

Virginia Writers
Club, Inc.
Virtual Anthology

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2013 Golden Nib Writing Contest Winners

First Place - Fiction

A MOTHER'S PROMISE KEPT

By Rudolph Keith Dunn (Richmond Chapter)

Roaring hot flames devoured his mother's flesh, and the small boy smiled. Achebe noticed the soft brown skin was now black and charred, the delicate nose, full lips, and piercing eyes had disappeared. The beautiful, elegant, form of Ashanti, the envy and pride of her village, was no more than a roasting dark mass of skin, muscle, and bone.

The pounding heat pushed Achebe back a few feet closer to his younger brother and sister. Tears stained the small faces of Carmara and Kanasha, as they witnessed their mother disappear before them.

Achebe strained as he picked up two heavy pieces of wood and threw them on the engulfing fire. "Step back," he said with all the authority his nine-year-old voice could muster. He then picked up a kerosene can a few feet away and with all of his might launched it into the middle of the inferno. The flames flew high in the air and caused the children to turn away and cover their faces from the vicious, unforgiving, heat.

"I'm scared," said Kanasha, in a soft, trembling voice. "Why are you burning up mama?"

Carmara was silent as he watched his six-year-old sister say what he thought, but was too frightened, shocked, and confused to utter. His voice seemed trapped, with no escape, deep in the tunnel of his throat.

Her pleading question could not reach Achebe, as he stared at Ashanti's form dismembering into smoky black pieces.

The memory of his mother's bright sparkling eyes filled his thoughts, eyes so full of love and affection that greeted him each morning when he was awakened to do his chores and help care for Carmara and Kanasha. But those eyes were gone now, along with the beautiful mouth that lit up the village with its smile and laughter, that poured out so many joyous and soothing songs for all to hear, that said they were loved and wanted even when scolding them.

Achebe watched as all of her disappeared into a pile of fiery nothingness. But as he listened to the crackling of the fire and tried his best to ignore its horrible smell, he knew that his mother had really begun to disappear, bit by bit, long ago.

He knew the small cough that grew worse over time, the once strong arms and legs that weakened, the attractive figure that transformed into only a slight shadow of itself, had all been signs to him that the sickness which had taken away his father only three years before, had now returned to steal his mother.

Achebe couldn't recall a time before the sickness. It had invaded his village to take away aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbors, and friends. It caused villagers to flee and abandon loved ones and homes, to pretend they weren't ill, until they could no longer rise up from their mats and death claimed them in their sleep.

So as the strong arms that pounded meal, hoed rows of okra, and carried clothes to wash by the river became weaker and weaker, the small arms of Achebe grew stronger and stronger.

For several weeks he awakened his mother at dawn as she once awakened him. He wiped her eyes and mouth with a damp cloth, fed her the daily meal and put the tin cup of cool water to her lips when she was thirsty. When they became restless, he sent his siblings out of the hut to play so that Ashanti could rest, and he fanned her face and tried to make her laugh when the mid-day African sun became unbearable.

But this morning when he bent down to kiss his mother he discovered she couldn't be awakened. The warm brown skin he loved to touch felt cold, the arms that once lovingly embraced him were stiff and hard, and the piercing eyes that looked upon him with such love and affection were frozen open with only a blank, lifeless stare.

Warm tears filled the corners of Achebe's eyes. He placed his small head on the breast of his mother and embraced her fiercely. The early

morning dawn was the sole, silent witness to his sorrow as Kanasha and Camara slept comfortably on the straw mat in the corner of the hut.

He thought of how his mother had wiped away his tears after his father's death. She gently held his face in her hands, promising him she would never abandon them and would always be there to guide and protect them and remain by their side forever. And now, he felt she'd taken her promise with her on her journey to the ancestors.

A few minutes passed before Achebe raised his head and found the courage to stare into his mother's eyes. It seemed the deeper he looked, the more he realized his mother would never lie to him. She would always keep her promise. It was then the answer of what to do came to him.

Later that morning, while Carmara and Kanasha wept over the body of their mother, Achebe was outside gathering brush and wood and anything he could find that would burn well. He then came inside the hut and brought out a can of kerosene they kept by the door and carried it over to the pile of objects and thoroughly soaked them.

He returned to instruct his brother and sister to grab Ashanti's feet as he strained to lift up her shoulders. Despite the struggle, they were able to drag her to the pile and place her upon it. His siblings looked at him strangely after seeing the pile of brush, rags, and wood. He ignored them. He was the eldest, and there were simply some things they couldn't yet understand.

He kissed his mother on the cheek for the last time and carefully poured kerosene over her body. After covering her with rags and brush, he struck a match and lit a piece of paper and tossed it onto the piling. He watched as the fire grew hotter and completely engulfed Ashanti's twenty-four-year-old corpse.

For several hours he stoked the fire, smiling, feeling pleased at his accomplishment, ignoring the loud sobs of his brother and sister a few feet away.

The approaching evening had spread its shadow fingers across the darkening sky, and the red ball of the sun dropped below the tip of a group of distant trees by the time the charred black mass that had once been Ashanti had cooled, and Achebe's thoughts had returned to the present.

"Carmara, go in the hut and get father's axe, and Kanasha, go with him and bring me mother's special basket." Without saying a word, the

children obeyed their older brother and walked slowly to the hut.

Achebe grabbed the axe and recalled how his father had taught him to always take long even strokes when cutting wood. Now, using the same technique, he cut his mother's burnt remains into pieces being sure to thoroughly smash Ashanti's skull and remaining bones.

He then took the beautiful green and black woven basket in his hands, recalling how his mother loved to trace her long, slim fingers along its triangular designs. Not since receiving it as a wedding present had she ever allowed anything to be put inside it, always believing it to be too special for keeping meal or corn.

"Do what I do," he instructed his siblings. He knelt down and placed his small fingers into the cooled ashes, slowly and reverently, putting scoop after scoop into the basket, until he and the children had filled it to the brim. He used his palm to smooth out the ashes on the top and then carefully placed on the lid, sealing the basket securely.

"We must go now." His voice was gentle, yet firm, the way he imagined his father's voice would be in this circumstance. "No one else is left in the village; the sickness has taken them all away."

Neither the darkening sky, nor the screeching sound of the animals resting in the bush, nor the thought of the evil illness that had come so swiftly to destroy his village and family bothered him now.

The soothing touch of the warm dirt below his small feet felt good as he walked along the road to Nkoli, a large village several kilometers away, where he once remembered hearing several villagers had fled.

He sensed the fear in the eyes of Carmara and Kanasha as they walked closely behind him. He knew they were still very young, and he was almost ten, so there were simply some things they couldn't understand.

Achebe smiled, hugging the basket tightly to him. He could now, once again, feel the same love, warmth, and safety from Ashanti that he'd always known. He had found a way for his mother to keep her promise to always be by their side and never leave them.

"A mother always keeps her promise," he said softly, before singing one of Ashanti's favorite songs.

Second Place - Fiction

TUPPERWARE

By Jeanne Johansen (Chesapeake Bay Writers Chapter)

The Tupperware container rested uncomfortably in Sarge's icy hands. He had given his last pair of gloves away, so his exposed fingers resembled mottled blue sausages. It was the first Tuesday in May and the weather was still iffy. The cold and damp dug deep into his bones this morning as he waited for the Veteran's Center to open at 0700 hours .

Buzz was waking up next to him. He'd had a tough one last night. Fought those Viet Cong all night long in his nightmares. He had roused Sarge from a deep sleep somewhere around 0200 hours by standing over him, swaying back and forth like a deranged rocking horse. Sarge's quick blow to his right leg sent Buzz to his knees and back to reality. The rest of the night was peaceful.

"What time is it, Sarge?" Buzz asked.

"Fifteen more minutes 'til she opens up," Sarge answered. "Don't ask me again. And don't ask me if we're there yet."

It was their little joke. Sarge's son used to ask that all the time from the back seat of the car. "We'll get there when we get there, son," he'd to say. It was a bitter-sweet memory.

"Papa Smurf ain't doin' so good this morning. His eyes look glassy," Buzz managed to croak. Once Buzz had his coffee, he sounded better. Sleeping on the street can leave your mouth tasting

like it was full of wet sawdust. Sarge wanted to remind him Papa Smurf had a glass eye. He thought better of it.

“Put him toward the middle so he’ll stay warm. Can’t do much else ‘til she opens up.”

They moved the Viet Nam veteran they called Papa Smurf to the inside. No one asked the time again. Time was meaningless for homeless warriors living on the street. And no one asked if they were at their destination, or even close to it. They all knew there was no stop beyond this one.

The wait was easier on some mornings, especially if the weather was obliging. Today wasn’t one of those days. The group of twenty or so huddled together on the streets of Richmond, Virginia, not far from the Marine Corps recruiting station. They ranged in age from seventy to twenty-one. All damaged goods. All veterans. All homeless. The cold wind lashed them as it zipped around the corner causing them to pull in tighter.

“Any minute now. Any minute now.” Buzz mumbled under his breath. No one seemed to listen except Papa Smurf.

Sarge hated it when one of them died on the street. It meant the cops would come and roust them from their sanctuary. It meant he had to hide the Tupperware so they wouldn’t take it away. It meant questions with no answers. “How long did you know him? Any family? What’s his name? What’s your name? Where do you live?”

The cops always thought the group was being evasive. It wasn’t that they didn’t know the answers. They just weren’t telling.

The lights were on in the center now and between that and the sun peeking over the roof of the building spirits started to improve. Buzz and Sarge helped Papa Smurf to his feet. “Let’s get you inside, Papa Smurf,” Sarge muttered as the two staggered under the dead weight of the soldier’s body. Papa Smurf had been on the streets for forty-five years and he had always kept his white beard and hair trimmed no matter what. This morning they were matted with dirt, and his skin was the color of an overripe banana.

