

TRUE WORDS

from

Real Women

An Anthology of Life Writing
by the Women of Story Circle Network

Edited by Mary Jo Doig

Layout by Robin Wittig

*An Annual Publication of Story Circle Network
The Organization for Women With Stories to Tell*

At Anchor

Ruth Crowley, Folsom CA

Thanks

For what comes through the eye—
slow spinning trees,
vagrant clouds,
sun on the waves

For what comes through the ear—
insistent thrum of insects,
woodpeckers' patient knock,
the water's lapping

For what comes through the skin—
the body's sure knowledge
that it is held and cherished

For the cradle that bears us
quiet now, at peace now,
rocking on the lake.

November, 2013



Letter from the editors:

A large circle of talented women birthed the Anthology you are about to read. The poems and stories in the following pages have brought me smiles, sadness, joy, and laughter as I have, always feeling privileged, given each several readings. Some pieces took much courage to write, others record simple beauty of everyday moments, and all reflect the rich truths of each woman's life. Some have intersected in ways with my own story and I know that you, too, will find parts of your story here.

A little more about this large circle. First, it begins with you, our SCN authors who have generously gifted us with your life stories.

Next is Robin Wittig, to whom I send a very long Word document (think 52 pages of size 10 font) with carefully selected and edited stories and poems. When she sends me her layout, I never fail to enjoy the magic Robin does with arranging and illustrating your words. Following my final edit, I return the document to Robin. She makes those changes and the Anthology is ready to go to press in Austin.

None of this word-passing back and forth from authors all over the country to me, to Robin, and exchanges could happen without the extraordinary talent of our Executive Director, Peggy Moody, integral to the circle I speak of. Peggy created, maintains, and continually upgrades the internet place we all know as www.storycircle.org, the vital center for so much of what we do.

Our Board of Directors and our current president, Pat LaPointe, work quietly in shaping and moving us forward in our evolution.

And last, yet really first and foremost—bringing us back full circle—is Susan Albert, Story Circle Network's founder, who understood the deep need for and importance of women telling their life stories and decided, more than a decade ago, to create this unique organization.

Picture the hands of each of the above women, along with so many others past and present, joined together in commitment to women all over the world to encourage us to share our life stories, and you will feel the essence, the heart and soul, of Story Circle Network.

Enjoy!

Robin Wittig, layout

Mary Jo Doig, editor



Story Circle Network

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

Anthology Editor

Mary Jo Doig
scn.truewords@gmail.com

Layout by

Robin Wittig
robinlynn7133@msn.com

We welcome your letters, queries, and suggestions.

Editorial Address:
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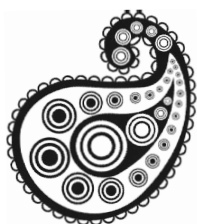
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Strawberries and Champagne

Linda Hasselstrom, Hermosa SC

I was young, your second wife,
 busy teaching, studying, discovering
 our new marriage, sex,
 your infidelity.

Champagne frothed like lies.

I remember sitting high
 on that limestone shelf
 swept by air warm as flesh.
 Trees below shivered. Sunlight
 flashed from car windows,
 drivers unaware our lives reeled
 above them. Your perfect teeth sliced
 strawberries. Champagne bubbles
 rippled on my tongue. The air hummed.
 You promised *that* affair was over.
 I remember sunlight on my shoulders,
 how I squinted looking north.
 Limestone rasped my hands.
 You whispered in my ear
 of love we'd sworn to honor
 until we were as old as I am now.
 I couldn't see your face,
 can't see it now.
 Already I was bound
 toward stormy sky and crumbled stone,
 to shadows; how each blade of grass
 offers a different shade of green.
 Champagne frothed like lies.
 What counts now
 is what I knew that day:
 this solid world
 beneath my feet.

Memory of a Fall

Victoria Jessop, El Cajon CA
 w-ecircle 7

Out of my mirror, a face that stares
 And strange it seems to me.
 What are those black and swollen eyes?
 What purpled nose I see?
 That is the face of one I know,
 Who had a mighty fall
 On scorching sidewalk in the sun,
 And not myself at all!

(With apologies to A.E. Houseman's *Into my heart an air that kills...*, this pastiche came to mind after I tripped up the sidewalk, and later took a look at myself in the mirror after I had come back from the hospital.)

Partners at Every Turn

Ronda Armstrong, Des Moines IA
ronda.armstrong@gmail.com

Five weeks before Bill and I married over thirty years ago, an unexpected turn taught us the value of partnership. Early on a Saturday in September, he called me from the emergency room.

“Honey, I can’t stand feeling so crummy.”

I threw on my clothes and hurried to the hospital. Soon lab studies revealed that Bill’s worrisome symptoms—extreme fatigue, blurred eyesight, frequent thirst, and weight loss—had a name: insulin dependent diabetes (Type I.)

The doctor gave orders to admit him. Bill had other ideas.

“How about I go to the wedding shower in our honor tonight and then check in?”

“No way, Jose!” Bill couldn’t persuade the doctor, so I went to the shower without him.

Crossing off the days before the wedding, matters more pressing than final details filled our time. We learned to do blood tests, recognize and treat insulin reactions, and give insulin injections. We studied diet plans and carbohydrate counts. Addressing Bill’s diabetes together made it less intimidating.

Both of us had moved to Des Moines three years before, meeting at church shortly thereafter. Before we married Bill understood I occasionally needed his help. Due to my longtime hearing loss, Bill filled me in when I missed what someone said. If my weak voice gave out and others could not hear me, he repeated my words. In addition, I had Carney Triad, a tumor syndrome so new and rare no one knew what to expect. Part of my stomach had been removed due to one type of the triad tumors.

Bill’s diagnosis with diabetes put partnership at the forefront of our marriage. With both of us having ongoing needs, ones we couldn’t ignore, wedding vows to stand by each other, at all times, amounted to more than words in a ceremony. The claps and hallelujahs we heard as we strode out of the sanctuary echoed our joy.

Though we faced challenges, we also had points in our favor. My social work job showed me the value of generating support, building resiliency, and mastering tough circumstances as a team. Due to Bill’s friendly nature and trademark humor, I nicknamed him “the smile man.” His ability to stimulate laughter while navigating the challenging turns our lives took helped manage chronic concerns and take new issues in stride.

One year I spent six weeks at home, tethered to an IV pole (we called it “Iva”) receiving antibiotics to treat a raging ear infection. Another year more tumors resulted in removal of my remaining stomach and formation of a gastrointestinal loop to

act as a small stomach. My need to balance rest and work to conserve energy, and to eat small meals and snacks throughout the day, blended with Bill’s diabetes management routines. As partners, we tweaked routines to work for us, becoming pros at food selection and making adjustments. Going on an insulin pump ten years ago gave Bill greater control of his diabetes, adding yet another layer to our routines.

Bill and I joined efforts for reasons other than medical concerns. From the outset, we divvied up household chores and errands. When one needed down time, the other stepped in. We valued communication, making sure we shared our thoughts, listened to the other, and made decisions together. Serving others added to our optimism and contentment. We prioritized fun and nourished friendships, both individually and as a couple. A few years after celebrating our tenth anniversary, we started ballroom dancing, a major turn in our lives, one that added healthy patterns and new dimensions to partnership. Swinging and whirling on the dance floor gave us infinite delight, while developing into a positive activity to carry into our future.

We’d been married almost twenty-five years when one day, while I was at work, Bill phoned me on my cell.

“The doctor called. I have blood cancer...,” his voice trailed off.

Bill’s diagnosis with mantle cell lymphoma (MCL) put our partnership to its toughest test. We knew little about blood cancer, and the aggressive pattern of his type scared us. When Bill achieved remission after several months of chemotherapy, he qualified to harvest and transplant his stem cells, requiring a month’s hospital stay and extensive recuperation.

After considering options carefully, we gave the go ahead even though his diabetes compounded the risk for the rigorous procedure. We were confident that our combined faith, resolve, and resourcefulness would see us through.

Today, Bill remains lymphoma free. More flare-ups of my Carney Triad have occupied us, requiring surgery, ablations, procedures, and chemotherapy. As partners, we’ve learned to be flexible and patient, convinced that withstanding trials and celebrating joys strengthens marriage and gives it depth and resilience.

Although Bill’s diabetes arrived as an unexpected wedding gift, it gave us the patterns we needed to start strong as partners and to keep growing as years passed. Now well into our retired years, when others ask if we continue to dance, we answer, “Yes, we’re still dancing through life!”

No matter what the tune, we’re partners at every turn. Till death do us part.

As partners, we’ve learned to be flexible and patient, convinced that withstanding trials and celebrating joys strengthens marriage and gives it depth and resilience.



Chesapeake Summer Memories

Barbarann Ayars, Medina OH · w-ecircle 9

Every summer I tell my parents I think I won't go this year. Every summer I change my mind. This will be my fifth summer, my second as a trained boating instructor at Camp Chesapeake, Maryland. Rowing a boat is as natural to me as breathing. I think what I feel is mystical. I don't know it is competence.

My favorite time of day is dawn when the camp is silent, everyone else asleep. The cool morning lies damp on my skin from the water souging off the Bay. The tide is out, the surface glass as the Bay waits for the day. I slip from the cabin barefooted, silent, waking no one, to preserve my solitude. There is enough light to see but not enough to cast shadow.

I walk the water's edge on cold wet sand, smell the seaweed, taste the salt air, feel the already underlying heat to come when the sun is fully up. Dawn sneaks in, lights small fires on the wings of ospreys, speckles my mouse brown hair with gold.

The gulls lift off the beach at my approach, flapping their disturbance, scolding. Out in the channel a fog horn sounds as a ship plows the bay sending soft trollers to shore, washing my feet. I climb into the moored rowboat, slip the oars and pull out into the quiet water, rowing effortlessly, aware of the power of my slight body to propel the craft, maintaining my solitude.

I ship my oars and sit still on the water, watch the silver droplets slide from the oar tips down through the gray-blue surface. Sunlight deposits a silky shimmer as it shifts along the hardly-there waves of the dead calm sea.

Sunrise occurs without notice except to warm my sunburned neck as I sit in my cradle, gently rocking. A gull lights on the prow and eyes me; he is an ornament watching the

water for unseen fish. Together we drift toward the channel, toward the osprey mother perched on her nest built upon the buoy marking deeper water. She stands to object, spreading her wings to warn me off.

Morning has broken; the light is brilliant now across the bay, the water still, like glaze, and shining like the sun. I sit in peaceful silence, feeling the heat and the breeze and the peace of the place. The silence is utterly unlike that malignant kind at home where hostility thunders in the secret quiet, where two people duel wordlessly, the very air thick with their hatred.

I have no idea this peace is healing. I've hidden most of my wounds even from myself. They will surface later, as wounds do. Here I submit myself to the call of the water and its comforts, not knowing comfort is my greatest need. Bathed in solitude, well fed on the bay sounds of fog horn, calling gulls, the shushing of

small waves against my vessel, and now voices of the wide-awake, I turn my boat and slowly row to shore. I shake myself into the present and prepare for the day, at peace with myself and looking for breakfast.

Later, when the brilliant sun is high and full of heat, I'll slip beneath the water, cool myself from the sweltering day and swim to the dock where I'll lie beneath its intensity and quietly snooze in the presence of my camp mates, listening to the rise and fall of their afternoon voices slowly winding down to the soporific lengthening shadows and the coming dusk that accompanies our dinner. And I'll sleep sound amidst the song of cicadas and katydids in the wee morning hours, looking forward to tomorrow's repetition of my day.

I have no idea this peace is healing. I've hidden most of my wounds even from myself.

...when I began to feel that I was in a different world from that of the teenagers... I decided it was time to go.

When I found myself glancing at the clock in the classroom as often as the students did, I knew that my teaching days were coming to a close. I'd had a good run—taught grades one through twelve—with the last fourteen years the best of all, spent teaching English to the gifted at the Bronx High School of Science.

Looking back, most of my feelings are positive. I started in a junior high school, not the easiest place to begin and, at times, felt a bit disoriented, as one period spent with a bright seventh grade group would be followed by a period of quite different seventh graders: fifteen-year-olds who had been pushed through the system and could not read or write. After this class learned to trust me, we developed a method so that a "look-out" would be placed near the door, and if someone entered the room, all their "baby readers" would be shoved into the desks and "age appropriate" books put out on show.

One treasured memory from this class was when the gang leader yelled at the group one morning as the class arrived, and I was not standing up as usual. "Shut up all of you. Mrs. Benardo's sick."

The Time Had Come

Helene Benardo, Bronx NY
w-ecircles 15 and 9

I asked him how he knew I wasn't feeling well. "You're sittin' aintcha?"

This amazing group threw a party for me at the end of the year. Where they got the gifts, I never asked!

By far, the happiest and best days of my career were spent in the high school, especially the last several where I taught a senior elective in Women in Literature. I have nothing but mostly good memories of those years. However, when I began to feel that I was in a different world from that of the teenagers and, what's more, didn't really want to relate to that world anymore, I decided it was time to go.

