

**NONFICTION**

## DIP, SPIT & ASH: ON SOLID GROUND

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There are decisions you make when you are seventeen that, for better or worse, you have to live with once they are made. There is no second chance. There is no going back, only frantically forward.

Maybe because of my under-developed pre-frontal lobe I couldn't resist being a thrill-seeking adolescent male. Whatever the reason, I was inclined one dark night to take an off-road expedition in my Ford Ranger. I ventured onto a narrow, icy trail during the first night of snowfall at the start of the blizzard of 2010, the heaviest snowfall in Virginia since 1772. The blizzard began on a Friday and did not cease for days. I learned more about ice and snow than I ever wanted or needed to know.

Maybe it was all about my truck. I named her Reba, after the aging country singer. It's one of the most important possessions in my life. That January afternoon I peeled wheels out of my school's parking lot to the tune of Jake Owens *Eight-second Ride*. I sped through Lovettsville, then blasted down Old Wheatland Road on my way to Lincoln, a small Quaker settlement on the outskirts of nowhere. I've lived my entire life within the boundaries of this county without ever wanting for much of anything. Here, you make your own fun, which includes excessive amounts of dip-spit and ash, country music, off-road driving, oversized tires, lift kits, ultra-bright off-road lights, and a modified exhaust. I was about to find out what my bucket of fun was going to spill this week.

It was late afternoon when I decided to go four-wheeling. I rallied my friends. We met up at the sharp curve in Lincoln. It was all rolling hills, narrow lanes, horse pastures, and the part I like: trails perfect for off-roading. My Reba was the most ill-equipped for our adventure. Dark clouds gathered across the sky, and the weather reports screamed blizzard. Black is usually associated with ominous events, but white was the color of the monster that inched closer to us every minute.

Forest Mills Road is long, narrow, and steep. To the side of this road is a winding horse trail that looked enticing that evening. Barely covered with an untouched layer of snow, it begged us to enter. I turned onto the trail ahead of the rigs driven by my high school buddies who followed like a convoy. I carefully traversed the trail thinking I could make it. My truck was the smallest of the bunch and could go where the others couldn't. They held back a bit closer to the road. I passed along the trail the first time, cautiously, but then began racing back and forth like an insane coyote. It was exhilarating, weaving my way through a constellation of trees. I felt alive. It didn't last. Suddenly, in what seemed to be a scene from

Steve McQueen's 1968 Bullitt, I reversed Reba in an attempt to complete a 180-degree turn; I got sucked into a hole—a deep one. I spun tires but only dug myself in deeper until my chassis was resting on land. The flinging muck revealed the severity of the situation. Stuck, high-centered in the midst of a floodplain, I tried to power my way out. The more the tires spun, the worse it got. We shoveled around her. That failed. We tried to yank Rebs with tow straps and heavy-duty chains. That's when it started to snow heavily. I just couldn't get her out on my own power.

We dug for hours in the darkness to a point of despair, like a battery charging down. I jumped in the driver's seat. Full of rage, I just stared at the steering wheel as the snow began to fall more heavily. Reba sank deeper. I wanted to get out of there.

I sought help from my family. My dad was not known for over-parenting. No return call from him. I called my grandfather. He is an Asian black belt who spent the first eight years of his life in an American internment camp during WWII and now owns a local ice cream store. He is actually my step-grandfather but the only one I've ever known. I live with him and my grandmother in the small historic town of Leesburg. He gets pretty frustrated with me. Still, he takes me in no matter how badly I mess up. But on this night, I got no answer. Finally, an hour later, I got a text message that bluntly said, "Shouldn't be driving off-road and making bad decisions, can't help you." Meanwhile, in another part of town, my dilemma cut no ice with my father and stepmother. They didn't call or even return my calls that night. My grandparents wanted this to be a "lesson," and my stepmother, whose cold stare is like a T-Rex, couldn't have cared less about my truck—only about the truck payments I still owed her. I was thinking, why couldn't my family just call me a tow truck like most normal parents would do? I could work the cost off later. I text-messaged every able-bodied person on my cell contact list. I called my dad a few more times. I don't live with him because of the constant conflicts between me and my stepmother. She and I just never could get along, even back when I was seven. No answer. I didn't bother to call my grandmother because it's my steadfast belief that women cannot solve problems. According to these women, I am crazy, belligerent, condescending, offensive, and even dangerous. There is another side to every story.

