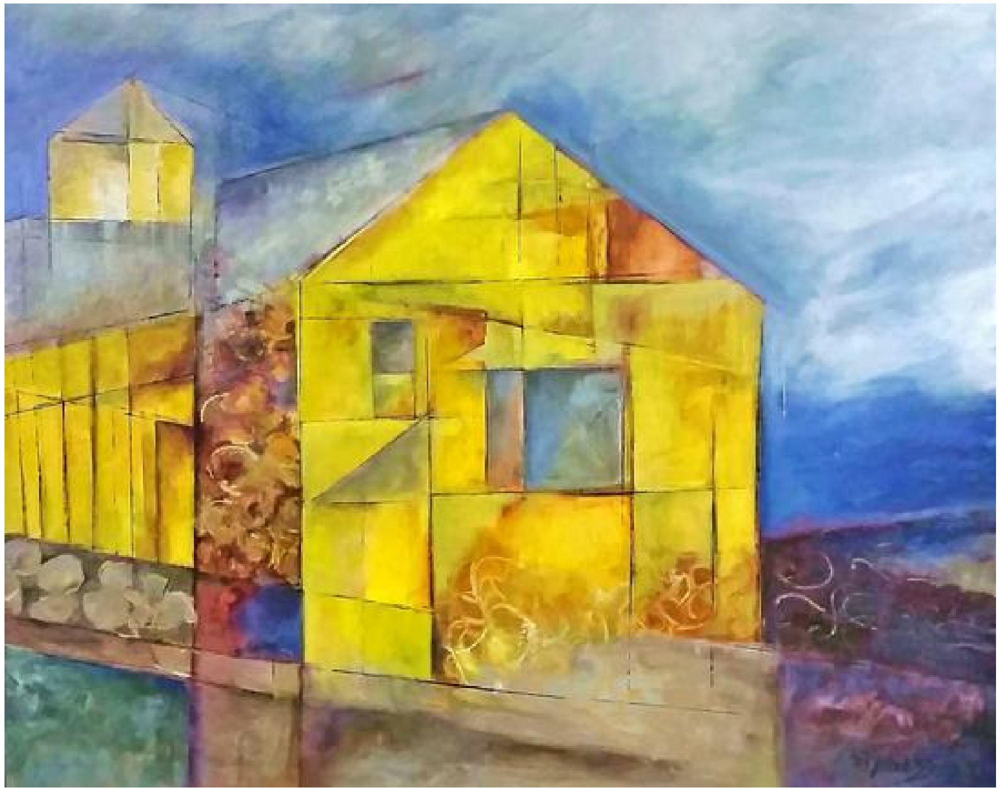
The Write Place at the Write Time

Come in...and be captivated...

Search

"Our Stories"

We have decided to devote a portion of our magazine to non-fiction. These are stories of things that have happened serendipitously, being in the right place at the right time or just heartfelt musings, thoughts, and feelings on life. Join us in our non-fiction section. These stories speak to anyone and everyone and are told by anyone and everyone who has a story to tell.



"Yellow Barn Seneca" by Linda Bigness; http://www.bignessart.com/

(About This Image)

Visual Journey into the Abstract: Note on Painting

by Linda Bigness

Sometimes, not often, a scene along the highway catches my imagination. Usually it is when I am the passenger and not the driver as I tend to pay attention to the road when traveling. My father, a lifelong truck driver, who passed away many years ago, used to pay attention to the road but also looked beyond the dashboard and the yellow lines, to take in the beauty of our countryside. I used to ride with him and remember how he would point and holler, over the vibrating diesel motor straining against its load, for me to look "over yonder sister." I did, and took in the thousands of vistas that would appear over the horizon from my viewpoint, in the passenger seat of the towering cab of our rig.

Through the years these scenes of barns, cityscapes, horizons after a storm, sunsets, mountain views and more have stayed with me and reappeared through my abstracted memories in the paintings I have created over the past 35 years. Recently I revisited yet *another vista that appeared over the horizon as I rode passenger style in a rented van. We were delivering work to a new gallery, in the finger lakes region of western New York state, and I sat dreaming and looking out over the beautiful country side, going back in my memory, remembering the many, many trips I took with my dad, when suddenly I heard a familiar voice: 'Look over yonder sister,' and I did.*

Funny, how our memory can have such total recall. Taking us back using all our senses to remind us or recall us to the present. Here I was alone in my thoughts, drifting along the highway and I hear my father's voice. At the moment his voice became present in my thoughts I saw what he might have seen. A yellow barn floated on a hilltop over the highway. "Can we pullover I asked? I need to get out and take a picture of this yellow barn."

Getting out of the van I felt the presence of my father and visualized his smile as I crossed the highway to get a better look at this amazing barn. I felt something extremely familiar about the place and knew that I must photograph this magnificent barn that overlooked the Seneca Lake. Later, back at my studio, I took the picture, printed it out, and studied it for a very long time. It was unbelievable how many memories this simple photograph of an ancient and cared for barn brought to the surface. I decided that I would paint it in all its glory and I would use color and abstraction to meld the memories with the beauty of the barn, the highway, and the water. Elements of my memories that have always been there but for some reason have been surfacing more often as I grow older with my art.

See artist's original text alongside photos of the barn which inspired the painting, and photos of the painting in the artist's studio and in the Quintus Gallery

Dad’s Passing

by Mike Dorman

His chin lies on his chest. *Dad’s* chin, just stuck there on his chest! Helpless, head bowed, chin and chest inseparable like Velcro lovers. A vegetative state would be one thing, but Dad looked anything *but* calm.