I'll end with my favorite anecdote of all time. During some of those years, I was going through menopause and, consequently, was always burning up. The windows in my classroom were kept open regardless of season. Standing behind two youngsters who were planning their electives for the following year, I heard one ask the other, "How's Benardo's class?"

The answer? "It's a great course, but you have to take notes with your gloves on!"

The Little Girl in the Photograph

Pat Bean, Tucson AZ

w-ecircle 6

I was in my 70s when a cousin sent me a small, black and white photo that changed the whole context of my childhood. I knew the picture was me only because of its back inscription: Patricia Lee Joseph, age 3.

The little girl's pale, straw colored hair was curled into neatly-arranged ringlets, the puffed-sleeve, short frock she wore had clearly been starched and pressed to perfection and beneath her black-patent leather Mary Janes, she wore lace-trimmed socks.

This was not the childhood I remembered. I remembered one in which I went to school with straight, tangled hair and hand-me-down clothes. Together with my bratty know-it-all nature, which was reflected even in the scowl on the face of the daintily-dressed little girl in the photo, I came to be called cootie-brain by jeering classmates. It was a name that stuck with me all the way through the end of fifth-grade, which was the year my grandmother died and we were forced to move from her home.

I blamed my mother for both my unhappiness and our family's dysfunctional nature. She was always grouchy and unpleasant. And when my dad came home at night, usually long after I had been put to bed, she was especially angry with him. I would put the pillow over my head to block out the bitter words she screeched, but my mother had a sharp and penetrating voice, and the small cushion was a weak defense.

I was in my mid-30s before the reality that my mother had good reason to be angry hit me, like Thor's hammer coming down on a dim-witted skull. But then children don't see the world through the same eyes as those of an adult, and child I had still been when I married at barely 16 to escape the discord.

My day of recognition was the one in which I sat, unweeping, at my father's sparsely attended funeral. For the first time, I suddenly knew that my mother had cause to be angry at my always cheerful, but seldom present, father. His early demise at 55, I realized, was probably hastened by his alcoholism, for an alcoholic is what he was, and a gambler as well.

The words of those midnight sessions my mother had with my father, which were especially frightful on Friday nights, replayed themselves in my mind. Sitting at his funeral, I realized my father hadn't come home until he had gambled and drank away most, or all, of his weekly paycheck.

He was the reason I wore hand-me-downs and sometimes went to school with holes in my shoes. He was the reason I had been forced to go out in the neighborhood to sell my mother's beautiful crocheting. It was that money, I now realized, that had helped put food on our table. I also remembered the many times,

when my father, who drove the family car, failed to pick me up as he had promised so I could attend a school event.

I had forgotten all these things, and overlooked them when I was a child, because in person, my dad was always kind and funny and cheerful, everything my mother was not.

I eventually reconciled with my mother, coming to appreciate her many strengths, and realizing that the year I had started first grade, she had given birth to her second child, and then a third one less than a year later. At the same time, she had planted a huge garden every year, canned its bounty, and dutifully taken care of my bedridden grandmother.

While my mother's personality could at times be abrasive, and she was not much of a hugger, her love for us children was real. She expressed it by making sure we children had a roof over our heads and a hot-cooked meal on the table every evening.

Even accepting this reality, there was still a lingering, small voice that whispered in my ear, telling me my mother never loved me. Why else would she have allowed me to go to school with my hair looking like it actually had cooties, like my peers had claimed? Yet here was proof, in a tiny black and white photo of a girl with ringlets in her hair, that she did love me.

I had been surprised to receive the photograph, because the same year I had started a new school in sixth grade, I had gathered up all the photos of myself and burned them. I had been determined to put my past behind me and start fresh, and the ugly photos of me, with my stringy hair, skinny body, and freckled face, were part of that past. I had no choice but to destroy them.

I realized that the only way this one small picture of me had survived was because it had been taken by my aunt, my mother's older sister. Looking at it also brought back another memory that I had long suppressed. It was of me, the first day of school, sitting on a stool with my mother trying to tame my tangled, unruly hair.

The bratty kid I was back then screamed and yelled and cried that she was hurting me. Maybe she was, but I'm sure not as much as I pretended. With the picture of the little girl in ringlets still in my hand, I reheard the words my mother finally uttered that same morning.

"Well from now on, you can comb your hair yourself," she said. Then she put down the comb and walked away, never again to touch my hair.

My going to school with uncombed hair had nothing to do with love. It was all about my mother being a woman who, unlike my dad, stood by her words.

This was not the childhood I remembered.

Vanishing Point

Ruth Crowley, Folsom CA

From your bedroom we can see for miles—
the edges of the road converge
at the horizon: world's end.
On either side the corn grows thick.
The sky sits low and swollen with unshed rain.
We sprawl on the window seat that hides
your hope chest. Just sixteen and already
you own linens and flatware. And hope.
Summer friends, we let our laughter braid
in the heavy air like clematis on the trellis.
On your red Vespa we test that road,
riding our own wind, brownlegged children
ready for anything, flashing with future.
At the DQ I flirt—you are busy looking down,
being the good girl Dennis wants.
Years later I pass through, heading to California.
Children and some silver teeth in front
and your cheek the color of that stormy sky.
Your hair is chopped and permed
like every other woman's in the Red Owl market.
West of everything I mourn you.
Connie! Let your children raise their children.
Let your steely hair grow long!
Straddle your scooter and ride to land's end,
laughing into the wind as if nothing matters.
On the way out of town, the road runs forty miles
before you hit a stoplight.

The Yoohoo Lady

Amy Greenspan, Austin TX
r-ecircle 1 and w-ecircle 4

She lived alone, with paints and easels,
almost thirty years,
bottling words that poured unchecked
when people were around.
Astounding art and boundless talking
were her hallmark traits.
But not of late. Her house, her talent,
pieces of her mind left far behind,
she's baffled by her new, communal home.
The verbal tide now locked inside,
she clings to one word:
"Yoohoo."
She flings this call at all who pass,
accompanied by a wave
or by an eager, reaching grasp
at those who venture near.
A million words distilled to one.
"Yoohoo!" I'm still here!

*I often wish she were still
here to call, or visit, or see.*

Bewitched by Beads

Sara DuBois, Renton WA · w-ecircles 14 and 7

A major interest I have is beading and this story is dedicated to the wonderful woman who introduced me to the craft about twenty years ago, the late Arleen Sutton. I met Arleen at the second Take Off Pounds Sensibly group I joined in Olympia, Washington. We met every Saturday morning to weigh in privately, and attend our meeting. Once a month we could bring in something to share, a special hobby or interest. Arleen brought in her beautiful glass beads, among other things. We each had an opportunity to create earrings and we learned how to use some jewelry tools: to twist/bend wire and eyepins, to attach everything to the earwires, and to try them on and share them. I was hooked. Over the next four years, I would often invite myself to her apartment to see all her beautiful beads. She often gave me at least five of each color or shape and many more things, plus we also went to *Shipwreck Beads*, a small bead shop on Mud Bay Road.

I had never seen so many different kinds of beads, beading materials, and supplies. It was like going to a treasure trove of the most exquisite and beautiful jewels and metals imaginable. Each time we went to *Shipwreck Beads*, I scraped enough together to buy some new beads to add to my stash.

Eventually, Arleen opened her own small bead shop in downtown Olympia. I would visit her there at least once a week to rifle through her treasures. She had some necklaces created with paua shell cabochons, and then surrounded with stunning seed beads, valued at about \$500.00. Paua shell is really dyed abalone shell. Its cabochons would be glued down to a stiff material, in this case a thin piece of soft leather. The seed beads are sewn by hand around the cabochon. They remind me of the embellishments found on the robes of Professor Dumbledore in the Harry Potter books.

I miss Arleen a lot. She taught me so much about beads of all kinds, about gemstones, about the love of beads, and more. She had Parkinson's and, sadly, lost the use of the fine motor skills in her hands as the disease progressed. God took her home about twelve years after I first met her, and at that time I no longer lived in Olympia. Through my job, I was able to keep track of her, knowing she lived her last years with her daughter Roma and their family until her time was complete.

I often wish she were still here to call, or visit, or see. And I think if I were ever going to open a beading business, I would want to call it *Beadwitched*.

Rest in peace, Arleen.

Popcorn Psychology

Amy Greenspan, Austin TX · r-ecircle 1 and w-ecircle 4

Regrets.
Hard kernels of remorse
at words, chances, time misspent.
Salt those kernels with perspective.
Roast them in the virgin oil of truth.
As they burst, you'll find the "mis" goes missing.
Time, chances, words were simply *spent*.
Learn, but don't regret.

The Truth About Family Histories

Darlene Hayman, Montrose CO

This story is a mixture of faded memories, swollen imagination, and real events.

On March 3, 1895, in Sublette County, Wyoming, a tragic event may have happened. This story is a mixture of faded memories, swollen imagination, and real events. The truth is, all family histories are dusty traces of the truth.

In Pinedale, on July 29, 1986, my husband Dale dropped me off at the Pine Tree Motel and went to get gas in the car. He stopped to look at a very old building and then went next door and asked the neighbor if she knew where the old Albert store was. Mary Turner didn't know.

The next morning we stopped for breakfast at the Wrangler Café on Pine Street. We had called the Chamber of Commerce Director, Judi Myers, the night before because we'd been told that she was writing a history of Pinedale and could tell us where to find my grandparents' old store. We had an appointment to meet Judi at 8:30 the next morning.

The following day at the Chamber of Commerce office, we met Judi and went across the street to have coffee at the drugstore. Judi carried a huge briefcase with historical data. She was especially interested to learn that my Grandmother Albert was Charlotte Hartley, the girl whose father had branded her because she had gathered wood too slowly. Incredible!

Judi's list of old graves at the cemetery showed two Hartley markers on her list. One was George Hartley, my great-grandfather. The other was Eliza Hartley, December 17, 1881—March 3, 1895. In all the family history my mother had told me, I had never heard of 14-year-old Eliza.

We went back to the Chamber of Commerce office, picked up some brochures and were about to leave when Mary Turner came in the door. She had lain awake all night thinking about the old store and remembered where it was. She said she would take us out there but Mable Williams knew Bob and Lottie Albert better than she did, so we stopped at Mable's house and took her with us.

Mary was 70 years old and she and her husband Jim homesteaded near the Albert store, in view of the Tetons. She had worked in the Pinedale Library for "about 30 years." Her grandfather built fifteen cabins at the Pine Tree Motel where we stayed.

In Mary's light green Monte Carlo, we headed west out of town toward Daniel. I was following a milepost map that Judi Myers had given me. At mile 119 we turned into the old Albert store and gas station. Mrs. Williams came out in the yard, greeted Mary and Mable and they introduced us. She knew Bob and Lottie and said Bob was the County Assessor and his picture was in the capitol building in Cheyenne. She said we could take pictures of the store and after we'd taken several, she said this store was built sometime in the thirties. "We built it and

Slim West helped," she said. "The original store was down by the river. It was torn down and the wood was used for the sub-flooring of the new store."

Later, when I returned home in Lakewood and talked to my mother, Una, I learned there was an original old store by the river but it was built and owned by old man Wallace. The boards were never used to build the new store and Grandad Albert, my father Charles, and his brother Jerome built the new store and two cabins in the back. Charles and Una lived in one. After time, who remembers how things actually happened?

We drove back toward Pinedale along the Green River. Scattered among the sagebrush, willow trees, and pasture grass wandered blue lupines, blue asters, and yellow rabbit brush. As we rode past the Fred Pape house and through the pastoral meadows, a grazing young buck antelope ignored us. On this ride, Mable said she knew Lottie well and Lottie had told her that her dad had branded her for not bringing in the wood fast enough. She had showed her the brand on her back. Both women said George Hartley was mean to his animals and to his family and everyone was glad when he was ambushed and killed. Was this rumor or a fact of astonishing history?

Later, in Pinedale at The Patio restaurant, the conversation came around to the cemetery. I asked, "Who was Eliza Hartley?" Mable said it was Lottie's sister who killed herself because she could no longer face her father's abuse.

I was stunned. Why had I never heard about this?

Later in Lakewood, my mother said she had never heard of Eliza Hartley, yet the grave is there and Grandma Charlotte includes the story in "Tales of the Seeds-Ke Dee" by the Sublette County Artists Guild, 1963. My mother said she never heard Lottie say anything about being branded by her father but Lottie did say that when her parents were away working, their children were left alone all day. If they didn't have all their work done when the parents returned, her father whipped them with a buggy whip. She also said that George was mean to his family and animals. One day, on his way to Kemmerer, he was shot in the back. Lottie said they were pretty sure they knew who did it but no one really tried to find out who it was.

