

# Folio



*"Mom Getting Some Sun." Photo: Rita Hermann.*

## Editor's Notes

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...When Rita turned sixteen,  
our mother set fire to her sheets  
as Rita slept in bed. Through the flames,

she sang to her, Happy Birthday  
to you, Happy Birthday to you.

—James Cihlar, “House Beautiful”

It is with great pleasure that I introduce the poems of James Cihlar in this issue of *Folio*. This selection of poems about Cihlar’s mother is set in the landscapes and cityscapes of Midwest America. We encounter the narrator and his mother through poems and striking family photographs by Rita Herman, Cihlar’s sister. The images and poems range from depictions of the young woman before marriage, the mother during the narrator’s childhood and adolescence, to the narrator’s estrangement from the mother seen from the lens his identity as a middle-aged gay man. Throughout the collection, the narrator’s voice is accompanied by the stream of daughters, sisters, sister-in-laws, and friends who carry the reader through encounters which culminate with the mother’s aging, the ravages of illness, and death by cancer.

In a series of poems that begins with “What My Mother Used” the poet uses an economy of language in couplets that strike us with blunt force. For example, the title is followed by: “Miss Clairol/Custody,” then later in the poem, another couplet: “Seagram’s/Rage.” The dark humor of the titles that follow: “What My Stepmother Used;” “What My Sisters Used;” “What My Older Sister Used;” “What My Mother Used Later;” are undercut by painful memories.

Throughout these poems, the sense of the narrator’s city is a constant, haunting character. The City Beautiful appears in the poem “House Beautiful,” and Cihlar skillfully plays with notions of aesthetics of home, domestic spaces, while using plain statement to reveal the shocking incident of the mother setting the daughter’s bed on fire. In the last stanza of the final poem “Resolution,” the narrator’s tormented relationship with the mother is the

tension of living, a return to childhood, mother-love tinged with fear:

And I'm middle-aged and fearful,  
Holding my knees to my chin  
On my old bunk bed,  
Waiting for her to crash  
Through the door.

At once powerful and knife sharp, Cihlar's work is also poignant, deeply affecting, and human. Readers can look forward to reading more of Cihlar's poetry in his new book length collection *Undoing*, published by Little Pear Press of Seekonk, MA, edited by Martha Manno.

—Rishma Dunlop



*"We Would Wear the Highest Heels." Photo: Rita Hermann.*