

# STORY CIRCLE JOURNAL

Vol. 16 No. 4, December 2012

The newsletter for women with stories to tell



## LifeLines: A Story Circle LifeWriting Retreat

with Sheila Bender  
March 8-10, 2013  
Festival Hill, Round Top TX

What if we really talked with each other, and listened to

each other, and held each others' stories as sacred information that could transform our lives?

What if we learned to shape the stories of our lives as containers for our experience & an expression of our heart's greatest desires?

What if we wrote what we had learned & took it home with us as a guide to realizing our dreams & hopes?

Writing our past in the present can be a life line to a future filled with hope.

Join us for a women-only weekend lifewriting retreat, led by Sheila Bender, at the beautiful Festival Hill.

### About the Retreat:

**"Write! Write! Write! Learn Tools Experts Use and Enhance Your Life Writing"**

Spend a weekend with Sheila Bender, founder of Writing It Real, and fill your notebook or laptop with personal essays, vignettes, and poetry that you can incorporate into your ongoing life-writing projects. Sheila offers guided practice with writer's tools for using imagery, lyric sound, dialog, forms of organization and much more. Using Sheila's much talked about gentle, yet empowering three-step responding method, you'll discover your writing's depth, purpose and insight. Her mantra

concerning work-in-progress is this: there is no such thing as bad writing, only the opportunity for good writing. Join us for a weekend of writing and sharing to discover those opportunities.

### About the Facilitator: Sheila Bender

Sheila is a poet and essayist best known for her books on writing instruction, such as *Writing in a New Convertible with the Top Down*, *Writing Personal Essays*, *Keeping a Journal You Love*, and several others. Her most recent book, *A New Theology: Turning to Poetry in a Time of Grief*, is her most personal: it is a memoir chronicling how reading and writing poetry helped her move through grief after the death of her son.

Sheila has devoted most of her career to the teaching of writing and the improvement of writing instruction. In addition to her nine books on writing, she has written instructional articles for *Writer's Digest* and *The Writer* magazines. She is the founder of Writing It Real through which she provides an on-line writing magazine, offers individual and group writing instruction as well as offering writing conferences in Port Townsend, Washington and many other sites across the country. She is also a regular instructor, panelist and presenter at writing and educational conferences nation-wide. She has recently been an instructor for several Story Circle on-line classes. Read more on her website at <http://writingitreal.com>

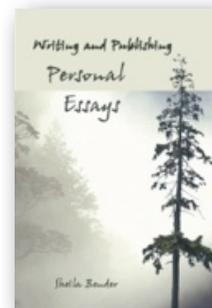
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Sarton Memoir Award

**Submissions Due  
December 7!**



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

## Letter From SCN's President—



# Gifts

Wow—another year coming to an end! I think part of what makes us accept that the year is ending is all the celebrations we have in December. Whether you celebrate Christmas, Hanukkah, or Kwanza, there will be times of joy, and gifts to share with those who are close to you.

Story Circle is celebrating as well. Just look at this:

•A wonderful group of women joined us for our Stories from the Heart conference in Austin.

- We have already begun to plan our 2014 conference.
- We presented the first Sarton Memoir Award to two very talented women: Leila Levinson and Jamie Patterson.
- The wonderful Sheila Bender has agreed to lead our Lifelines Retreat in March, 2013 at Festival Hill.
- Many creative women have become part of our organization over the year.

Story Circle offers gifts all year in terms of opportunities for women writers to tell their all-important s life stories, to have their voices heard. Have you claimed yours yet? Choose an Internet writing or reading circle or one that is conducted in many sites around the country. Do you have a book you'd like our reviewers to see? Struggling with your latest writing project? Choose our editorial services to help you. Want to polish up or move your writing to the next level? Check out the many online classes. How about submitting to the Journal or Anthology?

I've never been comfortable being a gift-grubber, but Story Circle always appreciates the "gifts" our writing sisters give us. We'd love to have you renew your membership or move up to a new membership level. There are many levels to choose from: Friend, Donor, Supporter, Contributor, Sustainer, Patron and Benefactor.

We are always looking to increase our membership, especially in areas of the country where we have few members. We'd love the gift of your willingness to distribute our brochures in your area. The template is available on the SCN website. It's easy to copy. Even I, the electronically impaired President, was able to do it!

And speaking of gifts, do you know someone who would appreciate receiving a gift membership? This would be a most generous and thoughtful gift that any woman writer would be more than happy to receive.

Whatever your celebration might be, the Story Circle Board wishes you happiness on that day and throughout the coming year!

~Pat LaPointe

## Story Circle Network's 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.

### Story Circle Journal

The quarterly newsletter of Story Circle Network, published in March, June, September, and December. It is written by and for women who want to share their experiences. Its purpose is to encourage readers to become writers, guide women to set down their true stories, and encourage the sharing of women's lives. This newsletter is provided for information and is not intended to replace qualified therapeutic assistance. If you have special mental-health needs, please see a healthcare professional.

Editor: Robin Wittig  
[journaleditor@storycircle.org](mailto:journaleditor@storycircle.org)

Contributing Editors:  
 Mary Jo Doig  
 Lisa Shirah-Hiers  
 Susan Albert  
 Barbara Miller  
 Trilla Pando

We welcome your letters, queries, and suggestions.

Editorial Address:  
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### Membership Rates

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**Missed Issues:** We try to ensure that *Story Circle Journal* arrives in your mailbox four times a year. If you miss an issue, send us a note and we'll mail you a replacement.

**Change of address:** If you move, please tell us.

# Save the Date!



Stories from the  
Heart VII  
April 11-13, 2014  
Wyndham Hotel,  
Austin, TX

Stories from the Heart VII will provide you the opportunity to meet your Story Circle Network sisters, make new friends, learn new skills and hone old ones. It's a wonderful opportunity to share and to learn and to understand the heart of the Story Circle Network.

Our keynote speaker Linda Hasslestrom, author of *No Place Like Home*, has led a fascinating life; you can read her biography at her website: [www.windbreakhouse.com](http://www.windbreakhouse.com).

Nancy Curtis, founder of High Plains Press, will speak on Sunday. Besides publishing, Nancy has co-edited three collections of writing by plainswomen. Learn more about Nancy and High Plains Press here: [www.highplainspress.com](http://www.highplainspress.com).

Stories from the Heart VII (can you believe, VII?) will be co-chaired by Peggy Moody and Jeanne Guy. With Peggy's experience and Jeanne's fresh ideas, you will not want to miss out on this conference!

Mary Jo Doig will provide support as the Program Chair. She will send out a Call for Presenters in June or July of 2013.

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart.

~Helen Keller



Linda Hasslestrom



Nancy Curtis

Help Us  
Choose  
SCN's Super-  
Star Blogger  
of 2012!



Every month, we feature one of our SCN bloggers in our national eletter. The selection is made on the basis of the blog's outstanding content, visual appeal, and the importance of its contribution to the growing universe of lifestory blogging. You can see all of our wonderful bloggers and Star Bloggers listed here: <http://www.storycircle.org/blogs.shtml>

Now we invite you to help us select one of our Star Bloggers to be our Super-Star Blogger of 2012. One team of judges has already done a first-round screening and chosen four of our twelve Stars to continue to the second round.

Beginning on January 1, 2013, you'll have your turn!

Each of the bloggers represents a different approach to the art of lifestory blogging. Read about each one and click on the photo to visit the blog. Then vote (at the bottom of the web page) for your favorite (*vote only once, please!*).

The winner will receive a two-year Story Circle Network national membership, a copy of *Kitchen Table Stories*, and publicity in our national and membership publications.

**NOTE!** Two lucky voters will receive a one-year Story Circle Network national membership, as well as a copy of *Starting Points*.

## Star Bloggers for 2012

January:	Dawn Thurston
February:	Constance Moylan
March:	Helen Ginger
April:	Monica Devine
May:	Linda Hoye
June:	Susan J. Tweit
July:	Len Leatherwood
August:	Jennifer Payne
September:	Samantha White
October:	Times They Were A- Changing
November:	Mary Purdy
December:	Mary Ann Parker

# Times They Were A-Changing

By Pat Bean

The 1960s and '70s were gate-breaking years for American females, a coming of age when the barriers between men's work and women's work fell -- or were swatted down. It was a period crowded with creative new ideas and shattered glass ceilings

While public feminists like Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem fought the sexist battle in the headlines, millions of other women fought the good battle in the trenches, lobbying their bosses for equal pay for equal work, ignoring the no-pants rules, and invading previously male-only bastions.

Kate Farrell, Amber Lea Starfire and Linda Joy Myers were among this second wave. The three, all writers with impressive credentials, came together this past April in Austin, where they were presenters for the Story Circle Network Memoir Conference.

During a shared lunch at the Treehouse Grill – beneath the spreading branches of a 700-year-old oak tree, as they described the setting – the trio got to talking about how that tumultuous era had been ground-breaking for each of them.

And so was born the idea for an anthology, "Times They Were A-Changing." It would be about women remembering the '60s and '70s, authentic stories from personal experiences and about the wisdom gained from living through those times, and with poetry that evoked emotions of the era.

As Amber recalls that luncheon, the idea began with the swapping of stories among the three.

"From the different perspectives of different cities, different family cultures, vastly different experiences separated by only a few years, we couldn't help but note the variety and richness of the stories. We recalled how we had to wear skirts to school year-round, the first time we saw a hippie, the first time one of us was called a hippie, what it was like to live on a commune, the beginning of the women's movement, the transition from jazz to rock ... we recalled being inspired by female rock and roll stars, poets, writers and activists," Amber said.

"The wind was blowing our tablecloth," said Linda, "and that 700 year-old oak's branches were swaying as we listened to each other's memories unfold, interrupting sometimes with an 'Oh that reminds me ...' or 'Wait a second, I've got to tell you this ...,' punctuated with lots of laughter, a few blushes, and sometimes the blinking away of tears."

"I'm still connected to that decade of extreme changes for women," Kate said. "It challenged and defined me. I grabbed the golden ring of opportunity that appeared in San Francisco and held on. I took the new options offered, to participate in public policy, to become a professional who could make a difference, to value myself as a woman for my character, ability and intelligence."

This day's conversation wasn't a new one for Linda Joy and Kate. The two of them were chatting after a California Writers Club meeting when Linda Joy had mentioned her growing

interest in a collection of personal narratives from women who had lived through the 1960s and '70s.

"I found myself immediately wanting to share my experiences from that era, and with some pride," Kate said. "Yet while my memories were still vivid and charged with feeling, I realized I'd rarely shared them before."

During the Austin conversation, Amber said, the three of them talked about how so much written history from that era was about important men, and how wonderful it would be to hear more stories from other women.

"Think about the variety of experiences ... the differences between experiencing the Vietnam War as a mother of a son, a younger sister, a college student. What a rich tapestry of culture from a feminine perspective that would be," Amber said.

"So many stories left untold, the personal evolutions, the unique journeys," Kate said.

And finally, someone said it: "Why not now?" And then someone else said: "Let's do it."

And three glasses clinked, one holding red wine, one holding sparkling water and one holding white wine. Three different women now all having the same mind set.

"Somewhere a cell divides ... and "The Times They Were A-Changing: Women Remember the '60s and '70s" begins its gestation process," said Amber.

It's in good midwife hands.

*(Continued on page 4)*



**Times They Were  
A-Changing**

**Women Remember  
the 60s & 70s**

**Contest & Call for Submissions**

**Where were you in the 60s & 70s?**

Seeking women with telltale stories and poems of  
that extraordinary era for a new anthology.

**Deadline: January 15, 2013**

**[www.timestheywereachangin.com](http://www.timestheywereachangin.com)**

(Continued from page 3)

**Linda Joy Myers** is president of the National Association of Memoir Writers; co-president of the National Book Association in San Francisco; author of “The Power of Memoir: How to Write your Healing Story” and the award-winning memoir, “Don’t Call Me Mother.” She is also the author of a new workbook, “The Journey of Memoir: The Three Stages of Memoir Writing.” She co-teaches the program, Write Your Memoir in Six Months, with Brooke Warner. In addition she works as a writing coach, and has a blog <http://memoriesandmemoirs.com> on how to write a successful memoir.

