calhoun removed his fleece lined jacket,

Never Wake Up in a Morgue (cont'd)

Doris Parmett

found two sheets without bodies under them and draped them over me.

"Okay, it's your turn," he said. "What's your name?"

"Thwusty."

"Thwusty. All right. Thwusty what?"

Was he crazy? What sane parent would saddle a baby girl with the name *Thwusty*? My mouth felt like the Sahara Desert. I licked my upper lip.

"Thwusty. Thwusty. Wah-wah."

He grinned. "You're thirsty!"

"Yeth."

The grin became a broad smile. His teeth captured my attention. Such glamorous teeth. No spaces. Pearly white.

"Better not drink now. Your lips are swollen. We'll wait for Dr. Troy to give permission. He'll administer any necessary first aid and send you to the hospital. Meantime, please tell me your name."

Like hell. Puffy lips or not, I wanted a drink. "Thwusty. Thwusty fwust. Pweeth."

I resorted to whimpering. When that failed, I wagged my parched tongue. Being pitiful did the trick. Or maybe it was the Dr. Frankenstein atmosphere. Who could refuse the near dead a last wish?

Calhoun reluctantly wet part of a paper towel. "I'll only squeeze a few drops into your mouth." He squeezed. I drooled.

He spoke as I licked my lips. "Your toe tag says Jane Doe. What's your real name?"

I lay there in miserable confusion. As hard as I tried, I drew a blank.

"No problem. I'll give you a temporary name. Wiggle your fingers if Brenda Kramer is all right?"

I wiggled them just as the door flew open, admitting a doctor and a trio of ambulance guys. I'm not sure how I affected men in the past, but now I was clearly the star attraction.

Never Wake Up in a Morgue (cont'd)

Doris Parmett

Dr. Troy introduced himself. He grunted greetings with Calhoun. From their respective frosty demeanors, I guessed they weren't bosom buddies.

Troy removed a stethoscope from his coat pocket. Flipping aside the sheets and Calhoun's jacket, he stuck the cold instrument on my chest. Great! Now I was freezing and displaying my charms for an even larger male audience.

Calhoun demanded to know why he sent a live victim to the morgue.

"I didn't. She was unconscious but still alive, for goodness' sake. I'm sending her to New York Presbyterian, but first I'm going to teach you EMS men about lividity."

With that, he unceremoniously shifted me onto my side, launching into a description of lividity, the discoloration of the skin after death.

"Blood," Troy informed us ignoramuses, "settles in death on body touch points. She'd have discoloration on her shoulder blades, buttocks, calves, and her heels if she died while on her back."

I shudder to think of how my nipples would look had I died face down.

Troy rolled me onto my front, giving the group another look-see. Had I the strength, I would have dropped the doctor's trousers and checked him for signs of his lividity!

"Cut it out!" Calhoun barked. "Cover her, dammit! You're embarrassing her! Next time you want to conduct a session on lividity, do it on a corpse or a dummy! You'll be lucky if she doesn't sue."

Lightbulb time. I tugged Calhoun's sleeve. "Yes?"

"Ahm gonna thew. Fa bwillyins. Dell 'em."

"What's she saying?" Troy asked.

Calhoun translated. "She said she's going to sue. For billions. Don't be surprised if you're included."

"Me?" Troy's eyebrows shot up as his bottom lip revved into action. At this rate, he would walk around with permanently chapped lips.

Never Wake Up in a Morgue (cont'd)

Doris Parmett

Calhoun responded in a professorial manner. "Lawsuits sue up the line." He sent me a dazzling smile. "I'm absolved, of course. I saved her."

From what? I wondered. Better yet, from whom?

Calhoun answered my silent questions. "I intend to arrest whoever is responsible for hurting you."

I tugged Calhoun's hand. He leaned down to hear me say, "Bweak hith dew fron deeth."

"Rather than my breaking his two front teeth, I have a better idea. I'll introduce you to my sister Grace. She's a periodontist. Grace specializes in dental implants. I want to see you smile at me with your two new front teeth."

Some women meet their future husbands on an internet dating site or through friends, at work, in college, on trips, in stores, and countless other places. When my memory returns, I'd love to know if anyone besides me met her future husband in a morgue.

COVID Critter-Ridder

Linda P. Morgan

During the COVID-19 stay-at-home quarantine that engulfed our lives this spring, I devised a clever *Occupy Husband* strategy designed to rid our modest backyard of an exploding population of pesky squirrels. These rodents' forbearers had once clawed through my screened window to trash my kitchen in search of nuts and berries, so I had no love of squirrels. Nor did I assume we'd outwit the wily creatures—I'd been given three copies of the book, *Outwitting Squirrels* one Christmas, and the bottom line was *you can't outwit squirrels*.

But you can move them out of your neighborhood, I'd read. If you drive them at least three miles across railroad tracks or a highway, they might not find their way back, despite precise homing capabilities and a keen sense of smell. So that was my plan. Phil would attract the couple of garden-digging squirrels with a splotch of peanut butter on cardboard, the trap door would fall, Phil would cover the cage with our blue picnic blanket and drive the squirrels to a park or greensward to set them free. The squirrels could build themselves a new home and find a new family to terrorize.

My plan worked better than expected. One trapped squirrel led to another, and soon my husband's unemployment doldrums became a thing of the past as he wandered the county in search of appropriate places to resettle squirrels numbered 13, 14, 15, and beyond. Sometimes Phil caught two in a day, which kept him well out of my way while I worked from home. He burned through half a tank of gas driving the rodents collectively over 130 miles to safely release them in deserted lots and playgrounds.

