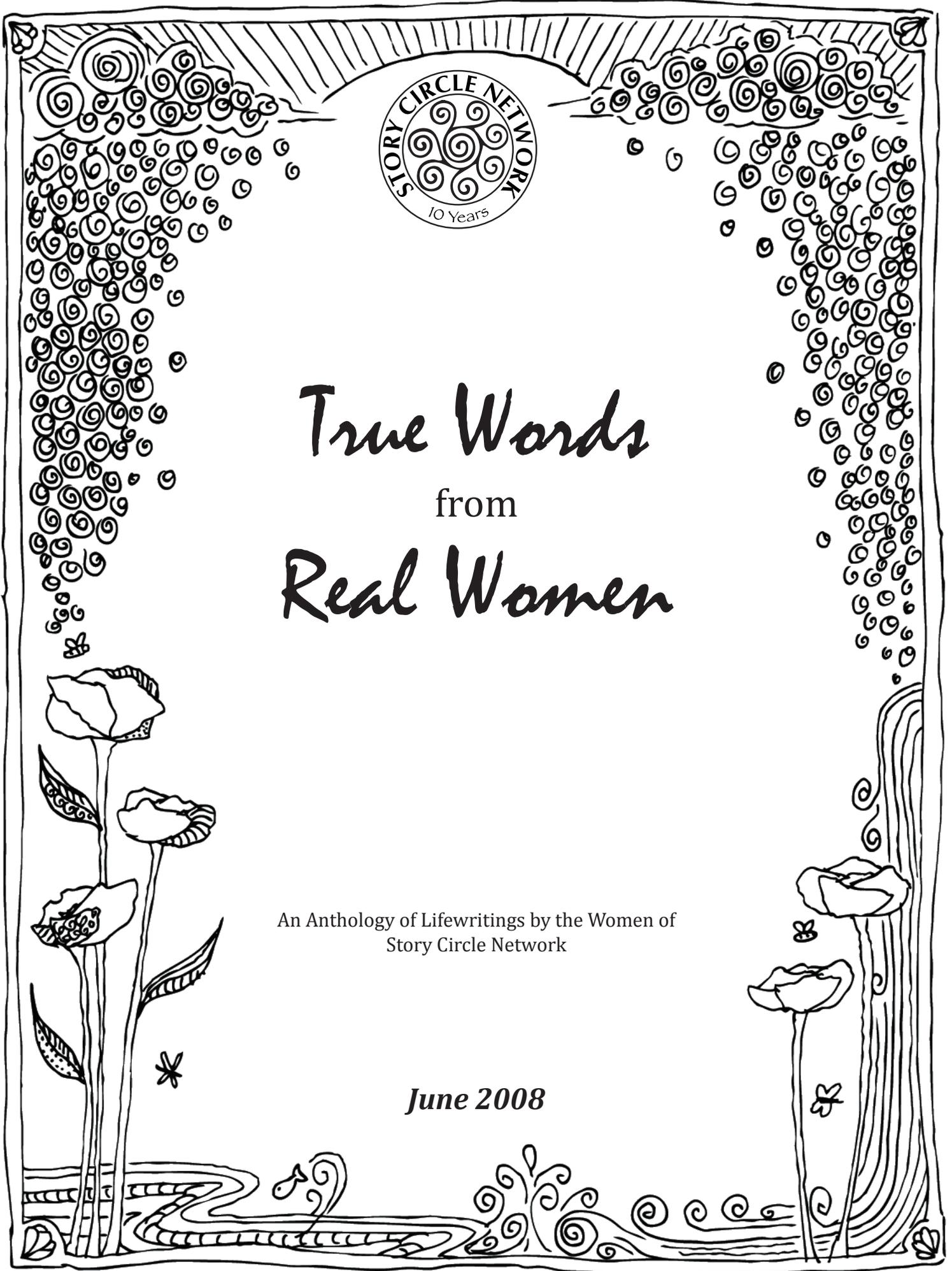


*True Words*  
from  
*Real Women*

An Anthology of Lifewritings by the Women of  
Story Circle Network

*June 2008*



*We come from all walks of life and join  
here in the circle to beckon our creativity  
and weave our stories.*

## Letter from the Editors

**Judy Whelley, Dayton, OH**  
**Becca Taylor, Pinehurst, TX**

Story Circle Network is a magical place, a birthing place, a nurturing place, a place of fulfillment, and a place of dreams. It is so appropriate that our logo includes spirals going ever deeper nestled within a circle.

For many of us the Circle is not a geographic place but a cyberspace nest. We share our stories with other women who encourage us and help us become not only better writers but more fully our true selves. The anthology's name, *True Words from Real Women*, accurately reflects the diversity and creativity of our women as we share, from the heart, our stories.

Editing this anthology has been a challenge and a labor of love. As writers, we have learned about the process and reasoning that underlie the selection of pieces for publication. We believe our own writing has improved because we know better how to polish a piece before submission and how very important it is to follow submission guidelines. If you have the opportunity to edit or to submit your work for publication, seize it.

The breadth and depth of the works submitted was awe inspiring—more than we anticipated, in volume, topic, and quality. We've seen many times the writing of our Circle sisters, so we knew the pieces would be fantastic and it would be difficult to choose what would go into the printed anthology. We had over 100 submissions but only 28 pages! We wanted so much to be able to share more than 28 pages of your writing, which is why we also published an online supplement. Every voice is deserving of a platform, and those of you who sent in your writing have blessed us all.

For the first time, you'll also be able to order extra copies of this anthology from Lulu. Visit the Story Circle Network web site ([www.storycircle.org](http://www.storycircle.org)) for details. We hope you'll use this opportunity to show other women the power of life stories.

Editing this anthology has been both a privilege and honor, and we hope the opportunity comes again. We look forward to reading many more of your stories!



## Acknowledgments

So much spirit and so many women helped make this anthology happen:

Jane Ross, whose indefatigable energy and dedication make SCN publications shine.

Danelle Sasser and Jane Ross, our very keen-eyed proofreaders.

Peggy Moody, who just makes everything work behind the scenes (is it magic?).

And most of all, to all of you, our Circle sisters, who know that our stories are vital and sharing them makes us stronger.

## True Words from Real Women

TRUE WORDS FROM REAL WOMEN is an annual publication of the Story Circle Network. 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.

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# Personal Growth



## Getting It

**Louise Saxon**  
**Yarborough Library Circle, Austin, TX**

Years have lives of their own,  
galloping past without notice.

Suddenly,  
bones creak,  
joints speak to us  
in languages we only begin  
to understand.

Reformations come too late.  
Only the wise learn early.  
I'm just beginning.

The point is to keep moving,  
no matter what comes.  
Pain is part of the cycle.  
It threads its way tangentially  
through the fiber of our lives.  
When it abates, if...  
pay attention and be grateful.

## Melt Down—Break Through

**Jerril Jean Henry**  
**Moon Writers Circle, Austin, TX**

I had a melt down at the pool today.

First, a little background: My mother and her sister Kathryn loved to shop together. It was their hobby. Kathryn lived in Tulsa, OK, we lived in Bedford, TX, and Mom would fly to Tulsa four times a year to do her fashion shopping. Mom was 5'10" and looked like a model. Kathryn was 5'1" tall and about 5'1" in the breasts. She did not look like a model. She hated photographs of herself. She would always give her photos a mastectomy. I have a photo album full of images of Katherine with legs, belly, neck and head, with a gaping hole where the breasts should be.

In 1960, when I was five, Mom and Kathryn bought matching dresses on one of their famous shopping trips. These dresses were shirtwaist (think, *I Love Lucy* with the big full skirt and the tiny belt at the waist.) The fabric was white with big red polka dots the size of golf balls. Two matching women... one tall and slender, one short and fat. It

was quite a sight. Sadly, I have no photo of this, but the image was burned into my child's mind.

Growing up, I struggled with my weight. I must have inherited Mom's height and Kathryn's poundage. Mom incessantly discussed my weight, took me to weight doctors, and worked endlessly to make me pretty enough for the boys to notice. It was the major bone of contention between us. Even as Mother was dying of cancer during my teen years, her last wish to me was to please lose weight. She died on my twentieth birthday, with our unresolved issues hanging in the air. Thirty years later, I've never married. I've never believed any man who said he loved me or thought I was lovely.

After Mother died, Kathryn and I became very close. She would write me monthly, and I would fly to Tulsa twice a year to spend time with her. She was encouraging, telling me over and over that she loved me. She would close her letters with, "I love you...every pound and every inch." This made me mad because I felt she was always calling attention to my weight. Why couldn't she just say a simple, "I love you"? Kathryn grew up fat. She was a fat adult. Why didn't she understand how it hurt to call attention to this? But secretly, it felt really good to hear her declarations of unconditional love, and I loved her very deeply. When Kathryn died last summer at the age of eighty-six of Alzheimer's, it had been many years since she has been able to tell me she loves me... every pound and every inch.

Now to move forward to today:

I've been listening to the Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now* CDs and his lesson on how parents should talk to their children and give them blessings each morning. He said you should never degrade your child. Your words will determine their future. Your blessing and encouragement will create a future of blessings for your child. You should never speak words of discouragement, hurt, and shame

with someone you have authority and influence over. Speak positive words that build up and encourage your child.

As I listened to this in my car on the way to the YMCA for my daily swim, I became very frustrated and angry at Mom and started yelling, "Yeah! Listen to *this*, Mom! I have made your words come true! You told me I was fat and unlovable. When you were dying with cancer you told me that your dying wish was for me to lose weight so that some man would love me. This made me feel horrible! Why couldn't you tell me that you love me when you were dying? Why did you have to leave me with *this* in my brain to rattle over and over and over? I wish you



were here to listen to me now and tell me you love me!"

Ten minutes later, still angry, with hot tears in my eyes and a tight throat, I jumped into the pool. Slamming my hands into the water, trying to splash my frustration in noisy waves, it took about five laps before my mind settled down. Then it happened, a revelation. Mother spoke to me while I was swimming, saying calmly:

"Once I got to heaven, God showed me how I had hurt you. Ever since your twentieth birthday, I have been telling you that I love you through your Aunt Kathryn. I spoke through Kathryn's lips. My hands guided her pen when she wrote her letters. I have looked at you with deep love through Kathryn's eyes. She was my soul speaking directly to you."

I had an instant meltdown right there during lap five. Crying so hard that my goggles fogged over and my nose filled with snot, I discovered quickly that while it's almost impossible to breathe when I blubber on dry land, in water I almost drowned. I struggled to the end of the lap lane and laid my head down and bawled. Thirty years of anger lifted instantly. I was loved and accepted, and upset that I took so long to open my ears to hearing these words. I thanked Mother for finally revealing this to me.

I imagined Mother and Kathryn standing arm in arm, in their white and red polka dotted dresses, shaking their heads, smiling and saying, "Good grief...it sure took you a long time to figure this out!" I spent thirty years yelling at Mother instead of listening quietly for her voice to speak to me.

I'm totally exhausted now. And I have a feeling that the revelations have just begun.

## To the Soul

**Sandi Stromberg**  
**Joyce Boatright's Circle, Houston, TX**

In the lecture hall, a woman asks to be shown that place in the body where you reside. The audience laughs, but she persists, understanding you are a wounded organ that could break like the heart or suffer the colon's blockage. We become intolerant of her need to pin you to a place and time, as though you were some being the clock could govern. We want her quest to be absurd so we can feel your ineffable presence, superior in our connection. And yet, a hidden part of us would like you and God to come out and declare your existence.

## Unglued

Jan Golden

Women of the Round Table Circle, Largo, FL

What day is this  
I ask myself  
Do I dare say  
The day I snapped

What makes it different  
From other days  
To say I've come unglued  
And how

Is it the glue I used today  
My Mother said use Elmer's  
My church said use carpenter's  
The world said use super glue

We've glued you together  
A collage of our rules  
Do you dare to come unstuck  
In your role as super woman

Ah to soak in the solvent  
Of freedom, to be, to do as  
I see fit ... unglued and  
Glorious. Snap. Crackle. Pop



## A First Taste

Sandra Simon

Sharing Our Stories Circle, Austin, TX

I was almost eighteen the first time I ever ate pizza. I knew about pizza from an ad in *Seventeen* magazine, my source for knowledge of all things glamorous and important—but I had never seen a pizza, much less tasted one.

