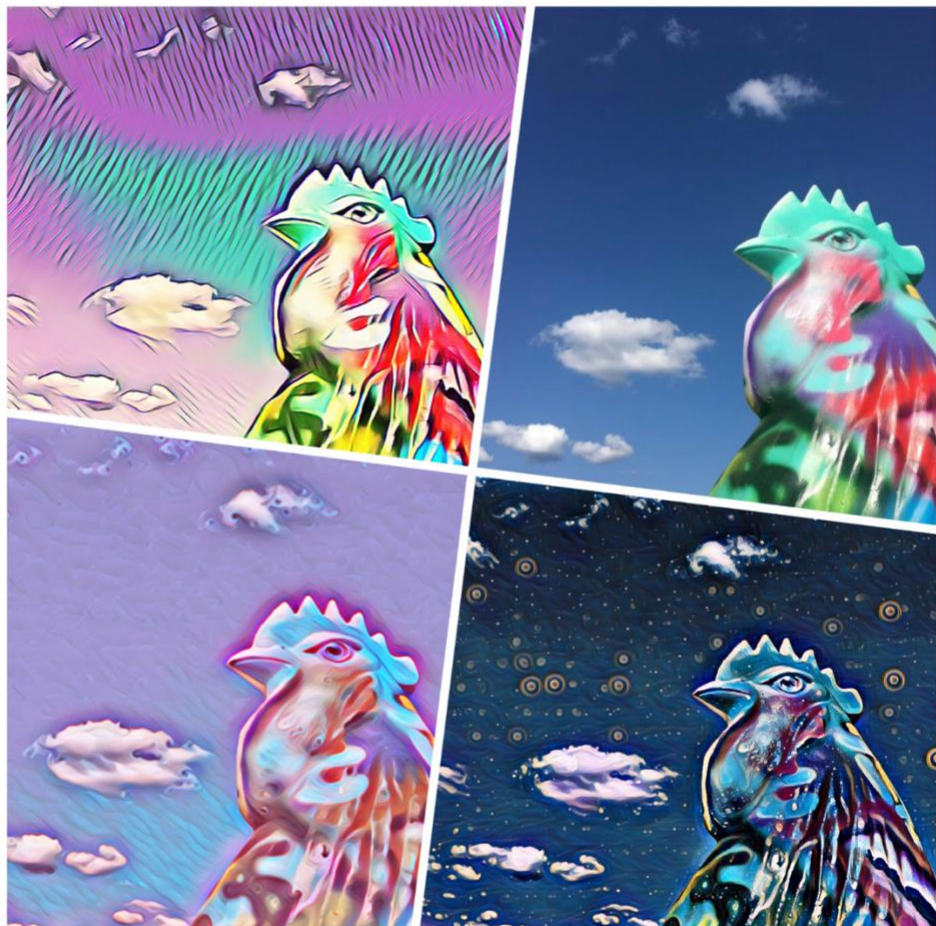


EAGLE'S NEST



Volume VII

Presented by the Eastern Arts Society

FOREWORD

I only have faint memories of my kindergarten days; of long hours of finger-painting-fun at the 5th avenue public school, located right outside my backdoor. All that fun and relaxation changed with my entrance into Catholic school in first grade. The transition was like going from a warm, sunny day, into an ice-cold militia world filled with scary nuns. I wondered to myself, what the heck were my parents thinking, placing me in this gulag? In reality, my parents did not know any better because they were staunch Catholics, never missing Sunday mass, both working full-time, supporting eight children on meager salaries. Catholic school was part of the culture of the time - you were going, no questions asked; at least through eighth grade that was.

I was raised in rural Long Island, in a town known as Bay Shore, on the Great South Bay. My early days were filled with playing basketball till late in the evening, to the light of the white, summer moon. The 60's and 70's was a relaxed time for kids, care-free, and playing games outside 90% of the time. My summers were typically spent hanging out at the beach, catching crabs along the docks, playing basketball, and hitchhiking with a surf board under my arm, headed to Fire Island.

Hitchhiking was a common thing for kids to do back then. We were too young to drive, and if we could not find



someone to take us to the beach, we just thumbed with surfboard in hand and away we went to spend a day without a

care in the world. Hitchhiking back from the beach was always more problematic than getting to the beach, but somehow, we always found a way over those long metal bridges and back to the mainland. Most people did not feel threatened by young boys with long, bleached-blond hair and innocent smiles needing a ride home after a day of fun.

Technology at the time was sparse, limited and rudimentary. I believe the first time our household had a color television set was when I was around 10-years-old. No cell phones, no computers, no video recordings, no social media, no text messaging.. say what? We transcended from the rotary dial phone to the push button phone and thought that was the coolest thing on Earth! The emergence of the cassette tape player was a game changer, and a hot item on every kids Christmas list. There are days that I wish some of that technology did not exist. We were never tied to any electronic devices, and as much as I like them and use them, and they are now in the fabric of our society, I wonder what life would be without them today? More relaxed, less stress, more time to have real live conversations with people? Hmm.. stop dreaming Tom, wake up!

