

# TideWriters Tales

Volume I

Issue 1



Jeremy Peill

**A rolling selection of  
Fiction, Non-Fiction,  
Short Stories, Essays and Poems  
by the Rappatomac Writers.**

## Table of Contents

### SEASONS

A Day at the Beach by Mike Barden .....	3
The Cold Front by Mike Barden .....	4
I Set My Clock Today by Dave Miles .....	5
A Windy Morning by Mike Barden .....	6
Sweet Summer Day by Don Loop .....	7
Canada Geese----for Billy in Afghanistan by Mary Duley Guy .....	8
The Breath of Autumn by Mike Barden .....	9
A Morning Hunt by Mike Barden.....	10
Winter On Cockrell's Creek by Don Loop .....	11
A Long, Lonely Way Home by Mort Payne .....	12
The Ache by RuthE Forrest.....	14
Down In The Dumps by Jeremy Peill.....	18
Cap'n Jack by Dave Miles .....	19
Ask A Silly Question by Jeremy Peill.....	20
My Computer has a First Name by Rob Ransone.....	21
Porridge by Jeremy Peill .....	22
Fallen Whispers by RuthE Forrest .....	23
Life Is So Unfair by Jeremy Peill .....	24
On A Winter's Day (The Ice Storm) by Dorothy Alves Holmes.....	25
The Letter by Mike Barden.....	26
Priceless Gifts by RuthE Forrest .....	27
Social Boons by Jeremy Peill .....	28
Below the Belt~A Cleanser Contract by Sean Gates.....	30
Downturn Hits Toy Town by Jeremy Peill .....	32
History Repeats Itself by Maggie Lyons.....	33

### TIDEWRITERS CREATURES AND CRITTERS

Not Henry James by Jeremy Peill.....	34
Trust Me by RuthE Forrest .....	35
Decade by Alessa Leming .....	36
The Bitch by Alessa Leming.....	36
As Advertized by Jeremy Peill .....	37
Sam's Psychic Dog by Jeremy Peill.....	38
Doggy Rain by Alessa Leming.....	39
Rescue by Llewellyn Ott.....	40
The Great American Frog Rescue by Janet Abbott Fast .....	42
Close Encounters Of A Slithery Kind by Janet Abbott Fast .....	44
Another Frog Story by Janet Abbott Fast.....	46

### LIFE AND DEATH

Last Night I had a Martini by Rob Ransone .....	48
Dinger, RIP by Janet Abbott Fast.....	50
The Tragedy Of Tweed by Jeremy Peill.....	52
Lies, Lies, All Lies by Jeremy Peill .....	53
Witness by Jeremy Peill.....	54

# A Day at the Beach

Mike Barden

**W**hen the “hum drum” business of living begins to lose some of its luster, let me suggest a tarnish remover that works for me. Arm yourself with a tube of sun block and a fold-out chair, and spend a day at the beach—like I did yesterday. When I chose my spot and settled into the beach chair, I was immediately impressed by it. Who could possibly imagine that such a simple arrangement of rods and canvas could be so comfortable? I wiggled my naked toes in the warm, soothing sand and gazed, like a spellbound child, at the beautiful world in front of me.

I’d probably have snoozed a bit in the delicious caress of sunshine and breeze, but I couldn’t take my eyes off of the shining Gulf of Mexico that was spread out before me. The water was undulating with low, wide swells that traveled slowly across its surface from some unknown beginning far beyond the horizon. One could surmise that the movement itself would be what fosters such fascination—such enchantment. One might think, perhaps, that we’re all a little like a cat when he watches a small creature scamper about, but I believe it’s the magic of the liquid itself that binds us. I have no doubt—that life did, indeed, begin in the sea. I’ve watched the water swallow the evening sun, when there was no motion, when the surface was so flat, smooth and reflective, that I expected to see Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing across it. Diana and I have sailed the Chesapeake and the Atlantic for years together. We live on the water, and the luster of it is just as captivating to us today as it was when her hair was the color of a shinny, new penny and I had some hair on the top of my head.

I watched gas guzzling speedboats smash their way across it, destroying the rhythm of the swells and leaving a trail of sparkling foam. The water soon regains its composure, though; it devours the scar and obliterates all evidence of the trespass. Power boaters are a hardy lot. Some of them travel straight out, to search for grouper in the deep canyons, many miles offshore.

I also studied the tall sailing vessels, with gracefully curving white sheets pushing them through the surface, as they plod their way from one horizon to the next. They remind me of ballerinas that glide in the background of a dance from stage right to stage left. One cannot help but wonder about their voyage. What distant port they hail out of, and if they’ll spend tonight anchored in some quiet cove. Do they have a nice steak and a crispy salad aboard for their supper? I hope they brought a good bottle of wine along. No proper sailboat should ever leave the slip without life preservers and a bottle of port or sherry cooling in the bilge.

The shoreline was alive with seabirds, but the pelicans are always the ones to watch. Whether it’s a single hunter, diving like a warplane for a minnow, or a squadron stroking by with their wingtips almost dipping the water, they’re a great deal more articulate than their overweight, clownish design suggests. The little waves came upon the shore, with gurgling sounds, so quiet that one needed to strain to hear them. They spread their life-giving wetness out across the sand, and the sandpipers scurried about, dipping long, sharp beaks into it.

I watched people—families with chubby little, brown skinned children. There was a lad, barely out of diapers, who built such fine sand castles, that, someday he may rival Donald Trump, and a darling little girl, who bubbled in lilting Spanish, but her bright brown eyes and her squeals of delight were universal in any language. Ugly, old men walked by, with pot bellies and hairy backs, and younger guys, with muscles. Some of the girls had polluted their skin with tattoos that they wore like dull, blue, ill-designed, jewelry, but one young lady, in particular, swayed by with a rhythm every bit as sweet and smooth as the water itself. She could have carried a jug of water on the top of her head and never spilled a drop. The sight of her liquid motion was a treat.

I’ll sleep like a baby tonight, because this has been a long and happy day.

If one needs a bolt or a bucket, he can go to a hardware store. If one is hungry, he can go to a restaurant, but, if one needs to recharge his batteries and to put some new sparkle into his life, he should go and spend a day at the beach.

# The Cold Front

Mike Barden

February 8th

Only a man confronted with an important quest would crawl out of his warm bed at three o'clock in the morning but that's exactly what I did. I dressed, stumbled to the kitchen and put some coffee on. I was, indeed, a man on a mission; a mission important enough to drive a sleepy old troll, like myself, out into the night at such an unheard of hour and on such a dreadful night. My Queen had a problem and I felt bound and determined to rescue her. After half a century together, I suppose that sort of thing becomes a second nature to a husband. She was a thousand miles away, slumbering comfortably in the tropical arms of Southwest Florida—but the car that I had left there for her wasn't quite so content. It wouldn't start. She was in no immediate danger but her groceries would soon be running low, and, of course, there was always the possibility that some emergency need for the car could arise. I couldn't leave her in such a pickle—so, I closed the house up and headed down the back steps toward my car at four in the morning. Through the shrieking wind I could hear the heavy waves breaking against my shoreline in front of the house, as I climbed into a bitter cold automobile and started out, alone, into the black night.

After two hours, I had bypassed Richmond and joined the infamous route I 95. I was speeding down the eastern seaboard, and the darkness around me was still broken only by patches of gray fog and pierced occasionally by the lights of other cars. The traffic was growing, because morning was coming, and I was glad to welcome the light of it. As the lumpy clouds began to show themselves, I was careening down the interstate with the little car purring like a well oiled sewing machine. I settled back into the driver's seat and adjusted the temperature around me to keep the terrible cold outside where it belonged. After a dry piece of leftover pizza, a cup of coffee from the thermos and two boisterous verses of "Carolina in the Morning," my body was beginning to rise to the occasion and face the oncoming day. Actually, I was feeling rather good about myself. The trip had a cost, in dollars for fuel and the human effort required to drive so many miles, but the rewards of my venture far outweighed the cost. I felt a bit smug about it, because of the picture in my mind. Soon, I would be sitting beside my lady in a fold-out, deck chair on a sandy beach. I'd be sipping a glass of iced tea, with a wedge of lemon in it, or a cold beer from one of those tall, sweaty, long neck bottles, while we chattered and relaxed in a breeze that had traveled a hundred miles over blue Gulf Stream waters just to find the most tantalizing temperature for our personal enjoyment.

My "dream picture" was a reasonable assumption, but in my naive happiness, I couldn't see the whole picture. I was like a lone outlaw, galloping contentedly across the badlands, without knowing that a sheriff's posse was gathering to pursue me. A massive cold front was swirling over the ice and gathering bitter cold temperatures, somewhere high on the brow of our planet and it was contriving evil plans to interfere with my beautiful picture. It was several days behind me, but it was following me with insidious tenacity.

I crossed the Carolinas in my own, isolated corridor. Friendly, progressive people were all around me, but on highway I 95, I may as well have been in an underground tunnel or riding the jet stream, miles above them. I watched them go about their daily lives as I went speeding by, but no connection, not even a smile, passed between us.

The first sight of Spanish Moss always marks a new frontier, and old "Stephen Foster" songs carried me for at least a hundred miles after I saw some, hanging from an ancient tree. By the time I reached a rest stop in Georgia, only a light jacket was required while I was outside the car. Clearly, I wasn't in my destination yet, but I was getting closer.

I arrived at my doorstep in Florida, tired and bedraggled, at about 10:30 that night. I was, indeed a shriveled reduction of the hardy soul that had left Virginia so many miles and so many hours before. Perhaps, by then, I was somewhat less the "gallant white knight" and more the weary old husband, but, even then, I could see and hear the palms swaying and rustling in the moonlight above me. The balmy breeze caressed my shoulders and I stood, happily, for a moment to languish at my doorstep

before I went inside and crashed for a solid eight hours of sweet oblivion. I was finally secure and content in my second home. The next day, I spent unpacking, fixing her car, and recuperating.

Meanwhile, the curling mass of frigid, Arctic air had organized into a major winter disturbance, and had stormed across our nation's northern border with unstoppable impunity. Its icy breath blew over Montana and the Dakotas, and they reeled beneath the onslaught. It meandered southward, leaving a trail of heavy snow and misery. With the appetite of a massive ameba, it enveloped whole states in dangerously cold weather as it sashayed at will on a crooked path down through the middle of our country. Just as I had begun to settle into my tropical routine, it turned eastward. It overtook me as I sat, innocently, in my beloved deck chair, with my bare knees and bald head soaking up the precious vitamin D, from the sky. The breeze that fluttered across me carried a chill as cold and biting as the words of an angry woman. I gathered my gear, folded my chair and retreated to the cottage.

We'll have to spend tonight cooped up my tiny citadel. We'll eat a fine supper, probably make hot chocolate and popcorn. We'll laugh and chatter together, while the cold wind howls it's evil course over our peninsula paradise and then, goes off to make the Bahamians shiver. Perhaps tomorrow, I shall stand again in flip-flops and shirt sleeves and enjoy the tingling warmth of golden, Florida sunshine.

Life is good!

## I Set My Clock Today

Dave Miles

Spring made a promise to me today. Brushing my cheek with a breeze,  
Warm and soft like a sleeping baby's breath. Carried by that gentle wind,  
I hear an urgent sound, a bell that rings and sings to me.  
Take notice of that measured beat. It is the subtle, textured sound  
Of time and without consent it pushes me relentlessly onward.

I shield my eyes from the summer sun. Brilliance is its promise.  
The bright and dark often ignored, like the crying of a child.  
Do I hear my call for help, a chilling chime ringing only to me?  
I think not. Time fills my room, darkened by the brightness outside,  
and I grope for the missing hours as they paw my blinded eyes.

I set my wintry clock today, and the hands refuse to move.  
Dumbfounded, I watch the dial, as if it is to blame for freezing time.  
Is it my turn to hear the fear? Do I want to see the future?  
I don't think so. It is easier for me to watch the face of a frozen clock,  
than to know when winter's wrath will bother me no more.

# A Windy Morning

Mike Barden

I left my bed and dressed in the blue darkness this morning to enjoy another day and I heard the wind whistling and moaning, like a pipe organ, outside of my cottage. As the sky filled with light, I saw dark clouds scudding by the boiling surface of a shuffling Potomac River. The water was churning and rolling with harsh winds, from every direction. Every leaf on every tree was shivering and trembling as it clung on for dear life to the branch that nourished it. I watched ospreys and graceful, white terns with their long wings arched as they piloted back and forth, over the water, looking desperately for a fishy morsel. I wondered if the tiny minnows appreciate how much safer they are when the water's surface above them is in such an active state. They wouldn't stand a chance if they swam near the top on a calm day, when the surface is smooth, glossy, and so much more clear.

From a side window, I can see "our resident eagle" as he sits, like a statue. He's watching a grassy field from his stately perch, high on the dead limb of a massive oak tree. He doesn't seem to mind the wind ruffling up a feather now and then. Like the others, he'll probably go hungry this morning. It's not easy to spot the movements of a delicious mouse or a tender toad when every blade of grass is dancing wildly.

I'm not a bird. I'm a sleepy, old man—but, by this time, I can hear my coffee pot doing its gurgling thing that's saying "you can pour a cup now." I shall grease my pan with a pork chop and fold an egg in the heat of it until I see it cooked to that perfect point that suits my frivolous fancy and I'll expect the toaster to crisp my bread, just the way I like it.

How grand it will be to sit in spoiled decadence and eat my breakfast while I watch the poor creatures around me work so hard for theirs.

It's good to be a guy, on a morning like this.

# Sweet Summer Day

## Don Loop

A stream of water noisily  
Laboring o'er the bottom stones,  
As where the creek widens and  
Shallow water bumps into the rocks,  
And reflecting sun, goes on its  
Chuckling way.  
What is abrasive in just water  
That makes the stones so smooth?

Isn't love like that?  
Much softer than the dawning day,  
It smooths the burrs of heart away,  
Like puffy kittens in a pile,  
A sunny walk, a walk, and hollyhocks  
That dreams us from life's guile.

But, where can love be found?  
In golden bands that hitch us to  
The plough of life?  
Which drawing, outward bound,  
Deceives sweet love's intent?

Where has love removed?  
Decended like the water of the  
Stream, oceanbound from whence  
Be born again from clouds of rain?  
Is love recycled? (Would it hurry!)  
Where have all the poets gone?  
How long to suffer this love drought?

Above the stream this summer day,  
A thousand minute insects swarm  
Transformed by fancy into fairies,  
Sinking me in dreams, where Omar's  
Just a glass of wine away.  
In the poet's pen love's safe.  
And I can wake.

# Canada Geese-----for Billy in Afghanistan

Mary Duley Guy

## I

When you were just a little boy, year after year,  
in the silence of morning, we watched Canada Geese  
like house guests, like old friends return to your  
grandfather's farm. And year after year, you jumped  
up and down and squealed like the happy cricket you were,

"the geese are here mom, the geese are here."

Then once again, we glued our noses to the window,  
intoxicated by exotic dancers who wove symphonies  
through honey colored fields to the pond. And later, when  
blackberries and honeysuckle bloomed, goslings were born  
and bathed in the shelter of their mother's arms.

And you and your sisters raced like Appaloosa's to the pond  
inhaling the sweet chocolate of childhood, the crescendo  
of Arias as you tumbled the marsh,

and captured fireflies in mayonnaise jars.

## II

And as the years passed, we watched Canada Geese come  
and go as if they were floating on stars; and I watched you hunt  
and fish and savor your first teenage kiss as you soared lean  
and long and race triathlons as if you were Lance Armstrong.

One day, in the stillness of dawn, as the leaves tangoed  
outside our kitchen door, you lifted your wings like the Canada  
Geese and flew high above your grandfather's farm to college,  
Afghanistan and beyond.

And once again, I embraced the water color of your life:  
the marathons you'd won, the brave warrior and son you'd become.  
And in the distance, I faintly heard you call,

"the geese are here mom, the geese are here."



# The Breath of Autumn

Mike Barden

**Y**esterday afternoon, I stood near the water's edge and looked across the Potomac River. The silver surface of the water was shimmering in the afternoon sunlight. It was a moving field of diamonds that glittered and danced in changing patterns and the sharp brilliance of each tiny, flashing penlight combined to overwhelm my eyes with brightness, but, with the help of my sunglasses, I gazed at it for as long as I could. I was entranced by the beauty and the constant motion; just as intensely as one might be while watching a campfire or as a cat might be when he stares at some small, unfortunate creature.

