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Mother Lake: A Collection of Original Poetry, Prose, and Essays

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Mother Lake

by

Tanya Renee Cochran

Mother Lake: A Collection of Original Poetry, Prose, and Essays

**Mother
Lake:
A
Collection
of
Original
Poetry,
Prose,
and
Essays**

Tanya Renee Cochran

*for
Daddy and Mom
and
Helen*

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As the German poet Rilke says in Letters to a Young Poet, "Everything is gestation and then bringing forth."

So the unborn ideas, developing in the natural basin of Mother Lake, cushioned and protected, nourished through the umbilicus of language, my poems grow and finally, with hard labor, are born.

love is cool water

the languid mother lake
of sky,

moon,
time . . .

the fertile, genesis life-storm--
mad,
luscious

singing

Prose and Essays

Sticky Buns, Anyone?

Reading a new book, I lay heavy into my bed. Coffee gurgled, sticky buns sizzled in the microwave, hot cinnamon vapors warming, flavoring the air. The down comforter pillowed my full sixty-one and three-fourths inches. Cozy. "It's a wonderful life," I sighed, looking at the icicles on my window full of the fainting horizon.

The bathroom door flew open, arousing my heart. Pony-tail whipping, Cora bopped in sporting her air-pump Nikes, sweat band, dumbbells, and additional aerobic paraphernalia. She smiled huge and announced, "I've lost five pounds." Actually, she squealed.

Yippee. I glanced at my cinnamon buns through the microwave window then my coffee creamer by the sink. I remembered the box of Mom's homemade fudge waiting to be dipped in scalding coffee. And slowly I eyed Cora. *Yeah, yippee. Her waist is smaller than my upper thigh.* "Am I supposed to be happy for you?"

The smile slid from her face. "Yes. My clothes were getting to small," she whimpered.

"Oh [big pause] my [big pause] goodness! You mean you almost had to wear a size two?" I gasped. (Weight is a sensitive issue with me. I reason: Why should I starve because Cindy Crawford has a high metabolism? Life is too short. And so am I. So instead of wrestling nature, I savor a happy, semi-healthy, early-morning-short-breath-chest-pain-sideache-sweat-free life.) Cora and her minus-five-feather-frame wafted away. Sticky buns, anyone?

Gram

She was still strong when they planted the seedling oak. They took turns shoveling the earth, holding the tiny trunk upright, packing the red clay tight around the pencil-thin base. Through that dry, hot summer, they each watered it. And it began to grow.

But as the oak thrived, Gram deteriorated. I wondered why Mom did most of the watering and other yardwork. I wondered why Gram started sleeping upstairs in Mom's bedroom. And she slept more often than usual.

She didn't dance to Elvis with me and my sister in the living room anymore. And Elvis was her "hunk." She didn't braid my pigtails for school. She didn't make homemade spaghetti sauce. She just grew weaker . . . as the water oak grew stronger.

Storms came for both of them. Through the pelting rain and even hail and lightning and determined wind, the tree kept standing and grew sturdy and tall. But Gram fell again and again and became frail and small. The chemotherapy was too hard.

Gram died about thirteen years ago. And I cried for a long time. But everyday I looked out the kitchen window, and there, backdropped by Lake Lanier and a host of pines and grassy banks, stood, hardy and maturing, the water oak. It was a symbol of love, of Gram. It lived . . . for her . . . for me. And I was comforted, comforted in knowing that I wouldn't forget, that Gram would never be a faceless memory.

The construction workers have pitched camp already. Their work is frenzied--only 484 days to the opening of the '96 Olympic Games. Only 484 days before my backyard becomes host to the Olympic VIPs. The rowing event will bring revenue into town. It will be exciting. It will put Gainesville on the map.

But is anyone concerned about people . . . about trees . . . about memories? A giant toothed machine plucked the water oak like a rootless weed and threw it into a pile of other plants and trees--objects in the path of progress. I wonder, *Would the Olympic Committee have Gram tossed aside as easily?*

The water oak is gone--consumed by a calculated brush fire. Gram is gone. And my memories are blurry, clouded . . . faceless.

