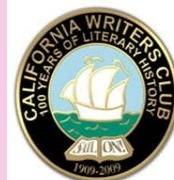


IN FOCUS

Newsletter of the
California Writers Club/West Valley



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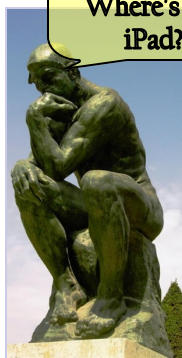
Meeting Info
and Map 14

Put On Your Thinking Caps

This month – **February** – CWC/WV members will shine and put forth our best writing. How will we accomplish this amazing feat? Here's the plan: President Dave will first split our February attendees into small groups. We'll work cooperatively in these groups to create amazing, original, mind-boggling stories.

After a period of intense writing, each

Gotta write
that down!
Where's my
iPad?!



group will share their compositions with the whole group.

What an opportunity for fun interaction with other members! This session might produce bodies of work that may qualify for publication in our illustrious newsletter. (Our speaker last month was quite impressed with the quality of IN FOCUS, thank you, Kathy).

Please bring a pen and notepad to the meeting. Or your laptop. Whatever your preferred form of composition, come to the February gathering prepared to write and share.

- Yolanda Fintor

west valley whimsicals

A Schwartz / Highcove Production

Every good writer must also be a good editor.
And a songwriter can't make a living
without editing skills.

It's a start...



This is Truth with a capital letter,
A hug is good, but a kiss is better.
You'll always ring my chime,
Every blessed time after time.
And when we get to sparking,
In my Chevy while we're parking,
Believe me when I tell you,
Our love will always be sublime,
Every blessed time after time.

Let's go back in
time to 1931
and imagine how
Herman Hupfeld
might have
composed a very
famous song.

Nope, not there yet.



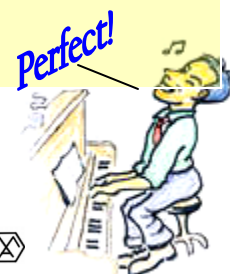
Try to keep in mind,
That important ties will bind.
Romantic rules don't change,
And together we must range.
Like a boy and a girl
Giving love's wheel a whirl,
No telling what fates will arrange,
And on together we must range.

Eventually, with editing:

You must remember this
A kiss is just a kiss, a sigh is just a sigh.
The fundamental things apply
As time goes by.

And when two lovers woo
They still say, "I love you."
On that you can rely
No matter what the future brings
As time goes by.

© Herrman Hupfeld 1931



Artwork by Max Schwartz
Practice verses are fictional
Cartoon text by Kathy Highcove

Executive Board

President ... Dave Wetterberg
Vice-president/Membership ... Sheila Moss
Vice-president/Programs ... Yolanda Fintor
Secretary ... Position Open
Treasurer ... Dean Stewart

Board of Directors

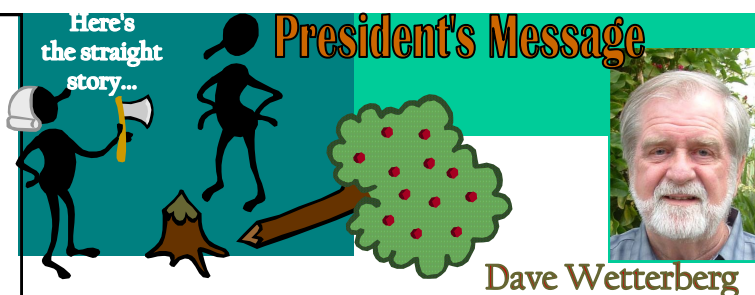
Editor, Publicity ... Kathy Highcove
Webmaster ... David Burr
Photographer ... Ken Wilkins
On Site Coordinator ... Betty Freeman
Critique Groups Coordinator ... Lillian Rodich
Open Mike ... Bill Sorrells
Members-at-Large ... Bill Hitchins
Karen Gorback

Looking Forward to March

The temperamental month of March delivers dicey weather across the Southland as we leave winter behind. The cusp of spring inspires creative work centered on **Forces of Nature**—our March theme. This theme may bring wind storms, floods and earthquakes to mind. Let's widen the category. Natural forces of all kinds—surprising events, strong or unforgettable personalities, health issues—shake the status quo. And give us things to write about. Think of a “forceful” experience and write about it. Length is negotiable.

As always, I hope to receive submissions from more members about **Why I Write**—50 to 200 words. And the March topic for our next Twenty-Five Word Story is Sports. Tell us a story about an athletic feat, a sport, a sportsman, a sporting event, or an athlete.