But yesterday soon became a very special day. Yesterday, something different happened. The gentle breeze that bathed me didn't feel the same. It was tainted with a trace of discomfort. It was cold! It made me feel chilly. No coat has been draped over my back for several months, but as I stood there, I felt a need for one. I felt the hairs on my bare arms standing at attention. Goose pimples were probably holding them up. When I turned my back on the beautiful water, it was not because of the glare but because of the shiver that ran across my shoulders. The water that was softly lapping with a shushing sound against the shoreline was whispering something to me and I had to stand perfectly still for another minute to hear what it was saying. It was whispering "Autumn is coming, Autumn is coming." As I began to step away, along the pathway that leads back up from the river bank, the activity of my climb warmed me. My body became more comfortable but the message that burned in my heart was clear. Another season, with all its joys and pains was coming to a close. The dry leaves on the oak trees overhead were trembling in the breeze as I walked below them and their crackling seemed to be telling me the same fact. That change, with all its mettlesome interventions, was in the air and would be approaching soon.

The grain crops have all grown and gone and the neat lines of tiny, green, corn sprouts, row upon row, acre after acre, have all grown tall and begin to dry where they stand. The great, green combines with their noise and dust clouds, have already splintered and scattered most of the brittle, tan stalks and collected their bounty of golden kernels by now. The rolling fields of dark, green soybean bushes are already yellowing and will soon be harvested. I've seen clumps of bachelor buttons standing along the roadsides in such numbers that they added a heavy blue haze to the landscape—but they've all disappeared more than a month ago. A few pokeweed plants can still manage to stand upright, but their plump, deep purple berries have withered and shrunk into nothing more than little, black raisins. Only a few of the colorful, wild morning glories remain to stand out like jewels scattered among the tangled roadside weeds. Dutifully, they've opened and closed with the coming of each new day—but soon now, they will wilt into oblivion, back into the rich earth, and they will exist only in the tiny seeds that hold their hope for life in another year.

Our civilization has been built around the rhythm of changing seasons. Long ago people learned to become more productive when they realized that only those who had prepared for the lean months ahead were able to survive them. Any change that brings about a gain also seems to involve some discomforting loss. Those of us who are fortunate enough to enjoy the mellow serenity of our quiet, mature years do so only at the loss of our more vibrant, youthful ones.

I shall smile at the sight of the rich blue skies that only autumn can bring and I will bask in the delicious warm air on my cold ankles when the car heater begins to function in the chill of the mornings to come, but it is unlikely that my soul will sing as joyfully as it will in the springtime at the sight of the first jonquils. Indeed, the coming of fall has an exciting freshness about it, a crisp newness about it, but the change will be bittersweet when I remember the summer that has passed forever.

# A Morning Hunt

Mike Barden

I'd planned my hunt carefully, right down to the last detail, but when I pulled off the old dirt road and parked, I found that the morning wasn't quite as ready to begin as I was. Darkness was still everywhere. I waited a few minutes for the sky to soften, but the night seemed in no hurry to end and I was anxious to get started. Looking back on the situation, one wonders why I'd want to leave a warm, comfortable car and step outside into a cold, alien world of pitch black night. Everything around me was shrouded in deep, dark mystery.

I dutifully set out on the trail and followed the dim splash of light from my flashlight in front of me and I was concentrating within that little lighted space and trying to keep my footing when some creature, probably a rabbit, decided to jump up, right beside me. He thrashed through the bushes noisily as he moved away and he certainly got my attention. At that moment, I figured that he was, at least, a grizzly bear. But I persevered, and, with all the nerve I could muster, I continued, clutching my shotgun in one hand and the flashlight in the other. Already, my hunt had become an exciting adventure, and later, where the trail skirts around a swamp, a bullfrog, that had to be as big as a hippopotamus, jumped into the water, with a loud plop, but I suppose I had become a hardened veteran by then. It didn't faze me.

By the time I settled down on my favorite deer hunting spot. I was wide awake and I was proud of myself to have managed to stay on the trail and not bump into any trees getting there. I couldn't see it yet, but I knew that right in front of me was a well worn deer path and when mister buck came strolling by on his morning constitutional, I planned to be ready for him.

On other days, I would be just getting out of bed at this time, starting to dress, making coffee and doing things around the kitchen. I wouldn't be paying much attention to the appearance of dawn outside my window. How naive we spoiled humans are. This morning, I slowly became aware of a larger picture as I sat and watched the light around me open the small envelope of deep blue that had encapsulated me. Trees that had been hiding in inky blackness began to take shape while I watched. They were reaching upward with extended arms and long, graceful fingers towards the sky. As my eyes began to recognize colors, the carpet of dry, crunchy leaves beneath my boots began to appear brown and the holly trees nearby started to show themselves in deep, glossy green with bright red berries. I was reminded of why the first light of morning was often used in the Bible and other literature to represent new hope after a fearful night. Not a breath of air was stirring around me. The woods were silent. The damp coldness was trying to reach me but it couldn't get through all the layers of clothing that I'd piled on. I was toasty warm and quite comfortable as I sat in my insulated cocoon with no movement or sound to contend with, except the thump of my own heartbeat. I soon had enough light to see clearly, and I was waiting with anticipation, with my trusty old shotgun handy, across my lap. I was watching for that big buck to show himself and I expected to hear his hooves on the dry leaves at any time.

The first noise I heard wasn't from a deer. It was from a boisterous songbird. I have no idea what sort of bird he was—but, obviously, he was a lonely guy. He twittered and chirped in his obnoxious, programmed pattern for all he was worth, and when it produced no answer, he packed up his music and flew away. I understood his problem, but I figured that if a guy expects results, he'll have to be more patient and listen a bit longer for an answer. Perhaps he'll learn. I heard his call a few minutes later, from some distance away in the forest and I figured that he was just making his rounds, checking out the local hangouts, so to speak, to see if there were any new chicks in the area. In my mind, I wished him good luck and if I could have communicated with him, I would have said "Hang in there, Buddy. We've all been there. Keep at it. There's a doll for you, out there somewhere."

I was alone again in the quiet woods and by this time, the morning sun was up and shining. Light was everywhere. Long shafts of it were filtering through the trees and taking away the translucent, velvet frost from my carpet of tawny, brown leaves.

The peaceful silence didn't last very long. A noisy flight of tiny birds flew into, and under, a nearby holly tree. They scratched in the damp leaves for grubs and flittered about in the tree to gobble the shiny red berries. Their

movements were so quick that they seemed to disappear from one twig and, with a flash of wings, reappear on another—an arm's length away—all within the same instant. No one without a photographic mind could have counted them. They didn't stay still long enough. They were minuscule points of vibrant life, fluttering around madly and totally shattering the atmosphere of stillness around them. I wondered how a few berries and bugs could keep the fire going in these little dynamos and how such a small brain could coordinate the strokes of their delicate wings through the maze of branches with such breakneck speed and accuracy. Then—as if by some unseen signal, the entire squadron produced a loud swish of wings as they all flew away to find another restaurant. The little busybodies had dropped in, out of nowhere, and splattered the quiet woods with sound and motion. And now, just as suddenly as they had appeared, they were gone and I was sitting alone again with nothing more than the shafts of yellow sunlight through the trees to keep me company.

Before long, I was beginning to understand what a fidgety wiggle worm I've always been and what a chore it was just to keep still. The heavy clothing had been doing a grand job of keeping me warm but my old carcass was getting stiff. I began to yearn for a sip of hot coffee, so I took a long, careful look at the deer path in front of me before I slowly moved my hand toward the thermos.

Perhaps he heard the rustle of my multi layered clothing, or perhaps he just saw me move. Who knows? All I saw was a flash of waving, white tail. It could have been a doe, but then, it could have also been the biggest buck in the county and he may have been watching me for a long time. We had played a game, he and I, and, obviously, he had proven himself to be a great deal better at it than I. I suppose that he had "the home town advantage" because I was on his turf. I can think of all kinds of excuses but none of them really matter. He had bested me. Perhaps I'll eat pork or chicken tonight but I certainly won't be eating venison.

I gathered my gear and left my deer stand. The walk back to my vehicle was a pleasant hike this time, and I leisurely meandered along it. I marveled at the thought that I could have managed to make my way along such a treacherous trail in the darkness.

My morning hunt was over. The whole thing had lasted little more than three or four hours and I suppose one might be tempted to say that it had ended in failure because I hadn't killed a deer. But I didn't feel that way at all. My trek into the forest had allowed me to leave my manicured world of electric lights and sterile atmosphere and spend a bit of time among the trees. I had been entertained all morning with my own personal show of light and life that a TV documentary could hardly match

## Winter On Cockrell's Creek

### Don Loop

On Cock'ell's Creek  
In Feb'ry's blow,  
The winter geese  
Stand in a row,

Like soldiers do  
At morning call:  
Erect, aligned,  
Upstretched and tall.

Their beaks and eyes  
Southeastward bear,  
Awaiting dawn's  
Pink, welcome glare.

You might would think,  
Like ancients' fear  
The're not quite sure  
It will appear.

So, there each day  
Six dozen stand,  
Knee deep in water  
On the sand.

While mortals, we,  
Who rapsodize  
The dawning day,  
Look with surprise

At God's creatures  
Other, just as we,  
In motionless  
Rapt reverie...

Watch.

Black crow flies past  
As night compressed.  
Cold night departs,  
Earth, sun caressed.

# A Long, Lonely Way Home

Mort Payne

**W**orking hard in the heat and humidity all day long. Too tired at night for fun. Too tired to even cook a good meal. After five days of drudgery, I left work early Friday, came home, ate a quick snack and took a nap. By night fall I was very hungry and thirsty for cold beer which I hadn't tasted all week. To prepare, to move into a hopeful mood, I splurged, unwrapping a brand new bar of expensive vegetarian soap untested on animals from Carytown. A VCU with a tattoo on her chest suggested I try it. I said, "You have a tattoo!" She said, "You have a hat." I always used Ivory. In Sharps Wharf in days-gone-by everyone ate salt fish and corn bread on-the-griddle for breakfast, and bathed Saturday night with home-made lye soap, except after the steamboat arrived from Baltimore, our capital, with store-bought soap, in preparation for the square dance Saturday night before church Sunday morning. Mr. Ryland, Superintendent of Schools, allowed dancing on Saturday night, only, like the King & Queen Baptists. He was from King & Queen. I figured the VCU girl knew more about soap than me because she made 1250 on SAT. She works next to the pet food store where my hunting partner buys Northern California organic dog food for his Northern Neck coon dogs.

Ferebees on Friday night! What the Mechanicsville women call the Northern Neck meat market. I might meet somebody. A suburbanite? A comehere? A comeheresuburbanite with cash money?

Ferebees is a 50 minute drive. As I sped enthusiastically along past Thomas Store where the too-narrow two-lane road becomes four lanes I happened to glimpse a large shadow bounding across the wide, grassy medium. I braked hard turning sharply leftward. Too late! I hit the deer on its right rump with my right headlight throwing the deer out of the road across the guard rail. The light went out. I impulsively estimated the cost of repairs. Disappointed and mad, I was acutely aware that my night had changed and that I could do nothing about it. However, raised-up in a family of hunters, I wanted to fulfill my obligation to the deer.

I turned around, and drove back. My thoughts and feelings began to change from my car and me to the deer. It hurt, but it happened. She, too, returned. It wasn't fair for Nancy to bother me at that difficult time. So long ago. It wasn't my fault. She called and called. I should have expected it. Mr. Faulkner at the University said the past is never past as long as there is memory.

I parked, and walked along the road side numerous times using my flash-light to peer down the embankment. If it had no broken bones, it could survive, but I had a dreadful, sinking feeling deep in my stomach. The major highway, usually busy, was eerily devoid of traffic creating a strange quiet. The crunch, crunch of loose gravel under feet unsettled me, and I imagined the sound loud enough to awaken neighbors and arouse the stunned deer to jump to its feet and bound into the deep, dark woods. I hoped someone I knew from Thomas Store would happen-by, recognize my car, stop and help.

I needed a friend. God, it was hard to be alone on that road in the pitch dark.

I had just left another sunset on the Rappahannock River. They are beautiful, but sad. They bring night time. Memories. Nancy. It wasn't my fault. I didn't love her. I couldn't do it. But she called and called.

I had thought I had escaped by moving to Height Ashbury with old friends from the 1960's. They wore flowers in their hair then. By the time I got to San Francisco they had changed. I was disappointed in them. Some even wore coats and ties and worked in banks. Smoking a joint and riding the cable car up-and-down the hills. The anything goes parties every other night. No, every night. Flying along the turnpikes on TGIF for Lake Tahoe weekends. Bright sunny days, cold, and dry, powder snow. Perfect skiing. Going to the top, and skiing down half-way to the little restaurant. Getting a good buzz. Continuing to the bottom. Napping in my room. The rest of the night at Harrah's for blackjack. The Bible says happiness becomes unhappiness.

I had learned to play-without-losing in Aberdeen, Scotland. An older lady came to the Blue Lantern most every night, at least every night I was there, and stayed all night. I watched her. After awhile, she became comfortable enough to talk. I wanted to ask why she came. She sipped Scotch all night, too, and I watched, and tried to copy her. Like picking crabs and shucking oysters, and waiting from the first of September when you start to think about it and then craving the first oysters of the season

from Bowlers Rock. You don't learn it overnight. You almost have to be raised-up into it. If you weren't raised-up right, you might learn it if you happen upon the right person who takes you in.

Robert Ruark of Southport, NC, wrote about the do-gooder Christian missionaries sent to help the poor Africans. The come-here didn't know or understand the natives' ways, nor did the missionaries respect the natives, who were told their ways were no good. They lost something: of value.

I said to the too-thin waitress, "Where you from?" She said, "Jersey." I said, "have the trout, but fry it." She returned from the kitchen and said, "The chef said it's against California environmental laws and San Francisco health regulations to serve fried fish." I craved fried perch and corn bread and turnip greens. I knew then I had failed.

I was alone Christmas. The San Francisco Chronicle stated that more jump-off the Golden Gate Bridge during Christmas than at any other time. One is suppose to be happy Christmas. I wanted to get home before the end of hunting season. There wasn't much to pack except skis. I stopped in Aspen intending to ski. The La 'Rhonda has a large Victorian lobby and confronting the entering visitor a very large, bright-burning fireplace in the center of the back wall. The longest fireplace logs I ever saw drew tired, on-the-prowl skiers Western-American dressed in cowboy hats. I turned left and walked into a crowded room with a long busy bar backed by a full length mirror. When My eyes adjusted to the smoky dimness, I could just make out John Denver drinking beer, talking with friends.

I drove on slower -uneasily. I wanted to somehow salvage the night. So much planning, so many expectations. I remembered attending Sunday School across the street in the Presbyterian Church as a little boy. All good little boys and girls from proper families attended. If I had taken this problem to Miss Helen, my cousin the Sunday School teacher, she would have said, "Well, boy, don't you worry. Just take your problems to God. Bible says we Christians are better than dumb animals. God put animals on earth for us to use."

The people at the bar were loud and friendly, and seemed to be happy. I was alone. I ordered a beer. My mind drifted back to the beginning of the night when I was happy. Now, I was struggling to have fun, but, deep down, I knew it wasn't going to work. I recalled reading a passage in *A Sand County Almanac* by Aldo Leopold. It has long bothered me: "In those days we had never heard of passing-up a chance to kill a wolf. In a second we were pumping lead into the pack, but with more excitement than accuracy: how to aim a steep downhill shot is always confusing. When our rifles were empty, the old wolf was down, and a pup was dragging a leg into impassable slide-rocks.

"We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known since, that there was something new to me in those days—something known only to her and to the mountains. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunter's paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountains agreed with such a view."

I don't control what brings it back to me: the sudden, unexpected whiff of Locust smoke in September, the faint honk, honk of unseen geese; dogs running a deer deep in the swamp just after sundown, their fading in-and-out; our old, unpainted barn in the Great Valley that Jackson ruled for so long; a bustling Manhattan street in the theater district at curtain call; a New Jersey marsh from a train window. The fading green fire in the dying wolf's eyes and the sadness in the mountains carries me back to harmful things I have done, the hurts I have caused, the preacher who stopped preaching because she "...just didn't believe it anymore." Somebody wrote on the wall at The Oaks in Lively, "You cannot undue a cruel remark." The girl in Aberdeen Scotland between dances Saturday night who said she couldn't have babies. The helplessness of inadequacy wrenched silently, unseen, and cut and slashed. I was unprepared for the burden I acquired that night while the cold wet North Sea wind blew the dense fog past the hushed, shapeless street light of old Aberdeen. When I see her face, again, my unhealed wounds hurt, and I cry, again, silently, unseen.

It was a long, lonely way home.