The Rocking Chair

The rhythm is hypnotic. Back and forth. Like the pendulum of a grandfather clock. Back and forth. Back and forth. The fine, baby hair wisps across my nose as the rocking creates a gentle breeze. Cheek against my mother's breast, I rest in the murky haze between waking and sleeping, wooed by the soft creak of the rocking chair.

As a child, my favorite place to be was in this chair. Generations of my family have rocked in this heirloom. It was first my grandmother's. She rocked my daddy in it when he was a boy. Then when I was born, Grandmother gave it to him.

The weave is broken in the back, just big enough for half a bottom. I have scars from being poked, pinched, and scratched by the jagged ends. I don't remember what caused the nick in the right arm, but every night Mama rocked me, I rubbed that little scar. Now it's smooth, just as if someone had sanded it down and covered it with a new layer of lacquer.

It creaks like a rusty hinge muffled by a pillow. And the sound is like music. The rocking chair's lullaby. For many years, I drifted into rhythmic breathing and peaceful dreams to its melody. Even though the rocking chair is mine now, I won't fix the creak or the broken weave or the nicks. They are character traits that give the chair a name . . . a face . . . a voice.

The rocking chair lived in Mama and Daddy's bedroom. On days the swaying didn't carry me to my afternoon nap too soon, I watched Boots stretch full-length in front of the huge windows that lined the far wall. The sun stoked her fur, and she purred like a distant lawn mower. Then I traced the grassy slope down to where my eyes cringed, meeting the glittery reflection of light tip-toeing across the lake. And Mama would sing, "The trees are gently swaying, swaying, swaying. The trees are gently swaying, showing God's great love." She followed up the sung verse with a hummed verse or two. The humming vibrated in her chest, a gentle massage against my jaw.

The rocking chair was a refuge. When the sharp ache and throb of a burnt finger or the raw, piercing sting of a skinned knee conjured a stormy sea of tears and hiccups, the lull of the chair and Mama's caresses cushioned me in a healing stupor. Colors twirled and swirled behind my droopy eyelids, and the duet of Mama's buzzing hum and the rocking chair's soft creak was medicine for my wounds and my soul.

I am grown. The rocking chair is lonely now. Mama doesn't have babies--or kitties--to rock anymore. And she's not old enough to want it on the front porch for breezy, summer afternoons of iced tea and embroidering. No. It

rests in a musty storage room, waiting for the day I rock my own baby angels into star-dusted dreams. Even now, far from the chair and Mama's embrace, when I'm lingering before the misty window separating consciousness and unconsciousness, colors dance and swim in circles, wrapping me in a cocoon of dream-clouds. In the distance, I hear the hollow echo, a symphony of humming and buzzing and purring and creaking. Mama's breast pillows me. And a draft tosses curls across my flushed cheek.

To Remember

Last night I sat five rows back and four seats over from the center aisle in the Shiloh Room at the University of Tennessee Knoxville. The speakers are both small and sweet-looking like stereotypical grandparents. But they are not stereotypical. They are survivors of the Holocaust–Schindler Jews.

I sat fixed for two hours as Kuba and Helen Beck each told their World War II stories: the occupation of their towns, the ghettos, the liquidations, the camps, the empty stomachs, the hot water soup and black coffee. Helen wept little. Kuba left out details because children were present. And they both repeated: “We must not forget.” Remember. Remember the six million. Remember the one and a half million children. Remember the unspeakable, unbelievable. Don’t forget.

And I try not to forget. I have seen *Schindler’s List*. I have read Elie Wiesel’s autobiography. I have touched the rusty barbed wire and cooled my hands on the crematory bricks at Dachau. I’ve been to the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. And now I have heard the truth from survivor’s parched mouths. But I still do not understand.

I still can not grasp the numbers. No picture, no book, no museum, no lecture will teach me what I want to know. Nothing and no one can make me suffer enough to understand.

And I wonder, *How am I to remember?* My reading and searching for a way to internalize the Holocaust atrocities leaves me empty. I try to create memories, because I do not have them. And without the memories, how can I remember? How can I not forget the past?

