



STORY CIRCLE JOURNAL

Vol. 21 No. 2, June 2017

The newsletter for women with stories to tell

SCN Announces 2016 Sarton Winners

The jury is in and the winners have been announced in the seventh annual Sarton Women’s Book Award program!

The Sarton Award is one of SCN’s most popular (and fastest-growing) projects. Uniquely, the awards are given to women authors writing chiefly about women and are limited to works published by small/independent publishers, university presses, and author-publishers (self-publishing authors). Story Circle chose to define the awards in this way in order to recognize outstanding women’s work that might otherwise be overlooked in the crowded and competitive world of book publishing, which until the past few years has been almost entirely dominated by large publishing houses.

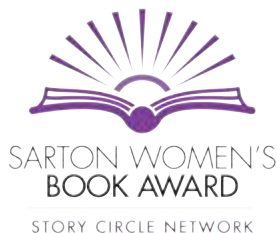
This year, the Sarton program was expanded from three to five categories, with entries in Memoir, Biography, Contemporary Fiction, Historical Fiction, and Young Adult Fiction. Thirty-six SCN members volunteered to jury the large number of submissions, and twelve professional librarians (not affiliated with SCN) served as second-round judges.

Five winners and nineteen finalists were named. Three of the winners were published by She Writes Press (a hybrid press that works exclusively with women); one winner was published by a university press; and one was self-published.

The success of this program depends entirely on SCN members, according to Susan Albert, one of the coordinators. “Paula Yost (my co-coordinator) and I depend on our SCN jurors to give us candid, thoughtful reports on each book. Our jurors usually read six books (some read more), making their evaluations via the easy online form that Peggy Moody has set up for us. We’re so grateful to them for their dedicated work—and always welcome new members to our team. We expect the program to continue to grow. It’s exciting to be a part of it, and to read the work of so many outstanding writers.”

If you’re interested in joining the Sarton team, go here to apply: http://www.storycircle.org/members/sarton_juror_application.php

See all of this year’s winners on page 3.



Conference Scholarships for Women of Color

Because *all* women’s stories are important, our SCN Board of Directors has made it a priority to invite women of color to attend and participate in our July, 2018 national women’s writing conference. To make this possible, the board has created a conference scholarship fund specifically targeted for this purpose. Currently, the balance in the fund is \$2,400, raised through private gifts and through SCN’s participation in the 2017 “Amplify Austin” fundraiser.

If you’re interested in helping with this important project, you can designate your gift especially for this purpose. Please visit SCN’s donation page: <http://www.storycircle.org/frmdonate.shtml>.

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Letter From SCN's President



Dear SCN Sisters—

Lately, it seems that my inbox is full of ads for writing organizations. It appears that “writer support” is an idea whose time has arrived.

But the idea for Story Circle “arrived” 20-plus years ago, and for two decades now, we have been going strong. Story Circle is more than just another organization of writers, however. For one thing, we are *women* writers. We believe that women’s stories are a vital part of human history, and that recording our lives—in journal, memoirs, fiction, poetry, drama, dance, and more—is a vital responsibility that comes with the gift of literacy. Think for a moment about the momentous change in human culture when women—many women, in many nations around the world—learned to write, to document their lives, to tell their stories, and share their stories.

And that’s where our women’s writing community comes in. It’s very easy for those of us who are committed to sharing the stories of our lives to feel alone, as if we are the only woman who has ever taken on this task. Through Story Circle, each of us has the opportunity (if we will take it) to connect with other women who want to do what we want to do: write about our lives and write about other women’s lives.

- Through story circles in our communities, we can participate in the energies of other women writers. For inspiration, see Mary Jo Doig’s interview with Sheila Allee Kershaw, page 8.
- Through one of SCN’s online Writers’ Roundtables (Writer2Writer or Work-in-Progress) we can share writing ideas, tips, problems, issues, dreams, encouragement.
- Through our online writing circles, we can join other SCN members, share our writing, and discuss our stories. (Our program is undergoing revision right now: more information later!)
- Through SCN’s online class program, we can study and write with women teachers. See Len Leatherwood’s article, page 11.
- Through “True Words” in our *Journal* and our annual *Real Women Write* anthology, we can expand our writing portfolios and develop an audience for our writing.
- Through StoryCircleBookReview, we can enlarge our reading experience and gain recognition for our published book reviews and author interviews.
- Through service as a juror in SCN’s unique Sarton Women’s Literary Award program and in SCN’s contests, we can learn to recognize what makes effective writing and help to honor outstanding women writers.
- Through service on SCN’s board of directors, we can put our skills and experience to work to build a more effective women’s writing community.
- Through SCN’s upcoming conference (July 2018), our LifeLines retreats, and online class program, we can meet our writing sisters, learn more about the writing we want to do, and strengthen our commitment to it.

Story Circle offers many ways for you to participate in our women’s writing community. Please spend a few moments considering what you would like to learn, how you would like to use your learning, how you would like to grow, and what you would like to give back. We would love to welcome you as an *active* member of our community.

With joy for your journey,

Susan

Susan Wittig Albert
SCN President, 2017



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.

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We welcome your letters, queries, and suggestions.

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

Sarton Winners and Finalists 2016



The Space Between: A Memoir of Mother-Daughter Love at the End of Life

Virginia A. Simpson
 El Dorado Hills CA
Memoir
 She Writes Press



Finalists:

Walking the Llano: A Texas Memoir of Place, by Shelley Armitage
Secondhand Scotch, by Cathy Curran
The Outskirts of Hope, by Jo Ivester
Elder Care Journey: A View from the Front Lines, by Laura Katz Olson



Finding Dorothy Scott: Letters of a WASP Pilot

Sarah Byrn Rickman
 Colorado Springs CO
Biography
 Texas Tech University Press



Finalists:

Lois Lenski: Storycatcher, by Bobbie Malone



A Drop in the Ocean: A Novel
 Jenni Ogden
 Great Barrier Island, New Zealand
Contemporary Fiction
 She Writes Press

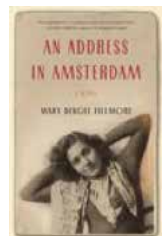


Finalists:

After the Dam, by Amy Hassinger
In the Context of Love, by Linda K. Sienkiewicz
Fill the Sky, by Katherine Sherbrooke
Hidden Shadows, by Linda Lucretia Shuler
Original Cyn, by Sylvia Dickey Smith
Twister, by Genanne Walsh



An Address in Amsterdam
 Mary Dingee Fillmore
 Burlington VT
Historical Fiction
 She Writes Press



Finalists:

American Tumbleweeds, by Marta Elva
What Gold Buys: A Silver Rush Mystery, by Ann Parker
Eliza Waite, by Ashley E. Sweeney
Lum: A Novel, by Libby Ware



Upside Down in a Laura Ingalls Town
 Leslie Tall Manning
 New Bern NC
Young Adult Fiction
 author-published



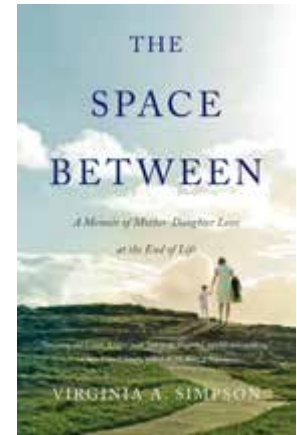
Finalists:

The Stone Collection, by Kateri Akiwenzie-Damm
Soldier Sister; Fly Home, by Nancy Bo Flood
Talent, by B. Lynn Goodwin
Teresa of the New World, by Sharman Apt Russell



An Interview with
Sarton Award Winner for Memoir
Virginia A. Simpson

by Pat Bean



Virginia A. Simpson, winner of the 2016 May Sarton Award for her book, *The Space Between: A Memoir of Mother-Daughter Love at the End of Life*, grew up wanting to be an actress—almost a given because she grew up in Los Angeles in an area located between MGM and 20th Century Fox studios. She also thought about becoming a hairdresser, like her mother.

“The desire to be a writer came later,” says Virginia.

“My parents would call me into the room to sing for their friends. Their favorite was ‘I Could Have Danced All Night’ from ‘My Fair Lady.’ I thought I sounded like Julie Andrews, English accent included. I had a great childhood ... never simple because I had an abusive older brother, but it was balanced by a wonderful group of friends to play with who lived on my block. My friends and I loved to sing, dance, and make up stories to act out.”

But it was her dad, Virginia says, for whom she performed and whom she wanted most to please. She strived to get all As in school for him, as anything less was met with anger and disappointment.

“Anyone who saw or heard the musical, ‘I’m Getting My Act Together and Taking It On the Road,’ may recall the song ‘Smile.’ I related to the character wanting to please her dad: *‘I was always Daddy’s smiling girl, I always tried to please. I could make him happy, put him at his ease. I would smile for Daddy, sing a little song. Daddy would take care of me, that’s how we got along’*”

Virginia’s dad died when she was twelve, however, and with his death Virginia’s childhood was no longer wonderful. She felt she had lost not only her dad, but also her mother and the way of life she had known. She had even lost her best friend, who moved away about the same time.

“I was left to figure everything out on my own. I didn’t do a very good job of it because I thought I had to be miserable, and being happy would mean I didn’t love my dad. Once my father was gone, no one seemed to care about what I did. I lost all motivation and reason to

achieve. I spent many years of introspection and hard work to learn to heal myself, and find my own source of motivation,” Virginia relates.

Writing, meanwhile, was always waiting in the wings of Virginia’s life. It just took a while for her to have the confidence to do it. While an elementary school teacher praised her writing, and gave her A-pluses, she recalls her junior high teachers being less interested in her writing ability than wanting her to “think like them. I now got Cs. I began to shut down.”

As an adult in her early twenties, Virginia enrolled in a writing class, but dropped out because she was too afraid the teacher would not like what she had written. “I stopped writing stories ... only journaling provided me the freedom to express myself without fear of being found out.”

A second attempt at enrollment in a journalism class went a bit better, but then the professor, who supported her writing even after the class was over, died suddenly. Virginia was once again left with the need to cope with her phobic fear of death, which had haunted her since her father died.

“I began to read everything I could locate on death and grief. After marrying and moving to Northern California, I went back to college ... and this time stayed until I completed my doctorate in psychology. My emphasis in all the years I studied psychology was on learning about death, dying and bereavement.”

A few years after her graduation, and following a divorce and a move to Indian Wells, CA, Virginia founded a nonprofit center that provides free support for grieving children and their families.

“The work was rewarding and I spent eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, focused on the needs of the children and the survival of the nonprofit. It was during this time a life-threatening condition necessitated that my mother come live with me,” Virginia relates.

Writing, meanwhile, was still in her head.

“I always thought I had time. After all, my writing professor had said that some famous writers didn’t publish their first book until they were in their fifties. But one day I woke up, and I was in my fifties and still hadn’t written my book. I realized I needed to act now, or I might run out of time and never accomplish the one thing I always said I wanted to do—write a book.”

Six months after her mother died, Virginia enrolled in a six-week Artist’s Way workshop, and following that a memoir class. For the first time, she shared her writing with others, until she broke her shoulder and became housebound.

