

*Venture Out
Creative Writing Club
Annual Readings*



Saturday, March 7, 2026

Table of Contents

A Message from Our Club President	3
The Silver Mercedes – Rene Moquin.....	4
Try a Little Kindness – Helen Wilkie	5
Discovery – Serene Flanagan	6
Balance Beamers – Suzanne Schultz	8
A Change in My Life – Gerald “Gabby” Hayes	9
You Bought the First Round – Linda Wallace	10
Embracing My Imperfect Past – Patty Wagner	12
You Are a Chosen One – Paulette Thompson	13
Our Greatest Accomplishment: TEAMWORK – John Nordstrom.....	14
Encounters with Wild Horses – Diana Tokarchuk	16
My Granddaughter Payton – Greta Landry	18
Letter to Senator – Willard “Woody” Michels	20
Ollie Goes to Court – Dennis Meyer	22
Note to Self – Peter Keithly	24
Totally Hollow – Renee Radloff	25
It Is Impossible Only If You Believe It Is – Charlie Johnson	26

A Message from Our Club President

Welcome, and thank you for attending our once-a-year opportunity to share a few of our favorite pieces with our friends and fellow Venture Out residents.

If you like what you hear today and are thinking, “That sounds fun,” or “I would like to do that,” we encourage you to join our club next season. We meet every Tuesday from 1:00 to 3:00 pm in the Auxiliary Ballroom.

Each week, we suggest a thought-provoking topic – or prompt – members may use for inspiration when writing pieces for the following week. Many of the readings you will hear today are based on these weekly prompts. However, not all members write to the prompts, and that’s OK. We are free to write on any topic of our choosing. We are creative after all.

Thank you again for supporting us today!

Patty Wagner – President
Creative Writing Club

The Silver Mercedes – Rene Moquin

During my participation in international volunteer projects around the world, I sometimes identified other needs. Such was the case during my teaching term in Katom, Poland. Nearby was a small and sparsely-equipped community library. Books and supplies were practically nonexistent.

After returning to the States, I solicited a number of friends and groups I knew had the resources to support the community library in Katom.

One Sunday I was invited to speak at a large, singles group at the downtown Fort Worth Methodist Church, the fifth largest Methodist church in the US. After my presentation, a young woman named Ann approached me. Ann indicated that she was in the middle of a divorce and wanted to donate to my Polish charity rather than allowing her soon to-be ex-husband securing the funds.

I acknowledge my interest in her donation. Nervously she indicated that she would call me later as to when and where we could reconvene. Her reaching out to me left some concerns. Was this potential donation for real? Was this part of some drug deal? Would the police become involved? What if her husband were to find out and feel the need to intervene? I had never met this woman and I did not know how to assess her story. Anyway, I headed back to my house, about a twenty-minute ride from the church.

Shortly after lunch I received a call from Ann indicating she was ready to meet with me. Since my office was downtown, I suggested we could meet after work. Abruptly she interrupted me and indicated in no uncertain terms that we would have to meet in the next 30 minutes or the deal was off. Catching my breath, I said okay. We would meet in her silver Mercedes in front of the church. One of my twins was sitting near the telephone. I think she saw the worried expression on my face. Somewhat jokingly I told her that if I was not back in a reasonable time to call the police. I have raised millions of dollars for a variety of projects but never like this.

Off I went to the church. Upon arriving I saw her silver Mercedes. I pulled up slowly behind her car while trying to determine if it was her in the car. Why am I doing this? This is crazy. I approached and she motioned to me to enter her car. Immediately I noticed a bag between us. She gave me the bag and asked that I never share this matter with anyone. I told her that this was all cash and asked whether she wanted a receipt. Otherwise, I could spend the donation any way I wanted. She assured me that she trusted me. Without any more words she told me that she had to leave immediately. Off she was in her silver Mercedes. Children in Katom, Poland would never understand how I was able to buy books and supplies for their library from a lady with the Silver Mercedes.

Try a Little Kindness – Helen Wilkie

I quickly finish cleaning up my kitchen before I head out the door. It is a beautiful Monday morning and a great day to be alive. A brisk walk and I will soon reach my destination at the nearby church that I attend and volunteer at once a week. Between ten a.m. and noon, we hand out thirty boxes of food as well as serving coffee and doughnuts. I really like what I am doing so much I have my day off from my regular job, scheduled on Mondays.

Several people come and go. Some even join the church. Today a man came in. He didn't really look like he wanted to be here. His body language clearly suggests this. Before he fled, I go over and ask him if I could help him. Nearly in tears, he explains that he just lost his job, has wife and two young children to feed and didn't know which way to turn. By this time, all the boxes of food are gone. I ask him if he would leave his phone number and I will see what I can do. He does. All afternoon my thoughts keep niggling me. Before supper, I head to a nearby Safeway store where many "2 for One" advertised specials are displayed in the front window. Should I or shouldn't I? I hesitate but not too long. I begin to fill my cart with meat, milk and cheese, eggs and butter. I get healthy cereal for the children, even some staples not advertised in the sale flyer and a couple bottles of pop and cookies as a treat for the little ones.

