

October Hill
MAGAZINE 

First Annual

LITERARY

CONTEST

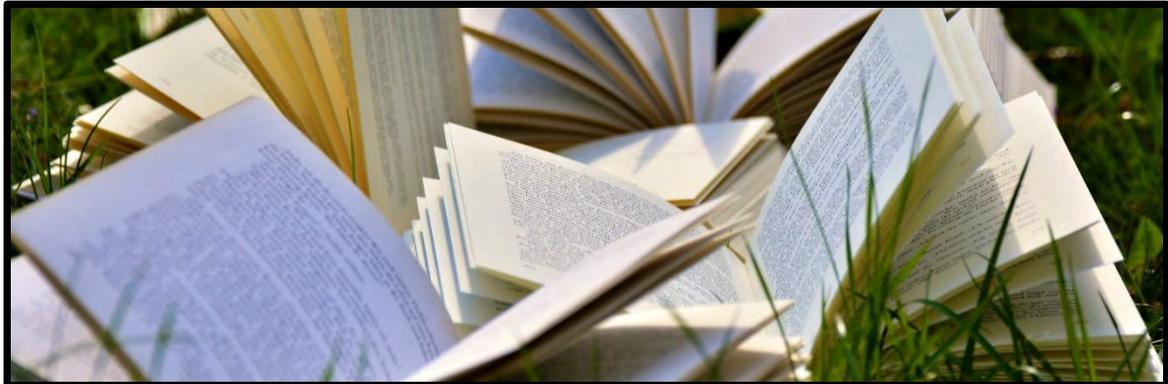
October Hill

MAGAZINE



Literary Contest Issue

Welcome to October Hill Magazine



We're thrilled to bring you *October Hill Magazine's* very first Literary Contest Issue. We're extremely excited about it because it represents our level best efforts to bring you the most creative new short stories, as judged by Dr. Stephen Carter, Assistant Professor of English, University of Colorado at Colorado Springs; and poetry, as judged by Allan Johnston, who teaches literature and writing at Columbia College and DePaul University in Chicago.

We believe the contest served to inspire our contestants to submit their most innovative new works for judging. We are grateful to all of our contestants for raising the level of competition. We wish to recognize and congratulate the winners of our short story competition: Jimmy Banta, first place, for "The Endless Night"; Jeremy Lawrence, second place, for "Barnabus Flowers, American Hero, Keeps His Head"; and Hannah Levine, third place, for "The Wedding"; as well as the winners of our poetry competition: B.R. Dionysius, first place, for "In Account With the Public Curator"; Aria Ligi, second place, for "XCII"; and Lana Scibona, third place, for "The Mad Girl."

We also wish to give special thanks to Professors Carter and Johnston, who spent countless hours carefully reading, evaluating and judging each literary work. They honored and maintained the integrity of our contest process throughout. We are extremely grateful for their hard work.

We hope you enjoy our first Literary Contest Issue. Let it be the first of many.

Richard Merli *Editorial Director*

Samantha Morley *Managing Editor*

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Short Story Category

Meet the Judge



Dr. Stephen Carter

Dr. Stephen Carter is an assistant professor of English at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, where he teaches classes on twentieth-century American literature and critical theory. He earned his PhD from the University of California at Santa Cruz, and his work has appeared in *New England Quarterly*, *boundary 2*, *Criticism*, and *The Canadian Review of American Studies*. His current book project, “Designs of War: Military Thought, Social Form, and Modern American Culture,” examines the functions of military thought within American culture between the Civil War and the long 1960s.

First place

“The Endless Night”

By Jimmy Banta



“The original idea for ‘The Endless Night’ was a story about the world after the sun turns off. But I wanted something more than that – another layer. So, I started thinking about who I could choose as my protagonist who would have an incredibly unique experience during this apocalypse – and that’s how I got the idea for Katie Webster.

I’m very happy about how it turned out. It took a little while to figure out a good balance, but I got a nice equilibrium I’m happy with. But I think it can always be improved and I’m always looking for way to make it better.”

On December 6th, 2017, at exactly 1:53 AM Central Standard Time, the sun turned off. Manuel Hidalgo of Santiago, Chile didn’t notice. Neither did the Ross family of Lincoln, Nebraska, nor the entire city of Pittsburgh. However, Uh Yong-Sook in Seoul did, as did 80,347,568 Chinese farmers and 458 kangaroo ranchers. 334 people fell off their bikes after suddenly not being able to see where they were going. 84,568 people, in 89 different languages, asked someone near them, “Is there a solar eclipse happening?” 56,475 people replied, “I don’t think so;” 23,743 said, “No idea;” 4,104 said, “Yes;” and 256 people pretended like they didn’t hear.

8,408,372 people screamed; 2,109,334 people pinched themselves; 843,145 laughed; and two drunk middle-aged men shouted at their wives to turn the lights back on, even though they were both outside.

As billions of electrons zoomed across cables stretching all across the Earth, carrying with them messages, pictures, and cries for help, newscasters, priests, comedians, used car salesmen, and gourmet chefs all asked the same question: Where did the sun go?

Around the time when the piercing rays of the sun would normally be peeking through the blinds, curtains, and tent flaps of the Western Hemisphere, hundreds of millions were shutting off their alarms

and groaning, reluctantly dragging themselves out of bed for a day of work, school, or driving to visit Aunt JJ in El Paso.

It didn't take them long to realize that something was wrong, whether it was through the TV, radio, calling their spouse, or looking outside. By 9:24 AM, Central Standard Time, nearly everybody on Earth knew. Everyone except 284,485,460 kids too young to know what the sun was; 45,278,994 elderly who refused to believe it; 83,428 people in comas; and Katie Webster of Tuskegee, Alabama.

Katie Webster was born August 16th, 2010, weighing in at seven pounds, five ounces. Her breathing was steady, appetite good, and she laughed and cried as much as any other baby. By all accounts, she was healthy as can be.

One year later, her mom took her in to the doctor after she got a particularly bad sunburn. After hours at the hospital, a team of a dozen or a hundred doctors broke the news. They called it Xeroderma Pigmentosum. It was rare, it was serious, and it wasn't going anywhere. All Katie saw were a bunch of giants in white coats. Then she saw her mom start to cry, so she cried, too.

On December 6th, 2017, at 9:24 AM Central Standard time, Katie Webster was where she normally was at this time: sleeping in her bed, where she would remain for another six hours or so. Her mother, Mary Webster, was downstairs in her kitchen, watching her TV in disbelief. Her twelve-year old brother Mac and fourteen year-old-sister Angie were sitting at the table, patiently coloring some pictures of dolphins and squirrels. And her father, Roy Webster, was currently in Alaska, staring with a remarkably similar face at his television, but neither of them was aware of this coincidence. After two years of having to deal with three kids on opposite sleep schedules, Roy had gone out for a pack of cigarettes and had never come back.

After two days of no sun, the potent initial shock subsided and gave way to a more sustained, steady fear around the world. Hundreds came forward as the Messiah, the Second Coming, the Grand

Wizard of Destiny, announcing that Judgement Day was upon them and God or some fourth-dimensional shapeshifters were coming to save them or damn them. Millions believed it.

It was the golden age of TV news. They brought on agriculture experts claiming that plants need light to grow. They brought on thermodynamic physicists claiming that the sun provides heat to the Earth. They brought on clinical psychologists claiming that sunlight combats depression and fatigue. They brought on nutritionists and biologists, photographers and congressmen, astronomers and practitioners of sorcery and magic, all with the same doomed message. The more fear they produced, the higher their numbers climbed, as more and more sat in their homes, too afraid to go outside, to look out their windows, to confront the debilitating terror that what was going on in the world of their TV's might be going on in their world as well.

