

**The  
Golden Nib  
Anthology  
2008**

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## **Fiction**

<b>The Key to the Quarter Pole</b> , by Robin Williams – <i>First Place</i>	<b>3</b>
<b>A Perfect Funeral</b> , by Sarah Collins Honenberger – <i>Second Place</i>	<b>9</b>
<b>The Journey of a Prince (A Fiction)</b> , by Manjari Mohanty – <i>Third Place</i>	<b>15</b>

## **Nonfiction**

<b>Reflections of a Southern Gentleman Farmer</b> , by Jack Trammell – <i>First Place</i>	<b>21</b>
<b>Islands</b> , by Diane Parkinson – <i>Second Place</i>	<b>26</b>
<b>It's Okay to Cry</b> , by Catherine Brooks – <i>Third Place</i>	<b>30</b>

## **Poetry**

<b>Balefires</b> , by Anne H. Flythe – <i>First Place</i>	<b>33</b>
<b>John Joe McCarthy</b> , by Sara Kay Rupnick – <i>Second Place</i>	<b>34</b>
<b>The Interview</b> , by Becky Mushko – <i>Third Place</i>	<b>35</b>
<b>Contributor Biographies</b>	<b>36</b>

## The Key to the Quarter Pole

by Robin Williams

Louisa Ferncliff helped Mike tighten the overgirth on the last of five horses he had running that day. Amazingly, the mess that morning had not involved any of Mike's string. It had been a long day and she was tired, but she wasn't quite done yet. When the groom led the horse out of the saddling stall and walked him around the paddock, Mike went to the grassy oval in the middle and talked with the horse's owners. Louisa turned to watch Lawrence and Hank give their preview of the race.

Mike's horse was the Three, and Hank tabbed him as a prohibitive favorite. "He's the winner, but there's no value there, unless you key him over an exacta wheel," said Hank. "What do you say, Lawrence?"

"It's been a good night for Mike Lucci. He's already won three tonight, but I'm seeing an upset in this race. Gloucester Genie looks ready to run big. Number Six wins and pays forty bucks."

"Well, folks, Lawrence goes with another long shot. Is he good or is he crazy?"

"Hey, the Six horse has been winning all night," joked Lawrence. "Why not one more time?"

Colonial Downs general manager Boyd Keswick extricated himself from the circle around the owners of the Two horse, a small syndicate of graduates of St. Christopher's School in Richmond that went by the name Six Saints Stable. With so many local connections, they did not need his personal attention the way out-of-state owners often did. He'd had a busy day with the usual complications of weekend racing: not enough tables, not enough mutuel tellers, too many wacko patrons. One woman had brought her dog, a sort of golden retriever-looking thing, and when she was refused entry, she had tied knots in the leash to form a harness and claimed the mutt was a seeing-eye dog.

On the other hand, some good friends from Florida, where he worked as general manager of Calder before he came to Colonial, were passing through, and he spent some time with them. The reunion was happy until they began to reminisce about Laura. "We had some good times, then, when the children were small, didn't we?"

Wick had to agree.

"I was miserable when you all moved to Virginia. Laura and I had our babies together and everything. I didn't think I could raise Karen and Scotty without her."

"Yeah, Shirley moped around like she'd lost her sister."

"She was better than a sister."

Wick nodded. "Are you being taken care of?" He signaled a waiter. "I'm sorry but I have to get to the paddock. Michael, please get Mr. and Mrs. Himmel a

drink and put it on my tab.”

“Tell Laura... Give her a hug for us.”

“I will.”

When Wick got to the paddock, he saw Louisa watching that boy give his handicapping analysis. After exchanging pleasantries with the principals in Six Saints Stable, he joined her. When Lawrence and Hank finished their commentary, Louisa turned to him and said, “Wick, I need your help. It’s important.”

There was hardly anything Louisa could have said that would have made Wick feel any better. He puffed up and smiled. “What?”

“I have to find a swimming pool.”

“All right,” he said.

Wick did not know, right off, how he was going to construct an equine exercise pool nearby in the next twenty-four hours, but he was committed to fulfilling Louisa’s desire for one. It was tough being a woman in this business, and Louisa had managed to be strong without becoming hard, which Wick found amazing. He had always admired her, and he liked doing little favors for her when he could. Finding a swimming pool for a fourteen-year-old claimer was somewhat more than “a little favor” but something in the way that Louisa sought his help made him think it was within the realm of possibility.

Although now, as they drove out of the racetrack, Wick did not even know which way he was going to turn when he got to the highway.

“How far is the river?” Louisa asked, and Wick turned south, towards the James River.

“Route 5 runs along the river, and it’s ten or fifteen miles over there,” he said.

“We need a boat landing,” she said.

“And a boat,” he added.

“First we’ve got to find some water we can get him into, then we’ll figure out how to make him swim,” she said.

They crossed a small bridge over a rivulet with a sign announcing this was the Chickahominy River.

“You could walk along the banks of the Chickahominy and lead him,” Wick said.

“Don’t think that would cover his ankles.”

Wick laughed and kept going. At Route 5, he turned west and drove parallel to the James River, which was screened from view – and accessibility – by acres of corn and hardwood forests. Signs indicated the waterfront was laced together in the privately-owned colonial plantations: Evelynton, Shirley, Berkeley. They did not see anything resembling a public boat ramp.

The drive along the scenic highway was pleasant and Wick relaxed. It crossed his mind, now that he finally had Louisa to himself, that this was his chance to talk to her about Laura. Somehow though, the issue didn’t seem as pressing. He struggled to think what it was that he wanted to say to Louisa about

his wife. Louisa, la Madre of the backstretch, lifeline to all the lost and misguided little people floundering through the flooded streams of life. Had he become one of those?

“Let’s see what’s back here,” Wick said. He turned the car into a dirt road by a sign for Riverside Park. The road skirted a field and entered a small woods with signs for a nature trail on either side. As they emerged from the woods into a small parking lot, they saw the river spread out before them, three hundred yards wide and forty-five feet deep there, a few miles below the fall line at Richmond. “That’ll cover his ankles,” said Wick.

“I wonder if it’s always this crowded?” Louisa asked.

A middle-aged man was using the boat ramp to load a jon boat onto his trailer, and a young couple waited nearby to ship their canoe. Another car with a boat and trailer was parked on the side, and a couple of men sat on a picnic table drinking something out of a cooler. On the dock several people were fishing. Prominent signs posted on the dock and by the boat ramp read, “No Swimming.”

“You start canoeing here with Alice and it’ll be on the front page of the New Kent County *Gazette*, then you *will* have a crowd.”

They stared at the scene in silence.

“Let’s go back up and explore the Chickahominy,” Louisa suggested. “Maybe it gets deeper if you go east.”

“Louisa.”

“Now Wick, don’t say ‘Louisa’ to me in that tone of voice.”

Wick looked at his friend, who sat forward scanning the landscape as though she believed a suitable body of water lurked behind the pine brush. He wanted to find something that would work, for her sake, but the whole thing seemed impossible to him. Finding some water they could get the horse into. Getting permission to use the body of water. Getting the horse to swim around. Trailering him back and forth. It was overwhelming. “This isn’t the old days and I’m not Croaker Norge,” he said.

“Thank goodness for that!” said Louisa without taking her eyes off the passing view.

“And Alice ain’t Kelso.”

She ignored that and said, “Look. There’s a sign for a public boat ramp.”

They turned off the highway and followed a narrow road that wound between small farms and old gingerbread houses set close to the road. Other small roads intersected but, in the way of rural areas, where locals know where they are going and strangers are unexpected, there was little in the way of directional signage. Periodically they saw yet another small brown sign announcing the existence of a public boat ramp some undisclosed distance ahead.

“This damn boat ramp must be on the Atlantic Ocean.”

Louisa laughed.

At the next intersection, he turned around. She didn’t protest.

“Here. Turn down this little road.”

They drove a mile or so between cultivated fields, passing a small house with several outbuildings and farm equipment neatly parked around it. Then the pavement ended. “Louisa,” he said, in that tone of voice again, “this is somebody’s farm. We might get shot for trespassing.”

“No it isn’t. Look. There’s a state route sign.”

They followed the gravel road through some woods and emerged in a clearing. Directly ahead was a large body of water, large enough to swim most of the racehorses in Virginia in. They had found a place where the Chickahominy languorously spreads over the flat coastal plain and loops back on itself. Fringed with marine grasses and dotted with floating islands of lily pads, the marshy area contained secret channels for the river that were easily deep enough for a horse to swim and a man to drown.

“That looks perfect!” Louisa said. “Pull over and let’s go look.”

Wick drove as near to the water as he dared. Louisa got out and began exploring the shoreline for a firm place to lead a horse into the water. Wick followed, wondering why he had not anticipated hiking through a marsh and worn something more suitable than the tassled loafers of his Turf Club attire. The ground was soft and the bank poorly-defined, but Louisa pressed on, pushing tall marsh grass aside and searching optimistically in the fading light for a paved ramp at a thirty-degree angle into the water.

“Louisa, I don’t think this is the place.”

She walked a few more yards then stopped. “I guess you’re right.”

“You’re damn straight I’m right. It’s nothing but a bog. You’ve got about as much business leading a horse through here as a kitten in Sunday school.”

