

THE NEW SCHOOL CHAPBOOK AWARD SERIES

The Chapbook Award Series is published by the Graduate Writing Program at The New School. Winners are selected annually from among the graduates of the program by writers of national reputation.

2014 COMPETITION WINNERS

FICTION

Gillian E. O'Neill, *The Cottage*
selected by Justin Torres

NONFICTION

Anna Fridlis, *The Edge of the Known World*
selected by Ted Conover

POETRY

Steven Klett, *A Field Full of Mirrors*
selected by Rachel Zucker

WRITING FOR CHILDREN

Chelsea Schoenbeck, *Born to Run Away*
selected by Aaron Starmer

**“The Cottage” © 2015 Gillian E. O’Neill
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The Cottage

“THE COTTAGE” is a very evocative story that is also very short. When I reached the end I thought, *surely this is not the end!* My other thought was, *surely I’ve just read the winner.* Judging is a strange business. The stories for this contest were all strong, all laudable. I wondered, should I pick the sexiest story? The boldest? The most imaginative? The saddest? “The cottage” is all these things—sexy, bold, deeply imagined, sad. But where “The Cottage” is superlative, and undeniable, is in the quality of the writing itself. O’Neill’s writerly instincts, her pacing, her use of dialogue, the clarity and variety of her sentences, somehow exhibit both maturation and promise. This story could, to my mind, go on, go deeper—or not. There is, after all, something satisfyingly startling in its sudden termination. Either way, it is a winning story written in winning prose. And most importantly, and what seemed most worthy of recognition, was the certainty that O’Neill herself will go on writing, going ever deeper. So my initial thought, *surely this not the end,* might be seen to have arisen from a kind of general hunger for more from this author, and an awareness that I had just read the work of a writer with a brilliant career ahead. Let me then revise and rephrase that thought, and in doing so, offer a toast to O’Neill: *surely this is just the beginning!*

Justin Torres

I couldn't sleep. I tried to picture myself on Spectacle Pond, a place I had only heard about in Jack's stories of summers spent at the cottage with his parents and sister and brothers, whose names I knew, and his hundreds of cousins, whose names even he didn't know. His Cape Cod seemed like the distant America of old movies—sun-bleached, freckled kids riding Cruisers along Main Street past waving American flags, holding on tight to sticky, chocolate ice cream cones—idyllic and uncomplicated, not unlike Jack himself.

Sam stirred next to me. After five years in this queen-sized bed together, the mattress had begun to dip in the middle. We couldn't help but roll into each other. I slid to the cool edge of my side and watched his bare chest rise and fall, trying to slow and match my sleepless breath. I widened my eyes and searched his face for reasons why, but there weren't any. Not really. I listened for whispers of words, but he doesn't talk in his sleep. Jack does sometimes. Apparently, I laugh in mine.

Sam, still tan from our last trip with Jack and Annie, stood up from our bed, leaving the impression of his long body behind. I rolled over into his leftover heat and flipped his pillow to the cool side, confused that I had fallen asleep at all.

"I want to be on the road soon," Sam said.

His short, brown hair was sticking up from sleep, and his eyes looked tired—the green of them only really green around the edges.

"Ok, sounds good," I said.

"I'm all packed."

"Ok, I'm getting up. I'm getting up, I promise. I didn't sleep well."

"Why not?"

"I wish I could say."

I waited until he slammed the bedroom door to reach for the round pill container and glass of water on my nightstand. I knocked back the tiny, blue tablet like I had every morning for the last decade. I lit a cigarette and wondered if my body would always be able to be tricked, or would it rebel and swell with something unplanned.

All of us had been friends for half a dozen years. Jack worked with Sam and was with Annie when we met him, and then he wasn't, and then they were married. Sam and I were always married. Even when we weren't. It had been almost a year since that party since I knew what I felt—so foreign—was trouble. Something electric, that catch, had always been there but overlooked like old, live wiring capped off and hidden behind new, sheet rock walls.

