

NORTHERN NARRATIVES

A Collection of Poems, Essays, and Short Stories
by Citizens of North Dakota and the
Red River Valley

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Red River Valley

Volume 5

Collected and produced by the following Fargo Public Library Staff:
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2021

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First Printing 2021

ISBN: 978-1-329-11951-2

Fargo Public Library
102 3 St N
Fargo, ND 58102

www.fargolibrary.org

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Our heartfelt thanks to the volunteers who donated their time to judging the submissions. We also extend our most gracious thanks to the Friends of the Fargo Public Library, without whose funding and support this project would not be possible.



To learn more about the Friends of the Fargo Public Library, please visit friendsfpl.org.

NORTHERN FOCUS

Cover Photo:

“The Wild Mist” (2021) by Brittani Hovland. Taken at Theodore Roosevelt National Park in western North Dakota.

This photograph was chosen for the front cover of *Northern Narratives* as a part of the Fargo Public Library’s second annual Northern Focus photography project. Northern Focus was conceived by the library for regional amateur photographers. We aim to provide a free space, for artist and viewer alike, where we can showcase amateur artwork and share local perspectives.

Photographers from North Dakota and parts of western Minnesota sent in their favorite photographs taken anywhere within the region. All received entries were on display at the Main Library, August through September 2021. Find the permanent digital gallery online at www.facebook.com/fargopubliclibrary.

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the fifth volume of *Northern Narratives*.

Northern Narratives is an annual anthology published by the Fargo Public Library to highlight and preserve the writing of local and regional authors. Our aim is to promote the sharing of our stories and the creation of content that is meaningful to our community; therefore all poems, essays, and short stories featured in this volume were written and self-edited by residents of North Dakota and the Red River Valley. To learn more about the *Northern Narratives* project, please visit our website at fargolibrary.org

Selection to this anthology was done by volunteer judges with various backgrounds in writing, reading, teaching, and publishing.

We hope you enjoy this book, and fall in love with the creativity, passion, and humor of our region's writers, just as we did.

POETRY

TRUED LOVE

by Steven Aakre

Her image lasts, imprinted from first glance:
a look preserved, yet new as that first day.
Each smile, each laugh, first kiss, the high school dance,
all merge in waves of memory's display.

Two hearts, when joined, begin their journey blind
to what the world will give, then take, as tolls.
Some dreams we reach, but others slip behind,
the daily grind eroding lofty goals.

Yes, passing years wear down the hardest stone,
but love, like pearl, accretes a precious sheen
that over time has grown as we are shown
how love can work minutely, seldom seen.

Bouquets all wilt, cards fade, and sweets decay.
True love is trued in quiet grace each day.

WHEEL

by Steven Aakre

On her last night alive
Mom was watching Wheel of Fortune.
“Like we always did,” Dad said.

As the three players vied for the prize
she simply closed her eyes,
her last view some unfinished phrase.

The wheel spins.
Now my habit each night
is watching,
wondering how to fill the blanks,
to complete the words, to win.

DAKOTA IN FOUR SEASONS

by Nolan Alber

LATE WINTER

spring-beat echoes
touch-and-go beams
a father in the field

NOT WINTER

garden-dusted wind
fits of illusory warmth
a father in the field

EARLY WINTER

rapier-prick chill
skeletons framing decay
a father in the field

DEEP WINTER

bone-white mounds
blinding grey skies
a father's reverie of the field

FATIGUE

by Anthony Albright

Fatigue.

Are we agreed that our need to bleed is gone?

Can we agree to disagree that we need to just soldier on?

Gone are the days when pandemic was just in the movies.

Disaster is faster, and yet slow.

We know what we know but we can't agree.

To save our lives is to go slow but our patience has worn with speed.

Our need to be freed from restriction is an addiction to entitlement.

We greedily consume the room we once mistook as free.

We cannot ever be as we once were: ignorant of a disease that does not know we are free.

We must be as we once were, not divided but united against the enemy.

Unfortunately, this enemy is one we cannot see and though the numbers of dead are telling, our death-knelling will be recorded to be the inability to sacrifice our comfortable life for the good of community.

A WOMAN DRINKS RED WINE SHE KNOWS HAS BEEN ROOFIED

by Gabrielle Brandt

She had seen the slip of his hand—a flash of white submerged by blood red, then a dissolution into nothing. She felt the grittiness against her teeth when she next drank, the few countable particles that remained. It was never control she felt she couldn't give up. She relished in it, smelling the desperation in his sweat. Feigning ignorance was her favorite after-dinner mint, his imagined dominance dying once it reached her tongue. She'd go home with him, all the rest. In the morning she collects her belongings, disappointed that the peaceful sleep on their faces always takes her by surprise.

THE GIFT

by Loretta Cantieri

For my Grandmother Genevieve

Each visit I worried about the work we left you.
You washed our sheets. You shuffled outside to
hang them on the line. When they were dry
you brought them back inside to iron them.

You seldom let me help with the work.
I might run water too long or scrape good
food off the plate. You thought I didn't know
what should be stored and what should be kept.

Each visit we blew our noses into tissues,
which you had cut into small squares.
each visit we refolded our used napkins,
which you saved for cleaning grease.

Each visit I marveled at your
methodical trash can set-up:
a cylindrical oatmeal container placed
inside the brown paper grocery bag,
placed inside the tall avocado green plastic pail.
bull's eye, I thought, as I dropped
my used tissue inside.

Each visit you were a careful cook.
you emptied rice into boiling water,
shook each kernel out of the bag and
caught escapees off the stove top

between your index finger and thumb.
afterwards you relentlessly scraped
the sides of the pot with a spoon
to save what remained.

You gave me stacks of foil from frozen dinners
when I used a piece to wrap a leftover, I heard
you say, "Give it to me,
I'll get the meat off the bone."

Crinkled squares of foil were safely stored
in my kitchen the night you died, grandma.
A month later I moved and packed them
above jars of vinegar, molasses and oil.

A year after your death, I open my cupboard
to find the unused portion from our last
meal together. A handful of rice,
I stored in a plastic bag to keep.

DOUBLE HELIX

by Nina Flippance

I stand at the top with two ways down. The spiral stairs of my life that I worked so hard to climb. Day after day, week after week, year after year.

I can go no farther. This is the pinnacle. The peak. I am dizzy, nauseous even, looking down at those twisting curling stairs with their gaping maw in the center. One breath, one blink, then I divide myself in two. And each makes a choice.

I slowly turn my body around and grasp the railing with my other hand. Easy and thoughtless as turning a page in a book.

A tentative step, another, and another. Gradually gaining momentum like gears in a machine, I go down the way I came.

Each step a memory of the last time I set my feet here. A slow, steady re-imagining of me.

I know not how long this new-old journey will take, as much has changed since I last walked these treads.

And I do not know the end.

But I intend to enjoy every step.

I slowly lean, my stomach against the railing, that railing that guided my hand and balanced my person to this point and place.

Lean, lean, farther and farther. A slow motion seesaw into the dark, spiral pit that will take me swiftly down. For I have depleted the energy needed to take the long way. Some would say the right way.

Head over foot, top over bottom, the air rushes past, like a sudden exhale.

A moment, just one fleeting moment, of peace.

Fulfilled?

Only finalized.

SUPERNOVA

by Nina Flippance

tears fall.

Sometimes, the act of taking flight finds one,
suddenly, and surprisingly,
At a homecoming.

a pause.
a breath.

Like an eclipse, a new life covers the old.

a sharp intake.

The shock, a little expected
and a little nice, satiates the atmosphere.
It is welcome. It is palpable.
In the temporary darkness, one knows
light is coming. But dares not believe it.

skin tingles.

But the old life does not return
to shine through. Instead, new paths,
new possibilities, burst forth, one after another.

Like flares. Life flares.
heart beats.

More and new and faster and lighter and brighter.
blood races.

The flares of life combine and expand.

It. Is. Blinding.

breath catches.

Into a supernova

stillness.

and life is beautiful

as tears fall.

RIVER FLOW NORTH

by Ren Gay

I am as unused to loose muscles

as a desert fox who has never felt a
drop

of cool rain

against its musk.

The dancer pulls my arm
behind my back and

wings

my scapula turns to

She compares my knotted muscles

to bags

of

glass

marbles.

Sand dune body shifts as weight

rises and

drops

How much of my blood is

composed of what ever chemicals

rattle

inside those capsules that still taste

faintly

of bone?

The yoga instructor says emotions

are stored in the hips

and i am too afraid to sit cross legged
in fear of the

dam break

each knot,

point of tension,

holds onto

memory

The last twisted sinew of braid

snaps,

an elbow to the sorest spot

and it all comes flooding back,

racing waters turn dust to mud,

name it red

even though in the most direct sunlight

it is still nothing more than

murky brown

SLAVE ROW

by Charles Hinton

“Come let’s go to Slave Row,” said Massa Moe.

“The Buck’s are out in the fields, we know our wives know.

