Clinch Mountain Review 2025

Welcome to the *Clinch Mountain Review* for 2025. The *Clinch Mountain Review* is the literary review of Southwest Virginia Community College and features poetry, fiction, and memoir. The *CMR* fulfills SWCC's mission to provide cultural enrichment.

The *CMR* accepts submissions from authors and artists who live, work, or have a tie to southwest Virginia. SWCC students can submit poems, short stories, and memoirs. Cover art is accepted. Submission guidelines can be found on the *CMR* website: http://www.sw.edu/cmr.

S. Russell Wood, Editor

Clinch Mountain Review 2025

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Cell Phone Dream
By Lou Gallo

I dreamed that my cell phone died
in the middle of a not urgent
but serious conversation. Upon
reflection, I thought, what a sad,
pathetic dream spawned by technology.
Then I realized the dream worked
as a metaphor for all of us as we
come into and go out of this world.

Technology, a ruse—the real import
(given Jung who claimed dreams
predict the future), King Thanatos
swinging that scythe, never resting
until every single thinking reed
in the field lay spent, all thought,
all pleasure or pain, all remembrance
obliterated, each one of us a tragedy
far exceeding any drama dreamed
by Shakespeare.

So I sought out the Wise Man who said
that life afflicts in inchmeal increments.
Some acquire the pearl, others a piece
of string—talk to the dead, not I.
The dead have no illusions.
Wisdom isn't wise; it butchers the eye,
what we see and know beyond the mind.

Now be off with you. Pray you go blind
and see again with the heart's blood

you knew as a child.
I pressed Recent Calls, scrolled down
and noted a call from my father's land line
dated some weeks before when he tried
to call me, but failed, shortly before
he died.

Rebar

By Lou Gallo

Twenty-five years ago Richard crafted
Some garden beds for our front and back yards—
Four-by-fours in squares or rectangles.
I seeded those beds with quite an array
Of plants and flowers, mainly red tips
Which began as saplings but now tower
Over the house. The others, most sadly
The butterfly and popcorn bushes,
Have either withered or disappeared.
And now, two decades later, I'm on my knees
Before one of the empty wooden beds—
The wood has rotted and I can splinter it
With my fingers. What's left are the spikes
Used to anchor the wooden edges to the ground
And keep them in place.

They are dangerous, rusty, evil-looking protrusions
That could maim or injure our dog as she races
Through the yard—they could trip anyone
Who fails to see them. My lower back has eroded
Along the way with the wooden four-by-fours--
And kneeling as I am now requires slow descent
And careful alignment of my knees with the earth.
The rebar spikes cannot be extracted by hand
Or with tools—they were meant to endure—
So I lift my mini-maul and pound down their shafts,

A slow-motion ordeal that seems to sap
More energy than it would have once.

When the stake heads meet flush with the ground
I wipe beads from my forehead and focus not
On the work at hand but the first new daffodils
And asters of the year rising a few feet away,
Golden beauties cinched by no boundaries,
And the bluets, speedwells and crocuses now
everywhere,
Suddenly, overnight, ecstatic, jubilant. . .
As if after the Fall I've been transported
Back to the original garden—
and all it took
Was the sweat of my brow and a sweeter view.

Disc Jockey Vs. News Mouse

By Mark Fryburg

My gamble: Fresh out of college with paltry portfolio,
hired as news reporter/anchor, WROV Radio. News?
Mere sideshow to twenty-four hours of top-rated

red-hot Roanoke Virginia Rock and Roll. I did
Watergate. Disc Jockeys did Elton John. DJs'
other job: tormenting newscasters. Holidays

brought out the worst of these masters
of harassment. The jocks' bare butts pressed against
news booth windows. Lighters ignited paper scripts

under our lips as we read. Rubber chickens landed
on newsman laps. Nefarious practice perfected
by Bart Prater, untouchable nationally-known talent

in top time slot. Risking nascent career, this reporter

plotted to get even by end December. Tip from reliable sources: That broad-shouldered powerfully-voiced man

had tremendous fear––of mice! Secret weapon lay frozen in radio station lot, furry, dead and flat on icy tire tread marks. I grasped tiny gritty tail. Crept quietly

to control room. Paul McCartney closing, Bart opening microphone. My opening! Launched mouse missile––rocketing down counter top. Bart leapt, tripped,

fell, headphones flying. Music stopped. He left the mic on. Tens of thousands heard Bart cry, "Goddamn you, *Fryburg*!" This novice promptly summoned to the station

owner's office, head hung, standing before a massive desk, expensive art––termination certain days before Christmas.

"Mighty Mouse?" the boss laughed, and sent me back to work.

Hips

By Chrissie Anderson Peters

How did my hips get older than me?
I wake frequently to still joints,
hips that refuse to move forward,
even to get me to the bathroom –
the most necessary of movements –
three or four times a night.
I don't understand the problem,
their inconsiderate uncooperativeness.
I never misused them in my youth:
I didn't spend hours dirty dancing;
I was no hula-hooping hooligan;
no meaningless gyrating
in front of mirrors;
no Elvis pelvic thrusts
to frighten my mother
and make her think I was loose;
yet now, they are stiffer
than Mamaw's lumpy mashed potatoes,
muscles knotted, joints constricted,
and I wonder where I went wrong,
being a good girl, saving all my body
up for later, and now later
seems to be too late
to make use of it all because
nothing moves like it used to,
like it's supposed to –
I'm fifty-three years young

but my hips belong to someone
with at least ten years on me;
what a pity for my careful planning!

