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## Beyond the Gray Green Gate

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## Beyond the Gray Green Gate

### **Author Bio**

Sarah is a current senior at Gettysburg College studying Classics and Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies. In her spare time she enjoys getting in touch with her more creative side through the art form of stippling and writing.

## Beyond the Gray Green Gate

SARAH TOKAR

The musty scent of a car on its last legs filled my nostrils yet again as I leaned my forehead against the upholstery on the back of the passenger seat. My parents whispered to each other as though there was some magical barrier between the front and back seats, preventing me from hearing them. As if the words tumbled out of their mouths, ricocheted off the front dash, and slid down the center console only to...stop. Except that's not what they did, not really. As much as I'm sure my parents would have liked them to. I would catch bits and pieces of what they were saying, fragmentations really, not enough to draw much of a conclusion from.

"How much longer do you think she'll be in there, John?" My mother asked, voice wavering, dangerously close to letting the tears she had been so fervently holding back break through the dam.

"Not too much longer now hon, I'm sure of it." He lied so easily. I could tell what he really wanted to say was 'As long as it takes' with a non-committal suggestion as to the time frame that we might be looking at. "She's really doing great." He said as resolutely as he could possibly muster.

My mother kept up with her futile questions as if they could solve all of our family's problems, creating strangled conversation until she finally let her tears etch small rivers down the curves of her cheeks. My father kept his eyes on the road, a true steely gray. I imagined they were turning harder and more metallic with every passing second. Not wanting to let on that I had been eavesdropping, I pulled out my notebook and set to work. Pencil scratching meticulously on the paper, line after line of roman numerals appeared. I = 1, II = 2, III = 3, IV = 4, V = 5... I was well into my hundreds by now. The pencil scratching drowned out the noises coming from the front seat— well enough, at least. It was a poor substitute for the iPod that my ten-year-old self so desperately wanted but wasn't old enough to have. I knew better than to ask.

*I knew I was meant to feel excited that my family was visiting, but I remember dreading having to face them. While all of us in-patients waited for our various family members to arrive some of the aids attempted to distract us with art therapy, passing out scattered art supplies and pestering us with possible prompts to spur our creativity. The paint splatters did little to distract me from the fact that my little sister would be visiting me during what felt like my incarceration.*

*tion. It was embarrassing to think that she would see me at my most vulnerable, and would definitively know she was better at being a human being than I was. I was supposed to be her role model, but I couldn't stand to think of her following any one of my footsteps that brought me here.*

Our car carried us through the city until we finally turned onto the private winding drive that I had become all too familiar with. CXXVI = 126, CXXVII = 127, CXXVIII = 128... The trees that were once budding with hope now curled desperately over our vehicle, clutching at our windows and scratching at our morale. We slowed as we approached the guarded gate and gave our name in exchange for admittance. The sign read Sheppard Pratt: Center for Eating Disorders in large, dull, gold lettering— as if it was once the shining crest of an important aristocratic family before being downgraded to its current status simply alerting disheartened families to its presence.

“Tokar” my dad said with a confidence that was all too rarely seen those days. With that the rusty green-gray gate creaked open and we were searching for a parking spot. I had always hated this goddamn parking lot. Painted white lines too straight, too perfect. Why couldn't they let some imperfection into their lives? Imperfect patients translated into this need for structure falsely implanted in every possible nook and cranny of the institution.

I slammed the car door behind me harder than necessary, that satisfying thud no longer bringing a smile to my face like it so often used to. We walked up to the large front doors, my parents in front and me following closely behind. My dad reached over to ring the doorbell, and a shrill trill like that of an un-tuned piccolo echoed within the entryway announcing our arrival. An aid met us at the threshold to unlock the heavy metal doors and show us to the room where we would be meeting my sister for family therapy. I had been taken out of school early to come— something that my mom didn't often allow.

*We had already gone through our individual tutoring and therapy sessions for the day, and I remember thinking about the exhaustion that was sure to stem from the mandatory family therapy session that we were to take part in before family dinner. I couldn't imagine what my younger sister would think of these group therapy sessions where families were expected to open up about their deepest struggles to complete strangers purely on the basis that they were likely going through something similar. Sarah could always be counted on for a good burst of humor— I remember hoping that she'd be in a joking mood that evening.*

The hallways were a sterile off-white— ceilings, walls, and tiled floors— and there was a distinct pattern of paintings on the wall, as if to

distract the eye from the institutional feel of the building as a whole. This was in stark contrast to the room where family therapy was held— in fact the entire ambience shifted to a warmer, more natural feeling as soon as we found ourselves in the community center. Large overstuffed leather chairs lined the walls in tidy rows, and a few blue and green plaid couches completed what was meant to be the seating area. A stained glass window was the focal point of the room, casting the entire room in rainbow fractals.

Rachel was standing there cast in blue by the seating area talking with some of the aids, knobby knees, striking collarbones, taut skin and all. I remember her looking up and meeting my gaze with her own before hesitantly approaching us. She seemed so embarrassed, though of herself or of us I was always unclear. After a fairly successful hour of group family therapy, or so the nurses touted, it was time to have our weekly family dinner. Meant to normalize an in-patient's experience, family members were allowed to visit and share a meal with their loved one once a week. It was my first time attending. All of the in-patients gathered in a line to head to the cafeteria, family members trailing next to them in a line of their own like tag-along siblings.

*The timer at the front of the cafeteria read 45:00:00 and begun to count down. We had forty-five minutes to eat our meal, and if we were unable to finish everything in the time allotted, it meant we would have to drink an extra supplement in the evening to account for the missed calories. It was all about the numbers at Sheppard Pratt. How much time was left on the clock, how many calories we ingested, how much the scale proclaimed we weighed...nothing else seemed to matter as much.*

Dinner was served much like the middle-school lunch line I was accustomed to— everyone getting the same hefty portion of green beans, mashed potatoes, and peach cobbler alongside the main entrée of a drumstick. Despite being held in a cafeteria; I could tell that the staff had made every effort possible to make the meal feel as homey as possible. They set up the tables in such a way that it almost felt like we could be back in our dining room at home— apart from the probing eyes of the aids and the incessant conversation of the other families surrounding us. It almost seemed like we were actors on the set of a television show, constantly falling in and out of character with each other. Forced conversation peppered the sound of scraping plastic forks against paper plates— a constant reminder that many of the patients were in a precarious enough mental state so as to not be allowed to handle real silverware.

*That night they were serving us drumsticks. Everyone was watching me— our parents, the nurses, and I had never felt more self-conscious about what I was*

*eating. There was such pressure for me to do well; to prove that I was getting better to everyone who had taken the time to come and visit me. I distinctly remember cutting the chicken off of the bone and mom lashing out at me, saying “You never used to cut your meat off of the bone at home— why are you now?” She was always the caretaker of our family, and I knew it was hard for her to watch me here— her first born daughter, undeniably broken and unable to be fixed. I was also concerned with how Sarah would react to the rigid structure of meal times, but I could tell she was trying her best to crack jokes and normalize the experience for everyone else.*

It was dark out after we finished our dinner, and saying goodbye to Rachel was bittersweet. I remember being eager to leave the façade of normalcy that was Sheppard Pratt, but feeling destitute at the prospect of not seeing my older sister for another few days. It was difficult to understand that this would be our lives for the next couple of months until she was well enough to be placed in an out-patient program. I climbed back into our sedan— my nostrils yet again assaulted by its familiar scent— and prepared for the long drive back home. Pencil in hand, paper on lap, CCLIII = 253, CCLIV = 254, CCLV = 255, CCLVI = 256...