Louisa returned to the car dejected.

As it turned out, driving a car along the bank made as much sense as a kitten in Sunday school, too. Wick tried forward and reverse, but the wheels spun in deeper. It was nearly dark as they gathered some pine branches and laid them behind the wheels to provide traction.

“All right, see if you can back it out easy. I’ll push,” said Wick. “If it gets moving, don’t stop till you’re on the road, even if I fall down and have a heart attack.”

“Oh Wick, I’m so sorry. You’re such a good sport. You were so nice to take me on this wild goose chase and now I’ve ruined your shoes and gotten your car stuck. I feel terrible.”

“Well, you ought to.”

They both laughed.

The pine boughs failed to get the car out.

“Come on,” Wick said after Louisa spun mud on his trousers. “Let’s go see if that farmer back there wants to fire up his tractor tonight. I don’t think triple-A covers this situation.”

The farmer was surprised to find a muddy, middle-aged couple knocking at the door seeking assistance. He had, on occasion, been approached by worried teenagers who had parked too close to the marsh on a Friday night, but these folks

seemed a little old for that sort of thing. Although who could say these days. The man's tie had been loosened and the woman's gray hair was falling down from where it had been pinned on top of her head. Definitely hanky panky, he decided. The man wore a tie but the woman had on jeans. Somebody, maybe both of them, was slipping around.

For twenty bucks, though, he was happy to get the tractor and pull their car out of the marsh. Besides, he sort of liked showing off his shiny new Massey Ferguson with the enclosed cab, air conditioning and CD player. With the car on firm ground, the axle chain stowed in the tractor's tool box and a fresh Andy Jackson in his billfold, the farmer couldn't resist asking what they were doing.

"We're trying to find a place to swim a horse," Wick began, aware this explanation would make them appear even more foolish.

"Alice is handicapped and needs the exercise," Louisa said.

"Alice? Your horse's name is 'Alice'?" the farmer said.

"Yes. 'Alice's Restaurant'."

"Oh," said the farmer, "like that Arlo Guthrie song: 'You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant.'"

"You know Arlo Guthrie?" Louisa asked with delight.

"Well, not personally," said the farmer. "I've got a CD of old folksongs that I play a lot in the tractor. I really like 'The City of New Orleans'."

"That is a great song," said Louisa.

"Thank you for helping us," Wick said, taking Louisa's arm and guiding her towards the car.

"What about your horse?" the farmer asked.

"We'll figure out something."

"What are you trying to do?"

"It's a racehorse," Wick said, "and he's got a bad knee. Back home they've got a pool they swim him in to keep him fit between races. We've got to find a place to swim him around here." He shrugged. "We thought maybe we could swim him in the river. Sorry to bother you."

"He's got a regular pool he swims in back home?"

"It's a pool for horses. It's got a ramp to walk down, and it's got a walkway around the edge for a man to lead the horse. You know somebody who's got one like that?" Wick said with a smile.

The farmer looked thoughtful. "I don't know if it's still there or not, but there used to be a pool like that down there." He nodded towards the east.

Wick and Louisa looked at each other.

"They used to have this camp for handicapped children. It's seven or eight miles from here. My wife used to work there. They had a ramp in the pool because some of the kids were in wheelchairs, and it was easier to get them in the water that way. That what you need?"

Later that night, after a clandestine tour of the defunct handicapped children's camp and the discovery of a small but serviceable swimming pool with

a ramp, the two explorers stopped at a country store for beer and nabs.

“Oh Wick, isn’t it great we’ve found a pool for Alice? You are such a great friend. Thank you.”

“I just hope it’ll work. You’ve got a few more hurdles to get over.”

“The pool was the hardest. You found me a pool, I can make the rest work.”

As they drove through the barn area to the camper park, they were enveloped in the aroma of drying marsh mud.

“Will you ever be able to get your shoes clean?” she asked.

“I’ve been thinking of setting up a shoeshine stand in the grandstand,” he said. “In the old days, all the tracks had them.”

“You said this wasn’t the old days.”

He smiled.

“Bring them to me in the morning and I’ll soap them for you.”

“I’ve got saddle soap at the house.”

“Yes, but it’s the least I can do for you.”

He sat a moment, contemplating the thought of a woman doing something for him. “I hate to go home,” he said at last. “The house is so empty.”

Louisa nodded. “It’s hard, I’m sure.”

“The boys don’t... I was...mad for awhile because they didn’t go see her, but Boyd Junior said he wanted to remember her the way she was. I guess it’s better for them to go on with their lives. They’ve got children of their own to look after.”

“If they are trying to be good parents, isn’t that a tribute to Laura and you?”

He shrugged.

“Maybe that’s the best thing they can do for her now.”

“I guess.”

“But what about you?”

“What about me?”

“You’ve been very loyal.”

He looked surprised. “I love her.”

“I know. And it’s hard to let go.”

“Is that what I’m supposed to do?”

“One day,” she said and opened the car door.

“Gracias, Madre.”

“Buenos noches, Senor Wick.”

## A Perfect Funeral

by Sarah Collins Honenberger

Even after forty-two years the feeling catches me right below my breastbone. My chest aches, my face burns, my knees sink. If you had to live your whole life with a perfect brother like mine, you'd be angry too. It's an ear-splitting, festering, perpetual kind of angry I never quite adjust to, so that each time it surfaces I'm shocked at the depth of the feeling, the despair at not being able to escape. I don't hate him. I can't, because he's too nice and that's the worst part—because I want to.

Jarrell is a successful man. He makes the right decisions, knows important people, and collects beautiful things. He's handsome in the fine-tuned way of a fancy violin. The lines in his face are etched, his cheekbones narrow. He moves with a quiet confidence. His clothes hang neatly from his frame, never twisting at his elbows or bunching around his waist. Just by the way he holds his head you think he's someone famous. People listen when he speaks. They want to be his friend.

Even as a baby, I was the one with the splotchy skin, the gangly arms, and the raggedy cry. With the birth of twin boys, my mother sank into a constant weariness. A husband who loved his whiskey didn't help. And then to have Jarrell, sweet and patient, and Tuck, cantankerous and greedy, just undid her.

Right from the beginning, we were jealous of each other. As she spent more time in bed, our time with her was rationed, one at a time. While Jarrell was with her, I counted to a million or threw the baseball against the garage wall. Sometimes I climbed the maple tree to spy through the window. Every day after Jarrell went in and closed the door behind him, I was lost.

When it was my turn, I sat where I'd seen him sit on the stool by Mother's bed. I tried to make her laugh at my stories the way she laughed with him, but she was usually tired by then. Once I took her a rose from her own garden. Jarrell said she'd be mad that I cut it, but it stayed by her bedside for weeks.

It was a natural progression from sibling rivalry to anger. Jarrell loved to read. Mother read to him; he read to Mother. I couldn't sit still, so I played ball, any kind, anywhere. Dad and Jarrell drove me to the games, but Mother never saw me play.

In high school Jarrell dated the minister's daughter, the president of the French Club, the girl next door. I hung out with girls from the orphanage. By the time he left for college, I had quit school to sell insurance. My second year I made Million Dollar Salesman—so it wasn't a money thing.

When Jarrell came home with his fancy degree and took charge at the local bank, I thought we'd reached a compromise. By then I had built a house, near the river on a big piece of land. It was a good investment. Even Jarrell thought so.

We had some good times then, even-handed times when I invited him

somewhere and he came without complaining about my friends. He let me continue to drive Mother to church. We shared magazines and movies and Sunday afternoon football games with Dad.

Then Jarrell proposed to the girl I'd dated when he was away at college. Things got worse. It's a sad story, but an old one. Although Elizabeth had already discovered I wasn't right for her, she found Jarrell's golden touch irresistible, and he made good on the promise. I was a wild card, and I got wilder.

When Myra finally convinced me to marry her, I'd been to two thirty-day treatment programs and was living over the bus station. The house on the river had gone back to the bank. Not Jarrell's, luckily. Jarrell had my girlfriend and his bank. Just like our endless childhood games of Monopoly, I had the "get-out-of-jail-free" card, and he had all the hotels.

I even had my brother to thank for Myra. The way he tells it, he showed her a photo following my second hospital stint. I'd lost thirty pounds and looked anemic. He presented me as a challenge, *this guy's father is a drinker, think you can beat heredity?* After nursing retarded children and tutoring slow learners, she had a head for that kind of frustrating work. I was another project.

But, like everything Jarrell suggested, it worked. She loves me and I love her. It's a good match, better than Elizabeth and I would ever have been. Athletic and funny, Myra likes beer and basketball. Our girls play touch football with us on Saturday mornings. Chrissie's in Paris on a student exchange. Jo's the math whiz kid at the middle school. I can't remember the last time I had something to drink, and I set sales records regularly. Life is better than I imagined it would be from that maple tree.

Despite Mother's retreat to her bedroom, she managed to outlive Dad. He died on a Saturday morning and, when Jarrell called to tell me, Myra and I were napping. Her fingers, familiar and comforting, massaged my back where I sat on the edge of the bed after hanging up the phone.

"It's Dad. He's dead."

"Oh, Tuck, I'm sorry. How. . . ?"

"His heart just quit."

