

FICTION • SECOND PLACE

# Good Night. Have A Nice Sleep.

by Jan Nieman

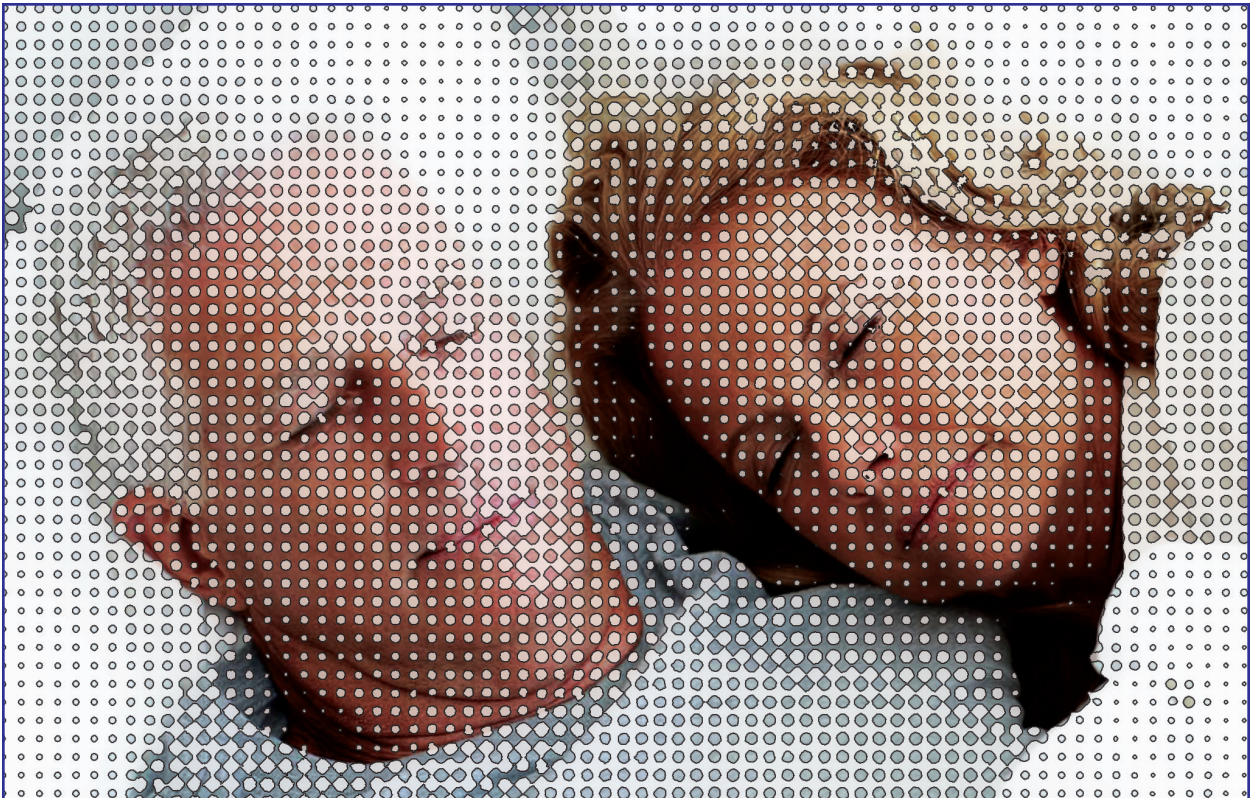
MRS. Jacobs here. Did you catch the announcement in the Maryvale News? It says: “Mr. and Mrs. Wm. Jacobs celebrated their 50th Wedding Anniversary March 16 at Sonny’s Resort. When asked what contributed to their fifty years of marriage, Mr. Jacobs offered, “We never went to bed mad at each other.”

Don’t you believe a word of it!

Please note it was Mister Jacobs who recited that cliché. Missus Jacobs - that would be me - was biting her lip and stewing when Bill uttered those words. He has no clue as to how often I’m in a snit when I mumble, “Good night. Have a nice sleep.”

Lately, I’ve been in a constant state of irritation. How many times do I ask him to take out the kitchen trash before bugs invade? Instead, he smashes it down with his foot, cramming more in. “There,” he sez, “It’ll be OK till Tuesday.” It’s not OK. Trust me. It doesn’t stop the ants and his foot leaves garbage prints where he walks.

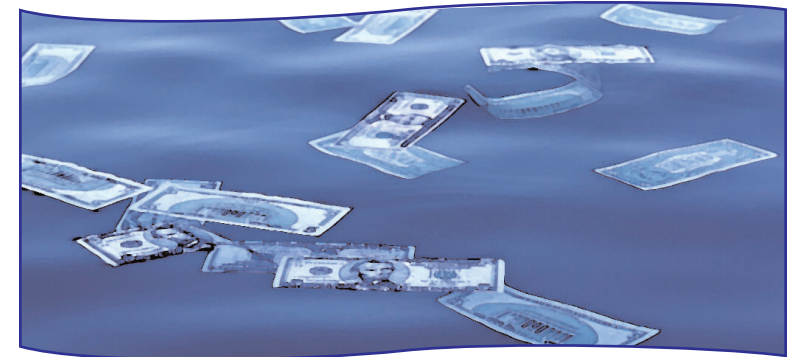
How often can he misplace his Bank of America card and tear the house apart before he phones them to report it missing. If he’d tell me when he first notices he lost it, I’d immediately check his shirt pocket before (not after) it goes through the wash.



