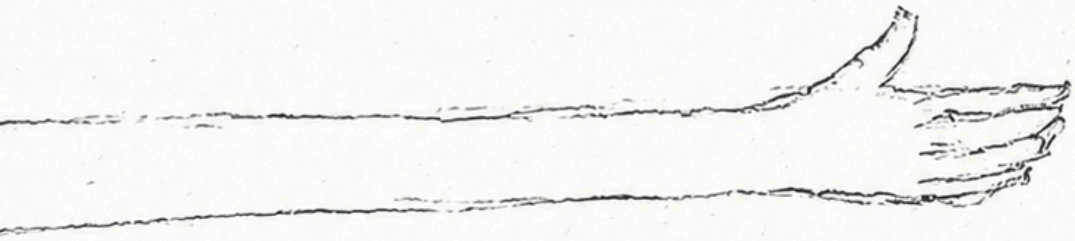
epistle literary magazine

issue iv - summer 2026



Issue IV

Summer 2026

Epistle

Literary Magazine

Letter from the Editor

There are certain people whose influence we recognize most clearly in retrospect. A phrase they once offered finds its way into our writing; a question they asked of us is raised again in our own lives years later; a particular way of seeing the world is gradually adopted into a fundamental part of our being. With all of the varied voices we encounter throughout our lives, in and outside of formal education, it can be easy to merely assimilate important lessons into our lives without remembering where we learned them.

Issue IV of Epistle Literary Magazine is dedicated to the teachers, mentors, and guides whose contributions to our lives extend far beyond the time we spend with them, and often go unnoticed. Across poetry, memoir, letters, and creative nonfiction, the pieces collected here approach gratitude in its many forms. While some recall particular moments, details that remain vivid even decades later, others approach Epistle's guiding theme by reflecting on the more enduring effects of having been understood, encouraged, protected, or challenged. Each piece is a testament to the fact that the relationships which shape us most profoundly do not stay confined to a single place or period of our lives. The contributors of this and every issue undertake a difficult task when they submit their work; gratitude, inherently, does not lend itself to straightforward explanation. It is painted with nostalgia, resentment, and complication. I hope that, in reading these pieces, you find something familiar in the experiences of others, or perhaps discover a new way to think about someone who has shaped your own life.

This is also our largest issue to date, and I am enormously grateful to everyone who has helped make it possible. With each issue, Epistle has become a little larger than the project I initially imagined, not simply in the number of contributions it receives, but in the range of voices and experiences it brings together. I am continually reminded that literature is as much an act of connection as it is one of individual expression: while I hope that the very act of responding to this prompt is meaningful for each and every writer, I find it most meaningful that these pieces will take on lives of their own for each reader.

To our contributors, thank you for entrusting us with your words. To the educators and mentors whose influence inspired them, thank you for the work you do, often without knowing how far its effects will reach. And to our readers, thank you for continuing to listen to these stories. There will always be more to tell.

Rory Baskin, *Editor-in-Chief*

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RIP Reading Plato on Love

Madison Baker

You taught me that death was an unfearful thing

Since Epicurus believed we'd never have to experience it

But there we stood, enduring the death of

Wisdom

As they cursed the art of love

Marked our state of aporia a sin

Criminalized questions that broke the bounds of politics

We gathered at the wake

Us philosophers in attendance of the final will and testament

Of the university

And we witnessed the Second Sex's unbecoming

Watched Talia Mae Bettcher be oppressed into the binary

Tasted slivers of poison swirling down Socrates' throat

His crime for corrupting the youth

And there was the death of reading Plato on Love

Our desire for wisdom to be locked inside a manmade cave

The spread of love, like a contagion

The journey of a philosopher became forbidden

And so, reading became death

I cried to you, begged to you,

How can I fight for truth when they've killed it?

You wouldn't give me an answer

You'd only ever ask me

Well, what do you think?

You never taught me to seek answers

Only to explore questions

To stay curious—to desire wisdom

Beyond human control, you etched into

Me the love of learning

A love so deeply within me that the death of learning

Would be mine, too

I told you simply I'd live as a philosopher

Even in the face of death

You, too, stayed curious,

Tell me more.

Madison Baker is a self-proclaimed poet and professional philosopher. As a recent philosophy graduate, she uses poetry to explore philosophical questions as she learns what it means to live unapologetically as herself. Her previous works have found their home in her previous university's creative journal.

To Stephen Roxburgh

Barbara Krasner

At Chautauqua, you told me my novel was bland and not working. I never told you that made me, a diabetic, want ice cream. I never told you that this in-my-face feedback led me to gorge on Hebrew National hot dogs. I never told you that I wore sunglasses the rest of the day to hide the redness in my eyes. But I also never told you that later that day, I sat on the veranda of my hotel, my notebook in my lap, staring at people on the lawn. Yes, you were right. My main character was boring. Yes, the women in the kitchen offered far more texture. I began scribbling a new opening featuring the primary female character as the protagonist. It opened new doors for me.

At Boyds Mills, I attended your workshop on revision. I wanted to know whether I should pursue this new project at all. I forget which project it was, not the Chautauqua one. You gave us advice to throw the whole manuscript in the air and start revising with whatever pages land first. That starting with page 1 and working our way through was not effective, because we would see what we wanted to see. We had to trick the brain. You also said that we rush our work into critique before it's ready. That first drafts are compost heaps. Compiled mounds of wordspaghetti. Just raw material. You said that the best person to critique our work…is ourselves.

I never told you, as we both pursued PhD programs at the same time in different fields at different institutions, how much of your wisdom stayed with me. I never told you how your questions challenged me to think big, bigger than I ever thought I could achieve. You encouraged me to be my most authentic self on the page. To lean into my culture and heritage.

And for this, Stephen, I thank you!

Barbara Krasner's most recent books include *The Color of Time and Other Stories* (Blaze/VOX, 2025), *The Night Watch: Poems* (Kelsay Books, 2025), and *The Wanderers: Poems* (Shanti Arts, 2026). She's co-editor of *Kelsey Review*, the literary journal of Mercer County (NJ) Community College. She lives and teaches in New Jersey.

Two Years at Ballard University

Patrick Carella

The grandfather clock struck 1969.

I used to hear its chimes waiting for the elevator in the lobby. Ned Ballard lived in 1B.

I met Mr. Ballard when I was ten.

"Hello there, young fella, what's your name?"

He was imposing—tall, reedy. Always wore a tie. But it wasn't until my teens that I got to know him.

He'd been a fixture of the building since the beginning—back when the place still had dumbwaiters, tennis courts, and valet parking.

His rimless spectacles stood out among the Browlines and Foster Grants on Bronx River Road.

When the sun hit his face, it bore age spots, but none of the noonday sun of hard labor. The lines suggested something finer—more learned.

"I have a coupon for Underwood Deviled Chicken. Could you pick me up four cans? There's a quarter in it for you."

He was getting on and no longer drove. His Oldsmobile was growing treaded roots in the parking lot.

He also didn't cook. He lived on a steady diet of cans: spreads, salads, fruit cocktails. It was there I learned the finer points of Campbell's jellied beef Consommé.

He sat erect at the kitchen table, snapped a napkin into his lap, and spooned the cold squiggly stuff with such casual dignity it was easy to believe little Ned had been weaned on it.

I pedaled my Schwinn to the Food Fair on Yonkers Avenue. The fresh air blew away the smells of his apartment—stale tobacco, ancient sebum, and Bay Rum—that hitchhiked onto my clothes.

An hour later I returned, handing over the prized cans of deviled chicken.

"So, you're a big fella, aren't you? Play football?"

He opened one can, releasing a torrent of concentrated chemical something that could have been poultry.

"Yes."

The odor made me miss my garlic-perfumed apartment.

No one in my family read unless they had to. Dog-eared Family Circle's and Woman's Days in the bathroom, token books on the shelves, and the omnipresent Daily News.

I wasn't required to read. Maybe that's why I loved it so much. At the moment, I was deep into The Catcher in the Rye.

While my father was engrossed with the latest collapse of the Yankees, I was wandering through Manhattan with Holden Caulfield, getting duped by pimps and trying to understand the meaning of adolescence.

My education with Mr. Ballard began quietly, softly, as casual as one would mention the afternoon's baseball score or the weather:

"Love's labour lost."

"C'est la vie."

"Procrastination is the thief of time."

His mustachioed upper lip showed the untrimmed evidence of Camels.

It took me a while to understand that these sayings were directed at me.

I learned through osmosis—much the same way my Mom taught, except her examples were a little more dire: "I cried because I had no shoes, until I met a man with no feet.

No, these had a soft edge—like something finely aged, from places I'd visited only in my dreams.

Those afternoons with him turned out to be their own small Balm of Gilead.

Mr. Ballard lived by himself but he didn't live alone: old dust and lint kicked up their feet in the afternoon sun, the nicotine-dappled walls sharing their unfiltered history.

Books scattered the apartment—many of the pages marked by one of his notes. His writing resembled a typeface more than something from a human hand—***Ballard Light Extended.***

Then there were the sounds.

Life in apartment 1B moved to a score—the toilet tank that never completely filled, the tap dancing of the radiator, the shuffling of his steps to greet a caller. A constant stream of "yups" to let them know he was still there.

He moved with a casualness the world had forgotten, his hickory cane kept time with the floor.

Common sense draped over him as naturally as the seersuckers and straw hats he wore in July and August. Pearls would pop up without notice—sometimes while supping on his canned concoctions:

"Better a dinner of herbs where love is, than a stalled ox and hatred therewith."

I knew he was born in Olean, New York and was great friends with aviation pioneer Glenn Curtiss, with whom he worked for several years.

I imagined him making cross-country flights on the wings of a monoplane.

He described his youth in Olean: harsh winters led into green and fragrant springs. Summers filled with band concerts and ice cream stands. The entire clan piling into the family flivver for a trip to Poughkeepsie.

He never wore a raccoon coat, but I imagined him in one.