There are certain events from my childhood that are easy to recall, while others are just a faint recollection. I was really too young to remember the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, but I do remember when Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, and the unrest the country felt. I could not grasp the gravity of the civil rights movement or the conflicts and protests associated with the Vietnam war. The news and press were vastly different at that time as well. News did not flow 24/7, you had the six o'clock news and the local newspaper....that was it folks! Two of my older brothers were in the military during the Vietnam war, but neither saw any action and I was lucky that they both came home safe. The gas crisis in 1973 brings back vivid memories. Gas stations would

warn customers of their supply status by flying a green flag if they had gas, yellow if they were rationing and red if they were out. It's both sad and funny how some people complain about the smallest service disruption in their lives today, like the world is coming to an abrupt end....oh no I have no Internet... God help us! 😊

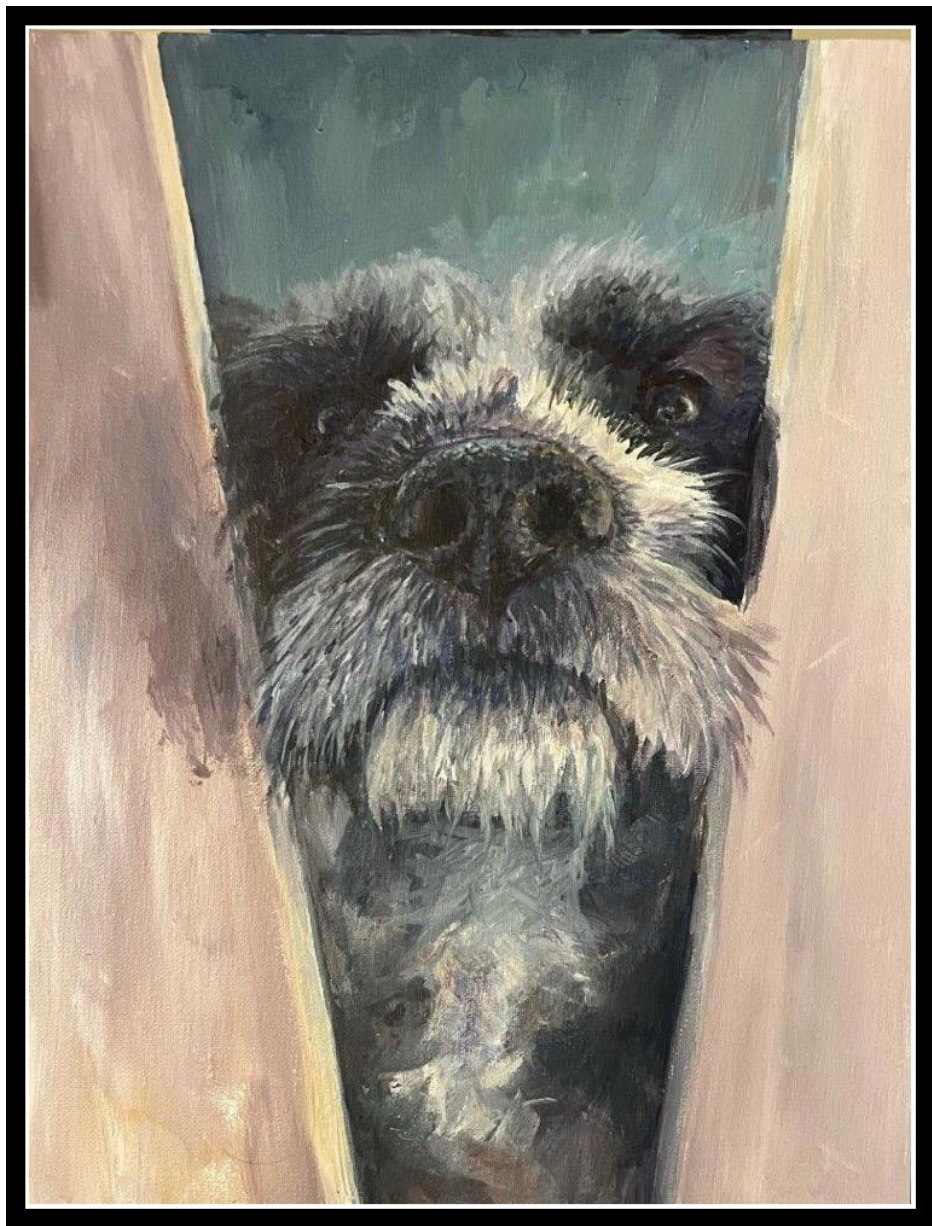
I will continue this forward in the next volume and share perspectives of growing up in a different time, and different place, in the hope I make you laugh, smile, or if I bore you to death... just make you throw up. 😊

