



## **The Virginia Writers Club**

**2014**

### **Virtual Anthology**

(Featuring the winning stories, essays, and poems  
and honorable mentions for the 2014 VWC  
Summer Shorts and Golden Nib Contests)

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# SUMMER SHORTS WINNERS

Judges:

FICTION: Michele Young-Stone, author of *Handbook for Lightning Strike Survivors* and *Above Us Only Sky*

NONFICTION: William Ramsey, III, Local Editor, Staunton News Leader

POETRY: Jeffrey Schwaner, author of *20 Poems and Other Translations from the English*

# Fiction

## FIRST PLACE

### The Passing

By Julie Leverenz, Chesapeake Bay Writers

The ginger tabby turned his head sideways and nosed the door open just as the first splash of dawn slanted across the ceiling. A white-tipped paw curled around the door's edge and gave an extra push. With his orange-ringed tail high, the cat padded across the rag rug and paused next to the bed. He rubbed his cheek against the tarnished brass and chirruped—not quite a meow—the same sound he made to birds at the feeder outside the kitchen window. His yellow eyes regarded the slender, gnarled fingers draped over the edge of the mattress.

The cat stood on his hind legs and bumped the fingers with the top of his head, seeking a caress. None came. Stretching up, he sniffed the fingers, gave one of them a tiny lick. He hovered for a moment, then folded back down on his haunches, still studying the fingers. They were small and still. He crouched, then hopped lightly onto the thin eyelet coverlet. Going straight to the gray-fringed head on the pillow, he sniffed the mouth, the nose, then touched the fine hair with a soft paw. No caress. No, “Hey, Punkin,” in the familiar quavery voice. The cat sat motionless. After a while he tucked his front paws under his chest, hunkered down and waited.

The telephone rang. The cat's head jerked up. He stared at the blue princess phone on the rickety night stand. Three rings, then four. The head on the pillow did not move. Downstairs in the kitchen, the answering machine kicked in. The cat heard the machine mumble, then *beep*.

“Mama?” A high, anxious voice. “Mama? You there?” The voice continued, becoming louder and more anxious. Then *click*, and silence. The cat relaxed, just a little, and rested his chin on his paws. Only his eyes moved as he watched the morning sunlight float across the ceiling and down the wall, illuminating the yellowed wallpaper with its trellises and pink flowers. Dust motes shimmered in the shaft of light like suspended sparkles in a snow globe. The cat's eyes drifted closed and he slept.

The metallic click of a key in the lock brought him instantly awake. He stiffened at the rubbery suck of weather-stripping that signaled the front door opening downstairs.

“Mama?” The high, anxious voice again.

“Caroline?” A deep, rumbling voice.

“I’ll look down here,” the high voice said. “You go upstairs.”

Heavy footsteps creaked on the wooden stair treads. “Caroline?” The deep voice boomed down the hall. The cat froze, eyeing the bedroom door. The footsteps paused at the guest room. Then the bathroom. The tip of a shoe appeared in the doorway. The cat dove under the bed.

“Caroline?” Glossy brown shoes with tassels—the cat shrank away.

The deep voice choked, “Oh, Caroline.” The shoes stayed still for a moment, then left. When the deep voice sounded again, it was softer, without the rumble. “Honey. Up here.”

Lighter footsteps clattered up the stairs. “Where? Is she okay? Mama?”

“Sweetheart.”

Brown shoes with tassels came back into the room, accompanied by painted toes banded with shiny pink straps.

The wail was primal, the sound of an animal wounded beyond repair. The cat’s fur rose in a peak down the ridge of his back as he flattened his spine to the bare pine floor.

The click of the phone leaving its cradle. Three robotic beeps. Deep voice spoke. High voice sobbed.

Growling engines came down the street and squealed to a stop outside. Doors slammed. The stairs thundered and more shoes appeared by the bed: shiny black shoes with strong, flat voices and a waxy smell of authority; soft leather boots with subdued, awkward voices and the hint of antiseptic cleaners; grass-stained plaid sneakers with a soft, soothing voice and the smell of crushed flowers. The cat cowered.

The soft leather boots brought four wheels with shiny metal legs into the room. Boots shuffled on both sides of the bed. The ivory coverlet fell to the floor and the boots stepped on it, kicked it aside. The bed creaked; its brass legs shifted, engraving small gashes on the floor. Under it, the cat cringed against the wall, every muscle tense, his eyes black and bottomless. Finally the boots rolled the wheels away and clumped down the stairs. Then there was silence.

The shaft of sunlight moved to the corner of the window and disappeared, leaving behind diffused brightness, then a fading memory of daylight. When the cat got hungry he ventured out from under the bed. With wide eyes and twitching ears he stepped around the slumped coverlet. His nose caught whiffs of antiseptic and crushed flowers. The stairs made no sound when he descended.

In the kitchen, he found that his food bowl had been filled and the water was fresh. The cat ate, pausing every now and then to lift his head and listen. The darkening house was quiet.

After eating, the cat hopped onto the kitchen windowsill and chattered at the late-dining cardinal on the feeder in the yard. Then he wandered through the living room, pausing to stalk and kill a Bic pen under the roll-top desk. In the music room, he used the cane-seated chair as a springboard to bound gracefully onto the piano, avoiding the round stool that wobbled and swirled. He stepped around the stacks of sheet music—Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced—and inspected the framed photographs: grinning children holding trophies, adults at pianos by themselves or surrounded by people holding clarinets and violins.

The cat sat on his haunches and washed his face. When he was finished, he looked up and called, “Mrow?”

He went back to the living room, past the powder room where hand-embroidered linen fingertip towels hung untouched over the stained porcelain sink. Next to the claw-shredded easy chair he found his favorite toy, a mangled feather-twist that used to have a wand attached. The cat grabbed it in his teeth and, through the scraggly feathers, called, “Mrow?”

Carrying the toy in his mouth, the cat scooted up the stairs. At the entrance to the bedroom he paused, then padded over to the coverlet and laid the toy on it. He looked at the toy, then up at the bed. After a while, he jumped onto the bed and surveyed the tangled bedclothes. He sniffed the sheets. With a tentative paw, he patted a bump in the blanket. The bump collapsed.

The cat stepped over to the pillow, which still held the impression of the gray head, and held his face to the indentation for a long time. Eventually he curled up on the pillow, breathed deeply, and settled down to wait.

## SECOND PLACE

### Riding the Tortoise

By Esther Whitman Johnson, Valley Writers

Now listen up, ladies, I'm telling this fast before the shrimp and grits come. You want to know how this thing happened, traveling on a bus, camping at my age. So here it is.

The Tortoise is an old Greyhound bus painted lime green, stripped, fitted with tables and floor pillows. One night we both had too many juleps and my daughter Caroline dared me to take a wild trip. Caroline, all smug, doing her wise-ass-college-girl routine.

"Mom, you're so predictable, living in little Buckhead, throwing little cocktail parties, playing in little tennis groups." If she'd said *little* one more time, I was gonna belt her, but she went off on another direction, saved her ass. "You're a Sweet Potato Queen, Mom, one of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood."

"If you're trying to insult me, Caroline, don't use my favorite books."

"Oh, Mom, you haven't been daring since you got naked during a toga party. You're not the Sweetheart of Sigma Chi anymore, and the bulldog doesn't live here."

*Now* she was getting cheeky, making fun of the Georgia bulldog. You girls know I love that bulldog. Anyway, Caroline was on my last nerve.

"Throw yourself out there, Mom, live as if you won't be here next year." Now *that* got to me. Ya'll know a lotta our friends have croaked lately.

"Okay, Miss Know-It-All, what do *you* suggest?"

"I'll get back to you."

Three days later Caroline e-mailed the website of The Green Tortoise: *Here's a trip for you, The Costa Rica Loop. I DARE YOU!!*

Next day I called her. "Okay, it's booked. Two weeks—beaches, parks, giant turtles, camping, cooking, hiking, zip-lining, white-water rafting. Who knows how long I can do this kind of thing? People my age are dying."

Never mind that I hadn't camped in thirty years.

Ya'll shoulda seen that motley group. Forty-something-men-on-the-make scoping out thirty-something-women-on-the-make. Twenty-something potheads clicking together



like magnets. Bay Area outdoor enthusiasts who *actually* came for the nature. Then, the fifty-somethings, The Melancholy Divorcee and me.

The first day, our hippie guide—we called him The Beard—broke the bad news. “The Tortoise needs repairs, can’t do the national forest, going to a hummingbird park instead.” The outdoor California-types—you can tell ‘em by their hiking boots—complained. Guess they didn’t like hummingbirds.

Missing the forest was just the beginning. Did we camp on the beach our first night? No way. Ended up in a parking lot in the middle of nowhere. I was pissed, wouldn’t put up my tent, slept sitting up in the bus, mosquitoes dive-bombing all night. Woke up stiff, hungry, and cranky.

I was gonna kill Caroline.

The second day we barely made camp before dark. My one-man tent sat snug, cute, and Caroline woulda been proud of my set-up. Everyone drank too much and jumped into the ocean. A moonlit night, thousands of stars in the sky, and I floated in that warm water like a bath.

“Look, phosphorescence!” somebody yelled. Diamonds fell from my hands and I swam like a porpoise in neon light. I dangled my hands across waves, dripping jewels into the night—downright poetic. Ya’ll woulda loved it. All of a sudden I got this idea. “Let’s skinny dip.” Everyone got naked and came on in. *Okay, Caroline*, I thought, *how’s that for daring?*

I wasn’t gonna kill her anymore.



I woke up off and on all night in my little tent, my too little tent. Too hot, too cold, too claustrophobic. Caroline told me the tent was too little, but did I listen to her? Noooooo. So, ya’ll, don’t tell her she was right.

Anyway, around four a.m. just before dawn, it started.

“Oooooooo. Oooooooo.” Blood-curdling screams. A few, then dozens, then what seemed like thousands, reverberating in the jungle. I had goosebumps, never went back to sleep, and woke up crankier than the day before.

“Howler monkeys,” shrugged The Beard, “no big deal.” Well, it was a big deal to me. Maybe ya’ll have spent a lotta time in the jungle, but not me. I was proud of pitching that tent once, but that was it. I never slept in the tent again. I rode in front every day, first off to claim a cabin in every campground. When the twenty-something’s griped that I beat them unfairly, I chanted, “Age before beauty.”

By the end of the trip, everyone raced for the cabins, but I did not lose, *not once*.



Ya'll would've loved my first indoor accommodation, a pseudo-palace. The German-jerk-owner Klaus suffered delusions of grandeur, and *El Castillo* was his architectural mish-mash. I sprinted upstairs and claimed a room overlooking the Pacific. Gauzy mosquito nets draped over beds like little princess canopies—hog heaven. No panes in the windows, but who cared? I plucked an orange wildflower, stuck it in a brown beer bottle for decoration, and jumped into a hot shower.

Now listen up, Caroline doesn't need to know about hot water, so don't tell.

My roommate, The Melancholy Divorcee, had a revelation the third day. "My birthday, I'm fifty. A turning point, away from victimhood and garbage of the past. Moving on to the next chapter. Let's celebrate."

The M.D.—that's what we called her— put on makeup and a low-cut red blouse, sauntered to the bar, drank a toast to herself with everyone, got smashed, and seduced German-jerk-Klaus, who reeked of pot. She flirted shamelessly with Klaus—not well, but I gave her points for effort.

"Klaus is a sleaze ball," I said. "You can do better."

The M.D. ignored me and disappeared. Well, ya'll, she was a grownup and I wasn't her mother. The next morning she showed up bleary-eyed and contrite. "Okay, I'm done. A mistake, already in the past. Don't want to hear his name ever again." I didn't ask questions, didn't want confessions. I'd drunk too many margaritas, my stomach was talking to me, and I wanted no gut-wrenching disclosures.

I swear, ya'll, the whole thing was a fiasco! I sweated nonstop in the steamy jungle, stalled in mid-air on zip-lines, almost drowned on white-water rafts, hobbled butt-sore from horses on the beach. It was awful, but kinda fun awful. And I did it! Fifty-five years old, and by god, I did it!



When I got home I phoned Caroline. "Didn't skip a thing, did it all just like the twenty-somethings."

"White water rafting?"

"Yeah, didn't tip over."

“Horseback riding?”

“Yeah, didn’t fall off.”

“Jungle hiking?”

“Yep. Saw a huge poison snake!”

Then, a little twist of the knife. “The volcano erupted. And we saw tortoises lay eggs.” Caroline missed both on her Costa Rica jaunt.

“Zip-lining?” Caroline asked.

“Yep. Saw tons of wildlife.” A lie.

“And you really camped out?”

“Yes.” Well, once counts.

Here’s what I didn’t tell Caroline. After The Tortoise, I recuperated four days in a luxury hotel. The maid created animals from washcloths, left exotic flowers on my pillow, and I wallowed in a three hour spa treatment with cucumbers on my eyelids. Didn’t seem necessary to mention. . . . And, ya’ll, don’t say a word.

Ah, here’s the shrimp and grits.

## THIRD PLACE

Beneath My Hats

By Suzan Anderson, Valley Writers

"O.K., I'm ready," I say, sinking into the chair while Scott puts the black drape around my shoulders. "My third appointment in three weeks. Some sort of record, I except." He just smiles and starts shaving my head.

I squeeze my eyes shut and pretend I can't hear the buzz.

A month ago my hair was long, reddish brown, and wavy. Depending on the weather, it might also be frizzy and unmanageable. In the intervening weeks, it had gone from long to short and then short to pixie. Today is the final cut.

My husband and my friend, Jenny, sit watching me. Amazingly, there are no tears. We actually laugh as Scott playfully cuts it into a Mohawk. And then it is all gone. Just like that. Done.

I fearfully look in the mirror but am amazed at what I see. Looking back at me is a stranger who resembles a proud Masai woman. White, in this case, but similar. What I see is not horrifying. Like a warrior, there is power there and purpose. I hope it is true.

"Hand me your wig," Scott says.

"You mean the cranial prosthesis," I try to joke, handing him the limp, brown package. He pulls that thing onto my head and trims it to fit my face.

"Oh my gosh, you look so cute!" Jenny says, whipping out her camera. Pictures are taken. Without a backward glance, we get in our cars and leave.

"I hate this thing," I say on the way home. "Are you sure it's on right? It feels like it's going to pop off my head. Look at those people next to us. Are they staring at me?"

"They're staring because you're yanking on what they think is your hair," my husband answers.

"Well, I'm not good at fake."

Three weeks earlier, the doctor's office called and asked me to come in right away. Never a good sign. "You've got non-Hodgkins lymphoma. There are treatments, and I've made an appointment with an oncologist I think you'll really

like. You'll have a port put in, no big deal really. But you're going to lose your hair. You need to know that," my doctor told me.

That is when I stop listening. Hair, port, oncologist? These are not words that relate to me. Some women actually pause and weight their options—hair or life. Refusing treatment to save my hair does not occur to me, but the gravity of losing it and all that represents is stunning.

"It will be several weeks after the first treatment before your hair starts to fall out," the oncologist says, two days later.

Well, I am not going to be that woman in the shower looking at my hands full of my hair, I promise myself. I set up an appointment with Scott.

"I need to have hats," I tell the family after Sunday dinner. "My hair is coming off next week."

"Let's go," my daughter says. She and her children take me shopping. "Here, try this one on," is heard throughout the store. All six of us try on every hat. We buy five, having no idea what will look good on a bald head. Newsboy hats, a wool, purple beret, and a sun hat. I will wear those newsboy hats for months. I never wear the beret—what were we thinking? The sun hat disappears.



The cute newsboy hats take on a life of their own over time. I have white, peach, black, brown, tan, and navy. I match them to my pajamas. I decorate them with pins just above the brim: an angel my mother gave me, a beautiful flower, a bow. "These are my warrior's hats," I email my friends. "Remember the Masai woman I saw in the mirror at the beauty shop? Well, I feel powerful when I wear my hats. They make me feel courage in my bones, find the strength and the will to fight instead of hiding in a corner. I see these hats imbued with the strength given to me by all you powerful Masai women out there."

What I do not tell my friends is the hats help because underneath I am truthfully just a scared, bald me. And so the hats are cover on very bad days.

Being swept into the cancer system unawares, I have only two questions for my oncologist. "Am I going to live? When will my hair come back?"

"Oh, heavens, yes, you are going to live. Hair cells usually begin to rejuvenate about three weeks after your last chemo. But you'll be lucky; eyebrows and eyelashes are stubborn and generally won't fall out until sometime after the sixth treatment. You're only going to have three. That's good," she says.

“Whew.” I feel pretty smug.

Shortly after my first treatment, however, I have to draw on eyebrows. I skip mascara since I have only eight lashes on my left eyelid and fewer on the right. So much for that.

Until my diagnosis, I maintained my image of youthful immortality. Now, I am in trouble. I feel I have only two life choices in this situation: I can cry, or I can laugh. I chose to laugh. And so, in my daily emails to my friends and family, I make a joke of the pain, dehydration, burned esophagus, my prowess at solitaire, my hats. Only my best friend, who calls every day, hears some of the real story.

