Crafting Character: Exploring Elder Identity through Story

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CRAFTING CHARACTER: AN EXPLORATION OF ELDER IDENTITY THROUGH STORY

A Capstone Experience/Thesis Project Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Bachelor of Arts with Mahurin Honors College Graduate Distinction at Western Kentucky University

By
Cameron Fontes
May 2021

*****

CE/T Committee:
Prof. Jessica Folk, Chair
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The following thesis is a culmination of several key activities I have engaged in as a creative writer with a single focus: to create fiction that employs the perspectives, the voices, of persons at later stages of their lives, a population vulnerable to disease and, more insidious, loneliness. First, I discuss my experiences reviving the Western Kentucky student organization Companions of Respected Elders. C.O.R.E. allowed undergraduates to work with local residential centers (nursing homes) by engaging their residents in the collaborative act of creating stories from picture prompts and encouraging questions, following the training and paradigm of TimeSlips™. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, through C.O.R.E., I helped to create a writing workshop for the local seniors group Silver Streamers. Drawing from these experiences as well as personal relationships, my own fiction diverges from the literary traditions of elderly characters. The characters that came to life in my stories were queer elders, all female. While both the creative and literary worlds have wrestled with who can write in whose voice, these are the voices I hear as I create. As you read my stories, I hope you find real voices that are not cut-out representations of persons experiencing a disease or decrement, but, rather, vibrant, cerebral, struggling human beings.
This project is dedicated to my grandmothers,
the ones who have been there from the beginning
and the ones who have found me along the way,
with love and gratitude.
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Finally, thank you to all the elders who shared their time and experiences with me in the process of researching for this project. Your stories and voices deserve to be heard, and I hope this work plays a small role in making that happen.
VITA

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INTRODUCTION

Identity manifests itself differently in each stage of our lives. One might fulfill the role of a child in youth, an employee in early adulthood, and then a spouse at midlife. However, as we age, our ability to maintain all the facets of our identities begins to slip beyond our grasp. Our bodies lose function. Our social networks shrink. Our lives slow down while the world around us keeps moving at a breakneck pace. This project draws from research and personal experience to investigate the societal issues that influence elder identity and explores these issues through literary interpretation. To represent these issues accurately, research was conducted of scholarly journals, anthologies, and other publications, and storytelling workshops were conducted with local elders, both in-person and virtually. The stories crafted from this research illustrated the possibility of creating elderly characters through fiction that reflect issues affecting elders while simultaneously giving them agency of and pride in their own narratives. On this basis, existing authors should be encouraged to incorporate realistic yet dynamic elderly characters into their work and to work with elders in their communities to help them learn how to write their own stories.
AGING BY THE NUMBERS

There are many societal issues that act as barriers to elders’ participation and happiness in modern life. The UN’s World Population Aging Report from 2019 states that “Over the next three decades, the global number of older persons is projected to more than double, reaching over 1.5 billion persons in 2050” and notes that in Europe and North America, “the population is already significantly older than in other parts of the world.” The 2019 Population Reference bureau confirms this trend, saying, “The number of Americans ages 65 and older is projected to nearly double from 52 million in 2018 to 95 million by 2060, and the 65-and-older age group’s share of the total population will rise from 16 percent to 23 percent”.

As the proportion of elders in the general population increases, so does the number of elders residing in nursing homes. Unfortunately, elders in these settings often do not receive adequate amounts of social interaction on a daily basis: a 2010 study found that, on average, residents in a typical nursing home spend six to eleven minutes on social activities throughout the day (Thorsell). This trend is not just confined to care facilities, though. The Pew Research Center reported in 2019 that “Americans ages 60 and older are alone for more than half of their daily measured time… All told, this amounts to about seven hours a day; and among those who live by themselves, alone time rises to over 10 hours a day,” and, in 2020, the CDC elaborates that this chronic loneliness results in increased risks for elders of premature death, dementia, stroke, depression, and
hospitalization. This social isolation was only worsened by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic last year.

Clearly, elders experienced loneliness and isolation at a higher rate than the rest of the general population even before COVID-19. But Jeremy Nobel, president of the Foundation for Arts and Healing, notes that the societal loneliness that elders face disproportionately has been compounded over the last year by a severe lack of connection due to social distancing, particularly for elders that live alone. He says that “[loneliness] affects anyone subject to exclusion, including people who don’t meet our beauty standards…even many older adults. Society systematically excludes people, often.” Harvard professor of psychiatric epidemiology Karestan Koenen adds that it’s even harder for these excluded groups to combat loneliness because they have a hard time reaching out to others, even more so for elders in a time that requires proficiency in technology. “If you’re lonely,” she notes, “almost the last thing you want to do is reach out. But you have to make yourself” (Sweet). Because elders often face a barrier of technological deficiency to virtual human connection during a pandemic, I decided to take part in creating a series of virtual writing workshops for elder adults last summer through the on-campus club I co-chair, C.O.R.E.
C.O.R.E.: PRE- AND POST-COVID

In the spring of 2019, I helped restart a student organization on campus called C.O.R.E (Companions of Respected Elders) that volunteers with elders in Bowling Green (Appendix A). Our basic programming pre-COVID consisted of going to a local nursing home (Signature Healthcare of Bowling Green) every month and facilitating themed craft or game nights (making Christmas cards in December, harvest crafts in the fall, etc.), but in summer 2019 we were also invited by the Milwaukee-based TimeSlips to participate in their NextGen pilot program for college campuses.

TimeSlips is an organization that utilizes improvisational storytelling techniques to work with elders. Their methodology was designed specifically for use with elders who have dementia to create more meaningful interaction between elders and their loved ones, but it can also be used with non-dementia elder populations with similar benefits. The NextGen program paid for the online training necessary to become certified to conduct TimeSlips sessions for myself, C.O.R.E.’s other student officer, and our faculty sponsors, and so in the fall of 2019 we began to conduct monthly storytelling sessions at Signature with both dementia and non-dementia populations.

There were certainly differences in the results of working with these two different subgroups. The stories crafted with the residents in the dementia unit might not have been as traditionally coherent of a narrative as the stories written with those in the general long term care residency at the facility, but because TimeSlips emphasizes the acceptance of all responses (whether they make “sense” or not), that was okay. It was evident that the
elders with dementia were intrigued by this new, more engaging and person-centered form of interaction, and that even if they didn’t participate at first, they were curious enough to come back the next month and participate. This is noteworthy, as often times the hardest part of trying to interact with elders in care facilities is persuading them to be willing to do so in the first place. The elders at Signature without dementia enjoyed our storytelling sessions as well, and after getting used to the format of contributing ideas in response to the open-ended question prompts from us, the facilitators, they became enthusiastic and really started to bounce ideas off each other and have a lot of fun.

Of course, when the COVID pandemic hit, C.O.R.E. had to halt all in-person interactions with elders. This presented a clear dilemma: how would we continue to ensure that elders are still able to interact with people in the community without physically visiting the facilities where they live? One solution to this problem came from TimeSlips. Just as they use open-ended questions as prompts in their traditional storytelling sessions, they also provide postcards with similar prompts on them that volunteers can fill out and send to elders to add to. In this way, we were still able to encourage the elders we work with through creativity and collaboration, which became as increasingly valuable as in-person interaction disappeared in 2020.

Another opportunity for C.O.R.E. to continue to work with elders in the summer of the pandemic came when we were asked by a local group called Silver Streaming to create a series of videos helping their patrons learn how to write and share their own stories.
The process for the video essay project I completed last summer with C.O.R.E. is as follows. Over a period of one month, I collaborated with C.O.R.E.’s two faculty sponsors (Prof. Jessica Folk and Dr. Trini Stickle) and the other student officer (Samantha Eaton) to create three recorded lectures on creative writing for elders. Our series of videos was titled “Writing for Longevity,” and the topics of the three lectures were the generation, creation, and distribution of stories. The first lecture was an overview of the series, the second was a lecture on process, and the third was a lecture on how to share a story once it has been written.

