

**The
Golden Nib
Anthology
2010**

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Promises to Keep

by Frank Milligan

As she exits the taxi, the wind whips from the Potomac River, past the Lincoln Memorial to Constitution Avenue and catches Ellie full in the face. She pulls up the collar of her flannel coat to ward off the chill of the gray windy autumn day and brushes the windswept hang of her once auburn, now mostly gray hair away from her eyes. She smiles as she remembers how so many years ago, Mack would reach over and sweep the wind-tussled hair out of her eyes as they sat after school on their favorite bench overlooking the ocean in Coos Bay, Oregon.

Ellie encounters the sign directing visitors to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and its reality roots her to Constitution Avenue like the majestic oak trees that line its sidewalks, their colorful protective cover stripping away in the wind, her courage swirling away with the leaves. She sees no one else except for a bearded man, his long gray hair swept back and tied in a pony tail hanging to his waist, squatting on his haunches adjacent to the path to the memorial, like a jungle animal, all at once at rest but prepared to bolt. She guesses him to be around her own age, late fifties to early sixties. He's wearing an old army field jacket, the front painted with the hippie peace sign in day-glow colors. He takes no notice of Ellie, his eyes somehow both vacant and wary, stare straight ahead seeming focused elsewhere, toward something only he can see. In front of him on the ground, a rusty blue Maxwell House Coffee can containing some dollar bills and some change rests upon piece of brown cardboard on which is scrawled: VIET NAM VET NEEDS HELP.

Regaining her mobility, Ellie approaches and plinks some coins into the can. As the man slowly raises his face toward Ellie, her budding smile to acknowledge his expected gratitude freezes as his eyes lock onto hers. Though he hasn't moved toward her, the vacant wary stare has been replaced with a need so raw and urgent it causes her to take a step backward. In an ancient voice coated with tobacco and grit, he asks Ellie "Did you keep faith with us?"

Her fingers involuntarily clench her purse as he begins to rise, the veins on his neck taut, his face darkening. Again he demands, much louder now, almost a bark: "Did you keep faith with us?"

Retreating another step she tells him what he seems to need to hear, "Of course, yes. Of course, I kept the faith."

His face softens but he doesn't smile. For a moment his eyes seem only eyes as he says, "That's good. Very good. God bless you lady." He returns to his crouch and the vision only he can see.

Ellie quickly walks away, whispering a small prayer of thanks for her safety, thinking not all the casualties occur on the battlefield—so many who can't seem to get past the war.

She bends into the wind willing her body to move toward her destination, what she has traveled 3,000 miles for, what it has taken her so long to build her courage to do, determined not to let Mack down again. For what must be the hundredth time she checks her handbag to assure what she's brought for Mack is in there. The wind stings her face and her legs feel heavy as Oregon timber as she makes her way toward the monument.

When she arrives at the memorial wall, dizzied by its sheer immensity, she reaches out to it to steady herself and must force herself to breathe. Though she'd seen pictures of it, it is so much bigger and its effect so infinitely more powerful than she'd imagined: all at once as soaring, shining, and stunning as first love; yet, crushing, overwhelming, and appalling as the death of a lover. So many names, so many boys, so much misery, and so many unfulfilled dreams.

She knows each name has a story: a family left behind, a wife, a mother, a girlfriend, a lover. Disoriented, she's buffeted less by the wind than by the memories of Mack that come rushing over her: Erasmus High, the basketball games, the prom, the quiet evenings by the ocean.

Despite the many years it seemed like only moments ago they'd met. Ellie sitting by herself at a table in the corner of the vast cafeteria at Erasmus High, feeling cold and alone, pulling her sweater tighter around her, this the third time in as many years she'd had to change schools because of her Dad's job. She knew from experience that sooner or later she'd fit in, but this time would be more difficult. It was already October and the school year was well underway, too late to try out for cheerleading and dance which had been her ticket to acceptance at the other schools. She was feeling sorry for herself when a boy carrying a lunch tray suddenly appeared beside her, as if materializing out of the air.

"I've been looking all over the cafeteria for you," he said to Ellie. He was cute rather than handsome, very tall, with sandy hair, blue eyes, an athletic build, and a warm smile that made Ellie feel like an old friend.

"Looking for me?"

"That's right. You look to me like a girl who can appreciate a man of special abilities."

"Well, yes . . .," she said puzzled.

"Great. Then you won't mind my joining you for lunch," he pulled out a chair as if it had already been decided. "Most kids don't want me to sit with them."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm a Gypsy prince and I can see their future."

"Really," she said, going along, "that's funny, because you look Irish. And why does it say McDowell under the basketball letter on your sweater?"

Arching his eyebrows to accompany his broad grin, he answered, "Well I'm an Irish Gypsy, of course."

"Of course."

"Here, let me show you. Give me your hand." He took her right hand in his left. "Let me read your palm and feel the vibes."

He rubbed his fingertips gently around and around on her palm. Then, without asking, he unbuttoned the sleeve of her blouse, pushed it along with her sweater up past her elbow, and slid his fingers ever so gently, just barely gliding across her flesh, past her wrist and up onto her forearm all the way to where it bent at the elbow. He repeated this stroking motion several times making her feel weak and almost hypnotized by the rhythm of his touch. An involuntary shiver coursed through her body.

Sensing her unease he flashed a reassuring smile. “Well I’ve read your palm, and felt the vibes, and I can tell you whatever you care to know about yourself. For example, it says right here on your palm that you’re new here and don’t know too many people. Am I right?”

She smiled and nodded.

“And see, when I rub up here like this,” he again stroked her forearm, “I can see your future. It says that you’ll come to the game Friday night, and afterward you’ll attend the sock hop with a tall, handsome, debonair Irish Gypsy basketball player.”

“Oh it does, does it?”

“Yes indeed, and it says right here,” he rested his fingers on the heel of her hand, “that you and he will hit it off, and you’ll push away all the other men in your life, and devote yourself to him body . . .,” he winked at her, “and soul. In fact, you’ll want to immediately pounce upon him and bear his children, but being the fine gentleman he is, he’ll tell you to get a grip on yourself, and wait till you’ve known him for a decent interval—at least half an hour.”

“It says all that, huh.”

He answered with mock seriousness, “Have I ever lied to you? Would an Irish Gypsy prince ever lie to a woman so beautiful?”

Just then the bell rang. He said, “Got to run, bio lab is on the other side of the building, so how about it, will you be there Friday night?”

She stood up with her tray, “You can see the future, so you already know the answer.” He returned her smile, a little too smug she thought.

She began to walk away, then turned over her shoulder and said in the sexiest voice she could muster, “Know what? I can see the future too, and I have the feeling you might actually score on Friday night.”

For the first time the self-assured grin left his face and he looked flustered. She added, “On the basketball court that is.”

Smiling, she turned and walked away.

From that first Friday night on, they were inseparable.

Mack never formally proposed; he didn’t have to. They simply knew they’d be spending their lives together. And they made such wonderful plans.

After high school Mack would join the Service so he could use the GI bill to go to college. If they were really lucky, and he got stationed in Europe, they’d marry while he was still in the Army and she’d accompany him. Otherwise, they’d wait until his enlistment was up. Ellie would work at the cannery to support them until Mack graduated, and then it would be her turn, after which she’d teach first

grade as she'd always dreamed. Such wonderful plans, such sensible plans, but back then, neither of them had even heard of Viet Nam.

The last night they'd spent together, before his unit shipped out to California for transport to "The Nam," as Mack called it, they'd gone to their bench to watch the sunrise.

"Mack, promise me you'll take care of yourself. No unnecessary chances."

"No Hon, no unnecessary chances."

"Look me in the eyes and promise me you'll come back to me."

"Of course, I'll be back."

"No Mack, look me straight in the eye and say it."

Mack looked into her eyes, his broad grin in place as it always was when he wanted to play with her. Affecting a broad Irish brogue, he said "Now of course Darlin I promise I'll be back. You can't kill an Irish Gypsy Prince. Just wouldn't be natural now would it?"

With all of her strength, she slapped him.

"Oh my God, I'm so sorry Mack." Still angry at him, but more angry at herself, she threw her arms around him and buried her face into his chest. Sobbing so deeply she had trouble catching her breath, she said, "I'm so scared Mack. I can't bear the thought of losing you."

Cupping her jaw in his strong right hand, he lifted her face, and kissed her gently on the lips. As they withdrew she flushed at the angry white marks her fingers had left on his cheek. But he seemed neither hurt nor angry. He only smiled gently and whispered, "Don't worry Hon. I'm coming back. I promise."

She nestled her head in his shoulder and said, "And I promise I'll always love you Mack."

Now, the cold making her nose begin to run, Ellie feels through her coat pockets for a tissue. As she focuses on the names on the wall she is seized with panic. They are not listed alphabetically! Oh God, she thinks, how will I find Mack? She feels the tears welling up but, thank goodness, a park ranger seems to sense her confusion. He shows her the book of names and tells her how to find what she needs. She fumbles with her reading glasses, and finally, with the ranger's help, finds the correct segment of the wall. As she scans the names, her breath catches.

There it is: Edward F. McDowell. So formal and so unlike him; not Eddie as his Mom called him, or Mack as did everyone else.

The ranger asks, "Would you like to make a tracing?"

"A tracing?"

"Of the name. A lot of people like to trace the names onto a sheet of paper and keep it as a memento. I have some tracing materials, if you'd care to use them."

She can't imagine what she'll do with it, but since she'll likely never return, she says, "Yes, thank you. I think I would like to make a tracing."

She runs her fingers over the letters, the indentations so smooth, so cool to

the touch, so much like the headstone on her parents' grave, and so unfair. Poor Mack has no headstone, no proper grave. The army reported to Mack's parents that their son died bravely in an ambush while on patrol near An Loc. His unit had to chopper out under intense fire, forced to temporarily leave their dead. When they returned, the bodies were no longer there.

