



# *True Words from Real Women*

A Special Story Issue of the *Story Circle Journal*

April 2004

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*Thoughts drift  
with the tides  
While a great blue heron  
watches knowingly  
The past swirls with  
the present  
Thoughts drift  
to memories  
of yesterday.*



—From *Time and Tides*  
by Lee Ambrose (p. 20)

## Editor's Notes

As newborns, we all came into this world filled with optimism and trust and love—sometimes called the unconditioned mind. As we grow up, our experiences lead us to form beliefs about life that act as a filter on our experience, but always, in back, there is a yearning to return to that infant mind of love and optimism. It is usually only later in life that we can see our beliefs for what they are and move past them to reclaim the paradise that is the unconditioned mind.

One of the most powerful tools we have for reclaiming the unconditioned mind is life-writing, where we revisit the events of our past and reconsider their true meanings. The stories in this year's anthology, beautifully illustrate the movement that each writer and we all as human beings must make through memory, in search of the unconditioned mind.

This anthology is arranged in five sections. We begin in section I with the loving, trusting, unconditioned mind, most easily seen in stories from childhood. In section II, the tribulations of life begin to create the beliefs that make up the conditioned mind.

Even in our dark periods, nature can offer us a glimpse of the paradise to which we long to return, and the nature writing in section III takes us to this paradise. In section IV, we read how some of us have discovered a key to the unconditioned mind. And finally in section V, the stories complete the cycle of the generations, by telling of the unconditional love shared with children and grandchildren.—*Jane Ross, Editor*

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## Story Circle Network

*True Words from Real Women* is an anthology, published yearly. It is written by and for women who want to share their experiences. Its purpose is to encourage readers to become writers, guide women to set down their true stories, and encourage the sharing of women's lives. It is not intended to replace qualified therapeutic assistance.

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**See Editor's Biography on p. 26.**

ISSN: 1093-7528

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### Membership Rates

*One Year \$24 US*

*\$36 elsewhere*

Foreign Memberships:

International Postal Money Order

*only, please*

### Editorial Address

**Story Circle Journal**

**PO Box 1616,**

**Bertram TX 78605-1616**

**Back Issues:** Back issues are available either as first-run or photocopies, for \$5.50 each (includes first class postage). Canada, Mexico, and elsewhere: \$8 each.

**Missed Issues:** We try to ensure that *True Words from Real Women* arrives in your mailbox each spring. If you miss an issue, send us a note and we'll mail you a replacement.

**Change of address:** If you move, please tell us. Unless you send us your new address, we can't guarantee that you'll receive your journal!

## § 1

*We huddled there, breathing the slightly smoky air that came from the kerosene lantern, our only light, snug and safe in our cozy, shadowy womb of Mother Earth.*

### Grandma's Cellar

EJ Phillips  
Santa Fe NM

A mound of dirt, a heavy wooden door with a large black iron handle, a vent of some kind rising from the back of the mound—that was my grandparents cellar. The clay colored hill just outside my grandparents' back door was packed hard from the bare feet of my cousins and me as we scampered up and over it. We, pretending it was a huge mountain, chased each other up and around it, playing hide 'n' seek, or riding magnificent, imaginary steeds.

Down wooden stair steps into the cool darkness. I loved the slightly musty, earthy smell that I breathed in. Wooden shelves lined three walls of the cellar. Rows of Kerr jars marched along on those shelves, jars filled with red cherries that Grandma had put up to make her wonderful cherry cobbles, jars of golden corn, green beans, burgundy colored pickled beets, the yellow-green of fresh peas—a riot of color on parade. In the corner were several brown burlap sacks filled with potatoes, carrots, and onions. Grandpa was a gardener, you see. I think they gave away to friends as many of those jars of fruit and bags of veggies as they kept and used.

In the summer, a large cottonwood tree shaded the cellar door as well as shading several chairs that sat not too far from it. My Grandma Rose and Grandpa Gordon sat in those chairs each summer evening, visiting with friends and relatives that stopped by. And it was there, near that door that tables were set up and then loaded with homemade goodies. Deviled eggs sprinkled with paprika, hot corn-on-the-cob dripping with butter, crispy country-fried chicken, mouth-watering chocolate cakes—wonderful summertime picnic foods.

I was 10 when my father passed away. Until that time, we lived on a farm 15 miles west of where my grandparents lived. After he died, Mother moved us, my three siblings and I, into a house a block or so from my grandparents' home. I don't remember summer storms until that time, so maybe 1948 was an exceptionally stormy spring or maybe it was that we had just lost our father, and Mother felt her parental responsibilities strongly, but it seemed many times that summer she chased us down into that cellar, supported convincingly by lightning bolts, roaring claps of thunder, and fierce winds. More than once she got the four of us out of bed in the middle of the night and herded us through the darkness to find Grandma and Grandpa already in the cellar waiting for us. And there was the afternoon storm when Mother couldn't find my younger sister. Just as she finally located her and

propelled her down those solid wooden steps, the skies opened and a deluge of water hit the cellar door, slamming it shut behind them. My mother, my strong, nothing-can-faze-me mother, sank to the floor, crying.

Back then, before TV storm warnings and sophisticated weather practices, if a tornado hit a populated area, there might be severe injuries or deaths, yet as neighbors, friends, and relatives clustered together in Grandma's cellar, the atmosphere was one of laughter and camaraderie. We huddled there, breathing the slightly smoky air that came from the kerosene lantern, our only light, snug and safe in our cozy, shadowy womb of Mother Earth.



**He Was My Hero**  
Carolyn Blankenship  
Austin TX

I was going to be a cowgirl. My heroine was Annie Oakley, who struck my fancy when I saw *Annie Get Your Gun*. She was right in the middle of everything, and she took no guff from anyone. My fantasies were all about riding the range and righting wrongs like Gene Autry, the Lone Ranger, the Cisco Kid, and Zorro. (Roy Rogers was just kind of annoying, though I did admire Trigger.) I never wanted to be a guy, I just wanted to do the things they did, and it never occurred to me that I couldn't. Fortunately, no one ever implied that I shouldn't do something just because I was a girl—one of the perks of being brought up in Texas, I guess. My mom grew up on a farm and didn't expect me to be a "little lady," though she was deeply pleased that my younger sister liked to play with dolls, since I had no interest in them.

My heroes were anyone who owned, rode, wrote about, or knew anything about horses, and my Uncle Buster. He was a handsome man, with a rolling laugh, a deep tan, and a full black mustache that tickled my neck when he hugged me. He loved animals and nature and shared his knowledge with my cousins and me on long walks in the hills above the Frio River where he lived.

On our yearly summer visits, Uncle Buster would gather up the kids and take us on long treks in the hills and along the river, telling us what plants and snakes were poisonous, where deer slept during the day, and how to keep the ticks off. We would offer up the contents of our pockets to him and he would dump any rocks we'd found into the barrel of his rock polishing machine and set it to tumbling. On our last day, he would produce gleaming treasures—agate, tigers eye, or rose quartz—that would become our summer keepsakes and the first "show and tell" objects of the new school year. He taught us where to swim and tube and which currents were treacherous. He showed us how rubbing the leaves of wild

*(Continued on page 4)*

(Continued from page 3)

honeysuckle on nettle stings or poison ivy rash would ease the itching. We were sure he knew everything worth knowing.

After supper, as the evening breezes moved down the canyon, Uncle Buster would sit with us kids on the bluff overlooking the Frio, sharpening his pocket knife and spinning tale after tale of stalking cougars, courageous dogs, flooded rivers, rattlesnakes as big as your arm, and the mythical white stag. (I actually saw the white stag many years later, but that's another story.) Never once did he talk down to us; he treated us as peers. The other adults would relax on the porch, feet propped up, smiling indulgently at Uncle Buster's tales, talking desultorily among themselves. We always knew Uncle Buster was one of us—more like Peter Pan than a real adult. He was absolutely my hero. I wanted to be just like him, know everything he knew about rocks and rivers and rattlesnakes, be able to walk through the forest without making a sound, spin tales that would keep folks mesmerized, and live in the hill country with a fawn for a pet. He was the only person who never made fun of me for wanting to capture wild horses and raise them; in fact, we would discuss whether the best Mustangs could be found in Montana or Wyoming, and whether we should look for lost Spanish gold in south Texas first to fund our adventure.

Well, I never actually caught a wild horse, though I've ridden many tame ones, and I never performed in a Wild West show except in my head—but every time I tube down the Guadalupe, wander through the woods, or hike through the hills, I think of my Uncle Buster, and he looms as large in my memory as he did striding through the summers of my childhood.

### **My First Job**

**Pat Flathouse**

Austin TX

My first job, aside from baby-sitting, began the summer I was 14. That was in 1955. I was bored to tears at home and was trying to learn to knit, but mostly just tangling up the yarn on two pointy needles. However, about two weeks into the summer, Daddy called from the wholesale hardware company where he worked. He had just heard that they needed catalog stringers and wondered if I wanted a job for the summer. The pay would be the marvelous sum of a dollar an hour. I was ecstatic and agreed immediately! I was to start my first job the next morning, so I got up early, ate a good breakfast, dressed in my finest clothes, and rode to work with Daddy. I had my purse and my sack lunch with me. I felt so excited that I had hardly slept the night before.

At work, Daddy introduced me to my new boss, and my new boss introduced me to the time machine where I would punch in each morning and punch out each evening. The time machine would keep track of my work hours and determine my pay for each two-week pay period. My job consisted of standing up for eight hours a day before head-high racks of

catalog pages to string together new weekly price sheets and inserts for the salesmen's catalogs. These pages were printed on huge printing machines in the department where we worked. We would then insert the packets of pages into brown envelopes to be mailed out each week for the traveling salesmen to show to customers across a five-state area. This job was easy—a real no-brainer. My two co-workers were Thelma, an older woman who lived out in the country with an invalid husband, and Anne, a college freshman. Thelma cheered us up and kept us fed by bringing in gorgeous flowers and wonderful snacks she made for our workroom. Her delicious baked goodies fed us well to keep up our energy, and her remarkable dahlias brightened up our rather dreary workspace. Anne kept me entertained by talking about her college life. She also talked about her boyfriend who taught swimming at a camp in Kerrville. Her boyfriend's job sounded so exciting that those tales planted the seeds of an idea for a future job for me.

Our task of stringing catalog pages was easy and fun for me, and my first paycheck was one of the great delights of my life! That very day, Daddy helped me open my first bank account, and I got checks of my very own. Then I went with Mother to Fedway and bought the first two blouses I ever had that Mother had not made for me. My first job was such an exciting adventure, and it opened up the world of work for me!



### **Lilacs for Mrs. Moore**

**PJ Pierce**

Austin TX

"I see that the first lilacs have blossomed," my mother would say on that magic day each April when the warm Panhandle sun had awakened the purple blooms on the big bush in our backyard. And handing me the well-used kitchen shears, she would say, "Now cut only the ones whose blooms are open—and we'll put them in water and you can take them to Mrs. Moore."

Mrs. Moore lived next door. She had been blind since well before I was born—and she had been old as long as I could remember, too. Her name was Lee, but I never called her that. And although the two were good neighbors, my mother always called her "Mrs. Moore"—never "Lee"—although Mrs. Moore called my mother "Pauline." Mr. and Mrs. Moore had raised one son, Rex, who still lived with them, although he was probably 30. Mrs. Moore had had measles when she was pregnant with Rex. He had been born with only one leg and his limp was quite apparent as he maneuvered on his wooden leg. Rex rarely spoke to us children, and we were somewhat afraid of him. After we were old enough to have read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, we began calling him Boo Radley behind his back.

Mr. Moore was old like his wife. He was a man of few words but nice in his own way. We weren't afraid of him. But Mrs. Moore was the one we could always count on to be warm

and welcoming. She was delighted when she opened her front door to find me or my brothers and sisters there for a visit. We knew to lift our face so she could feel it with her fingers, reading faces like she did her Braille books. That way she could always recognize which one of the ten Robertsons I was. Mom tried to make sure that at least one of us visited her every day—to make sure she was okay and because she didn't get out much. Mom didn't want Mrs. Moore to be lonely. Mr. Moore and Rex weren't good conversationalists, we knew. But Mrs. Moore liked to talk.

Since there were so many of us, we shared the task of visiting Mrs. Moore. I don't think any of us ever saw our visits as a chore. Mom encouraged us to go alone—or sometimes in pairs, so as not to overwhelm Mrs. Moore with too many little voices. My whole family was involved with the Moore family. Mrs. Moore would call my dad at his grocery store every other day to put in her order, and my dad would deliver her groceries when he came home from work. He would chat as he helped put groceries away in their kitchen.

I remember many long conversations with Mrs. Moore during solo visits throughout my growing-up years. Once she told me about the day when she discovered that she was going blind. She had been a young mother. "I'd been canning peaches all day," she said. "I was tired, so I sat down at the kitchen table and rested my head in my hands. My right eye was covered with my hand. I was shocked at the darkness. That's when I knew my left eye was blind," she remembered. Shortly after that, she had lost sight in her right eye as well. Now, doctors repair retinal detachments every day. But in the 1920s, ophthalmology wasn't very far along.

Mrs. Moore didn't let her blindness keep her from the chores of daily life—or from her favorite pastime: working with plants. Our best conversations happened when she was tending her garden. She knew all of the plants by their smell and feel and would educate me about them. It was that way with the lilacs. I must have been about five years old when I began delivering treasures—such as lilacs—to Mrs. Moore. "Hi, Mrs. Moore," I would say. "I have brought you some flowers from our yard." And although Mom had coached me on the word "lilac" before I left home, I had forgotten it by the time I handed them over to Mrs. Moore. "What are they, honey?" she asked me. "Ummm...I can't remember," I said, embarrassed that I had forgotten.

She held the tiny purple blossoms to her nose and said, "Oh, lilacs!" From then on, each April I would bring the first lilacs to Mrs. Moore. And, although I never forgot the name "lilac" again, I would sometimes let her smell first—just to see if she could still recognize the scent. I could never fool her. Although her blue eyes were faded and glazed over with the film of blindness, she could identify by fragrance the various flowers I would bring. In March, jonquils then hyacinths and forsythia, in late April, lilacs, and in the summer, roses.

