

2021 Writing Contest Winners



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

Teen Short Story

Ravenfire
Sofia Santamaria-Micher



Teen Short Story

I was the only person on the bridge when the distress call arrived. I stared at my glowing phone screen underneath the fading and hazy sky. Several texts had come in. I read them one by one.

She's dying.

She needs you.

Come NOW.

I leaned against the rotting wood of the bridge and closed my eyes for a moment. A breeze swept across my face, teasing the tears at the corners of my eyes to tremble and trickle down my cheek. I wiped my face with the back of my hand and rode off on my bike as lavender and taffy clouds bled across the horizon.

The house was concoction of peeling butterscotch paint and ivory shutters. I stared at its exhausted stoop and laid my bike against the squeaky deck railing. The front door opened and my best friend's mother, her face a collage of puffy red and stern white, gestured for me to enter.

Rem's bedroom was unusually silent. The band and movie posters had faded long ago. Only white-streaked paper remained. The desk had crumpled notebook papers and broken pencils littered across its surface, appearing like a ravaged forest gasping on its side.

The worst sight was Rem. Her copper-colored skin clung to her bones like paper to wet glass. Around her head like a melting halo, her glossy black hair was crumpled on her pillow. When her eyes lifted and met mine, a tiny gasp escaped from my mouth.

"Avalon?" she whispered. Her hand twitched on the blanket, beckoning me forward.

"Rem, don't look now but there's a beautiful girl in bed," I said, sitting down on the edge of her mattress.

Rem grabbed my hand with her frail, cold one and smiled a little. Her mouth trembled in place before falling back into a heavy frown. “You flirt.”

I grinned and squeezed her hand. A sob thrust against my throat and my lungs filled with the thick scent of death. I forced myself to look directly into her brown eyes and not notice the purple crescents weighing down on her bottom eyelids. I noticed the two pretty peaks that lifted her top lip towards her rounded nose, and not the way the darkness around her grew thicker as the lights in her eyes dimmed.

“I need you,” Rem exhaled. She let her cheek fall against the pillow. “I need you to fight for me.”

I swallowed hard and replied with a stiff nod. I pulled the desk chair to the bed and relaxed in the seat. I slipped out a blinking metal wreath from my backpack and placed it on my head. An identical silver machine sat on Rem’s head, blinking a dark red.

“Close your eyes,” I said, grabbing her hand.

An all-consuming white replaced the bright pink of my eyelids. A single pop-up screen blinked at me. I willed my consciousness to reach out and accept the invite. Within moments, the white dropped away like a curtain and I entered Rem’s mind.

I stumbled into a snow-laden field surrounded by black evergreens that glared with black spikes and torn bark. When I breathed in, the acrid smell of smoke clawed its way into my lungs.

An old-fashioned turquoise car slumped into the slushy mix of red dirt and gray snow. From the driver’s seat, a blazing tower of fire roared at the cobalt and marigold sky. Rem stood before the car, covered with a long lace dress and ankle boots. Her shoulders were stiff as she gazed silently at the brilliant exhibit before her.

“Rem?” I called. When my hand landed on her shoulder, she whipped around. Black pits stared back at me. A body of swirling tangerine, canary, lime, and garnet wore Rem’s black curls and lace dress. My hand turned a dark sapphire at the contact point with the moaning creature.

“Get away from Rem!” I screamed, tackling the creature and tossing them to the ground. “Leave her alone!”

The creature grew in size as I gripped its pulsing throat. My arms were quickly consumed with flaring violet and indigo. It’s vehement glow brought forth tears to my squinting eyes. The creature seized my waist and flung me towards the spiny obsidian trees. The needles gathered on the crisp snow bit into my palms as I crashed. The creature hurtled towards me and lifted its clawed hand to swipe across me. Time slowed down as our gazes locked onto each other. Within their black pits of eyes, I encountered a longing gone arid after a too long period of desolation. I saw a raven and the dying fire within its trembling chest. I realized there was only one way to reach the raven. To save her.

“I LOVE YOU!” I screamed.

The creature faltered and its colors stopped swirling.

“I love you so much, Rem,” I said, my voice cracking.

The creature bowed its head and dropped to its knees. As they hit the ground, honey-colored petals exploded into the air and I was transported to a sunflower field.

Rem laid on her side in a rolling sea of gold flowers. Her hair fluttered in the light breeze as she gazed at the folded sunflower beside her face. I approached her slowly, feeling the flowers bend and snap beneath me.

Rem continued gazing at the ground as she said, “I can’t find the light anymore.”

“It’s still there,” I reassured her.

“I push and climb and I always end back in the cold mud,” she whimpered. “I’m always alone and forsaken.”

I knelt beside her. My hand brushed her arm. “You are not alone or forsaken. You’re just lost.”

Rem raised her brown eyes. They were tender like the soil beneath her. “Why is it impossible to escape this?”

“It’s not impossible. You just can’t do it alone.”

Rem reached out her hand. “Am I loved?”

As our hands met, our fingers intertwined. “*So much.*”

“Do I matter?”

“Infinitely so.”

“Don’t let go,” she whispered.

I kissed her forehead and said, “Never.”

The light of the sky softened to a pale pink and the sunflowers were whisked away as I scooped Rem up from the ground. When we both woke up, Rem collapsed in my arms. A gasp erupted from her, muddled by a quavering sob.

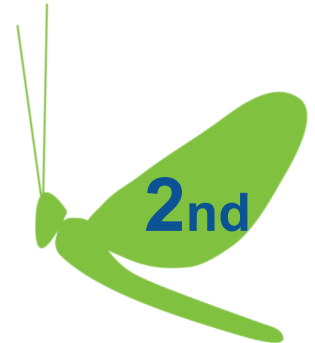
“Thank you,” she said, her face pressed against my shoulder.

“Everything can be overcome,” I said, laying my head on top of hers and sighing.

The ivory shutters outside the window moaned as the wind disturbed their rigidity. The last few ribbons of gold unfurled at the horizon and trickled into the bedroom. Our intertwined hands were brushed with the fading light. I poured all the affection every cell of my body could conjure into my gaze, into our touching skin. I wanted her to have it all. Warmth softened the edges of her face as we contemplated each other. Her eyes were twin pools of sunlight through a glass bottle of whisky. In them, I saw the raven again. This time, the black wings were displayed like a stretch of infinite midnight, resplendent and defiant against a shipping wind. Its blazing feather rippled as it soared. I smile, disarranging the trails of tears on my cheeks, and kissed her softly as the darkness evanesced.

Author Biography:

SOFIA LOURDETTE SANTAMARIA-MICHER is a seventeen-year-old senior in high school and a writer of color. Born in Mexico and raised in Wisconsin, she currently makes her abode next to Lake Michigan. Her love of storytelling has been since the early days of her childhood and is now working on getting her novels published. Sofia Lourdet is a trilingual, scientist, dancer, and musician. She can be found staring out the window pondering the universe, with her nose in a book, or exploring her creativity. She has received various awards, including valedictorian recognition, and is going to college next year.

Bloomed**Alydia Hug-Hafer****Teen Short Story**

As Rosylin troweled the fresh dirt with her garden shovel, she didn't bother to keep her hands clean, in fact she let the soft silt seep into her pores. The feeling of being outside again delight er just as the sound of an ice cream truck's musical tune would thrill a child.

She had never been fond of winter, so when spring came, the first thing she did was plant her flowers. Rosylin grabbed the seed out of her pocket and place the seed—one that her mother had given to her as a gift—in the hole she had dug with her kind, gentle hands.

Rose's mom had died that last summer from a heart attack. She was 17 when it happened, surely old enough to recognize how sorrowful it had been. Rosylin could recall every single scream of terror when her mom collapsed, every teardrop falling from faces when a breath never escaped her mouth, every tremble and quiver when they came to the conclusion that her mother *had* passed away. Everything... she could remember everything.

Rose took a second to rub her temples; the memories that flooded her mind were giving her a headache.

Her mother had loved to garden with Rosylin, she had even named her two daughters after aspects of nature: Rosylin (Rose) and Willow.

She picked the shovel back up and scooped the dirt over the seed. Her head veered left to the crunching sound of a dead branch.

“Hehehe” tittered a voice, smaller than a whisper.

“Um, hello?” Instantly, she sprung to her feet, dropping her shovel. Attentively, Rosylin glanced around a tree where she assumed the giggle had come from. She knew she heard something, but she couldn’t see anyone. Fear cloaked her face. Who could be there?

A petite, little girl came forth from the bush she was hiding behind.

“Willow! You startled me!” Rosylin yelled.

“Hahaha! You were *terrified*, weren’t you Rose?” Willow said wryly. Embarrassed, Rosylin tried to make a joke out of it, “Well, at least you weren’t a squirrel, that would be *horrifying!*” The two girls laughed obnoxiously. Willow looked at Rosylin’s hands with revulsion. Rose followed her glance and rolled her eyes. Willow had a strong aversion to gardening, for it was too dirty and she didn’t have the patience for it.

“You don’t have to *enjoy* gardening; just don’t glare at me in disgust.”

“Whatever,” Willow answered absently, then walked away.

“Double-digits! Woohoo!” Rosylin’s dad shouted. Willow smiled. It was her 10th birthday, and Willow was exhilarated.

“Blow out your candles! Make a wish,” Rose said, obviously psyched as well. Willow closed her eyes and searched through her mind for a wish to make. *I wish Mom never died.* She let the air she held in escape from her lips as she blew out the candles.

