

Village Voices

In Our Own Words

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DEBTS I OWE MY TEACHERS by Howard Arons

My kindergarten teacher was known to parents and students alike as “Miss Alice Mae.” In those days it was a Southern custom to refer to young, unmarried teachers by first name and “Miss.” Our entire class, boys as well as girls, was crazy about her. Miss Alice Mae expected and got good behavior from us. On one occasion that I still remember, she managed to turn a small discipline problem into a lesson for life. We had a little comic book published by our local electric utility, featuring the adventures of “Reddy Kilowatt,” a stick figure with lightening bolts for arms and legs. That booklet really seized our imagination, and it was in great demand for our leisure-time reading. Unfortunately, certain prissy girls monopolized the booklet and passed it within their own circle with cries of “No, you can’t have it. *She* asked to have it next.” Of course, the whole affair ended in tears. Miss Alice Mae sat us all down in a circle and very solemnly

explained that it wasn’t fair to the class to monopolize a book, because we all needed to share things. She was so well liked—and in that moment she was so earnest—that everyone in the class suddenly wanted to share. I’d like to believe that her lesson in sharing became a lifetime habit for us all.

Mrs. Mills, my fourth-grade teacher, was Canadian. I never knew how she became a teacher in Dallas, Texas. She always seemed to us to be like someone’s mom rather than a “teacher.” She told us tales of maple trees alight with fall colors, maple sap boiling down over open fires, and winter temperatures below zero, leaving us Texas kids wide-eyed. One day she brought a well-used book to class, and she explained that it was a favorite of hers and very popular in Canada and Britain. It had the silly title *Winnie-the-Pooh*. In her British accent, Mrs. Mills told us about the lives of British children and about “the changing of the Guard.” She read to us at least one tale of Pooh Bear and his friends every day. That

Christmas I insisted on getting copies of *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner* for my own. Eventually I read those same books to *my* children, and our family always loved them for their gentle, whimsical humor.

My teacher for first-year algebra was Mr. Nicholson. I'm not sure how he achieved it, but he made mathematical reasoning and algebra clear. The whole concept of treating unknown quantities with letter abbreviations as if they were numbers suddenly seemed simple. He stressed "translating English into algebra" as the approach to the dreaded story problems (or "stated problems" as we called them). "*Find two consecutive odd integers whose sum is 36*" was a snap. Through the years, his calm, systematic approach to problem solving helped me in math courses all the way to differential equations.

I'm embarrassed to say, but I just cannot remember the name of my biology teacher. What I do remember is the way he showed us that the bright green moss which grew in damp, shaded patches of earth were perfect little plants. At his direction, we took a careful look at winter's brown twigs in early spring and saw tiny new leaves and blossoms waiting to unfold. Under a microscope, a piece of the thin skin of an onion, stained with household iodine, was an

orderly brick wall of cells, each with its round nucleus. He opened my eyes to the beauty and wonder of nature's simple things that are all around me. I owe him a debt for that. Unlike today in these safety-conscious times of instruction by computer simulation, he taught us how inspiring direct exposure to the real world can be.

My instructor for freshman English in my first college year was Mr. James Dickey. Yes, the same James Dickey who went on to write *Deliverance* in 1970. On our first day of class, we knew that he was not a typical English Department faculty member. He was very young and irreverent. He proudly told us that he had no Ph.D., because he didn't want to waste his time "mastering the use of the comma in the works of John Milton." He ran his class with energy, zest, and a light touch. We read and discussed novels and short stories, of course, but the focus of his teaching was on writing. When I was handed back my first writing assignment, I was appalled to see that it was covered with red marks and comments like "Awkward" and "Cliché." Under his patient direction, I learned how inadequate my high school writing style was and how to criticize and revise my own work. The principles of writing he taught me have been invaluable throughout my life.



MY MAGNOLIA by Alice Warshaw

The tree belongs to the community, but it fills a large part of my balcony view, so I call it my tree.

The metal label says it is a Sweetbay Magnolia, *Magnolia virginiana*. This tree is quite different from the huge-flowered magnolia we had in Florida. One of several types of *Magnolia grandiflora*, it produced bright white platter-sized flowers two or three at a time. Each lasted just a day, then turned a disappointing brown. The huge leathery leaves stayed green year-round, but also shed year-round, cluttering lawns. Because they were impossible to rake up, we gathered them by hand.

My 20-foot Sweetbay here goes through a glorious transformation every year.