Piggly Wiggly Bag Boy
by Sam Dixon

After loading groceries
over the tailgates
of miners' pickup trucks,
flour and buttermilk
oatmeal cream pies
a month's supply at a time

I would climb spring's forest above Norton
to the tumbling stream
where I caught my first fish a rainbow trout
with my bare hands,
and whistled like owl calls
to beguile indigo buntings
scarlet tanagers

and in summer sampled loose-leaf baccy
where the honeysuckle fireflies

or skewering autumn's apples from the backyard tree
onto long switches
would fling them at the coal cars
trundling past my grandmother's shingled shack

and fueled by nickel Cokes
from the pharmacy fountain
would pedal my bike
chasing the affections
of girls named after berries

or in snow

slide with my sled
all the way down
from Chestnut Flats
dare-deviling through each hairpin turn
right along the edge of the drop-off,
and back on Main Street
that had a length of only two traffic lights
despite the cold
would snitch a carton of chocolate milk
from the PET Dairy delivery man's open rear door

and then do it all again
under the great ridge
of purple rhododendron blooms

in the busy important time,
before college.

Is There a Way to Repair the House Without Harming Any Soft Creatures Gently Living Within its Walls?

By Christina Linsin

Is everything a metaphor? I wonder, turning
a corner, forgetting to signal my intention,
I apologize with gesticulations
I hope mean something sort of kind to
not just me.

Maybe seeing things through isn't the point
of it all. Or of anything, really.
The tin-throated trill of a woodpecker's call
in its aloneness exposes what's tenuous;
it's so much closer to be found.

I want a love that meadows me and lets me grow wildly.

Grackles like broken umbrellas flap
into a front yard, all reflected light

at bold angles. When I was a kid, my father fed
the house finches each day, but shooed
away the grackles like flies.

What from the dead do we gather as we go?
Someone once asked, “what about
the blessings?” *Yes!* I thought;
“yes,” I answered, alone in my car, “there could be
blessings, too.”

What Makes Us Human

By Christina Linsin

My kitchen sink this morning is filled with knives, slivering implements used to cut barely noticeable slices from the brownies my son bakes when insomnia deprives him of rest. The water filling the sink turns cloudy with their ghosts, gooey stickiness left to soak some before I scrub the knives clean. In the middle of the night, my adult children float down the stairs and then, arriving in the darkened kitchen, lift the pan's lid and carefully cut razor-thin slivers they can pop into their mouths quickly before heading back upstairs to whatever videos or games keep their lights ignited. According to a *National Geographic* article, the skill of cooking is the defining activity which separates humans from all other animals. And so that is the difference—the scent of warmed chocolate and a hot oven pulling us toward it. Leaving with a mouth barely full and a dirty knife someone who loves us will end up washing.

The Devil's Bathtub

By Thomas Roberts

More like the icy streams of Jordan

Are your clear waters

A pool in which

To baptize God's sons and daughters

Did the Evil One really take a dip here?

For, looking into your depths,

I feel none of that hell-frenzied fear

Desperate

By Thomas F Smith

Some days seem peaceful enough
When Helios and his chariot make
Their lengthening way to sunset
Others are more like nights
Waiting to cross the river Styx

Alto flute has been playing
Instrumental celebrations of
Mid-winter filled with
Saturnalia and a baby that
Are back in the attic

Hedgehog sees its shadow
And we are burdened with
Prophecies and drinking songs
Of Candlemas and endless winter
When desperate for a change

(A Tourist's Guide to) Thomas Jefferson

By Craig Kurtz

Thomas Jefferson was quite

the gentleman, if hist'ry's right;

he was among the best of guys —

now, who am I to criticize?

He's rather rich, with fancy clothes,

and what he wants, well, that's what goes;

he is the master of the manse —

he owns each inch of this expanse.

There's luxuries a statesman craves —

so that explains 6oo slaves;

he grew tobacco so white folk

could be enslaved to snuff and smoke.

‘Tho Monticello’s rather grand,
Mulberry Row’s a bit offhand;
if you’ve seen one slave shack you’ve seen
a million, they’re so damned routine.

The dinner guests don’t need to know
the goings on after they go;
there’s secrets the dumbwaiter hid —
a ‘servant’ looks like master’s kid.

Supposedly he felt real bad
enslaving relatives he had;
‘Someday we’ll free our horses, too,
but until then we got bills due.’

A wedding gift might be a slave —

no one turned down the gifts he gave;

a lot of people called it fair —

I guess you just had to be there.

.

Whatever politics you got,

the DNA has master caught;

nobody called it jailbait then —

‘You can’t blame us for being men.’

He went to France to help them with

democracy, which proved a myth;

the beautiful words that he said

might contradict the life he led.

Sure, everybody justifies

which principles to compromise;

and ‘tho this is the tourist’s guide

there are some details we elide.

Optimists and Pessimists

By Craig Kurtz

"Discontent is the first step in the progress of a man or a nation." — Oscar Wilde.

The disenchanted, I dare say,
have issues which they will inveigh;
they won't be happy, nor they should,
until there is more greater good.

The satisfied, on the obverse,
don't care for people who asperse;
they think when their glass is half full,
there's no cause to be radical.

