

Judges Commentary on “Rewrite History (We’ll Burn Bridges, You and I)”

by Rikki Li

Second Place Award in the 2013-14 Composition Program Writing Contest

In the first sentence of Rikki Li’s essay, “Rewrite History (We’ll Burn Bridges, You and I),” the reader is immediately thrown into a swift existential vortex:

Zero, and everything starts like this; kicking and screaming and choking on the particles of consciousness that flash behind your eyelids like little explosions, *electric*, you’d say if you could spit it out, *electric* because the world is a collision and you are the creation, yes—you crawled out of the wreckage vibrating with energy, atoms firing in all directions, and in this moment, right *here*, you could have been anything you wanted, anything if only you had known to ask for it.

And so, with lightning language like this, the reader is braced to hold on for Li’s inquiry into how we “become”—as in, how we enter from nothing into this world—and then how we *become*—as in, how our imagined selves, the stories others tell us about ourselves that help us create our own identities, are born. Li’s opening birth scene shows clearly how *They*—the arbiters of power and influence—begin to put us in boxes. After birth, we’re measured and weighed—and yes, named: our ultimate burden that begins the mythology of our being.

Li’s essay is organized into sections with various definitions of the word “smart.” At a young age, the speaker was separated from her classmates because *They*—her teachers—realized she was, well, *smart* at math, so they place her into a gifted program. Li didn’t understand why math was important—she asked, but nobody really explained the significance—but she did learn that it felt good to be praised. She did learn that it felt good to be called the “smart girl.”

One learns from the assignment that this essay is supposed to be an inquiry into John Taylor Gatto’s opinions against schooling. With magnetic leaps and repetition, Li shows that all of our separations have been learned—and that school is a major player in creating hierarchies, separating the “haves” from the “have-nots,” so to speak, disciplining us to become *addicts* for praise: “*I am addicted to approval*,” Li says at one point—and so, we learn to self-discipline ourselves, until we finally learn that the boxes we were placed in are actually empty. The speaker discovers this and “breathes” “finally”—as the unknown is ahead of her. Time to re-write history, burn it. Time to “dream loud and run free.”