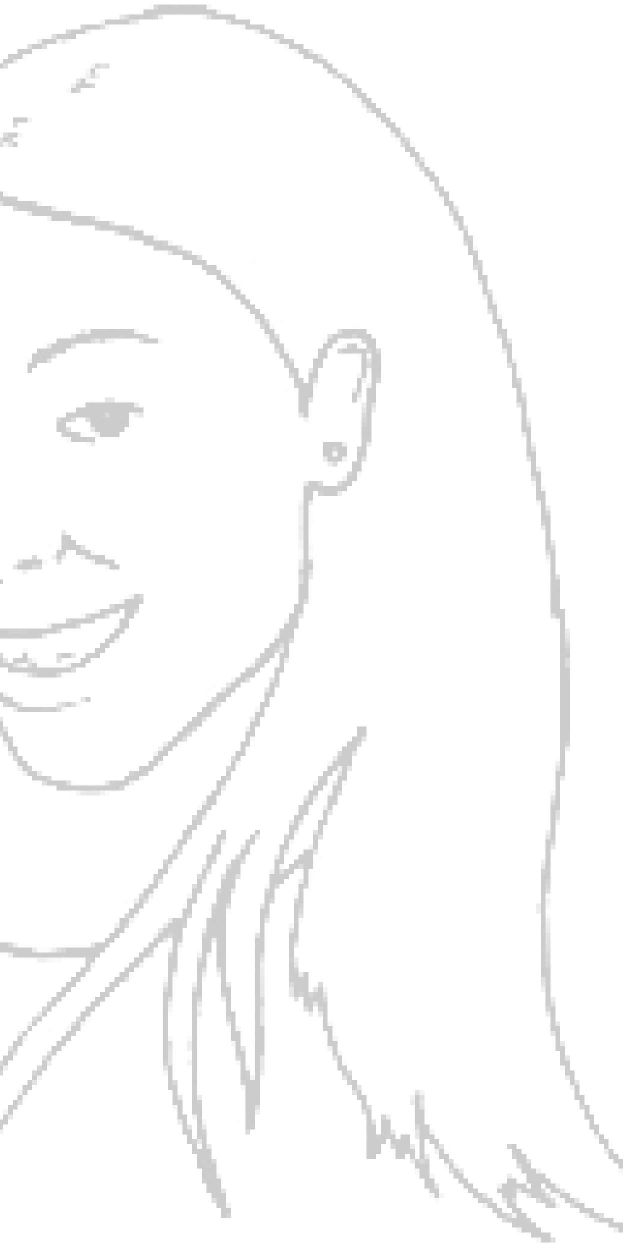

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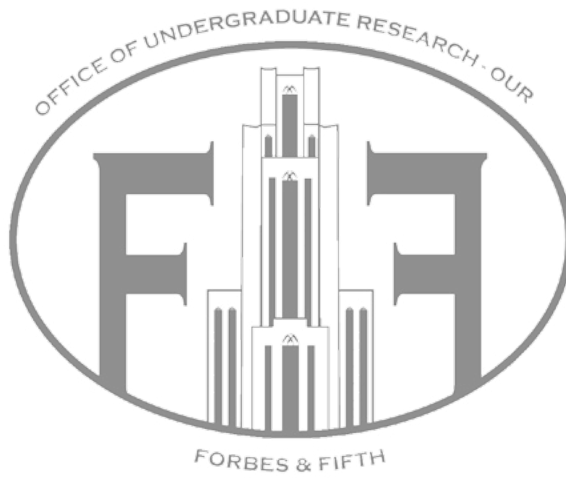
Nicole Arthur is a senior majoring in English Writing, with a concentration in fiction, at the University of Pittsburgh. Apart from writing, she enjoys cryptograms, Asian cuisine, playing the guitar, and dancing. She has a dog named Science that she plans to grow old with. It is her life's ambition to write one good song.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Rice-blood

When I was in first grade, I was made to draw a picture of what I wanted to be when I grew up. I scrawled out in deep blue crayon, *2+2=4*. Funny thing is, apparently that was enough, because Mrs. Kellison just smiled through her saggy red lips and paper thin teeth and collected it like normal. Maybe she knew it then. I think maybe she knew that I wouldn't be another Benson drawn to the mill and drowning in rice. I think maybe she was saving me.