Cheers,

Tom Striplin



Photo by Peter L. Barstow



Painting by Donna Davy

Forest Walks

I can feel the dirt in my bones
I can feel the iron in my veins
I need the forest to wash over me
like the treetops when it rains

I need the dirt beneath my feet
to feel Earth's heart beat
I need the feeling of moss on my skin
and to open up my lungs, and let life in

I miss the mystery of a rustle in the distance
the smell of the forest
of life's essence

The sight of fallen siblings returning to the soil
still teeming with life
nothing is left to spoil

I miss feeling connected to the spirit of life its self
It's the most whole I've ever felt

- Jennifer Sunryder



Pandorous Sphinx. Photo by Joe McGee

Watch the Wind

by Mary-Faith Tantillo

I heard my mama say that she took me out for a walk, but I did nothing. She said that the walk was typical, my brother pooped and peed, but I did nothing. She is wrong. I did lots of things. I smelled the scent of the dew, I licked the dew from the grass, I spoke with the leaves as they breezed by. I listened to the grass as it waved and most important, I watched the wind. I also studied the air and the enemy and determined what I need to do to protect my family.

The wind is so fascinating as it glides and slides and whispers. You must listen and watch carefully for it is elusive and quick. It is also very quiet so you must be still and silent yourself if you want to observe it and hear it. As it flies by it makes such wonderful images. I am one with it and I am fascinated by it. When my mama says I did nothing, she is wrong, I watch the wind...and there is more. I have heard my mama say to my grandma that she, my mama, is the wind. I love that because to me she is the wind that I most love. Just as I watch and hear the wind's heartbeat, I also heard my mama's heartbeat; I heard every breath she took. I smelled her scent as we walked so, I can walk that path again, if someone else walks me. I smell her scent just as I smell the wind because she is the wind. She doesn't know this but when Grandma walks me, I pull and yank on my leash so I can walk the path my mama takes to where she parks her car. I think, maybe, just maybe Grandma understands. Maybe.

During the winter you see the images made by him whom you call Jack Frost. He is the winter wind. You don't see him but the images he makes surely can be seen. In the spring the wind whips up and brings wonderful showers. In the



summer the winds can be part of squalls. I don't like them much. They make me shake and shiver. Sometimes my mama has to give me Xanax to calm me down. In the fall the winds can bring what they call hurricanes. There was one called Sandy that was not too bad here, but I heard my grandma talking to my great aunts and uncles in a far away land called New York. They talked about the

winds taking out the power and the cable, knocking off roofs, and flinging a 165-foot tanker a mile away. I don't know what a tanker is or what a mile is, but I could tell by my grandma's voice that none of it was good. Oh my, I would not like that! There probably would not have been enough Xanax in the land, in the country, in the world, in the universe!!! to calm me down in that kind of wind!!! I'm not proud of this, but it is what it is.

I also study the air and protect the lands. The dogs next door are vicious and even if there weren't a fence I would still

defend the land. My brother is the chorus behind me; the drumbeat that keeps me savage. Those dogs next door are nothing! Nothing compared to my thirteen pounds of Corgi: the Doberman that winces, the poodles that try to bark in response, mean nothing as I protect my land. They are confined, they are confused, and they are confounded. I am the Cgis...they are nothing....

Finally, I do poop and pee, but it is after many adventures and many experiences. Some of which is passive by watching the wind; some of which is active by saving the homeland. I am CJ. My mama thinks that stands for Claudia Jean, her favorite TV character but really in dog language it stands for Car Jowl which means mighty and awesome savage who watches and speaks with the wind and protects the land. If anyone doubts my word just ask the privileged ones about my bite! It is to be feared. The teeth are crooked, and the bite is off, but it is still to be feared. I am the Cgis, she who protects and defends the land...and watches with the wind.

A Day in the Park

On a hot and sunny
Summer's day, Mom and I
start our walk with the sun
beaming down on us.

We walk to the only shaded spot, leaves and moss
cover the old bridge and walkway
as sunlight peeks through the breaks in the trees.
Potential walking sticks hidden in the grass and leaves.
The old green bridge peeling as we walk
to the other side.

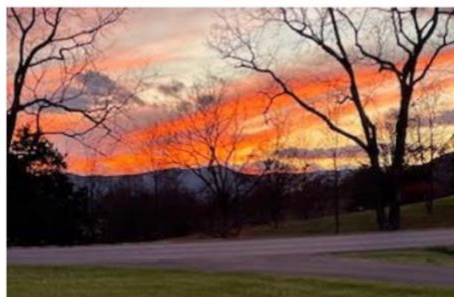
Mom walks with her music playing. Hair tied
up in a ponytail, bouncing as she steps.
Every now and then
she changes the song.

At the bridge I walk slower.
The curve of the trees makes an arch.
Sun peeks through
fading as it shines on ground. Mom
calls for me to catch up.

On a hot and sunny
Summer's day, Mom and I
start our walk with the sun
beaming down on us.