“Well let’s go to Slave Row,” said Massa Jack.

“Any nigger *that* protest, we shall whip his back.”

“We’ll grab a wench and spoil her roots way into the night.

In fact, we’ll grab the whole lot and turn their babies white.

“We’ll race back to town and brag to all the men.

Fill their minds with lust, much money they will spend.

“A penny a go, a penny a go, money well spent.

“Now let’s go to Slave Row, and break in our wench.”

THEM ALABAMA TREES

by Charles Hinton

My eyes have seen them Alabama trees. With strong arms they carry churning black men. Strange that such a beautiful green can turn so black when the sun falls scarlet. They become as black as the men *that* hang, these Alabama trees. How tall they grow you would not believe. They say it is the blood that makes them grow. Them Alabama trees.

OZYMANDIAS ON THE PRAIRIE

by Mark Holman

After Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Ozymandias"

"I met a traveler from an antique land,"
Who said that great ruined machines, the tombs of ancient kings,
Still, stand along the primordial broken roads of the prairie,
"Half sunk, their shattered visages lie," whose broken,
And eroded forms have the look of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well read the designs,
"Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,"
J.I. Case Threshing Machine Co, Racine, Wisconsin, Trade Mark,
Seal of the King of Kings, a great iron eagle astride a globe,
Echoes the stone cut words of the ancient Pharaoh,
"Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!",
Words transcending time and space,
Ozymandias to Diodorus to Shelley to J.I. Case,
The mighty turn to dust, but the words endure,
Nothing else remains. Decay, all that is left,
"Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare",
The lone and level grasslands stretch far away.

HARMONICA PLAYERS

by Atiya Khan

Why, they just up and die
And leave harmonicas all over the place
Reeds drying up
Blues harps in glove compartments
And kitchen junk drawers
Marine bands asleep on bookshelves
Or on top of radios
Harmonicas on the workbench in the garage
The end table beside the cat-clawed couch
And what about that harp left in the pocket
Of the jeans on the floor beside the bed?
Think about all those blue notes
Comatose behind black holes
Waiting, waiting, waiting for a breath
To blow them back to life.
Who will bend those blue notes now?

MORS VIVENTIUM

by Atiya Khan

Look,
Here in the rainforest
The tree is turning its own fallen body
Into a womb for new life

The Witch's Hair Lichen and
Stair-step moss spores
Take warmth and moisture
From its decaying trunk

A colonnade of trees stands tall
And regal, surrounding us
The lone tree molders,
Rich and generous, into dust

How did it know when to stop reaching for the sunlight?
Who showed it the way to such a lively death?

STILL I COOK

by Bibi Khan

I chop
I grind
I pulse
I knead

my hands grow weary
head bent in task
my legs they ache
but still I dream and hope
and pray
this war that we must win
wholesale death that we must conquer
with prudence not recklessness

I boil
I grill
I fry
I bake

my heart it churns
it burns
and cries
this holocaust of hell we're bystanders to
no handshakes
no hugs
no congregating for prayers
no last rites for those who die

Yet I stand and stir
I whip
I flip
I blend

why cook
and eat
and dream
when others alone must breathe
their final breath
because we live in the present
and the future lies
in God's hand

THE PERILS OF SHEEP COUNTING

by Bibi Khan

Last night I started counting sheep
It was a cold and windy night
I started at the top of the hill
There were two first time mothers
Huddled close with their kids
Counting sheep is easy
I wandered down the hill
Under the old oak tree
Most of the sheep were asleep
I added those standing first
I tried to tally those laying down
Moving around disturbed some
Bleating and baaing ensued
I paused
Started calculating from the beginning
By now they were all up
Shifting and nudging
Slowly they followed each other
Wandering in the night
I hurried after them
Summing up in twos and fives
But it was useless
And I was tired
I had no choice but to give up
I sighed and closed my eyes

APRIL BABY

by Erica McCoy

I am an April baby
which means I am sometimes
the first sight where the grass is greener
I am, most times, an incessant rainfall
and on occasion, in particularly turbulent times,
I still might bring the wrath of an unyielding snowstorm

I am an April baby
which means I am sometimes
a muddy puddle, a swirling black lagoon
you've been dared to dig your feet in
I am sometimes a first sunburn
I told you not to get too close
I told you not to stay too long
I am 'get your hopes up'
then make your stomach drop
a rollercoaster ride in the amusement park
that doesn't open for another month

I am an April baby
which means I am sometimes
the fresh song of the birds
I am sometimes the lonely cricket's chirp
I am sometimes the screams of the geese
and I can't always tell
if it's in joy or agony

I am an April baby
which means I am probably
most people's least favorite month
your least favorite season of all four
but I promise, well, I hope
if you can look past all this slush
you might catch a glimmer of light
be happily surprised at what's to come
you might see a speck of my beauty

DON'T FORGET

by Erica McCoy

don't forget
you are made of reds
like the velvety color of roses
you are romantic, not maleficent
you are made of greens
like the signal to go ahead
you are positive, not impulsive
you are made of blues
like the iridescent waves
you are the calm sea, not a tsunami
you are made of yellows, pinks, and purples
like a midwest summer sunset
foreshadowing, floating gracefully
into new beginnings, not bitter endings

you are made soft
because hard can't handle blows
with such resilience
you are made with a heart of gold
powerful, yet precious
sturdy, yet sympathetic
don't forget
to be good to yourself
too

DECEMBER

by Carrie Noel

The air is cold and crisp
Down in early December.
Frosty windows nip
Off the green I remember.

The days are dark and dim.
Still, a firelight warms our
Cold old souls and we sit,
Wishing our days were not numbered.

HOME SWEET HOME

by Alice Olson

Our comfy home.
Aloft on stilts
and crawling with bugs!

Boys and girls.
Playing frolicking games
and marching on adventures!

Wolfing down Khmer food.
Fish, veggies, and MSG
and heaps of fruit and peppers!

Seasons in Cambodia.
Thunder, lightning, and rain storms
and also extreme humidity and scorching heat!

THE CLEMATIS VINE

by S.E. Page

Supple green flesh,
Happy piling and heaping
Of life in leaf,
I am sorry to slash you
Rend, cut down—
Tear into weeping pieces.
Yet, you must go.
My garden is not yours.

The favored falls, another rises,
Blooms heady and high
In the perfume of youth.
Such is the passing of flowers.
And you must go.
But I dream of a garden
Where nothing is unlovely, unworthy,
Unwanted.

Even dandelions are stars there,
Every seed a silver wish,
Each petal free as light.
As your roots wither
Here,
May you go
There, grow there!
Bloom as meant to be.

SONGS IN THE WIND

by Victor Pellerano

The wind tells the story of our distance past
It whispers in your ear will tell the future if you ask
The wind listens in the night for a baby's cry
And carries it across the land to the mother's side

The winds are our memories
Of forgotten shores
The sound of soldiers marching off to war
The wind is the breath of a wild mustang running in the snow
And the thunder of a thousand buffalo

The wind is you, the wind is me
We are all songs in the wind

The winds are the mountains that reach up to kiss the sky
The symphony of a waterfall as you walk by
The wind dances with the rain on a moonlit bay
And the cry of the summer breeze on an autumn day

The wind is you, the wind is me
We are all songs in the wind

WILD HORSES AND DREAMS

by Victor Pellerano

Riding through the badlands, wind to my back
Thought I heard someone call me
And in the distance, see a shining light
And hear a sweet melody
As I approach, I see an open fire
And a silhouette of an old man by a tree
Sitting cross-legged playing a flute
He stops and smiles at me

So I asked him
If he would mind if I warmed up for awhile
I'll share my bottle of whiskey
He said, no son, I don't mind
But first you must learn to fly
I looked in his eyes
Saw the history inside
I wondered how he managed to survive
We passed that bottle till it was empty inside
And I swear that old man grew wings to fly

He said
Wild Horses and Dreams will set you free
Ride the wind with Eagles and no one clips your wings

We talk of all the tales, the good and bad times
And all the love we once knew, we laughed and cried like good
friends do
Saw my father in his eyes
When I awoke, that old man was gone
He vanished in the night

Like a shadow over the landscape under the moonlight
So I got up and dusted off my clothes
And was fixing to leave
When it finally occurred to me
That old man was a lot like me
As I rode out, the sun to my back
Thought I heard someone call me
As I glanced back, squinting my eyes
It was my father smiling back at me

He said
Wild Horses and Dreams will set you free
Ride the wind with Eagles and no one clips your wings

SILVER ANNIVERSARY

by Lana Pulst

My life has passed me by.

Depression gets you in its grip & doesn't let go & the next thing you know years have passed & you wonder 'what did i do? did i touch anyone? did anyone touch me? my hand? a hug? did i have fun? ever laugh out loud? smile? how many hours, days, weeks was i in bed because to get up & shower, do makeup & dress was too monumental a chore to deal with?'

25 years living with depression.

Years lost living in a fugue.

Where did all that time go?