Lilacs are scarce in my life now. It must be too hot for them to thrive down here in Central Texas where I have lived for many years. So on the rare occasion when I breathe in that delicate, delicious scent, I am thrilled to be back on Mrs. Moore's doorstep, offering her the first lilacs of April.

## § 11

*So my brother began his eight-year  
homeless odyssey carrying one small,  
nearly weightless item. Unless you count  
the tormenting voices in his head. He  
carried their weight everywhere.*

**Priorities**  
**Mary Elizabeth**  
Austin TX

I'd been writing stories and poems since I was in first grade, but inspiration completely possessed me in fifth grade when I first encountered *MAD* magazine. Satire became my forte and my steady diet of Warner Brothers westerns, *Gunsmoke*, and *Rifleman* became the grist for my prolific parody mill. Mrs. Murray, my teacher, encouraged me and let me read my stories to the class. I was having a great time and at these moments forgot about my typically overwhelming shyness. My tour de force that year was "Naugahyde," a parody about cowboys driving a herd of cattle to Sedalia. I learned the word "naugahyde" from watching *The Price Is Right*.

Cindy Boldt wrote stories too, but not as many as I did. Cindy played the piano very well and did not read *MAD* magazine. She did not write satires. Her stories achieved some depth, even for a fifth grader. Cindy was known for being responsible, and my mother often suggested I be more like her. Her working class family was large and she didn't watch as much TV as I did. Cindy was the kind of girl whom adults trusted. She helped her mother wash and dry the dishes after dinner. My two older brothers were in the same grades as Cindy's two older brothers. The oldest pair were close friends. I heard a lot about the virtues of Cindy and her family.

Dorothy Woods was bossy and authoritative and this was rarely questioned, even though it was often the subject of her classmates' complaints. Dorothy did not write stories. Her father was an English professor at the university. She had three older sisters. They lived in a huge, proud house on Summit Street that evoked scenes of carriages pulled by perfectly matched Hackneys, women in velvet gowns, and a wailing ghost or crazy old woman locked in the attic.

Dorothy learned all the trendy insults from her sisters and she especially liked to practice them on me. I was her best audience because my feelings were always hurt. I begged Dorothy to explain to me why I was a "cad" or a "dolt." I tried to explain my shortcomings to her in long, insightful notes. I told her I would gladly change my ways if only someone would tell me what to do. As if pleading for justice, I added

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that my burden of having so many innate faults was heavier due to the fact that my mother was always angry about them and that I didn't have a father. I didn't really know how not having a father played into this, but I knew it sounded dramatic, and it got people's attention because it wasn't very common in 1959. My mother alluded to its significance by frequently saying in exasperation, "If your father were here!"

Dorothy seemed to take me under her wing for a while and try to help me overcome my problems. Maybe she was just exploring my vulnerabilities more deeply. She advised me to look up, not down at the sidewalk, when I walked. She counseled me on the importance of having a boyfriend while seeming to compete with me for the attentions of my true love, Dean, who was also verbally precocious, able to draw life-like human figures, and who was learning to play the violin. Dorothy and I both watched *American Bandstand* and she advised me that I could learn techniques of relating to boys by observing Carmen and Yvette and the other girls on the show. It was Dorothy's influence that helped me talk my mother into letting me carry a bucket bag and wear hose (but only to church).

My mother liked the idea that I was becoming Dorothy's friend. Cindy remained the preferred model, but Dorothy's parents had some status in the community. Dorothy's extroversion was the hoped-for antidote to my extreme introversion.

One day Cindy approached me in a much more confidential way than usual. Cindy was almost always straightforward, never had secrets, and treated everyone with a friendly respect. Cindy got along with everyone and didn't seem to need one best friend. Dorothy and I were much more concerned with social hierarchies, status, and manipulation. Dorothy was straightforward about this, whereas I was surreptitious.

Cindy told me that I should be careful not to give Dorothy my stories if Dorothy should ask me for them. Cindy said that Dorothy asked one day if she could take the stories home with her to check for spelling errors and possibly suggest improvements. Cindy said she hesitated but, not being able to come up with a good enough reason for not going along with Dorothy's plan, she handed over many pages of white, blue-lined notebook paper covered on both sides with her handwritten stories. Cindy said Dorothy never gave them back. When she asked Dorothy about them, Dorothy told her she lost them. I heard the hurt in Cindy's voice. "I don't know if she destroyed them or not," Cindy added, "but I never saw them again. Don't give her yours if she asks for them." I was touched at Cindy's protectiveness of me and my stories.

Of course, it wasn't long after this that Dorothy approached me with her characteristic air of authority. She didn't ask me if she could take my stories home with her. Like a skilled attorney, she conveyed the assumption that I had already agreed to hand them over. I don't think we used words like "edit" and "revise" yet, but that's what she was suggesting. Even Cindy wouldn't have thought of making handwritten copies.

I remembered Cindy's warning. I felt the urgency of wanting to be Dorothy's friend. I wanted to escape by suddenly becoming invisible. Dorothy demanded my stories again, more forcefully. I knew better. I tried to take a stand with myself, but my body gave in. My hands pulled the white, blue-lined sheets of notebook paper covered on both sides with my writing out of my desk and abandoned them to her. I never told Cindy.

I never saw them again. I never confronted Dorothy about it. I kept reading *MAD* magazine, watching TV, and writing stories through sixth grade. But I didn't feel the same rush of inspiration. The words no longer flowed as if already formed in my pen.

In seventh grade, Cindy and Dorothy were getting straight A's every semester. I did poorly in math. Dorothy was a cheerleader. Cindy enthusiastically started playing the flute the year before and was now sitting second chair in the band. My mother allowed me to quit my dreaded piano lessons and followed that by forcing me to take flute lessons. I was last chair of twelve. Dorothy was still insulting me. I turned beet red and stuttered whenever teachers called on me. We had to take showers in gym class. Menstrual periods started. I didn't have a boyfriend. I never saw Dean any more. I had to make some major change in myself somehow. Giving up writing didn't seem like much of a loss. My third grade teacher, Miss Montgomery, said children outgrow these things. Maybe I already had.

**Just Yesterday**  
**Mary Lou Schultz**  
 Austin TX

A little boy had his sixth birthday on board a ship bound for the United States from England. The only family member in attendance was his seven-and-a-half-year-old brother. The brother was old enough to view the trip as a grand lark. The sad, scared, frustrated, angry boy felt very much as if his mother had thrown him away.

The year was 1940. The German bombing of London was a daily occurrence. The lady with the baby and two young boys were among many waiting for medical attention in the relative safety of a poorly lit basement.

It was the baby who needed attention. The boys had fed their 18-month-old brother some raw beans they found in the garden. The baby's stomach was distended and the doctors held out little hope for his survival. They had more immediate patching-up to do. Not that they weren't concerned about the little tyke, but they felt their attention should go to those who had a greater probability of pulling through.

The lady was in a state of resigned anguish. She found herself alone in the situation. Her veterinarian husband had

boozed and womanized his way through a third practice, this time bankrupting her. The opportunity to spend the duration of the war at a plantation in Virginia had been offered by a wealthy man of English ancestry to a very small group of children. Making the decision out of love and desperation, she managed to get her two older boys on the list. They were in London on their way to the ship when the baby got sick.

By some miracle, suddenly the baby exploded at both ends, expelling everything. Although it seemed like another catastrophe at the moment, that mess assured his continuance, even into adulthood.

Thus the good-byes were said and her two boys, along with a dozen or so other children, were off to a safe haven.

Eventually the war ended and most of the children returned to their families, but not the two young brothers. Even though the lady and her husband had repaired their marriage, there was no money to bring the boys home.

The brothers were sent to an orphanage in New York City. Many people were interested in helping English war orphans, but, when the boy who had his sixth birthday on the ship was taken by a family for a weekend, he behaved so badly they brought him right back. He surely was not going to get emotionally involved and have his heart broken again!

By yet another miracle, a woman who should be canonized chose to take on the boy with behavior problems. The brother was taken in by friends of the woman, who lived just across the hall in the central Manhattan high-rise apartment building, so the boys grew up more or less together. They both became financially successful adults.



Epilogue: The angry boy became an angry man. I loved him with all my heart!

**Justice**  
**Jazz Jaeschke**  
Austin TX

THUMP! Book hits back of my skull.  
THUMP! Again—one too many—  
this jolt jars loose  
all hesitance, all restraint.  
In swift flurry, I spin and stretch,  
bridging the back of the school bus seat  
into his realm in the seat behind,  
right smack into his smirking face.  
He who steadily sought to provoke  
sits there grinning in vile revelry,  
so cocky proud of himself,  
so sure of his accomplishment.  
But watch that expression change  
as unexpected, inescapable pain  
rips down through smile creases  
and humiliated bully pulls away, shrieking.  
Nails sparkling with wet red  
rest along seat back, poised  
to strike again at slightest temptation.  
Fire eyes declare my remorseless intent.  
Hour-long bus rides into the country  
long dominated by his macho maneuvers  
transformed for the better this afternoon  
with the infliction of feminine justice.

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## *Submit Your Own True Words*

The quarterly *Story Circle Journal* includes up to six pages of stories submitted by our members. If you have a story you'd like to share with members, why not submit it to the True Words section of the journal?

Each issue of the journal is loosely organized around a theme. While we do accept non-thematic writing, we give precedence to stories written on the theme of a particular issue. **Story Circle Network members only, please.**

We're looking for stories rich in evocative detail, showing something of the struggles, challenges, and resolutions of real people living real lives. We're not looking for generalized, abstract truths about life. We want to read your stories, not your essays! Please make sure that your stories are **350 words** or less. We may edit your submissions for grammar and spelling. Here are the upcoming topics and deadlines:

***In the Kitchen***—September 2004 (due July 15)  
***Fat and Thin***—December 2004 (due October 15)

If you can send your writing via email or as a Word attachment, the editors will love you. If you type your story on an Internet computer, all you need to do is **highlight** the text, **copy** it, and **paste** it directly into an email message. (This will eliminate lots of extra typing!) Send your work to Marie Buckley, marie@aracnet.com. If you do submit typed or handwritten stories, please make sure that every word is legible. Mail to Marie Buckley, 1070 N.E. Sturgess St., Hillsboro, OR 97124-3330.

**Signing Day**  
**Cindy Yarbrough**  
 Lakeway TX

I heard the alarm's first brrrrng and was determined to ignore it. Ten minutes later I stood in the doorway of my brother's tiny room, my bowl of milk-covered Rice Krispies in hand, all the snap, crackle, and pop soaked out of them. I glared at his hulk, covered by a single sheet in the twin bed, lying on his side and snoring. "Gary, your alarm is ringing." If he weren't snoring, he could be mistaken for dead. "Gary. Gary!" He opened his eyes, seeing nothing and not moving. "Gary, your alarm is ringing. It's time to get up." He continued to stare, not acknowledging my presence. I rolled my eyes and stomped back to the kitchen to finish my cereal. The alarm, at least, stopped abruptly.

I drank the milk left in the bowl and thought, I wish Mom had never said, "Make sure your brother gets up in the mornings." Then I placed my rinsed bowl in the sink beside the half-empty coffee cups and toast crumb-littered plates left there by Mom and Daddy. I would wash and dry the dishes when I got home from school that afternoon. Walking back down the narrow hallway that created Gary's cubbyhole-like room, I couldn't resist looking in to see if he was up. He was sitting on the side of his bed, still staring ahead at nothing. His eyes were swollen and puffy, as if from too much sleep.

"Isn't this signing day?" I asked.

Grunt.

Signing day, February 13, 1963, the day Gary would sign a Letter of Intent to play football for Coach Darrell Royal at the University of Texas in Austin. Royal had already led his team to one national championship and two Southwest Conference titles. Gary would be joining an elite group of athletes. During recruiting season, Coach Royal had impressed Mom and Daddy with his down-home, country charm and warmth. "It would be an honor, Mr. and Mrs. Shaw, to have your son on our team. He'll be in good hands; we care about our boys."

"Are you excited?" I asked.

"I could pee in my pants."

"You better hurry up before Mrs. Rowlett gets here."

Grunt.

Mrs. Rowlett was a family friend who picked us up on her way to take her daughter, Susan, to school. When she honked 15 minutes later, I rushed to the front door and yanked it open with my right hand while cradling my schoolbooks in the crook of my left arm. "Coming!" I called out, waving.

Gary was still in the bathroom, dressed in neatly pressed jeans and a muted plaid, long-sleeved shirt, worrying with his hair in front of the mirror. I rushed back down the hallway, urging Gary to come *on*. It's time to *go*. He stood before the mirror, his feet solidly planted and his upper body leaning in, his eyes locked on his reflection. One hand was up by his head, the four fingers together, thumb tucked in like a salute. With his salute-shaped four fingers he gently and repetitively touched and cajoled wayward hairs into their proper places. The wayward hairs were invisible to me. It was a flattop, for

crying out loud.

Even on signing day, Gary went through his usual intense scrutiny of each and every hair on his closely cropped head. He was going to complete the inspection no matter how hard I begged or how many times I threatened to tell Mom. The fact that Mrs. Rowlett was waiting—again—made me frenzied with worry that she would be annoyed. Gary, though, was unperturbed at that possibility, if he even considered it.

Giving up, I rushed out to the car and climbed in with a heavy sigh. "I can't for the life of me get Gary to hurry, but I think he's almost ready." Mrs. Rowlett and Susan smiled brightly, as was their habit, and said cheerfully they didn't mind waiting. Eventually, Gary came down the front steps, climbed in and lit up the car with his smile, while managing to look chagrined at the same time. "Boy, I don't know why I had such a hard time getting up this morning. Sorry I'm late." Except for me, there were smiles all around.

Once at school, Gary sauntered into his first period class with Mrs. Yarbrough, favoring her with his crooked smile and teasing her just a little. Then he asked if he could grab something to eat in the cafeteria because, gosh, he hadn't had a chance to eat anything before his ride came and he was *starving*. She hesitated.

