



## **The Virginia Writers Club**

### **2015 Virtual Anthology**

Featuring the first-, second-, and  
third-place winners, for

The 2015 Golden Nib  
and  
Summer Shorts Contests

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# 2015 Summer Shorts Winners

**Judged by:** BILL GLOSE is the book review editor for *Virginia Living* magazine and an award-winning writer whose honors include the F. Scott Fitzgerald Short Story Award, the Virginia Press Association First Place Award for Sports News Writing, and the Morgantown Chapter Award for Poetry. He is the author of two books of poetry, *The Human Touch* (San Francisco Bay Press, 2007) and *Half a Man* (FutureCycle Press, 2013), and editor of the story anthology, *Ten Twisted Tales* (San Francisco Bay Press, 2008).

## **FICTION**

1. Linda Dobkins, Marion, VA - "New Woman and Mad Dog" - A wonderful character study set amid a traumatic situation
2. John M. Wills, Fredericksburg, VA - "Monica's Surprise" - A clever, table-turning tale of revenge
3. Esther Whitman Johnson, Roanoke, VA - "The Artificial Mother" - The roots of a dysfunctional relationship are examined during a turbulent confrontation

## **NON-FICTION**

1. Esther Whitman Johnson, Roanoke, VA - "Tempest of Stuff" - One person's quest to take stock of what matters and get rid of what doesn't
2. Judy Whitehill Witt, Glen Allen, VA - "Foolproof Recipe for a Mind Like a Steel Sieve" - A comical metaphor for an aging, forgetful mind
3. James F. Gaines, Fredericksburg, VA - "Shifting Zones" - An intriguing philosophical and sociological deconstruction of the Ferguson shooting incident

## **POETRY**

1. Esther Whitman Johnson, Roanoke, VA - "New Song for El Condor" - A captivating poem full of history and wonder and despair over what has been lost
2. Rod Vanderhoof, Fredericksburg, VA - "Hawaiian Undertow" - A beautiful sonnet using the sea as a setting for life and afterlife
3. David Black, Louisa, VA - "For Plato and My Mother" - A clever use of Stoic philosophy as a corollary for dealing with loss

## Fiction

### New Woman and Mad Dog by Linda Dobkins First Place

She's here. My daughter has arrived to fix what I can't, and I fear this might not end much better for her than for the women in front of me. But I don't see another way out of this confounded mess. I was half-hoping Julia wouldn't come, that Amos couldn't find her, but here she is.

Josiah Stockton sees her arrive and turns his curses toward me, my two deputies, and now Julia. His wife, mother, and older daughter look up from where they kneel, hands tied behind them, on the rough wood of what passes for a porch. Two unbound youngsters huddle near the door. Mrs. Susan, Stockton's mother, is rocking side-to-side to ease her knees. Stockton's most riled at her. She's the one who sent the oldest boy off to fetch me when Stockton started getting rough with the womenfolk.

"What's she doing here, Sheriff?" Stockton waves his old single-action revolver at Julia. "What's that shameless excuse for a woman doing here?"

I'm not close enough to hear what Mrs. Susan says, but her son turns on her. "Don't tell me what I ought not say."

Oh, Lord, he's moving. He takes the four steps to his mother, aims down at her lap, and fires.

The screams are so loud from Josiah's wife and children that I can't hear if Mrs. Susan's able to speak. She's toppled over, and it looks as if her skirt is soaked with blood already. Without thinking, I start forward. So do Amos and Jed. And Julia.

Stockton doesn't hesitate, not to hear what anyone's saying nor to consider what he's done. He pulls the teener daughter to her feet and uses her as a shield, his gun to her head.

We all stop. He doesn't even have to warn us. He grins instead, enjoying our open mouths and stunned stares, I expect. And staring is all we can do, studying the scene for what comes next. The house was abandoned until Stockton moved his wife and five youngsters back here last summer, and it's gotten shabbier since. There can't be many rooms inside and, from one of them, the piercing cry of the baby rises. We're still thirty yards or more from the porch, and though my hand is on my gun, I have even less chance of stopping him now that he has a hostage so near.

I risk turning my back on him and take Julia by the arm. Stockton is yelling to ask what I'm doing, and I shout back, "I'm getting her out of the way, calm down." As if I hadn't summoned her in the first place.

But, of course, this is the moment that shapes Julia's life from here on out, maybe changing how she feels about me or—Lordy—how I feel about her. "Get behind the barn," I tell her. "Find your shot and kill him if you have to."

Oh, Julie. Her eyes widen, and she knows now why I had Amos fetch her. She's searching my face, the one so like hers, wanting to be sure she's heard me aright. All I can do is nod and insist. "Before he murders them all."

She nods back and then moves fast, ignoring Stockton, who's calling to her, "Watch this, bitch. I'll learn you something," and Jed, who's taken up yelling back at him. She ducks under the horse's neck, using him for cover as she pulls him around a garden of desolate, rustling, stalks and behind the barn, another twenty yards away. Stockton doesn't seem to see the butt of the Winchester lever action peaking above the saddle. I frown after her a moment. It occurs to me she'll tie the horse to a door handle on the decrepit wreck of a barn, and we'll be lucky if the young gelding doesn't pull the damn thing down around her when she fires. If she fires.

I turn back to the porch, relieved to see Mrs. Susan's still moving. Stockton is as happy as I've seen him, not like the other times I've confronted him for beating his wife and kids. No false regret from him now. He and Jed continue to argue, allowing me my leisure to worry, worry mostly about Julie shooting at someone holding a hostage. Maybe I'm wrong to be so prideful in her skill. She'll draw a good bead, but he could move at the last split second and then her bullet hits the daughter. I remind myself I haven't seen Julie miss with that gun when the targets were old jars and bottles and, three weeks ago, a deer.

And the dog. Back in August, the Nelsons' young coon hound appeared on Bluff Street, growling and stumbling. The Nelsons were strung out behind the dog, so it had to be a perfect shot from Julie.

Right in the head. Hound went down like you'd dropped a bag of wet grain.

But Stockton isn't a rabid dog. I said, kill him if you have to, Julie. How will she know if she has to? I should have just said . . . kill him.

And then? I know the people of Callaway County. Good people, but . . . If I'd called my son Verne to do the job, he'd be celebrated. People'd be saying what a cool head. A real hero. Saved those Stockton women, you better believe. But Verne isn't as good as Julie. If she saves the Stockton family, people will say always told you that gal would come to this after her mother died, wearing her hair down, doing without a corset, going on about women voting, spending all that time with her dad and brother shooting. And now she's killed a man.

And any young fella in the county that might've courted her will look elsewhere. None of them will have the guts for Julie after this.

The baby in the house is shrieking. Mrs. Stockton must be asking Josiah to untie her, let her help either the baby or Mrs. Susan, who's writhing on the floorboards. All I can make out is "please" over and over. Stockton holds his daughter at arm's length so he can turn and aim into the house, through a window covered with waxed cloth. Mrs. Stockton screams, "No!" And Stockton turns back, glares at her, frowns at us. And then squints at the barn.

The Winchester erupts, its report ripping through the winter day and leaving me bobbing, breathless and heart-sick, in its wake.

Josiah Stockton falls like Nelson's hound, and the porch shudders. He takes the daughter with him, but it's clear she's not hit. We run for the porch, the three of us, pull the girl to her feet, tend Mrs. Susan and Mrs. Stockton.

Julie doesn't appear.

I try to calm the women and shield them from seeing Stockton's head. But I want to go to Julie, even as I worry how she'll receive me. What I see in my mind is not the Stockton women sobbing, but Julie crying, silently, in the hot summer street. Crying for the dog, mad as it was.

Monica's Surprise  
By John M. Wills  
Second Place

The silver Escalade with darkened windows made a second pass, slowing at the spot where Monica stood just inside the doorway of the pawnshop. It was almost 10 p.m., yet warm humid air covered her barely clothed body in a shimmering coat of sweat. *That had to be him.* The third time around the vehicle crept to the curb, its side window lowering slowly as if the car was smiling at her.

"Hey, beautiful, want to have some fun?"

She glided over to the silver beast and rested her forearms on the opening, bending forward enough for the driver to get a view of her ample cleavage. A familiar odor of weed wafted out into the night air.

"What kind of fun did you have in mind, handsome?"

"Something that'll please us both, if you know what I mean." He shifted his bulky body in the seat and rested a hand on the console.

*That's it, that's the ring.* She focused intently on his gold pinkie ring with its triangular diamond pattern. She had to be certain. It was big and gaudy, just like her sister had described. *Yeah, that's definitely it.*

"Okay, sugar," she said, opening the door. "But I need to know up front what you're lookin' for. If you're talkin' about some, shall we say, oral fun, that's fifty bucks."

"Ha, ha," the chunky man chuckled. Beads of sweat popped out on his forehead. He took a meaty hand and wiped the sweat upward into his jet-black hair. "That's a funny way to describe it, but yeah, that's exactly what I'm lookin' for. Get in."

She climbed up into the SUV and put her tiny purse on the floor beneath the console. Her short skirt rode high on her thighs exposing a sexy red thong, exactly how she hoped it would. As the vehicle pulled away, his hand went to her leg immediately, and he looked down at what she offered.

"Looks inviting . . . very inviting," he said, nodding.

"I'll bet it does, but it's special invitation only," she said smiling, "and it's worth more than the fifty bucks you're talkin' about."

"Yeah, I figured as much," he snorted, "but I ain't got time for that right now." The stranger drove several blocks and then turned into an old neglected industrial complex. Several hundred yards down the street, he parked beneath an overhang jutting out over an abandoned loading dock. Glass and other debris littered the ground. The building's windows and security lights had long since been smashed by vandals.

"Here we are, sweet thing." He pulled some bills from his pants pocket and handed her the agreed upon amount. "Now, start earning your money." He undid his belt and lowered his zipper as she put the money down her blouse. "If you're as good as you look, I'll have a surprise for you when you're finished." He reclined his seat back, took a deep breath, and clasped his hands behind his neck.

Monica quickly reached down to her purse and then jammed the subcompact 9mm pistol against the man's forehead.

"You're the one due for a surprise."

His eyes bulged like two ping-pong balls just before the bullet exploded in his brain.

*That's for you, Melody, the best sister a girl ever had. You had your faults, but you didn't deserve to die from a beating at the hands of a sick bastard like this.*

Two hours later, Monica stood at attention in the police station at midnight roll call as the shift sergeant called her name. "Officer Larson."

"Here," she answered.

"Unit 13 with Officer Thomas. You two are working the vice car tonight. We had a john murdered behind factory row, probably a pimp ripping him off. Keep your eyes open and shag anybody on the stroll in our red light district."