“This is good.” Mom whispers. She’s looking at me eagerly, studying and noting every revelatory twitch of my face. She’s been jaded, accustomed to Dad in the late stages, and she wants to be vicariously horrified all over again. “I’m telling you, Michael, compared to a week ago...he wouldn’t even sit. He was bouncing off the walls. I don’t know how he stayed awake, with all the meds they were giving him.”

“Hi, Dad!” I try to be happy. Try to hide my fear at what lies before me. “How’s it going?”

No response.

“It’s a good thing.” Mom whispers. “He’s finally sleeping.”

He’s so skinny. I see veins drug addicts would covet sticking out of his legs, climbing up his arms. His hair is shaved, a row of stitches above each ear marking where the emergency (and ultimately unsuccessful) brain surgery took place. His face is likewise shaved, and I consider my dad anew, study the contours of his face, consider the handsomeness in his bone structure. He just looks so damn helpless. I want to run out of the room and cry.

“Steve.” Mom leans in, nose to nose, rubs Dad’s shoulder. “Do you know who’s here?”

His answer is only a babyish noise, a high-pitched grunt. It breaks my heart. His eyelids flutter, and for a moment I think he will succeed, open his eyes. But his eyes close and his body slumps as he gives into the Seroquel and morphine.

“Michael’s here, Daddy.” Mom rubs his shoulder again. “You know? Your son? He’s come from Germany.”

“Yeah, Dad,” I parrot, “I’ve come all the way just to see you.”

No response.

His hand slowly rises to his scalp, where he rubs it softly in what looks like a gesture of pain. Another babyish sound emits from his mouth. I notice his lips hardly have the strength to lift. His chin never leaves his chest.

I look around the room, eyes blurry, searching for exits. This is too much. My dad’s not supposed to look like this, not supposed to sound like this. I want to flee, go into the parking lot and, I don’t know, sob. Yet I can’t. This is the way Life must pass through to go forward. No way around it.

The rest of the veteran’s home comes into focus as I force the tears back in. It is not a pretty sight. Emaciated old folks are strapped in chairs, heads flung back or hung forward in various positions of stupor. Are they someone else’s dad? Mom? I shake my head, remind myself that none of these poor people are anything close to what they truly are. My dad certainly shouldn't be remembered for what he is now: a brain-dead, slumped and dying man with his chin forever fixed to his chest.

Yet these nurses only know "Steve" as what he's reduced to now.

"You gonna help me build the puzzle, Les?" Her voice is kindergarten-teacher, all condescension and controlling. She doesn't look a day over 16, but I assume she's 20, her mis-proportioned body stuffed inside maroon scrubs. She talks *loud*. "I know you can be nice, Les, you just don't like to show it."

Les shakes in his wheelchair. His face is fixed in a gesture of what looks like extreme pain—as if he can't move from it. Skin wax-like, his face looks to be melting off, one eye completely milked-over with pus leaking from his blood-shot other one.

"Whose gonna help me build the puzzle then, Les?" She speaks to the entire room. No one responds.

"Oh, I'll help you." Another nurse strolls by, in different colored scrubs but with the same, sing-songy attitude. She plops in a chair, elbows propping up her chin, and nudges the old lady in the chair beside her. "What do you say, Grace, you want to help me with this puzzle? I'm not very good, so I'll need your help."

Grace "says" nothing. A strange sound—something fartish—emits from her lips as she contorts her face like she's blowing an invisible trumpet. Then, to counterpoint this sound, she leans forward and mumbles some gibberish, her eyes malevolent. Finally, she leans back, arms folded on chest, and sticks out her tongue. Without any dentures in, she truly looks like a witch.

"Well, okay, Grace. If you don't want to help, you don't have to."

The positivity never leaves the nurses' voice. Apparently the entire staff—and there is quite a few, their individuality revealed through choice of scrubs and tennis shoes—has decided to counter all the suffocating misery and imminent death by a positive attitude. A really, really positive attitude.

It's terribly annoying.

Dad is wasting away over here, suffering needlessly—can't they respect that? Take that attitude back to where it belongs, to childhood classrooms, to places where life grows, where life triumphs, not where it ultimately surrenders.

Dad's arms hang lifelessly in the recliner. I watch with renewed fascination, observe the ways in which his mind no longer functions but coasts on some malfunctioning autopilot, watch as his fingers grasp for a non-existent lever to control the footrests.

"You comfortable, Steve?" Mom leans forward at the slightest movement.

Dad tries to lift his lips, a pathetic, heart-wrenching sound escapes. It resembles a weak "yes."

"You are?"

The same sound. It makes me want to get on my knees, hug Dad tight, whisper in his ear my gratitude, how wonderful a father he was. Sure, we had our differences, our relationship couldn't be accurately defined as anything "close," but I never doubted his love. This was my dad, my *dad*, so why couldn't he lift his chin and talk like a regular human being?

"I'm glad that you're feeling more comfortable, honey." Mom's eyes well, and she rubs his shoulder again. Her voice trembles. "It's nice to see you more relaxed and comfortable."

Dad reaches out a hand, clasps Mom's awaiting one. Little more than a mumble, it's still clear.

"I love you, too, Steve."

I don't know what's harder to watch—Dad, slumped and helpless in his recliner or Mom, desperate to find signs of life and recognition in places where it simply no longer exists. I see it in her eyes, the way she bends down, nudges her eyes in Dad's limited field of vision, and tries to force recognition from him. Though she acts upset when Dad rouses from his limited sleep at the mere sound of her voice, I can tell it makes her happy. Why wouldn't it? This is her life companion being taken from her.