One day, he pulled a photo from a sea of old sepia prints. It was he, years younger, holding the outstretched wings of a dead American bald eagle.

"I shot it by accident," he countered.

"But that was, let's see…" He examined the writing on the photo.

"Nineteen ten. It was still legal to hunt them, but I never did. Poor fella."

Upstairs, Mom stirred the pot over the stove. Dad sat in his recliner watching TV—belt-back jackets traded for frayed flannels.

That night I thought about my Mom's prodding that I was "college material," though the only guidance I ever got was, "Did you do your homework?" I listened to the traffic outside and the sound of the train.

I forgot the college Mr. Ballard attended. He never asked if my parents went to school—my father's hardened, dark hands told him all he needed to know.

As I got older, I stopped visiting. Girls, sports, the usual drift. Other boys from the building began appearing in his apartment. Some of them stole—one of them took his mother's French carriage clock off the mantel.

I matriculated for two years at Ballard University. Campus 1B. What I learned there stayed with me for a lifetime. Shakespeare, Burns, Hemingway, and a poem from Charles Hanson Towne, whose lesson I learned a little too late.

When Edward H. Ballard died, his son came and emptied the apartment in two days.

The nicotine-stained walls vanished—painted white.

Then the grandfather clock that used to sing its tired song every hour in the hallway—gone.

The spare bedroom with the abandoned Lucite cases of seashells—Goodwilled.

By the end of the week, every trace of Mr. Ballard was removed.

Except the things I took.

Patrick Carella spent four decades in advertising before turning seriously to fiction and creative nonfiction. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *BULL*, *Hobart*, *JMWW*, *Eunoia Review*, and elsewhere. He is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Texas at El Paso.

I Could Read a Poem Right Now...

Anna Reyes

As I leave my cold,cold desk, monotonous and dull and enter into a wide world anew like a text beginning to dance, just as you taught me.Beginning the dance of life as we flow… smoothly with exhilaration, ultimate grace. Brain cells turn to Eraserheads, start, stop, go. All mistakes effortlessly gone..just as you taught. Where we can create and create more, more. Ultimately we knew, dancing and choreographing our thoughts..believing and becoming poetic through time. So why not read metaphors and countless enigmas to our delight. With one text and with one thought or two.. I can truly read a Poem right now, thanks to you.

Anna is a human service worker who earnestly graduated with a B.A. from a nearby tiny town near home. She spends her valued time crafting all poetry especially relishing in spirituality and has in addition been published several times.

St. Barbara

Barbara Edler

Never underestimate

the power of a woman,

Sister Lyons solemnly

proclaimed in a small

Catholic college classroom,

during my sophomore year,

the year I lost my daughter,

a stillbirth.

Lost and faithless, I floundered

inside a queasy abyss,

expertly failing at everything.

I embraced her words,

that morning in May,

sharpened each syllable,

into a silver sword

to slay my grief

to sever the angry tourniquet

wrapped around my bitter heart.

Then I weaved a rope,

tied a knot,

dangled from its course rawhide,

above a fiery pit,

forever murmuring,

Never underestimate

the power of a woman.

Barbara Edler lives in southeast Iowa. Her works explore human failure, loss, and unexpected joy. She loves to write flash fiction and poetry. Her work has been published in a variety of journals and anthologies including *NFSPS Encore 2025 Prize Poems*, *The Cities of the Plains*, and issues of the *Ekphrastic Review*, *Grant Wood Country Chronicle*, *Lyrical Iowa,* and *Moss Piglet*.

Teacher (for RWW)

Pamela Joyce Shapiro

I have two sons, and hundreds of children
every year. Some indifferent,
some with affection, some with hate,
some need and some take. And I remember
how much I loved and hated you then.

You who dismissed me as young housewife,
who corrected my grammar, who gave
me new words, who dissected my thoughts
like a sheep's heart. You held up a hoop
to force a leap, then raised me from the fall.

I remember the books you loaned me—
your notes written in neat black ink
across margins and between the lines—
your thoughts shaping mine.

When they come to me now, I see
the fragility I brought before you,
and I remember how a single word
of praise can change a life.

Pamela Joyce Shapiro is a poet and cognitive psychologist intrigued by memory and language. Her work has appeared in *Poetry Breakfast*, *The American Scholar*, *Ekphrastic Review*, *Unlost*, and *One Sentence Poems*. Recently retired from her teaching job, she is pursuing an MFA at Temple University. When she's not working, and sometimes when she is, she enjoys watching the light changing over the Delaware River from her apartment in Old City Philadelphia.

Learning

Michael Theroux

to be a father friend boy

to play again

to enjoy youthful awe

to be forceful

without a flaw.

Learning to lead

from a child's touch

telling so much.

Michael Theroux writes from Northern California. His career has spanned field botanist, environmental health specialist, green energy developer and resource recovery website editor. He is shifting from the scientific and technical environmental field to placing his cache of creative writing, challenging in his seventh decade, but much more satisfying.

Unlearned

Isi Unikowski

In the long afternoons, shushed by sprinklers,

we were made to listen

to the poetry Mrs—too far away now to remember her name—

played for us, on scuffed records whose clicks and scratches added

to the patina of the actors' voices. Despite my clownish instincts,

I learned to listen, then forgot that I was listening

for plosives and fricatives like chocolates in tinsel, phrases

polished as window panes that catch the sunlight

in half-remembered cities where I'm always late,

or lost, unable to find my way back, hearing

a celebration taking place where I'm meant to be

but from which I stray ever further down bright boulevards,

into the traffic of my dreaming. Thinking of Mrs—

in unembellished morning light, surprised to find

those days arriving unbidden, marred by regret,

like the little pits her high heels left in the linoleum.

Isi Unikowski lives in Canberra, Australia. He has been widely published in Australia and overseas, including *Best of Australian Poems 2022*. His collections *Kintsugi* (2022) and *Re:Vision* (2025) are published by Puncher & Wattman, New South Wales. His published poetry can be viewed at https://www.isiunikowski.net.

When I sing

Madeira Miller

When I sing

in dusky Springfield bars,

I don't sing

for you.

I grip an arctic glass

with hands that never let go,

let swinging lights survey my rose

petal skin rife with dew.

I cling to a microphone white

knuckled, will my eyes to focus

on the faceless crowd, unsure

if it's them or myself that is swaying.

I sing for my high

school art teacher and her halo

of aureate blond curls,

who told me not to bother

with an AP Art portfolio

"because the world needs to hear

your voice instead."

She died before she could see me

drop out of music school

and recede into the snarled thicket

of my own madness. Oh,

how I hid there from view.

I took up drawing again, but it was no

use. Nothing in my sketchbook came alive

anymore.

I work in a restaurant now,

hum along to seventies music.

In the evenings, I sing

in a shower so hot

the steam blinds the mirror. It forgets

my anonymous face, but never

my voice.

Madeira Miller is a Pushcart-nominated writer and MFA candidate at McNeese State University. Her work has appeared in several publications including *Ponder Review*, *Barely South Review*, and *The International Human Rights Arts Magazine*. She can be found online at www.instagram.com/madeiramiller.

The Library Lady

Antaeus

One Saturday, when I was about ten years old, I was working my shoeshine route. My route took me past the Marion Branch of the Jersey City Public Library. As I passed the small neighborhood library, I noticed a table outside on the sidewalk piled high with books.

The sign said, "Used Books for Sale." Hardcover books were fifty cents, and paperbacks were fifteen cents. That may seem like a paltry sum today, but in 1955, fifteen cents would buy you a lot. For example, gas was twenty-three cents a gallon, bread was eighteen cents a loaf, and a postage stamp was three cents. There was penny candy, and a Hershey Bar or Three Musketeers bar cost a nickel. Comic books were ten cents each. Admission to a Saturday matinee was about twenty-five cents for a double feature plus cartoons. Popcorn was ten cents a box, fifteen if you wanted butter.

A cover on one of the paperback books caught my eye. It was a man with a sword holding up the severed head of a monster with snakes for hair. Later, after I read the book, I learned the monster's name was Medusa.

The book was *Mythology* by Edith Hamilton. I was mesmerized by the cover. To me, it meant that monsters could be killed.

I didn't know her name then, but the librarian I called the "Library Lady" was Mrs. Florence Munson. She approached me and asked if I wanted to buy the book. I had shined three pairs of shoes that morning and had thirty-five cents in my pocket. The extra nickel was a tip I had cajoled from a drunken customer. However, any money I made always went to my father to help with the cost of supporting the family. So, I lied and told her I liked the book, but I didn't have any money.

I was surprised when she said she would hold the book so I could earn it by stopping by after school, and we could read it together. I immediately said, "Yes," and then remembered I had an after-school job that took me an hour to perform. She said we could meet after that.

Forgetting that it was covered in shoe polish, I stuck out my hand to shake hers. Mrs. Munson hesitated just a moment before smiling and grasping it firmly.

We would meet every day after my after-school job for one hour, and I would read her a story from the book. Most of the names were hard to pronounce, but Mrs. Munson taught me to "sound them out" in a gentle, coaxing voice.

The demigod Antaeus became my favorite character because his mother was Gaea, the earth mother, and his father was Poseidon, the sea god. In fact, I legally changed my name to Antaeus because I wanted to be like him.

Nunzio, my street-smarts mentor, taught me how to survive the streets, but Mrs. Munson was the woman who instilled in me a love of reading and, more importantly, the desire to learn.

To this day, the smell of vanilla reminds me of her, and I'll never forget the words she often repeated to me. These are the same words I paraphrased and passed on to my children. "To become more than everyone expects you to be, you must learn. But, to learn, you must read, understand, and remember."

After we finished *Mythology*, Mrs. Munson gave me the book as she had promised. Although I was not old enough for a library card, Mrs. Munson lent me books to read from her "personal" library and became my second mentor.

I took home books like *Tom Sawyer*, *Peter Pan*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Iliad*, *The Odyssey*, and many more. I devoured them all like a man who hadn't eaten for a month.