Kathy Highcove



Dave Wetterberg

February, another midpoint in the saga of the West Valley. Our membership is holding steadily, although attendance tends to tip one way or the other from month to month, whether for “cold” season, religious holidays, family trips, high school reunions. Yolanda Fintor, VP Programs, has something social planned for us this month. A group activity is in the works. Hope to see you there.

Webmaster David Burr now resides with his new wife in Ontario. Although Dave assured us he would maintain the website in spite of the distance, Kathy Highcove has volunteered to take on the responsibility. Thanks, Kathy. Thanks, Dave.

In October I presented our annual \$250 donation of appreciation to Andrea Dzurdis, MPTV's Director of Annual Giving Foundation, a most charming and appreciative young woman. A week later I received a letter from MPTV CEO Robert Scherer, thanking us and placing us on the annual listing of donors.

Elections: Start thinking about them. State by-laws call for branch elections every two years for the offices of president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer. I have appointed Bill Hitchins nominating committee chairperson to come up with a slate.

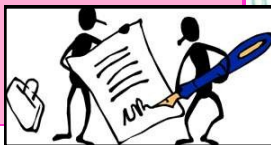
I have served as branch president two terms, total four years. Dean Stewart has served five years as treasurer. Dean and I choose not to run again. Sheila Moss will be unable to serve as Vice-President-membership. The position of secretary has been unfilled since September.

Please accept the nomination if Bill comes calling. Time to step up and contribute. Time for some new blood. Help us keep a good thing going.



Ester Benjamin Shifren was recently a guest speaker at the Skirball Museum. She related episodes of her early life in China,

Before You Sign...



It takes a village to raise a child, goes the old saying. And in the same way, a writer's new book often needs to be raised to public notice with the help of an extended publication village - so advised Dr. Julie Ann Wombach, our January speaker.

"Whom do you depend upon?" Wombach asked us. We named our family and friends, and wondered how a personal support system tied in with publication and sales. Continuing the village analogy, our speaker listed the writer's professional support system: critique groups, copy writers, librarians, distributors, marketers, book designers, artists, agents and editors. Even a self-published book needs specialized help.

We learned that Dr. Wombach, a professional mediator and counselor, believes that "rankism" can poison the atmosphere of any group project. There are always "somebodies" who want to keep "nobodies" in their place. Some publishing houses are infected by rankism and try to discourage writ-



Dr. Julie Ann Wombach

ers from interfering with publication choices. To better define our personal rank or ability to negotiate effectively with publication nabobs, Dr. Wombach handed out a short personality test. After we paced through it, she explained the results of our tallies. Many members discovered that they were probably not prepared for prime time bargaining sessions. Instead of the desired Coaxer rank, some of us were Grandees or Snubbers or - horrors! - Dog Kickers!

How to resist rankism and improve one's own rank? Dr. Wombach advised our writers to surf the Net and look at several companies, read blog feed back and work to find the best support system.

Don't accept the first deal that's offered until alternatives are well researched. Go into negotiations with the publication professionals equipped with information researched through your personal support system.

- Kathy Highcove

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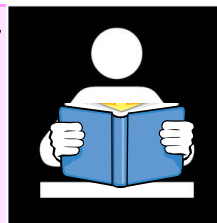
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- Kathy Highcove

library corner



Window to the Past

From the London Evening-Post, Saturday, February 12, 1774:

Newport, Rhode Island Dec. 27th.

"The ladies in Boston, to their immortal honour, are entering into an association against the use of tea ; and we hope the ladies in this town will universally do the same."

The above quote was copied from an actual newspaper image in [LA Public Library's Access Newspaper Archives](#) database - a virtual collection of newspapers from all over the world. The front page displays news as it happened, and the back pages display several smaller articles of human interest.

The Access Archives database contains the actual page images of newspapers dating back to the early 1700's: cartoons, advertisements, births and obituaries.

One searches by keyword and date, such as [Pearl Harbor, December 1941](#). Or one can randomly pick an issue from a city and date to surf through the pages.

Here's where to find Access:

www.lapl.org Go to [access databases](#), then [Access Newspaper Archives](#).

Type in your library card number and PIN when prompted and you're ready to go.

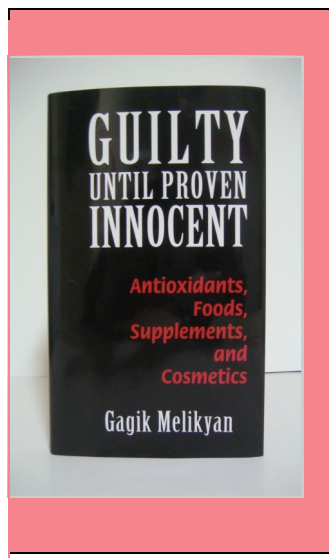
Happy researching!

