

NICOLE SIMONSEN

The Ghost Writer

Many years ago, when I was a young woman, I lived with a young man in a brownstone on Commonwealth Avenue, a street of copper-roofed buildings, gargoyles, and—if you could afford it—rooftop decks with views of the Charles and Back Bay. There was another writer in the building, an old man named Ernest Mulvaney. He had a typewriter, and sometimes, as I passed his apartment, I could hear him attacking the keys. *Clack, clack, clack, ding! Clack, clack, clack, ding!* It was rhythmic and satisfying to hear that little ding. I had just financed my first computer, and there was no happy ding, just a bill due on the twenty-third of every month. I hadn't written much of anything with it.

Ernest had bad lungs. As soon as he did anything vigorous, he'd lose his breath and have to lie down. Once, I found him stretched on the landing. He was fine, he said, dusting himself off. He'd been at the races and picked a winner. He'd gotten overexcited, taken the stairs too quickly, when a furry light filled his head. I asked if I should call someone. But there was no one, no woman to fret over him, not even an aging sister.

"And what will you do with the money?"

"Why do you wanna know? You a slyster?"

"Mr. Mulvaney! I was only wondering if you were saving for something special."

He narrowed his eyes. "You wanna know? All right. I wrote a book, a collection of stories, and I'm publishing them myself, a thousand copies."

"Are you going to sell them?"

"Course I am!" He shook his head, muttering, "Am I going to sell them!" Then he cracked open his door and slipped inside, leaving me alone on the landing.

I felt foolish and annoyed with myself. I had offended him.

* * *

Another time, as I was walking down the park that separates the two sides of Comm. Ave., I mistook Ernest for a homeless person. Though I'd been in the city for a year, the presence of this long, thin park had not stopped delighting me. If you walked all the way up and crossed the street, it opened to a fairy-tale park with swan boats and a little bridge where lovers stopped to take their picture. And after the longest, whitest winter of my life, tulips had appeared

in front of the brownstones almost overnight, their shapes so uniform, their colors so bright, they seemed to have been stamped out in a candy factory. Whoever designed this city, whoever planted these tulips—thank you! I would think. I had not before, nor since, lived in such a beautiful neighborhood. It made me expansive and generous.

Up ahead, the homeless man kept stopping to cough. Then he sat down on a bench, his shoulders slumped over. It didn't take me long to catch up to him. Already, I had my dollar out. "Sir."

He looked up. It was Ernest. He hadn't been coughing, but writing. His notebook was full of a dark, sloping cursive. He writes by hand, too, I thought. How eighteenth century, how romantic and tubercular. I half expected him to cough into a monogrammed handkerchief. Quickly, I shoved the dollar in my pocket. He squinted.

"Mary, from upstairs."

"Ah. Sorry. Of course."

I sat down. "Working on a story?" Back then, I was always trying to figure out where ideas came from or how writers nurtured an idea until, like a baby, it grew into something tangible and complete.

"You could say that."

I glanced at his notebook. An idea occurred to me—I could use his opening line, just as an exercise. Didn't writers borrow ideas all the time?

But Ernest abruptly shut his notebook. "Not for prying eyes." He looked up at the treetops and back down Comm. Ave. I followed his narrowed gaze. He mumbled something, an apology, I think, put his pen to the notebook, and lifted his ear as if it were a radio antenna tuning in to a frequency I couldn't hear. Without a goodbye, he stood and walked in the opposite direction.

Later that day, when I described our encounter to my young man, he improvised a silly song on his guitar. "Senile old man, senile old man, writing a love letter . . ."

"No, that's not it," I said irritably. Ernest had been in another time and place, that's how absorbed he was.

* * *

The next time, toward the end of fall, I found him on the landing again, his forehead resting lightly on the wall, a cardboard box at his feet.

"You need some help?"

*His notebook was
full of a dark,
sloping cursive. He
writes by hand, too,
I thought. How
eighteenth century,
how romantic
and tubercular.*

"Take that box to my door."

I lifted it and followed him up the stairs. "I can't believe you got this up that first flight."

He put his key in the lock. I realized with excitement that I would finally get a glimpse inside his apartment. But it was as if he'd read my mind. "You can put that down—I'll take it inside."

Disappointed, I bent down and let the box fall a few inches so that it landed with a thud. "What's inside? Gold bars?"