# Marked For Life

by Sandy Dalhofer

As the money floated down stream, snagging the edges of the riverbank, gathering bits of green moss and tiny twigs, Purvis Brown figured the gods were punishing him for his way of life. The smell of moist earth and honey-suckle hung in the air like wisps of the past and hints of the future. But Purvis



wasn't feeling optimistic about his future since discovering the loot he had stolen was all in marked bills. He got a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach as he dumped the last of the cash over the embankment into the swirling water below. He had spent the better part of his life in and out of jail, and each time he got out, he vowed to change his ways. But as the saying goes, once a thief, always a thief.

As the last bill caught a puff of wind and drifted skyward, Purvis reached out with gnarled fingers. He yearned to grab the greenback while at the same time ached to let it go when he heard the faint sound of yelping bloodhounds and muffled voices in the distance.

"I ain't going back to the slammer." Purvis swore under his breath as he hightailed it into a nearby corn field, disappearing as quickly as a snake in a tangle of weeds. He ran, zig-zagging between the rows, ignoring the stalks scratching at his arms and the mud clinging to the soles of his prison issued sneakers. By now, every cop in Buncombe County was likely on the lookout for the bank robber and checking all the places they expected the perpetrator to break a hundred or pass off a twenty.

Purvis was a thin man. His awkward gait made him appear as if the small frame he was strung on had collapsed and the stuffing had shifted. A bar room brawl in his younger days left him with one eye that didn't quite look at you and a puckered scar that ran across his pale forehead. He was not a pretty sight.

Bobby Rubble sat on the three-legged stool daydreaming of pirates and swashbucklers. He gripped the cow's swollen teats, slid his hands downward in a pulling motion the way his real Dad had taught him, and a stream of warm milk splashed into the galvanized bucket at his feet. Without warning the barn door banged open. A wild looking old man, all bony and dirty, hurled himself inside. The boy jerked around causing the startled cow to kick over the bucket of milk. Spotting the lad, Purvis stopped short. Man and boy faced off like two prizefighters, neither knowing what chance he had against the other. Bessie bellowed and Bobby realized his hold on the cow's udder had tightened into a death grip.

Bobby stood up, knocking over the stool and inching his way behind the cow in case the crazy looking old geezer did something....crazy.

The disheveled man wiped a crusty hand across dry lips, cocked his ear toward the door, then pulled it shut. "Sure could use a drink." His

good eye stared at the foam of white cream on the dirt floor while the other scrutinized something in the hayloft.

Bobby grabbed the overturned bucket, offered what little milk was left in the bottom. Purvis snatched it and drank thirstily.

"Who are you?" Bobby asked.

The old man held out his hand and chuckled, revealing a few missing teeth. "Purvis..Purvis Brown, man about town."

The old guy seems friendly enough Bobby thought shaking his hand. "I'm Bobby Rubble and I'm in big trouble." The boy hooked a thumb at the milk on the floor. "My stepdad's gonna kill me."

"Guess it's my fault your cow knocked over the bucket." Purvis reached for the stool, sat it upright, plopped himself down and stuck the bucket beneath Bessie, milking her as if he had milked cows all his life.

"Wow, I'm impressed." Bobby said, crouching down beside Purvis. "Are you that escaped convict I heard about on the news?"

Purvis paused in mid-stroke. Turned his head in slow motion, zeroed in on the boy's face with his one good eye. "Don't you go telling your Pa about me, you hear boy?"

Suddenly, Bobby didn't feel quite so confident Purvis was just some harmless old coot. A dribble of fear bubbled in his chest. He stood quickly, tripping over his own feet. Purvis was fast for an old guy. The milk bucket caught the side of Bobby's head with a sickening thud. He collapsed as black spots darted in and out before his eyes.

Bobby felt as if he were drowning. He coughed and spat out a mouthful of water from the hose his stepfather was squirting in his face. Shaking his fist in disgust at the lump on the kid's noggin and the wasted milk seeping into the barn floor, Leonard Wilkes shouted. "Get up you idiot." He jerked Bobby to his feet by one arm. "You're dumber than that cow. I told you a hundred times Bessie's gonna kick the crap out of you if you get behind her." Leonard kicked at the empty milk pail. "Clean up this mess and you better figure out a way to get some milk on the table before your Ma gets home." Leonard stomped from the barn, tossing a final warning over his shoulder. "No supper for you tonight either you stupid little shit."

Bill cannot carry a cup of coffee from the kitchen to the living room without a trail. Last night Bill fried a hamburger. As usual, he left spattered grease all over the stove, not to mention salt everywhere except on the hamburger. What do you think the odds are that come morning I'll be greeted by the mess?

But, do I say anything? No!

"And why not?" you ask.

