Scene: Today is the fourth day of the UW-Milwaukee National Writing Project, and my fellows and I are in the midst of a writing marathon. Our task is to tour UWM’s campus and write about anything that strikes us. At the moment, we are visiting the Zelazo Center, formerly a Jewish synagogue, and we are sitting in the balcony of the sanctuary because we couldn’t find anywhere else to sit. Unexpectedly, it is Freshman Orientation Day at the Center, and groups of parents and fresh students are spilling out from the auditorium into the already crowded entry way. Also, several recruiters and admission personnel are ushering people to their seats, and a blond woman, who looks as young as most of the new fresh students, is beginning to lecture on the importance of enrollment and tuition. As I focus on the stained glass windows and huge crowd, I am reminded of a childhood experience.

This feels like church, the Catholic Church I attended in Compton, 5th grade, when I realized I could have a conversation with God without the presence of a priest.

I remember being squished in a sweaty wooden pew, rubbing my Peter Pan sleeves and pleated wool skirt against Regina’s midnight skin. We were singing something about sheep, and I imagined cotton-balled creatures with pink button noses floating across the cathedral ceiling, and then asked myself why.

Then I spotted him, Father Gleason, the revered man-like figure, wearing starched white robes draped with a metallic apron that resembled some modern-day shield. As he lifted his arms to the heavens singing melodious “Alleluias”, I closed my eyes and imagined myself doing the same, only I was orchestrating a symphony of horns and violins, and my robe was silky golden.

When I came back from my vivid fantasy, somewhat dazed and bewildered, I awoke to Father Gleason asking God to forgive us our sins. What sins? I thought. Mine? His? Sister Constance’s for accusing me of flirting with Maurice because I played basketball with him at recess? I could believe that my classmate Walter Lewis, who got caught stealing nickels from the “pagan baby” collection, had sinned but me? I was hurt by Father’s assumption. How would he know? In my defense, I began to question Catholicism, priesthood, and God. If God is so powerful, why do I
need a priest to talk to Him? I wondered if anyone else near our crowded pew thought the same, or if I was all alone in this sweaty pew.

Yeah, this feels like church, the Catholic Church I attended in Compton, 5th grade. The difference now is that a young woman wearing pants, purple, and pumps is singing something about tuition and money. I close my eyes and imagine myself rubbing my Peter Pan sleeves and pleated wool skirt against Regina’s beautiful skin.