PEN IN HAND

The Biannual Literary Journal of the Maryland Writers’ Association

July 2021

Editor: Dr. Tapendu K. Basu
(Gandharva raja)
Dedication

In sympathy to those who lost their loved ones due to COVID;
and gratitude to the dedicated COVID fighters who saved and comforted many
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Pen In Hand is the official literary publication of the Maryland Writers’ Association. It is published biannually in January and July.

Submission deadline for the next issue of Pen In Hand is November 30, 2021. MWA members and young writers are encouraged to submit poetry, sci-fi, flash fiction, short stories, drama, mystery, memoirs, creative non-fiction, personal essays. Photographs/Art must relate to submitted articles. Submit to peninhand@marylandwriters.org or tkbasu@verizon.net

Please follow the following submission guidelines:

- Use black type only
- Submit only in Times New Roman font
- Use font size 12 for the manuscript
- Leave 1 inch margin on top, bottom, left and right
- Place title of ‘story’ two double spaces below top of page.
- Center title
- One space below your title place your name: center name
- Indent first line of each paragraph 1/2” inch
- Single space between period and next sentence
- In general, dialog should be double spaced and in quotation marks
• Insert approximate word count at the end of your manuscript (except poetry): flash fiction 500-1000 words; short story word count 2000 to 3000 words
• One double space below the end of your manuscript, include a brief Bio with Chapter affiliation. The Bio should be limited to your literary works and interest, publications and awards.
• Art/photograph (Minimum 300 DPI) must be original. If not, permission to reprint must be obtained by submitter.

For further guideline details refer to Maryland Writers' Association website.
Is Space the final frontier or is it the beginning of a new chapter in human progress? Many believe there are living organisms outside our planet earth. If so, in which form do they exist? Do they share the genomic sequence of earthly creatures? Will our space travelers run into humanoids who share our DNA double helix? Will the Rover on Mars give us a clue as to the origin of matter, energy and life? Will it provide the answer to the eternal question, *who upheld the earth beneath, and the firmament from falling?* (Zarathustra) As I follow the launch of Space-X, and the spindly legs of Rover stepping on Martian rocks with the insecurity of a toddler, I search for the prophesy and space-probing fantasy of poets and writers ...

**Brian Greene:** in his book *The Fabric of the Cosmos, After centuries of thought, we can only portray space and time as the most familiar of strangers.*

**Ray Bradbury:** *We are an impossibility in an impossible universe... we should go back and build a base on the moon and go on to Mars and we should put a civilization on Mars and then, 500 years from now, move out into the universe, and when we do that, we have a chance of living forever. That’s why I believe in space exploration.*

**Isaac Asimov:** *The people of the United States spend exactly as much money on booze alone as on the space program.*
Pablo Neruda: Anyone who hasn’t been in the Chilean forest doesn’t know this planet. I have come out of that landscape, that mud, that silence, to roam, to go singing through the world.

Carl Sagan: The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff...Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:
There is no light in earth or heaven
But the cold light of stars;
And the first watch of night is given
To the red planet Mars.

Emily Dickinson:
Ah, Moon—and Star!
You are very far—
But were no one
Farther than you—

Gerard Manley Hopkins:
Look at the stars! look, look up at the skies!
O look at all the fire-folk sitting in the air!

Edith Sodergran:
On foot
I had to cross the solar system
before I found the first thread of my red dress.
I sense myself already.
Somewhere in space hangs my heart,
shaking in the void, from it stream sparks
into other intemperate hearts.
Stephen Crane:

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;
Round and round they sped.
I was disturbed at this;
I accosted the man.
“It is futile,” I said,
“You can never —”

“You lie,” he cried,
And ran on.

There you have it! Our horizon has shifted beyond where our eyes can see, to the light’s ends in a secret tunnel where life’s treasures are stored. So, save the quarters in the piggy bank. One day soon we will fly to outer space on Virgin Galactic! It is 250,000$ per pop. If you are as impatient as Bradbury, Blue Origin takes off on a 62 miles odyssey into space on July 20, 2021.

Which leaves a vexing question unanswered. When I return from my space voyage, will I have aged or regained my youthfulness? Einstein’s Twin Paradox: The theory of relativity tells us that the faster you travel through space, the slower you travel through time. Rocketing to Alpha Centauri—warp 9, please—is a good way to stay young.

Or is it? Some researchers are beginning to believe that space travel could have the opposite effect. It could make me prematurely old. For the answer, wait till I return...

Dr. Tapendu K Basu
Editor, Pen In Hand
My high school Latin teacher wrote “pervenire ad astra” in my yearbook. Despite my less than spectacular grades, I knew that the translation was ‘reach for the stars,’ but didn’t understand what he meant until years later. Since then, I’ve strived to ‘try to do something that is very difficult and impressive.’ So has humankind, although it has occasionally faltered. In my lifetime thus far, we’ve created microwave ovens, the internet, cell phones that fit in your pocket or wrist, launched a reusable spacecraft, and sent robots to other planets in our solar system. A century ago, these things only existed in science fiction.

Here are a few quotes for inspiration.

The stars will never be won by little minds; we must be big as space itself.

— ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

Space travel is life-enhancing, and anything that’s life-enhancing is worth doing. It makes you want to live forever.

— RAY BRADBURY

NASA’s next urgent mission should be to send good poets into space so they can describe what it’s really like.

— SHANNON HALE
We cannot predict the new forces, powers, and discoveries that will be disclosed to us when we reach the other planets and set up new laboratories in space. They are as much beyond our vision today as fire or electricity would be beyond the imagination of a fish.

— ARTHUR C. CLARKE

Keep writing. Keep creating. And always reach for those stars.

President, Amy Kaplan
Terza Rima

The Terza Rima consists of tercets using a complex rhyme scheme, typically written in iambic pentameter. The first and third lines of a tercet rhymes with the end word of the preceding tercet’s second line. Hence the rhyme scheme is *aba, bcb, cdc, ded...etc.*

We see the finest example of this verse form in the three part epic *Divine Comedy*, a sublime poetic journey of Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) through *Inferno, Purgatorio and Paradiso*, guided by his muses, the Roman poet Virgil and Beatrice. Born in Florence, Dante wrote his classic in Italian.

Modern examples of Terza Rima in English, often using near rhymes:

Robert Pinsky (1940- )
*And rushing upwards left a cavity:*
*This hollow where we stand.” There is below,*
*As far from Beelzebub as one can be*

*Within his tomb, a place one cannot know*
*By sight, but by the sound a little runnel*
*Makes as it wends the hollow rock its flow ...*
*(Translation, *Inferno of Dante Canto XXXIV*)
Sylvia Plath (1932 -1963)
By the gate with star and moon
Worked into the peeled orange wood
The bronze snake lay in the sun

Inert as a shoelace; dead
But pliable still, his jaw
Unhinged and his grin crooked, ... (Medallion)

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792- 1822)
O wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn’s being,
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,
Pestilence-stricken multitude. O thou,
Who charioted to their dark wintry bed...

Shelly ends the first of his two part Terza Rima Sonnet with
the couplet
Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;
Destroyer and Preserver; hear, oh, hear!... (Ode to the West Wind)

Interestingly, Shelley conceived Ode to the West Wind during
a tempest, in a wood near Florence, while visiting the
birthplace of Dante Alighieri.

Dr. Tapendu K. Basu
POETRY
Witches Brew

By Marla Johnson

Some think we hide it
in the crook of our smile,
in the length of our lashes,
in the weight of our walk

but, our magic resides in dark hollows,
like caves branching out through the earth.
It shimmers in the dark
and hides in the light.
It coats our skin in chromium,
harden our bones like ironwood,
allows us to grow like wisteria vines.

The recipe changes with each batch.
We measure. We grind and mash and mix,
boil the parts into a whole
and drink the brew.
We use it as balm to heal our wounds.
We use it to decorate ourselves as
a compliant refuge,

because they’d gleefully set us on fire
to char our flesh and ruin our body.
They’d drown us in the shallowest of waters
to silence our voice.
They’d hang us with rope as callous as them
and laugh as we flail like marionettes.