- *Laura Combs*

A VIEW FROM MY FRONT YARD



Photos by Trish Halterman

Artistic rendering by Joe McGee

One Small Fart for Mankind

by Williams Wayne

I've never seen a block of Velveeta that I didn't want to devour. Something magical happens when you toss in a can of Rotel: presto – you have the best queso dip on Earth. I have eaten a one-pound serving of Velveeta queso dip and a full bag of tortilla chips countless times, all in one sitting, and I always have the same satiated feeling afterward – the world is as it should be, and all is happy in the world. But one cold night in January 1997, after eating my favorite concoction, I felt a sensation I hadn't experienced since I was a toddler, an experience that I still ruminate on after almost twenty-five years.

I was twenty-six and training for my first marathon. I had always liked long-distance running, so one day, I decided to dip my toe into the murky waters of marathon training. Training for a marathon involves increasing your weekly mileage over several months, including one long run a week of at least 10 – 20 miles.

I had always struggled with my weight as a teenager – I would yo-yo between being husky and thin, but training for a marathon kept my weight in check, and I felt good. Soon, my favorite defense mechanism, rationalization, reared its ugly head, and I convinced myself that I deserved a reward – Velveeta and Rotel. How much harm could one sinful indulgence cause? You're in the best shape of your life! Processed cheese and carbohydrates be damned!

In 1979, Tom Wolfe unleashed the New Journalism juggernaut, *The Right Stuff*, on the world and provided a

glimpse into the world of swirling machismo that pushed men of a certain ilk to strap themselves into what was the equivalent of flying “crotch rockets” and conquer both the space and sound barrier. But, for me, perhaps the most crucial thing Tom Wolfe unleashed in *The Right Stuff* was the term “screwing the pooch.” In the book, Wolfe used the phrase to describe a mistake by Gus Grissom, the second American in space. Decades later, screwing the pooch has entered the American lexicon and is familiar to anyone who has tried to achieve something, whether big or small, and failed miserably. I have screwed the pooch more times than I would like to admit, on both a small and grand scale. Once, as a teenager, when Michael Dukakis was running for president in 1988, I complained about Kitty Dukakis’s first name and frankly commented that anyone who named their child “Kitty” was an absolute moron. Unfortunately, I proclaimed this to my mom’s boyfriend and future stepfather, whose mother “Kitty” had recently passed away from lung cancer. I still babble incoherently to myself when that memory pops into my head, confirming to others that I am, in fact, frequently unstable and downright idiotic.

In 1878, Thomas Edison struggled in his research lab, Menlo Park, to create the world’s first “successful” light bulb. The project’s major stumbling block was finding the right material for the bulb’s filament. Edison publicly failed on thousands of attempts, experimenting with cardboard, grass, hemp, and palmetto leaves to create the perfect filament, all of them failing to last long enough for practical use. By 1879, Edison had solved the problem and patented a carbon bamboo

filament, which could last for over a thousand hours. When presenting his discovery to reporters, one of them asked Edison how he felt about failing so many times before finding the right solution. Edison responded, “I have not failed 10,000 times – I’ve successfully found 10,000 ways that the light bulb will not work.” This quote is as ubiquitous as red MAGA hats in West Virginia because it underlies one of America’s self-identifying ideals, grit, of never giving up and succeeding despite failing countless times. But Edison’s ultimate success reminds me of something else entirely, a mantra we should all chant on a daily basis, especially when considering the world in which we live in today.

After devouring all of the queso dip and chips, a wave of guilt crashed through my prefrontal cortex, causing me to pull on some shorts, lace up my running shoes, and run out the door for a ten-mile run through the frigid night and snow-covered streets.

