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SPECIAL EDITION - WEST FLORIDA LITERARY FEDERATION'S LEGEND

IN FOCUS



MEET THE IN FOCUS TEAM



Luke Wallin, Guest Judge

Luke Wallin's writing stays in touch with the Mississippi woods where his dad taught him to hate clear-cutting because the animals need a home, too. He has lived and written songs on a lookout tower in Idaho, in New Orleans, Tuscaloosa, Chattanooga, Iowa City, New York City, Ireland and France, and for the most recent three decades in rural New England. He has M.A. degrees in Philosophy and Regional Planning, and an M.F.A. in Fiction Writing from Iowa. His eight novels for children and young adults explore a family of Alabama poachers, a parrot smuggling ring in Louisiana, ghosts of slaves in Mississippi, and the histories of Creek and Mikisuki Indian tribes in Florida. His book *Conservation Writing* reaches toward conservationists who want to write, and toward writers who want to conserve. These days he writes poems in which animals and trees have speaking parts. Visit at lukewallin.com



Claire Massey

While designing a virtual workshop for Florida State Pen Women on the short forms of prose, Claire Massey conceived the idea of a WFLF-sponsored contest for flash memoir. Thanks to the enthusiasm and support of WFLF members, In Focus became a reality. Since retiring from her decades-long day job, Claire has reunited with the muses of creative writing. Visits from these ladies have inspired over 30 published poems and stories in an array of literary journals. Claire is not unaware that muses can be fickle and their stays short, therefore she is grateful to WFLF for workshops, critique groups and the uplifting company of accomplished authors. Writing eco-poetry and prose is a passion for Claire; she hopes to spur fellow Floridians to protect the few sacred places left to them.



Karen Morris

Karen McAferty Morris writes about nature and social issues. Her poetry has been recognized for its "appeal to the senses, the intellect, and the imagination." Her chapbooks "Elemental" (2018) "Confluence" (2020) and "Significance" (due for publication in 2022) are all national prize winners. She is a fan of Billy Collins, Mary Oliver, and Gary Young.



Diane Skelton

Diane Skelton is a former student publication adviser who dabbles in graphic design. With a background in journalism and advertising, she handled marketing, submissions and communications for the In Focus team. She is currently completing *A Literary Traveler's Guide to the Gulf South: From Bay St. Louis to Apalachicola*. Her favorite outdoor adventures are Mardi Gras parades, watching fireworks, catching fish, and taking pictures.

IN FOCUS: A CONTEST FOR FLASH MEMOIR

- Inaugural WFLF flash contest
- Entries accepted Jan. 1-31, 2022
- Open to members & non-members
- 800 word-limit
- Nationally recognized guest judge
- 45 entries from as far as Tampa, St. Augustine & Mobile

A LOOK INSIDE

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Guests As Gods

By Jess Patton

In the foothills of the Annapurna mountain range, beside the Seti Ghandaki River, we set off on our evening trek to dinner. We meandered through the sleepy hillside village, making our way through cascading layers of rice paddy fields and colorful shanty houses. I heard the rain in high pitch G clef, hitting the metal roofs before I felt it touch my skin. I was sick. I had been in Nepal for three months and my stomach was still unaccustomed to untreated water wells and the fire of the Dalle Khursani peppers served with every plate of Dal-Bhaat (rice-lentil curry).

I had neither appetite nor desire to eat that night but I had learned something about the eastern way of life in the few months I had been away from my country; food is a honor, a kind of offering. Growing up with a single mother I understood this. But poverty in a developing country looked nothing like I had ever seen or experienced. I was 21 and I had never imagined the type of suffering or starvation I saw there.

Bir and Samjana had invited us to dinner at

their house and despite the several hours it would take us to walk there, I was determined to make it. The rain made the hillside muddy and difficult to walk on. The cramps in my stomach had me retching every few minutes and the journey became excruciating. I wanted to stop; I needed to stop. The bright pink salwar kameez I was wearing had become covered in a mix of mud, vomit and muck. It was growing dark and taking longer than we had anticipated. We turned our headlamps on and slowly made our way under the black night sky. I stopped repeatedly as my body expelled whatever unwelcome visitor was still hanging around. I longed for sleep.

When we finally arrived, the Tamangs greeted us warmly, with their palms pressed together in front of their chests and a slight bow, all smiles. My stomach howling, I abandoned all etiquette, running to the



outhouse just steps away.

Their tiny home was modest, a tin roof extended over the front door, held up by poles dug deep into the ground. After everyone had gone inside, I stood under the awning, wet and disgusting, too embarrassed to come in. Using hand gestures and assuredly bowing her body repeatedly, Samjana encouraged me that it was okay to come inside, welcoming me into her home. The small box of a house was immaculate inside, the dirt floors were dry and swept, I could tell they had spent the day preparing for our visit. The rice and dal sat resting atop the clay hearth, the aluminum plates gathered in a pile on the table, waiting for us. The aroma of black tea, already spiced, wafted through the room.