A FINAL REQUIEM FOR RYOKO

by Andrew Reed

Another passage of times is upon us,
and the winter solstice will be here soon.
Isn't it strange how the burden of time's yoke
can feel so heavy in one moment, and near
weightless in another? And clarity, from time,
can be as pointed—as sharp—as a scalpel, or
as dull as the blunt end of that old sword.

I've learned well from, and within the confides of,
that poignant pedagogy and as characters in books
often do, I too have learned about development. I am
resolute in knowing that the final coda of the song
we sung is drawing to a close;
much as I treasure its melody, the
verses no longer leave me breathless
the same way as we've both grown in age.

Summoning salt and parchment; pentagrams
and sigils; a string tied to the shaft of time's arrow
set to suture your wounds. Accepting defeat and
living with grief are both remedied with experience.
Not unlike accepting death.

Ghostly words from a ghostly past; this is how
I want you to remember me. You're not porcelain,
are you? Rather, human; blood and bone. Dizzy,
the synthetic strings decay and the ashes of their notes
flicker in the surrounding darkness like the moon hangs
in starless night.

There's something uncanny in your breath, your touch,
your very being, and still...one wonders how the human
body can move that way. Though, it is true that all things
good and bad shall pass. A final breath taken in so you
may belt out one last, final requiem.

THOUGHTS ON DREAMS

by Andrew Reed

When are we the sum of various parts
and when are we just the parts? When
does a group of atoms become a rose garden?
Better yet, when does pain become beauty?

We are, of course, the result of disparate cosmic forces randomly
reacting together, countless chances, ephemera, and milieus;
a thought put into action by some sort of incorporeal force.
You have to trust in the process, the ritual.

And as we are pushed or pulled through life by so many unseen
hands, we occasionally enjoy the journey, or at least the respite
from oblivion—that split second of sweetness before we must
once again swallow the bitter.

The morning song; the robin's aubade. Discourse on death and
disease. Faith spinning, music plays in caves all cats are grey
one of many that haunt, or otherwise hang on the periphery
of each day. The silence that permeates the busy places,
or the noise that chokes the empty spaces.

I dream, today, of juxtaposition. What we see the same,
and what we perceive differently. All these things,
a cacophony of stimuli and yet we not only sleep through them,
we dream.

GRATITUDE

by Michaela Schell

Have I forgotten that my house is measured in square feet of thousands instead of hundreds?

Have I forgotten that my jacket is North Face rather than nothing?

I ask for tuition paid, and hardwood floors, and stimulus checks, and so much more.

I drink my fair-trade coffee, get vaccines, watch netflix, and laugh at memes.

Yes, I work hard. And times are tough. I struggle and pray and worry about stuff.

But have I forgotten the good that I hold? My memory foam bed and safety from the cold?

I'm not rich nor famous nor perfect, just a middle class American working on making it.

Yet I have more than most of the world can even dream.

Still I find myself complaining, or wishing, or just going on living.

Striving for more, for better, for greater, isn't a flaw.

But it *is* a gift.

A gift I need to treat as so. A gift I need to recognize and with gratitude bestow.

So while I'll keep working for more and better,

I must remember to be thankful for what matters.

A BRIEF MOMENT IN TIME

by Dennis Seeb

A brief moment in time where we come to meet.
You in your car and me on the street.
You pull up to the corner as the light turns red.
Not looking at me, you look away instead.
So, I ask "What is the difference between you and me?"
Let's start with similarities, and then maybe we will see.
We both had a mother; we are someone's son.
That is similarity number one.
Where and when you were born was not chosen by you.
That is similarity number two.
"How are we different?" it is time to ask.
You may have a home, a car, and some cash.
Food, clothing, and shelter, we all desire.
Maybe you think I lost mine in a fire?
Or maybe you think I drank it all away,
Or other such choices led me here today.
I am sure you have problems; you certainly do.
It's just that yours may be hidden from view.
A simple twist of fate, a decision or two,
And you could be me and I could be you.
As the light changes color and you get ready to leave,
Think about what you know and what you genuinely believe.
As I look at you, and you look at me,
Remember we are all part of humanity.

ODE TO A NEW WINTER COAT

by Jen Silverman

Clean

Cozy

Fur lined warmth.

Zipper that zips,

Long enough sleeves,

Pockets . . .

Not yet filled with old receipts.

WINTER MORN

by Jen Silverman

Crisp, cold winter morning
Sun shining
Dogs frolicking in fresh snow
A lucky glimpse
Of cardinals
Dashing through the trees.
Sparkling crystals,
Steamy breath.
All the glory of winter on display.
But inside,
There are still litter boxes to clean.

BROKEN

by Ryan Slapnicka

What does it look like to break
Not just to crack or feel heartache

When every moment of every day
You relive the words you wish to say

The memories you cherish
That slowly fade
Brings realization to new memories
Never to be made

An emptiness inside that has no end
A burning desire to hold them again

What does it look like to break
Not just to crack or feel heartache

I look in the mirror and what do I see
The person that is broken

Is me

THE CRYSTAL WILLOW TREE

by Angela Maria Snyder

At night the freezing wind
whistles as the frozen rain comes
down with cold clicks and tings to
the windows as I sleep in bed so
soft and warm, breathing in the
fresh scent of newly washed
cotton. The morning dawns
bright with icy ferns imprinting
on the windows. A look outside with
a bright blue sky and the ground
covered in white glass that
sparkles with light. A glance to the
right shows the weeping
willow made of bright clear
ice crystals that tingles and
jingles as the soft cool breeze moves
through the smooth frozen glass. All
through the day it will
play a soft windchime melody
along with bird songs, in
the crisp country air.

ESSAYS

GROWING PRODUCE AND COMMUNITY

by Nancy Kvamme

I have volunteered with the Growing Together Community Gardens in Fargo for the past two summers and plan to continue into the future. Growing Together is a community garden program that started in 2006 to create a safe space for New Americans and to help them grow their own produce. Some of the growing practices that are used in the gardens have come from other cultures by members of the garden. Along with growing produce they can also grow community relationships.

It started with 9 families in 2006 and now there are over 150 families that garden in the six locations. The information on how they started the community garden has been shared with other communities and organizations to help them start gardens of their own.

Volunteers meet for 2-3 hours, one night a week to help with a variety of tasks. Once they have volunteered at least 16 hours they are able to share in the produce that is harvested each week. The produce that is harvested each week is shared between the volunteers in attendance who have met the required number of hours. Depending on the garden and the growing conditions, each individual may get quite a bit of produce each week. Excess produce is donated to local food pantries and other organizations. In recent years, tons of produce have been donated to those in need.

I share a lot of the produce I receive with family and friends. It is a way to help them and also spread the word about the community garden. I am able to freeze a lot of the produce and enjoy it all winter until the next gardening season starts. This helps save money on groceries and I know where it was grown. There are a number of ways to preserve produce such as freezing, canning and dehydrating. I have tried different types of produce that I might not normally purchase on my own. I have enjoyed trying different recipes and experimenting with different types of produce.

One way I have found to use some of the frozen produce is in smoothies. Some items I had not thought of using in smoothies but do now are zucchini, eggplant and squash. The zucchini and eggplant add extra nutrients without much change in the taste. I use squash and squash puree in many recipes in place of pumpkin puree. One of the main items I freeze are tomatoes. Sometimes I make sauce from them and freeze and sometimes I cut up them up and freeze to cook with them later.

By getting produce from the garden I get the health benefits of both being outside and being active along with eating more healthy foods since they are available. Many people may be intimidated by vegetables or not how to cook with them. This is a great way to get people exposed to different types of produce.

There is one garden where produce is grown primarily for the weekly produce sales that are held during the summer. This is an opportunity to share fresh and local produce with the general public and proceeds help with future gardening expenses. There is a family garden that is geared towards families with young children to get them involved in gardening. They feel accomplishments knowing they helped grow the vegetables and may be more willing to try more vegetables. I feel it is important to teach kids about eating and cooking healthier when they are younger so they are prepared to cook on their own when they get out on their own.

Being a part of the community garden is a great way to meet people and spend time outside. Especially after working inside and sitting at a desk most of the day, I get energized working outside. You get to meet people from a variety of different cultures. Some volunteers bring dishes made from the produce or from their culture. I have made many friends by being a part of the community garden.

One thing I like about the program is that you get the benefits of gardening without all of the time, labor and expenses that you would have doing it all on your own. As the saying goes “many hands make light work.” The chores are divided up among the volunteers and are completed quickly and easily. So you only need to work a few hours, one day a week instead of many hours on multiple days if you have your own garden. It is especially helpful for smaller households, as a way to get fresh produce without all of the work and expenses of an

entire garden on their own. It is a rewarding experience to know that you helped grow the produce you are eating.

You don't need to know anything about gardening to volunteer at a community garden. There are others to show you what to do. This is also a great way to learn about gardening if it is new and intimidating to you. Each garden has a team of leaders to help the volunteers know what to do and show them how to do it. What you learn by volunteering at a garden can be used at your home garden if you wish to build one of your own to grow more or certain items or different items than those that are grown at the community garden.