But, our magic resides in dark hollows,
and it grows every time a woman or a girl
learns the recipe for witches’ brew.
Marla Johnson writes fantasy and speculative fiction. Her short stories have been published in *Linguistic Erosion* and *Wild Violet*. She is a member of the Howard County Chapter.
Removal

By Tina Raye Dayton

Cleared of all but one crumbling tree,
the yard kept the old pine,
its southern branches lost to the saw—
cut flush with the trunk.

With only one side left to bud, the body
became ensnared in tangles of ivy—
unbalanced, weak in the wind, tilting
toward its limbed side,

like my mother
after the stroke, diagonally stuck
in a hospital bed—her left side
may as well have been cut away, too.

Tina Raye Dayton grew up on the Eastern Shore of Maryland
and is a member of the MWA Lower Shore Chapter. She was the
2012 Dogfish Head Poetry Prize winner and is the author of the
chapbook, *The Softened Ground*. She recently received her first
Pushcart Nomination for her poem, *The Shell*. Her poems have
An Overdue Farewell
By Ellen Coffey

You stood full and certain
in the backyard of memory.
Fat roots guzzled rain until
only dusty soil prevailed.
We played in your shadow
on hot, syrupy afternoons,
tracing your thick bark
with chubby kid fingers.
Stick fights, circular chases,
tree tag and worm races,
the favored games of
unruly, barefoot hellions.

Your fruit was unsightly.
No Crispin, no Pippin,
no Granny Smith.
Just hard, misshapen orbs,
with yellow-green jackets
and a crunchy, tart taste.
Yet neighbors came
to harvest your offerings.
Pies, cakes and strudels
were born of your bounty.

Three generations
sheltered in your shade.
Your sturdy branches
bent to bless our heads.
When we moved
we left with no goodbye.
One day you were felled
to make room for
yellow brick bungalows.

No more birthday parties,
or family gatherings cooled
under your leafy awning.
If remembrance is mourning,
this is an overdue farewell
to an old friend.

———

Ellen Coffey is the current president of the Cumberland Chapter of Maryland Writers Association. Her poems have appeared in *Pen In Hand Literary Journal, Poets Choice, Flight of a Feather Anthology, Maryland Bards Poetry Review 2020* and *Backbone Mountain Review*. 
Threadbare shirts for decades,
Shoes worn ‘til the soles disintegrate,
A closetful of 50’s plaid.

Tinfoil old as those shoes,
Flattened and re-flattened–ten years flat;
One box is all you need.

Soap flakes squished together,
Towels so old they exfoliate.
Showers don’t take long.

Garage shelves overflowing
With hammers,
    maps,
    trinkets,
    nuts and bolts—
Treasure everywhere.

Tupperware and Pyrex—
Gotta eat all those leftovers.
No food goes to waste.

Strong hands of a mechanic,
Passed that knowledge to hundreds of students;
Honest living earned.

Voices on the scanner!
Head to the station, grab a coat.
Duty calls sometimes.
Knows who's doing what—where—when.  
He knows a guy who can get you that thing.  
(Usually he’s that guy.)

Hospital-cornered bedsheets,  
A pajama set from the 70s—  
Still comfortable, you know.

Takes his nightly phone calls,  
Wondering what the weather’s like up your way.  
Him? He can’t complain.

Navy photos and pea coat,  
Wartime horrors left back on the beaches.  
Memories kept to himself.

Won’t use the hearing aid.  
Not much worth hearing these days anyway, so  
batteries last a while.

Every week’s coupons clipped;  
Ten cents off is ten cents in your pocket.  
That’s how you get rich.

What he needs, he has—  
If he doesn’t, Who needs it, anyway?  
That keeps life simple.

Kari Martindale is a children's author, nonfiction writer, and spoken word poet. She is the President of Frederick County Chapter and MWA Board Member.
Of Rainbows and Jelly fish
By Anita Nahal

My soul has batik splatters, favored hues of carrot, baby powder, kale, mustard and pistachio. I munch, feel good health; sprinkle cool talcum. I sit on a block bench to feel organic. Adjusted length pencils with erasers ready; scripts have been angling and yearning. Need can arise anytime to wade with the flow. Angling and yearning for a rainbow to come tiptoeing, waving ever so gently, lest destiny scares it away. And I see my black chiffon bikini peeking from beneath my gold satin embroidered sarong as I lay on a striped red and white, candy cane beach towel sipping fruity cocktails, painted paper umbrellas popping out and flirting with the smooth breeze. I am now old enough to wear a bikini to the chagrin of many. My soul joins the teasing with verses, strokes, brushes, and daydreams. Amused jelly fish bounce out of the ocean, shrieking and chortling like little children watching a bio-scope show. The afternoon winter sun urges me to snooze, take it easy, let them be. On waking slightly, I find brick-red, magenta, turquoise, white, coffee, bottle green, and silver jelly fish sauntering and napping side by side with me on the sand. Paper umbrellas from my cocktails have jumped purpose providing them welcomed shade. I am beginning to tan more and more. Didn’t think a brown girl could tan. Finally, a rainbow knocks on my head. I awaken fully and walk over with clear lens to the dance party now in full swing.

Anita Nahal, Ph.D., CDP is a professor, poet, short story writer, and children’s writer. She teaches at the University of the District of Columbia, Washington DC. Anita has two books of poetry,
one of flash fictions, four for children. Her third book of poetry, *What’s wrong with us Kali women?* is set for release in August 2021 by Kelsay Books. Two books of her are prescribed in a course on multiculturalism at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands. Originally from New Delhi, India, Anita is a member of Montgomery Chapter. https://anitanahal.wixsite.com/anitanahal
White Violets, Red Poppies
By Roderick Deacey

(Great-grandmother Ruth, “Tiny Granny,” 4’ 10”: 1874 – 1950, Poppies and white violets planted in memory of the Fallen in WWI: 1921)

Now gone seventy years, a tiny ghost
once haunted by the “War to end all wars,”
Ruth sadly mourned those she had loved the most,
twin younger brothers she would see no more.
At Passchendaele, they breathed in deadly gas
and life was never as it was before.

At war’s end, she thought grief too strong to pass;
the poem “In Flanders Fields” spoke to her heart.
On a bank down the lane she pulled the grass
and planted flowers to set her loss apart.
Red poppies and white violets brought some ease
and as they grew she felt that ache depart.

Every year, her bank’s alive with bees –
white violets, a springtime scent sublime,
while poppies splash scarlet beneath the trees
and still salute those fallen in their prime.
It’s been a hundred years’ remembrance time!

———

Roderick Deacey is a performing poet in the DC area. He is a member of the Frederick chapter. In normal, non-viral times, he regularly performs with his drummer and bass-player, presenting
“neo-beat” poems inspired by the Beat Poets’ poetry and jazz forays of the nineteen-fifties. Deacey was awarded the 2019 Frederick Arts Council Carl R. Butler Award for Literature. Crossing genres, he won the Gold Award for Best Lyrics in the 2020 Mid-Atlantic Song Contest held by the Songwriters Association of Washington.
Your sharp gaze fell upon me,  
I was caught unaware.  
You, adept at stealing shoes  
from the innocent pews.  
I was distraught, unraveled.  
My path blasted with thorns.

You created a gravestone,  
my first permanent scar.  
With my one shoe, I begged you  
Wandering, I wondered  
what about my other shoe,  
fearful you’d take it too.

I traveled onward with hope.  
Your gaze had abated.  
Tiptoeing along my path,  
bearing unwanted weight.  
Managing with the one shoe  
and the worry of you.

Decades faded my worries  
until your gaze returned.  
I fell through the world I knew.  
Flipped my middle finger  
at you, imagined switchblade.  
Accepted the mess made.

My bare feet tread carefully.  
Silver-linings abound.  
It was never about me,
was never about you.
Knowing now, it was my path
for me to see, I’m free.