A wave of nausea came over me and I thought I might pass out. Seeing me, Samjana took me by the arm, leading me to the second room in their two-room home. This room held just enough space for a queen-size bed. I could see the sheets had been hand-washed and sun-dried that day. I imagined her pulling them off the line, making a fire and placing the hot coals inside the iron, so she could carefully press the newly cleaned sheets. She gently pulled back the top sheet and gestured for me

to lie down. There was no way I could do that, knowing that she and her husband and their two small children needed to sleep in this same bed later. She didn't have another set of sheets and she would not be able to wash this set again tonight. I moved towards the floor but she wouldn't let me. Still bowing her head slightly to me, holding my arm, she urged me to get into the pristine bed. I had tears in my eyes. After I sat down, she lifted my dangling legs and placed them on the bed, tucking me inside their clean sanctuary. Before falling into a deep slumber, I remember wondering if I would have done the same for a complete stranger, or for anyone.

At the time and for years later, it was one of the kindest acts anyone had ever shown me. The hospitality and generosity of Bir and Samjana to spend the day preparing for our arrival, offering us literally everything they had, when they had so little, taught me the Nepali's generous belief about hosting guests: "Guests are our god." The kindness shown to me that night has reminded me throughout my life of the power of being kind to others. Kindness has become one of the highest values in my life, allowing me to generously welcome others, no matter how messy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jess Patton is an LGBTQ woman who believes all people have value and love is the most powerful force in the world. Jess has been writing poetry since she was five years old. After studying at Western Kentucky University, she traveled overseas for nine years working in 33 different countries. She currently lives in Pensacola, FL.

Judge's Comments “Guests As Gods”

This beautiful writing captures and holds the reader with its confidence, its focus, and its narrative drive.

Its heart is a powerful act of kindness remembered.

The first sentence begins panoramically, with a mountain range, foothills, and a river, then zooms in on the beginning of a journey. “In the foothills of the Annapurna mountain range, beside the Seti Ghandaki River, we set off on our evening trek to dinner.”

Readers are taken to an exotic land, and perhaps to the beginning of a folk tale like journey. We are about to be taken through rain, mud, cold, darkness, illness and exertion. The description is fresh and vivid —“I heard the rain in high pitch G clef, hitting the metal roofs before I felt it touch my skin.”

In fiction or nonfiction, description makes us believe the setting exists, dialogue brings us close to the characters, and narration gives movement and meaning to the whole. The most thrilling and effective stories are composed of a balance between these three elements.

This story moves effortlessly between details of personal suffering on the trek, backstory of the author's life, cultural comparisons between what she has known and the norms of Nepal, and the dramatic tension of what will happen next. The depth of the narrator's suffering, the generosity of her host, the culminating statement “Guests are our god,” and the narrator's final sentence, “Kindness has become one of the highest values in my life, allowing me to generously welcome others, no matter how messy,” gives this story a folk tale like wholeness, and gives the reader a sense of cathartic satisfaction.

Now, this is not a folk tale. In its form it feels somewhat like one, but its characters are unique and realistic in their speech and, in the case of the narrator, her thoughts. The writer has achieved a memoir which contains both idiosyncratic charm and a sense of the classical hero's journey. Both the host who cares for the suffering guest, and the guest who undertakes the adventure and brings the precious gift of its conclusion in kindness back home to the reader, are figures of courage who transcend their circumstances.

Notice how the writer encloses “Guests are our god,” in quotes.

It's not a line of dialogue, but the narrator's summary of Nepalese philosophy. However, placed in the lyrical flow of the final paragraph, the quotes create the impression it was spoken by the host. It crystalizes the entire story, links it back to the title, and seems to make the apparent speaker emerge poignantly as a person as well as a cultural avatar.

There is no subterfuge here, just writerly magic.

Luke Wallin

April 1968

By Carolyn Tokson

It was just getting dusk. The day before had been my brother's birthday and the next day would be my mother's, early April 1968. I figured we were at the end of chance for frost and had planted some seeds. The children were drawing on large sheets of newsprint from the newspaper where my husband was a state editor. I was pulling an apple pie out of the oven when I heard loud knocks on the sliding glass doors.

Two tall Black men were standing there. I could see that one had a rifle or long arm slung over his shoulder. I heard him call out, "Don't be afraid, Ma'am. We're Miss Hattie's boys."