The pessimists, most hist'ry's shown,
complain until the seeds are sown;
the seeds of progress for us all,
and not just swells at the masked ball.

The optimists say everything's
OK, for those who pull the strings;
preventing the world's improvement,
they're why we need more discontent.

Skiing

(for Dave)

By Matthew J Spireng

I tried a few times when I was very young—
on the short slope across the driveway on
wooden skis my parents had from who knows
when or where that lacked bindings beyond

loose leather strings so they slipped on
and off easily, which was fine when I fell—
quickly and often as I tried to slide
straight down the slope as if on a sled.

I've never regretted not being a skier,
especially after friends have ruined knees
and broken bones on the slopes. Given
my clumsiness on skis on two good legs,

I'm amazed at how a guy I know who lost
both legs below the knees in Vietnam
has gotten so good at skiing he teaches
others on the slopes, though given

I knew him for at least six months,
drank with him often at a bar in town
before I discovered one night
his lower legs weren't flesh by

accidentally kicking him in what would be
one's calf, finding his hard and
unyielding, I shouldn't be surprised
at anything he can do that I cannot.

Lego Man

By R R Beach

Anymore

when I look
In the mirror

The face looking back
is distorted by

An impenetrable fog

Could be a man
I had words with in a little
dive bar down by the docks

Could be a small child
on a street corner
holding a sign

Help me I'm hungry

Her mom standing near
plucking on a tired old banjo

could be
brother James
long dead of a bad heart

Once long ago he saved
me from drowning

Or maybe just
a little Lego man
lost in a forest of

What-might-have-beens

Transcending Eros

By Kohava Blount

We sit in tranquil nearness
sans external requests.
Subtle energies infiltrate an
unburdened instant.
Selfless peace, the meaning
quantified in a permeated embrace.
Rapt amid incarnate amity.
Seeking the gift of imparting
from a core founded in
the intention to bequeath.
Divine virtue; purity of heart
Mentalities immersed in the
Exalted paradigm of righteousness.
Beyond the carnal,
the truest version of you
revealed while
still in this realm.

The Change

By Justin Askins

Perhaps it started the day I was diagnosed
with colon cancer. The first sleepless night
found my wife and I chatting close to dawn.
Flooded with dark angels, death seemed
no stranger. After the 4-hour operation
I needed harsh chemicals for 5 months.
I went on teaching at my university,
living on 140 acres of poplar and white pine,
kayaking, fly fishing and traveling
until I got a call from a nephrologist
who told me, after I said I was on my way
to Big Bend National Park, to immediately
turn around and head back to Virginia.
That 3 day drive, like spending a week
in a waiting room. The landscape meant nothing
and after the kidney biopsy
spoke stage 3, the next two years
were like swimming against a current
where I never moved.
Then a mild heart attack had me driving
to the local hospital where
an ambulance took me 40 miles
to a waiting surgeon who put in a single
stent. If my mind hadn't already filled with cortisol,
how about Long Covid, which lasted a year
and a half, at which point I could only leave
my bed to drive to Food Lion for groceries
twice a week. I thought about suicide,
knowing I couldn't continue to live this way,

but my dear therapist kept telling me that things always change,
and she was right. Covid left and I stopped taking buspar, started Physical Therapy, and returned to 30 minute nature walks twice a day. This morning, I listened to a meadowlark
on my pasture foray then reveled in thousands
of bright yellow coltsfoot blossoms on a forest service road.
There was nothing in my head but beauty.

Sallie's Crying Tree

By Cody Hester

Many trees are rooted
in parks and near streets
others grow in crowds called forests,
diverse in needle and leaf
they keep memory in their rings.

One held deliverance in its branches
this one was sentinel in harsher times
of auction block and crack of whip.

A guardian against sunlight and rain
for a six-year-old girl in rattling chains.

**The "Crying Tree" is a historical landmark in Marion, Virginia, that was known for being the refuge of a five-year-old girl named Sarah Elizabeth Adams, who was enslaved in the 1840s.*

Molasses

By Cody Hester

In days when families cultivated
more than crops, they made molasses.

Few raised sugar cane in Rich Valley,
my great-grandad was one who did,
Bevly by name. He'd rotate the cane
throughout the field year after year.
He'd harvest the cane and leave remnants
for kids to drain, while the rest was poured
into a shallow pan twice as wide as a dining table
with a wide fire underneath to slow-roast the juice
and skim the top for every drop of the sugar concentrate.

Dozens of cars would drive to Lick Creek,
unprompted, for molasses-making day.
They'd take turns skimming and stirring the pan.
Into the evening and early night, they'd pick and strum

every known string and a flatfooter would follow their beat.

In days when families cultivated

more than crops, they made molasses.

A Spring Trio
By Les Epstein

I

Steely clouds but no rain again.
Over a breakfast table plateau
Past empty bowls
formerly with flakes and raisins
with a spot of sugar
(Fine! Two spots of sugar),
A ladybug larva, black and yellow
Cuffed by pollen
Seeks, perhaps,
An aphid union.

II

The cat's outrun by a centipede
legs in gear for a morning sprint—
to a safe space by a toilet base
and a firebrats breakfast.
She performs a comprehensive study,
paw skyward,
then touches her current subject
zipping segments to unknown places—
fifteen wedges of bug carried
by one hundred legs—
outfitted with venomous claws—
on the run from a feline
carried by a mere four peds

and spiky tongue.
Pulling back precipitously,
she madly shakes her paw
What weirdness engulfs the pads.

