

POLK COUNTY SENIOR GAMES &
SILVERARTS

LITERARY

ARTS



2023

Table of Contents

Short Stories

1st Place- Barbara O'Bannon
by Jacqueline Brown-Williams

2nd Place- Rock and Role
by Lisa Roszler

Poetry

1st Place- Reconciliation
by Jacqueline Brown-Williams

2nd Place- Moment of Mother Dying
by Jacqueline Brown-Williams

3rd Place- Suicide
by Jacqueline Brown-Williams

Life Experiences

1st Place- Lilac Ashes
by Lisa Roszler

Essay

1st Place- What Does it Mean to be an American?
by Jacqueline Brown-Williams

SHORT STORY

Barbara O'Bannon

Short Story

Jacqueline Brown-Williams

Barbara O'Bannon

At ten I had already created an evacuation plan for my mother and me. My brother was in the seminary, so he was safe. I had planned a logical escape with an elderly relative and the timing was right. It was spring of 1958 and we could leave my father's house during Easter Vacation. He'd be on a 10-day drunk and would never miss us until Easter Sunday. By then we would be well ensconced in Aunt Beatrice's house and in a safe haven. An old two-story frame house, with a weeping willow tree on the side, Aunt Bea's house was as imposing in stature as she was. Bea was a large woman with arms like tree limbs and had grown up shooting squirrels and rabbits for dinner. She would have shot my dad on sight had he crossed the archway to her house.

What I hadn't expected was that my dad would rape my mom as her Valentine's Day present. So much for roses and chocolates. Missing for almost a week he came home in a rip-roaring drunk and thought no woman could resist him. My mother had been resisting him for ten years, so what made him think he could still charm her? I could see through this charade, why couldn't others? I thought she was the most beautiful creature on earth. In my dreams she was Black Velvet, the horse of my favorite book. My mom was an Irish wonder, a dark beauty with a mind to match. My mom had learned her hard knock lessons as the eldest of ten; that men could be fooled if the women put their heart and soul to it. This was obviously not a lesson my Gram learned. Oh yes, she stood by her man, fourteen children and 10 who survived. I don't even know if she included her miscarriages in her litany of babies.

Mam was the eldest, born to a fifteen and nineteen-year old. My grands were Irish immigrants with the wonderment of having a fabulous American journey lasting all their lives. My granddad worked himself up from a sign painter to the VP of a great American distillery. My Gram was a brilliant statistician who found some measure of happiness, after motherhood, as a bookkeeper. They were both musicians, so music became the heart of this family, and my utter joy. My mom had been one of the first to sign up with the Women's Air Corps when war broke out, and would go on to become an excellent role-model for Women's Liberation in the 1960's. She was never a 'stay-at-home' mom, as she was one of the first lady cops in my hometown. This was great in the eyes of my grands. Police work is definitely in the Irish blood. What I didn't know quite yet, was that Mam had made a life decision based on the wild colt she married.

Da' was the 'younger man', only 17 when they met. At 20, my mom had been wildly in love with a red-head Jew, Aaron Minch. Aaron would never fully leave her heart. His greatest fault was his religion, my mother's greatest fault was that she listened to her father, Jake McNamara. My dad was the spit and image of Jake. Jake set the law of the land for my mom and her siblings. Friendships with Jews and Protestants were allowed. Dating, and God forbid marriage, was a mortal sin. The Catholic Church had a way of entering into everyday life, even if it wasn't frequented on Sunday. So, when the jovial, but very drunken young Irishman brought my mom home from the party she had attended with Aaron, Jake McNamara welcomed this Irishman in, and called him Son.

Robbie O'Bannon was tall, dark, and handsome, and of course an alcoholic Irish-Catholic. His descendancy was from the Irish Famine in the 1800's. As so many Irish immigrants, his dad worked in the distillery that my mom's dad helped bring to international fame. Enough said.