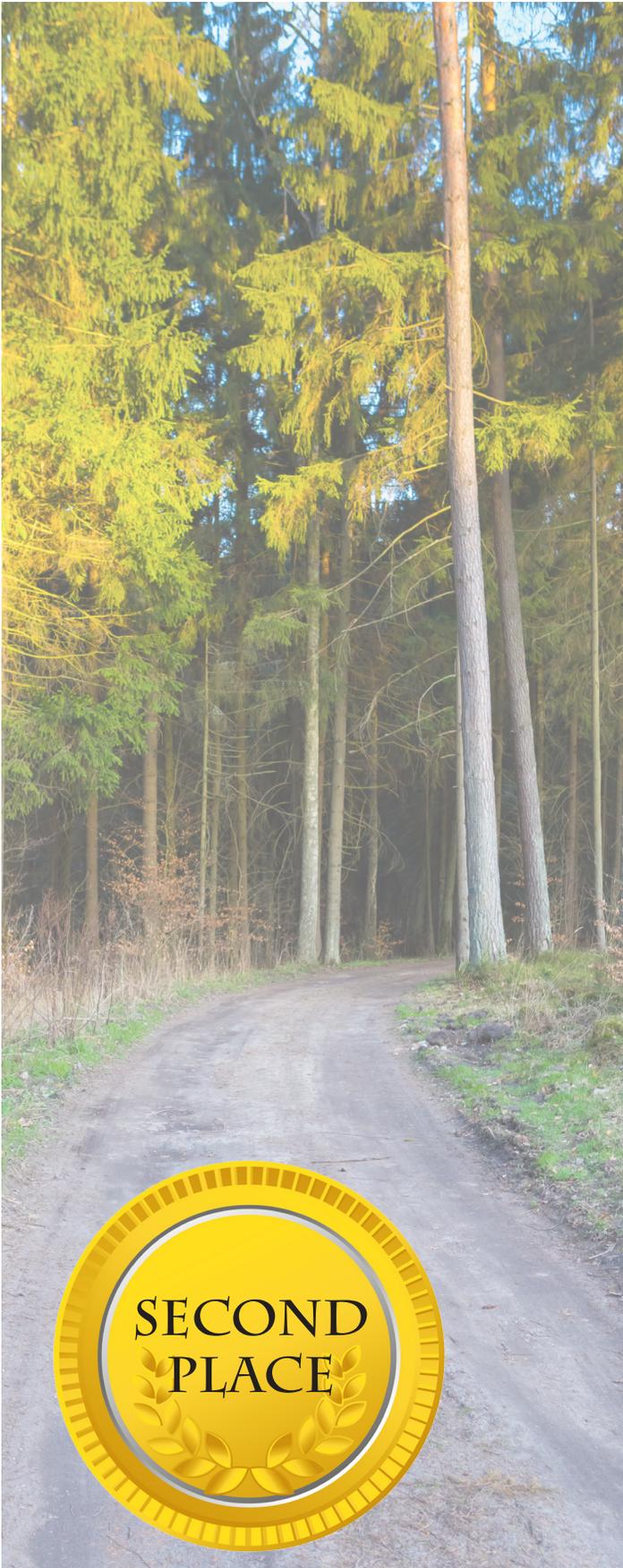
Hattie was the middle-aged Black woman who lived on the adjacent property. I didn't know her well, but I had met her at a funeral. I went to the door and opened it.

I could see the second man had a shotgun. "What's wrong?" I asked.

"Dr. King's been killed. We're afraid there may be crazy people out shootin' in white folks' houses soon. Mama and Rancie said for us to come get you and take you to our house where you'll be safe. Your husband will have heard at the newspaper. You better call him and let him know that you are with us," he said softly.

Rancie took care of my children while I was teaching. She was a wise old woman.

Within minutes, I had called my husband who agreed that I should take the children and



leave. I asked the men to get the little red wagon on the patio and bring it to the door. Quickly, I took my pot of beans and some cornbread I had ready for dinner and put it in the wagon. I told my six-year-old daughter to go get some toy trucks, my son's teddy bear and books for herself. I rolled the newsprint quickly and gathered the crayons. Not wanting to frighten the children, I told them we were going to have dinner with our neighbors and that we needed to go quickly or we would be late. The tallest man said he wanted us out before it got any darker and reminded me to turn off all the lights. With everything in the wagon, we followed Hattie's sons and walked through the long field to her house.

Halfway there with my voice breaking, I asked "Is he really dead?"

"Yes, ma'am," they replied.

As soon as we were in the door, Hattie told one of her sons to go tell Rancie that we were safe. The television news became the focus. We were all in shock, but soon the tears came.

We had the memories of the last summer's riots in the larger cities still fresh in our minds. We knew that there would be violence.

We talked, and ate Hattie's chicken, my beans and talked more. Miss Hattie made pots of hot coffee and served my warm apple pie. The children fell asleep in her bedroom. The sadness blanketed the room. It was as if we were waiting for a storm and listening for the

wind. They knew what it was like to live in South Carolina and to be Black. I knew what it was like to be white and have had a cross burned on my lawn in Georgia.

Our neighborhood had a quiet night. We were somewhat rural with houses like mine on three acres and homes of both black and white families scattered in the fields. My husband came to pick us up after midnight. We listened to the warning not to turn on the lights, to use a flash light. We were like mourners walking in a fog. I remember that that was the first time I said to him that I didn't want to live in this country anymore. I didn't want my children growing up in the south.

Easter came and there were the Holy Week riots in cities all over the U.S. The assassination of the man who preached nonviolence led to great violence. The kindnesses of my neighbors never left me. We were grieving together for the loss of the one man who had the voice that could pull people into a dream, a dream we thought would bring us all forward into a better day.

My family moved to Europe that summer and I found a job. Any doubts I had about our decision were taken away in July as I walked to the hotel in Galway, Ireland and saw the newspaper that reported the assassination of Bobby Kennedy. We didn't come home for a long time.

