The 29th Edition of
The Scarab
at Oklahoma City University
Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach to the stars to change the world.

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Three Seconds Too Long

Neilee Wood

A voice calls my name in the bookstore—familiar, catalogued and labeled inside the file cabinet wrinkles of my brain, and there’s an employee, a girl: quiet, glasses, a Pink Floyd t-shirt tucked into a high-waisted blue skirt; a girl who is familiar in the way that flavors are familiar—your tongue hails them as friends, but your brain must search through all its file cabinet wrinkles before it calls them cinnamon—or basil—or the creaminess of milk. So as with flavors, it takes me three seconds too long to flip to the right page in the yearbook of my mind and find her name.

She’s noticed and frowns—a clench in the air while I stumble and smile, but those three seconds lie like a spiderweb on my skin, telling me: the same girl, with longer hair, glasses added, and a bow to her shoulders; a pulling inward like a child’s collapsible telescope; a breathy thing now, a pause, a comma to be overlooked just as she disregarded punctuation in her own poetry; but before—in a green sundress in front of a wall of windows—hands on her hips like Peter Pan crowing: an exclamation point in her own life.
I lingered in a darkroom once among the dimness and the clotting haze of the chemicals.

The photographers moved like dreamers, phantasmagorical, cocooned by volcano red glows and stinging smells.

This girl came from such a place. One of those phantom photographers pulled her from a tray, liquid dripping off her corners.

Her face is unguarded and open to the light, and behind her head, there’s a shelf of rock made damp and dark by the runoff of rain, the ridges of stone haloing her hair.

If she could speak from beyond her frame, I wonder if she would tell me that she thinks about that darkroom sometimes, the way I think about the place I came from:

dark, too, with a red glow like sunlight seen behind closed eyes; a smell that’s too sharp, too angular; me, mucoid liquid dripping off my corners as someone pulls me from my warm tray; figures, moving like dreamers; and cupping my head, latex-covered hands made dark and damp by blood, the glove ridges haloing my hair.
Even after running the scalpel
down his beige belly
and pinning back his flesh;
even after seeing the hard fist of his heart,
the closed gate of his ribcage,
and the bean-shaped kidneys
so like our own;
even after the girls at the next worktable
hacked into his brother’s head
and held his little gray brain
in the palm of their hands;
even after all of that,
I still expected him to suddenly roll over,
shake his triangle ears,
grunt, and then run squealing
out of the classroom.
I’d been wandering in and out of butcher shops, collecting bones and losing guts, looking for You.

Telescopes and fishing poles, mascara runs from drying eyelids- porn stars, priests, and hungry pirates all looking for You.

Papa’s got some penny loafers. Mama smiles with an “Amen”. One is golden, the other’s moping, but both are more than just looking for You.

Magi came to Bethlehem, Judas with a band of men, to an empty tomb went Magdalene looking for You.

An overdose, a bloody nose, and You found me. I should’ve known religion’s not the place to be looking for You.
I had art in my pocket, and a pocket watch of filigree gold. It ticked in my fist as I squeezed it; I could almost feel the mechanisms work inside its own body. My pocket doesn’t work that way, but I can feel the stitch work of wool against the skin of my finger. I move my finger across it and now it becomes my world in blindness; and in blindness, I am smothered. I think to myself, this is honest work.

I love to walk with Father. He knows all the best locales. Just yesterday, “Boy, rise!” said he, “we go,” in his old Hebrew drawl. And I appreciate the exercise.

I love to hold the firewood. Its weight makes me feel strong. But Father says, “Large arm alone will not attract a proper mate.” Perhaps desire will do me no real harm.

We sure are walking far today. I certainly don’t mind, for when my legs begin to ache I sing, thereby relieving hurt. A note to self: is singing loud a sin?

I’ve heard of off’ring produce in a jam, but tell me, Father, why we left the lamb.
When are people going to stop telling me what to do? Five minutes ago my mom told me to go clean my room like I was a five year old. So here I am putting my green Hulk T-shirt in the dirty clothes pile and Spiderman keeps looking back at me from my bedspread, cause he knows he’s next to be straightened up. He’s been keeping me warm for a long time but I’ve really needed him since dad left. Maybe I should pick my action figures up more often. Last night I stepped on Aquaman and almost broke him. Uh, oh. Here comes mom. I better stop playing with Aquaman and pretend like I’m picking up my room.

“Timmy, honey. Why isn’t your room picked up by now?”

“Aquaman needed help defeating Sea Demon.”

I thought it was a good reason, but the frown on my mom’s face told me she didn’t think so.

“Timothy, clean up your room now. You are 13 years old.”

“Aquaman, do you think I’m too old to be playing with you?”

“You are too old to be playing these games young man. Put that silly action figure down.”

I held up Aquaman in my right hand and he said, “No, Timmy you’re my best friend and I’ll always take care of you.”
"I'm going to start dinner. I would really appreciate some help."

"Whatever you say mom."

Yikes, she slammed the door pretty hard. I might’ve gone too far that time, but she's always pulling the "you’re too old to act like this" card. Maybe, if she would start treating me like an adult I would act like an adult. I wish dad were here. He understood me. We used to go to the comic book store every Friday, and get every new Justice League issue. But that was a long time ago. Now, it’s just me, my mom, and...

"Can I come in?"

Great, what does she want?

"Come in if you have to."

"Hey, bub. Can we talk about...well, you know, do you mind talking about dad?"

"Why?"

"I just talked to Emily and she is going to the movies with her dad tonight, and well, I miss him."

"What do you want to know?"

"I don’t know like what did he smell like? What was his smile like?

She remembers just as much as I do. She just likes to here me talk about him. It’s okay though I really like it when we talk about dad, but I never tell her that."
“He smelled like that blanket in mom and dad’s room. You know that one we snuggle under, with mom, on Saturday mornings while we watch cartoons. And his smile was one-sided. Like he only knew how to raise one side of his mouth. Remember, how he would take us camping in the backyard and we would pretend we were on the moon?”

“Yeah! I would be a cute alien and you were the astronaut! Dad was always like the moon itself.”

It’s amazing how my eleven-year-old sis is able to say things like that. Our adventures always seemed to be a part of dad and sometimes they would literally take place on top of him.

“Yeah, I know what you mean.”

“Ok, I’m going to help mom get ready for dinner. Do you want to help?”

“No, I’m going to stay up here. Yell when dinner is ready.”

My room does smell kind of funny. Now, that I think about it I’ve been wearing the same Superman T-shirt all week. Maybe that’s why most of the kids at school think I’m weird, but I prefer that to the ones that feel sorry for me. I wonder what dad would say about me now? Would he be proud of me? I bet he would be disappointed with how I talked to mom. He was mom’s superhero. He could always make her smile. Now nothing makes my mom happy. Uh oh, here she comes again. At least my room looks a little better.

“Hey, superboy. Do you have any dirty clothes?”

“Yeah, you can take all these. Oh and the one I’m wearing.”
“It’s about time you took the superman shirt off. I thought it was permanently stuck to your body. Whoa! And it smells like Superman hasn’t taken a bath in days!”

I saw a smile sneak across her face as she said that. Wow, I forgot how pretty she is. I remember dad always saying that he was a very lucky man, but I never understood until now. I never see mom smile much anymore. I mean really smile. Not the half grin she gives me when I’m goofing around like now. Her smile used to make every ones day better, and it seemed everywhere she went people were happier because she was there. Our house always smelt like cinnamon when I came home from school. But she doesn’t make snicker doodle cookies anymore. Snickerdoodles were me and dad’s favorites. She has to work two jobs to keep my sister and me in private schools. I want to help her but I just don’t know how. If only I could bring dad back...

“Dinner is almost ready. Timmy, did you hear me? Come down and help your sister soon.”

“Ok. Oh! Um mom.”

“Yes, honey.”

“Can we go shopping for new clothes this weekend?”

“Wanting to change out your wardrobe a little sweetheart?”

“Yeah, I thought I could start wearing something a little different.”