It was a Sunday. In the afternoon, I went to the Houston City-wide Science Fair with my friend Richard Bridges and his family. Richard was tall and gangly, with thick dark hair that stood up like the bristles of a brush, making him look even taller. He was only fourteen, awkward as well as gangly, but he was already a senior in high school, just as I was. I was a little awed by him—after all, he was the same age as my younger sister—but we had become friends.

When the Bridges family came to our house to get me, I was surprised to see Mr. Bridges wearing a gray business suit, Mrs. Bridges also in a suit, and Richard and his brother in white shirts and ties. I wondered whether they dressed like this every Sunday, maybe to go to church. My family was pretty casual on Sundays, and my dad usually went fishing if he didn't have to go to work.

I think that Richard's parents were math professors. Once

we began looking at the Science Fair exhibits, I could hardly keep up with the conversation. I didn't like that—I wanted to understand! We spent a long time looking at the math exhibits. I remember one exhibit that showed a number, its square, and its cube as geometric figures. I was astonished; it had never occurred to me that squaring or cubing a number could be shown as an actual, physical square or cube.

But there was a more amazing experience yet to come. Mrs. Bridges suggested that we go out for pizza. "We often go to Valiant's on Sundays," she said. "Do you like pizza?"

How could I confess that I had never eaten it? I couldn't. After all, I was seventeen, the oldest person there, except for the parents, and I already felt like I was barely hanging in. So I said, "Sure."

Valiant's was beyond my expectations. The walls were decorated with green trellises covered with plastic grape vines. The tables had red and white checkered tablecloths, and candles stuck into dark, squat straw-covered Chianti bottles. In the ad in *Seventeen* magazine, attractive teenagers were happily eating slices of pizza and drinking 7UP against a brightly colored background. Valiant's fit the picture perfectly.

I looked at the menu. *How to order?* Thank heavens, Mrs. Bridges explained, "We always share a large combination pizza." I was safe! And, thanks to that 7UP ad, I knew exactly what to drink.

The pizza arrived, golden-brown cheese festooned with circles of sausage and pepperoni, and other little things that I couldn't identify by sight. Mr. Bridges placed slices on plates and passed them around to each of us. *A new challenge—how to eat it?* The pieces were much larger than I had imagined from the ad, where the teenagers were holding small, firm-looking triangles of pizza in their hands. The crust before me sagged under the tomato sauce, cheese and toppings; it looked unstable and dangerously drippy. Moving slowly, taking a sip of 7UP, I watched. Richard, his younger brother, and Mr. Bridges picked up their slices in both hands and went at eating them. Mrs. Bridges used a knife and fork. Okay, I started out with my knife and fork. The taste was overwhelming—the strong, heavy, thick tomato sauce, the rich, tangy cheese, the sharp, fatty sausages, the bite of peppers and onion, all against the slightly sweet crust. Fantastic! Nothing I had ever tasted, certainly not my mother's spaghetti and meatballs, approached the intensity of these flavors. After a few bites, I put down the fork and knife, cradled my slice in my messy hands, and bit right into it, like the boys. The magazine ad had helped me cope but had given me no clue about how delicious the pizza tasted! I decided that 7UP was a little too sweet and that our



Texas drink, Dr. Pepper, would be better.

I wonder whether it was obvious to Richard or his parents that I was winging it. They never said a word about it. But a few years later, when I went out with my boyfriend and his parents for Chinese food, I made no secret of the fact that I was eating it for the first time in my life. This was wise: I needed lots of help with the chopsticks!

## Patience and Playing the Hand You Are Dealt

**Marcy Meffert**  
**Leon Valley, TX**

Patience is a virtue  
Or so I have been told  
But somehow I have less  
As I am growing old.

I had some as a mother  
I had some as a wife  
I had some with the others  
Who came into my life.

But I think I'm being tested  
In the twilight of my years  
To see if I can deal with life  
With minimum of tears.

Clichés have come to haunt me  
Like: "Play the hand you're dealt"  
They're easier to say  
Than apply to what I've felt.

With patience lost and temper short  
My choice is laugh or cry.  
I know that when I lighten up,  
The days go quickly by.

So how do others keep their patience?  
They tell me that the fact is:  
It's like, "How do I get to Carnegie Hall?"  
You gotta, "Practice, Practice, Practice."

Easy for them to say!

## Cocoon

**Tricia Stephens**  
**e-Circle #2**

I have been in love with the idea of moving to a new place and the changes it will bring for several years. But now that our family's move from Texas to Colorado is less than six months away, I'm sometimes scared in spite of the many reasons I want to move.

I've always lived around Dallas in northeast Texas so I've

never known fall. Most years leaves fall in one day with the first cold snap. Other years the leaves drop slowly from exhaustion when a cold snap doesn't happen until late in the season. In either case the leaves barely change color. I look forward to finding out if the calendars I collect with pictures of fall in the north are true.

For two to three months each year the temperature feels to be one hundred or more degrees in Dallas. At first I happily work in our garden as my sweat drops back into the ground. As the heat continues everyone's energy fades. I look forward to four seasons, to winters that last, and snow that covers the landscape. For years we've enjoyed backpacking in Rocky Mountain National Park, now hiking can be a regular activity, not just something we do on vacation. We'll take our dogs with us and our Lab who faithfully watches the sky will have wildlife to see and smell. When family and friends visit from Dallas we won't have to stay indoors, but can enjoy being outside together.

I've watched Dallas grow and the land disappear beneath concrete. I've watched as people isolate inside their houses with their central air conditioning. Seldom do I see houses being built with porches, instead they have tiny entrances. I look forward to open windows that will let in sounds and smells. I look forward to seeing trees, mountains, and people outside. Maybe I'll see porches again or outside areas to sit and visit with others.

Today I'm feeling brave. I'm excited that when we move, the cocoon I've built around myself of known and familiar things will be replaced with new things to see and do. I don't know what I'll see when the cocoon opens, but I'm looking forward to being surprised.

## Ensure Daily Exercise—Get a Dog!

**Janice Kvale**  
**e-Circle #5**

I was full of rationales to persuade my reluctant spouse that getting a dog was a good idea. He liked dogs, I reminded him. Furthermore, I spent a lot of time alone while he worked. I talked to myself. Wouldn't I look less crazy if someone was actually listening, even if it was just the dog? Most notably, I needed exercise, something I couldn't motivate myself to sustain. A dog would ensure I exercised daily. (Secretly, I acknowledged that I would be happy to exercise only my right arm throwing a Frisbee for the dog!)

The characteristics I wanted in a dog were legion: the dog should not smell, shed, be allergenic, require grooming, be aggressive, or be one of those little yappy types. Most important, the dog should be of medium size. I had once



been dragged across a tarmac by a mastiff. No big dogs for me.

A rescue dog appealed to me, but nothing moved me to action until I read about a local dog trainer rescuing dogs in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Perhaps it was my desire to do something about that whole debacle with people and their pets being separated or abandoned that caught my fancy.

So I applied, not to adopt, but to foster one of the animals. Just in case the reality of having a dog didn't match my fantasy, I wanted an out. My list of doggy attributes was trimmed to two: non-aggressive and medium size. I was accepted as a foster "Mom." I imagined a room of cages, a potential adoptee in each. I would walk by the cages deciding which one was for me. How could I choose? As it turned out, I didn't need to worry about that.

When the dogs arrived, I reported to the Lee Mannix Center for Canine Behavior. A few other "Moms" were there and already with their dogs. There were no cages visible. The dogs were kept out of sight, and they were all preassigned.

I sat on the raised hearth of an unlit fireplace watching the drama swirling around me. Then someone said my dog was next. Before I was aware of the dog's entrance into the room, a medium-sized dog with super canine energy came charging across the room, threw himself full speed onto my chest, and licked me across the face! In this room full of people, how did he know I was his?

I liked him immediately despite the full-face doggy kiss. His history indicated he had been rescued in a New Orleans parish close to the shore of the Gulf of Mexico. He was already dubbed Connor. I got instructions on when to bring him back, snapped on his leash, and took my dog home. I already suspected I would be adopting this boy.

At first, he wouldn't eat or drink. He was afraid of crossing the kitchen floor because his feet slid when he walked on it. Minding the warning that these dogs may be escape artists having survived the hurricane and the days following, I allowed him no farther outside than the backyard on a leash. This precaution was abandoned when he proved he had no intention of escaping.

He seemed a shy creature, prone to rolling on his back when humans approached. I soon learned that he generously shared much of his long, thick coat and did indeed smell like a dog. But he wasn't a barker, and his affection and sweet personality made up for any defects.

My first lesson in dog behavior came when I took him for his evaluation with trainer Lee Mannix. In less than a minute, Lee had him trained to sit before getting a dish with food.

(Connor still remembers that lesson.) I was already falling in love with this dog and told Lee I must have gotten the best dog of all. Forget fostering, we were adopting him.

As time went on, we learned more about Connor. He had symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, doggy style. He was obsequious with all adults, but fearful and aggressive with other dogs. He snapped at small children. Noises that sounded like gunshot made him nervous. (Dogs were shot post-Katrina as they ran loose in New Orleans.) Other experiences caused silent panic in Connor. One day he was in the car when we drove through the automatic car wash. With all the noise and water pelting the car, Connor didn't make a sound but his whole body trembled. He was in agony. We hadn't thought how much like a hurricane the car wash experience was.

There were physical problems too. Like many of the dogs rescued, he came with heartworm and underwent the toxic treatment inherent to that condition. He had a slight limp in his left hindquarter. An X-ray showed a badly healed break, and surgery was required to relieve the deformity that may cause pain later.

These things were not the financial burden for us they could have been. These dogs were rescued with money from a grant that also covered their initial medical care and two training sessions at the Lee Mannix Center. The training insured these dogs would be desirable family companions for any future adoption should that prove necessary.

Connor has been our dog for two years and is a delightful companion for my husband and me. He was the perfect dog to rescue me from talking to no one at all and from lack of exercise. He listens attentively to me, cocking his head to one side. He has no idea how to fetch Frisbees or anything else. His best moment of the day is when it is time for a walk. When I pick up the leash, he leaps high into the air and performs a dance of anticipation. Then he bays at me with a long "Awoooooo!" telling me I am the slowest creature on earth and would I please hurry up.

Connor makes sure I get plenty of exercise.



## A Tale of Two States

Arlene Howard  
Internet Reading Circle

A few sweet gum leaves fluttered to the ground. The dogwood berries were beginning to sport their red coats.

Standing in the middle of nine acres of woods, I felt at home. "Wait a minute!" I said out loud to myself. "I'm in Georgia. How can it feel like home? I have never been here before."

My experience in Georgia happened five years ago, but my story began almost forty years ago in Walnut Creek, California. We were in the middle of laying twenty-five hundred bricks in our atrium when the call came. "You better sit down," my husband, Alan, commanded. "If I want to stay with the new company, we will have to move to Maryland."

"We just bought our home. I'm in the middle of graduate school."

"We want to eat, don't we?" he replied.

The move didn't happen right away. Thank goodness for small favors as my mom used to say. There was a recession in the country in 1970-71. We had a difficult time selling our home. The year it took to sell our home gave me time to finish my degree and get used to the idea of moving east. Oops, I mean south. It also gave us time to finish laying the bricks.

Moving day arrived. We packed our Saint Bernard in a giant crate and off we all flew to Maryland to a new house and a new life. Our new home was okay. At least it was California-style. Oh, I missed my native state. "What am I doing here?" I wondered. My only answer, "I am with my husband."

A few years passed. While there was an empty feeling inside me not to be living in California, I began to adjust. Our favorite neighbors from Walnut Creek moved to Connecticut, and we began to see them. New neighbors moved in and we became and still are close friends. Our daughter, Allyson, was born. Imagine me having a southern-born daughter. We fell in love with sailing on the Chesapeake Bay and moved to Annapolis so we could be closer to the boat.

"Mom, how come you didn't fly to Grandma's so I could be born in California?" Allyson asked me on more than one occasion. Sure enough, her college choice was in California. Off she went "to where I belong, Mom." Then, nearly thirty years after our great journey across the country, an amazing thing happened. My husband was transferred back to northern California. We had three weeks notice. Back we flew with our second Saint Bernard and two cats. It felt

glorious to live under California skies with native blue oaks in my backyard and a view of the American River. After a while, Alan retired. We moved to southern California. Southern California? I was a staunch northern California girl. Warm sunny days, Pacific Ocean breezes and living twenty minutes from Allyson convinced me I could easily become a Southern Californian. Ironically, our new home was not a design usually found in Southern California. Rather it was Federal-style, which is common in Maryland. During the holidays I always put single candles in my windows, a tradition I borrowed from the historic brick buildings in Annapolis.