Phil toted his blanket-covered Havahart trap from car trunk to parking lot, kneeling on green medians to give the squirrels a soft landing. At one particular cemetery he traveled to, in releasing one squirrel, he was visited by another that ran up to the cage to greet the captive. Perhaps it was the captive's long-lost brother, plucked from our yard only days before. If Phil surmised that neighbors were starting to notice his suspicious catch and release behavior, he would move on to the next site—a Walgreens lot abutting a housing complex, a ballfield or garden center, checking

COVID Critter-Ridder (cont'd)

Linda P. Morgan

that cops weren't hiding out with cameras, or that bird-watchers sporting binoculars were not spying on him. The stakes, he knew, were high—if busted, he'd have to bring the snarly rodent back home to me, and bear my wrath at his failed squirrel-buster tactics.

With the yard noticeably clearing of squirrels, other creatures soon appeared; a swarm of aphids devoured our honeysuckle bushes. Ant colonies bred under the doormat, storming through the foundation to infest our kitchen and dining room. A family of wasps built grey, powdery hideouts under the picnic table, and carpenter bees warred viciously outside my office window. Their shiny bodies crashed noisily against the panes in their eagerness to attack their own reflections.

Reading up on the damage carpenter bees can wreak on clapboard houses, Phil ordered a special bee trap in the shape of a miniature log cabin. He hung it on the fence at the corner of the house, squirting it with Bee-licious serum to lure the insects to the small dark hole in the center of the structure. We watched and waited all day long, sipping coffee and tea, then cocktails on our backyard patio. Thankfully, in a week's time we'd trapped nine shiny-bottomed bees slowing, buzzing in the sun's fading rays.

Where once squirrels buried acorns in my flower pots, a family of chipmunks moved in, scurrying under the umbrella stand, into and around my potted plants. Soon they paid us no mind at all, brazenly trotting across the patio as we relaxed in our lounge chairs, their cheeks stuffed with dirt they'd excavated from a series of underground tunnels throughout our lawn.

Reading about how to eradicate chipmunks (which turn out to be a member of the squirrel family), Phil suggested smoking them out, like Bill Murray's fated attempt to rid the Bushwood Country Club of gophers in the movie *Caddyshack*. He offered to run to Home Depot to buy smoke bombs, but I deferred, saying there had to be a kinder way to treat the chipmunks, who resembled the cute gerbils I'd raised as a child. I'd begun to give them names, and envisioned saving blueberries from my breakfast to offer them as a treat.

COVID Critter-Ridder (cont'd)

Linda P. Morgan

Phil declared the chipmunk's number one predator was the red fox. This presented a problem of course, for our yard was less than an eighth of an acre, not enough space to shelter a fox. Neighbors had reported seeing deer and even a wild turkey ambling down the street during COVID's lockdown, but so far, no red fox. Seeing no natural alternative, I instructed Phil to buy a chipmunk cage from Amazon for next day delivery. There was no time to waste. According to Phil's research, chipmunks have a thirty-day gestation period, and they'd already been frolicking in my pansies for two weeks!

Phil dutifully baited the wire trap with organic blueberries, small ones leading a path to the big berry at the back of the cage. Soon he alternated between driving squirrels in the big cage and chipmunks in the small cage to far-flung destinations. As of this writing, he's transported thirty-seven squirrels, twelve chipmunks, and probably several dozen ants as well, throughout the county.

One misty morning I peered down the chipmunk hole at the far end of the patio to witness a sleepy-eyed, grey-muzzled mouse emerging blinking into the light. Except that it was huge and had a long, hairless tail. It was a Norway rat—same type as on the New York City subway tracks. In my backyard!

That did it—no more Ms. Nice Gal. "Phil!" I shouted, "Now we have a RAT problem!"

Phil, it turns out, had anticipated new scourges, and on his trips to Home Depot, had selected an arsenal of poisons he'd been saving to assuage various critter onslaughts: Moletox for rats; Raid for ants; neem oil for aphids, scale, and weevils. Proud as the Terminix-tracker, he mixed Moletox with peanut butter, slathering it onto a discarded greeting card that he positioned by the back door. He poured vinegar into Windex bottles, withering sturdy weeds that grew through the cracks of our pavement. Spraying mists of bee-friendly insecticide, Phil dusted mold-covered dogwood leaves, bug-addled rose blossoms, and night-crawling earwigs that chomped entire flower petals off my precious clematis vine. Never mind that the back yard smelled like a fish house

COVID Critter-Ridder (cont'd)

Linda P. Morgan

from those sprays, and no birds were seen for a week—we had overcome our backyard pest problem! At least until it rained again.

What would it take to stop the critter-ridder, I wondered? Birth control pellets encased in rodent peanut butter treats? A run on insecticides at the garden store? Turns out the answer came soon enough, from two unexpected sources: the Governor's news announcement that Phil could return to his *nonessential* construction job in New York City on Monday; and the unfortunate occasion of snaring a baby bunny in our Havahart trap, which sent me crying to my room, horrified that Phil would hurt the tiny animal in his haste to free it from the cage.

As all cruel things must come to an end, our days of trap and release will soon be behind us. This weekend Phil will hang the Havaharts up on their hooks in the garage, close the containers of Moletox and Bee Gone, and ready himself for his next battle—navigating transit into New York City to renovate office buildings in anticipation of workers seeking refuge from COVID's storm.

Resisted Reunion

Bernice Bellouny

Once I was free to come and go at will.
Now, I'm little more than a prisoner
Trapped by my infirmities—alone, ill.
Time has lost all meaning—it is neither
Night nor day. In the end, does it matter?
Fear—and ghosts—now my constant companion.
Those who've passed on before beckon, whisper
To me—yet I resist our reunion.

Snowy Messages

Carole Garibaldi Rogers

Newly married, expecting our first baby, we wandered the displays at the outdoor art show on a warm Sunday in Atlanta. It was the last day of a short business trip and we had no plans to buy anything—until a painting spoke to us.

