

THE LOYALHANNA REVIEW

ISSUE 37 • 2026





TETON PASS BY JANET KENDRA

CONTENTS

PROSE

Nothing Comes Clean Here	<i>Kumar Sen</i>	3	Second First Communion	<i>Jessica Turko</i>	16
A Day for the (Story) Books	<i>Karen Nagy</i>	6	Tuxedo Cookies	<i>Erin Jamieson</i>	17
Shoe Shine	<i>F.J. Hartland</i>	9	Grown-Ups	<i>Matthew Betti</i>	20
Finding Beauty	<i>Rachel Allen</i>	10	First Job, Great Job	<i>Rod Cross</i>	22
The Sixth Sense	<i>Nancy Clark</i>	13	I'm Not Martie!	<i>Alicia Stankay</i>	24
Valley Forge	<i>Marge Burke</i>	14	The 54 th Street Brunsy Showdown	<i>Joe Potts</i>	26

POETRY

The fireflies devoured the moon	<i>Cithara Patra</i>	4	A Quiet Exile	<i>Saumya Ashita</i>	14
Creek After Rain	<i>Abraham Aondoana</i>	4	What Remains Unsaid	<i>Abraham Aondoana</i>	15
There Is a Bird That Lives Inside Me	<i>Piper Bjerke</i>	5	At Ten	<i>Ed Schad</i>	15
Running Rebirth	<i>Tammy Rullo</i>	5	Ekphrasis of my father's upper gastrointestinal endoscopy	<i>Molly Steenhoven</i>	15
View from My Condo: A Mid-October Haibun	<i>Kimberly McElbatten</i>	5	Spiritual Matters	<i>Paul Turtzer</i>	16
October's End	<i>Tammy Rullo</i>	7	Euphemisms	<i>Jim Busch</i>	17
This one is for that first car	<i>Andrea Janov</i>	8	In the Event There Is Life after Death	<i>Jessie Anne Harrison</i>	17
First Sunburn of the Season	<i>Jessie Anne Harrison</i>	8	When She Died	<i>Shontay Luna</i>	19
Bread and Butter	<i>Milo Brown</i>	8	Living in A Burning Tower	<i>Cithara Patra</i>	21
Cottdale, AL	<i>Madeline Boles</i>	8	Saviour	<i>Bella Melardi</i>	21
She	<i>Sara Frye</i>	12	A Wisconsin Farmer	<i>John Grey</i>	22
Photo in Wallet	<i>Shontay Luna</i>	13	A Fisherman's Story	<i>John Grey</i>	23
Moving On	<i>Candace Kubinec</i>	13	Wilmore Reservoir South, Late Evening with a Full Moon Rising	<i>Kimberly McElbatten</i>	23

ARTWORK & PHOTOGRAPHY

The Prince	<i>David Frye</i>	7	American Pride	<i>Louise Vrable</i>	18	FRONT COVER	
Bleak Mid-Winter	<i>David Frye</i>	7	The Mighty Duck	<i>David Frye</i>	23	Won't You?	<i>David Frye</i>
Petals of Yellow & Blue	<i>Cecilia Frye</i>	11	Over the Falls	<i>David Frye</i>	23	FRONT INSIDE	
Colors of Summer	<i>Cecilia Frye</i>	11	I'll Be Watching You	<i>David Frye</i>	25	Teton Pass	<i>Janet Kendra</i>
In Living Color	<i>Cecilia Frye</i>	11	Monarch Butterfly	<i>Vickie Babyak</i>	25	BACK INSIDE	
Hats Off	<i>Louise Vrable</i>	12	Eye Spy	<i>David Frye</i>	25	You Called?	<i>Candace Kubinec</i>
Back Porch	<i>Cecilia Frye</i>	12	Hummingbird Moth	<i>Vickie Babyak</i>	25	BACK COVER	
Taking Aim	<i>Candace Kubinec</i>	14	Morning Watch	<i>David Frye</i>	26	Allegiance	<i>David Frye</i>
Rainbow Maker	<i>David Frye</i>	16	Punch's Friend	<i>Cecilia Frye</i>	27		
Life is Fragile	<i>Susan Potts</i>	17					

THE RUTH MCDONALD FAN FAVORITE AWARD

To honor our Editor-in-Chief Emeritus, we instituted the Ruth McDonald Fan Favorite Award. As you peruse this year's magazine, note your favorite piece—prose, poem, or photo. Submit your vote on lvwonline.org by August 16, 2026. The author or artist receiving the most votes will be awarded a \$50 honorarium. (Please: One vote per reader.) The winner will be announced on the website, where you can also read past issues of *The Loyalhanna Review* and watch for upcoming events.

We welcome your feedback on how to make *The Loyalhanna Review* enjoyable, relevant, and reflective of our readership. Contact us via email, Facebook/Meta, or our website.

Finally, your financial support makes this magazine and our other programs possible. Thank you!

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FROM THE EDITOR

REBECCA E. DUNN
Editor-in-Chief

So many topics for this special edition of *The Loyalhanna Review* have been bubbling in my brain: "America 250," Ligonier Valley Writers 40th, *The Loyalhanna Review* 35th! What is the commonality? Community, continuity, coordination, cooperation, co-existence? Yeah. All of those.

We are here because others came here before us. They came with needs, desires, visions, hopes. Often, even with the highest intentions, they came with desperate deeds and dark hours. However, "in spite of dungeon, fire, and sword," we are still here.

This year's call for submissions did not result in a supply of items on the themes of celebrations, anniversaries, and freedom in an obvious fashion. Instead, the work revealed those topics in unexpected ways. Slices of life, death, merriment, sorrow, soldiering on when everything goes sideways. Yet there is still beauty. There is still hope for continuity. There are still reasons to celebrate living in a free United States of America.

In this issue you will find the words of contributors living in the United States, Canada, Nigeria, India, and France. We are more the same than we are different. A member of the Oglala Lakota Nation once taught me Mitakuye Oyasin: we are all related.

Read on, my friends.

Rebecca E. Dunn
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

SPECIAL THANKS

to the following donors for supporting The Loyalhanna Review

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(The list includes gifts received as of June 24, 2026.) Thank you for your generosity.





NOTHING COMES CLEAN HERE

by Kumar Sen

The last day the mill ran, the sky didn't turn black. People mentioned it the way they mention small betrayals—quietly, in passing, as if saying it outright might make it stick. By noon, the word had moved through town—*blue*—carried from porches to sidewalks to the line outside the gas station where men stood longer than they needed to. It wasn't a good blue. It hadn't earned anything.

My grandfather said the sky over the Monongahela had to fight for its color. "Nothing comes clean here," he told me. "Not the river. Not the steel. Not us." He didn't mean it as a complaint. He meant it as a rule.

He also said people who left didn't come back right. By the time I understood that, I had already left once. He never asked what it was like.

The last winter before he died, I found him at the kitchen table long after midnight, his hands wrapped around a mug gone cold. The TV was on but muted—some late game, players moving without sound. He didn't look up when I came in.

"They'll shut it down," he said, like he was finishing a conversation we hadn't started. "Not all at once. They'll make it feel like it's your idea to let it go."

I asked him what he'd do.

He shrugged, slow, like it cost him something. "Same as anyone. Pretend it's temporary."

On the morning they locked the gates, I didn't go to the mill.

Some people did: stood outside the fence, hands in their pockets, as if waiting for someone to change their mind. Someone brought coffee. Someone took pictures too carefully, like the moment might bruise.

I went to the river.

The Monongahela moved the way it always does—slow until you look closely, then faster than it should be. A barge pushed upriver, stacked with coal, the engine carrying low across the water. The air held that faint, chemical edge that never leaves.

The bank gave under my shoes, then held. No ceremony. No countdown. The last whistles had already faded, phased out so gradually no one could say when they ended.

My fingers brushed the silver ribbon in my pocket, a habit I'd developed since returning.

My grandfather called freedom making something out of what you're given.

He believed it even when his body wore down faster than the work did. Even when the doctor told him to stop and he didn't. Even when he came home angry and took it out on whatever was closest—tools, doors, the air itself. He called that living.

No one argued.

They held the anniversary that week.

Twenty-five years under the town's current name—long enough for banners, short enough to feel official. The sign stretched between two lampposts that leaned toward each other, as if they'd been talking too long.

By late afternoon, Main Street filled in.

Tables outside the VFW sagged under trays of pierogies, haluski, sausage slick with grease that soaked through paper plates. A coffee urn steamed nearby, carrying that burnt smell that never leaves church basements. A radio played a Steelers rerun, the sound cutting in and out—crowd noise, a clipped voice, *touchdown* rising briefly above everything else.

Near the curb, a kid tried to light a sparkler before it was dark enough. It sputtered, caught for a second, then died in his hand. He shook it once, sharp and impatient, then dropped it and reached for another.

"Feels like something," a man said.

"Yeah," someone answered. "Something."

My mother found me and handed me a lemonade. Too sweet. It sat on the tongue.

"You could try smiling," she said.

"I am smiling."

"Not with your face."

She had almost left once—packed a bag, filled out forms, stopped just short of becoming someone else.

"I didn't want to learn a new way to belong," she told me.

At the time, it sounded like hesitation.

Now it sounded like refusal.

The mayor spoke at dusk.

"Resilience," he said, and then again, and again, until the word flattened out, worn smooth. The crowd clapped on cue.

"Resilience is what defines us."

Behind me, someone said, "Resilience is what you call it when you're stuck."

For a moment, I wanted the microphone to fail, the lights to flicker—something small, just enough to break the sentence before it settled.

Nothing did.

The applause rose and fell exactly where it should.

The music started as the light softened.

Strings of bulbs flickered overhead, uneven but holding. The band struck something quick, the fiddle cutting clean through the air. People moved closer, pulled by rhythm more than intention.

I let myself get drawn in.

A woman I half-recognized took my hand.

"You're back," she said.

"For now."

"They always say that."

We turned, not quite in time.
“Does it feel different?” she asked.
“This place?”
She nodded.
“It feels like it’s waiting,” I said.
“For what?”

“For someone to decide what it is.”
She laughed. “Good luck.”

Across the street, my mother stood with women who
had learned how to stay, their laughter rising and falling
easily, like something practiced. Celebration is a way of
agreeing, briefly, not to argue.

The fireworks came late.

Small ones. They rose, broke, vanished before your eyes
adjusted. People looked up anyway.

For a few minutes, everyone was looking at the same
thing.

“Doesn’t feel right without the stacks,” a man said.

“No,” I said.

The last firework scattered white and disappeared. The
sky returned to what it had been all day: clean, unmarked.

When I reached the river, the lights were still on,
dimmer now, thinning out. The path down held its shape
in the dark.

At the edge, the water caught the remaining light and
pulled it apart, stretching it into lines that wouldn’t hold.
Nothing asked to be remembered.

The river had never needed the mill. It carried what it
was given—runoff, memory, whatever couldn’t be kept—
and moved on without deciding what any of it meant.

I took the silver ribbon from my pocket. It caught a
sliver of light, then lost it.

For a moment, I held it over the water. Then I wrapped
it once around my wrist—not tight, just enough to feel.

Up the hill, lights flickered off, one at a time. From
there, you could still see both—the mill, empty against
the sky, and the thin line of brightness along Main Street,
holding a little longer than necessary.

They didn’t cancel each other out. They didn’t fit. The
river moved between them.

I stepped back. The ground gave, then held.

Halfway up, I turned once—water, light, the shape of
what used to matter.

None of it asked me to stay. None of it asked me to
leave.

I kept walking. ♦

the fireflies devoured the moon

BY CITHARA PATRA

tonight, the fireflies devoured the moon
and plunged the world into darkness,
leaving nothing but their lights
and the stars to guide us around

the streets blanketed in black
the trees covered in shadows
the nocturnal creatures peek out
and seek their prey in the dark

as for the fireflies, they light up
like tiny dots blinking on and off
blink

blink

blink

without the moon, they’re all we have
and they’re all the lights we’ll ever get
to make our way in darkness
and brighten our nights

Creek after Rain

BY ABRAHAM AONDOANA

The creek loses its banks at first.
Water climbs the stones,
meanders along the long side roads,
brings leaves into short contracts.

