

ALONSOVILLE VOICE

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL DAY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

Issue No. 17

Brought to you by:

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vivant

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design & layout

In this Issue:

Featured Neighbors:

Cyndy Serfas

Don Berger

Denise Bolton

Eric Gordon

Esha Janssens

Henri Gordon

Teresa Bogdon

Kieran Paulson

Marloe Filippi

Max Garner



Hydrangeas, Cyndy Serfas

News and Notes:

Thanks to Jerry Henger for editing and delivering the latest Alonsoville Directory. Due to printing-company errors, the man had to deliver it twice. When Jerry discovered the errors, he went to each house and collected the directory and returned with the revised version. Well done, Jerry!

Shows of the Variations Project by Rapid Lemon Productions, July 11th - 27th at the Strand Theater on Harford Road.
Information at www.rapidlemon.org.

Recently, yours truly, David Bolton, was featured in *The Baltimore Sun*. Main topic? The Alonsoville Voice. "Alonsoville Voice chronicles the people who live in the North Baltimore neighborhood" June 14, 2025

News and Notes (continued): Coming Soon: *Whispering Pines*, a Towson Novel by David Bolton, Set in 1956. Each character in the Whispering Pines apartment complex has a story to tell. Published by Rare Bird in Los Angeles. Approximate release date: Jan 1, 2026.

Don Berger: Poet Laureate

By David Bolton

He was born in Queens. When he was five, his family moved to Long Island, to a planned suburban community like Levittown, "an interesting place." In a recent interview, Don remembered with fondness how neighbors "put down sawhorses and had block parties. Speakers hung on telephone poles. People danced to Glenn Miller songs.



"My parents and two sisters were fun-loving and close." His father worked for Eastern Airlines. His promotion to Master of Crew Scheduling required a move to Boston. Don was eight at the time. "It was kind of difficult. I left friends behind." Don remembers the ride with his father up highway 95. "There was rust on the floor. I could see the road." Their destination? Peabody, Massachusetts, 14 miles north of Boston.

He ended up in a Catholic school, part of a Polish church. "My father pulled into the driveway and my parents enrolled my sister and me." The Franciscan nuns were demanding but he managed. He didn't get hit, and his grades were always good. He did well in spelling bees. However, instead of earning an A for conduct, Sister docked him down to a B. The offense? Smiling while gazing out the window. The boy had a vivid imagination. School wasn't exactly rigorous. He wished he had gone to public school.

In the sixth grade, Don's favorite baseball player was Carl Yastrzemski. He treasured the baseball signed by "Yaz," given to him by a classmate, the son of the manager. Don suffered along with his fellow Bostonians when the Red Sox lost another game 7. The curse of Babe Ruth would follow him into his adult years.

In high school, he sang in a folk band, and Rita was his first girlfriend. "She lived right down the street. I saw her every day." He lost his girl when she became a cheerleader and fell for the star of the neighboring high school's basketball team. Despite the heartbreak, it was "a happy time," full of friends, music and sports: football in fall, basketball in winter, and baseball in spring. In his senior year, he found himself losing interest in organized sports. Too much drama on the ball field. The baseball coach he admired had quit. This led to "the Steve Blass

disease," named after a pitcher who won the 7th game of the 1971 world series, tossing a complete game against the Baltimore Orioles. Then he lost the ability to throw a strike and was soon out of baseball. Playing shortstop, Don made error after error throwing the ball to first base. "I had to go."

You as in what

Angle I saw you from...

"You," *The Rose of Maine*

Now he could devote himself to other interests. On his bedroom wall were posters of Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. "The beat generation was floating around in high school." He immersed himself in Ginsberg's famous poem, "Howl," and he studied the brief humor and melancholy in Richard Brautigan's poems. He wrote poetry with his friends. "Smoking cigarettes, walking to the bowling alley, like the beats, on the road," he was rarely alone. "I had friends from Salem, upper middle-class friends, and working-class friends. When he won the Harvard Book Award for academic achievement, he received a standing ovation.

At the University of Massachusetts, Don chose philosophy as a major. "Reading about Alan Watts and Hermann Hesse changed my life. It got me thinking about life without God. I was a devout altar boy... had an altar in my bedroom. I stopped believing and slid into Buddhism."