There are six different gardens with different times so you can pick a location and time that works best for you. Once you sign up for a garden you are urged to remain at that garden for the season but may be able to change to different gardens other years. This is a way to meet different people and different growing conditions. The gardens are of different ages and locations so the soil conditions may result in different harvests.

Being a part of a community garden has been a very rewarding experience and I look forward to many more years. I encourage you to check into volunteering at a community garden. I had heard of them for a number of years and finally learned more information about the opportunity and signed up as a volunteer.

A DAY IN THE PARK

by Kate Machacek

The school bus doors barely open before I see Liam bounding down the steps in his light-up shoes and performing a dramatic leap onto the sidewalk. He grins, happy with himself, and jogs towards me with his large backpack bouncing against his back. “Hey! I’m hungry!” he shouts, coming to my side and bumping my leg in the process. I don’t have to look at the child’s face to know that he is giving me puppy-dog eyes, hoping for a snack from the sacred vending machine in the school building beside us. I let out a small laugh and run a hand through his disheveled hair as we go inside.

Moments later, he is armed with a bag of Cheez-its and is practically vibrating with excitement. “Thanks for the snack. I’m starving! Oh, I have so much to tell you. Today in kindergarten, my teacher let us go to recess an extra five minutes and when I got on the swing I swung so high, I’m pretty sure higher than the birds probably...” he trails on for the better part of ten minutes, detailing every encounter he experienced throughout the day. The entire time, he has a jubilant grin on his face, as if it were the best day of his life. Once he finally comes to a close, he rocks back and forth against the back of his chair and glances at my Toy Backpack. “Please, can I look?” he asks, pointing to it. I nod and let him dig through an endless pile of legos, books, and other various objects that were sure to catch his attention. Sure enough, he pulls out a red measuring tape and hugs it to his chest. “Aha! He was hiding from me, but I am too good at finding things. Hey, can I measure you?”

Liam soon grows tired of poking through my bag, and a pout forms on his face as he longingly looks out the window. “I wish I could go outside on such a nice day,” he huffs. He sneakily glances at me to see my reaction. I keep my eyes focused on the zipper of his backpack, pretending to be oblivious to him. He lets out a frustrated sigh. “I said

I wish I could go outside..." he repeats loudly. I press a hand to my ear, initiating one of his favorite games.

"Do you hear something?" I ask him. His face scrunches up and for a brief moment, I think he might cry. Instead, a quiet laugh slips out of his mouth.

"Come on! I know you can hear me!" he exclaims, pulling on my arm.

I snap my fingers in mock-frustration and slap my hand on the table in front of us. "I keep hearing this noise. It sounds just like a little boy," I say, which makes him squeal and wiggle in his chair. I gather my things and stand, which makes him hurriedly do the same. "I can't quite tell what that pesky noise is," I begin, poking his side, "so I guess I'll go out to the playground and see if I can hear better."

Liam gasps and scurries towards the exit, frantically pressing the door opener. I trail after him and let him run ahead of me. He comes to a halt when he reaches the spot where the grass meets the street. He knows he has to wait for me to cross with him, so he clumsily jumps from leg to leg in anticipation. Once I finally reach him, he grasps my hand and looks left and right multiple times before skipping across.

I cherished the times when Liam wanted to venture outside and enjoy the park. These were the moments where I could really sit back and observe the little boy and the curious things he did. Today, it seemed, he was rather fascinated with the dirt worm on the ground underneath the slide.

He has been crouched in the same position for a while now, inching his finger towards the creature and then pulling back. His eyebrows pull together and his tongue sticks between his teeth as he scoops the dirt into little specific piles. He is muttering incoherent phrases to himself, smiling when his brain comes up with something amusing.

Eventually, he builds up the courage to coax the worm into his small palm. After securing it in a gentle hold, he takes small, quiet steps towards me. "Look what I found," he whispers, not taking his eyes off the little guy.

"That's cool, buddy. Did you give him a name?" I ask, amused at his patience and dedication.

He shakes his head and lets the worm crawl across his fingers. "I don't think I can do that. What if he already has a name?" He ponders

that for a moment. “If I was a little worm, I think I would only want one name.”

I nod thoughtfully and study him once more before lightly tugging on his muddy jacket. “It’s time to head inside; do you want to say goodbye to him?”

Liam looks to me and his lip quivers for a brief moment, but he snuffles and shakes it off. He walks back to his original spot by the dirt piles and sets the worm down with a delicate touch, as if it were made of glass. “I have to go now, Mystery Name Worm. I hope you maybe have another friend who will come to play with you. Or you could play by yourself, but I think that would make me lonely and bored.”

With that, he leaves the creature to itself and skips back to my side. He grabs onto my hand as we cross the street again. I have to carefully guide him forward as he tips his head back and stares at the sky.

“Can I ask you a question?” he asks.

“Sure. Anything,” I answer.

He blinks at the clouds a couple of times before looking back at me. “Do you think it will be nice out tomorrow?”

“Probably. Why?” I respond, glancing at his freckled face.

“I just thought if it was sunny and warm and nice the worm might want to play with me again. I think he would want to.”

We take a moment to beam at each other before I gently give his hand a squeeze. “I think he would too.”

SMITTY'S PLACE

by Mike Morrissey

“—Opening of a new barbershop on Main Street, just west of Lind’s Cafe, has been announced by L.A. Smith and K.M. Wisted. The two had operated a barbershop in the basement of the David George Hotel building until recently.” From “Fifty Years Ago, July 9, 1952,” — *Valley City Times Record*, July 9, 2002.

In 1952—I was 12—Dad decided it was time for me to enter the world of work. He had come home from Smitty’s barbershop that afternoon, resplendent in the fragrance of lilac aftershave. There might even have been a hint of Ancient Age blended into the overall aroma. “Mickey,” he says, “How would you like to have a little job to earn some spending money?”

“What doing,” says I, quick on the uptake, but wary of where this conversation was going. I was fond of the carefree life that had come to me through no intention of mine. I had managed to grow a few inches in the past year, and the girls in my class were no longer towering over me. And, the new skyward movement had discouraged a few of the perennial schoolyard bullies happy to take a swipe at me.

“Shining shoes,” says Dad. “Smitty said that if you come down on Friday nights and Saturdays you could make pretty good money. Smitty’s got a shine stand with three chairs and all the brushes you’ll ever need.” In those days, “pretty good money” was a standard used by older folks who had known a period in their lives when it was hard to get two dimes to rub together! I thought about it for a moment, maybe fifteen seconds, and then gave my studied reply—“Naw, I’d rather play with my friends on Saturdays.” I raised my eyes up from their focus on kitchen floor and looked at Dad rather sheepishly. He gazed back, his eyes betraying no emotion whatsoever.

“You start next Saturday morning—Smitty said that all you have to do is furnish your own polish.”

The following Saturday, with a heavy heart, I trudged off toward Smitty's on East Main. My friends were still lagging behind in bed—exactly where I wanted to be. When I arrived at the barbershop I was hesitant to go in. It was not a place that I chose when sent to get a haircut. I knew it to be peopled by a certain strata of our small town society with which I did not identify. In my narrow view of the world they were largely unkempt people, definitely working class. Never mind that I was born into that very class. They were farmers, blacksmiths, plumbers—tradesmen of all sorts. In my pre-adolescent mind, I thought people whose clothes were dirty, greasy, or made from a certain type of cloth, a khaki twill, were somehow not quite up to the standard that I had as a yet-unfocused life goal. Smitty's was not a place mothers and daughters would get their hair cut.

I, on the other hand, wished to be tonsorialized amid that other society who frequented the barber shop on North Central Avenue—men in suits, bankers, lawyers, merchants, shopkeepers and doctors. That was my destination when Mother gave me fifty cents and booted me out the door with directions to “get it cut.”

That first morning—the pleasantries soon over—Smitty introduced me as Bill Morrissey's kid to the other two barbers, and I shuffled toward the back of the shop where my workstation awaited, my mind churning all the while. Suddenly I was staring at an old-fashioned shoeshine stand, three giant steps, where the customer would occupy the top shelf. It took some serious climbing to get to one of the three chairs perched at the top. An assortment of brushes, rags, and old polish tins, contents beyond resuscitation, littered the space beneath the chair legs, untouched in God knows how long. An assortment of dyes used for coloring the edges of the soles of shoes waited in bottles whose applicators had long since dried up. This detritus embodied the tools of my new trade. I stood with my mouth hanging open, wondering what the next step would be.

Smitty seemed an old man to me. He might have been in his late sixties at the time, with a white mane and stubble of the same color. It was his shop; the other two barbers were tenants. He was affable in a formal sort of way and told me I was welcome to use the shaving lather to clean my clients' shoes before shining them. I wanted to slink into the woodwork and disappear. As I sized up my situation I realized the

most difficult part of this job would be soliciting customers—asking whether this motley collection of scuffed shoes and boots would like a shine.