Monica smiled. "Will do, Sgt."

The Artificial Mother  
By Esther Whitman Johnson  
Third Place

“You, always you.”

My daughter’s in my face, practically spitting.

“All my life, even *before* my life, it’s been about you. You’re a selfish, narcissistic egoist.”

“Spouting Psych 101 now? Glad you got something out of school before you bagged it. Or should I say, it bagged you?” That’s hitting below the belt, but damn it, I sent allowance for four extra months before Hope bothered to tell me she hadn’t gone to class after they put her on academic probation.

*Everything’s about me?* I want to say, *You wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for me. He had little to do, practically a bystander. I dreamed, planned, sacrificed for you.* But I keep my mouth shut, repeat my mantra, *This too shall pass.* The family counselor would be proud.

“I’m going to Florida to live with my father. I’m eighteen, and you can’t stop me.”

“Thank god, you didn’t say ‘live with *Dad.*’ You don’t have a dad. You’ve only seen him a couple of times, so this is not about him. It’s about me, about us.”

Us, Hope and me. We don’t function alone. Hope’s more than my daughter, she’s my best friend and the sister I should have had. Without her I am nothing.

Desperate for her not to leave, I notice the dog and have an idea.

“Hope, if you go to your father’s, you’re not taking Nemo. She’s too old for the ride, and your father lives in a no-pet complex. I’ve got a new schedule at work, and I can’t handle her meds without you. I’ll have to put her down.”

A blatant lie, and Hope should know I won’t do it. But we’re spewing venom, and neither of us knows what’s true now.

“You couldn’t. You wouldn’t.”

“I could, and I would.”

Hope’s slaps me so hard I fall onto the kitchen chair. We’ve never touched each other before in anything but a hug. I swear some demon crawled inside my daughter when she turned eighteen and stole her away.

“Mom, you’re the lowest. I’d tell you to go to hell, but you’re already there.” She disappears into her room, the used-to-be-blue room we painted years ago to remind us of days diving in the Caribbean. Bygone days.

###

Maybe Hope’s right, and I am in hell. Or maybe I’m crazy. They all thought I was crazy to have a child that way. And the husbands—certainly I could have chosen better. I was crazy about them and crazy to have married both.

“I’ll give this marriage six months,” my father said on my first wedding day. The marriage lasted two months longer than my father predicted.

Apparently everyone but me saw that disaster coming, even my best friend. “He wants no more children. Believe him,” she’d said. “He has two marriages and two children under his belt already.”

Did I listen? No. “If he loves me, he’ll want what I want, a child.” He didn’t love me, and that relationship was over before it began.

Thirty-five when that marriage ended, I heard the clock ticking. I was working nights behind the camera in a TV station, and that's how I met Hope's father. Jerry was short, shaggy, overweight, and a sweetheart.

One night I popped the question. "Hey, big guy, I got a huge favor to ask. Would you father a kid with me? No legal problems. I'll sign away all responsibility on your part, raise the child myself as a single parent."

He said he'd think about it, and I decided to get some advice myself. My sisters weighed in opposed. And my best friend, whose advice about my ex I had totally ignored, disapproved.

"Bad idea. No matter what you think now, you won't let him off the hook. You'll expect something, or he will—in either case, things will not go well."

I ignored her again, slept with Jerry a few times, and got pregnant ridiculously fast.

Hope was the best thing that ever happened to me. I knew I'd made the right decision the moment I held her. Things haven't been easy, and god knows we've had problems, but nothing like this.

"I called my father again," Hope screams. "He says I can stay as long as I want." Her screeching sends Nemo cowering to the corner, as if there's a thunderstorm. Dogs know when their human family is off-kilter.

"You haven't seen *that man* in ten years." I refuse to dignify him with a name. "If he cared, he'd have contacted you. He knew where you were. Trust me, he'll fall off that white horse you've put him on. You were a favor he did for a friend, conceived with a case of beer. That's all you've ever meant to him, a six-pack at midnight."

*Stick the knife in, twist it. Hurt her like she's hurting me.*

Hope comes out of her room to sling one last volley. "What about your last husband? You just had to get married again, such a loser."

*Here it comes now. I've been expecting this.*

"I wasn't enough, you had to have a man. I couldn't stand him, told you before you married him, and I was right."

*Yes, you were.*

"You had to have him and *her*, that crappy daughter. My age, in my own class, embarrassing, I didn't want a sister, didn't want *her* sharing my blue room. Didn't want to paint *my* room prissy pink because blue made her sad. I hated her, hated him, and then I hated you. You finally divorced him, and it was too late. The damage was done. I hate you."

Hope retreats again. I hear her zip luggage, shut down her iPad, and scoop pictures from the dresser—photos of prom, graduation, and Nemo. Will she take those of us gathering Easter eggs on the White House Lawn, swimming with dolphins in the Keys, smiling in front of California redwoods? Forever redwoods.

###

Hope's backpack sits on the floor beside me, her wallet sticking out, and I remember she has no credit card. I struck her off my account when she pulled the dropping-out-of-college stunt. What'll she do for gas? I slide three twenties, all the cash I have, into her wallet.

As I throw the wallet back, an old photo falls out—the two of us in a pool, taking a swim class. A toddler in my arms, Hope's laughing, already a duck. Haven't seen that picture in years, wondered where it was. Quietly I slip it back and push the backpack away. Nemo curls up, chin on the pack, soaking in the scent.



Hope sweeps through, grabs the pack, and slams the door going out. Then she turns and walks back into the house. To hug me? No. My daughter kneels in the corner and sobs over her dog.

“Nemo, I love you more than anything in the world. Take care of Mom.”

And Hope is gone.

###

For thirty minutes I stare outside. Nemo puts her snout on my knee, tail thumping as she licks my hand.

“Okay, buddy,” I pat her. “I’m going to Lowe’s for blue paint. Wanna come? You get to sit up front now.”

## Non-Fiction

### Tempest of Stuff By Esther Whitman Johnson First Place

“How many closets did you clean over spring break?”

Or Christmas? Summer? Makes no difference *when*, the question’s the same. It’s what teachers talk about, what women talk about, what people talk about

Closets are about stuff, the places where we store our treasures and our junk. Problem is, out of sight, out of mind. We forget how much useless crap we’ve stuck in the closet, attic, basement, and garage. I’m not talking about hoarders, just regular folks like us, and most regular folks keep too much stuff.

“Might be useful someday,” my husband says.

“Yeah,” I reply, “you said that thirty years ago when we moved it from the last house.”

When I tell someone I cleaned a closet, I don’t mean I took everything out, dusted, scrubbed, and put it all back. ‘Clean’ means: *the stuff I did not put back*—threw away, gave away, or shredded.

As I get older—and I find it true of my peers—I spend more time getting rid of stuff than accumulating it. The dictum of William Morris, nineteenth century artist and designer, has become my mantra: *Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful*. I’m even getting rid of beautiful things bought decades ago in exotic locales, because empty space itself is restful. Too much stuff assaults the eye and the brain. I crave empty walls, empty shelves, bare floors.

At this point in my life I need silence, time alone, and “me” space. For more than three decades my job was defined by others—directing, complaining, wheedling . . . talking, talking, talking. As a high school counselor I spent hours listening to the ‘stuff’ of others. Now I focus on my own stuff, material and emotional.

I’m cleaning out.

###

Last year I flew to California to help my daughter Leigh and son-in-law Johnny ‘power pack’ for their move to Switzerland. Moving’s one of those experiences at the top of the stress scale, next to death and divorce. And we know what puts it there: stuff. *Your* stuff, *my* stuff, *our* stuff. And in the case of my son-in-law, *their* stuff—his relatives’ belongings, two generations’ worth of stuff. The son-in-law’s divorced parents and a set of grandparents, all pack rats, died within three years, leaving four households for a thirty-year-old orphan to sort out. Grief of losing four close relatives was bad enough, but being reminded of them every time he dealt with their things added to his pain. Consequently when it came to his own things—and Leigh’s, as well—Johnny was obsessive about getting rid of as much as possible before their move to Europe. I sat mum through arguments between my son-in-law and daughter about stuff.

“Why do you want that cracked wooden spoon? Can’t believe you’re keeping that!”

“It was my grandmother’s, from the old country. Look, Norwegian words and a cute little elf in a pointed green cap.”

Leigh glanced at me, a question in her eyes.

"I'm not weighing in," I said. "You wanted it, so I gave it to you. Not my business what happens afterward."

I said I didn't care, but I did care about a few things. Textiles, for one. "If you don't want that red silk pillow cover I brought you from Vietnam, I'll take it back. And the Guatemalan cloth from Atitlan. I can still see the little Maya lady who wove it, showing me her special loom."

In the end Leigh threw away the Norwegian spoon and packed the textiles. Her husband rolled his eyes. *He's bullying her*, I thought at first. But they muddled along, and I watched Leigh work through the process, pondering, compromising. They sold a house, stored artwork, got rid of most of their furniture, and shipped the important stuff to Switzerland: cookware, hiking and climbing gear, bicycles, and skis.

I've been thinking lately what that culling process says about my daughter and son-in-law. Art, food, the outdoors, living deeply with nature—not a bad combination for the good life.

I wonder what I'd keep if I were moving to another continent.

###

In 2005 I returned from a volunteer stint in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and I got serious about pitching stuff. I had gone with a team to 'muck out' a flooded house in St. Bernard parish. No one was living in the empty neighborhood then, but sidewalks were inundated with trash dragged from houses—mountains of appliances, furniture, clothing, and kitchen ware.

Our team was assigned to Joyce and Tony—too old, too stunned, and too plagued by health problems to muck out their own home. After four months of waiting, they'd lost possessions not only to the flood, but to vicious black mold spreading through the house at an alarming pace. Our faces covered with two layers of masks, our team carried load after load of stuff to the curb. Then we picked up sledge hammers to tear the walls down to the studs and disinfect the foul smelling place. Disgusting.

The amount of stuff I threw out was mind-boggling. One afternoon I carried out two dozen never-used, lighted make-up mirrors, still in water-logged boxes. "Oh," said Joyce, "I bought those twenty years ago on sale. Presents. Guess I forgot they were there."

I lugged out at least six dozen heavy, sopping towels from a storage closet. "Those were for Goodwill or for refugees. Never got around to taking them."

Hundreds of books in the library glued themselves together with a thick paste of green fuzz. "Too bad," said Tony. "I should have given half of them to Tulane when I thought about it. Some rare books there, ruined."

Joyce and Tony were not eccentric, doddering old fools or borderline-crazy hoarders. They were regular folks like you and me who simply got busy and let stuff accumulate, growing stealthily year after year.