While everyone watched and waited for the announcement of a solution, of a plan, anything, the minds of scientists, leaders, and opportunists began plotting, thinking, and racing towards some unknown future.

Katie Webster couldn't quite grasp what was happening. Her world of darkness and artificial light now pervaded into the hours when she was usually locked away behind her protective curtains. "Hey, on the bright side, now you'll never get a sunburn," her mom had said through choked tears and bitter fear. Katie wasn't quite sure what she meant.

Katie wasn't quite sure of a lot of things. Like why her tutor Jody hadn't been showing up.

She missed her warm hugs and coffee breath. On the other hand, Mac and Agnie seemed to be around a whole lot more, but they weren't their usual bright and eager selves. All they did was sit around with wide eyes and hushed breath, trying to showcase their maturity and fear. Katie didn't know why they weren't going to school, or why Mom was waking her up during these strange hours, but she did know one thing: somehow, her house, her cold jail of familiar, resigned loneliness, felt lonelier than ever.

Word spread that they had a couple weeks before it would get noticeably colder. A few more after that and the outer extremities of the Earth would be virtually uninhabitable. Two months in, they expected hypothermic deaths by the millions. Six months, and it was a different world.

Governments urged people back to work - food, water, and energy require working economies. They reopened schools to keep children busy, and poured billions into research, though whether to focus on astronomy or theology was anybody's guess. They promised that they had the best and the brightest working overtime, though 87,431 of the best and 44,181 of the brightest had long since retreated to secret cabins far from civilization, if they hadn't jumped off a bridge by now.

Out of the public eye, the world's rich and powerful began constructing a huge facility designed to sustain life for generations to come. They built elaborate systems of hydroponics, energy transfer, air and water filtration, nutrition, entertainment, and leisure and luxury. Life underground would not only be comfortable but decadent, where one could forget about the cold wasteland above ground while lounging on imported sand and enjoying an artificial sun below. And slowly, covertly, they began to auction off the right to life to the highest bidder.

The last, and only, time Katie had been on anything like a school bus was when her mom had let her go with Angie on a stargazing field trip. She remembered the foreign world of chatter, gossip, and hormones. Laughter rung in her ears as she lay on the mossy ground, drawing lines between stars. That was also the last time she heard laughter that wasn't Jody's. She wondered why everybody laughed differently, and why school buses were yellow.

She wondered why she was now on a school bus, surrounded by strangers. She wasn't used to this many people; it was disorienting and destabilizing. Her mom had said to take the bus back home after school. She wondered how long school was. She spent the day being told about numbers by sweaty grown-ups, even though Jody had already taught her all of it. At one point, they were all let outside. Katie watched as other kids ran around the huge floodlights, screaming and pushing. She ventured to a

breezy patch of trees to explore. As she padded around in the dirt and mud, she saw someone coming towards her. A boy.

He stood by and watched her for a minute or a millennium. She kept jumping, stomping, searching. Eventually he waved, and so she waved back. She had never waved at a boy before. He said “Hi,” and she said “Hi.” She had never talked to a boy, either. His name was Michael. He wanted to join her. So, he started stomping, too. Eventually, he stomped over to her and brushed her arm.

“You’re it.”

Unfamiliar with tag, she watched him run away, looking tauntingly back over his shoulder.

She kept on stomping. A few minutes later he returned. “Are you gonna tag me?”

30 minutes and 30 tags later, Katie and Michael stumbled inside, grinning from ear to ear.

The cold was piercing, the darkness relentless and infinite. Rationing began in Australia, Angola, and Amsterdam, after two months and eighteen days in the dark. Millions of farm animals had died, and farmers rushed to salvage any meat that they could. But instead of selling it off, they decided to keep it, hoard it, as they began to realize that they didn’t need money; what they needed was food. And just like that, thousands of years after its inception, the people of the world slowly began to lose faith in the institution that had nurtured civilization, forged great armies, and dominated the lives of kings and peddlers alike. Farmers everywhere, embittered by the cold, sent shockwaves of doubt and fear all around the globe.

The hoarding came first, then the looting. Neighbors became enemies as they wondered how much gas, food, and water they were hiding from each other. As communities slowly crumbled, so did common notions of civility, of manners, of patience, courtesy, and shared humanity.

A few places managed to band together, to cooperate and channel their common fear into productivity instead of hostility. The town of Doolin, Ireland, managed to pool all of its resources and restore faith in the local government, successfully doling out rations and making tough decisions to ensure its survival for as long as possible.

Addis Ababa pulled together like no other city could, with 90% of able adults going in to work, to keep the city functioning and producing, spurring the economy and keeping its supplies of food and energy steady.

And a small town in Australia decided to go out with a bang, gathering all of its food and alcohol and throwing a fifteen-day feast, filled with music, dancing, and debauchery, preferring to spend its last days in the hedonistic presence of friends and loved ones as opposed to slowly dying from the hunger, if not the cold.

As hope deteriorated, an idea, the inklings of a plan, were born in the mind of a prominent energy researcher, and a few weeks and phone calls later, Dr. Laura Butler announced her daring and heroic plan to save the Earth.

In front of reporters, cameras, and the world, Dr. Butler and her coalition of scientists described her pioneering new method of energy extraction, capable of producing sixteen times the energy from the same amount of fuel. This, coupled with a special form of lamp inspired by sun lamps used to treat babies with Jaundice, could save millions, if not billions, she said.

By producing not only light that replicates sunlight, but also vast amounts of heat, the lamps could not only provide the necessary conditions for humans to survive, but also for crops and animals. Everybody would have to gather in densely packed cities, leaving their homes, their lives, and the memories behind them. Life would be unquestionably altered, but life would remain.

Billions donated, and research and development began. Countless scientists, engineers, urban planners, and designers offered their services, and for a select few, Dr. Butler graciously accepted and let them join her team. The world held its breath as its hope for survival was crafted in labs and factories, while food, water, and heat continued to decline.

Katie and Michael spent recess everyday racing among the trees and the kids, feeling the soles of their shoes grind the asphalt, releasing that beautiful smell of rubber and rock that Katie had grown to love so much. One day, she tripped and fell. She skinned her knee and cut her lip, but she didn't care.

She felt more alive than she ever had; her knee became a symbol for adventure, her lip a symbol for freedom.

Soon, they were joined by a third. Then a fourth. After her first two weeks at school, Katie had acquired a small posse of recess-time adventure-seekers and tag-fanatics. They ran, carefree, under the floodlights, dodging each other's hands, laughing, screaming, unaware of the stress, worry, and fear that were dominating the minds of the teachers who stood around them, silent and bleary-eyed.

The other kids were impressed by Katie's agility and speed, skills that were nurtured and improved over countless empty nights running through the woods around her home, just her and a million crickets, all ignoring her mother's cries to return home. Exploring was her love, an escape from the strange, dull world inside the house. The woods were her home; she felt warm and safe, even on those cold moonlit nights.

Never did she realize that there were others just like her out there, others wishing to feel the wind in their hair and the sweat on their neck. She had always been so alone and assumed that it would be that way forever. But as she played, she found warmth and safety in these people. She began smiling and laughing with them during class, talking about candy and cartoons on the bus, and feeling a bittersweet contentment as she left them, sad to leave but excited to laugh with them tomorrow.

Her mom took down the blackout curtains in her room, and Katie sat on her bed, looking up at the sunless sky filled with stars. Her dark prison cell became a waiting room with a view, a place to pass the hours until she could see her friends again.

