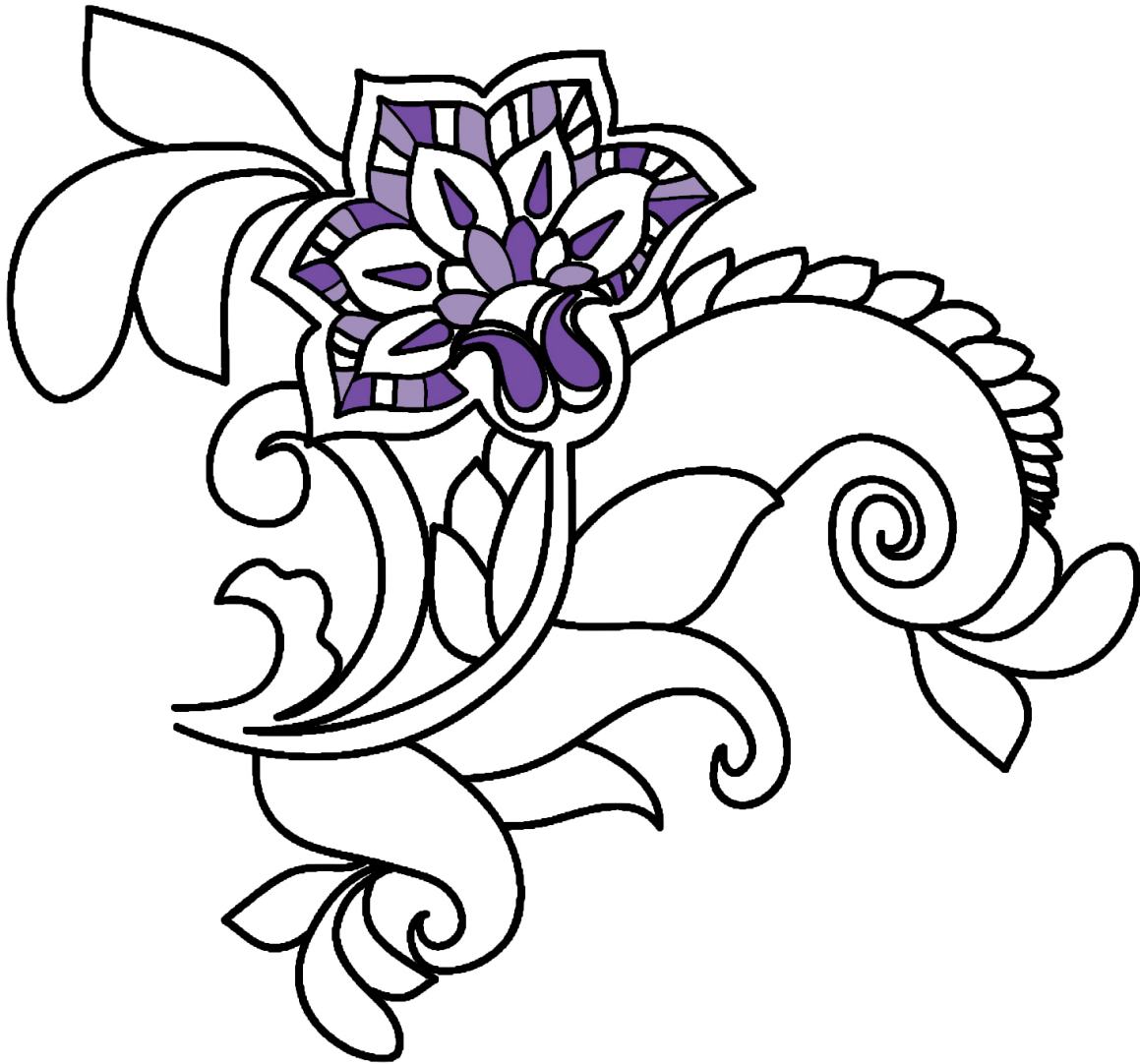


Real Women Write: *Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives*

An Anthology of Fiction, Nonfiction, and Poetry
written by
The Women of Story Circle Network

Volume 15, 2016



Real Women Write:

Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives

We learn best to listen to our own voices if we are listening at the same time to other women, whose stories, for all our differences, turn out, if we listen well, to be our stories also.

—Barbara Deming

Writing makes a map, and there is something about a journey that begs to have its passage marked.

—Christina Baldwin

Real Women Write is an annual anthology of writing by SCN members, including fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. It appears each January in both print and online media formats, showcasing the talent and creativity of our own writing women.

Story Circle Network values every woman's story, and in *Real Women Write* we publish writing about both the individual life in all its uniqueness, and a woman's life as it's understood by all women.

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January, 2017

Welcome to another remarkable collection of writing from the members of Story Circle Network! In this edition of *Real Women Write: Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives*, our fifteenth anthology, you will once again find an array of women's common and uncommon experiences, in voices that are strongly individual.

It's a winding trail from claiming our stories to telling them, from the lives we were given to what we've made of them, from caring for ourselves to nurturing others, from tantrums and setbacks to bravery and good humor and finding our true art. Here we recreate that meandering path of human growth. There are no tidy chapters, but there are connections that build a way forward as you read. From potent memories of childhood to the complexities of grown-up grief, from the challenges of mothering to the lessons of marriage, from hard-earned wisdom to the wild hairs of aging, there is much here that will feel achingly familiar and much that will lead you somewhere new.

As contributor Connie Spittler writes, "The globe moves to the magnificent hubbub of happiness, sadness, love, laughter, grieving, and anger, as women's words sing out, each story separate, yet each story connected by a mystical thread reaching back to ancient times." Anything and everything can be the subject that reveals larger meaning, creates greater understanding, or strengthens your spirit.

The many submissions were a trove, sure to provide what speaks to you. We were able to include an ample selection, yet restrictions of space and more subtle considerations – such as significance, duplication, or imagery – require choosing the best and most meaningful. Accomplished writers are balanced with new voices. Inevitably, there is not enough room for all that could be included. Great thanks go to all the members who entered their work, for every piece comes from the heart.

All those heartfelt words make editing this collection an honor, for which I'm truly grateful, but many more Story Circle members helped to create this annual celebration of women's writing, from the contributors to the Publications Workgroup and the Board of Directors. Each of you is vital and much appreciated. Especially, thanks go to Peggy Moody, our Executive Director, who so skillfully manages all the website and internet parts of the process, and keeps track of everything; to Robin Wittig, our layout and production expert, who turns the selections into a whole and lovely volume; and to our founder and president, Susan Wittig Albert, who provides the inspiration and guidance that began and sustains both SCN and the anthology.

For me, editing *Real Women Write* is a pleasure, a challenge, and an important vehicle for growth. I hope this volume provides those same results for you, as you enjoy the words of your sister writers. Story Circle Network gives voice to women's stories, and in doing so, changes women's lives. We are all truly fortunate to be part of that "magnificent hubbub."

Susan Schoch, editor

Idledale, Colorado

Contributors

Susan Wittig Albert – Bertram, TX

Susan is the author of mysteries, biographical fiction, and memoir, both traditionally published and published under her imprint, Persevero Press. She is the founder and current president of Story Circle Network.

Lee Ambrose – Kingsport, TN

A hospice nurse, certified lay minister, and volunteer hospital chaplain, Lee writes for poetry circle #4. She long served as president and coordinator of the Internet Chapter, and has a seat on the SCN Board of Directors. Lee enjoys writing, reading, and time with her kitty and her grandchildren.

Marilyn Ashbaugh – Edwardsburg, MI

Marilyn is a poet, writer and organic gardener. She lives in a village near the shores of Lake Michigan. She is a member of the Sunset Coast Writers, The Edgewater Writers, and the Riverbend Haiku Club. Her poems have appeared in numerous national publications.

Pat Bean – Tucson, AZ

Retired from a 37-year career as a journalist, Pat bought a small RV, in which she and Maggie, her canine companion, traveled across the country for nine years. She is finishing a book about this adventure called *Travels with Maggie*. Now living in Tucson, Pat's passions are writing, reading, birding, nature, and art.

Deborah Two Trees Birthing – Wimberley, TX

Deborah is forming a nonprofit ministry of the Earth, *Creating Earth Connections*, which is rooted in the voices and relationships of trees and women, researched through storytelling, relationality, and ceremony. She seeks to create opportunities for people to deepen their relationship with nature through experience.

Joyce Boatright – Navasota, TX

Joyce is a longtime member of SCN and currently serves on the Board of Directors as the Program Chair. She also facilitates an OWL story circle and teaches lifewriting at the Carl Jung Center in Houston.

Lois Ann Bull – Easton, CT

Lois says, "Life writing has been pure joy for me and I was over 50 before I found it. Writing stories about my life delights me. I get to relive all that fun. I do it for me, and for my family so that they don't forget how to laugh."

Patricia Daly-Lipe – Haymarket, VA

Author of eight books, winning several awards, Patricia has also written for magazines and newspapers. She studied abroad, ultimately earning a Ph.D. in Creative Arts and Communication. Mother of three, Patricia lives with her husband, rescued thoroughbred horses, dogs, and cats. www.literarylady.com

Karen DeFranco – Twinsburg, OH

New to Story Circle Network, Karen says she is "making up for much lost time. The online classes have jump-started my writing and with other women, good friends, I am writing more than I have in thirty years. It is a rebirth and wonderful."

Debra Dolan – Vancouver, BC, Canada

Debra is an avid reader of women's memoir and a private journaler, chronicling her feelings, thoughts, and activities for the past 45+ years.

Cindy Eastman – Watertown, CT

Cindy is an award-winning author, whose first book, *Flip-Flops After 50: And Other Thoughts On Aging I Remembered To Write Down* (2014), is a collection of humorous essays. She teaches writing to students whose ages range from 5 to 85, and contributes regularly to SheWrites, Huffington Post, and Next Avenue.

Sara Etgen-Baker – Anna, TX

After retirement, Sara rediscovered her inner writer. Her work has been published in anthologies and magazines including *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, Guideposts, *Times They Were A Changing*, and more. Sara is currently working on her first novel, and spends free time walking and gardening with her husband.

Sarah Fine – Toronto, ON, Canada

Says Sarah, "I am a retired teacher enjoying the time to read, write, do yoga and get involved with the culture and energy of my hometown, Toronto. My partner of 32 years and my three adult children continue to support my writing and teach me how amazing life can be. Carpe momentum."

Mary Lee Fulkerson – Reno, NV

A retired basket artist, Mary Lee is author of *Weavers of Tradition and Beauty: Basketmakers of the Great Basin* (1995) and "A Basket of Blessings" perpetual calendar. Her upcoming book is *Visionaries: Women Artists of the Great Basin*. She and her family enjoyed many years bumping over Nevada's back roads.

B. Lynn Goodwin – Danville, CA

Lynn owns Writer Advice, www.writeradvice.com. She's written *You Want Me to Do WHAT? Journaling*

for *Caregivers* (2008) and *Talent* (2015), which won two awards. Her work has also appeared online and in many periodicals. She is currently working on a memoir about getting married at age 62 for the first time.

Martha Graham-Waldon – Felton, CA

A writer, mental health advocate, and armchair activist, Martha has been widely published. She is a winner of the 2015 Women's Memoirs contest for a vignette of her memoir, *Nothing Like Normal – Surviving a Sibling's Schizophrenia*. Martha lives in the Santa Cruz Mountains with her family and a menagerie of pets.

Jeanne Guy – Austin, TX

Jeanne has been a teacher, coach, and speaker for 20+ years. She is co-author of *Seeing Me: a guide to reframing the way you see yourself through reflective writing*. Jeanne offers writing workshops and retreats, blogs monthly, and is completing a memoir, *You'll Never Find Us*. www.jeanneguy.com

Patricia Roop Hollinger – Westminster, MD

Patricia is a retired Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor and Chaplain, after 22 years of employment in a mental health setting. She and her husband, Byron, live at Carroll Lutheran Village in Westminster, with their pet cat, Spunky.

Arlene Roman Howard – Paradise Valley, AZ

"Who am I?" asks Arlene. "I write in the early morning Arizona light: stories for SCN, or my memoir, or edit my cookbook. During the day I take care of my granddaughters. At night, I don my nightie and my knitting needles and, after my husband and I Netflix, read on my Kindle. I am still becoming."

Jazz Jaeschke – Austin, TX

Jazz found poetry at mid-life, retired, and got a whole lot happier. Photography, labyrinths, SoulCollage®, nature, and travel arouse her muse and poems spill forth. Jazz facilitates an SCN online poetry circle and shares her poems and photography on her blog: www.stepsandpauses.wordpress.com

Janice Kvale – Austin, TX

Joyfully writing from the cool woods and lakes of Minnesota to the rocky hills of Texas, Janice says, "I live with Rusty the Dog, my companion for exploring woods and waterways. We are the same age." Her poem "Tasting Summer" was written in August in Minnesota, where the tomatoes ripen on the vine.

Bette J. Lafferty – Valrico, FL

A retired widow, Bette has been published many times, but writes mainly for the pleasure of finding

the right words. She also enjoys gardening and jewelry making. Her regular online posting is Monday Morning Offerings (MMO). Contact Bette if you would like to receive the MMO.

Maya Lazarus – Caldwell, TX

A retired ESL teacher and development editor, Maya has been writing for 20 years but only started submitting her work a few years ago. She is currently working on a memoir about her relationship with her daughter, who has bipolar disorder. Maya enjoys living in Caldwell with her husband and four dogs.

Helen Leatherwood – Beverly Hills, CA

The Program Coordinator for SCN's Online Classes, Len has been teaching writing for 15 years, winning a state and national teacher award for the past 5 years. She blogs at 20 Minutes a Day, and her works in flash fiction and memoir are widely published. Len was a nominee for the elite Pushcart Prize in 2015.

Ethel Lee-Miller – Tucson, AZ

With a background in education and counseling, Ethel's business, Enhanced Life Management, is the core of her work as a writer, editor, public speaker, and storyteller. Her publications include *Seedlings: Stories of Relationships* and *Thinking of Miller Place: A Memoir of Summer Comfort*. www.etheleemiller.com

Juliana Lightle – Canyon, TX

Juliana has had many careers and adventures, including college administrator, race horse breeder, singer, and author. Her most recent book is *On the Rim of Wonder*, a memoir in poems. Juliana served on the Board of SCN, teaches high school, writes, raises horses, and sings on a canyon rim in the Panhandle.

Dreama Plybon Love – Rocky Mount, VA

Dreama is an educator and enjoys learning. Currently, she is caring for her aging parents, and completing a second Master's degree. Her son, daughter-in-law, and lovely granddaughter bless her life with joy. She also enjoys walks in nature, travel (think Mexican vacations), skydiving, reading, writing, and stargazing.

Lily Iona MacKenzie – Richmond, CA

Lily has published many reviews, interviews, short fiction, poetry, travel pieces, essays, and memoir. Her poetry collection is *All This* (2011). Novels include *Fling!* (July 2015) and *Bone Songs* (out in early 2017). Lily paints and travels widely with her husband. She blogs at <https://lilyionamackenzie.wordpress.com>

Jan Marquart – Austin, TX

Jan is the author of 12 books for adults and 10 books in the children's series *Can You Find My Love?* Her

work has been published online and in print journals and newspapers. Jan has written daily since 1972. Learn more about her at www.JanMarquart.com

Susan Marsh – Jackson, WY

Susan's work has appeared in journals that include Orion, North American Review, and Fourth Genre, and in many anthologies. Her books include her award-winning novel *War Creek*, plus *A Hunger for High Country*, and *Cache Creek: A Trailside Guide to Jackson Hole's Backyard Wilderness*.

Linda A. Marshall – Dayton, OH

Linda's contemplative spirit can be found in her writing for *Sophia's Table: Women's Wisdom in Five Voices* and in her memoir, *A Long Awakening to Grace*, in the process of being edited. Linda tied for third place in the 2015 SCN Lifewriting Contest for her essay, "Perfect Failure."

Claire McCabe – Elkton, MD

Claire lives with three dogs, two cats, a life partner, and a sometimes-home-from-college son. She teaches writing at the University of Delaware. Claire writes poetry with online and local writing groups, and loves every minute of it.

Ann McCauley – Bradford, PA

Ann is the author of two novels, *Runaway Grandma* (2007) and *Mother Love* (2012), and a contributor to anthologies, magazines, writing journals, and newspapers. She also reviews books for WPSU radio and StoryCircleBookReviews.org. For more info, visit her at www.annmccauley.com

Margaret Dubay Mikus – Lake Forest, IL

Margaret was a molecular genetics research scientist and teacher, who healed from MS in 1995 and breast cancer a year later. Now a poet, singer, photographer, storyteller, and healer, her third book is *Thrown Again into the Frazzle Machine*, a "lifeboat through life's hard times." www.fullblooming.com

Merimée Moffitt – Albuquerque, NM

Merimée's recent memoir is *Free Love, Free Fall: Scenes from the West Coast Sixties*. She sometimes teaches classes for SCN, is at work on a second collection of poems, and recently assumed the duties of editing "The Sunday Poem" on Duke City Fix. Contact her at merimeemoffitt1@mac.com

Abby November – San Diego, CA

Born in New York, Abby has lived in Georgia and Texas as well as San Diego. Her degrees are in the field of Nutrition. Since menopause, Abby has performed stand-up comedy throughout the Southwest, combining health and humor.

Edith Ó'Nualláin – Greystones, Ireland

A long-time member of Story Circle Network, Edith reads and writes from her home on the east coast of Ireland, nestled between the Wicklow Mountains and the Irish Sea.

Lucy Painter – Williamsburg, VA

Lucy recently moved back to Virginia, her home state, and continues to collect stories from her family and her own life, although still not sure where they will go. She lives with her husband Charlie – a glass artist, two dogs, and one very old cat.

Jane Louise Steig Parsons – Austin, TX

A former California teacher and research educational psychologist, Jane turned toward the arts and for 40 years exhibited her photos and created Prints Charming Photography. Recently working in poetry and memoir, her writing, artwork, and images have appeared in books, newspapers, and other publications.

Mary Olivia Patiño – San Antonio, TX

Mary is the author of *Moments of Grace: A Collection of Poetry Inspired by Faith*, and her Christmas and Mothers Day stories have aired on Texas Public Radio. Mary facilitates "Writing with Angels," a faith-based writing group, and also leads spiritual retreats and creative writing workshops.

Kim Pearson – Snoqualmie, WA

An author and ghostwriter of more than 45 books, Kim's titles include *Making History: how to remember, record, interpret and share the events of your life*, and *Dog Park Diary*, both award winners. She also teaches the fine art of ghostwriting. Find out more at her website: www.kimpearson.me

Nancilynn Saylor – Austin, TX

Nancilynn was inspired to write poetry by reading Emily Dickinson, e.e.cummings, and Poe. She says, "Even when I write prose, my mind is actually thinking in poetry. I live in Austin with my long-time partner and our dogs. We enjoy gardening and spending time with grandchildren and great-grandchildren."

Sandy Schuster-Hubbard – Murrieta, CA

Sandy says, "I have a bachelor's in literature and speech (which means I can recognize and appreciate good writing far easier than I can produce it) and a master's in educational technology. I've retired from teaching, so when I'm not spending time with family, I garden, write, and read all those books I didn't have time for."

Madeline Sharples – Manhattan Beach, CA

Madeline is the author of *Leaving the Hall Light On: A Mother's Memoir of Living with Her Son's Bipolar*

Disorder and Surviving His Suicide. She co-edited *The Great American Poetry Show* Volumes 1, 2, and 3, and has published many poems in books, periodicals, and online. Her work in progress is a novel.

Noëlle Sickels – Los Angeles, CA

Noëlle is author of the historical novels *Walking West*, *The Shopkeeper's Wife*, *The Medium*, and *Out of Love*. She lives in Los Angeles and is working on a memoir, *Searching for Armando*. Her story, "Lover Boy," won third prize in the 2016 SCN Flash Fiction contest.

Sandra Simon – Austin, TX

Sandra discovered the fun in writing as a teen, when she and her grandmother exchanged weekly letters. In her career, she wrote scientific and technical articles. Now retired, she enjoys walking, music, informal classes, time with family, and writing. She is a long-time member of a terrific, nurturing writing circle.

Barbara Mosier Smythe – La Verne, CA

Barbara served as a pastor's wife in the late 1950s and early '60s. She later had a successful career in public service administration. Currently she writes, chairs a community cultural arts and gallery committee, and enjoys her role as mom, grandma, and great-grandma. Contact her at blsmythe@earthlink.net

Connie Spittler – Omaha, NE

Connie is the author of fiction and nonfiction, including short stories, poetry, essays, mysteries, as well as a producer of film and videos. Her award-winning literary mystery, *The Erotica Book Club for Nice Ladies*, came out in a Czechoslovakian edition in 2016. She is at work on the next book in that series.

Diane Stanton – Warrenton, VA

Diane is a retired educator. She lives in Virginia and participates in an SCN writing circle online.