Each video required a PowerPoint presentation to be created (Appendix B). These were all based off the same design template for visual cohesion and contained the bulk of each lecture’s information. I was paired with one other team member for each video (except the first, which included all of us), so before we recorded each session my partner and I needed to review the slides I had made to make sure we agreed on what content they were going to deliver and what examples and images need to be included so that the concepts we were sharing were communicated in the clearest and most accessible fashion. When the visual component had been agreed upon, we moved on to the recording phase.

At an agreed upon time, my partner for each video and I joined a Zoom call that we recorded as one of the video lectures in our series. One of us screen shared the
completed PowerPoint, and then we started recording. The tone of each video was casual and impromptu; our audience was, after all, a group of elders who typically gather for interaction at a local senior center, none of whom were likely keen on the idea of being talked down to in a classroom-like setting. When the video was finished recording, we downloaded the original recorded file along with the transcript for the video provided by Zoom and saved these materials, until all three videos were completed. Once they were, we collected all our files and sent them to the group of elders for them to disseminate when their schedule allowed. Because we were not directly interacting with any elders or sharing any or their personal work or reflections, this project did not require IRB or HSRB approval.
THE ELDERLY IN LITERARY TRADITIONS

The tradition of depictions of elders in Western literature offers admirable and problematic examples of how elders are characterized. They are often depicted as infirmed, feeble, and detached from the rest of society. But in this brief sampling, these typical characterizations become informative for how to imitate and depart from these traditions in contemporary literature. In Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” (1933), the writer depicts two characters of advanced age: one an elderly deaf man, and another an older waiter. At first glance, the elderly man seems to be a stereotype of the despair of old age: deaf, drunken, and depressed. However, when observed through the lens of the older waiter, who has sympathy for the elder man, it is clear that he is the symptom of a society more concerned with his well-being in the afterlife than in his remaining time on Earth, as evidenced by the elder man’s niece saving him from hanging himself not because she doesn’t want to lose him, but because she has “fear for his soul.” The older waiter, by comparison, laments his younger coworker’s insistence that they close the café before the old man is done with his drinks because he likes to keep the place open for people like him who like the quiet ambience, the peace of a seat stashed away on an otherwise empty terrace, the soft glow of the electric light and the shadow it makes across the tiled floor. In other words, the older waiter keeps the café open for the elderly, those among society who most crave stillness for introspection late into the night. He does this because as he approaches the elder’s age himself, he feels the oncome of the “nothing” that age brings, the isolation, the loneliness,
the shrinking of one’s world as one becomes what society deems unproductive to the workplace, to the busyness of everyday life. The older waiter knows this “nothing,” wishes to make its advance pleasant for others so that one day someone else might make it palatable for him. Through this depiction of an aging man sympathetic to another already in his twilight, Hemingway illustrates how a writer might choose to convey the plight of elderly persons via a sympathetic protagonist ruminating on his future by observing an older person, rather than writing from the perspective of an elder themselves.

Another writer of note that illustrates the hardships of elders via external observations by other characters (albeit through a far less realist lens) is Gabriel Garcia Marquez in his short story “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” (1968). This story describes the quasi-miraculous appearance in the courtyard of a peasant couple, Pelayo and Elisenda, of a decrepit old man who is determined to be an angel. Due to his haggard appearance, the townspeople treat him as nothing more than akin to a carnival freak (in fact, when actual carnival oddities come to town later in the story, they’re treated much better than the elderly angel), tossing scraps of food into his makeshift cage in the couple’s chicken coop. Because not even the town priest can understand the old man’s dialect, for he does not understand the priest’s speech in “the language of God,” he is deemed all but demonic, contributing further to the loss of voice already experienced by mere human elders. In the end, the old man escapes death and sprouts wings anew, flying off over the sea, much to the relief of Pelayo and Elisenda (who all the while renovated their house, upgraded careers, and bought new wardrobes from the money taken in from strangers paying to gawk at their unwanted houseguest). Marquez commentates on many
issues through this narrative, but his choice to make the fallen angel an old man cannot be overlooked or considered to have been made at random. Marquez knew that an elderly person was more likely to be overlooked and mistreated by a significant portion of society. As in Hemingway’s story, the townspeople here care more about who the old man has been or will be outside of his existence on Earth, and what ramifications their treatment of him based on that distinction will have on their own eternal well-being, than they do about his well-being in the present while he remains in the realm of the finite. Additionally, the townspeople and the peasant couple treat the old man’s potential wisdom and intangible worth as a nuisance while profiting off his existence, much like how elders are taken advantage of for profit-by-court guardians and shifty salespeople in reality.

Female elders are often thought to be the most prone to this kind of swindling, although an infamous older woman in classic literature that somewhat subverts this assumption is *Great Expectations*’ Miss Havisham, created by Charles Dickens (1861). While she was duped at the altar by her runaway bridegroom, she channels her humiliation from that experience into manipulating those around her, particularly Estella, who is trained to be cold and unfeeling towards young men like protagonist Pip. When Havisham sees how she’s hurt Pip in the same way she was hurt long ago, she begs his forgiveness, but the fate that Dickens condemns her to can hardly be said to provide her any kind of absolution. After suffering severe burns when her antiquated wedding dress catches fire, she is forced into life as an invalid, begging Pip’s mercy for the rest of her days. On one hand, her fate is deserved since she ruined others’ romances so cruelly, but on the other, she cannot be blamed for the devastation caused to her by a man who
crushed her prospects as a young woman in a society in which marriage and a woman’s position in domestic life were implicitly required to avoid categorization as a wench or an old maid. Add to this devastation the tension between age and human sexuality and desire, and it is not difficult to understand why Miss Havisham is so jaded. Dickens’ depiction of a spinster in despair can be read as problematic and stereotypical, but it is also a comment on the rigid gender norms of his time, echoes of which are still present today.

More modern literary examples of elderly characters draw from these older depictions while pushing the image of elders in fiction further towards one that is independent, desirable, and, yes, set in their ways, but also point out that these old ways still have some value to modern society. In Cathleen Schine’s 2017 novel *They May Not Mean To, But They Do*, a group of adult siblings must learn how to deal with their mother’s rebellious behavior after her husband dies. Much like the old men in both Marquez’s and Hemingway’s stories, this character’s refusal to conform to society’s ideal of a person in old age puts her in conflict with people younger than her, and this conflict helps establish a more authentic characterization of an elder that is more self-sufficient and capable than many readers may assume elders to be. In Kent Hrauf’s *Our Souls at Night*, a neighboring widow and widower literally find solace in each other’s arms, showing that (unlike for Miss Havisham), physical intimacy is not only possible but valuable and necessary in old age. (A 2009 study on intimacy and sexuality in nursing homes heard from one facility manager that the residents where they worked “still have sex, you know… It’s happened here quite often” (Clark)) (2015). George Hodgman’s *Bettyville* (2015) provides a complex portrait of an elderly woman via memoir, as the
author relocates from his cosmopolitan life as an out gay mine back to his small, rural, Midwestern town to care for his aging mother. While there are certainly aspects of his small-town roots and more than a few painful memories associated with them that he did not miss, there are also values and reminders of the simple joys of life and tradition to be found. As the older waiter tries to teach the younger waiter in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” there is something worth protecting in the slow and simple aspects of life.