Dr. Laura Butler and her team of world-savers worked tirelessly as the people of Earth watched. Men, women, and children put all of their faith in chemistry, physics, thermodynamics, materials science, and quantum mechanics. Updates came daily, and Dr. Butler spared them the jargon and complexity. She kept it simple and gratifying, exciting and easy.

Hope became the new business of TV. As spirits lifted, communities started gathering to share food and watch the news together, the atmosphere contagious and electrified with hope.

Progress accelerated, and the people of Earth began envisioning their future, one devoid of the light and heat of the sun, but filled with the light and heat of chemical reactions, a cheap substitute, but a substitute nonetheless.

The countdown began when Dr. Butler said they nearly had it; it was only a matter of days until they were ready for mass production. A lottery system was set up to decide which towns and cities would get the lamps first, but rest assured, Dr. Butler said, with all the manufacturing resources that they had devoted, they could light the world in a few months.

Small celebrations were thrown, celebrations of human ingenuity and the sheer willpower to survive. Celebrations of that which had turned us from apes into kings in a cosmological second.

Then, one day, Dr. Laura Butler stopped showing up on TV. No longer did the days countdown, or her voice assure everybody that the solution was close. The people of Earth remained incredulously glued to their screens, wondering what had happened. Bewilderment swept across the globe and remained until, a few days later, a weary looking man appeared on TV.

He apologized and apologized. Apologized that he had taken part. Apologized that he had been selfish. Apologized that he had participated in the lies.

As he described the elaborate hoax that had been born in the mind of Dr. Laura Butler and perpetuated by the hundreds brought in to legitimize it, people in all time zones felt like they were sinking to the depths of the deepest ocean trench. He said that the guilt was eating him alive. He said that it wasn't fair, how he and the others had taken the world's money and bought themselves tickets to survival, how only the wealthiest got to survive, and how they would be sipping mimosas while a few hundred feet above them, millions would be slowly freezing, starving.

He apologized and apologized, and then he stepped out of view of the camera, never to be seen again.

Riots broke out, the worst the world had ever seen. Fires the size of cities lit up the globe, giving a brief respite from the eternity of cold that would follow. The collective outrage fueled a mass search for the underground safe haven that the man was talking about. Within days, it was found. The

infrastructure that remained of the Internet was used to organize a mob hundreds of thousands strong, which descended on the location like a swarm. They burned the living quarters, ate the food, found those that had already moved in, and mercilessly beat them, promising the same for any yet to move in.

And Dr. Laura Butler, found fourteen miles away trying to escape, was turned into a horrifying example of the most brutal human capabilities, an example that was broadcast live on the Internet for billions to watch.

Anger and mob mentality brought about the destruction of the underground Noah's Ark, and just like that, humanity's last hope for survival disappeared.

Katie's mom sat her children down to explain what had happened. To explain that all hope was lost, that they didn't have long. Katie didn't pay much attention. Her mind was elsewhere, reminiscing of yesterday and dreaming of tomorrow. Content to go to school forever, as long as she could play with her friends.

She thought back to her world before, a world of artificial darkness and manufactured air inside her house, occasionally broken up when she was allowed to go outside. Now, the darkness was pure, deep, and penetrating, the air crisp and smooth on the lungs. Her countless stuffed animals were replaced by real friends, friends who could laugh with her, get mad at her, and talk to her.

As her mom spoke of the end of the world, Katie thought of Michael, and Rose, and Michelle, and Drew, and Ian. They were her friends, and they always would be.

On March 3rd, 2018, at exactly 12:17 PM Central Standard Time, the sun turned back on.

Manuel Hidalgo of Santiago, Chile, was temporarily blinded and dropped the makeshift club that he was about to use to smash a grocery store window. The Ross family of Lincoln, Nebraska looked through the barricaded slats covering their window and screamed. The city of Pittsburgh, now a fraction of its population a few months earlier, felt the warm, comforting, and life-affirming rays of the sun for the first time in two months, twenty-one days, ten hours and twenty minutes. They all stopped what they

were doing and basked, like a city of a thousand lizards. They felt the warmth overtake them, reaching deep into their bones. What birds were left began to sing sweet songs, unable to articulate their joy in words, so opting for beautiful melodies instead.

Uh Yong-Sook didn't notice. Neither did 80,347,568 Chinese farmers or 458 kangaroo ranchers. But within minutes, electrons had zoomed across the Earth, informing them of the news. And they eagerly waited, waited for the most beautiful sunrise the world has ever seen.

At 12:17 PM, Katie Webster was outside, half a mile from her house, upset at her mom for not sending her to school, confused as to why her mom was saying school had stopped being organized.

So, she left and she ran. She dashed through the woods, leapt over creeks, and stomped on all the dead plants. Then, suddenly, the sky opened up, and Katie Webster saw something that she had only seen in the days before memory.

Panic gripped her, and she bolted out of the woods, emerging under the vast expanse of an unfamiliar, starless blue sky. The rays of sunlight enveloped her, and she felt what everyone from British Columbia to Buenos Aires was feeling. Stunned, she sat for a minute that felt like a millennium. She wondered if Michael felt it, too.

She heard her mom's cries, even this far away. She ran back to the house, eager to share whatever this was with whoever was there. Near her back porch, she saw Mac and Angie dancing. As she rushed to join in, she saw her mom's tear-stained face emerge, stuck between what seemed like laughter and fear. She thought her mom was going in for a hug, so Katie opened her arms and embraced her.

Her mom held her tight and covered her with a blanket. Katie was confused for a moment as her mom dragged her inside but started to flail and fight in confusion and anger as she heard the door shut behind her.

Everywhere, friends hugged, families cried, and couples made so much love that nine months later, hospitals around the world would suffer shortages of space and medical supplies. But no one

thought of the future. All thought was on the present, and the sweet, simple joy of sunlight that came with it.

Huge celebrations kicked off, impromptu parades were thrown, and joy was spread on the rays of the sun.

Meanwhile, Mary Webster hung up her daughter's blackout curtains once more, and Katie Webster was kidnapped from her land of laughter and love and banished to her world of artificial light and never-ending night. 

Jimmy Banta is a student studying Film and Mathematics at NYU. He has a deep love of reading and telling stories and has recently begun trying his hand at writing.

Second place

“Barnabus Flowers, American Hero, Keeps His Head”

By Jeremy Lawrence



“Barnabus Flowers, American Hero, Keeps His Head” was a fun story and I had a good time writing it. It’s probably my second favorite thing I’ve written. I’m fascinated by conspiracies and good old-fashioned suburban rumors and myth, especially when they come from places that seem otherwise so innocuous. The idea of the American Dream and the Hero, I think, are especially open to these kinds of lurking horrors.”

Barnabus had the gross misfortune of being born in the range of years that proved prime for the military draft. He did not watch the lottery on television; he was alerted of his conscription via a letter delivered to the family home, alerting the intended recipient (*one Barnabus Curtis Flowers*) to report to the nearest draft center (address provided) on or before the 31st. This was done promptly, with Barnabus borrowing the household car and driving across town, hopping on Route 64, passing the one story ranch house he would years later inhabit, entering the six-times-larger city “next door”- a wildly misleading epithet; Midway City was more than an hour’s drive from Bloomfield, though it remained the nearest municipality - and answering every question the man in fatigues posed. In the end, Barnabus received a small slip of paper deeming him A-1 and informing him of the date for his return to the draft center, when he would be transferred to Basic.