“Okay, we’ll see what we can find. Now, finish cleaning up your room and don’t stop to read those silly comics.”
Everyone always tells me to grow up. But the truth is the more I grow up the farther I feel from my dad. What will be left of him if I stop reading comic books and playing with action figures? I went to a psychologist for a little while after it happened, and he just told my mom that living in the reality of superheroes was my way of coping with the accident. Maybe that’s true. Sometimes I make myself believe that if I surround myself with superheroes, I will eventually turn into one. Then I can go back in time and stop my dad from getting on that plane. I remember pretending that I could time travel the day dad left.

Dad walked by my room with his suitcase in his left hand and his jacket in his right. He leaned him to tell me goodbye.

Dad! Don’t go! Something bad is going to happen.

Son, it’s okay. I’ll be back in a few days.

No, dad! You don’t understand I’m from the future and your plane is going to crash. I used my superpowers to come back in time to warn you!

I love you son. Take care of your mom and sister. Read a comic for every day I’m gone, and I’ll be back in no time.

But, dad. Don’t go.

He was already gone.

I’ve read a comic book every day since he left, but the time doesn’t feel any shorter. It happened two years ago. They said it was a mechanical error that caused the plane to go down over the Rocky Mountains. They said that dad didn’t feel any pain. Who are they? They only bring bad news, and then they disappear. They didn’t have to watch
my mom cry for weeks or listen to my sister wake up screaming with nightmares for months. They didn't sit in their room staring at the door for the last two years waiting for their dad to walk in. I did.

Mom’s yelling at me to come set the table for dinner. The S on Superman’s uniform is blurry. Why do I always cry while I’m reading Superman? Probably cause they were dad’s favorites. He was funny because he always said that his favorite part about Superman was not when he was flying around saving the world, but when he was Clark Kent, the newspaper reporter. He always said that a man is not measured by the strength of his arm, but by the strength of his heart. What would dad say if he could see me now?

“Honey! Well, this is certainly a nice surprise. I haven’t gotten this good of a hug in quite some time.”

“I love you, mom. I haven’t told you that in a while.”

“I love you too sweetheart. What’s gotten into my little superhero?”

“I’ve just been thinking about dad. He told me to take care of you and sis, and I haven’t been doing a very good job of that. I’ve been reading about superheroes for so long that I forgot that they don’t just exist in comic books. Dad was a superhero, wasn’t he mom?”

“Yes, Tim. He was. He also raised a super son.”

“I'll set the table.”
idea getting ready for a date was so hard.

“You look great,” Rin said with a bright smile. “Cody won’t know what hit him.”

“Really?”

“Really,” came a voice from the doorway.

Charley looked over startled, but that turned to anger at herself when she saw it was Matt. He was so going to get on her for not only leaving her door unlocked, but also allowing someone to sneak in on them. Even if that someone was the world’s best stealth agent!

“You know,” Rin said, “knocking is much more polite than barging into someone’s room.”

Matt fixed Rin with one of his cold gazes. “I did knock, but you two didn’t seem to hear me over that headache you call music.” Looking to Charley he added, “You shouldn’t keep your door unlocked. And you really shouldn’t let someone sneak in on you.”

Turning off the music, Rin said, “The Screaming Thunders happen to be very popular. But I agree, they’re terrible. It’s just that Cody likes them, and I thought Charley should at least be familiar with their music because that is sure to come up sometime tonight. It’s common first date discussion.”
“I’m sorry Matt,” Charley said, “I should have had my door locked. It’s just when you live in a place where everyone can pick a lock, I just don’t see the point in locking the door.”

“When you have to do Home Security Checks for getting caught with your door unlocked during an inspection you’ll see why. Speaking of which,” Matt said turning to Rin, “Can you design me a new lock? I got busted for not having the latest technology fused with my current one.”

“Done. Now let’s go. Cody is picking Charley up from Simon’s place in an hour.”

“Simon’s place?” Matt asked, looking at Charley.

“Yeah, well, I couldn’t exactly have him pick me up here. I’d rather not explain the whole secret agent thing to him.”

“Smart thinking. Explaining that you’re a secret agent doesn’t fly on the first date,” Matt said. “That, and the Agency would have to erase his memory if he found out.”

“And now that you made her even more nervous,” Rin said. “Let’s go!”

20:00 Mike’s Pizza Palace

“I can’t believe you said that to him!”

“Really?” Cody asked.

“Well, yeah,” Charley said, smiling. “He was your coach. What about respecting your coach?”

“Yeah, but he’s also my dad. And he seemed to have forgotten the whole respecting your players thing when he started grounding me right on the field for something I didn’t do.”

“But still, I would have never gotten away with it.”

“Well after that we all decided it would be best if my dad wasn’t my coach and my dad. It made things easier at home,” Cody said.
"I can see that," Charley said. After a moment, "This has been a lot of fun. Thanks for asking me out."

"Thanks for saying yes."

"Of course. Why wouldn’t I?" Charley said.

"It’s just, you’re the smartest girl in math. Not to mention the best cheerleader on the squad. Varsity, not even JV. I wasn’t sure you’d want to go out with a guy like me," Cody said, turning as red as his hair.


"Thanks," he said with a shy smile. "You want to go play a round of Putt-Putt?"

"I’d love..." Charley began but was cut off by the Beep, Beep of her cell phone – the sound it made whenever Matt sent out a 9-1-1 call to his team. Seeing the confused look on Cody’s face, she gave him her biggest charming smile, “Will you excuse me for just a moment? I have to make a phone call.”

Walking away from the table, Charley dialed Matt.

“Glad you could get away,” Matt said after answering before the first ring was even complete.

“I don’t have much time. What’s wrong?” she asked, not letting her annoyance into her voice.

“We’ve been called into action. We leave in 30 minutes. I’m on my way to pick you up now.”

“But what about my date?” she asked, but it was too late. Matt had already hung up. Charley looked back at Cody. He was sitting there smiling at her. “Why,” she said to herself, “do I get the feeling that this is just the first of many unfinished dates to come?”

22:00 An Agency Plane – Exact Location Unknown
“I’m sorry your date got interrupted,” Matt said. “But I need you to get your head in the game.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just I was thinking…”

“About leaving Cody behind. I know. But we have a dangerous mission ahead of us, and I need everyone focused,” Matt said to Charley. Addressing everyone he added, “Any last minute questions?”

No one had any. They were all getting in the zone. Charley looked at Matt. It was scary the way he seemed to be able to read peoples' minds. She knew they were getting close to the drop point, but she couldn’t stop thinking about Cody. He looked so sad when she left...

“Are you sure there isn’t anything I can do?” he had asked. “I can…”

“Don’t worry about it,” she had said. “My friend Matt, he’s a family friend, is on his way here. It’s not the first time my grandma has fallen. Matt will take me to the hospital. Really, it’s okay. I’m just sorry our date got ruined.”

“It didn’t get ruined,” Cody said with a smile. “Theses things happen.”

All she could do was smile at him. Charley hated lying, especially to such a nice guy. “I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t want to date me again.”


Charley let him walk her to the car. He smiled and waved goodbye, but she had turned around as they pulled out of the parking lot. She had seen the sad look on Cody’s face...

“Minus ten seconds till drop,” said the captain.

Charley stood up shaking her head to try and clear it and walked to the launch pad with the others.
“Five...” Matt said, counting out loud for everyone. “Look on the bright side,” Simon said with an evil smile. “Leaving your date will be a piece of cake compared to this. “One... Launch!” Matt yelled. “Somehow,” Charley yelled at Simon over the rush of the wind as they fell through enemy air to their destination, “I doubt that.”
They have her. They’ve taken her.

***

She awoke with a large pain in her side. She tried getting up, but when she felt something grind in her leg, the pain kept her down. She began to shiver. Not because she was cold. It was 75 degrees that night. Mary began to shiver because she knew she was in trouble.

“How you doing, baby girl?” The Man asked.

“I wanna go home!” Mary replied.

“Home? Home with your mother and father and sister and cat? That home isn’t there anymore,” The Man said.

“I hate-” Mary said before she was cut off by The Man.

“I wouldn’t say that. I’m the only person you’ve got. I’m the only person who loves you, wants to be with you, wants to love you,” The Man said.

Mary sighed deeply. The pain was getting worse. She began to whimper.

“So, it hurts doesn’t it, my dear?” The Man asked. “Well, you did it to yourself, you know? I wouldn’t have done it if you weren’t so quick to leave. I need to get you to understand.”

She continued to whimper.