-Anne Arnold Olivier



Let's see -
Am I a natural
born Coaxer
or more of a
Gatekeeper?
hmmm...

Two Members Focus on Health and Hearts



Making Informed Choices

Congratulations to Gagik Malikyan, chemistry professor at CSUN and recent West Valley member, on his new book *Guilty Until Proven Innocent*.

In his book Gaglik provides compelling evidence

that antioxidants, foods, supplements, cosmetics, and natural compounds can be harmful to the human body. The focal points of the discussion are green tea, coffee, red wine, hair color, sunscreen lotions, bisphenol A (BPA), and parabens in women's cosmetics.

In *Guilty*, Gaglik arms a layperson with the critical knowledge that will allow him/her to make educated choices and protect themselves and their loved ones from potentially hazardous substances. When dealing with consumables, this author adopts the concept of "presumption of guilt," as opposed to "presumption of innocence," criminal justice terms. A chemical compound of any origin is considered harmful ("guilty") to the human body until proven harmless ("innocent") by qualified, independent parties.

Gaglik's down-to-earth writing style has made complex scientific subject matter easily read and understood by the layman. But this book is also written for professionals from the food industry, academia, government agencies, and consumer protection groups.

Guilty Until Proven Innocent is available at Amazon for \$29.95 including tax and S&H. For more info: <http://blogs.csun.edu/news/2010/12/cosmetic/> (University Press)

Email: gagik.melikyan@csun.edu or <http://www.csun.edu/~hfchm006/chemggm.html>

February is American Heart Month



Norman Molesko's latest book relates his experiences with coronary heart disease.

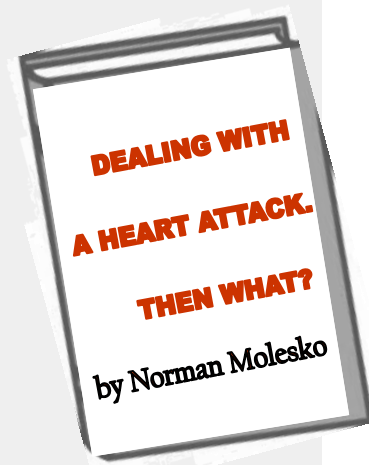
This affliction often appears as a heart attack. According to the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention, an estimated 785,000 Americans had a new heart attack in 2009.

About 470,000 of that number will have a recurrent attack. Approximately every twenty-five seconds, an American will have a coronary event; every minute, another US citizen will die. Heart disease is the leading cause of death in the U.S.

Norm's theme is timely and significant to a large number of Americans. His book *DEALING WITH A HEART ATTACK. THEN WHAT?* relates his experiences over a year's time as he lives through his initial and second heart attacks, just seven days apart. Norm describes how he found his way back to health after these episodes.

People with heart issues and their family and friends can connect and learn from Norm's journey to relative wellness.

This book will be available in 2011.





Talkin' about the KING'S English, Dave?

“who” and “whom” and they never end a sentence with a preposition. “Who did you go to the prom with?” should be “With whom did you go to the prom?” God forbid they’d ever split an infinitive.

Standard English is the language of most average, intelligent, high-school educated Americans. They speak correctly most of the time, but they play it loose and they slip up sometimes.

Substandard English is the language of the uneducated and/or the careless. “Pamela don’t have no money.” “Larry don’t come from around here.” My readers can find others that scratch the chalkboard, I’m sure.

Too often, if the expression sounds right and if it’s used long enough, it works its way into Standard English. The following blunders might fall into this category someday, but I hope not. They’ll still be substandard in my book:

The use of nominative pronouns instead of objective:
Not “Mildred sat between Bernie and I.” but “Mildred sat between Bernie and me.”

The use of “myself” instead of “me.”
Not “Refreshments were provided by Bob, Max, and myself.” but “Refreshments were provided by Bob, Max, and me.”

The use of the “me” instead of “my.”
Not “Do you mind me coming along?” instead of the correct “my” as in “Do you mind my coming along?”

The use of “would have” instead of “had.”
Not “If he would have known ...” but “If he had known ...”

The use of “badly” instead of “bad.”
Not “Malcolm felt badly about lying.” but “Malcolm felt bad about lying.”

