

**Young Writers Award
Winner
2016**

**An Overflow of Dust
by Tee Indawongse**

The reading of the will was short. No relatives, few possessions, hardly any money. Most of it went to Laurel; the rest to a local charity. She took the boxes full of books and trinkets and the weight of it reminded her of the funeral on the boat, the moments before she said goodbye. This wasn't something they prepared you for. The fact that death left behind a thousand little goodbyes. It was hardly final. It was something that you need to spill out again and again.

Goodbye, goodbye, goodbye.

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Laurel pulled out moths from her mouth—one, then two, then three. They were small and fluttering creatures, flying from her fingers as soon as she released them. Dust from their wings coated her tongue, making her cough, *gag*. The taste of it reminded her of ash, the last pull of a cigarette as it burned up to the filter, something toxic and foreign.

Grief flew away from her, heading towards the open window. Laurel stumbled past the moths, to the bathroom, turning on the taps to rinse out her mouth. She brushed her teeth twice to get rid of the taste, and made her way back to bed in the dark. Only one of the moths were still in her room, fluttering listlessly above her pillow.

She watched it for a while, wary, before batting it away with her hands and slipping under the covers again. Laurel hoped for a dreamless sleep. It had been a month now, and the moths were still appearing. Grief, according to the research, tended to be moths, though bees were common too. She should have counted herself lucky not to have gotten bees; they stung.

So Laurel closed her eyes and dreamt of honey, but woke up with ash in her mouth and the fluttering of wings at the back of her throat.

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It was summer, and Laurel had her hair buzzed to the scalp. You could see old scars now that her hair wasn't hiding it. She felt the breeze of the ocean slide across her bare head as she walked along the beach. The air tasted of salt and westerly winds.

Summer saw the air filled with colourful butterflies—joy, harmony, peace. It was holidays and so many families lined the beaches, spilling delight as easy as breathing. There were so many butterflies that nearly no-one noticed the small grey wings that clung to Laurel's earrings or the few hiding in the shade of her starched collar.

Dan loved sunny days, loved the crash of waves mixing with the taste of pier-bought lime gelato. Laurel felt a sob turn into a swallowed cough, and felt legs scratching at the inside of her throat, a lump she could almost choke on. Instead she brought up another moth, and she caught it in her hands. It unfurled its wings and made no attempt to fly.

Laurel placed it gingerly in her pocket, heavy as an anchor. It was hers, regardless whether she wanted it or not. She went up to the ice-cream truck and bought herself a lime gelato.

She hated lime. As she made her way down the boardwalk, it dripped down her hand, and she washed her sticky fingers in seawater stained pink and orange hues by the bleeding sunset. When she brought them to her mouth, she tasted salt, and no traces of anything else.

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The room was big and airy, a large window allowing the midday sun to stream onto the seats. The walls were plastered with posters and photographs, all vaguely inspirational and oversaturated with brightness. Everything about the room was bright, as if that would be enough to chase away clinging shadows.

Laurel watched as a middle-aged mother spoke of her alcohol addiction. She was covered in crickets—the mark of self-loathing, self-hatred, self-destruction. It was an uncomfortable sight. The mother kept crying, sobs that were mixed with the unceasing chirping of her personal plague.

It was almost hard to listen to her speak over the din of insects. Crickets and grasshoppers alike were spread across the floor, hopping over shoes and under seats. It was rare to see so many emotionally-borne insects clustered together like this. Laurel had never seen wasps circle as malevolently as they did here. Her moths tended to stick close to her—her grief was private. The wasps though belonged to a small man who seemed so quiet and calm that it was deceiving—those wasps were rage manifested.

That strength of violent emotion could be enough to get someone locked up, if they weren't careful. It was rare to have swarms attack others, but it wasn't unheard of. There were laws in place to police it if it did, though it was still a point of contention over how much control people had over the bugs. Laurel watched as they crawled up and down his arms, restless.

Laurel shifted in her seat, uncomfortable and sweating despite the air-conditioning units working full blast in the summer heat. She didn't belong here. Moths perched precariously on her shoulders and knees, and she wanted to crumple them all up. Catching one in her hand, she tried to crush it in a fist, but when she opened her hand, it was empty, as if nothing was ever there.

The woman kept crying, almost transforming into part of the background hum, and Laurel saw through the windows that the skies were painfully blue. The colour of Dan's eyes. The shade of sky that marked the day she threw his ashes into the sea.

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Summer meant Christmas, at least in Australia, and soon shopfronts were busy hanging paper cut-outs of snowflakes and foam-made snowmen as everyone tried to ignore the fact it never snowed this time of year. Laurel had made her usual rounds in preparation for the holiday season; perfume for her cousin, cards for her co-workers, and flowers for her parents' graves.

It was dusk now, and she sat on the beach, tired from what the day had stolen away from her. She felt drained, like the masses of humanity sucked out the breath from her lungs and left her gasping for air, drowning in plain sight. Everyone was so damned *happy*. It was a chaotic mess of butterflies and ladybugs and even the occasional dragonfly.

Damp sand felt nice against her toes, in between her fingers. She watched the waves churning and wondered when she would be okay again. The timelines for these things were messy. The stages of grief were uncertain blueprints to a building that could not be mapped.

She never told Dan how she felt. Not so much in words. She hoped he knew, somehow, in her actions. In her group therapy, everyone talked a lot about wishing. Wishing things were different, wishing for a second chance, wishing for another five minutes to say the things they always wanted to say.

Laurel exhaled, heavily, before breathing in deeply the tang of ocean spray. Salt, found in tears and sweat and the sea. She didn't need forgiveness. She didn't need to say anything more to Dan. She just needed... something she couldn't describe. A moth crawled behind her ear, then stilled, waiting. It didn't bother her so much, not anymore.

The sun sank below the band of the horizon and Laurel sat until the moon was high and bright and bathed everything silver.