Stuttgart, Arkansas: "A Natural Place to Call Home;" "Rice and Duck Capital of the World." Beloved host of the International Duck Calling Contest; where people from all over the world flock to expose their mastered talents in the art of the duck call. Proud hailer of the second Greatest Wall of China, where you might like to climb on up and have a quart of shrimp-less shrimp lo mein. Home of the 800-year-old corn effigy, pottery crafted by a Native American tribe that we don't have a name for. A safe place to wear work boots with dress pants and your sweat infused Hanes tee shirt knotted up over a hairy belly. But above all else—the heart of the Southern rice belt, Stuttgart's mill production accounts for a little over forty percent of all rice exported from the country. There's money in rice. Just last year the state recorded rice export revenue of about 918 million dollars. There's money in rice; that is, for the people on top. But in a small town like Stuttgart, there's *respect* in it for anyone strong, brave, or just plain stupid enough to make it their life.

My father worked for the mill down the road from us straight out of high school and before that, his father, and before that we don't really know because Pap-Pap had a mean way about him and never acknowledged that he had any family before marriage. For twenty-eight years my dad walked the quarter mile to West Prairie Grain and Rice for his ten to twelve hour shift moving, loading, unloading, drying, and husking rice. Moving, loading, unloading, drying, and husking.

I remember I went with him sometimes, back before I started school and Mom first started getting sick. He'd take me back with him after his lunch and I'd bounce along behind him like a loyal puppy dog anxious to play fetch. I wasn't allowed inside any building with a machine in it, but I would wait outside in the sun, picking at the tall grass

and wrapping it around my ankles, watching him load and unload fifty lb. bags onto truck bed after truck bed. The bags were my size back then, and so from a very early age, I came to believe that my father was some sort of super hero, invincible even; that he was the kind of man, you know the kind, that could carry the weight of the world—the weight of all the rice in the world—on his narrow shoulders and still have strength to carry Mom to bed when he'd find her stumbling around at night.

He was a quiet man with a moustache so grand that it overwhelmed his whole mouth and took over. Made it damn near impossible to read his subtle expressions, but at the same time had a way of living entirely detached from his mood. It seemed to me that when he was at his saddest, it spent all day bouncing up and down and twitching happily—uncontrollably. And in those rare moments of joyful bliss, it would simply sway with a certain somber defiance. "We Bensons," my father would say with his nostrils flared, moustache sadly swaying, and his chest puffed out just right, "We Bensons have rice runnin' through our veins, we do." It was well rehearsed and I figure his father might've said something of the like to him growing up. "We got that rough rice runnin' straight through us—pumps straight through our hearts and comes out clean and ready." And maybe he was right all along. Maybe it is in my blood—rice blood desperate for the husking, because after four years at USF and three years in grad school in Boston, I somehow still found myself walking to the mill for the first twelve hour seasonal shift of the summer.

"…I came to believe that my father was some sort of super hero, invincible even; that he was the kind of man, you know the kind, that could carry the weight of the world—the weight of all the rice in the world—on his narrow shoulders and still have strength to carry Mom to bed when he'd find her stumbling around at night."

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"You Manny's son?" He was an average-built guy with light greasy hair and some frog- like features though I couldn't pin which. I

took him to be a few years younger than myself, but later came to find he was well into his thirties.

I extended a hand. "Yeah, I'm David." He ignored it and motioned for me to follow him and I forgave him immediately because he walked like a frog too, and who can stay mad at someone like that?

He handed me a small brown slip. "This is your punch card. You gon' want to punch in right off when you get here and right before you leave."

"When do I find out my–" I started, but he was good at his role and was set to interrupt before the thought had even formed and from that point on, I resolved to be the simple silent type that summer.

"Schedule gets hung in the office every Thursday before the shift. If you have a problem you best submit it in writing before the shift ends and there ain't much time for writing when you workin', so it's best to not have any problems."