“Happy birthday!” her sister and father chorused and they all came together into a hug.

Rosylin was outside, tending to her flower, when Willow came in behind her.

“Do you want to go to the park with me? Laura will be there too,” asked Willow, hoping for a yes.

“How about Dad takes you?”

“Okay,” Willow responded, knowing she couldn’t get the answer she wanted. When she walked away, Rosylin turned her head to Willow but then almost instantly redirected it back to her garden.

As the weeks came by, Rose’s flower grew more and more, but hadn’t yet blossomed. Rosylin was expecting it to bloom anon.

Willow grabbed her kite from the garage and dashed outside. She only spent a few seconds running back and forth, around and around ‘til the wind picked it up and carried it high into the sky. She giggled and smiled as she wandered around the backyard, steering the kite left and right. She got it stuck in a tree twice, but climbed her way up, as a monkey would, and fetched it each time. As Willow was merrily playing along, she unwittingly trampled over something. She looked to where she had stepped and saw a flower, the flower her sister had planted. Willow gasped, knowing Rosylin would be furious with her. The stem was snapped in half. No matter how much she attempted to put it back together, she knew nothing could mend it. Her hands were filthy and painted with dirt after trying to fix it with no success. “Ugh,” Willow murmured to herself. Her nose was scrunched in revulsion. She wiped it on the dewy, moist grass. The sound of footsteps came around the corner and Willow ran behind a tree, letting the leaves veil over her face. She peeked through the branches to see her sister with a shovel in hand, heading to the garden.

It wasn’t long before Rosylin discovered the broken flower. Rose looked dejected as she eyed it, once standing tall, now in ruins. She fell to her knees, eyes wide. She did the same thing Willow had, trying to hold the flower up to make it straight. Nothing. Nothing worked. She couldn’t give up hope, not

yet. She stood up and looked around, searched the ground, as if the answers lied there, as if written down on the dirt was what to do. Rose found the nearest tree in sight and broke off a slender branch. She threw it, threw it at the air with all her power. About to grab another branch to hurl, Rosylin turned. She saw a figure just inches away from her. Almost immediately, Willow knew she had been spotted.

“You did it, didn’t you,” Rose said, as if the two sisters were having a normal conversation.

“It was an accident,” Willow responded shamefully, avoiding her sister’s eyes. Rose didn’t know what to say, for she was too upset. She turned around, ignoring Willow, and trotted away. Willow took a step to run after her, but she could only manage the words *I’m Sorry* out of her mouth.

While lying on her bed, Willow felt guilty. She gazed at her bedding, trying not to think about the hatred Rose felt for her right then. She noticed each color, observed each pattern, and remarked each wrinkle on the comforter. Willow rolled over so her face met the bedding and groaned.

A whimper came from the room across from hers, Rosylin’s room. Willow stood up and scampered there, silently, and peered through the door left ajar.

Rose was at her desk reading. The pages were filled with more drops of tears than words; her eyes were damp and splotches of pink colored her face.

Determined, Willow went to the kitchen and rummaged through the drawer where Rosylin kept all of her seed packets. She found the one she wanted and hurried outside. Right next to the fractured flower, Willow used her hands to dig into the moist silt. She hated the dirt that lingered on her fingers but kept digging. She planted the seed into the ground and smiled. Willow walked back inside, excited for her sister to see the surprise, and to wash her hands.

Willow and Rosylin both looked at the newly bloomed flower.

“Thank you,” Rose whispered to her sister.

“I’m just glad you could forgive me,” Willow said, relieved. She took a moment to ponder about her birthday wish. *I wished that Mom never passed away, yet the best things happened through change. I know I can never get over the fact that she is gone though, she is dead and things are different, but maybe I just have to see the beauty in difference. Like a simple seed to this beautiful flower, how renewal changed it, transformed it.*

“A rose...for you,” Willow spun to fix her gaze on her sister, “Rose.”

Saved Devils: The Heroes Among Them
Cristi Isaula-Reyes



It was difficult for society to move on after tasting the sliver of death. They were reminded that death constantly loomed over their heads. Twenty years ago, the sun merely ended all society, but they were saved by an anonymous man that society dubbed ‘The Savior’. Sorrowfully, all that was left from the world-renowned Savior’s time on Earth is the legend mentioning his death and how to find his reincarnated soul. Directly, the stone legend stated that The Savior is ‘amongst them with a scarred soul’ and that ‘if burned, they will not burn’. Civilization, thereby, believed The Savior was to be incarnated as a man living lavishly- as redemption for The Savior’s sacrifice in his previous life. Hence, society searched and searched for The Savior, burning thousands of hands of the top one percent but to no avail. Until The Savior *was* found, but in the most unusual place.

There was a small, dolorous town where the sun always seemed to dim from the sins of the inhabitants. Saved Diaboli was full of unfortunate mishappenings; truthfully, it was a rare as finding a needle in a haystack for the town to receive newcomers. Yet, on one cloudy evening, the needle was found. A kind-hearted woman was scheduled to move into one of Saved Diaboli's dull apartments that same day. For the town where everyone knew of one another's bad karma, it was an understatement to say that the town inhabitants were intrigued by her soon-coming-presence. They wondered what kind of misfortune she endured for her to move into the town where the residents only seemed to bond over their miseries. Most of them supposed a fire. Soon thereafter, they would find out that the woman was a key to all their doors. The day that the woman would arrive would soon be the day celebrated by all future generations, however.

So, there she was. A woman in a pencil skirt wearing a bright cyan button top and cascading her glowing, bright hair down her shoulders. It seemed as though her hair shone brighter than the sun in Saved Diaboli. She bowed her head slightly as she exited the glaring yellow taxi. Her heels would've likely made a loud clicking noise each time she took a step, but the roads of Saved Diaboli were mere dusty sand paths and they forbid so from occurring. Instead, the only sound in Saved Diaboli was the sand that wished and drifted up into the air, burning the average person's eyes down to the cornea. The woman walked toward the old town square that lied dead in the middle of Saved Diaboli. She was used to the eyes. The dwellers of the town curiously walked out of their shams to watch her in curiosity. No one spoke to her.

The woman clicked her silent heels until she accidentally passed a homeless man huddled on the ground on the corner of the outside of the only shop in Saved Diaboli. She looked down at the man, realizing he carried a bulging scar on his right eye. Unbeknownst to her, the man was named Vulnus. Everyone in town knew Vulnus. In contrast, no one knew where he came from. Nicknamed Slash, there wasn't necessarily a positive association regarding him. In fact, contrary to his nickname, he was not exotic nor the main character of an action movie. Frankly, he was the human embodiment of pathetic: a poor, homeless man that contributed nothing to society. People would even often whisper that The Savior should've let useless people

like him die. With posture so bad, people joked that he must've carried the whole world on his back at one point.

It was nearly a silent encounter. Vulnus, with his knees tucked into his chin and his arms wrapped around them, his head down, as well. He wearily lifted his head, barely peeking above his frail arms to see the woman. She slightly frowned at his state. Gently, she placed a few coins next to him.

“Get yourself something warm, won’t ya,” she whispered and, just like that, she walked away, practically disappearing. Vulnus hesitantly gazed at the coins, then snatched them and began to head into the shop that he was nestled at. His back nevertheless curved into a c-shaped, carrying the weight of the watchful eyes of his neighbors. The bell of the diner dinged as Vulnus walked in barefoot, his feet padding the cold floor. He took a seat at a booth and waited for a waitress to tend to him. In the back of the shop, the waitresses played rock, paper, scissors in order to decide who would get to serve him. Fearing his meager tip, they played as though their life depended on it until the loser groaned and walked up to Vulnus with her notepad and pen. She skipped introducing herself as his waitress today, finding it useless considering she only did that for the people who looked like they would drop a hefty tip.

Vulnus gulped and cleared his throat before his raspy voice released a quiet, “Just a burger and a coffee.” There was a pause as he nearly forgot his manners, then he quickly added on a, “Please.” The waitress tried her best to cover up her disgusted features. She slightly furrowed her brows and her upper lip fought to stay static. The man *reeked*. To put it simply, she fought the urge to hurl her lunch in his face.

“I’ll get that right out for you,” she swiftly replied with a desperate attempt to keep her professional composure. Beginning with the coffee, the woman carried out the coffee pot from the back and strode toward Vulnus. She began pouring the hot drink into the mug, the coffee sloshing around as it made its way in. “Now, we did just make this batch, so I have to warn you that it’s somewhat warm,” she added. Warm was an understatement as the coffee was practically boiling, bubbles rising up to the surface in scorching hot pain. In response, Vulnus merely nodded.

All was going well until someone accidentally bumped into the waitress from behind. Boiling hot coffee was flung all over Vulnus, burning through his thin clothes, supplying him with fourth-degree burns.

The diner exploded.

“Oh my god! What have you done! Sir, are you okay? Someone get napkins!” the waitress shrieked. Members of the diner scurried and returned with rags and towels. “Here. Pass me your hand and I’ll start drying you off,” babbled she. The waitress snatched Vulnus’ hand. She prepared herself for the sight of a bloody, red burned hand. The sight, However, was much worse. The waitress furrowed her eyebrows in confusion before her eyes widened and her jaw dropped.

“Oh...my god,” she whispered. The diner froze in shock. Bodies slapped their hands over their mouths as their eyes began to water. “You. It’s you.”