Mrs. Munson would sit with me at a library table and encourage me. Through the books she had me read, I learned there was more to life than working jobs before and after school and on weekends. In my mind, I visited places I never knew existed. In time, I thought of her as my guide, and since my mother was abusive, she was a kind surrogate godmother, like in Cinderella.

I enjoyed my time with the "Library Lady" until we moved to the Duncan Avenue Projects. Talk about going from the frying pan into the fire. More drugs were being sold there than in a drug store. Nunzio's teaching helped me live through those years.

Although I never saw her again, I kept reading and learning despite peer pressure not to. Finally, in 1967, I returned to my old neighborhood to thank her for changing my life. But unfortunately, she had retired by then, and no one would give me her address or phone number.

Were it not for Mrs. Munson's tutelage, I could have ended up like many of my friends from my neighborhood. Either dead from drug use or as a criminal. That is Mrs. Munson's legacy to my children and me: the love of books and, by reading them, literacy.

Thanks to the "Library Lady," I became a successful executive with a Fortune 100 company. To repay my debt to the "Library Lady," I spent most of my career reaching back to help those less fortunate gain a foothold on the ladder to success.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Florence Munson passed away in 1985. I can never repay her for all she did for me. The best I can do is pass her words on to the following generations.

"To become more than everyone expects you to be, you must learn," she said. "But, to learn, you must first read, understand, and remember."

Thank you, Florence Munson, for giving me a gift that has lasted a lifetime.

Antaeus is an eighty-one-year-old US Navy veteran and lifelong storyteller. Now retired, Antaeus writes from a lakefront home in Southwest Florida. His work explores resilience, irony, and the strange beauty of human connection. When not writing, he mentors fellow authors and advocates for creative voices that are often left unheard.

Flash Cards

Paula Praeger

In first grade I had a teacher named

Miss Glatz.

Glatz sounds like an

airborne bird. The soaring

glatz disappeared into the

clouds.

She taught us reading,

holding up oak tag

rectangles on which

she had clearly

printed words.

They registered in my brain

for one second, then

vanished.

Ma got the vocabulary list

and made “flash cards,”

each card, one precious

word.

In days, I mastered them,

then went back to class,

calling out my newly

acquired verbs and nouns

the second Miss Glatz held

them up.

She, with kindness,

curtailed my blurting, to

give other kids a chance.

I was a beaming, little show-off girl,

proud of my know-it-all, *act, fact,*

lacked, dog and cat.

I read avidly from then on,

flying, like a glatz bird.

Paula Praeger is an artist and a writer. Her prints have been exhibited in the United States and abroad and she has contributed artwork to literary magazines. Her poems were published in *Hindsight*, *Cancer*, *Months to Years*, *Close Up*, *Visible Ink Anthologies*, *The Poetry Distillery*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Epistle Literary Magazine*, as well as on the *Sad Girls Club* and *Humans of the World* blogs.

The Netherlands 1944

Betty Brown

Who knows in what shape an epiphany shall arrive? This one came in a new-minted Dutch dime. A silver, domed coin created with a tiny hole to keep the laws of physics from suctioning it to a damp tabletop.

He was an impish young man clothed in the khaki green of an American G.I. waiting for military orders to move out. The minutes spent analyzing the clever coin design allowed a brief respite from the chaos of war in a peaceful moment of simple, scientific wonder.

Magic carpet of curiosity—

Glimpse

of a better world

A few of the coins found their way home with him, their smooth, silver, roundness jingling softly in his pocket as a good luck charm and reminder of the power of a curious mind.

The future would find him teaching science while jigging around a classroom lab to a jolly, off-key tune:

I love me. Yes, I do.

I am all the world

to myself.

He taught his students that learning is fun and all of life is learning…along with a smattering of chemistry and physics. Expanding those small-town, fresh minds into lifetime learners like ripples in an ocean stretching out across space and time.

What? Why? How? Huh?

Best answer:

It depends. Let's figure it out.

As the winter of life approached, he passed on the coins and their story. The gift a token of luck, legacy, and remembrance shared with a new generation carrying them onward. Along with the echo of silver-domed dimes jingling in a pocket.

Betty Brown was born and raised in the Northern Appalachia region of Southeastern Ohio. Her poetry is influenced by her deep Appalachian roots and has been published in numerous anthologies. She is a member of the Ohio Poetry Association. Her work is supported by a grant from the Greater Columbus Arts Council.

An Open Letter to My Polestar

Rimpa Pal

Dear Madam (Soma Bharati),

In this era of digital technology and artificial intelligence which is overshadowed by educational corruption, unjust question paper leak cycles, uncertainty and hopelessness—among the very few people who always motivate me to become a teacher, and whom I consider my role models, you are one of the foremost.

In 2011, I first met you in XI classroom at Bhangamora school. Though you were not the subject teacher of our class for that session, you checked our answer scripts and distributed it among us. Then you picked up some of the answer scripts and discussed some major mistakes with the class so that all the students could rectify the mistakes. From that day onwards I began to like you and your approach to teaching.

In class XII you taught us English poem and prose and grammar and helped us to write by ourselves. What was different from other classes and what was most striking to me was that you engaged the whole class in the lesson from the first bench to the last bench. I appreciated this interactive approach of this class as it was quite different from the traditional method of one sided boring lecture. I wish I could get your class from class five then I would have learned many things.

Instead of emphasizing on rote memorization you always encouraged us to write answers independently. I acquired knowledge from your elegant way of understanding literature with emotions and explaining difficult grammatical rules and introducing individual creative thoughts to writing. Now while I am teaching in my class in the college, I try to follow all these things. Your innovative lessons enhanced my intellectual growth.

We all agree that school life is the formative stage of our life. Your prudent motherly warning about the usual temptations of the adolescence period always protected me and never diverted my focus from study. From that time you advocated for economic independence of women which is the most important thing for women's empowerment and their status in society. Your wise counsel imprinted in my mind from school life which will help me to become successful in my professional life.

When I took admission in Tarakeswar Degree College, a lesser-known village college in 2012, the whole world went against me. That time when I was not mature enough to deal with the matter, you stood beside me by saying that "institution does not matter if you keep your focus on study and you can also get first class from this college." I am happy that I proved your words by securing first class second rank not only in the college but also across the entire University of Burdwan. Entering into the vast sea of English literature, at first I felt a fish out of water. Then you guided me how to approach my studies fearlessly and how to write answers and how to crack tough examinations with good marks.

You instilled a love of literature in me from school days and introduced me with rich repository of Bengali literature and classical works of Rabindranath Tagore, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay, Sunil Gangopadhaya, Buddhadeb Guha, Narayan Sanyal. Your suggestion of reading cult texts like *Madhukari*, *Purba Paschim* and *Aranyak* changed my outlook on life. You gave me your books and we discussed book reviews in a homely literary 'adda' (discussion). This helped to grow my literary sensibility which paved the way for my further study in the field of English literature.

You played a crucial role in navigating my voyage of education and self-exploration.To step forward in the field of study is not so easy for a first generation learner like me in our country. You always advised me how to overcome economic problems and fight against social barriers. My parents gave me life and support but you gave me inner mental strength that enabled me to overcome all the adversities of life with courage and a silent smile. When I look back on the bygone days I reminisce the fond memories from 2011 to till now—I visited your house innumerable times and I called you through thick and thin. You never gave up on me and always believed in my capabilities even when I myself abandoned hope of success. Your words "You can definitely do this" ("*Tumi Parbe*") urged me to do the impossible. Your heartfelt blessing "May all the success kiss your feet" served as magical words which helped me move ahead. Your encouraging words lighted up my 'half-asleep' possibilities consistently. Your philosophy was in resonance with Kahlil Gibran's saying in his famous work *The Prophet* ("*Teaching*")—"No man can reveal to you aught that which already lies half-sleep in the dawning of your knowledge.

The teacher who walks in the shadow of the temple, among his followers, gives not of his wisdom but rather of his faith and lovingness."

Now let us leave the academic realm behind and step into life. I have learned from you how to live life fully and joyfully, how to respect one's private space and where to stop, how to keep balance between emotion and reality, joys and sorrows in life. You teach me how to move forward in life without wasting one's valuable time in the conundrum of the past and how to forget those painful episodes by forgiving people. Your lesson of compassion and forgiveness is perfectly aligned with Alexander Pope's famous proverb in *An Essay of Criticism*—"To err is human, to forgive divine." You possess a powerhouse of positivity whose fragrance you can spread over to the persons surrounded by you. You have the ability to view the same incident from a different perspective. You are a person of diverse talents. Your engagement with the field of theatre, music, poetry, cultural program and travelling make you more dynamic and energetic. My sole regret is that I wish I could implement that kind of positivity in my life, then my life would have been easier.

Although I am an established 'introvert,' I can discuss with you anything without hesitation—literature, politics, love, marriage, etc. I can share everything with you from this firm belief that you never judge me yet you always rectify me if I have made any mistakes in life. You give me that safe shelter and I observe your care and concern for me when I am in problem or distress or in ill health. Like a skilled boatman, you have steered my life's boat through every storm of darkness and fog of uncertainty. Till today I share not only any news of success or joy but also the moments of failure, depression, emotional turmoil and mental dilemma with you. Your motherly affection and patience never fail to read my mind and understand my feelings and emotional state even from my face without much saying. I need your counsel especially in the days of sorrows and sufferings. You always appear like an angelic solution bank to all my questions of life—both personal and professional life. In a word, you are a panacea for all my worries and doubts.

I always try to obey your golden advice "Be honest to yourself," which you had written in my diary in 2013. Crossing the boundary of mere a teacher I accept you as my 'friend, philosopher, and guide.' You not only extend your loving hand to make me academically enriched but also assist me to become a better human being. I feel no need to address you by any other nicknames as I regard and honour you as a 'real life guide' ('Gurudeb').

