STRANGE TREE (1944)
Narration by Zoe, age 10

Before Sunday eggs, toast and dad's babble—a breeze sways the curtains, waking me up. I stare at the shadow of the strange tree outside my glass pane. Blood on leaves clash with its look, dripping on the earth, staining mom's garden. My nose cannot bear magnolias mingle with decay black fruits. This strange tree, with its red leaves and black fruits, hanging and waving with this breeze, casts a shadow past my window.

I will not abide old things in my home.

Nothing that smacks of age, antique, nostalgia; nothing that is worn-in, patched, ripped, stained, mellowed, murky.

I will not have flowers in my house.

I cannot stand the scent of flowers, the overpowering sweetness, their heavy, cloying smell.

Makes me sick.

I cannot, I will not stand, being near such a thing.

A magnolia tree grows outside my window. I know that there are other things—breakfast on Sunday mornings, and dinner when play was done. I am the one who can do Petty's hair right, divide it neatly into pigtails, so it pulls back from her round face.

In the mornings, when I have trouble convincing myself that no one else is there, when I am still groggy from the startling sounds of alarms, from lack of sunlight, I find that all I can smell are the magnolias. It is the suffocating scent of a man being given blood to drink; it might as well have been in mom's garden just outside the window.

In these moments before waking, the shadow of the magnolia tree hovers over my heart.

I carry it with me to the kitchen where mom drops the frying pan. The grease is everywhere and Petty, Loretta, and I have to help clean it up. We try to make it matter, but we know that the magnolia tree is already dripping blood. The deep red soaks into the soil and feed the plants that thrive so well off her-my-their-our misery. Even when we do not see it, we feel it. And even though my own dad is home safe, soon coming into the kitchen for eggs, bacon, bickering, it will still hang heavy in the air.

Over the grease on the kitchen floor, egg bits on the stove, trees outside in the sun. Tomorrow, someone else will be given blood to drink, and the magnolia tree will swell with the life its branches take, heavy with dark, liquid fruit.

I know that someday dad and mom will be gone and I will be left to clean up the mess inside and feel the heavy drip from the outside world right in my heart, right in my bones. In these moments before waking, I watch and listen to things I do not understand besides a sick dread, a slow learning, and the smell of bacon on a Sunday morning.

NIGGER VIRGINIAN (1944)
Narration by Emmanuel, age 12

A wink can trigger, holes that configure, welts on a nigger. Pigs and Crow add niggers' death tolls. If human nature, wrap in rapture, occurred for the darker—then the marcher, rider and dreamer, can be freer.

It wasn't but two hours before they came for my brother.

It only lasted a few moments.

It was that quick.

No more than a week before his poor small body was jolted by invisible fire and cremated unceremoniously.

The events of my childhood are fog and dim compared to the memory of when they took Whit from us. I have gone over it many times, adding details, examining the sober *knock* of the sheriff at the door. Even now, an unexpected visitor can tumble my balance and send me reeling into panic.

Could I have known what the pounding meant? Surely not.

Whit and I came home flushed and bright from our Saturday bike ride and Mama scolded us for dirt on our knees from a monumental unthinkable height. The kitchen smelled like coffee and sausage; Pops not even home yet for dinner, and we scurried to scrub our hands and faces, giggling and quarreling. Whit plucked a stray wildflower from my hair and let it fall to the floor.

Knock knock knock.

And here the images scatter out of order.

The photographs of those poor girls, Petty and Loretta, plastered across the newspapers, delicate in detailing what I would come to know in indelicate intimacy, tore a deep hole in

Mama. I kept my eyes firmly open, looking for an escape for Whit amongst the barricades, they had set up on all sides, determined to convict him of a brutal crime.

It took a week, maybe less, and afterward Mama fell ill and wouldn't leave her bed, not even for the trial and swift sentencing (that judge gave a speech, the words of which I can't remember but I remember his eyes, which looked dead to me then).

Now I can recognize that expression:

I have seen it in the faces of other well-respected men since. It was the distance necessary to sentence a 14-year-old boy to death; to look in his small fearful face and determine that he had mutilated and raped the bodies of those girls scarcely younger than he.

Whit's eyes were anything but dead or distant; to me they betrayed the great wide world that lives in boys' minds; in their deep brown sadness I saw reflected everything—the moon and sun and clouds scrambled forward through his whole life, beauty joy pain love.

I saw them evaporate when he finally understood the judge's words: firm, immoveable words, as immoveable as the tall white wall of oppression that kept us dirt poor, kept my father in a stinking factory, kept my shoes in holes and now most horrifying of all, this monument of hatred had now swallowed up Whit inside of it.