Nothing argues.
Even the mud loosens its hold.

I am standing at the place where the bank was,
listening to the current
revise the story
of where it’s allowed to go.



There Is a Bird That Lives Inside Me

BY PIPER BJERKE

A feeble finch built of fragile bones
and fluttering feathers softer than silk.
It startles so easily, rattling against my ribs
while clawing my intestines.

Sometimes I hate it.

Sometimes I spend my nights fantasizing about
clawing my way through my chest, nails breaking
as they scrape and scratch through cracked skin
and collapsing capillaries until I find the creature
caged in the dark of me and rip it out
Piece by piece if I must.

But sometimes,
When I'm watching the sun rise over the world
with tea warming my hands and the sound
of mourning doves in my ears, it settles
in my stomach. Sometimes I think the occasional
flutter of its wings soothes the turmoil in my mind.
It is the cause of it half the time. Sometimes I
remember it is a little thing trapped in the dark,
so very alone, unable to see the sky.
I would hurt myself before I could reach it.

Running Rebirth

BY TAMMY RULLO

As I escape
to run
through the woods
in gentle rain
small stones seesaw
my ankles, where
the mucky trail
between ferns
dips into watery
pools, until mud
splatters up the
back of my
legs and my
T-shirt, as though
Pollock himself,
hiding behind
a gnarled
maple wearing
Lombard Street
carved by
fungus, has
wildly flung his
brush, and at
that moment I
breathe embryonic
solitude
without a care
in the world.



VIEW FROM MY CONDO: A MID-OCTOBER HAIBUN

by Kimberly McElhatten

Impatiens, pink and leggy, bend toward the sun with seedpods like full bellies, reminding me of my mother, how she taught me to plant, to water, to deadhead touch-me-nots into the shade of fall. On the bank where I scattered hen of the woods last week, hopeful for next season, a sugar maple commands my consideration. Our neighbor Kevin jogs by, and across Ridge Run, more sugar maples mix with mountain laurel and fern and oak. Where the mountain drops to South Poplar Run, the

sun rides the leaves
trailing gold—hushed orange beyond,
on the next ridge east.

A Day for the STORY Books

By Karen Nagy



The summer of 1976 was very special for me, as a young college student and aspiring entertainer. Not only was 1976 our country's highly anticipated bicentennial celebration, it was the summer of my first real job.

Our nearby children's theme park, Storybook Forest, was one of many 1950s kids' parks that featured fairy tale characters, both live and artificial, in a walking tour spread throughout the grounds.

The park is still in operation. You enter through a giant storybook and follow a tree-lined path on which childhood fairy tales come to life. Little Red Riding Hood's house; the Old Woman's shoe; Goldilocks' cottage and more: These whimsical, musty little buildings evoke a bygone era.

I had a busy summer that year. I worked as Snow White on Mondays, Little Bo Peep on Tuesdays, and Little Red Riding Hood on Wednesdays. The other days, I was a cashier in the gift shop. I was also loaned out to the Historic Village next door when the need arose, sometimes staffing the saloon or patrolling the General Store. I loved the varied routines each week.

At the same time, I was a founding member of a local performing group called ReachOut. We had a nice selection of themed shows, singing and dancing to a wide variety of music. Our group became quite popular in the tri-state area. We teenagers were kept busy with gigs throughout high school and into college, as many of us attended nearby schools.

By the summer of 1976, we were regular guests on the bandstand at Idlewild Park, adjacent to Storybook, performing 40-minute sections of our Patriotic Show twice a day. On those days I would start work at Storybook, change my clothes at lunchtime and run over to Idlewild to do the afternoon show, then run back to Storybook and work until we closed at 6:00 p.m.

Then I'd change clothes again and head back to Idlewild for the nighttime show. Sunday, July 11, the week after the Bicentennial, was one of those very busy days.

The day had started out even muggier than usual for a July morning in western PA. The floor of our back porch was covered in condensation. I headed to work at Storybook early. I would meet up with my family later for the first show. I took a late lunch, changed into my red, white, and blue costume, and headed over to do the 2:00 p.m. show.

Mom and Dad had arrived in our station wagon. They, along with other cast members' families, had joined a picnic under the trees close to the bandstand. From there, they watched us perform. My folks planned to stay for the evening show, which would close with a fireworks display.

After our first show I headed back to Storybook for the rest of my shift. I was subbing for Becky, the regular Snow White, so I was stationed outside Snow White's little cottage on a tree-lined path halfway up a hill. The life-size Seven Dwarfs statues surrounded the house on a little embankment.

The weather gradually became even more humid. Distant thunder could be heard over the adjoining hills, and the sky turned a weird yellow-green. Soon the storm was upon Storybook Forest, and most patron traffic had ceased as folks ran for shelter.

Panicking, I brought a couple of the dwarf statues inside the small house with me. The house was too tiny for park patrons, who were always instructed to peer inside over the Dutch door.

As I started to shut the top of the door, up the path came a family, huffing and puffing and in a panic about the storm. They asked if they could come inside with me, but there was no room.

I hollered, "Go up the path to Little Red's. Her house is bigger!"

Up the path they ran, as I managed to pull shut the door. I heard hail hitting the roof. Then the rain began and the wind howled around me. I huddled under the dwarfs' small table in the middle of the tiny room.

Crack! A huge bolt of lightning hit a tree right outside the house, and I screamed. The lone ceiling light went out and the little house was in darkness.

The storm roared through quickly. I cautiously stood up and opened the top of the Dutch door. The uprooted tree was lying just a few feet from the house, across the path. I looked out for a few minutes, afraid to move.

Soon, up the path came a couple of firemen, asking, "Ma'am, are you okay?" I assured them I was. They said that a freak tornado had come just shy of both parks!

Since there was no electricity, I figured they had to close Storybook. I wound my way carefully down the branch-strewn path to my home base, the souvenir shop. Mrs. Klosky, matron of the shop, confirmed that the park had closed.

I took my ReachOut costume and sidestepped huge puddles of water over to Idlewild. My parents sat in the station wagon, shaken but okay. We joined up with other families from the show and were told there would be no second show.

Mom told me later that she and Dad had watched the storm from inside the car. Dad, who loves storms and is comforted by them, fell asleep, but Mom stayed vigilant, exclaiming, "Ray, look! There are branches spinning in the air! Oh, and there goes somebody's lawn chair!"

Dad snored on and missed the whole thing. The parking lot was just feet from the Loyalhanna Creek, which meanders through the park. We would soon find out that the tornado had headed up through the creek just downstream and had lifted off the creek bed right before reaching Idlewild.

We headed out of the front gates but could not drive home because the road was closed. The tornado had destroyed sections of Route 30 along the creek. We had to drive east to Ligonier and go home the long way, via Route 711. This section is called a "scenic byway" because of the beautiful views of the Chestnut Ridge in the distance.

Well, that night was indeed scenic. The night sky, looking west towards the mountain, was lit up with the most eerie, beautiful cloud-to-cloud lightning I have ever seen. We drove slowly and marveled at it. It was like the aftermath of an apocalypse.

This ethereal display, we were convinced, was presented to us to make up for the canceled fireworks at Idlewild. It was an awesome ending to a most unusual day at Storybook Forest. ♦



BLEAK MID-WINTER BY DAVID FRYE

October's End

BY TAMMY RULLO

O' wistful October's end,
When honeybees, desiring wildflowers,
Instead settle and suckle swaying washed sheets
hung in a brisk breeze, a desperate attempt

In late afternoon,
Harvest moon rises high, humidity low, windows open wide,
As mosquitoes and my mind scream persistently
at stagnation, at early darkness

My eyes close
to the rattle of a neighbor's cough and irresolute frailty
of oak leaves cascading like tears gnawing summer's passing
Both of us grieve, the inevitable.



THE PRINCE BY DAVID FRYE



THE LOYALHANNA REVIEW



Cottondale, AL

by Madeline Boles

The little things will be the end of me.
I have always known this.
Locking Doors,
Brushing Hair,
Cooking Meals:
All chafe against the girl who grew
her legs long in kudzu fields—
Flawless, unkempt.

Bread and Butter

by Milo Brown

It starts as a warmth in the sternum
After the tea trickles down my spine
Teasing dough between my teeth
Grains of salt meet, grow old
and perish on my tongue
In the butter

A tongue is not an easy thing
But I taste more good than bad
And all things that are sad are beautiful
And all things that are beautiful are sad

This one is for that first car

by andrea janov

That first car. A 1989 Mercury Tracer. Orangish-red. Covered in band stickers. I <3 Andrea in masking tape on the passenger side dash. Backseat littered with everything that mattered. CDs, most scratched. Skips became part of songs. Pointe shoes, leotards, tights. Cameras and loose rolls of film. Books and notebooks.

It shook as the speedometer neared 70 mph. Yet, I acquired an impressive pile of speeding tickets. And by the end, I blew out the speakers. But that car meant freedom. No matter how cliché. No matter how many movies and TV shows say the same. Being able to just go, meant the whole world was open. That I could have something more. Than this small town.

I drove that car on those back roads. Alone or with friends. In the middle of the night. I controlled my destiny. Even if just for those few hours. Even if just for that moment.



FIRST SUNBURN OF THE SEASON

by Jessie Anne Harrison

Happy Spring! reads the caption
Of my kinda-friend's Instagram story,
The babiest of pink burns dusting her shoulders,
And I'm fixated on the thought of *Spring!*
March hasn't even finished killing February yet,
We had the first major snow of winter two weeks ago—
Happy Spring! My happy weather is back!
I threw on a sweater in the melancholy cold
That comes from waking up an hour before my alarm,
But the sweat that begins as I walk outside
Warns that I cannot hide.
I'm the groundhog and I thought I saw my shadow,
But it turns out it was just clouds the whole time.
The president signs an executive order:
There's no such thing as global warming.



Shoe Shine

BY F. J. HARTLAND

CHARACTERS

KEEGAN, an adult male

AT RISE: **KEEGAN** is sitting on the floor polishing a pair of shoes.

KEEGAN

Does anyone shine shoes anymore? Back in the day, there are boot blacks at shoe shine stations in office buildings and court houses and train terminals. At fancy hotels, you could leave your shoes outside the door of your room, and they would be returned all polished the next morning.

I mean, do that now and you can kiss that pair of shoes good-bye!

And this, of course, raises another question ...

Do people even wear shoes that require polishing anymore? Today, we all run around in our Nikes and Sketchers and New Balances ... and God forbid, Crocs.

(He shudders a little)

All his life, my father loves to polish shoes. He claims that the best Christmas gift he ever got was the year my mother gives him—get this—shoe shine kit. This thing is like a piece of furniture. A box like this big...

(KEEGAN uses his hand to indicate the size)

... by this big. Heavy. And varnished oak ... or maybe maple? On top there's a place to put your foot so you can polish your shoes while wearing them. Inside there is a treasure trove of shoe shining accoutrements.

There are many tins of polish each one with a picture of a kiwi on the lid. Black, brown, clear—and something called cordovan, which never gets opened. To this day, I still don't know what cordovan is!

There are all kinds of polishing cloths and two big brushes with sturdy bristles. On one, my father meticulously prints the word "Black." On the other "Brown." He warns us—never use the black brush on brown shoes or the brown brush on black shoes. Never.

He can't wait to teach me to shine shoes. The phrases "makes a good first impression" and "elbow grease" get bandied about ... a lot.

First step is to set down old newspaper because—as he puts it, "Your mother will never forgive either of us if you get shoe polish on her carpets!" I don't want to get my father in trouble, so I always remember the newspaper.

Besides filling me in on how to apply the polish and proper use of the brushes and how to buff with the soft cloths, there is a special time to do all this ...

