

2020 Writing Contest Winners



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We would like to thank the Oshkosh Public Library for their generous support

POETRY

To the Unknown Singer Yvette Flaten

Who are you, Unknown Singer?
Voice like lisping prairie grass
Voice like slipping water streaming
Over bloodred Pipestone red rock
Streaming over gnarling dark root
Lifting on the evening breezes
Voice like lisping prairie grass.

Who are you, Unknow Singer?
Voice like distant summer thunder
Voice a drumming pulse of heartbeats
Words of praise you are lifting
Lifting over bloodred Pipestone
Singing at the end of daylight
Words Flying to the setting sun.

Who am I, Unknown Singer?
Am I but a tourist here?
I have walked the circle pathway,
stopped and read each tourist card
I have drunk the slipping water
Touched the bloodred Pipestone red rock
felt it answer my fingers softly
felt it answer my drumming heartbeat
answered with a voice of breezes
voice like lisping prairie grass.

Who are we, Unknown Singer?
Wanderers on this face of earth
You who work the bloodred Pipestone
I who hear your red sky chant-song
Visitors to this red rock fissure
Open heart into the earth
Who are we, Unknown Singer?
With songs like lisping prairie grass.

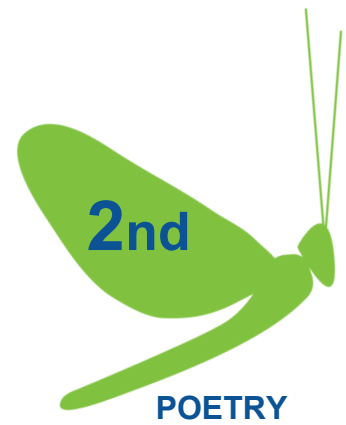


Author Biography:

Yvette Viets Flaten was born in Denver, Colorado and grew up in an Air Force family, living in Nevada, North Dakota, and Washington state as well as France, England, and Spain. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish (1974) and a Master of Arts in History (1982) from the University of Wisconsin--Eau Claire.

Yvette writes both fiction and poetry. Her award-winning poetry (Muse Prize, Jade Ring, Triad) has appeared widely in numerous journals, including the Wisconsin Academy Review, Rag Mag, Midwest Review, Free Verse, Red Cedar Review, and Barstow and Grand.

Paloma, Because
Bill Kolberg



Paloma, because

You are open twenty-four-seven

Because you hold your arm so gracefully above the cash register

Because you are the first of your father's children

Because he called you *Paloma*, dove

With your jouvence blue thumbnail

Your neck arched swanlike

And your hair wrapped like a bunhead on her way to the Palm Garden

I will bathe beneath these streetlamps

In the light of purple iris

I will take gulps of night

Perfumed like a cachet between your breasts

Until I find a chalked yellow arrow

Drawn toward a pebble as if to say:

Here! Look upon *this one*

The first of my daughters

My bird, my stone

Look upon her as you

Behold pastel green dragonfly

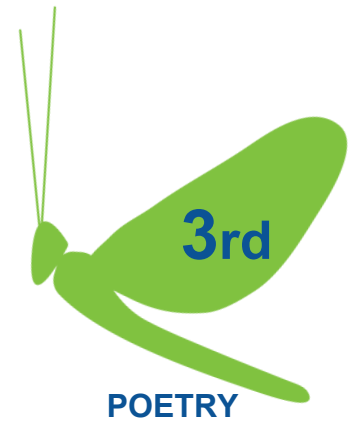
Sun hung like a mustard spider

Pink and blue creations scrawled childlike
On rough sidewalk canvas
Listen. She breathes into the telephone your name:
“Cory, line three”-
Because
This Paloma-of-Walgreens
My open twenty-four-seven swan
Whose blue thumbnail
Whose cruciform pendant
And thank you havva nice day
Stir my thoughts
I remember you, Paloma
Because

Author Biography:

Bill Kolberg is a writer living in Watertown, WI. Kolberg is a 1994 graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Kolberg was sports editor for the Milwaukee Area Technical College newspaper, the MATC times, where he earned a Pulitzer Lite award in 1992. Kolberg won a Guinness silver spoon consolation prize for his 50-word “Win a Pub in Ireland” contest entry. Kolberg’s lyrical writing includes his musical homage to Lafayette Hill and Milwaukee’s East Side. Kolberg’s articles have appeared in the UWM Times, The Mother Earth News and the Watertown Daily Times. He enjoys playing acoustic guitar and composing poetry.

Invitation
Deborah Cooper



Walk out each day,
in every temperament
of weather,
and choose one thing
to save.

Set it in the blue bowl
of the heart,
or add it to the page

be it a hawk,
a frosted branch,
a passing face...
traces of warmth there,
or of wanting.

Listen deeply,
be it a meadowlark, a creek,
or someone's sorrow.

Make of your listening
an open field
where windblown seeds
take hold.

Make of your listening
a garden.

Forgive some one
some thing.

Notice how a tiny door
swings open
deep inside you

and a bird flies free.

Always sleep beside
an open window;
never draw the drapes
or shut the shade

so that the moonlight
and the owl's shadow
sweep the bed.

Keep the window open
in all seasons,
even in the winter,
just a crack

so that, while you sleep
you breathe the night

filling your body
with a million starts.

Author Biography:

Deborah Cooper is the author of five collections of poetry, most recently 'Blue Window' published in 2017 by Clover Valley Press. Deborah has used poetry extensively in her work as a hospice chaplain. She has taught poetry classes in a variety of settings, including jails and homeless shelters. She was the 2012-2014 Poet Laureate of Duluth MN.

FLASH FICTION

A Most Unusual Find **Kerri Lukasavitz**



Artie Fischer liked collecting and selling old things. He and his fourth wife, Norma, had a little shop in one of the old sheds on their old farm filled with an odd assortment of items for sale that were displayed in relative disorder across the worn wooden floor: rustic furniture needing only some repairs, dusty books on sagging bookshelves, oil-painted portraits of eerie people whose eyes followed you, fragile china stacked haphazardly in a hutch missing both doors, and three glass cases lined up along the long wall flaunting prized costume jewelry and exceptional trinkets. A painted sign, weathered from too much wind and sun, was propped up at the end of their gravel driveway indicating they were open for business Thursday through Sunday, with the exception of some weekends when they could be found attending local antique shows.

Estate sales were a treasure boon for the couple's business. Artie had found some of his most peculiar finds among the bartered odds and ends sold at the end of people's lives. At a particularly splendid sale, Artie spied a shoe box of tangled costume jewelry set out on a mahogany table among an assortment of hideous lamps. Curious, he dug through the box. He raised his eyebrows when he moved the snarled necklaces aside and saw what was at the bottom.

"How much?" Artie held up the box and its contents toward the bored estate attendant who surveyed the people whose turn it was to look over the merchandise. Artie was careful to tuck the snarled necklaces back over the bottom.

“What’s in it?” the attendant asked.

“Tangled necklaces, some old plastic bracelets, unmatching earrings.” Artie was mostly truthful.

“What number?” The attendant rifled through his clipboard of papers.

“115.” Artie felt wicked. He glanced around to see where Norma was. She had been two rooms away looking at a pair of overpriced chintz chairs. She was nowhere in sight.

“Um . . . 115 . . . \$20.00 for the box of assorted costume jewelry.” The attendant looked at Artie.

“Will you take \$10.00?” Artie asked. “It’ll take me hours- -”

“Don’t care,” the attendant replied rather annoyed. “\$20.00. Take it or leave it.”

“Sold.” Artie paid the attendant and walked out of the room with the box tucked under his arm. He went to find Norma, who was still looking at the pair of chintz chairs.

“What’d you buy?” Norma asked him, nodding toward the box under his arm.

“Costume jewelry.” Artie held out the box to let her see.

“It’s all tangled up!” Norma shouted. “We already have jewelry no one buys. Why’d you get more? Wasted money, you stupid old fool.”

Artie’s cheeks flushed crimson. “Coming?” He turned and started toward the front door.

“No, I want to see the- -”

“We’re leaving!” He held the box tighter under his arm.

“Oh, you old coot?” Norma followed him outside.

When they got home, Norma went inside the house and slammed the door, and Artie went inside the little shop to put away his treasure. He flipped on the lightswitch and then pushed aside the window’s limp lace curtain to make sure Norma had indeed stayed in the house.

Satisfied, Artie took his box over to the glass counter by the rest of the displayed costume jewelry and unusual trinkets. He picked up the tangled necklaces and promptly tossed them into the garbage can along with the plastic bangles, unmatched clip earrings, and four fake-jeweled cocktail rings. He picked out the last two remaining items and set them on the countertop before throwing the box in with the rest of the bejeweled trash.

Artie picked up one of the items. He examined a tarnished but beautifully cast woman's Victorian ring with rosettes and vines curling around the sides and over the dome top. He fumbled along the ring's dome, but the hidden latch wouldn't open.

"It'll still fetch \$125.00. Now who's the old fool?"

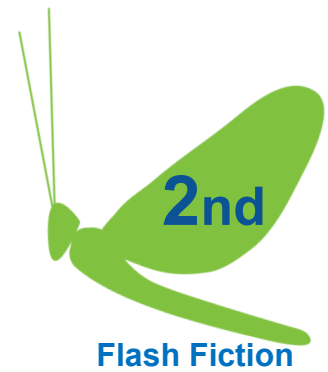
He placed it back on the countertop and picked up the second sterling Victorian dome ring. This one was a man's pinky ring- -a most unusual find. He barely touched the edge of the ring's dome when he heard a tiny clink! The dome opened to reveal a hidden chamber once used to carry a bit of poison for an unsuspecting foe.

Artie laughed like a crazed man, intoxicated on heinous thoughts. Placing the ring on his finger, he blurted out, "There's always room for a fifth Mrs. Artie Fischer!"

