

# Portfolio Submission

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Statement of Purpose

Poetry: Ignition

Prose: Colors and Numbers

Prose: The Secretary's Choice

Prose: From Above the Casket

Poetry: Owl

## Why I Write

I am a writer. I am a poet.

My first poem was written in a leopard print key-chain diary I received from a birthday party when I was eight. It read something like: "The rat is fat. He has a hat. He goes splat." Original, I know. But I wrote my next poem ten minutes later. This one I copied in red ink onto a sheet of paper that I still have: "It's nighty-night time, play is over. Think of places where there's clovers [sic], think of stars and a big round moon, think that play will be here soon." The words flowed in an innate sense of imagery and sound, but the sensitivity resided within my fingers, waiting for the perfect moment to blossom.

When I was ten, my "younger twin" cousin Abby died unexpectedly. Within a few months, my writing changed from poems that began like: "Johnny Go-go likes his yo-yo; he can do an around the world, an under-doggie, Why! he can even do a hop-the-froggie!" to: "Lilacs on river, must you dry your eyes? Must you whisk away the rain, Lilacs on river..." The world was ablaze, full of sorrow and unfairness; through poems and extended metaphors, I cried, "Why? Where is God?" Writing was all I could do to express my emotions and reach into the well of my soul that yearned for answers and understanding. Reading over poems and stories I have written, I find a map of my childhood.

A story I wrote for Mrs. Metlach, my sixth grade English teacher who never failed to encourage me, has proved to be instrumental in my development as a writer. Up to this point, my writing had been personal and private, exploring my own emotions and experiences. With "Fantasy Life," I became my sister, struggling to cope with autism in middle school. Writing became like acting, an instrument for compassion. I realized that writing connects people, and based on the deep reactions exhibited by my sixth grade classmates, that my writing can be a tool to make those connections.

I am a writer. I write to love. I write to laugh. I write to grieve, to believe, to search, to question, and acknowledge. I write to share my experiences and to experience what I cannot. I write to learn; my passion to learn and my desire to succeed will only continue to drive me. Even today, after long hours of homework, I spend extra time on English reading that I could easily Sparknote, because I enjoy reading and because I realize that underlining key phrases, writing in the margins, and asking questions will make me a more profound and efficient writer. I will continue to improve throughout my life, but I have a purpose that drives me, to enrich the lives of others.

I am a writer. I am a poet.

I write to inspire.

## Ignition

Brown eyes glisten,  
Leaves burst of chlorophyll green and swing  
in the windy spring.

I spring, sing in pink-and-purple of movie star dreams  
and Sissy on the tire swing --  
slow-motion as the birds chirp in haughty trees,

back forth, forth back.  
Knees crawl and hands under an alpha evergreen,  
silent.

Jealous leaves whisper, birds whimper,  
Beauty nests in the dead pine needles--  
a gleaming blue egg.  
Oh  
a baby blue Easter egg.  
Knees and hands I will cradle as a Mama Bird.  
Slowly,  
Fingers reach,  
Touch,  
Grab,  
And --  
On knees and hands cradle Mama Bird.

But premature are glistening eyes,  
Tear like the volatile sac beneath the shell.  
A quick crack SMACK!

Life is spat in runny muck.

This is  
Life dead, sticky and repulsive  
    By my fingers;  
guilt and greed and need, sadness,  
    Compassion;  
the sound of shrieking birds and quaking leaves;  
a crying love, a hating knowledge.

This is  
a dead baby Robin;  
Brown eyes ignite.

## Colors and Numbers

Autism is seventeen years old and trembling as a rock grows in her stomach. I see patches of colors and shirts, hear shrill voices across the hallways diffusing the salty smell of fries and chicken. "Lilly!" I hear, "Over here!" I look around, desperately, like I am back in middle school, eating lunch with the nurse.

I follow Anne's voice, see her green "Peace" shirt, rush to the classroom door. "Good luck in philosophy."  
"Thanks," I smile. "Good luck on your physics test."

I focus on each blue tile before me. Always the hallways seem like a vast network of tunnels; they wait like snakes to slither and rearrange. Clenching my fists, I feel a bee tickling my forearm. I hold my breath, pretend there is no bee.

I sit at my desk next to a brunette sophomore who smacks gum and talks loudly. Mostly she ignores me, but once in a while she teases me to get laughs from the class. "Shut up, Lilly," she'll remark, "Don't be so loud." I look away and pretend not to notice the class smirking guiltily. They think I'm stupid, that I can't understand her.