"Please. I'll hurry." The smile again and the appealing little duck of the head, while looking up at her, beseeching with his sometimes blue, sometimes turquoise eyes.

"Oh, alright. Go on, but hurry up. And this is the last time," she said for the tenth time.

Gary was out the door, returning in a few minutes to the classroom with a couple of half-pint milk cartons and doughnuts. At the moment, he wasn't thinking about the signing that would happen later that afternoon. His thoughts were on the warm doughnuts and the sugary icing, sticky in his large hands.



Nearly 20 years later, in 1982, my brother left the comfort of our parents' home in Denton, Texas, suddenly and inexplicably agitated. He carried nothing with him but the clothes he wore: no toothbrush sticking up out of his shirt pocket, no brown paper bag with a couple of sandwiches inside. He didn't grab a handful of the fruit my dad always kept around the house or pick up the jacket my mother had bought him. No umbrella was tucked under his arm in case of a downpour. He left behind the wristwatch with the Orange Bowl symbol on its face that he received as a football player at the University of Texas. He didn't take the leather bound, gold-embossed copy of his book, *Meat on the Hoof: The Hidden World of Texas Football*, that St. Martin's Press gave their best-selling 27-year-old author nearly a decade earlier. Even if he'd wanted to, he couldn't take the one-of-a-kind copy. It was permanently confiscated, along with all Gary's belongings when, in a fit of fury, he wrecked the apartment my mother had rented and furnished for him the year before.

Before leaving, Gary dropped by, unexpected, at the home of long-time family friends, Chris and Margaret Chrisman. He looked exhausted and worried them with his pacing and chain smoking while sharing his intention to hitchhike to New York

City. He asked for a lift to the highway and Mr. Chrisman, seeing he was determined to go, obliged. But before taking Gary, he pulled a hundred dollar bill from his pocket, neatly folded it into a smaller size, and showed Gary how to tuck the bill inside his sock to prevent its being stolen. So my brother began his eight-year homeless odyssey carrying one small, nearly weightless item. Unless you count the tormenting voices in his head. He carried their weight everywhere.



**A Letter to Angela**  
**Beverly Galante**  
 Austin TX

I don't know why I was drawn to you, Angela, but I thought you were the most beautiful person in my kindergarten class. I was astonished when I learned that you had a twin brother, my first exposure to twins. He was coarse in countenance beside your clear, beautiful, ivory skin, blue eyes and long, shiny blue-black hair, and therefore he wasn't even worthy of note. I couldn't keep my eyes off you and every time I saw you, my little heart would skip a beat. I never mentioned this to you or anyone else. I look at your picture now, in the group school picture that I have in my scrapbook, and I only see a little girl wearing a pretty but ordinary dress, with shoes that look too big for her feet and socks that seem to be stretched out and sagging from being washed too much. You always had that scrubbed clean look, cheeks always flushed as though you had been running. Your blue eyes were shiny and intelligent, sometimes haunting and sad. I thought I could read your thoughts. The sadness, I was sure, was because our country had just gone through a war. Not knowing much about your family and what connection they might have had to this war, I imagined the worst—a loss of some sort. It made my love for you seem more dramatic.

We loved our teacher, Mrs. Eaton, a white-haired lady with a kind face and quiet manner, and we were eager to please her. You and I were not rivals for her attention because we knew in our heart of hearts that she was content with our progress and could turn to other less fortunate fledglings. I wondered if you ever noticed my covert adoration of you then.

Alas, the days went by too fast, and the wheels of scholarly advancement into the first grade scooped us up. There you were, in my first grade class, sitting toward the back of the room because your last name began with S. My last name began with C, so I sat right in front of the teacher, a hateful, homely, buck-toothed woman who spit when she spoke. Often, I was the recipient of her spray. It was not laughable in my book. In fact, I was paralyzed with rage at her. Other students would make fun of her out of class while I looked on in misery.

I always felt your presence behind me in this classroom. Sometimes I would sneak a peak over my shoulder to see if

you were still there. It would catch my breath to see your beautiful face, and everything else in front of my eyes would become cloudy and ethereal.

Miss Rickles (to rhyme with pickles) was as sour as her nickname. I couldn't gaze too longingly at you sitting there in the back of the room with girls and boys I had never seen before. Thus began my first clash with the realities of life and scholarly things. It was too difficult to keep up with my childish regard for another human being and deal with higher learning.

I was tired a lot then. It was a struggle for survival and I seemed to be getting a lot of headaches—bona fide, agonizing, unbearable headaches—perhaps caused by the effects of malnutrition, problems at home, the new school regimen, and the war just ending and the social tensions associated with it. All of this was just plainly adding to my stress. My mother, however, called the headaches “growing pains.”

On one occasion, when the school nurse felt that I should go home, she called upon you to go with me. I was devastated. I couldn't keep from sobbing, partly because of the pain and partly because you were there to observe me losing my cool. That was the most painful of all. You were so helpful, so caring, and so solicitous. I was mortified and wanted to lash out at you. I sat down beside a chain link fence and yelled, “Leave me alone, I just want to die.” Somehow, dutifully, with my heart breaking, you got me to stand up to begin the long walk home, while tears continued to rush down my cheeks. Years later, whenever I experienced a violent headache of this same sort, which occurred often enough, I would recall the memory of this day. It marked the end of my infatuation with you. The spell had been broken, but I have never forgotten the exquisite pain of the love I felt for you.

In fact, one Christmas a few years later, Santa brought me a beautiful doll, one with long black hair and blue eyes, and I named her Angela. I cherished my doll and vowed that I would also name my first daughter Angela, which indeed I did. I put the doll away into a chest one day, until my firstborn came into the world. Even though my first child was a son, I took out my Angela doll to be played with by us. We dressed her and fashioned her hair in different ways. My memories of you and the mysteries of the spell I was under as a small girl would surface from time to time. But soon my son grew weary of my Angela doll as he went on to schoolboy thoughts and activities. Somehow I let her go out of my life, soiled and disheveled and lost long before my daughter was born. I can't believe I still miss it and I can't believe I still remember you. A web was woven through the years of my life, without any real thought to why, of two little girls who knew each other only briefly.

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**Retirement**  
**Judy Watkins**  
 Hillsboro OR

She stepped off the curb to go home when the realization hit her—this would be the last time she would be driving home from work. She was leaving behind all the good and bad associated with her job, with the career that she had loved and given so much of her life to. She was retiring.

She didn't feel any different but she knew it would take a few weeks before she really missed the routine and, yes, the people. She was 61. Her husband was 75 years old and in excellent health, but how long could they depend on that? If there was to be quality time in which to travel and enjoy each other's companionship, it had better be soon. Most people her age would be looking forward to retirement, even be excited, so why didn't she feel something—anything?

She had been only 16 when she married and she came from an unhappy childhood in a dysfunctional family. Even at that age, she had firm ideas about how her family would live. She knew that she would never work outside the home. Her children would always have a mother at home, the house would be clean and meals well prepared. She was very determined even though she had no idea where or how to begin. She never had a chance to learn anything about cooking, cleaning, or doing laundry while she was growing up. Her mother had always worked and a housekeeper took care of the house and children.

Not long after she was married, she saw a newspaper ad saying there would be an ironing demonstration in a local department store. It was 1956 and permanent-press clothes were unheard of. She spent several hours at the store watching the demonstration and asking many questions about the do's and don'ts of ironing.

The State Extension Service offered classes in dressmaking and the canning of fruits and vegetables. The local hospital gave pre-natal classes for the girls like her who were totally unprepared to care for a baby. She used every resource available for little or no cost to learn how to care for her husband, home, and children.

For almost 20 years she dedicated her life to being the best homemaker she could possibly be, always concerned about the well being and comfort of others. Then the day came when she looked around and asked, "What about me? What have I ever done just for me? I want an identity of my own; I want to be more than someone's wife, mother, daughter, or sister."

She decided to look for a job, but what did she know how to do? It wasn't only job skills she lacked; she had no people skills, low self-esteem, and no self-confidence. A neighbor told her that the State Employment Office gave tests to determine a person's strengths and weaknesses. That could be a place to start. After a series of tests over a week's timeframe, she learned she could still type 50 words per minute, a skill she learned in high school, but the rest of the news wasn't as encouraging. She was told she had achieved the highest overall test scores of anybody ever testing in that office and

therefore she could do anything she wanted to do. That is not what she expected to hear. She wanted somebody to say, "You would be a good \_\_\_\_\_." Now what?

Next she went to a temporary agency where she was tested again and placed in a manufacturing company as an accounting clerk. Only two weeks later, she was offered a permanent position. Oh, how she loved that job. Her only concern was the personal attributes she lacked. She signed up for a course at a finishing school to learn what type of clothes best suited her and how to apply makeup (to that point she had only worn lipstick). She still wore her hair as she did in high school or in a ponytail. The school taught her about hair styles. She was taught how to walk and sit down and overall given the self-confidence she lacked. She would look and act professional and never again worry about embarrassing her boss or herself.

She was happy and nearly walking on clouds when her boss gave her the performance review that would change her life. He said that she had the worst grammar he had ever heard. That hurt—it really hurt and she started to cry. Her boss asked, "What are you crying about? When it becomes important to you, you will do something about it. Until then, it doesn't really matter what anybody says."

She wanted to do something about it, but what? She had quit high school before graduation—how could she go to college? A friend told her that nobody cared if she didn't have a diploma, only whether she could do the college-level work. With that advice she signed up for a class in English grammar and another in writing. These classes led to 12 years of school going two nights a week to finally earn an MBA when she was 48. She must have had a guardian angel because the company she worked for paid for all the classes and books and allowed her to advance in her job as she gained knowledge.

The years between graduation and retirement were the best years of her life but they went by so fast. Her career advanced well and her pay was more than she ever dreamed possible. Her company retirement together with her 401K plan would allow her to retire comfortably.

So why was retirement so hard? Was her career too short? Did she fear the loss of the personal identity that she had worked so hard for?

A recent quote out of "Our Daily Bread" added some insight: "When we are set aside by illness, or replacement, or retirement, the interludes can be frustrating and unfulfilling....It seems that our performance is over, that we've come to the end of our song. But we need to remind ourselves that the Lord may be using our time to rest to make our music better...in time He'll enable us to chime in again....In the meantime, we can enjoy the rest. The rest is not a mistake nor an omission, but a necessary part of the symphony God wrote in the beginning and is conducting for us every day."

She would build a new and different life, just as rewarding, though different. Now she could do volunteer work to help others, pursue the hobbies that were neglected for so many years, and finally spend the golden years with the husband who had stood by her throughout the journey.

## Celebrations

**Rosalie Hooper Thomas**  
West Salem WI

When I was two years old, my dad was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Many years later, the doctors identified his behavior as manic depression. Whatever the label, my dad's craziness punctuated much of my childhood. Holidays and celebrations were especially difficult, with Dad at times flying into rages or sinking into pools of depression. Too often he would angrily refuse to go to Mass, or offer presents, or even thanks. Too often he would sabotage our best-laid plans. Difficult times, yes. But I'm amazed that those aren't the memories I've kept closest to my heart.

Mom loved celebrations. In spite of Dad (and sometimes even us kids), we always celebrated bright and beautiful holidays and birthdays with sparkling decorations and delicious food. For Christmas, a real tree was decorated with shining bulbs and lots of glistening tinsel. Mom crocheted red and white candy cane ornaments to hang on the tree along with miniature felt stockings covered with red and green sequins. I still have most of the trimmings, which bring sweet memories as I place them on their special branch. All things edible have since merged into a memory of ongoing delight. At the foot of the tree, baby Jesus always gurgled in the midst of his parents, shepherds, sheep, and cows and, of course, the Magi. Back in those days our Santa, strangely but pragmatically, put a sheet over the presents to be uncovered after we returned from Mass.

For the celebration dinner, Mom would bring out her best china and crystal, candles and silver, even if just the four of us were there to enjoy the meal. However, often we would have friends join us and invariably a stray priest or a couple of nuns. Father Kelleher was a regular. Sister Mary Michael and Sister Mary Catherine always raved about my mother's cooking. Mom was rightfully proud of her table and delighted in guests asking for seconds of roast beef, mashed potatoes and gravy and the requisite yellow and green vegetables. I didn't do any of the cooking. Dad was rather particular about burnt vegetables. But I did set the table under Mom's watchful eye, creating a beautiful setting for the bountiful feast.

Throughout all the changes in my life, I kept the tradition of celebration. Birthdays were never forgotten and Christmas held that special meaning of connection to the family and to childhood memories. What was most important to me was Mom continuing the customs in her home, even when I knew I wasn't going to be able to visit. One year she suggested that she get an artificial tree. In a panic I told her, "You just can't. It has to be real. It doesn't matter that I'm not going to be there!" She bought a real tree.

During my 30s, although I put up real trees and remembered birthdays, I entered into a dark period of my life. Sometimes those rituals seemed quite hollow, sometimes rather pointless. Then in the summer of 1985, my mother was diagnosed with a brain tumor. In September, she dreamed of being alive at Christmas and the house filled with a sparkling

tree and the aromas of holiday cooking. I was determined we would have that dream. We brought her home from the hospital. The left side of her body was weakened from the tumor. My brother and Dad bought a huge tree that barely fit in the corner of their apartment living room. We brought out all the ornaments and tree grew into a shining testament of our love. Under my mother's sporadic direction, I attempted to cook the Christmas dinner. My brother and I set the table with the Belgium linen tablecloth and the shining silver. I cooked the vegetables and the potatoes and the Chateaubriand. My cheese sauce curdled, but I served it anyway.

There were just the four of us, my mother and father, my brother, and me. We prayed that God would be present as we continued this journey. Mother prayed that she would have ten more years to live. And then we enjoyed the carrots, peas and potatoes, and meat with the curdled cheese sauce. Not up to Mother's standards, but for a few short moments we were together, receiving through my inadequate hands the gift of Mother's love and also her legacy of nurturing.