Quiet and empty during the winter, its curvy bare branches trace lacy shadows on the lawn.

With spring the fun begins. Slower than the showy blossoming all over campus, pale gray-green leaves emerge in their own good time, followed by quiet ivory.

Next come the cone-shaped knobby pods. As the pod matures, its many knobs burst open revealing within

each a quarter-inch glossy, red-skinned, energy-rich seed. The mature pod is dark brown. An amulet bejeweled with shiny scarlet.



Yoma Ullman

When the green pods first reach thumb size, the squirrels get interested. At that moment last year, my resident squirrel spent exactly two days harvesting these immature pods one at a time. He or she buried them in the lawn within 30 feet of the tree and appeared to eat . . . not a single one. On day three, feasting began, continuing for weeks until only the most inaccessible pods remained. The squirrel would climb, search, jump, twirl, balance, grab, retreat to the tree crotch—then slowly, methodically, pick . . . and nibble . . . and munch. Discard. Repeat.

Days later, more squirrels came—sharing the feast, clinging to thin branches, swinging, venturing farther and farther out, and probably wishing those glorious tails were prehensile. Not that squirrels actually think about

such things . . . never having watched TV nature shows.

Finally, the showy abundance was over, and winter came Again.

Even then, scraps remained. Red sparkled the ground. As with various fruiting trees worldwide, the fallen half-eaten fruit from this magnolia provided food for ground feeders. In December a slate-colored junco visited from time to time, delicately picking at scarlet treasures under my tree.



F I C T I O N

AHMAD THE DREAMER by Gaby Kopelman

By the time the Nachai, once the High Commissioner, proceeded with the ceremony, it was, of course, too late. Ahmad's friends had seen it coming. A blind man could have predicted it, they said. But on the day of the wedding, there was only one blind man: the bridegroom, and he saw nothing.

Blind? Ahmad would have asked, puzzled, had he heard such talk. Too late? But too late for what? And had it not already been too late once he saw her in the mirror? For his first glimpse of Eileen O'Brien, waitress at that small teashop near the college, had

not been of the flesh-and-blood Eileen, but of her reflection, and that, to Ahmad, was an omen as portentous as the release of doves or the strewing of rose petals. For—like his father who had first glimpsed his mother's embarrassed smile in the Imam's silvered mirror when her veil was swept aside at the end of the ceremony—Ahmad, too, had first seen his beloved in a mirror, in this case in the etched mirror behind the counter of the teashop.

Her back turned to her customers, Eileen had been bending over the sink, her arms steeped in the sudsy water. Steam had clouded the glass, turning the pink of her flesh shiny, radiant. She'd been gossiping with the other waitress, the two of them giggling amidst the rising vapors, as though in the women's bath of the harems of old, thought Ahmad.

He had sat quite still, sipping his tea slowly, watching her over the rim of his teacup. That he could sit there, impassive, while she laughed and chatted, wiping her blond hair away from her damp forehead, unaware of being observed, innocent of the future he was planning, that too, seemed as it should be. It is a moment to hold, he thought. We will tell our children. In the evening, I will kiss her neck, and she will have breasts like melons, like the women in the manuscript of the Sha'n Sha. The fact that Eileen had

breasts that would not have over-burdened the hand of a boy of ten did not disturb his fantasies. Nor did he consider for a moment that marriage to an impoverished Iranian—cut off from support at home because of the recent political events—was perhaps not the height of his loved one's ambitions, or that, for all he knew, she perhaps was engaged to another, or even married! For Ahmad was a dreamer, the far-away lover of many a waitress, actress, or shop girl.

And even he could not have said later what it was about this particular girl, or rather her image, that emboldened him to get up, leave his table, and make a straight line to the counter, positioning himself so that his face as well was reflected in the steamed-up glass, his gaze softened by the clouds of moisture still rising from the sink, where Eileen was still rinsing plates. He had stared at the two of them, now joined in the glass, its surface atremble with droplets, rivulets running into the tub below, until "his eyes met hers, and never let go," as he'd remember it afterwards.

She had smiled at him in the mirror, and turned. "Another cuppa?" she'd asked, and Ahmad did not remark that her voice was not "of velvet," as the poets say, or that her teeth, far from being "pearls, strung in a row," exhibited as varied a set of peaks and jagged edges as the English predilec-

tion for sweets could produce in a girl of seventeen.

Ahmad the dreamer had looked with satisfaction at the mother of his children. "Oh, yes," he said. "Oh, please."