The campus was packed with students living in 30-story dorm towers. As luck would have it, Don landed in the "hippy dorm, an amazing place." For his first semester, he had an "ecological interest" and took a logic class. He didn't like it. In the second semester, he signed up for an intro in creative writing. Writing up a storm, he now viewed himself as a poet. The professor was very encouraging.

In his sophomore year, in an intermediate poetry class, he met James Tate, winner of the Yale Series Younger Poet Award. The man had no pretense. Ten years older, the poet dressed



Don Berger as a high school student

like an “older graduate student” and had a great sense of humor. “He was like a rock star. I soaked up one of his books, *Absences*.” No wonder the poem he submitted for the workshop “sounded like one of Tate’s poems.” Tate read Don’s poem first. He praised the approach. “For better or worse, he became my guru.”

O little while.
while you last,
as somebody
who doesn’t know meets
somebody who does,...
“The Long Time,” *The Long Time*



Don took every opportunity to learn from James Tate. “He was a Francophile and focused on European translations. If he mentioned a book, I would go to the bookstore and buy it.” Through independent study, he met another great teacher, David Lenson. The professor hosted in his house “weekly night workshops, with gallons of wine on the table. There were four of us, Peter Cole, a future Macarthur Fellow; Eli Gottlieb, an amazing novelist; and future best man Martin Earl, a great poet.”

One afternoon in his senior year, Don caught the free bus to Northampton. He took a seat in front of a young woman who was eating yogurt. He asked if that was dinner. This led to a conversation on bees and how they communicate. “When the bus stopped at Northampton, I had the whole length of Main Street to chat. ‘We should have coffee.’” He said this when they stopped at a corner and were going to part. He asked three times before she gave in. When they said goodbye, he had her phone number. Five days passed before he found the right venue for a first date, the Moscow Philharmonic, featuring jazz giants Max Roach and Dexter Gordon. Cindy Moss said yes to the invitation. “I met her in March and by June we were engaged. We joked about getting married. On December 30, we got married in Rockville. All my poet friends came. It was a big wedding.”

Yes, this is compared with heaven;
The chair you are sitting on
derived from a tree that mountain
lions used to sleep in....
“Use This,” *Quality Hill*

Within five weeks, they graduated from college, got married, went to Portugal for their honeymoon, and drove to Seattle, where Cindy “had a gig” as research assistant, studying infant vision. While waiting for acceptance into the M.A. Creative Writing Program at the University of Washington, Don worked at the ELS Language Center, teaching English to Europeans, Latinos and people from Middle East countries. Shortly thereafter, he was accepted into the program. “I liked Seattle, pre-Apple, before Bill Gates had arrived, great city for walking. We were there less than two years. I got my master’s and met a lot of people,” among them poet Jane Shore, critic Charles Hartman, and visiting professor Stanley Plumly, who later would become his boss at the University of Maryland.

Next stop, Providence, Rhode Island, where Cindy continued her work in experimental psychology. “It brought me back to the East Coast. My parents were there. It was a wonderful place.” He got a job teaching at the Providence Hebrew Day School where he developed a writing curriculum. In ‘82, he won the Chimnoy Poetry Award at Brown University. The same year he joined the Wheeler School as an upper school English teacher. “That was where I learned to teach... on the fly.” He had two stints at Wheeler, sandwiched between two years in West Germany as a Fulbright scholar. Cindy was awarded a National Science Foundation Fellowship to do a “post doc” in Germany. She used the opportunity to work with bats. The two ended up in Tübingen, a medieval town not damaged by war and known for poet Friedrich Hölderlin. Don was impressed by the turret tower on the river, once home for the great poet. “It was like being in heaven.”

In ‘88, *The Cream-Filled Muse*, his 15-poem chapbook, was published by Fledermaus Press in Providence. When Natalie was born, he spent a lot of time taking care of her. “I tend to be a worrier.” Having a daughter made him “less fretful... miraculous. I lost all those extraneous worries.”

“It’s true what life does

Across a desk, what next week is,

How days kiss and people get wet...”

“The Rose of Maine,” *The Rose of Maine*.

When Cindy took a job at Harvard, they moved to Cambridge. At Brimmer and May School in Chestnut Hill, Don became chair of the English Department. In the meantime, Jack was born. “I learned to write with kids around, hanging on me in the same room.” Every morning he would sit, often before school, and write for a short time. “If you tell yourself to write 15 minutes each day, you will trick yourself into writing longer.”

