FOCUS 2008

Focus 2008

A Sampler

Cover Art: ***Flowers*** *by Nyheisha R. Williams*

This issue of Focus

is dedicated

to the Class of 2012

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Aunt Chloe: A Journal of Artful Candor

Dear Class of 2012,

My name is Kyla Marshell, and I am a senior English major, Creative Writing minor from Scarborough, ME. This year, I am Editor-in-Chief of Spelman's literary journal, which has been newly renamed *Aunt Chloe: A Journal of Artful Candor*. We are a literary journal that publishes fiction, poetry, articles, essays, reviews, interviews/conversations, and visual art. We publish the work of writers and artists from the AUC and beyond. I hope you will all consider submitting your creative works, or volunteering for the magazine. There is also the opportunity to have us critique and help polish your work if we want to publish it, but first help it out a little.

For more information, you can visit auntchloe.blogspot.com, or email me at kyla.marshell@gmail.com.

Welcome and congratulations!

Kyla Marshell


l-i-n-k-e-d
The Spelman College Online Literary Journal
Join the L-I-N-K-E-D staff! If you're a creative writer, visual or sound artist; if you've got serious editing or Web skills—or if you want a place to hone your creative talents and publish your writing and art, then get involved with the newest, exciting literary journal at Spelman (see our link on the English Dept. webpage). For more info on how to work with us, drop by Cosby 310 or call 404 270 5591.
"...Art urges voyages."
- Gwendolyn Brooks
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Focus on Identity

LEST WE FORGET: An Open Letter To My Sisters Who Are Brave by Alice Walker

I have come home from a long stay in Mexico to find – because of the presidential campaign, and especially because of the Obama/Clinton race for the Democratic nomination - a new country existing alongside the old. On any given day we, collectively, become the Goddess of the Three Directions and can look back into the past, look at ourselves just where we are, and take a glance, as well, into the future. It is a space with which I am familiar. When I was born in 1944 my parents lived on a middle Georgia plantation that was owned by a white distant relative, Miss* May Montgomery. She would never admit to this relationship, of course, except to mock it. Told by my parents that several of their children would not eat chicken skin she responded that of course they would not. No Montgomerys would. My parents and older siblings did everything imaginable for Miss May. They planted and raised her cotton and corn, fed and killed and processed her cattle and hogs, painted her house, patched her roof, ran her dairy, and, among countless other duties and responsibilities my father was her chauffeur, taking her anywhere she wanted to go at any hour of the day or night. She lived in a large white house with green shutters and a green, luxuriant lawn: not quite as large as Tara of Gone With the Wind fame, but in the same style. We lived in a shack without electricity or running water, under a rusty tin roof that let in wind and rain. Miss May went to school as a girl. The school my parents and their neighbors built for us was burned to the ground by local racists who wanted to keep ignorant their competitors in tenant farming. During the Depression, desperate to feed his hardworking family, my father asked for a raise from ten dollars a month to twelve. Miss May responded that she would not pay that amount to a white man and she certainly wouldn't pay it to a nigger. That before she'd pay a nigger that much money she'd milk the dairy cows herself.

When I look back, this is part of what I see. I see the school bus carrying white children, boys and girls, right past me, and my brothers, as we trudge on foot five miles to school. Later, I see my parents struggling to build a school out of discarded army barracks while white students, girls and boys, enjoy a building made of brick. We had no books; we inherited the cast off books that "Jane" and "Dick" had previously used in the all-white school that we were not, as black children, permitted to enter. The year I turned fifty, one of my relatives told me she had started reading my books for children in the library in my home town. I had had no idea – so kept from black people it had been – that such a place existed. To this day knowing my presence was not wanted in the public library when I was a child I am highly uncomfortable in libraries and will rarely, unless I am there to help build, repair, refurbish or raise money to keep them open, enter their doors.

When I joined the freedom movement in Mississippi in my early twenties it was to come to the aid of sharecroppers, like my parents, who had been thrown off the land they'd always known, the plantations, because they attempted to exercise their "democratic" right to vote. I wish I could say white women treated me and other black people a lot better than the men did, but I cannot. It seemed to me then and it seems to me now that white women have copied, all too often, the behavior of their fathers and their brothers, and in the South, especially in Mississippi, and before that, when I worked to register voters in Georgia, the broken bottles thrown at my head were gender free. I made my first white women friends in college; they were women who loved me and were loyal to our friendship, but I understood, as they did, that they were white women and that whiteness mattered. That, for instance, at Sarah Lawrence, where I was speedily inducted into the Board of Trustees practically as soon as I graduated, I made my way to the campus for

**During my childhood it was necessary to address all white girls as "Miss" when they reached the age of twelve.*

meetings by train, subway and foot, while the other trustees, women and men, all white, made their way by limo. Because, in our country, with its painful history of unspeakable inequality, this is part of what whiteness means. I loved my school for trying to make me feel I mattered to it, but because of my relative poverty I knew I could not.

I am a supporter of Obama because I believe he is the right person to lead the country at this time. He offers a rare opportunity for the country and the world to start over, and to do better. It is a deep sadness to me that many of my feminist white women friends cannot see him. Cannot see what he carries in his being. Cannot hear the fresh choices toward Movement he offers. That they can believe that millions of Americans –black, white, yellow, red and brown - choose Obama over Clinton only because he is a man, and black, feels tragic to me. When I have supported white people, men and women, it was because I thought them the best possible people to do whatever the job required. Nothing else would have occurred to me. If Obama were in any sense mediocre, he would be forgotten by now. He is, in fact, a remarkable human being, not perfect but humanly stunning, like King was and like Mandela is. We look at him, as we looked at them, and are glad to be of our species. He is the change America has been trying desperately and for centuries to hide, ignore, kill. The change America must have if we are to convince the rest of the world that we care about people other than our (white) selves. True to my inner Goddess of the Three Directions however, this does not mean I agree with everything Obama stands for. We differ on important points probably because I am older than he is, I am a woman and person of three colors, (African, Native American, European), I was born and raised in the American South, and when I look at the earth's people, after sixty-four years of life, there is not one person I wish to see suffer, no matter what they have done to me or to anyone else; though I understand quite well the place of suffering, often, in human growth. I want a grown-up attitude toward Cuba, for instance, a country and a people I love; I want an end to the embargo that has harmed my friends and their children, children who, when I visit Cuba, trustingly turn their faces up for me to kiss. I agree with a teacher of mine, Howard Zinn, that war is as objectionable as cannibalism and slavery; it is beyond obsolete as a means of improving life. I want an end to the on-going war immediately and I want the soldiers to be encouraged to destroy their weapons and to drive themselves out of Iraq. I want the Israeli government to be made accountable for its behavior towards the Palestinians, and I want the people of the United States to cease acting like they don't understand what is going on. All colonization, all occupation, all repression basically looks the same, whoever is doing it. Here our heads cannot remain stuck in the sand; our future depends on our ability to study, to learn, to understand what is in the records and what is before our eyes. But most of all I want someone with the self-confidence to talk to anyone, "enemy" or "friend," and this Obama has shown he can do. It is difficult to understand how one could vote for a person who is afraid to sit and talk to another human being. When you vote you are making someone a proxy for yourself; they are to speak when, and in places, you cannot. But if they find talking to someone else, who looks just like them, human, impossible, then what good is your vote?