I approached an old man reading a newspaper while waiting for a cut. “You wouldn’t want a shine while you wait, would you?” “Nope,” came the answer.

“That’s not what you say—you say, ‘How about a shine, Mister?’ It’s only two bits,” was Smitty’s advice. And so I tried again. Eventually a farmer in high tops, feeling sorry for the skinny, rag-tag towhead said yes, and a career lasting two years was launched.

My father’s intention in leading me to employment was honorable. He wanted me to learn about the world of work, and where the money I wanted for spending actually came from. But there was a dark—make that shady—side to the employment for which I had been conscripted—one that I would greet with mixed emotions. Among the stacks of dog-eared magazines that had come to their final resting place in the storage space beneath my newly acquired shoe-shine chairs were titles that I had never seen before, never even imagined existed! *True Detective*, *Crime*, *Saga*, *Cavalier*, *Esquire*, and others, the *Playboy* wannabes of the 1940’s and ‘50’s were stacked in random fashion, many with their covers long gone. The magazines opened readily to pages dog-eared from frequent reference.

Soon my presence in the shop was no longer a curiosity to the regulars, and a banter ensued which had a particularly sexual content. This was a new world to me, one of which my father would not have approved. I whiled away long periods between customers, fascinated with the pictures and new information, and there were new stirrings in my body—stirrings not well understood, but I was quickly getting the hang of the cause/effect relationship. One slow Friday night I happened upon a magazine that was all photographs—black, white, and gray tones. There were women with bare breasts, and even more forbidden, full frontal nudity. Something I had only imagined before—ah, sweet mysteries of life—unexpected rewards of employment.

I soon began to reap the financial benefits of the gainfully employed. On a good Friday night and nine-to-five on Saturday, I sometimes headed for home with twelve dollars in quarters. Tips often equaled the price of the shine. I spent the money lavishly: hamburgers

and cherry cokes, comic books, and Pearson's Nut Goodies. One time I bought a whole dozen and took them home and stashed them in a drawer in my bedroom. I took my sister in to see them and her eyes popped out of her head. "Boy, you must be rich," she said. I thought the look on her face reflected envy of the nouveau riche!

Into my thirteenth year I began to loathe my employment situation. Friday nights found my friends at football games or the Teen Canteen in the lower level of the Straus Building. I hated missing the action but knew that I wouldn't be permitted to quit the job without good reason. Suddenly it came to me as I walked home past a baseball diamond. Athletics would be my ticket out. If I played, I couldn't be at work at the same time. In August I informed Smitty that I must quit. I had donned football pads.

A first job probably teaches the most. Little could Dad have imagined that in addition to throwing open the doors of employment, and experiencing the relative value between work and money, he had also managed, unintentionally, to open the shutter slightly to the salacious, the titillating, the exotic and the scatological—a sneak peak, if you will, at the world of soft porn, such as it was over a half century ago. During the next forty years jobs came and went. Reasons for being hired and quitting have faded into the mists. Details of many of the jobs that I held escape me, but the memories of first one are etched forever in my memory; they may even survive dementia.

SHORT STORIES

THE BOY AND HIS DOG

by Zachary Kuhlman

The boy and his dog were partners in life and adventure. Scout was as loyal a dog as there ever was. He first came to the Callaway household in a cardboard box with a red and black blanket stuffed in the bottom. Scout, who was black and white, eagerly explored his new home starting with the front yard. His nose vigorously worked over the warm pavement, the apple tree, and the front steps. Once taken inside he left no corner unventured and no scent unsmelled. He surveyed the entire living space like he was on a mission, and that was how he got his name.

The boy, Mark Callaway, came home with his mother that afternoon to the surprise of the new, furry family member. At least, he acted surprised when the puppy sprouted its face from the box, its brown eyes windows of curiosity, but he had known what was inside the moment he saw it. Mark followed the spirited Border Collie all around the yard and the house. He was so enamored with the creature that he didn't even mind the nonstop lecture his father was giving. It's your dog which means your responsibility. If he makes a mess you clean it up. You feed him, you walk him, you bathe him; that's the deal.

Mark Callaway had no intention of shirking his chores where the dog was concerned, and everything he did for the dog was a labor of love. Once done exploring, the newly-christened Scout approached Mark, and from that moment on they were best friends. The boy belonged to his dog as much as the dog belonged to his boy.

Scout had boundless energy, and it was well-spent in the company of his new family. They played old favorites like fetch, but the best games were the ones they made up themselves. Scout especially had a talent for hide and seek. He played both parts well even if he did become predictable (he always hid under the porch until he grew too big to fit). Mark and Scout explored the woods, the town square, the local parks—anywhere that would allow a dog. Mark was always safe

when biking around town, and Scout accompanied him obediently on a leash even though it went against his rambunctious, audacious nature.

In Cyprus Park, Mark and Scout would race across the green past the tennis courts and the baseball diamonds. Mark always won because Scout was a sporting gentleman but he knew that Scout could run to beat all hell. Their races spanned the entirety of the park, and at the end, Mark would collapse. His trusty bike would crash to the grass, and Scout, panting breathlessly, would lick the sweat off of Mark's face while he giggled with little protest.

Scout was popular with many of the kids around town, none more so than Henry Matthews. Scout was amiable and gentle with Henry. One afternoon, on their way home, Scout ran ahead of Mark and put his paws up on the Matthews' fence. He barked, but it was a soft bark, a beckoning. Even before Mark caught up with Scout, Henry was already across his front yard clamoring to see Scout. The dog smiled in the way that dogs do, his tongue lolling out like a little pink streamer.

"Hi, boy," Henry said, panting a little bit just like Scout did after a particularly hard race.

Scout barked his own greeting and licked Henry's face. The skinny boy laughed and rubbed Scout's ears in return, the dog pivoting to give him better reach.

"He likes you," Mark said. "You're the only other person he licks like that besides me."

"He's such a good dog," Henry said.

Mark looked at the little boy on the other side of the fence, took him in. Henry was a scrawny kid. Mark's dad had once said that a soft breeze could take that kid sailing around the world twice, and Mark's mom had gently slapped his arm to admonish him. Henry was a few years younger than Mark and didn't go to school. They only knew each other through the friendship that their mothers shared. One boy from Mark's class had called Henry a weirdo because he was homeschooled. Even if Henry had attended school with Mark they would have been separated by three grades and that spanned an eternity in kid years. Mark never saw Henry playing with any other kids, and an idea occurred to him.

"You wanna come to the park with us sometime?" Henry's blue eyes sparkled in the Saturday sunlight as he looked up. In the brightness

of the day, Mark was taken aback by how sunken Henry's eyes looked. The boy's face was almost hollowed out like a cavern.

"Gee," he said, softly. "I'd love to but I couldn't."

"Scout would love to run around with you," Mark offered. "Run, fetch, race—whatever you want."

"I run errands all day with my mom," Henry said. "And I'm too tired to do anything when we get back." His face had turned downcast which was immediately remedied by Scout turning his ears for more friendly scratches.

Speaking of his mother, Mrs. Matthews called for Henry from inside their house and then made her way outside. "Oh, hello, Mark."

"Hello, Mrs. Matthews."

"Henry, would you come inside, honey? And, Mark. Please tell your mother not to worry about snacks for our book club. She's hosting the next meeting and I don't want her to worry about a thing. Please let her know I'll bring a snack tray."

"Yes, ma'am," Mark said. "She'll be happy to hear it."

"She deserves a break from it," she said. "Henry, come inside."

"Well, gotta go," Henry said. "Who's a good boy?"

Scout knew he was the good boy and he reveled in it.

"See you later, Scout," Henry said, smiling wide. It made his face look fuller.

"See ya," Mark said, climbing back aboard his bike. "Come on, Scout. Come on, boy."

Scout gave an agreeable bark and stepped in line beside Mark.

"Is he your best friend?" Henry said. Mark looked back at him but before he could reply Henry answered his own question. "He must be." Then the boy turned and walked across his yard to the house.

When they got home, Scout and Mark collapsed under the shade of the apple tree in the yard. They had raced down the block as they rounded the corner. Mark won again but he gave Scout a couple of doggie treats as a consolation prize. Scout considered himself properly consoled. As Mark leaned against the rough bark, Scout thumped down beside him in the charming way that he had. His angular head rested on Mark's knee. The tongue was currently tucked away, and instead of panting, he wagged his tail placidly. It was the very start of autumn.

The dog days of summer were over, figuratively and literally, and the dying daylight started to coalesce around them like red dust.

One morning a few weeks later, Mark awoke with Scout predictably awake and watchful at the foot of his bed. Seeing his boy up, Scout's tail started thumping once more, and his tongue lolled out in that dog-smiling way. After morning chores and lunch, the two of them were out the door, the reminder from Mark's mother to be home by five o'clock fluttering behind him.

