Melissa Sylvester: First Place 2007
The Birth of a Writer from Revolutionary Iran

We have all learned the mechanics of reading and writing. We sat in our elementary school classes and traced As and CATs and wrote out big, sloppy sentences on that special paper with the dotted lines designed to help us make our letters right. We had reading groups that required of us seemingly endless streams of book reports, we had lists of vocabulary words to spit up onto our weekly spelling tests, and eventually we got to the point where – hopefully -- we became fluent in the reading and writing of the English language. For most people, it stops there: reading and writing are tasks required in classes and for basic day-to-day communications. For some of us, however, reading and writing go infinitely beyond simple communicative tasks: a good book is a portal into another cosmos or the inside of someone else’s mind. Writing a carefully-crafted essay or story or poem is a kind of religious experience, a plank to bridge the gap between Michelangelo and God’s outstretched index finger. It is evident in reading Journey from the Land of No that Roya Hakakian is of the latter breed: to her, the art of writing and the power of language are a means of transcending the mundane world and exposing herself in a way that can only be done through the written word, and she could not have become the writer she is today were it not for the experiences she had and the people she encountered while growing up in Iran.

Before the story of her life as a young girl in revolutionary Iran begins, Roya includes a poem by Seamus Heaney about the meaning of writing poetry in which the author likens it to the experience of staring at his reflection in the surface of a body of water, “To stare, big-eyed Narcissus, into some spring/Is beneath all adult dignity. I rhyme/To see myself, to set the darkness echoing” (“Personal Helicon”). Roya presents this poem to prepare the reader for the depths of the tale to come, as a premonitory that the story ahead is a reflection of herself, a pool of words for the reader to gaze into in order to see Roya’s reflection as well as his own. Before the first page, Roya has already established herself as a writer.

Roya’s first encounters with the written word came the way it comes to many people: she was read to. Her older brother Javid would read to her from her favorite book, The Little Black Fish, and she would listen, “He read to me so my last thoughts at night would be great thoughts. I listened so that I could be awash with great sensations” (20). This early fondness that she had for The Little Black Fish, and the effect the story had on her paved the way for her arrival later in life as a lover of books and, most notably, as a writer.

Roya grew up in a home immersed in poetry that was located in a country where quoting poetry was “a national pastime” (69). Her father was “an elder pro” (69) at writing poetry and his verses were well respected in their community. Where The Little Black Fish was Roya’s introduction to reading, seeing her father write poetry in his unique way was her introduction to writing and, more importantly, what planted in her mind a seed of desire to write, “He looked into the distance once more, rubbing his thumb against his fingers, as if to firm his grip on an elusive word or a fleeting thought. ...Watching him, I prayed to someday be on the same road,
peeking at the same world” (22-23). As Roya grew older, that seed began to grow, nurtured by the events and people she encountered.

When Roya’s brother Albert moved to America for reasons that confused her, she began to read through the “several bound volumes of Tofigh magazine” that he left behind to investigate the matter, which she did “with greater diligence than [she] did [her] homework” (35). There she felt the first thrill of seeing her name in print “when [she] discovered that under the pseudonym Roya Hakakian Father [had] contributed several mildly erotic poems to the magazine,” and fell in love with Coco, Tofigh’s “mascot,” a “black human-mouse... [who] spared only the shah and the clergy” from his political commentary (35). Although she did not know it at the time, Tofigh was Roya’s first taste of journalism. Her first experiences with being a journalist came not long after and she was equally unaware of their significance: as the youngest female of her family, Roya spent a lot of her time trying to get in with the older women and join in on their conversations. While at a family gathering, she saw her elder female relatives talking secretly, so, “because [she] was too young to be elbowed, [she] fashioned a personal reconnaissance [she] thought of as human osmosis: learning the untold by breathing in its vicinity” (55). Adult Roya reflects, “Years later, I realized that the proper term for the technique was journalism” (55).