It is hard to relate what it feels like to see Mrs. Clinton (I wish she felt self-assured enough to use her own name) referred to as "a woman" while Barack Obama is always referred to as "a black man." One would think she is just any woman, colorless, raceless, past-less, but she is not. She carries all the history of white womanhood in America in her person; it would be a miracle if we, and the world, did not react to this fact. How dishonest it is, to attempt to make her innocent of her racial inheritance. I can easily imagine Obama sitting down and talking, person to person, with any leader, woman, man, child or common person, in the world, with no baggage of past servitude or race supremacy to mar their talks. I cannot see the same scenario with Mrs. Clinton who would drag into Twenty-First Century American leadership the same image of white privilege and

distance from the reality of others' lives that has so marred our country's contacts with the rest of the world. And yes, I would adore having a woman president of the United States. My choice would be Representative Barbara Lee, who alone voted in Congress five years ago not to make war on Iraq. That to me is leadership, morality, and courage; if she had been white I would have cheered just as hard. But she is not running for the highest office in the land, Mrs. Clinton is. And because Mrs. Clinton is a woman and because she may be very good at what she does, many people, including some younger women in my own family, originally favored her over Obama. I understand this, almost. It is because, in my own nieces' case, there is little memory, apparently, of the foundational inequities that still plague people of color and poor whites in this country. Why, even though our family has been here longer than most North American families – and only partly due to the fact that we have Native American genes – we very recently, in my lifetime, secured the right to vote, and only after numbers of people suffered and died for it.

When I offered the word "Womanism" many years ago, it was to give us a tool to use, as feminist women of color, in times like these. These are the moments we can see clearly, and must honor devotedly, our singular path as women of color in the United States. We are not white women and this truth has been ground into us for centuries, often in brutal ways. But neither are we inclined to follow a black person, man or woman, unless they demonstrate considerable courage, intelligence, compassion and substance. I am delighted that so many women of color support Barack Obama – and genuinely proud of the many young and old white women and men who do. Imagine, if he wins the presidency we will have not one but three black women in the White House; one tall, two somewhat shorter; none of them carrying the washing in and out of the back door. The bottom line for most of us is: With whom do we have a better chance of surviving the madness and fear we are presently enduring, and with whom do we wish to set off on a journey of new possibility? In other words, as the Hopi elders would say: Who do we want in the boat with us as we head for the rapids? Who is likely to know how best to share the meager garden produce and water? We are advised by the Hopi elders to celebrate this time, whatever its adversities. We have come a long way, Sisters, and we are up to the challenges of our time. One of which is to build alliances based not on race, ethnicity, color, nationality, sexual preference or gender, but on Truth. Celebrate our journey. Enjoy the miracle we are witnessing. Do not stress over its outcome. Even if Obama becomes president, our country is in such ruin it may well be beyond his power to lead us toward rehabilitation. If he is elected however, we must, individually and collectively, as citizens of the planet, insist on helping him do the best job that can be done; more, we must insist that he demand this of us. It is a blessing that our mothers taught us not to fear hard work. Know, as the Hopi elders declare: The river has its destination. And remember, as poet June Jordan and Sweet Honey in the Rock never tired of telling us: We are the ones we have been waiting for.

Namaste;
And with all my love,

Alice Walker
Cazul
Northern California
First Day of Spring
March 21, 2008

Photo by Jean Weisinger
Www.nea.gov/about/40th/

The Gift of Alice Walker

It seems to me that much is made of the fact that poet/writer/activist Alice Walker left Spelman College in 1964 to attend Sarah Lawrence College where she earned her undergraduate degree. In her essay, "The Unglamorous But Worthwhile Duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist," Walker describes her departure as "fleeing from Spelman College in Atlanta, a school that I considered opposed to change, to freedom, and to understanding that by the time most girls enter college they are already women and should be treated as women." This essay was based on a paper delivered to the Black Student's Association at Sarah Lawrence College during Black History Month in 1970. The comment is a rebuke of the College's conservative traditions (which lined up with the traditions of the larger culture). However, it may be important to understand and useful to note that it is not a rebuke of the College's mission and history; rather, it is a rebuke of the ways in which the institution may periodically fall short of the grandeur of its mission and shortchange the potential of its students. Few know that even though the young Ms. Walker left the College in search of herself and her own freedom to think and live, the mature artist has never turned her back on the young women at Spelman, especially those who have the courage to write.

Every student should read Walker's essay on the duties of the Black Revolutionary Artist, as well as other works in her first collection of Womanist Prose, *In Search Of Our Mother's Gardens*. Here Walker reminds us that the work of the artist is not merely to create, but to read, understand and preserve that which has been created before her. *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*, with its critique of Spelman, was published in 1982. In 1988, Ms. Walker turned back to Spelman College, inspired by the deep, enduring friendships she enjoys among our faculty, to sponsor the "Zora Neale Hurston / Langston Hughes Award," an award designed to assist a graduating senior—specifically, a young woman who "already more or less knows that she is going to become a writer," as Alice Walker described her intentions in her gift letter. The annual award was for $5,000 and continued for a decade. Last year, Ms. Walker resumed her gift to Spelman students who want to pursue a life of writing.

In this final issue of FOCUS magazine, which will launch its re-design in 2008, we express our appreciation for Alice Walker who recognizes that being a writer is perilous work. When one writes honestly, and from one's truest convictions, the work may earn prizes as well as enmity. The peril is in both the prize *and* the enmity. The challenge for us at Spelman College is to grow our many gifts through the deeper understanding of the ways in which art and literature challenge us to be more human. Not only must we learn the craft of our art, we must also be prepared to do work that does not always sit well with the ones we love.

Opal Moore
Advisor to *FOCUS* Magazine, and the forthcoming
Aunt Chloe: A Journal of Artful Candor

