

2018 MCC Creative Writing Contest

Fiction Category

First Place: “Some Things are Better Left Untouched” by Christina Schafer

“Land! Land ahead!”

Oliver looked up from the deck of the boat, hope evident in his eyes. The mist clouding the ship parted, revealing a beachy shore far off in the distance. The crew stared for half a heartbeat, almost unwilling to process they’d found land after a grueling journey of more than two months, before erupting into a chorus of cheers. Most hurried to the edge of the ship, peering out at what they could see of the land while one or two rushed below deck to write in their journals or prepare to dock. Oliver elbowed past the mass of crew members, which was significantly smaller in number than it had been weeks before, and clung to a spot on the rail, leaning over the edge to get a better view.

“Prepare to dock!”

Heads turned as Captain Pinzón emerged from his quarters. Everyone scurried back to their posts as the tension slowly built. Sails were adjusted, several men prepared the anchor, the steering wheel was under precise supervision of the captain, and a crewman scouted a place to anchor the ship. Lagging behind them, to their left and right, were the Niña and the Santa Maria, the crew audibly cheering as they, too, spotted land.

As the Pinta anchored, the crew began to unwind the rowboats, dropping them into the water. Group by group, crew members took their exit, bringing nothing off the ship except for the bare necessities. Oliver gathered in a group on one rowboat, eager to explore the grounds and find a campsite; the crew had not seen or felt land for more than two months and none intended to wait more than another five minutes.

The branches shifted as a young boy ran clumsily through the woods, following his father and older brother. The bow slung over his shoulder bounced around as he slowed down, under his father's silent request. The trio squatted and peered through the bushes at a group of birds clustered on a low branch. The boy's brother notched an arrow and took aim, but his father brought his arm up and pushed his bow back down. He gestured at the boy.

“Helaku.”

The boy's eyes widened. Trembling, he turned and fumbled to set an arrow, awkwardly raising the bow with shaky arms. This was his first hunting expedition, and it showed. Taking a deep breath, he released the arrow, anxiously watching as the birds flew away, squawking. Helaku sighed, disappointed. His brother, Songaa, pushed himself up from his squat and set out to find more wild game. Helaku rose, and his father put his hand on his son's shoulder, conveying unspoken words. Helaku smiled gratefully before walking dejectedly to find his lost arrow. Pushing aside branches, he scoured the ground for the arrow.

Finally, he caught sight of it, and hurried to pick it up, but as he reached for it, he faintly heard voices speaking in a strange tongue. He slowly stood back up, making certain to make no noise. Helaku was certain that this voice was neither his father's or his brother's or even any man in his tribe. Ever so lightly, Helaku picked his way past branches and stones toward the voices. He parted the thicker leaves on a tree and squinted at the sunlight.

Helaku's eyes took a moment to adjust to the brightness, but once they did, he gasped sharply. Right in front of his eyes was a group of strangely dressed men with metal tools and charts of some sort. Occasionally, one would stop to pick up a leaf or stick and observe it for a second before tossing it into the woods. With widened eyes, Helaku watched their every move.

He took a shaky breath and stepped back, fully intending to find and warn his father and his tribe.

Crack. All eyes turned in his direction as he looked down at his feet with a snapped stick wedged underneath them. Several men narrowed their eyes, searching for the source and blinked several times when they saw it was a child.

There was a second of pause when Helaku made eye contact with the man who seemed to be leading, before taking off in a sprint through the forest. There was shouting and Helaku heard footsteps following him. The young boy stumbled into a clearing and frantically called for help, spinning in circles to find his father. He saw one of the men step into the clearing and turned to run, only to come face to face with the same man as before. Helaku desperately searched for an escape, but to no avail. His eyes flicked from face to face as each man stared curiously back at him. Who were these strange men? Why were they here, invading his home?

Meanwhile, the men glanced around, as well, wondering the same things. Who was this odd, timid boy? Was there more? Oliver turned to Captain Pinzón. The captain threw back his shoulders and approached the boy with his hand extended.

“Greetings. I am Captain Vicente Yáñez Pinzón. We arrive from Spain.”

Helaku furrowed his brow as his world fell down around him. He could not understand these strange men or their language. What began as a simple hunting expedition had led to Helaku losing sight of everything he ever knew. Their home had been discovered. The year was 1492, and the New World had been discovered.

