

Right at Home



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[Write In Louisa \(WIL\)](#) is a writers group designed for writers and aspiring writers ages 18+ with any level of experience, from any background. From published authors to those simply interested in exploring different forms of self-expression, all are encouraged to join our open, friendly group to read, and if desired, receive helpful feedback.

We meet the first Wednesday of the month from 2 to 3:30 p.m. (unless otherwise specified) in the Purcell Gallery at Louisa Arts Center. Donation is \$5 + associated fees. All donations support [Louisa Arts Center](#), a nonprofit providing opportunities for the community to explore and enjoy the arts.

Right at Home

A Write In Louisa anthology

ATW Publishing

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Dear Readers,

I am thrilled to present "Right at Home," an anthology that showcases the creativity and passion of our talented local writers and celebrates the first year of our existence as a group. Because of our members and guests, Write In Louisa has become a warm and welcoming haven for writers, both experienced and aspiring, from Louisa County and other areas of Central Virginia. Our first meeting was held on November 5, 2024, and since then, we have enjoyed monthly gatherings facilitated by our fun and talented members and guests. This slim volume features an array of their work.

Write In Louisa opens its doors to individuals from all walks of life—whether they are seasoned authors or exploring the joys of self-expression for the very first time. We have cultivated a supportive and friendly environment where creativity flourishes through shared reading and valuable discussions. Our members have made that happen. As you explore these pages, you will hear their unique voices. You will get a sense of who they are, the experiences they carry with them, and the ways they turn those experiences into prose and poetry.

You will also get a sense of what we write during our meetings. Some of what you will read is unedited and reflects responses to prompts, Louisa Arts Center Purcell Gallery exhibits, and other aspects inspired by our surroundings. Karen Welch, Executive Director, and her team have supported us from the start when the group was just an idea. We are extraordinarily grateful for that support.

I hope you enjoy this celebration of local talent and our journey together over the past year and that you find inspiration in these words. Thank you for reading, and thank you for being a part of our story!

Warmly,
Katherine Mercurio Gotthardt, M.Ed.
Founder, Write In Louisa

A Fable of the Links

Some Non-Inspirational poetry from the Bard of Tanyard, recalling prehistoric days of the Tanyard Golf Course in Louisa, when Pamunkey Indians resided nearby and homes were lit by whale oil lamps

Larry Kavanagh

The Tanyard Duffer snarled and hurled the hated club to earth.
His golfing partner stepped aside and tried to hide his mirth.
The groundhog raised his head, but wisely slipped back in his hole;
The songbird ceased to sing, as golfing duffing choked his soul.
Now, who would think a golf ball, teed one summer afternoon,
Would ricochet from tree to tree, and land in yon spittoon,
Then shatter 'toon to shreds, and roll out free as me or you,
Straight out to Beaver Creek, atop Pamunkey hide canoe,
And nestle in the folds of all the shiny groundhog hides
Pamunk had tanned for trade and paddled downstream for the tribe.
Down Beaver Creek, South Anna, York, and on to Chesapeake,
The ball and hides and 'Munk traversed. It took about a week.
And then a storm arose and drove the whole thing out to sea,
Where wind and heavy rain destroyed the hide-boat utterly.
But ere the golf ball sank below, 'twas swallowed by a whale,
And whale in turn harpooned by passing Pequod under sail.
Thence on to nearest cannery, and stuffed into a can,
A bit of blubber bland and bile, all tallowish and tan;
Then sold as fuel for oil lamps to the prudent groundkeep crew,
Who warmed their hands by blubber fire in the early morning dew.
Then opened at the golf course on the night they needed oil
To light the lamps of whale oil for the golfers' weary toil,
Duffing home around the back nine after sun had sunken low
And they needed light around the greens to give the cups a glow.
But look! The tallowed golf ball falls from whale-can with a roll,
On course that takes it straight away to drop into the hole!
"An ace!" the Tanyard Duffer cried, for how could he forget
That yonder ball was HIS, though months had passed and yet
That selfsame ball, untouched by man, to cup at last did fly,
And, Lordy, what a lie, a lie, a lie, a lie, a lie!

From Outrageous Tales of Old Louisa, Copyright 2023 by Larry Kavanagh, printed with permission

Badlands Balloon Ride

Randy Holladay

What provoked them to set up balloon rides over a place called 'Badlands'? There had to be a reason, maybe a ride, would not be so bad.

The release of the ropes, the sudden whooosh skyward was the shocker. The earth began to shrink..and expand. There was so much more earth. The rolling badlands, rounded, without trees or stark definition began to change. They stretched off, farther and farther into the distance, the pale, bland colors at the surface began to change, separating into distinct bands, distinct but matching distance bands.

The sound of the burner, constantly adding the hot air to keep us aloft began to be a less noticeable drone..even though it was the only sound. Our personal ooohs and aaahs heard only in our own heads. And, then the burner was off and the sudden silence shocked us almost as much as the blast from the burning propane.

There was a hint of wind but, we moved with the wind so there was really just the silence. Now, the delight we all felt and had been expressing could be heard, yet no one really dared break the silence.

We drifted over the 'badlands', they looked much less bad. The dirt and rock, so lifeless from below didn't come alive but it was now able to tell a greater story. Millenia in the making, unseen by any human.

Based on the writing prompt "balloon ride" provided by Larry Kavanagh

A Christmas Story

Larry Kavanagh

Santa Claus 🧑🏻🦊 had had enough of this North Pole residency.

Christmas Eve, December 24, was essentially the same day as the winter solstice. On this, his busiest workday of the year, there was no daylight, not even the faintest glimmer of the sun, and it was the coldest of all four seasons. It made sense to move.

So, Santa moved to the South Pole. December 24 was summer down there. It was warmer, the sun was up 24 hours a day, and the penguins were fun to watch. Why hadn't he made this move a long time ago? All of Santa's staff were happy at this new pole. The elves even started developing a southern drawl and eating grits for breakfast.

All were happy, that is, except Rudolph. His shiny red nose was no longer needed. He was not needed. All of the other reindeer started laughing and calling him names again. Rudolph fell into depression.

But then, a cure came along. It was spectacular. It made Rudolph a new person. All was well, even better than before.

What was the cure? I could tell you, but I only had 10 minutes for this writing exercise, and time is up.

WAIT A MINUTE! WE JUST GOT A FIVE-MINUTE EXTENSION. HERE'S THE CURE: Rudolph discovered that a red nose actually gives off heat. It does essentially what a red heating lamp does. So, since Santa was becoming rapidly enamored with his new Southern comforts, he was actually getting too cold every time his sleigh ventured into the northern hemisphere to deliver presents. He invited Rudolph to sit next to him on every annual trip, and Rudolph's nose kept Santa comfortable and warm. This gave Rudolph the place of honor, and all eight of the other reindeer turned bright green with envy. Every family who looked into the sky to spot Santa on the magic evening saw a sleigh that had both red and green colors, and this gave all observers a warm, fuzzy, Christmas-color feeling. Happiness all around.

Ten-minute open writing, December 2024

Ugly

David Reid Brown

No one would like trees if they grew upside down.
The unsightliness would most certainly bubble-blister your soul.
Consensus would move the masses to burn them all to the ground.
Pinch your nose and say, "Welcome!", to the cinders and charcoal.

The exposure of roots was too awful but God's mercy hid them well.
He placed them below the crust so they could only mate with the dirt.
Even winter's barren limbs have more charm than one could tell.
Signaling the birth of a new season while keeping our eyes from needless hurt.

Go pluck a bloom of wildflowers, each of one of you of every kind!
Pen clever rhyming platitudes about their radiance instead.
Ms. Dickinson would agree, so, I'm sure she would not mind,
the beauty of timbers overlooked for affirming words to be read.

The wretched bronchial crookedness of a tree's mooring system,
provides its life, leaf, and fruit and conspicuous definition.

A Write In Louisa Local Authors Book Expo showcased author

A Role Model for the Revolution

Jesse Fowler-Malone (AKA Squid)

Get up and yell at the sun.
Shake and preen, my siblings. Shake and preen.
Sharpen your spurs.
Throw your head back and be heard.

Loud. Proud. Golden.
Desired.
Desire Incarnate, even.

Fly anyway and be good at it, despite your haters.
Just know
you can be like him.

No one but you
can ruffle some feathers like a rooster crowing at 6 a.m.

Ekphrasis on Carol Cullinan's pastel drawing, Cock of the Walk
MidAtlantic Pastel Society November 2024 exhibit
Louisa Arts Center, Louisa VA

"Steam Tractor Being Belted Up to Sawmill"

Dick Harris

When these machines were in their heyday around 1900, they were state-of-the-art made possible by advances in knowledge of how to make high strength steel parts. They were large and heavy machines and moved slowly and were primarily used to power rotating machines , such as sawmills and grain threshing machines by a long flat leather belt.

In the central part of the country, they were used to pull large plows, called "sodbusters," to break up virgin sod, where the fields are a 1 mile square.