As soon as I arrive home, I phone Darlene, my best friend, for a ride, (I don't drive) to deliver the food. Quickly, she obliges, throwing in a cash donation that I am not aware she did. Not only did the family thank us but called the church to thank our pastor. Meanwhile, the lady who is in charge of our food program gets very upset when the pastor tells her about this, she flew into me like a bat out hell. She was so angry. She said that I had no business overstepping her food program.

I shrug my shoulders and walk away. I guess it might be safe to say that we never did see eye to eye after that. No matter, I know that when helping others, we will feel good inside and find real happiness. God will always bless us. Go ahead and try a little kindness today and see.

Discovery – Serene Flanagan

“Oh the places you’ll go,”
my folks said to me,
when I was little,
as young as three.

The nursery rhymes of Humpty Dumpty,
and riding a horse to Banbury Cross,
and Mary’s little lamb, and the Crooked Man’s style—
were wonders to imagine—far away, many miles.

But when Wynken, Blynken and Nod
sailed off on their wooden shoe,
the caverns in my mind got lit,
and Finnish switched to English bit by bit.
It was like bridging over a moat,
when new words escaped from my throat.

Discovering Curious George
and Aladdin’s lamp and magic carpets
opened fantastic new wonders,
as Daddy read bedtime stories.
They lay the foundation for discovery...
of new people, new places and my imagination...
leading to my first library card
and learning the Dewey Decimal System.

In that magical place—
which still fills me with awe—
there’s diversity, history,
cookbooks, and mysteries;

there are map books and guidebooks
and how to paint, sculpt and draw.
Mom truly nailed it. Her wisdom I see.
The world's many wonders—wait there for me.

“The world's my oyster,”
I know that's a bit trite,
but I've been to Jacques Cousteau's depths
and don't care much for great heights.
While here on earth, I'm content
to embrace the arts and sporting events.
I know the last trip, that's on my mind,
will be to Paradise, where others I'll find.

Still, for now, a world cruise
would suit me just fine.
I'd speak a little French
and imbibe on fine wine...
while seeing how we humans
are really all the same...
from Tim Conway and Harvey Korman
to Rosa Parks and others of acclaim.

Though I've had problems and passions, and financial upsets,
I study the Humanities and include all the arts.
I still embrace music, but watch others run,
since there's joy in Mudville, and I love having fun.

“Oh the places you'll go,”
my folks said to me,
and now, I've seen much,
at my age of eighty-three.

Balance Beamers – Suzanne Schultz

Nothing like a new pair of shoes except when they
Have the prefix ortho.

They make feet feel comfy but are definitely not
Fashion status quo.

Nor do they protect me from stubs, trips and falls
All those surfaces impossible to detect before the sprawls.

Ach du Lieber? Another near tumble climbing the stairs
Caught on the railing – too many previous scares.
There must be a way to counter this old age curse.
Why not create shoes to prevent events so adverse?

Shoes that sense the least little bump, slant and slip
Shoes that keep me from taking a dip
Shoes that take care of my dwindling balance
Shoes to avoid always looking askance.

To my physics and engineering friends I did go
To seek expertise to help to stave off this walking foe.
Analyzing walking patterns, devising sensors, testing prototypes
For months on end finally giving rise to a new archetype.

Five years later: millions made on the Balance Beamers
Health care costs slashed in the billions for the original dreamers.
Always looking for quality improvement to solidify the branding
Our new slogan, “when all else fails, we’ve got a sensor to provide a soft landing.

A Change in My Life – Gerald “Gabby” Hayes

The other day, I went for a bicycle ride. At one point during my ride, I came to the bottom of a long, fairly steep hill. I put my bike into the lowest gear and powered up the hill. When I reached the top, I stopped for a breather. I dismounted and looked around at the scenery. I could see for miles in all directions. The view was beautiful.

While taking in the view, I started to think about where I’ve been and where I’m heading in life. I don’t know why my thoughts went there. Maybe I was feeling tired. Maybe old. Maybe I was feeling philosophical. Whatever the reason, I took my time and reflected on my current situation.

Two years ago, I retired. When I shut down my consulting business, I gave up a large part of my identity. For over thirty years, I was Gabby Hayes the IT consultant, software designer, technical trainer, technical writer, and systems tester. For proof, all you needed to do was read my business card. It had my name, followed by letters – BS, CS, MS, IPT – which signified my credentials, education, and certifications. If you needed to know more about me, my Curriculum Vitae, or CV, listed my schooling, employment, engagements, and published works.

My cards and my CV stated who I was. I was a businessman. That was my life. No one ever asked me my wife’s name, if I had children, if I had a best friend, or what I did for fun. They asked me if I had the necessary knowledge and skills to help them with their business problems.