One evening the phone rang. My dearest friend's husband had died. I went to Athens, Georgia, to be with Nancy for a few days. There in Nancy's woods, while I was comforting her, I was comforted myself. I discovered this California girl felt at home in the forests of Georgia. How could that be? After thinking about it for a while and doing a bit of reading, I learned that Georgia is located at the southern end of the Piedmont region, the same region that encompasses Maryland. The trees and shrubs and plants that I saw in Nancy's woods were similar to the trees and plants in the woods where I had lived for twenty-eight years.

Slowly I began to realize that this California girl, who had lived more of her life in Maryland than in her native state, missed Maryland. I missed her woods. They had become my woods. Maryland is where I raised my daughter, became a gardener, and became a librarian. It is where I had grown into being me. It may be that I have two native states: one where I was born and one where I became whom I am. Where is home? I ponder.

## Childhood Memories



### Dandelion Days of Summer Recipe

Carol A. Feder  
Wimberley, TX

- 7 sisters
- 2 bedrooms, 1 bathroom
- a fistful of fuzzy dead dandelions
- 7 homegrown tomato sandwiches
- a gallon of Kool-Aid-flavored ice cubes
- an armful of library books

a jarful of lightning bugs  
7 pairs of rusty roller skates  
varied and sundry bee stings

Mix all ingredients, stir lovingly. Bake in a small town's summer heat for three months or until crisp, tender and vibrant.

Dillonvale, Ohio, a quaint hamlet just outside of Cincinnati, Ohio, our childhood neighborhood. My flock of six younger sisters and I were marinated in this summer recipe, taste-tested and savored for life. We were seven sisters stirring, stewing, and steeping. Seven ponytails bobbing in the sizzling heat. I was the eldest ponytail, holding a cherished position of hierarchy. We clustered and slept in two bedrooms, sharing one bathroom. Sleeping stacked up like books on library shelves in our red-brick Midwest home. There was no room to call our own, never a private moment. There were seven of us to wash, clothe, and feed. By lunchtime, we were hungry again, seemed like forever since breakfast. We'd whisk up luncheon picnic outings—outings as far away as our own backyard or a neighbor's—plain white-bread sandwiches packed thick with homegrown tomatoes, red or green or yellow, slathered with salt and mayonnaise. The sweetness of orange, lime and strawberry Kool-Aid ice cubes sucked from pastel tin metal cups. Finishing up with smiles of grape-colored lips and tongues. Our little bodies coated with the fragrance of sweaty sticky kids' skin, we ran barefoot, blistered and bee stung, ending our days with Noxzema-covered sunburns and a jarful of lightning bugs.

During the summers, we were deglazed from homework. Free from the nuns' all-knowing eyes that seemingly peered from the back of ominous black-hooded garments. Three months filled with dreams and wishes blown into the air on the backs of fuzzy dead dandelions. We didn't have to be school smart in the summer. We could simmer away the day, Crayola color the day, scissor cut a play day with paper Barbie cut-outs, a day of carefree kids, free to be free if only for a few precious months.

We blended in a house on a cul-de-sac atop a sloping hill. A "circle," as we used to call it. We learned how to ride shiny new two-wheeler bicycles on that circle. Held our breath, feeling as though we'd free-wheel right down that hill out of control. We played kickball incessantly. Jump rope. Hopscotch. Baseball. Marbles. Jacks. Learned how to throw a baton high in the air, catch it expertly before it crashed into our little faces. Encircled our hips with hula hoops, keeping a handful of hoops wildly twirling all at the same time. We'd entertain our parents with goofy skits diligently produced and directed in three-and-a-half

minutes. We played hide-and-seek until the lighting of the streetlights marked the dreaded time to return indoors. That was our playground, a safe circle of Dillonvale cement.

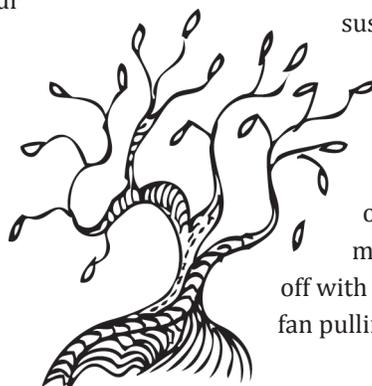
Our sautéed summer-delight highlight was a trip to the library. This was a real afternoon outing away from home, a whole mile distant, yet a world away. Walking in bare-soled shoes filled with squares of cardboard, we'd troop single file through a wooded creek route. That old library shaded us with its cool-haven charm. A building of quiet alphabetical order, steeped in the aroma of musty-seasoned books. We would disappear into our age-related book sections, escaping into a world of enchantment and encouragement. A world of new dreams not yet imagined. A world of reading unspoken thoughts, feelings and sentiments not discussed within the family home. Living within the written words and whimsical worlds as if they were our own. We sisters seven remained caramelized for hours in search of a fresh batch of books to sear our imaginations. Once the books and sisters were stockpiled, we lined up for the antique blue-haired librarian to diligently hand stamp each due date in each book. With books nestled in our arms, we'd trudge home, wishing for an iced Coca-Cola to fizzle away the heat.

When fresh evening dusk basted onto daylight, we took off rickety rolling downhill on rusty roller skates. Without regard for cars crossing at the end of the street, we'd stop rolling once our skates crashed into the edge of someone's grassy lawn...full of dandelions, of course. We'd maneuver ourselves back uphill, awkwardly walking with our skated feet turned outwards. No need to start rolling backwards. And then downhill we'd roll, again and again. Hidden in landfills just outside Dillonvale, those rusted metal skates with their clever skate keys secretly hold our summertime memories.

The nightly hunt for lightning bugs added finishing garnishes. Sweet slow-flying lightning bugs were oblivious to their impending capture. They'd hang buoyant in humid air. Electric brilliance glowing on/off. We'd dart in and out of yards, laughing and sassy, never stopping to ask permission to trample through. One by one, we'd carefully place our treasured bugs in their glass-jar home, poking air holes in the lid. A few pieces of fresh green clover thrown in for

sustenance. What exactly do lightning bugs eat anyway? It was always a sad sight to find our captives dead by sunrise.

As I cooled down on earthy sun-baked sheets deliciously dried outdoors, with Noxzema smeared across my blistered nose, my bedroom lit on/off with lightning bug tiny glows, the basement fan pulling in damp night air, the whisper of



moonlight through the window screen, the latest sister baby diapered and jammied in her crib next to me, I'd lay there wishing summer would never ever end, remixing the ingredients for tomorrow's Dandelion Days of Summer recipe.

These summertime memories, deeply braised upon my psyche, are three parts truth, one part fantasy, and one hundred percent vibrant memory.

## The Wild Ride

**Marilyn Greene**  
**Free Range Circle, Wayne, MI**

The hills were fun usually. The dip at the bottom would make the butterflies in my stomach do somersaults. Sometimes they would tickle all the way up in my throat, but not today. Today, in the car, Mom handed me a rope and said, "Hang on." I didn't know how the door got crumpled. It wouldn't latch. The seat belt was snug across my bony hips, holding on to me while I held onto the rope. My knuckles were white. The rope burned my hands. The muscles in my neck ached. And the smoke. I usually didn't get car sick in the front seat. Today the smoke from Mom's cigarette made me gag. I tried not to breathe in the smoke as I held on tight to the rope.

"Now hold on or the door will fly open and you could get thrown from the car."

That's what Mom said.

So there I sat, hanging on for dear life. I could taste blood in my mouth. Every time we went around a curve I had to fight the urge to throw myself out of the car. It was the fear, that urge to let go. Better to throw myself out of the car than to be thrown. An eight year old in control of her destiny. I held on. The seat belt held me and I held the rope that held the door. Down another hill past the RCA Victrola building. The one with the white dog with a brown spot over one eye sitting above the door. I knew there was a dip at the bottom of the hill. This was my favorite hill, but not today. Today as my rear end bounced off the seat everything was in slow motion. My grip on the rope went slack. The door started to open. I yanked on the rope and the door slammed back into place as my bottom made contact once again with the front seat of the car. We traveled up and down hills, around curve after curve on those twisty roads until finally we arrived at Grandma's house.

Mom pulled into the driveway. I let go of the rope and unbuckled the seatbelt. My legs felt wobbly. I wasn't sure if

they would hold me up. I held onto the side of the car for the first few steps. A dew of sweat covered my forehead. Relief. Now, can we stay here?

## A Cup of Tea

**Carol Purroy**  
**Writers Unanimous Circle, Reno, NV**

I bolted out of my house, slammed the door, raced across the street and around the corner to Cathie's house, through her backyard. I was furious over my stepfather's latest dastardly deed and in a rush to talk to her. I could always count on Cathie for solace in my times of need.

Her mother opened her kitchen door. "Carol, dear! Come in, come in! Catherine's not in just now," she stated in a crisp British accent, her voice high-pitched and lyrical. "But she'll be back soon. I'll put the kettle on; we'll have a cup of tea." By the time the words were spoken the kettle was on the stove, with blue flames licking at its base. Just seeing Mrs. Bailey and being welcomed into her cozy kitchen, I was comforted. If she noticed my frantic state she didn't let on.

Although initially disappointed that Cathie wasn't home, I was soothed by her mother's familiar greeting and her apparent pleasure at my unannounced visit. Under a cheery cover-all apron she wore a dark housedress. Her shoes were clunky, and she wore long stockings. Her dark hair, threaded with silver, was twisted into a knot at the back of her head, with soft tendrils framing her kind face.

She took a brown teapot from the cupboard.

When the kettle's whistle reached the right pitch, she poured boiling water in the pot, swirled it and let it rest a bit, then emptied it into the sink. "To make a proper pot of tea, one must use a brown porcelain teapot," she declared. "And heat the pot first, of course." From the cupboard she took a brightly painted tin, pried off its lid and scooped three spoonfuls of Hedley's English Breakfast into the pot, added boiling water, and then stirred vigorously. She covered it with a puffy tea cozy and placed it on a brass trivet on the cherrywood buffet in the dining room.

While the tea steeped she instructed me to "lay the table," adding, "We've some lovely scones, made this morning." From the buffet, I took fine bone china cups, saucers and dessert plates, silver, and soft linen napkins. The table was covered with an embroidered cloth and, at its center rested a small bouquet of roses from her garden.

As we sat down to tea, Cathie arrived. Mrs. Bailey poured



milk into their two cups—I take mine black—then poured the strong tea; mine first, then Cathie’s, then her own. Holding the delicate cup in my hand and breathing the fragrant steam rising from it, I felt soothed and nurtured. This was just what I needed. Our conversation was lively and, blessedly, not centered on me and my troubles. The calm ordinariness of it took the edge off my taut emotions

By the time we’d had our tea and scones and tidied up I felt a good deal less agitated. Still, Cathie and I went off to her room where I unburdened my soul. She was understanding and supportive, as I knew she would be. I could now go back home and make it through another day.

This ritual was repeated many times during my teenage years. I won’t claim that every time I visited the Bailey household I was agitated. More often, Cathie and I talked about our hopes and dreams, our fears and fantasies, our current teenage issues, which usually included boys. Sometimes we played the piano or phonograph and sang along, as if on stage—we especially loved the music from *South Pacific* and *Showboat*. And sometimes we read to each other, or individually, silently. In other words, we would just hang out, as best friends do.

But there was also the angst. Although we both had some—typical teenagers that we were—my life seemed to provide more than hers. For instance, there was my sadistic stepfather who constantly made me wish he’d been drowned at birth.

Her own father was wonderfully unexciting. A physician from Canada, he was reserved and stuffy, but a good soul. She wished he weren’t so straight-laced. But the more she learned about my stepfather the more grateful she was for her dear father.

And my mother and stepfather had loud, frequent fights, which made for a lot of tension and anxiety.

I could not imagine raised voices in the Bailey home.

Then there was my sarcastic, snotty and surly older sister. I suppose that’s a big sister’s “job description.” Cathie’s brother was away at college. Four years older, he was barely on her radar screen and didn’t bug her at all.

Money was always tight at our house. My mom had to work outside the home (at a time when most mothers were “stay-at-homes”). And I always created odd jobs—babysitting, lawn mowing, dog sitting, haircutting and home-perms, sewing and altering—whatever I could convince someone to pay me for.

Cathie never had to give a thought to where money would come from.