His last night in Bloomfield was not unlike other nights that were predetermined as critical during his youth (High School Graduation, Prom, The Night He Lost His Virginity, et al.). It was spent cruising the town in the family’s ’62 Chevy, weaving back and forth across the loosely knit streets, his older brother Ike in the driver’s seat, a slowly diminishing six-pack of Lucky Lager at Barnabus’s feet in the passenger’s. The cruise wasn’t long. In their peregrination, they passed First Methodist, Chester’s Chicken, Bloomfield High, Mory’s Vintage, Mory’s Auto, P&G Grocery, Devlin Hall, Marty’s Bar,

Foster's Freeze. That was the main course, consisting of ~73% of the excitement in town. Other sights of personal note: Presbyterian Coleman Hospital (birth site of Ike and Barnabus, Fall '40 and Spring '50, respectively), Darrell's Pool Hall (Barnabus's first drink, Summer '66), and Sudz Car Wash (first and only fully-automated service in Bloomfield, also the site of one very risky instance of fellatio performed by Barnabus's high school girlfriend Laura Fernandez, Fall '68). The whole drive, with the radio on and the windows down, Barnabus succumbed to the synesthesia of home. He felt a distinct this-will-be-the-last-time-for-a-while-if-not-forever sense of responsibility to remember it all, to connect the dots of tangled senses into one compact memory that he could fit with him in a Southeast Asian trench. The touch melting into the sights, the sounds morphing into the tastes and smells...

This journey of sentiment and weak booze they completed in no less than one hour and seventeen minutes. They stopped by Darrell's and shot a few games of pool. Drinks were on the friends of their father who happened to be there. It was all: "Cheers!" and: "We're proud of you son," "Fighting the good fight," "Stopping those commies in their tracks," "Uncle Sam picked a good one with you," "Uncle Sam *always* picks a good one." Barnabus was more than once reminded that he was the only one from his graduating class who was drafted. This fact inflated his already broad chest to a pre-heroic width. He had already been dubbed a Bloomfield icon. The final cheers of the night at Darrell's were offered by Darrell himself: "To the next great American hero!"

The next morning, Barnabus, dry-mouthed and lethargic, took the 10:00 AM Greyhound to Midway City. By 10:00 PM, he laid on a bunk bed in a camp whose name he couldn't remember and whose location he wasn't told.

And life continued as it does in a place far from war. Food drives, conscious minimizing of waste, recycling, and diminishing the space you take up, possibly to make you feel less guilty for not being "over there" yourself.

Ike worked on the family farm for three months before a night of prodigious drinking at Marty's that ended with him and two farmhands dangling off the West River bridge, the ass of the '62 Chevy sticking straight up out of the otherwise unperturbed water below. Though this was the impetus for Ike's

parents to kick him off the family payroll and out of the two-story house, he still says with ~65.5% certainty that that was the most fortuitous turn of events he'd ever experienced (more fortuitous than the flat feet God blessed him with to keep him out of military service). Ike and the two accomplice ex-farmhands (similarly fired and living in a garage together, all three) pooled what money they had, purchased an out-of-service garbage truck and an empty lot to match. With the leftover change, they acquired a foldable table and an industrial 20 x 20 canvas tent, on the side of which they painted *BLOOMFIELD WASTE MANAGEMENT*. What began as three heavy drinkers in their late-20s making rounds in a rickety truck to diners and groceries and community centers reached its peak and plateaued when the city council decided most defiantly and dramatically to forgo the contract renewal of 1970 with the State's Waste Management, and instead hire three amiable, familiar trash-boys.

It was ~mid-1972 when I first met Ike Flowers. My father, by then, had passed. Killed in the same auto collision that put Ike's wife in a wheelchair. Between 1972 and 1976, Ike Flowers spent ~67.3% of afternoons into evenings at the home of Widow Nicholson, my mother. The other ~32.7% contains a myriad of possibilities and convolutions, ranging from but not limited to: Marty's Bar, his office at Bloomfield WM, and, most rarely, his own personal home in the company of his wife, and later, a child who I occasionally babysat. But, undeniably, an affair had begun with Ike visiting our home as a representative of Bloomfield WM, here to pick up my father's old roller desk.

And while Ike purchased a fleet of new garbage trucks, devised an economically feasible disposal system, and maintained a not unsubstantial coital schedule with my mother, Barnabus crouched in mud, helped carry the occasional stretcher, and passed joints. So far, war wasn't all bad. The Army had taken to Pvt. 1st Class Barnabus Flowers, 25th Division. He entered Basic a rugged and handsome country boy (6'2", 180 lbs lean), dark eyes, sun-bleached hair, a freckled vision of health and youth that made him a magnet to the other draftees who saw him as a signifier of fraternal protection. Barnabus had always been effortlessly popular in Bloomfield without being conceited; it appeared to carry over into the strict, less-enthusiastic summer camp that was Basic training. Not once was he assigned garbage detail. But post-Basic - after his draft class had received their individual deployment assignments and transport

aircrafts were boarded - good fortune alone had kept him out of combat. On one occasion (1343h), he had left for the latrines, and upon his return, as he refastened his belt buckle, found that his entire squad had abandoned their game of poker. Their guns and gear were gone, cards hastily strewn on a crate. He had been left behind. Dejected, the weary Pvt. went off to find another squad to follow like a lost puppy.

Then, later, at the end of a twelve-hour overnight watch shift (2000h-0800h), Barnabus retired to a deserted corner of camp. He fell asleep supine on a dry tarp, hands resting on his chest as if in final supplication, helmet covering his face, his in- and exhales nearly imperceptible. So imperceptible that when platoons began returning with their dead, they assumed the napping Pvt.'s corner had been designated for the KIA. The bodies were laid around Barnabus with care. Not long after this, when his adopted platoon was given the orders to move out, Commanding Sgt. Connor looked around for the missing Pvt. Flowers and, barely spotting him from afar among the dead, solemnly made the sign of the cross in the air and ordered the others to move out.

All of this was relayed to Ike through a series of letters (received Sept. '70 – Aug. '72), along with Barnabus's descriptions of the jungle terrain - the lush, aggressive foliage and humidity with its own voice of chirping crickets and bellowing tree frogs, almost a paradise for a South Western farm boy - and inquiries about Bloomfield. Barnabus found it reassuring to picture Bloomfield the same now as it was the night he and his brother drove through it. As it was then, so would it be when he returned.

The last letter Ike received was cleaner, the paper crisper, the handwriting less hurried. In brief, Barnabus told his brother that he had finally reached combat, though only momentarily (~25 minutes after stepping foot off base, including ~20 minutes of marching along a dirt road) before managing to get himself in the way of a bullet. He was injured, not inconsiderably, and was writing from an Army Hospital somewhere outside ———. Barnabus didn't share any specifics regarding said injury, just that he would be writing again to let him know roughly when he would be back in Bloomfield.

And that's how two years, eight months and seventeen days after his departure, Barnabus showed up at his brother Ike's doorstep - a tract home purchased in the last month with the help of a generous contract renewal with the city - army issue duffel at his feet, minus one nose.