———

Tamlyn Corr is a member of the Annapolis Chapter. She writes poetry and fiction. Life’s Curtain, a sestina, was printed in Amaranth, the AACC Student Journal in May 2021, and won the 2021 AACC Burt Dall Metrical Poetry Award.
MEMOIR & PERSONAL ESSAYS
In 1972, two days after my eighteenth birthday, I went north from Florida to Rhode Island to visit my grandparents in Riverside, a working-class section of East Providence. It was in mid-June and hot for New England. I had returned from Europe a few months earlier with what would eventually become a drinking problem all my own. Being young and fresh, I still believed in the myth of the bawdy, jolly, lusty sailor who drank and romanced women, port to harbor, with endearing abandon. My father drank. My father’s father drank, and though I knew Grandpa George was in ill-heath because of a fifty-year tobacco habit, I looked forward to tipping a few with him at the Riverside Social Club, where the old salts would juice quietly whenever the stress of aging overwhelmed. My father, George Jr.; (whom they called Sonny) was dead by that time. He was a gunner in the Coast Guard during WW2 and piloted landing craft in every invasion from N. Africa to the first wave on Omaha Beach. He had been killed in an airplane accident in the Philippines a year earlier. Grandpa still mourned his only son. Drinking was a male rite of passage that Grandpa understood. We were sitting at the kitchen table. I finished off a slice of my auntie’s blueberry pie and handed the old salt his favorite cap (the one with the Navy anchor). “Grandpa, I’m eighteen now- and I’m old enough to drink. Let’s go to the club.”

My grandfather, who was hooked up to an oxygen tank and unable to smoke his beloved pipe, seemed to consider the idea fondly by arching his eyebrows and chuckling a bit. I think he not only liked my audacity but welcomed it.

“Just like Sonny.”

He could barely walk then. I remember half carrying my grandpa down the hill through narrow streets, his
lungs, costive, wheezing from the emphysema in the early afternoon heat. The sign read ‘Riverside Sportsman Club-Private- Members only’. I remember thinking that Rhode Island working class architecture was not much to get excited about. Everything seemed small and cramped compared to the southern architecture I’d grown up with. The interior was stark. No windows. Fluorescent neon lights were placed above the Formica bar in a dry attempt at decoration. Old Glory hung above the mirror, faded and dusty. Chipped blue stools for seating. For ambience, bathed in the pink glow of a Budweiser sign, were some girly calendars from the 1940’s. Beefy women wearing bikinis. Holding tools. The six old Vets sat drinking at the bar in the middle of the afternoon. Wrinkled tired men, survivors of hard lives. They all looked up as I, a baby-faced hippie kid with long hair halfway down to my ass, walked in with my grandpa. One of them let go the zinger; “She’s a little young fer ya, ain’t she George?” Haw, haw. My Grandpa laughed with them and looked at me in masked amusement. I gamely smiled back, thinking - Yankee salt-geezers. “Naw, he’s Sonny’s boy... just up fer his first beer with the grown men.”

He coughed as I helped him to the barstool. His lips were turning slightly blue. “You sayin’ he’s a full eighteen then, George?” asked Kenny the barkeep, looking me over with suspicion. I produced I.D. “Flarida, eh”? he remarked as he handed me back my card. He was too old for me to read, when he looked me up and down a second time I couldn’t tell if he was jealous or disdainful. New Englanders don’t share their feelings much. Grandpa quietly nursed his beer. After his third Budweiser, he gargles, “Y’oughta be signed up, kid.” “Signed up for what, Grandpa?” “Fer the service, kid, if yeer eighteen, y’oughta be signed up fer the service.”

The effects of all the beer made me bold enough to sass him back. “So, in order to serve my country, I gotta go get
my ass shot off in Viet Nam?” “Hell, yes boy; y’go where yer country sends yah. “Y’doyer duty!” barked Kenny, the barkeep from the end of the bar, polishing a glass. My grandfather’s renewed coughing fit kept him from speaking. He nodded an affirmative and pointed at the flag. His face white, nose red, lips blue.

“Isn’t that why all you guys fought WW2? So I wouldn’t know what war was like? Right Grandpa? Didn’t you guys suffer the big war so dumb-ass kids like me would never know? Wasn’t that the idea?”

Grandpa George looked at me from his bar stool, his blue lips twisted in thought. The others in the bar grew silent. One old Vet rose slowly to leave. It wasn’t until he stepped fully into the light and faced me that I noticed his left sleeve was pinned at the shoulder. He smiled down at me. “He’s gotta point they-uh, George.” He patted Grandpa’s shoulder. “He’s a smaht one, got Sonny’s head on ’im.”

He’s Sonny’s boy alright.

———

J.D. Brayton is a member of the Montgomery County MWA chapter. He is the author of 4 novels: The Clabber Grrrl’s Retreat, Eye Skin, Thrip and The Light Horse. His poetry has been published in Pen In Hand. His short stories and commentaries may be found at jdbraytonauthor.com
When I was at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, I broke from study three nights a week to participate in the fencing club. My parents have remarked many times on my growth as a person during college, and I believe learning to fence played an important role. I realized how much I would miss college when I was preparing to graduate, and fencing was a big part of it—not just the sport but the sense of community.

Since childhood, I’ve watched movies about knights, pirates, and other heroes who fought with swords. I’ve always loved imagining myself as one. I got toy swords at the Maryland Renaissance Festival. While living in Japan, I was fascinated with ninjas, samurai, and katanas. In all these cases, when I held one I felt like Luke Skywalker when he first held a lightsaber. Fencing at St. Mary’s was a club and not a varsity sport, which means I could join without having had prior experience. Nevertheless, I was in for a surprise.

Fencing doesn’t seem to be as popular in movies or books as are duels. Two characters are called to fight when one’s honor is threatened. In some cases honor involves revenge. That character feels satisfaction can only come by killing the enemy, who is a skilled swordsman. If learning to use a sword is ever featured in a movie, it’s a means to an end for the character to achieve revenge or preserve their honor. But the modern sport of fencing is so much more than merely fighting with swords.

It would be weeks before I got to hold a blade at the fencing club. We all had to first master footwork: standing in the proper En Garde position, advance, retreat, double advance, double retreat, lunging (short, medium and long), and advance lunging. I had to keep my upper body erect. My legs were meant to glide, without scuffing my feet. Still, I and
many others scuffed, but we did our best not to. Those first few weeks were, as veteran members put it, to weed out the less dedicated. People who signed up came the first night, but many didn’t return a few weeks later. It would be the same scenario over the next three years. I stayed because I was determined to learn and because I wanted to use a sword. I couldn’t give up. I wouldn’t.

Following those first few weeks, at last it was time to put on the jackets, masks, gauntlets, and use weapons. There are three different types of blades: foil, epee, and sabre, each with its own rules and target areas. Before any of us could choose which weapon to specialize in, we all first got the feel for using a weapon with foil. Just as we dedicated time to footwork, we had to dedicate time to learning to attack, parry, and riposte, the last two of which respectively mean blocking an attack and following with a counterattack. After rotating between the three, I won my first duel—or bout—in sabre. In sabre I could hit with any part of the blade, and I didn’t like being stabbed directly with the tip a foil or epee, even if it was rubber—it felt painful. Therein lay my decision to join the sabre squad. Still, as I discovered, being hit with the side of a sabre blade is painful too.

Next, the club split practice into three groups by blade. I continued to learn to parry and riposte. Parry 3 (6 in foil and epee) is an attack to the back, Parry 4 to the front, and Parry 5 to the head. We would perform a “triangle drill” that reminded me of how swordfights were portrayed in movies. By parrying, a fencer changes right-of-way, used by sabre (and foil) to determine who scores a point (right-of-way isn’t used by epee, where fencers can score simultaneously). In sabre, the fencer who attacks first has right-of-way, while in foil whoever extends first has it. We practiced so many places throughout the year, including the outdoor tennis courts, the gymnasium, and even in hallways when it was cold.
In the club, there were several friendly rivalries between members and squads. This rivalry included exchanging insults that are taken as jokes. Sometimes members literally would through a gauntlet at another’s feet, which, of course, is how one traditionally issues a challenge to a duel. However, club members challenged each other for fun. Even I had friendly rivalries with fellow club members in the sabre squad. We all enjoyed it. Even with hard work and dedication, one can still have fun in a sport, and make good friends.