Author Biography:

*Kerri Lukasavitz has a BFA in Interior Architecture & Design/Illustration from Milwaukee Institute of Art & Design and an MA in English (Creative Writing/Literature Concentration) from Mount Mary College. She is the recipient of a 2020 Residency at Write On Door County, 2019 Hal Prize winner for Nonfiction with *Homeland*, her debut middle-grade novel, *Mystery Horse at Oak Lane Stable*, was a 2018 Royal Dragonfly Book Award winner, and she published two articles—*Dispelling the Myth of the Starving Artist* and *Messengers in the Night: Dream Interpretation Benefits Life*—in *Arches* newspaper.*

Unforgiving Winter
Yvette Flaten



The Storm began quickly, the sky going bruise blue in the northwest. A cold November rain started first, and within half an hour, it slipped over into sleet, and when everything was glazed, the snow began. Within two hours, it was a full blizzard, the wind rushing down from Manitoba like a banshee. It blew for three days.

No one had put up ropes to their milk houses before it hit; there had been no time. Horses and cattle went without feed the first day, while the farmers waited out the wind, hoping for a break. But cows had to be milked, so the men went out to the barns in the blizzard, bundled, struggling over growing hummocks, squinting against the knife-wind, groping for their barn doors.

The second day, without any let-up, the blizzard began to take its toll. Wood for the stoves was starting to run low, if enough hadn't been gotten in at the last minute. And wood piles were frozen fast, needing an ax to break apart. It was hard enough work, without the cold, which was now arriving. Bone cold. Unforgiving cold. the wind was needle sharp on cheeks and noses. It made eyes water, and the watering made lids and lashes stick. Throughout the day, the temperature continued to drop.

Thea was worried about her children. Little Milo, Gracie, and the baby were bundled in every warm stitch they owned, against the licks of wind coming in through the window cracks and foundation cracks of the old farm house. She had herded them downstairs and settled them on their bed- -hers and Sigur's- -covered with their quilts. When the uneven blasts rattled the farmhouse, Thea thought its bones shivered as much as hers did. Through the crack under the kitchen door, a think trail of snow began to snake onto the pine floor boards.

When he came from the barn, she knew she was in for it. He was in a rage against the blizzard, the strain of it, the toil, the torment of numbing cold and frostbite nibbling at toes and finger tips exposed too long. She turned away and stirred the brown beans in the pot. But she needed more wood. In a whisper, she asked him to bring more wood, to keep the stove going, to keep the frost away, to keep them warm enough for another night.

He flew into one of his rages. He shook his fist in threat, and then stormed forward and made good his threat. She fell against the table. “Always, something!” he bellowed at her. Then he stalked out into the white.

He came back with three logs in one arm, the ax in the other hand, carried high up, by its throat. He threw the logs down beside the stove. Behind him, the kitchen door flew open, snow flying in like white bees, swarming. He swore and kicked the door shut. she watched him shove the curve of the ax blade into the loose jamb, wedging the door tight against the wind. she put a careful log into the stove, and a second, and a third. She served the brown beans, never as good as his mother’s. He told her to flush the children upstairs and get into bed. In the dark, she listened to the blizzard moan for hours.

In the morning, the wind still raced down from the north, as cold and strong as ever. The stove fire was failing. Angry again, he went out for another arm of wood, and came back, ax in hand, just as before.

“A few more, please,” she whispered.

“Always something, with you!” he shouted. He leaned the ax beside the jamb and turned away.

The ax blade slide into the gap under the door with hardly any effort. When he stomped back up onto the porch and shouldered the door, it only served to wedge the steel between the wood and the floorboards even tighter. Every push only made it more secure. The storm carried away his bellowing rage.

When he tried to reach the kitchen window, he could not surmount the drift that had risen like a tidal wave before the frosted panes. He fell in the snow, rose, stumbled toward the house. . .the barn. . .the house. . .

Five days later, once the roads had been plowed out, Thea and her children caught the train at Larimore, to go back to her people, somewhere in Minnesota.

Author Biography:

Yvette Viets Flaten was born in Denver, Colorado and grew up in an Air Force family, living in Nevada, North Dakota, and Washington state as well as France, England, and Spain. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish (1974) and a Master of Arts in History (1982) from the University of Wisconsin--Eau Claire.

Yvette writes both fiction and poetry. Her award-winning poetry (Muse Prize, Jade Ring, Triad) has appeared widely in numerous journals, including the Wisconsin Academy Review, Rag Mag, Midwest Review, Free Verse, Red Cedar Review, and Barstow and Grand.

Short Visit Home
Ronnell Gibson



My aunt and uncle will kill me when they find out I've left. The compound, they remind me daily, is the only place we're safe.

I set out early, planning to be back before they realize their niece is gone. It's only eight miles to our house, and I'm in good shape. But because I cautiously stick to backyards and tree-lines, it takes me a few hours.

The house looks small, quiet, and alone. Just like I feel.

I haven't been home since the sickness took my parents, my older brother, and two-thirds of the world's population. That was a year ago.

I'm anxious to go inside, but I gotta be careful. Others roam the deserted suburbs. Some are still healthy like me, but most are infected. It starts with a cough. A fever. Soon, delirium sets in. For some lucky souls, death comes quickly. The rest are trapped in a perpetual state of violent hallucinations. They're the ones I need to avoid.

After thirty minutes, I'm convinced the house is empty. I enter through the sliding back door. The place's been ransacked. Furniture upturned, photos and books strewn across the floor. I pick up a framed picture of our family. The glass falls in pieces to the floor. I pull the photo from the frame and put it in my backpack.

I head to my little sister Sarah's room, praying what I seek is still there. Colored butterflies pepper the walls. The contents of her dresser drawers clutter the floor. Her twin bed rests in the corner, remarkably untouched. I pull the wooden bed frame away from the wall, then hear a clunk.

My breathing stops as I peer around the bed. I exhale and smile.

The inhaler.

Lost and forgotten till Sarah's latest asthma attack triggered a memory—of all the misplaced treasures abandoned behind her bed. Sara's episodes are coming faster, longer. Aunt Pauline says without medicine there's nothing we can do.

I grab the inhaler. Clutching it to my heart, I scan the room for something special to bring back to Sarah.

Pink ears peek out from under a fallen drawer. Mr. Bunny, a present dad won her at one of those old claw games. Her favorite. I stuff the animal in my backpack and move on. I scrounge around the bathroom, then the kitchen looking for anything we can use. Besides a half full tube of toothpaste and a frying pan, there's nothing.

My room is last. I don't have space for mementoes, but I choose a few favorite photos stuck on the wall. My friends and I at Six Flags. My boyfriend, Chad, and I hiking right before our first kiss. Taken one month before my world disintegrated.

My friends are gone. Chad is gone. Out of necessity, I've managed to close off my memories, but now they come rushing back in a flood of emotions. I collapse under the weight.

Tears fall. I let them. Eventually the emptiness lulls me to sleep.

Slam.

I jerk awake.

How could I have let myself fall asleep? Stupid.

Cr-e-e-e-ak.

Throwing my backpack over my shoulder, I crawl to the window, avoiding every squeaky floorboard.

The footsteps continue down the hall.

I slide the window open, then raise the screen. Click.

I freeze.

So do the footsteps.

I'm diving out the window as feet run down the hallway, and the door to my room bangs open. A hand grabs my foot.

I hang there, fingers barely touching the ground, the window frame scarping my shins.

A guttural voice calls out. "There's no escaping this time, she-devil."

I use my other foot to try to kick myself loose. It works. Scrambling to my feet, I run. He's out my window and gaining. I head to the forest, hoping to lose him in the dense foliage. But the terrain is rough.

My foot twists on a downed log, and I face-plant into the brush.

I can see the figure. Male. Large. I won't be able to fend him off. I try to get up, but pain shoots up my shin..

Pulling my backpack closer, I reach inside.

He wipes his sweaty face and smirks.

My body trembles as I retrieve my uncle's gun and release its safety.

The man steps closer. His foul stench burns my nose.

I steady my hand as I aim and pull the trigger.

He crumples in a heap.

With the realization of what I've just done, my limbs numb.

And the coughing begins.

SHORT STORY

Where Do We Go from Here Jarrett Kaufman



Otis scarfed down meatloaf at the Golden Carrol before he went home for the day.

He was obese. He loved the buffets in Milwaukee, eating at those “All-You-Can-Eat” joints in furtive necessity on most days, like today, after he left work. He knew if he’d only eat dinner at home with his wife Fay he’d become afflicted with a dreadful anxiety that’d haunt him all night. Otis cut at his meatloaf but he noticed, across the buffet, three women sitting together. One woman—she was huge like Otis—gawked at him in cruelty and the others jeered at him.

The big woman said, “Look at that fat ass eat,” and the women erupted in laughter.

Otis took a doleful bit of meatloaf but the women continued to chortle him so he began to eat *for* them. He shoveled the meat and potatoes and the sweet rolls into his mouth. The food smeared his face. There was bread crumbs and gravy everywhere. Otis chews the food with an absurd fury and he chugged his Pepsi with a feral passion until each woman lost her catty smirk. After that, Otis finished eating in a solemn quiet, then he paid the bill and went home for dinner.

Otis smelled the greasy fried chicken when he entered the foyer at home.

“You’re late, “ she hollered from the living room. “I already ate.”

Otis sighed, shrugging off his jacket as he moseyed into the living room.

Fay was sprawled out in the recliner watching *Lost*. Her body had exploded to a horrific size after Bruce, her sister Maxine's now ex-husband, had filed for a divorce a year ago. When she hit 400lbs, her feet swelled to the size of grapefruits so she quit her salesclerk job at Walgreens and began to work at home as a telemarketer. Otis had supported Fay in all of this. He'd not forgotten how their love had blossomed out of the cruel indignities they'd come to bear together. "I'm going to diet," Otis said. He tossed his jacket onto the couch. "We both—"

"My *show's* on," Fay said. She was rubbing scented lotion on her feet.

Otis yanked off his shirt. He said, "I'm serious." He said, "Really..."

"Otis *Francis* Brown," she ragged, then then turned on the floor lamp.

"See that?" he said. He grabbed a pasty roll of stomach flab. "I'm sick of it."

It rained all morning at work the following day so Otis took an early lunchbreak. He was a sales associated at Meyer's Automotive. Otis sat in the breakroom as he munched on a protein bar and sipped on a Tazo. He'd read an article last night on *WebMD*, when Fay binged *Lost*, about the metabolic benefits of tea. Otis drank the Tazo again and Brother Saul, a coworker, lumbered into the breakroom chomping on a red apple. "I'm on that Atkins diet," Otis said.