I am grateful to God for everything. I am thankful to you, Madam, for everything I have learned from you. Although the world progresses with AI, genuine compassion and concern of a true teacher cannot be replaced by any machinery instruments. I know the debt of a teacher cannot be repaid in a single lifetime. So I pray to God that our cordial bonding remains intact forever. Please stand by my side and give me blessings so that I can gift you proud moments and shine your name as your student. That will be my only offering to you.

With love and respect,

Rimpa Pal

Rimpa Pal is a State Aided College Teacher in the Department of English at Tarakeswar Degree College, West Bengal in India. Alongside publishing scholarly research articles, she is deeply engaged with the little magazine movement, contributing poetry, essays and short stories.

Saint Margaret Mary, Lomita CA. 1962

Mark J. Mitchell

Chalk speaks against green slate. New alphabets

appear out of a nun's sleeve. Spelling names,

she says, but shapes don't make noise. Outside, jets

loudly steal your thoughts. Second grade's the same

as first. The nun tells a story, explains

each letter's shape. Part of you wants words

to come out and play all at once, like birds

at the pier. Blue, green, white and black all blend.

Chalk dust dirties her habit. You heard

her lesson. Lust for bells to ring the end.

Mark J. Mitchell has been a working poet for fifty years. His latest collection is *Something To Be*. A novel, *A Book of Lost Songs,* was recently published by Histria Books. He's fond of baseball, Louis Aragon, Dante, and his wife, activist Joan Juster. He lives in San Francisco where he points out pretty things.

Odium

Greg Reinbold

In Memory of Stuart Moore & Fred Dreher

Because I could not speak English, far from a native's rambling,
my words were like broken ice upon which I kept slipping,
and time and again I could not connect my sentences, and even
when I could, I could not tie them so that they appeared linked.
I fell behind, often the last in the line of glorious stumblers,
like a troupe of bumbling circus clowns, my mishaps, along with theirs,
were despised, taunted, and viewed as culpable and incapable.

Because I was a wounded child of a young woman of bitter war,
I retreated to the back of the class in a seat next to a frozen window,
and watched common grackles straddle the telephone wire. I loved
their mimed silence, their sudden ascents, quick returns. How
attentive I was of their sidesteps, their chorographic shuffling.
When I think back, how rarely I was called upon, easily overlooked,
I moved along like a branch in a stream of classes until I bumped
into high school, where I noticed my slate was nearly clean.

Fortuitously, while going from door to door to collect dailies,
to recycle and sell by the pound, I came upon two visionaries,
a musician and an artist, hardly known, their years swallowed
first by the Depression, then by the War, yet they stood against
the times and inspired me, a boy of odious streets, hated by all

the neighbors, like an enemy of the people, like the Madman

himself, who started it all, and taught me about Joyce, Fitzgerald,

Mansfield, Twain, and Fuentes, and then later, there was Picasso,

Van Gogh, Cezanne, Klee, and Ernst, and when there was a holy day,

Stravinsky, Debussy, Rachmaninoff, Shostakovich, and Britten.

I went from stink and forgotten to viable and flourish, becoming

that one common grackle that shuffled far from the right to the left,

and migrated to Canada, where they sang, not one, but two languages.

Greg Reinbold has taught writing for over thirty-five years. He's written for the stage both in the US and Canada and has published short stories and poetry in both countries and abroad. He's a graduate from University of British Columbia's MFA writing program. He lives on Long Island where he continues to write.

The Gift of the Three Essays

Christina Robertson

I hadn't thought it possible that an English professor in 1982 could actually dress and conduct class as if it was still 1922. Professor Milne had the whole nine yards covered. Standing fully erect and composed at his old wooden lectern in his brown tweed jacket with elbow patches, properly buttoned up, a bow tie (truly), his white hair neatly combed, his voice perfectly modulated, quiet and humorless, he occasionally looked out at us, big-haired, too cool, living for life's ironies, and uniformly disinterested in the syllabus he was teaching. He'd almost certainly been bleeding the same titles for the last forty years, a career devoted to transfusing the youth before him with their dullness. Bla bla bla, *The Magic Mountain*, *A Passage to India*, *Grapes of Wrath*, and so forth (frankly, after forty years, I no longer remember them all)

Milne himself was as dry as sand and about as interesting. Conversely, his lectures became for me and others, wide, tree lined avenues accommodating all manner of daydream, perhaps about the party you went to the night before, who you made out with, how you could have tolerated so many refills on that heinous, neon cherry red grain alcohol punch. Jotting down the occasional note while knitting your brows or biting the end of your pencil seemed enough to throw him off the trail of your wanderings.

I was that smuggest of humans, the college senior. Milne's was one of those filler classes I assumed I could coast through, as I felt (like most twenty-two year-olds) more or less like a genius. On the cusp of graduation, I'd completed all requirements needed for a BA in psychology. This little pebble of an English class fit into my schedule (freeing my afternoons up). It would be boring, yes, but I'd have blocks of free time and it would be an easy A. Of course I'd intended to breeze through the books assigned thereby strolling off with said easy A. Trouble was, anytime I tried to carve out an hour late night or a hungover Sunday to these tomes, I invariably fell dead asleep. My life as a brilliant and highly sought after second semester senior took full precedence over homework. I could hardly find time to be concerned that exams were looming. I simply knew in my bones I could pull this one off, ok, maybe not land an A, but for sure a B.

Fast forward to the huge, dressy end of year senior party thrown by the loosely defined fraternity houses on campus. I can tell you what I wore (a blue vintage dress and high tops), who I walked over with (Tonya) and who I'd formerly made out with that I was trying to make jealous, feigning indifference (Shea). I can tell you there were no heinous grain alcohol concoctions at this bar. The event was held in the gorgeous great room of a historic building just off campus. A few faculty were in attendance: Claire, the renegade psych prof everyone loved; Alex and Ramona, married, mainstays in the Fine Arts department, both pretty good drinkers; affable Spike from Admissions. I can tell you I twittered and glittered and felt unstoppable that night.

What I couldn't tell you was how to answer any of the three extended essay questions that made up the entirety of Milne's final the next morning. Three questions, three blue books to fill, three hours to complete. And, as they say, *and I had nothin'*. Well, except a hammering, nauseating hangover and about two hours sleep.

I cringed in the merciless brightness pouring through the window of the little exam room—and under the scrutiny of Professor Milne. From beneath white eyebrows his little gray eyes seemed to accuse me. Like I was a weed he'd discovered invading his prize roses. He knew. I excused myself to run to the washroom and throw up.

This final was fifty percent of the grade. Two days prior, I had gotten my term paper back, something I'd fudged on *Huckleberry Finn*, for the most part quite conveniently drawn from an old movie I'd seen as a kid. This suspiciously Hollywood take on the book earned me the thinnest of B minuses. I couldn't afford an F on the exam.

It was in the bathroom that I came up with my plan. It was a Hail Mary of sorts, though I knew I didn't deserve divine mercy. I'd blown off the assignments, slept through the books, and rallied too late in a last ditch effort cram session. Desperate times call for desperate measures, however. The plan: I would confess. I would stay the allotted three hours filling my blue books with…something. I figured I could either bullshit about these books or, smarter, I'd show Milne I at least had the integrity not to. I chose the latter. Purged and inspired, I filled a paper cup with tepid drinking fountain water and returned to the sunshiny, hot little room, my stomach having settled just enough to cope. I opened the first booklet. I didn't look at Milne. If I was to pull this off I couldn't take his judgment. I had to supplicate myself.

I devoted the first booklet to coming clean. A stream of consciousness flowed forth onto the page. I laid out what it was like to be swept up in the final weeks of one's college career. I described the range of emotions, the temptations and rationale for giving in to them, the itchy restlessness, the fear—fear of the fast approaching unknown. The need to quell that fear with what's familiar. The regression. The dissolution of respect. I admitted I had neglected to read more than a chapter or two of the novels assigned. And I introduced my (genius) intention: I would take my lumps. Moreover, I would offer up whatever I did know; the things I'd noticed, was impressed by, or found engaging in the smattering of material I had actually read, however inadequate. I included any questions that lingered for me (undoubtedly answered across the board, had I only bothered to complete the readings).

Book two would be harder. The '*what I did learn*' part. I took a big breath and, focusing first upon the works with which I was a bit more familiar, launched into an off the cuff review, dotted with a lot of *it seems as though* and keen psychological insights into various characters. Into my paragraphs on the likes of Joyce, Sawyer, Forster, Steinbeck, and Mann I wove a few thin threads of contextual observation. Moments which reflected characters bumping up against or falling prey to the societal norms expectations of their times. The repressions and indignities. The hopes. I went out on a few limbs. In other words, I used my BA. Oh yeah, and I cared enough to actually think about it all.

I surprised myself. It hadn't been altogether unpleasant to spend my three hours this way. I left the exam room humbled, yes, but somehow also excited. I knew I would fail, but I felt good about how I'd done it. I liked my own audacity. I'd exercised a new creative muscle. I didn't chicken out. So I'd have to retake the class over the summer… so I wouldn't walk at graduation, I deserved it. And now felt somehow mature enough to accept that.

When grades arrived I was utterly stunned. Milne had given my exam a C! Good Lord, how was it that Professor Milne, that piece of ancient tree bark, was able to open himself to my wild outpourings? It felt personal, like he was signaling to me that he got it. He had some measure of respect for my efforts, despite the truth being they should have been too little, too late. I walked the stage at graduation, packed up and moved back home self-satisfied, with my diploma and my memories. I never set eyes on Milne again, yet a shadow of guilt followed me around, this proper old gentleman's unexpected generosity in the face of the exam debacle. The admiration I'd had for my own cleverness gave way to admiration for him. He'd met my creative problem solving and raised me one. I knew then what I had to do.