“Although I could only type using one hand, I finished the book I’d started in the memoir class. Then I read it and realized it was flatter than Texas. My broken shoulder and the pain I was experiencing somehow gave me courage. After doing some research, I learned that a NYT bestselling author, whose book I’d read and admired, was offering her services to writers. I contacted her and we began working together on a one-on-one basis, and after a few months I joined her online group.”

Virginia says her career played a large part in the issues covered in her book.

“I wanted my story to be one that would help anyone who ever was (or would be) a caregiver. With the aging of the baby boomers, the numbers of caregivers are going to swell throughout the world—there are more than 45 million caregivers in the United States today. I intentionally included the tough issues and some of the unpleasant and sometimes personally appalling thoughts I experienced during the years my mother lived with me, knowing that my personal story was also a universal story shared by millions.”

Virginia said she learned a tremendous amount about her mother as she wrote their story. “I was able to see her

with new eyes and with a more compassionate heart. I had to forgive myself for what I was incapable of knowing while she was alive. Anyone who has a mother knows that this is a complex relationship. As my mother would have said: ‘I was the perfect annoying mother, and you were the perfect annoying daughter.’”

It was while writing her book that Virginia came to understand the true story of the years she was her mother’s caretaker. It was about her race against time to heal their relationship. “By the time of my mother’s death” she says, “the only space between us was filled with love.”

Virginia says her writing space is her head. Ideas, she finds, must be written immediately. Sometimes she even uses her phone to email herself notes. As for the best writing advice she received, she says it came from the journalism teacher who encouraged her. “Just write. I know no other way,” he told her.

And from Jennifer Lauck, bestselling author of *Blackbird*, Virginia says, she learned not to take criticism personally, but rather to use it as a gateway to learning and improving. And Linda Joy Myers, SCN member and president of the National Association of Memoir Writers, taught her the benefit of digging deeper to find the underlying story. There’s always more, “even when you believe you’ve excavated as far down as you can go.”

Receiving the Sarton Award, Virginia says, has given her the validation and the encouragement she needed to restart work on her next memoir, although she admits its story line is still hazy.

As for her advice to other writers, Virginia says, we should never give up our dreams. “Often when we’re at the edge of our capacity and feel we can’t go on, we’re actually closest to the opening that gives us wings.”

Virginia A. Simpson, Ph.D. earned a Fellowship in Thanatology by the Association of Death Education & Counseling (ADEC). Dr. Simpson was cited in the July 2007 issue of *Town & Country* article on grief, numerous times in *Palm Springs Life Magazine* and *The Desert Sun*. Her articles have appeared in publications throughout the world. Dr. Simpson began her informal grief studies at the age of 12, after her 48-year-old father died suddenly of a heart attack. In 1982, she embarked on her formal education in death, dying and bereavement, and started counseling the dying and bereaved in 1984, including creating a special program for at-risk grieving teens in Redwood City, California. Upon completion of her dissertation on the psychosocial variables affecting the long-term adaptation of bereaved parents, Dr. Simpson received her doctorate in psychology.

In an effort to create meaning out of the sudden death of her beautiful stepson, Douglas William (Doug) Simpson, in 1991, Dr. Simpson founded The Mourning Star Center, a place of hope and healing for grieving children and their families in Palm Desert, California in 1995. For ten years, she trained all grief facilitators and led every support group for grieving children, teens, parents and spouses. Although intending to stay involved in the organization, the prolonged illness and subsequent death of her mother, along with unforeseen events, moved her life in other directions. In 2006, Dr. Simpson was honored for her work by the Cities of Indian Wells, Palm Desert, Palm Springs, and Rancho Mirage. Dr. Simpson brings more than a quarter of a century of experience and expertise to her work helping grieving children, teens and adults cope with the loss of a loved one due to homicide, suicide, accident or illness. She has appeared on numerous television and radio programs, is a sought after public speaker, and is also a consultant to school personnel, psychologists and other mental health professionals.



An Interview with
Sarton Award Winner for Biography
Sarah Byrn Rickman
by Pat Bean



Sarah Byrn Rickman, winner of the 2016 May Sarton Award for Biography, wrote her first story at the age of five. Her award-winning book, *Finding Dorothy Scott: Letters of a WASP Pilot*, is the author's seventh published book. She dictated that first story to her mother and aunt while she was recuperating from measles in a darkened room.

"That's what they did back then, to protect a child's eyes," Sarah says of the dark room. "I was very much into Christopher Robin and Pooh Bear, so I dictated my own story about them, ... and illustrated it on shirt cardboards, the ones that came back from the laundry in my father's clean white shirts."

Her first writing goal, Sarah says, was to follow in the footsteps of the glamorous comic strip reporter Brenda Starr. "I also wanted to write books and was always telling stories in my head ... they were more like movies running behind my eyes. Remember the mind's eye that you developed reading and listening to radio? When the Lone Ranger shouted 'Heigh-ho Silver away!' I could see that white horse galloping over the plains. I also read voraciously, way above my supposed reading level. I think I was eleven when I read *Gone with the Wind*. My senior prediction, upon graduating from high school, was that someday I would write the sequel to *Gone with the Wind*."

Sarah grew up in Denver, Colorado, and when she was twelve, she spent the summer at the Trails End Ranch for Girls, an experience, she says, that altered her life.

"I was an only child – and I'm an introvert – and that was my first experience living with, and having to get along with, other girls. It prepared me for college, but more than that, it made me who I am today. The ideals, the friendships, the camaraderie there, along with a stable full of horses, which I loved, and hiking and camping opportunities in the mountains of the wondrous Rocky Mountain National Park, completely changed my perspective.

"I learned to live with and deal with other people, to accept them for who they are, and I learned to love nature

and the mountains and freedom and responsibility, all wrapped up together. I spent six glorious summers in that rarified atmosphere."

As for college, there was never any question but that Sarah would attend her father's school, Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee. "I wanted to go there ... our little family of three had lots of family there. Vanderbilt is a great learning institution. It, along with my upbringing, and something inside me, sowed the seeds of the liberalism and the feminism I now embrace. And that colors everything I do and write and think now."

Sarah did become her own version of Brenda Starr, first as a reporter and later as an editor when her two sons were in the fourth and fifth grade. In her fifties, she wrote her first book, a mystery, in collaboration with a friend. After her boys graduated from college, she returned to school and earned a master's degree in creative writing. Her second novel was her thesis.

Then she was introduced to Nancy Batson Crews, who, Sarah says, "made it possible for me to win the Sarton Book Award. She is why anyone who reads about the WASP or is interested in their story knows my name. Nancy was one of the 28 women pilots selected for the very first women's squadron, the Women's Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron: acronym, WAFS, which later became known as WASP.

All seven of Sarah's published books are about these brave World War II female pilots, who led the way for what is now women's roles in military flying.

Sarah says the story that resonates with historians, a story that is truly a heroic one, is the story of Nancy Love, and of Nancy Batson and Dorothy Scott and the twenty-five other women who were the original WAFS.

"Add to that another hundred superb women pilots brought into the WASP ... and you have the untold story — the story that tells how the WASP of the Ferrying Division, Air Transport Command, did their part to help win World War II. That is the story I told in my other 2016 book, *WASP of the Ferry Command: Women Pilots, Uncommon*

Deeds.

“*Finding Dorothy Scott* tells a small piece of that story, but Dorothy didn’t live to take part in what happened in 1944 – though she was on the brink of that when she died.”

Nancy Batson did live it, Sarah says, and sixty years later she passed that story on. “She challenged me to write it, and then helped me do it by introducing me to her fellow surviving WAFS, who told me their versions of the story. *The Originals: The Women’s Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron of World War II*—my first book, published in 2001—is that story.”

Sarah says she had wanted to fly since reading about Amelia Earhart, but that she was into her seventies before she finally earned a Sport Pilot certificate, the lowest rating you can acquire and still be a licensed pilot.

“Another word for it could be ‘fair weather flyer,’ as I am not instrument rated, nor do I want to be. When I fly ‘in the soup’ I am in an airliner, and they do the flying. I fly when I can look out at the unobstructed and incredible views of the earth from the air.”

Sarah says that on the day she completed her first cross-country solo, a 75-mile trip that included landing at two grass fields, she was “pumped.” It shows in a photo of her on the Internet beside a yellow 1946 Aeronca Champ plane known as a taildragger.

“I love taildraggers and I love flying off a grass runway ... and now, thanks to my Sport Pilot certificate, I am a full-fledged member of the Ninety-Nines, the organization for women pilots founded by Amelia and 98 other women pilots in 1929.”

Sarah says encouragement for her writing came at the right time, but that it is the writing itself that inspires her. “I continue to see more possibilities and avenues to explore. I’ve just written my first script for a 15-minute WASP

documentary I plan to produce. I am now part of a poetry group, and they are encouraging me to shed my journalistic restraint and let it all hang out in poems. But I’m not there just yet, but thinking ...

“Winning the Sarton Award has blown me away. Validation is so important. The Sarton Award is my first gold sticker. It confirmed my sense of the worth of my writing, but, even more important, it confirmed the impact of Dorothy Scott’s story. It is her writing, her incredible letters that made the book possible. This is, I believe, the affirmation I needed to move away from my reportorial style and to explore the depths to which writing can take you.”

Sarah gives credit for getting Dorothy’s story told, and leading her through the best way to present it, to her editor Joanna Conrad at Texas Tech University Press. Meanwhile, Sarah’s eighth book, “*BJ*” *Wasp, Squadron Leader*, is expected out this fall. It’s the author’s first young adult biography.

“I will say this, and hope it never comes back to haunt me. I have never suffered writer’s block. Right now, I have more stories to tell, books to write, than I can possibly manage. But I’m relishing the challenge.”

As for the best writing advice she received, Sarah says, it came from her mother, although she calls it non-writing advice.

“Back to those shirt cardboards that I used when illustrating my Pooh book: My mother’s advice to me, 21 years later, was to start off my marriage *not* ironing my husband’s shirts, because he would always want me to do them. By then, of course, we had automatic washers and dryers and permanent press shirts. Besides, I was a liberated 1960’s working girl. I took her advice and never ironed a shirt.”

Sarah Byrn Rickman is editor of the official WASP of World War II newsletter, the author of five previous books about the WASP, and an amateur pilot. In addition to her books, Sarah is the author of numerous magazine and journal articles about the WASP.

Sarah is a former reporter/columnist for The Detroit News (Michigan) and former editor of the Centerville-Bellbrook Times (Ohio). She earned her B.A. in English from Vanderbilt University and an M.A. in Creative Writing from Antioch University McGregor.

Sarah was born in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and grew up in Denver, Colorado. She now lives in Colorado Springs with her husband, Richard, and their black Lab, Lady.



Pat Bean is a retired, award-winning journalist who traveled around this country for nine years in a small RV with her canine companion, Maggie. She now lives in Tucson, Arizona, where she is putting the finishing touches on her book, *Travels with Maggie*. She is passionate about nature, birds, writing, art, family, reading and her new dog, Pepper.