I am no longer Gabby Hayes, the IT consultant. I am no longer a businessman. A huge part of my life disappeared the moment I quit taking on new clients. Now I’m Gabby Hayes, the husband, father, friend, writer, and photographer. I like the change. I like who I am.

I still have a business card. It no longer lists my skills. It no longer has letters after my name, although I could probably keep the BS there, for obvious reasons. Now my card only lists my name, phone number, and e-mail address, ways to get in touch with me. If you want to know who I am now, you can call me or send me an e-mail. I have lots of time now to chat. I’ll tell you about my real life, where I’ve been, who I’ve loved, how my kids are doing, and what I do to fill my free time.

My moment of pondering was over. It was time to move on. I hopped back on my bike, turned it around, switched gears, and continued on with my life.

You Bought the First Round – Linda Wallace

Jerry needs something different to do. As owner of the Moonlight Motel, he is just tired of filling his days and nights with work. “Well, maybe I will find the answer, if I go for coffee at Maude’s Diner. Maybe I’ll see Charlie there. Still thinking on his friend, he suddenly stops. He is in front of the Broken Spur Saloon. “I have my ‘what to do’ idea! It is time for us regulars to play poker.” Going inside the saloon he yells, “Hector, Hey Hector! You ready for the gang to have poker in your backroom?” Jerry looks and listens but doesn’t see or hear his friend. It is then, Hector, the bar’s owner, comes up behind Jerry and taps his shoulder. Jerry jumps, yellin’, “You scared me so much I almost lost my dentures.” Hector laughs, “So, you want a poker night, Jerry? Well. Tuesday is a slow night here. Yes, let’s do it. I’ll set out the poker chips.” They shake hands. “Great, I’ll call everyone, and the group will be in your bar by 7:00.”

Jerry sits on a bar stool, opens his wallet and pulls out the list of his poker friends. Of course there’s Hector, the bar owner. Then Charlie, his special friend, H.B. Charlie’s ranch hand, Mr. Johnston better know as Aces, Justice of Peace Mitchell, Peter who’s newly married but well, maybe he will join us. I wonder if I should invite the ladies, Ms. Cathy and Mrs. Daffy Dolbie. Daffy could still be angry at Charlie. Ah heck why not. He sits down on the bar stool, pulls out his phone and begins the calls.

There wasn’t one person that said no to the evening. He emphasized, as he always did, that the last one to arrive buys the first round of drinks; that bein’ the fine for showin’ up late. Charlie asks, “Hey is Daffy Dolbie comin’?” “Yes, Charlie, Daffy is coming, now be nice to the lady.” “As long as I can be there before her, I’m good. I won’t be paying the bar bill cause she is always slow. See you tonight, Jerry, way before 7:00.”

Charlie smiled thinkin’ on bein’ with his poker gang then he remembered how Daffy had treated him at the barn dance. Jezz, He’d been havin’ a rough time at that dance rememberin’ things. And Daffy – well Daffy was just plain ornery to him. Yet, he had gotten a good laugh at her. She’d fallin’ down on the dance floor and showed her flowered undies. “Still I gonna be at the Broken Spur way early. I’m gonna politely thank her for my special drink of top of the line, double whiskey. The kind I’d never splurge on for myself. He’s thinkin’ on bein’ ornery and grinnin’ from ear to ear.

It's only early afternoon but he decides to take a shower and even shave. That cleanin' stuff bein' done he sits down in his favorite chair closing his eyes. He is awoken much later by Tonto Dog howlin'. What's goin' on fellow? He gits up and looks around, then at his watch. Oh, Tonto thanks for wakin' me, I am going to be late for poker. Runnin' his fingers through his hair, he jumps inside his truck and guns the engine. He's got to beat Daffy to poker. He's driving as quick as his ol' pickup has ever gone. His watch reads ten minutes to seven as he pulls into a parking space. He jumps out, slams the door and runs for the bar.

Inside he looks around, Jerry and everyone else is there, even the lady he was tryin' to beat. She is beamin' at him. "Why Charlie, I was wonderin' if you was gonna make it at all. I've already ordered a glass of the 2010 elite Chateaux Valley Vino. But I had to take the whole bottle because it's only sold by the bottle. Daffy gives him a beamin' smile, holds up her wine glass and sips. Thank You Charlie.

Embracing My Imperfect Past – Patty Wagner

What would I do differently in my life if I could?

After giving it careful thought, I'm really not sure I should.

If you'd asked me when I was twenty, I'd have made a lengthy list,
But each erasable aspect holds something good I would miss.

Of course, the obvious answer would be THE diagnosis,
To wish I'd never been born sick with genetic cystic fibrosis.
Though, that'd require I gained DNA from a different mom & dad,
Yet there could be no better parents than the ones I already had.