We lingered at a booth where a local artist, Jeanne Sauls, displayed her watercolors. Jeanne was standing nearby, hiding from the sun under a wide-brimmed straw hat. As we riffled through the pile of unframed watercolors, one caught our attention—scrubby, leafless bushes in the foreground leading through a snowy field with deepening afternoon shadows to a steep-roofed, snow-covered old farmhouse. The colors were shades of brown and gray and, of course, white. The wintry scene was a dramatic contrast to the southern sun and bright bougainvillea that surrounded us.

Jeanne came over as we set the painting to one side to study it more. She offered no sales pitch; she only wanted us to know that on the reverse side she had abandoned an earlier version.

“That heavy paper is expensive,” she said. “I can’t afford to throw away my mistakes.”

J. Sauls, as she is known, went on to a wonderful career. Our paths never crossed again. But gradually, through the decades, we went on to collect many more snow scenes—watercolors like Jeanne’s, oils, woodcuts, etchings, photographs, prints, and some mixed media. Palettes and perspectives vary, but snow and a sturdy structure appear in each.

This year, as the pandemic so limits our lives, I walk around our home, looking at the snow scenes on our walls, and feel anew the tug I first experienced with each one. I remember the artists and travel to the places where we encountered their work. Sometimes the connection was only via a gallery or an art show. In one case the painting summons my memories of an elderly New England couple and the gift they gave my parents. The link among them, in all their diversity, is a universal snowy moment that continues to speak to me.

Snowy Messages (cont'd)

Carole Garibaldi Rogers

Perhaps it is universality that enticed us through the years, but in these pandemic times the scenes suggest deeper messages and I must pause to listen.

Here, in Betti Williams's oil of a Glastonbury, Connecticut farm, there is turmoil—swirling brush strokes, clumps of white paint hanging from the fence, the pines, the rooflines of the barn and nearby sheds that dominate the canvas. This is soft heavy snow, piling up, planning to stay around awhile. This white-on-white-on-white painting also found us on a summer day at an outdoor juried art show. A well-known New England artist, Betti was older then, a great grandmother, but she had not lost her passion for observing what she saw around her or her skill in oils. In the painting we chose, she had captured life fenced in, hunkered down.

Blinding, disorienting snow also draws me into a pair of Pennsylvania photographs. Silos, steep-roofed barns, and an abandoned wagon are barely visible through blizzards. These photographs have titles—*March Wind* and *During the Storm*—but words are not necessary.

A blizzard attacks the senses, these photographs say. It changes what you feel, what you hear, what you see. Familiar objects disappear. Horizons vanish. The quotidian gives way to mystery. Perspectives change—much like living through a pandemic.

It is not all turmoil on our walls. My favorite among the more peaceful scenes is by John Bradley, an accomplished New Jersey artist with whom I maintained a correspondence for several years. I first saw his work at a one-man show in Morristown. Among the twenty-five or so works on display, one came home with us, traveled with us over the years, and most recently earned its place over a new mantel. John titled this *Winter Barn on Crumpled Tissue* and his choice to paint on crumpled tissue instead of heavy stock or canvas adds to the delicacy of the work. The gentle tracery of the barn's stone walls is interrupted by thin, still-leafless branches. Subtle touches of pink in the trees and sky are reflected

Snowy Messages (cont'd)

Carole Garibaldi Rogers

in the snow. Spring is clearly coming. John has captured an in-between moment, a transient time where we must stay a while before the future can come. I find hope here.

The rural farm life scene portrayed in the painting that my parents loved brings some humor to the collection. The oil was originally hanging over a heat register in a cold and rambling New Hampshire home where my parents often visited. Years later when they inherited the painting, my mother shipped it off to Boston to be cleaned and repaired. She was amazed to discover that the scene she loved in its dark and dreary state was *Winter Time at Jones Inn*, a luminous primitive by John Henry Whitney, a painter in the Currier and Ives school. The curators at the Currier Gallery of Art in Manchester, New Hampshire, loved the painting, too, and kept it on display in the museum until my parents decided quite spontaneously to give it to us.

I stare at *Jones Inn*, watching a staid couple, he in top hat, she in bonnet, set off in a horse-drawn sleigh. Snow covers the ground and nestles in the crooks of tree branches. With ominous snow clouds gathering over their countryside, where are they going? And why now? They are leaving behind a busy farmyard, barn door open, cows and horses visible inside, chickens scrambling for feed, two dogs facing off against each other in the foreground. Another sled filled with lumber is just ready to depart; men gather on the porch of the clapboard Inn. It has been snowing and will soon snow again, but rural days move along at a steady pace. Whitney has put life in perspective.

There is humor, too, in a small square woodcut by Vermont artist, Sabra Field. In *Heading for Shelter* Field has placed a striking red barn at the top of her block. Across the bottom, below a snowy field, are three stylized bare trees—spindly black branches frozen in place. The only signs of life are the half dozen black cows dutifully following each other, angling across the snowy field, going home to their barn. The cows, too, are caught frozen in place but it's not hard to get the drift. Warmth and security are in sight.

Snowy Messages (cont'd)

Carole Garibaldi Rogers

We have lived with our snow scenes for close to fifty years now. We still find new works we want to buy to add to the collection. Our most recent purchase claimed us during a rainy late summer walk through Laconia, a small city in New Hampshire that is struggling to reclaim its downtown. We grabbed a latte at a new coffee roasting emporium and walked down the street past a local photographer's shop. A snow scene of Hersey Farm, a local barn we recognized, was in the window. My husband responded to the composition of the photo, to the angle of a weather-beaten barn at the edge of a woods. I was attracted to the tiny red berries that remained on a bush in the middle of the field. No human being had placed pinpricks of red there amid such stark surroundings. Ian Raymond, the photographer, had come into a moment that demanded his attention and he captured it with his lens.

"I really didn't want to get out of the car that day. It was so cold and windy," he said. "But I had to get that shot."