As the night fell, almost faster than the snow, the weather worsened. Down the narrow path, I could see clusters of headlights all askew. One set of headlights moved slowly, trekking towards my position. The rumbling of exhaust and the clanking of diesel signaled the arrival of my friend's rig which gave me a tug but failed at unearthing old Reba.

There was something special about that night—close friends, CB radios chirping, and snow covered trucks sitting silent, like the skeletal remains of discarded cigarettes tossed on the ground. Ice cracked as

my truck sank another foot deeper than it ever should have. Its weight dragged it into the slush that lay just under the blanket of snow.

My truck, newly transformed, has a camper top, fog lights, oversized tires. It is the only object of value that I own, and to me, it's beautiful. It sat like a black shadow with Virginia plates upon the white landscape. I envisioned it floating away into the nearest large body of water once the snow melted and the river beneath rose.

The Snow fell on. We missed two weeks of school. I spent that time next to Reba, trying hopelessly to release it from its trap like a captain going down with his ship.

We kept shoveling. My hands, blistered and raw, were bright with cold. The routine was dip, dig, drink, smoke, spit, stare, rinse, and repeat. Exhaust filled my lungs until they hurt.

Late on the fourth day, I felt like a smoking filter at the bottom of an ashtray, and my burning anger was replaced with exhaustion. A never-ending flow of slush, ice, and new fallen snow soaked us as our constant digging echoed through the woods. Finally, on the verge of collapse, I had to abandon my dear Reba to regroup.

I slept at my friend's house. I refused to return to my own home. Any quantity of frigid discomfort was better than the diet of icy lectures I'd get there. But then, what parent is proud of a son who's been labeled a delinquent more than once?

We slept most of the day. We tried getting back to Reba, but even with a Hummer—yes, a fucking Hummer—we could not get through the snow. It was urgent; we had to get to Reba before the temperature rose. We got supplies. Layers and layers of clothing, wool socks, grocery bags, another layer of socks...all rationed out to navigate the moonless night.

Back at the dig site, we built a fire pit. The flames made our boots steam with condensation. Hours dragged by as we dug a trench around the truck. By 2:00 A.M. the second wave of the blizzard had begun. We hunkered down in sleeping bags around the fire.

Morning came. Just standing was hard. I ached. My hands were sanded over with dried blood scratches. Sharp ice had gouged them. But that night the moon was huge and shining. In my mind it symbolized hope. In the dark, clear night we celebrated. The music from good old Reba's sound system echoed through the woods, and the glow of my roof lights illuminated the night. We made decent food: cuisine of choice—hot dogs. I was happy, alive, and hopeful, only because all of us were completely loopy from exhaustion.

Still, I was angry at myself and the situation, feeling foolish and entirely abandoned by my family.

Blue is a deep, cold color. Blue is the color of cold snow and also the color of my family's resentment. It goes back a long way. With my stuck

truck, my family could only think *He needs to learn a lesson. He took the only object of value to him out on an icy trail on a moonless night on the eve of a blizzard. He was warned.* It was just one more bad decision in a series of bad decisions that have made up a lifetime of bad decisions, many I am not proud of. I knew they were right. I did not want to face that. I didn't go home any night during the storm. It wasn't the first time. When things got bad, I just lived with a friend or in my truck. I could be stubborn for as long as it took. Living like a boxcar hobo was becoming routine for me.

And then, suddenly...my phone rang. Finally, it was my dad. A simple text message: "Still stuck?" I replied, "Yes." Within twenty minutes the scenario changed considerably.

A caravan of trucks arrived with heavy chains, sand spreaders, and oversized plows mounted up front. Wedging myself underneath Reba, held up only by a floor jack slowly sinking into the slush, I chipped away at ice with a small hatchet while my dad hooked up the chains that were needed to attach to the hand crank winch. With each crank of the lever, my dad slowly lifted Reba out of captivity and up onto the ramps we had in place. The self-pity and anger left my exhausted mind. This was perfect: Dad and I came together and freed my truck. She emerged intact back on solid ground. Feelings of betrayal melted away with the ice.

A lot surfaced as I dozed that night. Like what it was that kept my father and I from being closer. It was a barrier I could not break through. I'd always felt it was his wife and her refusal to accept me. Blaming was easy. But maybe I needed to spend some time sorting out how to forgive the past and accept her, if for no other reason than to remain closer to my father. Soon, I'd be on my way to Basic Military Training. This would change things—for me, and for them, forever. It would, I hoped, change their perception of me from disappointment to pride.