Our team salvaged surprising things for the couple, some with great value—china, crystal, even an expensive diamond ring. But of all the things we rescued, the thing that pleased Joyce most was a ceramic piece I cleaned and left for her on the patio. A small figurine of the Virgin Mary. When the slime slid off, her garments shone deep blue and Mary smiled, serene.

“Oh,” said Joyce, “I’m so glad to have her. At Christmas I’ll put her on the mantle at my son’s house, where we’re living now. She’ll remind me of what’s important, not all those things we lost, but what we still have. The rest is just stuff.”

###

It’s been over almost ten years since Joyce took the Virgin home with her, but I see the muddy little figure as if she’s still in my hand. She’s whispering to me, to my daughter, to my son-in-law. *The next tempest could be tomorrow, next week, next month. Do not wait until it comes to take stock of what matters and what is only stuff.*

Foolproof Recipe for a Mind Like a Steel Sieve  
By Judy Whithill Witt  
Second Place

As my friends and family can attest, it's no longer safe to bank on my memory retaining certain details, such as birthdates, the fact that we're out of milk, or—when pressed for time—their names. They wonder why I can remember my Annie Oakley outfit (complete with fun fringe and a gun belt) from when I was five, and the name of my fourth grade teacher (Miss Puncer, who got married and became Mrs. Esquivel), yet recently buy a duplicate of a shirt with cardinals on it, after acquiring the original six months ago. What can I say? I like cardinals.

I've come to the conclusion that Fate has served me something special, following a foolproof recipe for a mind like a steel sieve:

Ingredients:

- 1 bushel finely chopped memories (like high school Latin and Spanish words mixed with college Russian)
- 6 doses chemo (may substitute 6 doses general anesthesia or—hell with it—add both)
- 1 can condensed menopause (do NOT dilute with estrogen supplements)
- 66 chocolate-frosted birthday cakes with my name on top

Beat ingredients together until well mixed. Batter will be lumpy. Pour into one quart brain. Do this over kitchen sink so excess disappears neatly down drain instead of slopping all over kitchen counter. Bake in hot flash oven. To check for doneness, stick out tongue and examine tip. If it's clean, without pin numbers clinging to it, mind is finished.

I've got the uneasy feeling I'm supposed to be somewhere at 1:30 this afternoon. Now where did I put my calendar? Ha, I don't need no stinking calendars. I probably forgot to write whatever-it-is down in the first place.

Things would be so much easier if Fate had added preservatives.

Shifting Zones  
By James F. Gaines  
Third Place

Part of the difficulty of dealing with the Ferguson, Missouri, incident is that it is difficult to establish a spatial reconstruction of what went on in the mentalities of the police officer and the suspects. To begin with, the primary suspect Brown seems to have been in the process of trying to reassess his own zones of personal control. The video from the store where the tobacco was stolen appears to show him seizing objects he desired without thought for a transaction and then pushing the store employee away from him, out of his newly declared zone of command. Shortly thereafter, various sources agree that the two suspects were walking together down the middle of a street, perhaps trying to push farther to determine how large a zone they could control. It is likely that this experimentation was not without precedent in their experiences, that they had already been going to various spaces and seeking to assert various degrees of unmediated control prior to the night of the incident, but access to relevant information is limited by the processes of law enforcement itself. In any case, the fact that the shifting zone of control was both rapidly expanding and unmediated (no limits were being self-imposed and no standards of exchange were being sought), suggests a dangerous level of exposure. The fact that the tobacco seizure seems associated with masculinity symbols constituting a rite of passage into manhood only amplifies the urgency of this level of concern. It is worth remembering that these elements of the spatial restructuring were already present before the involvement of the police officer.

Scanty details available seem to suggest that the officer encountered the suspects while alone in his vehicle and without having full information via radio from his command center. Though the officer was considerably experienced, these two factors increase the probability of a perceived danger zone arising, just as they would in parallel situations in a military encounter. However, part of the problem in the incident stems from the possibility that the officer may have originally assumed too small a danger zone. The officer was attracted to the pair of suspects based not on a report of the events at the store, but on banal behavior that was deemed suspicious, that is, walking down the center of the roadway. This may have induced a misperception on the part of the officer, perhaps that the pair were intoxicated, a state of danger sometimes less menacing than that of opposition through physical force, but this remains to be determined. In any event, the officer may have fallen into a certain amount of spatial confusion about how to proceed, since it appears he may have exited his vehicle and then attempted to re-enter while being physically attacked by at least one of the suspects. One can thus surmise that the officer made an initial decision as to his own zone of physical control that had to be rapidly and not quite successfully revised.

In light of this line of thought, it would seem logical that the aggressive response on the part of the suspects was not simply a random or unmotivated action, but part of a progression of spatial revisions that was spiraling out of control on both sides. To return to the police vehicle, one should not underestimate its symbolic as well as physical importance. To the suspects, such a vehicle would presumably represent at least the possibility of detention, distress, and embarrassment, the latter all the more important in a

community where embarrassment is traditional considered an invitation to abuse from anyone, much less a police officer who may be designated as an enemy by a peer group. Thus, the vehicle represents a space to be avoided and normally feared. But the officer's behavior of leaving and then seeking to return to the vehicle would suddenly downgrade its fear element and turn it into a potential target and make the officer an obstacle to the suspects' claim on this newly dominated space.

By this point in the incident the outcome was becoming increasingly inevitable. For the suspects, their reassignment of control zones had resulted in a triple success, first the store, then the roadway, then the immediate area of the police vehicle. All had been unmediated and there is little chance they would suddenly begin to impose mediation before they went a step farther. The officer, while doing nothing wrong in terms of regulations, had failed to establish a wider control zone and even lost the one he had arrived with, removing any possible refuge of secure space. Whatever the officer did next, the fact is that his service weapon was the next and only space of expansion left for the suspects. Even the proverbial "warning shot" was a dubious expedient, given the fact that modern young people have been largely desensitized to loud reports and even to the potential dangers of projectiles.

Unfortunately, easy solutions to such a situation are not available. Had additional officers been available, one or more might have been extremely useful, even if only as a distraction or an implicit mediation, and certainly as a remedy to the isolation of the one officer from communication and coordination. But one can assume that single patrols were part of a systemic arrangement that the officer had no control over. Some among the public have suggested that the presence of an officer of a different race might have changed the fundamentals of the situation, but this is by no means certain. It seems unlikely under the circumstances that the suspects would even recognize the race of the officer until the confrontation was under way, and it is worth remembering that the previous acts at the store did involve a person of another race, who was totally incapable of preventing the spatial "conquest" that took place there. Subsequent crowd reactions suggest that there may have been a racially motivated animus against Asians involved in the store prelude which would indicate a collective desire to reclaim space by pushing out perceived intruders, but this cannot at present be included as a primary element of the events themselves.

So why bother about space at all if it does not offer an immediate and comfortable antidote to the elements of the Ferguson incident? Primarily, I would argue, because it can be a major factor in retrospectively changing community attitudes and behaviors in relation to law enforcement matters, especially on the educational and institutional levels. While "gang turf" and spatially neutral race quotas are often considerations in law enforcement matters, the more personal elements of spatial control are often overlooked, despite the fact that they are far more susceptible to readjustment.

## Poetry

### New Song for El Condor\* By Esther Whitman Johnson First Place

Condor, king of the Andes, you sit in a squalid  
cage, chained, majestic wings clipped, searching  
for escape. You, who soared from mountains

of Peru to falls of Iguacu, confined behind  
a cheap hotel in a backwater town in Ecuador.  
Santo Domingo *de Los Colorados* it's called,

as if it belongs to the tribe for whom it's named.  
Los Colorados—*the red ones*, the Spanish said—  
named for topknots on the head smeared with

berry juice, protection from spirits and disease.  
Los Colorados walk the streets of Santo Domingo,  
blazing hair, chests bare, hips wrapped in skirts

of stripes, black and white. You, Condor, brother  
of Colorados, saw the demise of your common  
home. Destruction of the rain forest—cutting trees,

rerouting streams, planting crops—brought what  
horrors of history could not, not the sword of  
Pissarro, Bible of the Jesuit, scourge of smallpox,

army of *el dictador*. Nothing destroyed the  
struggling Colorados until the death of the forest  
in which they lived. Villages gone, tradition trampled,

customs crushed, the Colorados live in town now,  
posing for pictures, offering shaman sessions to  
cleanse the soul. A ragtag group of Indians stands

on the street with Peruvian pipes, playing your  
old song, *El Cóndor Pasa*,

*I'd rather be a forest than a street . . .*

*I'd rather feel the earth beneath my feet.*

Not now in Ecuador.  
Here, there is a new song.

\* Original *El Cóndor Pasa* by David Alomia Robles



Hawaiian Undertow  
By Rod Vanderhoof  
Second Place

*A sonnet for my late wife*

Out where tall waves smash down and crush, my Jo,  
in squally seas beyond the coral reef,  
my downcast, forlorn heart sinks 'neath the flow,  
in a precarious undertow of grief.

Out where the trade winds surge from distant lands,  
where flying fish cavort in froth and spray,  
far beyond the endless, glittering sands,  
our memories convey us faraway.

I'll drift back to your waiting arms, my Jo,  
as eager flotsam from the bounding main,  
our blessed, sacred love will ever grow,  
our souls becoming one, and so remain.

On our snug isle, forever we shall be,  
secure from dangers of the restless sea.

For Plato and My Mother  
By David Black  
Third Place

Railing against literacy, the old Greek  
said it would destroy a man's memory  
by letting him forget what he could write down.  
I find myself reliving the truth of it,  
searching for a scrap of paper and a pen,  
muttering, "Now let me write this down  
so I won't forget it," all the time meaning  
"Let me write this down so I **can** forget it."  
Putting your name and birth and death  
on a tombstone and then walking away.

# 2015 Golden Nib Winners

**Judged by:** Judges names not provided.

## **FICTION**

1. Ann Skelton, Williamsburg, VA - "Handsome Maids of Good Repute"
2. Esther Whitman Johnson, Roanoke, VA - "Trucker Wanted"
3. Not received in time for publication

## **NON-FICTION**

1. Esther Whitman Johnson, Roanoke, VA - "Short Weekend at the Hotel Torremolinos"
2. Not received in time for publication
3. Not received in time for publication

## **POETRY**

1. Barbara Stout, Rocky Mount, VA - "Table for Two."
2. Judy Whitman Witt, Glen Allen, VA - "Night Mood"
3. Linda Levokove, Crozet, VA - "Chinese Food in Florence, Italy"

## Fiction

Handsome Maids of Good Repute

By Ann Skelton

First Place

### **Brideship: Destination Jamestown**

Sarah Tanner ducked her head under the boom and leaned over the rail to scan the docks. *Surely he's out there, but where? Surely he'll call to me.*

"Look sharp there Lass or you'll risk getting dragged into that dark sea. You're not to stand here now, ye know. We're casting off and setting sail. Step yer dainty boot into this here hauser when it plays out and away you go into the sea -- quick as a wink. Then fare-thee-well to yer good looks."