Since that last holiday with my mother, I realized that in her insistence on having celebrations, she created moments of sweetness, of respite from the pain we lived with. And in my own dark days, these rituals were antidotes to my own loneliness and gave me glimmers of hope for happier times. As my days have become brighter over the years, Mom's spirit accompanies me as I begin the ritual of decorating for the holidays.

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**Pictures on a Shelf**  
**Mary Welker-Haddock**  
 Spring TX

On the shelf behind my shoulder is a collection of photographs that span a lifetime, the better part of the twentieth century, and that tell my mother's story. Some chapters are missing, and I can fill in some of the blank spots with my own memories or stories told me, but I am also certain that there are secrets I will never know about her.

The oldest picture on the shelf is of my grandmother, my mother's mother, who landed on Ellis Island from Holland with her family on the eve of World War I. A poor, unschooled teenager, she quickly had to learn to survive in this country. By her mid-twenties, she had worked as a domestic, married, had two daughters, was widowed, married again, had two more daughters, the youngest of which was my mother, and was abandoned by her husband. She suffered through poverty and tuberculosis and would later marry for a third time and have two more daughters. Life was hard and desperate for her, and she must have had little to give her daughters in physical and emotional comfort.

The four eldest daughters bonded together and took care of each other. The closest bond was between my mother and her older sister, Jerry. Their relationship never faltered and, even in the last dark months of Mom's life, when we could no longer reach her, my aunt felt that she was always with her in spirit. I have a picture of the two of them taken in 1930, my mother was 14 and my aunt 16. My mother has written on the back, "How poor we looked, and cute."

My mother left school after eighth grade to relieve her mother and stepfather of supporting her. She was bright and energetic and earned the goodwill of people, who enabled her to support herself as a domestic working nights and weekends and to attend business school to become a secretary. This education started her on her own path. Neither the hardship she had met in her young life nor the determination it took to rise above it show in a picture, dated 1937, where a gentle kind woman full of trust looks at me across the years. She never lost those qualities.

The day Pearl Harbor was bombed, Mom was lying in bed with the flu, and she said she knew as soon as she heard the news that she was going to help the war. My next picture shows her in uniform as a member of the Women's Army Corps. The war took her out of her hometown of Grand Rapids, Michigan, and, although she would always return to visit, she never returned to stay. After one tour of duty, she settled in San Francisco working as a secretary for Standard Oil of California. She loved San Francisco and must have had a wonderful time there because she spoke fondly of the cable cars, Chinatown and the boarding house where she could look out onto the Bay. She fell in love with a foreigner, a sailor in the Swedish merchant marine, and married him. They had three days together, and then he was called back to his ship. She never heard from him again. Was he lost at sea? Or was she deceived? She would never know. Heartbroken, she had the marriage annulled after one year. "How could you not

know his ship, or the name and address of his family in Sweden?" I asked her and her answer was, "You don't understand. It was the war and everything was different." She once said that she never stopped looking for him. But life countered her grief by offering her new horizons. Standard Oil needed secretaries in Saudi Arabia, where the company was drilling for oil to support the war effort. She was one of the first Western women to go to Saudi Arabia. I have picture of her on a camel in Egypt, another flanked by Saudi princes in their flowing robes, and one with a bunch of rig hands wearing hard hats.

Life was an adventure and she had become a woman of the world, but something was missing. She wanted a family. She had many proposals, and here she made the worst choice of her life. My father was handsome and charming, but egocentric and irresponsible. There are no pictures of him on my shelf. He made and squandered millions, deceiving and hurting those closest to him. Finally, when she was 60, he abandoned her, leaving her penniless. Although she admitted that she had made a poor choice in a husband, she followed him all over the world, supported him in all of his self-centered endeavors, flamboyant successes, and dismal failures, and made a home for her family.

Her children were the joy of her life and nothing could distract her from us. She really wanted half a dozen but had to settle for two: my brother and me. No matter what storms raged in her life, no matter where we lived, no matter what my father was doing, she created a cheerful home, where we were safe, loved, and affirmed. While my father traveled the world as a salesman, most of our youth was spent in a small isolated village in the Swiss Alps. I remember those years as being calm and happy, and it is only now as an adult that I realize how lonely and difficult that time must have been for her. She generously welcomed our ideas and our friends, applauded our success, and encouraged us in all our dreams.

When finally her grandchildren arrived, she gave them no less. I have a picture of her holding me on her lap, her black hair braided and pinned in a crown on her head. Next to it, in an identical pose, she holds her first granddaughter, my daughter, her namesake. Her hair is now snow white, but in both pictures her love and wonder for the child glow. I also treasure a picture of her in her 60s, wearing an evening dress and escorted by a dear friend. She is still, in spite of all the hardship, an elegant and gracious lady. Even though during those years she struggled financially and was deeply hurt by my father's actions, she found opportunities to be happy and to bring happiness to others. One of her favorite sayings during those difficult years was: "I am not going to let my yesterdays rob me of my tomorrows."

She was full of these little one-line bits of wisdom. My husband, who loved her dearly, has remembered all of them. He also keeps her present in our lives by countless humorous anecdotes he tells our daughters about her, so she is still with us, even though she has been gone for almost a decade. I find myself sharing my pain and doubts but also my excitement and success with her, and still I feel her love and encouragement radiating from those pictures on my shelf.

**Twin Gifts**  
**Lana Dalberg Landaverde**  
 Daly City CA

*El Salvador, Central America. June, 1986* The soldier clomps up the bus steps and into the aisle. Swinging his M-16, he swaggers at a bully's pace, eyeing each passenger. The bus is jam packed with Salvadoran refugees trying to return to their plots of land. They huddle in the bus seats behind me, hushing their children and clutching their few belongings—bulging knapsacks called *muchilas* and frayed baskets stuffed with pots and clothes.

Anxiety pokes holes in my stomach. Sweat trickles down my face and greases the underarms of my black dress flecked with tiny rose buds, a dress I've chosen to highlight my pale skin and tawny shock of hair. I want to look as American as possible. You'd understand why if you were with me, watching a dozen teenage soldiers milling about, their sweat-sticky fingers resting a little too easy on the slick black of their automatic weapons. I cling to the belief that being American cloaks me with a protective aura and bolsters the refugees' efforts to return home. Or so I hope.

Outside, the commanding officer lights a cigarette, puffs and paces. With 200 Salvadoran refugees, 21 Americans, and an international news team heading straight for the war zone, he has reason to be nervous. We gringos have focused the eyes of the world on him. We hang in the bus windows like amulets.

After his superior radios permission for our passage, the officer calls the soldier off our bus and waves us through the roadblock. The buses belch black diesel clouds and launch us into the road to Chalatenango, a hilly northern province and the refugees' home. Outside our window, the sugar cane rushes past us like huge clumps of grass. Here and there an immaculate field of sprouting grain pops up to calm the eye. Beyond the carefully tended squares, the land riots green. Verdant tendrils spill over culverts gushing with rainwater. Fat-fingered leaves bristling with nettles shoot over rocks. Vines climb up out of gullies, reach out into the road. Everywhere, everything is green.

As our caravan hurries past endless stretches of towering sugar cane, I watch the refugees' leader, Magdalena. Her hair, silvered with gray, is pulled back into a bun, and her broad face breaks into a grin. Most of the refugees are thin as rails but Magdalena has a nice girth to her, like she'd added a layer with each child, and—as we found out yesterday—there have been 12 of them. Magdalena had told us her story the day we arrived, when we visited the church-run refugee camp outside of San Salvador. Her husband had been killed because he helped the sugar cane workers organize a union. Magdalena dabbed her eyes with her apron. “My oldest daughter was a *catequista*—she used to help the priest with the first communion class. The soldiers raped her and left her legs twisted back *como si fuera muñeca*. My son Gilberto was killed in a bombing raid. He was still alive when we found him, but the shrapnel had cut off his leg, and he bled to death. My youngest, Maira, didn't make it to cover in time. She was

only five, couldn't run fast enough. She was hit by machine-gun fire from a helicopter ... *ametrallada*...” Magdalena stopped, dropped her face in her hands.

What could I say to this rosary of deaths, one right after another? I reached out and squeezed Magdalena's shoulder. For me, it was enough that she didn't hate us. After all, my government had sent the helicopter and the bullets that killed her little girl. For her, it was enough that we were here, that we would do everything possible to stop the bloodshed.

Looking at Magdalena now, I want to believe that her story was only a nightmare, but I know we are going back to the same patch of earth that absorbed so much blood. And really, it is the earth that draws Magdalena and the others. They long for the soil crumbling between their fingers, the breeze lifting the feathery fronds of the umbrella-shaped Conacaste tree, the bent-down ears of corn drying on the stalk for the harvest—all that was cut off from them by the barbed wire fence of a refugee camp. For their tiny plots of land, they are willing to brave mortar and machine-gun fire. Their courage inspires me. If they can dare to return to their destroyed homes and demand peace in the middle of war, the least I can do is go with them.

With the consent of the Salvadoran military, we begin our ascent into disputed territory. The red tiled roofs and adobe walls of a nearby town shrink to a picturesque patchwork as we head up into the hills where the thick mud bogs down our buses and we end up hiking at night. Magdalena parts a path through the leafy darkness. I follow the pale rectangle of her back, glad that she can read the stones in the dark. Trailing in single file, the other refugees balance babies or supplies on their hips and backs. I can't help but think of all the times that they'd picked their way through slippery streams and thorny underbrush to escape the army, their courage pushing them into the black heart of the unknown.

Just when I feel my feet can't go any further, the mud hardens into round lumps of cobblestone and a cement plaza opens before us in a square of dreamy light. One of the women whispers, “*Ya llegamos*.” Home at last! The breeze lifting off the plaza tastes like ripe mango.

We sleep in the empty church facing the plaza. When I awake a few hours later, the women are already cooking breakfast on the blackened clay griddle balanced over a fire. Suddenly a helicopter gunship chops into the morning's stillness and fans the beans right off our tortillas.

Thinking that they can't possibly shoot if Americans are in the way, I dash into the middle of the plaza and wave. As the Salvadoran women grab their toddlers and dart for the trees, the other gringos join me, the lot of us waving like shipwrecked vacationers.

The helicopter tilts, its machine gun outlined against the drop-dead blue of the sky. I hold my breath; hope flares in the white of my palm. A roar, a scattering of leaves, and the chopper slices back through the sky, disappearing between two hills.

As my group cheers and hoots, an emaciated woman in a tattered yellow dress parts the bushes at the plaza's edge. She reaches out to hold my hand, thick and fat-boned next to hers

*(Continued on page 14)*

(Continued from page 13)

where the tendons move like long fish beneath the skin.

“*Gracias, muchas gracias.*” Profuse thanks tumbles from her lips. She produces a mango from her apron pocket. “For you.”

“But you have so little food,” I protest. She smiles and nods at the mango she extends, and I accept—hope and love are gifts we feed each other.

### The Old Cemetery

Marylouise Lyman  
Ashland OR

The day has walked up the hill  
Moving the gravestones' shadows  
From West to East in its wake.

Barrons, Dunns, and Mary Ann sleep on.  
When last they looked in 1861  
The dam and its lake weren't there.

Only a creek flowing spate or sparse  
Coursed though the small valley  
Now lying at their feet.

Their hillside-resting place, now fenced  
And locked against potential harm  
By those who care not who they were,

Only wishing to topple the silvered boards,  
Or the weather-pitted stones  
That define their final space.

How came they to be laid in this spot?  
Was it old age or epidemic?  
Childbed fever or Indians?

Mary Ann was dead at twenty-eight.  
What dreams did she forfeit?  
How many mourn her loss?

Barron and Dunn, whose descendents  
Prospered, became locally renowned,  
Lie equally still beside her.

The summer-blue lake mirrors  
The blue-sky canopy above;  
Footsteps pass to reach the water.

Hawks soar over the imprisoned creek  
That irrigates the enduring land  
And supports the swimmers.

And the old cemetery occupants  
Remain only a curiosity  
To beguile tourists.



### I Have a Dream

Ruth Hetrick  
Doylestown PA

I have a dream! It is one that I have never had while asleep, but would dearly love to, just once before I die. It is a dream about my father—a man I never knew and have never, ever dreamt about except when I am awake!

My dream would start out with an image of him standing tall in his Naval uniform, formed from one of the very few pictures I have of him. The photo would come to life and my life would start out like so many other newborns—being held in a happy, proud father's arms. He would be gazing down at me, but the camera would capture his wide smile, that slice of blond hair showing beneath his Navy cap, and his light blue eyes sparkling as he held me close. And I would know, as all babies know when they are loved.

The dream moves on—he is standing at the back door of one of the homes I grew up in, gazing out across a long, green expanse of lawn and fields that he never once laid eyes on. I run up to him and wrap my arms around his leg, swinging back and forth, anticipating that comforting smile and those powerful arms that would reach down and pick me up and point out the wildlife and flowers that abounded in that field, and I would know how I came to love nature and animals. His arms would be strong, loving, and protective as they enveloped me—no empty lonely space around me in this dream. He would brush my hair out of my eyes and his gentle touch would feel so good to my hungry young skin. But in my dreams, I wouldn't know that painful yearning because he has been there from the beginning.

The dream would find my mother happy and smiling, knowing that the love of her life was a part of her life. There would be no lonely frowns or silent times to greet me and I would not worry every day if it was something that I had done! She would wear pink and yellow and blue dresses. Her dark brown eyes would glow as she brushed her hair and she would hum as she brushed mine. Her lips would not tighten across her face as she worried where life would take her and me.

In my dream, I would never doubt where my father was. I would not be bewildered when other children would ask, “Why don't you have a Daddy?” I would not have to dig down into my very being, summon all my courage and hesitantly, but oh so casually, approach my mother, inquire about my father, and then be so overwhelmed by any small amount of information that I heard that I would go to pieces.

No, in this dream, I would have a Daddy and I would know many things about him. He would like a big breakfast and on the weekends he would be in the kitchen stirring up all those wonderful Saturday morning breakfast aromas of bacon frying and coffee perking. I would linger in my bed under a beautiful thick quilt listening to those busy household sounds.