**Kate Farrell** has a master’s degree from the University of California at Berkeley; is an author, teacher, librarian, and storyteller and has published numerous educational materials. She is the founder of the Wisdom Has a Voice memoir project <http://wisdomhasavoices.com/> and editor of the anthology, “Wisdom Has a Voice: Every Daughter’s Memoires of Mother”. In addition, she is a member of the Redwood Branch of the California Writer’s Club, Story Circle Network, the National Association of Memoir Writers, and is vice president of the Women’s National Book Association, San Francisco Chapter

**Amber Lea Starfire** is a teacher, editor, and author whose passion is helping others tell their stories and make meaning of their lives through the act of writing. Visit her blog at [www.writingthroughlife.com](http://www.writingthroughlife.com). She also offers online and in-person writing classes and workshops in journaling and memoir writing. She is a former editor of Story Circle Network’s “True Words Anthology,” and a member of the California Writers Club in Santa Rosa (Redwood Writers), the National Association of Memoir Writers, Story Circle Network and the International Association of Journal Writers.

These three have come up with an interesting way to collect stories for “Times They Were A-Changing.” They’re running a contest for entries with prize money to be awarded to the top three entries, while all the stories submitted will be eligible for inclusion in the anthology. You can get all the details at <http://timestheywerechanging.com/submission-guidelines> All entries must be submitted through the official form, and both poetry and prose will be accepted.

Kate said statistics tell the story of the strides made by women during the 1960s and ‘70s, but that the personal and unique stories have been left largely untold.

“Now is the perfect time,” she said, “to look back, to take the luxury of time and distance, to shape stories and to see what those experiences finally mean in creating the trajectory of our adult lives.”

Linda, who participated in a March on Washington during the breakthrough era, and who has been mulling over the idea for this anthology the longest, said she was thrilled that Kate and Amber are now involved in the project.



Left to right: Kate Farrell, Amber Lea Starfire, Linda Joy Myers

“I knew I couldn’t do it alone.”

Kate believes the anthology of writings from women who were part of the “amazing movements of consciousness, politics and feminism during the ‘60s and ‘70s” will inspire young women today to evolve and grow. She also hopes the book will remind the women from that era the importance of their legacy, and that it will educate all readers about women’s involvement in those changing times.

The goal for the anthology is to have it available in both eBook and print by June of 2013. It will be published by a hybrid press, SheWritesPress, associated with the SheWrites web site for women writers.

“The press invites us to collaborate in design, publicity and marketing the book” Linda Joy said. “We are very pleased to be selected by them for this project.”

“It seems to me,” Amber said, “that the history of that incredible era has been told and written mostly by men -- about men -- and that the female presence in men’s stories is almost as nonexistent as women’s voices were at the time. I believe that women have a unique perspective and a rich her-story that needs to be told.

“Our lives and experiences -- whether we were children, teens, or adults at the time -- woven together, create a vibrant tapestry of story and images,” Amber said.

Kate said she hopes “to learn the diversity of women’s experiences during these decades and unearth our shared legacy.”

And Linda Joy wants “women to remember their younger selves, and investigate how coming of age during the era of the ‘60s and ‘70s altered their lives, and to learn how this era is being lived out in them now.”

And they all three want women with stories to tell about their experiences during the 1960s and ‘70s to participate. You have until Jan. 15, 2013 to do so.

**[www.timestheywerechanging.com](http://www.timestheywerechanging.com)**



## Circles: The Heart of Story Circle Network

# “Circle Up” with Sisters



by Barbara Lindquist Miller

A Story Circle is a group of women who come together to read, write, and celebrate the stories of their lives. A Circle may be made up of as few as two or three people, or as many as twenty. Each meeting of your Circle will probably include a period of writing, a time for voluntary reading, and discussion. Some Circles have chosen to share a meal or refreshments before they settle down to writing and reading.

What is the first circle you can remember? Where were you when you first joined with others in the joy of a circle? My first memory is of “Ring around the Rosy” at my three year old birthday party. I felt apprehension. The song was new for me. There was joy as six of us tumbled to the ground in a laughing tangle.

Over a lifetime there have been many circles: family meetings during raising children, the planning of neighborhood celebrations and neighborhood problem solving, the all important peer group in adolescence, family reunions, groups in the workplace where we witness for peace and the dignity of each person. We gather together, sometimes with kindred souls and other times with a diversity of persons, to celebrate, share grief, dream our visions for the future, solve social problems too big to tackle alone, to journey spiritually, and to write our personal stories.

As the Circle Coordinator for the Story Circle Network Board during the past three years, I have heard one statement consistently.

“What, there is no writing circle in my part of the world?”

We know instinctively that circles work. Almost every woman who joins SCN wants to participate with other women in a face-to-face writing group. The circle is where they expect to engage with other women who are sharing their life memories, sharing stories about the ups and downs of daily living, the extraordinary peaks and valleys which shape each of us. If you have been in SCN very long, you already know what my immediate response is.

“Please seriously consider starting a circle where you find yourself.”

Often the response is a long silence followed by self-doubts, stories about full schedules, lack of writing expertise, the fear of being vulnerable and fear of failure. We all shrink back when confronted with one more thing to do, to engage in, to make a commitment about. Believe me! The rewards far outweigh the effort.

As I complete my term on the SCN Board, I recall the dozens of times that I have heard from members about the explosion of self-confidence that emerges once women put their own stories out there. Just imagine with me the power we might unleash if each of us would step forward to facilitate a writing circle in 2013. Circles, the very heart of Story Circle Network, are the places where women empower each other, where women rally around to discover they are not alone, where their own stories can send them forward to new encounters with life.

If you are reading this column, you can lead a story circle. Give yourself that gift in the year ahead. Give the gift of life-story writing to the women in your community. The SCN Facilitator’s Guide, free for members, is a great place to start. The copy can easily be downloaded from the SCN webpage. Many current facilitators have told me, and my own experience confirms, the stories shared carry the day. Circle members share, laugh, cry, celebrate, grieve and witness life’s power together.

What are so desperately needed in today’s world are places for us to be authentic with each other. Story circles are that and so much more. As I continue to facilitate a circle and participate in another, I dream that you also will have the experience of sharing with your sisters the multiplicity of rewards of writing together.



*Thank you, Barbara. We’ll miss your faithful and professional contributions to the Story Circle Journal. Happy Circles to you!*





# Internet Chapter

by Lee Ambrose

*"Life is a series of choices made with the best intentions, often with hope... It [was] a fresco not a painting, filled with details that require years of collaboration to create.*

~ The Shoemaker's Wife by Adriana Trigiani

To look at a fresco is to see that slice of the world through the heart, soul and eyes of its creator. The fresco slowly comes to life over a period of time through the energies and talents of the one who envisioned

it in the first place. Over the course of centuries, the frescos have suffered from the insults of the elements – both man-made and natural. In order to retain its beauty, a fresco must sometimes undergo a process of restoration. Once restored by modern-day artists, there are those who would argue that the fresco loses some of its original beauty, message, or both. Those same folks argue that the artist's original intent to portray those events is muddied by the fact that modern eyes don't view that slice of life in the same manner. Others applaud the restoration efforts and look at it as a way to allow future generations to share that centuries old story.

What, you may wonder, does all this talk of frescos have to do with Story Circle Network's Internet Chapter? Here at the Internet Chapter – in our reading and writing e-circles, we mine the depths of our hearts and souls to bring our own unique stories to the surface. We share them in such a way that they can be as private or as public as we desire. And, in putting those stories into written words, we are creating our own sort of fresco for future generations to experience.

The beauty of writing our own life stories is that we don't have to leave the interpretation of that piece of our life to another individual. We can paint our own word paintings, in our own ways, and in our own time. Our stories, like the frescos, come under changes with the passing of time and the effects of the elements (life experiences, both good and bad). Hence, it becomes increasingly important to those of us who want to leave those stories for our children and their children that we put them down before they are beyond the point of recovery. Sketching out the story now and fine-tuning it later -- as a way of restoration -- in the hopes of returning it to its original intended form turns us into the fresco painters and restoration artists of our own life story.

Being able to have a safe place in which to write those stories -- and giving ourselves permission to do so in small increments over time -- is an incredible gift that is afforded to us by virtue of our participation in the writing and reading e-circles. Using life's details to pen a story that is as rich as any magnificent fresco is a privilege that SCN Internet Chapter members share.

You may not have considered yourself an artist – at least not a fresco artist but that truly is what you become when you begin the process of writing your own life story. It's an incredible journey and the years of experience that come together to create the final piece of artwork are uniquely yours!



*Sarton Memoir Award*

## Sarton Memoir Award Honoring Women's Lives

The award is named in honor of May Sarton (1912-1995), distinguished American poet, novelist, and author of twelve memoirs and journals. It is sponsored by the Story Circle Network.

### 2011 Winners

#### Leila Levinson

*Gated Grief: The Daughter of a GI Concentration Camp Liberator Discovers a Legacy of Trauma* (Cable Publishing, 2011). *Gated Grief* reveals how unspoken memories and unshared stories can imprison and haunt us. It speaks to the power of story to honor and heal the wounds of the past.

#### Jamie Patterson

*Lost Edens: A True Story* (Beaver's Pond Press, 2011). A memoir of a failed marriage and abandoned dreams, *Lost Edens* helps us understand that while some relationships are too broken to fix, we can change our stories and thereby transform our lives.

### About the 2012 Award

The winning author's name and the title of her book will be announced on the Story Circle Network websites and to its extensive email list in March, 2013. She will be invited to attend and be honored at Stories from the Heart, the biannual SCN National Memoir Conference, Austin TX, April, 2014. Her book will be featured in SCN publications and websites throughout 2013.

Want to enter your memoir? Visit the website for full details: <http://www.storycircle.org/SartonMemoirAward/>

[www.storycircle.org/SartonMemoirAward/](http://www.storycircle.org/SartonMemoirAward/)



# We've Come a Long Way, Sisters!

## Story Circle at Fifteen

by Susan Wittig Albert, SCN Founder



Susan Wittig Albert

"Our stories arise from our hearts and our souls. In this sense, telling our stories becomes a sacred gesture, opening a clear way to that deep, ecstatic center where we are most uniquely and individually our selves, and yet are *ourselves*, joined together at the heart."—*Writing From Life*

Fifteen years ago, Story Circle was born. It was conceived out of a series of journaling and memoir classes I taught for the Jung Society in Austin, TX, in the 1980s and 1990s, and a book—*Writing From Life: Telling the Soul's Story*—that I wrote in 1996. Personally, I wanted to find a way to continue journaling and lifewriting with a larger and more permanent group of women. And I was convinced that telling our stories was not just a way to preserve our experiences but to understand and clarify the many meanings buried under the busyness of our lives.



Peggy Moody, Executive Director

So in 1997, a group of about ten of us got together and began dreaming about what we might offer to women who wanted to tell their stories. *Telling our stories*—now, we hear a great deal about that, but fifteen years ago, that was an idea whose time had not quite yet come. We knew we had some work to do to carry out our mission: to help women tell the stories of their lives and to raise public awareness of the importance of women's personal histories.

So we rolled up our sleeves and—like every woman with a dream—got to work. We called ourselves a "board of directors," obtained our Texas charter as a not-for-profit organization and began developing programs and projects that would help us turn

our hopes for Story Circle into realities. Now, fifteen years later, we can count seven board presidents and over 90 talented, creative women who have served Story Circle as active, *working* board members.

Our first major project was the Older Women's Legacy Circle, a workshop program funded with a \$100,000 grant from the Sisters of the Sacred Heart in Houston, TX. The project has involved nearly fifty writing circles, over 500 women (and still growing), a workbook and Facilitators Manual, and a wonderful collection of stories (*With Courage and Common Sense*, published by the University of Texas Press), as well as a website.

We began publishing early in our community life and continue to publish regularly. The quarterly *Story Circle Journal* was launched in 1998 and is now published in both print and online editions. We publish an annual anthology, *True Words*, of our members' writing, edited this year by Mary Jo Doig and Robin Wittig. We publish an eletter that began going just to our members and now goes out, monthly, to some 4,000 readers. The Internet Chapter and the book review website publish their own monthly eletters as well, and the Online Class program publishes an eletter series about its classes.