“What do ya think?” Buzz mumbled to no one in particular.

“Don’t look good,” Sarge countered.

Once inside the warm building, everyone but Sarge and Buzz headed for the coffee and breakfast station. Most of the stuff was donated and a bit stale. You don’t care about “stale” when you’re hungry.

One of the volunteers saw what was going on with Papa Smurf and ran off to fetch the director. She appeared, checked his pulse and asked Sarge and Buzz to take him to the back room and get him up on one of the old gurneys housed there. Sarge told Buzz to go on, and he half dragged, half carried his companion to the back. He managed to sit Papa Smurf, swinging his legs around so he was on top of the clean sheets. Buzz had reappeared with coffee and a couple of biscuits. “I knew you wouldn’t leave him, Sarge. I brought you something. That food is goin’ fast.”

Sarge nodded in acknowledgement and eased his six foot, thirty-eight year old body into one of the chairs in the small room. He had sat watch too many times lately, and the weariness of holding these guys hands as they passed on was getting to him in ways he never dreamed possible. He’d seen a lot of it on the battlefield where it was expected. All of them thought the war would be over when they got home. For some it was. Not for him, or Buzz, or Papa Smurf. It would never be over for them until they died.

“You can go on if you’d like,” a voice behind him crooned. “This old man’s dying. Nothing you can do here.” He ignored the words, gripping Papa Smurf’s hand even tighter.

“You think he’d let you hold his hand if he knew what was in that Tupperware dish you carry around? You think any of these men would call you ‘leader’ if they knew?”

Sarge held both the hand of his companion and the Tupperware container even tighter as the voice serenaded them both. It did no good to tell his tormentor to stop. He’d been trying to get it to stop for ten years and it was a hopeless cause.

He must have dozed off. He was home again and it was warm and the breeze off the Chesapeake was calming. His wife was with him and his son, barely ten years old, was running toward him, fishing poles clutched in both hands. He could hear the gulls and feel the sun and all was well. No war. No closed head injury. No homelessness on the streets of Richmond.

All was well. That's how he knew it was a dream.

“Sarge! Sarge!” He heard his name called, but sleep wouldn't release him easily. Now someone was shaking him hard and calling his name louder and louder.

He opened one eye. “What?”

It was Buzz. “Sarge, they took Papa Smurf to the hospital.”

Sarge bolted upright. Where was his Tupperware?

“You dropped this.” Buzz said. He handed him the Tupperware container he had retrieved from under the chair.

Sarge tried hard not to snatch it from Buzz, but he couldn't help himself. “Thanks,” he mumbled.

“What's in that thing, anyway?”

“You don't want to know.”

“Hey, Papa Smurf is in bad shape. The cops just talked to me and want you soon as you wake up and can talk. They're in the next room.”

Sarge panicked. Usually he was on the street when they came along with their notebooks and questions. He could hide the Tupperware safely in several spots he had claimed for just such emergencies. No hiding it now. Not in here.

He looked toward the door. It was blocked by the bulk of two detectives. He recognized one of them — a man who had been in his

unit in Baghdad. He didn't fear recognition anymore — living on the streets had changed his appearance to the point that he didn't recognize his own face in the mirror of the bathroom.

“Buzz, listen. I need you to take this and keep it ‘til I’m finished. Don’t open it. I am trusting you here.”

It was the only time it had been out of his control in the five years he had been carrying it around.

“You can trust me, Sarge. I’ll sit right here with it ‘til you’re done.”

Nodding, Sarge went out to face the two detectives. He answered their questions as best he wanted to; then went back to fetch his Tupperware from Buzz. Sarge found him on a gurney, fast asleep, clutching the container to his chest. Buzz was a man you could count on. He shook Buzz gently and then backed up. Sometimes when you wake a man up he’ll knock you silly. Reflex and war did that to a person.

They spent the rest of the day watching television at the center and waiting for news on Papa Smurf. The Director came out and gave them regular updates and by closing time he was still in critical condition.

Everyone had to be out of the center by 1930 hours and finding a place on the street was difficult, especially on weekends. Their territory was being gentrified. That meant people going to the pubs and fancy restaurants didn't want to step over the bodies of displaced veterans. They didn't want to look into their eyes or smell them or even acknowledge their presence.

Every month more and more of them were rousted from their sleep and told to move on. The abandoned buildings had been boarded up, and space was becoming scarce. An upside to this was they had to huddle closer together in the alleyways that were still available to them. They kept warm that way.

Some of the cops were ex-military. They would look the other way, or move them to an area that hadn't been touched by the developers. They also told their fellow officers to lay off. A couple of them recognized Sarge as one of the medics that had tended to their buddies. Often they'd slip him a burger for dinner in gratitude. He'd split it into pieces and give it to his men.

Tonight none of the cops were the good guys. They were all told to move on and they did, marching off to a safe spot three blocks over.

Sarge hated this spot. It reminded him of the incident five years ago.

In Narcotics Anonymous, there is a saying that the program is a gateway to strength and hope. After getting back from Baghdad, Sarge had entered the gateway. He never found strength or hope. He knew then he was a terminal addict.

He had invisible wounds. One of them was his addiction to narcotics, and one of them was a closed head injury that went undiagnosed during his two tours in Iraq. He came home to his wife Veronica and his two daughters—home to the only things that had kept him going in Baghdad. It was the IED that blew him from his vehicle. The doctor said he was fine and lucky and sent him back to care for the “real victims of this war,” the doc had told him unsympathetically. “The ones missing legs and arms. Stop whining, Sergeant. You are lucky. These men are not.”

He had returned to the U.S. facing a hero's welcome. He was back with his wife and his girls and he knew he was not the same.

So did Veronica.

He tried everything to reintegrate himself into the community. His skills as a medic landed him a job in the local hospital, but his irritability and failure to recall conversations, difficult concentrating and inability to make decisions caused his superiors to fire him. They had given him a neutral reference, but the staff nurses knew he had

been taking extra drugs from the locked cabinet at the nurses' station room and charging them to patients.

After experiencing his mood swings and outbursts, Veronica had fired him from their marriage also. He got to see the girls under supervised visitation, but that failed too, and so he headed for the streets and the companions of other veterans who knew his pain and asked no questions.

Except about the Tupperware.

Papa Smurf was doing better, and they were talking about sending him to a nursing home. His fingers no longer looked like blotchy, blue sausages, and you could recognize his toes. Sarge visited him once, and he begged to go back to the streets. "I ain't dying in no nursing home," he told Sarge. "Tell 'em that, 'cause ain't no way I'm dying in there in my own piss."

Sarge knew he had nothing to do with Papa Smurf's discharge instructions, and since he had no next of kin, he truly hoped the old man would just die in his sleep in the hospital.

Instead, he got better and better with each passing day. The drugs and regular meals agreed with him, and soon they were looking for a bed in one of the local homes. Sarge was assigned the task of telling Papa Smurf he was being discharged to Twin Oaks Nursing Home. The discharge planner at the hospital had tried, but he took a swing at her and now it was left to him.

He was sitting on the side of his bed dressed in his clothes from the street. Someone had laundered and patched them up a bit. He had six new pair of boxer shorts and some socks in a bag.

"Let's go, Sarge," he said as he got to his feet.

"Papa Smurf, we aren't going back to the street. Well, you aren't anyway. They found you a bed in a nice place not too far from here. I think you'll..."

He never got to finish his sentence. The old man had lunged for the door, knocking the bedside rolling tray aside. He ran down the hall and out the emergency exit, setting off the alarm. One of the male nurses went after him, but he was long gone before the nurse even got to the door.

Sarge looked for him and after three days gave up the search. He's find him one way or another.

And he was right. On the fifth day after the escape Buzz came to his place on the street and told him Papa Smurf was dying and needed his help.

He followed Buzz to an alley about three blocks from the gentrified area. He found the old man wrapped in the blankets of other veterans who stood watch. Sarge knelt beside his friend and fellow street dweller and took his hand. "Leave us," he told the others and they slowly disbanded, calling Papa Smurf's name as they left.

Sarge had been here before. Twenty-nine times so far this year. He took Papa Smurf's hand and held it between both of his. "It's gonna be okay," he mumbled to try and comfort the old man. "I promise."

Five years ago he stood on this same spot and waited for the doctor from the local clinic to show up. Sarge knew him from the hospital, and was fairly sure he was the one who turned him in. "Ironic as hell," he thought. "The guy gets me canned then starts passing me drugs."

Five years ago a lot more veterans were going into the hospital. The VA took too long, and if you didn't have an address they wouldn't or couldn't get you help. These guys were street dwellers, kicked out of their homes because of addiction or invisible injuries or their inability to cope. There was no high like being in combat. Hard to come home to little league and ballet recitals.

Five years ago the doctor had arrived for the first time. He also brought Sarge's drug of choice—alcohol and oxycodone. He'd been

mixing them for years, and the first time he was rushed to the emergency room with both in his system, the doctors were amazed he survived. “He’s opiate resistant,” one of the doctors had pronounced. Being resistant didn’t make him want it less. He’d tried to overdose, but never succeeded. He wanted to be one of the four to five veterans who committed suicide every day. It just wasn’t in the cards.

But later, as the years rolled on, he realized his purpose. He and the other guys on the street were the support structure for each other, just like when they had been active duty. When they were in combat, mental and physical toughness was expected. Here among the “street troops” as he liked to call them, you could cry or shake or scream. No one demanded anything of you.

Sarge remembered his commanding officer being incredibly drunk one night. Sarge came upon him vomiting his guts out. “Hey, just like you last night,” the Lieutenant had gasped between heaves. “You can drink all you want — just don’t let it be a problem.”

The next morning the Lieutenant was fine. Sarge knew he would be because the Lieutenant knew better that to seek substance abuse treatment; he knew the punishment. After all, soldiers were supposed to fix their problems without help.

