



STORY CIRCLE JOURNAL

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The newsletter for women with stories to tell

Stories from the Heart IX: It's a Wrap!

by Joyce Boatright



Story Circle Network hosted its ninth national conference in July. Despite the triple digit temperatures across Texas, 68 women met in the well air-conditioned Wyndham Hotel in Austin. We shared, learned, networked, and bonded as only women can.

At least two SCN members posted about the conference. This was Teresa Lynn's first conference and Len Leatherwood's fourth.

Teresa writes: "It was my first time attending this conference, but it won't be my last." She was delighted by the number of quality workshops in the

program. "There were too many workshops to attend all of them—that's always a problem at writing conferences—but the presentations I did get to were terrific. Some of the topics: using Meyers-Briggs personality types to develop character and introduce conflict; tips on how to keep a travel journal that's more than a list of "today we went to..."; building your platform; overcoming the guilt of spilling family secrets when writing a memoir; how to shape your voice; and getting unstuck."

Teresa presented a workshop on book creation for members who were

Continued p 4



SWA LifeWriting Competition Winners Announced

Judges for the Susan Wittig Albert LifeWriting Competition have selected **Linda Wisniewski**

as the first place winner for her entry "Thirty-Two Words for Peace." Her story appears on page 6 in this issue.



Debra Dolan was awarded second place for her entry "Temporarily No More" and **Susan Corbin** won third for "Uncertain Heart." Their entries can be viewed through a link on the SCN home page. Big congratulations to all the winners!

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Letter From SCN's President



Dear SCN Sisters—

Our conferences have always been wonderful, but this one takes the cake! It was an experience that we'll never forget, and marks a new chapter in the life of Story Circle. This is my last presidential letter to you—and an introduction to our new president Jeanne Guy, who will be leading SCN into its next decade. So it's a good time to look back, and look forward. And there's a lot to see in both directions!

• **At SCN, we honor outstanding women writers.** Pat Bean introduces us to two of our 2017 Sarton Award winners (pp. 10, 14), with more interviews to come in later issues.

- **We love women's stories**—women of all ages, all times and places! Like Lara King's story (p. 5) about her grandmother. Lara is mentored by Len Leatherwood, whose work with young women is boosting several fine writers. And like Kitty Anderson's diary, recording her experiences in 1861 Texas and Mexico (p. 13), reviewed by Susan Schoch. Wonderful women's voices, speaking up, speaking out!
- **We have a lot of stories to tell!** The *Story Circle Journal*, filled with stories by our members, is in its 21st year of publication. In 2017, we published selections from our annual anthology, *Real Women Write*, in a collection called *Inside and Out*. It has been so successful that we are now considering publishing our 2018 anthology as a book.
- **And there are more exciting stories in the works!** For example, our online class program is planning an Italian writing adventure. You are going with us, aren't you? Check it out: back cover.



As we look ahead, SCN's third decade promises even more—and our new president, Jeanne Guy, is just the woman to lead us. Jeanne has been a member since 2003 and a board member since 2009. She has presented at our conferences and Writing from Life and LifeLines workshops, is a member of the Austin Reading Circle, and serves as a Sarton juror. She writes daily (well, almost) and is currently seeking a publisher for her memoir, "You'll Never Find Us." She believes that the

most important story you'll ever hear is the one you tell yourself. And to help others find and create a better story, she offers monthly Austin-area "Re-story Circles," described on her website: <http://www.jeanneguy.com/>

I've known Jeanne for 15 years and admire her dedication to women's story and her commitment to the Story Circle Network. She's a high-energy woman with a wry sense of humor and an often irreverent (but never snarky) voice that will make you chuckle—and then *think*. In fact, I can't imagine a better introduction than her essay, "The Grip of the Gripe: Shut the Duck Up" (p. 9).

Go read it. Now. And smile—that's Jeanne talking. You're going to love her. Guaranteed.

With joy for your journey, always,
Susan

Susan Wittig Albert is the founder and a past president of SCN. Visit her website:
www.susanalbert.com

Story Circle Journal

The quarterly newsletter of Story Circle Network, the Journal is 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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A Sharing Circle

Story Circle Network benefits tremendously from the generosity of our members. *Thank you* to all these women who currently help to sustain SCN by adding a donation to their membership. Learn more on our membership page:

<http://www.storycircle.org/frmjoinscn.php>



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.

Inside and Out:

Women's Truths, Women's Stories

Excitement about this new Story Circle book continues! One of our authors, Sipra Roy, recently shared this picture of herself with her new favorite volume.

Reviews continue to be glowing. Here are a few from our Amazon page. And if you haven't yet read *Inside and Out*, treat yourself! Then tell your friends, and give us a review. Let's amplify the voices of our SCN writers!

"I wasn't sure what the stories would be when I ordered it, but have found so much that has reached my soul. Real women/real life/honest thoughts and feelings are expressed so clearly. *Inside and Out*...excites me to be more open with my own feelings and events that have colored my life."

Elizabeth Vaughan – Jan 31, 2018

"Compassion, heartache, growing pains, triumph—grow along with 76 writers from the Story Circle Network. Ordinary women courageously, laughingly, delightfully telling their stories. 76 author voices provide a pretty big range of styles and perspectives to enjoy...[and] a great variety of topics making for an enlightening read."

Elizabeth Lee-Miller – March 7, 2018

"If you're into women's voices, women's words, women's lives, this anthology has it all."

Susan Weidener – June 21, 2018



Continued from p. 1, It's A Wrap



considering indie publishing or who just wanted to understand the process. There were dozens more workshops as well.

Plus, she adds, “There were readings by award-winning authors, open-mic night, inspiring keynote speakers (Linda Joy Myers and Bird Mejia), book signings....

and so many interesting people to meet and visit with, that I forgot to take a single picture!”

Like Teresa, Len is a board member who writes about the conference as a place “where I had the honor of spending time in the company of the most open, honest, loving, and wise women I’ve had the occasion to meet in a very long time.”



For Len, since this was not her first conference, a big part of her experience involved reconnecting to women she had not seen in two years.