# The Ache

RuthE Forrest

**T**he ache in the center of my chest is a constant reminder. It began three months ago with a story related by Mortimer—a quirky southern gentleman who was our only male participant in the Rappatomac Writer’s Group. He had asked us to ‘critique and comment’ on his story about his date at the local watering hole with a much younger tattooed girl. Instead of meeting the girl he met with a wild deer on a dark country road. For various reasons I had originally identified with the tattooed girl upon first listening to Morti’s story. They included my being what is commonly referred to by our small-town natives as a ‘come-here’ from the big city, and living with a much older gentleman to whom I am not ‘wedded.’ I also have a fair amount of ink hidden on my body. But as the story unfolded, somewhere along the telling my mind made a seamless transition to Mortimer’s point of view.

I began to empathize with Mortimer when his tale recalled several ancient boyhood teachings. In them he had given us a glimpse into what life was like for an awkward boy in a conservative rural town. His Sunday School teacher’s hunting advice not to worry because “animals did not feel pain” particularly struck me as odd. It forced me back into my own past to glean snippets of outworn advice from revered mentors. The ache had been a shadow reminding me even then.

Slowly I came to realize that I had never had the experience of having to be watchful for wildlife on the roads. I mainly had driven the urban black ribbons, and had dodged my share of cats, rats, and dogs. Driving these country roads was a whole new daily adventure. I loved flying down them in my vehicle, alone on the road, not having to dodge other drivers, or to weave in and out of a crowded rush hour. I used to drive in the country when the stress of city life became too much to bear, and banging gears always relaxed my driven mind. Now I savored every mile of pastoral scenery while driving a sixty-mile radius of small towns conducting business. Sunnybank Road was my beautiful two-mile driveway as I pulled my mobile office into home base each evening. The ache continues to scream down this road today.

I remember thinking how awful it must feel to hit and kill an animal with your vehicle. I had no frame of reference for this kind of experience. With the exception of a few good men I had never hunted wild things. And although I truly enjoyed discharging weapons at the local gun range while I lived in the dirty city, I had never killed anything wild or domesticated. I had never been trained to be watchful of wild things on the roadway. In 30 years of driving I had never hit anything. I imagined it must be terrifying. By the end of Mortimer’s telling I had begun to fantasize about how I would handle my own thoughts after such an experience. The ache was calling.

The monthly writers group worked with the story during several meetings, and Morty revealed much of himself with every re-write. While driving down those long country roads I started to notice the deer at dusk along the ‘edge habitat’ – the place where the woodland meets the field. I took pleasure in seeing them, began looking for the deer ones. I felt a special thrill when catching a fleeting glimpse of their regal buff-colored bodies, or a flash of white tail. This place was becoming home to me, and revealing more of itself with every re-write of Mortimer’s story as well.

One morning I paused during my usual routine to look out the bathroom window at the dew on the soybean field next door. I found myself staring face-to-face with a large doe and her sister who were munching their way down the soybean rows straight toward my house. We locked eyes for a glass-divided eternity before they leapt silently and swiftly into the woods lining the field. Now this memory reinforces the familiar ache.

I met the source of the ache in the misty fog of an early December darkness. I was coming down my driveway on Sunnybank Road when he appeared walking down the grassy culvert that rimmed the tree-lined roadway. His eyes glowed yellow in my headlights as he raised his head in curiosity. Our eyes locked for an interminable instant as I said out loud “don’t do it.” He did not hear me. It was a frozen-mind moment, and it was too late. The young buck leapt in front of my vehicle. In a surreal instant the ache had begun.

I slammed on the brakes with all of the strength my clenched body weight could muster, and instinctively turned into the direction of the object. I don’t know how I remembered to do this race car driver’s tip

in the dark blink of an eye, but later I would remember that it was a tactic that may help you to avoid a crash. My compact car skittered across the slippery fog-soaked road. The left front fender caught him on the rump with a sickening thud that brought me to a jerking halt. I sat there clutching the steering wheel frozen in horror while watching the broken body sliding on its side down the dark gray ribbon with a swishing noise. In ever widening circles he tumbled away from me until finally coming to rest in the deep culvert on the opposite side of the road. The stabbing pain in my chest caused me to wince. My body shuttered with instant tears. Numbly, I pulled over to the side of the road. After fumbling for a flashlight in back of the passenger's seat, I got out of my vehicle and stood alone in the middle of a silent country neighborhood. With knees shaking I screamed out into the night "I'm sorry little deer!" By now the ache was burning bright within me as I searched the curved roadway. Eventually I found the bent and twisted dead thing. It stared accusingly up at me from its grave in the culvert. His big black long-lashed eyes were still wet pools. Another frozen-mind moment passed as the ache grew stronger. Turning in circles I whimpered my ineffective apology to the creature, and to all of the creatures hiding in the fog.

I struggled back to my car, fumbled with an impotent cell phone, and absentmindedly drove a few miles back down the road to the local Country Store. The ruggedly handsome new clerk chuckled when I asked to use the telephone while holding up my dead cell phone. I called the sheriff, explained my predicament, and received instructions to "return to the scene of the incident and wait." I made some ineffective small talk with the clerk before setting back out into the hoary night clutching the ache tightly with both hands.

I waited alone in the fog for what seemed like a very long time. On the pitch black country road the click of my flashers drummed the beat in time to my incessant mantra of "sorry, so sorry..." The young sheriff finally arrived, and the wonderful smell of his cologne was somehow calming. I was grateful for the camaraderie as we walked single-file down the road—our flashlights dancing in two-part harmony. Placing long brown fingers against the deer's throat he confirmed that it was definitely dead. He commented to the night that it was "just a little buck with broken hips." I stood mute—shaking back the tears that once again threatened to erupt from the middle of the white-hot ache.

He deftly pulled the carcass up out of the culvert while explaining that the local hunter-types would be able to see it on the shoulder of the road. He assured me that it would be "gone by morning." I thanked him weakly. He instructed me to have my insurance company call him for any questions about my claim, and offered his business card. I watched his beautiful dark hands reach out to help me in the grayness. I wanted to fall into them, allow this stranger to hold me, and to receive comfort from the all-encompassing ache. Instead I stood there dumbstruck holding his card. He cast a compassionate eye while stating "you are the victim in this incident." His parting remark was meant to remind me that the deer had struck me, and not vice-versa as the ache insisted.

I apologized again to the little buckface now visible on the gravelly shoulder as I slowly drove past him. I became consciously aware of the ache after turning onto Smith Point Road. I made my way home rubbing my chest in circular motions while reminding myself to breathe. By the time Willy greeted me at our door I was definitely hurting, and feeling more like the perpetrator than the victim. His anxious embrace revealed his gratitude for my continued existence. In a staccato voice he expertly outlined how much worse the situation could have been. While listening to my eulogy I was conscious only of the numbing ache radiating from the center of my body. I had the distinct feeling of being an outside observer of some twisted drama. I tried to tell Willy about the ache but I didn't know where to begin, so I remained silent until I no longer felt anything. Exhausted and drained I wrestled with sleep for the next eight hours.

The sheriff's prediction proved to be true as the deer was no longer there in the morning. During my usual hour-long Thursday drive into Warsaw I experienced the first of what would become days peppered with flashbacks. The headlight-illuminated scene of the deer sliding in circles down the roadway in front of my vehicle flickered in my mind's eye like a B horror movie. I began to see glimpses of the little buck in my peripheral vision. I started noticing the multitude of dead carcasses strewn along the winding country roads. With each episode the ache swirled closer to the surface of my consciousness carrying with it a whole host of muddy memories.

In my driving meditations the frozen-mind moments replayed strung together into a sinister silent movie. I fantasized different endings to the various events, and tried to reason the whys and the what-ifs. I particularly struggled with the sheriff's last retort that labeled me a victim. I stubbornly refused to identify with the word. I had worked through untold hours of therapy as a young woman to reach the survivor mentality. I told myself that once again I was a survivor. I stubbornly held onto that part of myself as a knee-jerk response to the ache resonating deep inside.

No matter how many times I rearranged the details I could not quell the pulse of the ache. It hung on me like an electric line strung along the big telephone poles whose knees rotted away in the marsh. I too was knee-deep in the muck. Like the poles those big hulking memories were strung out behind me as landmarks of a life lived in the fast lane of the city. I compulsively counted my survivor trophies each time the deer mind-movie flickered. The list included my abused child trophy, a rape survivor trophy, a cancer survivor trophy, and my most current trophy—the young widow surviving by moving to a kinder gentler place in the country with an older kinder gentleman. I was working hard to create some happiness on the Little Wicomico River. I repeatedly followed the lines back into the past in an effort to release the pain. With the ache singing to me I slowly began to connect it all down deep in my soul.

When I remembered that I had originally connected with the colorfully tattooed lady in Mortimer's story the floodgates opened in my mind. Hadn't I dealt a deathblow to dear ones? Hadn't I been the guilty one at times? I had played the victim, and also the survivor who must go on living with the memory of a painful experience filed safely away in a moldy pigeonhole. A deep feeling of shame prevented me from talking about the incident with my friends. I rationalized that if I didn't talk about it then somehow the whole embarrassing experience had never even happened. A steep deductible was the excuse I used to avoid making the insurance claim. The sheriff's card was filed away in a crowded Rolodex.

I did not attend the next meeting of the Rappatomac Writer's Group. I knew that I would not be able to bear to listen to Mortimer's fully developed story. In my twisted logic I had begun to blame him. It was Mortimer who had caused me to wonder what a deer-strike would be like to experience. I had never before entertained the idea. I truly believed in the Universal Law of Attraction. It states that you manifest whatever you give your full emotion and attention to, and I was sure that in this manner we co-created our daily lives. We attracted others of like mind into a shared existence. I rationalized that I had somehow drawn the deer strike to me from the abundant energy of the probable universe. The process of repeatedly listening to Mortimer's story, identifying with the characters in it, and actively participating in writing the story had brought me to this point.

I had always loved driving, but now for the first time in my life an unfamiliar fear taunted me. Over several days the fear generalized to any car I entered, and whispered its stony tale whether I was driving or sat in the passenger's seat. It instructed me to be ever vigilant, to scan the brush and tree-lined roads for the slightest movement, and to keep bone-crushing tension in my arms and shoulders. It contorted my face as I fought to reach each destination unharmed. One day I had the white-knuckle realization that I was driving like someone I had previously hated to follow behind in this land of retired folks. The thought made me laugh, and the laughter eased the ache somewhat. I knew that I must mentally process and release the emotional baggage left behind from the deer strike, or forever fight an unbearable ache that would eat me up inside.

I began a campaign of rational self-talk. The internal war of words brought up a garbage pile of questions that were lurking in the landfill of past memories in my mind. These questions I put to my Self reflected in the rear-view mirror during my daily driving meditations. Why do I insist on blaming? Is there such a thing as coincidence? Do we really attract into our experience that to which we put our full attention? Did I attract the deer strike to me by wondering how that would feel? Do I want to live with shame and guilt as friends? The ache mentored me during this process.

After much prayer, self-talk, and meditation I finally came to a place of understanding. I connected to this land, and to the beliefs held by the native Pamunkey Indians who have inhabited this wild land for centuries. I came to realize that in the perfect medicine-wheel circle of life there are no victims, no coincidences, and no accidents in the incidents. I understood with gratitude how the deer gave its life for my learning. I saw that the deer fed the vultures, the eagles, and also the people. I started talking about the experience



with my friends who shared a myriad of deer-strike stories. The advice on how to avoid hitting deer ranged from driving down the middle of the street while honking your horn, to coming to a complete stop when seeing them along the edge habitat. Everyone agreed that if you saw one deer that there would be more to follow, and counseled me to be patient before starting up again. I heard more than one sigh of relief over the minimal damage done to my vehicle, and saw many insurance claim pictures of broken parts. I attended a beautiful memorial service by the river for a friend who swerved to avoid hitting a deer and the car was damaged beyond repair. She was a kind person who worked tirelessly for animal rights, and I'm sure that she preferred to be taken-out rather than strike-out. Her transition brought everything full-circle for me. The ache became the missing piece of the puzzle that once acknowledged formed the whole picture.

It was no accident that I attended a small group of writers to listen to a southern gentleman's story. It was no coincidence that I am a tattooed lady living with an older gentleman in a contented country home. Like telephone poles reflected in water-swollen culverts I began to see both sides of the story now strung along a continuum of events forever documented in time. The beauty and the dangers of living with the wild ones here were revealed to me in a holy instant. The ache began to change, and it slowly spoke of the sweetness of a life more than just survived.

I attended the next meeting of the Rappatomac Writer's Group—not coincidentally in January of a New Year. I listened attentively to a new story about the tattooed girl, the deer, and the lonely nightlife of a Southern country gentleman living with regret. I felt infinitely more than the ache as I listened while it gently encouraged me to share the electric stories of my own country life. I drove that black ribbon home with the ache quietly glowing within—more aware, more alert, and oh so grateful for the beauty and sacredness of all life.

# Down In The Dumps

Jeremy Peill



“Let me give you a hand” offered Ben with a contagious grin. “You OK?” he added with concern. Encouraged by his usual zippiness I nodded at him, trying to disassemble an answering smile. “Do you have better news of your sister?” was Ben’s next friendly sally. I had to tell him that my sister’s case was terminal. Ben looked me straight in the eye and promised “I’ll be with you all the way my friend. I know how hard it is, believe me.” I knew Ben had lost relatives in concentration camps, so I believed him more wholeheartedly than any other soul in my Northern Neck world.

Ben had made our very first encounter as unforgettable as anything the Readers’ Digest ever published under that heading. Riveting me with a stare as insinuating as the Ancient Mariner’s, Ben told me then how he had been a sniper for Uncle Sam, traveling to a catalog of countries on his black passport. A sniper? Black passport? This was no Darth Vader standing before me. Smiling now, Ben looked more of a Robin Goodfellow. In no time flat he had got out of me that I collected used brick for our farm’s old courtyard. “I’ve got a couple thousand at home” Ben offered “Way more than I need for the patio. Come over and help yourself!” I could not help wondering at his generosity toward a total stranger. “Stop by any time” sang Ben, “Just be sure and let my wife know you’re

my guest. She has her own carbine.” Right there, I shelved any idea of a visit. Still, over time, Ben faithfully put all kinds of old brick in my way, even cleaning many of them for me first, until I had my heart’s desire.

Throughout our growing friendship, Ben has sprung all manner of surprises on me. These have included other material gifts like a handsome Victorian shilling, or a case of new wine glasses. There have been intellectual ones too, like the proper definition of a word that was stumping me, or an abstruse tidbit of technical, geographical, scientific or cultural knowledge. Without fail these come with Ben’s favorite disclaimer: “But I wouldn’t know anything about that now would I?” He looks coy as he says this, but he is not actually being coy, he is feeling proud. You see he is self-taught. Meeting dozens of people each day, from all walks of life, he is forever hearing new words, terms, phrases, ideas, insights and facts. At home each evening, Ben and his wife check all of their day’s finds online, and never seem to forget what they learn from Professor Google.

Last year Ben got a new manager, who was democratic enough to consult him. After hearing Ben’s suggestions, the new man told him he was obviously overdue for promotion. “Oh I couldn’t think of leaving my friends” Ben told him at once. “Believe me; no-one is more important than they are.”

“Where can I meet this wonder?” you cry. Well, it depends on the day of the week. Aside from that, just turn off Gaines Road in Nuttsville, Regina Road in Lancaster, or White Pine Drive, off 200, between Kilmarnock and Irvington. You’ll find Ben down at one of those three dumps, where he takes equally loving care of Lancaster County’s business too.

**Photo by Jeremy Peill**

© All Rights Reserved. Reproduction in whole or in part of any material in this publication without permission is strictly prohibited

# Cap'n Jack

**Dave Miles**

Off to the east, a blood red moon blazes a sinister light.  
The glass is down, and the wind is up, the devil means to fight.  
No sleep for thee, you scurvy souls, no fear can make it right.  
An evil omen, warns Cap'n Jack, will taunt us all this night.

Upon the tilting deck we lean, the ocean's grip is tight.  
Keep faithful to the course we steer, the devil wants to fight.  
Pray hope for thee, you simple swabs, and for your wretched plight.  
Use all your skills, pleads Cap'n Jack, to save our souls tonight.

We struggle on past light of dawn which has refused to break.  
Now rollers swamp our sinking ship, we're caught in a devil's lake.  
It's no easy life, you sorry coves, for the sea will always take.  
Man the pumps, orders Cap'n Jack, or suffer in Jonah's wake.

Saint Elmo's fire roars up our mast, glowing like burning coals.  
The ship is done, time has come for the devil to collect his tolls.  
He'll count the losses of your closest kin, then add them to his rolls.  
So say your prayers, warns Cap'n Jack, to save your mortal souls.