I'll tell you why not. If it'd been the first time, I'd have drawn it to his attention, perhaps even the second or third. But, if you've been married fifty years and it hasn't sunk in, what's the point?

It's not the big issues like losing your job or your youngest marrying a no-good druggie that creates bumps in a marriage. Nope! You get through that stuff. It's the daily grind of denied expectations that eat away year after year until you explode.

I'm almost asleep when our mattress shifts. Guess Bill's not going to wake me up to say, "Good night." He must have forgotten something, because a few seconds later he tip-toes to the kitchen. I hear the spray of Lysol Kitchen and Bathroom Cleaner followed by a whisk of paper toweling. Well, how about that? Guess I'll find a clean stove come morning. Bill can be downright sweet at times.

He eases his bulk into bed. I pretend to wake up, give him a kiss, and say, "Good night. Have a nice sleep."

Mr. Jacobs here:

Listen! Hear me out on this. Lily is an "A" type personality. Me? I'm definitely a "B." She wraps her mind around putzy household chores that require daily attention. Of course, I'm the source of some of them. The problem is she'll want them done immediately and I figure I'll get around to them before the house burns down. For instance, if I leave my empty Miller Lite on the end table, she's grabbing it and erasing the invisible ring before I'm barely out of my chair. Cripes!

Yep, we've been married over fifty years, so the paper says, and I've gotten used to the way she operates. See, the thing is we have different levels of expectation. Now don't you smirk. It gets to be seri-

ous-like to adjust to one another and it doesn't come out when you date. No, siree. Everyone's on their best behavior and its kissy, kissy until one day all hell breaks loose over something trivial.

For instance, she's late for everything. I can't tell you how many times we sneak into the last row at church just in time for the sermon. You'd think someone who demands stuff done right this minute would be a timely person. But, that ain't the case.

I tell her, "I'll go out and get the car warmed up." (It's a little hint that we should be on our way.) It doesn't do a bit of good. I sit out there running the engine for another twenty minutes. Does she think church begins at a different time every Sunday? I don't get it. I'm so aggravated I can't even open my mouth to sing and to top things off I leave my church envelope in the car.

Now maybe I'm telling tales out of school, but another thing that bugs me is the way she's pleasant to everyone after we've squabbled. I still have hurt feelings when we arrive at some shindig while she swishes in

happy, happy. How can the woman fake that for three hours? Me? I find a corner where I nurse a couple of beers.

We get home from one of these, climb into bed, and she seems to forget we promised we wouldn't go to sleep without settling things between us. But, when I say, "Good night," she doesn't even answer.

I know you're wondering how we managed to last fifty years. I'm thinking one reason is we both have a good sense of humor and for some reason we go into survival mode to weather the big troubles like Jenny being born with Down's syndrome. Then, it could be God getting us through, too. Although, I wonder where he is when we get bent all out of shape for the little things.

Nuts! I forgot to clean the stove. If there's one speck of grease in the morning, Lily will have a hemi. See, I fried this big hamburger and...sorry, 'scuse me a second.

Guess I'm not quiet enough. Lily wakes up and gives me a sweet kiss. She says, "Good night. Have a nice sleep."

I reach for her hand, "You, too." •

# The River

by Carmine Lombardo

The river is like a dragon  
forked into fringes of frenzy,  
Lapping the shores in gulps -  
gorging a ghost-like figure  
out of a medieval tale,  
And yet, sometimes frail and silent,  
it sings like a flute on a  
moonlit night  
Echoing the life of its past.  
Bending, winding, always rolling;  
strolling like a drunkard on  
a rainy night,  
Forever living, forever giving  
finding its home in the sea.



Bobby's head throbbed. He gingerly touched the lump on his forehead. He thought of trying to milk Bessie again but he was shaking uncontrollably and the poor cow was so spooked she wouldn't let him near her. He should have told Leonard about the convict. Bobby sighed out loud. "Yeah, like he would believe me. No one ever believes anything I say." Bobby shivered and glanced toward the dark stalls wondering what happened to Purvis Brown. He eased open the barn door, cautiously peaking around the corners, scouting the yard for any sign of bad guys. He whistled for Toby who immediately bounded to his side.

"Where the heck were you when I was getting clocked over the head?" The yellow lab licked his master's hand, let out a woof. "Yeah sure, now you bark." Bobby stroked the dog's head and together they headed for the river. It was if a sign from God told Bobby to look down into the gorge. He could barely believe his eyes! A whole mess of soggy bills floated on top of the water. Fives and tens and twenties were stuck to the side of a log. A bunch of hundreds were caught in a tangle of fallen branches. Bobby let out a war whoop, scooted down the muddy bank on his behind so fast he practically tumbled into the rushing river. He grabbed handfuls at a time and stuffed the bills in his shirt and the pockets of his jeans. Bobby couldn't get over his luck. It was more money than he had ever seen in his life. Probably more than Leonard made in a whole year. Bobby ran home, hid the bulk of the money in the barn, jumped on his bike and pedaled as hard and as fast as he could to Conrad's Market. He rushed to retrieve a gallon of milk from the cooler and a Hershey bar from the candy rack. Slapping a five on the counter, he winked at 14 year old Janie Conrad and told her to keep the change. Bobby dashed home, full of hope that maybe this time Leonard would be proud. He slipped unannounced into the dimly lit kitchen. A broken plate of food lay upside down on the linoleum. Angry voices resonated from upstairs. The sound of a hand striking flesh permeated the air. He heard a scream and his Mother's sobs. He wanted to grab the shot-gun, race up the stairs and shoot his stepdad square between the eyes. Instead he opened the refrigerator door, stashed the milk inside and hurried out to the barn to count his windfall.