Vulnus carried no burns.

Author Biography:

Cristi Isaula-Reyes - 16 years of age and high school sophomore in Oshkosh, WI.

SHORT STORY

Babinski's Sack **Terry Steele**



At first, no one noticed the white-haired woman wearing a blue gown, green shawl, and silver slippers as she climbed the small knoll in the center of the park. The woman carried a large stiff paper sack by its rope handles. On the side of the sack were printed the words, Babinski's. We Deliver. She set the sack in the center of the low hill. The sack quivered. It throbbed. It sputtered.

Nearby, a warm breeze blew across a field, lofting kites high into the sky. Children clutched strings tightly as grandparents offered dubious advice. The older folks did not spot the white-haired woman nor her quaking sack. But the children did.

The white-haired woman knelt on her knees and reached into the sack. She pulled out a handful of milkweed seeds dangling from silky white parachutes. She gently tossed the seeds into the air where they lazily floated above her head. She then blew on the seeds and they sailed up and up until they mingled with the kites.

Her sack shifted. It wobbled. The white-haired woman put both arms inside and slowly withdrew them from the sack. Orange and black butterflies clothed her fingers, wrists, elbows, and shoulders. Their wings pulsed momentarily before the butterflies flitted from her arms and climbed into the sky to join the milkweed seeds that were frolicking with the kites.

The children stared with delight. But their grandparents did not notice.

The white-haired woman wearing a blue gown, green shawl, and silver slippers stood up and gently tapped the side of the large paper sack. She stepped back. The sack jostled and buzzed. Suddenly a cyclone of honeybees exploded from the sack and darted toward a pumpkin patch that stretched beyond the kite field. A pair of grey parrots followed and joyously chased the bees.

The children handed their kite strings to their grandparents and walked toward the knoll.

Nearby, boys and girls dashed about in a blur of checkered jerseys and striped uniforms, attempting to kick a ball into a net. Parents cheered loudly and hollered unheeded instructions. They did not detect the white-haired woman nor her sack. But players on the sidelines reflexively turned to watch.

The white-haired woman put her hand into the sack and pulled out a fuzzy white bear cub by the scruff of its neck. She nuzzled the cub's soft fur before setting the cub on the ground. The woman reached back into her sack and drew out a second bear cub. She gently squeezed the cub to her breast, then set it next to the first. The squalling cubs romped in the grass and then tumbled down the hill. They scampered across the soccer pitch.

The ball rolled to a stop as surprised players watched the cubs clamber across the field toward the woods beyond. Their cheering parents did not notice.

The white-haired woman wearing a blue gown, green shawl, and silver slippers once again peered into the jiggling sack. She reached in, poked about, and soon her hand emerged grasping a floppy ferret with four black feet. Then a second and a third were plucked from the sack. The ferrets spilled down the hill like a tangle of slinkies. They, too, skittered across the soccer pitch and disappeared into the woods.

The white-haired woman furled up the sleeves of her gown and plunged both hands into the sack. This time she drew out four hairy-nosed wombats and an iguana. She scratched the wombats behind their ears and the iguana under its chin, then set them on the ground. The wombats sniffed the air. The iguana licked its nose with its tongue. Then all meandered down the hill, across the soccer pitch, and into the woods.

More children stopped their play and drifted toward the hill to see what the white-haired woman wearing a blue gown, green shawl, and silver slippers would pull out of the sack next.

A playground lay on the opposite side of the hill. Mothers pushed toddlers on creaking swings as fathers nervously waited at the bottom of slides to catch their plummeting children. Just as the children prepared to launch themselves down the slides, they paused to gaze at the white-haired woman on the hill.

The woman removed a dripping octopus from her sack. She glanced at the grass and put it back.

Then she measured the sack with her hands. So high, so long, so deep. She rubbed her chin, thought a moment, and tipped the stiff paper container on its side. The sack rustled. It trembled. It danced. The woman gently tapped the sack with the toe of her silver slipper. And with loud squawks, three penguins bolted from the sack. They waddled to the bottom of the hill and paused to look about.

The sack continued to shimmy. Then slowly, cautiously, the wooly head of a small red panda peered from the sack. She took a step out and warily inspected the hill. Suddenly, a large furry paw from within the sack gave her a playful swat on her behind. The startled panda leapt and whirled down the hill. A snow leopard crept from the sack. He considered giving chase, but the white-haired woman tenderly clutched his whiskers and held him back. Disappointed, the large cat lay near the sack to loll in the sun.

Children jumped off teeter-totters, climbed down from the jungle gym, and wandered toward the hill to see what else would shuffle, shamble, or ramble from the white-haired woman's astonishing sack.

They did not wait long. The sack quaked. Presently, a long black tail appeared. The tail was followed by a low and furry body. Then the flat head and small black eyes of a bearcat materialized. The musty bearcat carefully scratched an ear with one of its claws, then gazed about. The white-haired woman patted its head before it strolled down the hill to join the penguins and red panda.

The white-haired woman put her ear to the sack. She quickly stood up and stepped back. A large bumpily crocodile emerged. It smiled at the woman as only a bumpily crocodile can. The woman smiled back.

The penguins spotted the playground and wombled over to explore. The other animals followed. The panda scurried, the bearcat sauntered, and the crocodile crawled. The penguins jumped onto the merry-go-round. The panda scrambled across a teeter-totter. The bearcat climbed into the jungle gym. The crocodile sniffed the air and ambled toward the creek behind the playground. One by one, the other animals stopped

their play and pursued the crocodile.

Children on slides watched. Toddlers in swings watched. Doting mothers and nervous fathers did not notice.

The snow leopard that had been resting in the grass atop the hill, stretched, yawned, and leisurely trailed behind the crocodile, the penguins, the panda, and the bearcat. As he strolled across the playground, several alarmed mothers instinctively wrenched their toddlers from the swings and clutched them tightly. The women anxiously scanned the playground. But they saw nothing.

The children were delighted. Several ran after the leopard. But before they could catch him, the large cat faded into the shade of the tree-lined creek. So, the youngsters turned and joined the growing crowd of children surrounding the low hill.

On another side of the knoll, a church picnic unfolded in the shade of an oak grove. Old men pitched horseshoes while gray-haired women filled long tables with potato salad, coleslaw, and corn on the cob. Young men talked of vintage cars. Mothers sat in lawn chairs, bouncing babies on their knees, while exchanging recipes and gossip. A very, very old man dozed in a wheelchair. None saw the white-haired woman standing on the hill. None saw her sack. Only the children playing tag stopped to watch her.

The white-haired woman wearing a blue gown, green shawl, and silver slippers got on her hands and knees and poked her head inside the sack. She pulled her head out, but no animals followed. The woman picked up the sack, turned it upside-down, and gave it a gentle shake. Out popped a baby orangutan. The orangutan swung from a rope handle for a moment, then dropped to the ground. She clung to the white-haired woman's knees as the woman gazed up into the sack and gave it another cautious jiggle.

Soon the large head, then body, then tail of a long and thick python slid to the ground in a jumble. Its eyes blinked in the bright sun. The orangutan scrabbled upon the back of the snake. The children surrounding the hill moved aside as the great spotted python and its passenger silently glided past toward the picnic. The snake slipped through the cluster of women reclining in their lawn chairs. Its tail upended an empty chair as it

passed. A woman sitting close by absently set the chair upright as if it simply had been blown over by a breeze.

Young men continued to speak of classic cars. A bearded man tossed a horseshoe around a stake with a clang. Gray-haired women placed desserts on the picnic tables. None noticed the snake. None noticed the orangutan.

Yet more children stopped their play to watch the animals pass. As did the very, very old man sitting in the wheelchair. He woke from his slumber, looked in the direction of the departing snake and orangutan, and grinned.

The white-haired woman wearing a blue gown, green shawl, and silver slippers set the paper sack upright on the ground. She stretched her muscles and cracked her knuckles. She took a deep breath. The sack convulsed and rumbled. It bellowed. It swelled as if ready to burst. Then the woman picked up the sack, turned it upside-down, and held it as far as she could from her blue gown and green shawl.

A massive black rhinoceros squeezed from the sack like toothpaste from a tube. She tumbled to the ground with a great thud. The rhinoceros looked at the woman, inspected the children, and stood up with a grunt. She shook dust from her horn to her fuzzy tail. The white-haired woman caressed its leathery skin as the rhinoceros waited for the children to make a path. The beast then calmly lumbered off to investigate the picnic.

The young men spoke of carburetors and transmissions as the rhinoceros passed among them. The women chatted of politics as the animal wove through their lawn chairs. Conversations briefly paused as the men and women attempted to identify the peculiar tingling deep inside their brains. They glanced at each other, shrugged, and resumed their exchange.

The rhinoceros lingered at a picnic table long enough to eat a bowl of potato salad. The very, very old man sitting in the wheelchair chuckled. Then she plodded through the horseshoe game and vanished behind the tennis courts.

The white-haired woman wearing a blue gown, green shawl, and silver slippers gave the sack one last shake. Nothing more came out. She placed the sack on the ground, reached inside, and pulled out a telescope. She peered deep into the sack, smiled, and tossed the telescope back.

Then the white-haired woman took hold of the two rope handles... and climbed inside the sack.

Her feet and knees disappeared first. Then her legs and waist. The woman raised her arms over her head, wiggled and squiggled, and down went her chest, shoulders, and head. All that remained visible were her hands.