Circle Voices

Reflections of a new OWL facilitator

by Mary Jo Doig

Sheila Allee Kershaw took on a new challenge during the past year when she presented two Older Women's Legacy (OWL) workshop programs, the first at her church and the second at the Seton Cove Spirituality Center in Austin, TX. I asked Sheila if she would tell us when, where, and what led her to take that step, as well as how she located her participants and the teaching facility.

Sheila: I have taught at Seton Cove before and I knew the clientele was a good fit for the OWL workshop. Seton Cove advertised the class and signed people up. I also promoted it on Facebook and through a newsletter I publish for my students.

You've recently completed your second five-week OWL workshop, using SCN's Older Women Legacy Facilitator Guide and Participant Workbook. How helpful were those materials for your workshop? Was any part particularly helpful for you?

Sheila: The OWL workshop materials are extremely thorough and detailed. After reading through the facilitator's guide and each workshop session, I felt well-prepared for each class. I also created a timeline for each class. I would allow a certain amount of time at the beginning for participants to read homework writings, then a certain amount of time for the first exercise, and so on. Sticking to a schedule helps keep the discussion focused. Class participants have commented that the writing prompts are excellent, and I agree.

Approximately how many women participated in each workshop? Do you recommend an ideal number? What was the writing experience of the attendees, novice or experienced or mixed?

Sheila: The first class had eight, the second had four. I think five-six is an ideal number, allowing ample time for all to share their writings and for a bit of discussion. If you have more than six, you usually need more than two hours for each workshop session. Most of the participants have been new to writing.

As each workshop week passed, what did you observe as one of the strongest benefits to the participants? And what, for you, was the richest part of your time together?

Sheila: Many participants emphasized that they wanted to write down their life stories for their children.

Just as many were working through painful events in their lives, seeking a better understanding of what happened and coming to a resolution. For me, the richest part has been sharing my own stories and in the process, feeling a connection with the women in the workshop. We all seem to identify with each others' stories.

What are your fondest memories of the workshops?

Sheila: I do a lot of reading and research on writing for self-knowledge and coping with life issues. I like to share some of these insights with OWL workshop participants. In a recent session, I shared about my discovery of the Freedom Writers, a group of inner city high school students who used journal writing to cope with gang violence and poverty. The students went to a high school in Long Beach, Calif. One of my workshop participants had taught at the same school and knew the English teacher who started the Freedom Writers.

When your workshop ended, did members want to continue on? If so, how did you work that through?

Sheila: Yes, some of them did want to continue but scheduling conflicts have interfered with additional sessions.

Did you undertake any special projects, such as compiling a booklet of stories, as part of the workshop? If so, nuts-and-bolt-wise, how did you develop the final product? Did you hire a printer or use another method? What was the benefit and how did your participants experience seeing their work in print?

Sheila: I decided that most participants really wanted a record of their own life stories. So I made copies of the workbook pages and put them in a three-ring binder. Under the clear plastic cover on the binder, I put a title page where each writer could put her name. At the beginning of the OWL workshop, each participant received a workbook. I told them the binder would serve as their own individual collection of stories. They could expand on the writings we did in the workshop and add those to the binder, removing the instruction pages. I invited them to type up their own stories if desired, or they could leave them in their handwriting. At one workshop, two participants offered ideas on how to develop such a personal life story book, adding pictures and keepsakes and using design elements.

Based on your two workshops, what advice would you give to someone considering starting a circle?

Sheila: I think it's a good idea to offer your first workshop in a familiar place and preferably with people you know. My first workshop was at my church and I knew or had met most of the people. Knowing them helped me relax a bit more and the group seemed to "gel" more quickly than the other one, where I knew none of the participants.

Is there any advice about conducting writing circles that you'd like to include to complete this portrait of your experience?

Sheila: I would just add that OWL circles are extremely rewarding to lead. The women are very enthusiastic about writing their stories and each one has been open and revealing about her inner world. This makes for a rich experience for all of us. One other thing: I do the exercises along with the class, even if I have done them before. The exercises are flexible enough that you can focus on a different aspect of a life event for several sessions. No matter how many times I write about a subject, I get new insight into what happened and why. And I think it's important to be more of a writer-seeker along with the workshop members than a teacher who is somewhat removed from the learning process.

If you'd like to talk with Sheila about her experience, she welcomes your comments or queries. Contact the circles coordinator at doig.maryjo@gmail.com and she will send Sheila's email address.

If you'd like to read more about the Older Women's Legacy program, check out Story Circle Network's OWL informational pamphlet: <http://www.storycircle.org/brochures/OWLbrochure.pdf>.

If you want to experience writing and want feedback from other writers, SCN gives you that opportunity. We have Internet circles for life writing, poetry, and fiction with monthly prompts. There is also a reading circle that reads a memoir or memoir-type fiction each month and discusses it. Through this reading and examination, you may find a form of writing that will work for exploring your own life. Please let us know if you want to take advantage of one or more of these opportunities by filling out the form on the website.

Mary Jo Doig joined SCN in 2001. She is a member of the SCN board, a reviewer and editor for StoryCircleBookReviews.org, a Sarton juror, "True Words" editor for 13 years, and facilitator of w-Ecircle 7 for several years. She is near completion of her memoir, *Stitching a Patchwork Life*. Visit her blog: <https://maryjod.wordpress.com/>



Announcing the Maya Prize for Unpublished Memoir

Memoirists, this exciting new project is especially for you . . . SCN and She Writes Press are teaming up to co-sponsor a competition for an unpublished book-length memoir. SCN will accept and jury the manuscripts; She Writes will make the final selection. The winner will receive an award of \$2400 toward publication by She Writes Press. In addition, both SCN and She Writes will sponsor a crowd-funding project to help the author raise the remaining cost of publication (about \$2400).

The Maya Prize is named in honor of beloved poet, memoirist, dramatist, and essayist Maya Angelou, who worked tirelessly to support women writers. She Writes is a woman's press and an important new voice in the publishing community. Brooke Warner, one of the She Writes publishers, was our conference keynoter in 2016. SCN is delighted to be teaming up with Brooke and She Writes for this important project. The competition will open in January, 2018. Watch the *Journal* and SCN's monthly eletter for details!

LifeLines Weekend Retreat brings renewal to participants—and more.

by Joyce Boatright

“I am setting my intention for 2017 to compose a monthly blessing throughout the year to share with family and friends,” Ann Haas, from Akron, OH, shared with participants at the May 5-7 LifeLines Weekend Retreat in Fredericksburg, TX.

Ann was one of fourteen women who joined in circle with the purpose of reimagining and reframing their current lives as writers. The weekend was extraordinary.

On the final day at the final hour, retreat facilitator Jeanne Guy closed with a blessing Ann had shared with the group, one she’d written previously for a physician’s office. It was perfect for the closing of the retreat.

As Jeanne read the second to the last line of Ann’s blessing: “We are honored to receive your stories and aid in the healing that comes from the strength and spirit within you that we find on our mutual journey,” she laid her head on another’s shoulder and said, with tears in her eyes, “I don’t want to read the last line. If I do, it will mean the retreat is over and I don’t want it to end.”

Women around the circle nodded in silent agreement.

“I’ve been writing for as long as I can remember,” Trish Houser, from Houston, said later, “but I arrived at the SCN retreat feeling stuck in every sense of the word and somehow even afraid to call myself a writer. Jeanne Guy led us on a skillful, soulful, artful journey toward discovering our own revelations, those truths we each knew deep in our souls that we only needed the space and permission and vessel to access. Through perfectly chosen poetry and prose and a progression of poignant prompts shared in our magical circle, each of us uncovered those truths. In this process, we realized that the human condition is not so different for any of us. From thirty-something to eighty-something, we share the same struggles and found

truly kindred spirits in one another. I gained perspective. I gained wisdom. I gained confidence. I gained sisters. And I left empowered to call myself a writer.”

Upon returning to her home to Austin, Jen Slaski sent an email that echoed Trish’s comments: “Jeanne’s retreat was in a word: magic. Each of us had a unique thirst that compelled us to “come to the water” (Barron’s Creek, that is!). The lovely setting, along with the combination of poetry prompts, reflective writing, thoughtful sharing - and laughter! - created just the right cocktail to quench my thirst. I re-connected with my inner self in a healing way that sparked new insights and inspiration. And I went home with the reminder that while our journeys are different, we don’t go alone; we’re all pilgrims who all navigate the ebb and flow together. There’s grace and solace in that.”

Laurie Hamilton, from Denver, CO, felt a deep bond with the women who shared deeply their fears, challenges and vulnerability in being authentic in their writing. Each participant stood as a non-judgmental guardian with everyone listening deeply with her heart’s ear. She summed up her experience with these words: “Ebb and flow, birth and death... and now, rebirth.”

On a personal note, I felt renewed and re-energized by the retreat, and I believe Marsha Fields Jones, from Cuyahoga Falls, OH, spoke on my behalf when she reflected: “I have returned to my new ‘retirement routine’ with a newly found freedom. Each of you contributed to that change within me and a burden dissolved.”

On that last Sunday, blinking back (but not repressing) fresh tears, Jeanne read the final line in Ann’s blessing: “May you go forth with hope and new beginnings from the blessings we share with one another in this practice.”

And indeed, we are.

Susan Albert to facilitate retreat in Galveston

Save the date: The next LifeLines retreat will be held over the weekend of Oct. 13-15 in historical Galveston, TX, less than an hour from Houston. SCN president Susan Wittig Albert will facilitate a LifeLines Writing Weekend in mid-October on the craft of writing.

Since both internal character changes and external plot



Joyce Boatright is our LifeLines coordinator. Her book, *Telling Your Story: A Basic Guide to Memoir Writing*, is available on amazon.com and on her website. She teaches writing at North Harris College in Houston, Texas, and steadily posts on her blog.

changes are important in nonfiction and fiction, Susan plans to focus on character and plot, with an emphasis on how setting, point of view, scene/structure, and dialogue can be used to build character and plot arcs.

This is a golden opportunity to work with this extraordinarily talented teacher and best-selling author on the elements of the writer’s craft that are important in both memoir and fiction. Whether you are only in the idea stage or have a draft of a memoir or novel, Susan will instruct and inspire you.

Registration details and the schedule for the weekend will be posted on the SCN website.



Online Classes

A Little Writing Encouragement from Brenda Ueland

by Len Leatherwood

I learned that you should feel when writing, not like Lord Byron on a mountain top, but like a child stringing beads in kindergarten - happy, absorbed and quietly putting one bead on after another. — Brenda Ueland

Writing can be tricky. You want to write. You have ideas for writing. But the actual writing—the process of sitting down and getting words on the page—can be elusive, particularly if you have a loudmouthed internal critic who is constantly informing you that your skills just are not good enough, or that your life experience just isn't interesting enough.

Enter the journalist, freelance writer and memoirist, Brenda Ueland, author of *If You Want to Write: A Book about Art, Independence and Spirit*, which poet Carl Sandburg described as “the best book ever written on how to write.” Ueland states unequivocally that all human beings are “talented, original and have something important to say,” and she encourages writers “to try to find your true, honest, un-theoretical self.” Her book offers many gems of wisdom. Here are a few:

If you don't know what type of writing you want to do, Brenda says, “Tackle anything you want to—novels, plays, anything. Only remember Blake's admonition: ‘Better to strangle an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires.’”

