

GULF COAST WRITERS ASSOCIATION 2019 WRITING CONTEST WINNERS

FICTION - SECOND PLACE

The Trophy

by K.J. Boyd

MARTIN Becker hadn't been to St. Luke's since the day he graduated eighth grade in the early 1970s. Those days he'd boasted a full head of rust-colored hair, dozens of freckles, and a frame so skinny you could count his ribs. Far cry from the pudgy, balding guy he'd become. Martin wouldn't be headed to St. Luke's now except he and his son-in-law were in Cleveland on business and Jeffrey wanted to see the place. Said it didn't matter the school had long since closed. Martin glanced at his watch. Maybe Jeffrey would be on time for a change.

He was surprised to see several cars in the parking lot at the rear of the school. Martin assumed the building would be locked. If he and Jeffrey could

get inside, they wouldn't have to settle for peering in windows.

Smiling, hand extended, Martin crossed the parking lot toward a gray-haired black man straightening his cardigan sweater and hiking up his khaki pants.

"Hello. My name's Martin Becker." He got nothing but a scowl in return. Refusing to be cowed, he launched into his pitch. "I'm a St. Luke's graduate. When my son-in-law arrives, could we come inside so I could give him a tour of the school? It would mean so much to me."

The man broke into a grin and shook Martin's hand with his rough calloused one. "Robinson. Stanley Robinson. Your suit threw me off. Figured

ILLUSTRATION BY CAROLYN ARCABASCIO

you for a county building inspector.” Stanley cocked his thumb toward the church. “My Bible study meets here every Tuesday. When your son-in-law gets here, come on in. You’ll have the whole place to yourselves. We only use the school on Sundays.”

Martin signed thumbs up. “That’s awesome. Thanks so much.” Stanley raised his worn Bible. “Thanks be to *God*, Mr. Becker. Thanks be to God.” He gave his pants another tug and ambled toward the church. Martin turned his attention to the school; a clean-lined facade hunkering low to the ground. It had once been the lifeblood of a handful of blue-collar families, most of German descent, who believed a Christian education would inoculate their children against the evils of the world.

Jeffrey beeped his arrival. He often bragged his slender build was the reason he looked good no matter what he wore. Martin seldom agreed. Like today. *What a get-up*, he thought. *Fleece vest, check shirt, cargo pants, hiking boots.*

Mr. GQ scratched his unshaven face then stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Old. Really old.” He eyed the school from one end to the other. “We’re talking ancient.”

Martin bristled. “Yeah, the school and the Taj Mahal were dedicated the same year. I’d just celebrated my eighth birthday.”

“Didn’t mean anything personal. Guess the building looks older than it is because it’s in terrible shape.”

Martin imagined building inspectors saying the same thing. He caught himself scowling like Stanley Robinson. “There’s a good reason. After declining enrollment forced the Synod to close the school they couldn’t afford to properly maintain the building.”

Jeffrey nodded. “That explains the sagging roof, crumbled mortar, cracked sidewalks.”

Enumerating flaws only heightened Martin’s rancor but he managed to brush aside his annoyance in his eagerness to enter the school. “We can get inside but it might not be in any better condition than the outside.”

“No problem. Besides, I got time to kill before my flight leaves.” Martin wanted to suggest he spend some of that time shopping for clothes. Instead, he settled for, “Let’s get hiking.”

They pushed between maple double doors leading from the church to the school. Directly ahead stood a trophy case.

Martin opened the dust-caked glass door to reveal a jumble of plaques and faded ribbons awarded for choir competitions, Bible story orations, creative arts, and sports.

He snaked his arm through the clutter on an upper shelf and pulled out a tarnished trophy not more than a foot tall. The engraved plate read *Lincoln County Parochial Basketball League, “A” Division, Varsity Boys, 1969-1970 CHAMPIONS.*

“Big deal?” Jeffrey asked.

“We thought so.” Martin polished the plate with his handkerchief. “I still remember the final game. We were down one point with three seconds left on the clock. From the far end of the court, Charlie Scott heaved the ball underhanded toward the basket. The shot was way off. I streaked down the court, jumped, and tipped the ball toward the goal. The horn sounded just as the ball dropped through the basket. Couple teammates lifted me on their shoulders or I’d have been crushed by the fans swarming the court. My jersey number was thirty-four. It’s still my lucky number.”

Martin returned the trophy to the case and closed the door. “Ready to see the rest of the school?”

“Lead on.”