“You’ll come around. If you don’t, I’ll understand. I understood with the other girls.”

***

Mary was supposed to go the movies with Jeff. He was going to pick her up at 7:00. It was 6:30 and Mary was getting ready. She had everything done but her lips. Mary had her routine: hair, cheeks, nails and then her glorious lips. She had everything planned out days in advance. But a week before her date, she ran out of her favorite shade of Revlon. 103 A, Candy Apple. She had to have it. So, she planned a trip to the drugstore.
Mary had decided to go the drugstore before school started, but her alarm didn’t go off. She completely forgot about the lipstick until later that day when she stepped out of the shower and saw her dull lips. So, she got dressed and took the ten-minute walk to King’s Drugs. She got to the store in record time: seven minutes. They had her shade; it was the last one in the store, and she was happy. She bought it, a nail file and a pack of gum. About halfway home, she heard footsteps. The familiar screech of shoe against pavement, the crackle of gravel, the slipping sound of pant leg against pant leg.

She ran. The footsteps grew louder and faster. She could hear him going faster. The heavy feeling of dread settling upon Mary was cut short when he pounced. A lion to its prey. They rolled around in the grass, Mary’s dress getting stained and ripped. He punched her in the stomach and hit her head against a rock. She went out and woke minutes later.

Mary saw that The Man had bound her. She could tell that she was in the back of a station wagon. When she shifted her weight, the pain in her leg started. The pain killed her thoughts. The pain was similar to dousing her leg in gasoline and lighting it on fire. She slipped into unconsciousness. The Man drove on.

***

After their conversation, Mary and The Man slipped into an uncomfortable silence. The Man continued to drive. Mary could see no lights outside the station wagon, so she assumed that they were driving out in the country, 20 minutes from home. The radio played softly. A song from a new album involving tapestries—Mary couldn’t remember the name of the woman who wrote it—was on. Mary began to get used to the pain in her leg. Her thoughts began to return. With them, anticipation settled upon Mary. The wagon turned sharply, then stopped. She heard the door open and then the crush of gravel as The Man made his way to the back of the wagon. He opened the back.

“You look prettier up close, baby girl,” The Man said.
“Thanks,” Mary said caustically.

He pulled her over and got her up. Mary thought about fighting, but the idea of moving her leg any more than she had to was unnerving. As he pulled her up over his shoulder, Mary offered no resistance. Mary’s long, wavy red hair hung limply over his back.

“You know, although men are supposed to prefer blondes, I’m partial to redheads, Mary,” The Man said.

With this, she retched.

“Don’t you do that!” The Man hissed. “This shirt was a gift, you idiot.” Mary began to cry.

“That I can handle.”

About ten minutes later, the pair sat face to face. The Man bound her to a white Windsor chair. Mary’s mother had these same chairs in their dining room. She got them from Gibson’s on special. The thought of Mary’s mother brought the tears back.

“What is it with you girls and crying?”

Mary stopped. Her rather small brown eyes looked up at her captor with hate. He looked back, smiling. Mary studied him. He was good looking, not a day over twenty-five, had shaggy, sandy blond hair and hazel eyes. Of average height and build, he had an air of responsibility and control about him. Not an ounce of the Man looked evil. Mary could have been attracted to this Man if he hadn’t kidnapped her.

“So, whadda we do now?” he asked.

Mary had no reply.

“I though you were different from the other girls. You seemed to have more . . . spunk,” The Man said. “I guess I was wro-”

“Why the hell did you do this?” Mary interrupted.

“There we go! You don’t fear authority.”

“You aren’t authority,” Mary said with hate pushing every word.
“I hold control over you, don’t I? I set the rules don’t I?”

“You control wasn’t earned, it was stolen. I respect those in authority, but I don’t respect you,” Mary said.

He stood there, shocked. It was as if he had seen a sponge talking to him.

“Well, do as you wish, stubborn.”

***

He popped on a record. Mary didn’t know which until she heard the lyrics.

“Mary, Mary, where you going to? Mary, Mary, can I come, too? This one thing, I will value: I’d rather die than to live without you.”

The Monkees. Mary remembered this from youth. Although Mary was young, she remembered buying her first record player. That same year, during Christmas, “Santa” brought Mary More of the Monkees, and wouldn’t you know it, it had a track called Mary, Mary. Mary had squealed with joy at this, but when she had heard the song, she was displeased.

“Like it? I found it in your closet a few weeks ago. You should really lock your windows,” he said.

***

Mary realized if she could move better, she could escape from The Man’s place. She was in some house that more than likely had a phone line. She began to examine her surroundings. The walls of her prison were clad in wood paneling. On the east end, a white partition door stood. Mary focused on that door. Every time her captor came in or out through that door, she could see the room beyond. In it, Mary could see a beige blob that could have been a phone. Could have.

Those words kept Mary from being too hopeful. She asked herself what would happen if that wasn’t a phone. She didn’t have to wonder what she would do if it was. Although The Man was strong, he underestimated Mary’s strength: he had tied her to the chair somewhat loosely. She could move her hand enough to check her pocket. She had lost the pack of gum she bought
an eternity ago, but she found the nail file. She knew it wouldn't cut the rope, 
but it could loosen the knot. She began working, all the while thinking could 
have.

***

"How are things, love?" he asked.
She said nothing.
"Good, I hope," he said.
She said nothing.
"Women always give me the silent treatment. They think that I don't like it. 
But I love it. It gives me a chance to hear myself think," he said.

"Damn you!" she yelled. She jumped up, cast off the ropes, which she 
held to make it look convincing, and drove the nail file into his neck. Red 
gushed out. He screamed, causing more blood to flow. She took the file and 
dug it into his eye next.

As he collapsed on the floor, Mary dragged herself across the room. She 
pushed the partition door open with what little might she had remaining and got 
close to the beige blob. Could have. It was a phone. Mary began to laugh 
while crying. She picked up the phone and dialed a number.

There was silence.
Mary tried to follow the phone cable with her eyes, but there was none.
"Mary!" he yelled.
The partition door opened.
Woman Torso Back View - Blisha Gallegos
I believe in the power of storytelling—and of epic stories in particular. I even believe in their power to unravel life’s thorniest questions: what it means to be an American, the nature God, or the fate of Frodo and the Ring.

As to this special predilection for stories, I trace it back to the fact that I’m an American-born-and-raised-abroad—a “missionaries’-kid” to be precise—growing up in a cauldron of competing identities: national, ideological and religious. My two younger brothers and I were born and raised in Mexico, living there up until our high school years—speaking two languages and being dual citizens of Mexico and the U.S. (I could add that we’ve also amassed between the three of us a collection of passports spanning the North American continent, given that our middle brother Steve is now married to a Canadian.) And if you throw in our family’s range of (Protestant) church affiliations, plus international ties that run further afield, it won’t surprise you to know that all such identities have been, for us, fluid and dynamic. I, for one, have never considered them to be set in stone. Citizenship in particular has always been a matter of deliberate choice: a choice to be (or not to be) part of a particular epic narrative.
As a first and second-grader I learned to sing the Mexican national anthem in a patio damp with the smell of moss, not far from the muffled din of Insurgentes Avenue, one of Mexico City’s main thoroughfares. I learned of the Aztecs and President Benito Juárez long before I knew much about Abraham Lincoln or the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. And I absorbed this tale as one of epic (and more often than not tragic) grandeur. As for the anthem we sang, I understood little of its martial pomp, and perhaps it’s just as well I didn’t. I recall that the line al sonoro rugir del cañón (“to the resounding roar of the cannon”) got refracted through the prism of my first-grade brain to read: al salon va a ir el camion (“to the classroom goes the school bus”) --all this as I stood, in stiff posture of salute, with furtive glances at the lizards scampering among the vines of the patio walls. And I was oblivious, even as I’m sure our elders were, to the political tumult and violent repression that was happening not far from where we stood. We were living, after all, in the aftermath of the massacre at the square in Tlaltelolco (the aftermath of the year 1968) and the one-party-state media of the time gave no hint of what was going on.

