

Firefly Ridge

LITERARY MAGAZINE

EDITED BY ZELDA LOCKHART



Winner of the 2016 Women's Writing Award is **CANTRICE J. PENN** for her short story, "The Orange Line."

Finalists are **FAITH S. HOLSAERT** and **ELIZABETH ZERTUCHE**

Judge for the 2016 Women's Writing Award was **METTA SÁMA**

Metta Sáma is author of *le animal & other creatures* (Miel Books), *After "Sleeping to Dream"/After After* (Nous-Zot), *Nocturne Trio* (YesYes Books) & *South of Here*, published under her legal name, Lydia Melvin, by New Issues Press. Her poems, fiction, and creative nonfiction essays have been published in *Heir Apparent*, *Valley Voices*, *Puerto del Sol's Black Voices Series*, *Literary Hub*, *Kweli*, *bluestem*, *Apogee*, *All About Skin* (edited by Jina Ortiz & Rochelle Spencer), *Please Excuse This Poem: 100 Poets for the Next Generation* (edited by Lynn Melnick & Brett Fletcher Lauer), among others. She has served as special guest editor for *Reverie*, *Black Camera*, *RedLeaf Poetry Journal* and *North American Review*. She serves on the board of Cave Canem and VIDA and is a Fellow at Black Earth Institute. Sáma is the director of Center for Women Writers and an Assistant Professor and Director of Creative Writing at Salem College.



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Studios**

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Firefly Ridge Literary Magazine is an online publication produced yearly by LaVenson Press Studios. The magazine highlights the works of women who have taken the Studios' workshops and those who have won the Firefly Ridge Women's Writing Award.

From the Editor: Over the past thirteen years I have taught countless women to use writing as a mode of expressing their life experiences, as a mode of healing from those experiences, and as a mode of celebrating their gifts, yet much of their writing remained unfinished, because it remained unpublished. Firefly Ridge Literary Magazine is one of the many possible conduits for their art to reach you.

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photo by Danist Soh

The Orange Line

a short story by

CANTRICE J. PENN

“**W**ow, you bring Véronique’s name up, like, a lot,” Jazz would say the night we laid in his bed in the basement of his parents’ house – the same bed that we used to giggle at when it would squeak from the rhythm of our merged, brown bodies.

He pulled me into his neck and chest to kiss me, his body still emitting warm hints of cologne that filled my head with all the times he’d driven me around town in his silver ’94 Prelude, and the way he always cleared his throat before well-formed thoughts emerged from his mouth. But I barely kissed him back. His brow wrinkled as his chin jerked into his neck. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” I said quickly, swallowing the heat in my mouth, blinking back tears as my ears twitched at the shrill sounds of proud crickets rubbing the membranes of their wings in unison against the dark on the other side of the double-paned window above us.

But it all felt so foreign now, here in Jazz’s bed, lying next to him. That same foreign feeling I got a few weeks before, when he put his arm around me in the ticket line at the movie theater, only for me to brush

it away. I kept thinking about Véronique Bertrand and all of the other women I had dreamt about. My shoulders grew cold as I allowed my forearm to casually fall between us over the sheet, like a striped wooden arm at a railroad crossing, creating a force field around my body that I hoped he wouldn’t really notice. My thoughts fastened onto my gaze, traveling the uneven terrain of the hills and valleys of the dingy popcorn ceiling above in his bedroom. I didn’t know how I was going to tell Jazz that I didn’t want to be with him anymore. My heart sank deeper into my chest.

I wasn’t sure if I should tell him about the way she made me feel. The way I melted at the crooked smile perched on the edge of her mouth when she swaggered down the hall at work with the confidence of a seasoned employee. The way a feverish warmth collected in my chest and between my thighs whenever she was around. But I had kept all of that a secret on the inside.

“I kinda... I had this... fantasy about wanting to kiss this girl at work.” The string of words at the end of my confession would rush from my lips like Class

V rapids on the Potomac River when Jazz called the next night. My mouth watered the dry places in my throat as constellations of goosebumps formed on my skin. “You know... Véronique.”

A long silence fell on the line. A silence that spanned the open road of Route 123, whose bright yellow lines mapped the awkward space between us. I was expecting him to lash out. Yell. Tell me to go to hell. Hang up in my face.

“Well, I mean... that’s normal, though. See, girls can do that. But not guys. Plus, we were having a hard time last year, remember?” Jazz said in his trademark Valley guy accent. He had decided that these thoughts of mine had surfaced, because we had gone through a rough patch that summer.

My right ear warmed against the overheating cell phone cradled in my neck as I fingered the waves that rippled the flannel blanket on my bed, a geometric collage of black and bright, bold colors that

I was expecting him to lash out. Yell. Tell me to go to hell. Hang up in my face.

had helped warm my shivering body back to life in my dorm room last year when the harsh Northern

Virginia winters threatened to cancel class and blanket the landscape with quiet whispers of snowfall. I didn’t know what to say to his response. When we hung up, my gaze met the floor, trying to figure out why Jazz was so calm about everything.

Sheldon Mensah, Jr. was his government name, but everybody called him Jazz, a nickname that stuck after he picked up the trumpet in high school. Along with his parents, siblings and aunts, he moved

to the United States when he was six years old, to put down roots in Woodbridge, Virginia – a Washington, DC, suburb just south of I-95, the highway that cut through the Occoquan River, whose boat-lined shores boasted a handful of shops and eateries bordered in weather-worn siding that overlooked the water, erasing almost all traces of the Doeg people who had been forced out centuries ago.

Jazz and I met at the 1998 Harvest Jam put on by the African Student Association at George Mason University, the student group that welcomed me with open arms as an honorary Ethiopian – probably because of the Lauryn Hill-style, blackberry stain from Sephora that coated my lips and the half-processed Wave Nouveau I got put in my hair just before school started.

Layers of rainbows and light travelled across the dance floor, where a pair of big-veined, masculine arms slid underneath my startled arms from behind. I turned around to discover a guy whose name I didn’t know yet, whose loose, white linen shirt layered over a tight, white cotton undershirt would underscore his deep brown skin that brushed against mine as he closed his eyes and cradled his chin in the groove between my neck and shoulder. I should’ve been offended in that moment, but I enjoyed the attention. Fractured, mirrored bits of light would dance right along with us that night, bouncing off of the smooth, soulful sounds of 112. I was 19 and Jazz was 20. My first boyfriend. An old soul, he had a megawatt smile and cried at tear-jerker films and hurt feelings more than I did.

The summer after my junior year at Mason, I decided to intern as a receptionist at the North American satellite office of a European news agency that sat on the fourth floor of a big glass building lined in gold trim and pink stone, with long hallways that echoed against the faint city sounds of excit-

ed jackhammers and wailing sirens in the heart of DC's business district – the same area of town that would have my mother fight back tears one day, as we clocked a trial run from the on-campus student apartments to the hot, stuffy confines of the Metro, an underground, color-coded gateway to the city, teeming with oversized dust particles caught in the beam of train headlights, and rushed commuters clutching newspapers and PDAs.

On my first day of the internship, Clara-Beth – a middle-aged editorial assistant who, despite her ginger appearance, had a New Jersey edge about her and always called me “sugar” before the work-day officially started – gave me the grand tour of the office, and whispered into my ear the little unspoken subtleties to watch out for whenever the bosses were around. But I stopped listening when a young woman, who looked about my age, caught my eye. A young woman whose graceful stride would rival that of any high-level executive in the office.

I finally gathered a few moments after lunch to collapse into the office chair at my new desk, where I unrolled my sleeves and the uneven layers of confusion and anxiety and excitement in my mind, hoping that my time at the agency would help me flex my French-language skills and satisfy the job experience that future employers would probe for after my completed international communications degree. I only had one year left at Mason, and was determined to take on a job that would allow me to grow into something much bigger than my Chesterfield County roots.

My boss, Mr. DesRochers, was a tall, burly white man who hardly ever smiled, with hair that matched the dark coffee in the chipped white mug he always toted around the office. He would come by my desk to drop off my latest assignment, interrupting a steady flow of photocopying that would keep me

from falling asleep after lunch each afternoon.

