

Just Write

Gloucester County Library System

Logan Township Branch

Writers' Group Selections

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Freeholder Director, Robert M. Dammingier | Freeholder Library Liaison, Lyman Barnes



**This issue is dedicated to the memory of
A. Muhammad Ma'ruf & John Witkowski**



Muhammad is in the first row, third in line.
He was a Fulbright Scholar to the US in 1961 or 1962.



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DREAM WORTH REMEMBERING

Writer A. Muhammad Ma'ruf never discussed his personal dreams, but he got me thinking about mine.

A key member of the Just Write writers group that meets regularly at the Logan Library, Ma'ruf wrote several essays about dreams, including "Life is a Dream," which was published in the April 2013 edition of the group's quarterly literary magazine.

In this essay, he highlighted the children's song, "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," which ends with the stanza "Life is but a dream."

"Most people who feel compelled to get up in the morning, wash, go to work, get paid, come back home, pay the bills, clean, and cook may not accept the proposition that life is a dream," he wrote.

But the notion that life is a dream can be found in a variety of languages, he added.

"Some Sufis have also made similar assertions, but with a difference of a word," he wrote.

"The difference may be significant. The Sufis say, 'The world is a dream.'"

Sometimes life on planet Earth feels surreal. People weave in and out of lives.

But Ma'ruf was real. He was a genuine person who valued education and gave loyal dedication to his writing. He rarely missed a Just Write meeting. He came prepared with his papers in hand and a prompt to start each gathering. He set his flat cap on the table and was ready to listen intently to the work presented by his fellow writers and to offer constructive criticism for their manuscripts. He delighted in the quality work of others and set forth high standards in his own writing.

A quiet and thoughtful man, Ma'ruf earned his doctorate in cultural anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and taught at Cheyney University of Pennsylvania.

At writers group, Ma'ruf wrote eloquently about various real-world topics including friendships and social media; the politics of speaking English; and the growing popularity of tracing history through genealogy.

He also composed an essay about the writing life of Benjamin Franklin, who as a young man met weekly on Sundays with a writers group of his own in the woods near the banks of the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia. Ma'ruf and Franklin, who many considered a Founding Father of the American Dream, were born in different eras and could only meet through fancy. But I can picture the men casually walking side by side along the waterfront and discussing topics of anthropology, sociology and writing. They would have much to contemplate.

When Ma'ruf shared his writing with the writers group for feedback, he read softly, as if speaking a lullaby. His tone radiated calm. The group discussion responded in hushed tones, as if someone might be sleeping nearby and shouldn't be disturbed.

Ma'ruf talked about several writers whose work was inspired by their dreams. For instance, Samuel Taylor Coleridge said his poem "Kubla Khan" came to him in his sleep. In addition, Ma'ruf voiced an interest in the work of Spanish philosopher Maria Zambrano and her theories about dreams.

Motivated by the discussions led by Ma'ruf about dreams, I bought a sparkly pink steno-pad notebook to keep by my bedside and record my family's dreams.

Many of the visions proved vivid and easy to remember. Several times I have dreamed about returning to a past job that I previously found challenging and most rewarding. But the workplace in my dreams had changed completely. I was confused in the space and no longer fit into the routine.

Other night dreams disappeared quickly from memory and could not be recorded. My son recalled that he ate pickled okra in a dream, but that was all he could remember.

Dreams remain a mystery. The world remains a mystery.

But if life is a dream world, I'm glad Ma'ruf shared his writing in mine.

In memory of Just Write author A. Muhammad Ma'ruf.

Writers' Group Memories
Jane Harre
October 2017

Eight or nine years ago I began to attend a writing group at the Logan Twp. Branch of the Gloucester County Library. It was a nicely structured bi-monthly meeting with an average of fifteen attending. Folks brought pieces on which they had been working and there were time slots for reading and critiquing a few of those. Writing for a quarter of an hour on a “prompt”, a suggested theme or beginning sentence, and then reading them aloud was an enjoyable exercise which produced an amazing variety of creative ideas.