"Your mama's okay?"

"Jarrell's there with her."

Outside, the midday sun blazed so brightly that the grass and the trees were colorless, diluted like the white heat of a candle flame. All I could think was how I wished Mother had called me first.

I let Jarrell plan the funeral. He was really good at that kind of thing, making everyone feel comfortable, remembering the little things like putting Grandpa's pocket watch in Dad's suit coat. After a perfect ceremony, tasteful and sincere, the neighbors turned out in all their finest. The food could've been in a gourmet magazine, and Jarrell and I were civil. Mostly.

With her feet propped up, Mother dozed in the wing chair. Remembering how cold her grandma always was, my daughter Jo retrieved my old childhood

quilt. I brought Mother miniature sandwiches and cake. Whenever I asked if she wanted to retire, she said, “I haven’t talked to everyone yet.”

Jarrell and I rolled our eyes while the guests shifted trance-like from room to room, desperately trying to remember good things about my father, an innocuous man at best. After Mother finally let Myra lead her in to bed, I stood at the foot of the stairs and listened to their mumblings back and forth. Some gifts are unexpected.

On the sofa Jarrell’s wife sat with Jo, the family scrapbook spread across their laps. I’d argued with him about displaying them until Myra reminded me that everyone grieves differently.

“Here’s your grandfather at the fair.” Elizabeth’s blonde wisps floated about her face.

Jo examined the photo up close. “Who’s the little kid with the red face?”

“That’s your father. His face was always flushed from running.”

“That’s really unfair, Elizabeth,” I teased from the dining room, where Jarrell had asked me to carve more roast beef, “Why don’t you show her Jarrell’s pictures too?”

“Where IS Uncle Jarrell?” Jo asked. “Dad’s in practically every picture.”

“Right here, honey,” Jarrell was working his way through the thinning crowd.

She grinned, “I meant in the pictures, Uncle Jarrell.”

Elizabeth poked the book. “That’s him; you just don’t recognize him with that bleach-blond hair.”

Jo laughed. “With hair, period.”

Jarrell winced. Across a dozen black-suited shoulders, I watched my brother lean down and kiss the top of my daughter’s head. Observing the three of them there, I thought it would make a perfect photo; the father figure standing tall behind mother and child.

“Jarrell,” I said over the drone, “I think they’re calling you in the kitchen. More wine, maybe.”

Being the good provider that he was, he went. He inched through the neighbors, bending his head to one who was hard of hearing, taking the hand of another. Aunt and niece turned back to the photographs. With a polished fingernail, Elizabeth pointed at the page. “There’s Baby Jo. Look how tiny your feet were.”

“Did I look like Mom or Dad as a baby?”

“Oh . . . you had your father’s gorgeous blue eyes.”

I shot a quick glance at Elizabeth to see if she was being facetious, but she winked.

Jo pressed her, “What happened?”

“Well, I think lots of babies born with blue eyes grow out of it.”

Elizabeth’s answer echoed in my head. Had she meant more than she said? I sliced in double time, the meat falling in a great heap on the wooden platter. There were things I couldn’t forget even if everyone else had.

“Why didn’t you and Uncle Jarrell have children?” Jo asked, but before Elizabeth could answer, she added, “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked you that.”

“No, no, it’s okay,” Elizabeth lowered her voice. “After I lost a baby, the doctors said, no more. Too risky. And Jarrell wouldn’t chance it.”

Like most kids, my daughter looked horrified at the unexpected answer. “Well, you have Chrissie and me. We’ll take care of you in your old age.”

“Thanks, thanks a lot.”

They laughed quietly, a twosome of sweetness. As their voices faded into the surrounding conversations, I thought Myra should be proud. She’d raised our girls with the right kind of heart. More heart than their old father.

I caught Jarrell as he emerged from the kitchen with a new platter of biscuits. “If you can figure a way to do it, maybe Jo could have Dad’s truck for school?”

“Sure,” he said. “I already offered it to Grayson, but I’ll tell him we’ve changed our mind, if you want.”

“I haven’t changed my mind. I never agreed to sell it.”

“Whatever. This isn’t the time and place, Tuck.” His tone was tense. Long afternoon. Even my patient brother was losing patience.

“You’re right. Sorry,” I said softly, and to myself, *you’re always right.*

When Grayson turned up just then at his elbow, I tried to smile. Yale and pre-med and handsome. They could’ve been related, their coloring and stance so similar. Grayson’s parents were great friends with Jarrell and Elizabeth, and it had given Jarrell a surrogate child to spoil. They fished together, jogged some, shared Grayson’s school plays and football games.

Every once in a while I saw them together somewhere, and it reminded me how it had been growing up with my brother. Like a professional coach, he had managed us both, telling me what to wear, when to go outside, and where we were going after school. If he wanted to enter the art contest, then I had to draw right next to him. If he was taking algebra early, then I had to also. It took me until sophomore year to realize I was only his shadow, that I had no life independent of his. When I did figure it out, I went a little overboard; but, hey, I was entitled. Jarrell cast a big shadow. Grayson hadn’t figured it out yet.

Jarrell put his arm around Grayson’s shoulder. “Tuck’s taking skin-diving lessons.” He turned to me. “When is your island trip, buddy?”

“August,” I mumbled.

Grayson put his hand in the pocket of his slacks in a subconscious mime of Jarrell. “I took scuba in the college pool last semester. It’s a little frightening to have to depend on that equipment, but they say it comes back to you when you’re really diving.”

How little he really understood of fear if he’d never been in the ocean. “Wait until you . . .” I started.

“It’s one of those things,” Jarrell beamed at Grayson, “that you do for the challenge. Lots of people don’t have the nerve even to try.”

I seethed. After a hundred hours of training, I'd be exploring real coral reefs in less than two weeks, facing real sharks. Jarrell rarely swam and certainly never left these fine United States, but he'd said just the right thing. Grayson threw his shoulders back and moved toward the roast beef. Tired of trying to work out my irrational feelings, I poured a bourbon and water.

By the door, Jarrell, the ideal host, shook hands with departing guests. For the briefest moment after the door shut behind the minister, he surveyed the room. And then he nodded like an actor, as if everyone had been waiting for his return. I dumped the whole drink into one of Mother's flowerpots.

"So," I started when he was close enough, "we need to make a decision about Mother."

"We can talk about it next week, Tuck."

His words were gentle, but I heard the steel reminder that he was in charge, born a minute and a half before me, and so much more clever.

"I want to talk about it now," I announced. "I think we should take turns staying here until we can hire someone to live in."

"If you think that's best," Jarrell said.

"Just trying to think it through."

It would be easy to blame the grief over losing Dad or the temptation of the bourbon, but the truth is, I wanted to fight. It had been a long time coming, and I needed it to be aired and over. When Myra appeared from the kitchen, Jarrell kissed her on the cheek.

"You're working too hard. The caterers will do that." Draping his arm around her shoulder, he drew her closer. "Everything'll be all right."

"Don't touch her," I hissed.

He stepped back, his eyes wide. Holding out her hands to take mine, she moved into my range.

"Sweetie, let's go home. I'm beat," she said.

"As soon as he apologizes."

"For what?" Her eyes darted between us.

Behind her there was a short lull in the general conversation. People edged away from where we stood.

"He knows," I announced.

Turning on his heel, Jarrell walked into the crowd. I would have followed him except that Myra held my hands. When I tried to pull loose, she squeezed more tightly.

"Let's go home," she said evenly, her shoulders rigid.

Dad always said she was a pearl, one in a million. She might not have Elizabeth's flair, but she'd been good for me, keeping me sober, teaching our daughters to be strong but loving. I couldn't bear the way Jarrell looked at her. He already had everything. I wanted him to leave my wife alone.

"Okay," I said, and she let go.

If Jarrell had stayed buried in that crowd, we would've sneaked out the back door and been home in ten minutes. But just as I was thanking the women

who'd done the cooking, he strode back in, a huge bouquet of roses in his arms. They were piled high, gathered loosely in a great bunch, the palest pink. Mother's prize roses. "Renegade," she called them for the way they grew wild over the fence.

He thrust them into Myra's arms. "Thanks for all your help. Take care of him."

Things moved in slow motion. Myra bent her head to the roses. Behind Jarrell a blur of faces admired his public forgiveness of an unruly brother. Elizabeth reached out and touched his shoulder in the way she'd done to me when we stood on the bluff and planned the river house together.

Instantly and completely it struck me more clearly than anything I'd ever felt in my life. I hated him. He had drained my mother, inspired my thirst for liquor, stolen the first love of my life, and killed my father prematurely. Lowering my head, I plowed into Jarrell's stomach. It sent him backward into Elizabeth, who fell sideways, catching herself on the counter, but barely.

"You had no right," I screamed, my fists quick and sharp against his ribs. "Those were Mother's roses." My breath came in short ragged bursts of hot air. My knees pinned him to the floor. Back and back and back I drew my fists and shot them into him where he lay motionless, not even trying to avoid the blows. "Not everything is yours to take whenever you feel like it," I yelled.

The whole thing lasted one minute, maybe less. When Jarrell didn't argue or fight back, I hauled myself off of him. Elizabeth's face was inches from mine. Tears streaked her cheeks with mascara. Where her shirt had come undone with the fall, her hands fluttered, working the buttons. Jarrell moaned at our feet. No one moved. No one spoke.