She states: “I arrived at a dinner for the SCN board the night before [the conference opened] and there I was seeing these women I only ‘talk’ to mainly on the internet. I felt shy for just an instant, then spotted my beloved Pat Bean, who has been in my e-circle writing group since I joined SCN ten years ago. Pat was wearing her usual tie-dye tee shirt and the minute she saw me, she stood up and held her arms wide open. I stepped right into them and she pulled me close. I can’t describe how loved I felt with that hug. Before the night was through, we were all laughing around that table, sharing stories about our lives. When we stood to leave, we hugged and loved on each other as if there had never been any distance between us at all.”

Len presented a pre-conference workshop on Flash Fiction/Flash Memoir. She teaches the subject online as part of SCN’s online class offerings and she is a frequent award-winner in flash story competitions.

After her own workshop ended, Len attended Susan Albert’s pre-conference workshop about paths to publishing. Len notes in her blog that Susan was “open, honest,

unassuming, and generous despite the fact that she is an award-winning author or co-author of over 100 books of fiction and non-fiction (and yes, I counted them on her website). She recounted her process of writing over the years—she even wrote as Carolyn Keene for some of my favorite Nancy Drew books—and she shared her surprises, setbacks, and lessons.”

Commenting on the two keynote speakers, Len describes Linda Joy Myers as “humble, self-disclosing, real” as she talked about the power of women breaking their silence to express their personal truths.

Bird Mejia amazed and delighted everyone when she “brushed out her beautiful curled hair to show us the power of the ‘wild’ woman...her locks extended full and wide into a glorious fan that framed her entire head.” The action served as a visual underscoring of the importance of embracing our true selves and sharing that pride with other women.



Sarton Award winners and finalists participated in a noon reading of excerpts from their books in historical, contemporary, young adult fiction, and memoir/biography. They also joined Susan Albert as a panel to answer questions about their process and their ideas and inspirations for their next projects.

Len agrees with Teresa that the myriad of workshops offered “insight and advice on a whole host of topics,” forcing participants to make hard decisions regarding which workshop to attend.

“In between, there were countless conversations about writing, life, and each other,” Len writes. “The entire weekend could be summed up with these words: love, kindness, generosity, openness, connection, sisterhood, learning, and hugs.”

I heartily agree with both Teresa and Len in their individual evaluations of the conference. Susan Albert, Peggy Fountain, and I were honored to be the co-chairs for the 2018 event. We look forward to Jeanne Guy assuming the presidency and leading the SCN board in determining where our 2020 conference will be. Start saving your money now. You won’t want to miss it!





Our Future is Female!

Lara King, a Michigan high school student who has taken several Story Circle Network online classes, has won a Silver Medal in the Scholastic Artists and Writers contest, the oldest and most prestigious writing contest in the US for youth (grades 7-12). Her prize-winning essay, "Ship of Theseus," was selected from 350,000 submissions by young artists and writers from all over the country, placing it in the top 1% of all submissions. We here at Story Circle Network are very proud of Lara and her accomplishment!

Ship of Theseus

by Lara King

Theseus's Paradox: A wooden boat has its original boards replaced with new boards over time. If all of the original boards are eventually replaced, is it the same boat?

Slipping my hand through the nook of my grandmother's arm, I steadied her as she shuffled to the piano bench and sat down. Gazing up at me as if I were a stranger, she pursed her shriveled mouth, but, by then, her thought had disappeared. Nonetheless, she straightened her spine, positioned her fingers, and began to play the piano.

Like crops infiltrated with saltwater, my grandmother's disease had not only corroded her memories, but also prevented her from cultivating new ones. The vestiges of her childhood, education, travels, and family barely remained accessible. Recently, her youngest child had been missing from her list of children that she recited. She had never known her grandchildren. Even after I spent hours with my grandmother, she could never produce a name or label for me.

Every day, she wore the same heavy layers of clothes and the same indifferent countenance, corrugated in wrinkles from a lifetime she could not remember. I could not fathom her world; a world consisting solely of the random thoughts that stuck in her mind like gum on a sidewalk. Within a single visit, she owned the title of 'fastest runner in Scotland' numerous times in answer to questions, and attributed every background sound to her brother, long dead, entering her New Zealand home of over thirty years. Over time, these disjointed responses grew more meaningful to me; they were all she had left.

Wandering throughout her house, I examined the plein air paintings and family photographs hanging on the walls. Searching for any hint of my grandmother's identity through her long-forgotten possessions led me to dead ends. I imagined her sculpting her identity like an intricate sandcastle on a beach, only for the ocean waves to ebb

away at the foundation until it collapsed into an amorphous mound.

One aspect of her identity, however, seemed immune to the tide: her love of music.

Her translucent hands, purple veins beneath, danced across the piano keys. They did not require her eyes, foggy with cataracts, to hit each note perfectly. She chose melodies from either dormant memories or song requests and executed them perfectly, like a human jukebox.

If a person has their original memories stripped away over time, how much of the same person remains?

Was my grandmother the same person? The same avid bird-watcher who could, at one time in her life, accurately identify every sacred kingfisher, tui and fantail that visited her garden, even if she now only recognized the creatures as colorful masses? The same dotting mother of six, despite forgetting the existence of one child? Or was this version of her simply the palimpsest of her former existence?

I could not tell. As my grandmother reached the end of the song, I wished I knew. In face of loss, she clung onto the last intact aspect of her identity. Like the band that played as the Titanic sank deeper and deeper into the ocean, she not only endured the vicissitudes, but also maintained the most fundamental joy in her life.

And like the Titanic, my grandmother was a doomed vessel. She died two years later and I grieved not only for her passing, but also the role she was meant to play in my life. While her favorite piano and bagpipe songs were playing at her funeral, I thought about her love of music and the boat paradox. Her memories may have vanished, but she retained the intrinsic shape of the ship, the shell of her existence. Gazing around at the funeral attendees, I realized that I had inherited her life's frame. I would save the memories that she could not keep and preserve the ones that she could.

