

**The truth is...**we gather on the Third Monday of each month to practice our writing skills. We listen and share in each other's work. We are small in number and our commitment is strictly to produce and foster creativity among our members.

**We started** in July 1999 and consist of adults that enjoy writing memoirs, commentaries, essays, poems, and/or prose. Our simple method each month is to use a pre-selected word or phrase as the basis of a story, an idea, an opinion, a derivative of, or an implied essence of and write a 1 to 1 ½ page document. We share our stories, comment, and in that way build up our writing skills through practice and presentation. The atmosphere is friendly and supportive, and the feedback is gentle.

**Curious?** Always wanted to try writing for fun, entertainment, or even profit? Come visit with us at any of our open meetings. Bring a sample of your work. Sit in and see what we do. If you like it, join us every month and become a member. Contact Nancy at [nestewart@ameritech.net](mailto:nestewart@ameritech.net) to zoom with us during COVID restrictions.

**Original Works by Members of the Pen & Ink Writers' Group**  
© 2021 Pen & Ink Writers' Group

**April 2021 selection – Balance**

**Balance**  
**By Edward Scheffler**

I endorse a balanced equilibrium between extremes,  
Provided the moderation itself hasn't become excessive.

###

**Balance**  
**By Carol Karvon**

Elena looked at her image in the mirror and was surprised at how pale she looked. She had almost forgotten about the stress of the past week. If it wasn't one thing going wrong it was another all week long.

It started last Monday morning when her boss left a note on her desk asking to see her first thing that morning. He was on his usual rant about getting work done on time and not using unfinished projects as an excuse to accrue overtime. As if she wanted to stay late, alone, in that creepy deserted office past quitting time, while everyone else was on their way home or somewhere fun for the evening.

She hadn't been able to convince him he needed to hire another person who could assist him with his overflow and ease some of her burden. To be fair she knew his boss also made

demands of him that were sometimes unreasonable and then her boss passed them on to his subordinates, Elena being one of them.

Anyway, she thought, that was the beginning. The rest of the week went downhill from there. The balance in her life that she tried hard to maintain between work and the rest of her time was totally shattered. She knew she should just go with the flow and let whatever was going to happen, happen. She had no control over events that might take place.

She would again need to work overtime to finish the heavy load of projects her boss delegated to her care. If or when she ever became a boss, she hoped she would not make impossible demands on her staff, if she were lucky enough to have one. With The way things were going, she'd probably be lucky to keep her job.

There were almost constant rumors going around the office about her company merging with or being bought by a larger company. The rumor mill was working full blast with unsubstantiated tidbits people gossiped over in the lunchroom and the water cooler. Everyone was on pins and needles and waiting for the other shoe to drop.

As a result of the uncertainty, people were becoming either uncharacteristically nasty or very nice depending on their personalities. Adversity seemed to bring out the best or the worst in people.

Since Elena's boss was close to the top of the hierarchy chain, people assumed she knew more than she was sharing. This was causing her even more stress. They would stop her in the halls, at the copier, even in the ladies' room and want to know what was really happening. They insisted she could tell them, but they wouldn't tell anyone else. Some people believed her when she denied having knowledge of any coming changes; others thought she really knew and was being evasive and secretive. Her life had become unbalanced and complicated these days, through no fault of her own. And, she didn't like it. She almost wished for the good old days when no one talked to her at work and kept to themselves.

Some of her closest co-workers assumed she was holding out on them. They wanted to be prepared with current resumes for possible job applications and interview appointments. She couldn't blame them. Secretly she felt the same way. She wanted to be ahead of the downsizing or whatever might happen. But the truth was, she didn't know any more than anyone else. She didn't know if her boss was involved in any of the planning. Whenever she tried to feel him out, he professed ignorance and changed the subject. It was extremely frustrating to try doing her job as if everything was going on "business as usual", but she decided that was exactly what she must do for now.

