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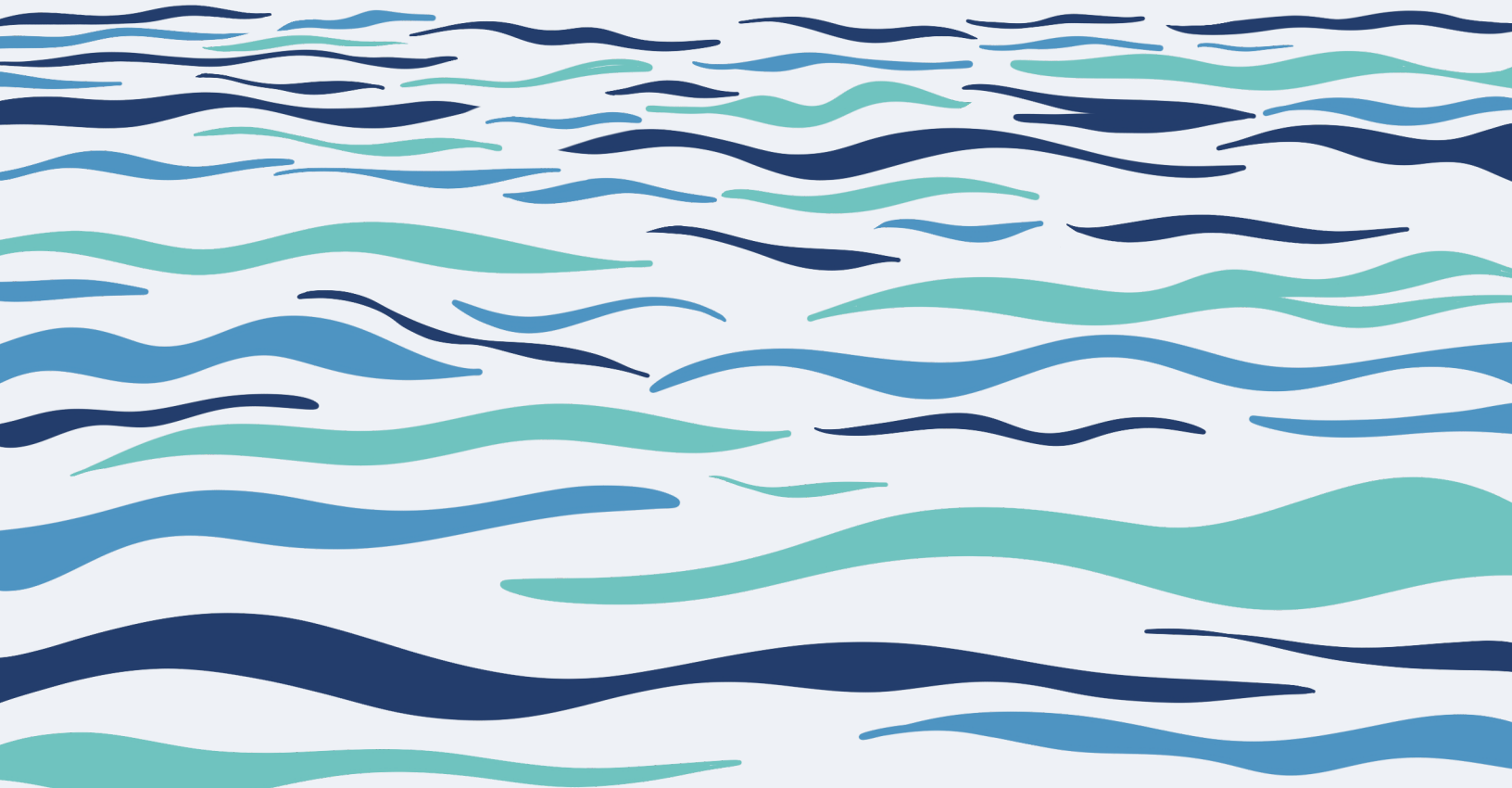


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1st Place

Laughtear William Brydon

Her face is nuzzled against her mother's arm,
and the chubby cheeks compress from the contact.
Wispy brown hair covers her head, a bobblehead
almost as it teeters precariously atop her tiny body.
Expressive blue eyes rest under hairless brows,
yet the outline is there just the same, like streaks of
cleaner left behind on a freshly wiped window.
Her chin is a stack of pancakes, slightly askew, one
on top of another on top of another, rounded with
youth, and her nostrils flare in and out, in and out,
like valves on an air vent as peek-a-boo is played.
When the hand is removed from over her face and
Mom reappears, those lips curl up at the corners as
the mouth opens to emit a gushing guttural burst, an
eruption of vocality from the volcano of happiness.

Yet Mom's duties elsewhere call, so Baby is passed
carefully, cautiously into Dad's waiting arms.
The movement immediately widens her itty-bitty eyes,
like ripples expanding slowly across the face's pond.
The pupils dilate, an eclipse of the eyes that robs their
light, as those little lips purse then twitch then quiver.
A red sea spreads across those chubby cheeks, like



1st Place

split fruit punch absorbed by a white paper towel,
and trenches appear in her forehead as fat folds
together one after another, like a tiny skin accordion.
And those eyebrows, once wide with wonder, now
flatten into hard straight lines while the under-eye
swells, like a pink balloon oh so close to bursting.
The lips fully commit to the frown, and tears well in
the eyes' corners, squeezed from the source of sadness.

How wondrous it is that two emotions, seemingly on
opposite sides of the spectrum, can switch so quickly,
like a coin rotating in air, one side then the other?
This baby's life is dominated by dualities that swap
in an instant: Mom and Dad, sleeping and waking,
ignorance and knowledge, so is it any marvel that
her emotions lack permanence like her objects?
But there is something to be said about these two,
laughter and tears; after all, can't shrieks be of
delight or despair, tears be of pain or of joy?
Isn't it hard to tell sometimes if someone is
laughing or crying, the noises being so similar?

Maybe we all are like her, a silver sphere in Newton's
cradle, bouncing back and forth, back and forth between
the two; no matter which one, isn't it nice just to feel?



1st Place



William Brydon, a high school English teacher in Oshkosh, WI, holds a BA in Secondary English Education from the University of Wisconsin - Oshkosh and is currently pursuing his MA in English at the same institution with an interest in memoir. He is now exploring forays into fiction, however, with both poetry and the short story becoming a preferred genre for sparking growth within him. Friction creates fire, so he strives to get outside of his comfort zone. When not teaching or writing, William enjoys spending time with his wonderful wife, Elisabeth, and their two amazing children, Ophelia and James.



2nd Place

The Smell of a Bar on a Cold Night

Cindy Forsberg

Cigarettes huffed hurriedly between numb fingers,
clinging like thistles to bare skin, barely masked
by the musky *eau de douche* leering over
the metallic scent of cleavage painted in glitter
come-hither sparkles shimmer in the neon glow
of Pabst Blue Ribbon spilled on sticky linoleum floors,
soaking since our parents' heyday to rotting subfloor
ripe with black mold, musty green felt faded by years of
grease-stained hands calling shots in corner pockets,
fingers nimble with cues and clues that find their way to
unbutton each other in bathroom trysts, heavy breathing in
sour breath of beer while cherry urinal cakes attempt sanitation
failing to think past the spectacular now, nirvana achieved
if only to be erased by lemon Pine-Sol in the morning.



Cindy Forsberg is an accountant slash poet or poet slash accountant, depending on who you ask. She currently resides in an old drafty house in Fond du Lac with two crabby cats and is looking forward to the apocalypse so she can finally catch up on her reading.



3rd Place

She is Glass

Angelina Vu

She is glass.

not just in the cliché that says She's fragile but
in the way diamonds are scratched against Her skin to determine their authenticity.
in the way She loses her shine and the cut of Her edge after too many waves
have consumed, wounded, twisted, and spit her out.

She is glass in the way you can see right through Her.

how She's overlooked
how sometimes you don't see Her at all
how you can never tell how She's feeling
because hot and cold glass look as identical as
"I am falling apart" and "I'm fine."

She is glass in the way that She is a mirror.

constantly reflecting as She criticizes with Her teary eyes
the many lies Her mind has tried to tell Her.

She is glass in the way that you take caution around Her when She's broken.

never picking Her up with your hands unless you are careless and want to bleed.
because even the smallest bits are dangerous
and you'll be checking for the fractured pieces that might be caught under the rug
so you won't step on them later
and be reminded



3rd Place

of how you treated Her.

She is glass in the way that you can focus a bright light on Her and start a fire.
a fire inside Her that can be put out by sand.
sand that is made of broken bits of glass.

but maybe
just maybe
She's a diamond.
a product of insurmountable pressure
gleaming in the sun
worn on the hands of the wealthy and those in love.
any girl's best friend.
but also
scratching the skin of glass to be reminded of Her worth.

see, both broken glass and diamonds can sparkle.
but diamonds are beautiful
glass is not.
diamonds are rare
glass is mundane,
acting as cups, filling window panes,
and singing quiet songs
when hit with rain.



3rd Place



Angelina Vu is a junior at Oshkosh West High School. She enjoys acting, singing, songwriting, playing the piano, and tennis in her free time. Her future plans include studies in acting, pre-law, and business.

The Papa Gift

Yvette Viets Flaten

Hazel woke suddenly, at the sound of the kitchen door closing. She peered through the dawn gloom toward the windowpanes, keeping her nose and uppermost cheek under the safe overhang of Ma's Best Quilt, safe against the cold in the unheated bedroom.

Next to her, nestled close to her side was her sister Albe--short for Alberta--younger by two years, who had not moved all night from the protected island of warmth the two sisters' bodies made in the swaybacked iron bed. On the other side of the room, Emma and Evangeline made the same double hummock in an equally ancient wooden bedstead. It had been fashioned by hand by their grandpa, Halvor Halvorson, of Ness, near Oslo, God rest him now, once boney-tall and red-faced rough, the shaper of tree trunks into any form a neighbor farmer needed, or his womenfolk could dream.

"Are you awake?" Albe asked, from the muffled depths of Best Quilt.

"Ja," Hazel answered. But she hesitated to move. It meant day was about to begin again, even this birthday, with the slop jar, frozen water at the pump, and frost on the windows muting the grey of Wisconsin's November days to an even darker slate.

"Snow today, I think." Across the room Emma and Evangeline were rising. Which sister had spoken was not clear. Older by five and four years, both were alike; tall Norsk girls, with auburn hair, and clean white skin. Both were rebraiding their long hair, pinning it up around their heads, facing each other across their quilt, made of remnants of a dark brown horse blanket and strips of Pa's long cast-off overalls.

"You put Best Quilt away, Hazel," Emma said, turning an eye to her younger sister. "You had your Mama Gift, for that, last night, against the cold."

Hazel moved off the slop jar, and did not answer. Emma thought she could tell her every step to take, as much as Ma did, but without Ma's right to do it.



“Hazel?”

“Ja, Emma. Sure, I will.”

