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Refrain: (They) Let Me Be

Catalina Florina Florescu

*“Do words last, mother?” No answer. She is too weak to move, let alone to speak.
“Do words heal, mother?” They are weightless. We create worlds with them without our
being a magician. We also erase worlds. We camouflage worlds. We reveal worlds.*

I have discovered my writing self by accident. While I was in high school, my older sister’s reputation weighted heavily on me. She was famous not only for her breath-taking, Rafael-like beauty, but also because she managed to get into the annual, highly selective National Literature Competition, where she competed against other gifted students from Romania. Mom felt kind of guilty for having one beautiful, talented daughter, while the other was rather chubby and without any hobbies. She encouraged me to enroll into a painting club as extracurricular activity. I used to be very docile back then. Or maybe I loved mom very much. I accepted what she suggested. Our instructor was very talented and kind. Eugen Barău was a great painter and mentor. He never told us any theories about painting; instead, he let us paint from the heart, or on the spot. He said: “Act out your emotions on a piece of paper, glass, or canvas.” Those sessions were so liberating for me. *We spoke* our feelings through colors.

But when mother died, my sister stopped writing. I had stopped painting long before her cancer. I guess my withdrawing from painting was normal since kids and teen agers try many things until they discover their true loves. My sister’s abandonment of literature and writing was to haunt her for years. On the other hand,

colors still send me back to those years when the word cancer was not part of my vocabulary. Colors possess a different load of emotions that don't request of us definitions or labels. Looking back, I loved playing with colors most likely because I never had an initial design, an outline, or a plan. I simply sat down and painted.

"It hurts to write," my sister said, tears in her eyes. "Stay away from words. They cannot bring mother back. They will only paint a pale version of her. From now on, mother will only be misrepresented through words. I for one refuse that."

I have to admit that I had no intention to verbalize mother. I would not know where to start anyway. My relationship with words was at the moment frail. Somewhat similar to an infant, I was in the "crawling" phase of writing back then. There was a reason for that, I guess. Mom probably wanted me to focus on painting because she wanted me to somehow continue her abandoned passion. Like my sister, she did give up too easily on her own. She always explained to us that once she had become a parent she could not afford to care for anything else. That's sweet... in part, at least. But I could not or did not want to become her. Painting was fun and adrenaline releasing, yet it was not my path. Back then I wanted to be an actress. I was like Icarus, the legendary figure who flies too high until he reaches the sun. In return, as punishment, the sun melts down his improvised wings. Icarus falls mortally to the ground. I knew about him, but please, I beg you, dare to point to one single adolescent who has not been stung by the age's trade-mark hubris. At that age, we dream because that's mostly the last time when we can do that before we wake up confused in (a land called) maturity where rules are rules where there are no ways out (or if they are, they are too rigid), and where we need to act our age, dress accordingly, and speak in a serious tone. That's the screwed-up land!

After mother had died, I discovered the imprint of Icarus' wings. They were rainbow-like and that made me laugh. Mother, you are gone, but colors are all around to remind me of you. That hurts. That heals, too.

I had no idea that I would exit my teenage passage brutally and enter the world of words and introspection. It was a phase of initiation, with hours spent inside, addicted to reading. With mom gone, and, more importantly, with colors as a too weak pain reliever, I needed a potent drug to cure my longing. I searched for my pharmakon that would dissolve my second-hand inhaled pain and then kindly let my brain be bubbly again like a glass of sprinkling water. I did not have a plan. I simply poured myself into the stream of words. I needed something to balance my body of pain.

At first I scribbled in a journal. I also had a very close friend, Liviu, with whom I shared some excerpts from my readings. I started writing by quoting. There was no computer in my life back then, so I retyped the passages by altering the colors that I used. I underlined a lot. I capitalized every now and then. I added a visual next to a word, probably as a relic, an almost lost reflex back from those years when I painted. I had fun. It was rudimentary iconology. At one point, Liviu became a reason why I wrote passages after passages. It was an excess. A manic desire to not let go of that particularly finished book. The longing for mom became the longing for not losing words. A character fictitiously addressing death became an anchorage in a new world in which I was discovering longing signs and forked paths to deal with them.

Nobody knew of my “disease” because nobody thought I had one. For them I was an almost normal teen ager, an orphan of mom, a reclusive, but still functional. I had to discover that words had more sides than those in a dictionary. Take

“functional,” for example. I could think of some good examples that a first grader may comprehend. But functional is not a word. It’s a symptom. And so, I had my first writing epiphany; that is, words are symptoms of various affections: loneliness, excitement, passion, loss, hunger, isolation.

Mother, please forgive me. I cannot yet write you. But wait. Right now I learn symptoms as words and vice versa.