So the doc from the hospital came bearing gifts and the answer. No one wanted to die in the hospital. No one wanted to go into a nursing home. They had fought together; they wanted to die together. The Roxanol would ease the transition and ensure the soldier didn’t go out of this world screaming. The bottle of booze was a gift from the doc to feed Sarge’s addiction. After that first night five years ago he never drank another drop. Instead, he kept it for the other soldiers who kept watch over their dying comrade. “Make sure you call me when he passes,” the doc reminded Sarge each time. “We don’t need no autopsies or questions. I’ll make sure it’s taken care of quietly.”

Tonight was Papa Smurf’s night. Twenty or thirty of the street troops sat by his side, telling stories, laughing. Papa Smurf was in and out of consciousness, but he smiled and squeezed the hand of those

who surrounded him that night. When he became agitated, Sarge would place the Roxanol dropper under his tongue and administer a dose. As time went by, and the shift changed, he required more and more of the drug. His grip loosened, his struggle stopped, and at around three a.m. Papa Smurf died.

Sarge told his troops to stay with their fallen mate and walked up the street to the all-night diner. He used the telephone behind the desk to call the doc and let him know that Papa Smurf had died. "I'll call the mortuary," the doc replied. "Time of death?"

"0310 hours," Sarge replied, and then replaced the telephone on the charger. "Thanks," he managed to say to the night manager. He left the diner and walked back to his waiting men. They kept their vigil.

As he had done twenty-nine times before, he pulled the chain over Papa Smurf's head. He removed the dog tags from the chain and tied one to his shoe lace. The other he placed in his pocket just as he had done so many times on the battlefield in Iraq, carrying the tag back to the green zone in Baghdad, turning it over, and dreaming that night of families being notified.

There was no green zone here on the streets of Richmond. So, later he would open the Tupperware and lay Papa Smurf's dog tag to rest with the other twenty-nine in the vessel he guarded so carefully.

Third Place - Fiction

A FAIR-‘E’ TALE

By JoAnn Meaker (Hanover Writers Chapter)

Gramma Rose walked into the room and saw her three grandchildren glued to the TV. This won't do, she thought. She reached for the remote, hit the button and the screen went blank. Three set of eyes turned to her in surprise. Before any words were said, Gramma reached for the youngest, pulling the girl onto her lap as she sat between the two older boys.

“Now, let's have a story. Who wants to start?”

Easily distracted, the youngest said, “Once upon a time...”

“Okay, a fairy tale it is.” Gramma Rose paused, thought and then started the story.

“Once upon a time in the great land of USofA, there lived three young children. Lady Lauren and her brother Sir Alexander lived in a small kingdom called VA. Their cousin, Sir Ethan James, lived far across the land in the city of See-at-ill in another kingdom called WA. Now the three children loved to be together. They played games whenever they could. Simple games like hide and go seek—where one child could hide from the others. Lady Lauren sometimes got so excited she forgot to hide really well and the two older boys would find her quickly. Her giggles could be heard all through the castle.

But because they lived in kingdoms so far apart, their time together didn't come very often. Mostly they were able to see each other during the

great holiday when a tree would appear in the castle filled with bright lights and lovely decorations. On the great feast day, many wrapped packages would appear under the tree and the children would spend several hours opening each and every one. They looked forward to this special holiday every year and, when the time came for them to part and for Sir Ethan James to travel back to the kingdom of WA in an air carriage, the three children would mope and fret. Lady Lauren would put on her best pouty face and stomp her foot. Sir Ethan James, in frustration, would give a great yell and Sir Alexander would cross his arms and say humph!

Most of the time, their fathers would ignore this reaction and continue what they were doing, but this one holiday was different.

While the children played their last game, the two fathers were secreted together in the study planning and strategizing, and writing code. They had a special gift in mind for the three children, and they were almost done. The two fathers had studied at the great RIT and armed with the knowledge gained there, were able to do most wonderful things with the ‘tronics in their castles.

“I sure hope this works correctly,” said Sir Cam to his brother as their fingers flew across the black keys on the pad in front of the magical screen. His brother, Sir Scott, didn’t say a word, just nodded and continued his coding of the ‘tronics. A few minutes later he sat back in his chair and said, “Done.”

“Have you tried it out to make sure?” asked Sir Cam.

“Several times,” replied Sir Scott.

“Well, then, let’s get the kiddos and we can try it out on them.” The two fathers called their three children together and explained how the ‘tronics would work. Sir Alex and Sir Ethan James were so excited they jumped around the room—and as Lady Lauren learned more, she joined him.

“Okay, now. We’ll try this out next week, when we get back to our own kingdom,” Sir Scott explained to the three.

So, a week later, after everyone had returned to their own kingdoms, Sir Scott and Sir Cam got the 'tronic ready and made the connection. The great SKYPE was turned on and the children were able to see each other on the magical screen. But this time—it would be different. Sir Scott explained to his son, Sir Ethan, how it would work. Across the great land, Sir Cam explained to his son, Sir Alex. When the boys understood, and with a nod from Sir Scott and Sir Cam, the two boys reached forward and touched their screens and disappeared.

“Where’d they go,” young Lady Lauren cried. “I want to go too.” She stomped her foot and pouted.

But Sir Scott was frowning, a great worry coming to his face. According to the code the fathers had created, the two boys were supposed to reappear in the Kingdom of WA, but something had gone terribly wrong. They were nowhere to be seen. The two fathers were stunned and before they could stop her, young Lady Lauren touched the screen and she too disappeared along with the boys.

* * *

Now the three children woke up in a Magical Land. They looked around them and didn’t see anything familiar. The road they were standing on was yellow. The houses were lovely, and seemed to be made of candy. Yummy, thought Sir Ethan James. They were so amazed they weren’t worried a bit.

“Look at those birds, Alex.” Lady Lauren pointed to the bright green trees, and the birds in them. They were acting in a most unusual manner. They moved and talked in the same way over and over and over again.

Alex crossed his arms and said, “Humph.”

The three wandered throughout this magical land all day enjoying the amazing rides and games they found to play. Lady Lauren especially enjoyed meeting some princesses. But the boys saw that they were acting strangely too. Each princess just nodded and said the same thing to Lauren.

As the sun began to set, they realized they had no way of knowing how to get back to their own castles in their own kingdoms. Lady Lauren

put on her best pouty face, and stomped her foot. But her Daddy wasn't there to notice. Sir Ethan James gave a great yell, but no one answered him. And Sir Alex had already realized that crossing his arms and saying humph wouldn't do any good. They found a purple bench under a pink tree to think.

"We have to find our way back," Alex said.

"How are we going to do that, Alex?" asked Ethan.

Sir Alex thought and thought. "There are 'tronics all over this place, replied Alex. "They run the rides, tell us where to go and what to do. I bet our dads are trying to get us out of here. Maybe we can get a message to them."

Lady Lauren cried, "Look, there's a 'tronics screen on that wall across the road and it's a big one. Let's go there."

And so the three crossed the yellow paved street and stood before the giant 'tronics screen. Lady Lauren touched the screen but nothing happened. Just then, a bird landed on Sir Ethan James shoulder. In its beak was a folded piece of paper. Sir Alex carefully took the note and the bird flew off. He opened the message and read...

We're working on getting you all home, but you must help. Go find three e-padlets and bring them back to the big 'tronic.

Dad

"Hurray," shouted Lady Lauren. She was getting so tired and wanted to be home right now. She started a pouty face, and raised her leg to stomp, but slowly put it down and sat on the bench instead. "So where do we find three e-padlets?"

A hum sounded in response and the yellow road under them –began to flash – pink, red and green – with arrows pointing in three different directions. Sir Ethan looked at his cousins and pointed. "Green is my favorite color – I'm going to follow that one."

"And red is mine – let's meet back here when we find those e-

padlets,” said Sir Alex.

“Oh, pink is my favorite – I’m going that way,” and off Lady Lauren walked following the pink arrows around the corner. She followed her color until she came to a small hut. Inside the hut was a little ‘tronic station. Lady Lauren walked to the one she found, and saw a pink button on it. Curious, she pushed the button and was surprised when the ‘tronic asked a question. She thought hard, answered correctly and the ‘tronic opened revealing a pink e-padlet with her name on it.

Sir Ethan followed the green arrows and found a little hut and with another ‘tronic station. He pushed the green button and answered the question. He found his green e-padlet.

He left to join the others and found Lady Lauren with her pink e-padlet and Sir Alex with his red one.

The three set their e-padlets down in front of the giant ‘tronic screen and watched as something even more magical happened. The three e-padlets joined together and glittered beneath the giant ‘tronic screen.

“Let’s try to touch the screen – on the count of three. Ready?” asked Sir Alex.

“Ready,” said Lauren and Ethan.

“One, two, three,” they counted and they touched the joined e-padlets. The world went blank and then lights swirled, and they found themselves traveling through cyberspace – back to their own castles, in their own kingdoms, into the arms of their own Dads and Moms. They didn’t seem to want to play with ‘tronics for a while after that. And they learned that pouty faces, great yells and crossed arms didn’t get them where they wanted to be after all.

Gramma Rose finished her story-telling, and her little granddaughter, in a pleased voice, said, “And they lived happily ever after, right Gramma?”

“Right!”

First Place - Nonfiction

GRAVE DRESSING

By Rebecca D. Elswick (Appalachian Authors Guild Chapter)

Spring is the time of naissance. Stories abound about the rituals and celebrations of spring that bind our human fates with the cycle of nature. It's during spring that the sun teases the plants from the ground, and the animals fill the barns and fields with their young. In central Appalachia, it's during this season of birth that the long-standing ritual of grave dressing begins.