And we had to buy the photograph.

When I look at one of our paintings or photographs, I feel the artist's presence in the scene, be it peaceful or stormy. I am grateful for their unique perspectives and their palettes. The resilience of a structure like a barn is an artistic symbol for them, a necessary counterpoint to outside forces. But something in these works speaks to deeper emotions. I remember bleak days and tumultuous times in my life. I recall the sturdy structures that gave me protection. And I relax into the moments of serenity that followed.

The pandemic has brought all of us, no matter our climate, into a swirling blizzard—disorienting, frightening, isolating. We have searched for moments of loveliness or humor or warmth and rejoiced wherever we found them. We have learned some lessons. Yes, sometimes the wind blows and turbulence comes and we have no control. But is that any different from our past lives? Surviving a storm is possible.

My First Car

Ronnie Hammer

It was finally time for me to have my own means of transportation, and Mom and Dad generously gave me the joyful gift of my own car. My parents made the decisions and choices, and that is how I wound up with a stick shift, little, red Renault Dauphine. That car seemed to be a step or two away from a toddler's toy push car.

It was adorable, a car with fun features for playful drivers. The most notable feature was the double horn sounds. Push the lever up, and the car made a high pitched *beep beep*. Push the lever down and the horn, in its grown-up low register sound, said *beep beep*.

When one Renault passed another on the road drivers would greet each other; the first car beeped in the high pitched *beep beep* and the passing responder beeped back in the lower pitch. What fun that was—instant friendly connections with strangers!

The car had all of a seventeen horsepower, four cylinder engine. It couldn't go too fast, which was a safety feature that my parents no doubt took into account when they chose this little car for me.

It was said, though, that the car's finish wasn't of the highest quality. Time magazine wrote an article about the Renault in which it sarcastically mentioned, "It could actually be heard rusting!"

Originally founded in 1898 by Louis Renault and his brothers, Renault was nationalized in 1945. By the 1950s it became a new sensation; foreign cars were new in the United States. Renault became a novelty that people wanted to know more about. The cars were reasonably priced and suited city drivers very comfortably. They were easy to park, needed very little garage space, and rewarded Renault drivers with good mileage.

A strong memory that I have of my days as a Renault owner is the one of a repair that the car needed. The problem occurred when I was parked next to a delivery truck filled with cases of soda. One case fell off the truck and landed on the roof of my little red car. Nobody was hurt, but the deep dent the case of soda

My First Car (cont'd)

Ronnie Hammer

left was enormous. We all feared that the repair bill would be huge. Maybe they would have to replace the whole roof with a brand new one to replace the badly dented roof.

My father and I drove to the nearest body shop to get an estimate, expecting the worst possible news about the cost of repairing a foreign car. Imagine our surprise when the car mechanic took one look at the damage, did an *about-face*, and instantly walked back inside of the station. He headed directly to the men's bathroom and came out a moment later holding a plunger. An ordinary plumber's plunger used to clear clogged toilets! He placed the plunger right over the enormous dent and pushed in the plunger as far as it would go. To our amazement, when he pulled out the plunger he pulled the dent out right along with it. The car was as good as new!

Seeing how easily the car's finish could be rearranged was a bit of a shock, making us a little less confident about our safety driving in that little vehicle.

The sad end of my story of the Renault Dauphine was the one of the man who took over the company from the founder, Louis Renault.

Pierre Lefauchaux, the new head of the company, was killed in a Renault Dauphine when the car he was driving turned over on a sharp curve in the road. A large carton from the back seat careened forward to the front of the car and smacked him right in the head, killing him instantly.

Au revoir, Monsieur Lefauchaux.

It is said that on the day of his funeral, both the high pitched and low base tones beeped away in unison from hundreds of Renaults for several minutes. They could be heard across the country in tribute. I cannot vouch for the truth of this story, but it adds a pleasant tone to the sad ending of the story.

And that is the perfect ending to the tale of the double beeping, slow moving, happy little beginner's car.

Linen Napkin

Vivian Fransen

Often relegated to a stuffed drawer in a china cabinet
and only let out during holidays or sit-down dinner parties,
I live a lonely life.

At first glance my sixteen-inch by sixteen-inch physique
when unfolded may not dazzle you.
Some may even call me plain looking, a lightweight at one ounce.
But I have so much to offer.

I'm absorbent; I soak up any spills on someone's lap.
I'm durable; I stand up to the rough and tumble rigors
of washers and dryers. A hot iron can remove any wrinkles.

I can be endlessly amusing to those who delight in all sorts
of origami designs—consider me a contortionist.
Others prefer to follow the maxim: Put a ring on it.

I love to be touched—repeatedly folded and unfolded
Drape me over your lap or tuck me in your waistband
I'm on standby within easy reach to wipe your face and fingers
when eating.

Absorbent, durable, and amusing with a touch of elegance.
What's not to like about me?
Yet I am an object of neglect.

It turns out my distant cousins—
those shabby use-it-once-and-trash-it paper napkins—
are far more popular these days.

But, hands down, an evening with me on your lap
can be more meaningful in our throwaway world.
Instead of bending down when that flyaway paper napkin falls at
your feet,
why don't you come up and see me sometime?

The Letter

Donna Piken

Constance hurriedly put on her dressing gown and walked to the front door of her flat. Who was calling at this early hour?

"I have a letter for a Mrs. Constance Leeds. Need a signature."

She looked out the peep hole. The man wore a courier's uniform. She pulled the tie of her dressing gown tighter, ran her fingers through her hair, and opened the door.

"Sorry for disturbing you. Are you Mrs. Leeds?"

Constance nodded and signed for the letter. He rushed off. He had more people to wake up, she imagined. She walked into the bedroom to fetch her glasses. Printed on the envelope was a formal return stamp from a solicitor in Cornwall.

