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Echo

A Journal of Creative Nonfiction

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Echo

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About Echo

A heart echo test, or an echocreditgraph, is a painless test that examines the structure and function of the heart, according to the National Institution of Health. This test may involve the injection of saline or a specific dye into the patient's vein to showcase the heart.

We chose the name Echo because we expect the work we publish to come from the heart. In our quarterly issues, we want to publish the greatest creative nonfiction that we can find.

We accept creative nonfiction submissions year round, and we would love to read your work!



Lessons from the Woods: Introversion, Childhood, and Wonder

Written by Sarah Richter

As a child, rainy days were my favorite: the sweet smell of Pennsylvania woods permeated my whole world, critters would emerge from their hiding places, and everything felt different and new. I would collect bright orange newts in a little plastic container and build a home of sorts for them, complete with a sandy beach and pebble-filled waters. The most I've ever caught, I proudly stated as an eight year-old, was twenty-one newts. I would release them after observing them for a few hours and move on to the next exciting adventure.

My sister joined me in these heroic quests as we ventured through the birch and pine wood, crossing over the small forested barrier to my grandmother's house. We were queens of our own Narnia. In winter, we would collect and eat icicles from overhanging rocks embedded in the hills of her front yard. There are countless memories of sledding down the path behind our house and miraculously save our necks at the last second before riding straight into dense bushes. It would probably be for the best that our mother could not see us through the kitchen window.

Growing up surrounded by nature employs a sense of wonder and curiosity in a child. The reverence for the natural world lasts into adulthood as the best memories are of imaginative play. It holds a magic in its open skies and meadows, ancient and unknowable but felt by people as they strip away everything else about the world. The digital world is consuming our every attention, from work to entertainment to production, and we are losing touch with what has birthed us and what will ultimately take us away. Our minds are cluttered with the dopamine bursts fueled by consumption. The electric energy exhausts us, yet we are in an endless cycle of addiction and promotion by the media to consume more. Blue is reflected in all our faces as we are sucked by digital vampirism.

Now, I reflect back on these memories of fresh, wet air and unlimited daydreams. Through these experiences, my introverted soul and creative thinking were nurtured. Susan Cain's *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World that Can't Stop Talking* was a revolutionary book for me as it soothed the shameful thought patterns regarding my soul and self. In a concise chapter, Cain explains that introverts' personality types are biologically derived due to differences in the brain that make us more sensitive to sensory overload. Think of sold-out rave concerts and Black Friday shopping; those are generally *not* preferred activities for the introverted mind.

However, even though it is biologically derived, I believe that thoughtful, introflective, sensitive, and compassionate tendencies can be knit into a person with regular contact with nature. Why is it an admirable quality to handle obscene noise, lights, and sounds that are forcing our attention ever day? Returning to our roots reminds us that this lifestyle of blaring media and blue light is wearing us down like rivers to stones. We lose pieces of ourselves when we cannot bring our minds to a quiet place where we can get in touch with *our* thoughts, desires, and dreams, not what the media thinks or dreams for us.

It is seen as almost shameful to enjoy time on one's own for solitude's sake. Enjoying your own company certainly does not profit anyone else, so of course that would not be a popular commodity. The world prefers extroverts who love overactivation and risks. It is a fast, hard world speeding through space with no particular care for the slow growth of the body and mind that occurs through deep connection with nature and self. However, the lurch into the digital realm has some people scrambling to find their ground in this new world. Most people are speaking about this need to return to nature as we have drifted so far from what is natural and comprehensible.

In my mind's eye, I return to that wood deep in eastern Pennsylvania's temperate forests. The trees grow tall above my head and drip rainwater from the tips of their leaves. My short legs carry me over the leaf-laden path; chipmunks scurry across during their routine foraging. I am alone, yet I am not alone. The natural world surrounds me in all its quiet, seemingly-motionless growth. My friends are speckled black salamanders, white-tailed deer, and the occasional black bear from a respectable distance. The trees are consistently there, only

fallen by natural events to be taken by the earth and feed bugs, fungi, and birds. I am mesmerized by the magic that lives in the depths of the soil, but I dig for earthworms knowing, as a child knows, that I am a part of it. The television speaks from the living room with its persuasive flat screen, asking if I want to go for a wild ride, but I am not here for it. I'm here for the real world.