This was also the moment when I needed to challenge words. I took a pen and started to write on my skin. I liked to temporarily tattoo my body. My sister always laughed at my project. My father let me be. There is no danger in things that can be erased in a second, right? My grandmother scolded me and then she gave in and let me be. The skin was a fine piece of paper. But it did not multiply my writing. I discovered the carbon paper that helped me retype manually a message twice. Fascinating! If I held that thin paper in the sun, I could understand what a palimpsest meant. In retrospect, this phase of writing could be called “doubling” because paper was like mirror, literally reflecting and cloning my moods.

Mother, look, I wrote your name on a carbon paper. You are not one now. You are ten because I made ten copies. You could be as many as I want. Or as words and paper let me have you.

Still, there is another form worth mentioning. When I was young, I used to take a piece of thread, dip it in ink, and then arrange it on a piece of paper, which I folded later. I waited for ten seconds or so until the ink befriended the paper and then I pulled the thread out without folding the paper because that was supposed to be the

last step, or when I was revealing the design to myself. Needless to say, the result was always full of bizarre shapes never designed to be.

Accidents happen. My sister was the one who aspired to be an author. She used to write adolescent poems, mostly syrup-y, about love and desire. We used to play librarians for hours in the house, taking books out of the shelves, pretend playing stamping them, lending them to invisible customers with whom we even initiated small talks, exchanging pleasantries as we had seen at the local public library.

One day dad brings home a huge book, which I grab from his arms and put on my parents' bed. I spent days looking at the old images in that book. When I was in high school that book was my best source for research. Its title was *The History of Romanian Literature from Its Beginning until Today* and it was written by George Călinescu. This was the first book that really captured my attention professionally. The style was so precise and well informed, and the images that accompanied the chapters sent me back in time to moments from my own country's cultural development. I was truly fascinated by and impressed with this book. Without fully realizing it, I had started my journey into becoming a writer myself, and it was mostly because of this impressive work.

At that time, mom still hoped I would continue her dream of becoming an artist (a painter); dad thought I would embrace his profession as an economist. Everybody knew Mari would become a writer. They let me be and that was exactly what I needed to do. I had to wait *to become me*, without anyone making assumptions or pressuring me into becoming something I did not want to be. I was free to dream. And because I was free, I read this book from cover to cover and dreamt about words.

Words evolved into my substitute for loyal friends and, when mom died because of breast cancer, I was lucky to enter my room, pick up a book from the shelf, make notes while I was reading and dream some more. My sister was away at college in Bucharest. Dad spent too many hours at work. And grandmother was a walking ghost now that her own child had passed away. I was buried in books, by my choice, and I became part of a stable world where upside down situations were reversible, where deaths could be avoided, or where pain was simply textual. I finally found my purpose and, when I told dad, "I want to go to college to study literature and writing," he was very shocked. But then again, he let me be.

After I had announced him that, I went back in my room where I had hand-made crosses at which I used to stare without expecting an answer. I went back in my room where mother had died in the bed that I used to share with my sister. For a second, I lifted myself off the floor to reminisce an episode where I talk to mother for the very last time, while stroking her hair: "Mother, I know cancer made you too weak and you cannot talk. BUT if you hear me, could you please open and close your eyelids? That would be enough for me." I did not cry in front of her. I cried rivers inside, though. Mother did open and close her eyelids, whether as a reflex or per my request, that did not even matter. Then and there, in the midst of mother's physical agony, just a few hours before her demise, I realized that there was a chiasm between talking versus writing about pain. But later I have come to admit there is also a very potent will to survive humiliation, suffering, and depression.

In the past two decades I have written a lot, from personal entries in my journals to papers for my academic degrees. My first published book was a revised form of my dissertation. Now it is part of impressive libraries' catalogues at Harvard,

Princeton, Columbia, and others. Last year I also published my first memoir. It was in a way a return to the small entries in my journals because there was not a precise style I was asked to follow. There were no rules. I let my personal style flow from one memory to another and then back into the present. I snuck in and out of time. If my critical book started with mom's cancer in the '90's, my memoir started with my arrival here, in the States in 1998. In 2005, seven years since I left home, I thought I would become Ulysses ready to return to Penelope, or in my case, Romania. I am still here. The memoir was written in Romanian because that was the only way I could express my appreciation for who I am today. I first read and wrote in Romanian. It was only natural that I would dedicate my memoir to this wonderful Romance language, whose expressions and grammar I pass on to my son.

“A scrie-scriere-scris” or the Romanian versions for “to write-(a) writing-written.” All these almost similar forms revolve around the idea of writing. Try to pronounce them and you may feel a sensation of satiety, of satisfaction. Writing is trying to achieve that, too. To empty ourselves so that we may become another and yet another and yet still another volatile being. The cocoon of writing reveals the author at the very end. Words let authors be personae and thus manifest their anger, disgust, change, permanence, vulnerability, and infinity.

Mother-grandmother-father (or their exact sequence of their “departure”) are now like words, weightless. But I let them be whatever I want. People who are metamorphosed into characters are extremely versatile. They arrest our imagination. By letting them be fictional, I finally let myself be! I realize that words can transport us away from pain, if we let them to!