2018 LifeWriting Winner: Linda Wisniewski

Kudos to Linda Wisniewski for her first place win in the 2018 Susan Wittig Albert LifeWriting Competition, which was centered on the theme "Uncertainty." Winning entries were chosen for their freshness, originality, clarity, and authenticity of author voice. Linda's award-winning story plus an interview with her are here. Please check out the second and third place winners – Debra Dolan's "Temporarily Unable No More" and Susan Corbin's "Uncertain Heart" – through the link on our home page: <http://www.storycircle.org/Contests/1806.shtml> And look for the announcement of our next competition in June 2019.

Thirty-Two Words for Peace

by Linda Wisniewski of Doylestown PA

It was a blue-sky summer evening and I bounced on my heels and grinned. At seventy, I had finally made it to Paris. My husband and I eagerly waited in line to climb the Eiffel Tower. But the line wasn't moving.

"I'm hungry," I said, hoping for a view from the restaurant on the second level.

"Me too," said Steve. "We'll be up there just in time for sunset."

At the ticket window, a Middle Eastern family waved their arms in the air. Nearby, a handful of Japanese tourists milled around wearing puzzled expressions. Then a man in a business suit appeared, shouting first in English, then other languages.

"The Tower is closed temporarily! You may wait at least an hour here or proceed to the exit!"

Steve and I exchanged a glance. Hundreds of tourists murmured around us. Nobody smiled.

I looked back at the entrance where a guard in a security trailer had peered into my open backpack before I stepped out, excited and happy. Now the entire atmosphere had changed.

That same afternoon, we had walked down the Champs de Mars, named for the God of War, to see twelve glass panels engraved with the word Peace in 32 languages. Built for the millennium, the plan was to dismantle them after three months but they were still standing.

After a short walk from the glass panels, we stepped into the trailer, paid the admission fee for the Eiffel Tower, and proceeded to a small doorway. We were used to the drill back home, at the Empire State Building, the county courthouse, and every airport – open your purse, lift your arms, remove your jacket – and with rueful glances as our eyes met, we complied. Built as a temporary structure for the 1889 World's Fair, the Tower was one of the most famous sights in the world, and an obvious target for terrorists.

After the unexpected announcement, we – and probably other couples with romantic dinner plans –

wondered if we should stay. All at once, soldiers with assault rifles and stern faces strode up and began going through everyone's bags. I felt a shiver of fear.

Another man in a suit rushed up and spoke to the soldiers, who then moved to close the gates. One soldier turned to the crowd.

"You must exit across the plaza!" His face and his voice conveyed high alert and we knew there would be no more questions.

"Let's go," Steve said, taking my arm. We crossed back to the entrance with hundreds of people speaking into cell phones. I never thought to ask anyone for information in my high school French. The police looked much too busy to approach, and the eyes of the soldiers were hard, unblinking.

"What do you think it is?" I asked.

Steve shook his head and shrugged. "No idea."

But, of course we had an idea. We watched the news every night. We knew about the coordinated attacks here the previous November, when over 100 people were killed at a football match, cafes, and the Bataclan theater. But on this lovely summer evening, we didn't speak of it, as if saying the words might make it happen again. To us.

At least we were together. To the right of the trailer, tourists crowded before three open gates. A man shouted "Men!" and pointed left, then "Women!" and flung his arm to the right. Why were they separating us? My footsteps slowed and I thought of holding back but the crowd surged forward, carrying me along.

"See you outside!" I called to Steve, as he disappeared into the flow. But my promise was no comfort. I was alone in a crowd in a foreign country. I reminded myself to breathe and looked through the black iron bars of the fence for a sign of my husband on the street outside. When I was almost at the gate, a uniformed woman pushed her palm hard against my chest.

"You wait!" she shouted, then ushered a woman with a young girl through ahead of me. She patted my body from

head to toe and examined my backpack, the same one I had opened for inspection on the way in. Trembling, I kept my expression sober so she'd have no reason to hold me back.

At last, I stood next to Steve on the sidewalk outside, catching my breath. In the street, police cars careened to a stop, and sirens blared in that high-pitched scream we knew from foreign films. *Enough*, I thought, wanting to get away. I pulled on Steve's arm.

"Let's find a restaurant. I'm starving."

We walked toward our hotel as more police cars screeched to a halt across the intersection, closing off the street behind us. I exhaled my tension as we left the commotion behind.

At the first bar along the way, we sipped cold beers, devoured hot mussels, and shared our admiration for the businesslike French police. As I sat back and watched the

people of Paris go about their evening, I was overcome by tenderness. For them, and for us. Yes, this kind of thing happened back home, but I'd never been so close before, never seen such calm in the face of danger. I held Steve's hand across the table, grateful beyond measure.

Back at the hotel, I checked the news online. "Eiffel Tower Evacuated!" French authorities were calling it a false alarm by a new employee who mistook a drill for the real thing. The next day, I read that a backpack or "suspicious package" had caused the evacuation. Whatever the reason, a new reality had set in, dusting our visit with sadness.

Early last year, French officials announced plans to build an eight-foot bulletproof glass wall around the Eiffel Tower. In the new millennium, hate can kill without warning, even on beautiful summer evenings. Nearby, twelve panes of glass stand engraved with our longing.

Writing strategies from a winning writer

by Joyce Boatright

When you read Linda Wisniewski's winning essay, "Thirty-Two Words for Peace," you may be awed by her exquisite, focused, theme-driven writing. Does she have a photographic memory for detail? How did she write with such evocative description? Was she born a gifted writer or what? How did she write such a polished piece?

"When I travel, I take a notebook and jot down ideas, impressions, conversations, that I want to remember when I get home," she said in a recent interview. "Back home, I wrote the first draft, telling what happened, where and who was with me. At the time, I didn't really know what it was about, I just wanted to record this powerful experience. When I saw the announcement of Story Circle's essay contest, and the topic, I knew it could find a good home there."

Once she completed her rough draft and self-edited for grammar and style, she worked on structure, writing a reminder in red to herself at the top of the page, *What is this about?*

"In this case: fear, terrorism, sadness, disappointment, modern times," she said.