Then there's Dad. I consider his face again, how friendly it looks, how babyish in some ways. His eyebrows scrunched up in what looks like pain and surprise. I think of all the things he's done for me. The college education, for starters, the very thing which opened up my mind and, later, my opportunities, the gift that keeps on giving. I'd taken the tuition money as if it was my birth right. There were more heartfelt gestures, though: the Christmas he bought me a guitar. I didn't get presents from anybody else that year—I was 'flunking' in life, doing lots of drugs and not a lot of work, depression my excuse for all my mistakes—and the guitar was unexpected. *I noticed you playing Dave's a lot, and I think you're really good. I think you should have your own*. That was Dad: gentle, ungrudging.

Sure, I knew Dad was a human being—it's part of the trauma of growing up, realizing your parents are only human like everyone else, that Mom and Dad are also only doing their best to survive and make it through—and I knew that there were reasons for our estranged relationship. Seeing him in this state, though, it seemed grossly inappropriate to remember anything but the good.

Dad, like the rest of us, had his shortcomings. He never processed the trauma of his childhood—and, gathering anecdotal evidence from a weird family history, it seems like it may have been much—and suffered as a result. Yet he didn't continue the cycle of abuse. He never hit me. Not even when I begged for it, when I arguably might have deserved it during my woe-is-me 20s, when I simultaneously lashed out at the world and demanded it leave me alone.

Sunlight shines outside, an odd reminder that life goes on. Does it? Yet, even now, my dad is the best reminder—his broken brain, still trying to riddle things together, his body twitching and squirming, willing itself forward, wanting up and out of the chair he's strapped to. Narratives are far too complex, but you can see his mind trying to make sense of the world. It is painful, and terrifying, to watch. He twitches awake, his fingers rubbing at the knitted blanket in his lap, a baby differentiating where it ends and the environment begins. I watch Dad's mind struggle, see him twitch back asleep, realize he hasn't riddled up from down, if he's in a chair as opposed to a bed.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change…

I try the tools given to me to deal with "life on life's terms." This latest of life's terms makes me question the tools' efficacy. No one should go out like this. What was the point of stringing life out like this?

Anger soars from my gut, a more comfortable emotion to process than this dull, dreary sadness. What's wrong with this picture? A veteran's home, filled with broken war heroes, all sentenced to die slowly without even the dignity to chew their food. Yet we keep pumping their terminally ill, brain-dead bodies full of nutritious gruel. Prepping them for another day propped up in a chair and on pain-meds to stare dull-eyed and slack-jawed out the window at the concrete courtyard.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change…

What's wrong with the picture? It's cruelty, plain and simple. Cruelty in the guise of help. In her old age, my beloved dachshund Gretchen's crippled and cancer-filled body was no longer capable of supporting her weight. When the sparkle and zest in her eyes leaked away, when her tail quit wagging as she pulled her body to where it needed to go, we hesitated, sure, but ultimately decided mercy. Suffering was all that life held for Gretchen.

The courage to change the things I can…

We treat animals better than our fellow man. Seeing the Alzheimer's unit of the veteran's home, I couldn't help but ponder the question. Maybe it was distraction from my grief, from my helplessness, but the question couldn't be avoided. What was the point of all this suffering? I couldn't find the counter-argument. Labels already poisoned their arguments, and I didn't want to use them: "assisted suicide," "euthanasia." Often the reluctance to speed death came from a fear of responsibility, a reluctance to play God. Yet, medical science had long since passed that point! We played God with every other medical achievement, wrestling life from nature and death's grip in all myriad of ways. Left to his own devices, my dad would've wandered out of his chair, followed the poor-guidance of his broken auto-pilot and ultimately would've crashed and fallen on the floor (as he'd done a few times already). Without the emergency brain surgery, my dad would have passed three weeks earlier.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change…

"Oh, are you Steven's son?" She, too, is young. She, too, has a super positive attitude. A nylon headband holds back her hair, making her seem even younger.

Mom and I have moved to a solitary couch in a quieter wing. We want to let Dad get as much sleep as possible after last week. Distracted, I hold out my hand, greet the friendly nurse. I can't help but notice the contortion of sorrow and sympathy on her face.

"I just love your dad. He's so funny. I still remember the day I fell in love with him." She blinks her eyes, clasps her fingers together by her shoulders in an overstated show of infatuation. "I was outside with him in his wheelchair and he asked me, 'What's your name?' and I said, 'Emily.' And then he said to me, 'I like you, Emily.' It was so adorable."

For some reason, I'm very, very comforted by this knowledge. The Steve that this nurse Emily knows is somehow close to the image I would have remembered.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can…

I'd imagined it differently.

Magical thinking dies hard, and I, perhaps arrogantly, imagined my dad waiting for me, his third and youngest son, to arrive from Germany before he passed gently into that good night. I'd imagined recognition, a tear-filled goodbye as we shared a Hallmark moment, declaring our love and admiration, our regrets for all our shortcomings. I would rub his chest, comfort him, insist it was all right that he go back to All That Is. That he'd done a marvelous job, that it was okay to bow out. And then, magically, mystically, and ultimately comforting, Dad would breathe his last, leaving Mom and I both breathless at the macabre beauty of it all.

Life, as it so often does, played out differently.

The beeps of sensors play in the background, another young nurse rushing out of the cafeteria to see if, this time, it actually means anything. It doesn't. The nurse—buff and young, exhaustion already creeping in on his features—props Les upright and clicks a button on his lap sensor. Dad sits several recliners over, one of several patients slack-jawed and medicated to comfort. Mom is kneeling, kneading his shoulder, looking up in his eyes and desperately asking if he knows who she is.

It’s my last visit. I fly back to Germany in a few hours. Debatably, I will never see Dad again, certainly not on this earth. He doesn’t even know I’m there.