A HAUNTING **by Phyllis Purscell**

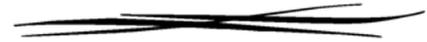
I would have it that
in some corporeal way
we are all still there:

the rank funk of
old sneakers still lurking
in the laundry room;

sound waves
from doors slammed in anger
hovering in the hand-hewn beams;

vibrations from piano practice
and first guitars, quivering
under old paint.

That our cumulative breath,
sweat, spent cells
exist there—and matter.



F I C T I O N

WRITE ON!

by **Kathy Hoff**

“Wednesday she realized that she was living in her own book.”

What a great opening line for a novel!

It could be about . . .

Or . . .

Damn! This is going nowhere. It could turn into a great lament about writer’s block.

Actually, I have this friend who has made a living out of writer’s block—writing about it, offering *paid* therapy sessions purporting to cure it. This friend all but finished her Ph.D. in English lit—all but the dissertation—then she wisely gave up on that enterprise before she rammed her car into a bridge abutment, which she had been sorely tempted one day to do—and, as an alternative to suicide for her writer’s block, went back to school for a whole new start. That’s how she came to get an Ed.D. and establish a clinical psych practice counseling blocked writers. She published a number of books, too, and had a good marriage and family life—a happy ending all around.

I don’t think I can steal her story for my novel, though. Too academic. And she might read it. So what kind of novel would my opening line work for?

How about comic-domestic? I could use the story about my bath-robed sister-in-law being dragged, face-planted, through the snow in her front yard by the Malamute my niece got from her boyfriend against parental orders that she promised faithfully to walk every day, then didn’t. All the while, the neighbor across the street, male of course, was laughing at my sister-in-law instead of rescuing her. My brother gave away the Malamute to a stranger he met in line at his bank after it ate the flowers he brought my sister-in-law for her birthday.

No, I’m not a ho-ho-funny writer. And there’s no book part here.

How about comic-tragic, where the no-good-scoundrel husband cheats on his lovely, unsuspecting young wife who’s trying to become a writer, but she gets even by ordering a lot of stuff from Amazon while she pretends to be writing? Meanwhile, she’s taking up with the UPS guy.

Soap opera! No serious writer would stoop

Well, I’d stoop if I thought I could make anything of it, but, alas, it’s

common as dirt. Anyway, it's more romantic-tragic than comic, and the Brontës have pretty well sewed up that market. I did fall in love with Lawrence Olivier as Heathcliff when I was about nine, but poor Heathcliff was as much sinned against as sinning, and Byronic heroes are pretty passé in this age of the metrosexual man. Even if they weren't, I don't have any Mr. Rochester in my life to model a male character on.

Let's face it, I don't have a metrosexual man in my life either.

So where am I?

"Wednesday she realized that she was living in her own book."

A detective novel! Maybe since I'm not so sharp on male protagonists, I could do one of those snarky, witty lady detective types. I could certainly crank out a couple of hundred pages of snarky. Witty, though, that's a challenge. I'm not good with blood and gore or with steamy casual sex scenes, either. Yikes! I can't even begin to imagine

These days I see TV ads soliciting Christian books. I believe an End Times series sold like hotcakes, didn't it? Maybe I focus on a porn writer and "her own book" she's living in is a world of sinful, materialistic imagining that leads to a crisis in her life.

Desperate, she turns for counsel to a neighbor-friend, who brings her to this handsome, single, young minister like the one in the *Grantchester* series on Masterpiece. Through him, she finds love and Jesus.

I don't believe this plot for a minute.

Maybe the protagonist isn't an author at all, but she's in a book club. No, better leave her an author. She's got this boyfriend who is a computer nerd. It could be like *Avatar* where he manipulates her virtual self, and it turns out to be her real life. A fancy computer game that he orchestrates as a kind of parallel to the best-seller this author-character has already had a huge success with. He's jealous because she's getting famous, going on book tours, and all that stuff, so she's getting a swelled head and neglecting him. This would be salable—computer sci-fi.

Who am I kidding? Lesson One: Write about what you know, and I don't know beans about computer games or virtual reality. How would I pull that one off?

What about an evil literary agent? She plants an idea for a book with this innocent author that she's jealous of, then hires these out-of-work aspiring actors to get involved in the author's life and play out the agent's idea.

I don't know beans about literary agents, either, and I can only imagine out-of-work aspiring actors because I'm playing at being an out-of-work aspiring writer.