Then she rewrote around those themes until she zeroed in on one or two ideas. After that revision, she shared the "final" draft with a writing group and received some great feedback.

"In the original essay, I included having a beer at a sidewalk cafe with an old friend from high school who was visiting his daughter and her family in Paris. I wrote about the daughter's cute baby, the cafe.... But the writing group convinced me that it detracted from the sense of uncertainty of the piece. I never would have seen that without the writing group. So Bob and his family hit the cutting room floor."

Only then did she have the *real* final draft, which she submitted to the Susan Wittig Albert LifeWriting Competition. It won FIRST PLACE.

Linda is a daily writer. She begins her mornings writing in her journal, with a cup of tea, a lighted candle, and a short reading from Julia Cameron's book, *Blessings*. She also has a travel journal. "Most of the time, when I want to start a new piece of writing at home, I use a big spiral notebook and a pen. If I am 'stuck' I can open it and page through for something to type into the computer and work on."

Why does she write?

"It's just fun for me to see where it goes, and how I surprise myself, for example, starting to write about being in Paris with my husband and finding out it's really about living in an age of terrorism."

She adds, "Also, in the background are the women in my life who did not write their stories, and the ones who are still hesitating. Not good. So I hope to inspire a few of them." And indeed, she does.

Linda C. Wisniewski is a former librarian and teaches memoir workshops at the home of Nobel Prize author Pearl S Buck. She blogs, is published in literary magazines, and her memoir, *Off Kilter: A Woman's Journey to Peace with Scoliosis, Her Mother and Her Polish Heritage*, was published by Pearlsong Press.

Joyce Boatright is an author, writer, teacher, and storyteller. She serves on the SCN Board as Program Chair.



From the Blogs:

One Woman's Day



Writing is often a series of experiences, which become a journey and sometimes even a revelation. An experienced writer, teacher, and One Woman's Day contributor, Len Leatherwood gives us insight into this highly personal process in a lovely piece that was posted recently. Find out how you can contribute to One Woman's Day blog, at: <http://onewomansday.wordpress.com/about/>

~Kali' Rourke, Coordinator, "One Woman's Day"

Fiction vs. Memoir: Finally, I Made the Choice

by Len Leatherwood

After a huge cry this morning, I feel better.

I have spent the past five days immersed in one of the toughest/saddest times of my life – moving to LA in 1994 to be near my brother, who was about to go into active AIDS just at the point when the life-saving protease inhibitors were first introduced. (*My oldest brother had died of AIDS just 3 years before.*) My husband, three kids and I came after my brother offered me a job in his laser surgery center, so that I could run his business when he and his partner got sick, and we could be near him as he died. If that weren't bad enough, he also had a "loving" boyfriend who had targeted him for his money. I wish I could say it all went smoothly. It didn't. The result was an emotion-ridden roller coaster ride that forced me to grow up and understand that tough love is sometimes the only love that makes sense.

Robert had the opportunity to choose life over death with the help of those coveted protease inhibitors. In truth, Robert chose death. In my book, I had him do one thing differently, which helped him to see why and how he could choose life. In both real life and fiction, my brother and I made peace with each other and were deeply bonded as a result of this experience.

I went with fiction for lots of reasons, primary among them being that the predatory boyfriend is still alive and

would sue me in a second. However, I also wanted the freedom of fiction and to have the chance to "re-imagine" what life could have been if my brother had made a different choice. Plus, John Rechy, my writing mentor, with whom I workshopped this book for five years in a Masterclass, is well known for calling all of his books fiction even when some mirror his life fairly closely, and he strongly encouraged me to go this route.

I read through every volume that I have produced over these past 18 years of trying to wrestle with this subject – five major drafts, most of which were memoirs – and finally concluded that my decision to fictionalize this book was indeed the right choice for me.

Alas, I worked 18 hours a day on Saturday, Sunday, and Monday and then stayed up almost 24 hours on Tuesday, so I could finish the editing.

Is it perfect? No. I woke up in the middle of the night and realized I'd forgotten a scene that must be included. I also have a few scribbled notes regarding details I need to make sure are right. In addition, the pacing might have a bump or two and the ending might need one more run through. However, am I finally going to be able to put this baby to bed so I can move on? I believe so.

I am tired, but also happy and relieved. Hooray.

Len Leatherwood, Program Coordinator for SCN's Online Classes, has been teaching writing privately to students in Beverly Hills for the past 17 years. She has received numerous state and national teaching awards from the Scholastic Artists and Writers Contest. She is a daily blogger at 20 Minutes a Day, as well as a published writer of 'flash' fiction/memoir.



Kali' Rourke, Coordinator of SCN's One Woman's Day blog, is a retired Mortgage Banker and Escrow Officer who is now a full-time volunteer and philanthropist in Austin. She is a Mentor and is a board member of BookSpring, which makes children's literacy its mission. She writes about the parallels between parenting and management, mentoring, personal stories, and living with Burning Mouth Syndrome, in her blogs: **Kali's Musings** and **A Burning Journey**.

As noted in Susan Albert's final letter as President of SCN, a great way to be introduced to Jeanne Guy, our new leader, is to read her writing. Here she is in SCN's HerStories blog, March 6, 2017.

The Grip of the Gripe: Shutting the Duck Up

by Jeanne Guy

I'm not a griper, at least not an out-loud griper. My griping is done in the privacy of my own little head – it's all internal chatter. I get hooked into playing a Spiral Mind Game that keeps me in a swirling ain't-it-awful loop. By the end of the day, it has successfully sucked the life out of me.

I lose my true aim, and feel like I should just give up. Ugh.

I know. Griping about a situation is a waste of time, yet there I was, doing it. I was complaining, grumbling, grouching, and, my favorite, whining.

"But I promised myself I would write daily. I'll never get the draft of *You'll Never Find Us* finished," I whined in my journal. I thought I had paved the way to easy writing by reducing obligations and saying no to meetings unless they furthered my book and/or my health.

It sounded good at the time. Here's the reality of it.