I would never be cold! I would never be hungry! I would never hear him say to my Mother, "I want you to get rid of her—I married you, not her!" No, those kinds of words would be as foreign to me as a land far across the sea. I would hear my father and mother laughing—what a miracle that would be. There would be lots of picnics and parties at his parents' home in the country, where his eight brothers and sisters would gather and I would have tons of cousins to know and grow up with, instead of wondering who they were, that magical family that was mine but always out of reach. And when people would say, "Why, she looks just like her father," I would be able to look up at him and see the same round face, the same cowlick parting the blond hair at exactly the same spot on the same wide forehead, and I would not have to work so very hard to see the resemblance in one of the few pictures that remain.

We would have a car, because I have heard that he loved working on cars. He would take us for long rides and I would fall asleep in the back seat, contented, knowing that all is well in my world—that the two most important people in my life are at the helm and will carry me safely home.

He is there for my senior prom, my graduation, and my wedding. How wonderful it is to have this handsome man walk me down the aisle and give me away. That I would be his to give away is a blessed feeling that I will always cherish in my dream.

And in this dream, I finally hear his voice. A soft but strong voice that could scold me but in the next instant, comfort me. There would be no ranting, shouting, and cursing at me, leaving me to cry in despair, alone in my bedroom.

I would wake from this dream—happy that I saw and heard him for the first time in my life, but aching with sadness that this never was and never can be. He will have been there every day of my life and my first contact with him won't be standing at his grave, as his mother is buried, when I am 29 years old, finally painfully realizing that this man did exist, that his remains are right there beneath his mother's coffin, right there beneath my feet. If I could just touch them—just to say, This is *my* father! He did exist....

## **A Bunny at 35**

**Penny J. Leisch**

Tempe AZ

Our college security team gathers to celebrate birthdays every month. As second-shift supervisor, I usually keep my appearances brief but I'm a birthday guest tonight. I have no way of knowing this party will lead to the most memorable birthday adventure of my life.

Birthday parties take place in a small sports bar near campus. Tonight, downhill skiing competition is followed by a weather report announcing excellent skiing conditions at the Arizona Snow Bowl. The crowd cheers.

I hear a flurry of conversations. "...Skiing tomorrow." A chorus of "Great." More fragments: "...Work at 3 p.m. tomorrow." "...Arrive by opening time...back for work."

They're kidding, right? I forgot young college people haven't discovered they need sleep.

Raising my voice over the babbling crowd, I yell, "Hey people, the roads are snowy. Snow tires or chains are required." The voices drop to a mumble for a moment.

Then, a voice from the crowd suggests driving my elderly Suburban. My employees are barely older than my children. I've never skied and I can't remember the last time I survived 24 hours without sleep. But, I drive a truck and know the roads well.

"OK. Let's go. We'll meet at my place in an hour."

After a flurry of activity to acquire gas, sandwiches, water and warm clothing, we depart. My watch says 2 a.m. Allowing for breakfast, snowy roads and a stop to obtain at least a gallon of coffee, we'll arrive by 7:30 a.m..

Someone in the back of the truck yells, "Hey! We'll have three hours to ski and four hours for the drive home. We can make it to work on time with no problem."

Now, I'm feeling my age. Make it two gallons of coffee!

A glistening wonderland greets us. Decorations, colorful banners, and people dot the landscape. Signs announce free snow cat rides and Special Olympics ski races during the Winter Festival. We're in the middle of a gigantic frosty carnival.

On my way to the ski shop, I see toddlers on skis and I'm ready hit the slopes. Well, maybe. First, I discover I can't walk in ski boots. Next I learn, skis move of their own volition on absolutely level ground. The young people take pity on me and provide at least 10 minutes of basic tutoring.

Then, someone slaps a lift ticket into my hand and says, "Let's go." The lift chair swings under me, scoops me into the air, and glides up the hill. A breathtaking view of snowy scenery erases my fear of heights. Soon, everyone piles off at the first stop for a warm-up run.

All I need to do is stay on my feet and coast to a stop at the bottom. How hard can one trip be?

I take a deep breath; plant my ski poles and push. My brain freezes the instant I take off. Other people—even children—fly past me even though I'm sure I'm traveling warp speed. My knees and legs tremble. Then, I see the end: wide, treeless, level. As soon as I recover my senses, I disappear into the crowd to explore the festival.

The snow cat driver provides an exciting narrated ride up and down the mountainside. Next, I join the crowd cheering for the Special Olympics contestants. Later, before I go inside to warm up, I loiter near the children's ski lessons in hopes of picking up some tips. After a snack, I rejoin the college group but politely decline an offer to go "to the top" on the lift. They push, prod, and cajole, reminding me I'm here to ski.

My next run starts like the first trip, except my legs are worn-out from walking in heavy boots on slippery snow. Halfway down the run, I can't stop. As my legs collapse, I squat, downhill racer style. Then, I lose it. I'm careening down

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the ski run on my bottom! Children laugh and point when I rocket past them, upside down like a turtle. The college crowd thoroughly appreciates my spectacular performance too. As I skid to a stop, several people greet me laughing and pointing to a black pattern in the snow on the run. Apparently, black denim fades sliding down a ski run with one's backside in direct contact with the snow.

My next stop is the ski lodge. Over a cup of hot chocolate, a ski instructor explains "bunny" means a person who doesn't ski. My young friends immediately dub me the bunny of our group. A group of friendly witnesses to my skiing prowess heartily agree and after much teasing and a substantial meal, we begin the trip home.

Everyone arrives at work on time. They also arrive with enough stories about my premier skiing exhibition to entertain the entire campus for weeks. Fortunately, I graduate before my next birthday.



**Ghost Story**  
**Anne Beckner**  
 Austin TX

A number of years ago, my family and I escaped the frigid confines of Chicago and happily moved to a wonderful house on Corpus Christi Bay. It was light and airy and comfortably spacious for a family of six. We marveled at the changing colors in the bay, were astounded at the summer heat, and were delighted with the friendly people we came to know.

One morning my oldest daughter told me she had been unnerved by the sound of heavy breathing in the next room after the rest of the family was asleep. We reasoned that we were not accustomed to the noises of the household machinery and blamed on the air conditioning system.

Meanwhile, I kept waking up at night to noises that I could readily identify—boxes falling over, wicker waste baskets being tumbled about, and drawer pulls being rattled. I attributed these sounds to our prowling cats. But in the morning, there were never any signs of disturbance.

One night I awoke chilled and got up to turn off the air conditioning. As the house became silent, I heard loud, labored breathing downstairs as though someone were suffering terribly. I flew down to my son's first floor bedroom, fearing that he was ill. But I found him sleeping peacefully behind his closed door. Denial is a wondrous, protective thing—I told myself that I had not heard agonized respirations and went back upstairs to bed and to sleep.

The next morning I recalled my daughter's experience. But still, I concluded that we were both overly imaginative, and we agreed to keep these experiences to ourselves. Meanwhile I sometimes awoke to the smell of wet ashes and household objects continued to seem mobile in the wee hours.

Then my youngest daughter nervously told me one morning that she had heard windows sliding open during the night and feared an intruder. But when she checked, the windows were closed and locked.

One episode finally convinced me that we were sharing our home with something inexplicable. I ran a short errand early one day while my 12-year-old daughter was still sleeping. When I returned home, she was sitting bug-eyed at the kitchen table. She had awakened to the sound of pots clattering in the kitchen and had come down for breakfast. But the pots were in the cupboard and there was no mother stirring oatmeal.

I began to scour the libraries for information on the paranormal. I concluded that this was not a typical poltergeist phenomenon despite the fact that these entities are supposed to be attracted to adolescents. We had no apparitions, cold spots, or flying objects usually described by students of the unexplained. While we were not terrified, we wondered if we could continue to live there. We spent a lot of time treading water in the swimming pool and staring at our Stephen King house.

Eventually I found a book written by an Episcopalian priest who described what was happening in our home quite accurately. He wrote that restless spirits try to contact us when we are in a period of sleep in which our subconscious is receptive to their attempts at communication. That explained my midnight awakenings but did not explain the sounds we heard during the day. He added that it is beneficial to pray over these troubled souls and urge them to go to another plane of existence and leave behind a place of suffering or trauma. So it was back to the swimming pool where we held hands and talked to our spirit in what we hoped was a loving and sympathetic way.

Finally, one night I was awakened by loud tappings in the attic. The metallic sounds traveled from one end of attic to the other. There were only insulation covered air conditioning ducts up there—no metal pipes. The males in the household had never heard or experienced anything from our visitor (and had concluded that the females were just being their usual weird selves). So I woke my husband to listen with me, and the tappings stopped after about three minutes. He promptly went back to sleep while I pondered this new phenomenon. Early the next morning there was a knocking on the outside of the bedroom window. That was the last time I heard from our lost soul.

Twenty years later, I still wonder about this experience, and know that I was changed in a subtle but permanent way. Now I cannot automatically retreat into skepticism when I hear of similar happenings. It colors my religious philosophy. I wonder if tragedy might trap our spirits in a strange limbo. But perhaps our prayers and concern did enable someone to go to a better place—I like to think so.

## Letting Go of Christmas

Jacqueline Newman

Austin TX

Ignoring the impending electric bills my neighbors compete to show the brightest lights. Silver-blue glows in all the yards and on the windowsills. Returning from a last minute business trip, I am greeted with these gorgeous sights. “Merry Christmas, Happy New Year” rings in my ears, and bounces off my lips. The indoor tree is not yet decorated, but the outdoor tree already sparkles with large, colored lights. I feel the stress of only four days before the first guests arrive. The gifts are bought but they laugh at me, still not wrapped, from their piles.

Soon two daughters and a granddaughter are in the house—laughing, talking, sounds of rustling Christmas paper. Cooking, planning, stress, not enough sleep, laughing, talking. More laughing, more cooking, more food shopping, quick visits with neighbors. Stress. Wishing them Merry Christmas, laughing, talking, cooking. My sister and her friend arrive with four poodles. More stress as the dogs drive the cats into hiding in my bedroom.

I awake with a small headache, but attribute it to not enough rest. Mistake. Within a short 15 minute stretch during that afternoon, I am shivering furiously under a quilt, quite unable to warm my frozen hands and feet. Out comes the thermometer. Three degrees too high. Oh dear, it seems the flu is near, so near it’s in my bed. I am hurting in every joint. First hot, then very cold. I order that Clorox wipes be used on every surface I may have touched. Now a veritable disease control center, I order that no fork, plate, or glass I use should leave the bedroom. I vaguely hear all the laughter, shrieks, and loud talking for four days. No one else catches the germ.

The fever finally leaves. I get up. Everyone is still here. I stick to the kitchen floor with every step. I see the scraps of paper everywhere. There is not an inch of open countertop. My younger daughter has taken control of the food prep. “Everything tastes fabulous,” they all say enthusiastically. Laurel runs to me, “Nana is back,” she shrieks with obvious joy. Everyone says to me, “It’s been so much fun.” There is no doubt they all had a good time. As for me, I can’t remember much except sleeping, shivering, and sweating. But, I can say with great certainty, “This is the year I missed Christmas.”

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## § 111

*The beauty of nature sustained me.  
The vastness of the sky enveloped me  
and lifted my spirits.*

### Florida Keys Sanctuary

Lee Ambrose

Naples FL

Crystal blue waters  
Coral reefs, unmatched beauty  
Lush mangrove island.

Silence, calm, stillness  
Tropical birds invite me:  
Come, share our world.  
Rest in the shade of our trees—  
Find peace only nature gives.

### Ghost Ranch Magic

Louise Saxon

Austin TX

As I passed over the cattle guard at the ranch’s gate, I slowed to the required 25 miles per hour so as not to stir up dust. The winding unpaved road took on a rosy hue in the late afternoon sun, much like the adobe architecture so prevalent in New Mexico. Huge outcroppings, punctuating the skyline, made monumental statements, and I knew I was leaving one world and entering another. For the next mile or two it was impossible to see anything but the beauty of nature. This was definitely Georgia O’Keeffe country. I was awestruck, and I wanted a piece of it for myself.

Rounding the last bend, I spotted my friend Sarah on the path to the guest quarters. She had promised a “magical place,” and Ghost Ranch delivered. Inside our rustic cabin there was no telephone or TV, only two single beds, a shower, a small desk, and a Bible. At the dining hall we could count on plain yet nourishing food. Each meal featured at least one dish that was a specialty of the Ghost Ranch kitchen. I ate well but not too much, for a change. The beauty of nature sustained me. The vastness of the sky enveloped me and lifted my spirits.

We had signed up for watercolorist Pomona Hallenbeck’s short course, which featured sketching trips into nearby villages, places where gringos were not usually welcome.

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Ghost Ranch allowed cattle from these villages to graze on its acreage in exchange for access. Sarah and I felt fortunate to reap the rewards of that trade-off.

I was dubious about getting into the watercolor medium, which I initially considered unforgiving and not well-suited to my way of applying paint. But Sarah was very certain that I would love it and that I needed to give myself a respite from a stressful job. She was right. It was great to be with my childhood friend again. Life had been bumpy for both of us, and we didn't indulge ourselves often. Sarah told me that Ghost Ranch had been her salvation on more than one occasion. Once, when personal difficulties had overwhelmed her, she spent an entire weekend there in tears, but that time had been therapeutic and was marked by the reappearance of Halley's Comet. Its message was prophetic and seemed to say, "Don't be too sad for remarkable events are just around the corner." She wanted to share this emotional reaction with me. When I said yes, that one word gave me an uplifting experience that I would take through the rest of my life.

To this day, whether I am there physically or not, I carry Ghost Ranch in my heart, and I'm often pleasantly surprised when pieces of the "magical place" come out in my paintings. What a great gift from a dear friend!

### **Time Stands Still**

**Jane Ross**  
Austin TX

Drip...drip...raindrops fall from the eaves and patter onto the earth. Nearby, on the main road, cars shush through the waters of this gentle winter shower. The sky emits a watery silver light that illuminates the bare branches of the young cedar elm outside the living room window. The Photinia's leaves glisten with the wet. A leaf on the red oak in the front yard flips back and forth in the light breeze hoping to twist itself free, to fall, and to be reunited with the cool welcoming Earth.

