



# THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

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Year 2018

Article 3

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4-25-2018

## Cave Colored Smile

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Class of 2020

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Joyce, Meghan (2018) "Cave Colored Smile," *The Mercury*: Year 2018, Article 3.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2018/iss1/3>

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## Cave Colored Smile

### **Author Bio**

Meghan Joyce '20 is aiming to complete an English major with a writing concentration as well as a Biology minor. She enjoys listening to alternative and classic rock, reading anything and everything, over analyzing films, shotgunning coffee, spending time with friends and family, and, of course, writing.

## Cave Colored Smile

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Age: 3

It's hard to see. The teacher closed the curtains again. She's telling us to sit in a circle. We're not very good at making circles. She doesn't care. Keeps smiling. We're going on a bear hunt, she says. I don't know why. No one knows why. She puts in a tape. The music starts. *We're going on a bear hunt. We're going to catch a big one.* Everyone's singing and laughing. The hunt is a game. An adventure. Finding the bear is fun. Not to me. *I'm not scared.* I sing along even though I am. Because I can see it. Black fur. White teeth. Red eyes. Like in *Fox and the Hound*. Breathe in and out in and out in and out. My eyes hurt. My chest hurts. She walks over. "I'm not crying," I say. She doesn't believe me. I'm taken away. She kneels down. Says everything's ok. The music is gone. I still feel the bear.

Age: 6

School starts later for me. Around a year. Mom and Dad told me I needed an extra year of preschool. I was surprised. I got good grades and had friends. Why couldn't I go with the other kids? They don't say why. It's probably the crying. My teachers always called them when I cried. I tell them I'm ok. That it just happens. That I'm happy. I think they believed me, which is good. I'm happy, but the bear still hunts. His cave is my stomach. He runs around and around until I feel queasy. Sometimes, the bear bats my lungs, just like my cat when he plays with his toys. I think it's fun for them. What I hate the most is when he's awake. When I'm alone, reading a book or watching a movie, he's asleep. Wet breath tickles my insides, but, for the most part, he's quiet. When I'm at school he wakes up. The bear has made me his home, but he forgot the welcome mat.

Age: 10

We're starting long division in math class. Math has never been my favorite subject, although I solve the problems. There's only ever one answer. To pass the time Christina and I start doodling on each other's worksheets. She draws a flower, while I draw an eye. She's better than I am but it's fun making something together. Then a name is called. My name. I turn away from my doodle to see my teacher staring at me, holding a stick of yellow chalk. A division problem, 192.5 divided by 7, is on the board, written in that same color. The problem is mine to solve. If she chose me randomly or because of the drawing I don't know, but I stand and walk to the board. The chalk is in my hand. The problem in my head. *Ok, so I know that 7 goes into 19 two times so the 2 goes on top and 14 is subtracted from 19 and 19-14 is 5.* Forty-six eyes watch my hand move. I was drawing them, now they are drawn to me, and I know two more eyes are starting to open. *You write down 5 then you bring down the 9 in 192.5, and that makes 59.* Twenty-five hearts are beating. Two have the same rhythm. *How many times does 7 go into 59?* I start from 21 because it's the last multiple of 7 that I can remember, and I start counting from there in my head and on my fingers because that helps me at home. 22, 23, 24, 25... He's banging into

my small and large intestine and *did you know that the small intestine is actually larger than the large intestine which makes the naming really, really strange and why can't I be in science class right now because we're learning about the digestive system and I actually know that answer instead of whatever 192.5 divided by 7 is.* He's running up my chest and into my lungs, chewing until I can't breathe, then he's running again, scratching my throat at the same time he scratches my eyes until I'm sobbing in front of twenty-two kids and one scared teacher. I'm forced into the hallway, and she asks if I want the guidance counselor. I try to smile. I say I'm ok. That I'm used to it.

Age: 13

Mom and I have been in the car for over twenty minutes when we reach our destination: a white house with shutters slathered in blue paint. Pigmented flowers thrive beneath the windows to create an inviting garden, if not a bright one, and the graveled driveway crackles under our feet as we hop out of the van. Despite my misgivings, there is a charm to the place that is undeniable. I'm still not thrilled about the visit, though. I know I have a problem, and I don't need this flawless house to remind me. Mom glances back at me, probably making sure that I'm following her. With that one look I fall back into form. Standing straight, eyes alight, smile on. She seems satisfied, and I am again reminded why I'm here. For her and Dad. Because I hate feeling their pain every time the school calls home or they find me crying over a homework problem, or worse, over nothing. I hate hearing their whispered worries, the what to do's and what can they do's. That's why I hide it now. Being honest only leads to stifled tears and hollow silences. I love them too much for that. It's better to stay quiet and talk to someone else than talk to your parents and watch your crazy needle into them like starved mosquitoes. Better my blood than theirs.