She sat at her small makeshift desk, took her letter opener, and sliced open the envelope. Her hands began to tremble. She headed for the kitchen to make some tea. Tea would calm her and prepare her for whatever news might be delivered. She spooned out her favorite blend of chamomile, rose hips, and lemon. When the teapot whistled, she jumped out of her reverie. She poured the water through the strainer and let the leaves steep slowly.

Constance sat at her small kitchen table, the chair creaking stoically beneath her. The steam rose elegantly in swirls from the cup. She sipped slowly, feeling the earthy sweetness course through her body like a drug. She pulled the letter out of the envelope and read it.

"Dear Mrs. Constance Leeds. Your husband, Mr. Henry Leeds, has been a client of mine for some forty years. With his recent passing, as you are legally his wife, I am notifying you of an inheritance notwithstanding. Please contact my office to make an appointment to review the details. . . ."

Constance placed the letter on the table. This was obviously a mistake. Henry passed well over forty years ago during the war. They said he had fought bravely in a bloody battle that resulted in high casualties. Family and friends called him a British hero.

She reread the letter. "His recent passing?" she said aloud. She twisted her gold wedding band, round and round. No, he wouldn't have missed time with Hilde. Not that he ever knew he had a daughter. She learned of her pregnancy after he had left for

The Letter (cont'd)

Donna Piken

war. It was shortly thereafter that she was told he was missing. Presumed dead. She waited. Waited for years.

She lamented and rubbed her arthritic hands. She looked down at her thinning skin and brown age spots. Her sewing days were over. She had worked as a seamstress earning a meager pittance to provide for herself and her daughter.

She walked into the parlor and looked at the framed pictures spread across the fireplace mantel. What a handsome man Henry had been. He would have loved Hilde. She'd missed out on having a father. At least she was settled in, married with two children and another on the way. Being that they lived several hours away, she didn't see them as much as she would like, but they spoke every day.

Hilde was relentless. It was either, "Mum, please move in with us. We have plenty of room" or "You've just given up on life. Get out of London and breathe in some of our clean country air."

"Perhaps one day," she would answer.

Hilde and her husband had even generously invited her to join them on their upcoming trip to America. She, of course, declined, not wanting to be a burden.

Holding Henry's picture, Constance sat down in the old oversized armchair and stared at his face. "Where have you been all this time?" she shouted. "How could you?" All the stages of grief once again flowed through her. She wondered if the solicitor would provide enough insight that would fill the void within her and remove her anger. At least, a husband's death placed her in a respectable category amongst other widows. But desertion? What kind of man behaves in such a manner? Hadn't she been through enough? Hadn't he loved her enough?

Constance rose and turned Henry's picture faced down on the mahogany table, pulled off her wedding ring, and slammed it on top of the frame. She walked back into the kitchen, took a sip of tea, and lifted the phone receiver and carefully dialed.

"Hello, Hilde? It's Mum. Sorry to be ringing so early. Is it too late to join you on your holiday? I'm feeling a strong urge to live again."

Normalcy During COVID-19

Gwyn English Nielsen

From March until the immediacy of now
although the scales have tended to tip
in the precarious direction of change,
some things aren't so entirely strange.

Like the way the persistent rain hits
the stained, yet transparent awning,
puddles up in small circles, drips down
in a syncopated rhythm to the ground.

Like how the kitchen's transistor radio
sings songs across invisible airwaves,
the lilt of disc jockeys' voices smiles
while maintaining consistent styles.

Like the trenchant clatter of the blender,
crushing frozen bananas and blueberries,
swirling the concoction, mangling the ice,
seemingly immune to playing very nice.

Like the smooth, earthy smell of coffee
in the morning hours just before light,
peat grounds mingling with hot water,
revealing two states of genuine matter.

Like the rich taste of a fresh cider donut,
a sweet cushion of packed dough, flesh
that fills the inner crevasses of the mouth
before dropping way down to the south.

Like how the whispering autumn breeze
tickles the tips of quiet, waning leaves,
burnished in deep hues of red and yellow,
reminiscent of sugary childhood Jello.

Normalcy During COVID-19 (cont'd)

Gwyn English Nielsen

I could go on and on and on interminably
listing all the average, unalterable things.
But still, you may choose instead to mourn
aspects you once knew, loved as the norm.

Rock and Flower

An Unlikely Love Story

Kate Cutts

Rock sat in the middle of a lush verdant meadow. He was strong; he was solid; he was content. He had the whole meadow to himself, as far as he could see. This morning, as he surveyed his quiet surroundings, he noticed a tiny speck floating his way.

It floated nearer and nearer, until he caught the sound of a charming little voice, singing enchantingly, “La da di, La da da. La la li, La ru ah—”

He couldn’t take his normally cool eyes off the approaching speck as she swayed close enough for the music to slip into his heart.

“Hello there!” The speck sang out and floated down inches away from Rock. “I need a strong, solid place to plant myself. You look strong and solid. May I plant myself by the curve in your side?”

He could think of nothing more delightful than having her sweet music beside him. But he was barely able to croak out, “Uh, yes. That would be, uhm, fine.”

“Are you really sure?” she asked softly, worrying the strength she sought was laced with coldness.

Suddenly afraid the music would disappear, Rock mustered his most passionate voice— “Please do!” The speck floated into the soil in the cleft by his side and began to burrow.

Rock waited patiently while the seed went about the business of putting down roots. The idea that her beautiful music would fill the air through coming days filled him with excitement and anticipation.

His heart jumped days later when a small green shoot appeared near his side, and the song began again. “La da di, La da da. La la li, La ru ah—”

The sun warmed the bend in his side, and he watched day after day. The slender seedling grew taller and taller and eventually a bud formed at the top. Finally, with sunrays glistening off the dew on the bud, it opened and a beautiful face smiled, “Hello.”