One of Mack's buddies had telephoned her when he got back to the states and told her it was more likely they couldn't find the right place in the jungle and finally gave up looking. Either way his body was never recovered; so unfair and so damned incomplete. Tears form as she whispers, "I'm so sorry Mack. So sorry," while she traces his name.

She sees many things on the ground under the place where Mack's name is enshrined: a pair of old combat boots, a glass vase containing some red, white, and blue chrysanthemums, a wedding picture, a Beatles album, and other things. Ellie expected this. She had read about how people left things here for the dead and so she brought things with her to leave for Mack.

She unbuttons her collar and reaches stiffly behind her neck, cursing the arthritis caused by years of working in the damp cannery. She undoes the clasp on the gold necklace carrying its two adornments which she has worn under her clothing and over her heart every day for more than 35 years. Her fingers tremble as she carefully slides from the chain, the two translucent jade wedding rings Mack had sent to her from Viet Nam for their wedding. From her handbag, she retrieves two old and yellowed envelopes, one opened, the other still sealed, holding her last two letters to Mack.

The opened letter was given to her by Mack's mom, one of a stack of Ellie's letters Mack had rubber-banded and carried in his backpack, returned to his parents by the Army with the rest of his effects. She had told Ellie she hadn't read the letters and Ellie prayed that that was true. She wanted his mother spared the pain of knowing that in that letter, that stupid stupid letter, she had complained to Mack of how lonely and bored she was; that maybe she'd like to be going out again; and that maybe they were too young to be thinking of marriage anyway.

The other letter has remained sealed as it was the day Ellie sent it, and as it was the day the post office returned it undelivered all those years ago. It had arrived in Viet Nam two days after Mack's death. Had he read it, it would have told him to ignore the stupid letter; that she'd been in a silly funk when she wrote it, her time of the month and all that. She didn't mean any of it, and loved him so much she couldn't imagine living another moment without him. Poor Mack.

She kneels and carefully makes a place on the ground for the two letters. She wedges them partially under the vase of chrysanthemums, so they won't blow away, and places the larger of the two rings on top. She slides the smaller ring onto the fourth finger of her left hand, closes her eyes, and whispers, "I'm so sorry Mack. I didn't mean to hurt you."

She remains kneeling for so long the park ranger gently lays a hand on her shoulder and says, "You all right, Ma'am?"

Sounding like she's just wakened from a dream she says, "Yes. Yes. I'm

fine, thank you.”

She waits until the ranger moves on, then slips the ring off her finger and places it next to its mate on top of the letters. Softly she says, “Mack, I’ll always love you.”

She pauses to straighten a small confederate flag tipped by the wind and wipes her eyes. “I guess at first I didn’t believe you were gone—not you. And I knew God couldn’t have let you die thinking I didn’t love you. He wouldn’t do that to us.

“And then you hear these stories . . . miracles happen . . . the Army so screwed up . . . I kept thinking it must be a mistake. I knew you’d come back. You’d promised me.

“Later, when I finally understood you weren’t coming back, there were other . . . relationships. But they never worked out. I don’t know, maybe I didn’t want them to, in case . . .

“But I don’t want to be alone any more, Mack. It’s been so many years and as I look to the years I have left, well . . . God forgive me Mack, when my time comes I don’t want to die feeling I’m not loved. Feeling the way I made you feel.”

She takes a deep breath as if fortifying herself. “I’ve met a man Mack—a good man. I know you’d like him,” she smiles, “a strange sense of humor just like you. He says he wants to be there for me, to grow old with me. And, he’s waiting for my answer.

“So I’ve come to say good-bye, to my beautiful Irish Gypsy Prince. God bless you and keep you Mack, and know that you’ll always be in my heart.”

Stiffly, placing her hand on the wall to steady herself, she rises to her feet, turns, and walks away.

“Promises to Keep” is a heartfelt, moving story of lost love and found courage. Reading it brought tears to my eyes. Anyone who’s ever visited the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, DC, will be stunned by the author’s pitch-perfect rendition of that melancholy place and the terrible sacrifice it honors.

— John Gilstrap

Musing (With Lemons)

by Becky Mushko

My favorite muse, Gertrude, left me last year. I was sitting in a wi-fi enabled coffeeshop, surfing the net, pondering an idea for my great American novel, and sipping my third cup when she flounced out.

“Look,” I think she might have said, “if you’re gonna sit on your butt, guzzle house blend, and make a feeble attempt to look like a writer in public, I am so outta here.”

I didn’t look up from my laptop. I didn’t need her drama.

“Besides,” she said with a sneer, “I’ve done all I can. With me to guide you, you became assertive, brash, cocky, persevering, out-spoken, confident, and bitchy. You stopped taking crap and could even dish it out when required. Thanks to me, you get paid for what you write. Thanks to me, you go to conferences and hobnob with people who might know a lot more than you. Thanks to me, you can self-edit a damn sight better than you used to. And you can almost query and pitch ideas that make sense. I made you who you are!” She pointed her immaculately manicured index finger at me. “And don’t you ever forget! But, you’ve still got a long way to go, Babe!”

Then, she turned on her stilettos and was gone.

Gertrude was one in a succession of muses I’ve had. The first, Annabelle Lee, was a wimp. She was the one who gave me bad advice under the guise of encouragement. She told me to “share my feelings” and encouraged me to write poetry that I now realize really sucked. Because of Annabelle Lee, I got suckered by the International Library of Poetry and thought I was really published.

“That’s OK,” she’d murmur softly as she sipped a cup of chamomile tea. “You tried. That’s what counts. And you *are* a semi-finalist in their contest. Your poem is even ‘Editor’s Choice.’ That’s *so special*.”

Annabelle Lee made me think that all my words were golden, that I didn’t need editing, and that anywhere I submitted work was just wonderful. She told me that I shouldn’t expect to be paid for my efforts—what I did was *so special* and *wonderful* and anyone who couldn’t see it was *just jealous*. All I had to do was type out more drivel and—*someday*— someone would see how wonderful my words were and I’d be a *big name author*. All I had to do was spew my wonderful words of wisdom to the world and wait. (*Wonderful* was her favorite word.) Sometimes, she’d grab a page right out of the typewriter and gush over it.

“Wonderful!” she’d say. “It touched my heart. You’re just *so special*.”

She convinced me that writing a self-absorbed column—*for free!*—for a local publication that did no editing to speak of was a good idea. She consoled me when I didn’t win writing contests.

“When life hands you lemons, *make lemonade*,” she’d murmur. “Look for the silver lining. Keep trying. Keep your eyes on the prize.” What she said seemed to

make sense—even though she used a lot of italics and clichés.

Annabelle Lee was warm and positive and wonderful. She hovered over me and stroked my ego as I typed.

“Dream big,” she’d say. “*Build* those castles in the air! There are *no limitations* to your imagination! The world is waiting for your *special wonderful* words!”

She was, in short, a clueless twit.

Fed up with her patronizing and italics, I realized what I had to do: I kicked her out. She pulled herself up by her special bootstraps and limped off, no doubt to inflict her wonderful warmth and encouragement on another clueless writer-wannabe.

My next muse was more practical. Maud arrived in the box with my first computer.

“Look,” she said, puffing a Benson & Hedges menthol, flicking her ashes onto my floor, and grinding them into my carpet with the heel of her Doc Martens, “you gotta be practical. Computers let everybody think they can write. Who’s gonna read all that drivel, tell me that?” She leaned forward and blew smoke into my face. “Look,” she said, peering over my monitor, “you wanna make a go of this writing gig, you better get a clue. First, do your homework!”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said. Frankly, Maud scared me a little.

“Nobody gives a fig about *sharing your feelings*,” she’d say. “People don’t want to think or feel. They want to be entertained. They want a good laugh.” She blew a couple of smoke rings over my computer. “Look—when life gives you lemons, realize that any schmuck can make lemonade. You’ve got to do something different. How about redneck humor? You could probably do that.” She snubbed out her cigarette butt on my keyboard.

I nodded. And I started writing a redneck humor column. The crap actually sold.

While I hacked out my column, Maud flipped through my novel. “This is a long way from finished,” she said. “Look—you need another chapter or two to wrap it up. And get rid of those clichés. Sheesh!”

Eventually I got used to Maude’s cutting remarks and her over-use of the word *look*. “Cut the adjectives!” she’d say. “And the adverbs. My Gawd! Look! What’s with all this explaining? Cut it!”

If I didn’t do as she said, she’d grab my keyboard and either refuse to relinquish her hold on my delete key or else blow smoke until I couldn’t see what I was doing.

Finally, she gave up on me. I knew she was gone when I saw the writing on the Post-It note on my monitor. “Look—you need more help than I can give you!”

A few days later, Elvira came in the mail with a rejection slip. She was all business. Peering over her horn-rimmed spectacles and sipping a martini that she said she’d saved from her last lunch with an editor, she insisted I go to readings by professional writers and ask them questions afterward.

“Find out how they did it,” she’d say. “Then you do it.”

She gave me a reading list and expected reports. “How are you going to write if you don’t read what’s selling?” she’d say.

She assigned me agents to research on the Internet, told me to look at other writers’ websites, and forced me to create a website of my own. She showed me how to detect scammers.

“Listen, my dear,” she said, “If an agent or publisher says they ‘welcome new writers,’ run the other way—as fast as your chubby out-of-shape legs can carry you! Don’t you see, anyone who solicits ‘new writers,’ is really saying, ‘Welcome, sucker!’”

Elvira didn’t stay long. One day I found her business card on my desk. On the back, she’d written: “We’ll do lunch sometime. Meanwhile, if life sends you lemons, make a lemon meringue pie and copyright the recipe.”