Old Men Walk Funny (V2)

Michael Lee Johnson

Old men walk funny with shadows and time eating at their heels.
Pediatric walkers, prostate exams, bend over, then most die.
They grow poor, leave their grocery list at home,
and forget their social security checks bank account numbers,
dwell on whether they wear dentures, uppers or lowers;
did they put their underwear on?
They can't remember where they put down their glasses,
did they drop them on memory lane U.S. Route 66?
Was it watermelon wine or drive in movies they forgot their virginity in?
Hammered late evenings alone bottle up Mogen David wine madness
mixed with diet 7-Up, all moving parts squeak and crack in unison.
At night, they scream in silent dreams no one else hears,
they are flapping jaws sexual exchange with monarch butterfly wings.
Old men walk funny to the barbershop with gray hair, no hair;
sagging pants to physical therapy.
They pray for sunflowers above their graves,
a plot that bears their name with a poem.
They purchase their burial plots, pennies in a jar for years,
beggar's price for a deceased wife.
Proverb: in this end, everything that was long at one time is now passive,
or cut short. Ignore us old moonshiners, or poets that walk funny,
"they aren't hurting anyone anymore."

Just Because, Bad Heart

Michael Lee Johnson

Just because I am old
do not tumble me dry.
Toss me away with those unused
Wheat pennies, Buffalo nickles, and Mercury dimes
in those pickle jars in the basement.
Do not bleach my dark memories
Salvation Army my clothes
to the poor because I died.
Do not retire me leave my in a factory pension
in dust to history alone.
Save my unfinished poems refuse to toss them
into the unpolished alleyways of exile rusy trash barrows
just outside my window, just because I am old.
Do not create more spare images, adverbs
or adjectives than you need to bury me with.
Do not stand over my grave, weep,
pouring a bottle of Old Crow
bourbon whiskey without asking permission
if it can go through your kidney's first.
When under stone sod I shall rise and go out
in my soft slippers in cold rain
dread no danger, pick yellow daffodils,
learn to spit up echoes of words
bow fiddle me up a northern Spring storm.
Do you bad heart, see in pine box of wood,
just because I got old.

Canadian Seasons

Exiled Poets

Michael Lee Johnson

Walking across the seasons in exile

In worn out house slippers, summer in Alberta prairies --

snowshoes, cross-country skiing winter in Edmonton, Alberta.

I'm man captured in Canadian wilderness, North Saskatchewan River.

I embrace winters of this north call them mercy killers.

Exiled now 10 years here I turn rain into thunder,

days into loneliness, recuperate loss relationships into memories.

I'm warrior of the trade of isolation, crucifier of seasons

hang torment on their limbs.

Ever changing words shifting pain to palette fall colors and art.

I'm tiring of Gestalt therapy, being *In and Out the Garbage Pail*.

I'm no longer an Aristotelian philosopher seeking catharsis.

My Jesus is in a vodka bottle soaked with lime, lemon juice and disco dancing.

Pardon amnesty I'm heading south beneath border back to USA --

to revise the old poems and the new, create the last anthology,

collected works before the big black box.

I'm no longer peripatetic, seasons past.

Injured Shadow (V3)

Michael Lee Johnson

In nakedness of life moves
this male shadow worn out dark clothes,
ill fitted in distress, holes in his socks, stretches,
shows up in your small neighborhood,
embarrassed,
walks pastime naked with a limp
in open landscape space --
damn those worn out black stockings.
He bends down prays for dawn, bright sun.