An article in Evanston's *The Wyoming Press*, August 2, 1902, states that a "murder was committed at or near Daniels on July 24th, the victim receiving three gunshot wounds at the hands of his assassin." On August 16, that article says "Ranchman George Hartley was found with a bullet hole in his head near his ranch on Piney Creek on July 24, 1902." There were no legal arrests, no trials, as far as the records show, but there is a transcript of a newspaper article telling a story about a Pinedale assassination.

Ode to Twiggy's Eyes

Sara Etgen-Baker, Allen TX · <http://www.saraetgenbaker.blogspot>

I opened the note that Susan slipped me in study hall. "Let's go to McKnight's after school and sample some of the makeup and test some perfumes."

I glanced in her direction, shook my head, and scribbled, "Oh, I shouldn't." I hesitated then wrote, "What if my mother finds out? You know how she feels about girls wearing perfume and makeup." I refolded the note and sent it across the aisle toward Susan.

Susan read my reply, frowned at me, jotted down her answer, and returned the note. "She won't know. Come on! We'll have a blast. You know you want to."

True. I wanted to go but was torn between my teenage fascination with makeup and my fear of mother's disapproval. I felt adventurous around Susan, so I scrawled, "Okay. See you at 3:30."

After school Susan and I walked downtown and ventured into McKnight's Drugstore. We strolled past the soda fountain, selected a song from the jukebox, and then ambled our way through the small, cluttered store. We passed shelves that housed some of our favorite beauty products: Prell Shampoo, Lux Soap, Aqua Net Hair Spray, Spoolies, and Toni Home Perm Kits. We lingered at the cosmetic counter and tested some of newest 60s mod lipsticks: Yardley of London's Lip Slickers and Revlon's Moon Drops.

"Good afternoon, girls." A cheerful voice startled us. "My name's Joy." A petite, red-haired college coed stepped from behind the perfume counter. "How may I help you girls today?"

Susan looked directly at her. "What's new at the perfume and cosmetic counter?"

"McKnight's has the newest perfumes as well as the latest mod trends in makeup." Joy pulled a bottle of perfume from a display. "You've got to smell this!" She sprayed a generous portion of Heaven Scent perfume on our wrists.

Susan sniffed her wrist. "Yummy! It smells sexy!"

We blushed and giggled as only teenage girls can and then in unison began singing the words to the Heaven Scent commercial. *Suddenly you're an imp wearing Angel's wings... Suddenly you're all the things you want to be—a little bit naughty but heavenly.*

Joy rolled her eyes then headed to the other side of the counter. "Over here are the eye shadows, eyeliners, mascaras, and the new Twiggy Eye Paint Double Liner Duo."

"I confess," Susan said. "I don't know the first thing about putting on eye makeup."

"Me neither," I sighed. "But I'd love to look like Twiggy!"

"You can. It's easy." Joy pointed to some stools next to the cosmetic counter. "Have a seat, and I'll show you how to achieve the Twiggy look."

"Groovy!" said Susan.

Joy handed me a mirror and bottle of Bonne Bell foundation. "First, dab some of this over your face." Then she opened a drawer and pulled out an eye shadow trio. "Now, brush

this smoky shadow over your eyelid. Drift the lighter gray eye shadow out to your hair line. Next swirl the darker, dusky smoke on your upper lid just up to the crease."

She turned to me and nodded. "Far out!" Then she handed me a package of Twiggy's Eye Paint Double Liner Duo. "Go ahead! Open it!" Joy winked at me. "Wet the eyeliner brush and mix with Twiggy Eye Paint. Brush a thin line of dark liner on each eyelid right above your eyelashes." She waited then instructed, "Now brush a second white line above the dark line for the real Twiggy eye. Next, carefully draw skinny Twiggy-lashes with dark eyeliner in between your own lashes." Joy looked at my progress. "Spiffy! Now, follow with several applications of lengthening mascara."

When I finished, I turned and faced Susan. "You're really cute," she blurted. "You look like a brunette Twiggy or perhaps Mia Farrow. You should buy the makeup and eye paint kit!"

"Oh, I can't! You know my mother won't allow me to wear makeup. Besides, I don't have any money."

"Hmmm....I've got the most scathingly brilliant idea!" Susan's eyes sparkled like Haley Mills' eyes in *Trouble with Angels*. "Save your lunch money and buy the makeup. You can hide it in your purse, put it on at school, and take it off before you go home. It's sooo simple."

So for several weeks, I sacrificed nutrition for beauty and secretly hoarded my lunch money, saving over \$15 for my Twiggy eyes. By the time I purchased the Twiggy eye makeup, I'd lost enough weight that I was almost as thin as Twiggy. My makeup charade continued for months—until that fateful January day when I broke my ankle in gym class.

I was lying on the gym floor when my mother arrived. As I lay on the floor, she looked first at my ankle then swiftly turned her head focusing on my Twiggy eyes.

"What's *that* on your face, young lady?" she pronounced in front of all my classmates. "You're grounded till May!"

I was so busted! I didn't know which was worse: my broken ankle, my bruised ego, or my mother's angry look of disappointment.

Nonetheless, mother was true to her word. So, that semester there was no Valentine's Dance, no slumber parties, no Friday night dates, and certainly no more Twiggy eyes!

At that time I thought my mother's reaction to my Twiggy eyes was extreme. In the years hence, I realized that mother understood how to prepare me for the 50s with their simplicity and predictability. But she didn't understand how to prepare me for the 60s with their complexity and instability, a time when women changed everything from their hairdos, makeup, shopping habits, and husbands to their ideas about life in general.

Perhaps my Twiggy eyes represented her apprehension with all that turmoil and uncertainty. Maybe she thought that my Twiggy eyes meant that I, too, was becoming as unpredictable as the 60s. And although she couldn't eliminate her anxiety about the 60s, mother could banish my Twiggy eyes. Doing so probably made her feel just a bit better.

I...was torn between my teenage fascination with makeup and my fear of mother's disapproval.

A Child's Sorrow

Kim Keikkila, St. Paul MN

Happy Valentine's Day, Saturday 14 February 2009:

The day starts with some light snow showers. Steve is running late, so I leave for the church alone, without him and Tu. I arrive early and wait in the parking lot for ten minutes, watching them bring Mom's coffin in from the funeral coach. Steve and Tu arrive after I've gone inside.

We sit in the front row of the nave, Mom's small clan of progeny: the three of us and Eric. Swells of music from the giant pipe organ fill the church but leave me cold. The pastor reads the biography of Mom I wrote. It ends with her own words about love: "Love gives us companions to find our way through this world with, though our gait be uneven and our music out of tune."

Tu is quiet for most of the service, but at one point begins whispering, "Dead, died, dying, dead dead dead."

Eric rides with us to the cemetery. Tu falls asleep. We leave Tu in the car as a small crowd gathers around the grave just a few steps away. Steve retrieves him when he begins to rustle. They join us as an awkward silence descends after the pastor finishes speaking. Eric gets things moving by putting his stalk of wheat on our mother's coffin. I save mine.

We leave Mom behind, in her coffin, hovering over a hole in the cold, February ground.

Eric, Steve, Tu and I have dinner at Perkins. The waitress gives us a heart-shaped cookie.

"Can I have that?" Tu asks.

"Yes," I say.

Good-bye, Mom.

Wanderings, Friday 20 February 2009:

Today Tu and I go to a sing-a-thon at a local high school, a fundraiser for an organization that provides financial assistance for families affected by cancer. We sit in the middle of the auditorium in the middle of a school day to listen to teenagers sing. At one point, Tu pulls out his toy phone and calls Grandma so she can listen to the music because, he says, "it will be beautiful."

One of the student-singers dedicates her song to her mother, who has been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

"She's going to die," I imagine saying to the girl. "She's going to die, she's going to die, she's going to die..." I can't even dream up any platitudes, any hopeful words. "She's going to die."

But I also think, "It could be worse. I could be in high school."

One Week, Saturday 21 February 2009:

I check on Mom's empty house today, shovel the newly-fallen snow. I take pictures of the house to preserve something of it for after it's sold. Tu and Steve come over later. It's the first time Tu has been here since Grandma has not.

"Is Grandma upstairs?" he asks.

"No," I reply. "Remember what happened to Grandma?"

"She died. Can I go upstairs?"

I let him go. When he returns, he asks where Grandma is.

"She's resting," I say.

"No. Where did she go?"

I pause, not knowing what he wants.

"Where did she go? She was in that big box. Where did she go?"

It dawns on me, what his three-year-old mind needs to know.

"She went into the ground. They put that box in the ground and buried her."

He's satisfied.

Grammaphone, Thursday 26 February 2009:

Tu calls Grandma again on his purple plastic phone. He says she wants to talk to me. I tell her I have a headache today. She says to take medicine and drink water. I hand the phone back to Tu, and he carries on his half of a conversation. He says Grandma doesn't feel very good today, that she needs medicine and water.

This purple phone has become Tu's link to Grandma. He has a Grammaphone.

Peeps, Monday 2 March 2009:

It's the Peeps that get me this morning.

I stop in the middle of the Easter candy aisle at Rainbow and stare at the sugar-coated marshmallow bunnies. I shut my eyes and let loose a silent scream. "Aaaaauuggghhhh." Mom loved Peeps. She gave us Peeps every Easter, including last year, when I was almost forty years old.

I don't even like them, but I put several boxes of Peeps in my cart. For Tu.

Later, Tu and I watch television. Cartoon bunnies, Max and Ruby, tussle over buying birthday presents for Grandma. I want to chuck the remote at the television. Instead, I reach for the Peeps.

"Have a Peep, Tu."

"Can I have two?"

"How about three?"

*Sorrow makes us all children again—destroys all differences of intellect. The wisest know nothing.
~ Ralph Waldo Emerson*

We watch the rest of the program with yellow sugar sticking to our fingers and teeth.

Leave-Taking, Monday 16 March 2009:

Tu and I go to the cemetery today. It's a beautiful day—65 degrees and sunny. By the time we arrive, Tu has fallen asleep, so I leave him in the car.

I walk around by myself, enjoying the silence and the sun. I return to the car, intending to leave, but can't quite do it. I stare at Mom's grave, easy to spot among the otherwise uniform lawn.

By now, Tu is awake. I take him out to see Grandma's grave, show him her name on the headstone, introduce him to the Grandpa he never knew.

"Can I sit on that?" he asks, pointing to the tilted headstone.

"Yes," I say, knowing Mom would like it.

"Too bad we can't see Grandma."

There are a few wheat stalks still near the site. Tu and I pick some up and write a message to Mom in the wet sand.

"Hi Mom! Hi Grandma! From Tu. 3/16/09"

I suggest we leave, but Tu needs more time.

"Not yet. I want to sit here and look at the dirt." He pauses. "Grandma's still buried there."

When finally we pull away, we say, "Bye, guys! See you soon."

Tu adds, "When you're alive again."



Barbie Doll

Juliana Lightle, Canyon TX

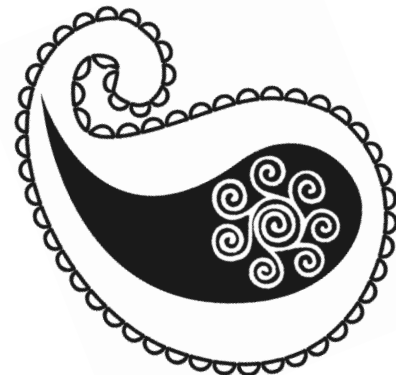
www.writingontherim.wordpress.com

Barbara Lewis Duke, pretty, petite, blue-eyed and blond, my mother, one fearless, controlling woman. Long after Mom's death, Dad said, "Barbara was afraid of absolutely no one and nothing!" They married late: 34 and 38. He adored her unconditionally. She filled my life with horses, music, love, cornfields, hay rides, books, and ambition. Whatever she felt she had missed, my sister and I were going to possess: books, piano lessons, a college education. Her father, who died long before I was born, loved fancy, fast horses. So did she. During my preschool, croupy years, she quieted my hysterical night coughing with stories of runaway horses pulling her in a wagon. With less than one hundred pounds and lots of determination, she stopped them, a tiny Barbie Doll flying across the Missouri River Bottom, strong, willful, and free.

Broken Glass

Linda Hasselstrom, Hermosa SC

She found more whiskey.
That's how it started every time.
When he came home
she screamed and
he yelled. I was three,
crouched under the table
holding my breath
as she broke bottles
in the kitchen sink.
I could see his ankles,
shoes set wide apart facing
her hose and high heels.
Smash. One. Scream. Two.
Sour whiskey fumes choked me.
Glass shards pierced air,
shrieked against the tile floor.
Three. Pop. Four. Bash.
Holding my breath, I counted.
His drinking, her spending.
How he left me alone while he bedded
the woman upstairs and now
she's having a baby. If I
held my breath, they'd stop.
That night mother carried me
up steps that clanged
onto a chugging train.
I held my breath and counted
lighted cars uncoiling
behind us in the dark.
Mother divorced father,
found a job, married a good man.
When she slapped me,
I held my breath and counted.
Her good man died. She
shriveled away into eternity.
For sixty-five years I've
held my breath and counted.
This poem is me learning to breathe.