Jack and I settled for sneaking around for the year since. It seemed less cruel than to upset Sam and Annie who were perfect, before we knew better. Sam's charm and Annie's gorgeous consistency were wasted on us. And Jack and I hated ourselves because of it, wrapping up in wet, hotel room sheets every chance we got.

Sam and I reached the edge of Connecticut, and the clouds had rolled along, but the air was thick with the smell of rain. We drove up the quick northbound climb into Rhode Island, around Providence, and then finally, along the easy, eastward dip of Massachusetts Highway 25 towards Cape Cod.

Sam playfully smacked my thigh and smiled. The feeling of him was foreign now. That was his fault. And no one's fault really. I forced a smile and switched on the radio. We were better with music between us, and sometimes, I believed it sustained us. We were better without Jack between us, and yet sometimes, I believed he sustained us, too. Without him, Sam and I weren't happy, but we weren't unhappy either. With him, I was better, so Sam and I were our best. A strange kind of threesome.

At the old motel on the corner, we turned left like Jack said, and after one right turn and then another, we hit the dirt road. The cottage on Spectacle Pond, even the length of the Cape, were visible now. The day had turned to blue-green twilight; it was that summer evening hour when fireflies begin to flutter and pulse.

Jack pointed us to an empty stretch of sand lined with a stone wall he had been building all summer. Jack joked that he was just

moving rocks from one side of the house to the other as he shook Sam's hand, and they slapped each other on the back. I dug my feet into the cool sand and lit a cigarette. Annie appeared on the porch in the warm light of the house.

"How was the drive?" Jack asked as he kissed me hello on the cheek.

"Fine. Just the usual traffic in Connecticut," I said.

"I could use a drink," Sam said.

"Come inside," Annie shouted, "I'm cooking dinner. Jack can mix you a drink."

"Jack does make a mean gin and tonic, honey," I said.

"Does he?"

"He does. I like gin now," I said and kicked at the sand as we walked up to the house.

"I've never liked gin," Sam said.

"Let's get you a beer," Jack said.

Annie was inside at the kitchen sink, trimming fat from chicken breasts and patting them down with lemon pepper. My stomach churned and dropped like a small sailboat cresting rough waters as I kissed her hello, and I wondered what kind of a man would leave her for me. Her only flaw was an intensity, an intensity just enough unlike my own. She needed Jack. But I wanted him.

"Do you need help?" Sam asked.

"Please, that would be nice," Annie said, "Jack, are you making drinks for them?"

"Yes, babe, I got it."

Jack tipped the bottle of Tanqueray into my tumbler, and the gin rushed clean and clear over the crackling cubes of ice. I pushed the bottle from underneath with my finger for more and cocked my head to the side. He smiled and twisted the top off the tonic slowly, letting the pressure hiss and subside, and it splashed and bubbled up to the rim of my glass. He sliced a bright, green lime and squeezed half into my drink—that's what made it so good—flexing his forearm and coating his palm in sticky citrus.

The dining table was large enough to seat eight or maybe ten, so our four huddled at one end; plates and glasses and

candles covered only half the table, leaving the other half empty and dark. Annie always prepared a square meal of salad, meat, and a vegetable or two. Jack sat next to me across from Annie and Sam across from me next to her. Forks and knives clinked against plain, white plates, and Sam's smart voice filled the room. I stared at the swirling grain of the hard, oak, dining table. Jack gripped my thigh. Annie was unusually relaxed—she actually seemed happy.

“You ok? Too much gin already?” Annie asked.

I finished my drink in two, long, cool swigs, “I can't get enough. You should have one.”

“Let's clean up and go for a swim,” Jack said.

“Sam and I will clean up. You two go mix another drink,” Annie said.

Jack and I rounded the corner of the dining room, and I slid my arm around his waist.

“Gina, Annie is pregnant,” Jack said.

