

# The Heron's Hymn

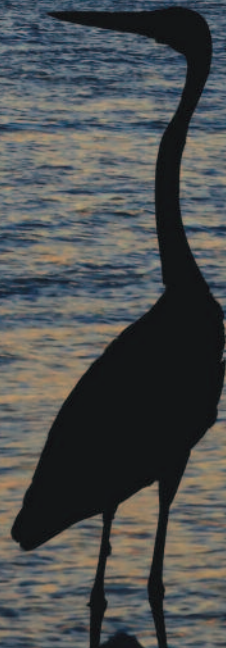
by Peyton Smith



LAURA EMERY PHOTO



Peyton Smith today (above) and (left) with her late grandmother, Sally Smith.



# Grandmother's Love Inspires Student's Winning Essay

I read Terry Tempest Williams' *When Women Were Birds* after my grandmother passed away last fall. Her retreat from this world left me silently heartbroken. As I turned the pages of Williams' book, the words were quietly reassuring; they buried themselves deeper and deeper into my conscience. My grandmother's presence drifted slowly back to me as she became increasingly intertwined with my ethereal passion for birds.

One of Williams' thoughts, in particular, was responsible for this spiritual reunion: "Once upon a time, there was the simple understanding that to sing at dawn and to sing at dusk was to heal the world through joy. The birds still remember what we have forgotten, that the world is meant to be celebrated."

My love for birds and for the natural world existed long before I picked up Williams' book; however, her sweet-tempered words certainly solidified my adorations. More importantly though, these words expressed the very essence of the relationship that I shared with my grandmother. In coping with her passing, I was struck by perhaps the most perfect example of timing in my short life: the combination of Williams' lovely message and an ornithology class that I was enrolled in for the spring semester.

My grandmother was gentle and she was passionate. She celebrated the natural world, and she shared with me her song. Her garden, her love for the water, for old Virginia, for good-natured tradition and a breath that was often stolen by the beauty she encountered in her life. Her home in Virginia Beach on the Linkhorn Bay, a heaven of sorts, was where I spent many summers as a child.



PEYTON SMITH PHOTOS

After she passed away, I often put myself to sleep by tracing the edges of a map of the Chesapeake Bay affixed to my bedroom wall with thumbtacks. The gentle but intricate curves of Virginia's rivers and coastlines reminded me of my grandmother. They reminded me of her morning walks through her garden to acquaint herself with the new day, her attention to the fluctuation of each year's ocean, and her eye for all things simple yet remarkable at the same time. Virginia's coast and the birds that I imagined encountering on its beautiful shores became a welcomed distraction to the grief that I was experiencing. As the days grew warmer, I anticipated my professor's daily announcement about which warblers had migrated through the night and made it to his neighborhood. He described their sweet songs, a sensation that I regret never fully appreciating until the year my grandmother died.

The fresh and fragile landscape of spring and its spectacular fleeting migrants absorbed my troubles. I spent much of spring in my garden where the aroma of peonies and lilies filled the air. I focused on opening my ears to the chorus that echoed above me in the treetops, remembering what my ornithology professor had taught me in the last weeks of class. I looked beyond my garden fence and saw a Chestnut-sided Warbler for the first time. I stared in disbelief as the bird retreated to the depths of the ravine. How could I have possibly been so oblivious? These birds, which for a time lived only in the pages of my field guide, existed in my very own backyard. Why was it just this year that my eyes were introduced to the most brilliant ornaments of the natural world? Timing is a strange, but remarkably beautiful creation.



## PEYTON SMITH – COOPERATIVE LIVING AWARD WINNER

Elizabeth Peyton Smith is the winner of this year's *Cooperative Living Award*, part of the Virginia Outdoor Writers Association's (VOWA) annual writing contest.

A Richmond native, Peyton is a rising senior at the College of William & Mary, majoring in environmental science and government.

Peyton's interests include bird watching, photography, spending time outdoors, gardening, and music. She is also particularly interested in Virginia's geography, especially the lower Chesapeake Bay, the Eastern Shore, and other coastal areas and ecosystems.

She says, "After school, I hope to gain farming and livestock experience, so that I might one day work on a farm or start an operation of my own."

If you're a high school or college student and would like to enter the 2015-16 VOWA writing contest, visit the VOWA website at [www.vowa.org](http://www.vowa.org) and click on the Contests tab.

I've made an effort ever since this discovery to chase these alluring beings, to indulge my need to escape to the woods, to the coastline, to the shore. As my boots sink into the mud of coastal Virginia marshes, I take the deepest breath I can manage. I fill my lungs with a precious breeze that creeps softly through the sharp grasses, providing solace to the very core of my being. All of these wonders are celebrations. They are songs.

My grandmother shared Virginia's coast and its sensational rhythm with me. I've chased Clapper Rails and Seaside Sparrows through the salt marshes of the Eastern Shore. I've cherished the coo of an Eastern Screech-Owl harmonizing with a chorus of Spring Peepers in an earnest effort to greet the night. I've wallowed at the brilliance of a Prothonotary Warbler's golden feathers, contrasting sharply with the young green needles of a cypress tree. I listen as he sings to claim his lovely territory. This land is rich, and its song spectacular.

All of these wonders fill me with gratitude for a perspective that was shaped by many things, but especially by my grandmother, and by the birds.

When I look out over the moonlit coastal marshes of Virginia, the water extending as far as my unknowing eye can reach; I see mystery, majesty: a vast liquid desert. On calm days this tranquil habitat may even restore lost faith. A blue heron whooshes its powerful wings as its dark silhouette glides smoothly into the quiet distance. Virginia is home to the things I've cherished most in my life: my grandmother, the coast, and the birds.

This home, a show-and-tell of sorts, is undoubtedly the most marvelous song to have ever graced my ears. ■