It has been a frustrating ride writing this book. Life still gets in the way. When I fell off the proverbial writing-wagon the chatter in my head kicked in almost instantly. It sounded like the quacking of a duck telling me: give up, you'll never write the book, it'll always end up on the back burner, you're not good enough.

I needed help to shut the duck up.

And then the weirdest thing happened.

As I continued to journal, whining about the plight of my book and questioning my worth, who shows up on the page but a "voice" I'd never heard before. It was Big Mama: bold, full-bodied, with a loud mouth and very funny.

You know what she said? She said, "You need to let go of that garbage, girl. Get a grip! Stop listening to that quacker."

Startled, I asked, "Who are you?"

"I'm your new best self. You already got enough crazy voices in that head of yours. You don't need another one. You don't need permission or anybody's approval to write your book, and you sure don't need to work your fingers to the bone proving your worth. You're a worthy girl, you hear me?"

I told her I felt like I had a new spine.

"You're my baby now and we're gonna take baby steps when the crazies start getting to you. Got it? If they show up, just ask yourself, is this making me feel better about myself? If not, shut them up and start writing. I'll check in with you tomorrow."

"Wait," I wrote. "What's your name?"

It was as if I could hear a big, deep belly laugh when she responded, "Honey, just call me Rita."

I got a grip and plan to keep my aim true...and write that book. Rita and her sense of humor have saved me.

What saves you?

If you hear yourself repeatedly complaining about the same thing, I'll send Rita your way and have her get in your face, or at least in your head.

Those other voices don't make you smile. Rita will – if you'll listen to her.



"We write to taste life twice, in the moment, and in retrospection... We write to be able to transcend our life, to reach beyond it. We write to teach ourselves to speak with others, to record the journey into the labyrinth.

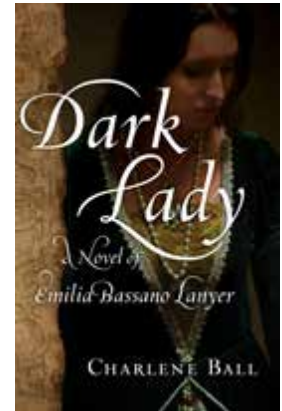
—Anais Nin



Profile of Sarton Award Winner Charlene Ball

by Pat Bean

A historian's low opinion of early feminist poet Emilia Bassano Lanyer, who may have been the dark lady of Shakespeare's sonnets, prompted Charlene Ball to research and write about the woman. Although the writing was put on the back burner for many years, Charlene's book, *Dark Lady*, recently won Story Circle Network's Sarton Award for historical fiction.



That eye-opening lecture in the mid-1970s at the University of Georgia, Charlene says, brought together the two different sides of her life. “I was fascinated. Up until then, my feminism and my love of Renaissance literature were kept in separate areas of my world. Feminism was about marches and demonstrations for the Equal Rights Amendment and Take Back the Night; reading *The Second Sex* by Simone de Beauvoir, *Our Bodies Our Selves*, and *Sinister Wisdom*; listening to talks by popular feminists like Gloria Steinem; reading Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde; and talking with our very own resident radical feminist, Julia Penelope Stanley, who taught linguistics in the UGA English Department and whose mother ran a cool bookstore called The Hairy Hobbit.

“Feminism,” Charlene recalls, “was also about identifying as a lesbian, and going to softball games to cheer on lesbian friends who played on a softball team called The Hairy Hobbits – the bookstore sponsored the team.

”In her other world was Charlene’s course work for her doctorate in comparative literature, which involved attending classes and writing papers on medieval narrative, Shakespeare, European romanticism, French classical drama, and Renaissance narrative poetry.

“I loved it all. But there was a disconnect. My coursework did not overlap at all with my life,” Charlene says. “Writing about Emilia brought together those two strands.”

The author says she chose to write about Emilia as a woman struggling to survive in a time when her life would have been severely restricted and constrained by laws and anti-female beliefs, yet also a time of excitement and possibility. She chose to write Emilia’s story as historical fiction instead of a biography because she wanted more scope for imagination. But she also “tried to keep close to what actually could have happened or was likely to have happened. I don’t put her in places she was not likely to have gone.”

Her novel differs from others about Emilia, Charlene points out, because it shows her relationships and support of

other women, particularly women writers.

Charlene taught English literature and composition for years in colleges and universities – and published articles and short stories. Her writing has appeared in such publications as *Sinister Wisdom*, *The NWSA Journal*, *The Journal of the Short Story in English*, and *The North Atlantic Review*. She also has written plays, one about Shakespeare and Emilia, and the other about Christopher Marlowe.

“In 2009, I retired from Georgia State University’s Women’s Studies Institute where I taught and served as program administrator. Since retirement, I spend my time writing, doing community work, digging in my garden, and selling books with my wife Libby Ware, a writer and antiquarian bookseller.

Charlene shares, “Libby and I got married last May. We had been dating for 14 years, so we thought it was time. We don’t have plans to live together; we enjoy our independence and solitude too much. We spend time together on weekends, when we go out of town for book fairs, and when we go to community and congregation activities. Bookselling is a new world for me, and I enjoy learning about it.”

The author, who lives in Atlanta, Georgia, belongs to a writers’ group that she founded, and to the Atlanta Writers Club, and the Georgia Writers Association, and frequently takes writing classes. She is also a Fellow of the Hambidge Center for the Arts.

Charlene and Libby, meanwhile, just finished writing a mystery novel about two female booksellers who try to solve a murder while searching for a missing book of magic spells. It’s called *Murder at the Estate Sale*, and the couple are hoping it will become a series.

Charlene says she has also started on her next historical novel, *The Ballad of the Duchess*, which is about Katherine Willoughby Brandon Bertie, Duchess of Suffolk, who appears briefly in *Dark Lady*

New Members with Stories to Tell

When new members join SCN, we ask them to tell us their stories. They are always fascinating, demonstrating the variety of writing interests of our members. Here are a few engaging introductions, revealing that diversity.

