



# WRITERSTALK

Volume 28  
Number 12  
December 2020

Monthly Newsletter of the South Bay Writers Club™

## Happy Holiday Greetings of Every Kind: Happy Hanukkah, Happy Diwali, Happy Spirit of Kwanzaa, and Merry Christmas

DECEMBER MEETING INFORMATION

### Holiday Memories

by President Edie Matthews

Celebrate the Holidays! In lieu of our annual Holiday Party, this year we invited members to submit a short reminiscence of the season to *WritersTalk*. This edition of the newsletter is dedicated to this purpose. We asked members to share a memory of baking Christmas cookies, decorating the tree, opening your favorite Hanukkah gift, children waking you at 4 a.m. to open gifts, or skipping the fuss and sleeping in.

Twenty-three responses to our invitation appear in this issue of *WritersTalk*. Our “speakers” are listed below. Just pretend that they’re reading to you. The twenty-fourth article, “Fantasy Mirrors Reality” by Evie Preston, gives you some holiday reading: 100 best fantasy books, starting with *One Thousand and One Nights*.

- 5 Forest Yule: Renée Anderson
- 5 Santa Down the Driveway: Marjorie Johnson
- 5 Holiday Spirit: Jamal Khan
- 6 Christmas in Chile: Marcela Dickerson
- 7 Pasties & Tourtière: Edie Matthews
- 7 Tripped Up: Colin Seymour
- 7 The Old Coal Stove: Mary Miller Chiao
- 7 Memory of a Christmas Memory: Luanne Oleas
- 7 Christmas is Alive and Well: Betty Auchard
- 8 Christmas Lutefisk: Dave Strom
- 8 My Never-Special Birthday: Kelly Harrison
- 8 Santa’s Garage: Linda King
- 8 Christmas Day 1956: Jac Fitzenz
- 9 Fantasy Mirrors Reality: Evie Preston
- 9 Gift from a Homeless Stranger: Russ Towne
- 11 My Favorite Christmas: Bill Baldwin
- 13 Christmas in Connecticut: Monte Lorenzet
- 13 A Bicycle for Christmas: Bonnie Vaughan
- 13 Christmas in Pennsylvania: Vanessa MacLaren-Wray
- 13 Selecting Our Christmas Tree: Apala Egan
- 14 Fighting Fire on Christmas: Jill Meryl Levy
- 14 So It’s Christmas: Karen Thomas
- 14 Silver Lady, Tiny Lady: Leslie Hoffman
- 14 Hannukah on Thanksgiving: Valerie Estelle Frankel

Zoom meetings will resume on Monday, January 11, with “On Writing Humor” by Stanford Professor Ed Porter. See more in “View From the Board,” page 4.

Zoom Meeting Recap: November

### Heather Chavez

by Bill Baldwin

On November 9th we were delighted to hear Heather Chavez, author of *No Bad Deed*, share her insights on the craft of *pac-ing* in novels. Of course, long narratives ebb and flow. How do you maintain the right pace in your writing?

Heather has achieved the dream we all hope for: A contract with a prestigious publisher (William Morrow) for *muchos dolares*. Her thriller came out this past February.

Now well into middle age (and proud of it!), a graduate of UC Berkeley, a member of the Redwood Writers branch of the CWC, Heather had already written multiple novels (she calls them her “practice books”) and hundreds of thousands of words. Does this sound familiar? Many of us, I suspect, have done the same!

But an incident at her daughter’s school — several boys attacking another boy — drew her into a project that moved her in a way none of her previous writing had. Until then, she hadn’t felt strongly about her novels. This time she *did*.

She worked through four drafts, and then, the day before her birthday, two years ago, she got her contract. You have to believe in yourself!

*No Bad Deed* is a thriller, but not all novels need to be fast paced. You need find the speed *you* think the story should move at. How quickly should your story advance? What will draw your readers into your story and keep them reading? If you move too quickly, you may lose your readers; too slowly, and they may get bored. You want a balanced ebb and flow.

Consider: As the story develops, events happen. These events have consequences — both physical and emotional.

*Continued on Page 4*

# Presidential Message

Edie Matthews

President, South Bay Writers



## Writing Influences

Childhood memories leave a lasting impression. People, places, and experiences play a role in our creativity. Writers often draw from them, incorporating them into their work, and adapting them as needed. I suspect that's why most of us have vivid memories of our earliest Christmases ...

The holiday season took over downtown Los Angeles. After exiting the bus and walking a few blocks down Hill Street, we'd arrive at Pershing Square, the heart of downtown. One December, beneath the warm skies, an ice skating rink was set up among the royal palms and banana trees. Under an open tent, Christmas music played and skaters from the Ice Capades entertained holiday shoppers.

The department stores designated corner windows to Christmas scenes. Crowds, with children's noses pressed against the glass, hovered in front of the display to enjoy holiday scenes. Some portrayed a cozy living room with Santa setting out toys under a glittering tree, as an electric train traversed the parameter. Others stores had elves hammering in Santa's workshop; some had Sugar Plum Fairies pirouetting and toy soldiers marching to music from *The Nutcracker Suite*.

In Barker Brothers, not one but two gigantic trees greeted customers. The trees towered above the mezzanine and held ornaments the size of beach balls.

Economically my family struggled, though I never felt self-conscious, since there were others far worse off. At least, we lived in the largest house on the block, a tired but noble Craftsman, that I loved and felt secure in.

Several Christmases there were no funds for a tree. However, we had a backyard filled with fir trees. On two occasions my dad chopped one down as a substitute. I hated those scratchy trees that were difficult to decorate.

We had traditional colored lights and bubble lights and loads of delicate bulbs. One year, we strung popcorn, but most of it got eaten by us kids before it could be threaded into a garland.

Those were the days of tinsel. For the best effect, you had to patiently put the strands on a few at a time—tossing them onto the branches made a mess.

Once we had a tree so tall that my mother worried it would topple over. So, she ran wires securing it to the wall. I hated those unsightly wires.

*Continued on Page 6*

## INSIDE

### Holiday Memories Throughout

View From Board: M. Johnson	4
Meeting Collage: C. Donnell	5
Off the Shelf: E. Matthews	6
Fantasy Mirrors Reality: E. Preston	9
Les Prose Comics: K. Roberge	9
Contests and Markets: C. Donnell	10
Calendar	15

## Wishing everyone a Cool Yule and a Happy New Year

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### SBW Mission

Educating writers of all levels of expertise in the craft of writing and in the marketing of their work.

### Join Us

We have a membership category that fits you. Renewal dues are \$45 for membership through June 30, 2021. Dual membership, \$25; student membership, \$20. New member, \$65. Contact Membership Chair at a meeting or sign up online at [southbaywriters.com](http://southbaywriters.com) or send a check to CWC-South Bay Writers, P O Box 3254, Santa Clara, CA 95055.

## WritersTalk

The monthly newsletter of South Bay Writers, the South Bay Branch of the California Writers Club

email: [newsletter@southbaywriters.com](mailto:newsletter@southbaywriters.com)

### Managing Editor: Interim

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### Deadline

Submissions are due by the 15th of the month.

### Submissions

SBW encourages writers at all levels of expertise to submit their creative works for publication in *WritersTalk*. All submissions should be sent to the above email address in the form of text or an attached MS Word file (sorry, no hard copy submissions can be accepted). Please prepare your work as carefully as you would for an agent. Use Times New Roman 12-font; no tabs; no colors; no page breaks. Send graphics separately as jpg files, with separate instructions for placement in the submission if placement is important.

All submissions will be copyedited. Titles and headlines subject to change. Managing Editor reserves the right to selection.

**Suggested word limits** (less is more):

**Member Achievement / News** (200 words)

**News Items** (400 words)

**In My Opinion** (300 words)

**Letters to the Editor** (300 words)

### Creative Works

Short Fiction/Memoir (1800 words)

Poetry (200 words)

Essay/Nonfiction (1000 words)

### Reprints

Authors retain all rights to their works. *WritersTalk* gratefully acknowledges the authors' permission to publish their works here. Contact individual authors for permission to reprint.