The volumes I checked out from the library were even older than the same books I'd sold back on campus at the end of the semester. They were faded, their covers handled to the point of being soft. Yet, I was resolved to read—and finish—each book I had trivialized in Milne's class. I lay on the floor in front of our air conditioner and lost myself. Let's just say, I was a little more shocked than amused at the original *Huckleberry Finn*. *A Passage to India* had me riveted, intoxicated, furious and frustrated. *The Grapes of Wrath* left me astonished and choking with dust and rage, yet inspired. *The Magic Mountain* brought me to breathless alpine heights of idealism. Each novel was so

moving, very deeply personal and seemed to point to issues that are timeless, begging important questions. One thing that wasn't in question: I was an idiot.

I tracked down Professor Milne's home address and immediately wrote to him. I told him I'd felt I owed it to him to read these great books and so had taken it upon myself to do just that over the course of the Summer. I told him I was able to answer the three essay questions, offering a couple of sentences on each. I was also able to say that I enjoyed the task, that I loved each of the books and understood why they had been assigned. In fact, that experience taught me to be more curious, less quick to judge, and left me longing for more. Theodore Milne and I exchanged Christmas cards every year after that until one year mine came back. He was gone. I felt sad. I went on with my creative efforts, becoming a therapist…and a writer. I still read classics and find in them, life.

Christina Robertson is an ex-counselor, ex-floral designer, and hopelessly hopeful writer. Her professional background in psychiatric settings left her with an enduring respect for Nature's terrible beauty, especially as it exists within people. This is frequently the inspiration for her work. She is a current member of the long running Off Campus Writers Workshop just outside Chicago. Her fiction and creative nonfiction pieces have appeared in *Pleiades*, the *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Ocotillo Review* (story was nominated for a Pushcart), the *Examined Life Journal*, and numerous other publications, both in print and on line. A piece she wrote also took first place for creative nonfiction in A&U Magazine's 2021 Christopher Hewitt Memorial Awards.

My Sunday Service

Kayla Lumish

We gather as a community

to become one with scripture,

to escape the turbulence that waits

outside these sacred walls.

Greeting our neighbors,

our mentors, our strangers

while dipping biscuits in tea—

body and blood.

We take our seats

to receive the invocation,

who will carry us today?

a poet and a screenwriter.

Reading delicate passages

intertwined with lessons—

their traumas and joys are ours

and our joys and traumas are theirs.

We give our offerings

to bring their words home

to weather storms

till the next Sunday service.

Kayla Lumish (she/her) is a poet, writing tutor, and aspiring English educator from Pittsburgh, PA. She is currently earning her Bachelor of Science from Pennsylvania State University. Her work has appeared in *The Red Branch Review*, *Tap Into Poetry*, and *KLIO Creative Arts Journal*. She serves as a copy editor for *Kalliope Literary Magazine* and recently presented at the 2026 Mid-Atlantic Writing Center Association Conference.

Donald Hall, Poet, Educator

Doug Stuber

It started when a local poet visited my school to read.

More well-known than a 16-year-old might know,

He mesmerized with poems of New England's creed,

Of the Ox-Cart man who toiled all year, then let it go.

Of his love of Jane, topography, of every type of cheese,

And after poems essays of his backyard critter parade.

But more than this, an educator, Wolverine at ease,

He absorbed my sycophancy, offered guidance as a trade.

Just send one poem at a time and I will look at them.

For forty four years he red-lined my novice verse.

Not just lining out the words, but putting better in.

If not for his grace my poems would have been much worse.

It's also true that Hall was the Department Chair

At Michigan at the time, and edited the Paris Review,

And wrote books on how to write, and read with flair

Still used for English 101, though he's under dew.

Even while Laureate he sent a note to my class.

Always hand-typed, after we had analyzed his lines.

He never stopped educating, made sure that we all passed.

I only met him twice, yet he always took the time.

Doug Stuber edits poems from the *Heron Clan*, has nine books of poetry published, and won the 2026 Emily Dickinson Award.

Letter to My Favorite Teacher, Postmark: From Another Century

Lyn Davidson

I didn't know then that you were the first Black teacher who ever taught at Hillcrest Elementary. Not one other Black teacher or aide, not even a single janitor or cafeteria worker, when you arrived. Just you. You got there years before I sat in the center of your front row, wrapping myself in the silk pages of a mythology book, embraced by the soft cadences of your voice that was bright with dignity, exacting about learning, heavy with love and care for us.

I only found that out when I googled you a few years ago, missing you, missing my mother, hunting traces of how the child I was became a woman who could wrestle with words and live on them and learn not to be afraid in a world on fire.

I still don't know what all you had to put up with behind the scenes, the long walks down the hallway, color-rich with our drawings, turning things over in your mind on your way to the teachers' lounge. I imagine how some of the admin talks were, how some of those parent conferences must have felt. How does a nine-year-old child know what her teacher's life is like, when anyway we just assume they live at the school, even though I'd met your son, who was in another class, and surely you lived with him in a house like I lived with my mother? And my skin and my mind made of milk, like all the others' in your class that year. The flames of the '60s gone but still simmering under the ashes we played in. But anyway, by the time I knew anything, everything was supposed to be just fine.

Sometimes after the last bell rang, I'd swing my book bag over the covered-bridge walkway and there you'd be, talking to my mother under a tree, where she waited faithfully every day to walk me home on her work break. I wish I knew now what you two talked about. I never thought to ask her, except I think she said once you were both proud of me. You're still alive, she died a decade after you knew us. You're past ninety now. Could I find you, could I ask you? Would you remember?

Somehow I just knew because I knew because I knew that it was hard for you, sometimes. And your voice never wavered. Your back never bent, although you carried us, the kids in your class.

Once, during silent reading hour, you clapped your hands and we all got up, and you looked for bookmarks to verify we'd really been reading. My closed book had no bookmark. I could always remember the page. You put me with the kids who'd been found not reading. How could you think I belonged there? I cried in the bathroom—I never would have in class—because you thought I'd failed you, and I couldn't explain why I hadn't.

Back in class, you came up to me, said another child told you they'd seen me reading. I hadn't known it was possible for a grown-up to admit to a child they'd been wrong, but you looked me in the eyes and apologized like I mattered, like you were about to cry too, and your eyes were filled with worlds. I can't remember what that fat old book smelling of spring and vanilla was even about, it might have been Bambi, it whispers to me now of forest and loss. But I will never forget how I felt when we walked hand-in-hand through the whole cycle of mistake and apology, forgiveness and freedom, in a single minute.

The fourth-grade play: I was the Flower Doll, my dress, dark blue with jewel-tone flowers no pastels, because of the dark I always carried inside, where it never showed. White rick-rack making a little corset, I was already longing to be grown. That other girl, the one I was always a little afraid of on the playground, board-shaped, loud-mouthed, you picked her to be the Best Doll and I was mad. The lead, the role everyone thought I would play, their eyes a blank sea of O's staring at me. In rehearsal, her lines stacked up like sheets of metal spat out of a factory, machine-stamped and flat: *stop stop you mustn't be mean two wrongs don't make a right*…

Decades weigh down my tongue, but I remember the words, because you had me say them for her. You had me teach her how to say them, show her how to say them with expression, how words can matter, how they can make us human. You put your trust in me. I put everything I had into them, saying them for her over and over:

A shot out of nowhere, sharp: *Stop!*

A pause, a thought uncurling. I knew it had to be not-too-dramatic, but like a real person suddenly unstoppable as a river with the need to say it, *Stop.*

You mustn't be mean.

An appeal, a pleading that no one would ever be hurt again, not me on the playground, not my mother crying on the phone begging my father for child support, not the people in Nicaragua after the earthquake, or handsome, smiling Roberto Clemente who died trying to take them food and whose picture I had in my Weekly Reader, not you there alone when mean things happened with white teachers and parents and kids.

Two wrongs…the wrongs when she tried to trip me, when she whispered bad words so only I could hear, when she laughed because I wore dresses my grandmother made, not jeans like the popular kids. The wrongs done to my family, to yours, and not just in history books.

She'd ripped a jagged hole in my soft world. But I said them for her. Really, for you.

Two wrongs don't make a right. You carried us. All of us.

I wish I knew what you talked about with my mother under the tree, two poplar-backed Demeters, heads bending toward each other within a cool and ancient grove with a flock of sunshadows. Was it the sadness that always sings low around grown women? The coincidence that you were born one day before she was? The taste of sweet tea on a porch in the Florida heat? Or the news, gas prices, another building burned, another life burned out? It was probably just about me.

The month after the play, I wore jeans bought from the mall, sleek and velvet, and of the darkest, darkest blue.

Lyn Davidson grew up in Florida. Today she is a multilingual journalist, poet, and tour guide based in San Francisco, Prague, and Mexico City. Her poetry has been published in *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Poetry Super Highway*, *The Jewish Literary Journal*, *Consequence Forum*, and the 2026 e-book anthology *The Metaphor Tree* (edited by Lorette C. Luzajic).

The Puzzle of Purpose

Loralee Clark

Never arrogant enough to say

he wanted some pulpit

because he had answers—

though he was always looking.

Years ago, he climbed Deboullie Mountain

with a friend, both returned down to the lake

at dusk, put in the canoe

and started out

in the gathering darkness.

They spoke of

nothing. The only the sounds:

paddles dipping, ripples along

the canoe.

Dead calm lake, rowing for an

hour, just breath. *If I had to do that*

for the rest of eternity, it wouldn't be

a bad choice. Maybe this

is an area for poetry but I don't have

the words, he said. *Perhaps*

you do.

Any attempt I make will be paltry,

unequal, a pittance in the

presence of all-encompassing

nature; small puzzle pieces of

stardust recognizing itself in

the other.

His attempts, when he signed his

letters to me, were better: *love, peace,*

blessings, hope, good wishes.

Be careful—we need you.

Loralee Clark's fourth book, *Neolithic Imaginings: Mythical Explorations of the Unknown* (Kelsay Press, 2026), was released in April. Her interests include myth, the natural world and environmental science. She resides in Virginia; her website is sites.google.com/view/loraleeclark. Her Substack, which focuses on the process of creativity, is nosuchthingasfailure.substack.com.