Penelope Starr – Tucson, AZ

Penelope is a writer, artist, founder and producer of Odyssey Storytelling, workshop presenter, restorer of Navajo rugs, LGBT advocate, and citizen folklorist. Look for her book, *Voices Uncensored: The Radical Act of Community Storytelling*, published by Parkhurst Brothers in March 2017. www.Penelopestarr.com

Janice Strohmeier – Houston, TX

Janice teaches history at a community college, and also teaches high school to adults in continuing education. She lives with her husband and three

Boxer dogs, who share their home with Boxer fosters. When she is not on road trips, she works on her piano lessons. She writes only when she is breathing.

Marian McCaa Thomas – Leawood, KS

Marian has been married to the subject of her story for over 53 years. She is a retired organist/choir director, who built her own harpsichord, sings in her church choir, and teaches music to elementary school children through her church's "Peace Quest" program. She has three grown children and two grand-girls.

Jo Virgil – Austin, TX

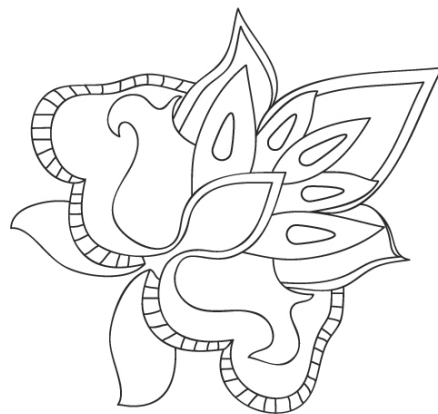
Recently retired from a career in Community Relations, Jo has a Master of Journalism degree with a minor in Environmental Science, reflecting her love of writing and appreciation of nature. She edits "True Words" for our quarterly Journal, and is a member of the SCN Board. Jo loves her WordWeavers group in Austin.

Jude Walsh (Whelley) – Dayton Ohio

A past president of SCN, Jude writes memoir, personal essay, fiction, and poetry. Her work has been published at Mothers Always Write, Indiana Voice Journal, and more. Her blog, Writing Now, can be found at her website www.judewalsh.com. Jude lives with her son and three lively dogs.

Carol Ziel – St. Louis, MO

"I'm a 68-year-old grandmother, gardener, poet, and memoir writer," says Carol. "I have grown hugely in the companionship of SCN women, and am grateful to be here."



The Paper Trail of Women's Words

Connie Spittler – Omaha, NE

Women belong to an ancient tribe of storytellers, a long line of ancestors who washed clothes down by the river and remembered, who sewed at quilting bees and talked of the past, cooked for harvesters and shared stories, held children on warm laps and whispered true tales. Today, in laundromats and spas, or texting on coffee breaks, women talk of life's unfolding events to one another. No matter where it happens, this is storytelling, one of our oldest traditions. As writers, we pursue the stories worth telling and find reasons enough to write the words down, producing a testament to the fact that we were here.

Poet Muriel Rukeyser asked, "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?" Her answer: "The world would split open." Because of the universal knowledge we hold within us, telling it, sharing it, writing it down sets the commotion in motion. Like a breakfast egg, we crack open the sphere that is our world and find our truth, the simple wisdom that comes from life stories.

Since time eternal, women have passed on wisdom. We've told and retold family stories as we stirred the soup, wiped little noses, and comforted oldsters. Never mind that we've accomplished some other great things: led countries, discovered radium, protected the environment, founded colleges, and crusaded against birth defects. Think of Indira Gandhi, Marie Curie, Rachel Carson, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Virginia Apgar, M.D., to name a few.

But closer at hand, we soothe teething babies and clean mineral deposits off faucets. We make paste from flour and water in the morning and gravy thickener from water and flour in the afternoon, working from common knowledge and passed-on wisdom.

When a friend calls for advice, a class needs teaching, the gravy is too thin, we contribute our knowledge and skill. Life turns these corners into experience. We turn these corners into

stories offering a tantalizing mix of information – family stories, homey postscripts, heartbreaking secrets, like...

... the reason cousin Maria doesn't talk to cousin Elena.

... how to remove film off pots and pans with pickle juice.

... our medical family history of miscarriage.

... reasons I was beaten as a child by Daddy.

When we're too busy mopping our floors or our brows to write our stories, valuable information is lost, words and phrases left crumbled in the dust. How was the family name pronounced in the old country? Why did Gramma take medication? How did Aunt Rose's fiancé die in World War II? Who was the original owner of the gold pocket watch in the bureau drawer?

Women carry this practical, historical, emotional wisdom within. It flutters near the surface of our awareness and if we feel so inclined, we part with it. We write it down. In my family, with technology, the old family tales lost their sheen. My mother dismissed Gramma's time and ways. She didn't want to discuss the Great Depression or steep ginger for nausea. She preferred new appliances, pharmacy prescriptions, and cake mixes. Fortunately, ideas recycle. Like healing herbs and chicken soup, we can reclaim the tradition of telling our old-fashioned stories, bringing them into contemporary life. Whether we are thirty or one hundred, passing on the things we've learned has never been so important.

As storywriters, there are common things and things-in-common. Bundling up our hopes and dreams, we find creative joy, whether the increment is word, paragraph, page, or chapter. Board by board, wall by wall, we build something of our own making. As we read the works of others, we understand that every woman's life, every woman's contribution, counts as heavily as the next. The words of the cleaning woman are as important as those of the business executive. Each lives in a story house of wisdom, possessing personal knowledge to be made available to others.

Remember Muriel Rukeyser's question, "What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?" My mind visualizes the earth as it reacts ever so gently to one woman who begins her story and unfolds her reality. Then the world reverberates to the creative buzzing of another, then hundreds, no thousands, why not millions of women, speaking out, telling the truth of their lives. The globe moves to the magnificent hubbub of happiness, sadness, love, laughter, grieving, and anger, as women's words sing out, each story separate, yet each story connected by a mystical thread reaching back to ancient times.

I imagine their words on paper and when the stories are written, the sphere trembles in anticipation as the pages go flying round and round, faster and faster, spinning and turning, cream into butter, egg white to meringue, straw into gold, life into stories – until Mother Earth splits open from the pure joy of it all.

As we rotate a ball of truth around and about in the palm of our hand, others await our truth, the mystical lore, inexplicable bits and pieces of data, facts and tales handed down from relative to relative.

You know only one part for sure, your own, rolled together from knowledge carried forward from centuries ago. Add to this the things you've learned in all the yesterdays of your lifetime, traveling from there to here. You hold the measure of universal knowledge in your grasp, the symbolic breakfast egg. It is this certain wisdom that makes things happen, a world spinning more smoothly in its orbit because of women working at their tasks. The simple and dramatic things they do. Take up your pencil and paper. Get out your typewriter. Turn on your computer. Get ready to crack open your world.

When the writing is finished, then say, "Yes, I was here." Your stories will last as long as the paper that holds them.

Long live this endless paper trail of women's wisdom.

Waking Up

Mary Lee Fulkerson – Reno, NV

I tapped the brake as a jackrabbit scrambled across the road. Back in 1985, Highway 50 was a lonesome Nevada road, where eagles and hawks swooped to feast on critters like the one that just got away. In the passenger seat, Kathleen, my partner in this formidable mission, slept blissfully on. I pursed my lips in a quiet whistle, feeling a little defiant, a little scared, and a little proud.

We were doing it! This 300-mile trip to the Duckwater Indian reservation was a long time coming. Kathleen and I, genuine products of the '50s generation, were striking out on our own.

Until recently our role was clear: keep the house clean, serve a well-balanced meal at six, and support our husbands and children. In any spare time, we sought little part-time jobs and volunteered here and there. Then the Women's Movement came along – in time to embolden our daughters, but we never dreamed it would catch up and run right over us, too. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and Gloria Steinem's "Ms Magazine" riveted us. Why couldn't a woman be a mailman, they asked? And if so, she would be called a "mail carrier" (that term shocked us). Why couldn't she be a lawyer or college professor or a road flagger, or anything a man could be? We were first horrified at these ideas, then mystified, and finally we embraced feminism. This, our magical road to freedom, was long and rocky, and is grist for many hilarious and heart-wrenching stories, but the idea that we could actually direct our own lives changed us forever.

I finished college at age 48 and met Kathleen; together we built our careers as professional basket artists. One day, we learned that Native basketry here in the Great Basin was the longest

continuing basket tradition in the United States, and few people were aware of it.

Kathleen and I knew baskets. Knew the hours and days spent gathering and preparing materials, knew the skill required. We also felt that Native people, like women, were an under-appreciated fragment of the human race.

We decided right there to write a book about these Native basket makers, and embarked upon an odyssey we thought would take a few months, but which stretched into years. Kathleen learned the mysteries of a camera and I bought my first computer, both amazingly complicated instruments. We needed to gain the weavers' confidence, but first we had to use our newfound skill of reading road maps and find the weavers, who lived in nooks of sand and sage all over the Great Basin. And I needed to write it all down in an interesting yet factual style. And – oh, yeah – we had to find a publisher.

We accomplished all that, rubes that we were. And now here we were, approaching the little town of Eureka, where we would return to spend the night after interviews. I woke Kathleen. It was already late afternoon as I pulled into the gas station and proudly pumped my own gas, another new accomplishment. "How far to Duckwater?" I asked the attendant.

"'Nother 20 miles." He looked at my '85 Buick doubtfully. My husband, Chuck, had insisted we take the new car to reduce the chance of automotive problems.

"How's the road?" I asked.

"Fine 'til you get to the turnoff. Then watch out. Rocks all the way in. This here's your last gas station."

The assertive woman (me) jumped in the Buick and hit the road, gravel flying. We needed to conduct an interview and return before dark. Kathleen leaned forward. "Let's hope Evelyn got

our message." Evelyn Pete was the Shoshone weaver we were to visit. She had no phone and we'd never met, but through a series of messages called the "Indian grapevine," we thought we had a date for 3 pm. People said we "couldn't miss" her house. It was now four, and I had never maneuvered so many rocks. I stepped on the gas pedal.

The tire went down.

We were miles from everywhere, on a strange road, headed for a house with no address, as daylight dimmed. We retrieved the tire-changing directions and read that this model required a certain key to reach the spare. I had no key.

In the distance, a little road branched off and a stand of cottonwoods indicated a nearby house. Kathleen, refreshed from her sleep, said, "I'll find someone!" and she dashed down the road, soon disappearing from view. I waited. Read my notes. Searched for the spare tire key. Contemplated Women's Lib. Finally, a ribbon of fine dust signaled the approach of a car. It stopped and Kathleen and two young Shoshone men jumped out. One, who said he was Mitch Pete, Evelyn's son, looked at my spare area with confidence.

"It'll be fine," he smiled. His friend Joe drove us back down the road and stopped at a house nestled against the cottonwoods. Evelyn's house.

We could hardly contain our wonder at the sight unfolding in Evelyn's back yard. She sat in an old lawn chair under a leafy cottonwood, weaving a great burden basket, her willows soaking in the clear stream and a winnowing basket of pine nuts at her feet. Mitch's beaded pipe-in-progress lay against a nearby rock. Evelyn's brother, Bud, smoothed a stone down the shaft of a spear. A rabbit fur blanket hung over a rope clothesline and swayed in the breeze.

We had discovered a paradise in the middle of the Nevada desert. That vision, those kind and

smart people, that way of life, became our guiding light as we devoted the next years to finding more basket weavers on Nevada reservations, recording their stories, purifying in sweat lodges, learning about a culture that carried the tradition of their ancestors onward into the new century.

The South American writer Antonio Machado described in one sentence what I could not say in this entire story. "Beyond living and dreaming there is something more important: waking up."

Ordinary Days

Susan Wittig Albert – Bertram, TX

Who would live happily in the country must be wisely prepared to take great pleasure in little things.

– *Henry Beston*

The best days begin about 6:30 a.m., waking from a warm dream to a kiss from my husband and an ecstatic canine greeting. (The cat is not particularly affectionate, except with Bill.) Make the bed, brew fresh coffee, start a load of laundry. Coffee in hand, turn on the computer, check the e-mail for urgencies, glance at the weather radar and the front page of the online New York Times. And then out with the dogs.

Eighteen degrees this January morning, the frost a bright, brittle crust of diamonds on grass, weeds. It is just dawn, and the three dogs and I walk the east meadow loop: across the meadow to the Ramsey Ranch fence; along a path under live oaks, cedars, and mesquite; up the lane behind the abandoned barn to the pasture where our cows and sheep stand broadside to the winter sun, warming their brown flanks. The dogs discover with ecstasy the trace scents of the deer, coons, possums, mice, and coyotes that travel this same path every night (it's their

territory, too, their homeland, their place). As I walk, I revel in the sights and sounds of this very ordinary place – the cardinals flashing scarlet through the dark green junipers, the frostbitten grasses of our remnant scrap of native prairie, the lamentations of mourning doves.

Thirty minutes later, I'm back in the kitchen making pancakes, golden, crunchy with Bill's pecans. We gathered an astonishing two hundred pounds last fall from the trees he's grafted and cultivated. We won't run out of pecans for a while. And then the day's ordinary work: a casserole out of the freezer for supper; laundry into the dryer, another load into the washer; a quick sweep of the kitchen floor (oh, the dog fur!); and I'm on my way back to the computer, to finish the e-mail, post to the blog, make an entry in this journal, and open the file on the current writing project. It will keep me busy the rest of the workday.

Late in the afternoon, Bill and I drive up to the barn to break the ice on the tank that supplies water for Texas and Blossom, our longhorn cows, and Mutton, a Barbados sheep. I feed the animals their wintertime ration of cow cake, chopped corn, and sorghum and molasses, and scatter corn for the ducks and the pair of large white ganders we call Mutt and Jeff. The seven white and four black ducks were released on our little lake last summer by a neighbor and were adopted by Mutt and Jeff, who clearly needed something to do besides swimming and eating. These two big ganders take their parenting duties seriously, herding their unruly charges with a nip here, a tuck there, an occasional wing-swat. Little things, as Henry Beston says. Fun to watch.

I love living here at Meadow Knoll, the name we gave to this patch of Texas Hill Country when we came here in 1986. It is a small, ordinary, thirty-one acre stretch of meadows and woods on the east side of a variable-level lake that was scooped out in the early 1970s by a

small-time developer with overblown ideas and an oversized bulldozer. The lake is fed by a spring, a creek, and rainwater runoff from a 400-acre watershed. Full, it covers about twenty acres. During droughts (like the one we're living through now), it can shrink to the size of a wading pool. Before white settlers arrived, the area was the site of a Tonkawa Indian campground – perhaps a trade camp, where Tonkawa, Caddo, and Jumano came together to swap goods and food and news. The road to the lake is called Indian Wells, reflecting the old-timers' knowledge of the campsite.

If there were any archaeological remains at the Indian Wells spring, that fool with the bulldozer chewed them up. Pity. Researchers in nearby counties have uncovered human-occupied campsites dating back some twelve thousand years. For centuries, the Hill Country was home to a network of peaceable hunter-gatherer families, clans, and tribes, moving north and south, east and west, in the regular pursuit of deer and bison and seasonal harvests: pecans, mesquite beans, prickly pear cactus. All this changed in the mid-1800s when the fierce Comanches attacked from the north and the land-hungry Anglos pushed in from the east. Together, they squeezed out the friendly, trusting, transient Tonkawas.

But I think of the Tonks often, especially on nights when the moon is full. I imagine them camped at the spring, on the sloping hill, relaxing beside their fires or asleep in tipis and brush huts. Sometimes I think: if I look hard enough, maybe I'll see them, see their spirits or the drifting smoke from their campfires, hear the barking of camp dogs, the singing of the children – the ordinary pleasures of a peaceful life. But they're gone, extinct now or nearly so, their homeland carved into ranches and farms and subdivisions. And in place of their camp, a developer's lake: home to herons, kingfishers,

migrating cormorants, Mutt and Jeff, a flock of unruly ducks. And us.

The early evening twilight is settling like a gray scarf across the landscape, and we are driving home. Home, where Bill lights a fire in the fireplace while I feed the dogs. The casserole is ready to come out of the oven, and a book is waiting for me to open it for a few hours' reading. It's been a good day, and I remember Henry Beston. "Who would live happily in the country must be wisely prepared to take great pleasure in little things," he says.

And yes, I think he's right.

Table For Five

Janice Strohmeier – Houston, TX

I can feel the morning chill. I can almost hear the rain slithering down the outside walls, water collecting in tiny pools in the rusted vegetable cans that serve as flowerpots. The sheets, cold and clammy, cling to me. There is nowhere that feels dry.

There's no sun again today. The clouds are thick; I can see them through the small slits of the open bricks at the top of the wall. It's going to be another day of limp laundry hanging on the line begging, waiting desperately for some sun.

I get out of bed and walk over to my dress hanging on the nail hammered into the cement wall. The nail is large and coarse, tiny bits of plaster have chipped away from the wall where the nail met the cement. I dig into my knapsack and find a long-sleeved T-shirt that I thought I would need on cool desert nights. There are no cool nights here, what was I thinking? Here, there are just miles and miles of cane fields stretching endlessly before giving way to the grey Gulf waters.

I fold my dress and my T-shirt over my arm, tuck my underwear under my armpit, and try to sneak into the bathroom before the kids realize I am awake. The plywood door has rotted in some places. The sides of the door are swollen and the layers of plywood have begun to separate, exposing pale shards of wood that bulge out of the sides. I want to pick at them but I know if I do, the wood will keep peeling back to expose more rot. The hook-latch hangs weakly through its eyehole; one good tug would have the latch fall away from the rotting door in a moment of weakness. I hope Mom or Isabel has left the boiler on for hot water this morning.

Before long, I walk into the kitchen to choruses of *good morning auntie, how did you sleep last night my daughter, and sister, did you have enough blankets?* I love these people.

The table is set with plastic placemats and chipped dishes. The placemats have prints of Santa Claus and Rudolph that have faded under several washings with bleach and brush. There are five chairs placed around the table but only two of them match. The table is wobbly and I can see strips of packing tape wound around the tops of the legs trying to hold in screws that lost their thread some time ago. Cleanly washed and freshly pressed linen napkins sit beside each plate, regally topped by forks with slightly bent tines and tarnished butter knives.

A pitcher of juice sits in the middle of the table. The pitcher used to boast a colorful rooster crowing the morning sun, but the top plume of the rooster has cracked, and most of the plumage has fallen off. Discolored lines now trace the remains of what used to be colorful ceramic feathers. A small wicker basket covered by a worn kitchen towel holds fresh rolls that Isabel just bought from the street vendor moments ago. Mom is at the kitchen counter beside the stove and when she presses a button on the blender, it screams out its defiance against chili peppers, onions, tomatoes, and garlic. The whole

concoction sizzles angrily as it hits the hot grease in the frying pan. Underneath it all, fresh eggs burble, promising exquisite *huevos rancheros*. Isabel pours freshly squeezed papaya juice into each of our glasses from the worn-out beak of the rooster. I can see flecks of pulp swirling down to the bottom of my glass.

The kids are freshly showered and they sit brightly at the table, hair plastered back with what I can only imagine is Brylcreem. Caesar smells like a little man; Isabel has dabbed some of Benjamin's leftover cologne on his neck. Iris, with alabaster skin and penetrating onyx eyes framed by massive curls as wild as she is, wilder than her mother ever was, pats the napkin in place on her lap. As she sits erect in her chair, her feet do not touch the ground. Their school uniforms are neatly pressed; the shoulder-crests proudly bear the name of the school. I know Mom woke up in the wee hours to make sure their clothes were ready for school today.

On the floor in the corner of the kitchen is a small charcoal barbecue. It's more of a squat *chiminea* sort of thing, although back then we didn't call them chimineas because they weren't yet in fashion. We just needed to heat our home. I think Mom did that for my benefit, me being a foreigner and all. Although a Canadian winter would have killed any Mexican hands-down, I wasn't used to this no-snow-on-the-ground type of winter with this dampness permeating everything – clothes, books, bedsheets, walls. Your soul.

The smoke rising up from the burning hunks of coal, white and glowing under the grate of the chiminea, pierces my nose. In any other kitchen in my former reality, the smoke would have clogged the room, choked the breath out of us. However, in this kitchen, the courtyard doors are open and the airshaft seems to beckon the smoke up and out into the morning sky.

The kids are arguing about who got their homework completed first last night, and whose new knapsack is the prettiest. Whose will be the envy of the school? The new knapsacks with their Made-in-Canada maple leaf symbol are sure to raise eyebrows in all the classrooms at school, not just first and third grades. As the kids roll their beans into homemade, freshly warmed tortillas, and scoop their scrambled eggs in wide mouthfuls, Mom walks over to the table and pours hot, thick coffee into my mug. The faint scent of cinnamon rises up in tiny swirls around my nostrils.

The day has begun.