This time, a round of phone calls to a handful of mom-and-pop car-rental outfits in the Caribbean, where it was my job to dispute unauthorized charges made to the company credit card. “*D'accord*,” I agreed. I tried to look interested, studying the carbon yellow slips he handed me that would stain my fingertips a strange shade of slate blue. After he went back into his office, my chin settled into my palm propped up by my elbow, as Ledisi's hopeful, upbeat “Take Time” hummed in the background on WHUR to the beat of blinking green and red lights on the multiline phone in front of me.

A few days later, I finally met the mystery woman I had seen around the office. “*C'est Véronique Bertrand*. She'll be working with us cet été,” Clara-Beth would introduce me, in French, to another intern from France working as an executive assistant for the reporting department. Right away, I noted Véronique's full lips and that she was a bit taller than me. She extended her long, thin hand with a warm smile. “*Enchantée*.” I shook her hand, barely able to look up at her, hoping that I didn't have any pen marks or stray crumbs from lunch on my face.

Véronique. Her name melted onto the tongue like gentle drops of honey, the same color as her eyes.

Eyes that seemed to sparkle whenever she stood still. I had never met anyone like her. She seemed so relaxed and self-assured

I had never met anyone like her.

all the time. Unlike me, who would lose my cool whenever my kitten-heeled sling-backs clacked across the big, metal grates embedded in the sidewalks downtown, always threatening to swallow me whole underground.

“How was work?” Jazz’s questions seemed loaded over the phone. He cleared his throat as I peered through the blinds from my bed, hoping to find a suitable answer, where a streetlight flickered on as the evening sky shifted from violet to black, ushering in flurries of overly-animated moths.

“Fine. It was fine,” I blurted out as I pulled my faded bed covers up to my shoulders and leaned back, sinking into the sea of sheets beneath me, already warm from nesting in my own body heat. He wanted to know if my co-workers seemed cool. If there were any dudes at work trying to push up on me that he could jokingly beat up. If he could come by to join me for lunch sometime. “Um, sure,” I uttered, feeling a bit caught off-guard and uneasy at the possibility of Jazz and Véronique sharing the same breathing space at my workplace for reasons that I couldn’t quite place.

After we hung up, I reached for my baby blanket – the one that I had secretly slept with all school year, kept out of view from my dorm mates – and inhaled big and deep: A crocheted grid of pastel squares that my mother had swaddled me in after I emerged from her womb, against her chest, where I would remain secure against her warm skin at night, long after the baby fat had melted away, and long after the baby teeth had made space for new adult ones. A stitched-together reminder of safety, laced with the scent of Coty Wild Musk oil that Ma dabbed on her pulse points and the hospital-grade Lysol she did laundry with, braided with the rich, earthy aroma of wood smoke from the woodstove back home,

a testament to my father’s mountain upbringing that eschewed central heat.

My alarm clock went off at 6:15am, which sent my hand fumbling for the snooze button. I rubbed my right eye encrusted with sleep, and gathered myself and my thoughts before stepping out of bed. I sauntered to the bathroom – thick with a humidity that rivaled the rising curls of steam from the sun-scorched DC asphalt – and flipped on the switch, where a coil of fluorescent light overhead buzzed on in three-part harmony. The phantom sounds of the rails grinding the wheels of the Metro train snaking through the long, dark void beneath the city rang in my ears as I stared hard at my reflection in the mirror, blinking back at a young woman who belonged to a circle of friends always ready to give fashion advice or head to the club, but had no one with whom to unravel and make sense of connection in the face of truth.

To save time, I contemplated wrapping up my hair in a casual *gole* again, which pulled my memory back to last week’s news of a pipeline gas explosion in southern Nigeria, near Warri, that killed hundreds of people attempting to scoop up opportunity in the form of free-flowing fuel. I took a deep breath and exhaled at the thought of catching a last-minute ride with another student to the Rosslyn Metro station, which meant that I would have enough time to do something with my hair in exchange for braving the steep, near-vertical descent of the escalator encased in a tubular wall of water-stained concrete,



photo by Unsplash

pregnant with hollow echoes, claustrophobic tourists and untold secrets of the city.

Véronique and I became fast friends, talking shop about intern life and the latest trip-hop acts in the US whose music would always reach France's airwaves a few months later. She seemed to have an eye for well-tailored jackets and no one in particular. "*Bah non, je ne sors avec personne,*" she replied when I asked her if she was dating anyone. I was relieved when she said that she grew up in a suburb too, near Lyon, and didn't really know what kind of life awaited her after college. She spoke of her father, who was originally from Morocco and the one who had urged her to apply for the internship. When she mentioned her mother back in France, the sparkle would disappear from her eyes and her brow would wrinkle for reasons that were never revealed.

We decided to go out to lunch once a week at Sizzling Express, a café on the first floor with a \$5.99

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buffet, where the smell of fried food with roots in far-flung corners of the world had worked its way into our clothes and welcomed the less-padded pockets of college students like us. Soon, our weekly outing would swell to sev-

eral in a week, our awkward silences punctuating our *conversations françaises* that most diners around

us couldn't understand. Like a secret language we shared.

"*Comment dit-on... ça?*" With the outer prong of my fork, I pricked the caramelized flesh of fried plantains in the square compartment of my Styrofoam plate. Véronique leaned in a bit, resting her chin in the palm of her hand over her elbow, and pointed with her eyebrows toward the plate. "*Les bananes plantains.*" Her breath escaped her lips with a hard stop on the last vowel, which sent my gaze down to my plate and then back up again, where my brown eyes locked on hers. I repeated the French word for "plantains" and her knee grazed mine under the table and my pulse quickened as we giggled for no reason over the sweet bananas soaking in their own syrup between us.

Our mini-language lesson would keep us at the café until the 58-minute mark. We finally got up from the table, pushed in our chairs and performed an awkward waltz toward the door which deposited the two of us onto the cracked sidewalk facing the street, where buses and cars zoomed by under the stillness of the summer sun.

"*Alors, ça vendredi?*" She requested a Friday lunch date in her central French accent; her mouth cresting into a half-smile, which interrupted a lock of hair resembling a drizzle of caramel that she quickly brushed behind her ears. A spark ignited my insides when she placed her hand on my shoulder, and stared at me a little too long after finishing her sentence – a stare that would make the beat of my heart skip and my face hot with a certain hunger. I didn't push her hand away and agreed on another one of our secret-language lunch dates.

We headed back to the office and stepped onto the elevator, a boxed space that had enclosed us, where the hum of the gears and cables dampened our speech, and made our eyes dart in uncomfortable directions away from each other. Véronique's

voice would break the tension in the air when she asked me how to get to the Cleveland Park Metro stop. The clammy palms of my hands smoothed the front of my skirt as I satisfied her request for help, assuring her that I would show her the way in person after work. A look of relief settled on her face, growing into a wide smile, which sent a wave of quiet heat through my body.

After we parted ways in the hallway, I returned to my desk and pulled up my wheeled office chair that struggled to pin down the clear, cracked plastic mat beneath it. I settled into my seat and began to log into my computer, when my fingertips lifted from the keyboard, levitating over perfect gray squares of letters and numbers, as thoughts of Véronique would begin to flurry about in my head. Thoughts of being close to her, absorbing the warmth of her olive skin. Taking in the sweetness of her scent. Feeling the gentle, warm current of her breath on my ear. My fingertips gently raking through her soft, baby-down curls at the nape of her neck. My lips grazing hers on the Metro ride home. A ribbon of traffic whizzing by outside. The rhythmic jerk of the rails rumbling beneath our feet.

My cell phone buzzed as Jazz's name and number lit up on the little two-tone LCD screen, breaking my blank stare at the keyboard, jarring me out of my daydream. I swallowed hard and flipped my phone open. "Hey, you!" Jazz's voice leapt from speaker. He wanted to see how my day was. I offered him generic replies that would keep any suspicion at bay, until he reminded me that he was planning to pick me up from work that day, so that we could make the 5:30 showing of *Big Momma's House*, where Martin Lawrence would gussy up in drag on the big screen. "Oh, I forgot to tell you – I'm helping a friend right after work. She needs help with directions." My words struggled to surface from the mounting guilt swimming around my insides. Jazz cleared his throat.

"But I thought we already agreed on tonight. Can't she get help from someone else?" Sure, I thought. But I wanted to be the one to help her. The one to be there for her. Even if it meant that my conscience – and Jazz's ego – would take the hit.