That night, the chief of Helaku's tribe had come to the understanding that they would welcome the foreigners with open arms and help them in any way they could. Although the order was very controversial and very much opposed, after a round of heavy debating, the verdict was final.

So, the very next day, Helaku awakened at the peak of the morning and donned his hunting gear. His hunting skill still remained a priority and was no less relevant than it had been the day before. Still awakening, Helaku stepped outside into the crisp, dewy morning air and roamed over to a group of men his father and brother were in. He stared curiously at the white men, trying to figure them out, as they spoke in their native language, which, it seemed, the men of his own tribe were trying to understand.

As the men became closer and closer to the center of the woods, it seemed the white men were only getting louder. Leaves crunched, sticks cracked, and stones clicked with every step a newcomer took. Had the animals they hunted not have been their dinner that night, it would have been much more amusing.

Predictably, Helaku and the white men were sent back with Songaa accompanying them, as the other men still had the responsibility of bringing home dinner, and for an extra thirty or so men. The path back was long, and Helaku and his brother soon tired of trying to communicate with the others. It would be much longer before Helaku would understand the strange white men.

The weeks passed smoothly as the men began to settle and even adapt to the ways of Helaku's tribe, who they had curiously titled "Indians". There was always something to be done, and there was no shortage of volunteers.

Winter was soon approaching, however, and the flow of bright days was quickly interrupted, however, when people began vomiting, coughing, and complaining of soreness and fatigue. It started as one, and grew to two people, then three, and, eventually, the disease took hold of more than half the camp. The tribal healers were baffled by the ailment and the chief could not console the tribe as they began to panic following the first few deaths. The white men did not seem to be affected nearly as badly, and people began to point fingers as they noticed that our numbers were dwindling while the white men suffered minimally.

Helaku and his mother soon fell prey to the illness, oftentimes coughing up blood and vomiting. There were many nights when Helaku would wake to the sounds of his mother crying, and the pure hopelessness in her sobs broke his heart. His own tears sometimes fell from his eyes as he watched his brother laugh with his friends or his father notch an arrow, knowing the likelihood of survival was slim.

It was a frosty December night that Helaku woke to screams instead of sobs. Throwing off his quilt, he dashed to his mother's bedside, shaking her, only to find she was not breathing. Desperation unhinged him, and he grabbed her shoulders, rocking her rapidly, refusing to accept the truth. This was his mother, who he used to plant with, who used to show him how to set up a tipi even though he was a boy, because she had wanted a girl so badly. This was his mother and she couldn't be dead, she just couldn't be. He sunk to the floor, quivering with tears he would not release. His body racked with silent sobs, as he failed to process that neither his brother nor his father were still in the tipi and that the screams continued to persist.

Helaku's sobs morphed into violent coughs, and he didn't bother to clean the blood from the cough. His eyes went out of focus, and he only looked up when the flap of the tipi was shoved open. Two of the white men, battered and bloody, barged in, holding long, metallic

instruments that Helaku vaguely recognized. He weakly tried to push himself up from the floor to at least give himself a fighting chance but found he could barely stand.

“He is too weak. Leave him.”

Before Helaku had another second to blink, a bang sounded throughout the tipi. He dropped to the floor, gagging and closed his eyes, willing the pain away. As he looked at his mother one last time, he blinked away tears, and took his last breath.

Helaku would not live to discover that his mother had been pregnant with a baby girl when she had lost her life to what was, many years later, named influenza. He would not live to see the day that his brother, Songaa, was married to the only woman left of his tribe, and he would not live to see the day that his father was released from the plantation he was taken to. Nine- year old Helaku died with the faces of the white men in his mind, and with a gunshot to his side. The year was 1492, and the New World had been discovered.

Works Cited

“The American Testimony.” *History2U*. Web. 8 Sep 2016.

OriginalPeople. 15 Nov 2012. Web. 8 Sep 2016.

“Pre-Columbian Hispaniola-Arawak/Taino Indians.” *Hartford-hwp*. Web. 8 Sep 2016.

“Christopher Columbus Ships.” *Christopher-Columbus*. Web. 13 Sep 2016.