They were expensive, and only well off people could afford to buy one. They took 2 people to operate when used to pull something. One person to keep up the fire and one to drive the machine.

They were dangerous to people around them, in that they could explode without warning. If you were not killed by the explosion, the steam and hot water would cause severe burns, which would cause a horrible slow death.

The main plus they had is that they were very powerful and the benefits of this power is that they allowed man to produce things in great quantity with his work. Take for instance the sawmill. Before steam power, the sawmill was powered by water turning the rotary saw. This meant that logs had to be moved to where the water was. When the sawmill could be set up deep into the forest, much more timber could be turned into lumber for houses and other uses.

They were one of the steps that man went through to where we are today. If you wish to see a real one, go to the steam and gas show in Somerset, Virginia every first week in September. There they run a sawmill and cut lumber and also pull a large plow in the field.

They were made obsolete by the internal combustion engine. Steam power did not exist until man learned how to make metal strong enough that it could be safely used to contain the pressure of steam. It was not possible to make these machines until it was discovered how to turn cast iron into steel. This was discovery happened by accident, but that is a whole another story.

All of man's progress has been in steps of discoveries that have occurred in the past. The computers and smartphones we use today are only made possible by what we call

"Chips" that have come about in my lifetime. What will our world be like 100 years from now? Stay tuned.

*Based on "Steam Tractor Being Belted Up to Sawmill"
MidAtlantic Pastel Society November 2024 exhibit
Louisa Arts Center, Louisa VA*

State of the Fair

Katherine Mercurio Gotthardt

See, right there,
at the 4H milkshake truck painted like a cow,
there's a girl snapping selfies at the serving window,
makeup shrink wrapping her brow, her lip line, her boredom,
left hand, French manicured, casual on a counter sticky with tradition,
right positioning the lens like an inexperienced lover. She shakes
corn silk from her hair, releases with her thumb pad a digital shutter,
catches threads of field and fake laughter in a daylight so shocking,
it's hard to tell even with a squint if the truck's splotches are bovine
or eye floaters, art, or a melting innocence, mixed media,
or tricks of a naked, middle-aged eye.

*Inspired by "Milkshakes" by Michael McGurk, MidAtlantic Pastel Society November
2024 exhibit, Louisa Arts Center, Louisa VA*

teaching yoga while intoxicated

Valerie Forde-Galvin

we sit at tables under palm trees
our liberated feet luxuriating in the sand it was a long flight from Boston
and now this waiter offers two-for-one so we order up our margaritas
and cool piña coladas
frugal New Englanders thinking we could share but no we didn't understand
we each got two what could we do
but shed our cloistered upbringing
and give ourselves over to tropical breezes mariachi singing
and warm brown eyes
if there's a distinction in the tropics between bliss and intoxication
we couldn't know because we're on vacation
I come to my senses all too soon
I have brought them here for yoga and not a drunken afternoon
a nap
a siesta
and before long we are sober
at least enough to climb to our palapa to lie on mats
observed by curious iguanas
and focus on our breath and movement caught up in our yoga postures
we almost miss the twilight special
a sensual ballet choreographed by sun and moon crimson languishes across the
Caribbean sky above a radiance of clouds
shimmering gold and copper and eventually surrenders
to the sultry warmth of violet and mauve
time moves more slowly in this garden of delights so breathlessly we watch as day flows
into night beauty that's almost too much to bear
and we are truly here
as we have never been before and never will be quite again

Shared during critique session, based on teaching yoga at a retreat

Chiara

Larry Kavanagh

The

Mid Atlantic Pastel Society

says

Hello Chiara

receives

A Blue Ribbon

but

There's nothing blue about Chiara

except

Her Background

Based on "Hello Chiara" by Nanette Catigbe

MidAtlantic Pastel Society November 2024 exhibit

Louisa Arts Center, Louisa VA

sire

David Reid Brown

Women *can't* resist
a good scoundrel,
the envy of
"Last Place Finishers"
like me.

Shade to Prince Charming

David Reid Brown

Girl, look at you!
Trying to give "Darth Vader"
a peck on the cheek,
hoping it will create a kinder villain.

You'd have better luck
kissing a frog
and using a whole stick of Lysol lip balm
when you're done.

Al Jabr

David Reid Brown

Middle School Math
was a hardcore hitman
and I've got all
the red ink, wrong-answer,
blood spatter to prove it.

Is That My Brother?

C. S. Ellison

A few days ago I saw a young man walking across a parking lot. I count my lucky stars I was not driving, it was all I could do not to jump out the car and run to him, find out—are you my brother?

My mind went entirely off the rails at that moment as I starred at him with every part of who I was and with a hunger for an answer that could never be true. While I was taking in what I saw I knew in that moment what I was seeing would be too fleeting and more meaningful to me than anything I expected when I woke up that morning. It was also more devastating than anything I expected to encounter when I woke up that morning. I'm still there in my mind as I write this and I don't foresee the memory will ever leave me.

Since that time, I have thought long and hard about seeing that young man crossing the parking lot of my favorite restaurant. If only I could have talked to him, maybe my senses would have been restored, even though it most likely would have been the strangest conversation either of us would have ever had. I also question had the stranger looked up and saw me starring at him, what would he have thought as I tried to bore holes into his soul with a stare of longing for someone I missed with all my heart. I remember looking for him after we passed him in the car and it was as if he had vanished into the thin hot air of an ordinary day. Since then my mind has moved off the rails even more. Was what I saw a spirit passing by to let me know what he would have looked like as a young healthy man not riddled with the worlds array of addictions that plagued him most of his life?

I've meet people before who've reminded me of Ted, people I've taken my time talking to just for the opportunity to feel that he was there with me, but then I've had to turn away so they could not see the tears in my eyes or the sadness engulfing me. There was always some mannerism or something the person said that reminded me of Ted, but never ever have I run into someone that looked so much like him.

The part that blew up my world the most and still does is that the young man in the parking lot looked like my brother would have looked...

Before he shot drugs and it rattled him with desire for the rest of his life

Before he drank himself to sleep so many nights

Before he smoked himself out of breath for the last time

That man could have been my brother in another dimension, clear skinned, confident, nothing standing in his way. It was as if the person I saw was a version of my brother had he...

Never used drugs for the first time

Never picked up a drink and couldn't stop

Never inhaled smoke into his lungs to feel a rush

Had his childhood never turned into the many addictions that ravished his body and soul

Had whatever led him to hide from himself and ruled his world with escapism never owned him

My mind, back on the rails, tells me the guy was a stranger and if I talked to him, reality would really return me to my senses. I'm not even sure I want that scenario. Instead I'd rather believe the off the rail thought that I saw the spirit of my brother in physical form three years and two days after he died, because he personally wanted me to know he is entirely renewed and the world that ravaged him so unmercifully is no longer his existence.

Ambush Monday Morning

David Reid Brown

I insist on a fair chance at a weekend do-over,
so I can secretly set a trap for a time yet to come.
I'm wed to the soothing warmth of my squishy flannel cover,
in total dread of engaging another Monday morning.

Common sense suggests, "Get up! Get a jump on the day!"
Your present self will gladly thank your past one's work.
Only you make the choice to let diligence have its way,
and fend off Sunday's inevitable procrastinating shirk.

Who knew that coffee could keep your mind sane and stable?
That first hot sip hits better than a clutch buzzer-beater!
Caffeine can adjust your attitude in a way that's quite remarkable.
Keeping your displayed "Dr. Jekyll" from that other unbearable creature.

Ugh! I'm up and life's sucker punch has landed to my chagrin.
But this time I made sure it's me—not Monday—for the win.

Oliver the Opossum

Larry Kavanagh

Oliver was an opossum who loved to sleep in the woods in a delightfully warm place where he could soak in the warm water of the swamps.

Pedro was a penguin who lived at the South Pole, but he hated the cold weather. It embarrassed the other penguins that Pedro had such a bad image about the cold. They would cringe when he spoke to tourists in Antarctica about how bad the cold was.

Even though Pedro wore a bow tie, as any well-dressed penguin should, it didn't keep him warm. Pedro kept a stove in his icy igloo, and he always kept the fuel tank full of kerosene.

Oliver, on the other hand, loved the quiet of his swamp, but he thought it was too hot. As an aside, Oliver also had a giddy love of eating strudel. He was miserly about sharing his strudel with anybody. He was greedy; he wanted to eat it all.

Eventually, Pedro took a vacation to the swamp, using a zero gravity rocket ship to get there. The zero gravity made the trip pleasant, because otherwise he would have surrendered to the backache pain of a long trip. However, because of the zero gravity, he had to glue himself to his seat to keep from flying around.

In the end, Oliver and Pedro decided to change places, but it didn't work out because there's no place like home.

Based on June meeting prompt: Write a very short story in fifteen minutes or less which using specified words

Survival

Valerie Forde-Galvin

Clouds are streaks of vomit spewed across a bloated August sky, the crescent moon retreating from tomorrow's sun.

