

TRUE WORDS

from

Real Women

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

January, 2015

Open Hearts Shine In Open Faces

Kathryn V. White, Seattle WA

Open hearts shine in open faces

As I search the corridors of time
for my selves.

All lined up, standing beside
what once were closed doors.

Each one magnificent.
Each one with her own story to tell.

How could I have hidden thee?

When the smiles of your eyes
warm my heart so.



From the [new] editor...

First of all, praise to those who have gone before, and to all who have contributed to this issue of SCN's annual life writing anthology. The book is an important creation, and it takes the SCN village to make it happen.

It's been a privilege and pleasure to edit this collection, which spans a broad arc of women's experience. Here are women as daughters, mothers, friends, caretakers. Women as artists, women bonded with nature, women as cooks and campers and concert pianists. Feminists, spiritual seekers, ranchers, wives. Perhaps most importantly, it reveals women as architects of their own unique lives.

In these stories and poems, our members evoke a spectrum of moments from blissful to excruciating; they find the grace in humor and the strength of conviction; they show us woman as less-than-whatever, and also woman as powerful creator. From girlhood joys and sorrows to the liberation and losses of aging, there is a chronology that women share, though the specifics change. The *2014 True Words from Real Women Anthology* is strong testament to the varied but strongly connected truths of what it means to be a woman.

Though in every way diverse, this group of writers shows us ways that we're alike. There are moments and events here that resonate as the truth of common experience, that are potently familiar. Sometimes contradictory, there are words here to make us laugh and make us cry. It's a collection as complex and mixed as any woman's character.

Space, and less measurable considerations – such as the significance of the topic and the depth of an author's exploration, or the avoidance of duplication, or the beauty of a writer's language and imagery – demanded choosing the best and most apropos from a bounty of fine entries. New voices were balanced with those of more experienced writers. It is the sorrow of such a project that there is never room enough for all that should be included. I am very grateful to all the women who submitted their life writing, knowing that each one sent a piece of her heart along with her true words.

My great appreciation also goes to the previous editor, Mary Jo Doig, who was unfailingly generous and gracious with her help and understanding; to Peggy Moody, SCN's executive director, who was likewise, as always, patient with questions and a terrific resource; to Robin Wittig, our layout designer, whose wonderful skill turns many thousands of words into a beautiful volume despite the vagaries of editors and authors; to my SCN sister-writers, whose support means so much; and of course, great thanks to Susan Wittig Albert, the woman who started it all, and sustains it. My ever-supportive family and friends have my love and appreciation always.

Editing the *2014 True Words from Real Women Anthology* has been a happy and growthful experience. It was a joy to read the writing, and a gift to learn a bit about these women. I hope when you sit down with this collection of work from our members, you will be – as I was – moved, inspired, amused, encouraged, and more. Once again, Story Circle Network is honoring women's stories and changing women's lives, and we are all fortunate to have a share in that good work.

Susan Schoch, 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.

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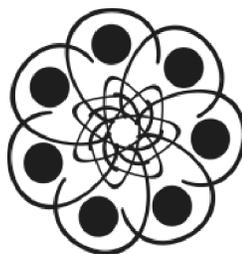
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In This Town You're Still Alive

Linda M. Hasselstrom, Hermosa SD

You'd walk down to this mountain creek,
 followed in parade by Loki the white poodle,
 the black cats Janet and Jacob.
 You'd lean against a tree
 in sunlight, watching as the cats
 pawed sparkling water.
 Someone poisoned the dog;
 the cats vanished.
 We moved away.
 You died.

Today I walked by that water at sunrise.
 Two ducks slid into an eddy.
 I found the tree's stump,
 its heart a dark hollow.
 Leaning there, I watched
 the water sparkle.

Later as I waited for a green light
 you drove an old blue pickup
 through the intersection.
 A red headband held back
 your gray hair. The earring
 you always wore flashed light.
 Two black Labs leaned against each other.

Maybe the part of me
 that died with you
 lives here too:
 keeping you company here
 where we were young and loving.
 I wash your shirts, write poetry;
 you carve wood, build a chair.
 Each evening we drink beer
 on the porch of a small house,
 above the running stream.



More Than a Tradition: A Sestina for Sharon

Jo Virgil, Austin TX

I lift my glass of wine in toast
To our two decades and more together
As friends, as soul mates, as a sacred shared story –
One that glides between place and time
And defies us to capture its depth on paper –
A tale that becomes our own created tradition.

Our visits are, indeed, a treasured tradition,
And the anticipation makes my heart warm as toast,
But even when we are apart, our letters on paper –
Mine on white, yours on color – keep us in spirit together,
Turn a year apart into just a blink of time,
And offer up fodder for laughter, secrets, and stories.

They say every happy ending has a story,
And in our friendship, happy is a tradition,
Just as strong as memories of cooking with thyme
Or homemade strawberry jam on fresh-baked toast.
Our time apart lasts a year, and only days do we spend together,
But at first hug that year collapses into a thin sheet of paper.

How many memories have we shared? Vents from the paper,
Get Fuzzy cartoons, quotable quotes – all part of our shared story –
The myth and legend of our history together,
Of the love of Sharon and Jo – a heavenly tradition
To which I, right now, will lift my glass of wine in toast,
And smile as I remember the time

That you and I met, when our watches were both on Central Time,
And we decorated our girls' classroom with crepe paper
And served party treats sweeter than toast.
That was the beginning of the Sharon-Jo story,
The start of a bond dressed in garments of tradition,
Laced with ribbons and bows to tie us together.

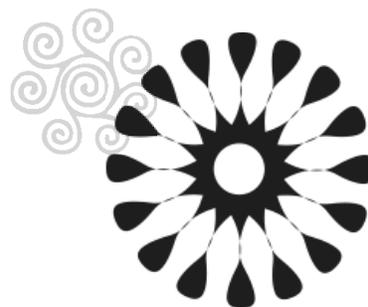
Our friendship has served us to a "T" – Transcending Together;
Traveling the Test of Time;
Treasuring our Tradition.
It would take a hundred reams of paper
To begin to capture our sublime story
And a carton of wine to offer an adequate toast.

There is no more perfect tradition than our annual visit together,
No more fitting toast than the blessing of our shared time,
No more valuable paper than the one that holds our story.

The blues got a piece of me

Merimee Moffitt, Albuquerque NM

His smile today, my grandson's,
almost-thirteen tender, often
seeing the joke,
his smile that I had a fiver for him
tucked in my yellow-flowered-oilcloth
zippered purse-ette for xmas from
my daughter his aunt,
his smile bending down to goodbye
as I dropped him at a red light,
his smile that he
found a way, even without the dough,
to hang out on Central at the yogurt shop
an hour without his
mother or troubled father but with
a friend; his sister would fetch him
and the day was perfect New Mexico
early fall bliss;
that smile was so worth five bucks
in his happy hand,
his other holding a Galaxy Samsung phone,
his soccer ball in his elbow crook'd,
and his pounds and pounds of school books not
today because we had worked our brains
into raisins doing proportions,
equations, and solutions, the calisthenics
of mental after-school in my living room
and today, this glorious Friday of today,
he was turned loose to be almost
thirteen without an adult, without the hurriedness
of everything the parents battle,
without his grandmother weary, ok'd
to hang out with his friends his city and him-
self alive and the much deserved fiver will buy
time in the coolest yogurt shop
with nothing to do but enjoy until
the smart, rock-climbing sister picks him up
and he does have a phone
and plenty of people who love him.



City girl, country kid

Fran Simone, South Charleston WV

Our three-story house on Bushwick Avenue in Brooklyn sat beside a candy store with a lunch counter and red vinyl stools that swiveled. The place was cluttered with magazines, newspapers, and sundries. Penny candies were displayed in a large glass case beside the cash register. Each day, I followed my dad into that store, where he purchased the Daily News, a pack of unfiltered Chesterfield cigarettes, and Rheingold beer, and then gave me five pennies for candy. I favored candy dots on paper, Broadway licorice (red), Mary Janes, and Bazooka Bubble Gum. Sometimes Dad treated me to a bottle of Coca-Cola, which floated in an ice chest in back of the store.

Bushwick Avenue was heavy with traffic. Kids didn't have much room to play. In warm weather, we jumped rope on the sidewalk or tossed tennis balls against a brick wall in the backyard. No grass or flowers. Just cement. Tall buildings near our house cast long shadows. There was little light or sunshine.

My grandmother, Francesca, was from Sicily and wanted her grandkids out of the city and in the country in summer. She purchased forty acres of land in Nesconset, Long Island, and built a small cottage. Each summer my mother assembled clothes, linens, and household goods for our eight-week hiatus. The day after school let out, my father packed up our light green Chevy and we headed toward the island along the old Jericho Turnpike, stopping for lunch at a restaurant shaped like a windmill. My grandmother, aunts, and mom stayed at the cottage all summer; my uncles and dad worked in the city and joined us on weekends. Every Friday night, my Uncle Antonio arrived with a bag full of penny candy.

Mornings, after breakfast, my cousins and I ran through the woods like wild beasts, while my mother and aunts washed mountains of clothes in an old wringer machine set on the back porch, hung fresh laundry on clotheslines rigged between trees, and watered the vegetables, flowers, and fruit trees planted under my grandmother's careful supervision.

Afternoons, the women relaxed in Adirondack chairs in the side yard. In their crisp housedresses, they laughed and gossiped, mended clothes, shelled peas, and yelled at the kids to "slow down and watch where you're going," "be careful in the road," "stop that fighting right this minute," or "wait 'til your father gets here on Friday."

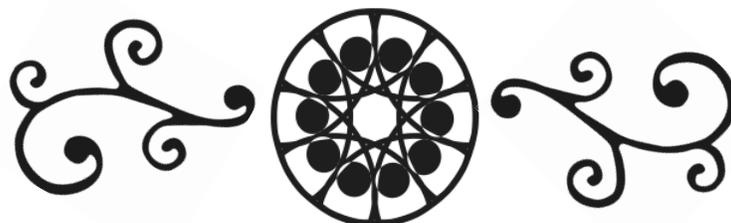
Some snapshots from those enchanted summers: learning to ride my shiny blue Schwinn bicycle, devouring donuts from the Dugan Bakery Truck, picking blueberries, digging for cherrystone clams and catching crabs in the Long Island Sound, playing Old Maid and Monopoly on rainy days, piling into the Chevy and heading to the drive-in theater on Saturday nights. I can still smell the sweet scent of fresh basil, my grandmother's roses and freshly mowed grass, the foul odor in the outhouse out back, the antiseptic stench of Mercurochrome,

the clamminess of wet beach towels, and the pungent aroma of manure from our neighbor's farm with its enormous vegetable garden, many chickens, and several cows. That neighbor, Mrs. Wysoki, walked through the woods between our houses to bring us fresh milk and brown eggs. My grandmother reciprocated with fresh tomatoes, garlic, and zucchini the size of bowling pins.

My grandmother was a fantastic cook. I can still taste her homemade pasta and tomato sauce, and the fresh peaches and plums from trees she planted. I can also taste chilled watermelon and Junket pudding, two favorite desserts. I can feel the crisp air after a thunderstorm, the cool of freshly laundered sheets, the sweat on my back on hot, humid days, the sand in the bottom of my bathing suit, the icy chill from that first dive into Lake Ronkonkoma, the splinters in my hands, the bruises on my knees, and bee stings. I can see my grandmother, crippled with arthritis, dragging a long hose through the garden to water her plants. I can hear the songs of birds, the sizzle of an open fire, the crack of a bat hitting a softball, the grinding of gravel when a car arrived, and the laughter of the grownups as I drifted off to sleep in a double bed shared with my sister in a cramped attic which slept seven: my mother, father, sister and me on one side of a sheer curtain; my aunt, uncle and cousin on the other.

During the month of July, a school bus picked us up for swimming lessons sponsored by the Red Cross at Long Island Sound. I mastered the dead man's float and began my love affair with bodies of water and swimming. Unlike our more affluent neighbors, we didn't own a boat, but every weekend my dad and uncles chauffeured us to either the Sound or Lake Ronkonkoma (the largest lake on Long Island). We'd climb on their shoulders and hit the water like dive-bombers. We stayed in too long and clambered out shivering, with blue lips and goose bumps.

Those eight weeks of summer flew by. On Labor Day, we repacked the Chevy and headed back to Brooklyn; I returned to Fourteen Holy Martyrs Grammar School. I walked home for lunch everyday, copied copious notes from a blackboard, stained my fingers with ink from fountain pens, read about the lives of the saints, fingered rosary beads during mass, and wondered what was hidden behind the nuns' veils and robes. My mother drilled me on my weekly spelling list and checked my homework. My father and I resumed our candy store routine. We celebrated Halloween, Christmas, and Easter, but the holiday we most looked forward to was Memorial Day. Soon after, school ended. Then my father would pack up the Chevy and we'd head out on the old Jericho Turnpike for another enchanted summer at my grandmother's house in the country.