###

**Fire Force Rookies: The Arthur Conundrum**  
**By Mark Moe**

Fire Force Company 8 has two rookies assigned to them. One named Shinra Kusakabi has proven himself to be both powerful and mostly responsible, but the other one Arthur Boyle

needs more help to reach his potential. The leadership of Company 8 met in the conference room of their firehouse to discuss how best to help Arthur. “I am calling this meeting to order. Officers present today include myself, Captain Akitaru Obi, Lieutenant Takehisa Hinawa, Researcher Victor Licht, Engineer Vulcan Joseph and Sister Iris as our acting secretary. The reason for this meeting is to discuss our second-generation fire soldier rookie, Arthur Boyle,” stated Captain Obi.

“What do we need to discuss regarding our blonde-haired rookie, Arthur?” asked Lt. Hinawa. “I am glad you asked and to further explain, I will have our Researcher Victor give us an overview about the issues with Arthur,” replied Captain Obi.

“Thank you, Captain Obi. As you know, Arthur Boyle is a second-generation fire soldier. He is both exceptionally strong physically and uses a plasma blade which he calls “Excalibur.” The plasma blade can cut through most metals like butter and is great at extinguishing cores of individuals who have become infernals. His power and skills with the plasma sword increases when he gets sucked further into a delusional state of grandeur where he sees himself as King Arthur of Camelot. However, if someone breaks him out of that delusion his abilities and power plummet drastically,” stated Victor.

“I can certainly attest to seeing both of these states. When Arthur and Shinra came to recruit me at my junkyard to join you guys here as the Engineer of Company 8, Arthur needed my help to become more powerful. I had to make a noble steed out of metal with a donkey head on top. Then I welded it to a harness around his waist. It looked completely ridiculous, but the results were amazing. Arthur’s power skyrocketed and he was able to deal with those rogue fire soldiers from the Church of the Holy Flame. Everything was going well until one of the enemy soldiers created an illusion of himself as Arthur with the welded donkey so he could see how ridiculous he looked. Then his power tanked completely,” replied Vulcan.

“This is why we need to come up with some options to “*balance*” Arthur’s need to be in this delusional state and keep him grounded enough in reality to make him a more effective teammate,” replied Captain Obi.

“If you ask me, we should just focus on training him mercilessly within an inch of his life to get him to overcome his delusions and realize how strong he can be without it,” replied Lt. Hinawa.

“Lt. Hinawa, we should keep that option as a last resort. I believe he can be better served by playing into his delusions when we need the extra power and restricting that power when we need him to be more of a team player. Victor and Vulcan can you come up with some ways to help out Arthur?” Captain Obi asked.

Vulcan ran his hands through his short-cropped, red hair and turned toward Victor and said, “I can make whatever you want, I just need to take Arthur’s measurements so it can be effective for him.”

Victor acknowledged Vulcan with a nod of his giant head of long curly hair but was busy drawing out a new Fire Force armor for Arthur. “And done. My idea was to change Arthur’s current Fire Force uniform for something more medieval looking. This should give Arthur a 20% increase in his power and abilities with the plasma sword. The armor can retract back to his standard Fire Force gear.”

Vulcan took a look at Victor's drawing and said, "It looks quite heavy even for Fire Force soldier heat resistance armor. Will he even be able to move in it?"

Victor laughed and he said, "This is just a template. The real design will be done on my three-dimensional design program on my computer. The final result will be more practical and hopefully much lighter. If it is not, then we could work on increasing the power output of his plasma blade separate from his delusional increases."

Vulcan jumped in "If we were to tinker with the sword's energy output, we can always tell him that "Merlin" reforged his plasma sword and he would believe it. As long as he does not brag about it to enemy Fire Force soldiers who would not tell him otherwise. What do you think, Sister Iris?"

Sister Iris had not expected to be included on this discussion and was surprised that Vulcan asked her. She put down her pen and pad that she was taking notes with and looked to the me around the table, "I feel bad about being deceptive towards Arthur, but he is beyond stupid in those delusional states. You might as well try it if you believe we cannot reach him any other way."

