

Dear Charlotte Forten Grimke,

Most young adults these days only know about history from their textbooks and seventy-five minute lectures. But I have found, learning is not analogous to actually knowing. As a Civil War reenactor, when I stand sopping wet and splattered with mud from head to toe, I have seen, I have heard, and I have literally felt the taste of smoking campfires, the look of worn and tattered men, and the deafening roar of undying cannons. Yes, I feel as though I have definitely been there. Yet, it is only a glimpse, one eye peaking through the crack in the door, one finger pulling back the velvety curtain onstage.

As you know, literature is another avenue leading to discovery, not only a pathway to the past, but an avenue to an emotional connection with the period of time in which the poetry was written. Ever since I started re-experiencing history through reenacting, the world of Civil War poetry has swung open, revealing new light on old subjects. I had read a poem here and a poem there, feasting on some and skimming others. Then, I saw a title, your title: The Two Voices. Not knowing whether I was in for a snack, or for a feast, my eyes scanned down to the first line.

"In the dim December twilight

By the fire I mused alone

In addition, a voice within me murmured

In a deep impassioned tone..."

Hooked, I read on and something occurred to me. Could it be that people in the 1860's felt the same bewilderment and tragedy we feel today? Could they not only experience obvious feelings, but also those that are normally hidden from view? Sure, I had examined the historical fiction aisle of my library, and had scrutinized over fuzzy photographs in museums, seeing the careworn and anxiety filled faces of mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives. But, amid all the fictionalized accounts and sepia toned pictures, I had missed the point.

When my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004, life was hard. But, even after the intense "gunfire" had ceased, a battle still raged within me. You would think that the most horrible part of watching someone suffer through cancer would be the actual diagnosis or the chemotherapy treatments, but for me it was the aftermath, the calm after the storm. I had been in survival mode, standing strong, so that she could get through this, and so that at some point, everything would get back to normal. Then, it happened. Everything did go back to normal, and I was left with the realization of what could have happened, and what could have been our future. It was one of the toughest times of my life. This year, when I read line after line of your poem, I saw myself sitting beside you, in front of a roaring fire, with

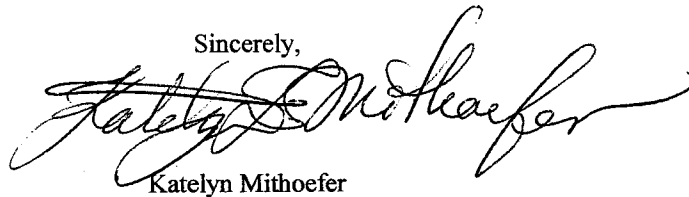
thoughts of doubt and fear creeping in from the surrounding chill, and two voices battling with my thoughts.

*"But does such a vengeful spirit
Soothe thee, and make thee calm and strong?
No, thy inmost life it poisons,
Makes strife more fierce and long."*

It was not only me sitting there; it was every woman who lived during the Civil War. Waiting for the next letter to come, waiting for the war to end, and waiting for the sun to rise. They did not have a single clue to the future of their families, or homes. Yet, I wonder. Could it be that like in my case, the worst day did not dawn until the letter affirming safety had arrived? So I asked myself a question, "Could it be that all the moments spelling death were fully realized after all were safe and happy at home?" You could have written this poem when all should have been well, when everyone around you appeared happy, joyful, and full of life. You also could have been reflecting on a terrible time behind you, healing through the power of verse. But, whenever you wrote The Two Voices, you wrote it for a reason, and I think that I caught a glimpse of your reasoning. Now, when my arms are shivering with the twisting chill of a reenactment, and my ears ring from the sounds of cannon gunfire, I can stand there, and remember more vividly. Because through your poem, I have made a connection to the emotions of the past. I have shared a little in the battle and have watched as the morning finally dawned, and the smoke drifted on a fresh breeze.

*"Ceased the voice; again, in silence
By the fire I mused alone;
Darkly closed the night around me;
But my soul had stronger grown."*

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Katelyn Mithoefer". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "K".

Katelyn Mithoefer