Patricia Dreyfus – Corona del Mar, CA (Apr 2018)

My Story: I am too old to be eulogized as "so young and so gifted." I have a great story called "Virgin-Martyr, A Woman's Journey to Reclaim Her Spirit." I am a poet because I love words, just the right words.

Blog: patriciadreyfus-writer.com From the Grandstand

Facebook: Patricia Adelman Dreyfus

Storytelling Medium: words, words, written and oral

Annette Gendler – Chicago, IL (Jan 2018)

My Story: I'm the author of *Jumping Over Shadows*, the true story of a German-Jewish love that overcame the burden of the Holocaust. I've been teaching memoir writing at StoryStudio Chicago since 2006 and I live in Chicago with my husband and three children.

Book: *Jumping Over Shadows*

Blog: annettedgendler.com/blog

Facebook: Annette Gendler

Storytelling Medium: words and photos

V J Knutson – London, ON Canada (Dec 2017)

My Story: Former teacher, lifelong lover of literature, now navigating through chronic illness, currently living on the road. Life is inspiration.

Blog: <https://vjknutson.org/> also <https://onewomansquest.org/>

Facebook: V. J. Knutson

Storytelling Medium: Poetry, nonfiction, memoir in progress

Ann Parker – Livermore, CA (May 2018)

My Story: I came to writing through reading: as a child, I read avidly, wrapping myself in stories told through the written word. I've been a writer all my life (science journalism, marketing, etc.), and began writing fiction relatively late. My love of history – specifically women's history in Colorado and the West – is the engine that drives my stories.

Books: *Silver Rush* historical mystery series

Blog: <http://silverrushmysteries.blogspot.com/>

Facebook: [annparker.writer](https://www.facebook.com/annparker.writer)

Storytelling Medium: Words! And photos... but mostly words. :-)

Ashley Sweeney – LaConner, WA (Mar 2018)

My Story: New York born and raised. Bookworm turned author, with 40 years in-between (current Nancy Pearl Book Award winner for debut novel, *Eliza Waite*). Winter in sunny Tucson.

Book: *Eliza Waite: A Novel*

Blog: <http://ashleysweeney.com/>

Facebook: Ashley Sweeney

Storytelling Medium: Gardening, fiber art, and words

Joanna Young – Rutland, VT (Jan 2018)

My Story: I am an author and freelance writer and columnist. I am also an expressive writing coach, facilitator and presenter holding a MA in Transformative Language Arts and trained through the Center for Journal Therapy. I have a memoir in the works.

Book: *Lilian Baker Carlisle, Vermont Historian, Burlington Treasure: A Scrapbook Memoir*

Blog: <http://wisdomwithinink.com>

Facebook: Joanna Tebbs Young

Storytelling Medium: Words

Be Part of a Writing Circle

It's a great way to improve your writing and get connected with other writing women.

Need help starting a Story Circle?

You can find our Facilitators' Guide, with lots helpful information, here: <http://www.storycircle.org/facguide.shtml>

Want to join an established Writing Circle?

To see the current list of writing circles that meet around the U.S. and the world, look here: www.storycircle.org/circles.shtml



Writing Tips from Our Teachers

In every Journal, we bring you valuable advice from one of the talented instructors in our Online Classes program, coordinated by Len Leatherwood. A vital aspect of writing circles is responding to the work of others, so this issue's Tip will speak to many of us.

Accentuate the Positive: How to Give (and Take) Criticism

by Andrea Simon

When I was in my twenties and decided to pursue the literary side of writing, I took a short-story course with a famous author and teacher (whose name will remain "Joe"). At the time, I was nursing a broken heart. I wrote a fictionalized version of the relationship, fashioning it into a dramatic (or perhaps melodramatic) storyline. A week after submitting our stories, Joe opened his briefcase and flipped through a stack of papers as if he were shuffling cards. From my first-row seat, I could see black-inked comments, arrows, exclamation marks, and enough colored Post-its for a roomful of confetti.

Without revealing the author's name, Joe read a two-page dialogue between a man and woman in a heated argument. I could feel my cheeks redden. With each character, Joe's voice took on a prolonged screechy tone, deeper for the male and weepy for the female. He wrote the names of the characters on the blackboard and elicited negative comments from the students. At the end of class, holding back tears, I collected my story and asked Joe, "Why did you pick mine to dissect, if it was so terrible?"

"Oh, but it was the best one in the class." Then Joe said, "And you can imagine the quality of the others."

Although I made a career as a writer, I didn't produce another fictional piece for almost twenty years. By that time, I learned to choose positive mentors and joined a writing group of all females. Later in life, as an MFA student, I was bewildered by my teachers' poor preparation in the art of workshopping, often allowing dismissive, hurtful remarks. When I began to teach writing, I vowed to nurture this art, so that my students were not only vested in improving their work but in helping others. They responded with enthusiastic and creative revisions.

Ten Tips for Critiquing

1. Look at the piece from the writer's perspective. What is she trying to accomplish? Do NOT put your value judgments on the work. It is NOT helpful to say, "This is not my taste." Instead of "what I like," think of "what this piece is like."

2. Closed-door and open-door criticism. Some words inspire you to revise and others lock you into a self-critical mode. Avoid words like "boring" and "not interesting." Turn them around and say instead, "Perhaps this scene can use more detail." Avoid the word "should."

3. Be respectful and supportive. Look for cues that the writer is taking in the comments and not upset by them.

4. Focus on the strengths of the piece. Is the writing lively? Are there good details?

5. What is the piece lacking? Do you want to know more? Is there something that you don't understand? Does the scene need more description? Does it need a backstory? Is there too much dialogue or not enough? Are the characters thinly drawn? Is the pacing choppy? Make suggestions as "suggestions," not as absolutes.

6. Listen for Voice. This is the character of the writer, the personality (sad, happy, ironic, humorous, thoughtful). Is it too formal or informal? Is it active or passive?

7. Point of View (POV). Make sure the POV is consistent and is the best use for this piece.

8. Scenes and Dialogue. Does the scene work with or without dialogue? Can I picture the setting? Do the voices sound distinctive and believable?