Becoming An Elder Of The Earth

Deborah Two Trees Birthing – Wimberley, TX

Asleep face down on a small woven rug at the base of a lone pine tree, near a rippled lake and a grassy meadow, I feel the Earth shake. A single strong jolt awakens me. Startled, I look up to see Earth Dancer, a large male buffalo, one of three American bison moving around my vision circle since early morning. He is approximately 20 feet away, standing in the direction of the South, calmly grazing on patches of green grass. It seems I have been oblivious to him.

Did the movement of the buffalo make the Earth shake? The jolt was strong enough to wake me from the sound sleep I so desperately seek. I ask aloud, "Did you shake the Earth, or did the Earth shake Herself?" The answer lies in his silent walk in the direction of the West. Am I in a dream state or is this waking reality? I feel the vibration in my bones, in my body still. Prostrate upon the Earth, I contemplate these questions a while longer. No matter the source, the message is clear. Wake up and pay attention!

Hawk calls loudly again and again. Red bird points the way. My fasting body is exhausted. Sleep is short and disturbed. A thin, sky-blue woolen shawl from India covers me, a remembrance from my days of following a guru. I wear it like a shroud, covering my body as I lay upon the Earth; the sky is visible through the arms of the pine tree with its pregnant cones aplenty. The day is sunny and warm, with coolness hidden in the strong wind blowing across the meadow, causing ripples on the surface of the lake. The position of the sun tells me it is late afternoon. It is a sensual path.

I am here at Deer Dancer Ranch in Texas, the site of years of sacred ceremonies. The roots of my relationship with the Medicine Wheel take hold on this land, within the nature-based spiritual community of the Earthtribe. At 58 years of age, it is my first time to vision quest. At this point in the story, it has been a year since I put my stake in the ground, committing myself to a focused time with Spirit, vision guidance and preparation. I learn the vision quest is a tool, a doorway to enter spiritual realms, revealing a direction for life. It is a time to retreat into nature in solitude, providing an opening to a heightened state of awareness. My mentor informs me the vision I seek is on behalf of the tribe as well as myself.

Two years earlier, I began attending a monthly sweat lodge ceremony, where people gather to deepen their spiritual lives and reconnect to Mother Earth. It is a healing process. I joined a study in spiritual mentoring with Earthtribe founders Dr. Will Taegel and Dr. Judith Yost. I learned the Wheel can be used as a map, a guiding tool for life. I know it as an ancient symbol used by Native Americans. In the fall, at the annual Earth Dance, I help to lead the direction of the East, a place of birthing new beginnings. It is a time of deep reflection on our relationship to the Earth, through creativity, dance, and laughter. All the while, I find my

relationship with the Earth is being reborn. Questing and ceremonial practice deepen the connection, helping me move beyond my comfort zone.

On the early morning walk to my vision site, two supporters guide me. We are astonished to find three buffalo along the path. A little later, sitting alone inside my vision circle of 405 multi-colored prayer bundles, Earth Dancer approaches directly from the North, the place of masculine energy, courage, strength and focus. The voice of *Changing Buffalo*, a tribal elder, whispers in my ear, "If a buffalo approaches, stand tall and firm upon the Earth, with arms raised and feet wide, do not draw near, respect its wildness, and ask permission to spend time on this land." Grateful for the memory of this wise counsel, I do as instructed, allowing the energy of this act to feed me.

My body is framed and supported by the pine tree at my back. The companionship of this tree instills strength and comfort, helping me to find my voice. I tell Earth Dancer I am here to listen to any message he may have for me. When I ask him to respect his distance, not to come too close, not to come inside my vision circle, he stops and turns away as though he understands.

The powerful yet gentle presence of these grand creatures of nature, moving sun wise – gradually, cautiously, and deliberately – around my vision circle, shifts me into an altered state of consciousness. The feeling of a safe container is created, safe enough for me to awaken to their teaching of the *wheel*, in what I come to understand later as preparation for a lesson in soul retrieval, the act of healing a hidden, traumatic wound.

When the Earth shakes me awake in the vulnerable and compassionate arms of the South, I become aware the buffalo are greeting me in an up-close-and-personal way at each of the four cardinal directions of the Medicine Wheel:

North, East, South, and West. This guiding *wheel* of buffalo surrounds the safe circle of colorful prayer ties, providing an extra cushion of protection, filling me with the courage to enter the dark, shadowy teaching of the West, and face the unfinished business of my youth. This experiential lesson of the buffalo roots itself deeply within the womb of my being, providing an intimate map on how to walk the Medicine Wheel – slow, steady, and focused. The nature name bestowed on me for this quest is *Buffalo Wheel*.

Tasting Summer

Janice Kvale – Austin, TX

stand over the sink
bite the red middle of summer
suck up the juice as you taste
lest it run down your chin
and dribble, lost in the sink
summer is like that, sweet,
excessive, juicy, slippery

hummingbirds hover watching
wanting more than sugar water
nestlings stretch new wings, steal
tastes of summer from the garden
cicadas chirp into a calm night
warmth envelops waiting tomatoes
kissed ripe by the day-middle sun

imperceptibly summer edges away
already a chill rides the fall air
trees on the far shore sport
an orange-brown tinge, a warning
that time is passing faster
one can keep summer only so long
before winter is upon us, alas

Farmin' Fool

Nancilynn Saylor – Austin, TX

It was a name he gave himself in a song
and farm he did –
nestled in our hot, southern suburban paradise
turning endless clay into soil

we drew hope that
we would have tomatoes
slowly but certainly each year the garden came
some years two crops if we had the energy

some years both crops failed us
some years there were no tomatoes
unlike true farm families
a grocery store less than a mile away

now we are aging
farming grows harder...
in my mind's eye
I see my grandparents – their slow walks

and bent backs, he as he walked to the garage to
fire up the
ancient tractor
she as she went out to toss vegetable scraps in
the garden
to decompose

just as their lives slowly did the same
wiping her rough hands on her worn apron
she trudged back up the stairs to the house they
built
so many decades past

our parents had different lives
a generation skipped but just as important
the farming genes of the grandparents passed on
to us

we are those who remember
we are the ones keeping the legends
and their memories
alive.

Kitchen Revolution

Penelope Starr – Tucson, AZ

Twisty clear plastic airlocks jut out of the tops of mason jars filled with canary yellow and bluish purple sauerkrauts. A jar with a perforated top is tilted facedown in a stainless steel bowl, so mung bean sprouts can drain. A hand-woven cotton dishtowel is draped over the opening of a two-gallon glass jug, where kombucha and its starter "mother" reside, turning tea and sugar into a fermented powerhouse of healthy organisms. Yogurt is warmly tucked in its blanket at 110 degrees, waiting for lactobacillus acidophilus to do its magic. Sourdough bread proofs in a warm corner on the counter. My kitchen looks more like a science lab than a food preparation area. Bottles and containers, strainers and graters, these are the tools I am using to heal myself.

Over five years ago, I started to cough. It began with frequent throat clearings and an occasional burst of dry hacks that quickly turned violent. Great breath-stealing, rib-busting spasms became more frequent until I ended up at Urgent Care attached to a breathing machine. I was sent home with a prescription for an inhaler for my next emergency and no answers about why this was happening to me. Soon, the spaces between my coughing fits got closer and I developed a strange wheeze that was audible across a room. Being horizontal brought on the fiercest attacks so sleeping became a challenge.

I dragged myself to a succession of experts looking for a cure. I had x-rays to check for valley fever and allergy tests to find out that everything that grows outside is my enemy. I bought prescription nose sprays and a neti pot, B vitamins, Claritin, and Nyquil. Nothing helped. Acupuncture, aromatherapy, Reiki, yoga,

mindfulness and meditation; I tried them all with disappointing results.

Being in public was challenging. On airplanes, I felt compelled to assure my seatmates that I was not contagious, I just coughed. During meals, conversations stopped when my face turned a deep crimson and it looked like I was choking on my last bite. I became the focus of attention in social situations, when the cough would prompt at least one person to offer the Heimlich maneuver. I politely declined in pantomime because the cough precluded me from speaking.

I read many books on how to heal myself with food and found that one possible cause of the cough was "silent GERD" or a type of acid reflux that bypassed the typical heartburn and landed in my throat. I had medical procedures that probed the tubes that make up my digestive system from both ends. I began to follow a GERD diet. I learned to love the previously despised fennel and gave up chocolate and peppermint. My one concession to the medical monopoly was a small purple pill that I took every morning before breakfast.

My quest for a solution led me to Sandor Katz, an enthusiastic lover of all things fermented and author of "The Art of Fermentation." His life's work is being validated by a raft of current scientific studies, which declare that you are not only what you eat but also what's living inside your gut. According to research, having the correct microbiota can make you healthier, smarter, calmer, and thinner.

Finally, I was getting some results. Regular exercise, smaller meals, drinking lots of pure water, ingesting whole foods and all kinds of fermented foods seemed to do what none of the doctors could do for me. I stopped taking the purple pill.

I still suck on a lot of cough drops, and am occasionally wakened by a coughing attack, but I

am slowly getting better. My gut is happy and that makes me happy.

I have had a few relapses. Collective wisdom says that booze irritates GERD, but occasionally a glass of chilled white wine beckons me. As does a garlic and sundried tomato pizza. Sometimes I think that I'm too busy to go to the gym. Old patterns are hard to break, but when the discomfort and coughing come back I take it as a reminder that I am in charge of my own health and I do what I need to do to heal myself. I head into the kitchen and check on my science experiments.

Author Michael Pollan says, "To reclaim control over one's food, to take it back from industry & science, is no small thing; indeed, in our time, cooking from scratch qualifies as subversive." The revolution has already started in my kitchen.

Living with Purpose

Joyce Boatright – Navasota, TX

Human beings are storytellers. We've been passing on our histories since our ancestors scratched the original picture books on cave walls. As a species we want to leave our mark, to let future generations know we were here. That is the power of story.

The two most important days in your life:

- The day you were born.
- The day you find out why.

Usually the day you were born is recorded in a family bible and in county records, but recording why you were born is up to you. Genealogy will trace your ancestry, but genealogy only shows the lineage. Your story gives texture and depth. As you write stories from your memories, more will come and soon your story plot (your reason for being here) will reveal itself. You will

understand the purpose of your life, and you can pass on those contributions, values, and lessons to the others who follow in your line.

We are living longer and longer. "Retirement" is more than playing bridge, starting a small business, or going fishing. The fourth chapter of our lives is meant to be savored through reflection and consideration. We have the opportunity to understand the meaning of life and our place in it.

An unexamined life is inexcusable. In fact, according to Socrates, "An unexamined life is not worth living." However, when we reflect on our lives, we can see the personal and spiritual growth that fuels our *joie de vivre*. Take some time to review your life, so that rather than stumbling through it, you live with purpose.

Look at where you are in life, whether in your second, third, or fourth act, and answer this: What would you do if you knew nothing could stop you? I have asked myself that question and I'm living my answer.

I plan to finish strong. What about you?

Mysterious Mirth

Janice Kvale – Austin, TX

A tiny twinge in the middle of me
arising from somewhere and nowhere
spreads slowly though the core of me
travels the length of my limbs explodes
like rockets of joy that shoot into the ether
and ping from one planet to the next
like thousands of stars unable to stop their sparkle
like a field of flowers that open their petals
at precisely the same moment. Bits and pieces,
shreds and ribbons flung to the sky,
to the oceans, throughout the universe,
I dance through the heavens,
and dissolve into the music of the cosmos.
Ecstatic joy settles my senses,
and seeps out to be shared.

Unaccompanied

Diane Stanton – Warrenton, VA

My mother hummed away her days
elegiacally leading her daughter to be
a good catch – to cook and sew
wash and iron the clothes
clean the house and drink
coffee all day.

In her house, chores were organically
assigned – gender determined the task.

Girls did not mow, change
a tire, the car oil, or paint.

They certainly would never have to
go out to work for pay.

Practice made perfect –
first a cake then a soufflé.

Iron a pillowcase before brother Jack's shirt
sew a hem then make

an A-line madras skirt –

little inclination toward intellectual pursuits –

read Good Housekeeping

but rarely a book,

which, wouldn't you know,

became my proclivity.

I found succor in

words of all kind.

My refuge was my bedroom,

but on long summer days I'd escape

to the front porch with some tea,

green-striped canvas awnings shielding

unwanted views of me

and my coveted library books.

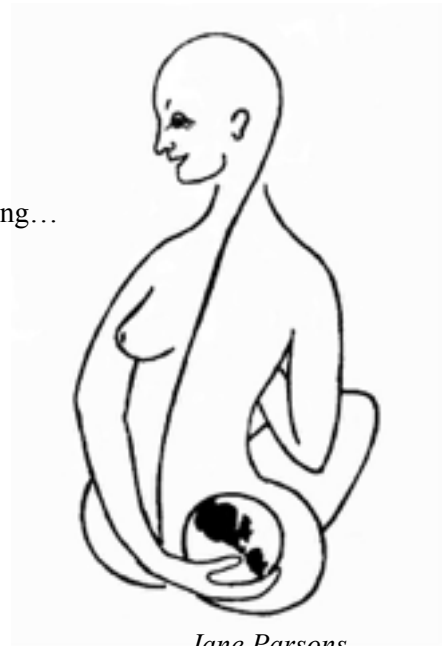
The Voices In My Head

Lee Ambrose – Kingsport, TN

These voices in my head...
They wake me from my sleep...
They distract me from my work...
They chatter constantly these days...
 They soothe me when the cacophony of the world insults my well-being...
 They nudge me to shut out the noise and let in the calm...

They are the yearnings of my heart...
They are the remembrances of teachings long ago...
They are the voice of reason...
They are the freeing spirit of wild abandon...
 They are voices in my head, yes, but...
 They are necessary guides to a life of peace and fulfillment...

I'm listening...
I'm waiting...
I'm longing...
I'm anticipating...
I'm learning to pay attention and to honor...
 These voices in my head...



– Jane Parsons

Intersections

Helen (Len) Leatherwood – Beverly Hills, CA

Jacob Peterson stared at the tall taupe vase with its intricate pattern of circles and lines that held a bouquet of purple and white lilacs. He loved that vase. He had made it with his own two hands. The pattern on it reminded him that life had dozens of lines and intersections, places to connect and disconnect. The flowers, with the tiny blossoms and sweet scent, helped him to remember that no matter how difficult life could be, there was always beauty to be found in nature that could salve the soul.

Now was the time that his heart needed salving, having just learned from a phone call that his beloved best friend from childhood, Kit, had died in a motorcycle accident. Ah, how cruel life

could be. He and Kit had a whitewater rafting trip planned in just a few weeks to celebrate their twenty years of friendship. There would be no fun trip now, only Jacob traveling across the country to his hometown for Kit's funeral. He sat staring at the vase, wondering about those intersections and let the tears flow down his cheeks.

Five days later Jacob sat surrounded by family and friends in the familiar old Episcopal church where he and Kit had met. Everyone was there to commemorate Peter John Kitman, the best and most adventurous person most of them had ever known.

Jacob listened as old Father Morgan spoke loving words of the boy he had watched grow up, someone the old priest certainly had not expected to bury. "I am looking over the congregation here," Father Morgan said,

spreading both arms to include everyone, "and I see open and loving faces. Faces of people that only our Kit would have had in his life."

He paused, then laughed. "Oh, how well I remember the antics of a few of you out there after being trained as altar boys along with Kit. What a lively bunch you all were, sneaking a sip of the altar wine and rearranging the kneelers just to have a little fun.

"Now Kip, of course, went on to become a gifted botanist, someone who felt driven to learn more about the world around us. This came as no surprise to all of us who knew him. He was always stopping to examine the petals of an unusual flower or researching to determine the exact type of moss growing on a wall. He had a power of observation that made him special.

"Kit was a person who could 'see' in the best possible way. He lived in the present moment and focused his attention on the particulars in the world around him. That is one of the reasons we are all here. That same focus extended to his family and friends, and made him one of those people who everyone could count on to be right there with you in your time of need or if you just wanted to have fun."

Jacob felt the sting of tears. That was so true. Yes, Kit was always right there no matter what the circumstance.

Father Morgan went on to describe Kit's many accomplishments, then added that God had him now in his loving arms and, because of that, everyone could feel at least a measure of comfort. He smiled at the congregation and said, "I am hopeful that Kit's untimely death helps all of us to remember not to waste another moment pondering 'What if?' but rather to listen to our hearts and strike out in the direction God leads us." His eyes lingered on Jacob.

Jacob shifted in his seat. He knew that Father Morgan was giving him a little prod from the

pulpit. The last time they had spoken – just a year back, over the phone – Jacob had admitted to the old priest that he was lost. He had enjoyed college and the first couple of years of his corporate job, but then it had all gone cold as he began to long to do something more meaningful. He had remained in his job, but he wasn't inspired. He was still searching and now Kit was gone, the one person on whom Jacob relied to provide support and guidance. But now he heard the old priest's words from a new perspective. It was time for a real change.

After the service, Jacob hugged Father Morgan at the back of the church. "Thank you for that inspiring eulogy. I believe I know where I'll be going now."

The old priest's blue eyes lighted up. "And where might that be, Jacob?"

"I am going to open a ceramics studio, Father. It's been my passion my whole life, but I've not pursued it because everyone has always told me I can't make money being an artist. But I've decided as of today to take my savings from my corporate job and use it to head in a direction that will make me happy. I don't need much money to live on and I want to live instead of just exist."

Father Morgan opened his arms and pulled him close. "There you go, dear boy, that's the ticket. Live your passion! Money is highly overrated, let me tell you, son. I know a lot about that."

Jacob smiled as he headed for the reception. The intersection of circles and lines. Yes, that was indeed what had brought him to right here, right now, and to a realization that was going to change his life. He knew Kit would be very proud. In fact, he felt proud too in a way that was new and different and made him happy even before this adventure began.

Lemon Tree: Scented-Blossom Memory

Mary Olivia Patiño– San Antonio, TX

Citrus sweetness descends
As she rests under the lemon tree,
Dusty feet tucked under well-worn dress,
Softly showering her,
Lingering into scented-blossom memory

Permeates skin on eager outstretched arm
Twisting off the tantalizing fruit.
She peels rough rind also tempting busy bees,
Juicy gift that Lemon Tree offers,
Infusing her young soul

Long before she was "Mother"
Cuando era niña, antes de ser "Mama,"
Long before this moment
Became a scented-blossom memory.

Yellow lemons, fresh elixir ready to tingle
An already sharp tongue,
Restore grievous injury from wasp sting or cuts,
Heal sore throat with honey:
Add a bit of tequila
As *Abuelito's* faith-effected true, tried remedy.

Simmering in *Abuelita's* copper pot,
Fragrant shiny leaves release green-tinged
Healthy benefits.

El tesito (a little cup of tea),
Warm liquid soothes all ailments
Or inspires dormant recollection
To be shared *en la meza*.

Years later, I delight to hear her stories,
When life bestowed kindness
While she rested from her labors,

Recognizing how scented-blossom memory

Heals once more, the pain, the struggles
That lashed a young girl's soul.

In Times of Uncertainty: Rethink Who You Are

*A Message for My Children and
Granddaughters*

Jeanne Guy – Austin, TX

"When our future is uncertain, we have a hard time functioning in the present."

– Peter Bregman, author of *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distractions, and Get the Right Things Done*

It's August 2016, and the current political scene could easily paralyze me. The vitriol spewed from various sources, including friends on Facebook, is hard to take. I'm sure I'm not alone in this feeling. When I feel heavy and weighed down by the rhetoric and the hatred and fear, I know I need to do something. But what?

Jim Rigby, a local Austin progressive minister and social justice advocate, recently said, "*We are trying to hold on to human decency, not win the battle of the apes. As the public airwaves now fill with masters of bluster, innuendo and conspiracy theories, it is tempting to respond in kind. But just as bluster cannot win if the standard is reason, neither can reason succeed if the standard has been set by bluster. Instead of countering with the same kind of hoots and howls that only mimic human thought, we must hold on to our civility and reason as to a flickering flame in a lightless midnight.*"

His words lift me up and put me in a good place. But I must confess, I'm already in a good place right now – literally. I'm house-and-dog-sitting on Whidbey Island, my heart home, for dear friends, and am also sharing this time with my very special and very exhausted sister, who is in need of time away from caregiving. Here, she can rest and regain her sense of well-being.

Recognizing the need for me to practice self-care as well, I don't hesitate when Sarah, a new island neighbor/friend, extends a welcome invitation to attend a yoga class with her. The yoga instructor impresses upon the dozen or so of us in attendance to "*practice being with yourself*" – being in a deeper relationship with yourself, a new kind of intimacy. Though I have definitely learned to slow down (at least part of the day), being with myself is still admittedly an ongoing mysterious challenge.

As I follow her instructions for different yoga poses, I listen with curiosity and wonder to my body, focused on its response: to feel it, hear it, know it. In that moment of awareness, I experience the intimacy she spoke of and feel remarkably more conscious and more engaged. It is an eye-opening moment, and the importance of a deeper relationship with myself becomes clear.

