

TULIPS

By Noche Gauthier

Judges' Choice Award, 2021 West Virginia Fiction Competition

Noche Gauthier is a homeschooled student from Harpers Ferry. She was tutored in English and Composition by Katie Quinnelly and William McDonald-Newman. Anthology editor, author, and teacher Ellen Wade offered these suggestions for Noche's award-winning story. “At a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged our sense of humanity and our willingness to connect with one another, I found your story captivating and close to home, reminding us of the importance of taking care of one another and honoring those who give freely and unconditionally to the community. It was refreshing to read, “Walter realized quickly how much his wife had meant, how she had always been the first one to volunteer for other people, or who was kind to every child who came to play baseball in the field.” I think we can all identify with Walter and know someone special like Tulip. It was a pleasant departure from the stories about flower gardens that I have read before. I love the use of the character Tulip as a metaphor and her comparison with the flower. I also liked the line, “He doubted she would be a springtime perennial much longer.” Your use of analogy throughout the story, offered a powerful insight into Walter’s character and a visual representation of the landscape. You made skillful use of other figurative language, especially, when you described “how the sun shone through the trees and created a lightshow on the forest floor.” I found your story compelling and was anxious to see what would happen in the end. Most of my suggestions for editing have to do with establishing a context for time. The time frame is important in your story. Establish a context of time that alerts the reader about the passage of time. Provide details that would indicate whether Walter and Tulip have interacted during the ten years they are apart. Include the chain of events that brought Walter and Tulip to this place. I hope these suggestions are helpful as you continue to refine your story. I found your story to be captivating and I hope you to continue in your pursue of writing.”

He watched the tulips rise from the ground year after year in a form of callow reminiscence. He didn't suppose it mattered the color, and the flowers littered his property in such a way that the land appeared to be a work of Claude Monet. All kinds of people would stop to marvel at them, from children waiting for the bus, to those who needed a rationale to keep going. The tulip fields were a place of magnificence, a place to breathe, and a place above all other memories.

It all had begun a little over five decades before, at the end of a long bike path through the mountain on a warm Easter Sunday. That spot didn't hold a lot at the time. A small stream, a bus stop near the edge, and a long, green field where all sorts of folk would gather to play sports. It was that particular day, just a few short minutes after Church, that a bike, a girl, and a group of hooligans started a long, unknown history.

He had thought the day was much too warm for April, grumbling as he was keenly aware that his bike brakes weren't acting as sharp as usual. He could feel the weight of his cotton shirt, the sweat starting to soak through. His brow beaded, and he huffed in annoyance. He'd escaped away from Sunday brunch with his Church and family as soon as possible, wanting to get home and do as he pleased. It was a three-mile bike ride, and he'd opted to take the path down through the green woods, not wanting to waste time along the road.

The trees had brightly greened, honeysuckle and magnolia in the air. If he hadn't been such a moody person altogether, perhaps he would have stopped to admire how the sun shone through the trees and created a lightshow on the forest floor. Or how the birds came to life again, chirping and carrying on and being the beautiful nuisances only unperturbed creatures can manage.

He eventually made it through the forest, the trees opening up to deliver him the sight of the wide, bright field. The sun glared into his eyes and he yet again sighed. He was the type of person who was so easily fragmented by the world, until he just stood with his broken little pieces and complained, all the while putting himself back together. His bike, a hand-me-down from his older brother, creaked and groaned as it bumped along down the dirt path. In that moment, any person watching him would have concluded that there wasn't too much difference between man and machine.

Fighting the glare of the sun, he glanced down to where a group of his peers were gathered. He watched them for just a moment, finally being able to gather that there were three boys and a girl. That troubled him for a moment, how he could see the girl begin to dash up the hill toward the bike path. The boys began to chase after her, and in a quick flash, all of his techyness dissipated. He had the gut feeling that the girl was in trouble, and so he pedaled faster down the hill, trying to see how he could help.

Snap! His eyes widened when he heard the noise, and looking back, he saw his bike chain lying in the dirt. He increased speed heading down the hill, and held on for dear life. *Should I ditch?* He wondered as the bike continued to go faster and faster down the hill. He finally remembered to plant his feet just as his bike made impact with someone.

Crashing to the ground, he landed with his nose in the dirt and let out a loud groan. He peered up when he heard laughter, and saw the three boys from earlier watching him. He recognized them quickly from school, a group of boys on the baseball team who went around bragging about their finances and troubling everyone else. He realized quickly that if he hadn't crashed into them, then it must have been the girl.

He quickly dragged himself to his knees, moving to pull the bike off of her, "I am so sorry, my bike chain fell off, and I came dashing down this darn hill, and—"

She raised her hand to silence him, and he quickly quieted, offering her a hand to help her stand up. She took it, rubbing at her nose, and he quickly recognized her as a girl from his math class. The one who spent most of her time singing and was part of the jazz club. Her father was Mr. Wells, who played fiddle at the local cafe on Saturday mornings.

"Your name's Tulip, isn't it? We have math class together." He had let go of her hand, and she was staring up at him with bright eyes under dark lashes.

"Yeah, we do. You're bad at algebra," She seemed to recall, then looking back at the group of boys,

"Those your friends?"

He quickly shook his head, glaring at the boys who continued to mimic the way he had gone crashing into the girl.