III

Last night I swallowed a gnat.
It was on the Gnat Nightly News.
My features were revealed for swarms
to see how he flew into my gnathic gap.
How a gnat larva-reporter
Called me enemy number one
Even though now together—
As gnatlings—we remain.
Warnings are directed to all random flight patterns…
Under no circumstance
Is my mouth an Apron
for weary cloud travelers.
Passing moths and flies express no concern.

Drift Mouth
By Frank Shortt

Ivy twines down over her top
Stinging nettles grow in her front,
Her gaping mouth is not saying
What all went on inside of her!

The only benefit she gives
Is the cool water flowing out!
Purified as acids subside
By natural means, through sandstone!

If her gaping mouth could relate
What went on inside her bowels!
What a story it would entail,
Of hardship, toil, and strife!

How kettle bottoms came crashing
When least expected to do so,
Requiring hours to break them up,
Before clean coal could be produced!

She could tell of anxieties
When dynamite didn't explode,
The fear of going back inside
To see if the fuse fizzled out!

She could tell all the secrets shared
By the miners, about their lives,
Of stories only men could tell
About bad jobs held beforehand!

There she stands! A stark monument,
Reminding us of how our dad
Labored inside to feed eight kids,
A memorial to his kind!

Reverence

By Piper Durrell

Late April and my senses are on full alert

as hundreds of trillium make a maze of color and sizes

up and down muddy leafy hillsides, meandering next to the creek

demurely looking downwards or standing at attention

like a god-anointed battalion ready to take the next hill.

Wake Robin, Toad Shade, Wood Lily

deep red, white, shades of pink

these graceful flowers named

for their symmetry in three's-

three leaves in a whorl

three petals, three sepals lurking below.

By the end of a six- mile descent on branch strewn trails, across creeks,

around through and over rocks serving as barricades, steppingstones, or shade-

-this path, where beauty distracts us from our cautious steps

and hiking poles save us from tumbles-

we reach a gorge of wider trails. Here,

where boulders reduce to pebbles, feet merely weary,

and eyes have become almost numb to the magic of nature's beauty,

we encounter the world of sound.

Tumbling waterfalls and rushing creeks

music no words can portray for it harbors contradictions

loud, soft, stirring, soothing

holding multitudes of memories and dreams

and putting me at peace with the world.

Songs and trills of unseen birds' float by,

just another fount of enchantment, faint in the distance

like the swallowtails that, a few paces ahead, dip in and out of sight.

On one bank the water runs down mossy rocks slipping quietly into stony pools.

On the other side the creek bursts with the passion of spring storms

showing no restraint or homage to its homeplace forever impatiently moving.

A welcomed touch from a cool spring breeze, the disagreeable prick of sharp briars,

a taste of spring ramps, one leaf in my mouth spreading the scent of garlic onion in the air.

Reverence- is that not what spring brings forth?

One day we awake and the world is alive, a world not of our making is erupting

with meadows of green, melodies of birds, confusingly intricate

staging of colors and smells, tastes and sound.

I stand in awe of nature's gifts.

Butter and Eggs

By J Claude Asbury

They call them Butter and Eggs
these daffodils
of my mother's mother's great-great-grandmother
Carted on a wagon from up Virginia
Up and back and back again across the great migration
Passing from yard to yard
through six generations or more
Our family's only gold
Jonquils of immortality
Returning each spring.

The Cave

By Frank Shortt

Times on Grassy Creek were hard, but we had fun, too. We had all kinds of games to play such as Annie Over, Tag, Whoopie Hide, Cowboys, and a score of other games either established or made up. We had great imaginations. These games accounted for all our free time when we weren't working in the garden or the perpetual "digging of the basement". That basement was never finished, and I often wondered why dad kept us at it, until I grew older and it dawned on me that it was a way of keeping us busy when there were no other chores to do. Lee Burke finally built it.

Weekends were usually taken up with "church" on Saturday night and Sunday mornings, but Sunday afternoons we were allowed to play with visiting cousins or the neighborhood kids. Our place of play in on summer days was usually at the "Cave". This was no ordinary cave, mind you, this was a genuine, upward spiraling, crack in the rocks where all sorts of pirates, cowboys, Indians, and any other character that we could imagine, hung out. We'd spend countless hours climbing out of and down through this edifice. We knew every foothold and handhold and just when to jump down from the last place to stand. There was a second smaller tunnel leading off into the hills that none of us could fit in that was always used for speculation as to what might live there!

As one climbed upward out of the "Cave" there was an opening that led to the top of the cliff where, just as one emerged, lay a bed of teaberries that would usually ripen just as the first snows of winter came along. Wendell, Ken Brown, Gabe Brown and I knew just when they ripened and were usually the first ones there to taste the juicy and delicious treats. Of course, the leaves had to suffice as treats during the summer. We would just lie in the sun and eat to our hearts content. I have never to this day found another bed of teaberries like that one.