Despite my resolve, it is impossible to imagine away the results of the chemotherapy. I wake up daily, exhausted and weak. The woman in my mirror is drawn and gray with dark circles under her eyes. I am filled with bone pain that never seems to leave. I can't take the twenty-seven steps from my bed to get to the kitchen. For week, I am stranded in the back of the house. I grieve. I know I am irrevocably changed. I feel fear all over my skin. Poison is coursing through every cell, through my brain. I cannot concentrate. I fear I will not return from this desperate place.

Remembering the oncologist's promise, three weeks after my final chemo treatment, I start looking for hair. Nothing. I ask her about it. “Hmmm,” she says. “I've only had one patient whose hair did not come back.” This strikes me like a slap. For days, I just about wear out the mirror hunting for hair.

One day, I find it. I call my oldest granddaughter. “I have two hairs! They are about half an inch long, but unfortunately one is on my arm.” We laugh.

Nine weeks after my last chemo treatment, my hair begins to come back in. And when it does, it is startlingly white and very curly and baby soft. It is hard to keep my hands off it. It is hair still full of the chemicals which saturated every cell in my body, but I am delighted. It is hair, and I love it.

## HONORABLE MENTION

Where We Fit In  
By Stanley Trice, Riverside Writers

Tea, a three-year-old Yorkie, met the sixteen-year-old Schnauzer Saucer on an early fall day.

“Saucer just needs a younger dog to play with,” Rebecca told her husband Timothy. She sat Tea down beside Saucer, and the younger dog tried to wake up the old one with a lick on the nose. It tasted dry and pasty.

“We don’t need another dog to take care of Saucer. She’ll be gone soon, and we can start traveling and enjoying our retirement. We can visit the kids and their families.” Timothy stared down at Tea as if she was a stain that would not go away.

This job would be a challenge, Tea realized.

Eight days later, Tea was standing on the back porch waiting for Rebecca to open the door and let her back in. She hoped Rebecca had not forgotten her. It was getting cold. Tea remembered her previous owners as she gave off a shiver.

Those other owners left the front door ajar on a late summer day. Tea took the opportunity to get away from them and various pet sitters who had no clue how to take care of a pet they did not love. Her wild world experience lasted only one night before a tall man, who seemed nice, coaxed her toward his arms. No love there as he shoved her in a cage.

During her days of confinement, Tea hoped she would find a home before the gas chamber found her. When Rebecca came in, Tea gave her a look of someone needing redemption. Rebecca looked like she needed Tea to love, and Tea needed that love. Tea was sure she had not made another mistake with an owner. Yet on this eighth day with Rebecca, it was getting late and no one was coming to let her in.

Tea started to yelp and couldn’t stop as panic set in. Her yelps got louder as the neighbor’s back door light came on. Timothy let Tea in, and there was no love in his face.

Over the next three weeks, Tea watched Saucer move a little slower, get lost more often in the house, and sometimes become aloof. Tea felt like she had an obligation and a duty to keep Saucer moving.

Being smaller and younger, Tea kept the older dog active and alive. There was the run around the coffee table until Tea caught up to Saucer, and they changed direction. Tea played tug with Saucer’s favorite rubber toy giving the older dog a chance to win each time. It was that or watch more teeth come loose. The long days of lying around and

doing nothing became days of long strolls in the Sun along the fence line of the backyard looking for squirrel.

Soon, Rebecca spent more time tending to the tiredness of Saucer who played too hard with the youngster Tea. During recoveries, Tea stayed with Timothy who had no time for dogs and chased Tea away.

“I need another dog to balance things out,” Rebecca told Timothy one cold winter day.

Really? Tea wondered where this came from. Saucer was happy when Tea gave the old dog a run. People should really learn to speak dog.

“What’s another dog gonna do? How are we going to visit the kids with three dogs? How are we supposed to travel when we have to spend money taking care of these dogs?”

“You don’t like traveling.”

“I was doing it for you.”

“I’d rather you got me another dog.”

Tea ducked behind the sofa to avoid this tone. On her way, she passed Saucer asleep on the couch unawares. Being deaf and blind had its advantage.

Rebecca added, “The kids and their families can come here and stay in their old rooms.”

“They have homes and rooms of their own. We need to visit them.”

“I don’t care. I need another dog to take care of if it’s just going to be us.” Tea thought Rebecca should be taking care of Timothy. Peering around the corner of the sofa, Timothy looked as old as Saucer.

“I don’t want to use my retirement years taking care of dogs.”

“I need another dog. I’m getting another dog.”

When the stale air got quiet again, Tea emerged and looked out the window. She watched Timothy enter a small shed outback where he had a workshop. Soon, the man produced loud, grinding noises.

Rebecca called this third dog Cup. Another Yorkie that was smaller and younger than Tea. The now middle dog Tea watched Cup and Saucer consume Rebecca’s



attention. One was small and fragile and the other slow and needy. Tea was stuck in the middle being neither.

Whenever Timothy sat in the living room recliner snoring, Tea sat on his lap. From her perch, she watched Rebecca and the two dogs sit on the small couch with no room left. Rebecca scratched both dogs behind their ears. No one scratched Tea anywhere. She could use a nice, long scratch. She looked at Timothy who had drool spilling out of the corners of his mouth. Tea licked it off, woke up Timothy, and found herself hiding behind the sofa again.

Tea could do nothing else but continue with what she thought was her duty. That which was to bark at Cup when she pooped on the rug. Or, run outside to check on the neighbor's dogs since Saucer no longer sensed them. But, Tea did this with some hesitancy and not quite sure this was her place in the family or not.

As winter ended, Timothy stayed more often in the shed out back using noise to grind metal things. From the cold recliner, Tea watched Cup, Saucer, and Rebecca on the short sofa sit together like a proper family.

On a warm, spring day, the kids and their families visited for Timothy's birthday. The excitement bore down on Cup and Saucer, yet Rebecca had nothing to do with them. The human family had the priority. Tea stayed with Cup and Saucer like a mother she would never really be. She stood in front of hands reaching for Cup and laid next to Saucer who would not know someone was there.

When everyone left a day later, Rebecca and Timothy along with three stressed-out dogs stood on the front porch watching the cars drive away. All five looked at the sunny air melt the dirty snow. Dog and human could feel themselves change with the thaw and a warm breeze ruffling their fur. However, Cup did not know better and ran through a slit in the porch gate. Moving vehicles lived on the black tar before them.

Tea ran with the owners after Cup as Saucer stayed on the porch. A quick bark of the older dog stopped the youngster just before the black tar. Not the middle one who kept running.

## HONORABLE MENTION

Petite Small

By Elaine Ruggieri, Blue Ridge Writers

The average woman's height in the U.S. is 5 feet 3.8 inches. I miss by four inches. Dr. Ruth is 4 feet 7 inches, Madeleine Albright, 4 feet 10 inches, and *Jersey Shore's* Nicole "Snooki" Polizzi, 4 feet 9 inches. We short women cannot be judged by vertical dimensions alone.

I was always the "runt of the litter." Strangers would ask if I had started school yet. I was in the third grade!

My taller, high school girlfriends thought I was "so cute," as if I were their playmate The Talking Doll. "Lucky you. You can date anyone," they'd say. *I didn't date.*

After high school and college, I realized how much I preferred small things: compact cars, little cans of peas, mini-Milky Ways, dot-sized earrings, scant portions of pasta, anything slight, petite, tiny, modest, measured, and simple; nothing looming large, elaborate, loud, or lunch in a restaurant with more than four people. I never bought a gigantic box of Tide, and certainly not an SUV. I drive a Beetle and stock travel-size toothpastes. But, I always liked tall men, maybe something to do with a future gene pool.

Today I am shopping for a new dress to wear to a big party. Petite sizes are somewhat new to the ladies' fashion world. There were none available when I finally grew out of the children's department. My only choice was Misses Small, which had to be raised at the shoulders and shortened at the hem. Now there are whole departments dedicated to diminutive women. Unfortunately, the petite merchandise often mirrors the regular sizes "sewn small" as in Petite 4 or Petite 6, or are labeled in redundant sizes like PP (Petite Petite) and PS (Petite Small)—with little consideration to styling for the short.

A saleswoman approaches, slender and towering. She has the ideal figure for the pencil skirt. She looks down and says, "May I help you with a *little* something." I resent the *size* reference.

"I'm looking for a dress. Not too dressy and not too casual, but I haven't seen anything I like in my size."

"Which is?" she asks, looking at me from top to bottom. I straighten up and inhale deeply.

"Petite Small or Petite 6, maybe P4," I answer and add quickly, "Sizes lie."

"Sometimes," she says. "Let's see." She leads me with a runway swagger to a rack of dresses in splashy prints of pink, lemon, and aquamarine, a pale one's palette, perfect for the "Summer/Spring" complexion types. But, not for me, a brunette, and most definitely a "Winter," according to a supermarket magazine.

"Not my colors," I say. "And, I can't wear those large, crazy prints. I'm too short."

"Try them anyway. They can go anywhere, perfect for the cruise season," she says as she swings a tangerine number from the rack and holds it up against herself. She is at least 5 feet 11 inches, blonde, and long, long-legged. She could have worn a wine-stained tablecloth and still looked chic.

I shake my head. "No Love Boats in my future. Don't think so." I try to sound decisive, but her tallness and chic-ness intimidate me. I look away thinking, "Thank God, I don't have to try on bathing suits!"

"Ooookay. Let's move on. Do you like knits?" the elegant stork asks with obvious disdain for such practical fabrics.

"If they don't cling around my bottom, yes."

"Look through these then. And, if you need me, I'll be over there," she says, and points to the busy Misses section. Striding away in her stiletto heels and lime green pants, she hurries to help a 5-feet-7-inch, Misses 10. Uppity blonde! May she sit in Economy Class for a 10-hour flight!

I hang two knit dresses, dark brown in sizes Petite 4 and Petite 6 in the dressing room and begin the dreaded trying-on dance. The mirror provides three different ways to see that the P4 bunches in rolls around my butt, and can go no farther without tugs and pulls. Why didn't I wear pantyhose? Lycra, I need!

Next I try the P6, but the brown looks like mud. Although it slides down more easily, the fabric curves around my seat in a perfect question mark, asking "Tight enough?"

Dressing rooms are airless, claustrophobic cells. I begin to perspire, and the lingering smell of citrus perfume and shopworn clothing makes me sneeze. Am I really that lumpy *there*? I ask myself in the fun-house mirror. The fluorescent lights hum while my skin turns sallow.

I wonder where Stork Legs is and if she'll come to see how I'm doing. Impatient and dejected, I throw on my own clothes and go for another search for dresses in P6 or P Small. Ah, there's her High-ness in the Misses' section cashing out a customer.

She holds up a finger and then sashays in my direction. "Have you tried anything yet?"

"Just those knits! They fit like a sock with the heel in the back."

"Knits can do that," she says. "Yeah, but not on her body, I think."

"Sorry I couldn't help you. Got busy. Look, give those dresses over there a chance. You might be surprised."

At the rack she first showed me, I snatch up an armful of P6s and P Smalls, all in shades of tropical fruits, and hurry back to the dressing room.

I spot a Petite Small in a deep, pinkish shade, like the dark flesh of a ripe watermelon. I hold it against myself, and think *this short Winter person can wear this*. I twist the price tag around. \$68. Can even afford it. Better yet, wear it to the party. It fits!

I am triumphant as I leave the stifling room with the dress over my arm. "I see you found something," says my sylphlike saleswoman as she approaches.

"Yes, I was lucky," I say. "I need it for tonight."

"If you have a store card, you get 20% off today. Lucky twice," she says, looking at the dress. "This is a great color for you."

I know she's waiting for me to acknowledge she was right all along, but I don't. She carefully hangs the dress in a garment bag, knots the bottom, and holds it even with her shoulders. I have to stretch to reach it like a game of keep-away. "Thanks for your help," I finally say and hand her my charge card.

"It's perfect for your petite figure," she says. At least she didn't tell me good things come in small packages. "So, big bash tonight?"

"Anniversary party. You know—lots of single women and few eligible men. But, they'll all be trimmed out."

"You'll look great. Sorry I didn't see it on you."

"I dressed fast. Afraid I'd change my mind."

She laughs, and says, "I do that too. Your signature, please."

"But you can wear anything," I murmur as I look down and sign.

"Not always." She looks me over. "Three-inch heels are what you need. Follow me. The shoe department's having a big sale."

Regretting my small-mindedness about her tallness, I follow her eagerly; confident she'll find me a pair of spike heels to raise me up.

## HONORABLE MENTION

Lucky

By Jean Lancaster, Blue Ridge Writers

I have always believed that Aloysius Saint Luke, who was named for saints and nicknamed Lucky early in life, had nine or more lives. I concluded this despite the fact that he was not of the feline breed. Lucky has been my faithful companion for almost as long as the English literature dissertation of my midlife crisis transition has lingered on my vintage roll-top desk.

Lucky's loyalty has indeed been like the evangelist Luke's was to Paul in the early years described in the New Testament. If Lucky could pray for me, he probably would howl up to Expeditus, a patron saint for perpetual students and others with unfinished projects.

I lived most of my adult life of procrastination in a sprawling house on the Rappahannock River that I inherited from my grandmother. It was there that I once witnessed this phenomenon of Lucky's persistent survival.

Hurricane Sandy was off the coast of Virginia. About an hour before the rains were expected, I stood out on my pier that extended into the river. I stubbed out my cigar, pulled my UVA baseball cap down tight, and snapped up my yellow slicker. As the winds pounded, I worked the ropes into bowline knots to secure my fishing boat.

Lucky and I seemed to be directly in the face of an approaching tempest that everyone called the *Superstorm*. Spinning winds uprooted the river's water into wave-like surges. Thunder bellowed and lightning sizzled.

Lucky was hunkered down under the oldest tree around with its gnarled branches bending and cracking. A boom and a howling shriek erupted. As Lucky raced away, I saw a zigzag pattern carved in his chocolate-brown fur, starting at his blue collar and zipping all the way down to his pelvis.

I finally found Lucky seven days later, asleep and snoring, in the shade of the swing on my porch. His fur was growing back, but he still smelled of singed flesh. He greeted me seemingly without any memory of the lightning strike. I thought then, that no matter how badly you are burned, you always returned to those who loved you.

Years earlier, when Lucky was a two-year-old pup, we stayed for a week in a friend's cabin on the Bullpasture River in western Virginia. Towards the end of the week, we crossed the river and hiked to Marshall's Cave mid-way up Bullpasture

Mountain. Returning from our caving trek, I tottered along the swinging rope bridge that goes from the mountainside trail back over to a campground.

Halfway across and ahead of me, Lucky spotted a rainbow trout as it leapt up and spun above the torrential water. Lucky made a dashing leap between the support ropes and dove headfirst into the river. The rounded rocks below knocked him out cold.

I raced the rest of the way across the bridge and jumped into the rushing water. I wrapped my arms around Lucky and laid him out on the primeval rock ledge while the river cascaded around us. I put my ear to his chest trying to hear his heartbeat.

As I cried and soothed his soft brown forehead, he opened one eye and sneezed out white river foam. Then he licked my face with sloppy drool to relay his gratitude and acknowledge my courage.

Surely there was much more to Lucky's devotion to me than my life-saving efforts. "Hounds follow those who feed them," Count Otto Bismarck was quoted as saying. Lucky was indeed grateful for our feeding routine.

I believe that his dedication was the reason he always wanted to go along with me wherever I went. The few times when he did not ride on the passenger seat of my '57 Chevy pickup, he waited in an unwavering sprawl on the front porch. He was not a dog to run away the minute I was out of sight. When I pulled back in the driveway, allegiance sparkled in his eyes like fireworks on the Fourth of July.

The sparkle disappeared from Lucky's eyes one time; and I thought I was going to lose him. We started the morning at our favorite fishing spot. The azure pond seemed to float on the surface of the marsh. I cast out my line for the mammoth largemouth bass that lurked in the pond.

Lucky waded through the low water, followed his Labrador retriever ancestral memories, and nosed around for unsuspecting ducks. From the corner of my eye, I spotted the glide of the four-foot long water moccasin. Before I could even blink, the toxic fangs struck Lucky's barreled chest.

I sloshed through and picked up my already lethargic dog. By the time I laid him on the front seat, his chest was swollen into a pregnant mass. I sped to the vet's office where he received the anti-venom serum. My arms cradled him throughout the night until, as if it was a normal day, he licked my chin when he woke from the anesthesia.

Other less terrifying episodes have added to the count of Lucky's numerous

incarnations. There was the time that Lucky was the unfortunate cleanup crew after a cookout I had with friends. He reclined on the deck during our party late into the night, just waiting for his opportunity to be one of the guys.

The next morning, I found evidence that he had ripped open a package of sodium-laden hot dogs and downed almost a dozen. He had knocked over unfinished, open beers to lap up the warm liquid. I found him in a stupor on one of the lounge chairs. As the Irish satirist Jonathan Swift said, "Every dog must have his day."

These days, Lucky takes medication for an aging-related ailment. Twice a day I coax him into taking the large white capsules by hiding each one in a spoonful of vanilla ice cream. One night, instead of licking the sweet treat, he swallowed the whole spoon. He fortunately hurled it back up, instead of waiting for the spoon to pass through his stomach and intestines.