9. Tension/Resolution. Are there tension points? Can they be further developed? Is there growth or change?

10. Focus. What is the most important theme? Is the writing about too many things?

Read the piece twice: once for content, second for comments. Pay attention to character development, language, and integrity of story. Note inconsistencies, repetitions, gross grammatical mistakes/typos/format issues. But don't overwhelm with critical remarks. Notice phrases you like. Remember that you are helping the writer make the best story that *she* intends. Follow these guidelines when revising your own work – and don't take the "Joes" of the world too seriously.

Andrea Simon is the author of the historical novel, *Esfir Is Alive*, and the memoir *Bashert: A Granddaughter's Holocaust Quest*, as well as published stories and essays. The recipient of numerous literary awards, Andrea holds an MFA in Creative Writing from the City College of New York, where she has taught writing. For SCN, she has taught a course and workshop on writing about family. She is also an accomplished photographer and lives in New York City. (www.andreasimon.net)



SCN's Book Reviews

Featured Review

A Promise Fulfilled: The Kitty Anderson Diary and Civil War Texas, 1861 by Nancy Draves

StoryCircleBookReviews.org
Review by Susan Schoch

In *A Promise Fulfilled: The Kitty Anderson Diary*, Kitty declares, "What terrible days those were of anxiety and suspense in a country and at a time when much less conspicuous men than our Father were mysteriously killed for their sentiments or spent weary years of imprisonment. Alas, in times of war power will abuse the innocent offender and stain the purest cause!"

Details of the chaos created by secession enliven this small historic diary, which Kitty's father asked her to keep as a record of the events of 1861. The Andersons were a wealthy and influential Union family in San Antonio when Texas joined the Confederacy, and he would not abandon his principles. There were bound to be consequences.

Editor Nancy Draves writes, "The strength of the diary lies in Kitty Anderson's gifted prose and her willingness to catalogue all her experiences, including the names of those she encountered, the dates, and the places. The challenge," she notes, "was to support and complement the story she weaves with the background needed to fully understand and appreciate its significance."

A former teacher, Draves is up to this challenge. After an informative introduction, she presents selected sections from the diary, as well as a second manuscript by Kitty Anderson, following each part with her context-building commentary. Extensive notes are set at the back of the book and provide further clarification, specifics, and resources.

There are a few times when the commentary feels redundant, but that small complaint is well outweighed by appreciation for Draves' effort to paint the larger picture of politics and events in Texas and the nation. Her meticulous research adds helpful detail about people that Kitty mentions. Draves creates a sense of history overtaking individuals, as in the drama surrounding a speech by Kitty's father in San Antonio many months before the war began, a speech with drastic results when Texas seceded. The family

was suddenly required by law to leave the Confederacy within 40 days.

"Boldly, fearlessly my Father has expressed himself always," Kitty writes, "but seeing too truly that he must leave the country or, profess what he did not believe he felt obliged to go, and in going, to sacrifice a great part of his Texas property."

Hurry as they might to prepare, the family waited too long. Her father was arrested and separated from his wife and two daughters. The women were forced out under military escort to Mexico. It was an arduous and dangerous journey, though Kitty often records the kindness with which they were treated. Once they are safe again, the diary simply ends, no longer needed.

The second part of the book is a description that Kitty wrote much later, telling what her father experienced as a prisoner and his perilous journey on a longer and riskier route to meet his family in Vera Cruz. Draves makes it clear what an accomplished man he was, as were his notable forebears, all playing significant roles in history far beyond Texas. Revolutionary War pride and principles were real for them, and so was the notion of Manifest Destiny that would transform the country. The Andersons were a family that owned slaves, yet they were uncompromising believers in the Union. They freed their slaves when they left Texas, but did not provide for them. In her chronicle, Kitty Anderson sketches her family in a particular place and time, and 150 years later, they are still relevant and important. Their story raises issues we still struggle with, like racism, economic disparity, and gender inequality.

Nancy Draves has done a great service in bringing us an opportunity to know about the Anderson family, to remember them, and to recognize the larger social/political changes and shifts that shaped their lives, and continue to shape our own.

Nancy Draves taught high school in San Antonio for twenty years, and now is a prize-winning author, still living there. *A Promise Fulfilled* is her first book.

Susan Schoch specializes in writing and editing personal history. She is author of *The Clay Connection*, a study of ceramic artists Jim and Nan McKinnell, for the American Museum of Ceramic Art. A long-time member of SCN, Susan is editor of the *Story Circle Journal* and our annual *Real Women Write* anthology. She is a regular reviewer for SCBR.

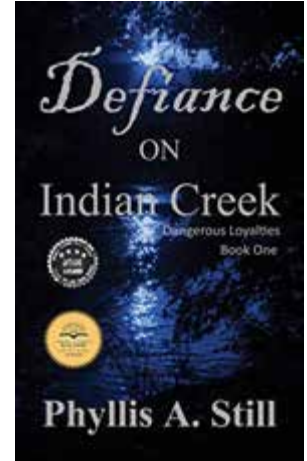


An Interview With Sarton Award Winner

Phyllis A. Still

by Pat Bean

The childhood of Phyllis Still, whose book, *Defiance on Indian Creek*, won Story Circle Network's Sarton Award for Young Adult Fiction, was full of clues that a writer lay in waiting. Born into a troubled family in Texas, her dad's job had taken the family to seven different states by the time Phyllis was 11 years old.



"I grew up mostly a shy lonely tomboy, who spent a lot of time outside barefooted or in the tallest tree I could climb. My vivid imagination provided an escape from reality, and my curious nature led me into many adventures. I could readily allow myself to become a different person in another world," she recalls.

When Phyllis was in middle school, her English teacher passed out a short story about an Eskimo family, from which the ending had been removed. The students' assignment was to read the story and write their own ending.

"I immediately became the character, and writing the ending came easy for me," says Phyllis. "After turning in my paper, the teacher picked it up and read. Suddenly, she leapt from her desk, stepped to the door, and waved a passing teacher over. They looked at me. I lowered my eyes, embarrassed. When the class ended, I stopped at her desk and asked what was wrong with my paper. She smiled and explained that my ending was better than the original. She encouraged me to become a writer someday."