The night is still and, in the absence of a breeze,
a thrashing in the thicket indicates a kill.

Slashing talons quickly end the rodent's cry
and once again the heavy air hangs still.

The bird who hunts at night will feed her young.

I lie awake in fouled and sweat stained sheets
in this bed no longer shared.

He too hunts at night – the occasional convenience store,
the unguarded wallet in a crowd.

He won't be back; I changed the locks.

At least I get to keep the kids,
two souls dreamless, dead asleep.

Wings disturb the fetid air; the owl is on the hunt once more, her need more urgent with
the coming dawn.

The weak must die so that the strong can thrive.

I have no talons. Will my young survive?

First Snowfall

Valerie Forde-Galvin

Silent flakes of snow begin around the time when there should have been a sunset. But it seems that earth and sky have conspired and together they have conjured up a softer way to turn day into night. All we can see out there is white.

We watch in wonder from our upstairs window. Hypnotized by snow crystals lazily floating by, we lose our sense of direction. Up and down is undefined. Whirling snow commands the sky.

On the ground below, the snow has made its presence known. We see the cityscape is changing. And so we put on boots and hooded parkas and go out into the night where we are surprised to find that darkness has been banished. There is no need for flashlights. Without the moon, we are guided by an otherworldly radiance. Could it be that snow is phosphorescent?

The snow is everywhere. We look up and open our arms to the falling snow. Its touch is light and delicate. Snowflakes tickle our eyelashes, melt on our tongues, and evade capture as they drift through our fingers. We stand as still as statues and enjoy the playfulness of snow.

When has the city ever been this quiet? There is no sound; the snow absorbs the urban clamor and we are cloaked in silence. We wonder if the earth has shut down all activity in reverence for this event.

There is no proof that we are here; the falling snow covers up our tracks as if our earthly presence is a myth. We think the earth and sky have formed a plan to transform the world. "Let the snow erase all evidence of human error," they scheme. "Blank out everything and start anew."

We understand the earth is tired. It's time for a do-over. We're fine with that.

Although weightless in flight, the fallen snow has substance. It continues relentlessly and, throughout the night, efficiently covers up our neighborhood. The projects are blanketed in snow.

City streets are meadows extending to an infinite horizon where the veil between heaven and earth has been lifted. We wonder if we have been transported to a softer, cleaner world because our feet no longer touch the pavement. Perhaps we are suspended in a halfway state between two worlds.

But then we see the lamp posts. They still stand as beacons to the neighborhood we know. In the alleyways between tenements, snow clad trash cans create a pleasing geometry, lined up along pristine powdered paths. Snow has softened the city. This weekend in the suburbs, kids like us will try out their new sleds on some nearby hill, returning home to sip hot cocoa by a fireplace while a golden retriever lies sleeping at their feet.

This weekend in the projects, a great deal of alcohol will be consumed but gun shots will be muffled and rats will be disinclined to bite.

Foodie

Katherine Mercurio Gotthardt

It arrives on the fingertips of elegance: smattering
of crisp lardons on bone china. Chilled Crème Fraîche,
organic chives, sourced locally. Textural yet smooth
mouthfeel, masterpiece of some culinary artist
of advertised origin, who screeches in pedigree
at a sallow sous chef. The dish has been reviewed
by three major food writers in New York City, all Italian,
or semblances of Mediterranean (because a good dinner
is not just a metabolic recharge). Go ahead, see for yourself—
adjust the refined linen on your lap, flip the garnish
with a sterling fork, and relish the impermanence. Chew
deliberately, swallowing next week's paycheck. Sumptuous
and earthy, isn't it? With notes of cultured butter?
What a lovely baked potato.

*After readings from Rattle and East to West, Pole to Pole by Larry Kavanagh;
collage poem based on Write In Louisa workshop, method by Mike Maggio.*

Riding Out Of The Sunset

Tim Braun

As Donald Hawkins put the finishing touches on his beloved Valkyrie, he could barely contain his satisfaction and contentment. He looked up to the very tip of the gleaming blue and white rocket with pride. This was his baby, Valkyrie. The first rocket ever to be built and launched by a single individual. It had taken over six years and a hell of a lot of money but tomorrow was finally the day for the launch. His brother, head of marketing at the internet start-up Axiom Technologies, had acquired most of the funding necessary for Donald's building of the rocket. All they asked for in return was that "Axiom Is Here!" be prominently displayed in seven-foot letters on the side of the rocket, which Donald had dutifully done. Better to make them happy now, he had thought as he added the garish letters to the side of his rocket.

Many people had offered him advice for his mission. This advice was tolerated patiently and just as quickly dismissed. He alone knew what his mission truly was. The press release had stated that "...this pioneering journey will take Mr. Donald Hawkins on a trip the likes which no one on Earth has ever seen. The Axiom Technologies Valkyrie will soar 93 million miles to the sun at 30,000 miles per hour, whip around the back side of our star, and come back to a successful splashdown in the Pacific Ocean. This precedent-setting voyage will take ten months and Axiom Technologies is proud to be a part of it." The world scoffed at him day in and day out. The newspapers and internet made fun of his sponsorship, prompting headlines such as "Hawkins takes 'Axiom is Here' to Nowhere" Scientists unanimously decried the mission saying that it was suicide. Even if he did manage a successful launch and escape the Earth's atmosphere in his little home-made rocket, they said, he would surely not be able to create a craft to survive the insane heat as he neared the sun. The most insulting of all was when Charles Johnson, founder of the Flat Earth Research Society, had called him personally to berate him as a liar and that the mission was impossible because, according to Johnson, "the sun is nothing more than a light approximately 32 miles across and 3,000 miles high that follows a circular course over the flat Earth." But as Hawkins ran his hand along the smooth skin of the rocket, his mind wasn't on all these skeptics. He was thinking about his great adventure that was to begin tomorrow. The adventure that only he had knowledge of. For Donald Hawkins had a plan, only to be revealed in five months behind the sun.

The outer skin of Valkyrie had reached 3500 degrees Fahrenheit. Donald wasn't worried because the outer skin would only need to last another few hours anyway. Now that he

was out of radio contact with Earth, being behind the Sun, Hawkins had exactly seven and one-half hours until he came out the other side and started the scheduled five-month journey home. He had exactly seven and one-half hours to overhaul the Axiom Technologies “Axiom is Here!” Valkyrie from the loud, thunderous rocket to the new Valkyrie that he had meticulously planned for during these last six years, that no one beside himself knew anything about. He entered a series of numbers in the on-board computer and the smooth blue and white, and now somewhat scorched, outer shell peeled slowly in half. The upper half immediately ejected itself off Valkyrie while the lower half seemed content to stay where it was for a few seconds, then also slowly slid off and tumbled quietly into the seething inferno below. And there, lurking beneath the obnoxious advertising and gleaming blue and white paint, was the true starship Valkyrie. She was now a sleek, needle-nosed ship that was so black that she just seemed to absorb the light. Sitting on top of the eighty-foot-long Valkyrie, parallel to the ship, was a long cylindrical tube that Hawkins was slowly extending to its full 200-foot length. Now his baby was beginning to look like it had been designed. Slowly rotating the tube so that it was perpendicular to the hull, Hawkins looked at the timer on the computer. Thirty minutes until they came out from behind the Sun. Thirty minutes until I start the process, he thought to himself. Donald settled himself into his chair with a heavy sigh as he wondered for seemed like the millionth time if, in fact, he was doing the right thing. Certainly, nobody would have believed that his mission was possible if he told them what he truly wanted to do. Yet somehow, he felt that he was just deserting all the people that had helped him make it this far. His brother, Axiom Technologies, all of them would be expecting his return. But Donald had been dreaming about Valkyrie and planning the Valkyrie mission for twenty years and couldn’t turn back now. His head was full of these conflicting worries and thoughts as he looked again at the computer.

Donald realized that it was time to get to work. He walked to the back of the ship and, after pausing for a second, pulled the engine release lever. He felt the Valkyrie lurch forward as the enormous weight of the engines was left behind. Donald then walked back to the computer and punched in a series of commands that had escaped the ‘security experts’ at NASA when they examined the software running the ship. A slot slowly opened along the entire length of the long cylindrical tube on top of the ship and from that tube began to emerge a thin wall-like surface. As Hawkins piloted the ship back into radio contact with Earth, the full 200-foot by 200-foot wall emerged. But it was not a wall. Because as the Valkyrie was supposed to fire its non-existent engines to get it back to Earth, and as Donald Hawkins watched with somewhat mixed feelings, the entire surface of the wall began to billow outward. He felt the ship quicken its pace considerably as the sail filled to its fullest extent. His calculations were exactly right, he surmised. The solar wind, a stream of ionized particles flowing out from the sun into interplanetary space, had picked him up beautifully. Had it been too strong, it could have

ripped the sail right off. The speed of the wind ranged anywhere from 200 to 500 miles per second normally and Hawkins estimated it today to be a comfortable 300 miles per second. The sail collected the particles as they continued to beat against it much as the elegant China Clippers sailed the oceans of Earth in the 1800's. But there was a difference. While the old sailing ships possibly did 30 knots, or about 26 miles per hour, Donald Hawkins had just become the fastest human who ever lived, currently sailing away from the Sun at approximately 300 miles per second, or 1,080,000 miles per hour. Donald thought once again of the people waiting for him to appear from behind the sun at 30,000 miles per hour. He'd never see or hear from them again, he reflected.