The children stared in amazement.

The hands of the white-haired woman grasped the rims of the sack and began to neatly fold it from the inside, gathering the top edges, bending them down, making the sack flatter and flatter. Soon the woman's hands receded into the sack and only her fingertips remained. Her fingers patiently folded the sides downward, over and again, until the paper sack lay flat on the ground.

The fingers then folded the sack inward, as if folding a piece of paper in half, then half again, over and over, until the sack was collapsed into the tiniest piece imaginable. With one last fold, the sack and the white-haired woman wearing a blue gown, green shawl, and silver slippers... disappeared.

Grandparents reeled in the kites. Gray-haired women cleared the remains of apple pies and cupcakes from the picnic tables. Old men gathered up their horseshoes. Women folded their lawn chairs.

They then noticed their children staring at the hill. And wondered why.

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A Farm Boy Starts School

Larry Scheckel



We eight first and second graders were dismissed for the 15-minute mid-morning recess. We ran around and most of us ended up behind the school, away from the prying eyes of older students or Teacher. One of the two girls said, “I will show you something if you won’t tell.” She lifted up her dress, pulled down her pants, squatted down, and provided a good view for several boys. “See, I’m different than you,” she happily revealed. Yes, she was different all right. We boys got an education that is not part of the curriculum. Such was life in 1949 in the one-room country Oak Grove School outside of Seneca in the heart of Crawford County in southwest Wisconsin.

September 6, 1948 was my first day of school at the Oak Grove District #15 one-room country school. Mom fitted me with blue denim bib overalls, with straps over the shoulder, buckle hooks on the ends, buttons on the sides and pockets on each hip. I sported a new light blue shirt and wore new farm shoes.

I had learned to tie my own shoes a few months earlier. There were hints, yes, downright threats, that if I couldn’t tie my own shoes, I couldn’t go to school. I checked the Johnson One□Stop Feed Store calendar every time my brothers and sisters mentioned school. I had circled the date, then counted backward to see how many days were left before I started school.

In late August and early September, second crop hay was done, the corn was ripening, and squirrels started to store acorns. Late August and early September in southwestern Wisconsin can be “hot and sticky.” No home or school in Seneca Township had air conditioning. If you want “air conditioning” you opened the window. September 1948 was hot.

I started out with my older sister, Teresa, grade 7, and my brother, Phillip, grade 2. Reaching the end of the driveway, only 50 yards from the farmhouse, we turned right and began the mile-long trek on the gravel road to Oak Grove School. We passed the “diggings”, a dirt bank that Phillip, Bob, and I had sculpted out with hoe and toy shovel, making “roads” to run our toy trucks, tractors, and other miniature farm machinery.

Phillip was a year older and Bob a year younger than me. We didn’t realize it at the time that we were growing up together. Bob was left behind, in tears. Mom consoled him with “you’ll be going to school real soon next year,” but next year is an eternity to a kid.

It was a cool morning when we awoke to the company of roosters, robins, and mourning doves. Bright and sunny, by 8:30 am it was already 75 degrees and climbing. Teacher rang the “first bell” at 8:30 a.m. We didn’t hear it on that day of September 6, 1948. Teresa said, “The wind has to be in the right direction to hear it, we’re too far away.”

On our journey to Oak Grove School, we passed the bushes that had strange round smooth berries. They were green and later turned red. We were told they might be poisonous and not to eat them. We saw patches of goldenrod, tiger lilies, and milkweed. Milkweed emits a white sticky substance that looked like milk, hence the name. We boys tried it once, it sure didn’t taste like milk, very bitter. The pods started bursting exposing the milkweed floss. Our older sister, Rosemary, and big brother, Ed, gathered that milkweed floss a few years earlier to put into lifejackets for sailors and jackets for airmen in WWII. They dried it in the sun, stuffed it in a mesh onion sack, and took it to school. They earned two dimes for a full sack.

We watched for honeysuckle, the familiar four pods, reddish in color. We picked the ends and sucked on them. Yes, they tasted just like honey. We passed the big oak tree that we had sat around while haying or shocking oats just a few weeks earlier, then on to the Bernier farm. We watched for wild blackberries and red raspberries that grew in abundance next to the road. It was a gravel road, and the berries had a sheen of dust thrown up by passing cars. Best to catch those berries right after a rainstorm. We ate them anyway.

On the slight downslope to the Bernier farm was a patch of Canadian thistle. They were the bane of any farmer, seemingly to spring up anywhere. Big sister Teresa said they were a perennial. Phillip asked, “what’s

that?” to which Teresa explained, “they come up every year.” Neighbor John Payne called them the “lettuce from hell” thistle. The leaves have an array of prickly barbs that seemed to say, “stay away from me.” In contrast, each plant had a beautiful pink fragrant flower. If you stood back away from a Canadian thistle plant and waited a few minutes, you could count on a bee using the flower as a landing pad.

Now in the early Fall, the grasshoppers were out and about, jumping up ahead of our steps, and alighting a few feet away. Dad told us boys how huge swarms of grasshoppers out West would completely wipe out whole crops.

Dad said, “In 1931 when Mom and I got married, they had a swarm go through South Dakota. We had Scheckels living out there. Cornstalks were completely eaten and fields were left bare. The clouds of grasshoppers were so thick, it blocked out the sun. Grasshoppers had to be shoveled off the sidewalks with scoop shovels.” Dad said not to worry, as that happened years ago, and those grasshopper swarms were wiped out.

On the mile-long trek were the sounds of 1948 rural Wisconsin. Every farm had one or more dogs. Dogs won’t get up to bark at regular 40 mph traffic, but kids on foot are a novelty to Pooch, and a greeting is in order. Oh, those dogs could hear us coming, the loose gravel crunching beneath our feet. The Berniers, first farm on our journey, had a long-haired mangy Collie. We could count on a gentle bark, before sidling up for the expectant pat on the head.

Kozelka, next farm down, owned a short-hair black dog named Curly. We argued over which breed. Curly came to greet us because he heard the Bernier dog bark, and the Bernier farmhouse was only a few hundred yards from the Kozelka farmstead. The Kozelka kids had to shoo that dog back otherwise it would follow us to school, and often did. Curly wore out his welcome at Oak Grove School when he ate the eggs set out of the Easter egg hunt. Several Kozelka kids joined the Scheckel group.

We made our own sounds. Throw a small chunk of gravel at a tree and listen for the zing sounds as it passed through the leaves. If we spotted a squirrel’s nest in a tree, quite common along the last stretch of the mile-long hike, a few rocks would be pitched in that direction.

Brother Ed showed us boys how to take a blade of grass and hold it between cupped hands, making it into a reed, blow hard, and make it screech with a high pitch tone. We thought we were making a “joyful noise onto the Lord.” Our walking companions did not agree.

We labored up the big hill by the Ingham farm. It was slow going as my short six-year-old legs could not meet the exhortations of sister Teresa to “can you walk a little faster?” Half - way up the hill, the Ingham dog, Winston, would be waiting.

Phillip asked one of the Ingham men, “What kind of dog is that?” Tom Ingham replied, “Half English bulldog, a quarter boxer, and a quarter retriever, we think.” Winston had folds of skin around his face, yellowed teeth that showed, a bit of tongue hanging out and often a slobber out both sides of this mouth. He looked like he would take a bite out of a kid at any time, but Winston was a gentle soul. I always tried to figure out which parts were bulldog, boxer, and retriever. It seemed like he was a whole dog and not put together in pieces.

Teresa wanted to know why they named him Winston, but she said she was afraid to ask, so Phillip asked. Bob Ingham replied, “We named him after Winston Churchill.” That didn’t make any sense to me at the time, as I had no idea who Winston Churchill was. Much later did I learn that Winston Churchill looked like a bulldog with a small face and prominent jowls. And that Churchill was the beloved wartime leader in England fiercely loyal to his people and defending them against Nazi aggression.

Tom, Bob, and Jack Ingham were English bachelor farmers. Their house was on the south side of the road and their barn, granary, and hog house was on the north side, necessitating frequent road crossings. The Ingham men had one of the first milking machines on Oak Grove Ridge. If the Inghams were milking late, we could hear the motor running the compressor.

I did find out later that the Inghams were one of the early settlers on Oak Grove Ridge and a whole row or two are buried near the back of St. Patrick’s Cemetery in Seneca. Records show that James Ingham was born in Lancashire, England and came to the United States in 1856. He died in 1901 and his wife, Nancy, died in 1889. One of their sons, Isaiah, married Anna Bernier. Another son, John married Ellen Lawler. It was John and Ellen’s children that we Scheckel kids knew as adults: Tom, Bob, Jack, Margaret, and James.

James married Eleanor Crowley and all seven of their children attended Oak Grove School as kids. Margaret taught school at Oak Grove for some years then became postmistress in Lynxville. Tom died of a heart attack in 1963 while pouring milk into the cream separator. It was the first time, at age 21, that I was asked to be a pallbearer. Wakes or visitations were in homes, not funeral parlors. The funeral procession was from the Ingham farmhouse to St. Patrick's Church in Seneca.

Sounds, other than dog barks, greeted us along the hilly gravel road. The Aspenson farm, with all white buildings, could be seen due north of our Scheckel farm. Temron and Clara had five daughters. Those girls attended Oak Grove School but had all graduated before I attended. They walked across fields and through woods to get to the school, a much shorter route than taking the roads.