Warrior's Pentacle

Juniper, Austin TX

In July 2013, Suzanne extended an invitation for the Living River, a group of pagan political activists, to join her under the dark moon and walk the Pentacle of the Warrior under the Texas capitol rotunda. Tejas witches have walked that pentacle for a couple of decades, tracing the star's five points inlaid within the marble floor, vocalizing a quiet tone beneath the granite dome, as Texas Rangers watch us from under the brims of their white cowboy hats and evaluate the terror potential of our meditation.

But this July was different. Wendy Davis, iconic in her sophisticated white suit and well-worn pink tennis shoes, had delayed the vote on a bill that would end safe abortion access for many Texas women. The tactics of the anti-abortion bill's supporters had defeated Wendy's filibuster, but in the last few moments before the constitutionally-mandated end of the legislative session, thousands of Wendy supporters ran out the clock with a deafening roar, preventing a Senate vote. So Governor Perry had called the legislators back to Austin for a controversial special session to pass the bill.

Tonight the rotunda, usually almost empty but for the Rangers, was a swirling sea of bill proponents and opponents, flowing around families or couples there to sightsee. As I contemplated walking the pentacle, surrounded by blue-clad anti-abortion activists, I felt an un-warriorlike fear. Suzanne lead others along a path from point to point of the 30-foot pentacle, while I studied the faces of those not walking, some in orange, some in blue, a few in the unaffiliated clothing of tourists. Eight teenagers in blue stood at one edge of the circle around the points, with red tape marking the word "Life" across

their chests, singing all of the verses of Amazing Grace in angelic four-part harmony.

After watching a few moments, I walked to the north point, and stepped onto the pentacle path. Zee Helene was just ahead of me, her long, thick hair flowing and an orange, coiled, belly dancer's scarf tied about her round, supple hips. Two young, dark-eyed girls stood with their mothers and brother on the edge of the circle surrounding the points. As Zee walked past the girls, drawn by her pied-piper beauty, they followed her onto our path.

As I approached their mothers, they stopped me with a smile and a question: "What are you doing?"

"We are walking a prayer to awaken the energies of the Warrior. Each point stands for one of the warrior powers: Commitment, Honor, Truth." I gestured toward one of the points with each word.

I had remembered the name for all of the points while walking, but in that moment I couldn't recall the point we were standing on. As Lisa made the turn, I asked her, "What is this point?"

"Strength."

"And Compassion," I said, gesturing toward the fifth point.

With their questions answered, I resumed my pentacle walk. Each time I approached the point where they continued to stand, one of the mothers, her dark eyes bright, softly spoke the word to remind me: "Strength."

Love Unrequited

Barbarann K. Ayars, Medina OH

I search to find the dance she'll like,
And always miss the mark she sets too high.
I hug her tight. I pirouette.
She pushes me away and says
Don't hang on me.
I protect my brother with my life,
Her favorite child in the whole world.
I search to find the open door.
She slams it closed so that
I cannot enter.
I make my gift and reach
To give it to her. She turns away
As I draw close.
Put out your hand, Mommy. Look!
I have a present just for you!
I uncurl my fingers to reveal
The beating tenderness that is
My heart.
She turns away. She turns away.
Again.



In Season

Joyce Boatright, Houston TX

In my youth
I was a peach,
My skin smooth and lush,
Juicy with curiosity
About the world – my world.
Sitting in my family tree
Between two boys –
Prickly pears, for sure.
In my teens
I was a raspberry
Juiced up on life,
On its possibilities,
On its taboos.
Drunk with its wildness.

As an adult
I've been a star fruit
Making my mark,
Taking center stage.
Now I am
A mulberry
Remembering, recollecting
The journey and its lessons.
I'm less juicy,
Drying up, drying out
Leaving the seeds of memory,
The bittersweet taste
Of a well-lived life.



Speak Up

Bette J. Lafferty, Valrico FL

Fear is often said to be the path leading to failure. Unfortunately, I have traveled down more than my fair share of those paths, but I have learned many valuable lessons trudging through the swamps of life. One such experience that remains clearly etched in my memory was during the summer I turned fifteen.

The owner of a little coffee shop hired me as a waitress. There were four small tables plus eight stools at the lunch counter; only breakfast and lunch were served. How hard could waitressing be, I wondered. It didn't take me long to find out.

"Your job will be to take orders, cook, do dishes, sweep the floor, and anything else that needs to be done," the owner said. "In turn, I'll pay you seventy-five cents an hour. I'll expect you to be on time, too."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," I mumbled, turning on my heels and exiting his office.

Seventy-five cents was the minimum hourly wage in 1951. Three times as much as I made babysitting. I figured by the end of the summer, I'd be rich.

But there were two problems. First, the coffee shop was located in downtown Toledo. I would have to walk a half-mile to the bus stop before my brain kicked into gear, as I wasn't a morning person. Next came the bus ride and walking several more blocks to get to work. This was an enormous challenge, as I had never been to town by myself before.

Second, I didn't know how to cook.

I arrived early on my first day with a stomach full of butterflies, but I made it. The owner turned out to be a kind old gentleman. He immediately began showing me my duties. I knew how to wash dishes. The cleaning chores came naturally. But when he showed me the menu, and started explaining where things were, it put the fear of God in me. I bluffed my way through his instructions and prayed like crazy.

The bewitching hour arrived. Doors were unlocked. People began strolling in for breakfast, ordering orange juice, coffee, and toast. I managed until a tall, friendly policeman came in and ordered a chocolate milk shake with a raw egg. I questioned him about the idea. He guaranteed me that he drank one here every morning, and suggested I shouldn't let it worry my pretty little head.

The next customer ordered coffee, toast, scrambled eggs, and bacon. I smiled and walked slowly to the grill. Popping the bread into the toaster, my brain did cartwheels trying to imagine how to scramble eggs. I stood staring at the hot grill just as another waitress clocked in.

"Hi," she said. "You must be the new girl."

"Yes," I replied, and quickly confessed my dilemma.

"No problem," she whispered, "I'll handle them. It'll be our secret."

Whenever I drew a blank, she was right there to help me. She explained how to fry a hamburger, roll a hot dog, clean the grill, and set up for the next morning. I saw her as my guardian angel. I even began to enjoy working at the coffee shop. Several weeks passed without incident.

Then one day I arrived earlier than usual. As I opened the back door to the shop, there sat Jake, the man who squeezed our orange juice. We were both startled to see each other. As I stared at him, I recalled words of warning from the other waitresses.

"He's a poor excuse for a man," they had said. "Be careful of him."

His hair was shaggy and matted. He needed a shave. His clothes were soiled, and he smelled bad.

"Good morning," I finally managed to say.

He just glared at me and grunted. Then it happened. Horror upon horror, as he squeezed the juice, he spit chewing tobacco into the container.

"What are you doing?"

"Never you mind," he snarled. "You best not tell anyone what you have seen or I'll report you to the authorities. You're working here illegally. You're only fifteen, and I know you don't have a worker's permit. I'll get the cops to put you in jail."

Fear gripped my throat like a vise as he stood there hovering over me. I was so frightened; I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to go to jail. What was I to do? My legs felt like gelatin. I strained to catch my breath as I hurried into the shop.

When my regular customers arrived, I steered them away from ordering the orange juice. A fierce headache caused me to drop a cup. Then I spilled coffee. Finally I decided seventy-five cents an hour wasn't worth ending up in jail. At the end of my shift, I lied to the owner and told him that I had to quit. He wrote out my paycheck and thanked me. I smiled and rushed out of his office.

The ride home took forever. I felt so ashamed, such a failure. I anguished over what I'd tell my parents. Dad would yell at me, but telling him a lie would hurt less than his condemnation.

Fear's crippling power kept me a slave until my mid-thirties. When I invited Christ into my life, He replaced my fear with His peace. I began to write my life stories in my late sixties, and realized I had never told my parents the truth about the incident. My father had already died, but my mother was surprised to learn what had really happened.

Today, with God's help, fear no longer defines who I am. Armed with His truth, time has become my friend as I travel over the bumpy roads of life. I realize one incident doesn't make me a failure. One lie doesn't set my path in stone. Forgiveness has made me stronger. Yet, somewhere in the back chambers of my mind, I can still see and smell the fear of encountering Jake.



Her Feet's Too Big

Barbara G. Feinberg, Cleveland Heights OH

I have always had a love-hate relationship with shoes.

As a kid, I was pigeon-toed. To correct this graceless walk, I wore "corrective oxfords." Brown, clunky, unyielding, and decidedly inelegant. I hated them! All the other girls were wearing sneakers, patent leather, or Capezio ballet slippers, in many, many colors – none brown.

By the time I reached junior high school, I wore an 8-1/2, a size equal to the shoes worn by Cinderella's ugly stepsisters. I had just moved to a new town and school, and was feeling that ever-present self-consciousness that's a specialty of tweeners. I wanted so much to fit in with my classmates, even the too-cute-and-she-knew-it, cheerleading Mimi Halpern. Never expecting to reach her celestial heights in the seventh-grade hierarchy, I just hoped to look like I belonged, even though I knew I didn't, really.

I had seen Mimi and the other popular girls at my co-ed ballroom dancing class wearing cute Cuban heels. Clearly that was part of the uniform I needed to wear, so I begged to get my first pair of heels. My mother advised – read *insisted on* – heels that were essentially chunks, not what I had seen the queen bees strut around in. I'd be steadier on my feet, she thought. Now, truth be told, I was a bit of a klutz, more likely to totter, twist my ankle, or trip the light un-fantastic on a narrower impractical heel. But when did practical have anything to do with fashion, anyhow?

Dancing school class in my new heels was a nightmare come true – my very large feet encased in black suede clunkers that my Yiddish-speaking grandmother would have worn. I moved as if through molasses, each step yanked with great effort. Ginger Rogers' partnership with Fred Astaire was definitely not threatened by my cha-cha-cha.

I missed my small town friends, low fashion expectations, and Janette Santoro's dance studio. Miss Santoro and her brother, Nicky, were the town dance experts, celebrities before *Dance With The Stars* hit the scene. Actually, as I think about it, even before TV itself became a household fixture.

A large room, with a ballet barre on the wall, a few folding chairs for waiting parents, and dust balls in the corners, served as the dance center of the universe for me and the kids I grew up with. Being classmates since first grade, I took for granted my place as an accepted part of the group. So, dancing was fun, especially doing the tango with my cousin, Frankie. Feeling secure in the Santoro milieu, I easily mastered any dance they demonstrated, swooping by with perfect form. In my new dance class, though, I felt increasingly awkward and inhibited when wearing, on those rare occasions I was asked to dance, those clunky, old-lady shoes.

Later, I graduated to high heels, a wonderful invention for big feet. Elevated three inches or more, your foot looks smaller. Finally, a fashion statement below the ankle! One slight hitch: finding the size 9-1/2-Narrow my feet had grown to morphed the fun of shoe shopping into an embarrassing and painful

experience. In those days, the average shoe was a 7, a size I hadn't worn since fourth grade.

At the super sale held by a fancy shoe store every August, we eager bargain-hunters waited for hours in the hot sun. "A size 9-1/2?" the salesman seemed to shout. The chatter of women excited about the wonderful bargains trickled away like rain letting up in a summer storm. All eyes seemed to turn to me, slowly panning down to my feet. The humiliation. The slow hot flush moving up my cheeks.

"Well," he'd mutter, "we might have one pair." Imagine my excitement when he finally emerged – if I were lucky – with two boxes.

Going off to college, I knew I'd knock 'em dead with my two pairs of bargain heels and matching purses. After all, *Seventeen* magazine guaranteed a great social life, if you were properly accessorized.

I dated tall boys from high school on. High heels brought me up to the shoulders of various beaux. But none of those six-footers turned out to be Mr. Right, despite the elegant pumps, and the just-right handbag.

During my senior year in college, a hallmate fixed me up: "He's tall, I think, and really nice." She went on to say those things one wants to hear when going on a blind date: smart – at Harvard Law School, after all; attractive; probably delightful since he was a friend of her very charming buddy.

Wearing my black high heels and that perfect pocketbook, I thought, "Seventeen would be so proud." But the guy at the reception desk was definitely not tall. Regretting the three-inch heels, I slouched down awkwardly. I couldn't be taller than this who-knew-who-he-could-be-to-me. You couldn't go out with guys shorter than you, another important magazine-imposed dating rule we all accepted without question.

As it turned out, he was very very nice – cute, smart, and a good kisser. His height became less and less important as the evening, and months, went on. I found one-and-a-half-inch heels to replace the spikes, so I didn't develop a permanent crick in my neck. I even got over my reluctance to dance with anyone other than my tangoing cousin, Frank.

When we were married, I wore a beautiful full-length wedding dress that hid my big feet. We danced the first dance in perfect waltz harmony, my self-consciousness gone, with my permanent dance partner.

Forty-eight years later, I've pretty much gotten over my big feet phobia. But looking for footwear that doesn't hurt guarantees that shoe shopping is still a real pain, now literally as well as psychologically. One of life's many little ironies: now that I have accepted the things I cannot change – i.e., that I have big feet – I can't find shoes that don't pinch.

So my feet's still too big!