Behind Elizabeth, my Jo stood in an old black suit of Myra's that had been tailored for the funeral. Jo was thirteen, her grandpa just buried, her father gushing blood from split knuckles, and her uncle curled up on the kitchen floor. For an eternity she stared at me. Then she stepped over Jarrell and took the roses from Myra's arms.

She laid them on the counter so gently they could have been a baby. Bending down, she scrounged under the sink. The same sink where Jarrell and I were bathed as infants, one after the other, the same sink where Dad taught us how to shave—first Jarrell, then me—making us watch him as he sharpened the razor and told us to be careful, razors were for men, and we were men now.

Jo pulled out a vase and ran water into it. Carefully she fit the stems into the vase and lowered her face into the blooms, breathing deeply. After a minute I reached down, put my arms under Jarrell's and lifted him up.

## **The Journey of a Prince (A Fiction)**

by Manjari Mohanty

“I have come from Dwarka. I would like to have a room for myself”

The keeper of the hostelry peeked through the window hole at the new comer. He was tall, youngish, and very handsome. Though much of his person was covered with various layers of clothing, the man appeared to be of aristocratic bearing.

“Sorry, there is no single room available”

The traveler put two silver coins on the crude sill of the window.

The keeper said, “Well, if you are willing to share it with a bunch of Egyptians, you are welcome to do so.”

The keeper looked outside. He could not see a horse or a camel there in the dark.

“Where is your vehicle- the horse or the camel?”

The man did not say anything.

How did this man come by? - thought the innkeeper. On foot? Strange! He looked rich but travelled like an ordinary man on foot, and that too alone! He made a mental note to report it to the town sheriff. He was given money on the regular basis to do such work. In another word he was at the king’s employ.

He showed the room where the Egyptians were camping.

The man entered the room. Everybody looked at him but nobody talked. The man became cautious and handled his hidden weapon under his voluminous garment. He gestured for a lying down space and all others moved to one side of that not very large room. As it was, the room was filled with tobacco smoke. These Egyptians wore a different kind of clothing. Very soon they started talking among themselves in low tones. The man tried to overhear. He was not totally unfamiliar with the language. Actually in his former life, while frequenting those Saranic brothels across the border of Gandhar Desh, he used to come across many such languages. So, though he apparently lay down on his side and pretended to sleep, he kept his ears open. The Egyptians were unaware that this new man in the room understood anything they were saying.

Next morning, the man came up to them and said, “I know, you are all going to the east. If you have some room in your boat, I would like to come along with you. And I am willing to pay handsomely.”

The Egyptians looked at each other and nodded. They were also looking for sailing partners. Money was on short supply. What if they could manage the whole trip through this man, then their problem will be solved. They started talking to each other in right earnest. The Egyptians wanted to go to

Pundrabardhan, in Bengal, which was on the eastern coast of the country. It was a long dangerous journey through a great network of rivers and oceans. Pundrabardhan was becoming a big business center with silk and spices and other things like sugar and indigo and cotton and such...

These Egyptians were thrown out of the country because they angered their king by worshiping a different God. Their family members were killed, their property confiscated. When they arrived here, they discussed among themselves, "These people in this land are relatively peace loving ones. They might fight for properties, and other things but religion was not their bone of contention. The inhabitants of this land named Bharata, have a thousand gods to worship, all in different ways and all legitimate. People were free to pursue their own interest." Thus, the Egyptians found it very relieving and decided to make a new life in this new country, following a simpler livelihood

Next morning all of them got out of the hostelry and walked towards the sea shore. There three or four big dhow boats with sails were waiting in the pier. The Egyptians at once started haggling with the boatmen. Only one was willing to go as far as Pundrabardhan. Most of the people around had never heard of the place. The boatmen were collecting their own navigators. Nothing was ready yet. Even if the boat agreed to take them, they would at least take a week to embark on the journey.

The man decided to stay away from those Egyptians for a while. The idea of spending months together with those fellows in close proximity was distressing enough for him, but he had no choice. He had to go away- to the far east, in search of the Maitreya bon forest, find out the real teacher and start his penance as soon as possible. He, too was fleeing his land. The fear of a horrible death was driving him to seek out the refuge promised to him by the great sage. Now he had no choice but to run, seek out. And start his penance!

The area around the ocean side was dirty, full of eating shops where very cheap food was being fried and doled out to the customers. Along with it came the Sura drink, very intoxicating and potent. The man did not feel like eating anything there, but bought a vat of Sura and sat down under a big Pipul tree. Discarded leaf plates of the previous meals were strewn everywhere. The flies sat on them and then sat on the vat of the Sura.

The man felt nauseated and felt like vomiting. But he tried to control himself. If people found out how sick he was, there would be no space for him on the boat. After he gained some control over his nausea, he wanted to find out a place where he could lie down in privacy. But he had to search for a while. At the end, a shopkeeper agreed to rent the small room behind his shack for a few copper coins. He said, "You have to urinate behind the wall of your room." By now, the man was quite used to such arrangements. Three four months have passed since he left home. In very good accommodations they just provided a hole in the ground and no more. Often time they overflowed with someone else's faeces. The man was not used to such

collective living. But now there was no choice.

For the next three four days, there was no work but to wait for the boat to sail. The man became bored and sought a whore house near the shore. It was no fancy place, but the girl looked nice and fresh and adept in singing and dancing. Money was not too much either. After the preliminaries, when they started disrobing each other, the girl was awestruck by the beauty of his person but suddenly noticed the sores in his body, specially near the crotch. She was totally horrified though she did not know the nature of that disease. She shrieked in terror, collected her clothes and ran half clad outside to jump into the nearby pond to clean herself thoroughly.

The man became frightened that her cry would attract others in the place, and he would be in great trouble. He quickly dressed and left that place. The owner saw him leaving but did not say anything. He had already paid, so it was none of his business!

When at the end of the week, the boat sailed, he paid by a gold coin for the whole group of the Egyptians. His only prayer was nobody should find out who he was. No body did, though the chief navigator went on searching in his mind about the identity of the man, who could pay by gold coin, but travelled alone with a bunch of foreigners ?

When he could match the description with his memory, the boat was gone far into the ocean. He said, "I know who you are! You must be the Shamba, the son of King Krishna. You are the prince who was cursed by his father. You are a leper, you have to leave this boat."

The rumors traveled fast in that part of the world. Everybody knew of the kingdom of Krishna and prince Shamba. The word 'leper' struck immense fear in everybody's heart. They would have easily carried a Lion, but not a leper? Before the boatman finished his sentence, Shamba jumped up with his knife—"Nobody can make me leave this boat before I reach my destination."

The Egyptians were frightened into a corner. The boatmen were cowed down by the name of Shamba and Krishna. Who, in the world did not know them? Everybody kept quiet. Shamba said, "I will not harm anybody. I will protect you from danger. Give me just this corner of the boat. I will not touch your stuff. I will also pay for all your food and things as long as you let me travel with you. Just for the sake of humanity, let me be on this boat and not in the ocean!"

Even after this promise, everybody waited to hear the full story!

When Shamba pleaded and implored, his handsome face took on a hue like the glow of the setting Sun. People subsided a little. At least, there was no ugly sore visible on his body yet. Who knew the rumor was right or not. They wanted to hear from Shamba himself! So, Shamba was compelled to tell them his own story.

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Here was the actual story of Shamba's banishment

That profligate son of Krishna could not contain himself and jumped into the water with those half naked beautiful nymphs who were actually his father's playmates. Traditions and courtesy demanded that they stay out of his vision altogether. They were just like his surrogate mothers. But Shamba was no respecter of such rule or etiquette. He disrobed and jumped into the water. The women moaned with delight! Such a handsome man! Who would let go such a chance in their right set of mind? They bared themselves happily to him. When this water sport was getting a bit too serious, Shamba's friends signaled to him to come out of the water, the sage Narada was approaching! The sage was of a very choleric nature. If such impropriety caught his eyes, then heaven knows what would happen!

But Shamba was too busy to pay attention. His maternal grandfather belonged to the Bear clan, a ferocious fighter people, more close to the jungle animals than to sophisticated court people. In his amorous behavior he was closer to them than this whole lot of singing and dancing before the actual act. He ignored the call and went on with what he was doing.

The sage saw what was happening from the distance and immediately left the place. He was very much perturbed. One day Shamba would become the king, but he did not seem to have mastered the dignity and the virtue necessary for such a task. He thought about it for a while and related the matter to king Krishna.

Krishna knew his son well. Shamba in his adulthood had done many things unlawful, indecent, unethical, but this time he has transgressed all barriers. He was shaking with anger and called Shamba in his presence immediately.

When the prince came, Krishna uttered his judgment. He said, "Son, this time you have gone too far. There would be no forgiving this time. You will be afflicted with leprosy. Tomorrow, my people would drive you out of the city, and out of my land. Henceforth, you are no longer my son."

The sage who was standing close by was dumbfounded by the decree. He did not know that the matter would take such a turn! Leprosy? A death sentence would have been much more desirable.