He showed me around the mill and the fields and I impressed myself with how familiar I still was with all of it. Even with the detailed things that I know my father couldn't have bothered to explain to me at that age, it felt more like remembering rather than learning it for the first time. It was an older mill so the procedure of removing the husk and the bran was a two-step process unlike some of the newer competitors. The rice comes from the fields, one machine removes the husk, one machine removes the bran, and then it's dried, sanitized, and packaged to be picked up by truckers from all around the country. The hours are long, the noise is unbearable, and the summer heat could make you want to sell your soul to the devil twice over.

Frog Man handed me my contract and pen and I read it over once. I furrowed my brow critically, but mostly skimmed through the lot of it. *Seasonal workers are responsible for dumping trucks, sampling grain, assisting in setting bins and drying grain, making minor repairs, scooping grain and sweeping in and around grain elevators.* I pictured my father doing all of this in his beat up West Prairie polo and for the first time wondered why they made them wear those things every day. *Basic Qualifications:* Must be able to work twelve hours per day, seven days per week during harvest period. Ability to work both day and night *shift. Ability to read and write in English (preferred).* I don't remember signing a thing, but I must've because next thing I know I'm in slot two

at the first drier, watching the paddy—the rough rice, bounce up and down in its rack and getting sprayed in the face with bran at slot three and then in a blink, I'm lifting those same fifty lb. sacks of rice into a bed that I made myself. *I'm* the superhero, and I'm carrying it all just fine.

I kept to myself mostly. There were never more than six of us in the same slot at the same time, and it was usually no more than four. I was in slot three with a weathered Dominican man who I had a lingering suspicion spoke a lot more English than people seemed to believe, two squinty-eyed light skin dudes who were around my age and I took to be brothers, and a massive black man that I'd heard had a criminal past and a short fuse. I was sweeping up grain from around the holding bins and one of the brother guys, the kind of guy who would raise his hand in grade school for a hall pass and then change his mind when the teacher gave it to him, he comes over carrying one of the leaky sacks of paddy and starts walking in circles around me. He's walking in circles and whistlin' like he don't even see me there and I can hear his shithead brother laughing to himself and I can feel the Dominican man ticking his tongue and all the while the rice is just trickling out all around me and I just stare at him because who the fuck picks fights with the simple silent type? So I just stare. And he just stares. And then I'm back to sweeping and he's walking off like nothing even happened.

"I'm the superhero, and I'm carrying it all just fine."

"Dem is dogs." He had been sitting in the dark corner behind the gate to the first sifter. He looked to be twice the size of it and it was as if his shadow casted over the machine instead of the reverse and it's important to note that unlike other large men I've known, the longer I knew this man the larger he became.

"Huh?" I had heard him but his voice was deep and made sense and I found comfort in it.

"Dem is the dogs." He nodded toward the brothers and kept his eyes on his hands as he steadied the sifter and gave it a gentle tug at the end of each cycle of new paddy. "You new and you white so you'll need to be workin' twice as fast and twice as quiet to keep the dogs off." I

watched his huge hands comically fiddle with the latches on the side of the bran tray. His deep brown skin was coated in white powdery bran, making it look like he was wearing some kind of surgical glove.

"It's Barney, right?" I extended my own bran-coated hand through the rusting gate.

"Twice as quiet."

I took the hint but stared at his hands for a little longer and found myself imagining him flossing his teeth with those hands. Then I was sweeping again. He began humming to himself and I wondered if he'd been humming the whole time, from the start, and I was embarrassed for not noticing. And then I was humming along with him. I was shoveling a pile back into a basin and I was humming along with him. It was an old Journey song, I think. Couldn't tell you how I knew it so well. My father liked Journey.

I looked at my watch and it was time for me to head to Gate B and meet a new truck, and as I was leaving I hesitated and then heard him again.

"They call me Bethlehem." And if I hadn't paused for that fraction of a second in the doorway, I never would've heard him.

"I'm David." I looked back at him to see if he was looking up now. "I'm seasonal."