I pulled away from him, dropping my empty tumbler. A thousand tiny shards of glass spread across the tile hallway. Sam and Annie just laughed loudly from the kitchen.

“Don't move, you're not wearing shoes. I don't want you to cut yourself,” Jack said.

“You don't want me to cut myself? I don't care about a fucking piece of glass in my foot. Annie is pregnant?”

“Gina, I'm so sorry. She just told me today. Gina, she just told me today.”

“And you wait all night, through drinks, through dinner, through touching me under the table to tell me?”

“I know, I'm so sorry. She just told me today. Gina, stop. She just told me today.”

Jack was saying it over and over again, trying to believe it, trying to hear it. All I could hear was the late night chaos of crickets rubbing their wings together outside the front porch screen door.

“Is it even yours?”

“Don't move. Let me get your shoes and a broom.”

“Clean that up and then we'll go for a swim,” Annie yelled

from the kitchen.

“Yeah, Jack, clean this up,” I said.

All four of us walked down the sandy, stone steps towards the dock, towards the water, murky and rippling in the breeze. I undressed as we walked, leaving my clothes in a pile at the base of the steps. My skin, usually white, was brown and freckled and crisscrossed with tan lines after an entire summer in the sun. Jack liked my freckles. Long, wavy strands of blonde hair clung to my breasts and back sticky with sweat. I squared off my hips and dove in.

Jack followed.

Annie and Sam watched from the picnic table on shore. I could already see her body, usually strong and tight like a high school cross country runner’s, had softened. I was surprised I hadn’t noticed earlier. Her belly was slightly swollen, and her small breasts had turned plump. She tossed her limp, brown hair and laughed at whatever Sam was saying. He looked good in his crisp, white shirt and Levi’s, but he wasn’t next to me, swimming naked, slipping around in the middle of the night, grabbing tight to that space between my ribs and my waist. I wondered why. Jack and I floated on our backs with our ears submerged, the water hollowing out the sounds between us. We didn’t speak. Jack gave me his hand and helped me out of the pond up onto the dock. It was time for bed.

Upstairs in our room, in a bed bigger than we were used to, Sam wrapped his arm around me, and I tightened while he kissed the back of my neck and listened to the whirring of the ceiling fan overhead until I couldn’t hear it anymore.

Jack was in the kitchen alone.

“Let’s take a walk,” I said.

The morning sky was awash in pastels perfectly reflected in the still water of Spectacle Pond, like two identical watercolors hinged and folding onto each other. Canoes lined the shore, half

in-half out of the water, a single-person sailboat sat motionless by the dock, towels from the night before were still strewn across the shore, and a low morning fog was rolling over it all. We walked down the dirt road towards the cranberry bogs.

“I didn’t even know you were still sleeping with her,” I said.

“It’s been months,” Jack said.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m sorry. I thought I wanted to talk, but there’s nothing left to say.”

“There’s plenty left to say.”

“Are you still going to leave her?”

“She wants to have the baby. Would you even want me if I had the heart to leave her now?”

“No.”

“Are you still going to leave Sam?”

“I have to leave him. We obviously don’t want each other anymore.”

“What do you want?”

I turned away from Jack and started down the dirt road back to the cottage. The Pond was low. It had been a hot and dry summer. Everyone was hoping for a wet fall.

GILLIAN E. O'NEILL earned her BA in American Literature at Hunter College, City University of New York, and completed her MFA in Fiction at The New School in 2014. Since graduating, she has continued to work as an advertising executive, spending most of her time pitching campaigns to her biggest client—The Empire State Building. “The Cottage” was the first short story she ever wrote and she’s thrilled it is the first to be published.

JUSTIN TORRES is author of the novel, *We the Animals*, a national bestseller. His fiction has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Harper’s*, *Granta*, *Tin House*, and other publications. He has received grants and awards from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard, and the Wallace Stegner Fellowship at Stanford. Currently he is a fellow at the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library.