Levent—Just Let Go

Abby Remer

"Come on," Levent says, taking off his belt. *I trust him, right?*

This dark-haired, well-built Turk, with an accent from his homeland and warm, gleaming brown eyes, has been nothing but supportive in my struggles to get better, urging me to face my hidden fears. But as the belt slips through his pants loops, an electric jolt sweeps through me.

It's the end of my first year, and I wobble away from the circle of my twenty-three classmates at the IM School of Healing Arts, who, like me, are thirsting for spiritual transformation in this funky SoHo loft. Big, overstuffed suede couches line the brick walls, bearing oversized, rapid-fire paintings of models in brash colors. There are massage therapists, a struggling musician, and many aspirationalists working in nonprofits. Kono, an actor; Joyce, a graphic artist; and Corinne, an intriguingly way-cool Wall Street financial advisor, squeeze my hands as I get up.

At the school, with its enigmatic name standing for "I AM," we've been studying various modalities of healing arts—Reiki, meditation, reading transcripts of channeled talks of a wise being called Gabriel, and the like. Throughout the year, we've shared vulnerable moments with Levent, who, with determined love, sees through our deeply rooted defenses and resolutely confronts us with them. He'd helped just a few weeks back. I'd been bemoaning that, yet again, I would be alone at Thanksgiving. I'd named all the people I'd contacted, listing their reasons why they weren't available. With each name "proving" that I'd done everything possible to break this habit, the universe had for leaving me alone on holidays—poor me.

"Close your eyes," Levent had told me, and then led me through a breathing exercise during which I connected to my body. "Now, think carefully. When did you decide, way down deep, that whatever you tried wasn't going to work out?"

Slowly, quietly, reluctantly, but then with a flash, I recognized that I kinda, sorta, didn't really want anyone to be free *before* I got around to actually making the calls. Some minute part of me wanted it to work out that way, so I…and I hoped others would feel sorry for me.

I've spent the morning lying on the couch, trying to find a position where the pain that is searing through my gallbladder and liver is a little less intense. But my focus is on the fear of still not qualifying for disability insurance. The big corporate machine will not budge. Since the autoimmune illnesses create an unnamed medically recognized syndrome, the insurance company, despite the reams and reams of doctors' records and test results, refuses to grant me a monthly stipend, and the bills are mounting mightily.

Lost in that bucket of pea soup fear, Levent says, "Grab hold of the belt, and do not let go."

I take hold of the strap, feeling the warm leather from his waist in my hands.

Although probably only 5'10", he is much stronger than I am. Without shoes and a bit lighter from losing weight during my illness, Levent easily drags me around. He whips me in, out, and through the circle of chairs where my classmates sit, watching my helpless struggle against something still far more powerful than me. Back strained, bent over at the waist, I am no match in this slipping, sliding tug of war—just like with the disability insurance.

Maybe it's only four or five minutes of this—panting, sweating, and my heart pounding against my chest—and I am losing hope that it will ever stop. As I slide past Kono, I nearly miss his soft whisper.

"Just let go."

But Levent had told me to hold on. I'm obeying the fucking rules, clearly missing the point.

Duh! It slams me. Of course! I open my by-now mightily sore hands and stand, gasping for breath. I burst into an avalanche of tears, feeling supremely stupid for missing the metaphor of not letting go when clearly that was the answer all along.

"Right," says Levent gently. "So, why did you hold on so long?"

"I had to; otherwise, I'd lose," I admit, suddenly realizing the irony of creating my struggle to control when everything around me—the disability company, but even more my deathly illness—feels so beyond my control. My sense of powerlessness is hysterical and thus historical. It is just like dealing with my mother when I was growing up, and thus at the heart of the matter.

It is my utter powerlessness that truly frightens me. Even with this illness, which has laid me out flat, I've been trying to power my way through it, only barely allowing myself enough rest, eating the right foods, or taking enough time to be quiet and still inside. The need to go, do, push forward, and accomplish is relentless, and I begin to see that it's preventing me from healing.

Can I let go of this phantom safety net of control? Can I release my grip on the "belt"—whatever is dragging me around? Will the universe be there to catch me each and every time I go into free fall? Scared, I look through tears at Levent.

"We're all here to remind you that you are safe, you are whole, and you are loved," he says softly.

Corinne and Joyce hold out their arms as I walk back to join the circle and cry quietly as the class goes on.

In 2017, Abby left a thirty-five year career in arts and education to pursue her passion for writing. With publications about women artists in Western and non-Western traditions alongside three other books, she is an award-winning lead features writer for *The Martha's Vineyard Times*. She won a 2026 Massachusetts Cultural Council Grant for Creative Individuals to complete her memoir, *In My Mother's House, There Will Always Be Dancing*. In addition, Abby crafts powerful personal essays that have appeared in *Shift: A Journal of Literary Oddities*, two issues of *Washashores Review*, *BlinkerLit*, and on her regular Substack newsletter, *Digging Deep with Abby*.

Larry

Andrew Davis

Larry once told me
the ancients believed
that sky was a cow's
belly and the houses
of heaven waged war
with beetle dung, poor
men were living proof
that god was just, suits
of armor were sure
signs one could endure
evil. Oh, how his
eyes would twinkle
when these stories leapt
from his tongue, crept
across the room like
roaches fleeing light.
He taught me to see
truth inside lies, see
lies inside truth; told
me I must hold
onto these stories
like death onto fleas.
Larry said such things.

I listened with glee.

* * * * *

More than this,

though not without it,

Larry taught.

No mean feat in a country and age

that would rather teachers not.

We were scabby little dogs pulling against leashes held too tight.

We dreamed of losing ourselves in the delights of country matters.

We bathed in legends of blood-red, ocher light.

We understood less than half of what he offered us,

yet half of what we understood was more than everything else.

We were dragons rising with dawn to lose ourselves in evening.

We sang to the moon and watched rivers swallow mountains in our dreams.

We kissed the ground at our feet and listened to the earthworms sing.

And through all of this, not once were facts gathered and counted and carefully doled out

in sterile, plastic vials like medicine for the faint of heart.

* * * * *

It's good you died before politicians

reduced your life to the most common denominator

that statisticians could pretend mattered.

* * * * *

The best teacher I ever knew drank himself to death.

On a friend's living room floor, eyes shut, lips parted, he drew his last breath—

and nothing happened. A broken limb after a violent storm,

slightly discolored, thoroughly battered, skin lukewarm.

His was the body whose lips kissed Chaucer's words to life,

whose fingers caressed a page as if it were his wife

when they were both young and silly and crazy-in-love. But

they never were young together, or lost in the luck

of ignorance. Still, they held hands and laughed

for no other reason than they could hold hands at last.

But when Donna was attacked, when her head was thrown against

a sidewalk and a boot and a fist, she said her strength

came from holding Larry's hands, from finding them deep within

the dreams she carried in her heart. Still, Larry cried when

he heard this, when he heard her breath dragged through her body

like wild dogs captured, muzzled, hauled through fog-draped streets

long after all the decent people snuggled safe in their beds.

Strange that happiness could lose itself in words said

out of gratitude: Donna gave thanks, Larry took pain.

Only in Donna's dreams was holding hands the same.

It was after Donna came home from the hospital,

after the scars were pronounced permanent, after all

that physical therapy had to offer was less

of a limp than six months without it, after the best

life Larry could spin out of broken bodies and dreams

lay frayed at his feet—after all of this, Larry swallowed Donna's screams

one last time. He gagged and choked, tried to spit them up,

but he was too weak to keep from drowning in the muck.

On a friend's living room floor, eyes shut, lips parted, he drew his last breath.

The best teacher I ever knew drank himself to death.

Andrew Davis earned degrees in Religious Studies and Communications from Wichita State University. Along the way, he became certified to teach English, Speech, and Humanities; earned his National Board Certification; and taught in the Wichita Public School for thirty-one years before retiring in 2018. Mr. Davis's poetry has appeared in *Midwest Quarterly* and *Glint Literary Journal*. He currently resides in Wichita, KS, with his wife, Kay.

Unfortunately, Fortunately

Barbara Edler

Miss Matt,

when my mother fell ill,

permanently paralyzed,

bed-ridden and mute,

we wrote stories.

Fortunately, Unfortunately,

adventures of obscure sorrows,

silliness and catastrophes.

Years later I became a teacher, too,

encouraging my students

to pen their pain,

to release their inner child

while modeling your patience,

your gentle smile.

You became my lifeboat,

my unexpected rainbow,

the parachute keeping me afloat

above crocodiles and sharks.

Thank you!

Canyon Prayer

Michael Theroux

Sunshade filled the canyon floor

Soon, the cliffs would bring us an early eve

Tamarix had gone smoke grey

from its bright-sun green wavings

My body, sun soaked, would set on boots

looking again to the walls and the plants

An hour of walking, taking notes

of small lifeforms sighing, in the new shade

Whiptail lizards peered out at me

shimmers past, pursuing lizard business

unhurried, confident: they belong to this place

Redrock above steel grey water, rustling, shining

memories come of the day's colors

to calm my thoughts, all but a few:

There always remains one small wish

whispering in my innermost mind:

My father was just leaving hot work for a close walled home

a cold beer, a short nap—he would have sat quietly by me there.

How is it that a child can so seldom find a way

to repay nature's gifts—to take his parent by the hand

Say: Come, walk with me—See what I see

Look! This life that you first brought to my eyes

swells around me now—sings its soft songs,

as well as its harsh.

Would that I could have played tour guide

to his soul—his hungry, aging soul.

Ah, but ages later now, I still pray

that the finest sparkling beauties

to ever settle in the heart, in my mind's eye

had crossed all the miles unblemished

to give to my father,

my peace.

Educator

Bruce Parker

As Yang Wan-li wrote,

I quit my job! Quit and came home

to learn how to teach my native language to immigrants.