Then there was the terrible business of my mother’s cancer—her radical mastectomy and the subsequent

therapies and treatments. The doctors thought they’d gotten it all, but before long, it came back and spread. And no one was talking about it. She got sicker and sicker, thinner and thinner, weaker and weaker. Then, finally, it was over, and I had to deal with having no mother. (I’d long-since gotten used to having no father.)

So, all through my teenage years I needed a peaceful haven.

I doubt I realized that it might have been Cathie’s mother to whom I ran, as much as it was to Cathie. It was as much for Mrs. Bailey’s invariable welcome and her cheerful, “We’ll have a cup of tea,” along with the constancy of her tea ceremony, as it was for solace from her daughter, my best friend, Cathie Bailey.

## W. F. Ward, Confectioner, 1958

Kathy Waller  
e-Circle #12

Out on the porch it’s August,  
But it’s cool inside and dim, one bulb suspended from a cord.  
A slim brunette holding a bottle of Royal Crown Cola  
Smiles down from above the mirror.  
In the back, where it’s dark and you’ve never been,  
Sit two small, dusty tables and four delicate chairs.  
Once, flappers and their beaux  
Sipped sodas and flirted there  
But now they’re ghosts.  
Behind the marble counter stands Dick Ward,  
Eighty years old to your seven, and deaf, and wiry as the chairs,  
Blue eyes dancing.  
“Chocolate, please,” you say.  
He leans down, tilts his head.  
“What?”  
You stand on tiptoe, breathe deep, and shout.  
“Chocolate!”  
Of course, it’s just a game, because  
He knew before you asked.  
He dives down, disappears into the marble, rises with a cone,  
Huge, double-dipped,  
And proffers it.  
You hand him your nickel.  
“Thank you.”  
As you turn to leave, Mr. Perry shuffles in.  
“Bugler!” he rasps,  
And as Dick reaches for the tobacco  
You know that’s wrong,  
Because your grandfather smokes Bull Durham,  
And anyway,  
How could anyone pass up chocolate?





## Book Tour

**Diana Raab**  
**Santa Barbara, CA**

You've just written a book  
it's taken one year, five or ten,  
you labor over the publisher hunt;  
it lands in the hands of an enthralled editor;  
followed by periods of back and forth,  
feasibility studies, marketing ideas  
and finally galleys, book covers and blurbs.

Like a magical puzzle, the pieces come together—  
your publicist calls with schedule  
you start at local venues—  
friends and family boosting the morale  
once shattered by rejecting publishers.

You celebrate and like a sponge  
soak up accolades and reviews.  
Nothing can shatter you now,  
not even unopened rejections,  
nor the lover who just said good-bye.  
And then.

One full moon night, you arrive at a reading  
in a faraway town, two airplane transfers  
and four security checks later,  
greeted by street placards waving your name  
and booksellers announcing your book.

A stroll to the back of the store  
lands you at a lovely display of your books,  
a podium, and chairs lined in church fashion.  
The store owner arrives with a glass  
of fresh water drizzled over ice.

A glance at the clock whispers  
the reading begins in one minute  
and only two women wait in the front  
row—lo and behold  
you know them both.

Bless thy friends, I say.



## Making the Good Confession

**Jackie Woolley**  
**Free Range Circle, Austin, TX**

Once we give birth to a child, we have no problem saying, "I'm a mother." When we go to school, we easily say, "I'm a student." If we jog every morning, we casually brag that we are a jogger. But when we write, some misplaced modesty prevents us from saying, "I'm a writer." Saying I am a mother doesn't mean I am a professional any more than saying I am a writer means I have a bestseller out every year.

Write this down and post it near your computer: *A Writer is one who writes.* Anything. You might be a published writer or an unpublished writer, a frequent writer or a sometimes writer. You can be a new writer or an old writer. Well, you get the picture.

I've been a writer for about forty-five years. Actually, I have been a writer more years than that, but I was afraid to say it out loud. I too thought I had to be a nationally published writer to say so.

Many years ago I went to a writers' workshop in Houston, and the leader asked how many of us were writers. About four or five brave souls tentatively held up their hands. She asked us what we had written. One mentioned a poem published in a church bulletin; another had submitted a letter to a local newspaper; and I said I had written letters home from Brazil, describing my life there. These were picked up by some local neighborhood papers in Dallas.

"If the rest of you aren't writers, then why are you here?" she whispered.

A few mumbled they guessed they were wanna-be writers.

The workshop leader smiled. "Stand up, everyone," she said, "and repeat after me: *I am a writer!*" We chanted those words like a mantra throughout the workshop. At the end of the two days she said, "When you go home, I want you to look in the mirror every morning and say: *I am a writer. Because I say so.*"

I've been a writer ever since. Of course, it was a number of years before I ever published anything professionally.

Now, if you're one of the guilty ones who hasn't made the good confession and don't call yourself a writer, hear this. If you're reading this, you probably belong to Story Circle Network. You are writing the stories of your life and saying what's on your heart. You have learned that if something happened to you, you own that experience, and you have the right to write about it.

The more you write, the better you express yourself. You may wish you could just sit down at any hour and watch the beautiful prose flow onto the page without any effort. For

most of us, however, we have to go through the agony first. The ecstasy often arrives much later. Your job is to keep showing up at the page. To listen to the stories of others. To observe your place in the world and how warm the sun feels on your body. That's how it gets easier and how you get better and better.

In every writing group I have ever led, the question always comes up: Am I a writer?

Yes, you're a writer, a real one, if you want to be!

As *Star Trek's* Captain Kirk says, "Make it so."

## The Finish Line

**Bette J. Lafferty**

**Bloomington Regional Library Circle, Valrico, FL**

Please don't rush me, I know my pace.  
You'll burn me out before the race.  
Easy does it, I will perform.  
I just go slower than the norm.

My brain it runs in circles fast.  
The thoughts whiz by though seldom last.  
A word or two will trigger more.  
But too much pressure shuts the door.

If you will give more time to me.  
The task at hand will finished be.  
So easy does it, the race is won,  
By catching the words, one by one.

## Abuse and Fear



## The Wet Pool

**Brenda Carr**

**Milwood Circle, Austin, TX**

I felt my body in the warm wet pool. I could feel myself passing urine as I awoke. What would I say to the nun in charge? The atmosphere was far from a friendly one. Discipline was metered out harshly as I had seen. Everyone appeared frightened of the nuns. But Reverend Mother has assured my own mother that everything would be alright, that they would cure me of my bedwetting.

"What should I do with my wet sheet?" I asked Sister Veronica, when we had said our morning prayers. She looked

at me coldly, "Go down to the penance walk and put your wet sheet on your head. Stay until I send someone to get you and then you can go to the laundry and wash out your sheet. Bed-wetting is laziness. You were too lazy to go to the toilet."

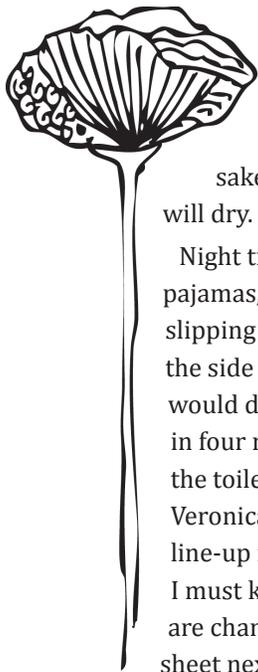
I stood frightened in the dormitory, thirty other girls all watching me being told off, being called lazy. My stomach felt empty. There was nobody to turn to, no kind accepting face. My mother didn't ever chastise me for these mishaps. Why was I being told I was lazy? I knew quite plainly that it was the passing of urine that made me wake up. It was a feeling of dampness over which I had no control. Sister Veronica stood there, huge in size being something near six feet tall, huge in girth with rosary beads dangling down her long skirt and clanking each time she walked. Her hands were massive and she dispensed spankings with great vigor. Her hands were pink and scrubbed looking and gentleness never entered into them. Her fat face bulged out of the sides of the headdress that covered most of her forehead and all of the hair.

Down the stairs I went, four floors of linoleum covered stairs with rubber treads, along the cardinal-red polished corridor, past the refectory, and up to the penance walk. The wet sheet sat awkwardly on my head and I shifted a little to get it to sit right. All the time I was frightened and humiliated. I didn't understand what wrong I had done. Nuns walked down the penance walk, rosaries clacking, on various errands. They frowned as they passed me. My legs grew weary from fear, and stiffness settled in. Perhaps the Reverend Mother wasn't in her office. Perhaps she was away in some distant part of the convent by now. I listened to the sounds of steps coming towards her door that opened onto the Penance Walk.

Nuns of various shapes and sizes passed, none sympathetic. I could feel the blood coming to my head each time someone walked in that corridor that joined the nuns quarters to the rest of the buildings. The nuns higher up the rigid hierarchy were to be feared more than those that performed menial tasks. Someone came to relieve me and I quickly went to the laundry to wash my sheet in one of those enormous metal tubs. Anyone could lurk there in those damp spider ridden places. Huge washing machines cowed there like huge metal pumpkins. I went back to the dormitory to more ridicule.

Perhaps Sister Bridget would be kinder, when an accident happened on her day for getting us up. But Sister Bridget, whose main job was to supervise the refectory, was hardly kinder. Sister Bridget beat me with a wooden coat hanger on my urine soaked pajamas.

Fear again, I couldn't face it all any more. Make the bed quickly. Don't let her see that it had hasn't been aired, as



was the routine while we washed our faces and cleaned our teeth before breakfast. Our dressing gowns were let down only to the waist for modesty's sake. Make the bed, it will dry, slowly but it will dry.

Night time again. Slipping quietly into wet pajamas, hoping nobody would smell. Then slipping into the cold wet sheets. Try to sleep on the side a bit. Perhaps the warmth of my body would dry it out. In two nights it was better, in four nights it was dry. Remember to go to the toilet at least three times. But then Sister Veronica teases me when she sees me in the line-up for the two toilets thirty children share. I must keep it a secret and tell nobody. Pajamas are changed every two weeks, and I'll get a clean sheet next week too.

I was only eight years old.

## Protect and Serve Whom?

**Anonymous**

**Lockhart Circle, Lockhart, TX**

October. I pull up to the front gate of the house as eight-year-old Becky and six-year-old Paul run to greet me as they do every morning.

Today, they are not smiling.

Becky asks, "Mommie, can we move without Daddy?"

"Would you mind telling me why?"

"Daddy's hurting me and Buddy while you're at work."

I am in shock. Things have been bad—very bad—with my husband. But I wasn't expecting this. I try to stay calm.

"I tell you what. I'm off work tonight. So how about I speak to Pop and see what he says about the four of us leaving after I get paid tomorrow. Would that be okay?"

I get woohoo's and yeah's from both of them. The smiles are back, and their eyes are dancing.

I speak to Pop, a friend who's helped in the past. He agrees.

November. Just before Thanksgiving, I see Becky try to slide her hand into the back of Pop's pants. I immediately ask to see her in my room. I pull her onto my lap and ask, "Who told you it's okay to put your hand down men's pants?"

"My daddy," she answers.

I try to stay calm. "Honey, your daddy lied to you. Now, what else did he say was okay?"

She tells me things that made me sick to my stomach.

"Okay," I finally say. "Let's not speak about this anymore right now. Becky, honey, would you like to tell the police?"

"Only if you and Pop go with me 'cause Daddy said he'd kill me if I told."

"Daddy won't be able to get to you if you tell. I'll make sure you are safe, one way or another. How about we go after school? Will that work for you?"

"Yes, ma'am. Momma, I love you."

"I love you too, sweetheart."

Becky files her report against her daddy. The first warrant against him is filed.

December. I hear Paul ask Becky, "Do you want to have sex for your birthday?"

I don't wait for her to answer. "Hey, little man, can I speak to you in my room for a moment?"

"Yes, ma'am."

I pull him to my lap and ask, "Buddy, who told you it's okay for you to have sex?"

"Daddy."

He goes on to tell me things that tear a hole through me. I ask him if he wants to tell the police. He quickly agrees.

January. A second warrant is filed. The next month, Legal Aid agrees to handle my divorce.

March. I receive a letter from my husband, threatening to kill the kids when he gets out. I take his letter to the police, who inform me: "He's locked up. We can't do anything about it."

I receive two more similar letters and get the same response from the police and from Children's Protective Services.

October. I marry Pop.

I get another letter, and the same response from the authorities. They can't/won't do anything. They imply that if I were someone important, it would be different.