Central Appalachia is in the oldest mountain range in North America. In this beautiful and rugged place, that I call home, small towns and communities are the way of life. Small town life taught me to have a strong sense of place and a great love for, and pride in, my heritage. My Appalachian legacy includes its folktales, legends, superstitions, and traditions. One of its oldest traditions is the rituals that surround death.

Family cemeteries, or graveyards as they tend to be called, dot the mountainsides and church yards in this rural part of the country. The number of graves in these cemeteries range from a single family to generations of the same family. In central Appalachia, graves are not kept to areas designated as cemeteries, but can be found on a hillside adjacent to a house or even in the backyard.

Often, I pass by a small lot next to the road; on it is a mobile home that has a grave in the front yard. The teddy bear tombstone claims it is a child's burial place. Even when the yard isn't mown, the area around the tombstone is pristine. As the years go by, the absence of toys in the yard and the empty front porch is like a spotlight on the child's grave. No matter what story I imagine about this place, there are no happy endings.

Funeral services in central Appalachia are still dictated by religious practices and family traditions. As old-fashioned as they may seem to some, in truth, today's funerals bear little resemblance to those of a hundred years ago, when families took care of the wake and the burial. The absence of undertakers and funeral homes as well as the lack of church buildings made home services the norm. In those days, the women prepared the body while the men hand-dug the grave. The coffin was made by the local carpenter or a family member who was handy with tools, and the women lined it with cloth or a funeral quilt – a quilt made for this express purpose.

Houses were built with a window in the front room wide enough to get the coffin into the house, and the body was always 'brought home' to be made ready for burial. If the family owned a clock, it was stopped at the time of death and any mirrors in the home were covered. Often pennies, or sometimes nickels, were placed over the closed eyes of the dead.

When everything was prepared, the wake was held before burial. Since a hundred years ago, ministers in this area were in short supply, there was no actual service. Family and neighbors brought food, and often moonshine, to the home of the deceased. Women were supposed to cry over the dead while the men stayed in the background. At night, family members were expected to "set-up" with the body, because an old mountain superstition decreed the soul didn't leave the body until twenty-four hours after death; therefore, someone had to keep the soul company and make sure the devil didn't steal it away.

When the undertaker arrived in this area, death practices began to change. The modern funeral home changed them even more, but some of the old rites are still practiced. Today, funerals may take place at the funeral home or in a church instead of the deceased's home, but the tradition of 'setting up' with the body is still observed. After friends and family pay their respects, a practice now called 'visitation,' chosen family members stay with the body all night.

Internment in a family graveyard, instead of a large public cemetery, is still the norm in central Appalachia. Location of the cemetery dictates how the burial takes place. Family plots are often on steep ridges in out of the way places. Some don't have roads that are passable, making it impossible for a hearse or even a four-wheel drive vehicle to get the body to the grave. In days past, a wagon pulled by a horse or mule would be used to get the coffin to the graveyard. Today, the coffin must be carried to a grave that

has to be hand-dug because it is impossible for a backhoe to get to the grave site. Burial is also done by hand, with the pallbearers lowering the casket and filling in the grave.

The old family cemeteries are some of central Appalachia's most beautiful landmarks because families embrace the ritual of grave dressing. This seasonal activity is especially important after winter has ravaged the landscape. Decorating family graves is as much an Appalachian tradition as eating soup beans with cornbread. For some, it's a simple affair of mowing grass, removing old arrangements and installing new ones, but to some families, it is a ritual that has become a family ceremony as worshipful as the funeral.

When the grass greens and the sun warms the earth, it's time to make the trek to the family graveyards. This is an important ritual for my family, and on the appointed day, I arrive at our family cemetery early, so I can wander through the uneven rows of old graves alone. The beauty of spring juxtaposed with death doesn't escape me. I sit under a poplar tree and look out at my history; the most recent chronicle being the graves of my sister and father. As the breeze, with winters chill still upon it surrounds me, I think of these lines from Walt Whitman's poem "Leaves of Grass":

I WAS looking a long while for a clue to the history of the past
for myself, and for these chants—and now I have found it;

It is not in those paged fables in the libraries, (them I neither
accept nor reject;)

It is no more in the legends than in all else;

It is in the present—it is this earth to-day;

When my mother arrives, it takes some time to spread out the paraphernalia she needs to dress the graves: bottle of soapy water, gallon of freshwater, bottle of baby oil, brush, various rags, and of course, two large bags that hold the new arrangements. I discover she has added a new tool to her arsenal - a pair of small grass clippers, battery operated, and fully charged. I ask her what I can do, but she waves me away while she, "cuts a little grass" around the graves. I watch her for a while, amazed at how she can bend and cut so carefully and methodically when at eighty-nine, she

suffers from arthritis and osteoporosis. Her back is bowed from an old fracture to her spine. I know she suffers pain, but it doesn't stop her; it merely slows her down.

While she cuts, I wander around the cemetery. I see by the cut grass and bright spring flowers that other family members have been there to tend their branch of the family tree, but there are many graves waiting to be dressed, their vases holding weathered Christmas arrangements. It saddens to me that the favored flower, the silk red rose, looks the worst after a winter's exposure. I find many arrangements whose roses are now the color of dried blood tinged in gray, and I want to change them to spring pinks, yellows, and oranges.

Half an hour later, my mother is ready to clean the grave markers. She lets me pour the soapy water over them and use the soft brush to scrub away the dirt, taking special care to get inside the letters of the names. Mother watches me, instructing me like I have never done this before, and I get the sense that she is making sure I know what to do for the day when the side of the tombstone she shares with my father, bears not only her date of birth, but her date of death. I realize I have accepted the job of grave dresser, even though I was never formally asked.

When the grave markers are rinsed and dried, she lets me apply the baby oil. This is her special trick to make the headstones shine. I rub it over the entire surface, taking special care to get inside the letters of the names. When she is satisfied, I step back and let her put the flowers in the vases. I have not earned the right to do this, not yet. I am merely a grave dresser in training. My mother makes the arrangements herself, and they are beautiful. They are full and lush, but not too tall, so the spring winds won't blow them away. My sister's and father's arrangements are just alike, and in my mind's eye, I watch her creating these arrangements, bent over her work, counting the orange tiger lilies, pink mums, yellow and orange zinnias to make sure there are equal numbers in each arrangement. There are sprigs of greenery and ivy, baby's breath, and her signature touch – long green blades that look like sea grass.

While she works, she talks of times gone by, of relatives I barely remember, if at all. As is her way, she speaks of them in present tense, reminding me her brother Roy “won't eat breakfast without gravy on the table,” and her sister Frieda, “wore my new high heels out to the coal pile and left them. It snowed and ruined them, and Mommy didn't even whip her.”

Mother tells me of coming to this graveyard when she was a girl. She recalls that every spring, the whole family from all around, gathered for a big dinner on the ground. This dinner coincided with the coming of the traveling preacher. The family would hold a service at the cemetery for the dead who'd been buried in the time since the preacher had last visited. They called this custom of having a funeral after the fact, funeralizing.

While I listen, I stand by, handing her pieces of Styrofoam and strips of florists' green tape that she uses to anchor the flowers into the vases. I feel like a nurse handing instruments to a surgeon. When at last, she stands back to observe her creations, wondering aloud if they are secure enough, I see her eyes rest of the names of my sister—Jeannine, and my father, Frank. It's now when she makes a remark that has "missing you" somewhere in it, and I know it's almost time to leave. This year, her "missing you" remark was followed by "I'll be seeing you soon."

At last, she stands for a minute in silence, then picks up a bag and starts packing her things. I help her put everything away and then carry it to her car. I walk back for her and together we walk to our cars. When we get to the road, she turns and looks back at the graves. She doesn't comment on them, instead points out the kaleidoscope of colors that the cemetery now boasts. When she's finished, I help her get in her car, seeing the pain on her face as she uses her hand to pick up her leg. We don't talk about it because she doesn't complain. The aches and pains of old age she bears in silence. She puts that pain alongside the grief she's born for twenty years after losing her oldest child, added now to her newest grief of two years, the loss of my father.

I watch her drive away and go back to the graves we've just tended. I sit down between them and turn my face toward the breeze. I breathe deeply. My hair blows back from my face. I imagine the wind says, thank you. After a while, I stand to leave and see others moving about the cemetery. I feel a sense of peace like I have been blessed by the hand of God. My heart is full with the blessing of it. I know that one day soon, I will be the one conducting this ritual, and my heart accepts it. I know, too, the day will come when I will take my place here next to my family, and other hands will dress my grave when spring returns to the mountains.

Second Place - Nonfiction

TRAMP

By Patsy Asuncion (Blue Ridge Chapter)

We met in the 1925 house with creaky old-timey floors, at the top of the only Florida hill. You loved playing in the big crabgrass yard, hiding the rotten fruit of citrus trees as buried treasure. The tree house became your castle, almond trees – your soldiers, and the cool darkness under the porch – your dungeon. You were never distracted from missions by feathered dive bombers protecting their young. I fondly remember your unwavering vigilance in protecting your fiefdom.

Nature transformed you. We spent countless vacations on long walks in the woods or traveling cross-country to new vistas. Do you remember our trek by tent to eleven southwestern states in one month, latter July and early August? The hottest summer in recorded history, Dallas hit 120 degrees Fahrenheit and Vegas sizzled even higher! That trip gave a whole new meaning to Death Valley! By the time we crossed into Mexico, we both were so parched that our tongues were cracked. I recall that kind wrinkle of a Tijuana woman who gave you water, which almost killed you. Parasites attacked your pancreas so you had to take pills for the rest of your life! I always knew when you skipped a pill because your stomach would swell into a garbage gut of undigested food! The gastro-misery didn't slow you down. You'd eat anything put in front of you, especially when you didn't know what it was. Our misadventures convinced me that you'd never ever hesitate to venture onto risky ledges.