After I was awarded a Master of Arts degree in Education,

I still didn't know how to do that

and became a mother who talks incessantly to her baby,

leaving her child to pick her language up.

I taught second graders table manners and cooking,

not allowed in the classroom,

so we carved a bean and served it on doll china.

We kept a store, I taught how to make change, sneaky arithmetic lessons.

Evenings with their parents, I taught how to read a map, take a bus,

fill out a job application, sneaky English lessons.

I wasn't the right kind of teacher, unable to serve up grammar to children,

so I quit my job. Quit and left town.

Nominated for a Pushcart Prize, Bruce Parker has published three chapbooks, *Ramadan in Summer*, *Tears for Things,* and *Marriage: A History*. He holds an MA in Secondary Education from the University of New Mexico. His work appears in *Triggerfish Critical Review, The Field Guide, Prairie Schooner, Cerasus,* (UK) and elsewhere. He lives in Portland, Oregon.

The Professor

Curtis Morgan

Here is a striking way to die. Jump into a river to save people who do not need saving. If William Teunis had done nothing—stood on the bank, shouted, waved his arms—everyone would have walked away. The girl went through the turbines and lived. The boy got free on his own. The danger passed. What killed Teunis was the act of trying to help.

I have spent eighty-four years avoiding an early exit by various means, some of them my own fault and some of them not. A bottle through a car window. A gun. A ladder to a concrete floor. Teunis was thirty-four, and what undid him was a decent impulse on a summer afternoon.

I met him once. In May of 1960, at Northwood High School in Silver Spring—my school, before he moved on to Kennedy. My friend George William Daly brought me over to say hello. George thought the world of this man and said so at some length.

Teunis looked right through me.

Not unkindly. Simply without interest. I was nobody to him, which was accurate. George was gushing. I stood there feeling what you feel when the person you've been brought to impress is already looking past your shoulder. Awkward, brief, and then it was over.

That was the entirety of my acquaintance with William Teunis. Ninety seconds, perhaps. I have thought about him, on and off, for sixty-six years.

He was, by George's account and everyone else's, extraordinary. Harvard educated, Shakespeare scholar, chair of the English Department at Kennedy by thirty-four. He had been to Iowa. He came back to high school. George was not given to exaggeration. Fifty years after his death, former students are still posting online about him—what he taught them, what he meant to them—the way you don't for a teacher who simply did the job.

Marcia Stickle was in my class at Northwood. Homely, Eastern European stock, very quiet, honor society. I knew her only slightly. I was six foot two, an athlete, and—when I applied myself—a decent student, and I never looked twice at her. Someone pressured me, during our high school years, to take her to the Winter Wonderland dance. I declined, and I was, if I'm honest, a little insulted at the suggestion—I understand now they were simply trying, however clumsily, to find any boy willing to ask her, because it seemed like no one else was going to. I am not proud of how I felt about it, but there it is.

A decade passed. By 1970 Marcia was twenty-eight and, from what I understand, close to Teunis—how close I cannot say. He kept a cabin near the Shenandoah, not far from Front Royal, and that June weekend Marcia and her sister Patricia were among his guests there, along with two of his students. He knew that stretch of river. He had brought students there to swim before. He trusted it.

About three miles north of Front Royal sat the Warren Dam—a small Potomac Edison hydroelectric plant operating on the Shenandoah since 1924, and still running today. From the surface the water looks calm enough. The pull toward the intake is invisible until it has you. It has a reputation, that stretch—a known drowning machine,

others lost there before and since. When asked afterward about the lack of warning signs, a spokesman for the power company said only that the danger was obvious enough to need no sign.

"Duty of care" wasn't yet the fixed phrase in 1970 that it would become, but the underlying obligation wasn't new even then—a teacher bringing students to swim in a known hazard, repeatedly, was already a serious lapse in judgment by the standards of the era, whatever they called it. It is one of the harder things to hold about Teunis: a man careful enough, by every account, to be extraordinary in a classroom, and not careful enough to keep his students out of water that had already earned its reputation before he ever brought anyone there. I don't know how to reconcile the two facts. I have simply carried them side by side for fifty-six years.

On June 20, 1970, two of his students, Susan Woods, seventeen, and Harvey Luckenbaugh, eighteen, were swimming near the dam when the current took hold. Harvey swam free. Susan was drawn into what the Washington Post called a whirlpool, and what became of her defies belief. She passed through the plant's underwater sluice gates and turbines and came out the other side, where she saved herself by grabbing a weed growing out of the concrete wall. She likened it to being inside a giant washing machine.

Teunis jumped in after her. His body was found lodged against the steel grate that shields the generator from debris, twenty-five feet below the surface.

Years earlier, Teunis had written a play, and made it into a film with his students, called "The Rape of Lavinia"—a wild farce of Shakespeare and Keystone Kops whose climax has the hero leap off a rock, swim a mile and a half down the Shenandoah, and rescue the heroine from a dead tree hanging over a dam. The Washington Post's headline two days after the drowning: "River Tragedy a Twist on Victim's Play."

I think about the grating more than most people would. My father started me swimming at eight, in Texas, and by fifty I could still swim the length of an Olympic pool underwater and then some. At forty-three I went back to Salado pool in San Antonio, where my father had managed the same feat in his thirties, after many failed attempts, before he finally made it the whole way. It is not a casual thing, swimming that distance on one breath. It takes years of the body learning to stay calm when every instinct is telling it otherwise.

The girl made it through the machinery. Teunis did not. He was a small man, and by every account I have of that afternoon, in a state of total panic—which is exactly the condition that closes off whatever narrow gap a calmer body might have found. I have wondered, more than once, whether a man who had spent time learning what I learned in a swimming pool as a boy—how to make the body wait, how to find the smallest opening and not fight the water around it—might have slipped through instead of being pinned there. I will never know. I only know that the width of a grating, and the difference between panic and training, decided who came home from the Shenandoah that day and who did not.

Years later I became a relief teacher in Australia—a substitute, walking into classrooms for a day and walking out again. I taught one Shakespeare class I am still proud of: The Tempest, at Mackay High School in Queensland. I moved all the chairs out and we staged a scene on our feet. The kids wanted more when the bell rang.

It had taken me hours to prepare. I had one of those in me, maybe two.

Teunis did it routinely. Off-syllabus, on instinct. That was simply what he thought teaching was. And when the moment came on the river, he didn't think about that either. He just jumped.

He never knew my name. I have never forgotten his.

Curtis Morgan is a retired IT contractor and former high school teacher who came to essay writing later in life. His work has appeared in *Mother Earth News*, *Responsible Statecraft*, *Prime Number Magazine*, *Across the Margin*, *Good Men Project*, and *The Avalon Literary Review*.

A Master's Cameo

Venkatesh Puttaiah

He was there

through our struggle

almost hand-holding

as we wrote

poems and stories

guided by his acute mind.

We could

grasp & grip

clasp & clench

win some accolades

all owing to his nurturance.

Did he also write?

No one knew.

On the day we hosted him

a farewell dinner

he read his haiku for us

a rare glimpse of

our master.

Someone remarked,

he's like Alfred Hitchcock

appearing only briefly on screen

in his own films.

In a conservative small town in India, Venkatesh Puttaiah watches the seasons change. He reads poetry with his young students in an old college where the semesters are called Odd/Even instead of Spring/Fall. In 1999-2000, he served as a Shastri Indo-Canadian Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada.

jubilee

Olga Dugan

I remember the days of old; I meditate on all thy works; I muse on the work of thy hands. Psalm 143:5

(for Sonia Sanchez)

to write is to read voraciously
connecting breaths of image
beyond content to the stable
and conscious voice of ages
or so Mom says, confirming
that I'd proven myself a writer
tracing growth from the child
reading Bible Stories till all
binding falls apart, to writing
a dissertation and teaching
reading for better writers, then
she asks what I'll read on a
next rung of Jacob's Ladder—
since this, I have read horror
in the world that pilfers from
the heart, sometimes hollows

in the pandemic's topsy-turvy
life-flighted looks like stealing
a life rather than saving it, a
week into COVID robbing us

of loved ones, of walking them

home—gunfire burns through

yet another high school, ten

students, several officers get

life-flighted to hospital rooms

where what ifs finally reside

we visit a care-center's parking

lot so Mom can see our waves

cards, flowers, open hearts

from her first-floor window

until EMTs come and life-flight

her outside city limits where

she lands in saving hands that

eventually lose her—but such

readings quicken my writing to

praise the lights in shadow, what

still rests beneath every sun—

more life, more love, more joy

Olga Dugan is an English professor and poet from Philadelphia, PA. Her submitted poems honor Sonia Sanchez—a great teacher, friend, poet, and professor—whose mentorship helped her "find my shape as a poet, claim a vantage point uniquely my own, and tell stories in a voice that carries, for us all, the resonance of ages." A Cave Canem Fellow nominated for Best of the Net and Pushcart prizes, Olga's award-winning poems appear in many literary journals and anthologies including *Amethyst Review*, *Cathexis Northwest Press, The Spirit Fire Review, The Write Launch, Ekstasis (now Inkwell), Litmosphere, Relief, Channel (Ireland), evolution: The Red Moon Anthology of English-Language Haiku,* and Munster Literature Centre's *Poems from Pandemia.*

Mr. Billingsley Lives

M. Elaine Wilkins

Long after the Memphis garbage strike ended, the rats were still there. They were bold. Creepy and sneaky, they lurked. With skinny tails, beady eyes, and yellow fangs, the "crawling squirrel cousins" watched from grated sewers or hiding spots, reminding me, a thirteen-year-old, that a pied piper only lived on paper. Aware of the rats, some of us Black children made our way to school or public bus stops with steady steps in the middle of the sidewalk. When I walked alone and passed the alleyways, I stepped into the center of the street. No alley crossing.