I'd love to eradicate the stupidity I displayed as a youngster,
I wished to be "in" and popular . . . not the nerd, but a funster.
Instead, I developed lasting friendships with my fellow wallflowers,
Now we dorks reminisce and laugh at ourselves for hours.

While employed, there were times for a more exciting career I yearned.
Fear of the unknown kept me there; however, the longer I stayed I learned,
The knowledge I held garnered respect and helped empower my voice.
Plus, retirement benefits I enjoy convince me I made the right choice.

I wouldn't trade the man I wed, I snagged my ideal spouse,
Each prior boyfriend, for comparison, was a liar and a louse.
Had we traveled the world or lavishly spent great amounts of money,
I'd dare not dream of retirement or enjoying VO with my honey.

If I stew about the "what ifs," my anxiety will push sleep away,
My brain looping perceived slights, as though on autoplay.
I am better off looking to the future, embracing my imperfect past.
Maybe, following this approach, I will accept who I am at last.

You Are a Chosen One – Paulette Thompson

Times will change, my little child-mostly for the better.

May one be happy as a girl, if the world will let her.

Be who you are, do what you want, though not a fortunate son.

There is a reason you are here-you are a chosen one.

You like to throw the football with your brother in the yard;

Also pitching baseball isn't really hard.

Don't feel that you're not special though they make you wear a dress.

Walking through the snowdrifts in the winter is a mess.

You didn't want a Barbie doll – that Christmas was too sad.

You much preferred a microscope – next year you were so glad.

Your gym time would be limited to when it wasn't needed

For the boys' teams who were favored – it made you feel defeated.

You find and join activities girls are allowed to play

Summer fast-pitch softball-from your own pocket you must pay.

You study hard and get good grades-you're on the honor roll;

Yet you feel inferior-I tell you that's not so.

It's okay to have short hair, even if it's curly.

You don't have to be a certain way-don't let it make you surly.

One day you will be older. Somehow you'll make it through

The ups and downs of living-you'll find this fact is true.

What you are is what you are; you can relax and breathe.

If you accept yourself today, great joy you will achieve.

Our Greatest Accomplishment: TEAMWORK – John Nordstrom

It all began with a small little bribe, that this girl, I begin to woo.

Not long after, we both stepped to the altar, and together said I Do.

And over the years we worked hard at those bad qualities to rid.

So again, amidst the business of life, we together said, I Did.

Years they begin to pile up, so at 50 we joined to say, I'm Done.

We said, let's find a place down south, somewhere to have fun in the sun.

It's been a journey throughout the years, for each of us to find our place.

Through hard work, and give and take, our marriage has won the race.

My humor, so many times, has caused her to laugh and smile,

But sometimes she tells me, go sit in the corner for awhile.

Our driving finds me behind the wheel, driving on the route.

Her instructions are required for us to survive, which often includes a shout.

Her grocery list, well thought out, with only healthy meals to eat.

I push the cart, help find some items, but always look for treats.

She cooks in the kitchen, I sit and dream, waiting for her dinner ready call.

But meal is done, and then it's my turn, as dishes are my downfall.

She sorts and runs the clothes washer and sometimes I help to fold.

I offered to wash, but reds and whites, made pink clothes so bold

In the bed, I sleep on the left, the furthest from the door.

If a robber enters, she's the first line of defense, and I'll be on the floor.

I'm fully capable of picking out and deciding what to wear.

When I enter the room she often says, "I can't leave with that outfit to share."

When we travel, I plan the trip, the places we will see.

She's more than willing to ride along, despite all the history.

Volunteering is one of our good traits, that we both honor and share.

But volunteer her, without a warning, is something I don't dare.

For 25 years, I organized our Boy Scouts with much of my time being lent.

Behind the scenes was Bonnie, caring for our kids and fixing the tents.

Oh, there are many times, volunteering, I ended up being in charge.

But a yell for help, and she comes running, when that job became too large.

Hanging a picture, or that quilt she just made, is not a job of just inches.

It's a test of our work together strength, a few nail holes, and often some glitches.

We love to dance and take every chance, as it makes us feel so freed.

And especially for me, it makes a difference, as it is the one time I get to lead.

Our success takes a special kind of glue and giving God his due.

Every Sunday, together, with our faith, you'll find us in our pew.

When someone says, "56 years, it's really is hard to believe."

I say, I know, it's not been easy, all these years, I've worked hard at getting her trained.

Oh, you don't think that's true, I know what you're all thinking.

Yeah, I'm the one who's often the cause, that glass of wine she's drinking.

We find that marriage is hard work, and one that requires some humor.

So not to worry, we'll be together, till death do us part, the rest is just a rumor.

I read the poem to my wife, she smiled and nodded her head.

But she had to say, "You know, you got it wrong, it's 57 years instead."

Encounters with Wild Horses – Diana Tokarchuk

Three friends and I went for a walk on a beautiful sunny day. It was my favourite path and we all enjoyed the sunshine and fresh air.