Saturday night.

Why Saturday night?

So your shoes are shining for church on Sunday morning, of course.

Sadly, I soon grow tired of polishing my shoes—and of going to church. Sometimes on a Saturday night, I hear my father say, "Keegan, bring me your shoes to polish."

"Don't worry about it, Dad."

But this is not the end of it.

Because then he comes into my room and retrieves my shoes. A short time later, he returns with them—all polished.

I am ashamed to admit that I don't think I even say, "Thank you." Not once.

That's when I start to wonder why he's so obsessed with polishing shoes. Maybe it's his upbringing. Because he's the last of six children, born at the height of the Great Depression. His parents keep a roof over their heads and food on the table, but there isn't money for much more. Especially shoes. When you got a new pair, they had to last. And that's what polishing does. It makes them waterproof, keeps the leather supple so it doesn't crack.

Is that why he does it?

Or is it something else?

My father is not a demonstrative man. Displays and declarations of affection—well, he just doesn't do those. Then one day—much too late—it dawns on me why he polishes my shoes.

It's his way of saying, "I love you, son."

I wish I'd realized this sooner.

(A beat)

The funeral director gives us a list of things to bring—suit, shirt, tie—and I blurt out, "What about shoes?"

He explains that they don't put shoes on the dead. Something about how difficult it is on an embalmed body.

I can't permit this, so on the way home, I buy some polish. Then I find his good dress shoes under his bed, and go to work.

(KEEGAN holds up one of the shoes)

I will not stop until these shoes shine like new pennies. Because tomorrow, before they close the lid, I am going to slip these in the casket. I can't allow my father to meet his maker without shoes. Polished shoes. Buffed until they gleam. So that in Heaven, he makes a good first impression.

And why am I doing this?

It's my way of saying, "I love you, Dad."

(KEEGAN resumes polishing the shoes)



Finding Beauty

BY RACHEL ALLEN

PITTSBURGH, 2009

I stand in front of Monet's *Water Lilies*—the colors accented by the golden frame containing the original painting at the Carnegie Museum of Art and Natural History in Pittsburgh. The thick brushstrokes are visible an arm's distance away. I walk around and observe this painting from all angles, taking in the mastery of blending and mixing colors. My breath expands, a ball of emotion catches in my throat, and tears rise.

JOHNSTOWN, EARLY 1970s

I sit in front of a large glass case that holds my collection of dolls from around the world. "Don't play with these dolls! Don't even touch them! They are collectibles!" My mother's voice repeats this often.

I can't resist. I open up the glass case and arrange the dolls into little groupings. Here in my bright pink bedroom with blue trim in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, I create a make-believe version of the United Nations. I line them up, the dolls from African countries in their vibrant fabrics, the dolls from Asian countries with silken garments, the Scottish Highlands doll with her plaid skirt, and the doll that resembles Heidi from one of my books.

All the dolls have cheery expressions that invite me to defy my mother. I yearn to travel to their home countries, which seem vibrant and interesting due to their ethnic dress (a stark contrast to my red, white and blue hand-sewn polyester outfits) and welcoming due to their smiles.

Every Sunday we attend the Methodist Church with the domed ceiling, elaborate woodwork, and ornate stained-glass windows. A window by our church pew depicts an angel wearing the same facial expression and hairstyle as my classmate Chris Burbolla, but with robes and a halo. During service, too old for nursery school and too young to make sense of church life, I stare at this angel.

After church, we walk down the street to Whitfield's Market and purchase *The Star* and *The National Enquirer*. The ladies who work there, both wearing glasses and helmet hairstyles held together by copious amounts of hairspray, speak in high-pitched, adult-friendly voices to my mother as she purchases magazines, cigarettes, and licorice. My sisters and I, impatient, shuffle our patent-leather Mary Jane shoes loudly on the wood planked floor.

My mom reads *The Star* first.

We fight over who gets *The Star* after her. My sister Kelly, especially competitive, calls out first, as soon as we exit church. *The National Enquirer* is not as popular, but it still sees all of us clamoring to read every page of it by Sunday evening. Kelly loves all things Elvis. Alien sightings are often reported. We cannot look away.

JOHNSTOWN, 1977

Mud and dust coat everything after the flood in July of 1977. Throughout the city, piles of debris lie scattered. Many kids from my junior high school live in the small HUD trailer park homes, their families displaced by the floodwaters. They wear the same clothes again and again.

The first fall after the flood, the hillsides blaze red, orange, and yellow, and russet brown. The rolling hills of Appalachia surround homes in various states of disrepair. Dust, dirt, bricks, siding, and piles of lumber are intertwined with fabric, plastic, and other unrecognizable household remnants.

Scenic Wonders of America, my favorite book, entertains me for hours. I absorb photographs of the redwoods in California, Acadia National Park in Maine, and even the swamps of the low country in the South. Spooky as the swamps are, they don't harbor any piles of debris where a tiny tennis shoe rests on top.

PITTSBURGH, 1986

In a dimly lit bookstore in the Pittsburgh neighborhood of Oakland, I sit on the floor in a dusty corner, cross-legged, surrounded by piles of books from the 25-cent shelf. On these Saturday mornings, I discover Milan Kundera, Kurt Vonnegut, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Maya Angelou, and Marge Piercy.

The print is small and the pages yellowed. Nonetheless, I drink in these new-to-me worldviews. New in their rawness, their vulnerability, their poetry. I read these worn paperbacks on buses, subways, and lunch breaks during rare spaces of free time between working three jobs and being a full-time college student. My fingers are usually smudged from the print of the books and my cigarettes.

In the late 1980s, Walnut Street bustles with young urban professionals in the Shadyside neighborhood. They dress smartly in tailored suits and walk with purpose, infiltrating this vibrant neighborhood of undergraduate and graduate students.

I walk there from the University of Pittsburgh down Fifth Avenue past the synagogue, the grand mansions with circular driveways behind wrought-iron fences, and the condominiums perched on the hillsides. As I get close to Walnut Street, I walk past modest apartments.

The restaurants and stores on Walnut Street range from New York, New York, a dimly lit gay bar/piano bar where I attend my first drag queen show, to a Jewish deli market and to the store where I work, *Kards Unlimited*, a funky card and gift shop.

IN LIVING COLOR BY CECILIA FRYE



PETALS OF YELLOW & BLUE BY CECILIA FRYE

COLORS OF SUMMER BY CECILIA FRYE



I love this store and the women's collective that owns it. Here, amidst the tall wooden shelves stocked with knickknacks for the cultured and well-educated, I find Monet and the other Impressionists. Monet's *Water Lilies* painting is the June feature in the art-inspired calendars and embossed on coffee mugs. This image catches my breath. Captivated and soothed by it, I buy a calendar and a mug with my 10% employee discount, a significant purchase as most of my hard-earned money goes towards rent and tuition.

PITTSBURGH, 2009

My husband, two children, and I make an annual trip to the Carnegie Museum of Art and Natural History in Pittsburgh during the Christmas break. We manage a family membership on a limited income and visit this museum and the Science Center throughout the year.

This year, the kids are older and not as enthralled with the dinosaur exhibit, so we enter the museum's permanent art collection. There, to my surprise and delight, hangs Monet's *Water Lilies*.

My kids move quickly through here with my husband. I linger, breathless, and approach this painting.

I walk back and forth in front of it, slowly. Then I sit on a bench to view it longer.

I wrap my hands around my chest, my whole body barely able to contain something I don't understand. Tears stream down my face.

Fragments of memories of this image appear.

A calendar hanging in my room, with *Water Lilies* for the month of June. On it are scribbles for my work schedule, college classes, and appointments.

A mug with a teabag steeping in hot water, my hands curled around it, the image distorted slightly by the curve of the mug. I sip the tea, feeling connected to beauty.

These depictions pale in the proximity of this painting in front of me.

In Monet's artistry, I sense the depth of the water with its varied shades, the hum of insects, the symphony of bullfrogs, the song of birds, and the moisture in the air around the pond. I smell the soil around the water, the light floral scent mixed with the muskiness of mud, the air thick, heavy and warm.

Eventually my family circles back.

They find me here. The concern on their faces tells me they did not expect the tears.

How can I explain the magnitude of what is in front of me, and what is readily available to them?

How can I convey the yearning for beauty, the desire to express life through color, words, ritual, and song, from dolls behind glass to stained-glass windows and *The National Enquirer* to scenic wonders of the world and dime-store books to calendar art to Monet's fully dimensional painting *Water Lilies* in real life? No words arrive.

How do I explain that a life lived with longing for beauty is art itself? ♦



BACK PORCH BY LOUISE M VRABLE



HATS OFF BY LOUISE M VRABLE

She

BY SARA FRYE

She:

the Personification of
Purple Prose:
Perceived as lacking somehow
in Her ornate symphony

She:

the Monstrously baroque
in both artifact and constitution
Flowery and fruitful
Lying in wait, and therefore

She:

Biblical in proportion and provocation,
rather opaquely offensive
In her determinate resolution—
Rather too much, yet not enough

She:

Once Poignant, Powerful scenery
Now lost in the weight of obsequiousness
Weeping with criticism; each word and deed
Stricken by petulance

She:

Skewered too soon
in the first hours of her rebirth.
Voice drowned in the din of mediocrity.
Weak will, and weak pen,

She: *no longer*



THE SIXTH SENSE

by Nancy Clark

According to Aristotle, our five senses “connect physical reality with inner perceptions and soul, stimulating our consciousness and zest to participate in life.”

We recognize, experience, and connect with the world via our eyes, nose, ears, fingers, and taste buds, each sense assigned a specific reaction/response.

While some sensory experts consider touch the foundational sense, others regard the nose to be the most potent memory transporter: bread baking in the oven, perfume-scented candles, a lifeless skunk in the middle of the road.

Within our body’s miraculous network, each sense harmonizes at the fundamental level of its allocated reach. The eye can only see and not hear; the ear can only hear but not see, etc.

Laureates, letter writers, and everyday people through time have coined phrases to flesh out each of the five acclaimed senses:

Sight:	A sight for sore eyes; in the blink of an eye
Hearing:	Turn a deaf ear; in one ear and out the other
Taste:	Sweet as honey; a taste for power; leaves a sour taste
Smell:	Stinks to high heaven; stop and smell the roses
Touch:	Smooth as silk; rough around the edges

But hold the phone! Let’s not forget to pay homage to our Sixth Sense, a life preserver for the famed family of five: COMMON SENSE! As rare as hens’ teeth and worth its weight in gold, the sixth sense is as essential to our earthly walk as air, water, and food, yet many humanoids fluff it off as poppycock and walk an extra mile to circumvent it.

Many voices have acknowledged its power, as well as the consequences of its absence. (“He doesn’t have the common sense to come in out of the rain.”) In 1764 French philosopher Voltaire picked up his quill pen to proclaim, “Common sense is not so common.” On this side of the pond, Thomas Paine in his 1776 “Common Sense” pamphlet declared, “Common sense is dead.”

The increasing lack of common sense has been noted by public intellectuals from Ben Franklin, Mark Twain, and Gertrude Stein to Oprah, Big Bird, and Winnie the Pooh.

If Aristotle and his band of merry news correspondents were still around, they might disrupt a session of Congress with this: “Breaking news: Common sense is now an endangered species. Stupidity has taken over the world. Unfortunately, there is no known cure.”

Common sense is a flower that doesn’t grow in everyone’s garden. It’s a gift, but also a punishment for those dealing with people who don’t have it. Like intelligence, it can’t be legislated. Like deodorant, those who need it most never use it. It’s something everyone needs, few have, and none think they lack.

For those meandering through life on a half-empty tank of CS, there’s public signage. An official state road sign posted at drivers’ eye level along a western U.S. highway screams this warning in big, bold, black letters on a vibrant bright-yellow background:

CAUTION. WATER ON ROAD DURING RAIN

Need I say more? ♦

She took the pictures off the walls, carefully wrapping each one. She boxed up books, the ones she really wanted, and filled baskets with floss and needles and patterns—slowly moving her most precious possessions, box by box, to her new home.