# Ask A Silly Question

Jeremy Peill

**E**n route to my 70th birthday celebration in Nashville Tennessee, a brown sign reading “Antique Sparta Historic District” lured us off I 40. At the foot of the ramp another sign told us to go left for 4.6 miles, except that when my wife Margaret found Sparta on the map it was more like fifteen miles away. A numeral must have parted company from the second sign and set out on its own. At the Sparta exit ramp a third sign promised just 0.6 miles to go, and a fourth at the bottom, 0.5 miles. Half a mile on found us amidst strip malls that by 2117 might constitute a legitimate Antique Historic District. They looked no more likely to last that long than we might expect to ourselves. In the absence of further signs, Margaret arbitrarily recommended the first right turn and we soon broke free of the appalling malls. “Look, there’s an old boy we can ask,” she pointed out. I pulled in alongside a late model Buick, and parked next to the elderly figure stooped over its gaping trunk. “A teak part restricted?” he quavered uncertainly, grappling with my alien accent. “The sign at your off ramp reads Antique Sparta Historic District 0.5 miles,” I told him slowly and distinctly, “but we didn’t see any trace of one.” “I was born here,” said the old man equally slowly “and I sure don’t know of one left in this town.”

He leaned an elbow on my lowered window. His jaw sported three or four days growth of stubble, but his eyes were clear behind polished gold rimmed spectacles and his strong hands were steady. His maroon plaid shirt looked freshly pressed, and his white hair showed neatly under a dusty black NRA cap. You know the kind—rising straight up from the bill and smothered with fake gold braid. Where I come from, we call that scrambled egg whether it’s real or not. “Okay, is there at least a courthouse?” I asked him in a burst of inspiration. “They took that down with most everything else” he replied regretfully. “You mean all the historic buildings have been torn down?” asked Margaret. “I hate that expression,” he said firmly and added, “but if there are any old buildings left, there’s a lady in the new courthouse who could tell you. I can’t put my tongue round her name just now, but she issues the license plates.” He began to recite directions for reaching the licensing lady, whose office was “around the back.” The details of turns and lights and lanes grew so lengthy we got the distinct impression the new courthouse must be in the next county. In any case, our roadside friend clearly disapproved of it powerfully. “I can see now what those signs were really for” I broke in. “They were to give us the pleasure of meeting you.” He smiled warmly, straightened up and reached his right hand into the car to give mine a hearty shake. His action was like opening a sluice gate.

“I’m not strictly from here” he confessed. “My farm is twelve miles out of town. I’m 79 and I have a Harley. A Harley Davidson, I mean. I ride it too. When I was a young’un, all the roads around here were just mud. My life has gone from mud to moon.” There was a charm in his phrase that enthralled us. From this point on he had our full attention.

“Burgess Johnson,” he volunteered, “and my father was a Baptist preacher. I didn’t always agree with what he said, mind. In 23 years he never preached for money—only for the good of it. He lived to 87 and my mother to 93. One of my relatives is over 100 now. There’s nothing wrong with me yet, but when I go I expect to go all in a rush. My farm work keeps me fit. I raise black cattle. I love to take trips. I’m just back yesterday from a 1200-mile drive down through Louisiana looking at what—who was it?—Katrina left behind. Holy Moses, was it bad! Now I got to catch up from being away. I’m in the parts business.”

Had this encounter taken place in England our informant would have been an old gaffer sitting outside a pub, craftily angling for a free pint or two. But we were in Tennessee, outside the Sparta Sporting Goods store. Besides, the very next thing he told us was, “I never have been a drinker. I didn’t drink when I was young and I don’t drink now. It’s not that I don’t touch the stuff at all. I may have one now and again. Mind you, I always keep a bottle in the house.

“I got my education in Detroit—learned to be a tool and die maker. It was a good life and a good living. I was lucky.

“I still pick a guitar—used to play with Ernest Tubbs. Got a booking this coming

Saturday as it happens; up to the Red, White and Blue Saloon.”

My niece Megan Gregory plays the fiddle and has her own band. Thinking it might be good for her to be in touch with him, I asked him rather doubtfully if he had a computer. “Yes I do, but I don’t do e-mails. If other people want to chat, that’s okay, but I use the Internet to advertise my classic car business. Right now I have an ’84 ‘Vette to sell, and a ’76 Plymouth Satellite—you remember, the Roadrunner kind.” Neither of us can recall the make and model of the ’63 car he mentioned next, but we are hardly likely to forget the last vehicle he brought up. “Myself I drive a Porsche. It’s a red Boxster convertible.

“I don’t always shave nowadays. Sometimes I’ll go three or four days without. I built the farmhouse myself. It’s a thousand feet back from the road, under a hill. I can do what I please there, there’s no one to interfere. Other people should mind their own business I believe. I never trouble them. Live and let live, like they say. When I go away, my nephew takes over. If he needs help he calls on his friends. Nobody else knows I’m gone, and they don’t need to. I have friends all over: Louisiana, Michigan, California, Virginia. I can see them any time I want. They are all of them real people. I gotta go now. This part has to be rewired.” There was no sign of any part nor did he return to the unseen contents of his trunk. Instead he gave a big, long thumbs-up and told us, “Y’all be real careful how you back out onto the road.” He indicated the friendly road that had led us to his vivid personality.

On back down this road, he would not have been able to see us turn towards the highway, in the opposite direction from the new courthouse and its nameless oracle. We were savoring the wisdom of that old maxim: it is better to travel than to arrive. Its veracity was underscored for us not two days later when I myself was using the Internet. Idly I Googled Sparta, Tennessee and linked to their website. The letter from Sparta’s mayor includes a sentence worth quoting verbatim: “Be sure to visit the lovingly restored century-old buildings of our town center.” But then he is probably just a boring old bureaucrat, hardly a real person at all by Burgess Johnson standards.

## My Computer has a First Name

Rob Ransone

My computer has a first name,  
It's named for a Deity,  
But surely He is not to blame,  
For what it does to me!

I have often thought,  
When about to sock,  
That I should have bought  
A bigger rock!

I think my computer's patron saint  
Comes from the other end,  
And resides in that place of taint  
To whence it I would like to send!

But I have a much better tool,  
That it may some day meet  
When next it makes of me a fool,  
I will lay it at my feet.

I wake it every morning,  
And rock it to sleep at night.  
And then without a warning,  
It screws me out of spite!

And taking careful, gleeful aim,  
My heavy sledge I'll wield,  
I'll seek not just to wound or maim,  
But my troubled soul be healed.

# Porridge

Jeremy Peill

October the first.  
 A coldish night.  
 Don't eat the muesli  
 Ordered Margaret,  
 I'm making porridge.  
 Porridge I thought,  
 Visions of chill, damp English lawns,  
 Windswept trees,  
 Whirling russet leaves  
 Skittering across gritty gravel  
 Under low, gray skies;  
 Fine steely rain  
 In your face,  
 Numbed fingertips,  
 Marmite on toast,  
 Steaming hot chocolate  
 On the kitchen stove

Real porridge  
 Isn't quick.  
 It would take a while.  
 Hollow and stiff  
 I tug the kitchen door  
 Step into the bright  
 Northern Neck morning  
 Dazzled by its light,  
 Warmed by the blue above,  
 The lush green grasses beneath,  
 Glad birdsong  
 On the soft breeze,  
 Our calico cat sunning  
 Curled and relaxed.

I ate my porridge anyway.  
 We haven't had it since:  
 Our October reprieve.

November the first.  
 The off-key jubilation  
 Of gregarious geese  
 Swerving into sharply  
 Shaped squadrons  
 And raucous complaints  
 Of cranky crows  
 Tumbling and diving  
 Crowd my senses as  
 I sit on our dock  
 Searching the wide scene  
 Spread before me  
 For a possible painting.

Kingfishers flash,  
 Amber stains show  
 On the still green  
 Foliage clothing  
 The Richmond County shore  
 Across Lancaster Creek  
 Lost in its wet wrinkled face  
 Smiling in the still warm sun,  
 Flexing its reach  
 Into the Rappahannock,  
 Into the Bay beyond,  
 Far over Atlantic deeps  
 To my home country  
 Whence the geese  
 Have long flown.  
 Only the crows remain  
 And on kitchen stoves  
 Throughout the land  
 Porridge bubbles,  
 Heaves and erupts  
 In the morning chill  
 Like a welcome lava.

# Fallen Whispers

RuthE Forrest

A fine wind blew across the Neck today  
Removing red robes from proper Bay Ladies,  
Stripping golden garments from Kingly Oaks.  
Maple Maidens shook their heads in protest,  
Dangling silver earrings wildly swishing.  
Fairy Hemlocks held fast to  
Feathery green chiffon gowns  
Flowing about their ankles.  
Laid-back Loblollys pined for  
Indian Summer,  
Sprinkling slender brown  
Spangles into tawny grasses.

I soared down the black  
Dotted –Swiss ribbon with a  
Flock of winter geese  
Sailing overhead.  
All together being  
Pushed about.  
Fighting to stay on course.  
A burlesque show rolled on  
The carpet of color,  
Sound,  
Movement.

Joyfully we joined  
With bare anticipation,  
Awaiting the  
Icy caress of  
Winter's  
Kiss.

# Life Is So Unfair

Jeremy Peill

**A** year after VE Day I was a nine year-old, finally living with both of my parents and sister in a real permanent home. During the war we had been shuffled all around rural England, off the track of German bombers, doodle bugs and V2 rockets, while my father stayed in the Home counties—a timber salesman by day and an air raid warden by night.

Our new home stood in a large lot favoured with big enough gardens to require a part-time gardener. Whether or not he started the rumor, word was that our rhubarb plants had come from the kitchen gardens of Buckingham Palace. Such a startling possibility one day drew a school friend of mine called Ian Satterthwaite to come and behold this natural wonder. Ian was a bit of a chancer, and quickly tiring of the rhubarb patch, shinnied up a tall oak from which he started gathering acorns. Before he had filled his pockets, who should arrive but our gardener, who set to work weeding quite close by the oak. In no time he was rubbing his head and glancing about. Careless of his own exposed position and lack of escape route, Ian had begun dropping acorns on the man's bald pate. Our gardener, glaring at me stalked off into the house to complain. Ian seized this opportunity to climb down and make himself scarce. You can guess who got all the blame, and no chance to duck. Now wasn't that unfair?

One outcome was that I started spending all my spare time with Michael Martin. Michael lived on his parents' extensive small holding that shared a common boundary with our land. Our first major project was to build a tree house on the far side of this small holding, in the basket-like pruned branches of an old willow alongside the local rail yard. Over the yard's fence we could see endless heaps of anthracite coal waiting to be loaded onto local merchants' delivery lorries. Lining the "walls" of our tree house were old sheets and tablecloths tacked to the cradle of branches. When the coal-heavers arrived, our fragile sanctuary afforded little protection for certain noisy boys unable to resist shouting derisive comments. In no time the offended heavers were pelting us with lumps of coal large and small. Most just bounced off the willow branches and fell harmlessly to the ground, but a few got through and effectively silenced us. How Michael's parents managed to miss the din of battle, who knows? When we proudly presented them with several buckets of perfectly good free coal, however, the truth somehow got out. I was back in trouble again. But in trouble for offering a gift? Just what were Michael and I being blamed for?

Life is so unfair.

After this we naturally sought a more secure retreat. Well out of sight from the house among the Martins' rows of vegetables we started to excavate a new hideout. We stored all the earth in baskets and tubs. When we felt the subterranean space big enough to house us and our indispensable emergency supplies, we roofed it over. For this we used bits of old corrugated iron, spread the excavated soil over this and its trapdoor entrance, then camouflaged it all with rough plantings. From somewhere we scrounged a pair of olive green army ammo lockers. These we set at either end of the cavity to serve as larders that we surreptitiously stocked with purloined goodies.

Unfortunately, these provisions drew millions of tiny red ants into our now very cramped space. We stuck this invasion out with mandatory bravado. That it definitely shortened our stays underground, however, was the main reason we were not at home when an unsuspecting Mr. Martin fell through our roof. Coupled with the nasty rash that the ants gave Michael, this calamity brought our friendship to an abrupt end. Michael and I were forbidden each other's company or even to talk on the phone.

I was encouraged to take up butterfly collecting with John Cordery, a much more respectable boy who lived a few doors further away from the rail yard. I still can't blot out the fearful smell of the handsome Cinnibar Red butterfly beating its wings one day in its jam jar jail.

Life is unfair for too many of us.

I abandoned John Cordery for an older boy across the road who knew how to build model airplanes. Instead of sticking pins through harmless butterflies now I only stuck



them into balsawood and paper. Even then that seemed much fairer to me.

A couple of years ago, R. F. Lafferty & Co., on Broad Street, Manhattan, assigned one Michael Martin to be my broker. We talk frequently now. I called him again this morning, but he is still not the Michael Martin I knew, nor even his son. Life is still unfair, but in the intervening years I have enjoyed many bizarre experiences that made me lighten up a lot. A number of these are recounted here to help the lucky reader lighten up him or herself. Play along and you will not have lightened up your pocket in vain.

## On A Winter's Day (The Ice Storm)

*Dorothy Alves Holmes*

The early morning quiet was shattered  
with the sound of crackling crystal crowns  
of elegantly dressed trees falling into space.

Translucent ball gowns crumbled and crashed  
in crystal towers on the frozen forest floor.

The trees wailed and moaned, joining in  
passionate strands of choral crescendo weeping.

The echoing sad song of the trees persisted  
and giant tears splashed below...

The ice palace ball would be cancelled.  
The sun spread out in joyful radiance, lingering  
on everything.

The winter night returned, wrapping around naked  
trees.

The woods are silent now, and listen to the wind  
as it serenades the trees with soft lullabies.

The solitary, pale, crescent moon, gazed down  
cool and aloof, from a navy blue midnight  
colored sky.

The stars refused to twinkle and play, or to  
carpet the sky with trails of diamond dust.  
"Let the melancholy moon hang its lanthorn light"  
they whispered, after all, the ice palace ball  
has been cancelled.

# The Letter

Mike Barden

March 11th 2009

**W**hen Mom died, I had the joyless duty of cleaning out the massive old house where my sister and I had grown up. I endeavored to tackle the duty with the same energy that had carried me through an engineering career, but this job turned out to be quite different. It was incredibly difficult. The enormous size of the task was so overwhelming, that I wasn't sure where to begin. I decided to start in the sun room.

I opened the big, French doors and looked around at the furniture. This had been where my sister and I were allowed to play on rainy days. It was always warm and filled with the light from hundreds of little window panes that surrounded it. They were very old glass panes and sometimes the sunlight made little prisms, like rainbows, on the red, tile floor. I could almost see my mother making doilies or sewing patchwork quilts in the bright cheerfulness here. It had been a happy place.

With all the discipline I could muster, I cleared the room, and swept it clean, before progressing on to the next one. I hauled load after load of things to distant relatives, to the Salvation Army, and to the city dump. For months, I spent my nights and weekends laboring away at the dreadful job, and I hated every minute of it. Mom had been a "pack rat." The old place had become a massive warehouse. I did what I was supposed to do; I proceeded to dismantle and destroy something that was beautiful, while familiar echoes whispered to me from every room.

The great dining room had been only used on special occasions, such as before we all went to midnight mass on Christmas, and on Thanksgiving, or birthdays. I could almost hear the family talking together, around the dinning table, as we sat in the high-backed chairs with red velvet seats. We used Mom's best china, crystal, and silverware here, but on ordinary days, we had our meals in the breakfast room. In my mind, I could still hear Mom softly singing the lyrics of a Gershwin tune as she kneaded the dough on the kitchen counter, for supper biscuits. I remembered the sound of "Narcissus," over and over, as my little sister practiced her piano lessons, with the evening sunlight shining on her golden curls and her little patent leather shoes swinging beneath the piano bench.

One is foolish to dwell too longingly into the past, and so, I diligently attempted to seize the day, and attack the task at hand. I rummaged through hundreds, perhaps thousands, of old letters that were neatly packed in china cabinets and bureau drawers. Some were letters from friends and uncles who were fighting overseas, in the World War. Many of the words had been cut away or blanked out by military censors. I took the time to read a few, before tossing them out. What valiant men they were! And I found beautifully penned letters from my darling little sister, later in her life, when she was in college and when she became a new housewife. There were stacks of letters from me, too, from distant schools, in the Marine Corp, and when I was setting up my own household with my new wife. Many of the old letters were from people I simply didn't know, or names that barely brought back a dim glimmer of memory. I couldn't possibly read them all, but I was, indeed, somewhat mesmerized by the richness of their thoughts.