“What will be the Papa Gift?” Albe asked, springing from the bed to the jar in one movement, squatting with her knees up past her ears and her toes curled up off the bare floor so only the balls and heels of her feet felt the burn of the frozen boards. *Like a nisse*, Ma would say, to see her like this, bent into an almost impossible shape, her wide set eyes and turned-up nose harking to, somewhere, old Lapp blood. *Like the little folk who do chores on Jul-eve and charm the cows to talk....*

Albe spang back into the bed, to recapture some of her furrow’s fading warmth.

“Ingvald’s Papa Gift was tobacco...”

“Ingvald is oldest, and a man now,” Evangeline spoke for the first time. Her voice was softer than usual, softer than usual these last three months, since Pastor Lokken’s son Gustun had twice--twice, mind you--reached the church door at the exact moment when Vangie’s hand went out to take the wooden knob and their fingers met. Oh, Ma knew. And Papa, too, as did Hazel and Albe, who laughed to each other at the sudden piety of their older sister, now reading long passages from the Good Book or else staring out the window at distant fields.

Hazel pulled her wool skirt over her head and tied the laces at the side. Quickly, she pulled on her stockings, careful to keep the hole in the toe under her foot. *Stockings. A new pair of stockings*, she thought. But she knew it was impossible. Her father would rather lose his right arm than go into Iverson’s Store and buy women’s things. He would not even do it for Ma. Stockings were impossible.

The notion of a Papa Gift kept Hazel company all morning. Papa had gone out early. His closing the kitchen door had awakened her, after all. He had taken the team and

wagon. That meant town. Well, then, if not stockings, perhaps licorice? Or those stick candies occasionally bought from the fat German storekeeper in Abernathy? She folded away Best Quilt and laid it in Ma's trunk, ready for the next special time: birthday, wedding, laying out. Hazel shuddered at the last thought and thrust it far to the back in her mind--Great Aunt Tilde laid out on Ma's best needlework, her face yellowed and puckered as drying corn.

"Hazel! Hazel! The calves!"

"Ja, I come."

Perhaps, Hazel thought, it might be *kaffe*? Emma's Papa Gift was *kaffe*, poured into Ma's white china cup, and stirred with a little brass spoon, and set by itself on the Sunday table, after Pastor Lokken had finally gone, for there was no *kaffe* to spare just for Sunday show. Only enough for Emma, who was almost as full grown as Ingvald, with her position secure as hired girl at Tryggveson's farm, starting tomorrow, to help the Missus with the twins in that big house.

Hazel passed from calf pen to hen house, careful to rub her hands warm before she slipped them under the pea-eyed broody hens. She only found two eggs, and with great care she carried them to the house. Darker clouds were slipping in from the west on a fitful wind. Before Hazel reached the kitchen stoop, bits of snow began falling.

Boots, Hazel thought, fleetingly, but if Papa wouldn't buy stockings, why would he consider boots? Albe came running from the barn, scarf pulled up over her ears and tied on top of her head. Panting, cheeks smarting red with cold, she stopped still before her sister.

"Hazel, maybe it would be a book?" The two sisters stared at one another, stilled

by the prospect. Miss Myre had some books that she carried back and forth to the schoolhouse, books with blue or green covers, full of close black print on thick paper. One even had golden edges.

The snow was falling faster now, turning toward sleet and making a rattling noise as it fell, covering the girls' heads and shoulders. Muffled by this sound, they did not hear Papa's wagon until he was almost into the yard.

Hazel and Albe ran to open the barn doors so Papa could drive Pipa and Thom into the dry warmth without stopping. The horses were blowing, eager to be unhitched and wiped down, but neither girl moved to touch the horses. Papa forbade it. It was man's work, same as plowing or wood cutting.

Out of the corner of her eye, Hazel could see a package of brown paper, tied with twine, lying on the wagon's floor boards. She looked at Papa, but he was busy with the harnesses. Albe was smiling at her, and joining hands, they ran out of the barn into the snowy dusk, across the yard, into the kitchen full of the smell of boiling rutabagas and fresh rye bread.

"Wipe your feet," Ma said, not looking up from the stove.

Emma and Evangeline came into the kitchen. Evangeline set the table with a plate and a spoon each, and Emma filled the kerosene lamp, trimmed the wick, cleaned the globe, and set it back in place, waiting for Papa and Ingvald to come.

After a time, when it was all but dark, the menfolk came inside and began their ritual of cleaning: barn clothes off at the door, a wash of hands and face at the basin, and then, to the table, with Emma lighting the kerosene lamp and Ma passing behind them, spooning the first serving on their plates of beggies and a piece of side pork.

Hazel could hardly finish her food in her excitement. Though Papa had been very careful, she could still see the edge of the package and a whisker or two of twine poking



out from the pocket of his coat as it hung on its hook by the door. Once, when her eyes stole that way, Papa was watching her, steady as he always was.

The meal ended with Papa's quiet pipe, Ingvald whittling a trifle from a piece of soft pine, and Ma's darning needle working some new toe hole. The girls sat on benches around the room, leaning forward to avoid the room's cold winter walls. No one spoke. In the wood stove, the sap snapped and hissed out of a new log, and the wind whispered through the flue upon occasion.

Hazel could contain herself no more and was about to spring up and beg to know what was the gift when Papa rose slowly to his full height and slid the smallest lid on the woodstove aside. He tapped out his pipe ash into his big calloused hand and then dropped it into the flames. He settled the lid back into its place.

Hazel looked up at her father as he towered over by the end of the table. His moustache and beard were graying and his eyes were the color of river ice. He looked at Ma and then at his daughter. "Birthday wishes, Hazel," he said, using English when usually he did not. "Felicitations."

He turned away to his coat and then came back to the table. The package was not large, flattish and rectangular in shape, and the paper looked store-bought, although the twine was simple binder twine that might have come from their own barn. Papa stopped. Hazel held her breath. What was inside she could not begin to guess.

Papa laid the package in front of Emma and stepped back. Mama's needle and Ingvald's knife quit their digging. Vangie and Albe were like twin fence posts propped against the wall.

"Open," Papa commanded Emma.

Hazel's mouth gaped, her eyes big and round, like someone with fever. In Emma's fingers, the twine came away with one pull, and the paper separated. Emma slowly held up a pair of grey woolen mittens.



Short Story

1st Place

"It's a long way to Tryggveson's," Papa said. "Your hands would be cold, otherwise."

Emma looked at her younger sister, whose eyes now shimmered with pooling tears.

"Papa, no--"

"Your hands would be cold," he repeated as he rose, lifting the kerosene lamp and going to the stairs, the sign that it was time for them to be lit to bed.

Toward dawn, after Hazel's sobbing had faded into a heavy, raspy breathing, Emma heard her mother's footsteps on the stairs, and even in the gloom, she recognized the pattern of Best Quilt. They spread its weight across the sleeper in the iron bed, Mama tucking the edge around Hazel's shoulders.

"Mama, I--," Emma began.

"Shush," Mama replied. "Papa is right. It's a long walk to Tryggveson's."



Author Biography

Yvette Viets Flaten (Eau Claire) lives near the Chippewa River and enjoys watching its ever-changing nature. Yvette writes both fiction and poetry and her work has recently appeared in Nightingale and Sparrow, Silver Birch Press, Barstow and Grand, The London Reader, and Summer Bludgeon. She enjoys reading, collecting cookbooks, walks with Daisy, and travels with Dan.



Midrato-First Contact

Susan Imbs

Their arrival went unnoticed, one more blaze of glory in the Leonid showers that year.

The Envoys moved quickly into the network of caves they had targeted from orbit, collapsing the entrance behind them and obliterating all trace of their presence. Safe from the brutal atmosphere of their new home, they dispatched initial probes to begin the detailed study of planetary life that was their *raison d'être*. Small shafts to the surface gave access to air and sunlight.

When one of the younger explorers snuck out to experience the planet unprotected, it went mad and blind, overwhelmed by the songs screaming at it from every direction, the light blazing from the sun above, the cacophony of scents lifting it to heights it had never imagined possible. It lay alone on the rocks outside the cave for a day and a night, writhing and gesturing as one insane, until those within decided it was an acceptable risk to mount a rescue.

Returned to safety, the survivor spent its remaining time babbling of symphonies it lacked language to share, filling the air around it with confusion and bliss and joy and terror. The team members cherished it, whispered to it, sang to it as best they could. When it died, its friends crafted epics to record the tale and its bones were laid in the newly established Cave of Remembrance. Death was a risk when exploring and they had all agreed to take it.

The Envoys began a regimen of adaptation and accommodation that in a few short centuries made it possible for them to handle the environment of this new planet. They were a long-lived species, having more in common with a Joshua tree than a fleeting oak. The speed of life on their new planet was at first baffling. It left so little time to decode the minds they touched, to understand the ways of communication, to forge a bridge.



Probes were sent to reconnoiter the local flora and fauna. Sampling, cataloging, and indexing began, the humdrum foundational work of interplanetary exploration. None on the team really expected to encounter sentient creatures. Each harbored a sliver of hope that they would.

The most prevalent lifeforms lived so fast as to seem a constant flicker and shimmer, and the Envoys found no way to connect. While many of the impulses they encountered from the specimens collected were at least familiar to them, all lacked the crucial spark of true sentience on which real communication could be based.

One afternoon, in the hottest part of the year, as the great sheets of ice were retreating from the northern hemisphere of the planet, a biped crested a ridge of the mountain in which the Envoys had taken refuge. The sentries noted it was unlike any other creature they had encountered. It carried gear on its back, had a gourd hanging from a belt, wore coverings on its body and feet. Their excitement filled the air of the lookout station and they raced to report.

Consensus was nearly instantaneous. Scouts were sent out. The being ran in terror, but the Envoys moved with great speed in quadruped mode. Capture was inevitable. Pounced on by a scout, the creature shrieked, wet itself and fainted. The chase was over.

When the captive awoke in the dim light of the observation space it made odd repetitive noises, ran around the small enclosure and pounded wildly against the featureless cave walls. An Envoy stepped out of the shadows. The creature froze, pointed, screamed, and died. The Envoy cradled the broken clay in its arms, grieved over the failure and sang of the mad, blind explorer who went too far, too fast. An autopsy followed – the heart had seized. The team took measurements and samples, ran analyses, established baselines. The bones of this first contact were laid beside the young explorer's in the Cave of Remembrance, adding to the tiny pattern being created. The work



continued.

They pondered the sounds the creature had made, learned to recreate them, debated whether it was instinctive like bird song or contained actual meaning. The advanced, for this planet, level of technology the creature carried on its person tipped the decision. Additional data was needed.

Scouts went out. More samples were brought back to study. Sometimes the Envoys remained in the shadows. Sometimes they stood in the light. They repeated the sounds they had learned to those who were thus 'volunteered', which sometimes soothed and sometimes terrified the fragile creatures. The team meticulously recorded every interaction, every sound, every gesture, every response down to the dilation of each blood vessel. One or two captives were able to bridge their fright. They made sounds, pointed to themselves, to objects around them, towards the rock overhead, even at the Envoys. Some knelt or prostrated themselves while making repetitious noises.

When it finally occurred to the Envoys these beings were trying to speak, they were caught between wonder and mirth. No dance, crude gestures, not the slightest hint of song and only an acrid dank scent? How could any beings express themselves fully like that?