On my birthday, a thick layer of gray sky opened up to spill a hard rain that pelted the windows around the perimeter of the office building, cooling the charred city streets outside. Clara-Beth had rounded up

I looked over at Véronique, whose gaze fell to the floor as her lips folded inward.

the administrative department to surprise me with a cake from Lawsons Gourmet, a local caterer typically reserved for senior managers roaming corner offices with big-city views and lots of time on their hands. After an endearing, off-key rendition of "Happy Birthday" over clinked flutes of cheap, bubbly champagne and plates weighted with spongy, chocolate triangles, I proudly announced my transition into my 21st year. I looked over at Véronique, who was playing with her earlobe, her eyebrows raised, anticipating the festive moments unfolding before us. I massaged the back of my neck with one hand and flashed her a wide grin just before my co-workers broke my trance with intrusive questions about my plans for the night.

"Oh. Well, I'll probably..." I looked over at Véronique, whose gaze fell to the floor as her lips folded inward. "...Uh, go out," I continued. I couldn't bring myself to mention that my boyfriend probably had an elaborate date planned with flowers, a bite at Ruby Tuesday and a night of displaced passion,

where I would imagine Véronique's supple skin and breasts and lips against the trembling, burning places on my body that wanted her so much.

My breath caught in the jagged edges of my throat. Eyes wide, I slapped my hand to my forehead covered in a thin sheen of sweat, and stood over my computer monitor, frantically shaking the plastic mouse to clear the screensaver, to check the time. I announced my fake need to get back to work. I felt overwhelmed with all of the talking bodies in the space and needed to breathe. I fielded a last round of hugs from my co-workers, anticipating Véronique's warm embrace that would allow us an unspoken closeness under the guise of team-player work politics. But when I looked up, she was gone.

Véronique. I would speak her name into all the quiet corners of my mind and body when no one was around. Later in the day, she came all the way down the hall to the reception area, just to say hello. This time, we were alone. She slung her arm over the front of the desk as she stood in front of me, the way my other co-workers did when they stopped by to chat, but Véronique made a point to look me in the eye and make it seem like nothing else in the world

I would speak her name into all the quiet corners of my mind and body when no one was around.

mattered but the two of us. A pair of pearlized cufflinks peeked out from the sleeve of her jacket as she leaned forward, fixing her lips to form a sentence. Just then, Mr. Des-

Rochers emerged from his office, asking if I had completed the photocopying project yet. Véronique

slinking away, winking at me on her way out as Mr. DesRochers hovered over my shoulder. I presented him with a neat, bright yellow folder of alphabetized, copied news articles dating back to 1990, and tried to graduate my expression from flustered to serious, quieting the flames that were burning out of control in my head and heart. He praised my work and took the folder with him as he stepped away with a look of suspicion printed on his face. I stifled a geyser of giddy feelings inside as I turned up the volume a few notches on the radio, where Cassandra Wilson serenaded the empty space of the front office with the sophisticated, stringed sounds of "You Move Me" veiled over the boom of her low, sultry voice.

"Please note that you must vacate George Mason University Student Apartments by 12 noon on August 4, 2000. Failure to do so will result in additional room, board and meal plan charges."

I had plucked the notice from the bottom of a pile of papers on my desk, only because my mother had asked me over the phone when I was coming home again. I ran my index finger along the hard edges of the letters printed on the crumpled piece of paper as my eyes blinked hard and my mouth hung open in disbelief. How did I miss this information? On the interview, I had already told my boss that I could work until the end of August. There was no back-up plan. No friends that I could stay with – my parents wouldn't approve of that anyway. I would have to break the news to Mr. DesRochers that I would need to leave the internship a few weeks earlier than planned.

I could feel imaginary chocolate birthday cake smeared all over my face and I felt like a failure.

"Alors... vous n'en savez pas déjà?" Mr. DesRochers probed me about my knowledge of the early August

date, his tone a bit louder than usual. I felt small in the high-backed, black leather chair in his office, my gaze fixed on the cracked mug leaking coffee rings on his desk, as my body tightened and my hands wrung with dread. I apologized over and over for my oversight as my eyes grew big in shame, now fixed on the beige, prefab carpet beneath my feet.

He let out a defeated sigh and directed me to clean out my desk by the end of the week. “*C’était un vrai plaisir.*” He shook my damp hand with an assuring nod and a quick smile, his face retreating back to an expressionless state before swiveling his chair in the direction of his computer screen. Tears burned the corners of my eyes. I had sabotaged a precious career opportunity. And my connection with Véronique.

I thanked Mr. DesRochers for my short time at the agency and darted out of his office, nearly sprinting back to my desk, careful not to let him see me cry. I heeded his request to pack up my things and prepared to say good-bye.

I had to see Véronique. I made a beeline down the hall to the reporting department. I approached her desk, where she was drumming her fingertips next to the mouse of her computer, her eyes fixed on the glowing screen in front of her. She then looked up at me with her sparkling, honey-colored eyes. My heart thundered under my breastbone. “Véronique,” my gaze shifted to the floor, “*je dois partir.*” I told her that I had to leave, keeping the details of my housing gaffe brief. Her face fell with a look that I hadn’t seen

since she mentioned her mother that day at Sizzling Express. “*Écoutes... je partirai pour la France en quelques jours...*” Véronique whispered her plan to move back to France in a couple days, to prepare for another year of school back home. The growing awareness of our truncated connection washed over both of us. Exchanging phone numbers seemed futile, as

her US number wouldn’t work in less than 72 hours anyway. She jumped out of her chair, the soles of her dress shoes hitting the floor hard, and motioned for me to join her in the hallway.

The door clicked behind us, sealing us off from the din of the busy newsroom and the rest of the world. Without a word, she hugged me long and deep, her thin arms sliding underneath mine the way Jazz’s arms had that night at the Harvest Jam, her cufflinks catching onto the open threads of my blouse. The soft of her cheek nuzzled against my neck, which sent my eyes closed as I inhaled the scent of

her warm skin and whispered into her hair how much I would miss her. Only the layered sounds of muted heartbeats would become a shared language. A language that filled the dead space in the air.

After my internship ended, I knew that I wouldn’t see Véronique anymore. I knew that I wouldn’t be able to go out of my way to help her find her way home when she got confused at the layout of the city. Or listen to the melody of her soft-spoken voice in between bites of plantains and kimchi. Or get weak in the knees when she flashed her adorably

I knew that I wouldn't be able to go out of my way to help her find her way home when she got confused at the layout of the city. Or get weak in the knees when she flashed her adorably crooked-toothed smile, a slight overbite that made a brief appearance whenever words like “poulet chinois” and “économique” rolled off her tongue.

crooked-toothed smile, a slight overbite that made a brief appearance whenever words like “*poulet chinois*” and “*économique*” rolled off her tongue. By now, Véronique had already left for France. I would move back into my parents’ house in Chesterfield until school started up again at the end of August.

Maybe Jazz was right: Girls can have thoughts like that, and not be gay. All of my secret trysts with girls as a kid – my back against the cold, hard metal of rusty toolsheds under the protective arms of dogwood trees – would be chalked up to child psychology-vetted behavior marked as “normal,” that would stay locked away, buried in the yellowed pages of my childhood diary. Besides, my parents loved Jazz and already treated him like a son-in-law. There was no use in ruining a good thing now.

The sun was out, its bright white light fighting its way through the spaces of the plastic vertical blinds in my bedroom, casting stripes and shadows across the twisted blankets on my bed, whose shape mirrored the unsettling fullness in my belly that wouldn’t go away. My nose felt warm and tears welled in my eyes as I packed my things in the silence that hung heavy in my apartment, the memory of Véronique haunting me after every fold of linen, after every click of a suitcase. I pulled an old Metro ticket out of my jacket – the one that the agency would reimburse me for at 75% each month – and studied the magnetic stripe running past the stamped fare amounts for the Orange Line.

“Véronique,” I whispered to myself.

CANTRICE JANELLE PENN is a writer, editor, movement artist and multilingual educator. Her interviews, non-fiction and poetry have appeared in LUMEN, *In Our Words: A Salon for Queers*, *Fabulously Feminist* and *After Ferguson, In Solidarity* (Mourning Glory Publishing), an anthology addressing state-sanctioned violence and trauma through visual and literary art. An alum of LaVenson Press Studios and VONA/Voices of Our Nations Arts Writing Workshops, Cantrice is currently developing a full-length work of fiction.