Against the Current

Arlene Howard, Rancho Mirage CA
w-ecircle 14

Recently I spent a relaxing week on the island of Kauai. With me was my husband of fifty years, our daughter, our eleven-month-old granddaughter, and our son-in-law. Amenities of our hotel included five different pools set amid tropical gardens with the Pacific Ocean as a backdrop. Our favorite pool was the lazy river, which meandered through giant lava boulders. We could float upstream or downstream on inner tubes ducking waterfalls that spilled over the lava. Ferns, pink hibiscus, and red ginger lined the edges of the lava. The scent of plumeria blossoms filled the air.

As I floated upstream with the rush of 80 degree water over my body, inside I was also swimming against the current. On July 5 at 10 a.m., the phone rang. "The second set of mammograms, the biopsy and the ultrasound indicate at you have a 2 cm infiltrating ductal carcinoma in your left breast," my doctor said.

"Me with the big C? No, no," I screamed. "How can that be? There is no history of cancer in my family." Over the next month I had more mammograms, another ultrasound, an MRI, a chest x-ray, an EKG. I also got a second opinion.

"I have to do what my gut says is right," I tell my daughter.

Idol Worship

Amy Greenspan, Austin TX
r-ecircle 1 and w-ecircle 4

When I was twelve a poster of his boyish face
graced the wall beside my bed.
"I love you, Paul"
I said in place of prayer.
Add fifty years.
I'm here with tens of thousands.
who turn to mush
when he appears onstage.
Aging eyes brim with teenage tears.
He starts to sing.
Emotions overflow. We dance in place
with people we don't know
as decades drift away
in curls of scented smoke.
Our reverent ears
absorb the sound, so loud
it pounds inside us,
destroying years of hearing
for this post-hormonal joy.
The boyish face is worn,
the hair has thinned. We don't care.
Here, in looming winter, our springtime prayer
is answered. We can say
I saw him standing there.

While I do have breast cancer, I certainly don't have to feel lonely. The American Cancer Society estimates that in 2013 there will be 232,340 new cases of breast cancer in women. This statistic knocked my socks off. Yet when I thought about it, my mother-in-law and three of my lifelong friends have had breast cancer. My mother-law died of the cancer at age 72; my friends continue to be breast cancer survivors. I also learned from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention that the risk of breast cancer increases with age. I had been advised by my previous doctor that I didn't need a mammogram after age 70. Lucky for me my new doctor disagreed and ordered one. I kept the appointment, which I don't always do.

After meeting with two sets of doctors, I chose to do the surgery at Stanford Hospital. Both sets of doctors felt I could have a lumpectomy with radiation. I decided that was not for me. One of my body's characteristics is like other women in my age group of 70 plus years: I have osteoporosis that has resulted in compression in three of my spine's discs. Several years ago this compression put me in a wheelchair for a month. With daily water therapy I can now out-swim some younger women.

I decided to have a bilateral mastectomy so I won't be lopsided and put pressure on my spine. My doctor doesn't feel I have to do this. My physician daughter doesn't feel I have to do this. It is lonely swimming against medical opinion. My husband supports my decision. So do the women in a local cancer support group. "It's your body," they all say.

"I have to do what my gut says is right," I tell my daughter.

So if you see someone swimming against the current, it just might be me or another woman like me fighting the big C. By the way, my socks are still off!



The Vacation

Susan Lines, Duncan BC, Canada
w-e-circle 9

I remember a vacation we took—my parents, my brother, and I—back in the mid fifties. It was to Long Beach, Vancouver Island BC Canada. It was one of two vacations that we took while my father was still alive. The plan was that my mother would take us up there for the first week, and my father would arrive for the second week.

This was before the road had been put in, now allowing the zillions of tourists that come every year, all year long. In the summer, this beautiful, long sandy beach, boasts wonderful beach combing, sunbathing, rock fishing, surfing among others. The winter caters to the storm watchers.

We left Port Alberni, on a small freighter called the *Uchuck*. Not much later on, she was replaced by another small freighter named *The Lady Rose*. The trip itself down the inlet and around to Ucluelet on the west coast of the island, was exciting. We would stop and give groceries and mail to those who would row out and collect their booty.

When we arrived in the little town, we caught an old dusty school bus, which took us out to Long Beach. There, waiting for us, was a small donkey named Dolly, who had the unenviable job of pulling a small cart with luggage, groceries, etc. Her driver was a First nations elder, named Joe.

Down the beach we went, to Peg Whittington's camp named "Singing Sands," (and the sands did sing.) There were about six cabins nestled in the woods. These cabins had been built and used by the Canadian Air force during WW2. They were stationed there just in case the Japanese attacked. This idea was extremely unlikely, so I would think those boys spent a frustrating time in the isolation, away from the "action."

When we arrived at the beach, amid clouds of dust from the gravel road and the wind from the sea, we could hear the boom and crash of the waves on the sand. This seemed to awaken a primal feeling within me, causing me to run and scream, with arms waving wildly, dancing along the edge of the ice cold water. The day was hot, and this activity caused lots of knowing nods and laughter. I seemed to lose all sense of control when I saw and heard those waves thundering in, along with the screaming of the gulls, and the smell of the beautiful dark blue-green sea.

Little Dolly obligingly pulled the luggage, while we walked, almost a mile along the beach to the cabins. Joe helped us with our luggage and groceries, and we quickly settled in. In quick order it soon became home. We slept like the drift logs on the beach.

The next morning we started the wonderful explorations of the beach, the surrounding rock outlets, with their "blowholes" and running along the masses of old bleached drift logs that had been storm-tossed high up on the beach. There were glass fishing floats to be found, and Dungeness crabs in the tidal pools. We found the skeletal remains of a wolf eel one misty morning, very ugly, with wolfish head and teeth, and a long snake like body. Even now, the thought gives me the shivers.

We spent an idyllic week, the weather was beautiful, the cabin ideal, and the beach, an indescribable collection of adventures.

Then my father arrived.

He, on the other hand, did not care for this sort of thing. He had begged off coming with us to begin with, saying there was work to do. Upon arriving for the second week, he had trouble walking in the sand, due to his bad leg. So poor little Dolly had to pull him along in the cart. That intensified his very bad mood and the little "silver flask" soon appeared. If I can remember correctly, there were plenty of refills in the suitcase, as we could hear gurgling. Things went from bad to worse, and we left a couple of days later. We may even have been told to leave, I don't recall.

In defense of my father, who was a very unhappy individual, and who unfortunately, would take it out on those he "loved," I am sure he did love us as much as he was capable. He had come from a loveless family, and was called a cripple. He was always aware of this.

At fifteen, he had contracted polio, and lost the use of his left leg. In those days, there were many bullies, (even in his family) and lots of taunting. Nothing was ever done, and so, psychologically, he didn't survive. Others might have, but he didn't.

I am sorry that he was not strong enough, as an adult, to overcome these feelings for the sake of his family. But he treated us as he had been treated, with coldness, and also used corporal punishment as the method to retain control. I think that in those days (70 years ago), this was not recognized as being so damaging for the family, especially the children.

Even so, I still remember that first week with such joy. It was perfect happiness.

...I still remember that first week with such joy.
It was perfect happiness.



Trusting My Inner Wisdom

Ardine Martinelli, Tacoma WA

w-ecircle 6

“All I need is Inside Me.” This is my six-word memoir. It is a hard-earned truth about who I am today. Much of my life has been spent allowing the voices of others to rule me. Parents, husband, and friends held sway over my opinions about myself. I have experienced pivotal points in my life when I followed my heart, often at the dismay of family and friends. Each of these experiences has taken me on a path I could not have imagined. At the same time, each produced an internal dialogue between my head and my heart that created great interior conflict.

I experienced this inner conflict when I chose to leave a tenured position with a school district. I was 43 years old and newly divorced. After six years of being an elementary school principal, I was feeling short-tempered, frustrated over little things, and angry at the system, at parents, at whatever or whomever I felt was blocking me from doing my job. I realized I needed to change something. After a particularly difficult situation involving a school bus and the safety of many students, I knew it was time to leave. I requested a year’s sabbatical. This afforded me a year off, at half salary, to renew and regenerate.

What a gift that year was. It gave me the time and space required to listen to my needs. It also forced me into getting my financial house in order. While still working, I paid off all my debts, except my mortgage, and became much more aware of my spending patterns. This one step allowed me to make future choices without fear of debt.

As my sabbatical year ended, I knew I was expected to return to the district. Each time I thought of returning, I could feel my whole body constrict. Fear grabbed my heart, freezing me in place. Fear’s language seems practical, asking questions like, “Who’s going to pay the bills?” “What about benefits, you have to think of retirement?” “You’re wasting your future, what will you do?” These questions came from family and friends, and ran like a litany of fear and doubt through my head.

Relief washed over me once I decided not to return to the district. By making this decision, the voice of fear subsided and I was able to focus on my next steps. Within two months, I began growing a business as an educational consultant in restructuring schools. For the next twelve years I was fully aligned with my passion for reinventing schools. Leaving a secure tenured position was difficult, yet the gifts I received were immense. Whole new spaces opened within me when I said yes to my heart.

After ten years, much to my surprise, I began to experience similar burnout feelings. At 55 years old, I was again edgy and restless. My body constricted each time the phone rang. I didn’t want more contracts. I kept hearing, “Stop everything, go inside, and listen.” I came to call this plea “the voice.” I ignored it,

talked to it, and bartered with it, but the voice became louder. I knew, from past experience, I had to do something, but what?

I finally decided to partially follow the voice. I cut my business in half, keeping on-going clients and accepting few new clients. I did this for a year, believing it would give me time to “Be still and listen.” It didn’t work. As long as contracts were on the books, I put all my energy into program design and training. There was no energy left for listening to the “Still small voice.”

After a year, I quit bartering and took the ultimate steps to close my business. The same voice of fear raged through my being. Fortunately, having experienced this before, I was able to release the fears more easily. Truthfully, I knew at some deep level I had no choice. I was being called somewhere, I didn’t have a clue where, but I knew I had to pay attention. I sank into a retreat mode, a time for stillness, listening, and reflection.

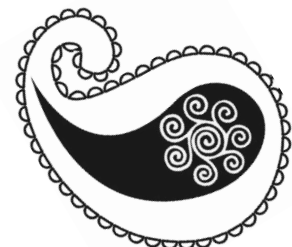
I started this year with a three-week sojourn to New Mexico. A whole new world opened to me. I was introduced to spiritual direction at Ghost Ranch, in New Mexico, and began a long overdue healing process with the Catholic Church. Returning home, I found a spiritual director to walk with me on this journey. The hardest part of

this year was learning how to *be*. To this point, my life had been about doing, proving, producing, and achieving. I wanted to get busy and do something, anything to feel productive. I finally called this my soul work. The word “work” tricked my overactive mind enough to settle into listening and being. So many new doors opened after taking the risk of closing a known door. I am living a life I could not have envisioned ten years ago. I am grateful everyday for having the courage to “Stop everything, go inside, and listen.”

These two experiences, along with others, have taught me to trust my inner wisdom. I know that when I’m facing a difficult decision, I need to stop and pay attention to my body. Is she constricting or expanding? It is still difficult, but I stop the mind chatter and breathe until I get below the words. This is the point of my body/heart connection. I know when they are in synch because I feel my heart expand and a surge of energy that says *yes*.

I am again feeling a sense of restless discontent. I accept this as the beginnings of a call to a new direction for my life. Today I smile with curiosity about where I am being led. I don’t experience the angst and fear; I just know it is time to pay attention. I am excited about what’s next for my life. I trust implicitly that “All I need is inside me.”

Fear grabbed my heart, freezing me in place



The Right Thing?

Sheila McNaughton, St Petersburg FL
Jan Golden/Sheila McNaughton Writing Circle, Safety Harbor FL

The streets were slushy. Dirty snow piled at the curbs. Lights were on in many homes as I drove through the neighborhood. After a few wrong turns I found the church and pulled into the empty parking lot. The rectory was dark except for a bulb burning in the frosted globe by the door. I got out of my old blue Maverick and locked it. Shivering, I stuck my hands in the pockets of my long coat and walked up the sidewalk. Should I knock or ring the bell? My tentative raps on the ornate wooden door didn't produce any results so I pushed the button and stepped back as loud chimes rang deep in the house.

A light came on in the foyer, shining through the beveled glass panels beside the door. A young priest in black pants, black shirt, clerical collar, and shiny black shoes opened the door. His light blue eyes and warm smile welcomed me as he held out his hand.

"Hi, Sheila. I'm Father Mike. Come in. We'll go to the sitting room. Let me take your coat."

He helped me off with the coat, hanging it and my scarf on a wooden coat rack.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee or tea?"

"No thanks." I managed to whisper.