This rich tapestry of texts portrays elders in a variety of complex ways, creating a healthy foundation on which I based my own writing for this project. My own two stories presented in the latter half of this document feature protagonists dealing with the same issues that the elderly characters in the aforementioned stories must face. In “My Night at Bea’s,” an older woman revisits her college town to pay her respects to the dead wife of her former girlfriend, dreading that she will also have to confront the passing of their own long-decaying bond, the price for their years of longing unresolved and unspoken having been resentment, loneliness, and disconnection from each other and their true desires. In “Blown Away,” a woman in her later years reflects on how her world has changed and grown smaller through memories of the woman who raised her. As these flashbacks progress, both women deal with declining health, the slowing of life, and familial conflict based in tensions around lapses in parental responsibility that affect themselves and those whom they love. A key component of both these narratives is the subtle queerness of the elder female characters. As evidenced by the above collection of already existing elderly characters in fiction, a subset of the elder population that is underrepresented in literature is that of LGBTQ elders. Elders of color have also been consistently underrepresented in fiction, but as I will discuss in the next section, I believe it best to limit myself as a writer.
to inhabiting only identities of my characters that I can more directly relate to, leaving
further diversification to artists of color to explore through adaptation, as they can better
and more justly present their own experiences.
The problematic potential of authors writing from fictional perspectives other than their own is an issue of increasing relevance in the contemporary literary world. Just last year, Jeanine Cummins’ novel *American Dirt*, a novel detailing the experiences of a Mexican immigrating with her son to the U.S. that made it onto Oprah’s Book Club list, was called out by many Mexican American critics for appropriating the immigrant experience and stereotyping an immigrant woman character. One scene in the book often cited by critics as an example of Cummins’ well-meaning but ignorant slant on the background of a Mexican immigrant is one in which the protagonist marvels at seeing an ice-skating rink for the first time. More than one dissenting voice noted that ice-skating rinks do not solely exist in America, as many of them learned to ice skate in Mexico.

To be clear, I am not arguing that Cummins should not have written outside of her own experiences at all. She does have some Latinx heritage by way of her grandmother, who was born in Puerto Rico, and has some insight into a general immigrant experience via her husband, who is an immigrant from Ireland. However, having been raised in New England and having identified herself as white in a 2015 op-ed in The New York Times (Lim), then later re-identifying herself as Latinx the year before *American Dirt* was published (which is at best bad timing and at worst a selfish utilization of ancestry for better royalties and publicity), Cummins could certainly have at least recognized the need to have her work read by at one (if not more than one) woman who had actually
immigrated from Mexico to the United States to be sure that her depiction of that journey was authentic and honored the actual experiences of immigrant women.

Blogger and author Corinne Duyvis discusses this issue in detail through her creation and subsequent posts about the concept of Own Voices. This concept started as a hashtag that Duyvis used on Twitter to describe writers who craft fiction based on their own experiences and featuring characters who have similar backgrounds as they do. In one of her blog posts defining the concept, Duyvis clarifies that “people can write about whatever they want; whether they should is a valid and complex discussion to have” and notes that the publishing industry “tends to favor privileged voices even regarding a situation they have zero experience with, and thus those are the authors that get published. All #ownvoices does is center the voices that matter most.” So, according to Duyvis, rather than authors ceasing altogether to write stories outside of their own experiences, they should instead be sure that they’re not overpowering or discrediting writers who have lived said experiences themselves, as many have argued that Cummins did in her writing of *American Dirt*.

This is not an easy task for a writer. In a way, it goes against the very core of what authors and all artists are called to do, create work, because it requires that the creator take the time before starting a project to listen to others’ perspectives and be open to the possibility that those voices may rightfully say that a writer’s artistic vision will not adequately portray their reality. This could mean that the writer needs to go back to the drawing board, do more research, and maybe collaborate with others to improve the quality and authenticity of their work, or it could even mean that the writer would best serve the community they’re writing about by choosing to not to write about them. I
understand that this prospect for many writers raises the specter of “cancel culture” and goes against one of the basic principles of creativity: that an artist should be allowed to tell whatever story through their work that they feel led to tell, in whatever way they see best. But in today’s age, when it is more apparent than ever and easier to hear than ever via social media how and when work by the privileged is damaging to people who have been historically marginalized, I see it as irresponsible for a writer to not even engage in a dialogue with people who claim that their writing is offensive to their culture and identity. As writer Kit de Waal posits in her piece exploring this dilemma, appropriately titled “Don’t Dip Your Pen in Someone Else’s Blood, when “people from the dominant culture…say there is no such thing as cultural appropriation and insist that we can do what we want, we need to think again of the impact of taking another’s story and using it as we want.” So, while it is true that an artist is technically allowed to write about anything they want, even if they are not connected at all or are only tangentially connected to the experiences in their work (while not fiction, J.D. Vance’s recently adapted *Hillbilly Elegy* (2016) comes to mind), if that work is meant to be consumed by the public, the writer cannot be upset when the public has whatever response it has to that work. Writers are entitled to choose whichever subject they choose, but they must also accept the consequences of that writing if they also choose not to adequately research and consider their subject’s actual perspective and experience.

A valid concern regarding this argument is that if there is a need for better representation in literature and fewer authors of privilege write from experiences other than their own out of fear that they’ll not do justice to the stories of marginalized people, then it will take too long for enough marginalized authors to be published to provide a
varied range of stories and perspectives to the general reading public, leaving the gap in stories depicting a variety of identities unfilled for longer than is necessary. A recent, effective example of how a writer can make their work more diverse while also avoiding the appropriation of cultures and identities other than their own is in the writing and adaptation of Celeste Ng’s bestselling novel *Little Fires Everywhere*. In a piece in *The Atlantic*, Ng says that she originally intended to write one of the novel’s main characters, Mia, and her daughter as people of color, but “didn’t feel like [she] was the right person to try to bring a black woman’s experience to the page.” In the novel, Mia and her daughter clash with the wealthy Richardson family in the suburban town of Shaker Heights, Ohio, where the author actually grew up herself. While Ng felt qualified to write about the gender and class politics of the story, being a woman and a native of the book’s setting, she recognized that she was not personally able to portray issues of race in a way that would do justice to the gravity of said issues in the real world. “It’s such a complicated thing to try and suss out,” she goes on to say. “It’s not just a writer-by-writer conversation or [an] Is this writer allowed to write about this? It’s really sort of *Can this writer do justice to it?* … You are allowed to write what you want, but it is on you to try to do it right” (Li). When Ng’s book was adapted for television, the developers assembled a diverse writing team that was able to accurately add in the aspect of racial conflict in a way that spoke to, rather than misinterpreted, similar conflicts in real life.

As it pertains to my own writing, I feel similarly to Ng in that I feel comfortable writing queer, female elders in my work, but not of racial identities other than my own. The queer perspective is bolstered by my own queerness, and the elder perspective is based on my close work with elders over the last several years and on my many close
friendships with female elders in the community (e.g., church, school, workplace). The female perspective comes from my proximity to female authority figures (some elders, some not) from my upbringing, mainly consisting of my mother, grandmother, and aunts. Similar to the work of canonical writers such as Tennessee Williams and Terrence Rattigan and as well as that of contemporary writers like Kentuckian Silas House, these female figures’ influence on my own life during my development in childhood and adolescence (rather than their and my being gay, as some might assume) colors the female characters in my work as more nuanced and authentic.

In addition to being influenced by actual people in my life, my own general understanding of older women has also been influenced by depictions of older women in other media such as television. Perhaps the best example of this is the popular eighties sitcom *The Golden Girls*. I have seen every episode of this show at least three to five times and started watching it at a young age. As a result, it affected many of my own assumptions and expectations of older women as I began to start volunteering with that population in nursing homes. Some of these assumptions about older women’s personalities were positive, such as their penchant for witty humor, their capacity for intimacy and romance in old age, and their persevering spirit in the face of hardship. (Many of these positive qualities from the show’s writing that were revolutionary at the time of its premiere stem from their creation by a female showrunner, Susan Harris, which reinforces my earlier argument about the importance of at least some stories about underserved populations being written by people who’ve had those experiences themselves.) Others, however, were not as positive, such as the stereotype that older women will tear each other down in competition for a man (just as they would be
typecast to do at a younger age), that they can be grouchy or even hateful due to their age, and that they are resistant to change.