It was simple the way things ended. Not long after Bobby paid for the milk, the cops showed up at Conrad's Market. They went through all the money in the register and came up with the marked five dollar bill. Janie Conrad admitted the money was given to her by Wilkes nine-year-old stepson, Bobby. Early the following morning, Leonard Wilkes was arrested for robbing the local credit union two towns over. Three thousand seventy-five dollars in marked bills were found hidden in an old saddle bag inside Leonard Wilke's barn. Bobby watched the arrest from his hideout in the hayloft. He thought about telling the cops what really happened but they were too busy handcuffing Leonard who was too busy wailing his innocence at the top of his lungs. And why bother, no one ever believed him anyway. •

NON-FICTION • SECOND PLACE

## Swinging Back To Life

by Geneva Kelly

**F**IVE years after my son's diagnosis with Type 1 Diabetes, I accepted the fact that a full night's sleep was a thing of the past. Still, the lack of sleep was getting to me. When I woke up to check on him, the quiet of the night was like a tornado sucking me in. With one month until my 40th birthday, I wondered if I could be having an early midlife crisis. "This is your life," said the voice in my head.

To say time flies is an understatement.

After moving a few times, breaking up with my child's father, having a less than satisfying job, and no sleep; it took years to finally be content. Content and bored that is. Sure I had written some good stories, finally got my articles published online and tried dating again; which was interesting. But something was still missing.

My past was full of adventurous things. I had been parasailing, snorkeling, horseback riding, and had flown a small plane. I had even been skydiving! But now that I felt like an adult, it was different. Being a mom was great. Finding balance however, was hard. That carefree girl I used to be was gone. The thought of doing the same thing day after day, for one more year was painful. I started thinking. What were some things I hadn't tried yet? I'd never been waterskiing. Never learned a new language. Never eaten Sushi or a Corndog. None of those seemed significant enough to change my life though. I remembered always wanting to do a back handspring, or join the circus. Then it hit me: The Trapeze!

If at 40-years-old I could fly through the sky and live, things would have to feel different. My body was in decent shape. But how would I hold myself up? How does anyone hold themselves up? I decided to worry about it in the morning and let myself dream of possibilities for the rest of the night.

With the sound of the alarm, came a nudge of excitement. Instead of feeling tired, I was eager to start the day. I made my son's breakfast and sat down to watch some trapeze videos on YouTube. To my surprise, there were kids doing it. Granted, their bodies bounce back faster, but if a seven-year-old could climb a huge ladder and swing from their hands, what was I afraid of? (Besides broken bones or death?) After the first few snippets, it was official. For my 40th birthday, I would fly the trapeze!

As luck would have it, I'd be in New Jersey for my brother's wedding that weekend. There was a school in New York that was only a half hour away. But who would go with me? Anyone? Would I be comfortable enough to do it alone? I decided to call some friends and ask them to join me on my new adventure. Each one told me I was crazy.

Not to my surprise, they each had a reason they couldn't come. One was dealing with back pain, the other had shoulder issues and the next complained of not having extra finances. The last one pretended



she never got my message. I checked the year to make sure we were all turning forty and not eighty.

Again my inner voice spoke to me. This time it was more of a confirmation that change was necessary.

Part of me agreed I may very well be crazy. But the part that longed to be free couldn't wait for the day to come. My birthday was one day before the wedding, so to avoid visible bruises, I scheduled the class with a week to recover just in case.

Never would I have guessed what happened next. Two days before going, I convinced my friend who's terrified of heights, to let go of her worry and go with me. Lord knows miracles happen because that same night, when I told the story at my brother's house, his fiancé said she would go too! My brother joked, with seriousness; that if anything happened to her he was not marrying a vegetable, and it was her choice to act like a child.

That is exactly what she did. The three of us made a day of it. We found exotic stores with trinkets and funny things that put us at ease before going.

Finally, with our hearts pounding, we showed up at the rooftop building where the trapeze stood about thirty feet in the air. A huge net spread out on the bottom of this long rectangular looking contraption. Still, we agreed it didn't look as scary as we thought. Then the ground training started. They secured a belt around each of our waists tightly. It was thick and felt strange. Like most warmups, we started by stretching. We practiced how it would feel to balance our bodies in a completely unusual way. This was no regular swing we were about to get on. After our brief introduction, it was time to fly.