Tomorrow strong men will come, wrestle her furniture into the open back of a big truck—the couch, the chair, that antique Hoosier cabinet, her bed—as she begins to fill new cupboards and closets and shelves, hoping she’ll remember where she put the sheets and towels and her hairdryer.

But the most important things, the memories created in her little brick house, are safely stored in her heart, where she will always be able to find them.

PHOTO IN WALLET

by Shontay Luna

The reason she opened the wallet escaped her. She forgot what she was looking for as soon as she did. The picture of an unknown child stared back at her, a little girl with straight hair and two ponytails that fanned out like wings.

Her breath left her and forgot to return. Decades of marriage and vows spoken in an elaborate church that’s since closed down rumbled under the quietly brutal discovery. For this picture wasn’t of her child. And men only keep photos of their children in their wallets.

MOVING ON

by Candace Kubinec



Valley Forge

by Marge Burke

Winter.

It settled on the bare branches. Drifted to roofs and fences. Fell into layers on the rough ground. Crept under the doors and through the window cracks.

We feel it, every second. We are never warm, always hungry. Most of us are sick, even the animals. Our clothes are always damp and dirty and threadbare. Letters from home are unimaginable. Loneliness surrounds us like darkness.

I remember the winters of my childhood. Building snowmen and ice skating on the ponds. Sleigh rides and hymn sings. Bonfires and laughter and hot apple cider.

Thinking about that warms my heart but chills my bones. So far away; so long ago, yet just past. I try to imagine, but that part of my mind feels as frozen as my fingers.

Sometimes Mrs. Washington comes. She wipes our faces with a soft cloth. She feeds us spoonfuls of cool soup and gives us stale bread. That's all there is. She does what she can. I pray for her safety and her health. She risks so much.

We struggle to keep our weapons clean. Fingers trembling with cold cannot handle the frigid metal, the tiny pieces, and the stiff leather straps. The bayonets are sharp, but we often can't feel the edge. Blood mixes with dirt and snow.

There are fires in our huts, but the warmth is not enough. It seems that the heat lifts up the chimney with the smoke. We are crowded and starving and filthy. We haven't been paid in forever.

The British burn the towns. They capture innocent people, take our food, live in our houses, and leave them in ruins. They are confident, but we have more to lose. Therefore, we will fight with all we have.

We will not quit. The despair runs rampant; the illness and starvation take lives as if plucking daisies from a field. But we do not quit. We cannot disappoint General Washington. Or our families. But mostly our country and ourselves.

Everything we give, everything we endure, we do for America in this quest for independence.

Winter is here, but it will not stay. The sun will shine and dry the muddy trenches. The warmth will really warm us. The dirty snow will melt into the soil and push the grass and flowers up.

We will have food and clothes. The animals will graze. We will get letters from home.

We will march again. We will fight together with our heads held high.

We will march toward freedom. ♦



TAKING AIM BY CANDACE KUBINEC

A Quiet Exile

by Saumya Ashita

I bear no hatred for the crowd,
yet their gazes turn me away.
Not fury—but the silent weight
of whispers, of measured eyes.
They gather where a dream has fallen,
laughter stitched with careless tongues.
And when a soul begins to rise,
they weigh the wings—
“At what price did you learn to fly?”
Their words roam through borrowed lives,
tending gardens not their own.
If fortune finds your quiet door,
their smiles bloom with hidden thorns.
I never wished to wound a heart,
nor dazzle them with borrowed light—
yet in their gaze my simple joy
returns to me as quiet guilt.
Perhaps I am mistaken.
Perhaps I am merely weary.
I do not know—
I do not know.
I ask only for a small refuge:
the still corner of my room,
where silence wraps my thoughts
like evening around a tired sky.
But if even that sanctuary
is claimed by restless voices,
then I shall drift far away—
to Tristan da Cunha,
a lonely whisper in the ocean,
where the wind asks nothing of me
and the world forgets my name.

WHAT REMAINS UNSAID

BY ABRAHAM AONDOANA

Not the argument—
that burned clean and fast—
but the afterward:

the cautious manner voices came back,
the space left open
between sentences,
as if something fragile
may even be on its way through.

We learn to live there,
in the unsaid—
not empty,
just waiting
for the right weight of air.



AT TEN

BY ED SCHAD

I would find one dead bee
on the floor of the shower.
It would lie there alone.
I fiddled with the levers
and knobs for water,
hit with cold, then lukewarm,
testing my tolerance for heat,
to step back to try the knobs again.
I would shake from swift,
manic changes on my skin.

Behind the wall, millions worked,
tried pollen, made feral honey,
chased and desired their queen.
Touching their vibrations, I leaned
into the fiberglass shower wall,
the deep hum of their frenzy,
the other side in rapture or pain or both.
Sadness was toenailing the bee
down the drain, standing hairless
over the pipe, unable to follow.

EKPHRASIS

OF MY FATHER'S UPPER GASTROINTESTINAL ENDOSCOPY

The eye.
The eye's wire
slithers
deep inside
to see
Caged
Red
Liquid
walls
Tongue tied
and dressed
like swelling
blood bags
Cells' senescence
is hungry
empty
Time
Like uncooked
antelope heart
Like magma
in silence
A soldier
dying
on the
battlefield
who thinks only
of his unimportance.

Like a kid going down a playground slide
for the first time
The camera slithers to the cancer
The white pillow in his throat
To rest on the words
That he will die before he will say.

BY MOLLY STEENHOVEN

SECOND FIRST COMMUNION

by JESSICA TURKO

My mother pulled my hair back and smoothed it into a low bun. She placed my veil on my hair, the tiny plastic combs digging into my scalp. My veil was trimmed with white satin ribbon, which matched the white satin stripes on my dress. I grabbed the tiny white purse, with a nylon lily of the valley glued onto its front, that had come with my dress. We hopped into our car.

A week earlier we had celebrated my First Communion at a large brick church in a small town in western Pennsylvania. A frenzy of second graders had milled around the church, processing in and then out with hands clasped to signal prayerfulness. The ceremony was followed by a group photo of all fifty of us neatly positioned in rows in the church hall, a split second of calm before we spilled out of the hall into the parking lot and surrounding lawn, a sea of suits and dresses from Kenny Kardon, the fancy children's store.

Now we headed to my grandparents' house. My grandmother had been too sick to attend the official celebration the week before. More importantly, she hadn't had a chance to see me dressed in my Communion outfit.

So I had pulled on my white tights again, fastened my white leather shoes, recreated my entire look. Even at my young age I was beginning to understand that this was how we marked important occasions, by looking put together if not perfect.

In fact, one of the first clues of the seriousness of my grandma's illness had been revealed to me a few weeks earlier when she had emerged from her bedroom in just a nightgown, a stunning breach of unspoken protocol. It was her birthday, the last birthday we would celebrate with her. We had brought her a cake from Giant Eagle, a round cake topped with a decadent crown of pale pink roses fashioned from buttercream icing.

She sat politely at the dark wood table that took up most of her small dining room. Her cotton nightgown hung loosely over her now skeletal frame. She tried to conceal how terrible she felt as her children and grandchildren circled around and sang "Happy Birthday."

A few months later she passed away. I was eight, a third grader. She was fifty-eight. I did not understand that fifty-eight was not old, it was not a normal age to die. Years passed before I did the math and realized that my mother's youngest brother had still been in his twenties at her death.

I did not understand, as an eight-year-old, that my grandma surely had unfulfilled goals, dreams that would never materialize, an expectation that there would be more time to do all the things she had not yet gotten to do. She and my grandfather had raised three children in a two-bedroom aluminum-siding house in Sutersville, a tiny town in rural western Pennsylvania. It was up the street from the house where she grew up, a house equipped for years with an outhouse instead of a bathroom.

My grandfather had worked in the mills and there had not been money for extras. They had gone on one big trip, to Hawaii, before she got too sick, one vacation that took them on an airplane. When they returned, they came to our house and surprised us with the souvenirs they had brought back. For me, a dress-up outfit with a plastic grass skirt, lei, bikini top, and a little purse made out of a painted coconut shell. They passed around chocolate-covered macadamia nuts, and we all marveled at their exotic deliciousness.

After my grandma died, my mother tried, in the desperation of grief, to hold on to the ways her mother had done things. Cooking stuffed shells and ravioli, anise cakes, apricot cookies with a dusting of powdered sugar, and pizzelles, the snowflake-shaped anise-flavored waffle cookies that she made at Christmas and Easter.

I did not understand that when we lost my grandma, we would also lose our easy, effortless connection to family traditions, to earlier generations. My mother brought my grandma's heavy cast-iron pizzelle iron to our house. A few times a year, she threw a cloth tablecloth over our kitchen table, pulled out the beast of the pizzelle iron, and laid it on the table.

But every time we tried to make pizzelles, we failed. We burned them, or they turned out comically misshapen, or the batter was too sticky and they stuck to the iron. My mother would swear under her breath as she tried to dig the batter out of the elaborate crevices with a fork.

Several years passed before I worked up the courage to admit that I did not even like pizzelles. We had to do the things my grandma had done, to cook the foods she'd cooked. We were terrified that if we stopped, we would lose her completely.

I did not understand any of this when I carefully dressed in my Communion outfit for the second time in two weeks. I had an inkling that a storm was coming, but no sense of the tsunami that would follow.

My mother did. She knew she was powerless to stop the loss of her mother, but she could fix my hair, choose the right necklace for me, make sure my shoes were the same shade of white as my tights. Recreate the ceremony in meticulous detail and bring it to my grandma's doorstep. Make sure she got to see all of this.

Sometimes life inflicted painful blows that could not be blocked, but their impact could be softened with buttercream roses, well-pressed pizzelles, the perfect First Communion look. Sometimes a sheer veil trimmed in white satin ribbon was the only buttress we had against impending grief. ♦



RAINBOW MAKER BY DAVID ERYE

SPIRITUAL MATTERS

by Paul Turtzter

I walk through the cemetery,
stare at the clouds,
sense eternity.

The arrival of an early spring,
a hard-earned mountain vista,
trout rising to my dry fly,
a gathering of old friends,
my wife preparing dinner.

For words and music
that enrich my humanity.

The life I have been permitted,
mysteries still to come.

I am grateful.

In Loving Memory

Euphemisms

by Jim Busch

June 19, 1952-February 5, 2026

When someone dies,
People don't use the words
Dead or death.
These words are
Too harsh, too real.
Instead, they say
She has passed away
Or . . .

He has gone to his heavenly reward,
Or (God forbid)
Heaven has another angel now!

When it is my time to go,
Just say that
I've "checked out."
Tell them I have enjoyed my stay at
This earthly hotel and
Wish

I could stay longer.
I liked the accommodations.
The food was great,
The view was beautiful,
And the people were delightful.
But all things must come to an end.
It's time for me to
Pack my bag
Of thoughts and dreams,
Settle my account with the manager
And
Move on down the road,
Destination unknown. ♦



In the Event There Is Life after Death

by Jessie Anne Harrison

I won't attend my own funeral.
I've no need for rose-tinted eulogies
And stories I will swear I remember differently.
Funerals are for the living,
And I won't begrudge them their tear-stained indulgences,
But I won't let the first days of what happens next
Be occupied with human things—

And don't look for me in the mountains,
Or even my beloved aspen groves.
I won't be in the meadows
And I certainly won't be at Stewart Beach,
Even though I'll love Galveston longer than I'll breathe—

I'm going to be chasing whatever made music
Back when sound was still new.
I'll be figuring out if there is a God,
And making Them tell me why evil exists.
I'm finding the end of a rainbow
And learning that gold is cheap.
I'll be waiting for everyone else I love
To get curious enough in their death to find me.

ordinary things

HOME

ABOUT

JOURNAL

RECIPES

tuxedo cookies

by Erin Jamieson

My grandmother's condo is painfully ordinary, with off-white curtains, a slate-gray door, and warm brick that's been weathered by time.,
A stubborn chin. A slightly crooked nose, like the one I've cursed for years.
Why does she have so much power over me?