Thanks Eversomuch, Dr. Spock

Sandy Schuster-Hubbard, Murrieta CA

Today was my day to waddle my seven-months-along pregnant body into Sears Roebuck and pick up our Christmas order. Overnight, a pristine snow had blanketed Lincoln, Nebraska, and it glistened in the sunlight, reminiscent of a Currier and Ives lithograph. A perfect day to lounge quietly on a sofa near a fireplace with logs a-blazing, reading a good mystery. However, we had no sofa, no fireplace, and no quiet – just wistful longing.

Anyway, I was more likely to continue reading my well-worn Dr. Spock book than any mystery. I was consumed with what was best for the children and mothering well, and also needing the world to know me as a good mom. Having grown up without a mother to model or ask advice of, I partnered with Dr. Spock and harbored grandiose visions of being the perfect mother. Consequently, I relied heavily on Dr. Spock's sage advice and thus far had managed well-behaved children – at least, in public. However, at twenty-two and expecting baby number three before my first-born turned three, perhaps I should have been consulting Dr. Trojan.

Dr. Spock wrote it was important to nurture mutually respectful relationships (easier said than done with toddlers) and to set safe limits for them without undermining their self-esteem (so after eight straight minutes of playing peek-a-boo, I shouldn't say, "Look kid, it's always going to be me!") And most of all, I should trust my own instincts in meeting their needs.

Meanwhile, back on planet earth, I needed to bundle two-and-a-half-year-old Kim and one-year-old Paul into warm clothes, snow pants, jackets, hats, mittens, and snow boots for the six-mile trek to Sears. I loaded the kids into our antiquated 1951 Lincoln. Safety measures consisted of flinging my right arm swiftly across the passenger seat to save children and sometimes groceries from catapulting and kissing the dashboard on sudden stops. All mothers in the '60s possessed such super powers.

When we arrived, the pick-up line snaked well beyond the twelve-foot counter as the clerks took the receipts and disappeared into the cavernous back room to retrieve the orders. We inched along in a line at the tropically-heated Sears, still bundled-up like Nanook of the North. Squirming in my arms, Paul felt like he had gained five pounds since we got

there. It was challenging to hold him, my purse, the diaper bag, and Kim's hand. A third arm (or a nanny) would've helped.

Periodically, I shifted the arm holding Paul because he was not only heavy but also slippery as wet soap. Kim became restless and wanted to explore. With arms aching, ankles swelling, and armpits engulfed in a tsunami of sweat, my patience evaporated.

As I switched positions in a vain attempt to find a measure of comfort, Kim seized the opportunity to make her move. What exactly would Dr. Spock expect me to do at this juncture? So I trusted my instincts to use what tools I had in the moment. I did not yell or swear – out loud. In hopes of corralling her, I lifted my left leg and swung my foot out to the side using my arch and ankle to snare her back toward me like a cane hooks a bad vaudevillian off the stage.

She was quicker than I expected.

Instead of redirecting her, I nudged the seat of those puffy snow pants. Kim lurched and lay sprawled on the floor, a pathetic Dickensian waif. Though unhurt physically, she was indignant and shrieked, "Yooouuuu kicked meee!" Her caterwauling continued as she up-righted her little self and repeated, "You kicked me," with an expression that said, "Maybe next time you'll let me do what I want to do when I want to do it."

The people in the line, as if cued by an orchestra conductor's baton, all turned to look at the dastardly mom manhandling the cherubic toddler. Their glares shouted silent disapproval.

What would Dr. Spock think now? So much for his "trust myself" philosophy. I was chagrined. I'm not a spanker, let alone a kicker, yet my Kimmie wailed to the world – well, to the people in Sears – that I kicked her!

I yearned to leave but I needed that catalog order. So we inched our way along, while I avoided eye contact with others, until I got my packages. I vowed I'd never use the "hook-my-leg maneuver" again – nor would I likely return to Sears anytime soon.

Humiliated, I half-expected Dr. Spock to call, demanding his book back.

Pantsing

Jude Walsh Whelley, Dayton OH

When I pull on my jeans,
my pants feel loose.
Unexpected...
because my belly
is big and
the waist is elastic,
but loose they are.
I decide to not
weigh myself today.
I think I will just
enjoy this moment,
even if
an illusion.



Thunder

Molly Welch Harris, Miami FL



Thunder shakes the sky,
sharpening my attention.
I wait in a dark green alcove,
trees and tangled growth entwined.
An unseen bird caws
urgently, repeatedly.
Wind arrives,
unfastens its cloak,
unfurls the message:
Storm gallops in,
its dark steed wild,
pounding the earth.
I breathe
elation.



Anything

Linda Hoyer, Kamloops BC Canada

It is early morning and the three of us sit side by side: mother, daughter, and granddaughter. We are perched on the edge of my daughter's new-to-her sofa, recently purchased then shampooed and shampooed again. We are peering at our smart phones, which are propped up on the also new-to-her coffee table. These ordinary pieces of furniture are symbolic of a fresh start and a strong determination.

There is no wi-fi in her apartment; the internet is scheduled to be connected later today. We have been relying on our smart phones to connect us to the web, ever conscious of how much data we're using.

"How much data do you think it would take to play a music video?" my daughter asked a few minutes earlier, at the exact moment I invited her to join me on the sofa saying, "Come sit down; I want you to watch something."

We laughed at the fact that our minds were going in the same direction. Courage. Strength. A need to get "pumped up" before we headed out the door.

From the time my eyes first opened this morning I have been thinking about how to help impart strength to her for what lies ahead. It came to me as a whisper, a lyric, a song I remember from many years ago. Funny how, at the same time, my daughter realized, too, that she needed music to empower her.

"I don't care how much data it will take. Let's do this," I tell her. So the three of us sit together and I queue up the song on my phone.

"Listen to the words," I tell her. "Just listen to the words."

Helen Reddy begins to perform the anthem of a generation, a song I hadn't cared for when I was young. But I had listened to it again recently, and the words had resonated. The message is one I believe for myself. I want her to internalize it as well.

Mema Who

Sally Jean Brudos, Atherton CA

Mema who defies the wind to see me
 And engulfs me in her enormous embrace
 Who is a renaissance woman
 Who is a critic of the first sort
 Whose 1957 Green Studebaker was the talk of the block
 Who tells me I'm fat
 Who tells me the same stories over and over nonstop
 Who can't recall my name
 Who grows orchids in her kitchen
 Who craves the presence of others
 Is stubborn and defiant and bubbles with laughter and joy
 Is in love with the sweet smell of babies
 Mema who has chickens in her back yard and canaries in her front yard
 Who is famous for her Royal Baking Powder buttermilk biscuits
 (Brimming with butter and honey to go with chicken stew fresh from the hen house)



*You can bend but never break me...
 I come back even stronger...
 If I have to, I can do anything.
 I am strong. I am invincible. I am woman.*

We listen together. I watch her face. She listens, she nods, she understands.

Then it's her turn. She starts a song for her generation performed by a group I am unfamiliar with, Hedley. The music is different, not something I would choose to listen to, but the message is similar. *I can do anything.*

My granddaughter bops and sings along with her mommy; she knows the song, too. Daughter and granddaughter have sung these words together often over the past few days.

You *can* do anything. Silently I pray that the music will help my daughter find the strength she needs for today and the days to come; and that my granddaughter will grow up strong and independent, knowing she can do anything, as a result of the difficult choices her mommy is making now.

Later, my daughter checks herself in the mirror, as we get ready to head out for the day.

"Hold your head high," I remind her. "Stand strong."

Her spine straightens; she stands taller.

"I can do this. I can do anything." She repeats the lyrics of her song and she smiles.

"You are strong. You are invincible. You are woman," I agree. "You *can* do anything."

We head out the door, taking another step on her journey, doing what she needs to do to ensure safety and sanctuary for herself and her daughter. She takes a path she would not have chosen but that she is faced with nonetheless, on a road that will call upon her to dig deeper than she has ever had to before, and to muster strength she never knew she was capable of.

She is strong. She can do anything. I am so proud of her.

Translation: Mema, my grandmother, was one of a kind. She would arrive after a five-hour drive in her green Studebaker and smother me in her big bosom hug. She was widowed and ran the lumberyard, the water company, and the library, out of her home in a small valley town. She excelled at sewing and cooking, but when it came to cleaning, she could have used some help. She loved me very much and was very critical of everything about me. She always went through a string of names before she got to mine – Ada, Bertha, Frances, etc. She was lonely and talked nonstop when she came to visit. But she would mend my clothes, and we always had delicious Royal Baking Powder buttermilk biscuits.

Culinary Treasures

Sara Etgen-Baker, Anna TX



Mother's rectangular-shaped kitchen was tiny – no more than 7 feet long and 5 feet wide – which was to be expected since the house itself was small. When my parents moved into their two-bedroom house in 1952, the kitchen – designed primarily for functionality – came equipped with a moderate-sized refrigerator and a full-size gas range with stove, but little storage space. Storage was so sparse that mother kept her pots and pans in the oven overnight and removed them the next morning when she prepared breakfast.

I learned to cook standing alongside her but often complained about her cramped, cracker-box kitchen. "I hate cooking in here! It's hot and there's no room to breathe." I'd open the kitchen window and fan myself rather dramatically. "You know, clean up would be easier if you just had a dishwasher and disposal."

"When I was a young girl during the Depression, I helped my mother cook on a wood stove that was so old it had holes in it." Mother stopped what she was doing and grabbed her wet dishtowel. "Look around. My kitchen has a stove, a refrigerator, pots, pans, and cooking utensils; everything else is optional." Then she whipped her dishtowel between her thumbs and forefingers and snapped it on my buttocks, "Don't be so fussy!"

After dinner, I usually hand-washed and dried the dishes, while my mother, aunt, and grandmother huddled around mother's tiny kitchen table. They dumped all their S&H Green Stamps onto the table, sorted them by denomination, licked them, and then stuck them on the grid pages of the booklets that the supermarket gave away.

Like most women in the '50s and early '60s, Mother didn't work outside the home and didn't have an income of her own. Collecting and redeeming Green Stamps gave her a feeling of independence and a means of obtaining items she wanted or needed. Occasionally, my grandmother gave my mother filled stamp books so Mother could purchase what she needed. Even with my grandmother's help, Mother saved for two years before she had enough stamps for an electric waffle-maker and mixer.

The day Mother redeemed her stamps, I went with her to the Redemption Center. "Here," she handed me a blank order form, "I forgot my glasses and need you to fill this in for me." While we waited for the stockroom clerk to check their inventory, I browsed through the store.

Then I saw it – *The Betty Crocker Cookbook for Boys and Girls* – aptly described as a great cookbook for children, introducing them to basic cooking techniques and easy recipes. I slid my fingers across the pages and glanced through the recipes, drawings and photographs, and knew that I simply must have that cookbook. Although the cookbook cost only half a book of Green Stamps, I knew better than to out-and-out ask mother to give me any of her precious Green Stamps! So, I formulated a foolproof plan.

"Mother," I paused at the cookbook display. "Have you seen this cookbook?" I opened the book's pages. "It's just perfect for me, and..."

"Hmmm..." Mother turned a few pages. "I don't know. Half a book of stamps is..."

"...I know, but I'll do extra chores to earn enough stamps to buy it. Please, mother, pleeeeee!"

"I s'pose so. But you're responsible for your own stamps and putting them in the booklets." She returned the book to the display. "And once school starts, you won't be able to do as many extra chores. School comes first."

Determined, I spent the entire summer doing extra chores – ironing my father's shirts, folding clothes, vacuuming, and dusting. At some point, even the neighbor ladies helped; they gave me Green Stamps for polishing their shoes, ironing their clothes, washing their dishes, dusting their houses, and running errands to the nearby supermarket. I was so ecstatic that I even stopped complaining about Mother's kitchen! But by summer's end, I was two pages short of having the half-book of Green Stamps that I needed.

Once school started, I did as I promised and dedicated myself to my schoolwork. The fall and winter months passed, and by Christmas I still didn't have enough stamps to buy my cookbook. Then one December evening while sipping on his coffee, my father asked, "Sweetie Pie, how many more stamps do you need for your cookbook?"

"Just two more pages, Daddy. Why? Do you have an errand or chore for me?"

"Yes, I do." He placed his cup on the table. "Tell you what – grab your coat and stamps and hop in my pickup."

I followed him to the truck, hoisted myself onto the seat, and noticed an envelope with my name on it.

"What's this, Daddy?"

"Go ahead, open it."

When I did, loose green stamps poured out onto the seat. "Are all these for me?"

"Yes, Sweetie Pie!"

"But how, Daddy?"

"A few months ago, my gas station started giving Green Stamps, so I've saved these for you as part of your Christmas present. Merry Christmas!" I squealed and hugged him. "Now let's go get that cookbook!"

He immediately drove to the Redemption Center where I filled in the order form and received my cookbook. At home, father inscribed these words on the inside cover: "May this, your first cookbook, help you to learn to love cooking. Love, Daddy, Christmas 1961."

"Pick a recipe, Daddy, and I'll make it for you."

He flipped through the pages. "How 'bout this Eskimo Igloo Cake?"

So on that Christmas and many Christmases thereafter, I made the Eskimo Igloo Cake just for father – our very own father-daughter tradition. Now – 50+ years later – I miss baking father's special cake in my mother's cracker-box kitchen. I miss sitting at Mother's kitchen table and licking green stamps; and I miss cooking in close proximity to my mother. Sometimes, though, as I putter around my spacious kitchen, I feel my parents' presence, and treasure the culinary moments that we shared.