The living room is hushed and peaceful. The cat sleeps; the box of Christmas wrap waits to be stored away for another year. The hands of the clock tick slowly towards the end of one year and the beginning of another. No need for striving and doing—there is only being.

Drip...drip...raindrops fall and the watery light shines on, weakening as five o'clock passes. The clock's red second hand moves silently past the twelve, the Earth turns so that the sun lies low to the horizon, and I sit here savoring this timelessness in the midst of time passing, this stillness in the midst of constant turning, this peace in the midst of change and turmoil, aware, amid the stillness, of the drip...drip...dripping away of time and life.

A car shushes up the driveway and stops under the carport, and a car door slams. The stillness is interrupted, but somehow the present moment goes on...goes on...goes on



### **A New Shoreline**

**Kara P. Flathouse**  
Pampa TX

I grew up vacationing and living on the beaches of the Atlantic and later the Gulf of Mexico. My childhood memories are filled with beaches covered with shells and clear blue water for as far as the eye could see. I have a heart full of memories at the beach—my mom loves the ocean and we were close to it whenever possible. As an adult I had a very memorable experience with a completely different shoreline.

Scott and I had been married a little over a year when we decided to spend a week visiting his youngest brother, Mark, who was stationed in the Coast Guard in Washington State. I had never visited this part of the country before and was so excited to be seeing an entirely new area. At the Seattle airport Mark led us to the red Ford Probe he had borrowed from a friend at the Coast Guard. He was worried his Jeep would be too rough a ride as we traveled up the coast to Port Angeles. I had to laugh as we poured ourselves into the small two-door sports car, Mark being six foot seven and my husband and I being five foot eight or so. I sat sideways in the backseat with my legs stretched out as far as they could go and watched the scenery outside the window. As the city and traffic of Seattle faded into the distance the road stretched out before us in long curves with slender pine trees reaching so high into the sky it hurt my neck to peer up at them as we passed.

After a while the road seemed to drop off in places on our left and I could catch glimpses of the ocean. I longed to hear the roar of the waves and to smell the salt-drenched air and begged the guys to roll down the windows. It was a chilly day and the blast of air that hit my face was revitalizing. As Mark slowed around a curve in the road there was a place to pull over and see the beach. We had to climb down to get to the water. The air was cool and I was dressed in jeans with a t-shirt and windbreaker. It was overcast and I couldn't tell if the spray hitting my face was from the water before me or the clouds above. On the climb down to the beach I couldn't see anything spectacular, nothing that could beat my home shores of the East Coast. It was deserted, which I thought was a plus, but it was cold and the water was frigid and I was used to surf and sun. Mark walked a little ahead of us and led us down the beach a ways. Slowly, I began to see some large rocks up ahead, just jutting out of the beach every which way. As we got closer I could see that in between these rocks in the sand was water trapped from the outgoing tides. Tide pools! I had never seen tide pools; my East Coast beaches didn't offer this. My husband readied his camera as we closed in around the sea life abounding within these pools. I was in awe at the beauty of the sea urchins, clams, and small fish swimming around the

pieces of coral. I looked up to see my husband teetering off a large boulder angling his camera toward another rock. My eyes drifted to where his camera was pointed and I saw the most magnificently colored starfish. It was bright reddish orange and was clinging to the side of the rock.

We spent a while exploring these tide pools before heading back to the car. As we reached the ledge where the car was parked I looked back over my shoulder and took a mental picture. I felt such awe and inspiration in this special place we had found and wanted to have it with me forever.

### **The Last Signs of Fall and First Signs of Winter**

**Carolyn J. Scheider**  
Austin TX

The first snow of the season fell on Mt. Washington during the night. Talk about an awesome sight—the last signs of fall with various kinds and colors of leaves changing in the valley and the first signs of winter with fresh snow above the timberline.

Max and I wanted to take the auto tour up to the top of the mountain, but they cancelled it because of the snow. Instead, we take a gondola up Wild Cat Mountain where we have a breathtaking view of the valley and Mt. Washington. Seeing it from a distance on that beautiful, clear cloudless day is even prettier than being in it so we're glad the tour was cancelled.

In a couple of weeks the leaves will change completely then drop. There's no turning back once Old Man Winter comes. The first snow won't melt on Mt. Washington as it sometimes does in warmer climates or valleys. Instead, there will be snowfall after snowfall until spring comes. And spring will come with all its glory—new life—and the cycle of seasons continues.

I start thinking beyond the scenery and about my own season in life. Like it or not, the first snow fell for me and it didn't look pretty like the snow on Mt. Washington. And what about the cycle of seasons? Spring. Not going to happen. Morbid thought. No more seasons once winter passes.

What can I do about it? Can't turn the clock back. But I can be grateful for life and live on in the life of others. Hopefully, my bloodline will continue and my talents will live on in that way too.

After thinking deep thoughts, I take a deep breath like I learned in Pilates class last week. In other words, I suck it up, and decide I'll not let those scary feelings get in the way of learning new tricks, new stuff.

I decide to sign up for the "Intro to Mac OS X" class at the University of Texas. I'll pay to take the Austin Metro bus for the first time ever—scary thought in itself. Max reminds me of a senior perk: soon I'll be old enough to ride the Metro for nothing. Not as beautiful as a gondola ride up Wild Cat Mountain, but, hey, free is free, and I have new awesome sights to see.

### **The Yard** **Judith Helburn** Austin TX

The day after the temperature reached 108°, I set the sprinkler in the wild part of our yard at the base of the cliff. The uncut grass that has thrived with neglect needed some perking up.

The sprinkler had been moving in lazy arcs for about half an hour when I stood in my window with my morning tea and took in the re-greening of the long and tangled grass below. There, in front of me, on the ground, in the shrubs, and in the trees extending above the next drop-off was a circus of birds, fluffing, preening, and flying through the fall of the water drops. Two pairs of cardinals flew back and forth following the arc, then perching on branches and giving a good shake. A brown wren hopped along the worn-down-to-the-earth deer path and a dove perched upon a rock gracefully extending one wing, then the other. Blue jays, loudly announcing to the neighborhood that they were in charge, were flying through the water and soaring up to my eye level. A pair of woodpeckers with scarlet caps upon their heads moved timidly into and out of the spray. And below, on the ground and in the grass, were sparrows taking their turn as well.

The days after that, rains came sporadically dampening our yard and parts of our city and the heat broke. When I picked my granddaughter up from nursery school we drove in and out of cloudbursts. I felt like one of those birds, bathing, drying off, and bathing again.

Years ago, when my husband and I settled into our home in Austin with our small children and dog, I focused upon my backyard—down steep stone stairs. For several years, after clearing a small plot, I raised green beans, tomatoes, lettuce spinach, radishes, squash and other veggies, but, as the years moved on, the trees grew and shaded my small plot. One year after a severe drought followed by a colder than usual winter, I decided to turn my bottom yard into a meadow. It didn't work. Fifteen years later, the grass is still sturdy and green but uncut all this time.

Now that the deer have come back into the city along the creek and greenbelt, I have several narrow paths across that small pasture. In the heat of the summer I put a tub of water down below the cliff and the wildlife appreciate it. The does repay us by bringing their babies to show off, while the bucks stage dramatic antler butting demonstrations. I worry that they will get their antlers tangled and not be able to pull apart.

These days, I must settle for in-the-front gardens with strong smelling flowers and herbs. This past spring, one stealthy deer knocked over my gazing ball and polished off the geraniums and columbines just five feet from my front door. No matter—I love my yard, front and back.



## Renewal by Water

Tricia Stephens

Carrollton TX

Lake Texoma in northeast Texas has sticky clay beaches, the water is brown and murky, and in late spring garfish are eerie alarm clocks that wake me bumping into my sailboat as they eat the bright green algae blooming along the keel. None of these facts discourage me from racing to the lake whenever I have the chance because magic happens on the water. Here, I can look at the shore and imagine I'm a part of any century as I cruise in my time machine. With no phones, no electricity, and no time schedules my work-week fatigue floats away.

In the morning the sky is clean and the bright reflection off the water invites me to explore the new expanse of blue the same way a book teases me with its first chapter. Once on the water, the outline of the white sail betrays the wind's every move and leads me through patches of waves that move into and through each other from many angles. Tacking up the lake I maneuver the sail back and forth turning the boat right and left to find every bit of air to pull me up the lake. I stare up at the red tails dotting the sail being sure no air escapes my notice. I pass islands and wonder how close I can sail before the keel of the boat will bury itself in the hidden shoreline. As I play this game of dare, the chicken part of me glances across the lake and spots several motorboats that might come to my rescue if I lose my battle temping faith.

Mid-afternoon the lake becomes very quiet as the heat builds and the wind fades, it's time to stop sailing and go into the lake. Finding a place to throw the anchor over is easy, any of the little fingers of water that branch out from the lake can become a personal haven for a couple of hours. The trick is to be sure I take everything I want into the water the first time, because if I have to climb the ladder to retrieve something while I'm still tired I feel as if my weight has doubled. I tie one end of a rope to my life jacket, the other end to the boat, and float holding on to another life jacket packed with sunglasses, water, and a book. I move my big hat from side to side and position the holes to give me both a view and shade. I drift in and out of sleep; sometimes seeing a flash of light as a fish breaks the surface near me, sometimes feeling temperature changes ripple across my body and knowing I've found the flow of the Red River as it travels through the lake.

As the light starts to fade the wind picks up and thoughts of food send rumblings to my stomach that call me back onboard. Any food tastes superb when I'm sailing, especially scrumptious since I don't have to worry about gaining weight. Burning calories while the wind blows me across the water is fun, unlike ordinary exercise that produces clock watching. Snacks include as many Cheese Nips and chocolate chip cookies as I can eat. Sandwiches, cheese, and fruit are elevated to the status of gourmet meals after tacking up the lake.

Once the food is gone and everything stowed I pull up the anchor and as the boat turns in the breeze a low beating noise begins as the wind moves in and out of all the wrinkles of the sail. Heading back to the marina is fun, the sail fills with the evening breeze and its taut fullness pushes the boat so quickly

and smoothly I feel like I'm flying. The only giveaway is the fine mist of water I feel when I lean back against the side of the boat to counteract the force of the wind pushing the boat towards the other side. By the time dusk falls, enough speed has built that I'm looking down into the water off the other side of the boat. I feel like I'm on a ride at the fair and love every moment.

Turning into the marina I let the sail out until it is loosely flapping in the wind, reducing my speed until I'm drifting. Once I've stopped at the dock my body is as loose as the sail. Stowing my gear below deck I replay parts of the day in my mind, I'm happy and my skin is warm from lots of sun. Leaving the docks, I nod and receive nods from the owners of other boats; we say little, each enjoying the peaceful feelings a day on the water has given us.

Walking to my car I watch the clay from the beach stick to my shoes and smile knowing I'll be back soon.



## Time and Tides

Lee Ambrose

Naples FL

Waves crash along the shore  
 Sand shifts  
 Ocean's gifts revealed  
 Waves along the shore  
 Time knows no beginning, no end  
 Thoughts drift with the tides  
 Waves crash along the shore  
 Sands shift.

Thoughts drift with the tides  
 Memories of yesterdays  
 Of moonlit walks  
 Thoughts drift with the tides  
 While a great blue heron watches knowingly  
 The past swirls with the present  
 Thoughts drift  
 To memories of yesterday.

While the great blue heron watches  
 From the water's edge  
 Lovers walk in nighttime bliss  
 The great blue heron watches  
 In the shadows of a starry sky  
 The tryst is now his secret too  
 The blue heron watches knowingly  
 From the water's edge.

## Not a Creature Was Stirring

Dawn Peters  
Cave Creek AZ

It wasn't peripheral awareness of the usual wildlife activity outside my home office window that caused me to stop scrolling and clicking. It was the lack of it. Minutes earlier I had seen several desert cottontails nibbling on an assortment of flora, a covey of Gambrel's quail scratching the sand in search of seeds, and a gila woodpecker rhythmically hammering the mesquite tree. Perhaps it was the lack of companionable chortling, as the notes of the quails' songs abruptly ceased, which penetrated my computerized mindset. Whatever it was, the sounds of my Sonoran environment were replaced by silence. It meant only one thing. There was a predator in our midst. My eyes instinctively scanned the closest cover, a wall of dense chuparosas. No doubt the quail and a rabbit or two were huddled beneath low branches waiting for the coast to clear.

Abandoning the Internet, my eyes searched our desert acreage for the predator. Rising from the desk chair, I leaned toward the window, scoping the sky for a red-tailed hawk. Raptors never fail to disrupt activity on the desert floor. Red-tails are most prevalent during daylight; owls at night. Chilling screeches from high perches, courtesy of the phone company, regularly announce the presence of hawks. But the elusive intruder didn't appear to be a bird of prey. Chances of the predator being one of the plethora of snake species were slim. Hibernation is the reptiles' preference during Arizona's winter months. I wouldn't, however, consider that particular generalization gospel. Caught up in the drama of survival outside my window, I continued to search for the predator while contemplating the minutiae of the situation. Which species gave the initial alarm? Was it because a quail sentry cried a warning song that the rabbits and round-tailed ground squirrels sought refuge? Or did rabbits dashing for cover alarm the quail?

I considered indigenous cultures who had once lived in tune with their environment. Would this situation have presented an opportunity or a threat? Perhaps both. As I waited for the predator to reveal itself, my mind drifted back to the summer of 2000 when my husband Andy and I experienced what it felt like to be prey. We had packed our horses with our painting gear, tent, bedrolls, and food, and headed into the back country of Glacier National Park. Two days on the trail and we were far from the nearest human. Survival instinct kicks in big time when you find yourself at the mercy of the elements in the habitat of one of the world's largest living carnivores, the grizzly bear.

We were crossing the Belly River when I spied a set of bear bells in the shallows along the bank. Dismounting my horse, I retrieved the string of bells used to alert bears to the presence of humans. Typically the jingling sound is enough warning for bears to retreat unnoticed, their preference being to avoid humanity if possible. Some might say that that statement is a generalization. Personally, I go by the old adage, There's an exception to every rule.