Brother Saul took a bite of fruit. "Just eat raw foods and exercise," he said.

Brother Saul was a fit, gregarious 65-year-old man who'd been a street preacher in the Ozarks during the 1980s. He'd told Otis his story several times how he'd been forced to abandon his calling because he and 6 of his followers founded The Church of Mystical Love professing communal marriage. It didn't take long for panic to spread through the small towns. The pontoon boat that was docked on the Black River and served as their temple was set on fire and Brother Saul was beaten and tossed on a bus that dumped him in Milwaukee's old Northside a day later.

Lightning struck and the lights went out and when they returned, Otis saw granola crumbs scattered like birdfeed on his stomach. He'd learned as a boy his body served as a spectacle of appalling wonder for the crude. Otis remembered his father Frank always called him "fatso," as a kid. So when Clara, another coworker, entered the breakroom he folded his pudgy arms over his belly. She was a Cajun who's moved to Milwaukee from New Orleans last year.

Clara poured herself a cup of Folger's in the kitchenette and said, "Hi, guys."

Brother Saul winked at Otis after Clara had walked out of the breakroom.

"What?" Otis said and Brother Saul chuckled and ate more apple as he went to his office.

Otis wanted to fanaticize about Clara but he and Fay had taken each other's virginity only 7 years ago. There was a cherished loyalty in this act. So he closed his eyes and imagined making love to Clara with Brother Saul's trim body. He tried to *see* what Brother Saul would've seen and he tried to *feel* what Brother Saul would've felt. But still, Otis failed. He stood, hustling to the kitchenette to find food that he could bury his carnal guilt with. Otis opened the refrigerator and he rummaged through the shelves but lightning struck, and the lights left again.

It began. Otis ate a diet primarily of raw fruits and root vegetables and every morning he jogged two miles across his neighborhood in Sherman Park. At the end of each week, Otis tracked his weight on a digital scale. He'd lost 100lbs over 6 months and in October he and Fay underwent health exams. Otis's cholesterol was down. His blood pressure read: 120/75.

Months passed. Otis worked at his diet and exercise regimen, but he never felt satisfied. He'd never run far enough and he'd never eat healthy enough foods. Some nights, Fay locked herself in the bathroom, and Otis would sit outside the door and talk to her about a time where they'd diet together. He chatted about days they'd take beach vacations to Cancun. "I disgust you," she'd yell and when Fay spat vile drivel like that,

Otis became restless. So he'd leave.

Otis would cruise the Villard Avenue in remorse, gazing at the smoggy glow of the industrial wasteland. He'd stare at the decayed steel factories with their towering flue stacks pumping funnels of ethereal smoke into the dark sky. Otis would glare at the lights of that dead city and be reminded of his own dark loneliness. Fay *was* right. Everything *was* different: When she slept in, he woke early. When he ate figs for lunch, she ate Hardee's cheeseburgers.

Everything changed. Clara and Traci, the receptionist, praised Otis's lean figure and Brother Saul even took a renewed interest in him. He's take Otis to the old Northside for lunch to eat vegan tacos at Paco's next to the old Handi-Mart where prostitutes loitered. One day, as Otis and Brother Saul left Paco's, they witnesses a man toss hot coffee at a prostitute. "Those women are judged to *real* despair," Brother Saul said nodding. "I can tell you this. I can say it. I believe those women know more about the suffering soul than any *goddamn* man of the cloth."

On Thursday, Brother Saul invited Otis to Happy Hour at TGI Friday's downtown.

"I don't know," Otis said, recalling how Fay had wept in the bathroom last night.

"Clara's coming," Brother Saul said. He said, "You've *earned* this."

"Yeah?" Otis said. He hesitated, but then pulled his iPhone out from his 501s.

"Come on, amigo," Brother Saul said.

Otis texted Fay: "Working late," and Brother Saul grinned like a shit-eating possum.

Otis and Brother Saul huddled at the bar in the crowded TGI Friday's and Clara sat on a tall stool in between them. Brother Saul and Clara were drinking pilsners, but Otis was swigging on bourbon since he'd read in *Men's Health* liquor was a low-calorie beverage. He was drunk, attempting to listen to Clara gossip

about Traci. She told Otis and Brother Saul that Traci left her most recent boyfriend, Roy, because she'd found out he peddled meth to kids behind a Rally's on the Southside. Clara leaned over to show Otis a Facebook picture of Roy on her iPhone. "He has belly tattoo," she laughed and Otis thought her breath smelled like a fart. She said, "It's a *fucking* rabbit," and Otis nudged closer so he could sniff her mouth. "He's a loser," she sassed.

"He's a lard ass," Brother Saul added after studying the picture of Roy.

"Jesus," Clara said, frowning hard. She said, "Don't be a jerk."

"*You* look great," he said to Otis. "How much weight you lost now?"

"170lbs," Otis said, patting his stomach. He smiled.

"You're so thin," Clara said. She touched Otis's hollow cheek.

"Too bad you're married," Brother Saul joked. "We *need* sex. The church—"

"You sound like a stoned teenager," Clara said.

Brother Saul was playing with his drink. He said, "He who walks with—"

"Please," Clara heckled. "Don't make me vomit."

"Fine," he said. He finished the last swig of his pilsner then left.

"We should go, too," Clara said after Brother Saul had gone. "It's late."

Otis followed Clara out of TGI Fridays and to her Nissan parked on Tenth Street.

Clara unlocked the car doors. "Get in," she said.

"Sure," Otis said as they scuttled into the car. Clara turned on the radio.

"Can you drive?" she asked as she tuned-in a station.

"Yeah," he said. His iPhone buzzed and when he saw it was Fay, he pressed "silent."

It began to rain and Otis sat with both of his hands cupped over his knees.

"My Girl," played on the radio. When it ended, Clara said, "I'll take you home."

“I think Fay hates me. Or maybe I hate Fay,” he said.

Lightning flashed and for a moment, Otis saw black sky rolling clouds in the East.

Clara reached over the armrest and took Otis’s hand then held it. She was talking about her divorce and how she’d felt anger and confusion towards her ex for some time but Otis wasn’t able to concentrate. His heart pounded like a bass drum as the rain slammed the windshield and the thunder rumbled above the riverfront. He stared at their embraced hands—hers dark and his light—and he felt a sublime ecstasy from their touch. So Otis took a breath. He closed his eyes.

“Clare,” he said then lurched over the armrest and kissed her and grabbed her breast.

“What,” she yelled. She slapped Otis. “Get out,” she screamed.

“Oh God,” he said. He opened the door and the rain drenched him. “I am so—”

“Shut the door,” she demanded and when he did, she sped off.

Otis ran in the storm to his Impala that was parked a block over.

“Idiot,” Otis yelled. He leapt in his car and started it then moved the gearshift to Drive.

Otis sulked into the house at 11:45PM. He tumbled through the kitchen, belching a dollop of hot bile in his mouth. He moved down the dark hallway. He went to the bedroom. Fay was sitting in the dark in the bed. The TV was on. Otis said, “I’m sorry,” as he set his iPhone on the nightstand. He peeled off his wet clothes and climbed into the bed. “I went to TGI Fridays with Brother Saul,” Otis confesses. “I drank.” He said, “I’m a shit. Clara and I. We—”

“What?” Fay said. She pushed at Otis. “You reek. You *reek*. You *reeeeek*.”

Otis reached for her hand. “We need to talk. I messed up.”

“Talk?” Fay said and slapped him. She kicked him off the bed.

Otis stood. His face creased ugly. He yelled, “You fat *ass*. You *fat* ass.”

Fay pulled on her wedding ring but her finger was too thick. She wept, “Go.”

Otis exploded out of the bedroom and stormed naked through the house. In the kitchen, he saw a box of Twinkies sitting on the table. He opened it. He grabbed a yellow sponge cake and he slung the Twinkie against the wall then tore the box to pieces. Otis kicked a loose Twinkie across the tiles and as he stomped on the others that scattered the floor, he felt good.

Otis drifted to the living room. He laid down on the couch and sprawled out naked in the dark. He thought about Fay—her fat face and her fat body—wallowing in the bed. He rolled to his side and began to think about Clara. He touched his slim and weak body while picturing that he was touching Clara's body. He let his tired eyes close. Then he passed out into a black sleep.

The next morning, Otis woke in a fog of remorse lying on the cold living room floor.

"Fay?" he said. he staggered to the bedroom, but the bed was empty.

Otis looked in the bathroom. He noticed that Fay's toothbrush and foot lotions were gone. He rushed to the closet and found her clothes were missing as well. He stood naked in the bedroom, gazing in a numb shock at the empty wire hangers that dangled off the closet rail. Then he remembered. He'd called Fay that terrible name last night. He felt sick. He grabbed his iPhone off the nightstand and when he called Fay, there was no answer. He called her again but the call went to voicemail. On the third call, Otis left a message: "I'm sorry," he said.

It was 10:00AM. In a fluster, Otis chucked on the damp clothes he'd left in a pile on the bedroom floor the night before. He scampered to the Impala in the garage. Then he sped to Yankee Hill where Maxine rented an apartment above a laundromat. Otis parked behind fay's Jeep. He banged on the door and he pushed the call button, but there was no answer. So Otis shuffled on the street. He looked up at the second floor and saw Fay at the window. "Fay," he shouted but she closed the drapes. Otis got in his car. He called her. "Please," he groveled in the voicemail. He brewed and he hit the dashboard. He said, "Fine," then he started the car. "Fine."

Otis drove the I-94. When his iPhone rang, he grabbed at it in a flurry hoping it'd be Fay. He looked at the caller ID but it read: "Brother Saul," and Otis tossed the iPhone onto the floorboard as shame burned through his body like a death fever. When Otis looked in the rearview mirror, he was struck with alarm. He looked frail. His face was pallid and his eyes were lost in dark circles. His anxieties clustered into a know of ravenous hunger in his gut. He drove with focus and tried to ignore the McDonald's and Hardee's billboards. His hunger grew and so did his desperation. Otis stomped on the accelerator and drove to Southside and he pulled off at the West Greenfield Exit. There were rundown buildings everywhere. There was an old bank with a maple tree growing out of its dilapidated roof and the bricks were covered in graffiti.