Blackout

B. Lynn Goodwin, Danville CA

"Hello. I'm calling from the Starbucks on Camino Ramon in Danville," the young manager in the green apron said into her cell. "We're currently experiencing a blackout."

I'd never been in a Starbucks without inside light.

A clerk who sounded like a high school student told me the coffee was cold. She suggested I try another Starbucks, but I decided to wait. I liked the natural light coming through the windows, and besides, I wanted to be a part of the adventure. It's not every day a business grinds to a halt because the power is out.

Power blackouts are a holiday from real life. If this one had happened when I was at home, I'd have felt my way to the kitchen, found the matches and candles, and put them in the bronze candlesticks I gave my mother when I was thirteen.

Then I'd have opened the freezer door for flashlight batteries, and heard her voice saying, "Don't open the refrigerator. The cold air will leak out."

When I was younger, a power failure brought out cookies and crackers from the cupboard, my favorite legitimate unbalanced meal. It also brought us out of our separate rooms.

Trapped by an electric garage door that would not open, we gathered in my parents' bedroom to wait out the storm that knocked the lines down. Through rain-splattered windows, we could see the distant lights of San Jose twinkling below. Sharp black rooftops and ebony tree limbs blotted out portions of the city. It was 1959, and we had no idea we were looking out on the future Silicon Valley as we sat high atop the hills of Los Gatos.

In the shadows, my parents began to tell tales of the "olden days." My father remembered a blackout in Martinez during World War II. He was outside with a friend walking through a darkened neighborhood when he lit a cigarette.

A neighbor woman rushed out to scold him for aiding the enemy. "Are you crazy? Put that thing out before the Japs see it glowing and attack."

"So what happened?"

"Your father put out his cigarette to shush her. Then Art and he laughed the whole way home." My mother's voice was warm and gentle as she added her memory of that long-ago night.

This is the way it's supposed to be, I thought as I sat on my mother's bed, looking from one darkened face to another. I knew we would remain a close-knit family as long as the power was off. When it came back on, my father would return to KQED or the ballgame, broadcast in black and white; my mother would return to the kitchen or stacks of student essays; and unspoken resentments that screamed for attention would lace the air, unanswered.

My parents were good people, flawed by resentments they didn't know how to process. Their strained silence ate away at me. Maybe the power failure brought out their long-hidden need for one another. Though I was only ten years old, I knew I would always cherish the openness that came out when the electricity went off.

Starbucks is back in business, but who wants to return to pouring coffee and heating cookies with adrenaline still racing through the body? Blackouts, like unexpected holidays, charge us up in ways that caffeine cannot. They bring out the helpful side in some and the celebratory side of others. They make us hyper-aware, and often they make us grateful.

Every Morning

Linda M. Hasselstrom, Hermosa SD

A red glow announces five a.m.
 Both dogs shake,
 collars jingling. I snap
 on the light, slip on shoes,
 punch the coffeepot's red button.
 The dogs jump and whine
 at the basement door.
 I make them wait
 until the porch light shows
 no lurking coyote
 no mountain lion.
 Yipping and jostling,
 they skid on new ice
 into their morning.
 The thermometer
 reads twenty. The sky is black.
 Each star quivers
 with fire
 falling ten million years
 toward this day.

Night

Carol Ziel, St. Louis MO

Dusk cradles me
 I drift toward Night
 folding into itself

Origami
 Each crease sealing in daylight

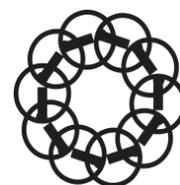
I rock as darkness furrows around me

stars slipping in
 sprouting

spinning me into slumber
 where dreams embrace me

Dark lulls me deeper into sleep
 The moon and I breathe together

A nocturnal nest holds us
 until Dawn peels back Night
 crease by crease



The Girl

Juliana Lightle, Canyon TX

She stands alone by the train tracks,
 watching and waiting and dreaming.
 Hobos no longer exist.
 She remembers reading stories of life
 when her grandmother lived:
 hobos begging for food, gypsies stealing
 children and telling fortunes, long days of
 working in the corn fields, chopping weeds.
 Her own family praises:
 tractors, riding lawnmowers, herbicides, pesticides,
 electricity, TVs, dishwashers, muscles, cars, MacDonalds,
 diet Coke, cell phones, computers, DVDs, iPads.
 Now the only excitement lies in Grand Theft Auto,
 guns, and sex. She watches and waits and dreams.

The Woman

Juliana Lightle, Canyon TX

She stands alone on the rim,
 watching the moon rise,
 wondering.
 Life flies by on wings
 outstretched.
 She remembers rich years
 filled with long joys, living,
 loving,
 temporary sadness, divorces,
 moving here and there,
 Narragansett Bay, Utah mountains,
 Veracruz,
 babies held to breast, one
 blond and chubby, another
 café con leche.
 She remembers girlhood longings
 for far horizons, traveling
 around the world, lovers,
 husbands, shades of brown
 beauty.
 She's learned to make
 her own excitement,
 singing Goddess songs,
 dancing on the rim of wonder.



Getting a Life

Helene Benardo, Bronx NY

The occasion of Gloria Steinem's 80th birthday got me thinking of the past.

How different life was forty years ago. I remember working in an office during summer vacations from college and having an executive tell me to make his coffee because his "girl" was out that day. I remember wanting to open a checking account in the bank where I cashed my weekly paycheck and being told that I needed a man's signature – father, husband, brother, guy on the street – presumably any male would do.

I remember wheeling my first child to sleep in his carriage with one hand, and reading "The Feminine Mystique" with the other, and realizing that I was crying. What a wake-up call!

I became the first in line at the "new" Women's Movement. I was re-born. A whole new world was out there and I was, along with so many other women, shown a life we hadn't even dreamed of.

My parents told me that my first word was "no." Well, I didn't say it again for 35 years. The changes in my life brought on by the Women's Movement are far too numerous to list here, but suffice it to say that the second part of my life has been far more meaningful and satisfying than the first part.

I have been lucky in that I had no great struggles at home. My husband became as staunch a feminist as I, and you can bet that my sons and their children know about grandma's philosophy!

All told, it's been a rocky ride, with huge boulders in our path (some of which still exist), but on balance, the woman I am today looks back with sorrow on the years when it was often said, "Girls don't...." Now they do!

the way of the pilgrim

Marilyn Ashbaugh, Edwardsburg MI

coaxing slumber from her eyes
 sleep no longer lingers

as smoking burgundy arises
 from dawn's majestic mist

webs bejeweled with dew drops
 tingle with mischief

now there are dishwashers to empty
 and coffee cups to fill

now words flow like lava,
 languid and lustrous

now one drop of nectar
 fills her grieving heart

Rosary Beads

Mary De Vries, Hutchinson KS

My mother pulled me out of public schools, not because of any real principle along religious or moral lines. I could read at third grade level entering kindergarten, due to a bout of polio, and the public school wanted to place me in that grade. Mom said no and called her childhood pal, Father Kazmareck, and asked to enroll me at St. Teresa's, which was across the street from our house. So my life was set for several years. During the school week I did everything my classmates did: catechism, mass, daily Stations of the Cross during Lent, and all the prayers, including a daily rosary after lunch. Saturdays I attended the religious instruction at our Lutheran church.

Father Kaz highlighted most of my tenure at St. T's. He laughed, giggled, and slapped my mother's butt to get her attention when she was pulling weeds. Why did he do it? To make sure she, and only she, would pack his lunch for the school picnic. He was a Hawaiian-shirted, khaki-pants priest, who made life and religion joyful, if not very serious. However, all that was to change when his assistant pastor arrived in my sixth grade year.

Father Ritz was an escapee from behind the curtain where practicing any religious faith could mean death. Perhaps that, though we students did not think of it at the time, explained the man, who was a polar opposite to Kaz. Father Ritz – to this day I cannot shorten his title – wore cassocks so starched the edges looked like knives, and only during mass was the berretta gone from his head. He walked so quietly he was behind you before you knew it. If you were "sinning," his hand would go to your shoulder and he would march you to the chapel, where you and he would sit in silent contemplation of your error. Not one word of displeasure or reprimand, just silence until the words "forgive me" issued forth from your lips and several Hail Mary's were assigned. That silence was more forceful than all the laughing "do not do it agains" from Kaz.

Friday confessions were fraught with wonderment and fear. Who was the priest in the booth? As a Protestant, I sat closest to the booth in the Mary row (yes we had ten Marys in my class and we had our own pew). The Marys expected me to check out the shoes beneath the curtain. Loafers or sandals peeking beneath the scarlet drape and they breathed a sigh of relief. If the shoes shone like patent leather and were laced oxfords, they began to reduce the things they would confess.

Ritz was not feared, but he was not attainable. Silence surrounded him. Idle conversation was not his style. When he spoke, it mattered. The only time I feared him was the day I asked if Mary had other children after Jesus. His hand slowly rose, with a finger pointing to the door, as he quietly said, "Out, Protestant." Yet to give him his due, he was also the one whose hand on my shoulder brought me back into class, as he whispered a quiet "Forgive me." An adult who could admit his error; I was stunned.

But the image that still moves me is again one of near silence. Having forgotten my school bag in the chapel, I ran across the street after supper to retrieve it. Going down the chapel stairs, I stopped when I noticed someone praying. Father Ritz knelt in a pew, evening sunlight streaming on him from the stained glass window. His hands – so long, lean and strong – were moving his wooden rosary beads as tears flowed down his cheeks. I stood for a moment in a silence broken only by the clacking beads and then I tiptoed up the stairs. My schoolbag could wait; I was sure I had seen a saint.

Bookstore Haiku

Jo Virgil, Austin TX

Nestled among shelves –
Nonsense and words of wisdom.
Our landscape, our Truth.

Heron and Turtle

Ardine Martinelli, Tacoma WA

She flies in on prehistoric wings
Gracefully landing
On a small rock

Gathering herself together
She majestically scans
The new terrain

Her long slender neck bends
Scooping water with
A beak of beauty and utility

A large turtle suns on the rock
No movement, no acknowledgment
Of this new neighbor

Heron standing tall
Turtle sunning
No territory has been breached
Just the sharing of a rock
The sharing of the sun

Heron turns head toward turtle
Stops looks
Bending neck down
Beak almost touching
Turtle's shell

One foot of turtle moves slowly
Heron continues observing
Turtle alert

Enough, heron straightens neck
Bends down to scoop more water
Turtle's foot moves back in

Life continues
As each rests in the sun
Sharing a rock



The Cat Came Back

Jude Walsh Whelley, Dayton OH

We were a dog family. I can mark time by which dog we had when. As a toddler I remember Blackie, the cocker spaniel who would eat a bit of aspirin ground up in some jelly so I would have the courage to do the same. There was Clancy, a border collie mix that tolerated being dressed in my dresses and hats and being squeezed into a doll carriage as my baby. Patricia, the Irish setter, was a short timer. We had to give her to a friend who lived way out in the country with no near neighbors because she would not stop stealing laundry from our neighbors' clotheslines. When I was in junior high we had Pedro, a miniature rat terrier whose most distinguishing characteristic was his shivering. And finally, there was Henry, an English springer spaniel. My mother and I had food poisoning when Henry arrived; we were quite ill. Despite our suffering, my dad brought the puppy to us and said we could name her. In our delirium, we missed the "her" part and tossed out Henry. When we were well enough to cuddle the puppy, we realized our mistake. My father thought the whole thing made a great story so her name stuck, despite Mom's suggestion to change it to Henrietta.

We never had cats. My father didn't like them and my mother still harbored some old-wives'-tale fear about cats stealing a sleeping baby's breath. We were long past the baby stage in our house when my older sister brought home Pierre. Pierre was a gray and white boy with a devil-may-care attitude and a desire to be outdoors more than in. My sister begged, and pleaded, and generally wore my parents down. I didn't care one way or the other, staying centered in the "we are dog people" belief.

Soon after, my sister went off to nursing school, leaving Pierre in our care. And darned if we all didn't develop a fondness for the critter. If we wanted to call the cat home, one of us would shake a box of Friskies, a dry cat food popular at the time. Pierre would appear, and come into the house for his bowl of food and a good night's sleep.

One fall day, Pierre did not come when I shook the box. I was not overly concerned, thinking he had wandered out of hearing range. I tried again later that night, still no Pierre. It would not be the first time he had spent a night outdoors. When he had done so before, he was always meowing at the back door in the morning, demanding breakfast since he'd missed his dinner. But not this time. First days, then weeks went by without Pierre's return. My stoic father made scathing remarks like, "You can't trust a cat. The *omadhaun** probably got himself killed in a fight or hit by a car." I wasn't sure what either of those things had to do with trust but knew it was my dad's way of admitting he missed the cat.