People Always Ask Me Why I Don't Straighten My Hair

by Juliana Partridge

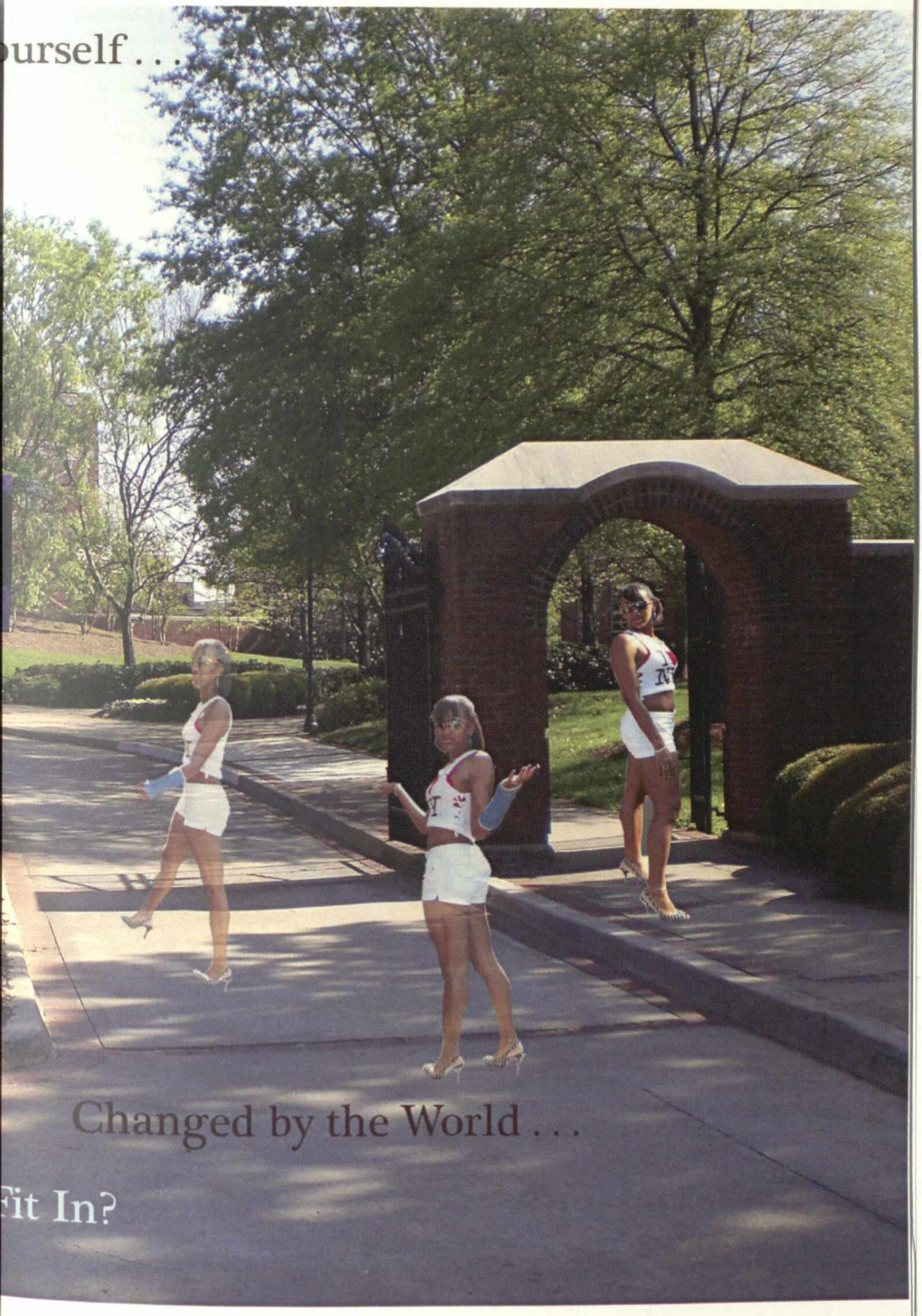
I am, have always been, a little bit different. For example, I am unusual enough to have never once regretted selling my flat-iron for five dollars. I sold it to one of my dearest friends, who happens to be white. At the time, she was a girl in search of a way to make her straight hair even straighter, for she was a product of a society that places beauty in such superficial things as bone-straight hair that falls almost unnaturally flat down a woman's back. And, so, with these mostly impossible standards of beauty, I'm often surrounded by awe because I haven't killed my curls in three years. Curls that dance in the rain, curls that sing in the shower, curls that I allow to live. Curls that are the product of my mother's straight hair and my father's short afro, a product of their undying love for each other and their fierce love for me. And people find my love for my natural and curly hair unusual. And I wonder why am I the unusual one just because I love me? Love me natural?

Naturally, the girls who wear the least often get the most attention. And so it's unusual that my skirts love to kiss my knees. Some bold enough to flirt with my calves, float past my thighs, dance over my hips. Some might find it strange that I'm not best friends with the mini skirt. I suppose I wasn't supposed to fall in love with the camisole peaking through the V of my shirt, covering up parts of me that I don't think everyone is allowed to see. I'm told my love affair with clothes that cover is unusual. And I'm sure the guys would notice me more if I wore a little bit less, just like they'd like me better, according to this one Spelman sister who told me so, if I straightened my hair. In a few words she was telling me that I should learn to like the smells and sensations of scorching my hair just so I could fit in to the very same cultural standards of beauty that for many years made my life miserable. She was telling me I should spend several hours solely dedicated to making my hair the opposite of how God created it. Then, according to this particular girl, and probably according to some silent others too, I'd be more beautiful, and a lot more normal.

Normal and beautiful to those people who assume things, those people with strong desires to place people in very limited categories. Because I suppose it is human nature to assume that I am this. Or that. Or the other thing. And so, I say, assume. But make sure to assume that I am a biracial girl who has the nerve to call herself Black, who doesn't eat meat, who's from Maine but hates the cold. And I assume that people assume that I'm a little bit unusual. Because I'm unusual enough to wear clothes that cover, to love my hair natural. But these things unusual to others are natural to me because naturally I don't want to be normal because I don't understand normal and I'm desperately trying to understand myself.

And so, curious onlookers, *that* is why I am the girl who does not straighten her hair, who wears clothes that cover, who loves herself. *Natural.*


In Order to Change the World, You Must Chan
Changing the World . . .
Where Do



By Amber Mathewson

And She Was Called Rosaline
by Namina Forna

My love for him is a distant sort of love. A graying love that flakes and dulls with the passage of time. He occupies a place of high regard in my heart, a pedestal that no man can ever hope to reach. And while I love him, I don't want to be like him. I don't desire to possess that indefinable trait that he has, that quality that makes him so appealing to others.

Ajo , Sierra Leoneans call it. It is the same quality that feeds his ruthlessness, strokes the embers of his ego, and encourages his deceit.

My friends sometimes ask me, "Arabella, what was your childhood like?". I always smile and mumble a reply – something witty, something in Krio, one of the many native tongues of my homeland Sierra Leone. For that is what they want to hear. They don't truly want to know about my childhood, about my life before I came to America, my life with him. He is my father, the Honorable A.G.S. Sesay, former Minister of Lands, Transportation, Mines, etc. – a consummate politician from birth.

My friends don't truly want to hear about why I feared turning into him. Why I feared becoming a personable monster, a selfish being that joyfully wreaks havoc on those around for his own amusement.

I was four when this particular fear began to slide its mossy tentacles around my throat, constricting my vocal passages, forcing silence where there had been none before. This fear smelled like rotten mangoes and dates – the way she smelled. She was about twenty, almost four decades younger than him and she began visiting our home with alarming frequency.

This – the visiting that is – was nothing new. There were always people coming in and out our house. Foreign dignitaries, ambassadors, new servants, old members of the family – they all had a habit of popping up on any given day, expecting their rooms to be ready. And there was always room. The last time I'd counted the house had at least twenty, all twice the size of the typical American family room. It was a sprawling white house, a mansion, some might say, built in that peculiar colonial style in which at least two verandas sprout from each wall, enabling the occupants to enjoy the breezes that drifted in from the beach, which was right across the street.

As with every post-imperialist house with at least some pretension to old money it possessed all the accoutrement that came with a British manor. There was a tennis court, a swimming pool, a guest house, a formal garden, and a manicured lawn. There was also a bakery, my father's personal touch. He could not endure even the thought of eating day old bread and had a healthy appetite for French pastries, which somehow never managed to show around his waistline.

There was ample space for everyone.

But not for her, never for her of the ample hips and cloying embrace. Never for her was who so unlike my petite mother – so loud, so brash, so overpowering. She loomed over my four year old world like the first warning clouds of the rainy season. Because when she came I started to notice things I'd never noticed before. Things my four-year-old mind could barely comprehend.

Like kisses.

My parents were never really kissers; no Sierra Leoneans were in those days. It was regarded as a vulgar display of affection in our culture, rather like having intercourse in public. Buts every once in a while he'd give her a peck on the cheek or she'd give him a quick buss on the forehead if he was reading to me at night.

