



THE MERCURY

THE STUDENT ART & LITERARY MAGAZINE OF GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Year 2009

Article 7

1-1-2009

Patchwork

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Class of 2009

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Harenchar, Sara M. (2015) "Patchwork," *The Mercury*: Year 2009, Article 7.

Available at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/mercury/vol2009/iss1/7>

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Keywords

creative writing, non-fiction

Author Bio

Sara Maria Harenchar is a senior at Gettysburg College. She currently holds the world record for consecutive episodes of Golden Girls watched in a single sitting. Although birth records at a well-known Pittsburgh hospital would seem to strongly suggest otherwise, Sara has managed to convince dozens of friends that she is the illegitimate love child of Ernest Hemingway and Aretha Franklin. Sara's passions are traveling and shopping, peculiar hobbies indeed given her profound lack of funding. Her future plans include a career in editing and publishing, a vocation certain to insure continuance of a post-undergraduate Bohemian (read: indigent) lifestyle.

Patchwork

It is an early morning in July and the wooden church floor is familiar to my bare feet. I quietly open the front door and walk onto the porch, gazing into the sun as it breaks through the misty Kentucky Mountains. There is a distant aroma of coffee as a rooster calls from the farm next to me. It is a cool morning, and after draping a quilt around my shoulders, I sit down on the floor of the porch. I lift my face up to see the majestic green mountains in front of me. The sound of feet on the stairs to the left breaks my attention, as another worker, Megan, greets me with a cup of coffee and a smile.

"What a beautiful quilt," she reminds me as she hands me the mug, "Especially on this porch."

I have traveled to the small town of Vanceburg, Kentucky several times since the summer after I graduated from high school. Buried deep in the Appalachian Mountains, Vanceburg is one of hundreds of agricultural and coal mining towns that fell with its industry, leaving hundreds of families in abject poverty. The first time I went to Vanceburg for mission work, I expected to meet poor, depressed alcoholics and drug addicts living in old shacks. Instead, I found hopeful, loving, hospitable mothers, fathers, and children struggling to make ends meet, all the while keeping the faith that God was watching. Neet was one of the women I met: an avid quilter sinking into old age not with sadness, but with hope and laughter.

The first time I met Neet, she was already eighty-six years old. It was a sunny day in late August. Along the road where Neet lived, the houses were spread out with about a half a mile between each farm. The paved road was uneven and narrow, barely big enough to be a one-way street. On one side of the road the land rolled down into a valley, but on the other side the houses stood on a steep incline of grass. Neet's house was about two miles down the "holler," as natives call it, on the steep side. It was a small white ranch house as old as Neet, maybe even older. The siding on the house was cracking and its white color had taken on a grayish tone. A broken sidewalk led up to a small screen door.

After we knocked, Neet's face appeared behind the screen door, and she smiled. I don't think she wore dentures. I can't remember ever seeing any of her teeth.

"Come on in!" she said. My boyfriend, Kevin, a veteran of the Kentucky mission, walked in first. He gave her a hug and held on for a few seconds. His parents were with us, and they took a seat on Neet's couch. Neet had no idea who I was, so I simply smiled at her. After a few minutes, she took a seat on an easy chair, and looked across at me.

"I'm Sara," I said.

"Ya, ya, ya," she answered, still grinning.

"This is Sara," Kevin repeated, much louder this time. *She must not have heard me, I thought.*

"Nice to see ya!" Neet responded, flashing me her toothless smile. I smiled back, uncomfortably. Old age terrified me because it meant dying. This woman was not only old; she was living alone in the middle of nowhere.

The house reeked. The combined stench of moth balls, rotting food, a dirty

bathroom, and cats were overwhelming. It was unbearably hot inside her house, since she couldn't afford air conditioning. She had a calendar from 1996 hanging on the wall, fixed on October. All of the sudden, I wanted to be outside as quickly as possible.

In the corner, I my eyes fixed on a small chest. It was open, and a quilt leaned out over the wood. The quilt pattern was called "North Star," and I recognized it since my aunt was a quilter. I wanted to ask Neet if she had made it, but I didn't want to seem nosy, so I kept silent.

Above the chest on the wall was a wooden sign. On it was carved a pink rose and three short lines:

*I believe in the sun, even when it is not shining,
I believe in love, even when I feel it not;
I believe in God, even when He is silent.*

Neet was hunched over in her chair, her sheer, short white hair sticking out from her head. She had a gigantic nose, the resting place for her glasses, which were too big for her face. Elaborate wrinkles swam in her pale skin. She appeared to be senile yet somehow remarkable.