Remounting, I wondered what happened to the bells' former owner. This wasn't a good sign. Perhaps the person in question had so many bells in his or her possession that the missing string went unnoticed as it sank to the river's icy bottom. I shivered, but not from cold. The backcountry took on an eerie quality as afternoon shadows darkened the forest floor.

We were a couple miles further up the trail when I felt my horse's body tense beneath me. There were countless possibilities for this, all of which I considered in double time. When no obvious reason became apparent, I too felt my muscles instinctively tighten. This was accompanied by a simultaneous super-sensitized awareness of the surrounding habitat. Suddenly Andy began to sing loudly. He sensed something too. I joined in, my off key voice enough to set teeth on edge, as I struggled through "Coming Round the Mountain." I jangled the bells nervously as we continued along the narrow trail towards a hairpin turn a couple hundred yards ahead. The horses weren't snorting or prancing, but they were definitely on edge and it wasn't from being subjected to my singing voice.

As we rounded the bend in the trail, both saddle horses and both pack horses vapor-locked. Frozen in place, heads high, eyes bulging, they snorted in fear. Standing majestically before us in the middle of the trail was a magnificent white-tailed buck with an enormous rack. My inner voice of 35 years ago silently yelled, "Bambi's father!" It's incredible what goes through one's head at key moments. The reality is that unlike deer at lower elevations, this one, having never been threatened by humans, had no fear of us. He was simply curious about the odd entourage noisily making their way through his habitat. The breathtaking beauty of the animal was worth the few minutes of bone chilling fright we endured while feeling like grizzly bait. The buck stared at us for several long seconds. The horses, concluding that he wasn't a threat, stared back. Absolute silence prevailed. Then, losing interest, the buck casually turned away. Lunging forth in a spectacular leap he disappeared from view.



Suddenly my eyes detected movement and I was instantaneously transported to the present. Emerging from the dry arroyo bed where the paloverde trees are thickest, first one, then a second coyote appeared. They separated at the gigantic agave where a third coyote mysteriously materialized. Fanning out they worked the area in full hunt mode. In the silence of life's pursuit they circled the house and barn before traveling west into the preserve, their search for sustenance ongoing.

Three minutes later the quail ventured from their hiding places. A desert cottontail hopped over to the small pond for a drink, and life's orchestra resumed. Encore.



## § 1v

*Slowly but ever so surely, a peacefulness  
is beginning to flow in and renew the  
place once filled with sorrow.*

### Comfort and Joy

Mary Jo Doig  
Raphine VA

The sun has set over the Blue Ridge mountains outside my window but the sky is not yet dark at 5 p.m.. I gently place my son Keith's picture in front of the window, then light the candles on each side of it. Inhaling a long deep breath, I relax into my chair and journey back in time, immersing all my senses into the features of the smiling, dimpled third grader in the picture before me.

Thirty-one years ago today, December 8th, at this time of night, Keith and I, holding gloved hands, were leaving the Department of Social Services building in Cooperstown NY where I was employed as a caseworker. The Catskill Mountain world that day was white and hushed with large, falling snowflakes.

"It's almost Christmas," I said, chilled yet loving the awe of a silent, snowy night.

Keith grinned broadly. "I can't wait!"

I smiled and squeezed his hand as I opened the passenger door for him. We belted into our seats as the car warmed and then, tires crunching beneath us, started a slow drive home on the unplowed road. About twenty minutes later, near home, oncoming headlights approached from the other lane. I stayed focused on my side of the road when suddenly the approaching car skidded over into our lane and hit us head-on. Metal crunched sickeningly, glass shattered wildly, and Keith drew in a long, deep breath, his last independent breath in this world.

A passerby stopped and successfully administered artificial respiration yet it soon became evident that my bright, lively son was now forever stilled. He lived on full life support for four months, nearly the length of time it took for me to accept the fact that he'd been too long without oxygen and was brain dead.

The picture before me today is his last school picture. I look deeply into his round, square-jawed little face, almost able to feel the texture of his thick shiny dark hair on my fingers. I smile at the sparkle in his vivacious dark eyes and I can still hear the sound of his voice.

I feel very close to him at this moment and my thoughts begin to flow easily. First I think of how, over the years, I've

anguished at length because his life story was so far from the script I would have written. I'm always sad or frustrated or tearful or numb, or a mixture of all.

Yet today is a sharp contrast for I realize I'm feeling acceptance, at long last, that his life was as it was and it was all we had. My next unexpected thought is to wonder about what we would say to each other if we could have just five minutes to talk right now—and then the scene spontaneously unfolds in my mind.

"Hi, Mommy!" He stands a few feet from me, still seven years old, his eyes sparkling, his voice joyous, his smile broad.

I open my arms wide and we collide in a huge bear hug. I lift him up, look at his face with wonder, touch his cheeks and his hair, then tightly embrace him, rocking from side to side. He rests his head on my shoulder, I feel his deep contentment, and we are still for several moments as we deeply treasure our embrace. There is nothing in the world as important as right now.

I whisper, "I've missed you so much and wished for just a little bit of time together."

"I missed you too, Mommy." He hugs me tightly, then says, "but I've been okay. I live with Jesus now and I'm happy, even though you and Chip aren't there with me."

My heart swells with joy at his words. "I'm glad." I pause and a lump grows in my throat, "I wish we could have had more time together. I wish your father hadn't left. I wish our life hadn't been so difficult during those few short years we shared."

"It's okay, Mommy." He lifts his head and looks at me. "I know it was hard for you when I left, too. But Jesus told me you and Chip would come home with me one day and then we'll be together again." He smiles so happily I cannot doubt the truth of what he says.

"We will. Do you stay near us in the meantime?"

"I'm always close, Mommy. To Chip and Tommy too."

Tears spill from my eyes.

"Don't be sad, Mommy. I love you just the same as before. That's all that matters—I love you."

"I love you too, Keith." The love I feel flows through my body and fills me with perfect serenity. "You're so right—love is the only thing that matters."

"They're the three most important words in the whole world, Mommy. I love you. Whatever else happened, it's all gone. But our love will never go away."

"I know. I'm sorry to cry because I'm really happy inside. I love you so, my baby boy."

"I'm not a baby," he chides me gently. "Silly Mommy!"

"No, you're not. You've more wisdom than me." I draw in a deep breath and say, "I feel so peaceful near you."

"You should. I'm so fine."

"You have two sisters, you know. I married again."

He smiles impishly. "I knew them before you did, Mommy."

"I wish you'd had time together with Polly and Susan."

"We did, in heaven, and we will again—later. It just wasn't God's plan for me to live with you all."

We're quiet awhile, then I say aloud, "It's so true—what

you said—that love *is* all that matters. Thank you, son. You've given me such a gift today."

He slides down from my arms to stand on the floor. I bend down, resting on my heels. Our faces are close as he murmurs, "I'm going to say bye now for a little while, Mommy." His eyes are locked on mine. "Remember, I love you."

"Bye for just a little while, Keith. Remember, I love you too."

"I know," he says, nodding, eyes shimmering.

I hold up my right hand, my fingers extended outward except for my ring and middle fingers, which are folded downward, in the American Sign Language symbol for "I love you."

Keith forms the same symbol with his short, child fingers and holds it up toward me as he steps backward, one step and then another and another. I watch his joyous face fade until I can see it no longer.

Now I lift my eyes from his picture upwards to the mountains beneath the nearly darkened sky. I feel the deepest peace because I have connected with my son in a whole new way. This silent yet vibrant dialogue between us has given me profound comfort and joy.

I gaze upon the dimming flames of my candles. Leaning forward, I gently blow out each, knowing I will light them again another day soon.



### Life Rhythms

Jan Acker  
Portland OR

Losses...gains...something leaves; something else takes its place.

It's said that Nature abhors a vacuum so there must be something that always comes in to fill the void. Maybe that is what will get me through this series of leavings, of emptyings, of transitioning and going onto new ground.

Something goes out, something comes in. That is a comforting thought. My son is leaving home for college but coming in to refill that space will be new growth for him and a redirection of energy for me.

Something goes out, something comes in. What has come in to fill the space left by the passing of my mother? That's a question whose answer is not yet clear. The grief is still there, and the tears still come; I know that the sadness still exists. However, I can tell that slowly but ever so surely, a peacefulness is beginning to flow in and renew the place once filled with sorrow.

That is how it is then. Something leaves; something else takes its place. Life flows on.



### Putting Humpty Dumpty Together Again

Jackie Woolley  
Round Rock TX

One sunny August morning my father-in-law went into the bathroom and shot himself. His suicide was an anguished, life-changing event that paralyzed the whole family. A few months later my older son miraculously escaped death in a motorcycle accident and prematurely aged all of us during the eight weeks he was in the hospital and the year of his long recovery. My husband of 24 years went through a wrenching, middle-age crisis and quietly confessed he didn't love me any more, breaking up what I (and everyone else) thought was a storybook marriage.

In the midst of this confusion, after numerous delays, Word Books finally published my nonfiction book, *All the Things You Aren't Yet*. I immediately found out that my romantic illusions of book publication did not lead to Paradise. My book appeared on the shelves the same week the doctor said I had colloidal carcinoma of the right breast. Zombie-like, I attended two book signings and checked into the hospital that afternoon. A few weeks after surgery, I went through cobalt radiation therapy and was pronounced fit to re-enter life. I hated to leave teaching at the local community colleges because it fitted well with writing, but I needed a steady income now that I was single. I put on survival gear and re-entered the business world and started an engineering inspection company with a new partner.

Whenever I looked at my bookshelves and writing files, all I could do was mourn the writer I might have been. Outwardly busy with running an office and editing engineering reports, my creative writing totally stopped. Confused about my purpose in life, I remained encased in a block of ice as I searched for a connector cord between my present and my past. I mourned that other gal with her boundless energy and enthusiasm, her belief that she could make a difference with words. Obviously I'd never been a real writer because I couldn't write any more. The copies of my book, so soon out of print, taunted me. The picture of the author on the book sleeve was a maiden from a fairy tale. So much for my 15 minutes of fame!

A few months later I went to a writers' conference and heard a psychologist talk about the emotional impact of rejection, how any rejection can halt the creative process because it damages the self. For the first time, I connected my broken relationship to my current writing block.

One day I read Madeleine L'Engle's *Walking on Water*. She reminded me that when we lose ourselves as creators, we aren't fully alive. I felt the iceberg groan and shift its weight,

(Continued on page 24)

(Continued from page 23)

like a fetus moving in the womb.

By now, my sons were successfully launched forth into the adult world, and they asked how I made such tasty soups from leftovers and other delicious things they remembered from their childhood. They told me to make the instructions very plain, so I resisted the urge to include directions on how to find the kitchen stove. I compiled *Your Growned Up Cookbook* and printed out three copies, one for each of them and one for myself.

After aerobics class one afternoon a friend in the midst of her own marital crisis asked, "How did you get through these last years, Jackie? How did you survive all the crises in your life?" The next day I typed a file label that said, SURVIVING CRISES. The frozen blob thawed a bare trickle. I laughed without mirth at the idea that I might consider writing on a raw subject that still held me in its grip. I needed to read some good advice on surviving crises. My own life was too shaky to examine closely. The file stayed empty.

One late afternoon, I went to the grocery store for a package of spaghetti. The cashier smiled as she rang up the sale. "Bet I know what you're eating tonight. My first husband was Italian. Wanted to eat nothing but spaghetti, spaghetti, spaghetti. For ten years, I cooked Italian every night." She winked. "My second husband likes to eat out. Glory hallelujah." I laughed, and my face hurt from the effort.

The word divorce resonated in my head all the way home. This was not a simple division of bank accounts, bed linens, and photo albums I had gone through. It was like someone had split the head between the eyes with a meat cleaver all the way down to the crotch, leaving the two bloody pieces with half a head, half a beating heart, and one mangled arm and leg. I scribbled a note: "Today, I laughed at the D-word for the first time." I felt like a Jew joking about her time in Auschwitz.

Awakening at 2 a.m., I paced the floor. *Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall. Humpty Dumpty had a great fall. And nothing could put Humpty Dumpty together again.* My emotional wounds couldn't seem to heal. I kept trying to figure out why it happened and who or what was to blame. I wouldn't leave my wounds alone. I picked at the scabs and flailed at the bruises, daily keeping them fresh and raw. I was still a cracked eggshell, drowning in self pity, reluctant to let go of my pride.

I knew all along that my life could only be regained through writing. Up to this point, I was a woman who only knew how to write in a cave. I thought I needed large blocks of time in order to write. It seemed impossible to put three creative words together in my busy office. Now, I learned again that old adage about necessity being the mother of invention. I didn't have hours to spare, so I had to find a way to do it in minutes. For the next ten years, even though I worked long hours for my company, I managed to write in 10 and 15 minute segments, something I had considered impossible in the years before.

I pulled out the novel I'd written for my master's project, *What Death Can Touch*, and re-wrote it as *The Sound of Windmills*. Set in North Texas, where the sound of windmills was the sound of life in the 1930s and 40s, I turned it into a

story of survival, especially of the females in a farm family named Taylor. Like me, they struggled with the need to have power and control over their lives and, lacking the proper role models, often erred when they relied on what others told them rather than trusting their own instincts.

By the time I had completed four book manuscripts, I could literally paper the walls of my office with rejection letters from famous agents and publishers, who in various mealy-mouthed, clever, or smarmy ways said, "Thanks, but I wouldn't know how to market your books." Some wrote nice words before the "but" clause: "I wish I could evaluate your manuscript in terms of how much I enjoyed reading it." "You must be a very nice person." "Your work just misses being very good."

I was finally writing again.



### Timeless Embrace

Lee Ambrose  
Naples FL

With a backdrop of crisp blue sky,  
The old banyan tree beckons  
come closer it seems to say.

Broad shoulders bear the weight of lush green leaves  
Their shade is cool, almost palpable  
On this hot, humid day.