These episodes of defying death and overcoming severe injury have accompanied Lucky and me through manhood. I am officially a senior citizen and Lucky is fifteen, seventy-three in man-years. He is aging noticeably. He struggles to rise up onto all fours. He is deaf and looks at me with dull eyes when I talk to him. His appetite is gone, even for his favorite bacon cooked to a crisp in the cast-iron skillet. Lucky never whimpers or whines to complain about his aches and pains. Vincent van Gogh, suffering from ill health, wrote in one of his letters, "To suffer without complaint is the only lesson we have to learn in this life."

Lucky and I have lived through the fragility of life, which he tested to dramatic limits. According to novelist Robert Louis Stevenson, "You think those dogs will not be in heaven? I tell you they will be there long before any of us." Although, I dread the day that Lucky goes to the life beyond, I feel that he will enter the pearly gates before me and wait with his tail wagging and his faithful eyes shining bright.



## HONORABLE MENTION

The Preacher's Daughter  
By Susan Elliott, Valley Writers

"Kiss me, Mark." Ella climbed across the truck bench until she was cradled between his legs. "We're alone. Don't you want to kiss me?"

Mark squirmed beneath her. "Of course I do. It's just that you're so young. We shouldn't even be out here."

"I'm not that young, Mark. This little girl's all grown up. Why can't you see that? I thought you wanted me." Ella unbuttoned his shirt, and ran her tongue down his throat and bit his bare shoulder, leaving little teeth marks.

Mark gasped.

"Look around, Baby. Ain't no one around. Just you, me, and the riverbank." Ella lightly kissed his rough chin, and trailed kisses to his ear. "Kiss me." She pressed into him.

Mark grabbed her face and forced his mouth upon hers.

Ella answered, sliding her tongue along the inside of his teeth. She pressed herself hard against his chest, and pulled his bare flesh against her skin.

"Oh, Ella."

She could feel the heat radiating from him as her own desire began to take control.

"Mark...Mark. I need you."

Suddenly, he pulled back and buttoned his shirt. "You make it hard for me to stay in control, Ella."

She smiled, biting the corner of her lip. "I know. You make it hard for me, too."

"Look this isn't a game." He pushed her into the seat beside him.

Ella frowned. "I'm not playing, Mark. I just love you so much. I dream about you at night. I taste your mouth. I even feel you touching me."

Mark turned from her and studied the oak trees growing beside the river's edge.

"Look, you're the most passionate girl..."

“Girl?”

“...woman... I’ve ever met. Someday, you’ll make someone a good wife, Ella.” He stuck the keys in the ignition. The speakers blared. John Cougar echoed through the trees.

“I’ll make someone a good wife?” Ella leaned back against the seat, and turned her head to face the window. Tears slid from her eyes. “Why’d you bring me here? You could have just taken me home. If you don’t want me, you really, don’t want me, why do you keep doing this to me?”

Mark turned down the radio. “I don’t know. I just...” He looked away.

“You just what, Mark? I don’t know why I let you under my skin. You’re killing me. I’m just your dirty secret.” Ella sobbed, “I don’t think I can live like this anymore.” Ella’s shoulders shook, and her nose ran.

Mark handed her a Whataburger napkin, “You’re not a dirty secret, Ella. You’re a child of God.”

Ella’s eyes flashed. “Really, you’re going there? You don’t even let your parents know we’re seeing each other. We have to sneak around, so no one knows. You tell me I’ll be a good wife—to someone, as you kiss me, and fondle me. Mark, you’re my world. I’ve given myself to you in nearly every way, and I am willing to give you more.” Ella took a deep breath. “Look at us, we’re hiding in the bushes down by the river. How can you say that I’m not a dirty secret? And why bother bringing God into this, Mark? We left God behind us when we turned onto this dirt road. Just because I’m the preacher’s daughter, doesn’t mean you can solve everything by quoting a scripture or calling on God. Take me home.”

He placed his hand on her leg, dangerously close to her inner thigh, and drew circles on her jeans with his forefinger. “Oh, come here, Ella. I don’t want to fight.”

She felt the heat rise from her midsection. “I don’t want to fight either, Mark. I love you.”

“I know, beautiful. I know. Come here and kiss me.”

Ella crawled back into his lap. She leaned into him and tugged on his lips with her teeth, gently prying them apart, and inserted her tongue deep into his mouth.

In less than a heartbeat Mark pushed her onto her back and climbed on top of her, his full weight crushing her to the seat.

“Mark?” Ella smiled.

“Don’t talk. I want to feel you under me.”

She felt the blood pulsing in his Levis, and her breath quickened as he kissed her lips, neck and chest.

“I love you, Mark.”

“You’re a sweet girl. Oh, Ella, so sweet.” He buried his face in her hair. “So beautiful, desirable.” He kissed the side of her face, “but you know I have a girlfriend that lives in California.”

Her voice caught in her throat, “I know you do.”

He pulled at her ear with his teeth. “Does it matter, Ella?” He kissed her throat. “You know she needs me. She’s all alone. I can’t leave her.” He bit her neck, and returned to her ear. “Let’s just use each other. We don’t have to go too far. I’m not going to rob your precious body. I know you’re a virgin, but I can teach you things, and you, oh man.” He kissed her again. “You’re so passionate. I’ve never met a woman who’s so exciting. What do you say, Ella? Can we be here for each other, use each other’s bodies?”

Ella closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. “Yes, whatever you want, Mark.” She kissed him deeply, drinking his taste, and smelling his cologne.

She opened her eyes. The Texas sun was burnt orange and pink. It barely hovered above the horizon. “It’s getting late. Maybe you should take me home.”

Mark sat up and stored a pinch of dip in his cheek. “Sure. I have school tomorrow anyway.”

Ella fastened the center seat belt, and leaned against his chest. His warm arm draped around her shoulder.



She stared in the mirror, and watched as her dark green eyes turned emerald with each tear she cried.

“Why do you let him do this to you?” She asked her reflection.

The voice in her head answered, “Because you love him.”

Sobbing she shook her head. “I love him, but he loves her.”

“He doesn’t love her. If he did, he wouldn’t kiss you, touch you, tell you you’re beautiful.”

She shook her head trying to clear the voice from her thoughts. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Sure you do. Make him love you. He has to love you.”

Ella shut her eyes, felt his lips on her body, and smelled his cologne.

# Nonfiction

## FIRST PLACE

The Mongolian Hold

By Esther Whitman Johnson, Valley Writers

*Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia*

Brow furrowed, frown fixed on my face, I hunch over the street map. Bewildered. How can I have gotten lost so quickly when I'm certain I know this area of the city?

I am alone. The team I will be meeting won't arrive for two days, so as usual I prowl, reconnoitering through a strange and exotic city. Grey clouds of pollution hover on the horizon, horns howl, and fumes belch from bumper-to-bumper traffic. Hordes of bodies jostle on the sidewalk, off the sidewalk, through the crossings. Pedestrians ignore the "don't walk" signs and drivers disobey the red lights. Only two days here, and I disobey too.

He approaches from behind, quietly, leans over my map, his face close to mine. Too close. Startled, I jerk away, but he is only a boy, maybe ten or eleven.

"You lost, lady? I help."

Suspicious, I think he wants money, maybe even my handbag. I put the usual choke hold around my pack and wait to answer. Then I notice he's super clean, has on a school uniform and a backpack, probably full of books. *What the heck, he's only a kid and he speaks English. Let him help.*

"Yes, I think I'm lost." I am loath to admit it, proud of my map skills, proud of finding my way in strange places.

"Where you go?"

I put my finger on the large grey building that dominates the map. "I need to go back to the State Department Store." It's not my final destination, but it'll get me reoriented. I point to the one place everybody knows—locals and tourists alike. A leftover relic from the Russians, the State Department Store is a newly renovated Mecca of commercialism, a hymn to democracy and crass materialism.

"I take you." The boy reaches out, grabs my wrist with a vice grip, and leads me in the direction from where I've just come. *You don't need to take me*, I start to say. *You can point the way, and please let go of my hand*. But he is looking straight ahead, a young man on a mission, marching like a soldier with a prisoner. I say nothing and get dragged behind.

After two blocks, the buildings start to look familiar and I relax, still wanting my hand back. The grip does not loosen until I am standing in familiar territory. "Here is State Department Store, lady. You not lost now." I reach to give him a tip, but before I can get my wallet, he loosens his grip, bows his head slightly, and turns back towards where he found me.

"Thank you. *Bayarlalaa*." I call out the only phrase I know in his language. He does not turn around, just nods his head, and runs to catch a bus.



A few days later I meander to the National Theater—past the ugly glass skyscraper of the Blue Sky Hotel, a tour bus of Chinese pulling up; past the Irish pub, its Celtic music blasting; past the Gobi Mohair shop where androgynous, stick-thin models with bony hips prance on the sidewalk; past the massage place, where just yesterday a masseuse transported me to heaven, rubbing knots out of weary, walking muscles. I carry a flyer, intent on buying a ticket for a concert by the National Symphony of Mongolia. The theater's front doors are locked, the side doors are locked, the back doors are locked. How can this be? In English, the brochure says tickets are sold from 10am to 5pm. The building is pictured on the flyer, so I know I'm in the right place, and I keep wandering. The janitor smiles and points, but when I follow his lead, I arrive at another locked door. The desk lady at the puppet theater smiles and points, but when I follow her gesture I go all the way around the building and back to the puppet theater. A customer there smiles and points me in still another direction, but again I find nothing. *I give up*, I think, *just forget the whole thing and have dinner and drinks in a good restaurant instead*. Then the voice kicks in, my wandering-in-foreign-cities bossy voice: *You will never be in Mongolia again . . . a once in a lifetime opportunity . . . on the other side of the world . . . nothing like this anywhere. Nothing.*

I go back to the puppet theater a third time, and by now the lady knows me. Sheepishly I make the I-am-so-stupid gesture, shrug my shoulders, and throw up my hands—international sign language. The puppet lady smiles, strides from behind the desk, and grabs my wrist in the Mongolian hold. I laugh this time, don't even try to get my hand back, and let her lead me around the building, past the gold gilded front doors, past the carved wooden side doors, past the janitor with his bucket to a little stall in the garden at the end of a path no one would notice. She points to the flyer in my hand and to the poster above the kiosk. The symphony.

Only then does she let go of my hand.



I traveled to the far north of Mongolia with volunteers to build two houses on the steppes near the Russian border. I thrilled at hundreds of horses racing untethered across fields, snapped photographs of yaks fording cold streams, cheered wrestlers fighting in rural matches, and clapped at archery competitions in the capital. I gawked at the president of the country from three feet away, slept in a yurt, and rode a camel in the Gobi desert. Yet, when I think of that journey—the most unforgettable of my life—the thing that stands out most is the Mongolian hold on the sidewalks of Ulaanbaatar.

## SECOND PLACE

### Nana's Arm

By Jean Lancaster, Blue Ridge Writers

Ever since Nana was a little girl of three, she had only one arm. My dad, her youngest son, drove our family of six every summer to visit her when she stayed with her elderly sisters in Warm Springs in western Virginia. Along the way, we passed through the small town of Goshen. At that point, Daddy always pointed his arm out the car window and said, "Look, that's where your grandma's arm is buried."

As the eldest daughter and the tallest for looking out the car window, I never knew exactly where or what he was pointing at among the old clapboard houses over to the left. There was no church or stone walled graveyard that I could see as we whooshed past. Maybe he drove faster because he was afraid we would see a small soiled white cross, forlorn and neglected, under a weeping willow tree. He must have thought that all of us children would begin to sob. Instead we were in awe and wondered what this meant. Nana was no different than any other grandmother in our eyes.

When Nana was about ten, her father moved their family from Goshen to Warm Springs in Bath County. He was a country doctor who visited his patients on horseback and carried his medical supplies in a double-pouch, leather saddlebag that lay over his horse's haunches. The family lived in a large farmhouse on the side of Bonner Mountain that was named in his honor.

In 1915, when she was twenty-seven, Nana married our grandfather at Maple Grove Farm in nearby Rockingham County. The Bath County newspaper described the celebration of the marriage of Nell and Richard. "The parlor was artistically decorated in mountain laurel, spruce and potted plants, the ceremony taking place under a canopy of spruce arranged in one corner of the room." The bride was "gowned in a blue traveling suit with hat and gloves to match and she carried a shower bouquet of bride's roses." Her older sister as matron-of-honor "wore a gown of white lace and carried Kilarney roses." Nana's younger sisters were maids of honor and "wore dainty frocks of white mull and carried pink sweet peas." Her niece presented the wedding ring in "the bloom of a pink rose."

Following the ceremony, "a bountiful dinner was served the bridal party and guests." When they left the wedding festivities, the newly married couple carried "with them the best wishes of a host of friends in this section where the bride has spent her life and where she is deservedly popular."

Nana and Papa settled in Rockingham and later at Merry Oak farm at Gum



Springs in Louisa County. Daddy took me to stay with them when I was two years old, while Momma gave birth to my little brother. At that age, I must have followed Nana around every day while she checked on her sheep, cut roses for the vases, and brought in firewood for the stove from the woodshed. All these farm tasks must have been much more difficult with only one arm.

In the kitchen, she wrapped her one arm around me to set me up on a stool in the mornings to watch her roll and knead the dough for the biscuits. A pitcher of fresh buttermilk always sat on the counter with a glass poured for me.

My brother and I stayed at Merry Oak two years later when my sister was born and during the birth of my youngest brother. While I was there, Nana taught me to play a one-handed duet of *Chopsticks* on the old upright piano in the living room.

When I was older, I became more aware of the images and scents of Merry Oak. In the mornings, salty bacon was still warm on the white-enameled wood stove that Nana cooked with ever since my father was a child. In the deep sink was a metal colander of fresh-picked blackberries with morning dew on their bubbled surfaces. Anchoring the center of the room was an oval oak table with its mixture of ladder-back, upholstered, and round-backed Windsor chairs. They reminded me of all the cousins, aunts, and uncles who dined there when we came to visit.

I noticed the comforting fragrance of the lilac hedge that surrounded the front lawn and floated through the open windows of the two-century-old farmhouse. The perfume of the purple wisteria that covered lattice on the side porch glided through the air when Nana and I sat on the porch swing.

Although I never saw Nana with a canvas, oil paint, or brushes, her paintings hung on the walls of the living room and bedrooms. Since she studied art at Randolph-Macon Women's College, Papa and my young father gave her a paint set one Christmas. When her children were almost grown, she started painting again.

My favorite painting was a ruby red Cardinal on a branch of a blooming dogwood tree. Another painting was of two silvery fish on a pewter platter. This still life looked like a William Merritt Chase masterpiece. She even painted a small watercolor of a nude woman at the edge of a French lake that was a copy of the infamous and controversial *September Morn* painting by Paul Chabas.

Did Nana have a bit of spunk inside her one-armed anatomy? I thought that was true. Daddy often told the story of how he and his two brothers were helping to dig a new well. Even Nana agreed to be lowered down in the bucket tied to a rope to help bring up the Virginia red clay from the bottom of the hole.

At night, Nana would read stories to my siblings, our cousins, and me. We all sat with her on top of her tall walnut frame bed. Usually, I was restless and fidgety. She paused in the story to ask if I had “ants in my pants” which truly embarrassed me. As I squirmed even more, I noticed the wink of her eye that softened the admonishment.

We grandchildren never asked Nana about her missing arm. The only explanation we ever had from Daddy was that she lost her arm when she was a child. She, her brothers, and her sisters were playing at rolling over a water barrel turned on its side. It seemed that Nana hurt her arm and it never healed. Her father studied surgery at the University of Virginia Medical School in 1882 and 1883. He had the skills, tools, and the unfortunate task of amputating his young daughter’s arm at the shoulder.

As far as I know, Nana never wore a prosthetic arm. Once though, I happened to see her shoulder when she was dressing and still in her white cotton slip. That part of her shoulder looked like a soft rose, waiting to curl open.



Traveling recently to Warm Springs with my sister and brother for a weekend at the Gristmill Inn, we crossed over the bridge at Goshen. Since I was the eldest, it was my responsibility to point to the left and say, “Look, that’s where grandma’s arm is buried.”

## THIRD PLACE

### The Magic Shop

By Judy Witt, Richmond Writers

Anytime I smell fresh wood shavings my heart beats a little faster. Dad's workshop, tucked in our basement just past the furnace room, was pure magic. You'd never figure Dad was the resident magician if you based your guess solely on his hands—broad, thick hands resembling catchers' mitts more than deft, sleight-of-hand hands. Each finger pointed in a different direction; knobs of arthritis deformed every joint. Yet when those hands touched a chunk of wood—poof!—a skateboard, a bathtub boat, a huge Chris Craft ship model, bookcases, stilts, a nightstand, even a pool table might appear. Little did I know there was buried treasure in that magic shop, too.

I was never happier than when Dad let me help. Of course, nine-year-olds had to stand way back anytime he guided a two-by-four through the table saw's spinning blade, but once the saw was safely unplugged, he let me suck up all the shavings with the huge shop vac. He trusted me enough with that beast of a vacuum for me to tidy up long after he went upstairs. Well, that was his mistake number one.