Too many of us have already forgotten. Croatia. Bosnia. Rwanda. Africa. South America. America. All have hosted and host atrocities. But I still go to school. I still eat lunch and laugh about the baseball strike with my tablemates. I still go to work and sleep peacefully at night. And the atrocities rage on . . . because someone forgets to remember. I forget to remember.

Kuba and Helen Beck autographed my lecture program. My throat was tight with bottled tears as I read Helen’s words: “I was there. I remember.” *I wasn’t there*, I thought. *Will I forget?*

I try not to forget. That is why I write about the Holocaust. My poems are snapshots of the horror, snapshots I create—for myself and for others. They are how I try to remember.

Poetry (1994-1995)

Dachau*

You can't walk
In his shoes—
 feel the oozing blisters
 and solid callouses
 from marching to the quarry,

 standing torture,
 carting the sick . . .
 the wounded . . .
 the dead
 (friends,
 family,
 children).

But
He can't walk
In his shoes,
 feel the blisters
 or callouses . . .

He can't march to the quarry.

He can't stand as torture.
He can't cart the bodies.

He can't walk
In his shoes
 because he hangs
 (toes naked and pointed,
 ankles limp,
 heels rested)
 by the rope he smuggled.

Because
He didn't want his shoes.

And
You can't walk
In his shoes
 because you'd have to dig
 through 80,000 to find
Them.

*Dachau was a Nazi work camp in Germany during World War II.

No More Tears: A Poem to Elie Wiesel After Reading The Accident

The boy shivered
at the brink
of his Fate
 (snow collecting like ashes
 on his size 24-month shoes),
at the edge
of a railroad platform,

surrounded by silent sheep
 (lambs of God
 to be train-tracked
 to their slaughter),
surrounded by SS soldiers.

But the bleating
rose from his gut,
passed his vocal chords,
and surfaced

in his eyes--

his dry, bleating
eyes.

Home of the Brave

They did not see
the rockets' red glare,
hear
the bombs in air
on earth
bursting,
had no proof
no proof--
our flag
 (I pledge allegiance . . .
 with liberty and justice
 for all),
our forces,
our faces
 (filled with agony--
 eyes of tears,
 mouths of prayers)--
we were still there . . .
here.

While mothers clung to their screaming babies,
husbands and wives were torn from embracing
 (sliced apart like meat),
fathers chanted prayers
and
a mournful plea rose unison above their shaven heads
the silent sky swallowed.

The stars over Auschwitz broke

and the striped, numbered uni-
forms
lay limp,
 oversized
on skin-covered skeletons . . .

over Washington faded

and Old Glory
lay limp,
 overstated
on her pole.

I embrace
Love
and not
my love--
so embracing,
embrace
nothing,
no one
but myself.

When I feel you coming
before I see you,
pink rises in my cheeks--
 like the pink
 that blushes
 the morning sky,
 like the pink
 that preludes
 the moon--
and my heart beats--
 like the beating of wings
 opening after a long night
 of nesting,
 like the pounding of a dam
 freed after a long winter
 of ice.

You reached for my pen
and brushed the tip
of my finger.
No explosions.
No fireworks.
Just one microsecond
of skin fusion,
one microsecond
that my skin
breathed
 your skin
breathed
 my skin.

Her body
swelled
with his
kisses.

But like the moon,
he withdrew—
slipped slowly
and uneventfully
over the bed's edge,
disappeared
into someone
else's night—
and left
her body
still . . .

still glistening
with his kisses.

You wind me
so tight
that I don't tick
anymore.

She is the shadow of summer,
a goddess
gowned in delicate rain
and petals,
singing the music of vision.

Forest--
 child of Sun and Moon--
dressed with lakes,
possessed with wild music.

She shivers and heaves
life as Day
slips his arms
 around her.

Her skin is a delicious garden,
lusciously like spring--
 of roses and honey.
Her hair is a silent sea,
languidly like summer--
 of rain and sweat.

