



**The Virginia Writers Club
Golden Nib Contest 2019
Winning Entries**

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Conversation with a Terracotta Warrior

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, January 16, 2018

Larry Turner
Poetry, Third Place

As I walked into the gallery, I immediately saw the general,
Standing at attention in his uniform and armor.
His square boots, his hair in a neat knot.
His proud face displayed wisdom, but also humanity.
His eyes looked directly at me. I felt I must speak.

*Good afternoon, sir. I have met you twice before,
at the British Museum in 1971
and in Chicago in the mid-seventies.* He replied:

I fear you are mistaken. We visited Chicago, but in 1980.
And as we were unearthed in 1974, we could not have been
at the British Museum before that. You may have conflated
your Chicago memories with those of the British Museum's
1972 Tutankhamun exhibit.

What was it like being buried all those centuries?

For many years I stood at attention, wondering
when we would have a chance to defend the emperor.
Then as the centuries passed, I realized we were defending him.
No one dared invade. And the knowledge came to me:

The war that is won is the one that was never fought.
If war breaks out, both sides have already lost.

And what of your experiences since you were unearthed?

We have travelled the world and met the people of many lands.
I have heard of the terrible weapons you have today,
and realize it is truer than ever:

The war that is won is the one that was never fought.
If war breaks out, both sides have already lost.

I thanked him for his wisdom and left the museum,
determined to spread abroad his message:

The war that is won is the one that was never fought.
If war breaks out, both sides have already lost.

Mergansers: The Path Unwalked

Catherine P Ryan
Poetry, Second Place

Mergansers diving on the lake,
Come out my love and see.
Snow melt opens wide the trail,
Come out and walk with me.

You linger there with book in hand
While spring is on the rise
And wonder if the air's too chill
For pleasant exercise.

For us, few seasons still remain
To wander on the lea,
And so I beg you once again
Please come and walk with me.

Your chair is wide enough for two
You beckon with a smile.
A cozy-comfort peacefulness
Is surely more worthwhile.

I yield and settle by your side
and hand-in-hand we turn
The page of someone else's dream
And ours are left unlearned.

As wine and rose o're wash the sky
With evening's final blaze
I grieve yet for the paths unwalked
With you these closing days.

Author's note: Mergansers are a species of duck with bold, distinctive markings. I only ever see them here at the very end of Winter.

As We Study an Old Photograph

David Black
Poetry, First Place

Here's Josh, about age three, on the sidewalk
and a dog standing behind him, staring
to the side at something we cannot see.
Big and brown, he strongly favors Jackson,
Josh's old chow mix that still lives with us,
but the photo goes back some thirty years—
and here is a different pet, and we three,
try as we will, cannot remember him
at all.

Josh half-jokes that he's owned him twice,
this forgotten friend caught in a time warp
from his youth. I tell myself he's a ghost,
like the Civil War soldier who shows up
in a black-and-white with one's grandparents
from 1933...a strange woman
seen in the background of last year's photo
of smiling newlyweds...

tales heard often
enough to make us ask how this could be,
what there is in and out of this world that
we cannot fully know, curious if
we leave here some whisper of our presence
that lingers and disturbs the order that
people think they know, just as we, from time
to time feel the return of family,
friend, or creaky old pet so strongly that
we weep—and sad that without the picture
to hand to you, we will not be believed.

He Needed Killin'

Cat Brennan
Fiction, Third Place

I peeked out and saw a shiny badge and read *Detective* on it. The door had been slammed so many times that the glass cracked into more pieces than are in a jigsaw puzzle. I taped them in place to keep out the mosquitoes. It didn't look too good, but at least it wouldn't fall out.

I opened the door to a man wearing thick black-rimmed glasses. Even in the hot and humid weather, he wore a coat and tie. The detective wiped his forehead with a well-ironed, white hanky, and he said, "Are you, Mrs. Spunochle?" *With a wan smile, he raised his eyebrows, as if asking a question, but to me, it sounded more like a statement.

"Yes, I'm Arletta Spunochle." I tried to smooth down my shirt, but I'm not sure it helped. I'm only thirty-eight, but I fear I look a lot older. The other day, a lady told me my grandkids were cute. Grandkids? They be my kids!

"Is everything okay? The kids are in school. Did something happen?" I knew that whatever this cop wanted it couldn't be good, and there were just too many questions he might ask that I didn't want the little 'uns hearing.

Before I had a chance to ask his name, he flipped up the little black, leather case that held his badge. The other side held his ID with his name. My stomach took a nosedive, but I managed to hold it together. "What can I do for you?" I felt the sweat collect in my hair and run down my neck like spring runoff but tried to remain calm.

"I'm Detective Samuel Riley, Richmond PD, and I need to ask you some questions. May I come in?" He looked real uncomfortable standing there. The grass, which was mostly tall weeds reached up past the car bumper—the car that George promised to fix for me—but never did. The kudzu had crept up the mountainside, threatening to swallow everything in its path, even our cabin. I called it a cabin because that made it sound more charming. In reality, it was a falling down shack with a leaky roof, holes in the floor, and mold in the bathroom. The barn needed painting, but it was in better condition than this dump.

"Yes, come in. I don't think that I've ever seen a Richmond policeman out this way." We lived in the middle of nowhere, up to Cutler's Ridge, not too far from the Virginia/West Virginia border. Richmond was at least three and a half hours away. I opened the door wider so that he could get past me and into the living room.

I pointed to the chair by the window and managed to say, "Y-You can sit there," while I sat down on the sofa facing him. I was glad he'd come to the front door. Most times, we used the back door because it was closer to the barn. At least he couldn't see the junk piles in the laundry room. George said we didn't need a new washing machine. He said this one still had a lot of use left in it, and he'd fix it. That was last spring, and it still lay in dozens of unrecognizable pieces.

I thought I knew why the cop was here, but I had to remember that I didn't know anything.

"Mrs. Spunochle, I'm sorry to be the one to tell you this," and he looked sincere like he cared. "We found a body in Richmond and believe that it's your husband."

He stared at me while I did my best to muster up some tears, but there weren't any. I knew that I presented a sad-looking face, though. I was sad—sad that George didn't have any life insurance. That man was a monster, but to the policeman, I said, "George hasn't been home in nearly two weeks, but I never thought he'd be dead. Are you sure it's him? He takes off all the time, and then just shows back up, so I haven't been worried. Why do you think it's George?"

"As near as we can tell, he was a victim of Gaston. That tropical storm created so much havoc all over Virginia, and as I'm sure you heard in the news, it nearly wiped out Shockoe Bottom. That's where we found him. We figure he got caught in his car, maybe even tried to get out. You probably saw the news

about the lives that were lost and all the destroyed buildings. We even had a semi-tractor rig float down the street.”

“My TV reception ain’t too good up here, but I’ve watched what news I could. Been listening to the radio mostly. They said that storm did some awful damage, but what about my George?” I hoped I sounded like I cared.

“He got caught in the floodwaters. His body was found half in and half out of the vehicle. I have a picture of him to show you for identification. It’s not pleasant, but it’s all I have. If you believe this is your husband, then I’ll need you to come to Richmond to identify his body. Once you’ve done that, we’ll release his remains to you.”