Otis cruised past Pink Kitty's that flashed in bright lights. He stopped at an intersection and watched a man lick dried soda off a Redbox outside of a Family Dollar. The man turned, lifted his coat, then thumbed a red boil on his chest. Otis turned and sped down the road to the fish market that Brother Saul had taken him to a few weeks ago, but it was closed. So he pulled into the Handi-Mart parking lot where a group of prostitutes were smoking cigarettes.

When Otis parked, he rolled down his window. A prostitute sang, "Hey, baby."

"Hi," Otis said, then pointed at the obese one. "Hello," he said.

The woman trotted to the car. "Call me, Birdie," she said. "What *you* want?"

Otis was shaking so he grabbed the steering wheel. "Everything?" he said.

"\$300," Birdie said. When Otis nodded, she flopped into the car and he motored off.

Otis shut the window blinds in the dingy Motel 6 room and then he handed the \$300 to Birdie that he'd withdrawn from the ATM in the lobby after paying for the room. He watched her shake off her fur coat. She wore a red skirt and black high boots. She began to undress Otis. "Ol," he said as Birdie unbuttoned his shirt. When she tried to pull off his levis, he stopped her. "Wait," Otis said. "Wait." He zipped his jeans and he buckled his belt. He said, "Hold on."

"Daddy?" Birdie said. She shot him a grave look. "*What. We. Gonna. Do?*"

“Will you undress?” Otis asked.

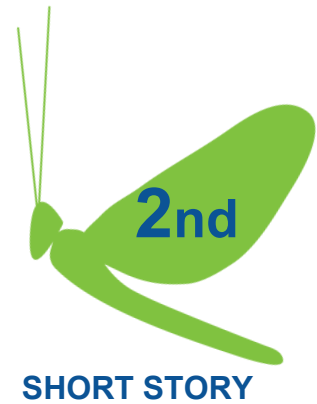
Birdie shimmied off her skirt and then unlaced her boots. “Like this?” she said as she rolled the soiled stockings down her beefy legs. “Daddy?” she said, slipping off her bra. She held her breasts in her hands, the left breast twice the size as the right, and again, she said, “Daddy?” She smiled and her teeth were stained the shade of burnt caramel. Birdie said, “Touch me,” and Otis dropped to his bony knees and he set his gaunt hands on her saggy and uneven breasts.

When Otis hugged Birdie, she cradled his head in her portly hands. “There,” she said and Otis held onto her as he shuddered in bitter solace, knowing that he’d go back to Fay. He’d go back to her today and tomorrow and the day after that. He’d do that. He’d make it right with her no matter what the cost. “There,” Birdie said in a whisper. She said, “There,” and Otis sank into Birdie’s kind embrace as the more of a familiar sorrow settled into the marrow of his very bones.

Author Biography

Jarrett Daniel Kaufman has been published in Owen Wister Review and The Worcester Review. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and listed as a semifinalist for the Sherwood Anderson Fiction Award.

A Walk in the Snow
Pamela J.A. Fullerton



Sometimes with ‘true love’, it’s as important how you fall out of love, as how you fell in...

“A Walk in the Snow”

Her husband of fourteen years unexpectedly left her. Actually, it was a little worse than that. He kissed her good-bye and told her he loved her when she left for work that last morning and called her, as he did every day, when she had her lunch-break. For the customary twenty minutes, they talked and laughed about the usual things, the ‘antics’ of her delinquent students (she taught in a juvenile prison), compared and contrasted with the antics of the foals and dogs at home. As usual, they ended the call with mutual declarations of love and, on her part, longing.

When she arrived home she was disappointed his truck wasn’t in its normal parking spot by the house. She hoped none of the animals were hurt and had required a trip to the veterinarian. She let herself into the house to look for a note on the fridge. Nothing... Maybe he just gone to the little rural grocery store for some milk or other necessities- - a pack of cigarettes- - - that was probably it. He couldn’t seem to stop smoking. She considered it to be his one vice.

She ran upstairs to change clothes. When she went to hang her dress in the closet she knew something was terribly wrong. Half of the long closet was empty of his clothes. The suitcases were gone. She checked his dresser; his ties, his socks, his watch collection and gold jewelry, his underwear: it was all gone. . .

Elsewhere in the house, some antiques were missing, along with all the antique horse-racing prints, a Bedouin rug, and his camera equipment. Outside, the restored horse-drawn sleigh was gone. All of the tack that fit his horses was missing, but then, so was the horse trailer and the two horses he thought of as “his”.

She was stunned. She couldn't even think what to think. She felt numb, like her limbs didn't belong to her, or, if they did, they didn't want to respond to any instructions her brain might issue. She recognized she was in some kind of shock. There had to be some reasonable explanation, didn't there? She was, however, a creature of duty, and animals didn't feed themselves, so, purely by rote; she went through the motions of caring for the cats, dogs, horses, and peacocks. Then she waited for the call that must surely come. It didn't.

For thirty-three days she waited, alternating between despair, anger, and worry. . .maybe he'd had some sort of mental breakdown. She didn't sleep, she hardly ate. She went into work at six-thirty instead of eight-thirty in the morning just to be gone from the house because when there, she checked the phone every half hour in case she had somehow missed his call.

She never said a word about his absence; not to her parents who lived on the other side of the section of land on which their farm was located, and not to her sisters, who were her best friends and had supported her through all sorts of tribulations without a word of judgment, just as she had them. She also said nothing to her two sons, both in college. They had been pre-adolescents when she remarried and had never been particularly happy about a new step-father. Then the letter came.

It was on dingy motel stationery from some little town in Oklahoma. All it said was that she should contact a lawyer and start divorce proceedings. Not one word about why, not one sentence about who they were to one another, the love they had shared, or how it had broken. It was so cold and impersonal she could have retrieved it from the freezer instead of the old-fashioned mailbox lovingly hand-painted with vines and roses.

She didn't see much alternative, so she spoke with an attorney, tears sliding down her cheeks the entire meeting. The lawyer said proceedings would be complicated by the fact they had no way of contacting him. She broke down and talked to her sisters (who talked to her parents) and finally went to see her doctor for

something to help her get more than an hour or two of sleep a night. Her doctor gave her a prescription for pills that gave her nightmares (always involving him) even as she slept the sleep of the dead, but she also suggested long walks. Her father came to visit one evening and told her not to be sad, but to get about the business of repairing her life. Both pieces of advice seemed valid, if somehow a bit easier said than done.

Her husband had left at the start of September, it was now mid-October. Not eating had already eliminated those sneaky pounds that had crept onto her body over the fourteen years she had been happily, perhaps even complacently, married to the man she had believed was the love of her life, her true soul-mate. As independent as she thought she was, she missed their shared laughter and companionship with an ache that was worse than any physical injury she had ever suffered; broken arms and cracked skull included.

She started walking in the evenings after chores were finished. It was like training one of the young horses. First you went short distances at slow speeds, and then increased one or the other; never both at once. She strolled down to the corner of the section and back, one and a third miles. Soon she was walking around the corner to the west and back to the farm again; two and two-thirds miles. Devo, the little brindle terrier began to trot along next to her. It took him a couple of times to listen to her command never to reply to the farm dogs who barked inquiry as they passed, but once he learned, he was the perfect companion, steadfast and undemanding.

By late November she was doing four miles around the adjoining one-mile-square section to the east, the one with the massive hills on three of its mile-long borders. When she first tried the section at her usual pace, she couldn't believe how winded she was when she reached the crest of the very first hill. By the end of that walk she collapsed gratefully into a deep armchair and sipped a hot mug of tea. She realized, with something like amazement, she hadn't thought about 'him' the entire hour she had been walking. Later she slept soundly, without any pill, for five straight hours.

Within three weeks she could walk those big hills without significant extra effort, although the twenty-degree cold did seem to require more energy than she had needed when it was a balmy forty-degrees. She had stopped letting Devo come along when he started getting ice balls forming between his pads on the plowed, but snow-packed gravel roads. He still wanted to come and whined when she donned her winter gear, but the last time he accompanied her, he had stopped very quarter mile or so to chew the ice off his paws, before scrambling to his feet and running to catch-up with her. It just didn't seem kind, so she left him home with the other dogs, although his absence left her feeling lonely again.

It was four nights before Christmas Eve when she stepped outside for her walk into a world so brightly illuminated by a full moon, it was like strolling on some well lit city boulevard. The fresh snow which had fallen that morning made the total depth about fourteen inches, more than usual for Wisconsin in early winter. The thought flitted through her head that the Native Americans must have loved the full moon; with it they could work outside later, or travel so much easier regardless of the season. The next thought was a lyric from that old song, "Over the river and through the woods, to Grand-mother's house we go. . ." Perfect! She would take advantage of the bright night and trek cross-country to mom and dad's house. As the crow flew it was only a little more than a mile if she went up over the hill and through the woods instead of going the two plus miles around the perimeter of the section.

She headed west to the access road that went north up the hill, past the horse pastures, to the entrance of the old logging trail leading into their- - *her* woods. That thought brought with it another unexpected throb of pain which she tried to ignore. Once she got through the woods she would only need to cross Mr. Lang's harvested corn field to arrive at the back property-line of her parent's small hobby farm. The occasional shimmering snow crystal wafted against her exposed skin and fizzed gently as it melted.

The first quarter-mile of the access road was fairly easy going. It had tractor tire-ruts from where her neighbor, Greg, had been going up to the woods to cut firewood from the piled logs hauled out during autumn. He shared the cut and split wood with her; her timber, his labor. Both their houses had monstrous old wood

Furnaces which spewed out glorious heat but gobbled up wood logs like a defending Hot-dog Eating Champion gobbled frankfurters during a competition.

As she entered the forest, she felt a moment of such intense appreciation for the platinum and obsidian beauty that surrounded her, it caused her to hold her breath for a long moment and then release it in a trembling cloud of silver mist. It was somehow spiritual and soothing. She remembered some long forgotten art history professor rambling on about the concept of chiaroscuro, that play of light and dark he adamantly declared was at the heart of every great painting. . .and here it was, surrounding her. She moved forward into the scene, a living theatrical setting for some classic high drama.

