

## **CREATIVE NON-FICTION, 1<sup>st</sup> Place: Addyson H. Groetsch**

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### **Nile of Doubt**

I knew no God as a child. Like all nose-picking toddlers, I was a sponge. I extinguished my primitive habits by absorbing what was in the world around me. Among my family were versed tongues and cousins who could recite every chapter of the Bible by age ten. If I rode my bike through the neighborhood, I would pass beneath at least five churches' looming shadows on my way to Grandma's house.

My family sewed many seeds. Good grades were a priority; I gobbled up every ounce of knowledge that trickled from the whiteboards at school. I treated my peers with kindness, even if they stole my blocks during playtime or were quicker than me at recess. These seeds grew and flourished naturally with age and experience. There was one dormant one among them, though—one minute, black and shiny seed— a seed of love and appreciation for an invisible force of life. I was a quick learner in every other subject, but God was a rule, a staple of life that I just could not seem to grasp. As I grew older, my skepticism only grew steadily in length and amount.

I did not understand why a God who was perfect in every definition of the word would raise me to be abandoned. For reasons unbeknownst to my childlike naivety, my father, the sole male figure in my life, was never around for longer than a few days at a time. It was a rigid system; he would show up to my mother's house, he would greet me with his arms outstretched, and I would eagerly dash through them, gleeful shouts and giggles in my wake. A few days later, I would come back home from school to find my best friend had vanished without a trace.

I did not know why he would always come home and leave. I did not know why every time I nuzzled my face against his chest, the smell of chlorine and Listerine would choke my nostrils. I did not understand why he loved me but left. I did not know why my Mom would cry behind locked doors and swear angrily into her phone. My father was an erratic, chaotic storm of joy and confusion and anger in my childhood home. My father was an alcoholic.

I suppressed a startled yip when my fingers curled around the degraded safety handle of my father's jeep, wrenching them backward as something sticky and mildly lukewarm met my fingertips. My lungs inflated, held onto the sour air for a moment, and then expelled it into the car's humid interior. I knew he was trying. I bit my tongue. Every sharp motion from the car sent me tumbling into unceremonious piles of neon candy wrappers and faded plastic bottles. Despite its unforgiving nature, I found a sort of fondness for the jostling road below. It distinguished the recurring lump in my throat, even rewarded my stomach with a soft giggle. Then he spoke, and my mind crumbled.

"We're almost there. Hang tight, sweetheart." He slurred.

It was strange seeing him again. The recurring shadow, the birth of my grief, my very first heartbreak. I was elated to hear my father's voice again, but I had grown older. Not old enough to know, but old enough to sense the disturbance in my soul. Danger, or something neighboring. I didn't like attributing my father with that label, so I forced it down my throat like sharp candy that, every so often, would rise to poke me in the throat.

"Where are we going?" I asked, tone maintaining the zen I tried so hard to plaster on.

My question was met with heavy silence. A sharp, husky drag answered in its place. The car filled with a dense pillow of smoke that choked my nostrils, smothered my throat, and burned my eyes. He must not have heard me.

I struggled free from the confines of my seatbelt, the resounding crackles of garbage followed every clambering movement that carried me to the car window, where I eagerly pressed my fingers and forehead. The vapor from my nose caused the window to fog. I wiped off the haze with the thick sleeve of my sweater. It was black as pitch outside, but I could just barely make out the silhouettes as we flew by. The bridge below bumped in a steady rhythm, like a heartbeat. Clouds pregnant and thick with potential storm just barely masked the moon, which peeked through the thick expanse and laid wash across the surface below. I could just make out the river's ripples, black and silver with moonlight.

The parking lot was a thick slab of concrete, gingerly cut and thrown out. It hugged the cliffside, only broken up by a hazardous expanse of wire tied to wooden posts that stretched as far left as I could see. On the right, the cliff tapered just steep enough to allow teenagers and fishermen to wrangle the rock and meet the water's edge. My father took my hand in his. We started the taper.

"The Sandbar?" My voice rose in pitch as I followed, confusion and curiosity cutting through my logical line of reasoning like a knife. It was the middle of October.

"Yep. We're going for a walk. Used to bring your brother and you here all the time some years back. If you can even remember." He slurred.

I swallowed. The Sandbar enveloped most of my summertime as a child. Memories flickered through my mind like a quickly fading lamp. The tangy smell of freshwater and the crunch of sand-caked sandwiches. The sticky-sweet icepops that melted all the way down to the elbow before you got a chance to make it to the wooden center. I remembered the warmth.

As we continued down the path, I found myself questioning whether or not this was the same beach. My brain seized as it searched for the nostalgic caress that would tame my nerves, the unknown that crept along my spine and branched to my fingertips. This wasn't the Sandbar that I remembered. Instead of the plushy sand undertow, my shoes slid dangerously between the sharp rocky outcrop. It was nearly impossible to find my footing through the veil of darkness. The sand used to be undisturbed, a beckoning call for my wobbly toddler legs to trample through. What I thought were shells proved to be something a bit morose; thin slips of moonlight illuminated the haggard, pointed crests of broken glass buried in the sand.