If you are constantly dissatisfied with your work, Brenda says, “If you are never satisfied with what you write, that is a good sign. It means your vision can see so far that it is hard to come up to it. Again I say, the only unfortunate people are the glib ones, immediately satisfied

with their work. To them the ocean is knee-deep.”

If you compare yourself to other writers, Brenda says, “Don't always be appraising yourself, wondering if you are better or worse than other writers. ‘I will not Reason & Compare,’ said Blake; ‘my business is to Create.’ Besides, since you are like no other being ever created since the beginning of time, you are incomparable.”

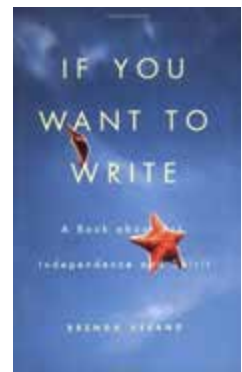
If you get discouraged, Brenda says: “When discouraged, remember what Van Gogh said: ‘If you hear a voice within you saying: you are no painter, then paint by all means, lad, and that voice will be silenced, but only by working.’”

I would add one more piece of advice. When feeling discouraged, uninspired or overwhelmed, consider taking an online class through Story Circle Network. Our instructors (including me) are all working writers and understand all too well the tough parts of the writing process. Our goal is to provide that reassurance, that perspective and that gentle nudge to help you express your “true self.” Come join us and silence that noisy critic.

It's time to get to work. Here is the link to our Spring II classes: <http://www.storycircleonlineclasses.org/index.php>



Len Leatherwood, Program Coordinator for SCN's Online Classes, has been teaching writing privately to students in Beverly Hills for the past fifteen years. She has received numerous state and national teaching awards from the Scholastic Artists and Writers Awards. She is a daily blogger at 20 Minutes a Day, found at lenleatherwood.wordpress.com.





True Words from Real Women

A selection of short pieces of lifewriting by our members, edited by Jo Virgil. Please be sure that, if your story includes other people, you have not violated any privacy rights, that there is nothing defamatory in it, and that it does not infringe copyright or any other rights. Contribute your own True Words to the Journal. Future topics are listed on page 32 (the back page). This month's topic is: A Little Thing That Mattered.

The Type B Electrical Outlet

Sarah Fine, Toronto ON
e-circle 3

At yoga class this morning my eye is caught by a cream-color Type B electrical outlet, low on, and complimentary to, a mint-green wall. I am sitting with legs outstretched listening to my teacher when I suddenly wonder if that U-shaped socket wall receptacle will cause problems to any of my favorite poses.

Taking a closer look, I realize the three pins in the outlet resemble a face: two rectangular eyes, one slightly smaller than the other, and an inverted U-shaped mouth, closed at the bottom. This face, as a whole, has a surprised, slightly fearful look about it.

I want to be reassuring. Yoga is gentle. You are in no danger.

Then suddenly my teacher is talking about “small things.” She reminds us to attend to the weight in our feet. Are we balanced more on our heels or our toes? Can we shift to having weight over the arches? She tells us to move the flesh on our calves, to wrap them in order to straighten our legs. I visualize the flesh moving and feel my legs straightening.

“Now drop your tail bones to protect your lower backs.”

Her voice reassures me. The small things keep us grounded and in balance; they lead to the “big picture” and being peaceful in the moment. By the end of Yoga class, I am there.

Namaste!

Eenie, Meenie, Minie, Moe, Catch a Rabbit by the Toe ...

Ariela Zucker, Ellsworth ME
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On my bed, my younger brother is on one side and I'm on the other; my mother reads to us every night before bed time. Nursery rhymes are my favorite: “Jack and Jill went up the hill” or “The cow that jumped over the moon.” I never question the logic, and I marvel at the strange pictures and the rhymes. Little Miss Muffet who sat on her tuffet; Wee Willie Winkle who every night, with his lantern, walks the streets; or the fractured Humpty Dumpty. “Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.” I never get tired of them and their quirkiness. When my mother closes the books I sigh. It's time to go to sleep.

Years later, I do the same with my daughters. At bedtime we sit in their room with our favorite books all around. We recite the same rhymes and enjoy the uncanny and odd, the fantasy that lights the imagination. We keep adding new favorites to the bedtime literary collection: Melinda May who ate a whole whale because she said she could; “There are kids underneath my bed,” cried little baby monster Fred; “Whosever's room this is should be ashamed! His underwear is hanging on the lamp. Huh? You say it's mine? Dear, I knew it looked familiar;” and our all-time favorite – “I cannot go to school today,” said little Peggy Ann McKay. “My neck is stiff, my voice is weak, I hardly whisper when I speak. My tongue is filling up my mouth; I think my hair is falling out ...”

I can see my daughter, now a mother, in her living room so far away, reading to my granddaughter. I look at the books and laugh to myself: Little Miss Muffet, still sitting on her tuffet, Wee Willie Winkle with his lantern, and little Peggy Ann McKay, who now has a Hebrew name but still is looking for the most peculiar reasons to stay home.

A Stranger's Touch

Judy Watkins, Myrtle Creek OR
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w-circle 3, w-circle 6

It was the second day of our riverboat cruise through Europe when my husband's gall bladder burst and he was taken to a hospital in Germany. For ten days his survival was questionable and he spent four weeks in intensive care.

For me it was an emotional time. I was alone in a country where I did not speak the language. Where would I live? Did I have enough money available to me when I had no idea how long I would be there? The hospital wanted to know how I planned to pay the bill (they wanted a wire transfer for the amount before I left Germany). How would I get all the things done at home that needed care? How would I get the cat out of the Cat Sitter? So many issues flew through my mind and I felt so alone.

I first turned to the hospital's English speaking Lutheran Minister, then the travel insurance representative. They helped with lodging and phone calls home. On the second day, the woman working at the hospital's information desk asked to talk to me. She knew of a woman who once lived in England who spoke English, and she had made arrangements for us to meet so that I would have somebody to talk to. It was such a thoughtful gesture from a complete stranger.

The woman from England came to my room that same day. She was my age. We arranged to visit and walk together every day, and she invited me to join her for activities at her grandchild's school. Once, she invited me to her 100-year-old home and prepared an English dinner for me. She thought I might be getting tired of German food.

It has been ten years and we continue to correspond and exchange small gifts for Christmas and birthdays.

A woman from Germany introducing two women from England and the U.S. at a time of need was one of the most significant events of my life. Such a little thing, but it holds a major place in my heart.

Be Prepared

Jan Marquart, Austin TX
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My mother had little phrases that mattered. One of them was: "Janet, always be prepared." She put me in the Brownies and Girl Scouts. Their motto was "Be prepared." I took those words to heart. They kept my medicine cabinet complete, my kitchen stocked, my finances in order, my tool chest full, and a stocked light bulb collection on the

shelf. I have to say, it served me well over the years. I was able to take care of myself in just about any situation. But there was one thing for which there was no preparation.

A call broke the stillness of the night; my boyfriend shook me from a deep sleep. I sat up in bed, my mind trying to free itself from a dream, my blue flannel nightgown suffocating me with its warmth.

"Your mother died," he said.

I stood, walked to the back of the house, went outside into cool ocean air. My boyfriend came to the door.

"Honey," he said, "you're washing the garbage cans. Come back in."

I had to move my body, prove I was still alive because in that moment something in me fought for its life. I kneeled on our new white couch and stared through the window into pure darkness. Slowly, reality slammed me into excruciating pain. I fell into a deep black hole pounding with grief. It was bigger than me. I disappeared.

I needed a way to be prepared for what was to come—the funeral, flying home, seeing my dad without my mom. I never got to say goodbye to her. I needed to talk to her. *Now!* But I could never talk to her again. How could I prepare for that?

My boyfriend sat on the edge of the bathtub as I made plane reservations, instructing me to take care of him because he had never seen a dead body before. My voice raised to a high level instructing him that now he had to take care of me. After all, it was my mother.

Perhaps that was the best I could have done to "be prepared."

Closed for Lunch

Dreama Plybon Love, Rocky Mount VA
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She had curly hair and glasses, thin and attractive as only a 20-year-old can be. Some would say it was a chance encounter. But meeting Macy was a divine appointment.

It was a sunny day. Walking toward the door of the hair salon for my appointment, I noticed a young girl sitting on the curb. She was absorbed in reading a C. S. Lewis book. My heart skipped a beat—C. S. Lewis is one of my favorite authors. Since moving back to the small town where I grew up, I hadn't found anyone who even knew who C. S. Lewis was, much less someone reading one of his books!

Excited, I couldn't help but ask what she was reading. The salon was closed for lunch, so we had some extra time to talk. Immediately we connected, our thoughts on the same path. Although I am old enough to be her grandmother, talking with Macy was like finding a long, lost

friend. Astute for her years, she was ready and willing to ponder life's mysteries.

Now we text and email and get together when we can for coffee or a movie. More importantly, we share our writings (she is a deep thinker and pensive poet) and send each other quotes to encourage and challenge. One of her recent emails still makes me smile: "Thank you for that quote and encouragement. Every time I hear from you I am once again amazed at how God has weaved our lives together. Your soul is so like mine. And it seems like what the Spirit is speaking to you also speaks directly into my circumstances. A lot of times He puts expression (that I couldn't find) to my experiences through you."

What makes our friendship so wonderful is the power of faith and mutual influence. I feel blessed to share things that are meaningful to Macy, but perhaps more striking to me is how much she deeply enriches my life. We experience that shared way of seeing—as C. S. Lewis once said, the "What! You too?" factor that is the eternal core of friendship.

Heart at Work

Debra Dolan, Vancouver BC
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The personal contents of my desk arrived in a cardboard box last week, plastic spoons and all. I was shocked with how sad and demoralized I felt as I opened it alone. It had, after all, been 17 months since I was last physically present at the office due to my injury recovery. I had struggled for several weeks after an accident, maintaining my commitment to employment while a slow erosion of my ability to enjoy life and its activities emerged. I fought and I fought until I realized that all I was doing was recovering from one day in the office till the next. My doctor placed me on medical leave so I could fully focus on the harsh reality of post-concussion syndrome and damage to occipital nerves causing chronic head pain.

As the pitiful domesticity of my recent working life was placed on a beloved farmhouse table, I wondered who had been designated the task. Were they stricken and sympathetic or mildly gleeful? Although I enjoyed my position very much, there were some odd dynamics and some catty remarks related to my schedule that had surfaced. Even though I was paid at a reduced salary I was the only one who did not work the summer months. This arrangement allowed me an annual structured amount of time to travel and pursue my passion for writing. Each September I witnessed the conspicuous behavior of a kind that I have despised all my life as I reconnected with the team.

Reflecting upon these raw unpacking emotions, I recognize there was never an opportunity for goodbyes, and now, after nearly forty years of always—effortlessly, it seemed—having a job, there is not one. Working has never been the center of my life yet it has always been a very important aspect of it, and I have poured energy, intelligence, strength, candor, diligence and true self into diversified positions. Work ensured purpose, routine, socialness and financial stability. Each desk held one consistency—a beautiful, unique piece of heart-shaped glass serving as a paper weight. Now returned, I feel amazingly stronger.