Now in high spirits, nothing disheartened Martin. Not the yellowed vinyl floor tiles, warped bookshelves, or moth-eaten window draperies. He wasn’t even bothered when Jeffrey claimed he sensed cold spots. Martin was reliving his past, breathing the mingled scents of leather bound encyclopedias, acrid chalk, rubber cement, pencil shavings.

The men ended their tour back at the trophy case. Jeffrey slowed his pace and pat his pockets. “I’ve lost my phone. Probably fell out in one of the classrooms. Wait for me in the parking lot while I check.”

“Want my help?”
“I’ve got this.”
Martin glanced at the trophy case then hurried toward the doors thinking himself an old fool for getting choked up.

A few minutes later, Jeffrey opened the passenger door to Martin’s car and scooted in. The expression on his face mimicked the one he couldn’t suppress when holding a winning poker hand.

“You look happy. Guess you found your phone.”
Jeffrey laughed. “Never lost it.” He unzipped his vest and pulled out the trophy.

Martin’s jaw dropped. “What are you doing with that?”
Jeffrey shoved the trophy in his father-in-law’s face. “Got it for you.”
Martin recoiled as though nose-to-nose with a dead rat. “You stole the trophy?” He repeated himself. This time it was an accusation not a question. “You stole the trophy!”

Jeffrey’s smile faded. “I thought you’d be stoked.”
Martin buried his face in his hands. “I don’t believe this.”

“Hell, Martin, the trophy shouldn’t be stuck behind a bunch of junk no one cares about. I thought we’d clean it up and set it on a shelf in your office. A memento of your play that won the tournament.”

“How could I look at this every day knowing you stole it? It doesn’t belong to me. It’s a team trophy awarded to the school.”

“You said the school closed years ago.”
“Doesn’t matter. We gotta return the trophy.”

Jeffrey rolled his eyes. “You’re making a big deal out of this.”
“It is a big deal. Zip it inside your vest and let’s get going.”

Jeffrey didn’t move. “If we run into the guy you told me you met this morning, he’s gonna wonder why we’re back. Let’s just keep the trophy and get out of here.”

“No. We’re taking it back. I’ll be your lookout. If anyone questions me I’ll tell them the story you told me about dropping your phone when we toured the school and coming back to find it.”

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And that’s how it happened Jeffrey was alone when he grudgingly replaced the trophy. He stepped back to close the glass door but hesitated when he noticed a picture frame face down on a lower shelf. He turned it over and squinted at a faded school newsletter clipping mounted on black paper. The headline read *ST. LUKE’S WINS!* A basketball team photo accompanied the story. One of the players hoisted a trophy similar to the one he’d just returned to the case. The lead paragraph read *St. Luke’s Boys Varsity Basketball Team won first place “A” division, Lincoln County Parochial Basketball League Finals, 1969-1970 season. Team captain Marty Becker was sidelined with a broken arm but suited up for every game.*

“What the hell?” Jeffrey scanned the photo. Right side, second row, third from the end stood an unsmiling skinny kid with his left arm in a cast, jersey number 34. “Him and his superstar bullshit,” he muttered. “And that asshole treated me like a sleazeball. I’m never gonna let him live this down.”

He returned the picture to the trophy case and pushed between the doors to join his father-in-law.

Martin exhaled like he’d been holding his breath the past five minutes. So, number thirty-four, tell me again —

Martin cut him off and whispered conspiratorially, “Glad that’s over. Now everything’s back as it should be. Just as I remember. Everything’s exactly as I remember.”

Jeffrey looked hard at Martin. The lined face, downturned mouth, tired eyes, rounded shoulders. The younger man faltered but there was no malice in his voice when he said, “Guess that’s all that matters.” •

NON-FICTION - FIRST PLACE

Unvarnished Truth

by Robert J. Nelson

AT the old Grebe shipyard on the Chicago river, Captain Dutch taught me how to varnish. On the second floor of a boat storage building was a room devoted to varnishing boat parts: teak handrails, steering wheels, cabinetry, and hand-made flag staffs that Dutch sold to boaters. Assorted work benches, saw horses, stools, and upended old milk bottle crates, were covered with fine mahogany and teak boat parts waiting for glistening coats of marine spar varnish with not a drip or run to be seen.

The “Varnish Room,” contained an old dining room table and chairs, ancient refrigerator, hot plate, and a bathroom with a stainless-steel shower made by shipyard welders. While workers did all major painting, captains were allowed to varnish bright work on their owners’ yachts.