Our publications come from the heart of our writing community. *With Courage and Common Sense* (2003) was just the first of our books. In 2005, we published *Starting Points*, a collection of writing prompts developed for the Internet Chapter. Two years later, Jane Ross collected and edited our very popular *Kitchen Table Stories*, featuring the writings and recipes of our members. Our ambitious anthology, *What Wildness Is This*, was published in 2007 by the University of Texas Press and edited by four members: Paula Yost, Susan Hanson, Jan Seale, and myself. It features the work of nearly 100 established and emerging women writers, reflecting on their experience of the landscapes of the Southwest. Most recently, three of our SCN members are collecting stories for their anthology, *Times They Were A-Changing: Women Remember the 60s and 70s*. SCN is a writing community, and our publications reflect that commitment.

Our most important woman-to-woman work takes place in our circles, workshops, and conferences. Starting in 1999, in Austin, we offered writing circles, a reading circle, and—through the *Story Circle Journal*, which began publication in 1998—writing workshops and other activities. Each year, we have offered several Writing From Life weekends and Be Our



*The OWL Project*



*Telling HerStories*



Guest programs. In 2002, we offered our first biennial conference, Stories From the Heart; our sixth conference was held in 2012. And we're already at work, planning our seventh, to be held in Austin TX, April 12-14, 2014. (We hope you'll join us for this wonderful event. In 2003, we offered our first biennial LifeLines Writing Retreat, and will be offering our sixth on March 8-10, 2013, with Sheila Bender.

For all of our fifteen years, Peggy Moody has contributed her wonderful web skills to SCN, helping us take our programs online and broadening our membership internationally. She created and has maintained our ever-expanding website, our community center, our bulletin board, and the face we turn to the global online world.

But there is much more. In the early 2000s, we began our Internet Chapter, with its writing and reading e-circles. In 2002, Paula Yost launched our book review website, now the largest, longest-lived women's book review site on the Internet. In that same year, we taught our first writing classes—for, by, and about women—online. Now, under the direction of Amber Starfire, SCN offers a strong online writing program, with a large and experienced faculty offering regular and occasional classes in journaling and memoir, poetry, skill sharpening, publishing, and networking. We also offer an online Editorial Service (launched by Matilda Butler and Kendra Bonnett, now coordinated by Helen Ginger) for people who need experienced, reliable help in presenting their work for publication.

And as blogging became the passion of the Internet, SCN was there, too. We offer the HerStories blog, with frequent posts by a dozen writing teachers about the practices of journaling and memoir writing. Linda Hoye launched the One Woman's Day blog, so that a community of SCN writers could showcase

their lifestories online. Our Star Blogger program recognizes the best of our blogging members, and our online LifeWriters chat group keeps us connected. And of course, we're on Facebook and Twitter.

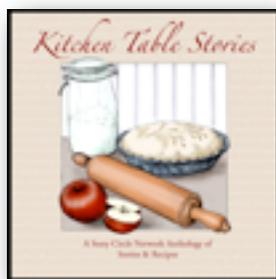
We have always believed that it is important to recognize and honor excellence in writing, so SCN sponsors two competitions. In 2000, we began sponsoring an annual essay competition. Since that first year, over fifty women have been recognized for their writing. And in 2011, we sponsored the first May Sarton Women's Memoir Award, honoring the best book-length woman's memoir published in that year. We plan to continue both programs—the essay and the book competitions—in coming years.

As I step back, take a deep breath, and think about all that our SCN sisters have achieved in the past fifteen years, I am both proud and amazed—proud of us, amazed by the marvelous complexity of our achievements. But really, there's nothing to be surprised about, is there? Women who put their hearts into doing what they love and what they believe in can accomplish *anything*. You prove that every day, as you do all the things you do for your families, your communities, your selves. And SCN proves that every day, too: working for our family of sisters, for our writing community, and for ourselves, as women writers, writing our lives.

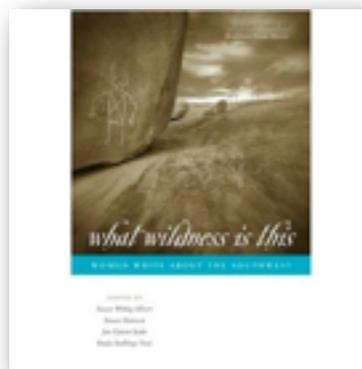
Susan Wittig Albert is the author of three popular mystery series and the co-author of a fourth. She has written four nonfiction works, including *Writing From Life* and two memoirs. You can read more about her at [www.susanalbert.com](http://www.susanalbert.com).



*With Courage and Common Sense*



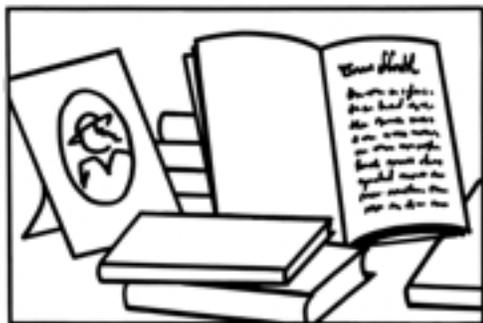
*Kitchen Table Stories*



*What Wildness is This*



*Starting Points*



## Story Circle Network's Book Reviews

# Giggles and Wishes

by Trilla Pando

Visit us on the Internet:

[www.storycirclebookreviews.org](http://www.storycirclebookreviews.org) • [www.facebook.com/storycirclebookreviews](https://www.facebook.com/storycirclebookreviews)

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Giggles and wishes, secrets—must be December. Everything builds up to that special morning of surprises and traditions. Likely there will be some surprise gifts at our house, and some that are not so surprising. Everyone knows that small rectangular box holds a Christmas book from Trilla. In my family, both my growing-up family, the Nordykes, and my grown-up family, the Pandos, books dominate the season, not just the opening time on Christmas morning right after the stocking but before the Christmas Kringle breakfast.

First, there's the shopping. No, probably that's the second. First is the dropping of gentle hints starting in about August for books I might want, and hard listening for hints about the ones I'll give. "Say, look at this review in the Times. That sounds like a great book." Then, 'round about Thanksgiving the book buying gets serious, and at the same time, I quit buying books for myself—why jeopardize a good surprise? I try to remember the wishes I've picked up on. (New Year's resolution—next year, make a list.) I scan my stack of saved book review sections. For my women friends and relatives—and often the guys too—I go to our own Story Circle Book Reviews to see what others liked.

I'm lucky. I'm a Story Circle Book Reviewer myself. All year long, I've been reading and reviewing, and sometimes about halfway through a book, I stop and think who else would to enjoy this book. In fact, (don't tell) my sister, my daughter and my friend Gertrude, who can remember those times, all are getting *Face of the Enemy: A New York Wartime Mystery* that I reviewed a few weeks ago. Fine book! Read the review here: <http://www.storycirclebookreviews.org/reviews/faceoftheenemy.shtml>

When my list is ready I drop by my three nearby independent book stores. I love them all, especially Murder by the Book. I might even venture into Barnes and Noble if the indies don't have my choices, but it's so big that it intimidates me. I'm much more likely to rely on Amazon.

Soon I'm intercepting Lisa, our UPS person, when I see that familiar brown box in her hand. Except for the day she smiled and said, "This one's not for you." Then it's wrapping time. Well, okay—sometimes I do a little previewing—it would be awful to give something inappropriate. The big day comes and the reading begins. Yes, we do have a family dinner and some visiting and telephoning, but come the morning of the 26th, it's reading time, don't bother to call.

Here's my December 26 haiku from 2011. Yes, I got a book of haikus.

December fading  
grey and cold; cat naps, I read,  
winter settles in.

If you'd like to give a gift of books that will last the year long, you might consider being a reviewer yourself. We're looking for

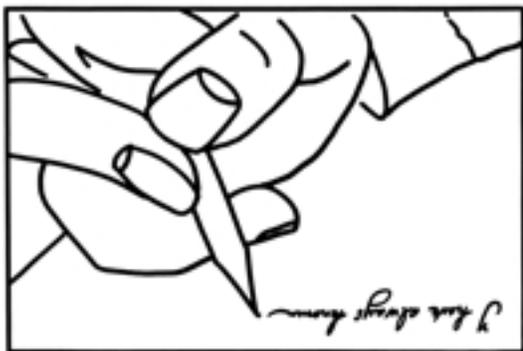
strong reviews of books by, for, and about women. We prefer reviews of books published within the last two years, as well as reviews of womens' classics, but we will consider other submissions. We prefer reviews of hardcover or tradepaper books; only rarely do we publish reviews of mass market (paperback) genre fiction. We do review digitally published books, but the book must also be available in hard copy.

If you wish to submit a review of a book outside our guidelines, please first contact an editor for approval ([bookreviews@storycirclebookreviews.org](mailto:bookreviews@storycirclebookreviews.org)).

All reviews must be submitted via our online book review submission form. Only automated submissions will be considered.

If we have not previously published your reviews, or if you are a former or inactive reviewer and wish to review for us again:

1. You must query us with the title and the Amazon link to the book you propose to review. Email your query to [bookreviews@storycirclebookreviews.org](mailto:bookreviews@storycirclebookreviews.org). With the query, please send a brief bio.
2. We review books by/for/about women. For a list of our categories, see the Category Index. Please be sure that the book is currently in print and is offered for sale by Amazon.com. Send us the Amazon link with your query.
3. We are more interested in women's memoir, biographies, non-fiction, and serious fiction. We are selective about the genre fiction (mysteries, paranormal, romance, and chick lit) we review. We prefer to publish reviews of books published within the last two years, as well as reviews of the classics, but we will consider other submissions.
4. Before you submit, read "General Requirements" and "Review Guidelines" on the website.
5. We accept new reviewers to our team on a three-review probationary basis. We work with each new reviewer to help her develop her first submission so that it is editorially acceptable. If a second submission requires extensive editorial work, we will send it back to her for revision. If we must return a third submission for substantial revision, we will regretfully not accept her to the team.
6. When we have accepted your first review for publication, we will add you to our review team (as a provisional member) and begin sending you email notices of books we are offering for review. Once we have accepted three reviews, you will become a permanent member of our team.
7. If you live outside the territorial U.S., please know that, while we are glad to have international reviewers, we cannot mail you books for review. Our site is supported as a public service by a nonprofit organization, and the cost of international postage is prohibitive. You may, however, submit reviews of suitable books that you obtain locally, from your library or bookstore.



## Motoring to the Ballroom

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

One late-May evening in 1995, back when hubby Bill and I were novice dancers, we took our first trip to Lake Robbins Ballroom thirty miles away. Hopping on the freeway north of our Des Moines, Iowa home, we exited at Highway 141 and headed northwest toward our destination.

A few miles before the town of Woodward, we turned left off the highway, hitting gravel. Wait a minute. A ballroom on a gravel road?

Surprise! Our rudimentary directions did not note gravel. Accompanied by the crunch and clack of gravel, our car kicked up dust swirls as we pressed on—passing farmhouses, newly-planted fields, and fenced pastures with horses peering at us.

After cresting a hill we saw it, a modest structure surrounded by corn fields.

Really? This is the historic place known for “the finest dance floor in Iowa?”

Rhythmic sounds of the live band drifted toward us as we rolled into the lot. The air smelled fresh and inviting when we eased from the car. We entered, straight into “a piece of Americana,” as described by one friend.

The ballroom oozed with charm and hospitality, as did its staff and patrons. Slipping on dance shoes we joined those dancing, agreeing that the magnificent floor deserved its star billing.

Soon we ranked among the generations of dancers who returned week after week. That first time we focused on finding the ballroom. Once familiar with the route, we delighted in leaving city bustle and driving through the scenic countryside. In surveying the luscious Iowa landscape. In savoring seasonal changes: first signs of planting and burgeoning growth, fields in full glory, multi-colored foliage, the last harvests, stark winter beauty.

Today when we exit the hum of the highway and pick up the dust and dings of the gravel road, our hearts quicken. Almost there! To the magical place where dancing and hospitality have mingled for eighty-one years, smack dab in the middle of corn fields and wide-open spaces.

Refreshed from reflection on the ride from the city, we’re ready.

“Dance time!”

## True Words from Real Women

# Country Roads City Highways

A selection of short pieces of lifewriting by our members, edited by Mary Jo Doig. Contribute your own True Words to the Journal. Future topics are listed on page 28.

## Journey Within: A Still Small Voice

Abby November, Austin TX • abnova@earthlink.net,  
Judith Helburn Circle, Austin TX

My heart races; I’m having cold sweats, as chattering monkeys control my brain. Not again. I’m racing as fast as I can and getting nowhere faster. Creativity is at a low point. How can I control the feeling of not enough time, pressure to get to the shortest line in the bank, store, green light?