Slowly, they realized that these creatures did in fact communicate, in their own fashion. This changed everything. No longer was this a mundane biological survey looking for additions to the Envoys' rich indexes of planetary knowledge. Now they sought a bridge, a *midrato*, one who could communicate fully with the Envoys' people while remaining fully themselves, a representative of an entire species to the rest of the galaxy.

First contact protocols offered a full range of bridge building skills and sciences, including initial interaction protocols, communication techniques and measurements.



The Envoys shifted focus.

Gene tweaking to remedy what evolution had failed to provide was possible, as were body or neural modifications if required. Envoy medical technology was built on knowledge drawn from thousands of planetary systems and countless species. There was little doubt a bridge could be built, one way or another. It was a simple question of time, and how much the Cave of Remembrance would need to grow.

Capture tactics changed to reduce the terror of the subjects. The creatures were sedated with a dart from a distance and placed in a cave chamber filled with objects the teams had collected – baskets and furs and pots of foods and water. A small fire was kept burning in the middle of the space to give light, warmth, and comfort. From deep shadows the Envoys practiced simple sounds, seeking connection, filling the air with calming scents and music. The Envoys' vocabulary grew exponentially. More bones were laid in the Cave.

The team realized these beings used forms of marks and colors on nearly everything – rock walls, pots, slabs of clay, leather, even sheets of pressed fibers and woven into their fabrics. With patience and careful observation, they began to decipher these things, and replicate them, too. Color was such a part of their Language they were relieved to see the creatures used it as well.

Noting early that this was a race of gendered beings, the Envoys were careful to keep a good mix of both females and males present for breeding. They established a pool of test subjects, speeding up the research and making it easier to track the results of genetic alterations. Envoys documented the mating rituals and activities of the captives when they were allowed to mingle with others of their kind. Herd animals, this growing tribe seemed more at ease when in communal settings.

Channels carved through the mountain created spiral pathways to the outside world,



establishing open spaces where the tribe could work and play. The subjects could live in the sunlight so vital for their health and wellbeing, venturing back into the caves only when summoned. The Envoys taught the tribal leaders how to use refuse and plant matter to enrich the sandy jungle soil, increasing crop production. Carefully planted arbors of fruit and nut trees made harvesting easier. Better pots and baskets gave some protection to the harvests from the ravages of the heat and humidity. The tribe flourished and spread out.

These humans, as they would call themselves in seven or eight millennia, told themselves they had been chosen by their gods, and became proud in their service, teaching their children and the generations that followed they were the best and brightest. Scouts brought new specimens in regularly from the continual stream of travelers in the region to keep the gene pool varied. The bones of each failed experiment were laid in the Cave of Remembrance.

Committing to a longer stay than originally planned, the Envoys triggered their own breeding cycles, ensuring replacements would be available when death inevitably caught up with the original explorers. In time only planet-born Envoys would remain to finish the research and return home with the results. Hopefully those back home would accept these Envoys as their own and accept the *midrato* they were working so hard to find.

The tribe grew. They expanded beyond the cave entrance and built a settlement. This, too, grew. The Envoys watched in amusement as they procreated so quickly, wept when they died so soon, and recoiled with horror as one group would rise against another with murderous results. The ferocity of the species left the Envoys speechless. If they could not generate the *midrato*, there was no doubt about the fate of humanity. The Elders back home would see to it, if only to protect the rest of the galaxy from infection.

Some tribe members were encouraged to migrate, carrying stories about the Envoys



with them. First-hand accounts quickly became fireside stories, then legends and, in the end, tales of gods and creation. Even memories of the bones buried at the heart of the Cave of Remembrance were passed down. The practice of building spirals of rock to mark sacred places become a custom shared across continents long after the origin was lost.

The Envoys paid little heed to such outside things, focused as they were on trying to crack the code of these beings in a way that would enable a *midrato* to arise. They made tiny tweaks to the genetic code of their subjects, sent them out to procreate, and watched the results. Ten or fifteen generations later they harvested another sample and made further changes.

Eventually the Envoys abandoned their genetic engineering projects. The results were too detrimental to the species and lingered through the generations. Humans had only two hands, two feet, and twenty fingers and toes, unlike the far more elegant distribution of thirty-six digits which graced the Envoys' six appendages. All attempts to genetically alter this configuration were halted.

Humans lacked useful scent glands. Their olfactory systems, while sensitive enough, lacked a richness of connection to the limbic system and frontal lobes. They used such a tiny portion of their brains it seemed almost laughable to the Envoys. The team turned their focus to augmenting what evolution had already given the humans. They seeded scent glands in bodies, wove internal and external neural nets to enhance olfactory differentiation and engage frontal lobe capacity to control and process these new abilities. Each variation required testing. The initial subjects died almost instantly. Their bones were cherished and added to the Cave.

The early survivors of this latest round of experimentation were left damaged and insane. The Envoys created the Sanctuary, an underground oasis of light and water and beauty carved from the root of the mountain itself. At first, tribe members competed to



be chosen to care for the *na-midrato*, the failed bridges. Envoys would comfort and tend to them, too. Later this selection would become wrapped up in games of violence and sacrifice, original purpose forgotten, chosen victims offered for the “good of the tribe” or “to serve the Gods”. Regret over their failures fueled the Envoys’ innate compassion and drove them to honor all of the sacrifices made. Envoy bones rested beside human as the ages sped by.

They sought a person well-enough established to retain a sense of self and flexible enough to withstand the transitions demanded to truly communicate with the Envoys. The mind needed to be open enough to encompass the changes it would undergo housed in a body able to accept the modifications required. It was a difficult, delicate cocktail to craft.

The Envoys worked through an ever-expanding network of humans, suggesting lines of training, putting together list after list of sought-after characteristics. Each sample led to more insight, more *na-midrato*, more bones.

They established satellite research centers on the other continents, adapting and relocating as climate and human populations shifted. Civilizations rose and fell. The research continued out of sight, dwelling in the space between myth and magic, the truth known only to a vital few humans.

The Envoys knew that without a bridge, the planet would be lost. Given the ferocity of these bipeds, their rapid progress towards space and the stars, humanity would not survive once revealed to the Elders without a *midrato* to intercede. Even the deeply patient explorers began to feel the unfamiliar and uncomfortable sense of urgency.



Short Story

2nd Place



Author Biography

Susan Imbs is a child of the sixties, born in southwest Michigan right on the Lake. She started her writing career in fifth grade with a limerick about a squirrel and a nut. Her first publication, in the Chicago Tribune Sunday Magazine eight years later, invigorated the steady stream of poems, short stories, a patent application, a dissertation on healing, and the obligatory novel or two which have followed. A student of both spirituality and science, she writes to explore pathways for touching the flame at the heart of every soul and bridging the distance between Self and Other.



Passing the Buck

Ali Ruckstadter

My voice never sounded like mine, not here, it vibrated through my chest like I was underwater. Deer Man, head mounted to the wall above the mantel in the back seating area of Tart's Bar and Grille, thought about my request.

"I can fulfill your request," he commanded. "I can give you work. Please bring me my legs."

He talked as if I came up with the words. The fire in the fireplace breathed to the beat of his voice.

His legs were his usual request. I'd like to think legs would be my request too if I were mounted on a wall in an empty bar. The only issue was, I'd never been able to fulfill his request by the time I woke up. It's like when you're falling during your dream and wake up before hitting the bottom. It's impossible to experience the bottom, not because it doesn't exist, but because we are not falling fast enough.

As I walked outside the bar, I stopped and waited for the crowd to swarm me. All up and down the boardwalk were families and friends and couples in their swimsuits and giant beach bags. The first couple of people that crossed my path stopped to awkwardly circle me. As more and more people circled and I could see less and less, the numbers grew exponentially.

I crossed my arms against my chest and the crowd packed in tighter. Even the beach-summer sun started to look dark. Out of the corner of the crowd, I could make out the Tart's Bar and Grille front sign, where the light in the R in Tart's was flickering.

Before long, a long, hairy leg appeared pressed between two people in the second row from me. I quickly elbowed my way through the first couple of people and lunged at the leg. By the time I hit the ground, most of the crowd had dispersed. And it was me alone



with a lonely deer leg.

Once I got myself together, I headed off the boardwalk and onto the beach, towards the volleyball game playing on the furthest court down. I knew what to expect.

The men playing volleyball were tall and dark from melanin or sun. The deer leg hoofs clanking together above the net rang familiar. The ball bounced over to me along the sand and I stopped it with the deer leg.

I didn't stop as I crossed over onto the court. Neither did the game. The serve crossed over me as I grabbed the deer leg from the middle hitter. He didn't object as I crossed under the net to grab the third leg from the other team's middle hitter.

Carrying the legs like a child carrying lumber, I made my way back to the boardwalk and back inside of Tart's.

The bar itself was all dark wood, matching the walls and the hunting theme of the rest of the building, despite being a bar on a sunny beach.

The bartender, a short and pretty man I named Devin, was behind the bar filling the giant tub of ice. He shuffled the ice around which sounded like a snowy car crash since the bar was empty and quiet. He shuffled the ice around, as he always did, with a familiarly hairy stick.

I ran around the bar and grabbed the leg out of Devin's hands and out of the ice tub. My encounter with Devin was usually when my dream came to an end. But on this particular day, it didn't. I assumed there was more of a pep in my step.

The entire bar got extra silent when I realized I suddenly had more time. As many times as I'd experienced the dream, I'd passed the end of the tracks, and the rest of my time was a mystery.

Without wasting too much time, I ran the legs man to Deer Man.

"I have your legs for you."



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“Excellent,” he said. “Please submit by passing the buck legs into the fire.”

Without caution, I pulled the metal cage back from protecting the empty fireplace. I set the legs into the fireplace, which sat like long pieces of firewood.

The dream faded away.

The Tart’s Bar and Grille I worked at, the one not on a beach, was in the parking lot of the local mall. There was nothing but a parking lot on every side.

So as I approached the building, the firetrucks could be seen from far away. The once light grey building was all black and half hollow. The back half was almost completely gone and lay in an ash pile minefield. I walked up to the building only half able to register what was happening. It felt like I was underwater again, that I was going to wake up and go to work and clock in in the morning like usual.

Emily came up and hugged me. She was crying so quietly it was like a whisper.

“I’m so sorry for the loss,” she said.

“Was someone hurt?”

“No. It’s from overnight. No one was here. I just feel so sorry that you have to go through this.”

I pulled back from the hug and studied her. I’d only met her a few days before, she was a transfer from a different Tart’s location after they had a fire last week. The mall was the closest location to her for her to move while they repaired everything. It was her fault. The fire followed her.

The passing of the guilt buck made the air feel breathable again. There was only rubble to deal with.

No one besides Emily had arrived at work yet except for Jeremy, our General Manager. He was leaning against the hood of his two-door lost in an angry flip phone conversation



that even involved his hands.

Emily and I silently and palpably waited for Jeremy. Once he was done with his call, he sprang off the hood and flipped his phone closed.

"I just got off the phone with Kelsey," he said to Emily. "She said that the Quill Square location will be the closest to you for you to work temporarily. So just go there and tell them we sent you, they can get you on as a write-in today and we'll get you on the schedule moving forward.