Yes, where once that perfectly refined nose had been seated was now a flat, scarred landscape, like a clean portion of a green field ravaged by the precision of a napalm strike. It gave Barnabus a distinct, reptilian profile. Ike tries not to make too big a fuss out of the puce, unnatural patch etched with thin lines of scab in the middle of his brother's face, but it's futile. He picks up his brother's duffel. Barnabus, once inside, explains through nasal wheezes: "took some fire on this dirt road we were patrolling, about 18, 20 of us...right outside this village, and we all made beelines for any cover there was...and as soon as we're inside, the bullets stop. We couldn't see Charlie anywhere and it got all of a sudden real quiet...I was crouched by the front door of this hut and, you know, I go to take a look outside and as I'm just peeking out the door...there's a shot somewhere and my nose is just...wiped off sideways and I'm knocked on my ass...man, blood everywhere, worst bloody nose I have *ever* had..." He is, as Ike remembers, very proud of this obviously rehearsed joke.

His voice has a new and unfamiliar quality. And there is a slight whistle when he breathes. But that's not it. Barnabus has become an older man; at the time of his return, he is 21 years old but looks not a day under 51. His skin is aged, like fabric left in the sun for too long. He sprouts the seedlings of a patchy beard. The taut skin over his nasal cavity keeps his upper lip ever-parted from the bottom. Ike asks if he wants any water, whiskey. Barnabus is curious where the water comes from, what is the source? Unsure if it's a joke, Ike tells the truth: the tap. "Oh, brother..."

And Barnabus takes a seat at the dinner table and expounds upon his brother the Truth, the dangers of chemical compounds that good ol' Uncle Sam has been pumping into our drinking water. It is unwise to drink straight tap, or bottled for that matter, due to the fluoride and experimental microscopic bacteria (biological composition: $C_{12}H_{17}N_2O_4P$) that have the capacity to rearrange in our lower intestines and construct miniature tracking devices. It is safest to boil water for at least five minutes before consuming or stick to rain water whenever possible. After a full night's interrogation (Barnabus's arrival: 5:43 PM; his claim about American drinking water: 5:59 PM; discussion's conclusion: 7:03 AM), Ike learns two things. (1) While in the Army hospital, post-surgery, ingesting a steady stream of Morphine and Demerol, Barnabus was educated in and convinced of the clandestine habits of the United

States government by his roommate, a recovering Marine missing one eye, six teeth, and two legs. 34 days shared together in close proximity, one educating the other, penetrated the ebb and flow of numbing haze and throbbing pain with his testimony. The Marine was effective in his goal. (2) The baby brother, Barnabus, who Ike knew from '50 - '69 was gone and never coming back.

Newly converted to his conspiratorial beliefs, and strong in his convictions, Barnabus begins to move into the recently vacated house on Route 64, ~1.3 mi from me and my mother. Ike helps and fills his brother in on the life of the town he missed, of his secret rendezvous with my mother, the Widow Nicholson. To his brother, he comes clean about his extramarital affair and pours quasi-remorse into his attentive and conscientious brother's ear.

There are trips to Mory's Vintage, Bloomfield Consignment, and P&G Grocery in Ike's '55 Ford. These places are filled with Bloomfield folks, caught somewhere between disgust and reverence, who can't help but stare at the returned hero. Words of welcome and congratulations are stuttered and stop just short of "lucky" because it is visibly clear that he was not. It's as clear as the nose on...

Children stare in passing, and adults do their best not to. A "welcome back" trip to Darrell's pool hall is cut short when Barnabus refuses every drink offered to him and becomes convinced that Old Jerry over by the jukebox is an FBI plant. On ~3 separate occasions—as he and his brother make trips to and from the almost complete home on Route 64—Barnabus comes under fire from middle schoolers on bikes, hailing him with apple-sized dirt clods, dubbing him the Snakeman. Every molecule of Bloomfield seems to have turned against the returned vet.

Barnabus feels like a circus freak let loose; the only solace is the haven of his new abode. Small, but it doesn't need to be any bigger to accommodate just one person. Plus, the real bonuses of the property: three industrial size rain water barrels, perfect for collecting one's own fresh, pure H₂O; two emergency generators that could, with sufficient elbow grease, be upgraded to relinquish the Route 64 house from its dependence on the city power grid; a concrete encased 30 x 15 x 7 basement/bomb shelter; and 2.5 acres of land ripe for potatoes, carrots, onions, and chicken run (i.e. the house on Route 64 was

prime real estate for any individual concerned with government surveillance/tracking/mind control, or otherwise Hermit inclined). A first-class, practically impregnable compound.

The town of Bloomfield sees no more of Barnabus Flowers, and after their brief encounter with his facial deformity, they are generally relieved. Instead, they busy themselves with Bloomfield's 4th of July parade, city plans for a new library, and suburban gossip ("I hear Mr. Flowers - no, no the one *with* his nose, dear - has been paying a few *courtesy* calls to the Widow Nicholson, yes, yes..."). The town is content to relegate the memory of Barnabus Flowers to the past, to modern myth, and to paint him as an ageless hermit with foot-long fingernails and yellow eyes and a beard clotted with blood from a breakfast of live chicken. The gutsier of Bloomfield's pubescents make regular trips to the Route 64 compound and pelt it with dirt clods, trying to get a look at the Snakeman. Over the ensuing years, one or more kids will tape their nose flat, slather their chin in false blood, and string out their hair out for Halloween.

The only person who spends minute one with Barnabus is, of course, his brother. He stops by after work, on his way to Widow Nicholson, and makes sure his brother is settling in fine. Barnabus's cheeks are each time scragglier with coarse brown hair, tacking on ~5 years every time Ike sees him. With those sallow eyes and no nose, he looks like a naked skull under a false beard. Barnabus keeps his home clean, at least in comparison to the popular expectation of someone living a life of hermitage: stacks of books create low parapets throughout the living room, kitchen, and hallways; a bedroom contains one twin mattress without a bedframe; and a table serves dual purposes as a dining surface and research area, where books and papers (ordered and delivered by his brother from the public library) and files ripped from manila folders are spread, dissected, and annotated. Barnabus tells Ike about the links that he finds - oversights in cover-ups, mismatching timelines - holes in historical texts that, without a doubt, prove his theories. Dots are connected, and senses tangled. And Ike tells Barnabus about Widow Nicholson, the guilt tearing him at the seams, and how his wife, the woman whom he had married one year and three months prior, was an angel and was he just a faulty man? Eventually, Barnabus's displeasure with his experience in the war boils to the surface. He admits to his brother that he feels cheated, marched only so close to heroics only to be rejected and sent home with nothing but a facial

lack to show for it. Each found a considerate listener in the other. Ike wants to be a better person; Barnabus advises him to stop drinking un-boiled tap water and listening to FM radio, because they are scrambling his judgment.

For months, and then years, the myths spread like radioactive roots or an invisible virus dissipating in the air. It spreads every time Ike visits Barnabus and relates the news of the outside world, his own guilt, and his growing concerns that I, Widow Nicholson's only daughter, am catching wind of the affair. I had gotten close. During my final high school year, bells are installed on all the doors in the house. This was when my mother could not as accurately track my comings and goings - between my volunteer work, regular babysitting, college applications, dates at the Drive-In, rounding out my GPA to become valedictorian, etc. - so the ringing of metal bells was to the adulterers a welcome warning. Total risk was not eliminated, but what remained was negligible and the small penance of paranoia for the meetings' tea and intercourse was acceptable.

Spring '77. Barnabus Flowers has lived in willful exile for ~5+ years. And on a night at the very end of my senior year, Prom Night, to which I have accepted the proposal of one Rodney LaGrange (he and I nominated King and Queen, respectively), the cosmic Flowers and Nicholson parabolic arcs are reaching their defining limit, threatening to do the impossible and cross to reach a nexus.