He led me down the hall into a dark paneled room lined with books. We sat in green wing backed chairs near the brick fireplace with logs crackling. Above the fireplace was a painting of an older priest sitting behind an intricately carved desk. The same desk sat in front of a large window with the tapestry drapes pulled back. The yard was dark and the room was an odd reflection in the glass.

"I spoke to Father Jim at Annunciation Church. He told me you want to talk about Christine and Tom." said Father Mike.

"I don't want to cause trouble for anyone." Looking down at my hands, I remembered the pear shaped diamond and slender wedding band I had worn three years ago. "Christine is planning to marry Tom in this church in three months. She needs to know about him before she does."

"Have you spoken to her?"

I couldn't look at him, just rubbed the spot where my rings used to be. "No. I don't know what to say."

"Tell me." he said.

"I married Tom and I didn't know. No one knew or if they did, they didn't say."

"What didn't they say?"

I hesitated, not sure I could speak the words aloud. "Tom is gay. He told me he doesn't like women. Why would he do this again?"

"Maybe you should talk to Christine? Or Tom?"

"I can't live through it again. But, she has a right to know." I sat closer to the edge of the chair, wiping sweaty palms on my jeans.

"Tell me what happened." He said leaning forward.

My speech had been rehearsed in my head on the ride here but now unable to speak, tears filled my eyes.

"Here's a Kleenex." said Father Mike.

Wiping away tears, I raised my eyes to meet his. "We were married in August, 1973. My perfect wedding. Mom made my dress. Everyone was there. My brother came from Florida. My little sister was a bridesmaid. Daddy walked me down the aisle. Tom's family came from all over. Our friends were there. His Lutheran minister was part of the ceremony."

I stopped talking as the memories of that day whirled in my head.

"Are you alright? Do you want something to drink?"

"No. I'm okay. Remembering is hard."

"Take your time." He said sitting back in the chair and crossing his legs.

Looking into the fire, I took a deep breath. "Three months after we were married, I came home from work and found Tom sitting alone in the darkened living room. A bottle of scotch on the table beside him. He didn't say hello, just sat slumped in the chair with the glass in his hand. He didn't look at me as he said "It isn't personal. I don't like women. I can't be married to you anymore."

"He told me to leave, go home to my parents. I did. Ten months later the marriage was legally annulled. I stood before a judge and swore to tell the truth. I said it was because I wanted children and Tom didn't. That was a lie. I couldn't say Tom was gay."

"What do you want me to do?" Father Mike asked.

"Tell her."

We talked a bit more. Father Mike tried to comfort me by saying I had done the right thing. I wanted go home and not think about this ever again.

As he walked me to the door and helped me with my coat, Father Mike promised to take care of things. I unlocked my car and looked back at the rectory. He stood on the porch watching me. I couldn't see his face, only his outline against the light. He stayed there until I turned onto the street. Gripping the steering wheel and watching the road through tears, I prayed I had done the right thing.

Father Mike told Christine on Friday night. She confronted Tom on Saturday morning and broke off the engagement. I heard Tom had been in a rage. Drinking, screaming at his parents, swearing at his brother. He threatened to ruin me as I had ruined him.

Tuesday morning I stood in the kitchen looking out the window above the sink, grateful for the first sunny day in weeks. I finished my first cup of coffee. Reaching for the pot I poured another as the wall phone rang. Picking up the receiver I answered, "Hello."

There was no response. "Who is this?"

"Sheila, I'm so sorry to be the one to call." My older brother Shawn spoke in a voice so quiet I almost didn't recognize him. "Tom is dead. He hung himself."

Rags! Rags!

Barbara Miller, Austin TX

Jackie Newman Writing Circle, Austin TX

“Rags! Rags!” The quiet of the bright, 1947 August morning was shattered by the loud shouting from down the alley. Mommy warned me often about that alley. “Stay in the yard. The alley is dangerous. The neighbors drive through there too fast and you never know who might be back there.” I got the message. The alley was a scary place.

Our family had only been living with Grandpa John for about ten days in the Midway district of St. Paul, Minnesota. Having moved four times in my seven years of living, I was used to new places. Nonetheless, that gruff, loud voice sent me running from the back yard, up the back stairs, and into the kitchen with tears streaming down my face.

“Somebody is coming!” Mommy put down her big mixing spoon and scooped me up in her arms.

“It’s okay! It’s just the ragman in the alley. Let’s go see him.”

I clung to her skirt as we walked through the backyard, opened the gate and walked into the alley, a narrow road that ran the length of the block behind our house.

“Rags! Rags!” He was right on top of us.

“Hello!” Mommy shouted. “Sorry, Jake. I don’t have anything for you today. Maybe next week.”

The horse looked so skinny and old. I couldn’t see his eyes behind the grimy blinders attached to his head. A big bag hung below his mouth. Straw stuck out from all the edges. Poor animal! He needed a bath. I really couldn’t tell the color of his coat because of all the dirt. He pulled a large ramshackle buckboard. The driver, a very

Jake wore grubby, tattered clothes with a greasy cap pulled down over his forehead.

old and filthy man, sat high above me on the driver’s seat.

“Jake, this is Barbara. She heard you comin’ and didn’t know what to make of all your racket.”

Jake wore grubby, tattered clothes with a greasy cap pulled down over his forehead. He waved his arm in greeting and then used the whip in his right hand to urge the horse to move down the alley.

“Rags! Rags!” receded into the distance accompanied by the *clomp, clomp, clomp* of that tired old horse.

When we got back to the kitchen, Mother poured a cup of cold milk and handed me a couple of just baked cookies. Feeling the safety and warmth of the kitchen, I asked “Who is that man and what does he have in that wagon?”

She began her story by telling me that Jake’s Daddy used to come down the same alley, maybe with the same buckboard, when she was a little girl growing up in this very same house. Her mother, my Grandma Thulin, always kept a box on the back porch. She filled it regularly with things for Jake’s Daddy to haul away. Many times she included fresh baked bread or some meat for Jake’s dinner. Mommy told me that she and her brothers had the job of hauling that box to the alley when they heard “Rags! Rags!” resounding through the neighborhood.

Still puzzled, I asked “What does he have in his cart?”

“He’ll take anything he can sell. Old clothes we no longer wear, old newspapers and books, used furniture, broken appliances like ice boxes and cook stoves, all get piled on his wagon. It’s a big help to us. We get rid of things we no longer use and Jake makes money to feed his family. It saves us a trip to the dump.”

“Rags! Rags!” The next time I heard that cry I ran to the back fence and waved to Jake who quickly became a fixture in my Minnesota summers.

Memoir

Nancilynn Saylor, Austin TX

w-e-circles 2, 3, 4, and 6

My youth was spent
on “foolish things”...
like poetry and
song.

I spent much of my
young motherhood
keeping little boys
from harm.

Then in marched
middle ages:
saving for a
rainy day.

Now I’m
a senior citizen;
with how long
left to play?

The boys
are grown,
the music lives,
and poetry
ebbs on.

My soul’s
portrait:
brief Earthly moments
spent
in eternity’s
song.

Divorce

Jane Parsons, Austin TX

Jackie Newman Writing Circle, Austin TX

Co-existing within me are two selves,
desperate and disparate.
They disagree;
They barely speak the same language.
One is reasonable, accepting;
The other is frightened, unwieldy.
My body serves two different masters.
First one and then the other is in control
The transitions back and forth between them
Tear my self apart.
Bleeding, confused, I seek
Something to which I can cling
All the while, an undertow of tears
erodes my moorings.

The Gifts of Loss

Judy M. Miller, Zionsville IN

My mom used to remind me that *every* cloud has a silver lining. Yeah, I heard her, but it lodged somewhere in my subconscious, along with the many, many other colloquialisms and Yiddish expressions she was so fond of lovingly imparting to me.

I knew before I was told. A woman always knows; this innate knowledge is part of who she is. My worst fears were confirmed on a Friday, with an exclamation point.

I'd lain on the exam table, expectant and excited as the technician prepped me for the ultrasound. Cool jelly was smeared onto my skin, warming to my own body heat as she moved the wand over my abdomen. My breathing slowed as I waited to hear confirmation.

"There's no heartbeat."

A black chasm exploded open, and my dreams went rocketing into that bottomless void along with me. Hyperventilating and shaking I fought back to the surface, slowing my breathing, returning to face what I thought I'd imagined. She was mistaken or inept, perhaps just fresh out of certification. I corrected her in fury, "There's a heartbeat. You just need to look around."

"I'm going to get your doctor. Why don't you sit up?" She vanished. My fear grew into torrential panic as the door closed solidly behind her happy pink scrubs and silent white shoes. Pink and white; my baby girl....

My husband held my hand as silent tears rolled down my cheeks and dripped onto the pale blue paper covering the exam table. His large warm hand softly rubbed my back. I looked at him with difficulty; concern was etched in his forehead. Hazel eyes held my brown ones, pleading with me to remain calm and present, patient for an explanation. We were silent.

The pale blue walls held pictures of smiling mothers with soft, delicious smelling newborns, mocking and closing in on me. There was a knock on the door. My doctor entered, followed by a nurse. I'd been forced to open my soul to this man in order to find some help in conceiving again. I had fought to trust him. His gentle eyes and quiet voice registered concern.

"Let's have a look."

I lay back down on the now-damp papered exam surface. He recoated my abdomen with ultrasound jelly. Its coolness reminded me that what was happening was real, not something I could escape.

"You took a pregnancy test?"

"I did; several. They were all positive." I willed myself into believing that my doctor would find what the technician had missed.

He moved the wand over my abdomen slowly, pausing every now and then. "I believe you," he said, pulling the stirrups out. He went on, "I want to do a quick exam."

He was exceedingly gentle as he palpated my abdomen. I winced as he went over to the left side.

"You're tender," he commented. "Any pain, vomiting, or bleeding?"

I shook my head. *What was he getting at?*

My doctor turned to the nurse, "Draw a beta. Stat."

Well, I knew what "stat" meant. The chasm reappeared, opening wider, beckoning. I struggled against the pull of falling, fainting. I began to sob and shake.

"Talk to me," he said, as he came over to my side and stood next to my husband. He reached down and took my hand, pulling me into a sitting position.

I began slowly, barely getting the words out between hiccupping snotty sobs. I grew calmer as I shared the joy of discovering I was pregnant, how I'd felt at peace, grounded by the life that grew inside of me. And then I quietly shared something I'd never uttered, not even to my husband, out of fear it would come true: how I had felt a change in my body several days prior. I'd sensed a lack of progression, but ignored it, chalking it up to fear related to all of what I had been through to get pregnant: batteries of tests, fertility drugs, and procedures.

"Do you think I'm crazy?"

"No. I always listen to women. They know things I can't. Let's wait for the test."

"What do you think?" I asked him.

He still held my hand and he continued to watch me as he spoke, "I think you might have an ectopic pregnancy." And he went on to explain just what that meant.

My husband and I wanted to go home, spend time to come to terms with the news, however that was not to be. I was immediately prepped for surgery because I was at critical risk for hemorrhaging. The IV went in on the fifth try. I drifted off, with my husband by my side fighting his tears back and the concerned expression of my physician.

Groggy, I avoided waking up, irritating one of the nurses. I drifted in and out for some time: surfacing, understanding I had lost my child, and quickly retreating back into the deep.

It was my husband's voice that eventually pulled me to the surface and kept me there, "Babe, wake up. I need you. We need you." Finally alert, I opened my eyes and looked at the man I promised to love through anything and everything.

He looked spent. I felt as though I had committed the worst imaginable act because I had lost our baby. My sorrow for him piled up on top of the baby-loss grief that threatened to suffocate me. I had let him down. Us down.

I apologized to him. He smiled tenderly. Kissing me, he said, "I have you. I thought I was going to lose you."

"But, the baby..."

"We'll have another child. How can we not?"

~

I sometimes reflect on the profound loss I've experienced. There is no anger, only fading sadness and the occasional pain of her loss. I feel humbled by the knowledge that there was a bigger plan. My baby was the cloud, and her loss the greatest silver lining, ushering forth three of life's most sacred gifts.

Lucky Dog

Sallie Moffit, Ovilla TX

I didn't want another dog. I had recently put my beloved pet of twelve years to sleep, and I wasn't ready for a new one. But my husband liked her. He named her Franny, after his cherished grandmother, Frances. A friend told me that when a dog chooses to live at your house, it means the dog will bring you good luck.

The day she wandered into our yard, all I could see the German shepherd bringing us was misery. Her rib bones poked through her pale black fur. Her teats hung down under her belly, flabby from being over-nursed and underfed.

Someone had abandoned the year-and-a-half old pup in the thick woods of red oaks, hackberries, and mountain cedars near my home. It happens quite often, and I usually call animal control to pick up the stray. But this dog was different, she had been abused.

The cream-colored canine kept her bushy tail tucked firmly between her legs. Fear and distrust were visible in her brown almond-shaped eyes. One day I got her into a dog carrier and tried to pet her. She lowered her head and acted like an invisible whip was beating her. As the gentle dog trembled from my touch, I began to cry. Her wounded soul crumbled the wall guarding my heart, so I decided to give her a chance.