"And watch for traffic on your way home," his mom called out after him. "That construction on Main Street has gone overdue so more cars and trucks are coming down this way on the detour."

"I will, Mom."

He and Scout made dust on their way to the park. When the pair arrived, Mark's circle of friends had already gathered. They spent the entire afternoon playing baseball, not on one of the diamonds but in their own little patch of green. It was an impromptu game and not under any official regulations.

They all agreed that Scout was the best player among them even though he had no tangible grasp on the rules. This afternoon though, they kept no scores. The only competition was to see who could have their ball retrieved from the farthest distance by Scout. Mark never worried about him going too far or going where he shouldn't. He was an old hat at fetch and always came when called. He ran up and down the small hills in the park and weaved through the trees and bushes like a black and white streak threading a needle. He bounded through the fallen leaves which were thrown into the air and cascaded down again in showers of red and gold and orange.

One by one, the kids started to leave until only Mark and Scout remained. All the bats and balls missing didn't spoil their fun though. As was their tradition, they raced. They ran until Mark's heart was pounding like a jackhammer in his chest and the cold air burned in his overworked lungs. But he didn't feel tired, only elated.

"You pulled ahead there, boy," Mark said, panting. "You're lucky I didn't have my bike." Scout scurried around Mark in a circle, barking and eager to start the race again. "Whoah, boy. Alright, should we race back to the bike?"

Scout barked his answer.

“On your mark, get set—go!”

Mark’s mother needn’t have worried for him. He remembered her warning about the heavier-than-normal traffic flow in the neighborhood and had Scout leashed as he pedaled his bike at a leisurely pace. As they approached Henry’s house, Scout whimpered in anticipation and tried to pull ahead.

“Don’t worry, boy,” said Mark. “We’ll stop and say hello.” As soon as they rounded the corner Scout had his paws up on the yard fence and barked his hello. There was no reply. Mark stopped and held himself upright on his bike with one extended leg. Little Henry didn’t come running across the yard as he usually did. Scout whimpered, his brown eyes scanning across the house and then fixating on the door. He barked again.

“I don’t think anyone’s home, Scout.” Mark looked at the dark house with its curtains drawn, looking stubborn. He thought about knocking on the door, but there were no cars in the driveway so he thought it pointless. “Come on. Come on, boy.” Scout followed but whined and drooped his ears and head.

“Hello,” Mark called into the house when he and Scout returned home. There was no answer. He stopped in the kitchen to hydrate himself and he grabbed a treat for Scout. “We gotta stay fueled up. Right, boy?” Scout’s answer was to munch on his bone. Mark was going to get himself a snack too when he noticed a note on the refrigerator. It had been scribbled by his mom. It said, Gone with Laura Matthews. There was an emergency. There’s meatloaf in the fridge. I’ll be back tonight.

That was why no one had been at the house. What emergency could have happened? How could his mom help? Mark then thought of Henry—whittled down and weary with those dark circles under his eyes. He decided he had no appetite, not even for his mother’s meatloaf.

They lay slouched on the couch and watched cartoons. Mark sat dead center in the middle of the sofa, and Scout claimed a patch of the sitting room next to him. He curled up atop the red and black blanket that had adorned the box which carried him to the Callaway house some years ago. Mark’s mother wasn’t home until late. He had just decided to call her when she came inside. Her face was red, and Mark realized

this wasn't the result of the incoming cold of winter but a flushed face raw and tired from crying.

Three days later, the Callaway family minus Scout attended the wake for Henry Matthews.

"Can't Scout come?" Mark had asked.

"No, honey, not this time."

"But Henry loved Scout," he had pleaded. "He'd want him to be there."

"Now's not the time," his mother has said more firmly. "The dog stays at home." The dog. She had a habit of addressing Scout that way when she was getting irritated, so Mark left it alone.

Mark was surprised at the number of cars in the parking lot. The lot was so packed that the cars spilled out, lining the adjoining streets like a long steel snake. The Callaways parked two blocks away and walked to the funeral home, a stout brick building, professional and stately. This was Mark's first experience with death, and he was taken aback by how formal it all seemed. People milled about, talking casually; they formed a line and respectfully waited to enter the building.

"The whole town is here," his mom said.

Dad agreed with her. "And more. Lots of folks from the surrounding townships are showing up today."

"Oh," she replied, her lip quivering. "Poor Laura. I don't know if I'd be up to grieving around so many people. The poor thing must be exhausted."

Sandwiched between his parents, Mark looked around at the myriad of faces. Many were strangers to him, and he figured they must be relatives. The whole town couldn't be here, could it? Not really? He reconsidered as they entered the building which was overflowing with people like a pot of boiling water. Mark's mother signed all three of their names in the guest book, and when she moved on, Mark carefully printed Scout's name in also.

The line moved slowly but steadily through the foyer, then a sitting room (although no one was sitting), and then finally into a wide-open space that was adorned with framed pictures on rows of folding tables. At the front of the room, Laura Matthews stood with her husband. They were flanked by a forest of bouquets—wreaths, stands, planters, and baskets made a colorful variety. Majestic gladioli were side by side

with red and pink carnations. White and yellow lilies were joined by pink and purple orchids. Completing the rainbow of colors were red roses, more beautiful than the notes of sympathy scribbled along with the floral arrangements. The floral tide was a symphony of remembrance and praise, all for a little boy. Scout's nose would have been working overtime in this room; Mark felt like he should be here.

Behind the mourning couple was a dark brown wooden casket. Mark thought it was an ugly thing trying to look pretty. No amount of polished brass or smooth, sleek steel and woodwork could change what it was. It was made for one cold, pragmatic purpose. Mark shuddered.

Their little family of three approached the open casket, Mark somewhat furtively. He didn't really know what to expect as his eyes came up and over the edge. There was Henry Matthews, delicate as ever, but there was something different about him. His cheeks didn't look sunken anymore, there was more vigorous color in his hair and in his face. His chin was set up as if he was lying there defiantly, and no dark circles plagued his eyes which were closed in resigned rest. Despite an inauthentic, waxy appearance, Henry Matthews looked... good. A beautiful mirage.

They greeted Mr. and Mrs. Matthews who thanked them for coming. Mrs. Matthews said that she was moved by how Henry's death had brought so many people together. Mark felt like he should say something too. "I'm sorry," he said simply. "Henry was always really nice to me and my dog."

Mrs. Matthews smiled, and Mark noted how she looked tired yet resolute, strong. "Sometimes seeing Scout was the highlight of his day. Thank you for coming, young man."

They moved along to make way for the tide of people behind them yet to pay their respects. They visited with the presiding minister and a couple of other people that Mark didn't know. The talk was all very serious and hushed.

"Mom?" Mark asked when they were alone, walking back to the car.

"Yes, sweetheart." Her voice was still hushed as it had been inside.

"Is Henry all better now?"

His mother smiled at the honest curiosity in the question. "Yes, sweetheart. He's perfect now."

“He looked all better,” Mark said. “Didn’t look sick anymore. He’s not sick anymore?”

His mother nodded.

“There were so many people there,” Mark said in wonder, thinking about what Mrs. Matthews had said.

“Well, Henry’s story affected a lot of people. He was very sick, and it’s very sad that such a young boy should have to endure so much pain.”

“If he’s in heaven did he see us inside there?” Mark asked. They stood by the car now. His father, perhaps uncomfortable with the conversation, sat in the driver’s seat and started the ignition. His mother knelt down in front of him, caressed his face, and then rested her hand on his shoulder.

“Funerals are for the living,” she said. “We weren’t there for Henry today. We were there for Mr. and Mrs. Matthews. All of Henry’s problems are—I won’t say solved, that’s not quite right—but they’re gone. He’s gone and resting in heaven. But his parents are still here and suffering; it was our job today to show them that they’re not alone.”

“How do we know he’s in heaven? And not in pain anymore?”

“Faith, sweetheart,” she said. She stood up and repeated, “Faith.” Mark thought she was done, but his mother added one more thing. “You know that you did help Henry, right? Those visits with Scout were really important to him.” She got in the car.

Mark tried to play with Scout when they arrived back home, but his heart wasn’t in it. Instead, he laid down on his bed. The Collie laid down with him, a sentry of solidarity on top of his red and black blanket. Life went on.

Months passed and the school year dragged on. Mark had school work due and half-heartedly wished Scout would try to eat it, but Scout stayed true to his nature of a good boy. The bike and the baseball mitts gathered dust in the storage shed as they waited out the snow. Mark still walked Scout to the park, but it was often too cold for their usual adventures. Scout wasn’t very good at making snowmen but he loved playing in the snow all the same. So while the pair didn’t lounge under the apple tree, they spent plenty of time in the front yard barreling through the snow like a couple of tornadoes. Scout even accompanied

Mark to the neighborhood hill and ran down alongside him, not content to let Mark have all the fun on his bright red sled.

