CATALINA ZUMAETA

Colegio Internacional SEK

3rd Place in the ESU Chile Creative Writing Competition
2023
Senior Category

This document contains two texts. First one is the Round 1 Finished Work Entry on the theme of "Family". Second one was done on the day of the in-person final 10th June 2023, as a Freewrite/First Draft activity with the following prompt: "Write about the friendship that inspired your favourite song."

ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNION
discovering voices

First Text: Round 1 Entry

The Dutiful Daughter

Mother always said, “Be good and nice things will happen.” And, like an ancient proverb, those were the words I lived by each day of my life. I never spoke out of turn and I never told a lie. I never left the house without permission and I never acted up. Even if I ever wanted to, I was not strong enough to do it.

My hand coyly approached the closed window. I could feel a thread of cold air climb in from the microscopic gap underneath it. Clouds and sunlight glided gracefully in the heavens, seagulls sang shanties as they roamed the waters, and sailboats arrived and left the dock.

I had a bad cold when I was an infant. One of those poxes that quietly hides below the cradles of unassuming children, I believe. It made my muscles weak and my lungs weaker. I was prone to headaches and sickness. I was fifteen years old and ill since I could remember. As a matter of fact, Mother and I had moved here to the Riviera years ago, back in 1893 at the suggestion of a doctor, who affirmed the sun and fresh air of the shore would make my frail body stronger than it was in Paris.

After taking in the image of the morning, I took the walking stick by the side of my bedpost and carefully stood up to make sure my legs would not give up on me. My very mind rattled at the motion and a pang of pain seeped through my forehead, both of which would only somewhat alleviate when I closed my eyes. Once I was ready, I made my way out of my bedroom. The floor creaked and my stick produced a loud knock with every step I took with it. The hallway had no windows, but it did have a mirror I looked into. A crownof two intertwined identical braids rested on top of my head neatly held together by concealed pins.

Despite every ounce of pain, I did my very best to look as beautiful as I could in case someone looked at me and saw me. I truly wanted to be seen. Whenever I was outside, I wondered if anyone took glances at me. I begged the angels would tell that person to pay no mind to my feeble gait, andinstead look at my hair. How I wish they would look at my hair.

I reached the kitchen where mother awaited my arrival. The small table awaited too; preemptively offering a little cup of milk- my health kept me from drinking coffee-, a well sized piece of bread, a block of soft cheese and a type of meat or two. My chair, the one to the right, meekly invited me to sit down before this banquet. Mother sat tall and imposing on her chair. Such an elegant image she was, she could very easily pass for the queen of a chessboard. But she was Mother. My mother. She greeted me asking if I rested well; If the headaches caused me any trouble falling asleep. I told her breathing bothered me more than my head, yet I managed to get enough sleep in the end. After congratulating me, she talked about how we would go for a walk around town after the meal, so practicing the flute and my reading would have to wait until we returned. After agreeing, the rest of the breakfast was spent with her telling me all about the latest news and reminding me how I had to behave during our stroll. Before I left to get my shoes, I asked if we could perhaps visit the dock and buy chocolate. "Only if you are good." She said.

The stroll went just like any other stroll we had. Mother walked by my side, at times carefully holding my arm when I had any difficulties. We walked past the church and through the market, where an ocean of colors and sounds swam into my senses. I enjoyed the sea of sounds and sights, as Mother explained how my ailment was treating me to any acquaintance who cared to ask. In a sudden moment of ferocity, a typhoon hit the shore of my attention. A dog, a Briard or perhaps a Great Pyrenees, ran into me as fast as any creature could. I could almost feel it knocking over my sickly and fragile body. I flinched in anguished anticipation, but before my demise befell me, the flood retreated back into the waters. I heard whistling and a masculine voice issued a scolding to the canine. Once I opened my eyes again- which I did not recall closing at all-, the animal was bowing for his owner, ready to follow his every order. The young man who the dog belonged to was quick to ask if I was hurt. His gaze met mine. With a strong frame yet a boyish charm, his looks dazzled me. How I wished I made myself more beautiful that morning. And how I hoped he saw me. Saw my hair. He apologized profusely for the behavior of his canine companion and offered any sort of help he could provide. Mother seemed disdainful to the stranger, though, and affirmed we required no help from him, before we walked away. However, my starstruck gaze lingered until he was lost in the waves of the market. Mother did not take me to the dock that day.

During my daily reading, Mother sat in her armchair, the largest armchair of the parlor, that is. I believe she knitted, but I was as lost in the pages as I could be. Mister Darcy looked like the young man from the stroll. At least in my starry eyed recollections he did. My psyche

took delight in reminiscing of his form, his eyes! Memories of his image danced around my head, each a dancer amid a ballroom waltz.