To avoid falling into depictions of older women that draw from negative stereotypes can is complicated because sometimes, older women (like all human beings) can be persnickety, stubborn, and behind the times. These traits are often attributed solely to a decrease in social skills and likability that many assume to be inevitable with age, but upon further reflection, some of these traits are understandable from the elders’ point of view. If one’s social circle shrinks dramatically with age because a lot of friends have died, it would only be natural that this loneliness might be translated and projected as bitterness. If one’s romantic prospects are declared all but nonexistent by the majority of society, the search for a companion for the end of life would seem urgent and competitive. If one had seen technology advance so exponentially that one felt left behind by progress, this distance would create some resentment toward societal advancements in general. While these considerations do not excuse bad behavior, they at least provide a more multifaceted illustration of the character of older women without devolving into mere caricature. The trick here, as I mentioned previously, is to become acquainted with a variety of actual older women so that these experiences inform our perceptions and depictions of them, rather than letting the depictions inform our assumptions about real people. This is what responsible artists should do, and it is what I try my best to do in my short stories.
Every time I’ve sat down to write a story since I started career as a creative writing student at WKU, the only protagonists to come out of my brain have been queer women over the age of sixty. Professors have joked with me that I am on the verge of creating an entire new genre of fiction: nursing home lit. This is comical, although in a way, I think they’re onto something: rather than crafting an entire new genre, it is both possible and necessary to insert elder female characters into all existing genres (in settings within and beyond a long-term care facility).

For this project, I delve into two genres where there is usually at least one man present: the family drama and the rekindled love story. In addition to finding a few years ago that I always wrote about queer elder women as protagonists in my stories, I also soon realized that there are really no male characters present in my narratives, and if there are, they typically occupy marginal roles. This is not purposeful, but as I mentioned earlier, I think that because of my personal experiences being colored much more by female presence than masculine, my stories develop the same way. I also wonder if my stories act as avenues by which I can explore and imagine how the women who have so influenced my life interact with each other when men (myself included) aren’t around.

In my first story, “Blown Away,” a woman rummages through her family’s past so she can honor the aunt that raised her, that acted as the matriarch for their chosen family tree of two. It hearkens back to the familial epics of Faulkner and Steinbeck, while
recentering the narrative on not the tortured male relatives who make rash decisions, but on the women who dare to live without them and find strength to persevere in each other.

In my second story, “My Night at Bea’s,” a woman travels back to the town of her alma mater to revisit a flame that she had long thought to be snuffed out, but which in fact has the potential to be rekindled, albeit differently than before. Too often, we assume (and society mandates) that the changes in relationships that come with advanced age must be negative and devastating. With this story, I hope to acknowledge the pain of loss in old age, while also suggesting that even though these social circumstances evolve dramatically, they can be embraced and enjoyed as new opportunities at the same time that they are hard to accept.

As with any good writing, I hope that the reader sees bits of themselves in the following narratives. More importantly in this context, though, I hope that these stories make the reader think differently of the older women in their life: how they might be more than the reader has seen, felt, or experienced personally, and how they can still grow and change just as they could when they were younger.
Sarah dug her wrinkled hands into the pile of rusted tools in the corner of the basement, dry metal and grime secreting under her chipped, pale-pink fingernails. The wind shoved against the house, moaning in agony. She’d forgotten her hearing aids, so she could feel it rise up from her feet and through her body better than she could hear it. Sand spat in spurts at the tiny window just below the ceiling. She didn’t have much time.

She hadn’t found her yet, not in the closet with the water heater where Vi used to keep all her landscaping junk, not in the old wardrobe that never held any clothes. As she turned to investigate a mold-covered garbage can, her ankle caught on the tattered strap of a beach chair and dragged her to the ground.

“Shit,” she said as she grasped at the handle on the can’s lid, her strength (more than she often remembered she still had) bringing down the whole bin onto its side. Before she could get herself back on her feet, she spied a long wooden handle sticking out of the upturned can. Upon further inspection she saw that it was an old shovel, blade turned from onyx to amber by time and disuse, handle splintered like hairs charged by static.

“Perfect.”

She felt the chill of a slow, cool drip down her leg, and looked down to see a small stream of blood coming from where her skin had scraped against the metal leg of the chair. She snagged a moth-eaten beach towel from a parched drying rack by the wall and pressed down on her ankle. The deep red bloomed across the pastel blue and white
striped cloth, staining the pattern that had been on every towel in Aunt Vi’s house for as long as Sarah could remember.

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Sarah had irked Aunt Vi from the first day she stepped on her front yard at twelve years old and stumbled into her rosebushes.

“Gracious, child, what have you gotten yourself into now?”

Vi stooped down from the front step to look at Sarah’s leg, scraped to pieces by thorns.

“Don’t move. I’ll be right back.”

She ran back into the house, her track shorts and windbreaker swishing with every step, and reemerged with a bright blue and white striped towel with the tag still attached.

“Brand new linens, ruined.”

Sarah, feeling brave, said, “Mama always says that everybody has to have old towels to clean up messes, so at least now you have a dirty one to clean with.”

“My mama would say that.”

Sarah thought this was a strange thing to say about your own sister, but she also knew that Vi and her mama didn’t speak, hadn’t since she was born. As for her father, well, he hadn’t spoken to Vi since she told him he was wrong for her sister at his own rehearsal dinner, and Sarah didn’t think that was likely to change anytime soon.

“Alright, it’s stopped bleeding well enough, come on inside and we’ll get you bandaged up.” Vi held Sarah’s arm as she limped up the front steps. “Christ, aren’t you cold? You need to get yourself a jacket. It’s liable to get down to forty degrees in the winter around these parts.”
“You have shorts on, Aunt Vi.”

Vi stopped just as they were about to walk through the front door. “That’s because I’m old and I’m hot all the time. Why do you think I stay up here when everybody else goes South for the winter? Besides, when you’re old you get to do whatever you want. Didn’t your mother ever tell you that?”

“No.”

Vi scoffed. “Well, she wouldn’t have. Anyhow, she lost that perk on account of your father.”

“What’s he got to do with it?”

Vi looked down at Sarah, then huffed and rolled her eyes, turning her disappointment inward for once.

“Never mind. Now get inside, you’ll catch your death of cold.”

It was true that no one stayed in Maine past October, most people preferring warm breezes and sunshine to frigid gales and snow on the beach. Aunt Vi was one of the few exceptions. New England Decembers paired well with her frigid constitution. Sarah hadn’t wanted to stay there for the winter, but when the police came to her parents’ house after what was at least the tenth time to respond to a report of a domestic disturbance and found her crying in the fetal position in her bedroom closet, hands jammed so hard into her ears that they’d broken skin, it was decided that she should spend the holidays with a relative while her parents worked out their differences. Aunt Vi was Sarah’s only relative not dead or in a nursing home, so she won by default. Sarah wouldn’t have been dreading staying in Maine as much if she didn’t know that three months wasn’t near enough time
for her parents to learn not to scream at each other, but she did, and so she and Aunt Vi would just have to learn to live with each other.

After Vi had slathered Sarah’s leg in disinfectant and put bandages on the worst cuts, she went back to stirring the vegetable beef stew they were having for dinner. Sarah watched her as she propped her foot up onto another chair at the kitchen table.

“Aunt Vi, do I get on your nerves?”

“What?”

“Do I get on your nerves?”

“Sarah, everybody gets on somebody’s nerves. You’re no different. Why did you ask me that?”

“I don’t know, it just seems like you aren’t happy I’m here.”

“Honey, this is not how either of us expected to be spending the winter, so we’re going to both be uncomfortable with each other for a while. That’s just the way it’s going to be. It doesn’t mean that I’m upset with you, it just means that it’s going to take some time for us to get used to living together. Please try and understand that. Okay?”

“Okay,” Sarah said as her aunt stared at her, still guiding her spoon around the pot on the stove.

Sarah could tell Vi was trying to make sure that her niece understood her explanation. Sarah had heard what her aunt said, but she didn’t want to think about what it meant. Not yet.

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Sarah placed the shovel on the rotted old kitchen table and grabbed her overnight bag off the counter. The wind rattled the windows and howled through the slats of the
shutters that were still attached to the house, pushed the ocean onto the beach on top of itself with a roar.