Kind Rather Than Nice

Marilyn Ashbaugh, Edwardsburg MI
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At the clinic, people pack the small room as the doctor shares his cancer research using the acronym PITTS: poor nutrition, infection, toxins, trauma, stress. He explains that if a person reduces one or more of these, the appearance or reappearance of cancer statistically diminishes. His words resonate and I vow to heed them. Recently, my mother died of cancer complications and a loved one was diagnosed. I feel solace that my loved one and I can live with cancer rather than die from it.

The clinic offers both a treatment and prevention program. We enroll in the program that includes yoga, meditation, nutritional infusions, nutritional counseling and other treatments. Some of the treatments have unpredictable side effects such as nausea and exhaustion. One day is great and the next not.

We traveled thousands of miles to participate and our friends in the area ask us out for activities while we are "on vacation." We try to explain, but cannot. The program is outpatient, yet the imperative of the program is rest: no television, no shopping, no sightseeing. It takes energy both to heal and to change lifestyles. It is a struggle.

Friends do not comprehend. What harm is there to meet for lunch? I learn the hard way. A friend offers to take me to lunch but once we are together she seems uncomfortable in my presence and when the bill arrives, she tells me she forgot her money. How could she? I am furious at both of us.

I reached a fork in the road. Growing up the oldest in a large family, I learned to be prepared: band-aids, aspirins, extra cash. My friends relied on me for these and more. But now, this preparedness seemed like a burden I no longer wished to carry.

Sixteen years later, I return with my loved one for our healing week of treatments. I may talk to friends in the area but am clear that I cannot visit. I am a slow learner, but I finally learned to be kind rather than nice.

Diana's Folly

Mary Jo West, San Clemente CA
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It was time for dinner.

"Diana, get out of the pool," I shouted.

Ignoring me, she dove under the water and swam away. I called her four more times, but she still refused to get out.

"That's it," I yelled, as I ran across the deck and leaped into the pool with all my clothes on.

Diana froze. Grabbing her arm, I dragged her to the shallow end of the pool. In a flash, she darted into the house up to her bedroom, slamming the door behind her.

My daughter never pulled that stunt again.

I Watched Movers Box Up a Life Today

Juliana Lightle
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I watched movers box up a life today, a life I thought left me 30-some years ago. I was wrong.

When our daughter and I cleaned out the refrigerator, we found a large pot filled with egusi stew, remnants of the last meal he cooked. I took the foot-long, hand-carved wooden spoon, scraped the dry bits clinging to the sides of the silver colored pot. Scrubbing it clean, smells of memory flooded my nostrils—cayenne, bitter leaves. It took me ten minutes, ten memory-laden minutes. Even scrubbed and dried, the pot's cayenne smell filled my nostrils, the distinct smell of West African food.

I watched movers box up a life today, a life I thought left me 30-some years ago. I was wrong.

Our daughter and I found papers and photos, items her father kept all these years, detailed memories of our life together. I could barely look at them, throat constricting, tears welling in the eyes of this woman who never cries. Our daughter, dismayed, told me to go outside. I walked down the quiet street, brown leaves scattered from autumn, unraked, a strange street, both urban and rural inside a city of nearly half a million residents. Is this where he walked to improve his health? Was I walking in his footsteps?

I watched movers box up a life today, a life I thought left me 30-some years ago.

Table for One

Dona Billey-Weiler, Niles MI
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Oddly, I am the only female in the restaurant. Requesting my usual corner table, I sit down and pull a book out of my bag, looking forward to a quiet lunch, catching up on some reading and watching a steady rain green up the grass on a wide expanse of lawn outside the windows. She greets me, hesitantly today, and takes my order.

For over an hour, I am distracted, watching her serve three different tables of men, all within earshot, each group self-absorbed—laughing, discussing baseball teams, workout regimens, portfolios and politics. Talking through her, around her and past her, it's like they don't or won't even see her. As she refills their cups and bread baskets for the umpteenth time, I wonder what must be going through her head. A few minutes later, she walks over to my corner nook.

"I've noticed your black eye and bruised cheek," I say quietly, my hand on top of hers as she reaches out to give me the bill. "That must've really hurt."

Eyes cast down, she mumbles "Yeah."

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah."

"Did someone hit you?"

Rambling, haltingly, averting my gaze, she begins. "... me and my boyfriend ... on the bed ... just fooling around ... only a wrench ... it fell on my face ... I'm okay." Pause. "He's a good guy ... really."

A long, uncomfortable silence fills the air around us. She doesn't move.

"May I give you a hug?" I ask.

"Yeah...okay...sure."

It is a long hug followed by her heavy sigh.

"You can leave him, you know. It is never okay to hit a woman."

I have taken some cash from my wallet and scribbled on a napkin the address and hot line number I'd googled for the local YWCA domestic abuse shelter. I put this in her hand and add, "Watch yourself."

She looks at it and murmurs a quiet thank you, sad, puffy eyes meeting mine for the first time. Wiping away tears that have started to fall, she lets me hug her one more time.

"Keep her safe, God," I pray out loud on the way to my car.

Just a Phone Call

Patricia Hollinger, Westminster MD
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It was May 2009
I wondered if I would ever be fine.

I was still reeling from the death of my son
Why! It seemed that his life had just begun

An ailing husband sat and stared,
While the TV continuously blared.

My life as I knew it was falling apart,
To begin to rebuild ... where should I start?

As I read the paper wondering what to do,
An obituary hit me ... out of the blue.

"His wife died?" I exclaimed in disbelief,
Why he must still be in the throes of grief.

"Call him, call him," an inner voice said,
He may be grieving, but he is not dead.

I called and suggested lunch sometime,
Being aware he might need more time.

"How about breakfast this Saturday?"
"Are you sure that soon would be okay?"

We met for breakfast where we met long ago,
Discovering that we still made each other glow.

Our marriage took place the following year,
Never once did we have any fear.

While hopes and dreams were being shattered,
That phone call was all that really mattered.

Haiku Story of a Japanese Garden

Sarah Fine, Toronto ON
e-circle 3

Small thoughts bubble up
By the Japanese garden
I search for silence

Water falls gently
Over grey and red stone walls
Ripples into waves

Stones center the pond
To an island of plants
Refuge for the birds

Summer heat descends
Envelops me as I wait
Within the silence

Meditation wind
In the Japanese garden
Blows away my thoughts

Safe Haven

Mary Jo West, San Clemente CA
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The first time
I stepped into this home,
I felt as if
I had lived here before.

For thirty years
we've labored
to enhance its character,
create our own environment.

Like a womb,
our 1950's bungalow
overlooking the sea
wraps around us,
sheltering
our contentment.

Memories are here,
gatherings together
enjoying unity,
strength and support
of family,
in good times and bad.

Our family's collective soul
is embedded in the walls.

For me,
leaving this home
would be like
losing a loving companion
who gave us this precious gift
of a safe haven.

Raindrop

Sally Jean Brudos, Atherton CA
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A raindrop in my hand. Smooth, elliptical. Clear enough to see
the fortune lines in soft pink tissue. Future lines that tell the tale of generations past: quilters and farmers, sewing bees and
shipbuilders, financiers and academicians.

A raindrop so clear it melts the image of the past before
it can mirror it. A raindrop that washes away the past and allows freedom of choice for the future.

Clouds above, grey and gathered, begin to drop not just one, but a few and then many wet, refreshing, life-saving morsels of
clear, clean, fresh water that quickly melt away.

The raindrop that I hold in my hand, a small elliptical raindrop of glass, will never melt. It is as round and smooth as a river
rock sanded and refined with years of rushing water flowing over it.

A fortune message.

Seasons

Sally Jean Brudos, Atherton CA
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They say there are no seasons in California.
They think they are right.

Gold seekers traving westward
Turning fertile farms into concrete cubes
Digging for Silicon Valley gold.

They are wrong.

Like all natives, I feel the seasons in my bones.
The air chills—
Apple harvest, grape crush, golden hills of wheat.
Fall has arrived.

Wind whips branches bare
sending warm blankets of fallen leaves
to coat the cold earth.
Rain and snow blow in from the north sky
Filling lakes and rivers, covering mountains white.
Winter has come.

The air warms—
Trees begin to bud, daffodils show their beauty,
Light rain showers refresh
the fragrance of jasmine and daphnia.
It is Spring.

Long light evenings, a dip in the pool,
Hot dogs, hamburgers, parades,
The sun is warm. A lazy life flows
Into Summer

We don't live by the gold-diggers
calendar. We live by the seasons.

Ratas in the Patio

Maya Lazarus, Caldwell TX
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When I call their attention
to the rats they tell me,
those aren't *ratas*, those
are rabbits, Ha, ha.
I see plain as the parrots
in their cage, these are rats—
fat, bold, fearless—
who have burrowed down
by the lemon tree and scurry around
while I eat my lunch.
Mediodia!! Daytime!
How arrogant can they be!
I buy some poison and throw it near
their hole. They ignore it.
Look at this *gringa*, they probably titter.
Does she not know how *inteligente* we are?

A Dog Named Rufo

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A Dog Named Rufo
patrols the paved street
where I stay in Cartagena.
Scruffy tan with white patches
of stiff fur plastered to his lean body.
I call his name and the breeze
carries it to his attentive ears. He knows
my voice. Knows that I feed him.
Follows me to the store,
hopping along on his injured foot,
hoping for more food,
but knows he's not allowed to go in.
My heart bleeds for the cruelty he's
endured—kids who throw rocks,
dogs who challenge him,
fleas and ticks who suck
his life force. Yet he has survived
with a Will much stronger than mine.

The Girl I Used to Be

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What happened to the girl I used to be?
Full of life and creativity.
Full of expectations and energy.
Look at the picture, it's easy to see
What happened to the girl I used to be?
Where did she go?
I need to know.

I prayed very hard that God would
Grant me the strength to do the best I could.
Daughter, wife, mother, friend,
Somewhere along the way to the end,
I disappeared.
Where did I go?
I need to know.

Days and months and years have passed.
Life has moved on oh so fast.
My body is old, my face is lined.
There's not much future but I no longer mind.
My time is now—time to explore.
And find the girl I used to be.
Me.

Flower Power

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I've had insomnia since my mid-teens. Usually it's manageable, but from time to time it bursts into full, evil flower and plays havoc with my health, my equilibrium, my outlook. Last summer it hit me hard, creeping in over April and May, two of mid-California's most pleasant months, and lasting well into the fall.

At first, I diligently honored my usual pursuits—writing, playing music, gardening, reading, taking a daily walk. And I practiced good sleep hygiene, trying especially to honor its cardinal rule: If at first you don't succeed, get up and do something boring. But the sleeplessness expanded relentlessly, joining with various geriatric ailments and medications to put me in a perpetual fog—a miasma, as a long-ago college art teacher would have put it.