Mom and I reach the door, the color of fresh cream, knocking politely, or however politely ramming a fist against wood can be. The wait is excruciating, a tooth-pulling torment, until finally the door opens, revealing the home's owner. She doesn't seem too judgmental. A bit older, maybe sixty, grey swirled into nutmeg hair. Her eyes are kind as she eases into a smile. They are paper lanterns in a summer sky. Mom waits in what I assume is the living room while Maria--I learn that's her name--and I walk to her office. Once I sit down, we begin the standard introductions. Our names. Ages. Hobbies. Our conversation is just that...a conversation. I relax, answering her questions freely. Then Maria mentions why I'm here. If I know why I'm here. *Water burns my throat. I'm swimming through the river, the deep, cold river.* She's waiting for my answer, and, dear God, what if she tells Mom what I tell her? *My feet are stuck in thick, oozy mud. I have to go through but with a squelch and squerch I'm pulled under.* If Mom knows then Dad knows then their fear will grow, and I can't live knowing my parents fear me. *I stumble and trip in the big, dark forest. My head hurts, pounding on and on through the forest.* Words aren't coming. I don't know what to say. After all, I just met this woman, and I can barely talk about this stuff with my parents, so why should I talk to her? And even if I do talk to her, what if she doesn't believe he's real or she thinks I'm crazy because maybe I am, and that's one fact I do not need to learn today. *Tiptoe, tiptoe keep yourself quiet.* I can always talk to her next time, say what's really bothering me. *A shiny nose*

*and a goggly eye and a voice that's not my own.* Our discussion turns to school, my favorite classes, my friends, and other mindless topics. Mom is reading a magazine when we exit, lips twitching up seeing me intact. I thank Maria for a good session and head to the car. There was a time when the bear only destroyed my thoughts. Now he creates new ones.

Age: 17

I receive my driver's license later than my friends. Most of them got it when they were sixteen or seventeen because they didn't focus on the consequences. Driving is a freedom, a way to escape the mundane household and enter into a diverse world. For me, at this moment, driving is man's worst innovation. I mean, yeah, we invented the wheel for a reason and, sure, cruising around without adult supervision sounds like a fucking fantastic time. Then I hear the consequences murmuring in my mind: injuries, death, casualties. How a single mistake could cost everything. The thoughts aren't as loud as they once were; I try to ease them out, but they still appear in the most inopportune moments. Like right now.

I am convinced that the DMV is modern man's solution to the rack, except instead of stretching limbs it stretches time. Every second feels like a century, each customer either on their phones or admiring the curve of their cuticles. Mom's chatting with an older gentleman, something about a Celtic festival, while I break out my go-to nervous smile and wait for the instructor. The room smells of wasted time, that musty aroma encompassing moldy exhales and erupting brain cells. For over twenty minutes we wait, which is funny considering we were running late. Twenty-six minutes and at least eight sighs later the instructor walks over to shake my hand. He's in his latter years, mid-sixties or so, with no-nonsense eyes and equal shares enthusiasm and hair, that is to say none. We meander through the standard procedures as I introduce myself and give him my insurance information. In a matter of minutes the two of us enter the car.

He wants me to use my turn signals. I do. He wants me to check my hazards. I check them. My windshield wipers wipe, my horn honks, my head squirms, and all I can think is *not today dear lord not today it's been ok why does this always have to happen at the shittiest times.* He tells me to back out, head over to parallel parking. I can't make it that far. Memories blur, then I realize I'm sobbing as an elder woman leaves without my insurance information but with a slight dent in her car.

I can't stop crying. We're driving home. The tears won't stop. My chest is raw from the dry heaving. Mom is angry. Not about the car or that I failed. She's livid because of me of my "reaction," she says. What am I going to do when something really bad happens, how will I handle catastrophe when I can't work through a failure this simple? She keeps asking, demanding for an answer I've never found. I'll be fine, it'll be ok, I didn't mean to overreact. Whatever I say she won't believe. There's nothing left to hide. So I just sit there, wailing into my lap, longing for a solution.

Age: Unknown

I don't know how old I'll be when I'm better, when the bear grows sick of hunt-

ing, when he forever sleeps in my chest, my mind, or wherever his cave might be. I don't know how old I'll be when I'm calm, when I don't enter a crowded room and feel his claws raking into my sides every time words pinch my throat. Honestly, such an ideal world may not exist. I may be as I am forever, balancing highs and lows with the in-betweens, and that's fine. That's alright.

A bear was born to hunt, after all.