The heavens above pushed a sort of static into the air; it promised activity, and it promised danger. It took the form of a soupy cloy that gave the early winter air a warm edge. Still, I shivered; the electricity and rumble of the sky above made my hair stand on end. His fingers tightened around mine as we met the water's edge and paused. I surveyed the impressive expanse of water. The river stretched far, so far that it could almost be considered a lake if it weren't for the dull, thunderous roar of a dam nearby. The thought of the drop made me shiver. My stomach clenched as we continued, my father's boots crunched heavily over shattered shells and broken glass as he made our way into the water, my hand still held firmly in his. I peered upward.

"Uh... Dad?" My voice cracked.

"I don't think I want to get my feet wet."

His lips spread, and a chuckle carried the wind. The dull moonlight glimmered against his jagged teeth. My stomach calmed. I remembered who I was with. He would never put me in harm's way. My Dad was here, and I was safe. I had to believe that.

Thunder boomed overhead. We kept going deeper. I looked from the depths, back to his face. Something was wrong. It was almost as if he was being allured by the call of a siren far out on the opposite shore, something that waved and beckoned him closer. A siren that cooed

sweetly, promising him sanctity. It promised an escape. I began to shiver again, not from the cold, but from a looming dread that was becoming impossible to overlook. A weed that grew back thicker and stronger, no matter how many times I had wrenched it from the Earth. Reality crashed down on my shoulders. The river was trying to pull me apart. It sucked hungrily at my calves. Every time I looked down, more of my body was being hidden by thicker scarves of darkness. The waves tightened through my jeans and scoured my bones in scalding water, biting me, eating me alive. The river was a ravenous hound from hell sent to devour me and quench its hunger. My nerves struck, the alarm bells in my brain shrieked. The ink rose like bile from my knees, scarcely enveloping my waist.

I found myself silently calling out for mercy. I grasped for the unknown, an enigma that I had shoved away from my life. For the first time in my life, I prayed. My fear screamed out towards the thundering sky in a deaf plea for forgiveness. I did not understand. I did not want to die. I wanted to grow up, to soak up more knowledge and drown myself in education, so that I could become a doctor and find answers to the questions that had burdened me my entire life. I wanted to know what debilitating plague took over my father. What parasite nested in his brain, what made him cradle a bottle of whiskey instead of his own daughter? Why did he quarantine himself in his car, suffocating in his own sin, instead of curling up at home in the warmth of my bedroom? Why couldn't he read picture books to me before bedtime? Why couldn't he have been there to hold me and scare the monsters away? What illness forced him to choose exile over existence? Despite my skepticism, I prayed for a miracle. I prayed for hope, I yearned for the explanation I had spent an entire lifetime searching for.

When my father's phone suddenly buzzed in his pocket, I found that I had spent an entire lifetime ignoring the answer.

"What?" He hissed into the phone.

We had come to a pause in the depths of the roaring current. I had long lost my footing beneath the surface; my father's shirt was one of two mercies I clung to. His resounding barks and curses into the phone were drowned out by an overwhelming wash of serenity. It warmed my cold, aching bones and plunged deeper. Deeper than the marrow, somewhere indescribably and incredibly in between.

The little rectangle in his hand slipped from his fingers and broke the surface. He swore at the sky, grappling with the torrent as he groped for the rapidly fading screen. His foot skidded against the smooth rocks below. My shriek of terror sliced through the night air like a blade. Something broke across his face then. Awareness.

We were back on the shore in less than forty seconds. I fell to the ground, knees scraping through the jeans and cutting into my skin as I choked on tears. I heard matching sobs, pleas that were not my own. Sounds that I could not decipher through the pungent cloud of relief that chimed in my brain like an entire envoy of angels had surrounded the very shore that I knelt on, all with their own voices and harps and instruments in perfect harmony. Without warning, I was being scooped from the shore of broken glass and held between the arms of something solid, warm, and familiar. My father stroked my hair, gasping indiscernible apologies through snot and tears.

The conversation that followed was probably the most painful thing I have ever had to endure. A steady mist of rain began to sprinkle our silhouettes on the beach. My father explained to me why he was always away, why he turned to bottles, pills, and syringes instead of his family. I was taken by surprise. It was almost as if he had taken his entire life, the mental prison

that was his addiction, and plastered it across the sand for me to see. He took me home and signed up for a long-term rehabilitation center that morning.

There was a lot that I lost in the swirling depths of the river that night, pieces of myself that I will probably never be able to recover. But I think I like it better that way. Because, for the first time in my life, I got answers. I stopped blaming myself for the vices of others. I was able to leave my childhood behind, not in tears, but in forgiveness. My faith had been restored in a single night.

Through that faith, by pushing past the murky curtain of doubt, not only had I rescued my biological father from addiction, but I had also found another father in a stranger.