### Announcements

An announcement is information of interest and value to writers that does not provide direct economic benefit to its originator and is published free of charge.

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Also, we cannot accept political advertising of any kind.

**Change of Address:** Send changes of address to [membership@southbaywriters.com](mailto:membership@southbaywriters.com)

**Circulation:** 150

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# Words from the Editor

Marjorie Bicknell Johnson  
Interim Managing Editor



## Got verbs?

Does the title of this editorial evoke an image of a thesaurus wearing a milk moustache? A few years ago, those "Got milk?" commercials made someone rich, but the magic was in the graphics, not in the writing. Got is a workhorse verb with fifty-six definitions but no personality and no story.

- Mary got a new red dress and got a pedicure with red toenails to match, but she got the flu and couldn't get out.
- Bob got the job, got the money, and got twenty years for embezzlement.
- Harry got moving, got to New York before noon, got in on the ground floor.
- The bullet got her in the leg; her tears got to me; somehow her secret got out.
- She got up early, got information from Google, and then got ahead by sheer determination.

Got the picture?

However, too much "got" in writing leads to mental fog because got is so imprecise. And it doesn't help to replace got with had because has/had has thirty-eight definitions.

Many one-syllable verbs are as imprecise as got and every bit as ubiquitous. For example, "took" takes up eighteen and a half column inches in my unabridged dictionary, with "set" setting on seventeen and a half inches, while "got" has got a paltry fifteen. However, the champion seems to be "run," running through more than three full columns—thirty-three inches with one hundred seventy-one definitions.

Got the idea? Writers who got to the root of the problem have stronger stories because they replaced some of those "gots" with more precise and colorful verbs.

When you've got the words, send them here, [newsletter@southbaywriters.com](mailto:newsletter@southbaywriters.com). (This address should always lead to the Managing Editor.) And now that you have a polished story, check out Carolyn Donnell's Markets and Contests page.

Now that it's time to hand over *WritersTalk* come January, maybe I should tell you what I got out of membership in South Bay Writers and the privilege of being Managing Editor.

I joined SBW in 2002, shortly after signing up for a creative writing class with Edie Matthews. I'd had a lot of experience contributing to academic mathematics journals, but I wanted to write something for fun, something that others might read. SBW offered me opportunities to meet other writers and to attend lectures and workshops on the craft of writing. I have become the proud author of three novels. Also, I have made friends among the writers, valuable contacts for support and camaraderie.

As to being Managing Editor (2011 – 2017 and September 2020 to date), I had a chance to grow as a writer and learn new ideas. My forty years on the Editorial Board of *The Fibonacci Quarterly* and my eighty-nine published mathematics papers had little carry-over to the world of creative writing. I have taken pride in making this publication as error free and pleasant to the eye as possible, and I will continue to help with its production. The short explanation is, I got fun.

Now you've got to keep writing, and I've got to run. — WT

*Thought for the day: Easy reading comes from hard writing.*



Continued from Page 1

## Heather Chavez

These consequences lead to further actions—and further consequences. As you progress through the story, you will sometimes want to speed up, and sometimes want to slow down, to linger a bit.

Pay attention to your speed (like a good driver)! You have action, you have dialogue, you have description, you have shifts of plot, point of view. A cliffhanger can propel the reader into the next chapter—but you don't want to use these too often; it becomes repetitious and predictable—and melodramatic.

Consider how a reader will speed up or slow down as you build sentences or paragraphs or scenes. As you shift from action to description to dialogue. As sentences or paragraphs or scene grow longer or shorter. As you surprise them or shift point of view.

Active voice and action verbs accelerate; passive voice can decelerate. Diversions into back story, flashbacks, and introspection can slow the reader down—but sometimes you *want* to do this.

Start strong, and orient readers quickly. Get the significant stuff in up front. In your first draft, write at the pace that seems natural to *you*. During later editing, you may realize that you want to adjust the pacing.

Heather, who lives in Santa Rosa, answered questions on many topics at the end. Examples:

- Three-Act Structure works often—but not all the time! Don't feel you have to use it.
- She has her own writing schedule—but yours will come out of your own home situation.
- She has written a second book. No Hollywood offers *yet*—but *No Bad Deed* has certainly moved her along. —WT

## View From the Board

by Marjorie Johnson

On November 4, 2020, the SBW Board met online on Zoom. Those present: Edie Matthews, Marjorie Johnson, Trenton Myers, Inga Silva, Tatyana Grinenko, Alfred Jan, Bill Baldwin, Janet Patey, and guests Carolyn Donnell and Renée Anderson. Jamal Khan sent a report.

Many of our website issues have been dealt with. If you find more, please send a list to Tatyana Grinenko at [webeditor@southbaywriters.com](mailto:webeditor@southbaywriters.com).

Renée Anderson has stepped up to be Managing Editor of *WritersTalk* beginning in January. Send submissions for January to her at [newsletter@southbaywriters.com](mailto:newsletter@southbaywriters.com). She has much more experience and expertise than I did when I took on WT in 2011.

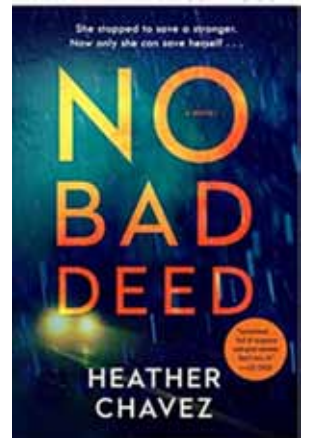
Jamal Khan reported on upcoming speakers for our second Monday Zoom meetings:

- January 11: Ed Porter, Stanford Professor: "On Writing Humor;"
- February 8: Cara Black, *New York Times* Best Selling Author: "On Writing a Series;"
- March 8: Bill Belew, Website Guru: "Find and Engage Your Readers;"

South Bay Writers, Zoom, Monday, November 9

On right, top Page 5: Collage by Carolyn Donnell

Below: November Speaker, Heather Chavez



### Editor's Comments on Heather Chavez recap:

At the meeting, I would have liked more time to read Heather's slides because I wanted to learn from her presentation. If she returns to South Bay Writers, I would suggest that she make shorter slides and take more time with each one. Having copies of the speaker's notes available would have helped me.

Let me say that I do hope that Heather **does** return to SBW.

I read her book, *No Bad Deed*, and I discovered some of her secrets. She writes in first person and is adept at portraying body language and feelings. Strong action verbs throughout made a thriller that I couldn't put down. I would like to hear a presentation from her on how to use body language in writing. —WT

- April 12: Lee Anne Krusemark, New York agent and publisher: "Manuscript Formatting and Submission Do's and Don'ts: Avoiding Simple Mistakes That Can Cause Rejection."

Bill Baldwin is still active with Open Mics on first and third Fridays. (Except December, when there will be none on the third Friday.) Contact Bill at [WABaldwin@aol.com](mailto:WABaldwin@aol.com).

The next Board meeting is Tuesday, December 8, 7 p.m. on Zoom. For your invitation, contact President Edie Matthews at [pres@southbaywriters.com](mailto:pres@southbaywriters.com). Come to a Board meeting to let your concerns be heard. —WT

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### An Apology from Marjorie

I apologize for the frustration you experienced when trying to contact me regarding the short holiday memories. While I did put my email [marjohnson89@earthlink.net](mailto:marjohnson89@earthlink.net) into the Chat at the November 9 Zoom meeting, many people tried to use the [newsletter@southbaywriters.com](mailto:newsletter@southbaywriters.com) address which did not reach me. Thanks to Kelly Harrison, many of our website problems have been addressed, including correcting the email contacts in our masthead on Page 2. —WT



## Holiday Memories

### Forest Yule

by Renée J Anderson

In Denmark the winter solstice is a sacred day. More, it is a sacred night, for it is the longest night of the year. At that northern latitude, where my family and I lived for 15 years, by December 21, memories of sunshine are fleeting and vague. What little light pushes through December's thick cloud cover is glimpsed through office windows, or on weekend walks in Hareskov forest or along the marsh trails.