One reason trouble found you easily is you thought you were much bigger than you really were. There were a few run-ins with a nasty neighbor, a very large bully, who'd left you bloody on the street more than once. I had to drag you away when I'd see him coming because you'd never back down.

Other times, you'd disappear for days chasing a skirt and I'd worry the whole time. When you'd finally return, you acted like nothing happened and slept for days. I'd see a few bruises and cuts to help me figure out your story. My scariest time was seeing you with gunshot wounds after returning from an assumed fling. At the hospital, I was relieved to learn they were pellets from a BB gun, four of them, three of which the doctor removed. The fourth, the one near your spine, stayed there, a reminder of your death wish. I never did get the full account of what had happened. You were this little tough guy, a James Cagney, larger-than-life character from the movies.

As rough-and-tumble as you saw yourself, you were a big baby around water. It was always a huge fight to get you to bathe, even if you'd been outside all day in the sweaty humidity that makes Florida famous. I suspect you never wanted to lose the crusty woodland scents or sandy burrs salted between your toes. Yet, you defied definition as a man's man when you dissolved into quivery jello in loud-mouth rains. You couldn't even get up the nerve to look out the window during a thunderstorm! Absolutely glued to my skin, you would hunker down with me in hurricanes. When the barometric pressure dropped during the big storms, we'd both fall asleep in each other's arms. The all-clear sirens would wake us both up, but you'd be the first out the door to check the place for damage in your restored burly-man fashion. I can't say you ever liked the beach much either, only joining me when I forced you. I'd be splashing around with my friends and there you'd be in your usual spot, under the farthest shade tree from the water. A scaredy-cat under the bravado, you were a unique mix of extremes.

I am most grateful for another side of you, the tender-hearted friend. Not long after we'd become buddies, I'd lost a nasty custody battle for my children in Ohio. I can still remember the phone call from my lawyer. For the longest time, I stood there motionless, a statue that couldn't cry. By the time I'd regained balance, my second husband had quickly disappeared into his practice, a familiar retreat whenever emotional turmoil hit our front door. My close friends were scattered. I had no one but you. You said nothing. I cried and cried as we held each other on the stoop by the back door. It went on like this for a very long time. Thanks to you, I was able to deal with my loss, one hug at a time.

Satisfied that he'd won his battle, my ex-husband called a few months later to give me custody of our children. Ironically, they came to live with us on Mother's Day. We were complete, one big happy family with you as a special uncle. They quickly joined in your backyard adventures. The kids loved running around with you after school, learning all the best playgrounds and alleys in the neighborhood. Chasing after them, you helped

me teach them both how to ride bicycles. Like their mother, they weren't afraid with you by their side. When they had boo-boos, you were always right there to help them feel better, just as you were for me. Even as they grew, you'd always manage to get them into some silly game to distract them. Although a kid yourself, I knew you were a rock-steady member of our family, there whenever anyone needed you.

We were there for you too. I lost count of how many times I'd rushed you to the doctor after one of your crazy Evel Knievel ventures went wrong. There were stitches for fights, hospital stays for exotic infections, pills for poisonings, antibiotics for alien skin conditions. Even when you were under strict medical orders to stay in bed, you'd find a way to escape the house. I think you earned your nickname, 'Tramp', by doing whatever you pleased since you were little. I loved and hated that stubborn streak in you.

Your tenacious temperament also made you a loving-to-the-bone friend of mine for life. I'd be so angry with you sometimes for doing something stupid, but I always knew we had each other's back. I remember one time fighting with you, trying to stop you from eating something that I didn't think was good for you. You inhaled the whole thing and then were sick all night. I just took a deep, deliberate breath and nursed you until morning when I dragged you to the doctor. Every time I was bedridden with a migraine or home with a touch of the bug, I'd find you right there, next to me to keep me company. We were buddies through the thick and thin of everyday life.

I've not looked at another little red-haired mutt without seeing you these past twenty years. You were an ornery ball of fire, but your unconditional love quieted me. When I was playfully happy or still-life sad, you were my steadfast companion.

With me on every walk in the woods – just ahead, you are my vigilant scout. You stay the soft cushion for my tired bones at the end of the day.

Third Place - Nonfiction

THE IMAGINARY RAY

By John A. Bray (Chesapeake Bay Writers Chapter)

While I served on desk duty in Manhattan's Fifth Precinct one late tour filling in for a lieutenant on vacation, a visitor pushed through the door of the precinct stationhouse a few minutes after two am. Nothing remarkable about him drew notice until he got close enough for an observer to look into his eyes. The hours of midnight-to-eight as the desk officer in the precinct often dragged wearily. Built during the years that Theodore Roosevelt held sway as Police Commissioner, our stationhouse bore a distinctly time-worn appearance as befit a late nineteenth century structure.

Seldom anything happened to disturb the dull routine during the somnolent hours of what we called the late tour. Rarely did one of our uniformed men on patrol make an arrest during these hours much less would the detectives in our precinct bestir themselves to perform any police work. The officer manning the precinct switchboard and I chatted amicably but soon ran out of small talk. When the door to the stationhouse opened and the shabbily dressed young man entered, we both assumed he needed directions, or wanted to make a report about a minor incident. Any interruption of the monotony would receive our full attention.

Disheveled in appearance and about thirty years old, the man who approached me, said in a calm, quiet voice, "I'd like to report something, Sergeant."

I slid my chair on its casters closer to the desk where the huge ledger which functioned as an official log book known as "the blotter," lay open before me. "What is it you'd like to report?" I asked.

"I need to make a report about the man who lives in the apartment

next to mine.”

“Why, what has he done?”

The young man looked furtively over both shoulder and strained forward to whisper in a conspiratorial manner. “He has a ray machine.”

Now the distracted look in his eyes drew my closer scrutiny. “A ray machine, what sort of a ray does this machine produce?”

“This ray can go through walls. He focuses it on me when I’m home. He sends it through the wall and into my brain.”

“What does this ray do to you?” I asked, straining to maintain my composure without displaying the mirth welling up inside.

He glanced around again in an effort to assure himself that only we two behind the desk could hear him. “The ray is destroying my brain. I can feel it. It can go through walls,” he repeated.

“How long has this been going on?”

“It’s been happening ever since he moved in months ago. I’ve never seen him. He stays in his apartment and waits for me to come home. Then he starts the machine.”

“Does this ray machine make any noise?” I queried.

“It’s very quiet. But I can feel it destroying my brain little by little. I came here to ask the police to do something to stop him. I’m afraid I’m going to die soon if he keeps destroying my brain.”

By this time, the officer behind the switchboard had to duck down and avert his face to hide the laughter about to burst from his lips.

“Where do you live?”

“I’m at 642 Forsyth Street on the second floor, apartment 2B. Can you send a policeman to the apartment next to mine and tell him to stop using the machine?”

“Do you know his name?”

“No, he never comes out of his apartment. He waits for me with his ray machine until I get home. Then he turns it on and aims it through the

wall at my brain.”

“This sounds like something the detectives should investigate,” I told him.

“Really?” he asked, surprised but pleased that his complaint would merit that kind of attention. “Where can I find them?”

I pointed to the stairway leading up from the large open area we called the sitting room. There the outgoing platoon mustered for the change of tours, received their assignments and stood in formation for roll call at the beginning of their eight hour shift. “Take those stairs to the second floor,” I told him, “there’s a door at the top of the staircase marked ‘Detectives’, just knock on the door until they answer. Tell them about the ray machine. I’m sure they’ll be interested.”

I must admit I bore a somewhat disdainful attitude toward the detective squad assigned to the Fifth Precinct due to a series of events which had occurred a few weeks prior. I listened to the worst narration one afternoon just as I reported to the stationhouse to begin a four-to-midnight. When I came through the door, the desk officer, Lieutenant Bass, called me over. “Hey John, listen to this. I have a great story to tell you.”

I walked around to where he sat. “Yeah Lieut, what’s up?”

“A little while ago I got a call through the switchboard,” he said. “The caller asked to speak to whoever was in charge. The cop on the switchboard transferred the call to my phone. A voice on the phone immediately began by saying, ‘I screwed her but I didn’t kill her.’”

“Wait a minute, back up, I said. You didn’t kill who?”

“I don’t want to get blamed for killing her, my friend did it.”

Lieutenant Bass continued, “Hold on, I said, start from the beginning. Who was killed, where and by whom?”

“The man on the phone went on to explain that he had picked up the girl at the Port Authority Bus Terminal in midtown. He said he was scouting the talent getting off the buses from out of town. This young girl, he thought she was a runaway, asked him where could she go to meet hippies? He told her he could take her to meet hippies and that he knew lots of them. She went with him and he took her to an apartment on Baxter Street on the fifth floor of an apartment building. His friend Willie waited

there. Willie got so excited as soon as he saw the girl he grabbed her and started trying to rip her clothes off. She began to scream and struggle so the caller said he helped him undress her. After they attacked her she jumped up and ran naked into the bathroom and closed the door. Next thing they heard her shouting for help from the bathroom window. Willie ran in and saw her leaning out the narrow window and screaming. He took her by the legs and stuffed her through the window. She probably didn't realize she was screaming into an airshaft. It was five stories to the bottom. It wasn't me the caller said, it was Willie did that.

"The next thing," the lieutenant said, "the detectives walked in here. I asked them did they respond to a call over on Baxter Street."

"Yeah Lieut, one of them said. A girl went out a window into an airshaft behind an apartment house. We made it an apparent suicide."

"I told them, you'd better go back and make an arrest."

"Arrest, why? This clown said to me." As he related the incident the lieutenant shook his head in obvious disgust.

"Oh, nothing, but I just got a call from one of the perpetrators who says his friend shoved a girl into the airshaft after they abused her. They're still there, where it happened."