"Ha! Gold bars from a missing Spanish galleon . . . Nah. You wanna see?" He cut through the tape with a pocketknife. He keeps a pocketknife in his actual pocket, I thought, how adorable. "Here." He held out a black book. Then he snatched it back. "Wait a minute. It's not done yet. Can you wait?" He disappeared into his apartment. I could hear drawers opening and shutting, and above us, the faint twangs of my young man's guitar. I concentrated on his voice, trying to determine if he was serious about practicing or if he was just noodling around.

The door opened. With a shaking hand, Ernest handed me the book. Now it had a cover fashioned from blue construction paper. The words I DREAD THE FALL OF NIGHT were stuck on unevenly with clear stickers like a ransom note.

Wonder, a word
I hadn't thought
about in a while,
though I wondered
about things
all the time.

"That's a gift. I hope you like it."

I opened the cover and flipped through the pages, remembering the quick flash of his handwriting I'd seen at the park. Now that scribble was transformed into these typed pages—all those words Ernest had managed to string together! How had he done it? I'd started so many stories, but hadn't finished one.

"They're ghost stories." He leaned in. "Sometimes I go walking at night when I can't sleep. This is an old city—ghosts, they follow me."

I was about to tell Ernest that I didn't believe in ghosts when my young man's playing grew loud and violent.

"Your man up there—he likes to sing, eh?"

I nodded. He was working on an album, but I didn't tell Ernest that. Lately when my young man played, marathon sessions of the same song, I'd make up an excuse and leave. I could tell it hurt his feelings, but I couldn't make myself stay. It felt like a matter of survival. Something inside me would scream—*Get out now, while you still have your own thoughts!*—and I'd flee, sometimes just to the cold front steps of our building, where I'd sit, my notebook open on my knees.

Ernest raised his eyebrows when the singing got louder. "Does it bother you?"

He shrugged. "I'm old and I don't guess I get the new music."

"You're not old." It was a lie and we both knew it. He looked at me sadly through rheumy eyes.

I don't know why, but I leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Thanks for the book, Mr. Mulvaney."

He turned red. "Call me Ernest."

I reddened too. I took a step back. Why had I kissed him? It was as if, standing there on the landing with him, I'd had a sense of us as characters in a book—the young woman and the old man. A kiss, but no transformation.

He slipped through his door again, dragging the box with him, and was about to shut it, when I stopped him. "How long did it take you to write this?" I weighed the book with one hand—it had to be at least three hundred pages.

"Wrong question," Ernest said. "You're a writer. I see you," he waved his hand, "out there with your notebook." I blushed again—I had been *seen*. All this time, I'd thought it was me doing the looking. "You could start by asking the right questions."

"Like what?"

He shrugged. "I can't tell you what to wonder about."

Wonder, a word I hadn't thought about in a while, though I wondered about things all the time. I often wondered about Ernest, especially in those moments when I passed his apartment and could hear him typing. I wondered if he ever struggled with writing, what books were on his shelves, if he had a closet full of old suits, if there was a woman in his past, if he kept her picture in his wallet or in a leather frame by his bed. And what did his bed look like anyway? I imagined it like a monk's—a bare mattress on the floor with a single thin blanket. What had he been like as a young man? Embarrassed, I realized what I had been wondering all along, would I have been attracted to Ernest if we had been young at the same time?

"I used to be a bricklayer," Ernest said. "When I was a young fellow. Put one brick down and then another, and sooner or later, you'll have a wall."

I nodded.

"That's all it is. Just write one sentence and then another. There's no mystery. Anyone can do it." He took a step backward into his apartment, his face falling half into shadow. "And put that in your bag—it might snow." Then he shut the door, and I heard the deadbolt click into place.

I put the book to my nose. Fresh ink, a faint library smell, and in my chest, the swell of anticipation. I started up the stairs, but stopped midway when my young man's voice, straining at the edges, filled the stairwell. If I opened

the door, I would find him in our tiny living room, his face flushed, using his whole body to push a song out. Sometimes, it reminded me of a woman in labor. Other times, I felt jealous at how easily songs came to him, as if through the open window, little melodies that just trickled out of his fingertips as they flew up and down the fretboard. I was already wondering, subconsciously, if there was enough room for two artists in our little apartment, or in our relationship. Back then, I had a deficit view of talent, a deficit view of love, only so much to go around, so take what you can, while you can.

I walked down the stairs. When I pushed the front door open, I saw that it was starting to snow and that the streetlamps were casting little orbs of light onto the sidewalk. Some of them flickered. Ernest's ghosts. I would follow them and see where they led.