One Sunday afternoon I'd worked the vac hose over to the edge of the room, when I noticed a cardboard carton with a few shavings on top and spider web droppings nearby. As I dragged the box out to get the crud behind, it seemed awfully heavy. I knew every scrap, tool, bolt, nail, spare part, and piece of sandpaper in every corner of this wondrous room. What could be in this mysterious box? I cocked an ear. All was quiet on the basement steps.

When I lifted the tucked flaps of the carton, I discovered dusty engineering textbooks—thick ones with tiny print and lots of diagrams. Why hadn't Dad unpacked this? We'd moved into the house over a year ago. I stacked the books beside me and dug deeper. What were these pink envelopes? I'd never seen postmarks from way back in 1939! Heck, none of us kids had been born yet. Mom and Dad weren't even married then. I could easily read the loopy handwriting on the flowery stationery. And more envelopes from 1935, big ones whose typed contents I recognized only too well—report cards. Now that the secret was out about all those C's and D's, he'd never again pass off the stern "grades speech" as coming from a flawless father. And from the very bottom of the box, I pulled out a little black book—yes, *that* kind of "little black book"—with a starred rating beside lots of names, all female. This stuff was begging to be shared—with Mom. Dad was always the biggest tease. Now it would be Mom's turn.

My mom *never* giggled. She wasn't ticklish. She chuckled occasionally if she read a comic in the daily newspaper, but she never missed filling every square on

the crossword puzzle. I always thought of her as the serious type. But she giggled that Sunday as I curled up beside her on the sofa, put the open Funnies section in her hands, and passed her each letter behind cover of the newspaper.

*"Wasn't that such a romantic evening, under the light of the full moon? I can't wait to see you again, have you hold me so tenderly, kiss me with those wonderful lips! ...."* Mush, mush, more mush! The letters even smelled mushy with perfume. *"Love ever and always yours, Bobbie."* Mom's name was Marion.

Dad barged into the den to find out what all the commotion was about, but only saw Mom and me reading the funnies, chuckling. With a puzzled look, he turned and left. Mistake number two. This gave Mom enough time to study each and every letter.

Next I slipped her that black book opened to Bobbie's page—two stars. Lucky for Dad that the only entry with more than two stars was for "Marion Brand"—four big stars. Mom's giggles morphed into the heartiest laugh I ever heard from her. This brought Dad back into the room.

"What's so funny?" When Mom lowered the paper, tears rolling from her eyes and a grin plastered on her face, Dad's face went white, then deep red. "Let me see that!" He snatched the book, then the letters and envelopes, and disappeared into the basement.

After every project, Dad still let me use the monster vac all by myself, but no matter how thoroughly I probed every corner, the contents of that box never reappeared. Sorry to say, no mistake number three.

That very day I learned that my mom wasn't always Mom, the Serious. And Dad—Oz, the Great and Powerful—could speak in that thunderous voice, but I didn't tremble. I had spotted an ordinary pair of feet under the curtain.

## HONORABLE MENTION

Peas Behind the Washer  
By Kimberly Dalferes, Valley Writers

It may seem odd to love an inanimate object. We should love people, and special moments, and extraordinary memories. But truth be told, I have indeed loved an object. An object that provided for me a great source of love, joy, and warmth. I loved my grandparents' house.

When I was young, I believed their house was an enchanted palace. It was crafted in the traditional Spanish architecture of South Florida, with white stucco walls and black shutters and an arched heavy wooden front door. However, as a child I had no awareness of the architectural style of the home. I only thought of the house on Omar Road as the safest place on Earth.

This home was where my mom and her brothers and sister grew up. I would listen intently during family gatherings as stories of their childhood were passed along to all the kids including myself, little brother Scotty, and my bevy of first cousins. Beloved stories were often repeated each year, as is the way of oral histories. There was the time my sleep walking Uncle Sammy, mid-nightmare, came running down the stairs to greet my mom – who was returning from a night at the movies; having just seen *Psycho*. There were frequent descriptions of how my Aunt Terry would aggravate my mom at the dinner table by pinching the tops of her feet with her toes. So many stories of shared bedrooms, sibling pranks, and beloved all-night gab-fests.

I also have my own recollections of time spent in my grandparents' house. I remember in great detail much of its interior, such as the standing piano that greeted everyone who walked through the front door. There was a wonderful black rotary phone perched on a small table at the top of the stairs. The only bathroom in the house was encased in shiny pink tiles. The dining room floor had a permanent and noticeable slant; the china cabinet contents would tinkle against each other if you rushed by too fast and sounded the alarm to stop running in the house. Within its walls, I learned to cook and sew and make proper hot tea.

The enchantments of this house were not limited to its contents. The surrounding yard also reflected the talents of a gifted southern woman. I often fondly recall my Gramma's prized avocado tree, which each year produced a bounty of football sized green beauties. There was a melaleuca tree with bark that shredded off in layers like thick, spongy paper. We kids, the Hell 'Yuns that we were, often got into trouble for playfully stripping away the tree trunk. In our defense, it was quite irresistible; like the popping of bubble wrap.

The holidays, especially Thanksgiving, were almost always celebrated at my grandparents' house. All the heathens – as my Grumps so fondly referred to his

grandchildren – would voice feeble protests about being relegated to the “kiddie table” on the back porch. Weak rationales were offered as to there not being enough room for everyone to congregate around the dining room table. The truth was, we loved our back porch banishment. Back in that small little room we were unfettered by any pretense of good holiday table manners or proper etiquette. There was something about the gathering of cousins that often made us quite literally lose all self-control. The grown-ups frequently needed a break from us.

Dinner always began with the best of intentions. The saying of grace was a respected ritual; even sequestered on the back porch we could clearly hear Grumps bless the meal and offer his favorite prayer tagline: *and please make Scotty a good boy*. Warnings always followed: BEHAVE. Cousin John usually smiled slyly as the porch door swung shut behind Gramma.

The cousins would maintain some semblance of composure for, at the most, fifteen minutes. Inevitably, each year it would start with a random piece of food – perhaps a chunk of turkey – being dunked into someone’s milk. Peas would begin to be placed up noses, only to be dislodged by a squirt of our turkey-laden beverages. Mashed potatoes would follow, being flung past a ducking Cousin Brian, to hit and fall behind the washing machine with a bit of a dull thud.

Our squeals of delight were not lost on the adults assembled in the not so far away dining room. They knew – they had to have known – what we were up to. We would get away with our shenanigans for a short while, but our uncle’s booming *Ya’ll better clean that up!* would most often bring us back to our senses.

As the years passed, as they always do, our sanctuary eventually became too much for Gramma to handle on her own. She sold our beloved refuge and moved to Jacksonville to live with her sister in 1986, ten years after my Grumps had departed this world. Just before her move we were back at the house helping with the packing, sorting, and culling of treasured memories. The house looked so different as seen through my adult eyes, and yet just the same. It seemed smaller, but the dining room floor still slanted and the tiles in the bathroom were still pink and the piano was still anchored against the wall near the front door.

I walked through the rooms littered with packing boxes and soon found myself on that back porch. The washing machine had been pulled away from the wall and there, stacked against the wood slats that had never seen daylight, was what looked to be the remnants of an archeological dig – years of Thanksgiving food fights, stacked up in layer upon layer like an intricate cross-cut section of a deep gravel pit. I smile now thinking about what a glorious mess we made each year and how that house protected and preserved our antics in the hidden spaces behind the washer.

Gramma and Grumps are both in heaven now; she joined him there in 1999. When I think of them, I almost always picture them together in the house on Omar Road.

Do you think the heavenly version of the home where they now reside includes a back porch with a washing machine that conceals the remnants of Thanksgiving past? I hope so, I truly do.

## HONORABLE MENTION

April Love

By Liz Williams, Blue Ridge Writers

I pushed my sister, April, in her wheelchair from the bedroom into the dining room, where she wanted to chat with her visiting stepson, Matt, and her daughter, Missy. I watched as April, the party girl, smiled and talked to them. It warmed me to see her animated. Her clothes draped around her shrunken figure. After a while, she wanted to return to her bedroom. I wheeled her back.

The month before, August of 2007, April's cancer had spread to her lungs. My husband and I visited her in the oncology ward of Wilmington's Christiana Hospital, where she lay attached to an oxygen tank; a plastic tube drained fluid from her lungs. The room had a walker and wheelchair at the ready. She sat on a portable commode, from which she couldn't move without a nurse. "Are you afraid?" I asked her. She nodded. We stayed for two hours, fed her some dinner, and then went to our hotel, where I lay awake all night. Missy arrived from Pittsburgh the next morning. Outside April's room, Missy sobbed on my shoulder, while I held her and stroked her head of long silky hair. She was only 28 years old.

This September weekend, I'd spent at April's home to relieve Missy. Before Matt arrived on Sunday, I'd fixed April an egg topped with a piece of cheese and toast, with one piece of bacon. She hadn't much of an appetite but ate it all, feeding herself. Her toes curled unusually as she sat in bed, I'd noticed, a sign of imminent death.

After fixing her breakfast, I changed her bed sheets, which were wet again, took them down to the washer, and loaded whatever was there that needed washing. I put a pair of Depends and pajama pants on April so she was dry. If only I could have done more.

A great beauty, my sister had wanted her makeup on for Matt's visit. I had washed her face and put on her astringent, she instructing me. Then I'd applied the foundation makeup and blush. She'd fussed at the job I'd done. She'd put her mascara on herself.

After talking together awhile, Matt and Missy joined April and me in the bedroom. Seeing Matt had cheered April and they resumed talking. It was time for me to go. I kissed her lightly on her cheek, so lightly she didn't acknowledge it, a kiss still vivid though seven years old.

As I left the house, for some reason, I opened a drawer in a small wooden chest by the front door. Inside, I found a black-and-white, 8- by 10-inch photo of April's



“flight hostess” class of July 1967. April, the tiniest one in the picture, and her classmates wore pillbox hats. I wrote down the date of the graduation on a piece of paper—for the obituary—and put it in my purse. I glanced at the mantelpiece, full of greeting cards and framed pictures, and noticed a photo I’d never seen before, one of Mother and April as a child. Mother wore a long gown, and April, a dressy dress and little straw hat. I took the picture, thinking I’d bring it back next time. As I pulled out of the driveway, I knew it would be last time I’d see my sister. Finally, I cried.

# Poetry

## FIRST PLACE

Driving the Blue Ridge in October  
By Ann Skelton, Chesapeake Bay Writers

Morning light plays in the forest.  
All is quiet.  
Bouquets of trees wave at my passing.  
Showing off.  
A canopy ablaze with leaves of red of orange of palest green.

Rolls of hay, giant and motionless, testify:  
Harvest is in.  
Everywhere I turn beauty pierces my heart.

*Time is passing.*

Not again shall I know the joy of first things:  
Plunging fearful into a rocky river,  
My first dance.  
Never again, moments of motherhood so fleeting.

*Memory assails my heart.*

Once I had a boy-child I sang to sleep at night.  
Once I had a girl-child twirling in my flowing skirts.  
Once I had a child who held my hand so tight.  
Once, and again, they come to me in sleep.  
No need for mother's comfort now.

*Time is passing.*

Blue Ridge autumn stirs memories.  
Long ago we read before a fire.  
We hoped for news that school would close  
And then we built a snowman and his snowdog,  
And after, wrapped in blankets on the couch to read aloud.

Would a Greek chorus lament for me?  
That time together, when I was Mother.  
Who will lament October in a mother's heart?

*Time past.*

## **SECOND PLACE**

When We Listened

By Sally Zakariya, Northern Virginia Chapter

We would sit at the bar, listening to the next Thelonius while sweet slick gin burned my throat and belly, music rising upward, borne on the joined exhalations of our several breaths, beat deep in our chests.

The city consumed us, its rough edges and right angles, the narrow threads of space between us, mingled smells of sweat and garbage and hot grease, the blare and blaze of trouble down the street.

If there were guns (and there were guns) we hardly worried even though a man pulled one on us and took our watches and our rings. But they were cheap and no harm done, no real harm, we said later at the bar.

Days spun out before us, a profusion of possibilities, a kind of warmth and wonder to it all, and always the promise of the music—the pulse of its secret geometry, as though the coda would never come.

## THIRD PLACE

### Sand Castles

By James Gaines, Riverside Writers

The wind out of Canada  
Blows these last few leaves  
Pin oaks across ravaged meadows  
Flyers mixed with flurries

Tickling my nose  
Wet as a setter in a marsh  
And still I am thinking  
About castles on the beach

Gem-shimmering by the Gulf  
Here yet elsewhere  
I morph these lonely crystals  
Into turquoise swells

Shepherding conches and pipefish  
There can be no contradiction  
If cold calls back to heat  
Premature darkness to illumination

Desolation to fulfillment  
Think on righter times  
Turn the mind unhindered  
For all of us turn the wheel

## HONORABLE MENTION

Reaper

By Larry Turner, Riverside Writers

*Suggested by "Wheatfield with Reaper" by Vincent Van Gogh*

*Swing*

Stalks of wheat

*Swing*

See them fall

Cut down in the midst of life

*Swing*

My wife Anna

*Swing*

There in my neighbor's embrace

*Swing*

My arm has never been so strong

*Swing*

Hot day

*Swing*

Image of them in my head

*Swing*

How long until it disappears?

*Swing*

Stalks of wheat

Cut down in the midst of life

*Swing*

## **GOLDEN NIB WINNERS**

Judge for all three categories:

Mary Carroll-Hackett, MFA  
Associate Professor, Creative Writing  
Editor, The Dos Passos Review  
Briery Creek Press  
The Liam Rector First Book Prize for Poetry  
Department of English and Modern Languages  
Longwood University

# Fiction

## FIRST PLACE

"Prairie Winds"

by Ann M. Skelton, Chesapeake Bay Writers

### 1934, Early Spring

Will McCarthy stepped out of the Nebraska First Bank in Spalding folding and refolding a single piece of paper. He tucked the paper into the bib of his overalls, patted the front pocket and glanced up at the darkening sky. The weather stations in Kansas repeated messages all week that he already knew in his bones: another storm likely.

Will was a tall, lanky man with keen blue eyes and the gnarled hands of a working farmer. Those who took the trouble to look closely, saw hints that Will was more prosperous than many. His denim work shirt was still a bright blue, not yet faded from lye soap, for instance. His peaked cap was the sturdy variety purchased from Sears mail order, not one of those flimsy cotton caps handed out free with *Swenson's General Store* scrawled across the front.

Will had a reputation in some quarters for foolish spending, not a favorable comment in this town. But those few who knew him well understood he was a natural born mechanic, fascinated by new technology. Could fix anything. Bought a Philco battery-powered radio before half the town caught on. Was the first to get himself a tractor with rubber wheels.

Will turned toward his Model T parked in the next block, well away from the town square and the bank. He was proud of the black sedan with its chrome headlamps, but he didn't want to advertise that he was at the bank. "No one's business," he thought. As he approached the car, he spotted Tom Donnelly limping toward him from the feed store across the street. For a moment, he considered pretending he hadn't seen Tom, but he didn't want to hurt the old man. Besides, Will never had been good at pretending.

"Hi there, Will. In town for business, I reckon? See you just come outa the bank."

"That's so, Tom. Decided to give some of these new pesticides a try. Experts in Lincoln say they keep the whole field clear right up to harvest. Don't have to hoe

one bit. Guaranteed.” He lifted his cap and ran a hand through his black hair, an impatient gesture that Mary used to warn him about.

“I see you’ve been over to McPhee’s. Getting ready for calving then, are you?” Will asked.

“Yup. That old tightwad McPhee. He’s got all his prices jacked way up.” Tom shook his silvery hair in disgust. “Wouldn’t give me a break even with all the business I done with him over the years.”

“Guess he hasn’t figured out yet these are hard times. Lots a folks just trying to hang on.”

“That’s a fact. Suppose you heard that Jim Kane is selling out? Taking the family out West.”

“That so? My girls will be sorry to hear that. They’re pretty keen on that young family.”

“Yup. Bank took the farm. Gotta watch them bankers, Will. Wouldn’t give a plug nickel for the lot of them. Even though ole Thornton’s been here in Greeley County a good time. Acts like one of us, but he ain’t.”

“Oh, Thornton’s all right. Just gave me an extension till harvest’s in.” Will saw Tom’s look of surprise and knew he had said more than he wanted to.



*Hastings Tribune, May, 1934*

*United Press:* “A gigantic cloud of dust, 1,500 miles long, 900 miles across and two miles high buffeted...almost one-third of the nation today.”



By the time Will turned his Model T onto Highway 91 toward the farm the sky had turned an ugly gray and wind whipped gravel and dust against the windshield. “You’d think 20 horsepower could get me moving along a bit snappier,” he shouted to the wind. Will was pushing hard to get home. No doubt now, another dust storm was moving in and fast. If it was anything like the last one, the animals needed shelter. Don’t want to lose another cow to that strangling dust.