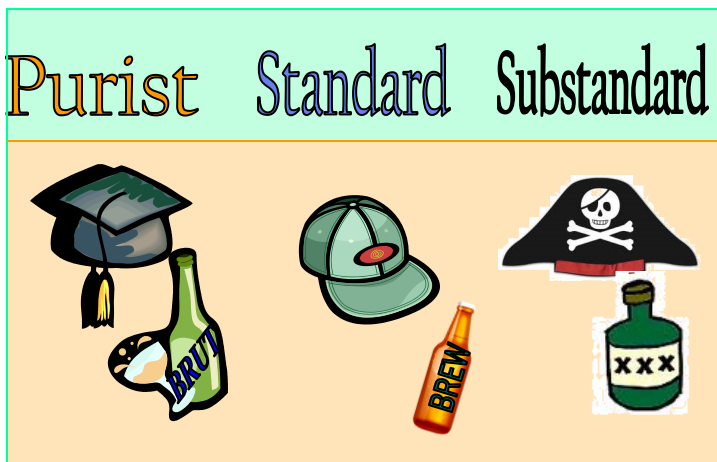
The use of the double negative “barely no one.”
Not “Barely no one noticed he had already gone.” but “Barely anyone noticed he had already gone.”

- Dave Wetterberg

When new friends discover I was once an English teacher, it’s not uncommon for them to act apologetic about their use of the language. (“Gosh, an English teacher? I better watch my grammar!”) One lady asked me to correct her whenever she made a mistake. I politely refused. Imagine breaking into a conversation with “Excuse me! That’s a double negative!”

I must admit, however, that after thirty-five years with a grammar book under my arm, I’m cursed with an acute consciousness of everyday speech. One outgrowth of my teaching career is that in my jargon I now use the terms “purist,” “standard,” and “substandard” more frequently than “correct” and “incorrect.”

Purist English is English by intractable rules. For example, “to be” verbs take nominative, not objective, pronouns. In other words, “It’s me, Mommy!” should be “It is I, Mommy!” And purists are very explicit about



Three CWC/WV members tell us Why I Write in a very few words.

That's not so easy. Try it. You might enjoy the editing challenge.

Sum up your reasons for writing in 50 to 100 words.

No more. No less. Period.

It started when Mom gave me a pen and a small five-year diary with a little key. There wasn't much space to write between days. When I complained about needing more room, Mom said: "Write what you know using only words that matter...the rest will flow".

When I write, the whole world melts away like sand castles sucked into the sea, leaving everything suspended, reverberating like sounds inside a big church bell.

Slippery words slide to the page trembling, shaking, and swaying as if blown by a thousand winds.

- Keyle Birnberg-Goldstein



The urge to write has struck again
Compelling me to take up pen.
I can't control the surge in me
That never ever sets me free.
Occurring any hour of day,
Or night, it interrupts, holds sway.
The page now before me—white,
Will take control of what I write.
I make my notes, line after line,
At first there is no real design.
Very soon some words appear
To make some sense—now it's clear,
That I am hooked and must complete
My story—not accept defeat!
Yes, I'm a writer who *must* write,
When my creative urges bite.

- Ester Shifren

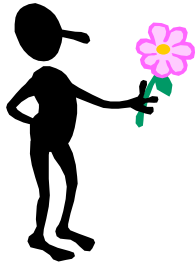
**just
write**



For seven decades, I sketched and painted scenes around me as I worked on the Pan American Highway in Central America, served as a combat engineer in WWII, and as a Civil Engineer. After retirement I began to paint those scenes with words. During this transition, my books included artwork to illustrate what I tried to write about. My words became my brushes and my stories contained the atmosphere and feelings I felt, and to let the reader paint the same picture in his or her mind.

- Max Schwartz





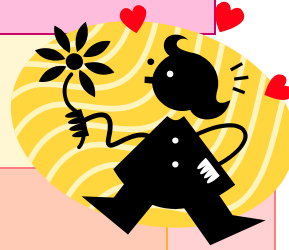
twenty-five word love story



Several adventurous members met the challenge to fashion a complete plot about **Love** and **Pain** in just twenty-five words.

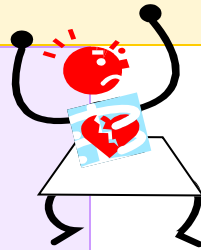
We were dancing; he was tall and I short.
Someone said to him: "Why are you dancing alone?" - not seeing me! I sighed and left!

Marganit Lish



Two hearts beat as one,
Pledging their oaths by saying, "I DO,"
Suddenly the bride exclaims, "I Don't,"
Causing her intended to clutch his heart.

Sheila Moss



At a widow's gathering, Louis was told by friends:
"Helen is emotionally unstable, Don't date her."
He didn't listen.
We dated, we loved, we married.

Helen Katzman

"hello?"
"i missed you"
"me too"
"i'm there"
"yes"
"touch me"
"yes"
"feel me?"
"yes"
"Feel me!"
"YESSSS"
"You trembled"
"yes"
"goodnight."