We would also have movie nights in the club and watch a variety of films as long as they featured sword fighting. One of these was *By the Sword*, which was the first (and currently only) film specifically about the modern sport. Some, but not all, high schools have a fencing program, but the sport has grown in popularity over the past few years, in part, some think, due to the Olympics. I still remember, after graduating from St. Mary’s, catching a brief glimpse of the sport during the 2012 London Olympics when my parents and I were eating lunch at Red Robin. When the Olympics drew nearer, I kept telling them we would have to keep our eye out for when fencing matches aired on television, so I could watch more of it. Now, I wouldn't miss the opportunity to watch fencing whenever the Summer Olympics are held.

Ethical conduct is important in fencing. Fencers must always salute each other before a bout, and sometimes the director as well. They must do the same at the end and shake hands. I learned there are many ways, and some even make up their own—I tried making my own using my first initial, like Zorro. It’s sort of like how, when I was kid, me and my fellow teammates in little league baseball and soccer always told the other team “good game” after it was over. If emotion gets in the way, a fencer is in big trouble. Anyone who fails to abide by the rules of conduct is automatically black-carded.

There are three different types of penalty cards in fenc-
ing: yellow, red, and black. Yellow is for minor offenses and are like warnings, for such things as aggression (in sabre, moving the blade above ninety degrees horizontally or vertically and then attacking, for example). Red is equivalent to two yellow cards, and is for a second minor offence or something slightly worse. When a fencer is given two yellow or one red, the opponent gets an automatic point. Black is for the worst offenses. It can be given for failing to salute an opponent before or after a bout, as well as failing to shake hands (in *By the Sword*, one of the characters actually does this). It can also be issued for deliberately attacking an opponent with intent to harm (during or after bout), insulting a director or opponent, or for throwing a mask or sword at an opponent.

Fencing’s rules of conduct remind me of the code of chivalry used by medieval knights. I recall in a children’s book titled *Knights in Shining Armor* that I got at the Renaissance Festival, part of that code was treating one’s enemies with respect, even when they became captives. If a knight was found guilty of bad behavior (not all knights followed the code of chivalry, as the book specified) or of cowardice, he was stripped of his rank, as was shown in his sword and spurs being broken. No one in the club had gotten a black card during my time there, and the club hoped to keep it that way, as I’d heard many times.

Senior year, I got very upset with myself while fencing with a few other students against various other schools and although I didn’t unleash my anger out at anyone it was clearly visible. I can remember a student from another college saying something like, “What is your problem?” after which I took a seat and regretted my actions, knowing I could’ve gotten a black card. One director told me that day something I did involving the way I saluted would’ve had him give me a black card (which I’d never intended) had he
been directing that bout. Even so, I did lose my temper at a
cub meeting later in the semester. Though I saluted my op-
ponent and shook his (or her) hand, I was admonished for
taking off my mask and—to my shame—to tossing it behind
me after losing another bout.

I felt I should have been black-carded, even though I
wasn’t. Overcome with shame and guilt, I felt the only hon-
or able thing I could do was to resign from the club until I
could control my emotions. I sent e-mails to club leaders,
saying I wouldn’t come back. However, the then-captain of
the sabre squad, a good friend with whom I’d had a friend-
ly dueling rivalry, spoke to me later. He acknowledged my
earnest regret and made the case that I had come too far to
quit now. He displayed true ethical, gentlemanly conduct. I
was forgiven and welcomed back. No one mentioned the in-
cident again, but I still reminded myself to never get angry
and sometimes still struggled to avoid it. I felt lucky, and that
I didn’t deserve such mercy. I certainly never wanted to get
close to that edge again.

Fencing teaches control over one’s emotions, to move on
from past mistakes, and become a better fencer and person.
Hamlet and Laertes forgave one another before they died. Ro-
meo asked Tybalt for forgiveness in the Capulet tomb. Win-
n ing isn’t everything. No sport or competitive game ever is.
Anyone who only cares about winning shouldn’t really be
involved. Fencing is work, but it can be enjoyed. It teaches
more than how to use a sword. As my parents told me when
I was a boy about sports, the important thing is to have fun.
Perhaps even more so, with sports like with college, what
matters are the people one shares those experiences with.

I’ve learned that the modern Olympic sport of fencing
isn’t something one can learn, let alone master, overnight.
It’s not merely waving a blade around, nor trying to stab
the opponent with the tip of the blade (like how Alejandro
Murrieta and Arya Stark thought in *The Mask of Zorro* and HBO’s *Game of Thrones*, respectively). It requires discipline, dedication, good sportsmanship, and being responsible for one’s actions. In the end, it was all worth it. I learned more about a sport I had very little knowledge about beforehand, and at the end of every year I got to celebrate in a party with the other club members.

I still have my old equipment, as well as all the wonderful memories from my college years. Once in a while, I’ve held my sabre and gone through a few of the moves down in the basement, not in the fantasy of being a knight or a pirate but in memory of fencing at St. Mary’s College of Maryland.

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Assisted living facilities and nursing homes have been hit hard by COVID-19, resulting in total lockdowns with residents and families not able to see each other, some residents even dying under such isolated and lonely circumstances.

My wife Mary was diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer’s disease more than eleven years ago and has been living in an assisted living memory care facility for almost nine years. With my wife not being able to communicate verbally for several years, before the pandemic we had reached a level of nonverbal connection that surpassed what we could ever accomplish verbally...but it took physical contact and being together to hold each other, look into each other’s eyes, dance, smile and laugh, sing and hum together.

I had built up our relationship over these years, seeing her almost every day, helping her to have good days and know that I was still “with” her. She knew I loved her and was always happy to be with me. We had good times together and I know these daily interactions kept her “going” and interactive.

Then it happened...quarantine due to the coronavirus... and we could no longer be with each other at all!

It was over a year that she and I could not be together in any meaningful sense. This caused me a lot of anxious ruminations...Without our personal time together, would she now go downhill more quickly? What might she think about my not being there for her? Would she even remember me when I was able to return? What if she became infected with COVID-19?

I’m sure it was especially tough on Mary since she couldn’t understand why she was always in her room or alone at times, or probably wondered why she might not recognize her caregivers because of the masks. I almost hoped
she was oblivious to the fact that I wasn’t there, but I knew she had to miss my visits. There was no way she could comprehend any of what had changed.

I didn’t worry about her safety and needs because I knew she was well taken care of by the caregivers and other staff. I also realized they were doing everything possible to ensure her happiness under the circumstances. I deeply respect and truly admire these people. But I worried about the absence of additional physical and emotional happiness I had always brought her on a different level, a void that only I could fill.

Mary and I had been unable to have any kind of real verbal conversations for years, but nonverbal communications were developed over the years to the point we communicated our love and emotions more visually and physically.

I arranged for caregivers to call me to “talk” with her on a regular basis during the quarantine. She often hummed louder and tried to become more vocal when she heard my voice. We video conferenced a few times. Sometimes she seemed to look at me on the screen for a few seconds, but like with the phone, she seemed confused, and I knew she needed to be with me physically to experience the special loving feelings we had shared.

Eventually, a handful of opportunities were allowed for me to visit her outside with six-foot social distancing and masks. She also wore a face shield. These visits had to be during the day and she was sometimes “out of it” because she often wanted a nap during that time. Whether she really “knew” me during these times I’m not sure, but when she didn’t have her head down she seemed to at least acknowledge the company.

Finally…after more than a year, and now that she and I have both been fully vaccinated, I’m allowed to visit her in her room after I get a temperature check at each visit. Appointments are needed for the caregivers to adjust their
schedules, and I now visit her at least every third day, at the same time I used to stop by each day on my way home from work. Catching her after she finished eating dinner but before she got ready for bed was always the best time for her.

But a lot has changed during the year or so I was away.

Physically, she can now do nothing for herself. Before the pandemic she fed herself, albeit not in a socially acceptable manner—now she has to be fed. Previously I walked her some every day, slow as it might be—now two caregivers are required to move her from one chair to another.

When I first returned to visit, I noticed she had also gone downhill mentally, exhibiting very little reaction or interaction with me. I’ve now visited in her room about a dozen times, and at least this is getting better. She seems happy to see me. She would also be pleased if one of the caregivers, whom she has always loved, gave this length of undivided attention, but I believe I make a difference for the moment. She leans forward in a positive way, seemingly wanting to connect better, and occasionally reaches out to touch my face. A sad part for me is that it seemed she had lost the ability to smile, but glimmers of smiles are coming through the more I’m with her. Her smiles meant everything to me before the pandemic because I knew they were true signs that she was happy as she had lost any ability to fake a smile.