I later came to learn that she was a thirteen-year old runaway from Ohio and had taken a Greyhound Bus to New York City thinking she could join a hippie commune. The detectives arrested both men but only on the insistence of Lieutenant Bass who received the call from the man describing the crimes.

Some weeks before that event, during a midnight-to-eight tour on supervisory patrol in a radio car, I received a radio call concerning an explosion at a social club on Mott Street. When I arrived at the scene the detectives had already responded. The wood-frame and glass front door of the store-front club was shattered and shards of glass littered the entrance both inside and out. When I stepped through the now open door I could see fragments of copper-colored metal casings strewn around the interior as well as bullets from thirty-caliber rifle ammunition on the floor, imbedded in the walls, the ceiling, the pool table, the telephone booth and some of the furnishings. Someone had placed an explosive device in the transom of the doorway, created with rifle rounds bound together with roofing tar, a fuse and primer cord inserted in the center of the bundle and detonated. This improvised device had caused the damage.

In my apparent naiveté, I asked the detective inspecting the scene, “Shouldn’t we notify the bomb squad?”

“Bomb squad?” he retorted with obvious contempt for my lack of insight. “Why should we call the bomb squad? It was just a fire cracker.”

Soon after that episode, Sergeant Strang, a fellow sergeant in the precinct told me another “detective story.” He could scarcely conceal his cynical smirk.

Sergeant Strang said, “Yesterday I got a radio call about a dead body in one of the apartments in a building over on Mott Street. When I got to the scene, a doctor from the Bellevue morgue wagon had responded to make an official pronouncement of death. The body of a white male, stripped naked and in the early stages of decomposition was lying in the middle of the floor. Dried blood stains spattered the floor and walls around him. The apartment was completely bare of any kind of furnishings. The doctor was explaining to the sector car team who first received the call the types of wounds the dead man had received. He pointed to the corpse’s head with a pencil. ‘This is a gunshot entry wound, this is another one, and these on the other side are the exit wounds.’

Strang continued, “I went back to the stationhouse to let the desk officer know the results of the radio run since a dead body had been found under suspicious circumstances. I met the detectives on duty and asked them if they had been made aware of the corpse in the vacant apartment.”

“Yeah, Sarge” one of them said. “We were there. We made the cause of death a hemorrhage.”

I later came to realize that the detectives considered keeping the rate of serious crimes in their precinct at an acceptable level, their most important function. They down-graded or completely ignored many crime reports referred to them to maintain the statistics as low as possible. They especially did not want to carry open and unsolved homicides. Unexplained fatalities became simply ‘natural causes’ or suicides. They certainly did not want to investigate an explosion at a social club where no one had suffered injury.

I learned as a patrolman in uniform that almost any crime brought in by the patrol force was downgraded to misdemeanor status if at all possible. If the arrest had any noteworthy value the detectives took it over. Managing statistics or taking credit for high profile arrests was their primary concern. I began my career in the PD with a burning desire to earn the cachet

attendant upon receiving the detectives' gold shield. That never took place but I witnessed several bungled investigations and serious crimes overlooked.

However, the one crime that received the most attention and mobilized all the resources of the department was the murder of a police officer. Then everyone available sprang into action and the apprehension of those responsible took precedence over any other business. Sadly, many brave officers lost their lives in the line of duty during my time in the department. A number of my colleagues risked their safety to do their job. Not all of us lapsed into cold cynicism.

As the mentally disturbed young man trudged up the stairs toward where the detectives on duty reposed in slumber, the cop on the switchboard looked at me in astonishment. "Sarge," he said, "they're all asleep up there. They'll go nuts when that crackpot wakes them up."

"I know, let's wait and see how they react," I said.

Moments later the disturbed man came clattering down the stairs far faster than he ascended them. He flashed past the desk and out the door. Then the switchboard lit up. The patrolman answered. He turned toward me with a grimace of apprehension, "It's the squad, Sarge."

"Switch it to my line," I said.

I picked up the phone and answered in a businesslike manner, "Sergeant."

The voice of one of the detectives screamed into the telephone. "What the (bleep) is wrong with you, sending that screwball up here?"

I listened without response while the man on the other end of the phone vented his fury at me. "Ain't you got no better sense, sending a lunatic like that up here in the middle of the night? That (bleep) has nothing to do with us anyway."

While he shrieked in frustration I took the phone away from my ear and turned it toward the switchboard man. He could hear the outrage plainly, so loud was the voice shouting into the telephone from upstairs. He couldn't help but grin at me.

"What the (bleep, bleep) is wrong with you?" the voice repeated at a higher decibel, "you stupid or something?"

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I waited until he had finished with his angry rant and replaced the phone on the receiver. The switchboard man was still shaking his head.

“I guess they didn’t get the joke,” I said.

First Place – Poetry

CONCATENATION

By Amelia L. Williams (Blue Ridge Chapter)

Ms. Williams opted not to have her winning entry published in this virtual anthology.

Second Place – Poetry

VALEDICTORY FOR G.

By Sally Zakariya (Northern Virginia Chapter)

They're playing jazz in heaven

No more missing out on promotion at the library
though you know more about recorded sound
 (the spooled wire, the reel to reel)
than the white man with all his degrees

No more seeing your father on the street
 slumped, mumbling, rheumy eyed
the price of a short dog all he asked
all he asked of you for years

No more seeing your light-skinned daughter just
once a month
 having to beg for even that

The women you cared for don't forget your soft voice
how the dark hairs corkscrewed into your chest
how you lit candles by the bath in the third-floor walk-up
 (a different time, and long ago)

They're playing jazz in heaven now
 Art Tatum, John Coltrane, and the rest
 cigarette-smoke clouds
ham steak and macaroni on the table
your ulcer healed—miraculous recovery

Praise be to the music

Third Place – Poetry

REDEMPTION

By Bruce Slater (Richmond Chapter)

What are those demons that slip into my head,
That crawl from the floor and into my bed,
That watch for my slumber when I cannot defend,
Too tired to escape, run away or transcend.

I know them too well, they are my own making
And I patiently built them when my heart was just aching
So now they are free to attack as they please
And all I can do is relent and concede.

My demons I made out of mistake and regret,
When I tried and I failed and could not forget,
So without the power to undo the past
I gave mistakes life with both legs and a mask

And now they visit me whenever they please,
They torment with memories till I fall to my knees
And I think if only I could erase what I've done,
Be absolved and released from the web I have spun

But that cannot happen, as nature well knows,
Time stays the course, unfettered by woes
It points cold and sure to where it is aimed
And will not be slowed, twisted, hurried or tamed

It is off to the future with a mind of its own,
What waits down the road in time is unknown,

And we must go if God wills that we may
Unless our past errors hold us firmly at bay

Keep in mind Mother Nature heals mistakes and despair
She created the wind to blow regrets to thin air
The rain , soft and pure, to cleanse deeply the soul
And the sun to replenish, restore, make us whole

So the answer, my friends, as I've learned what is true
That the future is ours but it's just out of view,
And the way to grasp fully life's moments so rare
Is to take off the blinders of regret and despair.

So begone you demons of the past evermore
Today is a gift placed at every front door
Tomorrow holds promise of the bluest of skies
Lest we're locked in the darkness and don't open our eyes

Its not that we won't make mistakes as we go,
For that is a part of the ebb and the flow
But redemption is ours everyday of our lives
Forgive and forget, seize the day and revive

So for those who are bound by the yoke of remorse
Whose ships have been crippled and drifted off course
Of this I am sure, a life full to the brim
Has both triumphs and tragedies, losses and wins

2013 Summer Shorts Writing Contest Winners

First Place – Fiction

NIBBLES

By Hayleigh Phillips (Valley Writers Chapter)

This winning entry was not received in time for publication.

Second Place – Fiction

MACHINE GUN WEDDING

By Sally Zakariya (Northern Virginia Chapter)

First was the scare at the wedding, then the frozen canaries, then the lost ring. It seemed like the marriage was off to a bad start. But Molly and Ray didn't believe in omens, so they decided to stick it out.

“I've heard of shotgun weddings, but not machine guns,” Molly whispered. Thursday at 10 a.m., room B-34, said the sheet they'd been given. But it didn't look like there'd be a wedding in that courtroom that day. Military guards stood at attention on either side of the door, brandishing machine guns as Molly and Ray approached.

“Stop right there,” said one of the guards. “You can't go in.”

“But we're supposed to be married in this courtroom.” Ray handed the scheduling form to the guard.

“Not here you're not. There's a big murder trial going on.” The man turned a hard gaze on them. “Check back with the Marriage Bureau.”

A quick question flashed through Molly's mind, Is this a sign? Am I doing the right thing marrying this guy?

Then Ray caught her eye and they shared a smile. “Sitcom material,

right?” he said. “We’ll be telling this story for years.”

“You need to get rescheduled.” The clerk at the Marriage Bureau was stating the obvious, but by the time Molly and Ray made it to the head of the line and explained their problem, they were ready for anything—including being told the next available judge couldn’t perform the ceremony until late that afternoon.

They waited out the hours nursing cup after cup of weak coffee and eating greasy hamburgers at Steak in a Sack, the only restaurant they could find near the courthouse. Ray was in his new gray suit, complete with boutonniere, and Molly wore a corsage of forget-me-nots on her blue silk dress. They didn’t look like the typical Steak in a Sack customer, but the bored server didn’t bat an eye. You get used to anything around here, his shrug seemed to say.

When the time came, they made their way to Judge Liam O’Connor’s office on the top floor of the U.S. Pension Bureau. It was a grand building, with tier on tier of colonnaded marble hallways circling a soaring atrium.

“They used to use the Great Hall for inaugural balls,” O’Connor’s secretary told them as they waited for the judge. “It’s about 15 stories tall at the peak—beautiful but really hard to heat back in the 1880s when it was built.”

“Really?” asked Molly, though she hardly cared.