I am desperate and angry. "Okay, you won't uphold what you were hired to do. Give me a couple of weeks and watch me! I'll be in jail, and you'll have my kids. And we'll all be safe," I scream.

Pop and I start renting a lot with a garage, a septic system, a light pole, and water. I talk him into letting us move out to the property before the trailer arrives. We set the kids up in the garage, and we sleep in a camper.

Two weeks later, Children's Protective Services comes to follow up on us and decides that the children cannot live like this. They say the children are in danger and take them away. I am arrested and charged with child abandonment.

August. I am sentenced to ten years of prison. My children are adopted by a family member out of state.

They are safe now.

## I'll Love You...

**Sandra K. Heggen**  
e-Circle #6

I'll love you...  
if you'll give me sex  
if you'll make me feel like a man  
if you're a good girl (what does it take  
to be a "good" girl?)  
if you're quiet  
if you're not lazy  
if you stay out of my way  
if you do a good job (what does it take  
to do a "good" job?)  
if you work harder  
if you work longer  
if you don't complain  
if you're thin  
if you're smart  
if you're pretty  
if you do as you're told

You should...  
do more  
work harder  
be different  
be someone else

And...  
if I don't love you  
it's your fault.



## Sunflower

**Mary M. Elizabeth**  
Free Range Circle, Austin, TX

I rise taller than the corn in the field,  
Orange flames blazing from my head,  
Grinning,  
I throw seeds of fire.

## I'm Back

**Shawn Essed**  
e-Circle #3

This is the first time I've tread this path.  
I hike the trail  
upward, boots greeting the dirt, again and  
again. I am discovering a new land.

And yet,  
I remember these  
mountains.  
They are mine.

These trees I know.  
My nose against the bark I sniff their pine and vanilla.  
This red earth I know.  
I rest upon a rock for the elevation  
makes my breath come short. I know  
this turquoise sky. I inhale its expanding breadth.  
The sky and the air and the trees and the earth  
all remember  
me and welcome me home.

## Rain

**Sharon Tieman**  
Continuing OWL Circle, Austin, TX

As I look out the windows onto my back deck, I see a  
weather front moving into Central Texas.

There are some gray clouds overhead and I hear faint  
sounds of thunder in the distance.

The sky is changing so I step out onto the deck to get a  
better view of patches of gray clouds mingling with blue  
sky with only one lone white cloud peeking through. I see a  
definite line in the east over a division of gray and clear sky.  
Our weather is moving from west to east.

The pleasant slight breeze now changes to wind. Trees are  
swaying with their leaves eager to receive rain.

Now a few drops of rain fall on my paper as I write. There  
are darker clouds to the north and the thunder is getting  
louder. More raindrops begin to fall so I go inside and watch  
the rain quietly falling in dime-size spots on the deck. Except  
for the thunder rumbling in the distance it is very quiet.

The wind is not blowing at all now and there are no sounds  
of chirping birds. I have a picture in my head of blue jays,  
mocking birds, cardinals and other birds huddled in nests or  
sitting under a canopy of thick leaves among the branches of  
oak and cedar trees.

Now it really starts to rain, no more individual drops; it's  
as if the sky has opened up. Huge raindrops are splashing  
off the outdoor table onto the deck making large puddles

of water. Rain cascades off the roof spilling into the gutters which soon overflow like a waterfall. No more definite clouds or patches of blue sky. It's not late enough to be dark yet, but the sky is all gray and I can barely see the canyon below my house.

I open the door a bit and a wonderful fresh smell surrounds me. With deep breaths filling my lungs, I feel a oneness with the rain. I believe the bright green blades of grass are smiling as they welcome the life-giving drink of pure rainwater. I love to witness and write about rain while it is happening. I feel such a close connection with Mother Nature.

## Curiosity

**Pattie C. S. Burke**  
e-Circle #7

I opened a door  
onto spring snowflakes  
not falling  
just meandering  
on puffs of air  
and me

I had never walked  
with snow  
before

Amazing



## She Wolf

**Rhonda Esakov**  
e-Circle #3

As I watch the rosy hues of first part of day, I raise my nose to check the breezes for news. Ah, there would be meat today to help the boys grow strong. Glancing over my shoulder, ever diligent in keeping tabs on my offspring, I see the two young pups tumble from the den below and plow into their father. As usual, he growls at them and gives them a kick with his back paw, which only serves to invite them to practice their own growls.

As I watch out the window at the rising sun, I inhale the fresh brew of my morning cup of tea. I need to go to the store today or we wouldn't have much to eat for dinner. Glancing at the clock, I realize the noise I hear is my husband rummaging around in the fridge and wonder if the boys are up. A clatter in the kitchen and low growl of voice affirms that indeed, the boys have encountered their dad, who is not at his best without that first cup of coffee.

I am reluctant to leave the den, to find food for my family, but at some point I must trust the others to watch over the

pups while my mate and I team up to bring down some fresh food. You can only protect the young ones so much. Giving a low whine, I call to my mate. Spotting me on the hill, he rushes up. Sniffing the air, he turns to break away and chase after the game. Grabbing him by the ruff, I give a low growl of warning. He backs down, quivering with anticipation, and then I give him a lick or two to smooth the snarled tangles of fur around his eyes.

I am reluctant to leave the house for my trip to the store, but I have to trust that the bus will come on time and deliver the boys to school for their daily dose of education. I call out to my husband to hurry up so we can beat the early shoppers to town. He comes into the room with coffee in hand and nuzzles my neck with a playful nip. Smacking his hand from its playful roaming, I turned to brush a lock of his unruly hair from his eyes and smile at his rumpled look with fondness.

Today was a good day to be alive and after quickly capturing some prey, we stop on a hill to let the breeze blow through our fur to cool us down and lap up the cool clear water from a nearby spring. Sniffing some fragrant sage, we both roll around in the grasses to coat ourselves with the clean earth smells. Although mated for five seasons, we still felt young at heart sometimes and liked to enjoy our inner pups.

We make quick business of our shopping, surprised to find some fresh late-season vegetables at the open air market. At the café on the hill, we stop for a break and sit in the cool shade of the outdoor tables as the breeze cools our skin of the sweat that we earned on our walk up the hill. As we sip our cool drinks, we notice the fresh flowers on our table, and being in a silly mood, my husband plucks a couple of petals from the roses, rubs them between his fingers, then smooths the fragrance on my cheek.

## Death and Illness

### Sweet Face

**Abby November**  
OWL Circle, Austin, TX

My sister Esta's voice is my own. We have strong Brooklyn accents. People often mistook my phone voice for Esta's. Five years my senior, Esta was a gifted artist. She saw the world

in a wild palette of vibrant colors, not the black, white and gray of our daily lives. She had scholarships to the Brooklyn Museum and Fashion Institute of Technology.

She fell in love with a tall, dark and abusive man. His voice became hers. Her five children became her vibrant palette. Esta's voice, always positive, never betrayed the evil with which she lived. Her view of God's lovely colors was marred by the black, blue and purple on her skin. "I'm clumsy, always walking into things."

She left him for good ten years ago. Weekly, Esta would call me, asking for "my little *Zeiskeit*" (sweet face). These were her happiest years: filled with friends, travel, family once barred by the ogre, and her art: handmade cards for any occasion. Filled with her love of freedom and colors, her cards were gifts to us. She taught arts and crafts to the elderly at the Jewish Center. Her prayer book was her constant companion.

Last year, she was diagnosed with ALS. It stole her body, but not her spirit. She said, "This is not the only world." July Fourth, Esta's voice was stilled.

I long for the phone call asking for "my *Zeiskeit*." I miss her.

## When Am I Supposed to Cry?

**Susan Ideus**  
**e-Circle #3**

"That's an awful thing to say. You wish your uncle would die? You're telling me you want my brother dead?" Furious, my mother raised her hand to slap me.

I backed away, an action perfected in my growing up years. "No, Mom, I don't want him to die, but he will anyway. He's got cancer, and it's eating him alive. I just don't want him to suffer anymore. Don't you dare hit me for saying so. He's my uncle, and I love him, too." Sobbing uncontrollably, I ran to my room. How could it be bad to want someone's suffering to end?

A few minutes later, she came to my door. "Stop that crying, or I'll give you something to cry about."

Funny, I thought I did have something to cry about.

Three days later, on November 13, 1963, Uncle Wally died. Because of financial constraints, we weren't able to travel to Indiana for the funeral. I didn't mind. I preferred to remember him as he had been when he rode the Santa Fe Chieftain from Chicago to Albuquerque to visit, smiling and laughing a lot. That's what I'd keep in my heart.

"Well, young lady, you could at least shed a few tears for your uncle."

"Mom, you told me the other day to stop crying about him. I thought that's what you wanted."

"You always have to have a smart remark, don't you?" she muttered, walking away.

I decided not to argue with her. But she sure seemed to change her mind about the crying. Should I or shouldn't I?

November 22, 1963: A junior at Highland High, I was sitting in my fourth-period United States History class. Our teacher, Bud Adams, had just sent the class clown, Jeff, to the principal's office for disrupting class.

Jeff came to the door of our room. "They shot him. They shot President Kennedy! The radio in the office..."

"That's not very funny, even coming from you, Jeff." Mr. Adams was livid. "You don't joke about things like that. Now let me see your note from the principal and get to your seat."

The class clown just stood there and broke down in tears. "Sir, it's no joke. He's really..."

The intercom buzzed. Over the loudspeaker came the announcement that President John F. Kennedy had indeed been shot during a visit to Dallas. His condition was undetermined.

Within minutes, the principal came on the intercom for a second time. "Walter Cronkite just announced that the president is dead from an assassin's bullet." Teacher and students alike bowed their heads in disbelief. Crying was the only sound in our otherwise silent classroom.

Along with the rest of the nation, my family watched the unending television news coverage that evening. Tears streamed down my face.

"What are you crying about?" Mom asked. "You didn't know him. What's he to you?"

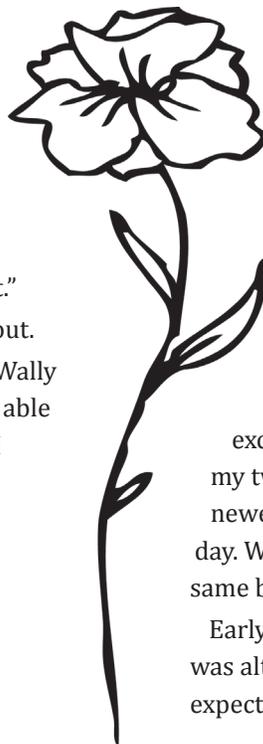
I couldn't believe she could be so cold. "He's the president, Mom, and he's been killed. It's sad. He has a family, little kids even. Don't you think it's tragic?"

"They'll get over it. People die all the time."

I just don't get it. I got in trouble for crying over my uncle, then again for not crying about him. Now, I'm not supposed to cry over this?

January 25, 1972: My husband, Harold, and I were expecting our first baby. To say we were excited didn't begin to capture our feelings. Today was my twenty-fourth birthday, and it was apparent that this newest Ideus would make an appearance sometime this day. What a birthday gift! Harold and his dad shared the same birthday; now, our child would share mine.

Early that evening, we made the trip to the hospital. Harold was alternately nervous and reassuring. I remained gleefully expectant. After settling into one of the labor rooms, I began



to tell the nurse about it being my birthday, too. She held up her hand and motioned for silence as she listened to our baby's heartbeat.

The nurse rushed out of the room, calling to someone, "Call the doctor, stat! This one's in distress."

Excitement turned to gripping fear. I held on to Harold's hand as to a lifeline, too terrified to even pray coherently. The nurse came back and said the doctor was on his way. She told us not to worry... as if that were even a choice.

As soon as Dr. McCaughey arrived, I was whisked to delivery for an emergency C-section. He tried to be reassuring, but I thought I could see the worry in his eyes.

Harold and the doctor were by my side when I came out of the anesthetic fog. I didn't need to ask. My big, strong husband stood there, tears freefalling. "They tried to save her, Susie, but she was too weak. We lost our little girl."

I learned that Dr. McCaughey had stayed with Harold all through the night. He looked exhausted. "I'm so sorry. We did all we could. I'll leave you two alone for now. You need to lean on each other and don't be afraid to cry."

Cry we did. Explanations would come later. I don't think I could have taken it in then anyway. Our pastor prayed with us and for us. Friends came, though no one knew what to say. Two couples we knew were expecting babies. One of the women didn't come to the hospital with her husband. "I'm sorry, guys," he said. "Joan didn't think she could do this." We understood.