That Saturday had been ordinary and beautiful, the way summer days always look when you are young: hopelessly blue, breezy, filled to the brim with milkweed and Queen Anne's Lace. A fertile day concerned only with its future progeny of flora and sunshine, a day into which Whit and I threw ourselves at the first opportunity after the long rainy spell, and Mama shooing us out the door with a tea towel, eager to get rid of us.

A day is so easily eclipsed by the smallest thing. Where the details of my brother's arrest, trial, and execution are so vivid as to be etched into the folds of my brain matter, the events

leading up to it are worn down to shallow nubs and I can't get ahold of them anymore. A milky membrane grew over it until all I could discern were the vague shapes of wildflowers and pale sunlight and yes, eventually the ghostly shapes of the girls whizzing past us as they flew by on their bikes. The sheriff said we were the last two to see them alive.

One might have wondered how it is that a 14-year-old boy overtook two girls on bikes while on foot, or how he had the strength to not only overpower them but to defile them as well. One might have wondered, but no one did. No one whose opinion mattered anyway.

The Whit that lives in my memory is slight and narrow-chested with large, liquid eyes that swung between deepest sorrow and brightest joy at a moment's notice, and no in-betweens. Being the only boy, he always got his way; I resented him for it. But he was a good brother.

Whit played with me outdoors and included me in his games; he comforted me when I cried and he taught me new things about the world and myself. Because of Whit, I gained a love of reading; for making things with my hands.

When the sheriff knocked at the door we were washing in the bathroom, letting the water run to fill the cracked porcelain sink with suds from the cake of dingy white soap, dulled by the constant stream of dirt from our hands and faces at the end of a day. I heard a man's voice in the kitchen; I wondered what kind of man would call on Mama while Pops wasn't home. When Mama called out to Whit to come to the kitchen, I followed him down the hallway. Whit and I shared everything, even punishments.

But when I reached the end of the hallway, I encountered the tall figure and ample hips of mother blocking my way, her arm flung out at a downward angle and resting firmly on the doorjamb.

"Don't you dare come in here," she uttered in a fierce whisper. Through the gap between her arm and steady thigh I spied the crisp blue uniform, the thick, formidable belt with the engraved silver buckle, the shined black boots that Sheriff Coffy wore for the rest of his term, perhaps for the rest of his life. I shrank back into the warm dark hallway crushing the wildflower underfoot.

For years and years after I couldn't understand why Mama didn't cry out when they took Whit; why she didn't throw herself on the sheriff, grab his leg, and beg God not take her boy; why she didn't flood the room with tears that washed us all away down the river and out of Egypt and into heaven. I didn't understand at all.

Not until later when I had my own children did I understand the deep dark heavy sadness that suffocates you and pushes both breath and blood from your body so you can neither move nor speak.

At the time, though, I thought I watched my Mama let him go. I thought she stood by in silent approval as the Sheriff handcuffed my brother.

In that instant, I wanted Whit to escape and run away to the woods. If he could just slip his wrists through those handcuffs, I would bring him food every day; I'd mend his clothes and bring them to him every week and tell him the news of town, of our parents. We could slowly build a tree house worthy of Robinson Crusoe together in the gnarled deformed branches of an angel oak, insulated with a deep carpet of moss, cultivated in the damp Virginian air. We could whittle cups and bowls and utensils from the tree debris and live happily ever after foraging in the woods and stealing pies from the windowsills of the old white women who yelled at us with clacking teeth, smelly dresses, and handkerchiefs chased us away and called us *little niggers* whenever we skipped by their houses on a play day.

But of course, he was afraid; of course, he didn't run.

The next day, Mama wouldn't get out of bed and Pops stayed home to look after her. He insisted I go to school. He packed my school bag and made me breakfast and sent me away at the door. School was how I found out why they took Whit away. It was in all the papers. Petty and Loretta were riding their bikes on the path that runs alongside the woods.

Whit and I and all the children in town were familiar with this path; if you followed it south out of town the tree line rose up on your right, thickening as you went, and on the right was there was an empty field filled with wildflowers, scrub, tall grasses.

The two girls' bodies were found behind a clump of wild blackberry bushes a few hundred yards from the path.

Bloody stains smeared the grass along the way, poppy red against the wheaten colorless palate of August.

The worst details were never released in the papers:

That a jagged lock of each girl's hair had been snipped off.

How they had been posed facing each other, clasping hands, legs arranged just so.

Their underclothes had been removed.