They called my friend first and by the time she made it up the ladder she was crying. The other people in the class cheered her on with encouragement. With tears in her eyes, she reached out for the bar swinging toward her. She grabbed on and swung forward, back, and forward again. And with a big swing she tucked her knees into her body to flip backwards and grab the bar with her legs. It was so close. Her left leg slipped off the bar and she hung upside down like a monkey, screaming. We couldn't help but laugh hysterically! Nervous laughter, I guess. But it was one of those heart felt belly laughs.

My brothers' fiancé, being about ten years younger than my friend and I, was next in line. You would have thought she'd done it before because she made it look easy. Her body went the right way and she listened to the cues perfectly. She dropped down with the biggest smile, and flipped out of the net almost like a dancer, taking her bow.

Then it was my turn. Adrenaline rushed through me with each step I took closer to the ladder. My fear was clouded by curiosity, and I was high on excitement. Until half way up, my body had its own reaction. My hands, my legs; even my mouth started shaking. After making it to the top, I was surrounded by a view of New York City. Everything looked small except the net in front of me. I felt numb standing at the edge of the open space. Now I understood why my friend started crying. It was scary! I prayed I'd remember to arch my body while holding on, jumping, and listening for cues to make the right moves... all while diving in to the intensity of the moment. Somehow I did it! Though there may have been some accidental words coming out of my mouth, on the way.

Instead of falling onto my back when dropping down from the bar, my momentum flew me forward. I dove superman style. My hands and knees slid for a brief moment on the net. Exactly what they said not to do. Fortunately, the exhilaration made it painless (at the moment). It gave everyone another good laugh. Especially us.

Forty was looking better already. And it was just the beginning of a new me. •

NON-FICTION • THIRD PLACE

## The Apartment

by Richard Urban

**T**HE stench is what assails you first. The door is barely open when it hits you like a sharp slap to the face followed by a low jab to the gut. The strange part is, once you get past the initial shock you simply have to wonder what could be causing such foulness.

You observe everything as you step into the two-room, first floor apartment. A single dim light bulb over the stove offers a glimpse of the world you are entering. The pale yellow glow displays a multitude of food-encrusted pots and pans splayed across the burners. Filthy plates, bowls, glasses, and silverware form a mountain of plastic and ceramic rising out of a lake of fetid dishwater. The beam of your flashlight causes a stampede of cockroaches as they scurry for cover amidst the mayhem of what is the kitchen.

Caution is your guide as you work your way further into the apartment. The soft crunch of flimsy cellophane wrappers flattening under each step telegraphs your approach. A squishy feeling on your next step tells you that not all of the small pastry packages are empty. "Shuffle steps from now on," you tell yourself. "Just like a snowplow in winter, move the debris aside and keep going."

A quick scan reveals a beaten up Bark-O-Lounger in the far corner with its heavily stained and randomly ripped fake leather. Next to the chair is a large beer stein, half filled with a golden liquid. You try to convince yourself that it is beer.

Nestled on a hassock in front of the chair is a small box, filled to overflowing with pictures. Some look to be old black and whites, while oth-

ABOVE: Cirque du Soleil's 'Crystal' comes to the Germain Arena in Estero, July 12-15.

# Pick Me

by Wendy Weiss

NANCY Jean resisted pushing the colorful, cube-shaped button in the center of the TV remote, but only for a minute. It was Sunday morning and the weather cold, but sunny. I should be outside, she thought, sweeping the porch or raking leaves. But the need to just do nothing, the anticipation of finding a new TV series that she could watch all day, was just too compelling.

She arranged the sofa pillows and kicked off her sneakers, then slid the ottoman in close. Her body slouched into the soft furniture and she tossed a blanket over her legs.

The menu of programs was extensive and overwhelming. Nancy scrolled and searched, stopped and selected, read the descriptions and exited to the next. She sighed. But then she scrolled one more time, and an image and title caught her eye.

“Pick Me,” was a single episode, unique for this type of TV. A plain looking woman wearing an open trench coat stood with her hands in her pockets on an empty city street. The buildings loomed over her. Were they falling? This has potential, she thought.

Nancy pressed the remote button to select the program and read the description, but there were no words displayed, only the title, “Pick me.” She pressed the select button again to play the single episode. The show began with no title, no credits, no producer, just the woman on the empty city street. She took a step forward and appeared to be looking directly at Nancy, slumped on her couch. Her coat was pulled back from the wind and Nancy could see her clothes, a simple pencil skirt worn halfway between her ankles and knees, and a white blouse. Her shoes were black, mary-jane style with a low heel. Her hair was coiffed in a fifties or early sixties style, and she wore bright red lipstick. Was she the only character in the show? She took another step forward and then pulled her hand out of her pocket. Was that a cell phone? It was out of place, in the wrong time line.

The woman looked at her phone and tapped with her thumb. A moment later, Nancy was startled by her cell phone ringing.

“Jesus!” She scrambled off the couch, her legs tangled in the blanket and she lunged for the phone that sat on the kitchen counter.

“Hello?”

“Pick me.” A woman’s voice said.

Nancy listened in silence for a second and then said, “Who is this?” The woman repeated herself, “Pick me.”