There it was. The last planet of the Solar System: Pluto. A full 3.6 billion miles away from the Sun and it had taken Valkyrie only 143 days to get here. It had been uneventful up to this point. He had whisked by Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars in the first five days, ejecting the entire sail assembly about 20 million miles past Earth. Since there is no gravity in interplanetary space, and therefore no friction to slow Valkyrie down, the sail was no longer needed. It had taken 19 days to reach Jupiter and two weeks after that he got a birds-eye view of the magnificent rings of Saturn. His course hadn't permitted him to see Uranus or Neptune but here he was now, on the very outskirts of the Solar System, looking at Pluto. He had discarded all the radios and computers so now the ship was just cruising through unexplored territory, oblivious to anyone or anything. He thought about saying goodbye before he dismantled the radio but decided that he didn't want to hear their parting remarks or pleadings for him to stop what Donald was sure they would call a suicide mission. Hawkins just felt this way would be easier.

He spent a lot of the flying time checking and rechecking supplies, calculating oxygen reserves, and cleaning. He also found time to read a multitude of fiction and science books, and thoroughly studied the classical music of Haydn, Bach, and Beethoven. He started his memoirs once, but when he stopped to think about it could find no purpose in it. What he spent most of the time doing was sitting in the observation booth and just staring at the universe that no one had ever seen. It was an incredibly humbling sight watching previously unknown space speed by. He was the first human being ever to be out this far into space. The first ever to see the sights that he was seeing. Donald thought about this a lot as he was whipped through the Solar System, and the feeling started to creep in that he wished he had someone to share it with. Fact was, Donald was starting to feel increasingly lonely.

The first asteroid hit sometime during the 249th day since Hawkins came out from behind the Sun. It hit near the rear on the left side, sending Valkyrie into a sickening, counterclockwise spin. Still speeding on at 300 miles per second, the once proud ship slowly started to tear itself apart. The oxygen reserve tanks were ripped from their moorings and thrown off into nothingness. The second asteroid hit Valkyrie squarely amidships, stopping the ship completely. Donald Hawkins couldn't think of anything he could do to help his crippled girl, so he went to the observation booth of the now completely silent and unmoving vessel. He sat and stared at what might be the Sun or might not be, at this distance it was practically impossible to tell. It seemed strangely appropriate that the very star that had shot him out here was now deserting him, like he had deserted everyone he knew. Staring at the point of light, Donald felt a tear come to the corner of his eye. As he sat there, the Valkyrie quietly broke her back, and let the emptiness in.

A dress is more than it's cut out to be

Mary L. Mobley

When my husband and I were invited to a semiformal work-related event, I sailed into dress mode like a sixteen-year-old dreaming of prom night, envisioning chic bliss in the perfect dress, albeit in a Beverly Hillbillies sort of way. Thus, the search began.

I ransacked racks of clothes at department stores and dress shops, where I found selections in small sizes a pittance compared to the abundance in size sixteen. My choices were also limited by my ever-pragmatic frame of mind that refused to let me pay an outrageous amount for an outfit I would likely wear only once.

When my shopping efforts produced no workable results, and my options were dwindling, I dropped in on a secondhand boutique of gently used designer castoffs. There I came close to snatching a spaghetti-strapped bargain, but its floor length made it too formal, and shortening the hem would have ruined the lines. Next, I persuaded my husband to come with me to a bridal shop where the sweetest salesgirl hung a mix of styles in my fitting room, including some that were cut to flatter Marilyn Monroe's curves or Tina Turner's legs.

After flinging more than half a dozen dresses off hangers and over my head, I walked out the door empty-handed alongside my husband, both of us downtrodden and exhausted.

On the way to the car, he said to me, "As well as you can sew, you ought to just make a dress." I responded by telling him I would not even consider such an undertaking, even though I could handle a needle and thread quite well and had been in stitches most of my life.

I reminded him that I grew up poor and wore homemade clothes out of necessity, and that I still associated one with the other, and that through hard work, I had risen above my meager beginnings and left my homemade clothes behind. I further explained that

my sewing skills were cut out for quilts and crafts and that making a proper garment, like baking the perfect pound cake, takes practice.

My cry-me-a-river dissipated into the wind as my husband's negotiation skills kicked in.

He can be persuasive at times, and at times, I can be receptive. The next thing I knew, we were in Piece Goods collaborating on a pattern, even though I had not sewn a dress since Mr. Carter's presidency.

Back at home, I pulled several yards of sunshine yellow gabardine from a stash of relics and made a prototype of the asymmetrical one-shouldered dress, learning again that following directions is easy, but obtaining the right fit is challenging. Undeterred, I pinned and re-pinned before heading to the fabric store again to purchase two yards of satiny black fabric and a zipper.

I cut out the dress a second time, then pressed the foot pedal of my Kenmore with tenacity and apprehension. My perseverance paid off, and soon a dress I liked emerged from my sewing machine, but it lacked pizzazz. After yet another shopping trip, I spent two hours hand stitching a sequined trim around the neckline, across the shoulder and back. When the time came for the once-in-a-lifetime affair, I put on the dress and zipped it up, free of any homegrown shame or psychological snags.

The dress still hangs in the archives of my closet, nestled between skirts and blazers leftover from my office years. As predicted, I only wore it once, but a few dollars and a trifle of hours turned out to be well spent. A little bit of grit goes a long way, especially when you throw in some sequins and satin.

A GOOD DOG..

“THE LITTLE HERSHEY DOG”

Randy Holladay

When my tirehouse (Earthship) building project began
Many questions were asked of me and my house plan
Had I gone crazy? Perhaps I'd fallen on a bike ride or a jog
One question never asked, “ya gonna get a puppy dog?”
But, when I awoke in a tent in my living room to be
Hearing little yips before a mom and pup I did see
That mom and pup ambled on off when they saw me
But she left two behind, black Lab pups, both quite tiny
Then, a magic moment when out of the tall grass
Popped a head, a chocolate morsel and I let out a gasp..
“Look at the little HersheyDog” and it was love at first sight
Turned out, my new best friend had found our new house site
Mom didn't return so I took 3 cute rascals home with me
Upon entering the store for puppy food, more serendipity
Two former students, one a neighbor, coming from the store
Told me, mom and pups from around the corner, next door
The joy from that puppy, fast becomes my whole world
Kisses wash away accidents, when in your lap she is curled
Never having a little pup, I oft wondered, what do I do
But, my little Hershey Dog, a quick study, she always knew
Hold it all day in her kennel, then run poop in the woods
Snatch a frisbee from the air, return it to me, not where I stood!
“Come on chase me, dad”, that brown dog was so quick
She'd fetch it and keep it, be it ball, frisbee or stick
As our house went up, she was always right there
Helping me dig in the dirt or romp with me anywhere
The tire walls finally done, a roof finally was on
As I sat inside, wondering where had she gone
I heard a faint sound, dog claws on the new roof
Had I finally finished, she needed her own proof
Work was still needed when we moved into our home
And, it was always easier to go out for a forest roam
Between school and walks, the progress, rather slow
But, my little Hershey Dog was happy to stay or to go
One day, watching her cross her standard path thru the creek

She walked right into me, bonk, quickly an eye doc I did seek
My poor Hershey girl, barely five, had gone almost blind
Yet, dog senses are amazing, me or trails she could still find
My dad, too, was going blind, learned much from both, I did do
Life's full of battles, we gotta keep pluggin' on through
We grew older together, my little girl, the Hershey Dog
Tick sickness, a car bump..Sitting, walking or rising, a slog
Harder and harder it became, to even get up on her own
I had to return to school, no way could I leave her all alone
Decision made, vet was set, that last week, friends poured in
13 years of Hershey memories, retold thru tears..again & again
The last tail wag I saw, was when she heard Denny Ray
Knew, was the right thing, yet guilt and doubt got in the way
My sister came out, we let the little Hershey Girl go
Former student carried her to my car, a final, local love show
Never easy, taking your best friend on her last ride to the vet
Was it too soon? But? What if? Tough to fight thru the regret
But, I went back to school, still the guilt refused to abate
As it all turned out,'twas only 18 days that I had to wait
Then the planet itself, let me know, I'd done the right thing
The rocks below us slipped in a magnitude 5.8 earthquake fling
Safely out with students, that August day, as aftershocks roiled our way
I knew, it was in peace that my Hershey Dog lay
With a shake, Earth, washed my last, lingering guilt far away

The Stamp Collector
H.J. Shalloway

The Stamp Collector
by H.J. Shalloway

When Walter and Harriet met on a blind date, he told her of his consuming passion for postage stamps.