Then one day, in trying to avoid the temptations of bed, I realized I could tweak that burdensome rule by resting and reading from time to time on the little sofa in my spare bedroom. What's more, I could, in lying there, take advantage of the view of my deck, and, beyond that, the flower garden that stretched the length of my house. Little by little, what caught my bleary eyes were not the vines, bushes, and plants I had labored so hard over, but a towering plant at mid-point along the garden, a hollyhock—a volunteer, its stalk covered with seed pods, its top adorned with a single magenta flower, right at my eye level, swaying with the breeze as if beckoning me.

So compelling was it that, after a few futile attempts to return to my book, I gave up and simply gazed at my statuesque garden guest. And gazed. And gazed. Nothing magical happened; the insomnia didn't retreat nor did the sleep deprivation symptoms dissipate markedly. But my mind, captivated by that lone flower, began to nod and bow in sympathy with its movements. And as the sun moved west along the length of the garden and the hollyhock fell into shadow, its image remained in my mind's eye until, ever so slowly, my internal sun began to shine again.

From the Heart

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The neurologist studied the MRI of my back, then he took his pen and pointed to the curvature of my spine.

“This is what is causing your lower back pain. You have adult scoliosis, along with arthritis. Now as I study this and look at old X-rays, I see scar tissues and a broken

tailbone that didn't heal properly.” He paused, looking at my husband and me as we sat in a sterile pale blue room not much larger than a closet.

I nodded. “I'm sure my tailbone was broken when I was a child. I've fallen off horses, crashed bicycles, jumped out of trees, and I've played golf since I was old enough to walk. Now that I'm retired and have time to play golf and travel, the pain and stiffness seems unrelenting.”

The doctor's face reflected a studied frown. “Have you been able to play golf this summer?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I began working with a trainer to stretch and strengthen my back through Pilates. That is all that has kept me going.” I smiled reluctantly, trying to make light of a serious moment. “Except for taking two to four Aleve a day when I'm playing golf.”

The neurologist sat across from me and looked me in the eyes, “When the day comes, not IF, but WHEN the day comes that you need surgery, a rod, plates, and screws will be used to stabilize your spine, but your days of playing golf will be over. The rod will keep your twisting mobility extremely limited.”

My mind drifted away to a golf course where we were all laughing, and then the tears began to pour as I thought of what I'd miss.

Quietly sitting in the car before the long drive home, my husband reached across and took my hand. “Love,” he smiled. “If the day comes, we will take up fishing together.”

In that little moment the clouds vanished from my eyes, and I could feel the lake water splash my face and smell the stink bait nearby. A smile beamed from my heart.

You Matter

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Busy Pens Writing Circle

Extend a hand
release a smile.

Say excuse me
and go the extra mile.

Say please often,
and thank you, too.

You are appreciated,
because I care about you.

The Mirror

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I look in the mirror and what do I see?
My Grandmother's face staring back at me.
Smile for a moment and there is another.
My daughter and then her daughter—how can it be?
Five generations—Immortality.

My Inheritance

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The week after my mother's funeral, I received a box sealed and addressed to me. There was a short note written in my mother's indecipherable hand: "I wish I could leave you more."

The box contained the red leather purse I had admired and that my mother had bought when she first moved away to be with her second husband. Inside, the purse was stuffed with my inheritance—volumes of yellow Top Value trading stamps. Back in the 1960s, these stamps were the modern equivalent of coupons, except instead of savings, you could buy things. I patiently pasted the stamps into coupon books until I had filled seven books. I hid the remaining two stamps inside a small tight pocket inside the purse.

Then, books in hand, I went to visit the catalog store to see what was available. And in the middle of the store there it was, like a beacon—a white wicker bassinet. It cost seven books. I didn't hesitate, since I was expecting my third baby in a few months. My two toddlers still slept in hand-me-down cribs, but this was new. I had never been able to afford a bassinet for my first newborns. Three years later I gave birth to my fourth baby, and when he grew too big for the tiny bed, it went up into the attic.

Then six grandchildren arrived and the bassinet began to travel and return, only to be shipped out once more. A cousin in Louisiana asked if she could borrow the little bed for her first baby, and then she went on to have five more children. Over the years the little bed has safely held 30 babies.

As for the future, I fully expect that one or two of my great-grandchildren will rest their tiny heads inside that cocoon of love. I know my dying mother could not have possibly known how rich her gift would make me feel 50 years into the future, as I gaze on the red leather purse that still holds the remaining yellow stamps in its pocket.

A Scarborough Marsh Morning

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w-circle 6

The mallards in the lake where I had camped for the night had their butts in the air and their heads buried beneath the water in search of breakfast when I got on the road on an early October morning some years back. It was when I and my then-canine companion Maggie were truly vagabonds.

Almost everything I owned had been pared down to what would fit into a 21-foot RV, which turned out to be my only home for nine years. One son-in-law used to jokingly tell his friends his mother-in-law was homeless. But mornings, such as this one would turn out to be, more than made up for my skimmed-down lifestyle.

Maggie, happy as always to once again be driving down the road, gave the mallards a passing glance, then yawned and gave me that wake-me-when-we-get-there look. She was still sleeping a short time later when I pulled into a parking lot at the edge of Maine's Scarborough Marsh, which my camping neighbors had told me was a great place to see birds.

I left Maggie sleeping in the co-pilot seat while I went off to explore. A wooden boardwalk took me through the middle of a salt water marsh, past islands of grass surrounded by patches of water, and a few birch trees, whose gold and red leaves shimmered in the sunlight. In the distance a belted kingfisher sat on a lone stump in a golden field of waving grasses.

Scarborough Marsh was created thousands of years ago when icebergs advanced and retreated across the land, leaving behind a depression into which the ocean crept. The marsh was filled with egrets, gulls, doves, chickadees, sparrows, robins, kingfishers and jays that kept luring me on.

The best bird sighting was an American bittern. The tall bird's streaky brown feathers and reach-to-the sky stance camouflaged it quite neatly among the reeds. It was only when I caught its movement to snatch a tidbit from the waterlogged ground that I saw it.

That glorious morning walk still lingers in my mind. I'm glad I didn't miss it.

Tule Fog

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Forty days of fog
sun never breaks through iron sky,
gray mist like water
clings to streets, obscuring views,
plucking colors from the trees.

Flicker of Life

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Towering tree sways
in cold, harsh, relentless wind.
Hummingbird nest gone.

The Other Person's Shoes

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I pulled out the vanity chair, perched myself upon its cushioned seat, adjusted the swivel mirror, and watched as Mother combed and rolled my hair. I gazed at the reflection looking back at me, my eyes roaming critically from one feature to another. I sucked in my stomach wishing it were flatter and poked my cheekbones wishing they were higher and rosier.

And although acne-free, my chubby, heart-shaped face was plain and bore no makeup. My dull brown hair was thin and unmanageable, my ears and lips were tiny, and my nose was slightly crooked. And behind my tortoise-brown, cat-eye shaped glasses were a pair of emerald-green eyes filled with self-doubt and teenage angst.

“Mother,” I said as I turned and faced her, “I wish I were beautiful and popular, like the other girls at high school.”

“You certainly can be!” She turned me back around and continued rolling my hair.

“So you’ll let me wear makeup and earrings and buy store-bought clothes?!”

“Those things are all well and good, but they’re nonsense. So, no.” Mother tightened the last curler in my hair. “Just put yourself in the other person’s shoes.” She walked away leaving me to ponder her idiomatic advice.

Experience taught me that Mother’s idiomatic advice was often seeded with wisdom and truth. So I followed her advice. But putting myself in other people’s shoes didn’t make me pretty or popular. Instead, it squelched my anxiety and subdued my narcissistic, adolescent ego. As a result, I became a mindful young woman who was respected and well-liked.

And employing Mother’s advice shaped me well beyond my high school years; her words taught me to think before reacting and speaking, and later transformed me into an empathetic co-worker, a compassionate counselor, and a non-confrontational teacher. Later, her advice helped me become a forgiving spouse and perceptive step-parent.

And most recently, Mother’s idiomatic advice allowed me to step into my character’s shoes – an important skill when writing a character-driven novel. So, I’d have to say that, yes, her words were a little thing. Yet, they truly mattered.

Enchanted Island

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In my dresser drawer sits a teacup-size plastic container, its original dull yellow color further dimmed by 50 years in 10 houses, nine cities, three states. I imagine my children coming across it years hence, curious enough to examine the contents—shells, tiny and varied, treasured for their intricacy, but equally for their evocation of a happy time, a rare place.

My husband and I were visiting Inisheer, the smallest of the Aran Islands, off Ireland’s West Coast. We had lodgings at a B&B run by a local family. After we’d unpacked and rested briefly, our bodies, kinked and achy after a half-day boat trip from Galway to the islands, demanded exercise. We consulted our hosts, who recommended a footpath that traversed the prettiest part of Inisheer.

The day was gorgeous—scarcely a cloud in the sky, the sun warming us, a gentle breeze caressing us, birds calling and flitting amongst the bracken. As in song, Ireland seemed “a little bit of heaven.” When we reached the crescent of beach at our path’s end, we stopped to honor the vast blue reaches of the Atlantic, then reposed on the beach and ran our hands along its surface, which turned out to be not sand but shells.

The shells seeming an appropriate souvenir of this magical island, I selected a handful of the most distinctive ones and squeezed them into a jeans pocket. We then headed back to our lodgings, where, after stowing the shells in a sock, we ate the usual Irish dinner of mutton and potatoes, enjoyed a Guinness and the lilting Irish of some local working men at a little bar, then called it a day—one of many, during which we admired the horses that roamed the harbor beach, investigated an ancient, ruined church near-buried in the sand, and visited a Danish weaver in his stone house on the beach.

Back home, we transferred the shells to the plastic container and stowed it in the drawer, from which we occasionally take it out to recall the many rare attractions of that far-off island.

Of Horses and Dreams

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Harnessing creativity is a challenge! The task reminds me of one of my fervent desires: to ride a horse. Once, in the mountains of Oaxaca, Mexico, while on a missionary trip, I sat on a donkey. But I’ve never sat on a horse. I long for the moment when, at a dude ranch, I can awaken to a hearty cowboy breakfast served on blue country plates, laden with grilled pork chops, scrambled eggs, tortillas,

spicy salsa, and a cup of coffee, freshly brewed over an outdoor fire. Afterwards, I'll walk to the corral and select a golden palomino or pinto. Helped by a ranch hand (just like in the novels), I'll boost myself onto the saddle, hoping my exclamations intermingled with delight and fear will not spook Callie (I already named her).

Alongside cowgirls and cowboys, we'll trot off on a path through woods heavy with sturdy Spanish oaks and stately red oaks. A sudden clearing will reveal the Texas landscape bursting with bluebonnets, Indian paintbrushes, and pink primroses. In the distance, I can see cows, slowly munching on thick, green grass with flies fluttering around their dropped patties. White cattle egrets hover nearby. That's my dream.

Not gonna happen! After all, how many times have I searched for just the right time (without rain, snow, or sleet in the forecast) and the ideal location (not too far from home) where my sister Ana and I can bunk in a rustic lodge for a fun weekend?

So, while riding a horse has long been a dream of mine, I must confess to a certain little fear. What if I fell off? Would I get a head concussion? Break a hip? Or I don't know what else could happen.