One winter solstice night, my ten-year-old daughter and I went to the woods with our flashlights. Vivian was a young scout and had learned how to start a fire with a tinderstick. We went with bags of jasmine tea, insulated cups, a campfire kettle, and fresh, pure water. In no time, we were huddled with the dark forest all around, the aromatic cups of tea warming our hands.

We sat in silence as breezes riffled through barren branches, stirring dead leaves at our feet, awakening the invisible life around us. In that solitude, every sound had its moment, its importance. An icy blade of moon slipped through the clouds and vanished again. The fire spoke to us: *God Jul*, it said. —WT

### Santa Down the Driveway

by Marjorie Johnson

My parents made Christmas festive. My mother baked star-shaped cookies and fruitcake, always a special one for me because I'm allergic to walnuts. My sister, five years younger, and I wrote letters to Santa listing what we wanted most from the *Sears Christmas Catalog*; I helped my sister write hers.

Santa always came while we ate dessert after a Christmas Eve dinner. My father would excuse himself and disappear, then reappear in the living room and announce Santa's arrival.

Our decorated tree would have stacks of wrapped packages, one of them mine from Santa, the rest pajamas made by my mother and small gifts from aunts and uncles.

On the Christmas Eve when I was ten, I saw Daddy running past the kitchen window carrying a gunnysack. The next day I caught him alone and asked, "Daddy, are you Santa Claus?"

"You're a big girl now, so I'll tell you a secret," he said. "The daddy does that for the people he loves."

I never told my sister. —WT

### Holiday Spirit

by Jamal Khan

We are approaching the holidays to close one of the most turbulent years in recent memory: impeachment, corona virus, civil unrest, and an election like no other. It is time to gather with friends and family to look back, reflect, and count our many blessings.

In my case, there was a marriage in the mix, so I have a bigger family to celebrate with this year.

New family members came from elsewhere too: my nephew was born a little over a month ago. When he was told about the electoral results in key battleground states, he broke out into an expression of utter glee as he clutched his beloved Baby Yoda. It's hard to believe that I am now an uncle.

I think back to holiday events in previous years, which were attended by relatives who have since passed on. As one generation gives way to the next, holidays give families a chance to pause from the grind of school and work and treasure loved ones. As the adage goes, no one ever says on their deathbed that they wished they had spent more time at the office. —WT



## Presidential Message: Writing Influences

My friend across the street had the latest fad: an aluminum tree with a revolving color wheel placed on the floor nearby. When I described it to my mother, we concluded even our scratchy tree was better.

The Nativity set was always honored by being placed in the center of the mantel. To my mother's chagrin, all of us kids took turns rearranging the figures.

In the days of "dime stores" (Woolworth's, Kress's, etc.), Nativity statues could be purchased individually. There were shelves filled with selections of St. Joseph, Blessed Mary, Baby Jesus, the three Magi, and shepherds, etc. I can recall my mother carefully examining each figure before making a decision.

My mother explained that one of the Three Kings was wearing an ermine cape. "Ermine" was a new word for me. The only place I'd seen this white fur with black patches was on royalty—like on Queen Elizabeth II in her coronation portrait. In it she is wearing the Purple Robe of Estate topped with an ermine cape. The other Kings are somewhat generic, except for the Black King who wears a turban.

The gifts for the infant included gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Some years later I learned that frankincense and myrrh were incense, and that I had smelled frankincense at celebratory masses. It's burned in a thurible (a metal container) suspended from a chain. The priest gently swings the thurible, disseminating its scent. Gray smoke emanating at the same time symbolizes prayers rising to heaven.

Myrrh was used to anoint royalty at coronations. Catholics put it in holy oils for Baptisms, blessing the sick, the Last Rites, or consecrating someone or something (e.g., communion cup) to God's service.

It wasn't unusual for our Christmas decorations to be up past New Year's, Three Kings Day, and even Chinese New Year. My mother, who would never rival June Cleaver, was not a nifty housekeeper. I recall late in February her walking into the front room and saying, "I really need to take down the Christmas tree." —WT

## Christmas in Chile

by Marcela Dickerson

Grandma's well-worn three-story house shone and sparkled throughout from the smaller rooms and tiny bathrooms upstairs through the larger bedrooms and Grandma's quarters on the second floor. The long oak staircase had a polished banister kept shiny by children sliding.

The stairs descended majestically into the reception area that still kept some of the old splendor.

The grand wood-paneled foyer held a few red velvet chairs and a tall half table by the door to the entrance with a silver tray on it. It was used to keep the cards of the visiting guests as well as the incoming and outgoing mail, with coins to pay the mail carrier.

The wall to the left displayed the magnificent oil painting of a sea battle between two sailing vessels, one in flames and the other shooting huge black metal balls from big cannons set in gunports below deck.

The main entrance had Tiffany-style colored windows on both sides, matching those in the piano room, where the traditional Christmas celebration was held. Those doors were closed until the very last minute, and we could hear the giggling from our aunts and uncles inside while they finished the elaborate preparations.

It was too bad that Grandpa could not see this, especially the glass display case in the studio. It kept his medals and naval ceremonial hat, the same hat he had worn when saluting the last Kaiser, Wilhelm II, on behalf of our country. Our Grandpa died of cancer in his late forties after a distinguished career that brought him to his position as Mayor of the city of Valparaíso. He left behind a wife and ten children. The city had provided the house for the family as recognition of his devotion and hard work. None of this impressed us as he had died before we were born.

Grandma's house was huge, a fun place, with lots of cousins to play with, great places to hide, and two very elderly nannies who had taken care of our mothers and now spoiled us rotten.

Continued on Page 12

## Off the Shelf

— Edie Matthews



"You have to admit, the Ghost of Christmas Past looks good."

"She's had work."

# Holiday Memories

## Pasties & Tourtière

by Edie Matthews

Our family gathers on Christmas Eve. In addition to exchanging gifts, the traditional menu features pasties and tourtière. This is a custom passed down in my husband's family who are descended from the English and French-Canadians.

Jim was born in Negaunee, Michigan, a mining town in the upper peninsula. Many of the miners immigrated from Cornwall, England where pasties originated. These meat pies resemble an apple turnover. It was convenient for the miners to take them to work and heat them on a shovel placed over a lantern.

*Tourtière*, also a meat pie, originated in Quebec. They are a combination of beef, pork, and occasionally veal. It's baked in a large pie pan and also served at Christmas.

There are no set recipes for either of these meat pies. The most common filling for pasties is beef and potatoes. They are always served with ketchup.

I've added my own touches to both. In addition to chopped sirloin, my pasties get onions, grated carrots, turnips, and spices. The tourtières are filled with ground meat, mashed potatoes, grated carrots, chopped celery, diced tomatoes, and plenty of spices. —WT

## Tripped Up

by Colin Seymour

I'm not a habitual liar, so please let me explain these two early 1970s exceptions. Both occurred during Christmas visits home to Oregon during my turbulent college years in Missouri – and both times the person I lied to was my mother.

But, why? I could tell her anything. You could even talk to her about sex.

Nevertheless, until now, I've never confessed that I appropriated six classical recordings while I was home for Christmas freshman year. I didn't know they belonged to the family friend who occupied my bedroom that year. It was an honest mistake, but when my mother asked about Jeff's missing records, I lied anyway.

Two Decembers later, alone four days with our dogs in Salem amid gloom and gasoline shortages, I carelessly left a sterling silver fork where our old Bedlington terrier found it and chewed it. My mother never did know what became of it.

As I take stock, with her gone but the records and the mangled fork within reach, you may sense latent hostility in the mix. I admit I was emotionally over-extended, but I blame the harried pace of the holidays.

So give me a break. It won't happen again. —WT

## The Old Coal Stove

by Mary Miller Chiao

On Sunday, December 19, 1948, fourteen inches of snow fell on Long Island, New York. I was four years old. We had recently moved into a two-story house on several acres in Glen Cove. My mother had wanted the old Kalamazoo kitchen stove replaced. It had four gas burners on the top right surface and a cast iron box on the left that could burn either wood or coal.