"How long are ya here for?" she asked.

"Just a few days," my boyfriend said, "we just came down for the weekend."

No answer.

"We're only here for the weekend!" Kevin shouted.

"Ya, ya, ya," Neet answered as she laughed.

I soon discovered that Neet was almost completely deaf. From the first time I arrived at her front door until the last time I saw her, I knew there was a chance that she'd never heard a word I said.

A year after my first visit, I traveled back to Vanceburg, Kentucky with twenty-two other Catholics my age and three or four adults to serve the families there. The missionaries travel to Vanceburg every year in July, and stay for about a week and a half. Neet is one our many stops on long rides in our big white van.

I always knew Neet's holler as "Salt Lick," since that is the name of the church on the hill where we all slept during the mission. Salt Lick used to be the main church in Vanceburg, and Neet had been married there.

During this trip, I remember her showing me a yellow and white quilt with bells on each square. It was the only time I ever set foot in her bedroom.

"That's my wedding quilt," she shouted to me, even though I was standing right next to her.

"It's beautiful," I said. And it was. The bells were patched together with different colors of yellow, probably because she could only afford the fabric scraps. She didn't answer me, but only smiled, and placed her hand on my shoulder.

Neet had nineteen cats. I never knew what Bob Barker meant at the end of "The Price is Right" when he said "Be sure to neuter your cats" until I saw Neet's yard. The cats roamed aimlessly through the grass, eating remnants of cheap cat food and small rodents out of aluminum trays. Neet always saved the trays from the Meals on Wheels she received during the week and used them as cat dishes. I found those trays everywhere: in the yard, on the porch, on the kitchen table, and in the living room. Some of her cats only had one eye, and some were missing a leg.

"Would you like us to take you to church?" I asked. Megan, another missionary,

smiled lovingly at Neet, and Neet smiled back at her.

"I already fed them cats!"

"No," I said, "would you like us to take you to church?" Now I was leaning right next to her ear, raising my voice so that she could hear me.

"Ya, ya ya," she said as she smiled.

I had to make it very clear that we would pick her up in the morning, probably before nine o'clock. I sighed, and smiled, knowing that I would have to shout again.

Neet's real name was Naomi, "Neet" for short. I never found out where the nickname came from, or who it came from. The entire time I knew her, Neet lived alone. I never met her husband, since he had died many years before I ever set foot in Vanceburg. Everyone in Vanceburg knew that Neet's children had moved away, and that they didn't visit her. The little town of Vanceburg had become her new family, and the farmers and their wives had looked after her into her old age. Neet went to bed with the sun and woke up with the chickens. It got so dark on that hill at night, and Neet was probably afraid to be awake and alone.

My relationship with Neet was in patches, since I only saw her a few times a year. I always looked forward to hearing her laugh, to appreciating the way she never heard most of the things we said, but the way she loved to see all of our faces. She couldn't hear, but she noticed our care for her, and how much we loved the community.

During the mission that July, I was cleaning up her kitchen, and pouring food into some of her silver cat trays. I took the trays outside, and the cats quickly gathered at my feet to eat the food. Some of the other group members were helping to clean up Neet's yard. She stood on the small concrete slab at the front of her house. She was smiling at us, not because of senility, but because of appreciation that she didn't have to verbalize. We loved her, and she knew that. It didn't matter if she could hear us say it.

My nineteenth birthday fell during the mission that year, and I was able to visit Neet on that day. A few of the girls went to her house in the morning to visit with her, and to ask her if she'd like to come to the revival at Salt Lick that night. During revivals, we'd all meet on the hill at Salt Lick church with members of the community, and sometimes a bluegrass band would play next to the fire. We'd sing songs, tell stories, and meet new people. It got chilly enough for a sweatshirt on the hill at night, the perfect relief from the day's hard work and heat.

When we arrived at Neet's house, Megan told her it was my birthday. Neet smiled, nodding, and I waited for someone to repeat what Megan had said to her. Neet didn't say anything, but she got up from her chair and walked slowly into her room. She came back with a beautiful patchwork quilt, made of rows of tiny squares. Each one was a different pattern.

"Oh! How beautiful," one of the girls remarked. Neet walked over, and set the quilt on my lap.

"Oh no, I can't take this," I said. Neet only nodded, and gave me that quirky smile of hers. I reached into my pocket to pull out some money. I knew that Neet usually sold her quilts for eighty or ninety dollars. I pulled out forty dollars, and two of the other girls put in two twenties.