Midnight Confessions of a College Freshman

Kelleigh Stevenson

Everyone talks about how college is a time for experimentation, for making bad decisions and doing all the things you were too scared to do in the past and will be too old to do in the future. Going into college having done just about nothing it's certainly been a time for experimenting, but it hasn't changed who I am as a person -- someone who's a little terrified at the prospect of actually letting someone close enough to me to actually have sex.

I graduated high school a fairly 'pure' person -- I had never been kissed, never dated, never had sex, never smoked, never did drugs, and had only sampled alcohol in small sips. Entering college two months later, I didn't expect things to change drastically. I was just a quiet, mousy girl with frizzy hair and glasses who only really showed herself on stage. *But*. I was wrong. Three months after graduating high school, I had my first kiss. Then multiple kisses following that; some bad, some disappointing, and one or two quite decent. There's the boy who kissed with a little too much spit, leaving my mouth and chin feeling like they were just slobbered on by a dog. There was the boy I really liked who kissed me on an alcohol-induced dare, disappointing and lackluster with no feelings attached. And then there was the boy with the scruff, also a dare but fun and full of laughter and completely comfortable. I even kissed a girl at a party, one of my best friends who I'd barely known at that point. I kissed, I drank, I partied, I went on midnight drives in convertibles and had my fair share of breakdowns over unrequited love. But, loandbehold, sex was still a no go, even during my freshman year of college.

It's not that I was never interested in sex. I am a girl who has needs and am not unaware of my body's craving for intimacy, even for minor attention and cuddling. Growing up it was easy to blame my lack of intimacy on just not being interested in boys or relationships yet, and I had lengthy conversations with myself about being gay. Turns out I may be bisexual, but all of my romantic interest has been directed towards guys. I'm not the kind of girl who can fall for any boy at any given moment. There's only been two boys in the past five years that have really caught my eye and kept me interested. I'm picky, but for reasons I didn't realize until college. My view of relationships has been altered by my family life growing up, a lot of the women I was surrounded by falling easily into relationships that were far from good for them. Toxic men, lots of sex, being lost easily into feelings and sensations. I watched too many people growing up having sex for personal validation and wanting to be accepted. In no way am I slut-shaming any of the women in my life; they can do them, and that's fine by me... but it's not who I want to be. I've developed a fear of sleeping with someone and then being left. I've grown a need to get close with people before daring having any sorts of feelings. And these thoughts are clear to most people around me.

It's come to a point that I'm willing to try. I've gone through so much of my life afraid of what could happen that I've never really tried. As I change as a person, it's hard to get other people to see the change. I can tell that people still see the broken girl who needs protecting, who doesn't want her feelings hurt. But I've grown into a girl who can quite confidently say 'screw it' and is willing to make a few mistakes in life. I'm not about to go sleep with every man I meet, but I'm more open to accepting relationships and building bonds with people. No longer can I stand feeling fear of the unknown, and no longer will I listen to people say they're 'no good enough for me' because of how 'good' a person I am. I get to decide my own path and way of living and should get to choose who I like and don't like. College has been a time of growth and change in my life, and hey -- it's normal. To all the girls out there who feel behind on life and feel like they're missing out, don't worry about it. Take life at your own pace, and eventually things will fall into place.

Have You Ever?

Kelleigh Stevenson

felt like you were in a movie scene?
A moment so pure, so fleeting, that
it seems too impossible to be true?

You asked me, if that's how it felt
while we sat under the stars on
the cool metal of the black bench.

It did.
Of course it did.

Because every time I'm with you
I'm struck with how pure, how
fleeting your presence truly is.
For like a movie scene, our time
will be up, as the director yells
cut and I'm left to play the reel
over and
 over again in my mind.