Bright blue eyes peered out of the old sailor's browned and weathered face. A grey pigtail reached down his back well below his shoulder blades. Sarah noted that his right hand lacked three fingers though it appeared not to hamper his work. He whipped the heavy rope around until it made a perfect circle on the deck. Though fully absorbed in winding the taff rope, he looked up when he heard Sarah's sharp intake of breath.

"Have you seen a ghost then, Lass?"

"No ghost, Sir. No. No one at all. All faces of strangers."

Several women stood in small groups on the larboard deck, taking care to place themselves out of the way of the sailors, bold and fearsome as they called to each other in a language all their own. Sarah scanned the quay, her eyes searching among the sellers of hot pies and gawkers watching the three masted *Marmaduke* loading its cargo. The sailors rushed to and fro hastening to obey the First Mate's commands. Sarah searched the faces on the quay. She still hoped, no willed, to see one last forgiving smile from her beloved, angry father. Hoped, despite their wrenching quarrel, to hear: *Come along home now, Sarah child. I didn't mean those angry words. It's a reckless thing you're doing, running off to Virginia.*

\* \* \*

The quarrel between Samuel Tanner and Sarah erupted with a suddenness that took Sarah's voice and breath away. Never in her 19 years had she heard an angry word from her father. She was his frequent companion, the favored child, the scholar who sat at his elbow working sums. Many a time she heard him telling Mother, "Sarah can sound the words better than most boys of the village and understand the text, by god."

Samuel's anger that last market day had been quick and piercing. The memory of her father's words pulsed like an open wound: that she acted like a foolish child; had shamed him before the town. A heavy silence grew between them. Even when she was called to help search with him for a wandering lamb, no word was spoken, no gentle nod indicated a softening heart.

And so it was that August day, Sarah leaned across the railing scanning the scene, willing her father to be there. "Surely that's Father; that's he, wearing

his fine brown coat and searching the crowds. Soon he'll see me and wave." As she watched, the man turned back toward the ship and Sarah's smile faded. How could she have mistaken this portly man so short of stature for her own father.

"Hoist the jib. Haul the main si'l. Be quick." Captain Masters shouted from the quarter deck. The sailors, at one with the sea and the winds completed the tasks even before the command was uttered.

"Cast off," called the mate.

"Casting off," repeated the blue-eyed sailor. Sarah felt the deck shift beneath her feet. In that instant Sarah came awake. *What a mistake I made to leave Father without mending the rift. What was I thinking to abandon little Jane in a gloomy household with our silent mother? Little Janey who needed me so.*

Sarah considered the fate she sealed by joining the Virginia Company's Bride ships. Even as she wished to shout, *I've changed my mind. I don't want to go to Jamestown, not across the ocean.* Sarah's unspoken words repeated in her head again and again as she watched the white sails flop, then fill with air, billow, and carry the great ship along the river.

Through the fog of her racing thoughts while still scanning the distance hoping for a glimpse of her father, Sarah began to take notice of the several clusters of women along the rail. They were of various ages and dress but all held the bridges and towers along the Thames in a fixed gaze. A very young girl, only a few years older than Sarah's young sister Jane, stood away from the group. Yet another woman, older and taller than the others, heavy of frame, approached the rail near to where Sarah watched. The woman stood with arms crossed over her chest. "It's some sight ain't it? Watching old London town move away from us as it were?"

The *Marmaduke* moved slowly down the Thames. Sarah held tightly to her emotions, understanding at last that the knot in her belly was fear. *What have I done? I've changed my mind. I don't want to marry a planter. No, nor anyone. But it's too late. It's too late now to undo what I've done.*

The older woman neatly dressed in gingham sidled closer. "I wager you're one of the 'tobacco brides.' I too am off to Jamestown and well rid of the grimy stench of London town. Name's Rachel—you know, the good wife—from the Bible. And how are you called?"

Sarah let out her breath in one long sigh and looked up at the woman who was nearly a head taller. "I'm...the air ... it smells of..." Sarah held her breath unable to think or speak while tears ran down her cheeks.

In an instant, Rachel wrapped her arms around Sarah. "There, there. No call for such sorrow leaving smoky old London town. Stay by me. We're destined for an adventure, we are." Sarah's body sagged and she leaned against Rachel for a moment before squaring her shoulders and wiping her face with the heel of her hand. She noticed the nearby women watching her.

"Move along there. Be quick. We've work to do getting us out into the wide sea." The sailor moved with alacrity from one group of ropes to the next, hauling the sails and securing lines. Though light of step, his face was sunburned and wrinkled like that of an older man. He was a canny old hand, interested in news of all sorts and his blue eyes missed nothing. He knew something of the

passengers on the *Marmaduke* from the gossip shared below decks. In short order, all hands knew their unusual cargo included provisions for the colony and women bound for Jamestown to become brides to the planters. Captain Master's servant-boy filled in enough details about the ladies. What the lad didn't know he made up, all for the sake of the story.

At the sound of the blue-eyed sailor's rough voice, the several women moved as quickly as children reprimanded by a cross aunt. They were 12 in number, one barely 15 years, and except for two women dressed as widows, the others appeared to be nearing 20 years. The women moved but remained near to each other on the deck. Their foreheads screwed into frowns; their lips pursed over clenched teeth, their braced shoulders showing determination to the world. The sailors, snatching glances at the women, understood they were anxious. The blue-eyed old sailor offered his version of comfort. "Never fear, madam, this here ship can handle the Atlantic storms. Capt'n Masters knows a thing or two about sailing to Virginia. Never pay mind to the creaking. The ship ain't cracking apart. Now move below. Ye aren't to be on deck while we're setting sail."

### **The Onward Journey**

As the group moved below deck, a fair-haired woman of about 23 years or so addressed Rachel. "If you please, Mistress, what did you mean by calling us 'tobacco wives?'"

Pleased to have information that others lacked, Rachel assumed the stern voice of a schoolmaster, "Sure, if one of the Virginia planters chooses a wife from among us, he is to pay the Virginia Company for our passage. And costly it is to be sure. No less than 120 pounds of tobacco. Some now call us tobacco wives and this the *Bride Ship*."

The women listening to Rachel's message were hungry for information but seemed undaunted by what they heard. "Not an elegant form of address, 'tobacco wife', but no matter. Life in Virginia offers much according to Captain John Smith's accounts. By the by, I am called Elizabeth Goodall. I did overhear that you are Rachel." Good wife Elizabeth held out her smooth hand to grasp Rachel's roughened one.

Sarah, noting that Rachel seemed to know more than most about the Virginia Company's arrangements, pulled a folded paper from her apron pocket. "I picked up this handbill at last market day. They were all over. It says the Company wants '*handsome, and honestlie educated maides to be disposed in Marriage to industrious planters...*' Also, that *no maide among us shall be forced to wed*. If we care nothing for the gentleman, we need not marry.

Rachel was quick to reply. "Ah, true Sarah, but passage must be paid. Those who do not marry will spend some seven years in indentured service. That's a penalty I don't wish to pay."

\* \* \*

Sarah huddled in her bunk sucking air deep into her lungs in an attempt to dispel panic. Maybe if Thomas were here she wouldn't be so frightened. He would remind her of Captain Smith's bravery and chase her fear away. Sarah thought of Thomas Gale and their occasional meetings along the stream where she gathered

herbs. Their friendship was short lived but it had become a tonic against the gloom cast by Mother's persistent silence. One thinks of silence as peaceful, but Mother shut her and Janey out when she stopped speaking. Nothing helped. No melody, no herbs brought by good wife Temperance eased their mother's brooding over her lost infant.

Now Sarah's own anger toward her father overtook her thoughts as she sorted out a new set of problems. Yes, Father was unjust in his scolding. Yes, Thomas caused her grief. Yes, she had only herself to blame. Would that she could now flee from the *Marmaduke*, return to her father's home in Kent, embrace her sister and forget this hasty decision.

Rachel was nearby, chattering to the two widows among them. The women took solace from simple conversation but there was no comfort for Sarah. Each night below deck, never alone, and cramped two to a bunk, Sarah brooded. She was paired with young Alice Baker. The child, though tall for her age, was barely 15 and homesick beyond comfort. Little by little her sobs penetrated Sarah's dark thoughts. Feeling the keen regret for her own impetuous decisions, Sarah reached out her hand to the child. From then on Alice looked on Sarah as an older sister. She talked to her of her own father, a craftsman, only recently dead, and of the family's poverty.

"How did you manage then, Alice, without your father?"

"Mother earned extra with her spinning and weaving, but still we had only a few loaves of bread and little left over for the rent. Mother taught me to gather the hops from nearby, and I can brew a fine draft, but no matter. We had few choices. Mother thought sending me along to Virginia to marry a rich planter would solve our problems."

Alice sobbed as she shared out bits of her story. "I won't deny it, Mistress Sarah. I ate little, but still what I ate took from little Bobby. Now with me away Mother can manage better having just the two mouths to feed. I am right sore of heart to leave them so, but it was up to me to find my own way."

Sarah noticed the tilt of heads typical of women listening to another's tale and vowed not to speak of her own misadventure. No one need hear of her friendship with Thomas Gale and her father's black anger.

"The handbill said that we are to marry only if we give permission. If someone I dislike chooses me, I don't have to give permission. That is true, isn't it Sarah?"

Longing to bring comfort to the youngster who barely understood the demands of marriage, Sarah paused long before speaking. "True it is, Alice. Though it might be a hard thing to refuse a decent man because something about him doesn't suit. Stubbornness might give us no other resource but seven years of servitude. I promise you this, Alice: we will stay together. Know that I won't abandon you whatever happens."

"Oh, Sarah, then I'll not be so afraid if you are with me."

Sarah along with Alice joined in the companionship of the other women though Sarah shared little about her life and her motives for answering the Virginia company's call for "maides honestly educated."

“Why don’t you ever tell us about your own wishes, Sarah? The women are all kind and motherly. They treat me like their own child. But, I’ve so many questions for you.”

“What troubles you, little Alice?”

“Just ordinary things about your family? How you know so much about herbs and flowers. You’re the mysterious one among us. Why are you going to Jamestown?”

“One day you may read my log, Alice. Perhaps that will satisfy.”