Over the years our group shrunk for one reason or another, and those who had kept the meeting structure no longer attended. Nevertheless, some of us hung on and from time to time new folks joined us, with Marian Fey, Brenda Sabol and Drew Young as regulars. Eventually all who remained of the earlier group were Pam Champagne, Muhammad Ma'ruf and I. Over the years our association turned to friendship. During our meetings at the library, Mohammed's kindness, humor, encouragement and gentle manner were gifts with which he blessed us.

From time to time Muhammad's wife, Nihar, would drive him and come to pick him up; as a result, we also became friends easily. Nihar says, “For him it was a relaxation. He loved the group and NEVER wanted to miss. He said, 'They are like family'.” Due to illness, he was unable to come from time to time in the past year and when first Pam and then Marian each moved out of state, and Drew took a leave of absence, there seemed no choice but to bring our

venture to a close. Mohammed objected and hoped at least our quarterly publication could continue.

The library personnel have decided to try a re-start, but Muhammed will not be among us to cheer us on. Despite all medical efforts and our prayers, he has left us. My sense of loss is only comforted by my thankfulness to have called him “my friend”.

AND MORE MEMORIES

Jane Harre

October 2017

Some names of regulars are missing from the previous article as categories overlapped. One who fit the category of “regular after I began,” was John Witkowski. John joined us a couple of years after I started to attend. He was a prolific writer of poetry. I can’t remember an evening when he didn’t have one or several poems to share. He was quite a talkative fellow and we learned a lot about his life – a rather adventurous life as a “first responder” on the Federal level.

His poetry was tricky and unique. John liked to use words in unexpected ways and particularly words which had more than one meaning, mixing them around from one usage to another.

I believe John also loved coming to our meetings; he rarely missed. After three or four years, he relocated to Florida to be near more of his family. Even then, he visited when back in New Jersey from time to time. So, I am sorry to say that John, like Mohammad, has left us permanently, leaving us many poems, many conversations and encouraging words, and a few illustrations to ponder in his memory.

Polio: An Ending, A Beginning

By Marian M. Fay

Happy little girl, standing up on the swing, life is just about to unfurl
Escaping from your crib, got a big girl bed, proud now, enough said
Happy little girl, standing up on the swing, life is just about to unfurl
Hula hooping, riding a trike, playing with all the dolls that you like
Happy little girl, standing up on the swing, life is just about to unfurl

Lying down, both arms raised, both hands framed by the window fan
Sitting up, no arms raised, no hands framed by the window fan
Lying down, both arms raised, both hands framed by the window fan
Sitting up, no arms raised, no hands framed by the window fan
Lying down, no arms raised. My arms won't raise! My arms won't raise!!

Mother! I can't raise my arms! Mother! What's going on?
Screaming, tears streaming! Someone help me, fix me please!
Mother! I can't raise my arms! Mother! What's going on?
Sobbing, frustrated, more pleading, more terrifying fears!
Mother! I can't raise my arms! Mother! What's going on?

Tears streaming, terrified I'm screaming!
Strapped to a gurney, painfully tight, driving off into the night
Tears streaming, terrified I'm screaming!
Where are they taking me? Who are these people? I want my family!
Tears still streaming, terrified but I've stopped screaming

No longer strapped down, I struggle to sit up and look around.
Where are mother and daddy? Why am I in a crib? I want my bed!
No longer strapped down, I struggle to sit up and look around.
The girl in the crib across from me seems chatty and friendly
No longer strapped down, I struggled to sit up, then laid down

Decades have passed in a hurry, memories are now hazy and blurry
My pinky finger starting to move, standing up, dizzy, need to improve
Decades have passed in a hurry, memories are now hazy and blurry
Me opening my crib bars, climbing out, falling then seeing stars!
Decades have passed in a hurry, memories are now hazy and blurry

Decades have passed in a hurry, memories are now hazy and blurry
Regaining strength and able to stand, everything healing but my arm and hand
Decades have passed in a hurry, memories are now hazy and blurry
Electric shock therapy for my arm, painful, did no good just harm