Her kitchen is a mix of modern and traditional: stainless-steel appliances and cabinets, maple wood with brassy handles. The walls are painted butterscotch yellow. Instead of family photos, like in our house, they are knockoffs of Van Gogh and Monet.

But what I notice most of all are the beads. Beads of every color, shape, and size, cluttering the kitchen table. Beads stacked in tall clear containers next to the pantry. There's even a container filled with beads when my grandmother selects two mugs from a tall cabinet near the sink.

I search for clues that this is the woman my father thought was terrible enough to shut out of our lives.

Her pantry has the same things as the Johars': boxes of pasta and rice, Rice Krispy cereal, canned tomatoes and soup, peanut butter and honey. There's a calendar on the wall next to the table, but even that is innocuous, with notes like *dentist 2:00* or *get the oil changed*.

I imagine the times we didn't know where Asha was, when she came back late, smelling like Lysol and sugar cookies.

When our parents demanded to know where she'd been.

My grandmother breaks the silence. "Is Asha doing okay? I haven't heard from her for a while." She must not realize the secret: My sister was rushing to visit her. Our estranged grandmother.

A grandmother who wasn't even invited to my sister's funeral. Who has no idea. I've trained myself not to react, but my vision is becoming blurry.

"Did she ever say anything to you about why she was here?"

My grandmother shakes her head. "She always had excuses to come, like I told you. Said she was just stopping by, didn't have anything to do. Said she liked my cooking."

Either Asha never said anything of substance, or my grandmother doesn't want to admit it. My grandmother takes both of our mugs to the sink and pulls out a sleeve of tuxedo cookies. I take one, nibbling the perimeter.

"It's good to see you, too," she says.

Neither of us moves to shake hands or hug. I eat the rest of the cookie. I am now the keeper of my sister's secret.

And the frayed thread that holds this fragmented family together.

I came here to ask about Asha's last day.

If she said something she would not to my family.
Sunlight streams into the cluttered kitchen.

For now, I want to imagine that there was a happy hour left for my sister.
That she made beaded bracelets and ate cookies.

That she had at least my grandmother to share secrets with.
This is what I tell myself, the narrative I need to believe.

A narrative stronger than how they found her.
A story of how she lived. ♦

LED UNDER family, memory, grief, secrets

SHARE:



LIFE IS FRAGILE BY SUSAN POTTS

AMERICAN PRIDE





WHEN SHE DIED

by Shontay Luna

When she died, it was mentioned that she was a poet. And my heart ached even more than it did upon hearing of her gruesome, senseless death. As with several tragedies that touch my spirit, I promised myself I'd write about her. But not in those immediate days following, because the wound was so fresh, the gash so deep, I wasn't ready.

Then, while still not past that, Mr. Pretti was executed as well. For, of all things, helping someone else. That mere act, of helping a woman to her feet after being violently shoved to the ground, demanded the price of his life. As I still couldn't bring myself to write about Ms. Good, I didn't make another writing promise I feared I may not be able to keep.

So instead, I'll write about Mr. Porter. Because he died a whole week before the other two and was barely mentioned. Like a homicidal afterthought. I'm not saying the other two deaths weren't unjust—they were. But the fact remains that even in death, Black People can't get respect. Even in death, they'll try to shame the framework that was a person's life, even to caricature levels, to erase their dignity. The news of his passing extra quiet because there was no footage. So it was easier to sweep under the rug. But that doesn't make it any less heartbreaking. He shot a pistol into the air on New Year's Eve. Maybe a little reckless, yes. But it was nothing to be killed over. Now I know what James Baldwin meant when he said—"To be Black and conscious in America is to be in a constant state of rage." Because during the course of our lives, we suffer one injustice after the other. And yet, still others are made to pay the ultimate price. As payment for the "crime" of existing in America.

In truth when all this started, "looking for criminals" was just code for "Open Season." In all honesty, ever since we were brought to this country in the seventeenth century, it's always been "Open Season." The years of time change, but not the habits of the hunt.

Grown-Ups

BY MATTHEW BETTI

"You read this number here, put a check in this box on the form, and then move the box to that pile over there."

"Sorry," I said, "one more time."

"Jesus Christ. Box has number. Read number. Check number. Move box. If I could train a dog to do this, I would."

"Yeah, got it. Thanks."

"Make sure you keep a running count of each type of box. You can count past your fingers, right?"

"I have toes."

"Fucking comedian. While you're here: don't break anything, don't sign for anything you haven't double-checked, and don't touch the radio."

I nodded. The manager brushed me off, unconvinced I'd been paying attention. In fairness, I hadn't. I was distracted by my future ex-girlfriend. She sat at the edge of my sea of boxes. She was morphing a blue tangle of fabric into folded shirts.

We worked in relative silence. The Latin jazz playing on the radio was only perceptible through divine concentration and aluminum fillings. I worked to the rhythm humming in my cavities.

I was staring at her. She seemed completely oblivious. It took me years to figure out that a coy smile at the corner of her lips was her tell.

Her neck twisted awkwardly, as if trying to keep me in her periphery. At the time, I thought maybe she was being deliberately obtuse. She looked everywhere but at me, as if even the smallest glance would betray something more.

Sometimes, though, a horse is just a horse. Sometimes a kinked neck comes from poor sleep. Sometimes a smile is just a memory passing through the synapses. Sometimes you can't see hollow, you just have to feel it.

Still, nothing passes the time quite like hope. The days became indistinguishable: move boxes; check papers (or was it check papers; move boxes?). The tinny Latin jazz filled the stockroom. I became convinced the radio had died long ago, leaving the music trapped in the walls. Across the box sea, she folded shirts with a precision forever in conflict with her practiced sangfroid.

I would imagine such vivid scenes that—without careful compartmentalization—my brain would store them as memories. Maybe one day she would look over and we would catch eyes for a moment before I jerked my head down at my papers, feigning stupor. The image played in my head, relentless.

We worked together, but separate. We fell into a sort of unspoken codependence. It wasn't something you could point to, but my days always felt a little bit off when the shirts went unfolded. The shirts always looked a little less perfect on days boxes weren't moved and checklists weren't checked.

One day, years later, we would be sitting at the kitchen table. I was doing the crossword, quietly resenting the fact that the callouses on my hands made my penmanship worse than it used to be. She was sitting across from me flipping through a cookbook, already worrying about making dinner.

I saw a flicker of light in her eyes as she flipped the page. A quick inhale, so close to telling me something before she abandoned the thought with a slow exhale. I should've asked what was on her mind. I didn't. We were separate, but together.

The days took their toll. With each paycheck, it was becoming harder to see a future where I wasn't counting boxes. Visions of a real job with a real salary, with a title that sounded vocational and didn't prompt people to ask if I was job hunting, were fading.

Every night my coworkers and I drank at the local bar, trying to wash away the regret of wasted education. I convinced myself that a slurred exchange with a stranger counted as professional networking.

"I wish we had people like you where I work." The guy sitting next to me at the bar was in a suit and had a fresh manicure. He drank something colourless with a lot of ice in it.

"You could. I'm for sale," I responded.

He muttered something about the economy and austerity.

"I named a mouse today," I mumbled, changing the subject. "Boxer, because he lives in the boxes. We share my lunch with him every day."

"How do you know it's the same mouse every day?"

"Share enough meals with someone and you know them," I said.

He nodded and moved to somewhere else. I don't think he had a plan other than away from me. I didn't need to share any meals with the suit to know him. In another life, I was him.

At home, half drunk and alone, I would pray for someone, or something, to take me away. I spent my days off applying for better jobs at companies I would never hear from. I kept count by the cover letters. I had applied for three hundred forty-six before I burned out. I was down to one application per day. It was mostly ceremonial, so I could technically say I hadn't given up.

I was working six days a week. I got promoted from moving boxes and checking papers to moving boxes, checking papers, and packing boxes. Unfortunately, it was at a time when job duties were on sale: buy two, get one free. There was no longer an imagined better life, and I resented younger me for thinking there could be. The future was just something that would come one day at a time; plans were for people who still had promise.

In that time, I would see her less. My routine hadn't changed but she had started making her way out to the sales floor more often. Our mornings mirrored the last six months: she would fold, I would move boxes. By late morning, she'd disappear to the sales floor, which was off-limits to gremlins like me.

She smiled more often—company policy. Like most company policy, it had a blind spot: they failed to specify how genuine those smiles had to look. Sometimes she'd come into the backroom to "check for a size." She'd sit on a box and watch me work for a few minutes. We'd catch eyes, she'd smile.

Those smiles were different. I was sure of it. This entirely optical flirting was the only reason I showered before work.

The days passed without much thought. My life had become a superficial ride, and I rode with an ennui some might envy.

As Christmas approached, shifts passed faster. More boxes, longer lists. The surge was exciting for about a day.

The real excitement came the day my boss got desperate.

"Hey," she said.

I dropped the box I was holding and looked at her expectantly.

"Time to shine, kid. I need you out here."

"With the people?"

"Yeah, with the people. Don't be so fucking weird about it."

I guess the showers paid off.

She guided me to the front cash register, hand on my shoulder. I was uncomfortable. Maybe I'd forgotten human touch was a thing, or maybe I didn't want her, of all people, to be the one to re-pop that cherry.

"Do you know how to work one of these?"

"All my degrees, and I never took a course on cash registers."

"Fucking Einstein. I'm leaving. If you get stuck, she's the boss."

My manager nodded over to the far register, where my future ex-girlfriend leaned on the counter, staring off and picking at her nails.

We were the only two working. Not unusual for a Wednesday afternoon, even if the store was busier than usual, with four customers.

I stood dutifully at my register, unsure what to do. She floated effortlessly through the racks of clothes, helping someone find something. She moved like a breeze; I hadn't even noticed she'd left the checkout. She must have felt my staring, because she looked over at me. Suddenly the ceiling was the most interesting thing in the world to me.

By mid-afternoon, it was just the two of us. I sat on the counter, swinging my legs, waiting for the day to end. She sat on the floor under the cash register, out of sight of the camera, checking her phone.

"So," I said, "what do you want to do when you grow up?" Was I five? I felt five.

I asked as if this was still just a stepping stone for me; as if I might walk in and tell my boss that I was moving and leave for better things. It would have to happen by some miracle, because it wasn't going to come as the result of any effort on my part. I asked as if this job was still temporary and not just part of who I was now.

She laughed. "I am grown up. This is it."

"This is what you wanted?"

"This is what I have."

Nothing had ever made more sense. I nodded with a resigned smile. She smiled back. That was what we had, at least for a while. ♦

Living in a Burning Tower

by Cithara Patra

Living with you is living in a burning tower
Smoke billowing out the windows
as flames engulf all we built together
The pictures and the memories
tossed in the fire
Dissolving, crumbling to dust and ash
Each fight, each tear, every little pain
Set the place on fire and we never stopped it
We only fueled it until it trapped us
And we couldn't stop
the foundation breaking
or the walls burning down
Instead, we're going up in a blaze
and we'll keep burning until the fire dies
and all that's left of us
... dust



SAVIOUR

by Bella Melardi

We were at a bar
Laughing and leaning against the bathroom sink
When I told you I wanted us to be close friends

But I barely knew you
What did I know?
I knew I was lonely
And I knew it was unbearable.
Sometimes I think of tombstones
and how they must feel the tremor of shovels above them
Do they mistake grave robbers for resurrection?
Does the earth loosen and whisper,
"This is it. Another chance at breath?"
When really it is only people
disturbing what was meant to rest.
That is what I did with you.
I mistook proximity for promise.
I built a cathedral from a glance.
I lowered you into the soil of my wanting
and called it devotion.
My expectations were graves:
deep, careful, lined with velvet certainty.
I buried you there
and waited for you to rise,
dirt in your mouth,
Reborn obedient to my need.
When you did not,
I told myself you were cruel
for staying dead.
Ever since we met
I have held onto you
like something unfinished.
I think my body is angry at me for it.
Parts of me keep falling
Strands of hair and flakes of lips.
Pieces of me spill
Onto my bedsheets
And into the bathroom sink

Sometimes when I stare at my phone for so long
It feels like my eyes are going to ooze
From their sockets onto the screen

I am an orchestral shipwreck
I want to blame you for my breakage
So I can keep you in my thoughts.
I have been unravelling my entrails,
offering you my centre,
believing if you held it
You would understand
How to love all of me better
even if you had to love me inside out.
But it did nothing
except leave me angry,
raw,
With a mess I now have to clean.
You were never my saviour.
I was only looking
for proof
that I could save myself.