“Your name’s Walter, isn’t it? Walter Harrington?” She asked as she dusted off her dress.

He nodded, sticking out his hand for her to shake, “I hope you consider me the one and only.”

Tulip shook her head, a smile tugging at her lips. They both looked back at the direction of the group of boys, who had now begun to walk away. They still continued to yell obscenities back at them, and jump around in clownish mockery. Walter whistled lowly, marvelling at how childish his peers could be.

“Why were they bothering ya?” He asked, picking up his bike from the ground.

“It was mostly my fault. They’ve been going after my little brother, George, in school. This field is on my typical walk route, I saw them out and jumped at the chance to give them a piece of my mind. Guess I forgot my size for a moment.”

“I’m glad I crashed into you when I did. Didn’t seem like they planned on leaving you alone any time soon.”

Tulip seemed to pause to think for a moment, “They seemed a bit apprehensive when they saw it was you that had arrived. You know why that is?”

He hadn’t noticed the apprehension, but he could quickly round out an answer, “My dad’s just gone to prison.”

“What for?”

“You know the one with the blonde hair in that group? The one that first started to chase you up the hill? His last name is Withers. His dad’s a problem and came by my dad’s mechanic shop one night to try and drive one of his cars. My dad punched him so hard in the jaw he’s missing his front teeth now. Mr. Withers got what he deserved, and now they’re both doing time.”

“I’ll come with you when you pick up your dad and congratulate him.” Tulip quipped, “At least someone’s doing some right in the world.”

Walter connected the dots that day similarly to the way someone searches for words in a crossword puzzle. He thought back to all the moments in which he’d seen Tulip, not that she was hard to miss, with bright red hair, and even brighter clothing. He decided that he’d found the first person amongst his peers that he could deem somewhat tolerable.

They walked home from school every day together, since they were quick to find that they lived on the same street. It had become a game where they’d race down the bike path, often dropping to the ground in a frenzy of reenactment at the exact place Walter had first crashed into Tulip.

Ten years later, they were strolling together down the path. Both had just come home after graduating at separate colleges, and Walter decided to create something permanent. It was in the same spot in the dirt, where flowers grew on either side, and the sun beat down in the summer. He’d rolled down onto the ground, and came up on one knee, and as said much too often: the rest was history.

When the land went up for sale, after the farmer who had long owned it decided it wasn’t worth his time to keep anymore, the couple had bought it quickly. In one corner was a small farmhouse, and the rest a large field that seemed much too precious of a memory to agriculturalize.

Fifty years they lived there together, and eventually with children, and the odd neighbor that stopped by, and the orange cat that simply refused to leave the porch. The field was used for sledding, baseball, and races down the long bike path. Tulip had started a small garden near the house, and was quick to give vegetables to anyone she could think of who might risk going hungry. Walter had watched the interactions, how it seemed to be that even though the neighbors were accepting of the gifts, they spared no ‘thank you’s’. He had always found that his wife’s heart was many sizes too big.

In the way that all lovely contrivances wilt, so did Tulip. Slowly, at first, with a trip to the doctors office, and disconsolate news. Walter watched as his wife became slowly less the real version of herself, into a person sick and lackadaisical. He doubted she would be a springtime perennial much longer.

It only took six months of battle, and medication. He would hide himself in the bathroom to stare up at the sky and wonder why he had to be the single person in the world to which all wrongs were granted. When she went, the bank tried to take the land too, and the town complained, “*What will you do with so many unused acres?*” His children rarely visited, and even the nuisance that was the orange cat no longer came by.

As summer faded away and autumn arrived, Walter stood on the porch of his cottage, staring off into the reds and golds of the sunset. When a vision came to him, by that of magic, or some grief-caused craze, he saw the field full of flowers of different colors.

It was the very next day he set to work, calling his children, their children, the neighbors, and absolutely anyone who he could possibly think up. To his surprise, they were all quick to jump at the opportunity to help. Everyone took trucks and cars to the plant nursery, running in with great urgency, and buying as many flower seeds and bulbs as they were able to purchase.

When the group arrived back, it had become a town wide effort as the field was dragged and seeds were planted. Every now and again someone would stop to pat Walter on the shoulder, and would say something along the lines of, “Because Tulip was always so kind to everyone.”, or, “I never got to say thank you.”.

That spring, when the shoots began to come up out of the earth, neighbors still stopped by to water them. Walter realized quickly how much his wife had meant, how she had always been the first one to volunteer for other people, or who was kind to every child who came to play baseball in the field. He saw now that after all her kindness, whether it was guilt or some debt needing paid, people would come back and return the favor—whether or not it took them years. Walter even swore a couple times that he’d recognized a group of men from he and Tulip’s school days. They reminded him of a particular humid day that still remained in a protected glass case, hung above other more scattered memories.

In just a few short months, the place had come alive with all sorts of different colors. Flowers spread from the porch of his house all the way down to the road, and his friends and neighbors would stop by every now and again to call out, “Well Walter, you’ve got yourself a work of art!”

Walter, in those moments, with the planting, and the blooming, and the new promise of flowers every spring, thought of the red-headed girl he’d crashed into by some peculiar happenstance. He remembered her best on Easter afternoons, rocking quietly on the porch, a new red cat in his lap, looking out at a field full of tulips.