Yamaguchi

they spared Kintai Bridge
while flames singed my mother's hair
in Hiroshima

Hiroshima Memorial Museum

ash in shapes like rice
in a twisted metal box
she leans to whisper
better that we are unseen
than a shadow on a wall

Kyoto

the ambassador's
letter to General Groves
diverted the bomb
sparing Kyoto's blood-red gates
where they would send their tourists

should we have painted
all our mountains torii red
so they could see us?
so I never would have heard
The Bells of Nagasaki
in the backseat of my mother's car?

she is like glass
unseen until she shatters
screaming

photo by Nate Mueller

Silent

a poem by

LISA HOSOKAWA GARBER

LISA HOSOKAWA GARBER's fiction has appeared in two anthologies and won the 2009 Alan Bunn Memorial Chapbook Award. An editor by day, she devotes her evenings to her book-length manuscript inspired by her upbringing in Hiroshima between an atomic bomb survivor and an US Marine.





photo by Harry Tang

Mother Memoir

a short story by

FAITH S. HOLSAERT

The bedroom was low-ceilinged, at the head of narrow steep stairs, like the stairs to other country bedrooms where I have slept. A window at the head of our bed: the sky a black comforter with mottles of cloud and the stars we couldn't see at home. Respite. A place to sleep near the ocean after a trying year. When I had been given my cancer diagnosis, the first thing I said was, "I am going to Chincoteague for a week every year from now on." I had been thinking of a solitary week, me and my writing, the shifting ocean and its sounds, the deep sky, and time, a whole week's time when I was accountable to no one, a week of spontaneity. A week in which I could sleep during the day and in the same day: write. That morning I had gone back to bed, sleeping into the luxury of full sunlight, the uncurtained windows, the low-ceilinged room with little space for much more than the bed.

Driving from Durham to Chincoteague, I had been on edge. My newish Subaru was mysteriously burning oil and the dealer had not been able to fix it before my trip, so I had traveled with three containers of super duper Subaru oil under my front seat, in case my car burned up its store. I hated checking the oil each time I filled up the gas tank, because I was afraid of what I would find, because I would read the dip stick incorrectly, because perhaps I was heading into disaster. When Vicki phoned, I pulled over and answered peevishly, but what she had to say was: she'd been driving along about an hour behind me, and her passenger window had imploded. Maybe the man mowing his lawn beside the road had thrown up some rock? She hadn't seen anything. She had driven to an auto parts place, not knowing where to go, where they had handed her some plastic to cover the gaping window and told her where there was a car

wash where she could vacuum the niblets of safety glass scattered over the inside of her car.

So we had arrived at this night's sleep by way of daunting travel, a car that was eating itself alive and another which had exploded inward, but we had spent our first wonderful day and were drifting off to sleep. No cats to weight us down with their need. No sounds of home — heater, plumbing—to worry us. We drifted.

My phone rang on the bedside table. My daughter in California. "Sorry," I said in the dark to Vicki, "it's Deborah." I fumbled to answer and while I was answering, my mind was racing. Deborah was always mindful of the time difference. Alarm one. She rarely phoned without letting me know in advance. Alarm two. It was Deborah. Alarm three. I imagined her in her eight by ten room in the Single Room Occupancy, SRO hotel in San Francisco's Mission District. The tan walls, the sink crowded with necessities, the exercise bike. But I didn't even know she was in her room.

She may be full of cheer. Or not.

"Hello."

"It's Deborah." That night her voice was a child's, but I was merely registering that, alert for clues. She had been unresponsive on phone and text for weeks. My mind rabbited, *What's wrong? What's wrong?* My heart sang, *Make it okay. Make it okay.*

"We're having a bit of a security issue," she said almost in a whisper. That 8 x10 room where we often spent afternoon hours on the bed with its worn flannel tan, gray, and sage green sheet (though the colors were almost worn away), only the sheet on her mattress, no other bedding, as a measure to forestall bedbugs. We would watch reruns of CSI SVU.

"I'm not supposed to be calling you, but." The voice could have been described as both conspiratorial and excited. "If you come around the corner

and down the hall, I can let you in."

Vicki sat up, a rustle and her presence a bulwark.

I came fully awake. Could I tell her I was not there, in her city, in her neighborhood, in her hotel? No choice. I was trying to figure out what to say, at the same time that

**My mind rabbited,
What's wrong?
What's wrong?
My heart sang,
Make it okay.
Make it okay.**

the words were coming off my tongue. "Deborah," I said, "I'm in Chincoteague."

A pause.

Don't hang up. Don't go. Don't leave.

"Oh," she said. "I must be confused. I have to go."

"Please call me back and let me know you're okay."

"I have to go."

"What?" Vicki asked and I told her.

"So sorry," I said and we were both soon asleep, though the edge of worry, a blade, was there.

Deborah called at 1:30 to say she was all right, but she couldn't talk. Vicki said, "She remembered to call you."

I said, yes, Deborah had remembered to call, but the blade of worry was turning and turning inside me. I got up and went downstairs for a while. Came back to the upstairs bedroom with its star-filled windows and slept.

Deborah phoned at 4:30. "I'm not supposed to do this, but if you come down the hall, I can let you in." She rang off as soon as I said I was on the East Coast.

"She wants you to be there," Vicki said.

"And I am so far away."

I'd planned to go from Chincoteague to New York City. I wanted to go home to Durham and board a

Don't hang up.

Don't go.

Don't leave.

plane to San Francisco, but I had promised to visit my 95 year old aunt in New York, so from Chincoteague, I drove north.

I knew I didn't want to walk in the rain, but I was in Brooklyn and I would need to, gauging the pain in my leg and worrying how wrecked my leg would be by the end of the day. In Manhattan, time to kill, so more coffee, off the Bleecker Street diagonal between Eighth Avenue and Avenue of the Americas, corridor my sister and I had walked to school from Jane Street. Displaced in this neighborhood which had once been mine, far from Durham where I lived, an entire continent away from my son Jonah and my daughter Deborah, I sat in the Cornelia Street Cafe, dripping, seated at a bar stool. Around the corner was Greenwich House, where I had taken pottery classes as a child. Why did I feel miserable? Well for one thing, I hadn't liked the skinny pants guy who had steered me to the uncomfortable chair.

My phone rang. My screen said: Jonah. Fear. The Chincoteague phone calls. Wednesday. Jonah and Deborah were supposed to have lunch. It was Wednesday. I needed them to have lunch.

"Hi, Mom." Jonah's voice was tight, high in his throat. He was sick. Had not gone to work. He had texted Deborah and also left a phone message. He had already called work to say he wouldn't be coming in. *Oh, it's bad that he's sick. I need him to...* She had not responded. He didn't know if she had received the message but hadn't responded, or had she for whatever reason not received his messages at all? He didn't think she would meet him. His voice wobbled a bit, but he went on: he didn't want to not

go and have her show up and he not be there.

A waiter cleared away my coffee cup, wanting me to go back into the rain.

I told Jonah I understood. I was sorry he was sick. We hung up. I was queasy with wishing he hadn't gotten sick, queasy with imagining how his not showing might make her turn against us. Again. And I did not want to go back into the rain, but there was that couple by the door waiting for seats. If only I didn't need Jonah's help. If only each encounter with Deborah didn't have the potential to set her loose.

I would sit for a few more minutes. I would not order \$10 pastry or French lentil soup, but I would sit.

My children had lived in the San Francisco area since the 1990s, but their lives were almost direct opposites. His, with a wife and two kids in Berkeley, was relatively safe, he and his wife on long-term career paths. Hers in San Francisco, though she also had two children, was not safe. She had worked in her 20s and 30s as a modern dancer and arts administrator. No financial security. And yet, they were brother and sister and saw one another for lunch.

When they were children, Jonah had been irritated by her bounce and noise. Not just a talker, but a chatterer, with no filter between her brain and her tongue. In kindergarten, she taught herself to read, which her teacher found inconvenient. In third grade she missed the week of achievement tests because she was sick. When she returned to school, they sat her down at 8 in the morning and, with only a break for lunch, had her complete the week's worth of tests, one after the other, "to raise the school's average," as her principal told me. Deborah moved into and through space, her adolescent body disciplined and athletic. In 1991 she had moved to the bay area to dance and shortly after that, had broken contact with us.