Within a hundred yards, she had nearly forgotten the beauty and was more obsessed with an internal discussion about the benefits of inventing aids for winter travel, things like snowshoes and skis. It was astonishing how much effort it took to slog through a measly fourteen inches of snow, to say nothing of the many drifts. When she had walked blithely along the freshly plowed her driveway and paths so quickly and efficiently, she never really had occasion to walk more than a few feet in untouched snow. This was a lot harder than she expected it to be, and darn it; she believed she was in much better condition than this! She stopped to catch her breath and partially unzipped her down jacket to cool her overheated body. She was almost halfway there and hoped it would be easier going in the corn field.

Her sense of relief when she emerged from the woods into full moonlight was almost foolish. Somehow during those last hundred feet of twisted branches, soaring cold black trunks, and snow-concealed tangles, the forest had begun to assume an indefinable aura of menace. That was just silly, this was *her* woods, a place she loved in all seasons of the year, in all of its moods. . .But still, it was good to be in open country.

The corn filed stretched in front of her like a pristine coverlet on a freshly made bed. She knew the rows of this particular field went in two different directions due to the contours of the land. Those directly before her lead straight north for a furlong then went perpendicular, or east and west, over the rise of the small hill which still hid her parent's home from sight, although, even at this distance, she could a thin

Braided string of gray smoke wafting from their chimney into the navy-blue sky.

She set-off down the nearest row. To her dismay, the snow between the mounded rows was even deeper than on level ground. She tried to walk along the top of one of the mounds but the corn stalks were sliced off at acute angles. They were as solid and unyielding as steel rods topped by the sharp points of Bronze Age spears. Back into the trough she went, reassuring herself that at least there were no more hidden branches to snag her boots. She had almost reached the spot where the rows should change direction when, with no visual warning of any kind, the ground disappeared beneath her feet.

She plunged forward into what must have been some kind of drainage ditch she had never noticed when the fields were covered with six-foot-tall corn plants. However, there was no conscious thought; *there was no reason, no rational thought at all*. Panic seized her mind and momentarily paralyzed her body. She had no footing; she was blind, lost, floundering in a suffocating cloud of shimmering, weightless white. There was no one to help her, no one to hear her cries, no one to know where she was. . . she was utterly alone.

She began frantically wind-milling her arms like some stupid 1980's cartoon character but, like the character, her hands encountered no resistance. Desperately, she ran in place, but there was no answering push of solid earth against the soles of her boots, only the soft, frightening feeling of snow yielding and falling away. Her terror, however, had a massive solidity and weight. Her chest pounded like there were two hearts in there, both beating frantically in an effort to break free. Her breath came in short sobbing gasps; she was crying and didn't realize it, and wouldn't have cared if she had.

Finally, her right boot touched something solid. She instinctively jammed her leg down and pushed upward but immediately slipped off the foothold. She moaned softly through clenched lips. She was exhausted. She was having a hard time getting a true breath, the snow was so dry and light it swirled and mixed with the air with every movement. She commanded herself to relax and a moment later felt a slight pressure under her toes. Shuddering, she sank further into the clinging whiteness until her knee collided against the side of the ditch. She used both hands to grasp at the deep-buried frozen-vegetation on the ditch wall and slowly,

Painfully, crawled, and clawed her way upward toward the edge.

It seemed almost impossible to pull herself over the lip even when she found the corn stumps within reach provided immovable handholds. She simply didn't have the strength left. She felt somehow abandoned by her own physical being, just as her heart had been abandoned by his betrayal of their love. For a long moment she hung there trying to dredge up, not just the energy, she the will to pull herself out of this frigid, Dostoevsky inspired hell. Her forearm muscles began quivering with the effort of holding her weight suspended against the vertical wall. Her chest, compressed against the edge, heaved in an effort to take a full breath. It would be so much easier to just let go, to sink back-down into the white oblivion. . .to let all of the pain go.

A sudden burst of hot anger flared in her gut. She would not give up- -she would never give up. She tightened her muscles and with the last of her strength, jack-knifed her knees, jamming them against the ditch in order to lift her chest from the wall. The release allowed her straining lungs to draw in a shuddering measure of biting cold air. She could feel the oxygen force its way into her arms. But, it was only a momentary, and her shoulders suddenly began to cramp. She bit the inside of her cheeks to stifle a cry of pain and tasted salty blood as it trickled across her tongue. She sucked in another deep gulp of air and pulled upward with a final wrenching effort that landed her belly-down on the lip of the ditch.

There, she began to sob again, soft whimpering sobs she couldn't seem to turn off. She lay on her stomach for four or five minutes, face pressed into the snow, legs still hanging over the trench, muscles going flaccid. Gradually, her sobs ceased. She wiped the tears from her cheeks with a trembling hand; then she turned over and lay flat on her back, looking up into the luminous silver-blue sky, watching the face of the man in the moon. She felt so *present*, like she had just returned to reality after an unexpected absence. A slightly hysterical chuckle bubbled from her lips. *Damn, it was still beautiful! How was that even possible?*

She levered herself into a seated position, then rose unsteadily to her feet. For a moment she swayed in place. No more adrenaline to help her finish that last quarter mile. She just had to push one foot wearily in front of the other. She shuffled forward, and, there. . .finally she could see the house. Dad would happily give

her a ride home, no more walking tonight. But that would be only after mom gave her a welcome cup of tea, and she had warmed up a bit by the old blue-enameled cook-stove in mom's kitchen.

As she crossed into her parent's backyard and neared the back porch, she heard the first of the farm dogs, big old Bear probably, barking a deep warning to the household of a presence approaching through the snow. It was the same shimmering silver snow she always respected and loved for its bewitching beauty but, which she now knew, could hide unexpected danger. . .just like love was beautiful but could encompass hidden depths of totally unexpected pain. But she *had* endured. She had continued to struggle, continued to fight, and, all alone, she had survived her moonlit walk in the snow. She could probably survive- - anything.

Author Biography:

Pamela Fullerton was born in Milwaukee but raised in rural Wisconsin as one of 15 P.K.'s (Preacher's Kids". Her Law Degree from the UW fostered careers in H.R., Educational Administration and as an Administrative Law Judge. Her articles and stories have appeared in such diverse publications as "Wisconsin People & Ideas," "Country," and, "Modern Arabian Horse." She currently lives on her farm near Wausau, breeding and training Arabian and Thoroughbred race horses.

She writes about those things that allow us as humans the privilege of laughter. . .or tears.

The Giantess Angel Rude



SHORT STORY

Whenever Lora entered a room, it seemed for a moment like all the air would be sucked out as conversations stopped mid-sentence and all eyes swerved to her. Just for a moment though, as people quickly recovered and you could once again hear glasses clinking and talking resume with a carefully casual air.

She hated that.

Lora knew that her height was something that people couldn't help noticing, and she found that any reaction would set her off. If they pretended not to notice, or if they made jokes. If they asked her what it was like, or if they acted sympathetic. There was just no pleasing her, she knew.

Lora had been born a normal size, but had started to grow rapidly when she was just starting 4K. At first her parents were pleased with the tall willowy child who seemed perfectly healthy after all, but when teachers and parents started to make comments, they began to worry. Then their worry leaked into the child, who continued to grow. By the 5th grade, Lora was 5' 4". She felt gangly and awkward around a lot of her peers, so she threw herself into her studies. Sitting at a desk made her height less noticeable, and she hid her downturned face behind a sheet of long brown hair. She was not inclined to join sports and chose the library over the gym, much to the disappointment of various coaches. The years came and went. She missed her Prom, and Homecoming too. She graduated Valedictorian of her class, and unwillingly accepted the honors at her graduation, imagining that everyone was sniggering at her as she towered over the principal and her smiling parents. Her father, a quiet man whose bald spot she could see clearly when she looked down at him, cleared his throat and spoke.

"Your mother and I are proud of you, honey." But Lora could see both of them were ill at ease with attention, too. So when they suggested a celebratory dinner at a local restaurant, she begged off and saw them exchange a look of relief.

Away from her parents at college, Lora finally felt like nobody cared about her height. There were lots of people who were “unique”, a word Lora had previously hated but now reluctantly admitted to being. As the months went by, her shoulders stooped less and her stride became longer. There were several young men who were as tall or taller than her, and even a few women who almost matched her height of 6’5”. They were all part of the athletic departments though, and quickly lost interest in her when they realized she had no concept of the games they lived to play. Still, she felt better than she had in the small town she’s grown up in that was full of small people and her academic peers grew to admire the brilliant girl.

Her major was in Astronomy, a field where she was comfortable looking at the sky and spending countless hours observing data for any interesting anomalies. Her lab partner, Stephen, was brilliant as well as handsome. She had been intimidated by him at first, but she soon realized that he had grown up feeling like a small town oddball as well knowing from the time he was very young that he was gay. They bonded over the first months exchanging stories that had once been tragic but now seemed hilarious.

Stephen had another passion, theatre. He begged her to see the University’s performance of *Moulin Rouge* with him, amusing her with his obvious lust for the actor who played the lead as the poet Christian. She finally relented, much to his delight. A few days later she found herself sitting in the center row of the Marion Theatre, with Stephen clutching her hand so tightly it had gone kind of tingly-numb. Lora wondered for a moment if this was her first date, but had to smile at the thought. *Only someone like me would have a first date with a gay man*, she thought to herself. But she smiled affectionately at his enthusiasm, realizing that he was her first friend, a much better thing.

The curtain opened and she found herself being absorbed by the ill-fated but passionate love story. As the actor who played Christian sang in a soaring voice, she felt like he sang directly to her, and more than once she felt almost like he was looking at her. She could feel her hand being squeezed even harder by Stephen and she gently disengaged it, shaking it slightly to see if it was still alive. He looked apologetically at her and she smiled down at him.

“He’s singing to me!” Stephen whispered excitedly. Lora felt silly then. Of course. This actor was also gay and had been watching the handsome Stephen. Not her. Still feeling foolish, she distracted herself by finding the name in the playbill that was rolled up in her functional hand.