“Yes—so hard to heat that when canaries were released at one of the first inaugurals, the birds flew up to the top, froze in the January cold, and dropped dead on the dancers below,” the secretary said. “At least, that how the story goes.”

Oh Lord, another bad omen, Molly thought. But just then Judge O’Connor called them into his office. A florid, red-haired man with a broad smile, he looked like the actor who had played Marcus Welby, M.D., on the old television show.

“I’m not a judge but I play one on TV,” Ray whispered, and Molly suppressed a giggle.

The ceremony was brief, the familiar words wrapping themselves around the two of them like a comfortable robe. . . . for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer . . . to love and to cherish . . . ’til death do us part. When it was over, the judge clasped his hands over theirs and beamed at them with well-practiced kindness.

“Congratulations. May you have a long and loving life together.” As he ushered them, perhaps a little quickly, to the door, a bird streaked by outside the arched window. Could it be a canary? Molly wondered.

“Well, we’ve done it. Mr. and Mrs.,” said Ray. “Doesn’t feel any different to me.”

And really, except for their pawn-shop rings and the signed marriage certificate, what was the difference? Even the rings didn’t really prove anything—especially after Ray lost his just a week later.

They were spending a few days at the cabin Molly’s parents had built in the foothills of the Blue Ridge, a kind of poor man’s honeymoon. Nights cuddled on the loft’s twin bed, which was plenty big enough if you’re in love. Mornings reading on the deck, looking up from the book now and then to gaze at the hazy mountains. Afternoons swimming in the Shenandoah.

Ray was half way across the river one day when he shouted to Molly. “Damn—my ring came off! Don’t worry, I’ll find it!”

The next thing Molly saw was his feet as he dove down to the river’s muddy bottom. And then again. And again.

“Ray! Forget the ring! Come back!” An old boyfriend had drowned in this very river, downstream near the dam where the current was stronger. That was different, she thought, but still . . .

Virginia Writers Club Virtual Anthology

Molly need not have worried. Ray was a strong swimmer, and after more dives than she could bear to count, he swam back to shore. Shaking off the water, he looked up at her. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t find it. It’s down there in the mud somewhere, along with the catfish. And no, I didn’t throw it away on purpose.”

“Oh sweetie, who cares about the ring?” Molly threw her arms around him. “That ring used to belong to someone else, and maybe it will belong to someone else again some day. Or hey, maybe we’ll be having catfish for dinner one night and we’ll find the ring in the fish’s belly, like the old fairy tale about the prince and the fisherman’s daughter.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” said Ray. “For one thing, you wouldn’t want to eat anything that came out of that river. And even if you did, it wouldn’t be you who found the ring—when did you ever clean a fish?”

Ray was right, and the ring became just another part of the wedding story they would tell their friends. But years later, Molly would still sometimes eye the rows of catfish cooling on ice at the market, their glassy eyes unseeing, their whiskers still. Was it you? Did you swallow it?

Third Place – Fiction

DOCTOR'S DOZEN

By Esther Whitman Johnson (Valley Writers Chapter)

“All rise,” the bailiff announces. The jury files in—eight women, four men, faces of stone. A grey fog envelops the courthouse outside, and beneath the florescent tubes, their faces look blue. A hundred reporters, and not one has any idea what the verdict will be.

Nine days the jury has sat through the trial. Three days they've deliberated, sequestered in a windowless room. Meals delivered take-out. Nights spent in the luxurious prison of the Hilton next door. No messages to or from friends or family.

Politically, sexually, racially charged—the story has gripped the city, the state, and the nation. There's been nothing like this since the O.J. Simpson trial. The Tiger Woods scandal has petered out, and pickings for the media sharks are meager. They are starving, especially for black-white stories.

Here is fresh meat.

The judge drops her voice an octave lower than normal, seeking gravity her age denies her. “Has the jury reached a verdict?”

“We have, Your Honor,” says the foreman, a petite, blonde woman with a heavy southern drawl.

“The defendant will rise and face the jury.”

She places pale, trembling hands on the rail, pulls herself up, barely

able to stand. Knees wobble, her palms sweat, her heart races, and her thoughts jumble. Scenes, one after another, race through her head—static, black and white photos at first; then grainy, newsreel film; then color photos, finally fleshing out to the full length, vivid—way too vivid—Technicolor motion picture of her life. Living colors: red, black, blue, yellow.

Red scars from the deep cuts, mostly self-inflicted, on her wrists. Red marks on her arms, legs, neck, buttocks—usually inconspicuous, he'd been careful of that—hidden by her clothes, where he'd hit her repeatedly, hour after hour, day after day, week after week, year after year. Red at first, black by the morning, blue in a day or two, yellow after a week.

The first time he told her of his infidelity, she had only threatened to leave him.

“I’m banging my nurse. Twenty-two, gorgeous, big ass, not a runt like you. Blonde, blonder than you. You know, you really should do something about your hair.”

The second time, she got all the way out the door before he'd grabbed her by the neck, dragged her back, and raped her in the foyer beneath the chandelier. She remembered noticing that the crystal teardrops were dusty; the fixture needed a good cleaning.

“My x-ray tech’s a thousand times better screw than you.”

The third was his receptionist; the fourth, his anesthesiologist; the fifth, a fellow surgeon, renowned for heart transplants.

I need one, she had thought, a heart transplant. Her own heart had failed early in the marriage. She carried it in her chest cavity now, like a dead fetus waiting to be flushed.

His sixth, seventh, and eighth conquests were younger than the first five, students in the medical school. Women attracted by his presence, power, prestige, and the novelty of sleeping with a black professor. All white, as usual.

Numbers nine and ten were younger still. He was on some downward spiral through the female spectrum, ever seeking fresher flesh. ‘Nine’ and ‘Ten,’ as he referred to them, were teenagers, twins. “A ménage a trios.

Virginia Writers Club Virtual Anthology

Best sex of my life. Sisters, black like me. They know how I like it. I'm sick to death of your skinny white ass, your white trash ass, your passivity. I brought you up from nothing, from the sticks, and I'm sick of you. Sick to death."

Death, that's it, she had thought. Death was the only way out. The gun had been easy to get; it was, after all, Virginia. She needed only the guts to put it to her head, but that had seemed easy enough.

Then, in one fell swoop, everything changed. And all her plans went awry. It was Numbers eleven and twelve who realigned the trajectory.

"Naomi," he had said, "is better than Ruth, even though she's younger. Who'd have thought a seven-year-old would be better than twelve. Baby girl body, delicious."

The first bullet hit him in the temple. Immediate death, the coroner ruled. But she hadn't stopped. She had pumped eleven more bullets into the inert body, pausing only to reload.

"The first is for the nurse. The second is for the x-ray tech. The third is for the receptionist. The fourth is for your anesthesiologist. The fifth is for your surgical partner. The sixth and the seventh and the eighth are for the medical students. The ninth and tenth are for the teenage twins."

"And last, you disgusting foul corpse, you sorry imitation of a human being, the eleventh and twelfth are for our precious daughters. Ruth and Naomi. Just babies. You fiend, rot in hell."

The next morning, still in her nightgown, she sips coffee, scrambles eggs for the girls, and barely glances at the headline: WIFE WHO FIRED TWELVE SHOTS ACQUITTED OF MURDER.

The sun is shining. No rain forecast. She's packing a picnic.

First Place – Nonfiction

JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF CREATIVITY

By Patricia Daly-Lipe (Northern Virginia Chapter)

“Within each of us is a creative core that actively creates the universe.”

Robert Hand

Maybe I am a late bloomer. Maybe it just took me a long time and lots of exposure, but I have finally arrived at an important juncture in my life. What I used to consider a pastime, I now consider a passion. Two creative arts, painting and writing, have become the focus of my life. I crept slowly into taking my art seriously. As a child, I watched my father paint. I learned to use watercolors when a woman down the street from my home in La Jolla, California, opened her house to the children of the neighborhood Saturday mornings and taught watercolor painting. Often we would take our tablets down to the rocks and attempt to paint the incoming surf. Later I attended the local Art Center's painting classes for children in a little white wooden building with trellises laced with flowering Wisteria vines in front. My work won at some shows, but art for me was just a pleasant thing to do. Although I continued taking art classes in school and later in college, it still was not enough of a passion to warrant full-time study. As a young adult, I studied figure drawing at the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, D.C. and portrait painting on Long Beach Island, New Jersey. My likenesses were quite good, but the paintings lacked depth (or was it maturity?). They were more like caricatures or illustrations. What is it about a painting that defines it as great? (I am thinking about Matisse's ladies. Their faces are not anatomically correct. Their features are rendered with simple squiggles and lines and blotches of paint and yet they are so expressive.) I came to find that between years of learning to draw figures with proper proportions and dimensions, tones and contrasts, and learning to paint with style, your own

style, there exists a kind of leap of faith. It takes knowing how to draw things and people as they really are to be able to draw or paint them as they appear to you the artist. And further, it takes knowing who you are to be able to relate to the model. There is nothing shy about most artists. A good example is Picasso. Knowing who you are, being secure in your own person is essential to relating to your model and painting with compassion. In the so-called modern period of art history, beginning with the Impressionists, I believe emotion comes through no matter what or who the subject is. Art has become more than a craft, a technique; it has become one of man's most wonderful expressions of himself.

After my children were raised, I began teaching part time in colleges and schools. Initially, I taught English skills: writing, grammar, poetry, short stories, drama. Then I introduced a new course to Maryland Hall for the Creative Arts: Myth, Magic, and Metaphor. In this class, I synthesized the techniques of painting with creative writing. Each semester the class grew.