I still miss Martin, Bobby, and John.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carolyn Joyce Tokson is a retired learning facilitator who taught 38 years. She has written poetry since childhood and has been published in an anthology, magazines and in the *Emerald Coast Review*. She is the editor and writer for Jazz Pensacola's monthly newsletter. In what she laughingly calls her spare time, she studies French and German and sings French chansons. Her latest project is a pollinator-friendly garden for bees and butterflies.

from Luke Wallin

Judge's Comments "April 1968"

This memoir takes us inside a racially mixed neighborhood in the deep South, on the day of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination. The story is told by a white woman — the young wife of a newspaper editor in South Carolina.

"The children were drawing on large sheets of newspaper from the newspaper where my husband was a state editor. I was pulling an apple pie out of the oven when I heard loud knocks on the sliding glass doors."

"Two tall Black men were standing there. I could see that one had a rifle or long arm long firearm slung over his shoulder. I heard him call out, 'Don't be afraid, Ma'am. We're Miss Hattie's boys.'"

Domestic tranquility is disrupted by crisis. Dr. King has been murdered, and armed Black neighbors of the narrator have come to rescue her family from those who may be shooting into white folks' houses, soon.

The story unfolds as one of fear, kindness, rescue, and solidarity. That warm apple pie will be eaten by Black and white neighbors together, as they wait for news, or violence, to break out.

The story is told somewhat in the manner of a newspaper report, with low key statements adding and implying large meanings.

The title, "April 1968," could suggest anything. It quickly takes on world-historical significance.

A drama of fear holds the reader, but notice an unusual second story emerging through the patient, reporter-like beats of the telling.

The storyteller's husband is a newspaper editor. That was a perilous job in the 1960s South if one tried to stand up to racism. Few had the courage to do it, and it would put one's family at risk.

We learn that this family has had a cross burned in their yard back in Georgia, have moved to South Carolina, still doing newspaper work, and are now living in a mixed neighborhood.

The writer's husband comes to pick up his family after midnight, and they return home without turning on any lights.

"We were like mourners walking in a fog. I remember that that was the first time I said to him that I didn't want to live in this country anymore. I didn't want my children growing up in the south."

This is astonishing. The fact that he would even work as a newsman in that place and time, and the way he and his wife are committed to standing up for truthful reporting despite the risks to their children, is rare. The husband is clearly brave, but what about this wife, calmly bringing her

warm beans and pie, and her children's toys, into an armed camp, and telling this story years later in a steady, observant voice?

Then she takes an even more surprising stand. She is done with this country and wants to move abroad. The writer turns back to the tragedy:

"Easter came and there were the Holy Week riots in cities all over the U.S. The assassination of the man who preached nonviolence led to great violence. The kindnesses of my neighbors never left me."

Juxtaposing "Holy Week" with "riots," and "preached nonviolence" with "great violence" returns the reader to the sweep of that history. The writer is "not making this story about herself," we might say. Her voice conveys a kind of concluding coda about the country, and honors her neighbors whose kindness "never left me."

We are fully back in the original story of tragedy, drama, rescue, and kindness. But then we get to see what happened with this family.

"My family moved to Europe that summer and I found a job. Any doubts I had about our decision were taken away in July as I walked to the hotel in Galway, Ireland and saw the newspaper that reported the assassination of Bobby Kennedy. We didn't come home for a long time."

She actually got her family to move to Ireland. She maintains a calm, reportorial tone, which is also elegiac. She reminds us, subliminally perhaps, of the presence of newspapers in our lives, as she notes reading in one that RFK has been shot.

"We didn't come home for a long time," would have been a fine ending for this memoir, maintaining historical perspective. But she adds "I still miss Martin, Bobby, and John."

This expression of emotion, offered briefly, plainly, but loaded with explosive new facts—the murder of JFK, RFK, and "Martin,"—as conjoined tragedies which have become a sort of single personal memory for so many, shifts the reader once more back to the world stage, while "I miss" sounds the personal engagement of that night, sharing apple pie in the dark.

How do you tell an unusual personal story, in a cool, understated voice, showing respect for the larger historical stage and for one's brave at-risk neighbors, while also filling in just enough about your family's past and future to cause your readers to examine their own choices, past and present?

This is not easy!



Loose Curls

By Lori Zavada

“This message requires immediate attention.”

It looked official, but it wasn't. I deleted it along with other junk emails and read the valid messages, but the message that “required my attention” tugged at me. Two weeks earlier my hypnotist said I was ready to start dating again. The “required” email was from a dating website. It had to be a sign. I'm an apprehensive participant in most things, but after a few minutes, I retrieved the email from my trash bin and registered on the site.

Scrolling past the bootie-call boys, anti-pet guys, sports fanatics, and corporate suits, one guy caught my eye. An easy, natural smile, loosely curled hair, sunglasses – he stood before a forest of green trees. Leaning over, forearms resting on a wooden bridge railing, his head was turned about 90 degrees. He was smiling directly at me. A shiver wiggled up my spine.