Right now, in these uncertain and volatile times, it is critical for me to learn to be with myself and know what I feel and think. To love myself, so I can understand the ramifications of such love – loving self, loving others, to be in right relationship with myself and with this world. I have been caught up in the current political scene. I have found anger and sadness I didn't know was in me, reminding me that we are all, every single one of us, capable of such feelings, letting us know (if we're paying attention) what anger and hate can do to us – to our relationship with ourselves, and what it does to our relationships with each other.

So the question becomes, who am I? What is it I want for this world? If I am overwhelmed, I can become just as paralyzed as the next person, throw up my hands and say that what I do, what I feel, how I treat others, doesn't matter.

Ultimately, self-care, moving into a deeper relationship with myself, gives me the clarity to know who I am and how I want to be. Not to

turn away from the vitriol and venom I read in Facebook rantings and ravings, but rather to come at it from a different place as I meet it. I don't want to become what I don't like, what I don't admire, what I feel denigrates and defiles the good so many people are trying to do in this world. I don't want to promote hate or participate in mean-spiritedness, because I believe when one starts spewing, others stop listening. I would rather choose kind-sight. Before I open my mouth, let me first be able to go deep within, establish a truer relationship with myself, know and be able to articulate my values and live and share them – by example.

Regardless of your political views, Michelle Obama's words can be taken to heart. "*...we explain [to our daughters] that when someone is cruel or acts like a bully, you don't stoop to their level. No, our motto is, when they go low, we go high.*" Before you go low, stop and find out who you are, who you want to be, and make the choice to go high.

The Warrior

Lucy Painter – Williamsburg, VA

Like most small towns, my hometown had its population of what my grandmother called "characters," people who lived among us with their eccentricities and quirks. Miss R. stood each Wednesday on the corner of Main and Magnolia with a collar of aluminum foil around her neck, her face turned toward the sun. We passed her by with a friendly hello and accepted her as the "Sunshine Lady." Mr. C. sat on his front porch serenading passersby with a banjo solo and, if they were not careful, a stream of tobacco juice launched over the railing. Our parents warned us never to make fun of anyone, no matter how different they seemed. I gave these "characters" no thought, until one day I learned how special one of them was.

His name was Rudell Smith. Dirty, toothless, and often drunk, he wandered the town in a stained undershirt and baggy pants, his shoe soles held together with rubber bands. I saw him on street corners, on wooden benches in front of the courthouse, and sweeping the sidewalks of my school where he sometimes worked. Quiet and bent, he lived in the background of my childhood.

As a child, I feared his odor and his dirt, his unsmiling silence, his otherness. I did not understand my mother's gentleness with him, the same mother who scolded me for not combing my hair or making my bed, for coming home from school with dirty clothes. She lived by the adage "Cleanliness is next to Godliness," except in the case of Mr. Smith. When she and I met him on the street where he wandered, often drunk even in midday, he always tipped his imaginary hat to us when passing.

"Good morning, ma'am, Miss Lucy." He stepped aside to let us pass, his odor filling the air. My mother always nodded in return and replied in kind words to him. "Good morning to you, Mr. Smith. How are you today? Fine one, isn't it?"

Her warm courtesy to this strange, dirty man puzzled me, until one July afternoon in Mr. Houston's grocery.

I was nine, old enough to know better. My mother and Mr. Houston were deep in conversation about the price of eggs. I was bored, eager to go home, when I spotted my friend Sheila across the street with her father. I had not seen her for two weeks and had so much to tell her, especially about the new kitten that showed up last week on our doorstep. Without thinking, I darted from the store and across the street.

I did not see the car, but Mr. Smith did. I felt myself lifted into the air by strong hands around my waist and realized that he held me in his

arms, the two of us spinning away from the oncoming car that brushed by. I heard nothing except a rushing sound and the pounding of both of our hearts, one into the other. I felt nothing except his strong arms around me and the scratchy stubble of his face pressed into mine.

Mr. Houston, my mother, people on the street, all began yelling at once, but I listened only to his voice in my ear murmuring, "It's OK, Miss Lucy. You gonna be OK."

Later, at home, I received a scolding for dashing into the street, of course, but also the answer to a puzzle when my mother told me the story of the man who had saved my life.

He had gone to war, seen many men die in horrible ways, and received the Silver Star for bravery and a Purple Heart. He suffered terrible wounds, physical and emotional, wounds he came home to heal. Instead, here in this town, another war began for him. While he was fighting in the forests of Germany, his wife deserted him, taking with her the daughter he never saw again. He began to drink.

Our small town was full of widows whose husbands had not come home, of fathers and mothers who had lost sons and daughters in that war, ordinary people who understood pain and loss. These ordinary people saw not the dirt and drunkenness in Rudell Smith. They knew his pain, suffered with him his decline. He was a part of them, of their community, a warrior still fighting battles of his own.

That warrior now sat on our porch with a glass of iced tea, in deep conversation over a shared cigarette with my father. What they talked about I do not know, but I know my father, who himself had lost a brother in the war, was thanking him for more than his one brave act that afternoon.

Blue Eyes

Abby November – San Diego, CA

Invisible man, arduously moving a loaded cart.
A cart filled with rags, three-legged stool, and his sleeping bag.
Elderly, weathered man purposefully
pushes his home from trashcan to dumpster.
This loaded shopping cart,
once a vehicle for groceries,
now lugs the debris of an invisible life.
Weekly, silently, he arrives where I work
claiming the free food bag and bread offered.
Talking about government conspiracy, he avoids dairy and most food;
I bring him special treats: chocolate, soy milk, and instant coffee.
Six months have passed; he talks more and moves closer;
he helps with heavy food bags. His name is Phil. He has blue eyes.
He is no longer invisible. He is my friend.



You Have to Be Carefully Taught

Ethel Lee-Miller – Tucson, AZ

Can you remember the dizzying feeling of your first love? I know how trite that sounds, like the loopy writing in a teenager's diary with little hearts over the i's. But I can remember, I really can. And I was only recently past being a teenager, so why not the dizzy feeling?

I danced into the kitchen where my sisters and I had curtsied and twirled as little girls in front of the refrigerator, to the delight of our parents. Now I felt light enough to rise up and float over my mother's head as she moved through a week's worth of ironing for our family. When I bounced back down to the linoleum floor, I swirled around the ironing board, trailing my fingers along the sleeve of Dad's office shirt.

My mother looked up, resting the iron with a clunk on the metal pad, caught for three seconds in the joy that was shooting off from me. Then back to the ironing.

"He called." I sighed, with all the trust and joy a twenty-year-old wrapped in infatuation could emit in two words.

"Who?" came my mother's muffled voice as she bent over the ironing board.

"Malachi. He works at the plant. He has the gentlest voice and is just gorgeous."

"Malachi? What kind of a name is that?"

"It's from the Bible. I looked it up. It means prophet or messenger, and his message is he wants to take me out to the movies."

I laughed and actually hugged myself. This was just too delicious.

"He's really tall – 6' 7". He has the most beautiful smooth skin. His arms look like silky dark chocolate."

"Do you mean he's a Negro?" My mother's voice held an unmistakable incredulous tone, tinged with some hostility.

"Well. Yes, he's black, Mom." My spin was slower. "What's the matter with that?"

"Friends, okay," was the flat reply. "But not to go on dates." She clunked the iron down again and walked out of the kitchen.

I'm always amazed at the power and speed of memory. In the time it took for my mother to disappear into her bedroom, I saw many past images. My mother separating from her father's prejudice by opening our summer home as a vacation place for children of different racial backgrounds. My mother piling boxes of clothes and food into cartons, and driving the cartons, along with my sister and I as witnesses, to deliver to a black family that lived in a shed in the middle of a farm field. I saw my neighbors tally up signatures and arrange for buses for the March on Washington in 1963. I remembered litanies of equality from my childhood. "Everyone is equal." "No name-calling."

With all the innocence of a child, I believed these actions went straight from intellectual decisions to behavior, to moral fiber that wove its way into matters of the heart.

The iron was hissing. I automatically reached out and turned it off. My heart was still beating far too fast, not from euphoria, but from the realization that what I thought was the cross-my-heart-and-hope-to-die truth was simply...not. And I didn't know why.

The world stopped spinning.

Musings from the distance of time are sometimes more objective, more balanced with maturity and the willingness to "step into someone else's shoes." Perhaps my mother could have explained that surface behaviors are not always grounded in core beliefs. Perhaps I could have hinted at a new friend, then developed him into a new crush, then delivered the skin pigmentation issue. But I was twenty and she was fifty, both of us products of our age and the times.

No Matter

Lucy Painter – Williamsburg, VA

Overwhelmed by paper work, indifferent students, incompetent administrators, I was ready to call my first year of teaching my last. Most high school teachers have that moment when they say, "That's it. I can't do this anymore. I should have been a banker, a baker, a lawyer, anything but a teacher." I was one of them.

Each morning on my drive to school I prayed, "Please, God, give me the energy to get through this day, just this one day." Silence filled my car, and I decided that God had better things to do than listen to my whining.

I continued to struggle, growing more discouraged, until Michael Brown, a student in my third period class, rescued me. Tall and silent, Michael towered over most of the other boys in class and spoke to no one. He lived in a neighborhood far from the tree-lined streets and freshly painted houses surrounding our school. As a result of new integration laws in Virginia, he and his friends rode a bus to our high school, often arriving just after dawn. There they found themselves surrounded by a sea of white faces, many of them hostile.

In the back of my classroom, Michael sat sullen and unresponsive, raising his head to speak only when I called the roll. His "Here" was the only word I heard him say each day for four months. His grades were barely passing, and he met with stony silence any attempts I made to talk with him.

In January, we began to read *Romeo and Juliet* in class, with eager students volunteering for parts. I had told them the story, shamelessly playing up the drama of teenage love and loss. All of the girls wanted to be Juliet, or at least the Nurse with her broad humor. Although the boys argued over who would be bold and dashing Tybalt or

charming Mercutio, there were no takers for the lead, Romeo himself

"On, no," I thought. "Now what? This isn't going to work if I have to assign a Romeo. It's the most important part."

I stood before the class frozen with anxiety and inexperience when Michael raised his head from his desktop. His eyes looked directly into mine for the first time all year.

"Miz. Painter?" His low voice startled me. I drew a deep breath waiting for the challenge I was sure to come. "I'll be Romeo."

Many thoughts crowded my head in an instant: Was he putting me on, all of us on? Why now? What's going on here?

I acted on instinct, with no thought and certainly no experience, since I had so little. Heart pounding, I answered for both of us, "Yes, of course, Michael is Romeo. So let's get started."

We did. For five acts, until his death by his own hand, Romeo came alive for all of us in the deep rich tones of Michael Brown, who read the strange words without stumble. His low voice captured the flow of the beautiful language, the agony of doubt and betrayal in a young angry man, maybe a young man much like himself, lost, misunderstood, and lonely. We all sat mesmerized.

Each day Michael stayed with me after school to go over difficult passages, and began to tell me about his life outside of school – an absent father, a mother who worked two jobs, the care of his elderly grandmother, how much he missed his former school. Each night he studied his part, reading and rereading his lines, listening for the right intonation. In class, he encouraged his fellow actors to match him in emotion as together they relived the great old love story.

"Come on, Wilkinson. Tybalt is one badass. He's not gonna talk like a little girl. Put some teeth in

it!" Wilkinson, the starting quarterback for the junior varsity team, grinned at Michael and pumped a fist. That afternoon I spotted the two of them walking to the gym together, alive in conversation.

On the last day of school, Michael came to say goodbye, and to ask me if I planned to return next year. "I don't even want to think about next year yet," I told him. "I'm just glad to have survived this one."

Michael smiled and turned to leave, but stopped at the door. "Yep, we both survived, didn't we, Miz P.? Now we know we can do it, no matter."

On the exhausting and discouraging days that often occurred over the next 20 years of my teaching career, I remembered those words and the brave young man who gave them to me – I can do it, no matter.

May Baskets

Sara Etgen-Baker – Anna, TX

Early one crisp November morning, Mother dressed me in thick corduroy slacks, wrapped me in Father's flannel shirt, then stuffed me into her bulky sweater. "Here," she handed me my slouchy-knit, oversized beanie cap, "you'll be needing this to keep your head and ears warm."

I slipped the cap on. "Now come outside with me." She handed me a brown paper sack; the contents smelled like wet dirt. "We need to plant bulbs before the first hard freeze." I knelt on the ground next to Mother, breathing in the soft scent of the dewy morning grass and the earthy smell of freshly turned soil.

"I've already dug the holes. Take each bulb from the bag, drop it in the hole, then gently push the dirt back into the hole, covering the bulb."

I opened the sack. "These bulbs are ugly and look dead!"

"Yes, they're not pretty. But they're not dead; they're just sleeping until spring."

"All the bulbs look alike." I covered the bulbs squishing the wet dirt between my fingers. "How do we know what they'll look like come spring?"

"We won't know for sure, but that's the point: we need to be faithful and patient."

Soon after planting the bulbs, autumn winds arrived, shaking the leaves off the trees. Days shortened, and nights closed in, chilly and long. In December, the snow and harsh sleet came; the birds disappeared from Mother's garden. I stood on the back porch and watched my warm breath mingle with the cold air wondering if the bulbs would come alive in spring.

In January and February, sunless, harsh days prevailed; winter's dreariness settled over me. Mother's garden became frozen and bare, but I clung to the hope that the flowers would eventually bloom. Winter's harsh sleet became rain, and sunshine drenched the earth now and again. But without the gentle spring heat, nothing grew in Mother's garden – not even weeds. At last, March arrived, as did the warmth of the sun's rays. Once more my breaths were invisible; the birds returned to Mother's garden.

In mid-April, while strolling through the garden, I saw pink poking through the ground. "Hurry Mother!" I hollered. She ran to my side.

"What is it? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. But...but...it's the flowers. They have buds!"

"Perfect!" She skittered around her garden. "They'll be ready at just the right time."

Within a few days, the tight buds began to open and had a deeper blush of pink. I touched the

silky petals; they were cooler and smoother than I expected. I laid my head to the ground, willing them to open faster.

"Mother Nature has its way, its timing," Mother assured me. "She's not ready yet. But a few more warm days, and the flowers will bloom. We need to be ready, though."

Mother hustled me to the local five-and-dime, where she gathered up tissue paper, colored ribbons, note cards, and all the discounted Easter baskets she could put into her shopping cart. "Okay. We're ready." Mother gathered up her purchases and scurried out the door.

"Ready for what?" I grabbed some of the baskets and followed her out to the car.

Mother loaded up the family station wagon then turned toward me. "To make May Baskets, of course."

"What are May Baskets?"

"They're small baskets filled with fresh flowers and secretly left at someone's doorstep. The giver leaves the basket on the porch, rings the doorbell, and runs away." Her eyes sparkled and gleamed. "So when we get home, we'll cut the flowers blooming in the garden and make May Baskets. Then tomorrow, May 1st, we'll get up early and deliver them to our neighbors. Won't that be fun?"

"But...but...I waited all winter for the flowers to bloom, and they're so beautiful. And...and...I thought we were keeping them forever." I tightened my face and bit my lower lip. "Instead, we're taking the flowers from the garden and giving them away and not telling our neighbors?"

"I can see you're disappointed. But flowers – like kindness – are meant to be shared. Their beauty is not ours to keep. You understand?"

"No! I don't!" I tilted my head down and frowned. "I want to keep the flowers...forever."

"Sure you do. Remember, every drop of kindness you give away returns to bless you in another way. You'll understand. Wait and see."

So later that afternoon, we snipped most of the flowers from Mother's garden and arranged colorful bouquets. We tied each bouquet together with ribbon, wrapped it in tissue paper, then placed each one in the refrigerator to stay fresh overnight.

"Before you go to bed, write this message on the note cards: '*A May Day Basket is a welcome spring treat. Someone thinks you're special and so sweet.*'" Mother handed me a stack of her tiny note cards. "Once you've written the notes, I'll tie them to the baskets. Use your best handwriting." Afterwards, I headed to bed and reluctantly drifted off to sleep, thinking about the flowers I'd miss.

Shortly after dawn the next morning, Mother woke me singing, "It's May! The lovely month of May!" She flipped off my covers. "It's May! No longer in bed can you stay. It's time to deliver bouquets!"

Still blurry-eyed, I loaded the baskets into my brother's wagon. Soon Mother and I journeyed through the neighborhood. At each house, we hid behind the shrubbery. Mother handed me a bouquet and I'd run to the front door, set the basket of flowers on the porch, then ring the doorbell, giggling as I ran for cover. We hunkered behind the bushes and watched our neighbors as they looked up and down the street, wondering just who'd left the May basket at their doorstep.

Mother was right. I was having fun secretly spreading joy and kindness throughout the neighborhood. And I am grateful to this day for the simple yet powerful lesson Mother taught me that spring – that kindness and giving are their own reward.

Love

Jo Virgil – Austin, TX

Snow didn't happen often in Odessa, deep in the West Texas stretches of sand and tumbleweeds. But when it did, once every few years, everything from schools to grocery stores shut down. Except the hospitals, the fire stations, the police stations. And my dad, being a Highway Patrol sergeant, had to work long and hard days when the weather sent vehicles careening into each other.

Why my dad was home on that particular afternoon in 1958, I honestly don't recall. The snow in our yard was maybe two inches deep, a veritable deluge in that part of the world. When I look at the photo of me all bundled up in my coat and gloves, barely worn, what strikes me most is the way I'm looking at my dad. He was all bundled up, too. The child-sized snowman next to us had used up all the snow in the yard. In the photo, my dad has his arm around me, and I was looking at him, not the snowman. My smile seemed to shine brightly enough to melt what little snow remained in the yard.

Looking at the photo, I can still smell that hint of English Leather, feel his strong hands, his hairy arms, and his coarse whiskers against my cheek when he hugged me. But mostly I remember his eyes, how they came alive when he looked down at me after a long day patrolling the endless roads across the desert. As special as that made me feel, I didn't fully realize how his devotion to his family warmed him, until I was an adult and came to understand the refuge that his home must have been for him. After a day of working bloody wrecks, chasing drunks and criminals, intervening in oil roughnecks' disputes – after all that, settling into his home, his family, his little girl, must have felt like being wrapped in the arms of God. I never knew all that, though, when I was eight.

Looking back, I see the routine that he used to put work behind him. His bedroom door was next to the front door, so he could slip in, close the door, and shed his gun belt, his badge, his uniform, and his stress. When he came out of that bedroom door in his casual slacks and shirt, he belonged completely to us, his family.

I wonder still today, years after his death, whether the roughnecks and drunks he had to arrest could sense that deep gentleness that was his true nature. Probably not. They most likely would have rubbed their eyes in disbelief if they had seen him with me at the dime store, discussing who was going to pay for my treat, him or me. He would gently ask me, "Do you want that candy bar?" And when I replied, as I always did, "Whose money?" he would feign surprise and stifle a chuckle, and then, of course, he would offer to foot the bill. When I was older and had more expensive tastes, I would often hear him repeat that story to friends when he didn't think I was within hearing distance.

What an odd revelation it was to me when I was thirty-something and realized that I never recalled my dad ever saying, "I love you." Not with those words. He said it with his touch, with his eyes, with his pure attention. But not with those words.

Yet I never, ever doubted it.

The Block Party

Maya Lazarus – Caldwell, TX

A summertime event in 1955: our annual Joralemon Street Block Party in Brooklyn Heights. Shouts and cheers from the crowds at the game booths. I smell onions and peppers frying, to eat along with spicy sausages. Popcorn sounds like firecrackers as it jumps and sizzles. I stare in amazement at the wheel-like machine spinning pink cotton candy. My dad hands me the sticky stuff on a paper stick and shoos me off down the crooked sidewalk. I can hear Mom

chattering with our next-door neighbors and our tenants, Jean and Marian. Her voice steadies me. I'm alone, but not alone, as she catches my attention and smiles. My sister, Donna, two years older, is roaming somewhere. I couldn't care less about what she's doing. She never has time for me. Pinches me when no one is looking. I can run in the street if I want to because the traffic is blocked off. I cross over to Willow Place. The shadowy trees along the sidewalk send me back. I already see shapes moving behind those trees. I turn around and skip across the cobblestones and stand with my back to our row house, looking out at the street thinking, "This is the best night of my life!" Around my feet lie gum wrappers, greasy waxed papers that once wrapped around hot dogs, empty cotton candy sticks with beads of sweetness clinging, and Popsicle sticks still wet. People's voices are rising on top of each other. The party is in full swing.

Suddenly, my dad taps me on my shoulder and I look up, barely making out his face in the streetlight glare. He's holding his white handkerchief over one eye. I wonder where his glasses are. In the calmest of voices, amid the din, he says, "Tell your mom I'm going to the hospital. A boy broke my glasses with a dart, and I think there's a piece of glass in my eye." I have an immediate image of his eye bleeding and cut up, but I can't see the blood because he's covered his eye with the handkerchief. I don't know what to say. I feel my stomach toss about. I'm scared. But Dad's touch and the squeeze to my shoulder reassure me that everything will be OK. It always is.