One of their cows was fitted with a cowbell, and if the wind was in the right direction, we could hear that bell while walking to and from school. One time my brother, Bob, told the Teacher, Mrs. Beihl, about the cow bell and she said that cows in Switzerland always wore cow bells. "That way, they don't get lost in all those mountains," she explained.

Adding to the sounds were, of course, birds. Crafty crows with their familiar "caw, caw" alighting in fields scavenging for food, bluebirds on fenceposts, starlings on the highline wires. Robins singing "cheer up, cheer up." Red-winged blackbirds with a conk-la-ree song, hiding in the tall brush alongside the road. The red-wing blackbirds did not bother us on our walks in the Fall of the year. Their youngsters were all out of the nest and on their own. In the Spring of the year, they would swoop down close to your head in an attempt to protect their nest. Some of those were really pesky. Get too close to their nest they're trying to protect, and you get dive-bombed by desperate mother birds. As a newly minted first grader, I wondered how they got that bright splash of red on the inboard section of each wing, fringed by a bright yellow band.

I had a genuine fear of red-winged blackbirds after Don Laskaski told us younger Scheckel boys, "Yeah, those red-winged blackbirds will dive down and take your head clean off, and while you're lying dead on the ground, the crows will come along and peck at your tummy and eat your guts out." I told this harrowing tale to Mom and she just laughed and said, "Birds will do no such thing. He's just trying to scare you." That comforted me somewhat, but I always kept a leery eye out for those red-winged blackbirds."

I knew I had it made after reaching the top of the Ingham hill, the highest point on our trek. We passed a bit of cockleburs to our left. I had heard stories about the dreaded cockleburs from older brother Phillip. Kids would pluck and ball up cockleburs and throw them at unsuspecting victims. The snowball of cockleburs would stick to clothing. We'll encounter them again on the way home.

A little pass the Ingham farm a walnut tree hung partially over the gravel road. Already, in early September, a few had fallen, thanks to a late summer windstorm. These smaller walnuts make wonderful throwing missiles. It's a reminder that in a month or so we Scheckel boys would be gathering walnuts from our trees along Short Cut Road, putting them in gunny sacks, hauling them back to the farmstead, shucking them out, and storing them in the basement to make fudge candy on wintertime Sundays.

A squirrel scolded us from a big oak in the Ingham pasture. Phillip, Bob, and I are too young to go squirrel hunting, but older brother, Ed, is 14, and starting high school, and he will take our family's single shot Stevens rifle and head out into the woods in a few weeks.

We pass an apple tree, now laden with rather small reddish apples. That would be high entertainment on the return trip home in the afternoon. Pluck an apple, take a bite, and throw the rest. Now we walk down a slight incline and around a small bend to the left, and the last 400 yards, the home stretch, to Oak Grove School, already 50 years old. Suddenly the school building came into view, and I got really nervous.

We kids didn't realize that we were walking across the Driftless Area, some of the most beautiful and unique landscape on Earth. The Driftless Area comprises 12.5 million acres in southwestern Wisconsin with portions in Minnesota, Iowa, and Illinois. This area was bypassed by the glaciers and thus not covered with the debris, or "drift" left behind when glaciers retreat, gravel, boulders, sand, silt, and clay.

Glaciers sheared off hills and the glacial drift filled in depressions. It left the land fairly flat. The Driftless Area is characterized by forested hills, valleys, small caves, springs, creeks, winding rivers, rock formations, and ancient rich farmland soil.

Native Americans had lived, traded, hunted, and grew food on this 220 miles-long and 110 miles wide area hundreds of years before the white man set foot. We were in the middle of some 24,000 square miles of beautiful landscape and did not know much of anything about it.

A few days before school started, Floyd Sutton would bring his hay mower and mow down the grass and weeds and small brush that has grown up during June, July, and August. John Sales was contracted to fill the cistern with fresh water.

Kids have gathered on the playground. There is lots of excitement, kids talking to each other that they may have not seen all summer, exchanging bits of banter and gossip. At 9 a.m. the school bell is rung by the teacher, Mrs. Louise Green. Kids move in. I didn't realize it at the time, but this scene could be witnessed by over 6,000 one-room country schools in Wisconsin, and 115 in Crawford County in 1948. Mrs. Green assigns a seat to each of the 28 students. My eight years at Oak Grove School had begun.

Author Biography

Larry Scheckel grew up on a farm in southwestern Wisconsin, one of nine children. He attended eight years of a one-room country school, four years of high school, off to the military for a spell, trained in electronics as a TV broadcast engineer, married, college, and started a teaching career. That career stretched over thirty-eight years teaching physics and aerospace science at Tomah, Wisconsin. Larry Scheckel has been named Tomah Teacher of the Year and Presidential Awardee. Larry and wife, Ann, are both retired teachers and live in Tomah, Wisconsin. Larry and Ann have published eight books.

Landing
Sherri Hoffman



From inside the yellow sky, the city is a grid flung against the east bench of the Wasatch Front and smoothed westward over the Salt Lake valley toward the mirage of water that is its famous lake. Mount Olympus is a jut of granite. Near the capital building, traffic clogs Gravity Hill, where visitors slip their cars into neutral to feel as if they are rolling uphill. The Mormon temple at heart of the city raises up a golden angel on its tallest spire, waiting for a Savior. When I was seven, I got sent home from school for insisting that the angel's name was Satchmo because that's what Lou always told me growing up. In my second-grade class, Sarah Smith called me a blasphemer, and when she wouldn't take it back, I dragged her to the ground by her skinny blonde ponytail.

park my rental at the curb. After all these years, Lou's white two-story appears unchanged behind the row of Chinese elm and sumac. Up the hill, his street runs into the university campus, and beyond its academic structures, the enormous red "U" is embedded in the hillside. New snow covers the terraced gardens layered across Leo's yard. A flat hedge is topped like an iced cake, scooped out in the center, branches stripped of bark, surrounded by the split oval prints of deer. I press my fingers into the tracks where they crisscross the walk.

Lou answers the door with an apron tied around his ample waist. Kiss the Cook. A twinge of guilt reminds me how I promised to send Andrea money for my share of the Father's Day gift. Lou was not legally able to marry our mother until after it was too late, nor was he our biological father, but after everything, he'd never abandoned us.

He folds me into his arms as if I am a small child. “How’s my girl?” he says. He takes my bag. “Your room will be so cold. I didn’t think you’d be here until tomorrow.”

I drop my jacket over the end of the worn, leather couch. “I see the deer are down early.”

“We got a good storm this weekend. About a foot. More up the canyons. You know how that always pushes them down. Life gets hard in the heights, and down they come.”

The kitchen is warm with cinnamon and curry, and over the blue-tiled fireplace, nag champa, a thin line of fragrance snaking up from a brass saucer on the mantel. Natural tapestries hang along the hallway between rows of framed photos, black and whites. My mother, skin like ivory, beehive hair and black lashes not her own. My 5-year-old self, towhead blonde before the Saltair carousel. Lou and our mother in their university caps and gowns, embracing, a black man and a white woman in the 60s. My child-self between them. Andrea straddled over our mother’s hip.

I own duplicates of these photos and keep them in a cardboard box that is never unpacked as I move, state to state. Taken only weeks before my mother died, they are a snapshot of that brief moment of calm, harbinger of the impending chaos that would change our lives forever. I’m told it was a single-car accident. My mother, drunk. The blue Dart spun off the road in Emigration Canyon.

The glass over my mother’s grey eyes is pristine. I touch her cheek. My finger leaves a print.

“I caught an earlier flight,” I say. In disgrace.

“I’m glad you did.” Lou sets a plate on the breakfast bar next to his. Steam rises from the wok on the stove and from a squat, silver rice-cooker plugged in at the end of the counter. Lou slices a yellow squash with a small knife. He cuts celery sticks and slides the saucer to me.

“Tell me how you are,” he says.

Work and school. I avoid too many details. My roommate has a new boyfriend. “He’s a lousy asshole,” I say. The celery stick crunches in my teeth.

Lou slices mushrooms and stirs them into the sizzle of the wok. “How do you figure? You working from a scale?”

I laugh then, and a weight lifts from my chest. Lou’s eyes crinkle in a splay of wrinkles on the smooth skin of his clean-shaven head. I’d never heard him disparage anyone. Except once—after my mother died and Lou was denied guardianship.

If you do this, he’d told the judge, *you are a human weed. I am their only family*. I remember how his great voice shook.

The judgment sent me and Andrea to separate foster homes with “discretionary visitation.” I saw Lou once a week; Andrea only on holidays.

“He hits on me when my roommate is at work,” I say. “That’s got to be down there at the low end of the scale.”

“Low enough to insult useful anatomy?” He winks. The wok sighs as he adds coconut milk. “Now tell me why you came home early, sugar.”

I scrape at the raw edge of a fingernail bitten short. “I don’t know. It wasn’t working. There’s got to be more than day in, day out, whatever that is. It feels like I’m circling the drain. It’s complicated. Sometimes I have bad dreams. Like I’m searching for something. Me. Or her.” The word forms in my head but doesn’t make it to my mouth. Mother. As if saying it raises it to existential. “Like we’re both lost.”

He eases a spoon through the curry. Languid bubbles melt into the surface. “Your mama loved you, sugar. Like no other.”

My voice fails me. Comes out in a whisper. “Tell me something else.”