I’m not sure I ever thought of myself as a full-fledged Mexican citizen, as my classmates there at Instituto Concordia did. I think there was always a part of me that felt like an expatriate. But I did absorb the notion that citizenship in general meant being a part of a saga—in this case one that went from the mythical edicts of an Aztec god through independence from Spain (1821) to the a Revolution featuring the likes of Pancho Villa. If there was a central character in this one, it was Benito Juárez—he who fought the last vestiges of colonial rule, established separation of church and state, and made it possible for Mexicans to be evangélicos (as Protestants there refer to themselves), or Mormon, or Marxist, or just about
anything else. And its main illustrator was Diego Rivera. Because even if we schoolchildren never saw Rivera’s work first-hand, his images (colorful, heroic, often melodramatic) found their way into our imaginations through textbooks or a host of other means.

Juarez might have been the central actor, but none of the images were quite as captivating as the weird and wonderful (and sometimes frightful) Aztec deities. There was Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent, imparting knowledge of art, architecture and maize cultivation. Then there was Tlaloc, the god of rain and life-sustaining water, with perfectly-round goggle-eyes and precise rectangular features, like some primitive robot carved in volcanic stone. And there was Huitzilopochtli, wizard and god of war, leading his nomadic tribe to found their capital at the spot where an eagle, perched on a cactus, held a serpent in its mouth. El águila y la serpiente: the image at the center of the Mexican flag.

Whether or not I remained Mexican, these things were bound to have an enduring hold on me.

When I was in the third grade, sometime in the fall of 1970, my brothers and I came home to our apartment just off Insurgentes Avenue to the news that we would be transferring to Greengates, the city’s elite English-speaking (British) school. Mom had just been offered a job there, earning us free tuition.

At Greengates, we were thrown in with the rich expatriate set. It was a milieu in which we fit in fine, except that we always felt like the poor cousins in the house. It wasn’t, of course, that we were poor per se. It’s just that we suffered by comparison. While our classmates lived in upscale or
lavish homes behind high walls (their parents being diplomats and upper-level corporate managers), we lived in a small spartan apartment. Where they had spacious yards, we learned to kick a soccer ball in an open-air garage that was shaped like a handball court, and we had to practice our running on a sidewalk crowded with pedestrians. To cap it off, our ride to school took us through and a grim expanse of cinder-block and grayish color that always seemed choked in smog and diesel fumes --the epitome of T.S. Eliot’s urban wasteland. Mexico had its grandeur, to be sure; but none of it was much in evidence on this ride.

So it was that at Greengates, in this elite cosmopolitan milieu, I came to think of myself first and foremost as an American. And I have no doubt that I was, at least at some level, compensating for my spartan economic conditions and capitalizing on the cachet that American culture held among the students. Who, after all, didn’t love Archie comics, Sweet Tarts, Charlie’s Angels, and the Dallas Cowboys? But there was also much more to it than simple cachet. I’d spent a number of summer vacations in the U.S., most of the time heading for southern Illinois, where my maternal grandparents lived. I loved the vast open spaces we’d travelled through to get there. After the crowded sidewalks of Insurgentes, there was much to be said for the prairies and cornfields. After all, wasn’t that the sort of place where Dorothy’d been whisked off to Oz, in a whirl like those dark flocks of birds? And weren’t these the open spaces where Jim Ryun had become an Olympic runner? And also, there was the anticipation of arriving at our grandparents’ place. They’d never failed to greet us with toys, and coins for buying Sweet Tarts.

Oh, yes. And southern Illinois was also the land of Abe Lincoln.
In the fourth grade our teacher, an expatriate Englishwoman whom I always suspected of disliking Americans in general, asked all of us to do a short presentation on a historical figure that we considered important. This was a no-brainer for me, and I chose Abraham Lincoln. I was also fresh from a visit to Illinois, and to New Salem National Park, where I’d bought a small copper bust of Lincoln as a souvenir.

I forget just what I said in front of that class, all clad in green cardigans and lion badges, like something out of Hogwarts, but I do remember uttering the word “emancipation.” I was so nervous and, judging by the puzzled expressions on my classmates’ faces, suspect that much of what I said was inaudible and inarticulate. And the distant, contemptuous look on my teacher’s face was no help. (I could swear, looking back on it now, that this woman was Professor Snape’s twin sister.) But the experience clarified something for me, if for no one else. I knew that I was to be first and foremost (and for better or worse) an American. If England had King John signing the Magna Carta, and if Mexico had Benito Juarez, the U.S. (and I) had Lincoln. I sensed that Lincoln was the central actor in an American saga—one whose central plot is emancipation and enfranchisement.

So it was quite natural that I gravitate towards football (the American kind, futbol americano) as I developed an interest in sports. Dad, after all, had played football and been a champion half-miler in his high school days. And how was I going to resist its appeal?: the speed, the precision, the elliptical ball spiraling through the air like a spinning top, and the players with their gleaming helmets like knights-in-formation? A new obsession developed: to attend high school in the U.S. and be a football player. I even dreamed of playing in college and then for the Dallas
Cowboys. Alas! I was to be no taller than 5’7” with no formidable strength and speed to compensate.

I got my wish, though. In the fall of 1977, as a high school sophomore, I arrived at French Camp Academy (FCA), a Christian school with boarding facilities in Dad’s home state of Mississippi. Things went well for me at FCA. I was well-received and even managed to excel (more in the classroom than and the gridiron, as it turned out) and rise to a position of leadership which I’ve never quite risen to since. I was well-suited at the time to life there. A missionaries’-kid upbringing, an earnest Christian conviction (which had not yet been tested or come into any sort of crisis) and a nascent desire to return to the “mission field” were all tailor-made for this high school. As dreams of heroism on the football field waned, another dream of heroism emerged. I was going to be intrepid missionary-scholar, wandering through the vestiges of the Ottoman Empire like an evangelical Lawrence of Arabia, and bearing the words of the Gospel like a clandestine code.

But there was also a homesickness that took me quite by surprise. Beyond the fact that I missed home, I felt an intense nostalgia for the cosmopolitan environment of Greengates. In spite of the fact that FCA was the only racially-integrated Christian school that I knew of at the time, and the fact that there were a handful of Spanish-speaking Honduran students in the dorms, the setting was isolated and provincial. The “culture shock” that I experienced (if I can call it that) had nothing to do with going from Mexico to the U.S. per se. It had more to do with going from an urban setting to a provincial, rural one.
I was an American, yes, no doubt about that. But I was a cosmopolitan and internationally-minded one --with special ties to Latin America and the conviction that I might be living further abroad somewhere. In time, I would search for a concept of what it means to be an American that did justice to my cosmopolitan inclinations, and the notion of narrative would be there to help. The virtue of narrative, I’ve found, is that it helps us feel grounded in a particular time and place without imposing those narrow, artificial boundaries that make our identities static and isolated.

For instance, I’m all for countries having a common public language -- an “official” language, if you will. And for the U.S., there’s no question that it is and should be English. But when the word is understood in a narrow, exclusive, sense (where English is the exclusive instead of the common public language), then I object. There are parts of the U.S. that, for practical and historic reasons, need to be bilingual --like our southern border-region, Native American Reservations, and Puerto Rico. A “storied” sense of what it means to be an American imposes no “pure” linguistic standard –much less a religious, ethnic or racial one.

I believe that being an American means belonging to a saga of emancipation and enfranchisement: the emancipation of former colonies from England, emancipation of slave from Southern plantations, and the enfranchisement of ever-widening circles of citizens who were not white, male or Protestant. It is the reason figures like Susan B. Anthony and Martin Luther King belong to all Americans and not just to “minorities.” After all, they’re central characters and indispensable to this narrative.

I also believe, along with anthropologist Benedict Anderson, that nations are “imagined communities,” the product of our human storytelling faculties. The fact that they are thus “imagined” does not
mean they’re any less real, or that all histories should be reduced to myth and fiction. What it does mean is that national identities (being an American or anything else) need to be thought of as fluid and dynamic things. They're unfinished business.
“Have fun, boys!” Phu and I clambered out of the backseat of my mother’s dated Oldsmobile and stepped onto the wet parking lot. After waving my mother off and watching her disappear into the distance, I turned to face the rugged apartment complex that towered over the surrounding neighborhood. “That’s my bedroom window,” Phu said, jabbing his index finger towards the second floor of the building. “See? Right there!” I gazed absently at the window. It was quite dusty and tinted with a soft shade of yellow: A morsel of vitality, profoundly accentuated by the insipid overcast that blanketed the sky. “Let’s go.” I clumsily followed my host’s lead through the maze of cars and up an unkempt spiral staircase until we finally reached a faded and rather unsightly door. Its pinkish shade stood as a testament to the age and weathering of the red veneer with which the door was originally coated, and like Phu’s window, provided a small hint of life within its cold and inorganic surroundings. “Here it is,” Phu remarked, “207B.” I watched as Phu grasped and gently shook the rusty doorknob. The door cracked open, and almost immediately my sinuses swelled at the exposure of exotic spices and herbs: The likes of which a young, American boy such as I would have seldom experienced outside of the typical Asian restaurant. Phu motioned for me to follow, and with a subtle feeling of anxiety pawing at my diaphragm, I quietly edged through the doorway.