First Job, Great Job

by Rod Cross

Every morning after breakfast we walked out and looked over what seemed an endless sea of blue-green rows of Christmas trees. A low morning fog gave the rows a discouraging depth, and before long the fog would burn off under a blazing summer sun.

We were a gang of fourteen-year-old boys on our first job, away from home, camping and getting paid for it. Actually, there was a lot of work involved too. Let me tell you about it.

Mr. Ralph Stuchell lived in my township, and the word was that he was hiring boys my age to spend a few weeks in the summer on his tree farm in Bedford County. In order for Christmas trees to grow into their best form before the holidays, they need to be trimmed and groomed every year.

After school let out, Mr. Stuchell gathered his six fourteen-year-olds and one sixteen-year-old, who had a car. We packed up his dump truck full of camping gear and supplies and went on safari to our working adventure near Shawnee State Park.

At the farm we unloaded the gear and pitched an Army surplus platoon tent. We decided it smelled like Korea. It probably came from Ralph's Surplus in Monroeville. Ralph's was the real thing, dented canteens and mess kits, parachutes and smelly tents. Cots went into the tent that was our bedroom, kitchen, and refuge from the thunderstorms that rolled across the county in the evening.

Then we were issued a pair of pruning shears with a holster, along with hedge-trimming shears. We were responsible for the tools and our own safety, and were shown how to clean and care for them. Lightly oiled with 3-in-1 oil and cleaned of the sticky pine sap, the tools cut efficiently to help us earn our 75 cents an hour.

Tom, the sixteen-year-old, was the crew boss. He was a two-year veteran of tree service and a nice guy. He was responsible enough to have a car because Mr. Stuchell had a real job and he left us on Sunday. Tom could take us to the hospital if we lopped off a finger or got snakebit or any number of things that could go wrong for a fourteen-year-old, in the woods, with sharp tools and fire.

So there we were, on our own with everything we needed for the week until Mr. Stuchell returned on Friday evening to restock. We had the basic teenage food groups: beans, Dinty Moore stew, Spam, peanut butter and jelly, bacon and eggs, Ho-Hos and Banana Flips. The transistor radio needed weekly battery replacements, but the rest of our appliances were powered by Coleman fuel and logs. The dishwasher was hand operated.

It was a marvelous time. We rotated through the cooking and cleaning chores on Tom's daily schedule. We did work long days, as there was not much else to do except trim the long straight rows of scotch pine, balsam fir, and the prized blue spruce. A well-shaped tree with piles of wrapped presents under it is the result of this trimming.

When each tree is approached, the whole symmetry is assessed. Starting at the top, all of the shoots are bundled in a gloved fist. Find the center shoot (called the leader) and clip the end. Then with the pruning shears, trim all of the surrounding shoots to half of the leader height.

Step back and visualize straight lines running from the top of the leader to the bottom branches. Use the hedge-clippers to trim any offending shoots back to an even cone shape. Now the tree could spend the summer growing evenly, and profitably.

Now, keep moving.

We always put in a full day's work in the blazing sun and the afternoon showers, which happened to be our showers.

Thunderstorms drove us into the tent to play board games.

It wasn't all work. On Saturdays Mr. Stuchell would load us all up and take us to Shawnee State Park to swim and get the stink off of us. We must have been nose blind to it. And there were girls to look at. If only we had the nerve to speak to them!

If one of us got homesick, lovesick, or just sick of the heat, washing in a bucket, and other hygiene peculiarities, he would take us back home on Sunday. Usually recovery was quick and the team member was welcomed back to the camp on Friday. If I remember correctly, we got the job done in a month.

We learned some good life lessons and developed a work ethic that served us well in future jobs. I felt a little different from my friends who spent the summer shooting hoops or hanging out. I was feeling mighty self-sufficient with my earned paycheck.

Time, jobs, college, more jobs all moved on. However, every year after that, my mom and dad were welcome to go to Ralph Stuchell's Christmas tree lot to pick out a free hand-trimmed blue spruce, until the year that my first boss passed away. ♦

A Wisconsin Farmer

by John Grey

This is how it was—
from the farmhouse to the barn,
barely light enough to call it morning,
fifty teats, buckets dinging and ping-
ping like BB gun targets.

Some Holsteins flinched at my hands.
Others, their eyes half-lidded,
drifted back into sleep, as if I were
some ward nurse with a gentle touch.

"Dumb animals," they said. Not me.
I knew the cunning of being born female,
the patience of chewing cud
on green and gentle Wisconsin hills.

It was all sweat and sleeves,
July's humidity thick as breath,
January's rafters cracking with ice.
A man takes what living gives—
even if it's Molly's swollen dugs,
even if it's the small mercy
of milk foaming in a pail.

I didn't know then I'd have
a poet for a grandson.
He gives me no peace.

The damn kid wakes me early, sets me on a stool,
gets my fingers working. I'm dead, I remind him,
but he insists, says there's nothing like Wisconsin stock.

So I do this for him, family being the tether
that keeps me milking, even in the afterlife,
even when the barn is only memory,
and those cows won't quit staring me down.



A Fisherman's Story

by John Grey

Rod in hand, I was a son at last.
And there were times
on the Swift and the Deerfield
where fishing was as easy as breathing.
So we breathed, my father and I,
and we caught our share.

And in Vermont's Green Mountains,
in so many streams,
the brook trout literally gave themselves away.
They'd swim just below the surface.
It was like they wanted to be seen, to be taken.

But I remember most
the faithful Connecticut River,
flush with rainbows.
Oh yes, all those rainbows.
My father just sat back
and let me at 'em.
So many I hooked.
They themselves were the pot of gold.

I came home
proud as a peak with sun on its face.
At dinner that night,
all hailed the boy.

I think of that child,
with his hands stinking of fish,
and his pockets loaded down with river stones.

To him, praise was suddenly a door.
And the world, if you let it,
would always walk you through.

THE MIGHTY DUCK BY DAVID FRYE



OVER THE FALLS BY DAVID FRYE

Wilmore Reservoir South, Late Evening with a Full Moon Rising

by Kimberly McElhatten

My kayak cuts
the water across a
reservoir between
Rosebud Coal
Mine and the Eastern
Continental Di[vide].

Along an
amethyst and
carnelian
skyline, windmill
lights fracture the
constellations and flash
red — [&] — red — [&] — red — [&] — red.

Starboard,
sunfish jump,
a flash of
opalescent
moon rises
behind
the hills.

I'M NOT MARTIE!

by Alicia Stankay

The clerk looked surprised to see me.

"Hi," she said. "You certainly haven't been around here in a long time."

She brushed her long golden hair behind her ears and smiled warmly at me.

Confused, I stared at her and then glanced at the shelves filled with typical convenience store items: candy bars, beef jerky, Little Hostess cupcakes.

"Sorry," I said, shaking my head. "I've never been here before in my life. I'm just passing through town and needed some gas."

There was no use telling her I couldn't quite remember *where* I was going.

"Oh." Now the clerk looked confused. "I could swear you're that guy who used to come here all the time to buy a cup of coffee and a cigar."

"Nope, sorry." I paid for the gas and walked out to the dilapidated Taurus, which wasn't my usual type of car. Rubbing my aching head, I looked back. She was still staring out the window at me.

I'd have forgotten that incident, except my car broke down at the far end of town. The guy who responded to my AAA card grinned when he saw me, wiped his greasy hands on his overalls that said "Tom's Garage" in bright red letters, and extended his hand for a shake.

"Hey, long time, no see." Curiouser and curiouser.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know you," I said.

He laughed so hard, he had to wipe the corners of his eyes with the oily rag he dug out of his back pocket.

"You're a funny guy, Martie."

I was beginning to feel pretty frustrated. What was it with this hick town?

"Sorry, but I'm not Martie," I replied. "My name is Steve Carstairs." The grin faded from the man's face and he stared at me and then studied my car.

"Then why are you driving Martie's car?" he demanded.

"*I am not driving Martie's car,*" I enunciated as if talking to an idiot. "It's my car. Now, if you could fix it, I'd really appreciate it."

"Sure, whatever you say." Tom shrugged and went about the business of hooking up my car to his tow truck. "You need a ride to a motel or something?"

Great! Now the guy is mad at me, and he'll charge me double for whatever's really wrong with my car.

"Look, I'm sorry I was so snippy with you before, but you were the second person in this town who thought they knew me. It just made me feel pretty weird."

"Right." Tom's eyes were focused on my license plate, but he finally turned back to me. "That's okay—I guess everyone has a double, just like they say."

He hopped into the cab and waited while I stood uncertainly before climbing in next to him.

"Do you really think you'll need to keep my car overnight?" I asked him.

"Sorry, bud, but it's almost 3:00. I'll be closing in an hour, and I don't even know what's wrong with your car yet."

"Okay. When you figure out what's wrong, would you check the fluid level, too? I must be burning oil or something because the car's starting to get an odd smell."

"Whatever you say, bud." I had a bad feeling that Tom wasn't using "bud" to be friendly.

Tom stopped the truck at the Restful Nights Motel. At least it wasn't the Bates Motel.

When I entered the lobby, the dyed-platinum blonde with a cigarette dangling from one lip grinned broadly.

"Martie! What are you doin' here? Finally burn down your house with those cigars you been smokin'?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, but I'm not Martie." I held up my hand as she opened her mouth. "I know I look like Martie, but I'm not. I would like a room for the night, and here's my photo license to prove I'm not Martie."

She took my license and squinted at the picture of me above my name.

"Well, I'll be doggone!" she exclaimed. "Sure you ain't his long-lost twin?"

"I seriously doubt it," I replied, but I smiled to soften my comment. "Now, do you have a room for tonight? My car's in the garage until tomorrow."

She sucked deep on her cigarette and smiled back at me. "No problem about the room. This is our slow season." Midsummer is the slow season?

She handed me a key. "The best in the house, and it's only \$49.95 a night."

"Thanks, I'll take it."

When she gave me the directions to the room, I asked. "Uh, don't you want me to sign in or something?"

She waved me off. "No problem, Steve. You're my only guest tonight."

I discovered that "best" was a relative term. The Ritz it was not. Two twin beds covered with grayish spreads, a scratched wooden desk with a 13-inch black-and-white TV, and a small window. I guess that was to enjoy the dusty parking lot and the two-lane blacktop running through town.

The bathroom did have the essentials, like toilet, sink, and shower, so what else could I want? Maybe a towel that wasn't as thin as a tissue? At least I had *two* tissue-thin towels, all for myself! There was also a tiny bar of soap wrapped in paper advertising the Restful Nights Motel.

When I noticed my reflection in the wavy mirror above the sink, I stopped and stared at myself. Who was this Martie that looked just like me?

I rubbed my forehead a little and then pushed back my hair on the right side of my face. There was the bump I had felt earlier today at Hicksville. The skin was split a little, too, and it looked like I'd been in a fight, but I couldn't remember any details. I couldn't even remember why I had been driving through this stupid town.

Despite the heat, I slept well that night. The next morning I accepted the offer of coffee and a doughnut from Platinum. I tried to ignore the waves of smoke rolling at me as she chain-smoked one cigarette after another. I even promised to stop back one day. Then I escaped and coughed out my lungs in the parking lot.