Decades have passed in a hurry, memories are now hazy and blurry

When in the ward time passed so slowly, memories of it are now so blurry
I don't remember birthday number four but Halloween I remember a little more
When in the ward time passed so slowly, memories of it are now so blurry
I threw a mask back and forth with a friend, I didn't know his life would soon end
When in the ward time passed so slowly, memories of it are now so blurry

I had polio, very deadly, and very scary
No one told me that I could die, it was not being home, made me cry
I had polio, very deadly, and very scary
Many kids on the ward passed away, kids I played with, gone home to stay
I had polio, very deadly, and very scary

Decades are long past, I'm still impulsive, but the body's not so fast
A lifetime spent proving my one handed abilities, my normalcy, my stability
Decades are long past, I'm still impulsive, but the body's not so fast
I never knew that some friends had died, and so for them I never cried
Decades are long past, I'm still impulsive, but the body's not so fast

The point of all this is to say, I faced death but I didn't let it get in my way
I wasn't aware of death as a child, thoughts of death never cramped my style
When my malignant melanoma was cut out, I knew it was gone, I had no doubts
My life could have been over, gone in a blink, now I thoroughly enjoy God winks.
I'm here to spread God's love as long as I can, life in heaven is just part of the plan

My Proper Table Manners

By Marian M. Fay

I will soon turn sixty-two
I have been feeding myself since I was two
I eat with one hand so please understand
I won't always eat the way that society demands

I don't cut my meat into tiny little bites
If I had to do that it would take all night
When it comes to salad I don't cut it at all
I eat what fits in my mouth, the rest can just fall

If my food can be skewered without being cut
For me this is proper, no ifs and or buts
I can pour my own liquids that are cold or hot
If it spills wipe it up, Miss Manners I'm not

I can set a table in the proper way
But my table manners are mine, what else can I say
Don't offer help when not asked for
If you see me as helpless, then you need to know me more

There are some days I need more help than others
But I will let you know, I only needed one mother
When you eat with me accept what you see
If we're friends please allow me to be me

My table manners are unique to me
They aren't always yours as you would soon see
Be polite enough to overlook a few things
To me it's more important the friendship we bring

The following poem was enjoyed by my dear friend Muhammad. It made him laugh and his eyes twinkle. He will be missed.

...lon...

By Marian M. Fay

Where to draw inspiration?
Drama pursues acts of desperation
To be or not to be, well let's just see
What if there is no depth, just perspiration?
Again I digress, but I can't suppress my indignation
I should be able to create works of poetry without stupefaction
Does this mean I have no imagination?
What would be my classification?
Rhyme after rhyme and time after time
This poem rolls on with no expiration
Arrrg! Aggravation!!!!!!!

Ode To The Driver's Side Window

By Marian M. Fay

When the car was newer you went down and you went up

You went down to let in fresh air year round
You went down to pay tolls while driving out of town
You went down to chat with family, friends, and neighbors
You went down to pay the gas jockey for his /her labors

You went up to keep the car locked up tight
You went up to keep the car safe at night
You went up during stormy weather
You went up to keep the car warm, no need for a sweater

Then one slippery, slidey, icy day
The car skidded into a sign post and your function went away
You stopped going down to let the air in, to pay tolls, or talk to friends
The days of cross ventilation had come to an end

The next two years were hot and annoying
To pay tolls I had to open the door even when it was snowing
It was hard to get fresh air circulating
I had to open the other three windows to keep from fainting

Finally we moved to a state that wouldn't pass the car for inspection
The drivers side window had to work, so I happily took the rejection
This meant the window when fixed would go up and down again
I took this as good news and wore a wide grin

I took the car into our newly found mechanic
It wasn't cheap but it had to be done, no need to panic
Now once again you go down and you go up without getting stuck
I waved my arm out of the window because I could, just for luck

Once again there is a breeze that blows through the car
I can chat with family and friends and not have to lean too far
I will never again take your function lightly
Thank God you once again can respond to command rightly!