Captain Dutch was not Dutch at all, but a German who fled the Nazis before the war broke out. Dutch became a fixture at Grebe, the elder statesman for the half dozen or so yacht captains still retained by owners. When I was hired as a boat salesman, he was the first to come into my office and introduce himself. In his sixties, still barrel chested with a leathery face from 30 years on commercial ships and Chicago yachts, he could have modeled for those wooden miniature sea captains wearing foul weather hats you see in gift stores. Dutch never wore his captain’s hat in the off season, proudly showing a full head of dark gray hair that neither thinned nor turned white, matching the wisps of smoke from cheap cigarillos he chain-smoked.

Dutch taught me how to varnish fine wood to look like amber glass with the wood grain showing through. He drilled into me the “three P’s” of varnishing: “Preparation, Patience, and more Preparation.” He complained so bitterly about the varnish work of shipyard painters, he was given special permission to do all the varnishing on his owner’s boat, the ROBERT ALLAN, a 36’ cabin cruiser built by Grebe’s in 1936. Every year Dutch added another coat from the deck up: the mahogany deck house, cockpit seats and coamings, etc., and every third or fourth year the inside of the cabin. Everything removable, like window frames, handrails, and trim pieces, he carried to the varnish room. Larger flat surfaces, moldings, and toe rails attached permanently to the boat he coated in place inside the wooden storage shed — a museum really — reserved for Grebe built wooden boats.

In late fall as soon as the ROBERT ALLAN was lifted out of the Chicago River and moved on 1920’s vintage rails into its winter home, Dutch began sanding every morning always by hand and never wearing gloves. “You can’t feel smoothness through gloves,” he sneered to anyone foolish enough to ask why. To prevent blistering, he cut strips of masking tape and wrapped the ends of his fingers. By mid-morning the tape wore through to bare skin, signaling break time. Dutch then came to my office for coffee looking like a school boy after an eraser fight and spun yarns about his war experiences in the South Pacific, always prefaced by his hatred for FDR for drafting and sending him there.

“The day after I got my U.S. citizenship papers that son of a bitch sent me as far away from Germany as you could get, worried I might

desert to the Nazis. That was the first and last time I voted for a Democrat,” Dutch said repeatedly.

“We were assigned to supply ships that moved in after the third or fourth wave of Marines. At Iwo Jima while our troops fought into the island interior shooting and burning everything in sight, us suspicious Kraut heads were ordered ashore to pick up enemy weapons and ammo to destroy. Well that was the Brass’s idea; mine was to find jewelry or daggers or fancy china, stuff like that to sell. You got to understand thousands of sailors on supply ships weren’t allowed to go ashore but wanted souvenirs, especially battle flags. They were nuts about taking battle flags home.”

“So, you found Japanese battle flags?”

“Found ‘em? No chance. Any Jap flags were grabbed by the officers right off. I made my own. I got the idea in one of the caves full of fabric and sewing machines — not exactly war souvenir stuff, so the Marines left them alone. Well, I knew how to sew, so I got this idea to make the one thing those nutty guys on the ships would pay a whole lot for: battle flags. Sewing the Jap rising sun onto fabric was easy; it was the writing that was hard. I didn’t know any Japanese. We were taught to kill the bastards, not speak to them. So, I grabbed empty tin cans of food, soap boxes, stuff like that and copied real nice Jap writing using indelible ink from the ship’s laundry, so it wouldn’t run if some hick farm boy got it wet and figured out he had a fake flag. After finishing it, I would drag it through some mud, maybe singe it a little, then hang it on a tree and fire a pistol at it. On my first flag I used a goddamn machine gun and tore the thing to pieces.”

“And you sold them to guys on the ships?”

“Couldn’t make them fast enough. Guys from small towns who saved every damn dime of their pay wanted to go home as big shots with a Jap flag, so they paid big. Can you imagine those rubes with fake battle flags hanging in their houses telling bullshit war stories, when some guest or college kid who knew Japanese translated, ‘Tide’s In, Dirt’s Out,’ or some other dumb slogan? Jesus, if any of those boys ever finds me, I’m a dead Dutchman.”

By late March the ROBERT ALLAN’S bright work was sanded in Dutch’s phrase, “smooth as a baby’s powdered ass,” ready for varnishing. Only then would he invite me topside to demonstrate his fine art. After making sure no paint work was scheduled on other boats in the shed that might float dust onto his fresh varnish, he shop vacuumed our clothes like a barber, checked his marine radio for the weather report on any wind that might blow dust, then hung a NO ADMITTANCE sign on the door. He opened a box of tack cloths, sticky cheesecloth with beeswax imbedded in the fabric, and showed me how to wipe down, not once but twice, always with the grain, every square inch of wood to remove any sanding dust his shop vac missed. And just to make sure not one dust particle remained, he wiped each square foot again just before dipping his expensive beaver tail brush. Only then would he lay on the varnish.

