

Congratulations to our 2017 Flash Fiction Winners. Please enjoy reading their stories.

Undergraduate Contest

1st Place: Brittany Church
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3rd Place: Suzanne Honda
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Grad/Alum Contest

1st Place: Emily Benoit
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Undergraduate Winners

1st Place: Brittany Church 's *Red & Blue*

What my cousin is saying about him is that he is a hard worker.

“The plant has him eight hours a day in that noisy exhaust cloud. Gonna ruin his lungs.”

I uproot a blade of grass from the hill and inspect it.

“Six hours at Farbman’s is reasonable, but on the weekends? The factory gives him fortysix a week, but he wants fifty. Never satisfied that one.”

I roll the translucent root between my thumb and forefinger.

My cousin knows shelving stock at Farbman’s is not the only job her boyfriend needs. My memories of last summer are condensed to one scene engraved in my mind. Flames. I was used to seeing them surrounded by cultured stone and flannel stockings. Instead, they were swallowing my uncle’s shiny, sky blue ’56 Ford Fairlane. I watched it cringe and shrink against the

mess of splintered wood that had been the porch railing of Farbman's. The blinking reflection of red and blue in the hairline cracked second-story windows. Sirens distant.

I found it difficult to accept that the car had to pay the ultimate penalty for someone who couldn't seem to get his life together. The factory job was the result of a merciful judge. Uncle is planning to use the money to put a down payment on an F100 he'd seen at the dealer.

My cousin was out of town traveling. One of those fancy cruises they advertise in the bifold pamphlets. The guy handing them out beneath dripping icicles had overly white teeth and was wearing a Stetson that had been out in the sun too long. The real, live, ocean. She hadn't talked about anything else that spring.

She came home to legal fees her parents refused to pay and an agitated southern drawl through the telephone every Saturday morning reminding her that "porch lumber don't fall from the sky." Mr. Farbman felt it was his duty to remind her to take responsibility for what had been done. Guilty by association.

She's still holding on to that idiot like he's suddenly going to figure it out, make money, be on a radio show with a cult audience and she'll be the courageous one for sticking with him through the rough patches.

She doesn't see it. But I'm convinced: the all-too familiar flashes of red and blue from her bedroom window will persist until they're replaced. Perhaps by the glint of the sun reflecting off brass handles atop a bier as it is wheeled down the street.

2nd Place: Jessie Vasquez's *On the Way Down*

It's all here. Under the surface. Just a little deeper. She dug with bare hands into the soft soil. All those memories, smiles, the things she enjoyed most were in a decaying wooden box in the earth. After Henry died there was a drive in her soul to see those memories again. To hold the same things she did years ago; to see the pictures and make sure she was remembering everything exactly right. Henry was the only man who truly understood her, who made her feel alive. She couldn't do him the disservice of not remembering him precisely how he was. *Just a little deeper; they're here.* Wet dirt soiled her dress and stuck to her arms. She grew heavier with every scoop, sinking lower into the ground. Worms crawled around her, up by her face and ears. She watched them. Up and up, until they were daisies protecting her from the heat. She always did love daisies. They could be yellow like the sun or white like the clouds. The clouds that shifted, moved. Slowly on down through the years onto her unwelcoming head and flowed thin and smooth midway down her back. *women your age shouldn't have hair that long; it doesn't look right.* Other women were quick to project their opinions of Mary's choices — noses high in the air — whether she asked for them or not. She liked her hair, the way it made her feel close to her long gone youth. Years spent laughing, smiling, collecting things that held meaning to her. *Where is that box? Just a little deeper. It's here under the surface.* Her hands were thick with damp dirt; she squeezed them together. She smiled to herself. How free it felt to be filthy. Opposite of the hole she had started were her daughters. They didn't offer to help, just looked right where she was. They were talking to each other in words that Mary couldn't understand. They sounded muffled, muted, far away. *What are you girls going on about?* "You know it is rude to exclude your mother!" she voiced. No matter, she kept digging. *There! Finally there it is!* With trembling fingers Mary brushed the remaining dirt from its lid. She opened her box and laughter flooded out of it, filled her nose with the smell of lemonade and fresh cut grass. Black and white pictures were scattered among glass jars filled with beach glass and marbles, a pair of white high heels, and other mementos. Pictures in hand, she looked up at her daughters who stared blankly back at her. There she began to match her memory with those photographs. An Easter egg hunt with children; a small girl covered in ice cream; a young couple at a piano, plainly in love. How happy she felt. Her heart pounded with joy, pounded and pounded her frail chest. Faster, faster, until it was stronger than she was. Pounding until she was calm again. Mary picked up one of her glass bottles. For a while now, she had been holding on to a marble that she had found the day of Henry's funeral. She removed a brown-orange glass ball from her pocket. Its smooth surface rolled about in the palm of her hand. With a smile she dropped the marble into the jar.

