

2018  
 Alex Albright  
 Creative Nonfiction Prize  
 SECOND PLACE

# LOOK

# ING

# FOR

# CHARLES

*AN ESSAY BY JENNIFER HARDING*

## Lake View Cemetery

As I sit in the cemetery director's office, I doubt whether I can lie. I have made this pilgrimage to Cleveland to try bluffing my way to the gravesite of Charles Chesnutt, my

favorite author, whose stories I teach religiously. Now that I'm actually here, the words I had planned to speak – "I'm Charles Chesnutt's great-granddaughter" – do not come readily to my lips. I'm a terrible liar.

I had expected to find Chesnutt in a small out-of-the way cemetery. I'm surprised by the beauty and enormity of this old cemetery where he's buried. It is "Cleveland's Outdoor Museum," a brochure jauntily informs me. I am currently being assisted by the director, who punches in "Chesnutt" on his computer and pulls up a map of the cemetery. On the director's desk are small stone rectangles that remind me of the countertop samples at Ikea. I guess I'm not his typical patron. This man must help people pick out gravesites and headstones, because, as a brochure reminds me with gothic glee, "Lake View is not full." He looks up from his screen and says, "Let's go," and we leave the office together on a quest to find the Chesnutt

plot. I sense that the director doesn't know who Chesnutt was. He seems confident, but I'm worried that the Chesnutt site will elude us.

Back out in the bright hot summer

day, I join my husband in our Volkswagen and follow the director's minivan on its slow drive through the hills of Lake View Cemetery, like a tiny funeral procession passing an uneven marble skyline. We drive by obelisks and mausoleums and the final resting places of John D. Rockefeller and President James Garfield, until we finally reach a peaceful section of flat headstones and dappled shadows.



COURTESY OF JENNIFER HARDING

JENNIFER HARDING is an Associate Professor of English at Washington & Jefferson College in Washington, PA. She has published numerous articles on Charles Chesnutt's short stories, including an essay in the MLA volume *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Charles W. Chesnutt*.

Harding also lectured on Chesnutt's stories as a Fulbright scholar in the Czech Republic in 2017.

Upon selecting this essay for second place, final judge Randall Kenan wrote, "I like this piece a lot. Very complicated. Very unexpected."