Naturally, I Googled him. I combed

through his Facebook and Linked In profiles, then I “liked” his dating site profile and logged off. The next day his smile kept running through my head. I wondered what he was like in-person. When I got home, I had a message. The back of my neck grew hot, but it wasn't him. It was a cross-country cyclist who wanted to meet for coffee at a bookstore. I was disappointed, but I accepted.

While scurrying to the bookstore, my inner voice said, “I wish it was Loose Curls instead of Cross-Country.” I wanted him to see my “like,” look at my profile picture, think I was pretty, and notice how our interests matched. I wanted him to message me first.

At the bookstore, I blew on a latte for at least 30 minutes before I realized that cross-country was standing me up! I held my head extra high walking to my car, pushing back tears. I was hurt, then angry. Loose Curls

would never do that to me.

I got home and logged onto the site. “Hey, time got away from me and I forgot about our meeting. I was out taking a bike ride.” I couldn’t hit the delete button hard enough. “Take that, you asshole!”

A few hours later I returned to my keyboard, breathed in deeply and typed a message to Loose Curls.

“Hello. I like your profile. Looks like we have some things in common. How do you like this site so far?”

Really? “How do you like this site so far? It was too late. I had hit the send button.

Oh well, that’s the end of that. Time for peanut M&Ms and a chick flick. I fell onto the sofa for a rom-com marathon with my dogs. All the while I wondered what if he scrolled right past me, uninterested? Or was he nervous too? But the next morning, I had a message.

“Good morning! (Sorry, I get up early.) Yes, it looks like we have some things in common. Just wondering, do you enjoy the outdoors?”

I paced the floor. He sounded like a nice guy, upbeat, friendly. His virtual voice was positive, relaxed and thoughtful. Moved in some spiritual way, I dove in and tapped out another message.

“Yes, I go kayaking often, and I walk my dogs every day. What do you like to do outside?”

The dialog continued for seven days when he finally sent a message, “Would it be OK if I call you?”

I felt afraid and mixed up like Meg Ryan in *You’ve Got Mail* when Tom Hanks wanted to meet in-person. At least this was only a phone call. I didn’t want to get hurt, but he could be the last good guy on the planet. I took another deep breath and let the virtual dating forces take over. We agreed on a 7 p.m. phone call when my dogs would be settled in for the evening.

My hands were trembling when my phone rang. I shushed the dogs and tried to sound relaxed. “Hello.”

A balloon inflated in the middle of my chest. My heart pounded against the pressure, and I felt lightheaded and tingly. “Hello, how are you? Are your dogs settled in?”

I melted at his deep voice that gently vibrated through the phone. Leonard Cohen meets Sam Elliott. He uttered nine words, and I fell in love.

Perhaps we were two old souls meant to be united, because conversation came easy. We laughed about quirky things we both like: pulp in our orange juice, apple butter on toast, DIY projects, getting up early, Thai music. Maybe it was divine intervention arranged by my hypnotist!

Six months later I married Loose Curls. That was 11 years ago, and even now, his smile sets fire to a million stars when he looks at me.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In addition to writing as a personal creative outlet, Lori Zavada is a professional writer for a nonprofit human services organization. She is an active member of West Florida Literary Federation (WFLF), Word Weavers poetry group, and a member of the National League of American Pen Women. Lori has been featured in the *2021 Nobody’s Home* online anthology and in the 2017 and 2021 *Emerald Coast Review* editions. Lori’s chapbook *First Flight*, published in April 2021, is available on Amazon. She is editor of *The Legend*, a newsletter published for members of the West Florida Literary Federation. A graduate from the University of West Florida, Lori is content to call the Gulf Coast home where she lives a quiet life with her husband and her pets – always reading and of course, always writing. Visit her at lorizavada.com

from Luke Wallin

Judge's Comments "Loose Curls"

What fun to read! The opening paragraph makes one wonder, is she kidding? It contains this line: "Two weeks earlier my hypnotist had said I was ready to start dating again."

Wait! Hypnotist or therapist? Hypno-Therapist? Is there such a thing?

She retrieves a trashed email:

The "required" email was from a dating website. It had to be a sign. Is she kidding? Then she launches the second paragraph with wonderful, dead-on descriptions: "Scrolling past the bootie-call boys, anti-pet guys, sports fanatics, and corporate suits, one guy caught my eye. An easy, natural smile, loosely curled hair, sunglasses –"

Here the humor is directed toward those who deserve it, one feels, and there's no need to wonder whether she's pulling the reader's leg. Looking at the attractive guy she begins thinking of him as "Loose Curls": A shiver wiggled up my spine.

Naturally, I Googled him. I combed through his Facebook and Linked In profiles, then I "liked" his dating site profile and logged off."

Okay! We're hooked. We're on her side. We want to know what's going to happen. Someone else on the site contacts her. She's disappointed but accepts a coffee date. Then he stands her up, and later wants to reschedule. Was this his strategy to screen for a compliant person? If so he's out of luck. She hits delete saying "Take that, you asshole!"

Now we're even more invested in this rom-com.

She takes the initiative and sends Loose Curls a message.

"Hello. I like your profile. Looks like we have some things in common. How do you like this site so far?"