I was a walker who traveled the streets to catch a bus to an integrated junior high school. The white kids didn't mingle with us, but they did not shun us either. The hallways were quiet. Listening, I heard some of the older white teachers' voices change when they called Black students' names from the rosters. Like a scouring pad scrubbing a skillet, their voices scraped against our names as if our mere presence offended them. On top of this, there wasn't any togetherness among different students because most white parents taught "beware," and Black parents taught "be careful." As children, we learned to be "leery." Segregation moved from physical boundaries to emotional lines, and we moved with it. At least that was until Principal Frank C. Billingsley arrived.

Each day, Mr. Billingsley stood at different spots in the hallways. Although he never called me aside, I saw him selecting white and Black students to have conversations with them. He smiled equally at both. Wearing his standard black suit, white shirt, and black tie, he blended in with the students.

Then one day, I heard a Black student behind me. "Mr. Billingsley will do something about that math teacher not being fair."

Fair meant a lot to me, and I wanted to believe in it, but Dr. King's death in 1968 had taken something deeper from me because it happened where I lived. My Memphis world became navy blue and dark purple. I wore bruises. By 1969, they were all gone. Medgar Evers. John F. Kennedy. Malcolm X. Martin Luther King, Jr. Robert Kennedy. History makers buried.

I didn't know one Black child who wasn't made different with each death. My grandfather said, "Lynching ropes are now high-powered rifles." His voice sank into me. It hit hard because Black leaders in Memphis wanted children to stand in front of evil and make demands. Protest got folks killed. My heroes proved that.

Children had always been part of Dr. King's movement, but he was alive then, and being asked for help was like an invite to a grown-up party. Now, he was dead, and Black children were told not to attend school on Mondays until at least one Black person was on the Memphis City School Board. My family agreed that I would participate. By the second Monday, someone in power changed the weekly testing date from Friday to Monday. They did the unspeakable, telling Black children if they missed Monday, they could not make up a test. What a mess!

Watching my grades move downward from As and Bs was devastating. But my grandfather was determined. With his Bible in his hand, he took me to meet with Mr. Billingsley. Calmly, my grandfather asked why I couldn't make up a test.

As I sat and listened, watching Mr. Billingsley's face remain balanced, I believed what I heard the student say so many weeks ago. Mr. Billingsley's spirit was even-handed.

He looked at me. "I'm so sorry this is happening to you." Keeping his eyes on me, he continued. "Any student who asks to make-up a test will have an opportunity to do so."

As he stood, my grandfather reached out his hand to Mr. Billingsley. "This may cost you."

Mr. Billingsley shook his hand and replied, "I can think of a greater cost."

When his eyes found mine, my heart woke up. It had been asleep since my last hero, Robert Kennedy, died. I looked at Mr. Billingsley. Did I dare add a living name to my hero's list? Frank C. Billingsley.

Then he smiled. It was a sunshine smile. A hopeful one. My heart added his name.

As I walked out of Mr. Billingsley's office, I felt it, my "David" rising inside me. I was finally ready to face that awful P.E. teacher.

Her tone with Black children was dismissive. She called our names for attendance as the pupils of her eyes became dark and the corners of her mouth turned downward. Gym was miserable for me. But after the makeup test meeting, I was different. Studying David taught me that true winners never started a fight; they finished it. So, I waited for her to cross the line.

When it was my time of the month, as my grandmother called my cycle, I always had a parental note to be excused from gym. I stood in line wearing my regular clothes.

Looking at my clothes, the P.E. teacher said, "Some people think they do not have to follow the rules."

The signs carried by the sanitation strikers stared at me from the past.

"I Am A Man."

Then the P.E. teacher turned those beady eyes on me and asked, "Just who do you think you are?"

I answered her question. "Mary Elaine Wilkins."

She screamed, "Get to the office."

As I walked down the hallway, I thought about the punishment I may get when I got home for having a "smart mouth," because my grandmother taught that a smart mouth got you killed in a white woman's world, no matter the reason. She always ended with saying, "Remember Emmett Till." But my grandfather said, "Sometimes all you have is a smart mouth telling a respectful truth."

I stood outside the door with the large print "Principal's Office" taking up almost the entire frosted glass. In a few seconds, it would only be Mr. Billingsley and me. How would my new hero hold up when it was just him and one child? No Bible. Raising my hand to knock, I paused and prayed, "God, please let Mr. Billingsley believe me."

Gently, I tapped.

"Come in."

He looked up at me. The water welled in my eyes. I tried to swallow it away but like the murky Mississippi River, it just grew thicker.

Nodding towards a chair, he asked, "What is it?"

I told him everything. She was hateful and spiteful, and I didn't understand how a person could be both at the same time, but she was.

I finished telling. Quietness fell.

In a voice that reminded me of how velvet felt, he said, "I'm so sorry that happened to you."

Taking a piece of paper, he wrote something on it and handed it to me.

"This is a note to the librarian. You can stay with her the rest of the day. I'll let your teachers know where to send your work."

When I got to the library, I handed the note to the youngest librarian.

Looking at me, she said, "He wants you to check out To Kill A Mockingbird and read it, especially Chapter 21, where Scout is told to stand up for her father after he loses the trial."

She handed me a book. It looked and smelled new. I would be its first reader.

The next day, when I went back to P.E., Mr. Billingsley came to the gym and took a seat on one of the bleachers. Quietly, he watched. He never had to come back again.

Over the next few weeks, I read the book, plowing through it the way I did math or science. It was Atticus Finch who held my attention. He believed in Tom Robinson. Atticus was courageous and strong, but he had something else, and I needed it. Willpower.

On the walk home from school, I didn't avoid the alleyway.

The next morning, just like I waited for the P.E. teacher, I waited for "Humpty Dumpty," a white man with thinning dark hair and black horn-rimmed glasses. He worked near my bus stop. If I walked alone, he came outside and tried to get me to take money from him. I always refused. On this day, he became brave enough to fondle his private parts and show them to me. He grinned.

Without dropping my eyes from his face, I remembered the fight in To Kill A Mockingbird.

In the book, Jem wanted to take Scout to the road to get away from Mr. Ewell. I stopped walking forward. Backed up. Crossed the street, and thought, "This is not over."

When I got to school, I went straight to Mr. Billingsley.

This time there was no hesitation. No thought. I knocked on his door, and the flooding Mississippi River didn't dwell inside my eyes.

As Mr. Billingsley listened, I noticed that his neck was red and he gritted his teeth.

When I finished, he said, "I'm so sorry that happened to you."

He handed me a note. "Wait for me in the library. I need to make some calls and notify your grandfather. I'll let your teachers know where you are."

"Yes sir."

Turning around, I asked, "Is there any book you want me to read?"

Caught off guard, he was quiet for a minute, and then he smiled. “Your choice today.”

“Do you know where he works?”

“Yes sir.” I told him the name.

I had to wait until the grown folks took care of their business. My business was the math I had to do until I was called by Mr. Billingsley. It was a three-hour wait.

***

In the office were my grandfather and two white men in suits and ties.

I stood by the door.

One of the men approached me and said, “He won’t ever bother you again.”

He reached inside his pocket and took out a card. The other man handed me one too.

“Keep these cards with you...”

My grandfather interrupted him. “I’m going to change her route to school.”

Both men nodded their heads. They had kind eyes but no smiles.

They shook Mr. Billingsley’s hand. I saw them shake my grandfather’s hand too. My principal blended the law and my family together.

After they left, Mr. Billingsley said, “You can go home if you want or you can go to the library.”

I smiled. “No sir. I want to go to P.E.”

“P.E.? I never thought you would say that.”

“It’s not that bad anymore. She treats us better.”

I never saw the “Humpty Dumpty” man again.

Over the next four years, I had other assigned principals, but I only remember the middle initial of Mr. Billingsley.

***

The rats of my childhood are long gone. Occasionally, I hear stories about them, but my experiences are becoming memories and not realities.

Time freezes greatness.

I remember the cafeteria baking fresh bread and frying chicken, the large windows letting the outside in, and the wood smelling of fresh orange furniture wax. I no longer carry the detective’s business cards, but I can feel the linen smoothness beneath my fingertips. The sound of the P.E. teacher's name plays inside my head, but I can’t spell it. Mr. Billingsley’s black and white dress clothes continue to be my “roll up your sleeves” colors. Ever so often, I re-read To Kill A Mockingbird.

When I interviewed others about Mr. Billingsley, I discovered that he started his career as a history and government teacher. Currently, I teach the same subjects. As I read the comments, I couldn't tell the racial identity of any student. We simply all belonged to him. Almost like a group of mockingbirds.

Mr. Billingsley lives.

I still enter the "Fight the Good Fight" arena.

The scenery changed, but the truth remains.

Not too long ago, a student told me. "I found my aunt dead this morning."

Before I did anything else, I said, "I'm so sorry that happened to you."

M. Elaine Wilkins is a writer and educator from Memphis, Tennessee. Her work explores family, memory, history, and the Southern experience. Her personal essay, "The Blues Is Hard on Your Feet," appears in *Porchlight: A Journal of Southern Literature*, Issue 13 (August 2026), and her flash fiction, "Sitting on China: A Hundred Years of Shards," was published by *101 Words* in August 2026. She is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at Lindenwood University.

Tuning Into the Frequency

Skyler Lovelace

For Steven Hind

Tony used to joke that I climbed off a tractor
and ran away to college, which is fair enough.
But at eighteen, in that junior college room,
you were the first to tell me that poetry matters
and that place matters—this Kansas expanse
where the landscape stops being the backdrop
and starts being the poem.

You acknowledged my lines with a matter-of-fact
Midwestern grace, as if good poems were as natural
as storms rolling from the southwest,
as sure as sunflowers tracking daylight.
Decades later, I still carry what you gave me:
Unfenced prairies of bluestem and milkweed and bison.
Everything I valued that this world did not.

Skyler Lovelace is a writer based in Wichita, Kansas. After a thirty-year hiatus from the submission world, she is actively returning to public work. Her previous poetry has appeared in *Poetry*, *Cutbank*, and *The Laurel Review*.

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