After my eyes adjusted to the indoor lighting, I found myself utterly confounded by the drastic shift in tone that had taken place before my very eyes. Beautiful, vibrant chrysanthemums surrounded the perimeter of the living room and were complemented by soft-colored silk paintings of Chinese origin that covered most of the walls. In the place of a TV was a rather large, ornate table of rich teak which was covered with tens, if not hundreds, of tiny and exotic glass trinkets: Treasures of the far Eastern world. Directly to my left sat a particularly short man of his mid-50’s who I took to be my friend’s father. As I
began to introduce myself, Phu interjected: “Ông khỏe không a? Ông đang làm gì?” I gazed in bewilderment as my childhood friend addressed his father with vivid and mysterious combinations of syllables, ranging from low mumbles to high, swinging yelps in a seemingly unpredictable, yet beautiful path of motion. Phu, sensing my confusion, laughed and explained, “When speaking Vietnamese, it not only matters the word that you say, but also how you say it that determines the meaning.” I was inexplicably fascinated by such a foreign concept, and I listened with a feeling of boyish wonder and excitement to the fluid exchange of the mysterious language between father and son for the rest of the evening.

I waved Phu and his father goodbye as I stepped out of the apartment and back onto the concrete balcony. Looking westward toward the distant lights of Oklahoma City, it became apparent that day’s looming overcast had persisted into the night. Aside from the weak glow of headlights emitting from the Oldsmobile below, the apartment complex and its surroundings were lost in a black and seemingly unnavigable void. I clumsily made my way back down the spiral staircase, nearly tripping over an assortment of beer bottles that had been emptied and abandoned some time since my arrival. Fighting my way through the maze of cars in the parking lot, the rickety mechanics of my mother’s car became increasingly audible until I finally opened the door and plopped myself onto the passenger seat. Before my mother could open her mouth, I shouted, “Chào ba!” She looked at me with a bewildered expression, as if I had spouted off some kind of alien gibberish. After a moment of silence, her confusion, surprise, and curiosity culminated into a single, resounding inquiry: “Huh?” I giggled and explained, “It means “Hello” in Vietnamese, but only if you’re speaking to a woman, and if you say “Ba” that means she’s older than you, and-“ My mother cut me off. “Well, that’s nice. What do you want for dinner? Your dad wants us to bring something home.”
It has been over a decade since that ride home, but I still remember the overwhelming resentment that I felt towards my mother’s indifference that night. What I considered an unappreciative and belying dismissal of my epiphanic first-hand experience with Vietnamese culture later became one of the most important lessons of my childhood: Humans are intrinsically predisposed to establish priority in races, ideas, and customs of familiarity. My White, middle-class mother wasn’t indifferent to my experience with Phu due to racism, but instead due to apathy occasioned by a lifetime of inexperience and unfamiliarity with foreign customs and tradition. Of course, as a child, I understood none of this; however, I knew before making it home that night that I wanted to feel what I felt that night for the rest of my life: Something different.

As the rusty Oldsmobile ptered its way around the street corner and into the driveway of our modest, suburban abode, I looked again at my mother for the first time since leaving Phu’s apartment complex. “Mom,” I grumbled. “Can I go to Phu’s house tomorrow too?” She looked at me, paused, and muttered, “Yes. That’s fine.” That night, I spent hours hunched over the family computer desk, researching the Vietnamese language and learning a phrase or two to impress my new friends the following evening.
The funeral procession begins like any other. Lining up to pay respects at a time of significant grief, we attempt to give our loved one a proper burial. In this case, we're bidding a dismal farewell to numerous loved ones.

Single file, as though in Kindergarten, we proceed to the casket. Made of cardboard, with a slit on top, we make our way to the Reebok shoe box.

Today, we bury words, words she has boisterously requested we no longer use in her classroom, or daily lives for that matter. Above the shoe box casket hangs a sign with a tombstone drawn on it. It reads, “here lies beautiful, fun, because, wonderful, special, a lot, little, things, stuff”, and others which cannot be recalled due to erasing them from my vocabulary.

With the exception of “casual Fridays”, her short, coiled, dark hair is most always tucked away under her black habit. Her perfectly pressed skirts alternate between khaki, navy blue, and midnight black. Her simple, circular rimmed glasses sit poised on the crook of her nose, and she wears blouses more crisp and clean than freshly fallen snow. Her features, though feminine and delicate, are also strong and prominent. Her exact age is a closely guarded dark secret. She wouldn’t divulge it in a million years. She dryly, and without a hint of joking, simply states, “I came over on the Mayflower”. 

To Sir, With Love

Kristin Stang
She relishes the classic Charles Dickens story, *A Christmas Carol*. In fact, she designs an entire unit around the story in late November into December. Toward the end of the unit, as if by a twist of magic, Charles Dickens himself appears in the classroom to visit. He shares his experiences of writing *A Christmas Carol*, answers our questions of life in England during the 1800’s, and speaks of his achievement in becoming one of the most recognized authors in English literature. He wears a checkered suit jacket in a combination of yellow and brown, his timeless black hat sits floppily on his head, and somehow, this version of Charles Dickens eerily resembles someone we've met before.

Never one to begin class with a lethargic group of fourteen year olds, she proceeds to the front of the classroom and demands her students rise to join her in a rousing rendition of her beloved “Donkey Song”. Slowly dragging themselves to standing position, she asks, “what’s wrong? are you all lazy today? I’m sure you all sat on your couches in front of your nut boxes eating Doritos and drinking RC. Doritos, RC, Doritos, RC, Doritos, RC. That’s how it is, right?”

Sister Clare lovingly leads them in the genius musical adaptation that is “Donkey Song.” Teacher in front of the blackboard, students beside their desks, bounce up and down in unison at the knees singing, “sweetly sings the donkey at the break of day, if you do not feed him this is what he'll say: hee-haw, hee-haw, hee-haw, hee-haw, hee-haw”.

In her intimidating, but amazing dry humored demeanor, she proceeds toward Ricky Turch. Ricky, more baby faced than Opie Taylor, with sandy blonde hair, and not quite at puberty, is filled with a confidence border lining arrogance.

With the posture of a disciplined drill sergeant, she bends to look him in the face.
“Excuse me, are you chewing CUD?” She asks, purposely emphasizing the “D” on cud.

“Cud” is a “Sister Clare-ism” for chewing gum. Sister Clare despises gum. Storing the gum in the corner of his mouth, he casually states, “I was just chewing my tongue.”

Offended, Sister Clare cannot believe anyone would think her to be so dense.

“You are chewing cud and you will get rid of it immediately, do you understand? Say YES SIR.”

When asking if we understand the point she is attempting to get across, Sister Clare requests we call her “Sir.” This most often happens when we are not paying attention. “Did you hear what I said” she inquires, “say YES SIR!” Timidly, students respond with her desired, yet often reserved, “yes sir.”

As the bell rings to signal the end of class, Sister Clare yells another “Sister Clare-ism” to her students, “quickly now, muck shnell, put your papers back yonder!” Ironically, without questioning, everyone happens to know where “back yonder” is, yet no one can figure what “muck shnell” means.

Always making her students and their individual needs a priority, she remains in the classroom late most days, staying to help the students who require her English knowledge most.

Notorious for confusing synonyms and antonyms, I myself remain in her room after the final bell sounds one spring day. Sitting next to her desk, head in my hand, I state that I can’t do it. “What did you just say?” She asks me. “I said I can’t do it. I don’t get it.” I reply stubbornly. “You can do it, and you will get it. I know you can. Do you understand? Say yes sir!”