She hasn’t been able to talk for years, so there are no words except for a sporadic “okay,” usually after I say “okay?” in a questioning manner. I talk to her and sing the same songs I’ve sung to her for years. She and I both hum a lot. I do so with different melodies she used to know. She hums most of the time, usually back and forth between two notes. I can tell she’s happy by the way she hums, especially when she moves her hands and feet back and forth to the rhythm.

How we really connect though is through our eyes. A few years ago, we seemed to have a renewed love affair. We
couldn’t communicate verbally, but the nonverbal connection was fantastic. She looked deeply and penetratingly into my eyes for long periods, seemingly trying to see my inner soul. It worked, and we had great love sessions through our eyes. Now, after the lockdown, she still looks deeply into my eyes, seemingly trying to understand me, but I can tell her gaze also means “I love you.”

I call her after she’s in bed most days that I don’t visit. A caregiver puts the phone on speaker and places it between her ear and pillow, and we “talk” for an hour or so. She’s very exuberant and “talkative” during these calls and hums a lot. It’s obvious that she’s happy. The nice part is that I’m told she’s usually this way also when I’m not visiting or on the phone.

Mary prepared her heart, mind and spirit for years before developing any signs of Alzheimer’s since she knew the chances of her getting it were increased by her family history. The peace of mind—and I believe true happiness—that she currently exudes are proof that her preparation worked.

At this point, she’s happy in her own space without a recognizable care in the world. She realizes and enjoys the care and love from her caregivers…and me. And despite all of the additional challenges it caused, COVID-19 can’t take that away.

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The Gray Cat

By Rissa Miller, Robin Peace, Melisa Lewis Peterson, and Ali Varden

Her brother had it wrong, Paula thought as she regarded the easy breath of the gray cat. The animal had a way about him. He was dignified, intelligent.

“We’re not calling him Robburrito,” she said.

“C’mon! That’s an awesome name!” Danny protested from the sofa, yellow nacho-flavor dust from his corn chips on his face.

“That’s a hole-in-the-wall burrito shack,” Paula shook her head.

The gray cat turned from the window and sighed. His thick fur rustled softly as he rose into an arched stretch and observed her with deep jade eyes.

Danny babbled about Robburrito’s and how he had the happiest meals of his life there— before they were quarantined. The past two weeks had frustrated her and her college-age brother. Paula saw a plea from a shelter to help with animals. So she picked up a cat with food, litter and a box. Her way to help, as well as smooth over things at the apartment.

But the cat’s stoic and poised countenance reminded her nothing of greasy Tex-Mex food. Instead, as she studied the cat, she felt transported to another place. Somewhere calm, meditative, magical.

He came with the name “Gray,” which reminded her of Dorian Gray. But Paula knew the cat was no Dorian. Silent and astute, Gray instilled her with a feeling that everything was going to be okay.

“We’ll call him TaiChi,” she said firmly.

The feline stretched languorously on the windowsill, the afternoon sunlight highlighting his gray fur until it seemed
to almost vanish into a sunbeam. Paula couldn’t help but admire him. Then suddenly TaiChi bolted upright and leapt out the open window onto the fire escape.

“Damn! TaiChi! Stay. Here kitty, kitty!” Paula called, rushing forward.

The cat flashed his green eyes, head cocked. Paula put her hands out to gather him from the metal grated landing, but TaiChi backed away and slowly tiptoed down the stairs that lead to the apartment below.

“Oh God! Danny, get in here!” Paula hesitated to climb out on the ledge. She was terrified of heights. She had never once been on the fire escape.

“What gives, sis?” Danny appeared from the kitchen scratching his beard.

“We have to go get him! He ran out—well, downstairs!” she pointed at the window.

“Downstairs? To the—lady?” Danny stepped back. “No way!”

“Madame Meredith isn’t a real witch. Don’t be silly!” Paula said, gesturing to the window.

“First off, we’re not allowed to leave our home,” he said, throwing his hands up to the walls around them. “Second of all, that lady is a witch. I mean, a real one. The cat is gone. Good job, you killed it within the first week.”

Paula’s frustration grew and she felt tears welling in her eyes. She knew she was overreacting but it was all too much.

“You suck, you know that? I didn’t even have him for a week,” Paula covered her face with her hands and let a sob break from her throat.

Uneasy with his sister’s display of emotion, Danny walked over and rubbed her arm.

“C’mon. If he means that much to you I will crawl out this window but you have to go tell the witch I’m going to be out there, so she doesn’t use her voodoo on me.”
Paula perked up.
“Really?” she used her sleeve to wipe the tears off her cheek.
“If I fall to my death you will be quarantined alone. If I fall and hurt myself, you’ll have to take me to the hospital which is totally infected. Just so you’re aware of the risk I’m taking for you,” Danny said as he swung a leg out onto the rickety landing.

Quarantine had closed the elevator, so Paula raced down the steps to Madame Meredith’s apartment. A nervous feeling rose in her chest. What if Danny was right? Meredith could a witch. What if TaiChi was drawn to her? Like the cat Salem in Sabrina the Teenage Witch—a familiar! Paula pushed the thought from her head. This was real life and TaiChi was her cat.

Paula tapped on the door. “Madame Meredith? It’s Paula Jacob from upstairs.”
“I’m coming,” a musical voice sang out.
“You don’t have to open the door. We’re supposed to be quarantined. I just wanted to tell you, my brother is on the fire escape getting our cat—“

The door whooshed open. Meredith was holding TaiChi in her arms. Danny was nowhere in sight out the windows. TaiChi batted a bauble on Meredith’s gaudy necklace.
Her melty brown eyes gazed at Paula and she said, “You mean this cat?”
“Yes! Thank you!” Paula said as she extended her arms. However, Meredith didn’t offer the cat.
She stepped back and said, “Please come in for some tea? It’s been awfully lonesome. My family, well, I’m the last. I had to close my shop because of the lockdown. Come pass some time with me?”

Paula wanted to take TaiChi and dash upstairs. There was a reason they were quarantined. She didn’t know if Meredith
was infected. If she was, it was too late now! TaiChi seemed mesmerized by Meredith's necklace. She sighed. If Paula was in her apartment alone, she would want company, too. 

“Sure, do you have ginger tea?” Paula said.

“I've got assorted teas from all over the world! Come and see,” Meredith replied.

Meredith's apartment was a mirror of Paula’s, but the way she decorated it made it seem completely foreign: the bland beige carpet was covered by plush Persian rugs in jewel tones; the walls were painted a purple so dark it was nearly black, brightened by tapestries. The living room had old Victorian armchairs—the wood and velvet kind you see in antique shops and a coordinated clawfoot couch. She smelled incense and Paula noted the windows were shut, her brother nowhere in sight. The whole room had a cave-like feel, if caves were cozy and made you sleepy.

“Sorry about TaiChi,” Paula said as she stepped inside.

In the back of her mind, Paula wondered what happened to Danny. That jerk probably went right back in the window and was watching Netflix!

Meredith disappeared into the kitchen. The sounds of a metal kettle banging against the sink stirred Paula from her stupor. She entered the kitchen and Meredith was humming to herself as she filled the kettle with water. TaiChi sat on the counter, grooming himself.

“Traitor,” she thought. He paused, his jade eyes peering up at her for a moment before going back to his bath.

“You named the darling TaiChi?” Meredith asked as she set the kettle on the stove. She leaned against the counter, one hand on her curvaceous hip. Despite her graying hair, her age was hard to pin down. “Whatever made you choose such a name?”

Paula looked at the cat in question, who stared at them both. “He just seemed so calm, collected.” She shrugged, rub-
bing her arm self-consciously.

“Names have power,” Meredith murmured as she took
down two dainty teacups from the cabinet. “Do you know
about Tai Chi, the practice?”

“Oh, no,” Paula confessed. “The name was just cute, like
him.”