Tornado Watch

A shy warning--
 flashing, running words
 at the base of his screen:
tornado watch.
He couldn't remember
the difference:
 "Which is worse?
 Warning or Watch?"
Just sat heavier
into his comfort zone--
 unaware,
 unprepared for
 her
 wind and rain.
Hair the color of lightning
and hands like angry winds,
she touched
 down,
 burst his brain,
 left the taste of her
 thunder
 in his gaping mouth--
and blew over
as fast as
she had come.

In My Suitcase

You weren't a one-nighter.
I left my sweater
 draped on your sofa,
wrapped my dripping hair
 in your towel,
parked my toothbrush
 in the cobalt mug on your bathroom counter.

I lived you
more than with you.

But it's a runaway train,
and I have to hop a car
before it passes me by.
I'll grab a rail
and grip with white knuckles
and jump into my future
 with my sweater,
 my toothbrush

and a snapshot of you
 in my suitcase.

Reader

I'm a new book,
a new leather-bound,
gold-leafed
book on his shelf-
full,
an unexplored classic
who will never stop
saying what I
have to say-

but

mute

until he turns
my first page.

My dreams
rise like vapors
in bliss-haze--
a heated sheet,
warm and wet
like love-made
sweat.

It's a rusty
taste
in my mouth,
feel
in my body cavities . . .

in my arms.

I can't drink you,
enclose you,
hold you.
I can't even imagine you.

My mouth,
body,
arms

don't remember

your mouth,
body,
you.

God plunged His finger
into a blazing blue sky--
 rocked and rioted
 by spilling clouds
 and hurling, whirling life--
and drip-dropped
the astral paint
in your eyes.

Lord,
why do I feel
that I have to get out
of Your lap
to know how good it is
to sit still?

Rosary

A pink plastic
Cross
around her neck.
No longer

wood and splinters,
iron stakes,
and thorns.

Just a pink plastic
Cross
and a molded little
Jesus.

Poetry (1991-1993)

The Screw

I do not stand alone;
He holds me.
Firm between thumb
And index,
He presses me.
I do not resist
His nudge
And feel myself
Break the surface
Of my new stronghold,
My fresh foundation.
Slowly he drives
Me deeper,
Deeper still
Into my destiny.
It is easy,
But with each twist
Of his tool
I lose freedom.

I lose breath.

I lose life.

I lose Life.
And I spin
Into my own
Coffin.

He says,
"Don't empty your drawers."
"Leave your dresses hanging in the closet."
"Stay with me."

Your eyes are dams
About to spill
Onto the already drenched soil
Of our marriage.
Don't threaten me with that look.
Beyond the dams are torrents
Of garbage and sludge--
Years of apologetic phone calls,
repentant rose bouquets,
justifying kisses.

No more.
I am a rebellious child
Freed from my demanding chores
As I turn
And walk
Away,
Giving you a full view
Of my stiff back
As I disappear into the
Darkness.

They build slowly with suspense
And break
At climax.
The thunder of impact lays on my senses
Like Grandmother throwing three heavy quilts
On top of the two already covering me--
Thick, heavy,
But
Not smothering. No.
I find peace here--
In the thousands of watery fingers
Playing the shore
Like a grand piano,
Running furiously over the keys.
Yet its simple tune is like a symphony.
Rolling, peaking, turning, crashing . . .
Aaahhh! And resolving . . .
The experienced hands run up the shore's keyboard
Like a confident, charging calvary
Then retreat like
A scolded, cowardly mutt
Only to reengage with fresh strength.
I find my peace here--
Peace in the stormy thunder and crack,
The pounding lull
Of the sea.

She Sat, He Sat

She sat
On the cool, concrete bench
Anxiously buttoning and unbuttoning her buttons
To make sure the buttons were buttoned
And
Watched the brilliant leaves
Fall
a
l
l
Scattering and littering
The heavily congested sidewalk
And
Waited for him
To rush by
But
Notice her new Fall dress.

He sat
On the icy, concrete bench
Nervously snapping and unsnapping his snaps
To make sure the snaps were snapped
And
Watched the intricate snowflakes
Fall
a
l
l
Sprinkling and decorating
The heavily congested sidewalk
And
Waited for her
To hurry by
But
Notice his new Winter jacket.