*I had recently put my beloved pet
of twelve years to sleep...*

However, when I came near her, she ran. When I fed her, she cowered behind a stack of firewood and wouldn't come out until I left. When I grabbed a leash off the hook on the back porch, she darted away, hiding in the shrubbery lining the embankment to the creek behind our house. Eventually she'd slink back into the yard after I had gone inside.

The shallow creek behind our house has a limestone bottom that allows many animals, such as coyotes and bobcats, to travel up and down it. Sometimes they venture into our yard. Franny surprised many of them with her deep bark and natural instinct to protect her boundaries. She chased them out of the yard and back into the creek. The smart dog seemed to enjoy patrolling the woods around our house, trotting through the yard with her tail wagging, head held high, tongue hanging out of the side of her mouth. By keeping the wild animals out of our yard, she provided a safe haven for our two cats.

Before long, the curious and playful dog had made remarkable progress. She learned to fetch balls, go for walks, and eat while I was still outside.

Late one summer afternoon I was in the kitchen preparing dinner when I heard Franny bark. I glanced out the kitchen

window and saw her in the back part of the yard. She appeared to have cornered a raccoon or possum and was barking at it.

I marched outside to rescue the scared animal. I scoured the dense mass of gray dogwood and prairie sumac, but I didn't see anything. Franny continued to bark and growl, her black wedge-shaped muzzle sniffing the air. Suddenly, she turned and bolted across the yard, her pointed ears lying flat against her head as her long graceful legs galloped toward the front of the house. I hurried after her. When I passed the corner of the house, I saw Franny charging across the yard, nipping the heels of a man in a red shirt. The man sprinted through the grass trying to outrun the scissor-like jaws of my dog. He appeared to be searching for a break in the vegetation so he could escape into the creek.

I screamed for him to stop. He ignored me, so I yelled again. Franny came to my side, barking fiercely. The man stopped, his short brown hair plastered to his red, sweaty face.

While he gasped for air, he explained that he was lost and trying to get down to the creek so he could cross over to a subdivision on the other side. I told him that he was on private property and that he was trespassing. I demanded he get off my property and pointed to the road. My loyal Shepherd

moved closer to me and growled, baring her teeth.

The man looked around. His options were limited by the thick shrubbery growing near the creek. He had two choices: he could go to the road or go through me and Franny.

I pointed to the chipped-rock lane. "Get off my property now!"

Franny leaned forward, her bushy tail straight behind her, and snarled.

The intruder chose the road.

Once he reached the one lane street, he started running. Within seconds, a police car sped past us and stopped. The officer jumped out with a rifle in his hands and ordered the man to get down on the ground. Franny and I watched while the officer handcuffed and arrested the man in the red shirt.

Later, I discovered the man had broken into a house down the road from me. The homeowner had called the police, and the officer was in pursuit of the suspect until he disappeared.

Someone asked me if I was scared when I confronted the criminal on my property. After thinking about it for a moment, I said no. I had Franny by my side. And then I realized that even an abused stray can become lucky—with a little love.



Panties

Lucy Painter, Sarasota FL
w-ecircle 8

I hefted the large Nordstrom shopping bag onto the counter to see if it contained any items usable for our agency's charity shop for young mothers. Hoping to find gently used, high quality clothes, I was disappointed.

Reaching into the bag, I pulled up what looked like stockings, only these were not the kind the little old ladies in my mother's bridge group wore. No, these were thigh-high fishnet, some black, some hot pink. OK, so maybe these were just thrown on top, and the good stuff lay underneath.

Digging deeper, I came up with a handful of little black lacy things which, upon holding up to the light, I realized were tiny bras and thongs designed to cover... well, nothing. Now intrigued, I continued to rummage through the satins and silks to find tiny teddies, filmy gowns, and diaphanous jackets, many in leopard print or scarlet red. *Who wears this stuff?* I wondered. I held the sheer lingerie up to my body and realized at one time I did. A very long time ago.

Standing amid the pile of filmy underthings, I thought about what panties I had put on this morning: cotton, of course, for the heat of Florida and big enough to cover more than the essentials. Nothing was more uncomfortable at my 60+ years of age than underwear which gathered in places it should not. How long had I been this way? Am I the same woman who once wore these teddies and thongs?

As females, we can chart our lives by what we wear under our clothes. For little girls, it is white cotton vests under our shirts and flowered cotton panties we are told to hide from boys who may want to look under our skirts, for reasons we don't understand. By the time we do understand, we have changed those white undershirts to lacy bras, preferably from Victoria's Secret, and those flowery briefs to satin bikinis, hipsters, and boy shorts. Now who's looking?

As females, we can chart our lives by what we wear under our clothes.

We feel sexy, powerful, our lean bodies lush with hormones and power. Teddies and thigh high stockings fill our dresser drawers, slide easily against our young bodies. Under our tight jeans and pencil skirts we wear thongs to prevent what ads tell us is that "unsightly panty line." Also, we love the feel of fabric against our bare skin, the way it moves as we do.

Then come the babies. Out go the bikinis, unless we wear them because they are the only panties which will fit under our bellies. We have so much laundry to do, so many baby clothes and blankets and bibs and crib sheets, that the idea of having to hand wash any filmy lingerie makes us only more tired. Our delicate bras give way to solid, substantial nursing bras, strong enough to carry our heavy milky breasts. The tight jeans and pencil skirts hang in the back of the closet, but we know one day we will wear them again.

And we do. Maybe not as tight as we once did, but as our children leave home for their own lives, we once again pull out those lacy bras, those thongs, and rejoice in our womanhood. We do not want to go back to those sturdy cotton briefs our mothers wore, the ones like those I saw hanging from my grandmother's clothesline. I was once sent to my room for two hours when I asked my mother if those things hanging on Grandma's line were flags of some country we had yet to study in second grade.

Not for us those flags. The panties under my shorts today are purple hipsters to match the purple and pink bra I bought at a local boutique. Tomorrow they will be black to go under the leggings I plan to wear. Our bras may be sturdier to compensate for gravity, but they are once again lacy and bright.

As I find a place among our shelves for these sexy things, I wonder what the woman who gave them to us named her baby. And if she will ever come and want them back?

The Driven Ride

Diane Stanton, Warrenton VA
w-ecircle 4, r-ecircle 1

It begins with the alarm clock buzzing. This signals the start to the day. Grab a fast shower, and then off for a driven drive to work in the rain. Spend the workday hours perpetually planning and determinedly disseminating procedures purported to do more than simply sustain. Head home to: care for the kids and the pets, make dinner, do laundry, and clean up the mess. Then, just do it all over again.

Just watch the sun set.

Rock back in worn wooden chairs,

Smile, join hands, and be.



Invisible

Lucy Painter, Sarasota FL
w-ecircle 8

I met her one summer day on East Bay Street in Charleston. Trying to catch a breeze, I stopped to rest in the shade of elegant pastel homes known as Rainbow Row where tourists gather to take pictures. A few yards away I saw an old lady standing on the same shady sidewalk. She peered into the faces of the passing tourists as if expecting to see someone she knew. Her dark eyes scanned the crowd and settled on me.

“Hello,” I asked. “Are you looking for someone? Are you lost?”

She was tiny, her head barely reaching my shoulders. She wore black, even on this stifling day: a long-sleeved blouse tucked into a calf-length skirt, black stockings in sensible black shoes. Even her cane was black.

“Dear,” she whispered to me, “Could you be so kind as to take me home? I walked to the Rexall on the corner, but now I’m too tired to walk any further. And you look like a sweet girl.”

My mind raced with scenarios: I would get stuck on the bridge at rush hour, I would be late for exercise class at 5:30, the meat I left to thaw would spoil. Instead I said, “Of course. Stay here and I’ll come back for you with the car.”

She was waiting for me by the curb. I lifted her bird-like frame into the front seat and buckled her in. She smelled of lavender and sage, an old-fashioned fragrance I remember my grandmother wearing on warm summer days.

Turning to smile at me, my passenger began to direct me through the crowded streets of Charleston.

“Turn left on Market and then right on King. You know, where the old farmers market used to be? Next to Mr. Morris’s furniture store before it burned down in ‘47. Remember?”

No, I did not remember. I had not been born in 1947 and the only Charleston I knew was the city of elegant restaurants and horse-drawn carriages and yuppie-filled condos overlooking the harbor. My husband and I had come here recently, drawn by the city’s beauty and charm. We loved the cobblestone streets flanked by majestic homes where residents relaxed on piazzas stretched out over small gardens, green and cool even in sticky summers. Leaving *Magnolia’s*, our favorite restaurant, we wandered the gas-lit streets of old downtown neighborhoods, enjoying the play of moonlight on stained glass windows and weathered cypress doors. Carriage wheels and horses’ hooves sang on old brick streets past mansions and stately government buildings south of Broad, or “SOB” to native Charlestonians.

After several turns up and down streets, she took me to a neighborhood I had never seen. It lay on the outskirts, far from downtown.

“Most of the people who used to live here,” she explained, “came from upstate around Spartanburg and Columbia. It got mighty hot up there in summer. Too far away from the water,

and lots of good folks got sick with malaria so they came down here. A lot of ‘em liked it, and just stayed on. Good people, they were.”

Broken-down bungalows lined a wide street, old oaks arched into a canopy overhead, and large yards stretched out from empty sagging porches. Rusted mailboxes tilted by the sidewalk, many without doors. A large black dog, the only sign of life, skulked into an alley

The air was cooler, the sun blocked by the oak ceiling overhead. But there was no beauty here, not now, in spite of the trees. Paint peeled from houses, their colors no longer identifiable. Dirt and weeds filled the yards. Plastic grocery bags, beer cans, and smashed toys piled up against gap-toothed fences. Shutters hung at odd angles from windows. Against broken azalea bushes rested old cars, many without doors or tires. Loud music blasted from windows, something heavy and percussive.

She spoke for the first time since we had turned onto her street. “This was once a lovely neighborhood. I came here with Herbert in 1940, right before the war. We knew all of our neighbors, but they’re dead now. And my friend Ethel went some kind of crazy after her Bob died. Thought she was Jesus and kept trying to heal people, so her children put her away up in Columbia. My sons come down once in a while, but they’re both busy, got their own families, their own worries too, I’m sure. Learned to ride their bikes in that park over there.”

She pointed to a weed-strewn lot where several men sat on a picnic table, drinking from bottles in paper bags.

“But it’s different now,” she sighed. “My children want me to come live with them up North, but... that’s my house on the left, the blue one.”

The one-story house sat dignified in its grassy yard. Beds of white daisies lined the sidewalk leading to a small porch and front door flanked by pots of red geraniums. A fat yellow cat sunned itself in the front window, perking its ears at the sound of my car.

“That’s Ginger. He’s my watch cat, sweet as honey and just about as smart,” she said.

I pulled to the curb. Gone were my worries about spoiled meat or missed exercise class. Here, only a few miles from my home, in the city we shared, this sweet widow lay rotting in secret, unseen by hordes of tourists and uncared for by indifferent neighbors. How many others were there? How many in other parts of the city like her, left to decay in the dark?

“Thank you, dear,” she smiled at me. I lifted her tiny body from the car. “You’ve been my angel today.”

She unlocked her door and entered the little house, protected only by her Ginger and her memories.

Here, only a few miles from my home, in the city we shared, this sweet widow lay rotting in secret, unseen... and uncared for by indifferent neighbors.

Tripping Around John's Barn

Judy Watters, Spring Branch TX

Mom is 92 years young. I really love my mom, but sometimes her thought process makes me want to tear out my hair. Oh, don't get me wrong. Mom is definitely in charge of all her mental faculties. She can remember everything in her youth, all the birthdays of her relatives, and even what kind of bagel she had for breakfast. However, sometimes discussing everyday matters will take the two of us around John's barn.

John's barn? "Who's John?" you ask. Going around John's barn is an expression I remember Mom using from the time I was very young. And no one knows John; it just means going in circles in our conversations. Let me give you a "for example."

For many years, Mom and I have quilted together making blankets for children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. Five years ago, Mom's arthritic hands stopped holding a needle altogether, so she continued to sew blankets by osmosis—meaning, I cut the pieces out; I sewed the pieces together; I put binding on the blanket; Mom presented the blanket to a loved one. Recently, my fingers also have given into arthritis.

"Mom," I said one day, "a friend of mine told me about the Quilt House. You take a two-hour class for \$35.00 and then you can use their quilting machine to finish out the blanket for just \$15.00 an hour. That would be so much easier on my hands. What do you think?"

Being the frugal lady that she has always been, Mom said, "Then you have to add the cost of batting."

"Well, that's right, Mom," I said. "You take in the finished top and the backing, along with the batting to go in between. Or you can purchase the batting at their shop."