“Do I have to? I mean, I’d rather remember George as he was.” I hope he believes that.

“We need a positive I.D. before we can release him to you. The only identification we found was the car registration. That’s what led me out here. There was no wallet, but the keys were in the ignition. Will you look at the picture?”

“I g-guess so.”

The photo he showed me was gruesome, and I gagged. “Excuse me, I have to…” I ran into the bathroom and heaved my guts out all over the floor before I got to the commode. Oh gawd, that was awful. The picture was sickening, but I didn’t feel anything else.

When I came back, the cop saw the tears running down my face. I hoped he thought I was grieving. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but I have to ask. Is this picture of your husband?”

At first, all I could do was nod. I’d rinsed with mouthwash, but that metallic taste remained. I took in several deep breaths and said, “Yes, that’s my George. He loved his old Camaro more than…”

As I tried to swallow the fear, he said, “I’m sorry, ma’am.”

I managed to mumble a thank you between gulps of air. “W-what happens now? What about his body? Will you bring him here?”

“First things first, ma’am. You need to come to Richmond to identify his body, and then you can make final arrangements. I’ll take you to town in my squad car.”

“Okay. No, wait! My kids are in school, and I can’t let them come home to an empty house. What in heaven’s name was I thinking?” Then in a whisper, I added, “I guess I wasn’t.”

“Is there someone who can look after your children?”

“I can probably get my mama to come over and stay with them.”

###

A few hours later, we were in Richmond. Detective Riley escorted me into that awful room. “It’s so cold in here.” That was the first thing that popped into my mind. “So cold.”

He nodded to a woman who was wearing green scrubs, a green cap, and blue rubber gloves. She walked over to the strange-looking wall and pulled out one of the drawers. I’d watched enough TV to know what was going on, but no Hollywood mock-up prepared me for this. I nearly passed out at the sight of the dead body lying there. I don’t know why, but when I tried to steady myself, I touched him, then jerked back my hand. His skin was cold and clammy, I guess from being in the refrigerator. The texture was weird. It reminded me of that stretchy-putty stuff the kids play with. I almost gagged again, but I purposely took several deep breaths to get beyond it.

“Mrs. Spunochle, are you all right? Do you need to sit down?”

I turned away from the corpse and said, “I think I’m okay. What’s next? When can I get out of here?”

“Very soon, ma’am, but first you need to sign a document of identification. I can tell you what the M.E. said. Do you want the full police report? Your insurance company may require it.” His eyes drooped at the corners, and I think he felt sorry for me.

“I’ll sign your paper. George didn’t have any insurance.” I twisted a lock of my hair around my finger and pulled hard on it to help me stay focused.

We went down a long hall and into a plain-as-day office. The detective pulled out a chair for me. He rounded the desk, sat down, opened up his laptop, and began typing. Soon the printer clicked and buzzed, and spit out several sheets of paper. He laid them on the desk, used a blue highlighter in a couple of places, and turned the pages toward me.

“Ma’am, this is the form that you need to sign. It states that you looked at the body and identified it as one George Jefferson Spunochle, Jr.” The detective pointed to the lines of information, and to the place where I should sign my name.

“Mr. Spunochle suffered a gash on the back of his head, but that’s not what killed him. According to the Medical Examiner’s report, he drowned. His feet were still inside the car, his shoelaces somehow snarled with the brake pedal, and he was hanging out into the water. He did have on his seatbelt but had pushed off the shoulder harness. He’d opened the door and probably tried to get out of the vehicle, but the car got swept away with the heavy flood. I expect that’s when his shoes got tangled, and he fell, then hit his head on something. That’s why we assume he was knocked unconscious and drowned. The M.E. ruled it death by drowning. It’s all in this report.” He handed me a few pieces of paper.

The detective was very kind to me and behaved almost fatherly. I looked into his eyes and said, “Thank you for coming out to see me and bringing me to town. I need to get home to my kids, and then I’ll figure out what to do.” He told me they’d hold the body until the mortuary came for it. I had no idea how I was going to pay for a funeral, but I had to do something for my kids.

###

Later that night, the detective brought me home but politely turned down my offer of coffee. “You have enough on your plate without a stranger in the midst.”

I had to tell my kids their daddy was gone. I’d told Mama what little I knew when I called and asked her to meet the bus when the kids got home from school. She didn’t say much other than to agree to be here when they got home.

###

Mama left, and I had a long talk with my kids, and of course, they cried. Sarah Jane, now in kindergarten, was only five, so she didn’t understand why her daddy wasn’t coming home. Johnny was eight, almost nine, and he understood. He cried a bit, and then, he stopped and laid his sweet head on my shoulder. After a little while, he quietly said, “Well, Mommy, I guess he won’t be hittin’ you no more.”

In some ways, that broke my heart. He hadn’t been fooled by my stories of falling down the steps or running into a door. He knew.

There were some things my boy didn’t know, would never know, and it was time for me to lay it all to rest. Had it been only two weeks? It seemed like a lifetime ago.

I still had a lot of details to figure out with all this mess. The good news was that Mama offered to pay for all the mortuary expenses—she and Pop had a nice nest egg—and with reluctance, I accepted her offer. The first thing the next morning, I called the funeral home in Richmond, and they agreed to pick up his body. He would be cremated right away. Since the Medical Examiner had signed off on the cause of death, there was no reason to wait.

###

Now, I’m writing these memories on paper of what took place, kinda like a journal, and then I’ll celebrate the finish. The writing will help to chase away the demons in my head, and the last thing I’ll do is to burn the pages in the wood stove and laugh as the truth goes up in flames.

It’s my way of letting go of a nightmare and trying to get my heart to stop pounding. I wonder if George will come back to haunt me. Even though the evil brute has been eliminated, there is so much more to this story.

###

This unbelievable tale began one evening just before dark when George called and told me to take the kids to my mama’s and stay the night there. He didn’t think I knew what he was doing. Maybe I didn’t know all the details, but I knew he was up to no good. I’d seen that young gal one night back in April here

at the cabin—he thought I’d taken the kids to Mama’s house for the night. Well, I had, but I didn’t stay. I told her that I had to run an errand and would be back before the kids went to bed. I snuck back to the cabin and waited. That no-account husband of mine had brought a real young one out to our place—she couldn’t have been more than thirteen or fourteen—and Lord only knows what he was doing, but I felt way down deep in my bones that it was real bad.

The next day, I saw on the six o’clock news that a young girl had gone missing. They showed a picture of the sweetest-looking child, with an Amber Alert, Janet Sue Beasley had disappeared. Oh, my stars! That was the same girl I’d seen with George at our cabin. What had that monster done?

I made a decision that night that there’d be no more missing girls if I had anything to say about it. I wasn’t going to play the good little wife anymore. I had a feeling there’d been others, thinking back on the number of times he’d sent me off to my mama’s, but I had no proof. I had to find the courage to handle this myself. I couldn’t go to the cops here since George was buddies with the local sheriff—had been close friends since grade school—and I didn’t figure he’d believe me.

So, I waited. The waiting was hard, and it took a few months—four to be exact—but finally, I got my chance.