“I’ve been watching as you grew,” Rock confessed, surprised at his warm clear voice.

Rock and Flower

An Unlikely Love Story (cont'd)

Kate Cutts

“I know. Thank you. This is just the right place for me.” Her song grew full and high and Rock sat listening, sighing deeply, wishing he could stay like this forever.

For many days it remained blissful. Rock warmed himself in the sun and gazed happily at Flower. She in turn sang sweetly and leaned toward his solid strength.

One day, Rock heard Flower’s voice calling brightly, “Yoo-hoo—bees! Yoo-hoo—I’m over here!” His tranquil world transformed into a hive of activity. Flower chattered her song with a throng of new friends humming and buzzing along. “La da di, La da da. La la li, La ru ah—”

It used to be very quiet here, Rock thought to himself. He looked past the beautiful face that usually gave him such pleasure. Petals and leaves littered the ground and scattered onto Rock. *It used to be very tidy here, too.*

Spring turned to summer and Flower swelled to twice her size. Slowly, her color faded from vibrant to pastel, and her smile seemed tired. Her song slowed and grew lower and weaker. Rock’s concern grew each day until one morning he awoke amazed to see his Flower burst a spray of seeds into the breeze. Her quiet sweet song was joined by tiny harmonies. Some of these new seeds dropped into the soil nearby and others floated farther away on the breeze.

Days later, Rock sighed, *It used to be less crowded here*, when the little seedlings peeked out of the ground.

At the end of summer, Rock didn’t radiate as much of the sun’s heat. Flower shrank down and shivered, *It used to be so warm here*. Her color continued to fade to brownness, and one by one her petals dropped off. As Rock noticed these changes, worry crept deeper and deeper into his heart. His Flower was more and more fragile each day, until at last her song became little more than a whisper.

“What can I do to help you?” Rock asked. “Are you going to be okay, my dear Flower?”

“I think I am going to need some rest,” she smiled weakly and leaned into the curve of his side.

Rock and Flower

An Unlikely Love Story

Kate Cutts

“Oh dear,” Rock’s heart filled with helplessness and fear as he felt her going limp. He spread as much of his warmth into her as he could. He tried to hum her tune and perk her up. He pointed out what the butterflies and bees were doing. He called out to her children to sing and try to rouse her, but nothing he did could wake her. As he watched helplessly, she grew smaller and thinner.

All through fall and winter Rock stood guard over the still form of his beloved Flower. Through the long winter vigil, he filled his time dreaming of the days she sang beautifully beside him. Snow covered the meadow and piled onto him, yet still he remembered, and longed, and dreamed.

In his dreams the annoying crowd, mess, and noise faded away to the delight of her song. He didn’t mind any of it—because she was there. His dreams filled more and more of his day. He lived in them so long that eventually they became sweeter and more real than the harsh winter surrounding him.

As winter’s bitterness withdrew, he was oblivious to his surroundings. He’d grown so accustomed to Flower’s song playing in his head it became all he heard. *La da di, La da da. La la li, La ru ah—*

Then one day, the sweetness of the song was different. It was stronger. It was deeper. He opened his eyes wide and blinked, not sure if he could believe what he saw and heard.

But it was real. There she was, radiantly wrapped in a new song, right where she belonged, sheltered in the curve at his side. “Da da di, Da da da. La la li, La ru ah—”

“Hello, my strong, solid friend,” she said, as she danced with the breeze.

“Hello, my love,” he smiled. She was there. He was strong. He was solid. He was content.

Hotdog Memories

Linda P. Morgan

Mom licks sauerkraut off pink flesh
Child's tongue swirls chocolate softie
Double delights from dept store
Saturdays in the 'sixties

Boiled flesh, sharp mustard
Fried brains: electroshock therapy
Hotdogs for Dad
in the psych ward in twenty-sixteen

March's cruel winds
carry Coronavirus cross-country
Crippled hands on crocheted covers
signal Dad's slow starvation unto death

Mom cocoons in memory care
attended by plastic ghosts
who poke and prod
and pray for escape

On FaceTime the child, now in her sixties
coaxes, "Eat a bit more, Mom"
Imagines Ensure chocolate
swirling delicious over her tongue

"I've half a hotdog here,"
Mom says, "Will you take a bite?
You could put it in your purse . . .
We'll sneak away

and no one would ever notice."

Becoming Queen

Lexi Merring

In chess, everything is simple, calculated. Pawns stand guard in the first row. They're worth the least amount of points. Most people will sacrifice them without a second thought, deeming them worthless.

I move my pawn to g3 and start the game.

"You have an unusual style," my boss insists. "You try to control the game from afar instead of controlling it directly from the center."

I shrug, unsure what I'm supposed to do with that information quite yet. He's trying to determine my strengths and faults, so that I can be prepared later on to teach chess to children in afterschool programs. He is taking notes, so that he can tell me where to improve my skills after we complete the game.

My boss takes direct control of the middle, placing his pawn at e3 to attack the center squares. I hold back, sneak along the edges, waiting for the perfect time to strike.

Knights and bishops are both worth three points. Worthy of sacrificing for a five-point rook, but certainly not for a pawn. I capture a pawn with my bishop. Immediately after, an unsuspecting knight captures my bishop. I'm down 1-3 but it's still anyone's game.

Teaching chess to little kids is a more difficult task than it sounds. You've got the kids who couldn't care less, and their parents just signed them up for the afterschool program presumably to keep them out of the house. They act like they are the ones who are kings and queens, throwing the pawns around the room without a care.

You've got the kids who truly care. They're focused, ready to prepare their army for battle. There's one little kid who uses World War II metaphors occasionally throughout the game, which confuses his opponents even more. Perhaps it's a tactic.