A few days later, Gertrude crawled out of the keyboard when I opened my new laptop. She had an agenda: either I’d get serious about writing or I’d get out of writing. She gave me a list of what to read. She signed me up for conferences. She was all business—or else. Her advice: “If life sends you lemons, make something of them, market it, and move on.”

She perused my website and found it lacking. “Lose the purple background and the yellow text!” she insisted. “Whatever were you thinking?”

“It was a template,” I said, “My service provider provides free web space to—”

She cut me off. “Nothing is free!” she said. “Now, get rid of the fluff. Combine and condense. Make it business-like. Writing is a business! A website—and one that has your name in it—isn’t enough. You need a blog!”

While Gertrude barked orders, I redid my website, sent out query letters, networked at conferences, rewrote several works-in-progress, gave up my column, and blogged. Before long, I had over 2,500 profile look-ups and a couple dozen followers. Blogging was cutting into my writing time, but Gertrude insisted it was necessary.

The day after she’d abandoned me at the coffeeshop, she left an anonymous comment on my blog: “Remember what I said about lemons.”

A few days later, I was browsing at Books-A-Million when Aurelia popped out from the pages of *Networking for Dummies*.

“I’m your new muse,” she said. “Friend me.” Then she followed me home.

“The blogging isn’t enough!” she declared. “Social networking is the key! You need a Facebook account. And Twitter. You should Tweet everyday.”

I continued to blog, but I also Facebooked and Tweeted. Aurelia had a long list of people I should friend and follow. It was all I could do to blog, mention on Facebook that I’d blogged, network my blog, Tweet about my blog, and then blog that I’d mentioned it on Facebook and Twitter. I rarely had time to actually write—and if I did, Aurelia made sure that I blogged about writing.

But it wasn’t enough. Aurelia thought I should freelance and then blog and Tweet about the articles I’d written, which would lead to more freelance assignments that I could post about.

“I can’t do all this!” I complained.

“A good writer can multi-task,” she insisted.

Later that afternoon, I saw the writing on my Wall: “If life gives you lemons, make sure you Tweet about how you shared those lemons.” Then Aurelia unfriended me.

My latest muse, Melvin, arrived as an email attachment the day after Aurelia Tweeted that she’d dropped me as a Facebook friend.

“Add more humor to your blog,” he said. “Folks like that. But it’s not enough.” He plopped his ample butt down in a chair next to my desk. “OK, here’s the plan,” he said. “Ya gotta good platform—what with the blog and Facebook and Twitter. Maybe ya oughta Link-In, though. Digg it?” He snickered at the puns he’d made. When I didn’t respond, he continued, “Parlay that platform into readership for a novel. Research the market and see what’s hot in fiction. Write a novel that fits. Polish it. Then pitch it. Any questions?”

I shook my head and stared at my computer screen. I was too busy revising an article I was working on, surfing the ’net in between reading emails, updating my blog, checking my status, writing on my Wall, and Tweeting to pay much attention to him.

“Oh,” he continued, kicking off his cowboy boots and making himself comfortable, “before ya get busy, ya think you can make me a cup of tea?”

I signed off Twitter and Facebook to go to the kitchen and make his tea. He took a sip and smacked his lips.

“Tasty,” he said, “but needs a slice of lemon. Ya mind?”

I returned to the kitchen where I took a lemon from the refrigerator and a knife from the drawer. I brought them back to my study where Melvin now had his feet propped on my desk while he read my email.

I didn’t slice the lemon. Instead, I brandished the knife under Melvin’s nose.

“Well,” he said, removing his feet from my desk and leaning back, “no reason to get testy. After ya give me a *proper* slice of lemon, I’ll see if I can give ya a little inspiration that might pay off. Maybe help ya cut that last article ya wrote to a workable length. But I’m not making any promises, mind ya.”

“Get out!” I said, pointing the knife at his throat. “I already know what to cut.”

Melvin sat the teacup on the edge of my desk. He eased himself out of the chair, grabbed his boots, and edged toward the doorway. “No reason to get testy,” he mumbled.

“You’re being redundant,” I said. “Out!”

He left.

As he ran down the sidewalk with his boots tucked under his sweaty armpits, I hurled the lemon at him. Then I went returned to my study. The aroma of him still lingered. I held my nose and got back to work.

“Who needs a muse anyway?” I Tweeted.

I could use a heavy-duty air freshener, though. Possibly lemon-scented. Maybe one of my Facebook friends can recommend a good one. . . .

Used To Be Famous

by Jody Hobbs Hesler

We're in the airport in Atlanta, just landed. Grant can't wait till Grandma's house for his snack, can't even wait till after baggage claim. We stop into one of those one-size-fits-all fern bars. We could be in Denver, Newark, Dallas. The bartender gives off the usual world weariness of a bartender anywhere, especially one who has to serve from a bar before noon. He's shaven bald with muscles that bulge out of his t-shirt sleeves like pet snakes wrapped there and waiting. "What can I get ya?"

"Do you have snickerdoodles?" Grant asks. This is his new favorite cookie/favorite all-time food. He asks for it everywhere.

"Ain't you too young for mixed drinks?" the bartender jokes, clearly not knowing a snickerdoodle from a Cosmopolitan. "How bout a ginger ale?"

Grant says okay, swings his feet from the bar stool, runs his fingers along the molding at the edge of the bar. He likes to touch things in new places. I ask for coffee for me, fried mozzarella for Grant, and before the bartender can finish nodding to that, Grant pipes up with a new comment. "My daddy used to be famous." He says this often to strangers, especially men.

"Oh, really now?" the bartender says. Curls of flame peep out from where his bicep meets the edge of his sleeve. Each of his fingernails is larger than a nickel. He could break your hand just squeezing it; I can picture him doing this. But he's taken a liking to Grant. Most people do. He's five, and his dirty blond hair tufts in every direction around the globe of his head. He keeps his eyes raised and his eyebrows raised further, always looking like he's waiting for the answer to a question he's just asked.

"Yes, really," Grant says, and, as always, tries to prove his point with his daddy's name. "Tucker Newsom? He plays a mean banjo."

The bartender's eyes crinkle with his smile. "Well how bout that."

I know Grant misses his daddy, but whenever he drops his name like anybody would know it, I cringe. Tucker plays in a band. He always plays in a band, though which band is ever-changing. He does play a mean banjo, and mandolin and fiddle and about anything with strings. Somewhere back in time, I was like Grant, believing all the stories his daddy told about what was going to happen next, sitting in the audience mesmerized by the sound of his banjo, his guitar, his mandolin rhapsodizing in the air.

"Grant, you can't say it like that," I tell him after the bartender moves away again.

"Like what?"

"People don't know what you mean when you say he used to be famous. They might think he's dead or something."

"He's not, though."

He wasn't ever famous, either, I want to add, but I don't want to spoil it for him. It was the same way with Tucker – hard to get him to believe things he wanted to be another way. It took Tuck three weeks to believe I wasn't coming back after I moved all mine and Grant's stuff out of our little apartment on Stuart Avenue. "But when will you come home?" he kept asking me.

"I've got my own place now, Tuck. I can't live like this anymore."

"Like what?" His voice was a child's voice.

"With you, Tucker. I can't live with you anymore. Remember? We talked about this."

Dead silence. Then a patter of his fingers drumming on the table: him thinking. "I didn't mean to." This had come to be a blanket statement by the time I finally left. Whatever it was, the latest thing, he hadn't meant to do that.

"I know, Tuck," I said. "I know you didn't mean to."

Grant shuffles along beside me, back out in the rush of the airport. For him, it must be all scissoring legs and eye-level suitcases, and so much noise. Sometimes, like now, I'm overcome by what a scrap of a person he is compared to the largeness of the world around us. Grant clings to me among all the coming and going, and I cling to him, too.

We've had our own apartment for six months now. Our third floor balcony faces the street; my bedroom window overlooks an alley. Someone could climb up the fire escape to my bedroom window or scooch onto our balcony from someone else's. Thoughts like that stick in my head sometimes, and I have to remind myself I'm no worse off alone. Tucker would be a disaster against any kind of danger. I can picture shoving him awake in the middle of a dark night, my heart beating so loud I can't hear, and me saying, "Tuck, someone's in the apartment."

"Someone?" I can picture his answer, him rubbing the side of his head – when he wakes up he always looks just like Grant: hair akimbo, innocent eyes. "Who?" By the time I'd get the point across, I'm sure the psycho murderer would be standing at the foot of our bed wielding an axe or a hammer or some medieval weapon. Grant would scuff into the room from behind. "It's not Halloween, is it? Nobody got me a costume." The maniac would be unmanned by this commentary. He'd turn to Grant, who would then say, "Do you have a snickerdoodle, maybe? I love snickerdoodles."

If Grant really is clinging to my hand right now, it's only because of how I'm holding his. He's not scare-able, so why should I be? He's matter-of-fact, expects the best out of everybody. The time for being scared would've been before we left Tucker, when the world seemed to totter like a rocking horse. The phone rang at all hours: band members drunk or having problems. I'd be left to get Grant back to sleep again. Half the nights most weeks, especially toward the end, Tuck would be off at his gigs till way past the middle of the night, sometimes out of town for days at a stretch. Even though I make a steady salary heading up the county rec office, money disappeared sometimes, and the days Tucker was supposed to pick Grant up from his day care, he forgot as often as he remembered.

I was the one to show up for the scolding from the center's director, her certainty of my negligence radiating off her like heat.

Grant points to a cluster of people getting coffee. "You want a latté?" he says. He knows what I like; nothing about me is a surprise. I can't picture Grant announcing things about me to strangers when he's off with Tuck. What is there to say about a person's preference for lattés? about a mother who's always on time? I used to think Tuck's zest and whimsy might rub off on me. But I've remained the same: reliable, coffee-drinking, civic-minded. Not the parent a kid talks about when she's not around.