I sit in the passenger's seat of Rodney's '75 Ford Mustang. Rodney is at the wheel. We have decided to skip the second half of the dance and make our way (at an average of 82.5 mph) to Midway City, where Rod's older brother is throwing a kegger. We've already had a few beers each in the parking lot of the high school with Marvin and Wesley Mondays and their girlfriends. We turn off Main at the edge of town and onto Route 64 where, just out of the turn, in a Lucky Lager-fueled burst of testosterone, Rodney jams the gas and tops out at a ludicrous 103 mph. We wiz past my house as he says something to me about the custom V8 that he had installed but I can't hear with my head out the window, the wind roaring in my ears, forcing tears out of my eyes. It's all black expanse and stars out here, no telling where the horizon ends and the sky begins. The cosmos are collapsing. I still can't hear what Rodney is going on about...something about the 50" tires not being able to handle the horsepower of a true V8 when it's

tuned up just right and throttling all 140 Horsepower...I draw my head back into the car...my vision is getting blurry...the booze and the flatland gusts are merging with the exploding gasoline under the hood, and almost drown out the sound of the oncoming horn and the pair of headlights that go with it. And thank god one person in the car (i.e. me) has enough motor skill left to reach over and jerk the steering wheel to my right just enough to avoid instant death with the other vehicle (a '72 Chevy Impala, brand new plates), but not the collision itself. Both cars are sent careening sideways, upside down, and into respective ditches in a paroxysm of burnt rubber, metal on metal, shattered glass, and our own personal ragdoll bodies.

Now, with four broken ribs, one cracked skull, three broken arms, one fractured tibia, and six missing teeth between me and Rodney (not to mention the driver of the '72 Impala [one broken nose, two cracked ribs, and one punctured lung]), it is not hard to believe our memory of the crash would be at best incomplete. Insurance representatives visit all three of us in our Presbyterian Coleman Hospital rooms, where condolences are shared and forms are filled out. Rodney and I - at my insistence, over Rod's concerns that we'll be in deep shit—admit to the drinking and driving, ramifications pending. Mr. Impala ends up being a salesman or a banker or someone else who Rodney thinks is out of his league with an Impala anyway. But a patient person nonetheless. The most salient and mysterious aspect of the incident remains our survival. Police reports determine that both cars' gas tanks had sprung leaks post-collision and subsequently ignited with loose spark plugs. The Police and Fire departments were only notified of the incident when someone in town phoned about an ominous orange glow and a cloud of billowing smoke off Route 64. When help finally arrived, both cars, wedged in ditches, ~56 feet down the road from the other, were entirely engulfed in flame. But, unconscious and (laboriously) still breathing, Rodney, Mr. Impala, and I were found lying shoulder to shoulder a safe distance off the road, limbs meticulously set straight, arms resting on our fluttering chests as if in nervous prayer. Questioning this odd scene came secondary to hurtling the three of us back into town and to Coleman Hospital. Theories and speculations erupted like the fire that claimed the Mustang and Impala, and the only iota of eyewitness testimony – mine - supported the town's decidedly least favorable outcome. When I came

to consciousness in the hospital, I was able to remember only a few things distinctly, brief and hazy, but indelible: while I hung upside down in the overturned car, still strapped in by my seat belt, my nostrils filling with blood, I turned as far as I could to my left and found the driver's seat empty. Then I blacked out. When I came to again, this time even less cognizant of my situation - eyes bleary, every synapse in my being firing like a nonstop lighting storm under the skin - I was outside the car. There was no longer the suffocating smells of gasoline and death. I was gently laid down in the dry grass like a baby in a crib next to Rodney's body, and for a brief second, caught the face of our savior. It was a face unfamiliar and distorted, like one underwater, and partially kept in the shadow where the light of the fire did not illuminate. Noticeably unkempt, a coarse beard and long uncombed hair, deep dark sockets as the intimations of eyes, and a surprising flatness in the center of the face, an oddly serpentine mug, but not uncaring or unwelcome. Yes. Yes, that was it. It was our savior, the prodigal Snakeman of Route 64, my noseless hero... 

Jeremy Lawrence is a young writer currently attending NYU. His interests lie anywhere in the realm of the strange, postmodern, and entertaining. He is working on his first novel.

Third Place

“The Wedding”

By Hannah Levine



“I wrote ‘The Wedding’ because I wanted to write about marriage or a love story but take it to a place we don’t expect, if only because we’re so trained not to. There’s no reason why this story should be any kind of surprise, and yet for many it is. I loved the idea of that and was so excited to be able to give it a go.

I’m really proud of this piece. It was difficult to write without giving away the game too early, but I’m happy with how it turned out. All writing can be worked on forever, but my mom always says, “perfect is the enemy of done.” So, I got this piece to a place I was comfortable with and decided it was done rather than perfect.”

My tuxedo was a sharp black so deep that I thought the color must’ve come from the blackest black hole in space, or the deepest, most unfathomable part of the ocean instead of the dusty back room of an old Men’s Warehouse. When the light hit the fabric, it winked at me with a glint as if to say, “hello world, I am Allan’s tuxedo and I know how to have a good time.” I picked it up from the Warehouse the day before, but now that it was here in my room, I didn’t know how to act around it. So, I just stared.

I was nervous. I couldn’t imagine my life without Kelly. We had been together for seven years, but a wedding was such a big deal! What if something went wrong? What if I forgot my vows, or dropped the rings and Ford, my pet schnauzer, ate them? I felt like someone had just blown up three balloons and stuffed them inside my stomach, ready to pop at any moment. I felt like I needed a Tylenol. Or a drink.

With a grunt, I got out of my bed and headed to the liquor cabinet for some scotch. I reached for the bottle, but at the last minute changed my mind in favor of the Tylenol. It was probably the smarter choice. I’d heard those stories of the grooms showing up completely trashed, and I knew that Kelly would never forgive me if I became one of those men. I went over to the bathroom and opened the

medicine cabinet. As I dry swallowed my pill, my mother knocked on the door. She didn't wait to come in; she never did.

“Allan honey I couldn't be happier I wish your father were here to see this he would've been so proud oh my you need a shower a good scrub down maybe a bubble bath!”

She always spoke as if there were no such thing as periods or commas. Everything ran together in one wispy breath as if pauses only delayed one's day.

Smiling at her, I told her that I was more of a shower guy, but the frown on her face made me reconsider. A bubble bath did sound nice, just for today. I still had hours before the ceremony, and Kelly would probably prefer someone clean. Why not relax while I washed away my pre-wedding grime? My mother nodded and left, promising that she would bring back waffles with M&M's stuffed snugly inside the divots and some whipped cream. “Just like you used to like them when you were younger!” she exclaimed as she left the room. M&M waffles with whipped cream is still my favorite meal, but I wasn't sure if I would be able to eat before the ceremony. My stomach was unsettled - I thought a balloon might be on the verge of popping - and my Tylenol may have made things worse instead of better.

I started the tub and watched the water fill the basin, added some decades-old bubble bath from a bottle with a picture of SpongeBob SquarePants on it around the faucet, and waited. Once the water was high enough and the bubbles looked like they had taken over as much of the tub as they were going to, I turned off the water and stepped inside. I heard something pop and looked down at my stomach in fear, but it was just a few of the bubbles—no imaginary balloons in sight. I needed to relax. Kelly made me go to yoga a few times, and even though I thought it was stupid, I had to admit that maybe some deep breathing would be good right about now. Inhale three, exhale six, inhale three, exhale six. A balloon in my stomach slowly let out air with every breath. I closed my eyes and let the relaxation wash over me.