On our return, rounding a bend, stood six beautiful horses. We stood frozen to the ground. One of the horses, the stallion, turned to block the path, but never took his eyes off us. With a shake of his head, one of the horses walked off to the side. This continued till all five had left the path. The stallion then nodded his head at us, and moved off too. We walked on, and as we glanced to the side we saw the horses a short distance away.

Leading a group on a hike was wonderful. This morning we had a small group, perhaps ten of us. We had a great walk. On our return, we walked the top of the steep hill where the path was. Watching our footing was required. I stopped frequently to look around, There was a mare and her new colt on the path not far from where we were. Raising my hand, I whispered "shhh" and held up my hand.

The mare was terrified, her eyes wild with fear, her body tense, ready to fight. She would protect her baby! Not a good spot to be in!

I quietly talked to her, saying we did not want to harm her or her baby. "If she could just take her baby off the path for a few minutes, we would pass by quickly, and she could return. " I quietly repeated this several times. Then she did! She nudged her colt off the path, and walked a short distance down the hill. We quickly walked by, and at the bottom, looking back up, there she stood with her colt.

One of the funniest stories: I was going up the same hill with four of my friends. Everyone wants to see the horses, but there are no guarantees.

Reaching one of the shorter, though steeper parts of the path, we rounded a bush, only to find ourselves encircled by the horses. What a feeling!

They just watched us, one keeping his eyes on me the entire time. It almost seemed they were laughing at us! We could not move. My followers were watching me too, but no one did anything foolish.

What felt like a long time, but was probably only a few minutes, the horse watching me nodded and they left. What a memory!

On another hike, we had not seen the horses at all. My fellow hikers were disappointed, but I did not dictate their presence. They climbed into their cars and left, one car at a time. I am always the last to leave when leading, to make sure all are accounted for. Looking up at the hills, to say good-bye for another season, there they were! Lined across the crest of the hill. I waved at them, they nodded and left.

That was the last time I saw "my horses".

My Granddaughter Payton – Greta Landry

At 10 months old, Peyton was easily frightened by any loud noise. At our house, there were many loud noises for her to be startled by; the water pump running, the upstairs bedroom doors blowing shut, when the windows were open, and the back door, slamming shut, with such a force. It shook the house. There seemed to be a vacuum suction between the garage door and the house door, that was uncontrollable.

When she was playing quietly on the floor and someone came in the back door, it would slam and startle her every time. Her arms shot up and her tiny hands would start vibrating. This was her immediate reaction, her way of letting you know she was about to burst into uncontrollable crying.

I would scoop her up as quickly as I could to offer reassurance. In my arms, she wanted to grab onto whatever she could, as quickly as she could, to feel secure, however, she would also catch a tiny piece of me in a pinch, that she squeezed tightly and held onto. This often resulted in bruises.

The days rolled by, and Peyton learned to walk, and talk, however, unexpected loud noises still frightened her. Now she could run, at the same time as she squealed, trying to find a hiding place behind my legs, and grip-pinch my legs, instead of my arms and chest.

There were plenty of unpredictable, loud noises to be started by at our house; the snowplough passing at the front, a skidoo whacking Past in the yard, and each time she would squeal and run to grab-pinch my leg as she tried to hide behind me.

On one occasion, she was so overcome, she began crying uncontrollably immediately. In seconds, her face turned red, her breathing became shallow. Sternly I stated, Peyton, you're going to make yourself sick, you have to stop crying now! At this point, she was beginning to hyperventilate, gasp for air and choke a bit. Through her sobs and gasps,

she choked out. "I, I" sob sob, "don't", sob gasp, "Know " gasp, gasp, "how."

I thought, of course, she didn't know how to calm herself, she was just a baby. So I began by telling her to slowly breathe in, like this, and then blow it out, like this as I modelled the instructions I moved towards the bathroom, where I use the damp cloth to cool her face. In about five minutes, she was calm, and ready for a nap. She often spent the day at

our house and gradually learned to except many of our loud noises, which was a relief to my bruised legs.

When she was about 2 1/2, she was at our house for the day, and Papa was also home and they were playing together. Papa was the bucking bronco and Peyton was getting a very bumpy ride on the lively horse. They were having a blast. I was in the kitchen getting lunch. The horse was bucking and making horse noises when Peyton got bucked off papa's back. When she tried to get back on his back, he decided to trot away with her chasing after him, while she continued laughing. Then Papa decided to turn into a ferocious lion. Something he had done many times with the other grandchildren. He got up on his knees, lifted his hands to become claws and began to growl very loudly as a ferocious lion. Peyton did her terrified squeal scream and started to run as fast as her short legs would carry her to find me. When she did the pinch grab to my legs, I could see her body was vibrating, and her hands were trembling. My husband, who was unaware of how terrified she had become, was still roaring at the top of his lungs. When he reached the kitchen door, I was about to say, "stop she is really terrified".