The First Time I Smoked a Cigarette

Liza Sofia

The first time I smoked a cigarette was on a Saturday night in late September when it was so terribly frigid that I nearly mistook the curling silver smoke for my own pale breath. It was bitter, but the sort of bitterness that tasted like nostalgia, and it made me think back to my childhood summers in Algeria all those years ago. I thought of my uncle, with a pipe half-hanging from the corner of his mouth, hunched over the greenbean bushes in the late evening while I sat and read from atop a nearby rock, basking in the warmth of the setting sun. That garden -- with the twisting grapevines and the night-blooming flowers and the fig trees with bark so slippery that you could only climb them barefooted --

it's dead now.

It was futile in hindsight -- the hours I had spent protecting that precious garden from wild creatures with my younger cousin. I thought of Eliza, with her long brown hair pulled back in twin braids, perched on a dirt mound by the cornstalks. Clutched tightly in her hand was the makeshift spear I fashioned using a knife, fishing line, and a tree branch. I had found the knife while searching for a roll of blue ribbon my aunt had hidden inside the mahogany drawer in the parlor that smelt of dust and mildew. When my thievery had been learned, my grandmother unleashed all her wrath on me, yet still had the benevolence to prevent my mother from doing the same.

My dear grandmother. Her vitality was stolen from her all at once, or so it seemed. The culprit was a cluster of cells which had first accumulated in her uterus and then moved into her lungs. I had never really noticed the wrinkles around her eyes until the doctors had begun to pump her with the ominous fluids that she said burned her skin from the inside out.

Sometimes I regret not going to her funeral. I had spent the summer of her passing in the hidden corner desk of the library, preparing for the SAT, and on exam day, when a drop of salt water fell off my cheek and onto the scantron, I convinced myself that I had a horrible case of text-anxiety. Test-dread really. Or perhaps I really just dreaded seeing my mother cry.

I did well on the exam, and I suppose it was that exam score which allowed me to leave my excruciatingly dull southern California suburb for Boston. Boston, the achingly lovely city stuck in the pages of a history book. The university was built along the bank of the Charles River, just beside a bridge which extended to Cambridge. It was on that bridge, high above the water, that Sebastian and I stood one Friday night, deep in anxious conversation. I still remember feeling the vibration of his thrashing pulse from where his wrist connected with the metal railing. Or perhaps it was my own. I'm not quite sure. But when he finally found the courage to take my hand in his, he pointed to the glowing Citgo Sign in Kenmore Square and called it The North Star.

I only came to understand what he had meant by that on Halloween night as my friends and I drunkenly stumbled home from MIT in our skin-tight velvet dresses and fishnet stockings. There, deep in the embrace of the blackened sky, was the flashing Citgo Sign to guide us home. Our scarlet North Star. Avery complained of the cold night, and perhaps it was the abundance of alcohol in my blood, but I disagreed. I didn't feel the cold, but I did feel the wind, running its fingers through my hair just as my Grandmother had done when I was child.

It was the sort of wind that should make you shiver, but instead, makes you feel strong.

And it was so intoxicating that some nights, I sat alone on the bank of the Charles, watching the golden lights of Cambridge stain the black water beneath it, just to feel it that wind.

Oh, the bitter taste of nostalgia.

I watched my pale breath gently dissipate on that terribly frigid Saturday night in late September, just like the curling silver smoke of my first cigarette, as a gust of wind silenced the last of the soft crimson ebers.

Gain

Virginia Petrucci

The very notion that one's virginity is something to lose suggests that girlhood is dependent upon purity, and womanhood upon transformative experience. This is inconsistent with the many girls who are sexually active but have yet to leave the green room and step onto the stage. Sex is an experience. It does not make one experienced.

Perhaps more disturbing is the implication that a girl requires the assistance of a man in order to transition into womanhood. Such a transition does not happen in an instant; for some, it takes years. This truth is at odds with the suggestion that womanhood is something to be acquired, and the acquisition comes through intercourse. And then there is the bizarre and dusty assumption that heterosexual sex is the only "real" way in which a girl can lose It. One sighs, and often.

Fourteen is when it really started to happen for me. My beauty blossomed, or maybe it was the improvement of my makeup skills, but whatever I was born with was intensified by Maybelline. I was very blonde during this time in my life, and very fragrant. This is why I stepped into Abercrombie and Fitch one afternoon -- I needed to replenish my perfume reserves.