PUZZLE MASTER OF POETRY

By Caroline Kalfas

The poem I read made no sense.
The words lay like puzzle pieces
In the lid of a box for me to shuffle
And dig through with my poetic fingers.
Gazing at the poem, written and typed
On a white sheet of paper,
I wanted to re-create in my mind
The message the poet put forth.
But like a child struggling to connect
Curves and edges that should fit,
Frustration overtook me as I read.
Similes, rhymes and metaphors failed to match.
Questions and answers confused me.
I chained the edge pieces first –
The easy-to-understand lines –
Hoping that clarity might come
From my incomplete interpretation.
But the gaps remained.
I needed assistance from the author,
Who, despite skeptical critiques of his verse,
Could joyfully read the poem, line by line,
To explain its meaning, make phrases fit,
And create a picture with his words.
Like Will Shortz, the poet was a puzzle master.
Wordplay was his game. His poetry remains.

Written in memory of Just Write Poet John Witkowski.

**Swedesboro Native Commands USS *Monitor*: Commodore William N. Jeffers
of the United States Navy**

By Ben Carlton

(Continued from the July 2017 issue of *Just Write* – Conclusion)

For as long as the Army of the Potomac remained encamped at Harrison's Landing along the James, the Union Navy patrolled the river to protect the Army of the Potomac. Blockade duty was hard on both the *Monitor* and her crew during the sweltering months of July and August. Baking in an iron hull under a blistering Virginia sun, the crew suffered as temperatures soared below deck – on one occasion reaching 130 degrees when the ventilation system failed yet again. At night, there was some relief from the heat as the men slept on the open deck, but clouds of mosquitos swarmed officers and sailors alike, making all miserable. By day the threat of rebel snipers unseen along the riverbanks made it expedient for the men to remain below. "Nothing but Swamps on both sides of the River," reported fireman George Geer, "with exelant [sic] places for these cursed Sharp Shooters to pick us off every time we came on deck."

Meanwhile the *Monitor's* engines were in critical need of an overhaul, and the ship's bottom was so encrusted with marine growth, she struggled to make even three knots in the river's current. Lieutenant Jeffers requested immediate repairs be made at the Washington Navy Yard where officers and crew could expect to see some much-needed shore leave. But the navy needed the invulnerable ironclad in the James just now and would not permit her to leave her post. Request denied, Jeffers asked for a different assignment.

While Jeffers awaited news of his impending transfer, some of the *Monitor's* crew began to suffer from the effects of scurvy. A diet lacking in fresh fruit and vegetables contributed to a general decline in the health of the men. Geer described the crew's usual supper as tea and crackers (i.e., ship's biscuit). A typical ship's dinner consisted of crackers – again – canned roast beef (all parts of the cow cooked to the consistency of jelly), and odd-tasting "preserved potatoes," and, of course, grog (whiskey). However, the grog law would soon be enacted which would prohibit the sailors' traditional ration of a gill (four ounces) a day. But Lieutenant Jeffers saw a loophole: he planned to circumvent the new law that banned liquor from being brought onto any navy ship after the first of September 1862. But the new legislation failed to stipulate what was to be done with the current onboard supply of spirits, so Jeffers intended to stock up on grog before the law came into effect. Geer wrote in his diary, "...our captain [Jeffers] has sent for three 40 Gal[lon] Barrels to have on hand...enough to last one Year." The abstemious Geer did not normally take his grog ration but, instead, pocketed the allowance of \$1.25 per month. Geer fervently hoped that the "Government will catch him [Jeffers] at it in some way, and make him trouble."

Lieutenant Jeffers, like many of his crewmen, also suffered from poor health. However, his ailment was not scurvy, but gout. The rotund Jeffers was often the beneficiary of fresh meat and provisions that were procured by the occasional foraging party – a "Thieving Excursion," according to Geer – to nearby James River plantations. Yet scraps from these supplemental rations rarely got past Jeffers and his officers in the wardroom to the crew, causing Geer to

denounce Jeffers as a “Gluttonous Hogg.” Jeffers’ diet, rich in animal fat and supplemented with alcohol, probably worsened his gouty condition, which in turn did little to improve his temper.

