

Ligonier Valley Writers Flash Fiction Contest

Honorable Mention

Carving Day

by Nicole Bradley of Ligonier, PA

Nicole Bradley enjoys her family, gardening, and spending time in the forest. This is her first attempt at flash fiction.

Fingertips caress the waxy orange edge before pushing into flesh, elbow deep. June's face twists. Cold slime. Tiny appendage recoils, reflexive, drawing with it wet, seed-laden strings. She recalls the balmy day she and Mama placed hundreds of these white ovals into earthen mounds. Lips unfurls into a semicircle of teeth before a deepening brow draws the corners of June's mouth down toward her collarbones.

She had not thought of Mama since before the leaves changed. Now the gooey innards of this orange globe feel like a poor substitute for the warmth of her mama's breast. A visceral longing cuts deep into memory like a knife opening the top of a gourd. There's no escaping the memory now.

Late summer in the garden, swaddled against her mother's body as she harvested tomatoes and nasturtiums for evening's supper. Clothes damp from the oppressive slant of afternoon sun. Mama sang songs to the plants as she honored them for the gifts they provided, repeating verses so June could learn.

Life, abundant and green, wound around them like the tendrils of the tomato plants they tended. Their work finished, baskets full, they headed down the path to the farmhouse.

As Mama began the refrain of her favorite song, "Lady spin your circle bright, weave your web of dark and light. . ." she gasped, stopped, lowering June gently to the ground before spiraling down to the dark earth herself.

June remembers how her mother looked like a fairy, sun shining through the dress curling around her body, like a ballerina in pirouette. She had thought her mom was playing. She sat in the grass giggling and tugging at her mother's long white cloth.

The sun was still just over the top of the trees when June's grandmother found them. As dusk set in, Mama was gone. June was an orphan. Memory set with the sun, only to rise again in the dawning moment brought on by the disembowelment of this pumpkin.

June's grandmother, Agnes, noticing the child's countenance, places her knitting in the basket at her feet. With midwife's hands she cups the small face and looks into her eyes. Their eyes convey what language cannot. Tears like vernal tributaries form pathways to the ground.

Two moons since they lost Amelia, and this is the first time June has showed any sign of recognition or comprehension that her mother is gone.

Moving her body onto the weathered boards of the farmhouse porch, Agnes wraps her arms around June. Tiny body shudders and twitches like a bird that misjudged a pane of glass for usable air. Minute movements dislodge the pain lurking in muscle tissue. Catharsis pushes the boundary of liminal space; movement transforms pain into healing.

Without warning, strong legs propel a tiny body into motion. As June spins in circles between patches of mid-afternoon sun and tree-thrown shade, Agnes tells her that today is Samhain eve, when the veil between the spirit world and the living world is thin. They will put a light in the carved gourd to welcome Amelia's spirit.

With bright eyes, June reaches for the silver carving spoon.