Back then, the scope of our universe was narrow, extending no further than the end of my street, the edges of the schoolyard, the bike path with the general store, and the post office. Outside news almost never touched us. A sheltered childhood was a luxury my parents were determined to give us. Even the war felt benign, remote, unreal.

There must have been boys who died overseas, knocked-on doors, paper-thin letters bearing bad tidings, and who knows—maybe the tears these missives brought seeped out the cracks in the door and warped the air, limbs, brains of everyone in our town like a backwards-

effect monsoon season so that what happened to Whit was inevitable. It was easier to condemn a child than to face truth.

There have been mornings when, sitting at my kitchen table, I felt a kind of sympathy for them. Yes, a sympathy, perhaps only a step above pity, for their sick rotten twisted insides, for the way their fears accumulated like grease, until every crevice and wrinkle of their faces, brains, and bodies was flecked in gunk, and for the way they took these fears and grabbed them by the shoulders and turned them around to be pushed on black folks like my parents. Like me. Like Whit.

Listen:

His wrists were too thin for the cuffs; if he curled his hands like petals, they could have slipped out without even a whisper.

They put him in a holding cell with 24-hour surveillance, without even a cot, without even a shred of comforting, dignified humanity they took him by the shoulders and turned him to face the other way and they locked the door on him.

Then they all sat and waited and watched. And Whit watched and waited too.

Listen:

The night they took Whit away my dreams were no longer my own. Instead of dreaming my own dreams, I began to dream those of PopsWhitMama—watching as Whit disappeared, as Pops dreamed of revenge and freedom.

Mama was never well again, but Pops was there every time she woke up in hot sweats and fits with cooling flannels, glasses of water. In my sleep, I watched her tumble down a black fevered well, down to the very bottom, except that she always woke before smashing into the stones, before disappearing completely.

In the week leading up to the trial, Pops split his time between jail, courthouse, home. If it weren't for him, I would not have gotten dressed in the morning, I would not have gone to school. I would not have eaten or gone to bed at reasonable hours. If it weren't for him, no one would have gone to see Whit.

All the other black folks in town were too afraid. Without Pops, Whit would have had no company love defense against the weighty mountain of filth and hatred that built up around him, inescapable, on every side. If it weren't for Pops, too, there would have been no food, no house, no clothes.

There wasn't any time for him to express his grief, body, brain, and soul a packed house, attention divided, standing room only, approaching a fire hazard.

Whit, ever the magician, performed a much more convincing disappearing act than anyone could have guessed.

But in his dreams, he was unfettered.

DARKER THAN RIPE (1955)
Narration by Zoe, age 21

Folks with white gates and gardens with rope ornaments fly southern pride religiously.

I am molded by Americana, say grace at tables, have aprons and a gown hem in my closet. I sing hymns; sew with mothers, doll-up for clubs—a bring-home, southern gal.

Joseph, next-door over, an Uncle Sam bred, has green lineage, foreign ventures, and title to his name. A tenor in choir, spars with boys, wine on commercials, and court daughters, his blond locks wins over the elderly female churchgoers every time.

First of shower season, and firefly evenings, have the town gleeful over my yes to Joseph. We are the quintessential twosome, bless by manifest destiny, in suburban Virginia.

It was a normal midday in June in a downtown café, when a nigger serves me, presents me with the wrong order. We share a laughter.

I have fallen for a nigger.

Around these areas, he is faux pas. But that smile of his is my desire color. And from that happenstance at the café—when the town sleeps, we conquer it, as liberated as the cardinals that welcome us each dawn. Our hands is always integrated.

Though the wine tasting and gown trimming reign during the daylights for Joseph and me—the uninhabited dark belongs to that nigger and me.

It is the twenty-second night, hours prior to my nuptials with Joseph, and my conscious scorches wildly as that crucifix did on that lawn on Duke Street last week.

I have to make a choice.

This is not about Joseph.

I sprint in the dark to the tracks to meet the nigger, just as we planned to.

His tone fades into the backdrop, as a streetlight lights the station's platform, leading me to him. He holds two one-way departure tickets, set for midnight, to elsewhere city; it was our way out.

Yet, no words exchange, nor touch felt among us two.

Just a one-way smile: his, not mine.

The vibrating steel and conductor's call comes out the shadows as the train pulls up. The nigger goes aboard and drifts away with the five passenger cars.

And I stand here, wailing loud enough to ring Jesus' deaf ears.

I perhaps will never see that nigger's smile ever again.

It is perhaps for the safer.

The town's lynching season begins this weekend, anyways.

LOVING V. VIRGINIA (1967)
Decision by C.J. Earl Warren, age 76

There is no purpose that justifies Virginia prohibiting only interracial marriages; these convictions must be reversed.