"No thanks, kiddo. One cup's plenty for me."

It was lousy coffee, though, and a latté would taste good, but I'm ready to leave the swirl of people behind us, track down a cab, and face my mom. She paid for our tickets, said we deserved a vacation. She also said, back when I broke the news about the divorce, "Oh, Susie, why didn't you think of that before Grant came along?"

I said, "Then I wouldn't have him now."

We make it to the baggage carousel. The conveyer belt makes a rhythmic slapping noise. If Tucker were here, he'd riff off that, drumming against his jeans seam. Without a stringed instrument handy, he'll beat out a rhythm on any surface with any available utensil. I've seen him drum out a tune on Grant's head with a spoon, then grab for a pencil and paper to write down whatever it was he'd heard in the deep background of his brain. It's what I fell in love with, his passion for his music, the way that translated into a passion for the world around him, and, for a time, a passion for me. It took me awhile to see how his passions weren't a solid thing, but impulses like flashes of light fanning through a prism, sending color in every direction but never reassembling into one.

Each of his bands found out the same thing, and more. He'd plunder the payment for a gig to buy a new amplifier, which would've been okay if he'd talked to the band first. "You should've heard our last set last night. We sounded like shit," he'd tell me. As soon as the next band bailed on him, he'd excuse himself with a final, "We really needed it, though." After every rift, he'd be out his share (and everyone else's) of all the money from the last few gigs, plus the band would keep the new equipment he'd bought without their blessing, and he'd lose that, too.

Tucker went through the good graces of a band every two or three years (and the good graces of various employers for his day jobs that allowed him freedom to travel for gigs). We were together for about three band formations. Whenever a band came to an end, they'd say their good-byes, and Tuck would slough around the apartment weekends for a month or so, kicking at clumps of dust under the sofa. Eventually, somebody would call, or he'd remember somebody he'd met and call them, and he'd start playing pick-up in a new band.

Some of the bands, like the last one, got pretty big around the Richmond scene before his magic wore off. For awhile, and Grant's old enough to

remember, we might go hang out at Byrd Park with a frisbee and some teenager might come up and say, “Hey, aren’t you with the Hat Shack?” This wouldn’t fail to bring a smile to Tucker’s face, along with a shy nod, and Grant loved it.

Tuck’s last mistake was buying a van so the Hat Shack could cart all their equipment from gig to gig. They were getting several gigs a week, playing the college circuit around Virginia, going from the shore to the mountains and back again every few days. Tucker’s shoddy old car stalled out or overheated more than once on the way to a show. The half of the band in Larry’s car would make it wherever they were going and open with the handful of songs they could play with drums and a tambourine and vocals, killing time till Tuck would finally get there with the rest of the people and equipment.

The van was expensive. To buy it, he milked cash from about ten gigs running, and from our bank account.

“Why am I getting overdraft fees on our checking account, Tuck?”

“Doesn’t that mean you don’t have enough money in there?” Tuck said.

“Tucker. I should have enough money in there.”

“Maybe it’s, you know, identity theft.”

“Sure. Maybe some criminal’s cashing out at the bank a block away.”

“Not every criminal’s smart. I mean, how smart is a life of crime?”

“Tucker. What’s going on?”

Eventually we got to, “We really needed it, though.”

The Hat Shack dumped him the instant they understood why they hadn’t been paid for so many gigs in a row. I managed to sell the van and pay everybody back up to about 70% of what was expected. I took less, and I got out. Tucker’s found a new band already, but they only get a gig about once every couple of weeks. He’s getting to be more infamous than famous these days.

“There it is!” Grant calls out when he spies his little plaid suitcase. He tries leaping toward it and gets tangled up in someone’s luggage.

“Ho there, little man,” says the man behind the bags. He has a long rangy white and gray beard and hair, a cowboy hat, skin on his face that looks like he’s spent all his life outside in the direct desert sun. The hair around his mouth is nicotine yellow. He reaches a hand toward Grant to steady him.

“Sorry about that,” I say, sidling through the people to get as close as I can to Grant. One of my hands joins the cowboy man’s to help Grant back to his feet.

“Thanks, sir,” Grant says. His suitcase has circled away from us; we’ll catch it on the next go round. “I’m going to visit my Grandma.”

“That’s mighty nice, son. Grandmas like to see their little grandsons. That’s the way it should be.” The man’s voice sounds like a modulated cough. His eyes are a piercing blue.

The luggage conveyor heaves a weird squeak and comes to a halt. A collective sound of frustration mutters through the crowd.

“I love snickerdoodles,” Grant says, still addressing the cowboy man.

“What’s not to love?” he asks. “Does your Grandma make those?”

Grant looks at me, all excited. “Does she, Mama? You never said so.”

These days my mother’s more wedded to protein shakes and Lean Cuisine. But she baked sometimes when I was little. “I bet we can get Grandma to bake with us,” I say. I balance a fuzzy memory of my mother with a cookbook open and flour spilled on the counter against her springing for these plane tickets. Snickerdoodles are almost a sure thing.

Grant clenches his fists and closes his eyes, looking like he’s making a wish. “I can’t wait to get to Grandma’s!”

“Might be a little while here, champ,” the cowboy man says. “No telling with these luggage thingies.”

“Nope,” Grant agrees, as is his way with strangers, always agreeing. “No telling.” He hums an old Hat Shack tune and taps his foot. “My daddy used to be famous,” he says. “But he’s not dead or anything.”

The cowboy man looks amused and startled all at once. “Is that right?”

“Yeah. Tucker Newsom.”

The man’s face takes a whole new look. “Now, who would’ve guessed that? You’re Tuck Newsom’s boy?”

“Yeah. Grant. Grant Newsom.”

“Well, I am pleased to meet you. You know, your daddy’s got a gift,” he says. Even closer to Richmond, Grant’s hard-pressed to find someone who knows who his daddy is. A handful of random teen fans have recognized Tuck by sight, but I can only think of one other person who knew Tucker Newsom by the mention of his name, and that turned out to be his former first-grade teacher.

The cowboy man hunches down to be eye-level with Grant. “I played with your daddy a good number of times. He could fiddle about anyone into the ground.”

“Yeah. And he plays a mean banjo.”

The cowboy man laughs and agrees at the same time. “A mean banjo,” he says. “You dang right.” He catches himself from saying “damn” at the last possible second. He stands again and stretches out a hand to me, “Lane Daggett,” he says. My knees fold forward, for just a second, at his name. Lane Daggett is as close to famous as anyone Tuck ever played with. He’s played back-up in Nashville recordings of real famous people, written songs for them, too. Tuck used to talk about him in the middle of the night, when he was too pumped up to sleep. If Lane Daggett liked him, well, the rest was a near guarantee. We were only inches away from the big record contract, then a coast-to-coast tour with the band, then a gig on Letterman. That was Tuck’s dream trajectory.

I get over my surprise and return the handshake. Lane says, “You must be Tuck’s wife?” The baggage rounder kicks up again. A huff of relief goes through all the waiting people.

“Ex-wife,” I say, a correction that’s been tricky to master. I’m tempted to let people think what they will, but if I skip the edit, conversations eddy into the oh-and-how-is-he? questions that are impossible to answer.

Lane nods. I'm surprised this superstar of Tuck's success daydreams even remembers him. I'd always figured Tuck had made up, or at least embellished, the things he'd claimed Lane said about him; instead, he'd been right. Could he have been right all those times he thought his life was waiting for him around the corner? Was he even a little right to think it was worth it, all the times he ripped people off? I remember how good it felt sitting up front at one of his shows, when he'd grab the mike and say, "This one here's for my wife," and the whole audience would turn around to see which one I was.

But then Lane leans toward me, gripping my upper arm in his firm hand. "God love ya, sister," he says into my ear, so Grant won't hear. "Musta been a rough road for you and the little man."

Next thing, Grant is standing at my feet with his plaid suitcase. Lane's beside him handing me mine. I didn't even see Grant point it out to him.

"Y'all take care now," Lane says, and winks. There in the sad blue shimmer of his eyes I can see how he knows it all: the sacrifices, the broken promises, the heartache. He's written my song a thousand times, I bet. Sometimes I think it's the only song there is.

Grant pulls out the handle for my suitcase and molds my hand around it. "Hurry up, Mama. We've got cookies to bake."

We stride toward the cab stand, our suitcases rolling behind us. When I look back toward the crowd at the baggage claim, there's no sign of Lane, just the chaos and crush of so many people in a hurry.

The Game

by Elizabeth Morelli

When the game is over, it really is just beginning.-Jerry Kramer

Where the game came from, I don't know. Neighborhood kids had visited their country cousins and brought back mosquito bites in strange places and games with no known origin. It was an "after-dinner game" to be played as the sun dipped for the final time and adults took appraisal of their day over evening cocktails while allowing their kids to run amok to burn the supper protein.

It appeared during the summer my mother started referring to my body as "long-limbed," said in a random way as if she was alluding to a stranger and not to her daughter, the kid. That summer my pre-adolescent girl friends shed their socks and tennis shoes for flip flops and began to pay attention to painting their toenails with clear nail polish in July, edging up to a dusty rose hue in August. The boys made disgusting noises about all the exposed toes.

The game turned up about the time the rose nails started to chip. Just before Labor Day, a kid suggested we play "Utica." He spit out the directions while we slouched on a backyard swing set in the gentle upstate New York breeze with only whispers of heat.

We were opened to new, to this regional game named for a mental institution in a city due west. Utica was easy, almost a non-game. Kids were divided into two teams: the wardens and the patients. The patients hid, and the wardens searched the neighborhood for these patients who had escaped the institution—a global hide-and-go-seek. When a patient was spotted by a warden, the warden pointed at him and yelled "Utica" or remembered where he had spotted him. Utica required no boundaries, no time period, and only an occasional physical capture—usually after a warden had consumed a sugary dessert. The part-action game, part-mind exercise demanded original thinking and had only one requirement—to be played at dusk when nothing was quite as it seemed anyway.