Alright, we have a plan! Victor and Vulcan will try to help design new armor and improve his sword. If that does not work, Lt. Hinawa will train him within an inch of his life to get stronger without the delusions. We will meet back in a month to check our progress with him!" exclaimed Captain Obi.

###

**Dear Marjorie  
By Vicki Elberfeld**

Dear Marjorie,

I miss you, old friend. Long time no see. Once we've had our vaccinations, let's do lunch. It's such a pity this pandemic has been keeping us down and close to home. The only good part of this is that I feel I'm not missing anything. "And why is that?" you may ask.

"Because there's nothing happening," is my smug response.

I don't know what I'd been thinking. Prior to this...this...Covid year, I'd drive all through the Chicago area on a nightly basis, going from one social event to another looking for excitement. Now, I only leave home once a week to go shopping and a second time if I feel the need to go to the drugstore or visit my brother. Had you told me a year ago I could survive, even thrive, in my house pretty much 24/7, I'd not have believed you. But this year has taught me that I can work, read, write, talk to my friends and pursue a rich cultural life online. And with libraries stepping up to the plate, and intelligent, masterful leaders organizing Zoom meetings to pursue writing, storytelling, languages, philosophy, history and literature, drawing participants not only from the greater Chicago area but from all over the world, my life is richer than I ever could have imagined.

But there are those times when I get lonely. I miss going to restaurants with you along with so many other friends, don't you? Now that our kids are fully grown, they don't have play dates anymore, so sadly you and I don't see as much of one another as we used to. I have a serious confession to make to you, Marjorie. I know we're supposed to love our children equally and not play favorites. I don't know about you, but personally I find that part of parenting to be extremely difficult. Perhaps because she's the youngest, perhaps it's her enchanting smile and generous spirit, or possibly because I dearly wanted a girl to console me in my old age, I have to confess that Happiness is my favorite child. Of course, she was born shortly after my husband left, and after raising her two older brothers, I dreaded being pretty much out of energy. But she was so sweet, never cried, and really she was no bother at all.

I don't know what's come between us, but it's rare now for me to get a call from Happiness, and I have to wonder why she avoids me. Perhaps I'm just too old to be fun anymore? I thought we were such good buddies, but lately she's been making herself scarce. She was always the most independent of the three kids, but now I'm beginning to wonder if she isn't rather fickle in her affections, as it's becoming so hard for me to grab her attention. Lately, no matter what time I try to talk to her, I find it impossible to connect. Perhaps she and I have nothing whatsoever in common anymore.

Of course, my least favorite child is her brother, Anxiety. You would think that as the middle born, he would be the most diplomatic. Isn't that how it's supposed to work? Well, with diplomats like him our country wouldn't stand a chance, for we'd be at war someplace new every other week. But he'd love that, wouldn't he? He's such a drama queen. I find if I put a little Prozac in his food, he's much easier to deal with. You know me, I can't stand clingy children, but every day since the start of the pandemic we've taken a walk together. Even though I prefer to walk alone, he insists on coming with me, chattering all the time about his worries. He's such a baby that he never ventures out on his own, not even to walk around the block. Oh, a real joy to be around, he is!

How are your children doing, Marjorie? You have always been such a loving, patient mom. What I wouldn't give to be half as calm as you are! I've tried meditation, but my chattering monkey brain won't keep silent for a minute. The only time I relax is in my sleep. And sometimes, on those rare occasions I can recall my dreams, they are sufficiently threatening that I wonder if I calm down *even* when I'm unconscious.

Depression, my firstborn, and I get along pretty well. He isn't as independent as Happiness and has much in common with his brother, Anxiety, in that he is never far from my side. How I'd love to take him shopping someday in an attempt to somewhat moderate his morbid taste in dress. Apart from the scythe, he typically looks like the Grim Reaper with his long, droopy, gray or black hooded robes. And his posture! He is always stooped forward as if he were carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders, poor fellow. Of all my children, however, he is most sympathetic to my moods and understands that on so many days, pandemic or no pandemic, I really don't feel much like going anywhere or doing anything.