Past the other pretty trinkets down, down she fell. The light began to fade. She fell into the sound of a pianist playing his last chords and became diminishing sound.

3rd Place: Suzanne Honda's *Bastards*

The snake in the boy's pocket was dead.

He had first spotted it on his way home after fishing coiled in a clump of dried-out grass. At first the boy thought it was a rope. The boy had no use for rope and so he walked past it, his feet bare, whistling. He passed the houses positioned across from the river - houses with curtains made of disintegrating lace - and kicked at the stray stones in his way. His brothers would be finished plowing when he got home, and hungry, and the boy's pail was nearly empty. Three small fish lay side by side on the bottom of it, their jaws stretched open wide. Their shiny black eyes stared up at the boy, taunting him, as if to remind him that his brothers would be disappointed with his paltry catch.

The boy stopped and set the pail at his feet. He leaned over and plucked out the eyes of each fish, one at a time, and rolled them in his palms. They were cold and coated in mucus. His grandmother, when she saw them, would turn her head away in disgust.

Why did you do this? Get them out of my sight.

But his brothers - his brothers would understand. Maybe, after dinner, they could use the eyes for a game of marbles.

He thought then of the rope, which was really a snake, back up the road. It would make a good line for an anchor when he built his boat. He could spend all day on the river; set up his pole and catch twenty fish, if he wanted. Then he and his brothers could fry them up on the riverbank and bury the leftover bones along the shore. After that, he'd convince them to roll him a cigarette, and they'd watch the moon yank at the tide through a haze of dirty smoke until they fell asleep, their feet in the water, their arms spread out behind their heads.

He was only sort-of disappointed when he realized the rope was a snake; after all, he had never had a pet snake before. And this one would be real quiet. His grandmother would never find out. The boy scooped it up with dirty hands and shoved it into his pocket. Maybe he would show his brothers, and they would clap him on the back and laugh; maybe then they would go inside and pull down their grandfather's worn encyclopedia and look up what kind of snake it was. It would be their secret, just the three of them. Their grandmother would never have to know.

The boy sauntered into his yard, swinging his pail and whistling. The dead snake was a thin lump in his pocket. He strolled up to the back porch where his brothers stood,

smoking. Look, the boy said, and he held out the pail. The brothers looked. The larger of the two snatched the littlest fish up in his hand and tossed it from one palm to the other.

You're crazy, he said. He poked a finger into an empty socket.

The smaller brother rubbed his rough chin and spat.

Little sick-o, he said.

The larger brother spun the fish on his finger by its socket.

Hey, the boy shouted. I caught that.

He grabbed for the fish and tucked it back into the pail. The smaller brother pushed one thick hand through the boy's muddy hair and smirked.

That fish is too little, he said. Like you.

Bastards, said the boy. Sons-of-bitches; but the brothers didn't hear him. They ground out their cigarettes and went inside.

The boy felt for the snake in his pocket. Its body was soft, still newly dead. He groped around for the snake's head. With a grunt, the boy clamped his thumb and forefinger into the snake's sockets and squeezed.

Honorable Mention: Michael Sullivan's *Stairs*

"Enough of this nonsense" My father said to me through the basement door. "You're too old to be afraid of the dark!"

"Dad, please!" I said, clawing at the handle. "I can't be down here." He responded by slamming the deadbolt and turning off the light in the hallway. The walls of the basement seemed to melt away, leaving me alone in its infinite void.

"No, it's just the dark," I said, trying to slow my breathing. "I can handle it. I've been down here a thousand times." I focused on taking long, deep breaths, relaxing my muscles. "Just eight steps, and I can turn on the light."