“My collection is almost complete. If only I could obtain the 1868 Franklin Z-Grill.”

He pulled a picture from his wallet. “See the portrait of Benjamin Franklin?”

Harriet put her hand to her chest. “Goodness! What a lovely profile he has! And how distinguished!”

“Yes, and although it’s only a one-cent stamp, it’s unique and very rare.”

Harriet lightly touched his arm. “Ooh! How interesting! What makes it so special?”

He pulled away, tucking his hands under the table to hide his goose bumps.

“Well, you see, it was embossed with a Z-shaped pattern that was meant to absorb canceling ink to deter cheaters from washing it out.”

Harriet clapped her hands together. “Gosh, how clever!”

Walter sat up taller, a slight smile. No woman had ever made him feel this important. Prior dates had dazed off as he described details of the Z-Grill. Eventually, they’d flip open their phone, blurting out they needed to leave. How strange: their phones had never rung. But this woman’s eyes were locked onto him with no phone in sight.

Perhaps a passage he’d memorized from his book on philatelic history would impress her. He cleared his throat, “Yes, it was a unique and significant chapter in postal history, showing the ingenuity of postal authorities in the late nineteenth century. And now there are only two known to exist.”

“Heavens! Then it must cost a lot!”

Walter nodded. “It sold at auction in 2004 for over four million dollars.”

Harriet's eyes grew big. "Really?!" She paused. "If you don't mind me asking, how much is your collection worth?"

Walter glanced down with a slight blush. "Well, not as much as the Z-Grill, but I've been collecting for thirty years, since I was ten, so its value has grown."

Harriet batted her lashes. "Oh, Walter, I could listen to you all day!"

He stared into her eyes, the same shade of light blue as the Z-Grill. His heart pattered. Who was this fascinating woman?

Unheeding of time, they continued chatting for hours.

Harriet sparkled, telling of the awards she'd won as a customer service representative. With a gentle giggle, she revealed that she could turn even the most difficult clients into pussycats.

Walter opened up about his melancholic disposition, born of years of yearning for the seemingly unattainable Z-Grill. Saving every penny to realize his dream was the only thing that mattered. How lonely he had been! She gently stroked his hand, so soothing. Gazing into her eyes, he knew perhaps there was more to life than the Z-Grill.

"How did you become interested in postage stamps?" Harriet leaned forward, as if not wanting to miss a word.

Walter cleared his throat, his voice deepening. "Well, when I was a child, my father took me to an exhibit of the first complete collection of U.S. postage stamps. That same day, he bought me my first stamp." He beamed.

"How sweet! But why the Z-Grill?"

Walter sighed. "It was my father's dream. Seeing it on display, he shouted with joy. Everyone stared, but I didn't care. I stood by his side until the exhibit closed and finally had to pull him away."

Walter sipped his tea. He wiped a tear from his eye, hoping Harriet didn't notice.

"Later, my father would stare in the mirror, admiring how he looked like Benjamin Franklin. He said it was proof he'd been reincarnated, and, therefore, the stamp was rightfully his. My mother said he had dementia, but I knew she was wrong. Because he *was* a great man, and he *did* look like Benjamin Franklin, and the stamp *was* rightfully ours!"

On his last two words, Walter banged his fist on the table. The plates and cutlery jangled, startling him. Everyone in the restaurant stared.

“You poor darling. I’m sure you’ll find the Z-Grill one day.”

Harriet leaned over and kissed him. An affectionate blush warmed Walter’s cheek, dispelling any thought of the stamp and easing his embarrassment.

A second and third date followed.

Besides both seeking companionship, Walter wanted a woman who would cook and clean, and Harriet wanted a provider and the respect conferred by the title of Mrs.

When Walter indicated he would be agreeable to her terms, Harriet’s warm, spontaneous hug melted away any lingering sadness. He hugged her back, comforted and content. How could he make this feeling last?

And so, within a month, he proposed.

She accepted with a slow smile.

In the beginning, their marriage was idyllic. Being with her distracted him from obsessing about the Z-Grill and made him smile. Being with him, she said, gave her a sense of purpose in life.

Back then, he perceived her short stature as “petite,” her heavy build as “voluptuous,” her pear-shaped nose as “cute,” and her vibrant rouged cheeks and hot pink lips as “exciting.” When she gushed over the virile masculinity of his balding head, he felt exalted. And when she openly admired her own prowess in warming his cold lips with her fiery kisses, he acknowledged her skill and submitted.

Delighted with the change in his life, Walter paused his thrifty ways and splurged for a honeymoon in the Maldives, where he arranged for a private, romantic beach barbecue at their villa. The grill superheated their romance as Harriet hand-fed him bites of seared tuna steak and smoky beef tenderloin. Afterward, they held hands, looking out over the pristine sands, turquoise water, and lush palm trees against a flawless blue sky. The only sounds were soft rhythms of waves hitting the shore, whispers of a gentle breeze, and an occasional tender, “I love you.”

By day, he bought her trinkets made of shells and coconuts with carved depictions of turtles and dolphins. When she gushed over a pricier pair of silvery earrings in the shape of moray eels, he bought those too. A descriptive card in the box mentioned that

eels were known to ambush their prey. Walter shrugged. Surely his dear Schmooky was nothing like that.

After the honeymoon, they returned to Walter's little house. He almost stepped in first, but a gentle tap on his shoulder and Harriet's outstretched arms reminded him of his duty. As Walter squatted, Harriet wrapped her arms around his neck. He scooped her up, taking tiny steps forward with a nervous smile.

Harriet whispered in his ear, "You've got this, Tiger."

Walter growled. She giggled. And with one bold step, he crossed the threshold. Harriet rewarded him with a congratulatory kiss and a wink.

In the following days, Walter and Harriet settled into their roles as husband and wife. He returned to work, managed the finances, took out the trash, and spent his free time organizing his stamp collection. She cooked, cleaned, and brightened up their home.

"Look, honey bun, I've replaced your ugly gray curtains with these sunny ones with big happy flowers! And look at the rugs—they're a zippy pink! Aren't they stunning? And all from the thrift store, just as you asked."

Walter stared at the yellow curtains with giant pink, orange, and blue flowers, trying to decide what to make of them.

"Try stepping on the rug, dear. It's cushy!"

His slippered foot hovered briefly before gently pressing down. Then, with both feet, he tested out the soft spring of the pile. It *was* cushy. Was that good? His lips curled up slightly.

"I'm so glad you approve, sweetheart!" said Harriet.

She rewarded him with a kiss.

Walter smiled and leaned in for another.

Over dinner, Walter made goo-goo eyes back at Harriet over tuna casserole. Pulled in by her infectious giggle, he played the game, each outdoing the other's overly amorous gaze. Then, following her lead, he clinked his wine glass with hers to toast their new life.

At bedtime, Harriet pranced back and forth in lacy red lingerie in front of Walter.

"Isn't it fetching?" she teased. "I found it at the thrift store."

“How much?”

Harriet showed Walter the price tag.

He smiled. “Yes, fetching.”

For many months, their marriage progressed smoothly. Even the common problems they resolved amicably: Walter learned to put down the toilet seat; Harriet moved her washed bras from the bathroom to the pasta drying rack.

But, eventually, tiny cracks emerged.

Walter pushed the toothpaste tube from the bottom; Harriet squeezed from the middle.

“Harriet!” he yelled, summoning her back to the bathroom from the kitchen where she’d been rolling dough.

“What’s the matter, dear?”

Walter pointed silently at the tube on the counter.

Harriet shook her head and, using her rolling pin, squeezed the paste to the top of the tube.

In the evenings, Walter preferred local news, and grabbed the remote from her whenever she switched to world coverage. She never complained, but Walter insisted her accepting smile was a grimace.

In winter, he preferred seventy-degree room temperature; she preferred seventy-seven. When he complained that the thermostat would wear out if she kept changing it, she offered him the use of a paper fan.

As the months passed, Walter’s list of grievances grew.

He preferred his boxers folded in a tidy compact rectangle and filed vertically in his drawer. If even a tiny bit askew, he’d yank them out and throw them on the floor. Moments later, he’d return, finding them dumped back in the drawer in a disorganized heap.

As things escalated, questions arose: To cuddle or not to cuddle? And what is the proper position for dishes in the drying rack? Were Harriet’s friendly greetings to their postman a desire for a flirtatious fling? And, when watching a movie on the weekend, how much salt to put on the popcorn? Each week, the list grew.

After a year, Walter tossed and turned in his sleep. This progressed to thrashing and screaming and, later, waking up in a cold sweat.

At dinner, he moaned, “Tuna casserole again?”

Harriet stared at him. “But, hon, you said hamburger was too pricy.”