Just like before, that hateful monster called and told me to take the kids and stay at my folks’ place for the night. I agreed to do his bidding, or so he thought. Once again, I took the kids to my mom and told her that I had an errand to run. Just like she had on a few occasions, she let me use her sedan. I went back to the cabin and waited. I hid the car back in the bushes. To be on the safe side, I rubbed some dark foundation onto my face, neck, and hands, then donned a black wig, a scarf, and an old, torn-up jacket.

Sure enough, a car came up the hill. Even in the poor light, I could tell it wasn’t George’s car. Once it got closer, I saw that it was a cute little pink jeep. When it stopped, I crept up behind with a large stone in my right hand. As George climbed out of the driver’s side, I heard him say something like, “Now Madicen, don’t you worry none. We’re gonna have a good time tonight, but if you insist, I’ll take you back down to Richmond to your daddy’s bowling alley. Do you want to have some fun with me, or do you wanna go back to your daddy that never lets you have no fun? Your choice.”

She sounded like she was sniffing, maybe even crying, but since I couldn’t see her face, I just waited to see what she’d do. Pretty soon, I heard her say, “Well, I guess I can stay for a little while, but, George, you’ll take me home before it gets late, won’t you?”

“Sure, Honey, sure,” is all he said.

When he started around the back of the jeep, I hit him on the side of his head as hard as I could with that big rock I’d picked up, and he fell to the ground. It must have been a good strike because he didn’t move. I walked around to where the girl sat.

“Madicen, I think that’s your name, you have no idea who you were dealing with tonight. If I hadn’t been here, you would’ve wound up dead in a few hours. You get your prissy little backside back to your daddy and don’t look back. If you ever tell anyone about being here, I’ll tell your daddy where you were tonight. Got it?”

Her eyes got as big as washtubs, and she managed to stammer, “Y-yes, ma’am. I’ll never tell.” I think I scared the daylight out of her ‘cause she took off, grinding gears, and throwing gravel every which way.

“Well, George now comes the hard part.” Don’t ask me why I was talking to him. I guess I was nervous. I’d never killed anyone. I didn’t know for sure if he was dead, but if he wasn’t dead now, he soon would be. I’d see to that.

The sprinkles we’d been having off and on all evening turned into a heavy shower. The wet grass made it easier for me to drag that dirty rat over to the old well. First, I took off the wig and threw it and my jacket down into the hole. I figured that by the time I got back to mama’s place, the brown color I’d rubbed on my skin would be washed off by the rain. Next, I checked George’s wrists and felt no pulse. To make sure, I leaned down close to his mouth, just like I’d seen in the movies. I didn’t hear or feel any

breath. I guess I did kill him. I didn't want to take any chances, so I took off my scarf and stuffed that in his mouth. I checked his pockets and found his wallet. I decided that I should burn his I.D. then I put the fake-leather billfold back where I'd found it. It wasn't hard to push his body into the hole. There were still a few large stones near the well—from the original wall, I guessed—so I rolled some in on top of him. Next, I went around to the side of the cabin and grabbed as many bags of trash as I could carry in a few trips and threw them all down in the well. Last I pushed in the rest of the large stones. "Well, George, for once I'm glad you were too lazy to haul off the trash." This is some kind of storm, hurricane-like, and the heavy downpour should wipe out all of my tracks.

That was easier to do than I thought. My head was pounding, but that would pass. It was getting late, and I knew Mama would worry, but it couldn't be helped. I'd just tell her that I'd made a wrong turn in the storm, and it took a while for me to get my bearings.

At any rate, George wouldn't be sending me and the kids off to my mama's anymore. I'd made sure that he wouldn't hurt anyone ever again. I knew that in time, my nightmares would stop, my bruises would fade, and I hoped my kids would be happy again.

###

When that Richmond City cop came out to tell me they'd found George's body, I thought I'd been caught for sure. I feel kind of bad for that man who'd died. I didn't have any idea who he was when he was alive. Now, he was my husband; we were going to have a nice memorial for him in just a few days. I wondered how he wound up in George's car. The only identification found was my husband's car registration. Guess I'll never know who got cremated.

One thing I do know for sure about George Jefferson Spunochle, He Needed Killin'.

The Spider Who Ate the Elephant

Kari Kilgore
Fiction, Second Place

You may have heard tales of spiders moving into a town and covering it with their silk. People seem to ignore spiders until this happens, at least as long as they don't *see* the spiders. Then they wake up one day to go about their important human lives as they always do, but they find their town transformed.

The grass, the trees, even their big, powerful cars are draped in layers of shimmering, white silk.

"What could have done this?" they cry. "No person has done such a thing, and no other creature could possibly be so powerful as to disrupt us in our busy lives!"

One of them, often a child, finally whispers...

"It was spiders."

"Spiders?" they cry. "No creature so tiny could do such a thing to us."

And yet it is so. One spider cannot do such a thing, it is true. But most people can not imagine that there are as many spiders as people. Hardly any people realize there are in truth many *more* spiders than people, and it has ever been so.

Many thousands of years ago, long before there were people and all of their lights and machines and rushing about, there were animals and insects all over the land. And as they do now, these creatures were able to work together when something threatened them all. It is a lesson they still hope the people will someday learn.

In this land, a great river brought all of the water the animals and the insects needed, and at times the river flooded. These floods made the land much richer and more fertile when the mighty waters receded. The animals and insects depended on the floods and prepared for their coming.

Many creatures had their homes near the river, but never where the floodwaters would flow. They had learned the pattern of the river over thousands of years, and they knew it very well.

One not so unusual day, a grand elephant was leading her herd through the land toward the river. She was ancient indeed, with many daughters, granddaughters, great-granddaughters, and great-great-granddaughters by her side. All of her sons roamed on a different path, as it has ever been.

On this day, she was feeling weary and tired. Her many, many years of living were coming to call all at once.

When she led her daughters to the river, she knew her days, her long and beautiful days, had come to an end at last. Her great heart, so wise and eternal to all of her daughters, slowly came to a stop.

Her daughters and eventually her sons for many generations came to mourn her, as elephants still do to this day. When the time for mourning was over, they moved along their way, with a new grandmother elephant leading the herd.

The problem was the grand old elephant was not only near the river, she was near one of the narrowest parts. Another problem was the floods were coming. Still another problem was none of the animals nearby could move or eat her in time, and they were running out of time.

As the floodwaters began to rise, the grand old elephant's body blocked the river, and all of the waters behind her began to rise. Many creatures were forced to leave their homes, homes that had sheltered generation upon generation of their families.

The grand old elephant's body began to poison that water, to turn it foul and evil-smelling. The fish were unable to stay, so animals who ate fish went hungry. The small animals who ate fish were soon unable to stay.

Then the animals who ate the smaller animals were hungry. The hunger spread throughout the land with no end in sight, with larger and larger animals suffering. The insects suffered too, with less animals to feed on every day.

The wisest of the animals and the insects was also one of the smallest. She was a grandmother spider. She had seen many years come and go, and she could see disaster building for all of her family and all of the other creatures.