### **Sarah Tanner’s Log**

Ship’s Log of *The Vessel Marmaduke*,

Known also as: *The Bride Ship*

Home Port: Portsmouth

Captain: Charles Masters

Recorded by: Sarah Tanner, bound for Jamestown

Date: August 20, year of Our Lord, 1622

I, Sarah Tanner, do commit to paper my record of events and thoughts during the voyage of the Bride Ship called *Marmaduke* in hopes that it will be of use to persons who come after me. I will faithfully record events that occur among the passengers and crew during this long journey to Jamestown in Virginia.

August 28, 1622

Just eight days at sea into our long four month journey. The English women destined for Jamestown have settled into a housewifely routine. They do chatter a great deal and press me to share details of my life but I have no wish to do so.

Maybe as time passes I will be able to share more freely of my pain. But still I think of Father’s ugly words. “Alone in the woods? Foolish girl. How could you think the family of the most prosperous estate in the region would have ought to do with the likes of you. No matter that you can read and brew. How you have shamed me.”

My sorrow lingers and even frightens me. Last night I held tightly to the edges of my bunk to keep from running upon the deck to gaze at the dark green water and thence to, what...?

September 21, 1622

Gradually we have formed a family of sorts on the ship. We seem to enjoy our own society and many of the women are quite clever at adjusting our circumstances. Mistress Elizabeth created privacy for us by rigging a blanket around our chamber pots.

Life aboard ship presents endless challenges. Cleanliness is a great difficulty as we all need water for drinking and can spare little for washing either ourselves or our clothing. We are called ‘the flowers’ by the sailors,



who see us as dainty creatures though most of us are braver than they know.

Tom of the wise blue eyes has become my friend. He has taught me much of the nautical language so I now understand many sailors as they call out among themselves.

We all prefer to be on deck away from the stale odors of unwashed bodies and the sounds of rats scratching in hidden corners. Alas, we are allowed up top only two hours each day. Sometimes we are sent below deck to escape high winds or to clear the area for the sailors' duties. They are always busy scrubbing the deck or mending sails or braiding each other's pigtails.

October 12, 1622

All night I dreamed of our last journey to the market in Dover Town. That was the beginning of my quarrel with Father and, now I admit, my own poor behavior.

I think I will not be a whole person until I am able to shake the memory of that market day. We all left in high spirits early Friday, Father expecting a better than usual profit from the sale of our lovely spring lambs that trotted behind the cart. Though I confess, I disliked parting with the dear soft things.

Janey was promised a special treat from the sale of eggs she packed so carefully in leaves and wood chips. Dover was a fair journey from our village along the downs but Father thought the busy town would yield greater profits. How enchanted we were to stand on the white cliffs and watch great sailing ships with billowing sails. I never thought I would feel the tilt of a deck under my feet and the touch of the breeze on my cheek in barely a breath of time.

The Dover market was a scene of wonder. Farm goods, cooking pots of all sizes, women selling woven cloth of soft blues and tans – I didn't know where to look first. Dover had treasures never seen in our little town. Lads called attention to their wares, tempting us with smiles. Goodwife Temperance, ever my good friend and teacher, teased that it was I drawing admiring looks.

Why do I conjure visions of the past. Better to stand on deck and watch the white foam again the dark green sea. Yesterday I saw a bird trailing us. Tom says that's a good omen. Perhaps we're nearing an island.

October 29, 1622

What a fearsome trial we witnessed today. Captain Masters' young servant, bearing a message to Cook, caught his foot in an anchor rope, which in some wise came loose from the fastening. The anchor carried him overboard and deep into the sea while Rachel and I watched in horror. With luck Tom, our blue-eyed sailor, witnessed the event and called all hands to rescue the boy. They dropped a scow into the water and hauled young Jimmy aboard but he had taken in a terrible measure of sea water.

Thanks be to god the sailors pounded his back and held his feet upright until the lad came back among the living sputtering and coughing and dreadfully sick to his stomach.

A lesson to us all.

I am grateful today for life.

November 11, 1622

Dear log book, I hope never to endure a storm like the one we faced all through the night. The howling wind battered the sails and tilted the ship so that Captain Masters sent the order to reef the main. We sailed then with just the jib which lay forward of the huge main sail. Our ship tilted over somewhat less. Before the winds abated, many of us *flowers* were quite ill and could keep no food nor liquid down. Oh the dreadful stench in our cabin. I thank the Lord I was not so badly affected as Mistress Rachel. She remains pale as the white sails.

November 25, 1622

What a good story-teller is Mistress Elizabeth. She knows quite a lot about Virginia having read all of Captain John Smith's report and the London news accounts of Pocahontas' visit. Captain John Smith twice explored the land called Virginia and dealt bravely with the Indians. The natives were oft threatening to the transplanted Englishmen and right dangerous. Captain Smith was fearless though. He was able to gain the respect of the Indians who called him *werowance*, meaning 'honored leader' or was it Chief?

December 20, 1622

I have heard the excited cries from above. I must put away my pen and rush above with the others. We have been expecting sight of land for many a day. Oh dear, my heart is racing...

### **Land ho. Virginia**

The sails were reefed to slow the speed of our approach. We could see land though the *Marmaduke* would drop anchor in the bay where the depth could support the ship. The women had long been awaiting the sight of land and now were adorned in their best dresses.

The youngest sailor had drawn watch in the crow's nest, so his was the good fortune to call out, "Land ho. Virginia ahead."

We crowded the rail unable to contain our excitement and curiosity. All vied for a turn looking through the spyglass to catch a glimpse of what awaited us.

"A crowd on the shore. Many men. I am unable to count them," cried Rachel.

Alice held Sarah's hand. "Remember your promise to me, Sarah? That you'll stay with me?"

Mistress Elizabeth, ever dignified, murmured, "I wonder what doth await us, now."

Trucker Wanted  
By Esther Whitman Johnson  
Second Place

DRIVERS NEEDED  
REGIONAL ROUTES  
MOST NIGHTS HOME

Like hell, thought Joe, taking in the sign on the truck ahead, most nights home. Haven't spent most nights home in ten years. Not since the trouble. Lucky to spend half the nights home. A wonder Jennie knows me, much less Beth Ann.

The rig ahead pulled out of the Botetourt truck stop as he pulled in. Might as well take down the number, probably never do anything with it. He scribbled it and threw the paper on the dash.

May stood at the counter, wet rag in hand, scrubbing like she was wiping the grin off her ex-husband's face. Joe put his hand over hers.

"May, you know I love ya, don't'cha? You're the one thing in my life that never changes. Leave home, drive hours up I-81, and walk in this diner to you. 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?'"

"Yeah, Shakespeare, the waitress with a heart of gold, outta those stories you write. Get published, and I'll quit this crummy job and audition for the movie."

"Just articles," said Joe. "The next Studs Terkel, on the road looking for material."

"Not much material here."

"May, you're as good as it gets. Speaking of material, what's new with the truckers' murder thing?" Joe reached for the newspaper.

"They're not talking drug deals gone bad on the I-81 corridor anymore. Three dead. They're talking serial killer. Rumor is some weird kind of ritual killing, but nobody's saying."

"You're kidding."

"Naw, they brought in the F.B.I. a few days ago. I told 'em about the big guy last month that beat the crap outta poor ole Jake."

Joe remembered—a huge trucker, built like a lumberjack, in red plaid shirt and bib overalls. Ole Jake had called him "Paul Bunyan," and the guy had taken offense. Serious offense.

"Maybe it's not a trucker. Maybe it's that guy they arrested and let go a couple years ago when the rest stop murders on Route 460 happened."

"Could be." May slapped Joe's arm with her wet towel and wrote up his order without asking. She smiled. "Glad to see you, honey. How's the wife and daughter?"

Joe pulled a photo from his wallet. Blonde, blue-eyed Jennie—looking not much older than the sixteen she'd been the day he met her in college—her arm thrown protectively around their daughter's shoulder. Beth Ann, clean-cut, ponytail, smiling with those "invisible" braces they all wore. Cost a fortune, and Jennie had chided him for caving in to a twelve-year-old.

Both his girls smiling for the camera. No, for Joe, husband and dad.

Joe leaned back on the cracked vinyl stool as May studied the photo. Then he saw her, a girl staring at him in the mirror, a cigarette hanging from her maroon mouth. Maybe not more than fourteen, but what did he know? Ten years since he'd taught, ten years since the trouble. Did they still do that Goth thing? Guess so, because that's what she was, Goth Girl. Dyed black hair, a pink streak over her eyes. Thick mascara, a dog collar, a ring through her upper lip, and a tattoo on her neck.

Goth Girl stubbed out her cigarette and moved to the seat next to Joe, her eyes never leaving his in the mirror. "Can I see that picture? Good to know what real families look like."

Uh oh, thought Joe. Be careful, just remember. . .

May passed the picture back to Joe, ignoring the girl. "Nice. Can't believe how that child has grown."

"Yeah, she's in junior high already." Joe pushed the photo across the stained counter to Goth Girl. Her black fingernails curled around it like talons.

"Ah," she said, as if she'd seen the photograph before. "Just what I thought. Is she a cheerleader?"

"No."

"She will be. That kind always is."

Joe swiveled to take in the girl. Black turtleneck, mini skirt, and biker boots, model-stunning beneath the makeup—green eyes, full lips, a graceful neck, surprisingly tall. She kept looking over her shoulder at the door, maybe a nervous tic or something.

"My daughter's twelve." Joe twisted his wedding ring. "Probably not much younger than you."

"Figured we'd get to that." The girl leaned in, flipping her hair behind an ear. "I don't look it, but I'm eighteen. Graduate next month. Planning to study French, as if you'd know anything about that."

May rolled her eyes and shook her head at Joe. He knew Goth Girl was talking down to him. How could she know he had an English degree, was a writer, and once taught English to smart-ass kids like her?

"So," said Goth Girl, "since we're getting personal, how old are you?"

"Forty-four."

"Wow, that *is* old."

"Think so?"

"Yeah, but you're sexy with the grey over the ears. A certain *je ne sais quoi*."

"*'Je ne sais quoi*,'" said Joe. "Aren't you cosmopolitan? And where might you plan to study French?"

She paused too long. Joe had taught high school long enough to know a graduating senior answered the college question in a nanosecond.

"Uh . . . community college first, save some money, then UVA."

Goth Girl looked over her shoulder again and excused herself to the ladies' room as May arrived with Joe's dinner. "Watch out for that one, Shakespeare."

She's got a sad story, and most of it's true. But she's trouble, and you don't need it, my friend."

"Been thinking the same thing. I'm outta here." Leaving the chicken and May's tip on the counter, Joe was all the way to the parking lot when the girl caught up.