"Glad to meet you, Davie."

"David, actually, it's just David," I managed.

"Uh-huh." He went back to his work and I swear I heard the softest chuckle under his breath as I was walking away.

When I went to grab my lunch from the office I found it by the door waiting for me. It looked like someone had stomped a heavy work boot into every individual thing I had packed and then shoved it back in the brown bag with some new artwork drawn on it. I glanced through the glass door and Frog Man was looking up at me with knowing eyes and I forgave him again because he probably wouldn't have been able to stop them if he tried.

I was walking up the path towards home to scrounge up something else for lunch when I heard him. Well, I heard crying and it's not like I knew it was him when I walked up to the truck or anything. I could've guessed but there was no way to know for sure, so I hoisted my leg over the back rail and looked down. He was lying on his back in the

mound of rice that coated the truck bed. He looked comfortable. Without even thinking, I found myself climbing into the back of the truck and walking over to him with my hands in my pockets and my eyes in the clouds. As I got closer I was less and less sure that what I had heard was crying, because by the time I reached him his eyes were completely dry.

"Hey, Bethlehem!" I flinched at the sound of feigned enthusiasm in my voice.

"Hiya, Davie!" He lifted a hand in my general direction and I wondered if he was mocking me. I didn't mind.

I sat down on my butt on the opposite end of the truck bed, careful to give him his spac. but not too much that I might give the impression that I was keeping him at a distance. His lunch was laid out on top of its plastic bag. Two sandwiches, applesauce, and what I think were a stack of crackers. My stomach growled and he must've heard it because he shoved one of his bologna and cheese sandwiches into my lap and said, "Have it."

It felt right so I ate it without the typical are you sure? and *no, I couldn't possibly*. I ate my first half and he ate his in silence and when I was finished I was a better person somehow.

"Why are you sad?" I didn't mean to ask this, but looking back, I am grateful it came out just that way.

"Why you think I'm sad?" He tilted his head towards me in the slightest.

"I don't know," I began lifting small handfuls of rough rice and letting it run freely through my fingers. It was strange how different it looked before the mill. I didn't much like the pure filtered white rice that the mill spat out and since I had moved out on my own I'd been buying brown rice. It went through half of the milling process but still maintained enough in size and color that I could eat it and feel right about it.

He let a soft chuckle escape that made me sure of the first one. "Oh you do, you has a reason for thinking what you thought, so you tell me." He bit into the second half of his sandwich and waved it in an arc. "Why you think I'm sad for?"

"Your family?" I continued to let rice run through my fingers.

"I got two healthy girls and a wife that can cook a mean beef stew." He cupped his hands behind his head like a pillow.

"You hate it here?" I had stood up and was drawing circles in

the rice with the tip of my boot now.

"Rice is my life. It's the only thing I ever learnt but that don't mean I didn't want to learn it. Think 'bout it in the morning, I eat it in the evening. And it's easy work when you like to be lifting things." He flexed an already bulging muscle and I winced as if he'd hurt me right then.

I lay down next to him. "Why do people call you Bethlehem?"

He quickly glanced to the side as if I had startled him. "Why people call you Davie?"

"They don't." I cupped my hands behind my own head.

"Oh don't they?" His head had turned towards me and he had that arch in his eyebrow.

I kept my eyes on the sky now. "No, they don't. The only person that ever called me Davie was my father."

"I know."

"You know?" I sat up and braced my back against the cold metal siding.

"Your father was the best friend I ever had." I noticed the rest of his sandwich was still resting on his chest.

"You knew my father?" I asked.

"Boy, I been workin' this mill for twelve years. Anyone that been here more than six knows your father and knows he the best friend they ever had." He looked me dead in the eye right then, as if I was the dumb one.

"He hardly spoke," I let out.

"He don't got to," he said without missing a beat.

"His moustache was alive."

"Rice is my life. It's the only thing I ever learnt but that don't mean I didn't want to learn it. Think 'bout it in the morning, I eat it in the evening."

"Talked about you well enough. Ain't think you ever be hangin' around here though. You a college boy right?" He sat up now, too, and faced me with his back against the opposite side of the truck.