Christan— played by Marcos Adian

Satine- -played by Miranda Riley

Marcos. She looked again at Stephen and had to stifle a laugh as he dramatically put his hand over his heart. She looked up and her own heart skipped a beat as she looked directly into the eyes of the actor as he stared deeply back at her. She felt a blush flood her face and he smiled. Not missing a beat, he strode across the stage to hold the beautiful Satine in his arms as their voices joined together harmoniously. Lora could feel her whole heart open up as the play continued, and she rose unselfconsciously with the rest of the audience with thunderous applause as it ended. Stephen looked at her with a rapturous face and shouted over the noise.

“Wasn’t he amazing? We’re going to go find him!” She must have looked reluctant, because he continued. “To congratulate him on his stellar performance, of course.” She rolled her eyes and allowed him to pull her along with another hand-crushing grasp. He continued honestly, “And to ask him out, of course! It never hurts to check. . .” Lora didn’t hear the rest in the clamor of the crowd, but followed him obediently. It almost seemed like Stephen had become more flamboyant with his lifestyle since they’d met, and she was glad to see him grow in self-esteem. He really is a wonderful friend, she thought as he dragged her along. Towering over most of the crowd, she could catch glimpses of the two stars of the play, Marcos’s dark hair close to Satine’s vibrant red hair that was easy to spot. She imagined several times that his eyes also searched over the throng of well-wishers, but he had an easy stance and could be seen graciously nodding to the congratulations around him. Eventually she managed to maneuver them to be almost directly in front of him, and again she felt that he looked at her only, with dark eyes that glowed warmly into hers. She suddenly felt the old awkward feeling and pushed Stephen between her and the actor, who she now saw stood around 5’10”.

I'm too tall, she thought again and her head dipped down a bit as she moved to congratulate the actress. Her mouth opened and shut again as the other woman turned deliberately. *Ouch*, she thought but immediately made an excuse for the behavior. *She's probably sick of hearing the same stuff*, Lora reasoned. But she still felt the snub. She turned back to watch Stephen gushing to Marcos about his performance, as the actor smiled politely. The snub had made her feel a little feeling of anger, a spark that she allowed to grow. She startled herself by speaking in a slightly exasperated voice to Stephen.

"You don't have to outline the whole story, Stephen. He was there!" The two men looked up at the tall woman with her amber eyes flashing, and Stephen flushed and smiled. He looked at her closely, and then back at Marcos. For a moment he was uncharacteristically quiet, but then he laughed.

"That is true. Well, it was a wonderful show." He looked at the two of them and dropped Marco's hand that he'd been shaking for the last 5 minutes. He took Lora's instead as he introduced her. "This is my best friend, Lora."

Lora looked down at him, pleased. *I'm someone's best friend*, she thought to herself. A first. She looked at Marcos and blushed at the undisguised admiration there.

"I saw you in the audience," he spoke in a voice that she felt all the way to her toes. "I couldn't help but notice you. "Her heart sank a bit until she realized with confusion that he meant it in the most flattering way. Stephen nudged her, and she spoke quickly.

"You're wonderful!" Immediately she felt foolish and corrected herself. "I mean, as an actor. . . the whole cast. . . Oh, jeez. I mean your play was wonderful," she finished lamely. Marcos didn't smile, he looked at her very seriously.

"I believe you are the one who is wonderful. I have seen you before on campus, and I have heard many good things about you. I'd love to spend some time with you, maybe tomorrow at noon for coffee? Do you like coffee?" Lora looked down at Stephen, who nodded encouragingly.

“Yeah, I mean yes. I do. Like coffee, I mean. Not I do like a wedding. . .” Oh God, she thought to herself. I am. Such. An Idiot. But both men were smiling now.

“Okay, then,” Marcos said, pleased. “Until tomorrow!” And he squeezed her hand one last time before he turned to join the rest of the cast again. Lora stood frozen looking after him until Stephen nudged her again.

“Come on, let’s go get ice cream.” He turned away waiting for her to follow, but then turned back and added, “I knew he wasn’t gay the moment I saw him!” She laughed then and he joined in as the two friends made their way to the exit.

The next morning Lora had second thoughts, though. She was in the lab alone, watching the monitors. She tried to focus, but Marcos’ face kept coming to mind. She couldn’t believe that he was so obviously attracted to her. She pulled out her phone and typed into her search engine: **Attraction to tall women.** . .as an afterthought, she typed in **Fetish** as well, and her heart sank when she began to read.

Macrophilia is a fascination or sexual fantasy involving giants, more commonly expressed as giantesses (female giants). Typically a male fantasy with the male playing the “smaller” part-being dominated, or being eaten by the larger woman.

“Oh no.” She moaned softly as she felt the humiliation wash over her. He’s got a fetish, she thought to herself. It all made sense now, but she felt sick with her new knowledge. She worked miserably accomplishing nothing. Stephen came in around 11:30 and seemed surprised to see her.

“I thought you would be getting ready for your date! Why are you still here?” He looked more closely at her stricken face. “Oh crap, did he cancel? What happened?” She didn’t answer for a moment; she felt foolish, sleazy and angry all at once. She handed him her phone wordlessly, and he took it and began to read. He glance up at her just once with an expression that was hard to read. He finished, handing her phone back to her without comment, and the two friends sat quietly for a minute. Then Stephen spoke softly.

“When I was in high school, I pretended to be straight for the first two years. I felt ashamed of what I knew I was, and I had everyone convinced that I was a big ladies man. I even tortured people that had been brave enough to admit they were gay. I was the perfect student, the perfect son, and the perfect boyfriend....

To a girl. I hated myself, but I wasn't brave enough to see myself honestly.” He looked over, seeing he had her attention. “I was able to hide what I was. You, on the other hand, can't hide that difference in yourself.” He was silent for a moment. “Tell me, what is the harm in his finding your height to be sexy? You might not realize it, but you are actually quite beautiful. A lot of people think you should be a model. You've got this all mixed up.”

Lora felt angry. And flattered. And confused as hell. “Why would anyone say that? And what if he asks me to dress up like Xena the Warrior-Princess? I don't want to be different.” She paused, fighting tears. “I'm tired of feeling different.”

Stephen started to smile. Then he started to laugh as he reached over to grab her in a hug.

“Different? Ha! I'll fill you in on a little secret. . .everyone is different!” He thrust his chin towards the window, where students could be seen milling around. “Every one of these people has something about themselves that they're a little ashamed to admit. You. You're beautiful tall woman that he'd like to get to know. Why wouldn't he?”

Lora felt a little better in her friend's arms. She started to relax, and smiled when he added, “A beautiful tall woman, with a big heart that never judged me for one moment. Anyone lucky enough to be with you would have to be pretty special. Maybe give him a chance before you decide he's a perv.” They heard someone clearing their throat and turned to look at the door, where Marcos stood.

“Is this a good time? I didn’t know if you’d know where to find me so I came looking for you.” He smiled shyly. “I couldn’t wait any longer, but I can come back if you’re busy.”

Stephen’s nudged her and raised his brows. She took a deep breath.

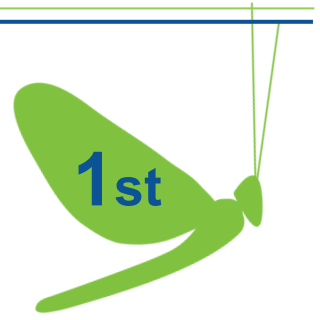
“No, it’s great,” she said with growing confidence. “I’m ready.”

Author Biography:

Angel Rude is new to writing, having worked as a hairstylist for 30 years successfully. She works and lives on the shoreline of Lake Michigan in a town petite enough to require the description “East of Green Bay on the lake”. Although she wasn’t able or willing to attend college, she has enjoyed participating in writing clubs locally. Her favorite inspiration for weaving tales is her large and colorful family, where love and laughter reign. She and her husband live with their own two children in a rural neighborhood made of siblings and grandparents, sprinkled liberally with a myriad of pets. The Giantess is her first contest attempt.

TEEN SHORT STORY

I know Why the Chicken Crossed the Road Paige Weber



Teen Short Story

My mother was quaking in her shoes, his words seeming to hold the power of God. Yet the doctor's diagnosis echoed through my head, and the word Alzheimers permanently rattled my soul.

The hallway was empty: cold hardwood floors encapsulated by white barren walls. It seemed to grow longer and longer as the task of reaching my mother's room grew daunting. My breathing stuttered as my hand wrapped around her iron doorknob. Ivory fingers in stark contrast with the ebony metal, I slowly twisted until I felt it release. In the past couple of years, I have found myself becoming the father of my mother.

Inside the floral wallpapered room sat my mother, perched peacefully on the edge of her bed, eyes wide, tapping her feet to a melody only she could hear. *I'm still here* her eyes shouted, yet I classified her by her disease and sold her soul to the prescription bottles.

Yesterday, we had done the daring act of venturing outside the four walls of our house to the corner coffee shop, having set a date on our calendar for a reunion with my mother's old friends. A gaggle of my mother's high school friends were gathered in the corner. Not recalling her years spent with them, pulling pranks and practical jokes, and being an adventurous teen, she walked right up to them and introduced herself with the title of her disease instead of her name. "Hi, I have Alzheimer's," she proclaimed loud and proud. As if a switch was flipped in their brains, my mother having instantly been degraded into an invalid, the ladies spoke through me instead of her.

“Poor Miriam, how is she doing, Robert? I take it she’s staying out of trouble?” the pitying voices asked, with wandering eyes.

“Fine,” my mother squeaked, her voice a breathy whisper as the ladies didn’t acknowledge her: more out of pity than spite, but in a few sentences, I watched my mother die tenfold before my eyes. It was at that point I wanted to shout at the ladies, to tell them they were a murder of old crows. Instead, I bit my tongue, my retort to be unheard as I ushered my mother out of the shop by her cardigan-clad shoulders, their wandering eyes following.

Every day, through each mistake, each slip-up of words, I saw my mother’s dignity pull away to hide in the photographs on our mantel, and memories on our camera. It was just last week that I had entered the house to be greeted by my mother clothed in a nightgown and curlers.

“You wanna hear a joke? Huh? Huh? Yes. Okay. Why did the chicken cross the road?” She asked this while punctuating each word with a slap on my arm, the humor too overwhelming. “She was looking for an egg-scuse to travel,” she giggled, clutching her robust, motherly frame as she spasmed in joy. Gritting my teeth, I laughed, tears gathered at the corners of my eyes, not from humor but from the pain of knowing it was the same joke she told me yesterday and the day before that.