Once my fingers had gotten to a significantly prune-y level, I got out of the tub. The water drained while I wrapped a towel around my waist and rubbed another over my head. I reached for the hair gel and heard the familiar *glub-glub* of the last of the water draining. When I was a kid, I used to think that was the bathtub saying it was full. I wondered if Kelly ever thought the same, and just thinking of it

made me laugh as I squeezed hair gel into my open hand. Maybe one day our kids would fear the bathtub monster just as I had.

When my hair was styled to perfection—also known as just the way Kelly liked it—I went back to my room to put on the tuxedo that I’d spent the entire morning contemplating about. My mother had straightened my bed while I was in the tub, and a tray of waffles and milk sat on the end of it as if a fairy godmother had left me breakfast. My stomach growled at me viciously as the smell of warm breakfast food and sugar reached my nose. Still in my towel, I immediately went to the bed and devoured my waffles. I guess I could eat on my wedding day after all.

After I was done licking the syrup from my fingers, I looked at my tuxedo on its hanger and the clock on my nightstand. It was time. I dropped my towel and grabbed my tux. Kelly told me to wear an emerald pocket square and bow tie so, of course, I couldn’t say no. I was surprised at the color choice, but I knew better than to question it and encourage Kelly’s fashion wrath. As I looked in the mirror, though, I realized that the green really did work. It brought out my eyes in an unexpectedly pleasant way, and it even livened up my smile. Kelly always knew what was best for me.

My mother knocked.

“Oh sweetie look at you you’re so handsome oh my let me fix your bow tie well look at your eyes oh my little baby boy!”

She wrapped her arms around me, and I softly kissed her cheek like my dad used to.

“The limo will be here in ten minutes I’ll be ready in eight don’t you worry about a thing I love you see you soon!”

And then she was gone. I was all alone in my childhood bedroom. I even looked like a child playing dress up in my dad’s old Navy dress uniform. But I wasn’t. I was getting ready for a wedding. My wedding. My dad wouldn’t be there but seeing myself look the way that I remembered him made me feel his presence just the same. I stared at myself in the full-length mirror until I heard a honk outside the house and my mother shouting at me that the limo had just arrived.

I took one last look at myself and my room and then walked out, closing the door behind me as if it would be the last time that I would ever see the place. My mother was already in the limo waving at me with a glass of champagne in her hand and the world's biggest smile on her face. I walked towards the limo and got inside. A man dressed in tails, the chauffeur, shut the door behind me with a slam that made me jump and look around. The back window had something written on it with a lot of glitter.

My mother saw me looking at the window and exclaimed, "Isn't that nice that they put 'Just married' on there for you I think it's delightful oh my little boy getting married I still can't believe it your father would be so proud and he would've loved Kelly oh my!"

It was really happening. I was going to marry Kelly. I wasn't even nervous anymore. I could feel the last of the balloons deflating in my stomach. I took the bottle of champagne and poured myself a glass before raising it up.

"To love!"

"To love!" my mother chimed in return, wiping a tear from her swollen eyes.

We arrived at the chapel fifteen minutes before the official start of the ceremony. It was a small sanctuary, barely able to hold all of our guests, but it was right for us. The chapel was so small that only one of us could get ready there without breaking the tradition of not seeing each other before the ceremony, so my mother offered up her house for my preparations so that Kelly could take the chapel. When she first suggested it, I was upset with my mother. I wanted to be part of the action throughout the day, and it seemed like it would be so much harder to get ready at home. But walking up the entranceway, I knew that she was right. She wanted one last day with her baby boy at home before he got married and moved out for good, and I had secretly craved one last night in my childhood bedroom, too. Selfish or not, I was glad to have those last hours before the ceremony with her. It gave me the opportunity to realize the reality of this day.

Even outside the chapel, everything looked beautiful. I couldn't wait to go inside and stand before Kelly to say my vows. Kelly had been busy for hours making sure that everything was perfect, and I could tell from the moment I opened the doors that perfection was achieved. There were red roses and

twinkle lights lined up and down the aisles. Three flower girls were spinning in circles, watching their dresses fly up while rose petals scattered from their baskets in every direction. Someone with a video camera was filming them while another man was running around setting up four other cameras that were pointed in all different directions to get the best footage for the marriage video. My mother led me to one side of the chapel to wait while our family and friends took their seats.

Then, before I knew it, and still not soon enough, the music began, and it was time to marry the love of my life. I put my arm out and my mother took it, squeezing me just a little. We walked down the aisle together in slow, calculated footsteps, just in time with the beat. Once we had reached the altar, the minister smiled at us and nodded. My mother fixed my bowtie, kissed my cheek, gave my hand another squeeze, and stepped aside.

Then the music changed.

Everyone stood up.

I saw him.

Kelly was walking down the aisle toward me, sandwiched between his mother and father. He was dressed in an impressive gray tuxedo that I could've sworn was made of stars. He was the most handsome man I had ever seen. I smiled at him as he walked towards me and he smiled back. A tear fell from my eye and I hastily wiped it from my face.

Then, Kelly was standing beside me. His parents were off to the side and it was just him and me. I took his hands and kissed them and together we turned to the minister.

He greeted our guests and asked them to be seated. Once the commotion of taking one's seat died down, the minister looked at Kelly and me. We were beaming. He said a few cheesy words about love having no barriers and how much he enjoyed watching us grow up, and then asked us to say our vows.

I went first. I collected myself enough to tell Kelly how I was so lucky to have met him and how I would protect him against dragons if I had to. How I would stay with him until the day I died, even though I wished that day would never come just so I had more time with him. And most importantly, I told him how much I loved him. When I was finished, I put a silver band around his finger and took a

moment to marvel at the look of it on his perfect hand. Then, Kelly said his vows and slid a matching silver band onto my finger.

We looked up at the minister with excitement and he smiled at us. Just like that, he pronounced us a married couple. We kissed and hugged and laughed as people all around us clapped and cheered and snapped photos of us from their smartphones. Then, triumphantly, we took each other's hands and walked back up the aisle as victors in love. The professional photographers followed us outside the chapel to take some more shots of us basking in our happiness. Cameras always made me shy but having Kelly beside me with a ring around his finger made me forget all of that. I just smiled and waved and kissed my new husband until he and the photographers were sufficiently satisfied, and Kelly and I could escape inside our limo.

The chauffeur closed the door behind us and ran around to the front of the limo. As he pulled away from the church, Kelly and I smiled at each other, the realization of our marriage hitting us. We had really done it. After years of loving each other and waiting for what felt like centuries, we had truly taken our two lives and joined them together as one. As if he could read my mind, Kelly took my hand and said, "It's real. I promise," and kissed me. I looked into his eyes—my husband's eyes—smiled and kissed him passionately back. 

Hannah Levine is the first Digital/Social Media Editor at the Detroit Jewish News. She's a graduate of the Denver Publishing Institute and the University of Michigan. Hannah is waiting for the day someone takes her to Antarctica, so if you're that person, please contact her so she can start packing. <https://hannahlevine.weebly.com>

Poetry Category

Meet the Judge



Allan Johnston

Allan Johnston is the author of two full-length poetry collections (*Tasks of Survival*, 1996, and *In a Window*, 2018) and three chapbooks (*Northport*, 2010; *Departures*, 2013; *Contingencies*, 2015). He has received an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship, Pushcart Prize nominations (2009; 2016), and First Prize in Poetry in the Outrider Press Literary Anthology competition (2010). His poems have appeared in *Rhino*, *Poetry*, *Rattle*, *Poetry East*, and many other journals. He teaches writing and literature at Columbia College and DePaul University in Chicago, and reads or has read as a contributing poetry editor for *Word River*, *r.kv.r.y*, and the Illinois Emerging Poets competition. He is also co-editor of *JPSE: Journal for the Philosophical Study of Education*, and has published scholarly articles in *Twentieth Century Literature*, *College Literature*, and several other journals.