Two trunks become one  
Intertwined, embracing  
While time stands still.

The rough, petrified bark  
A stark contrast to graceful branches  
Cloaked in Spanish moss

Sun sparkles on the river of grass  
As these aging lovers remain  
Locked in their lingering embrace.

## Simultaneous Passion

Bonnie Watkins

Austin TX

Usually we listen with our ears. On rare occasions, we hear with our hearts. And, then even more rarely we hear with our solar plexus, our viscera. These times that I have heard with my entire body can be counted on just three fingers. The first doesn't really count because it registered for only minutes at a stop light. Hordes of teenage boys in the car in the next lane played their music at decibel levels that pulsed through the seat of my car and throbbed out through my fingertips gripping the steering wheel.

The second time music reverberated through my entire body, I was a university student. Often, I crossed campus near the Tower, stepped down the stone steps onto the quad of buildings where I endured many daytime hours of boredom in lecture halls: Parlin Hall, Mezes Hall, Batts Hall. This Friday night promised a Liszt concert instead. I entered the concert hall and slipped into one of the worn fabric-covered seats. When the light bounced off the ebony of the Steinway grand and the music started, my ride began. I didn't hear the music; I felt it. The power of the pianist sent chords into the viscera of my body. The music swelled through my center core. I rose up to meet the swell, as satisfied as meeting a lover for that moment that Auden called, "simultaneous passion that makes one eternal chastity."

The last time music so stirred me occurred in Paris, not in Notre-Dame, not in Sacré-Coeur, but in a smaller Parisian church, whose name, sadly, I can't recall. That day my sister and I merely passed by to admire the stone lion fountain outside when the pull of music lured us inside. We sat in hard wooden pews before an organ that filled the entire wall with pipes. My body vibrated with each note. On and on the organist, hidden from our sight, enthralled us with the hymns known and unknown. We knew we sat on holy ground. As Joseph Addison said, "Music, the greatest good that mortals know, and all of heaven we have below."

### ***Does Your Friend Have a Story?***

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## My Leprechaun, Nimi

Mary Sullivan, r.c.

Highland Park NJ

As a novice she played the virtue "inimitable" in one of our home grown convent theatrical performances. From then on, we affectionately called her Nimi.

I met Nimi more than 45 years ago. The duration of our relationship has proved the truth of this name. Nimi is unique. When I entered religious life, our schedule, our habit (clothes), our rule of silence allowed for no deviation. And yet Nimi somehow managed to stand out.

Each meal was eaten in silence. As we ate, one of the sisters would read from Scriptures or the lives of the Saints. We were expected to eat swiftly and finish in the time allotted. Nimi rarely did. Day after day, meal after meal, Nimi would file out of the refectory with the other sisters. When everyone had left, she would re-enter the refectory, take her place and stand to finish her food.

We dressed alike—purple capes; black veils; silver crosses. Large costume rosaries hung from our waists; starched scratchy bonnets framed our faces. Nimi would tuck up her skirt, curl up on the floor, and sew whenever and wherever.

She muttered. I couldn't believe it. No one was allowed to express disagreement. She did. She muttered in chapel, in the refectory, in the community room, in the dorm, in front of the bulletin board. I was amazed that someone could defy the conventions and still be part of us. Over the years her prayerfulness, her capacity to work, her humor, and her sisterly kindness edified me.

After Vatican II our religious lives changed drastically. In her simplicity, Nimi approached me one day and asked how to use a laundry machine to wash her clothes. Up until then, our habits had been handed over to the sister in charge of the linens, the one responsible for their cleanliness. When we were allowed to drive and go out of the convent she became a steadfast companion. We would attend movies together (she in a modified black and white habit—I in my jeans); we would stop at Carvel for ice cream cones; we would discuss plays, music, books.

I have learned so much from her—how to be part of a community but still my own person; how to adapt and grow into new circumstances; how to maintain a love of the aesthetic as one lives out vows of poverty, celibacy, and obedience.

Her current lesson? Nimi is 96. Recently, she confided to me, "I'm not going to die right now."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Because God has revealed to me something that I have yet to work on."

Nimi is my pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. What wisdom to recognize in your nineties that the God you love, to Whom you have vowed yourself, can still invite you to let go, to change, to become someone new.

## § V

*My hands reach down and I lift you up.  
My arms encircle you, and yours  
encircle me.*

### Celebrations through the Years

**Karen Ryan**  
Fort Myers FL

This year I'm compiling a holiday scrapbook, sorting through 20 years worth of holiday photos in anticipation of a big family celebration this year.

The years with the most photos are when the most kids were around. And the transition years were short of documentation, "transition" being a euphemism for the years our family's lives were turned upside down by divorce. Almost no photos those years—nothing we particularly wanted to remember. So here is a brief compilation of some of our Christmas celebrations over the years (cast of characters: my sisters and brothers, Kevin, Kim, Kendra and Keith; my sons, Tony and Alex; my parents, Grandma and Papa; and many cousins).

1983—Papa, still with a full head of dark hair, and Tony play "down the drain" (Tony sits on his lap and falls through his legs to the floor). Tony kisses the white reindeer by the tree, next to his brand new Smurfmobile. I'd forgotten how cute those footed pajamas are! Was I ever really that thin?

1985—Tony, age three, nearly sleeps through Christmas morning. We wake him up around 9 a.m. after drinking a whole pot of coffee and checking three times to make sure

he's breathing. Aunt Kim gives him a train that whistles loudly and blows smoke, the same train we had decided not to buy because it was far too noisy. Wait until she has kids!

1987—Baby Alex's first Christmas. How cute he is in his one-piece tuxedo! I've still got my baby fat and look matronly. My sisters are glamorous though with their highlighted hair and glitzy outfits. Wait until they have kids!

1988—Our first Christmas in the new house. My Victorian-themed Christmas tree looks great. Tony gets a black bike. He wanted a red one. The Ghostbuster's arms are broken before noon. Pass the wine.

Alex pets the same white reindeer at Grandma's house. Gosh he looks cute with that little red bow tie! Wish I could get him to dress up for the holidays now. Santa is up all night putting Batman's cave together. Why on earth are there so many decals?

Great Grandma and Grandpa are with us this year in their matching red sweaters. It will be Grandpa's last. Alex loves his new fire truck, which took me hours to select. Who knew there were so many kinds of trucks?

1991—The boys are adorable in their holiday outfits; Alex wears red suspenders and a tweed cap. Grandma Dot is laughing and hugging Tony, but this is a hard Christmas for her.

1992—More kids this year! Baby Morgan and Aunt Kendra help us make Christmas cookies and Ginger licks up the frosting from the tabletop. Baby Artie cries on Papa's lap, stopping only when Papa's screws up his face and lets out a few wails too.

Another new house to decorate for the holidays! The oversized wreath in the Palladian window looks so festive lit up at night. We host Christmas dinner in our new dining room and then follow up with a New Year's celebration in Florida at the Ryan's. Kendra and Morgan make quite a picture in their matching green velvet dresses while the rest of us look pretty

### About the Editor

Jane Ross was born and raised in New Zealand of British parents. In her final year of college, while majoring in math, Jane discovered that what she really wanted was to be an editor. After graduation she moved to London England and soon found work as the mathematics editor for Chapman and Hall, the original publishers of Charles Dickens' works, now a scientific publisher.

After she met her future husband, mathematician Felipe Voloch in 1985, the next several years were a period of long distance romance, until Jane and Felipe married in New Zealand in 1988 and moved to Brazil. A stint as Subscriptions Manager for Latin America with *Time* magazine followed until 1990 when the family, now with a baby daughter, Sofia, moved to Berkeley CA. A year later, the family moved to Austin TX.

In the 11 years she has lived in Austin, Jane has worked as a freelance writer and editor, web designer, and OWL group facilitator. She became an active member of Story Circle Network in 1999 and presented at the recent Story Circle Conference, on the topic "How to Be Your Own Editor." She is currently the assistant editor of the quarterly *Story Circle Journal* and this is her second year as guest editor of the *True Words* anthology.

### Acknowledgments

For an editor, there can be no more rewarding assignment than taking the life stories of a group of friends and forming them into a publication that reflects back to the writers the beauty, diversity, and strength of their own words. I thank all the writers—those who were friends before and those who I now think of as my friends, having worked with their words and their stories over the past weeks—for allowing me to be part of the process of discovering and revealing your own true stories.

A number of people have given me truly invaluable help during the editing process. I would like to thank my eagle-eyed proofreaders, Pat Flathouse, Mary Ann Reynolds, and Danelle Sasser. I also thank Peggy Moody for coordinating printing and mailing and myriad other assistance. Peg Syverson provided the insights and the inspiration for the organization of this anthology. Susan Wittig Albert has been a tremendous source of encouragement throughout this project and over the past year. And last but not least, I thank and send my love to Felipe and Sofia.

silly wearing feathered party hats and beads. Wasn't this the year we had professional group photos taken and each family had to wear matching shirts?

1998—My first Christmas without the boys, I fly to Denver to be with Kendra and the girls. They are so cute and Charlie licks my face so often that I can't be lonely. Until I'm snowed in back home on New Year's Eve alone with the flu and the furnace goes out. Some memories need no photos.

1999—The biggest celebration comes with the millennium. Grandma and Papa's dream house on the beach is nearly complete so we all descend to bring in the new century, including the new man in my life. With 11 adults and nine children, it's chaotic but fun. Even though the cousins don't get to see each other often since we're spread all over the country, they seem to always pick up just where they left off. We have the most delightful picture of them all, from 17-year-old Tony to two-year-old Brandon, sprawled across a big bed tired out from New Year's Eve festivities.

2000—New husband, new house, new stepson, new dog, new life! Teenagers look like we woke them up too early. They promptly head back to bed after dumping out their stockings.

We travel again to the big house in Florida, joined by Kevin and family. Dylan at five lights up the holiday with his bright eyes and big hugs.

Epilogue 2003—This year for the holidays almost all of us will be present for part of the December festivities. Nobody loves a celebration more than my mother. Sometimes I think she had a big family and built a huge house just so she could host these gala gatherings. That reminds me, I'd better make sure the batteries are fully charged on the new digital camera—lots more pages to fill in this family's holiday scrapbook.

### Message in the Margin

Linda Soucy Collins

Chino Hills CA

Amelia Durst Klett, my grandmother, rode across the Texas Hill Country in a buckboard as a child and lived to see the first space flights in her old age. During that time, she buried both parents before her sixteenth birthday; faced financial hardship; lived with criticism; nursed a brother through tuberculosis; managed a household, garden, poultry-yard and home-based laundry during the Depression; lost a son in World War II; and buried two of her three remaining children and her husband. After a year and a half as an invalid, she died in her eighties. She had her failings and low times, but she was a great lady. The stubborn stoicism in her was surpassed only by simple honesty and a sense of humor that made her blue eyes twinkle in her set German face. A serious "sermon" was delivered when she felt it was needed, but just as often her shoulders would shake in silent, delighted laughter.

The gray head with its braided bun was often bent over her Bible in the later years when the hard work had finally ceased. After her death, my mother, her only surviving child, found clippings and sayings tucked or written in every available place in that worn Book. Since my grandmother's formal schooling had lasted only three or four months altogether, she developed her own system of writing and punctuation. Reading it was like deciphering hieroglyphics. One saying in the margin was especially worth the effort. Probably it should not be lived by literally. Yet I appreciate the glimpse of the humble graciousness in my grandmother's heart toward all people: "Say something nice about everybody, even if you have to make it up."



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**Hands**  
**Lisa Shirah-Hiers**  
 Austin TX

Your little hand was curled tight as a rosebud. Red, flushed, it waved uselessly where it had escaped from the sausage roll of your striped receiving blanket. Burrito baby we called you. All I could do was stare at the perfection of those tiny fingers, each with its own meticulously shaped fingernail. I was scared to use the miniature clippers when you began to scratch yourself. I resorted to nibbling. Mommy manicures.

I blinked. You were no longer my burrito baby. Now you disdained the sausage roll. You wanted both your arms free. You marveled when they crossed your line of sight. Your tongue poked in and out, in and out. You were a little snake, tasting the air. You waved hands and feet frantically and crowded when the toy Piglet circled Pooh and Eeyore round and round on the crib mobile. For some reason it was only Piglet who impressed you.

I blinked again. You were spilling over my lap. Your feet in their terrycloth pajamas dangled down my thigh. One foot bumped the seat rhythmically and your left hand slapped my breast gently as you suckled. We drowned in each other's gaze.

I blinked first. You were sitting in my lap again, your back against my chest, your left hand stroking the hairs on my left arm. I shivered. You took the sippy cup out of your mouth long enough to murmur "I wuv you Mama." I tried not to. But I couldn't help it. I blinked again.

You were scribbling in your coloring book. Snow White

and the seven dwarves disappeared under a furious rainbow. I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, you were holding a fork in your fist and chasing pieces of hotdog across your plate. You were petting the kitty oh-so-gently. You were, with great care, turning the pages of a book. You were struggling to brush your Barbie's hair.

I open my eyes. You are writing your name with great precision across the bottom of your picture. The S is backwards, but you are as proud as a first-time novelist at a book signing. "Awesome, Sarah!" I enthuse. You smile. We hang your drawing of a T-Rex (pretty good for a four-year-old, I think) on the refrigerator door. Your hands give it a pat and you run to your room. I follow breathless.

Your hands turn the knob on your bedroom door, open the dresser, and select a shirt and matching shorts. They pull off your nightgown and undies, tossing them nonchalantly in the corner. They pull on the size four panties and turn the shorts around so the bow is in front. They hold the waistband open while you step in—right leg, then left. They follow your arms through the bottom of your shirt, and after a brief struggle, make their way through the armholes. Somehow your head went through the neck. I didn't see it. I was watching your hands. Now they yank the shirt in place, impatient, fluttering like birds. You race across the room, arms open. Your hands reach around my middle and you squeeze. Your ear is pressed into my belly button. My hands reach down and I lift you up. My arms encircle you, and yours encircle me. From above we must look like a pretzel. I'm afraid to close my eyes again.

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