Hmmm ... Taking the reins and heading back to the subject of creativity: Fear flutters subtly when I contemplate the manuscripts awaiting completion. Will my work still be relevant? Will my efforts be rejected?

Is it really fear, tinged with procrastination? It's time to harness my apprehensions and realize this dream. After all, creativity is not a little thing to ignore.

Good Men Die

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I didn't know that my husband of 48 years would die that day. He walked into the hospital 16 days before for a routine procedure, but things went horribly wrong. Complication after complication rendered him unable to do anything for himself and in constant pain.

Unable to speak, he used his index finger to write on my palm: "Put me down."

"Oh no, oh no," I sobbed. "Please don't ask me that. I need you to come home."

Put him down? The way we did our beloved animals when they were suffering and beyond help? We both would pet and talk to them while our veterinarian administered the injection which brought relief. Could I do the same for my beloved partner, my hero, my best friend? He begged me with his eyes until I knew I had to find the strength to comply.

During his illness, we reminisced about how we met, our first kiss, falling in love. He said that I was the best thing that ever happened to him.

Now I spoke to the nurses, and one suggested I bring in Lulu, our tiny Papillon dog. Joe had entertained them with stories about her, plus they knew we had no children or nearby relatives.

Driving back to the hospital, I thought of the night I left there in an unexpected thunder storm. I splashed across the parking lot trying to avoid an army of earthworms who were desperately seeking higher ground. I felt as lowly as one of them.

Lulu snuggled next to Joe, and I held his hand. The nurse disconnected monitors, IV's, and oxygen, and administered morphine in his vein. Soon, he slipped away.

On this worst day of my life, the little thing that mattered was the fur ball of unconditional love tucked under my arm as we left the hospital.

That Cat

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The gray and tan-striped cat crossed my path
holding a gray mouse in its mouth
almost as big as its head,
distracting me from the poem in my head.
I startled, looked around the corner
as it walked up the hill.
Now I am determined to blank out
that image of that beautiful little cat,
and forget it could commit such violence
so foreign to this place and my day,
and think about the mass
of yellow alstroemeria and pink roses
almost as tall as I am,
the browning grass behind the solarium,
the wall of glass around me that streams in
hot bright light to warm
my always chilly hands and body and feet,
and how the white waves
seem to float and undulate
as they brush up against the rocks below.
They could lull me to sleep
like a cat on a full stomach as I write.
Then that beautiful cat sails
back to mind and I'm lost
behind a smoke screen of serenity.
So why not ask the question,
did that cat like the mouse meal
it had for lunch,
or did the proof of its kill
go out with the trash?

The Small Thing That Mattered

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“She wants a photo of you two together,” Richard, our adoption counselor said, concerned. “It’s the only thing your file is missing.”

“I’m not sure we have one!” I said. “I’m always taking the pictures so we’re never together in them. Why’s this so important?”

“Birth-mom wants proof that you’re a couple. A picture would put her at ease.”

“I have a small one—seven years old. If that works, I’ll try to find it.”

“It’s perfect and you probably still look the same!”

We worried about privacy, but worried more that without a photo she’d reject us. After she’d given birth, Vicki asked Richard to arrange a conference call among us. We spoke. Richard monitored our call.

“If I place my baby for adoption,” she said, “You’re my choice for parents. I know you’ll raise him right, plus he’ll get a brother.”

That night Vicki decided we’d be Michael’s adoptive parents. Ecstasy was short-lived.

“We should all meet tomorrow,” she announced.

Richard intervened. “Okay, I’ll arrange something, say 6:00 p.m., at that Mexican restaurant you like?”

Worries about meeting overwhelmed me. Would we seem ancient to her? Would she change her mind? What if our four-year old revealed personal information?

“Excellent!” she said. “And make sure you bring David. Sure, I want to meet my baby’s parents but I’ve got to see his brother.”

The next night, we gathered around a table in her favorite restaurant. Amidst tears, hugs and kisses, she signed legal documents. “We’re so lucky we found each other! So lucky my baby will grow up with a family I can’t give him. This is the hardest decision I’ll make in my whole life!” she said.

Dinner over and tears shed, we headed toward the door. “Your home is beautiful,” Vicki added, “Big enough so he’ll have his own room!”

Larry dwelled upon her last remarks, then asked me, “We agreed to maintain anonymity, so why’d you give her a photo of our house? Our address is right above the window.”

“It’s not our house. It’s us in the Cotswolds at Greenway Manor House!”

Something Unexpected

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 Susan Albert’s WIP Circle

Grampy Gene doesn’t have any grandchildren of his own, but they call him that anyway because he’s my partner of nearly twenty-five years and I’m their grandmother. They lost their birth grandfather to cancer only six months ago, so he’s taken on a bigger significance in their lives. He’s still just a step-granddaddy.

But how do we measure love?

We spent the winter at our house up on Puget Sound and spent a lot of quality time there with these two granddaughters, aged five and seven. My son brought them up to the island to celebrate Christmas, a tradition I hope to repeat every year.

I made dough-daddies just like my mother did on Christmas mornings when I was a child. As I drift into old age, reenacting moments like that are like grabbing a little piece of immortality, carrying things down to be repeated, keeping traditions alive.

Gene and I love to ice skate and we wanted to teach the girls, so we all met at a rink in Shoreline, rented skates and took off on the ice.

Catherine was game from the beginning. She grimly pushed herself out there, counting her splatters on the ice like a punishment. Emily clung to the sides mostly but braved the ice if I held her hand.

And Gramps was doing great. He’s a good skater, back on the ice after a few years. He was just getting his “ice legs,” skating backwards and doing leg lifts on one skate, but keeping his eyes on the girls.

Oops! He’s not so young anymore. Splat! Right on all fours on the ice.

“No, no, it’s nothing. I’ll just get some ice,” he insisted.

“Marilea, will you drive? My wrist hurts,” he privately whispered later.

Next day, X-rays at Urgent Care, double wrist fracture, painkillers.

“Geez, Marilea! Why’d you tell the kids? Now they’ll feel guilty we took them skating.”

Next morning, before she left for school, Catherine softly climbed into bed where Gene was sleeping, kissing him on the cheek.

“I love you, Gramps. Feel better soon.”

Great Job

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Busy Pens Writing Circle

A young man was stocking shelves at a grocery where I shop. I noticed he was humming to himself and greeted everyone as they passed by with a smile. He often helped a customer find an item and returned to his work. Everyone he greeted and helped stepped away with a smile, too.

I felt compelled to return to him after I had finished my shopping to let him know how much I appreciated the job he was doing. He said that his grandmother had told him to always do the best he could at everything he did. He thanked me.

I knew his grandma would be proud. What a nice young man.

One Afternoon

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We turned left on 24th Street, driving slowly as the narrow road wound up and up.

There was a light rainfall,
just enough to sprinkle our windshield,
but not enough to put our wipers on.
The hills were bright green, like technicolor,
and flecked with dark green clumps of trees
and patches of mustard.
When the sun appeared,
they had an iridescence
like mounds of emerald chips.

Soon we were in wine country
outside of Paso Robles, with rows
and rows of budding vines surrounding us.
We parked at the winery furthest out
and were shocked by the chill wind—
a reminder that we were only half way
between winter's cold and the warmth of spring.
Still, we sat on the patio, sipping deep red wine
and watching the blades of grass sway with the gusts
as birds like sentinels chirped their songs.
We found another not so twisty way back down.
By the time we arrived at our inn,
it had turned dark and cold.

Baby's First Haircut

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e-Circle 3

When my oldest son is born, he aspirates meconium and develops a fever right after birth. He also has significant orthopedic problems, one leg shorter than the other, bilateral club feet, four toes on his right foot. The doctors do not know if these problems are indicative of even more serious chromosomal abnormalities. He is whisked away to the NICU, leaving my husband and me alone, terrified, heartbroken. I am allowed to stay in the hospital in a "nesting room" in an abandoned wing waiting to be remodeled. I am grateful for the opportunity. I can be near Brendan; the nurses call up to my room when he wants to be nursed.

The NICU is not an easy place for any of us. Brendan is eight pounds, three ounces, a huge baby compared to the tiny fragile infants lying next to him. He is sturdy, loud and barely fits in those tiny incubators. His fists hit the sides; he yowls his indignation.

The doctor visits daily with news: "The nurses aren't used to babies that eat on demand." "He cries very loudly."

Once, he peed all over the doctor's tie. "We ordered a kidney function test, but with a stream like that we aren't worried!"

One morning, the doctor tells me, "Brendan pulled out his IV. All the IVs in the NICU are too tiny for your big boy. They had to shave his hair and put it in the side of his head. Don't worry; he is fine."

When they call me to nurse, I am even more nervous than usual. I reach his bassinet and see that someone has left an index card next to him. There are a few hairs taped to it with the words: "Hi Mom, This is from my first haircut."

I scoop him up as alarms go off in the next tiny bed. The nurses move calmly, efficiently, dealing with crises. I'll never know which of these amazing people took time out of their busy, stressful day, to bring a scared, new mom a bit of normalcy.

Jo Virgil, True Words Editor, has been a Story Circle Network member for many years and recently accepted a position on the SCN Board (Publication and Program member) and to serve as editor for True Words. Jo has a Master's Degree in Journalism and has worked as a reporter, as a writing workshop teacher, as Community Relations Manager for Barnes & Noble, and as Community Outreach Coordinator for the Texas Governor's Committee on People with Disabilities. Writing and sharing stories are her passion.





From the Blogs:

One Woman's Day



by Linda Hoye

Recently, on our One Woman's Day blog, Mary Jo Doig shared "A Mindful Meditation of our Women's Life-Writing Circle" that reminded me how precious it is when we come together to share the stories of our lives. I like to imagine One Woman's Day as a virtual coming together—a circle of another kind—where we open windows into the lives of women we might otherwise not have an opportunity to come to know. We share life, laughter, tears, ordinary, and extraordinary moments; we come to understand that we have more in common with one another than we realize.

I invite you to take time to read Mary Jo's meditation and consider sharing a glimpse into a day in your life too. Learn more, and find out how you can contribute, at: <http://onewomansday.wordpress.com/about/>

We gather in our quiet, secluded space at the recently constructed, variegated-beige stone Crozet Library, bringing the life-story we have written in preparation at home. We greet each other warmly as each woman arrives, and ask how things have been since we last gathered. "We missed you last time," or "How is your arthritis/pneumonia/or other recent ailment healing?" or "Here's the book I promised to bring you last time," are some recent observations I've heard. When we have caught up with everyone's well-being, we transition to preparation to share our stories, written from thematic prompts given at our previous gathering two weeks earlier.

I feel a change within myself then—a melting away of all the information that flows like a river through my mind nearly all day, every day—sort of like turning off a news broadcast that leaves blessed silence in its place. A woman volunteers to read her story to begin our shared two-hour gathering. I take a deep breath and exhale any stray interior distraction that might be lingering and prepare to fully listen to her words. She speaks her first sentence and everything else evaporates except her voice and what I hear in the words of this story of her life. She reads through it all and when finished we spontaneously affirm whatever the story has stirred within us. "I've been in that place, too," or "What a powerful story you've written," or "My favorite part of the story was when you said, 'this' or 'that.'"