Instead, I turned to Peyton, and said, "Peyton? scare him right back." She turned her head up, and blinked at me, with a puzzled and confused look, she grunted a questioning, "huh?" I repeated, "Scare him right back". This time she understood. She released her grip on my legs and brought her two balled up fists even with her face, as her entire body began to stiffen. She screwed up her adorable two-year-old face to be as scary as she could manage, and she uttered the loudest, most ferocious roar that began in her toes and gained force until it held every ounce of emotion she could push forward. She lunged toward Papa, who began a swift retreat, and the game was back on, with Peyton as the lion. Around and around, they went, until Papa fell onto the couch, hit his face with his hands and said, "I give up don't eat me. Don't eat me."

To which Peyton replied, "Oh! Papa, it's just me, Peyton I'm not going to eat you."

After that incident, I only had to remind her a few times, "scare them right back, Peyton" and she was never again consumed by that fear and anxiety of loud noises.

She's now a 12-year-old, tenacious, sassy, hand on hip, I'm not afraid of anything kind of girl. From a timid Fawn to a roaring lion.

Letter to Senator – Willard “Woody” Michels

Dear Senator,

Born 80 plus years ago and having spent my entire life in Montana, I have been through some trying times. In fact, most of my life, I was concerned about my family’s finances. While forgoing vacations, recreation time with family and persisting at a mom-and-pop business along with building a farming operation from scratch, our family was able to survive.

Starting in the 1970’s when jobs were scarce in Montana and living through the drought of the 80’s, and witnessing farm foreclosures of the 90’s was a trying time. Paying 18% percent interest on a home loan in the 80’s was very painful. Losing half your savings in the crash of 2008 was disheartening. Burying several close friends lost to covid was almost unbearable.

Today, in 2026, looking back at these tragic events, they almost seem trivial compared to what is currently happening to our country. Unless the current administration in Washington D.C. is somehow brought under control, all the above hardships we have endured will have been in vain.

Senator, to be compliant while this administration is wrecking commodity markets for Montana farmers is close to betrayal. To watch SNAP funds and welfare payments to the underprivileged being stopped is unjust. To encourage the layoffs of dedicated civil servants and delayed payments to farmers you represent is clearly poor economics. You evidently believe making health care expensive and out of reach for many Montanans is okay. Alienating my close friends and neighbors in Canada is just wrong. Good and decent people in immigrant communities witness children scared to attend school. People are afraid to go to work, attend church or buy food for fear of the ICE agents prowling around their communities.

As a United States senator, you should be aware of the ballooning inequality in our republic. James Madison warned in the Federalist No. 10 that a society could not long remain a republic if a small minority controlled most of the wealth. This is exactly what is happening in America. The top 10% control over 2/3 of the nation’s wealth while the

bottom half of our population controls less than 2.5% of the nation's wealth. We are quickly becoming a nation run by oligarchs.

Recall the concentration camps of WWII in Germany and the internment camps in our own country for Japanese citizens during this war. We asked ourselves how this could happen and believed that it would never have happened if we had been around. In case you haven't noticed, it's happening under your watch and mine. My head hangs in shame, what about yours? I suspect you claim to be a Christian, please act like one.

There is still time to salvage our nation. As a national leader you must realize tribalism inhibits one of the essential tools of a democracy. The right to change one's mind was evident throughout the Revolutionary War as several leaders who were once loyal to the king of England changed their minds and became supporters of the revolution enabling its success.

Senator, today I beg you to search deep into your conscience and consult your better angels for some semblance of justice and virtue, do the right thing and stop empowering this president to become that mad king our forefathers rebelled against 250 years ago.

Sincerely,

Willard J. Michels

Ollie Goes to Court – Dennis Meyer

The pond was hardly frozen, the grasses crunched while Ollie put her front paw close to the ice. She was a German Shorthaired Pointer and was smarter than going out on thin ice, moving back to solid ground.

The freezing temps would make her webbed feet sting if she were to get her front paw wet. She only had one front paw, and that is another story for another day, some might call her a tripod, but not a dog with a losing attitude.

Once again, Ollie was on her daily patrol. Her assigned job was animal control using critter control techniques in accordance with AETA or the Animals for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. There were bad acting critters whose job was to create as much chaos on this fledgling tree farm as possible and perhaps frustrate the new owners in the hopes they would stop planting trees.

On this particular day, she discovered a trickle of water on the dry side of the dike. She knew from her training to look on the pond's bank to see if she could locate the source for this leaking water, knowing if she didn't the entire pond would be compromised.

There it was. That damned muskrat. Ollie knew that muskrat from a previous encounter. She also knew that the pesky muskrat felt safe below the 1" thick ice. That just really, really frustrated Ollie. Ollie was at that moment thinking she didn't earn enough, because she just didn't quit, until her job was finished. Not being able to get this muskrat was maddening. You didn't want to be on Ollie's revenge list.

She didn't stop doing her work until she heard her healthy, crunchy dog food hit the sides of her shiny stainless food bowl at her sunset feeding time.