Jonah had gotten the morose gene from both sides, throughout childhood plunging into despair if his meals were delayed or he didn't get enough sleep. As a baby he drained every drop of milk at each feeding. Having absorbed my milk, he would lapse into bottomless sleep. He'd begun sleeping through the night at just two months and I would miss him from 7PM until the next morning. He was a math whiz, who dropped out of advanced placement math because he didn't like math. With golden skin, dark wavy hair, and a dimpled smile, by the time he was eleven or twelve, in the water at the local pool, so many girls would mob him, wanting to be near him, wanting to touch him, that, sitting on the sidelines, I sometimes feared his fans would drown him. From the time he was eight, he knew he wanted to attend UC Berkeley. A musician who wrote music for his band, he came to us through the domain of music.

As I put on my raincoat, Jonah texted. Oh, relief. He was feeling better and was on BART. Jonah had made the good choice. I had made that BART trip

She might have moved out without telling us. She might be lying on her bed in room 230, inert. She might have decided it was time to disappear.

and could follow him in my mind. I imagined BART, coming aboveground at West Oakland to the Steven Spielberg cranes of the harbor, back underground through the business of the Embarcadero.

The refrain in his head must have been *Deborah, Deborah*, though that was wrong. That was my re-

frain. He probably listened to music through ear buds. Would Deborah show up? What next, if she didn't? After the sidewalk rush and swoop, he would push through the door at the restaurant. I might hear from him at any time. If she were not there, which she probably was not, but maybe, maybe, she was, he would tell the staff he wanted a table for two and take up his vigil. Eventually he would order the biscuits and gravy (*like in West Virginia*, both Deborah and Jonah like to say of the biscuits and gravy at Mel's), and push them around on his plate, remembering how sick he felt.

Displaced in a rain-washed Greenwich Village Cafe, I was in a not-space. Nothing but Jonah and Deborah and my willing them to connect.

He texted. She didn't show. What should he do? *Save her. Make everything all right. Take us back to August*, I wanted to say, but he wanted to know, Should he go to her hotel? This would take another hour. My middle-aged son, a bit of gray threaded into his dark pony tail. Wearing his working guy jacket, jeans and his Skecher shoes. He could not know what he would, or would not, find. She might have moved out without telling us. She might be lying on her bed in room 230, inert. She might have decided it was time to disappear and disappear was something she knew how to do. I could hear him suck down the last of his Diet Coke.

Despite my fear for her, I wanted to write him, *I know it's too much. I know you're alone*. I wanted to text: *Don't go. It's too hard*. I saw him, sitting in Mel's, having eaten food which hadn't gone down well and I wanted to shield him. And yet.

Standing in a doorway, I texted, he should do what he felt comfortable with. I added, because I could not jump in my red Subaru and drive to help them, my children, I texted that none of this was his fault and that I loved him.

My do-or-die mother's heart started beaming to him: *I would go. I have gone. I know how awful it is to go alone, but do it. Go. Please go. What if she is dead?*

He texted that he was on his way to The Sunrise, her hotel.

People on disability or social security, or other below-poverty income, lived in a single room, sometimes whole families, sometimes people with pets, like yappy dogs, sometimes people who turned on one another with physical brutality and other times clustered in groups on the double bed, drinking and playing cards. Microwaves, televisions, toaster ovens, sometimes mini-refrigerators. All in one 8 x 10 foot room.

The first week Deborah lived in the Sunrise, Jonah, his son Zane who was five or six years old, and I went to visit her. She met us on the sidewalk. We walked to La Cumbre. She told me under her breath that someone in the building had been sick. The medics had been called. Zane wanted to see his Auntie Deborah's room and we agreed, after lunch, he could. We came up Valencia toward The Sunrise and she stopped walking. *That white van out front, she'd said. It's the medical examiner's. I don't think Zane should come in. We'd told Zane, maybe next time he could see her room.*

Another text from Jonah: *What is her room #?*

#231, I texted and added the names of a couple who lived down the hall. Like many men and women in the building Jay was a veteran. He and Joyce sometimes gave Deborah cookies they had baked in their toaster oven or gave her food after they'd been shopping. It was Deborah who had figured out how to get the wheelchair for Joyce. I sometimes passed Jay going out for his mid-morning beer and wondered, had this mid morning walk to the corner store become Jay's final battlefield? Jay pushed Joyce down Sixteenth Street in her wheelchair, her long white hair bright in the sun. And there were

the times when Joyce and Jay did not get along with one another, but still had to live confined in that 8 x 10 room.

After he had been to her room.

When she opened her door, Deborah was disoriented. She thought that Vicki and I had already been there, though we wouldn't be arriving for a couple of weeks. I asked, *Disoriented like in drugs or disoriented like in mental illness?* He was definite: not drugs or alcohol. "She doesn't want help. She couldn't talk to me. I think she was afraid of getting in trouble. She was thin, thinner than when we had lunch last month, but I don't think the weight loss is life-threatening. Yet. She was so out of it."

"Thank you."

"I couldn't not."

"Vicki and I will be there in a couple of weeks."

"Yes. I left my number with Ray. In case..." Ray the manager, a Tibetan refugee whose family lived in a tiny apartment on the first floor, a man with a demanding and thankless enough job.

And there were the times when Joyce and Jay did not get along with one another, but still had to live confined in that 8 x 10 room.

He was not a social worker. He didn't have the time to be a social worker. "Ray kept saying what a nice lady she is," Jonah said.

"I feel so helpless," Jonah said.

"You showed up."

"I know. But."

"Whatever happens, we'll get through it." This so contrary to my frightened, dread-filled, stuck

self, but a gift from my own childhood, from my own frightened, dread-filled and stuck mother who raised my sister and me despite her terrors. Stubborn. “She’s resilient.”

“Yes.”

“Maybe that *niceness* will save her.” I insisted to myself, *You can imagine it.*

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Go home. Go to bed. I love you.”

And on Cornelia Street it was still raining. Time to walk to the subway at W. 4th. Time to board a D train to meet friends at a biergarten on the Lower East Side.

Jonah and I knew a little more. It was not good, but she would last until I arrived.

I might have liked walking these streets where I had walked to school with my sister, walked doing errands with my mother Eunice, walked for some

“Maybe that niceness will save her.” I insisted to myself, You can imagine it.

health regimen with Charity. Walking with Charity, stopped every block or two by some parent or student who wanted to talk to her.

My feet hurt. I couldn’t just walk around for the hell of it, for the edifying calorie-burning virtue of it. I would have to buy another space at another coffee shop, or maybe go sit in the Barnes and Noble, which occupied the corner on Eighth Street where Nedicks had once stood.

In our airbnb, Vicki’s and my bedroom was downstairs in a rehabbed “working man’s” cottage that clung to the hill in Bernal Heights. Its perch was so steep, I felt like the house, though it had been

in place for over 100 years, could slip off its bearings and slide into the flat land below. There was no street to the house, just a stair-step walk from the bottom of the hill to the top. The house came with a cat, a calico female so ancient that to pick her up was to pick up a little furry sack of bones, but a little creature so hoarsely grateful for our warmth when we sat in her living room with our laptops, nervously playing electronic jigsaw puzzles. Vicki and I fed and watched over this cat for a couple of days while her owner, Amy, was in Oklahoma celebrating her mother’s birthday. In our borrowed home, we had a cat, a sense of family — both Amy and her Oklahoma mother, and the unknown of Deborah a couple of miles away in the Mission. We had a view of the bay from on high and a living room filled with sunlight. We couldn’t quite believe we had been so lucky.

And yet, we were going to The Sunrise. We didn’t know what we would find. We didn’t know if she would be there. She might have moved out without telling us. We didn’t know if she would open her door. We didn’t know if she had eaten, or if she was lying on her bed with no sheets, just a bedspread, lying there and not eating. We could neither phone nor text to let her know we had come across the country to her.

On Valencia Street, Deborah’s street, over 100 trees were planted in 2010 and around the bases of the trees, metal grates depicting the Day of Dead: dancing skeletons and the like. “What’s that?” Vicki asked and I tried to explain, but it was too bizarre, the expenditure of millions of dollars for beautification on the street where Deborah, and countless others, barely subsist.

Not time yet.