In '93, *Quality Hill*, his 35-poem book, was published by Lost Road Publishers in Providence. "Publishing depends on who you know. I got to know writers at Brown University. Two of them published my first book." Late one night he was walking by the Grolier Bookshop, which only sold poetry. Pictures of poets decades past lined the old shop. "It was kind of a shrine." It was after hours and the light in the back revealed Luisa, the owner, at the desk. She invited him in. Next to her was a box. "I reached in, pulled out a copy of my book, and asked her to sign it. She inscribed these words: 'Happy to be present at the baptism.' I walked on air around Harvard Square."

He had met so many talented artists. His best man, Martin Earl, introduced him to John Ashbery, "one of my favorite poets. It was an amazing moment." His most memorable moment? "At the French Consulate, I went to an Ashbery reading of Pierre Martory's poems, which John had translated." After the reading, John told him that he and Pierre had recently looked at Don's book. John told him he was "a wonderful poet."

Don loved Cambridge. His childhood home was just 12 miles north. He felt like he was living in a small town. with old buildings and lots of trees. His favorite basketball player was Larry Bird. The Boston Celtic superstar lived right down the street from where he worked.. While mowing the lawn, Bird would exchange waves with people driving by. That's how Boston was.

What do you mean?

I will write

On floor and ceiling....

"Stay Here and Be a Mailman," *Quality Hill*.

"It was hard moving to Maryland... heartbreaking leaving my New England family. My kids were their only grandchildren. Maryland felt like a foreign place... I had to make a transition. It took a while." Cindy was hired with tenure to do research at the University of Maryland. "I was appointed administrative director of the MFA program. I got to work with all writers, ran the poetry series, and taught a workshop every semester. Some of the greatest writers in the country were coming to read, including Nobel prize winner Derek Walcott. I liked my job."

Another great thrill was Takoma Park, where Peter was born. Their house was located on the side of a hill. 360-degrees of trees dominated the backyard, landscaped into three terraces; a huge oak tree stood in the middle. For the next 21 years, they raised their children, loved their work, and saw the world. In '05, Don became Takoma Park's first Poet Laureate. He would hold the post for the next three years. The best part about writing poetry was the readings, sharing the work.

Twice the family moved to Berlin. Natalie, Peter and Jack learned German. In '14, his 46-poem book, *The Long Time*, was published in Germany, a bilingual edition by Wallstein Verlag, in Goettingen. By the time they returned to the States, everyone in the family was fluent in German.

Don Berger's reach as a poet has spanned the globe. He's well known among scholars in Hong Kong, Berlin and Paris. From the *New York Times* to *the New Republic*, his poetry has made their mark in hundreds of publications. But their move to Baltimore was "tough" on Don. He missed his yard and DC. "I moved here for Cindy, who was able to get a job at Hopkins. I got a job there too, as a lecturer in the Expository Writing Program."

He loves the Alonsoville neighborhood and enjoys the city. At Hopkins, he's made friends in the program and savors the challenge of teaching essay writing. "The students are really smart and skilled." In '23, Don was awarded the James Tate Poetry Prize. That collection of poems, *The Rose of Maine*, was published by Survision Books the following year. He's a familiar face on the poetry circuit and has gotten to know the writers in the Baltimore literary scene.

"I was intensely affected by the passing of Tate and Ashbery—hard to describe. In each case, I found myself recollecting times with both of them and still do. James Tate taught me about life and poetry. In Ashbery's case, I couldn't believe how often I had enjoyed the warm company of this great writer, one of the best writers in the language."

Don rejoices in "this wonderful community, the neighborhood and the tremendous literary scene here." He plans to publish a couple of books, a collection of short poems called *God's Bedroom* and another collection called *If I Say Something*. And he still has a few more manuscripts "begging to be published." For Don, the greatest thrill about being a poet is "the company I've kept, the gift of being able to swap poems and prose with so many terrific writers."

Spoken like a true master of language, a poet laureate. Below is Don's poem, freshly composed.



Patio

I'm doing what makes me happy that is why
The earth spins as quickly as it does, or as slowly,
Whatever. Look it, there's glass in the middle of the street
Broken but I don't care as much

As a person might. I'll just at some point sweep it up
 As if I had a new brain, as if
 Life told me to go out and get
 My broom, and just sweep it--
 The glass that I don't know how it got there--
 And just remove it, in the surest way,
 The steadiest way anyone could know how.