This morning as I helped her button her shirt, she grabbed my hand, and started to repeat our daily ritual. “Just put the shoes on my feet hon”, can’t bend over like I used to. Leave the strings be though,” she would croon in that soft, singsong voice of her; the voice that would relay stories of Neverland and Fairies, and the voice that would kiss my forehead and whisper, “I love you my Robbie.” Now, though, when I try to do too much her voice barks, “I can tie my own stinkin’ shoes.” So, I left the laces lay flopped against the hardwood. She could tie her shoes. She always tied her shoes.

Some days, when her disease could no longer be eased by neck massages, hushed by reassuring words, or soothed by triple fudge brownies, she looked at me and told me to go. That she wanted to go before

her body became an eraser, and all she was left with were the shavings of who she used to be. “Alzheimer’s is more than just forgetting,” she would say, “it is the loss of independence that really gets us in the end.”

Hugging her tightly, I just stayed quiet, knowing no false reassurance would help. Each second I hugged her tighter and tighter, trying to imprint myself on her forever, trying to force her to steal some of my happiness to be adopted as her own. Yet, one crinkly hand would squeeze mine, and I knew that no matter how hard I squeezed her hefty frame, I could never fight this battle for her.

Three months after her diagnosis. . . I got a call at midnight; a man down my street had my mother. “She is in your house? Is she alright?” I had rasped into the landline phone.

“I saw her medical bracelet, I know she’s sick- -will you just come and get her? Her name is Miriam, yes?” the man replied gruffly. As I spoke my confirmation, I knew my anxiety was bleeding into my voice and sneaking over to the other side of the phone. Arriving two blocks down the street, to a curly-haired, be-dazzled Mother at 2 A.M. led me to wonder about those nightly teen adventures she no longer recalled taking.

Today, I gave my mother a paintbrush and led her to a blank canvas, just begging to be used. Motionless and hollow-eyed, my mother just stared at the one joy she had, and forgot about it. entirely. I guided her away by the shoulders (*yet again*), and tucked her into bed. *She was just having a bad day, it must just be a bad day.*

Today, my mother forgot how to swallow, her neck stretching wildly from side to side, as she tried to force her throat to be of any use. Unwilling to drink from a sippy cup, or be spoon-fed, she clung to her dignity and chose how she wanted to be remembered.

On her hospital bed, while her breathing swayed in and out, and her chest struggled to rise, my *mom* had looked at me and rasped, “Who are you?” Every emotion I felt for the last couple of years wet my eyes, and my breathing halted.

Reaching over the plastic bed rail, I unfisted my mother's clenched fingers from the paper-thin blue sheets. Gripping her hand in mine, as if she were as delicate as a butterfly's wing, I whispered, "Mom, why did the chicken cross the road?"

"He was just looking' for an egg-scuse to travel, Robbie," came her reply, as she peacefully smiled and closed her eyes right before the haunting constant beep began.

Seven years fighting a battle that could only be prevented by the prevention of time itself, and now my mother lay in final defeat. Hands desperately clutching the call button, I watched as a blur of nurses and doctors rushed in. Hollow condolences were offered from voices trained to be eerily cold, and it was *my* turn to be led away, as latex-clad hands guide *my* shoulders out the door frame. My mother was slowly wheeled away, her wishes for *no resuscitation* respected. Meanwhile, my world was left in watercolors, as my vision was obscured with tears.

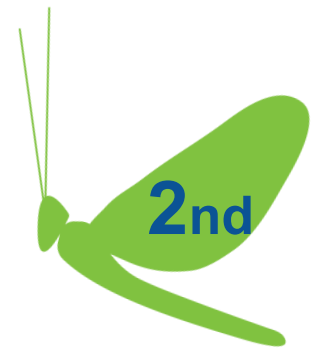
Robbie was the name she called me when we were alone, in a quiet room. A constant reminder of childhood innocence and the part of me my mother chose to remember, my teenage angst long forgotten. Every childhood "I hate you" and "You don't understand," having been benevolently stolen from her memory.

After my mother passed, I began to question many things, for which no answers could or would be provided. Yet I will always know one thing- -I will know I am Robbie, and I will know why the chicken crossed the road.

Author Biography:

Paige Weber's hands have always been marked with pen and pencil, and when she goes to school, she has a separate bag for her books. When she was in primary school, she would act out her stories, pretending her hair was a beard and her blanket a cape. She even started to leave her written books in the library at her school, hole punched, and bound with yarn. It was a rapid progression until she entered middle school, and found Author's Club, a space designated to promote creativity and bounce ideas. Paige found her niche and continues to entertain others.

Before a Fall
Sophia Danielson



Teen Short Story

The Monster had known Margot for as long as Margot had been alive. Margot had never seen it, of course, and if she had, she would have been both unnerved and fascinated. The monster was an exact clone of her, save one difference—unlike Margot, countless medals dangled around its neck, first-place ribbons hung from its shirt, and the adoration of peers was stitched into its DNA. The Monster loved nothing more than itself. The only thing it wanted was Margot.

Whenever she watched a play or movie, the Monster spoke quietly to her, though Margot couldn't hear it.

"You're better than them," it whispered, referring to the actors. *"You could do so, so much better."*

Without Margot's explicit knowledge, the Monster controlled every aspect of her life. Laid out like a banquet in its Margot-like mind was an elaborate plan, with singular goal: to become one with its only friend. A day would come, it knew, when it could finally touch Margot without the pain that usually accompanied such a gesture, and when it did, everything else would follow.

No plan was without hiccups, however, and that hiccup had arrived in the form of *Romeo and Juliet*—which, ironically, the Monster had been eagerly anticipating. All the way to auditions, its soft words had floated around Margot's car. *"Nothing stands in your way, Margot. Nothing. You'll get Juliet for sure. Your competition is horrible compared to you. Nothing to fear."* Its excitement had only grown as the two of them surveyed the auditionees. *"Look at this! You are so, so much better."*

As the auditions progressed, however, the Monster's plan had quickly taken several major blows. The director—Mr. Gerome—was new, for one, and possessed a gentler mindset than the last. And why was

Calliope Madsen suddenly a competent actress? *“She’s not cut out for this,”* the Monster had whispered, though its voice carried a thread of uncertainty. Hopeful, it had reached for Margot’s shoulder, but it pulled back at the red slice of pain that slashed its nerves. *“You are.. You are, beautiful. You’re wonderful. This town has never seen an actress as wonderful as you.”*

That all ended when an indecisive Mr. Gerome presented almost the exact wrong cast list. Evan Laurence as Romeo—not a problem. Margot Gaynor and Calliope Madsen as Juliet.

That was a problem.

“What if she’s better than you?” the Monster cried in horror, and for a second, it contemplated lunging at Calliope. It wouldn’t take much—a heavy slam of the girl’s head into the corner of the stage. *“What if this it is? What if you look bad compared to her? She’ll get everything you want.”*

Something stirred in Margot, though, as she observed Calliope’s beaming face. It really wouldn’t be *that* horrible. The show had an 8-night run, after all, meaning four nights for her and four for Calliope.

They could share, couldn’t they? Calliope looked so happy and excited, and she’d given Margot a huge hug after the cast was announced. She deserved it.

“She’s not as good as you,” muttered the Monster. *“You are better. Be nice to her, though, and you can show Mr. Gerome how much better you—”*

In a desperate bid for the control it was losing, the Monster stepped forward and grabbed Margot’s shoulders. It was a grave mistake. Blinding pain enveloped its entire body, like fire exploding down every vein, and the force blew it back into the wall screaming.

“I’m excited to work with you, Calliope,” Margot offered genuinely.

“Thanks!” Calliope’s light brown face shone with excitement. “You can call me Cal, by the way. All my friends do.”

“Sounds good, Cal.” They both laughed.

The Monster howled in agony.

With scenes to rehearse and Shakespearean lines to memorize, Margot stayed blissfully busy. She and Cal existed in an easygoing symbiosis, taking turns running bits with Mr. Gerome and Evan, always supportive. The two Juliets built their characters using traits they learned from each other.

Finally, a week before *Romeo and Juliet* opened, Mr. Gerome announced two dress rehearsals: one with Margot and another with Cal, crammed into the same evening. Margot found herself standing in the wings watching Cal perform, weight shifted to her hip and arms twisted over her chest, smiling faintly.

The smile began to flicker as the play progressed.

Cal was suddenly an electric performer. Every line she recited was crisp and perfect, resonating through the auditorium, and her body moved smoothly through every motion. Real tears glistened in her deep eyes when she threw herself over Evan’s unnervingly still form; she seemed to have actually lost the only person she’d ever love. A glance across the stage to the wings on the opposite side confirmed that Mr. Gerome was riveted.

Something twitched in Margot’s brain. A breath of wind seemed to glide behind her, almost enough to make the blood-red curtain move, and the Monster slipped close enough to murmur.

“She’s getting better than you.”

“Margot!” Mr. Gerome called. “Get your costume ready!”

“He doesn’t seem sincere. He likes her better than you, Margot. Everyone will.”

Margot didn’t outwardly hear the words, but they sparked a jolt of fear in her chest. Yeah, she’d been nice and shared with Calliope. But in the end, Margot was the better actress, wasn’t she? Calliope was going to make her look bad.

Be better. Be better.” The Monster’s accolades glimmered dully in the auditorium’s lights.

Nervous pain churned in Margot's gut. The word "better" was stuck in her head, for some reason, but as she mentally turned it around, its meaning began to take root. Better than Calliope. All she had to do was outperform Calliope.

It's not a competition, her conscience countered.

"Remember what everyone said? 'You're truly gifted. You should have more roles. You should be a professional.' All that's going to go away. Calliope's better. Calliope's always better."

She had *listened*, the Monster realized, and as it watched with glee, Margot gave that run-through everything she had.