Then I found one letter that was packed separately from the others. It was in a small, blue box with tissue paper around it, as though it had been a Christmas present. It first glance, I knew it was from me. I recognized my handwriting, and my formal name, "Maron W. Barden," was written in the upper left hand corner, but I certainly didn't remember writing it, and I couldn't imagine a return address of "The Guy next door." The mystery deepened when I saw the Post Office had stamped it several years before I was born.

It was written by my Dad.

Dad had always been my hero—and with good reason. He had been a totally self made man. He had never been to college, but our bookcases were filled with literature, grammar, politics, mathematics and history that he had studied. He had been made a supervisor at the nearby DuPont plant before I was born. Proper English at school was always easier for me, simply because I had never heard anything else spoken at home.

I read the short, well worded message and I pictured a twenty year old guy, asking the eighteen

## Seasons

year old girl next door (Mom), if she would like to go to a ball game with him. I was flooded with such vivid memories. His personality was apparent in every word. Each phrase was warm and sincere, and yet the words were as concise and well chosen as a business communiqué. For a few moments, I felt as though I had been talking with someone that I have sorely missed.

I knew, by then, that I was doing the right thing with the house—a hard duty—but a duty that had to be done. We're all born as little more than a tiny, naked erector set and those around us help to assemble the parts that compose us. All that this house represented, was "hard wired" within me, and would always remain so.

As I threw the old letter, along with the others, into the great, plastic bag, marked for the dumpster—I swelled with pride. A touch of brightness had been splashed right into the middle of a drab, gray undertaking and I was grateful for it.

I finished clearing out the house, and went on with my life.

## Priceless Gifts

**RuthE Forrest**

All through the year  
I searched for my gifts  
In the Towne of Kilmarnock's  
Animal Welfare Store Thrift.

Determined I was  
To make a small diff.  
In the lives of unwanted  
Puppies and Kits.

In the Dog Show program  
I placed ads for my Biz.  
I donated sheets for the  
Foster care kids.

At each seasons end,  
My castoffs in bits  
Were given to them  
To raise money for treats.

Every month when I could  
Through the store I would drift,

Finding treasures galore  
That were just the right fit.

Some new ones I got,  
Some vintage ones too.  
But all of them priceless  
For the good they could do.

Spay and neuter assist,  
Food and litter for kitts.  
Foster home beds,  
And yummy dog biscuits.

So if your present  
Has a scratch or a nick,  
The box is dented,  
Or doesn't quite fit.

Just remember your gift  
Was part of my mission  
To help a small bit  
Homeless pets this season.

# Social Boons

Jeremy Peill

**A** top Richmond architect has been buying and restoring old houses that come on the market in Whealton. Villagers feel his activity to be a social boon as he refreshes this modest waterfront community that has been around since 1612.

Whealton Post Office is more than a two mile walk from our farmhouse. On the Saturday before Christmas it was raining sporadically as Margaret and I squelched to the P.O.. As we started on our return Effie, the elegant, white haired widow with the huge, worried eyes, stepped out onto her porch. "Let me give you a lift back," she called out. "We're OK thanks. We can't get any wetter now," said Margaret.

On Monday we walked into Whealton under wind-torn clouds. Effie popped onto her porch like the shepherdess on a Swiss clock. "Can I..." she began. "Thank you," said Margaret, "But we've dried out now." "No more alcohol until Christmas," I put in, to distract Effie from her transparent disappointment. We gamely pushed on into the gale.

By Tuesday Margaret was fully engaged in her kitchen. I walked into Whealton on my own. It was dry but all the forecasts warned of rain. Effie materialized on schedule. "What about a lift? It's surely going to catch you again." "Thanks Effie," I replied, but I doubt it's going to rain before I get back." Shaking her fine head Effie picked her way carefully to the roadside. "But you're limping," she insisted in a confidential tone. "All sailors walk unevenly," I suggested lamely and she reluctantly let me roll off.

Next door the architect's genial foreman Bucky and his crew were at work restoring Annabel's old place, their fourth restoration project. Barry was holding a long builder's level perpendicular to the house wall away from Effie's. A heavily muffled up Mexican laborer pounded a stout post into the ground while another held a corresponding vertical level against its sides. I elected not to break their concentration.

Christmas Eve was mild and dry. Margaret had her hands full in the kitchen again, so I made a second solitary hike for our mail. At the P.O. Postmaster T R Lee said he hoped I had come by car. He seemed put out to learn I was on foot. "I've got a real load for Jim and Jean that I wish you'd bring up to their place. They're not going to be back in time to collect it, and I know you two feed their cat." "It's OK," I told Lee, "Remember I do this for exercise, so the more of it the merrier." T R dragged a loaded Post Office bin into the tiny lobby, a huge carton towering above its rim like an inverted iceberg. He put our own mail into a bag and stuffed this into the remaining space.

T R is special. The wrong side of seventy five, he fills the role of bartender to Whealtonians, listening to their problems and offering balm. He is minister to the Remo Baptist Church, Chairman of the next county's school board, on the Board of Governors' ecological committee, freelance sports and band writer for a local paper and displays knee-high red socks in summer. He trumpets to himself as he lowers the P.O.'s Old Glory. I dodged my burden through the doorway and set off home, being careful not to limp.

Right on cue Effie swung her front door open to offer me and my cargo a perfectly reasonable ride home. "Thanks but this lot's only going to Jim and Jean's," I explained, "Besides I have to stop at Nelly's first. It's all good exercise." Overhearing our exchange Bucky emerged from the far side of Annabel's. "Would you like some egg nog?" he invited. Grateful and curious I parked the pile of mail on the front steps and followed Bucky round the corner of the old house. Half way along its far side stood a massive pressure-treated table destined to support a pair of heat pumps. But on that day it was Bucky's Bar.

A dark, hood-enshrouded Mexican sat swinging his legs from the clientele side and nursing a tall, red, fast-food cup. Beyond him sat a matching red cup, a bottle of Pusser's Admiralty rum and a carton of egg nog. This esoteric brand of rum was no surprise to me. Bucky is fond of the historical naval novels of Patrick O'Bryan and C.S. Forrester. But it was a surprise to be told that the bottle's contents also ran to Benedictine, Virginia Gentleman, Bell's and Armagnac.

Looking over my shoulder Bucky asked if he could have a couple of glasses. I turned to find Effie

joining us but now going into reverse. She returned with a tray of plates bearing slices of apple cake and set this on the bar. "Sheri made this cake," she told us, then had to explain who our benefactress was, to whom she was married and where the couple lived in Irvington. "Do you have glasses?" Bucky put in as Effie's recital ended. "Oh yes, I'll be right back." She was, Bucky poured and we toasted each other, the holiday season, the mild day, old Morattico and the Royal Navy.

Bucky told us that for several days he had been cudgeling his memory for a particularly juicy Yogi Berra aphorism. The aforementioned alcoholic Drano had now dissolved Bucky's brain blockage. Ironically Yogi's tantalizing gem turned out to be the truly unforgettable, "It's déjà vu all over again." Bucky's brilliant breakthrough unleashed a torrent of vintage Yogiisms. In turn these led us to voice our admiration for their deceptive simplicity. The Mexican giggled throughout this impromptu seminar. Thus Yogi's pithy phrasing and the crystalline aptness of his word choices held us in thrall until the egg nog ran out and the party slowly dispersed.

Next stop Nelly's. Nelly is nearly ninety. She is upright, trim and thin as a Kenyan marathoner. Her knowledge of local and regional history is both personal and academic. To visit Nelly is to receive a valuable tutorial in the local byways of America's past. Uniquely in Morattico her outfits might have been purchased on London's Carnaby Street in the sixties, yet she has never strayed remotely as far from home. This week she had complained how Margaret and I had not come by to visit her for four days in a row. Now I set my overloaded bin on Nelly's back porch and stepped into this unpardonable breach.

Coming out later I had a bag of Nelly's frozen crab cakes to cram in amongst the already bulging mail. "Would you like a ride to Jean's?" asked Nelly, seeing my burden for the first time. "I have to go over to Elizabeth's," she explained. Ex Postmistress Elizabeth Morton preceded Postmaster T R Lee. By now Bucky's booze had eroded my compulsion to exercise. "That would be lovely," I enthused. Nelly at once topped off her natty plaid outfit with a page boy cap. She went out to drive her red Saturn wagon from its garage and around under her huge pecan tree. I put the mail on the back seat and got in. "Wait a moment," she said, "I forgot something." Nelly disembarked, re-entered her home and came back with a copy of the Times Dispatch in her hand. "I always bring this for Elizabeth," she told me. "Is that why you wear the newsboy cap?" I asked her. "Yes, I suppose it is," Nelly agreed, in the spirit of the season.

Jean's mail haul delivered I regained the road in time to see chunky Tom Silversen approaching with two tiny figures skipping alongside. "Who are the little folk?" I asked. "My son's kids," said Tom. "This is Patrick," one hand on the boy's head, "and that's Caitlin." "My other name's Summer Sun," Caitlin told me proudly, "My Dad has the same name too." "We all have that name," Patrick chimed in. "Is that more than you really needed to know?" Tom asked. "It all sounds like a perfect arrangement to me," I told him, finally moving on, a good two hours after leaving the P.O..

The Pony Express was all about speed. Whealton's postal culture has never had much truck with that. Unfettered by progress, it is all about the proper savoring of the village's richly embroidered social fabric, as complex as any wine.

# Below the Belt~A Cleanser Contract

Sean Gates

Prologue

**I**an was twelve when the United States government collapsed. Big business took over the country and white-collar crime exploded. The effect this had on him, directly, was almost none. Indirectly, however, it shaped his life in ways that as a child he never fully understood.

Ian's mother, Hettie Sullivan, was a Jamaican who came to the US looking for work in big business. She never found it, but she didn't have the money to go home even if she'd wanted to. She wanted an American life for her son.

In Miami the only way to live was day to day, surviving however she could. Hettie had slightly less than a thousand dollars. Everything was expensive in America. The money lasted only a month, and she often went hungry so Ian could eat.

She made the pocketful of cash last as long as she could, but when it was gone she still had not found a job. The only work was with the local bosses. Cuban gangs, Haitians, blacks, whites, it didn't matter. She wasn't a thief, or, Lord knew, a killer.

A man named Rodrigo Ortiz took a liking to her. He was a Cuban smuggler with a small fortune to his name; whenever possible he helped refugees from his homeland make their way across the short expanse of ocean to Florida.

Ortiz's advances didn't flatter or even interest her, but he had money, and Hettie had a son to provide for. She spread her legs for Ortiz and asked the Lord to forgive her. Ian would eat. He would be clothed. And he would grow up surrounded by crime.

She tried to protect him from the realities of their lives, from Ortiz and his clients, the dealing and the drinking and the language. The killing. But it was everywhere, seeping like the stench of death

into every corner of their lives. Sometimes when she didn't think Ian was looking, she would cry.

But Ian, like all children, had a way of being in unexpected places, seeing things he was never intended to see, and quietly living with knowledge that adults who loved him could never know he possessed.

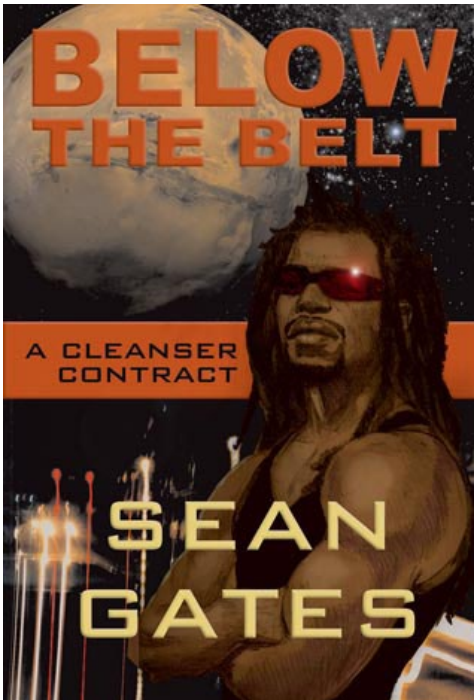
He loved to lie on the sloped roof of the cabin and bask in the sunlight, or on a summer evening enjoy the cool air blowing in off the water. One evening he watched a line of dark clouds roll in from the sea. As the first cold raindrops fell, he slid down the roof and onto a railed deck. He stopped at a lighted porthole and looked inside, and saw Rodrigo Ortiz, fat and naked, mounting his mother. Hettie was not looking at the porthole, nor was she looking at Ortiz; instead her eyes were fixed on a private place that only she could know. He would never forget the sadness in her eyes.

Ortiz looked up, saw Ian, smiled, and continued his work.

Ian went to his quarters, the cold rain dripping from his hair and clothes, and lay down on his bed in the dark. The thick smell of the rainwater soaked the pillow, and he did not sleep. He had no interaction with Ortiz for two days.

On the third day, one of Ortiz's lieutenants came and got him from his room, and took him to a deck table near the stern where Ortiz was reading the comics in the Herald. He made Ian wait while he finished the page, then folded the paper over and set it down on the table.

Ian had always been afraid of Ortiz. He was a big man with a round face and a thick mass of curly black hair that rolled in waves from his forehead to the sky. He used to tug at his hair when he got nervous and it always ended up sticking out, twisted at the crown like a pair of wolf's ears. His eyes were enormous and brown, his scleras yellow as his teeth, and his brows were as thick as if he'd painted them on with his fingertips.



Ortiz pulled out a chair and his lieutenant pushed down on Ian's shoulders so that he sat there, beside Ortiz. Ortiz leaned in close, putting his face near Ian's, his breath a rich fog of cigar tobacco and grapefruit.

"You understand what you saw, boy?"

Ian didn't say anything.

"I'm not mad at you, don't be afraid. You understand what you saw?"

Ian nodded.

"That's your mother's job. That's why you live here."

Ian's head began to throb in red waves of anger.

Ortiz put his big, brown hand around Ian's narrow shoulders, and drew him closer still.

"I like your mother," he said. "But you're something she forgot to wipe out of her chucha. Don't ever let me catch you watching us again."

#

Ian went to his mother and tried to find the words to say to her, but none would come. She was black and beautiful, her breasts and buttocks heavy against the fabric of her dress, her hair cut close to the scalp. She was a sad woman, but when she smiled, her eyes lit up and it was easy to believe that the darkness in their lives was like the storms that rolled in from the Caribbean, a mere moment of turmoil in an otherwise sun-filled world.

He put his arms around her, and she made a sound of surprise, but hugged him back.

"Just remember one thing, baby, when I'm gone. Remember that your mother loved you. Forget everything else. Just remember that."

#

One Wednesday when the clouds were heavy and grey, the Haitians bombed Ortiz's yacht. It didn't sink, but Hettie Sullivan died in the blast. Ian Sullivan and Rodrigo Ortiz grieved together.

It was the only thing they ever did together in Ian's life. Ortiz had barely tolerated the skinny kid running around on his yacht when Hettie was still alive. Now he had no use for the boy.

Ortiz sat Sullivan down again. Ian felt his stomach clench when he met Ortiz's eyes.

"You work for me now," the Cuban said.

Sullivan asked Ortiz what kind of work a twelve-year-old could do for the likes of him.

"You can help me repay Broulliard for what he did to your mother... and my yacht."

They would never expect a child.

#

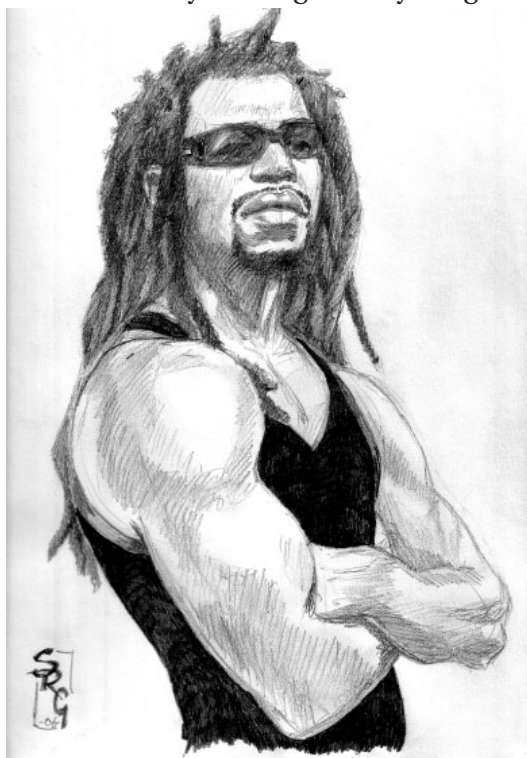
Ortiz or one of his boys planned it out. Broulliard had a lover who liked to help kids like Sullivan. She took in these street urchins, almost always boys. It was a hobby of hers that Broulliard barely tolerated.