Then always, Ms. Dimpsey who comes to my rescue. "Do we want more homework tonight?" Like I'm some kind of puppy being teased and they are guilty schoolchildren in need of scolding. Like I'm incapable of realizing I'm being made fun of because I can't function normally, like I'm some pitiable autistic girl who won't ever make it to college. Let Ms. Dimpsey bask in her magnanimous glory.

In fourth grade, my parents didn't believe Mrs. Winter when she asked if I was receiving speech therapy. "What?" They asked, concerned. "Why would Lilly need that?"

I didn't speak in class.

"She doesn't...talk?" "Not a word?" "For how long?!"

Mrs. Winter squinted straight into my parents round, frightened eyes. "You mean, you weren't aware?"

"For God's sake, no! How long has this been going on? Lilly?"

I looked away.

"She speaks at home?"

"Yes!"

"Mr. and Mrs. Frank, I don't want to intrude, but has anything been going on at home that would cause..."

"Of course not!"

On the car ride home, the sky was becoming dark, and I watched the children playing tag on the streets, wondering how. I felt the tension from the back seat as I rolled the window up and down, up and down.

"Lilly?" My mom asked. "Lilly...we know that you're shy, sweetie, but you have to talk at school, you know."

The window squeaked as I rolled it down again. I don't know.

"Lilly. Why don't you talk at school? Sweetie? Can you answer me? Lilly!" My mom sighed in the front seat.

Up. Screech. Down. Screech.

I don't know.

"Lillian Maria! Answer your mother!" My dad commanded, slamming on the brakes.

I stared into my dad's eyes in the mirror, feeling my chest bubble up my throat. I don't know I don't know I don't know I don't know--"God dammit!" I shouted and slid out the open window, thumping onto the ground. I began to run for the setting sun, straight ahead, my feet scraping the grass like scum.

Then my dad was beside me, grabbing my shoulders and pressing my face into his chest. "I'm sorry, baby, I'm sorry. We'll get you help."

Ms. Dimpsey passes out typed notes from the pages we were supposed to have read for homework. I tune out, lost in thoughts of my middle school years, when they pulled me out of class for hours every day.

Mr. Davis was my seventh grade speech pathologist. I knew he was only doing his job, but I disliked him; I disliked the turning in my stomach when I saw him and the way he pronounced my name like I was a toddler.

"Lilly," he would say, "Can you say 'good morning'? I'm talking to you, Lilly, look at me."

And I would miss hours and hours of class which I hated, especially when I missed math, because there I had formulas and answers and was smart. People called me a genius then, and I felt a part of them, even though I was different. At least they acknowledged me then, when I knew answers without even using a calculator.

But here, here in philosophy I am dumb. After all the years I have worked to make friends and appear normal, I regress in this class; I become the middle school version of me who avoids eye contact and jumps at slight noises. Here, they smirk and think I am weird, because I do not act like them, because I cannot act like them. A weirdo, just like Jimmy said.

"Hey, weirdo!" Jimmy McConnor shouted from up the street. "Yeah, you, you! Lilly!" I was walking to my house from the bus, and he was standing outside next to his bike, not even playing basketball or football, just watching me. "Wanna fight me, huh? Come on, you piece of shit, show me what you got!" Jimmy charged at me, and I stood, frozen on the sidewalk, as he butted his head into my stomach and knocked me over. "How's that!" He shouted, and his pale freckled face was inches from mine, his small hands pinning me down. He looked at me for two long seconds. "God, you're ugly. I don't want to touch you!" Jimmy rolled off me and ran past his bike into his garage.

I lay in the grass, looking up to the overcast sky, filled with empty grayness like there couldn't possibly be any clouds up there. I remember praying for it to rain, praying for it to pour on me like the piece of shit I was, to camouflage my tears and soak my skin that smelled like Jimmy McConnor.

But Jimmy was a long time ago, and I learned to pity him, pity his unstable family life and how he now smokes away his life.

"Lilly. Lilly." Ms. Dimpsey is smiling at me, all twenty-eight pairs of eyes studying me. "You all right, Lilly?"

I nod, aware of the loud sophomore who is laughing at something next to me.

"Okay, sweetie. I was just congratulating you on your perfect test score."

I feel my face burn as I accept my test; a few kids groan.