When she came the kisses started to disappear – the kisses from my father to my mother, the kisses from my mother to my father, the kisses from them to me. They slowly evaporated, vanishing like the trails of mist after a hot rainy season rain, disappearing into a darkness that was encroaching onto the light of my family. A foul, rotten mango and date smelling darkness.

And her name was Rosaline.

I don't remember her last name or I would have written it too. Her other name was the Whore of Babylon. hat was what my mother called her on that awful night. Slut! Whore! Whore of Babylon! Jezebel! Raray gial ! Kolonko ! – and a few other choice antecedents that the vagaries of time have erased from my memory.

She was not the first – there were at least two new ones every month, all of them very young – but not so young it would become exceedingly scandalous – all of them fleshy and vulgar with the stench of musky perfumes heavy on their skin. My father would set them up in houses of their own, with their own servants and their own tailors. He spent recklessly, plowing through his diamond generated wealth like his favorite Lamborghini through pedestrians.

They never really meant much to him, these fleshy girls. They were always gone by the end of the month with anything they could get their hands on – the diamonds, the impractical furs that stifled in the ninety plus degree Sierra Leonean heat, and sometimes, just sometimes, the deed to a house.

My mother would cry at night.

I would listen to her sob the nights when my father was away and I slept with her on their large, empty bed. Empty, because when he wasn't there it felt like the bed would swallow us like the sea did children during the rainy season. She only cried when she thought I was asleep, but I never was. I would curl around her and hope that my small weight was enough to erase the absence of his larger one. Finally, after she'd sobbed herself to sleep, I would allow myself to rest, comforting myself with the thought that it was my presence that made her stop. That I was enough to console her.

My mother was not the usual Sierra Leonean socialite, she had neither the prestigious name nor the money. Bust she was pretty, a trophy wife plucked from obscurity at the tender age of nineteen. According to legend, my father found her in the back of the Milton Margai library, poring over some musty tomes of property law. He immediately whisked her off to Paris and asked her to be his bride under the lights of the Eiffel Tower in an incredibly romantic gesture.

The reality, of course, was much different.

My father did meet my mother when she was nineteen at the Milton Margai library but he courted her for a few months, then paid her relatives a bride price of three herds of cows, a small house, and a Range Rover, which amounted to an almost unheard of sum of money in those days.

After the wedding my mother continued studying for law, eventually opening a successful law firm in the middle of town.

Perhaps that's where the problem originated.

My father could not bear having anyone outshine or even come close to his brilliance. My mother's success with the law firm must have infuriated him to no end. He had his first extramarital affair less than a year after they were married and an illegitimate child in the first two years.

Even then, their relationship must have been strained from the beginning. After all what sort of conversation could a forty year old man make with a nineteen year old girl? So by the time I came along their marriage must have been on its last legs. Not that either of them would admit that. In the grand tradition of the colonized they kept the British stiff upper lip, lying to themselves, each other, and me until Rosaline came and the façade collapsed.

While I was too young to truly understand what was happening I marked a few deviancies in my mother's daily routine. Usually, every Friday she would come to school personally to pick me up in her BMW. I would glance anxiously at the clock, waiting for that magical time. Three o'clock – the best hour of the day. She was never late. At three o'clock every Friday, her silver car would pull up the school's driveway and Mohammed, her chauffeur, would open the door. I always loved that moment because my friends would look on enviously, as I was hugged by my beautiful, stylish mother.

Sometimes we would go to the ice cream parlor or a restaurant on the beach. No matter what we did, we always finished the day at her office. She would put on a large pair of glasses that gave her the somewhat surprised look of an owl and work on some cases while I did my homework or played with my dolls. Sometimes, just sometimes, I would tell her about the new girlfriend my father had. She would always smile and say, in her distinctive mix of English and Krio, "Noh worry my pikin, she won't stay."

When Rosaline came my mother didn't pick me up from school anymore. Instead she'd send Mohammed, who would look at me apologetically, understanding that I waited so anxiously for my mother, not him. When I would ask him where my mother went he would reply "the American Embassy". I didn't know what the American embassy was but in my imagination it became an ominous castle-like structure with a small tower out of which my mother stared helplessly.

During this time Rosaline was a constant visitor to our house. She came whenever my mother was at work and somehow one month melted into two, the time of mangoes became the time of sugar canes, and then sugar canes became plums, and after the plums there were tamarinds. And all this time she stayed. She of the wide hips and the snakelike smile that never reached her eyes. She of the ample bosom, the grasping fingers, and the cold eyes that flicked over my mother contemptuously whenever they met at the soirees and the galas and the evening tennis matches.

My family was scandalized; my Muslim grandmother hid her face behind her veil whenever she talked to my father, calling on Allah to release him from whatever juju Rosaline had placed on him. He would smile, and then jokingly say that in his old age he needed a young girl to keep him alive and vigorous. Then he'd flatter her in that way of his, that way that made people forget their outrage, their morals, their common sense. That way that made them erroneously believe that he truly cared. Hours later she'd be gone, flattered beyond sensibility, foolishly believing that he would change his ways.

The gossip sheets were titillated.

They'd lampoon my mother for not being able to keep his interest. She who was once regarded as one of the most beautiful women in the country was tittered at behind hands and followed with pitying eyes. Meanwhile nothing was said of him. He'd always had a habit of plying newspaper editors with expensive wines and fancy champagnes, so they congratulated him on his good taste. They applauded him on his choices in women, as if they were interchangeable like cars or houses. They especially commended him on his new paramour.

For *she*, that mango and date smelling whore was the daughter of the current Minister of Lands, my father's contemporary and friendly rival. And *she*, contrary to what everyone thought, was trying to make their affair a permanent one.

It was a Saturday night, and like every other Saturday night we were entertaining. My parents were dressed to the nines. My father had on a red silk suit with black lapels --- Versace. Some obscure Italian designer he'd befriended while on vacation in Europe with one of his girlfriends. Later, he would always show me pictures and say "See, I knew him before he became famous". My mother wore a flowing white dress and her favorite diamond necklace while I was resplendent a pretty green dress and a profusion of long braids that cascaded down my shoulders.

In those days I aspired to be white like my aunt George. I had such a large family with so many different people of different ethnicities that it was not uncommon for me to choose a different race I wanted to be each day.

"What are you now?" My uncles would ask, laughing as they took a healthy swig of palm wine.

"Lebanese," I would reply shaking my long braids and thrusting my hennaed hands at them so they could see that I was indeed Lebanese.

That night I was white, or specifically, Rapunzel, for my mother had read me that particular story earlier. We took a picture together, my parents and I. I still have it hanging on my bedroom wall. We looked like a true family; happy, content.

Then she came, riding with her father in the gleaming white Mercedes that my father coveted yet simultaneously scoffed at because it was too nouveau riche, too ostentatious, much like its occupants. A collective gasp rustled among the guests like a hamattan breeze whispering through the leaves of the almond tree. Her effrontery was unparalleled. To attend the same parties as my mother was barely acceptable as it was, but to have the gall to show up at her house during her gala and embrace my father as though they were friends in plain sight of all and sundry was unthinkable.

She did not seem to care; she sauntered past my mother, swinging her hips as if she owned the house, smirking when she saw my mother's fingers tighten around her wine glass. Then less than an hour later she had disappeared, leaving behind only her mango and date scent.