Except perhaps for snow, there is no true white in nature. There's no true meaning stored in the mind of the individual, only perceptions. Do we remember the past accurately? Or do we rearrange it to meet our needs? We reinvent our personal past at every moment based on what we absorb along the way. This is how I remember the blizzard of 2010, which happened when I was seventeen.

## WHY POETRY?

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Emotions and expressions don't fit into molds. There is no such thing as "sadness" or "awe" or "glee." These words have no universal meaning—sure, a cookie-cutter conceptual cloud, maybe—but truly they are uniquely defined for each individual. They represent experiences with which nobody else can honestly relate. Why then should we—how then can we—express them in a manner so rigidly defined, so distant, so plain? Feelings are meant to blossom into poetry, not to be confined, controlled, conformed into prose.

Prose is made of sentences. Each sentence conveys an idea, each paragraph a well-developed thought process. It begs for logos, not pathos. Perfectly structured, it is a wall of brick, neatly layered and solidly cemented together. But thoughts, ideas, emotions are not so. They flow seamlessly one into another, blending and tangling and making unknown connections and implications that don't teach, don't preach, but engage and invite the mind to join their dance. A sentence has a subject, an action, and a period. But ideas don't always—sometimes they mean so much more or so much less, and if left unfinished...

The possibilities can imply much more than could be ended with a period. But you can't do that in proper prose. So many things can't be done in prose, or shouldn't be done in prose, or aren't done in prose. How often have you read proper prose with a truly stylistic flair? Rules are made to be broken. Who's to say that my writing is incorrect if I end a sentence with a preposition minus an object because I like the point it's getting to? why must my sentence begin with a capital letter when I want it to sound small and uncertain; why must my question end with a question mark when I'm using it not to ask for an answer but to make a point. Poetry defies these constraints, rejects these conventions. It says what it intends in whatever way best conveys the message, favoring style and meaning and expression over predefined rules of grammar.

Poetry is free. It allows the mind and the pen to wander together through thought, the best reflection. No structure, no limits, nothing it can't express.

This essay would have made a better poem.

## LIFE IS SUCH A JOKER

*Mircea Cernev*

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“Are you ever coming back?” she asked.

“Of course.”

With that last exchange and the tightest of hugs, half of my world seemed to vanish. I was crushed. My heart sank to my feet. I was on the verge of breaking down, but at the same time I was trying my hardest to put on this...“macho man” façade. At ten years of age, that must be commendable, especially since I managed to pull it off.

We didn’t realize it, but that was the end. The end of the beginning? In a way, yes—but neither of us had any way of knowing.

On June 22, 2002, I looked back at the small airport through the window of an Airbus A308. Suddenly, the past four years of my life came flooding back. All of that time my partner and I spent together every day came to such an abrupt stop. The golden-chain connection we had broke. I felt nauseous and uneasy. The smell of the air conditioning was sickening. My pulse went up as the whining of the engines increased, not because I was nervous to be on an airplane for the first time in my life, but because I was leaving behind half of myself. As the wheels broke free from the ground, my heart stopped. Would I ever see her again?

As I kicked off my life in the United States, everything seemed to go according to plan: we called each other on our birthdays and exchanged a few holiday cards, but...nothing special. I slowly started to get pre-occupied with school, dancing, and various other responsibilities. The calls were forgotten, the cards ever so rare. I graduated from elementary school and then middle school with the “Top Student” award. I was moving forward, and without a doubt, so was she. Time made certain I slowly but surely placed her in the back of my memories.

As a gift for my “academic achievements,” my parents planned a surprise trip back to the land of my roots. What was supposed to be a pleasant three months with my relatives turned into a huge revelation. Life, as I harshly found out, can be cruel sometimes.

While testing out my cousin’s bike through the center of Chisinau, I noticed through my peripherals a person with a familiar walk. It wasn’t a normal walk because, well, it looked just like mine. Her back was too straight. Her feet were doing all of the work. It simply seemed too effortless. At that moment, I knew. The walk was hers, the black hair a bit longer than I remembered it and the sophistication still apparent. Adrenaline started pumping, my feet couldn’t keep their place on the pedals, and the handles became slippery. All memories of her came back and brought

with them those emotions that gnawed at me four years earlier. I wanted to speed up towards her, but I hesitated. When we parted, she was a full head taller than me. That didn't seem to be the case anymore. Impossible. But what if?