Shamba also woke up from his dream world. At first he did not realize what was being said. Then he fell at his father's feet. Much imploring went on, nothing happened. Then he turned towards the sage and prayed for a miracle. The sage did not disappoint him.

He gave him a boon and said that if he could do the penance by standing on one foot in a particular yoga asana, for twelve years without break and could appease Sun god in Maitreya bon forest in the far east of the country, then he would be finally free of the disease.

Next day, before he could take leave from his favorite wives, there was the knock on the door. The palace guards have come to escort him out of the city. The guards gave him some money and a change of clothes and turned him out of the city gate and closed it unceremoniously behind him.

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When Shamba told the boat companions this story in his own version, all were quite sympathetic. Of course, he could not tell them exactly how it happened. He was not courageous enough to do so. But still it worked slightly in his favor. This was a very handsome young man, and a prince too. His punishment was perhaps a bit too harsh.

The rest of the journey was uneventful, but under a lot of tension. Even then a friendship sprung up between the Egyptians and Shamba. Those Egyptians were also Sun worshippers. They talked of their great temple of Karnak, and how they worshipped in their daily life! What a coincidence! Thought Shamba. Maybe the whole thing was preplanned even before his birth! May be he was chosen by Fate to find a cure for leprosy, the dreaded disease! It would certainly take a long time and a mighty heart to find the cure! It needed a Shamba to do the job. His mental orientation changed totally after this thought came to his mind. He no longer thought himself as a fugitive from Death's claw, but a brave man, a deliverer from that bane. His spirit lifted up, he thanked his father for this opportunity!

After they reached Pundrabardhan, life became quite difficult. It was truly a cosmopolitan city. All kinds of activities were going on there all the time, but after a few hour's job of unloading the cargoes in the port, those Egyptians could not get anything else to do. They just sat in the Jetty and watched the Bazar women going on here and there with deep black kohl in their eyes and in very thin cotton sari showing the firm breasts underneath. There was no purdah or veil, but the upper class women never got on the streets unescorted or on foot.

Finding a place to stay was difficult too. After a lot of search they arrived at the verandah of a lodging where everywhere there were blotches of blood! The Egyptians were frightened beyond their wits. They did not imagine the new country would be such a violent place. After some discreet enquires, it turned out to be the red betel juice thrown everywhere by the Paan chewing Bengalis, which the Egyptians themselves picked up promptly after several months of stay in that part of the country.

When sustaining life became real difficult with the little money Shamba had, suddenly, fortune offered a way out. As they were all sitting near the Cremation ground on the river, the master of the ground confronted them. Will they be willing to lend a hand in cremating people? They readily agreed. After all in their own land, they were used to seeing the dead being treated with such enormous respect! Dying was only an extension of life!

“Who are you people?” asked the master of the ground.

“We are Dom,” said the Egyptians. In Egyptian it meant ‘man.’ From that day, Dom people became the caretakers of the dead in Bengal. They could not live with others in the society. They had their own colonies near the cremation ground. When the Egyptians were thus settled, Shamba left for his own destination in the

south to the Maitreya bon.

He reached the bank of the river Chandrabhaga. At the confluence of the ocean and the river, there lay his destination forest. When he arrived there he saw few others engaged in deep meditation in similar yoga asana as he was supposed to do. He found a place near the beach, turned his face to the rising Sun and started his penance.

It went on unbroken for twelve years. There were a group of cottages nearby, where the people used to look after anybody who meditated in the forest. They offered their voluntary services of cleaning and feeding them regularly.

Thus the long twelve years passed. One day, the Sun rose from the ocean, came closer and closer and became bigger and brighter. Suddenly through the magnificent effulgence Shamba saw the chariot of the Sun God standing in front of him.

Sun God said, “Shamba, I am very pleased with your worship. You are now totally free of the disease. Build a temple for me right here, like this chariot and show others how to worship!”

And then God froze into hard blackened rock, His big chariot drawn by seven horses, His own person standing tall holding the rein. It was just for a moment, then it disappeared into a bright glow.

Shamba shouted with joy and started dancing on the beach. When others came around, he picked up the small black stone wedge of God’s chariot wheel and turned to them and said, “We will build a chariot temple here with this kind of rock. We will call it ‘Konarka.’ ‘Kona’ means angle, ‘Arka’ means Sun. Sun’s rays would enter the innermost sanctum of the temple through an angle of the chariot.” And he remembered his Egyptian friends and their Karnak Sun temple.

Others did not know about it, but they were overjoyed and said, “Yes, yes, lord Shamba, we will do that! Hail the lord Sun God! Hail the devotee Shamba!”

## Reflections of a Southern Gentleman Farmer

by Jack Trammell

### *I. Crossing Boundaries*

I've noticed that sheep are far from the brightest stars that shine on the small family farm. While their personalities can be endearing, and they have the sentimental advantages of being small and soft with the trappings of cuteness, they are also sorely lacking in any department of intelligence. I've witnessed my ewes and rams jump over high fences like agile pole-vaulters, seen them turn their heads and prick their ears as if stalked by a tiger, watched them give birth and sometimes die from accidents or illness. But never once have I witnessed them suffer from even a brief moment of true intellectual awakening. To cite an extreme example, I've never seen them show the least bit of concern about the fact that they live south of the Mason Dixon line.

Recently, however, issues of geography and sheep have intersected. When the lead ram, a quiet but feisty Karakul whose ancestors ran wild on the steppes of Asia, led the way through five strands of barbed-wire into a neighbor's carefully groomed yard, geography became tantamount. My sons dutifully tramped out to the nether regions of the most distant field on the farm, and completely consumed by trucks and music, ignored me as I asked for a roll of wire, gave instructions about how to avoid getting "snake-bit", and peered warily at the neighbor, who was one hundred yards away on the other side of the fence, washing his new car.

Our farm is a uniquely Southern anomaly in this day and age. An observer can stand in many fields, or near a stream, and in all directions you look, see nothing but rolling green pastures, tall peeling sycamore trees, and aging barns. When the cicadas begin their hot summer song, the grass turns brown with drought and the sun beats down without respite, this scene could be almost anywhere in the deep South. On the other hand, if you walk over to the far fence lines and boundaries, you will then have revealed to your view a panorama of new homes, the roar of a distant highway, and signs that advertise land for sale and homes built to suit. If one listens closely, he or she might be able to hear the whispers in the breeze about Wal-Mart or McDonalds, depending upon whether they are hungry or need diapers.

Our oasis of Southern agrarian culture has porous boundaries. In the spirit of Jesse Stuart, we still let our chickens hide their eggs, and encourage black snakes to live beneath old barn floors, but the roar of the bulldozer is never far from earshot.

My sheep, those mindless but wonderful agrarian ambassadors, seemed to me like novelists without pen and paper; orators temporarily muted; artists without brushes, who continually were drawn to greener pastures, as if to clearly communicate to my neighbor through their copious droppings the message that the 21<sup>st</sup> century manicured lawn and manipulated intellect are at odds with the heart and soul of the land and the existentialist angst of existence. Those messengers are unwanted and unwelcome.

And so on this day I toiled away to install a tight woven wire fence with new posts that will clearly draw a line between the old and the new, the rural and the urban, between humans and the land that has nurtured them for countless generations. My farm, my private world, must have a firmer membrane to contain it, and to seal it from what lies beyond.

## *II. Putting Down the Ram*

For several years we had a Dorset ram named Bo, who delighted in fibulas and femurs, meaning that he was at the correct height to lower his head, take a good running start, and seriously hurt the unaware. The children (we have seven) delighted in taunting him, in spite of my repeated warnings and punishments, and I have still vivid memories of walking near the barns and seeing out of the corner of my eye a teenager running pell-mell with a charging ram kicking up dirt right behind him.

Eventually, Bo somehow began to understand the rules of the game. When I would raise my voice with him, he would lift his head back up and abandon his threatening posture. But when the children would sneak into the pasture and hide in the old barn, he would run to them, circle the barn, and then hide around a corner waiting for them. To my amazement, they were able to teach a ram the rules of hide and seek. The stakes, however, were dangerous, and I could not endorse such fun. Our neighbor, in fact, had his upper leg broken by a similar ram tactic (not Bo; see previous story).

None-the-less, Bo became essentially a pet. He came by name when called, begged apples and other tidbits, and increasingly abandoned his ramly duties (tending the flock). I couldn't ship him to the stockyards, he was too old and too tough to eat, and he would fight with another ram. It was a real quandary.

That winter, Bo took ill, and the vet suggested in his clinical way that the animal wasn't worth the expense and effort of saving. In fact, he was a danger to the other animals, and needed to be put down. All of us, even living on a farm where life and death is a regular cycle, were quite distraught. The teenage boys went

with me to a lonely thicket of cedars, where we tied Bo to a tree. He was clearly in pain, and we knew we had to do it. One shot, and it was over.

Daniel, who had only cried once at his grandfather's funeral, and Alec who hadn't cried since a young boy, joined me in weeping for a few moments. The other children were back inside the house, but they heard the single shot. They knew what was happening. There are times when the whole world goes silent, and I thought of Martin Tupper, who said: "**Well-timed silence hath more eloquence than speech.**"

We walked home without words.