* * *

All this happened many years ago. I'm ashamed to admit this now, but I read only half of the stories in Ernest's book. One was about a night watchman who discovers the hotel he guards every night is haunted. Each room of the old hotel has a different ghost, each more malevolent than the last. Not a bad idea, but Ernest's sentences seemed antiquated, overly formal, a bit stuffy. I'd always intended to read the rest, but there were so many books back then and I used to sample them like a box of chocolates, or like lovers, a bite here and there. Eventually, I put Ernest's book on my shelf, between Morrison and Munro. Good company, I thought, the best. He couldn't ask for more.

Because of the construction paper and the stickers, the book stuck out, and sometimes friends would notice it, pull it from the shelf, and chuckle at the coarse paper, the old-fashioned type, and the audacity it took to self-publish a book—this was years before Amazon. "Don't make fun," I would say, snatching it back. "This represents one man's inner life. Who are you to judge?"

The following year, I moved to a new city, taking Ernest's book with me, but leaving the young man behind. I put the book on a shelf above my writing desk where, in the early mornings, I wrote. When I felt stupid or began to doubt myself, I'd look up at Ernest's book, sometimes touching the spine. "Be like Ernest," I'd tell myself. "Just

write one sentence and then one more. There's no mystery." He was right. If I sat there long enough, sentences would come; one would suggest and shape the next. As I lay down my sentences, I often had the sense that something was being built, though I didn't always feel that it was me doing the building. The best times were when I disappeared.

Eventually, some of my stories were published in literary magazines. When I won a contest, an agent contacted me. My first book debuted a few years later. This was a real book with an editor, a publicist, and a designer who created the cover. No blue construction paper for me. I thought about sending a copy to Ernest, but I doubted he still lived in that brownstone. If he was still alive, he was probably in some facility.

Two decades passed. I moved a few more times; I wrote a second book. For a while, I was happy.

* * *

But in my midforties, I began to feel unsatisfied. What I'd thought was happiness seemed shallow, washed out, flat. Is this all there is? I wondered. I had given up a lot to be a writer. I had ended relationships when they demanded too much of me. I had never had a child, and now it was too late. Like Ernest had been, I was the oldest person in my building. There was even a baby living in the apartment below me, and sometimes I could hear it crying, its mother humming a lullaby. Then I would put a baby in my story, and this baby would cry too much, or have a hole in its heart, or some such nonsense, but it was just a paper baby, a figment of my imagination, unlike the baby below me, who always rewarded my smiles with its own toothless grin. For the first time, writing seemed a poor exchange for real life.

I needed a change. I needed to put down roots. I no more apartment living, no more city hopping. I decided to buy a small house with a yard where I could plant tulips. I would get a cat. I would meet the neighbors.

The old house I found needed work. Over the next year, I busied myself with the tasks of a new homeowner: I painted, I planted, I rearranged. I adopted an old cat with a rheumy eye. I even got a part-time job teaching at a small college where my students shyly asked me to sign my first book. It was still in print. This is life, I thought, a series of tasks you check off before bed. Be happy.

*Reading the story,
I felt both excited
and shaken. Was
it mine or Ernest's?
Had I plagiarized it?*

and then something yeasty and soiled. Something about this combination of sounds and smells . . . so familiar. Then she knows. It's her baby, the one she abandoned years before. Look at the life you gave away, the baby ghost seems to be saying, look at what you abandoned! The traveler throws the covers off, runs to the door, but finds she cannot open it. The doorknob is missing. When she turns, the baby is lying in the middle of the bed, kicking its arms and legs, demanding to be picked up. Even as she walks toward the bed, the traveler knows that when she picks the baby up, she will never be able to put it down. She will be rooted to that place, becoming a ghost herself.

When the flame died out, I was done. My handwriting seemed sharper, more slanted, almost male. Reading the story, I felt both excited and shaken. Was it mine or Ernest's? Had I plagiarized it? Was he writing through me, or had I discovered a new way of writing? I decided to type it, making little edits as I went, and then, to gain some distance and objectivity, I didn't look at it for a week. When I reread it, I understood something: the language was mine, but not the plot or setting; Ernest, that old ghost, had guided my hand.

* * *

I sent the story to a small, well-regarded literary magazine under Ernest's name. If there was any credit to be had, I wanted him to get it. I had to open a fake email account, which I checked obsessively for two months. When the story was accepted, the editor asked if Ernest had a website, and so one afternoon, I made one, a simple website, black and white with a picture of my cat sleeping on a windowsill.