“Thin layers,” he instructed me, “thin as a pair of French panties.” He showed me how to lay the brush flat on its side and then lay on the varnish thin to prevent runs. When I brushed too fast or with too

much pressure, he grabbed my hand holding the brush and guided it, letting me feel the rhythm of his follow-through strokes. “Tight and smooth, tight and smooth.”

Being German, Dutch loved classical music and kept a portable radio onboard, so he could varnish to Mozart or Beethoven. He admired Stradivari violins knowing that their unique sound derives from a secret varnish recipe never duplicated.

At times he waxed philosophical about varnishing. The phrase, “unvarnished truth,” irritated him no end. One bitter afternoon below zero and too cold to work, he took me to a working man’s bar, dark and exuding thick odors of stale booze and cigarettes, a bar that could have been the set for O’Neil’s The Ice Man Cometh. Dutch was three sheets to the wind when another Grebe captain on the next stool made fun of barflies buying lottery tickets. When Dutch argued that state lotteries were a tax on the poor, the other captain agreed.

“Of course, they’re a tax on the poor... about time the lazy bastards paid for something,” adding, “That’s the unvarnished truth!”

Dutch’s face turned cheap wine red as he poked the captain’s ribs hard. “Truth is never unvarnished; it’s covered in layers that reveal and bring it to the surface.” When the captain angrily punched back, I dragged Dutch out of there before they started a bar fight and walked him back to the shipyard’s always heated varnish room where Dutch stashed an army cot just for such occasions. After coffee the next morning he gave me (no charge) a mahogany flagstaff for my sailboat, hand lathed in the carpentry shop and gleaming with at least five coats of varnish.

Long after Dutch died and Grebe’s was sold for riverfront condos, I still fly it every time I sail my 23 foot sailboat, whose mahogany bench seats, coamings, handrails and cutty cabin doors, I sand and varnish every two or three seasons. •

POETRY - FIRST PLACE

Decent/Descent

*I’m stuck at a bad intersection – longest red light in town
I absently turn the radio up and roll the window down*

*On the curb, six feet away I try to process who I saw
Can’t help thinking “Wizard of Oz” – scarecrow minus the straw*

*I know who he is without looking, flash back to our Little League days
When he was a slick-fielding shortstop, while I played a smooth second base*

*He’d chosen high-stakes poker as his highway to high-roller dreams
Sadly he lost the ranch and his soul with debts he could never redeem*

*A diamond flush beat his two pair triggered his steady decline
His bleak abstract: drugs and despair. “WILL WORK FOR FOOD,” says his sign*

*Relieved he had not recognized me, I stare straight ahead and relax
But quickly recall how he intervened in a frightening schoolyard attack*

*He halted a battle I would have lost, allowed me to save face and skin
James Taylor plays on the radio reminding me You’ve got a friend*

*I hastily reach for my wallet, selecting my highest bill
Extending my hand, averting my eyes, he takes it but stands very still*

*Finally he says, “Thank you, Larry.” I reply, “You’re welcome, Fred”
As I wave, raise my window, hit the gas and run the red*

— Nick Sweet

FICTION - FIRST PLACE

Thirteen

by F.J. Talley

“AND you can have your choice of room sir,” the desk clerk said with a smile. “Use this key to open any door in the hotel to check it out. Pick the one you like.” The man took the key with a frown, not sure of what he heard.

“Did you say I could pick my room?”
“Yes, sir,” said the clerk. “It’s hotel practice.” The clerk pointed again to the key in the visitor’s hand. “That’s a master key and you can head up to the rooms and check each of them out. Rooms with a yellow tag on them are occupied.” He smiled again. “I’ll be here once you pick the room for your stay.” With that, the clerk turned back toward his computer and the guest pocketed the key.

The man had little luggage, just a rolling bag and small duffel. Not much from fifteen years of marriage, but he wasn’t complaining. He could have ended up like his divorced friends who’d been taken to the cleaners. His wife just wanted out and to have a nice, clean split.

Of course, this meant that he wasn’t able to have the fun vacation he originally planned. But he felt coming to the city to enjoy a little culture, eat better food and see a few off-Broadway shows would be good enough. At least he still had his job.