Ms. Dimpsey continues to pass back the tests and the bell rings, three long dongs signifying liberation.

I recount the blue tiles until I reach my locker.

"How was physics?" I ask Anne, and she groans melodramatically.

"Miserable. Horrible. I must have gotten a C. I'm never going to get into college."

"Never," I laugh, and she smacks me playfully.

"You're just sooo modest, Little Miss 'I'm Already Accepted.'"

I become quiet, and Anne relaxes for a moment, the time it takes for a teardrop to roll down a cheek, then

smiles. "They never thought you could do it."

We look at each other as the teardrop hits the floor and then collect our books for calculus.

## The Secretary's Choice

*This piece was inspired by a video I watched on the New York Time's website about the protesting in Turkey of women's wearing headscarves in school. This law inevitably forces women to choose between religion and education. From writing this, I was able to place myself in Havva's shoes despite our different upbringings. I believe that from experiencing other cultures through writing, as human beings and, in this case, as women, we can break through barriers.*

Havva rushed into her boss's office. "You called?"

Mr. Cames smiled, white teeth glimmering. "Havva, darling."

"Yes? Would you like some coffee?"

"Funny." The young man eyed Havva's silky, black hair. "Actually, maybe in a few minutes, if you can manage."

"Oh, you think I can't manage, Mr. Cames?"

"As a matter of fact, I do think you can manage, sweetheart..."

"Mr. Cames." Havva suppressed a smile.

"Too inappropriate?"

"You called."

"Oh, yes, I was just reading the paper." Mr. Cames reached for the newspaper and proceeded to read the front page with a half-frown.

"Fascinating."

"Feisty. Yes, I was reading the paper, and I happened to notice something about these... headscarves...that your people wear."

"Yes, some do." Havva sat opposite Mr. Cames in a modern, square chair with brown and green ovals.

"Well," Mr. Cames began, "there's this whole uproar in Turkey. Yes, I know you're aware of it, but I was wondering why."

The young woman waited. "Why what?"

"Why you don't wear one."

She shifted uncertainly in the chair. "Ah. You have work to do, Mr. Cames. You have an appointment in an hour."

"You don't want to talk about it?"

"No."

"Oh. I'm sorry." Mr. Cames leaned forward at his desk.

"No. Wait. I...I do." As soon as Havva spoke, her rich, brown eyes began to glisten.

"If you want."

"I was...uh...born in Turkey, as you know. I lived with my mother. I don't remember much...but...rolling green forests, so beautiful Mr. Cames...so beautiful." Mr. Cames set aside the newspaper. "I remember squeezing fruit in the crisp air and how it slid down my chin into my palms. But it was hard then, to live, I mean. Turkey is secular. Women can't go to school if they choose to wear a headscarf. My mother was a very religious girl, and she chose the headscarf. You see, Mr. Cames, yes, she could not continue her education. And she was a very smart woman. No, she is not alive anymore. Breast cancer."

"I'm sorry." He leaned back.

"Thank you. But you see, I grew up a very religious girl like my mother. I wore the scarf starting at age ten, quite young. My first, my mother bought for me: deep purple, diaphanous with pale yellow flowers. Ah, yes, it was hard to live. My mother married young, and my father died before I was old enough to remember him. So we struggled for money. When I was a girl, a revolt movement began again, and we became very worried that I would be kidnapped."

"Kidnapped?!"

"Yes. The Kurdistan Worker's Party. Turkey wouldn't acknowledge the Kurds, you know how it goes."

"Yes," reflected Mr. Cames, memories flashing before his eyes.

"My mother met an American man. She was very beautiful, you know, with bronze skin and rich eyes. She attracted many men. An older girl, Sara, she was Muslim... the PKK in our village killed her, mutilated her because she didn't wear her headscarf. They hung her body from a tree and tied her headscarf around her eyes. When I saw her, dangling from the tree with crusting blood, I thought she might be alive because we couldn't see her eyes through

her headscarf. She wasn't, of course.

"After this happened, we left for America with my uncle's family. I stopped wearing my headscarf and forgot about my life in Turkey."

Mr. Cames reached for Havva's bronze hand, his fingers falling short on the desk. "Havva...I didn't know."

"Of course you didn't. I have not spoken of this since I was a girl, Mr. Cames."

Mr. Cames bolted upright.

"Why do you insist on calling me Mr. Cames, Havva?"

"You are my boss."