Instead of a security guard, a traveler on her way home. She stops for an elusive good night's sleep at the only hotel in town. In the first room, she hears knocking sounds, a thump behind the closet door, and when she opens it, she finds the first ghost, a beautiful young man, hanging from the ceiling. His body twists on the rope as she stands there, too horrified to scream. Then she sees his face, just like the young man who once proposed to her. Was it him? She screams, shuts the door. The concierge shrugs when she complains and hands her the key to another room.

In the second room, the traveler readies herself for bed. She's tired, nervous. She's been gone for many years and planned to drive the last one hundred miles to her childhood town the following day. In the bathroom, as she washes her face, she hears a vacuum cleaner in the room behind her. When she opens the door and peeks out, the sound ceases. She gets into bed, turns out the lights. New sounds come from the bathroom: a spray bottle, scrubbing, the tap water rushing through the faucet. She turns over in the bed and crushes the extra pillow to her ear. She's just about to get up when the sounds stop. Finally. She closes her eyes. Then she hears footsteps coming toward her. Cold hands wrap around her throat and squeeze, cutting off her air. With a burst of force, the traveler leaps from the bed and manages to wrench the door open.

This time, the concierge utters a rueful chuckle, "Old Maria." When the traveler demands to know who old Maria is, the concierge tells her that she had been one of the maids. Fifty years earlier, Maria had been strangled in that very room, right there on the bed. But she hadn't shown her face in some time. Something about the traveler must have angered her. Maybe it was the way she'd thrown her clothes on the floor? Left a mess in the bathroom? He raises his eyebrows.

The third room has to be better. But this room had the ghost of a baby. And the sounds this baby makes! Adorable coos and babbles, happy gales of laughter. Well, the traveler thinks, at least it isn't going to kill her. She settles into bed as the laughter changes, becomes a sad whimpering. The baby begins to cry, soft and weak at first, and then louder, until the cries become angry, accusatory. The traveler puts a pillow over her head, though that does nothing to block the baby's screams. She smells lavender, powdered milk,

When the fever broke, I understood something: I had been careless with Ernest's gift; I had lost my talisman. All those years, I had drawn from its power. Its mere presence had fueled me, had given me permission. Now, without it, words wouldn't come.

I had to get it back. I searched online, scoured used bookstores and thrift shops, asked the proprietors, but no one had seen such a book or heard of Ernest Mulvaney. The proprietors dutifully wrote my name and phone number down on slips of paper that I knew would be forgotten as soon as I left the store. For months, I kept my eyes open, rifling through boxes of books at yard sales, making regular trips to the Goodwill, always looking for that blue cover, those hastily put on stickers.

Finally, I went to a therapist, who told me it was absurd to think my writer's block had anything to do with Ernest's missing book. "It's not writer's block," I'd insisted. "It's a curse. I was careless with his gift. I had too much pride. I looked down on it and now I'm paying the price." The therapist told me that was a "distorted thought" and suggested I try a different hobby. "I hobby," I croaked. "I hobby?" I never went back.

Ernest would understand. He was the real writer because he'd written for himself. He didn't need attention or accolades. His writing had come from a pure place. I owed him an apology. I sat down at my writing desk, lit a candle, and watched the flame. "Ernest," I said out loud, "I made a mistake and I'm sorry. I hope you can forgive me wherever you are." Then I waited for some sort of sign. Silly, I know. I hadn't used to be a silly person, but there I was waiting for the flame to mysteriously flare out or for a bird to hit the window, anything. I won't get up, I thought, until something happens. As I watched the flame, I felt my hand moving across my notebook. When I looked down, the title of Ernest's book appeared at the top of the page in handwriting that didn't look like mine. I returned to the flame, concentrating on the gradations of color. My hand moved again without conscious effort. I looked down. "Vacancy at the Hopley Hotel." The back of my neck tingled, as if someone had brushed a fingernail or a feather against it. My hand began to move across the page, slowly at first and then with more certainty. I was in a sort of trance, though I could feel his presence looming behind me, urging my hand on.

When I did, finally, sit down at my writing desk, I looked out the window at the tulips I'd planted. A rainbow of colors, something lush and alive, where before there had been crabgrass and gravel. Now I can begin again, I thought. But no sentences presented themselves that day, no images swam up from the depths. Fine, fine, I told myself. Tomorrow.

Days went by, weeks, and then months and all I produced were a few stillborn sentences. I would scan the newspapers for ideas, reread my favorite books, hoping for a jolt. The tulips shed their petals. Browning, the petals curled like old scrolls and littered the yard. Summer turned to fall.