"One," I took my first step. The stair groaned underneath me, ready to give away and let me fall for eternity into the darkness.

"Two," I continued. The cold metal railing stuck to my hand as I shifted my weight.

"Three," I took another step. The shadows began to weigh on my shoulders, sucking away my breath as I mouthed the next numbers.

"Four, five," I started walking faster, ready to get out of this abyss. "Six, seven." I could practically feel the light switch next to me. "Eight."

I reached forward to where the light switch was, and took another step down.

"Nine."

No, wait, that doesn't make sense.

"I must have miscounted," I rationalized, taking another step forward, and down. "Ten. What's going on?"

I had lived in this house my entire life. There were only eight steps into the basement.

There had only ever been eight steps into the basement. Not seven, not nine, just eight. I couldn't do this. I took a deep breath, and started back up the stairs.

"One, two, three, four," I said, jogging up the steps. The stairs were silent, no creeks or bumps as I ran over them. "Five six seven eight nine ten," I should have slammed into the door, but I just kept running into empty space. "Eleven twelve thirteen no!" I stopped, the stairs just kept coming. I could feel my heart pounding through the sides of my skull. I bolted, taking the stairs two at a time.

"Fifteen, seventeen, nineteen," I said, as my foot slipped between the steps, and I began to fall.

"Five hundred forty seven," I said, walking back up the stairs. My legs ached and back moaned as I limped up the stairs. "Five hundred forty eight," I said, my throat so dry it began to crack. "Five hundred forty nine," I said. I stopped, and took a deep breath. My hand trembled as I let go of the railing, and looked back at the void. "Five hundred forty nine," I repeated.

Five hundred and forty nine steps, since I last lost count.

Grad/Alum Contest

1st Place: Emily Benoit's *28 Things I Remember About My Grandmother's Death (in no particular order)*

- 1) Sunday was far worse than Saturday.
- 2) The date of her funeral was March 4th. It was a Wednesday. Unbeknownst to me at the time, it was my friend's 20th birthday. We'd only just begun moving from acquaintances to friends; hence I didn't know his birth date yet.
- 3) It was extremely cold and surprisingly sunny when we got to the cemetery. I'd switched from my kitten heels, which I'd worn at the viewing and the funeral; to my boots, because I knew it would be freezing. I was right.
- 4) I was put in charge of finding Mandy's ashes. My grandmother had requested that Mandy be buried with her. Of the many dogs she'd had during her lifetime, Mandy was her favorite.
- 5) That Thursday, I went to the store to buy groceries. Over the course of two hours of shopping, I spent over 130 dollars. I felt both ridiculous and justified in spending that much money.
- 6) The following day (Sunday) I had to go to work, which consisted of inputting data for a small spa. Although I'd been a client, I was nevertheless hired as a receptionist. I worked there for over three years. This was less than half the length of time I'd been going there to get my eyebrows waxed.
- 7) All of my cousins looked terrible. One of them was wearing a pair of stockings with a huge run in it; another had on a skirt and top that would have been better worn during the summer; another wore an unwashed cardigan that looked like one of their three dogs had slept on it. My youngest cousin (the only boy) wore sneakers and a tie that matched my uncle's (his father's).
- 8) Thursday and Friday, from 8pm until 12am, had been spent cooking dinners that could be frozen and thawed when needed. For some reason I believed that the aftermath of my grandmother's death would be more bearable if I made dinners in advance.
- 9) I spent the evening after the funeral watching violent television. I don't understand why I didn't spend it with my mother, who had just buried her only surviving parent.
- 10) Mandy was a Doberman and, according to my mother, a huge baby who was terrified of everything. Her counterpart was another Doberman, who belonged to my other uncle (who wore a blue tie to the funeral). This Doberman feared nothing and growled defensively at anyone who was not family. His name was Talga.
- 11) My grandmother died on a Saturday.