So Vicki and I stopped at Muddy Waters half a block from The Sunrise. On the sidewalk, someone had written a long screed maybe against violence against women, but maybe about the church. Or the

end of the world. Or all of the above. The writing was in pink and lemon yellow and aquamarine chalk and had been laid down in panels the width of several store fronts.

Muddy Waters was my spot: darker, more coffee-centered. Baklava treats, gluten free and vegan cookies, an unsavory black-walled bathroom crawling with graffiti, the barista in her starchy button down shirt, short hair, businesslike competence. Muddy Waters predates the move to gentrification, the Day of the Dead tree grates and the new condos with doormen. Deborah had told me, the barista, originally from Lebanon, had worked there since Deborah was in her early 20s which comforted me to think that girl child, who broke all contact with me, had been here. Down-hearted and afraid to leave, one afternoon I was to catch the plane home to North Carolina, I had shared the outline of Deb-

orah's situation with the barista. I had stood on line on weekend mornings while she took orders, but most of her attention was devoted to her phone. *My sister, back home*, she'd said. The trip before, I had asked her name and I think she'd answered *Najhat*, meaning fresh breath. She had liked my name, *Faith*. She was religious, Christian, I thought. With her, I was on a dance floor I knew from the 1940s, the play and co-existence of butch and femme, not as oddity or rebellion against assigned gender roles, but simply as a way of being in the world.

I had invited Vicki into this space. I was glad she was there.

I placed our orders. Vicki scouted out a place in the back room. I had always sat in the front room with its windows on Valencia Street, its occasional moments of street life spilling inside, the young



photo by André Freitas

ones in feathers and neon leggings and purple lipstick, the wan parent urging on a uniformed child who was late for parochial school, the man writing page after page of numbers, neatly boxing in the sets with heavy black lines, flipping pages of his legal pad.

“A soy cappuccino?” the barista asked. I said, yes and a chai for my partner, nodding toward the back room. I ordered a cookie for Vicki and me to share, filling nervous time with food, which could add up to a disaster of baked goods and treats by day’s end.

“How is your daughter?” she asked, her eyes sweeping the entire front space.

“Thank you for remembering.”

She shrugged. She told a man where to place a delivery.

I said my daughter had been having a hard time. That I was about to go to her SRO. That I didn’t know if she would let me in. I could barely choke out these words.

The barista said angrily that I must never give up hope. Never. I loved this about her. But I wasn’t sure I agreed. Had we passed a point of hope? No. She was correct. Such a thought was inadmissible. With the stubbornness of my mother Eunice and the practicality of my mother Charity, this was something I could not evade.

I set down our drinks and sat with Vicki. We started up our computers.

This was all preamble.

Five ‘til eleven. I would make this trip alone. We didn’t know what might frighten or anger Deborah. I would phone or text as soon as “I’m so glad you are here,” I say.

I could not stand to wait any more. That five minutes, walking to the hotel, going up the wood stairs, knocking. That was why I had come.

At The Sunrise, Ray the manager was in the cubicle behind glass. He is from Nepal, but alabaster-skinned because of albinism. He can’t see very well, so I said, “Ray. It’s Faith. Deborah’s mother.” Outside cars rushed by. An ambulance. Ray was glad I was there. He was worried about her, but he had too many other worries: a dead body in the garbage chute last year; rooms with rancid carpets and mold smeared walls; old recalcitrant plumbing where feces from one room’s toilet surfaced in the toilet of another tenant; sex trade, drugs, alcoholism; a building brimful with PTSD. Ray was worried about Deborah, as later, Jay and Joyce in the hall, both of them worried, and, like everyone, relieved that I had come. Come with my frightened determination. *She will not slip through the cracks.*

The Sunrise is an old wood hotel. Every time I climb the stairs and turn the maze of corners on the second floor, passing the locked doors and the slatted wood walls, I think of *Gunsmoke* and hotel rooms above the saloon where Matt Dillon would track down wrong-doers. These halls: I have seen food garbage on the floors, breathed many kinds of smoke, heard people fighting and flailing against the flimsy walls, seen corners of rooms crammed with a welter of belongings, seen a young mother and her children set out in the moody morning fog for school.

You must never give up hope. Never.

I passed room #232, #231, and reached 230. I took a deep breath and knocked on the familiar door with its modern metal lock that opens with a key card. I said quietly

She will not slip through the cracks.

into the door, “Deborah, it’s your Mom.” Nothing. A long nothing in which I imagined her lifeless on the bed. I knocked and repeated myself and listened

again. The last descent, she had packed up her room at The Seneca after giving everything away that she could. At the door, no sound. My heart was pounding and my mind was rabbiting down a hole. That last time she had left her room at 11 at night, signed out at the front desk and taken a cab to the psych ward at San Francisco General, everything she owned in the cab with her. I knocked again. “Deborah, it’s your Mom.”

This is it. Whatever “it” turns out to be.

After the next knock, a faint cough inside. My mind took off: a cough like the flu? a cough like tuberculosis? a cough like....

I knocked more forcefully.

You must never give up hope. Never.

“Deborah,” I said in my Special Ed teacher voice, “It’s your mother.”

There was a stir, a presence at the peephole and a century or two went by while she opened the door.

“Come in.” She stood aside, looking away from me. She was wearing black leggings, a turquoise

cami over a pink tunic-length cami.

“Oh, I forgot,” she said, and hugged me. Thin, her skin hot to my touch. She sat on her bed.

I asked if I could sit and she said yes.

She stared straight ahead at things,

which I couldn’t see. I was taking in: *She is alive. She is Deborah with the sealed earring holes, the skinny hands like my sister’s, the wispy thin hair of the hard life she has led, the still powerful feet of a dancer.* I saw her years of fighting and in her fighting, I saw myself. In that fighting I saw the possibility that she could survive.

The room was barren. The exercise bike was gone. The cards and notes and photos, which had been stuck in the venetian blinds were gone. Two large plastic bins with lids were stacked at the foot of her bed, one upon the other, where her exercise bike had been. The microwave was stowed under the sink. Also under the sink, against the wall where there was an outlet, her phone was blinking.

She still had a phone.

Head lowered, she whispered, “I have to move,” and, “I need help.”

I said I was there to help.

“Where is Vicki?” she asked, looking around as if Vicki might be in the room, but overlooked.

“Muddy Waters.”

“Let me shower,” she said, using her arms to push herself to standing.

Deborah and I left her room, walked down the maze of corridor with its threadbare carpet that didn’t lie flat and which was often stippled with debris.

Deborah touched the wall on one side to steady herself.

She opened the door to the garbage room and tossed a knotted plastic bag into the chute.

Out into the sun of Valencia Street, down the half block to 16th, skirting the dog poop, smiling at people she knew, stopping at the newspaper kiosk to speak in quick Spanish with the older woman behind the counter, past the Día de los Muertos sidewalk grates, past the chalked hierarchy of plagues and cautions, and into the dark of Muddy Waters.

The barista gave me a thumbs up.

In the backroom, Vicki rose and she and Deborah hugged. Deborah said, “I need to leave that place. I don’t ever want to go back there.” I thought of the barren room, everything packed into two plastic bins stacked one upon the other at the foot of her bed, in front of the grated window.

**My mind took off:
a cough like the
flu? a cough like
tuberculosis?
a cough like...**

On her tablet, Vicki searched for a hotel where Deborah could have a respite for a couple of nights, until the three of us could figure out a more permanent home for her. I ordered coffee for Deborah. Vicki found a special at an old, respectable hotel downtown, near Westfield mall where Deborah and I sometimes killed time and where she used to sit in the posh Ladies Room on the top floor and nurse Joni while Ken, her kids' father and her son would shop. Vicki showed the web page to Deborah and asked if that would work for a couple of nights. The room even had a bathtub and soaking in a tub with Epsom salts is a luxury for Deborah.

Deborah took the tablet into her hand. "I don't know," she said. "I would have to see the room to know if I feel safe."

Vicki said she was afraid of losing the online rate.

I watched the two of them. Though small, this difference was huge. I knew the size of its hugeness

from my five plus years with Deborah, years during which I had tried unsuccessfully to second guess solutions for her. I knew Vicki. I knew her need to fix things and her love of a bargain were siren songs to her. I knew Deborah and I knew she had issued her condition and if she repeated it, it would be only once before she lapsed into adamant but unspoken refusal. I knew rooms that were wrong could wash over her in a flood of fear. I fell into a strategic posture of wishing. Wishing Vicki would hear Deborah. Wishing Deborah would like the room. Telling myself, chances were, she would.