That January, during a snowstorm, about nine o'clock at night, my family was gathered around the kitchen table having what we referred to as a "snack." What that meant was my mother, father, grandmother, and aunt were all at the table having sandwiches made from fresh cold cuts on thick slices of bread with cheese and mayonnaise or mustard, with sides of potato chips and dill pickles. They were having an ice-cold beer, or two, to wash it down. I was there as well but my beverage was a mug of piping hot, strong black tea with cream and sugar. My dad was, as usual, entertaining us with stories from his youth and from working in the mines. It was a wicked night, the wind howling and forcing cold air through the sash windows, sleety snow striking the panes. We were warm and cozy and enjoying one another's company when I thought I heard something. I asked them all to be quiet. A ridiculous request to an Irish family in the midst of beer and storytelling, but finally I persuaded them. "Listen, I think I hear something!" They got quiet for a minute but nothing aside from the storm was heard. "No, no," I insisted, "I thought I heard a meow." I opened the back door, ushering in a gust of wind and cold. Grabbing the box of Friskies still sitting by the door, I gave it a good long shake and yelled, "Pierre!" My family was howling in protest. "Shut the door! You'll freeze us all! That cat is long gone!"

I gave the box one more good shake and was turning to come in when something brushed against my legs. It was Pierre, scrambling in like he never had before. He was caked in sleet and his tale was broken, bent at an unnatural angle, the end appearing completely frozen.

Well, there was much rejoicing at the table. We all took a turn holding the cat and rubbing him briskly, trying to get the icy chunks out of his fur. He was less than pleased with our ministrations. Once we put him down, he went straight to where his bowl used to be and waited. I got out a bowl, filled it with Friskies and supplied water as well. While he crunched away, I got him a new cushion and warmed a towel for him to rest on as he continued to thaw.

The next morning, he was warm and dry and right back on his old schedule of spending the day outdoors and being called home by the rattling of the Friskies box each night. We never knew where he had been or why he decided to return. We just accepted it; the cat came back.

**omadhaun* - a Gaelic word meaning "a fool." Used in ethnic Irish neighborhoods to describe a stupid or dumb person.



I Hear Your Voice

Khadijah Lacina, Alton MO

I haven't forgotten the sound of your voice any more than I have forgotten the sound of my mother's heartbeat when I rested my head against her chest during cold Wisconsin nights.

I haven't forgotten the sound of your voice any more than I have forgotten the sound of the wind shuffling its feet through kaleidoscope-colored leaves in the Kickapoo Valley.

I haven't forgotten the sound of your voice any more than I have forgotten the sound of my breath exhaled in cold clouds of wishes half-formed.

"Assalamu Aleikum.

Ummi? Is that you?

Assalamu Aleikum?"

Yes, it's me. It's me here listening and waiting, thinking and planning, hoping and striving. Yes, it's me, still holding you as close as ever I did those hours spent each evening going over the blessings of the day and looking forward to what we would do on the next. Yes, it's me, still pulling you in your little red wagon with your name painted on the side, full of books and stuffed animals and the Cheetos truck you wouldn't let go of. Yes, it's me, sitting in the swing on Grandma and Grandpa's porch, holding hands, looking at the stars, never imagining I would be a world apart from you, my little blonde whirlwind.

Yes, it's me.

Just a few words, a few seconds of peace snatched out of a world that is increasingly chaotic.

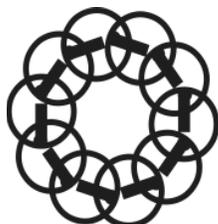
All of the words I had stored up in a full heart, behind closed lips for weeks, suddenly change form, becoming tears that refuse to be held back, tears of love and joy and loss and patience and pain for you, for me, for what has been and what may be.

I cannot speak, but I can hear, and I hear your voice as it always was, reciting Qur'aan all day long, no matter what you were doing.

I cannot speak, but I can hear, and I hear your voice as it always was, asking questions that made me think with my head as well as my heart.

I cannot speak, but I can hear, and I hear your voice as it always was, before.

Your voice and the wind blend together, and I hear the cry of the child that has become the man.



Catch and Release

Susan Keizer, Davis CA

October in New Zealand is spring going into summer, balmy days and clear skies. We had made our way down the south island to Wanaka looking for a prime fly-fishing location. Every promising spot we passed was vetoed by my companion, Bob, as was my suggestion of using a guide. I didn't know if it was a matter of the cost or his pride.

Bob and I had been together just seven months before this trip. I had been willingly seduced by his easy charm, even as I was aware of his history of serial affairs. In my libidinous fog, I was lulled into denial.

As we made our way down the island, I picked up fishing brochures at some of the tourist stops, hoping to persuade Bob to hire a guide. I particularly liked the sound of one who came recommended as someone knowing how to read the river. After considerable persuasion, Bob agreed that we hire him for one day.

We met Greg the next morning. A young, patient, quiet-spoken and agreeable man, he put us in at the head of the Upper Clutha, a pristine, swiftly-moving river following the smooth curve of the land on either side, lapping onto gently sloping sandy shores. We moved with the current, ripples bouncing, as we passed open groves of trees, low mountains in the distance. It was a clear, beautiful day.

Learning how to read the river, lure the fish, which fly to use, watching for the right moment, casting with finesse then reeling it in, is the essence of fly-fishing. If there is a hatch, the goal is to choose a fly that closely mimics those particular insects released into the air from the surface of the water, some then dropping from branches overhanging the river. Once the prize fish takes the hook, is netted, pulled on board and admired, squirming and lashing about, it is let go and flips its way back into the river, perhaps taking with it some degree of caution. This is the fine art of catch-and-release.

Greg maneuvered our rubber raft over to still pools where the trout were languishing in the warm water, then back across the river to follow the flow, looking for the best place to cast. Our rods flexed as we drew them back and forth, throwing out the line, and slowly drawing it back along the surface. Bob got the first strike and brought in a beautiful trout. Excited at his catch, he posed, grinning, as I took a photo. He extracted the hook from its mouth and released it into the water, a look of deep satisfaction on his face.

We spent another day with Greg, the first one was so successful, though not for me. Although I come from a long line of fly fishermen, my amateur status caught up with me, even if my one successful catch did bring in a very handsome trout. The second day, after tangling my line any number of times and frightening the fish, I lay my rod in the bottom of the raft and watched Greg and Bob continue their successful pursuit of the wily trout. I soon found myself lulled into the movement of the river, watching the clouds shift, hypnotized by the rhythm of the boat and the graceful pendulum of the back and forth of the casting rods. Bob caught at least ten more trout. His excitement was palpable. I was content in my solitude. Greg brought us back late that afternoon to where we had originally put in.

My relationship with Bob was to last another year and a half. It struck me later that his expertise at catch-and-release should have come as no surprise. He had had years of practice, casting his expert eye on the possibilities, knowing how to lure us in, catch us, and then release us when he was done. I had been caught in his net, as had many others, fooled when it came to distinguishing the fake fly from the real.

Deep Disappointment

Candi Byrne, Martinsburg WV

As a teen, sparked by the underwater adventures of Lloyd Bridges as 'frogman' Mike Nelson in the television show *Sea Hunt*, I daydreamed of experiencing close encounters with marine life, ransoming treasures from sunken vessels, and rigging underwater demolition charges.

After a grueling summer of babysitting, I'd earned enough money for scuba diving lessons at the YMCA, expecting Thrills! Exotic Equipment! Mysteries of the Deep!

Instead, I got...a submerged snack test.

"You must drink a Coke and eat a banana underwater to prove you can control your breathing," our hunky instructor informed us divers-in-training during orientation.

"Um, isn't that why we have air tanks?" I asked.

"What if your regulator malfunctions and you have to buddy breathe?" Hunky questioned.

I had no idea what that meant. At 15, I was by far the youngest student, and the only female, so I giggled fetchingly and nodded like my head was a cocktail shaker.

The first sessions were land-based – memorizing decompression charts and watching grainy docudramas about astonishing disasters awaiting a careless diver. I was fairly certain we'd be safe from great white sharks in abandoned limestone quarries – the diving sites of choice in my neck of the Northern Indiana woods – but one could not be too careful.

I chafed to get into the water and practice defensive moves, even in the swampy Y pool. They had a 'why bother' policy when it came to cleaning...or perhaps they felt excessive chlorine would either kill any germs on the flotilla of band-aids and mats of hair, or swimmers wouldn't see the flotsam and jetsam because of chemically induced blindness.

On certification day, I aced the hour-long treading water test; I've got the buoyancy of a fishing bobber – treading water for me means flicking a finger or flexing a toe every three minutes. With just the slightest bit of smugness, I performed an elaborate hand-jive during the legs-only portion of the test, as I watched the male students flailing – and failing – to keep their heads above water.

Certification was a slam-dunk...until chow time.

Hunky handed each of us a 10-ounce bottle of Coke, then instructed, "Sit on the bottom of the pool, remove your regulator, and drink up." He demonstrated the mouth move necessary to keep the pop aimed for the gullet – lips pursed like the elastic band of a shower cap over the open bottle top. "Once you finish, replace and clear your regulator, and I'll give you a banana."

Thumb-stoppered Coke bottles in hand, my male classmates slid into the deep end of the pool and rocketed to the bottom.

My cork-like body defied descent. I flapped my arms trying to keep myself under, but the moment I slowed, I breeched the surface like a whale, Coke pluming from the agitated bottle.

Hunky tapped my head and brandished a length of thick black webbing studded with weights. "Strap this around your waist. It'll help neutralize your buoyancy."

It didn't.

"Twenty-two pounds couldn't keep you down," Hunky said in admiration...or maybe it was vexation; the years dim the finer points. Either way, Hunky was undeterred. He ducked under water and grabbed my ankles. I had only a moment to consider what I would wear on our first date when he yanked me under.

He pointed at the half-empty bottle of Coke, then pinned me to the wall with his shoulder. I drank, choked, drank the rest, cleared my regulator, and tapped his back. He rolled away and I stood up.

"Banana time?" I asked hopefully, batting my chlorine-ravaged baby blues.

"No, you took too long and now I've got to run."

I pouted. It would never happen this way in *Sea Hunt*.

Farm Haiku

Maya Lazarus, Caldwell TX

noontime heat,
even lizards seek
a cool place to rest

yellow squash flowers
embrace the day –
sun closes them soon

sunset folds its wings,
egrets pass over
to begin again

spider struggles
to lift her cargo –
I too have my burdens

palm-thatched roof
sleeping bats hide,
arise at dusk

an ensemble of dragonflies
hover in midair –
where to go next?



A Belated Thank-You, Mrs. Allen

Julie Whitmore, Bandera TX

Recently, watching a group of talking heads on a well-known TV show, I realized that the debate about education standards has now become political as well as public. It has been going on at least 50 years with no sign of resolution. As the talk sometimes grows silly and trite, I'd like to add my two-cent's worth of wisdom, in the form of a personal thank-you, which I regret never personally delivering.

In the late 1950s, for reasons I don't know, middle school students in Pennsylvania were required to take one year of remedial English. I suppose the rule resulted from the seemingly endless debate over standardized test scores.

Anyway, in the seventh grade at Kennard-Dale Junior-Senior High School in Fawn Grove, PA, I found myself in such a class, led by Mrs. Allen, who otherwise taught math. We were all given placement tests at the beginning of the term. Having grown up an only child on a farm raising sheep, I was an early and profuse reader, and therefore tested as reading at college sophomore level.

Mrs. Allen was a sweet, middle-aged teacher. My desk was near the front of the classroom because I didn't yet have glasses to cure my nearsightedness, so I heard several long sighs as she sat at her desk grading the tests. I assumed these were because of the results. Many years later, another reason occurred to me: she was wondering what in the world to do with me as the rest of the class toiled through the equivalent of today's English as a Second Language Workbooks.

It sounds hifalutin' but it is no exaggeration to say that her solution changed my life. One day she called me up to her desk as she tore off a hall pass and handed it to me.

"You can spend the whole period (three per week) in the library," she said without preamble. "I don't think you'll be bored there, but if I ever find you anywhere else except on a bathroom break, you'll be back here."

I had no idea the gift I'd been given. This was long before "gifted children" curricula, and I'm not even sure I fit that category. There wouldn't have been one in the smallest high school in the county, anyway. I didn't have to write book reports, or even tell her what I was reading.

She accompanied me to the library and introduced me to the librarian, of whom I have absolutely no recollection. By today's standards, the library was small, about the 1400 rectangular sq.ft. of a double-wide mobile home. I don't know how many books there were – one set of *Americana* encyclopedias, several bibles, and a truly eclectic collection of fiction.

As I recall, reference books were in the middle. To the left when entering, arranged according to the Dewey Decimal System, fiction covered about half the total shelf space.

I'm fairly sure Mrs. Allen's decision would be frowned upon today. But I also now believe that because of that experience I became an English teacher, journalist, and freelance writer.

What did I read? Biographies. For a period the American Revolution fascinated me: Paul Revere, Thomas Jefferson, almost the whole gang. But the fiction shines in memory. What other seventh grader would read Robert Ruark's *Something of Value*, about the Mau Mau rebellion? or all the novels available by Rafael Sabatini – *Scaramouche* and *Captain Blood*, plus Alexander Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, and Bulwer-Lytton's *The Last Days of Pompeii*.

This last is humorous because the British nobleman began one novel with "It was a dark and stormy night," which has engendered many annual literary contests and represents the epitome of maudlin Victorian romance. I, of course, did not learn that until much later.