What's worse my father was gone too. One moment he'd been there, dandling me on his knee while talking to my godfather, the erstwhile president Albert Momoh and the next he was gone, his cologne swirling fitfully in the night air. And I, after being placated by Uncle Albert's presence for all of five minutes ventured out in search of him.

He was not in any of our usual places. The library seemed strangely bereft, deprived of his deep, hearty voice. The curtains drifted softly on the evening breeze, each rustling a lament. He's not here, they seemed to say. I searched high and low; ousting a few dissipated scions of the aristo families from their jamba smoke filled retreats

and interrupting more than one illicit tryst. Still no sign of my father. Then I had a revelation, as though the very hand of God -- or the Devil more like --- was guiding me in the right direction. The guesthouse! The one place in the compound I hadn't checked.

I ambled towards it, disregarding the darkness, which usually terrified me and the smoky tendrils of mist drifting up from the pool. I was feeling another sort of panic, a scaly panic that slithered up my spine, pooling just below my neck, seeping into my barely developed back muscles. Soft light spilled out of the guesthouse windows, compelling me to finish my journey. Whispery laughter echoed in its confines --- Rosaline's laughter.

I should have turned away, should have heeded my training, the standard training of any Sierra Leonean child that compelled them to stay out of the affairs of elders. Perversely I continued on my path, spurred on by the mango and date smell and the burning behind my eyes as the tears overflowed their banks. I already knew what I would find. It's impossible to grow up in Africa without an understanding of certain facts from an early age. But I soldiered on, the tears transforming into a hot, righteous rage that surged against my spine in waves, obliterating the fortress of strictures that had been instilled in me since I was an infant. I had to see, had to understand what made my mother sob into her pillows at night, what had her making furtive calls to strangers, what made her stop loving me – for back then, I equated our Friday afternoons together as her declarations of love to me. As with most other Sierra Leoneans she never vocalized her love, but every Friday, when she stepped out of the car and swung me into her arms, I knew that she did love me. So I had to see what had stopped the Friday afternoons and it was for this reason I kept walking.

In moments I was at the window and I couldn't shield myself from the sight that met my eyes, a sight that I have long since jettisoned firmly from my memory. It was a sight that I will never forget yet cannot, for the life of, me recall the details of.

At that very moment my childhood began to splinter; a tiny crack here, a small fisure there, the remnants of happy memories there. I don't know how long I stayed at that window crying. In front of my eyes was the end of all I'd known - the end of my trust in him, the end of my trust in all men, the end of my innocence, the end of my family.

I vaguely remember the rest. My mother came and after hugging me to her breast, guttural tears wrenching themselves from her throat, she gave me to one of the servants and walked into the room. I refused to leave and for the first time in my life I heard my usually well-mannered mother utter expletives.

They exploded from her throat in short bursts like the precise fire of a well oiled AK-47. "Raray gial! Bitch! Whore! Slut! Whore of Babylon!" she screamed. And then to my father. "Philanderer! Bastard! You couldn't keep your hands to yourself could you!" -- And words in Temne as well as Fula, Mende, and SoSo. She cursed him in ever language she knew, each of her rapid fire attacks of tongue followed by a crash as several priceless vases and eggs and other pieces of furniture met their destruction at the wall.

The servant tried to pull me away but she was new and didn't know what boundaries she could cross with me without being sacked. I refused to budge, struggling, screaming and clawing at her arms and face until at last she let me stay. And stay I did, fascinated by the incident occurring inside the guesthouse. For I knew that just as the gala was coming to an end -- as everyone was drawn to the drama unfolding inside the guesthouse -- so was life as I knew it. And I also knew that if I yielded to the tears that begged for release I would never stop crying. So I decided dwell on the absurdity of the situation instead, knowing that it was better to give in to laughter than to tears.
Consequently I waited patiently for my father's response to my mother's rant, endlessly and forcibly tickled when it came. It was his prerogative, he said simply. His prerogative and he would not explain himself to a child half his age. A child he'd virtually raised since he had married her when she was nineteen. A trophy wife, nothing more, he said, dismissing her degree in law from Foroughbay College , the first one ever awarded to a woman born in the country. Just a child, he said, dismissing her varied legal victories and the law firm she'd built on her own, using her own money and her own ingenuity.

When I heard this I laughed and laughed and laughed because I was hysterical, because if I stopped laughing I'd cry until all the water in my body became tears and I melted away into a child sized puddle of sorrow. So I laughed when they took me to bed. And I laughed the next day when the silence was so thick that if a fork clattered on the plate during dinner the sound would rebound and hurt your eardrums. And I laughed the day after that when my grandmother came to beg my mother to stay. And I even laughed when my mother left the next week, bound for Washington D.C, where she was going to a school named Georgetown to study the law my father had scoffed at.

I continued laughing when Rosaline moved in, if only to unnerve her and to keep myself sane. Then I laughed the hardest when she moved just as quickly out after she realized that my father, though he was charming and affable, was not an easily manipulated man and that furthermore he had no intention of marrying her. In fact, he already had another mistress, a twenty year old student that lived on Congo Cross Street. She left in a snit, calling my father all sorts of names and raising up such a fuss that the neigbhors were scandalized for weeks on end.

All the while my heart was breaking, shattering into a million small daggers, all of which I would have happily thrust into Rosaline's heart. Finally, after a few months my heart froze and I no longer cared.

My father liked many different women and didn't care who knew – fine.

My mother had left me for a strange foreign place and didn't want me anymore – fine.

Neither of them loved me anymore – fine.

It was all fine because I had laughed first, and would continue laughing till the bitter end. He who laughs last laughs hardest, as the saying goes. I would recover from this, I told myself. I would become stronger, smarter, better, and then one day I would hurt them all like they hurt me. I repeated this mantra endlessly, willing myself to disregard the pain of my mother's abandonment and my father's apathy.

In the months and years following that night, I became more like my father. I was charming, delightful, articulate, but under my façade of happiness I nursed venom so bitter there was enough to drown the entire country beneath its caustic waves. I had learned well from my father -- I could smile in a person's face and wreck their lives as they watched, unable to resist my charm. And so I did. I'd become the best sort of misogynist, the type that hates all people yet treats them all like their best friend. I would ruin friendships with glee, end relationships with obscene happiness.

I was on a path that would have eventually destroyed me.

Then the war swept in like a rainy season storm, and everything changed. All my friends left the country. Most of my uncles were executed, their daughters raped and killed, and their houses vandalized and destroyed. My mother sent for me, telling me that I was going to vacation with her in a place called Georgia. At first my father did not want me to go, but confronted by the destruction of his country and his family, he hastily put me on the first plane for Georgia. He himself refused to leave, saying he was of more use in Sierra Leone than he was in Georgia.

I knew there was more to it than that. His bank accounts had been obliterated by his reckless spending and erased by the war. He had long sold all his properties overseas to fuel his ostentatious lifestyle. Furthermore his pride would not allow him to bend enough to accept charity from the woman he had once deemed a child. He would rather stay in Sierra Leone and face whatever came, convinced that he could charm his way out of any situation.

In this manner I left Sierra Leone, thinking that I was only going to spend the summer.

I've been here eleven years now.