Of all the kids we took up to our retreat, none were ever hurt badly, just the usual scratches from sliding down over the rocks and mountain laurel that grew profusely alongside the cliff. Can you imagine that we never saw or heard a snake in that vicinity? Copperheads didn't seem to like that side of the hill, and I can't remember anyone in the neighborhood ever seeing a rattlesnake. Years later, after we had moved off the "creek," we heard that a man from Florida had gone "snake hunting" at the "Cave" and had netted one hundred and fifty large "rattlers" out of the adjoining edifice. My skin crawls, to this day when I think of all the times we placed our hands in the cracks and crevices to pull our self up to the top or to let ourselves down to the bottom of the "Cave".

Man About Town: A Memoir

By Donald Stephens, Jr

Robert Ward was a whirling dervish, a human twister blowing through town.

Bob dashed through each day, living on coffee, cigarettes, and a cupful of meds from his VA doctor. Tall, thin, pale skin, hawk nosed, with a shock of snowy white hair, his was an unmistakable profile. He might have been a character from a Twilight Zone episode, a misplaced specter from another place and time.

Two years in Vietnam had brought back a changed man in early May, obvious to those who had known the original. Still bright, quick-minded with a sharp sense of humor, but now often absent as though he were outside himself. We had stayed in touch during his tour, exchanging frequent letters. He had volunteered, I had gone to college, holding on to my 2-S deferment. His letters described a scene of chaos, FUBAR he called it, almost laughable but deadly serious. His letters always

ended with some form of "…whatever you have to do, don't come here."

His brother Carl, oldest of three boys, had told me that Bob was hospitalized in California and would be coming home soon. When I inquired about his status, Carl vaguely referred to him "getting checked out". I didn't push. The Wards had been hit hard by matters of war. The father had died young, a Korean War vet who never seemed to stop fighting even after his discharge. Carl had served and returned unscathed, but not so middle brother Marvin. His death in the early years of war had been a shock, a sharp slap to the face of the town. Ramona Ward made grief her persona, always in black, always tearful. I would stop by Bob's in the high school days, but he never wanted to hang around his home. Once, while waiting for him to come down, I stepped into the opening to their dining room. The table was covered with Marvin's things. Ramona appeared at my side, took me by the elbow, "Come and look". We stood close before the shrine. Drawings from elementary school. A bowl of marbles. A stack of letters, envelopes jagged torn openings. Yearbooks from high school, open

to classes and teams, proms. Books and notebooks standing between bronzed baby shoe bookends. Topps baseball cards. A small O ring holding four keys and a rabbit's foot. Letterman's jacket draped over a chair, football in the seat. Bob came down and impatiently announced his readiness. We left quickly.

I think Bob must have used that environment as a catalyst, determined to escape the still and somber, break away from that which was so opposite. He was enthusiastic and involved in everything. Bob was the one among our group who would try out for a school play, who was on the football team AND marched in the band's half time show, who dared stretch the boundaries of the school's dress code. He was funny and popular and probably could have been valedictorian if it had mattered to him. After graduation, he enlisted quickly, telling me it was what his dad would have wanted. Later, I wondered if it wasn't just a way to get out.

I was at home, working over the summer break, and we resumed our friendship – but it was awkward. He would stop by work in the morning, stand at attention,

and recite - sometimes quoting passages from Hamlet, or a stanza perfectly metered from Dickenson, perhaps a favorite Psalm. He was studious in thought, his eyes looking to the distance, in deep concentration. And occasionally he would end with a personal observation. He was very aware of his small town, its culture, how it breathed and moved, its people and what they thought of him. His commentary could be both pointed and poetic:

Gossip Monger

Finger Pointer

Old Miss Lettie

Small and petty

And,

Benediction

Contradiction

Ask Forgiveness

Fake Repentance

Always delivered with spontaneity, a fresh presentation that one might think had just occurred to him.

And then, with no indication, with a suddenness that would startle, he would sound a burst of laughter and delight, an announcement of a love of life that left me wondering what I was missing.

Followed then by his abrupt departure, walking away, striding around and through the town, up the hilly side streets, through the narrow alleys, in animated conversation with himself, cigarette pointing and slashing, as though he were conducting a symphonic orchestra, or perhaps offering a lecture on 18th century literature. Walking was his favorite thing, and he did it with vigor and enthusiasm.

Sometimes I would walk with him, almost jogging to keep up with his long strides. Once I said, "Bob, we could just ride my truck." "No thanks Donny," with a giggle, "I'm in a hurry."

He would have lunch at the Corner Grill, where a solid core of every-dayers had usually gathered by noon. He would sip on another cup of coffee and talk with them. A more unusual company of men could hardly be imagined. The rough-edged beer drinkers had watched in wonder at his arrival, unsure of this presence before them. Slowly they moved from skepticism, and a bit of mockery, to an acceptance and respect. They would trade stories with Bob, and always asked him for a new quote or passage. He delivered with sincerity. Then bolting out the door, now rested and energized, ready for his next journey.

Later that afternoon, he would stop by again, reporting on his discoveries of the day. Perhaps a flower garden or a newly painted home. He would talk about the dogs he had met up with that day – they loved him because he kept treats from lunch stowed in his pocket. And he always shared a story of his daily visit to the cemetery, where he liked to roam and read the old tombstones. His "BobVision", as he called it, creating a story of a heroic fallen soldier or the sorrow of a lost child. He loved the view from the cemetery hilltop, would

rest there and observe the movement on the streets. Sometimes he would walk across and upon the ridgeline of the old orchard, excellent cloud watching he said.