This is Hurry sickness. News flash to self: hurrying doesn’t help! When a “friend” stated, “You are wasting your PhD by being a standup comic,” why did I give her the power to make me feel despair?

In 2006, I was diagnosed with Pulmonary Hypertension. Not the blood pressure one can measure at CVS, but elevation of the pressure within the pulmonary artery in the heart.

Meditation has documented beneficial changes on cardiac health. What could I lose? Four years ago, my husband and I completed a workshop on Transcendental Meditation (TM). Since then, I’ve been meditating twice daily.

Quieting the racing thoughts and just “being” is a challenge. The first month was very difficult with random thoughts and chatter sprouting like mushrooms as I repeated my mantra silently. Often thoughts like, *buy tomatoes*, mantra, *pick up dry cleaning*, mantra, *call grand kids*, would float through my mind. Yet eventually my thoughts cleared, even for a nanosecond (or so it seemed).

I was waiting to be touched by the hand of God or at least lightening. What I’ve found is an inner journey to myself, a still small voice, white light, being.

I am home and found the journey to peace and serenity begins in a place of stillness. I can find it while waiting 20 minutes in a busy doctor’s office or sitting on an airplane.

Formerly, a white knuckled flier, now I savor flight time to do a meditation.

My journey begins with a still small voice... and a mantra.

## Ancient Paths

Peggy Christian, Missoula MT

pchristian@montana.com, www.backwoodsandbeyond.com

Alone in the woods. Already I have turned my back on the freeway, the thoroughfares, the interstates, the bypasses and overpasses and intersections and side roads, the back roads, dirt roads, logging roads. All these ways through the world where you spend your time rushing from place to place, always one step beyond where you are, moving toward a future at lightning speed and leaving things behind you never even saw or got to know.

Instead I am here in the woods, off trail, making my way through the undergrowth and over the rock outcroppings, pausing to stand still and listen for the direction of the wind, for the wing beats overhead that precede the shadow of outstretched wings crossing the ground in front of me.

The crackle of leaves pulls me in another direction. Curiosity guides my feet instead of a worn track or path. A cloud covers the sun and the bright warm meadow darkens and chills, the mood shifts and my feet slow to a stop. Uncertainty replaces curiosity and I wait.

To move ahead in what direction? Toward the sound of movement in the brittle grasses or away from that unknown and back the way I came? Or maybe to head for a familiar place, a tree whose spreading branches create a ladder to the sky. There to look down on the field below and get a sense of where I am in the bigger picture, to see all the possible directions I might proceed and know where I might end up.

The cloud passes and, staring down at my feet, I see a splatter of tiny blue drops of sky. Kneeling down I find the minuscule Blue Eyed Mary wildflowers all across the grass. I had walked over them to get here, never noticing them. The place where I am is where I need to go.

## Fall

Melissa Dallago, Safety Harbor FL

marniejade1999@gmail.com, http://melissadallago.blogspot.com  
w-ecircle 13, Safety Harbor Story Circle

Spring is commonly associated with a time of rebirth and renewal, a time of the robins returning to the trees and blossoming flowers. Fall is considered to be a time of harvesting the bounty and preparing for the coming winter. I do not ascribe to these sentiments of fall and spring. On the contrary, I consider fall to be a time of resurgence and rejuvenation, but then again, I am a fall baby born into this glorious season.

When fall arrives my spirit feels stronger; a sense of purpose enters my step. Fall is my time of year for being thankful for the joys in my life, a la Thanksgiving, but also of planting seeds for my future endeavors. Much like a butterfly emerging from its cocoon during springtime, I erupt from mine and burst forth onto the world during the fall.

I love my autumn colored clothes coming out of the closet for the cooler weather. I adore wearing my favorite boots for the first time in the year. I love the dry, cinnamon smell of the red and orange leaves. I especially enjoy celebrating Halloween with its black cats, witches and monsters. I start planning my costume months before, much like an early Christmas shopper. I wait in anticipation for the haunted houses to open so I can get the crap scared out of me. I also love Thanksgiving and my mom's homemade cooking.

I relish in Fall, embracing everything about it. So while others are turning their thoughts to the fast approaching winter, I dance through the falling leaves in my favorite boots, drinking hot apple cider, and giggling with the ghosts; celebrating my time of rebirth and renewal as I move down the road of my life.

## Laguna Road

Stephanie Dalley, Forestville CA • Definitelysteph@comcast.net • w-ecircle 13

Where does my passion lie? Some days I feel so confused; I am passionate about so much. I am passionate about the work I do with women and children, the victims of violence and assault. I am passionate about seeing them go from broken to being able to fly.

Today I will relax, and write about what I love and what brings me joy: It is my commute to work and, especially when I turn onto Laguna Road, I feel as if I've stepped into a fairytale, a fantasy world, and a script begins in my head. I love this road and I love the ladies on Laguna Road, those lovely ladies are Laguna Road's own litter patrol. Every morning they meet and walk the lane, come rain, sleet, or shine they walk, and as they walk they pick up the trash and litter left by others.

I know them for all seasons, in yellow slickers, in shorts and sunhats, and on really foggy mornings they might even wear a bright yellow crossing guard belt over their jackets. They both

always carry small white shopping bags to gather trash with. Some days as I drive by they seem lively, laughing with each other, stopping to pick berries instead of trash, other days it is more like they are lassies on a mission, one leading the other over the hills and around the bend. Heads tilted towards each other locked in conversation. I think to myself someday I will stop and introduce myself, I will ask them for their stories: who they are, how long they have known each other, and when did the walks on Laguna Road come to be?

But not today, for those things that take up a lot of time and energy keep me busy and I am so often late. As I drive by I look with longing at this place: the road is beautiful, it is clean, and there is a sense of lasting peace. Laguna Road is my link to something different, something lasting.

I love Laguna Road.

## Just My Luck

Pat Daly, Largo FL  
nifty33@verizon.net

A joyous 12-year journey with my best friend ended in October. My darling Rat Terrier, Luck, died in my arms. The dog we welcomed back then as a pet for my 11-year-old son became my loyal, loving companion as we traveled through the years down roads that brought us life's highs and lows, laughter and tears, pleasure and pain.

Luck was there for every adventure, always wanting nothing more than to be included wherever the road took us. When it came to watching over our family, the 10 pound terrier thought he was a 90 pound pit bull, so fierce were his protective instincts. He was one of us. I was not prepared for the powerful grief that shook me when the angels scooped up his spirit and took him on a new adventure where he now enjoys unlimited treats and a million new smells.

I look out my patio window and see the garden Irish Claddagh stone that marks his grave. The symbols on the Claddagh represent perfectly the qualities Luck manifested unflinchingly: Love, Friendship, and Loyalty. Happy Trails, my love, and thanks forever for the gift of traveling through life with you! It was a blessed trip, it was.

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## Drawn like Moths to Flame

Nancilynn Saylor, Austin TX  
mimi10417@sbcglobal.net  
w-ecircles 4, 5, and 6

I drive I-35  
three lanes of headlights and taillights, in darkness or in dawn,  
stopping, slowing-eventually going  
hi ho, hi ho, off to work we go, dwarfed between the big rigs  
and oil tankers, disaster in the making, every morning on  
a risky road.  
Zoom! Out of nowhere a motorcycle zips between and changes lanes!  
Everyone should be accustomed to that by now...still, I am not

I drive I-35  
in fog or sunlight  
behind ladies (with cars full of babies)-putting make up on;  
between men on cell phones screaming and saluting out-stretched fingers  
silently, outside my tightly closed windows, where the radio is tuned to SPA  
crashing waves and the sounds of flutes carry me along in the asphalt surf

I drive I-35,  
the road that fills the emergency room every day, each day; I drive  
ten miles in forty-five minutes, (on a good day)  
Heading home at night, six pairs of taillights six pairs of headlights, three lanes wide.  
Sometimes, recalling the days I used to drive  
through this beautiful little Capitol of Texas  
when you could see the statehouse  
from almost every part of town.

I told everyone (who would listen), I would live here, when I grew up.  
Moth to flame to Austin, I came.  
That same wild flame drew tens of thousands of others;  
our coming signaled the end-of-the-magic  
that used to be my Austin.

## Thank You Roget

Sara Etgen-Baker, Allen UT  
sab\_1529@yahoo.com

I glanced in the rearview mirror watching the Interstate slowly disappear from sight; I found myself meandering down two-lane country roads through the East Texas countryside where cotton bolls were ripe for picking and the leafy corn stalks were ready for harvesting. I, on the other hand, was unripe and ill-prepared for the college experience that awaited me a few more miles down this country road.

After arriving on campus, my parents waited in their pickup while I checked into my dorm. Before they left, my mother hugged me; slipped me a 20-dollar bill; handed me a package wrapped in brown paper; and said, "You'll need this. We'll see you in December." They drove away leaving me to fight back the tears as I calculated how many days lay ahead of me until December.

Later that evening, I unwrapped my mother's package, unveiling a hardbound copy of Roget's International Thesaurus. "What a strange gift," I thought. So, I opened the title page and discovered my mother's inscription:

*May you come to love and  
use the nuances in words.  
Love, Mother  
September 1970*

Although her sentimentality touched me, I naively believed I'd never use the thesaurus. The next day, however, I remembered my mother's words and her going-away package when I learned I'd need a thesaurus for my freshman English class. I wondered, "How'd she know I'd need a thesaurus?" Throughout that year I came to appreciate not only my mother's gift but also her love for words. The memory of those early college days faded like an old photograph until the day the digital cable line to my house was cut, severing my internet connection and eliminating access to my online thesaurus. With a manuscript deadline looming, I struggled to find the perfect word until I remembered my Roget's was tucked neatly on the shelf behind me.

I opened its musty-smelling, dog-eared pages—lost again in the tactile adventure of turning from page to page searching for exactly the right word. Somehow, I felt a deeper connection with words and grateful to have my mother's inspiration close at hand.

## Farm Raised and Corn Fed

Patricia Hollinger, Westminster MD  
woodscrone@gmail.com

Union Bridge, Maryland is where I was raised on a farm,  
What did you do after dark? A friend asked with alarm.

Uh! There was electricity, so we turned on the lights?  
Darkness brings with it the most beautiful sights.

She couldn't imagine life without sidewalks;  
To skate, play hopscotch and friends and their talks.

Ah! But did you ever listen to birds as they went about nesting?  
Or watch a cow chew its cud after a meal when resting?

I learned to drive a tractor at the age of 14  
To consider that child labor, would be absurdly obscene.

Meditation about life and its vicissitudes;  
Why, became a natural daily pondering and attitude.

Birth and death of animals were daily events  
The circle of life from whence we all came and went.

In the spring a sister and I ran, barefoot, up and down a lane of gravel,  
It was a contest to see whose feet were tough enough for that kind of travel.

I usually won, of course, as best I remember;  
Her speed improved over time, but not until September.

Butchering hogs and slaughtering chickens  
Became a social event with neighbors;  
With names like Coshun, Booher, Roelke and Dickens.

Showing a heifer at the 4-H Fair was an annual event  
While we laughed at city folk as they came and went.

Asking questions that for farm kids were commonplace,  
Why they often didn't know which end of the heifer was the face.

Give me the country where I meditate and ponder,  
Mysteries of life that bring beauty and wonder.

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## The Road Taken

Helene Benardo, Bronx NY • hlmb2h@yahoo.com • w-ecircles 15 and 9

As a child, getting away from the city for the summer was a yearly ritual, loved by my mother and tolerated by me. It was the time of polio scares, the 1940s, and the country air was supposed to keep that horror at bay.

Once there, I became re-acquainted with my summer friends and, above all, with the place itself. The trees, the river, (called the Neversink, honestly!) and, most of all, the road leading to the nearest village two and one-half miles away, all beckoned to me anew each July.

My friends and I would take this road for as long as we dared, feeling oh-so-grown up, as we strolled along, passing an

## My Cup is Filled

Teresa Werth, Spencerport NY  
twerth1@rochester.rr.com

Since my first trip to The Big Apple in 1964, I have been hopelessly hooked on Manhattan. I enjoy the hustle, being surrounded by people from other cultures, bright lights, music, theater, the cacophony of sirens, whistles, and construction machines. Cabs, pedicabs, subways, trains, buses, cars, limos, and horse drawn carriages add to this rich slice of life. If I've been away too long, I yearn for a visit as if this was a place rooted in my DNA, but it's not. It is simply a city I embrace. I DO ♥ NY!