### *III. The Value of Land*

We negotiated carefully with the family that sold us our farm. They had lived on the property for a number of generations, which is not unusual in rural Virginia or other parts of the South, and they probably made a deal with us they wouldn't have made with others because they knew we wanted to preserve the old farm house, and stave off further development in the area. Little did we know what we were getting into with maintaining and fixing the old house—but still it was a burden we willingly took on.

On a completely different front, we did not expect the visitors we had almost immediately. As we were moving boxes out of moving truck, a couple approached us, smiling. In this part of the country, at least in rural areas, the rule of thumb is not to trust strangers who show up smiling before any words have even been exchanged. Usually, what they are visiting about is not funny—a farm animal running loose on their property, a boundary dispute, or an invitation to a church sect that you've never heard of before.

'How much did you pay for this place?' the woman asked. Audrie and I were taken aback. "We'll offer you twenty-five thousand more in cash to walk away from it now."

We were speechless. Now it was our turn to smile, though without humor.

"We're not interested," Audrie said.

"We wanted this place so badly..." the woman said, wistfully it seemed.

I found out later that a local contractor had offered significantly more money for the place than we bought it for, and that the family had turned it down. The

contractor planned to demolish the old farm house and built a subdivision. The same contractor bought the land immediately behind us. When I left messages inquiring about buying that parcel from him (to prevent it from being built on), he refused to return my calls.

Other unwanted visitors came by, even months later. “Is this place for sale?”

It was hard to resist the tendency, so prevalent in our culture, to resort to sarcasm. “No, it is not for sale. Not today, at least...”

“So, you won’t even consider offers?”

What can you say without being rude?

Several years later, the adventure continued. A fleet of large trucks and vans drove into a field a quarter mile down the road from us, and several days later, a new farm magically appeared, complete with horses, barns, wooden fences, and a house. Yes, the house took a little longer to complete than a few days, but the transformation was almost immediate. From the knoll on the hill near our farmhouse, you could now see yet another house not too far away.

At one point, Audrie came running into the house. “Jack, you’re not going to believe this! Come and look at this house!” We drove up the road and pulled over at the entrance. The new farm house looked surprisingly familiar; in fact, the floor plan and style so common to post-antebellum Virginia farm dwellings was identical to ours. “They’re building our house! I found out it was the couple we met that day we moved in.”

What can you say without being rude? The value of land is obvious on one level, but our farm is so much more than simple economics. Beyond the dying septic system, the peeling paint, the sagging fences that need constant mending, the foundation that cost a small fortune to repair, the barns that can’t be saved, and the other countless problems, there are daffodils that bloom like clockwork that were planted perhaps a hundred years ago, there fruit trees that are discovered by accident, there are wild finches that sing to our domestic finches on the screen porch, and there is a spirit of time and peace in our old sagging house that doesn’t inhabit new homes.

Proust said, “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.” We are blessed to eat our own lamb chops, and garnish it with canned vegetables, and to sleep in the warmth of our own harvested wool, and we recognize the value of what we have. It’s so much more than economics,

or to put it as Wendell Berry does, “Better than any argument is to rise at dawn and pick dew-wet red berries in a cup.”

*IV. 101 Unintended Uses of a Tractor*

*V. The Strange Case of the Cleft Palette*

*VI. Urban Sprawl comes to Louisa County*

TO BE CONTINUED...

## Islands

by Diane Parkinson

The Cataño ferry skims over the bay. Blue water shimmers in the humid air and I tug my sticky blouse from under my arms. The bastions of Old San Juan rise up, stark and ancient. My mother and grandmother sit huddled together on an undulating deck bench, their glares just as severe.

The ferry glides into dock. People rise and shuffle in a line to disembark through a creaking turnstile. My mom stands before the rotating doors as if afraid to move.

“Come on, Mom. I’ll help you.” I take her arm to guide her. She jerks away from me and smacks me twice with her oversize purse.

Stunned, I back away. We leave the ferry in strained silence. I fight tears and walk beside my grandmother up the winding path into the old city.

“Your mother is having a lot of problems with your brother,” she whispers.

“Why is she angry with me?” I ask, frustration pounding in my head, but my grandmother just shrugs.

We enter a courtyard called *Parque de las Palomas*, where several pigeons squabble from nests in niches cut in a stone wall. Opposite, over the low city rampart, the bay stretches before us, lapping around El Morro, the Spanish Fort, a grim citadel close by. The breeze carries a lush tropical scent mixed with decay.

My mother stands stiff and indignant, ignoring the beauty of this white colonial town with its narrow, blue-bricked streets and lacy wrought-iron balconies. I try to ask what’s wrong, but she turns a frozen shoulder—always staging her private play where I’m not allowed a speaking part. I feel to suffer the punishment, one should at least understand the crime.

After desultory sight-seeing, we return on the ferry and catch a taxi back to the navy base. Before I moved here, I’d naively pictured myself residing in a hut on a white sandy beach with swaying palm fronds, not in a military compound with square, cinder-block houses all the same—cold conformity in a humid climate.

“The baby is sick again,” my husband says when we walk in.

I pick up my one-week-old son, hearing his little chest rumble with congestion. I press his warm cheek to mine. At the same time, my toddler hugs my knees. I trail my fingers through his golden hair.

My mother mutters something and goes to her guest room. I’m too tired and sad to be angry with her. My grandmother shakes her head.

Mom comes out with her suitcase. “Your grandmother and I are going to St. Thomas.”

“Why? You just got here.” My confusion makes her more self-righteous. “Fine, then go.”

We drop them off at the airport on the way to the hospital. My mother and grandmother had flown to Puerto Rico to help me after the birth of my second child. Mom arrived and left again with baggage she refused to unlock.

In our dilapidated Mustang, we rattle the sixty miles of back roads—through steaming jungle bordered by kiosks advertising pineapples and mangos in every form possible—to the naval hospital.

“Your son has a hole in his heart. But he’s too young for surgery. We’ll have to wait and see,” the pediatrician says.

At home once more, I care for my frail child while my husband works shift-work, back to back night shifts, sleeping days, double-backs, no time for exhausted wives. My hyper toddler fills my days, my wheezing infant cries all night. His clothes cling to his wriggling body, damp from the humidifier that adds to the sultry island air.

“I feel really sad, doctor, so tired.” *Afraid, alone, depressed!* I tell the OB/GYN on my next checkup.

“You’re young, you’ll be fine,” the unsympathetic Lt. says with a dismissive smirk, one of many; hysterical wives weren’t issued with his seabag.

Who knew that post-partem depression would become a recognized medical condition many years later? I thought I’d lost my mind.

A post card from St. Thomas extols the beauty of that island, and a hint of wishing for forgiveness for my mother’s eccentricities.

I read somewhere that eccentric is just a frivolous word for insanity. It must gallop through my family.

Still not one word on these “problems” with my brother. But my grandmother had whispered something about drugs.

I buzz on the outside of my family, trying to squeeze through like a fly, ramming my head against the screen of my mother’s silence. Four years previously my brother and I had unrolled green mesh like new sod and nailed it to the shutters of my house in Greece to keep out the insects. Those flies managed to burrow their way in, welcoming themselves if unwelcomed by us. I just splatter.

In fitful dreams my brother and I remain children. I roam inside the house I grew up in, still dressed in its hues of orange and avocado. I see my father sipping his spiked orange juice to drown out failures kept secret by my mother.

I climb our backyard tree, not the stump my mother reduced it to because she tired of the apples, but still tall with spreading arms. Branches that grasped toward our tarpaper roof, heavy with green fruit, tart and crisp to bite. My brother scuttling to the top, his high-top keds just out of my reach—a blond, buzz-cut boy with an impish smile.

He climbs to the roof where “tuck and roll” pigeons flutter in cages; below a chicken squawks and kittens frolic among the perfume of gardenias. The orange stucco wall, rough to the touch, doesn’t stop me from floating through, into my past. My mother locked in her room, taking valium “naps,” out of my reach in her shadowed corner.

The house deteriorated as I grew, as did my parents, a job lost, plumbing neglected, a toilet ripped out, holes in plaster to chase leaks, wiring that sprouts from walls like angry worms. My father, once so adept, grown fat, an atoll surrounded by a sea of alcohol.

Growing up, I never thought my family wasn't normal. We were dysfunctional before the trend.

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A knock on the front door.

"I have a phone call at the quarterdeck," my husband says after speaking with someone on the front stoop. In Puerto Rico, it's too expensive for us to have our own phone.

Seven months have passed since my mother's visit. My son is better and never needs the surgery. His own body repaired the hole, a miracle.

My husband drives off. The wall air-conditioner whooshes and drones. I pat medicated powder over the back of my oldest son's heat rash, little bumps on his fair skin.

The mee mees buzz outside. Tiny mosquito-like blood suckers.

My husband returns, his expression strange. "Your mother will call back. She wanted to speak to me first. Your brother has died."

"What?" All the usual questions bubble up, but most of all disbelief. No one in my family has ever *died*. Well, my dad's parents, but they were old when I was born.

It's April Fools Day, yet I know it isn't a joke.

"How?" is all I can ask. What a simple, stupid, inadequate word. Of course, it's a huge mistake.

"He was on drug treatment for heroin. He overdosed."

"On the treatment? How is that possible?" I want to scream, but I'm still in denial.