Today was just one of those days Ollie would like to forget and erase from her memory. The muskrat family had an extra exit in case Ollie dug into one of the rats' tunnels where the furry wet useless critters were hiding.

After working up a sweat, digging through the tough dirt, gravel, and tangled web of roots, Ollie stopped to admire her work. She had hurled up an enlarged pile of dirt which yielded absolutely zilch.

Tomorrow will be better she thought as she fell asleep with her melodious signature snore. Ollie smiled proudly in her sleep and dreamt positive thoughts of a better tomorrow.

The following day started out like any other. The sun cast its light and heat onto the ragged blue chair covered with a tattered sheet where Ollie slept. It warmed her soft skin,

but more importantly the sunshine relaxed her sore muscles from yesterday's excavations. Lately she has had this recurring nightmare in which she gets run over by a Mack gravel truck.

Ollie spent the first 3 hours of her 8-hour shift sleeping on the deck while she was punched in and supposedly on the job. When she awoke she sauntered out to see what she could see, and to take a pee.

After finishing that up, she sniffed over to the apple trees to see who peed there last night. Behind one of the larger trunks, was a really crabby woodchuck who thought it was just fine to be there challenging this three-legged canine to make her first move. Boy was that a mistake.

After doing a well-choreographed slightly modified line dance with that misinformed chuck, Ollie decided to end that chuck's old "boot scooting doogie" routine. When the chuck came forward to do his forward step, Ollie got vertical doing a quarter turn, coming down with her back molars on full display, clamping them hard around the woodchuck's sweaty neck.

That was such a nasty taste, Ollie shook the furry ball in disgust wondering why this chuck disliked showers so dang much, and smelled so so bad. To her surprise, the chuck stopped breathing. With her only good leg, Ollie did her improvised chest thumps, trying to revive this fun creature, but to no avail.

Feeling a bit of remorse and a bit of hope, Ollie carried that smelly critter to the far side of the deck, where the sun doesn't shine, saving the morning sun spot for herself. Ollie didn't realize it at the time, but this was the critter the tree farm owners didn't like because the woodchuck would dig tunnels and earth homes underground killing some trees.

Ollie counted 1000 newly planted trees and her job was to protect them.

Ollie was doing very good work and after each encounter with those chucks she would carry those loser woodchucks and deposit their limp, smelly, furry corpses on the deck at the very spot of Ollie's first chuck deposit.

That went on until Ollie was served her first legal summons. She was to appear before the magistrate of the Animals for the Ethical Treatment of Animals or AETA. When Ollie read the court summons, she muttered, there is no way they have any jurisdiction over what happens here, besides, I have never eaten any of these critters. I have never AETA chuck!

Ollie was released on her own recognizance shortly thereafter on the grounds of inadequate lifesaving training by her humans. Case dismissed. Ollie sighed as she rushed past nosy critters in the burrows!

Note to Self – Peter Keithly

Last week, I was talking with a fellow pickleball player as we both sat resting between matches. I mentioned to him that I would soon be leaving on a five-week-long solo bicycle journey through parts of Colombia in South America. As a fellow bicycle enthusiast, he was curious to hear about the details of my trip and how I planned to pull it off. Early into my explanation, he voiced the concern I have heard from so many others. “Aren’t you worried about traveling alone?” I explained that I had already completed over 60 similar adventures, and many of them without accompaniment. “I enjoy the experience of traveling alone, and I feel just as safe. In fact, I have found I am more focused on my surroundings and less distracted by other riders when traveling solo. In addition, I find myself making more of an effort to communicate with the locals I come in contact with, and I learn a bit more about what daily life is like for them”.

If I were to somehow have the opportunity to tell myself as a youth something important I learned later in life, it would be to communicate the importance of exploring our world and experiencing the lifestyles of the other inhabitants with whom we share this globe. I sincerely believe that many of our international problems stem from a failure to fully appreciate the perspectives and experiences that others may face. Without making an effort to travel and better understand the world beyond our boundaries, we become accustomed to our familiar and comfortable surroundings and establish artificial barriers to acceptance of the way other people may choose to live.

I would also endeavour to reinforce the importance of taking small steps when learning how to travel independently with confidence. Start by planning and attempting less complicated adventures, and then build upon your newfound knowledge. Independent travel can develop character and self-reliance. Accept the challenges you will face and be proud when you succeed in overcoming them.

Totally Hollow – Renee Radloff

When you're totally hollow –
There's absolutely no path to follow.
Everything you thought you knew is gone –
And it takes every ounce of strength just to carry on.

The process of being refilled requires
Lots and lots of waiting –
Even at times being perfectly still

One needs to be mindful of what's now going to fill the empty space –
This takes awareness, patience, and for sure, lots of grace.

For oneself and for others too –
Because there's so very much we're all going through.

Putting the best things in and keeping the worst things out –
Is a day-by-day challenge, of that there's no doubt.