In contrast, when my husband and I spent three days in Death Valley last winter, I was drawn to its starkness. There's a compelling, simple beauty about the salt flats, the gracefully rising sand dunes, and hills that look like mammoth sleeping manatees shouldered against each other, poised to come to life at any moment. From the fragile, prehistoric pupfish to the stealthy coyote, life emerges in unexpected places within a haunting silence under a blazing sun or a soft, shining moon.

It was there in Death Valley that I found myself wondering how many "Manhattans" would fit here? I could almost visualize the neat asphalt grid from north of Harlem to South Street Seaport laid end to end and side to side as far as I could see. The contrast was vivid.

How many city dwellers have experienced the vastness of this valley? Stood breathless at the vistas and felt themselves slow down as I did, breathing deeply, opening up to drink in the incredible expanse of creation, so raw, so dry, so fragile?

How many valley dwellers have experienced the push and pull of the concrete jungle that is New York City? Appreciated the endless caress of the East and West River, sensed the phenomenal output of worker bees in non-stop productivity as the lilt and rhythm of hundreds of languages fill the smoggy air?

In both places, my cup is filled—with overabundance and scarcity, with noise and quiet, with different types of diversity...all good and all part of the richness that is America.

occasional farm here, or a house there.

The day I was old enough to take this hike by myself was a milestone, indeed. I can still feel the dense quiet, the utter sense of peace that overcame me during the length of this "journey."

As a lifelong resident of New York City, of course I'm most familiar with city streets and highways. Strangely enough, weirdly enough, although the memories of the long-gone summers are still with me, and walking the city streets is not nearly as evocative as is the country road, I get a peculiar feeling of unease, a sort of "pavement withdrawal," if I am anywhere far from the city that is my home.

## Dimmed by the Dashboard

Nancy Jurka, Palmer Lake CO  
MtnTapestryPress@aol.com, <http://annablakegodbout.wordpress.com>

Pulling into a Salina truck stop  
the dashboard lights dim,  
the purring engine ceases,  
the rotating eighteen wheels halt.  
Your headlights scope out the open skies of the West:  
Colorado, Kansas, Arizona and New Mexico.  
Driving is all you know, like your father  
and his father before him.  
Drowned by miles of prairie dust, desert heat and mountain snows,  
you pause to study the fuel gauge.  
Humming along to the drone of the road  
I search through crackling stations on late night AM,  
dropping in on a hokey call-in show.

“Who do you want to dedicate a song to?”  
I say to myself, “A lonely trucker. No, his wife,  
play *Living Between the Moon and New York City*.”

I stop the station wagon. The crunch of gravel  
underneath four wheels turns to silence.  
Waiting outside our Denver home,  
I gaze at the odometer, mileage apart, mileage together; the ledger of years,  
coated by iridescent moonlight, swirls on the dirt-encrusted dashboard.

Looking beyond the dark, the unspoken quiet  
bleeds into dawn, and the light between us  
remains unchanged, undimmed.

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## Travel By Numbers

Amy Greenspan, Austin TX • [agreenspan@att.net](mailto:agreenspan@att.net)  
Austin Reading Circle, w ecircle 4

Four-hour drive from my Austin home  
to reach the solace of the beach

Hour One is pines and farmland,  
empty fruit stands, tiny towns

Hour Two is I-10 East; eighteen-  
wheelers doing eighty-five

Hour Three is Houston chaos,  
nine-lane-wide insanity

Hour Four is finally coastal  
Marshes, bridges, seawall's end

Two lanes to the family beach house  
Blessings counted, I'm home again

## Kids and Cars

Janice Kvale, Austin TX  
[janicekvale@yahoo.com](mailto:janicekvale@yahoo.com)  
w-ecircle 6, r-ecircle 1

Captured in the back seat of the car on even  
short trips was a challenge for me at age four.  
Bored, I would rock, slamming my back against the  
back of the seat. Blap! Blap! Blap! As I rocked I  
hummed a repetitive refrain. “Hmmmmmmm.”

“Stop that!” my mother yelled. “It won't make  
the car go any faster!”

I stopped. Maybe for one minute.  
Unconsciously, I would begin again.

“If you don't stop that racket, I'm going to stop  
the car and let you out right here!”

She slammed the brake. I imagined myself  
alone at the side of the road, crying. Stomach  
churning, I stared at her with big eyes. She threw  
me a stern look over her shoulder. After a long,  
silent pause the car moved forward again. A threat  
of abandonment was serious stuff.

I vowed I would never threaten to abandon my  
children. I knew from experience that such threats  
are taken seriously. On cross country trips, my  
husband and I stopped every two hours at rest stops  
using soccer balls and Frisbees to expend youthful  
energy (theirs, not ours). The desire to dump the lot  
of them didn't arise until they were in their preteen  
and teen years. The din the five of them raised,  
fights that ensued, would test the most patient  
parents. I began to understand my mother's  
frustration and devised my own, I hope non-  
threatening, version of “I'm-going-to-stop-this-car-  
right-now!”

I stopped the van, parked, and announced  
calmly, “Everybody out! We need a little exercise;  
you guys are getting squirrely. Run around the van  
three times; then you can get back in.”

This became routine when things got out of  
hand behind me. Sometimes I ran with them.  
Usually I drove a couple blocks up the road; they  
would trot up and jump back in. Once when I  
turned to see when they were coming, all five were  
calmly walking in the opposite direction. I went to  
meet them. Having had their fun, everyone settled  
down and we were on our way. Quietly.



## A Road Trip that Became a Pilgrimage to the Past

Rosalie Muschal-Reinhardt  
Webster NY

Twice each year, Al, my husband of fifty-seven years, and I take a trip to Gloversville, NY, his home town. The plan is always the same. First we visit his immigrant parents' and sisters' graves. He recounts their hard work and generosity to him. Graves of childhood friends bring more memories to him.

The second destination is a visit to each of his childhood homes. He talks about pot belly stoves, knickers hanging in the kitchen to dry, and the smell of his mother's cooking. At the house at 4 Stone Street a sign still hangs for "Watkins" products.

Third stop is to visit each school he attended. Some are still standing and empty; others have been razed. The place where the Oakland School was is now an empty lot. I wait to hear one more time about the City Championship they won.

We go next to the place where the "Candy Kitchen" was. There, two Greek men taught him how to make candy. Al never forgot how to make his uniquely flavorful peanut brittle; friends and family get a box every Christmas. Our granddaughters know the recipe now, another of Al's legacies.

As we pass the swimming pool, now in disrepair and needing to be torn down, Al's mood changes. On Main Street his sadness shows as he sees empty buildings, schools turned into low-income housing, and other evidence that people are having a hard time making a living. Familiar buildings, life-giving to him, have been razed or are either parking lots or municipal buildings now.

His heart is sad; yet he smiles as he remembers how life was long ago. Lastly we return to the cemetery again where I thank his parents once more for having him so I could love him.

This pilgrimage is bittersweet, full of happiness, and sadness. This visit Al said, "This time may be the last for me." I paused, thinking of the day when I will take this trip alone in his memory.

During spring break in my freshman year of high school, my friend Betsey asked if I would like to go with her on a greyhound bus to Indianapolis. It was about ninety miles south of our town of Logansport, Indiana.

My only trip out of town as a girl was to attend scout camp for two weeks during the summer. I wasn't sure my parents would allow me to travel by bus to go shopping with Betsey in downtown Indianapolis.

She had it planned that we would buy our own tickets and spend our own money. We would leave early in the morning and be back in early evening.

Betsey had been to Indianapolis with her mother and knew that she wanted to go to Marshal Fields and Baker's Shoe Store. Our parents agreed. We boarded the bus with snacks and money safely tucked in our wallets.

Upon arriving in Indianapolis we were within walking

## The Trail

Ardine Martinelli, Tacoma WA  
amart@nventure.com  
w-ecircle #6

Anticipation as I enter this trail.  
Meandering up and around,  
moving deeper into the forest.  
A canopy of trees envelop,  
dark safe protective.

An expansive meadow opens,  
wildflowers abound.  
Sun shining above,  
light open possibilities.

As the trail continues the journey becomes  
strenuous up, up, up climbing,  
ready to stop, turn around, go back.  
Something pulls me forward.

No exits from this trail.  
Steep open cliff on one side,  
rock face on the other.  
A washed out trail at one point  
requires slow, careful footing.

Although others are with me on this trail,  
I walk it alone.  
I walk it in silence and awe,  
nurtured by the beauty.

A deep body tiredness as the climb continues.  
After walking many trails,  
I know the pain, the tiredness, is temporary.

Reaching the top we sit in silence  
breathing in the cool crisp air.  
The majestic sights of an exquisite universe  
awaken all my senses.  
My heart and soul absorb the oneness.

## 1956 Spring Break

Carole S McGhee, Riverview FL  
carolesmcghee813@yahoo.com  
Busy Pens Story Circle, Valrico, FL.

distance to the stores. I saw the tallest buildings ever and was amazed at all the people in the shops.

At lunch we ate at Rexall Drug's lunch counter. I ate my first club sandwich, and Betsey laughed because I'd never had one before. After lunch we window shopped at several small stores and then went on to Baker's Shoe Store where we looked at hundreds of pairs of shoes. Heels, flats, and boots. We tried on whatever we wanted, and each of us bought a new pair of flats.

Before returning to the bus station, we returned to Rexall Drugs where we each had a chocolate soda.

We arrived home early evening and both Betsey's parents and mine were waiting for us at the bus station.

Our day was such fun. And, for the first time I realized my parents trusted me.

## Old Soles

Janice Strohmeier, Houston TX  
jimmy768816@sbcglobal.net  
w-ecircle 3

Pink Squares. Yellow check marks. Lime-green circles. Neon laces hold running shoes to fire-feet as we collapse on our backs in a circle. Black stripes outline the soles of the running shoes that face me. All that is left of this journey along three miles of hell are weary legs trembling, chests heaving, and arms splayed out, exhausted in recovery. I feel like I have crossed the Marathon tape, the tension of glory ripping against my chest. In truth, what I am really celebrating is this journey back to myself. I lay on my back, with the rest of my battered 5K companions gasping for air but drinking in the victory of a battle hard-won.

Too many miles and melted excuses follow us, too many pounds lost, regained, and lost again on the trail behind us. We are the warriors that gear up and bolster ourselves for another round of battle against the ever-widening bulge around our middle-aged bellies. We have borne our children, earned our degrees, fought for our wages, and tried to find peace with our husbands who complain that we have changed while we insist we have merely gotten better with age.

Slowly, each of us gathers our strength and pulls ourselves limply to our feet. We grin, hug, and congratulate each other. We who thought that we could not do it again, vowed that we would never do this again, embrace our demon along with the courage that we have so deeply dug to find just once more.

We are sisters-in-synch with our fiercest enemy and we measure the race in pounds lost, not miles logged. More significant than the pounds shed is the courage we gather each time we take this familiar trek. We know that we are on this journey for life. The same mile-markers are familiar; the plunging valleys, the towering peaks, but most of the road we are on is the level ground of day-to-day life.

Bolstered, I see the hills ahead looming, smaller now, and not as daunting. I will rise to meet them again another day.

## On the Road *Never* Again

Bonnie Frazier, Brookings OR  
bonnotes@gmail.com

“I am *never* taking these children anywhere again. Ever.”

The Plan: Load two-year old Nelle and infant Tim into the station wagon, drive to nearest city (100 miles), pick up large package, run errands. What could go wrong?

I loaded the wagon with enough stuff to support a lunar landing, and off we went. It was only 100 miles, but several of those miles were on narrow, winding roads. Nelle got carsick. Down my back. Clean-up seriously depleted our extra clothing supply.

Errand #1: Pick up large package. Deposit children and stuff on sidewalk to make room for package. I started re-packing stuff into the car. It began to rain. Hard. Tim screamed for food *now*. I ignored him, but a passing couple with obvious grandparent experience scooped him up and tried to console him for his mother’s lack of compassion, not saying what they thought of my mothering skills.

Errand #2: Redeem Green Stamps. As I stood in line with my purchases, a car outside scraped into my back bumper. I screamed and dashed out to protect my property, leaving Tim lying on the counter and Nelle wandering around the store. After exchanging insurance information with a frightened student driver, I went inside to find that someone had scooped up my baby and corralled my two-year old. Hostile looks told me what they thought of my mothering skills. In my defense, I knew the baby wasn’t yet able to roll off the counter, and I could see the toddler the whole time.