Her frustration is common, but does not stem from a student’s inability to understand. Rather, it is derived from her desire to want them to
understand and succeed. Having witnessed it first hand, I realized there is nothing she yearns for more.

Missing my bus one fateful afternoon, Sister Clare offers me a ride home. I’m hesitant at first, even though she lives just down the road from me. I’m unsure what it will be like to ride with my strict English teacher, but as I help her lock up the classroom for the day, I graciously accept.

Walking to the car, we say little. As we warm up to being in one another’s presence outside the classroom, we begin chatting casually. We talk of school, how classes are going, and the theatrical productions I’m taking part in. “I heard you sing at church last weekend.” She tells me. “Your voice is certainly a gift.”

Pulling into the driveway, I grab my backpack and swing it over my right shoulder, the heavy books inside producing a semi-painful “thud” against my back. I climb out of her car and begin to shut the door. Quickly, I stop. “Sister Clare, thank you so much” I say. “Oh, you’re very welcome, Kristin” she replies.

I’d never have realized it in that moment, but reflecting, I know I was expressing gratitude for far more than the eighth grade version of myself could comprehend.

I cannot recall any of the Pythagorean Theorem studied in every Math class throughout my high school career. I’m unsure of the exact latitude and longitude of foreign countries, and for reasons unbeknownst to myself, I truly find the state of Hawaii complex with its many islands. What I do recall with vivid memory, am sure of, and could never find complex is an eighth grade English teacher in Central Minnesota who came over on the Mayflower singing about donkeys, ranting about the negative affects of Doritos and RC, portraying Charles Dickens, and
creating funeral services for the sake of expanding the elementary vocabulary of the average adolescent.

By requiring me to choose more complex words and bury the ones constantly overused, she has instilled an enormous appetite for the English language within me, as well as for speaking it properly. Challenging me to reach beyond my means, she’s created a sponge-like action in me, as I seek to soak up new vocabulary whenever I’m given the opportunity. She has, with complete certainty, turned me into a “perfect grammar monster.” I couldn’t be more grateful.

Her unit on Charles Dickens alone opened a window of literature I wouldn’t have thought to open otherwise. As I devoured Dickens’ other fantastic works: Great Expectations, Oliver Twist, A Tale of Two Cities, and David Copperfield, I pondered as to whether this had been her goal all along, instilling a hearty appreciation for quality literature into her students. Charles Dickens once said, “there is wisdom of the head, and wisdom of the heart.” Sister Clare graciously shared both.

The procession begins like any other. Once again, we stand lined up single file, as though in Kindergarten. As the music swells, we begin to proceed.

No burial will be held today, no funeral services for words to remain unspoken. Adorned in blue robes, square caps, and tassels, we parade into the crowded gymnasium.

“Fellow classmates, are we ready?” Our valedictorian asks as he addresses us. “Let’s stand up, and turn to face our faculty and staff. Sister Clare, this one is for you.”

Together for a final time, we honor the teacher who gave us our words. Bouncing up and down in our blue robes, we sing, “Donkey Song.”
In the overheated gymnasium, Sister Clare sits on her stiff backed folding chair, a smile tugging shyly across her face, with a sense of pride. A tear slowly spills down her right cheek.

“Sister Clare, now that I’ve graduated will you tell me how old you are?” I ask following the ceremony.

“Of course” she says, “I came over on the Mayflower.”
Like my pale blonde hair, and borderline albino skin, the genetic disease, PKU had been part of my life from birth. It wasn't a bother knowing meat, dairy, seafood, eggs, nuts, poultry, peanut butter, soy, whole grains and diet soda were required to be eliminated from my diet for life. Even as a kid, it hadn’t irritated me. As far as my childlike mind was concerned, French fries were the “be all and end all” of the food pyramid. I acknowledged PKU as the lifestyle I had to lead, but I never allowed it to get in my way.

Unlike PKU, my baby sisters, Kara and Katherine had not been part of my life from day one. Katherine was born two years after me, and Kara showed up three years later. Their sickeningly adorable features were irresistible. At seven, I’d hit my “awkward stage” and could no longer fall into the absurdly cute category like the two of them. My sisters were on the brink of adorable 101. I was over it.

Katherine’s eyes swam a clear, crystal blue, light as the color of the ocean, and identical to our mom’s. Her blonde hair, always pulled into a ponytail, appeared longer and more intimidating than the tail of a purebred mustang. She was gorgeous, and eerily, could’ve been the clone of the murdered child beauty queen, JonBenet Ramsey. She had the power to win over everyone she met, all she had to do was flash her crystal blues.

Kara, the baby of our family, was exactly that. She was the picture of innocence. Her eyes, wider than dinner plates, sat beautifully perched beneath her perfect lashes. Longer and more lush than the Nile River, her lashes were something to be envied. What should have been a toddler, baby-fine mop top, was replaced with a sea of luxurious ash blonde. Her perfect toddler curls created tidal waves near the bottom, resembling the same sea’s waters on a windy day.
Although I adored my sisters, their cute phase was driving the seven year old version of myself bonkers. If I could’ve indulged in a glass of Pinot Grigio at this stage in my life, I would have. I’d have needed it to overcome the cuteness constantly puking from them wherever we went.

One particular spring day, our mom had been going nuts. Never one to sport “mom jeans”, she was dressed to the nines, as usual. Wearing a long dress, heels, makeup applied to the picture of perfection, and her glorious red hair spilling down her back, she resembled a corporate business woman, as she fought to coax her preschooler into ballet shoes for dance class. Still wrestling Katherine into ballet flats, she nonchalantly yanked the already tutu-wearing Kara onto her lap, saving her before she toddled to the stairs and tumbled face first into the basement.

In a nasally voice only a mother could love, I whined endlessly.

"Mommmee, I am going to starve. I need lunch now!"

Mom’s exasperated response had me on my toes, “Kristin, mommy will stop at McDonald’s on the way to dance, and you can have French fries, but if you don’t stop this obnoxious whining, mommy will get Katherine and Kara McDonald’s and you can eat whatever is in the fridge from your supper last night.”

It was a double whammy. I’d been both threatened and bribed with my guilty pleasure of French fries. Mom was no dummy. I clamped my mouth shut. The jaws of life couldn’t have pried it open.

As mom snapped the girls into their booster and car seats, I bounced in the backseat, unable to contain my excitement over our impending McDonald’s trip, I began singing at the top of my lungs, “McDonald’s is my kinda place, hamburgers in your face! Dill pickles up your nose, French fries between your toes! Ketchup runnin’ down my neck, I want my money back! McDonald’s is my kind of place!”
Exhausted, mom helped buckle my seatbelt and went around to get in the driver’s seat.

Still bouncing, I continued my song, “McDonald’s is my kind of place. They serve you rattlesnakes, and mixed up chocolate shakes made from polluted lakes. Last time that I was there, they deep fried my underwear! McDonald’s is my kind of place!”

As we pulled into McDonald’s drive thru, the excitement intensified from three little girls. Desperate to grab the happy meals and go, mom managed to make it through this trip with ease.

After receiving our food, mom pulled the car into the parking lot to ration it out to the three of us. With the energy of starving puppies, Katherine and Kara broke into their Happy Meals. I scarfed my French fries as though I was an inmate newly released from prison, having his first real home cooked meal in years.

Our family mini-van, with its heinous tan interior, quickly took on the smell of a fast food joint. The aromas of grease, spilled orange pop, and barbeque sauce quickly filled the tight quarters. With sticky little hands, Katherine dribbled barbeque sauce down the front of her dance tutu as she bit into a fully sauced nugget.

With mom wiping Katherine down, I saw a moment of distraction. Having never eaten meat in my entire seven years of life, I wondered what could be so incredible about the chicken nuggets my sisters devoured. Was I really missing out? Was it possible there was more to life than French fries?

Snaking my hand as flexibly as Spider Man, up the side of the van from the back seat, I weaved my arm toward Katherine’s container of chicken nuggets. Without her looking, I grabbed one.

I bit into it and worked it around in my mouth, the way an infant would when they first tasted a new food. It was chewy, almost rubber like, and I could only assume it was what a band-aid would taste like. I was not impressed.
Wanting to truly give it a chance, I bit into it again and again, until I had only one tiny bite left. Katherine chose that moment to turn around and catch me committing the crime.