No one, least of all George Geer, aboard the *Monitor* shed any tears when Jeffers was relieved of command of the ironclad, reportedly for reasons of ill health. Jeffers was assigned to duty with the Bureau of Ordnance in Philadelphia, and later in Washington City. Ordnance was Jeffers’ bailiwick, and the navy department needed his technical expertise in this area. Geer thought otherwise: “I think the Government have found out what I have known for some time...that he is half sesesh and is not fit to be in command any way.” Neither did Paymaster William Keeler lament the departure of Lieutenant Commander Jeffers (he had been promoted to date from 16 July 1862): “I can assure you we parted from him without many regrets.” Perhaps the navy’s opinion of Jeffers was more in line with Keeler’s assessment of his now-departed commander. Keeler recognized Jeffers as a man of great “scientific attainment,” but also saw him as “brutal, selfish & ambitious.”

Besides his harsh and arbitrary dealings with the crew, Jeffers’ tenure as captain of the *Monitor* was marked by his lack of initiative and industry. While in command of the famous ship. Jeffers fought only one engagement with the enemy at Drewry’s Bluff, where the *Monitor*’s limitations hampered his ability to silence the guns of Fort Darling. Earlier at Hampton Roads, Jeffers could not be faulted, however, for being restrained by orders not to engage the *Virginia*. Jeffers’ greater failure was his rather harsh, imperious manner of command that made officers and crew despise and disrespect him.

Upon Jeffers’ leaving on 15 August 1862 shipboard morale improved almost immediately. Geer wrote home, “Ever since [acting chief engineer Isaac] Newton and Jeffers left it seems [sic] like another ship.” Geer also stated that despite being away from his family, he was now as “contented” as possible as a man could be in his situation. Geer and his shipmates were pleased with their new commander, Thomas H. Stevens, formerly skipper of the USS *Maratanza*. “We like our Captain very much,” wrote Geer. “He is not so much an old Wind Bag as Jeffers was.” Whereas Jeffers had set himself apart from both officers and crewmen, the affable Stevens thought nothing of taking the ship’s boat out for a little fishing trip with Keeler and Daniel Logue, the ship’s surgeon. With Jeffers gone the comradery that once prevailed when Captain Worden was at the helm now had returned to the *Monitor*.

Jeffers was not sorry to have left. He was sick and he could not have failed to sense the crew’s hostility, which was made worse by a long summer of idleness on the sweltering James River. But Jeffers had only himself to blame for the crew’s ill will. He had antagonized officers and seamen alike with his harsh discipline and surly disposition. Still, he had been in command of the *Monitor* for five months – nearly half of her short-lived career. Jeffers commanded longer than Worden or any of the other captains of the historic little ship. Less than a month after Jeffers left for duty with the ordnance department, Stevens was relieved of his command on 8 September, allegedly for drunkenness. Commander John P. Bankhead, Stevens’ replacement, would retain command of the *Monitor* until she was lost in a storm off Cape Hatteras on 31 December 1862, taking four officers and 16 crewmen to the bottom with her.

Jeffers remained with the ordnance department for the remainder of the war. In 1865 Jeffers was again at sea in command of the steam sloop, *Swatara*. In a postscript to Civil War history, Jeffers was ordered to return John Surrat, accused conspirator in President Lincoln’s assassination, to the United States. Having eluded capture for two years, Surratt was finally

arrested in Alexandria, Egypt, in 1867 and extradited back to the states in irons onboard the *Swatara*.

Jeffers was promoted to Captain in 1870, and attained the rank of Commodore in 1878. He subsequently became Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance in 1883. After a long and remarkable career, Commodore Jeffers died suddenly of kidney disease at Washington, D.C. on 23 July 1883. He was buried at the United States Naval Academy Cemetery in Annapolis, Maryland. Despite what Keeler, Geer, and others aboard the *Monitor* may have thought of William Jeffers during the Civil War, in another war, the U. S. Navy esteemed him highly enough to name a destroyer in his honor, the USS *Jeffers* in 1942.

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Just Write

Meetings Held 2nd & 4th Wednesdays @

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