I saw him daily, and the first weeks of that summer fell into this easy rhythm. But toward dog days, maybe around the first of August, I began to notice some change in Bob. He was quieter, less easily sharing something from the library of his mind. I didn't see him on foot as much. Once I offered to walk with him. He stood quietly, looking away. I changed subjects and he seemed relieved.

He was content for us to stand together, leaned against the stone wall that bordered the courthouse, comfortable in our silence. He would suddenly point upward at a silvery slice of light and whisper "C-123, cargo plane"; or, head tilted, watching, and listening intently, "There's a Chickadee in that bush." Another day we were sky gazing, a breezy day with white clouds made brilliant by glances of the sun. He said, "Cirro-cumulus." I said, "the clouds?" "Yes, the fluffy ones, look like cotton balls." I said, "how about those thin, flat ones." He said,

"Cirrus, or maybe cirro-stratus." I said, "how about that one over the ridge." I pointed to a tall, slender white cloud, column-shaped. "Cumulus Erectus," he said. I looked and pondered, and it slowly came to me. "Dang it, Bob," I said and turned to scold him. But he was 30 feet away, talking to Joe Perry, pointing up to the sky and giggling. They glanced at me and laughed some more. All I could do was smile and shake my head.

As September neared, I was preparing my return to school. We talked about it, and he said "I'm going away, too. My brother says the Doctor wants me to visit with him." I saw Carl later that day and asked him about Bob's comment. "Donny, he's spiraling down and I've got to do something. He won't take his medicine, I can't get him to eat, and the doctor wants to check him in and get him more stable."

Those next few days were the last with my friend. When I saw Carl again at Christmas, he told me that Bob had not returned home, was now institutionalized and likely to remain. I wrote to him, chatty letters about our home and its people, my time at school. I received

nothing in return. By spring, I had accepted that Bob as I knew him was no more.

History provides the impersonal analysis of causes and results of war, although the perception of who "won" or who "lost" can change over time and with the measure of choice. One certain result is the loss of cultures and societies, the toll of human misery, the devastation that remains.

War can be seen through the bombardier's lens, distant plumes of smoke, or perhaps the cameraman's recording of armor-clad soldiers stalking carefully through smoldering ruins, examining the aftermath of battle. Too often we have accepted the impersonal, large-scale presentation: the devastation of Nagasaki, Dresden, Warsaw; later Dubrovnik, Palmyra, the Sudan; and the insulting phrasing of "collateral damage", "domestic casualties."

For a more personal consideration of that which is left behind, look into the distant eyes of Robert Wards who return less than whole, step into the quiet sadness of the homes of those who don't return at all.

You Decide

By Linda Hudson Hoagland

My husband is hanging onto life only because he is connected to a machine that is breathing for him. I don't know how long they, the medical persons who supposedly know much more than I do, are going to allow the machine to perform its function of keeping my husband alive before they make me decide what step I want to take next. It's not really a question of something I want. It is something I have to do, like it or not.

My life goes on whether Sonny is sick or not. I want to spend day and night with him, but I can't.

He doesn't know whether or not I'm here because he is so deeply comatose; but, just in case, I talk to him, I touch him, and I let him know that I love him.

It is Saturday and I've driven for two hours from the home that Sonny and I share in Tazewell, Virginia, to the Veterans Hospital in Johnson City, Tennessee.

"Hi, Baby," I say as I don a yellow isolation gown and force my short stubby fingers into the rubber gloves I've pulled from the box that is atop the metal rolling cabinet outside his pressurized Medical Intensive Care Room 28.

"I can't stay long, Sonny," I ramble on. "I've got to go to my book signing. It was too late to change it to a later date. I'm sort of obligated. I know you understand, but I'm sure I will be condemned by those who think they know better."

He is lying there with hoses attached everywhere imaginable. His face is relaxed. His eyes are closed. The machine is whispering with its breath of life.

He is in far better condition now that he was two days ago; not that he ever woke up, because he didn't. Two days ago he was having seizures where his eyes would fly open wide and his arms would rise and fall with a loud thump.

"God," I prayed, "Tell me what I should pray for. Tell me whether I want him to live or to die. He wouldn't want to be a vegetable. That's not a life." The tears were welling and I didn't want to cry. I didn't want Sonny to see the tears or hear from my scratchy voice that I'm that scared.

The eye openings and the thumps were occurring about every sixty seconds and the medical personnel were scurrying around searching for a way to put a halt to the seizure provoked activity.

Sedation was what was prescribed along with anti-seizure medication. Finally, the thumps slowed and disappeared, but so did all of the hope that he would wake up and see me, talk to me, or just breathe on his own.

Four doctors suddenly appeared at the doorway. That's a good thing. I was hoping to get an answer or two. Of course, this is a teaching hospital so three of the young men standing around gazing at my husband were doctors in training. The fourth person, a lady, is the teacher and the one from whom I should get some answers.

"How long do you think he is going to stay like this?" I ask her knowing that she isn't going to give me a direct answer, at least, not at first.

"Have you spoken with the neurologist?"

"Yes," I answer as I began to regurgitate the info garnered from him. "He told me my husband has significant brain damage."

As she stands in front of me her face transforms from a rushed busy doctor to a person professing to care about me and how I feel.

"We are here for you as well as your husband and especially for you because you are alone with no family to support you."