"Let's go to the front gate. She's calling back."

In a daze, we pack the boys into the car. The mee mee's splatter against the windshield. We rattle through the darkening cookie-cutter houses.

Why didn't she give me the dignity of calling me first? More of my mother's bizarre behavior. Her voice on the phone is more distant than just the thousands of miles that separate us. "We'll have him cremated. We don't want to be tied to a grave."

She's indifferent, cold. I knew virtually nothing of my brother's addiction, thanks to her secret-keeping, and now I must deal with his unexpected death.

I'm furious at her, though all I do is cry. She seems to resent my tears.

Her silence is a torment, an insult. I scratch at mee mee bites and want to smash the receiver against the plaster wall.

I slide back into the car. I cuddle my children and mourn my brother and the relationship I'll never have with my mother. No emotion is allowed in her world. She stewes privately on whatever demons she harbors. Am I not entitled to feel bewildered by any of this?

I look to my husband. "If I'd known, I could have said goodbye."

"I know, I know." He tries to comfort me.

"They don't want to be tied to a grave?" My childhood playmate tossed to the wind. When did my parents become this odd couple, apathetic, dull?

As a little girl, I remember Mom as nurturing to me and my brother. Always there for us, active in our school, making Halloween costumes, caramel apples, cookies for Christmas; Brownie leader and Cub Scout den mother. Was this all a façade? What hopes had she once envisioned that were never fulfilled?

I smell the sweet, baby scent of my sons and vow never to become like her.

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My children are grown and healthy, my marriage thrives.

Fifteen years after my brother's death my father passed on, cirrhosis. Mother is still the grim citadel beyond my shore, refusing to be close to me or her grandsons, unwilling to give up her secrets, to come down off her stone perch. She insists that she loves us, at a distance, on the surface. Maybe that's why in dreams I keep haunting the house of my youth, searching for an explanation.

In dreams I still laugh and romp with those I've lost, and awaken fuddle-headed, pondering their stumble through pungent leaves, spirits, white powder and disappointment.

Looking back from just as many years, I know we could have handled it better. As I struggle with the rough turns of life, I strive to make my own warm. Her neglect has made me strong, not weak. My children are secure in my love. I've come to realize I may never understand my mother's limitations. I just strain not to be damaged by them.

A friend once told me that a psychiatrist advised her "she would never have the mother she wanted, only the one she had."

As I pursue my own hopes in the second half of my journey, I try to reconcile myself to this woman on her arctic atoll, and the part of me that is missing because of her rejection.

Long ago, I realized you can't let your childhood define you if it holds you down. Remember the caramel apples, the warm holidays of my youth, my father's reading from *The Wind in the Willows*; *Peter and the Wolf* on the phonograph. My brother and I laughing at the follies of the adults. Don't look too close at the edges, where it's darker, and deeper, in the sea of memory and dreams.

## **It's Okay to Cry**

by Catherine C. Brooks

In mid-April 1956, I had prepared a meal for my husband, Kirby, and our young son that made my mouth water. Having eaten a bland diet most of the six months I had been pregnant, cravings overwhelmed me for something tasty. So I enjoyed a tiny bit of the fried food my family ate. Hours later, when I rushed to the bathroom with nausea that continued into the wee hours of morning, I regretted my dietary fling. Pain followed and made me double up in a fetal position. Surely I wasn't in labor but it felt so. By 7:00 a. m., I knew I had to call our family physician, who still made house calls.

When the doctor arrived, he confirmed my suspicion and made arrangements for me to see my obstetrician at the hospital, an hour's drive from our home. Before we left the house, I fell into Kirby's arms and cried like a baby. I wanted our little one to live.

Kirby wrapped his arms around me and said, "I want the baby too, but your life is even more important to me." His voice was softer than usual and I snuggled closer to him.

Once in bed at the hospital with pain continuing, I began to look back as tears rolled down my cheeks. Less than a year before, I had lost my forty-nine-year-old mother with a heart attack when she learned her younger sister had died an hour earlier.

With heavy responsibilities after Mother died, I didn't give myself time to cry but just kept pushing. I had gone into shock at Mother's funeral. Still, the next day I had to fetch her Last Will and Testament from the bank's safe deposit box. I needed to make sure that I did everything legally and as Mother wanted since she had made me executor of her estate. My sister and her husband lived 400 miles away in eastern Ohio and would be moving to an unfurnished parsonage in Indiana within weeks. They hired a U-Haul trailer to take the appliances and furniture that they needed. The burden of clearing the house, putting it on the market and closing the estate became my responsibility, besides taking care of my family and a job. I had no time to shed unwanted tears, as I had to keep going. My body was tenser than I realized until later when I collapsed and had to spend several days in bed under the doctor's care.

Since Daddy's death eighteen months before Mother died, Kirby and I had cared for her like an older child. I missed her and knowing she was in a better place didn't make the loss any easier. I had tormenting dreams over and over. Mother had come back to live in the home that I had dismantled, and they haunted me. A few months later, when I learned we would have a second child to love, it eased my pain. I determined amid the tears that I must do all in my power to save our baby.

The author of Ecclesiastes wrote: “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, ... a time to weep and a time to laugh.” *Hadn't the past year proved those truths? Surely the Lord wouldn't take the little one I longed to hold in my arms.*

Then I remembered that David told us in Psalm 30: “Weeping may endure for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.” I must relax and place all in God's hands.

When my obstetrician came back into the room, he said the food that I ate had nothing to do with the labor, but I had severe kidney infection. With his care and prayer, the hard labor pains subsided within two hours. But I needed to stay in the hospital with medications for observation. Kirby called me daily and visited on the third evening. I told him that the doctor said I'd be able to go home the following day, unless I had a setback.

Minutes after Kirby left, my doctor walked into the room. He told me that my temperature had soared. *What now?* He said, “It is your inactive gall bladder, and that's why fried food made you sick. We'll need to keep you a few more days.”

Tears flowed more freely than they had three days earlier. I felt like a baby myself. But he said, “Tears are a woman's best medication for healing. I saw your husband leaving but you need him. I'm going to call downstairs and have the receptionist send him back.” Walking out of the room, the doctor continued, “Tell him to forget that the visiting hours have ended, and I'll tell the nurses' station they are my orders.”

I went home after two weeks on a bland diet unlike any I had ever eaten. Antibiotics and medication for my kidneys continued with orders to spend most of my time in bed until the baby arrived.

“Lord, what are you trying to teach me?” I cried amid more tears. “I need Mother, and she is gone. There is a sewing room that I should be supervising, housework and a six-year-old son to care for.”

I knew God was there. Yet for a time, His presence seemed far away. Cleansing tears came from time to time and helped me accept my situation. I found more time to pray and meditate; gradually realizing the Lord had a purpose. I took time to reflect on losing both of my parents while in my twenties, and our Heavenly Father's provisions for my family and me.

I rejoiced when our baby girl came into the world quickly on July 14<sup>th</sup>. What a comfort Susan Kay brought her daddy and me, especially when the obstetrician told us that we could never have another child. Her big brother grinned whenever he stood and watched his baby sister.

When I read from Isaiah 25:8 that the Lord God would wipe tears away from all faces, I felt it was meant for me as well as the people of Israel. I rejoiced that we have such a kind Heavenly Father. Yet, it had taken tears to cleanse before I could fully trust Him to have control in every phase of my life.

Just four days before Susan Kay reached her 17<sup>th</sup> year, we lost Kirby in a freak accident when his van overturned. We had kept busy with a family-owned business, church activities and time with our children. Jesus gave comfort in a special way. Yet when alone, my tears poured. I had learned to let go of my emotions. I got through the days by relating the details regarding our last evening together as a family. It helped me to let the events flow out over and over when people asked, "What happened?"

I had learned my lesson years before. This time, I had lost my best friend, my husband and the one closer to me than anyone else in life. I needed to cry and let the tears cleanse any bitterness or anger. God cared and knew best for my life. Thus, I sought him as my burden bearer. The Lord showed me during my devotions a few weeks after Kirby's accident that we plan for today while God plans for eternity. Jesus said in John's Gospel, "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." I clung to scriptures.

The boys and men in my life need to cry as well as laugh. The greatest men in history let tears flow. "Jesus wept" in John 11:35. History tells that President Abraham Lincoln shed tears over the nation's condition during the War Between the States. President George W. Bush let tears flow down his cheeks as he spoke at the site of the Pentagon disaster after September 11, 2001.

Almost four years ago, I wrote a cousin whose wife had died with cancer that in time someone else might come into his life to fill the void and help heal the grief in a greater way. When I saw him five months later at a family reunion, tears still flowed. But after eighteen months, he introduced me to Betty Anne with a smile, saying he hoped she'd soon be his new wife. He remembered my letter and said it had given him hope during his loneliness.

I had to grieve but also live a full life. I needed to avoid self-pity and keep busy with the demands that lay before me. A time came for me to reach out to others, whether shut-ins at home, in nursing homes or saddened by death of a loved one. I found some, who faced problems with their marriage or teenage children, needed encouragement. God used a smile, a hug, a listening ear, a handshake and sometimes a tear with a few kind words to brighten the face that had been drawn. I have learned that besides fellowship with my Lord, I require close companionship with at least one or more Christian friends. We share each other's burdens and prayer requests, often praying and crying together. I needed, and still need, to be putty in my Master's hands and never try to push on alone; but to also remember that it is okay to cry and let the hurts heal.