"Who's in?" the ringleader, a boy who often avoided the rigors of physical activities, asked one September evening when the game was a few days old.

We raised our flashlights and said "Me." That night (I think there were nine of us playing) Sammy, the buzz-cut diplomat of the neighborhood, decided to be mayor. The mayor had the honor of spending the game sitting on the large corner mailbox and checking kids in—or explaining rules to latecomers.

"Who wants to be wardens? Patients?" The ringleader yelled out.

Neither role was preferable or held greater power. Wardens needed the creativity to second guess the inventive patients who would disappear in various neighborhood locations. I held-up a long arm and said 'Patient.'

When Sammy, now mayor, shouted "Go," we scampered off. I grabbed

Kate, my climbing buddy, and pointed up. She nodded. Since a couple of wardens were following us, we dashed between two houses to disappear from the mob. Then we crossed a street, ran down an alley and came to rest in her grandparents' backyard complete with a birdbath, a circular clothesline and a pre-fabricated garage with ridged sections that allowed a wonderful foot hold. Within two feet of the garage was a cement wall belonging to one of the buildings used by a car dealership. Over the years we had learned to shimmy up this wall by keeping our feet placed on the edging of the pre-fabricated garage and our backs on the cement wall. We'd inch our feet up and then our torsos until we reached the top of the garage. A climb over the sloped roof and then a short jump to the Chevy dealership roof placed us on the top of the first of the three buildings where sometimes we stopped to play with the too hot tar, or to comment on the convertibles below, or to check out the sunset. Tonight we watched a few of the wardens run this way and that through the quiet streets; the other patients had all disappeared into their hideouts.

Kate and I lay on the roof that evening for over an hour keeping one eye on the pond area of the nearby cemetery to see if Annie had chosen her usual marshy hiding place—and to discuss the possibility of wearing pantyhose in sixth grade. The warm tar felt like a large hot water bottle on our stomachs, and the longer we stayed in our comfortable position, the more we felt victorious in life and sport. If we were noticed, and the chances grew less as the light dimmed, we would have to fess up the next morning at the mailbox, but for now the reward was in the inactivity of the game.

I was the child who colored outside all the lines, so my picture never got hung on the refrigerator or the school bulletin board. Here, we played outside the lines. Wardens could become evasive; patients could disappear—or not. Jake Hudson, our tree expert might hide in his beloved maple with a book; Ellen Radisson, the bike whiz who had zoomed halfway down Suicide Hill to hide out at a friend's house, might forget about us, and our game, and begin to play. We accepted and welcomed all the kid variations of Utica: Tom Thompson, for instance, removed a sewer grate, crawled into a tiny spot and waited until the mayor stood over him before calling out “Fe Fi Fo Fum,” I don't think “penalty” was in our vocabularies, but we knew his hiding place was ingenious.

As a group of quirky right brainers, we decided without discussion the first night of the game that it didn't matter how long we stayed hidden. Boredom existed only when immersed in the checkers and chess sets that our parents placed on front porch gliders on summer days. We agreed that what we missed most when school was out were the giant lumps of tough gray clay that the art teacher dropped on our desks without instruction. Unstructured play in the schoolyard didn't exist, and we all deplored playground kickball, structured by teachers to

provide exacting physical activity and dominated by the sports-inclined who chose sides as if Olympic gold was to be awarded for elementary school kickball.

The Utica game never ended until the next morning after breakfast. Around 9 a.m. we'd meet at the mailbox to discuss sightings and non-sightings in the previous evening's game. Only one sighting had occurred that night—Karen had left her bike near her under-the-porch hiding place, a giveaway. No one had discovered Kate and my perch on the roof, so we told the group we hid “up high.” It was enough of a clue for the next game, probably that evening. And it was our turn to be wardens, maybe.

Utica was never about the capture, so Karen was not locked away. Her hiding place was simply noted. The initial moments of the game, when the mayor yelled “Go” and we scrambled to the concealed peaks and valleys of the neighborhood were the glowing moments for the patients. For the wardens, it was tapping into the patients' thinking processes and discerning their obscure locations. The game could be played out in minutes. “If the wardens don't find the patients in 20 minutes, the game is called.” But it wasn't about deadlines. It was enough to settle into a concealed pocket for however long one felt comfortable hiding there. If the patient emerged when wardens were still prowling, they risked a raised finger and a cry of “Utica.” If not, they reappeared about the time they were expected to return home, but instead of entering their home breathless and out of wind, they came home relaxed and nourished by the game.

Utica allowed rising sixth graders who were about to be set on a track to their future, a vital voice in putting together a temporary community of peers. And what the kids chose in this game was a slow-paced, reflective democracy where all the figurehead mayor had to accomplish was the send-off and the wrap up. Occasionally, a child who thrived on rapid fire existence and competition entered the game as warden. (That type always wanted to be the aggressor.) If he found a patient he would drag his catch to the mailbox, but once he realized the game had no time limits or rewards tired of the lack of activity.

Years later trying to explain the game, I jump to Cops and Robbers as an analogy. Two opposing groups each try and out do the other by hiding or capture. The difference in the Utica game is that no form of tagging was ever incorporated. When one is tagged in Cops and Robbers, he immediately changes sides. Cops to Robbers. Robbers to Cops. A career shift, and a mind shift, with the touch of a finger. But we didn't tag in Utica. Once declared a prisoner (or warden), one remained in that role for the evening. Since Utica required no direct action, it didn't fall into tag-game scenario giving it its own distinct classification.

Kids did get caught up in their roles in Utica, but in a one dimensional sense. Patients hid; wardens sought out the hiders. The roles were carried out, but in a laid back fashion. In role changing games, the role becomes entwined with

personality at some point. In Utica, we were content with our role at that moment—rising sixth graders. We needed no other label that summer, no identity based on fantasy.

While any neighborhood game suggests teamwork, Utica allowed the individual to shine for a little while longer in a child-friendly democracy. And it offered snippets of choice, early tickets to the adult world. A long-limbed pre-adolescent could do a lot worse in life than playing the game those late summer evenings.

By the next summer, neighborhood games gave way to porch slouching and gender division, and Utica fell to a newer group of pre-adolescents. My group, now forward thinking junior high students, watched the wave of patients and wardens charge around the corners and wondered what had been so captivating about the non-game. Thirty seconds later we turned on a radio and began the forgetting process.

While in graduate school some years later, I worked as a patient unit secretary on a psychiatric floor at the University of Rochester's Hospital (New York). Because the position required keeping track of everything from patient's sleep charts to their possessions, the job triggered a lot of communication with the patients. Also, I "buzzed" the patients with privileges in and out of the locked unit all day.

One patient about my age was annoyed when I didn't let her off the floor quickly enough one afternoon, and as she waited in front of my window to verify her status with a nurse, mumbled "You must have been the warden in the Utica game."

I hadn't heard the game mentioned in years and looked up in mild surprise. "I loved that game," I said earnestly.

"Me too," she said. "Patients were people in that game. Very much respected."

"So were wardens," I added. "It didn't really matter what team you were on. Everyone was a winner."

"Sure. But that's why it was a game. Now open the door, please."

I wondered if she colored outside the lines, too.

The entries this year were some of the most professional I've seen in my 15 years of judging contests. Grammar and format that followed the rules, evocative titles, subjects that mattered like funerals and the Cold War and generals in the midst of battle. Each of the stories seamlessly built in conflict but came to a resolution that was unexpected, but sincere and justified by the events in the stories. While all these true stories are eminently publishable, the winners chose subjects or events

that were unusual and very specific, but that reflected on larger issues. Subtle, but indelible.

“The Game”: Detailed images immerse the reader in those magical childhood evenings and that vague awareness that real life is going to change everything.

— Sarah Collins Honenberger

Way Off Broadway

by Donna Knox

Early morning; my favorite time of day. Everyone else is still in bed and I'm on the porch, sipping tea. We live under the rich canopy of a climax forest, which we share with an amazing ensemble of birds. The birds are awake with me, and singing. As the sun slips from behind the hills, it slivers through the leaves and lays its warmth across my face. The tranquility is encompassing.

My solitude gives way to the telephone. It's Kirstyn. "Hi Honey." I'm always happy to hear her voice.

"Hey, Mom."

"You're up early today." She doesn't get up before ten if she can help it.

"I have news!"

Kirstyn's news is generally fun. She's a senior at Harvard and it has been a great experience for us all. She's now at that stage of life where the world lies before her. What to do next is the question of the moment. She's been contemplating that for a few weeks. "I can't wait to hear."

"I'm going to Europe!"

"Wow. With who?"

There's a slight pause. "By myself."

My turn to hesitate. She's twenty-three and can do what she wants, but the thought of her roaming around Europe alone is not a good one. I tread lightly.

"Why by yourself? Isn't there someone you could go with?"

"A lot of my friends are going, but they're all just staying a little while. I want to stay the whole summer, so I'm gonna travel around from place to place and meet up with different people here and there."

"Kirstyn, it's really dangerous to travel by yourself."

"I knew you'd say that."

"That's because it's true. You'd be out at night, in foreign countries where people don't speak English. No one would know if you didn't make it back to your hotel, or even from one country to the next. No, Kirstyn, it's just too dangerous. Please make other plans."

"How come it's too dangerous for me, but it was okay for you?"

I open my mouth to speak, but stop. Over the years, I've shared with her the sordid details of a few of my own youthful indiscretions. I'm beginning to see now that might have been a mistake.