Those words are really beginning to bother me. I am hearing them way too often and they are sounding more and more phony just like the gentle little pats on the back I am receiving from almost every medical person who enters the room.

"You can't keep him in ICU forever. How do you determine when to move him out of here?"

"You will have to make a decision once your husband has been off sedation for four or five days and he is still showing no signs of climbing out of the coma."

I had heard a conversation earlier that told me thirty-six hours without sedation had passed. The time for decision making is getting nearer.

"You will need to decide if you want him attached to the respirator with a tracheotomy allowing him to rest just as he is indefinitely or if you want everything detached allowing him to slip away gently."

I shook my head in understanding. I couldn't speak. The words weren't there. The voice was completely gone.

Thirty-six hours have passed. Another forty-eight to seventy-two hours will need to pass before I am backed into the black hole of choosing life or death for my husband.

In the mean time, I'm going to my book signing. I'm going to try to think good thoughts. I don't want to dwell on the decision.

"Hey, Sonny, I've got to go. I love you," I say as I strip away the gloves and gown.

The book signing is about a half hour drive from the hospital but within the same metropolitan area.

It was too late time-wise to cancel the event when Sonny became so ill because it has already been advertised locally and it was scheduled more than six months prior to the actual book signing.

It is difficult to steer my thoughts away from Sonny but the hospital staff assures me they will call me if there is any type of change in his condition.

I smile and I try to convince people who are within earshot that my books are good and that they really need to read them.

My cell phone rang once later in the afternoon. No one was at the other end and the caller was identified as "Unknown". I'm glad now that they were not able to reach me at that time. I found out when I arrived back at the hospital after the book signing that they wanted the decision about pulling the tubes then.

I continue to try to smile and sell my books knowing what is waiting for me at the hospital.

The decision never leaves my thoughts but it already has been made in my mind.

He would want to slip away peacefully and that's what I will let him do.

"Just remember, Sonny, I love you with all my heart," I whisper before I step out of his room for the final time.

J Claude Asbury: I grew up in Richlands and lived in Bristol for many years before giving up and moving to Richmond. People often speak about their roots being in a certain place, but for me, Southwest Virginia's roots have grown so deeply into me that I long every day to return. Shout out to Gretchen McCrosky, one of *CMR's* frequent contributors. She was my eighth grade English teacher. Through a small act of kindness, she changed the trajectory of my life in ways that she could never have imagined.

Justin Askins is a retired Professor Emeritus of English at Radford University. His poems, photos, essays, and book reviews have appeared in many newspapers and journals, with his main interests being the natural world and environmental issues. His volume The Legendary Neversink was published by Skyhorse Press in 2007 and his chapbook Changing Terrain was published by Finishing Line Press in 2011.

R R. Beach lives and writes in Blacksburg Virginia.

Kohava Blount, a dedicated, enthusiastic, and multilingual author and poet, has had work continually published in newspapers, literary journals, and magazines since the age of eleven. Through varying themes of subject matter, she fervently seeks to inspire, to uplift, and to rouse thought into the human condition and the innumerable marvels of creation. In addition to writing, Blount holds a strong passion for volunteering in the community and serving as a medic/first-responder on the side. Further favored pursuits include composing and performing musical works, playing sports, creating artwork, singing, reading, and cooking.

A native of Norton, Virginia, **Sam Dixon** currently lives in Arlington, Virginia, near Washington, D.C. He has also lived and worked overseas in Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. Sam's poetry has appeared in *Clinch*

Mountain Review, *Plum Tree Tavern, Rusty Truck*, *Jimson Weed*, *Nine Muses Poetry* and *Dreich*.

Piper Durrell searches for peace and joy in the world around her and sometimes she is fortunate enough to find words to express what she sees and feels.

Mark Fryburg, age 74, is a very late bloomer. He finally relaxed in late 2022, when he, his bride Laura, and two pups returned to the Roanoke, Virginia, area––after three decades in Oregon. That sparked Mark's poetry, live storytelling, and other writing. Since then, he placed in four Virginia and Oregon contest categories ranging from "Sense of Place" to "Limerick." He received Honorable Mention in *Passager Journal*'s national contest. Mark is very honored to appear in this year's *Artemis Journal* and two previous years of *Clinch Mountain Review*. He typically writes concisely, hoping to be a favorite of readers with short attention spans.

Les Epstein is a poet, playwright and librettist. His books include *Sleep Cinematic: A Golem's Quartet*, *Lorenzo by the Ghost Light*, *Teddy Orloff and the Three Onions*, *Babka Nu: A Genesis Spiel* (Gnashing Teeth) and *Kip Divided* (Finishing Line). Recent journal credits: Reedy Branch Review, Otherwise Engaged, and Clinch Mountain Review, and the *Ohio Bards Poetry Anthology* (Local Gems Press). He teaches in Roanoke, VA.