He took the elevator to the top floor and figured he’d take the first room he saw and stay there. Picking your own room seemed an odd custom, but then again, if he could find the best room available, that would be to his advantage. This was only a two star hotel, but for four nights, who cared?

The guest left the elevator, walking to the end of the hallway. It was only then he noticed the number on the room: 1322. He looked at the other rooms on the floor: 1348, 1363 and others, all beginning with 13. *That can’t be right*, he thought, as he looked at even more doors. Shrugging, he put the key into the door of 1322 and opened it. The room was striking, as the furniture had to be almost a hundred years old, though it was in excellent condition. More fascinated than repelled, he walked into the room and sat on the bed. It felt good. He advanced toward the window, noting the radiator beneath it, and a newspaper on the chair. He picked it up and read *New York Amsterdam News*, May 20, 1922. Dropping the paper in shock, he opened the curtain and saw a large building in front of him with the marquee reading “Harlem Opera House.” The guest remembered that the Harlem Opera House was demolished before he was born. He sat in the chair and thought “What have I gotten myself into?”

After thinking for a few minutes, he left his bag in 1322 and approached another room. Closing the door behind him, he opened the door to 1354. The furniture in this room was as clean and fresh looking as the furniture in 1322, but clearly of a different era, with plain primary colors. He walked straight to the window this time and looked out. He was no longer in Harlem, but somewhere else in Manhattan, closer to Times Square? The *New York New Amsterdam News* lay on the bed, this time announcing the Supreme Court decision of Brown vs. Board of Education. Another headline reported on the McCarthy hearings going on in Washington. The man thought back to what else was happening in 1954; it was before the Montgomery bus boycott,

but still an interesting time for Black folk in America. He left 1354 and decided to check out at least one more room.

He stopped when he got to 1369 and tried to remember what was happening in America at that time. The only thing that came to mind was the moon landing. When he entered 1369, he looked for the newspaper, ignoring the pop art on the walls. The newspaper didn’t talk about the moon landing, instead focusing on Black students at Cornell University taking over a building and demanding Black Studies courses. *When did this happen?* he wondered. *They don’t teach enough about our history anymore.* He looked outside and saw nothing of particular interest, but turned on the TV out of curiosity. The TV took over a minute to warm up and he wondered if something was wrong with it. Finally, a black and white picture came on the round screen featuring Walter Cronkite, a man who had been a famous broadcaster on CBS a long, long time ago. The man watched the report for a few minutes before turning off the TV and feeling the heat that came from the console. I guess I won’t have Wi-Fi here, he thought.

He left the room, looking up and down the hallway at the other room numbers: 1368, 1396, and so on, but nothing called to him. He looked back at the three rooms he had entered, nodded, then returned to the front desk.

“I’ve made my selection,” the guest told the clerk, “But I have to tell you, this is the strangest hotel I’ve ever visited.”

“We get that all the time,” said the clerk. “Which room did you decide on?”

“1322,” said the man.
“The Harlem Renaissance. Excellent choice, sir,” the clerk said. “It’s one of my favorites, too.”

“Thanks,” said the man. “But how,” the clerk raised his hand.
“The rooms in this hotel come from the thirteenth floors of other hotels.” The guest stared. “You see, sir,” the clerk continued, “we know that no one comes to a hotel like ours because of the ambience or the neighborhood. So we felt we needed to do something extra to make the experience ‘special.’”

“Well, it is that,” the man said. “This could be a very interesting visit.”
“And you don’t know the half of it, sir.”
“Oh?”

“You need only head down the fire escape.” The man frowned.
“Is there something wrong with,” he began,

“Not at all, sir,” the clerk replied. “But if you want to visit the Harlem Opera House, for example, you can do that by heading down the fire escape.” The clerk pointed to the front door. “Through the front door is our current year but out of the fire escape, you’re, well, just go try it. I think you’re in for a very nice visit.” The clerk smiled and handed the guest the key to 1322. The guest pocketed the key and smiled back.

“I believe you’re right.”
The man took his key and then the elevator back to the top floor, opening the door to his room. He had always wanted to meet Zora Neale Hurston, and maybe this was the time. He turned on the radio in the corner and sat as the sounds of 1920s jazz filled the room. •

NON-FICTION - THIRD PLACE

Jus' a Bus Ride

by Michael Boyd

FROM 1967 through 1970, I played football for Wichita State University. "Playing football" is a euphemism for my attending football practice while pretending to pay attention. The number of enjoyable football moments at WSU were few and far between. During my career we won 2 games and lost 27. Despite our record, or perhaps because of it, our teams had some truly memorable characters.