Snow had fallen all night. When I rose in the morning and looked out the window, the white glare hurt my eyes. I dressed and hurried down the stairs. Dad put on tennis racket-type snowshoes to walk to town for groceries and the Sunday paper.

We spent the day decorating the large fir tree that we had chopped down the day before from the forest behind our house.

Just before bedtime, the lights went out and the oil-burning furnace quit. Dad went outside and filled a bucket with lumps of coal from the pile left by the previous owner. Then he cut the Sunday paper into scraps and placed it in the stove box with coal on top. After several attempts with matches, the coal started to burn, and warmth filled the kitchen. Our mattresses were placed on the floor where we slept comfortably. My parents took turns staying awake to add coal to the firebox. My mother never complained about the old stove again. —WT

## A Christmas Memory of A Christmas Memory

by Luanne Oleas

Mom has been gone for several Christmases now. Sometimes I think of the quilted tree skirts she made, or how she kept all four of our childhood Christmas stockings. Or how her rum balls would rate you legally impaired on a breathalyzer test.

Every year, when we arrived at her house, she would be listening to *A Christmas Memory* by Truman Capote on the radio. It features a woman with shorn white hair—like my mom's—standing at the kitchen window.

"Oh my," she exclaims, her breath smoking the windowpane. "It's fruitcake weather." —WT

## Christmas is Alive and Well

by Betty Auchard

Christmas never changes even though at the age of 90 I have changed a lot. Now I order gifts online. I purchase real pine wreaths because the fake pine needle spray actually smells fake. Someone in the family pulls out the boxes of decorations from under the stairs and I let them put things wherever they want to. My real live Christmas tree is small and sits in the middle of the dining room table. Holiday music is always in the background and eggnog is in the fridge. I also have a huge wreath hanging on the front door so my neighbors know I'm alive and well. —WT



# Holiday Memories

## Christmas Lutefisk

by Dave M Strom

When I was growing up, I lived on a small side street, with my mom and dad and three brothers. Also, in three other houses, were uncles and aunts and cousins. Every Christmas Eve, we met in one of the homes and had dinner.

One year, when I was pre-teen, the dinner was at my Aunt Barbara's. As Cousin Rod and I walked to Barbara's, he said with his usual sarcasm, "Here comes the worst meal of the year." I peeked into the kitchen. On Aunt Barbara's stove was a pot holding a gallon of simmering white stuff with a smothering fishy odor. Lutefisk. I had never tasted it. I decided I'd try it.

At the kids' table, my plate had veggies cooked to purgatory, hell, and beyond. One sluggy slice of potato sausage to prove I was Swedish: it did not make even one tastebud wiggle. Boiled potatoes with white sauce. Swedish meatballs: yummy, but would be better with patriotic, American ketchup. Savory ham. And one piece of lutefisk.

Imagine a blobby, bottom-feeding Swedish cod ("Yah, blub!") Its flesh soaked in lye for six months to kill it down to its soul. Its DNA spliced with unflavored gelatin. A glistening, translucent glob now quivered on my plate. I stabbed it with my fork. As a science fiction geek, I expected to hear an alien ultrasonic shriek of pain. Nothing. I forked it into my mouth.

My soul screamed, "WHYYYYY?!?!" My mind stated, "This will steal your soul via osmosis if you do not eliminate it fast." I was too old to spit it out, even as it slimed my teeth and gums with a hint of fish flakiness. My squirming tongue had nowhere to retreat. My throat sang, "Here I come to save the Dave!" It opened and sucked. Lutefisk sloooooozed down my gullet. My tummy knotted, unknotted, and said, "Dave, please do not do this to me ever again."

My super-heroine character, Super Holly Hansson, has green lutefisk as her kryptonite. Now you know why. —WT

## My Never-Special Birthday

by Kelly Harrison

My birthday has never been special. Most people, wrapped up in holiday chores, forget. Even my twenty-first. I was in England visiting my boyfriend (now husband), staying with his parents. That morning, we drove into Birmingham. We parked and walked and shopped until exhausted. In a crowded Argos (similar to the catalog showrooms Best and Service Merchandise), we bought and then waited for our merchandise to arrive on the conveyor belt.

"A parking ticket! Here," he said frantically handing me coins. "Go pay for more." I'd paid no attention to the maze of turns that got us here. "You go. I'll stay." They were taking so long, I figured he'd get there and back ten times before we got our goods. And then I waited. And waited. Alone. I searched for him in the crowd that seemed to grow and grow, and I grew anxious. By now, he'd abandoned me, with no passport or much money. An eternity later, the gifts arrived and I shuffled to the exit, dejected. But the doors had been locked!

The store had closed early, and there in the British cold, he stood with a bouquet of flowers. "Happy Birthday!" —WT

## Christmas Day 1956, Hawaii

by Jac Fitzenz

I was a Naval Intelligence Officer in a nuclear guided missile squadron in Barber's Point, Oahu, Hawaii.

On this day, everyone was off duty somewhere celebrating. I had no family there, so I decided to play golf.

The course was open, but there was no one on it. I teed off and started walking the course. It was a sunny, windless day in the 70s.

About halfway through the round a midsized, brown dog of unknown breed came trotting toward me. I stopped and petted him, talked to him and invited him to come along.

For the next round and a half he walked along with me and we chatted. When we finished, I thanked him for joining me.

He looked at me, wagged his tail and trotted off. I guess he was alone that day, too. —WT

## Santa's Garage

by Linda King

I was five, a joyful blur of straight bangs, freckles and buck teeth. I am lucky that 70 years later, I can remember my Christmas thoughts as a kindergartner.

I adored my father. He was a righteous man. As a child he had taken a solemn vow to never tell a lie, just like Honest Abe.

Most men in 1950 would be disappointed to have fathered three daughters and no sons. Dad assured me he wanted nothing more than just his three girls.

The 1950 holiday season in West Los Angeles was a time of great optimism. The darkest days of the Depression and WWII were behind. Daddy was rapidly working his way up the economic ladder. Before the war he made his living as a day laborer, working jobs plastering in booming Hollywood. Now he owned a tiny concrete block factory sited right across Ballona Creek from an MGM Studios lot.

Dad worked hard and had managed to earn enough to buy mother a fur coat for her birthday. It was not mink — only muskrat — but we loved sitting in Mom's lap and stroking the soft fur.

On Christmas morning, 1950 we three girls ran into the front room.

There were so many gifts Santa had not bothered to wrap them all. Stockings at the mantel were filled with whole nuts and candy kisses. At the toe there was always an orange, not a toy, a bit of a disappointment.

Mom and Dad finally woke up. Together we ripped open all the packages and strewed the floor with paper and ribbon, and heaps of toys and clothes and school supplies — enough to last a whole year.

Then Dad announced with feigned surprise, "Look! Santa brought something special!" He reached under the tree and pulled out a little gift the size of a matchbox. The label said, "From Santa To Peg," our mother. Curiously, a string came out of the box and disappeared into the mess on the floor.

Mother unwrapped her gift and held up a key. I was disappointed — for a five year old, a key is nice, but not the best of gifts.

*Continued on Page 12*



## Fantasy Mirrors Reality – Perfect for the Now World

by Evie Preston

Who knew that Fantasy – my least favorite genre – comprises much of the greatest literature of the ages? More surprising is that I've read so many of these stories as both a child and adult!

"N. K. Jemisin on the Timeless Power of Fantasy," published in Time, Oct. 15, 2020 (<https://time.com/collection/100-best-fantasy-books/5898000/nk-jemisin-fantasy-novels/>), is a fantastic (sorry!) assessment of the genre's staying power. Jemisin presents a panel-selected top-100 "best fantasy books of all time" from the ninth century on, with synopsis and commentary for each. Who doesn't know and love the clever Scherherazade who started things off? And *One Thousand and One Nights* is one of the first-known printed books.

As I recently lamented some lost classics of my youth, many of the fantasy favorites continue to transcend their original print versions to be reborn and re-appreciated as operas, movies, picture books, theme park attractions, even moving right on to video games. In fact, some Disney remakes have earned their own classic status.

