

Shanee Stepakoff

Winner of Reed Magazine's 2016 Gabriele Rico Creative Nonfiction Award

(for a piece entitled "Three Witnesses and One Silence")

Judge's Remarks

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Putting the story into the form of a poem was a brilliant and daring act of creativity. It helped make a difficult subject matter more palatable (if that is at all possible). The folklore narrative style is well-suited to the composition and reminds me of Chinua Achebe and some of the other great African writers, while the repetition of certain phrases is evocative of African drum beats. What also came to mind in reading it was my mother's memoir—the one she'd nearly finished when she died. She used a similar form for part of the narrative—the child's voice—and I think she would have appreciated how much punch it gave the story while not pushing the reader away with almost too painful material. Reading this essay made me uncomfortable, but it also made me extremely angry and extremely sad. The last "song," left blank, was simply bone-chilling. Poetry is all about boiling what it means to be human down into a few essential words, and in this case no words said as much as the other three "songs" together.

—Judge Suzanne Rico