“Kristin, what are you doing? You can’t have chicken nuggets. You’re gonna die! You have PKU!”

“Stop it! Don’t say that! I am not! Don’t tell mom, you little butthead,” I yelled back.

I was too late. Tattletale that she was, Katherine had already begun filling mom in. I wasn’t yelled at, but instead was given the whole “you know better then that, this is your health we are talking about, I’m very disappointed in you” speech - far more painful than being yelled at.

Fortunately, the following day I was scheduled to have an appointment with my PKU physcian. Since I’d always done so well with PKU, mom promised she and dad would keep my little slip up quiet unless he asked about anything out of the ordinary.

Normally, trips to Minneapolis to see my PKU phycian were loaded with excitement. I cherished going. Mom and dad called it our “special time”. They both took off work to take me, and I savored the alone time with them. It was Heaven.

This particular visit, however, was not. Not having a babysitter, mom and dad decided to bring along “cute and cuter”. I was less then thrilled.

My phycian, Dr. Robert O. Fisch was a tall man with a head of dark black hair that always looked as if he’d just rolled out of bed. He had lines running through his cheeks that made him appear older than his fifty some years, but as a Hungarian Jewish man, and a Holocaust survivor, having lost his entire family in a Nazi concentration camp, he had reason to have aged more than the average Joe. He’d worked tirelessly to become the outstanding phycian he was, and was recognized worldwide for his contributions to the PKU community. He was passionate about PKU, and about his patients. He sought what was best
for them, and had the most impeccable bedside manner of any doctor I’d
known, or would come to know in future years.

He gave me a hug and in his thick Hungarian accent he asked, as he
always did at my visits, “how are you doing mah lovie?”

Before I could answer him, this man I admired so much, my sister quickly
piped up and tattled once again.

“Dr. Fisch, Dr. Fisch, guess what? Kristin ate a chicken nugget! A whole
chicken Nugget!”

Mom laughed, dad laughed, Dr. Fisch laughed, and I hung my head in
embarrassment. Squeezing my shoulder, Dr. Fisch told me, “it’s okay, mah lovie,
but no more now.”

As we piled into the van after my appointment, I stared at my sisters.
Katherine, with her intimidating ponytail, and porcelain doll like cheeks, had
ratted me out full fold. Kara, ever the innocent, had sat on dad’s lap, clapped
her hands, and caused everyone to fall in love with her.

With their heads bobbing as they fell asleep from the lull of the car, I
realized I’d been right, for in that moment I knew PKU wouldn’t get the best of
me. It was my sisters, puking with cuteness, who certainly would.
Standing back stage I could see the performance perfectly. In early December of 2009, it was a cold evening. She was just a freshman: fourteen years old. Ariel Reeves was opening the top of the first ever Southmoore’s Got Talent show. She had on Miss Me Jeans, with a light denim wash, buttons on the back pockets with little rhinestones around the buttons, and a black top with sparkly sequins adorning the top of the neck line. Her cowboy boots were white. They clashed perfectly with her outfit. That night she wore her hair down in light curls, highlights spread strategically across the strands, her face powdered with make-up, and her eyes lined with a dark show make-up liner. Her lips had a pale pink gloss daubed across them. She was prancing around before she went on; I was sure she would wear a hole in the small backstage area dedicated to performers.

I leaned toward her and brushed my hand down her arm. Ariel was shaking slightly from the nerves. I had been assigned as her MC. I asked her, “Nerves getting to you?” She just shook her head lightly smiling. I knew her voice well, I was just waiting for the moment she would walk on stage and that power would fill the 866 seat auditorium. I could hear that voice in my head perfectly: alto, but springy, light, charismatic, and full of powerful laughter. Her personality was every bit as sweet as her voice. I stood watching her while the sponsor spoke.

I took the stage a few seconds before she would herself, “Thank you Mrs. Baugus! Alright y’all we have quite a performance spread tonight! We will cover the whole spectrum all the way from music to magic! We
have it all! Now to start us off with a bang for our first ever Southmoore’s Got Talent is Miss Ariel Faith singing Carrie Underwood’s number one hit “Cowboy Casanova”! I introduced her and walked off the stage to watch her perform.

As soon as I had said her name she had this air of confidence about her person. I still am not quite sure how she accomplished it. She shook her hair as she walked onto the stage, like she was shaking water out of her curls and the nerves were droplets of water.

“You better take it from me…” Everyone did. Her powerful voice rang through the crowd as their energy was raised by her tones. “…you run and you try and you’re tryin’ to hide and you can’t get free…” Had the audience not already fallen in love with the little girl they might have ran and hid. Ariel’s feet parted as she entered the chorus that enticed the crowd every time she sang it.

I watched Ariel in awe, her face shining in the spotlight. From talent shows in elementary school to performing that night, from a little girl singing into her hair brush to rhinestoned microphones, from lip syncing Shania Twain’s greatest hits to writing, composing, and performing her own creations, from singing of school lunches and recess, to vocalizing about “Karma” getting back to the boy who broke her heart, from being a shy little girl playing Margot Frank to belting “Cowboy Casanova”: Ariel’s power became her form of art.

Her microphone was in her left hand and she was walking down stage right as she started the second verse. “...I see that look on your face. You ain’t hearin’ what I say...” she leaned toward the crowd as she walked across the stage to make sure she had their undivided attention. Her voice never quivered, or faltered, Ariel Faith got fiercer, and added
more strength in her performance as she truly spoke to the members of
the audience.

I have watched many performers since that chilly night in
December. Professionals and amateurs alike haven’t matched her
passion or power to engross an audience, like I saw in her that night.
Despite her age or stature she can entice an audience, consume them
with her power, intoxicate their senses with her words, and she manages
to tell a story while asserting her powerful young voice. At Southmoore
she’s the first of her kind; the only one with that passion and power.

Her song was to warn them about this “Cowboy Casanova”. “You
better run for your life.” The song was over. The audience exploded with
applause worthy of Carrie Underwood herself.

When she strutted off the stage her aura slowly came back down to
her normal goofy self. The powerhouse performer was back inside, until
the next performance. Ariel walked to me where I was waiting for her in
the wings, and she smiled widely and hugged me tightly, as I hugged her
back.

“Ariel! That was unbelievably awesome!” I couldn’t help but feel like
a proud older sister for this younger girl who had waltzed or rather sang
into my life more talented in music than I would ever be. She had sang
with the Rodeo Opry—the best country music performers in the state—
and she still gave a wonderful performance for a high school.

“Thank you! You’re intro was so right on the spot!” she exclaimed. I
knew my intro had not been that wonderful; I did know that this girl would
be my best friend. She had changed my thoughts on country artists, and
she’s still in my every day, day to day life. I am not certain where my life
would be without her. Ariel Reeves still inspires me with her powerful passion behind her voice, as my best friend, and an aspiring country star.
Bright eyed and excited beyond belief, a young fifteen-year-old girl came rushing into the cabin at a church retreat she was attending. She looked around for her friend, about to burst with good news. She finally caught sight of her and rushed to her side. She sputtered, “Oh my gosh, guess what God told me during my quiet time!” Before her friend could even answer, the young girl exclaimed, “I’m going to be a minister!”

There was an uncomfortable silence, and then, “You mean a women’s pastor? Or a music minister?”

Confused at her friend’s doubtful response, the young girl replied, “No, I mean a real pastor that is in charge of a church.”

“Well, you just can’t do that,” her friend replied. Saddened and disgruntled by this unexpected response from my friend, I walked away to face a new life of sexism and reproach.

Throughout history the attitude toward women in society has changed in a drastic way. New opportunities and powers have been opened to them; yet one place, more than any other, remains sexist and medieval in its views of women’s rights. The pulpit is mostly barred from the female population of the church. There are denominations that are beginning to accept women clergy, but even those churches are predominantly men and can be sexist.

Getting over the stereotypes set by society can be a challenge a woman must face in accepting a call to ministry. A little over half a
century ago, becoming a minister was not even an option for women in a
time when all other occupations were beginning to open up to them.
When Judith Craig attended an all girls' summer camp when she was
fifteen, she heard a sermon calling for the girls to answer a call to Christian
vocation. She received a card listing the different facets for serving the
Lord, and the only occupations listed were missionary, doctor, nurse, and
teacher. Judith felt God calling her and checked the box for medical
missionary. She committed herself to this mission and enrolled as a pre-
med student when she began college.