Jemisin's article begins, "The world is stories." Especially in these fraught times, stories help us understand how to navigate

and deal with the reality of our world. Jemisin writes, "C.S. Lewis sought to comfort children with faith. Philip Pullman disturbed them with warnings of encroaching fascism." Aimed at children and young adults, much of the genre appeals equally to their parents. Think Harry Potter!

So many titles depict people who are hungry to confront reality and sort the polarizing messages with tales that offer a lasting effect. Many more deal with a need to change institutions and confront leadership while the diverse backgrounds of fantasy authors warn us of societal strife all over the world. Good guys, bad guys, win or lose, instruct and acknowledge reality. Battles wage whether due to real governments or dark, mythical Lords, in tales that help define who we are. Happy endings depend on the strength and repetition of all those loudly told stories that are so much more than mere entertainment.

All dressed up in magic, with singing swords and flying carpets, the ills of the world are transformed by hobbits, unicorns and elves. Fantasy is a training manual for children and a refresher course for grown-ups. Visit old friends below and learn more about new lands and people through these works of lasting enlightenment and sheer delight.

<https://time.com/collection/100-best-fantasy-books/> – WT

Editorial comment: How would you have chosen the 100 Fantasy titles? What do all these fantasies have in common? Joseph Campbell answered that question for myths in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*.

### HOLIDAY MEMORIES

## Gifts from a Homeless Stranger

by Russ Towne

I almost didn't notice her as I drove past on the way back from last-minute shopping for forgotten items for Christmas dinner with extended family. She was alone, lying on a sidewalk on Christmas Day. The sight broke my heart.

I drove to a tiny neighborhood store to find food for her. The selection was poor: a banana, a small carton of milk, and a pre-made meal for a child's school lunch. It was a meager offering indeed.

I didn't wish to frighten the woman, so I parked across the street and held the items up so she could see I had food. I noticed that her head lay within a few feet of several chickens of various colors and breeds on the other side of a wire fence. I said, "Excuse me."

She jerked upward, arms defensively crossed in front of her face and chest. I slowly walked toward her holding out the food. A smile lit her face as she eagerly accepted the humble items and thanked me. Unbidden, a rush of words poured forth as often happens when lonely people are offered a friendly ear. She said she lay near the chickens because she liked them and they made her feel safe.

"People like you are stronger than me, but I'm trying to get stronger," she stated in a matter-of-fact way, explaining she was addicted to crystal meth. She proudly added that she was

*Continued on Page 11*

## Les Prose Comics

by Ken Roberge (Kendad)



# Contests and Markets

by Carolyn Donnell



Carolyn Donnell  
Contributing Editor

Let us know if you have any success with any of the contests listed in Writers Talk. (Or any other contest for that matter.) Send your writing victories to [membernews@southbaywriters.com](mailto:membernews@southbaywriters.com). You can also check other branches for their

current contests or submission requests. See a list of other CWC branches at <https://calwriters.org/cwcbranches/>

To members of our Facebook group, South Bay Writers Club: see contest postings and other notifications.

### Listings are for information only. **NO VETTING** has been done by South Bay Writers Club. Some contests have been around for a long time and the reputation is known but some are newer. Please read all guidelines carefully before submitting. And please share any experience you have with them. Good or bad. ###

## CONTESTS WITH UPCOMING DEADLINES

**Writer's Digest:** Short Short Story Competition. Deadline, 12/14. Check out their website for next year. Also Annual Writing Competition. Deadline: May 7, 2021.

<https://www.writersdigest.com/writers-digest-competitions/>

**Regal House Publishing** current contests and submissions:

<https://regalhousepublishing.submittable.com/submit>

Terry J. Cox Poetry Award: Nov. 23, 2020 – Jan. 31, 2021

## 2021 St. Martin's Minotaur/ Mystery Writers of America First Crime Novel Competition

St. Martins Press and The Mystery Writers of America are hosting a novel writing contest with a \$10,000 prize, to be awarded as an advance against royalties. Open until January 1, 2021

St. Martins is an imprint of McMillan, one of the major publishing houses; this contest offers a chance to land a publishing contract earning well more than the \$10,000 advance.

<https://mysterywriters.org/about-mwa/st-martins/>

## RESOURCES: LOCAL AND OTHER CWC BRANCHES

**The Literary Nest:** A local online publication. See details for submissions at <https://theliterarynest.com/>. Also visual art high res .jpeg, .gif, or .png to the [literarynest@gmail.com](mailto:literarynest@gmail.com)

**Sand Hill Review:** Stories, non-fiction articles, and poems. <https://sandhillreview.org/>

**Catamaran Literary Reader:** Quarterly literary and visual arts journal. Fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and fine art. Submissions year-round with quarterly production cycle. <https://catamaranliteraryreader.com/>

**Fremont Area Writers:** Their webpage lists contest announcements, publications seeking submissions, freelance jobs, resources for screenwriters, genre organizations, and AWP Association of Writers and Writing Programs. See at <https://cwc-fremontareawriters.org/resources-writers/>

**West Trade Review:** Reading period Apr. 1 – Jan. 2. Original and unpublished fiction, poetry, and photography <http://www.westtradereview.com/submissionguidelines.html>

## OTHER CONTESTS AND SUBMISSIONS:

**The Blue Nib:** Essays/Journalism, Reviews, Poetry, and Fiction. They pay for items accepted for print but not for digital. <https://thebluenib.com/submit-to-the-blue-nib-2/>

**The Write Life:** 31 Free Writing Contests with Cash Prizes. <https://thewritelife.com/writing-contests>

**Sequesterum Literature and Art:** "competitive, paying market which publishes high-quality short fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and visual arts on a rolling basis." Previously unpublished. Nominal reading fee. Can subscribe. See link for details. <https://www.sequesterum.org/submissions>

**Poets & Writers:** See upcoming contests/deadlines here. [https://www.pw.org/content/upcoming\\_contest\\_deadlines](https://www.pw.org/content/upcoming_contest_deadlines)

**Association of Writers and Writing Programs:** <https://www.awpwriter.org/contests/overview>

**Electric Lit:** Free or Cheap Resources for Emerging Writers <https://electricliterature.com/free-or-cheap-resources-for-emerging-writers/>

**The Writer Magazine:** See their list of upcoming contests, articles, resources and you can subscribe to their newsletter. <https://www.writermag.com/contests/>

**The Vincent Brothers Review:** Submissions in fiction, non-fiction and poetry: \$25 per accepted item. Also on this site: Deanna Pickard Memorial Prize, a poetry chapbook contest for women over 50 who have not yet published a chapbook. <https://vincentbrothersreview.org/submissions/>

**2021 Effie Lee Morris Literary Contest:** WNBA-SF Literary Contest, Deadline March 31, 2021. Nonfiction, fiction and poetry. First Place \$200; Second \$100; Third \$50 and publication on the San Francisco WNBA website for 90 days. <https://wnba-sfchapter.org/2021-effie-lee-morris-contest-get-ready/>

## RESOURCES FOR POETS:

**Writing Matters:** 30 Publishers of Poetry Books & Chapbooks. <https://randallssanctuary.wordpress.com/2020/08/11/publishers-of-poetry-books-chapbooks/>

**Up The Staircase Quarterly:** Submit 3-6 poems in a single document. Submit up to 10 .jpgs for art. No previously published poetry, but previously published artwork is okay. <https://www.upthestaircase.org/>

**Poets & Writers:** Lists poetry and other contests. [https://www.pw.org/blogs/prize\\_reporter](https://www.pw.org/blogs/prize_reporter). Also lists literary magazines. [https://www.pw.org/literary\\_magazines](https://www.pw.org/literary_magazines)

**The Thimble Magazine:** A quarterly online journal. <https://www.thimblelitmag.com/submissions/>

**Authors Publish:** Poetry Manuscript Publishers. No fees. <https://www.authorspublish.com>

**Poetry Pacific:** Literary e.zine, 2 issues per year, Spring and Fall. Published and unpublished welcome as long as you still have the rights. <https://poetrypacific.blogspot.com/>