All Sullivan had to do was catch her eye, and he'd be inside. Killing the Man himself wouldn't

be easy, but once he was in, Ian should have plenty of options to explore.

It didn't quite work out that way. Broulliard's lover, Pauline, had certain desires, and Sullivan very quickly learned the reason why she took in boys. She mothered him, took care of him, made sure he was well-fed and had a nice bed to sleep in. Sometimes, she slept in it with him. Sometimes without any clothes on. She would touch him, stroke him until he got hard, take him into her mouth, her -----, and she would hold him close until he stopped crying.

He didn't want to kill Broulliard, especially now. Pauline mothered him and took care of him, and he wanted that. The sex was a new kind of attention, but it meant she cared for him, and he prayed to God that it would never end.



The first time he came, it surprised and embarrassed him. Pauline laughed softly and kissed his brow, and told him it was okay. He began to look forward to her visits to his bed.

Everything changed when Broulliard caught them together. Somehow, Ian had always assumed that Broulliard knew. But that night, the Haitian staggered into Ian's room and found him on top of Pauline, and Pauline on top of the sheets, both of them sweating in the humid summer air.

Broulliard appeared to have just woken up; he was dressed only in his boxers and a wifebeater, and carrying a near-empty bottle of whiskey. His hair was as ----- up as his liver. He stood there, shocked, his jaw hanging limp as the bottle fell to the floor.

Pauline shrieked and put her arms around Ian, rolling them both over so that she was on top. She was sobbing, begging Broulliard not to hurt Ian as the Haitian screamed and pulled her away. But he didn't hurt Ian.

Broulliard yelled a lot of things at Pauline, most of which offended Ian, though they were new to him. He called her a sick ----, a baby-raper and a filthy little slut, and a lot of other things that time eventually drove out of Ian's memory. Broulliard shook her, choked her, his big hands tight around her neck, and Sullivan, crying, somehow remembered the bottle on the floor. He crawled to it, picked it up, and ran across the room, smashing the thing over Broulliard's head. The drunk man let go of Pauline's neck and sank to his knees; but she collapsed in front him, the back of her head making a hollow-sounding crack when it struck the table as she fell.

Holding the neck of the broken bottle, Ian jammed it into Broulliard's neck and watched him die. He moved to Pauline, but he knew even before he tried to wake her up that she was dead; whether from the blow to her head or Broulliard's strong hands choking her, he wasn't sure. The bruises were darkening around her neck.

#

He went back to Ortiz, dirty, stinking, having spent a couple weeks on the street. He really didn't want to see Ortiz again but he had nowhere else to go. The big man was on his yacht, chewing a cigar and sipping something pink and alcoholic from a tall, skinny glass. He unfurled a deep belly laugh when his man brought Ian onboard.

Ortiz dismissed his man and put his hands on Ian's shoulders. The cigar clamped between the two middle fingers of his left hand dusted the boy's shoulder with ash. His smile was joyful and ominous as he met Ian's eyes.

"You, my boy. My son. You have made me proud. Ha! You sure took your time, didn't you? I'd begun to lose hope."

Ian made no response. He just stood there, wild-eyed, his coarse hair oily and ragged. Ortiz took a step back, put the cigar in his mouth, his smile fading. They were on the deck, Ortiz wearing a camp shirt and light trousers. He replaced the glass on the table, sat back in his lounge.

"Well, boy, say something. Fine, be that way. You've made good on your end of the deal, so you can stay. Maybe I'll have some other work for you, eh?"

"Money." Ian's mouth was dry, and it was the first word he'd spoken in a couple of weeks.

"Money? Ah," said Ortiz, his eyes hardening. "I see. My hospitality isn't enough for you, is that it? That wasn't the deal, boy. If you think you can survive on the streets, you're welcome to try."

"No hospitality," Ian said. "Money. You give me money, I go away."

"Are you threatening me?" Ortiz seemed amused. "You've grown up quickly, boy."

His hands quivering, Ian drew the gun. If he'd been an adult, Ortiz's doorman would certainly have searched him, taken it from him, but they never expected a child. Ortiz wasn't smiling now.

"Fine," he said at last. He took a roll of cash from his pants pocket, slowly, and tossed it on the table. "I want you to know something, boy," he said. "I won't forget this. After everything I did for you, for your mother, this is how you repay me?"

"It ain't nearly enough," Ian said, and shot him.

He dived over the railing with the money in his hand, and the gun in the waistband of his shorts. He never looked back.

**Art by Sean Gates**



# History Repeats Itself

Maggie Lyons

“You need to leap out of your box, Salome.” Galaxy Dillon looked at her friend across the bar. “You’ve been pouring too many shandies. This is a great pub, but let’s face it, can you see yourself bartending when you’re a voluptuous sixty-year-old?” Salome McGhee knew Galaxy was right, but she had no clue about mastering destiny. Life at twenty-one can be terribly confusing. “I’ve been thinking,” Galaxy continued. A look of dread came over Salome’s face. Galaxy was going to have another of her starry ideas. “No, really, Salome, this is a good one.” Oh gawd, thought Salome, cosmic blarney approacheth. “Salome, let’s face it,” Galaxy blithely forged ahead. “For a girl from County Cork’s Sheeps Head, you’ve got exotic good looks ...You’re a belly dancer in the making.”

Kaboom! There it was. Blarney on a cosmic scale.

When Salome’s bartending shift was over, the two sat in a corner of Mulligans pub, black and tans in hand, while Galaxy worked on convincing her friend that a great future was about to be hers. Against all Irish common sense Galaxy won the argument: belly dancing would be an improvement on the relentless round of filling insatiable gullets in a Dublin pub. “They say happy Arab patrons are very generous. You should cash in on the fact that Arab belly dancers are a rare commodity and Western women are big hits in the Middle East.”

Galaxy was on a red-shift roll. Salome bought a return ticket to Cairo.

The Holiday Inn in Cairo wasn’t quite the dream of exoticism that Salome had in mind when she checked in, but it was here that Galaxy’s cousin, Fatima Dillon, taught belly dancing to Western wanna-bes. “Salome, you’ve either got it or you haven’t.” Fatima had a penchant for the obvious. “And you’ve got it.” “Thanks, Fatima. It comes from a lot of experience—swiveling out of the way of overenthusiastic customers.”

After just two record-breaking weeks, Salome was ready for her first job. It came in the form of a dinner party thrown by celebrating OPEC members at the Omar Khayyam, one of Cairo’s hottest casinos. Salome was to be the star attraction between the entrée and the dessert. Fatima’s instruction was flawless. Salome put on a dazzling performance, wobbling and wobbling all over the place like a presidential campaign. Just as Galaxy had promised, Salome’s thrilled patrons were appreciative. Salome was invited to join her patrons at dinner. Belly dancing creates a hearty appetite and Salome responded accordingly. She felt adventurous and decided on the menu’s ras kharuf. Whatever arrived would be delicious, she was sure of that.

The waiter returned carrying a silver dish. He removed the cover with a flourish. The famished Irish wobbler leaned over in anticipation. A sheep’s head leered up at her.

“Well, I guess I asked for it.” Salome gallantly tucked in, thankful that it was not, at least, the head of John the Baptist. Thus does history repeat itself.

## The Lady In Pink

*Dorothy Alves Holmes*

Me thinks

Pink is her favorite color

In which she is so elegantly dresses.

She is the grand dame, in

Pink sweater,

Pink skirt

Pink coat

Pink hose,

Pale shoes

And pink pearls clipped in her

Perfectly coifed champagne colored hair, and

Diamonds in her smile.

# Not Henry James

Jeremy Peill

**S**quare and impassive, Jamie drives from Fredericksburg to Morattico for most weekends. On Fridays we look for his battered red pick-up at the farm next to ours. He comes down to drink, and to fish or steam crabs in season.

No matter how much Bud Light he has put away Jamie is always steady on his feet and deliberate in his speech, eyes locked on the horizon from beneath his ancient, ingrown, black cap. He is the oracle of Norwood Church Road.

The day I asked Jamie if he really was a crane operator his gaze didn't budge from the furthest tree line as he replied, "and driver." This sums him up perfectly. He favors brevity and precision. Very little fazes Jamie.

Margaret takes morning jogs. These bring her out and back past Jamie's house, that sits atypically close to the road. If Jamie is outside he will offer a fresh comment every time. This Christmas Eve Margaret spoke first. She had picked up the scents of wood smoke and pork wafting from his kitchen. She stopped and Jamie appeared. "What are you cooking for breakfast?" "It's in my belly," Jamie told her. "What did you have for breakfast then?" persisted Margaret. "Billy's new sausage," he told her. Neighbor Billy had slaughtered a pig on December the tenth. No small talk here.

Satisfied, Margaret then voiced her concern at the soil testing truck parked across from Jamie's. This could signal an unwelcome developer. "Just a hunter," Jamie said, "With the geese there," he added, pointing. "He's standing up, see?" "No I don't," acknowledged Margaret, "and anyway why aren't the geese flying off?" "They're decoys," Jamie told her, patient as ever.

Eyes focused judiciously on the bare treetops at the field's far edge, he added an uncharacteristically lengthy moral; "You're spending too long in the city."

## Downturn Hits Toy Town

Jeremy Peill

Thoughts inspired by the Financial Times  
in an article headed Sesame Street Workforce hit as Downturn extends to Toy Town.

"Oh Barbie," sighs Ken with a blush,  
"I'm laid off," he adds in a rush.  
"It's too bad for you don't you see?  
You've just had your last shopping spree."

Barbie stiffens on her high heels.  
"Our store has such wonderful deals,  
I can't pass them up and I won't!"  
"Oh Barbie dear," wails Ken, "Please don't."

"I've nothing to wear," she shoots back.  
Now Ken stiffens too at that crack.  
But plastic Ken can be quite flip;  
Smiles, "Dear, you can have my pink slip."

# Trust Me

RuthE Forrest

"Just take care of me."  
She said to the liar in her bed.  
"Of course" he said,  
Crossing fingers behind his head.  
And when the fib was fully sled  
Her fault it was securely then.

"Please take care of me."  
She said in the betrayer's homestead.  
"Sure I do" he pled,  
Crossing legs against a watershed.  
And when the done deed was wed  
The flaw revealed inside her head.

"Oh take care of me"  
She said to the deceiver in the field.  
"Why not" he tempted,  
Crossing eyes of colored lead.  
And when intent exposed he fled  
Her heart became a crumpled shred.

"You take care of me."  
She said to the savior in the nave.  
"You bet" he responded,  
A robed one artfully wizened.  
And when the hidden truth he bled  
She questioned every word she read.

"Take care of me"  
She said to the mirror framed in red  
"I will" the voice resolved  
From inside her soul quested.  
And when at last she stood unled  
She found a loving home roadstead.

# Decade

*Alessa Leming*

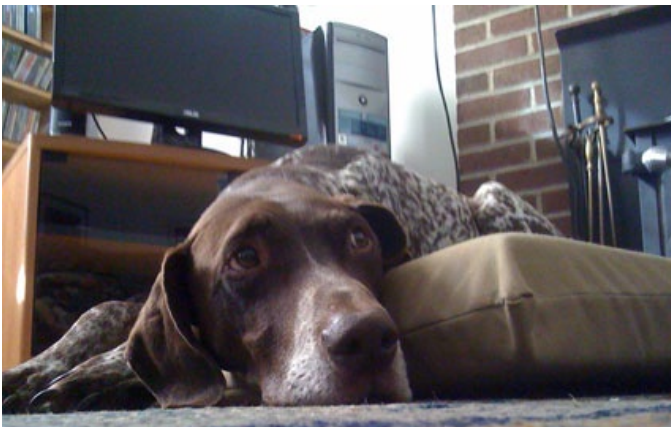
My ten-year-old Weimeraner,  
the one whose leg may be broken,  
who sports yet another set of stitches,  
I fear the day I will have to hold her

muzzle close as she struggles  
for air. I shy from the day I will see  
her deep keel still, her eyes haze, her  
tail cease to move, her paws lie still.

I avoid the thought of where she  
will lay down for the last time, or  
where I will spread her ashes, or upon  
which mantle I will keep her urn. I look

into her yellow eyes and vow to spend  
more time tossing the ball, scratching her  
ears, rubbing her near hairless belly. I know  
I will forget my silent promise until the

next medical emergency will remind  
me that she was 69 on her last birthday.



**Photos by Alessa Leming**



# The Bitch

*Alessa Leming*

Why is he always in my space?  
He pushes me off the good bed,  
the one I've warmed up so my

belly won't freeze. Now I have  
to circle three times again before  
I lay down on the rough blue bed

while he has the tan bed, the other  
bed, the good bed. I'll whine until  
my humans tell me to "Lie down!"

faces redder and redder until I  
obey them. Why did they ruin  
my life? Why did they bring

that spotted monstrosity home?  
Why didn't I kill him when  
he was the size of my head?

# As Advertized

Jeremy Peill

**O**ur friend John McKinnon really gets into his dinner table topics here on the Northern Neck. His latest concerned a neighbor's barking dog. Unlike Sherlock Holmes' dog (remarkable for not barking in the night) this one did little else. John was getting way below his nightly ration of Zs. The animal was dauntingly large, with resonant lungs. Naturally the shortage of shuteye was wearing John down. So he was cautiously credulous when he saw an anti-barking apparatus in Wal-Mart. It didn't help that the device was tastefully disguised as a birdhouse. Still it claimed to emit dog deterrent sound waves on demand, inaudible to humans. John had experienced the usual disappointments associated with duck calls that don't, squirrel proof bird feeders that aren't, rodent repellents that won't, impotence treatments for the balding male and other ruthlessly useless remedies. He hesitated long and hard before deciding that the cost was low enough to warrant a trial. John left the store clutching twelve dollars worth of forlorn hope.

At dusk he nailed it to a tree on a direct line between his bedroom and the dog's kennel. No instructions were included so John simply inserted batteries that fit the well, slid its cover back over them and stood by. The dog was annoyingly silent. John tossed a rock in its direction. The beast stirred, growled and burst into a fury of barks. John pressed the "on" switch. Just as he expected, nothing happened. He turned the knurled knob to 1 on its entirely unexplained dial. The offending animal whimpered and retreated into its kennel without another sound. Do you think John was satisfied? No. He turned the knob to 2, muttering "Don't bark!" Then to 3: "Don't BARK!" Then 4: "DON'T bark!". Relating this to us-how he dialed 5 then 6, 7, 8, 9, 10-John strained ever further across the dining table, his red face becoming like a bulldog's about to burst its collar. There was now not even the tiniest risk that any of us might dare to bark. Besides we were too stunned by this evidence of a product that actually worked as advertized.

# Sam's Psychic Dog

Jeremy Peill

Sam dominated Kate's dinner table at her geodesic dome in the Cuddebackville pine woods. Sam is large, loud and guffaws a lot. On this occasion she was all in red to boot. When the conversation turned to pets, Sam complained of a long gone dog given to causing public embarrassment on the streets of nearby Middletown. This dog, Sam said, barked exclusively at patients from the local Psychiatric Center. Those out on day release wore no uniform or other visual markers. The dog clearly utilized some private wavelength. Once his canine radar had locked onto the latest "bandit" Sam said she could then usually pick out the singularities of attire or motion that fell beyond the pale for Middletown's regular, free range and deeply inbred citizens. At this juncture Sam's overborne husband Wayne harrumphed, signaling displeasure at this unwifely republication of events unbecoming to the county politician that he still is, and aims to continue being. Margaret, Rob, Dmitri and I lay low.

Kate came to the rescue. She related how, in the days when she directed Middletown's dental clinic, she often used to lunch with colleagues at the Woolworth's counter. One day she arrived to find only strangers on hand, and few unoccupied stools. She took one beside a shapeless lady whom she knew only from occasional sidewalk sightings. At all seasons this lady swathed herself in layers of woolen clothing, and now crowded Kate like an overdressed sheep. The waitress, instead of pouring Kate's ritual first coffee, pointed out to her that Barbara was trying to catch her eye from the counter's far end. "Barbara?" doubted Kate, "I don't think..." "Yes you do," insisted the counter girl, bearing Kate's unfilled cup off in Barbara's direction. Kate hesitated and then, irked, rose to follow. The counter girl halted by a complete stranger, hand outthrust at Kate, advising all and sundry how good it was to see her. More quietly the stranger added: "This is a routine we've worked out. It's the best way. That woman is trouble."

"Seeing that I looked put out Barbara and the waitress conceded in low tones that there were days when she gave no offence. That said, the woolly lady was a Psych patient after all and had at least one problem that no one disputed: a morbid fascination with funerals."