As Will pulled the car up to the front porch, he saw the boys, noses and mouths covered with bandanas, struggling to drive the milling cattle. Will scrambled from the car and bent his head into the wind. He fought his way to the holding pen where the boys were trying to move the frightened animals. The horizon was now



engulfed with a black rolling cloud of dirt, the sky as dark as a rainy night in November. "I would give my bottom dollar for a rainy evening," Will muttered under his breath.

Together, Will and the two older boys swatted and cajoled the cattle toward the shed hoping that would provide some protection from the swirling clouds of dust. "Johnny, pick up the calf. Daisy will follow you then." Anthony, the older of the two boys, yanked Daisy's lead,; but she was ready to follow her calf into the barn.

"She doesn't know how lucky she is that we're still milking her," Anthony said and grinned. Anthony always had a smile on his face.

Inside, Will slumped down against the stall and pulled off his own kerchief, now caked with grit. He turned aside and spit out a mouthful of blackened saliva. Grit covered Will and the two boys from their heads to their boots.

"Shall we make a break for the house, Dad?" Johnny asked.

"No, we'll lay low 'til the worst is over, then head in. The girls will be blocking the windows - and saving what they can of our dinner, I hope."

"Things go okay at the bank today?" Anthony asked.

"Fine, fine. We're going to be able to plant wheat after all. Should get a better price than corn. Oh yes, saw Tom Donnelly. He doesn't have much good to say about bankers. You'd think they were the devil's henchmen."

Anthony persisted, shouting over the howling wind. "How about Mr. Thornton, Dad. Did he change the terms on your advance like you wanted?"

"Oh, he changed them alright. Wanted a good bit more of a guarantee than I expected."

"What exactly did you promise?"

"We'll go into it later, Son. After supper, maybe." Dirt and pebbles kept up a staccato rhythm as they bounced against the barn windows.

"Here, come on closer to me, Johnny. We're safe in here," Will said to the younger boy who had started to shiver. "You did fine today with Daisy's calf. It's almost as big as you are."

Two hours later Will and his sons struggled to push open the barn door. Two feet of dirt lay in mounds around the farm buildings blocking the door. Once outside, Will quickly surveyed the damage as they picked their way past the debris dumped

helter skelter by the wind. A sycamore branch lodged in the windmill frame. A dead goose lay in the path, smothered by dirt; dead birds littered the yard.

“Look Dad, the fence post is almost covered right to the top.” Johnny’s voice still quavered even though the unnerving wind had died down.

Inside the house, a fine layer of grit covered everything. The table was set, dishes and cups upside down to keep the eating surface clean. Peggy gave them a smile. She was wearing her mother’s old flowered housedress as she swept dust into piles here and there in the kitchen.

“Well, you’re a tough one, aren’t you, Peg? But what’s this little tear running down your cheek?”

“Not a tear, Daddy. Dust got in my eye, that’s all. That wind was so loud I couldn’t read to Bethy. We just curled up together in the corner.”

“Well, funny thing. That’s just what we did in the barn,” Anthony said as he poked Peg in the ribs.

After supper, Will dropped into his rocker and dug in his shirt pocket for tobacco. Weariness etched through his arms and shoulders. The events of the day churned in his mind: wind battering the barn windows, that business in the bank with Thornton, a conversation not as optimistic as he let on. His thoughts moved to images of his sons. Anthony, tall and more muscular than most 16 year olds, seemed to know how to calm the frantic cows with his crooning; and skinny Johnny, his thatch of red hair just visible above Daisy’s head as he struggled to hold her wiggling calf.

“Mary would have smiled at that,” Will said aloud.

“Is Dad talking to himself again, Peggy?” Johnny asked.

“Not to himself, Johnny. He’s talking to Mom.”

“Yeah, but that’s creepy.”

“Well, I talk to her sometimes. When Jimmy Hemple says something mean.”

Will’s shoulders slumped as he rocked. “All we have to do is hold on. This old homestead will belong to the boys one day.

Peggy, hearing a snore, stepped over and took the half-burned cigarette from her father’s hand, mindful not to let the ash fall on the floor.



## 1935, March

Headline: *Daylight Turned into Inky Blackness*

*Hastings Daily Tribune: "Snow came to this region today in the wake of the worst dust storm in years.... Snow obligingly obliterated the unsightly piles of dust heaped up by a 60-mile-an-hour gale which struck with tornadic fury Friday night."*



"Mind if I sit here awhile, Dad?" Anthony perched on the piano bench with his penknife, working on a block of pine.

"Sure thing, Anthony. Just want to see if the *Trib* has any news besides the weather."

Man and boy were quiet. Will peered over the top of the paper fascinated by Anthony's nimble fingers. As he watched, a tugboat no bigger than his hand and topped with smokestacks began to emerge from the wood.

"That's almost like magic, Son. Where'd you ever see a boat like that?"

"Found a picture in Mom's encyclopedia. Dad, mind if I ask you something?" Anthony watched his father's face. He knew his dad was quick to take offense and his words could bite like an angry wasp.

"Course," Will grunted.

"Well, it's just I've been thinking. Don't be mad now, but maybe we shouldn't take any more loans from the bank. What with the drought and all."

Two frown lines appeared in Will's forehead. He fought a burning sensation in the pit of his stomach. "I should tell this young cub he doesn't know a thing about the business side of farming." Instead, he clenched his teeth.

"It's just that we heard on Sunday that the McGuffins' were selling out too, leaving Spalding. Their little Ruby got the pneumonia – from the dust you know."

"Think I don't know that? You think I haven't listened to the reports and prayed for rain. But we're holding on, Anthony; we've got the pluck of the McCarthy's."

Anthony saw his father dropping into reverie, probably thinking of the family's migration to Nebraska again. He didn't need to hear about the early days

again. All the children knew that the farm had been Will's life from childhood. They knew how Grandfather Henry took his young family from Pennsylvania to homestead in Nebraska. "Sure, that was risky, but planting wheat in the middle of a drought was near to foolhardy," Anthony thought.

"We just can't give up, Son. Got to hold on. The wheat's due to germinate any time now. If the dust holds off just a few weeks, we're solid.

Peg put down the book she was reading to Beth and put her finger to her lips. She let her hair drop over her eye so she could listen to the conversation without being noticed. The deception wasn't necessary. The frown on Will's face told her he was fully engaged in Anthony's words. She crossed her fingers that they wouldn't have an ugly quarrel.

Then salvation came from the kitchen. Johnny, his mouth full of a left-over biscuit called, "Almost time for the Lone Ranger, Dad." Johnny turned on the radio and sat cross-legged on the rug so he could tune the station during the show. "C'mon Bethy, You can sit beside me."

Will closed the *Tribune* and pretended to listen, but his mind darted back to early days on the farm. The endless journey to Omaha from Pennsylvania with his brothers was their first train ride. But oh, how his mother loved it. She chatted and laughed with the passengers, never minding the noise of the tracks nor the soot that blew in the windows and got in their eyes. Mother loved adventure alright. Said she hadn't had such an excursion since leaving County Cork; said she left for America with nothing more than a clean shift and the bravado in her voice. Said she'd do it again in a heartbeat and glad of it for a good piece of Nebraska farm land.

"Anthony must get his good humor from my mother," Will thought.



Stories of the family's early days as pioneers dotted the McCarthy folklore. Will filled winter evenings with tales of homesteading, and the children loved them. They never tired of hearing how Grandmother Margaret and the children stayed alone on the barren homestead while Grandfather went to Council Bluffs to earn enough to buy mules.

Will told and retold the story of going to the land office in Grand Island on a scorching hot day when his father filed his homestead claim. The official paper identified their land: *Section No 20 in Township 19 North...*

One hundred and sixty rain-fed acres, exactly the size of the parcel stated in Mr. Lincoln's Homestead Act. Land was to be improved, but it was theirs for the tilling. More land than the McCarthy's could ever hope for in County Cork.

Will swelled with pride as he recalled his father dressed in his Sunday coat, one button dangling from a loose thread, raising his right hand to swear, "I, Henry McCarthy, am the head of a family and am a citizen of the United States." Then he paid the \$4.00 filing fee and everyone in the office started cheering.

"Congratulations. You're one step closer to being a land-owner." Someone patted Henry on the back and shook Will's own small hand.

"Yes, Sir. Thank you sir," young Will mumbled solemnly.

Afterward father and son walked across the street to Mrs. McCall's boarding house for lemonade and hot doughnuts, their celebration before beginning lives as landowners, and so proud of their windswept homestead in Nebraska's Leo Valley.



A news release interrupted the usual, "*Hi Oh Silver. Away!*"

*"This just in from the extension service in Lincoln: The final report on wheat yields is grim. A total of five million acres of wheat has been lost. All the wheat crop in Nebraska is gone along with half of that in Kansas and a quarter of the Oklahoma acreage."*

"What? What's that? Did he say the whole state? Can't be." Will's face had turned a deathly gray. "Anthony, did he say the entire wheat crop? All of it?"



## **1937, Handbill**

Printed on or about November; distributed through Swenson's general store, Spalding, Nebraska.

**PUBLIC SALE**  
**At my place 7 miles south of Spalding, Hyway 281**  
**Monday, January 6, 1936**  
**6 Head of Horses**  
**16 Head of Cattle**  
**25 Head of Hogs**

## **Farm Machinery, Etc.**

**Will McCarthy, Owner**

**Usual Terms. No property to be removed from premises until settled for.**

**Lunch Wagon on Grounds**

**Scott Baker: auctioneer**

Will lay still in the dark, his hand resting protectively against the trouble in his belly. He wondered if God were testing him. This gnawing presence in the pit of his stomach had been growing for a year, ever since the day Will lost the wheat crop and accepted the certainty that he could not repay his loans. Ever since he gave up hope for one last miracle crop. Ever since he accepted the truth that the relentless winds stripped away the once rich Nebraska top soil.

As old Tom Donnelly said, "The wind just plunders our land like a bandit."

"That's so," Will agreed. "Like a bandit."

Will crawled from under the quilts still wearing yesterday's flannel shirt, and picked his way down stairs to put on the coffee, careful not to wake the children. Will glanced at the Rosewood clock on the wall above the kitchen table. Mom's fancy clock, the children called it. Only 4:35. Too early to be up and rattling around. It would be hours before people began to arrive. Enough time to sit at the window with his black sugared coffee and listen to the whoosh of the windmill and watch the sway of the tire swinging from the old beech tree. Enough time to reflect on the land he once hoped to pass on to the boys.

Will McCarthy was still a young man in 1936, just gone 50 years of age; but he looked gray and weather beaten staring out into the dark. As the winter sun rose, shapes emerged one by one from the shadows of the barnyard. "There's the cultivator, the John Deere corn planter, the cream separator, the good McCormick-Deering Seeder."

He pulled a paper from his shirt pocket and reread the handbill, though he knew it by heart: *16 head of cattle, 6 head of horses, 25 Head of Hogs*. "Sounds like the goods of a prosperous farmer, not someone dead broke."

"I'm glad Mary isn't here to be shamed," he whispered. It had been twenty-three years since he and Mary stood before the priest in their best clothes. Will, tall and proud and nervous in his black suit and vest; young Mary Marcella, only 19, so elegant in her ivory satin gown. The enormous satin wedding hat perched atop her black hair almost kept Will from kissing the bride. Almost, but not quite.

"Oh, how I loved to see her drive that team of black mares, sitting straight and tall as she snapped the reins. Mary would have been sad about the horses."



That evening after the sale, after the auctioneer's hypnotic song had faded, Will gazed at the remains of his household goods. The farmyard, only a few hours ago cluttered with equipment and furniture, was now bare. Almost everything sold. A few old tools remained on a hay bale along with Mary's Rosewood clock. Odd that no one had bid on that pretty thing. It works just fine. In the fading light he could see the days of the month ranged around the face. "Still ticking," he said to the empty barnyard. Will stood alone and still in the cold night, watching the activity inside the kitchen, thinking of how he might comfort the family. He didn't have the words quite yet.

When he began to shiver, he picked up the old clock, pressed it against his stomach and walked across the near empty barnyard to the warmth of the kitchen. Peg was scrambling eggs and making biscuits for their supper, tears running down her cheeks. The two boys were staring out the window into the empty barnyard.

"You okay, Dad?" Anthony asked.

Will put the clock back where it had always hung. He patted Peg's shoulder and turned to his son, "Anthony, I want to say I'm sorry."

"What's that, Dad?"

"About the wheat. You were right. I was just stubborn."

Little Beth took her father's hand. "Daddy, are we poor?"

Will drew in a long breath. "Now listen to me children. Look around you. Look careful now and think of a picture you want to hold onto." He waited. "Do you have one?" He looked at each nodding head.

Peg started. "Mine is Blackie running pell-mell across the pasture."

Anthony hesitated. "Mine is the blue prairie sky that seems to go on forever."

"With all those white puffy clouds," Johnny added.

"What's your picture, Bethy?" Will asked.

"I remember the day I climbed up the windmill and Anthony had to save me."

“Well then you see, we’re not poor. Not on your life.”



The next day when everything was loaded into the car, Will walked through the empty house listening to his footsteps. Only the Maytag washer remained in a corner waiting for a neighbor to collect it. “Doesn’t seem like my house,” he said to the empty room. He took in all the details of the rooms, the lilac wallpaper, the corner shelf he built for Mary’s books.

“Mary, can you hear me? You know I miss you. I’ve needed you here beside me. I still need your hand on my shoulder.” Will listened for an answer for a long moment, then he turned on his heel and walked into the January wind.



## SECOND PLACE

### A Rite of Passage

By Carolyn Rowland, Riverside Writers

It wasn't that we were mean kids. Or even that we hated or disliked Derrick Wilder. He was different – just a bit slower at swinging the bat in softball, a bit more awkward in P.E. class, and he stammered when he spoke to any girl he liked. You wouldn't guess he's different until he smiled, then you know. A crooked little smile. Not that we were cool or anything but everyone was cooler than Derrick.

In 1975, our junior year was drawing to a close. We readied for the last party, chomping at the bit for our freedom and already feeling the glow of being a senior. Special privileges like lunch off campus and early dismissal on Fridays came to those soon to graduate in our small high school. Everyone had at least a learner's driving license, except Derrick. Some had old beat-up junkers like me while other parents bought their kids new cars. Wheels were golden, no matter what the age.

The morning of the big party, Derrick's mom stopped by my house.

"Jeremy," she said. "I need you to watch over Derrick. He wants to go to the party by himself. The only way that works is if I'm sure he has someone to bring him home safely. Will you do it?"

My face must have fallen since she added, "You've always been his friend. I'm so grateful to you."

How could you refuse with that kind of guilt trip in front of you? Plus I knew my mom listened from the kitchen. I wasn't ever sure why Mrs. Wilder asked. Derrick was almost grown.

"Sure," I said. "We're going to be at the gym. Probably Bobby or Jim's house afterwards."

Bobby was blond, tall, lanky and played baseball. He wasn't a jock really cuz only football counted, unless you're a girl and then it's basketball. Jim was all legs and ran hurdles but wasn't fast enough to qualify for regionals. Still, exercise kept them both in shape and allowed them to hang out with the jocks when all the athletes got together. My claim to fame was chess. My father had taught me. Semi-finals at state gave me a bit of respect but nothing compared to the adulation heaped on the quarterback and receivers.

"I know," Mrs. Wilder smiled. "I guess I'm one of those moms everyone laughs at. But you know Derrick doesn't have his license and we like to make sure he's in good hands. He can't know I asked, okay? We'll say you are giving him a ride instead of me or his dad."

My daydreams of making out with Susanna were dwindling fast. How on earth would I get her alone if I chauffeured Derrick?

“What time are you leaving?” Mrs. Wilder asked.

“About 8 o’clock.”

“I’ll be sure he’s here. Thanks again.”

My responsibility for Derrick began the day he was born. He lived next door to me all his life. Best friends, our moms had been pregnant together. When Mrs. Wilder had problems with the birth, my mom had stayed by her side until she and Derrick left the hospital. She’d once told me how hard that time had been to have me, a perfect little boy, while her best friend’s child struggled.

“Jeremy,” my mom called as she walked into the front room. “I’m proud of you. I know this party is special. Do you have clean clothes?”

My ever practical mom. “Yeah, I have some jeans and a shirt.”



“Derrick’s here,” my mom yelled up the stairs.

I was still taming a few hairs. I gave up and pulled on my cotton blue shirt, buttoning it. I took the stairs two at a time.

“Hi Jeremy,” Derrick said.

“Hey. Ready?”

Derrick smiled. Why did I ever agree to this? All I could think of was Susanna’s long blond hair, her curvy figure, and soft green eyes.

The party went as expected. Derrick followed me around a lot. Every time I talked to Susanna, he seemed to be there.

She and I danced to “Get Down Tonight,” “Jive Talkin,” and “Fame,” but it was the slow dance to “Mandy” that made me want the song to go on forever.

Afterwards, she asked, “Can we go for a ride in your car?”

“Can I come too?” Derrick had magically appeared again. I would have stared him down but I knew he wouldn’t understand what I was trying to tell him. What I wouldn’t

give to have his mom picking him up right now. Inwardly I groaned but I couldn't think of a good solution.

"I'd really like to but I can't tonight," I said to her. "How about we go out tomorrow night? I promise we'll take a long ride on the back roads."

