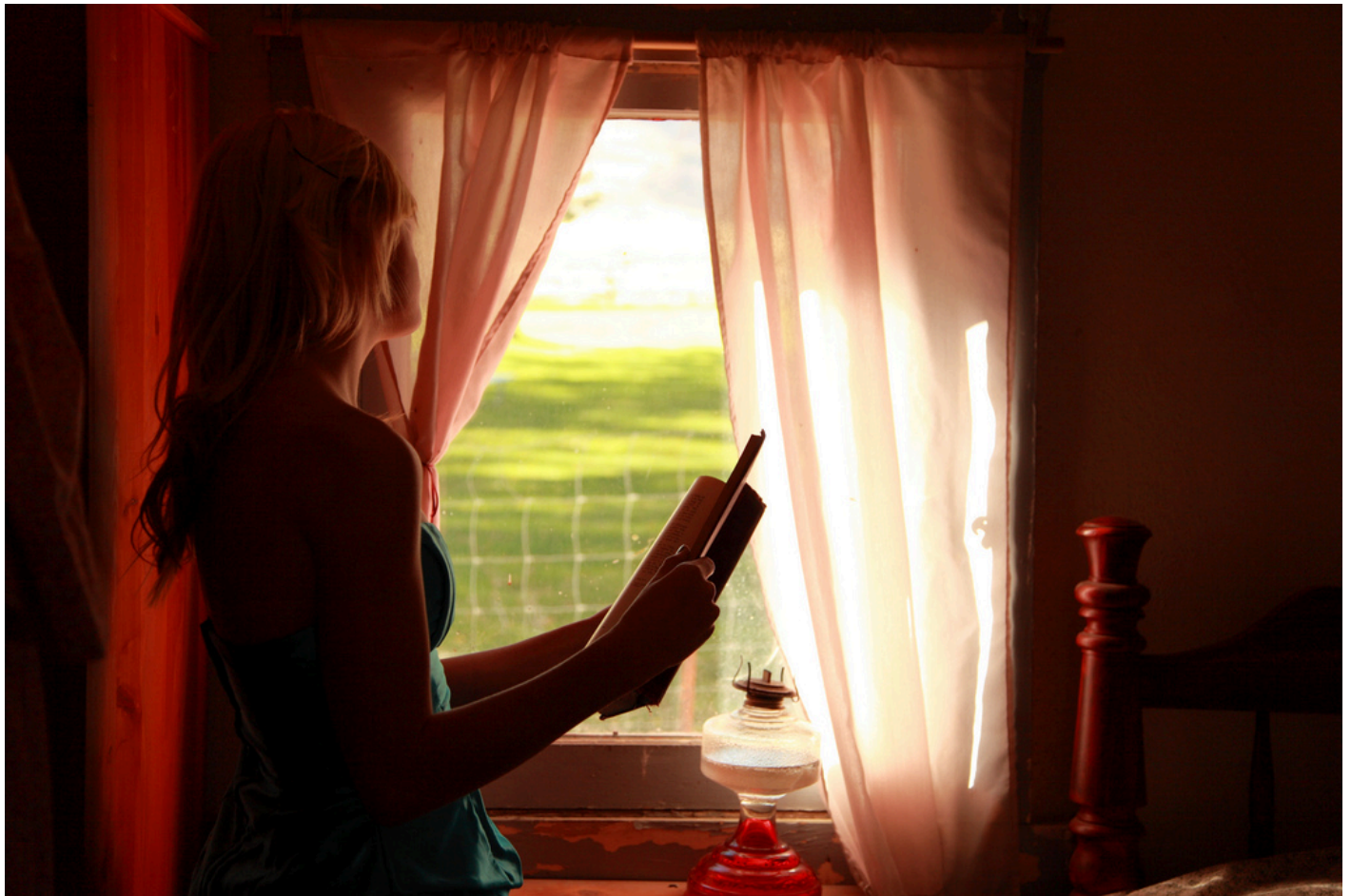# The Girl from Sophomore Year [1]

February 1, 2016   Teaching [2]
Flash Nonfiction [3]

Flash Nonfiction by K. Irene Rieger

When a Gifted Student Changes

She's the sort of girl who shows up to class without shoes. Regularly. "Where are your shoes, honey?" her friends tease. She doesn't know. She says she lost them.