Walter frowned, twisting his mouth to one side as he stared at the golden-brown bread crumbs atop creamy, flaky tuna dotted with peas on his plate.

“Fine!” he griped, and shoveled a forkful into his mouth.

“So glad you enjoy it, darling.” Harriet smiled, making goo-goo eyes at him.

But Walter did not make goo-goo eyes back.

Harriet shrugged, still smiling, and scooped out a generous second helping onto her plate.

As he chewed, Walter stared at the curtains and rugs. Why hadn’t he noticed how the colors clashed? Like Harriet’s syrupy affections, everything was becoming cloying and unbearable.

He surreptitiously dropped a pea onto the rug. Harriet finished her second helping and smiled at Walter. He flashed back a triumphant smile as he ground his slipper onto the pea, mashing it into her rug.

He pushed away his half-empty plate. “I’ve had enough. I’m going to bed.”

Maybe he couldn’t have his way with the tuna casserole, but he would have his way with Harriet that night.

Later, as Walter lay in bed, Harriet emerged from the bathroom and paraded about in her lingerie. But this time, Walter feigned sleep with only a quick peek.

“Huh! How about that!” she muttered, with hands on her hips.

As she whispered in his ear, “I love you —,” a loud buzzy rasp from under the sheets drowned out her words. It was as if Walter had blown gas through a kazoo.

But Harriet pressed on, kissing his cheek and tickling his chin.

Walter rolled over and snored.

“Well!” Harriet huffed.

She slid under the covers and turned off the light.

In time, she would get used to it. After all, a woman must understand, it is the man’s job to provide, not to satisfy her every whim.

As his resentment grew, Walter’s focus slowly shifted back to the Z-Grill. He closed the door to his den, a small room with a table and a cabinet that held his stamp collection. With one door and no windows, it might have felt claustrophobic, but to him, it was a sanctuary. A single chair meant company was not welcome.

He obsessed about the money he’d spent on their trip. The more he fixated on it, the deeper his gloom.

Her optimistic attitude and radiant smile mocked his misery.

Thus, whenever she asked to dance, he feigned a limp. Whenever she told jokes, he never laughed. He’d talked her into wearing only the most sensible shoes—sturdy black lace-ups with low block heels and, most importantly, dirt cheap.

But each morning, against his wishes, Harriet rubbed on that ghastly rouge and hot pink lipstick.

Finally, he threw the toothpaste tube across the bathroom and shouted, “I thought I asked you to stop doing that!”

Harriet didn’t flinch as she dabbed on another layer of rouge. “Doing what, sweetie?”

“Wasting money on makeup.”

“Oh Walter, don’t be silly. See?”

She pointed to her overflowing vanity case.

“I have enough to last a lifetime! So you needn’t worry.”

Harriet then blew him a kiss and winked.

“You’re doing that on purpose just to spite me!” Walter said, raising his voice again.

“Don’t be silly, honey bun,” she laughed. “You’re just imagining things.”

As she left the room, she sang out, “Now don’t be late for breakfast!”

Walter stared in the mirror, a blank expression on his face. Then, drooping his shoulders, he let out all his breath.

Other times, while Walter sat in his den, Harriet would talk to the birds while watering the plants, or break out into song and an occasional yodel while washing dishes. He'd slam the door three, four, five times in a row until the house shook, but her crooning only grew louder.

And now, ever since Harriet had discovered the flea market, knick-knacks filled their home like the floodwaters of a tsunami. And though Walter had declared his den out of bounds, the dam was about to break because Harriet had hinted about shelf space in his sanctuary.

He could almost hear the snickers of ceramic tchotchkes taunting him from just beyond his room. He imagined figurines of dancing pigs, chubby cherubs, and mischievous elves breaking down the door and laying waste to the remnants of his inner sanctum.

One morning, Harriet burst into his den.

Her face flushed, she blurted out, "You'll never believe what I discovered! It's a real find, a priceless object. And it cost me next to nothing!"

Walter's heartbeat quickened. What now?!

"Just a sec, I'll be back in a jiffy!"

Harriet rushed out of the room. She returned shortly, prancing back in.

She held a monstrosity. A hat that looked like a three-foot banana curved up in front and back, with a large opening in the center for his head. Secured by a lime-green ribbon that surrounded the crown, a feather as pink as his wife's lipstick jutted out like a giant frog's tongue.

She stroked the few remaining wisps of hair on his head, assuring him, "It will keep your head warm." Then, with pouty lips and puppy-dog eyes, she added, "I wouldn't want you to catch cold. I'm only thinking of you, honey bear."

Walter rolled his eyes. How much more could he take?

With an exuberant smile, Harriet stroked the hat's sides and top in grand gestures, reminiscent of a game show hostess displaying a prize.

"And if you look closely, you'll come to know its value."

She laid the hat on the table in front of Walter.

He stared at the beast. Its ultra-neon yellow, lime green, and hot pink stung his eyes.

“Enjoy it, my darling! I wanted to give you a gift to show how I feel. It’s not often I’m able to give you something so well deserved.”

Harriet turned to leave. The door creaked shut behind her.

Walter closed his eyes, overcome with nausea. He rested his head in his arm and breathed until the feeling passed.

That afternoon, he distracted himself with his stamp albums, but the hat kept drawing his attention. What did she mean by “if you look closely, you’ll come to know its value”?

Walter turned the hat in all directions, but no matter how hard he stared, it remained a radioactive prehistoric banana on steroids, its voracious, pink, feathery tongue lashing out to devour what was left of his sanity. And what next? Did she expect him to wear it?

Covering his face with his hands, he sank into his chair.

That afternoon, the door screeched again. The unnerving sound was followed by Harriet’s equally irritating Tinkerbelle voice. What further misery was she about to bestow?

“It’s just me, honeybunch! I don’t mean to disturb you, but... “

She waddled toward him, short and pudgy, with a bulbous nose. Her rouged cheeks that once thrilled him now reminded him of a clown. He frowned back at the smiley-faced daisies on her flea market apron. Lowering his gaze, he gasped. At the end of her squat legs was a never-before-seen pair of bright red shoes, and their sharp torpedo toes were aimed directly at him! What had happened to her sensible shoes? What had caused her to go berserk?

“... I almost forgot to give you this.” She placed a canister of lighter fluid on the table next to the hat. “I thought we could light up the barbecue this evening. It would be like a second honeymoon!” she cooed, smiling coyly, her silvery eel earrings glinting at him.

Egads! Had she no shame? What would ever make him want another honeymoon with her? Walter bowed his head, his shoulders hunched.

He exhaled with a strained sigh. “Yes, dear.”

“And perhaps you can wear your new hat while you’re searing the turkey burgers tonight. Just don’t let it catch fire over the grill! *That* would be a disaster!” She covered her mouth and let out a schoolgirl giggle.

Walter looked back and forth between the hat and the lighter fluid. A slight smirk grew on his face.

“I’m glad the hat can bring you joy. Isn’t it darling?” she chirped. “Why don’t you try it on?”

There it was! Just as he’d feared. Walter released his breath, deflated. There was no escape.

“Here, are you happy now?” he grumbled and placed the hat on his head.

The hat sank down over his ears, swallowing up his eyebrows, and jutting out a foot in front and behind.

Harriet smiled. “There, just as I thought, a perfect fit!”

The yellow protrusion now blocked Walter’s view.

“How does it feel, hon?” She tilted her head, her eyes searching for any reaction.

He shrugged.

“Oh, cheer up,” she peeped. “Don’t be such a Gloomy Gus. There’s nothing like appreciating what you have to put you in a good mood.”

With his face hidden by the brim of the hat, Walter rolled his eyes. Would the clichés never end? And what about that voice? It lilted up to ever-new heights when dispensing what she considered to be a profound insight. No doubt, her usual horse-toothed grin was galloping up and down as she spoke.

“You just think about what I said,” she continued. “If you’re not feeling chipper by this evening, I have a surprise that’s sure to give you a new perspective.”

“Another one?” Walter muttered.

But no one answered. His wife had left.

Walter lifted the hat from his head. There was only one thing to do. He had to rid himself of the garish gift, but he would have to act fast. Holding the hat and the canister of lighter fluid, he quietly slipped out the door.

He did the deed on the backyard barbecue, dispatching that awful yellow hat in a flash of fire and a puff of smoke. The canister of lighter fluid ensured its hasty demise. Only a small pile of ash and an acrid stench remained. But what would he tell his wife? Would he simply say he had misplaced the hat? Or should he concoct some tale of a giant condor that had swooped down and snatched it from his head? No matter, he would think of something. But he wouldn't say a word unless she asked. After all, it was her fault for bringing him the lighter fluid, plopping it down next to the hat, and mentioning that he shouldn't let the hat catch fire over the grill. And that schoolgirl giggle—he paused. It was almost like she had meant him to burn it.

That evening, Walter sat at his table. An open album displayed multiple colorful postage stamps. Clasp a stamp with tongs, Walter examined it through a magnifying glass, then slid it into one of the few remaining plastic album pockets.