She pulled Vi’s ashes out of the bag and thought she should bury them in something nicer than a gallon-sized freezer bag, so she began to look around for whatever would work. There was nothing in the kitchen but shattered casserole dishes and pots filled with mice droppings. The only thing left in the living room was an old sofa, half-collapsed and somehow still decaying. She walked into the dining room and saw Vi’s old silver set spilled all down the table, long past tarnished. Vi would’ve died if she’d seen them like that. She’d also have died if she knew she was being buried in the serving bowl. Even she wasn’t good enough for her own silver, but it would have to do.

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Sarah had peered through the glass on either side of the front door of the beach house that first night she brought Louise to meet Aunt Vi for the first time. She could tell that her aunt had gotten out the silver polish and was using the good silverware. Sarah wasn’t sure why Vi insisted on using the silver when company came over. It wasn’t like they were formal people, or like any of their guests were either. Even now, Vi was wearing khaki capris and an oversized denim shirt with the sleeves rolled up. She looked like a painter, which was fitting, seeing as she was the least artistic person Sarah had ever met.

“Aren’t you going to ring the doorbell?”

Sarah had forgotten for a moment that Louise was next to her, she was so caught up in seeing her aunt for the first time in years, for the first time since her mother had died. “Oh, yeah. Sorry.”
Sarah rang the bell and saw her aunt’s head jolt up from being bent over the silver. Vi stuffed the polish back under the china cabinet and laid the silver out on the table, then sprinted to the door.

“Well it’s about time you got here.”

“Hi, Aunt Vi.”

Vi looked Louise up and down.

“Aunt Vi, I’d like you to meet Louise.”

“Hello, Ms. Spencer, it’s so nice to meet you. Sarah has told me so much about you.”


Vi had pulled out all the stops for their meal. She cooked lemon sole that she’d caught on her annual trip out west with her ladies from the Y that summer, served wedge salad with the homemade dressing she never whisked together even for herself, baked fresh bread and made jam from her strawberry preserves. She even made Sarah’s favorite dessert that she used to get on her birthday and maybe sometimes on Christmas: banana pudding, with real banana pieces and vanilla wafers. It was all laid out like a picture in a cookbook on the dining room table, which was the same as the kitchen table, except it had a tablecloth.

“This is all delicious, Ms. Spencer. Thank you.”

“Oh, please, Louise, don’t call me Ms. Spencer. Call me Vi, like everyone else. “Ms. Spencer” makes me think of my mother, and there are about four hundred other people I’d rather be compared to than her.”
Sarah looked down at her plate. She had never known her maternal grandmother but hearing anyone talk about their mother was enough to send her reeling.

Vi must’ve noticed what she’d done. “Oh, god, sweetie, I’m sorry. I didn’t even think about it, ignore me. That was stupid of me to say.”

“No, no, Vi, you’re fine. You didn’t mean to,” Sarah said as she collected herself.

“Besides, I remember mom talking about how much she hated grandma.”

“It’s the only thing we agreed on, your mom and me. Not the nicest thing to bond over, but it’s what we had.”

Sarah watched as Vi stared down at her own plate and thought of the sister she’d never known, the sister she lost long before she died.

“Ms. Spenc—I mean, Vi, how did you end up in Maine?”

“Oh, well, when my mother died, she felt compelled to leave this house to me. I have no idea why. We hadn’t talked for years before she died. This house belonged to her second husband, a fat bastard who never let her talk to any of us, although she could’ve if she’d tried, if she’d wanted to. But as much as I hated her, I felt like I had to do what she wanted and take care of the house when she was gone”

“Why?” Sarah asked. “It’s not like you did what she wanted you to when she was alive.”

Vi looked out the window at the ocean, her eyes going back in time. “My grandma was a very superstitious old woman. I remember she’d tell me and your mother every time we saw her after Grandpa died that you can never ignore someone’s last wishes. She used to wake up every morning and spread sand in her garden because her husband always said it made the dirt drain better. It didn’t make a damn bit of difference,
and she knew it, but she’d sooner have died than not do it since he asked her one day after he got sick. He wasn’t even in his right mind at that point, but it didn’t matter. She thought if she didn’t do it, she’d have bad luck.”

“Did you believe her?”

“No, not now and not even back then. I guess it just stuck in my mind when my mother died, either that or I was delusional from grief, but either way I’m glad I kept this old place. I didn’t keep it out of any kind of loyalty to her, more out of respect for the dead, I guess. Me and Sarah had some pretty good times here when she was younger, if I do say so myself.”

“So I’ve heard,” Louise said as she took a bite of her pudding and smiled at Sarah. Sarah smiled back and took her own bite. “Yeah, we did.”

It had taken a while after Sarah had moved to Maine, but she and Aunt Vi learned to get along, and then even started to like each other. It hadn’t been easy, and there were plenty of screaming matches along the way (she was her parents’ daughter, after all), but it didn’t take long for Sarah to feel like Maine was home.

“Did you take Louise to see your dad?”

Louise’s eyes rose up from her plate to meet Sarah’s, her lips pursed and brows scrunched from pity. Sarah’s gaze dropped straight to the ground in embarrassment.

“I tried,” Sarah said. “He wasn’t very enthusiastic.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“It’s alright. I tried, that’s what matters. The rest is on him.”

Sarah had known that her father wouldn’t be thrilled to find out that she was dating a woman, but she’d hoped he wouldn’t be outright cruel about it. He’d never been
one to quote the Bible as a reason for anything he did, so this was just meanness,
bitterness, from his ex-wife dying, from the ex-sister-in-law he hated being more of a
parent to his daughter than he’d been, from the knowledge that before long he wouldn’t
know his own name.

Sarah had also known that Vi wouldn’t have a problem with it at all. If her aunt
had been the kind of person who dated, or even married, Sarah always suspected that it
would’ve proven she and Vi had something more in common than a blood relation.

“Well, you girls look like you’re about done. How about some dancing?”

“Jesus, Aunt Vi, I’m so full I can’t even get up.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, we’re not going to a rave. Come on.”

Sarah dragged herself up out of her chair and helped Louise do the same before
ambling into the living room. Vi was putting her favorite Aretha Franklin record on.

“I always liked to move to this one,” Vi said as “Don’t Play That Song for Me”
started to play.

Sarah looked at Louise, who started to laugh.

“Isn’t that song about getting rid of a man?” Sarah asked.

Vi froze right as she was about to start dancing. She peered around the doorway
into the kitchen. She looked over Sarah and Louise back into the dining room. She leaned
over to look behind the sofa. Then she turned to the girls. “Well, I don’t see any around,
so I think we’re safe.”

They laughed. They danced.

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Sarah kicked an old record out of the way as she stalked towards the back door, shovel in one hand, bag of ashes in a bowl in the other.

The wind knocked her back as soon as she walked outside, every blast shrieking at frequencies she hadn’t heard in years. She braced herself, cinched the hood of her jacket over her head, and fought towards the beach. It would start raining soon, and she had to bury Vi before it did.

With every step, she dug her heels deep into the sand, her tennis shoes becoming buried themselves. She couldn’t make out the hordes of clashing waves through the spray blown back by the wind, through the sand that stung her eyes, tested her grit. When she couldn’t walk any further, she threw the bowl down and slammed the shovel into the ground. It wasn’t that hard to dig deeper once she broke through the top of the sand. At that point the wind did most of the work.

When she had dug a few feet down, she reached up and grabbed Vi’s ashes. She brought them down into the hole and started to fill the bowl when all of a sudden, she felt a sharp pain in her ankle. Where she’d scraped her leg earlier a tiny crab had latched on. She lurched down to get it off, knocking the bowl over with her elbow, sending Vi’s ashes flying off into the storm.

“No,” she cried, but it was too late, they were gone now. The rain began to come down in sheets.

Sarah started to ride the wind into a spiral of thoughts of how she’d never forgive herself, but then she thought “Of course.”