Their love affair was quick. My grandfather didn't want any surprises or my mom's better judgment getting in the way. Grand wanted a wedding for his eldest daughter, and the sooner the better. He would not grovel to the parish priest again. There would be no more pregnant and teary-eyed brides in the McNamara family. My mom was teary eyed, but not pregnant. That came soon enough, two months to be exact. Then eleven months after my brother was born, I came kicking and screaming into a world of booze, broads, and bitterness.

At an early age my brother and I became secret co-conspirators. Each of us began plotting early on how to escape the hysterics and histrionics of an Irish-Catholic family. My 12-year-old brother would have run to the moon if he could have. Seminaries in the 1950's and '60s would take boys right out of Catholic grammar schools, if parents signed for it. My father saw this as his pathway to salvation; my mother saw it as her son's escape from madness. I saw it as desertion. To this day I hate him for leaving me behind to take the brunt of my mother's sorrow and my father's abuse. So, I plotted my own escape.

I was already spending all my non-school, daylight hours at my Aunt Bea's house. She was actually my grandfather's aunt, a true crone from the old country, a "Banshee" of old Ireland. Aunt Bea taught me to keep her vegetable garden clear of

pests and weeds. I washed her clothes and did all the housework she would allow. I would do anything she needed, as long as I could stay in her house, under her protection. She wasn't very fond of men and with good reason. For as many generations of McNamara men that could be remembered, only her brother Jake showed kindness to women. Their father drove more than a few women away from the shores of Ireland. Whatever Bea left behind; she fared even worse in America. Used and abused by other immigrants, Bea's ultimate hatred towards men was at the hands of a brutal husband who beat the love out of her while carrying the only child she would ever conceive. Her last intimate contact with males was delivering her stillborn son to the hands of the parish midwife. I never saw my aunt cry, but deep in her thrashing dreams I would hear the cries of a mother's mourning.

Aunt Bea inherited the house she lived in as a maid for 35 years. The family she was indentured to died with no heirs. An elderly couple with small means, they saw in my aunt a woman who could still show kindness in spite of her sorrowful past. They treated her well, made no demands, but kept her at a heartless distance. Their only gift was a house she could live in the rest of her life. To help pay her few bills, she kept boarders in her upstairs rooms. When I stayed overnight, I would share her bed, rub her back, and pray that her dreams would be of some newfound happiness. They never were.

I spent months convincing Aunt Bea that having my mother and me live in her house would be the grandest thing for all of us. I didn't know what her interests were beside her garden, but I was sure she could find a new hobby or spend more of her time on her own pursuits. My mother worked, so she could help supply additional income, and I was ever-so attentive to household needs. We could be three generations of

powerful women. One of her boarders was leaving in March as he wanted to be home by St. Patrick's Day. So, she agreed to welcome us on Palm Sunday, two refugees from a domestic war. After all she too had been a refugee. After the death of their mother, Beatrice and the McNamara boys came to America escaping a belligerent father. They came across the ocean to seek their fortune.

Then my mom's treason, she had gotten herself pregnant. I can't imagine letting herself be sweet talked by the dark devil, my Da'. She knew how to say no, to avoid his advances and she had become a master of birth control. Even as a child I knew that. Other moms were cranking out progeny every year or two, until they just couldn't have any more. Ten and twelve live births were the norm. My mom had only two of us. I had heard other girls talking about how their moms got around getting pregnant. I had even heard my own mom give her youngest sister some hints about keeping from getting pregnant or aborting in the first few weeks. This was no secret, except to the men. So when she announced to Auntie and me that she was pregnant, I was stunned, heartbroken and felt betrayed.

I knew exactly when it happened. My dad was all remorse and loving on that Valentine's Day. He had pretty much stayed drunk since New Year's Eve, and I knew mom was ready to pack up for the final time. Da' came home in a sweet drunkenness. This was becoming rarer in his spiral downward. But somehow, he found the where-with-all to buy flowers and chocolates in hoping to make amends for his devilishness. Or maybe he had gotten wind that Mam' was about to walk out of his sorry life. I know my

mother resisted his advances. She screamed and threatened and begged him to leave. I don't know if it was his charm or brute strength that wore my mother down that night. I do remember every china dish being hurled across the hallway. I heard very little, as I was under my bed with a pillow over my ears, praying for the morning to come. I knew I would either find one or both of my parents' dead or snoring off the last remains of an eventful night. I don't remember which I prayed for more, seeing them alive or finding them dead. I don't remember ever being afraid of death, either theirs or my own. I still don't.