In 1924, Andre Breton wrote the Manifesto. This document described a new movement called Surrealism, a term he defined as: "Pure psychic automatism, by which it is intended to express, verbally, in writing, or by other means, the real process of thought. Thought's dictation, in the absence of all control exercised by the reason and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations." I interpret Monsieur Breton as saying imagination was staking out a claim to its rights. Gertrude Stein wrote, "...drawing on the theories of Freud, (Surrealism) calls up on the irrational world of the subconscious to reveal itself via art." Surrealist artists often spoke about "automatic rhythmic drawing." Back in the fifteenth century, Leonardo da Vinci had already suggested "the possibility of self-revelation through automatic drawing." Salvador Dali is quoted as saying: "I am the first to be surprised and often terrified by the images I see appear on my canvas." I am not so bold as to put myself in the same league as these great artists; nevertheless, there is a sense of non-self which occurs when I paint. Time ceases. Often I am surprised, when I finally take a break, to find out how many hours have actually flown by. As Picasso said when referring to the act of painting, "...our initiative comes from within, a propulsion which we don't control, or create." The artist, drawing from his or her inner resources, does not have a preconceived notion of what is going to fill up the canvas. It appears without thought, spontaneous. Yet it emanates from all the artist has observed, experienced, felt.

Several years ago, while pursuing a graduate real estate course, I simultaneously signed up for a painting class. One evening I was having difficulty deciding what color or line or brush stroke to use. I was

appraising my needs in the painting and analyzing my options. The instructor came up behind me and said, "That is not you. You are not painting from inside. What is happening in your life right now?" Clearly, all the logical, left-brained information filling my brain during the day at my real estate course had actually shut off that part of my brain which was creative. When logic enters, creativity ceases. Sure enough, the following week, the paint flowed. The real estate course had ended.

Robert Hand declared there is "no clear boundary between ourselves and the world...the observer always plays a creative role in the observation." I do believe deep down within our very being is the source of creativity. It is that very source which connects to the primal rhythms of the universe. Watching a sunset, looking at the snow-covered bare limbs of a tree, peering into the opened petals of a rose, all these scenes are captured by our creative muse who stores them in our memory. Someday, they will find release in a work of art. That is, if we allow it.

Some say there are two natures involved. One is the world of nature "out there" and the other is the world of nature within man. I believe they are the same. "The greatness of a poem or painting is not that it portrays the thing observed or experienced, but that it portrays the artist's or the poet's vision cued off by his encounter with the reality." (Rollo May)

The full potential of the acorn is to be the mighty oak. We are constantly emerging and changing throughout our lives. The artist, in particular, has a unique advantage. Every individual can see the synthesis of him or herself and what is out there in the world. Vincent Van Gogh said it best. In 1879, he wrote: "...I know of no better definition of the word 'art' than this: 'art is man added to nature,' nature, reality, truth, but with a significance, a conception, with a character which the artist makes evolve..." It is a joy to learn from and be surprised by what we create as the words take over or the brush depicts a surprise on canvas or musical notes form a unique, pleasant pattern. Even scientific innovation comes from the creative muse. Einstein discovered relativity in a dream.

So express your creativity. That is what I plan to do. After all, the woods would be silent if no birds sang.

Second Place – Nonfiction

TAKING THE WATER

By Jean Lancaster (Blue Ridge Writers Chapter)

This winning entry was not received in time for publication.

Third Place – Nonfiction

EXPOSED TEMPTATIONS

By Kimberley J. Dalferes (Valley Writers Chapter)

Would you like to know one indisputable universal truth about women?

Birthdays matter.

If a woman tells you her birthday is no big deal, she's probably lying. On other occasions, a woman will happily accept and appreciate a purchased-at-11:30 pm-on-December 24th ugly Christmas sweater (Don't even pretend you haven't done this.), a last-minute, cheap box of valentine chocolates, or a hastily put together Easter basket filled with stale peeps.

Birthdays are different. To be clear: I do not subscribe to the weeklong "my birthday makes me the center of the universe" silliness. But it's certainly not too much to expect that one day, just one special and thoughtfully planned day out of three hundred sixty-five, be set aside for the woman in your life. A fair warning: never miss a woman's birthday. Never.

My husband Greg had promised he would be coming home soon. Unfortunately, the Department of Defense had decided otherwise. War is funny that way: It doesn't often concern itself with our small, yet important, life celebrations. Full of self-pity and cheap sangria, I sullenly and quite selfishly complained to gal pal Nicole that this unexpected tour extension would disrupt my 39th birthday. Thirty-nine being that last hoorah prior to 40, before we drift into dressing and acting "age appropriate" territory.

"Well," Nicole had replied, "what's needed here is a spectacularly immature act. Something even Greg would not have considered. I'm thinking: tattoo."

A tattoo! Truly juvenile; truly ridiculous; truly inspired.

I had talked about getting a tattoo for years, but it had always been just that: talk. The same way you talk about getting your boobs done or taking a poetry class or quitting your job to go backpacking through the South of France. Such musings always sound like fun and worthy adventures, but so does kissing George Clooney; doesn't mean it's actually going to happen.

Yet, there I was—a few days later via tremendous encouragement and handholding from Nicole—sitting perched on the edge of the tattoo parlor table. As we deliberated tattoo designs, “Tiny,” the beefy tattoo artist rolled his eyes as yet again another middle-aged rebel wannabe searched for just the right symbol to represent her life's being. (I assumed his name was “Tiny,” being that this moniker was tattooed on his left forearm.) Nicole and I hastily flipped through the book of glossy colorful illustrations of skulls, fairies, and roses, none of them speaking to me. I had this one chance to get this last, irresponsible gesture right. What was I going to do? Pick a smiley face?

Somehow we eventually settled on the image to be inked on top of my back left hip. I slipped slowly off the table and nervously dropped the waistband of my jeans and panties to expose where the tattoo would be drawn. For the record, few things scream mid-life crisis more than exposing the top of your sagging derriere to a total stranger and asking him—no, PAYING him—to leave an everlasting mark permanently on your backside.

Tiny, sensing my hesitation, immediately went to work before I could chicken out. I was surprised to discover that the process was not as painful as I had expected. It felt like a series of not-so-terrible bug bites. I had been warned that I might faint. Puulleeze; the whole process was a mere blink compared to childbirth.

One fateful oversight I committed was forgetting to stop by the ATM and withdraw some cash before our little tattoo adventure. I was left with no option but to use my credit card to cover the costs. Thanks to modern technology, even though the military had stationed him halfway around the world, Greg would be able to review online the monthly credit card bill summary.

I was pleased to discover that the August credit card bill simply noted: “\$75 – Exposed Temptations.” Greg pondered that purchase for months. He never once asked me directly about that credit card charge. Oh, but he noticed—and he wondered. How did I know this? Well, my husband is

smart, but he is not so smart. He casually dropped random and vague questions into our weekly phone conversations.

“So, did ya do anything fun for your birthday?”

Or...

“Just curious; purchase anything interesting lately?”

My answers were intentionally vague, little more than “Not really.”

I can play dumb, but I am not so dumb.

Months slowly passed. Eventually, Uncle Sam brought Greg back stateside, and our first November night together in almost a year, reunited as a couple, finally arrived. By November I had pretty much moved past my little self-centered August birthday stunt. That’s why I was a bit surprised and caught off-guard when Greg whispered, on this first-night reunion;

“Honey, you gonna show it to me?”

“Show you what?” I asked back demurely.

“You know, that 39th birthday surprise.”

At first, I honestly wasn’t sure what he was talking about. Then, as I realized what he was referring to, a great big ’ol smile spread across my face, and I answered, “Oh, you want to see that, do you? OK, turn around and close your eyes.”

I hastily stripped off my clothes and stood there behind him in nothing but my 39-year-old birthday suit.

“Open your eyes.”

Greg turned back around; wide-eyed and searching for ... something.

“Where is it?” he asked.

“It’s right here, baby.”

“Right here... where?”

“Here.” I cocked my naked left hip toward him in what I thought to be a most sexy gesture.

Virginia Writers Club Virtual Anthology

“It’s my bad girl tattoo. Do you like it?”

“A tattoo? You got a tattoo? That’s my ‘exposed temptations’ surprise?”

Smiling, he leaned over and peered closer. “It’s so tiny. You got a weed put on your hip? You can cover it with a dime!”

“It’s a shamrock!” I cried.

“Why, so it is. Didn’t know I was married to such a badass.”

Over a decade later my tiny shamrock still sits there on the top of my left back hip, our little green reminder each year to be grateful for another birthday together. It may not have been exactly the “exposed temptations” that Greg had been expecting, but my tattoo sure has lasted longer than any slinky, black, lacey thing. Best seventy-five bucks I ever spent. Wanna see it?

First Place – Poetry

AFIRE

By Judy Whitehill Witt (Richmond Chapter)

In Cleveland
the Cuyahoga River
was frequently afire
from the city's ooze.
I never understood
how they could quench
a flaming river
with water

or in a classroom
how a smug Of course,
you're damned to Hell
could be spitballed
at the lone Jewish boy
by a guaranteed Christian
hot with righteous zeal
and the knife be met
with numb silence
of both the damned lamb
and the dazed flock.

They'll need
Cleveland's firemen
in that Heaven.

Second Place – Poetry

UNDERTAKERS

By Barbara Stout (Blue Ridge Writers Chapter)

Ms. Stout declined to be published in the virtual anthology.

Third Prize – Poetry

WHEN WE LIVED ON R ST.

By Sally Zakariya (Northern Virginia Chapter)

You could have been anything with your olive
skin, your black hair cut too short to see the curl

When your white mother split from your black father
(jazz musicians both) she took you to Paris

where life was easier for boys like you and when
you came back you could have been anything

You could talk street or you could talk French
but my mother said to me, your Father wouldn't like it

My father from the white pillared house that cotton built
who was a fair man, a kind man,
but still

He would have admired your music, I like to think
and your Continental manners
but still

What would he have made of his blue-eyed girl living
with this man who could have been anything but was

in this country, at that time

nothing but black