“Ready?” Mom whispers, tears in her eyes. She gets her voice under control. “Dave and I agreed it’s better if you just say ‘see you later.'”

“See you later, Dad.” My voice is already giving out. Words become hard to form, my dad’s slumped-over form growing blurry. “I love you. Thank you for everything. You were a great dad, Dad. I love you.”

It wasn’t at all how I'd imagined it. Far from it.

Bio- Mike Dorman met a German girl when living in Tucson and is now a (married) American ex-patriot. When he’s not walking his dachshund or helping German corporate professionals refine their English, Mike writes. Ever since 6th grade, when he first read *Dragons of Autumn Twilight*, Mike has dreamed of penning his own fantasy series. His recently finished first book is now seeking representation. Links to both his short fiction and non-fiction can be found on his website: themikedorman.com.

Passiontide

by Kerry Muir

There’s an old man fishing in bedroom slippers with his beloved. They sit in canvas folding chairs, arm in arm, on the beach, looking out onto the water as if they are watching television in a living room. This is almost-Malibu, the place where Santa Monica almost becomes Malibu, and the sun is going down. She cuddles into him, happy. Her long black wavy hair blows. Her hair is wavy and wiry, like the texture of so many fishing lines. They are happy. There is love there, a young, happy kind of love.

I ask him, *What do you catch?*

Perch. Whitefish. This Big, he tells me.

The sun is going down. Lower and lower.

The man sits back in his canvas chair, his beloved tucked into one armpit, resting her cheek against one pocket of his soft plaid shirt. His fishing line runs down to the water. It goes the length of the beach.

She eats everything I catch.

The woman laughs, like a teenager.

Well, that's the biggest...compliment. It takes me some time to find the word I'm looking for, so the timing of the sentence has no pizzazz, but they laugh anyway. We are fishing for things to say to each other, working the conversation a little. It does not flow, exactly, but we all mean well. They are trying to make me laugh and I am trying to show them that, yes, they do make me laugh, trying to show them they charm me. Sometimes it works, sometimes there's a slight gap in the synapses, a delayed reaction time, but our intentions are good, and we all seem to know that.

I use a shrimp for a bait. If I don't catch anything, she eats the shrimp!

She giggles, curled into him, a love-bird.

I say, *That's good. I don't trust those skinny women.*

They nod. *Yes.*

He's an Anthony Quinn type, Zorba the Greek. Grizzled beard and fluffy hair, like a head or floret of broccoli poking out on the sides under his baseball cap. Plaid flannel shirt, very crumpled. And worn. And asymmetrical on him, the way he put the buttons into all the wrong holes.

His beloved has a huge, baggy, gray sweater on, but she still wraps an old blanket around her shoulders, pulling the ends snug across her chest. Submerged in so many layers, she beams, contented and warm.

Another fisherman, younger and alone, stands not much further down the shore, poised at the edge of the water. He has two children a boy and a girl, around age eight or so, ankle-deep in the waves. My two year-old, Mac, hovers near the three of them, observing their fishing gear with gravitas, a kind of concern. I say goodbye to the love-birds and head down the beach to catch up with Mac, towards the next gathering. The young fisherman, watching me approach, glances over his shoulder at me, smiles an apology.

I've never fished in the ocean before, he says, strangely embarrassed.

Maybe you'll have beginner's luck. He seems oddly relieved by this proclamation from a total stranger. He reels his line in with renewed energy, as if invigorated by the possibility of luck, taking heart.

I ask him, *What do you use for bait?*

He shows me a plastic toy. It's green and white. A small fish like a cartoon, with a hook on it. Then he shrugs and grins and tells me again he's never fished in the ocean before; usually he fishes the lakes around Bakersfield, and the ones off the Five, like Lake Pyramid.

Mac and I keep migrating north along the shore, leaving the young man to fish, to bumble in salt water for the first time.

Further up the beach, there is a middle-aged dad, shaped like an oval, all round corners, no angles. His huge shoulders and torso are squashed into a shiny spandex polo shirt of turquoise blue, the color of Windex. In contrast to his corpulent torso, he has tiny, short legs. He reminds me of a sea creature, maybe a seal, because he is so round. Except for his little legs, which are an afterthought, his big body is so portly—not obese, but ample—it could be composed of blubber. His black hair is cut short and parted on the side; it's thick, strong hair that he must have smashed into submission with force and Brillo to create his side-part, a forties-style part you don't see much of anymore.

Many children wrap themselves around him, hang onto him—maybe six, maybe more—and they all have bare feet and carry plastic buckets or shovels. There is some kind of project they all appear to be engaged in, like collecting barnacles or something. The dad is a walrus—a barnacle himself, round and oblong, not one sharp edge to his form—as if he himself had sprung from the sea, along with so many children dripping from him like seaweed, clinging to him like clams. The kids run to him, wrap themselves around his arms, his legs, his shoulders, letting themselves be thrown up into the air and into the water, laughing, saying over and over, *Again*.

The mom sits on a rock with long sculpted nails and platform wedge sandals the color of straw, surrounded by plastic sand pails, a serious expression on her face. She stares out at the sea, past her husband and children, as if hypnotized.

Mac impulsively grabs a yellow plastic shovel from one of the sand pails at the mom's feet. She and I both see, but neither of us says anything; we know he's not stealing, but borrowing, joining in. Mac digs his way into the clump of kids, drawn to them by an invisible force, as if being pulled by a fishing line, until he is with them, no boundaries, nothing separate about him, just another member of the large family lingering in the froth of the sea, surrounded by small, flat, wet rocks, his cowboy boots wetted by the tide as it crashes in and out, squatting in the water.