The next morning Mam' was up early making breakfast. Da' ate hastily, in a foul mood, and left without saying a word. She and I were left to clean up from the riot of the night before and our hopes of a new beginning lay shattered with the dishes on the floor. As she sat crying over her coffee, I swept up all the broken china before hurrying off to school. My mother was still at the table when I came home for lunch. Burned breakfast was still smoldering on the kitchen stove.

Six weeks later my mom broke the news of what I thought at the time was a death knoll. She was pregnant and could not leave my father. I don't remember what I prayed for that night. It was not for my own death, as I knew I had to continue being my mom's protector. I think I prayed for my father's death and the death of this unborn child.

Rock and Role

Short story

By Lisa Roszler

Rock and Role

“Dance with me!”

She saw his outstretched hand, and was powerless. She'd been unable to resist him ever since his father had laid him in her arms, swaddled tight in the flannel blanket, pink and new and wide awake. He had worked his fist out, grasped her finger and declared his territory: her heart had been won in the surprise attack. All the “Let Me Tell You About My Grandchildren” bumper stickers had not prepared her for the bond's ruthless strength and unsounded depth.

After they'd shared a book the night before, he'd announced that tomorrow he would show her a song: a rock song. It was a different kind of rock, he'd explained, not the kind of rock in the driveway or the kind of chair they were sitting in. Morning had come and he, still in his pajamas and bed head, had excitedly called down the stairs for her. So here she sat before nine o'clock on a Friday, before her tea, at her grandmother's table in her daughter's dining room, being pulled to her feet by blue-gray eyes and a dimple.

He pressed a button on an electronic game, producing the sound of digital guitar. “It's ROCK, Sasa!” His eyes twinkled and he bounded across the wide-planked floor, holding both her hands in his. She watched his feet move; watched the intent in his face as he thought and remembered and imitated movements he'd seen; watched as he made up his own motions; watched as he spun freely away to restart the song.

Sasa's own feet moved timidly. She'd never learned to dance, though she'd studied the diagrams in the books, the black and white numbered feet that patterned across the pages. The heyday of disco and the age of the long-haired rock bands had flourished in her teen years without her so

much as walking onto a dance floor: the long, satiny red dress her mother had made her for Homecoming had been worn in vain, a mere costume for a wallflower.

And there had been no dancing at either of her weddings.

Four-year-old hands grasped hers again, moving them in rhythm with his feet, pushing and pulling and swinging and swaying. How could she tell him she didn't know how to dance? She laughed at his antics and, after a quick look into the kitchen to make sure his mother's back was still turned to them as she scrambled the eggs, met them with her own, kicking her feet from side to side, twirling him and herself. Delighted in her silliness, he giggled, and the sound caused a thick thread inside her to break free.

Her heart squeezed hard enough to make her eyes brim.

Through the water, she saw years beyond, to a dashing young man in a smart suit, with blue-gray eyes and a dimple, extending his hand.

The music had stopped again. She touched the corner of her eye, clearing the tears, as the little boy danced through the doorway to investigate the status of his breakfast. The spell had been broken, but the melody still hummed in the ears of her heart, and she knew she'd be poring over dance diagrams again. Because there would be rock music. Because there would be time enough to learn, and as much opportunity to practice as her little partner desired, because the gift of grandparenting was being present; her role was to visit all the wishes, to loosen the dreams, to hear the songs.

And because there would be dancing at his wedding.