In June 1958, two Virginians, Mildred Jeter, a Negro woman, and Richard Loving, a white man, were married in D.C. Shortly after their marriage, the Lovings returned to Virginia to legalize their nuptials. However, the Circuit Court issued an indictment charging the Lovings with violating Virginia's ban on interracial marriages.

In January, the Lovings pleaded guilty to the charge, and were sentenced to one year in jail; however, the trial judge suspended the 25-year sentence on one condition: leave Virginia for 25 years.

After their convictions, the Lovings filed a motion to vacate the judgment, to present their constitutional claims to the Supreme Court.

This Court is presented with a question never addressed to us: whether a law adopted by Virginia to prevent marriages between persons, basis of race, violates the Constitution, to maintain white supremacy.

Freedom to marry has been recognized as one of the vital personal rights to the pursuit of happiness.

WELL-RESPECTED MEN (2009)
Eulogy by Emmanuel, age 77

Lord, I want a performance when I see my brothers. And even when Mama wails during the rites, I hope that the blares drown her out, so I may rest.

I know, Mama, how you'll be at my funeral today: still on your axis and rotating slowly outward on all sides, your grief crushed and compacted into the long hard plank of your body. Sinewed but silent as in life, and secretly burning with envy and then shame.

It won't be such a tragedy. A long line of clean men before me have been harvested and felled by the hard edge of a scythe. I learned each of their names and recited them before I could recite the alphabet.

Our family has always kept its emotions tucked safely away from prying eyes so that not even the most intimate of lovers or friends can read what's inside of us. You can see this in the faces of the men and women in our family leading back generations—in every photograph and portrait there is a hidden look of misery behind the liquid eyes, a certain tense edge you can't put your finger on.

Mama—I can remember plenty of things.

Your short cropped curls in the summer and you calling me home from the doorway, the loudest your voice ever carried.

I remember the family tree and the family bible with names written inside the cover, each name accompanied by dates of birth and death. While other children drifted to sleep to fairy tales or picture books, you took me piece by piece through our history until I knew it as well as some children know Cinderella or the Three Little Pigs.

In each of my brothers that passed before me, you found a new hero or villain, men who imagined and men who lied, and men who did nothing more exciting than darn their own socks. In all of these men, mother, I could see every day how much you favored them and wanted to be with them. Even the most brutal and mundane of them were an improvement on the present, on me.

I gathered this knowledge inside of me, each instance knotting into a hard little stone plop and one by one plop they fell into the deep well of my gut plop, to be forgotten or examined later.

I remember too how you railed and cried and moaned when Pops passed, how you threw his things against the walls with loud crashes. I was still very young then, and I stayed in the corner, quiet and waiting for it to be over. When you finished, it's as if you flicked a switch and brought your whole face and body back to instant composure.

I never heard you mention him again, and I knew better than to ask.

Mama—

May the sound of the band will drown out even the thunder of the dirt piling over my head, so that I may forget the pains of departure. You will either cry or spit on my grave as you drop in the last clod of soil. But by then, I will be a million miles away, unreachable.

The music running a loop to carry me all the way to eternity.

And you are here to remember that I have left you behind.

DEVOTED FATHER AND LOVING SON (2009)
Printed by The Washington Post

Emmanuel Lawrence, 77, died Sunday, April 5, due to heart attack. His mother, Georgina, survives him.

Funeral services will be held in Alexandria, at St. Marys Cemetery.

HELL, WITH JESUS (2014)
Narration by Zoe, age 80

I pray nightly with kisses on a cold case; his read mails with mailed reds, hoards my walls—illegibly blacken. I wake to cook and doze in pots, refusing to taste until he returns. It is dead petals casing my core, flies are passersby, and a holy vigor saves my patience.

In the morning, I decide to take all the poems Emmanuel sent me since that summer of ’55 when we last saw each other, and paste them to my walls, one by one.

I start in the living room, lining up the edges of the paper with edges of the ceiling and windows. I even cover up the television, painting the glue over the paper and the screen’s black surface. The coffee table goes the same way, and clutter of old remotes in the corner, and tattered hassock.

I move into the hallway, where there is less to cover but more lines to line up: the top of this letter to the molding above, and another letter’s bottom to the molding below. There is no chance I will run out of papering; there are six bullshit letters for every day he has been gone, and it seems like he has been gone for thousands of days, for a decade or more.
If he were to walk through the door today, a wall of his own words would face him, the same words repeated over and over again, so he could see just how empty they must be.