Just before I was discharged, my parents came to see me. Daddy hugged me with tears in his eyes and told me how sorry he was. My mother hung back, standing at the end of the bed. Finally, she patted my foot. "No use to cry. You'll get over it. I did." With that, she left the room.

Well, gee, Mom, then when am I supposed to cry?

## Seven Sorrows

Susan Myrick

Wordswomen Circle, Chicago, IL

six sisters shed  
tears  
into raised tissues  
and share glances  
through saturated lashes  
as they encircle the solitary suffering  
of their seventh

## The Little Things—A Eulogy for My Father

Bobbi Ann Chukran

e-Circle #6

Sometimes, when looking for the good things in life, we tend to focus on the big items—the houses, the bank accounts, the cars. But really, the best things are the little things—those things we often overlook and take for granted. Like memories, for example.

I called Daddy on Christmas Day, 2004, at my sister's house, and at that time, most of his memories were gone.

On the phone, he was hesitant, and brought up things that I hadn't thought of in years. He faltered when trying to remember the name of a lake where we had often fished. His frustration was palpable over the phone, and my heart ached, hoping that he'd find the words he was searching for. He finally gave up, dropped the subject abruptly, and started to hand the phone back to my sister.

He hesitated, and then suddenly said, "That old blue lantern..." I knew exactly what he meant. He was asking about an old blue lantern that had lit our way on many late-night fishing trips when we were kids.

He had given up fishing long ago, and my mother had sent me a large, cracked plastic tackle box overflowing with his old lures, rusty hooks, melted rubber worms and other bits and pieces. He meant to ask me about the package, whether it had arrived safely in the mail, but the memory of the lantern came up in his tangled and confused mind instead. I knew what he meant to ask, though, and assured him that, yes indeed, the package had arrived safely and that I would take good care of it.

As I sorted through the lures in the box, gingerly removing them and the hooks, I started remembering. Also tangled, these small lures brought back memories for me. There was the time we camped out at the lake and I was determined to cook and eat the shrimp bait he'd brought along. He warned me that they weren't edible by people, but I didn't believe him. I loved shrimp and was hungry. Surely they were okay to eat! He sat back and silently watched as I roasted one over the campfire, then took a bite. Of course, it was horrible. He laughed and laughed and teased me about that without mercy for years.

On those trips, the lures were reserved for the big folks, but I still remember their shiny silver tails flashing in the sun as Daddy flicked his favorite green Zebco rod and reel and cast his line out into the middle of Grapevine Lake. My brother, sister, and I were given cane poles and got busy bank fishing



with worms for perch and other small fry. Another memory pushes its way up to the surface, and I remember the taste and the foul sensation of accidentally putting my fingers in my mouth after baiting the hook, although I'm sure that my mother told me not to. Once you've tasted an earthworm, you never forget it.

Then there's the memory of holding my own rod and reel, finally grown up enough to be trusted with one. I remember Daddy standing behind me, holding his hands over my own, guiding my arms and showing me how to cast it out without snagging my own ear with the hook or poking both of our eyes out.

All the memories flooded back like a wave washing upon the shore of that lake. All tangled up in a few small fishing lures.

Right after I received the tackle box with the lures, I got a phone call from my sister. Seems she had bought a boat, and had spent the last few weekends with her husband at a nearby lake—fishing. I shared some of the memories with her, too, since she had been too young to remember much of my earlier ones.

Just one month after that conversation, I was able to talk to Daddy over the phone again. He was in a nursing home, and was in very poor health. He told me that he wanted to see me, so we made the trip to Texarkana. I thought that it might be the last time I'd see him and wanted to have the chance to talk to him in person at least one more time. We made the trip with that cracked plastic tackle box in the trunk of the car. This time it was going home to my sister, minus a few keepsakes for my own.

I did have the chance to talk to my father, and even though his memories were mostly faded, he still remembered a few things. A restaurant we had once visited and its delicious fried catfish. As sick as he was, he still thought to ask about a new kitten that we had just adopted. That was just like him, to remember the little things.

He passed away from complications of diabetes, kidney failure and Alzheimer's disease right before Thanksgiving 2005. He had been in and out of hospitals and nursing homes and had been in a lot of pain. He was a fighter, but at the end, he just gave up.

Finally, I understand. This is what life is really all about. Not the big things, but just one small memory at a time. We tend to overlook little things, thinking them not really important, but they are! It's those little things that make up and hold our memories inside them—like an old plastic tackle box holds a collection of rusty fishing lures.

## Accepting Help

Renee-Therese Dearborn  
e-Circle #3

There is medicine in my blood now.  
What is it doing?  
Does it run, like silver rivers to my brain  
Or does it seep to the edges of my nerves,  
Softening feelings?

Who would have thought  
I'd put a tiny pill into my mouth  
And wait for a miracle?  
Is this a good thing?

I wait, each day, for heaviness to lift.  
I smile and feel my skin grow taut.  
I pray. I am silent.  
To feel joy is as difficult  
As lifting concrete.  
Still, I try.

Hope is there—the tiniest butterfly,  
Its wings erratically flapping.  
It is white; I don't know why.  
Perhaps because of those I see  
In my garden.

The sparrows are, at last,  
Feasting on the suet.  
There is a second blooming of the lavender.  
There is new life all around me.  
There are tiny blue pills and love.  
Always, there is love.

## Losing My Footing

Johnett Scogin  
Chickenscratchers Circle, Austin, TX

I was "swimming," as I called it, playing around in the pool at my parents' fraternal club. My best friend Laura was practicing diving off the board, something I could not do since I wasn't allowed in the deep end, and holding her breath. I had the important job of counting off the seconds from when her brown curls went under the water until when they resurfaced. That and cheering her on.

We'd done this many times that day. Me standing in the shallows (up to my twelve-year-old shoulder height) and jumping up and down with each round, elated with Laura's success and just the joy of being free in the blue water, sun shining on my already pink shoulders.

What I hadn't realized throughout the afternoon's festivities was that I was scooting forward with each jump, getting dangerously close to the drop off line that separated



the five-foot-and-under shallows from the twelve-foot deep end of the pool.

Laura was getting better and better at holding her breath. Twenty seconds, then twenty-five, and then the long awaited half-minute mark. I jumped up and down like a seal in a Sea World show, clapping and shouting, "Thirty seconds! You did it! You did it!" Laura flashed her best smile at me and laughed, immediately climbing out for another go.

And suddenly, the world changed. My head is under water, my feet no longer making contact with the nubby floor of the shallow end. I am flailing about with my arms and legs, trying to get some purchase and only making things worse. I become increasingly disoriented with each passing second, even though I'm barely in five and a half feet of water. My head bobs up once, twice, three times, and I try to yell for help, only succeeding in inhaling lungs-full of chlorinated water and further exhausting myself.

Laura thought I was joking around, since on her next two dives I happened to bounce up just as she looked my way. It wasn't until her third go round when she could no longer spot me in the shallows that she got worried. Laura waited a few more seconds and then ran to the lifeguard, trying to get the girl to pay attention to her urgent pleas rather than the cute boy she was flirting with.

Eventually I relaxed or grew so tired I could no longer fight the water. I still have the distinct memory of thinking that I could be okay like this. I could simply breathe in a few more times and then go to sleep under the calm surface of the pool. It was quiet down there. Even though there were other kids in the pool, splashing and kicking, it was still relatively peaceful. And just as I was ready to close my eyes again, I felt my foot touch the rough bottom of the pool. With my last bit of strength, I kicked hard and propelled myself up and over to the side, a mere six or eight feet away.

This not-too-near-death experience had a profound impact on my life, and I walked away that day with several lessons that continue to stay with me. First and foremost, I taught myself to swim in that very pool. I worked that summer until I was able to pull myself completely across the pool with my head under water and later figured out how to elevate my head to breathe properly. Eventually, I went on to earn my Red Cross certification as a lifeguard and water safety instructor and worked for four summers at that same pool, making sure that no child was ever put in danger by inattentiveness.

But my near drowning and the ensuing panic it brought up in me taught me something infinitely more important and

more valuable. I learned that when I am feeling panicked or overwhelmed, being able to relax through the fear is key. Even when deep breathing isn't advisable, relaxing allows the fear to subside so your higher brain can take over and figure a way out of most situations.

I've been in many high stress situations since then, including the deaths of my parents, my own cancer diagnosis, and health crises with my partner and other family members. Whenever I start to feel my gut tighten up and the panic start to rise, I force my muscles to relax and I think of floating downward until I could touch the bottom of that pool. Usually if I can manage to let go of the fear for even a few seconds, I find my footing again even in the most difficult of situations.

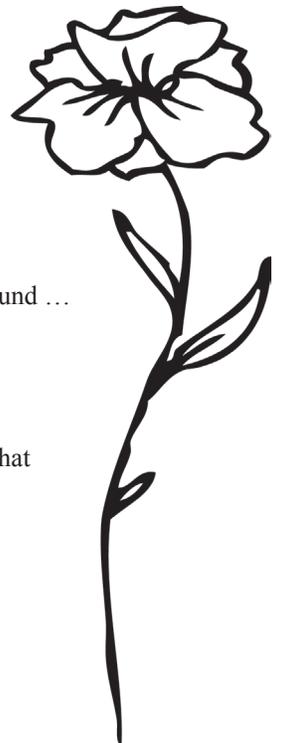
## Tears from Heaven

Rayn Plainfield  
e-Circle #1

White cherry petals were falling that April day  
Cascading all aw whirl  
I under a tree crumpled  
That softest of showers like snow  
Confetti in my hair...  
Echoing your gentle touch.

Five long years it was.  
I thought  
Sorrow's a thing of long ago...  
But then today...  
With head down...minding my own business...  
Just meandering along a trail,  
Walking the dog  
In a park...  
Enjoying the fresh spring breeze  
I suddenly come upon...  
White cherry petals...  
Cascading all around  
I'm caught in a gentle blizzard...  
A time-warp...  
White carpet like snow spread all around ...  
Tears from heaven

In the blink of an eye...  
Time... like Sisyphus' rock...  
In her arduous journey marching up that mountain.  
She's almost at the summit  
When suddenly...  
Fresh out of steam, she rolls back down...  
With a heavy crash  
All the way back



To the very beginning...  
Or was it the end?

Time-traveled back...  
I hear Lil's voice clearly  
Echoing through the years,  
Clear as a bell...  
The unexpected yet dreaded call  
Voice breaking, groping for  
Words lost in space...  
Clanging the final bell toll  
No one  
Ever wants to hear...

Cherry petals cascading...  
Like snow, white awirling...  
The great gods are weeping...  
We've lost you for all time...  
Tears from Heaven...

## Daddy Was Worried about Going to Hell

**Peggy S. Grose**  
Continuing OWL Circle, Austin, TX

As Daddy got older, he began to worry about his afterlife. Being Methodists, we understood the concept of hell but it wasn't drilled into us as in some churches. We certainly didn't spend time talking about it nor did we waste energy worrying. But now that Daddy was going on ninety-eight, he began to think more seriously about it. More than once during his later years, he mentioned to me that he feared what God would say when he reached Heaven's gate. "You know," he would say, "Me and your mama have never gotten along. We've had such a bitter relationship that I don't know what the Lord's going to say." I guess he was afraid that God wasn't going to allow them both in.

Come to think of it, that wouldn't have been a bad idea!

I would answer simply, "Well, don't you think the Lord will be able to figure that out? Why don't we leave the arrangements to him?"

Then, when we learned he had cancer and only a short time to live, I returned to him from my home in Austin, Texas. It was Good Friday and the family was coming in, one by one, to celebrate Easter and to be with him—for the last time, for all we knew. It was midnight on the day I had arrived and we were waiting for some of the others to come. When I went to tuck Daddy in and say good-night, he began, "You know, I'm in a real fix," as if he believed there was surely something somebody could do about it.

"I know, Daddy," I said, "You and I are going to do a lot of

talking about that while I'm here." I figured this was no hour to go into such a serious subject and, besides, I was tired.

But he persisted. "I don't know what the Lord's going to say to your mama and me, the way we've lived."

Sensing an opportune moment, I pulled up a chair. "Daddy," I asked tentatively, "are you worried about going to hell?"

He hesitated and then nodded, sheepishly.

"Tell me, was your papa a good man?" I asked as I took his hand.

"The best there ever was."

"He was loving and forgiving?"

"Yep."

"Do you believe that God is a loving and forgiving Father?"

"I sure do!"