There are also the kids who perpetually have to leave the room. Whether it be a trip to the bathroom or a long walk to the water fountain, they'd rather be anywhere else than in front of a

Becoming Queen (cont'd)

Lexi Merring

chess board. I'm normally the one who has to play against their partners since their partners get bored of just sitting there. That is unless they have to go to the bathroom too.

And you've got the kids who think that they are better than everyone else. They are the superior chess champions, and they insist that it isn't worth it to play against anyone since they know that they'd win.

Castling is a helpful way to protect the king. Remove the knight and bishop. Move the king over two spaces and then the rook jumps over the king to land on the other side. It legally breaks two rules with this move: the king can only move one space at a time and the rook cannot jump over any piece. The king can't move through or into danger.

I move my king to safety but risk losing my queen.

When I walk into the middle school library, I'm surprised to find the kids absolutely wreaking havoc while my coworkers teach two separate groups. This isn't the usual school that I teach chess at; my boss just sent me here to try and help calm down the madness. I don't know why I, the teenage girl, am determined by my boss to be the one who would be able to help calm the storm, but the two older teachers definitely do not have this under control. The chess club at this school has been in session for five weeks now, but today is the first day I've joined them.

On Sal's side, a few kids are lying on the couch, their heads hanging upside down with their muddy sneakers at the top. Other kids run around, stopping at shelves briefly to toss off a few books. Sal continues his lecture on chess strategies, his gray hair looking even more gray than usual.

Ed is on the other side of the room and he's not having any better luck gaining control of the club. He sighs, rubbing a hand

Becoming Queen (cont'd)

Lexi Merring

through one of the two patches of hair that he has left. A few boys have begun plucking pieces off of the boards and throwing them at one another.

Any time either teacher tries to raise his voice or send out threats, the kids amp up their wild behavior.

Even though the objective is to capture your opponent's king and protect your own, the queen is the most powerful. She can move any amount of spaces in any direction. She is free to do as she pleases, while the other pieces are restricted.

When she is captured by my opponent, I know there is only one way to get her back.

I stand in front of the class and try to speak over the roars. That quickly fails. I point to the board hanging at the front of the room. There are pictures of the pieces that are placed in pockets to show the students chess strategies.

I try to explain a famous chess match to the students, but only capture the attention of a few of them. Soon, they are all yelling and running around and hiding under tables.

I am merely a pawn, lacking the authority to tell them what to do.

Pawns stand guard in the first row. They're worth the least amount of points. Most people will sacrifice them without a second thought, deeming them worthless. But if you get them across the board, they can become a queen.

I place my pawn on g8 with a smile.

Becoming Queen (cont'd)

Lexi Merring

I ask Ed to let me try teaching the lesson this week and he eagerly agrees, letting me take his spot at the front of the library. For the past few weeks, I've stood on the sidelines, helping from afar, watching Ed and Sal struggle to keep the group's attention. The one week that I tried teaching directly, I struggled to maintain control over the class and noted which strategies are ineffective in teaching them. We still have a few weeks left of the club, and I'm not admitting defeat just yet.

When I approach the plastic board that hangs in front of the class, I clear my throat and speak as loudly as I can without completely shouting. Still, I cannot be heard over the chaos of middle school boys laughing and weaving through the round circle tables. The occasional sprinter knocks over a few chess pieces or even an entire chair and, of course, they don't pick anything up. They still aren't paying attention. I decide to take a different approach.

"Alright guys, we're dividing the class into two teams. Come up with team names and we'll play on the big board in the front, but only if you keep your voices down and sit next to your teammates!" I explain, trying to hype up the idea. They hesitate, intrigued by the change of pace. The "ultimate chess champion" who normally refuses to play anyone—as he is far superior—is actually the first one to make a move toward creating a team. "I'm team captain!" he announces, puffing out his tiny chest.

"Me too!" replies World War II kid.

The boys then run to their respective groups and excitedly begin discussing team names. I hold my breath for a moment as the teams scramble to sit at adjacent tables, crowding together instead of spreading out their chairs. A few of the boys clean up some pawns that had fallen to the ground earlier, while they discuss strategies for the game. When I think they have had a sufficient amount of time for discussion, I clap my hands together and the boys turn toward me quietly, ready to begin their group match.

A smile spreads across my face. I am queen.

About Our Authors

Patrice Bavos

Born the eldest of six girls, Patrice was raised in Westfield, NJ. She graduated WHS in 1975 and attended NYC's Cooper Union on scholarship. From 1987–2007 Patrice owned and operated Cyclone Printing & Design. In 2001 she created a stationary and night-light line for the wholesale market. In 2010 Patrice opened Hip Thrift & Art Gallery in Westfield. From 2014 to 2020 she worked privately in eldercare. Presently, Patrice works from her home of twenty-eight years, channeling her energy towards tending to her son with special needs, her two rascal cats and creating an environment of art and beauty.

Bernice Bellouny

Bernice credits a high school English teacher with inspiring her writing career. With a degree in journalism, she worked as Copy Editor for a legal publishing house in NYC, and as a Reporter/Editor for a weekly NJ newspaper. Bernice has also written financial news summaries for a division of Standard & Poor's Corporation, an investment newsletter for a NYC discount brokerage firm, and various freelance articles. Today she is Senior Staff Writer for a digital marketing/website development company. Bernice is grateful for the support of her Women Who Write critique and writing groups as she pursues her creative writing efforts.

Kate Cutts

Kate is a writer and voice actor following a successful career as a teacher of the gifted. She has published both short story and essay in Christian publications. She holds a master's degree in instructional technology and lives and works on her family's cranberry farm. Kate appears in the Ocean Spray television commercial campaign "Act Tiny, Be Mighty." Visit her webpage at KateCutts.com.

About Our Authors

Vivian Fransen

Vivian, a longtime Women Who Write member who is part of the Murray Hill Poetry Group and Published Authors' Group, writes nonfiction, poetry, and short stories. She is now a published author with her book titled *The Straight Spouse: A Memoir* (published by Open Door Publications, 2017). Visit straight-spousememoir.com for more details.