Happiness and he never got along, however. Most likely it was Depression that drove her away, not her loving mother. She's not too fond of Anxiety either and really doesn't understand him. Why would she, so carefree, so devil-may-care as she is? She is so light, and both of her siblings are so, so heavy. When Depression was down with a cold, he lacked the strength to even climb into his bed. I had to help lift him up, and I nearly broke my back in doing so. Anxiety is just the same way. I don't know, sometimes I think I'm getting too old for this, struggling with the weight of caring for both of the lads. If only Happiness were around more to help me. She could provide some much needed balance, and we'd finally feel like a whole family again.

But it's asking too much, I know. Happiness has her own life to live, and she doesn't want to be saddled with her miserable siblings. Why should she? And why should I, for that matter? My daughter seldom has a harsh word for anyone, but she doesn't fail to make an exception for her wretched brothers. Do you know what she called them? Ungrateful! Yes, that's exactly what she said! I could hardly believe my ears. She has always been known to smile and to see the good in everyone, continually pointing it out and encouraging everyone to lead their best possible lives. She has never been anything but sweet and kind.

She tells her brothers that they have a good home, enough to eat and loving, though separated, parents. She demands that they leave home and get jobs already.

She claims that I should insist and that I'm enabling them by keeping them here with me.

What Happiness doesn't understand is that she was born at a relatively stable period of my life, when her father and I had exhausted all our options for staying together and were content to be apart, the children living with me and their dad enjoying generous visitation rights. My poor sons, however, were born during our stormy period, and I think this destroyed their sense of stability. Even though he sees them every week without fail, they miss their father greatly. I feel guilty about the breakup and the effect it has had on my sons' lives, but Happiness has never known any other life.

It would take profound courage for me to call my daughter and invite her to return to me; I don't say, us, because she'll never come back if Depression and Anxiety remain. Do I have what it takes to cut the cord, not only for my sake but for theirs? Am I stunting the growth of my sons by neglecting to force them out into the world? I confess that I long for the return of Happiness. While just the thought of letting go of my sons terrifies me, I have to consider my daughter's needs as well as my own.

What do you think, Marjorie?

Love,  
Vicki

###  
**Out of Balance**  
**By N. Stewart**

Lucy sat on the bottom step of the stairs with her chin in her hands. She had been sitting that way for several minutes. Life has a delicate balance to it she thought, stepping from one foot

to another causes a shift in the balance, making it easy to tumble down. She sat there a little longer and then got up to stand on one foot and then the other. Seems her balance was fine and she plopped back down.

Yesterday was a good day, but today isn't. She couldn't explain how it differed. It just felt different, something inside had shifted. When she combed her hair, she looked into the mirror and saw the same person as yesterday or so she thought. Lucy felt uncomfortable with herself, but couldn't explain it. There was no energy to read a book or to play a game, or be around anyone. She wanted to sit here on the step and not be bothered.

Jenny, her dog, came running up and grabbed the cuff of her jeans and pulled and growled, wanting to play. Lucy hollered in a mean voice, intending to send Jenny away. The dog quickly backed up and looked at Lucy with a hurt expression in its eyes. Cautiously, Jenny tried the approach again, but this time slowly walked up and gently put her head on Lucy's leg. Feeling the pressure, Lucy looked down and mindlessly patted Jenny's head. Jenny's tail wagged and the light in her eyes brightened.

It was a cloudy day and a little chilly and that did not help Lucy's mood. She liked the sun to shine and the clouds to be fluffy and pillowy so she could lie on her back, picking out shapes and making up stories to match. A circus story had developed in her mind from the elephant-shaped cloud she once saw, and then she thought of the time she created a story about the pure-white angel shaped cloud that descended to earth, engulfing her with a sense of love and well-being. There once was that little cloud that grew smaller and smaller as Lucy watched and eventually it disappeared from sight. Lucy cried.

Her cell phone rang and Lucy looked down and saw her best friend's name. She swiped the call away. Lucy had nothing to say to anyone today and wanted to be left alone to ponder and to think.