Her emotions seemed to rattle the entire room, swinging like a pendulum—she alternated seamlessly from starstruck to heartsick to devastated as she and Evan unfolded their fictitious romance. Maybe she was fueled by the warring feelings over Calliope's supposed dominance currently clashing in her mind. Maybe it was the Monster standing behind her, whispering. *"See? Nothing to worry about. You're the best. You're always the best."* Satisfaction pulsed down to Margot's toes when Mr. Gerome emerged from the side of the stage, clapping and smiling broadly.

"Excellent! Yes! Margot, that was incredible!" He clapped her on the shoulder. "I can't *wait* for this show!"

"Thank you," she gushed. "Thank you so much."

"Oh, you're welcome." Mr. Gerome looked over to the left, where the actors were emerging from the dressing room. "Hey, here comes Romeo himself." He winked, then seemed to be distracted by another thought. "Too bad Calliope had to leave early."

"Leave?" Margot asked. "Said she didn't feel good." Mr. Gerome shrugged. "Can you check on her tonight? I know you two are close."

"Oh, yeah. Sure."

He drifted away, off to converse with someone else, and Evan quickly filled his space. “Oh. My. Word. You were incredible.” He pulled her into a hug. When they stepped back, his blue eyes were shining like sky-colored laser beams, and he let his voice drop. “Hey, no shade on Cal, or anything, but I honestly think you were better, dude. I mean, she’s amazing, but I think you’re just better for the role. You know?”

“Yeah. I get it. She’s great, though.” She threw the last bit in mainly out of pity.

“Well, of course. See you later, Juliet.” They laughed, and he jogged over to where Mr. Jerome was beckoning him.

He thinks I’m better than Calliope.

“That’s because you are.”

Margot had such beautiful hair, the Monster thought. Even though it was identical to the Monster’s own, there was just something about the fibers, thin and light as a feather. Patches of darker, almost brown locks faded from her scalp—covered with Juliet’s red and gold cap—down to the golden tips. What was that called? Dishwater blonde? What an ugly name for something so beautiful.

The Monster’s slender hand crossed the space, and though it expected the pain, none came. Nothing brushed its hand. And then—

Margot’s hair didn’t outwardly display the pressure of its fingers, but the Monster could still feel the softness. Trembling, it reached up, started at the base of the cap, and then trailed down to where the strands ended, just past Margot’s shoulder blades.

Margot’s heart swelled with pride.

Author Biography

Sophia Danielson is a 15-year-old 9th grader who loves writing fiction and hopes to be an author one day. If she’s not obsessing over her current story idea, she’s probably reading, playing piano, eating ice cream, or teasing her friends. She also loves God, her parents, her siblings (usually), and performing Broadway’s greatest hits in the shower.

Broken Pieces
Sofia Santamaria-Micher



My mom's fingers trembled as they wove my long hair into thick braids. I lifted my eyes and gazed into the small mirror before us. Her face twitched with hidden thought. Her worries were tucked away between her tight lips and the creases on her forehead.

She had been reckless and wild and beautiful once.

Now she seemed like the evanesce memory of a girl who had long ago been full of life; her hair once a fun combination of purple, fuschia, and bright blue, had transformed into a faded cascade of neglected hair; her once vivid violet eyes were a somber purple that always seemed to be crying.

My family was due at a meeting in an hour or so about public safety during the war. I doubted we would make it in one piece. Dad's location was unknown. Mom was quietly broken. And my siblings and I were anxiously awaiting the moment our porcelain family was going to shatter. It was already streak with cracks.

"I love it," I whispered and touched my finished braids.

Mom locked eyes with me in the mirror and replied with a half-hearted wink. "I'm glad, babe." She wrapped her arms around my neck and snuggled her head into my shoulder. I rested my head against hers. We sighed in unison.

The front door opened.

Dad was home.

The house seemed to crackle with harsh, restrained energy.

Mom whipped around. Her back snapped into a stronger posture. “Where have you been?” she demanded.

Dad slipped off his embroidered red coat and tossed it onto one of the chairs in the kitchen. He was silent.

“Where have you been?” Mom raised her voice.

He ignored her again. My heart caught in my throat. It pulsed. I tried to swallow it. I was caught in the middle.

Mom snatched Dad’s red coat. She chucked it at him with all her might. “WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?” Her voice cracked at the end and her hands began to shake.

Little footsteps entered the front of the house. It was Lexa. Her face appeared out of a doorway. She rubbed her small pink mouth with her fingers, her eyes clouded with thought. “Brynn, do you know where my - -”

“Not now, Lexa.” I rushed over to her and dragged her away from our parents.

“But where are my purple shoes?” she asked, stumbling away.

All I could hear were screams.

Mom was sobbing. Dad’s voice added to the violent chaos of voices on the other side of the door. I wanted to cover my ears. I wanted to hide under my bedroom desk, and transport myself away from everything. Lexa was already doing that. Her bottom lip trembled and she rocked back and forth. Athelio hugged her,

whispering encouragement that was too wise for a seven-year-old to be saying. I clenched my fists and marched over to them.

“Come on,” I snapped. “We’re going for a walk.” I grabbed their hands and hurried them away from the screaming.

A little while later, my boots stomped along an empty mosaic road. The Sun was pathetic that day, cowering behind the darkening clouds. I wasn’t going to cower. I wasn’t going to hide. I wasn’t going to scream.

Even though I really wanted to.

Lexa squirmed in my grip. I snapped at her for being so. She ignored me.

“Where are we going?” Athelio asked. His back was straight, his were steps confident, and his face was still with a serenity that made me curious to know how a kid nine years younger than me felt twenty years older.

“I don’t know,” I snapped. I took a deep breath. “Where do you want to go?”

Lexa’s face scrunched up. Tears converted her eyes into glass. “Are Mom and Dad going to be okay?”

“I don’t know,” I repeated. I looked at the cracked tiles beneath the tip of my leather boot. I inhaled deeply. “Come on, I think the sweet shoppe is nearby. I’ll get you something if you don’t act baby-ish.”

“Wait,” Athelio said, “I hear something.”

I groaned. “It’s probably the sky. A storm is supposed to be coming.” I began walking again, but Athelio kept his ground.

The first raindrops slid down my face.

The sky had darkened to a navy blue. It almost never rained in the Land of the Daydreamers, but when it did, it was always unforgettable. That's why I grabbed onto Lexa's and Athelio's hands again and looked around for an open shop or hotel. To my dismay, everything appeared to be alone. The silence in the streets was eerie. Wooden window shutters slammed against their frames as the wind picked up.

"Let's hurry back home," I whispered. "Let's not get stuck outside in the storm."

We picked up our pace and made our way back to our two-story house. The pale blue stucco building seemed to rattle with the chaos going on inside. My jaw clenched and I halted before the front door. I didn't want to open it. Inside were my worst fears, my nightmares crossing into reality. I was paralyzed. My feet were part of the mosaic road. I seemed to melt into the ground as my sense of control was carried away by the gale whipping the city.

Dad exploded out of the house. His brown eyes were wild with anger. He pushed past the three of us trembling before the house. His boots pounded the street as he ran off without a word. I turned to the gaping front door. Mom gripped the kitchen table. She slammed a fist against the wood. The small flower pot on the table shook and toppled over. Without another thought, I ripped myself away from Lexa and Athelio and took off after my dad.

I called his name amidst the rain. The storm roared throughout the city as I trailed after the disappearing figure that was my father. I ran and ran until my legs gave out and I collapsed onto the street. My cheek slammed against the swirling mud. At that point, I couldn't tell whether my face was wet with tears or with the overwhelming raindrops.

I laid on the ground, soaked through, bones chilled. With a cry of outrage, I pushed off the ground and got back onto my feet. I glared at the black sky.

"I hate you!" I shrieked. I threw my arms out to the side. "I HATE YOU. I HATE YOU. I HATE YOU!"

“Brynn?”

I turned to see my dad surfacing from the shadows. I wiped my face, forgetting my hands were covered with mud.

“Brynn, what are you doing out in the rain?” he asked, perhaps not realizing how he had ripped my family apart.

“I hate you!” I screamed at him. “How could you just run off?!”

“You don’t understand, Brynn,” he said. His voice cracked, quivered, but I didn’t care.

“You left me! You left Mom!” I shouted. “I need you, you idiot! You can’t just run off like that!” My chest heaved. “I HATE YOU.”

Dad grabbed onto my arms and shook me. “Be quiet, Brynn! This is hard for me too!”

“But you’re my dad! I need you...” I sniffled and wiped my nose. “What is going on? Why are you and mom always screaming at each other? Why did you just run away?”

Dad locked eyes with me. His intense brown eyes were just as wet as the mud I was soaked with. I knew those eyes. I knew that man. But at that moment it felt like he was a whole galaxy away from me.

“I’m sorry if I hurt you. I really am, Brynn,” he began. He let me go and stepped back. “Your mom and I...” His chest fell. “Love fails sometimes.”

“No,” I shrieked.

“Yes,” he said, his voice sharper. “It does, and you just need to walk away from the broken pieces. You can’t fix a broken vase. There will always be cracks to remind you of what went wrong.”

“I don’t care about the cracks!” I cried. “I just want you back. Come home with me.”

“That’s not my home anymore.”

I took a step back. My eyes bore into my father’s face, searching for the truth. I took a deep breath and squared my shoulders.

“You’re never coming home?” I asked, my voice cool.

Dad sighed. “No, Brynn.”

“Do your kids even mean anything to you?” I snapped.

“Don’t talk to me like that, young lady!”

“Then don’t abandon us like that,” I replied and walked away.

He called for me. Over and over. I lifted my chin higher and walked faster.

If he didn’t want me, my siblings, my mom, our home...then I didn’t want him. My father was lost to the storm. I wasn’t going to drown in it trying to fight for a man who wouldn’t fight for my family. For me. For love.

Afterall, love fails sometimes.

And I just have to walk away from the broken pieces.

Author Biography

SOFIA SANTAMARIA-MICHER is a sixteen-year-old junior in high school living in Wisconsin. She has a passion for life, adventures, and stories that inspire and ignite. Her love of storytelling has been since the early days of her childhood, but a dedication to the writing life began in the sixth grade when a magical little thought became a magical (and not so little) novel. She has received various academic and musical awards, including the President's Award for Educational Excellence, and valedictorian academic recognition. She can be found daydreaming about magical worlds, being creative, and discovering the amazing world around her.