Still, I kept my distance. She crossed the street. I crossed it too. She took the trolley, and I followed with the bike. At a moment of carelessness—or maybe curiosity—I sped up too much, coming side to side with the trolley. She looked out the window, straight at me. She knew. The spark in her eyes was too hard to ignore. As soon as the vehicle stopped, she quickly stepped outside, turned towards me, and then froze. For what seemed like a lifetime, she just stood there, motionless. I didn't know what to do; I stared back. As I slowly put the bike down, she realized it was truly I and sprinted into my arms. As soon as she touched me, my world was at peace.

Life apparently split us up just so it could bring us back together. It took us quite a few hours and even more ignored parents' phone calls to catch up. After all, four years is a pretty long time, especially when you've only lived for fourteen. She had stopped dancing because she couldn't find a partner she could get along with. Apparently, nobody was as good to her as I was. As a student in the number one lyceum in the country, she was struggling with math because she didn't have anybody to explain it to her—that was usually my job. Overall, her life changed since I left, towards the better rather than the worse. I was happy for her and she likewise for me. By ten in the evening, the park lights flickered on and off, and our parents could wait no longer. We dreaded the idea of ending the night but promised each other we'd stay in touch. She gave me her phone number and made me promise to call her every single day. For the rest of the summer, I did just that. We met every time I was in the capital, and during the last week of my vacation, I asked for her email. I told her international calls were, unfortunately, too expensive—I wasn't a working man at the time and couldn't afford it. She understood but asked me what "email" meant. As shocked as I was, I let it go. After I explained, she still seemed confused and simply got a piece of paper from her purse, scribbled something, dropped a tear on it, and gave it to me. There was an address. "Write to me," she said.

Over the past few years, I've gathered perhaps two hundred letters from her. They've been the link to my home away from home. They represent the time, commitment, and emotion put into this relationship. Nothing can compare to writing a hand-written letter—none of that typed-up, robotic, electronic nonsense. When you open an email from a loved one, there's usually a brief second of excitement before the text appears in front of you, and then it's gone as you see the Times New Roman, size 12 font. When I open a letter from her, my heart beats like the wings of

a hummingbird until I arrive at the last sentence. The smile on my face doesn't disappear for another ten minutes, or at least until I fold the sheet again and place it back in its envelope.

Every Monday, I expect a letter from her. If not Monday, then it almost definitely comes Tuesday, and it's usually twice as long. My letter departs the day after I receive hers. A reply comes two days later. We've never broken this tradition, and we don't plan to. No matter where we go, no matter what we do, we always write to each other. It's very cheesy and old fashioned, but it gets the job done. It keeps us in contact. It doesn't let us forget about each other. In a sense, it keeps the spark alive. I still call her from time to time, just to hear her voice and imagine her next to me. However, most of the visuals come through the letters.

I can see her through her writing. She's at her hazel-colored table, drawing a smiley face on the left corner of the page as she starts yet another addition to our story. I see the white lamp, the warm light, and the cup full of different pens in front of her. The messier her letters get, the more excited she is to tell me about some new development in her life. Her eyes gradually become wider; she bites her lower lip and smiles slightly. Then, as she comes to a small conclusion, she quickly presses her lips together. The bigger the dot at the end of the sentence, the more time she took to think about what to write next. If the gel ink flows without break, then she's thought about writing this letter for some time. The penmanship of the last paragraph, however, is always the same. The "I miss you" never changes.

Facebook shmacebook. Letters is where it's at.

## 3's

### *Hali Haskins* *Woodbridge Senior High School, 12*

#### I

I was raised in Kentucky, something most people would complain about. Most people despise being surrounded by corn fields and cow pastures, but I, for one, am not complaining or despising. I enjoyed Kentucky's two hour bus rides home from school. The only things that sat outside of my school bus window were extremely large John Deere tractors pulling tanks of ammonia fertilizer. Kentucky, for the most part, provided me with enjoyable memories. There is only one reason why I did not enjoy living there: the bigots, the ignorant bigots that I knew as my neighbors. The ignorant bigots that my mother forced me to address as Mr. and Mrs. These were the people who taught me the three things I learned in school. 1) Gays are boys who like boys. 2) Lesbians are girls who like girls. 3) Gays and lesbians go to hell. And that's all that I learned. I learned this from everyone who surrounded me, everyone except for my parents.

My elementary school principal was a short handsome man by the name of Mr. Pryor. He was single, yet old enough to be married, which was something greatly frowned upon. No one ever saw him with a woman, and he was, therefore, deemed a "faggot" for the rest of his life, which ended abruptly in the summer of 2007. I received a telephone call which informed me of his passing. I lived in Virginia at that time but I could still hear it then, even from hundreds of miles away: "Well, so long fag, at least we can have a real man for a principal now." I prayed for him.