The kitchen is harder, with more irregular surface areas to cover. I take my time with the toaster oven and the microwave, but as I inch my way over to the refrigerator, I start to lose my focus, the words on the letters popping through—

soon
live without
the others

cigarettes
cuttlefish

wide open

trinkets, photographs
missing

I finish the kitchen in haste, so that the sink is uneven, and the pantry door too thickly covered. I have to start in on the floor before I ran out of his words.

By the end of the day, my home is covered with the wrinkled, stiff sheets of paper, some of them too skewed to read, edges overlapping, and ink smudging. I sit then on the wooden floor, feeling its gaps beneath me, and look down the length of the hallway in the dim gray light that sneaks its way through my curtains.

I fall asleep that way, with my head leaning against the paper-plastered wall, drugged by the scent of flowers and failing light and the rustling words of those papers echoing in my head. When I wake up my cheek is sore and it is dark. I pull myself up from the floor and sit in a kitchen chair for hours after that, playing with the wax of white taper candles I found in a junk drawer a few days ago.

At the time, I thought they would be nice for our first dinner back together. Instead, I put them to use burning the petals of the flowers that crowd every surface in the room. Emmanuel sent those, too, in addition to the thousands of letters and poems and promises—leafy plants, delicate blossoms, and heavy scents. Bright and muted colors alike. In pots, in vases, they even hang from the ceiling.

I sit this way for countless hours as the white wax melts down, adhering to the kitchen table and the floor, coating leaves and soil and linoleum. I make a holy mess, dripping away the evening, still sore from the floor and unable to sleep.

Always the thought if I stay awake, today will be the day. I used to think that if I wished enough and atoned for unknown sins, the flowers and the paper might transform into flesh, and I would not have to feel this way anymore.

Awake or asleep, it turns out; nothing changes. But the morning became brighter and brighter, farther away from the night.

Don't you know I love you so?

And still no one comes, just empty things: living things that give off no warmth and words that mean nothing.

I resent the letters, suddenly. What am I supposed to do with them? Again the watery sunlight is creeping through the curtains. Again I think today might be the day.

I listen to the town sounds as hard as I can; digging beyond the sounds of trains and buses and ambulances and birds and pedestrians. I do not hear anything special. For the last time, I cannot lose my hope. I know that today must be the day. I've waited too long for it not to be.

I push a curtain of vine out of the way of my cabinet, pulling out as many pans as I can fit in one armload. I slam them on the counter, wounding countless tender shoots and shaking rotting leaves from their perches. I pull all the food from my refrigerator, stacking it on the floor in little piles.

I cook everything I can possibly think of. I cook in frenzy. There is so much smoke it blackens the white paper and burns a grease mark into the ceiling so that I have to open a window. It crackles underneath the strain of paper and glue laid over it.

I wash all my vegetables tenderly, rinsing them under cold water and scrubbing stubborn spots of dirt from their surface. Bits of paper float down the drain along with the refuse. I cut

sticks of butter and open dusty cans of beans and stewed tomatoes and peas. I run out of plates and pans and so I combine dishes and re-use old pots without washing them.

I run out of room in my kitchen for all the food and the plants. Platters and bowls and jars balance on top of each other on every surface.

I cook these things as an offering, the way ancients offered up their newborn, their virgins, and their enemies. I offer myself, sanity, food, well being—

And still nothing works.

Again I find myself sitting in the same dim gray light as the evening before, overwhelmed by scent and bone-tired from trying and hoping. I move a pot of chili from the chair to the floor and so sit, lighting the last taper candle of the bunch. I light a cigarette from the burning candle and wonder if any offering will ever be enough. I lean the candle over for the flame to snatch up the dry leaves and petals that have laid themselves to rest on the kitchen table.

I close my eyes and let the candle drop, hearing the dry, rough rustle as the fire catches on, consuming the wasted plant on which it has landed.

Slowly the taper's flame leaps from one pot to the other, running up a trail of plant limbs and vines and blooms, scorching food, and following its trail all the way to the walls where it starts in on the poems.

The sound of all the things he has ever sent me going up in flames is a gentle, safe sound, one of certainty and purpose. The heat beats against my cheeks and the fire spreads to the hallway.

I feel myself floating up and away from the stench and soot of this place and out into the soft gray light that can rock me to sleep.

The world shines.

BELOVED SISTER AND GARDENER (2014)
Printed by The Washington Post

Zoe Jacobs, 80, died Thursday, June 25, due to home fire. Two sisters, Petty Hunter, and Loretta Matthews survive her.

Burial will be held in Alexandria, at St. Marys Cemetery.