It was no use. Even if he found the stamp, how could a man who spent his days in a tiny cubbyhole pushing numbers for a living ever afford such a precious item? He'd already invested his meager savings in his collection. There was nothing left for the Z-Grill. And forcing Harriet to be thrifty had not saved much.

Tears brimmed in his eyes. Oh, the Maldives! Holding hands and whispering “I love you” in the gentle breeze. Had it all been a dream? And what had happened to his wife? Was she upsetting him on purpose? To get even? Is that why she gave him that godawful hat?

Or had he been wrong about her intentions? He *had* been hard on her, but perhaps too hard, even cruel. In return, she'd only had kind words for him, calling him sweetheart and honey bear. How could he have thought badly of her? Maybe she still was his dear Schmooky. And the hat, a gift of love he'd hated and destroyed. Walter wiped his eyes. What did it matter? It was too late.

The door to his room squealed open. Harriet scurried up to his side. Her lips were peeled back in an ear-to-ear grin, and her eyes twinkled like a child about to open an eagerly awaited birthday gift.

“I'm back, honeybunch!” she twittered like an excited bird. “Honestly, I could hardly wait. Did you figure it out?”

“Figure it out?” Walter furrowed his brow, perplexed. He sniffed. What was that acrid stench? Had she been out to the grill? Her eel earrings danced to and fro as she jumped about with glee.

“Yes, sweetheart, my surprise. Inside the band of your hat—the band that secures that funny pink feather. The Franklin Z-Grill, it’s tucked inside. It’s exactly like the picture you showed me—blue with those funny little zeas and that terribly nice rendition of Mr. Franklin. I found it at the flea market. Isn’t it amazing? Didn’t I tell you they had some real finds? I hate to admit that I bought it for a pittance. Can you imagine? The poor man who sold it to me had no idea what he had.”

Walter stared at his wife without blinking. His eyes welled up, and a lump blocked his throat.

Harriet tilted her head. Her smile wilted. But her puppy dog eyes were those of a pit bull.

“What’s the matter, honey bunny? I thought you’d be happy.”

Walter swallowed hard and forced a smile. His hands trembled. He blinked, wiping away a tear from each eye.

“Yes, dear,” he said, “I’m as happy as I’ve ever been. Still, I can’t help but think of the poor schmuck who didn’t know what he had.”

Harriet kissed Walter’s forehead and displayed a relaxed smile with eyes half closed in satisfaction. “I’m so glad, my darling.” Then her face brightened, eyes glinting. “And this evening we will light up the grill to celebrate!”

The glee in her eyes glowed like charcoal briquettes in a barbecue. Walter winced. Had she ever even found the stamp? If so, had she known all along what he would do? Walter slumped down in his chair, unable to move. Some things are too agonizing to bear.

As Harriet walked out the door, an eely smile crept across her face.

The Man from Calais, “The Curse of Anne Boleyn”

Elizabeth Ford

Three people from unique circumstances are brought together in London 1539, on the day of Queen Anne Boleyn’s execution: a teenage laundress, the French executioner himself, and King Henry VIII’s right-hand man, Thomas Cromwell. Anne’s ghost haunts each of their lives from that day forward, as their destinies intertwine through a series of serendipitous events, bringing us this story.

PART ONE

London, England, May 19th, 1539

The thunderous crowds in London were weary from gathering and waiting for the past three days. Awaiting something none of them had seen before. Executions were commonplace and good entertainment if you could get close enough to the scaffold to see them—usually, common criminals, occasional noblemen accused as traitors, but not a queen. No one living had seen the execution of a queen before. The streets were abuzz for days with the usual types hawking their wares.

The sun was burning off the morning fog that had crept from the Thames overnight and was now retreating in the light of day. A few street dogs were trotting down the lane, and people were just waking up to this strange day in May of 1536. Thin plumes of smoke streaming out of chimneys and the shadow of the Bloody Tower looming over the scene in the background.

Was this to be the day? No one really knew; the rumors were rampant and constantly changing. The word was that the foreign executioner was delayed in his journey from Calais. One story was that he encountered storms in the passing from France, another was that his horse had come up lame. Either way, the delays were now causing people to doubt if the execution was even going to happen. Maybe there would be a last-minute stay of execution from the King himself? What if one had already been issued and the news hadn’t been leaked to the people yet? The first people to have arrived at their spots three days prior were giving up their hard-won locations and returning to their daily lives.

Morning of May 19th, 1539 London

Young Tess’s morning was beginning the way that it had for nearly five months since her father’s passing from the sweating sickness right before Christmastide. He had been a smithy, and his passing had been quick and had forever changed the dynamics in their

family. Her mother, who had always been a laundress, hired out Tess to a few families that winter, and Tess had almost fallen into her new daily routine, well-almost. Her friend Margaret was a constant source of tension between her Ma and young Tess. Tess was on the verge of turning 15 that summer, and Margaret's life now was much different than Tess's. Margaret was the daughter of a baker, and besides occasionally helping her family, her duties were light. She was afforded much more free time than Tess, and she sorely missed their carefree time together, so she stole moments when she could.

Her mother wasn't stirring yet, so she was getting some water to put to boil after tending the dying embers of the hearth fire. As she looked up, she saw the top of a bonnet peaking over the windowsill out of the corner of her eye. It was the top of Margaret's nice bonnet reserved for church and holidays. Nervously, Tess poked her head out of the front door, trying to prevent the screech of the massive hinges squeaking and waking her brother and mother.

"What are you doing at this hour?" Tess whispered.

"I just got the news from me mum", she hissed. "The Queen is getting executed today. Hurry and get your shawl so we can get up front."

"I can't leave yet, my Mum will know that I cannot get to the Tavish's house this early". Margaret's eyes looked at her pleading.

"Oh, alright, I'll figure something out. Give me five minutes." Tess's mind was going to whatever story she was going to have to fabricate to tell her mother.

As she ascended the stairs to grab her shawl, she heard her mother praying at the foot of her bed. She opened the door just a crack, interrupting her and said, "People are filling the square, and if I am to beat the crowds and get to the Tavish's on time, I am leaving now. I just put the water to boil in the hearth and the fire is stoked. I'll be back as soon as I can." Her mother looked up at her startled, and before she had time to pepper her with questions, Tess was already down the steps and out the front door. The two girls clasped hands and darted through the streets, not noticing the mud they were racing through that was marring the bottom of their skirts. The cool morning air felt glorious on her face and just the momentary feeling of freedom, she could go anywhere or do anything. Tess knew inherently where they were headed. Straight to the butcher's shop, where Peter was probably out-front cleaning a bloody mess with buckets of water.

"We will have to let Peter know, he will be beside himself if he misses a chance to be up front with us, and it will help to have men with us in case there is a crush," Margaret

proclaimed. Tess had heard of people swooning and getting trampled in the front of the largest crowds, but how diminutive Peter was to protect the two girls from that, she knew, was impossible. Peter was neither a man yet nor of any imposing stature. Margaret fancied him because of his whip-like, humorous tongue and his impossibly blue eyes. Then the thought occurred to her that there was no being with Peter without his accomplice, William. Margaret always nudged Tess toward William during their time together. Although William was benign and not altogether unpleasant, he was as exciting as churning butter. His family were merchants and wealthy, so her mother always liked to hear that William was around and mooning after Tess. It would be a good match for her family, and her mother had told her numerous times that she should be as nice to William as possible and ply her wiles. Neither his appearance nor personage appealed to Tess, but she was polite and kind to him because that was her nature. Agreeable she was to a fault, forever trying to please whoever she was with at the moment and always feeling like she was failing.

Peter was already standing in front of the shop with his hat and coat on. He had already heard the news and was ready to go.

"I just have to tell me Da' I'm leaving and we can be off." He ducked inside and came out with a small basket of moldy vegetables past their prime.

"What are they for?" Margaret asked accusingly motioning to the basket.

"What do you think they are for? Don't people always throw things at the accused during their walk?"

"No one throws anything at a queen!" Tess spoke up

Well me Da' says that the King stripped her title 3 days ago and she ain't no queen no more. A common harlot she is, that's what me old Da' says."

"You don't go from queen to harlot in three days", Tess replied.

"You do if the King says it!" Peter retorted

"Well, I am hoping the King gives her a last-minute pardon and takes pity on her." Realizing in the silence after she spoke, she was alone with that sentiment, Tess decided to keep her thoughts to herself for the rest of the walk.

"Halloo!" They heard a familiar yell from the back of the lane. It was William, come running to catch up to the three. Red-faced and sweaty, "I went to your place, Peter, and just missed you. Me Mum said that she heard from her brother, my uncle inside the

tower, and they won't be holding the execution on the Hill, it will be inside on the Green. They don't want so many people to see. Lucky for you, mates, I can get us in. The executioner arrived late last night from Calais, so it is definitely happening today."