One of her sisters had told her long ago of the desert that came when a river stopped flowing. She was terribly afraid for all of the animals and insects in her land. She heard their cries, their terrible and piteous cries.

“What will we do?”

“We will starve!”

“How will we move the grand old elephant?”

This was a spider who had countless babies, and her time for having babies was nearly through. She felt helpless, for she knew all of her babies would starve and drown too if the river continued to rise behind the grand old elephant. All of her babies beyond the grand old elephant would starve and die if the river stopped flowing and a desert took over their fair land.

The grandmother spider was terribly afraid. She cried her strange spider tears until she fell asleep.

When the grandmother spider woke, she had an idea. When her babies hatched, they were so very hungry. Maybe they could help the grand old elephant and all of the other creatures as well. Maybe if she had enough babies, they could work together to save them all.

She set to work. She made egg sack after egg sack, far more than she had ever made, putting all of them safely and carefully in the trees above the grand old elephant. Instead of hundreds of babies, she made thousands, many thousands, more than even she could count.

The waters kept rising, but instead of leaving with other animals and insects, the grandmother spider worked night and day, making babies and spinning egg sacks to keep them warm and safe.

When she was through, when she had made as many eggs as she could make, the grandmother spider curled up in a ball on the highest leaf of the tree. She waited for the eggs to hatch, to try to save them and all of the other creatures in their fair land.

She could not move or hunt for herself, not anymore. She had used up all of her energy and her silk, all she had ever had. At last, the first of her babies began to hatch.

“Mother,” they cried. “We are so hungry! What shall we eat?”

With the little voice she had left, the grandmother spider whispered to the last babies she would ever have.

“The grand old elephant has all the food you will ever need.”

“We cannot eat one so huge,” the babies cried. “We will starve!”

“Wait until your sisters and brothers have hatched,” the grandmother spider whispered, even quieter than before. “All of you can work together. All of you can save all of us.”

With that, the grandmother spider died.

The babies hatched one by one, and each told the next one to join, to work together, to save their land and all who lived there. They began to spin, to make a funeral shroud for the grand old elephant, to cover her with the respect and dignity she so richly deserved.

Once the shroud was complete, the baby spiders fed. Together they worked so quickly that the waters were able to pass through, and the flood behind them began to recede.

The land was fertile again. Instead of poisoning the water, the grandmother elephant’s body made the land more rich than before. The insects and all the animals who had left slowly began to return, and before long even the fish were swimming in the waters again. Everyone in the land was happy and healthy.

The baby spiders were so strong and healthy after their start in life that they went out and populated the land, then other lands, then the entire planet. To this day, so many thousands of years later, the spiders remember that distant grandmother spider and how she saved everyone.

They gather together and make that same shroud, for their grandmother spider and for that grand old elephant.

Maybe now that humans know this tale, they will understand what that giant mass of silk is really for. It is not to slow them down, or scare them, or to make a mess of their orderly human world.

That silk is the funeral shroud, echoing through the millennia and all of the countless insect and animal babies the great love for that grand old elephant. That silk echoes the great love of that grandmother spider.

The spider who ate the elephant.

The Thirteenth Painting

Charles Tabb
Fiction, First Place

In her art studio where her son had once slept, Lisa stared at the canvas. She had finished a painting earlier that day and was eager to start another. Over three years she had given birth to sixty-two paintings. The early ones weren't that good—she knew that—but she recognized how she'd improved.

Her thoughts wandered to her life with Jim, her husband. They were nearly broke. He was working two jobs already and might have to work a third. She couldn't work. Well, she could, but her days were so wrapped up in Davey, their son. Their dead son, she corrected. Now, she spent her time in her studio, a place she never allowed Jim to enter, padlocking the door closed, something Jim had reluctantly agreed to.

Davey had died three years ago. A hit and run. He would be six now. Sure, being a mother had been hard. She'd been so frustrated at her apparent failures as a mother sometimes as she tried to deal with the terrible twos and his growing independence at age three. This had caused some resentment, which made her feel all the worse when he'd died. Lisa wondered if he'd be alive today if she'd been a better mother. She'd always felt guilt over his death. She'd been at home and could have kept him with her. Instead, she'd sent him to his death.

Jim had been at work, and Lisa was home because she took leave on a teacher workday. Ms. Barton, the lady who babysat Davey and four other children, had lost track of him while making their lunch. Davey had wandered outside because Ms. Barton had forgotten to re-latch the door when she'd come in with the mail. His explorations had taken him to the highway. Nobody saw what happened, and his life had ended there on the side of Highway 42. In a way, her life had ended there, too.

Davey had been named for both their fathers: David Franklin Murray. She had agreed to include Franklin, Jim's father's name, in order to be able to name their son after her father. Jim wouldn't have gone for it otherwise. However, she'd insisted her father's name come first. Jim's father was a creep. To this day, Jim had no idea what his father had tried to do at their wedding reception. She still felt nauseous when her father-in-law was around. She could often feel where his hands had groped her as if those hands were now ghosts but still active.

She'd left her teaching job. Now, all she wanted to do was paint. She'd converted his bedroom to a studio in his honor.

Her first subjects were always Davey. She had painted thirteen pictures of him in the first eight months after—well, after. She stopped painting him when she realized the pictures were becoming too dark—not only in color but in their presentation. The last painting of him had looked like the famous Dorian Gray. In it, Davey's skin seemed to be sliding down his cheeks; his mouth stood open in a howl reminiscent of Munch's *The Scream*; his stare was both haunted and haunting. She had been unable to destroy the painting, but it was stored in the closet, the frightening image of her dead son facing the back wall.

And she did her best to ignore the whispering that drifted from behind the closet door.

A part of her knew this was impossible. Paintings didn't talk. They were just a mixture of chemicals that produced pigment arranged on a canvas to create a picture. But if pictures couldn't talk, why did this one insist on speaking to her?

Lisa had heard of artists going mad. Van Gogh had severed his own ear; Richard Dadd had spent time in the infamous Bedlam, a psychiatric hospital in England; Goya himself reported hearing voices; and Rothko and de Staël, along with Van Gogh, had taken their own lives following struggles with madness. Part of her recognized she might be losing her mind. Another part listened to the voice from the closet.

She distracted herself by visualizing what this new, empty canvas would look like when finished. Deep red and the blue-black of night formed as she imagined the finished work. She saw cliffs and a car. Ocean filled the distance, with dark greens and blues and black, whitecaps foaming as waves reached skyward. The sky was a brewing tempest, dark purple and black with bright gray and white streaks highlighting the bellies of the clouds with the buried lightening.

Lisa mixed a dollop of red with blue until the shade of purple she saw on the bare canvas filled a corner of her palette. Pulling a clean, dry brush from a jar, she stabbed the paint and began to bathe the top third of the canvas with the angry color, using swirling movements to create the sense of motion and turmoil she saw in the clouds.

Her hand moved quickly, like a conductor pulling violent music from an orchestra. Her mind entered the void where it dwelled when she was possessed with a work of art.