"That's what I thought," Mom said with a *humph*. "You have to buy the batting from them."

I tried again. "No, Mom, you can bring your own batting if you prefer."

"But you still have to buy the batting," she insisted.

"Mom, we always have to buy batting for the filler. We would have to buy it even if we didn't use the machine at the Quilt House."

"And there you have it."

"Have what?" I asked.

"You have to buy the batting," Mom said without missing a beat.



It was at this point that I wondered what color John had painted his barn this year. I remember in my youth making countless trips around his barn with Mom. I thought I should try one more time. "Mom, walk through this with me. You and I cut out small pieces and then sew them together to form a blanket top, right?"

"Yes," she agreed.

"Then we find backing from all your fabric, and we match the two pieces up then slide the batting in between for a fluffy blanket, right?"

"Right." She was still marching in time with me.

"Where do we usually get that batting?"

"WalMart." Still with me.

"Mom, the only difference in going to the Quilt House is that they have a huge machine to run the layers through to be quilted."

"And we have to buy the batting," Mom reminded me.

My sister, Virginia, walked in at that time and immediately recognized that look on my face. She knew that Mom and I just had another glorious trip around John's barn.

But that's not the end of this story. As I drove home that day, I reflected back on John's barn. Having grown up on a farm in Pennsylvania, I think of a barn with a nostalgic sense of well-being, of home. It's a warm feeling of security. My mother gives me this same "safe and sound" down-home blessing every time I am in her presence. She has given me years of unconditional love and unremitting joy.

I look forward to experiencing many more delightful trips around John's barn with my precious mom.

Antidotes

Ruth Crowley, Folsom CA

It hurts enough to consider drugs
or the Macallan single malt you've had for ten years now,
bought on a whim to celebrate not getting younger, or even
your razor (but no, it's dull from shaving your legs
and the pills on your sweaters). You sob
in the shower. You could move to Alaska, start over
with a blue eyed husky and a barkeep job,
listen to the same stories from different lips
until you thaw, toss Jim Beam
into someone's face, and come back home.
Someday you'll sit on your porch swing again
with a glass of Amador County wine and let the cats
twine around your ankles and Willie Nelson
will be just a singer.

Paul's Tree

Madeline Sharples, Manhattan Beach CA

It has to be a climbing tree, I say
to replace the one
he used to climb as a boy,
to remind me of him
sitting in the wide Vee
of the upper branches
smiling and proud
of his climbing success.
I settle on a small coral tree
that promises pinky-orange blooms
and strong branches for climbing and sitting
and place it in its designated spot
exactly one year after his death.
In the thirteen years since,
Paul's tree has produced
dark green leaves—
the coral flowers are few—
and branches that shoot out
wide and tall from its
four ever-thickening trunks.
When it gets its yearly trim.
I cry, don't take too much away,
but the hackers always do.
Except they can't fix its damage.
The driveway cracked and
last week the plumbers
dug a hole as deep as a grave
that butted against it,
chopping away its roots
to take out a broken pipe.
They shake their heads and say,
It has to go or your troubles will never stop.
I shake my head no.
But I know it's grown too large.
Its roots undermine and its thick
and full branches let no sun shine through.
The day will have to come to replace it
with some red-blooming wispy thing,
and a single miniature trunk that will do
no boy who likes to climb any good.

Summer in the City: a Prose Poem

Carol Ziel, St. Louis MO
ziel.carol@gmail.com, facilitator of w-ecircle 6

*One by one they leap over the curb, knock on the door,
and leave with pockets full of promises.*

Sunflowers stand sentinel at the garden gate. Butterfly bushes bend in benediction to the city's soul while bullets scatter before yarrow. Lilies loiter among purple spikes of salvia. Their fragrances perfume the evening mist. Even this enchantment does not distract the drug dealer in the corner house. Or the customers in the white Chevy van, the beaten up Buick, the black Corolla. One by one they leap over the curb, knock on the door, and leave with pockets full of promises. Cocky young males strut as they pass the lavender stonecrops. Their buttocks rise like half moons above loosely belted pants. They grasp crumpled paper bags full of their own promises: Coors or Jim Bean or Mogen David being the magicians of choice. This city block is a tiny kingdom where nature spirits rub elbows with grain spirits, each vying for sovereignty.

I sit on the porch, queen of my small paradise, watching the seam where night and day are joined. My lap is filled with herbs for planting as I wait for the Light. Maybe this time basil, rosemary, and tarragon will conjure up salvation as night conjures up day one more time.



My Daughter's Baby

Jane Parsons, Austin TX
Jackie Newmam Writing Circle, Austin TX

As my fourteen-year-old daughter sits on a chair in our back yard practicing the French horn, I notice that her beloved baby possum is at home upon her shoulder. As is his custom, the tiny possum is using all four hands to steady himself on his lofty perch. He lifts his overly large head to sniff the morning air and contentedly peers into his world through inquisitive, bright eyes.

What a gift this baby possum is to her—so responsive, so affectionate—despite his genetic wildness! An orphan, thwarted by his blood mother's absence, he is compelled to seek the warmth of maternal closeness. Through his

attention and touch he is training his adopted mother to treasure their unlikely intimacy.

In response to the silky face he presses against her cheek, my daughter stops practicing her horn and silently studies her small charge. In disbelief she watches her baby possum lean forward, neck extended, and slowly, carefully, place his sensitive, pale pink nose into the silver mouthpiece. A proud, radiant smile forms upon my daughter's lips as she muses in the way of all mothers and whispers,

“He wants to be just like me!”

I feel truly blessed as I witness this heart-warming relationship within our family. As time passes, I continue to watch in awe as my daughter and her newly adopted baby share the affection and gentleness of this exquisite bonding between a young human and a young mammal, each rejoicing in the other's friendship and touch.

It is now many years since I was privileged to observe this remarkable adventure our family shared. Even today, when I sit quietly and close my eyes, I, too, feel our baby possum's touch and a gentle warmth fills my heart.

Finding My Soul Stride

Vickie Spray, Crawfordville FL
vickiespray@yourlifeexpressions.com

About six months before I quit my job—while I was in the last stages of clinging to security, insurance, and a future IRA—I paid sixty dollars to a psychic who conducts group and individual sessions. I had never been to a psychic, but a woman I met announced that this psychic was making his services available for a group reading. I was desperate. My whole being was yearning for another way to live, to make a living by being in service, and to find my “purpose.” I wanted to know my Dharma. I needed something concrete, proof that I could forge a higher way of life and by doing so, others would benefit from my courage and choices. I was awakening and I knew it.

The psychic gave each of us a free fifteen minute public reading. Nothing spoke from the skies to clearly announce my path like, *Quit your job, and do blah, blah, blah*. At the end of the session, the psychic announced that he was going to do a drawing for a full individual reading and put all our names in a large glass jar. I wanted that free one-hundred-fifty-dollar reading!

At this point all of my answers were coming from outside of me so this reading meant everything. But sitting in the living room with the other participants, I felt something move within me (I have never been pregnant but I swear I felt something stir inside me.) Then I heard from within, *Let whoever needs it the most get the drawing*. I settled into that thought, releasing my desperation for the reading and allowing the outcome to benefit the person who needed it most.

He pulled my name.

A month later I received my reading. These words were the most important thing I heard the psychic say: “It doesn’t have to be hard.” Yet I found the words preposterous. Of course it has to be hard! You cannot get anywhere without struggle and hardship. The more hardship you overcome, the better the prize. One must be bloodied like *Rocky*. One must lament like *Old Man and the Sea*. The hill is tall and stretches upwards forever but *The Little Engine that Could* can, and kept a smile on its cartoon face the whole time. I had prided myself on my ability to overcome great obstacles, yet finally came to understand that I had developed a habit of creating obstacles to overcome, so that I could pride myself in how well I could overcome hardship, which fueled my strength to overcome what I had put

in front of myself to overcome. It was a wearisome way to live. Now I could see the pattern clearly.

My culture of adults pinned emotional medals of Honor onto the shoulders of those who had overcome hardship. I received a medal early on known as “Strong One” because I carried the responsibility for my brothers in an insane household. I would feel strong in the overcoming of hard times, hard situations, and hard circumstances. I was a survivor. I was a victim that had moved beyond her victimization but carried the medal of “One Who Overcomes.” No wonder I was so tired.

As I continued the journey to discover my purpose, quitting my job and making what money I could with healing and writing workshops, I again heard the psychic’s words, *It doesn’t have to be hard*, whenever I felt like I was pushing a boulder up a mountain. These words did not save me from going through hard times, but they did spare me from creating situations that were overwhelmingly difficult, and they stopped me short when I wanted to complain that the spiritual journey was too hard. I could not allow it to become too overwhelming because that would send me scurrying back to my nine-to-five that I knew would smother me into servitude again. My new life *had* to work and I *had* to find a way to make it work.

It took a year to glean two essential truths to bring my soul forward into my new life. One was what the psychic gave me: *this journey does not have to be difficult*. And the other, strange as it sounds, I received by watching my dog try to determine a noise she heard by using her nose, an amazing epiphany that has changed my life and helped many of my clients find their way to their own higher reason for living. The truth I gained from watching my dog lift her nose was that my life is to be lived by my Spirit in the same way my dog uses her nose to decipher her experience. I continue to deepen this epiphany on a daily basis.

These became foundational truths and were the beginning steps in a journey to heal my long-held and distorted beliefs that stood between me and my new way of life. In these two truths I experienced a feeling of being helped in my journey of discovery by the medium and then by my own spirit. I became certain that I was being assisted by something much bigger than me.

“It doesn’t have to be hard.”



Corn Silk

Nancy Jurka, Palmer Lake CO
w-ecircle 3

My grandmother Cora picks firm pea pods
and dangling green beans that stretch to the cool black earth.
She sails up and down the aisle of corn stalks
picking, husking, picking, husking.
Sunflowers hover to shade her bent
shoulders with their golden faces.
My sister and I sit on the white rail fence
with our sweaty brown pigtailed wondering
if her hair was ever long, ever blonde enough to be corn silk.
We wear faded dish towels tied around our necks,
threadbare drapes of checkered blue and white.
The dinner table bulges with mismatched Pyrex bowls
holding tomatoes, sweet corn and tender beans.
Glass pitchers of ice tea with floating lemon circles
glimmer in the marmalade-colored dusk.
Sweet cream butter melts into crevices of sun-yellow kernels,
baking powder biscuits crumble
onto Cora's summer-stained tablecloth.

My grandfather nonchalantly whacks a blood-swollen mosquito
on his arm;
he does not miss.
Grandmother does not have many summers
left to eat tomatoes or butter her husband's biscuits.
She serves slices of rich pound cake smothered
in strawberries frosted with sugar.
My sister and I take one more swing
on this hazy night before the full moon comes.
We giggle until stars blink between oak branches.
Crickets fiddle and fireflies dance among
the blueberry bushes and Queen Anne's lace.
Cora sighs, hating to see August leave.
My grandfather takes her hand, and brushes
a single tassel of corn silk off her shoulder.



Bad News from Susan

Judith Helburn, Austin TX
Facilitator of Writing Our Stories Circle, Austin TX

The phone rings. I'm in the kitchen cleaning up after dinner. The leftover meatloaf sits in its glass loaf pan ready to be stored—half into the freezer for another meal and half into the fridge for a couple of lunches.

My husband, Beber, has already washed the dishes. He will not rinse and place them in the dishwasher unless I specifically ask, and, as he is conscientious about washing, I keep my mouth shut. I, however, must follow his tracks and wipe down the counters and sink, cleaning up crumbs, spots, and lettuce bits invisible to him.

I cross the kitchen from the sink to the wall phone, reaching across the table. On the other end, Susan calling from Minnesota says, "I finally have a diagnosis." My heart drops like a stone through my body hitting the floor with a thump. I know this is not good news. "I've been to Mayo," she says. "I have Neurological Cortical Degeneration. It will only get worse."

*My heart drops like a stone through my
body hitting the floor with a thump.*

The tears roll down my face. I can taste the salt as they course to my chin and keep going. I say, "We will still get together every six months—and when you cannot travel, we will come to you."

We are both crying now. She says, "In the end, I will not even be able to move. My mind will be gone."

Through my tears I say, "We will wipe your face. We will hold you close. We will read our favorite poems to you. We will even sing to you—and you will not be able to protest our off-key voices." A small chuckle comes through the line. I wipe my face with my sleeve. The tissues are just out of reach. After I assure her that I will call select other friends, we end the conversation.

Naturally, I go to the computer to research this disease, which I find out is like Parkinson's but worse. I shudder at the average life expectancy, but knowing Susan, I know that she has never, ever been average in anything.

Parallel Play

Susan Keizer, Davis CA
www.susankeizer.com

It had snowed the night before I arrived in Peterborough, New Hampshire, at the end of May, 1986. This late spring event did nothing to discourage the early daffodils from poking their heads above the rapidly melting snow, continuing unabated what had begun underground. I was there to begin a six week residency as a Fellow at the MacDowell Colony. The composer, Edward McDowell, and his wife had envisioned a retreat providing artists with privacy to work uninterrupted, a vision realized on the splendid piece of property they donated, four hundred and twenty wooded acres on the edge of Peterborough, a town of six thousand residents.