"Please."

"I respect your authority."

"Oh, please. You do not with your silly jokes. Why do you insist on calling me Mr. Cames?"

"I can't answer that."

He stared deeply into her eyes. "Havva."

"You are a white man."

Mr. Cames sat still for long seconds.

"Oh."

"Mr. Cames, I am bound to tradition."

Havva began again, "Forgive me. That's rude. It's not even—"

Mr. Cames stood. "Havva, you do not love me because I am a white man?"

"Mr. Cames!"

"Havva."

"I can't possibly begin to—"

"Havva, for two years you have taunted me with your shining smile. Two whole years you have—"

"You're joking!"

"See, you're doing it again! That smile thing! And you do not love me? You come back day after day from your apartment, and you smile and make me fall so deeply in love with you with your curly hair and smooth skin."

"Mr. Cames, I—"

"Havva, please do not call me that!"

"Mr. Cames, I am afraid that I have done something terrible." Havva stood now, her thick hair motionless.

"What, Havva? What could you have possibly done?"

She stared back into his eyes, gulping for words. "I am...bound to tradition, Mr. Cames...I have a...fiance. I do not know him, but he will arrive from Turkey next month. We have been engaged since childhood."

"No." Mr. Cames turned to the windows.

"Yes. I do not want to marry him, Mr. Cames, but you see, my mother wanted this. She did not live the life she wished, and she wanted this for me."

"Havva, I have dreamed of you for two years."

"I have a duty to my culture, to my mother."

"And who is this man? You do not know him! Who knows what he may be or do!"

"That is something women of my faith must accept."

"I can't accept that."

"I am sorry, Mr. Cames...terribly...sorry. You may fire me."

Looking out to the sun, Mr. Cames followed a young girl's path on a bike. "Havva. Havva. How many times I've said your name."

"Then, Mr. Cames, I will do what I should have done long ago." Havva bowed slightly. "Perhaps we will meet in another life."

"Please, Havva, please reconsider." Mr. Cames approached Havva, nearly touched her cheek.

"You will meet a beautiful woman and live a long, happy life together. Good-bye, Henry. I will miss you."

Mr. Cames watched Havva pass through the doorway, down the hall. "Good-bye, Henry," he repeated, "I will miss you."

## From Above the Casket

*The protagonist in this story, Lynn, first came to me in eighth grade, after reading To Kill a Mockingbird. I wrote an outline for a book but completed only a few chapters. However, Emma Lynn never left me, and she reappears in this recent short story.*

I never seen my mama so done and dead like she lies in a casket with roses all round her head. And Danny, he tells me: "Lynn, she's dead, Lynn" like I don't know it with her gray face and closed eyes. And she kinda looks peaceful, but like the way a porcelain doll looks, like any moment she could pop up out of a closet like Granny's dolls—Mammy's old dolls in the closet with their creaking cradles and Nina, the one who looks like me, with frizzy orange hair and blue eyes. I loved Nina so much, and right now Mammy looks like Nina too except with a gray face. Well, I did love Nina until that night, when the howling wind woke me and the covers soaked with sweat choked me. And then Nina opened the closet door, and I swear smoke slithered out and choked me more until I woke up again. And ever since then I was waiting to wake up again, and I hated Nina with her frizzy orange hair.

"Lynn," says Danny, "Lynn, she's dead."

And I wanna shout, I know she's dead, can't you see I know she's dead, but when I turn to Danny, he's staring at her like he can't believe it, and he looks so sad because his blue eyes are half-open, and when his eyes get like that everybody knows he's sad. When you ask him, "What's up sucker?" he says nothing, and that's when you know to leave him be. Mammy always said he was just needing some time alone.

"What's up sucker?" I ask, but he grips the edge of Mammy's oak casket. His knuckles grow white, his lips tight, his eyes half-open. I stare at him, and he just looks so funny with his half-open eyes. For a moment I think I might even laugh like they say people do at funerals, but I don't. He stares back, and his lips grow tighter, his knuckles whiter, and he whispers vehemently, "Lynn, why aren't you sad?"

And he startles me so much that I don't even answer; I just look at Mammy with her golden-red hair and think how beautiful she used to be before she had me and Danny and before she lost my baby sister. Mammy was always beautiful, even after she lost Baby, but I saw pictures of her before, like when she and Daddy were dancing at their wedding. Mammy looked like she could never die then, laughing with glowing cheeks in her lacy white gown.