The background of the storm begun, she started work on the ocean. She added a few drops of white to lighten the purple she'd used for the sky and used quick, curved strokes to paint what she considered the bodies of the waves, which undulated in her mind like a woman caught in the throes of forbidden sex. Finally, she mixed new colors to paint a cliff edge in the foreground. She would add the trees and other details later to provide perspective, along with the car in the foreground, sitting on the cliff's edge as if watching the approaching storm.

With the three major background components of the painting begun, she worked on shadings and other details of the clouds.

"Mooooomyyyyy."

The whispering began. While her heart beat a fast rhythm, she did her best to ignore it.

"Mooooommy. Please. I want out."

"Go away." She blushed because she had started talking to the voice several weeks ago.

"I want out. Please?"

"I can't."

"Please?" The voice—no not a voice, her son—began to weep.

She stood there, staring at the closed closet, wondering if she would be able to see the image of her dead son speak if she brought the painting out. Would the painted mouth move? Would it reshape itself from the oval of *The Scream* into words being spoken?

The crying continued, growing louder, more insistent. Davey had been like that. He would start out whimpering before the small cries quickly worked their way up to wails that had unnerved her from the start. The ceaseless crying. The torment. The baby that seemed to hate her to the point of causing torture instead of giving love.

As the cries from the painting began their slow crescendo, she realized she would have to take the painting out of the closet. It had never cried before. It had only spoken despicable things to her. Now, she had to make it stop crying.

Going to the closet door, she stood there, listening as the crying intensified.

"Stop," she begged, careful not to be too loud. If Jim walked in, he would wonder what was going on. She instinctively knew he would not hear the crying. "Please stop crying."

"Then let me out," the voice pleaded.

"If I let you out, will you stop?"

"Yes. Just let me out. Please."

Steeling herself, she grasped the knob. Then turning it, she yanked the door open as all went silent. Reaching toward the back, she grabbed the offending painting, pulling it out of its vault. She had to look at it. Had to see if the mouth had changed.

Her eyes had squeezed shut and she slowly opened them, expecting to see a painting of her son as he looked when alive, not the hideous creation she'd painted over two years ago.

But it was worse. The painting had changed, but not how she'd thought it would. Staring back at her was a demon. A grotesque image of a devil from Hell. It had three tongues, like a mockery of the Holy

Trinity. The tongues were flames shooting from the devil's mouth; the eyes, orange and yellow like flames themselves, accused and condemned; the face itself was a repulsive mask of red, green, black, and yellow; ram's horns twisted from its bald crown in a threatening spiral.

Then the painted mouth moved, the tongues of fire seeming to lick the corners of the horrid lips. "Why, Mommy?"

An unwanted image from the past, forgotten or ignored until now, surfaced in her mind like a drowned body floating up from the sea's depths to bob at the surface for all to see.

She was driving along the highway on her way to pick up her son from Ms. Barton's. She had received a call that her son's pediatrician had been forced to reschedule an important appointment, moving it to that day, so she needed to pick him up early to take him to the doctor. It had been an inconvenience she could have done without. After all, Davey was at the sitters to allow her a restful day off.

As she approached the house, she saw Davey in the yard. She watched as he moved toward the road, arms stretched toward the cat skittering across the highway. No other cars were in sight as she pressed the accelerator instead of the brake.

The look on Davey's face as he recognized his mother's car would haunt her forever. He'd smiled, unaware of the danger. The thud sounded like the slamming of a coffin lid. She watched as the fragile body flew through the air in slow motion, landing beside the road in a heap of broken bones and slaughtered organs. She knew he was dead or would be soon, so she went home, trying to remember if she meant to press the accelerator or the brake.

By the time she arrived home, her cell rang. Lisa answered as if she knew nothing of what had happened. It was Ms. Barton of course, screaming frantically and punctuating her shouts with regretful apologies. Oddly, hearing someone else say her son had been hit by a car brought the first tears, as if she had planned the entire episode. But of course, she couldn't have. How could she know Ms. Barton would not latch the door and Davey would be stepping into the road as she arrived?

When Lisa approached the car to drive to the hospital, she noticed the damaged fender. As she parked at the hospital, she rammed into a car in the space in front of her, hiding the damage caused when her car had struck her son.

"Why?" The words from the flaming lips brought her back to the present.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Putting the evil creation back into the closet, she went to the bathroom as if pulled by invisible strings, and undressed. Climbing into the tub, she took the box cutter she used in her artwork and split both arms open from elbow to wrist, slicing veins and an artery. She expected pain, but she felt nothing. As the blood geysered rhythmically, she gouged both femoral arteries.

After the funeral, Jim's pastor did his best to offer words of comfort. "She was just too damaged from the death of your son. Mothers often feel guilt over such things."

Jim looked at the reverend with eyes too tired from crying to shed another tear. He wondered about the enormity of the guilt necessary to do what Lisa did, especially after three years. He considered things he could have done differently. Was he the reason? Had his nagging that she find a job driven her over the edge? Was her art that important to her?

When he'd finally cut the padlock and entered his son's former bedroom for the first time since Lisa had converted it to an art studio, he'd found thirteen identical paintings of Davey along with a variety of other works that felt dark and forbidding. However, his son's sweet smile was captured perfectly in each of the portraits of him. Jim wondered why she'd painted so many, especially since they all seemed to be copies of each other. Wasn't one enough?

Desperately Seeking Sang-Froid

Judith Helms
Non-fiction, Third Place

It was the vilification that stood out most vividly in the messages hand-written in colorful letters on the hundreds of pro-choice signs at the first Women's March on Washington. Even one of the milder slogans, "Keep Your Hands Off My Social Security and My Lady Parts," carried by a sixty-something woman in conservative clothing and sensible flat boots, suggested a certain lack of respect for the intentions of the other side. It wasn't until the following day that the woman felt chagrined, realizing how easily she'd slipped into the satisfying embrace of the zealous crowd of like-minded people, proudly lifting her small cardboard standard high over her head so it could be seen by more than just her immediate comrades-in-arms.

She regretted she hadn't chosen more precise wording. She was certain she harbored no ill-will toward her pro-life friends, of whom there were many, and she sincerely doubted any of them wanted their hands on *her* lady parts, figuratively or literally. A more accurate reflection of her view on abortion would've been something like, "Abortion Restrictions Hurt Poor Women." But it was more than the tone of the signs that nagged at her. She felt a profound sense of embarrassment that her "side" of the abortion issue had excluded pro-life women from the first-ever Women's March on Washington. It was more than the obvious oxymoronic exclusion of approximately half of U.S. women from a "Women's March." What troubled her was the cleaving of women's political might—the abandonment of a unity which could be beneficial in securing rights all women do support.

Her discomfort around the event drove her to the decision to embark on a project she'd studiously avoided for decades, at the same time she acknowledged that, as a retiree, she no longer had the excuse of "press of work." She admitted to herself that she really hadn't done her homework to analyze thoroughly the abortion debate. Rather, as a life-long feminist, she'd simply supported the cause. In a general way, she knew what she believed, but she took no pleasure in articulating it for herself: A woman has a right to decide how to conduct her own life; and yes, abortion is killing something living—perhaps only a glob of cells, but something living.