"I have to say," Kate told us, "That woman gave no trouble that I could see while I ate my lunch that day. But it's not the kind of thing you forget. So the next time I noticed her out on the street I followed her discretely, from the other side. She kept going as far as the Applebee Funeral home on North Main, and turned in through the door. After a minute or so I went in too. I couldn't help myself. As muffled up as ever, her hat still firmly on, she was waddling straight up the aisle toward the deceased. Ignoring relatives and mourners alike, she went straight to the head of the coffin and turned to face along it. By now every eye in the place was on her. No one stirred. All talk and whispering faded. I think I actually held my breath. The woolly lady hitched up her wrappings, bent forward, gripped both sides of the coffin's end and began to jerk it up and down, left and right. "God dam it you son of a bitch!" she exploded. "You left me for her you son of a bitch! Burn in Hell you son of..." By then a couple of the parlor's younger staff had shed their veneer of calm and counterattacked. The first seized on an unwinding scarf and gagged her with it. His colleague wrestled both surprised hands behind her back and bound them together with another drifting scarf. Still by the door, I didn't stay to see how the mourners handled this sudden invasion of their grief.

Next day I made a point of lunching at Woolworth's to thank Barbara and her team-mate for protecting me that day from God only knows what it was that might have transpired."

Kate paused and looked up. "Sam, I can't think why you were embarrassed. That dog of yours had a priceless gift."

# Doggy Rain

Alessa Leming

**R**ain pours out of the clogged gutters into the indentation by the hedge when I open the door to let the dogs out. Between 4 and 6:30 am every morning, the dogs whine to go outside. If that doesn't wake me, they start to pace. The click of their toenails on the hardwood floors drives me out of sleep faster than anything else, even if there is the lullaby of rain in the background. Most mornings, they rush past me out the door, they stop to sniff the wet grass for other dogs' leavings and pee or pooh themselves. This morning, they push past me, screech to a halt and try to rush back inside. I block them with a well-placed knee, in a forehead or a shoulder, and try to force them off the small concrete porch into the sheeting rain.

Scully, the older dog, takes a left to the dry area between the hedge and the house and squats to do her business. Duncan trudges out to the nearest hosta and lifts his leg, which he has yet to do without overbalancing himself and almost tipping over. He still squats to pee most of the time. Scully doesn't like to get her feet wet with dew, and pees in the gravel or on the driveway most mornings. Duncan, my water hound, has had a change of heart lately, which I attribute to Scully. He used to charge out willy-nilly whenever any door opened, no matter what the weather. Now he tries to get out of going into the rain with slightly less determination than Scully.

I know when it's raining that I have to force the dogs out into the rain several times before they will empty their bladders. Scully is fortunate that I moved from Oregon when she was 7 months old. She only had to experience one or two months of the kind of rain which Frances and Ivan the Terrible have dumped upon us the last couple of weeks. She may have worked through her rain phobia if we had stayed in the Pacific Northwest. Perhaps without giving her phobia to our other dog. I doubt it though.

# Rescue

Llewellyn Ott

"I have to leave now," said Mom. "Don't miss the school bus."

"Let's drive up and down the road," I begged.

"She may have been run over."

"She hasn't been run over. She's off tom-catting. Disgusting."

That was unfair. It was Mom who turned her out this time.

I said what I always say. "If you'd let Doctor Wilson fix her, she'd never do it again." Mom said what she always says. "it costs too much." I called for Annie once more, and went in to get ready for school. I was in my bedroom when I heard meowing outside, looked out the window and saw Mom getting in the car with a cardboard box tied with



string. I ran through the house and out the door. Too late. The car was almost to the road. I ran after it, but Mom never looked back. At the road, she turned right.

Our vet is five miles the other way.

I got my bike and followed. The school bus was stopping and the driver honked, but I kept going. I'd follow Mom all the way to work if I had to, but I was hoping to find Annie before that. The dairy farm where Mom

had taken our last kitten was on the way and so was the dump where we'd found Annie two years ago. The dump was closer, so I checked there first.

The cardboard box was on top of the trash in the first dumpster, and the compactor was pulling up to it. I pedaled as fast as I could, yelling, and the driver stopped long enough for me to get the box. It was empty.

I should have known. Mom is Pro Life. She wouldn't leave an animal tied in a box to be trash compactor. I walked around the dump, calling for Annie. The compactor went on emptying dumpsters. I saw a cat jump out of the last one. It wasn't Annie, but I began to be afraid she'd been hiding in the trash. The man who works around the dump saw me crying. "What does your kitty look like?" he asked.

"She's a long-hair, white and orange with black spots," I told him. He said, "I'll keep an eye out for her."

Lots of cats get thrown out at dumps, even kittens too young to make it on their own. One wobbled up to me, trying to meow. White and orange with black spots, like Clementine, my favorite of Annie's last three kittens. I picked her up.

It was Clementine. So thin sad dirty, I hardly knew her.

I couldn't find Lola and Cowboy. Maybe they'd already starved to death. Or maybe Mom really had found homes for them.

"Is this your kitty?" It was the dump man, with Annie in his arms.

When Mom got home from work I was cooking dinner.



"Did Annie come back?" she asked.

"Yes," I said. "With Clementine. That dairy farmer must not even have given her any milk. She's almost starved."

Mom just stood there speechless. For all she knew, Annie could have made it home on foot, even carrying Clementine. "Where are they?" she said at last. "Clementine's in my room. Annie's at the vet's. He's fixed her. I paid for it myself."

"Where did you get the money?"

"I sold my bike."

She didn't like that. "Don't expect me to buy you another one."

"I don't want another one. I'd rather have Annie and Clementine."

"You can't keep Clementine."

"Then I'll get Doctor Wilson to put her to sleep. I'll never give away another kitten."

"If you keep Clementine, you'll have to give away dozens."

"No. Clementine will be fixed as soon as she's old enough. I'll pay for that too."

"How?"

"I've got some money left from the bike, and I've got an after-school job starting tomorrow, baby-sitting for Mrs Riley."

"And how do you plan to get there without a bike?"

"Walk. I walked home from the vet's today. That's a lot farther."

"You cut school."

"Yes. You can write me a note for tomorrow."

"Indeed. What excuse do I give?"

I looked at her. I could see she knew what I'd done today, only she couldn't admit it without admitting what she'd done. I decided she was right. Much better to pretend none of it happened.

I turned back to the stove. "Just tell them I had to take our cat to the vet."

# The Great American Frog Rescue

Janet Abbott Fast

**I** will now tell you a bedtime story, about the Great American Frog Rescue.

It is a true story and happened last night, right here at Marsh Rose. As is my custom, in the evening, two dogs are crated or four dogs are crated. These four dogs are known as the younger ones. The Matriarch is never crated and although nearly blind and nearly deaf she continues to rule the pack, when she's not sleeping and chasing game in her dreams.

In her youth the Matriarch, on hot summer nights, sat on the back porch steps "Toad Watching." Whenever a toad came into her view she began to play with it. Toads emit some kind of "stuff" which causes a dog's mouth to foam. I'd notice that the Matriarch was still outside, and I would go to investigate. Sure enough there was a toad in need of rescue, and the Matriarch's mouth would be foamy. No, she wasn't a mad dog,

just irritated that I interrupted her hunt and catch or retrieve.

Her granddaughters, the younger ones, have refined the toad rescue and brought it to a new level. Each summer night they whine until it's their turn to be out of their crates. They convince me that they are crossing their legs with an urgent need to pee. So I relent and they dash outside, and often a great deal of barking follows. Usually they're barking at something outside the fence, a rabbit, or a toad, real or imagined. I go back and try to read or watch TV or otherwise relax. Again, if they're gone too long (the Matriarch taught me well) I investigate and call them inside. Several times this summer a toad has accompanied them into the house (via the dog door and



someone's mouth.) I chase the dogs out of the room, close the door and rescue the poor toad from behind a crate or inside a crate where someone took it as a treasure. The toad is gently placed back outside, and the dogs are banned from access to outside for a while.

Last night upon being allowed out of the crates, the younger ones all raced outside. When they didn't return, I went to check on them. (The checking never can happen during a commercial break, the end of a chapter or at a convenient time.) I called them in and one of them, BB, as in Brassy and Brazen, had something dangling from her mouth. She was playing keep away with the others. She's the youngest and has refined this game to the championship level. I hastily corralled the other three, closed them in the dog room aka pet palace, and commanded BB to bring it to me; Give! I shouted. She pranced round and round through the living room, dining room, and hallway, making a circle and making it impossible to catch her.

Bring it to mamma, I whined and pleaded and shouted. At first I thought it was a green snake, then realized that snakes aren't out at this time of night. Finally she headed toward the laundry room, and dropped her treasure—a very large green leopard frog, one of several who inhabit my various ponds. I was able to get the frog into the laundry room and prevent BB from entering. Of course the scared critter headed for every dark and unreachable corner. But I spoke soothingly, apologized for the dogs' inhospitable



behavior and then chided him gently for being in the dog run instead of closer to the pond where he belonged.

I picked him or her up, and went through my bedroom and out on to the screened in porch, avoiding any more dog contact. There I had an audience of five interested cats staring at me and licking their lips. It was clear what they were thinking, Let us play, torture and kill! However, I ignored their pleas and placed the frog on the top step just outside the screen door. I wanted to exit the way I came, but I'd locked myself out of my bedroom! Thankfully, I quit locking the door from the dining room onto the porch, since the yard is all fenced in. So I let myself back into the house.

BB was still looking for the frog, and when I let the other three dogs back in and everyone went into "track" mode.

Hunting dogs will point the game and if

it gets away they will track the game. They're good at tracking, especially a frog. Finally everyone settled down. Several hours later I went outside and the frog was sitting on the ground waiting for me. Clearly he'd had a bath in the pond, the dust bunny was gone from his eye, and he looked right at me. I'm not sure what he was saying, but, no, I wasn't about to kiss him, or rather let him kiss me. I told him to stay away from the dog runs, to find his bugs elsewhere, at least until after 11 p.m. He thanked me for saving him, and asked me to thank BB for having such a fine soft mouth, that he'd suffered no injuries.

This morning when I went out to feed the cats and the fish, plop! plop! plop! all three frogs were in place and in the pond.



**Toad on previous page, Green Leopard Frogs, above. Photos by Janet Abbott Fast**

# Close Encounters Of A Slithery Kind

Janet Abbott Fast

**I** stop for animals. If a turtle is crossing the road—and if it's safe—I stop my car, get out and move the critter to the other side off the road. If a snake is sunning itself on a road or in my driveway, and the blast of the horn doesn't faze the snake, I get out, water bottle in hand, and sprinkle water until the critter moves out of the way.

When I first moved back to Virginia, Buffrey, one of my German Wirehaired Pointers, stood barking furiously. As I approached, I yelled at him to "leave it!". I saw a large black snake, coiled to strike. Snakes do not coil neatly like a flemished line on a boat; they form several "S" shapes. I had my ice chopper aka snake killer, in hand and when the dog backed off, the snake began to crawl away. I tapped its tail, it stopped and I said he could live here but his job was eat mice and to keep away copperheads. He was about six feet long, and I named him Ace.

Jake was an imported black snake. While attending a local Bluegrass festival, a large black snake slithered through the crowd. Later, I asked the property owner to let me know if he wanted to get rid of any black snakes. A few days later he called, and I picked up Jake who was in a cardboard box. I turned him loose near the back deck.

I guess I tempted the Fates discussing snakes on one of my German Wirehaired Pointer e-mail lists. On a lovely not-too-warm June morning I had an adventure.

This morning I decide is the perfect day to get out the Roundup® and kill the poison ivy in my yard. With the promise of heat and humidity later in the day, I want to get, for me, an early start. So I step into my garage and pick up the gallon container of Roundup®. I sit on a front porch step to read the directions. Out of the corner of my right eye I see a young black snake slithering around the corner into my garage. To my left, my German Wirehaired Pointers are barking and barking behind the chain link fencing.

I jump up, grab the hose, also to my left. It kinks on a whim. I turn on the water, pray the hose doesn't kink, and head for the garage. I grab a three tined fork, kinda like a hoe. The snake goes into the mess in a corner of my garage. There is an old oak table with wobbly legs. It's piled high with bulbs long overdue for planting, plant food, broken bird houses, and a variety of outdated weed sprays.

There are steps leading to the basement in that area as well. Since I now can't see the snake, I bend (I can no longer stoop, but I can bend) to pull stuff out of the way; a lawn mower and two garbage cans for bird seed—these are on a dolly with wheels; I proceed to spray the area with water, watching for the snake. I glance over my left shoulder to see water traveling down the steps toward the basement. I look to be sure the snake doesn't follow. I pull more junk out from under the old table. Then I spy the snake in the corner near more junk.

All this time, I'm thinking, "It's not like I have a husband to call and say, 'Honey, come on out heah and git rid of this dirty ole mean snake. Ah'm about to have an attack of the vapors.' That's not an option. If I don't get this snake out of here, it could slither down the steps and into the basement. It could set up housekeeping in my car, the basement or the garage. None of these options are appealing. If I don't get the snake out of the garage, no one else will."

The snake decides to crawl straight up the right angle corner of the wall! With the hoe, I try to pick him up (it doesn't work like on TV). No way am I going to pick him up by the tail! Finally, I gently press down on his tail end, which stops him. He changes direction, moving now, back toward the garage door and to outside of the garage. With hoe and water hose in hand I wait and watch while he goes back toward the steps where I was sitting, and toward dog run.

A little more water sends him someplace underground, away from the dogs, probably under the cement steps. I fear that if I continue the water trick he'll go back into the garage—not a good idea in my mind. After making sure he doesn't go back toward the garage, I put the hose on a needy plant, replace everything in the garage, retrieve my Roundup®, close the garage door, and say a prayer that he won't try that again. Then I come inside. By this time I am covered with sweat, smelly, a little shaky but relieved that

the snake decided to move out of the garage. I had visions of him getting into one of my cars or getting into the basement, despite the closed door. I sit down and enjoy an iced coffee and congratulate myself.

He was clearly a young snake, quite a bit thinner than many of his previous relatives I've seen around. Several years ago when I either opened or closed the garage door, I accidentally killed a larger, lovely black snake. I was quite upset about it. Go figure! I don't mind them living nearby by, as they do kill mice and voles. And rumor has it they kill or deter copperheads. But I want them *Outside* the house, not in my cars or in my garage.

The poison ivy continued to live the remainder of the summer. Somehow, I haven't felt comfortable sitting on the steps to read the directions to use the Roundup®.

So be careful what you discuss. You might tempt the fates.

# Another Frog Story

Janet Abbott Fast

**M**y love for frogs and nature's critters began back when I was in fifth grade. We moved to a house with four acres, three wooded and one which included a shallow pond, full of sweet smelling water lilies, frogs, turtles and snakes.

Today, as a result of living in that house, exploring the woods and playing near the pond, I developed a love of nature's critters, especially my frogs! My favorites are green leopard frogs who inhabit the marsh, my little pond and even the wine barrel on the back deck. Every spring I'm glad to hear them and see them back. It's fun to watch them grow from spring tadpoles and, during the summer, into small frogs. They hide in the pond plants or catch bugs on the back deck. When I feed the fish they make a loud Plop! from the ledge as they dive into the pond. I especially like it

when they grow into large frogs. They earn their badge of honor when I name them Mr. Big Frog.

It's not fun to find them in my concrete kennel area, because my dogs, German Wirehaired Pointers, often bring them in the house. The frogs come into the kennel area at night, when it's warm or rainy weather. The dogs go in and out a doggy door, which I can hear when the magnets on the flaps click, clack back and forth.

The dogs learned the best time to hunt frogs, and toads, is in the evening. Their grandmother, Sarah, sat on the back steps watchful and waiting for toads and frogs. Often she'd come in the house foaming at the mouth. I'd go outside and rescue the toad which had saved itself and caused her mouth to foam. Toads were her specialty. Her granddaughters prefer the bright green frogs.

The frogs evidently also teach the next generation where to hunt for bugs after dark—in my kennel. I try to pay close attention at night to be sure the dogs are indoors being couch potatoes rather than frog or toad hunters. The

dogs have brought frogs into the house. That's when I am called upon to make a froggy rescue. First I must clear the Pet Palace of dogs. Then I must find the frog, who has hopped into or behind one of the crates. I carefully take the frog back to the pond speaking softly and advising it to stay away from the dogs.

Usually the dogs are kind to the frogs. Because they are hunting dogs they have soft mouths and let the frogs live. Alas! Last spring my two largest frogs, both Mr. Big Frogs, had a death wish. Quite early in the season I found two of them, at different times, beyond the pale. I was upset with the dogs and with myself for not being more vigilant. I retrieved the dying frogs and placed them near their pond, apologizing profusely as they were leaving this life. I also promised myself to pay more attention to the dogs' frog hunting antics.