- Ray Malus



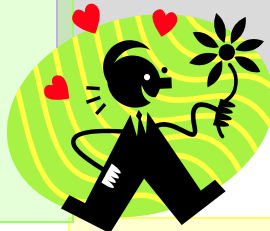
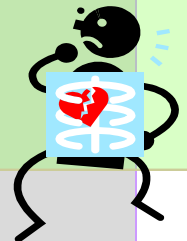
He entered the room.
She noticed.
Love started.
Life began.
They married.
Bought a house.
Enjoyed life.
Grew old.
Buried beside one another.

Debi Trent Brown



Gray skies. Tropical rain. Barefooted. The beach. Slow dancing. Margaritas. Passion. Love. Illness intrudes. Passion fades. Sky darkens. Rain falls...the day he died. PAIN!

Leslie Kaplan



My new love makes me laugh.
He's a good dancer, great kisser.
But he hates my dog and can't hold a job.
Goodbye old love.

Yolanda Fintor



Thought we were meant for each other.
'Cause we both loved dangerous sports.
We sky dived together. I fell hard.
Then, the thrill was gone.

Kathy Highcove



My high school crush Jim,
He loved me.
I loved him.

I helped Jim physics class.
Notes to pass.
Then he said, "Goodbye."
Why??

Lillian Rodich





ANOTHER HEARTBREAK SONG

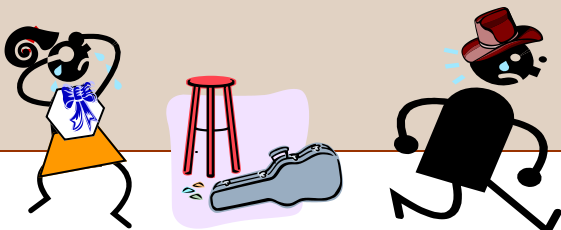
By Ray Malus

I know you're sittin' there and you're dyin' to hear
How I feel about my broken romance.
I know you sympathize; but you must realize
That I knew that I was takin' a chance
So you ain't gonna see a lot of agony.
I'm a winner and I'm gonna be strong.
I think we've all agreed that what the world don't need
Is ANOTHER HEARTBREAK SONG.

There ain't no reason to cry, just 'cause she told me good-bye.
I would do it over just the same.
'Cause a minute of love is worth an hour of pain.
And, so far, I'm 'way ahead of the game.
And, though she bent my heart, back when I chose to start,
I knew that this might happen all along.
It's just what fate decreed, and what the world don't need
Is ANOTHER HEARTBREAK SONG.

And, if she asks you, just say
That I'm doin' Ok.
In a day, you may not be wrong.

You say that it's a shame; and tell me she's to blame.
But it meant heartbreak for the woman too.
And though she wanted to stay, she had to play it that way.
I guess she figured that was all she could do.
So, I don't give a damn for your opinion of her
Stick your opinions where opinions belong.
'Cause even you'll concede that what the world don't need
Is ANOTHER HEARTBREAK SONG.



Sensing relief from discomfort is a simple pleasure.
For me, each simple pleasure is really treasured.

Feeling chilled on a wintry day,
trembling, cold down to the bones,
then sipping hot soup is so warming. Ahh!

Having a splitting headache,
with agonizing pain in the brain,
then the migraine is not there. Ahh!

A cramping in the upper leg,
causing anguish and screaming,
then the pain stops. Ahh!

Being blasted by raucous music,
assaulting to the ears,
then the noise abruptly stops. Ahh!

I can go on and on, but what I mean to say is
when a feeling of discomfort leaves me any day,
Ahh!, this sense of relief is indeed a pleasure,
though noticed only for a moment or two.

I hold such moments as precious,
valuing each as being a treasure.
Certainly you must have collected
many of these treasures during your lifetime.

© Norman Molesko, 2011

This poem is found in
Dealing With A Heart Attack. Then What?

Bea's Wildflowers

2000

Traffic rumbles
down Burbank Boulevard
with a screech and a roar
while twittering birds
continue their melodic mayhem
and hover over
the wildflower garden
circling Bea's driveway.

Flowers grown from seeds
blown to the damp soil
in confusion,
rooting and thriving,
join in a lacy network
of cornflowers and poppies,
lupines and daisies,
and dance through dry leaves
fallen from the oak tree near
them.

Blooms, bravely smiling,
face the dusty asphalt driveway
and taunt traffic
Breezes move the blooms
into a living picture
shyly welcoming me
at my old friend's door.

2011

Where are they now,
those colorful bouquets...
reduced to words?
Reduced to dust?
Seedlings blown away,
seeking life
away from a house
abandoned to foreclosure.

- Lillian Rodich

LOVE

AND

PAIN

"Love is a many splendid thing,"
As the old song goes.
Love is remembering
Loved ones.

Holding on to their warmth and affection,
Not forgetting the pain of illness,
Nor their passing,
Love and pain go together.

