



South Coast Writers Conference

**Winner of the 2012
Bob Simons Award Scholarship**

Cheri Merkley

My background is in marketing and nursing, but my dream was, always, to write. I joined the writing world five years ago, when I submitted a short story to the Festival of Arts in Brookings, and was awarded a grant. Since that time, I've joined a local writing group, have had poetry published in *The Insider*, and a short story published in *Rogue River Echoes*, 2010. I have recently completed my first novel, and am eager to explore new possibilities.

On the Wings of a Mercury

Cheri Merkley

I stared at the flat, nondescript letters that made up my name, before dropping the timecard back into its slot: Sue Jones, an only child, expected to learn the family business. But, my dreams were of music and dancing. *Silly dreams*, I'd been told.

Walking toward the front of my father's paint store, I looked through the windows that banked the building and saw gray skies and the first splatters of raindrops. I prayed my old, temperamental Mercury would start. It was a gift from my grandmother, two months before she died. *A piece of Americana*, she had told me. When I asked her why she held onto it for forty years, she simply gave me a shrug and that half smile of hers. I figured she was comfortable with the car, like everything else in her life: Sarah Jones, wife and mother, known for baking a perfect pie.

Turning the ignition, the engine rumbled to life, and I thought about my grandmother as I pulled onto Highway 238. Had she felt flat and nondescript too? Was that the reason her smile never quite reached her eyes? And did she ever dream?

Impossible, I decided. She never complained. But, as I neared the first stoplight in a string of three, the Wickenburg skies broke loose, and my opinion of her changed forever. Suddenly, thunder was crashing, the rain was pelting down, the lights went out, and then the Mercury fishtailed. I turned the steering wheel, but overcorrected, and the car took off like a waxed sled, flying over the side of the road and down a hill, past a sign that read, *Green Lawn Cemetery*.

The next thing I knew, I was parked in front of a stone pillar. And, someone was sitting beside me.

"Sarah, is it really you?" he asked. "I thought you left me."

"Who are you?" I shrieked.

"It's me, Jake," he announced, as if that would make a difference.

The stormy skies had blended with the fading light of dusk, but I could still make out a beard and long hair, and clothing that hung in strips, a mummy coming unraveled, a shroud of darkness with a voice. And, when he reached toward me, I begged, "Please don't."

"There's nothing to be afraid of," he said. "I won't hurt you. How could I? I love you."

"But, I'm not Sarah," I cried.

He slowly shook his head, saying, "You never did know who you were or what you wanted."

His words stung with familiarity, and I shuddered. Trying to steady my voice, I asked, "Why are you here?"

“To visit friends. Most of them war buddies. Viet Nam.”

I strained to look through the fogged windshield, wondering if anyone else was in the cemetery, and like a spear of fire sent down from Zeus, my question was answered. The rear door opened, and another dark shape climbed into the backseat. Icy breath funneled its way toward me, as a deep voice said, “It’s a cold one tonight.”

Jake pointed his thumb at the man, saying, “That’s one of my buddies. Name’s Gibbs.”

I grabbed the door handle, but it jammed, and Gibbs scolded, “Where are you going? Jake saved for a year to buy this car. Wanted to impress you. Even carved your initials in the dashboard.”

My grandmother’s initials *were* on the dashboard, but she had never mentioned Jake. I was confused and frightened, and my teeth chattered. Jake produced a woolen blanket out of nowhere, but hesitated before handing it to me. It smelled of late October, of ripened apples and dampened leaves gone to decay, of lost love. And, suddenly, I wanted to know more about *his Sarah*.

“Why did she leave you?” I asked.

Gibbs answered for Jake. “He was in love, wanted to get married and have a family, work at his dad’s hardware store. But, that wasn’t enough for you. You wanted adventure.”

Jake cleared his throat, but Gibbs continued. “He went off to war. Shouldn’t have been there. He wasn’t a soldier. And, then you did exactly what he had wanted to do—got married and had kids—only with someone else. The day he received your letter, was the day he gave up.” Gibbs saluted then and disappeared.

I knew the rest of the story without hearing it. He had given the Mercury to my grandmother, so she could pursue her dreams. Only she hadn’t.

“I’m sorry,” I offered.

“No need for that,” Jake replied. “You weren’t responsible for my happiness. *I was.*”

His words warmed me as much as his blanket had, and I reached over and laid my hand on his. Unable to keep my eyes open, I slept. When I awoke the next morning, my car was, indeed, parked in front of a stone pillar, but I was alone. And there was no blanket. Certain that it had all been a dream; I started the car and backed away. But, as the inscription on the pillar came into view, I stopped. It was my grandmother’s headstone.

Sarah Jones

1947-2010

You control your happiness

Travel many roads until you find it

I smiled at the ornate letters, as they danced in morning sunlight, dipping and swirling in perfect harmony. There was nothing flat or nondescript about them, and I finally understood. She had given me wings.