Errand #3: Get home. Get sympathy. First we had to stop on the side of the highway to feed the baby. The state trooper who knocked on our steamed up window didn’t seem impressed with my mothering skills either. We just got back on the road when a glance and sniff told me that Tim needed further attention. It took all our remaining supplies to clean him up.

We eventually got home. No sympathy, though. My husband had the day from heck, too.

And that’s why I’m *never* taking them anywhere again!



## My Husband’s Sister

Darlene Hayman, Montrose CO  
dhayman2010@gmail.com

not knowing what lurked down the country road, beginning just north of CO 50 and snake-passing through Unaweep Canyon, following Highway 141, an old Ute trail becoming “Uranium Road,” once a gardening spot now giant machinery roaring at the edge of the wilderness, gouging out radium, vanadium and uranium.

Welcoming marriage, a house and two babies, meeting the challenge to grow a life among radioactive mill tailings, never traveling a city highway, nurturing and caring and shaping, she fostered the human spirit in that toxic place.



## A Tale of Two Cousins

Teresa Wertht, Spencerport NY  
twertth1@rochester.rr.com

Picture two little girls in pigtails, cousins, nine months apart in age. That's me and Barbara. Our parents enjoyed spending time together. So did we, well-documented in B & W photos.

But life can take us down unexpected roads and what might've been disappears. Barbara's dad was transferred to Chattanooga, TN, a long way from Buffalo, NY in the 1950s. Barbara's mom was one of the first to have open heart surgery with "the new heart/lung machine" shortly after their move. My mother cried, saying "the surgery was a success but the patient died."

We went to visit Barbara soon after that. Our families took a trip to Washington, DC. But we were growing apart. Then one summer while I was visiting my grandparents in Florida, Barbara came! Teenagers full of energy and fun, we were together again, talking about boys and love, shopping, spending lazy days at the beach, imagining our futures, making up for lost time. Kodachrome photos made those days seem like they'd last forever.

But it was a short-lived reconnection. I headed to college in Chicago and Barbara, eager to escape her reluctant step-mother, married, too young. Divorced, remarried, moved around. For 40 years, we lived our lives out of touch but never out of each other's hearts.

As technology made searching easier, I began looking for her. The winter of 2010 I found her sister-in-law's address on line and sent a letter asking her to pass it along to Barbara. We left for a month in Florida as I was recovering from breast cancer. Returning home, we found messages from Barbara on our answering machine, happy I'd found her, wondering why I wasn't returning her calls!

A flurry of phone calls and emails, letters thick with photographs and scribbled notes followed. On September 11, 2011, I arrived at her home in Little Rock, AR and we felt the overwhelming joy of finding each other again. We're not letting go. We're celebrating the past, sharing our stories and making new memories. Two breast cancer survivors, wives of 40+ years, cat lovers, creative souls, cousins together again.



## What I've Learned from Traveling and from Mom

Len Leatherwood, Beverly Hills CA  
lenleatherwood@gmail.com  
lenleatherwood.wordpress.com  
w-ecircle 6

When I was 19, I decided I needed to travel to Europe alone. Off I went with my backpack and my Eurail pass from Italy to Switzerland then onto Germany, France, and then to England.

I was shaky through the first part of the trip, but before too long I found myself thinking, *It's okay. You are not alone. People are all around to help you. Just ask them.* And I did. Sometimes in tears when I was lost and a kind woman literally walked me to the correct bus stop, or with trepidation when the hostel was closed and several fellow backpackers guided me to another place to stay.

If one of my daughters told me she was going off to do what I did, I'd be filled with anxiety. What if someone hurt her or took advantage of her? What if she found herself injured or lost with nobody there to aid her? And yet, my own mother didn't bat an eyelash when I said I wanted to go alone. She just nodded and said, "That sounds wonderful."

I've learned a great deal from my mother. I think about her responses to the various exploits in my life and I try to emulate her words with my own kids. "Oh, I think that's great," I say, just as she said, even though there is a part of me nervous about the possible outcome. "I trust you to make the right decision," is my response when in truth I want to jump in and say, "Do it this way."

Yes, that trip to Europe taught me to trust myself and to recognize the interconnectedness we all share as human beings. I am grateful that I had a mother who allowed me to discover what I needed to learn in my way and in my time. I strive to do the same for my children. After all, one gift deserves another.

But now I know exactly how my mother reacted once she was alone. "Oh dear Lord," I'm sure she said, "I just hope she'll be all right."



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## As I Wander I Wonder

Pat Bean, Harker Heights TX  
patbean@msn.com, <http://patbean.wordpress.com>  
w-ecircle 6

It was my 22nd day on the road in a slow meandering adventure from Idaho, where I had spent the summer, to Nashville, Indiana, where I had stopped for two days while Mother Nature wept her blessings.

It was still drizzling when I began today's journey to North Bend, Ohio, about 100 miles away. This is my preferred daily mileage as it allows me to start my day leisurely with cream-laced coffee, do some writing, and then take my dog, Pepper, for a long walk before we get on the road in our RV, Gypsy Lee.

The first town we passed was a tiny one called Gnaw Bone. Why, I wondered, would somebody name a town Gnaw Bone?

Perhaps they didn't. It was originally a French settlement called Narbonne, which we Americans might have mistranslated as Gnaw Bone.

But the question filled my head with nonsense for a while as I traveled down several Indiana back roads. Usually I have these to myself, but not today.

The narrow tree-lined roads I had chosen were not untraveled roads. I had plenty of vehicular company, including a lavender semi that passed me in a swirl of blowing autumn leaves. Now I've seen purple semis but never a lavender one before.

Was a man or woman driving? I hadn't been able to look because the large truck passed me on a curve, and I had wisely kept my eyes on the road.

And then I found myself quoting out loud to Pepper: "I never saw a purple cow. I never hope to see one. But I would rather see, than be one."

It was just that kind of day.

Then a few miles farther down the road, there was a green farm truck with a rear sticker asking: "Who is John Galt?"

It started my brain thinking about Ayn Rand's book, *Atlas Shrugged*, and from there to how we seem to live our lives at either end of a pendulum swing.

And so this wandering-wondering day went, with my brain circuits traveling ever so much faster than Gypsy Lee.

## A Friend by the Side of the Road

Barbara Youngblood Carr, Austin TX  
bcarr2@austin.rr.com

*Let me live in a house  
By the side of the road  
And be a friend to man!*

- Sam Walter Foss - (1858-1911)

Frank Cato spends most of his long, hot, summer days sitting in a lawn chair, in the shade, in the back of his sturdy, self-built vegetable stand. His big, hand-painted sign on plywood says, "OPEN/PRODUCE - SQUASH-ONIONS-POTATOES." When Frank isn't sitting in the back of his roadside stand, he leaves a coffee can sitting on the counter in front.

It has a slot cut into the top and a hand-written note stating, "If nobody is here, just leave \$2.00 in the can for a basket of vegetables."

Frank's family has lived on the acres behind his vegetable stand since 1910. Back then, he says, there was just a "trail" used by wagons and no paved roads like we have today.

A few weeks ago, the money can was missing from the vegetable stand. Frank, a man who trusted everybody and tried his best to be a true friend to his fellow man, had been robbed.

## Tunnel of Trees

Brenda Black, Prairie Grove AR  
bblackwriter@gmail.com

My triplet grandchildren, Jasmine, Theodore, and Jackson, watched a video in the car as we drove to my house for the weekend. I preferred to talk, rather than distract them with a video, but traffic clogged the highway, making me anxious and tired, and they had begged. So we drove in mutual exclusion and silence, except for the sound track. They were rowed up in the middle seat of the SUV, passively giving their full attention to Phineas and Ferb on the small screen flipped down from the ceiling.

"How far to the tunnel?" Jackson suddenly asked.

"Oh, we won't go through the tunnel. It's over on Interstate 540, the big road." I replied.

*(Continued on page 19)*

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## Lessons

Caroline Ziel, St. Louis MO  
ziel.carol@gmail.com  
w-ecircle 6

It was 1972 and I was a midwestern ex-nun on a vision quest. My 10 year old Toyota Tercel was packed with a sleeping bag and a Triple A map. Fifth grade geography had introduced me to the concept of life outside of the tiny triangle of Belleville, St. Louis, and Chicago, but I had never yearned to stray further than my own backyard.

That summer I was searching for salvation. Perhaps the journey itself would help me arrive at some internal destination called self. Initially, the AAA map and I were as bonded as corn on the cob. I drove with it scrunched around the steering wheel. Every 10 miles I would stop, making sure that I was still on Highway 70, going in the right direction. The drive from St. Louis to Kansas was the longest part of the trip. I cried when I reached the Kansas state border.

Lesson #1; Highway 70 actually connects St. Louis and Kansas. Following the map had been an act of pure faith.

Once I understood that I could trust the road, I pitched the map to the backseat, pulled onto the blue highway and started driving through cornfields. Three more lessons soon followed:

Lesson #2: Night comes sooner in the mountains than it does on the plains. It descended like a theater curtain. Since guard rails were puny and the drop was deep, I pulled my car behind a boulder.

Lesson #3: There are biker gangs in the mountains of Wyoming. They circled the boulder all night.

I found Spirit on that trip. She lives between a field of sage and a field of stars in a cobalt blue night sky. I laid on a forest floor so thick with pine needles that once again I believed in fairies. I dangled my feet in the Strawberry River, pink with crimson clay.

Lesson #4: Sometimes, in order to make sense of our salvation, we need to throw the map in the backseat and take the blue highways. Salvation and magic both may happen.

## A Writer's Journey

Cheryl Bazzoui, Bradford PA  
wcbazzoui@atlanticbb.net, annmccauley.com

I believe I could have become a published writer much sooner if I hadn't been full of arrogant writer's pride. Twenty-eight years ago, my first grandchild was born, a bouncing ten pound boy who came into this world holding his head high with a smirk on his face. He still holds his head high and that smirk's been there all these years but that's another story. He was born one month after my unmarried daughter graduated from high school with honors. In those days it was scandalous.

I wrote a heart wrenching poem about the thrill of looking at my first grandchild and the sorrow of not being able to shout it from the house tops since no one really wanted to recognize his birth.

I sent the poem to one of my favorite magazines a few months later. Even though I'd never seen any poetry in that magazine, I told myself, "Never mind, this poem is so special they will start printing poetry." Wrong!

On my very first submission anywhere, I received a hand written letter from the editor, requesting I rewrite it as a story. I was hurt and angry. How dare she request a change in my work? I did not rewrite the poem.

I worked as a registered nurse and wrote sporadically for years. I kept an idea box under my bed for that someday when I'd have time to really write. Meanwhile I watched the career of another writer-nurse sky rocket as she became a regular contributor each month to the very same magazine. And to this day, I've never seen a poem there.

My words of wisdom to new writers are: do your research and know the market you are submitting to. Submit according to magazine style and submission/seasonal needs. Stay within the submission guidelines. When an editor takes time to write you a note on a rejection letter, send a thank-you. It might save you a twenty eight year detour!

When you get published, meet your deadlines and remember to send your editors short thank-you notes. Good manners will never be out of style.

*(Tunnel of Trees, continued from page 18)*

"But we always go through the tunnel to get to your house. It's magic. Everything changes in the tunnel."

"No, honey, you're confused. There's no tunnel on this road. See, we're almost to the turn-off."

I turned on the blinker and pulled onto the last mile of our journey, the dirt road.

"Stop! Stop!" Jackson yelled. "You were just joking, Grammy. Here it is. The Tunnel of Trees."

I looked down the lane. Overhanging, touching trees formed an arched tunnel, one I had not noticed before.

"It is indeed a Tunnel of Trees. You were right, Jackson. Thanks for those fresh eyes."

"Let's do what we always do. This is the place," Jasmine said.

"Yeah, Grammy. Unlock the windows. It's time," Theodore echoed.

I unclicked the child locks, then sent Phineas and Ferb packing. Loud excitement erupted in the back of the car as seat belts came off, windows rolled down, and little heads and arms stuck out into the warm air.

The late day sun flickered through the leaves as I drove slowly down the magical mile of dirt road, sometimes veering right or left as Theodore touched the limbs, Jasmine pulled a leaf, and Jackson leaned his whole torso into nature. All three jabbered so fast that Grammy-ears could barely keep up.