He came and went.
She came and went.

And now they only wonder.

Identifying

Who is Mother Nature?
Who blows wind
Through my hair,
Dances before my
Eyes with tiny bright wings,
Serenades my ears
And my senses
With sweet songs,
Warms my back
As I sit and rest
And watch the people
Pass me by,
Colors my sight
With vibrant Spring
(Reds, pinks, yellows,
Greens, purples, blues),
Speaks to my heart,
Feeds my hungry soul?

Could Mother Nature--
So sweet, so lovely--be
Father Creator?
Alpha and Omega?
One flesh, one spirit
Of male and
Female?

What Decision?

She laughs lightly
As she speaks to the man
Who has crawled
Out of the shadows
Of days put to rest
Years ago
To lay his head
In her lap
And plea for forgiveness
For a reputation
That once killed them
But he has buried
And resurrected
Clean-changed.
But she knows . . .

And she knows another
Man--the man
Who shares today
With her,
The man who gives
Her
Time and space
To be herself--waits
By the open door,
Already
In tomorrow's
Morning light.

She hears the whisper
Over and over
Like a sweet, sick song
That plants itself
In the brain,
Roots deep
And grows stout.

He had to.
That's what he said,
"I had to."
The dozen white roses and dinner
One November evening
("Just because!"),
The crystal, gold-rimmed candlesticks
("Happy Birthday!"),

The kisses that left his breath
In her mouth . . .
He had to.

He had to?

What makes you think
That I still love you?
I don't call.
I don't write.
I don't walk the same sidewalk.
I don't ride the same bus.
I avoid your calls,
Your letters,
Your glances,
Your "hellos,"
Your advances.
I avoid you!
Don't follow me,
Call me,
Look at me,
Talk to me.
And
PLEASE!
Don't send me flowers!
It's not my fault
 You
Love
 Me,
Because
 I
Don't love
 You.
Never did.
So stop.

An Empty Bed to Hold Him

How can she like someone
Who grates her nerves?
All he does is call . . .

call . . .

call!

Day and night--any time.
It doesn't matter if she's
Tired, sick, or sleeping.
She gets so annoyed
That she turns off the phone
So she can't hear the rings
And waits for the caller
To respond to the rude
Answering machine message.

Though,
How can she hate him?
He's just like her--human.
He's just like her--lonely.
He comes home
To an empty apartment,
 an empty living room,
 an empty kitchen,
 an empty bedroom,

an empty bed.

And all he wants is someone to call,
"How was your day?"
Just needs someone to listen,

to hold his hand,

to hold him.

And he still calls . . .

calls . . .

calls.

And she still doesn't answer.

Sometimes
I think waiting
Is worth it.
No decisions to make
When there aren't
Any decisions.
No feelings to hurt
When there aren't
Any feelings.
No life to share
When there is
No life.
Sometimes
I think waiting
Is worth it.
But
o
n
l
y
Sometimes.

Say, Say My Playmate!

I waited for you--patient
And reserved--to tell me
What your friends
Already knew.

But you didn't say
Anything!
So I walked a little
Faster--wanting
To be chased
But
Not caught.

"Let's play."
"I run."
"You follow."

"Let's play."
"I flirt."
"You flirt back."

But you didn't play
Anything!
So I walked a little
Slower--wanting
To be chased
But
Not caught.

I waited for you--impatient
And unreserved--to tell me
What your friends
Already knew.

But you got a new playmate.

The Organist

In fierce grace,
She releases each breath,
Thrusting language
Into heaven.

With calm repression,
She manipulates each sigh,
Forcing complexity
Into knowledge.

In ravenous petition,
She conjures each exhalation,
Hurling intelligence
Into masses.

With orgiastic attack,
She liberates each respire,
Injecting passion
Into entities.

In the sweetness of his smile,
There reigns peace.
In the blueness of his eyes,
There abides contentment.
In the control of his manner,
There lives intelligence.
But . . .
In the hatred of his commands,
There reigns malice.
In the jealousy of his stare,
There abides madness.
In the swiftness of his fist,
There lives rage.
Oh, God in Heaven!
How I wish people
Saw him
As I have
Felt him.