Self-involvement is the emblem of adolescence. I knew that I was pretty and, much like the histrionic Angela in *American Beauty*, I was deathly afraid of being ordinary. To the casual observer, however, that is what I was. An ordinary teenager.

The first person I saw in the store that day, aside from my own reflection in one of the full-length mirrors (platinum bob, check; form-fitting denim jacket, check; expertly penciled early 2000s eyebrows -- double check) was the prowler. I received a smile and a second glance from him as he arranged the men's shirts just so. I was already used to falling under flirtatious eyes, and knew how to reciprocate so as not to seem like a dumb-struck deer in glaring male headlights. The prowler followed me around the store, grinning like a birthday party balloon clown every time I looked his way. After a few minutes of wandering, I was finally confronted.

"I'm sorry, but I just have to say hi."

He introduced himself, and I was told he was the manager of the store -- words which struck me as divine. This particular Abercrombie and Fitch was holed up in a minimal mall in a corner of suburban Pennsylvania, and there was something royal about the concept of working for such a culturally saturated brand. This was back when Abercrombie was still selling pure white people sex to kids through overpriced denim and summer-ready frocks (or maybe they still do that).

The prowler wanted to ask for my number. He asked how old I was and, scrambling from embarrassment at feeling so young, so grossly fourteen, I coughed up a convincing "fifteen." Ah, the bravery of the young.

Then he asked how old I thought he was. I assumed eighteen. I was told he was twenty-two, by way of his mouth which never stopped grinning and displayed, despite the handsome craft of his young man features, a boyish exuberance. He gave me his card -- a *business* card -- with his name written in beautiful cursive right next to his phone number. "No pressure."

And so began my first foray into a romance with a man, as a not-yet-but-willing-to-lie-about-it-fifteen-year-old with only her allowance money to shop for clothes in the XXS and XS size range. Nothing of such great importance should ever start in an Abercrombie and Fitch store.

The next four years would be ruled by the regulars: high school boys, abrupt changes in personal style, school plays. They would also be ruled by the prowler. Our interactions were carefully planned, circuitous, and exhilarating. After he was fired from Abercrombie, he started wearing suits at his new position at Macy's (in the same mall). Rumor has it he was canned for giving away free clothes to underage girls who he entertained in the store's back office, the same office where I received my first kiss which was gross and intoxicating and during which I kept my eyes open to study his face with a bemused sense of dissociation.

We never had sex, and it was only because of female circumstance. I was sixteen when he decided to take me to a motel. Our interaction had become more public as I got older, looked older, acted older. Still, I was

asked to wait in the car while he paid for the room. I watched him grow smaller and smaller as he walked into the lobby, my sneakers on the dash so that his figure disappeared between my feet as I heaved with laughter.

The motel was exactly as you would expect it to be, given the situation. There were condoms in the vending machine down the hall. I wondered if I would ever look at the vending machines at school the same way. I wondered if any other girls my age were lucky enough to live such worldly lives.

The prowler's penis did not enter my vagina because I was on my period and, despite his protests that it didn't matter, I was too grossed out by the idea of bloody sex. The prowler wanted a blowjob and I obliged. I heard the appropriate sounds, sounds which I had heard from boys my own age who were somehow less tolerable than this man who was almost in his mid-twenties, this man who was out of college and probably had a real girlfriend. Not one to be completely deterred, the prowler stuck his fingers in my vagina, the blood pooling over his hand and onto the bed. I felt nothing.

I was told by the prowler -- and I recall this verbatim -- "this is the way you were meant to be seen." I was told this by way of his mouth which tweaked and creased the smooth, mocha skin of his face with its inordinate broadcasts of flattery.

It is nice to be watched in the glow of a TV that is unwatched but turned on, hidden behind dark curtains like the naked body of a girl who has lost her girlhood without becoming a woman. It is nice to end a performance with sound applause.