"It is a mistake to regard age as a downhill grade toward dissolution. The reverse is true. As one grows older, one climbs with surprising strides."

— George Sand

When the Rossmans Visited

Sandra Simon – Austin, TX

As she put groceries into the pantry, Mother said, "The Rossmans are coming over this evening after dinner. I want you and Helenie to stay in your room while they are here."

The Rossmans! Almost nobody ever came over, except Aunt Lora, or Mrs. Kaplan from next door. The Rossmans lived on our other side. They were older than my parents, but they didn't ask me to call them Grandma and Grandpa, like the Kaplans did. Also, after I hit a baseball that flew through their bedroom window, when I went to apologize, Mrs. Rossman said that I shouldn't be playing baseball. Their daughter, who was in college and engaged to a doctor, never played baseball. Nice girls didn't play baseball. I loved baseball. Maybe they were coming over to talk to my parents about girls playing baseball. I needed to be in the den with them, not playing a boring doll game with my sister.

"I'm not a baby. I'm in Low Two. Why can't I visit with them, too?"

"No. Go do something useful, while I get ready."

Worried, and angry at my mean mother, who treated me like a baby, I stomped off.

When the Rossmans arrived, I played near our open bedroom door, listening to the sounds coming from the den, trying to catch the words. After a while, Mother came in, told us to go to bed, and then returned to the den.

"I can't sleep," I screamed. "You're talking too loud!"

"Sandi, go to bed!"

I had an idea. I undressed, arranged my arms and hands strategically for modesty, and raced, bare as birth, into the den, to announce, "I can't find any clean pajamas!"

Mrs. Rossman shrieked. Mr. Rossman, very red, stared at the floor. Dad shouted, "Sandi!" Mother jumped up, humiliated and furious, and herded me toward my room. "Don't come out again tonight," she said, tight-lipped, each word hard and sharp. "And don't ever do that again."

Hot with embarrassment, lying in my bed in my pajamas, I heard the grown-ups laughing in the den. Now Mrs. Rossman would easily convince my parents that I was not a nice girl. There was no way to undo what I had done.

What other outcome could I have expected?

Looking back, I see my intense, quirky little self, and my astonished young parents. I don't remember what "negative consequences" followed, probably a tense conversation with my mother. This would, alas, not be my final episode of outlandish behavior. The many books that I read, even at that age, fueled my imagination with antics to try. My parents probably knew that my embarrassment was punishment enough. The Rossmans were certainly no threat. But I do think that Mother was concerned about their opinion of us, and I don't remember Dad ever playing baseball with me again.

"Let us simmer over our incalculable cauldron, our enthralling confusion, our hotch-potch of impulses, our perpetual miracle."

— Virginia Woolf

Nimbus Be Damned

Lois Ann Bull – Easton, CT

Puffy, billowing clouds suddenly blocked the sunlight. Toys collected from the yard rattled in my apron. I headed back towards the house with the playthings and a sudden gust of cold air fluttered my yellow blouse. A momentary shiver stroked my back and set my mind wondering.

Earlier, my three-year-old son, Christopher, and I had waved to Grandma as she trotted off on her horse for a trail ride. My father-in-law headed for his large apple orchard. Sultry morning air hung heavily, unusual for August in Vermont. Then another cloud blocked the sun. A cool breeze swished through me again.

Looking up, I noticed blue sky disappearing. Dishwater-gray clouds began stacking like towers over our heads. Uneasiness crept over me.

"Looks like a storm is coming." I thought.

My son trotted over. Did he sense my apprehension?

An hour later, low rumblings had turned into loud claps and fat drops splattered the windows. My in-laws, forced home by the impending storm, scurried in with lively steps. Thunder bounced and rolled around our hills while we all ate lunch. Lights blinked with the worst crashes. Hard rain pounded the tin roof like drummers practicing tattoos.

As I set the cleared plates on the counter, a flash of bright blue in the window caught my eye. While I tried to make out what I'd seen, blurs of red and yellow spun in the air.

"What on earth?" I muttered while peering through the haze of gray rain. "Oh, no!" I yelled, "The pond's overflowing!"

Uphill from the house, our one-acre swimming pond poured through the spillway and as I

watched, water topped the earthen dam. Now a twenty-foot-wide torrent streamed over, carrying paraphernalia left on the sand beach. A miniature Niagara dropped twelve feet through heavy grass into the gully where a normally small, gentle stream meandered down behind the house.

Then in horror, I watched Christopher's swimming float come to the crest, flip in the air, and drop out of view. I didn't care about the plastic pails and shovels taking the ride. But I did care about that float. A special harness arrangement on the Styrofoam helped my young son keep his head above water. Without it, I'd know no peace.

As my in-laws now peered through the kitchen window, I darted to the dining room window to look downstream, hoping to catch a glimpse of the wayward float. Nothing.

Hoping I might snag it from the bank, I dashed outside sucking in ozone-laden air as rain drenched me. Never once did I think about the weather conditions nor any consequences. As I slipped and slid on the slick grass, I raced down to the raging flow. Wind tore at the trees; thunder boomed overhead; water crashed over the dam. But the float. Where was the float?

At the water's edge I balked at the tiny brook now swollen eleven feet across. It muttered and thrashed in a great downstream rush, pulling past half-submerged bushes and tree limbs. My eyes raked the turbulent stream. Maybe the bubble had bobbed past, speeding away in the tumble and spill. At last, I spotted it on the opposite bank. The harness had tangled in wannabe trees.

Heart racing, I waded in to go after it, expecting only a few inches of water. I can do this, I thought as it swirled around my ankles. With my next step, my crotch soaked before my foot hit bottom.

Images flew through my mind – Hollywood Westerns from my childhood. Black-and-white

scenes flickered and a dim memory surfaced. A super cowboy helped a heroine cross a flooded arroyo in a terrible cloudburst. He clutched her firmly and kept them upright as he struggled toward the other side by hanging onto overhanging tree limbs.

Taking my nod from Saturday movies, I grabbed a nearby limb. Weaving drunkenly, I tried to plant my feet, but until I made a mental note of the gully, minus the raging water, I teetered around dangerously. Forging into deeper water, the current battered me left and right. Straining against it, I stared at Christopher's swimming float, willing it to stay put.

My supporting tree limb had started out thick. As I inched across the flooded gully, hidden rocks and submerged debris hindered every step. My stalwart branch petered down, much to my horror. The now supple switch had slimmed into twigs. Frantically, searching through the downpour for a replacement, I nearly fell in. A towel, from the pond's beach edge, slapped my legs. I kicked it loose and it tumbled on.

Fortunately, I realized I could grab a branch from the opposite bank. Once in my hand, I no longer tottered dangerously. However, my billowing clothes dragged on me, threatening disaster. Every step was a tug-of-war.

Once I made it to the little float, I untangled it and caught my breath.

Using what I will always think of as the Hollywood Cowboy Technique, I worked my way back across the flood, this time at an angle, moving slightly downstream with the current. Soggy and squishy, I finally climbed back up the mud-slicked side yard carrying my prize. Noah's animals had nothing on me.

My delight at having rescued the precious Styrofoam fizzed up in me like Coke bubbles in a first swallow.

As I stepped into the farmhouse all smiles, my father-in-law greeted me with a verbal tirade. He

cared nothing of my reasons for rescuing the device, but said I could have been killed, a concept that is difficult for a twenty-something to accept.

But he did get my attention, when he added, "Do you realize that the entire dam might have given way? And what about the safety of your unborn child? Was the float worth more than that?"

"Oh my God, I'd forgotten I'm five months pregnant!"

Science & Hardware: Girls Do It, Too

Kim Pearson – Snoqualmie, WA

Next time you feel yourself becoming irritated or infuriated over the sexism that still exists in our culture, remind yourself that things have gotten better. Here are two true stories showing that time and effort really can change things.

Science Time

In 1962, I was in third grade. Every Wednesday afternoon our class had "Science Time." Actually, only the boys had Science Time. They gathered on one side of the room to learn about things like chemistry – you could see smoke and smell their experimental concoctions from the other side of the room. Or they learned about astronomy and built scale models of the solar system and drew pictures of little green men with big heads. One day they even had an astronaut come and talk to them about space.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the classroom, we girls had "Junior Home Ec." We practiced sewing aprons and learned how to make chocolate chip cookies in a child's "Betty Crocker" oven – which was pink, of course. We were taught not by a real teacher, but a teacher's helper, usually a mother of one of the girls.

I don't think it was exactly forbidden for the girls to join the boys for Science Time, but it was definitely not encouraged. It was just accepted as the way it was. "Girls over here," they called, and we went.

I was puzzled that our teacher, Mrs. Scribner, taught Science Time, even though Mrs. Scribner was a woman. How had she learned enough science to teach it to the boys? Maybe she learned in secret, I thought. Or maybe she went to a special science school for girls.

I thought about asking her if she would also teach me, in secret, so no one else would know I was curious about science even though I was a girl. The reason I didn't want anyone to know was not because I was afraid people would think I was weird or unfeminine. It was because I was afraid of looking stupid – I had already accepted that science would be too hard for me. After all, I was a girl. So I kept my mouth shut and made a crookedly stitched apron that I forgot to hem, and gave it to my mother.

This memory, which even today makes me furious, is one of the reasons I am so inordinately proud of my daughter, who is a scientist.

Girls Buy Hardware, Too

In 1977, armed with my college degree, I entered the full-time workforce. I had worked part-time through college as a secretary, and I looked forward to working in a different role. However, the only jobs I was considered for were secretarial jobs. Most, in fact, nearly all of the jobs available for women in business were secretarial jobs.

Jobs in the want ads were always advertised as "Men Wanted" or "Women Wanted." I answered the "Women" ads for office help, naively hoping I could use a secretarial job as a springboard to something better. I was offered quite a few secretarial jobs, but when I asked about paths to

advancement, the only thing on offer was Office Manager or Head Typist. Although young men with the same education as I were considered for management trainees and entry level sales positions, I was told – in these exact words – that women couldn't manage because their employees wouldn't take them seriously, and that women couldn't be salespeople because their customers wouldn't take them seriously.

Eventually I landed a job as a Secretary/Purchasing Agent. That slash was why I agreed to take the job. The company was a furniture manufacturer and it was my job to purchase nails and screws and other small production items. My supervisor bought "bigger" things such as lumber, bedsprings, and mattress ticking. I thought this was temporary, just until I learned. Then I would be the Buyer for the major purchases. But when I asked when I would be given that responsibility, I was told: never. I couldn't buy these products because the purchase of lumber and such was really a man's job and the suppliers wouldn't take me seriously.

Unfortunately they were right about this. I learned this fact of life the first time my hardware vendor, selling nails and screws, came to see me. He knew my name but had not yet talked to me. Since Kim is a man's name as well as a woman's, he expected a man. He saw me and his mouth fell open in shock. "You're a girl!" he huffed. "I'm not selling nails to a girl!" And out he stomped. I never saw him again. I had to find another nail and screw vendor, which should have been easy but wasn't, because I wanted one who wasn't patronizing.

I was in that job five years, and although by the second year I devoted myself to purchasing and performed no secretarial duties, it wasn't until the last year of my employment that my company finally yielded to my pleas to drop the "secretary" from my title and promote me to Purchasing Agent without the slash.

You Heard It From Me First

Sandy Schuster-Hubbard – Murrieta, CA

Four children in the family ensured there'd be moments when a neighbor knocked on my door or a teacher called me to share that one of my four darlings was involved in a "situation." Because I never wanted to be blindsided or, worse yet, be given a partial or slanted story, I created the rule that if I had to hear about issues from someone other than my kids, or if I didn't have the whole story, "hell would come to breakfast." However grim something was, consequences would be less severe if I heard it from their lips first. If they were not at fault – it could happen – I'd support them; if they were at fault, they would face reasonable consequences. God – and each of the children – knew they didn't want me to utter through clenched teeth, "Precious-pooky-honey-love, come here now. Mama wants to talk to you."

By the time Sarah was a freshman at Serra Junior-Senior High School, she had seven years of athletic experience to her credit. She played in several youth leagues from age seven, with varsity high school athletics as her goal. Her slender, 5'4" frame was more suited to gymnastics than softball or basketball, but those were her favorites. Despite her size, she played those sports well and often teased me that I gave her a cursed genetic contribution, since I am 5'1". Not exactly slam dunk material. She might not have always been the best player, but she always played smart. What she lacked in size and natural talent, she more than made up for in intelligence, discipline, and enthusiasm.

While Sarah waited for softball and basketball season, she tried out for the badminton team. She made the team, excelled, and received her first varsity letter at age 14. She attached it to her expensive brown and gold Conquistador

letterman's jacket, and she wore the jacket whether it was 45° or 70°.

With Homecoming only two weeks away, each class level decorated a float for the Homecoming Parade with high hopes to take first place. Nearly twenty-five freshmen gathered on a Friday night at a classmate's garage to decorate the float. A few houses up that block, seniors worked on their float, too. Theoretically, parental chaperones kept a watchful eye on both groups.

As some freshmen measured, cut, and attached crepe paper to the sides of the float bed, others spray-painted backdrop cardboard pieces. A carload of seniors slowly drove up, hooting, "Losers. Incoming. Here's help." Splat. Splat. Splat. Water balloons burst, spraying everyone and everything. The water-soaked crepe paper sagged, colors and shape forever changed, while the freshly painted cardboard pieces had dripping splotches that left myriad streaks, like street lines on a Thomas Brothers' map.

The freshmen quickly turned into a mob mentality bent on instant retaliation. They grabbed the spray paint cans and chased after the seniors. Sarah yelled, "Whoa! Hey guys. Stop. Don't. Paint'll ruin stuff. Guys, don't." Her words, lost like echoes in a tunnel, had no effect. Only one other freshman refused to be a part of the mob, but she didn't quite have the courage to try stopping them. The freshmen wantonly sprayed the seniors, their cars, float, and athletic jackets – nothing spared.

When Sarah realized she couldn't reason with them, she raced for home. There she gasped and gulped out the story details, ending with "...n Mom, I really tried to stop 'em 'n I'm sure school is gonna call on Monday."

"Where were the chaperones?"

"I dunno. Never saw 'em."

"You 'done good,' sweetie. You chose not to vandalize, and you stepped up and tried to stop them. That's using great judgment." It's one of those moments when motherhood is sweet. Parents hope – well, at least this parent – that their children will not succumb to peer pressure, and my Sarah had done the right thing at the right time.

As we talked it through, she asked, "Mom, what should I do? If I tell on the others, I'll be a snitch, 'n if I get lumped with the others, I'll lose my letter and jacket for being unsportsmanlike – 'n all for somethin' I didn't even do."

I knew what I preferred she do, but instead said, "It's something you need to decide. Think through the consequences of your choices. It's always about the consequences and what you can accept."

She stared at me with a "that's not what I wanted to hear" look. I said, "I'll support whatever you decide."

She and I knew the truth of what she had attempted to do, and I'd heard the whole story from her first. That was good enough for me, but Sarah had a miserable weekend.

She wasn't the only one pondering a decision. I considered a visit to the principal and wondered how Sarah would feel if I intervened. We'll never know.

Monday after school, Sarah burst through the door: "Mom!" And then louder, her words tumbling out, "Maawmm. I didn't have to do anything!" Several freshmen told the principal that Sarah tried to stop them on Friday night. Her varsity letter was safe, and she hadn't snitched on her classmates. Wahoo!

As an adult, Sarah shared that following the incident she'd made an assessment. "The cool kids aren't all that cool. Destroying property isn't

cool." Consequently, she chose to spend more time with athletes and academics. Little surprise she chose a career in law enforcement. To this day, Sarah is still an up-front and "do the right thing" adult.

Stripper

Carol Ziel – St. Louis, MO

I stepped out of the darkness and into the neon lights. Finally, I had come home. Rooted to the beer-soaked carpet, I stood in a moment of Resurrection. Like Lazarus rising from the dead, I came alive. Scales fell from my eyes and I saw absolute beauty and freedom. The stage was above me – a shrine to womanhood, and I had finally found my place in the world.

I had never truly seen a woman's body before. Raised in a convent for many years, T-shirts and cotton bras were the norm – never tassels or pasties. We had 3-minute showers to discourage familiarity with our bodies. My faith tradition taught me that the body was a source of evil. But here was Eve before the Fall, revealing the possibility of who I might be as a woman. An exotic dancer became my mentor.

I returned to that club for many months and sat at the edge of the stage – me and a string of adoring men, pockets full of dollars. I was mesmerized by her movement, her grace. No shame, no embarrassment, no apologies for being female – just celebration through dance. Celebration through her flexibility, openness, boldness, and sense of humor. She was as comfortable in a modified stewardess or firefighter's uniform as in her street clothes, and she reveled in the process of revealing herself. What I brought to the edge of her stage was my own history of sexual trauma and my own thwarted connection to my body. I was hoping for healing. Maybe at least, osmosis would gift me with the freedom and acceptance that I saw in her.

Each week I returned to memorize her movements. Eventually the edge was not enough and I wanted to be up there with her. I wanted to be absorbed into her energy, her ambiance, her very person, and experience that freedom. I wanted to be part of her grace and sensuality. I wanted to burst from my cocoon and merge with this creature, who spread her wings like a butterfly. I wanted to be her.

My time did come. There was a side stage for neophytes. I stood at the bottom and waited my turn. The woman before me was in her fifties. She was wooden, jerking like a robot, eyes as flat and blank as Little Orphan Annie's. Something inside of me shifted. I looked at her husband, who was drooling and vacant. All of the men around me were slack-faced and wild-eyed. They were not who I imagined them to be in the beginning – temple priests worshipping a priestess. Once again the scales fell. This time I saw a different story.

Valued

B. Lynn Goodwin – Danville, CA

My parents planned to build their dream house before I was out of my high chair. That didn't work out, so when I grew too big for my high chair, I sat at a little table in the corner, looking up at Mommy, Daddy, and my sister, Patty, who all sat together at the family table, a device that lifted up from the wall and had only three sides.

Mommy would ask if I wanted more food, and they must have included me in conversations, but I don't remember that. Instead, I remember staring up at them from my little table and knowing I was separate. I liked being a fly-on-the-wall. It was my role.

This arrangement never felt unfair until my fourth birthday. That day I got to sit at the big table, while my older sister, Patty, who was six

and in first grade, sat at the little one. I looked down from my place between Mommy and Daddy and saw her big brown eyes burning as she fumed.

I loved my new seat. I wanted to make it permanent. My big sister looked small. It was a dream come true.

Daddy turned to her and asked, "What's it like down there?"

"Awful," she said, folding her skinny arms over her chest.

Daddy smiled and winked. "It's just for today."

I swung my feet from the stool and said, "I'm taller than you are."

"You only get to sit up there because it's your birthday," she said.

"But..."

"You only get to sit there for one day," she insisted.

I knew she was right. I had once asked Mommy how much longer Patty would be two years older. Mommy laughed. She had no way to know that I was asking when I would have equal power. How could she? I didn't know it myself.

The next day, watching my sister at the big table, I knew there wouldn't be room for me until we moved to the dream house.

When we got there, the table still lifted up from the wall, but it was bigger. I sat opposite a wall, staring at a pair of roosters on breadboards, one with his head up and the other with his head down.

Berggren was the name of the artist who had painted them. Over and over I read his name in the lower right-hand corner. While my family talked, I played with the letters in my head. If I

substituted a B for the N at the end, there would be perfect symmetry. Meal after meal, I respelled the name painted on the rooster breadboards. B-E-R-G-G-R-E-B I said in my head. B-E-R-G-G-R-E-N always stared back at me. I had no impact on what already existed. I had no voice. I did not yet know how to use my voice in ways that mattered.

Twenty years later, I had a teaching credential and a job. I made San Ramon High's Little Theatre into a safe haven for kids who were not cheerleaders, jocks, band members, student council representatives, or Model UN delegates. Friends of my students started dropping in during their unscheduled periods. I didn't ask if they were missing class as long as they participated and kept their comments positive. I knew they were learning something they might remember long after they had forgotten mathematical formulae and history dates.

After every scene, improvisation, and even after the warm-ups, I asked the audience to comment on what worked and what improvements they saw. "Rich really concentrated today" or "Suze wasn't hiding upstage" helped the shyer ones and showed our visitors how the drama class operated.

"Marci heard a different meaning for bear, and she played it full out" or "Dan's mime work is so precise" acknowledged both flamboyance and talent constructively. It was easy to get noticed for positive reasons in my class, and after my students heard they had succeeded, they were more open to suggestions for improvement. Drama built confidence.

I had no idea that I was giving my students the validation I didn't hear when I was a child. I only knew that being told what was good in my own work helped me blossom.