I listen closely to my heart's response to the story and then share those thoughts with the writer, as does each of our seven members. When I look around the circle at each

woman, I see we are as diverse as apples on a tree. After we've read and heard and discussed all our stories, we plan our topic for the next gathering. When we leave this place, we go home to different communities, different churches, and varied lifestyles; we have different ethnic backgrounds and hold dissimilar political ideals; we live alone or with family members or with pets. Although we seem at first to be so different, each time we share stories from our lives—and share laughter, sadness or tears, or other emotions—comfort or celebration—we form a richer bond. We discover we are not so different, after all.

Recently, we each shared "The Story I Don't Want to Write." When we met two weeks afterward, we agreed that was the moment in time when we opened a clearer, deeper bond with each other. We had known from previous gatherings that when we shared difficult stories, we were in a space filled with trust, respect, and confidentiality.

I pondered our time together that afternoon while driving home, those stories that had been heard and responded to with such honor, support, and compassion. Some women had also shared their own connecting threads with a particular story. And I wondered—avid, life-long mystery reader that I am—*what was that silent, deeper layer that circled between us? After all, women have been sharing their stories for centuries.*

When the answer came to my heart, I knew it was absolutely right.

Our time together was not only nurturing, it was sacred.



(This piece was first published on Mary Jo's blog, Musings From a Patchwork Quilt Life at <https://maryjod.wordpress.com/2017/04/07/a-mindful-meditation-of-our-womens-life-writing-circle/>)

Mary Jo Doig, a Story Circle Network member for fifteen years, is an avid reader, writer, quilter, knitter, gardener, cook, editor, and blogger. She lives in a small, eclectic town in Albemarle County, Virginia where she has an exquisite mountain view from her writing room window.



StoryCircleBookReviews.org
Review by Trilla Pando

SCN's Book Reviews

Featured Review

Thin Mint Memories:

Scouting for Empowerment through the Girl Scout Cookie Program

by Shelley Johnson Carey

I began reading *Thin Mint Memories* right at the peak of Girl Scout cookie season, so when I encountered a lively group of girls conducting a booth in front of my supermarket you can guess that I loaded up on several flavors—Thin Mints as well as S'mores, a 2017 brand new flavor. I proceeded to munch my way through this book which offers almost as many approaches to the Girl Scout cookie story as the cookies have flavors.

Scattered through the text between the chapters are personal memories of grown-up Scouts. These intriguing recollections triggered memories of my own: the sheer terror of standing in my Brownie uniform all by myself knocking on a strange front door with my empty order book in my hand—and my daddy hidden behind a nearby tree. (Girl Scouts have stressed safety from the beginning.) Thank you, Mrs. Colley. I made the sale. In later years as a customer I never bought cookies from a parent—"send the Scout and I'll buy the cookie."

The Scouts stress the selling experience for their members. They are not using the cookies merely as a fund raiser, but also as a means of teaching important skills to their members: goal setting, decision making, money management, people skills, and business ethics. The title of the book captures them all—"Empowerment."

Carey begins at the beginning with the life of the person who made it happen—Juliette Low of Savannah, Georgia. Even Girl Scouts will find some surprises here, for Carey burrowed through the Girl Scout archives to get forgotten facts that augment the traditional story of its founder. She moves right on to the business history of the

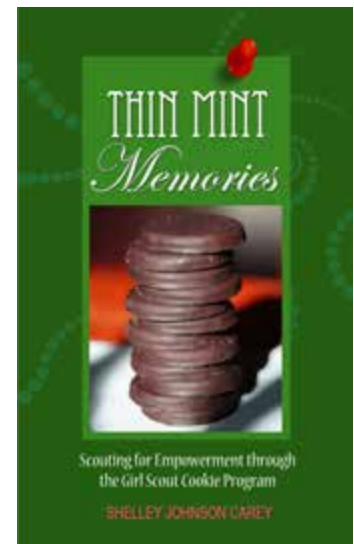
cookies from a few homemade offerings made by individual troops to the huge enterprise it is today—with revenues rising into the hundreds of millions. But the author keeps it personal—even offering the recipe for the original cookie.

Going from the inclusive to the specific, the book focuses on Girl Scout Troop 2288 near Washington D.C., led by full-of-life Jennifer M.

This gives us a good look not only at cookie sales today, but a full view of some great Girl Scouts. Here is empowerment in action.

Girls Scouts and former Girl Scouts are the obvious audience for this book, but I won't be surprised to see it gain broader appeal. As a former university professor of economics, I can see this book as a fine case study not only in economics but in management and marketing. Did I enjoy the book? I did and I was back at the supermarket the next weekend loading up on more cookies and sharing my book with those fine young businesswomen.

Girl Scouts are some smart cookies.



About Trilla Pando: I live in my favorite city, Houston, Texas where I write, volunteer at the Museum of Fine Arts, enjoy all the fun a city offers. For years in both Texas and Georgia I wrote about food and memories in a weekly column "Stirring up memories." That remains my writing interest. Since 2000 when I joined Story Circle I've been a contributing editor to the *Story Circle Journal* and a member of the board. In 2005, I became president for a two-year term. I particularly relish writing book reviews. I'm delighted to have become a SuperNova Reviewer. Reviewing has made me both a more careful reader, as I seek to capture the essence of a book, and a more adventuresome one, as I enjoy the fun of sharing a new experience and books I might not otherwise have chosen.

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Our SCN members offer writing-related help in 9 areas: Author; Editors (content, manuscript, copyediting, proofreading); Freelancers; Ghostwriters; Marketing Services; Publishers / Publishing Services; Speakers; Teachers / Coaches / Mentors; Web Services. If you're looking for help, look here first. If you'd like to be featured in our new directory here and online, please go here: www.storycircle.org/frmjoinscn.php

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Jeanne Guy: Author, speaker and self-awareness writing workshop facilitator. She is a member of SCN's Board of Directors & the 2014 & 2016 Conference Co-chair. www.jeanneguy.com
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Linda Hasselstrom: Poet and nonfiction writer who conducts writing retreats on her ranch on the plains of southwestern South Dakota. With a BA in English and Journalism, and a MA in American Literature, she has been a teacher of writing for more than 40 years. www.windbreakhouse.com
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Juliana Lightle: High School English teacher whose career experiences include college administrator, corporate manager, author, horse breeder and trainer, and educator. She currently writes, sings, and wanders the world. <https://julianalightle.com>
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Donna Marie Miller: Donna Marie Miller is the author of *The Broken Spoke Legend: More than 50 Years as Austin's Favorite Honky-Tonk*, to be published in 2017. Her articles have appeared in several magazines including: *Elmore*, *Creative Screenwriting*, *American Rhythm*, *Austin Food*, *Austin Fusion*, *Austin Monthly*, *Fiddler*, and *The Alternate Root*. <https://donnamariemillerblog.com>
Freelancer


Sallie Moffitt: Award-winning author whose work has been anthologized in Story Circle's *True Words Anthology* and published in literary journals such as *Ten Spurs Vol. 5* and *Ten Spurs Vol. 9*. She has worked as an editor and has judged writing contests.
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Kim Pearson: Kim's ghostwriting services have helped over 45 others become authors of polished, professional, and compelling books and memoirs. Her book *Making History* shows writers, especially memoir writers, how an individual's life participates in and contributes to "big" history.
Author, Ghostwriter

Annie Quinn: Author, publisher and speaker, Annie "Enjoys the Moments" of writing, reading, spending time with family and friends and sharing her journey in publishing with others. Annie supports her local writing community by hosting monthly writers meet-ups in Newport Beach, CA. <http://ballycottonpress.com>
Publisher, Speaker

Amber Starfire: Amber Lea Starfire is an author, editor, and creative writing teacher whose passion is helping others tell their stories. Her website, <http://writingthroughlife.com>, is a dynamic education resource focusing on legacy, memoir, journaling, and personal essay writing. There, you will find community and online learning support to achieve your writing goals.
Author, Editor, Teacher

Judy Watters: Freelance writer and publisher, Judy Sheer Watters has been published in newspapers, Guidepost, and several devotional publications. She is author of *The Road Home: The Legacy that was, is and is to Come* and a contributor in *Moments in Time*. She and her husband live in Spring Branch, Texas. They love to spend time with their three grown children, one dog and two grandcats. <http://franklinscribes.com>
Author, Freelancer, Publisher

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Out On a Limb

LifeWriting Competition

Enter by June 30, 2017

*You are invited to enter SCN's eighteenth annual lifewriting competition—
 a chance to win a cash prize and see your work in print and online!*

SCN is proud to announce its eighteenth annual lifewriting competition, named in honor our founder, best-selling author Susan Wittig Albert.

Topic: Out on a Limb

Sometimes we have to go out on a limb to get what we want or need. We have to take a risk, even though we're afraid it won't pay off—or we're just afraid, period.

"Fear's contagious, but so is courage."

—Betty Williams, Nobel Laureate,
 winner of the Peace Prize

"There came a time when the risk to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom."

—Anais Nin

"The trouble is: If you don't risk anything, you risk even more."

—Erica Jong

Awards: One prize of \$100, one prize of \$75, and two prizes of \$50 each. Winning stories will be published in a special section of the September *Story Circle Journal* and will be featured on the SCN's award-winning website. Upon the judges' recommendation, other entries may be published in later issues of the *Journal* and in other SCN print or on-line publications.

We invite you to write about a time you've gone out on a limb. This might be an occasion when you discovered that you had little control over your situation and were left hanging, with little expectation of success. Or it could be a time when you dared to stretch for something out of your reach, or you took a huge risk with little expectation of reward. Tell us your out-on-a-limb story.

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

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Looking Ahead: True Words



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.php>

Use these topics, or write on a topic of your choosing for upcoming issues of the *Journal*:

- September, 2017: Music and Memories (deadline July 15)
- December, 2017: Lessons Learned (deadline October 15)

SCN's Donors' Circle: Women Supporting Women

SCN's Donors' Circle is currently made up of 19 women who have contributed over \$5,600 to our programs in the years 2016-2017. It also includes the women who have upgraded their memberships to a "Friend," "Supporter," "Donor," or "Professional" level. You can see the current membership here: <http://www.storycircle.org/Donations/donors.shtml>

A Date for Your Calendar July 19-22, 2018

SCN's biannual women's writing conference is scheduled for July 19-22, 2018, in Austin, TX. The Wyndham Hotel, site of the last five conferences, will again host the event. Room rates will be \$109/double occupancy. The SCN board decided to move the conference from spring to summer to avoid a room rate increase.

"The Wyndham Hotel has been an excellent venue for us," says Joyce Boatright, conference co-chair, "and we think the summer dates will work well for many, especially teachers." Be sure to put it on your calendar. And watch for details in the September Journal.

If you're a member of the Donors' Circle, please accept our gratitude for your generosity and support. If you'd like to join, please go here <http://www.storycircle.org/frmdonate.shtml> to choose the program you would most like to support: SCN's Annual Fund, Memorial Fund, Conference Scholarships for Women of Color, or our Sugar Bowl. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you!