Maybe that is the reason why it took me a moment to hear the doorbell ringing. In fact, I did not realize what it was until Mother stood up to open the door, muttering to herself about unannounced visitors. As she walked out of the room, I saw a translucent object fall out of her pocket. Arduously, I picked it up, feeling both piercing pain within my knees and a most unusual uncertainty within my heart. It was a small slightly dark vial. I naturally was convinced this was none other than yet one more treatment Mother bought for me at the apothecary, nothing out of ordinary. That was the moment when my eyes took notice of a label with a handful of warnings about long term musclar, breathing and neurological effects carefully attached to the mysterious little bottle in my hands. I then turned around the piece of paper tied to the ampul and my sight was met with the word venom written beautifully in cursive. Could my eyes be betraying me? A chill ran down my spine. No. There had to be a reason for this. Maybe we had a rat infestation I did not know about. Yes that had to be the answer. I berrated my insolent mind for disrespecting Mother. For suggesting something… like that. I left it there and went back to my seat quietly, to pretend I had been reading the whole time. Mother returned and picked up the tiny bottle. I felt a suspectful glance at me. She must have brushed off any suspicions, however. I thanked the lord she did. I did not allow my thoughts to dwell on that diminutive vial for even an equally diminutive second.

The next morning, the young man returned to my thoughts like flowers return to the garden in spring. I hoped I would see him that day too. The thought made me smile at the window. The seagulls seemed to wait by the shore that day, instead of singing their shanties above the waters, and no sun rays broke through the clouds. Would it rain? I sighed and left for the kitchen with my walking stick.

The usually sparse light in the hallway was almost completely absent that day. A veil of darkness between the mirror and I made my face look unlovely. Even sicker than usual. I was convinced my eye sockets did not look this prominent and my features were not this pasty in normal lighting. A dash of embarrassment invaded my mind. It was certainly time to stop looking at it and continue.

When I turned around the corner, I caught a sight I could have never expected. Not even in my worst nightmares. Not even if it had been described to me. I saw Mother standing by the table and pouring the liquid of the tiny, innocuously sized vial of venom into a cup. Into my cup. I froze where I stood and yet I felt my knees weaker than ever. My voice was as fragile as them. I asked how she could do this, as dimly as a dying candle. Mother took a defensive

position. She told me to behave myself. To stop whining because she knew best. I felt tears rolling down my face. My mouth shook nervously, at a complete loss of words. I looked at my legs. Could that be why…?

I immediately sprinted as fast as my infirm legs would allow me for the door. Mother screamed bloody murders for me to stop in that instant, before she took a hold of her skirts to chase after me. Pain seared through my legs like they were about to break in a million pieces. I reached the doorknob and barreled out of that house that I wished to never return to. My walking stick fell along the way. I had always been good. Why did this have to happen? Mother must have picked it up as she persecuted me, for when I turned my head to look at her she held it in her fists above her head. Ready to strike me with it. In her eyes I saw nothing resembling the mother I knew. Right when she swung it to begin beating me and all my hope was lost, I heard a voice tell her to get away from me. I looked and someone had gotten between Mother and my trembling body. I could recognize that masculine silhouette anywhere. It was him. It was really him.

Since that day, I have never gone back to the house, or spoken to Mother. No matter how many times I got requests from her to come back. Lord knows when she started to impair me. I preferred not to find out. Although my legs have not healed completely and neither have my lungs or my head and they may never do so, I have gotten stronger. I never got rid of the walking stick, however. It is hung on a wall in my room. Inoffensive and immobile. Mother might have been as wicked as the devil and hurt me beyond belief, but she will always be a part of me. One I cannot get rid of even if I wished to. A few of my loved ones know about my childhood. But when those who do not ask about my mother, I tell them that Mother always said, “Be good and nice things will happen.”

Second Text: Free Write/First Draft 10th June 2023

"THE MAGICIAN"

I walked through the wooden veins of the old house for the first time in a century. Cold. Unforgiving. Unshaken. Never thought I would be back. An old house that became a childhood memory. Creaking of floorboards beneath me. Too much quiet, too much loneliness. A bottle of jack in my hand and bad bitter memories haunting my head.