There was also Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, and other short stories and novels, and Louisa May Alcott.

Upon reflection there seems to be a majority of historical novels, some of which never appeared upon a single university reading list in my six years of undergraduate and graduate study.

The most influential and ravenously read were the novels of Ernest Hemingway. I was at a point of walking around or even sitting at the dinner table with an open book in my hands. Our sheep dog did most of the work after school! My favorite Hemingway novel to this day is *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and some English teachers in college criticized my work for being "too much like Hemingway," who was not in fashion in college literature during the 1960s and early '70s.

I can surely say without bragging that I knew more about the Spanish Civil War, Picasso, and Guernica than any other 13-year-old in the county.

Mrs. Allen gave me a priceless gift – the freedom to read, and to learn, without judgment. This led to a life of enjoyment, lifelong job opportunities, a hobby that will never be exhausted, and the satisfaction of knowing that Mrs. Allen knew more than one way to skin a cat. I regret I never told her this in person, but she knows that I thank her with all my heart.



Invisible

Lucy Painter, Sarasota FL

Tap, tap – I felt a small pat on my arm as I picked out oranges from a pyramid at Sweet Bay Grocery on Beneva Road. My mind was five blocks away, back at the animal shelter, where I had spent the afternoon trying to teach Big Otis to walk calmly on his leash, not successfully. Today the goofy hound had won our battle of wills. I was sweaty, hot, tired, decidedly dirty, and looking forward to home and a cool shower.

Tap, tap. Irritated, I turned my head to locate the interruption.

Nothing. There was no one there. At least, that is what I thought until I looked down. Next to me, and reaching not quite to my shoulder, stood a tiny old woman, her arthritic hand on my sweaty arm.

"Dearie," she looked up at me with faded blue eyes. "Can you give me a ride home? I walked here but am too tired to walk back." The accent was something foreign, maybe Eastern European. She looked very old, her face a map of wrinkles and lines etched into leathery skin. Her shiny black suit, once elegant and expensive, hung on her frame, but lent her an air of Old World dignity. Around her neck draped a bright red and purple scarf, damp now with her sweat.

"Of course we can," Charlie, my husband, answered from behind me. "Where do you live?"

She gave us the address, one I recognized as in a neighborhood not far away but sitting along busy Fruitville Road, an obstacle course for even the young spry pedestrian, much less an elderly little woman.

Holding tightly to my arm, she crossed the parking lot with us in slow measured steps and allowed Charlie to lift her into the rear seat of our SUV, packed with dog leashes and dirty T-shirts from our day at the shelter. Ignoring the mess, she daintily pulled her skirt over her skinny knees and sat upright, her tiny feet dangling from the high seat. She reminded me of our children, the expression on their faces as we set out for ice cream or a trip to the park, expectant and happy.

As Charlie maneuvered through the heavy traffic on Fruitville Road, she told us her story. Her voice carried softly from the back seat.

"My husband and I came here many years ago. We were so happy then, had so much to look forward to. We knew all of our

neighbors, all of their children, who used to play in each others' yards and ride bicycles to school together and fish in the canal over there," she said, pointing to a slim thread of water in the distance.

"But that was then," she continued. "Our children are gone now, moved away. They say they are too busy to come to Florida to see me. Our son, Detrick, has a big job up in New York, but he always sends a Christmas card. And they all came down to their father's funeral last year. Last September it was, almost a year ago now."

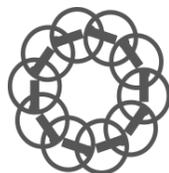
No one spoke as we turned onto her street, a short dead-end road of the small bungalows so popular in 1950s Florida. The sidewalks remained, but the trees had been cut down, leaving the little houses to bake in the sun, the surrounding grass burned to dust. Broken toys, plastic and faded, littered the yards, and white Styrofoam cups gathered at the edge of drainage culverts. Next to broken porches sat old trucks, some without tires, propped up on blocks and dripping oil onto the dirt. In grimy windows hung aluminum blinds at crazy angles. Not a human face appeared, only the tinny sound of a cheap radio blasting percussion into the hot still air. The street was empty, except for a black dog skulking along a fence. With a low growl, he turned to glance at us before darting into an alley.

"That's my house, number 14," she whispered from the back seat as Charlie slowed to avoid a black trash bag lying in the street. Her lawn, surrounded by a chain link fence, needed mowing, and weeds poked their heads through the lattice. But her shades were evenly pulled and her front porch swept clean. Pots of red geraniums flanked the white front door, and in the front window sat a large yellow cat, perking its ears as we approached.

Looking warily at the little house, Charlie asked, "Are you okay here? By yourself?"

"Yes, I think so," she sighed. "I don't know my neighbors now, don't know who they are or what they do. They don't speak to me, but they leave me alone. Their children play in the street, but they don't come into my yard, so I don't even know their names. But I'm all right here. It's OK."

Charlie lifted her down and helped her through the gate, while the cat stretched and yawned in the window. We watched her unlock the front door and enter the little house, alone and invisible.



A Pit Stop in the Middle of Nowhere Before Changing Directions

Grace Fiandaca, Altamonte Springs FL

We are somewhere west of the town of Wildwood, Florida, as close as I can tell from the map. We are at a transition point where we have to leave the turnpike, on which we have been traveling west for some time. It is here, in the middle of nowhere, we will get onto I-75, heading north on that artery that pumps cars in and out of Florida. It will take several hours to get through the northwestern part of our state – a huge chunk of not much – before we cross into Georgia.

The drive through southern Georgia is even longer, with its endless loop of landscape. For hundreds of miles, scraggly brush and Jesus billboards connect small towns made of truck stops, rednecks, and dilapidated and abandoned buildings. Once we close in on Atlanta, we return to civilization. Our destination lies north of the city, where my daughter and son-in-law live. But before we undertake the long trek north on I-75, we make a pit stop at McDonald's.

I have lived my life in context, in terms of my relationship to those around me. For these next few days, I leave behind the familiar responsibilities. My dog is in the care of my son, who is also charged with checking on my ninety-three-year-old mother, who resides in a skilled nursing care facility. Normally, my brother and I alternate days visiting her, as witnesses to her slow but accelerating decline, charging ourselves with ensuring her proper care and the assurance that she is loved.

My relationship with my mother was always difficult, until these last six months of infirmity, as her body and mind fail her. My relationship with my daughter is often prickly and hard to navigate, as well. In adulthood, she has kept me at arm's length, until a year ago when she stretched the distance between us farther by moving 470 miles away from me, from family, from Orlando.

But she is excited about our visit. After five years of marriage, she and her husband, unable to get pregnant, are

going the *in vitro* route. The required rounds of daily shots have taken a toll on her and she wants to see her momma. We are on our way. Right after we finish eating in this perfect setting for a post-apocalypse movie.

I gaze out at the landscape, which manages to be both eerie and unremarkable, echoing the generic décor of the McDonald's, with its assembly-line food products. As I bite into a tasteless breakfast sandwich, I feel a dull disillusionment coat my senses. My husband and I sit across from each other, both of us bleary-eyed and sullen from the hangover of last night's argument. Our sixteen-year marriage is in trouble; our relationship feels strained to a breaking point.

Once I've slugged down some caffeine, I feel fortified enough to tell him what my daughter (his stepdaughter) called me about a few minutes before we pulled in here. She just found out that she is, at long last, pregnant. And despite my efforts not to, I cry. In a McDonald's, sitting at a table bolted to the floor. To my surprise, he cries too.

I read a quote this morning: When you are nowhere, the possibilities are endless. My question: Is this still true for me, even at 57? I need to believe that the answer is 'yes', that there is still enough time for me to choose what I want next, without considering the answer in terms of others. Sixty is visible on the horizon and the possibility of nothing-special-and-then-I-die propels me to dare for something more.

So I sip my coffee and spread out a map in front of me, studying the options. It will require some semblance of a plan – an intended destination, a map, a flexible itinerary that includes alternate routes and extra time built in for a few wrong turns.

But whatever I decide, I know for sure I can't keep going in this direction. I need to make a sharp turn here, in the middle of nowhere, if I ever want to get out of the state I'm in and into another.

The Bridge, The Creek, The Woods

Ann Haas, Akron OH

Stroll a sweet wild path between tree and water

Climb

Listen

Reflect

Emerge refreshed



poetry in motion

Molly Welch Harris, Miami FL

poems,
though they don't arrive often,
slip from me like quicksilver,
a horse's shiver
from head to tail, rippling,
unfolding wholeness in swift motion
galloping freely across the fields

Wild Lavender

Linda M. Hasselstrom, Hermosa SD

The best politics is right action.

~ Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948)

On a visit to Albuquerque, my life partner and I find a well-known organic and natural food store. I'm hoping to buy lavender flowers, so I can make my own sleeping potion. After years in the city, I still have trouble sleeping with cars going by twenty feet from my ears.

One of the joys of shopping in this particular store is the people who work here, people of every age, color, shape, size, and hairstyle, and all smiling. Apparently the store's policies don't require uniforms; I've seen employees wearing every conceivable mode of clothing including flowing robes. We enjoy the refreshing contrast to the cowboy conservative look we grew up with; in our town, the western look is giving way to teenage girls in pajamas and teenage boys wearing pants falling off their hips and dragging the ground. Watching a couple of these victims of fashion try to run across the street can keep me giggling for blocks.

I first search unsuccessfully for lavender flowers in the herbal blossom section, then move in ever-increasing concentric circles out through other herbal beauty and health preparations. The degree of optimism or fantasy involved in either buying or selling some of these products ought to give us hope in a skeptical age, but I'm too cynical to buy most of the stuff.

By the time I realize I haven't found the lavender flowers, I've reached the meat counter, and made smiling eye contact with a skinny guy wearing a cap the size of a prize-winning pumpkin. The cap is huge to accommodate a head full of springy, curly, bouncy hair. The words to the song from the musical *Hair* start tripping through my head – "Shining, gleaming, streaming, flaxen waxen." His sidelocks dangle to his shoulders like the ringlets worn by Orthodox Jewish men. When I laugh with delight, he apparently reads my expression correctly, because his face lights up. I expect him to chime in with the words in my mind, "There ain't no words/ For the beauty, the splendor, the wonder of my hair," but what he really says is, "May I help you?"

"I know it's not your department," I say, "but I can't find any lavender flowers with the other herbals."

"I'll get you the guy in charge of the lavender flower department," he replies, reaching for the phone. "He'll meet you back in that aisle."

"There's a department?" I mumble, but he's turned away.

I amble back to the aisle and find it fully occupied by a scrawny little Hispanic guy wearing earphones. He spins and twirls and snaps his fingers, bopping back and forth from the jars of herbal flowers on one side to the tofu scrub on the other. His wide pants drag on the floor, and with every other shimmy,

he grabs one side or the other and yanks them up over his purple shorts. His shirt is unbuttoned, and his faux gold chains clank in time with some beat I can't hear. But I can almost see the beat: *snap, snatch, dip, sli-i-i-iiiide, snap, grab, bounce*.

I'll admit that I do not always feel warm around some of the gentlemen who dress in this manner because I've seen them selling drugs and waving knives and heard them make remarks in Spanish that I understand, but would rather not translate for a family audience.

But this lad is a spinning top, a dervish of joy. He stands only a little higher than my belt buckle, and he is so happy that I can't help but smile.

He looks at me, and I see myself in his shades. Uh-oh. The white-haired gringo female is wearing a foolish smile, an ankle-length dress, and yellow rubber shoes. She looks like trouble. She makes eye contact.

I look around for the Lavender Flower Manager.

The Hispanic guy bobs up and down in front of me. "May I help you?" he says, rhythmically, and gestures at the shelves beside us. "This is my section."

Be-boppa, slide, shimmy, YANK.

"Ah---er---I'm looking for lavender flowers, and they don't seem to be here."

"I see that," he says. "Let me do some checking." Still bopping, he gyrates to the phone in the next aisle. I wander past some lipsticks and cosmetic creams, peering over the top of a display to see him talking on the phone, twisting and wriggling around the column holding the phone. I drift off, but I hear him hang up and dial again.

A few minutes later, I turn a corner and find him coming toward me. "Ma'am," he says, and then explains politely that the store's warehouse in Los Angeles does not have any lavender flowers. No other health food store in Albuquerque has lavender flowers. "There's a shortage," he says, "Worldwide; nobody has any lavender flowers. I am sorry."

I thank him for trying, for going to all the extra work of making additional calls. I smile. He smiles back. We stand, looking each other in the eye, for a long moment.

And then he bows and puts out his hand. I nod and bow my head and shake it, and he breaks into a huge grin and so do I and both of us shake hands a little longer, nodding and smiling at each other. Another few seconds of that and we'd have been dancing. We are both so happy to be friendly to one another.

And then I go on down the aisle toward Jerry, and the manager of the lavender flower division goes the other way. Each of us moves to our own music. But we look over our shoulders at each other, smiling. And we will both remember.



Sacred Camping

Judy Miller, Zionsville IN

The birds wake me from a deep slumber. I rise from the hard, unforgiving ground, untangling my slightly sore adult body from my sleeping bag. I forgot to bring a ground pad to put under the bag, something it seems I now sadly require.