"And you," he pointed at me, talking faster than his hands could move like they were trying to keep up with him. "I have you going to Gertrude Lane. You can head over now and work your shift as a write-in. I'll call them soon, I just have a few other calls to make first."

He walked off before we could object or agree. Emily huffed back off to her car.

The crunch of the firefighters walking through tables and chairs and medium memories stood my arm hair on end.

Without anyone to object to, I got in my car and headed to Gertrude Lane.

The Gertrude Lane location of Tart's took me almost an hour to get to. I pulled up through the back parking lot, which was packed, behind a wall of different pastel-colored shops. Tart's back door was next to two large garbages. I walked around the side of the building's sidewalk to the front.

As I came up on the familiar boardwalk, my heart sank. There, apart from my mind, was the boardwalk overlooking the beach from my dream. I turned toward Tart's, and the R was flickering.

My eyes closed and I tried to force myself to wake up. But the air that brushed my skin was warm and the sun hit my face and the gargle in my throat shoved the good air up



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and out. It was real.

I stood in the middle of the boardwalk and took it in like I was standing in a painting. Groups of friends and family thumped on the hollow wood boardwalk as they walked back and forth to all the little shops and the hot yoga studio. In the small crowd, a man with a hung head pumped into my shoulder and headed into Tart's. Once I caught myself, I followed him inside.

The Gertrude Lane Tart's was the same as the one in my dream down to the artwork. I looked around at every painting and taxidermy and studied them like I'd walked into a museum. The dark wood everything was the same shade, the bar had the same glass top, and even the stairs had the same hooked banister.

There were only two groups having drinks in the front seating area. I could hear a bartender crouching down behind the bar.

Without a second thought, I headed over to Deer Man.

My toes curled as I approached him. He was just as ominous without the movement. His mouth was barely open enough for me to see the shadows of teeth that seemed a little too sharp to be a deer's true mouth.

But it was him. I waved my hand in front of his face, back and forth. I tapped him on the nose and flicked his ears. And nothing.

"Hello there."

I jumped towards the fireplace, then turned to face the person who scared me.

He was the spitting image of Devin.

My feet clicked on the hollow tiles around the empty fireplace.

"Hello, sorry."

"We're not open."

"I know - I came from Plankton Mall. We had a fire this morning and I was told to come



here. The General Manager told me you guys could put me on today and get me on the schedule.” He looked up and down the restaurant.

“You’re the Plankton Mall girl? Sorry for the loss and everything. I can get you set up,” he threw the rag in his hand over his shoulder and reached out his hand to shake. “I’m Devin.”

My mind began to melt. As I shook his hand, I tried to convince myself that I was underwater. It would be easier to be underwater. I held my breath anyways. My mind lay somewhere in the world, dissected and directed by some madman. Maybe a god, some animal, or maybe some poorly thought-out destiny.

Devin gave me a tour of the back of the house and introduced me to the cooks. I hadn’t seen the kitchen in my dream. I wondered if it was the same in my dream. I’m not sure if I wanted it to be.

I only paid attention to what he was saying. He talked about the specials that day and how they were having an issue with people walking in and thinking they were a tattoo shop. We circled back to the bar itself, more familiar to me than he knew, and he had me get started moving some of the kegs around from the back.

I waited tables the whole shift in the left half of the front seating area. It wasn’t very busy, not like it was in my dream. But every time I would have to go to the kitchen, I would pass Deer Man, and every time I expected him to move. He had to talk, eventually.

I almost lost my mind in the car after my shift had ended. I sat there, unable to move in the darkness, staring at the back of the building. I had to do something, the restaurant couldn’t be real. I wanted it to fall off the beach and into the water. To crumble away and let me go home. Something had to be done.

After a while, I saw Devin leave out the back entrance. He had closed the bar, the last



part of the front of the house to close. It was too dark to see me as he walked passed my car to his.

The other cooks and back-of-the-house people would still be cleaning up. But the front of the house had to be empty.

I snuck in the back door next to the garbages. I quickly walked through the kitchen, making it look like I was supposed to be there. I headed out and around the hallway until I stared Deer Man in the face.

His teeth had gotten sharper. And longer. They were only stalactites, pressing into his bottom lip. My throat went dry. I waited for him to snap out of it or step out of the wall, and nothing. I held my breath anyway.

He looked above me as I scolded him. "You need to tell me what's going on. You're just frozen on the wall, you're going to need to do what I say."

He didn't budge. I tried harder. And harder.

Eventually, I got so frustrated I picked up a chair from the table next to the fireplace and threw it at him. It crashed against the mantel and landed on the tiles.

I danced around the floor like there was music playing. I threw everything at him. The salt shakers, the sugar packet boxes, the ketchup - I threw everything at him. The ketchup splattered up the wall. I yelled as I threw another chair from farther away. It hardly hit the wall. I stormed away from Deer Man and out the front entrance.

Despite it being passed midnight, a crowd was forming on the sidewalk. The first group of people began to circle me, and then the next, and soon enough it became a familiar struggle. The crowd grew and grew until a hairy leg poked out from the crowd.

I pulled the leg out from the stranger and tried to elbow my way out of the human cyclone. They all went their separate ways while I was clawing my way out. I turned on my body's airplane mode and walked over to the beach and continued to the volleyball



courts. The only lights were the string lights from the boardwalk, but the same group was playing volleyball anyways. I could hardly see the ball, just the juking movements of their half-light efforts.

The sand was cold and I didn't sink as much as usual. As usual, the middles didn't object when I took the legs from each of their arms and walked off.

The R in Tart's sign was still flickering. I cranked the door open to be met with a familiar face.

"Hey, nice legs," Devin said from behind the bar.

I jumped back. "What are you doing here?"

"Why would you like me to be here?"

"I want you to tell me what on Earth is going on," I said, pointing one of my deer legs at him.

He thought about it for a second. "There are worse things to happen to someone than hitting the ground," he held out the last deer leg from behind the counter. "At least in your dreams."

I grabbed the last deer leg and ran back to Deer Man. Peeling away the chairs and the sugar packets, I pushed aside enough to open the metal curtain and shove the deer legs in.

Staring into the fireplace from inches away, I expected something to happen, anything. Waiting and waiting, I sank even further on my knees. The legs hardly looked like lumber.

The air was thin and my lungs grew frustrated. I banged my arms against the chairs in a fit.

"Come on! Come on!" I yelled at the nonresistant flame.

I heard Devin's footsteps stop just behind me before I bothered to stop my fit.

When I finally looked up at him, I got distracted by Deer Man. His teeth had grown



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thicker and darker down passed his lips. They were thick like tusks.

Devin stepped around me and up to Deer Man. He grabbed the teeth and pulled them in one swift motion. I winced.

“Do you want help?” He asked. “There’s no changing your mind.”

“Yes.”

It was all I wanted.

He took one of the tusks and flicked it along the side of the other. It sparked like a large match. The flame was the size of a ketchup bottle.

He opened up the fireplace and threw the teeth onto the logs. They started on fire instantly. I sat back on my feet and watched the flame grow. The heat made me want to back up, but I was too close. It finally felt real. There are no flames underwater.

Deer Man didn’t move even when an ember flew up from the fireplace and crusted over onto his cheek. And then another. And then another.

Deer Man went up in flames except for his antlers. He lit the foam drop ceiling. The ceiling fire started the wall on fire, and soon enough we were surrounded by the flame.

Devin and I stood shoulder to shoulder watching the building burn around us. It was like a dream, the kind where you’re falling, and finally, you get to hit the bottom.

The ash consumed.

And then it was gone. And I was standing next to my car in the parking lot, the siren blaring. The firefighters were firefighting.

Devin saw me from a few cars over and walked up to me. He threw me into a hug.

“I’m so sorry for the loss,” I whispered in his ear.

“Was someone hurt?”

“No, it was from overnight.”

The cards fit into their place. Hitting the bottom was warm and comfortable. Like treading water. I wondered where my body was the night before.



Short Story

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Author Biography

Ali Ruckstadter is a staff writer in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. She's currently finishing up her degree in communications at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee. In her free time, she likes to read, write, and knit. Ruckstadter is the author of the poetry collection *Her Next Party Dress*.

The Chosen Ones

Violet Noel

It was like every other day. The sun waltzed across the sky in its brilliant glorifying light and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. A red-tailed hawk swooped high above my head, letting out a joyful screech as it carried food off into the distance. I imagined it was going to feed its family. I smiled a little, thinking about my own family as I walked along the dirt road. It had been two years since I last saw them, and I finally would get to see them today. My leather sandals that weaved their way up to my knees crushed the small rocks into the ground. My emerald dress flowed like a green waterfall around me, and my golden crown was perched lopsided on my head. That was just mainly to annoy my protectors, Kane, Nick, Lilly, and Luke, all who surrounded me like a pack of wolves protecting their young. King Herold, my father, requested that they accompany me everywhere I went. This made sense of course. As protectors, they were chosen by my ancestor, the goddess Delphi, to protect me from harm and fight alongside me if ever the evil entity, Malice, should return. But, that hasn't happened. In fact, I don't think it's ever going to happen. The prophecy claimed that he would return on my ninth birthday. However, my birthday was two months ago, and nothing has happened yet!

"Are you feeling alright, Princess Cora?" Kane asked, looking down at me as I coughed.

"Yes, thank you," I said, looking up at him. "I'm just a little parched. That's all."

"Well," Nick began, pulling out a crumpled up map from his leather satchel made of cowhide, "there should be a stream nearby. Perhaps we should go look for it?"

"No, I'm fine," I said, my cheeks turning red as everyone began to split up. "I can wait." The kingdom isn't that far away, and I'm fine, honestly."

"Cora," Lilly said, gently placing her right hand on my shoulder. I turned around to look into her hazel eyes. "Please, be honest with us. If you're thirsty, we can find you a drink. It's

better than getting dehydrated because we still have a ways to go." She gave me a warm smile, which reminded me of a distant memory of my mother giving me the same smile before she died.

"Okay," I said, sounding defeated because I knew she was right. "I wouldn't mind getting a drink."

"Alright," Luke said, clapping his hands together, "Nick, lead the way."

"Yes, sir!" Nick laughed, giving a small salute. We turned off the road and into the long grass that seemed to stretch for miles. Thousands of flowers danced in a gentle breeze that swirled my chocolate colored hair around me, tickling my face. Lilly gave a small giggle and brushed the hair away. She grabbed some pieces of long grass and tied up her hair, then mine.

"There," she smiled. "Now, you can see!"

I laughed, nodding. "Thank you, Lilly." We continued to walk until the sun perched itself in the center of the sky, smiling down at us. The wind had picked up incredibly fast, which was strange to me. I must have had a questioning expression on my face because Lilly looked at me, concerned.

"Are you ok?" She asked.

"The wind," I said, looking at her, "it's... off."

"Indeed," Lilly nodded, glancing up at the sky. "Perhaps there is a storm coming?"

"Perhaps," I shrugged, continuing to walk. I didn't want to talk about it any longer. Lilly seemed to know and immediately dropped the subject.