Among them was Chief Al Boyd, a Native American. Chief was given a scholarship, not because of his football ability, but because he spoke fluent Spanish. His main job was to interpret for our best player, Margarito Guerrero, who spoke no English.

Another character, Randy Jackson, participated in our 1968 game with Arkansas for only one play. On that play, Randy ran 80 yards for a touchdown. Afterwards, Randy refused to re-enter the game. He was sure the Arkansas players would hurt him for having made them look bad.

Perhaps the most memorable character of all was Larry Talton. Larry was a mild-mannered guy who didn't drink much, didn't smoke, and didn't do drugs. He was a black guy from Harlem. How a black guy from Harlem ended up in Cowtown, USA was never clear. He may have gone to a junior college in Kansas, or he may have known a coach from a junior college who recommended him to WSU.

I'm not one to criticize anyone's football ability, but Larry was not a good football player. Larry was nicknamed "Willie" because he was a huge fan of New York Jets' quarterback, Joe "Willie" Namath. Like many sport nicknames, this one was meant to be humorous and slightly ironic.

Larry was shorter than the rest of the guys, maybe 5'8" or 5'9" and weighed about 190 lbs. He was muscular and strong, had an oversize head, and suffered from acne. Don't judge the size of 1960's football players by the size of today's players. While few guys on our team were Larry's height, several weighed less than two-hundred pounds.

As a football player, Larry Willie had only one idea, "Knock people down." Sometimes Larry Willie knocked down the right people. Sometimes he knocked down his own teammates. But, whomever he knocked down remembered both the event and the perpetrator. During practice, Larry Willie, playing linebacker, had difficulty staying in his area of responsibility. If the offense faked a handoff to the running back, Larry Willie would knock down that running back. Unfortunately, the actual play often went into the area Larry Willie had just left.

The racial mix on those WSU football teams from the 60's was about 50-50 and was not toxic. We didn't know much about each other, but in truth many of us came from similar backgrounds. Our parents expected us to behave ourselves and get an education.

I'd say the black guys tended to dress a little better than the white guys. They wore slacks and nice shirts and preferred square toed black leather shoes. In 1967, Wichita, KS fashion tended toward blue jeans and cowboy boots, neither of which the black guys would have been caught dead wearing.

Blacks and whites didn't hang-out together regularly, but we sometimes sat around in the dorm commons and talked. Talk was mostly sports, but often it included stories from home. Engaging Larry Willie was sometimes difficult. He didn't speak often. But every now and then we got him to talk about New York. Being midwesterners with limited travel experience, many of us learned about New York City from Larry Willie. Unfortunately, Larry Willie spoke a language none of us understood.

We thought the black guys should be able to understand and interpret what Larry Willie said. I guess we white guys thought all blacks knew each other and spoke the same language. Okay, that was stupid, but we were teenagers with very little worldly experience.

When we asked him to describe life in New York City, Larry Willie responded, "Harlem is Harlem."

Unsatisfied with that answer, we tried to expand the question, re-asking it slower and louder, "WHAT IS DAILY LIFE LIKE IN HARLEM?"

Unfazed by the repeated question or the way it was asked, Larry calmly responded, "Harlem is — jus' is — jus' is."

My mouth opened and closed without anything coming out. My mind repeated, "Harlem is — jus' is — jus' is." I blinked my eyes. I looked to Kenny Lee, a black guy from Philly. I turned my palms up, lifted my shoulders and eyebrows. Kenny's mouth turned down at the corners. He wiped his left hand across his mouth and chin. He looked at the floor. After a few seconds, he looked up. He turned his palms up, lifted his shoulders and eyebrows. I guess guys from Philly didn't speak Harlemese either. When asked to explain, Larry remained mute.

Perhaps we were in the presence of a philosopher and we were simply unaware of it. Maybe Harlem was a place which defined itself. If so, Larry Willie's response was surprisingly deep. We needed more from Larry Willie to know for sure. We tried having more conversations with him in the hopes of drawing him out.

"Hey, Larry Willie, what do you do in Harlem?"

"We plays da dominoes, da piccolos, and da ho's."

Kenny Lee wasn't around, but he hadn't been any help earlier. Randy Jackson was there. He was black, but he was from Big Sandy, Texas. That town was smaller than Butler, Missouri, where I came from. None of us white guys expected Randy to understand what Larry Willie was saying any better than we did. Kenny had at least come from a big, eastern city.