Everything changed in the Tunnel of Trees. And still does.

## The Road Back

Karen Mocker Dabson, Columbia MO  
[karen@mockerdabson.com](mailto:karen@mockerdabson.com)  
[www.mockerdabson.com/category/blog](http://www.mockerdabson.com/category/blog)

As soon as we turn off the highway, steep countryside closes in. Rolling along the two-lane, my eyes strain to take in all that they have never seen before. The River Kupa reflects light as our way curls up and around the mountain above it. Ascending to the ridge, hundreds of hills layer the foreground of the blue Gorski Kotar range to the south. We have crossed over from Croatia to this Slovene village without realizing how high we are.

We drive down the village lane. Stucco and tile houses parade past our car. Each boasts a kitchen garden and flowers! Coral geraniums, gentian clematis, fiery red poppies dance in the wind and fill every window-box and balcony with their celebration.

Where the single street forks halfway up the hill, a farmer and his wife wave. We stop and ask, "Do you know the house of my grandmother?" They have no English, but with hand signals, they indicate their willingness to help. The man directs. Park here. Here. It's all right. They beckon. Come, come with us.

A picnic table gets a clean cloth. Glasses and a pitcher of golden liquid materialize. With the same magic, bread and meat and pickled peppers appear. Sjesti! Jesti! Sit! Eat!

I gaze over the land as it falls away in stripes of barley, hay, maize, and grapevine. The air is fresh, seasoned with soil and straw and the constant breeze. Grandma, are these your mountains and your people? How did you ever leave?

Nikolaj pushes a glass of wine in my direction. I tear a hunk from the loaf and wrap it around the jerky. I chew, and the sweet-peppery meat juices my mouth. A swig of gold warms my belly.

Familiarity thrums through me. I press my hand to my chest. Suddenly, I know where I am. A place that began long before my time, but still colors the quiet corners of my heart, this is my grandmother's home—where life was simpler, work was harder, and people of good heart became characters within the story of their own village.

I am home.

I had it all arranged. My oldest daughter had told me it would be fine with her if I wanted to come down to her condo while she was at work. "The most I'll be there is twice a week for a couple of hours. I want to concentrate on that historical novel I've been researching. I need somewhere it's quiet to write with no telephone calls!"

I could hardly wait to begin. I went up to her third floor loft that first day, and stepped out onto her deck colorful with flower boxes. I inhaled the fresh air blowing in off Lake Ontario only a city block away. Returning to my computer, I sat down. Nothing would come to mind. What was the matter? I walked out to the deck again and glanced over the railing. A road below ran along the back of the condo.

I recognized this road, or "lane" as we used to call it, running from one street to the next. It didn't even have a name, used strictly for access to backyard garages, or a short cut from one street to another.

## The Road Home

Lisa Capehart, Foster KY  
[Lisa@LisaCapehart.com](mailto:Lisa@LisaCapehart.com), <http://www.LisaCapehart.com>

*Country roads, take me home, to the place I belong...*

So begins the chorus of the late John Denver's popular song. I was nine when this song came out and I sang my heart out as I played the record over and over again. I desperately wanted the road to take me back home again, back to all that I longed for: family, identity, continuity.

You see, we had moved from our hometown—a tiny river town in West Virginia—when I was four and for the rest of my childhood, we hit the road every few years for my father's career. I hated being uprooted and starting over. I was so angry with my parents for ruining my childhood.

In my early twenties, the road took me to Atlanta, where I married, raised our son, and set down roots for 22 years. Over those years, the resentment bubbled up through the cracks of my adult life and I blamed my unsettled childhood for most of the things that went awry in my life.

Until about two years ago.

I divorced and settled in rural Kentucky, only a couple of hours from "home," which allowed me to help rehab my 90-year-old grandmother after a broken hip and spend seven months in my hometown.

I was surprised by what I experienced. My hometown wasn't "almost heaven." I found fear of change, suspicion of differences, and rigid views: the result of an insulated life.

Almost overnight, my perspective changed; my resentment melted into gratitude for the wealth of experiences I've had in my life, living in many places and having the honor of knowing and appreciating people from all walks of life.

I now thank my parents for those moves (and have, by the way, told them that). They didn't ruin my life. Though difficult, they helped shape the person I am today: someone who embraces change more easily, who accepts others for who they are, and who realizes that by traveling that long road, I have come home to the place I belong.

I've come home to me.

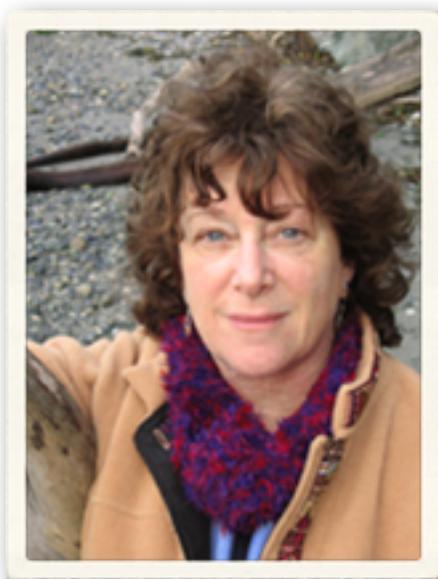
## A Road Can Lead You Astray

Lorraine O'Donnell Williams, Markham ON  
[lorwill@sympatico.ca](mailto:lorwill@sympatico.ca)

On my left I could see the corner of the apartment building to which I had been brought after my hospital birth. Married at the height of the Great Depression, my parents had rented a modest one bedroom basement apartment where we lived until I was five. I knew this road below me intimately. It was where my dad had chased those "bad boys" who'd thrown snowballs in my baby sister's pram. Where my mother dutifully walked me over to tap dancing lessons at the local Masonic Hall. Where I'd watch fluffy black squirrels "squirreling" away acorns for winter.

Hundreds of other images connected with this road crowded my mind. If I didn't get them down on paper, my mind would burst. Thus was born my most recently published book, *Memories of the Beach: Reflections on a Toronto Childhood*.

You never know where a road can lead.



Sheila Bender

# A Poet's Way Through Life, Love and Loss

by Lisa Shirah-Hiers

Sheila Bender will lead the Story Circle Network's Lifelines Writing Retreat in March of 2013. She is an award-winning poet, writer, writing coach and teacher. She has published essays, poems and reviews in numerous literary magazines, anthologies and newspapers as well as articles and columns about writing in *Writers Digest* magazine and *The Writer*. She is the author of many how-to writing books including *Writing and Publishing Personal Essays*; *Creative Writing Demystified*; *A Year in the Life: Journaling for Self-Discovery*; *Writing Personal Poetry: Creating Poems from Your Life Experience*; and *Perfect Phrases for College Application Essays*. She teaches classes and coaches writers through her website

[www.writingitreal.com](http://www.writingitreal.com) and online magazine, *Writing It Real*. She has published three poetry collections including her most recent, *Behind Us the Way Grows Wider*, and is co-author with Christi Killien of *Writing in a New Convertible with the Top Down: A Unique Guide for Writers*. Through donations and proceeds from her book, *New Theology: Turning to Poetry in a Time of Grief*, Sheila helps support the Port Townsend Marine Science Center's Seth Bender Memorial Summer Camps Scholarship Fund founded in honor of her son who was killed in a snowboarding accident. In 2009 she published the book to help others cope with loss in their lives. Lisa Shirah-Hiers interviewed her via email for the Story Circle Journal.

**SCJ:** What made you choose writing and teaching as a profession and what do you love about it?

**SB:** I think just as dreams choose us, so do professions and passions. I seemed to always be a teacher—as an older sister, as a friend and as a summer camp counselor starting as a C.I.T. in junior high school. It seemed logical to study to be a teacher—I earned a Master of Arts in Teaching while teaching seventh and eighth grade reading and English. Writing was a dream that chose me, but I didn't allow it to become my focus until after my first child was born. I remember holding up my infant daughter, looking into one another's eyes and saying, "Emily, who are you?" and hearing a reply with my inner ear: "Mom, who are you?" I knew in that instant that to be a good mother I would have to be my authentic self, and for me that meant taking writing seriously. I enrolled in poetry writing workshops at the University of Washington in Seattle, near where I lived. I knew I had found my tribe and I continued working with poets as an enrolled Master's student in the writing program. When I graduated, I combined my dreams and became a community college instructor, then a university professor. Teaching writing was rewarding from the start. I enjoyed helping students see that writing wasn't something foreign to them, that trusting the images and experiences from their own lives was key to finding their voices on the page.

Many, many people worry that what they have to say is not interesting or extraordinary enough. I love showing them that through writing they will find the extraordinary inside the ordinary and be able to mine experience for insight and discovery that connects with others. We are all alike in our range of feelings. When we reflect on our experiences and write about them, we change ourselves and then the world. I believe this.

**SCJ:** How does one decide which genre—poetry, essay, etc.

—will best fit their subject?

**SB:** I don't know that we decide which of the genres fits our subject. I think that our brains are wired for one genre over the other, and we gravitate to a favorite one and write in it. Then, something shifts, and we decide to write in another genre and we find that the new genre allows us to say different things or address different topics, stories or periods in our lives. Some memoirs are all in poetry (lyric memoir) and others contain poems as well as prose. I think there are many ways to write memoir; we can allow ourselves to experiment.

**SCJ:** Tell us more about your how-to book, *Writing and Publishing Personal Essays*? For whom did you write it?

**SB:** *Writing and Publishing Personal Essays* is a re-do of a book I did for *Writer's Digest Books* called *Writing Personal Essays: Shaping Your Life Experience for the Page*. They are both good books for those wanting to write the personal essay. Working in specific forms while exploring a life question helps a writer find a way into her material. For instance, a question like "What thing, person, or opportunity have you lost (or gained) that matters to you?" paired with the form of narration (a story through time) can lead to powerful writing. One woman whose work appears in the book narrated her last afternoon with a friend who was dying. The details in the story about ordering in pizza and extending her arms to allow her very ill friend to hold her new-born are ones I will never forget. Her insight about how beautiful and awful it was to see the two together, the new and the departing, is equally long-lasting. The way she went on to write about what she would tell her children about her important friend was a perfect part of the narration.

**SCJ:** You write about two fears that inhibit good writing: fear of the audience and fear of the truth. How do these silence us and how do we break free?

**SB:** If we think everyone must love what we write, we start to censor ourselves out of fear that what we lived and experienced, thought, felt and understood will be upsetting to others or disliked. We were taught to be nice, that if we had nothing good to say we should say nothing at all. Writers say the unsayable. Writers reach deep into the hearts of others by telling the truth. That can be hard for some to bear. It is just as likely, though, that the writing that manifests when we really work at finding our truths softens others. It certainly makes contact with those we don't know who are hungry for companionship in experience. Fear of telling the truth comes from not wanting to be singled out when others don't say what they see. It comes from not wanting to know the truth, even for ourselves. It comes from thinking it is easier not to upset the status quo of our own coping mechanisms, let alone of others. How to break free? Believe that good health and mental well-being relies on being intimate with your own feelings and thoughts and with the insides of others. Believe that there is a tribe you belong to (the one of writers) and that your work will be appreciated by the ones to whom it speaks. Believe that it is okay for you to say the unsayable. You are the one to decide whether to publish the work. Not writing it because you are worried about certain people reading it keeps you from being yourself.

**SCJ:** I was struck by the many interesting exercises and games you describe for helping writers uncover the essence of their topic. I couldn't help thinking they would make great party games! How did you come up with these?

**SB:** I love helping people see that the joy of writing is not knowing where you are going with something. I have worked at creating exercises that help people jump in and see what happens. I created the games by looking into written passages, by listening to what people have said to me, thinking I'd like to make that a writing prompt and by remembering how I came to write something myself. Here's one example:

A friend of mine just back from living in Morocco years ago complained, "Life is not the way it is supposed to be," when he got home and experienced a big adjustment in acclimating to life in the US again. I thought of a question to pair with the comparison and contrast essay style; students could write an idealized version of their life, the one their parents brought them up to have or the one they witnessed on TV growing up, and then tell the reader "but this is how it is today" and write the way it is now, or about life in a town they moved from and life in the town they moved to, or a job as others thought it was and then as it truly is. The possibilities are many.

**SCJ:** I was also struck by the many parallels you draw between music and the written word. What do the arts of language and music have to teach each other?