In my drama classes, there were no mistakes, only new material. From my director's chair, I

could help my actors go deeper and make their characters fuller. Apparently the time I spent feeling voiceless prepared me to be a creative, supportive drama teacher. It made me observant. It became a gift instead of an omission. I had opinions now and authority.

I believed the casts of Oklahoma!, The Crucible, Harvey, Rebecca, Our Town, and the other shows we did, were comprised of actors, not students. I treated my actors like professionals. They reciprocated, and I felt more valued than I ever had in my life. I empowered Lori, Liz, Rhonda, Ken, J., Sharon, Denise, Geoff, Jerry, John, Dan, Loretta, Laurie, Craig, and hundreds more. When my actors took their bows, their faces glowed. So did mine, as I applauded from the back of the house.

In the Café

Merimée Moffitt – Albuquerque, NM

Kenn said, sitting next to me in the booth, "What would you do if your son became a Born-Again Christian?"

"Well, that's extremely unlikely," I said, thinking I might know what he was getting at. One addiction is as bad as another, or worse. Bob chimed in that meth would be his drug of choice, if he were allowed to have such a choice. We were in the Flying Star having a brunch and poetry reading.

And I'm not afraid of Born-Agains, I found myself thinking two days after that coffee date. I was raised with Catholics, atheists, agnostics, onanists, self-haters, gourmet cooks, a library of books; also nuns, priests, bootleggers, hat makers, and artists; and piano players, tobacco smokers, gold rush junkies, and business men who binged on whiskey.

No, Born-Agains got nothing on the bad attitudes of my family, who never used the word love until

early cell phone conversations drove a whole generation to saying "I love you" at the end of every phone conversation and goodbye.

I heard the guy calling out to me from the Christian house forty-three years ago. "Accept Jesus into your life and your troubles are over." They were cute kids in a Christian commune a block from my apartment.

"Okay," I said. I was eight months pregnant and living in a garret in Eugene, Oregon. Things coulda been worse, or better, so I said, "Okay, why not?" Inside they had me kneel and repeat – to some poster of a fairly white-looking Jesus – whatever the leader guy said to say. Something about allowing Jesus into my heart. Nothing objectionable. When the speech was over, I wasn't expecting any instant salvation, lightning bolts, or cotton candy to rain upon me.

"Bye," I said. "Gotta go home now," and they hugged me and said come by any time, feeling sorry for me as I was so pregnant and all, no daddy in sight – but I never did. I'd just wave and smile, pushing my son in his buggy to and from the store or the laundromat. The Christian kids stopped bugging me, and having Jesus in my heart seemed just fine.

So maybe my baby has Jesus in him, too, and that Jesus will help him figure out how and why to stop with the substances that keep him apart from his kids, his family, his friends. Come on, Jesus. Kenn is a bit goofy to think Born-Agains are as bad off as meth heads or heroin addicts – not even. Not even close. But honestly, it's pretty clear to me that Jesus wasn't a druggie. Jesus was addicted to Love; for him, and for all us Born-Agains, Love is the word, not a problem.

Sirens Heard

Jazz Jaeschke – Austin, TX

Repetitive squeal of a siren
– designed to command attention –
makes me cringe
makes me want to flee to some cave
makes me angry – an anger I can't explain

Today, driving across town,
sirens upon sirens invade my senses
– although no visible flashing lights –
at least four distinct sirens in concert

Traveling the upper deck of I-35
riding over (risen above) crisis on lower deck
I hear these sirens differently –
feel them differently – a startling difference.

The overlap of sirens hits me
much like a drum circle's cacophony
embodies many beats melded
into a rhythm that stirs one
to get up and dance

Today's sirens melding, layering
– a symphony conveying rescue, care –
triggers an inner dance of gratitude

Now I hear siren essence – a first
since 1981 – my young daughter
struck by a truck a block from home
where I was cooking spaghetti for supper,
watching for her to come running in,
tuning out sirens signaling:
she can't

In Medias Res (for Bobbi)*

Sarah Fine – Toronto, ON, Canada

You were the first
To go out into that good night
With courage wrapped around you
Like a red Chinese shawl.
You went so fast
No one had a chance to say goodbye
To tell you what a good friend you are
To share one final funny story
To hear you laugh,
Though all those sweet moments
Might have been too much
For you to carry
On the journey taken.
I hope the way was easy
The passage smooth
That you died believing
You were falling asleep.
I must believe in souls
And a place beyond death
Where we abide
Or dance
Or do things
We can't imagine.
I can't believe it stops
We stop
That you have stopped
That life is only birth to death
And so I think
You've gone somewhere
And we miss you, Bobbi
You were the first.

* Barbara died June 12, 1988, of complications following treatment for leukemia at the age of 39, after buying her first house and spending one glorious night there.

Birth Poem

Debra Dolan – Vancouver, BC, Canada

Leg on the bed, bracing as he pulled and pulled,
adjusting, more pulling
Female sounds of anguish
Circling my mind like that frigid clasp
Flesh, bones
Pounded on metal
A flash of paparazzi, not able to scream 'til hit
The outstretched arms

I'm sorry having me destroyed your dreams
I'm sorry having me ruined your body
I'm sorry he left you and I remain
I'm sorry I look like him and you can't face me

Head games are your specialty mother
Never asked for this

A Memorable House

Patricia Roop Hollinger – Westminster, MD

"We might consider moving to Pennsylvania," I overheard my parents discussing one evening in 1956. I was in my junior year of high school, with 24 classmates that I had been with since first grade. I couldn't even imagine not being able to graduate with them. They were my second family. What on earth could precipitate this drastic move?

My father had invented a milking machine, and made a wooden model of it, and had finally obtained a patent on it. He located the Mellinger Manufacturing Company in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, to build his machines. I learned that this had been a dream of his since my parents were married.

The likelihood of my father achieving such an accomplishment was unfathomable, since he had attended a one-room schoolhouse and only completed the 8th grade. Being raised on a farm necessitated that

fall farm chores took precedence over beginning the school year with the rest of his classmates; he began to fall behind in his studies, and ultimately just dropped out without completing a formal education.

So, for this man to have the audacity to even consider inventing a very complex milking machine was, in and of itself, an unmitigated feat. His mother, though, had warned my mother when they married that he was her most determined child, and he lived up to that reputation with his perseverance to invent this machine.

There was consideration of my living with a close friend and classmate, while the rest of the family moved to Pennsylvania. However, ultimately the decision was made to move from our farm to a small town nearby, to enable me to continue attending the same school with my classmates.

This sounds like a simple solution, right? Not really, though, since my mother lost her role as co-farmer. We were all now smack dab at arm's length to the next door neighbor's house. There were no cows for me to herd into the dairy parlor for milking; thus, no time to sing at the top of my lungs in the middle of the field.

We could no longer see the sunrise or sunset over the Catoctin Mountains off in the distance. We were claustrophobic! "The neighbors have their clothes on the line by 6:30 a.m.," my mother exclaimed. "Who gives a rat's ass when your clothes are hung on the line?" I wondered. On the farm, she could hang her clothes out whenever she pleased. There was no competition.

Mother had also lost her huge farmhouse kitchen to one with virtually no counter space to bake the pies and cakes that she turned out in abundance. She had lost her role in life, and my younger sister and I had lost the mother we once

had, as well as our father's presence, because he was away in Pennsylvania during the week and only home on weekends.

One weekend in particular was a memorable one as I heard a scuffle in their bedroom, which was next to mine. They had their disagreements, but they were always civil and without any cursing or physical blows. "How unusual," I thought as I heard a scuffle and the bedroom window open. My mother was threatening to jump out of the upper story bedroom window. I was terrified at such a possibility. My father raised his voice, pulled her back in, and made it clear she would do no such thing. I covered beneath the covers.

My father went back to Pennsylvania the next morning and it was never acknowledged that the incident had even occurred. I still had the stability of being with my 24 classmates, and the family ultimately built a house on a lot that was part of the farm, which restored the normalcy of rural living for all of us. Yet I still cannot fathom that my father left town the next morning, leaving my younger sister and me with a suicidal mother. The event was never mentioned again. To this day, my mother would deny that it ever happened.

Not too surprisingly, this is when my own depression and obsessive thought patterns began. Only in retrospect did I gain the insight that because of this family upheaval, I became the identified patient in the family.

I still reside in the vicinity of that house in town, and recall with great clarity the dysfunction and disruption that living there for a period of two years created for our family.

Atonement

Linda A. Marshall – Dayton, OH

She covers her eyes with her hands, and starts to cry. "I thought you'd be mad."

It was the second time today she had burst into tears. The first was disappointment. The hysterectomy, which she had been looking forward to having, was being postponed. She had been preparing herself mentally for weeks and last night we had worked together to prepare her body. Oh those unpleasant enemas and douches. We were both glad when that was over. She had her last sip of water at 11:30 pm. "Nothing to eat or drink after midnight" the directions said. "Be at the hospital at 11 am." We were there at 10:30.

Her oxygen levels are too low. The anesthesiologist is not about to do surgery. "Are you sure you're feeling okay? Have you been short of breath? We're sending you to ICU to see how to get your oxygen levels up. We're calling in a pulmonologist and a neurologist."

A very kind and skilled nurse brings in a spirometer and teaches her how to exercise her lungs. I have rarely seen my daughter so motivated. Motivation is not a strong suit for someone with myotonic muscular dystrophy (DM). She is told to use the spirometer every hour. She uses it several times in the first hour, proud of herself when her breath pushes the ball into "good."

DM is a slowly progressing neuromuscular disease. Until Medicare kicked in, a year and a half after she was awarded Social Security Disability and before the Affordable Care Act was passed, she went without medical care except for a few trips to the Emergency Room and twice-a-year visits to a doctor through the Muscular Dystrophy Association's clinic in West Chester. When she needed an endometrial

ablation in 2013, she paid for it out of the back pay she received from Social Security. When her fibroids grew and began pushing against one of her kidneys, it was time to have her uterus removed.

General anesthesia is dangerous for someone with DM. Thanks to the Myotonic Dystrophy Foundation, we have pages of instructions for the anesthesiologist. The plan was to give her an epidural. The anesthesiologist seems to know what she is doing. She tells me later, "You will need to advocate for a neurologist."

I soothed my daughter's tears the first time they burst forth. "I think this is good. You will be getting the medical attention you have needed for years."

She is in panic mode. How will she manage her time off work? She has been granted six-to-eight weeks leave from her cashier position at a local discount department store, where she has been working part-time for the past several years.

Yes, she works part-time since the convenience store where she had worked full-time for seven years closed. When someone with DM wakes up in the morning, they feel as though they have already put in a full day's work. My daughter has insisted on working and living independently for as long as she can. She lives with the fear of being in a wheelchair someday. I hope you can appreciate how big that is. Motivation is not a strong suit for many with DM.

"We're going to take this one thing at a time," I tell her. "For right now, we need to get your oxygen levels stabilized. We'll see what happens after that. You won't be the first employee whose medical attention didn't go quite as planned. Your workplace will deal with it." She relaxes.

"What makes you think I'd be mad?" I ask the question but I already know the answer. I cringe. Her fear harkens back to old behavior on my part. So much about the way someone with DM

manages their world is foreign to me. In addition to the fatigue my daughter experiences with her muscle weakness, the executive function deficit that is part of the disease makes it difficult for her to plan ahead, organize her life, keep her living space in order, attend to personal hygiene. The list goes on and on.

As a perfectionist who needs order in her life, I have been impatient with her, and sometimes guilty of angry outbursts.

She says, "You weren't expecting this. You had your schedule all arranged for the surgery to be today."

I'm retired. I have no employer to contact. I have plans with friends to rearrange, and reworking my memoir can be put on hold. My daughter doesn't know about the spiritual practice I have adopted. I have been working to maintain serenity and equilibrium in the face of any stress that comes my way. I've been working hard to let go of my need for order, while she has been living with me in preparation for her surgery. I set an intention to extend loving kindness to her. She deserves that and so much more. She lives her life heroically.

I tell her, "I'm sorry for anything I've done in the past that would make you afraid I'd be mad today."

I atone for past transgressions. My relationship with my daughter continues to heal.

Only Darkness

Karen DeFranco – Twinsburg, OH

I am alone.

Never mind that you may be sitting next to me.
Never mind that you may even speak to me.
I am alone.

When I am in this hole, nothing gets through.
Nothing makes it better.
Isolation is all I know.

The darkness is pervasive.
The heaviness, unbearable,
And yet, I cannot take any step that improves my lot.

I cannot reach out to those who love me.
I cannot begin anything worthwhile.
I cannot remember what joy feels like.

I cannot break out of the cycle of pain and aloneness,
Even though I know that is what I need to do,
What I desperately need to do.

Why is today better? What is different?
Did the sun shine, the fog lift?
If I knew the secret, I could fill in the hole... forever.

Long-ago Romance

Marian McCaa Thomas – Leawood, KS

When your boyfriend wears full-length leg braces because he had polio, his lap is not the most comfortable place to sit! Still, the right circumstances can make even the uncomfortable appealing. He was a senior in college, and I was a year behind. I knew he would be going to graduate school thousands of miles away, and we would not be able to see each other for many months. Naturally, we wanted to take advantage of being in the same place as often as we could. Our

college campus, however, didn't provide many places where one could find privacy for romance. The director of the campus YWCA was well aware of this limitation, and she offered to let us use her apartment off-campus for a rendezvous.

"Go ahead, cook him a meal, relax, and enjoy a quiet evening together," she said as she handed me the key. She undoubtedly trusted me, the student president of the YWCA, to behave myself! On the chosen day, a day she was out of town, I went to her place to cook and set the table for two. As I did so, I imagined what it would be like if we were married, and I'd be cooking dinner and anticipating his coming home from work.

When he arrived at the apartment, we enjoyed eating together and talking without the noisy chatter of the dormitory dining room where we usually ate. After cleaning up the kitchen, we put on some music and continued our conversation. He was sitting in a chair that looked strong enough to hold us both, so when he beckoned me to join him there, I gingerly sat on his lap. Our clothes gave some padding between his leg braces and my bottom, and as soon as we began kissing, my sensations were concentrated elsewhere. We were blissfully enjoying those leisurely kisses when a loud knock on the door made us jump. He pushed me off his lap, a rather guilty look on his face. I slowly opened the door and found a neighbor asking for Gladycce.

"She's out," I apologized, and quickly shut the door. The romantic mood was broken, and we reluctantly decided to leave our temporary sanctuary. The memory of that evening, however, still brings a smile to my face, even after more than fifty-three years of marriage to the same man who held me in his lap.

Rendezvous in Riverton: A Wyoming Wander

Marilyn Ashbaugh – Edwardsburg, MI

Amid switchbacks and hairpins,
Dinosaurs ruled
The precarious pitch of
The pre-Cambrian boulders.

Traveling through the Big Horns
I am soft and puny as a gnat.
I comprehend
(With negative capability)
Why the aspens quake.
Gravity never succumbs
To my terror.

Thirsty at Poison Creek,
I lose my appetite at 10,000 feet.
Crippled at Crippled Cow,
I limp past Crowheart.

Deprived of my sea-level oxygen,
I sport a keen sense of losing control.
Tarrying in Ten Sleep makes my mind saunter to sinister
While neat Wyoming whiskeys
Refuse to smother suspicions
That my expiration date awaits
A rendezvous in Riverton.

Grief Tides

Martha Graham-Waldon – Felton, CA

Grief ebbs and flows like the tide
It rushes across the shore, drawing me in
Then pulls back some more
Leaving empty shells and patterns in the sand
I contemplate its absence
Recall the tempest of its arrival
And await its watery return

ER Revelations

Jude Walsh (Whelley) – Dayton, OH

I am not sorry...
to drive myself here.
to check the divorced box on the medical paperwork.
to not write your name in the In Case of Emergency Call slot.
to wait alone in the treatment room.
to answer the questions myself.
to no longer have to tolerate your loudly unsaid judgment that if
 I have a health problem it's because I'm fat.
to have only my mind to parse what the doctors say.
to make treatment decisions on my own.
to give myself a little hug and pat and say this will be all right.
to feel safe even in the Emergency Room.
to feel so peaceful.
to feel so powerful.
I am not sorry, not sorry at all.

Family Photo

Margaret Dubay Mikus – Lake Forest, IL

She is not in the picture,
but I can feel her there almost in the frame,

standing back from us, my camera in her hand,
small Mona Lisa smile on her lips, frown of concentration.

The four of us lined up dressed in our best
on a sunny fall day in front of a big tree.

And what would later shatter
has not happened yet.

The wind was calm and it did not rain,
unlikely we will ever go there again.

Capturing a Dream

Bette J. Lafferty – Valrico, FL

Where do dreams come from?
How do they actually start?
Does the wind carry them
From some distant land
And plant them in my heart?

Do my dreams come
As twinkling stars
Falling from outer space?
Or are they intricately woven
Into my brain
Like a delicate piece of lace?

One moment they appear so clear.
The next instant, gone!
Like a flash of lightning
Within my mind,
The details don't linger long.

Some flicker like a lightning bug,
Others are crystal clear.
I grasp them tightly,
Holding fast
Lest they disappear.

So I take my pencil in my hand
Writing pictures that I see.
On a sticky pad,
A napkin close,
Whatever space is free.

To my surprise, an image appears,
Painted by words alone.
How they come,
I do not know,
But I claim them as my own.

All of a sudden, I recognize
What these words really mean.
An open mind
Sprinkled with hope
Is one way of capturing a dream.

Mothers

Merimée Moffitt – Albuquerque, NM

I see a tiny woman on page one of the *Times*.
A turquoise scarf holds her flowing hair off the sticky resin she gathers.
Where are her sons? For the magenta-poppies sunset in Myanmar,
a sole reporter treks to see her.
She stands without a man, without a son.
Her hand grips the bag, the other plucks pods to stuff into her sack.

Her joyous clothing belies the effect on our side of the globe.
As the poppies disrobe, they drip their amber juices.
Stripes on her bag tie tightly to her waist, the colors
of the earth and orange-gold poppies, her open-necked shirt
reveals burnished skin.

Her family used to grow for medicine: stomachaches, accidents.
But they, too, have sons smitten to shards of themselves,
laid waste by the needle, the smoke of the resin, powder defiling the nose.
Love shrinks back to the size of a seed.
The flowers open and propagate banishment.
Grown on hilltops, one tiny packet
inside a pillowcase will feed her family for a year.

The tree-dotted fairyland rolls to the edge of the earth.
The hills are quiet as men come for bribes pushed into fists.
Trades are made. High stakes for high-grade dope from
the Golden Triangle into which our children disappear.
"Heroin," you said, "is the drug I'm afraid of."
And your anger rose and swept you away in a stream. I miss your smile.
Your son asks if I've seen you; we are partners in missing you.

Your small notebook sits by my phone:
neat entries of names, numbers, and debts.
You protected us from your compelling
need to use, took your business elsewhere.
You have covered your power with rags,
laid siege to your sanity. The pretty girlfriend,
one or both of you may wake up alive.
Which cruel world are you hiding from or in?
And your son? And your daughter?



– Jane Parsons

Homesickness

Barbara Mosier Smythe – La Verne, CA

Loneliness and her companion, Depression, stalked me, creeping around outside the old Craftsman-style parsonage at day's end, peeking in at the windows, slithering through the cracks around windows and doors. I was there alone with our two-year-old son during the week, while my husband went to seminary in Indianapolis, sixty miles away. I was okay during the day, busy with our son and the many duties of being a pastor's wife, but some evenings a simple snatch of a song on the radio...

"Once there were green fields, kissed by the sun,
once there were valleys, where rivers used to run..."

...and suddenly, Loneliness and Depression wrapped themselves around me and held me tight. Unwanted tears ran down my cheeks. Sad and hopeless thoughts tumbled around in my head, and a longing for the green of Oregon, where life was fresh and fertile, stunned me by its yearning power over me. Is this how homesickness feels? I didn't know what the feelings were; I just knew I couldn't stop sobbing. Mental and emotional turmoil twisted inside me.

"Green fields are gone now, parched by the sun,
gone from the valleys, where rivers used to run..."

Parched. Dried up. Infertile. That's what I'd become. It had been months since the trip to the gynecologist. The memory of that visit still haunted and embarrassed me. I wasn't so naive that I expected an immaculate conception, but it had been months now and there had been reason

to hope. I envied the Democratic presidential candidate and his wife, the young, rich couple from Massachusetts, who were expecting their second child. They obviously had it all. I hoped they wouldn't get the White House, too. At least they were getting their second child, and at Christmas time, too. Lucky them!

"Where are the green fields that we used to roam?"

How could new life flourish in this dreadful place where no one even spoke my first name? Where the walls were full of cockroaches and the grass concealed chiggers? Where the butter came in long, skinny, aloof rectangles instead of the short, chubby, friendly cubes we got at home? Where green peppers were called mangoes? Where the long distance telephone operator thought IDAHO was IOWA? Where parishioners were eager to think me a smoker and a drinker, and knew I read controversial books, attended infant baptisms, and spoke up when I should have been the submissive pastor's-wife?