The Heat

Slicks my body
So
That my hand
Slips from yours.

Drains my body
So
That my lips
Slide from yours.

Ravages my body
So
That my embrace
Steals from yours.

Gets me
Before you
Do.

One,	Two,	Three
Friends.		
One,	Two,	Three
Lovers.		
Three,	Two,	One
God.		

Vital Signs

I passed them
On the teaming highway
Months at a time—
Day after day.
Never time to stop,
Only seconds to read

The signs

As I rushed through traffic
In a hurry to shop:

“Will work for food.”

My heart
Went out to them.
My tears
Fell for them.
However,
My mission:
 A new dress.

But then one night
As I, on vacation
In London, was swept
Off a thudding
City subway car,
Through the herds
Of the never-ceasing
Stampede
I saw another one.

He wore a filthy, torn
Trench coat and
A crumpled black derby.
His feet . . . bare
And calloused.

No sign,
 no buddies . . .
(My breath choked.)
No hunger,
 no booze . . .
(My color vanished.)
No life.

NO LIFE!

Madonna of the Wind

She slips
 down
 the sidewalk
And clutches the scarf
That hugs her hair.
The wind begs to tussle
Her French twist
And teases with gentle
Puffs.
She consents
And releases her mane
Into the whimpering wind.

She slips
 down
 the sidewalk
And behind her billows
Hair like the sun.
The wind twines,
Twirls,
And spins
Her gold
With anxious
Gusts.
She smiles
And shuts out sight
For a fleeting instant
And covers her head
With the sunflowered scarf

And slips
 down
 the sidewalk.

Beach Walk

He is fully clothed but walks
Along the rising shoreline—
His shoes filling with the tide,
His head swimming with memories
Of forgotten birthdays,
Empty stockings,
And lonely weekends.

He is young but smokes,
Dragging long on the cigarette—
His body drowning with smoke,
His brain fishing for answers
For forgotten birthdays,
Empty stockings,
And lonely weekends.

He is cold and stiff but runs
Into the swelling ocean—
His body tumbling with the waves,
His mind sinking . . .
Ending forgotten birthdays,
Empty stockings,
And lonely weekends.

I feel you
Molded to my
Curves--
Two bodies
Resting in the cool,
Fresh earth.

Still,
You meet me
With a power
That beats
My chest
Of its breath.

Still,
I trace
Your figure,
Search
Your face
With my hands--
You wrack me
With sweet sobs.

Still,
I grip
You
Grip me--
Embraced . . .
Breathlessly
At peace.

I feel you.

I feel you
Engraved in my
Senses,
In me--
Two bodies
Resting in the cool,
Fresh earth

Of the cemetery.

For Daddy

Why are you still at work?
We've been waiting for you to come home.
It got so late
I fell asleep.
Sorry, Daddy.
I didn't mean to.
Your hands are cold.
Fell asleep too,
Huh?
Mommy turned down the covers
For you.
It's time to go home, Daddy.
Daddy?
Wake up! It's time to go
Home.

Fresh, old earth.
I weep.
You rest.
Tears water the plot.
Sixteen years,
But no time passed.
Still four.
Still calling
Daddy.

The flowers are for me--
An offering to a past
That never existed,
A reminder of the bicycle
You didn't teach me to ride,
The eighth grade graduation
You didn't attend,
The Saturday nights
You didn't wait up,
The love
You didn't give me . . .
 Concentrated hugs,
 Smothering kisses,
 Tickling whispers of pride.

I miss you, Dad.
The flowers on your grave
Are for me,
But
The memories are for you.

We Were Too Young

I was too young.

I couldn't tie my shoes yet.
I couldn't brush my teeth yet.
I couldn't count yet.

You were too young.

You hadn't taught me to tie my shoes yet.
You hadn't taught me to brush my teeth yet.
You hadn't taught me to count yet.

I hadn't lived yet.
You hadn't lived . . . yet.

You hadn't lived.

Yet . . .