"Maybe," Susanna said. "Call me tomorrow."

I wanted to kick myself for not saying no to having Derrick with me.



"So what now? It's only 11 o'clock," Bobby asked.

"I wanna see the Albino Bull," Derrick said.

I sighed. Derrick only spoke up strongly when it was something he truly wanted. He had been asking to go since he first heard of the bull. I'd always said no. Bobby and Jim looked at each other, then turned to me.

"Why not? It's late enough. Old Man Thompson will be asleep. It's a good night for a visit," Bobby said with a smile.

"Oh yes. I really, really want to go," Derrick said.

I'm not sure if it was because I didn't get to spend more time with Susanna or I just figured Derrick could handle it, but I said, "Okay."

Everyone piled into Bobby's Chevrolet Malibu. Beat-up and second hand, the car took the back road curves like one of the hot rods at the local track.

Earth, Wind and Fire radiated from the speakers. With the windows rolled down, a warm June air laced with a whiff of manure aftershave swept through as we flew along the road to Old Man Thompson's land. Bobby stopped the car by a field. The area was deserted.

We climbed out. A clear sky with a full moon and a raft of stars greeted us.

"So where's the Albino Bull?" Derrick asked. He enunciated every word. He was nervous.

"See the house on the hill?" Jim asked, pointing north.

Derrick nodded.

“Halfway in between is the bull. The only way to get there is to climb over the barbed wire fence and over that way. You’ll find it,” Jim said.

“What if the bull charges? Can’t we get closer?” Derrick asked.

“Nope. Now that you’re here you have to go. See the mass of white in the middle? That’s where you’ll find the bull,” Bobby said.

Derrick looked uncertain. It was scary but that was part of the thrill.

“Oh and you have to be quiet, cuz if Old Man Thompson wakes up, he shoots at trespassers,” Jim said.

“Wha... I don’t know that I wanna do this,” Derrick said.

I shook my head. “He doesn’t have to do it if he doesn’t want to,” I said. I was regretting not saying no earlier.

“That’s fine but everyone knows we were coming out here. If you chicken out, they’re all gonna know,” Jim said.

We weren’t mean kids. It was just some things you do or don’t do – and you have to accept whatever comes from it.

Derrick hesitated. Jim and Bobby walked back to the car and reached into the cooler in the back seat. They each popped the top on their cans and lazed against the car.

“Up to you,” Bobby said.

“I’ll go,” Derrick said.

“Good. Hop on over the fence and head out. Careful for rabbit holes and snakes out there,” Jim said. laughing.

“Don’t listen to him,” I said. “You’ll be fine. Go straight out to the white mass and then come right back. The barbed wire fence is the worst part.”

Hopefully he was listening to me.

Derrick walked to the fence, placed his hands on the top wire and began to climb over. His pant leg caught on the top but he freed his blue jeans without falling. Derrick disappeared into the night. Part of the fun was figuring out the Albino Bull was just a large white rock formation in the shape of an animal. Jim and Bobby gave him five minutes and then headed to the trunk of the car.

“Maybe we shouldn’t do this,” I said.

“Nah, we have to. If it was me and I found out there was more, I’d be mad,” Jim said.

“You worry too much,” Bobby said.

The boys reached in the trunk and pulled out two metal garbage can lids. They beat on these with metal pipes to make noise. Bobby reached in and started honking the horn. Lights flickered on in the house on the hill.

The front door opened. A figure stepped out, his rifle illuminated.

“Get off my land. You’re trespassing,” Old Man Thompson roared. I was always amazed how far his voice carried in the night.

He lifted his gun and fired a warning shot.

“Get off my land, now. And don’t come back. And you down by the road – get outta here now.”

Jim and Bobby laughed. We were too far for Old Man Thompson to reach us.

My eyes strained in the darkness for Derrick.

“I’m leaving,” he screamed.

Sounds of someone running through the brush reached my ears.

“AHHHHH,” Derrick screamed. We heard a thump like something fell.

A weaker, “Help me,” followed. Sounds of what were whimpers or cries drifted to us.

“Damn. We never should’ve brought him,” Jim said. “Now someone’s gotta go get him.”

“I’m not doing it. He’s not my responsibility,” Bobby said. “Besides if Old Man Thompson gets my license number, my dad will take away my car.”

I stared at Jim. He shrugged his shoulders.

“Help me.....Please?”

On the hill, the figure moved across the front porch.

“Crap, he’s going for his truck. We’ve gotta get outta here,” Bobby said. “Derrick will be all right. The farmer will help him.”

Jim crawled into the back seat while Bobby jumped into the driver’s seat. I sat in the front seat. Bobby started down the road.

“Stop,” I said.

“No,” Bobby said.

“Dammit, stop. I can’t leave him,” I said.

Bobby looked over at me and hit the brakes. “I’m not coming back for you. And you can’t tell anyone we were here. You got it?”

I nodded. I opened the door and stepped back on the road.

Bobby gunned the motor and threw up dust and dirt. I coughed and waved it away. I ran to the fence and climbed over.

“Derrick, I’m coming,” I yelled. “Holler out so I can find you.”

I stopped and listened.

“I’m here, over here.”

I headed to the spot and found Derrick lying on the ground.

“How bad are you hurt” I asked.

“My leg. I fell. I think I stepped in a hole.”

“Okay. I’m gonna help you up. We’re gonna get you to the road and then we’ll find a ride.”

“Where’re the others?”

“They had to leave. Now listen. This is important. You can’t tell anyone who was here, okay?”

“Okay. It’s our secret,” Derrick said.

“Can you walk if you lean on me?”

“I think so.”

Derrick and I hobbled to the road. He whimpered and cried out a few times. His ankle was at best twisted, and at worst, his leg was broken. Whatever it was, we had to get to the road so I could find help. He stumbled a few times and I did my best to keep him upright with no pressure on the bad leg.

As we approached the fence, lights flashed in our eyes. Old Man Thompson and his truck sat facing us. He'd turned on the headlights. We shielded our eyes.

“How bad are you hurt, son?”

I felt Derrick tense and begin to shake. We had all heard the rumors about Old Man Thompson's temper not to mention the stories of how he'd killed at least one man. I wasn't sure if Derrick was shaking from pain or fear. But at least he had an excuse.

“It's my leg, sir,” Derrick said as he sniffled.

I felt Old Man Thompson's stare as he sized up the situation.

“Well, it's gonna hurt gettin' you over the fence but I reckon you already know that.”

Derrick nodded. I let out the breath I had been holding.

I helped lift Derrick, trying not to lose my grip on his sweaty arms and back. Old Man Thompson reached over and hauled him up like he must have done for a hundred calves - across in a quick movement that was likely the most humane way to handle him.

“Ahhhh..., Derrick cried.

I winced but there was nothing I could do to ease his pain.

They moved to the truck while I climbed over the fence. Old Man Thompson lowered the tail gate and Derrick slid his way back into the bed of the truck, breathing hard. I followed him.

Old Man Thompson ignored me as I whispered, “Sorry about all this.” The gate slammed shut and minutes later we were on our way. Derrick leaned against my shoulder and sobbed off and on as we headed to the hospital 20 miles away.



The white walls and antiseptic smells seemed claustrophobic to me. I sat in a chair across from Old Man Thompson and got my first good look of him. He sat with his back against the chair and his straw hat pulled down low. Wrinkles lined his leathery tanned

face. Each time someone would walk by, he'd raise his right hand to the brow of his hat. Must have been his way of acknowledging them without saying anything. He hadn't said a word to me since we'd arrived.

All I wanted was to go home and crawl in bed. And for Derrick to be okay. When the door opened, my parents entered. Right behind them, Derrick's parents rushed in. The nurse rescued me by asking for information about Derrick. His mom and dad followed her behind her station. My mom stared at me with sad eyes.

"What the hell were you thinking?" my dad asked.

I had no answer. I lowered my head, staring at the floor. We waited.

Derrick's dad emerged from the back room. "He's going to be fine. His ankle's broken and the doctor is casting his ankle now."

He paused. "But what I don't understand is what the two of you were doing out there."

I sucked in my breath. "It's a dumb thing. Everyone does it. The Albino Bull."

Mr. Wilder's eyes widened. He turned to the farmer. "I hear you're the one that brought my boy in."

"Yes sir, I did."

"I can't thank you enough," Mr. Wilder said offering his hand to Old Man Thompson.

Turning back to me, he said, "But how did you get there? Where's your car?"

"At the gym."

"So who else was there?"

I remained silent.

"Jeremy, we've known you a long time and you've always been good to Derrick. Tell me who else was there."

"No one. Just me and Derrick," I said.

My dad spoke. "Tell us now, Jeremy, or your car will sit in the garage until hell freezes over."



I took a deep breath. My shoulders sagged. Derrick was going to be all right. So was I.

“I’m sorry Derrick was hurt and I’m real glad he’s gonna be okay. But I can’t tell you.”

Mr. Wilder and my dad stared at me.

Behind them, I watched Old Man Thompson straighten up from his chair. He raised his head and looked right at me. My eyes widened as he raised his hand to his hat’s brow and moved to the door.

## **THIRD PLACE**

### **Dinner Dishes**

By R. P. Barr, Write by the Rails Chapter

Glenn rested his hand on the furniture as he walked through the living room. At eighty-two, he suffered occasional vertigo. He could see the backyard through the kitchen window. It was still light out, but the shadows were long.

Beth was at the stove dishing macaroni and cheese onto their plates. There was a green salad already on the table.

Glenn looked in the refrigerator for a bottle of beer. He clinked it with his ring. "Do you want one?"

She fished a frankfurter from a pot. "I've got some left over from the hot dogs."

He opened a drawer to get an opener and popped the cap before sitting down. Outside, the leaves were turning color. A few were already on the ground. He sipped the beer.

Glenn hadn't shaved for two days, but tomorrow he might. His silver hair was thin, but hadn't retreated. Aside from the wrinkles, jowls, prominent veins, and liver spots, he looked relatively fit. Glenn winced as he shifted position in the chair.

Beth brought the dishes to the table. She was slender, cheeks sunk against her teeth. Her steel-gray, page-boy haircut still boasted dark streaks of her original color. After settling in her chair, Beth lowered her head while Glenn said grace.

As they started eating, Beth remembered the two-thirds empty bottle of beer next to the stove and rose to retrieve it. She returned to the table. "I called Julie today. She wasn't home so I left a message."

Glenn chewed and swallowed. "Julie works. Been working for twenty years."

Beth snapped, "Don't talk to me like I'm demented. I know she works, but I don't know when she gets home so I left a message."

Glenn nodded and continued with his meal.

She finished a mouthful. "The market had eggs on sale. Eggs are never on sale. I bought six dozen."

Glenn stirred his salad. "Should I ask what you plan to do with six dozen eggs?"

"Well—" Beth looked at the calendar on the wall. "I thought I'd pickle a couple of dozen. And, we've got space in the freezer for two or three pound cakes. I'm going to over some to Julie and Bill. And, how would you like a custard pie?"

He smiled at her, and she smiled back. After a few seconds, Glenn pointedly looked around the table.

Beth went to the cabinet and brought back a bottle of ketchup. As Glenn jiggled some onto his plate, she took her seat. "I noticed you moved the car."

With the beer bottle to his lips, Glenn held up his arm to show her the pad taped inside his right elbow.

She nodded, and they finished their meal.

Afterwards, when the dishes were in the sink, Glenn took her arm. Curiosity spread over her face as he led her into the living room. "Those dishes won't wash themselves."

"Just take a minute." He sat her on one end of the sofa and took a cushion on the other. Glenn gazed into her eyes. Amid the fine wrinkles, her eyes seemed brighter than when she was young. "Saw the doctor while I was there. He's got back the results of the biopsy." Beth's face took on a serious cast. Glenn continued, "It's spread to the lymph nodes. At my age, they don't want to do aggressive treatment—whatever that means." He patted her knee. "Looks like we'll have one more Thanksgiving together."

Beth sucked in a breath and looked toward the ceiling at the end of the room. Turning back, she gripped his hand fiercely. "I'd better get busy on that pie."

Tears came to both their eyes. Glenn kissed her hand. "That's one thing." He kissed her hand again. "The other—" He looked at the white curtain on the front window, then back into her eyes. "Remember Gretchen Knebel?"

Beth frowned and took back her hand.

Glenn brought his hands together. "I think you should know. We never slept together. I'm not saying I didn't think about it, but I never asked and she never offered."

Beth pinched her lips together and sharpened her eyes. "Oh, Glenn, why didn't you tell me that? All these years thinking..."

Glenn shrugged. "Men lie. You wouldn't have believed me. I'd acted like a fool anyway. Seemed best to ride it out."

Beth stood up and started at the dark face of the TV. "It would've been nice if I could've apologized to Gretchen before she died."

"You talked to her about that?"

Beth turned around. "Of course I did. She denied everything." Pinching her lips together as if she were trying not to cry, she continued, "But, I expected her to lie. I wanted her to lie. I just wanted to warn her to leave you alone." Beth fell to her knees beside Glenn and cried into his shirt.

He patted her. "If you're going to carry on like this, I won't go."

Beth looked up with glistening eyes. "I'm sorry, Glenn. I thought you'd cheated on me, and I wanted to hurt you."

He chuckled dryly. "You made that pretty clear."

She shook her head. "It's not that. I had an affair with Mitch Towson." Glenn drew back. Beth added, "For nearly three years. You'd be at work, and I'd go down to his shop."

Glenn stared in disbelief. "Mitch was married."

Beth nodded. "He said he was going to leave her. They'd been having trouble."

"How long was that before..." Glenn made a rolling gesture with his hand, and his voice took a harsher tone. "Is that when it ended? When he died?"

Beth laughed in a strange, high-pitched trill. Tears puddle in her eyes. She pulled out Glenn's shirt tail to blot the moisture. When she looked up, her expression was stark. "Of course. That was the end of everything." She bit her lip and shyly explained, "I shot him, Glenn. He was going to ruin everything. He said he wanted to divorce Alice and marry me. He was going to come over to the house and talk to you. What else could I do?"

Glenn leaned back as far as he could. "Good God, Beth! You didn't?"

"I've not proud of it."

After staring at her for a long half-minute, his alarm subsided. "I guess Gretchen and I got away easy."

Beth sighed and patted his knee. "Oh, I wouldn't have shot you, sweetheart. I thought about poison, though. So you could pass away in your sleep." She shrugged. "But I loved you, you rascal. I still do. These past thirty, forty years—" A sob escaped her. "I don't know what I'm going to do without you."

"Enough of that." Glenn's tone had a harsh edge. "What were your plans for Gretchen?"

Wiping her eyes with her fingers, Beth made a raspberry noise. "Oh, I would've *shot* her." She sighed. "For a long time, I was sorry I didn't." She patted Glenn's shoulder. "But you two split up, and I couldn't see the point. Besides it was Mitch's gun—the one he kept in his desk drawer. Two shootings with the same gun—it would've looked strange."

"I never would've guessed you had it in you." Patting the back of the sofa and picking at a loose thread, Glenn nodded as he processed his thoughts. "Well, it was another time, and I never liked Mitch—too smug and full of himself. If I'd found out about you two, I'd have probably shot him myself—the son-of-a-bitch."

Beth laughed. "And you would've been caught."

Glenn grinned. "No doubt about it." He held both her hands. "It must've been awful for you: the worry, the suspense, holding it all in."

She waved away his concerns. "Oh, pooh. Mitch was a coarse blowhard, but if he was good at anything, it was keeping secrets. Poor Alice never had a clue. That's the reason he wore that awful cologne—so she wouldn't smell some other woman's perfume on him. I wasn't the first, you know. He had at least two others before me. Apparently, nobody saw me leave the shop, so the police never looked in my direction." Beth leaned forward. "To tell the truth, I never liked him much either, but I was hungry for revenge, and you cook with the ingredients you've got." She rubbed his thigh. "In the end, I felt like I did Alice a favor." Pushing herself from the couch, Beth looked toward the kitchen.

Putting her hand to her mouth, Beth continued, "I've wondered, you know, whether his proposal was really just a ploy to get me to end the affair so he could move on to someone else. It sounded sincere, and I believed him, but he was such a liar, and if that was it, I shot him for nothing."

Glenn stood behind her, placing his hands on her shoulders. Bending to whisper in her ear, he said, "Then *he* made the mistake, not you." He kissed her neck.

He bent forward suddenly—chin bumping her shoulder—groaning softly, eyes pinched shut in pain.

Turning about, she asked, "Does it hurt?" Concern radiated from her face.

The spasm faded. He kissed the top of her head. "Not as much as it will—and then it'll stop."

Beth hugged him. "I'm gonna hate it if you go to heaven and I don't."

He lifted her chin and kissed her lips. "Don't you worry. I'll fix the books so you get in, too."

She lay her head against his shoulder, rolled her face upward and smiled into his eyes. "I'm glad I told you. I feel lighter. I worried so much about how you'd react if you found out."

"That was one heavy secret to hold inside all these years." He squeezed her shoulder and smiled reassuringly. "But, you know what they say about timing, and you caught me on a good day." He rubbed her arm as they started toward the kitchen. "You know," Glenn mused, "it seems you might have a skill I'll have need of before it's done."