First place

“In Account with the Public Curator”

By Brett Dionysius



“The inspiration of ‘In Account with the Public Curator’ came last year. My mother was readying herself to move into an aged care facility. On a bed in a spare room, I found an officious looking envelope from 1979. It was a letter from the Public Curator (Public Trustee of Estates) detailing the final financial position of my father, who had died from cancer in 1978 (age 45). I found out that my father died with just two dollars in his pocket and about \$50 in the bank. I was a bit shocked to discover this document that confirmed the weight of poverty that I’d carried around with me for years. Bureaucracy had eaten most of my father’s limited estate up, just like the cancer that had devoured his bowel cells.

I needed to remove a layer of intimacy, so second person narration creates a safer distance for me to talk about this issue, rather than first person. It’s just too confronting. Even today, forty years later, I still can’t talk to my mother about my father’s illness. I can’t even show her the poem, or read it out to her, such is the pain and awkwardness and embarrassment that I still hold. Such a tragic emotional juxtaposition – I can show the world this poem, but not my own mother.”

The letter is dated a year & a day after your father’s death. One of those officious envelopes with a viewing window as though looking into a miniature aquarium at the strange life undersea; shapes of long-lived marine giants captured against their will as you are, when you draw out the thrice-folded receipt from 1979. It is your father’s final statement of account & distribution, a document from the Public Curator - a title so Roman that you can hardly believe it even exists at all. You stumbled across it looking for something else. A report card from school your mother said she’d found & put on the spare bed. She tells you over breakfast that she & your eldest sister have been going through her things; suitcases full of crumbling correspondence, newspaper clippings she kept of you playing rugby league. She says she was never much of a letter writer. You have that in common. You tell her, the only items of value you want are her letters & ask her not to throw anything out. You’re not comforted by

the look in her watered-down blue eyes. Her Parkinson's disease gnaws wormholes in her brain space like moths at her lace curtains, weakening the woven structure that was once so durable, thread by thread. You see it when she talks, the pattern of her words, a silken slurry that spills over the dining room table & then harden into a silent tight cocoon. She loses a pill from the Advent calendar of drugs she opens every day like a perpetual Christmas card she nurses in her lap. It is blue & under her elbow. One of the twelve or so hosts she consumes daily. She says that her doctor had to change her dosage; she couldn't sleep, just kept thrashing about, her dreams so violent as she killed countless strangers, transforming into a dangerous woman by night, a forties' *femme fatale*. So, after breakfast, you steal into the spare guestroom. Single beds adorned with their dolphin bedspreads, the bedside table drawers filled with your old Sunday School parables -*The Little Sleeping Beauty* gifted to you in 1970, that tells the story of Jesus resurrecting a dead girl. In the book he is referred to as, 'The Stranger' & claims she is only sleeping. So, he tells her to wake up. The family's features are eastern, Jesus is depicted as middle-class, white, perhaps a bit mid-western. The girl has no name & just rises from her bed. But this is only a childhood tale, a throwback. You read the story out loud to your own children as a joke & your visually impaired daughter *poo-poo*s the bit about Jesus curing a blind man; how bullshit this is given the complexity of eye disorders & that he wouldn't have known what his problem was. One miracle does not fit all she suggests. *Scuppers The Sailor Dog* is safer territory; alone in his wrack & ruin, tailored European. But you are alone in the room when your fruitless search reveals a small envelope of b/w photos; men hauling seed bags into a shed in the fifties, your grandfather, the youngest you've ever

seen him before & your father smiling from a horse,
feeding the masses. There, beside the workingman's
life series, you grab the opened letter, disgorging
its contents. Forty years after his death, you learn
how poor your family really were. How he died at
the Magistrates Court with two dollars in his pocket.
How his account with the National Bank of Australasia
Limited, yielded a meagre fifty dollars at his surrender.
You realize it's a miracle this new evidence survived
at all, as you take a photo of your father's final balance
sheet on your smartphone. Something he might've
equated with a spy's tool kit, grief's remuneration
being so futuristic as you slip this dumb revelation
back into its certified sheath, before your mother sees. 

Brett Dionysius b 1969 in Dalby, Queensland, Australia. He has since lived in Melbourne, Brisbane and Ipswich where he is an English teacher, was founding Director of the Queensland Poetry Festival and in his spare time watches birds. He has recently published work in ginosko literary journal, Juste Milieu Literary Review, Remington Review, Sobotka Literary Magazine, Sky Island Journal, The Mystic Blue Review and was short-listed in the 2017 Montreal International Poetry Prize.

Second place

“XCII”

By Aria Ligi



“XCII” is a sonnet. I wanted to promote classically formatted verse. The inspiration came from the book I wrote for Petrarch. This poem is part of the yet-to-be-published book, which has 130 sonnets for Petrarch, in honor of the poet who created the Italian Sonnet.”

Come to Vaucluse the rolling litany swerves & chorales in me.
With thick hard crusts, yellow'd apples and spongy chestnuts.
A poets' complimentary banquet which builds within a supple
Mind, a trellis upon which rhymes are stacked rudiments for
Collegiate verbiage, a tracery o' frippery, supping queer and
Loquacious tomes, weighted texts, facts collected & intoned.
T's an oblique octagonal hive, an amber honeyed anodyne and
We the workers, filling the golden elixir, our busy feet &
Mouths wielding resinous propolis, sediment in furrowed
Wedges, a segmented symbiotic haven in a grotto o' delights
Er the golden door dissembling on the floor. Er the melding
Molded pews, entrees secreted in a cloistered reality between
Avignon and Vaucluse, intermittent as the ichor that doth rain
Between illusions, natural and strange. 

Aria Ligi is an independent scholar who graduated from San Francisco State University at the top of her class, with a degree in writing. She has a great love of history, and in particular, the English Romantics and has been writing poetry for over forty years. She is the author of *Temple of Love: Poems for Marie Antoinette, Blood, Bone and Stone*, as well as being published in many magazines both online and in print such as *Light Magazine, October Hill Magazine, The Australian Times*, and the *Vermillion Literary Project's annual chapbook* to name a few.

Third Place

“The Mad Girl”

By Lana Scibona



“The Mad Girl’ came out of a class assignment a little over a year ago before I graduated NYU. I personally always felt drawn to Millais’ “Ophelia” vibrant but melancholy figure and ever frozen in the riverbed where she drowns. There are so many levels of interpretation embedded in my poem; ultimately, I referenced both the painting and Shakespeare’s play to discuss voyeurism, femininity, and madness.”

Inspired by Sir John Everett Millais’ painting Ophelia (1851-52)

Poor lady in the lush reeds,
Drifting like a common recyclable,
Mouth a slack O!
What good can her gilded shroud perform now.
Someone has killed this young maid’s wit,
Snapped her mind like a branch underfoot.
Hysteria adored, then punished.
But, at least, her fate is to float
amongst the flowers. Look!
She has her rosemary, her pansies,
A sprig of fennel, a bouquet of columbines,
Daisies, and, of course rue.
And she blooms before us
In a gilded frame
Confined in our endless reverie.
Pray you, love, remember.
There is madness for you,
And madness for me.
It refuses to wither away. 

Lana Scibona is a recent graduate from NYU Gallatin, a writer specializing in poetry and non-fiction, and an essay instructor at Writopia.