The ultimate goal is to be just full enough –
Not empty and fragile, but also, not spewing out stuff.

When one is totally hollow,
The echoes inside are incredibly loud –
Making it very, very hard to be in a crowd.

The filling up takes as long as it takes –
Wishing and rushing doesn't help, so, keep one foot on the brake.
Slowly, but surely, some of the empty will be filled –
And the overwhelming hollowness will eventually be stilled.

It Is Impossible Only If You Believe It Is – Charlie Johnson

A Complete Puzzle

Lightning reflected on a man sitting at a table in the bay window alcove, and on a jigsaw puzzle and every item on that table. Unconsciously cringing at the thunder, he was unaware of the evening storm brewing as it crossed the landscape.

Yesterday, the man managed to connect the four borders of the puzzle; a depiction of the Mad Hatter's Tea Party from ALICE IN WONDERLAND. By midafternoon today, he added many background details, including a grandfather clock, several houseplants, a Cheshire Cat. He finished the last piece of the tea party dining table just in time for his supper.

Returning from his meal, the man figured he could wrap up this puzzle before bedtime. The characters were all he had left to achieve his goal: Alice at the left of the table, the March Hare and the dormouse huddling on the right side, the Mad Hatter in the center.

The storm repeatedly grew and faded as the evening advanced. So possessed with his task, the man gave no heed to the lightning, thunder, and torrential sheets of wind-driven rain against the window.

His fingers culled through the remaining puzzle pieces, forming stacks of what comprised the four characters. The blue and blond bundle would certainly be Alice. The purple and gold batch clearly would form the Mad Hatter. The man had difficulty separating the greys and browns into the dormouse and March Hare piles, but once he found the buck teeth of the hare and the sleepy eyes of the dormouse, he was ready to proceed.

The storm abated as the man strove to place all fourteen pieces of an exuberant Alice into her place behind the left side of the table. Her left hand held a dainty teacup, her right held a half-eaten scone; her bright blue eyes stared with astonishment at the space where the Mad Hatter would be. Blond hair, gathered neatly by a red ribbon, fell down her shoulders, outlining her blue frock. The storm renewed its fury as the wind churned branches and twigs across the lawn. The man's efforts turned to the March Hare and the dormouse. Five pieces of the sleeping rodent's head on the table rapidly completed the dormouse. The March Hare's seven pieces slipped snugly into place. The man didn't perceive that the March Hare's floppy ears seemed to flicker and quiver with the storm.

The man stood and stretched, steeped in the anticipation of finishing the puzzle. He rubbed his hands together in prideful satisfaction. He leaned over the table, glaring down at the heap of Mad Hatter parts and scolded them. "You're next, you insane haberdasher,

you!” His chair made a complaining sound as he sat back down to work. In time, the Mad Hatter’s form bonded into place. Returning to his feet and fully extending his arms high above his head, the man praised himself with great exuberance at the sight of the finalized puzzle.

A myriad of hail against the window announced yet another stormy boost. A crescendo of blustery winds with a simultaneous display of lightning and thunder surprised the man, freezing him in mid-revelry. His entire body paralyzed at the sight of a huge oak outside his window collapsing in slow motion, a victim of a direct lightning strike. It burst into flames, striking the ground just a few feet short of the window. Cascades of sparks and embers careened off the ground and the window. In his sudden horror, he found himself unable to move.

Just moments later, his wife of thirty-four years returned home from her evening shift at a local pub. Stunned by the sight of the burning oak tree, she parked in the driveway and hurried into the house. She called her husband’s name, only to receive an unexpected response from a frenzied, maniacal male voice in delirious commotion. She entered the living room to discover a stranger, clad in a golden hat and a purple tuxedo, gyrating in hectic pirouettes on the table, shouting. “Twas brillig, I say, totally brillig!”

Spotting her with crazed eyes, he ceased his dance, addressing the wife with insane bravado. “Ah, behold! It is the man’s mimsy wife. Your man is not here. This storm’s ferocity granted me the singular power to sweep him into this imprisoning puzzle in my stead, He is now frozen in his last pose forever! I arise to replace his beingness! I take my leave now, to gimble and wabe in an unsuspecting world!”

He turned to the window, crashing through it with great energy and feverish laughter. The dazed wife dashed to the table, watching him depart swifter than one of the storm’s lightning bolts. Looking down at the puzzle, there indeed was the image of her husband, paralyzed in his storm-horror stance. She howled out his name, then fainted to the floor.

The Mad Hatter is still out there.

*Thank you
for supporting our
annual reading event!*

We hope you have enjoyed our collection of some
our best works from the 2025/2026 season.

Speaking of “collection,” our Annual Reading has
been our club's primary fundraiser for many years so
we appreciate any donation you can contribute.

Perhaps our pieces have inspired you to take up
writing. If so, we would love for you to join us at our
weekly Creative Writing Club meetings next season!