Nestled in the woods are some two dozen studios, each with their own particular name and style, accommodating visual artists, photographers, sculptors, composers, and writers. There were twenty-four of us in residence at that time, each for various durations, each assigned an individual studio located out of sight and sound of the others to ensure privacy and lack of unwanted intrusion. I was assigned Adams, a two story live-in studio set back in the woods. A ten minute walk along a path threading through the undergrowth, surrounded on both sides by hardwood forest and past a tucked away piano studio, led to Colony Hall, the main building where we gathered for breakfast and dinner. Lunch baskets were placed on our studio doorsteps everyday at noon. The majority of residents worked in their studios during the day and slept in a dormitory adjacent to Colony Hall at night. In contrast, Adams Studio, with its upstairs bedroom, provided me with complete privacy.

Becoming a Fellow is a very competitive process and I was thrilled to be accepted. My initial excitement and gratitude soon gave way to an overwhelming anxiety at the reality of my isolation. The first few days found me dissolving into tears after dinner as I stumbled down the path returning to what all of a sudden felt like four walls of confinement. The second day into this state of panic, I asked the woman sitting next to me on the couch after dinner, "Is it pretty typical to find adjusting to being here a bit difficult at first?"

She paused, not turning her head from the newspaper she was reading and said, "There are a lot of tears shed here." And why not? We were surrounded by ghosts the likes of Thornton Wilder, who wrote *Our Town*, based on the town of Peterborough, Leonard Bernstein who finished his *Mass* while in residence, and Milton Avery, whose favorite studio I was

occupying. Being in the company of such greats was, in itself, reason to be paralyzed.

I took many photographs during my stay but there is one in particular that reminds me of the connection between my work and what was happening around me. The photo is taken from inside the studio, looking through a floor to ceiling window directly onto an enclosed tiny meadow surrounded by brush and trees, their branches hanging low, heavy with new growth. The light coming in the window shifted as the day progressed, reminding me of the cyclical nature of things and what ultimately seemed to insist on threading a connection to my developing work. I had brought with me some free floating, ill-defined imagery I was interested in working on, a cocoon-like image that began finding its way into what ultimately became a series of large scale, mixed media works on paper.

Starting the process is never easy. I inched towards the ritual of preparation, honed to a fine art over many years. After cleaning the studio, I began laying out my paints, my brushes and drawing materials on a long table, everything lined up just so. I stapled two large pieces of heavy rag paper on the wall, their blank surfaces challenging me to make the first mark. It was a struggle to bring to paper the illusive imagery that had been teasing me. Then the first slash of charcoal broke the silence of the surface and the work began. And any preconceived notions disappeared as line and brush strokes took on their own life. What had begun as an exercise in order and calm, gave way inevitably to a chaotic attempt to find meaning and resolution to the puzzles I was creating.

Occasionally there are moments that shift one's perspective, that inform us in ways not imagined. At the beginning of my stay, by chance I noticed a slowly developing sac of tent caterpillars on one of the overhanging branches outside my window. The synchronicity of my imagery and this coincidental event was remarkable. As the weeks progressed and my work along with it, the developing colony of tent caterpillars seemed to have dialed into the same schedule. By the end of my stay, my body of work was completed. The daffodils, who had struggled to keep their heads above the snow, had finished their cycle and my companions, the caterpillars, had done their damage and were ready to move on. I had found resolution in this place where nature was playing out its own cycle as well.

Occasionally there are moments that shift one's perspective, that inform us in ways not imagined.



Shadows Left Behind

Khadijah Lacina, Kansas City MO

Facilitator w-ecircle 3 & r-ecircle 1, member of w-ecircles 4, 10 & 14
<http://www.yemenijourney.com> and <http://www.wideearth.us>

The lid of the old plastic storage tub is difficult to pry off. A decade in storage has warped the plastic, wrapping it tighter around its burden of memories. A tug, a twist, and it pulls free.

Saudi white musk. I remember a nine year old Mujaahid, his face wreathed in smiles the first time a brother gifted him with a tiny vial of this precious fragrance. From then on it was his favorite, used sparingly to make it last. As I breathe in the essence of a child lost, I know this container must be Mujaahid's. Sad, but curious as to those things he felt were important enough to store before our journey to Yemen over ten years ago.

A Hot Wheel delivery truck, with "Cheetos" across the side, worn from years of small fingers holding it, just there, as a little boy raced it across his sleeping grandfather's back. A plane, a small purple VW Bug that was always "Umami's car." A notebook, written by a five year old boy.

"My little sister climbed the steps today."

"We went to Aunt Shaakira's and ate popcorn and macaroni and cheese."

And later, in the voice of a nine year old, a talk he'd written and given at an Islamic conference, and names for bows he would like to sell:

"Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqas Bow for Boys"

"Nusaybah Bow for Girls"

And rules and reminders for his first bowhunting season.

At the bottom, a scrapbook. I open it and see Morning Glories. A book of photos of my sister Patty's little house and studio in the woods, with her careful descriptions written years ago. Her voice, now stilled, comes to life again as I turn the pages and remember.

"This is the door to my studio. I can sit here and watch the birds for hours."

"This is our swing, covered in snow. Of course, we don't use it when it is like this."

"These are Morning Glories. I love how they close their eyes and sleep at night, and wake up and greet the sun in the morning."

Patty never had children, but she loved me and mine with a sweet and deep love that we never had cause to doubt.

A week of memories, of tears and reminders of a past almost forgotten in the fullness of each day. A hand painted milk jug and three matching hearts on ribbons, a final gift from my sister that last summer before we parted for good. Books on homesteading and raising goats, and my soap molds made by Patty's husband Sully. Afghans crocheted by my grandmother's hands, quilts I pieced lovingly for my two oldest children, all gone, chewed through and ruined by mice and bad storage conditions.

A week of memories, of tears, and reminders of a past almost forgotten in the fullness of each day

The afghans and quilts thrown away, the Cheetos truck carefully placed aside to send to the man that once lived in that little boy body, a pitcher on a window to remind me to watch the Morning Glories every day they bloom.

Gratitude, sadness, and prayer. A house filled with the shadows of what was, looking forward to whatever may be.

"Then which of the Blessings of your Lord will you deny?" (*The Qur'aan*, from Surah ar-Rahman)

Spent

Khadijah Lacina, Kansas City MO

Facilitator w-ecircle 3 & r-ecircle 1, member w-ecircles 4, 10 & 14
<http://www.yemenijourney.com> and <http://www.wideearth.us>

Do you remember the time we spent watching snowflakes listening to the soft pitter patter of white bloom on a windowpane dark with night?
 "Is it the moon?" you asked, small hand in mine warm curve of sweet honey scented cheek pressed to my chest full to burst with the love of you my sweet.

"Is it the moon falling, mama? Or just the stars?"
 As if it had to be one or the other in a jigsaw universe where everything fit Lego block tight in a pattern painted across the sky.

"Not the moon. Not the stars," I reply,
 Thinking yes the moon, yes the stars,
 yes breath of princesses long ago dead
 slain dragon's blood
 dust shaken off Bedouin feet before entering
 a camel hair tent a world away
 precious drop of water stopped, waiting
 at the end of a date palm frond
 lizard below tongue poised for that moment
 when it drops
 falls, begins its journey to a Wisconsin night
 a thousand years distant
 to land
 spent
 but brought to life anew
 by the dreams
 of one small boy.

So What Else Do You Do?

Pat LaPointe, Prospect Heights IL
Current SCN Board President, Facilitator of w-ecircle 9

I'm sure other writers have heard this after they tell others that they are writers. Or, is it only me?

A typical conversation goes something like this:

You've just met someone at a non-writing related event.

You ask: "What do you do?"

She responds: "I'm a CPA. What do you do?"

You reply: "I'm a writer."

"Oh, what have you published?"

You try not to give out an exasperated sigh. You've been asked this question over and over since you submitted your first piece of writing.

"Well I'm working on a novel right now..."

"Oh, but do you work?"

You think about telling her you've been given a grant or perhaps you have a trust fund but with eyes suddenly focused on your shoes, answer "Yes, I'm a writer."

She, like so many others before, suddenly sees someone she must talk to or needs to refill her drink.

This is not likely the only situation where you've had to defend your passion, your life. Have you ever tried to tell others that you're not available between such and such a time every day? They appear to understand your needs, only to call, stop in, or tell you they can only meet during those times. After all, you're just sitting around at home writing. No big deal.

And some of them just can't take a hint. You hear their car pull into the driveway and hurry to turn out the lights, only to see them peeking in the garage window to see if your car is there. Often they then proceed to press your doorbell for at least a minute or so.

This is when you are truly challenged. Can you live with the guilt of rejecting them in order to pump out that next chapter?

If it's a needy Nancy type, it's easier to just go back to your writing. She's going to call as soon as she leaves, probably several times and leave messages about how miserable she is and really needs to talk.

Oh, but what if you peek through the curtains and see a little person coming up the driveway. This becomes the toughest challenge of all—somebody's here to see Grandma.

The internal battle begins. They won't be little for long. Do you really want to miss some quality time, the opportunity to make memories, just to write something that you have now convinced yourself that you'll probably trash later? Besides, it's your child who is bringing the little lad or lassie. You remember her telling you that you never had enough time for her. It's a chance to make up for it.

And with that you open the door, smile and open your arms to the little one.

You're feeling good, you've done the right thing. This lasts until your child asks you if you can take care of the little one while she goes for her manicure or out to lunch with a friend. The little one has already come from the toy room. "Grandma, can you play this with me?"

After a couple of hours, the time you would have spent writing, the Mom returns and you're exhausted and stiff from sitting on the floor. She looks relaxed, but in a hurry to leave. It's the little one's nap time. You feel like it's Grandma's nap time too.

As they pull down the driveway, you walk over to your laptop and begin to sit down, ready to get back to your work. Instead, you hit "save" and then "shut down." As you walk away from your desk you keep repeating: "I am a writer. I am a writer. It is a real job."

This is not likely the only situation where you've had to defend your passion, your life.

The Water's Edge

Bette Lafferty, Valrico FL · Caroline Villa Writing Circle, Bloomingdale FL

You came into my life
Like waves crashing onto an unsuspecting beach
Washing away the pain of my past.
You propelled me into an unknown world
Filled with laughter, beauty, and the colors of the rainbow
That I had only dreamed of.
The countless hours of silence shared,
Sitting at the water's edge
Molded us together like sand castles.
Our love reflected the brilliance of the dancing waters
Warming our hearts,
Melting the chill of days gone by.
The intimate moments of passion
That carried us through the rough times

Sealed our love for each other.
Our first twenty-five years challenged the joy
Found only in heaven,
Traveling from sea to shining sea.
Then, like a thief in the night,
Death stole you away and the years dim the memories
I try desperately to hold onto.
My only solace is knowing your battle is over,
Your struggle to live has ended,
And that you dwell safely in the presence of the Lord.
So I watch the sun dip slowly below the water's edge
Leaving behind two empty beach chairs
Filled with a lifetime of bliss.

Story Circle Network, Inc.
PO Box 500127
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The Muse

Nancilynn Saylor, Austin TX
w-e-circles 2,3,4,6

I am your muse,
Otare.
You call to me...
when you are confused or
bruised
and disappointed; Otare!

Otare! You sit behind me sometimes;
Smirking, laughing, admonishing me.

We sit together
at the shimmering reflection glass
Sometimes...

I feel you crawling up as if
to bite me on my inner thigh, just to get my attention
In the old worlds perhaps we liked that sort of thing)
why, why, why

You screech so loudly in my ear I'll never know, but
sometimes it leaves me feeling compromised,
and cold

nearly deaf because of it!

Love... Yes, yes!

Love and passion once overwhelmed me.

Sweet passion,
sweeter love,
raucous lust;
I surrendered to it all.

You know...
better than any other,
you know...

In the mirror
you are

me...

Erato.



Textures

Nancilynn Saylor, Austin TX
w-e-circles 2, 3, 4, and 6

Unexpected and amazing cooler weather
caused leaves of the mighty Sycamore
to turn suddenly all orangey...
drifting down unseasonably
to land
on both the Roses and Butterfly bush below.
The trees no doubt,
as pleased by this renegade breath of spring,
in the midst of the scorching summer
as we, mere humans are.
I pick up a large leathery leaf,
tracing my fingers across her veins.
Remembering...
back to other bark from
another tree, my favorite White Birch
when I stood on many northern lake shores
as a young girl.
Stooping to pick up a bit
of this bark from the warm ground
at my sandaled feet
marveling...
it is soft, with a toughness-
not unlike me,
as my Divine Maker reminds me,
I, too, am unfinished...
a work-in-progress.