As Roya grew older while still remaining too young for anyone to heed her opinions, she began to realize the power that resided in words. She wanted to dissuade her cousin Farah from marrying a man she did not love, but knew that Farah would ignore her advice, so to account for this she, “had to transcend [her] age. Using fancy vocabulary was how [she] hoped to achieve that transcendence: ‘The foundation of a felicitous marriage cannot be built upon material things’” (73). Although Farah did not take her young advice, she did think twice, and Roya was discovering the power of words and the influence she could have by wielding them properly.

Not only did her own words have a sort of transcendence to them, but other’s words had a strong effect on her as well. Regardless of what tragedies were happening in the world around her, Roya always knew that she could escape into a book, that reading could save her; “reading made everything better, no matter what I lacked, no matter how strange or lopsided I seemed to myself. ... Reading was my corrective device” (89). In this feeling, this realization that she could escape into a better world through reading, Roya found her true desire to be a journalist; she wanted to give to people what she took from her beloved books, “Somewhere beyond my home, beyond my family, there had to be a bigger universe ... with possibilities greater than the ones I could see ... and I would read my way out to them. ... Years ago, I yearned to discover other people’s secrets. But that was before I had secrets of my own. Maybe I was meant to be not just a girl, but something more, like an interpreter. A kid who could make sense of what puzzled others” (89).

It is not until later in her young life, however, that Roya realizes truly what power writing holds. Though her father had told her throughout her life, “when all else fails, write your way out of misery” (90), she had never truly utilized his advice until she found herself on the rooftop of her family's home, in the atmosphere of the rising up of anti-Semitic feelings of her neighbors and the oppression of her country’s new leader, contemplating leaping to her death. She took out her notebook to write the world her suicide note, and instead wrote what saved her:
I opened my notebook. Writing had always been a way of arranging words into beautiful metaphors on the page. But ... I could not think of a metaphor. Ugliness was everywhere. Yet I had to write. ... The words flooded the page, a detailed report of everything I had seen. ... At last, a place where I was welcome! There on the rooftop, pen in hand, I led my own chorus of words, with a melody of my own making. Suddenly, between the covers of my notebook, a world had come into being. ... I wrote some more and just kept on writing. And I kept on writing. (138-139)

By this point in her life, Roya has discovered the world of writing. She knows the feeling it gives her to take a piece of the world and reshape it onto a page; she knows what it is to cast her image down for her to reflect upon as Seamus Haney does. But it is not until she encounters Mrs. Arman, her high school literature professor, that everything really falls into place. Mrs. Arman is able to help Roya make sense of what she has discovered on her own, “Panacea was what she called the force that had kept me from throwing myself off the rooftop a few years earlier. What I had known only in solitude, Mrs. Arman made public: literature” (210). In this class, Roya bloomed. Her quick wit and immense writing talent created a bond between Mrs. Arman and herself that would prove to be very influential on Roya’s life.

Namely, Roya wrote a paper that received a coveted 19 out of 20 which had not been received for 13 years in one of Mrs. Arman’s classes. The content of the paper was politically controversial and would have gotten Roya in a lot of trouble with the government if anyone had read it, but it showed Mrs. Arman just how talented Roya was, and she told her, “You’re a writer” (214). She makes Roya say out loud that she is a writer, and orders her not to waste it, “She brought out a fountain pen. ‘Take this! It belonged to my father, the great Arman, the writer. Put it to better use than I have. Keep it. ... And promise me not to waste yourself’” (214). Roya did promise Mrs. Arman that she would be a writer, that she would not waste herself, and that is a promise that Roya Hakakian keeps to this day.

For Roya, her path to becoming a writer was long and hard and filled with tragedies that many of us have never had to experience: a family torn apart, a political revolution resulting in strong racist and oppressive feelings from neighbors, a near-suicide attempt. But it does not require such extreme circumstances for writing to be the tool that it is, for it to allow a person to travel down the rabbit hole into a parallel universe all of one’s own. Although not all of us can be as naturally gifted as Roya Hakakian, we all possess the emotions and thoughts and beliefs that can be harnessed into words and shared with the world around us. When you feel like Roya felt on that rooftop, when you feel trapped in your world and powerless to change it, write. Be willing to lay yourself down on paper to look at; there are other people in the world who can learn from you and from what you have to say, and at the very least, you may find that writing is a new, surprising way of learning from yourself.