“Something else,” he says. The wok rings a soft chime, spoon to its side. “Marjory was a beautiful woman. A beautiful woman who never found what she was looking for.” The lid folds in the aroma. “Not that she didn’t try. Whatever it was, that thing she searched for, maybe it wasn’t here to be found in this lifetime. Maybe it wasn’t us.”

He reaches over the counter to cup my chin in his hand. His hands smell of ginger.

“Can’t find what you choose not to see,” he says.

His pain is my own, but I push away from the moment. Change the subject. Tell him a funny story about the stewardess on my flight, and when he smiles again, the sadness is tucked behind the corners of his eyes, where I can pretend it isn’t there.

After dinner, Lou rolls out some plans on his drafting table, adjusts the lights and his glasses. From the phone in the kitchen, I call Andrea. We arrange to meet at Sticky Wickets, Andrea’s “Members Only” sports bar, which is the workaround for the state’s complicated liquor laws.

Andrea is late. The Lakers are on TV, not a huge draw for this crowd, two couples in a booth, two men at the pool table. I chew the inside of my lip. Anxiety ripples through my stomach. I shoot another drink.

The man at the other end of the bar is lean and small-waisted, button-down jeans and button-down plaid shirt. I ignore him as he circles around to approach from behind, a hunter’s move.

“Buy you a drink?” he says.

“How many?” I say. “I got fired yesterday.”

He takes the barstool next to me, so I favor him with a glance.

“So, we’ve got some time,” he says. He orders a round from the bartender.

Andrea shows up late. Empty shot glasses line the bar, tipped up.

“Looks like I missed the party,” she says. Eyes Clay. The empty glasses.

“My sister,” I say. The warm tingle has long since faded into disjointed thickness. “Annn-drea. Clay.”
Wave a hand. “Vice-versa.”

Clay pushes back from the bar. “I’ll be around,” he says.

Andrea turns her back on him, orders a glass of wine. “How’s L.A.? How’s the job? Boyfriend?”

“Good. Busy. “Oh, so now we’re caught up? I don’t think so.” Andrea is engaged to an attorney named Martin. Or Michael. Milll-ton. Her face is thicker, hair shorter, makeup heavier. Her mouth moves more on one side, asymmetrical to a fault. She talks, and I consider Clay. Consider another whiskey. The game. The Lakers have ten seconds. McAdoo with the ball. Cameras cut to one of the referees. None,” I say. “You?”

“Foul!” I pound my glass on the bar. “Definitely a foul. We’re robbed!”

Andrea inclines her head, tucks an invisible stray hair into its invisible place. “Don’t make a scene, sweetie.”

I take a breath. Vomit.

The bathroom is a single sink and a stall with no door. I splash water on my face, rinse my mouth. By the time I get cleaned up, Clay is waiting at the bar alone.

“My sister had an early morning,” I say. “You can’t blame her.”

“Sure,” Clay says. He holds up his keys. “We can take my car.”

The street is a swell of new snow that pillows the shapes of cars against the curb. Snowflakes spill out of a sky as if emerging from nothingness into the yellow streetlight. Clay parks above the university in an employee lot. He unlocks a large metal door at the back of one of the research buildings, holds the door and extends his arm. To his credit, he's more polite than some.

His office at the end of the hallway is narrow, walls whitewashed cinder block. Metal desk. Filing cabinets. Everything anyone could have anticipated until we reach the back wall beyond a second desk: lights, flash of fish, bubbles, and three shelves of aquariums, stacked floor to ceiling on the back wall. Green, blue, and purple flickers through glass and water. Fish that glitter. Fins like sails or lace. Bulged eyes. Luminous stripes. They zip and hover, suck at the glass, skulk under rocks and within the undulating green of plants.

"What is this place?" I poke at the glass of one of the tanks. Orange-feathered angels trail after my finger. "Do you work here?"

He hangs my coat on a wide silver hook by the door. "Sometimes. Mostly I work in the lab upstairs." A bottle of wine appears from a filing cabinet, a rabbit out of a hat. "This used to be the graduate intern lounge. Then one year, there were no interns." He spreads a red wool blanket across the desk.

A skinny fish with white sucker lips wriggles up the glass. "Hey, honey," I say. "It's all right."

"Hey, honey," he mimics. His mouth finds my ear. His hands slide to my waist and turn me in a slow pirouette. "It's all right." He pulls me into a kiss.

I break from his lips for a breath. The room tilts with colors, fish lights, and whiskey. He sweeps me up like a bride and places me on the top of the desk. Pours red wine into a white paper cup.

"No, thanks," I say. Refusing the mix of alcohol. Snobbery posing as responsible drinking.

"Don't be silly." He kisses my neck. Collar bones. Lips warm with wine. I kiss him back, unbutton his shirt, slide my hands over his bare chest. He strokes a finger down my belly. Eases me into the pile of pillows. Touches me. With his fingers. With his tongue.

Wine swirls behind my whiskey-eyes and spins in my head. I lift my hips to meet him. Close my eyes.

The desk slides beneath us with a nervous, grating squeak. The wool blanket slips on the desktop. His motion falters, and a coolness touches my skin where he's been, the space where he is no longer. A lamp tilts.

He is falling away.

Too late, I grab for him. Clutch at air.

He crashes backwards into the wall of fish. The orderly grid of aquariums folds around his body, metal and glass taking him in, drowning him in light and color. A great whoosh of glass and water rushes toward the main door. Lights spark. Die. In sudden darkness, my eyes see only the burnout tracers of the aquariums.

A fretful pattering slaps along the floor, pat, pat, like tiny, wet feet.

"Stay there!" Clay's voice shrills. "Don't' move!"

I scoot away into the shocking freeze of the cinderblock wall on my back. The dark is more than blackness; it's an abyss devoid of light. I feel for the blanket. The scratchy wool is wet with wine.

Somewhere across the room, there is a solid snap, and florescent lights assault my straining eyes. I squint for my bearings.

Clay hunches against the door, limp and blinking. At his feet, the aquariums are a glistening jigsaw of glass, plants, and remnants of ceramic aquarium ornaments. Gelatinous shapes of fish writhe in the wreckage, sacrificial carnage run ashore. A berm of gravel marks the point of impact and is spread, thinning out toward the door like a colorful beachhead. Watercolor clouds splotch the wet floor, clouded with bloody footprints.

A deep shivering takes over. My clothes have fallen to the wet floor, all but my jeans. I slide my legs into the cool denim.

"Bathroom," I get the word out. "I'm going to be sick."

“No!” Clay’s voice breaks. “No, no, no.” He crabs his way over the fish, strands of fin, sea grass and gawping gills, glass and scales. He scoops fish and plants into the single aquarium intact on the bottom rack, tipped half-way out.

I gape at the dead and dying fish flap-flapping on the cement. At Clay, exposed as he picks his way through the massacre. I take a breath. Draw my legs up under me. Gauge distance. Leap.

From the edge of the desk to the open doorway, I am one of the fallen, twisting against primal forces, looking for a landing.

A gray tongue of water stains the floor in the outer hall. The colorful gravel is dammed at the threshold of the door sweep. Clay peers out at me, eyes wide, lips slack. I step one foot up on the other, off the cold tiles in the hallway, and hold my arms tight to my chest. Clench my teeth to slow the chatter.

Clay reaches my coat out to me. The fleece is salvation. His hand dangles my boots from the doorway, one at a time.

“Bathrooms to the right,” he says. “You can’t get lost.”

Around the corner, I fall to my knees. My held breath spills out in a crazed sob of laughter. It rocks me like grief, and tears fall from my open eyes. For the fish. For my chilled body and failed life. The empty space that should be my sister. For my mother. I can’t catch my breath until it jerks back into me. I’m hysterical but cannot stop any more than I can stop shivering.

“Miranda?” The call echoes down the hallway and shocks me silent.

I wipe at my tears and snot. Wrestle my boots onto my bare feet, wet laces biting into my numb fingers. In my coat pocket, I find gloves, lip balm, breath mints, and a familiar jingle. My tears turn to relief. Keys and wallet are zipped into a side pocket: barhopping 101 rules.

At the end of the hall, there are three doors: Men; Women; Exit. I slip the outside latch and ease the heavy door closed behind me with the barest click.

The moon glistens in an icy wake of silver. My boots whisper through weightless white hummocks, the snow dry as sand. The sky is brilliant, backlit with stars. Above the tree line beyond the industrial buildings of Research Park, the cluster of explorers huddles at the top of the monument, This is the Place. Gauge distance. Lou's is maybe a mile away down the hill.

That long-gone school day when I'd fought Sarah Smith, I ran the whole way from my elementary school, strands of blonde hair clutched in my fingers. Ran fast enough the school didn't have time to call for the foster mother, the second of five assigned to me before I turned eighteen. Lou answered his door and swept me up in his arms with that rolling laugh I'd known since as long as I could remember.

Over a short brick wall, the snow-covered street follows a ridge through the Army base and a cemetery, lording over the valley. A view for the dead. The air is a held breath before the hush of new snow. Down the hill, streetlights outline orderly blocks of houses and the bulk of the sleeping city. A single set of tire tracks marks the street before me. I walk in the middle, hands in my pockets.

A flash of movement startles me out of step, and a herd of mule deer flows like water onto the road. In the full moon, their wide backs gleam silver. They fold me into their current, breathing out great bursts of stardust.

I am carried down into the city with the herd. Tall, cupped ears swivel forward and away, keeping us safe. The stillness of the night clicks with an occasional hoof-on-hoof. A large doe rolls her eye at me, balks but doesn't run.