The pictures were in a closet that Danny discovered while we were playing Tarzan and Jane. "Lynnie! C'mere!" he called, and I ran to him like a jungle warrior woman. "Look at this!" And we opened the albums and saw the pictures of Mammy with glowing cheeks. "Look what Dad's wearing! Can you believe he wore that?" Danny giggled, but I only saw Mammy with her face full of roses, dancing like the stars would never go to sleep.

I look at Mammy's gray face again. My eyes travel down, and I realize she's dressed in her blue dress. Granny wore the dress when she was a young woman, because just like us, Granny had red hair and blue eyes. "We stand out," Granny always said, "and when you get older, you can wear the dress just like I did and like your mother does, with your shining blue eyes. You know, I wore that dress when I first met your grandfather." And Mammy says she wasn't wearing it when Daddy first saw her, but when she did wear it, he fell in love with her. And so I look at Mammy being buried in her blue dress with her eyes shut, and at Danny with his half-open eyes, and I realize that I will never wear that dress.

"Danny," I whisper, and he looks to me. "Danny, I don't want Mammy to go." And then I begin to feel hot tears slide down my cheeks, and Danny wraps his arm around me which makes the tears burn because all I care about is the blue dress that I will never wear.

"Lynnie, we're gonna make it, okay?"

Now my eyes are so blurred that I don't see anything but Danny and Mammy and Baby who is floating over us in a lacy white gown that I used to wear. And Baby has curly black hair like Daddy and Danny and electric blue eyes, and suddenly I feel my fingers squeeze into fists, remembering the time before Baby: we all put our hands on Mammy's tummy to feel her kick.

"What will we name her, Mammy?" I ask

Mammy says, "I don't know yet! What do you think?"

"Melodie, because Baby will sing songs."

"You think?" Mammy says and then we all sing to her, Christmas songs, "Silent Night," and I imagine rocking little Melodie in a manger. So we sing, and I sing the loudest to make sure Melodie can hear us and learn. If we name her Melodie, then she better be able to sing or we will have some trouble. But we do anyway when a few days later Melodie is born the wrong way. We never got to see her even. I want to see her so much, but Daddy said she had to go away real fast. I don't believe him even; someone stole her, but Danny tells me to be quiet. So I am. And so is Mammy, lying on her giant hospital bed, so quiet now and her cheeks not even glowing.

"I'm sorry, Lynn. I know you're sad." Danny is still looking at me with half-open eyes. Baby floats away in her white gown, and everything comes back to Mammy in her blue dress with her hair all curled up and her face gray.

"Her hair's not white, Danny." Wisdom white, says Granny. That's how Mammy should be buried, not with a young face and golden-red hair, not like my hair and Nina's hair. Because then Mammy is just a young woman with children not even grown up, and some even say Mammy is not grown up, like the ladies with knitted hats who click click their tongues: "What a shame, what a shame."

They say, "What a shame," from the back benches and watch as Danny and I turn away from Mammy who died with still-flaming hair like a meteorite.

Danny opens his eyes, and they are clear and blue like mine. "Lynnie, she's dead," he whispers, and he takes my chin into his chest and strokes my frizzy golden-red hair.

## Owl

Deer dancing;  
minutes before dawn,  
an owl above coos to chirping crickets,  
    whooooooh?  
glimpses slender in night shadows:

A curious glance toward blackened path,  
acid numbness, beating:

    ba-bum  
    ba-bum  
Beneath suburban streetlights,  
REVVVV  
    ERRR  
        BERRR  
          ATES

The goading leaves hiss;  
Fears slither down gutters  
She leaps in fleeting grace---  
VRRRRROOOOOOOM.

Illumined amid screaming rubber,  
Eyes golden in olive branches;  
    whooooooh?  
Beating:  
BA-BUM BA-BUM BA-BUM BA-BUM

"Jesus Christ!"

Jesus Christ, oh Lord, in olive trees, on blackened paths,  
in silent creeks and rubber tires, cell phones—  
"Oh Jesus Christ!"  
while glimmering glass sprays gravel like floating snow,  
lands to glitter in maroon effluvia under beating streetlight,  
like rays from  
"Oh God!"

shine upon a cricket symphony and golden-eyed owls and all things that never seem to die--  
crimson deer with glaring eyes.

    whooooooooh?  
"Damn! I'll be late to work!"  
    Leaves crackle.