“Nonsense,” Meredith chided. “When we name things,
we give them power. You do TaiChi a disservice by disavow-
ing the power you bestowed him.”

The kettle screamed and Meredith made quick work of
filling the cups with water and loose leaves.

“Now then,” she said, setting the steaming teacups on a
little two-person table tucked beneath a tiny window. Paula
used its twin upstairs to give light to the plants she kept un-
intentionally killing. “Let me read your leaves.”

The knot in Paula’s gut tighten. She knew she was judg-
ing unfairly. Meredith was just a person, a lonely woman
who held different beliefs. The uneasiness in her tummy
would not settle, though.

“Tai Chi is ancient. Controlled movements that generate
life force, energy,” Meredith took a seat at the table, gestur-
ing for Paula to join her.

“They had it at my yoga studio,” Paula said absently, as
she glanced from the gray cat on counter and down to her
cup. Loose pieces of tea and ginger floated in the steamy wa-
ter. “There’s no strainer?” she blurted out.

“That would defeat the purpose. This will soothe your
nervous stomach,” the woman explained.

Bringing the thin china to her lips, Paula tried to recall if
she mentioned her stomach. The tea was heavenly, though,
and as soon as she inhaled, Paula was eager to drink. It was
complex and assertive with a bite of spicy ginger, a touch of
sweet vanilla, all wrapped up in a secondary flavor… anise? It
was familiar, yet she couldn’t place it. Either way, with each
sip, she felt lulled.

“Just what you needed, wasn’t it?” Meredith asked, smiling. “Leave a bit in the bottom, so we can get a reading.”

As Paula looked on, Meredith turned both teacups into their saucers. A bit of tea drained out, and then she flipped them both upright. It looked like globs of tea stuck on the cup to Paula.

“Lightning, a rabbit, here. Goggles. You are refusing to see the truth. Sudden change, you must be careful. The rabbit is a prey animal. It warns you to listen carefully for danger,” Meredith said, her tone dark.

• • •

Danny shambled down the rusty fire escape, mumbling under his breath what a pain his sister was. The landing below stretched from one window to the next, connecting multiple times, just as theirs did above. He reached Meredith’s window and cupped his hands so he could see inside.

Paula was already there! Her cat was tucked under the other woman’s arm, they were smiling, things appeared fine. He’d crawled out the window for nothing! As he turned to go, a song caught his attention.

He found he couldn’t turn away. The tune wrapped around him, easing him closer to the apartment just past where his sister was. The metal groaned under his weight. When he looked inside the next window he saw her, a young Asian woman with long black hair, she appeared to be doing a slow, graceful dance.

Curious, he leaned forward. She wore loose linen pants and a tank top, her hair swished with the gentle movements. Then she caught sight of him and screamed.

He put up his hands, “Sorry! I’m just looking for my cat!” She rushed to the window, attempting to shut it. “Stay
back, I don’t want your germs!”

“Hey, my body is a temple, 100%,” he grinned, but she did not.

The metal beneath his feet shook, the fire escape groaning as the entire stacked construction began to tilt and pull away from the side of the building. Adrenaline surged through Danny, and to avoid falling six flights to his death, he jumped toward the girl’s still-open window and landed inside, crushing her small frame underneath him.

“Get off of me!” she cried, as her knee connected with his crotch.

The pain was so intense Danny nearly passed out. He rolled off of her, moaning and stuffed his hands between his legs for some comfort.

The young woman took in a defensive stance, as if about to fight him, then she glanced outside and saw the fire escape crumbling to the ground.

“Oh my gosh! I didn’t realize—are you ok?” she stammered.

He wasn’t sure how much time had passed when he finally sat up.

“So, you got a name?” Danny managed to spit out.

“Maaike Zhao, and you?” she said.

“Danny Jacob, nice to meet you, I think,” he snorted.

“I’m so sorry! I was scared!” she replied.

Danny had to admit, if the shoe was on the other foot, he would have reacted the same.

“I get it,” he said. “So, you’re here alone?”

“No. Well, sort of,” Maaike shrugged. “My brother and I moved here. For his...studies.”

Danny looked around. The apartment was similar to Paula’s, but mostly empty. There were simple furnishings and that haunting music kept playing. He also noticed a fancy cat bed.
“Yeah, I live with my sister. We’re up in 7C,” he said, standing and examining the torn curtain and busted screen. “I’ll call the building super, we’ll get that fixed for you and your brother.”

As he looked at Maaike, he couldn’t help but feel she was in distress. Probably my fault, he thought. Strange guy falling in the window during a quarantine. She was likely ready to hit him in the nuts again. She was just so... different, beautiful. He couldn’t help but imagine her like CatWoman, from Batman. And definitely in that outfit instead of the get-up she had on.

“If you’d be so kind, I’ll just head back up—the inside stairs. I’ll call the super—” he said.

“Oh, Danny, your cat! I hope it wasn’t on the fire escape!” she exclaimed.

He gestured towards the next apartment as he stepped into the hall.

“My sister is in there. She has him. TaiChi, she calls him,” Danny replied.

As he glanced back to get a parting glimpse of the lovely Maaike, her expression was completely alarmed, as if she was about to scream again.

“Danny, is TaiChi a large gray cat with jade green eyes?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s right,” he nodded.

“Oh goodness! He found his way back!” she clasped her hands over her face dramatically.

She practically trembled with excitement and it looked as if she might cry.

“I want to tell you everything, but there’s no time. If you sister is in there, only one thing can save her from the potion! Even my brother did not figure it out in time, and he is a great magician!,” she said with wild panic.

He frowned and just at that moment, the door to Ma-
dame Meredith's apartment flew open, smacking him in the face. Dazed for a moment, Danny grabbed the wall to balance himself and felt a rush of warm blood trickle down his face. A nose bleed, just what he needed.

Maaike gasped. He assumed it was for him, but then all of the sudden, a tabby cat scrambled into the hallway, meowing loudly, followed by none other than the infamous Tai-Chi! What the hell... was the cat carrying a necklace in his mouth?

“This way!” Maaike whispered loudly, gesturing to the cats. “Come now!”

Both cats yowled, a terrible sound, then as fast as a blink, they were gone. He was alone in the hallway as Maaike’s door slammed shut.

Danny pressed his hand into the wall, and looked down to see blood dripping onto the hallway carpet. He tried to wipe his face, and suddenly felt very, very tired. He must have gotten more of a bump from the door swinging open than he realized.

“Paula?” he called out, glancing around him. “Did you find the damn cat?”

“Your sister ran off, I'm afraid,” a sing-song voice responded. “But won’t you come in for a cup of tea?”

Despite the various pain in his entire body from jumping through a window screen, Maaike’s self-defense and the door smack, Danny knew trouble when it was right in front of him. Madame Meredith even looked like a witch with her dark, brooding eyes and floaty blue dress.

“I hate tea. And I’m done with neighborly bullshit,” he said. “Where’s Paula?”

“You’re bleeding! Please come in,” Meredith said, gently touching him on the arm.

Danny knew with every fiber of his being that he must not go into that apartment. Suddenly he understood Maa-
ike’s strange rantings. The witch had magic potions... her brother had found his way home... and his sister ran off... He thought of the tabby cat he just saw and summoning all his might he pushed Madame Meredith into her apartment by her shoulder, slammed the door, and threw himself against it, blocking her inside.

“Where’s Paula?!” he demanded. “What did you do to her?”

He heard Madame Meredith squeal with alarm as she landed inside the apartment, it sounded like she had fallen. Was his sister a tabby cat? Was he going to have to take her to the vet? Change her box? Would she still be... Paula?

The door to Maaike’s apartment opened and a slender Asian man in his early 30s stepped out, and gestured for Danny to be quiet. The man chanted softly and with his words, Danny felt the apartment door lock, solidify beneath him.

“This will hold for now,” said the man.

“Are you... TaiChi the cat?” Danny asked.

“I’m Maaike’s brother, Liu. She said you jumped in the window. I’m sorry, I didn’t know you would follow me. That wasn’t part of the plan. Also, I don’t know Roburrito’s,” he said with a sly smile.

Danny believed witches were real, but in this apartment building? Confusion rose in his mind.

“Where’s Paula?” Danny said.