Behind me, a soft bleat. Another answers from the front of the herd, and I find myself before the familiar row of sumac and elm, Leo in the window, working late at his desk as if I'd never left. As if I'd never been lost.

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Author Biography:

Sherri H. Hoffman is working writer, graphic designer, and sports fanatic. She holds an MFA from Pacific University and a PhD from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Some of her work is published in The Saturday Evening Post, Cimarron Review, Delmarva Review, december, PANK, and others. She loves birds, her family, and a good cup of coffee and currently teaches creative writing at Marquette University.

Poetry

We Happen as Exclamation!
Nnadi Samuel



"born with a siren & the wailing of each other" — Anthony Anaxagoru

It's scribbled in our meet,
shorthand elusive as what gathers here.
once upon a jargon, our lips anguish in all the wrongful tense
grammared for our wailing.
ghost pauses & spit punctuations splayed in their beaded white, like untouched drafts.

time scores every pitch.

the noise we shed— buoyant with hashtags.

the white barricade of canine tooth thwarting our wild attempts on a protest.

a hog weeps.

our lids, heavied with the artless wet,

& the filed lashes jut as though a stylus—touch sensitive,

spilling mild nyctography across the blind alley

to the guttural street, grooved by all our harsh consonants verbed to-be:

meaning, to seize any decent information from us

you'd grab & hold on tight, while we sift in our different forms— modelling after

such Is, was & am slimier than all my first tense.

nothing bridges time if it's not past perfect here. our acts were born finite, inflective as new slides.

should a grief we go through drag along as "present continuous?"

redemption is colored joy everywhere,

so the stain treats our night as discoloring agent.

the hour between dusk & dawn— mergeable as a noun phrase.

Boys diabetic at it, as gloom thins their sugary thoughts to moderation.

I body a war quick to play victim, yet proved a bellicist.

"Whose corpse triggers this?" I stretch,

tape-measured by a slashed plank:

em dashes that nails me to resting.

nothing is without sharp ends, even in the grave.

many a time, we happen as exclamation.

more harmed than surprise.

I am emphatic with this outcry! a grammar of tall stain.

how armed, we've patrolled language,

like a bullet mealed it's trademark on all our letters—

blood spaced by the weight of a crime scene.

"what font size do corpse keep?" I ask my plump self.

In a miss, thermal sky recedes stealthy as a bypass tray.

aerial jamming of turquoise white spanged in wasteful ceremony.

a phrase quells its heat.

glistening salt from typewriter pore, mirroring skin baptism.

In the night beyond letters, the heart bares itself of meaning—

how wildly we chase fluency, running out of things to say.

It occurs moronic as a job hunt, where I observe dumb dialogue.

the recent graduate in our third flat, making all her needs look like minimal pairs:

a want of gloom & groom,

& a bit of grief to outwit her tear gland.

cursive wailing leaning near punctuation mark, absorbent as a needle.

blood, puddling at word prick as if summoned.

we scream through the sharp task,

biting on nothing but wind.

out there, an effeminate child ask if 'boy' is a state of mind,

but I'm of a certain sex in what seems the last gendering left to us.

the parrots can't relate, how often we co-exist with just two vernaculars:

gloom & grief— milked from their core speakers, graduates & wordmongers.

raw dialect remixed, so how we lose rhythm is how we sorrow in the loss.

sadness once here, now stripped of intent.

we've known hurt as a first slang: a ruffled vernacular,

filling the orbits of our throats.

Author Biography:

*Nnadi Samuel is student of St. Nobert College & a graduate of English & literature from the University of Benin. His works have been previously published in Suburban Review, Seventh Wave Magazine, North Dakota Quarterly, Quarterly West, Blood Orange Review, Uncanny Magazine, PORT Magazine, The Cordite Poetry Review, Gordon Square Review, Rough Cut press, Trampset, Beestung Magazine, Rigorous Magazine, Blue Nib journal, Stonecrop Review, Kaleidescope Magazine, The Elephant Magazine, Birmingham Arts Journal, Lunaris Review, Inverse Journal, Canyon Voices, Journal Nine, Liquid Imagination, Silver Blade Journal, Star*Line Science Fiction & Poetry, Zoetic Press, Subterranean blue poetry, The Quills, Eunoia Review & elsewhere. Winner of the Canadian Open Drawer contest 2020. He won the Splendor of Dawn Poetry Contest April 2020, won the Bkpw Poetry Workshop Contest 2021, got shortlisted in the annual Poet's Choice award & was the second-prize winner of the EOPP 2019 contest. A longlist of the NSPP 2020 prize, & Pushcart Nominee. He is the author of "Reopening of Wounds" & "Subject Lessons" (forthcoming). He reads for U-Right Magazine. He tweets @Samuelsamba10.*

Fox Winter
Kayla Schwalbe



October saw her change
Swell up with rage and autumn rain
Slosh against her muddy banks
Submerge her choppy sparkle
She grew
Pensive, furtive, fleeting
Haunted by blurry red-yellow ghosts
Waving their branches in despair
She dreamt of others like her
And not like her
They leapt off mountains and
Kissed salty turquoise seas
She only sprang from a silty lake and
Lapped at dark woods
She dwelt on the coming cold
She started to run slow and sullen
November watched her skin harden and crack
Icy scabs reached out from her sides
And geese cried over

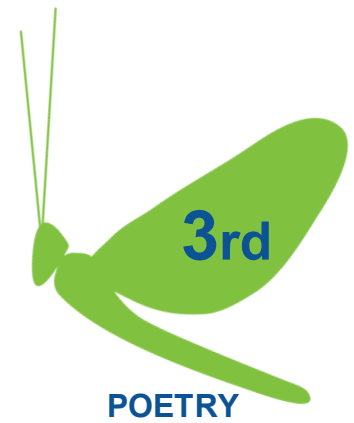
Her growing
Stillness, coldness, distance
December's measuring gaze lingered
Dusting her with flakes of concern
And winter rolled over in
Wide dove-colored clouds and
White drifts between the black branches
January listened as she whispered
Icy wrath to the wind
At the sameness, the sameness
At her short and shallow course
But in the muffled winter quiet
She caught a whiff of mountain spray
Tasted the tang of a salty sea
In her own waters
Her rage thawed
February peeled back her scabs
She showed flashes of silvery-blue skin
She ran fast, but this time with purpose
She writhed in the thin sunlight
Of March's afternoons
Sometimes she caught it
Threw handfuls of diamonds

back to her watchers
Their gazes still measuring
But she had the trick of it now
Fresh eyes and open arms for her
Dark woods and small cities
May saw her ripple with pleasure
Glowing golden through long afternoons
As she flowed over the familiar course
Sprang from her silty lake
Lapped at her dark woods
Sang to herself of
Her growing
Fleetness, purpose, poise
And she was
Reframed, reformed, renewed

Author Biography

Kayla Schwalbe was born and raised in Oshkosh, Wisconsin before venturing out into the wider world. After almost a decade spent living in other cities, states, and countries, she returned to Oshkosh to teach (and finally enjoy decent cheese curds again).

Ephemeral
Emma Vogl



Every moments fleeting glance
pales in tenor, next moments passed.
Heavy laments seeding chance--
else a sunflower, preening fast,
mess of chlorophyll, chloroplast--
entranced in summer's gleaming heat
rales asunder in sleeting rain,
allowing seeds to seed again.
Life's a sucker for second chance

Author Biography

Emma E. Vogl is a content specialist for DealerSocket, where she spends her days writing about cars and local events. She has a degree in English and minor in French from the University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh and was formerly the managing editor at The Wisconsin Review. She enjoys writing short stories, poetry, and longer works of fiction. Her poetry has been published in Eclectica Magazine.

Short Short Fiction

Lullaby in Pompeii Gail Sosinsky



Fausta tugged the stubborn goat, trying to get it to follow her through the gray streets, but it fought every step. She almost lost sight of Valens, who carried their son, Martius, on his shoulders, hurrying toward the arena, desperate to get away from the falling ash and growling mountain.

Vesuvius had roared and spewed rock and ash, and Valens's father would not leave. A whole day wasted, trying to get the old bastard to move, and the first thing he did when they finally convinced him to evacuate was slip on the ash in the street and break his head on the paving. Valens had left two of their few pennies on his eyes, hoisted Martius to his shoulders, and set a grueling pace toward the arena, and hopefully, safety. She'd kept up until the goat balked.

Fausta couldn't blame the beast. Its legs were as bloody as her feet. What fell might look like ash, but it cut like fine shards of glass. She'd leave the beast behind, but she was pregnant again, and Martius would need the goat's milk.

Valens and Martius were far ahead, cresting a hill, disappearing as the street dropped on the other side. Fausta was so busy tugging the nanny, that at first she didn't pay attention to the people running past. It wasn't until a man bumped into her that she realized they were running the wrong way. A feeling of dread fell on her, and she dropped the goat's rope and ran to the crest of the hill.

Dead people littered the ground below, hands to their throats or clasped to their faces. The air swirled thick and smelled foul. Through some Herculean effort, Valens had protected Martius as they fell, cradled his body now. His still, still little body.

Fausta took a step forward, but the baby's sharp kick made her stop. Valens still lived in her. She turned and fled the way she had come.

There hadn't been enough money to bribe passage by sea for all of them, but she had all the family coins tucked in her bosom. Maybe there was enough money for one. Two for one, she thought grimly. She always could get a bargain.