I considered the possibility that my time as a writer might be over. Maybe I had a shelf life. But lots of writers wrote into old age—look at Ernest. What had changed? I kept asking myself. Then one day, I remembered my old habit of reaching up and touching the spine of Ernest's book, something I hadn't done in a long time, and realized the book wasn't there. I searched my other bookshelves, the bedrooms, the few boxes I hadn't unpacked. I tried to remember the last time I'd seen it. Was it in my last apartment? Or two apartments ago? It didn't matter; it was gone.

I felt sick. Literally, I fell into bed with a fever. For days, I thrashed about in damp sheets as I shivered or sweated. I managed, a few times a day, to stumble to the sink for water and to dump kibble in the cat's bowl. Feverish dreams came to me in my half-waking state, the faces of people I once knew, my young man, my parents, childhood friends, Ernest, all of them paraded through my bedroom, all demanding to know one thing or another: Why was I alone? And why had I lost Ernest's book?

What I hadn't wanted to admit was that Ernest's book, a relic of a time lost to me now, had made me sad. Many of the people I knew from my days on Comm. Ave. are dead, and not just Ernest, several old friends, former coworkers, and the young man, too. I'd heard, secondhand, that he'd had a long illness. He'd suffered. I hadn't wanted that for him. People, they just die, and you never get the chance to say goodbye. Like with Ernest. On my last day in the building, I stood outside his door, listened to him typing, and decided not to disturb him. I'll come back, I thought, but I never did.

In the biography section, I wrote: *Ernest Mulvaney lives on a street full of cats and tulips. When he isn't writing, he's an amateur photographer, a gambler, and a ghost whisperer.* At a café I frequented, I took a picture of an older gentleman, his face half obscured by a coffee cup and large, veiny hands. I positioned the picture above the bio. It was a little artsy, a little coy, the way he looked over the cup, his bushy gray eyebrows raised with curiosity. I even wrote a few blog posts. I half convinced myself Ernest was alive again.

When the magazine arrived in the mailbox, I reread the story. It still surprised me how different it was from anything I'd written before. I put the magazine above my writing desk in the spot where his book used to sit. "Are you happy now?" I said out loud, believing my penance to be over.

It was time for me to get back to my real work. I sat down at my open notebook. Naïvely, I expected a door in my mind to unlock, a window to swing open, a synapse to connect. But that's not how ghosts work. Ghosts are greedy, wanting more and more of you.

Eventually, I did complete a new story, but it was without a pulse. "What more do you want?" I yelled at Ernest, tearing a draft of the story into tiny pieces. I ran outside, through various neighborhoods, one bleeding into the next, until I ended up at the river. Watching the water, I said, "There is no such thing as ghosts, there is no such thing as ghosts." I kept saying it until I believed it. Ernest didn't exist except in my own head.

When I finally got home, I swept the bits of paper up and opened my computer. I would try again. One bad story was no reason to quit. But an email notification for Ernest popped up on my screen from a name I didn't recognize. Just ignore it, I thought, but of course, I couldn't. It was from a literary agent who'd read the story and wanted to know if Ernest had any others. Before I could stop myself, I wrote back and said he was working on a collection of ghost stories called *I Dread the Fall of Night*.

"Ghosts are hot right now," she wrote back. "Send me what you have."

So that was it, my task, my true penance—I would have to rewrite all of Ernest's stories, even though I hardly remembered them. Only then, I reasoned, would I be free.

* * *

"There's no mystery," Ernest had said once. But he was

wrong. It is a mystery, where ideas come from, though maybe that's not the point. The point is an idea is a gift; one will come to you when you least expect it. But it helps to humble yourself, to get down on your knees and pray, or maybe the writing is a prayer. And when an idea comes to you, you have to follow it even if other people think it's foolish or impulsive or strange.

The idea to go back to the old city came to me one afternoon, after I'd tried to channel Ernest. Two hours of staring into the flame yielded only two words: Comm. Ave. Go back, I thought. I must go back. Of course that's what I should do. It felt inevitable. I bought a plane ticket, booked a hotel, took my cat to a kennel. The traveler on her way home. Who knew what ghosts I'd encounter?

I took a red-eye, then a cab to the hotel, where I left my bags. Immediately, I walked to the corner of Comm. and Mass. Aves. I started up the north side of the street and stopped to look at the brownstone where I'd once lived. A faded brown door, pale brick, probably the shabbiest one on the whole street. It hadn't changed. That's what I like about brownstones—they're eternal, like the pyramids.