Love is saying "sweet dreams" to the little ones,
Being proud of their academic achievement,
Being part of a school play,
Delighting in choice of friends,
And yet, we as parents worry.

Worry about driving, drinking and over-eating,
Pain and delight are part of children growing into maturity.

The tide reverses.
Children show love and concern for parents,
Are they eating properly?
Safely walking stairs?
Thinking clearly?
Keeping in touch by phone,
Time consuming, perhaps, for children.

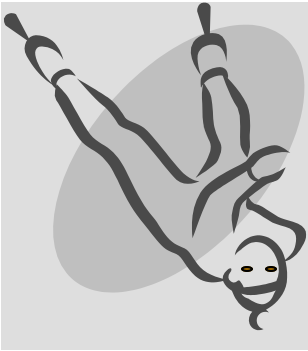
Pain of friends lost,
Off-set by making new ones,
Creating love and joy again.

Love and pain fit together in life!

- Helen Katzman

The Dark Waltz

By David Wetterberg



At the desk clerk's wake-up call, he jumped out of bed. By daylight, he stood beside his car, fishing for his keys, ready for the next four hundred miles. The silver door handle stuck to his hand. Let go fast, or your skin is mine, it said. The driver's side squeaked when he sat down, telling him he weighed more than when he lived here, considerably more. The heater came on with the starter and the air charged up his trouser leg.

At first it was as frigid as the outside air. Then it mellowed and smoothed out warm.

He drove uphill on the road to the highway so fast he hardly noticed the sign that said *Steadman, Land of Maple Sugar*. Each house of his old home town, plugged into its frozen brown lawn, had a long front porch supported by Greek columns. At the boys' academy, the road curved north, and the buildings, empty of students and silent for the Christmas holidays, looked at him with brick faces, gloomy under the winter clouds. Two miles more and the houses disappeared.

He slowed down, unusual for him, enjoying the early morning peace of the country road, thinking he could pick up the lost speed once he reached the highway. He leaned over the steering wheel to get a better look into the woods. The pines, matriarchal and stubborn, held their green in spite of winter, but the maples were skeletons, drawing straight lines into the sky. The birches and the younger trees, brutalized by the snowstorms, leaned over from the extra weight. He braked and idled in neutral

and squinted out the side window. The defroster hadn't completely cleared it yet, and when he rolled it down for an unclouded look, the icy air spilled into his car like quicksilver.

Along here there used to be ... there they were, marking the entrance to the pond, two posts without a gate, as if to say, this is mine, but come on in. Drawn to it, he crossed the blacktop and drove between the gateless posts onto the dirt road and into the woods slowly, the snow under the tires cracking and growling. Somewhere in here, he knew, was the pond he skated on when he was a boy. Then it was there, to the left of the steering wheel. He couldn't see the surface, but the clearing in the trees made room for a pond.

He stepped out of the car and slammed the door, the sound ricocheting off the trees and zigzagging through the woods. His breath a visible cloud, he walked up a rise and the pond opened up to him. The ice was white, not transparent, white from the circling and the scratching of skates, the way it used to be. The marshes at the far end of the pond stood up like spikes, upside down icicles. He tried to remember what it looked like in the spring, but he could not visualize it in color, only as it was now, in shades of black and gray. The sight of the pond, familiar but strange, moved him, and he trembled. He breathed deep and removed a glove and blew into his fist, as if this would stop it. He took a few steps onto the ice, gingerly at first, because the snow had packed itself into a layer under his soles. Then, gaining some balance, he stepped out and half slid, half walked to the ponds center, recalling when he was a young man here, surrounded by other skaters.

Then he realized that the pond was dark. He looked up. The overhanging clouds had melted together, losing their outlines. The frozen marshes along the shore were shadows. He heard the easy rhythm of a skater circling the pond's edge, first one skate, then the other, each answered by a hollow echo under the ice, a momentary stillness in between. Strange, he thought. No one was on the ice when he arrived. Whoever it was must have

(Continued on page 11)

(Continued from page 10)

been lacing up. He could see nothing now, only hear the rising sound of the skates approaching him.

"Hey, good morning!" he yelled, but the dark skater whizzed past silently.

It became darker, and the man, upset and a little frightened, shuffled his legs toward the shore. He heard the skater glide to the far end of the pond and turn and begin his second run toward him, louder and louder, until he swept by, nearly touching him. The man yelled again, "Hey! Wait! Stop for a minute!" his voice echoing after the skater, but the hollow sound faded again to the far shore. He slipped then, and went down on all fours, blinded by the dark, trying to feel his way. He felt warm. His hands and knees were wet. The ice was melting.