Stuttering, "L-L-Larry W-W-Willie, H-h-hold on now. What the hell does that mean?"

"Dominoes is numbers. Ya knows numbers?"

Universally, "No."

"Ya buys a number. If y'wins, y'wins."

Not even trying to understand the process of selecting a number, from whom it was bought, or how the winning number was determined, we asked, "What do you win?"

"Doh."

"Dough? Like pizza?"

Looking at us as though we might be idiots, Larry shook his head.

NON-FICTION - SECOND PLACE

Kay's Eternal Garden

by Geri McArdle

IF I ever go to hospice, please drop by with a handmade watercolor card flower every day I am there so that I can build a garden to take with me."

I'd recently started painting watercolor flowers on blank cards, as a hobby and a personal way to connect with people in those pre-digital days. Kay was always buying my cards to send to others. Hospice, I thought? My vibrant friend was many years away from hospice. I blew off her strange comment.

Kay and I lived in the same building. Our friendship began when she helped me fix my computer; she often left notes with a candy bar on my doormat, encouraging me to call her if I needed anything. Kay loved doing things for others. At Christmas we played Secret Santa for our neighbors and invited those who were alone to a holiday feast. I often traveled from Florida to cold-weather states for work, and Kay was always stepping in to lend me jackets, gloves, and sweaters. Her gestures were modest but frequent; Kay's kindness always had a big impact.

One year, Kay's annual physical results required more testing. She ignored it, yet her health declined in the following weeks. Back pains persisted, she had trouble walking, and she lacked energy. The doctor delivered devastating news: stage four cancer.

We could only watch helplessly as Kay endured chemotherapy, rehab, and a three-week hospital stay. It was a relief when doctors discharged her from the hospital, but after just one day at home, she lost the feeling in her legs. Hospice, she was told, was the final option.

Kay remembered her comment from years ago, and it was her only request: that I paint her a flower on a card every day. So every morning I painted a card and visited her before work, hoping my little flowers would help her improve. But Kay showed no signs of getting better. I could do nothing but continue to bring her "flowers" for her garden. She had hung the cards all over her walls, lending a soft, ethereal vibe to the drab little room.

I was determined to make Kay's last days as bright as possible and visited whenever I could. One night I decided to pay her a second visit in the evening with another card. As I approached her bed, she opened her eyes and said, "...good bye, my friend, you kept your word. See all your cards? These flowers are my garden forever."

Kay passed away later that night. My friend finally found peace, surrounded by dozens of muted watercolor flowers. I will carry Kay with me through the rest of my days, just as she carried her garden with her into the afterlife. I like to think she is up there giving out cards and other surprises to her friends in heaven. Perhaps she even leaves kind notes with candy bars for newcomers at heaven's doormat. •

POETRY - SECOND PLACE

Child of the Sea

*My soul was born here
Where the ocean meets the land
Skin thirsty for the warmth of sunshine
Heart yearning for the sound of waves on sand.*