The woman dove into the subject with the same rigor and tenacity that had fueled her law career. She located books and articles from decades before, as well as present-day writings. She studied medical journals and articles to better understand the science. She delved into a recent memoir by an abortionist, tomes written by philosophers, articles, letters, and opinion pieces written by women who had undergone the procedure and either felt fine about it or didn't. The cascade of online rants demonstrated that both sides of the debate engaged in the dreary exercise of demonization. She ignored the tirades, and anything else that wasn't either factual or useful for the moral analysis. And she studied *Roe v. Wade* and its progeny to refresh herself on the constitutional arguments and the various positions on the state's interest in the issue.

Finally, she separated the legal issue from the moral one, and found that the latter presented the more interesting and profound questions. Once she'd read, outlined, studied, pondered and searched her soul, she came to a determination she'd neither expected, nor had she seen identified by any of the writers on the subject. This, of course, caused her to wonder whether it was she or they missing something. She concluded that there is at least one irrefutable moral argument for the embryo's right to its future as a human; and at least one irrefutable moral argument for a woman's right to live her life as she sees fit. The problem with her determination was that it was neither guidepost nor stop sign, but an arrow pointing in both directions.

This conundrum forced the woman to change her focus from the back end to the front end of the problem. It occurred to her that the controversy is a prime example of "the bridge story," in which one

of two rescuers, on the verge of exhaustion from saving more and more women in a fast-flowing river, decides the better use of his time is to run up to the bridge to stop whoever is throwing the women in.

So, up to the bridge the woman ran. What she found there were facts supporting one central thesis: Pro-life and pro-choice women are demanding far too little. While it is obvious that there would be no abortions if there were no unwanted pregnancies, how to prevent the pregnancies has received little focus, or worse, downright opposition. Nevertheless, what the woman found on the bridge was that three efforts could eliminate the need for the exhausting, incessant, life-saving efforts in the river. First, medically accurate sex education for all teens and pre-teens would reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies to some extent. Second, universal, easily procured, effective, efficient, and free birth control, from the time a young woman reaches puberty, would further the goal of eliminating unwanted pregnancies. Third, the woman dared to dream of a day when menstruation—that painful, messy, and unnecessary monthly shedding of the uterine lining—could be delayed for every woman until such time as she chooses to activate her periods to permit a wanted pregnancy. Of course, the woman knew these dream scenarios were impossible. But, she recalled, so were the moon shot, I-phones, and immunotherapy...until they weren't.

Knowing that adult women were probably fully invested in one side or the other, she penned a novel for young women. Her intention was to provide them with the medical facts and philosophical arguments on both sides of the issue. She wanted girls to know that all people who stand up for what they believe deserve respect and appreciation—irrespective of how much someone else believes they are misguided. It was the one message which had been missing from all of the books, articles, essays and letters. Of course, some writers (the minority, to be sure) employed polite language as they explained to their sisters how misguided they were. Unfortunately, that approach always came across as condescending. What was missing was honest-to-the-bone, open-hearted listening. The woman tried to describe such an approach in her young adult novel.

She went on to publish the book, but to her dismay, no one bought it. So she wrote an Op-Ed, but no newspaper selected it. Desperate to start a conversation on the issues she'd addressed in the novel, the woman stumbled upon a sure-fire way to get someone to read her thoughts and conclusions. She submitted an essay to a writing competition. The judging process would result in at least one pair of eyes examining her work in order to evaluate its literary worth. The woman had finally found what she'd desperately sought, a place for a calm, rational examination of her writing, and by extension—unavoidably—her ideas.

The Best Weather In the World

Dan Walker

Non-fiction, Second Place

“The worst weather in the world” is what they say Mount Washington has. But they’re wrong: it has the best. Everest is worse, but nobody lives there. It’s like the moon: you go up there in a space suit, stick a flag on it, and come down. But every day and night of the year there are people on Mount Washington—weather people, freaks who will pay money to sit in that observatory, feed the cats, read the weather over the radio (theirs will always be the best, remember), and once an hour go out to look at the instruments, clear off the rime, and check for damage. Ice-rime is what collects from condensation on cold surfaces, like what you get in a freezer that isn’t frost free, and enough of it can keep instruments from measuring what they need to measure.

Ice-rime, get it? These are ice-poets, metrical poets. A term like that appeals to me. (Math appeals to me, too; I’m just not very good at it.) But these people have—they must!—my kind of goose-bumps, reading those gauges, knowing that the next line they see on that graph—like the next line in some manuscript dug out of a Blackfriars attic or the coast of Kent—might be a revelation, a record. The average wind speed there in some months (the *average*) is hurricane force, and the highest wind ever recorded on Earth was clocked there: 231 miles per hour. Supposedly this has recently been exceeded by reanalysis of a typhoon somewhere in the tropics in the middle of the ocean. OK, fine. But who was there? A satellite? Again, that’s the moon. This was just another spring day on Mt. Washington.

Two hundred thirty-one.

Say that number to yourself, hear all those cold trochaic thunks right in a row, and you know why the Saxon war-poets used them; you know why there are marine anchor chains over that building.

Today you can drive up there, in summer at least, or be driven up in vans by guides. I recommend the van: Even on a nice day, it’s only 50 degrees or so, and windy enough to blow you around like a kite. And look at the horizon, not down, because there are no guard rails. The road has to be re-built every year, and looks it. In winter they re-supply those ice-poets by snow cat. They do have real cats as pets, for some reason. (The poem about *that* almost writes itself, doesn’t it? And you *want* to write that one, don’t you? Admit it.)

It’s weird for an English teacher to be a weather freak, but weather *is* literature: a text to be read—rising action, falling action—and that can make a place *much* more interesting. Say you are up there at 6200 feet, bare rock mostly, even that building, and so high you’re in the clouds most of the time and can’t see your own hand. Well, 20,000 years ago there was an ice sheet here, so you can imagine that’s what the clouds are. But the truth is that the ice covered the mountain and went up *another* two thousand feet. Where you’re standing would be *under* the glacier and that white stuff around you would be solid, grinding rock. Even today, a few hundred feet down, there’s still a frost layer melting slowly from above as well as below, squeezed by the past and the future—and aren’t we all? What lives down there, you wonder? And you know *something* does. Does it know its Age is past? Or does it know what every warming is followed by? Does it expect—like an insurgency—to outlast the surge?

On that breezy April day in 1934, the anemometer was stuck at 150 mph from two feet of rime. That would not do. So Stevenson, the ice-poet on duty, grabbed a club and went outside to knock it off. We’re not told what kind of club. I like to picture a mastodon jaw. The force of the wind first blew Stevenson flat, then pinned him to the ladder so he *could* climb up and whack that gauge loose to do its duty. Then he crawled back inside to watch the needle climb toward immortality.

If you want to know what that watching was like, you can go to the museum in Conway where there's a little room with wood paneling, an oil stove, and instruments dating to the '30s. There's a red button on the wall.

Go ahead. Push it.

The room hums warmly at first, and the anemometer's needle climbs through the 60's while snow howls by the window in a blur. At ninety it whines so bad your teeth hurt. At one-hundred it screams, gauges rattle on the wall, and a cat sails by the window with a shriek. At two hundred the mountain itself trembles under your feet, the chains groan, and eighty-pound blocks of ice start slamming into the walls like—I almost said like couplets, but that's a cheap trick. And it's not true: That's *free* verse out there, Ms. Dickinson. but it's very costly in its way. (It's sure not for sale in Amherst.)