I now understand that coming to America was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. I had morphed from the happy little girl I had been before my parents' divorce into something unrecognizable. The events of that night coupled with the path I had taken and the brutality of the war left an indelible mental scar that I am still trying to erase. I came to America a traumatized, lost nine year old with an almost psychotic attitude towards life. I had stopped caring about people because everyone I knew and loved either left me or was killed.

Once I arrived, I retreated into the safety of my mind. My first words on American soil were "Is the grass ever green?"

After that I stopped talking completely.

It took me seven years to muster the desire to talk, for words would give life to the horrors I'd hidden away for so long. I have yet to confront these horrors but perhaps one day, when I'm old enough, mature enough, I will.

To this day I still hate Rosaline with venom so strong it could poison any one of the cobras that slither across the road during dry season. The wisdom of age tells me that while I would like to blame her for my parent's divorce, I cannot. The divorce would have happened anyway. Two bulls, one old and wily, the

other just growing its horns, cannot occupy the same pasture. However the fiery embers of my lost childhood tell me that she is the devil that ripped my family asunder and for that I can never forgive her. It is always easier to blame the outsiders, the incidental forces, rather than the true cause of your destruction.

Years later, after I regained the power of speech I discovered that I still loved my father, though that love was not as unconditional as it had been before. It was now a distant love, a love tinged with resentment and distrust. I felt the same about my mother. She was just as guilty as he was -- guilty of leaving me, guilty of freezing my heart into the wasteland it has become.

My heart no longer throbs like the rich moist soil of Sierra Leone during the August rains. It is no longer bountiful and accepting, loving and giving. It is now like the harsh Georgia clay. Unforgiving and unresponsive.

For now I can barely love, can barely trust.
Every time I get close enough to another person that fear strikes again, its mossy tendrils a double edged sword. I cannot love people due to the fear that they will leave me, that they will die like everyone did during the war or worse, that they will just not return that love like my parents did. Even more damning is the fear that I will use that love against them, manipulating them like I manipulated people after that night, manipulating them like my father has manipulated everyone around him. My greatest fear is that I will stifle their spirit and burn their wings with a fire tinged by the scent of rotting mango and dates.

Glossary

Ajo – Temne term meaning personable, friendly, affable.
Raray Gial – Krio term meaning slut.
Kolonko – Mende term meaning whore, prostitute.
Pikin – Krio word for child.
Juju – Term meaning magic or spell.
Aristo – Krio term for aristocrat. The families of royalty, chiefs, politicians and businessmen make up the aristocracy.
Jamba- Krio word for marijuana.
Foroughbay College – a university in Sierra Leone.

Focus
on
Fiction & Poetry

Yellow Flowers: Chapter Two
by Allaisia Cotton

Marlene's favorite place in the house was the kitchen. It was the only room in the house that Marlene had made any attempts at decorating. She'd put roosters everywhere. Porcelain roosters were on top of the yellow refrigerator, and on top of all the cupboards. They were printed on the decorative towel that hung on the stove, and every magnet on the refrigerator had a rooster on it. When asked why she liked the roosters so much, she'd say, "I just do. They aint never did nothin to me." Marlene's fondness for things and people always seemed to be justified with the latter statement. James cringed every time he heard her say it. He had never done anything to Marlene, and she hated him.

One could find Marlene, any time of day, sitting quietly at the round kitchen table, smoking a cigarette. Marlene didn't smoke like most people; it wasn't a trendy thing for her. It was private, like therapy. She inhaled deeply and slowly, and she seemed to be pushing out her troubles every time she exhaled puffs of smoke.

This was how James found her, as he walked into the house after visiting Vikki. She did not turn her head in James' direction, or acknowledge his presence. He sat down across from her at the round table anyway. James stared at Marlene, wanting her to say anything that would give him information on Zuri.

"You embarrass me," Marlene said slowly and pointedly. "You don't know how to treat a lady."

James was unamused. "I guess I need to ask some of your men to show me how to treat ladies."

Marlene's open hand dropped hard on the table. With the other hand, she slowly raised her cigarette to her mouth and inhaled. James glared at her, and Marlene glared back. After a moment, Marlene spoke. "James, I'm convinced that you will live and die an evil bastard."

James continued to glare, but it softened a bit. "Who was that girl?"

Marlene's facial expression turned smug. "She's not interested."

"How do you know?"

"Why do you care? Are you interested in her?"

"I wanna know who she is." James shifted uncomfortably.

Marlene threw her head back and laughed towards the ceiling.

"Her mother and I used to be best friends. I haven't seen her in years. She's a charming girl, just like her mother. They just moved back here, after her mother was in a bad accident. She—" Marlene stopped abruptly as she noticed how interested James seemed. "You'll never have a girl like her, if that's what you're

thinking. I think it's safe to say that's all you need to know."

Marlene continued, rattling off Zuri's appealing qualities, and highlighting James' unappealing ones. Realizing that Marlene was finished giving out information, James got up to leave.

"Wait," Marlene said nonchalantly to James, as he was moving past her. She fiddled around in her back jeans pocket, and pulled out a slip of paper.

"She asked me to give you this." Marlene handed James a small piece of paper, torn from the rooster shaped notepad Marlene kept on the table for her grocery lists. James didn't say thank you as he walked to his room, staring at the piece of paper. Scrawled on the paper was a phone number and written beneath it were the words, "call me."

James was more surprised than excited. Zuri really hadn't seemed interested at all. He had thought that, for once, he'd have to put on a chase and was kind of disappointed at the thought that he might not have to. Maybe he had thought too much of her. James threw himself across his bed and let Zuri's number fall from his hands onto the floor beside his bed. He looked up at his ceiling fan and listened to it click until he fell asleep.

♦

James woke up drenched in sweat. For him, this was normal. He always had dreams that he couldn't remember, but that he knew were troubling because of the state he was in when he woke up. This time, though, when he woke up his feet felt ice cold. James sat up, and looked at his feet. He was alarmed and confused at the realization that he still had his socks and shoes on. Why were his feet so cold?

The last time James had woken up with freezing cold feet was when he was about four. James lay back down in his bed, allowing himself to explore a place in his memory that he did not visit often—childhood. James remembered waking up in his room, which was hot and stuffy. There was a window open, and in the window was a fan. The whir of the fan was usually soothing, but as he rubbed his eyes, James' first instinct was to turn it off. He sat up and immediately clutched his feet. They were so cold. He rubbed them and whimpered a little bit, wondering why his mama hadn't rushed to his aid. Somehow, she always knew when he had woken up and she would swiftly come into James' room to see what was wrong. It was dark and quiet in his room, and he felt weird about being awake so late at night. James walked over to his window to cut off the fan, but it was too high for him to reach. He wanted to rush back over to his bed to cover his feet with his blanket. But, in his parent's room, he thought, were his mickey mouse slippers. He'd left them there, after he took them off to get in mommy's bathtub. Now, his feet were so cold that they hurt. James decided he would have to go and get them.

James opened his bedroom door. There was no light in the hallway, so he felt along the wall to make his way towards his parents' room. James slowly pushed

their bedroom door open, hoping that the squeal of the door hinges would wake one of his parents up. No one moved. James wanted to look for his slippers, but there wasn't enough light. He walked over to the bed to wake his mommy. His feet had gotten even colder. As he approached the bed, he saw one of daddy's legs hanging over the bed. James had hoped for mommy to wake up, but daddy would do. James skillfully jumped on the huge bed, and noticed first that his mommy was not in the bed. His daddy's face was facing the other direction, so James shook his shoulders. They were so heavy and hard to move.
Seeing that his daddy wasn't responding to his prodding, James called his name. He could feel his feet getting colder. Daddy still didn't answer. In desperation, James grabbed his father's face and turned it towards him. His father's eyes were open and bulging, and they scared James so much that he almost fell off the bed. James grabbed his father's face, and shook it, yelling for him to wake up. But his eyes continued to bulge out of his face. James wondered if his eyes would fall out of his face. James became angry, thinking that if his father would stop staring at him, his eyes would go back to normal and he would be okay.