“Right here,” she said, stepping out of Maaike and Liu’s doorway in a linen robe. Her hair was ruffled and her voice sounded scratchy. Maaike stood next to her, rubbing her shoulder, and nodded at Liu.

“They’ll be okay?” Maaike asked.

“Oh, very much so,” he nodded. “They will have protec-

He held an ornament with Asian writing. He placed it purposefully in Danny’s blood-covered hand and clasped his
own over it.

“Now, it’s active, your blood has sealed it. Protection from... the unexpected,” the man nodded again.

Turning over the ornament in his hand, Danny wondered what it was. A magic totem?

“Look, there are a lot of things I wanna know,” Danny began and then, as he blinked, it was just himself and Paula in the hallway. No doors were open anywhere down the length of the hall.

“You were saying?” Paula asked.

Danny shook his head and nodded towards the stairs. They helped each other onward and Danny figured they could talk later about the bizarre afternoon events.

“So, should we adopt another cat?” he asked.

Authors’ Bio:  Rissa Miller, Robin Peace, Melisa Lewis Peterson, and Ali Varden are members of MWA Howard County Critique Group. During 2020, they passed around the story of TaiChi, the gray cat, as a way to inspire each other to keep writing, despite the many challenges of the pandemic and life in general. Together they present this literary collage.
More snow, the old man thought. He rose and shuffled from his chair to the window. I’ll let the young men get rid of it. I got nowhere to go. Indeed, he had nowhere to go since he’d lost his wife.

As he started toward the living room, he heard the doorbell ring. He thought for a moment, then leaned on his four legged cane and headed for the door. Bracing himself for the cold, he unlocked and opened the door, and saw—nothing. He frowned before his gaze dropped to a little girl wearing a blue peacoat and beret, bundled up against the cold. Before the old man could ask what she wanted, she smiled and flounced into the house. He checked the path outside, but only saw her footprints in the snow. The old man turned and stared as he watched the little girl, then he closed the door to keep out the frigid air.

“May I help you, Miss?” he asked.

The little girl turned and smiled at him again, shook her head and spoke.

“Izíhi bemehoné desitenya nenyi.” (“I’m happy to be here.”) She placed her coat, hat and gloves on the sofa as she spoke.

The man frowned. “What did you say? And do your parents know where you are?”


This isn’t going to work, the man thought. She understands me but I can’t understand her. He looked again at the little girl: mocha skin and her hair in tight black curls on her head. He judged her to be around seven years old. “Sweetie,” he began, “We need to get you home to your parents.”

The little girl waved at him, muttering, “Gini iné béti
nenyi.” (“But I am home.”) Her eyes lit up, and she picked up a book on a side table. Turning to the old man, she smiled and handed him the book.

“Oh,” he said. “You want me to read this to you?”

Her wide smile broke out again and she nodded. “Awo ibakiwo.” (“Yes, please.”) She grabbed the old man’s arm and led him to his favorite chair. “Wait a minute,” he said. He placed the book on the side table, stood the cane on its feet, and gripped the armrests. “I have to be careful.” The man sat down slowly, and once seated, the little girl plopped onto his lap, grabbed the book from the side table and flipped through the pages. She came to a page she wanted, looked up at the old man and waited.

The old man examined the page, then flipped the book closed to check the cover. He opened it again, asking, “Thumbelina, huh?” The little girl nodded again. Isn’t that something, he thought. “Okay, then.”

“There once was a woman who wanted so very much to have a tiny little child, but she did not know where to find one. So she went to an old witch, and she said:

‘I have set my heart upon having a tiny little child. Please could you tell me where I can find one?….’”

The book fell to the floor, and the man started awake. Confused, he looked left and right for the little girl, then whipped his body around to see if she was behind him. A rich contralto interrupted him.

“I just want you to know, this is not before your time.”

The man turned and saw his late wife standing above him looking twenty years younger and fitter than she was when she died. He was so surprised, he vaulted out of his chair with a strength he hadn’t felt in years. She offered him her hand, and he took it. And at that moment, he remembered why the little girl’s face was so familiar.

His wife smiled at him again. “I’ve been so lonely waiting
for you.” Then she turned and led her husband toward the light.

* The dialect the little girl speaks in is Amharic, closely related to Aramaic.

F. J. Talley writes primarily in the mystery and science fiction genres. The winner of the 2019 prize for fiction from the Gulf Coast Writers Association for his story Thirteen, a short story By the River was included in the Maryland Writers’ Association’s 30th Anniversary anthology. The Only Way appeared in Pen in Hand in 2020. He is a member of the St. Mary’s/Calvert Chapter.
Satan leaned back in his desk chair and cracked his knuckles. Damn, he needed a vacation! He knew they’d be overrun with admissions for some time to come, what with all the pandemics and that sudden sea-level rise from the big Antarctic melt, not to mention the usual wars and violent takeovers of various governments. (Would these stupid humans never learn?) But it was getting ridiculous; he really did need a break. He passed a scaly hand over his weary eyes and scratched his head between the horns. “I wanna go to Vegas,” he declared.

Vegas was one of his favorite vacation spots—all that ersatz splendor, fake pyramids and such; he loved to watch humans oohing and aahing over tawdry imitations of things. He would take on the form of a really ripped young guy with mesmerizing dark eyes, his favorite human form, and the women (and men) would fall at his feet... aah! Sex, and plenty of it, with all and sundry! Drinking, drugging! Gambling! Cheating at gambling! Instigating violence and mayhem! A leering grin spread across his face. He loved doing all those things that got humanity in trouble on a regular basis and getting off scot-free himself. And when he got tired of all the venality and stupidity, he’d come back and resume his post, refreshed and reinvigorated. Hands behind his head, his mouth curled into a self-satisfied smirk. It was good to be the Devil.

While he was fantasizing about Vegas, a couple of minions hauled in an overweight old guy in scorched-looking golf attire whose hairpiece was askew.

“Well, well, well! If it isn’t the Apprentice-meister himself.” Satan rose from his chair to shake the man’s hand across his desk. “Come on in, we’ve been waiting for you.”
light went on in Satan’s devious brain. “And, hey, have I got a job for you!”

“Wait, what?” the man said, his eyes popping. “Where the hell am I?”

Satan laughed his sonorous, bone-chilling laugh. “You just said it, man—hell!” Satan swirled his cape and flashed his teeth. Turning to his minions, he whispered, “Lightning strike?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thought so.” Satan’s grin widened as he considered his own cleverness. He turned to the new admission.

“So, my friend,” he began, focusing his red-laser gaze on the trembling man. “I’ve got a proposition for you that’s right up your alley. You recently finished four years as CEO of a major world power, right?”

“Y-yes, sir.” The man’s face was deathly pale beneath the remaining traces of orange spray-tan and black smudges from being electrocuted.

“And a fine job you did, if I may say so, bringing them this close to an authoritarian regime.” Satan held up a taloned thumb and forefinger with a tiny space between them. “Authoritarian regimes are one of my favorite things in the universe, as you probably know.” He gave the man a conspiratorial wink. “So you’ll be delighted when I tell you that I’m going on vacation, and I want you to be in charge.”

The man’s jaw dropped. “You mean you want me to manage hell while you’re gone?”

“Sure. Trust me, you’ll love it.” Then Satan gave him The Stare, the look that says, “You WILL do as I say!”

Just then a few more figures materialized. Caligula said, “Seriously? This guy just got here. I haven’t had a turn for eons.”

Nero added, “Yeah, me neither.”

Attila the Hun chimed in: “Last time you said I was next up!”
Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot joined in. “Hey, we were here before this guy, shouldn't we get a turn before he does?”

Satan lost his patience. A deafening thunderclap silenced them all. The man looked like he would pass out from lightning-strike PTSD.

“I AM THE DEVIL, AND WHAT I SAY, GOES! This man will cover in my absence, and I will not hear any more about it!” The disgruntled strongmen dispersed in a flash of foul lightning, leaving the newbie alone with Satan and his minions.

After the man's color returned to something like normal, Satan dismissed his escorts, and it was just the two of them. Satan made a sweeping gesture toward his pristine empty desk. “It’s all yours until I get back.” His smile was less evil, more beguiling, in preparation for his transformation into drop-dead-gorgeous Vegas guy. “I don't need to tell you what to do. It will all come back to you, like riding a bicycle.”

