

Batter My Heart

By Sandra Miller

MY MOTHER taught poetry in the same voice that she taught me my faults. When I was young, she sometimes brought me to class with her, and sitting in the back of the lecture hall, I'd wonder how a poet could have such a limited range of expression. Dissecting Shakespeare's sonnets or picking on me for the way I cleaned my room, she never varied her tone.

Our house was stocked with poetry books. My mother said they were her only comfort, and yet an afternoon with Tennyson or Keats dredged up the worst of her aggression.

When she read at home, her silence was so pronounced it intensified the buzz of the radiator in the living room, where she would be curled up on the green boucle sofa, a marble-edged anthology in her lap, her cup of tea almost lost among the antiques on the end table.

My mother looked nothing if not polished with her tortoise shell glasses resting on the tip of her nose and the bottom of her auburn bob skimming the shoulders of a cashmere sweater. Anybody would look at the scene and admire her repose. I knew better.

If I interrupted her with a question, she would usually answer crisply then give me a smile, the unsettling kind I couldn't trust. Under her veneer of control, I saw tension percolating through her whole body, and precedence told me it would just be a matter of time. Hours could go by — my mother with her book, me with my apprehensions — but she was a time bomb and an explosion was inevitable.

In the late afternoon when I would hear the French doors of the living room rattle open, and then my mother's footsteps in the hall, an unfounded sense of hope drove me toward her. Perhaps I thought a show of docility would win her over, and so I'd pursue her for a chance to prove myself. She was usually in the kitchen, cutting vegetables into equal-size bits or pressing chopped beef into a meatloaf mold.

"Mom," I'd say, not so softly that I startled her or so loudly that I annoyed her. If she ever greeted me in a friendly way, I would have remembered it as an occasion. Usually she just spoke poetry from that world I couldn't inhabit.

"*We have lingered in the chambers of the sea,*" she once began. "*By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown.*"

"That's pretty, Mom," I offered. "Did you write it?"

Her back was like a wall in my face. "T. S. Eliot, a brilliant poet and scholar, something which you'll never be unless you start doing your homework."

I listened to the staccato chop, chop, chop of the knife against the cutting board. It couldn't have hurt more going into my side.

"Why do you love poetry so much?" I kept on.

She turned to me with one hand on her hip, her eyes narrowed to blades.

"Because poetry is more beautiful than life. It's pure and perfect and never ugly."

It sounded like a personal insult, which was probably her intention.

"Do you like it more than you like me?" I dared to ask.

"Stop these ridiculous questions?"

She tried to go back to her chopping, but I grabbed her wrist.

"Do you?" I begged. "Do you like those stupid books more than me?"

"You, young lady," she shouted, "have a few things to learn about manners."

Then she pulled her arm loose, wiped her dirty hands on her apron and slapped me so hard that my cheek blazed with heat.

The following afternoon when the babysitter was stationed in front of the television watching soap operas, I searched through my mother's poetry books trying to understand her.

She hadn't told me not to touch the books, although I never had, but in looking through them I felt furtive as if I were reading her private diary. Still, my motives were good; those books contained secrets of her character, and in learning those secrets, I thought I'd be able to curb her hatred for me.

I started with a thick, shabby volume called *An Anthology Of Immortal Poems*.

I had no idea what I was looking for, and even less understanding of the flowery images that swam before me on the tissue thin pages. But, convinced I'd find something powerful, I read through all the poems that she had marked with notes. There weren't many, considering the number of poems in the books, but most were so incomprehensible that I merely filtered the words through my lips, too confused to even guess at their meanings. Yet there were also poems that communicated something to me in a cryptic way, and as I skimmed through the volumes that afternoon, I had a short-lived love affair with poetry.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, I sampled the delights of Shelley and Blake and Coleridge. I read and reread

the words of the world's greatest amorists and wondered all the while how talk of morning dew and swans could provoke such anger in anyone.

At least that's what I was thinking when I came across a poem that had been lying in ambush, while I was lost in a world of dancing fairies.

The poem, marked over in both pencil and ink, had received a lot of attention; several words were not only underlined, but also circled and linked together with light, penciled-in arrows, making the page look like a literary connect-the-dots game. Desperate to find something in my mother's scribbles, I read over the circled words with a mixture of dread and fascination. *Knock, overthrow, bend, break, burn, imprison.*

EACH UGLY WORD exploded on my lips, until I felt betrayed by the poets I had spent two hours falling in love with. For what I read felt all too familiar, like an account of the cruel things my mother did to me. She had once said "only poetry spoke to her," and I imagined those were the loudest words she heard.

I spent the rest of the afternoon memorizing the poem.

It was the first thing I ever consciously memorized except for the multiplication tables to 12, and it came easily. I liked having such strange and powerful words at my disposal like a member of a secret club. Other 10-year-olds had the Brownie pledge to promote unity and good deed doing, but compared to "Batter My Heart" the simplicity of their oath seemed laughable.

They could have their Monday afternoon meetings, secret codes and handshakes. Anybody could. I, on the other hand, had magic.