## Balefires

by Anne H. Flythe

She is long dead and, I hope, buried deep.  
No hurricane of the same name laid waste  
to more, so many, and so much.  
She had a way of sussing out each weakness,  
a subtler invader than a computer virus.  
No Geiger counter, water witching twigs, or x-ray  
could do as well; A talent? More a curse.  
She'd begin by laying each of us against another:  
All flammable, the young and green, the old and dry,  
Driftwood, sapwood, heartwood, no matter—  
Everything will burn eventually.  
With all the elements in place, she'd supply the spark—  
strike the steel of malice against a core of flint,  
and as we self-destroyed, stand aside and watch;  
the flames of our destruction mirrored in her shining eyes.  
An angelic smile in place, firelight  
reflected on one small eye tooth.  
When she held out empty hands, her palms  
at a certain and familiar angle,  
I wondered at whose pain she warmed them.  
Thankful that ash and char held  
no further interest for her.

## John Joe McCarthy

by Sara Kay Rupnik

He was a bachelor, the son who remained on the farm.  
Tall and loping and light on his feet, he loved the dancing.  
In country pubs he waltzed every waltz,  
His well-weathered hands keeping time with the count.

Tall and loping and light on his feet, he loved the dancing.  
He strode up the lane in search of his cows,  
His well-weathered hands keeping time with the count  
While wild plaintive mooing floated over green hills.

He strode up the lane in search of his cows,  
His cap set back from his brow and his arms swinging wide  
While wild plaintive mooing floated over green hills,  
Echoing in the dank valley bottom of the old family farm.

His cap set back from his brow and his arms swinging wide,  
John Joe McCarthy tended his fields, every ancient windswept inch  
Echoing in the dank valley bottom of the old family farm  
Where hills blocked the sun and rain fell down hard.

John Joe McCarthy tended his fields, every ancient windswept inch.  
Not an easy life, not one he might have chosen,  
Where hills blocked the sun and rain fell down hard.  
He never complained, as his nights were free for dancing.

Not an easy life, not one he might have chosen,  
Neighbors found him in bed when his cows missed their milking.  
He never complained, as his nights were free for dancing,  
And died alone in his bed on his land in the valley.

Neighbors found him in bed when his cows missed their milking.  
In country pubs he waltzed every waltz,  
And died alone in his bed on his land in the valley.  
He was a bachelor, the son who remained on the farm.

## The Interview

by Becky Mushko

Sure, I'll talk to a fine looking young feller like you.  
Don't get much company nowadays. Got plenty of time, nothing to do but set here.

Teacher sent you, did she? "Get out and talk to some old codger," I reckon she said.  
Well, you found one. Pull yourself up a chair. Little closer—I ain't gonna bite.  
Ain't got enough teeth left for serious biting nohow.

Now whatcha wanna know?

*What did I do?* Farmed two hundred acres like my daddy and his before him.  
Tobacco, corn, and wheat—they was the money crops. *How?* Me and a mule  
struggling against a hard ground. Many a time, I'uz tempted to fling down the reins,  
leave the mule standing in the middle of a furrow, and just up and leave.  
*Where would I go?* Town, I reckon. Work in a factory or a mill.  
Make reg'lar money. Be somebody. But I never did go.

*What stopped me?* That farm held me tighter'n a spider holds a fly.  
Sucked the juices right outta me. Left me the old dry husk you're looking at,  
tangled so tight in its web I'd never get loose. Then, too, I couldn't work walled in.  
I'd got used to the sky, y'see, everything growing green around me.  
Besides, who'd look after the place? I can't stand  
to see a good farm overrun with pokeweed and cat-briers.

Folks held me, too. Family ties grip tight, that's sure.  
By the time I buried Mama and Daddy, I had me a wife and a crop a' kids.  
Time was, I couldn't go nowhere without one a' them chaps  
hanging onto my pants' leg tighter'n a tick on a dog.  
Then they growed up, scattered like seeds in the wind. Not a one took root.  
They come back, visit, brag how good they got it in town.

*Did I ever go modern?* Well, yeah—got a tractor, y'know. Then more and more  
machines.

Debts piled up high as Mama's pancakes on Sunday breakfast.

*Did I make a good living?* Heck, no! But I reckon I made me a right good life.

Anythin' else you wanna know?

## The Contributors

**Catherine C. Brooks** has spent a lifetime in Mathews County, Virginia. Besides her books *Walk with Me*, *Didn't Know We Were Poor*, and *War Brought Trials and Anxiety at Home and Overseas*, Brooks has been published in national, state and regional magazines. She operated "The Craftsman Shop," a fabric and window treatments/furniture cover business that she and her husband founded in 1952, for 25 years after his death. Since retiring, she has devoted her time to church work and writing. College was Brooks' ambition through high school, but World War II changed her plans. However, she has taken many correspondence courses, attended writer's conferences, seminars and critique sessions. Personal experiences and history take preference in most of her writing. Brooks lives in a private section of her son's home on Garden Creek Road, Mathews, Virginia, while her daughter operates a portion of Brooks' former business, living and working nearby.

**Anne H. Flythe** comes from a Navy family and attended many schools in this country and abroad. In her senior year, she won prizes in both poetry and art. After graduation, she studied at the Corcoran School of Art and the Phillips Gallery in Washington, D.C. Poetry has been important to her since age eight. She writes mainly in free verse. Her poems have appeared in multiple anthologies. She won second place in a contest sponsored by the mid-Atlantic Writers Conference. Later, a poem received honorable mention in the Charlotte Garrett Memorial Competition. For many years, she and her late husband, a newspaperman, lived in Washington D.C. where they had a good marriage and two sons. Around 1980, they moved to "Rebel Yell," a tree farm in Spotsylvania County where she lives with two cats and several guns. She says, "I have both a permit and an attitude."

**Sarah Collins Honenberger's** 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.

**Manjari Mohanty** came to the USA in 1978 as a Graduate Student and acquired two Masters degrees: in English Literature and Urban planning. She has written five novels:

1. The Island of the Kings – A native Indian king comes to America to study, marries an American, and alienates his family.
2. Evening Song – Tells the story of an American Professor who goes to India and gets involved with the queen who was a former student of his.
3. The Law of Grace – Tells the story of a Brahmin boy who was kidnapped by Portuguese pirates and then became a Christian.
4. The Mystery of Ronpur – Romance.
5. The Tree – A romance novel between a Muslim boy and a Hindu Girl in India.

Additionally, she has written some 40 short stories.

She has two sons and she lives in Virginia Beach with her husband.

**Becky Mushko** is a retired middle school teacher, former Ferrum College adjunct instructor, member of SCBWI, and vice-president of both the Roanoke Valley Pen Women and the Valley Writers Chapter of the VWC. She served as 2006-2007 writer-in-residence for Roanoke County Schools and from 1998-2009 wrote “Peevish Advice,” a redneck humor column. A 1997 Pushcart Prize nominee, she’s won the 2008 Bulwer-Lytton Fiction Contest’s “Vile Pun” division, the Sherwood Anderson Short Story Contest (three times), and the Lonesome Pine Short Story Contest (five times). Her story, “Out of the Fog,” appears in *A Cup of Comfort for Writers* (Adams Media, 2007) and her winning sentence in the 1996 Bulwer-Lytton Contest’s “Worst Western” category appears in *A Dark and Stormy Night: The Second Coming* (Friday Publishing, 2007). On her blog, “Peevish Pen” ([www.peevishpen.blogspot.com](http://www.peevishpen.blogspot.com)), she ruminates about reading, writing, rural living, retirement and sometimes a border collie. She currently writes children's literature.

**Diane Parkinson** grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area, joined the Navy at nineteen and has written and edited free-lance since high school. She married in Greece and raised two sons in Puerto Rico, California, Guam and Virginia. She writes book reviews for the *Historical Novels Review* and joined The Wild Rose Press in 2007 as a historical editor. Diane served as president of the Riverside Writers in 2007-2008. She has a historical novel being considered by a Canadian press and hopes for good news soon. She lives with her husband and dachshund in Locust Grove, VA.

**Sara Kay Rupnik**, a native of Northwestern Pennsylvania, resides in Richmond, Virginia, but spends a lot of time in West Cork, Ireland. She holds a M.F.A. in Writing from Vermont College and is co-founder of Around the Block Writers Collaborative ([www.writearoundtheblock.org](http://www.writearoundtheblock.org)). Her fiction, nominated for a Pushcart Prize, appears in literary journals from various parts the country. She also regularly contributes to Musings from Around the Block ([www.aroundtheblockwriters.blogspot.com](http://www.aroundtheblockwriters.blogspot.com)).

**Dr. Jack Trammell** teaches at Randolph-Macon College and is author or co-author of more than seventeen books, including Down on the Chickahominy, an ethnographic history coming out this fall (2009) with History Press. He writes regularly for journals, magazines, and newspapers, and has a regular column in the Washington Times. He has won numerous awards and recognitions, and resides on a farm in central Virginia with his wife and seven children.

**Robin Traywick Williams** —