"I found it!!!" Nick yelled in triumph as we climbed up to the top of a small hill. Kane whopped and Lilly cheered. Luke grabbed my hand and helped me as we made our way down the hill. At the bottom was a fast moving stream. Its waters glittered like jewels as the sun reflected against the surface. It was so clear that you could see millions of smooth pebbles that lay at the bottom. I knelt down, cupped my hands, and pooled water into

them. As I drank, the cool water filled me with a sense of peace and I immediately felt better. Everyone else followed suit. Then, we sat there for a moment, taking in the quiet, calming feeling that emanated from the world around us. It seemed that everything was perfect, at least until Luke looked at me and said: "So, Cora, what are you going to tell your father since you still haven't earned Delphi's blessing?"

"Luke!" Lilly snapped, glaring at him, "that's not something that you need to know!"

"Well, I was just curious! I-"

"No, it's okay, Lilly," I interrupted. "I get it." Then I turned to look at Luke. "Honestly, I have no idea, Luke. All I know is that he is probably going to be disappointed that I haven't succeeded, but glad that I'm home." I picked up a small pebble by the edge of the stream and threw it into the water.

"Well," Nick began, trying to not sound rude, "you're the only first born Delphi descendant that hasn't inherited the power to stop Malice yet. Surely your dad is going to be frustrated."

"Nick, don't push it," Kane argued. "It's not like Princess Cora's been lazy. Her fighting has greatly improved. In fact, she's bested the best fighter here: me. That's saying something!" He finished with a cocky grin.

"Hey! You are not the best fighter!" Lilly challenged, raising an eyebrow. "Luke is clearly the best. I mean, he was the one who was given the Staff of Light. The staff symbolizes that he is the head protector and..." The rest of their argument over who was the best fighter was slowly drowned out in my mind as the thought of telling my father of my failure reverberated in my head. *What was I going to say? "I'm sorry, father, I failed you and the kingdom? We're doomed?" This was not good.*

You see, Malice was created to balance out the good and evil of the world, much like yin and yang. However, Malice wants to plague the world with the evils that created him

in the first place: fear, death, conflict, everything negative in this world. Only Delphi and my ancestors were able to stop him, casting him deep into the earth. But every hundred years or so, Malice always finds a way back. However, he's been thwarted time and time again and returned to his prison before he can do any harm. This is all thanks to Delphi's descendants, who have earned her blessing. And like I said before, I don't think it's going to happen in my lifetime... but still, my father won't be pleased.

"I think Princess Cora should decide who's the best fighter," Kane said, snapping me back to reality. "Princess, tell us, who do you think is the best fighter out of all of us?"

"Uhhhh..." I stammered. "You all are very good at fighting. I don't think one beats the other. Each of you have important skills which is why you were chosen as my protectors."

"Wise words, Princess," Luke said, winking at me. "Now, let's make our way back."

"We'll help you with your father, too," Lilly added, getting up. "I'm sure he'll understand that you tried your best, especially, if we put in a good word." She reached out a hand to help me up, but before I could take it, a terrible roar filled the air. Cranes nearby were spooked and flew into the air. I gasped in terror as they screeched in pain and turned to ash, which floated away in the wind. Suddenly, the ground all around us turned black, every living plant within our line of sight disintegrated. The water in the stream dried up, leaving nothing but the pebbles.

"Look at the sky!" Nick said with urgency in his voice. I looked upwards to see that the blue sky didn't exist anymore. Instead, only the sun, which was now blood red, remained in a blacked out sky.

"How can this happen?" Lilly said, aghast.

"Malice... he's here," Luke said. Everyone looked at me, their expressions terrified. My heart began to pound fiercely in my chest.

"We have to get back to the castle!" I said, trying to stay calm. "We have to go help them!" Together, we raced back the way we came, trying not to focus on the world dying around us. Black vines were now breaking from the earth, reaching to the sky like hands. Luke pulled out a small golden stick from his holster and swung it over his head. The stick transformed into a staff that was seven feet long. A dragon spiraled its way from the bottom of the staff to a large hollowed-out sun that appeared at the top.

We finally made it to the dirt road, also covered in black vines, forcing us to a halt.

"Princess," Luke said, "stay in the center of us. We'll clear the path."

"But I want to help!" I argued, reaching for a small dagger I had hidden in the golden belt that wrapped around my waist.

"Woah!" Nick said, cutting a vine. "Where did you get that? That's mine!"

"I took it before we left," I grunted as I chopped down a vine that reached above my head. "Just in case I needed to protect myself."

"Okay, we don't need the backstory guys!" Kane yelled, "just keep cutting!" We forced our way through the dense patch of vines, slicing through their black flesh. Everytime we cut one down, a low hiss seemed to issue from them, as if they were snakes.

Finally, we made our way through the vines and resumed our running. In the distance, we could see black smoke billowing into the sky from the direction of the kingdom of Crystal Falls. Then, terrible thoughts began to swirl inside my head. *My sister, Grace... my father... were they okay? Were they alive?* I tried to push it out of my mind as the kingdom finally came into view. I froze, terrified at the horrible sight that met my eyes. The entire kingdom was in flames. Townspeople were running from their homes, carrying pets and little children as they screamed in terror. We ran through the crowd and I bumped into a boy about my age, covered in soot, wearing ragged clothes that were charred and torn. The boy was carrying the lifeless body of a little girl who looked no older

than two months. When he realized who I was, he cried: "You could've saved us!" Then, he ran away. I couldn't move, dumbfounded at what he had said. *I could've saved them. I could've stopped this all from happening. It's my fault.*

"Cora!" Lilly yelled over the chaos. "We have to go!" She grabbed my hand and pulled me along with the others as we made out way to the castle's entrance. Buildings around us were filled with fire and charred bodies lay sizzling on the ground. I tried to not be sick from the smell of burning flesh.

Just as I thought to myself that things couldn't get worse, it happened. Another terrible roar tore through the air and the earth shook violently.

"Look out!" Nick yelled, as time slowed down around me. I looked up to see a huge ball of purple fire fly through the sky, aimed directly at me. I heard Kane, Nick, Luke, and Lilly call out my name and they pushed me to the ground before the ball of fire hit the earth. I was blasted backwards by the force of the explosion, and crashed into a wall of a collapsing building... and everything went dark.



Author Biography

Sixteen year old Violet Noel is a sophomore at Oshkosh West High School. At a young age, Violet fell in love with the art of creating a story. Some of her most notable achievements include winning first place in a 2022 writing contest and submitting a full season of episodes for an animated TV series for consideration. Violet's latest work, *The Legend of Crystal Falls*, is a teen novel that she published at the age of fifteen. She plans on making it into a trilogy. Violet hopes to inspire young readers to reach for their own dreams.



Short Story (18 and younger) **2nd Place**

Her Bare Branches

Chloe Lusvardi

I leap gracefully out of the car, breathing in the warm summer air. The cabin is charming and rustic, which I love. Next to me, Leo barks happily.

"Well, this is our cabin," Mom says, grinning.

I give a nod of acknowledgment as we head inside. It smells like wood and old paint, exactly as a cabin should. I claim the bedroom at the end of the hall. It's quaint, with cute floral wallpaper and a spacious closet. I unpack a few things but quickly grow bored and decide to explore. Leo seems as restless as I am and jumps up from his spot in the hallway as soon as he sees me.

"Do you want to come, boy?"

Leo barks. I get a leash on him and dig out my phone.

"I'm going exploring and bringing the dog!" I yell.

I barely stop to hear my parents' response before rushing outside. Behind our cabin, there's a thick forest that is supposed to lead to a creek. The forest is dark and quiet, with only the sound of crunching leaves beneath my feet to keep me company. The trees are tall and beautiful, blooming with summer beauty. Suddenly, I notice a dying tree. It's a towering oak that must have been gorgeous at one point. Now, its branches droop, and all its leaves have fallen off. It stirs something deep inside of me.

"Hey there."

Leo looks at me quizzically.

"Don't look at me like that, Leo. So what if I'm talking to a tree? They also have feelings, you know."

I realize how insane I sound and continue on my walk, thinking about that stupid tree, so much so that when I arrive back at the cabin, I search up on my phone: "How to save a



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dying tree". Tree-lovers.com encourages watering the tree, using fertilizer, and talking to it, thus releasing carbon dioxide, which plants need. Science is weird. I grab a watering can and some old fertilizer. This time, it takes me longer to find the tree, but once I do, I get right to work. I water the tree and sprinkle some fertilizer around it, just like the website told me to. What am I forgetting? Right, talking to it. So, I tell it about my life, school, and friends. I ramble on for so long that I don't even notice the sky darkening. I just sit there, completely calm, talking, until my phone beeps.

"What?" I grumble into the phone.

"Leila, where are you? It's 9 PM, you missed dinner!" Mom says.

"Sorry, I lost track of time. I'm on my way home right now."

With that, I sprint back to the cabin, not once glancing back at the tree.

"Hey, Leila! How was your day?" Dad asks when I knock on the door.

"Awesome! I walked around the woods and befriended a dying tree."

"Good for you, befriending trees," he replies, his voice dripping in sarcasm.

"And what did *you* do today?"

Before he can come up with a witty reply, I run into the kitchen and heat some pizza rolls in the microwave. I'm starving; I haven't eaten since those stale Cheez-Its I munched on in the car. By the time I eat, shower, dig out pajamas, and brush my teeth, it's already ten-thirty. I was hoping to read a little, but I'm so tired from the day I just collapse on the bed and fall fast asleep.

At precisely 8:30 AM, I wake up. I devour a bowl of cereal and dress quickly, wanting to visit my tree. I'm not expecting much; trees don't just magically heal themselves. Right?

Wrong. When I arrive, the tree is standing upright, and little green buds are already starting to sprout from it.

"Wow, you're looking great, Jade," I blurt.



Short Story (18 and younger) 2nd Place

I don't know where the name came from. It just came to me. Jade, meaning green, meaning hope for this little tree. This little tree, that has already shown the promise of new life. I never want to leave it.

For the rest of the summer, I find myself drawn to Jade day after day. Sometimes, I'll draw, sometimes I'll sing, sometimes I'll journal, sometimes I'll tell stories, and sometimes I'll sit, totally still, listening to the swaying of her soft branches. My parents rarely see me; I'm gone by before sunup and back after sundown. Occasionally, I'll fall asleep peacefully in the perfect little corner of the world that is Jade. Jade grows stronger every day, becoming beautiful and green. It seems that nothing can last forever, and the summer quickly fades away. Before I know it, it's time to return to my real home, to a world much more chaotic than this one. Jade will be fine, though. I sincerely hope so.

The school year passes in a blur. I suffer through math, make new friends, and even take up writing. My novel is a familiar story about a girl who befriends a tree. Despite the novel, I slowly forget about Jade and our magical summer. That is, until June, when we again return to the cabin. I immediately rush to our spot in the woods, terrified that I won't be able to find it again. Luckily, my brain has memorized the path by now. Before I know it, I'm there. Jade looks worse than she had when I found her one summer before. Last summer, she was dying, but she was dying naturally. Now, she looks sad, gray, and lonely even. I sob. Her bare branches rustle softly.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

Her branches nudge my shoulder as if to say, *Leila, I missed you*. I missed you too, Jade. I lay down at her roots. I have to save her once and for all. But how? I start by doing the same thing I did last year: feeding, fertilizing, watering, and talking to her. I tell her about



**Short Story
(18 and younger)**

2nd Place

my novel and recount our adventures. Her branches sway softly and I can tell she is listening to me, feeling as nostalgic as I am, remembering last summer. Of course, I can't come back and restore her forever, but in that moment, I promise myself I will for as long as I can. And so I do, summer after summer, until the very end.