I wouldn't understand until years later: far better is it to be seen than to be watched. Far better is it to be heard than applauded. Far better is it to pay for the hotel room yourself.

Ambiance Model

Virginia Petrucci

Pull back the curtain of a woman and you'll find any number of dreadful incidents bearing witness to our society's victim-blaming shitshow, the evidence stacked like cheap baubles won at a ridiculous fair. You can only win the baubles by participating in events you don't want to take part in. Oh, and the baubles slowly, slowly cut you up from the inside out, abusing the interior of your curtains in such a way that people don't even notice because they're too focused on how the baubles got there in first place. *Toxic masculinity* doesn't even cover it. *Rape culture* is an exhausting accuracy.

On Saturday, November 8th, 2014, I went to an elite house party in Beverly Hills hoping to make \$140.00. I had responded to an online ad for "ambiance models" for what seemed to be a swinger's party, and the founder agreed to somewhat-hire me. After meeting in person, and undergoing an unorthodox asting process that involved me texting him non-professional nudes -- just in case I decided to "join in" the sex games -- my attendance was confirmed.

The parties claimed to feature a group of individuals described on their website as a *society of like-minded elites with sophisticated taste and style*. Furthermore: *The golden rule is consensuality. This axiom creates an environment of exalted adult freedom, a bona fide sensual utopia.*

At the party, there were baskets of white and black pins with a vaguely cult-like logo on them. The white pins meant that you were an observer and not a participant. The black pins indicated that you were game for sexual advances. I wore a white pin. HBO was filming the goings on for a new reality series on sex, and I signed a waiver, feeling slightly more comfortable around the unstirred crew than around most of the masked guests. I soothed my discomfort with generous glasses of champagne and awkward conversation.

Throughout the night, I lost count of my alcohol intake, guiltily smoked four cigarettes, and privately made out with a girl I wasn't very attracted to but had befriended. I watched as a silent orgy was filmed. I felt neither titillated nor violated. I felt bored. That's when I met the thieves.

The male thief was a well-known plastic surgeon with a stimulated gait and conversation style that both confused and tired me. Read: too much cocaine. The female thief was his much-younger girlfriend, a formed adult actress turned aspiring yoga instructor. After I met her, she did not leave my side for the entire night. I spent the rest of the party getting to know them, finding disproportionate pleasure and relief in the most mundane of our commonalities.

Once it became clear that the party was crawling to an end, I realized I needed to call an Uber. *No, no*, the thieves insisted. *We'll drive you to our house, and you can get a ride from there.* It made sense; their house was on the way back to my apartment. I accepted, and we spent the ride in silence, three people awkwardly squeezed into a ridiculous two-person custom roadster. I was relieved when we got to their house, as the male thief's drunk driving was as erratic as his conversation skills.

Maybe we came in a back door, because the layout of their house felt tidy yet disorienting. The male thief offered me a drink, and I accepted out of weary politeness. He left me with the female thief at their illuminated bar, while he mixed my drink in the kitchen, out of my line of sight. I thought nothing of this (trust is both necessary and fickle). He returned and I took a few sips, chattering clumsily about the orangutan skull that sat on display amidst their thousands of dollars worth of alcohol. At this point, my memory starts to catch and fray. Then...hours of darkness and a tantrum off surrealism.

I spent four hours in their house, in their bed, in their dreamy, plastic hell. I have only flashes of memory: not being able to move or to speak, realizing I was undressed, howling wordlessly for my phone, wanting to be far away from that place, those people, and that night as I possibly could. Under the weight of that drink, I felt a feral kind of fear experienced only when one is both loved and hated, although not in that order.

I regained consciousness when the male thief was putting his slack penis in my vagina. The female thief lay next to me, naked. I would later realize that one of them had removed my tampon, which somehow felt like a greater violation than the rape itself.