"Please, don't leave me." The sophistication gone, her voice had risen an octave. "I can't go home. I can't."

"Why not?"

"My mother's a psycho, does awful things. You wouldn't believe it if I told you."

"Try me." Joe stopped walking and faced the girl.

The tears were flowing now, streaking her make-up, and the girl wiped her face with the back of her hand, a Beth Ann gesture. Joe thought of his daughter, safe at home in Tennessee with a mother who doted on her. With a father who took on extra shifts to give her just the braces she wanted.

"My mother's a hog butcher. We live over the barn, and she makes me watch."

"Watch?"

"Yeah, while she cuts 'em up. The farmers don't know how she does it or they wouldn't hire her."

"What are you saying?"

"She tortures the hogs, cuts off their parts while they're alive." Goth Girl looked down at her boots, hair covering her face.

"Parts?"

"You know, the sex parts. She hacks 'em and then takes a foot or two before she slits their throat."

"Good god, how in heaven—"

"You're wondering why they don't put her away."

"Yeah, someone from school—"

"I've tried. Protective Services people come, but she's so crazy she acts sane. All nice and regular, quotes some book on humane hog killing and her good mothering." The girl's shoulders were heaving, her sobs so loud other truckers in the lot glanced over.

Joe pulled her to his chest and patted her back. "Don't cry, we'll figure out something."

"Let me ride with you up I-81, far as you go. I'll hitch to New York."

New York. Every kid who ran away imagined making it big in the city. Even Beth Ann, who'd never run away, talked about New York. Maybe he'd take the girl, but he needed to think and clear his head. Joe headed to the truck, the girl beside him. "Okay, listen up," he said. "You can sleep in the truck, and tomorrow I might—*might*—take you along."

"You won't be sorry—"

"Now listen. You gotta promise no trouble, no Lolita crap, or I swear I'll throw your ass out. Might even kill you, maybe I'm the I-81 killer."

"I promise, no trouble." The girl wiped the last tears with her sleeve and almost laughed. "Yeah, you really look like a killer."

Maybe he was losing it, because no sooner than he'd mentioned the killer, Joe caught a glance of a large figure behind a semi. Red plaid and bib overalls, he thought. Would the girl be safe with a killer on the loose or a crazy mother coming for her? Better take her to the motel with him, much as he didn't want to.

\* \* \*

Joe had washed down his Ambien with half a Coke when the girl came out of the bathroom, wrapped in a large towel. She smelled of soap and shampoo, a Beth Ann smell. The lip ring was gone and the tough girl with it.

"What's your name?" Joe asked. He couldn't think of her as *Goth Girl* anymore. "Gimme the truth, not some crappy French pseudonym like *Madeleine*."

"Robyn, with a y. Really."

"Okay, Robyn-with-a-y, I'm going to shower now, then figure out sleeping arrangements. This blue shirt'll do you for a nightgown."

"I don't sleep in anything."

"Put it on." Joe threw the shirt at her, left the Coke on the dresser, and disappeared into the bathroom.

Ten minutes later he finished the soda, pulled cushions off armchairs, and made himself a pallet on the floor. He was tired, eyelids so heavy he could barely see the girl. Was she unbuttoning the shirt? Yes. She was on her knees, body arched, letting the shirt fall. Her small breasts stood hard and her boy-slim hips began to gyrate. Must be his imagination, his ten year old guilt run amok. Why would she do this?

"Robyn, I'm a husband, a father—"

"Bet you're a good daddy too. Never knew mine. Coulda been any of three or four guys—"

Joe tried to shake off the stupor and stand, but fell back onto the pallet. "Robyn, help me."

*You're beyond help*, he heard. But her lips weren't moving.

The fatigue was pulling Joe down so fast he couldn't speak. His body was heavy, arms immobile, waves of nausea rolling over him, sweat pouring down his face. Had he been drugged? He looked at the girl, saw her eyes focused on the door past him, her cheeks wet, her mouth moving, *No, no, no!*

But he couldn't hear a word.

Then the image blurred and the girl wasn't Robyn, but Jessica.

\* \* \*

The trouble had occurred five years into Joe's career, teaching Honors British Lit. Jessica Peters, with wild red hair, pale skin and grey eyes, drove the boys mad, flirting and then ignoring them all. Joe was helping her study group get ready for the AP test, but that day three of the four hadn't shown. Five o'clock, the sun was low, the classroom dim. William Blake and E.M. Forster peered from posters on the back wall. Joe sat on a chair flipping through the syllabus, Jessica perched on the desk in front of him, her tanned legs crossed. She leaned back, her chest in the air, straining the buttons on her blouse. Laughing.

Not good, he thought. She's trouble. Where were the others? He should leave.

"Mr. Brancaccio, . . . may I call you 'Joe'?"

"No, Jessica. You may not."

"Okay then, *Mister* Brancaccio. As I was saying, I hope your World Lit class next year is as stimulating as this one."

"I try—"

"Everything about you is stimulating, *Mister* Brancaccio. Your Italian nose, your rear end in those jeans." Jessica leaned farther back, uncrossed her ankles, and spread her legs. No underwear.

Joe jumped up to leave, but Jessica grabbed his hand and slid it into her crotch. Numb with shock, he hadn't backed away fast enough. The girl played him like a puppet, her hand manipulating his, as she moaned, "Oh god, Joe, don't stop."

"No!" Joe pulled his hand back.

Jessica's lids flew open and she spoke, her voice icy. "*Mister* Brancaccio, finish what you started or you'll regret it the rest of your life." She reached again for his hand.

"Jessica, please, no—"

"I'll yell 'rape' and you'll go to jail," She smiled as she guided his fingers back.

A few minutes later, Jessica Peters slid off the desk, picked up her lit book, and strutted from the room. "Thank you, *Mister* Brancaccio. I look forward to more stimulating sessions with you next year."

\* \* \*

Joe had gone home, told Martha the sordid tale, and resigned the next day. Jessica never told her story, but he knew he would never teach again. There were too many Jessicas, and he was vulnerable. What should he have done differently? The guilt nagged him for years, and, worsened by his daughter's onset of puberty, it crept into corners of his brain during nightmares.

He started long distance driving the next year, telling himself that the likelihood of meeting young girls at truck stops was minimal. Whores, yes, but they were of no interest and no trouble.

He was wrong about the young girls.

\* \* \*

Jessica disappeared and Robyn came back into focus. Joe could make things right with this one. "I won't come near you, Robyn," he slurred. "Won't touch you."

But Robyn wasn't on the bed now, or was she? Joe's eyesight was so blurred, he wasn't sure. He thought he heard raised voices outside, arguing. A woman's deep voice? And Robyn's? Not sure. Exhausted, he fell back to the pallet, felt as if he were in a hammock, swinging, swinging . . .

An engine started, road sounds soothed him to sleep, and Joe dreamed of signs: *L'il Cucci's Pizza, Three Little Pigs Barbecue, Transfiguration Catholic Church*. Where was he? Joe's stomach lurched, his mouth went dry, and his head spun. He was not asleep, but in a pickup truck, and he wasn't driving. If not him,



who? Had the red plaid shirt and bib overalls in the parking lot been real? Was Paul Bunyan back, looking for a fourth trucker to murder? Would it be him? Where was the girl? Was she in on it, planted to lure truckers to motels where the big guy took over?

Joe was too tired to think. Had the girl slipped something in the Coke while he showered? What the hell was going on?

The last thing he saw before he fell into darkness was the door of a dilapidated barn.

\* \* \*

Joe woke later—how much later, he wasn't sure—to a woman's snarling face inches from his. Foul breath, cigarettes, and booze.

"You stinkin' pig, disgrace to the human race. A man, what's to expect but shit?"

With every word, she spat into his eyes, blinding him. "No, not a pig. Looka that pig yonder. Pig's got honor. Knows he's goin' to the slaughter, but pig's got self-respect."

Maybe no more than thirty, her hands were those of an old woman, wrinkled and raw with sores. Large, with arms of a weightlifter, she appeared six feet tall, and had a butcher knife in her hand. "You another case. Probably shit your pants when the knife hits your throat."

"No, no, I don't know what you're talking—"

"You picked up a little girl in a diner and took her to a motel room. Raped her."

"No, wait—"

"Too late to wait."

"You talking about Robyn? I never touched Robyn!"

As if she'd heard her name, the girl stepped from behind the woman. "No, Mama! I been telling you, this time you got it wrong! Please, no!" Robyn reached for the knife, but the woman was quick and lunged at the girl, barely missing her arm.

"You're a lunatic!" the girl screamed.

"Robyn, help me, my god, help me!" Joe begged. But the girl stood, frozen.

Joe struggled against the ropes, hands tied behind his back, feet bound together. Hog-tied. Looking at the pig in the corner, he knew what the woman would do. She'd practiced on dozens of animals, perfecting her technique. Killing him would be easy.

"I never touched Robyn!" he yelled again. The smell of manure was overwhelming, and straw was gouging his neck. "Tell her, Robyn!"

"Sweet little girl, my Robyn," the woman said softly, like a mother calming a child. We do this together. Not the killin'—she won't have no part of that. Gettin' 'em here, that's her part. I take care of the rest."

"You killed the three truckers? *You?*" Joe could barely get the words out.

"Men's always surprised, the other three too." The woman smiled, her yellow teeth flashing.

"Mama, don't—"

“Don’t you ever tell me what to do, girl!” She shook the knife in the girl’s direction again, and Robyn dropped back and ran out the barn door.

“R-o-b-y-n-n-n,” Joe called after her.

“I tell ya a bedtime story, mister,” the woman said. “Once upon a time, I was a girl, little bitty thing, only thirteen, runnin’ from home. Stopped at a truck stop, beggin’ food. You know the truck stop, one down the road.”

“I swear I never touched her!”

“Ya interruptin’ my story.” The woman slid the knife under Joe’s chin. “A trucker bought me dinner, said he’d carry me to New York.”

“But that wasn’t me—”

“Shut up or ya won’t hear how it ends. ‘Stead of New York, he done carried me to his rig. Raped me. Passed me to three others, all of ‘em, passin’ me round again and again.”

“But that wasn’t me. You got the wrong guy.”

“You the one’s here. Been fifteen years, so this sorta the anniversary and I’m celebratin’, so to speak.”

“No, please—”

“That’s right, beg, like I done, but didn’t do me no good. Won’t do you no good neither. So, Robyn goes to the truck stop, sees who’s gonna take her. Not all of ‘em does, some real nice. Them, I let be. Them that takes her inside like you—”

“But I didn’t . . . not at first—”

“Them’s the ones payin’ for what the four done to me.” The woman slid the knife from Joe’s chin to his throat. “Now, your turn.”