When I reached Tom's garage, Tom was sitting in the sun talking to a heavyset uniformed man. I realized the car pulled up beside them said Sheriff Dept.

"Hey!" I said, trying for the man-to-man hello.

"The good news is that your car is fixed," Tom said. Uh-oh. I knew what was coming next. "So how much are you going to soak me?"

"That's not the problem. The bad news is the sheriff has impounded your car."

"What the hell's going on?" I demanded. My forehead throbbed as I turned to the sheriff.

Rubbing my head, I must have pushed my hair away from the bump. The sheriff asked, "Somebody hit you lately?"

"Don't be ridiculous. I walked into a door at home."

The sheriff guffawed. "That's what they all say." Then he sobered before drawling, "The other good news is that we believe that you're Steve Carstairs."

"Well, it's about time." Somehow the relief I should have felt wasn't there. The sheriff was frowning and shaking his head.

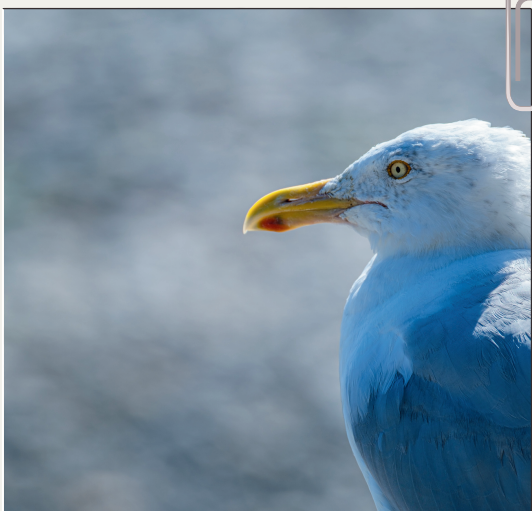
"The bad news is that Martie Cooper's body was in the trunk of your car, along with the tire iron you used to smash his skull."

As I stood there stunned, the sheriff pulled my arms around my back and cuffed me.

"That's impossible," I babbled. "Listen, last night I realized I had amnesia. Someone must have hit me on the head and—"

"I thought you hit your head on a door," the sheriff interrupted. "Save it all for the judge. But remember, the people in this town liked Martie."

The sheriff shoved me toward the police car. No one would ever believe I really couldn't recall what happened, but I realized now I should have just agreed with everyone that I was Martie. ♦



I'LL BE WATCHING YOU

BY DAVID FRYE

MONARCH BUTTERFLY BY VICKIE BABYAK



EYE SPY BY DAVID FRYE



HUMMINGBIRD MOTH BY VICKIE BABYAK



THE 54TH STREET BRUNSY SHOWDOWN

by Joe Potts

The notorious 54th Street brunsy showdown began innocently.

“What do you want for lunch?” my mother asked.

I had walked home from first grade for lunch, as I did every day. The school was only three blocks down cobblestone 54th Street, and it didn’t have a cafeteria. Besides, the nuns needed time to recover before facing the afternoon munchkin onslaught.

“A brunsy sandwich,” I said.

“Brunsy” was our slang for Braunschweiger, that soft spreadable meat-of-sorts wrapped in a casing. I was deep in my Braunschweiger period at the time. Jumbo bologna was passé. That Pittsburgh favorite, chipped ham, was possibly an option, but, well, this was my brunsy period.

The proper way to make a brunsy sandwich was on plain white bread, with a thin coating of yellow mustard. Nothing more. Nothing less. Perfection. My mouth tingled just thinking about it.

Brunsy was popular in Pittsburgh in those days, at least in my Lawrenceville neighborhood. It was the mid-1950s, and like many neighborhoods, mine was ethnically diverse.

There were Irish and English, Italian, German, and many eastern European people, including Polish and Lithuanian. Not that I was aware of such distinctions at that age.

Two of my friends were Jimmy Wisneski and Jimmy Misneski. This amused my grandfather to no end. “Who’re you going to play with today?” he’d ask. “Miz or Wiz?”

He’d ask me this as he tried to teach me to throw a curveball or demonstrated the new slingshot he had made for me. “Be careful with this,” he’d say. “You don’t want to send anyone to the horse pistol.” Brunsy wasn’t his thing, though. He was a roast beef man.

Most of my friends, regardless of national origin, agreed that Braunschweiger was Pittsburgh’s prime rib when it came to kid lunches. One and all would support me in my delicatessen delicacy choice.

“We don’t have any,” my mother said. She seemed genuinely sad, I thought.

I stood silently for a minute and let her words sink in. “But that’s what I want.”

“I’m sorry, dear, we don’t have any,” she said. “I know you love brunsy, but you’ll have to have something else.”

I didn’t understand why she didn’t understand. As parents go, she was usually smart enough. I could feel my brow furrow. She was probably planning to give me a leftover meatloaf sandwich. Probably *cold* leftover meatloaf. She might as well give me a baseball glove sandwich; they’d taste about the same.

“I want a brunsy sandwich, and if I don’t get one, I’m going to go sit up on the hill until I do.”

“Joey, that won’t do any good,” she said. “We still don’t have any brunsy.”

She evidently still didn’t understand. “I’m going up on the hill until I get my brunsy sandwich,” I said.

She must have thought I was bluffing. I showed her! I walked out the kitchen door, through the gate, and up the dead-end part of Duncan Street to the crude dirt steps leading to the hill behind our house.

It occurred to me another option was in play. My grandmother lived only a block away. I could go there for lunch. Hmm . . . I guess I had never actually seen Braunschweiger served in her house. She was my English grandmother, not my German one.

No, stand your ground, I thought. Mom always said to stick to it. I imagine she’s pretty proud of the determination I’m showing.

I felt sure that any minute now, Mom would come out with a brunsy sandwich and beg my forgiveness. I sat and waited. Nothing happened. The house was silent. My mother was silent. I was silent. Finally the silence was broken. My stomach growled.

My scalp prickled from the late September sun. *This isn’t going well, I thought.*

Obviously, I hadn’t thought this through. I learned that day that life is like a game of chess. You need to be thinking three or four moves ahead. I didn’t know anything about chess at the time, though. (And I still don’t know much. But that won’t stop me from making an analogy.)

As my lunchtime ticked away, I realized I had made a poor play. A bad chess gambit. A life blunder.

I pondered my options. Should I concede? Accept an inferior lunch? My stomach voted with a loud grumble. I slowly got up and headed toward the house and humble pie. I opened the gate and went through the kitchen door, not knowing what reception I’d receive.

“I made you a jumbo sandwich, Joey,” my mother said, offering it to me on a plate, complete with my favorite dill pickle.

“Thanks,” I said softly.

She placed the plate on the table. “It’s on plain white bread,” she said. “With a thin coating of yellow mustard.”

At least she had that part right. “OK, I’ll try it,” I said. I took a small bite. I took a bigger bite. It wasn’t bad for something that wasn’t brunsy. I finished it.

Now I could go back to school with a stomach that wasn’t snarling. Maybe Mom was smarter than she had seemed earlier.

“Thanks, Mom,” I said.

“You’re welcome.” She ruffled my hair.

I smiled self-consciously and headed off to another grueling afternoon of first grade.

I learned a lot that day. Perhaps some of the lessons took time to sink in, as might be expected for a six-year-old dullard. As I look back on the infamous 54th Street brunsy showdown, I like to think I adjusted my expectations and attitude.

The reverberations of that faceoff no longer haunt Lawrenceville, but they still echo in my mind. One of the lessons I adhere to, to this very day: If someone’s willing to make you a sandwich, shut up and eat it. With gratitude. ♦



MORNING WATCH BY DAVID FRYE

PUNCH'S FRIEND



JOHN L. NACCARATO MEMORIAL AWARD

Sponsored by Michele Jones

The LVW Student Poetry contest recognizes the best poem within each grade category. To ensure fairness across age groups, three “best of the best” awards were established—allowing younger students, such as those in fourth grade, to be evaluated separately from high schoolers. Many students who win in the younger grades continue to participate in the contest throughout their academic careers.

These awards are generously sponsored by longtime member Michele Jones in memory of her grandfather, John L. Naccarato. His passion for poetry continues to inspire a new generation of young poets across southwestern Pennsylvania.

These are the top three winners of the LVW’s 36th Annual Student Poetry Contest.

Congratulations to them and to all the winners.

The Best of the Best in Grades 4-6

Beautiful Night

by Ariella Gunn

Ligonier Valley Middle School, Grade 6

velvet ink above
silent stars spill frozen fire
night drinks in the light

The Best of the Best in Grades 7-9

Love Language

by Van Bobby

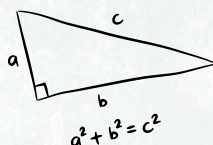
Somerset Area Junior High School, Grade 7

Not wanting to be MEAN or to seem OBTUSE,
But some who know you shout “Abuse!”
Me? I think you’re ACUTE subject. For real!
In my experience, you have RADICAL appeal!

Sure, you can be IRRATIONAL from time to time,
And your PI is inedible, but that’s no crime.
Your TANGENTS are things many may resent,
But I love you despite the PROBLEMS you present.

If you’re looking for PROOF of my affection,
Something that would MULTIPLY our connection,
Slip me your DIGITS (no IMAGINARY NUMBERS, please!),
And this opportunity, I’d be happy to seize!

What’s the PROBABILITY that I’ll love you always and forever?
Well, to interact with you daily would be my loveliest endeavor.
You’ve been the bedrock of KNOWLEDGE in many societies.
That’s why I love you, Math, in all your varieties!



$$X = \frac{-b \pm \sqrt{b^2 - 4ac}}{2a}$$

The Best of the Best in Grades 10-12

Flickering Years

by Caylin Raymond

Southmoreland High School, Grade 11

The clocks were soft then
They ticked in rhythm with dandelion breath
And the slow tilt of a worn swing.
Late afternoons pooled gold
Now the seconds pass
Time is pounding
Behind my ribs
Messy and uncounted.
We buried worlds in the dirt
Certain they would wait for us.
Now the air tastes faintly
Of something left on the stove too long
The same afternoon light shining through dust
Like years suspended in still air.
Sometimes memory warms
Without flame,
A small flicker hidden in the lining of an old coat
And I carry it
Careful not to notice
How small it's become.

MEMBERSHIP INFO

Ligonier Valley Writers is an all-volunteer nonprofit that has served writers and readers throughout western Pennsylvania since 1986.

To join LVW and receive discounts on events, download a membership application from lvwonline.org and mail it to LVW, PO Box B, Ligonier, PA 15658. Dues are still only \$30 per year.

STUDENT POETRY AWARDS

Ligonier Valley Writers has sponsored the Student Poetry Contest for grades 4-12 since 1991.

The contest judges award first, second, and third cash prizes in each of nine categories. They also identify a Best of the Best poem in each grade grouping (grades 4-6, 7-9, and 10-12).

The student poets receive prizes and read their poems to an appreciative audience at an annual awards ceremony held at the Greensburg Barnes & Noble.

Photos of the students along with their poems can be viewed at both lvwonline.org and LVW's Facebook page.

Thanks to all of the students who entered, the contest sponsors, and the teachers who encouraged their students to participate.

FLASH FICTION CONTEST

There's still time to enter the **Flash Fiction Contest**. The deadline is August 15.

This year's topic is: *What's behind the door?*

There's no fee to enter. LVW offers three cash prizes, three Honorable Mentions, and publication on the website. Previous winners are featured on the website.

Readings of the six winning stories will be performed shortly before Halloween.

STAY UP TO DATE

For details on events as they become available, visit lvwonline.org. Email info@lvwonline.org to get on LVW's email list.

LVW Calendar 2026

AUG 15

Deadline for Flash Fiction Contest submissions.

AUG 30

Annual LVW picnic. John and Sukey Jamison have generously invited LVW to hold our annual potluck picnic and readings at their farm near Crabtree.