Seven volumes of **Louis Gallo**'s poetry, *Archaeology, Scherzo Furiant, Crash, Clearing the Attic, Ghostly Demarcation & The Pandemic Papers, Why is there Something Rather than Nothing?* and *Leeway & Advent*. His work appears in Best Short Fiction 2020. A novella, "The Art Deco Lung," appears in *Storylandia*. National Public Radio aired a reading and discussion of his poetry on its "With Good Reason" series (December 2020).His work has appeared or will shortly appear in Wide Awake in the Pelican State (LSU anthology), Southern Literary Review, Fiction Fix, Glimmer Train, Hollins Critic, Rattle, Southern Quarterly, Litro, New Orleans Review, Xavier Review, Glass: A Journal of Poetry, Missouri

Review, Mississippi Review, Texas Review, Utopia Science Fiction Magazine, Baltimore Review, Pennsylvania Literary Journal, The Ledge, storySouth, Houston Literary Review, Tampa Review, Raving Dove, The Journal (Ohio), Greensboro Review, and many others. Chapbooks include *The Hymn of the Mardi Gras Flambeau*, *The Truth Changes, The Abomination of Fascination, Status Updates and The Ten Most Important Questions of the Twentieth Century.* He is the founding editor of the now defunct journals, *The Barataria Review* and *Books: A New Orleans Review*. His work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize several times. He is the recipient of NEA grants for fiction and Poets in the Schools. He is now Professor Emeritus at Radford University in Radford, Virginia. He is a native of New Orleans.

Cody Hester lives in Abingdon, Virginia. He graduated from Virginia Tech in 2021 and received a Creative Writing MFA at Liberty University in 2025. He enjoys exploring the Appalachian mountains with his wife, Abby, and their dog, Maggie. Cody's publications can be found at *Clinch Mountain Review.*

Linda Hudson Hoagland, a regional writer from Tazewell, Virginia, has written many mystery novels along with works of nonfiction, 5 collections of short writings and 5 volumes of poems. She has contributed to many anthologies and won many awards.

Craig Kurtz led the postpunk Philosophic Collage into cult status in 1981. He is the author of the novel *Surviving the Dream* (2023). Recent lyrics featured in *Cardinal Sins*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *Quadrant*.

Christina Linsin is a Pushcart Prize-nominated poet and teacher in Southwestern Virginia. Her work examines connections with nature, complexities of mental illness, and difficulties creating meaningful connections with others amid life's obstacles. She currently serves as the Western Region Vice President of the Poetry Society of Virginia, and her poems have been published in *Still: The Journal*, *Stone Circle*

Review, Whale Road Review, *Mid-Atlantic Review*, *South Florida Poetry Journal*, and others.

Chrissie Anderson Peters lives in Bristol, TN. She is a graduate of Emory & Henry College and the University of Tennessee who grew up in Tazewell, VA. Her passions include traveling and all things 80s. Her work appears in Still:The Journal, Pine Mountain Sand & Gravel, Women of Appalachia Project's Women Speak, Salvation South, Red Branch Review, Cutleaf, Chicken Soup for the Soul, and others. She is the author of three self-published books and is currently looking for a publishing home for a short story collection and a poetry chapbook. Find out more about her work at www.CAPWrites.com.

Thomas Roberts was born in Abingdon, VA and loves to write in his free time. On the weekends he can usually be found lost in the woods.

Frank Shortt was born in 1942 at Shortt Gap, Virginia in a coal mining family. He joined the USAF in 1960 during the Cold War/Vietnam Crisis with a final discharge in 1966. He retired from the San Jose, California school department as a Chief of Operations in 2000. Since then, he has attended college, writes for a San Jose newspaper, three college journals, for an online magazine *The Spectator*, contributed to the *Virginia Mountaineer* in Grundy, Virginia, and continues to write for *The Voice* newspaper in Buchanan County, Va. He has two daughters, four grandchildren, and one great-grandson living in Texas and one great-granddaughter. His hobby is, of all things, writing! Frank continues to write constantly at 83 years of age.

Thomas Smith is a physician and former University Professor. He has written poetry for fun, family, and friends since high school. He spent 18 years on medical school faculties and has over 65 articles and book chapters in the scientific literature. COVID changed his creative focus. He began writing poetry seriously after his book in verse *The Search for King: A Fable* was published in 2022. His first published

poem was in March 2023. He since has published over 130 Japanese short form poems (haiku, tanka, haibun, senryū, shahai, and others), free verse and rhymed poems, and limericks in a number of literary journals. He and his poems are listed in the *Living Haiku Anthology*. He lives in Austin, Texas, with his wife, three children, and four grandchildren.

Matthew J Spireng: My full-length poetry book *Good Work* won the 2019 Sinclair Poetry Prize and was published in 2020 by Evening Street Press. My book *What Focus Is* was published in 2011 by WordTech Communications. My book *Out of Body* won the 2004 Bluestem Poetry Award and was published in 2006 by Bluestem Press at Emporia State University. My published chapbooks are: *Clear Cut*; *Young Farmer*; *Encounters*; *Inspiration Point*, winner of the 2000 Bright Hill Press Poetry Chapbook Competition; and *Just This*. Since 1990, my poems have appeared in publications across the United States in such places in addition to *The Clinch Mountain Review* as *North American Review, Tar River Poetry*, *Rattle*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Southern Poetry Review, Prairie Schooner* and *Poet Lore*. I am a 13-time Pushcart Prize nominee

Don Stephens, Jr. is a native Southwest Virginian, having grown up in Wise. He attended ETSU and Appalachian State University, and worked in the public schools of Wise County, VA, Ashe County, NC, Sullivan County, TN and Kingsport City. He enjoys the consideration of his Appalachian-American heritage and the mountain culture; thoughts of the unique personalities and places add richness to his life.

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