By the time I left Kentucky I knew three things about myself: 1) I am a girl who likes girls, which means that 2) I am a lesbian, which means that 3) I am going to hell. After all the years I spent in Kentucky, I never grew a hatred for these people, and to this day I feel no anger towards them, only pity.

#### II

I woke up around eight o'clock that morning, kissed her on the cheek, and told her she could sleep in while I took a shower. We volunteered to help with creative writing auditions at our school, which began at nine. She worked in the art room as I ran back and forth between the sign-up table and the creative writing room. This lasted for about four hours. Not having eaten anything beforehand, we planned to go to Panera afterwards with a few friends. I rushed down the hallway to the art room to tell her that I had finished working.

One thing everyone knows about me is that I care what people think. I will never be the person with a bumper sticker on her car that shouts, "Hey! I'm a big fat lesbian! Would you like to join my softball team?" No. That person will never be me, I will probably never attend a rally, and I will probably never set foot in a gay club. I don't like the attention; I'll keep my beliefs to myself and save myself the harassment.

At that very second in time, I didn't care. I didn't care what the mothers of little Catholic girls thought of me as I trudged down the hallway in Doc Marten boots and cargo shorts. I was way too hungry to care or even to realize that I grabbed her hand as we hurried to my car. We passed two women around forty whom I spoke to earlier as they asked when a certain boy would be finished writing.

Now they were sitting on the floor, and one of them hit the other in the arm with a water bottle. "Look," I heard one say.

Instinctively, my mind began racing so fast, and I became so angry that I so badly wanted to turn around and scream, "YEAH, LOOK ALL YOU WANT. SHE'LL STILL BE MY GIRLFRIEND." But I didn't. I didn't scream.

I lowered my head and continued walking when I heard the other woman say, "You go girls!" I turned around, smiled, and kept walking. She gave me the thumbs up.

After convincing myself that she meant no harm, I felt something deep inside me say, "Hey, it's all right. I'm a lesbian, too. And maybe we won't end up in hell. But if we do, it can't be too bad, right?" My girlfriend was able to mutter a very shy version of the words "thank you." Finally, I was accepted by a stranger who could only assume things about me by the clothes I was wearing and the hand I was holding. I hope that these two women are in love, and I hope that they spend every night together for as long as they both may live. They deserve it.

### III

To me, there are three kinds of people in this world: people who love me for who I am, regardless of what gender I am attracted to, strangers who don't know me but accept me, and strangers who want nothing more than to drown me in a boiling pool of holy water. I respect all three of these people, and I do not hate anyone.

Lastly, I know three things about myself. 1) I am a girl who likes girls. 2) I am a lesbian. 3) Most people think I'm going to hell, but no one truly knows. I don't really care though. I've never been one to complain about hot weather.

## THE EXTRAORDINARY

### *Kathryn Hughes* *Lake Braddock Secondary School, 12*

Shoved somewhere in the back of my closet is an old, beat-up pair of black Converse sneakers. They may seem ordinary and commonplace and even ugly, covered in grass stains and dirt and the rubber siding pulling apart, but their value can't be measured by their appearance. I can still remember the day I bought them. I walked down the shoe aisle, turning up my fourteen-year old nose at the idea of ever being caught dead wearing any of the shoes my mother presented to me. But when I saw them, I knew that I could see myself in them. There's something about a pair of Converse that speaks of individuality, creativity, and adventure, the ideas stitched into them like the star next to the brand name. It's beyond me how such a popular style of shoe can provide such a defining sense of self to each of its millions of wearers, but there it is.

As I pulled out my wad of hard earned babysitting money and counted out the bills (ten, twenty, one, two, three, four, five), I was already picturing myself in them, imagining my fellow Converse wearers seeing me, seeing me stride down the street in confidence and knowing that I was an individual, just like them. It didn't occur to me that the company mass-produces their rubber and canvas product with the very hope that silly preteens like me will buy into the idea of being unique just like everyone else. But it probably wouldn't have mattered to me then, and it doesn't now.