"Stop it! Stop staring at me!" James cried, as he continued to shake his father. "I want my slippers!"

Finally he jumped off the bed and ran from room to room in the house, looking and yelling for his mother. After confirming that she wasn't there, James opened the pantry door, went in and sat shivering on the floor, next to unopened bottles of water and canned goods. There were snot, sweat and tears everywhere, but James did not bother to wipe them. Squeezing his knees up against his chest, James cried and shivered until he fell asleep. The next day, when he woke up, white people were staring and smiling at him, and his feet were not cold.

That had been the last time James ever remembered crying. He never saw his mother or father again, and no one ever bothered to explain to him what had happened. He would hear adults whisper in his presence that, "his daddy dead, and his momma the one did it." He never asked any questions about it, and had long since stopped wondering about it.

His father's eyes haunted him, though. James hated to be stared at, and was constantly paranoid about penetrating eyes. He wanted no one to know his thoughts or to see his intentions. He hated to feel like certain eyes saw past his guard. To James, any eyes that were turned in his direction were prying ones. Everyone wanted to see something. Except for Zuri, James thought. Zuri had not looked at him. She had not pried. James reached over the side of his bed and felt for the piece of paper he had dropped earlier that night. Before, it had seemed like waste, now he searched carefully in the dark for it as if it was a rare treasure. Once he found it, he kicked his shoes off his feet, folded the piece of paper, then gingerly placed it in one of his shoes. When he woke up the next morning, before he put on his shoes, he'd see the paper and be reminded. Calling Zuri would be the first thing he would do.

from Letters for Lita
by Serena Simpson

Dear Javi,
Didn't you know already that I would dance today? Why'd you ask me? Yes I know that Mommy says I shouldn't. She doesn't understand. I have to dance for him. He always loved when I danced. Javi, do you remember when we danced at the cemetery where we buried Lita? You were small then, but you laughed and clapped your hands. It made him better, you know? He was so heartbroken when she was gone at first. He lived for her. She lived to dance. He loved to watch her dance. I still remember the first time he told me the story of how they met. I know he told you that story too Javi, at least a hundred times, right? Did you ever really listen to him though Javi? He always says that she was a dancer. A dancer he had to be close to. He always says that she was a dancer first and a woman second. He says that she shared his rhythms. He loved her. He told me, "Mari, I was drawn to her because her hips made my drums come alive. I played to match her. That's what he says about the first night, Javi. Can you picture them? Lita young and beautiful her long skirts swaying, dancing in front of all those strangers, and Poppa entranced by her, beating his drum like it was the most important thing in the world. That's how I remember them Javi. So yes I will dance today because Poppa would want me to dance for him.

Lita danced everyday that I can remember being near her, except those last days at the hospital when only her eyes moved to the rhythm of Poppa's drums. In the beginning I would only hold her hand and cry at the side of her bed. After three days, Lita grew weary of my grief. She pushed me away and asked, "Didn't I love my Lita anymore? Why then do you cry and mope to be near me? Mari, haven't I taught you always that loving and dancing are they same? How do you love me lying there in a lump weeping? You are too still for me to feel your love, Mari. If you love Lita, then dance. I know that Poppa loves me still, he comes everyday to beat out his rhythms for me. Where are yours little one? Have you forgotten me already? My only rhythms are here now." She placed my hand on her chest to feel the steady drumming of her heart, "And here, where I placed them for safe keeping"; she then took my hand and placed it on my own heart. Do you not feel my rhythms beating there, Mari? Will you waste my love or will you dance for me as I have all these years for you?" If you love Lita, dance for me. For the next two weeks I rushed there after school and the dance classes that Lita insisted I continue even when she was not there to teach me, and I danced in the space between her bed and the window that she said was too small to feel the sun through. Poppa always beat the rhythms to match my dance and I always danced to match the rhythms in Lita's eyes.

That last day at the hospital is the only day in my life that I remember when I looked at Lita and there was no rhythm in her eyes. It was the only day that Poppa's drum was silent. It was the first day that I realized that everyday I had spent with them had been filled with music. I can't tell you, Javi, how awful a sound silence is when you've only known the sound of rhythms beat out on a drum.

I couldn't stand to see Poppa again after that last day at the hospital. I'm glad you were too small to visit Lita there, Javi, I'm glad that you never saw Poppa

that day when there was no rhythm. On the way to Lita's burial, Mommy keep telling me that I shouldn't cry. She kept telling me that Lita was at peace now, at rest, and she would be happy. She didn't understand that I didn't cry because I didn't believe her, but I cried because I did. I thought that my poor Lita was alone, forced to be still and silent. My poor Lita with no rhythms to match her. I thought that she would not dance, and that she would not love. My poor Lita. Mommy didn't understand.

You are the one that saved Lita, Javi, do you remember? When we arrived at the burial, you ran straight away to Poppa and you placed your chubby hands on the drum he always carried. "Boom, boom, Poppa," you said as you giggled and slapped your tiny hands on the drum. I hadn't seen Poppa since the last day at the hospital, and he told me later that the first time he played his drum after Lita died was to match the rhythm your tiny hands beat out. Poppa did not talk at the burial, but he played his drum for Lita again and he cried. I cried too, not because I was sad anymore, but because I was happy. I could feel Lita's rhythms in my heart and I danced to match Poppa's drum. You were still too little, Javi, but you laughed and clapped your hands. Yes Javi, I will dance today because I can feel Lita's rhythms beating in my heart and I can hear Poppa's drum beating to match her.

Ascent
By Kyla Marshell

Proteus Syndrome is a condition which involves atypical growth of the bones, skin, head and a variety of other symptoms. This condition was first identified in 1979....At this time there are over 120 documented cases worldwide.
—WWW.PROTEUS-SYNDROME.ORG

To be born alive. To be born whole. A fruit.

To be won. A prize.

To be won on a technicality. A trifle.

To be won in spirit. To be won with pride.

*

My child's name is Remarkable. My child's name is Good.

My child's name rings with the ringing of bodies shellacked

Calcified, potted.

There are many beads inside my child's head. They ricochet

With so much grace. He blows across the top of the half-full bottle

Of his mind. Wind sound fills the room like perfume.

*

My baby has hands like rubber gloves stuffed with rocks.

My baby wants to play football—run, kick and tackle.

I am naming each minute of the remainder of his life—

I am the mother to learn from.

*

Clumsily, he climbs a mountain of laundry

Soft and warm as the soil he picks me flowers from. He reaches the top

And crumbles.

In Retrospect
by Navi Lewis

When they put you in my arms, I thought
How beautiful.
All I had endured became a bundle of joy.
So young, so active, so innocent.

It was a challenge to say no.
I wanted to give you everything.
As you ran around in those "Nikes," I thought
How special you were.
My friends noticed how I admired you.
So young, so active, so innocent.