Some of the kids are on the shore, shivering slightly, and some are still in the sea, and Mac is in between them, at the place where the shore meets the sea, and they all move together in a kind of formation, like points of a shifting, roving cloud. Together they make their way down the shoreline, digging, dancing, scooping, until finally, one spot in the sand grabs all their attention, and they convene to dig a hole. It is important, this hole. There are discussions, fingers pointed, decisions made, steps taken back, then forward again. There are seagulls that approach for food and sand to throw at the seagulls, and then it's back to the hole again.

I sit a few feet away from the other mom, watching the group. The dad remains in the water with one last kid. The mom only stares at the sea.

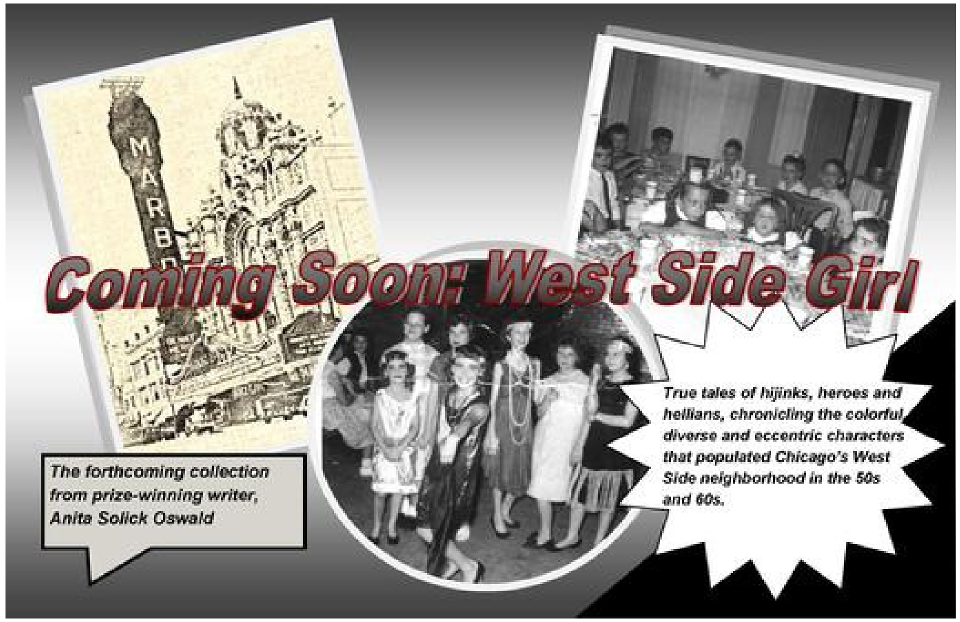
And how did it happen that we all came to be standing in a circle, around a yellow pail held by the dad, all of us peering in, scared, enthralled by a tiny orange crab the size of a half-dollar? And how did it come to pass that we were all afraid that crab would pinch us with its tiny claws, such a tiny crab, and all alone, in a yellow bucket without friends or family or a familiar ocean to engulf it, surrounded by a circle of human heads, alien and frightening and disproportionately huge, staring down at it? And how, exactly, did it happen that the dad then announced in an assuring voice that the crab was dead and so we should not be scared; it was dead, he said, and therefore could never pinch us—or why else would it float on the surface of the water instead of diving to the bottom of the bucket to get away from all of us, as it should? And how did it come to pass that we all said, *Ohhh..!* and *Awww..!* in pitying tones, as if we had known the crab for longer than half a minute, as we did?

We were remorseful at our actions—for having held such a small, helpless creature at bay, as if it were somehow freakish and distinct from us. How had we been so ready, so willing, to view it with such rancorous suspicion? It was innocent, after all, merely dead and floating.

And then how did it come to pass that the dad managed to take the crab out of the bucket with one bare hand, holding its shell gingerly with one secret, invisible finger tucked just so beneath the dead crab's legs, and jiggle the crab in such a way that we all screamed and jumped back as if the crab had come back to life, had returned from the dead to pinch us, malevolently? And how did it come to pass that the dad then laughed and changed his hold on the crab in such a way that we then immediately knew he was merely a puppeteer and the dead crab merely his puppet, and we all laughed, deeply relieved—and even the mom who had not laughed the whole time, who had not even spoken or smiled, but only gazed as if exhausted or hypnotized or both, at the horizon, now finally laughed at how easily we'd all been taken in? And how did it come to pass that when the dad laughed, stepping back from the crab-puppet a ways to expose his feat of legerdemain, we all laughed, and suddenly Mac and I felt so welcome, not like strangers at all, no longer outsiders, but as if we could go home with them all and sleep in their beds and wake up and help them clean their house and eat their breakfast and do their dishes and then perhaps go to church with them, today being, of course, just one day before Easter Sunday?

And how did it happen that after laughing and jumping back away from the dancing crab held in the father's hand, I became one of his children myself, right along with the others, and immediately found not one, not two, but *three* pieces of smooth, rounded glass on the beach underneath the secret wet part of a wave, like pieces stolen from the window of an old stained-glass windowed cathedral? They were unusual colors for beach glass—purple, turquoise and pink. They felt like talismans, auguring the possibility of good things. And the day went on until it stopped, and night overtook the beach.

Bio- Kerry Muir's nonfiction has appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *Kenyon Review Online*, *Willow Springs*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Literary Mama*, *Carve Magazine*, *The Pinch* and elsewhere. She holds an MFA from Vermont College and is currently at work on a book of essays.