Upon arriving home, I immediately went to work on breaking them in and making them look like I had owned them forever and had clearly always been this cool. My mother protested as I doodled on them (how else was anyone supposed to know how creative I was?) or purposely walked in muddy puddles and scuffed my feet on the sidewalk. These shoes were going to be me or, more accurately, who I desperately wanted to be: free and unique but imperfect in a hopelessly endearing way. I decided then and there that these shoes were going to accompany me on every adventure I had for the rest of my teenage years, if not longer. And since anyone who knows anything knows that the best adventures come when you least expect them, what choice did I have but to wear them every day? My mother firmly put her foot down when I tried to wear them to church on Sunday morning, but adventures rarely occur on Sunday mornings, so I changed with only a small amount of pouting.

I wore them on every trip my family took that year, from Vancouver to New York. I wore them on the first day of school and just about every day afterwards. I wore them on my first date and the first time I was

kissed. I wore them to my senior pictures, the three-year-old doodles on them seeming to come from another life when I put on the black drape and smiled as if I was actually ready to go be successful on my own. All of the adventures I've had in them admittedly would have been just as meaningful in any footwear, but when I open my closet in the morning and hopelessly stare at my mound of shoes, knowing that none of them reflect the kind of day I want to have, I spy my Converse buried behind my running shoes and ballet flats. I slip them on, disregarding the fact that they're falling apart and the fact that my doctor curses their lack of arch support at every check-up.

As I put them on, I'm reminded of every adventure, the memories laced into them, each as much a part of the fabric as the faded white stitching. I'm fourteen again, driving across the country with my dad. I'm fifteen again, and I'm walking into a new school, overwhelmed, as four thousand strange faces surround me. I'm sixteen, and I'm wondering how I'll ever survive SATs, a varsity sport, academics, and all my other responsibilities. These shoes have no special powers, and they certainly won't win any fashion awards, but because of them, I'm a little wiser than I was three years ago. The shoes didn't make me any cooler, any more adventurous, or any more creative. Rather, I gave the shoes their importance by allowing them to become tangible versions of my most personal memories.

In a few months, maybe the siding will completely tear off, or the laces will snap, or they will just become too worn to wear. The inevitability of physical objects breaking or falling apart is a sad discovery of growing older. But I don't know that it really matters. I had one thing, a pair of completely ordinary shoes, which held extraordinary meaning to me. It could have been anything, and it wouldn't have mattered. Learning to find value in the insignificant things is what makes us human. That is what really makes all the difference.

## MY ALMOST LOST SIBLING

*Lisa Junta*

*Thomas Jefferson High School, 12*

I sat next to my younger sister Katrina in the darkened movie theater. The film had been about two sisters impossibly close and caring of each other. As the titles scrolled to an end, I glanced sideways to see if Katrina was registering any reaction. Nothing. She jumped up to leave, so I followed, walking just a couple of steps behind her. I wasn't ready to share any reactions yet, and I felt I couldn't hide my feelings of guilt.

Katrina was twelve and navigating the unmapped territory between childhood and adolescence. Boys were cured of their once permanent Cooties disease, and though she still grimaced at kissing scenes, Hannah Montana replaced Pokémon as her show of choice. The raggedy soccer sweater with "Thunder Blue" and the number 6 sewn on, which she had once refused to take off, was replaced with a stylish series of jackets and overcoats from her latest shopping trips to American Eagle and A&F. But for too long, we'd been living in the same house, occupying adjacent bedrooms, not being more than marginally conscious of the other's presence. She had worries, fears, joys, and aspirations, none of which I was aware.

Earlier that afternoon, my dad nodded when we told him we were seeing a movie together, but I could tell he wondered whether or not we actually planned to sit next to each other and engage in interaction, or if we would revert to texting our friends. Was it that out of character for me to have a friend-like hangout with someone who was four years younger than I?

We no longer live lives intermingled with our neighbors as the barriers of value, income, and schedule differences separate us. But we also set up barriers within our own homes. I am talking about the "No trespassing" and "Do not disturb!" signs plastered onto the closed doors of our rooms behind which we hide on computers all day. I am talking about the ear buds that fill the void of silence whenever we go in the house so that we do not feel the need to converse with others. After all, why hang out with those who are ten feet away when we can "Skype" with people we do not even know from Germany or Japan?

It had been one of those rare days when I woke up before my sister left for school. I noticed something that brought me out of my isolated world of homework and friends. In looking up from the *Washington Post* spread across the breakfast table alongside my cereal bowl, I saw a new person sitting in front of me. I saw black-painted eyelashes that clumped together, the result of inexperience. I saw patches of foundation form-

ing a mask, an imperfect attempt to hide the blemishes she now felt embarrassed by. The last time I had looked at that face, I had seen mud stains—possibly the result of a game of pick-up soccer with her friends or possibly from the mud pies she made for her bug farm.