Neet shook her head. Finally, she spoke, and I'll never forget what she said:

"You help me, I help you."

"Neet, you have to accept at least some of this money," Megan said as she clasped Neet's hand.

Neet took one of the twenty dollar bills from my hand and put it next to her bible on the coffee table. I gazed down at the beautiful quilt on my lap. I kept trying to examine all of the different patterns, but there were so many. The quilt was vibrant and alive. I held the quilt under one arm as I wrapped my other arm around Neet.

"Thank you," I said to her, "It's so beautiful."

"Ya, ya, ya!" She said, and she hugged me back, holding on tightly to me. "Come back anytime."

"We'll see you tonight," I said.

When we left that day, I could smell Neet's house emanating from the quilt, spreading throughout the van. But it didn't disgust me anymore. I realized that old ladies and smelly houses and poverty and cats with one leg can be beautiful if you look at them with hope instead of despair.

When I arrived back at the church that day, I showed everyone in the group my quilt.

"Guard it with your life," said Father Mike, a priest from Erie, Pennsylvania who had gone on the first Kentucky mission almost twenty years ago, "You're holding Neet right there."

Megan ended up buying a quilt from Neet the following day, a North Star quilt with a beautiful white background, and multi colored stars. We covered ourselves with our new quilts inside the old church that night, the doors unlocked and mice crawling in the walls. Underneath that quilt I felt safe. I've taken it with me on every single Kentucky trip since, and it is my companion when I travel far from home.

Later that year, in December, Kevin and I went back down to visit our friends in Vanceburg. Instead of going to Neet's house right away, we stopped by Holy Redeemer, the Catholic Church in town. We knocked on the door of the house next to the church, expecting to see Sister Joseph, the church caretaker, but instead we were greeted by a woman neither of us knew. I don't even recall her name.

"Are you lost?" She said.

"No," Kevin answered, "we do mission work here in the summer with the families on Salt Lick."

"Where?"

"At the old church, the white church on the hill," he answered.

"Oh," she said, "come on in."

We sat awkwardly on her couch, and began to ask her about the families we worked for and loved.

"I just moved here a few months ago," she said, "right after the summer ended. As soon as I moved in they had a funeral for a lady up there, but I can't remember her name."

Kevin's face turned white as my stomach dropped. The woman sensed our discomfort.

"Naomi something or other," she said. "I think they called her Neet."

Without thinking about it, I let myself begin to cry. A single tear crept down Kevin's cheek, as this unfamiliar woman narrated a death to which she had no connection, about a beautiful, quirky woman she would never meet.

"Oh gosh," Kevin finally spoke.

"Did you know her?" The woman asked.

"Yes, we knew her very well," Kevin answered.

"She gave me a quilt for my birthday in July," I said, the tears relaxing in my eyes. *How could she be dead?* I thought. Sure, she was old, but to me she had always been so full of life.

"There was an auction at her house," the woman continued, "but her things are all gone now."

"What about the quilts?" I said. "Did the neighbors take them?"

"Oh no," she answered, "I don't think any of her neighbors could afford them. Some people from the city came. One of Neet's daughters came from Indiana and organized the auction. She took a bunch of the furniture, and sold everything else."

I sighed. The quilts were sold, gone for good. Not given to Father Mike, or to Kevin or Megan or the other missionaries, but to strangers. Neet's daughter didn't even want them for herself.

"It was a lovely funeral, though," she went on, "they buried her up on Salt Lick, right next to the church."

The next morning, I took a walk up the hill to see Neet's new gravestone. It was cold, but it wasn't snowing. I thought of Neet's giggle, her face, her cats, and her quilts. As I walked towards the church, I drug my boots up the three stairs and onto the porch. I stopped at the edge and lifted my face up towards the gigantic mountains. The trees that had been so green on my birthday were now brown, stricken with the death that winter brings. The cool wind brushed across my face and crept around the edges of my hands as they gripped my patchwork quilt. I pulled it closer to my shoulders. It was the only color in a bleak landscape.

I took a deep breath and sighed, knowing that Neet was still in the mountains, still on the hill. More importantly, she was all around me. In the wind, she was running her fingers along each stitch of my quilt.

Neet was a lot like the quilt she gave me for my nineteenth birthday: patched together, worn, mismatched, and a little crooked, but dignified and eccentric, adding warmth and color to my life.