- 12) For lunch that day I had *kadai paneer*, a curry dish consisting of capsicum, paneer (which is a soft, acid-set, curd cheese that looks strangely like tofu), onions, tomatoes, and traditional Indian spices.
- 13) This was probably a poor choice, due to the fact that I'm lactose intolerant.
- 14) I had never lost a human being to whom I was close before. The day after, I took a picture of myself in hopes that I'd understand my emotions better if I could read them on my face.
- 15) I looked and felt like hell. My eyebrows, however, looked great.
- 16) I looked for Mandy's ashes for over twenty minutes before discovering that my mother had found them downstairs with the rest of my grandmother's things.
- 17) I was the first person to start crying during the funeral. I was also the first to stop.
- 18) A few of the nurses who'd cared for my grandmother came to the viewing. One of them stole packets of Kleenex that were supposed to be for my family to use.
- 19) I drove through a snowstorm to get to the funeral home the day before my grandmother's funeral. She was laid out for my family to view before the service the next day. My mother was angry that I'd driven over twenty miles in the snow to get there, since the weather was clearly horrible and driving conditions were dangerous. I was the only one of the six grandchildren to be there.
- 20) Dinners I made included, but were not limited to:
 - a. Spinach lasagna
 - b. Quinoa and rice stuffed peppers
 - c. Spaghetti sauce with ground turkey
 - d. Banana bread (two loaves) (Possibly four)
 - e. I bought frozen broccoli for a recipe too. It was supposed to go into a broccolirice-and-cheese-casserole, but I don't know if I ever made it.
- 21) The reason nearly everything was vegetarian was because it was Lent, and I had given up meat. My family had not.
- 22) After lunch my brother wanted to get coffee at the Dunkin Donuts across the parking lot. I made us cross the lot on foot because I'd eaten too much *kadai paneer* and wanted to walk it off.
- 23) My uncle (not the one who owned Talga) was wearing a bright yellow tie. To this day none of us have been able to understand this fashion choice.
- 24) I made coconut cake for the luncheon after my grandmother's funeral. It was a favorite dessert of hers. I hope never to eat it again.
- 25) I was the last of my grandmother's six grandchildren to see her alive.

- 26) I too plan to bury my pet's ashes with me. He's a cat and his name is Niles. At present, he is very much alive.
- 27) The following day, my mother and I took off work and school, respectively, to detox from the funeral. We went to the fruit market, which may have been my suggestion. I remember that we ate soup there for lunch. My mother remembers us looking at the fruits and vegetables. Neither of us shares the same memories, and we have no idea what we did for the rest of the day.
- 28) While my mother was watching her mother die, my brother and I were at an Indian restaurant eating a late lunch. The suffocating amount of guilt I feel about this is indescribable.

2nd Place: James Corcoran's *The Bee Jar*

When I was just an innocent, there was a kid on my block named Gary who was a vicious little prick. If a bird happened to land in Gary's yard, Gary would be waiting for him, splayed out in the tall weeds by the garage with his CO₂ rifle, his helmet stuffed with grass like a Special Forces sniper. No birds were safe: sparrows, robins, blue-jays-and if a hapless bald eagle were to fly into his yard, all patriotism aside, Gary would have plugged the white-headed sumbitch.

His self-assigned role as the neighborhood's arbiter of Death made him feel superior to all other creatures--and he exercised this superiority in the most disturbingly imaginative ways.

One muggy day in July, Gary wandered over to my house.

"Come on *out*, loser," he barked at my door, "I wanna show ya somethin'." When I came out, I could see that he had an empty mayonnaise jar in which he had trapped a large bumble bee.

"Whatcha gonna do with that?" I asked.

"Oh, this is SO cool!" he gushed, "Check this out."

So, being curious, I walked with him to a nearby vacant lot. It was no more than half an acre, but to us it was the natural kingdom in microcosm—and that day, it was to be the bleak setting for a real life-and-death struggle, the like of which I had never seen.

"I didn't notice it 'til yesterday," he declared without explanation, "but it's a *big* one...and I just *bet* they do it."

"Who? *What?*" I asked--getting more and more curious, as the fat bumblebee, its legs and thorax covered with yellow pollen, buzzed frantically along the glass seam of the jar.

Gary stopped, shaking it with both hands like a bartender mixing a martini, getting the little bugger all worked up. Yellow flecks of pollen flew off his legs and stuck to the side of the jar as the buzzing grew louder...and *angrier*.

Gary stifled a sinister chuckle.