Author Biography

An aspiring author, 13-year-old eighth grader Chloe Lusvardi loves to spend any spare free time on the couch, writing. When she's not writing, she can be found dancing, sketching, reading, or spending time with her dog.

The Sound of Silence

Lauren Theiler

What word is so loud that you can't ignore it? What word makes your stomach squirm if it's said for too long? What word can make you rethink what you just said?

What's described is not a word. But it's quite the opposite.

This is stronger than any word. I sat here trying to find the word that is the most powerful. Some words are equal in powerfulness while some are simply not close enough to truly being *the* word that's being searched for. Sure, we all love a good apology or a genuine "I love you". But there is something that speaks louder than any singular word. Not even a necklace of words could quite hold its spot.

The sound of silence.

The time that his fiancé walked down the aisle in her white gown, \$3,000 over budget. But it was worth it. She looked so beautiful, tears stung his eyes. He wanted to tell her how beautiful she was, how much he couldn't wait to spend the rest of his life with her. But when she stood in front of him, his voice fell short. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. He just stood in silence, admiring her. She knew that he couldn't find the words to express what he was thinking.

The neurosurgeon was 17 hours into surgery on a little girl. He had been selected to be the head surgeon for the surgery. He didn't stop when the heart monitor fell flat. They tried multiple attempts to revive her. It wasn't until she was pronounced dead that he dropped both tools on the ground and the weight of the world fell on his overworked shoulders. When " he went out to tell the young girl's parents she didn't make it. He stopped before saying anything and looked at his feet. The silence was so loud. Words were not needed. The couple embraced one another while the mother whispered, "She's

in a better place now.

The teenagers sat in the Chevy holding eye contact. The girl's eyes looked as if they'd just seen a ghost, but she didn't want to believe it. No emotion was detectable behind the boy's eyes. She was fidgeting with the promise ring he had given her, she hated it more than anything in this moment. She pulled and tugged at it side to side, never slipping it off her finger. They looked at each other for a very long time until she said, "Do you still love me?" Her voice broke as she spoke. The boy looked down, not answering the question. He never did answer it. And in that moment, her heart broke as fast as it fell in love.

The raspy breathing of the 15-year-old chocolate lab, Lucky was the only thing that filled the room. The 5-year-old boy couldn't understand why everyone looked so sad. Even Dad had tears slipping from the corner of his eyes. Lucky's shallow breaths became less frequent. "What's wrong with Lucky?" the 5-year-old boy asked. Silence answered that question. Lucky's eyes closed and his chest no longer rose. Dad and Mom hung their heads lower than their hearts, and the 5-year-old boy knew his best buddy was gone.

The dinner table was silent, it was the 100th day since he left. The mom smiled sheepishly. The kids picked at the tortellini on their plate, any other day it would have been their favorite meal, but today it just felt ironic. The doorbell rang even though they weren't expecting anyone. As the mom stood up, the sound of keys could be heard unlocking the front door. A familiar presence stepped inside the house. Pins decorated the camouflage clothing he was dressed in. The initial silence was even louder than the cheers that followed. He was home.

Silence fills the void when we don't know how. Silence is both a beautiful and ugly thing. Silence is inevitable when we can't find the words to sat.



**Short Story
(18 and younger)**

3rd Place



Author Biography

Lauren Theiler is a senior at Arrowhead Union High School. She loves writing short stories in her free time. She is currently enrolled in AP Art and creating her portfolio in oil pastel and acrylic paint. She works at Barkin' Up Hickory, a doggy daycare, in Pewaukee. She has been working at that current job for a year and a half and loves what she does.



What Happens to Your Feet in Space

Nicholas Hansen

In space, the skin on your feet peels off, but only the skin on the bottom. Weird, right? After about 2-3 months in space, the foremost layer of skin on the bottom of your feet will fall off all at once, like it's been waiting for a chance. Apparently, it happens because when you're in space, your feet are never on the ground for too long and they never see any work. Your feet form calluses, and then the callused portions fall off at once, leaving the skin on the bottom of your feet soft and much like an infant's.

I've always had a weird relationship with calluses. I formed them slower than everyone else I knew. The first time I heard about calluses, I didn't understand what they were. My friend Rachel was climbing the jungle gym and I was sitting at the bottom. We were far away from all the other kids. She kept talking about how her calluses formed and fell off then reformed again and I was just nodding along and saying "uh-huh" like I was already old enough for that to be boring.

The reason astronauts' feet form calluses in space and then they all fall off at once is because they're constantly in zero gravity. The bottoms of their feet never touch the ground. Whenever astronauts have to stand up straight for something, they use loops on the foot rails. The only times astronauts have their feet on the ground is when they use special exercise equipment, and even then their feet are placed in sneakers that are attached to said exercise equipment. To tell the truth, I don't really understand that.

To me, hard work and calluses are the same thing. I didn't form calluses until I had been lifting weights for months. I was 14 at the time. I wanted bigger arms so I would do better at Football. Also, I wanted everyone to stop talking about how my brother wasn't the skinny weird kid anymore and how I still was. I wasn't going to be the one failure. We were going to be normal, an honest-to-goodness successful goddamn family, my mom's



drinking and my dad's absence aside. I abided by the schedule my brother and I made and lifted weights for hours, until the makeshift Fall Out Boy and Avenged Sevenfold CD reached its end. I formed calluses a long time after I started lifting from constantly grabbing dumbbell bars embedded with railroad track patterns. I had tough hands. My dad was a mechanic, I had mechanic hands, so I never really formed calluses. You're supposed to get calluses because you're tough, but I wasn't getting them because I was tough. It reminded me of how I wouldn't get in fights because fighting was wrong and adults would say I was too soft.

This one kid always chased me around on the woodchip splattered playground. He was a two years younger than me, and though he was a ginger, the base of his hair was still more blonde than red. He always let out this scream before he and this other kid his age sprinted after me. I thought about beating them up, but I had what were called "behavioral issues." Sometimes, I would get overwhelmed and behave "wrong." Tears would stream down my face whenever people wouldn't leave me alone, like when Noah said my favorite pokemon was stupid or when I'd scream at kids for telling me I could cut ahead and get milk if I wanted since I brought lunch from home. I got stressed out easily—probably because my mom would drink that clear fluid from a glass bottle and get a slurred voice and scream at me for playing in my own backyard. I couldn't fight them, because then I'd have to sit in that one office to the side of the school where the man in glasses would ask me how I was feeling, and I wouldn't be able to describe it. I had to let them chase me, even though the other kids called me a wuss for it.

In a way, I always got reprimanded for being too tough.

Apparently, in space, the skin on the bottom of your feet falls off but the skin on the top becomes tough. Some astronauts say it becomes like alligator skin. This is because



astronauts oftentimes use the top of their feet to get around on guard rails. The top of your skin becomes tough, while the bottom of your skin becomes weak and soft. That top skin could probably do just about anything you wanted it to do. If I drop my iPhone on my foot, the spot's a little tender for about a day. I wished I was tougher.

Foot toughness was an important value in my hometown. I remember one time when my brother and I were going on a camping trip and we were exploring the woods. He was in college and I was in high school. He was barefoot, and I was wearing shoes. I asked him how he walks around barefoot all the time, because when I walk around barefoot I feel every single pebble like it's a knife. He said that he likes to be barefoot when he's outside because his feet adapt to the rough ground and things like small pebbles didn't bother him much when he got used to it. Then he said some Environmental Science major thing about respecting the power of nature. I told him that I was more inclined to respect the power of humans who were smart enough to create shoes so they didn't have to deal with pebbles and other shit like that. He scoffed and mumbled something I didn't hear. It was probably something about being ignorant, but I pretended it was something about being tough. I wanted to be tough.

I learned that, in space, your skin shedding presents a practical problem. In zero gravity, your skin doesn't hold together very well and your skin flakes end up floating around along with you.

There's a lot to unpack there.

Basically, your actual human skin will start floating around with you in space, which is gross, unhygienic, and impractical. Your skin flakes will just float around in the same spaceship as you.

One time, my brother and I went out to a lake to go collect some weird fungus called Chaga. It looks like a big burnt growth on the side of a tree. It only grows on dying birch



trees. You've probably seen it if you've gone on a hike in the woods for an extended period of time. I decided I wanted tougher feet, so I almost never wore socks the whole summer. Eventually, I just got used to not wearing socks even when I went outside. On that hike, a wood tick bit me between my two smallest toes. The tick got really big before I ever found it and pulled it off, and to this day, the spot where it bit me still itches when I touch it, all because I wanted tougher feet.

That's something nobody tells you about being being tough: eventually, it poses a practical problem. Nobody ever tells you when that alienating quirk or strange thought will drive you to places you never pictured yourself in. Then, when you make that unpredictable mistake, you'll be on your spaceship, all alone, floating around with your stupid, gross, skin flakes and the only way to let them out is through the air lock. Good luck closing it in time.

Obviously, astronauts have to do something about the fact that their skin will just fall right the heck off. Thing is, they never wear shoes and they keep on the socks they wear for a week. Clothes just doesn't get dirty in space. One astronaut found an answer when he accidentally put on a sock meant for a smaller female astronaut. It hugged his foot tightly enough that it applied constant pressure, like it was holding the foot skin against the layer underneath it. He began to make this a habit. He loved the small socks, and started calling them "foot koozies". I think that he learned something important when he discovered foot koozies. He learned that, maybe, it's just not very practical to try to toughen yourself up against everything.

Foot koozies. They're like bags for your skin flakes, little containers that capture your failures so they don't fly all around you and so you don't have to pop open the airlock and play the riskiest game of let-the-fly-out-without-killing-it ever, which is probably a smart choice.



Personal Essay

1st Place

I think everyone could use Foot Koozies. Well, figuratively, not literally. I sure as heck hope nobody on Earth has to watch all their foot flakes fall off for no reason. I mean I think everyone needs something that will catch their problems for them. Everything sucks a little bit. Everyone has something like a tick that gnaws on their toes as hard as they can, and as a result, everyone learns that they're stupid for letting that tick get there. Everyone learns they aren't as good at understanding nature as their brother, or something like that. That's why people need Foot Koozies. Everyone needs something that makes them realize their mistakes are OK and that at least now they can do better.



Author Biography

Nicholas Hansen is a writing tutor in Long Lake, Wisconsin. He graduated from Northern Michigan University in 2022 with a degree in English-Writing.



The Rabbit

Alissa Kiedrowski

I noticed it somewhere between the mindless task of washing my hands and pausing to consider the puffy bags under my eyes, the ubiquitous talismans of spring allergy season for me. It was a terrified, piercing wail. Like a scream, but not like a human scream. The pitch was too low to be a banshee, too high to be a fox. Pitch notwithstanding, it was altogether too urgent to ignore.