"How can I keep searching when dark clouds hide the day?

I only know there's nothing here for me..."

Sobs racked my body. Through my tears the ugliness of the kitchen assaulted my eyes, offended my senses, and hurt my very soul – pink vinyl-looking walls, dirty grey-colored floors – UGLY. Not my choice. Never my choice. Would I ever have a choice? Such dark thoughts in the black of night. Loneliness and Depression had their way with me that night.

"...I'll keep on waiting..."

Damn the radio! Damn the night! Damn it all to hell!

Ok. OK. OK. Stop it! Enough! Get busy. It's Tuesday night, isn't it? Time to make the best

damn pumpkin pies the Wednesday Church Community Luncheon has ever seen! Never mind that the Church Ladies won't acknowledge the quality of my pies, or even say thank you for my donation – it's my job. Maybe tomorrow...

"...home to the green fields, and me, once again." *

*"Green Fields" composed by Tery Gikyson, Frank Miller, & Richard Dehr. Recorded by The Brothers Four, 1960. Despite all reasonable effort, the author was unable to contact any copyright holder. For copyright concerns, please contact the author.

Two Mistakes... and a Surprise

Pat Bean – Tucson, AZ

My first and biggest mistake was that I married the wrong man, and then stayed married for 22 years simply because the word divorce wasn't in my vocabulary. It was the 1950s, and no one in my family had ever been divorced. When I finally got up the courage to do the deed, basically because I knew my own children would have no respect for me if I didn't, I worried I would repeat my mistake. The worry was intensified because several women among my acquaintances had done exactly that.

This thought preyed on my mind for five years, until I married Michael in the early 1980s. Michael was as opposite from my ex as a hummingbird is to a vulture. But he, too, was the wrong man – and I knew it when I married him. But unlike the first marriage, I have no regrets about this second one. I truly loved Michael. He was the most intelligent man I had ever met, the sexual chemistry between us was fantastic, and Michael always made me feel good about

myself, unlike my first husband who made a game of putting me down in public. I felt I would have had more regrets not giving this second marriage a try than I would have had by making yet another mistake.

I originally met Michael in the 1970s, when I was working at Utah State University, with my small salary supporting five young children while at the same time putting my non-working husband through college. It was a big sacrifice for the family, which was never repaid, not even by my ex-husband helping his children with their educational needs. To add insult to injury, during his last year of college my then-husband changed his major from math to journalism, which was my established career. He immediately saw himself as a bigwig editor and me as the cub reporter.

After graduation, my ex got a job at the Logan, Utah, newspaper where I had been working part-time, in addition to my university position. It was here where both of us met Michael. The two of them hated each other instantly, but since both Michael and I were married at the time, I never looked at him twice. Years later, when Michael, also divorced, came to work for the Standard-Examiner newspaper in Ogden, Utah, where I was then features editor, we had an instant connection. I know it's not pretty of me, but besides loving him, I think I might have married Michael as revenge on my ex. I know the thought went through my head a time or two, and it always made me smile.

Michael and I dated for the two years we worked at the same paper together in Ogden, then he took a job as news editor at the Las Vegas Sun. We married a few months later, and I followed him to Las Vegas, where once again we found ourselves working for the same newspaper. The Sun hired me immediately as their features and Sunday editor. It was a fun time for a few months, until Michael's womanizing ways floated to the top of my days. I suspected he had been playing around, but it was finding a

Tampax in the toilet – not mine, when I returned home from work one day, that broke my spirit.

I ransacked our apartment and tossed anything important to me into my car, and the rest of the stuff on the floor. And since Michael wasn't home at the time, I left a note that simply said: "Take care of the cat you asshole." I then drove to the newspaper to hand in my immediate resignation, after which I drove out of town and cried all 560 miles back to Ogden, where I crashed on the couch of a good friend.

Michael, through my daughter who was then living in Ogden, got in touch with me a week or so later and asked me to come back. I asked him, through tears that were still falling, if anything would be different. He honestly replied, "No." A couple of weeks later, he hired a truck and drove the rest of my belongings and furniture to me at my new apartment in Ogden.

From the first mistake of marrying the wrong man, I learned not to repeat mistakes. From the second mistake of marrying the wrong man, I learned that I could always change my mind, that a decision didn't have to be permanent, and that I was strong enough to handle the world alone.

For many years after that, I clung to the hope that I would find a true soul mate. One day, however, I woke up and realized what a great life I had, and that I had been sabotaging any relationships that held promise. Perhaps it was because, subconsciously at least, I knew I was happiest when single. I gave too much of myself away when I was attached to a man.

Now, as I write about my marriage mistakes for the first time, I'm suddenly realizing my true soul mate is myself. Perhaps I should have written about these chapters in my life earlier. But then I do love to read stories with surprise endings. I also love being a writer. How else would I have discovered the real me?

Ice

Noëlle Sickels – Los Angeles, CA

There is no ice in L.A.
yet each December we skate
across the year's days frozen
like a winter pond
in woods we used to know
reached by trails trod so often
we did not consider the way
could ever be lost

There is no ice in L. A.
yet each December the days behind
so liquid in their living
stiffen into glacial sheets
that slide ahead to build new ground
where grass may grow and we may walk
no step without the steps before
no deed without its prologue

There is no ice in L. A.
but under every changing hour
ice lurks, strong, ancient, familiar
faces lie within like captured leaves
words of anger, words of love, talk
no chisel can chip away now
words, faces that hummed with heat once
next year and the next
will hold them fast, prettify
rough edges with rime crystals
make their stillness almost beautiful
no thaw will loose their grip
cold fingers round our hearts
but stubborn pump of blood will warm
their touch so we may bear it better
so they may rest in easy water
freed to shift and settle, inhabit
long silence beneath our flashing blades
in the melt of our remembrance

Sweet Icing

Inspired by a 1961 song by Ervin Drake

Arlene Roman Howard – Paradise Valley, AZ

When I was five plus two it was a very fun year
A very fun year for a San Francisco girl
Who walked to the beach, swam in the pool
Played hide and seek
Welcomed Uncle Jack home from the war.

When I was thirteen
Baby-sat, swam, rode my blue Schwinn
Sewed clothes for Sweet Sue, my American Character doll
Read *True Romance*, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Louisa May Alcott
Was kissed.

When I was twenty-three
One Sunday afternoon in June married a blind date
Honeymooned in San Francisco
Camped at Lake Tahoe and Yosemite
Flew to Hawaii.

When I was twenty-nine and thirty-one
Graduated from Cal amid the unrest of another war
A recession, moved to Maryland
More graduate school
Read, knitted, cooked, sailed, swam, canned red cherry jam.

When I was thirty-seven
My daughter was born
She snuggled on my breast
Nursed, sang, read to her
At long last, I was a Mom.

When I was fifty-one
Skied, sailed, canal boated, gardened
Back to college, became a librarian
Few years later sang "California Here I Come"
Bang! the World Trade Center fell.

When my seventh decade arrived
Became a grandma twice
Celebrated fifty years of marriage
Big C came calling, surgery, chemo aided in recovery.
Pray C won't return to snatch me away.

Now home is Arizona
Camp in Grand Canyon, care for granddaughters
Sing to, swim beside, play games with, read books to
Like their grandpa and mom, sweet icing on a very good life
A very good life.

My Jazzman

**Madeline Sharples –
Manhattan Beach, CA**

My jazzman
beat it out
on the mighty eighty-eights,
played those riffs,
tapped his feet,
bent his head
down to the keys,
felt those sounds
on his fingertips.
Yeah, he was a hot man
on those eighty-eights.

But all too soon
his bag grew dark.
He went down,
deep down.
My jazzman
played the blues,
lost that spark,
closed the lid.
And, yeah, you got it right,
quit the scene,
laid himself down
in that bone yard
for the big sleep.
Yeah, for the really big sleep.

**"Release, release;
between cold death and a fever,
send what you will, I will listen.
All things come to an end.
No, they go on forever."**

– Ruth Stone

Listening for Angels

Edith Ó'Nualláin – Greystones, Ireland

Not for the first time you came,
and left, without my noticing.
I have been blind and deaf
for years innumerable, wandering
in a desert of my own making.
Still the yearning never left.
I suppose it was the sharp edges
of hopes dashed, cries unheard,
all this and more, for which I should be grateful.
The yearning and the wandering,
in the end, all a-piece.

And what if I never really ignored your call
when it arrived in dreams, through the darkness,
what if, all this time, I held it quietly
in the crevices of my heart,
unknowingly pondering the mystery,
wondering, waiting, like Mary?
What if the path I have followed,
the one I didn't choose to take,
has been the right way, the only way, after all?

**"A voice is a human gift; it should be
cherished and used to utter fully human
speech. Powerlessness and silence go
together."**

— Margaret Atwood

**"I prefer to knock on wood.
I prefer not to ask how much longer and when.
I prefer keeping in mind even the possibility
that existence has its own reason for being."**

— Wislawa Szymborska

Mother's World

Claire McCabe – Elkton, MD

The trip feels long,
my young dog in tow.
Quick potty stops and water breaks.
We cross the Potomac, the Tappahannock,
until deep in Virginia
at a patch of green wayside,
we pause.

Here, in Mother's domain, I hear all of them:
her daughters...my sisters...two down,
her husband...my father...long gone.
Their spirits press on me
heavy with the scent of holly blossoms,
and a thickness that rivals the humidity;
they urge me back on the two lane highway:
Quick, before Mother joins us...

Back in the car,
my puppy and I hurtle past
abandoned gas stations,
dilapidated antique shops,
graceful brick homes
two hundred years old.
We arrive on Mother's doorstep.
She, too, a mix of age and grace.

Sipping sweet tea on her porch,
pup curled at our feet,
I list the dogs we shared
when the family was whole:
the spotted one she chose from the shelter,
the skinny stray I brought home,
the black pup from a neighbor's litter,
only memories now.

"Well," she exclaims, "you really know this family!"

"I should; I'm your daughter," I smile.
She frowns, confused and embarrassed.
"You didn't have your glasses on," I console,
wrapping my arms around her, holding
as tight as I can to the fifty-some years I've loved
her.

The scent of holly drifts on the breeze:
Quick, before Mother joins us...

The Ice Cream Cake

Noëlle Sickels – Los Angeles, CA

Inside a confectioner's shop on Christmas Eve. Carol and Ron, wearing overcoats and hats, standing before a freezer, peering at ice cream cakes.

Ron: What about that one?

Carol: That's for a baby shower. See the plastic booties? I don't want booties on my birthday cake.

R: But it's His birthday, too. Booties might be a nice touch, a gently irreverent reverence.

C: Tomorrow. He gets to have tomorrow.

R: Who ever heard of ice cream cake in December anyway?

C: This is my first birthday at home in five years, and everyone expects two ice cream cakes from Bischoff's like we had every Christmas Eve my entire life.

R: Two cakes? Christ, we'll never get out of here. Why do you need two?

C: We always...

R: Okay, okay. Let's just get on with it. The snow's coming down harder. We don't want to get stuck.

C: We won't get stuck.

R: (theatrically) Christmas Eve in Bischoff's. The other customers have chosen their cakes and left. The power goes out. Melting ice cream oozes from the freezers. It's reached their knees, their waists! The door's blocked by snowdrifts. The hot fudge machine gurgles ominously. Scalding chocolate heaves like lava. Carol and Ron and old man Bischoff leap onto a tabletop, calling out for mercy. But who's to hear? Everyone's snug at home eating figgy pudding and knitting booties for baby Jesus.

C: Shhh! I can't think.

R: There aren't that many cakes to choose from.

C: Because we got here too late.

R: Don't look at me like that. If you hadn't hidden my manger set at the back of the closet...

C: Hidden it? That's where I put stuff we never use.

R: Who thinks to look for a manger set inside a fondue pot at the bottom of a box labeled snorkeling gear?

C: Weren't there masks and flippers in there?

R: You must have put the flippers away wet. One of the camels from the manger has mold.

C: It'll rub off.

R: I already tried. I broke off one of the humps.

C: So now you have a dromedary. Big deal.

R: It *is* a big deal. I've had that manger since I was nine years old.

C: You never took it out other Christmases.

R: We never had a tree. Where was I supposed to put it, on top of the toilet tank?

C: You never said you wanted a tree. Poinsettias are more sophisticated, you said. Let's fill the apartment with poinsettias, you said. I thought you'd pee yourself last year when we found those pink ones.

R: Besides, every Christmas morning the past five years, we've taken off for the Caribbean – was I supposed to pack up the shepherds and the sheep and the wise men and everybody, and set them up in the sand underneath some coconut palm?

C: (placating) Look, we can get a tree next year. And this year, we'll have my parents' tree.

R: Which is why I needed to find the manger.

C: Which you did.

R: My back's still aching from having to lift that rowing machine out of the way.

C: Can we not get into your back problems right now? Can we concentrate on the cakes?

R: All right, all right.

C: (beat) But I do want to hear about your manger scene and why you...

R: Yes?

C: Later.

R: Of course.

C: I mean, it's not like you ever explained to me before about...

R: No.

C: And we really do need to get these cakes and get going.

R: Yes.

C: (beat) So, have you been hating our Christmases all these years?

R: No, no.

C: (mournful) You have. I can hear it in your voice. Oh, Ron. It's my birthday, and now you're telling me that all these years, you've been pretending...

R: No, no.

C: And I did put those flippers away wet. The mold on the camel is all my fault.

R: No.

C: (starts out teary, slowly shifts to anger) You were this little boy with a manger scene and it was special to you, and I never knew, and I thought *I* was special to you... (beat) Who was that little boy, Ron? And how come you never told me about him, about yourself and that you wanted a Christmas tree so you could put out your manger scene – your extra special, goddamned extra secret manger scene?

R: Well, I...

C: And what else aren't you telling me? What other parts of our lives do you think are shallow and silly and...and... "irreverent?"

R: Whoa!

C: It's Christmas Eve and it's my birthday and I want to know!

R: In Bischoff's?

C: In Bischoff's!

R: Where we're picking out your birthday cake? Oh, correction: birthday *cakes*. Plural. That *must* be bought *here* and nowhere else. That mustn't have booties on them. That must be Christmas-y, but not too much. That must exactly match some cobwebby, no doubt inaccurate childhood memory newly festooned with guilt – a memory that you have never bothered to share with *me*. Not that I'm offended. Because I am secure enough in your love not to be offended by that!

C: Don't you dare take the high road! I'm secure in your love, too!

R: (deflated) Well, then.

C: (deflated) Well. Then.

R: (pointing to a cake) What if we took the booties off?

C: (working to regain composure) It *is* a pretty cake. And for the other...how about that one?

R: Kind of plain.

C: It's chocolate. (beat) Chocolate *is* really your favorite, isn't it?

R: Yes. Please, Carol, yes. But don't you want something that looks more festive? More seasonal?

C: We could put one of your camels on it. (beat) Couldn't we?

R: What would your family think?

C: What they think anyway – that we're weirdos, especially about Christmas.

R: The dromedary.

C: Huh?

R: I think I can spare the dromedary.

"If you hear the dogs, keep going. If you see the torches in the woods, keep going. If there's shouting after you, keep going. Don't ever stop. Keep going. If you want a taste of freedom, keep going."

— Harriet Tubman

Trip To Bittersweet

Cindy Eastman – Watertown, CT

What I would have read at the Open Mic on Saturday night:

I had the title all ready, "My Bittersweet Trip to Stories from the Heart." I lived in Austin from 1976 to 1985 and I hadn't been back since 1991. My husband Angelo (my second husband) was coming with me, back to the place where I met and married my first husband. Last October, when I got the word I would be presenting a conference workshop in Austin, the anticipated trip brought feelings of excitement and nostalgia. Was my old house still there? The places I worked? In January, though, everything changed in the way I was looking forward to going: my ex-husband died. The April trip I had been looking forward to with excitement was now a trip that would bring...well, I wasn't quite sure what to expect.

We arrived at Austin-Bergstrom airport, formerly Bergstrom Air Force Base and the place where my wedding reception had been held. At our hotel room, I opened the curtains and saw the red spire of St. Edwards University. I spent about two years there as a student (not a very good one) and my first wedding ceremony was held on campus in Our Lady Queen of Peace chapel. I dragged Angelo out the door, across I-35, and down an isolated sidewalk so I could walk around the campus. It was dusk and the lights of downtown Austin shone bright in the wide Texas sky, many more lights than I had viewed in the late 70s. We headed back to the hotel, ate a bite in the lounge, and ran into some of the women attending the conference. Finally upstairs in our room, I fell to sleep exhausted and dreamed of all my Texas exes.

I didn't sign up for any of the pre-conference workshops, so Friday morning seemed the time

to catch up to my past in South Austin. My way-back past. My first boyfriend from elementary school in Louisville, Kentucky, moved to Austin just as I left in the 80s. We stayed in touch via sporadic email, but since I was in town, he invited us to lunch after we poked around my old South Congress neighborhood. Now it's hip to live in "SoCo," back then it was cheap. Angelo was a trouper, as I reminisced about nearly every street corner along the way. (Oh! I used to get Schlotszky's here! We used to go for beers here!) He kept me company and began to enjoy the scenery. Nostalgia or none, Austin is a great town and it's not a hardship to have to sightsee there. Then we met my friend Steve for lunch. My husband and I meeting my old boyfriend in the town where I met and married my ex – I needed a margarita. And then a nap.

Back at the hotel, I registered for Stories From the Heart and looked through the black bag containing the conference swag. Included was a novel: *Bittersweet* by Susan Wittig Albert. Appropriate, I thought (and hence my title here.) I became caught up in the opening night and keynote speaker. As a She Writes Press author, I was carried along on the exhilaration of the She Writes presence that weekend: publisher Brooke Warner's keynote, the Sarton winners from She Writes – it was wonderful to be a part of it. Looking around at all the women gathered, I remembered the Story Circle review my book had received and wondered if the woman was here at the conference. Before I went to sleep, I looked up the review and found her name: Helene Benardo. I Googled her, hoping to find a bio or a picture, but the first hit on her name was an obituary. This saddened me so much, and on top of my already emotion-laden heart, the only thing I could do, once again, was sleep and let my dreams process the nearly unprocessable events of the last two days.

Saturday promised to be rainy, but Angelo, intrepid explorer, headed out to see more of Austin as I stayed in to begin my conference experience, my first national writing conference

both as an attendee and a presenter. I spoke to women I had only "met" via email, women who spent a lot of time emailing me back and forth, helping to prepare me for my workshop. And I was prepared. I got help I didn't even know I needed. That's when the idea to join the Open Mic took root in my brain. I had to speak about this experience and share the intense, convivial, and unexpected gifts and realizations that were hitting me fast and furious.

But instead I went out to dinner. I figured Angelo deserved a little company after managing by himself the last day and a half. (He was not suffering by any stretch of the imagination – he was at the pool most of Friday afternoon!) I thought if I made it back in time, I would head over to the Open Mic, but once I hit Sixth Street, I became caught up in a swirl of memories and emotions, and we ended up sitting in a comfy booth in a nice restaurant, watching beautifully dressed-up people come and go, while we ate our chips and guacamole and drank fancy margaritas.

I missed the Open Mic, but I didn't miss the significance of sharing stories from the heart. The women at this conference all bring their own stories of joy, heartache, pain, and renewal. They have written them, spoken them, carried them, and we all joined together in making them real.

The story that was my experience – returning to Austin, facing my past, meeting new colleagues, and integrating the new with the old – is now part of my heart. It was an honor and a privilege to be a part of this extraordinary group of women, and I look forward to making it a part of my work and my life for years to come.

"It took me half a lifetime to understand that each encounter with the natural world pleats together all the things you've read and heard, and adds to them, making something more of the bird or leaf or landscape in front of you, so that the older you get the more meaningful these things become."

— Helen Macdonald

I Still Remember

(In Memory of Daniel Paul Love,
January 7, 1957 to October 22, 1995)

Dreama Plybon Love – Rocky Mount, VA

I was sleeping, but gradually awoke. The darkness met my heavy sigh. Still cloudy with sleepiness, I heard myself say out loud what my heart was feeling, "I miss Daniel."

The room lightened. Startled, I became aware of a presence. I felt his arm next to mine. I threw back the covers and saw him there in bed with me. He was awake. In shock, I whispered, "How are you?" "I'm fine," he said, "just a bit tired." His expression was calm and steady.

I looked at his body. It was different. It was no longer grotesque with a skeleton-like upper body and from the waist down, a body swollen beyond recognition from the colon cancer that took his life. There was no evidence of his sufferings. He indeed appeared to be fine.

So many questions, but I blurted out instead, "Where have you been all these fifteen years?" In silence, he looked at me with his deep-set green eyes, casting his lover's spell that always caught me off guard.

My mind raced. I wondered what I was going to tell Bryan, the man I had been dating recently. Then the thought, "Bryan's a sensible man. He will understand that we have to stop dating because miraculously my husband has returned."