"Really? "How do you like this site so far? It was too late. I had hit the send button. Oh well, that's the end of that. Time for peanut M&Ms and a chick flick. I fell onto the sofa for a rom com marathon with my dogs."

This self-doubting humor is charming and maybe irresistible.

The next day he responds and they get to know each other through texting for seven days.

Then he asks whether he can call and she tells the reader she felt nervous like Meg Ryan did in *You've Got Mail*.

At the appointed hour, he calls.

"Hello, how are you? Are your dogs settled in?"

"I melted at his deep voice that gently vibrated through the phone. Leonard Cohen meets Sam Elliott. He uttered nine words, and I fell in love."

They discover they have many things in common, and the writer says to her readers,

"Maybe it was divine intervention arranged by my hypnotist!"

I don't know about you, dear reader, but I found this hilarious. And yet—I wondered, is she 70% kidding? 90%? 99%?

There are only two more lines in the story:

"Six months later I married Loose Curls. That was 11 years ago, and even now, his smile sets fire to a million stars when he looks at me."

Is this wonderful ending too good to be true?

I hope it's true. This isn't a Comedy Contest, it's Flash Memoir one. I've been swept away.



Encountering America

by Mladen Rudman

There must have been sounds and smells during my first exposure to America five decades ago but their memory is gone. My eyeballs outperformed my ears and nose. They did a better job burning the United States into my brain. I was poorly equipped as a seven-year-old emigrant to comprehend the stark differences between what was then Yugoslavia and today remains America. Back then, in 1972, one word was sufficient for me to understand contrasts between the two countries: Bigness.

My introduction to Bigness, initially anyway, was paced and absorbable. It went from the smaller big of an obsolete airliner operated by JAT to the bigger big of a state-of-the-art Lufthansa 707 for the transatlantic flight to New York City. Nothing of NYC was processed by my bewildered self. We landed at one of its airports to catch a connector to our new home, Chicago. It was at O'Hare International that unhinged Bigness mounted an assault that would stay acute for weeks and eventually settle into a chronic state I've labeled Kaiju Catharsis. The airport terminal with windows spanning ceiling to floor. Dozens of airplanes, including ones bigger than the 707 that was my ride from Old World to New World, parked at gates or queuing for takeoff. The many arriv-

al and departure thru-lanes channeled more vehicles in a few minutes than I saw in a day or two in what is now Croatia. Exiting O'Hare, it was a wonder my uncle could find his way among dozens of ramps leading to tiered, multi-lane highways heading in all directions. Trucks, moving plenty fast, were everywhere. They dwarfed what must have been the biggest cars ever. On the horizon was Chicago, generating skyscrapers that did as their description promised. The hyper-pyramid with two long antennas was the mega city's crowning jewel. How many stories was the John Hancock tower anyway?

More overpasses. More cars and trucks. Tall billboards aligned at precise intervals paralleling the tollways served as waypoints. Big buses. The El. People concentrated in a big, dense span of houses and apartment complexes stretching from horizon to horizon. There were big stores with big parking lots on every block. No way to acclimate instantly, in a few hours, or even days to the sight of a place bursting with everything. It'd take months. The Bigness was an unfathomable overwhelming. No choice but to respond to it with stunned incredulity. My eyes bounced from spectacle to spectacle like a pinball gets pushed around by

pop bumpers. America was an alien land to a youngster armed with neither the language of his adopted home nor the experience of life in the Big City.

Our apartment building had voluminous elevators. Our apartment was big by the standards of a child coming from a country that dispensed better living quarters as reward for allegiance to its government. We had more room than needed to move about or be comfortable. Some of that space, in somewhat short order, would be occupied by a technologic marvel. By itself, the floor-standing color television set was a sight. Switched on, the images it beamed astonished me. Of those moving pictures, none ranked higher than the kaiju – Japanese for “giant monster” – known as Godzilla. There it unfolded, a first grade-aged Croatian boy in the big U.S.A watching a foreign movie about a big monster on a big television.

Five decades after my encounter with America, the Bigness adheres, vestigial as it might be. My library of kaiju movies is large. The Cloverfield quadruped. Kong. Gamera. It includes the film that first mesmerized me long ago during my Bigness inculcation. If “Son of Godzilla” is about a young animal struggling to hold its own in a big world, I’m the son of Bigness doing the same.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mladen Rudman lives in Fort Walton Beach, Florida. He is a former newspaper reporter and defense industry technical writer.

from Luke Wallin

Judge’s Comments: “Encountering America”

This memoir gives readers the rare chance to see through the eyes of a seven year old child leaving his home and encountering landscapes of BIGNESS everywhere he travels.

The language is inventive. “My eyeballs outperformed my ears and nose.”

“Back then, in 1972, one word was sufficient for me to understand contrasts between the two countries: Bigness.”

“Nothing of NYC was processed by my bewildered self.”

“It was at O’Hare International that unhinged Bigness mounted an assault that would stay acute for weeks and eventually settle into a chronic state I’ve labeled Kaiju Catharsis.”

The language is fresh and the project feels bold. Who would take such an experience from so long ago and patiently stay with it, exploring, opening it up, respecting its power, trusting it as a worthy subject, and trusting his own unconscious writerly brain to open this flower for his readers?