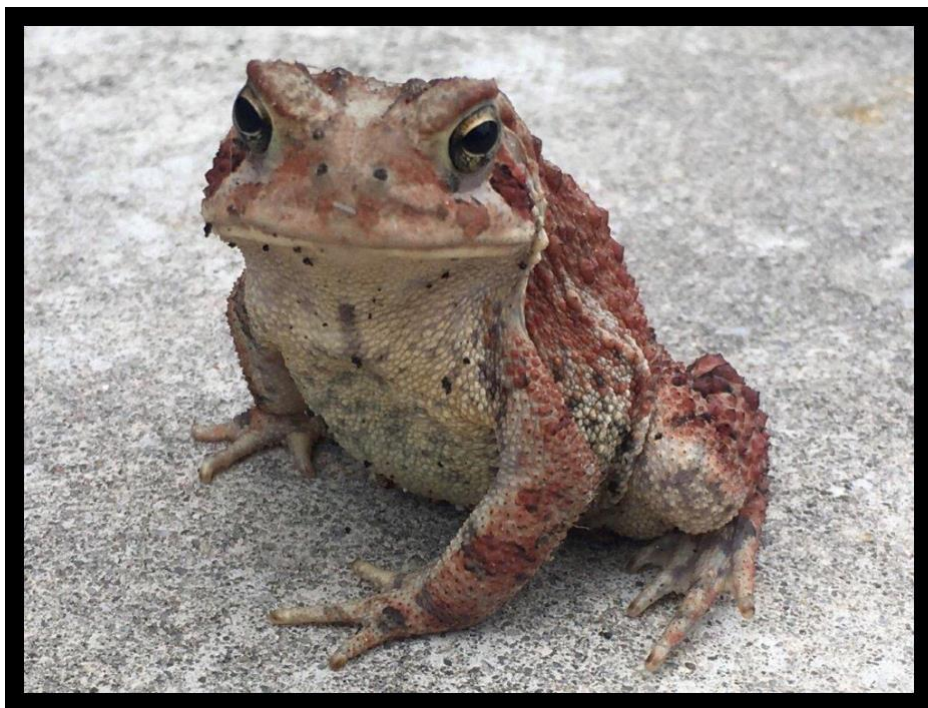
“You’ll be warm in ten minutes,” I rationalized to myself as I chugged through downtown and huffed and puffed my way to the college’s arboretum. Five miles out from my home, I crested a long and steep hill next to the arboretum’s entrance; my breath hung in the crisp air like acrid smoke from a large Victorian paper mill. At that exact moment, another type of air wished to express itself from within my body, one associated with another orifice. As a reward for reaching the top and the halfway point of my run, I let out what I thought was going to be a small little “toot.” Unfortunately, my body disagreed with my opinion, and I literally did what so many figuratively do – I crapped my pants. It wasn’t a pretty sight. Wracked with embarrassment, I stumbled into the woods, and behind a large

white oak tree, I dropped trough and used some snow to clean myself up, which caused my lower extremities to go numb. The aftereffects of this resulted in the worst case of diaper rash I ever experienced, and I waddled myself home in the cold night, wholly embarrassed and thinking about the meaning of life.

After ruminating on this event for almost twenty-five years, I can sincerely laugh about it now and have told this story to most of my friends and family. And I don't couch this cautionary tale with some humorous moral about the dangers of consuming massive amounts of processed cheese before going on a long run, although that point is not without its merits for those as ignorant as I once was.

No, it's really about not taking yourself too seriously and gaining a healthy perspective on life. Whether we screw the pooch, shit the bed, or crap our pants, we need to look at ourselves realistically and accept our personal peccadilloes. We need not blame others for our mistakes; should I have sued Kraft Foods for gross negligence and for not providing a disclaimer about running after a massive consumption of one of its flagship products? No. As we saw, Edison couched his thousands of failures into the framework of his success and felt no guilt over doing so. Perhaps we should all do the same because even if these screwing-the-pooch-moments don't propel us to achieve our greatest dreams, they are there to remind us that we are human and that we all can laugh at ourselves without condemnation. In a world where most incessantly post only their "best moments" on Facebook or Instagram, projecting their seemingly perfect lives to millions across the globe, it is now more important than ever to highlight our embarrassments and failures, even if it's just for others to have a little laugh at our expense. As John Riggins, Washington's NFL Hall of Fame running back, once mumbled

to Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor before completely passing out drunk on the ballroom floor of a star-studded congressional banquet, "Loosen up, Sandy baby." With the exception of my sometimes unpredictable digestive system, we should all loosen up a little bit and embrace our imperfections and less-than-perfect life experiences. So, each morning, before I rise, I repeat the wise mantra of a hammered John Riggins and let the words echo through the surrounding rooms and collected junk stored in my mom's basement: "Loosen up, Sandy baby. You only live once."



Fowler's Toad. Photo by Peter L. Barstow

Old Song and Dance

We've been through this song and dance a million times
The words aren't so bad, at least they rhyme
I know every step and swing by heart
It's fun at the start
But I hate when we part

My Skin misses your warmth
The sweetness of your breath
That lovely pitter patter
When I'm pressed to your chest

Your upturned lips
The laugh under your breath
The eyes that adore me
When I know I'm a mess

When it comes to that inevitable end
Ill keep spinning and stepping
Till I meet you again