I walked on. It was midsummer, muggy. The tulips were long since gone, but I didn't mind. Comm. Ave. is beautiful any time of year. Between Gloucester and Fairfield were three bronze statues I'd never seen before of women, all writers, who'd spent most of their lives in this city. I stopped to read the inscriptions. "Imagination! Who can sing thy force," Phillis Wheatley wrote so long ago. "Or who describe the swiftness of thy course?"

I walked on. What would have happened if I'd stayed? I've often wondered that. Would I have become a writer at all? Would I have gotten married? At the time, I didn't believe I could do both.

When I got to the memorial for the lost firemen, I stopped. There, beyond it, was the bench Ernest had been sitting on one day a month or so before I left.

That day, I'd made a decision. I was going to leave, though I hadn't yet told my young man. I'd been toying with the idea for a while, saving money, checking the rents and job prospects in other parts of the country. I would have stayed in that beautiful city, but I couldn't afford to live there on my own. And I wanted to live alone for a while, so that, like a bashful bride, I could give myself over to writing.

I was relieved to see Ernest sitting there; he was a distraction. It was late spring and everything was wet and cold, but he'd had the foresight to place a garbage bag over the park bench.

"I've been reading your book," I told him.

For a second, his eyes had a hazy, unfocused look. Then he snapped to attention. "Oh, it's you." He scooted over, and I sat next to him on the other half of the bag. His hands were on top of a notebook in his lap, his fingers laced together, the knuckles veiny and swollen with arthritis, the kind of hands Michelangelo might have drawn and made beautiful.

"And?"

"It's original. It's different from anything I've ever read. Have you sold many copies?"

"I've sold plenty."

"Oh. Well, good."

We were sitting across from one of my favorite brownstones. It had wide stone steps that led to an arched doorway and heavy black doors. But what I loved most was the brick tower with tall, curved windows, and ivy creeping halfway to the top. Memorize this place, I told myself, for later.

"Do you really believe in ghosts?" I asked. "I mean, have you ever seen one with your own eyes?"

Ernest glanced at me, maybe to see if I was sincere. "I hear them mostly, if I can shut my goddamn mind up and let them speak."

I knew that if I told my young man this detail, he would suggest, in his offhand way, that Ernest was crazy. "Hearing voices?" he might say, his eyebrows raised. This imaginary infraction seemed, to me, another good reason to leave.

"Are you listening to them now?"

He grinned slyly. "There was one here a few minutes ago, sitting right where you are now."

"What did it tell you?"

"She. She told me that she'd once dug up a body on her property, by accident, of course. She had dug a big hole when her shovel hit the skull."

"Creepy. Did she live on this street?"

He pointed at the tower. "Right there."

"She must have been rich."

Ernest shrugged. "Don't hold it against her."

I laughed.

Then we were quiet for a while, listening to street

traffic. I could see the shadow of a person in the top window. I wanted to ask Ernest how I should break up with my young man. I'd never broken up with someone before and I was afraid of a scene. Worse, he'd been hinting at marriage, and I was worried that if I didn't leave soon, he'd pull out a ring.

"I need some advice," I said.

Ernest surprised me by putting his finger to his lips. He tipped his head. He closed his eyes. I looked around. Was there a ghost nearby?

He uncapped his pen and began to write, his hand moving faster and faster across the page. Maybe writers are nothing more than radios, positioned in the right spot, tuning themselves until they hear the music, however faint.

Finally, I stood. I made a coughing sound, hoping Ernest would look up, but he was lost in his story. I felt disappointed. I would have to figure out what to say to my young man on my own, and I hoped I wouldn't rely on clichés—it's not you, it's me, that sort of thing—though it was true, it was me. I walked on. At the corner, I looked back. Memorize that tower, I thought, memorize that streetlamp, the tulips, that old man writing, take a picture of it with your mind's eye so you can put it in a story one day.

I never saw Ernest again. I never saw my young man again either. Now, all these years later, I sit down on that same bench. "I'm here," I say. "I've come back." I open my notebook to a blank page. I tip my ear, close my eyes, and wait. If I'm lucky, if the dead do speak, Ernest, or some other lost soul, might whisper through the static, saying, *Start like this . . .*

Nicole Simonsen's short stories have appeared in *Washington Square Review*, *Raleigh Review*, *Tin House Online*, and elsewhere. She has won the Fifth Wednesday Journal Editor's Prize and the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Norman Mailer Writing Award for an essay written by an English teacher. She has an MA in creative writing from the University of California, Davis, and was awarded the Still-Emerging Scholarship at the Tin House Summer Workshops.