What poet would not pay to stay up there till they rebuild that road in the spring?

Who needs grass? If you want me again, Walt, don't look for me under your boot soles. Look under the ice-rime.

Amazing Grace

Dory Hulse
Non-fiction, First Place

The announcement shocked and saddened all of us in the church choir that Wednesday night at rehearsal. We learned that Grace O'Brien had called 911 the night before because of her severe abdominal pain. Soon after arriving at the hospital, she underwent emergency surgery. We looked at one another with rueful, knowing looks as we all assumed this might spell the end of our dear Gracie.

Now in her nineties, she had once contributed her solo-worthy soprano voice to our music program, but these days she remained in the choir because we were all "family." Thanks to macular degeneration, she relied on large print music and sometimes the assistance of fellow singers to locate her folder and robe. Widowed twice, Gracie had no children and no relatives besides a nephew and his family who resided in Canada, a long way from Charlottesville, Virginia. She lived alone in the cherished house she and her second husband built. To get around she relied on JAUNT, a public transportation service for the elderly and handicapped. Get around she did.

Gracie went to the gym twice a week where she walked forty laps and worked out on several kinds of weight lifting equipment. Her regular ceramics class offered fellowship as well as a creative outlet and she rarely missed weekly choir rehearsals and church on Sunday. Each week she joined a certain group of male attorneys at a restaurant on the downtown pedestrian mall for breakfast after which one of them walked her to a hair appointment a few blocks away. We never knew how she happened to become part of that group. She had a standing weekly lunch date with a few lady friends at a local Red Robin restaurant and no doubt had numerous other activities we didn't know about. One day when I was shopping at a ladies' clothing store, without naming Gracie, I happened to refer to a fellow choir singer in her nineties who was quite a character. The woman helping me brightened as she exclaimed, "Oh, you must mean Grace O'Brien!" Everyone, it seemed, knew Grace O'Brien.

In her younger years, Gracie had worked as a bookkeeper and continued to demonstrate an affinity for numbers. She committed phone numbers to memory since it was hard for her to read the fine print of telephone listings. Her wit was as sharply honed as her facility with numbers.

We fellow choir members thought of indomitable Gracie as truly amazing and as an inspiration. She was savvy, sassy and strong. So, it was a sad time when we learned of her illness and feared the worst. Silly us.

After she was discharged from the hospital, Gracie spent a few weeks in a nursing home for rehabilitation. When she returned to choir rehearsal she was still sputtering her dissatisfaction. It took little encouragement to learn about her adventures.

She didn't think much of the staff at the nursing home who seemed more attuned to their own bad days and private concerns than to their patients. Grumpy attitudes didn't cut it with our indignant Gracie.

"When they walk into your room, they should put on a smile and say 'Good morning, Miss O'Brien' no matter how they're feeling themselves. Their job is to make their patient feel better!" she stated with fire burning in her eyes and a tone that dared rebuttal.

"You're absolutely right, Gracie, but I don't think you should take it personally," I agreed. "It sounds as if these aides are just ignorant about how their moods affect patients and nobody has trained them very well."

"Well, somebody ought to teach them!" she huffed.

"You'd be the perfect messenger," I noted. "You're the one who experienced the behavior. Maybe you should call the manager and let them know about how you were treated so they can make some improvements. You could offer to provide a patient's perspective in a meeting with the aides."

Gracie quickly rejected that idea and added another complaint. She had been waiting for a bill for incidental expenses like phone and television charges. When she finally called the nursing home to find out where her bill was, they told her they had just given it to her friend who was a regular visitor. This was too much.

“Why on earth would they give MY bill to somebody else? I can take care of my own finances,” she fumed.

In addition, she was not happy about the occupational therapist’s home visit assessment when she was about to be discharged from rehab.

“They wanted me to get rid of my throw rugs, they didn’t like the five steps to the front door, they didn’t think it was safe for me to walk down the hill to my own mailbox, and they wanted me to put grab bars in the shower. I agreed we could do the grab bars, but I’m not about to make any other changes. This has been my home for forty-one years and it’s the way I like it,” she defiantly asserted. “Besides, steps are good exercise for you.”

When I went to work the next day at the University of Virginia School of Nursing, I ran into a faculty friend. Anita’s specialty was psychiatric and mental health nursing and I knew she taught her students about mental health and aging, incorporating therapeutic communication skills in her classes. I thought she’d get a kick out of hearing about Gracie, her complaints and, especially, her determination to remain independent and strong. Not only did Anita appreciate Gracie’s story, she asked if I thought Gracie would be willing to come to the nursing school to talk to the students.

“It’s one thing for me to lecture about good mental health and aging, but it would be so much more impactful for them to meet such a good example in person,” she enthused. I promised to ask Gracie if she’d be willing to come.

The following Wednesday at choir practice, I told Gracie about Anita and the invitation to speak to nursing students and asked if she’d be willing to share her insights.

She quickly dismissed the idea, “Oh, no, I couldn’t do that.”

“Why ever not,” I challenged.

“I’ve never done anything like that before,” she responded.

“Grace O’Brien, when did you ever let something like that stop you?” I laughed.

“No, I don’t want to do it. Besides, how would I get there? What if the students weren’t interested? Would I have to stand in front of them the whole time?”

When I reported back to Anita that our star was reluctant to appear, she asked if Gracie might be willing to have lunch with her one day soon so they could get to know one another and so Gracie could ask questions about how such a session might go.

The next Sunday at church, I told Gracie about Anita’s invitation and willingness to pick her up and take her home. I also assured Gracie that she’d certainly enjoy the company as Anita was such a gracious, kind lady with a good sense of humor. Gracie softened enough to accept the invitation. I would have been happy to make a bet on the outcome of that meeting.

Sure enough, the lunch meeting went swimmingly and when I had a chance to talk with Gracie about it she was full of praise for Anita and had agreed to be a “guest lecturer.” All she would have to do was to explain to the class about her background growing up in Canada, what health issues she had confronted in her long life and how she had coped with those and with the losses of her two husbands.

She had shared much of that story with Anita over lunch, but a fresh troubling thought had occurred to her.

With an anxious tone she asked, “Will there be any men in the class? If I talk about my health in the past, I’ll have to talk about my missing bosoms.”

Knowing that she had undergone a double mastectomy in the 1950s, I looked her in the eye as I answered, “There might well be men in the class since we do have male students, too. But, Gracie, these men are going to be nurses just like the female students and they will someday be caring for women in cancer treatment who have had mastectomies. They need to learn everything the women students learn.”

She paused in thoughtful reflection and finally answered, “Well, I guess that’s right.” Another hurdle overcome.

On the appointed day, Gracie dressed in her usual tasteful clothing in her favorite bright colors, hair done, and ready for her time in the spotlight. She and Anita sat at a table in the front of the classroom that filled with students – including a few men.