The skater returned on his third run, and the man sensed danger. He struggled to his feet and nearly fell over backwards. The sound charged into him. "Stop! Stop!" he screamed.

At the collision, he glimpsed the skater's face, and it was his own face, as if he were looking into a mirror. And it was not a collision, nor even an impact, but a blending, and the man found himself skating with the same rhythm he had only heard before, floating, leaning ahead with each thrust of his leg, gliding into the darkness. He skated on, unquestioning, sensing the shoreline like a blind man senses an obstacle in his path, confident, at one with the dark and the cold and the ice and the water and the silky muck that lay underneath it, waiting.

As he sailed her surface, he heard the pond, softly at first, as she rose under him and floated with him and eased him down again. "Caress me, my darling," she sang. "Caress me, my love." The man twisted lightly and jumped, making a complete revolution in the air before returning to the ice on one skate. Then he turned and skated backward. "That's it, my darling," crooned the pond. "Love me. Love me." The man streamed on, lulled by her song. Along the shore the shadows followed him with their anxious eyes, whispering to him, urging him on to his rendezvous. They knew the pond, how she would crack under him and suck

him to the velvety sludge below.

"Come, my love," the pond sang. "Embrace me."

She would bury him and he would be hers forever then, no matter how he protested, no matter how he screamed in the last seconds, trying to hold his breath forever as he slipped under the surface into more darkness, floating again, but sinking this time, senseless, motionless, into the bed of his deceitful lover.

"Come to me, come," sang the pond. "Be mine, darling, be mine."

Panting, the man kept up his pace. The surface was overlaid with water, the edges disconnected from the shore, an island floating.

"You're doing well, my lover," the pond cooed. "Come - - - once more around, once more."

Drenched, exhausted, the man strained for more speed across the watered surface. His skates hit the immobile dirt of the shore and he vaulted blindly forward, hitting the frozen ground shoulder first, rolling until he lay spread-eagled on his back.

"Come back, my darling," called the pond. "Don't leave me!"

But the man said no.

"Then tomorrow or the next day or the next," the pond lusted. "Come when the winter is turning to spring. One assignation before the snow is gone. Be mine to answer to my whims."

The man said no again.

Painfully, he leaned forward to unlace his skates, but there were no skates. He looked up at the sky and the clouds were in their old pattern. He took a last look at the ice. It was frozen solid, not melting. His breath rushed out in steam again. A winter breeze pierced the trees and entered his clothes and iced the perspiration on his body.



guest writer carter washington

Sharing the Pain



She sat at a table in the library last Saturday morning. I caught sight of her just as the book she held slipped and fell to the floor. She crossed her arms and gradually slumped down until her forehead lay on her wrist. Sleepy? One of the homeless who spent their days reading for lack of anything else to do? I couldn't tell.

Then she slowly sat up and stared into space. A tear ran down her cheek. Something was wrong. Should I offer to help? Too well dressed to be a bag lady. Maybe forty--not young enough to be one of the college students who infested the city.

She brushed away the tear with her sleeve. Then she leaned down, picked up her book and opened it. I turned back to the shelf I'd come to check. Not my business. But I heard her chair move when she slowly stood up--and then sat down again. More tears, her head in her hands. I couldn't stand it any longer. I stepped over to the empty seat next to her.

"Hey. Everything okay?"

She glanced up at me, then turned away. I sat down.

"I'm an accountant, and I have damn little experience talking to strange women. I mean, I know everything's not okay, but if I could help I would."

She finally looked at me. "No, nothing's okay. Everything is shit. So what?"

"I'd be glad to listen. Want to go out to the lobby?"

She sat for a minute more, and then rose and started walking toward the glass doors to the street. Didn't even

look back. I followed. The book stayed put.

We sat down on one of those wall benches near the entrance. She stared out at Boylston Street. Cars went by. Trucks. Snow piled on the curb collected more dirt. Some poor bastard stood just outside taking a drag on a cigarette. Then, still looking at the traffic, she started talking.

"I'm an editor. Was an editor. They laid off half the staff. Me included. My daughter's in high school. You heard of subprime loans? That's us."

I guess she had to spill it to somebody.

"Won't your friends help?"

"Friends? That's a myth. My 'friends' are still working. I'm nobody." The bitterness showed, but she still didn't look at me.

"You have a daughter. Where's your husband in all this?"

"He won't help. Being dead slows a person down. Afghanistan, couple of years ago." She glanced at me and turned back to the window.

No point in telling her I wasn't much better off. At least I didn't have a kid depending on me. "Maybe things will get better. How about we go across the street and have lunch?"

"Okay." She finally looked straight at me. "Why not? Thank you."

She took my arm as the door closed behind us.