The man, now fully recovered, gave Satan a crafty look as he pondered the possibilities. This could be interesting.

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A few weeks—or eons, whichever—later, Satan returned, all tired out from raising hell in Vegas, but just as refreshed and rejuvenated as he’d hoped. Humans were idiots, but they sure knew how to give one a good time. Good thing he couldn't catch STD's or COVID or any of the more recent plagues; good thing they could never catch him to prosecute his various thefts, murders, etc. So much chaos in so little time—he loved it! It had been harder to leave that seductive male form behind than it usually was. Maybe next time he'd try a female form again; that was always fun...

When he materialized in front of his desk, Satan was appalled at what he saw. The man behind the desk now wore
a suit, his face made up and his hair coiffed once more, a grease spot on his ridiculously long tie, his thumbs flying over a smartphone screen. There was no sign of the bedraggled non-survivor of the golf-course lightning strike. A minion was standing next to him, looking uncomfortable.

“I told you to bring that nasty woman straight to me!” the man bellowed.

“Sorry, sir, but she doesn’t seem to be here.” The minion flinched slightly.

“Dammit! You minions are useless!” The man slammed a sheaf of papers down on Satan's desk, which was strewn with several more documents, all marked with black Sharpie-pen signatures, plus a pile of greasy hamburger wrappers, some French-fry crumbs, and several crumpled Diet Coke cans. And—gold curtains behind the desk? The man had trashed Satan's lair and outfitted it to look like the West Wing of the White House! Satan loved chaos, all right, but NOT at his desk. And the unmitigated gall of this imbecile, making Satan’s office look like a human one! And bawling out his minions to boot!

“What the HELL do you think you’re doing?!” Satan thundered. His mighty voice surrounded the man on all sides. He looked up, eyes white with fear.

“J-just what you asked me to, sir... keeping your seat warm while you were gone. So to speak.” He managed a timid smile.

“GET OUT OF HERE NOW!” Satan’s voice was deafening. The man covered his ears as he morphed back into a disheveled lightning-strike victim once more and whirled off into the lowest circle of hell. All the papers, the cell phone, and the food trash swirled into a black hole and disappeared. Satan dismissed the minion. “As you were. Sorry about that.”

Satan took a deep breath. His brow smoothed, his fists unclenched, and he resumed his seat at the empty desk once
more. Then he signaled his minions to resume bringing in admissions for processing.

“Round up the usual suspects,” he said, with his customary wicked grin.

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DRAMA & ONE ACT PLAYS
When Morning Comes  
By Gandharva raja

(The den is arranged as a multi-purpose room, the furniture in it represents middle class values. A narrow sofa-cum-bed, neatly folded up, is placed along the left wall. The ceiling fan above it is turned on at low speed. In the middle of the far wall is an open door. The Commentator, dressed in a gray cloak with a monk’s hood, stands in the faintly lighted landing behind the door. A framed photo of Tom and his wife, Tammy hangs in the center of the wall on the right. Below it, a pile of books and magazines on a small writing desk. Tom, a middle-aged teacher, is seated at the desk, writing. A faint cone of light falls on the Commentator as the scene opens.)

Commentator: During extended moments of fantasy, Tom feigns greatness. He is a good man in spite of occasional lapses of depravity. He regularly inserts a dollar bill into the March of Dimes Box at the checkout counter at Giant’s. On his way back from school, he gives two quarters to the unshaven homeless man in torn jeans and a shabby coat. He would give a dollar more if he was certain that the precious money would be put to use for other than buying a pint of rum. What more can society demand of Tom?

Tom: (Reading aloud from a book) How to be Attractive to Women...A guide for Middle-aged Men. Let me see. Ha-ha! Splurge on trinkets. Being whimsical catches the woman’s eyes...Okay, I can do that. (Tom turns a page) The sun is glorious, the fickle moon enchanting. Character is respectable; lack of it spell-binding. Women marry respect; they flirt with the frivolous. Poppycock! (Tom slams the book on the desk with annoyance)

Commentator: Dead right, Tom. You want to be more than
respectable.

**Tom:** *(Picks up another book and reads aloud)* How to Raise a Child in Today’s Complex World...A child should be disciplined, admonished when appropriate, not for the sake of control, but for his/her safety. The legality of corporal punishment...

**Commentator:** I warn you, Tom. Stay away from law and lawyers. They benefit mainly the upper class to which they belong. The top one percent. Consider that their advice could be an assault cloaked in compassion. Put that book down. *(Tom reluctantly puts the book back on the desk)* Good!

*(Tom is in the act of picking up another book: Psychology For Our Time)*

**Commentator:** Control yourself, Tom. Trouble brews. You are not prepared for this. I warn you, reading one article does not qualify you as a psychologist. Mind you more families are torn apart by advice than by criticism.

*(A young coquettish woman in her thirty’s walks in, shoving the Commentator aside. She is dressed provocatively)*

**Tom:** *(Jumps up from his chair)* Oh! Tina!

**Tina:** I know I can count on you, Tom. My daughter, she is thirteen now. I am worried about her. She skips classes. Forever on her phone, texting. Her report card has one single alphabet repeated umpteen times! And it is not A, B or C. Dennis is never around. I don’t know what to do. I know I can count on you to give good advice. *(Tina snuggles close to Tom who is standing by the desk.)*
(The Commentator reappears)

**Commentator:** Be careful Tom. It is a trap. Tell her to talk to her daughter’s teacher, her doctor, her next door neighbor, anyone but you.

**Tom:** Maybe you should talk to her doctor.

**Commentator:** Well done.

**Tina:** Her doctor? What does he know? This is an adolescent problem.

**Tom:** Her teacher then. She needs positive reinforcement. Support, love, praise...

**Commentator:** That’s it, Tom.

**Tina:** Praise! Praise for cutting class? That is Dennis’s job, for God’s sake. I teach her to look good and to stay slim. When I was her age, I was slim and pretty.

**Tom:** You are still very pretty. (Hesitates. Looks toward the commentator, repeats) You are still very pretty.

**Commentator:** I warned you, Tom.

**Tina:** I am prettier than Tammy. (Tina turns the framed photo of Tammy and Tom to face the wall.) I am! Say so.

**Tom:** (Looking towards the commentator sheepishly) You are. you are.

(Tina unfolds the sofa-cum-bed. Tina and Tom sit close to each
other on it. Tina puts her arms around Tom and kisses him. Tammy appears at the door. She brushes past the Commentator. Tammy is five years older and a size larger than Tina. Tammy walks deliberately towards Tom and Tina. She stands menacingly in front of the sofa-cum-bed, her hands on her hips.

**Commentator:** (Turns his back to the room) I can’t watch this.

Tom stands up and is about to speak when Tammy kicks him in the shin repeatedly. Tom falls back on the sofa writhing in pain. Tina starts to hit Tom with both fists. Tammy joins in the act. At first, Tom protests, then slumps on to the sofa face down. He is motionless.

**Tina:** Tom, Tom, Tom! (Shaking him vigorously by the collar)

(Tammy watches as Tina caresses Tom’s face and repeatedly kisses him. Tom remains motionless. Tina lies down next to him, hugging him tightly)

**Tammy:** Tom, Tom, Tom! (She shakes him as Tina did, then lies down on the other side of Tom. She too hugs him tightly)

(The room lights are dimmed till the three are visible as a huddled silhouette on the sofa-cum-bed. The cone of light on the Commentator outside the door is faded in as he speaks.)

**Commentator:** I know what you are thinking, Tom. The top one percent gets away with aphrodisiacs. Infidelity is the cannabis of the middle class. But you want more than a high, Tom. You want respect, love, you want it all! For the one percent, respect is inherited. For the middle class it is do or die. You dangle from the tall tower till you either fly or drop down and die!
(The light on the Commentator shuts off abruptly as he finishes the last line. The room is pitch dark for ten seconds. Then flashes of light with changing colors envelops the three figures huddled on the sofa-cum-bed.)

Commentator: And there they will lie, till morning comes to each of them. (Curtain)

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