POETRY

Reconciliation

Poetry

Jacqueline Brown-Williams

Reconciliation

I was once a basin
A bowl
A vessel
I served mulberry wine
Mulled cider
Lemonade
And Champagne

I've been scooped from
And dipped in
I've shared my wealth with the thirsty and full alike
I've been warmed by liquid love
And chilled with well crafted ice and snow
I've stretched out my width to hold fruits of the earth

But with love
And age
And transportation
I've been chipped
And bruised
But still well used

No more liquids
But no less warmed
With the rising bread of life
And cooled for spring gardens

And then with time
And age
The chips led to cracks
And cracks led to holes
But I'm still in use
To hold dried flowers
The daily news
And notes
To you

Moment of Mother Dying

Poetry

Jacqueline Brown-Williams

Moment of Mother Dying

Ma Mere est Mort.

Frail, foiled and finally at peace

She only clings to the last moments of saying good bye

Gone but not gone, her breath is in tiny whispers

And soon she will not breathe in again

The moment is wait now.

I wait

And in the moment to minutes I watch as her face

Changes

Transformation

Her face goes from the face of death

To the face of angels

How can that be?

Her face takes on the blue alabaster of marble

Eyes still open but a smile on her face

Where has she gone?

Oh I know, she has skipped along with the gypsies

My dad the rover, her brothers, her friends

Gone but not gone

SUICIDE

Poetry

Jacqueline Brown-Williams

SUICIDE

Today I am thinking about suicide.

Not my own,

but the why of those I've known, loved, admired,
and wanted to stop.

Others say why?

I say Why Not?

I understand.

Suddenly, I sat and watched.

And understood.

My latest friend

Was tall, handsome, full of life,

And sad.

He was finished.

He had done all he had to do.

He was tired.

There could be no more mornings,

No more mournings.

He was so very, very tired.

And finished. His work was completed.

He said all that he had to say.

She had left him. His work was complete.

There was nowhere else to go. It had all been done.

When I least suspected it, but knew it was coming,

He hanged himself from the rafters.

For ten days I've mourned.

I miss him.

And now, today, I understand.

And I can let him go.

LIFE
EXPERIENCES

Lilac Ashes
Life Experience
By Lisa Roszler

Lilac Ashes

I stood on the lawn, looking up at my bedroom window.

It had taken fifty years to return here; fifty years and a four-hour drive followed by an early morning flight over half the country and another two hour drive in a rental car with my sisters. And my mother. Or what remained of her.

This had been her house, her favorite house-- the one she dreamed about; the one of which she had commissioned a painting; the one that hosted parties, neighbors and a senator; the one that she cried over when my father's infidelity with the boss' daughter necessitated a new job in a new state.

I imagine she often visited the house in her mind, walking the flocked-wallpaper hallways, fingering the old crystal doorknobs, gazing out the wavy glass of the kitchen window into the back yard. It was her wish to have her ashes scattered there, beneath the lilac bush.

In some ways, it was as if time had not moved. The house still stood as it had for more than a century, with its white siding and narrow windows and steeply pitched roof. I closed my eyes and breathed in the thick July heat that radiated from the painted wood and rose in waves from the fragrant black soil. For a moment, I was that child again, the one who wove clover chains in the grass and tunneled hideaways in the spirea and read books in the cherry tree.

But the cherry tree was gone, as was the lilac.

As was Mother.

For me, she had been gone a long time.

I struggled to remember who she had been in those Kansas years, before her marriage finally succumbed to its inevitable death by transgressions. She'd been a wounded child, abandoned by her parents. The empty places within her had hollowed and hardened her heart until a pervasive bitterness rooted itself in the ashes so deeply that it became self-infectious. Cancerous.

To disagree with her was tantamount to disloyalty, and disloyalty was treason. Treason was treated with detachment and, finally, with disowning.

I had disappointed her too much. Disagreed with her plan for my life. She had admitted that she considered me to be dead, had flown into raging fits when there arose evidence to the contrary, and at the end, had asked the hospital chaplain if a mother could go to heaven after writing off her child.

Mother never called for me on her death bed.