Carter Jefferson has written news stories, book reviews, a biography, and just about everything else over a long career. No telling what he'll do next, he says. He had a great time in San Diego and Coronado, where his ship often put in while he was in the Navy. Much better weather, he says, than in Boston, where he lives now.

More information on Carter Washington at this website:

<http://carterj.homestead.com/>



A Prickly Situation

"Brad, please pass the mashed potatoes to Grandpa Willis. And why is there a band-aid on your earlobe? Did you cut yourself

shavin' again?" asked his mother Suzy.

Brad passed the dish and stared at his plate. A pink hue crept up his neck.

"Reminds me of when your Dad started shavin'," said Grandpa Willis and chuckled as he looked over at Brad's ear. "That what happened, Brad? Razor slipped?"

Brad lifted his head and looked around the table. His family suddenly reminded him of cattle at the feeding trough. Just chewing and staring. But Dad looked like their testy bull Zorro when he was getting ready to charge.

"Nope, not shavin'," Brad replied. "After school today me and Bruce stopped in town and I got somethin' done I told you I wanted to do before they took my graduation picture next month."

"Not a TATTOO!" Suzy exclaimed.

"Nope, not a tattoo," said Brad. Not this time, he thought.

His dad, Big Dan, leaned closer for a better look, glared at Brad and said, "If you didn't get no tattoo, I think I know what you did get in town today with that fool friend of yours. You got that goddamn ear pierced, didn't ya? After we told you NO and that was s'posed to be FINAL!"

Big Dan set down his knife and fork with a clatter.

The dogs whined and slunk into the kitchen.

Suzy also looked closer and recognized the signs.

"Brad! What were you thinking!?" she asked.

"Only the Willis WOMEN get their ears pierced...when they're old enough," Suzy added with a hard look at Janet who was staring fixedly at the little white adhesive patch on her brother's earlobe.

Grandpa shook his head slowly and opined, "Hired help shows up here with pierced ears and tattoos and all kinds of rodeo cowboy crap. And the folks who go to the dude ranch come with pierced ears, eye brows, plus toe an' tummy rings an' we allus laugh at 'em, Brad. At least, you USED to laugh at 'em." He stopped long enough to shovel in another scoop of mashed potato.

"I never thought piercin' body parts was funny! I don't find it hysterical to staple tags on my herds' ears!" said Big Dan. "And I don't know why a son of mine had to go and get his ear punched like one of our steers!"

Brad looked his father in the eye and responded heatedly, "I'll tell you why I did it. I'm the lead singer of our rock band Dynamite. Singin' is what I really want to do! And I gotta look like a real rock singer and not like a...a..."

"Like a RANCHER? A boring RANCHER like your father and grandpa? Like ALL the Willis men? I should take that guitar and break it into a..."

Brad jumped to his feet, lithe as a pole cat.

Big Dan pushed back his chair.

"Who-o-a, son," sputtered Grandpa.

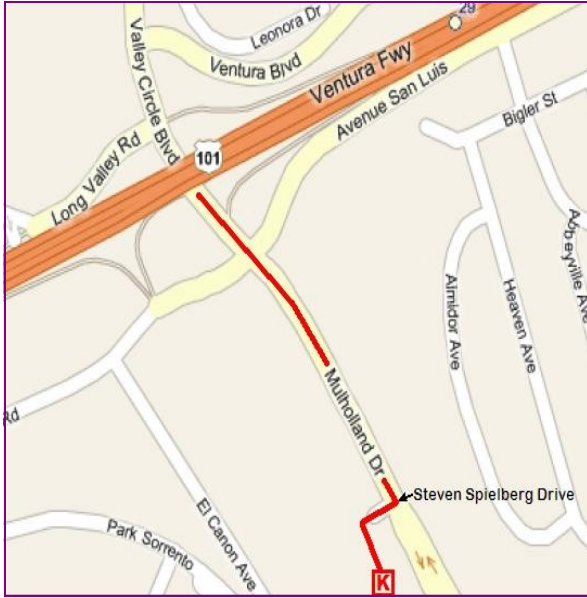
"Don't make a scene, you two," Suzy implored.

Janet watched her brother's glower grow. The familiar signs of impending implosion implied she'd have the TV to herself that night. She smiled and buttered her cob.

Brad sprang away from the table, tore into his room, grabbed his guitar and was out the back door before his father could waylay him.

He spent the night in the Swifts' cow barn. Doreen Swift helped Brad break a few more rules in the hay loft.

- Kathy Highcove



MEETINGS

The California Writers Club meets the first Saturday of the month except July and August at the Motion Picture and Television Fund complex:

Villa Katzenberg

23388 Mulholland

Woodland Hills, CA 91364-2733

NEXT MEETING

Saturday, Feb 5th, 2011 at 1:30 p.m.

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