



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2012

Article 33

1-1-2012

For Elise

Victoria J. Reynolds

Gettysburg College, reynvi01@alumni.gettysburg.edu

Class of 2015

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Reynolds, Victoria J. (2012) "For Elise," *The Mercury*: Year 2012, Article 33.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2012/iss1/33>

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For Elise

Author Bio

Victoria is a sophomore at Gettysburg College.

For Elise

Victoria Reynolds

I can feel you in the middle of my stomach. It's that feeling which arises on the edge of my skin as I remember you. Pain, twisted in my pancreas, knotted in my spleen. Pain, crawling out of the pores of my arms, hands, shoulders. It claws its way out of the base of my spine, pushing organs aside until the memory of you resurfaces. The memory that's vivid, pulsating, alive.

I remember you alive. In the back of my mind there are the faintest memories of you: your soft hands, rubbing my back when I was upset. I can see your long, curly mess of hair forming a wreath around my head as you bend down to hug me. I even remember your high, lilting voice as you sing me to sleep. But what I remember more is you cold, dying gradually.

First, your hair died, slowly falling in clusters into the awaiting pearl-colored trash bin. Then, your breast was swiftly killed, chopped off so that you might live. Finally, your flesh left you – your womanly curves disappearing, the disease making you into a lovely shadow of a skeleton.

That last night is what I remember. You looked like a golden queen, bald and regal lying in your ruby bed. The room was a kaleidoscope; emerald highlights in the curtains, amber on the floor, sapphires in your eyes. My young legs tiptoed along the floor: a feeble attempt to be quiet, as I peered in to witness this cave of jewels. The soft lamplight made you look almost at peace, as if you were still alive and warm, and not just a husk of the woman you really were.

The next morning, you lay under the comforter, and you were so thin, it was as if you weren't even there. Summoned to your room, I waited at the edge of the bed to hear your words.

You said, "I am dying."

My lungs could not get enough air to scream out the wretched knowledge I had received. I wanted to expel it. My reality was filled with fairies and clean laundry; this knowledge did not belong there. The truth seared me out of that realm, and I never went back. As I watched you close your eyes for the last time, the snow falling through the windows blinded me, so your image was embedded on the inside of my eyelids.

I cannot remember a thing, until I am at the church, dressed all in black, walking beside you. But you are not walking. You are being carried in an oak coffin, your no longer beating heart next to my head. How many

times did I lay my head against that heart, hearing it beat like a drum in my ear? A drum, that when silenced, silenced a part of me.

After you were buried, the night terrors followed. I couldn't bear to imagine the thought of you underneath the ground, not being able to see the sun or the moon or the stars. I had the most realistic dreams. Your hair fell out and your breasts fell off, until the doctors thought you were dead. Your skin was so taut around your skull you appeared to be dead, and so they buried you... alive. I dug and dug until I woke up, screaming with my fingers aching. I cried until I felt like my stomach had dropped to my knees. My will to save you was strong, but in this dream, I couldn't win.

Dad thought it would be a good idea to send me to a shrink. I didn't want to talk to a shrink about what happened to you, to our family. What I liked to talk about was my dreams about you. One afternoon, I told Dad I dreamt about you. That you were happy, in this dream, and that you had a glow about you.

He whispered, "When you see her, Tor, tell her I miss her."

"Why can't you dream about her yourself?"

"I don't dream anymore. I go to bed, everything goes black, and then I wake up again."

I thought about that for a long time what it would be like to go to sleep and not see you in my dreams. I glanced up in the mirror, and thought I saw you, but it was just my curls, framing the eyes that were the same color as yours, the lips that were the same shape. I immediately thought to the funeral, and how they cried, "You look just like her, Victoria..." I wanted to make them cry then, and I still hate it now. I guess there is a price for everything.

Years later, it was a warm summer afternoon, the last summer home before college, and I practiced "Für Elise" on the piano. It was the only thing that could really bring back the memories of you: your name embedded in the title and your spirit wrapped up in the notes. Dad walked in, looking somber and burnt from a day in the blazing sun. He dropped his keys and hat onto the counter and poured himself a glass of lemonade. As I watched him, a question I had held back for years slipped out.

I said, "Would you do it all again?"

He met my gaze and never had to ask what I meant. With a quick nod, his blue eyes flashed in a blaze of memory.

"Yes," he murmured, "I would love her again and again, even if it was the same each time."