Beth stopped with her head bowed for several seconds. Then, she swatted his bottom. "Well, while you're still here, make yourself useful. Those dishes won't wash themselves."

# Nonfiction

## FIRST PLACE

Once Again, Naked in Public  
By Kimberly Dalferes, Valley Writers

Best gal pal Dani has a knack, a gift really, for getting me into situations where, for various reasons, mostly on purpose, I find myself... naked. I'm not talking scantily clad or barely there see-through t-shirts. There is no grey area here. I quite literally mean Bare. Assed. Naked. In public.

Plaintiff: *If it pleases the court your Honor, we enter into evidence, Exhibit A: the Korean Day Spa.*

Defendant: *Objection!*

Judge: *On what grounds?*

Defendant: *The plaintiff knew full well that upon entering said establishment, disrobing would be required.*

Plaintiff: *In my client's defense your Honor, she did not fully understand, until it was much too late, that said establishment utilizes towels the size of postage stamps.*

Judge: *Objection sustained.*

Plaintiff: *We further enter into evidence Exhibit B: The Luxor Hotel, circa 2003, Las Vegas, NV.*

Defendant: *Again, objection!*

Judge: *Grounds?*

Defendant: *The plaintiff cannot hold the defendant accountable for their behavior in Vegas. May we remind the court that this comports with the "What Happens in Vegas [including being naked in a hot tub] Stays in Vegas" precedent?*

Judge: *Objection sustained.*

Plaintiff: *Well then your Honor, we offer our last and final Exhibit C: naked on a street corner in Washington, DC.*

Defendant: *Objection!*

Judge: *Grounds?*

Defendant: *The incident in question did not entail full nakedness. They were, in fact, only partially naked... on a street corner... in Washington, DC.*

Judge: *I believe I'll allow this final evidence. Objection over-ruled. Please proceed.*

The Mandarin Oriental Hotel is by far one of the most elegant establishments in the Washington, DC area. Situated on prime real estate adjacent to the Potomac River, it offers stunning views of the city. The grand marble entrance provides a spectacular welcome to everyone who enters. One actually *feels* different the minute you walk through the large lobby doors and over the threshold. This hotel is but one of a handful of five-star hotels in DC. After all, our city caters to government, business, and tourist-type travelers. We're not exactly known for our luxury digs.

I had the good fortune to be invited to meet a friend for a drink at the lobby bar when the hotel first opened back in 2004 – trust me, they were buying. The serene architecture blew my mind, but I knew I would not often frequent this grand structure; not on my working girl budget.

Turned out, a full seven years would pass before I would return to this oasis by the river. While perusing a high-end glossy shelter magazine during a 2011 dentist visit, my eyes were drawn to an advertisement for a budget massage at the Mandarin Oriental Spa. OK, they didn't describe it as a *budget* massage, they labeled it something akin to "the mid-day sneak-away sample-how-the-beautiful-people-live experience." Presented before me on the magazine page was something that even a budget-conscience gal such as myself could try at least once. I eagerly purchased a spa gift certificate for Dani for her birthday (yes, that's how I roll for my gal pals). I was elated when she suggested we go to the spa together as a joint birthday celebration.

Dani and I were able to find a work day during the August dog days of summer when we could meet at the spa for our pampering session. A day when I could travel into the District and she could take an extended lunch break to steal away from her downtown office. This was not a common occurrence for us – we are not the ladies who lunch; we are the women who eat at their desks and multi-task.

It is necessary to note – for reasons that will soon become clear – that the spa at the Mandarin Oriental is located on the lower level of the hotel. As we exited the elevator, we entered a long hallway with shiny beige marble floors, dimmed lights, and soothing music playing in the background. In this netherworld, you immediately felt compelled to speak in hushed tones. A beautiful Asian woman greeted us at the spa front



desk. She took our shoes and while we sat and sipped our tea, she washed our feet in warm scented water enhanced with tiny delicate purple orchids. Right from the start we knew this would be a memorable experience.

Our lovely escort guided us to an elegant wood-paneled locker area where we were asked to change out of our work clothes and into the softest, most lavish robe and slippers I have ever experienced. The slippers even fit – no small feat for a gal who sports size elevens. Dani and I placed our clothes and valuables in our lockers, snuggled into the robes and slippers, secured our locker keys on the wristbands they had provided, and allowed ourselves to be guided back to each of our respective personal massage rooms.

My masseuse, a soft-spoken beauty with dark hair and eyes, waited patiently in the hallway as I hung my robe on the hook on the back of the door, kicked off my slippers, and eased my naked body onto the heated table and in between the ultra-soft sheets. I nestled in, face down, and waited for her return.

The music lightly tinkled in the background as the masseuse, now back in the room, began to massage a lovely lavender scented oil into the tight muscles along my shoulders and down my back.

“Do you work at a computer?” she asked.

“Yes, how did you know?”

“Oh I can always tell by the tension in someone’s neck and shoulders. I’ll spend some time on this area for you.”

Fine by me. Ahhh...

There are few things in life as blissful as a masseuse who has mastered the art of applying the precise amount of pressure that transforms you from a bag of knots into a plate of applesauce. As I lay there face down, close to drifting off to sleep – she was that good – the table quite unexpectedly began to forcefully shift back and forth.

Lifting her hands away from my back, my alarmed masseuse proclaimed, “That’s not me; I’m not doing that!”

Tucking the sheet up and under my armpit I rolled over and onto one elbow. The table was still rocking, and all the beautiful little bottles of oils and lotions on the shelves were tipping against each other and falling over onto the counter. Strangely, I knew immediately what was happening.

“It’s an earthquake,” I stated calmly. Where that epiphany came from I have no idea. I’m originally from Florida – I do hurricanes, not earthquakes. However, somehow I knew with great certainty and clarity that we were in the middle of a genuine rumblor.

“It’s a WHAT?! This is DC – we don’t have earthquakes here!”

My calm, sweet masseuse was suddenly sporting a bit of a Jersey accent.

The shaking came to an abrupt halt. As I lay there in my surprised stupor, not sure what to do or say, there came a hard knock at the door. Before either of us could say ‘come in’ the door swung open. Standing in the darkened doorway, with the emergency lights glowing behind her, was an older woman whom I assumed was the spa manager. She stated most matter-of-factly, “We have to exit the building immediately. We believe that was an earthquake, and we are concerned that the building is possibly compromised.”

“Um, don’t mean to state the obvious, but, I’m naked here.”

“Sorry, we have to get out NOW. Grab your robe and slippers and please exit right away.” Without closing the door behind her, the manager moved on to the next room.

My masseuse bolted through the doorway and out into the hall. In the dim light I grabbed the robe, slippers, and key with the hopes of being able to retrieve my possessions from my locker. I hastily slipped on the robe, shoved a slipper on each foot and attempted to head left toward the locker room. No such luck; the manager was standing in the hallway, directing all of us to turn right to take the stairs up and out of the building.

To my left, Dani’s voice echoed out, “Kimmee? You OK?”

I turned to watch Dani ignore Madame Manager, dash down the hall to her locker, and grab her cell phone. Why she didn’t grab all her belongings was beyond me, but I was grateful that she had been able to at least retrieve her phone before the staff whisked us both outside.

The bright August sunlight greeted us as we shuffled in our robe and slippers out onto the city sidewalk. Up and down the street government employees, lobbyist types, businessmen, and other various well-heeled and suited professionals streamed out onto the pavement. A communal conversation began to arise and move through the stunned emerging crowd:

*What WAS that?*

*Was it an earthquake?*

*In DC – no way...*

*Another attack, a bomb?*

*Did you feel the building move?*

*Cell phones are down.*

Dani and I stood there a bit shocked, not knowing quite what to say. I finally grinned and proclaimed, “Well darlin’, you’ve managed to do it to me again. Naked. In public.”

To this Dani and I started giggling. The absurdity of our situation was becoming quite obvious. We were almost completely naked, no money, no identification, and a cell phone that wasn’t working. If things went further south, what the Hell were we going to do? Looking around, it began to occur to me that everyone else also knew we were nearly naked.

“Dani, is it just me, or are those guys in the suits with the briefcases across the street staring us down?”

Dani circled around and then playfully replied, “Should we give them a show?”

I grinned more broadly. “Honey, we’re already giving them a show.”

“You do realize we’re in a bit of a pickle here, right?” I continued. “Let’s say the worst happens, these buildings come down and we’re buried in the rubble. No identification. Naked. In the middle of the day. We’ll be presented in the history books as the ‘Earthquake Hookers.’”

After many tries, Dani was eventually able to get a few text messages through to, of all people, my husband. He confirmed that, in fact, it looked to have been an earthquake, and a pretty strong one too. Upon hearing of our predicament, he responded, *You’re naked? On a street corner? Surely a pillow fight is about to break out. Pictures please.*

Men.

We found ourselves completely at the mercy of the hotel staff who were doing their best to keep us informed, but truly knew as little as we did. We finally found a bench under a tree where we could perch and perhaps not appear so conspicuously out of place. Sitting there, we had to be careful that the robes didn’t fall open as more people exited the buildings, marching down the sidewalk in front of us with the occasional sideways glance our way.

I attempted to summon my best *What are youz looking at?* stare. It really wasn’t very compelling; a lot of the fellas just smiled wide and leered back.

After what seemed to be an eternity but was really just a matter of minutes, hotel management came to our bench to inform us there was concern about the spa's location in a sub-floor level of the hotel. It might not be possible for us to return for fear that foundation damage may have occurred. I stared back at the manager with a bit of disbelief flashing across my face.

"You do realize - and if you don't you're the only person in a three block radius who hasn't picked up on this - that all we've got with us are the robes and slippers the spa provided. You see our predicament here, right? All of our belongings are in the spa lockers... our money, our credit cards and keys.... our CLOTHES."

"Yes Ma'am, I'm aware of our situation."

*Our situation*, now that was funny. I damned near asked him to switch places with me. I pictured him quite fetching in the robe and slippers, and I could carry his menswear look – I had sported that particular fashion trend for most of the early 80s.

After almost an hour of being on display for the public's viewing pleasure, we were allowed back into the spa to quickly gather our belongings, get dressed, and beat a hasty retreat. No idea how they decided it was safe to return, but we were in no position to question their judgment. The spa staff were incredibly apologetic – as if it were their fault! They presented us with gift certificates to use for a future visit as well as a set of lovely oils as a parting door prize. I would have much preferred the robe, but thought it would have been quite white-trash-esque to ask.

As we once again exited the hotel, this time fully attired, we could see that the DC streets were visibly swelling with commuter cars, all attempting to exit the city simultaneously and get back to the suburbs. The metro was beginning to overflow as well. Had we learned nothing from 9/11? This time around it was of course not even close to being as urgent. Most folks, I suspected, were merely eager to get home and assess any household damage. Yet, once again, just like 9/11, the streets of DC became one giant inter-locking traffic gridlock mess.

Dani and I headed back to our cars – she having given up on any notion of being able to return to her office – and joined the long, slow trek out of the city. It took me over two hours to return home. To be honest, the trip wasn't as bad as I had expected. I was buoyed by the knowledge that I had just weathered standing nearly-naked on a big city street corner... in daylight... with nothing separating me from the working masses except a spa robe and slippers.

Plaintiff: *And so your Honor, what say you?*

Judge: *Based upon the evidence presented, the defendant, Danielle, is indeed guilty of getting the plaintiff into some wickedly fun trouble. You have a true and*

*trusted friend in Danielle. Consider yourself lucky.*

I do your Honor, every day. There's no one else I would rather be stuck with naked in public. Well, except George Clooney and Ryan Reynolds and Hugh Jackman. Ya know, I might need to make a list.

## SECOND PLACE

Lone Reader's Society  
By Sally Zakariya, Northern Virginia Chapter

*I'm not who you think I am, I say to myself as the woman gives me a half-smile. Just because we're women alone reading our lunch at the diner doesn't mean we're sisters under the skin.*

Clearly on her way to the ladies' room, she has stopped at my table for a chat. Her book, she tells me, is about two women in a prison camp in Siberia. "One of them has been in love with a man named Vasily forever," she says, "and the other one escapes in order to find Vasily and bring him back to rescue her."

It sounds improbable to me, but fiction is fiction. We've already been through the "What are you reading? Oh, James Patterson—he's always a good read" exchange. I'm a little self-conscious about my potboiler novel and hasten to say a friend passed it on to me third hand.

But so what if she judges what I'm reading? I'm judging her too. She's big, even bigger than I am, and keeps tugging at the stretchy black and white jacket that doesn't meet over her middle. Her hair is dyed blond, her glasses hip black rectangles, her voice young and breathy.

I put her at 50 anyway.

I dig another hot pepper out of my Greek salad and push it to the side of my plate. Pepperoncini sounds Italian, so why does it always come with Greek salad? Bet they don't have pepperoncini in that prison camp in Siberia.

"Your book sounds interesting," I say, but I'm thinking, *Don't you have to pee, lady?*

"Hey, Mary, howya doin?" asks one of the servers as he passes.

So she's a regular. Mary and her book.

She mentions some other titles—*The Emperor of Maladies*, *The Kite Runner*, *Water for Elephants*. And yes, I've read them all, liked them to varying degrees.

"Looks like we've got the same taste in reading," she says.

I smile and pick up my fork; she continues on to the ladies room, a poky place with a few pieces of cast-off furniture. I begin to wonder if Mary feels a little cast off

too, cast aside. Though she's not to know it, I'm here alone by choice while my husband is at home with his students. But if she brings a book here most days, I suspect she may be alone by default, nobody at home waiting for her.

Salad finished, bill paid, I give Mary a cheerful "Enjoy your book!" as I leave.

*I'm not a member of your lone readers society,* I say smugly to myself. But then I think, *Why not?*

### THIRD PLACE

#### The Price of a Pig

By Erin Newton Wells, Blue Ridge Writers

It shocked him to hear himself called old. Two women on their break stood by the door of a fried pie factory on the outskirts of our neighborhood. He was on one of the regular walks for his health, swinging along at a reasonable pace in the rolling gait caused by one leg being just a bit shorter.

"See that ol' man?" the first woman said to the other. "He go by here evvyday."

In his usual good humor, my father reported the observation to us, trying to see it from the woman's point of view and treating it with his customary charity. But I could tell it puzzled him and that he had not thought of himself in this way before. None of us did. He seemed always the tall, blue-eyed twin of the Duke of Windsor in his earlier days, the same light brown sweep of hair, the elegant, flexible body. And he had that same gentle smile with the questioning brow. He was not old. But it was all right if the pie woman wanted to think so.

The times in which I grew up were still favorable to walkers. We were a relatively small community in Beaumont, Texas, still centered in our neighborhoods, without the commercial and residential sprawl that would occur later. Our family did not own a car for many years, so anything in the area was reached by walking. We walked to school and to the corner grocers and to the houses of our friends. For something too far, like going downtown where my father worked as chief accountant at the post office, we rode the city bus. These were big white and yellow affairs with open windows and no air-conditioning yet, and clouds of nauseating fumes.

Dressed in suit and hat, my father would walk in the morning to the end of the block and around the corner, past Cireo's grocery, to the Royal Street bus stop. He returned by the same route at the end of the day. When I was little, I waited until he rounded the corner, with that Duke of Windsor smile. Then I ran all the way to meet him, and the two of us walked home. In summer, his jacket was over his shoulder, and his white shirt sleeves were rolled up in the humid Gulf air. His hat was light straw. In winter, the jacket was on, and he wore a felt fedora. He smelled of cold air and of the post office, a mix of federal granite, letters, and stamps.

A mysterious medical event happened involving my father when I was still young. It was not explained to me, and I can only piece together what it might have been. Probably it is what initiated the more vigorous walking campaign in evenings after work and on weekends. I recall that my father had to be in the hospital a few days, that his skin turned yellow from jaundice, and that he was put on a strict diet



for awhile. Was it an infection or malfunction of the liver? I don't know and was too young to know to ask. My mother cooked good meals that had no fat. When he was better, he began the walks for his health, such as the one that, much later, took him past the fried pie affair.

Often I accompanied him on these rounds of the neighborhood. They were a source of great enjoyment to both of us and of valuable lessons for me, although he never intentionally presented it that way. What I learned came from him aslant by observing what he did and how he said it. More likely than not, it was in just one tiny passing expression on his face which he did not know was seen. These unintended lessons were about kindness, about trying to see from a point of view other than your own.

On weekends in the autumn when the heavy air of East Texas finally cooled and turned moderately crisp, we would sometimes drive to wooded places and get out to walk. This, of course, was after we had a car. The first of these was a used black Chevrolet from the 1940's. It was high, rounded, and dignified, with running boards and heavy chrome handles to open the little vent windows, and a source of great pride to the children of the family. We took Sunday drives in this. But the next car, a charcoal gray Plymouth of the 1950's, is the one in which I remember riding with my father on our autumn adventures.