This memoir is a gift.



The Cliff and the Gun *By Ethan McGuire*

The wind scurried across the rock-strewn hollow with chilly fingers. An orange globe of a sun fell slowly behind the dry-leaved oaks that crowded the hills surrounding the merrily bubbling Spencer Creek. A drip-drop-drip of water drops fell gracefully from atop a clay-rock cliff and, one by one, assaulted a rock ledge scattered with red clay coral fossils halfway down the cliff's face. My brothers and I called this place, simply, The Cliff, and every time I visited The Cliff, awe overcame my thoughts at its simple yet amazing beauty.

However, I did not feel much awe this evening. On this particular evening, as I stood peering over the edge of The Cliff, only one thought jabbed my mind over and over again with a sharp edge. Where had I left Dad's shotgun?

This certain shotgun for which I searched now did not represent much money. It was only a plain, wooden-stocked, cheaply blued, sin-

gle-shot .410, an inexpensive firearm. Yet, as Dad always said, a dollar is a dollar, and this gun had served him well. I knew if I did not find that little shotgun, I would have some explaining to do, and some money to pay. As a fourteen-year-old boy in fear of his father, I might as well have lost a fortune. I was always a guilty feeling little kid anyway. Panic began to seize my mind, and I paced back and forth across the stretch of woods in which I had left the gun.

I had placed it, oddly absent-mindedly for me, on the ground sloping down to The Cliff. I definitely should have known better. That slope consisted mostly of three things: thick, grayish brush; hundreds of lichen-covered, black-and-gray boulders and other stones of varying sizes; and thousands of dying, fallen leaves. A dense, camouflaging carpet, all in all. Somehow, I just could not find that gun. On my dejected way back to the faint old logging road leading home, I passed a couple black caves, misplaced among

the boulders. I could only sneer at their mocking eyes, for they held no interest to me this night.

I still do not know what happened to that .410. It frustrates me to even remember. Dad did not kill me as I thought he would, though. Actually, he just laughed, and told me to look the next day. This eased my mind, of course, but not my guilt. I did look again, too, and thoroughly, but—to my great surprise and consternation—no luck. Afterwards, he only made me pay the one-hundred dollars the .410 was worth, besides the price of the occasional ribbing he gave me over the whole ordeal. I guess he thought the shame of losing a firearm punishment enough for me. He was right.

It was certainly punishment enough. Often when I leave something of any value somewhere, planning to come back for it, I think of that lost .410 shotgun. I have not lost another thing like that ever since. Not for long anyway.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ethan McGuire works by day as a healthcare IT professional and by night as a writer, whose poetry, fiction, and essays have appeared in *Better than Starbucks*, *Dark Sire*, *Emerald Coast Review*, *Foundling House*, and *The Poetry Pea*, among others. Ethan grew up in the Missouri Ozarks, but he and his wife currently live in the Florida Panhandle near the Gulf of Mexico. Ethan is a proud member of the West Florida Literary Federation.



from Luke Wallin

Judge's Comments: "The Cliff and the Gun"

"Where had I left Dad's shotgun?"

This is a powerful question.

"As a fourteen-year-old boy in fear of his father, I might as well have lost a fortune."

How could you have done such a thing? the reader asks.

"I had placed it, oddly absent-mindedly for me, on the ground sloping down to The Cliff. I definitely should have known better. That slope consisted mostly of three things: thick, grayish brush; hundreds of lichen-covered, black-and-gray boulders and other stones of varying sizes; and thousands of dying, fallen leaves. A dense, camouflaging carpet, all in all."

Two questions almost have the reader shouting at this point:

WAS IT LOADED?

DID YOU TRY A METAL DETECTOR?

But these questions don't arise in the story. Should they? That depends! This is a memoir, so what matters most is what mattered to the writer. Leaving out information can sometimes engage the reader more emotionally.

And a third question may trouble a reader in 2022:

DID YOU REPORT THIS TO THE POLICE?

"I still do not know what happened to that .410. It frustrates me to even remember. Dad did not kill me as I thought he would, though."

"Often when I leave something of any value somewhere, planning to come back for it, I think of that lost .410 shotgun. I have not lost another thing like that ever since. Not for long anyway."

We are left with mysteries, and a gentle ending. This writer does a lot in a tight space.

I will be worrying about that shotgun for the rest of my life.



What I Learned from the Kelp Beds

By Andrea Walker

A thick forest grows from the floor of the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Catalina Island. Tall ribbon-like blades wave gently in the silent current. Shafts of golden sunlight angle through the stalks and light the way for shimmering fish.

We had flown to Los Angeles on a working trip for my husband Bob, and extended our time for a brief vacation. When he completed his job obligations, we visited the La Brea Tar Pits and spent a day at the Getty Museum. We booked a day cruise to Catalina Island from Long Beach the day before we had to fly home. The hour-long trip over the deep blue waters was filled with anticipation and well rewarded. Foamy surfaces lightened from the dark depths to aqua as the ship made her way. As the mountains came into view in the distance, I confused them with clouds. Eventually, I realized I was seeing Avalon, the town named for the mystical land of King Arthur. As the ship broke through the mists, the Pacific calm gave way to a bustling little city.

