

BLURRED
Genre
CONTEST
2018

Judge

Lincoln Michel

Blurred Genre Contest Winners

“Swell” does exactly what a great micro-essay should do: it juxtaposes different concepts to let us see a topic in a new, clearer way. Here, America’s large legacy of racism and genocide is looked at beside Dunbar’s number--the relatively small number of people we can meaningfully hold in our heads. The author deepens the piece through expert use of the personal and poetic. A perfect short essay.

“Tenth Grade” gives us the thoughts of three teenage girls in a round-robin of terrific poems. The six parts use different styles to conjure those strange years when “Melancholy swims in shallow water / the size of movie screens” and everyone feels like “cheerleaders for the losing team.”

“Dawn” blends together the poetic, the fictional, and the essayistic into a memorable piece about the strangeness of our animal bodies. There are many lines here that will stick with the reader, like “dripping skinned-knees-on-asphalt” being “a color so pink I wanted to lick it off.”

— *Lincoln Michel*

Swell (Excerpt)

Keith S. Wilson

In second grade, my teacher told us to research our last names. What she intended was this: someone, Samantha or Jeremy, would go home to their parents, and come back to class and say “Our last name is Baker. In England, our great-great-great-great-grandparents baked bread. Baker.”

I went to my dad and asked him where Wilson came from. What it meant.

“It’s a slave name,” Dad said. “A slave owner gave it to us.”

That was almost all he said. He told me to tell my teacher. And I did.

My first day of work after 45 was elected, I couldn’t stop from crying. As I dressed for work, my girlfriend told me it would be all right. It isn’t precisely true, but it’s kind. I had three blocks to stop crying, to walk in the shadow of my father, into a body that labors for others.

I put my things away. I got behind the counter. My smile was all elbows. And it was done.

Dunbar's number represents the cognitive limits of the number of people we are able to maintain meaningful relationships with—whose names and faces we can be intimate with, whose relationships and passions we might begin to understand.

Dunbar's number: around 250.

Above that threshold and we are not really considering a person. We romanticize. Invent. With just a name or a face or a relationship, we are flirting with truncation.

The vast majority of every human being on the planet, if we know them at all, we know this way.

I loved a woman once who came to the hospital every day for months to hold my hand as I watched, I thought, my father die of stomach cancer.

All of our dates, we slept in that hospital, with her white body beside mine, in another chair. We said we loved each other many times a day until the last.

250 feels to me like a grade for a cage: the number of birds that will fit stacked on their sides.

I don't know anything about what her life is like now. When she became hopeless, it was not about my father, since he had lived. She left my cage.

The UN states that 17 million African-Americans (Africans) died during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade's human trafficking throughout the Americas. Some estimates, equally if not more conservative, assert that as many as 10 million Native Americans had been killed by the end of the nineteenth century in what would be called the United States.

More than 27 million lives forgotten by the State.

A key strategy of state-sanctioned genocides involves an assault on the truth as the victims know it. Genocide is twofold: first, the people's bodies; second, the soul of them, their stories, songs, funerals, histories.

Sometimes the order is reversed.

A definition of history: the cycle of one people's army stirring the blood of another people into lemonade. See: epic poem. See: anthem.

When supporters of 45 look at an empty capital, they see an empty capital, whatever they say. When they say that 45's inauguration attendance is bigger than Barack Obama's, it is not because they believe it.

One definition of truth: a living lie.

A man continues to cheat on his wife. When he lies to his friends, it is not because he believes he is actually faithful, but because he believes he should be loved.

Some of the now-Americans that lived have a tradition called homegoing. Faced with the reality of a loved one's passing, the thought of them finally returning home is a kind of comfort. This is not home.

If you have been to a homegoing, you know it. Even if you have not, imagining a death like this is probably simple enough, if you are unfortunate in the way all humans eventually meet misfortune. You remember a sibling or a parent or a close friend, and what losing them was like. You remember the air. You remember the feeling of the pew, the weather of the funeral, the phone call.

To know the 27 million unrecognized men, women, and children, to really understand the scale of that loss, is a labor our bodies are not made to hold: 250 of their lives at a time in the cage of your chest.

Things that swell after beating:

Your flesh.

Any number of birds.

The heart.