- Jennifer Sunryder



Photo by Joe McGee

Inside the ADD Mind

by Brian Bucklew

I once read that what we see as colors don't really exist. Color is just the flashing of electrons as they move around atoms. I don't remember where I read it, but I am certain I did. My right ear has suffered quite a bit of hearing loss, yet I wonder why I hear everyone so well. Even in other rooms. Does this shirt smell funny? Does it smell like the animal family I have at home? I feel like a fraud, like my work ethic is severely lacking and all eyes notice. Is it raining? It is warm. Will it be warm tomorrow? Allergies are making me crazy. My eye hurts from rubbing so hard. Is this course of words beginning to sound too James Joyce-like? At least there's more punctuation than "Penelope." Will the world end soon? Or worse yet, will it continue? Are there too many questions being asked? Isn't life itself one big question? I've heard the answer is 42, and I even read why it is 42. Or at least I think I read something about that. Now things are too quiet. All I hear is the constant 'eeeeeeeeeee' from my one good ear. Should I be so open about myself? I don't like to hide anything, for several reasons. Secrets can be used against me, it feels that way. Stay the course, pal. Will I die when I go to sleep at night? Why does it always feel like I will? Good thing I have trazadone. That reminds me, I need to call in my Cymbalta prescription. Have you ever felt a sudden sharp pain in your chest or head and wonder 'is this it?' I wish my mind would stop. The never-ending thoughts and constant analysis of anything and everything is exhausting. Medication helps. Do people have the same foresight? Can they see the things coming that I do? Am I just crazy? Perhaps I worry too much. Or not enough. Either

way, I have not achieved balance. Why do I retain so much useless information yet forget the name of Tom Cruise when I see him in a movie? Why do I forget so much! Will that ever end? I remember knocking over a Christmas tree as a child. Or did I? I am hungry. Maybe. Definitely thirsty. My head has a slight ache. I need a nap. Does this qualify as stream-of-consciousness? I need to Google stream-of-consciousness. Kinda seems like it is. I read a story once about someone making contact with the “other side.” He asked what was waiting after death. The reply: reality. I can’t find that story anywhere. Did I read it? Are we only meat machines being driven by a brain? Am I merely only an extension of my own consciousness? Maybe these words are closer to Woolf. “Mrs. Dalloway,” maybe? Nah. Just my own thing. Ever notice it’s too cold to get in the shower? Ever notice it’s too warm to get out of the shower? Ever go into the restroom after someone makes it smell bad? Doesn’t the warm seat feel good though? I could have been a much better dad. I think we all feel that way. That I could have been a better dad. Do I worry about my failure’s way too much? Does that push me to do better? Not really. It should be an intrinsic motivator, but no. Are you beginning to understand how the ADD mind works yet? This is mild. It gets worse. Had to get up and walk. Does everyone else struggle to stay awake daily? I read somewhere that not everyone has a voice to their inner monologue. I do. I wish the bastard would shut up. Sometimes I wonder if it’s schizophrenia. No, I know I don’t. There are no auditory hallucinations, just random thoughts that pop in intrusively. Did I finish my assigned work for the day? The week? The month? Crap, there’s something I forgot about a month ago. I am forgetting something, I know it. Did I say too much? Do they think I am insane? Was an alcoholic Europe a catalyst for colonization? Don’t forget to pay

the bills tomorrow. I forgot some last month, so don't do that again. I read somewhere that the brain deletes old memories in fragments and just fills in the blank spots with whatever makes sense. The same article read that as we age, many memories are completely fabricated. I read that once. At least I think I did.



Photos by Joe McGee

Roses

Born to raise flowers
with the farmer's kids,
turning sweet, spectacular roses
into Valentine's favorite prey.
Only for them to wilt
and be thrown away after.

- *Laura Combs*

The Scapegoat

It has cost my family and heart
as I stand here
sacrificed to society.
Insist it was me
if the truth doesn't matter.
judge me
after taking everything into
consideration.

- *Laura Combs*

The Softer Side

by Mary-Faith Tantillo

I'm an arrogant city kid with a tough exterior who leads with my attitude. Yes, it is true! It's even okay. Except that the arrogance tries to hide things from me that if the truth be told, the rest of the world sees! Even that is okay. I have been heard to say that I am not a nature lover. I have also been known to say that I am not an animal lover. Lies both of them, big fat fibs! I have also been known to say that I don't have a softer side. Another lie, a whopper! A lie so bold evidence to the contrary lies in the blankets I cross stitch for every baby that is born in the family. Most of those blankets have had nature's animals as the theme: little chickadees, a sloth, Mickey, Minnie, Daisy, Donald, Pooh Bear, Pluto, monkeys, turtles, frogs, giraffes, as well as many others. Evidence of the lie lies in my feelings towards my animals as well.

Baby Blankets

I do love puzzles that I will admit. I love to watch the blankets come to life: like a puzzle. Since my daughter Marianne has moved to New York she demands seeing the progress. She is a task master, indeed. So, I send her images of the blankets as they progress.



I have those images and am so glad that I do. They are moments of my life, a testimony to the softer side I deny. They speak to a love of nature that I deny. The animals I construct with each stitch, each thread, absorb and amaze me as the cross of each stitch brings life to what was once a coverlet devoid of image or character. Granted by the time I get to the last thread I hate the bloody things! Then I stand back. This is what I behold:

My Animals

Through the years I have had many animals, dogs, cats, rabbits, hamsters, fish, guppies and a snail named Uncle Bob. I drew the line with snakes. The dogs and cats I have truly loved. Like children you can't say you have a favorite because each of them gives you something different. Sprite, though, gave something entirely different! Perhaps because he was a child of my older years not born when I had the youth that mothers so desperately need for their active (and in his case, ADD) babies. Perhaps because he came after I had training as a special educator and knew a little more about handling problematic behaviors in our children, perhaps because he channeled Bigsby, perhaps.