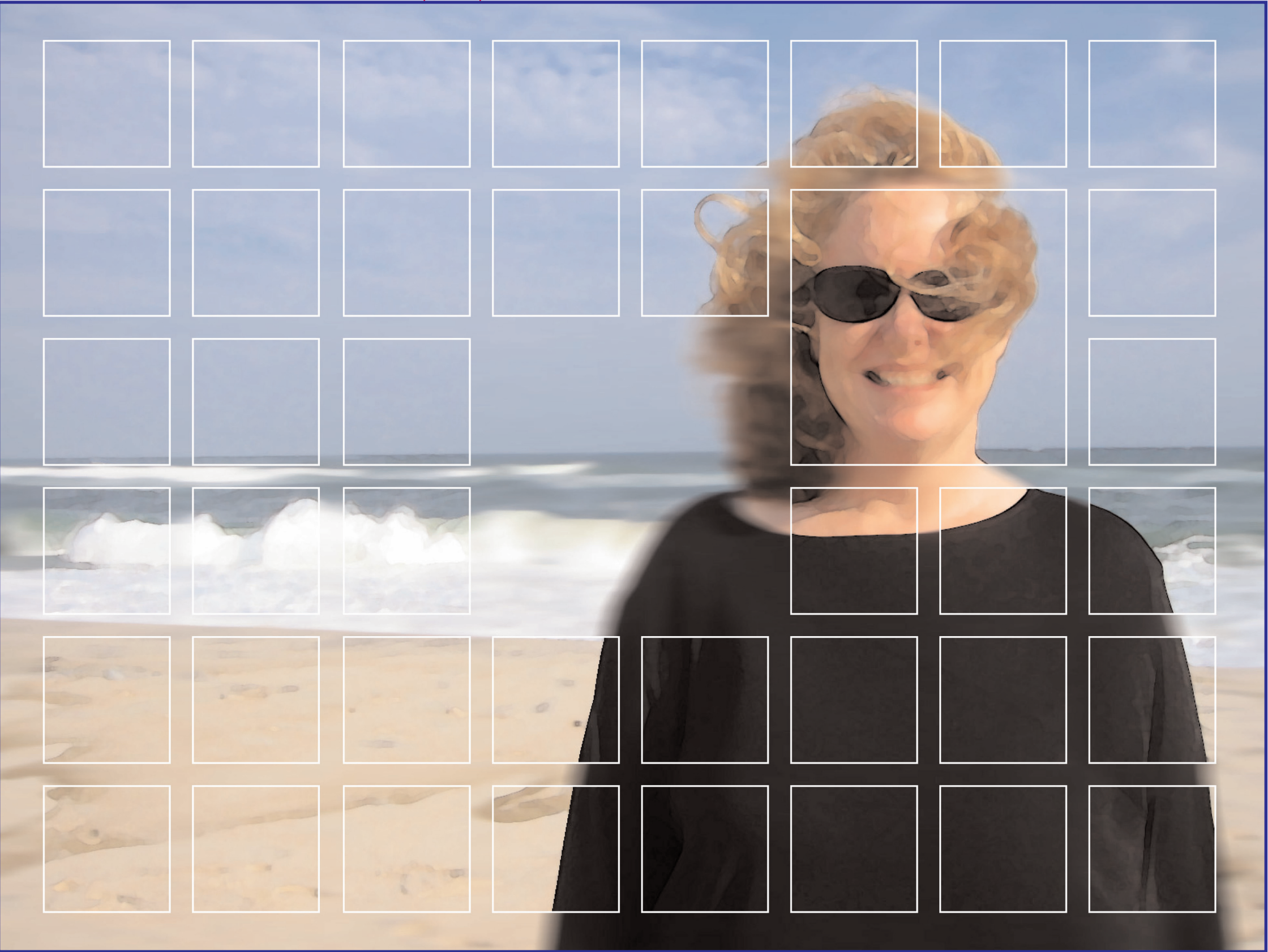
*My family lives for the water
It's the freedom each of us craves
Our place of work and house of worship
My spirit sings loudest from beneath the waves.*

*To get to know the universe
Reach deep into the wet sand
As coquinas move the earth around you
The sea's heartbeat beats against your hand.*

*My children will grow,
Faces turned to the skies,
With the salt of the sea on their hair
And the wonder of the world in their eyes.*

— Megan Dalziel

ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREW ELIAS



OTHER WINNERS

FICTION - THIRD PLACE
Sweet Taste Of Success
by Pauline Hayton

POETRY - THIRD PLACE
She Walks The Decks
by Lona Haskins

CHILDREN'S - FIRST PLACE
Oliver Goes Exploring
by Nancy Leake

CHILDREN'S - SECOND PLACE
Pointless, The Misfit Star
by Mariah Julio

CHILDREN'S - THIRD PLACE
Three Cheers For Emilio
by Elizabeth Weiss Vollstadt

GULF COAST WRITERS ASSOCIATION

gulfwriters.org

The Gulf Coast Writers Association provides a forum for fellowship, education, and information for writers in our community. Whether you write for pleasure or profit, you'll find support from their members. And with an average of 175 members, there is always encouragement and friendly guidance to help you improve your writing skills. Members can also help you find a critique group in your area to provide supportive comments on your writing project as it progresses.

Monthly meetings are informative and fun, featuring a variety of guest speakers providing expert advice on topics such as writing techniques, publishing, marketing, and others, as well as a range of genres: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, children's, young adult, historical fiction, romance, mystery/thriller, memoirs, and more.

2020 will mark the 25th Anniversary of the Gulf Coast Writers Association.

Meetings are held the third Saturday of each month (except December) 10am-12pm at Zion Lutheran Church, located at 7401 Winkler Rd. in Fort Myers. Meetings are free.

The Gulf Coast Writers Association holds an annual Writing Contest in four categories: fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and children's stories. The writing contest is open to members and the public. Cash prizes are awarded for first, second, and third place winners. Winners are published in the July/August issue of *Ft. Myers* magazine.

Visit the Gulf Coast Writers association website for more information about the group, membership, upcoming meetings, and writing contest.

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