"It's right over here, next to this tree," he said, pointing with a dirty, bandaged finger to a miniature volcano about six inches across.

"Just watch," he said, unscrewing the lid and quickly dumping the jar upsidedown on the large ant hill. The bumblebee, further agitated by this, buzzed furiously inside the jar.

"Okay," I said, "Now what?"

"Just *wait*," Gary told me, getting down on his belly and peering into the jar like he was watching a TV.

We waited. After flying around for several seconds, the bee dropped to the ground and started to explore the rim, looking for openings. There were none, of course--

Gary had forced the jar into the moist earth. There was no escape.

Again, I heard Gary's evil chuckle...

"Heh-heh-hehhhhh..."

Looking first at him, and then back at the jar, I noticed that a couple of red ants had made their way out of the hole and were apparently scouting out the situation.

Before long, dozens, then *scores*--marched out like Roman legions. Alarmed, the bee rose up off the ground like a lumbering helicopter, hovering in mid-air to avoid the dirt floor that was now swarming with a battalion of red ants...*agitated* red ants...while still more were streaming out of the nest.

"Heh-heh, heh-*hehhhhhh*," Gary again chortled up his instinctive croak:

primeval, cold-blooded, and Darwinian.

The ants now started to march up the jar's glass side--dozens of them--and when they reached the upside-down "bottom" of the jar above they started dropping down, launching themselves toward their prey. Several missed, but before long, one of the soldiers landed on the bee's back and immediately started tearing into it with its powerful mandibles.

The bee flew desperately, erratically, and after a few more seconds, several of them were on top of it, tearing at its wings, forcing it to falter and ultimately plummet to the ground. When it hit the earth, Gary shouted, "OH, BABY!" like he'd just gotten an electric shock. The ants swarmed over it like flood waters--so thick the bee was lost from sight.

I stood there transfixed, dumb-struck while Gary continued with his bloodcurdling chortle..."Heh-heh, heh-*hehhhhh*...."

I watched the ants dismember the creature, even as it tried reflexively over and over to use its only defense, its stinger—like a man with a knife against a school of piranha. I blinked, stunned, as three ants pulled off one of the wings and dragged it down the hole. Gary was very much amused...his face welded in a buck-toothed grin.

Within seconds the entire carcass was gone. The army, very businesslike, had mopped up the aftermath and marched back down the hole to the nest.

The spectacle over, I stood there on that sweaty afternoon, my heart racing, my mind stunned beyond words. And although it is true that I was horrified by the carnage I had just witnessed, it is also true that I found it oddly and unexpectedly thrilling--thrilling in the intensity of its life-and-death struggle, in its primitive power and splendor, in its raw display of the natural world--and even more thrilling was the electrifying animal nature it uncoiled in my innocent, mammalian brain. It was a very odd, very mixed feeling...and a very *powerful* one. Something snapped, and had profoundly...*changed*. All that time, I had viewed myself as superior to Gary--in intelligence, in spirit, and in occupying the higher moral ground. But what I had just witnessed, and my complex reaction to it, proved to me that this superiority was nothing but an illusion.

And I couldn't forgive him for that.

So, weeks later during recess, having lost the higher moral ground, I sought out some paltry stratagem, some shabby pretext by which I might "legitimately" get angry at Gary--and did just that. I trapped him.

I cornered him over by the bike rack behind St. Brigid's--and I beat him senseless.

3rd Place: Scott Conto's *The Kuleshov Contest*

The delights of our youth—the soda and junk food our parents wouldn't buy, movie tickets and music cassettes, gasoline in our tanks so we could drive our dates to secluded coves at the edge of town to risk our virginities—were largely subsidized by working weeknights at our small town's local videotape dispensary. We called ourselves the Movie Boys, an appellation that declared our collective love for cinema and also the inescapable fact that no female sought admission to our exclusive club. We spent many a night cataloging new arrivals, eating stale popcorn from the antique popcorn machine that management hoped would echo the prestige of the once vaunted theaters, and watching tapes on the small 13-inch television that we kept cubbed behind the counter. Occasionally, we would pop in comedies that provided lines of dialogue to quote while we worked ("And stop calling me Shirley..."), but our cinematic diet consisted mostly of arthouse staples—the videotapes that were rarely, if ever, rented out and whose titles were never offered up when a customer asked for a suggestion.