Bigsby was a cat we had who died of cancer. He was young when he died, perhaps seven. And his death came very quickly, a mere six weeks after we realized he was very sick. Although he had tumors for a few years we were told they would not metastasize internally. After he died, I declared, "No more animals". My heart had been ripped out so horrifically at



the suddenness of his death. I knew I still had 4 animals and I couldn't take one more on. Bigsby had been a great cat. He would perform tricks for my son Tom, who was very attached to the cat and devastated by his death as well; Tom, who held Bigsby in his arms, as I couldn't do, as he died or was perhaps, already dead. Marianne, my elder daughter shared with me the burden of going to see Katie, my youngest, who was away at school and telling her the news. Katie had brought Bigsby to us. He was a barn cat at a kennel where she had worked. She too, naturally, was devastated by Bigsby's death. But she heard my words and she understood: no more animals.

Until one fateful day

It was a warm summer's day, a beautiful day kissed by the gods of nature. Katie and her best friend were out shopping when they saw a Sprite soda box left in the parking lot. To their surprise the box moved! When they explored, they discovered that there was a tiny black cat within the box. A tiny cat left in the parking lot in a Sprite soda box awaiting a horrific fate. (At least this is their story and they have stuck to it for all these years!) What could they do but bring the cat home? Thomas saw the cat in Katie's arms as she tentatively, with a look that only Katie can get when she has embarked on a possibly problematic adventure, like the time she drove home in an albeit light snowstorm, brought the cat into the house. His heart melted. I watched it happen. He took that tiny ball of ebony and held that kitten gently, so gently in a way he had not held an animal since he had held Bigsby as he died. What could I do? Actually, the question if we could keep him was never asked. Some questions don't need to be asked.

Now let's talk about Sprite.

I have never used the word brat on any of my children, two legged or four; however, Sprite may have brought me

closest to using that word. My training as a special educator kicked in and I was able with love and logic to parent him in a way that was necessary for this child with special needs. So often I would hear my children laugh when they would hear me say, "Now, Sprite, that was a very bad choice!" after something crashed or boomed as he jumped from coffee table to piano to credenza seeking the greatest height possible. Like a snow boarder or a trapeze artist he would fly though the room, whatever room he was in, seeking the thinner air, the higher altitude. And there he would perch...for seconds. Suddenly though he would spy another adventure, another poor choice. Off he would go.

We learned to put things away, to close doors, to make the house safe for him. We did, we made great adjustments for this kitten with special needs. We also fell deeply in love. And when that kitten rested, when he curled up besides you on a chair, all three, four, five pounds of him, and snuggled into the tightest squeeze possible and placed his tiny paw on your leg...you knew that you had on your lap one of nature's greatest gifts. You knew love. You had to admit to a softer side, at least, and at last, I did.

Now I can admit to my softer side. I can reverence and enjoy nature's gifts, a chickadee, a puppy's yap, a kitten's soft mew. All these are gifts, gifts that have made me look inside myself and realize that love comes in colors, and textures, and sounds. Gifts the city kid denied and decried until she fell in love with babies, blankets, and kittens.



Photo by Joe McGee

Pastel canvas sky
whispers to the crashing waves –
Be here. Be now. Be.

- JM

Shaded

How did it come to be
that I should be so lucky?
Shaded by your thorny leaves
and your blossoms ripe for plucking?

What did I do to earn
the breeze, sending me your way?
In your shadow, how I yearn
while watching your leaves sway.

Though I'm not as vibrant -
in fact, many see me as a pest.
If anything, I'm latent,
but I swear I'm trying my best.

As a lesser being,
I am honored to be
able to share the same soil
and with you, experience the same breeze.

Despite all this, I'm glad to be
the dandelion, shaded by your thorny leaves.
And though time may wither me
I'll come back to you, on the breeze.

- *Jennifer Sunryder*

Words

by Joe McGee

The organ fills this hallowed place with haunting melodies. Its beauty is lost amidst the sea of anguish. I carry my words toward the pulpit like a herald of the Gods, words of power meant to convey his spirit to the afterlife.

Ave Maria
Gratia Plena

Cold sun bathes the bare branches of Winter birch. A grey wash sky threatens snow, promises melancholy days ahead. Nothing stirs outside, save the skeletal hands clawing the clouds from the ends of anorexic branches. Through the window, that world seems so far away. But here, in this room, with the fever consuming him, Winter is coming. Storm clouds rage inside his broken body and Winter's chill touch may be only hours away. A handful of leaves have not surrendered.

The steps loom like the banks of the River Styx. For years, I feared these polished, wooden fingers, ascending to a nightmare place; a world awash in pain and turmoil.

The ferryman does not hold out his hand. He does not request payment. The fee has already been paid, in blood. His blood. Jack's blood.