When they finally drove me home -- they had to find my driver's license in my purse to get my address -- I huddled silently against the backseat window. We weren't in the sports car I rode in earlier, and this time

the female thief was driving. I felt like I was playing dead -- maybe, if I kept quiet and held still, I would make it home alive. I don't know why I feared death at their hands, but I did. It was the first time I had ever truly felt frightened for my life, and it was like losing a small but critical part of my spirits to some kind of chemical storm.

By the time we reached my apartment building, it was almost 5:00 AM. The male thief had to help me in the front door, up the stairs, and down the hall to my apartment. *Please, nobody see this*, I managed. Once he got me home, he dropped me against the door. He didn't knock or try to help me inside. He just ran. I will never forget the darkly comical site of that small man, barefoot and insane, sprinting down the hallway. I will never forget the night I was robbed of a deep and necessary component of myself, one that I had always taken for granted.

I will never forget the words of men that whipped my way after it happened: my ex's admonishment of my "morbid fascination with sexuality" followed by the reassurance that "now you know better", the reclaimed lover who propped me on his lap and asked me -- mere minutes after I detailed the experience -- if I wanted to take off my clothes, the same lover who equated his contentious divorce to "being raped", the only fling who cried when I told him, then tried to sleep with me on *his* couch, the boss who made a rape joke but couldn't get sued because I was an independent contractor, the boss whom I confided in about the whole thing, then asked with a smirk, "what kind of party was it?", the father who remained silent and unavailable as he had been for most of my life.

I will always remember the actions of the women involved in my recovery: the surefooted yet emotional engagement of my LAPD detective, the musical professionalism of my therapist at the rape clinic, the heroic testimonies of those who accused Bill Cosby and Harvey Weinstein and the countless essays, poems, and fictions penned by women writers seeking to discover, once and for all, the root of the damn problem. And I will always remember that, even with a violated vagina, even with a spirit momentarily curbed, my mouth remains the deadliest hole in my body, because truth is a weapon to those who have been living in the shade of denial and dismissal.

That's What I Thought I Thought I Should Do

Sara Stevenson

He slid his hand into mine, squeezing and tangling our fingers together as he led me through the house and out the front door. As if fell shut behind us, a fat orange and black tabby cat meowed loudly from beneath the steps of the porch. He kicked the step, mumbling under his breath about the consequences of feeding strays, and led me through the front yard. We stepped over piles of rusted car parts and around puddles of mud; frogs croaked in the woods ahead of us, and the sun settled over the horizon.

My heart slammed against my ribs, and sweat glued the palm of my hand to his. He pulled me around of sticks and leaves, and we stepped over fallen trees, slipping through the expansive woods. Nothing about this felt right, yet everything about it felt required. The guy next to me had been my on-again-off-again boyfriend since I was a freshman, and as a junior who had never been with anyone sexually (save for a rape that resulted in a pregnancy) this felt like something we should do. He'd been pressuring me for months, telling me that he loved me and that if I loved him I'd let him in my pants; he was more eloquent than that, of course, but the message was the same nonetheless: we'd been together for three years and it was time I put out.

He apologized for his family coming home earlier than he expected, pushing us to the outer limits of the woods that surrounded his Perry County home. He apologized for the chill in the air, and he apologized for his nervousness. I laughed and told him it was fine -- everything would be fine -- because that's what I thought I should say. I followed him through the woods and let him press my back against the wide trunk of an old oak tree because that's what I thought I should do. I let him run his hands across my body, let him cup my breasts in the palms of his hands while his lips sloppily trailed kisses along my neck, because that's what I thought I should do.

His hands clumsily found their way to the bottom of my t-shirt, tugging it upwards. As it fell into the pile of leaves next to us and his hands returned to my naked skin, my back rubbed against the hard, rough bark of the tree. I frowned, irritated by how unromantic and unimpressive this whole ordeal was turning out to be. I was a hopeless romantic (I still am), and while I had expected a bed covered in rose petals and a night filled with laughter and love-making, I had expected things to feel better than this. When he slid one hand down my jeans and started to rub me over my panties, I expected to feel something -- to feel excitement, to feel like things were finally heading in the right direction. Instead, I felt more irritation at how wrong it all felt.