Nancy disconnected the call and set it back on the counter as if it was too hot to hold. A shiver ran up her back and she went back to the sofa then pulled the blanket over herself.

The woman on the TV was holding out her phone, aiming it at Nancy. Was that her? This is crazy! The woman took a few steps closer, and the buildings and street darkened behind her. She was so real, three-dimensional on the TV screen and the expression on her face was one of desperation. Nancy turned off the TV. She kicked off the blanket again and decided that watching TV was a bad idea. No binge TV today. I’m going for a walk.

She tied the laces on her sneakers and opened her coat closet, reaching for her black ski parka and spotted her trench coat pressed against the side wall of the closet. Her mind flashed on the creepy woman on the TV but before the coat could illicit a reaction, she was startled again by her ringing phone. She pulled her parka off the hanger and slid on the jacket walking back to the counter. The caller ID read, “Unknown.” Nancy sent the call to voicemail.

She decided to take the twenty-minute walk to her sister’s house and see if she wanted to have lunch together. Certainly, it was a better choice than watching some creepy TV show.

The cold air hit her face as she stepped onto the front porch. It felt good to be wakened from her laziness and a walk was exactly what she needed.

Nancy tapped her sister’s image on the phone, and the call was answered on the first ring.

“Jen?”

Jen didn’t say anything but Nancy could hear her breathing.

“Jen? Are you there? I can hear you breathing.”

Still no acknowledgment. Nancy disconnected the call and waited a few seconds, intending to call her sister again, but the phone rang in her hand. She accepted the call without reading the caller ID.

“Jen?”

“Pick me.” The woman’s voice said.

The hairs stood on the back of her neck as the cold wind rustled the fallen leaves on the porch. Fear rose inside her.

“What is this? What do you want? Who are you?”

“Pick me.” The woman was pleading, drawing out the “Me.”

Nancy didn’t know what to do.

“Okay, okay...I pick you. Now please stop calling me!”

She quickly disconnected the call and then tapped her sister’s face on her phone. This time there was no answer. Something’s wrong. She tried again, and the call connected.

“Jen? Is everything alright?”

She heard Jen breathing again, and she also heard something in the background, a faint voice, a woman’s voice. THAT voice.

“Pick me.”

“Jen! Turn off the TV now! Do it now!” Nancy screamed into the phone. But her sister didn’t answer. She ran back into the house and grabbed the car keys. Tears broke free from her eyes, and she wiped one away from her cold cheek. Once in the car, she called her sister again, only this time she chose the facetime button. The call connected.

“Jen! Look at me!” But all she could see was the big screen TV with the woman in the trench coat walking toward her sister, waving her phone.

“Jen! Turn off the TV!” But then she remembered that the woman hadn’t called HER back.

“Jen, say I pick you. Just say it...I...pick...you! Do it!”

Her sister didn’t respond, and the call was disconnected.

Nancy drove as fast as she could in her busy, pedestrian neighborhood. She rounded the corner on her sister’s street screeching the tires and noted a man on the corner waving at her to slow down.

She left the car engine running and rushed to the door. It was locked. She banged on the door with the bottom of her fist and rang the doorbell. No answer. Where is she? The back door! Nancy ran around the side of the house and climbed through the thick hedge. Her jacket caught on a branch, tearing the fabric. She wrenched her arm free and shimmied around to the back, pinning herself against the sliding doors, cupping her eyes to see inside.

There she is! Nancy slapped her hands on the glass door but Jen didn’t flinch. Nancy screamed, “Jen, open the door!” No motion, no acknowledgment. Nancy moved to the far end of the door to see where her sister’s eyes were aimed. Oh, my God! The TV, the woman on the TV with her fists buried in her coat pocket, is gawking at my sister. Jen was frozen, staring. “Jen! Jen!” Nancy screamed. “Just say I pick you.” Do

it now! Jen, do it!” Jen was frozen, stuck in her stance, staring at the TV.

Nancy yanked the sliding door hard, and it popped open. She lost her balance as the door slid in the track, nearly falling, but she held firm on the handle with one hand and scrambled to her feet. She’s gone! “Jen!”

No answer. Nancy ran toward the front of the house, to the living room and dining room. Where is she? She went back to the family room and looked at the TV. Sweat plastered her hair to her head, and her heart pounded in her throat. She picked up the TV remote and pushed the colored, cubic shaped button.

“Jen!” There THEY were. Walking together, hands buried in pockets. They looked back at Nancy through the TV and smiled. •

# Caloosahatchee

for Dan Gravely

by Gary McLouth

To be god of naming  
Mississippi, Appaloosa, Snake  
To cling like red skin  
Memory flush with pride  
To fire the smoke of Tecumseh  
A crazy horse  
I’d gladly succumb to ash  
Coal dust, the dried out skin  
Underworld

Deep in my throat, the songs  
Measure notes, scores  
By rote, bang drums  
Dumb like heart beats

Who straights the bearing sea, tunes  
the Golden Gate

If I knew, wouldn’t you  
Seminole you, Caloosahatchee me  
Scrawling onshore to see



# Where The Action Is

by David Aiken

THE Navy PBR patrol boat glides slowly and silently along the clong, barely making way, yawing slowly from one bank of the narrow waterway to the other. The ominous silence is broken only by the gentle splash of muddy water against the bow, the muted, low rumble of the twin diesel engines, and the occasional screeching of a tropical bird in the treetops. My muscles are taut, every nerve on edge, and my fatigues are soaked with sweat. I wait and watch and listen. The jungle canopy closes in over our heads like a malevolent, green shroud. I crouch low behind the gunwale and ready my weapon, flipping the selector lever from safe to full automatic.