**Trish Hopkinson:** a blog. <https://trishhopkinson.com/where-to-submit-reprints/>

**Ace World Pub:** Submission lists. <https://aceworldpub.com/ng/category/latest-opportunities/>

**Poetry Foundation:** <https://www.poetryfoundation.org>

**Everywriter: The Best Poetry Prizes.** Lists poetry prizes and competitions.

<https://www.everywritersresource.com/best-poetry-prizes/>

#### Some Facebook Poetry Groups:

- Poetry Center San Jose - PCSJ
- Willow Glen Poetry Project
- Cupertino Poet Laureate
- Santa Clara County Poet Laureate
- Los Gatos Poet Laureate
- National Poetry Month-write a poem a day challenge
- California Poets
- How Writers Write Poetry Community Group
- No Fee Calls for Poems
- SF Creative Writing Institute drop-in poetry workshops

#### OTHER RESOURCES: (\* Both Internet and Facebook.)

- *Poets & Writers*:\* Lists contests and grants.  
[https://www.pw.org/content/upcoming\\_contest\\_deadlines](https://www.pw.org/content/upcoming_contest_deadlines)  
<https://www.pw.org/grants>
- *MWA NorCal Chapter*: \* Mystery Writers of America  
<https://mwanorcal.org/>
- *Women's National Book Association: San Francisco Chapter*: \*  
<https://wnba-sfchapter.org>
- *The Write Life*: \* Contests. <https://thewritelife.com/writing-contests/>
- *Funds For Writers*: Contests, submissions, grants, etc.  
<https://fundsforwriters.com/contests/>
- *Freedom With Writing*: \* submissions, contests, jobs, and more. <https://www.freedomwithwriting.com/>
- *Authors Publish*: \* <http://www.authorspublish.com/>
- *The Best Writing Contests* curated by Reedsy <https://blog.reedsy.com/writing-contests/>
- *NewPages Classifieds*: <https://www.newpages.com/>
- *Hidden River Arts*: Book award deadlines listed at <https://hiddenriverarts.wordpress.com/>
- *ProWritingAid Writer's Community*: Facebook group
- *Writers Post No Fee Call for Submissions*: Facebook group

#### The Ultimate Grammar Cheat Sheet

ProWritingAid Presents: The Ultimate Grammar Cheat Sheet. The page at this link presents an overview of several grammar problems such as dangling modifiers, comma splices, sentence fragments, misusing the apostrophe with "it's", vague pronoun references, and unnecessary commas, and also discusses confusing words: less or fewer, then or than, affect vs. effect, complement and compliment.

Another section discusses alternative words for emotions including happy (from glad to euphoric); sad (gloomy, forlorn, depressed); angry (from offended to enraged); surprised (confounded, shocked, stunned); and confused (muddled, flustered, baffled, or bewildered).

See more at <https://tinyurl.com/CheatSheeturl>

Also, you can download a free ebook, *20 Editing Tips*, from <https://prowritingaid.com/en/Landing/WritingResources>

*That's it for this month.* — WT

The road to Hell is paved with adverbs.  
— Stephen King

## Contribute to History in the Making

*Reported by Apala G. Egan and Carolyn Donnell*

Historians will be analyzing and writing about the COVID-19 pandemic for centuries, trying to imagine and recreate what life was like in a world upended by an invisible enemy. The Los Altos History Museum recognizes the importance of contributing to this history by collecting community experiences and preserving this history for future generations.

To document the impact of COVID-19 in Santa Clara County, the museum is actively seeking personal stories, photos, diary entries, and other materials from county residents. How are you and your loved ones experiencing this event — how has it disrupted your lives? How are you getting through it? How has everyday life changed in your household?

Material will be archived for the museum's permanent collection, and the deadline is open-ended. To share your part of history, visit <https://www.losaltoshistory.org/documenting-covid-19-in-santa-clara-county/>. — WT

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#### Continued from Page 9

#### Gifts From a Homeless Stranger

trying to get off the drugs and hadn't had any for two days.

I was speechless and didn't know how to respond. She had only a light jacket and used it as a pillow — I had a second one in the car. "I have an extra jacket. Would you like to have it?"

She nodded, I got it for her, and she put it on immediately. We talked for a while more. Then I handed her some cash, saying, "You may need this."

She thanked me, then looked at me eye to eye and solemnly swore, "I won't do anything bad with it."

She gave so much more to me — priceless gifts. Trust, gratitude, and glimpses of her glorious spirit. She reminded me of the joy that can come from giving.

We wished each other a merry Christmas. As I drove away, I called out, "Stay safe!" and hoped that she rose above the terrible demons that tried to keep her down. — WT

#### HOLIDAY MEMORIES

#### My Favorite Christmas: 1957

*by Bill Baldwin*

1957 — when I was six years old — at the height of the Cold War — my happiest Christmas. I'd watched Sputnik fly over Virginia a few weeks earlier. We'd only been in Virginia a few months.

This is the first Christmas I remember with my father. Before that my only memory was a week of leave when he'd flown home from Japan, where he was serving with the Red Cross.

Now my parents and sisters and I were all actually together, on an air base near Chesapeake Bay. My father had been away at least three years — Korea, Japan — my early life in a nutshell. I had known he existed, but age six was when I actually began to know him. I didn't appreciate that at the time.

What I loved were the presents my parents showered me with, now that we were all together: a model train, a toy gas station, toy airplanes, an inflatable plastic globe, a plastic Robbie-the-Robot. — WT



# Holiday Memories

*Continued from Page 6*

## Christmas in Chile

Our eldest cousin, Mauricio, six months my senior, was their favorite. He got a special treat when visiting: scrambled eggs, with fresh butter and milk, cooked by Yayi, his mother's doting nanny. When I turned seven, I was allowed to share it. Age had privileges in our family.

Not so at the Christmas celebration that included everyone. Once the doors to the piano room were opened, Fernando, my youngest uncle, a musician, started playing "*O Tannenbaum*" in honor of Grandma's family, which had come from Germany. Then we took turns oohing and aahing in front of the fireplace that held the Nativity scene: a forty-piece display that included not only Baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph but also the three Magi carrying their gifts, angels, shepherds, sheep, cattle, camels, and a donkey. Then we sat on the paneled wooden seat that ran under the window throughout the length of the room. That is, we older kids sat there, and below on the wooden step younger ones, followed by the toddlers and infants who could choose to crawl or sit on the carpet. Someone would call for attention ringing a bronze bell, and Grandma handed out gifts from the pile under the tall tree that stood next to the piano, decorated with colored foil and

fancy crystal balls, and sprinkled with cotton balls simulating snow.

Christmas in Chile comes in the heat of summer, and the cotton balls were then the best replacement available for the European snow.

The younger children received their gifts first to keep them busy playing, while we older ones had to be patient and wait until the end.

This year I was ten, and I had asked for a fountain pen. Grandma was not only Grandma to me but also my Godmother, and I knew I was her favorite, being the eldest granddaughter.

When it was my turn, Grandma handed me a small silver-wrapped box with a lacy ribbon. I opened it carefully, a beautiful turquoise-colored fountain pen with a gold top laid in a Bakelite box with a clear lid.

Months earlier, when Grandma was teaching me to knit, she asked me, "What would you like from Santa?" I had told her that as I wanted to be a writer when I grew up, I would like my own pen, so I would not have to borrow my father's or use the wooden ones from school that needed an inkwell.

Now I had it, and after testing it on the reverse of the wrapping paper, I took it to my mother to keep in her purse until

it was time to go home.

After every grandchild had received his gift, Grandma called the adults and gave each family a gift. These were usually homemade cookies and sweets, placemats, dishcloths or aprons, knitted bed jackets for the women, and socks for the men, as well as books, prints, and music sheets. The last gifts were huge baskets with food, sweets, and fancy envelopes containing cash for the nannies and their helpers. More music followed with everyone joined in another off-key choir, full of fun and laughter.

The last stage was dinner in the formal dining room for the adults and the grandchildren seven years and older. We sat at the long table, set with real silver, Irish linen, crystal goblets, and china, all of which Grandpa had brought home while sailing around the world.