She climbs the trees on the quad, sings spontaneous rap songs, bursts into breakdance. She once threw a party and invited the whole campus in an attempt to create unity among the different student factions. When I ask how it went, she's cautious. She thinks it went well. But she won't do it again. She didn't realize how much her hospitality would cost.

But she's brilliant, too, and kind. I walk into class, and she's turned a difficult theoretical article into a comic strip on the whiteboard, helping her classmates. And as my assistant in freshman comp classes, she manages to squeeze some water from the stoners.

She gets a job as a babysitter, and we compare notes. Her arms are sore, my thumbs are arthritic, from lifting the little ones high in the air.

When it happens, she paints the fore-edges of her textbook black, with a large brush, heavy strokes. The leaves swell with the weight of the paint. I had to, she says. They were already written on. With their black borders, the pages now resemble Victorian mourning cards.

Her grades drop, but that could mean anything. Perhaps a new sculpture constructs itself in her mind, crowding out everything else, or her heart expands to encompass a homesick international student who comes with her own world of treasures and traumas, or maybe the music in her head is loud enough to drown out the sounds of the world around her, as my mind-music did when I was her age.

I'm glad she chooses to confide in me. Certainly, there are links in our stories, connections between her senior year and my own in a small Baptist college. She planned to drink that night and felt guilty for it; the experience was so new and surprising she wasn't even sure what had happened at first. She asked him not to, but she didn't scream or fight. She continued to hang out with him because he was part of her group of friends, and she didn't want to lose the rest of them. (In the end, these forays were fruitless; she became such a hated figure on our small campus that she had to leave permanently for her family farm, finishing her classes and student-teaching long distance.)

She thinks she'll be fine. She tells her sister, but not her parents. She edits the literary journal, turning the often lifeless amateur poems into a tree on the bulletin board outside my office. Her palms in paint, her fingers on phonemes, she mixes pages of the journal with bark from trees on the quad, distracting herself from the pain, perhaps transforming it into this tree that holds her handprints. I remember teaching her Ovid.

The spell is broken when she runs to the bathroom to vomit. It's the morning after pill, she says. It makes you sick.

She writes a poem called "The Girl from Sophomore Year" and reads it to me in my office. It's about how she's changed over the course of her college career. I used to climb trees to read books, she says. Only sometimes I would drop the books, and they would hit someone as they fell. I met a lot of people that way. She is wistful. She doesn't climb trees anymore.

I'm not a friend; I'm just her professor. I'm not an artist, and my feet are always firmly shod; I am no loser of shoes. Still, I need her to be well, because with this brilliant girl, I can feel righteous anger toward that pretty missionary boy with his immaculate reputation. I can hate the counselor who informed her it wasn't rape—that she'd wanted it at the time, and now she's embarrassed to have done it and is taking her self-loathing out on an innocent young man.

Because if it's rape, you can't have been drinking. Because if it's rape, you surely will scream. Because if it's rape, you won't go to the movies with a group of your friends, your rapist among them.

Art Information

- "Girl Holding Book Looking Out Window" [4] © D Sharon Pruitt; Creative Commons license.

K. Irene Rieger is an English professor, fashion historian, and freelance writer whose award-winning work has been published in the *College English Association Critic* and the *Journal for the Liberal Arts and Sciences*. Unfortunately, this was not the first time a student has confided such a story to her.

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[4] https://www.flickr.com/photos/pinksherbet/4046234527/in/photolist-7ay1yg-9QRrEw-qyHTXN-iPRZhz-aqgHyz-7LtUbi-vpzQcg-dveBpj-dUzTQb-67xDTH-w9KPd6-e7gqwd-25Hoy-vCXMhS-nQFW5D-c6MHX7-7oEkMg-jUtw38-o18v66-n6jBwF-9pSPSW-hWg3K-pNPidd-bZdwGd-p6bVT8-8srS63-b5Tvn2-7YyQJY-9Tn5Yi-jbKjZP-djBB9u-fPfypm-6oaw6P-68gc7t-eeNjtm-fKXNqL-4u61Kw-rvU5TM-9t7MsZ-f2xSDN-c9Wnn9-9TDmMi-pXDKZL-nMWhmh-omf2wX-p5Qatc-62bBpe-aaMQG2-8vw3Kk-vtkDnH