This is enemy territory, Charlie country. No one talks, and the smoking lamp is out. The sound of a voice, the smell of burning tobacco, even a cough, could give away our presence and spoil the element of surprise. The Viet Cong is in charge here, night and day. Charlie owns this jungle, not us. "Victor Charlie," the military phonetic slang for VC – Viet Cong. Charlie is our enemy, and Charlie could be anyone, any man, any woman, even any child. Anyone who is Vietnamese, that is. No Vietnamese national can be completely trusted, regardless of age or gender or position. The old man who cleans up our headquarters, the Vietnamese Army lieutenant who works alongside me, the little boy who comes by my hooch begging for candy. Any of them could be Viet Cong. And any one of them could put a knife between my ribs, or slit my throat, or plant a bomb in my quarters. There are no front lines here, as there were in other wars. Charlie is everywhere, in the cities, in the small villages and farms, and definitely out here in the boonies. But some places are a lot more dangerous than others. This narrow waterway through the jungle is one of those places.

After an hour of moving slowly up the clong with no action, the radioman taps the chief on the arm and hands him the headphones. The chief listens a moment, keys the microphone and quietly voices a short reply. He nods to the coxswain. The young sailor at the helm spins the wheel hard to port. There is no need for stealth now, and we make no attempts to conceal our presence. The wake generated by the PBR causes waves to spread out in a large "V" behind the boat. The waves crash hard against both banks as we race by. An old woman stands on the shore beside her hut, watching us. I can see the hatred she holds for us in her eyes. A hatred that comes not because our wake has just capsize her small fishing boat and destroyed her rickety dock, but because we are the enemy, foreign invaders in her land.

We quickly exit the narrow clong and pull out into a side channel of the Song Hau River. The coxswain pushes the throttles to full. The PBR lurches forward and its bow rises high out of the water as we speed

upriver. "What's happening, Chief?" I shout above the roar of the engines. "Is someone under attack?"

"We got a request to pick up wounded a few 'clicks' back up the river," replies the chief.

Our boat suddenly slows, the bow drops back into the murky water, and we turn out of the main channel and into another clong, making our way more cautiously now. Sailors jump to man the twin fifty-caliber machine guns mounted fore and aft, their eyes searching the jungle on both sides for any signs of the enemy. The chief tosses me an M-79.

"It will be a lot easier to hit something with this than with that M-16," he shouts. I lie down on the deck, resting the barrel of the grenade launcher against the gunwale, intently watching the impenetrable jungle. I can now hear the soft pop-pop-popping of small arms fire and the thud of mortars and grenades, their sounds muffled by the thick stand of vegetation.

The chief takes the helm himself now, skillfully steering the PBR along the maze of vegetation and mangrove roots that clog both banks of the waterway. The chief boatswain's mate knows all of the twists and turns of this river, all of the clongs and all of the villages along them. His knowledge of where the water runs deep and where the shallows will reach up and grab the thirty-two foot boat as it maneuvers can mean the difference between life and death for the chief and his crew. And, for me as well.

"There it is!" calls the forward lookout as we round another bend. Red smoke from a signal grenade wafts out across the water from somewhere in the jungle. As we draw closer, I can make out three men standing on the shoreline. They are Vietnamese, all wearing black pajamas, their faces streaked green and black with camouflage greasepaint. They have the hardened appearance of seasoned fighters. Vietnamese Rangers. The only way we can tell they are friendlies and not VC is that they are not shooting at us. The coxswain reduces power and the boat slows as it approaches the shoreline. As the boat reaches the bank, the coxswain reverses the thrust of the water jets. We glide into the bank, jerking to a sudden stop as the bow digs deeply into the mud. One of the Rangers shouts something in Vietnamese into the green wall of vegetation behind him and two more men suddenly appear from the cover of the jungle. One of them is a "snake eater," an American, a Green Beret sergeant. He is the Special Forces adviser to these Vietnamese Rangers. He is dressed exactly as the Rangers he advises. His face also is streaked with green and black. He is recognizable as an American only by his Caucasian features and his height, over six feet.

The Green Beret sergeant is carrying a young boy. He is unconscious, and his arms, and legs and head flop down like those of a rag doll. Without saying a word, the Special Forces soldier passes the kid up to the Navy crewmen standing on the foredeck. They lay him on the

deck, face up. The coxswain slowly backs the boat away from the riverbank. The American advisor and his small group of Rangers instantly melt back into the jungle.