OCT TBA

Keep your eyes peeled for more information about our upcoming murder mystery fundraiser!

OCT TBA

Readings of the winning Flash Fiction stories at local venues.

DEC 6

Annual LVW holiday party. Potluck and readings from guests' writing. St. Michael's of the Valley Church, Rector.

Please check lvwonline.org or the LVW Facebook page for the latest information about events, contests, and publications.

GET INVOLVED

Event Planning
Fundraising
Publicity

Have a skill that you're looking to share?
Contact info@lvwonline.org
for ways to participate!

CONTRIBUTORS

RACHEL ALLEN

Rachel Allen is a survivor and a community activist. Her mission is to foster healthy, joyful communities by sharing tools for healing, empowerment, and self-expression. Rachel and her husband live in Johnstown, PA, along with their mischievous Japanese Chin. Her writing has been featured in *Hags on Fire*, *Northern Appalachia Review*, and *Long Shot Books*. She is a member of the Christians Practicing Yoga blog team and the author of *Blessings Beyond Bypass*.

ABRAHAM AONDOANA

Abraham Aondoana is a writer, poet, and novelist. He is a recipient of Idembeka Creative Writing Workshop 2026. His poem was shortlisted for Interwoven Anthology (Renard Press). His works have been published in *Kalahari Review*, *Prosetrics magazine*, *Rough Diamond Poetry*, *The Cat Poetry Anthology*, and *IHTOV*.

SAUMYA ASHITA

Saumya Ashita is a pharmacy graduate with an interest in the healthcare domain. Alongside her academic pursuits, she writes reflective poetry inspired by nature, human behavior, and philosophical ideas about balance, ethics, and humanity.

VICKIE BABYAK

Vickie Babyak is married and has three adult daughters and three grandchildren. She is a retired special education paraprofessional, freelance photographer, and writer from Dravosburg.

MATTHEW BETTI

Matthew Betti is a professor of math and computer science in New Brunswick, Canada. His short fiction has appeared in magazines like *A Thin Slice of Anxiety* and *The Antigone Review*.

PIPER BJERKE

Piper Bjerke is a writer based in Texas whose work explores themes of change and internal conflict. She is currently completing her BFA in creative writing at Stephen F. Austin State University.

MADELINE BOLES

Madeline Boles is a writer of poetry and prose living in Brooklyn, New York. Her short story "Cheese Day" will be published in *Stand magazine* in 2026.

MILO BROWN

Milo Brown (they/them) is a poet, artist, and recent Chateau Orquevaux resident. They have published poems in *Eunoia Review* and *The Pill* magazine. You can find them on Instagram @milo_brown_poetry.

MARGE BURKE

Marge Burke has been published locally and has two books published. She has a master's in writing popular fiction from Seton Hill University (2001). Her hobbies are historic research and volunteering at Historic Hanna's Town. She currently works part time at Pinnacle Auto Sales in Jeannette.

JIM BUSCH

Jim Busch passed away in February 2026. "Euphemisms" was the last poem that he wrote. It was read at his burial upon his request. He was a longtime member and president of LVW and enjoyed coming up with creative pieces to make people think and feel something deep inside. He was married to the love of his life, Glenda, for 49 years before her passing in 2021. He is survived by his children, Jesse Busch and Rachael Morgan, their spouses, and his beloved grandson, Max Busch.

NANCY CLARK

Nancy Clark and her hubby, Tom, rejoice in 65 years of marriage, the company and support of dear friends, and the priceless love of a growing family—which now includes the blessing of six great-grandchildren. Life is good, and they are grateful.

ROD CROSS

Rod Cross is retired but has landed another great job at Fallingwater in Mill Run, PA. An avid fly fisher and conservationist, he is a member of the Chestnut Ridge Chapter of Trout Unlimited and on the Board of the Pennsylvania Fly Fishing Museum in Carlisle. His stories are lifted from journals that he has kept for over fifty years.

CECILIA FRYE

Cecilia Frye, a California native, loves everything about art. From the moment her mother put a crayon in her hand, she knew art would be a part of life forever. Her inspiration comes from all over—from the news, from nature, from her travels, and from her family. She is partial to whimsical watercolors and loves to use color to bring a canvas to life.

DAVID FRYE

David Frye is a national award-winning photographer and photojournalist. One of his many cameras is always at hand to capture moments in real time. His true passion is nature photography, and his sharp eye for detail helps bring his work to life. His love for God's creation shows through his art, and he hopes each piece allows his audience to connect to the universe.

SARA FRYE

Sara Frye is inspired by words, tea, and chocolate. She's devoted to her soul-dog, Lady Shelby, and thankful for her husband, David. She feels music transcends all boundaries. She is a light-seeker and a light-bearer and believes that light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it.

JOHN GREY

John Grey is an Australian poet and U.S. resident, recently published in *Shift*, *Trampoline*, and *Flights*. His latest books, *Bittersweet*, *Subject Matters*, and *Between Two Fires*, are available through Amazon. He has work upcoming in *Levitate*, *White Wall Review* and *Willow Review*.

JESSIE ANNE HARRISON

Jessie Anne Harrison is a poet from Houston, TX. She has an MFA in creative writing from Arcadia University and balances a multi-hyphenate lifestyle of teaching, writing, acting, and art. A catalog of her published work can be found on allthebestjess.wordpress.com

F. J. HARTLAND

F. J. Hartland holds an MFA in playwriting from Carnegie Mellon University, where he was a Shubert Fellow. His works have been seen across the United States and Canada, as well as England, Ireland, Australia, Italy, South Korea, Ukraine, and Mexico. He has made a record-setting nineteen appearances in the Pittsburgh New Works Festival.

ERIN JAMIESON

Erin Jamieson's (she/her) writing has been published in over 100 literary magazines and nominated twice for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net. She is the author of four poetry chapbooks, including *Fairytales* (Bottle Cap Press) and a historical novel, *Sky of Ashes, Land of Dreams* (Type Eighteen Books).

ANDREA JANOV

Andrea Janov believes in the beauty of the ordinary, the power of the vernacular, and the history of the abandoned. Her work reveals the art in what we see, say, do, ignore, and forget every day. She has published in several journals and has two collections out in the world. andreajanov.com.

JANET KENDRA

Janet Kendra discovered her passion for writing after retiring from the nursing profession in 2020. She loves participating in Osher Lifelong Learning Institute classes, takes banjo lessons, and enjoys photography and watercolor painting. Originally from St. Louis, MO, she lives in Greensburg, PA, with her family.

CANDACE KUBINEC

Candace Kubinec is a poet and photographer from Greensburg. Along with *The Loyalhanna Review*, she has had poetry published in various anthologies, including the *Pennsylvania Poetry Society Prize Poems*. Her photography has been published in *Ink in Thirds* and *Black & White* magazine.

SHONTAY LUNA

Shontay Luna is the author of four chapbooks, most recently *The Goddess Journal*. Writing credits include *Misfit Magazine*, *Blue Lake Review*, and *Brittle Paper*, among others. After majoring in poetry at Columbia College Chicago, she remains there with her pens and notebooks. See her published work on Instagram @shontayluna

KIMBERLY McELHATTEN

Kimberly McElhatten's work appears in *South 85*, *Red Branch Review*, *Unlost*, and *Touchstone*, where she won the Spring Poetry Prize. She edits at *Brevity* and *Fourth River* magazines and directs the WCoNA Book of the Year selection. She is a past participant of the Tupelo Press 30/30 Project and the Fallingwater Residency in Nature and Place-Based Writing.

BELLA MELARDI

Bella Melardi is a poet and author. She writes about the political and the personal. She attends OCAD U.

KAREN NAGY

Karen Nagy is a Greensburg-born singer, instrumentalist, and music professor in south Florida. She is the proud author of *[Girl]friend of Bill: 12 Things you Need to Know About Dating Someone in Recovery* (Hazelden, 2014). Longing for home, she's now back in Greensburg for summers and holidays, along with her big old hound, Lizzie.

CITHARA PATRA

Cithara Patra currently lives in North Carolina. They've written for a few literary journals including *Poetries in English*, *Instant Noodles*, and *50 Word Stories*. In their spare time, they travel, solve logic puzzles, and check out local restaurants.

JOE POTTS

Joe Potts is a retired engineer. His articles have appeared in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, the *Tribune-Review*, the *Laurel Mountain Post*, and *The Loyalhanna Review*. His SF-tinged fiction is on the WAOB Audio Theatre (podcast, YouTube). He lives in Unity with his wife, Susan, and feline literary critic Sofia.

SUSAN POTTS

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

TAMMY RULLO

Tammy Rullo is a teacher, writer, poet, writing consultant, and a Western Pennsylvania Writing Project fellow currently living in Pittsburgh.

ED SCHAD

Ed Schad is a writer and art curator living in Los Angeles. He has published widely, including in the *L.A. Review of Books*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *The Blue-Collar Review*, *Rue Scribe*, *The Broken Teacup*, *The Blue Moon Review*, *The Nonconformist*, and *Frieze*. His first collection of poetry, *Letters Apart*, was published by Dopplehouse Press in 2023.

KUMAR SEN

Kumar Sen is a mathematician from India. His writing explores cultural reflection, misrecognition, and the strange logic of ordinary life. He is also a musician, composer, and bibliophile.

ALICIA STANKAY

Alicia Stankay is a writer living in Ambridge, PA. She has been writing poems and short stories since she was twelve. Alicia's first book is called *Between Two Bears*.

MOLLY STEENHOVEN

Molly Steenhoven is a student at an international school in Idaho. She spends her time reading, watching movies, and exploring public lands.

JESSICA TURKO

Jessica Turko was born and raised in Western Pennsylvania. She attended one of the first Ligonier Valley Writers Conferences while she was a student at Greensburg Central Catholic High School. She lives with her family in the suburbs of New York City and is a technology transactions attorney.

PAUL TURTZER

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

LOUISE VRABLE

Louise Vrable is a retired teacher. She is a member of the Greensburg Art Club and has been doing watercolor painting for many years. She has dabbled in many art forms all her life.

THE LOYALHANNA REVIEW STAFF

BRITTANY LUCZKI-STULTZ

Brittany Luczki-Stultz, a Christian mother of four with a background in veterinary medicine. She owns and operates her own business, The Vet Tech Unleashed, as well as other online businesses. She also helps part-time at her children's school, The Westmoreland Christian Academy.

JEAN PODRALSKI

Jean Podralski, winner of the 2024 Ruth McDonald Award for Fan Favorite, is a poet living in Greensburg. Her writing has appeared in *The Loyalhanna Review* and the *MockingHeart Review*. You can also find her at jeanpodralski.substack.com.

JANET BRUNOZZI

Janet Brunozzi has lived in Hempfield Township most of her life. She is married to her husband, Dan, and has 2 children and 3 grandsons. Janet most recently worked at Westmoreland County Community College. She enjoys reading, traveling, and volunteering at the Palace Theater.

REBECCA E. DUNN

Throughout her life, books have been Rebe's source of comfort, ridicule, employment, enjoyment, and danger. (Spoilers!) As current board president of the Ligonier Valley Writers and Editor-in-Chief of *The Loyalhanna Review*, she hopes to find new ways to engage the community in LVW's mission to serve readers and writers.

JUDITH GALLAGHER

Judith Gallagher is working on the third book of a quintet called *Tales from Tír na nÓg*, reimaginings of ancient Irish myths. Books 1 and 2, *Into the Rainbow* and *Brigid's Cauldron*, are available on Amazon. Judith worked in Chicago publishing for 15 years, then moved home to the Laurel Highlands.

STEVIE BONINE

Stevie Bonine is a graphic designer and writer from Export, PA. In her free time, she enjoys propagating plants and crocheting. Her dogs, Riley and Oliver, assisted greatly in the emotional support process of completing the design of *The Loyalhanna Review*.



YOU CALLED? BY CANDACE KUBINEC