Of course, Vi wouldn’t stay buried where Sarah had planned. When had Vi ever done anything she hadn’t wanted to do?
The last time she had seen Vi, it had been raining nonstop for six days straight. Sarah was tired of being in hospitals. She’d just spent three months with Louise after she got too bad to stay in the house, and now she was here to see her aunt. At least with Vi, Sarah knew she’d be gone faster. She had pneumonia, it had gotten worse, Vi didn’t want to try any complicated treatments. She was ready to go. Louise had not been so lucky.

Sarah thought it was cruel that Vi had to stay here when she was so close to the beach house, but the hospital had insisted. Besides, if Vi were home she would’ve tried to start spring cleaning, which she was in no shape to do. Sarah had just gotten to the hospital that morning, and the doctors told her that Vi could go any time, it was her own choice how long she held on.

“How’s the house, Sarah?” Vi asked, her voice raspier than normal.

Sarah had been up to Vi’s beach house the day before. In the last year, Vi hadn’t been able to get anywhere but the main floor, which was clear from the chipped paint and mold in the rooms upstairs.

“It’s fine. Same as always.”

“Good.” Vi sat up as much as she could in her bed. “Sarah, I have a favor to ask of you.”

“Sure, Vi. Anything.”

“When they cremate me, leave me somewhere nice.”

“Of course.”

“You don’t mind?”
“No, of course I don’t mind.” Sarah grinned as she remembered what Vi had once told her. “Anyway, I wouldn’t want to get bad luck.”

Vi laughed. “I almost forgot about that. I told you the secret about following people’s last wishes, right?”

“No, I don’t think you did.”

Vi smiled at her niece. “It’s the trying that counts. When my grandma got old, she couldn’t tell the difference between sugar and salt, so she started putting sweetener in the garden. Didn’t help any more than the salt did, didn’t hurt it either, and I’m sure my grandpa would’ve been just as happy knowing she thought of him every day, no matter how she seasoned the dirt in the yard.”

They both laughed and watched the rain out the window. Two gulls fought with each other in the air over a piece of food.

“Damn birds,” Vi said. “Always were a nuisance.”

“They aren’t always so bad.”

“Long as they aren’t squawking at themselves all night long. Those things used to keep me up for hours before I could fall asleep.”

“Did you ever get used to the noise?”

“About a year after I moved in, there was a night when there were no bird calls at all. I couldn’t sleep a wink.”

One of the gulls snagged the food with its beak and swallowed it whole. Their match over, the birds flew away.

“I guess nothing’s so bad as long as you give it some space.”

“I’d say so.”
Sarah sat, sopping wet, at the old kitchen table, watching the gulls fly by after the squall had blown out to sea. She’d heard that there’d be more birds than usual migrating for the winter and smiled when she thought of how good she’d sleep.

The stars would glisten as wings beat in tandem, riding the remnants of the day’s monstrous gales. The gulls would sing as they left for their holiday down south, and what was left of Vi would trail them, leaving only the innermost parts of her on the beach, in the winter, in Maine.
MY NIGHT AT BEA’S

I stop walking when I hear the creaking sound from my feet. A sprinkler pops up from the ground and tries to spray water, but it freezes as soon as it hits the air.

The creaking turns to cracking. The plastic bursts. I flinch and put my arms over my face, not that it would make any difference if the shrapnel hits me anyway. It would have to pierce through my nylon windbreaker, three layers of cotton shirts, and two scarves to cut any part of me that would matter. Instead, it just bounces off. I don’t feel a thing.

It’s just my luck that Fort Collins is having its deepest freeze in years when I come back to visit for the first time this century. When I was in college, the winters were cold, of course, but not like this. Every time the wind hits the skin around my eyes, all anybody could see between my hat and my highest scarf, it stings like acupuncture on my face. It makes my eyes water, and then makes the tears turn to frost on my cheeks. I’ll have to let them melt on their own when I get to Bea’s, so they won’t bring any skin off with them.

I should be at Bea’s soon. The cab driver dropped me off from the airport at the entrance to her neighborhood since the side roads aren’t clear yet. The sidewalks don’t have snow, but they’ve got ice. Thank God I have good boots on. I can’t afford to slip and break my other hip. I don’t know why Bea stayed after we graduated. There’s nothing good here, not anymore.
I can see Bea’s house now, at least I think it’s hers from the dried out black wreath on the door. I hope Bea forgives me for missing the funeral. She has no reason not to. It’s not as if I could have changed the weather, and it’s not as if I ever knew her wife to begin with. I’d had no reason to.

I waddle up the front steps, so I don’t slip and set my suitcase down on the porch. Then I just stand. I’ve been moving ever since I left Phoenix. Stillness feels good.

I knock on the door.

Bea still shuffles her feet when she walks. I can hear her getting closer to the door. She used to always wake me up that way when she’d shuffle across the hall to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

The latch turns. The door swings. She sighs. “Cher. Thank god you made it.”

I lean the handle of my suitcase on the doorframe so I can catch her hug in time. She’s warm, just like she used to be. Of course, she’s sixty-eight now, and if she’s still as cold-natured as she was in her twenties her living room is about the same climate as the dock on the River Styx.

“Come in, come in.” Bea fumbled for my purse which by that point was hanging at the end of my arm about to fall off. I bent down to get my suitcase and slipped on some ice, caught myself on the door handle.

“If for no other reason, I could never have stayed here because cold weather’s real pissy to clumsy people.”

Bea laughs as she shuts the front door. “You mean you’re not the one person whose balance gets better with age?”

I chuckle. “I wish.”
Bea’s house looks like my grandma’s house: quilts folded over every sofa, hard candy in a dyed crystal dish on every table. But it’s got traces of Bea from college, no doubt. My friends back home burn patchouli candles for the smell. Bea was always more practical than that. I guess that’s another reason she won’t leave Colorado, not now. Weed helps with pain, and pain comes with age. The girls in Arizona get all snippy when I throw out smoking as an option to help them out. Wimps. Bea was never like that. That’s what made me like her in the first place.

She comes out of the kitchen with a plate full of cheese. “Well, take your shoes off, sit down. This isn’t my mother’s house. You can fuck up the carpet all you want. I’ve got stain remover. “

“How long’s it been since you sold your mom’s place?”

“Oh, about twelve years now, I guess. Weird, doesn’t seem like it was that long ago.”

“I know. Was that the last time I was up here?”

“Yeah it was. First time you met Steph. And the last time I guess.”

I flinch a little but turn my head, so she won’t notice. “That’s true. Look, Bea, I’m sorry I couldn’t—”

“Don’t beat yourself up about it, you’re not Mother Nature. Planes can’t land on ice rinks, no big deal.”

“It is a big deal, though. I know it’s not my fault but—”

Bea huffed, exasperated already. “You still put too much pressure on yourself? Give it a rest, Cher. You don’t have time anymore to worry that much. You didn’t before.”
I look down at my black leather pants and fiddle with the zipper, embarrassed. I had told myself I wouldn’t start apologizing the second I got here like I used to. It’s just like old times, but not the part I miss.

“Oh crap, and here I am lecturing you like I used to. It’s like we never broke up.”

“Apart from not seeing each other but once a decade, yeah it kind of is.”

Bea looks around for something to do to distract her from the fact that someone called her on her bullshit. She grabs the cheese knife and cuts some white cheddar. I feel bad for making her feel uncomfortable in her own house, even though I’m right. Nothing’s changed between the two of us.

It takes about two seconds of awkward silence for me to start looking around for something to make me less uncomfortable too. I spot some photo albums piled on the coffee table, like someone just dropped them there.

“Are those pictures of you and Steph?”

Bea looks up from her cheese, startled I said anything. “Oh, yeah. I had gotten them out for the wake the other day.” She lifts herself up an inch so she can reach and plops them on the couch between us. “This one’s got stuff from when we first got together, this is our trip to Alaska, and this one’s from our last trip, when I drove her to Niagara Falls.”

I pick the Niagara Falls book, most interested to see what they’d looked like at the end, least interested to see how happy they were right after I left school.