"Well, let's just imagine that, toward the end of your life,

you went to your papa and said, 'Papa, I've made some mistakes in my life. In fact, I've made quite a few.' What do you think he would say?"

"Why, he would say, 'Don't worry about it.' That's all he would say."

"So, do you think your papa was more loving and more forgiving than God?"

"Why, no, I guess not."

"Well, then, please explain to me what it is that you are so worried about?"

After a few moments of silence, Daddy nodded—and never mentioned hell again. But, later, he told his great granddaughter that he was looking forward to going to heaven soon.

On the day he died, he and I held hands and recited the Twenty-third Psalm until he lost consciousness. Oh, I remember how he fought the Grim Reaper, fought like a tiger. My, how he fought it off, with everything in him. Yet, I believe that, in the end, he went in peace.

## Unknown

**Kunzang Roesler**  
Continuing OWL Circle, Austin, TX

Near the cold coffin  
Smiling gently at nothing  
Cellophane flowers.



# Far and Near



## I Will Take You Halfway

Janet Grace Riehl  
e—Circle #3

The rich cadence of an airport porter's voice rises up singing. "Your voice does me a world of good," I say, feeling as if we are in so many places, all at once. "I cannot begin to tell you. It's like hearing good news from home." His voice goes straight inside me.

"You just made my day," he replies. That's all we say or need to say. We've connected, and that's enough. "It's been a pleasure serving you," he offers.

"And it's been a pleasure being served," I reply.

In this brief exchange we are enacting the ancient call and response of all African languages I've ever encountered. In Twi, the language of the Ashanti tribe in Ghana, West Africa, the leave-taking exchange literally rendered is: "I lie at your feet." With the reply, "There is no need for you to lie there." It is a way of saying, "I am at your service," which is, I have noticed, a value dying in our own culture.

This exchange between the skycap and me takes perhaps ten minutes, yet it makes my day, too. The courtesy, graciousness, classiness, intelligence, and rich voice of the man whom I have not exchanged names with, has connected me back to a dusty roadside in Ghana, waiting for a small bus, which runs on no particular schedule, to take me to the next village.

Two young women have come with me to help carry my too-heavy bags and then stay with me. They will keep me company until my uncertain transport comes and I am safely on it and safely away. This is a scene I'll repeatedly experience throughout the Africa of the 1970s—wherever I go, west, east, or south.

In Botswana, this is the custom of "taking halfway." (*Ke tla boledisa*—I will take you halfway.) In a village one can spend the better part of the day faithfully performing this custom. It works like this. Upon the end of our visit, I escort you at least to the edge of my compound—to its entrance, where the space of my home meets the communal space. We travel the equivalent distance from a Mayberry front door, across the porch, to the sidewalk gate. This African custom is similar to the one in small towns of seeing off one's guest.

If I have time, I'll continue walking with you across the

village, in the direction of your compound. Possibly, we may even hold each other's hands, swinging them happily between us as we chat, until we reach some invisible intuited point at which we both understand we must part. Now our call and response ritual begins and goes like this:

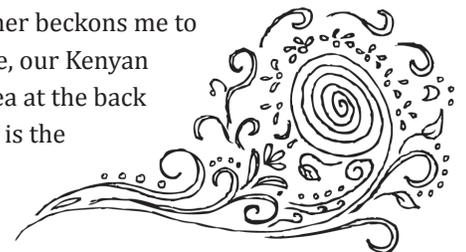
*Tsamaya Tsincle* (travel/go well), I will tell you, and you will respond, *Tsala Tsintle* (stay well). And, I do. I stay well on the path as you turn, take your first steps toward home, now traveling alone, not in company, with no one to protect you. And, I, for my part, breathe in and out the perfume of your presence, turn, and make my way, now alone, not in company, with no one to protect me—toward home.

Thank you, dear man who talks with the good news voice from home. Thank you. That is where you took me when you carried my three bags and a box at the airport today.

## Her Story

Pat Turner  
Memory Keepers Story Circle, Tyler, TX

The village is small, only about twenty huts, and seems to have been plopped in the midst of an open area with no apparent reason for being where it is. The huts are laid out in a circle enclosed by a bundled-twig fence. Behind each hut is a sort of gate, a twig bundle that is easily moved aside. As we enter the compound, I notice the twigs are covered with thorns. The huts surround a large open area where we are told the cattle are kept at night for protection. The cattle are out grazing now with the men of the village to guard them. When guarding cattle, Masai men wear bright red cloak-like garments that are visible from long distances and that predators have learned to avoid. Today we are greeted by the women and children who sing and clap in rhythm smiling broadly obviously glad to welcome us. The huts are built on a circular twig frame covered with a mixture of dung and mud, hardened to near concrete. One of the ladies graciously invites us to visit her hut. Since the huts are quite small, only two or three at a time can enter. I must lean over to enter the low door. Darkness and a smoky smell envelop me. There are only a couple of small round holes for windows. Entering the darkened room from a bright sunny day, I have some difficulty seeing. A hand reaches out to guide me to a rise in the dirt floor covered with a leather hide and the homeowner beckons me to sit beside her. Kimanne, our Kenyan guide, explains this area at the back of the two-room space is the family area. The fire pit in the middle is surrounded by the



raised dirt platform where the family gathers for cooking and meals. On either side are sleeping areas, one larger than the other for the parents. As Kimanne explains where the children sleep, our hostess looks at me with questioning eyes and I realize she wants to know how many children I have. I hold up one finger; with a big wide grin and obvious pride she holds up four fingers. Our eyes meet and we share a moment of genuine connection I will always treasure. With this intimate exchange, I glimpse that her story is in many ways similar to mine. We are both women, we are both mothers, we are both proud of our lives, we are both glad to know each other. I thank her and leave richer having known the warmth of her gracious hospitality and a spiritual connection with one whose reality is so different from mine but whose spirit is much the same. I think of her often in her home there on the Masai plains of Africa. I wonder, does she have more children now? Do her children honor and care for their mother as she grows older? Will she prepare a meal for her family this evening as will I? Does she yearn for the best and dream of a promising future for her family? It is my belief that the same spirit moves in each of us on this planet no matter what our circumstances. Our stories are more alike than not.

## An Audience with the Chief

Virginia Coultas  
e-Circle #5

Protocol demanded it. We had to be presented to the chief. All new foreigners at the mission hospital had to appear at the palace for proper introductions to Chief Inyambo Yeta.

This was the appointed day. Dr. Salvador, my husband Lynn, and I sat on a crude bench outside of the palace compound under a flamboyant tree waiting to be received. Salvador, as “chief” of the hospital, was bringing us to be introduced. We had arrived just two days before and were a little nervous about this visit.

Even though we sat in the shade we were drenched in perspiration, but Dr. Salvador was cool and collected, as always. He was used to it. Born in southern Mexico he had spent all of his professional life in the tropics—the last ten years in Africa. As we waited (a half-hour at this point) Salvador told us stories of his experiences in Zambia—none of which reassured me.

“I’ll never forget the day of my official audience,” Dr. Salvador said. “You are going to have a private visit. Mine was before what seemed to me the whole Lozi tribe. It was not our first meeting. I had met the chief informally in the US before I came.”

“What’s he like?” I asked.

“Oh, he’s a very congenial fellow, educated at Yale, I think. He is easy to talk to, and we get along famously—very laid-back guy. The official affair was something else. It was held outdoors under that mango tree, everybody dressed in their finest. I just recall a riot of color. They all live in thatched-roofed mud huts, but they know how to dress—colorful robes, intricately woven sandals, the women with elaborate headdresses. Men usually wear western clothes, but on special occasions they get decked out in their native garb.”

We gazed at the large area around the mango tree, trying to visualize the gathering Salvador was describing. There was not much color today. The village of Mwandi was a dreary, dusty place, everything the same color as the dust of the road. The palace wall was adobe, and you couldn’t have distinguished it from the rest of the town if the two soldiers, rifles on their shoulders, had not been standing in ram-rod attention at the gate. The gate itself was made of corrugated tin, the lower part jagged with rust. There were no plantings along the wall to relieve the monotony. The only spot of color was from the dusty pink blossoms of a Poinciana tree that could be seen above the palace walls. We had yet to see the palace itself, but from Salvador’s story we gathered it was just an assortment of mud-walled rooms—not what you might expect of a “palace.”



Before the good doctor could continue, a servant appeared and nodded that we should follow him. We entered a spacious compound, well swept but barren. He hurried us along and indicated we should go to the room on the right. It was dimly lit with a single light bulb (the palace and the hospital were the only places in Mwandi to have electricity).

The chief, a handsome, very striking fellow, with velvety blue-black skin, sat boldly upright in the center of the spartan room. He was dressed in western clothes but wore a soft red hat (the symbol of his office). But as striking as the chief was, I could not take my eyes off the gigantic head of a hippo mounted on the wall behind him. I tried to concentrate on the ceremony of greeting the chief, but my eyes kept returning to that hippo’s head.

Solemnly introductions were made; everyone shook hands, no kneeling, bowing, or curtsies required. We were invited to sit on the simple wooden chairs in front of the chief, and then the attendant made his departure, clapping his hands three times, and backing out of the room head lowered.

As soon as he was gone, the chief smiled broadly.

“Well, now we can relax,” he said as he crossed his legs. “I have to perform for the palace staff—act like a proper

potentate. How was your trip?"

We took a little longer to relax but were soon telling about our trip, our family back home, and how glad we were to be there. The chief told us about his family. He divided his time between Mwandu and the capital, Lusaka, where his wife and little boy lived. They had a "proper" house there, but he had his palace duties to perform here. We got the impression that being a chief would not be his first choice of occupations.

He wanted to talk about the United States so the conversation touched on trivia about life in the US (he was a New York Yankee fan), then we finally got around to what we hoped to accomplish at the hospital during our brief stay in Mwandu. Lynn would be developing a garden for the hospital; I was to help out in the preschool. The chief listened with a show of interest, but we could sense he didn't really have much faith that foreigners, who dropped in and out of his country, would make much of a difference. Life in Mwandu would go on as it always had, and he himself would drop in and out of Mwandu—fulfilling his role but not making much of a difference, either.

The servant appeared and suddenly our audience came to a close. Smiling, we got up, murmured our good-byes and walked, not backward but sideways, toward the door.

Our audience with royalty was over, but ...not quite. The chief called to us.

"Oh, I forgot to ask. Do you play dominos?"

And even though we hadn't played since childhood we answered in unison, "Oh, yes."

"Good, I love to play," the chief replied. "Invite me over sometime."

## Anglesey Huts

**Jane Clarke**  
**Milwood Circle, Austin, TX**

As my husband and I drove over the Menai Suspension Bridge my heart soared like a bird. So many happy memories were fresh in my mind it was hard to believe that I had not been back for almost forty years. What's more as soon as we left the mainland of Wales it was as though time had stood still. The road Peter and I were traveling on soon turned into a country lane with very few cars. We went through the village with the old bakery, over the bridge and down a dirt track.

After going through four gates I saw the Owens farmhouse in the distance.

The dogs were already barking at us, hens were running about the farm yard and sheep were grazing both sides of the track. It was wonderful to be met at the door by old Mrs. Owens. She sat us down by the fire and gave us tea and scones. Apart from having put on weight and her complexion looking ruddier than ever, Mrs. Owens looked much the same and still had a twinkle in her eye. We found it hard to leave her but I was keen to show Peter where I had spent my summer holidays with my siblings, parents, uncles, aunts and cousins.

My brother had forewarned me the huts were no longer there; in their place was a huge sandpit. I was very emotional as I fought back the tears but once I got over the initial shock I started running down to the beach. A rabbit scurried into its rabbit hole and farmer Owens' sheep anxiously moved out of our way. We made tracks in the bracken, a large weedy fern that was still growing everywhere. I was so relieved to find our beach and the Dinus, a huge rock jutting out into the sea, as I remembered it. We went looking for shrimp in the rock pools; freshly caught shrimp with fresh bread from the village was my favorite meal. We walked over to the Dinus. It was low tide so we were able to wade out to a smaller rock even further out to sea where we sat down and marveled at the view. The Snowdonian Mountains on the Mainland of Wales were shrouded in hues of soft grey and blue, we were surrounded by a calm sea and above us seagulls were screeching. The soft sea breeze smelled so delicious, I wanted to eat it but could only taste the salt on my lips. We slowly made our way back to the beach and waded into the sea. I delighted in telling Peter about skinny dipping with my family. When it was warm enough, before getting dressed, the girls would grab a towel and walk down to the beach for a swim. When we returned to make the breakfast the guys would go for their skinny dip. I loved the feel of the cold sea water embracing my body; it was such a carefree way to start the day.