Vicki did book the room. I don't know if I was wrong to let her do so. Deborah's comment "I won't know until I see it," was as loud a signal as she was going to give.

Maybe when we reached the hotel, it would be okay.

FAITH S. HOLSAERT co-edited *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (University of Illinois). She was awarded the 2013 Press 53 prize in the Novella. She received her mfa from the Warren Wilson Program for Writers. After decades in West Virginia, she lives in Durham, NC with her partner Vicki Smith, with whom she shares ten grandchildren.



photo by Dan Watson

follow me to sleep

a short story by
SARAH HOWE

The post dinner dance begins again, a convoluted symphony of desires and needs. The dishes call to be cleaned; the leftovers put away. We compete each to be more exhausted than the other. We rally and fail. We snip our snippets of fading attention, showering each other with confetti dreams. Our eyelids droop, my arms drop the book and jerk it back into place until I give up reading and re-reading the same passage, my eyes bouncing around from paragraph to paragraph.

I run the toothbrush across my teeth debating about flossing. Regular flossing could mean once a week. Do I really need to floss tonight? I begin to whine inside my head again as my arms beg to be released from the day's work, my legs relieved of my body's weight. Flossing saves money and time by the time you count up both the time and cost of an additional visit to the dentist for the filling, it really does take more time to NOT floss than to floss.

And the bladder. The bladder that just won't stay voided. I pee before lying down and invariably will need to pee again before falling asleep. Or doing anything else in bed that might arise.

Randy settles into bed beside me. I roll away to avoid his flailing elbow as he settles against his stack of pillows and hugs his pillow supporting his 7 broken ribs, 6 of them broken twice. His elbow and pillow create a wall, which I must scale for intimacy. More often than not I am exhausted, too exhausted for rappelling.

I mumble a whispered good night, to avoid waking myself with my full voice, roll over and hit the pillow snoring.

SARAH HOWE, potter, puppeteer, doodler, and dancer, woke up one day in Zelda's class and began writing for an audience. She is currently working on a book about deschooling herself through unschooling her four children.





Escape

a short story by

GILDA PACKARD

Whenever Dad took out his writing tablet and headed for his lawn chair on the front porch I would follow. I had my little tablet. I sat on the floor next to him as he wrote poetry, lyrics and short stories. No words were exchanged.

Dad wrote things down after he and mom had a fight or after the collection agency called looking for their money. As I watched his face I noticed his brow relax. He would smile to himself.

My nine-year-old self had no understanding of what may be going through his mind but I knew peace when I saw it and I wanted that peace he got when he wrote in his tablet. Whatever escape there was, from the heat, overcrowded house, and general lack in our home, I wanted it.

When I scribbled in my little tablet, on the front porch, next to Dad, no one else existed. We were floating above our mundane and stressed filled lives, writing our way to a better place and time.

photo by John-Mark Kuznietsov

GILDA PACKARD has been happily reading and journaling most of her life. In 2015, in celebration of her sixtieth birthday, her gift to herself was to be still and write. She is currently working on a collection of short stories about her life growing up in Bogalusa, Louisiana.



photo by Nick Miller

The Prettiest Dress

a short story by

ELIZABETH ZERTUCHE

Nadie te va a querer si no te arreglas. Who would ever notice me looking like this?

Teresa pauses to stare at the dress in the display window of the dress shop. She looks down at her shoes and keeps walking. At the entrance to the burger place, the one with the huge buns, Teresa notices her reflection on the glass door, a figure wearing an oversized t-shirt not long enough to conceal a dark grease stain on a faded pair of jeans. Teresa tugs on her shirt as she walks through the door. At the counter, she orders her regular meal, a cheeseburger with bacon, extra-large fries and a large drink. Unable to decide whether to have sweet tea or lemonade, she serves herself a glass of half sweet tea and half lemonade from the drink dispenser. Teresa makes her way through the crowd to the far left corner of the room to the only booth without a window view. Placing her tray on the table, she slides into the booth let-

ting herself sink down as the vinyl seat cradles her. As she bites into one of the warm, crispy fries all of the chatter in the room and in her head fades. With a slow, deep breath, she stops to smell the bacon.

“At least the grease stain will have a friend,” murmurs Teresa after noticing the dollop of mustard on her lap after her first bite of bliss.

“Oh, you’re waiting for a friend? I was just about to ask if I could sit down with you. There aren’t any other empty tables,” says a petite girl in a short skirt.

Biting her cheek, “No, no friend. I mean, yes, empty seat. Never mind. Don’t mind me. You can sit.”

The petite girl sets her tray down and sits across from Teresa. Teresa’s eyes hop along each item of food on the petite girl’s tray.

“I couldn’t decide between the chicken strips or a chicken sandwich, so I got both.”

“Huh?” Teresa reaches for a fry.

“I always get fries with the chicken strips and on-

ion rings with the chicken sandwich. So, I had to get fries and onion rings. How's your burger?"

"The same," mutters Teresa looking down.

"What? Tastes like chicken? Cause I smell bacon," reaching across the table to pick up a piece of bacon that fell onto Teresa's tray. "Yep, bacon," acknowledges the petite girl crunching away.

"So, you don't just eat chicken?"

"I'm practically a meatatarian," retorts Teresa's table companion.

"I can't always decide on a drink," slurping her sweet tea and lemonade concoction.

"That's the only thing I'm always sure about," affirms the petite girl, taking her drink in her hand. "I always have a chocolate milkshake."

¡Mira! ¡Qué bonita muchacha! A que a ella sí le llaman muchos muchachos. I bet she is just another pretty girl who gets calls from boys.

The grease stain looks larger.

Teresa keeps her head low, shoulders forward, eyes firmly on the prize, takes the bacon cheeseburger with both hands and takes another bite. She dismisses the noise in her head one bite at a time, filling the silence with fries. She feels the stillness in her stomach, no longer hollow and empty, replaced with the warm sensation of a hug. Teresa tries to remember the last time her mom gave her a hug. No more fries. Teresa reaches for her drink.

"What are you drinking? I come eat here a lot. I see you sitting alone at this booth all the time. I really like the dipping sauce for the chicken strips. Have you tried the dipping sauce with the fries? The sauce tastes so good with the fries. Earlier today, I told myself I should sit with you if I saw you. And, I did! Do you always get the same thing? You seem to like fries. I'm a fast eater," stopping to catch her breathe before the last bite of the chicken sandwich.

"Fast? No, I don't fast," shrugs Teresa.

"What are you talking about? Neither do I. Do I

look like I fast?" laughing while taking the lid off the chocolate milkshake to finish it off.

"No, I guess not. Well, bye," Teresa mutters, getting up from the table.

"Hey, my name is Hailey. I've seen you at school. We go to the same high school. We're in the same math class, but you sit at the back of the room. You always chew your pencil during the quizzes, but not during tests. Do you like to go by Terry or Teresa?"

Teresa cannot remember the last time anyone had asked her what she preferred, much less her mom. She pauses to think about the question.

"I like Teresa," looking down to pick up her tray.

"Wait up, Teresa, I'm done," blurts Hailey following Teresa to the tray and trash collection bin.

Hailey heads out the door after Teresa and manages to catch up to her. As they pass the display window of the dress shop, Hailey comments, "I don't think that dress is your style."

"What?"

"I saw you looking at the dress in the window earlier. Are you thinking of going to the school dance this Friday?" Hailey inquires.

Teresa looks at the display window and notices Hailey's reflection alongside her own. She realizes she is not alone.

"No one has asked me to go," looking down.

"So? You can just go, you know, with friends," rants Hailey.

"I wouldn't know what to wear," mumbles Teresa.

Teresa cannot remember the last time anyone had asked her what she preferred, much less her mom.

Hailey opens the door to the dress shop, “Come! I’ll show you.”

“Huh? Well, uh, ok,” shuffling her feet.

Once in the store, Hailey walks away, leaving Teresa in the middle of the store surrounded by clothing racks. Teresa looks around and sees a mother and her daughter shopping together. The young girl is showing her mom a dress while the girl’s mom nods in approval. Teresa notices the colorful dresses on the racks. She realizes she is standing next to a pair of mannequins on display both wearing dresses similar to those worn by the women in the telenovelas her mom watches in the evenings. She steps back.