William clasped Tess's hand and guided them around the corner, and the four youths were walking towards Tower Green.

Cinnamon and Cardamom

Elizabeth Chadwell

Pulverized gravel crunched under Dina's sandals as she limped down the unrecognizable street of her neighborhood. Her left leg still stung from the burns, so she timidly stepped over the chunks of concrete and the scraps of what had once been her neighbors' homes and lives. An overturned couch, an unraveling knitted baby blanket, a dented cherished serving tray. Tears ran freely, leaving clean tracks on Dina's dirt encrusted face. She had no one left, and at fourteen she sought out her home amongst the war-torn town alone, the only mourner at the gravesite. The shells of friend's homes were gutted like carcasses picked clean by vultures while acrid smoke and yellow haze clung to the street as if in an attempt to cover their naked shame. The street was quiet, except for a father she recognized as the local butcher and his small son as they climbed through the bones of their home. The toddler's eyes were frozen in permanent terror as he repeated, "Ummi?" *My mommy?* Dina felt a fresh stab of pain and sobbed for her own mother, Salma, which fittingly meant peace and safety. Throughout the shelling, her mother had been a safe harbor, tenderly comforting her children through the loss of their father, the agonies of hunger, and from the daily destruction of what had once been an abundant life. Her brother Zaid, who had just turned 7, had climbed into her mother's skirts and fallen asleep even as the bombs dropped around them. Salma's smile came to her mind as if beckoning her onward. Exhaustion and grief threatened to collapse her where she stood, but the smell of baking bread and brewing coffee began to tease her forward as an image of her father holding Zaid on his shoulders flooded into her vision. Dina laughed at the figment, suddenly strengthened to move on.

Gone were the busy vendor stalls, the smell of the salty sea breeze, and the tall palms reaching into the hot desert sky. In their place were burnt out vehicles and the scent of Sulphur. The walk from the infirmary where Dina's family lay uniformly lined up with the other dead, was a surreal path, like a negative photograph of what had been on the "before" side of the war. There, in the garden between her house and her friend Rasha's house, Dina can see a game of Seven Stones playing out. Shouts of children's laughter, dust rising, and sandals scuffing as they dodged stones while trying to build back up the stone tower. The reality was that Rasha and her little sister, Amina, had succumbed to disease after drinking bad water. Dina struggled to breathe as her lungs grew tight at the memory of her vivacious friend gaunt with fever. Her father's precious olive trees came into view, scorched like the burnt bones in a funeral pyre. Dina crept over debris on the path to her front door and whimpered as she stepped over the wasted body of their dog Rula, *wise wolf*. She noted the futility of the door still closed, and on its hinges, even as the walls of her home lay in heaps, laid bare to the world like a woman stripped of her coverings. The stairs to the second floor where she and Zaid would wait

for her father to come home were open to the world and broken like a boxer's teeth after a fight. There it was again, the smell of food, her mother's Maqluba wafting about her. The perfume of garlic and stewing tomatoes made her swallow. Where could it be coming from in this desolate place, devoid of people and luxuries such as food and water?

Her hand left a print of ash as she pushed the door open. As if expecting privacy, Dina pulled the door closed behind her and when the latch fell into place, a gentle yellow light flooded her vision and filled her body with a warmth so loving, and so consuming that she felt as if she were floating in a warm, calm sea. Lightness and safety seeped into every cell of her body. She closed her eyes, overwhelmed by the sensation of freedom and joy. "There you are, Beautiful Binti!" her mother cried as she pulled her daughter into the room. "We've been waiting for you!" Salma clung to her and Dina breathed in the familiar odors of cinnamon, cardamon, and nutmeg. Rula whined at her feet, nibbling her hands in greeting.

Dina blinked, wondering what trauma had finally triggered the hallucination, when her father, tall and strong, came to her. "Quite the journey, Ibnati, no?" He led her to the gold and satin cushions on the floor, set before a table heavy laden with food and sweets, stuffed figs and olives drowning in their own oil. "Eat, habibti. You will feel better. You are safe. You are with us, home now."

"Baba?" Dina smiled tentatively as Rula panted and licked oil from her father's fingertips. Rula's fur was shiny and smooth, his waist thick, hiding his rib cage in a way she had never seen before. The dog bounded off to greet her brother Zaid as he loped down the stairs.

"Dina!" Zaid flung himself into her, his familiar childlike smell and his hot breath in her neck made her feel as though she might come undone with such happiness. She noted her leg didn't sting as the boy wrapped himself around her like a serpent. "What took you so long?" he demanded. "Now we can celebrate and eat, right Baba?"

"Yes, ibni," her father laughed.

Steam rose from dishes in the kitchen. Zaid's toys littered the floor. Her father poured amber tea. As her family settled at the table, Dina wandered to the window and pulled back the gauze curtain. Evening sun cast pink shadows. Familiar neighbors strolled leisurely as their children darted about without fear. Date palms and almond trees heavy laden with fruit swayed in the fragrant, warm breezes. Her friend Rasha waved fleetingly in a race with her sister.

"Come, Dina," her father pleaded gently. "Let us give thanks."

A Fable of the Links

Larry Kavanagh

Some Non-Inspirational poetry from the Bard of Tanyard, recalling prehistoric days of the Tanyard Golf Course in Louisa, when Pamunkey Indians resided nearby and homes were lit by whale oil lamps

The Tanyard Duffer snarled and hurled the hated club to earth.
His golfing partner stepped aside and tried to hide his mirth.
The groundhog raised his head, but wisely slipped back in his hole;
The songbird ceased to sing, as golfing duffing choked his soul.
Now, who would think a golf ball, teed one summer afternoon,
Would ricochet from tree to tree, and land in yon spittoon,
Then shatter 'toon to shreds, and roll out free as me or you,
Straight out to Beaver Creek, atop Pamunkey hide canoe,
And nestle in the folds of all the shiny groundhog hides
Pamunk had tanned for trade and paddled downstream for the tribe.
Down Beaver Creek, South Anna, York, and on to Chesapeake,
The ball and hides and 'Munk traversed. It took about a week.
And then a storm arose and drove the whole thing out to sea,
Where wind and heavy rain destroyed the hide-boat utterly.
But ere the golf ball sank below, 'twas swallowed by a whale,
And whale in turn harpooned by passing Pequod under sail.
Thence on to nearest cannery, and stuffed into a can,
A bit of blubber bland and bile, all tallowish and tan;
Then sold as fuel for oil lamps to the prudent groundkeep crew,
Who warmed their hands by blubber fire in the early morning dew.
Then opened at the golf course on the night they needed oil
To light the lamps of whale oil for the golfers' weary toil,
Duffing home around the back nine after sun had sunken low
And they needed light around the greens to give the cups a glow.
But look! The tallowed golf ball falls from whale-can with a roll,
On course that takes it straight away to drop into the hole!
"An ace!" the Tanyard Duffer cried, for how could he forget
That yonder ball was HIS, though months had passed and yet

That selfsame ball, untouched by man, to cup at last did fly,
And, Lordy, what a lie, a lie, a lie, a lie, a lie!

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About the Writers

Katherine Mercurio Gotthardt is a disabled GenX poet of Lebanese and Sicilian descent. Since the early 1990s, her poetry has appeared in Frogpond, Southern Quill, BigCityLit, Haiku Canada, Panoply, North of Oxford, ONE ART, Miracle Monocle, and dozens of anthologies. Her 14 books include a Silver Award winner from the Nonfiction Authors Association, an Amazon bestseller, a BookFest first place modern poetry award winner, and a Library of Virginia Literary Awards nominated collection. Other awards include those from Poetry Society of Virginia, Virginia Writers Club, Loudoun County Libraries, and Prince William Arts Council. Her poem, “Now Entering Manassas,” was included in the City of Manassas’ 150th anniversary time capsule. A resident of Louisa County, Gotthardt founded Write In Louisa in 2024 through a partnership with Louisa Arts Center. She can be reached through KatherineGotthardt.com.



Early 2026 Events



Saturday, January 24 @ 7:30 PM

Blue Highway

Saturday, February 7 @ 7 PM

Louisa's Got Talent

Sunday, February 15 @ 3 PM

Charlottesville Ballet : A Fairytale Gathering

Sunday, February 22 @ 2 PM

Charlottesville Opera : Sing Me A Story

Friday, February 27 @ 7:30 PM

The Barter Players : Alice in Wonderland

Saturday, March 14 @ 7:30 PM

The Man in Black - Johnny Cash Tribute

Saturday, April 18 @ 7:30 PM

Jesse Garron - Elvis Tribute

Sunday May 3 @ 2 PM

Cville Band Brass Quintet & Rivanna Winds

Saturday May 9 @ 7:30 PM

Live & Let Die - Paul McCartney Tribute

Sunday May 17 @ 2 PM

Magic & Hypnosis featuring David Anthony



Scan for Tickets

**212 Fredericksburg, Ave, Louisa louisaarts.org
(540) 967-5200**