Joe felt in some way he deserved what she planned, and the fight went out of him. There had been a girl, just not the one she thought. Retribution, just desserts. He was tired of carrying the old guilt.

Turning his head to the side, determined to focus on something other than the woman’s howling mouth, Joe saw the barn door slid open. Slowly, quietly. The woman neither saw nor heard it, and Robyn slid inside, a pistol in her hand, aimed at her mother’s head. When she squeezed the trigger, she appeared to be smiling.

The woman fell onto his chest, and warm liquid spouted over his face. Her surprised eyes met his as she bled onto him, chest to chest like lovers, while footsteps retreated into the darkness.

Joe could’ve sworn he saw a blur of red plaid behind Robyn before he lost consciousness.

\* \* \*

Two days later Joe Brancaccio was released from Roanoke Memorial Hospital where police had taken him for observation. After a doctor’s exam, the F.B.I. debriefed him. They’d found him more than twelve hours after the shooting, led by a tip from a payphone in upstate New York. Joe never mentioned Robyn, and since he wasn’t a suspect, there was no lie detector test. News of the serial killer—a woman, of all things—made international headlines. Joe’s face was plastered on newspapers, TV, and the internet. There were no leads on who had killed the killer, said to be a homeless woman with no family. The citizens of Botetourt County were remarkably mum.

Jennie had driven up from Tennessee to sit with Joe in the hospital and gone back home.

“When you get home tomorrow,” she’d said, “your bags will be packed and in the garage. You will *not* see me, and you will *not* see Beth Ann. Go live somewhere else until you get yourself sorted out. Do some thinking about what you want.”

The police dropped him at the truck stop to pick up his rig, and Joe went in to see May. She took his arm and steered him outside.

“She’s gone, Shakespeare. Left right after the shooting. Went with Paul Bunyan, probably in Canada by now.”

\* \* \*

Joe had pulled on to the forked entrance to Interstate-81 when he noticed the scribbled phone number on the dash. *Most nights home*. Maybe he’d check it out when he got back. Might be just the thing to get his life back on track. Then again, maybe not. He just might write a suspense novel, and with his newfound fame it was sure to be a bestseller.

At the last minute Joe swerved from the southbound lane into the northbound, headed toward Ontario.

## Nonfiction

Short Weekend at the Hotel Torremolinos

By Esther Whitman Johnson

First Place

I want to be alone. Two weeks with this Habitat team is enough, and although we did a great build, I am teamed out. I need space and quiet time. The chatter, constant nightly drinking, and the camaraderie are getting on my nerves. Up to my ears in camaraderie.

Three days to myself now at Lago Coatepeque in El Salvador—three days floating in a pool, lying on a chaise, reading a good book, drinking margaritas, and looking over a pristine deep blue crater lake. “The Hotel Torremolinos,” says Lonely Planet, “reminds you of the resort in ‘Dirty Dancing.’ A ‘50s place with character.”

*Character*—always a clue in a guidebook, but I missed it.

The second clue was a Salvadoran friend saying, “Do *not* take the local bus. Hire a car from Santa Ana and go *directly* to your hotel.” Which I do, not thinking about why.

The third clue, the driver hands me his card as he leaves. “In case you need me to take you to San Salvador. Transport from here is *muy difícil*.” I listen to my inner voice and arrange a pickup on the spot for Monday morning. If I’d listened even more carefully to that clue, I’d have gone straight back into the cab.

Rogelo carries my bags through the gate, leaves me at the desk, and wastes no time beating it away.

So, here I am in paradise

*Recepción* is a counter with no attendant, and except for some kids playing ping pong, the place looks empty. Eventually one of the ping-pong kids yells through the courtyard, and a surly *señora* arrives. Short, squat, wearing one of those shapeless shifts you see on Latin American women, she doesn’t smile like other Salvadorans.

“What do you want?” she growls in barely intelligible Spanish.

“*Tengo una reservación*.” Do I even need a reservation? Looks like I’m the only person here. I try my I’m-a-stranger-in-your-country smile, the one that engages most people. She’s not buying it.

“*Pasaporte*,” she grunts.

I hit her with The Habitat Story, usually a winner with the locals. “Two weeks I’ve been with a team from *Hábitat Para La Humanidad* in a pueblo near here, building a home for a poor family.”

She is not impressed. “*Tres noches?*” she asks, never looking up.

*No, only two*, I want to say, but it’s too late. My driver is gone and I’m stuck until Monday. The three ping-pong kids grab my bags and carry them to the room, lit by one bare hanging light bulb, so dark I can hardly see into my coin purse. I give each kid a quarter, and they disappear. Uh oh, maybe I accidentally gave one a Sacagawea dollar, about the size of a quarter. I despise those damned dollar coins, and I know why they are so profuse in this country. We hate them in

The States, so they end up in El Salvador, which uses the U.S. currency as its own.

Yep, here come two of the ping-pong kids, complaining. “We have a quarter, but our brother has *un dólar*.” They want a dollar too. Normally I’m a kid-pleaser, but for some reason this irritates me.

“No,” I shake my head. “*Nada mas*.” They are not happy. In the first five minutes at The Torremolinos I have pissed off the kids. Not smart.

\* \* \*

My room, Dreamsicle orange, with one tiny window and a water-stained ceiling, closes in, claustrophobic. The bathroom is bubblegum pink, with a wooden door too swollen to close. The spigot on the sink shakes as if it’ll fall off in my hand. A roach sticks his head out of the drain, looks around, and spying nothing of interest, withdraws to his moist underworld.

I escape from my cell, wander outside to find a hanging-out spot, as I do when I’m alone—under a palm tree, on a deck, or beside a pool. That’s it. My guidebook says the hotel has two pools. I’ll swim and lie beside the pool until Rogelo comes for me Monday.

Inside a shabby courtyard of leafless bushes and scraggly grass, two pools hide. One looks like a relic from my childhood in the ‘50s: flaking concrete, painted baby-blue—maybe, but the water is so opaque I can’t be sure. A yellowish film floats on the surface, and the other pool, empty, looks like it hasn’t been used in years. The ping-pong kids squeal in the shallow end of the filled pool, which might explain the yellowish tinge of the water.

“Come in, *Señora*, and swim.” That’s what they say, but they mean, *We’ll get you for giving us a quarter*.

I’m not putting a toe in that pool, not one toe.

I meander to the hotel’s open-air restaurant, a rickety pier on stilts. The walkway sways with each step as if the flimsy matchsticks will tumble to the ground. This shaky covered deck becomes my hanging-out spot, and after a few *cervezas* I don’t care if it falls into the lake and takes me with it.

From the pier I stare back at the Hotel Torremolinos, pink stucco faded beige, a sleeping animal, waiting to wake and prowl. Like the Alamo, a fortress...or a prison. Lago Coatepeque spreads across the horizon, so deep that according to locals, if you drown, they’ll never recover your body. Comforting thought. A fire high on the mountain sends fumes into the sky, clouding the lake with a brown haze. Maya farmers clearing their land, the locals explain.

“The smoke ruins the lake for everyone,” I complain.

“It is their right,” say the locals. End of story.

\* \* \*

Only Friday night. What’ll I do for two more days in The Hotel Torremolinos? I wander to the bar, order a Corona, and watch the horizon. No spectacular sunset like Lake Atitlan in Guatemala, where tourists congregate as vivid streaks of pink paint the sky behind the dark, brooding volcanoes. Here the day merely fades into a soft rose blur.

Across the lake, lights twinkle from docks of El Salvador’s rich and famous. I am like Gatsby gazing across an unbreachable expanse at shimmering dots on

Daisy's pier, aching for the party to which I am not invited. I am alone and a little lonely.

A waitress approaches to see if I want dinner. "*Yo soy Blanca.*"

"Ah," I say, "*como Blanca Nieve y los Siete*"—what is the word for 'dwarfs' in Spanish?

Blanca laughs, "*Sí*, I am Snow White, but there is no Prince, no friendly dwarfs either."

Now I have a friend. And because I speak enough Spanish, I get the story of Blanca's life. She has lived at the lake since she was born, been a waitress since she was old enough to work, and makes six dollars a day. "I'll be a waitress until I die, and that could be soon. Seven days a week, eight in the morning until eight at night, sometimes longer, no overtime pay."

I teach Blanca a new English term: twenty-four/seven. She nods, "*Sí, todos los días, todo el día.*"

Knowing she will tell me the truth, I ask, "Am I the only guest in the hotel?"

"No, *Señora*, there's one couple on the other hall. Do not worry, there is a security guard at night to protect you." Oh great, like the security guard in front of every shop, fast food joint, bank, and office building in El Salvador. A teenager with a fuzzy chin, smaller than the rifle he carries, the rifle as likely to be turned on him as used against criminals. I'll rest easier knowing this.

But I'm not really worried about crime at the lake. Big city thugs or drug dealers probably wouldn't bother with this area, and if they did, they'd go for the lakeside mansions, not poor suckers at the Torremolinos.

Just then, as if to confirm my safety in numbers, a van pulls up and spits out a dozen chattering young women, clad in sandals and pastel calf-length cotton dresses, with hair pulled back in white kerchiefs.

"*Las cristianas*," says Blanca. Missionaries.

Now I am not alone.

\* \* \*

Saturday morning I meet the first of the *cristianas*. "Hello," she chirps, and launches into her history before I ask—a thing Americans do in foreign countries when they pounce on one of their own. "I'm Sandra. My mother's American, my father Salvadoran. I'm getting married in two weeks and going back to Indiana with my husband. Since I'm leaving the Salvadoran mission and saying goodbye to all my girlfriends, I brought them all to the Torremolinos for a celebration."

"Ah, a bachelorette party," I say. "Lago Coatepeque instead of Las Vegas?" She looks perplexed, so I drop it. I notice the Bible in her hand, but at least she's not thumping it. Yet. Just when I think I'm getting away, she does that thing that ruins missionaries for me.

"Are you a Christian?"

Not even seven a.m. I don't have the energy to get into a religious discussion, so I take the easy way out, the coward's way.

"I am Lutheran," I say, although I'm not anymore, and I change the subject, going off on my Habitat tangent. Maybe if she thinks I'm a do-gooder, she'll leave me alone. Then, I stick my nose in a book. Goodbye Sandra.

An hour later her friends meander out in their rainbow dresses—lime, orange, blue, violet, pink, like a sherbet collection or maybe a flock of pretty birds. Yes, Pretty Birds. They drift out to the restaurant near my table for breakfast, but I don't make eye contact, the better to avoid the Christian question.