And by the way, this poem almost just wanted to stop
 And I almost let it, at the line two lines up,
 But why let it? Now I have to go
 To another room and will be back
 As sure as the darkness comes in four hours
 At 8:45 pm Eastern time. It feels sturdy
 I almost said pretty, talking to you here
 Where I am, where we are, on earth
 As it is in heaven.
 And give us this day our daily
 Whatever, like life was wanting to be,
 And *is*, so in its moment.
 Time wants to get up and scream out
 To itself, "It's OK
 Just keep on going, that way or any other
 You would like, because I never matter
 (*time that is*). You're always going to create
 Your own life out of sticks
 Metaphorically and a house will rise up

On the same street where the glass used to be
(*remember the glass?*). So that the right things is yours,
You can go to the bank on it,
Only we'll change that, and we can,
Change the word *bank* to some word else!"



By Denise Bolton, Plein air painting of St Johns Church grounds. Gouache on paper.

Quote of the Day

I'm tired of all this nonsense about beauty being only skin-deep. That's deep enough. What do you want, an adorable pancreas?

~ Jean Kerr, playwright and author

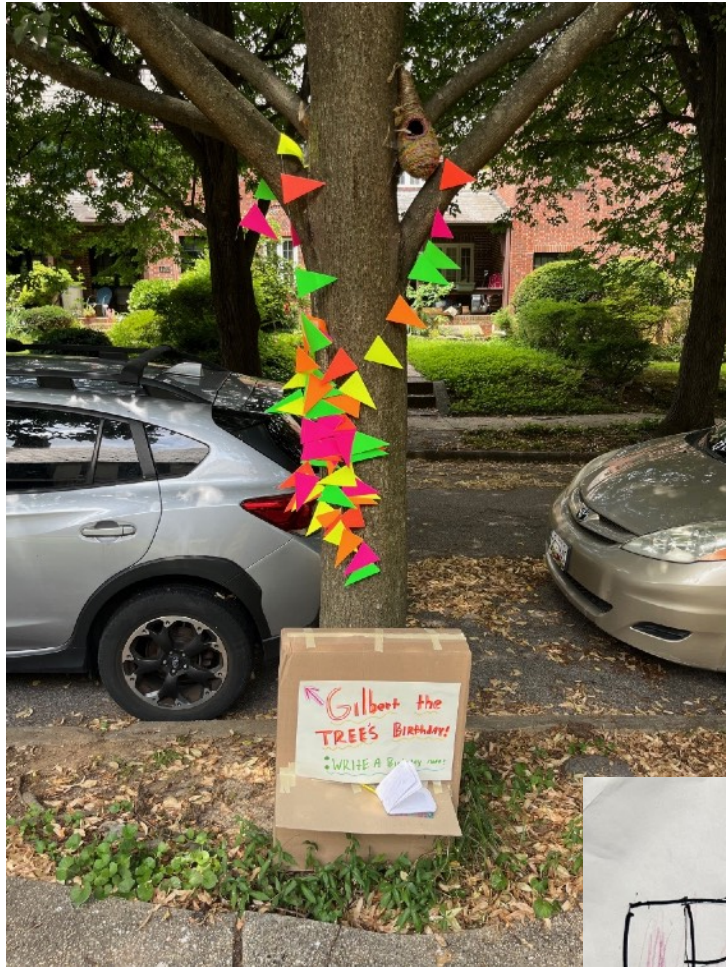


Photo by Esha Janssens, Happy Birthday to Gilbert, their "second favorite" tree



"80" by Henri Gordon, age 6.
80 is a super-heroic number block.



News by Denise Bolton, collage



Owl by Teresa Bogdan, acrylic

Another Quote of the Day

Truth is shorter than fiction.

~ Danny Thomas, comedian and philanthropist.

Idle Thoughts

By David Bolton

on *Isle Mujeres*,

a white cloud,

spoke to me.

I knew

I was

on

the right path...

two yellow spots on my fleece...

don't know how they got there

maybe from a cloud...

I'm hungry for graffiti, medium rare

How many tears make a war?