¡Qué bonitos vestidos! Lástima que no hay uno en tu talla. There probably aren’t any of those dresses in my size.

Teresa looks around for Hailey. Hailey comes around the corner of a rack full of skirts, carrying a long black skirt and a muted, forest green blouse. Hailey walks up to Teresa and holds the garments in front of Teresa lengthwise. Hailey hands the skirt to Teresa, takes the green blouse, turns around and once again disappears into the racks of clothes. Minutes later, Hailey returns with a black shirt with a light grey, black and white diagonal graphic pattern on the front. Once again, she walks up to Teresa and

“Of course, you still look like you, Teresa. That’s the point.”

holds the shirt and skirt lengthwise in front of Teresa.

Handing both the skirt and the shirt to Teresa, “Hold them, just like that.” Hailey

steps back. “Why don’t you go to the fitting room and try them on? See for yourself,” nodding in approval.

Hailey gently nudges Teresa in the direction of the fitting rooms. Teresa drags the black skirt across the floor as she looks over her shoulder back at Hailey. In the fitting room, Teresa turns away from the mirrors and puts on the skirt and shirt. Hailey calls Teresa to come out of the fitting room. When Teresa comes out of the fitting room, she catches a glimpse of a figure in the three way mirrors at the end of the row of fitting rooms. Teresa turns to look at the figure and is surprised to see herself looking back.

“This is more your style,” Hailey grins, proud of her efforts.

“I guess. I still look like me,” muses Teresa.

“Of course, you still look like you, Teresa. That’s the point.”

Staring down at her canvas, high top sneakers, “But, Hailey, I don’t have other shoes.”

“You don’t need any other shoes. Those look great. You look beautiful, Teresa.”

Back in the fitting room, Teresa catches the reflection of her sneakers and the skirt in the mirror. Her eyes follow the silhouette up the length of the mirror, stopping on her face. Teresa remembers how her mom is always quick to tell strangers, “Teresa was such a beautiful baby, with bouncy black curls. ¡Qué bonita era!”

When Teresa gets home, she finds her mom sitting on the couch in the living room watching her favorite novela. Teresa tries to avoid the inevitable commentary over the latest hair and fashion worn by the actresses. She walks swiftly to her room with the bag from the dress shop. Once in her room, Teresa closes the door behind her and hides the bag in the back of her closet.

“¡Ven pa’ca! Mira, look, Teresa,” yelling over the announcer of the television commercial.

Teresa peeks out her bedroom door.

“¡Mira, Teresa! Mira que bonita se ve esta muchacha con su pelo largo y con esos pantalones que es-

tán de moda. Look at how nice these pants look on this girl with long hair.”

“I like the pants I wear. Those skinny pants everyone is wearing look like leggings. I can’t wear leggings.”

“If you stopped eating so many burgers and fries, you could wear those skinny pants. Si no comieras tanto y te arreglaras más. If you didn’t eat so much and let your hair grow, wear some makeup.”

“What’s wrong with my face, Mamá?” implores Teresa.

“Your hair looked so nice when it was long,” changing the television channel.

“Where is the photo album with my baby pictures?” walking back from her bedroom.

“¿Por qué? Why? For school?”

“Sí, where is it?”

“It is on the shelves, next to all of those old VHS tapes.”

Teresa dusts off the photo album and takes it to her bedroom. She sits on her bed and opens the album. She is struck by the smile on her mother’s face in a picture where Teresa is being cradled in her mother’s arms. She turns the page. Page after

page, Teresa sees her mom smiling. In those pictures, Teresa is wearing colorful, bright dresses and long hair down to her waist. Teresa also notices herself smiling. There are even pictures of both of them smiling and hugging. She pauses to look at

a picture of herself with two other girls, each wearing identical pink and sequins dresses, white gloves and a high ponytail. Slowly, Teresa remembers that the picture is from her first grade talent show. She cringes

the second the song for the dance routine pops into her head. Teresa heads back to the living room with the photo album opened to the page with the talent show picture.

“¡Mira, Mamá! Look! Look at this picture of me singing and dancing when I was little.”

“Oh, those girls! Look at them, Teresa! ¡Míralas! ¡Qué bonitas niñas! Look, such pretty girls! They danced and sang like stars, como las estrellas en la tele. I saw them the other day at church wearing the prettiest dresses. They are all grown up. You should have seen them. Their hair looks so nice. They have highlights now. Esas muchachas sí que son bellas. They looked beautiful!”

“What’s wrong with my face, Mamá?”

ELIZABETH ZERTUCHE is a writer in the Raleigh area. Elizabeth is a Fellow in Residency for Fiction for the Voices of Our Nation Arts Foundation. She started writing in grade school, excelling in expository essay writing. She grew up in a family with a rich tradition of storytelling and sharing family history. This tradition for storytelling continues to inspire her writing today. Follow her on Twitter, @WriterEZertuche.



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Included in the price is a workbook so participants can revisit these exercises at their own pace.

Saturday, March 12 9am - 5pm
(Breakfast & Lunch & Snacks Provided)

\$200

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Write-ins at the Studio are four-hour sessions (9am - 1pm) on specified Saturday mornings. For that time you will write in the beautiful environment of LaVenson Press Studios. You will have the quiet writing company of other writing colleagues. These are silent sessions that space and time to get focused writing done. Fee of \$25 covers facility, your access to the library with all exercise handouts and prompts, access to the internet, drinks and light snacks.

Feb. 6
Mar. 5
April 2

April 30
Sept. 17
Oct. 15

Nov. 19

Saturday 9am - 1pm
\$25

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WRITING TO RECLAIM YOUR SUPER BAD ASS

Day-long Retreat

This workshop is ideal for the woman who finds herself remembering her bad-ass self and wondering, "Where did she go?" Ideal for digging down to the root circuitry of what internal obstacles are blocking the way to what you want.

Saturday, April 16 9am - 5pm
(Breakfast & Lunch & Snacks Provided)

\$180

[Click here to request a registration form](#)

THE YOUNG WOMEN'S SUMMER WRITING EXPERIENCE

is a week-long writing workshop for young women ages 13-18. Offers young women 3.5 acres of rural land where "who they are" is at the root of every expression. Participants utilize inspiration from nature, literature, visual art, music, film and the self-reliance of harvesting and making their own food to inspire multimedia writing.

Session 1 - June 13-17 1pm - 5pm

Session 2 - June 20-24 1pm - 5pm

\$165/wk

(if attending both weeks - 2nd week is \$135)

Includes a copy of the chapbook of the student's published works.

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FULL-LENGTH MANUSCRIPT WORKSHOP

takes the novice and experienced writer from the blank page, through the emotional, psychological, and spiritual experience of creating raw material from a person plot while combining the unorthodox use of craft to bring the manuscript through to the first draft of a full-length literary work.

Sept. 11, 2016

Oct. 16

Nov. 13

Dec. 4

Jan. 8, 2017

Feb. 5

Mar. 5

April 2

May 7, 2017

2pm - 6pm

\$950

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HEALING THE MIND, SPIRIT & BODY THROUGH WOMEN'S ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION, ART AND HEALTH THERAPIES

Day-long Retreat

A Panel Discussion Designed & Moderated by Zelda Lockhart

This panel will seek to offer women demonstrations that provide information on the emergence of alternative forms of healing for women that are carried out through education, art and non-traditional medicine.

The panel will also seek to offer women an opportunity to engage in discussion with local practitioners.

Break-out sessions will further seek to offer women a forum to safely and openly discuss and inquire about emerging alternative forms of healing.

Saturday, September 24 9am - 5pm

(Breakfast & Lunch & Snacks Provided)

\$100

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WOMEN'S WRITING INTENSIVE

This workshop is designed to help you create a whole short work of fiction, memoir or poetry by pulling your writing up from your emotional and psychological base. This workshop will supply you with tools to give your writing artistic depth. For 12 years The Women's Writing Intensive has led countless women on the adventure of utilizing life-plots to make good literature, much of which is now published work.

Oct. 2, 9, 16, 23

3-6pm

\$250

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PUBLISHING INTENSIVE

Learn the various types of publishing.

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Learn how to write a query & book proposal.

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\$80

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