On a fine spring day toward the end of the school year as Mark pedaled his bike home from school, he thought how the backpack slung across his shoulders was a burden not only on his back but on his wanderlust. Why should he be cooped up with history and spelling homework all weekend when he could let loose in the fresh air of the park? He realized when he pulled up to see his mother sitting on the front steps of the porch that something was wrong. She had been crying. She stood up and wiped her eyes in one motion.

“Mark, sweetie.” She inhaled, steeling herself to let the bad news out. “There was an accident. Scout has been hurt.”

Mark knew what she was saying but was in a haze. Through the fog of his panic, he realized they were in the car and driving somewhere. They were going to see the veterinarian; that was where Scout had been taken because he had been hit by a delivery truck. The vet will fix him up, Mark told himself. That’s what vets do. In the boy’s mind, Scout spending the summer anywhere but by his side was an impossibility.

The veterinarian, a woman with kind eyes behind a pair of glasses, welcomed them as soon as they arrived.

“Where’s Scout, ma’am?” Mark asked. There may have been introductions, but Mark currently had tunnel-vision.

“He’s right here in the back, Mark,” the vet said. “Now, I have to be straight with you. Scout is very badly hurt. You may not want to see him.”

“Of course I want to see him.” Mark started to cry. “He’s my dog.”

The veterinarian looked at Mark’s mother, asking permission. Unable to find her voice, his mother nodded almost imperceptibly.

That can’t be my dog, was the first thought Mark had once the veterinarian had ushered them into the back room. The dog in question was lying on a table, on top of and partially covered by rough blankets. Once closer, Mark examined the suffering creature. His black and white fur was matted and discolored with blood clotted black and brown. His right shoulder and right side of his head were misshapen and pushed down at the wrong angles. As a result of this, his jaw sat unaligned with his tongue permanently flapped out even though he wasn’t panting. His

breathing was slow and rough. His forelimbs were also disfigured, the right one a mass of pulp rather than a paw.

“Scout.” It came out in a shuddering squeak.

Reacting to his name, the Border Collie tried to turn. Instead, he let out a rough whimper followed by harsh breathing that sounded like he had sandpaper lining his throat.

“Don’t move, boy.” Mark quickly shimmied around the table so that Scout would be able to see him. “What’s wrong with his eyes?”

“I’ve made Scout as comfortable as I can, Mark,” said the vet. “I have him on some painkillers. He just looks like he’s far away, but it’s perfectly normal. He knows you’re here, and that’s comforting him.”

“Really?”

“Really,” the vet assured him. “I’ve had to keep an eye on him this entire time because he kept trying to move. But with you here he’s calm. He’s under a great amount of duress right now. Mrs. Callaway, this is always a difficult thing to discuss, but we need to talk about euthanizing Scout.”

That was a big word; Mark couldn’t even dream of a word like that being on his spelling test. Mrs. Callaway stepped forward as she pulled out Scout’s red and black blanket which Mark hadn’t realized she had brought from home. She covered Scout’s upper torso. “It’s really that bad then?”

“I’m afraid so. His shoulder blade and hip are crushed, on impact, I believe. Also, his ribs have broken and have pierced his lungs and possibly other vital organs. Right now staying alive is a terrible struggle. It’s causing him immense pain just to breathe.”

“What’s gonna happen to him?” Mark asked.

The vet gave Mrs. Callaway a look and held one arm out. Her expression asked, do you want to explain or should I? The veterinarian looked more than willing to play the bad guy, but there are some responsibilities that mothers don’t shirk off. She knelt down in front of her son. She looked him in the eye and placed her hands lovingly on his shoulders.

“Mark, Scout has been very badly hurt. He’s hurt so badly that it’s only a matter of time before he dies.” Mark cried, his face scrunched up as the tears fell from his face to Scout’s. “Mark, the most important

thing you can do is be here for him right now. But it's time to say goodbye."

"No," Mark thought he said but he really didn't know if any audible word could be heard through his weeping.

"Young man," the vet interjected. "I know this is a hard thing. Do you know what your dog wants more than anything in the world?"

Mark shook his head.

"He simply wants to be with you. An animal's love, especially a dog's love, is pure and unconditional. Has Scout always been there for you? Hm? Maybe waiting for you to come home?" Mark nodded. "And did he ever comfort you when you were hurt or sad?"

"Yes," Mark said. He thought of the time when he'd fallen from his bike and scraped his knee and both arms on the pavement. Scout had licked the wounds and whimpered the whole time as if the injuries were his own. He thought of the time he'd been home from school with Influenza and Scout had never left his side, curled on his bed. His food and water had needed to be brought to Mark's room because Scout refused to leave except to do his business in the yard. All because he thought I needed him, Mark thought. But I still need him. I can't say goodbye yet.

"Mark, the method we use is just like going to sleep. It's peaceful and painless," the vet said calmly. "If you want to help Scout, the best thing for you to do is be here with him. He needs to know you love him. That will be enough, and then he'll be asleep."

"Sweetheart, do you understand everything we've been saying?"

"He can't die, Mom!"

She offered him comfort as best she could. Mark reluctantly agreed. Even as the vet brought out the needle, he prayed in his heart of hearts that this wasn't happening. He fervently prayed that he was about to wake up, and this nightmare would fade away like mist exposed to sunlight. He prayed that the veterinarian was wrong and that Scout was going to heal up. Maybe he wouldn't be as spry as he used to be but he'd get better. He prayed that death would pass over his dog as it passed over the Israelites in Egypt—only it was Scout's blood on his old blanket that was holding it at bay in place of lamb's blood on a door frame. He prayed that death would swerve around him like a deceitful

curveball. Scout was his dog. And he prayed that neither God nor death would touch him because he wasn't their dog.

Even for all the pain engulfing him, Scout's eyes were resolutely affixed to his boy and he was calm. Mark placed one hand under his chin and stroked his matted head with the other. Scout was secure in his homecoming blanket and before he took his final breaths he licked Mark's shaking hand, offering the comfort that Mark felt he was ill-equipped to receive.

Then Scout was still. Scout was gone.

Mark sat silently while his mother completed the necessary paperwork, and then they were on their way home. Mark clutched the red and black blanket in white-knuckled fists. It was all that he had left of Scout now, and Mark was determined to hold on. He did relent, however, when his mother took it to wash it. His mother promised him he would feel better with time, but he didn't see how that could be possible. She told him that this feeling was normal too.

In a week's time, the vet mailed a postcard with two sets of Scout's pawprints. Mark tacked them onto his bedroom wall, where he could see them from the bed, and that did make him feel better because now he had something else of Scout's. The pawprints were a literal record of his best friend.

A couple of weeks later, Laura Matthews rang their doorbell and visited with Mark's parents for some time. Mark returned from school on that day, and Laura greeted him warmly.

"Hello, Mrs. Matthews," Mark said.

"Mark, I was so sorry to hear about Scout. I know he was a special dog."

This halted Mark and made him feel very small. Her still recent grieving made her condolence more meaningful, more poignant.

"Thank you, ma'am."

"I loved that dog too," she said, "in my own way. He made my Henry smile. Some days he was in such pain, some days he was hellishly fatigued, but he always made the effort to see good ol' Scout."

"Scout loved him too, Mrs. Matthews. He gave him puppy kisses every time he saw him and the only other person he did that with was me."

“Really?” She did seem pleased with this, contemplating Henry and Scout’s friendship. “Thank you for sharing that with me, Mark.”

The presence of Mrs. Matthews that afternoon sparked a thought in Mark, and he decided to ask his mother about it.

“Mom, is Scout in heaven?” It was an honest question; he knew they’d never covered it in Sunday School.

“Well, sweetie.” She sorted words in her head, hoping to say the correct things. “I guess the Bible doesn’t really say. But I can tell you what my momma told me.” Mark looked at her expectantly. “She said that animals, especially pets, never sinned, not really. Even a naughty puppy that tears up the trash is just doing what’s in its nature.”

“So, she believed pets go to heaven?”

“I think she did.”

Mark nodded.

Contrary to his mother’s intentions, Mark didn’t find much comfort in this answer. He just tortured himself with the thought of how lonely Scout must be on the other side. He thought of when his father had brought Scout home for the very first time and told him how Border Collies needed extra love and attention. Those first few nights, Scout had whimpered and cried because he was alone. He wasn’t potty trained and therefore wasn’t allowed in the house overnight. Mark had taken a sleeping bag and pillow and nestled on the garage floor beside the pup who had been whimpering out in the dark, afraid and alone. Mark only hoped that wherever Scout was now that it wasn’t dark, but was he alone in the void of death? Being alone seemed a terrible fate for any creature whether it was dark or not.

That night, Mark had difficulty sleeping. It was getting lighter now, and sometimes Mark woke up and saw the sky turning different hues of purple and orange as the sun started its daily journey, cresting the horizon. Sleep almost pulled him back under its sheet, but he was ultimately unwilling. Mark walked through the dark house with the deft familiarity that one naturally acquires in their home. He slowly opened the screen door so it wouldn’t scream into the still-sleeping house. He looked up and down the driveway and then the street and wished there was a bundle of black and white barreling toward him. Clutching the old red and black blanket, he sat down and leaned against the apple tree and imagined that Scout’s head was resting on his knee.