The first few pages are all nature shots. “Did you take these?”

“No, Steph loved photography. Her boys got her a real nice DSLR a few years ago for Christmas. She used that thing every day.”
“They’re beautiful.”

“Thanks. She’d taken some classes a while back at the community college. She loved it. Could’ve made a living out of it if she’d wanted to.”

“She never tried?”

“It would’ve been too hard for her the last few years. To make any money with it nowadays you have to have a website and a profile on every social media site. Steph didn’t use a computer. I always had to help her edit her photos when she got her new camera. She would’ve hated the business side of it, all the administrative stuff. Would’ve taken all the fun out of it for her.”

“I can understand that.”

Steph had talent. I turn the page and there’s a full-page picture of the falls, the Maid of the Mist a speck at the bottom of the frame. She could’ve sold prints of that for hundreds, if not thousands. There’s a lot of rich people with ranch houses and wall space in Colorado.

“How long did it take you all to drive all the way from here to Niagara?”

“About a few days. You can make it in about a day and a half if you’re in a hurry, but we weren’t. Not by then. We stopped at some cute, kitschy motels on the way, the kind where all the cabins look like wigwams, stuff like that. Found some little tourist shops by the Great Lakes, couple diners just past the plains.”

“That sounds nice,”

“Yeah. It was. I wish we could’ve done it again.” Bea sighs out grief, but there’s still plenty left inside, brimming at the corners of her eyes. I can’t blame her. She and Steph were together almost forty years.
I go to flip the page when Bea gasps. “I can’t believe I did that, I got our yearbook out for the funeral and put it back already. I told myself I’d leave it out for when you came, let me go grab it.”

Before I can beg her to please not go and grab anything, she’s up and darting to her room. I was hoping we’d be able to avoid dredging up the good ole closeted college years. I have never been to one reunion. Whenever people call and ask me why I haven’t accepted their friend request on Facebook, I pretend my grandkids made it for me upon penalty of death and that I never use it. In reality, I have no desire to linger in the sixties or get requests for money from old people who still play Farm Ville.

I roll my neck to try and shake off my anxiety and go back to the Niagara book. On the next page there’s a picture of Steph, Bea, and a beagle in front of a Canadian flag. Bea has on a fleece pullover and sunglasses. Steph’s got a wool cap on. I can’t make out the tube coming out of her nose at first, or a wheel from the oxygen tank tucked behind her legs.

Bea comes back in from the hall with an old tan, leatherbound book in her arm. “You get a tourist to take this one?”

“Yeah, nice couple from Saskatchewan.”

I realize I didn’t see a dog when I walked in. “Where’s your dog?”

“Oh, Auggie? He’s not ours, he was Pat and Mercer’s. Cute little guy. Reminded me of Jimmy.”

And now the one thing I wanted to hear nothing about on this trip.

I must be cringing because Bea starts to panic again. “Oh gosh, I’m so sorry. I know that must still be hard for you to talk about—”
“It’s fine. Just drop it.” I have no qualms about shutting her down this time.

“Here, I was so excited to look through this with you.” She opens the old yearbook and flips to a page she’s marked with a neon green sticky note. “Here we all are on the old common. How many hours do you think we spent out there?”

“A lot.”

I can’t keep from drumming my fingernails on the edge of the couch, and Bea knows I’m still annoyed. Her fingers scramble to move on. She flips to another marked page. “And here’s—”

And there we are with that damn dog.

“Oh, well, let me just—”

“Do you understand why it’s still so hard for me to talk to you about this?”

“Cher, I just told you I’m sorry, I didn’t have the pages labeled, I didn’t remember which was which.”

“You stole him when I left because Steph liked him so much.”

“I didn’t steal him. You can’t steal something you own.”

“You weren’t his only owner just because you signed some papers.”

“Well, that’s not true.”

That line always pissed me off. I can’t count how many times we had this argument after I left.

“Oh wow, you’re still schlepping that argument?”

“Cher. Listen. I am sorry that it hurt you so much, but I wanted a clean break. I don’t know why we’re still talking about this after forty years, we can’t change it now.”

“You mean you can’t change it now.”
“And neither can you.”

I try to hold in what I know will hurt her the most, but my mouth explodes. “You knew her for two seconds when you moved in after I left.”

“Well from the sixty some-odd pictures you just looked at it turned out okay, don’t you think?”


***

We sit on the couch watching My Night at Maud’s later that night. I can remember when we first saw this together, the first night we met. The arthouse theatre downtown was empty. The wind that night had been brutal, and the heat from the lobby hit the tip of my nose and spilled all down the front of me when I walked in the door. I was right on time from my night lecture, as usual, so I peeled off three layers of scarves while I power-walked past the concession stand into the auditorium where I railroaded Bea, who was bent over, looking for her glasses she’d dropped in the aisle. I helped her up, apologized about twenty times. She raised her head and grinned at me.

“You here alone?”

“Yeah,” I chuckle, “I can only take so many Friday nights in my dorm room while my roommate and her friends listen to Dusty in Memphis on a loop.”

Bea laughed. “You not a fan?”

“Not that many times.”

“Well, you’re welcome to sit with me, if you’d like.”

I hesitated, but she kept that smirk trained on me. I couldn’t resist. “Sure.”
The lights went down, and I wiggled into Bea’s row. I sat down and felt a lump underneath me, reached around and felt that I’d plopped right on top of her glasses. “Oh gosh, I’m so sorry. I hope I didn’t break these.”

“You’re fine. I can hold them in place until the movie’s over.”

We both laughed.

Bea’s living room now isn’t much different from that musty theatre. The heat rushes through the vent under our feet. The wind rips past us outside. The screen puts out the only light in the room. The man in the movie does his best to suppress his desires, and we do the same while we think of a time when we didn’t.
REFLECTION

As a college student, especially one on the verge of graduating, it’s easy to become obsessed with the fear that the choices I make now will dictate the trajectory of the rest of my life, leaving no room for ambiguity or the freedom to forge new, diverging paths. The women we meet in the preceding stories and their real-life inspirations reinforce for me that not only is this fear based in myth, but also that in fact with age can come not a narrowing down but a broadening of opportunities and new beginnings.

In addition to previewing this realm of possibility, the characters I’ve written for this project remind me to reach out to the loved ones around me who accept me as I am and build me up when times get hard. It is these relationships that will ensure the world provides pockets of light and connection for years to come, and it is these relationships that I can help foster between elders in my community and myself as I move on from college and begin to make my way in the world. Our individual quests for success and purpose as members of society need not isolate us from each other as we work ever harder to find what we’re looking for, even as we overcome barriers of time and distance, of generation and of life stage.

Because graduating from college and progressing into adult life is the biggest change in life stage that I’ll have experienced in my life thus far, I feel it is necessary that I embrace all of my identity before moving into this next stage. Therefore, I’m planning on coming out to my extended family later this summer. I’m a little nervous for some of
my relatives’ reactions, but I also hope that some of them will surprise me with how open they’ll be about my sexuality.

I have a great aunt who is gay, my grandma’s recently discovered half-sister. She is married and lives in Maryland. I haven’t met her yet, but I thought of her often while writing these stories. When I meet her someday (which I hope will be soon), I’ll be interested to see what she thinks. I hope I’m not too far off.
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APPENDIX A: C.O.R.E. MATERIALS

C.O.R.E.
Companions of Respected Elders

What is C.O.R.E?
**Monthly Meetings**

- To discuss the previous month’s visit.
- To brainstorm and plan for the upcoming visit.

**Monthly Visits**

- Monthly seasonal visits to a local long-term care facility.
- Hang out and provide meaningful companionship to members of the facility.
What’s TimeSlips?

**TimeSlips**

DO YOU HAVE A PASSION FOR WORKING WITH SENIOR ADULTS?