The party ended with Christmas cake, a bountiful dessert similar to a small wedding cake, with nuts, raisins, and liquor. We ate with the traditional Christmas drink *Cola de Mono* (*Monkey Tail*), a mix of coffee, milk, sugar, and spices, with rum added to it for the grown-ups.

We parted with many hugs and kisses, embracing our new treasures, while Grandma's silver hair, pinned up high on her head, shone in the light as she waved us good-bye. —WT

*Continued from Page 8*

## Santa's Garage

The string was tied to the key, and it wandered around the room.

Dad announced with a grin we should follow the string. He grabbed it and, moving it along hand-over-hand, worked his way towards the kitchen. Maybe we would find a special treat—a chocolate pie! But the string went on into the laundry room and disappeared under the backdoor. Maybe a swing set! Dad opened the door and followed the string through the small yard, to the front gate.

I had time to wonder, would Santa give a gift like this? He was supposed to leave presents under the tree, not lay strings around. I already had doubts about Santa flying in a sleigh up in the air. Nothing about him made sense.

We opened the gate and spotted the string running under the garage door. Dad lifted the door up, and we gasped!

We beheld the rear of a brand new, sleek Pontiac coupe! A Streamliner! It was bulging curves and chrome from end to end.

In 1950, new cars were for rich people. A man like my father who came home every night covered with plaster and construction dirt did not drive a new car. But I knew Dad's business was booming. So maybe.

The car's deep midnight blue paint glowed. Five chrome lines unique to a Pontiac ran up the big trunk. At the front the five lines continued across the hood to the crowning glory of the Pontiac—a jutting hood ornament in the shape of an Indian chieftain's head. The radio inside

looked like a chrome jukebox. The steering wheel was a work of modern art, a study in chrome and bone.

This would be Mom's car. Dad would drive the old one, a pre-WWII workhorse.

My doubts rose. Santa could not put a car in a sleigh. He didn't mess with strings. My suspicions were being confirmed—Santa Claus was my fun loving father.

I turned and asked, "Daddy, are you Santa Claus?"

He looked me in the eye. He could not tell a lie.

He nodded yes, without a word.

So that is how my father gave the greatest gift of all—the gift of Truth. Better even than a new car or a fur coat. —WT

# Holiday Memories

## Christmas in Connecticut

by Monte Lorenzet

I remember finishing up my first term as a freshman, or “lower middler” as we were called at a venerable, all boys, New England boarding prep school, one of 400 children of mostly well-heeled parents from all over. Living at this school on a scholarship, it felt like I woke up on a movie set every day, shot in impressive facilities and supported by a first-rate faculty cast. There was a demanding curriculum, sports of all kinds, and early admittance to Harvard, Princeton, and Yale. There were also a lot of quaint and sometimes wonderful customs, one of which I experienced for the first time one snowy December evening in 1964.

We students had just completed our first-quarter exams and were relaxing before parents arrived to take us home for the holidays. After dinner, we’d gathered in the Old Library, where through stained glass windows you could see the snow-blanketed main drive. One teacher, or “master” as they were called, sat sunk in a big armchair on the main floor. Students sat and stood around him on the floor, up staircases, in window nooks. Notorious for his strictness and tough assignments, the master at some unknown signal began with a warm voice to read aloud, as he always did, every year just before Christmas break, Dylan Thomas’s “A Child’s Christmas in Wales.”

I’d never heard the piece before, nor had I ever experienced such a perfect pairing of sentiment and setting. It felt like falling in love with Christmas, truly. I’ve never forgotten that evening, never forgotten the way it made me feel the whole world was home, and the way it welcomed me into a hopeful adolescence. —WT

## Selecting Our Christmas Tree

by Apala G. Egan

Being high up on the hills, tramping through the mist amidst the scent of pine and wet earth, is indeed a pleasant memory. We would select a tree based on the Goldilocks principle—not too tall, not too short, but just right.

As years slid by, convenience and time took front seat and instead of a tree farm we began going to a nearby lot. Nevertheless, we still endeavored to pick the freshest one of the bunch. —WT

## A Bicycle for Christmas

by Bonnie Vaughan

My mother loved Christmas surprises. When I was almost seven, I asked Mom for a bicycle for Christmas, but she said we couldn’t afford it. I hoped she didn’t get me another doll instead.

That year we stayed at my aunt and uncle’s house on Christmas Eve so we could open presents with them and their family.

On Christmas morning I woke up first and hurried downstairs to see the presents glimmering under the tree, in beautiful, fancy wrappings. Then I saw the blue bicycle with the huge, red bow on the handles in front.

Anger filled me. How could they give someone a bicycle when I couldn’t have one? I sat down in the easy chair, growing angrier until I heard footsteps. I jumped up.

Mom and my aunt laughed as they came down the stairs. “Merry Christmas,” Mom called out.

I frowned, pointed at the bicycle, and asked, “Who is that for?”

My aunt’s smile disappeared. She sat on the couch. I thought that the bike was for one of her kids.

“Why don’t you look at the tag?” Mom asked as she sat next to my aunt.

I didn’t want to look at the tag, but her left eyebrow went up. This happened when she thought we were misbehaving.

When I looked under the red bow, my name was on the tag.

I felt bad that I had ruined her surprise. After I apologized, her brow went down, to my relief.

Then I thanked Mom and went to the bike. I straddled it and ran my fingers along the handlebars.

While we waited for my brothers and cousins to come barreling down the stairs, Mom started one of her favorite dance songs on the record player. She smiled and taught me the cha-cha-cha. My aunt clapped and laughed as we danced. Then Mom hugged me.

It was a merry Christmas again. My new bike gleamed at me from across the room. —WT

## Christmas in Pennsylvania

by Vanessa MacLaren-Wray

We’re living with my grandparents in Pennsylvania while my dad flies airplanes back and forth from Thailand to Vietnam, a thing we do not talk about.

My mother has done all she can to make a magical Christmas for 12-year-old me and my beloved, irritating little brothers. Granddad sleeps late because, Mom tells us, he was up late helping Santa. Deep in willful defiance of reality, I accept this explanation at face value. We’ve done stockings, and breakfast, and church, and we’ve torn through unwrapping all the treasures that Santa has been able to cobble out of months of saving her house-keeping funds.

I’m carrying water from the kitchen to fill a plastic swimming pool for an eager group of tiny little plastic humans who seem completely unaware that it is mid-winter, when Mom says to me, “It looks like there’s another gift there.”

It’s big, leaning up against the window, a flattish thing in an odd-shaped package more than three feet long. Santa does not label gifts for our family. We are supposed to know what’s ours. It’s part of the magic of Christmas.

I say, “I don’t know. It’s not for me.”

“I’m thinking maybe it is,” she says.

I’m skeptical. I’ve not forgotten anything I wrote on my Christmas list. None of the missing items, ones that Santa could not manage, are anything like that big. So, it cannot be for me. But I will humor Mom. If it’s for my brothers, I can rewrap it just fine. Then again, maybe it’s for her. She’s been very good this year.

I wrestle it out from behind all the other stuff, lay it flat on the floor and open it. What? I didn’t ask for this. I didn’t ask, because I knew there was no way I could get it.

It’s a guitar. It’s not just a guitar, it’s a guitar and music and lessons that start right after the holidays.

I spend the rest of Christmas afternoon sitting on the couch, running my hands across the strings, pretending I know chords.

The little plastic people will have to wait a while to go swimming. Don’t they know it’s Christmas in Pennsylvania? —WT

## Holiday Memories

### Fighting Fire on Christmas

by Jill Meryl Levy

As we approach this holiday season, I think about the brave first responders who put their lives on the line to keep everyone else safe.

For 28 years, I had the honor and privilege of being one of those first responders—a volunteer firefighter for the Santa Clara County Fire Department. My most memorable Christmas is the one spent fighting two back-to-back second-alarm structure fires. The first was in an apartment building in the Monta Vista area, where several families lost their homes, possessions, and even their Christmas presents to a fast-moving fire that took out several units.

We weren't even done overhauling that structure when we were dispatched to a house fire in Los Altos, where another family's Christmas went up in flames.