I learned later that Gracie had sat on the end of her bed in front of a mirror to rehearse her speech. Her vision prevented her from using notes, so her memory carried the day as she first presented her personal story and then fielded questions from the students.

In my role as the school's communications director, I attended the class with camera in hand and discreetly took a seat in the rear of the classroom. Within the first few minutes of the session it was clear that Gracie had worked her charm on all these young people. She opened with the quip that they could safely fall asleep and she wouldn't know it given her vision limitations. They all laughed. Nobody napped. They leaned forward in their seats, occasionally casting glances sideways to their friends as they registered surprise at some of Gracie's stories.

After Gracie had given an overview of her biography, Anita prompted additional information with probing questions. After the litany of illnesses (including whooping cough, small pox, breast cancer, detached retina, pneumonia, osteoarthritis) and discussion of how she had managed painful life experiences such as being widowed twice, she was asked to discuss her current lifestyle. What did she eat? How did she exercise? How did she spend her time?

I was amused to photograph the slack-jawed expressions of some of the students. One young woman leaned forward with her chin resting on her hand and her mouth gaping when she heard Gracie describe a breakfast regimen worthy of a stevedore. In addition to fruit, coffee and eggs, Gracie broke up her audience when she added to the list oatmeal or other cereal topped, not with milk, but with ... ice cream. "I never did like milk," she pronounced.

Gracie proudly revealed that one fellow gym exerciser called her "the road runner" because of her numerous laps on the track, though she confessed that her pace was slow.

The period was winding to a close and before the class erupted into applause, I announced that I'd like to take a photo of Gracie with students. As the group gathered, Gracie provoked an outburst of laughter when she requested that the men stand next to her. Evidently, she had overcome her modesty impulse.

After I finished taking pictures, I noticed that three or four of the students had gathered with Gracie who was holding court and then I heard them setting up a lunch date with the star.

When I drove her home after the class, she expressed insecurity about how things had gone. Despite the applause, photos and lunch dates, she wondered if the students had liked it.

"Are you kidding?" I exclaimed. "I guarantee these students will remember you and this class long after they've forgotten the material covered in their 'real' professor's lecture."

The presentation was so well received that Anita dubbed it "Aging with Grace" and informed Gracie that she was welcome to return every spring and fall to repeat the class as long as she was up for it.

Gracie, her initial insecurity put aside, reveled in her new role. When I made an announcement to the choir about her new career as a "professor/guest lecturer" she lit up with the attention and applause. Then she began soliciting other speaking opportunities from choir members, eager to expand on her new identity. Alas, nobody else had an audience for her. But she did return to the School of Nursing.

In fact, in her third year of speaking, as she approached her ninety-sixth birthday, the Dean attended one of Gracie's presentations to a class of one hundred students to present a certificate of gratitude in recognition of her contributions.

The citation read: *This certificate gratefully acknowledges the contributions of GRACE O'BRIEN and establishes her honorary position for an indefinite term as VISITING LECTURER at the University of Virginia School of Nursing. Aging With Grace became a popular and traditional element of the Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing course NUCO 473 each semester over a two year period. In September 2008, Aging With Grace became the first class for the newly created Geriatric Nursing course NUCO 476. Ms. O'Brien became the first Visiting Lecturer in the School's newly opened Claude Moore Nursing Education Building.*

Soon after she had begun her new career, Gracie thanked me for talking her into that first presentation.

"It's nice to be able to feel like I'm doing something worthwhile, something that's meaningful," she assured me. "Now I have something to add to my resume," she added with a tone of triumph.

If there was ever any doubt about the impact of Gracie's new career the evidence was made clear within a few years when Gracie's one hundredth birthday was approaching.

Shortly before her birthday, I called a feature writer at the local daily newspaper.

"David, I think I've got a fun story for you," I began. "There's a lady in our church choir who will be turning one hundred soon..." and David interrupted me.

"Oh, you know it's not so unusual to have somebody turning that age anymore."

“That’s true, but not many of them are like Grace O’Brien,” I challenged as I began to describe her and all the things she was doing. He laughed and agreed that he’d like to meet her. He said he could meet on Thursday morning at ten if I could bring her to his office. I quickly called Gracie to let her know we had this opportunity.

“Oh, I can’t do it then,” she explained. “I have my ceramics class that morning.”

After further examination of her schedule, kept in her head, we settled on a few available time slots and I called David back. Now, with a sense of Gracie’s personality and lifestyle, he laughed as we came up with an alternative.

The Sunday before that appointment, Gracie approached me after church during the fellowship hour with a gleam in her eye.

“I have something to show you,” she teased. She reached out to shake hands and when I grasped hers, she quickly and forcefully jerked downward, literally pulling me off my feet as she gleefully chortled. Then she was off to find another sucker for her new trick.

On the day of our meeting with the newspaper writer we sat for an interesting interview and David seemed duly impressed, arranging for a photographer to go with him to Gracie’s home for a photo shoot. As we rose to leave, Gracie announced she’d like to shake hands with him. I began to laugh aloud and warned David that Gracie had a trick up her sleeve and to be careful. As a former Green Beret, I think he was afraid of accidentally hurting her and declined to take the bait. But we invited him to come to the church for her upcoming birthday celebration.

Gracie’s Canadian relatives had arranged to have a church-wide reception following the usual worship service on the Sunday morning of her one hundredth birthday. I looked forward to meeting them after correspondence with her nephew about her nursing school presentations.

On Sunday, November 4, 2012, Grace O’Brien turned one hundred years old. The pastor announced that news during the service and the entire congregation applauded. I had noticed a number of unfamiliar young faces filing into the pews just before the service began. Then I spotted Anita and realized they were nursing students who had come to celebrate Gracie on this special day.

During the reception after the service, I had a chance to meet these future nurses and to hear their reactions to Gracie. Two of them made a point of telling me they had decided to specialize in geriatric nursing as a result of meeting Gracie. All agreed they would be more effective clinicians with their future patients because of her influence.

A few days later, I went back to read some of the student comments about Gracie’s classes. One young woman had written, “She was humorous and lively with many stories to tell...She has been through so much and has had so many illnesses and yet remains active and optimistic. They represented great challenges in her life and yet, she has met them with determination and optimism and has not allowed them to affect the way she wanted to live her life. They have added to her strength, and this is one of the most amazing parts of her story.”

Another commented, “She has made a definite impact on me and many of my classmates in a personal and professional way. I know that I will invest more in my elderly patients in the future in knowing that they have as many options available as they desire.”

And, of course, it was clear that Anita was correct in her assessment. “The experience was not only good for the nursing students, but good for Gracie.”

Gracie lived to be one hundred and two years old. In her last few years, she became quite frail and relied on a walker to get around. True to form, she had a bicycle horn attached to its frame and took delight in squeezing the ball to honk at anyone in her way. She dubbed her walker “Gracie 2” and a friend gave her a license plate with that name to hang on it. With great reluctance she was eventually persuaded to give up her home and move into an assisted living facility that she grudgingly referred to as a “motel.” By all accounts she quickly became a queen bee there.

Grace O’Brien showed us all how to “age with grace.” When the choir sings that old hymn *Amazing Grace*, we think of her. Amazing, indeed.