It was the summer after junior year—forever remembered as the summer I ran my hand up the skirt of Molly Hansen and felt the wet warmth between her legs—when the mercurial attention of the Movie Boys was directed to a regular named Mr. Kuleshov. A Russian émigré whose salt and pepper gnarl of a beard and lined face lent him a certain foreign exoticism, Mr. Kuleshov came in like clockwork right behind the after-work rush every Tuesday and Friday and rented a single tape, always paying in advance for an extra night on the Friday rental even though it would've been cheaper just to pay the late fee.

Our passing interest in Mr. Kuleshov started at first with an offhand comment—Jimmy, a co-worker whose shift overlapped with mine, remarked one evening that old Kuleshov looked to be in a particularly dour mood and would be best served by renting a Marx Brothers or a Buster Keaton—but in the ensuing weeks that interest ballooned into a de facto contest—each of us scrutinizing Kuleshov's rumpled countenance and then wagering on if he was going to rent a comedy or a drama. The rules were simple: we weren't allowed to talk to Kuleshov while we were determining our verdicts (not that this proved difficult as he rarely uttered anything more than an asthmatic wheeze when reaching for a film on a lower shelf); and if he ever rented a musical or a horror film, we agreed it would be marked down as a draw.

I'd observe Kuleshov shuffle down the narrowed aisle ways in a pair of worn penny loafers and an amber trench coat that looked as if made of beeswax melting from his stooped shoulders. He'd take one crumpled video sleeve in his hand and examine the artwork on the front and then flip the sleeve to read the synopsis on the back as if it had been penned by Turgenev himself; the next sleeve then would receive no more than a perfunctory once-over before it was returned to its home with similarly orphaned films.

I'd study every minute detail of Kuleshov's face, every tremor of his purplish lips, every wince of his eyes that seemed to signal some inner torment; I even began to suspect that his wanderings amongst the shelves held patterns like those inherent in bird migrations. And soon I became the indisputable leader in the contest—the premier interpreter of the predilections and whims of Kuleshov. It did not take long before the Movie Boys took note, the youngest hirelings amongst us following me around the store and inundating me with questions as if I was a smalltown Aristotle, the colonnades of our Lyceum no more than sparsely carpeted walkways flanked by matinee idols of yesteryear.

"It's really simple," I explained. "Everything I need to know about the human condition I learned from the cinema. Rent *The Passion of Joan of Arc*; untold worlds are hidden in a single close-up on Falconetti's face." My acolytes would nod in agreement, and, much to my satisfaction, the rentals of Dreyer and other silents more than tripled.

My intuitive understanding of human psychology soon fostered teenage fantasies of following in the footsteps of Welles and fellow wunderkinds to become a filmmaker myself. If I wasn't tending to a customer or alphabetizing the shelves, I could be found jotting down kernels of plotlines or sketching out storyboards in a dog-eared steno pad. It may have been this budding confidence—and a want of validation for my talents—that prompted me to interrogate Kuleshov about one of his rentals.

"Bergman tonight, huh?" Kuleshov grunted.

"I've seen this one. *Autumn Sonata*—not very cheery."

"I wouldn't know," Kuleshov snapped back.

"You've never seen it?"

"Don't rent 'em for me."

The writer inside of me burned and I persisted. "None of them?"

"My daughter," he answered, "they bring her comfort. Never saw much purpose in them myself."

His admission instantly unmoored me. Our most faithful customer didn't share my love of cinema? And what of my reasoning that had notched so many wins in our contest?

"If you don't mind..." Kuleshov motioned to his rental that I held suspended in my hand.

I apologized and extended the tape to him. The vacuum he left behind as he pushed his way through the front door and into the street was suffocating.

I looked to the television set at my waist for comfort. It glowed with black and white images of refugees singing the "La Marseillaise." A single tear slid down the face of a satinskin woman. But now, for the first time, the anthem sounded muffled beneath a swell of hisses and pops on the soundtrack, and all I could see beyond the wavy lines caused by the recorder's poor tracking were actors masquerading in costumes and the haloes of the cinematographer's lights being swallowed in a dance of bewitching shadows.