My older daughter is still zipped-up snug in her sleeping bag, almost directly facedown, puffy contented snores wisp from her throat. My younger daughter sleeps face up, flat on her back, arms stretched out wide as if she is welcoming a friend. Her sleeping bag is apparently too warm; it is scrunched in a mess at her feet.

The kids went to bed late last night, after we ran out of marshmallows and stories around a roaring campfire. My husband and I retired a little later, after planning today's activities over a glass of wine.

I slowly unzip the front flaps, rolling and tying them up and out of the way so that the breakfast I make of biscuits, bacon, and eggs cooked over the open fire will coax their sleeping forms awake. I open other tent flaps so that cool morning air can move through the screened vents, cooling the tent, cleansing it of our salty night-sweat. I slip on my shoes just outside our tent. They are laden with dew.

I hear my husband moving about quietly in the "boy" tent, unzipping and opening their tent flaps. His head pokes out; he smiles and a green eye winks "good morning" at me.

We began taking our kids camping when they were toddlers, before they could become accustomed to and expect a cushy camping experience. We began in our back yard with small tents, just like I did as a child. The kids thought it was fun; they loved the adventure. We camped in pelting rain, in inches upon inches of snow, and in the soggy humid heat of the Midwest summer.

We quickly moved into bigger tents and to campsites with access to potable water and outhouses. Then we began to rough it, embracing primitive camping – where we brought in our own water, had no access to electricity, and dug our own latrines.

In a world that rewards us with instantaneous feedback, mires us in the sticky tar of information, and pulls us away from authentic relationships with one another, we have chosen to take breaks, physically removing ourselves from being plugged in to anything, other than each other. Camping forces us to slow down, to reconnect with one another in an organic setting, to explore and appreciate the miraculous world in which we live, and to hold our family sacred.

My younger daughter is up and out first; she goes to the nearby stream to wash her face and brush teeth. She runs into our campsite full of excitement, "Mom, I saw a cardinal feeding her babies! Right across the stream! Where are the binoculars?"



I ask her to stay close, out of the water, while she is making morning discoveries. She nods vigorously as she finds the binoculars on the camp table. She shucks her shoes and goes into our tent, quickly reemerging with her camera, sketchbook, and pencils, "I'm going to draw for a little bit."

My daughter is out discovering uncharted territory when my youngest son wraps his small arms around me, "Do you need some help, Mom?"

"I want your company, sweetie."

I receive a tighter hug and on-his-tippy-toes kisses in answer. He sits at the table, talking to me while his dad searches for firewood.

"Can you check the buckets? Make sure we have enough water?"

He looks in each, "We're good, Mom."

The fire is ready. I throw the bacon on the griddle. Its scent brings out my oldest, "Hey, I'm hungry!" He envelops me in a huge hug – "Morning, Mama" – and reaches for the bacon.

I playfully slap his hand away, "Not ready yet. Why don't you and your brother go to the stream and check on your sister? She's exploring and drawing."

The boys head down to the water. My husband returns from the opposite end of our site with a huge armful of dry kindling and places it over by the wood we've found for our campfires.

"Are all of the kids up?" he asks, as he pours hot water into his mug to make tea.

I pour myself another cup of coffee, "Three-quarters. I think she's rousing since breakfast is almost ready."

Sure enough, our older daughter emerges from the tent, eyes still full of sleep, toothbrush and toothpaste in hand. She is our night owl, our late-morning sleeper.

"Morning, honey!" we greet her. She smiles and stumbles toward the stream, in the direction of her siblings' laughter.

"Tell your sister and brothers that breakfast is ready, please."

The kids come back and we sit down to full plates around the camp table, and to conversation about what they have already seen this brief morning. Our younger daughter pulls out her sketchbook to show us a drawing of the mother cardinal and her babies, and a few pictures of other discoveries. There are also a bunch of photos of the four of them – singly, in pairs, trios, and all together with the help of the camera's self-timer – being goofy, being together, making memories of a beautiful late spring morning surrounded by nature and family.

Angels Landing

Pat Bean, Tucson AZ

I do not understand how anyone can live without one small place of enchantment to turn to.

~Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings

The first time I climbed Angels Landing in Zion National Park, the five-mile round-trip hike was little more than a walk in the park. I did the climb in about half the time the trail guide said to allow; and I scoffed at the guide's mention that the trail was a "strenuous" one.

My last hike to the top, however, took quite a bit longer than the trail guide indicated. And when I finally reached the summit, where family members and friends had been waiting for some time, I was greeted by a crowd singing "Happy Birthday" to me. It was my 69th birthday, and my kids had put together an impromptu party on top and invited all the other hikers to join in the fun.

After I managed to catch my breath, and thanked everyone, I looked around. I was, as always, awed and thrilled to the pit of my soul by the magnificent view. Once again I knew I could now handle anything the coming year might throw my way. It was the exact feeling I have experienced more than 30 times. Getting to the top of this Zion Canyon landmark has become, when circumstances allow, my annual birthday tradition.

The slower pace which the years have imposed on me is not something I bemoan. It has given me more time to thoroughly enjoy Mother Nature's bounties, from the trill of a warbler singing in a tree below the trail, to the colorful splash of Indian paintbrush that has pushed its way up through a crack in a rock. Growing older has let me fully appreciate the wisdom of Ursula K. Le Guin's words, "It is good to have an end to journey toward; but it is the journey that matters."

The trail to the top of Angels Landing begins by crossing a wooden footbridge spanning the Virgin River. The path then meanders gently, rising slowly up from the river's edge while providing a clear view ahead of Angels Landing. But the rough dirt and rock footpath soon evolves into a series of rapidly rising hairpin turns, which eventually dump hikers out onto a windy lane carved into a rock section of the mountain. Here, one can enjoy a breezy rest while staring down at ant-sized people and what is now just a pale green ribbon of river.

It is at this juncture in the trail, by way of another small bridge, that hikers pass from the mountain on which the trail

begins, to the base of Angels Landing. Depending on the season, the bridge passes over a gushing stream of water or simply a jumble of rocks. I once lost a pair of sunglasses when the water coming down the narrow canyon between the mountains was in high spirits.

On the far side of the bridge, the path gentles and the air cools, making perfect sense of why the canyon between the two mountains was named "Refrigerator." But soon the shady pleasure of the narrow canyon ends, and the trail heads upward again, and up again, through the 21 short, hairpin turns of Walter's Wiggles – yes, I've counted them – and then onto a huge flat-rock area known as Scout's Lookout. Located on the back side of Angels Landing, this is the stopping point for many hikers, since the last half-mile to the top is a scramble over boulders, and at one point crosses quite a narrow ridge, offering dual bird's eye views of the landscapes below. Thankfully, there's a safety chain to hold on to while making this particular crossing.

It's not unusual, especially when I've stopped to catch my breath and look around, to see a peregrine falcon soaring above – or below me. Peregrine falcons nest each year near the top of the Landing, and seeing one never fails to fill me with wonder.

I've hiked to the top of Angels Landing in scorching hot weather, in high winds, in rain, once in a snow flurry, and once with a knee wrapped in bandages. I've done the trip alone, and with friends, and once with three young granddaughters in tow.

If I had to pick a favorite climb to the top, it would be the windy one in which I found myself hiking alone. When I reached the top, I had the whole summit to myself, and so it stayed for the entire hour I was up there.

That windy climb was back in the late 1980s. I've not had the pleasure of such solitude since, although I did stand on top one time with only a kindred-soul friend as a companion. That was the snowy climb. She and I had continued on our hike as snowflakes fell around us, and as we neared the summit, the only people we saw were those returning down the trail.

Angels Landing is a part of me. I have no better words to describe it. All cares and worries vanish when I look out from its summit perch to the Great White Throne opposite, and then down to the tiny string of the Virgin River flowing below. I am home and at peace.



Accompanied by...

Marian McCaa Thomas, Leawood KS

You might think that after what happened on that August Sunday morning in 1958, I'd never want to do it again. Nothing had gone wrong while we were rehearsing, but now the soloist, who was singing from memory, suddenly switched to a different solo from the one on my music rack.

At nineteen, I was the summer substitute for the organist – my first paying job as a church musician. After eleven years of piano performance and several years of organ study, I knew that stopping cold was the worst thing I could do, so I kept my hands on the keyboard, finding chords I hoped didn't clash with what she was singing. I gave her a look of wide-eyed panic and a slight shake of my head. As soon as she realized what she had done, she quickly returned to the original song. What was probably only twenty seconds seemed like twenty minutes to me, but at least I didn't make the soloist look bad.

Despite that rocky start, which taught me the importance of being able to improvise during a public performance, for the next fifty years I enjoyed collaborating with a wide variety of musicians. I kept working on improving the skills needed to be a good accompanist. What are those skills? Besides the basics of playing well with accurate notes, rhythm, dynamics, and articulation, one must be a perceptive listener in order to follow the soloist's every interpretation. Three-way communication between the soloist, the accompanist, and the composer is essential, since all are trying to enable the music to live in the present moment. What did the composer intend? What were the performance practices in the composer's era? What is the appropriate tempo for the piece? If there is an introduction before the vocal part starts, is it in the tempo that the singer wants when the voice enters? The most satisfying collaborations occur when the soloist and accompanist agree on tempos, phrasing, dynamics, and interpretation without prior consultation. When they both get "inside the music," they have arrived at the same artistic place, which is thrilling for both performers and listeners.

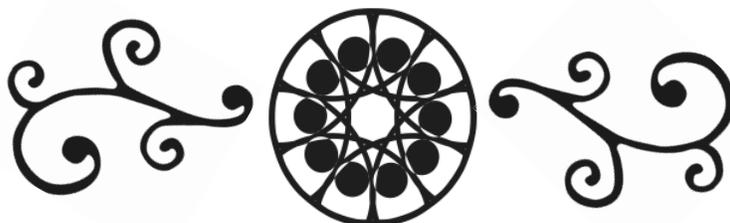
For years I enjoyed listening to the beautiful collaboration of the great African-American contralto, Marian Anderson, and pianist Franz Rupp. She could sing a world of meaning into one long note, and he never let the piano get in the way of her voice. Some of my most enjoyable collaborations were with African-American musicians, three of whom were tenors. The first young man, Bob Davis, was a year ahead of me in high school; I accompanied him for solos in concerts and district competitions. Bob's favorite solo was "Just for Today," a prayer based on Jesus' admonition not to worry about tomorrow.

When I became choir director at Linwood Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, Missouri, the first person I interviewed and recommended for hiring was Guerron "Reggie" Leach, a

violinist studying at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music. He had developed tendonitis and had been forced to stop playing his violin. That's when he took up singing instead, and discovered that he had a beautiful tenor voice that could soar to great heights with clarity and strength. We collaborated for eight years, during which he sang many Negro spirituals as well as oratorio solos. He had a deep understanding of the spirituals, which might have come from the fact that he, like the slaves who created the songs, had suffered from the blind prejudices of others: he was both black and gay.

Another student at the Conservatory of Music, Robert Hughes had already finished an undergraduate degree in vocal performance. He worked only a couple of months as the choir's tenor section leader before he decided he didn't really want the job and quit. He angered some of us for leaving us in the lurch, because it was impossible to find a good tenor soloist after the Conservatory's semester had started. By then all the good singers had already secured a church job! He was such a good singer, however, that I occasionally asked him to sing for special events, and eventually we made two CDs together of African-American spirituals. After leaving to pursue a career in New York City, he returned to Kansas City at my request to sing the solos in Alice Parker's "Sermon from the Mountain," her tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement. It was easy for me to capture the pathos or jubilation of the spirituals as I accompanied him, because he was very expressive both in voice and in body language.

Collaborating with Ronald Brown was a new experience for me. Ron was a retired professional pianist who had studied at Juilliard and had been house pianist at Kansas City's top hotels for many years. He played jazz, gospel, and classical music equally well, but hadn't played publicly for a few years. When he joined my choir, I discovered what a great pianist he was, and I convinced him to play in church occasionally. At a party we started playing some duets, and discovered that our sense of the music was nearly the same. It was inspirational enough to invoke the muse, allowing us to express our mutual musical convictions. Our two "One Piano, Four Hands" concerts were highlights of my career. In effect, we accompanied each other. Ron freely shared his Juilliard insights on playing the piano, and he became my teacher as well as a friend. He freed me from inhibitions and from self-doubt about my ability to perform at a high level in public, and gave me the gift of believing in myself as a musician. Perhaps the seed for that belief had been planted on an August Sunday morning in 1958, when I was able to cover for another musician who made a mistake, so that no one listening was the wiser.



Heart

Jeanne Guy, Austin TX

My husband's father died on Christmas Eve 2011 from a rapid onset of acute myeloid leukemia, so our holidays were bittersweet. While it was fast, with little pain, and Hospice Odyssey helped us all as we sat vigil from the date of diagnosis (December 17) until he died, it was just such a shock. We picture him now dancing with his wife, who died a mere eleven months earlier. What a wonderful New Year's Eve they will have.