I know which one she's referring to. It was 1974 and, with the swirl of my own college graduation still in the air, I was packing up for New York City. I wanted to be an actress. The dream had been long-standing, but this was the first

time opportunity had presented itself. My cap and gown were barely back in the bag before I was on the bus from Boston.

I'd taken an apartment with friends who, before I could get there, had changed their minds. When I found out I'd been ditched, I considered cancelling my plans, but the notion of going it alone had an appeal of its own.

Within a few days of my arrival, I'd signed up for acting classes and singing lessons. I wormed my way into every casting call that would have me. No production was too far off Broadway. During the first year, I performed in an improvisation piece at the La Mama Theatre, so far downtown that even taxis didn't go there after dark. For awhile, I danced at the Playboy Club. I waited on tables, made sub sandwiches, and sat in a coat check room at night. Nothing was beneath me.

Finally, after sending out countless headshots and resumes, I got an agent. When you are trying to sell yourself, there is no greater feeling than landing your first agent.

As the next summer made its way to the city, I began to notice that the population had thinned. I seemed to be one of the few who hadn't sought higher ground. People had gone home, or taken theater jobs out of town. Most everyone else had packed up for the Hamptons. There I was, with nothing special to do, as the long hot summer stretched out before me.

On a Wednesday afternoon I was walking the ten blocks to my apartment after having worked since early morning at a lifeless restaurant. It was more or less just me and various homeless individuals out on the streets. Waves of heat wafted up off the sidewalk in front of me as I moved along Broadway, on the upper west side. The smell of urine wafted up as well.

The phone was ringing when I opened the door to my apartment. It was my agent.

"Pack your bag. I've booked you as a dancer and back-up singer for the summer at a big hotel in San Juan."

"Puerto Rico?"

"Yes, indeed. San Juan, Puerto Rico. Can you leave this weekend?"

"Are you kidding? I could leave today!"

"Okay, then, come to my office tomorrow to get your ticket."

"Yes, Ma'am." I was already tugging my suitcase out of the closet.

Dancing and singing at a lush hotel! I couldn't contain myself and started jumping around the room on the furniture singing 'I Feel Pretty.' It was *West Side Story* all over again and I totally rivaled Natalie Wood, especially because I was doing my own singing. She had to have Marni Nixon do hers.

At her office the next day, my agent handed me a one-way ticket to San Juan with little-to-no additional information. I would learn the details once I got

there. You'd think I might have wondered about the return flight, but I preferred to live out every mother's nightmare and just head off without a clue. I was twenty-three.

As we taxied to the gate in San Juan, it was hard for me to sit still. I jumped up the instant we came to a stop and was in the aisle, ready to go, as though standing would somehow make other passengers empty out faster. Hurrying off the plane, I scanned the waiting crowd.

"Donna?" A middle-aged woman stepped in front of me. She was not what I'd expected; not the lush hotel talent scout type. Her clothes were plain and her eyes dull as they sized me up. She spoke with an American accent.

"I'm Jane. Let's get your suitcase and head over to the club," she directed. I was anxious to see the stage and maybe meet some of the other girls, so I was glad to be getting a tour before retiring to my room for the night. My adventure had begun.

Thirty minutes later, we pulled down an alley and in behind a sketchy, windowless building that looked like an old, dilapidated warehouse of some kind. "Let's go," Jane said with peculiar finality. I turned to ask what we were doing but she had already gotten out of the car and was hustling her way toward the door. I ventured out and followed her.

I could barely see as the bright Puerto Rican sun gave way to the darkened din of the one room bar, where three or four drunken latches sat about talking loudly. The relentless cigarette smoke singed its way into my lungs. In the corner was a small wooden platform, on which a barefoot girl in pasties and a G-string jiggled about seductively. She held a long scarf in her hand and, from time to time, ran it by her crotch, then twirled it around the neck of some guy in the audience. When the music stopped, the girl skanked her way over to one of the patrons, and crawled onto his lap to give him a little dance in exchange for a coin that she then deposited into the juke box to play another song.

"Go on back and get into your costume," invited my host as she gestured toward some hanging beads that covered a doorway behind the bar. I could only imagine what lurked beyond that fetching divide, when what I could see out front made me want to turn and run. It would take someone with a sense of abandon that far outstripped mine to part those beads and disappear on the other side.

I glanced around and realized that everyone was looking expectantly at me. It sank in. *This* was to be my summer job and the woman expected me to hop up on stage and give it a whirl right then.

My chest was so tight it's a wonder I could take in what little air there was to breathe in the room. I tried to harness some productive thoughts, but none were coming to me. I knew I needed to say something, but I was quite sure that 'Get me the hell out of here' was not what anyone expected. Finally, in little more than a

whisper, I offered that I was too tired after my trip and asked to be taken to my hotel. My hand quickly dealt with a runaway tear.

“You’ll be staying at my house,” Jane said. I looked at her in silence that said more than words could have. She stared back, unmoved. Our mutual gaze spoke its recognition of the moment.

A short drive away, awkward silence having stalked us the entire way, Jane and I came to another sketchy building, this one I assumed was to be home. She escorted me into what would be my quarters for the summer (unless they decided to keep me forever which, at that point, was a distinct concern of mine). There were bars on the one dirty window. The screen was cluttered with various hanging creatures, mostly of the reptile species. In the corner was something that resembled a mat, which I gathered was supposed to be my bed. The door locked from the outside.

“I have to get back to the club,” Jane said less than five minutes after we’d walked in the door. “Don’t go outside. Blonde white girls get snatched from the street here.” I briefly considered what would be worse, being hauled off the street by a gang of hoodlums, or a summer of sleazy sex with as many toothless codgers as would slap a five-spot on the bar for a shot of booze. My options weren’t looking too good.

“I’d like to call my mother and tell her I got here okay.” I would have preferred more volume, or something other than outright meekness, in my voice, but none of that was making itself available to me.

“We don’t have a phone,” she said without apology, as she turned and left the room. I waited to hear the bolt sliding into place. Instead, silence crept under the door, and then just the sound of her footsteps walking away.

My stomach felt weighted. I could tell its contents might not stay put. Adrenalin made its way, and left its heat, from fingers up to the elbows. Finally, the tears came, at first spilling lightly and then running freely. Risking certain encounter with any number of things that crawled, I curled up on the filthy mat and let myself go.

I gave it five minutes and then knew it was time to be on my way. I had no idea what to do, but decided to take my chances on the street. Thoughts of running aimlessly flashed through my mind. I wondered how many times I would have to fight off abduction.

Those images were interrupted by a telephone ringing in the house next door. I stopped and listened, like a dog when an unexpected sound catches its attention. Scrambling up off the floor, I grabbed my purse and ran from the bedroom, down the dark hallway to the front door. I threw it open, relieved that it hadn’t been padlocked shut, and made my way across the empty swath of dirt between the buildings. *Please let someone be there. Please let someone be there.*

The neighbor's front door was open so I banged on the frame of the screen. A woman scuffed down the hall in a frumpy housedress and fuzzy slippers, saying something in Spanish that I couldn't understand. My heart was pounding so hard I thought she might hear it.

"Telefono???" I pleaded. Maybe it was the mascara staining my checks. Or it could have been the look of desperation that I'm sure had taken hold of my face. For whatever reason, the lady opened the screen and pointed to a table just inside the door. The phone sat on it like a beacon in what had become an increasingly dark experience.

I called home, blurted out the gruesome details, and made it clear that I needed to leave immediately. I expected a couple of 'I told you so's' and a nice little lecture, but all I got was thinly veiled panic and assurances that a ticket would be waiting for me at the airport. I just had to get there.

I turned to the woman. "Telephono taxi, por favor?" I was now plucking words out of seventh grade Spanish. She took the phone and called someone. I was hoping it wasn't Jane.

I figured the woman might want me to leave at that point but I made no move to go. Standing alone on the curb didn't seem like a good idea and there was no way I was going back next door. There was nothing in my suitcase that I needed that bad.

In a few minutes there was a honk out front. "Taxi," she said, as a partially toothless smile snuck across her face. She pushed open the screen.

"Gracias, Señora."

The car out front was unmarked; no bright yellow paint and no sign on top. I climbed into the back seat. "Aeropuerto, por favor."

Without a word, the driver pulled away. I wondered who he worked for. Maybe Jane had sent him to get me. I'd become a problem and was now a flight risk. Maybe he was taking me someplace more secure. We drove down dirt roads and back streets. No highways. No businesses.

My fingers grasped the door handle. I was prepared to open and leap, if need be. A couple of times I thought the moment might be upon me, but we kept going. I sat forward in the seat, clutching my purse, taking a minute now and again to be amazed by my stupidity. I considered the possibility that I might not see anyone I loved ever again.

Finally, with anxiety mounting to gastric proportions, we rounded one more corner and I saw the first airplane hangar, quickly followed by the tower, such as it was, and then a runway. A little sound made its way from my throat. For the first time, I dared to hope that the ride would actually end at the airport and not in the dark basement of a boarded-up house.

As soon as the taxi came to a stop, I tossed a twenty over the seat and

jumped out without waiting for change, or even to find out if that was enough. It was awhile before my flight would be ready to board so I hid in the terminal until it was time. The trip home was white light. I can't remember any of it.

While others complained bitterly about having to spend the hot summer in New York that year, I didn't mind it at all. I went eagerly from audition to audition.

At first, I cringed at the thought of how close I'd come to slapping around barefoot and practically naked on a wooden platform, running a nasty scarf under the nose of dirty old men. And God knows what else. But, after awhile, I was kind of glad I'd gone to Puerto Rico. I could see that I'd made a mistake; not because someone had told me it was a bad idea, but because I'd gone through with the bad idea and seen first-hand how poor my judgment had been.

Still, terrible things could have happened. I'd put myself at risk.