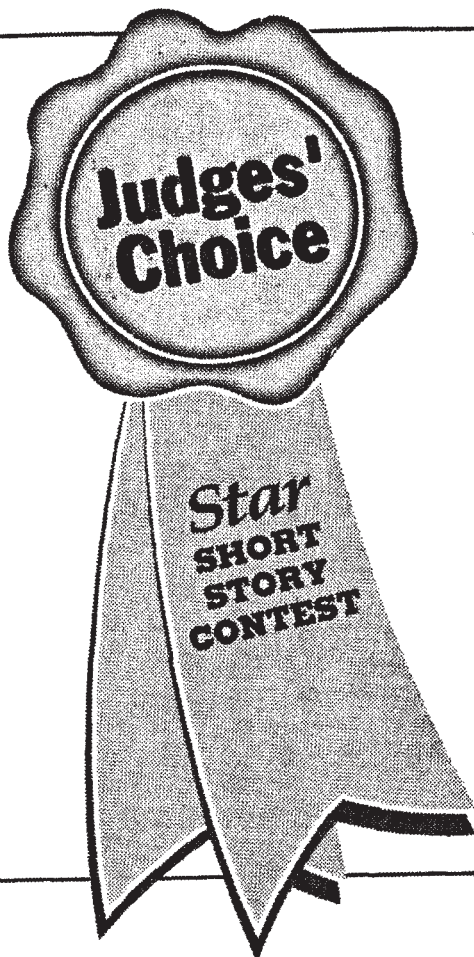
The following week the words constantly ran through my mind, so that I found myself hearing them over and over. I also found they gave me strength when I needed it most. If I was teased at school, the words of my poem buoyed me like a friend's support. I could be alone but not lonely when I had my poem in my head, and at night I would repeat it to myself, like a prayer before going to bed.

The first time I spoke it out loud was the last time I would ever say those words again.

It was a Thursday, my mother didn't have class, and when I came home from school she was in her usual reading position on the sofa.

If she was working in her study I was forbidden to disturb her, but that same rule had never applied to the living

MER'S DAY



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room. In fact, I was required to go in and say hello.

When I entered, she nodded and smiled and ran her eyes over me, mentally noting the flaws for the day. For a long moment she watched me squirm under the intensity of her gaze, then she beckoned me to her for a hello peck.

Her lips, the color and texture of dried apricots, puckered up to meet my cheek, but as I crept toward her a wave of repulsion stopped me.

"What's the matter?" she asked in the voice of the fox calling the rabbit to his lair. Another step meant asking to be eaten alive, leaving me with only one choice: my magic words. I hadn't prepared for the moment, but it seemed to be the time to try them.

"I have something for you," I said, shy with pride over the efforts I had taken. "A poem."

"A poem?" she repeated. Her face tightened up with something that looked like anger. "You don't know anything about poetry."

"Yes I do!" I bit back so that she flinched at my determination. "Listen."

Her chin tucked into throat, and her eyes went back to her book, telling me that she wasn't going to listen. But I couldn't admit defeat, and so I began.

"Batter my heart, three-personed God; for You / As Yet but knock, breath, shine and seek to mend."

The words shot from me in a mixture of spit, which must have showered my mother's face. I saw nothing, though, since tears had blinded my eyes before the first line was out, making it easy to continue.

"That I may rise and stand, overthrow me, and bend / Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new."

"Stop it!" she screamed, and I think that's when her hands were on me. I only remember how the sharpness of her nails and the sting of her palm goaded me on.

"I like an usurped town, to another due, / Labor to admit You, but Oh, to no end! / Reason, Your viceroy in me, me should defend, / But is captive, and proves weak or untrue."

She kept shouting at me to be quiet, but on I went like a freaky child evangelist screaming in tongues, until I thought my mother was wringing out my insides with her own hands. But there was still more, and so I continued, using the only words that had some power against her. She tried to clasp her hand on my mouth, but I bit down on the flesh of her palm and kept spewing lines between short takes of breath. When I couldn't remember the last part, I made do with the bits that came out.

"Yet dearly I love You . . . Your enemy . . . Divorce me, untie or break that knot again . . . You imprison me . . . You ravish me."

BY THE TIME those last words came sputtering from me, I had collapsed face down in a heap on the floor. As I fell quiet, the beating stopped, but my body still throbbed from the power of her smacks. My head, which was buried in the crook of my arm, had the sensation of being sucked into a whirlpool, and when I tried to move it, I let out a whimper like a wounded animal.

The pain was great, but the satisfaction greater. She was the source of her own cruelty. Not me. Seeing my mother's performance was like finding the ordinary object that made the spooky shadows on the wall at night.

It tried to turn over but my body was immobilized.

"I'm sorry," I said into my arm. It was damp from tears and the heaviness of my breath, and it muffled my voice like water.

"I promise I won't ever say that poem, or any poem again." I waited for her reply.

"Mom?" I said, this time loudly, in case she hadn't heard me, but still no reply came, just the rattle of her teacup, the click of the French doors, her footsteps in the hall.

I started to hear my poem in my head but I stilled it, like a mother might hush a crying baby.