After a difficult year due to outside obligations, her grades dropped
too low for her to be admitted into medical school. She changed her
major to English and faced the feeling of great failure as she saw her
opportunity to be a medical missionary disappear. She stopped attending
church services and had a year of facing her doubts about God and
herself. She didn’t have any plans for her future and began looking at her
choices. Seminary was not an option. There was a running joke in her
family that “The women who go to seminary are the ones who can’t get
married or do anything else, so they tuck their Bible in their bra and march
off to serve the Lord.” (Craig 50)

Judith finally decided to attend graduate school for English
literature and headed to St. Louis. She sought a job and reluctantly went
in for an interview to be a part-time youth director at a Methodist church.
She could not shake the sad and lonely image of women in ministry that
she and her family had created. After the interview, she came out smiling,
happy, and she finally overcame the stereotypes to accept the job offer
and begin her journey of serving the Lord (Craig, 49-51).
It is not a thing of the past to be filled with stereotypical views of women’s roles in the church. Selena Gilliam, a 16 year-old girl from Lindsay, Oklahoma, grew up thinking that women had no right to take on important roles in the church. She remembers when she was a small child asking her Sunday school teachers questions like, “Why can’t women talk in church?” and, “Why can’t there be women pastors?” Each time she asked these questions she was immediately given an answer that supposedly came straight from the Bible, and she was asked not to think anymore about women in ministry. Even as she grew older in her high school years and became friends with kids of other denominations and beliefs, her parents would often make comments about the roles of women in ministry. Her mother would say things like, “You know that a woman pastor sins EVERY time she preaches to a congregation?” Despite these comments, Selena found her call to become a music minister on a retreat during her sophomore year of high school. She was very excited about her new future, but her mother was not as enthusiastic when she was told about it. Selena’s mom had seen a wooden board Selena had made from another camp she had gone to. One side held Selena’s goals in life, and the other side held obstacles. One of the obstacles listed was “family,” and when her mom saw this, she asked why Selena would see her family as something to hold her back. This is when Selena opened up about her dream of becoming a music minister. Her mom told Selena that she was gullible and that she needed to grow up and realize that there is no place for women in church leadership. Her mom finished the conversation by saying, “This is just a phase. You’ll realize you’re wrong eventually,” (Gilliam, interview).

I have also been on the receiving end of discrimination and judgment. My sophomore year of high school I was selected as Student of the Month for the Kiwanis club in my hometown. An article is published for
every student that is selected. The article shares their achievements and
gives their future plans. I wrote about my awards in band and class honors
and then moved on to my dreams of attending Oklahoma City University
and later seminary to become a pastor.

The same week the article was published, I went to the post office
to drop off some mail for my boss. As I was dropping the envelopes into
the slot, I heard the door open and turned to see an older woman I didn’t
know coming in. She did a double take when she saw my face and
asked, “Were you the young woman in the paper this week?” I politely
answered with, “Yes ma’am, “ and began to walk out. She hastily
grabbed my arm and looked at me with urgency and concern. She
exclaimed, “You cannot do that! You have no right to be a minister! You
are following Satan! God would never ask a woman to be a minister. He
would never call some one like you. You can’t possibly be a pastor
because you have a vagina!” I took a step back and stared for a
moment, trying to collect my thoughts. I was still not very secure in my
calling and had no idea how to respond to this woman who looked like
my grandma and yelled like a witness on a street corner condemning me
to hell. I finally took a breath and said, “I’m sorry you feel that way.” I then
sprinted out the door and crawled in my car to cry. I wondered why
everyone was so upset that I wanted to follow God and help people. I
was so confused and worried that I wasn’t following God. My head was
filled with the question, “Is this really the right thing to do?”

Even women who are ordained and full-fledged pastors in the
church receive discouragement and discrimination. Jennifer Long, a
United Methodist pastor, remembers walking into a hospital room after
receiving a call about a woman who would soon die. She told the elderly
lady that she was a minister who was here for any spiritual care she might
want, to which the woman replied, “Women aren’t supposed to be ministers! Doesn’t Paul say they can’t?” Jennifer quickly replied by saying, “Well, Paul says it, but Jesus never mentions it!” It took some time, but after some convincing that should not have been necessary, the woman began to realize that Jennifer could actually be a legitimate minister despite her gender (Long, interview).

Before women finally received full clergy rights from the Methodist Church, there was much fighting and debating. The Women’s Division of the Board of Mission and laywomen from the Women’s Society of Christian Service had been fighting for years trying to attain clergy rights and ordainment. Before the church finally decided on May 4, 1956, to allow women full clergy rights, there was a great debate about what limitations would be placed on women ministers. It was suggested that only single women and widows should be allowed to hold full clergy rights and be leaders in the church. Another suggestion was that those who had previously been given ordainment must give it up if they wish to be married. The church finally decided these limitations were unfair and unnecessary and voted to allow all women, whether married or not, to be clergy in the church (Thompson 28).

Discrimination can come from many different places in the church. Jennifer remembers subtle things that had a belittling attitude toward her ministry, such as when congregation members would come to her after a sermon and say, “That was a nice talk.” For some reason, they wouldn’t say she had given a sermon. It was too much of a stretch to say she had given a sermon, even as a member of a church that accepts female clergy (Long, interview). Kay Buchannan, a United Methodist minister, talks about a time when she received disapproval from other women in the church. She was serving on a Walk to Emmaus, a spiritual retreat for
women and men. She was on the women’s walk as a leader, and she began to realize that some of the other women would not speak to her because of the fact that she was a pastor. She focused on the fact that God had put her on the Walk to minister to the women who were participating and tried to ignore the negative treatment she received (Buchanan, interview).

The church did not begin with such negative attitudes toward women taking leadership roles in the church. There were many women found in the New Testament who were integral parts of the birth of the church. A woman named Lydia was the first person to be converted to Christianity in Macedonia, and she played a leadership role in the church of Phillipi (Smith and Williams 149). Another woman named Priscilla actually became an important associate with the great evangelist, Paul (155). Paul also recognizes a woman named Phoebe as a deacon and patron of the church at Cenchreae in the book of Romans (p. 159). Yet another example of encouraged female leadership is found in Romans. Paul recognizes a woman named Junia as a famous apostle, or disciple, of Christ. Women began in the church as leaders and somehow were lost in the growth of the church (165). They became neglected and rejected in their calls to ministry, or they were redirected to a role that supposedly better suited them.

The church began with a positive view of women in ministry, and it is beginning to come back to the acceptance of female clergy as time goes by. Judith Craig eventually attended seminary and was ordained as an Elder, or full fledged minister, in the United Methodist Church in 1974. She eventually became a bishop in the church and has mentored and inspired many women to answer the call placed upon their lives (Craig
She overcame the stereotypes and discouragements to find a fulfilling life of witness and ministry in the church.

Selena has also seen a light at the end of her discouraging tunnel with her parents. As time has gone by, she has had many discussions with her parents about her future. Each conversation has been more encouraging than the last. Even though her parents are still not completely supportive of her role as a music minister, they are more accepting of the possibility of Selena attending a university of a different denomination and majoring in music. She has decided to be more open about her call so that her parents can see that she is determined to achieve the goal of becoming a minister and that it is not a phase she will eventually grow out of (Gilliam, interview).

I have found hope for those women seeking ordainment today. As I moved from my hometown of Lindsay, Oklahoma, to Oklahoma City, I found many people who encouraged and were even excited for my future in the church. Even those who are not Christians smile and give support to my ministry. The first day I was on OCU’s campus my freshman year I met someone from Washington. I told him my major, and he asked, “What exactly do you do with a religion degree?” I smiled and said I planned to become a United Methodist minister, and he exclaimed, “That is so cool! I like that you can do that as a girl. We need more young women as leaders in the church.” I smiled to myself, thinking maybe things are changing after all.

Maybe people are beginning to see the value of women not just in the work force and the home, but also in the house of God. A movement has begun that is striving for betterment of the entity we call the church,
and people are beginning to realize that women can be a part of the solution to the needs of the body of Christ.
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