"Yeah, that's right. I'm in grad school now. I like math." I was breaking the rice into halves between my fingernails.

I could feel him examining me as if he already knew. "Why you

here?"

"Came home for the summer. Couldn't find work worth a damn." I flung the halves between the metal railings and onto the ground.

"Davie, why is you here?" He already knew.

"I needed a break," I said.

"You call this a break?" He shook his head and smiled like he does.

"I needed a change for a while. Make sure I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing, you know?"

"Davie, I think you scared."

"Huh?" I could feel him still staring at me and I thought about getting out right then and there.

"You like math? Go math. Don't come running up in here putting that pity veil on your father—puttin' that pity on me. We ain't the sad ones… never was," he said, sounding more honest than angry.

"The machines in slot four and seven are calibrated wrong. I calculate they're wasting about sixty-seven cents an hour which is about sixteen dollars a day which is about 5,900 dollars every year and I figure I should probably tell someone about it and then I think I should probably just mind my own because I don't want people to think I'm some sort of well-shaven prick who went to college and thinks he's better than everybody else."

"Do you think you better than ev'body else?" He flared his nostrils.

"My dad said rice is in my blood. You believe that shit? Like it's my destiny or something." I flung more rice between the bars.

"So what if it is?" He raised just one eyebrow this time.

"Then what the fuck am I doing in Boston?" I said, tossing limp hands in the air.

"You're changing it," he said.

"Walked into town the other day and met a girl. The kind of girl I'm supposed to wanna marry and all that." She was the sweetest thing I'd ever met and didn't have those perfect teeth like Boston girls. "Only maybe I don't want to marry her at all, because maybe I don't want to have to take care of someone like he did."

"Don't go talkin' 'bout your mom like she was dead weight." His eyes dug into me and I swallowed hard.

"My dad carried her from the altar and never stopped carrying her." The clouds were moving faster now.

"He loved her. And when you get to loving something, you're willing to do all kinds of things for it." He shrugged his shoulders but kept his eyes digging into me.

"She made a good stew," I admitted.

"He loved her more than rice," he said.

"She was a good woman."

"He was a good man," he said.

"Why are you sad?" I found myself asking again except this time I forced my eyes back to his.

He smiled and rolled his eyes like he was fourteen again and I really felt for him. "I'm hidin' in this truck, crying..." he inhaled and started again, "I'm hiding in this truck, sad, because I miss him." He stared at his hands with blank eyes. "That's all."

"I know," and I wrapped my arms around my chest because I deserved a hug.

We lay in that truck in silence for about fifteen more minutes, or maybe it'd been hours, and when the lunch bell rang twice, we picked each other up and got back to our rice.

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When I got home, I collapsed onto the steps leading to our side door. I buried my face into my hands and took the deep kind of breaths that give you something to think about. When I opened my eyes, my finger was tracing the cracks on the step beneath my knees. I heard the creak of the step as he crept up in through the side door, his pores bursting with white powder. He would place an unrecognizable finger to his lips and wink at me and I would watch the dust flutter way from his eyelashes and dance around his pupils. He'd slide out of his heavy boots and I'd slither into them as he carefully flew with the dust to Mother at the ironing board. He'd wrap his arms around her curve and dive into her limp curls and bring them to life with the dust. She would giggle and he would shake and I would stumble forward desperately, trying to catch flakes of light powder on a warm tongue. And he would tell her, it was the middle of the night. And she would claim she needed to get me ready for school. And he would tell her that it was summer and that it was the middle of the night and with a pacifying hand, firm in the small of her

back, he ushered her out of the kitchen, but not before turning to give me one last wink—his moustache bouncing up and down happily.

I heard movement inside—a low guttural moan and sticky footsteps on the swollen floor boards of the living room. I stood and let those molting weathered boots carry me inside to Mother. *Manny, is that you, rice cake? A pause. Yeah, Ma… No, Ma... Let's get you to bed.*

> "I heard the creak of the step as he crept up in through the side door, his pores bursting with white powder."