Ronnie Hammer

Ronnie is the author of the book *En Garde: My Battle with Breast Cancer*. She writes the blog *Morristown Memos* in which she describes true events adding her own twist and a bit of humor to each story. She has been published in the *New York Times's* "Metropolitan Diary," *Executive Female Magazine*, and *Technology Helping Seniors*. She was the director of Power Presentations for twenty-two years. Ronnie started a new group for Women Who Write called The Essay Group.

Diane T. Masucci

Diane writes short fiction, poetry, essays, and is working on a historical fiction novel. A veteran print journalist who taught in the Montclair Writer's Room, she holds a master of fine arts degree in fiction from The New School. She also tutors immigrant residents in English. She formerly chaired Women Who Write's Membership Committee. She lives with her husband and visiting grandchildren in Montclair, NJ.

Lexi Merring

Lexi is an undergraduate student at Fairleigh Dickinson University majoring in creative writing and psychology. She enjoys writing and reading both fiction and poetry. She has previously been

About Our Authors

published in the *USA Boxing News*, *Canvas Literary Journal*, and *Iron Horse Creative Anthology*.

Linda P. Morgan

Linda directs the Montclair chapter of Women Who Write. She is an urban planner working in social impact real estate development in Newark, NJ and nationally. She enjoys writing about family, nature, and the everyday challenges people face in navigating work, relationships, and the inevitability of growing old.

Ginny B. Nescott

Ginny's a Cornell graduate with years of HR, as well as an elected Councilwoman in New Jersey. She gave it up to volunteer and become an author with several published novels and short stories. She lives with her Texan husband, artist son, and a large rescue dog. A theatre and arts buff, she's written and produced three murder mysteries helping to fund theatres during this hard time. She's looking forward to a COVID-safe world where travel and the arts can flourish again.

Gwyn English Nielsen

NJ native Gwyn has been writing and publishing poetry, prose, nonfiction, and plays for twenty-three years. She holds a BA in English/theater/communications and an MA in creative writing. After over twenty years in education, recognized as a member of Who's Who Among America's Teachers, she retired from teaching English, creative writing, theater, and public speaking. At present, she tours underprivileged schools as a speaker and storyteller of her children's books. Gwyn is also a professional singer, guitarist, songwriter, and actress. Presently, she introduces senior citizens to theater via creative workshops. Recently, she received the Albert Nelson Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award.

About Our Authors

Doris Parmett

Doris enjoyed a dual career as a reading specialist and national bestselling author. In addition to her many novels, she's been published in poetry, plays, magazine articles, and short stories.

A former board member of the Romance Writers of America and the National Reading Association, Mrs. Parmett was instrumental in bringing the Young Authors Program to New Jersey.

Donna Piken

Donna writes poetry, fiction, and memoir. She is a longtime member of the Women Who Write's Livingston Mixed Genre group and is currently revising her YA historical fiction novel. When Donna isn't writing, she can be found with a paintbrush in hand working on a canvas or art journaling. Her mixed media art has been featured on the cover of *Goldfinch* vol. 21.

Dana Punzo

Dana is interested in making the mundane magical and vice versa using just a pencil, a notebook, and a smile.

Carole Garibaldi Rogers

Carole is a journalist, oral historian, and poet who lives in Morristown with her husband, Leo. For more than thirty years she has published numerous articles and essays in national newspapers and magazines, including the *New York Times*, *McCall's*, and *America*. Her poetry has appeared in a variety of small-press journals and in anthologies. Her eighth book, *Hidden Lives: My Three Grandmothers*, was published in 2013 by Serving House Books. She is delighted to be a member of the Women Who Write Essay Group.

About Our Authors

Judith Tilden

Judith is a retired English teacher and occupational therapist who let the writing craft lie dormant for many years while raising a family and following several different careers. In the mid-nineties, she returned to writing and served as a mentor for an online writing school, Writers' Village University. At present she is a member of Women Who Write, Inc. of New Jersey and the international Historical Novel Society. Judith has had short stories and novel excerpts published in previous editions of ***Goldfinch***, and is currently working on the final draft of her third full-length book.

About Our Cover Artist

Jennifer Sendros-Keshka

Jen is an artist, educator, and author/illustrator. Under the pseudonym Jenny Pinkerton she created *Lil' smARTies*, a series of art board books for kids, published by Penguin Workshop. Her books *Play with Clay* and *Play with Paint* are aimed at guiding young children and their grownups through engaging, age-appropriate art-making experiences. As of June 2021, Jen's debut title *Play with Clay* was selected for Dolly Parton's Imagination Library. Over 380,000 copies of *Play with Clay* have been distributed as a result. The Imagination Library is an international book gifting program aimed at building early childhood literacy skills.

About Our Editor

Mary ann Mosa

Mary ann has spent the last three decades working in human resources technology, touching almost every industry. She's had the privilege of working with people across the globe in both technical and functional areas. Mary ann's foray into the literary world was editing the book *Fashionable First Ladies*. Having served three years on the **Goldfinch** editorial staff, she was elected as **Goldfinch's** Editor-in-Chief, a post which she has held for the past four years. When not working, she spends her time cooking and exercising.

About Us

Women Who Write, Inc. began in June 1988 as a single writing group called Mothers Who Write. Today, we are a regional women writers' organization and nonprofit corporation with writing groups that meet throughout New Jersey.

Any woman who writes may join Women Who Write, Inc. Our members include writers of short and long fiction, poetry, plays, journalism, essays, autobiography, science, mystery, history, romance, and children's literature. Some are award-winning professionals who publish regularly; others write mainly for pleasure and self-discovery. We support each writer in establishing and meeting personal objectives.

Officers:

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