All summer long I remained vigilant, especially when it was warm weather and raining. But no frogs came into the kennel this past summer as far as I could tell. Perhaps the need to surf the kennel for bugs died with the frogs who died in the spring. Until recently. I thought.

The dogs were in the Pet Palace. It was too quiet. They'd been outside and I was settling down to watch TV. Things were quiet. Very quiet. No click clacking of the dog door. I called, Rosie! Gremlin! Sassy! BB! Nary a whisper. Not a single clack. I went into the Pet Palace, turned on the light. The three



liver dogs, bright orange hunting collars contrasting with their dark coats stood watchful. Their cousin, BB, the fourth dog, liver and ticked, also with a bright orange collar stood on the blood red bath mat by the dog door. BB was munching on something bright green. The red rug made it impossible to see any blood. She had made it clear to the others that this was her prize. Back off, she seemed to say with her doggy body language. The other three dogs waited and watched hungrily, respectfully.

OMG! Another Frog! I thought as I barged over to chase her and the others away. Before I reached her the pungent whiff reached my nostrils.

I discovered that my counter surfing dogs had stolen a green pepper from the counter top! Even though BB didn't like it much she wasn't going to share it with the others.

I burst out laughing!

**BB, German Wirehaired Pointer, experienced counter surfer.**

**Photo by Janet Abbott Fast**

# Last Night I had A Martini

**Rob Ransone**

Mother was getting on in years, and we were all concerned about her living alone. Everyone wants to stay in their homes, but sometimes it's not safe for them. Paula had had to make the very difficult decision to put her mother and dad into assisted living quarters, and eventually to bring them to Virginia. My sister Sally and I benefited from Paula's difficult experience.

Mother had tripped over one of her dogs and broken her hip. After her surgery and surprisingly fast recovery, she was much more careful, but Sally and I grew more concerned. Mother was diagnosed with mild congestive heart failure, a disorder that impairs the ability of the heart to fill with or pump a sufficient amount of blood throughout the body.

A trip to Texas, from our home in Virginia, was now in order, so Paula and I traveled to Fort Worth (Sally and Frank still lived in nearby Arlington, Texas) and took Mother to look at assisted living apartments. We found a very nice one near Sally, but Mother was not happy. She had lived in her home since 1954; it was comfortable for her and had all of her beloved things; it was completely paid for; it was home to her and her menagerie of dogs and cats. She didn't want to give up any of this, and Sally and I respected that.

Sally hired a woman to come in during the day. This worked out fairly well, and Mother accepted the caregiver into her home, realizing that it was the lesser of several much less desirable options.

Then, on the morning of February 7, 1996, Sally telephoned with the sad news:

"Mother stopped breathing this morning..."

The day before, Mother had gotten a letter that I had written her, telling her how much I appreciated all that she and Dad had done for me to make me into the success that I am, and that I loved her. What a quiet, calm departure from a full life, in her own home; in her own bed; with her beloved animals around her.

Paula, and our daughter Cheryl, and I flew to Fort Worth the next day, and helped with the arrangements. Our son Key, could not come home from Paris, France, where he was a chef. We were able to see Mother one last time at the funeral home in Fort Worth. We each went in separately, and I was able to see her once more and kiss her goodbye.

Death of any relative is always sad, but the death of a mother is especially hard: even though she was 91 years old, and could barely look after herself - much less care for me - I felt that she was no longer there for me. I felt so alone. Yes, I know: Paula was certainly there for me and very capable, but a child's loss of its Mother is not rational - it is wholly emotional.

The only service was the graveside service at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, where she would be interred next to Dad, an Army Lieutenant Colonel, who had died in 1953. There was a short, religious service. At the exact moment the graveside ceremony was over, a military funeral was being completed across the fields: We heard the 21-gun salute, and the soft sounds of taps, wafting cross the quiet cemetery. Eerily appropriate.

Mother was a remarkable woman. As a young girl she had dreamed of being a ballerina, but her short, 5' 3" stature and slightly stocky build prevented that. To compensate, she took me to a ballet class when I was about five years old, but I refused to dance "...with those funny looking people!" When Sally came along, she found a willing pupil, and Sally took Japanese dancing while we lived in Japan after World War II, and then ballet after we returned home to Texas. Mother took Sally to Los Angeles while Paula and I were at Edwards AFB, but to no success. After Sally graduated from TCU in Fort Worth, Mother took her to New York where she studied modern jazz. She loved this, and subsequently auditioned and won chorus positions in a number of Broadway musicals.

When we got home to Virginia, I emailed friends:

"Yesterday morning, February 7, 1996, Mother 'slipped the surly bonds of earth...and touched the face of God.'

"She had wanted to stay in her house with her beloved pets, and did not want to go into a nursing home. She could no longer care for herself, and had to have someone come in during the day to fix her meals, straighten up, and keep her clean. It had reached the point where she needed around the



clock care, and Sally and I were faced with the unpleasant task of putting her into a nursing home.

“She was getting weaker and weaker, and could not get out of bed, and her congestive heart failure was making it harder for her to breath. Her kidneys were quitting. Yesterday morning, she simply stopped breathing. There would have been no pain. She was 91 years old.

“Mother loved her life. She was the most contented person we know. She loved her house, her pets, and, most of all, she loved her children and grandchildren. A fearsome adversary if against you, you could do no better than to have her on your side in a scrap. No she-bear or lioness would defend her cubs more fiercely than she, and no one should ever, ever cross her!

“She missed Dad, who died 43 year ago almost to the day. She told me that she had had a good life, and was ready to go any time. For us not to feel badly.

“She had a very special yellow cat that slept on her bed. The cat also died the same morning. We figured that Mother took it with her.

“A very special lady, who will be remembered in the heavens forever—several years ago we named a star for her in the Orion Constellation—and always in our hearts.

*“Released from earthly bonds, this soul is free once more to travel farther.*

*– Mischa Brown for J Stone cards, (c) 1987.”*

The opening quotation is from High Flight, by Pilot Officer Gillespie Magee, No 412 squadron, RCAF, Killed 11 December 1941.

*Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of earth  
and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;  
sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth  
of sun-split clouds - and done a hundred things  
you have not dreamed of - wheeled and soared and swung  
high in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there  
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung  
my eager craft through footless halls of air.  
Up, up the long delirious, burning blue,  
I've topped the windswept heights with easy grace  
where never lark, or even eagle flew -  
and, while with silent lifting mind I've trod  
the high un-trespassed sanctity of space,  
put out my hand and touched the face of god.*

Normally I have a Jack and water before dinner, but last night I had a martini. Mother enjoyed one martini before her dinner, and she enjoyed this every night until she died. The following April 3rd, she would have been 91 years old. Yesterday was April 3rd. So last night I had a martini.

# Dinger, RIP

Janet Abbott Fast

**M**

y name is Dinger, and I am preparing to cross the Rainbow Bridge to run free of my failing body. I am one of 13 pups, four of us survived. My human mom, Jan, used to call us her tragic litter. She planted tiny daffodils by the graves of my siblings and every spring she remembers them. Today she calls us her miracles. I was born into her hands. I've always been special because my skin is lighter than most of my kind and I appear to mostly



white. When I was three weeks old I was blinded in one eye, but it never bothered me much, except when I ran into small trees. I was younger, but learned quickly. I could catch anything tossed to me.

When we were very young we ran with our dog mom, Sarah, and dog dad, Hans, in fields looking for birds. Everyone was so surprised when I found my first bird at a very young age. Silly humans, my nose has always worked very well. I loved to swim. My dog mom Sarah set a wonderful example. We would retrieve anything my human mom tossed into the water. Sarah would swim for the pure joy of swimming. I've missed swimming in recent years; I looked at the swim toys with sad, pleading eyes, but my human mom was concerned about helping me out of the pool if my body failed me.

I loved the days when Uncle Buffrey, older sister, Cricket, dog mom Sarah and I were able to leap wildly into the pool and pick up those toys mom tossed for us. We'd all bark and watch and wait for our toy. Then we'd jump into the water. Jan Mom has pictures

of us leaping into the water and swimming. We could climb up a human pool ladder or come up steps which reached down into the pool. Sometimes we would go down those steps and start to swim or drink water. We brought water into the house. But Jan Mom didn't care. She loved us more than the house. Such fun!

When we were all younger and there were more of us, we'd go to the Fox Pen (where others trained foxhounds) and we'd run and run and splash in the water. Hans dog dad, Uncle Buffrey, Sarah mom, dog brother Hi-Gae, dog sisters Cricket and Gretchen loved to run. We'd pile in the big old Suburban and as soon as we arrived, Jan Mom would let us out to run. Sometimes a fox would cross our path. The scents were wonderful! Jan Mom would blow a whistle when she changed her direction, we always came back to check on her. Often she'd eat an apple as she walked with us. Uncle Buffrey loved to "run big." He'd cross the path way in front of mom, to let her know he knew right where she was.

I loved my brother Hi-Gae. We played together, carried toys together, slept together and he was as nuts about swimming as I was. When we were about



two something changed between me and Hi-Gae. Mom says it was testosterone. He went to live with a wonderful family, another dog, cat and kids. Sometimes he'd come for a visit so he could swim.

Gretchen, brother Lager, Hi-Gae and I were all tested in North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association (NAVHDA) before we were 16 months old and we all qualified in Natural Ability (NA). It was so much fun training for that. Really we didn't need any training except to always know where mom was. We were able to swim, point birds, track a pheasant and even hear gun shot. Jan Mom was so proud! Our dad and a number of other relatives also earned NA. Mom always said I have a great nose! As tired as I am, breathing impaired, I can still smell food and treats!

Jan Mom went to Chicago where dog sister Gretchen had pups. Jan Mom brought home several pups and dog nieces Sassy and Rosie, joined our family. Dog Gremlin, decided to be their "udder mudder," that's what Jan Mom said. Gremlin is a cousin. Her dog mom was dog dad Hans' sister and her dog dad was Mac, Sarah mom's son. As you can see it's really confusing, but all of us are related. Later, I had a girlfriend and Jan Mom went to New Hampshire and brought home more pups. My daughter BB (Brassy N Brazen) joined us and another daughter, Renn, lives nearby. She's a great hunter, too!

I love cuddling on the sofa with mom, my head on her knee, she scratches my ears. I sleep by her bed. When I cough or need water, she talks to me and soothes me, gives me water. She's always there when I need her and doesn't complain when my body fails and I am embarrassed and fall down. She always talks baby talk to me, tells me she loves me, that I'm special. She calls me Dinger Stinger, Sweet Pea, Baby Boy. I know she loves me and I love her, too.

My dog family, Sarah mom, Hans dad, Uncle Buffrey, Cricket, Mac, Rosie, Sassy, are waiting to escort me to the Rainbow Bridge. I know my ashes will join theirs on Jan Mom's headboard. We'll all be waiting for her to join us one day.

Love, Dinger, aka Haar Baron's  
Ring-A-Ding's Legacy NA  
4/6/1998—2/4/2010



# The Tragedy Of Tweed

Jeremy Peill

**A**ccording to the late lexicographer William Safire, there is a major misunderstanding about the fabric known as tweed. He noted that the word for this prized cloth represents the Scots pronunciation of twill as tweel. In its turn, tweel was misheard by English buyers as tweed. No wonder the Scots and English don't mix too well.

Scene: A fabric outlet on the Edinburgh Road in the 1930s

Tweedle Dum approaches the sales counter: "Ah my good man, I want you to show me your toughest thorn proof tweed patterns, and make it snappy."

Tweedle Dee stiffens into immobility: "Yi dinna ken what yirr talkin' about mon. Tweel has nae pattern at all the noo. It nivver did."

Tweedle Dum, bridling: "You ignorant Scot, don't you go telling me those bolts of cloth have no pattern. I have eyes in my head. Have you been drinking?"

Tweedle Dee: "It's yi that must hae tekken a drram to think those bolts are tweel. All I've tekken today is me mornnin' parritch. If it's tweel yi wants tae see, why dinna yi say?"

Tweedle Dum, colouring up: "How dare you, you ignorant savage! I never touch a drop until dinner."

Tweedle Dee, savagely: "Savage am I yi, yi Sassenach? Dinna yi think yirr kind ha' nae din harm enuf tae mi puir wee Scotland? 'Tis yi should be fool o' shame fae yir sins: Bonny Prince Charlie, the Heeland clearances, the battle o' Culloden, oer ain puir Queen Mary, yir stupid tourrists!

Patterns is it? Who stole oer tartan patterns in the firrst place? Savage yirself!"

He chokes, shakes and starts to sob. The lights dim. It's closing time.

# Lies, Lies, All Lies

**Jeremy Peill**

The king of fish leaps clear,  
In veils of rainbow foam  
Over a rock face sheer,  
Back to its spawning home.

Today it lies in town  
Limp in a package blue  
Along the next aisle down  
And I feel only rue.

The package label lied:  
Pure puffery outside  
The kettle-of-fish inside.  
For what was writ thereon?

Wild Pacific Salmon.

But it is no such thing.  
No more silvery king,  
Nowhere is left to go,  
No courage left to show.

Filleted the corpse was sent,  
Pink with embarrassment,  
To be laid out, and dry  
Beneath the label's bitter lie.

No diving down the deeps,  
No flashing, skyward leaps.  
No instinct drives it on,  
All of its beauty gone.

In my mind's eye I see  
Its urgent upstream haste.  
This finger food for me  
Leaves such an ashen taste.

Tidewriters Tales  
**Witness**  
 Jeremy Peill

Five miles across the water  
 Tiny and bright and fine  
 Shines the good ship Endeavour;  
 Docked there on Pad Thirty Nine.

A delicate ivory point;  
 In an amber necklace of light,  
 Focusing the distance  
 Under the Florida night.

Like a flinty Indian bird point;  
 Or a baby's precious first tooth;  
 Exposed and alone and little,  
 Facing its moment of truth.

Seven adventurous crewmen,  
 Sealed in this fragile shell,  
 Including in their number  
 One we have come to know well.

Engineer Reisman had studied  
 At Nicola's university.  
 Now he and his fellows readied  
 For a different kind of sea.

No bellowed orders for this launch;  
 No scrambling of deck hands,  
 But calm and soft from Houston  
 Flow numerical commands.

Their craft all checked and holding,  
 The final numbers sound,  
 A tidal wave of fiery smoke,  
 Floods foaming over the ground.

Swelling and glowing and drifting;  
 Roiling and tumbling and lifting,  
 Flashing with inborn light,  
 Drowning their ship from sight.  
 But soon the Endeavour slips clear,  
 Testing the navy black night;  
 Bright point atop a skein of smoke,  
 Mounting and slanting right.

Riding a gout of sun,  
 Spewing a bending wake,  
 Gripped by gravity's thrall,  
 In search of Man's ultimate stake.

Piercing the soft stratus ceiling  
 Like a perfect Olympic dive,  
 That snuffs out the sun, leaving only  
 Their umbilical smoke alive.

Now a deep crackling round us flies,  
 Rains from the sky, quaking the earth,  
 As they battle a vacuum ocean,  
 These men with the stars in their eyes.

As their ivory point takes aim,  
 On its shaft of Phoebus' flame,  
 The moment is fixed and treasured;  
 Men of all ages stand awed:

Their wives and their lovers,  
 Their parents and children;  
 Those scientists in Houston,  
 Families watching TV,  
 The sighing spectators here,  
 And many a long-dead lord;

King Ferdinand and his Queen,  
Visionary Isabella;  
Columbus and Ericsson;  
Vespucci, Vasco da Gama,  
Verrazano, Cabot and Cook,  
Ponce de Leon and Dias;  
Os navegadores Pinzons;  
Their men on the Nina and Pinta,  
Proud Spanish ensigns unfurled;

Cabral and Drake and Raleigh,  
Fathering pilgrims from Plymouth;  
And fearless Captain John Smith;  
de Soto and Henry Hudson;  
Magellan, Humboldt and Gilbert,  
Picard and Polynesians;  
Humble Portuguese fishermen,  
Working the distant Grand Banks  
Off the coast of our old brave new world;

These men and more, from every race,  
Explorers of each time and place,  
Risking all for their fellow man  
Watching the spawn of their fame;  
Watching tonight's seven seekers:  
Reisman, Gorie, Foreman and Doi,  
Johnson, Linnehan and Behnken  
In their exultation of joy;

All of these watchers, with upturned face,  
Witness a new beginning,  
Witness in wonderment,  
Witness in grace,  
Witness the sailors of space.