I never made it home to see my own family that day. And yet, it remains my favorite Christmas memory.

In part, it's the excitement of fighting fire. I won't deny enjoying that part of my life, when I could truly play heroine. But being there with my fellow firefighters to help those families in need meant far more than opening presents under a tree ever could.

This year I say an extra prayer for our healthcare workers treating COVID-19 patients. They never signed up to "run into a burning building" the way I did. And yet, it's the risk they face in this pandemic. They are truly the bravest of heroes. —WT

### Hanukkah on Thanksgiving

by Valerie Estelle Frankel

A few years ago, Hanukkah took place on Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving celebrations went wild, especially the food—sweet potato latkes, cranberry cocktails, donuts stuffed with pumpkin.

Menorahs alternated with autumn leaves and berries.

When my family gathered, my brother had gone full out: a massive turkey

### So It's Christmas

by Karen Thomas

When I was eighteen, I had determined that I would buy everyone in my family, including six cousins, two aunts, uncles and grandparents, a Christmas present or make one. By Christmas Eve I still had my grandmother left. My grandmother was not the "It's the thought that counts" kind of person. She was a classically trained watercolor artist who collected antiques with the eye of a designer. Her holiday table featured Limoges porcelain dinnerware and real sterling silver serving pieces that none of us youngsters were allowed to touch. I knew that no mere knickknack that I could afford would impress her.

My friend and I panic-shopped all day, and I could not figure out what I wanted to get my Grandmother with my last twenty bucks. With only minutes left before midnight, my friend picked Marshall's to make our desperation buys. I found myself at the last aisle, in the back of the store with the triple reduced clearance display. Right in front of me, a set of four silver-plated goblets with red interiors. Over-the-top Christmas kitsch, and yet I kind of liked them. The silver wasn't even very silvery, it was off-silver because the thin plating showed the cheap brass underneath. But they were on sale for \$12.99, and after tax I would have five dollars and change, so I got them.

On Christmas the next day, I couldn't watch my grandmother open her present. The next year at her house, I saw the silver goblets set out for the kids' table, and they loved them. —WT

and mashed yams his style (about 80% marshmallows).

There was also chocolate gelt at everyone's place and a few dreidels for decoration. It's a children's game, but there was one bored child at the gathering, so I taught her to play.

She won all my chocolates, and when I gambled the empty net bags, I lost them too.

What a hustle. —WT

### Silver Lady, Tiny Lady

by Leslie Hoffman

The 4:15 Arkansas-Missouri blew its whistle, jolting me out of a panic attack induced by a silver-haired twig of a woman shaking a butcher knife in my face.

"What are you doin' in the kitchen, little girl? Go play with the other children!"

*Little girl? Good grief, she has no idea who I am.*

I immediately dropped the half-shucked ear of corn, said, "Yes, Grandmother," and began backing out of the kitchen.

Tina "Tiny" Isabelle laid the butcher knife on the counter, harrumphed, and shuffled off to continue her daily chores.

*Christmas Eve supper can wait.*

It'd been twenty years since I last visited Grandmother Tiny, and I remembered her as a good-natured, hard-working country woman who had raised five sons and two daughters. Twenty years and two strokes later her reality had regressed to the 1940s and Grandmother no longer possessed the patience of Job.

*Supper will wait.*

I followed my grandmother at a discreet distance into the parlor and watched her perform the imagined chores of long ago. Fingertips grazed porcelain figurines, making certain all remained in their proper places. A gossamer hand patted the arm of the faded velvet settee, swept over the Tiffany lampshade, and brushed across yellowed ivory keys of the heirloom upright piano.

Grandmother then tottered to the front porch where she chattered to the barn swallows building nests beneath the eaves. Reassured that all was as it should be in her world, "Tiny" Isabelle sat down on the porch swing, wrapped her arms around her midriff, and began to softly sing, "Hush-a-bye, don't you cry, go to sleep my little baby," swinging back and forth until she sang herself to sleep.

For a brief moment, I saw myself as the imaginary baby cradled in my grandmother's arms.

*Now, I'll fix supper. —WT*





Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
<b>December</b>	<b>2020</b>	1	2	3	4 Open Mic	5
6	7 2P Valley Writers Zoom	8 7:00P SBW Board, Zoom	9	10	11	12
13	14 2P Valley Writers No SBW this month	15 <b>D e a d l i n e</b> <b>WritersTalk</b>	16	17	18 (No Open Mic)	19
20	21 2P Valley Writers Zoom	22	23	24	25	26
27	28 2P Valley Writers Zoom	29	30	31		

## Future Events:

TBA. All zoomed directly to you.  
*Calendar page is more or less blank  
because everybody Zooms these days.*

## SBW Board Meetings

Look for announcements of Board meetings. Contact Edie Matthews at [pres@southbaywriters.com](mailto:pres@southbaywriters.com).

## SBW Regular Meetings

Watch your email for announcements and for invitations to Zoom meetings. Every second Monday, 7 p.m.

## CWC Around the Bay

For years, *WritersTalk* published meeting locations and times for other CWC branches in the greater San Francisco Bay Area. If you want to attend one of their meetings on Zoom, first check their websites for details.

**Berkeley:** [cwc-berkeley.org](http://cwc-berkeley.org)

**Central Coast:** [centralcoastwriters.org](http://centralcoastwriters.org)

**Fremont Area:** [cwc-fremontareawriters.org](http://cwc-fremontareawriters.org)

**Marin:** [cwcmarin.com](http://cwcmarin.com)

**Mendocino:** [writersmendocinocoast.org](http://writersmendocinocoast.org)

**Mt. Diablo:** <https://cwcmtdiablo.org>

**Napa Valley:** [napavalleywriters.net](http://napavalleywriters.net)

**North State:** [northstatewriters.com](http://northstatewriters.com)

**Redwood:** [redwoodwriters.org](http://redwoodwriters.org)

**Sacramento:** [cwcsacramentowriters.org](http://cwcsacramentowriters.org)

**SF Peninsula:** <http://cwc-peninsula.org/>

**San Joaquin Valley:** [trivalleywriters.org](http://trivalleywriters.org)

## Open Mics

**South Bay Writers Open Mic on Zoom.** On first and third Friday nights. Contact Bill Baldwin (408) 730-9622 or email [WABaldwin@aol.com](mailto:WABaldwin@aol.com)

## Ongoing discussion groups

**Facebook Group:** Members of SBW can join our Facebook group—South Bay Writers Club. Admin: Carolyn Donnell

## SBW Recommends ...

If you know of a regularly occurring event for writers, send an email to [newsletter@southbaywriters.com](mailto:newsletter@southbaywriters.com).

**Morgan Hill Writers Group:** We're a critique circle based in Morgan Hill. These days we meet on Zoom, and our membership comes from all over. Mondays at 5 pm. Long and short narrative (any genre). Contact: Vanessa MacLaren-Wray, [cometarytales@gmail.com](mailto:cometarytales@gmail.com), for the current meeting link.

## Ads in CWC Bulletin

by Bob Isbill (760) 221-6367

Want to increase your visibility? Sell your service? Promote your book? Increase speaker engagements? Pump up your web traffic? Or just send a greeting?

Each issue of *The CWC Bulletin*, published three times a year, reaches 2,000 published and aspiring writers in 21 CWC branches throughout the state and is published on [www.calwriters.org](http://www.calwriters.org)

Now we are accepting writing-related advertising from businesses, CWC members, and individuals who wish to reach our target market at reasonable prices. See [calwriters.org](http://calwriters.org) for details and how to format your ad.





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Santa Clara, CA 95055  
[www.southbaywriters.com](http://www.southbaywriters.com)

## MAIL TO

Address Correction Requested

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**South Bay Writers  
Regular Zoom Meeting  
7 p.m., Monday, January 9, 2021**

**ZOOM**  
Details arrive in your email

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## Holiday Memories No December Meeting

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*WritersTalk* deadline is the  
15<sup>th</sup> of the month to have  
delivery by 1<sup>st</sup> of next month.  
Regular meetings are second  
Mondays 7 – 9 PM on Zoom