With her nose, Jenny nudged at the underside of Lucy's stilled hand, wanting to be petted more. Lucy obliged. The two sat there for some time when a bunny entered the yard. Out of the corner of her eye, Jenny saw the bunny and wanted to chase, but seemingly sensed her person needed her more and stayed close.

After a lengthy time of pondering silence, Lucy looked down and said, "Let's play soccer, Jenny." Hearing the magic words, Jenny's ears perked up and jumping off the stair she began spinning in circles on the cement. Lucy felt a little smile creep across her face as she watched. She took the red ball from the garage and tossed it into the air. Jenny ran after it, barking and tried to send it back, slapping it with her paws until Lucy picked up the ball and tossed it again. Over and over, they played the soccer game until both were tired. Lucy headed for the bottom stair again. Jenny came to the stair with tail wagging and tongue hanging long, receiving a big hug from Lucy.

Somehow that little dog had brought back balance to Lucy's world. Lucy felt better than she had earlier. The uncomfortableness was gone, the sun came out and the fluffy clouds began to appear. "Look over there, Jenny, at that happy cloud - it looks like you," she said, sighing and hugging her dog for a second time. Lucy knew the rest of her day would be better and knew the reason as she petted the head of her furry best friend.

###

## **Balance** **By Pauline Bastek**

I always saw the word balance as sitting on opposite ends of a teeter-totter at a playground. The picture in my mind is my friend Ruth on the bottom and me on the top. Since Ruth always outweighed me growing up, I would pull the board down from its middle-balanced position, mount it, and Ruth would then easily pull her end of the board down and mount it. Up and down, we would go but I automatically gave a good push when I was down to get Ruth up while she just had to touch the ground. The idea was that we could balance at the same level, but since our weight was unequal this wasn't possible but we still had fun going up and down with Ruth expecting me to give the extra push to get her up and me expecting her to hold down the board as she got off so I wouldn't slam down. It worked we were not equal in weight but we cooperated and made it work. That to me is balance.

The recent pandemic showed what it wasn't. School children whose parents could afford WI/FI and computers while being able to assist them in their school tasks thrived. They missed physical contact sports and socialization but were able to compensate with the aid of parents and tech devices to achieve a balance in their lives for this temporary period.

Oops. Forgot to mention that if Ruth and I only had the teeter-totter to play on boredom would surely have ensued. Playtime would have been out of balance.

A year in the life of a pupil is not temporary and the lack of parental support due to parents needing to work outside the home and even then, not being able to afford WI/FI and tech devices creates and imbalanced that this nation of ours makes no discerning effort to correct. When 55 of our leading corporations paid no taxes despite racking up over \$40 billion in profits, we are out of balance. More than that, we are showing our nation's checkbook with a negative balance for our school children. The same negative balance that have caused student loans to cripple economic lives of many of their parents.

To rely on the philanthropy of the billionaires is to believe in fairy tales. Balance is not going to be achieved in basic human rights of education, housing, health without federal legislation.

Ruth and I are still friends and she has weighed about the same as I since she found that others in life were not going to give her that extra push to get up on the teeter-totter, to achieve a balanced ride. Waiting for the 1% to correct with Philanthropy what is owed the 99% through legislation is to wait for Prince Charming to waken Sleeping Beauty.

###

## **The Epic Story that was Destined to Stand as a Colossus of Adventure** **By J. Smetana**

Bob was tellin' me you usta ride the L train between the cars. Yeah man that's true--why would you even bring that up? And why in the world would Bob ever mention it? Maybe it's a slow news day. In that case I need more pictures of Kendall Jenner. We all need more pictures of

Kendall Jenner, tell me about it. I just wanna make it clear: we did not do such things for “kicks” it was just a way to get home without havin’ to be jammed into one of the overheated fart-infested cars. Sometimes you had the platform to yourself so that you might “stand as a colossus” one foot on the front car, one foot on the back car maintaining a zen BALANCE. Is there a karaoke part to this story? There sure is!

Gray skies are gonna clear up

Put on a happy face

Brush off the clouds and cheer up

Put on a happy face

###