Editor's Note: This piece, as explained by its author, is not intended to present political or religious views but is meant to convey an individual's in-depth personal exploration of issues concerning heritage and identity while growing up. The perspectives here are the writer's own and do not comment upon the views of the publication as we are a literary magazine dedicated to literature and art and do not share specific political or religious stances. This sophisticated essay from a young voice depicts a universal search for belonging and the ageless quest toward an understanding of one's roots.

My White Noise

by Kayla Cohen

I found my Jewish identity in separating the frequencies of ideological white noise. By “found,” I’m not talking about a certain “this-was-lost-and-now-forever-found” kind of discovery. My Judaism is far from being solidified. And by “white noise,” I’m not referring to the crackly noise emitted from a vintage television set. Rather, it is the variety of frequencies found within that crackly white noise, made indistinguishable under identical intensities, that resonate with me.

Like the crackly effect of white noise, the complexities of my identity's different frequencies used to exist in my mind and heart without much notice, blurry and undifferentiated. The lessons of my parents, teachers and religious figures were mixed, leaving me unable to separate and qualify different narratives.

As I've grown older, however, I've learned to question. My questioning has granted me a sense of clarity and has afforded me the ability to separate the different frequencies of my identity, to draw conclusions from the sounds of my own spiritual T.V. set. I want to share how learning to question has helped me better understand my history and separate the frequencies of surrounding white noise to form my own voice.

The year is 1922 in the Jewish ghetto of Tehran. Rahim Cohen, my grandfather, is seven years old. He is sitting in the filmy water of a tin washtub. His mother is washing him, equipping him with enough of her stories, childhood memories and dreams to satisfy any starry-eyed child. She tells him her biggest dream: "You're going to become a doctor one day. You're going to help people." And Rahim smiles while sitting in suds.

I'd been transported back to this washtub every time my grandfather told us his story of becoming a doctor. When my grandpa was 10, his mother died from tuberculosis. Her message of helping others, of bringing honor to his community, never left him.

He graduated at the top of his class, but was denied from Iran's most prestigious medical school solely because he was Jewish. Never compromising his faith for success, he persevered and became a doctor, specializing in internal medicine. Along with managing his own clinic, he treated Jews and non-Jews afflicted with infectious diseases, among them typhoid, in the ghettos of Tehran, often for free.

My grandpa made huge contributions to uniting and uplifting his community, but his work never touched upon his society's deep-rooted anti-Semitism. While anti-Semitism was rising in Europe, two anti-Semitic men came into his clinic; one pretended to be sick while the other stabbed and wounded my grandfather. And after World War II, when he organized his Zionist newspaper, *Israel*, as a platform to unite Iranian Jews, the newspaper's great showing of Jewish pride only made my grandpa a top target for harassment and death threats by the Iranian authorities.

As a young child, I had immense pride in my grandfather even if I couldn't appreciate his accomplishments or understand his Judaism fully. I couldn't read the print of his 20-something awards. I didn't know that in the black and white photograph in our family's living room my grandfather was shaking the hand of Israel's prime minister. I was too young to understand the topics being discussed in his newspaper. Anti-semitism always felt like a myth to me. Nonetheless, he taught me the importance of Jewish pride, of having a Jewish education, the importance of loving Israel and keeping Shabbat, and that was good enough for me.

Rahim's Judaism were obligations to his name. As a Cohen, he saw it as his duty to be a proud leader. Consequently, I was taught how much weight and tradition my name held. With a protest of going to synagogue or a school accomplishment, my brother and I were reminded of our legacy: "You're a Cohen." Even when I was five or six years old, I entertained myself with highlighters and paper, sticking messages of "I AM PROUD TO BE JEWISH!" and "I LOVE JUDAISM!" and "I AM A COHEN!" around the walls of my dad's office without much thought.

Understanding the source of my grandfather's Jewish pride, and therefore, my Jewish pride, had been brushed over when I was younger. What fueled my grandfather's pride? Was my name a ticket to my pride? What did pride look or feel like, anyway? Separate frequencies of individual identity, tradition and opposition to tradition were combined and hushed, undifferentiated, creating the basis of my white noise.

It's 1972 in the heart of Tehran. Today is the day of the Munich Massacre. My father, Sina Cohen, is in his neighborhood grocery store. He is at the check-out stand with a case of soda his mother had asked him to buy. The clerk asks him, "Are you having a party?" "Yes, we have guests," Sina tells him. "You guys are celebrating the killing of the 11 Israeli Olympic athletes too?!" In response, my father leaves the soda behind and goes home.

My father refused to shop at the store again. Of all the stories he has shared with me about his experiences of anti-Semitism, of being beaten up or made fun of in school, this one story about soda and the massacre has always stood out to me. These kinds of acts were encompassed by a culture of discrimination and were intensified during the Iranian Revolution. Before the collapse of the Pahlavi dynasty, my father, then a teenager, and his family immigrated to the United States. He went to UCLA and focused on chasing his own American dream, untainted by corrupt government or discrimination.

My father now sees himself as an American over an Iranian, and more recently, after experiencing issues with organized religion, as a cultural Jew over a religious one. His break from the synagogue was difficult for me to deal with. It introduced a new frequency into the mix that contradicted what I had been brought up to believe. Where was my community now? Where did my responsibilities lie? What did my last name mean if it served no use in a synagogue?

In December, I was eating dinner with my family on Pico Boulevard across from a family of recent Iranian immigrants. Even the son and daughter, about five years older than me, had much thicker accents than my father. Eventually, my father began to speak in Farsi to their father. I couldn't understand what they were talking about, but the other man was very passionate, maybe even a little mad, when he spoke.