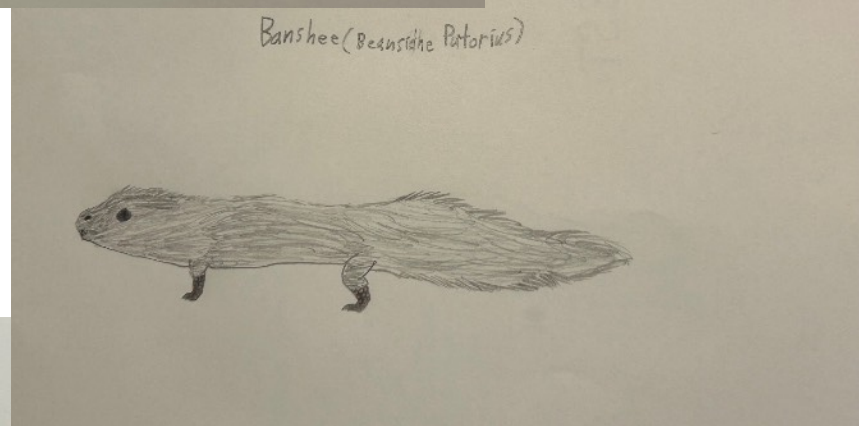
Do you hunger for love?

How 'bout a pastrami on rye...

Once Upon a Time

Cold Spring Lane was a black, two-lane road which ended at Roland Avenue. Eventually Cold Spring Lane widened to 4 lanes and extended to Falls Road. There were no traffic lights or buses. Streetcars traveled along Roland Avenue.

~ Tom and Addie Bracken, *Keswick History Notebook*





Painting of Van Gogh's self portrait with bandaged ear;
drawing of a friend by Marloe Filippi, Age 12



Photos by Max Garner, Valerie Lewis in *Variations on Myth*, 2019

Mia Robinson in *Variations on Magic*, 2017

One More Word

By David Bolton

I came from a family of lawyers. Dad was deputy state's attorney and Grandad had been a U.S. Congressman. At the University of Maryland, I entered the prelaw program. After graduation, I would go to law school at night at Dad's Alma Mater, the University of Baltimore. During the day I would work as a bailiff for Judge Turnbull, Sr. After two years, I could take the bar. Maybe I would go into politics. It was all set up for me.

It wasn't meant to be.

In my junior year, I decided to become a novelist. Inspired by Hemingway, Hesse, Faulkner and Fitzgerald, I wanted to tell stories. In May of '72, I graduated from The American University with an M.A. in literature. I hitchhiked to San Francisco, drove a cab for five years, and lived the Writing Life. It was a wonderful time. The city was full of characters, and rent was cheap. Pounding that Underwood, I became a very good typist. One night near Union Square, novelist Norman Mailer slipped into the back seat of my cab. I recognized him by that mound of curly white hair. "Let's talk about books!" Mailer declared.

"I've written two, what have you written?"

"My last book was *Marilyn*."

"Funny, you don't look like Normal Mailer..." On the way to North Beach, we had a lively conversation, full of banter. In front of City Lights bookstore, I had to ask: "Do you have any advice to give to an aspiring novelist?"

"Find a good agent. And if you find one, let me know." Off he went into the night.

Truth be told, I already had an agent for *Rainman*, my Mayan fable. She came close with Putnam, but all I got out of it was a nice letter from the editor.

Turning 30, I packed up the manuscript and returned to what Jack Kerouac labeled "the brown and holy East." I entered another line of fiction, advertising and public relations. In Tokyo, Baltimore and DC, I carved out a very satisfying career. For 12 years, I taught business writing, "the art of hyperbole," at UMD.

In 2015, I retired. I could wait no longer. I pulled out the *Rainman* manuscript that I had carried for four decades and gave it to my daughter Stephanie to read. She had majored in English at UMD. After reading the 400+ pages, she concluded that I had "a great story," but the female characters were shaped from "the point of view of a man." That key observation opened the door for me in the rewrite. In 2018, my pre-Columbian fable, "Love Thief, the Legend of Ixmal the Healer," saw the light of day. Kirkus Reviews called it one of the "Best Books" of 2019.

My Towson novel, *Whispering Pines*, is due for publication by Rare Bird in L.A. later this year. Can't wait to see the cover.

Dad was disappointed that I didn't become a lawyer. In the words of Joseph Campbell, I had to "follow my bliss." I never regretted my decision.

I live to write.



Alternative Cats by Eric Gordon, ink on paper