I touched my fingers to the old blue hand towel by the sink, one of the ones my mother had given me years earlier. In that moment, that little knowing inside of me, the one that was always there, always watchful, but usually silent, spoke up.

"You know what that is," she insisted. In my sleepy state, I saw an old woman sitting in the corner, salt and pepper hair in impossibly long braids. Crepey, translucent skin wilting off her high cheekbones. She looked at me over the tops of her lenses as her glasses perched on the very end of her long nose. She shook a bony, outstretched middle finger at me. It was a strange, but not unfamiliar gesture, as that was the hallmark look of my long-gone Aunt Roma.

My mother's sister Roma had spent her life raising kids and working as a night nurse. I always thought the quiet, creepy isolation of that job somehow suited her undeniably odd behavior. She was a legend in my childhood, a woman of stature, impossibly tall and thin and serious. She always stood in stark contrast to my chubby mother's disarming grin and effervescent laughter. Plus, Roma came with her own ghost stories.

Long before I was born, there had been an accident. She was in the kitchen cutting chicken and the knife slipped, severing a crucial tendon in the index finger of her left hand, leaving it paralyzed. With the cold pragmatism of a farm kid turned nurse, she decided she no longer needed a finger that would not bend to her will, so she had it



amputated.

As the family story goes, she had taken it home after the amputation, put it in an old glove box and buried it under the bleeding heart in the backyard. We still wonder if she left it there when her family moved to Tennessee or if they dug it up and took it along. Family sticks together.

She hadn't been a significant figure in my childhood, as my mother hated her, but she was often on the periphery of what was going on. I didn't think of her often, or even fondly. But somewhere in the years between visiting for my Uncle Mike's funeral and today, she had morphed into the personification of that little knowing inside of me.

"Quit dawdling. Go deal with it." Roma was direct and known for calling it like she saw it. I imagined more finger shaking as that inner knowing called me to action.

I shuffled down the hall and looked ahead to the family room where the dog was losing his mind. Our pandemic puppy was a highly excitable English Springer Spaniel purchased from a family in Janesville. True to his breed, he would bounce when excited, but this was a special kind of bounce. Not the "Hey, let's go on an adventure" bounce or the mysteriously twirling kind of a bounce that meant he needed to poop.

No, this was a special bounce. A "Hey, mom, you need to do something now!" bounce. The thing was, I really didn't want to.

It was a lovely spring morning, toward the end of May. Summer was around the corner, and we'd already mowed the first crop of dandelions, though replacements had already arrived to ensure the continuation of the species, forming a dense yellow and green carpet that stretched from our deck to our dock on Big Muskego. The morning had been cool, so I had already spent an hour on the deck, enjoying the sun and my morning coffee. I had only come in for a few minutes, and fully planned to return to my spot, watching and soaking in the beauty of spring, allergies notwithstanding.



But as any mother will tell you, you only have to turn your back for a minute before chaos could break loose. And by the sounds of things, some demon from the inner ring of the inferno had stubbed his toe on a piece of sulfur and was now shrieking about it.

Except it wasn't a demon. Or a banshee. Not even a person. The shrieking was coming from a rabbit.

A tiny, tiny rabbit. Large enough to have fur and the ability to control its little limbs, as this one clearly did, wriggling desperately to free itself from the jaws of death and eternal damnation. Otherwise known as the mouth of Big Kitty.

Big Kitty had been with us for years and in that time had grown into quite the neighborhood personality. I had picked him up the first September we lived by the lake. I had been looking for an orange cat when I saw the ad on Craigslist. What really caught my eye, though, was buried at the bottom of the ad: Acts more like a dog than a cat.

I still think about how understated that description really was. While he didn't bark or fetch, per se, he would come into the house when called. Like the time my husband, in nothing but his boxers, stood outside in the dark, shaking a box of Lucky Charms. Not that we ever fed the cat Lucky Charms, but because Lucky Charms sound a lot like cat food, Big Kitty came bounding out of the dark night and into the house. He was that kind of cat.

When I picked up the orange and white fluff ball from his previous owner, they cautioned me that he might like to go outside. I was not terribly concerned about that, since I grew up surrounded by cats on our family's dairy farm. I decided we would just retrain him to be happy inside. We, of course, failed that on the first day we had him and almost every day since, regardless of the weather.

The cat needed his outside time, to take in the fresh air, stretch his legs and indulge his instincts. We sometimes called him NBK: Natural born killer. The cat, despite his big



beautiful fluffy orange and white profile, really loved to stalk things. But due to his fondness for Meow Mix, he rarely caught anything and if he did, he never actually hurt it. He was one who enjoyed the hunt more than the kill. Today's catch-and-release trophy was a very vocal bunny.

I considered both the rabbit and his captor through the glass as the dog continued his acrobatics around me. The cat desperately wanted in the house with his newfound friend. He didn't seem especially committed to killing it or eating it, but he didn't look like he would surrender it willingly.

So, as I stood there taking in my options, the old woman in the corner spoke up again. "Don't you dare open that door and let that cat and soon-to-be carcass in the house. You'll have a complete circus."

I knew she was right, not just because she was the knowing one, but because I remembered our first rodeo of this kind. It had been fall that time, maybe October. The days were still warm but eroding into winter. I had been reading and my husband was in the kitchen doing the busy stuff he liked to do. The Packers were playing in the background.

"Hey, Jer, the cat wants in." I suggested it in the most deadpan, disinterested way I could. But my heart was chuckling because I saw the cat had a special prize in his jaws. That time it was a field mouse, and it was not at all dead, but quite animated and quite interested in being set free. My husband, fully distracted by the game, moved on autopilot to let the cat in, noticing the present just before he opened the door.

"The cat has a mouse in his mouth?" It was more of a question than a declaration. His mind was still clearly on the game. So, feeling oddly mischievous and not looking up from my book, I muttered. "Oh, well, you better let him in, then."

I swear to this day it was a joke. I would have never said that if I had thought for one



moment that my husband would do it. But he did. He let the cat, with the mouse in its mouth, in the house.

All hell broke loose after that with mouse, cat and husband doing laps through the kitchen and dining room. Eventually, the mouse was shoosed outside and the cat restrained inside. My marriage has never been the same since that day.

But back to the matter at hand. I had a dog losing his mind on the inside, a rabbit fighting for his life and an eerily friendly cat on the outside. A sliding glass door and myself were all that kept the melee from escalating further.

“Well, don’t just stand there.” Again, the helpful voice of my dearly departed Aunt Roma. I wondered why she never showed up when I really needed a bit of nudging. Or a second opinion. Or the recipe for Grandma’s pfeffernusse cookies.

It was a simple thing, really: Get the cat inside without the rabbit while keeping the dog inside. Nobody else was awake, so, I would just need to use my five hands to make the magic happen. Without thinking, because at times like this it doesn’t always help, I stepped outside, one hand firmly on the dog’s head. I think I saw puffs of smoke where his claws scratched the floor in a move not unlike what I’d seen on the old Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner cartoons.

I rushed the glass door closed behind me until the click assured me that we would not have to worry about the dog for the moment. Fully focused on the cat and his unfortunate find, I realized I had brought nothing with me. No towel or tongs, shovel or broom. I stood barefoot on the deck in an old red housedress. I didn’t even have a shoe, not that I would have known what to do with one in that moment.

I also realized, as Aunt Roma started chuckling again, that I really didn’t want to touch the rabbit. I don’t think I was afraid of it biting me or the cat, more that I was reluctant to touch it. Diseases, the sanctity of wildlife, whatever the reason, it was important to me to not make hand-to-fur contact.



So, with no tools or weapons, I used the only things I had: My words. I start issuing commands at the cat like he was a properly trained dog.

“Drop it!” had been an effective command for some, but not all, of our dogs. Our current one was not great at it and the cat, even less so. Mostly because cats don’t respond well to commands. But in his defense, we had never tried to teach him any tricks.

In retrospect, having lived with this cat for more than 5 years and been greeted by dozens of his presents, teaching him drop it would have been smart. But since we never tried, I was standing on my deck in the warm May sunshine using words to impose my will on a cat who clearly had enough of his own. He stared back at me with bemused green eyes.

As I considered my options, I gave up the foolishness of vocal commands and moved on to a plan requiring brute force. I decided I could pick the cat up and shake the rabbit out of its mouth. It might have worked, but as I was steeling myself for the mission, the cat dropped the bunny and retired to another part of the deck, glaring at me with something between murderous contempt and full-on rage. A blend of both. He was not happy when he realized he had inadvertently acquiesced to my will.

I paused briefly while the old woman in the corner and I exchanged surprised looks of relief.

The rabbit was now quivering on the faded doormat, terrified to move. But at least the screaming had stopped. But now I would have to carefully step over or around it when I went back in the house, taking the cat with me.

Anyone who has owned a 20-plus pound cat knows that removing them from any situation is a foolish act of bravado. Because 20 pounds of fur magically transforms into 2,000 pounds of blades and fur when you attempt to make it do something against its will.



Yet, here I was, with that knowing voice chuckling in the background, picking up a cat and, balancing on one foot and leaning a bit to the side, trying to shove him through the smallest possible opening of the sliding glass door while my third hand firmly held the still crazy dog in place.

But cats do as they will. It's their spirit, their essence. We wouldn't want them to behave any other way. And so, Big Kitty promptly began pummeling my thighs with his not insignificant tail. While beautifully fluffy most of the time, it was a magical thing that could transform into a military-grade assault weapon on a whim. He was furiously whamming away with his tail while his telescoping legs grew from the standard 8 or so inches into seven-foot-long projections. Each was deployed in a cardinal direction, making it physically impossible to actually push the cat in through the door.

Using my sixth and seventh hands, I encircled his legs and pulled them together like the spines of an umbrella. Then, I unceremoniously launched him through the door, over the dog and onto the carpet in the middle of the room.

Ok, maybe it didn't really work out that well and maybe there was a terrifying potpourri of cat and dog fur flying for a bit, but eventually, the cat ended up on the rug licking his insults and the dog recovered from the trauma, though he was still insanely interested in getting out to check out the quivering bunny lurking behind a pot of pink petunias on the deck.

My mission had been successful, but it was too much to take in before my second cup of coffee. So, I crawled back into bed with my husband, who sleepily asked if I'd made coffee.

I gently stroked the thinning gray hair at his temples and smiled. "Yes, there's some left for you."

The old woman in the corner nodded slightly, then faded into the paisley upholstery until I needed her again.



Personal Essay

2nd Place



Author Biography

Alissa Kiedrowski is a proud member of the Waukesha WriMos and lives near a lake with her husband, son and the most precocious pets ever.



Lake 17

Brandon Hansen

I remember flicking basswood seeds as far as we could off our fingers, and blood pooling in perfect moons beneath our nails. I remember chasing minnows down impromptu rivers in our gravel driveway, how suckers and shiners swelled over the lip of the water barrel Dad used to flush customer's boat motors by week, and that on the weekend became a home for the baitfish he would trap.