After dinner, my father explained to me how the Iranian government denied that family the right to leave because they were Jewish, how their son, a brilliant chemistry student at the top of his class, was rejected from universities because of his religion, how the father was threatened by Iranian authorities for talking back—and yet, how the entire family missed Iran and its culture, how they hated how separated and assimilated American Jews had become. I found it interesting that both of those ideas could coexist. My dad surely felt differently.

By exploring my dad and his generation's narrative and their confusing cultural exile, another issue surfaced: what does it mean to be a free Jew? Here were two distinct narratives, two distinct frequencies, two sides to assimilation, that would have otherwise gone undifferentiated.

It's 1977. It's 4:30 in the morning. My mother is in Ein HaMifratz, a kibbutz in Northern Israel. She is in the top of an orange tree, picking fruits for her morning work. In the afternoon, she will play with Jewish schoolchildren. In the evening, she will sing and have trouble pronouncing the throaty "ch" noise in all of the songs. When the summer is over, she will extend her trip for two more years.

My mother was born in Renfrew, a small city in Western Scotland, to a Protestant (though fairly nonreligious) family. After high school, she took a trip around Europe, where she ended up in a kibbutz and fell in love with the land of Israel. Two years later, she met my father in Los Angeles. She converted to Judaism before they married.

Until recently, I had been okay with the implications of conversion. My grandfather always stressed the importance of marrying Jewish. And while I do appreciate how much simpler my identity is with the practicing of one religion, something about conversion no longer sits well with me.

Last year, my cousin, who is much more observant than me, told me I am not *halachically* a Cohen since my mother wasn't born a Jew. Hearing that was like hearing a single intensified pitch, separate from the rest of the frequencies it belonged to. Was I that wrong sound? His comment made me think about the spirit of a Jew. Never had I questioned my last name. I wanted to know: what does a conversion stand for? What am I the product of?

It's 2016. My name is Kayla Cohen. I've attended a Jewish day school my whole life. I don't know how to navigate my way through a *siddur* or the Talmud or how to wear a *talit* properly or how to *daven* the old-school back-and-forth way. I've never been to a *mimuna*. I touch electricity on Shabbat. You could blame it on my Reform elementary school education, or my untraditional background, or the safeguard/assimilationist aggressor that is open America. But time and age's lagging ability to catch up are the real problems.

There's this cliché that all Jews know how to ask "why?" I only recently discovered the power of "why" when I spent my second semester of my sophomore year of high school studying abroad in Israel. There, I was given the freedom to think for myself and more importantly, the freedom to be confused. I was exposed to narratives I'd never heard of before, not because they were new or unique to Israel and never existed in the white noise of my subconscious, but because the frequencies never drew my attention or pervaded my thoughts back home. Distinct sounds and voices and questions that had previously been meshed together at the same intensity were given their own space to be heard. I, consequently, found myself noticing the ideological white noise of my upbringing that had blurred opposing voices and forcefully shaped my own impressions.

Israel, in all of its messy, intertwining, complicated beauty, revealed itself and larger issues to me. I spent time with my great uncle Yehuda, an orthodox Jew, and his wife, Margalit, a former member of the Haganah. At their Shabbat dinners, I was swept by right-wing ideas of protection and duty. When I watched people cry at the Western Wall, I grew frustrated with myself for not being able to connect to it in the same way. I tried to force meaning through unfamiliar prayers; collective prayer inspired me and made me wish I belonged to a more traditional and orthodox community. When I visited Tel Aviv, individualism inspired me. When I visited under-funded Arab villages, I became pro-compromise. When I sat on a hill overlooking Syria, learning about Eli Cohen, I favored *kol-Yisrael*. When I visited *kibbutzim*, I became a socialist. When I spent 4 days in an IDF base in Sde Boker, I became a militarist. When I learned about the Lechi and Irgun, I became a pacifist. When I visited Rachel's tomb overlooking Tiberias, or Ben Gurion's home in the Negev, I felt a sense of belonging.

In debates, when I watched some of my friends oppose intermarriage, I was confused. I followed the progressives and then listened to the conservatives and believed them. When I heard the *Hatikva*, I became a dreamer. When I visited *Tzfat*, I felt spiritual. When I hiked across Israel from the Mediterranean to the Kineret, I became a transcendentalist. When I saw a rainbow over the Dead Sea or sang "Hine Matov" underground in a cave that hid Jews during the Roman occupation, I believed in God. When I visited Yad Vashem, I could only reject God. Everything changed every day.

I already knew about people's stories of being the subject of hate, about hard work and this narrative of opposition and glory, like my grandfather's, and many other immigrants. I knew what bottom to top perseverance looked like, inherent to both the Jewish and American experience. I had already heard stories of assimilation, of challenge and cultural loss, like my father's and other Americans, and their Jewish counterparts in Europe, Africa and Israel. I knew the story of the outsider, whether it be the Jew or convert.

I've now been exposed to frequencies that sing total free will, or total power in the Divine. I can recognize the difference between coexistence and acceptance or Biblical entitlement, whether it be directed to the issue of borders in Israel or immigration and gay marriage in America. I now know the difference between small or big government. I have learned the word "compassion" goes beyond my grandfather's name (רחמים) and that people have different takes on it. I know the narrative of success, whether it be my grandfather's or those who toiled to make the desert bloom. I know the narrative of the struggling man, whether it be the Jewish immigrant from Iran, or Arab mother in Gaza, or African-American boy. I know there are frequencies of issues and different parts of my identity that can't be simply boiled down to categories of right or wrong, black or white.

Being able to recognize a larger picture has granted me the ability to dive deeper into the buzzing white noise of my surroundings. My questioning has afforded me the ability to appreciate the lively collision of so many voices and ideas. I don't have answers to most of my questions and I've accepted the fact that I may not for a long time. As for now, my Jewish identity, to me, means celebrating the range of frequencies I've begun to separate and the intensities I've begun to play with. From these blurry voices and sounds, eventually, will come a song.