**WKU COMPANIONS OF RESPECTED ELDERS**

Working to benefit the lives of elders in Bowling Green, KY

INFORMATIONAL MEETING
THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 19TH @ 4:30PM
HCIC 2017

We will discuss our mission, plans for the semester, and eat pizza! All are welcome! Questions? Email us at wku.core1@gmail.com.
WKU Companions of Respected Elders

wku.core1@gmail.com

What is C.O.R.E.?
The purpose of C.O.R.E. is to provide an opportunity for students at WKU to deeply affect the lives of elderly individuals in the Bowling Green area. The students will do this by offering companionship, hope, and a chance to alter the life of another person.

What do we do?

Monthly On-Campus Meetings
- Discuss/debrief the previous month's meeting: what worked well, how can our visits improve?
- Plan for the current month's (seasonally themed) visit.
- Trainings and Certifications

Monthly Facility Visits
- Scheduled visit to partnering long-term care facility, Signature of Bowling Green.
- Hang out with, and develop meaningful relationships with seniors through our planned group activities.

What’s next?

TimeSlips

TimeSlips is a creative process that allows elders with memory problems to regain the role of storyteller through fluid interactions with a trained TimeSlips facilitator.

As students, we have the opportunity to become TimeSlips certified, and lead group activities that allow seniors to tap into their memories through a creative performance.
APPENDIX B: SILVER STREAMING WORKSHOP POWERPOINT SLIDES

WKU Companions of Respected Elders (CORE) presents Writing for Longevity

A 4-part self-guided workshop on tips for writing creative and creative non-fiction
Designed specifically for Silver Streaming
Samantha Eaton, WKU student; Jessica Folk, screenwriter & assistant professor; Cameron Pontes, WKU student;
Trini Stickle, linguist & assistant professor
Part 2: Writing Your Story

How do I write a story?
Where do I start? What if I'm not "creative?"
A lot of people are hesitant to try creative storytelling, especially if they’ve never done it before. Some questions you might ask yourself before starting the writing process are:
- What if I’ve never written a story before?
- What if I’m not naturally an “artistic” or “creative” person?
- What if I write a story and it isn’t any good?

We believe that everyone is and can be creative if we look at creativity in a way that isn’t scary or out of reach for most people.

We define “creativity” as whatever you as a writer and a person can contribute to the world that no one else can.

Since we all have different imaginations and ideas and different life experiences to draw inspiration from, then we all can be creative!

There’s no pressure to be creative or artistic when writing your story because we are all creative just as we are.
The first choice to make when you decide to write a story is whether you want to write a piece of creative fiction or creative nonfiction.

- **Creative fiction** consists of stories that are not true, and which may or may not be based off or inspired by real events from history or from your life.
  - Examples: Novels like *The Color Purple*, Historical Fiction like *All the Light We Cannot See*

- **Creative nonfiction** consists of stories that recount actual events from history and/or your life and that are told in a creative, interesting way through your written voice and style.
  - Examples: Memoirs and Biographies/Autobiographies, Essays like those by David Sedaris and Annie Dillard

Whatever genre you want to write in is up to you. Whatever strikes your fancy! We'll talk about Creative Fiction writing first on the next slide.

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**Creative Fiction Writing Prompts**

There are lots of prompts you can use to get ideas and start drafting a fictional story. We've listed some below, but you can also click the link below or Google "creative writing prompts" and find hundreds more ideas to get your creative juices flowing!

- **Outside the Window:** What's the weather outside your window doing right now? If that's not inspiring, what's the weather like somewhere you wish you could be?

- **The Vessel:** Write about a ship or other vehicle that can take you somewhere different from where you are now.

- **Eye Contact:** Write about two people seeing each other for the first time.

- **Dream-catcher:** Write something inspired by a recent dream you had.

- **Greeting:** Write a story or poem that starts with the word “hello” or other greeting.

- **The Letter:** Write a story using words from a famous letter or inspired by a letter someone sent you.

Source: [https://thinkwritten.com/389-creative-writing-prompts/](https://thinkwritten.com/389-creative-writing-prompts/)
Creative Fiction Writing Process Example

• Now we’ll take you through one of our favorite ways of writing a fictional story step-by-step.
• The first thing you’ll need to do is find an image, any image you want. For this exercise, it might be good to pick an image of someone or something you’re not familiar with, so try and find something besides pictures of family, friends, and historical figures and events.
  • A good place to start this search is by looking through stock images in a Word Processor like Microsoft Word or Pages or by Googling “stock images” or visiting a site like Unsplash (https://unsplash.com/images/stock) or Shutterstock (https://www.shutterstock.com/photos).
  • Try and find images that feature a person actively doing something or an object sitting alone very prominently and largely in the picture. For our example, we’re using the picture of the kids talking at right.

Creative Fiction Writing Process Example (cont.)

• Next, have a pen and paper or a computer ready to write down your ideas and the story you’re going to write.
• Start forming your story in your head by looking at your picture and asking open-ended questions. This means asking questions about the people or things in the image you chose and asking questions about them that can’t be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.”
• For the image of the kids that we picked in the last slide, we might ask questions like:
  • Where are they?
  • What are their names?
  • What are they talking about?
• The beauty of using open-ended questions is that any answer you give is correct! Remember that this story is yours to tell, and any idea you produce as a part of your story is a good one.
Creative Fiction Writing Process Example (cont.)

- As you come up with responses to the questions you ask, write them down or type them as soon as you think of them. You can change them later if you wish.
- In response to the questions we asked about our picture of the kids talking on the last slide, here’s what we wrote down:
  - Where are they?
  - They’re in the park.
  - What are their names?
    - Samantha, Tommy, Ruthie, Jaden, and Scottie are their names.
  - What are they talking about?
    - They’re talking about Tommy's dog that can do a cool trick.
- Even if the responses to the questions you ask don’t make sense in the order they come out or seem to go together very well, that’s okay! At this point in the process, you’re only focused on getting out ideas and having fun.

Creative Fiction Writing Process Example (cont.)

- After you’ve written enough to where you feel like you’ve gotten to a stopping point, it’s time to give your story a title.
- Read back over what you’ve written and title your story whatever comes to mind that you think summarizes it well and reflects its tone.
- We gave our story about the kids in the picture the title “Kids at Play.”
- At this point, if you think your story is great as it is, you’re all finished! You can share and distribute your finished story as we’ll discuss in the next video.
- If you’d like to revise your story or change anything or rearrange the order of when events in your story happen, go for it! Make your story whatever you want it to be.
- In addition to writing your story using this exercise on your own, you could try it with a partner and take turns asking each other questions, or even try this exercise and tell a story with a small group!
Creative Nonfiction Writing Prompts

Just like when writing creative fiction, there are also lots of prompts you can use to get ideas and start drafting a creative nonfiction piece. We’ve listed some below, but you can also click the link below or Google “creative nonfiction prompts” and find hundreds more ideas to get your creative juices flowing!

- Tell the nonfiction story that you don’t want your mother to read. You know the one. Don’t censor yourself.
- Recall a moment in which you felt a strong spiritual or unidentifiable energy. Describe the scene in vivid detail, with special attention to the senses. Connect that scene to your relationship with your own religious beliefs or lack thereof. Examine how you incorporated that experience into your worldview.
- Create a timeline of events depicting your life by using newspaper headlines. Try to focus on events that didn’t involve you directly but connect them to the pivotal events in your life.
- Tell the story of a location. Possibly one that is very close to your heart that you already know well, or a new one that inspires your curiosity. Pay particular attention to your own connection to the location, however small or large that connection may be.

Source: https://thejohnfox.com/2016/06/creative-nonfiction-prompts/

A Note on Writing Creative Nonfiction

- Sometimes when writing about things that really happened in your life, certain people, events, or times may be especially difficult emotionally to revisit and spend time talking about. Whenever you’re telling any story, don’t feel like you must make yourself write about things that are too hard to remember. Your story is your and yours alone, and what you choose to share with others is always your choice.
We hope that this video helps you get started writing your story, and that you have fun doing so!

See the next video in this series for ideas on how to share and distribute your story with other people in your group or with friends and loved ones.