I kneel down beside the wounded boy. He is young, too young to be a soldier, even in the armies of this forgotten corner of hell. Twelve or thirteen. Maybe fourteen at most. He is dressed only in a pair of bloody, black shorts. A filthy field dressing covers the bullet wound in his abdomen. The medical corpsman, himself not much older than his patient, shoves a needle into one of the boy's thin arms and hands the IV line to me. I quickly connect a bag of sterile saline to the line. Opening the stopcock, I hold the bag high above my head, allowing the solution to drip into the boy's vein, replacing the blood that has leaked away from the hole in his belly. The Navy corpsman inserts another IV into the boy's other arm and connects it to another bag of saline. "GO!" he shouts to the coxswain.

The PBR leaps ahead again. I grab the low gunwale to keep from sliding off into the water as we make full speed upriver, rapidly closing the distance between ourselves and the docks at Can Tho City. Dark clouds have started building up to the west.

"Who is this kid, Chief?" I ask. "Dunno," comes the reply. "Too young to be a Ranger. Could be VC, could be a friendly who just got caught in the cross fire."

The boy's pulse is thready, an indication that his blood pressure is dangerously low. He has lost too much blood, has been too long in getting help. He has gone into shock. His organs are beginning to shut down, a prelude to death.

The Navy docks at Can Tho come into sight. A field ambulance is standing by to meet us, alerted to our approach by radio. Rain has already started to fall. We pull alongside the pier and gently lift the boy up to the waiting arms of the Vietnamese medics. The corpsman hands one IV to a medic, and I climb up after him, still holding the other. They put the wounded boy onto a stretcher and shove him into the rear of the vehicle. Siren wailing, the ambulance slowly leaves the dock, squeezing through the noisy crowd of bicycles, pedestrians, young couples on smoking mopeds, and children at play.

This is where I get off. I thank the chief for the ride. "Anytime," he shouts above the noise, as he hands my M-16 up to me. "Next time, we'll take you out to where the action is." •

POETRY • FIRST PLACE

## Hurricane

by Sharon Whithill

Dressed in red on the map,  
that symbol with two wicked teeth,  
she feeds on the moisture and warmth  
of the sea. Cool and dry at the core,  
empty of heart, she pulsates,

she pumps, she rises. Wind-spun,  
cloud-swollen, obese, she rages,  
swashes her buckler,\* spawns surges,  
spreads contagion, doles death by flood.

Oh, she is hungry, hungry. Chews  
whole cities to bits. Bites into buildings.  
Peels roofs like bananas, spits them out.  
Masticates mangroves. Spoils soil with salt.

Insatiable, belching, she gobbles gazebos.  
Gorges on gables. Gusts between louvres  
of roof-vents, exits crudely from drains  
with a drone like a drunkard's fart.

Now she's a Berserker bloated with frenzy.  
Foam at her mouth, she howls for blood  
like a beast, gnaws iron and steel.  
A machine, immune to fire and sword,  
she keeps grinding, churning.

The rampage forges her ruin.  
The land resists her. Friction slackens  
her speed. Stingy lakes, miserly rivers  
starve her of that which sustains her:  
ocean heat and humidity.

Fed by no fuel but her rage,  
she declines,  
dissipates,  
dies.

\*To swash is to strike violently; a buckler was a small, round, handheld shield

CHILDREN'S • FIRST PLACE

## Lola Bajola and The Fly Manuscript

by Laura Marske

CHILDREN'S • SECOND PLACE

## The Curious Gray Mouse and the Christmas Tree

by Martha Jeffers

CHILDREN'S • THIRD PLACE

## Pixel, the Filthy-Footed Feline

by Mariah Julio

## ABOUT THE GULF COAST WRITERS ASSOCIATION

The Gulf Coast Writers Association provides a forum for fellowship, education and information among writers in the community. It was founded to support, educate and encourage local area writers of all levels and genres, and to provide ideas, support, resources and networking opportunities to fellow writers.

The Gulf Coast Writers Association (GCWA) was founded in 1995, incorporated in 2004, and granted not-for-profit status in 2006. There are more than 200 members of the organization. Scores of members regularly publish their work. Others matriculate into the ranks of published authors each year. Genres include fiction, nonfiction, play and screenwriting, poetry, commercial media and children's books.

The general meeting is held the third Saturday of each month, often featuring guest speakers, workshop

presenters and member panels. In March the meeting is postponed one week due to the Fort Myers Reading Festival. They do not hold a meeting in December due to the holidays.

Meetings are held 10am-12pm at Zion Lutheran Church, located at 7401 Winkler Rd. in Fort Myers. First time guests are free. Newcomers are always welcome.

For information about membership, email [membership@gcwa.org](mailto:membership@gcwa.org).

The GCWA has an annual Writing Contest. Information about the 2019 Writing Contest will be available in the autumn. Categories are Fiction, Non-fiction, Poetry, and Children's Stories. The Writing Contest is open to GCWA members and the public. Winners will be announced in April 2019.

For information about the 2019 Writing Contest, email [SpecialProjects@gcwa.org](mailto:SpecialProjects@gcwa.org).

[www.gulfwriters.org](http://www.gulfwriters.org)