Bio- Kayla Cohen is a high school junior from Los Angeles. Growing up and learning how to navigate through complex ideas have not been easy for her. She is grateful for the direction that her school's Creative Writing program has given her and for the discussions that her writing has generated. Kayla writes for her school's literary magazine, *Verbatim*, and school newspaper, *The Roar*. An earlier, alternate version of her essay was featured in the Milken School online newspaper. Her poetry was published by *Germ Magazine* last month. She plans on continuing to write, learn, question and hear others' stories as she embarks on her last year of high school.

White Woven Fabric

By Lois Greene Stone

The canvas is pulled and I staple it onto a wooden frame. Seeing the white blank space, I envision filling it with color and creation; seeing a white piece of paper waiting for my words causes a similar excitement. I lift my oak box by its leather handle, unclasp the brass hinges, and the fragrance of linseed oil against the bitter scent of turpentine emerge. Removing a smooth wooden board that fits exactly into a slot inside, I clamp on two round yet tiny tin cups. I line up the sable brushes with their very long handles, adjust the wobble in my light-to-carry easel, and stand before my supplies. I grin and fill one cup with linseed oil as thoughts go back to the very first oil painting I did:

As a pre-teen, in my parents' living room, amid silk damask upholstered furniture, a Baby Grand piano, and a French Provincial design false fireplace, I unwrapped the 'magic box.' Metal tubes had odd names: cadmium yellow, burnt sienna, cobalt blue. A vase on a round table that I'd seen over and over now was 'seen' differently, and I opened the new three-legged easel, put the already-prepared canvas board on the narrow ledge, and knew I'd capture the colors of the object. My parents didn't object to my working in that room showing me that things are not important, people are. My mother knit, and the 78rpm records had music playing; my dad had to change each once the needle got to the end of the shellac grooves. I put small drops of paint from tubes, squeezing as if each held toothpaste, and used a metal palette knife to mix them into what seemed like a mess. I knew my mess was the color blend I wanted.

At that time, camera film was black and white, but my 'camera eyes' printed the vase in full color, with a slight interpretation of the way I felt viewing both the object and my painted strokes. My parents praised. If they minded the smell of oil, linseed liquid, brush cleaner, they didn't say. The painting, once dry, was taken to be framed and hung. As they'd always done, my parents made me feel important, encouraged all my creative yearnings, and provided the tools to develop them.

In undergrad school, once I switched from Arts and Science to the School of Education, my Sociology/Anthropology minor had to be changed; high school teachers would not have that as a subject. Also, my Speech and Drama major could no longer be pursued for the same reason. I switched to an English major and an Art minor. A Mid-western university had a summer program, for credit, and a life oil painting class was offered; my dad allowed money to be used to sign up for Advanced Shakespeare, Advanced Literature, and Oil Painting; I had to get special permission to take 3 courses during the summer as only 2 were considered 'correct.' I so wanted all three, although the main reason I was going was for the art course, different from what I was taking in the New England university I attended. The 'magic box' had very few original tubes left with crimped metal where I squeezed; but colors were replaced once gone. Now the wood inside had traces of hues, and the palette was stained by years of paint.

I'd turn 20 when my junior year ended and the plan was to have those summer courses, and get my BA as soon as I turned 21. Unexpectedly, breathing ceased for my 45-year-old father just weeks after my twentieth birthday. My mother insisted I have the summer school experience already scheduled, and I carried my grief and boarded the first train to Chicago. I had a private sleeping room arranged, in advance, by my father.

I raged with King Lear, understood politics with Coriolanus, felt Whitman beside me looking out on the river...but felt both excited and sad when a room with sturdy easels and the fragrance of paint was entered. I wore the dirndl skirts my dad so liked, and my favorite had ribbons of yellow horizontally and ribbons of black vertically. My brush, holding vermillion, connected with that skirt as I bent forward; tears filled my eyes and spilled over. Turpentine would not do more than spread the intense color on the fabric and ribbons. The model moved, left her platform, and took a necessary break.

I used that time to find a pay phone and make a collect call as I needed to hear my mother's voice. "I ruined my skirt, and daddy can never buy me another," was what I blurted out without thinking of her loss or her grief.

She was always available to comfort and this hadn't changed. "It's a skirt, dear. Enjoy your class; create something from only a blank area; wear that skirt knowing you didn't save it but used it and the paint stain will be a reminder that things are not important, only people are. I love you. Go back to class."

February 2016. I still find solace in creating from a blank area and see the abundant, meaningful possibilities in making use of white woven fabric. Recently, one of my granddaughters was eager to show me a photo on her phone. She'd used an oily kind of paint on a rectangle of canvas stretched on wooden frames for the first time and wanted to ask what I know about that vs. acrylic and, did I like what she'd done? Acrylic didn't exist during my education years, but I tried that medium about 5 years ago wanting something that didn't require more than water to clean up, and water to dip brushes into as well. I began to give her information about linseed oil and the distinct scent of turpentine, but found myself giving her the story about a white dirndl skirt with ribbons, and the philosophy of tangible items being temporary, but love and encouragement lasting a lifetime.

Bio- Lois Greene Stone, writer and poet, has been syndicated worldwide. Poetry and personal essays have been included in hard and softcover book anthologies. Collections of her personal items/photos/memorabilia are in major museums including twelve different divisions of The Smithsonian.

© 2016 *The Write Place at the Write Time*
This online magazine and all the content contained therein is copyrighted.