We had four hours to explore before embarking for the return ride to Long Beach and our hotel. We took a minibus tour up narrow, dusty mountain roads and saw colorful houses built three feet apart. We ate fish tacos for the first time ever. Bob swam in the 75-degree water, and I waded up to my knees. Our last excursion was the

famous glass bottom boat to the kelp beds.

After everyone boarded and the captain made his introductory remarks, he put soft music over the speakers. A short ride and we were there. I looked down on the most peaceful scene I can ever remember seeing. Tears came into my eyes. Bob put his arm around me. We were all mesmerized by the beauty. A few passengers whispered or spoke in hushed tones, but I couldn't break the sacred mood. Time slowed down. I wanted to stay there forever bathed in that golden water, caressed by those swaying grasses, exchanging curious stares with the fish. I imagined them swimming confidently up to me, unafraid. We all felt as if nothing would harm us in this place of calm and beauty.

Too soon, the captain broke our reverie to announce he would start the engines momentarily to begin our ride back to the dock. Breathing deeply, I fixed the images firmly into my memory. The boat moved slowly away, and when the kelp disappeared from sight, we joined the other passengers on the deck.

When someone occasionally asks, "If you could go back to any place you ever visited, where would you go?" My answer is Catalina Island. Seeing the kelp beds was a spiritual experience for me. My memory of the scene represents timelessness, eternal mystery and peace.

Today I read the California kelp beds are

disappearing due to warmer ocean temperatures and the overpopulation of sea urchins which feed on kelp. Scientists are studying ways to save the kelp beds because they grow through photosynthesis and take in more carbon dioxide than land forests. That underwater CO2 is less likely to be disturbed than in land forests or escape back into the atmosphere. Other ecological ideas include kelp farms and the harvesting of edible sea urchins.

The connection between spirituality and science is sacred and real. Like Avalon enshrouded in mist, the fine line is invisible until we have faith enough to break through. Other worlds exist—in our environment and in our myths. Sometimes, we are lucky enough to find them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Retired English teacher Andrea Walker has published four books and is a co-editor of the ezine *Panoply*. Reading and writing are as necessary as breathing. Her favorite place away from home is the beach where she loves to swim, contemplate, and take long walks. Fascinated with all aspects of nature and all forms of art, she dabbles in poetry and photography but is an expert at neither. She is a member of WFLF and Florida Writers Association.

from Luke Wallin

Judge's Comments on "What I Learned from the Kelp Beds"

The opening passage presents the subject:

"A thick forest grows from the floor of the Pacific Ocean off the coast of Catalina Island. Tall ribbon-like blades wave gently in the silent current. Shafts of golden sunlight angle through the stalks and light the way for shimmering fish."

This is beautifully described. The reader may think, "okay, these must be the Kelp Beds. What did you learn from them?"

The next 11 lines calmly take us through several days of vacation activities for the writer and her husband. We might be thinking, "that's nice."

Then: "Our last excursion was the famous glass bottom boat to the kelp beds."

"A short ride and we were there. I looked down on the most peaceful scene I can ever remember seeing. Tears came into my eyes. Bob put his arm around me. We were all mesmerized by the beauty. A few passengers whispered or spoke in hushed tones, but I couldn't break the sacred mood. Time slowed down. I wanted to stay there forever bathed in that golden water, caressed by those swaying grasses, exchanging curious stares with the fish."

For me, this passage felt so sincere, that I seemed to share the writer's sense of the sacred, breaking through the humdrum world.

There was no extended description of the kelp beds, just a few words about what they meant to her, the writer.

A few lines later: "My memory of the scene represents timelessness, eternal mystery and peace."

When I reread this short memoir, and isolate the brief passages above, I'm surprised by the power that seeing the kelp beds had for me. I saw them more in the opening of the

piece than in the final one. Still—for some reason it's as if I were there and whispered with her, yes, they are sacred.

Maybe this works so well for me because I often do feel this way about something in nature appearing suddenly, in the midst of ordinary life, for example seeing a flock of wild turkeys out the window of my car.

However this writer has conveyed the transition from the ordinary to the extraordinary, it works for me. And her next move is another strong one:

"Today I read that the California kelp beds are disappearing due to warmer ocean temperatures and the overpopulation of sea urchins which feed on kelp."

After a paragraph discussing ecological research and conservation proposals, the writer concludes with this passage:

"The connection between spirituality and science is sacred and real. Like Avalon enshrouded in mist, the fine line is invisible until we have faith enough to break through. Other worlds exist—in our environment and in our myths. Sometimes, we are lucky enough to find them."

Showing transitions between common activities and awareness of the sacred, then to ecological research, and finally to a clear affirmation of the connection between spirituality and science, all in the space of a short memoir, hit me with a stronger punch than I would have expected.

An effect like this can't be explained in terms of technique or close reading of the sentences that make up the story. It's the writer's heart that somehow comes through. Her directness, her trust that this modest account of a moment on vacation might convey to others the strange rapture she felt, is a gentle force greater than the sum of its parts.