In her final minutes, my sister held a phone to my mother's ear. I thanked her for all her sacrifices and the hardships she endured to raise us on her own. I told her I loved her and asked

her to trust Jesus, that He loves perfectly even while we are imperfect, and that everything was alright, and that I would remember her in the lilacs and the sunflowers and the lace curtains.

A year had passed between that day and this one. My sisters had taken turns, roaming the yard, sprinkling here and there to honor this memory or that, in the absence of the lilac. My turn came, and I was at a loss.

I stood beneath the window and turned to scan the yard. There, time had moved on. I had to smile at the irony: where I had climbed the cherry tree now stood a treehouse-style fort with a climbing wall. Next to it, a swing set sat on the spot where I'd first grown my very own garden. Beyond that, probably a couple of decades old, grew a hedge with familiar glossy green leaves. Upon further inspection, I found spent panicles and smooth brown seed pods.

They were lilacs.

And they were, in all likelihood, the daughters of our original.

I looked down at the cylinder in my hands, at the gray powder that was my mother. I said a prayer. And then I poured out the ashes at the base of the bushes and poured out my heart in hopes that she was finally happy, that she was finally at peace, that she finally knew love.

There, in the deep shadow, the ashes took on a gentle hue, the color of spring and hope: lilac.

ESSAY

What does it mean to be an American?

Essay

Jacqueline Brown-Williams

Dear Mary Kay –

What a hard, hard assignment. Wow! I guess I haven't been asked 'What does it mean to be an American' since I entered the American Legion Writing Contest in the 11th grade. (I won.)

The hardest part in answering your question was to take it seriously and to heart.

In the 11th grade I was so patriotic, praised the hardships of my grand and great grand-parents and waxed poetic about the wonders and greatness of this country to poor immigrants who came from nothing.

So, at 72 and half years, 'What does it mean TO ME to be an American'?

Nothing. Sadly, I look at my life and being an American is completely taken for granted. It's like asking 'what does it mean' to be white, or a female, or a Catholic. In fact, those attributes are easier to address.

I decided to really mull over your question. To REALLY look at my life and answer this question candidly AND seriously. So, it has taken me well over a week

to answer your question to us, as American teachers going to (back to) Poland.

I poured myself a gin and tonic and walked around my house asking myself this question over and over again. What does it mean to me, to be an American?

It means that I can have thousands of dollars' worth of original artwork hanging on my walls and on surfaces around my house.

It means that I can have spent thousands of dollars on my 12-year-old dog over his past 12 years.

It means that I can have four cars in my driveway. And there are only two of us

living in this house.

It means that I can live in a four bedrooms, four bath, and 3,600 square feet house.

And there are only two of us living here.

It means that I can own 10 acres of land, paid for by my husband and myself.

It means that I didn't have to work hard to get and pay for all that I have.

It means that I can put myself through college (and three degrees) with minimum time, effort or money.

It means that I can own two other houses, which I rent to others, because of a terrible fluke of fate (called a medical malpractice suit, twenty years ago.)

It means that I can vacation when I want and where I want, now that I have retired from teaching.

It means that I can give my son and his fiancée the wedding of their dreams and invite all the people I love and treasure.

It means that I have never wanted for anything. I've never gone hungry, homeless, ragged or alone.

Sadly it means that I didn't have to face ANY of the adversities that 'my people' had to face when they left their homes and families to find a better life in a distant country.

It means that I am free to believe (or not), worship (or not), vote (or not) and no one will harass me, threaten me, condemn me.

I've heard that we are no more than 'the luck of the womb', meaning that we Americans, I mean the majority of Americans and merely blessed by whom we were born of. No more, no less.

I remember once as a teenager telling someone that I was poor as a child, my father corrected me, “no, we weren’t poor, we were just broke”. And he was the son of Polish immigrants. Yet he and all of his brothers were college grads. My mom was the daughter of Irish immigrants, yet all of her brothers were college graduates. Though I am the first female college graduate, I am from a long line of professional women, all in their own right.

So, what does it mean to me to be an American? Freedom. Freedom of choice, freedom of consciousness, freedom to be.