Let me explain about the Anglesey Huts. They belonged to my grandfather's family, and had stood on an unspoiled private stretch of coast on the island of Anglesey. They were white wooden huts with no plumbing or electricity. Every morning my father would put a yoke round his shoulders and balance the buckets either end. I would quite often walk with him to the well to get water. We had to make it last for us to wash, clean our teeth, and wash the dishes. We also used it for drinking after we boiled it. The stove ran on Calor gas. The toilet we named the bog was some way from the Huts. Life couldn't be much simpler than this but what fun we had! More often than



not we ate outside where we had more room, we washed up outside and washed our hands and teeth outside in a basin. I vividly remember the lumpy mattresses, so my siblings and I preferred to sleep in our sleeping bags on camp beds under the stars or on the ground in tents. On wet days, there were so many of us huddled up in the small living room we created quite a fug. We endlessly played cards, Monopoly or Scrabble. Warm sunny days were spent on our beach, making sandcastles, burying each other in the sand, shrimping, beachcombing and hiking. The children enjoyed playing kick-the-can and hiding from each other in the bracken.

I cherish the memories of the carefree times at the Anglesey Huts. Every year life becomes more complex and bewildering; I think we need to seek comfort in the joyful simplicities of life more than ever.



## Chocolat du Paris

**Jane Parsons**  
Free Range Circle, Austin, TX

Our eyes caress every chocolate morsel  
nestled in the Brasserie window,  
attractively displayed to  
accentuate each unique feature.

We note and discuss their delicious differences,  
their variations in size and shape,  
color and decorative wrap.

Three plump ladies, we "ooh" and "ahh,"  
pointing as we exclaim unabashedly  
about the beautiful excessiveness of each piece.

In silence, each in our own way,  
we imagine the soft caress of Parisian chocolate  
melting in our mouths as we resist the urge to chew,  
so as to let the flavor linger before dripping  
all too quickly down our throats.

There is no sensation quite like it.

The world is over-populated by women our age.  
Like our fewer-numbered male counterparts,  
we, too, admire fresh tarts and taste them in our minds.  
We, too, marvel at incredibly smooth shapes and

contours,  
aromas and textures.

Occasionally our judgment submits to passion;  
we choose to taste and satisfy.  
We cross the Brasserie threshold confidently,  
franc-filled hands extended in anticipation.

Let the orgy begin!

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Goldsberry Colker, Editor*

## The Great Pretender

**Sandra Shackelford**  
Free Range Circle, Green Bay, WI

I broke the rules in school  
more than once  
felt the sting  
of sister's angry ruler  
against my out-stretched palm  
daring  
to engage in simple pleasures  
forbidden fruit  
denied by the sterile practitioners  
of Thou Shall Not.

Oh yes...  
*Slap...*

... I went to YMCA dances on the sly  
every Tuesday night  
folding into the arms of the boy  
in the red plaid shirt,  
a small animal burrowed  
inhaling the scent of his mother's steaming iron.  
My breasts  
coming to ripeness  
in the muscled cage that restrained  
his thundering heart.

Oh yes...  
*Slap...*

... Steam rose from my Ship 'n' Shore blouse  
as his hands  
rode the crest of my rock 'n' roll hips  
covered by prickly virgin wool  
standard issue for Catholic girls,  
our hymens  
like our hearts  
forever faithful  
to a covetous father.

Oh yes...

*Slap...*

... my fingers  
brushed the skin of his blemished neck  
as we returned to primitive roots  
bone on bone  
combustible  
we invented fire  
grinding  
oh yes  
beyond childhood  
as rain fell on those 1950s nights,  
the scent  
oh yes  
of lilacs  
staining the lavender air  
as we clung  
yes  
yes  
yes  
to the loveliness of innocence  
for one last spin around the moon.

## Hurricane Faye

Judy Abrahamson

Write On Circle, Austin, TX

Wind  
Refreshing, caressing  
Blowing acceptance over naked skin  
Lightning overhead, surf below  
Healing coolness all around  
I am at peace.  
My body is my own.



## Piano and Other Life Lessons

Helen (Len) Leatherwood

e-Circle #6

When I was growing up, I took piano lessons from Miss Virginia Baird. She lived in a brown-boarded two-story house on the corner of Main and Ninth Streets, and she had at least thirty cats that lived in that great big house with her. I remember thinking that Miss Virginia must be lonely. Her only friends seemed to be her sister who lived around the

corner, her students, and her cats. She got dressed up every evening to walk the block and a half over to Miss Belle's house for supper. I saw her at dusk many a night in her "Sunday best" dress, a black shawl draped over her stooping shoulders, and lace-up old-lady shoes on her feet.

One day when I was ten, Miss Virginia asked who the cutest boy in my class was.

I shrugged. "Philip Sewell is cute," I said, "and Allen Sanderson."

She leaned so close that I could see the fine blonde hair on her rouged cheeks. "Do you know who the handsomest boy was in three counties when I was growing up?"

I shrugged. "No, ma'am."

Miss Virginia's eyes lit up behind her glasses. "Why, Len, it was your very own daddy."

I heard how pleased her voice was. I smiled.

Miss Virginia scooted closer and said in a loud whisper, "Did you know that he and I used to date when we were young?"

I looked over at her and marveled. I knew my father was a lot older than any of my friends' dads, but Miss Virginia seemed ancient. Was it even possible?

Later, at home, I sat down at the kitchen table while Daddy was making himself a ham sandwich and decided to get the story straight. "Do you like Miss Virginia?" I asked.

Daddy spread Miracle Whip on two pieces of white bread and glanced over at me. "Of course I like Miss Virginia."

I leaned back, my bare feet touching the cool linoleum of the kitchen floor. "Did you know her when you were growing up?"

Daddy cut a thick piece of ham and put it on his bread. "Sure I did. We've both lived here all of our lives."

I reached over and took a little sliver of ham that had fallen from his knife onto the plate. "Was Miss Virginia nice when she was younger?"

He glanced at me. "If you're asking me if she had all those cats like she does now ... no, she didn't. Those cats came after her mother died."

I went over to the refrigerator to get milk. "Her mother?"

Daddy nodded. "Her mother got sick when Virginia was in high school and Virginia took care of her for years."

I paused. It was time for the real question. "Miss Virginia says that you two used to date."

A pained expression came across his face. "Oh, my goodness, that was a hundred years ago."

He wasn't denying that it happened. "You actually dated Miss Virginia?"

Daddy looked very serious. "I went out with her one time,

for heaven's sake."

I sat and contemplated my father and Miss Virginia together. Did this mean that she could actually have been my mother instead of Mama? "She said you were really handsome."

Daddy smiled in a bashful sort of way. "Well, I did have my pick of the ladies."

That went back to my basic question. "Then why would you ever date Miss Virginia?"

"Now, honey, Virginia used to be more attractive than she is now."

"But isn't she a lot older than you?"

"No, believe it or not, we're the same age. She's just had a much harder life than I've had, not as much happiness." He reached over and ruffled my hair. "Besides, it's important never to judge a person until you've walked a mile in their shoes."

My mind went to Miss Virginia's black lace-up old-lady shoes.

"Miss Virginia made a lot of sacrifices in her life. Those choices caused her to miss out on a husband and kids to love."

"Do you wish you had married her?"

"You mean instead of your mother?" He shook his head hard. "Never!"

Relieved, I looked into his dark eyes. "You ought to know that Miss Virginia talks like you were her boyfriend."

My father shook his head. "A person can get awfully lonely in a house with just cats."

The next time I went to Miss Virginia's house, I tried to imagine how she might have looked when she was sixteen years old, all dressed up, and going out on a date.

The minute I sat down she asked, "Did you ask your daddy about what you and I talked about last time?"

I nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

"What did he say?" Her eyes were big behind her bifocal glasses.

I glanced down at her shoes, and then looked back up at her. "Daddy said you were pretty."

Miss Virginia's eyes lit up and she giggled. "Oh, that George Leatherwood," she crooned, "he'll be a rogue until the day that he dies."

And I'll remember that happy look on Miss Virginia's face for the rest of my life.

## A Belated Tribute

**Helene Benardo**  
**e-Circle #15**

Picture, if you will, a child of twelve, on her own, crossing the ocean. The year is 1912, and this little girl has left her father and a series of "wicked stepmothers" and is obeying her brother's request that she leave her small village in Turkey and come to him in America.

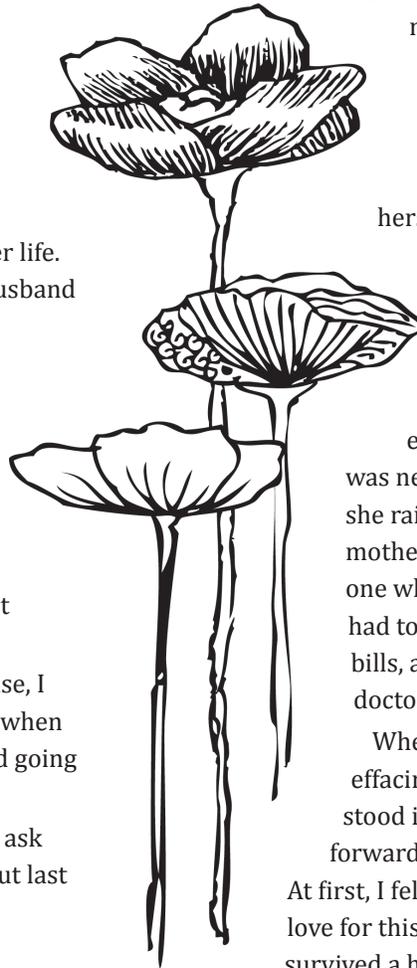
After a passage of several weeks, spent in steerage, she arrives in New York, speaking not a word of English and is met by her brother. She lives with him, cleans houses during the day and goes to night school to learn English. Six years pass in this fashion.

At eighteen, a marriage is arranged with a young man who had emigrated from the same town, although they had never met. What started as a convenient arrangement turned into a lovely union that lasted fifty-seven years.

During this time, she literally "brought herself up." While tending to her three children (my husband is the youngest), she increased her knowledge of English by reading whatever she could get her hands on and by her one and only indulgence, going to the movies every Wednesday afternoon. This escape was necessary for her sanity as well. Not only was she raising her three sons, she had her husband's mother and brother living with her; she was the one who spoke and read English and, therefore, had to read the mail everyone received, help pay all bills, and take everyone in the neighborhood to the doctor.

When I met her, in 1960, I saw a short, self-effacing woman who shunned the spotlight, who stood in the background never putting herself forward and who was beloved of hundreds of people. At first, I felt deep respect, but that rapidly grew to great love for this amazing woman. Here was a person who had survived a horrific background and made herself into a warm, loving, incredibly generous soul who was able to tell me, after we had developed our very good relationship: "Helene, I have three daughters-in-law, all very different, and my motto is deaf, dumb and blind!"

She died in 1975; I miss her to this day.



## The Watch

**Rose McCorkle**

**Chickenscratchers Circle, Austin, TX**

I was cleaning out my jewelry box a few days ago and felt a sharp pang of guilt as I came across a silver Timex watch. I thought back to the occasion when I got the watch and why it made me feel this way.

It was a cold Christmas day and my brother and sisters and I were huddled by the fireplace at my dad's house. Ashes drifted out onto the hearth and sparks occasionally flew up toward the ceiling. We were never at my dad's on Christmas morning. We would usually have had presents with Mom and then gone to my paternal grandparents for a big lunch of turkey and dressing. As we huddled there I got the biggest surprise of my life. My dad had gifts for all of us. He had never done that before. I got a Timex watch, silver, with a stretch band.

I cherished that watch and wore it from then through college. There wasn't a day that I didn't wear it with pride. After college the watchband broke and I stored the timepiece

carefully in my jewelry box. It's been forty years and I still have that broken watch.

Why did my stomach tie in a knot when I saw that old, broken watch? I realized that from all those years of my childhood, I didn't save anything that my mother gave me for Christmas. I hadn't kept a single gift! She worked three jobs to provide gifts for a plentiful Christmas for four children and I kept the watch my father gave me and nothing from my mom.

Then I realized that my mother had given me not only the best material gifts she could afford but the gifts of love and of giving without recognition. She sacrificed willingly for me and I hold that in my heart, not in a jewelry box.



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