"Aren't you supposed to get wet or something?"

His question made me laugh, though I knew it wasn't fair. He was a virgin, despite all his persistent pleas for sex, and he had minimal experience with females. He didn't know what to expect, didn't know how to react, and he assumed that because I had a child I knew exactly what was supposed to happen. My laugh caused him to chuckle uncomfortably before slipping his finger around the edge of my panties and shoving it into my vagina.

He moaned at the feeling, a low, guttural, animalist sound that erupted from deep within his chest. I was surprised at the feeling, surprised at the rush of enjoyment that wracked my body when his fingers touched me. I let a soft moan slip between my lips, but the satisfaction quickly faded as he continued to move his finger. I leaned against the tree, rolling my eyes in slight annoyance.

Everything after that happened rather quickly: he couldn't contain his excitement and quickly dropped his pants. While he fumbled with the condom he'd been prepared enough to bring, I pulled off my jeans and panties, tossing them in the pile of leaves with my shirt. He pressed me against the tree, and I wrapped my legs around his waist. It felt uncomfortable and awkward, but I'd read about this position in a young adult romance book. It's what I thought I should do. The bark dug into my bare back as he slid inside me, and I couldn't decide which was more painful, but I told him I'd felt good when he asked because that's what I thought I should say.

When he was finished he asked me how I felt, asked me if he'd made me hit the Big O. I told him I felt great, and I lied and said I was glad we got to have that experience together. We went back inside, and we laid around watching movies for the rest of the night. He slipped his hand down my pants a few more times,

tempting me, and we went two more passion-less rounds before he took me home. There was nothing exciting about what we did that night, just as there was nothing excited about what we did in the year to follow. Each time we were together, he wanted to have sex, and each time I faked my way through it. Each time I did what I thought I should do.

Contributors Notes

Sarah Richter is working toward her baccalaureate in English with a minor in history. She currently works as a publishing strategist. Her passions include reading and writing, as well as painting pop surreal art. She hopes to one day teach in academia as an English professor.

Michael Lee Johnson lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era and is a dual citizen of the United States and Canada. Today he is a poet, freelance writer, amateur photographer, and small business owner in Itasca, Illinois. Mr. Johnson is published in more than 1,042 new publications, his poems have appeared in 38 countries, he edits, and he publishes 10 poetry sites. He has been nominated for two Pushcart Prize awards (poetry 2015) and various Best of the Net nominations from 2016 to 2018, and he has poetry videos on YouTube.

Kelleigh Stevenson is an English Creative major who spends too much money on coffee and too much time writing poetry. Her works have been published in multiple literary magazines, and she hopes to continue spreading her work.

Liza Sofia is a 19-year-old university student in Rochester, New York currently studying French and Economics. Her passion for literary arts started in early childhood, and by age 17, she finished her first manuscript. Liza has hopes of becoming a novelist. Her piece “The First Time I Smoked A Cigarette” has also appeared in the *White Wall Review* and Sant Fe’s *Writers Project*.

Virginia Petrucci is a former columnist for the LA Post-Examiner, and the author of two poetry chapbooks: *The Salt and the Song* (Headmistress Press 2018) and *Recipes and How-To’s* (Red Flag Poetry 2017).. Her poetry has been Pushcart nominated, and her writing has appeared in Flash Fiction Magazine, Another Chicago Magazine, Flash Fiction Online, and Best New Writing, among others. She lives in Ventura, California with her family.

Sara Stevenson is a full-time mother of three who consumes copious amounts of caffeine. She holds a Masters of the Arts in the Humanities from the Pennsylvania State University, and her work can be found in various literary magazines and on various online platforms. When Sara isn’t writing or chasing her children, she enjoys taking hot bubble baths and reading.