Out the window, the memory street where I met him. He was a loveless child and I was a loveless child. When he cycled by, all my dreams began. The saddest thing I'd ever seen and the most alive pair of eyes that ever met mine. I asked his name. He said "Magician". Oh, Magician. I never called you any other name and I never will. We grew up with only each other and whatever adventures you could come up with. So when I heard the news they found you hanging from a noose I returned to this painful home that was never such to me. Just in case this was another of your magic tricks. The hallway got smaller. Like it was squeezed. It led to a stretchy staircase. You never respected authority. Not your parents. Not your teachers. Not your brain. Only your rowdy heart. I reached the second floor. So much I never told you. You never knew what I felt. Could I have kept you here, Magician? If I pulled my ribs open for you, could you have fallen asleep in the warmth of my chest? Sleep. You needed so much sleep and you rarely got it. You did not even respect the night. Countless times I picked you up at crossroads before the break of day. You were Houdini, Magician. Could not be held in a single trap. You never taught me your secrets. If you did, perhaps I could escape this house. I took a sip from the bottle. But in the end, I left. Not you. I left this town of bad memories. A town of bitter taste in search of something sweeter and a backbone that could hold me. I should have stayed, Magician. I should have listened to your angry, bitter words when you felt betrayed. Maybe I would have realized they were nothing but a crying beg. You and I stood at the crossroad. Not children. Not adults. But loveless still. I made my way to the only big window. The one from where the street can be seen.

Magician. You innocent lonely lamb. You clean martyr of silvery blood. Your obituary will go straight to the bible. I will be your first devotee, a witness of your life. Your one and only disciple. Why, Magician, if you get any holier they will canonize you. A broken hyoid will be

your only relic. Are you pulling rabbits from your hat for the angels, in a garden of purity? Does the Lord enjoy your magic? But wait…

Maybe instead, you are burning in the fiery bowels of hell, your tricks scattered as you beg for the forgiveness you shall never get for your sinful dyonisian ways. Heretic. Bastard. How dare you leave me here all alone, Magician? Greedy for relief. Indulgent and obscene you were. A million vultures must be eating your organs everyday, only to start your punishment again the next. I must be terribly merciful or terribly stupid to grant you my brain to dwell in. All this misery is in vain.

I looked at the window covered by a layer of dust and dirt. Maybe this was it. Your magnum opus. The ultimate trick. Behind that old curtain no one was bothered enough to change you hid. I pulled it with unnecessary might. Sure for a moment. Just a moment that you awaited my applause behind. Nothing. Only a couple of flies made their way out. At the window, the sun. The weak sun that did not keep this town warm enough was overcome by the night. How could it? The sun was my last living friend, and the bloody night killed it too. Dusk is nothing but a crossroad too. If the night was cruel enough to take that dim, coy light from me, it could have also killed Magician. Yes. The night hung Magician and it shall pay. I tossed the bottle to it. Hoping to hurt it. But the night remained. It laughed at me with a new moon wide smile. Before my feet, the broken bottle cried liquor. Liquor rolled down my face as well.

Magician was gone. The night told me he was. The night he never respected or feared and I always felt petrified by. I was all grown up. An adult. A loveless adult. Much like he should be too. Not loveless, but an adult. If I could have stayed and told him what I felt, standing firmly, maybe he would have stayed as well. Oh, Magician. Tomorrow morning everybody will say they love you and pat each other on the back for it. We will both know them all liars. None cared. They rolled their eyes at your cries for help and your pursuit of crossroads. At the earthly thrills you seeked to soothe your seething pain. I will be a liar too, I confess. They will tell me it was not my fault and I could not have known you would disappear as your final act and I will nod my head. I will pretend they have anything of value to say at all. I will pretend I care about their feelings, which I would gladly see as broken on the floor as this bottle of jack if it meant you could come back. If it meant those alive eyes would look into mine as you tell me the next mischief we would be up to.

The street never changed, Magician. I could swear I saw from that filthy window the ghosts of all the moments we had there. Of all the times we ever were pirates. Of all the times we were astronauts. Your house stood on the other side of that road, but you always hated being there. You told me to run away with you countless times, as you pulled golden coins from behind my ear. As a joke, I thought. You told me we should simply leave. Forgetting the bitter memories and faces of this town forever. And I laughed when you said that. I laughed. I wish I agreed.

After agonizing hours, the biggest miracle of the millenia happened. I saw light behind the house you despised. The sun had returned glorious. Victorious. It survived the attempt on its life made by the night. That is when I understood that despite the pain and joy it would bring, Magician lived within me. His body may have been housing all sorts of undesirable worms and larvae by the afternoon, cried by hypocrites who never cared for him, but as long as his name was Magician in my head and in my heart, he would be alive. I walked out of the old house, away from the window. down from the second floor, through the stretchy hallways and out into the street. Out into the day. Not feeling joy. Only feeling enough closure to live for both of us.

I sometimes think of going back to the old house. But I never will. There are too many bad memories I wish to disown. The only ones I will never get rid of while I breathe are those of Magician. Whenever I see a crossroad I think of him. Of Magician. Magician, the lamb. Magician, the bastard. Magician, my friend. Magician, the one who lives in my head.