I was at that point in life that fell somewhere between youth and experience, making my way from one toward the other.

~ ~

"Mom? Are you still there?" The tinge of impatience in Kirstyn's voice snaps me back: back from New York; back from Puerto Rico. Back from those days when I wouldn't listen to anyone because I had to learn things for myself. I am on the porch again, torn between different notions of what it means to be a good mother.

"Yes, honey, I'm here."

"Well, you didn't answer me. How come you could do it but I can't?"

"When you're a mother, you will probably understand the answer to that question. For right now, let's start thinking about which country you should go to first. I'm sure you'll have a great trip!"

Rescue Dog

by Linda Morefield

The dog was a terror. He tore at the front door, crashed against windows, threatened anything within sight, sound, or smell, not just the mailman. Friends, strangers, pregnant women pushing baby carriages, a falling leaf. He growled at guests and so frightened the weekly maid that she quit. The door and frame bore deep gouges, the window sills, lacerations. On walks, he would suddenly lunge into the street to attack FedEx trucks, school buses, and other 10,000-pound vehicles. I had to stay alert for bicyclists, motorcycles with loud mufflers, running children, strangers approaching from behind, unleashed dogs.

His name was Monty, but I started calling him Monster Man. He had been found howling in the woods, wrapped in chains, and taken to the Auburn Virginia shelter, which euthanized any animal not claimed within two weeks. Their policy was formed of desperation since in rural Virginia not many neutered their cats and dogs and the shelter was small and underfunded. He was rescued a second time, the night before his scheduled death, by a woman who confined him to a crate at her business for the three months before my husband saw his picture on a dog rescue website and fell in love. Monty reminded him of one of his favorites, Tashla, who had died the year before. They both had pointed ears, alert gold-brown eyes, fluffy black and gold fur, and tails that curled into a question mark. Both looked like wolves, only Tashla had weighed an appropriate 70 pounds and Montoya, an underweight 45. Neither his ribs nor his scars showed though his thick double coat that kept falling out in chunks.

Returning him to a shelter would be a certain death sentence. Who would want him? But how could I live with this impossible animal?

In desperation, I hired a trainer. "He's frightened," she said. "He's afraid of being hurt. Love, time, and a strong choke collar," she added. "He must know who is boss. He needs to know you will protect him."

I tried to follow her directions. When the dog barked, I rushed downstairs from my second-floor office, placed myself between him and the door or window, put my hands behind my back, palms facing out, and stood sentinel until he "got it". I was protection, and he could go off duty. Often I couldn't stop screaming at him, my workday ruined.

To admit someone to the house, the trainer taught me to grip his collar, force him to sit, ask the terrified person on the other side of the door to come in, ignore the dog, explain that "he is more frightened than you are." Even I didn't believe that. It became easier to meet friends at the near-by coffee shop.

After lots of trial and error, I identified the safest time to take him outside.

Late afternoons we would walk the neighborhood to the far side of little-used city tennis courts. From there to the safety of the woods and eventually home along sidewalks with a clear view, enough time to avoid all by crossing to the other side of the street.

For a month, Monty and I had the woods to ourselves. Then one day I was surprised to see, in the distance, children. I approached slowly, pulling in Monty's retractable leash for greater control. Four boys were whirling and waving sticks. Monty stiffened. His head jutted forward and muscles tensed as he followed their movement. As we walked closer, I saw a child tied to an oak. A ropey brown vine, the thickness of an electrical cord, looped around him, tight, neck to ankles, so that only his head and hand could move. His young captors charged, war danced around him, three wielded two-foot tree limbs, one a two by four. They thrust their weapons at the child's face, stomach, and genitals, close but not touching. They retreated only to whirl and thrust again. The child attempted to protect himself with a three-inch stick, waving it back and forth, but only his wrist could rotate. His arms were lashed to his body. The threats and violence occurred in silence--no sobs or screams. No taunts or triumphal yelps.

This was the middle of the afternoon, a sunny April in Alexandria, Virginia. The woods were city-owned, adjacent to an elementary school. In the distance, about two-football fields away, children scampered up monkey bars, slipped down a twisty slide, pumped high on swings. Mothers, some holding babies on their hips, looked like they were making play dates, comparing recipes, exchanging neighborhood gossip, their voices too far away to be heard in this strange and silent place. Even if they had been facing the woods, all they would have seen were four boys cavorting with sticks. Their victim was tied to the side of the tree not visible from the playground. A thin rivulet of blood ran down his neck from where vine had cut into flesh.

Such an impossible sight. I had to steady myself, restrain the dog, look again to make sure that I was really seeing what I thought I saw but couldn't believe, a young boy, maybe nine or ten, immobilized and surrounded by four taunting children about the same age.

Three of the children, the ones with tree branches, also froze, as surprised by me as I by them. The boy with the two by four could not stand still. He kept shifting his weight from side to side, hefting his fence post from hand to hand, making short swings as if the weapon were controlling him. He looked in my direction, but his eyes were strange, like they were not in this present but locked in whatever fantasy he was acting out. The captive watched me in silence. The dog strained at his leash, body alert and angled toward the children. He, too, was silent.

I couldn't drop the leash to untie the boy. I wasn't even sure, as we stood

facing each other, about two yards apart, that they wouldn't turn and attack me. There was that much strangeness and uncertainty. "What are you doing?" I asked while further retracting the sixteen-foot leash so that my tense and overly stimulated dog pressed against my knee.

At first, no one answered. Reluctantly, the tallest youth, thin with a crew cut, said, "We're playing a game."

"A game?" I repeated. I looked at the bound boy, now staring at me. He said nothing. Not taking my eyes from him, I said to his tormentors, "If I were playing this game, I would be scared." The trapped child watched me, silent.

"Oh he would be," the tall one answered, "except I'm his friend." The boy with the two by four kept swinging his weapon like a baseball bat, warming up for the big hit. He could not stop moving.

I was scared. Game, one had said, and I grasped at the word. "This is Rescue Dog," I announced. "Rescue Dog is angry." I directed these words to the spacey child with the two by four who finally stopped moving. Monty tried to charge forward, but I held him back. "Rescue Dog likes to rescue people," I said, desperate to keep their attention. No one moved. "Rescue Dog doesn't like this game. He wants you to untie your friend." They waited, doing nothing, saying nothing, which increased my anxiety. I repeated myself, louder. "Rescue Dog wants you to untie your friend." They didn't move. "Now," I snapped. Monty and I stepped toward them, and everyone moved. The tall boy laid down his weapon and approached the tree. The other children disappeared, but I didn't see them go. My focus was solely on the victim. I watched as his "friend" began fumbling with the knot at the victim's neck. Neither boy spoke as the vine fell in large loops around the tree. I could not take my eyes off the falling vine. I didn't dare blink. I felt like I was controlling the action, that if I looked away, anything could happen.

Once his arm was free, the boy rubbed his neck. By the time the last loop of vine fell to the ground, the "friend" had disappeared.

I was alone in the woods with my difficult dog and the liberated child. Are you OK? I started to ask. But before I could speak, the child rushed to Monty. He wrapped his arms tightly around his neck, nuzzled his head in deep fur, kissed his snout.

I froze, terrified. The dog was going to rip his face off. Did I save this kid so my dog could kill him?

But nothing happened. The dog stood patiently, even kindly, and allowed himself to be hugged. The moment over, the boy jumped to his feet and ran to the playground. Monty didn't lunge, chase, or try to nip. He simply waited, relaxed but expectant. When we were alone, he looked up at me as if to say, let's go. We haven't finished the walk. And so we did.

I would love a fairy tale ending, the dog that rose to the occasion, transformed by his own goodness, behavior problems no more. But that's not what happened. What changed was me, or at least, I changed first. He had probably always been Rescue Dog, but I had to be shocked into seeing it.

He barks at passersby, and occasionally claws the windows and door. But I rarely look up from my work. I have stopped screaming at him, dreading our walks, holding his leash so tight that his collar throttles his neck. I relaxed and he relaxed. Now even strangers can pet him.

Sometimes we take our old path around the tennis courts and through the woods. I always walk up to that oak tree, part of me still not believing what I saw that day. This winter, the tree was toppled by massive amounts of snow. Loops of dried thorn vine still circle its uprooted base.

Late Garden Days

by Judith Grissmer

Poetry sacramentalizes experience,
Edward Hirsch, Poet's Choice, p. xv.)

Three years ago the angel arrived,
strapped to the back of a Guatemalan mover
who carried her down the hill. Today,

she prays, as September Pink Turtlehead
reach their season, Japanese Maples blaze,
summer-heavy Phlox topple in rain.

We make holy what we attend to -
this garden grew of such a time and
sun still filters through branches,
glistens on filaments of moss,
illumines the angel's face.

But I avert my gaze,
resist beauty and its burn -
forget to sanctify mimicking jays,
skyward stretching hemlocks,
leathered Lenten Rose.

Flashing screens parade promises;
possessions sprout underground needs,
and I create rituals
at altars of shadow and deceit,
neglect Maple's crimson seeds,
orange Skippers on Sedum
opening and closing their wings.

And what of Purple Beautyberries,
silk of spider strings, summer's final clamor
before surrendering? Who will sacramentalize
these first leaves, brilliant, blackened
spotted or torn
falling

falling . . .

The idea of the garden unifies the poem, as do the references to different varieties of seasonal flowers. The image of the angel makes the spiritual connection concrete. The music of the poem is very lovely, especially in the last stanza. The last line is very, very moving. A fine poem.

— *Barbara Eaton*

Fred, Your Guardian Angel, For Billy in Afghanistan

by Mary Duley Guy

Home from college that year, like a honey bee
swing dancing through a field of heather,
you inhaled Tom Clancy novels,
savored the sweet nectar of summer,
the remnants of childhood.