The sky darkened, and lightning flashes revealed the thickening ash. She covered her mouth and nose, but the stony dust made it impossible to draw air through the cloth. Fausta coughed and stumbled. Just a short rest. She leaned against the counter of a wine bar. She could barely smell the brine from the olives in the inset crocks in the counter. The almonds were covered with gray.

Thunder, lightening, thunder. The unholy belching of the mountain, half of it gone now, but where? She tried to get her bearings. She should have come to the cross street, the one that led to the gate to the sea.

Where was everyone? She coughed again, deeply, and dropped to her knees. Just a little rest. To catch her breath. Why hadn't she kept up with Valens? She could be dead now instead of terrified.

The baby thrashed inside her.

Fausta heard crying, a keening whimper. Close. She coughed. Spit blood. She cleared her throat.

"I'm here," she said. "Where are you?"

The crying came closer. A little girl, a bit older than Martius. She flung herself at Fausta, who wrapped her arms around the child. Fausta reached to cover the girl with her stola, but she had lost it, the nice one Valens had given her, the pretty green one.

Fausta tried to wipe the girl's face, but the ash drew blood, and the girl cried out.

"Sh, sh, sh. I'm sorry, little one," Fausta said. "What's your name?"

"Claudia."

"What a pretty name." Fausta coughed.

"I lost my mommy." Claudia clung tighter.

"It's ok," Fausta said, gently patting Claudia's hair. "We'll meet up with her soon." She hoped the ferryman would find her little pouch of pennies.

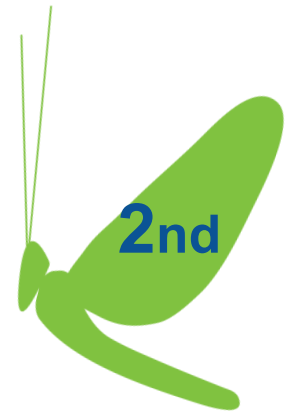
Fausta leaned heavily against the bar, whispering beautiful lies to Claudia in the last of the dying light.

END

Author Biography

*Gail Sosinsky (Madison, though born in Tomahawk) writes both fiction and poetry. Her work has appeared in Marian Zimmer Bradley's Sword and Sorceress series, America West Airlines Magazine, Mindflights, Star*Line, and multiple editions of the Wisconsin Poets' Calendar. She is currently revising her first novel.*

If Only
Valerie Biel



SHORT SHORT FICTION

She escaped the house, snagging a six pack from the fridge without anyone noticing.

Well, they might have noticed, but they left her alone. The sun was going down on the second worst day of her life and she was going to drink every single one of those beers by herself on the dock just to cap it all off. She nearly laughed at that—nearly. It'd been years, since college really, that she planned on drinking so much in one sitting.

The rough dock boards snagged the soles of her nylons. She tore them off in frustration and threw them in the lake. They didn't sink—just laid on top—looking rather grotesque as if the person who had been in them had just slipped into the depths.

If only she could.

“Good grief,” she said. And then realizing her words, a small strangled laugh escaped as she grabbed an oar from the rowboat to fish them out.

A canoe glided into view as she dragged the oar through the water. Once she recognized the passenger, she willed it to just keep going, but it didn't. *Damn it, damn it, damn it.*

He floated closer. “Lose something?” he asked, watching her attempts.

“No.” Maybe he'd take the hint and go away.

He held them up. “No? These aren't yours?”

“They were, but I didn't want to wear them anymore.”

He laughed, that deep booming laugh that she had loved—once. “Do you want them back?”

“No.”

“Okay, then.” He plopped them into his canoe but didn’t leave.

“Oh, my God. Just give them to me.” The idea of him having a piece of her clothing was weird.

He paddled over and handed them to her.

“You going to drink that all by yourself?” He nodded toward the beer.

“That was the plan.” She sat down, careful not to snag her dress.

“Just wondering if you could use some company?”

“I came out here to be alone and watch the sunset.”

“So, did I,” he said. “This seems like a better option.”

He didn’t wait for an invite, hoisting himself onto the dock to sit next to her.

They both grabbed a beer.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” he said.

“Fuck off. Do you know how many times I heard that this week?”

He chuckled. “What should I say? Sorry, this sucks? I’m sorry this happened? I’m sorry you’re sad?”

“Those work.” She appreciated he wasn’t being so careful with her—the way everyone had been since her husband died. Tears slid down her cheeks. “He was the love of my life,” she blurted out, and then gasped.

“Oh, my God, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. I’m glad you had that.”

Had - the word hit her heart like a freight train. She gulped some more beer.

Finally, he said, "You were mine."

She gasped. "What?"

"The love of my life."

"No, I wasn't. Don't say that. I was young and silly and impulsive."

"You were perfect."

"You're not trying to h-hit on a w-widow, are you?" She hated that her voice hiccupped from crying.

"No, I'm not. I'm just telling you like it was."

She was glad that were sitting side by side and not facing each other. "It was a long time ago. I was too young to know what I really wanted."

"I knew that."

"It was kind of pervy though." She kidded. "You were way too old for me."

"It didn't feel that way to me."

She sighed. "It didn't feel that way to me either."

"You were always older than your age. What do they call it—an old soul?"

"I guess I kind of was." Memories she hadn't thought of in years flooded back. "I'm sorry I left like I did. That wasn't very mature of me. I've always wanted to apologize, but it never seemed like the right time."

He didn't say anything. They each opened another bottle. The sun sank lower.

“I should go before it’s completely dark and I drown out here.”

“Not likely, but I suppose I need to go back in.” She looked toward the house as lights began to come on. “They’re probably wondering where I am.”

Neither of them moved.

She turned to look into his eyes. He gave her a little grin, even as tears tracked down his cheeks.

Before she could stop herself, she pulled him close.

He held her tight, making her feel like she was 15 again.

If only for a moment.

Author Biography

Valerie Biel is the author of the award-winning Circle of Nine series, stories of magic steeped in the Celtic mythology of Ireland’s stone circles. She has also authored three middle-grade novels. Her shorter works have earned first place honors in flash fiction, young adult, and the Wisconsin Regional Art Project categories at the Lakefly Writers Conference and the University of Wisconsin Writers' Institute. She holds a degree in Journalism and Political Science from the University of Wisconsin and utilizes her 25+ years of public relations experience to aid other authors with marketing and publicity via her agency Lost Lake Press.

In the Shadow of a God
Emma Vogl



The troops were crawling in. Soldiers in every direction, blurring out on the horizon in the distance. There was a thunderous vibration in the ground, as if a giant drum were being beat upon. The ground was black and cracked, absorbing the heat of the sun and keeping the low air hot and dry. The soldiers paid no attention to the triple-digit temperature. The two armies moved rhythmically towards each other. Each side seemed to be equally matched from the front lines. Although the lines of warriors appeared to stretch endlessly backwards, this was a war of numbers. The front ranks knew that they would fold and die, as did the second battalion, and the third. The larger army would prevail when both companies were built from the same Earth, the same sun, and this was the case, as both armies had been born and raised meters apart. Coexisting peacefully for many years left little to no room for a growing population. Today they would change that for their queens and their offspring; today they were going to war. The soldiers marched forward, and the drum beat on and on.

This was a savage fight with no weapons except the brute force of each warrior's naked body. Many soldiers watched their life-long comrades be pulled apart limb from limb, knowing they would be next. Still, the battlefield had a patient silence, broken only by the unflinching drum beat, which seemed to echo more forcefully with each strike. As the third battalion of each army began to die, a soldier of the Black army perceived that a comrade from the second battalion was still alive. His twitching body lay nearly lifeless under the fighting line, occasionally stepped on by friend and foe. The Black army soldier didn't hesitate, he leaned down swiftly and dispatched his comrade's head. Then he turned back to the enemy ahead of him and

repeated the motion, beheading soldier after soldier before falling under the endless tide of bodies. In his last moments, he wished only that someone would have the decency to put him out of his own misery as he had done for another. None were so kind. He was crushed to death slowly under an endless rain of stepping feet.

The great drum beat swelled to a frantic pounding. The armies, entangled together in the throes of killing, could not flee. They knew that a mighty god was approaching, and some prayed for its arrival, while others cursed its advance. Soon it loomed over them, a gargantuan figure blocking the sun. In the absence of light, some were given the blessing of dying without the glaring heat. Their last breaths were of cooler air, seeming to deliver them from a frozen, aching hell. The fighting went on, raged in the shadow of a god, who had paused to watch the bloodshed, quieting the steady drumbeat that the marching ranks had kept tempo with. War without weapons meant that one could hear the violence in a different way. The action of the front lines echoed back to the advancing battalions, and they heard the voices of their dying comrades calling them forth to their deaths. Many of them would not even make it to that fate. The shadow of the god swelled and came down on them, crushing entire battalions. The lucky soldiers died instantaneously, others bled slowly from their crippled limbs, watching as the god's foot was lifted and came down again, ending more lives. Neither army would win that day. The god laughed in glee, stomping its foot over and over, shattering the ranks of the two ant armies.

Author Biography

Emma E. Vogl is a content specialist for DealerSocket, where she spends her days writing about cars and local events. She has a degree in English and minor in French from the University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh and was formerly the managing editor at The Wisconsin Review. She enjoys writing short stories, poetry, and longer works of fiction. Her poetry has been published in Eclectica Magazine.