The following is what I wrote on Tuesday morning, December 20, 2011, while still at the hospital with him:

They've taken him away. He was sleeping as I held his hand, kissed his forehead and said I love you, before the attendant rolled the hospital bed out into the long hall, heading to wherever procedures are done.

We have all been reassured that the bone marrow biopsy my father-in-law is about to have is much improved since the days my sister-in-law had hers, 26 years previously. She had Hodgkin's lymphoma, and thanks to early detection and treatment, received a clean bill of health and is with us today.

My 85-year-old father-in-law apparently doesn't have the urinary tract infection first suspected when the family brought him, weak and tired, to the ER three days ago. According to initial tests, we're looking at a leukemia diagnosis; the bone marrow biopsy will let us know.

This funny curmudgeon of a man lost his partner of 62 years to Alzheimer's less than a year ago. Though he is in a lovely retirement center, her loss left a hole in his heart that even the nicest of facilities could not comfort. Lacking caregiving skills, he was at a loss even before she died, as he watched her fade. He was famous for saying "we're fine" when neither he nor she was even close to being okay. He wanted so badly for her to get better.

This morning, while Dad was gone for the procedure, a hospital volunteer came by. This attractive retired woman had stopped by unannounced with a newspaper for me. "You have a little glitter on your face," she said and gently removed it. I laughed as I explained it must have come from the sparkly Christmas boxes sitting next to my makeup mirror. I thanked her and said, "I don't know. Maybe we all could use more glitter about now," and started to tear up unexpectedly. "It doesn't look good for him, my father-in-law." She stayed with me a while and listened while I spoke of both the leukemia and the metaphorical hole in his heart.

After Dad was brought back to the room, Kay, the kind volunteer, stopped by to check on us and said, "I have a present for you." She gave me a wrapped, heart-shaped ornament, the size and thickness of the palm of my hand. It smelled wonderful, filled with a deep woods fresh pine scent, like my house at Christmas time when I was a child.

Dad is still sleeping and I am writing, and praying inadequate prayers. Comfort and joy. I pray for comfort and joy for him and his family.

Holding my new ornament in my lap as I type, the scented gift fills my head with memories of my mother and those long-ago Christmases. Kay the volunteer is now gone; I remove the sparkly, wide red ribbon on the package and unwrap it to get a better look at my unexpected treasure.

Glitter. Silver glitter covers the entire heart.

She brought me a glittered heart. I cry.

I reach for Dad's hand and place this new treasure in it. He continues to sleep as he has for the last three days but his big hand tightens around the comfort and joy that an angel named Kay brought us.

I'm thinking it would be a good idea for all of us to glitter our hearts and share them over the holidays and in the days ahead. If you do, I bet you'll experience that same comfort and joy. After all, we could all use a little glitter right now.

Gringas

Else Tennesen, Homer Glen IL

Gringas
they called us
laughing
at our accented Spanish
behind small, brown hands
that looked just like
Mine.

Gringas
in matching dresses
made by our *abuela*
who sewed *their* dresses
with small, brown hands
that looked just like
Mine.

Gringas
we carried tortillas
bought in the early morning
holding tight to *abuelo's*
small, brown hand
that looked just like
Mine.

Gringas
were they jealous?
Papá went north of the border
my mother's white hand
in his small, brown hand
that looked just like
Mine.



The Orange Flyer

Lois Ann Bull, Easton CT

"Don't worry, Mom, you won't go too fast. The sun's been on the snow for five hours now. I'm sure it's softened." Her reassurance made me smile.

Abbie took a few running steps and belly-flopped onto her molded plastic sled. She shot away, swished down the hill, and disappeared in a hollow as she carefully avoided an old cellar hole and electric fence. In celebration of my 50th birthday, my grown children and I were sledding on our favorite half-mile run under a cloudless, bluebird sky on our farm in Vermont.

Sledding topped my pleasure list. Starting under the watchful eye of my father at age three, I've never stopped loving the sensation of giving myself to gravity. Once I had children, the tradition continued. I even bought a baby sled before a stroller. The small slope in our front yard became the training ground. Over the years, the kids spent hours on runner-less metal saucers, sheets of blue plastic, molded polyurethane toboggans, and with the right snow conditions, Flexible Flyers.

When they outgrew the front yard, we switched to the bottom half of our meadow. This longer ride meant more huffing and puffing to get back up. But they begged to go again and again.

One beautiful day, we enlarged our horizons. Digging out the old Flexible Flyers of my youth, I soaped the rusted runners and took the children on an unforgettable ride down the snow-covered dirt road to the next town three miles away. The kids never forgot that ride, and when they got older, they begged to sled the road again.

I allowed a few very-late-night rides when they were in high school, but used a shorter section of the road. On those forays, I would follow in the car, my high beams illuminating them as well as the road, but my body rified with anxiety and I could hardly bear the thought of the danger. Often I clocked them at 35 miles an hour, much to their delight.

This rolling meadow, however, remained the favorite place. For years, I had led them down the long run, screaming and careening nearly out of control. Then they'd jump in the back of the farm pickup for the return trip to the top. Now grown up, they chose the runs and brought me back to the top on their snowmobiles. The round trips happened so fast I had little time to reflect.

Once dropped at the top of the meadow, we had to slog through snow out into the field and would flop down and be off before the pickup got back to the bottom. When the eldest got his driver's license, I started to get in as many runs as the kids. We usually had a crowd of teenagers and would be at it for hours.

With all that sledding experience behind me, I had no idea my 50th-birthday run would be unprecedented. Abbie was a

bright-red speck in the distance as I tried to gently lower my body into a prone position on my coveted plastic. "You won't go too fast, Mom." Her last words ran through my mind. I trusted her judgment.

The packed surface let my sled slither forward before I could get on. I flopped down as it picked up speed and, still partly off, wiggled madly to get my knees inside the raised edge. My hands groped for the front to steer. Snow whizzed by at an incredible speed. I came to a little knoll, and shot off airborne for a moment. Then slam, I hit the ground and, back on track, went headlong for the bottom. When I hit the next, bigger knoll, I felt sure I'd reached Mach I. This part of the hill, steeper and shaded from the forgiving sun, remained crusted with a maze of frozen tracks left from yesterday's snowmobiling. My orange sled chattered like a drummer's ratamacue. I worried I'd be black and blue.

Every few seconds, I jumped my trail and like a runaway freight train, switched over to another track left by the crisscrossing of snowmobiles. I had a wild time staying on board, careening over icy hummocks and frozen wakes. My head bounced up and down like a short-stringed yo-yo.

At the bottom, I negotiated the last thirty feet, a narrow opening between a fenced vegetable garden and a copse of evergreens. Then I shot out toward the frozen pond and quickly dragged my booted toes to brake, stopping ten feet from the icy surface. Abbie lay sprawled on the ice, her sled resting beside her. I knew why.

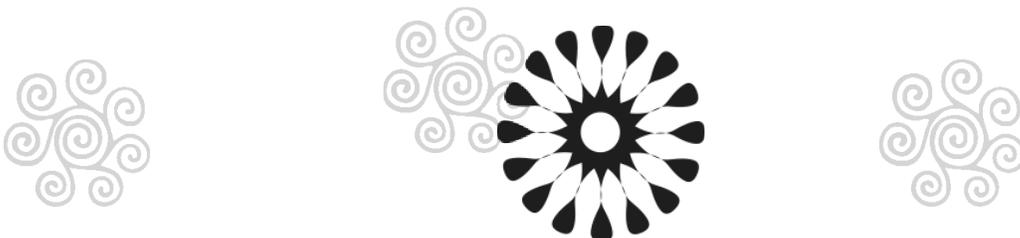
"Oh, my goodness," I moaned in relief and exhaustion as I rolled off my plastic. Within moments, the boys arrived on the snowmobiles to take us back up.

"Mom, Abbie, are you all right?" I heard the alarm in their voices.

Abbie recovered quickly. She rose exhilarated. "Wow! That was the fastest ride I've ever had!" I rose slowly, my frazzled mind less enthusiastic. In fact, I declined a snowmobile ride back up.

"You guys go ahead. I need to walk a bit." More to the point, I needed to decide if I wanted a second turn.

The previous evening, at my birthday party, I had felt as young as ever. My eternal optimism proclaimed I hadn't an ounce of senior in me, no matter what the calendar showed. But now, I questioned that assessment. I realized the excitement of being out of control at age 35 felt a lot different than at 50. Maybe I wasn't invincible after all. I knew I couldn't hang up my sled for good, but had I come full circle? The gentle slope in the front yard, and teaching grandchildren, seemed more appealing than another go-round of flouting, fearing, and flying on my orange sled.



Not Enough

Mignon Martin, San Antonio TX

My parents shared a great romance, but it pales in intensity when compared to the one I had with my mother. Although I was only one of her seven children, I knew early that ours was a powerful passion, which was essential to my sanity.

I sat in her lap and traced the veins in her hands with my little fingers, and when she took a nap, I sulked until she reappeared. I accompanied her everywhere, listening to her voice, savoring her manner with the boy who carried her groceries, the lady at the bank, and Evelyn, her hairdresser. She was utterly charming. Warm and witty. A grand and southern lady.

She was always interested – interested in my latest drawing, the spot on my dress, and the hurt in my heart. She held me and kissed me and told me she loved me. She told me I could do anything and be anybody. She showed me how to mix a cake and how to argue. She gave me spankings and huge birthday parties. She prayed for me and made me take piano lessons far past the time I begged to quit. I supposed each of my siblings had equally intense relationships with my mother, but I didn't care. Clearly, she could demand anyone's heart, so I simply celebrated that she seemed to want mine. She was, and she filled me up, and that was enough.

On the night of their twelfth wedding anniversary, I was sullen and brooding as I pondered the evening without her in it. I lay across her bed, flipping through *Aesop's Fables*, waiting for her to dress. When she stepped out of the closet, I caught my breath. She wore pink linen with pearls and sequins sprinkled across the bodice. Just below her slim hips, the hem flared, stopping right above her perfect knees. Her neck was circled by tiny pink pearls, her ears shimmered with matching clips, and little pink bows hovered on the toes of her shoes. She crossed the room to sit at her dressing table and began to pile her long, dark hair high on her head. She opened a drawer and took out a pair of pink combs made of pearls and sequins and delicate, pink, spun-sugar feathers. She carefully placed one behind each ear and turned for my opinion.

At six years old, sprawled across my mother's bed, I knew beautiful for the first time.

I couldn't breathe, and I wanted to cry, and I needed words I didn't have.

The Alzheimer's unit is called "The Courtyards". There aren't any – courtyards I mean – because they have to keep all the doors locked to prevent residents from wandering out onto the interstate. Just a couple of sad wrought iron tables sit beside a fishless pond in an inaccessible outside area. I visit when I'm in town and I can stand it.

I follow her from the dining room to the TV room, trying to hide my face. I take her arm and don't want to let go. I fix her hair and kiss her and tell her I love her. She sits in a rocking chair wearing a little pink duster, her legs daintily crossed at her ankles, smiling a blank sweetness. My flight leaves in an hour, so I put my head in her lap before I go.

I can't breathe, and I want to cry, and I need words I don't have.



American Dipper

Barbara Heming, Abiquiu NM

Like the Dipper
bobbing, bobbing, bobbing
on the stones at river's edge
I've dipped and dipped
into the current of life,
drinking from its clear cold stream.

Uprooted from Río Plata shores,
transplanted to banks of Wissahickon Creek,
my world shrank
from the freedom of toe-tapping tango
to the lockstep strains of Souza.

I fled to the books lurking
behind the library's gray stones.

Dipping, dipping, dipping
I tasted free flowing water
then took flight when the moment came.

To the shores of the Atlantic,
to Ríos Manzanares and Guadalquivir
and Long Island Sound,
to the Great Lakes – Erie, Michigan, and Superior,
to the depths of Titicaca and the breadth of the Amazon
and the banks of the Potomac, Mahoning, and Chama.

Dip, dip, dipping
until I learned to find water anywhere,
even in the deserts of Peru and New Mexico,
more precious than silver and gold
sought in wild, barren mesas and cliffs.

In the desert I am stripped
of all illusions.
In the silence
I hear the water gurgle
down my canyon creek
and I dip my head again
in reverence.



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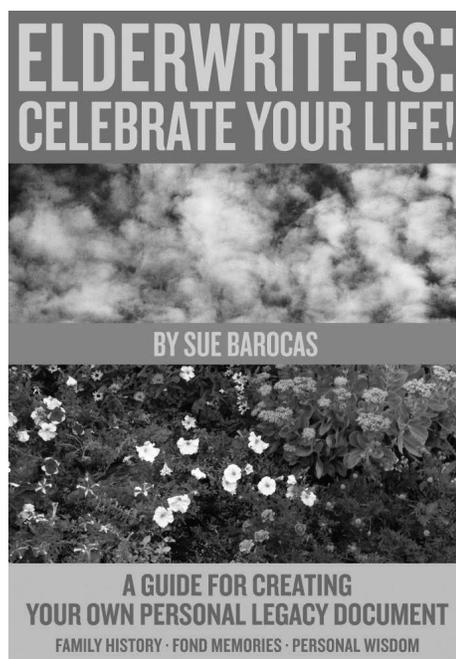
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