Maria, gratia plena
Maria, gratia plena

The last leaves are falling from the trees. Nothing lasts forever, but this hardly seems fair. I hold him on my lap, soothing back

his sweaty hair. Every breath is raspy, a death rattle. My little brother, unbridled innocence, is an hourglass in my arms. Every breath is a grain of sand and the bottom globe is almost full. I read to him, choking on every word. This will be the last time I ever read these stories to him. The last time my words will make him smile.

Incense fosters ritual thought, “*it honors his body.*” Braziers send tendrils of heavy smoke to choke me. The vaulted ceilings are laced with thick beams of oak that crisscross the heavens like a wooden web. Jesus looms over me like a spider, waiting to snare me in his ministry of sacrifice. But, it’s hard to sacrifice when you have nothing else to give...when you’ve bled out...when you are already an empty husk.

Ave, ave dominus
Dominus tecum

We are together, the family, in this room. The sun is leaving us, beginning to drop below the bones of the forest. “It won’t be long now,” says his nurse. She wipes away her tears and squeezes his hand. We drift like ghosts, through the room, unable to speak. Sunken eyes shimmer with frozen tears.

Benedicta tu in mulieribus
Et benedictus

I seize the pulpit with icy fingers. The congregation is a sea of upturned, tear-choked faces. Every seat is full. Every pew is occupied. It is a mass of somber bodies, packing the

aisles and crowded against the walls. I stand before them, ready to eulogize a hero whom I could not save.

They are a blur. They are a mass of still beating hearts who cannot know our anguish - the anguish of my parents, who have had their child replaced with a small, flower decorated coffin. Eight years is not enough.

I draw in the spiced air. *A sign of our community prayer of faith.* I push away my sorrow, my guilt, my emptiness. I have my words; my body and blood...

His blood, coughed up in purple-red chunks. I hold his cool body and blot away the scarlet reality. It is stark against his porcelain skin. Tissues stained like paper roses. He is so tired, so scared. But the morphine helps. I help, the little I can. They need me, he needs me, in his final hour.

I stand before them, this morning congregation. This mourning congregation. My eyes dance between them and the words I have so carefully crafted. These words, that open the torrents of tissues and tears and fill their hearts with love for our Jack. My words, transferred from the pages on the pulpit to the heavens, carried on the wings of incense.

Incense signifies our trust rising to God

I share with them, with him, these words. Words that had the power to bring joy to a broken little boy. Words that hold the power to warm the heart in the coldest Winter. My words, borne of anguish. Borne of sorrow. Borne of pain. My words, empowered with the strength of Jack's spirit. I offer them in sacrifice, losing a part of me but gaining a part of him. It is all I have left before he is laid to rest and I am left here, wrapped in the warmth of my words.



Photos by Joe McGee

FROM THE EDITOR

Creativity, in all of its forms – writing, painting, music, sculpting, photography, filmmaking, etc, etc – is as much a part of us as breathing is. Humans create, and we do so in order to make sense of the world, to discover ourselves, to heal, inspire, connect, share, and express. There's a reason the arts are part of "the humanities". To create is to be human. We've been telling stories from the earliest days of cave wall paintings and campfire tales.

As children, we draw with crayons and markers, without the fear of comparing our tree drawing to someone else's. Children don't put the crayons down because they're "not an artist". They sing without worrying about carrying a tune. They dance without feeling foolish. They make costumes and dress up. They play games. They express and create and share.

And then, at some point, when we hit adulthood, the curtain drops. Suddenly, it's embarrassing to sing, unless you *can* carry a tune. We feel funny about dancing in public. We only draw in private, or if we're "skilled". Creativity suddenly comes with pressure...self-imposed pressure.

And in some cases, it's considered frivolous. Perhaps unimportant. Undervalued. Unappreciated.

But art *is* important. It *is* valued. And here, within the pages of our humble literary journal, it *is* appreciated.

I hope you will appreciate the work that these contributors have been brave enough to share with you, and I hope that you will be inspired to contribute something of your own, to the next *Eagle's Nest*, to our community, and maybe even to the world.

Art is a beacon of light and hope in a world filled with entirely too much pain and darkness. I hope you allow your own light of creativity to help brighten our world.

- Joe McGee

The Eagle's Nest is an Eastern Arts Society publication made possible by generous donations and funding through the Eastern Foundation. If you'd like to help us continue to create and publish this journal, as well as develop more creative and artistic endeavors, please consider donating. You may contact megan.webb@easternwv.edu or robert.burns@easternwv.edu to find out how you can help.

For more information on submitting to The Eagle's Nest, please contact Joe McGee, at joe.mcgee@easternwv.edu.

A very special thank you to all of this volume's contributors, especially Dr. Thomas Striplin, for his foreword, and Peter L. Barstow, for his cover photograph (top right).

All rights remain the property of their creators.

*Volume VII
June, 2022*