One morning, after a breakfast of leftover
quiche, a protein shake, you traveled through
a maze of Southern Maryland farm roads
landscaped with weathered tractors,
century worn houses, tobacco barns.

Ten minutes from home, ten minutes from
the swim team you coached, blinded by a shock
of light, a deer; on impact your car propelled
air-born like a comet
up into the cornfield.

And there in the mist of that moment,
as if the cerulean sky had lifted its veil,
and he parachuted through the canopy of clouds,
our neighbor, Fred, out jogging that morning,
appeared like an apparition and

embraced and comforted you in the tangled rubble
of your car, and whispered clichés in your ear like,
“you’re gonna make it; don’t go to sleep now;
hold on old boy; hear the helicopter?”

Then as you were lifted from the
wreckage, in and out of dreams of running,
flying, bread pudding, and plates of French fries,
as high as a leaning tower, Fred, lean and brave
like Samson disappeared like
a seagull on the beach at dusk.

Today, as I think of you, son, there in Afghanistan,
I pray that you have a guardian angel like Fred
who parachutes through morning's mist,
 warms your wounds, warns you
 of land mines, roadside bombs.

Then, snuggles closely in night and whispers clichés
in your ear like, "you're gonna make it; hold on old boy,
it'll all be over soon; and wraps you up in his
 big brother arms and propels you closer to home.

Troublesome Creek '93

by Melanie Lynn Moro-Huber

She was only two and tired of rocks
so she lobbed her shoes, one footless vessel
drifted sideways out of sight, the other caught
in the brambles which dipped their roots
far over the edges of a rivulet named Troublesome.

We lived in a hiccup of a town called Ary.
This was before the Star Fire Coal Co.
decapitated the Alleghenies, this was when
the mountain bloomers were flashy and full—
red buds, dogwoods skirted the hills.

Now—Troublesome settles to silt,
a cemetery of puddles
caught in the tombstones of rock beds.
The blasting, at least, is over. It's quiet,
few trees left to rustle, barely a scuttle of hooves,
and the land rests
like a screaming child fallen into a fitful sleep.

But when I was still new
to my daughter and she to me, that day
we were pebble skipping and counting
the echoes of detonation, the thunder
of collapsing mountains against the softer ricochets
of wrinkling water, the carcass of a deer

rolled by. A stop and go of hooves over hindquarters,
then antlers sloughing up muck. The brambles
caught and held the pelt as bits of flesh and fur
floated off the hide. A wood thrush thrilled.
I took her away, screaming,
she wanted to see it, she wanted to help.

I said the word “dead” to her for the first time.
Pulling her away I promised bubbles, peanut butter
and jelly, purple dinosaurs. She broke free
but I caught her three steps into water, the smell of decay
moved me quickly, but it was the hellbender jumping
from the shoe wedged between branches and bone
which made me run.

The Contributors

Judith Grissmer moved to Charlottesville from Northern Virginia in 2007. She is a retired Marriage and Family Therapist and Licensed Professional Counselor. Judith has published previously in the *Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, and in the 2008 and 2010 Blue ridge Writers' Anthology, placed 1st in poetry in the Blue Ridge Chapter VWC 2008 and 2010 contests, and has received prizes in contests of the Virginia Poetry Society. She lives with her husband and 3 rescue cats, enjoying the proximity to her 2 daughters and their families who also live in Charlottesville. She is a member of the Insight Meditation Community of Charlottesville, and writes of family, her gardens, and the sea – inspired by frequent visits to her second home on the OBX of North Carolina.

Over the years, **Mary Duley Guy's** poetry has been featured in *The Folio*, American University's Literary Magazine, *Connections*, nThe College of Southern Maryland's Literary Magazine, *Women in Poetry*, Saint Mary's College's Literary Magazine and other publications. She gathers inspiration for her poetry from her past, her children, art, nature and everyday life with its delicate balance. A former English and Speech instructor at the College of Southern Maryland, Mary Duley holds a Master's Degree in Literature from the American University and lives in Morattico, a fishing village on the Rappahannock River, with her husband, golf historian and writer, Harold Guy. Currently, she is compiling her poems together for a future chap book titled, *Raspberries, Chardonnay and Sassafras Tea, Life's Delicate Balance*. In addition, she writes columns for "The Artline," and "Chesapeake Style" Magazine.

Jody Hobbs Hesler grew up in Virginia, and now lives, writes, parents and volunteers in Charlottesville. Some of her stories have appeared in print and online journals; one received a nomination for a Pushcart Prize. Other of her stories have won and placed in various local contests and have been finalists in Glimmer Train competitions. She also writes novels.

Donna Knox: *Way Off Broadway* is an excerpt from Donna's memoir, which chronicles the odious prosecution of her husband by a politically ambitious U. S. Attorney.

In 1998, Donna founded the Coalition of Families of Korean/Cold War POW/MIAs. Her work to account for missing American servicemen has taken her to North Korea, China, and several former Soviet Bloc countries. She helped draft legislation. For years Donna wrote for, and edited, a monthly publication devoted to the effort to account for lost servicemen. Donna's missing father will be the subject of her second book.

Formerly, Donna was a journalist in such markets as Los Angeles and Boston. In her current life, she is a practicing attorney and the mother of two amazing children. Donna belongs to The Naked Writers, a merciless writing critique group, and she currently serves as Vice President of the Valley Writers Chapter of the Virginia Writers Club.

Frank Milligan retired from his first career as a counterintelligence agent, federal criminal investigator, and law enforcement senior executive to pursue his second-career dream of becoming a writer. He has published both fiction and non-fiction and is author of the writing reference book, *Time to Write: Discovering the Writer Within After 50*, published in the Best Half of Life Series by Quill Driver Books (www.writingafter50.com). His book was recognized with a 2009 Silver Award at the 18th Annual National Mature Media Awards.

Frank holds a bachelor's in psychology; a master's in business and public administration; and a master of arts in writing (fiction) from the Johns Hopkins University. He teaches creative writing in the continuing education program at Northern Virginia Community College, the Lorton Workhouse Arts Center, the Christopher Wren Association of the College of William and Mary, and other venues.

Frank and his wife Isobel moved to Williamsburg from Lake Ridge, Virginia, in 2009. He is currently at work on a thriller/suspense novel.

Linda Morefield lives with her husband and the rescue dog, Monty--sometimes known as the felonious Montoya--in Alexandria, Virginia. Her essay "In the Hammam" was awarded the top non-fiction award by The Northern Virginia Review (spring 2010). They will be publishing her short story "The Explorer's Club" in their spring 2011 edition. She is currently working on editorial issues for

The Washington Independent Review of Books while struggling with a novel that resists completion.

Elizabeth Morelli was raised in New England and New York and received her English and Library Science degrees from the State University of New York colleges at New Paltz and Geneseo. For years she worked as a collection development librarian for the Richmond Public Libraries, but two years ago moved into role as librarian consultant to allow time for freelance writing. She also takes MFA courses at VCU.

In the last year, she has had essays published in *Writing and Publishing: the Librarian's Handbook* and *Psychiatric Services Journal*, a short story honored by Southern Illinois Writers' Guild and a story published in a *Motif* anthology. Jumping between fiction and non-fiction critique groups, she also spends time pondering and writing her first novel.

Becky Mushko lives in rural Franklin County with her husband, two elderly horses, four dogs, and numerous cats. Her middle grade novel *Stuck* will be published by Cedar Creek in 2011; *Ferradiddledumday*, her Appalachian version of *Rumpelstiltskin*, was published in 2010 by Cedar Creek. She has won numerous writing contests, including the Lonesome Pine Short Story Contest (five times) and the Sherwood Anderson Short Story Contest (three times). Her main claim to fame is winning two categories of the infamous Bulwer-Lytton Bad Fiction Contest—"Worst Western" (1998) and "Vile Pun" (2008). Her website is <http://www.beckymushko.com> and her blog is <http://www.peevishpen.blogspot.com>.

Melanie Lynn Moro-Huber —

The Judges

Barbara Eaton (Poetry) was born in Chicago, Illinois and raised in the western suburbs. She received B.A. and M.A.T.E. degrees from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Maryland at College Park. She published her first poem in the *Chicago Sun-Times* at the age of seven. Since then, she has published her work in various academic literary magazines. She teaches at College of DuPage and Morton College, and volunteers for the First Folio Shakespeare Company in Oak Brook, Illinois. She recently edited a book of poems, *Sacred Rivers: A Walk Along Divergent Waters*, by Marvin R. Young and Carolyn J. Sibr.

John Gilstrap (Fiction) is the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Hostage Zero*, *No Mercy*, *Six Minutes to Freedom*, *Scott Free*, *Even Steven*, *At All Costs*, and *Nathan's Run*. His third Jonathan Grave thriller, *Threat Warning*, will be released in July, 2011. His novels have been translated into more than 20 languages. John has also adapted four bestselling novels for the big screen. He is currently writing and co-producing the film adaptation of his book *Six Minutes to Freedom* for Sesso Entertainment. A former firefighter and EMT, John holds a master's degree in safety engineering and a bachelor's degree in history. Please visit www.johngilstrap.com.

Sarah Collins Honenberger's (Nonfiction) first novel, *White Lies: A Tale of Babies, Vaccines, and Deception* (Cedar Creek, 2006) was nominated for the Library of Virginia Fiction award. Her second novel, *Waltzing Cowboys*, was a December '08 Editor's Pick on Bookviews.com. Her short fiction has won first place awards in *The Antietam Review*, *New Millennium*, *SouthLit*, and *The Hook* and has appeared in numerous other literary journals. In April 2009 her unpublished manuscript CATCHER, CAUGHT was selected as a semi-finalist in the Amazon Breakthrough Novel Contest, one of 100 out of over 5000 entries. Honenberger appears regularly at book festivals and literary conferences.