**SB:** I am not a musician, but as a poet I am very sensitive to sound and rhythm, cadence and crescendo. It's all there in our vowel and consonant sounds and when we are writing well, we are writing from our inner song. We must come to recognize the sound of this voice and not allow in the words and tones that flatten it.

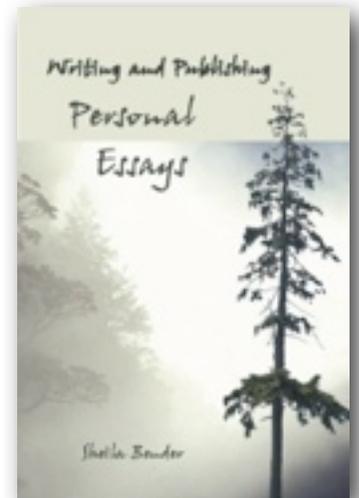
**SCJ:** You've spoken often about the importance of being your authentic self. How and why do we waver from that, and how do we recapture it?

**SB:** Sometimes people around us don't encourage us to become exactly who we have inside ourselves to be. Adults have agendas and expectations for us. We want to fit in and be conscientious and, as women, we take care of others without leaving time to speak up, be who we are and say what we see. It is not that achievement or striving are not good for us. It is that we have pearls to be discovered and we must discover them ourselves.

**SCJ:** How can we find our authentic voice as writers?

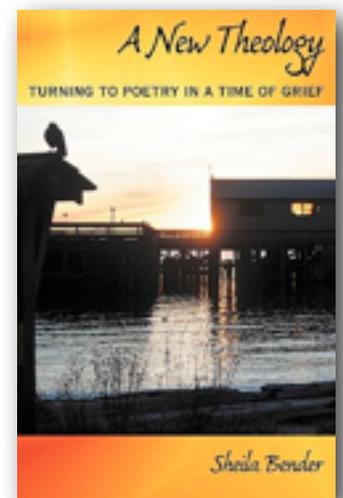
**SB:** You find it by relying on the images that come to you from your surroundings and your associations. You find it by showing rather than telling. You find it by not censoring what occurs to you. You find it by reading your work to trusted listeners and listening to what they connect with in your writing and where they are unclear or feel distanced. You find it by being brave enough to allow yourself to write what you thought was unsayable using images and sensory details.

**SCJ:** What is the hardest lesson life has ever taught you?



From *Writing and Publishing Personal Essays*:

"Getting to the flower of true voice requires work. Just as a seed cannot perform the miracle of growing into a new plant until it is released from what encloses it, often you must crack open the experience of your life to find the true seed from which to write."



From *New Theology: Turning to Poetry in a Time of Grief*:

"Our divine selves, connection to all that is, will arrive whether we are talking to shamans or to empty shoes, to sunlight or to squatters; these are the muses and our healing, the ones that break through infinity and bring always." P.130

(Continued on page 24)



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*(Sheila Bender Interview, continued from page 23)*

**SB:** That I can live with significant loss. My son died in a snowboarding accident almost 12 years ago when he was 25. I didn't believe I could live fully with this terrible loss. Having poetry as my "home page" and being in the presence of poetry was a foundation I used to absorb grief and grieving into my life and being. I wrote *A New Theology: Turning to Poetry in a Time of Grief* because writing was so important to processing this loss. I learned that though he is gone, my love doesn't end, and in that love I can feel him, be in his presence.

**SCJ:** What are some dreams you have for the future?

**SB:** I want to see the Aurora Borealis! I want to spend more time with my grandsons, 7 and 10 and a half. I want to continue helping my mother as she ages (she will soon be 86). I want to write about it all.

**SCJ:** Are there any new projects on your horizon?

**SB:** I am creating a short "writing through grief" ebook that will help people use writing as a way of coping with loss, retrieving the memory of their loved one and finding a way of resolving the longings and expectations they may have had that are no longer possible. I'm also hoping to create opportunities to read to audiences from my latest collection of poems, *Behind Us The Way Grows Wider*.

**SCJ:** What can we look forward to at the Lifelines Writing Retreat?

**SB:** We'll write, write, write, creating new work and finding new ways into older work where we've been stuck. We'll explore poetry and various genres of creative nonfiction: epistolary form (letter form), flash nonfiction, personal essay, prose poetry and more. I'm looking forward to working with everyone!

To find out more or order books visit Sheila's website: <http://writingitreal.com/> Donations to the Seth Bender Memorial Summer Camps Scholarship Fund can be made through the Port Townsend Marine Science Center website: <http://www.ptmsc.org/>

Visit <http://www.storycircle.org/LifeLines/> and register now for the Lifelines Retreat with Sheila Bender at Festival Hill in Roundtop, March 8-10, 2013. Remember—early registration ends December 31, 2012!

## Online Classes!

Remember to check out more learning opportunities at:

[www.storycircleonlineclasses.org](http://www.storycircleonlineclasses.org)

Winter classes run January 14 through March 11, 2013.





## Ordinary and Extraordinary Days

# One Woman's Day Blanketed in Grace

Story by Sherrey Meyer, submitted by Linda Hoye

Story Circle Network's One Woman's Day blog (<http://onewomansday.wordpress.com/>) features stories about ordinary and extraordinary days in the lives of our members. We welcome submissions at <http://onewomansday.wordpress.com/about/>.

Sherrey Meyer is a wife, mom, grandma and great-grandma living in Portland, OR, with her husband, Bob. She is avid about books, needlework of all kinds, and writing. She blogs at *Sowing Seeds of Grace and Healing by Writing*. Currently, Sherrey is working on a memoir.

Grace means many things--a name, a note in music, a fluid movement in dance, the composition of artwork, forgiveness. Although many definitions exist for grace, my favorite is found in 2 Cor. 12:9 (The Message): "My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness." David Reagan, pastor at Antioch Baptist Church in Knoxville, TN, says he likes to call this "God's enoughness."

In 2001, we moved my mother from Tennessee to Oregon in order to care for her. An unsafe nursing home situation mandated the move and gave her a greater sense of safety.

The most difficult part of caring for Mother was the fact that ours had always been a strained relationship. Elements of verbal and emotional abuse comprised Mother's discipline with my brothers and me. Just before the move, through a third party, I realized that Mother's childhood had great bearing on her temperament. However, this didn't diminish the pain or invisible scars.

Ten months after the move, Mother was speaking less and spending more time sleeping. Communication became difficult. Although she was in an excellent facility and well cared for, I needed to know I was meeting her needs. One afternoon when I stopped by to collect her laundry, Mother seemed more awake than usual. A good time to try to get her to talk.

"Mom," I said. "I've been wondering if all your needs are being met. If you don't let me know, I can't be certain everything is going as it should."

An almost imperceptible nod and she softly responded, "Everything is just fine. You have done everything just right." A slight smile and closing eyes let me know she was finished.

My heart pounding, I picked up the laundry bag and made my way to the door. I could hardly see through my tears. Here I was, 57 years old, walking through the rain to my car crying over just a few words. All I had ever wanted to hear from her were words of love, approval and affirmation. Not once in my life could I remember hearing favorable words. And now, she had affirmed me as having done a good job caring for her over such a short period of time!

After I got in the car, I just sat there, processing what had just happened. Suddenly I felt awash in a diaphanous mist of comfort and healing, like a blanket wrapped around me on a cool night. Although my memories from childhood would always linger in the background, my heart was soaring with abandon in this recognition of love and approval. Our history together had not been mentioned in the past 10 months -- the hurts we had inflicted, the pain felt by flying words and hands, no apologies, no mention of forgiveness.

Nothing other than grace could have brought this extraordinary exchange into play. Grace had the power to make it happen, and on that day grace was complete in its "enoughness."

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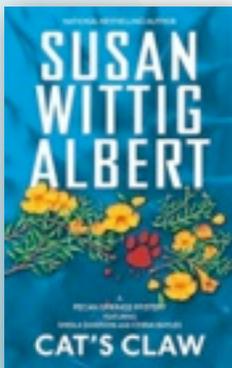
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 and in solitude, in self and  
 spirit, in heart and intellect.  
 And through it all, we are  
 together and alone.”*  
 ~Womensmemoirs.com~



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*The Confederate Rose*  
*“[Albert] brings a small  
 Southern town to live and  
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 culture--the Depression,  
 segregation, class differences,  
 the role of women in the  
 South--with authentic period  
 details. Her book fairly sizzles  
 with the strength of the women  
 of Darling.”*  
 ~Library Journal~

Writing From Life Workshop October 6, 2012:

## “Have You Traded In Your Bluebird of Happiness for a Crappy Pigeon?”

With Jeanne Guy

How do you find the Bluebird of Happiness when you're surrounded by a flock of crappy pigeons? Thirteen women from Austin, Houston, San Antonio (and Colorado) joined Jeanne Guy at Story Circle Network's Writing From Life Workshop on Saturday, October 6, to find out.

Using Jeanne's Re-Story method of journal writing, it didn't take long for them to bond and find out why a bluebird in the hand is worth way more than two pigeons in the bush. Jeanne lead them on an exploration of self-discovery to help rethink, reframe and re-story their lives. They took a “happiness” day for themselves to write, practice intentional listening, relax, laugh and reframe their lives with other women who are writing—and re-writing—their stories and their lives.

One participant, defined by her work but now retired, said after the fact, “Thanks again for the really calming program on Saturday which has given me some ideas on how to approach my “new life” without the business world.” Another said, “Being led to take your workshop was the best thing that could have happened to me. I'm so grateful our paths have crossed.”

For more information about Jeanne and her work, visit her website at [www.jeanneguy.com](http://www.jeanneguy.com).

November 13, 2012 Be Our Guest Event:

## “Your Writing Blessing”

With Janet Conner

Did you know you can create a blessing to help your writing and your life? Author Janet Conner provided the background and instructions for a dozen people at Story Circle's most recent Be Our Guest event, held at the FUMC's Family Life Center November 13.

Janet shared the practice and benefits of creating and saying “Your Writing Blessing” each day as a way to prepare for writing deeply and connecting with your inner wisdom.

Janet Conner, a Be Our Guest speaker in 2010 and author of *Writing Down Your Soul* has a new book on the market. Her newest release, *The Lotus and the Lily*, is a 30-day program created to help readers on their path to a soul-created life. Conner sheds radical new light on the “great paradox of prosperity” and redirects readers from asking for things to creating the receptive conditions that nourish a bountiful life.

For more information about Janet and her work, please visit [www.janetconner.com](http://www.janetconner.com)

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# Be Our Guest! “Frank & funny”

To introduce all women to the benefits of becoming a member of the Story Circle Network, we offer FREE workshops of interest to women in our area. Bring a friend, enjoy our programs, and find out about our upcoming workshops and projects to help women everywhere tell their stories.

Review by Bonnie Watkins



September’s “Be Our Guest” program featured Debra Winegarten reading poems from her 2011 award-winning collection for the Chapbook Contest sponsored by Poetica Magazine: Contemporary Jewish Writing. The book’s humorous title *There’s Jews in Texas?* gives a preview of the delightful unexpected laughter in these poems. Debra said that when she asked the judges of the contest why she had won, they replied that humor had so rarely been a part of Jewish writing that tended toward more serious, heavier themes.

Without sacrificing any of the social significance, Debra manages to inject “frank and funny” also, as Naomi Shihab Nye observed in her review of the book. For example, the poem “Permission Slip, 1966” included the actual choices for a student’s care in case an atomic bomb was dropped on downtown Dallas. Debra’s mother’s response, as she tore up the note was, “Ridiculous...We will all be dead.” Debra ends the poem with these lines: “I told my third-grade teacher, I lost the note.”

If you haven’t ever gone to a “Be Our Guest” program, you are missing a wonderful evening. These events are always lively with interesting writers and SCN members who dialogue together. And, it’s all free.



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We're always looking for stories rich in evocative detail, showing the struggles, challenges, and resolutions of real people living real lives. We prefer that you submit your work directly to the website at:

<http://www.storycircle.org/members/frmjournalsubmission.shtml>.

### Future Topics and deadlines for upcoming Journals:

- March, 2013 (due Feb 15)—Silence
- June, 2013 (due May 15)—Hidden Treasures
- September, 2013 (due Aug 15)—Storms



### 2012 May Sarton Memoir Award

Entry deadline is December 7, 2012

For details, visit  
<http://www.storycircle.org/SartonMemoirAward/>