How did I ever imagine I could support the kids and me by freelancing instead of going out and getting a real job?

"Wednesday she realized that she was living in her own book."

Maybe it could be a short story. I could just change *book* to *story*, then . . .



OH
by Iseli Krauss

After my daughter nodded to indicate that I could offer my granddaughter some hot chocolate, I did just that. My granddaughter looked up excitedly, "With marshmallows?" Again I looked at my daughter for a nod, and when I relayed the nod to my granddaughter, she said with a huge smile, "Thanks grandma, I'll just have the marshmallows."

Oh.

While having dinner with my daughter and a much older friend in an air-

port hotel in Los Angeles, our friend wiped her hand over the top of her head a time or two. I noticed a very giggly young couple at a table behind our friend and smiled at them. They smiled back. After the couple had left, a waiter stopped at our table and gave our friend a hand-written note on the back of a build-your-own-sandwich order form which read, "Dear Madame . . . Remember when you first sat down and thought you felt something fall into your hair—You were not dreaming—It was a watermelon seed I had inadvertently squeezed between my fingers & it landed in your hair. My sincere apologies."

Oh.

A student in an undergraduate psychology class I was teaching at Syracuse University urged me to meet a Nigerian graduate student with a vast knowledge of international relations. I was intrigued and agreed to meet the two of them on a campus corner on a winter-like fall day. When the undergraduate directed my attention down the hill, I spotted a very tall, slight student wearing a camel-hair coat amidst all the down jackets. I made a quick assessment: looks cold, probably unprepared for the weather to come, probably living on a strict budget as were other African grad stu-

dents I knew. He was limping, perhaps from a childhood illness or long-standing injury. Before even introducing us, the undergraduate asked him why he was limping. The grad student replied: "I fell off my horse playing polo in West Palm Beach."

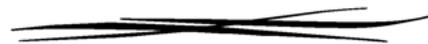
Oh.

Rufus, my rescue chocolate standard poodle, liked going to the kennel where he was loved and where there were dogs to play with. He would sit expectantly, watching me pack his duffle bag with food, medicines, treats, towel, blanket, leash, and toys. As soon as I would zip the bag, he would grab the handles and rush to the door, dragging the bag sideways. After I would open the door, he would drag the bag to the trunk of the car, drop it, and trot to the side door to wait for me to open it for him. One day, partway through the ritual, he stopped dead in his tracks, cocked his head, dropped the bag, and stared at me intently. He ran back into the house where I couldn't see him. Rufus was not in the habit of doing something so unexpected, so I just waited. He came back to the door with his leash and gave it to me to put in the bag. I imagined him thinking, "Krauss, dummy, you forgot my leash, and you know I can't go anywhere without it."

Oh.

Before our town had ambulance service, undertakers would drive my father's patients to one of two hospitals where he had privileges, each about 20 miles away or to the funeral home, whichever was appropriate. Over the years, doctors would develop close relationships with the undertakers they called most frequently. I heard this story from the son of an undertaker who knew my father well when I went to that son to arrange my father's funeral. I walked into the office prepared for the inevitable condolences. Instead, the young man rose to greet me with a huge smile and a firm handshake. He told me he was so eager to see me because he had a story to tell me, one his father swore was true. His father received a call from my father, who said that a patient had died in his waiting room and the body needed to be picked up. When the undertaker got to the office, my father asked him to turn the body around before taking it out to the hearse. When asked why, my father told him, "So it will look as if he died on the way into the office, not on the way out."

Oh.



TIME-MOTION STUDY
by John Wood

We scurry here and there;
Without stop, buzz about.
To and fro, incessantly on the go,
Yet, don't get where we know
We want or ought to go;
Or do we really know?

So, why not hit the button labeled
SLOW.
We reap that which we sow,
So, pause to plant a seed of kindness
As we flow—and stop awhile
To watch the asters grow,
The oriole in flight, or
Just to summon private thoughts,
And let the world
In endless orbit spin
While we unwind.



**FRIENDS OF THE
WRITTEN WORD**

Pennswood's semi-annual Poetry & Prose event will take place at 7 p.m. on Wednesday, October 19, in Penn Hall.

It's always a delightful evening. Some 17 residents read favorite pieces; the rest of us applaud vigorously. There's something about the event that makes it feel quite special. If

you'd like to be a reader, follow the directions in *The Bulletin* to apply. If you'd like to be a listener, make a note in your calendar.

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