Fall was our favorite time. He and I would stroll and soak up warm sun. It always inspired him to talk about the history of England. Our conversations covered 1066, with the Norman invasion, Battle of Hastings, and Bayeux Tapestry. Or it could be earlier, with the waves of Picts, Scots, and Jutes tumbling through Britain, painting themselves blue with woad, and tussling over Hadrian's wall. Or it could be later, the London of Samuel Pepys and his famous diary. My father had a complete copy and read to us from it regularly.

Several autumn weekends stand out in my memory because we drove to the Southeast Texas State Fairgrounds in our town to take walks in the large shaded area of old trees. We crunched through leaves and acorns. Oak galls that had fallen bobbed out of the way. The smell of pine straw warmed by sun surrounded us. Here were the great exhibit barns for livestock, produce, and crafts, all empty now. One of them housed a few parade floats. Through these rambles my father wove tales of England and the sad injustice that befell Harold, the losing Celts, or the unfortunate citizens of London beset with plague and fire.

One summer, in a fit of needing to blend with my school crowd, I begged to be taken to the fair with a friend, and my father agreed to do so. This was after my grandparents moved in with us, and my grandfather came along. It was his car we were using by then, a Chevrolet with no back seat. My friend and I sat cross legged on the floor, before the era of seat belts.

I didn't really like the fair. It was noisy, hot, crowded, tawdry, so unlike the quiet times I shared there with my father. I went through it because it was what other children did. In this spirit, I asked to have a foot-long hotdog, one of the fair's extravagant items, and my father obliged. My friend chose something more modest, and my grandfather chuckled and waved off the offer of such ridiculous food.

In looking back, I realize that my father assumed I would break the lengthy bun in half and offer part to him. This was well after the earlier health restrictions, and I knew how much he really liked hotdogs. But I was caught up in the invented popular image of myself. With an air of childish bravado, perhaps to impress my friend, I managed to consume the entire thing myself. When I saw his face afterward, that brief glimpse of sadness on it, I sensed what I had done. He never said a word. But I knew that momentarily I completely forgot him, my good, generous father. I had pushed aside those nearly hallowed times we shared in that place, and now I felt miserable. It became an awakening, just that fleeting expression that spoke more deeply than any lecture. I saw that I was capable of thievery and had stolen from him. It had little to do with a fanciful bit of food. It had everything to do with ripping out pieces of the loyalty and love that connected us.

Such occasions may seem trivial, even silly, at first, but they were leading me somewhere important. It took more than one of them, for I was a slow learner. A second instance of this realization, as it turns out, also is associated with food. My father often did the cooking on weekends to give my mother a break. Sunday lunch after church was her province, but weekend breakfast, Saturday lunch, and Sunday evening supper usually fell to him. He would go shopping on Saturday morning for his type of food. We had entered the time of supermarkets, instead of small corner grocers, so this involved the car, sometimes with me along. He would buy wieners, buns, pickles, mustard, sauerkraut, chips, pork n beans, a harkening back to his German upbringing. Frequently this fare would comprise our family's Saturday lunch. On the way home, we stopped at Daniel's Bakery for a surprise of cinnamon buns, which stayed in their white, slightly grease spotted bag atop the refrigerator until after lunch.

On Sunday evenings, he cooked scrambled eggs and bacon, which we ate at the kitchen table while listening to radio broadcasts of *Jack Benny*, *Fibber McGee and Molly*, and *Amos and Andy*. For a time, he and I had an agreement that after these meals he would wash the dishes and I would dry and put them away. It gave us another opportunity for our talks about history, literature, and what we called The Lore, concerning life in his childhood days.

I recall that on one Sunday evening, instead of helping to clear the colorful Fiesta Ware plates and utensils used for our family suppers, I pretended to be lost in thought. I let him clear the table and wash the dishes. I pretended not to see him

glance at me once when things began to stack up in the drying rack. I pretended not to see him pick up the dish towel and dry each piece and put it away. But I did see that brief, sad look, just like the one at the fair. He never mentioned it, never admonished me, and I never spoke up to apologize. I don't know why I did it, and it hurt me deeply afterward that, again, I had been so selfish. Like the incident at the fair, it pushed me around another hard corner, scraping away at wrongness of this difficult thing I needed to learn. I had presumed upon his goodness and had stolen from him, right out in plain sight of both of us.

Every little thing about my father had to do with kindness. I cannot think of any ill will that he bore. He never raised his voice or spoke sharply. He never harmed anything. One day as we set out to make a tour of the neighborhood, we came across a black ant crossing the sidewalk. My father rerouted us, making a wide circle around the ant, so as not to disturb its transit.

"He's going home from work," he said. "His children will be sad if he doesn't get there."

Immediately I understood. The ant was my father. I was the ant child. A whole philosophy was condensed in this small exchange over a very tiny subject. You must become the other thing. You must feel how it feels. That was the source of his great kindness which made harm to others unthinkable.

This carried over even to things which might seem absurd. We were an allergy prone family, always carrying handkerchiefs and then, later, the great luxury of Kleenex tissues when they appeared in the world. All of us were out for a drive around town, the windows open, I in the back seat with an arm resting on the window edge. The Kleenex in my hand flew out.

"The poor Kleenex," said my father, jokingly.

And yet I wondered if even the Kleenex had someone at home waiting. I wanted to go back and retrieve it from the roadside, but we couldn't. From then on, I was more careful on these drives. It was an outstanding deterrent to littering, before the days when people were much concerned with it.

Everything deserved to be considered equally, no matter how small. There was, for example, no hierarchy of importance for people in my father's eyes. He was kind to the little ones of the town. We found out about this from time to time, but never from him. He made a point of remembering names and greeted everyone. This included the clerks, cashiers, cafeteria workers at the Piccadilly where he had his coffee break and lunch, the shoeshine man at the stand in front of the Hotel Beaumont. He kept a list of their birthdays and made sure they received a card each

year. He built an invisible network of simple kindnesses throughout the town. They spoke of him as though he were a saint, that it was unusual to be treated this way.

He also made sure to buy things from the blind man and his blind wife who ran a small concession with newspapers, magazines, and candy bars in the post office lobby. Each Friday evening we could expect to be given a comic book, still smelling of the post office, from the blind man's stand. There was one for each of us. My sister, the oldest, got *Illustrated Classics*. My brother got *Donald Duck*. I, the youngest, had *Little Lulu*. I used to think this was done just as a nice surprise for us. But later I realized it was for the blind man, too. Everyone was going home from work to children, so to speak. Everyone was valued. My father would no more steal a person's self worth than he would steal their money.

Our walking routes would change over periods of time, but one that repeated frequently when I was younger took us all the way to Johnson's Florist. It passed by the corner building which, at a future date, the fried pie industry would occupy. It seemed like such a long way, but I was eager to reach the florist shop where we could look in the large plate window at the beautiful seasonal displays. The best was at Christmas, with animated figures of Mr. and Mrs. Santa dressed in deep, red velvet and bowing courteously to each other and to us.

The Easter window was also enchanting, with a great, kindly rabbit moving his head and arms jerkily over hundreds of large, pastel eggs. It was during the Easter season that I discovered the pig. Next to the florist was a lovely yard. It was shady and full of shrubbery and flowers. I happened to look down at the edge of a flower bed that fronted the sidewalk and saw something pale pink. I stooped to probe this with my fingers and pulled from the dirt a small, porcelain pig, not more than two inches long. It was old, soiled, the shiny finish dulled and crazed, probably long abandoned by a child or, perhaps, a gardener making a miniature scene. I wanted it.

This presented a dilemma. I knew I should not take things that belonged to another. My father saw the great and immediate need I had for this tiny creature. After a moment he reached in his pocket and brought out a few coins, which he stared at, putting all but one aside, a quarter. He bent down and pushed the coin into the dirt beside the pig. It was a fair exchange. This now made it all right for me to have it. We had paid for it.

But more was involved here. The coin chosen was not a penny or a nickel, or even a dime, but a whole quarter, which had value then. It was the day when a penny rolled five gumballs out of a machine, and a five and ten cent store was actually a place where useful things could be purchased for those amounts. A quarter was more than my father spent on his coffee break or a bus ride. It was big money to me, and him. He put himself where I was. He gave worth to my need. I kept

the pig for years, but it slipped away, perhaps for another child to find and for which an observant father must now pay five dollars, at least.

He never lost touch with his childhood, and that is what made him so understanding of us. He had a wise innocence with which he swept the scenery aside and got to the heart of who we really were. He never grew old. His face never lost its youthfulness, although eventually it was Parkinson's that slowed him down. It stiffened his body so that he could only shuffle slowly, and then not even that. The last time I saw him, he was lying in a bed, unable to move. He had a tube in his throat to help him breathe and could not speak. But his eyes could, and his eyes loved me. He continued to be kind to the attendants, to everyone, showing it in whatever way he could. He did not want to be a trouble for others. He probably would have sent cards to them, if he were able. I'm guessing he followed up years earlier with those two women at the pie factory and handed them remembrances on their birthdays, pushing quarters into the earth wherever he saw value.

## HONORABLE MENTION

Remembering Li Chang's Million  
By Madalin Bickel, Riverside Writers

I read the short story, "Li Chang's Millions" by Henry Gregor Felsen, in the seventh grade. It was my first encounter with the reality of child labor. The story took place in China following World War II and was about an American GI buying a hand-made suit before leaving China for the last time. He had argued with the shop keeper in an effort to lower the already ridiculously low price by pointing out how poor the workmanship was. In reality the hand stitching was remarkable and the soldier felt a little guilty complaining. The shop keeper pulled a small boy, who appeared to be six or seven years old, from behind the shop curtain and proceeded to explain in his broken English how the child, Li Chang, was his best tailor. The boy gazed up at the soldier. His large dark eyes seemed to portray both fright and anger. The soldier was caught off guard by the knowledge a child had made the suit. He quickly paid for his purchase and left.

Later, as he admired the new suit, he felt a great deal of remorse for complaining about the stitching made by the young boy. He decided to return to the shop and give the child several hundred American dollars. It would be like giving him a million in Chinese currency. Unfortunately, before he could make the trip back to the shop, his unit was called home. The story ended without Li Chang getting his million.

I had read the story at a time when sentimental or sad stories made me cry. I remember keeping my head down and holding back my tears until the bell rang. The same thing had happened with several of the stories our advanced class had been required to read including a story in which an otter had fought two hunting dogs and drowned them in a stream. I still remember the story and my discomfort as if it had happened last week.

Now, at sixty-seven and retired, I was pursuing my hobbies and dreams. Writing, crafting, and sewing filled my days when I didn't have my nose in a vintage mystery. One particular day I worked to "dress" a yarn octopus for our church bazaar. I had made it from wide pink yarn and decorated it with large googly eyes. I decided to dress her as a Victorian lady waiting for her tea to be served. I had enough time before getting ready for a luncheon engagement to make a hat for her. Carefully I hand stitched lace around a felt crown and pulled the thread to make it fit her head. She was completed with ribbons and bows and big earrings.

It was late so I rushed to get ready for lunch. I planned to wear my new Alfred Dunner Capri pants and matching top which I had bought on sale without

trying it on at the store. I pulled on the pants and was thrilled to find they were a perfect fit. Grabbing a pair of scissors, I reached around my waist and snipped off the tag. I didn't worry about the shirt fitting, so I cut off the tags and took a moment to admire the appliqué and bead work before slipping it over my head. Embroidery and bead work were a signature of Alfred Dunner clothes designed for the fashionable older woman. I sometimes joked if it weren't for Alfred Dunner, I'd go naked. When I first began wearing his designs, they were made in America, but like many industries, the making of designer clothing had been out-sourced to the far east. The shirt fit perfectly. I checked the mirror. Pleased with the way the outfit looked, I left for lunch.

When I returned it was late in the afternoon. Feeling sleepy, I pulled a throw off the couch with the idea of taking a short nap before dinner. I started to lie down when something sharp pricked my thigh. Looking around I saw none of my cats clawing for attention, and the dog was standing nearby watching me. The shirt stitching had bothered me at lunch because I had failed to wear a camisole under it. Consequently, I wasn't surprised that something had pricked me, but why my leg?

It took only a minute to discover a needle and thread had been left in my clothes. My first reaction was that a needle from my morning sewing had found its way into the fabric. But how? I didn't change clothes until after sewing. I examined the needle and noticed it was attached to my shirt. Tracing the thread backwards, I found the needle had been used to attach large orange sequins onto the sunflower appliqué. It was still attached as if it were unfinished. I cut the thread and tied it to prevent the sequin from coming loose.

Later I examined the shirt more closely and discovered it had been made in Indonesia. The realization overwhelmed me that my shirt probably had been made in a sweat shop. I envisioned my Li Chang bent over a sewing machine in a hot crowded room. Now, every time I wear my beaded knit top, I am reminded of the legions of Li Changs meticulously stitching fabric and beads in the humid cramped shops. It makes me uncomfortable, not from a needle in my leg, but from the needle in my heart.

# Poetry

## FIRST PLACE

In Memoriam

*Griffith Observatory, Los Angeles*

By Sally Zakariya, Northern Virginia Chapter

The day we threw the cigarettes away we hiked  
up a hill in the City of Angels

New married and glowing with good intent  
we made our way through chaparral and sumac  
watched by squirrels and mule deer

The day burned with the usual L.A. glare  
    sun blasted  
        smog veiled  
light beating against a clouded bowl

We smoked along the way but mindful of dry  
brush toed a little divot for each butt  
carefully covering it with dirt

Then at the three-domed temple to the heavens  
we sailed our Marlboros down from the observatory  
wall for the coyotes to ponder

That night I dreamed of a cigarette in a coffin  
slender and resplendent in top hat and tails  
surrounded by grieving smokers

Loss is loss and don't let anybody tell you  
otherwise



## SECOND PLACE

Famine Cottages: Ireland 2009

By Jody Hobbs Hesler, Blue Ridge Writers

It was someone's house  
once – stone husk, thatchless  
crumbling lump of  
history.

A cow outside, and sheep;  
a crop, a baby,  
two, three, four –  
a mother calling  
all the names.

I can hear it. Sounding  
down to the seas, ebbing  
with the waves, puffing  
through the sky: clouds,  
dreams – yesterday.

All those black  
potatoes, black as earth  
that birthed them.  
Now the peat runs  
with ruts where spades dug  
and plundered such fecund,  
hallowed ground.

How anyone could die  
here – among the wonder  
of the color green –  
the way it paints  
the landscape lush:  
the color of hope, of growth.

It was someone's house  
once, someone's town,  
someone's family tree  
bowing now, forgotten  
to the ax – All skeletons.  
The houses like grave stones  
crumbling in rows.

### THIRD PLACE

#### Polishing the Rhino

By Esther Whitman Johnson, Valley Writers

I stand at the sink, polishing  
the rhino, smaller than my palm—  
rump, back, horn. Gentle, then hard,  
but tarnish clings, silver hidden  
by coats of smoky scum.

The rhino was my father's, a gift  
returned to me upon his death,  
thrown in a drawer for years  
with discarded junk, pulled out  
yesterday, destined for a sale.

My father was a surgeon,  
known widely for his work,  
sutures and slices, detailed  
diagnoses, order and  
organization. Precision.

And yet,  
when he was safe at home  
my father was a messy man,  
wore ragged flannel shirts  
and baggy khaki pants,  
shoes worn thin from hauling stone,  
saving shore from wayward wakes.

My father had no use for power or  
prestige, even less for material things.  
And yet,  
he loved the curios in his cabinet,  
his menagerie—glass penguin, crystal  
swan, a slew of painted wooden ducks.  
And the rhinoceros.

The rhino gets one more coat of pasty  
white polish. His body gleams, his legs shine,  
but the horn will not come clean. Why waste  
time on something for a sale? Still, I scrub  
the head, run water down the back, dry him

with a cloth, rub my thumb on silver sheen.

The rhino weighs heavy in my hand  
for such a tiny thing. I curl  
my fingers round the beast, his horn  
jutting out. He will not be tamed  
with just one polishing. I stick  
him in my window to sell another day.

## HONORABLE MENTION

The Echo Waltz

*A Eulogy for my Jo*

By Rod Vanderhoof, Riverside Writers

Our college waltz played on, played on, played on,  
while our lives melded into one  
before the dawn, before the dawn, before the dawn.

We swirled among the ballroom crowd,  
floating on a mellifluous sea,  
*One, two, three*  
*One, two, three*  
*One, two, three*

We'd glide-whirl, glide-whirl, glide-whirl,  
spiraling, looping, turning with the sound,  
then spin-twirl, spin-twirl, spin-twirl,  
while waltzing another round.

She was spirited, spunky and free,  
with her lavish gown flaring, flaring, flaring.  
I loved her and she loved me,  
with a passion and a sharing, sharing, sharing.

The clock hands orb'd again, again, again . . .  
Unnoticed, time lapsed into decades.  
Now we say a final prayer: amen, amen, amen.

The music flickers softly,  
*One, two, three*  
*One, two, three*  
*One, two, three*

At Heaven's bidding, the musicians end our song, our song, our song,  
leaving harsh silence . . .  
Farewell my Jo: so long, so long, so long.

But hear distant music: our waltz yet plays, yet plays, yet plays!  
Mind-shadows now recall  
mirthful days, passionate days, love-filled days,  
echoes that forever enthrall, forever enthrall, forever enthrall.