My sister had begun her teenage journey right in front of me, but I had been looking the other way. I had been busy studying my notes for the next day's tests, memorizing the SAT word of the day, commenting on my Facebook friends' wall posts, and concocting my dreaded college essays. Did I live with my family, or did everyone just rent separate rooms in a house?

I soon learned few of my friends witnessed any more of their siblings' lives than I did.

According to a study published in 2009 by the Annenberg Center for a Digital Future, 28 percent of Americans reported spending less time with their family members, which is almost three times the 11 percent of Americans who reported spending less time with their family members in 2006.

How could the creation of technologies and applications like Facebook, texting, and cheaper cell-phones have served to decrease communication with our families and more specifically with our siblings?

It is possible my sister was satisfied with the separate lives we were living, but I did not want to miss the opportunity to watch her grow up. I wanted to know her ups and downs because chances were I had experienced the same feelings at her age.

An awkward conversation later, we found ourselves enjoying a movie together. When I caught up with my sister, walking stride for stride beside her, we decided to go out for ice cream. I asked her what worried her these days. It took a little bit of nudging before she realized I really wanted to know the answer. She let her bucket full of emotions flip over onto the table for me to see.

I would like to say I helped Katrina release her every worry, but I am still learning how to be a supportive sister. Going to bed that night, I felt I had just met a long lost sibling. I regretted our time of separation, but knew a new chapter of our lives was just beginning.

In this new chapter, we'd be a swing dance couple both literally and figuratively. With our slippery socks on, we'd dance across the linoleum floor of our house. Getting our stunts down pat would not be easy. We'd learn to synchronize our movements so our timing wouldn't leave one of us stranded without support. Soon I'd learn to prepare for the mistakes she'd make and help in advance. When we'd do the Charleston, I'd quietly mumble to her "kick hitch kick step," keeping us on beat. And as we'd dance the dance of our lives, we'd learn to rely on each other as dancing partners in case one of us forgets the steps or loses the rhythm.

## THE DIARY

**Sara Suarez**

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In my grandfather's attic, I sat on the floor across from my cousin, both of us staring at the book in his hands. Held together by blood-red leather, its pages crumbled at their gilt edges. The initials C.L. adorned the cover in faded gold script barely a centimeter high.

Geoffrey cracked it open. "Cora Livingston," he read aloud from the inside.

"Does it have a year?" I asked.

"Eighteen-twenty-two."

I removed the book from his hands and peered inside. The leaves, yellowing and unlined, crackled upon turning. Vein-like sentences spread across the paper in black ink. For the better part of the evening, we patched together the history of Coralie Livingston Barton, the daughter of a prominent American politician in New York, but the eminence of her family did not interest me as much as the book itself. Others had written in it as well, represented by several styles of handwriting—all with elegant penmanship, few errors, and entirely in ink.

I considered my own cursive. After third grade, my penmanship fell out of practice, and I usually scrawled in haphazard script. I rarely wrote in pen. Ink cannot be erased. Yet, somehow these nineteenth-century pages recorded few mistakes, in stark contrast to my own notebooks, which bore dark cross-out wounds and scars from erasers.

It must be the computers, I decided. The Livingston journal represented a whole historical attitude I had never experienced. Forget the permanence of ink. I don't even have to write on paper. Computers, with their streamlined error-be-gone word processors, do not retain battle scars from grammar wars but instead simply annul mistakes. On the computer, it's easier to write without thinking first since upon erring one can press a key and forget entirely about the existence of the error. I love to write, creatively and otherwise, and I often use a computer because of its convenience. However, when I work on the computer, it's easy for me to become distracted by fixing trivial errors as I see them rather than after I've finished writing. I might write, delete, and re-compose a single sentence several times before I move on to the rest of the paragraph. The longhand journal writers impressed me because they planned their thoughts before committing them to paper—they avoided errors by considering everything beforehand.

The written letter was similarly left for dead by email and instant messaging, reduced to polite formality. I imagined writing a letter to a far-

off friend without the ability to communicate any more quickly. Letters required an investment: postage and envelopes cost money, while writing and waiting cost time. In practicality, letter-writing loses easily to Internet conversation, but a letter makes up for lost time in care and devotion. Furthermore, writing letters by hand, in ink, requires the same thought before composition as longhand creative writing.