I remember how Savannah, the neighbor girl, watched me and Nicky pick bursting-ripe crab apples from our tree and boot them into her grandma's yard with dollar-store plastic bats. One day, she sprang through the field between our homes and emerged into our yard with the petals and calices of iris and wood violet glued by the morning dew to her legs. She opened her cupped hands and dumped a dozen, fragrant, crushed crab apples into my outstretched palms, and said something like, "I think these are yours."

On weekends, Nicky, Savannah and I marveled at garter snakes beneath old tires in the back, or leopard frogs that bathed in rainwater collected in the live wells of people's abandoned boats entwined in raspberry bushes behind the barn. Dad would come outside, grab his net, staple-gunned to a yardstick, and swap a few minnows from the barrel into a five-gallon bucket. I always wondered what that felt like, to be dunked into a new world.

I knew when he was going to Lake 17. His eyes would change color. They'd grow wide, wondrous, soak up sun, and turn green as water. Lake 17 was the one lake he would not bring me, the lake so deep in the woods it was never named, only numbered. In this state, he'd phase right past us. My mom, sun-drunk, ever dazed in her plastic chair, would slur for her kiss goodbye, and he'd be in the car.

It was like a little hook in my heart every time. But there would be Savannah, tugging at



my sleeve, Savannah who would point to a chrysalis in the leaves, who reminded me that there was wonder in the world, right there.

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Though we both grew up in the Northwoods, it felt like Savannah lived in one world, and I in another.

For years, she and I didn't know the difference. All we knew was how to wear a desire path into the wildflower field, where we dashed back and forth to each other's homes in the silvery light of post-school days and weekends, when we'd follow spring-melt rivers down the crackled asphalt road, or catch summer frogs in the cradles of our hands, or crunch fall's leaves into confetti and throw it about us, or build snowmen together, testaments of what we could build together.

But we grew. I started work when I was 12, Long Lake's mower of sprawling lakeside lawns, collector of crumpled twenties. Savannah's grandma, Bonnie, saw this in me. She called me over when I was 15, her tone unfamiliar, not quite the one who'd call to say she'd rented a DVD for us to watch, to sink into the clouds of her couch cushions before until we were all heavy-eyed, nearly dreaming.

In Bonnie's living room was the first time I saw a flat screen television. In her breezeway was the first time I was told to take my shoes off before stepping inside, and in the dark granite of her kitchen island was where I saw myself, in a way, for the first time. I saw the storm on my head, my ever-tousled hair. And I knew if I were to smile, there would be my crooked teeth. Clothes soaked in the smoke of Mom's Marlboros and our woodstove hung off my body, all my dad's or older brother's, down to the socks. I was an amorphous shape, growing taller so fast it hurt, uncontained, and yet with my gut sucked to my back with hunger, which left me perpetually dazed. In that daze I'd look up to see Savannah



there in the bright living room, her hair long and glossy seemingly overnight, smile straightened by the vice of braces, donning new clothes what felt like every day.

Then Bonnie would bustle in, her energy zapping around the room. I admired Bonnie, her busyness, how she took Savannah in when her mom ran back to the city upon her birth, and her dad took to the woods, a lumberman who rarely came home.

But that day, Bonnie took me out outside and pointed to the isolated stretch of forest that was her backyard, a canopy of maples that Savannah and I learned to hold hands beneath, listening to the wind in branches and the slow changing of our voices, and she told me to uproot the undergrowth, chop the dead-standing trees, drag them away, and burn them. She said, "Make it like a park."

It made me shake. When later I whispered this news to Savannah on the phone, I thought she'd storm into Bonnie's room, stomp her foot and fight for our woods. Instead, a line snapped inside me when she said,

"It's just a yard."

Seasons passed, and I tended those woods. By the time I was 18, newfound gaps of sky lit my way as I dragged trees to the burn pile. I wondered if Savannah was watching me through the window, watching our trees fall to my axe. Maybe she was, for a while. But it wasn't long until I could say for sure that she was curled up on the couch, face awash in the blue light of her phone, while Bonnie polished the dark granite, and I worked.

Those nights, I'd kneel before the fire. The sky would darken, and I would reflect.

I was leaving home soon. College. Savannah, a year younger, would be "Right behind me." That phrase comforted me, the idea that I'd step out of our world for just a moment and soon, it would crash back over me like a wave. But those evenings, when I'd breathe in the smoke of our fallen trees, I couldn't feel the warmth. Through the tree line I could



hear Dad angle grinding rust off some vacationer's chrome engine case, working after work. His fishing poles sat in the barn, cork handles brittle, missing the oils from his hands that hadn't touched them in years. I knew Mom would be out cold, day-clothed, also unloved, limbs akimbo and basically dead, and that Nicky would close her bedroom door like we used to when Savannah would visit, a funeral every night.

Maybe Savannah was cold to me because I'd be leaving our world for another one soon. But those smoky nights, I wondered if we'd ever been in the same place to begin with.

It was a cold evening in the fall when we sat cross-legged on my bed for the last time. She was still wearing her jacket, like for her, this talk was a stop at the store.

Images flashed behind my eyes as we sat there, elementary mornings and her grabbing my freezing hands at the bus stop, the misty lake to our right, the flaking stop sign the anchor for our meeting. I remembered the time she looked hard at me and said I had "a funny spike of color" in my eyes, and when I asked her what she meant, she just said that she loved me.

Now, she just said that she was tired.

I could only ask – "Of what?"

She shrugged. And I knew in that shrug was the name of a guy from school that she looked at the way she used to look at me, was the confirmation of those rumors that zip around hallways.

I felt an incredible heat in my face. In my mind there was only her figure and his, walking away through the hazy mist, the dissolved promise of our togetherness, separated only by wildflowers.

I shook. She was still. I sighed. I sputtered. I said,

You have no guts.



She looked at me in the most heartbreaking way, dark eyes wide and soaking up the lamplight. There we were on the bed together, but a world apart. And then she was gone.

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There wasn't much of a spring in Wisconsin the next year. There was more of a vacuum between the snow and the warm rain, which left its memory in the air as we slipped through the reeds and half-sunken trees of Lake 17.

I'd been through my first year of college, a drilling haze of time in which I learned to live in a city and push my nightly dreams of home deep into the waters of my mind when they threatened to spill out of me. Now, I was back. The first warm day of the year, I woke up and felt my eyes change color.

Nicky, our longtime friend Chance, and I hauled dad's old canoe, stuffed with camping gear, through the old growth. We tried to remember dad's directions, given to us after a sigh and resigned smile in the driveway, while from layers of compacted leaves we kicked up clouds of mosquitoes who drank from us obsessively. Every muscle burned and the rain left us steaming until we turned a final corner, and the opaque wall of leaves gave way to a clearing, from which Lake 17 appeared, still, as if waiting.

The way the lake accepted us – our canoe, our weight – felt loving.

I understood then why Dad disappeared all those weekends. Chance and I went dewy eyed at scarlet wildflowers ringing the lake, standing birches half-swallowed by its mirror surface, the lakebed white as snow, the bass and panfish darting in its contrast between the beaver-felled logs and lazy lily pads as big as plates, and their bulbs bursting yellow. This was what the world could be.

The lake spilled deep into the woods. We followed a cove until we found ourselves drifting amidst a meadow, where everything was fat with life, where bird-like dragonflies lighted on the tips of our fishing poles, cattails on the shore shaded us, and bass and bluegill bit hard and made our reels scream, as if exhilarated.



Enraptured by the fishing, it took me an hour to notice a loon, who slept on a bed of flattened reeds so close I could see its head tucked beneath its dark wing. A loon, like all other loons, who I knew loved for life, sung to its partner each night, and could dive into a different world whenever it wished.

Then, rain.

Unrepentant, sudden, clothes-turned-to-seaweed, streaming-past-my-lips until I was sputtering, rain. Lightning slashed the sky, stood my hair on end, showed us the way back to shore in episodes of light as Chance and I exchanged wild looks and paddled for our lives, chopping water. Absurdly, I kicked my feet up onto the wooden carry-handle my dad had carved for the canoe so many years ago, as if a lightning strike wouldn't hurt so bad that way, my feet off the aluminum, and Chance laughed. He laughed and I laughed and soon we slammed our stern into the muddy bank and flung ourselves ashore and into the tent, where Nicky shivered beneath the mist of rain that insisted its way through the canvas.

We just laughed. We could only get wetter and wetter and pass around a can of jellied cranberry sauce and laugh at our aching muscles, our rained-on trip, the sizzle of our fire outside. And as I did every day for our past year of silence, I wondered what it'd be like if Savanah could be there too, legs crossed under her like ours, trying to make room for each other, laughing at how it all hurts.

When the rain subsided at night, I stepped outside. Nicky and Chance slept. There was darkness and the lake, full of the perfect moon. And at my feet, there were frogs. They croaked to each other around the firepit, which in the faintest way was still warm, despite the downpour.

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It was spring again when Savanah called me. I remember the air was cold, and the apples weren't quite budding on the tree yet. Nicky and I had made breakfast for the



family, so it must have been a weekend home when my phone rang with an unusual number. I was in my room when I answered, and she said,

“Well, hey.”

She sounded the same. I sank onto the bed, mind washed. I probably said,

“Well, hey!”

But who knows. What I did know was that I could hear my own echo on her end, and that she said she tried to kill herself that morning. She was in the hospital now, and she was allowed one contact, and someone there was listening to our call, and she really just wanted to talk to me.

I never did know what to say, then or ever. I just whispered,

“Why?”

Since that day in my room two years ago, it sounded like everything had happened. She’d met people who sounded crazy or wonderful, she’d lived in a handful of places, had a handful of jobs, gotten the tattoos she always wanted, dyed her hair blue – all things Bonnie would faint to know now. I mentioned this, and for the first time in a long time, we laughed together.

“You should see me,” she said. “You wouldn’t believe it.”

I think I realized then that it’s easy to look at someone as if they’re the subject of your telescope, of whatever vision is left when you close an eye and glare down the lens at what you want them to be – parents laughing at the table, girl forever in the wildflowers.

I told her I was sorry for being so angry back then, and she laughed and said she was sorry about everything. We were both quiet for a minute, and in that minute, I looked at the space next to me on the bed, at the door where I’d watched her leave, and understood that things wouldn’t be that way again. There would be no more long hairs on the pillow, or bright chips of nail polish among the dust of the floor. And for the first



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time in a long time, my guts didn't burn up to think that way.

I asked her if she was okay, and she said, "Yeah." She said, "Besides wanting to nosedive off a bridge a few hours ago, I'm good."

We talked until the evening, peeling the ears off whoever had to listen in, I'm sure, as they us describe the world she'd seen, and the one I'd seen. While we talked, I stared out my window at the wildflower field, at the swerving path that had grown to make room for us, that seemed to learn before we did that love was a thing that comes and goes, a thing that takes many shapes.



Author Biography

Brandon Hansen is from a village in northern Wisconsin. He studied writing along Lake Superior, and then trekked out to the mountains, where he earned his MFA as a Truman Capote scholar at the University of Montana. His work has been Pushcart nominated, and can be found in The Baltimore Review, Quarterly West, Puerto Del Sol, and elsewhere. He now lives in Wisconsin's Northwoods, and writes.