Then I awoke – for real this time. I was alone in my bed. My heart was pounding and my pillow was wet with tears. I lay there slowly coming into full consciousness. I knew it was just a dream, but somehow it was different, so real. I had felt him there next to me. When I looked into his eyes, the familiar soul-touching connection was there. The look on his face and in his eyes was still fresh in my mind.

I got up and checked the time: 3 a.m. I went to splash cool water on my face and found my hands were shaking. Going back to sleep was impossible; I couldn't stop the tears. In a flood of memories, I grieved for the loss of our good times together.

I remembered the cartoons he drew on index cards and mailed to me when we were dating, and the unique way he proposed (a special dinner concluding with a romantic walk to a place where the engagement ring was hidden). His sense of humor and his love of all kinds of music – a classical piece followed by Elvis Costello then Bruce Cockburn – kept me guessing what he would do next. With a twinkle in his eye, he would corner me in the bedroom and spin me around to dance spontaneously.

In the mornings, he would whistle loudly in the kitchen. Often he would show up with coffee and buttered toast to entice me out of bed. In the evenings, we would read books together and discuss their philosophical and theological significance and implications for living. Novels were his favorite. "To write a great novel is to truly capture the essence of human experience," he would say, as he munched on carrots and read passages of *Moby Dick* to me out loud.

Our first year of marriage, we discovered our house had somehow been marked as a place for the homeless to visit. Each week brought colorful guests to our door, all asking for food, money, or transportation. Bordering Chicago, we researched the resources in our area and created a list of contacts to share with our visitors – homeless shelters, social service offices, etc. We purchased tokens for the "el" train and stocked our pantry with canned goods.

One young man in particular, an alcoholic banned from his home, showed up each week. Looking out the window, I saw Daniel opening cans of food for him on our front steps, and talking quietly as the man unashamedly

shoveled food in his mouth. Eventually, Daniel convinced him to go into treatment.

Two years later, Daniel stood beside me at the hospital as our son was born, sharing the miracle of life we were blessed to create together. I remember him whispering to me, "I love you and look forward to growing old with you." I was thankful for someone who loved me so completely.

On the morning of my vivid dream, it had been fifteen years since Daniel's death. We didn't grow old together. Instead, at the age of 38, he died – three short weeks after the cancer was discovered.

As a young boy, my son grieved as best he could. He says he doesn't remember much about his dad. But as he has matured, I have noticed many similarities to his father. Spontaneous whistling in the mornings, a love of art and music, a passion and talent for teaching, and his insatiable desire to contemplate the deeper issues of life, all still remind me he's his father's son.

When I first held my granddaughter, the day she was born, I was surprised to look into her face and see the same deep-set, green eyes of her grandfather. Touches of him still abound in those around me.

Time passes and the years move on. But because of that dream on the fifteenth anniversary of his death, I purposely took time to remember our good times together, the love expressed, and the life he lived in genuine relationship with me, and with others. It was a bittersweet time, but worthy of reflection. From time to time, I still come across other remnants of his presence – a recipe in his handwriting, an old music album he loved, or his name and insignia inside the cover of one of his favorite books.

At those times, I still remember my loss. But knowing Daniel's character, I can't help

wondering if his response to my melancholy states of remembrance would rather be something like the sailors' comments in Moby Dick, "...I know not all that may be coming, but be it what it will, I'll go to it laughing.... Oh, boys, don't be sentimental; it's bad for the digestion! Take a tonic, follow me!"

The Callahan Sisters

Ann McCauley – Bradford, PA

Kate's exhaustion was palpable as she sat at the table, stared at the unopened envelope, and absently sipped her lukewarm coffee. She knew from the shaky handwriting that it was from Sara. Dear Sara, always the final word on family matters.

Kate slowly opened the envelope and read the lovely birthday greeting. It was Kate's eighty-fourth birthday. Sara would be eighty-eight next month. As she sorted through the stack of mail, her mind drifted back more than seventy years... she could hear Sara teasing, "Kate, Kate, don't be late! Hurry Kate or I won't wait!"

As a child, Kate had adored her older sister, and sometimes hated her, but only fleetingly. After all, it was Sara who had taught her to swim in the lake; it was Sara who helped her with her homework. It was Sara who taught her to knit and sew when their mother was sick. Kate was twelve when Mother died. It was Sara who taught her about becoming a woman, and protected her from their father's drunken rages. She'd always had Sara to count on.

As adults they married, and lived in different states. They shared the joy and pain of raising their families through monthly letters. Sara had three surviving daughters; her Billy, Jr. had died of leukemia at age five. Kate had three sons and two daughters. Her oldest son, James, was given

to drink. He'd died in a drunken brawl at age twenty. Only Sara seemed to truly understand the anguish Kate felt at the loss of her James.

Kate's husband died a year later of heart failure leaving her destitute. She confided only to Sara that it was a relief to be free of the womanizing scoundrel. Several years later, Sara's Bill was killed in a car accident after forty years of marriage. Sara never considered dating, and never fully recovered from the loss of her beloved husband. Kate happily remarried at age fifty.

Until they were in their late fifties, they had seen each other only once or twice a year and stayed in touch through their letters. Then they learned about the phone company's weekend-long-distance low rates. And they rediscovered the joys of sister talks.

Their children went their ways; some did better than others. Both sisters had several grandchildren. At first, they tried to stay involved in the young people's daily lives, but as they grew older...they slowly, without intending to, pulled away from the hustle of the young and closer to each other.

When Kate was seventy, she faced widowhood again, and once more Sara was her rock. Kate finally understood why Sara had never considered another man. This time Kate was not destitute. Both sisters were strong, independent elderly women who refused to consider moving from the homes they'd shared with their beloved husbands. Each year passed more rapidly than the one before. Kate and Sara visited each other for two weeks every three months. They even traveled to California and Florida on senior discount tours.

About two years ago, Kate noticed Sara becoming forgetful. It began with just occasional spells of repeating herself. Then three or four phone calls in the same afternoon with no recall that they'd already talked that day. (By then

they'd progressed to cell phones with unlimited long distance service.)

Kate finally had to call Sara's daughter. Julia lived near her mother, and made frequent short visits. She'd been so distracted with her career, community, and family obligations that she hadn't noticed anything prior to Kate's call. But after observing her mother more closely, Sara's declining memory was all too obvious.

Julia and her sisters made safety modifications to Sara's modest home; they rotated morning and evening visits, each taking dinner with them to share with their mother. Sara was angry with her daughters for implying she was unable to care for herself. She became suspicious and blamed them for wanting her money. (In reality, Sara had no money. What she'd had after Bill died was gone long ago. Her social security checks hardly paid the taxes. Perhaps it had been her pride or she just didn't realize Julia's monthly cash infusions were what kept her going.)

Then Sara had the stroke. After months of rehabilitation at Rest Haven Nursing Home, she learned to use her right side again. She managed to walk with the help of a walker, dress herself, and sadly, continued to forget. Kate suspected Julia must have reminded Sara to write this birthday card.

Kate hated to admit, even to herself, that she was not in good shape either. Good grief, no one should get this tired from just walking to the post box. But her heart being as it was and those wonderful little nitro pills...yes, she'd call Sara this afternoon. Where did all those years go? We always planned to spend more time together. Even with Sara's memory problems, sometimes they still managed to have good sister talks.

Kate's trance was interrupted by her cell phone's shrill ringtone. She dug it out of her purse, always a chore.

"Hello...well, Julia what a nice surprise."

Julia said, "Aunt Kate, are you sitting down?"

Kate shuffled back to her chair and sat down. "I am now."

Julia's voice wavered. Kate knew something was wrong.

"Mother passed away this morning. Her mind was clear today, she knew she was dying. She asked me to tell you, "Happy Birthday, Kate. Good-bye for now and I'll see you over there."

Silence, deadly silence.

"Aunt Kate?"

"Thank you for calling Julia..." The stoic Kate didn't notice the phone slip from her hand as an agonizing mournful cry escaped.

Kate hurt like she'd been kicked hard in the stomach, she felt empty inside. She'd dealt with the loss of her mother, her son and her beloved husband. But there had always been Sara. For the first time in her life she felt alone, totally alone.... Sara!

Do or Die

Lily Iona MacKenzie – Richmond, CA

None of the things I've heard about aging applied to my mother, who died at 101. She slept soundly, going to bed around 9:30 PM and slumbering through the night, awakening only for bathroom calls. She had few aches and pains, even during her last days. And it wasn't till her mid-90s that she began to feel some discomfort in her upper back where her spine had curved from osteoporosis. She swore she didn't have arthritis in her fingers, which were extremely nimble after all the knitting she did over the years. And her knees were better than mine (I've already had a partial knee replacement).

This is a woman who never followed a physical fitness program, whose idea of exercise was to walk from the fridge to the table. She didn't do yoga or stretching exercises. In fact, she didn't follow any kind of disciplined physical activity, though she was always active.

She did have a religion, though. She loved to shop. Before her third official husband (of twenty years) died when she was 91 (he was nine years younger than she), Mum visited him nearly every day in a veteran's hospital. After she spent an afternoon putting up with his verbal abuse and demands – "Get me some razors... Here's my laundry...Bring me some bacon and eggs" – she shopped to get him out of her system. I recall her saying, "It really gets me down to see all those men in wheelchairs. Some of them can't even talk. They just sit there, day after day. Shopping cheers me up. If I can buy something new, I don't feel so bad."

In addition to her three legal husbands, she also lived with one man for so many years that he counts as a fourth – she outlived all of them. And it was clear Mum would have married again if she could have, and not an older man. Once when I was visiting her, she gleefully told me about a seventy-eight-year-old friend who was marrying a fifty-two-year-old man. Mum said, "Her husband died recently. He wasn't much of a partner for years. He had prostate cancer and was impotent. An alcoholic. She's having the time of her life now, playing house with her fiancée." Mum's friend's good fortune gave her hope.

For my mother's 90th birthday, my husband and I flew from our San Francisco home to her Calgary digs to help her celebrate, joining other family members and friends, a bagpiper, and two young Scottish dancers. We all were there to honor her accomplishment. She didn't let us down.

When the piper played "Home to the Isles," she stood up, wearing an eye-catching blue lace dress, her pure white hair a halo, and danced back and forth, unable to stop those feet that had trained for highland dancing. And when we invited her, impromptu, to sing a Scottish song herself, there was no hesitation. She took the microphone like a pro and sang several verses *a cappella* of "I Ken You're the Laddie That Gave Me the Penny" in a strong, steady voice, not missing a word or a beat.

Mum was overweight because she had a voracious appetite, eating anything and everything, including eggs and bacon, steak with fat intact, chocolate milk, French fries, pastries, ice cream (the real thing!) and anything else that struck her fancy, but her heart seemed fine. She took high blood pressure pills but still liberally salted her food. Physically strong and sturdy, she wasn't shaky on her feet. And when I phoned one night, during a heat wave, she was lounging on her patio wearing a bathing suit.

Of course, she slowed down some in her mid-nineties, her walking pace not as fast as it used to be. But she lived on her own and cooked for herself until 95 and loved entertaining, often preparing meals for my brother, my sister and her husband, my son, and my nephew. These weren't meals served on the run. She baked banana nut bread, scones, and apple and lemon pies; she made chili and stews.

From watching Mum all those years, I've concluded that our attitude towards life and others goes far in shaping our old age. And our will. She was a Scot, and claimed her family's motto was "Do or Die."

This reminds me of a fall she took one winter night. Until she was 95, she regularly played bingo a couple of blocks away from her cottage. While outside walking to attend the game, she hit a patch of ice, and her feet went out from under her. I was horrified when she told me

about it on the phone. She just cackled, "You can't kill an old bird like me."

Humans are social beings. We need regular contact with others. Without a focus in our lives, a purpose, a reason to get up, dressed, and groomed, many would deteriorate. And many do.

Mum had a focus. The Hudson's Bay store was her job, her touchstone. She was as committed to getting there each day as those who work are to their workplace. Somehow, The Bay became a fountain of youth to her, a place where she renewed herself each day, where she met others like herself who made it their headquarters. Rather than brood on how little time she had left, she went where she could feel young, where everything was new. She renewed herself by looking at all the latest styles, the vivid colors, the imaginative displays.

At the end of her day downtown, Mum went home refreshed, ready to watch her favorite soap opera, *The Young and Restless*, before fixing dinner and going out for an evening of bingo. She loved to gamble, bingo and "scratchies" (lottery tickets). And she won. A lot. The gambling reflected her attitude on life, her curiosity, her willingness to take a chance. Sometimes she won. Sometimes she lost. More often than not she won.

"As the lights darkened, as the lights of night
brightened,
We would try to imagine them, try to find each
other,
To construct peace, to make love, to reconcile
Waking with sleeping, ourselves with each
other,
Ourselves with ourselves. We would try by any
means
To reach the limits of ourselves, to reach
beyond ourselves,
To let go the means, to wake."

— Muriel Rukeyser

Lizzie and Annie

Susan Marsh – Jackson, WY

My great-aunt Grace Harness was in her final years the last time I visited the farm in southern Ohio where my mother grew up. Aunt Grace had a pair of flop-eared hounds and she loved those smelly dogs. She claimed they held no scent at all, unlike the barn cats that made her wrinkle her nose and whose odor I could not detect. At dinnertime, she would holler out the screen door, "Lizzie! Annie!" and their lanky bodies stirred from whatever patch of shade they had found for a nap.

They sniffed bowls the size of washbasins set together on a scrap of old carpet. They watched with focused intensity as Aunt Grace picked up the stainless-steel bowls and filled them with a concoction she mixed in a canning cauldron twice a week. Six pounds of ground beef and six pounds of soft-cooked elbow macaroni went into the dog food. Aunt Grace lit the range in the large, functional kitchen of a farmhouse built in 1803 and owned by her family ever since. While the macaroni boiled she gave her biscuit dough its final thrashing.

Water biscuits: dense and chewy and nearly without taste. They required hours of kneading and pounding before they were ready to cut into three-inch rounds for baking. Aunt Grace pricked them with a fork and baked them until they showed only a touch of browning on the edges. If I had known how much work they required I might not have asked for them. But I loved those water biscuits and since she was making the dog food anyway she cheerfully made biscuits as well.

She stirred her dog food until the meat browned and the macaroni absorbed all the cooking liquid. When it was done, it resembled a dish my mother made for dinner whenever she had leftover spaghetti sauce.

Mom called her creation "Johnny Marzetti" (who that was I never learned). She mixed macaroni with spaghetti sauce and cooked it for most of an hour before topping it with Cheddar cheese. The cheese melted and bubbled and turned brown under the broiler, ready to serve. My father was a meat-and-potatoes kind of guy who wouldn't touch a pile of baked noodles, so Mom shared the Marzetti with me when he was out of town.

Remembering the savory aroma that filled the house when my mother made Marzetti, I once stuck a spoon into Aunt Grace's dog food as it cooled on her stovetop. Bland and tasteless as a water biscuit, I discovered, and quickly returned what was left on the spoon to the pot. But Lizzy and Annie didn't care about salt or spices or the tang of cheese and twice-cooked tomato sauce. They sat with their ears pricked forward as Grace ladled a generous portion into each bowl and set them on the floor of what was once a screened-in porch, now a sort of entrance and utility room that separated the kitchen from the side yard. Its painted planks were worn smooth as old Ivory soap by generations of Harnesses.

Lizzie and Annie were delicate eaters for dogs. They nuzzled the macaroni, nibbled at the lumps of meat, and licked their bowls clean before collapsing on the floor with satisfaction.

When arthritis prevented her from climbing the stairs to her bedroom, Aunt Grace slept in a long narrow chamber between the kitchen and dining room where the china and silver had been stored, where platters were filled with pork chops and mashed potatoes before being taken to table. The space felt cramped when occupied by her twin bed, tall dresser and two large dogs. She lay on the bedspread on sultry summer afternoons, the radio tuned to a baseball game, and rooted for the Cincinnati Reds.

As their own arthritis settled in, Lizzie and Annie would flop on the porch floor like a pair of throw rugs, warming their muscles in a sunbeam, next

to the door that faced the barn and a pigweed patch where the kitchen garden grew. Only a few rank rhubarb plants remained in the garden, their tall flower heads gone to seed. The porch door used to be the "kids' door" when my mother was growing up. Now it was everyone's door, with two sleeping dogs to guard the entrance. No one had used the front entry in decades.

That front door opened to another world, as far as possible from the bustle and noise of dogs and kids and food production. A double row of black walnut trees led to the white painted pillars on either side. I pictured guests taking off their top hats and hanging overcoats before entering the ornate parlor.

Parlor. I had to look up the word just now: a room for the reception and entertainment of visitors to one's home. It served that purpose once, but later became the sickroom, first for Aunt Grace's father, my great-grandfather, when he was laid low by throat cancer. He died in that room. Grace's two sisters, Marguerite, a maiden aunt, and Lillian, a widow, grew old and died there, too. Ghosts lived in that dark, cool corner of the farmhouse. It was no place for children.

Nor a place for dogs, which were not allowed in the vicinity of oriental rugs and antique furniture. Since their people never went in there, the dogs had no interest anyway. The porch faced south and the afternoon sun poured in. From their beds, Lizzie and Annie followed scents coming from the kitchen and yard. They smelled their macaroni and ground beef simmering on the cook stove and listened to Aunt Grace's ball game on the radio. They monitored the approach of visitors, car doors thumping shut and the screen door screeching open, voices calling out their hellos. The dogs raised their heads for a brief ear scratch when someone passed. They liked it that everyone had to step over them on their way into the house.

Savior

Juliana Lightle – Canyon, TX

Twenty weeks ago you told me,
"My wife kicked me out!"
I stared, speechless, shocked, remembering
your shared passion, hands all over each other,
her jealousy, remnants from years past.
Eighteen weeks ago you sat by me,
"I have never seen your house; I hear it's beautiful."
My response, "Maybe a dinner party."
It never happened.
How could I tell you I have never loved you,
worse yet, I cannot get past your double chin,
your brown stained teeth.

Fifteen weeks ago you hugged me, told me you
bought a condo, showed me photos.
Ten weeks ago I met your new girlfriend,
she a Christian fundamentalist, you an atheist.
Eight weeks ago I heard she dumped you.

Seven weeks ago I got an email telling me
you're dead. I read it several times in disbelief,
think maybe a heart attack.

Six weeks and five days ago I learned
you committed suicide, an overdose.

Six weeks and one day ago I stood against
a wall in an overcrowded funeral home at your
memorial service listening to words, what
a wonderful person you were, kind, loving, caring,
how you helped everyone move, rescued friends
from their drunken stupors, reached out to the lost.
You will never see my house.

Would one dinner party, a glass of wine have saved you?
I will never know.

The Grounds, St. Paul de Mausole Hospice and Vincent Van Gogh

Patricia Daly-Lipe – Haymarket, VA

The trees were just as he saw them:
Twisted trunks, withering branches
Plaintively reaching for the glow
Of the pale blue and pink sky,
Gray leaves flashing silver at the falling sun,
Dry, pale ochre weeds coating the earth below.
The edge of his palette knife
Marking this place
Still so full of his presence.



Fountain in the Garden of the Hospital Saint-Paul,
Black chalk, reed pen and ink, May 1889
(image in public domain)

2017 LifeLines Planned for May 5-7

By Joyce Boatright

“Owning your story is the bravest thing you will ever do.” ~Brené Brown.

LifeLines Weekend Retreat



We've got the best date, the perfect place and the most fabulous facilitator. All we need is YOU. Whether you are an aspiring writer or a seasoned one, this is a retreat you don't want to miss.

Story Circle has scheduled the weekend May 5-7, 2017, in beautiful Fredericksburg in the Texas Hill Country with retreat leader Jeanne Guy, author and reflective-writing coach.

Our retreat theme promises to lead us through the weekend and leave with the inspiration and confidence to start (or finish) our memoir, family stories, novel, poetry, or short story. Fredericksburg Inn & Suites is a tranquil respite along Barons Creek, a relaxing haven where we can focus on ourselves. The program is designed so that we can reframe how we see ourselves as writers and come away refreshed, renewed and recommitted to our writing life.

<http://www.storycircle.org/LifeLines/>

Story Circle Network Mission

The Story Circle Network (SCN) is dedicated to helping women share the stories of their lives and to raising public awareness of the importance of women's personal histories. We carry out our mission through publications, websites, classes, workshops, writing and reading circles, and woman-focused programs. Our activities empower women to tell their stories, discover their identities through their stories and choose to be the authors of their own lives.



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Permission

Jan Marquart – Austin, TX

Pen by my side
Blank page's horizon stretching wide
Waiting
For
Permission to be marked.

"Write and become your own best friend."
She said, my dear friend, Tamara
She and I sitting on a hill
Strength of pine trees encircling us
Their tips reaching Heaven
Erupting desire.

The pen began
broke walls
pushed limits
explored with its scribble
And freed my squeezed self.