Then Mark heard something—a bark! Mark sat up as straight as a fence post. It was the excitable kind of bark that Scout employed at the start of a race. Then he heard the pattering sound of feet rapidly running across the blacktop. The rushing sound he heard was twofold. There were two sets of feet gliding across the asphalt, fleeting but solid. Mark could hear them getting closer and walked to the front yard fence to get a better look. Underneath the golden, purple dawn sky two figures were approaching. Mark told himself he had to be dreaming then because what he was seeing was impossible.

Running side by side in rhythmic harmony, awash in dawn's light and the orange glow of the street lamps, Henry Matthews and Scout were bounding down the street. It was a race, Mark saw, and he couldn't take his eyes off Henry. The boy who had been so frail in life, winded by jogging down the slope of his front yard, was now full in frame and vigorous. Henry's legs pumped with the strength of pistons firing. His hair, longer now and somewhat darker and fuller, slid off of his forehead and flew back behind him. His face was smooth and full, not the washed-out pit with dark rings under the eyes that Mark remembered. With seemingly no strain at all Henry braked, pivoted, and started running the way he had come.

Mark watched the two of them leave and come back again. This time he watched Scout whose eyes and coat of fur shone like the sun. He was perfect now like he was before the accident. The white triangle that angled up directly between his eyes was sharp, and the early morning sunlight glinted off his clear, brown eyes. His ears were discordant, one sloping back as he ran and the other perking up toward Henry, tracking the boy's joyous laughter. His mouth hung open revealing his tongue waving like a flag along with shiny, white teeth and pink unspotted gums. His tail streaked out behind him, a black and white rudder that steered wherever Henry beckoned.

Mark walked to the fence and leaned against it, taking them in so he'd remember. He thought about how racing had been his favorite thing to do with Scout and how Henry was now running almost faster than Mark had ever gone on his bicycle. Scout kept perfect pace with the boy. Their feet carried them in an adventure that Mark could not yet share.

He turned to go back inside but felt one last tug. Looking back again, he saw the pair of them standing and looking at him. Henry smiled a perfect smile and waved. Scout looked at him, head cocked, with pure contentment on his face. He seemed to be smiling as he barked his farewell.

Mark held in his heart the memories with his best friend and was grateful for them. He could stop worrying about where Scout was; he simply wasn't here, but that was alright. Mark knew that somewhere the boy and his dog were partners on a grand adventure, and that was enough for him.

BIG HOUSE IN THE LITTLE WOODS

by Kristin Stadther

I decided I wanted to move our family to Casselton. Close enough to not have to change our jobs, but far enough to get out of the city. As a teacher, I wanted them to stay with the same classmates kindergarten through graduation. This was how my husband and I grew up, in Minnesota and South Dakota, and here, in North Dakota, our children would flourish too.

After a year-long search without the right forever home, my husband decided we could afford to build a new one. The foundation was dug and poured in October and covered for the winter. In the Spring, the home would be raised and we could move in. Our son and daughter, aged five and three, were apprehensive about leaving our little blue house tucked into West Fargo amongst many other homes and apartments. They were won over though, when we showed them the acreage out the front windows, their future “Squirrel School”, and the seemingly ocean sized reservoir to bike around.

We put our blue house up for sale, and in less than two weeks it sold. We sighed in contentment. In four months, summer would be here and we’d finally show our children our bigger house. A room for each of them, a kitchen that opened to the living room, and a basement with room for guests to come and stay with their own bathroom. I would have a sewing room, where my fabric and gift wrap could explode out of the closet if I wanted.

Covid arrived first.

School closed. Stores and restaurants closed. We spent our days with my husband holed away in the playroom, busy with zoom meetings and multiple computer screens. I put my laptop on the kitchen counter, replying to student requests for help while cutting up yet another apple for a kid’s snack. I couldn’t take the kids to their activities, couldn’t take them to the mall to enjoy a meal I didn’t cook. No one let their kids on playgrounds. When April came it was so wet

outside you could only take your kids on bike rides. One of my students called me crying because she wasn't sure she could complete her work alone in time to graduate.

I felt as if I was an insufficient teacher and mother.

"Just a minute—Mommy needs to finish this email."

"Go *play*! I need to get this done!"

The news said we needed to wear masks. We didn't even know where to buy one. They said not to go to the grocery store more than once a week. We lived a few blocks from one, and were used to going much more often to get fruit and milk for our young children. We stocked up on frozen foods, and my mom mailed us masks she had made herself.

No more church. No more movies. A weekly group zoom call was arranged between my college friends so that we could support each other. We talked about how scary it would be to lie face down on a hospital bed, suffocating. My friends who were nurses told me how they cried after helping patients call their loved ones for the last time. Birthing mothers weren't allowed to bring anyone with them. After a few months they were allowed to bring one, which forced them to choose between their spouse and their mother during the most vulnerable time in their life.

The news said masks wouldn't protect you from catching the germs, but it would stop the spread between people. Some didn't want to wear masks. Someone parked a semi-trailer in a field off the interstate and crudely spray painted "No MAsK! FRee yOuR FACe!"

Eventually May arrived and my brother-in-law was engaged to be married the end of the month. He'd been dating his fiancé for a year and I was ecstatic to finally have a sister-in-law to accompany me to all of the family gatherings. They had asked our children to be the ring bearer and flower girl. I was so excited for all of the professional photos that would be taken of them.

Covid was still on the rise in May. Gatherings were limited to 50 people. Funerals were limited to 10. My grandma was hospitalized, and all I could think about was how if she passed, I wouldn't be allowed at her funeral.

My husband told his mother that the kids would not be coming to the wedding. We would come in masks for the ceremony only. She hung up on him in anger and disappointment.

That June we quarantined for two weeks so that we could visit my retired parents. For a whole week at the lake, everything felt normal. We ate ice cream, swam, and roasted hot dogs over the fire. No masks. No temperature checks.

We moved into our big house in the little woods. I didn't know if we should approach our new neighbors, but they solved the conundrum by initiating conversation from their yards. As moms we decided to let our kids play outside together without masks, but that there would be no indoor playdates. My children hadn't played with other kids since the beginning of March. They threw themselves wholeheartedly into their new friends' ball games and driveway races.

A week later a neighbor let me know her children had been exposed to a positive case of Covid at daycare, so we would have to keep the kids separated for two weeks. I don't know who was more devastated, the kids, or me.

The summer felt like one step forward, two steps back. Covid numbers rose. It was announced schools would be open in August. My husband's company demanded that everyone return. Across the country, schools were virtual learning only. Offices were remote work only. North Dakota decided to press on anyway.

Our family stayed healthy. We enjoyed sledding in our backyard. We made crafts and went ice skating. We relished our time together. No rushing around. No weekend road trips cooped up in the car. I didn't peel our daughter off of my leg so that I could go see my friends.

She would ask, "What are we doing today Mommy? Are you gonna leave?"

"No," I'd answer, "It's Saturday. We're gonna play-play-play all day!" She'd cheer and I'd help her get her dress up clothes on.

At Christmas we declined the invitation to attend the large Christmas family gathering. After, Grandma sent us a letter explaining how not to live in fear and to trust in God.

I tried to teach my high schoolers with my previous years' enthusiasm. We all wore masks. At first I gave a lot of cheesy thumbs ups, but I eventually figured out they could tell I was smiling at them

by looking at the crow's feet by my eyes. Instead of contacts I wore my glasses, since we were told this would keep the germs out of our eyes. Teachers had to eat alone in their classrooms every day so that we wouldn't get each other sick. I made all of my curriculum paperless so that my students and I wouldn't share germs. So far, I've cleaned my students' tables and desks 487 times this school year to keep them safe. I have prompted them to move their mask up over their nose only a handful of times. They have been understanding and kind to each other. However, this is the quietest our halls have ever been. They do not tease, they do not playfully swat their crush on the arm. The only joke they make about the pandemic is calling it a "panini" or "panoramic". Us teachers are tired of wearing masks, tired of the extra work. When one of my students has to leave school to quarantine, I worry about them until they return.

My grandma received her vaccination! My parents received their vaccinations! I received my vaccination!

My husband has his first of two shots. Our dr. says there won't be one for young children for two years. We send my son to school for his first day of kindergarten, just two days over a year from the date Covid arrived. Unlike other kids' first day of school pictures, it is a cloudy March day. I take his picture in front of the school with his red mask on and neither of us cries.

Soon our children will visit their grandparents indoors. Soon the kids will take pony riding lessons. My husband will go on a work trip. And me? I will be walking our dog down our street, gazing at the trees. I will wave at our friendly neighbors. I will say a brief prayer thanking Him for good health, vaccines, and our new home.

North Dakota presses on.