\* \* \*

The Torremolinos stands on one of the few beaches not barricaded from the road by walls, so the weekend drama plays out there. Singing drifts onto the hotel veranda from a ragtag group gathered on the shore for a church service. The minister's voice rises from the water, *Aleluyas* followed by *Gracias a Dios*, as he baptizes a young woman, dunks her, and passes her along to be wrapped in a white sheet. His voice rises, imploring the flock to come forward and be saved. One after another, the penitents walk into the water as the minister shouts "*Aleluya, Señor. Con agua en el nombre del Padre y el Cristo y el Espiritu Santo.*"

From the breakfast table The Pretty Birds watch the baptism with—could it be, jealousy, not having saved the sinners themselves? Near the preacher a half-dozen kids swim, squeal, and dunk each other while older brothers kick soccer balls on the sand, oblivious to the religious pageant playing out nearby.

The Ping Pong Kids from the hotel merge in and out with the children on the beach. They aren't allowed in the restaurant, but often they sit on the walkway outside, dark faces peering at me through the wooden slats, as if to say, *We've got an eye on you.*

By 9 a.m. the locals are pouring off rusty buses that run along the dirt road outside the villa walls of wealthy city folk. Since the property of the privileged goes all the way to the water, even into the water, the same walls prevent me from walking around the lake. Raised walkways from private homes go over the tiny public path and drop to elaborate floating docks where jet skis and power boats are moored, protected by barbed wire.

The locals crowd into the small area allocated for them, bringing plastic chairs, plastic shoes, and plastic sacks of food. By 9:30 trash accumulates on the little strip of beach in front of the Torremolinos. In Latin America, where pick-up is often non-existent, trash is discarded everywhere. Here is one of El Salvador's greatest natural treasures, a crater lake so clear that tin cans lying on the bottom glitter beneath aqua ripples. Why trash your treasure? For a moment I consider taking a large plastic bag to pick up trash, like the neighborhood association at home; but what would I do with the bag since there's no trash disposal on the beach?

Instead, I sit in my chair, watch the trash accumulate, and look over a wall into a city dweller's weekend hideaway—manicured green lawn with pebble walks, flowering bushes, a fountain, and no trash.

A disabled child speeds through the sand, flapping his arms like a runaway chicken. His mother plants herself in front of him, pushes him gently to the ground, pins down his arms, and sits on him until he calms. The child smacks himself on the cheeks, and she reaches out to stop his little hands, folds him in her large arms and holds him. She guides him into the lake, swims him around like a rubber duck, and even when he paddles for himself, she never lets go of his

tee shirt. She watches wistfully as other boys play a barefoot game of soccer a few feet away. If this mother lived in the villa on the other side of the wall, she'd have a fulltime nanny to care for her child while she floated in her pool. But her son will never play soccer, and she will never have a nanny.

The Pretty Birds finish breakfast and flutter to the next activity, taking pictures of each other, mugging for the camera like girls everywhere. They lie on their stomachs on the pier and gaze over the water, legs sticking out from their sherbet dresses, kicking the air like children. Two of them waded into the lake, dresses soaked to their thighs, and then to my surprise, they dog paddle out to a buoy, white kerchiefs sodden, dripping like wet feathers. Another Bird joins the group on the pier, hauling a cooler on her shoulder. Having just spent two weeks with a group who filled a cooler twice as big each night with beer, wine, rum, and tequila, I watch to see what pops out. This bachelorette party could get interesting. Too bad, just sodas

I loll away the day in the outdoor restaurant, reading, eating M&M's, and watching the world drift by. I awake from a catnap to three musicians, singing off key, passing the hat. Afternoon wind has whipped up the lake, and huge waves crash on the shore. Remembering what they say about drowning here and the body never found, I decide not to swim today. Maybe tomorrow.

Twenty-four hours at the Torremolinos, and I'm glued to the chair, have hardly left the restaurant deck. No boat ride around the lake, no walk. I'm a sloth and don't care. To celebrate my "slothitude" I order another Corona and fall back to watch the sun set. Again.

At dusk the day trippers from San Salvador, who've been on the lake all day, pull back to shore in their boats and jet skis to load up their shiny Jeeps. Every single one of them is light skinned, especially light compared to the families stranded on the beach all day. The Darks have departed on the local buses and The Lights have taken over—those not wealthy enough for walled houses on the lake, but with money for fancy cars and boats, the new middle class in El Salvador.

\* \* \*

Saturday night the restaurant fills to capacity, and because aromas whet my appetite I order dinner, *crème de congrejo*, cream of crab soup, specialty of the Torremolinos. Creamy bisque, chunks of lumpy white crab, I think, the way they make it at the Chesapeake Bay. My mouth waters.

Thirty minutes later Blanca brings me a bowl of watery brown liquid, no lumps of meat. Perplexed, I dip my spoon, hit something hard, and bring up an enormous whole crab, shell and all, legs attached, with two beady eyes staring at me. As if to say, *What did you expect, stupid?*

There's nothing to crack the shell with, so I figure I'm supposed to just enjoy the tasty broth. But, since I can't stand the broth and the smell turns my stomach, I decide not to eat.

"*No le gusta?*" asks Blanca, offended.

Too late to order anything else, the kitchen's closed. I guzzle another beer and go to my room. While I'm brushing my teeth, the roach sticks his head up out of the drain to remind me who's still in charge.



Tossing and turning on the lumpy mattress for a couple of hours, finally I fall asleep, only to be awakened by someone banging on the piano on the other side of my bedroom wall. *Chopsticks*, over and over again, Chinese water torture. Could it be the ping-pong kids, finding a new way to torment me? I turn on the light, look at my watch. Two a.m., all's quiet. Did I dream *Chopsticks*?

\* \* \*

I awaken Sunday morning at six a.m., counting the hours until Rogelo comes for me on Monday, cursing that I hadn't planned to leave today. I've finished two books and don't like the one I'm reading, but I plow through it with a horrific thought: what if I finish it today? What will I do until Monday? I'm tired of the scene from the deck, and today promises more of the same.

And the day delivers more of the same—families, kids, preachers, jet skis, plastic trash, and soccer. One change, more noise: musicians on the veranda, musicians in the hotel restaurant, musicians in nearby restaurants, all competing with two groups of evangelicals singing on the shore. One of the preachers reaches his sinners with a microphone directly beneath the hotel deck. Battle of the Bands, multiplied by ten.

I escape down a dirt path to a restaurant with no music, stick my nose in a book, and linger after a two hour lunch until the place fills up and the at-first-nice-waiter throws me a dirty look. I hold my ground until a mariachi band arrives, hits the first cord, and then I flee again.

What is wrong with me? I am trapped, suffocated, bored out of my skull, a little crazy. Completely out of character. I always find something to do, someone of interest, someplace to go. I haven't even tried here, wrote the place off the second I arrived, and this is payback for my obsession to be alone. I feel as if I've escaped from a Kafka novel.

I should fight this negativity, I think. Do a one-eighty: dance with the diners, swim with the kids, and chat with parishioners on the shore. But no, I succumb to nihilism. Awash in dejection, positive Pollyanna-me is having a pity party, soaking up every minute of it.

I stay awake only until nightfall at seven o'clock, crawl into bed, turn on the old TV, and find no picture, just snow. I fall asleep listening to a soap opera in Spanish. A pregnant woman, two men who could be the father, an ex-husband with a gun . . .

\* \* \*

By six o'clock Monday morning I am on the verandah with my bags, packed since Sunday afternoon. At eight o'clock Blanca finds me there, reading my book ever so slowly, so I won't finish before Rogelo arrives.

"*Café?*" she asks. I drink my last coffee at the Hotel Torremolinos and slip Blanca a twenty dollar bill, hoping she won't have to throw it into a communal tip jar. She gives me a hug, "I will miss my new *amiga*." I do not say I will miss her, and I am sorry for that; she is simply too tied to the hotel, which I will *not* miss.

When Rogelo arrives at nine o'clock, I sling my key onto the counter, don't even check out. Why bother? No one around anyway. I throw my bags into the rear seat, then fly into the front beside Rogelo and lock my door. Driving away, I

look back at the Torremolinos and see the three ping-pong kids at the gate, waving. Smiling or smirking, I'm not sure which.

Two hours later in San Salvador, Rogelo hands me the bill, *ochenta y cinco*. Eighty-five dollars, he must be kidding! I know what it should cost, and this is *not* in line. Rogelo is cheating me, for sure, but I count out eighty-five dollars and hand it to him.

"*Muchas gracias, muchas gracias. Adíos,*" I say. I throw my arms around Rogelo's neck, give him a hug, and pitch in an extra ten dollars.

I don't look back.

## Poetry

Table for Two  
By Barbara Stout  
First Place

The waitress asks, *Will you both want wine with dinner?*  
The chair across from me is empty. The question startles,  
  
Then puzzles me. I say, *No*. Something in my tone, my face  
must have told her why. She blushes. Embarrassed,  
  
she moves off to pour water into glasses at other tables  
where couples' faces float like moons above small candles,  
  
and mouths curve into smiles between bites of brie and sips of merlot,  
where postures slump in easy familiarity and the conversation  
  
might be about the dog's trip to the vet this morning,  
or the first date in a place like this four or forty years ago,  
  
about the dressing on the salad, or the recent week of rain.  
At those other tables, where fingers meet and curl like pink newborns  
  
on the white table linen, where mouths can talk and hands still hold,  
life and love seem endless in the spring night. Here, at my table,  
  
I pretend to be at ease with the abyss between me and the empty chair.  
I realign the silverware, adjust the position of my plate, reread the menu,  
  
sip iced tea, butter bread, reread the menu, realign the silverware,  
readjust my plate. But still your ghost rises across from me,  
  
your voice silenced by tubes, your hands tied down in that hospital bed.  
Something in my face has made those other couples  
  
fall silent and stare at me.

night mood music  
By Judy Witt  
Second Place

June, 4 a.m. ire -  
mockingbird insomniac  
in the nearest tree

bleary harvest moon -  
drizzle plinks into sewers  
echoes polish air

winter percussion -  
iced pine limbs snap and crash  
sizzling logs pop

Easter evening -  
peepers singing jingle bells  
marsh grasses applaud

Chinese Food in Florence, Italy  
By Linda Levokove  
Third Place

The gusty night wind awakens me.  
At the window I look at the rows  
of ornate black iron street lamps  
casting golden light on the Arno.

Earlier, strolling on the Bridge of Sighs,  
we argued - you flapping your hands,  
me shouting.

Back in our tiny room we ate Chinese food  
and made love for a long time - until  
shadows crept up the worn frescoed walls.

Afterward, we slept like the curled noodles  
that had fallen on the chipped terrazzo floor.

I knew this wasn't love forever ... just for now,  
and like Chinese food we'd soon be hungry again.