Later, I set about testing my penmanship. The pen jerked across the page, leaving clumsy loops in its path; however, my hand grew more legible with every letter formed. I tried to write in longhand more often and strode into school on Monday connected to the past by my handwriting. I didn't brag over my newfound skill, but the distinctive script could not remain secret for long.

"Is that your handwriting?" asked a friend as he stared at my notes.

I explained my new philosophy towards ink, paper, and writing letters. He suggested we write letters to each other, so I promised to send one to him. That evening, I honored my promise and wrote a letter. It would have been far easier to chat online or even to send an e-mail, but I threw my attention into my letter in a way I've never done on instant messaging. He wrote back—the paper exchange was worth the time and postage. I continued the practice, and now, my long, concentrated letters break up the day-to-day Internet chatter. Writing in cursive with ink forces me to think about errors before I make them. I'm not about to give up e-mail, but these habits help me keep a straight perspective on a world of ever-quickenning communication.

## MAMÁ, ME, WALT WHITMAN AND CELEBRATING THE SELF

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Finally, *finally*, the cold voice of the DMV clerk calls our number. I am eleven years old and eager to leave this place of yawning boredom. I glance again at the form my mother has filled out, and I tell her:

“You were only supposed to fill this part out if you already have a license. And this part is asking for your work address, not our home address.”

I cannot mask my growing impatience.

My mother tells me not to worry. Later, shame warms my cheeks when the clerk glances at the form and tells us to fill it out again. My mother perceives that some injustice is being committed and protests the dismissal. The argument sparks suddenly. I try to diffuse the situation with young words that build into a crescendo of frustration. My mother just continues. Her broken English will not be dissuaded. The thick pronunciations, confused syntax, and hesitant rhythm grate on my ears, something that scrapes at my secret yearning to lose any accent, lose any trace of foreignness. It is unsettling to hear her verbal struggle, and my clutching trust in her protection and power weakens.

The words come out of my mouth before I have mind to halt them. The hunger of time has stolen the exact phrases, and memory can only ghost over their harsh unkindness. My mother does not say anything. Her mouth becomes a line, weighted with sadness and trembling slightly as she reaches to take the forms; then she returns to her seat and does not look at me. I cannot look at her, or the clerk, who has now grown quiet. She did not have to understand Spanish to have heard the pitch of angry embarrassment.

Silence blankets the car ride home. An awful turmoil roils inside my stomach. Pride now catches the words in my throat. It is humiliation, my general shyness, and the inherent intimacy of language that has always tied my tongue. I settle for watching her subtly through the corner of my eyes and examine this complexity of a woman. Does she wonder, I think, what would have become of her life had she not come here, following the brazen footsteps of my father?

What *is* she doing here? A simple cashier at Safeway? Her gentle hands can reduce complex calculus problems to a neat answer, the process explained patiently to her daughter, a daughter who has not one iota of her mathematical prowess. I can see her now, at the job that works her much too late, punching numbers into a machine, asking in that mish-mash English that is all her own,

“You like paper or plastic?”

Did she know, I wonder, that my words were borne of my own private insecurities, of uncertainties about who I was becoming and who I have been?

Her voice follows my unspoken question as her fingers settle on mine, and she speaks the redeeming truth that exists in any language, a wonder that I will name “love.”

“*There is nothing to forgive.*”

I am tempted now to say that none of it mattered. I am embarrassed of those childhood fears that pestered me, telling me in all their wrongness that I must “choose a side” if I were ever to fit in. I was the typical immigrant child, pushing against the imagined constraints of the native culture, fighting to shed the influence of the past, reaching to grasp the totality of America itself, ignorant of the truth that I stand on the shoulders of those who came before me.

Yet growing up cannot be defined by any one single moment, pinpointed exactly when we are older and have had time to reflect on such things. Rather, I have grown to see it as a constellation of events in which emotions and memories intertwine. Artificial threads dissolve and give way to unique experience. I had to fight for it of course, call up that determination that has always carried me forward with burning intensity.

I remember we were almost home when the apology stumbles out of my lips, followed by everything that had been bothering me, every stifling and nagging anxiety and every expression of gratitude that I had not shared. My tongue explores the edges of the words with earnest, the sharp vowels of English, the twirling drum roll of the Spanish *r*. I feel my way tentatively on the newly created bridge, the line of vision linking two points of view, a newborn synthesis that will forever offer me an invaluable multifaceted view of the world around me.

The tones sing and sigh, rise, strain, and then surge when syllables burst into fragments of momentary silence as I draw in much needed air.

And finally, *finally*, it is a celebration of myself in a voice that is all my own.