It was hard when the time came to say good bye
And watch you from the class room window.
You learned to play kickball, basketball and then football.
I spent every free moment with you
At practice and Saturday morning games,
Even though work hours took their toll.
So young, so active, so innocent.

Delighted with your every move,
I never went out.
Not sharing my love with another ensured our bond.
So young, so active, so innocent.

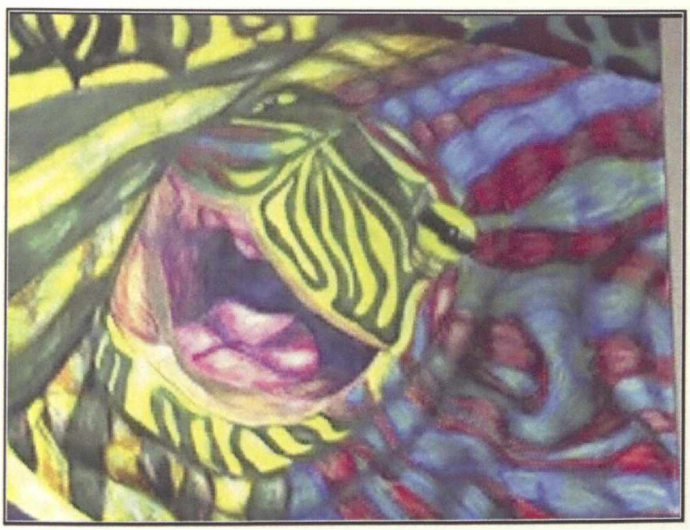
Together we laughed about your first kiss,
Not knowing it would lead to Candice's baby.
You promised to finish high school; I trusted.
So young, so active.

Summoned by the phone, I rushed to proclaim your innocence.
You promised never to sell again; still I trusted.
So young, so active.

Again the phone rang with news of trouble.
I rushed only to see you taken away.
Fifteen to twenty-five is the pain we bear.
So young.

Our visits are painful.
Disappointment ends with a long blank stare.
Wanting to find peace---I feel no trust or hope.
So young.

Focus
On
Reflection



Reflection for Independent Study: Fiction Workshop

by Allaisia Cotton

The most beneficial aspect of the Fiction Workshop for me this semester has been the constant encouragement to write. This semester has, by far, been my most hectic semester in school yet. My motivation to write has often disappeared, and without the deadlines that were set in this class for me to meet, I doubt if I would have completed even a journal entry on my own. It has been great to have someone whom I respect and admire (and who really knows her stuff) to read and critique my work. This is something that I don't take lightly because as a writer who seeks to improve my skills, I want to have my work critiqued by a writer I trust. This class has afforded me that opportunity.

With fiction, I struggle with developing detail and maintaining a believable point of view. I also thought that I struggled with dialogue, but found that with practice it comes much easier than I thought it would. I've paid particular attention to my male character's voice, and have spent a lot of time trying to make it his own. One misconception that I had was that my main male character's voice had to be in place before I began writing. However, if I had waited to feel like I had definitely grasped on to his voice before I started writing, I may never have started writing. While I know its important to give lots of thought to the voice of each character before writing, I found that as I pressed on and kept writing in his voice, it becomes more and more real for me. Learning my own writing style has been an invaluable part of this class experience for me.

In terms of writing regularly, I've found that I work best when I have the encouragement of knowing that my work will be read in a workshop setting. Knowing that I needed to prepare something for class made me a little more dedicated to my writing, and also encouraged me to work a little harder at it (because I didn't want to show Professor Moore any crap!).

Developing detail is still a struggle for me. As I move forward, I plan to focus on envisioning what I am writing as I am writing, so that adding detail won't be such a stretch. The more I learn to visualize each person and each scene, the easier it is to include detail where necessary. Setting is also something that I needed to develop. After realizing that I failed to develop setting because I didn't visualize setting in my mind, I applied the same attention to developing setting that I did to developing detail.

Of course, there are still craft issues that I need to work on, and I will definitely take the tools that I've gotten from this class to continue to develop my writing skills. Most importantly, though, I've learned more about myself as a writer, and the specific challenges that I face. Overall, I am very happy with the work that I have done in the class but most importantly, I'm pleased with the things that I've learned. The ONLY thing that I missed in this class was student to student interaction. I didn't get to learn as much from my classmates because I had none, and while I enjoyed having Professor Moore all to myself, I sometimes wished I could be learning from the challenges and critiques of my classmates' work as well as my own.

From the Other Side of Longing: The Work of Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons
By Kyla Marshell

In every language, there are concepts that cannot be precisely translated. There are single words that contain multitudes of history, in their formations and transformations, and in the contexts in which they are used. I have always been interested in the words that seem to have no direct one-word translations into English because they are so nuanced in nature. The lecture that visual artist María Magdalena Campos-Pons gave on March 20 in the Cosby Auditorium was not just an explanation and slide presentation of her art, but an elaboration on the word and idea driving her life's work, la añoranza, which in Campos-Pons's translation means "a longing for the other side." Her current gallery showing at the Indianapolis Museum of Art is a twenty-year retrospective of her artwork created in America since leaving her native Cuba. The exhibit, Everything Is Separated by Water, is an exploration of the different aspects of living in exile, and the less obvious ways a person can experience exile.

During her lecture, I was reminded of a discussion I had with my Comparative Literature class at Barnard last semester. We read Chinua Achebe and Ngugi wa Thiong'o in order to better understand the conflict of writing in English about African experiences. I thought the issue of whether to write in English or in the native tongue was an important one for immigrant writers and immigrants in general. But I also noted that some people who know their geographical or ethnic origins, such as Black Americans, do not have any other language to return to. I think many Black Americans in the twenty-first century long for Africa as the Motherland, but not for a mother tongue. But language is still an important part of any culture and any person's identity. Campos-Pons gave her lecture in English, occasionally slipping into Spanish, but explained herself clearly, and at times, poetically. Like any American Black woman, she has many facets to her identity, yet her longing for the other side is for a specific geographical place, something unlikely for Blacks descended from slaves. But Cuba cannot only be considered a place, an island, a country. In Cuba reside many of Campos-Pons's memories, but those memories have not been able to be relived or re-sensed. The phrase "You can't go home again" is a less poetic way of saying what Campos-Pons has dedicated much of her life to showing through her various artworks, mostly multi-media. No one can return to their former life, to a former age, or state of mind; yet most people are not faced with the impossibility of returning to their birthplace, or seeing their family. For most Americans, relocation is voluntary, and oftentimes exciting—not the only option for survival.

The inspiration for her work was an interesting matter to consider, but so were her approaches to creating the work itself. At the end of her lecture, Campos-Pons explained the rationale for and details of some of her choices of media, and knowing the ordinariness of her choices—she even told one audience member where he could buy the glass she'd used in a piece—made her work even more stunning. It illustrated the essence of a true artist—someone who can take very plain, overlooked things and turn them into beauty. Similarly, there is this metaphor, used as justification for explicating poetry that can apply to all art: you can take apart a working automobile, examine all its parts, and put it back together so that it will run again. It works the same before and after, but after seeing the mechanics, you think about it differently, because you know exactly what it's doing. In a way, it runs better. In the case of Campos-Pons and her exquisite artwork and specific explanations of how the art physically came together, her art runs better and means more—to an artist, to a Black woman, to a person in exile—to anyone longing for something irretrievable.