But that would have to wait a while.

Phyllis moved to the small East Texas town of Gilmer in her senior year of high school, where she married her best friend.

"My first and greatest passion was to have a happy family. My husband and I raised three awesome daughters, who are living good lives and raising our seven grandkids. I'm still married to my best and worthy friend. We went through rough years but are enjoying renewed passion for each other, and are championing each other's goals for the future."

Through the years, Phyllis's work outside the home progressed from daycare worker, to nanny, to real estate agent, office assistant, and receptionist with multiple tasks. She retired early to become a writer, and is now living her dream, still in Gilmer.

"Through the years, I wrote a few silly poems, and a

short story, but it wasn't until my daughters were grown that writing a book came to mind. However, nothing spurred me into the process until I received a box of mixed-up family genealogy sheets from my uncle," Phyllis recalls.

While organizing the documents into family groups, she discovered incomplete information about Mary Shirley McGuire, a Daughters of the American Revolution heroine, who is honored with a chapter bearing her name in Plano, Texas. Mary was a young wife with an 18-month-old son in 1780 Central Kentucky when Captain Henry Bird's joint force of British, Canadian, and Northern Native American tribes attacked the frontier forts. She kept herself and son Bennie alive on the 600-mile death march to Fort Detroit.

"I marveled at the tenacity, faith, and survival skills that Mary must have acquired in her younger years that allowed her survival at the age of 18," Phyllis says. "She and her family were sent to Montreal with other rebels, and worked as prisoners on a farm until the American Revolutionary War ended. And when I read about the tragedy they endured on their way back home, I cried. That's when I knew her story came to me for a reason."

Phyllis decided to write Mary's story as fiction, beginning the story in 1775, just before the girl turned 13, so as to highlight how the American Revolution affected women and children on the frontier settlements. To achieve authenticity of the times, Phyllis did quite a bit of early West Virginia and Kentucky history research, jotting down notes about real events, people and places.

"I wanted readers to understand the significant role young adults had in history, and that they're not too young to make a difference in today's turmoil."

Once the book was completed in 2013, Phyllis paid for a professional critique from author and editor C.S. Lakin. The results, she admits, showed it needed more work. "I

didn't have a plot, or know what a character arc was. I rewrote the 80,000-word manuscript, then paid the same professional for another critique a year later." This time the editor was more encouraging, but suggested the story be developed into a series, with a separate plot for each book.

"For the next three years, I studied structure. Then I worked on an intriguing plot and a strong character arc for Mary. I also enlisted the help of free critique partners. When I was satisfied with my new attempt, I mustered the courage to send it to Lakin again. To my amazement, she raved about how wonderful my story turned out and sent it back professionally edited.

"By then I had met my publisher, Evelyn M. Byrne of White Bird Publications, which formatted the book and sent it on to Ingram Spark, a print-on-demand service."

If she had it to do all over again, Phyllis says she would have joined a support group sooner, and learned early on how to develop purposeful scenes that placed the reader in the story.

"I wasted five years being a pantster. Now, I take the time to have a clear vision of what the story is about, and how it will end. However, I'm flexible with my plan. I allow my characters to have feedback and to experience unexpected plot twists, but I maintain control – like a good mommy should.... I would advise new writers to read and study the craft. Join a writer's support group and listen to advice from successful authors. Enjoy creating. I love all of C.S. Lakin's *Writer's Toolbox* series, and learned a lot of great scene-building techniques from them. Writing a fine novel is like developing a fine wine – both require skill, patience, and time."

Phyllis mentions that the authors who influenced her early in life were J. R. R. Tolkien and Laura Ingalls Wilder. "Their well-developed characters drew me into their fascinating story worlds. I loved the way they placed readers in the scene and immediately caused sympathy for the main characters. I love any author who can make me care about the characters' plight and allow them to be overcomers."

The *Defiance at Indian Creek* author says she writes on a laptop computer so she can change locations. "I find a desktop in a confined location too stifling. I tried to have a secluded office once, but found it depressing. I need a peaceful, light-filled, spacious place. I love going outside when it's not hot."

Phyllis is currently working on book three of her *Dangerous Loyalties* series, which has Mary and her family dealing with the volatile conditions at Fort Boonesborough in Kentucky territory. The second in the series, *Fleeing the Shadow*, has already been published and is available on Amazon. And if the books have a message, the author suggests, it's that "sometimes love and loyalty to people are more important than causes."



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, and recently published her book about those years, *Travels with Maggie*. She is passionate about nature, birds, writing, art, family, reading and her new dog, Pepper.



Mark your calendar!

Coming in wild-flower season, a LifeLines Writing Weekend with award-winning, NYT best-selling author, Susan Wittig Albert.

March 29-31, 2019, at the Fredericksburg Inn and Suites, Fredericksburg TX.

Details in the December *Journal*.





True Words from Real Women

A selection of short pieces of lifewriting by our members, edited by Jo Virgil. This month's topic is **"Words of Wisdom."** Future topics are listed on the back page. Please contribute your own True Words to the Journal by using this link:

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

Eve's Story: Overheard

Patricia A. Dreyfus – Corona del Mar, CA
<http://patriciadreyfus-writer.com/>

"I am tired of this crap, Adam," Eve said as she shuffled through the flowers of Eden. "You are always saying, 'I was here first.' Well, I don't care. You say I'm just a refurbished rib. Well, God just wanted to improve on Her first draft: you. Plus, you are always talking to that damnable snake, and worse yet, you quote it.

"I want to name the lion 'lion' and the tiger 'tiger,' and you have no imagination. You call them both 'cat'—big striped cat and big brown cat. Get a clue, Adam. If you don't shape up and get to work and finish naming things, we'll be kicked out of here.

"I don't want to leave and worry about if the fig leaf is in this year and have to go out and find food. Everything's right here and plentiful. Also, it's a good neighborhood for the children.

"Don't ask me what children are, you dolt. I told you that's what I'll call little repros of us. What do you mean? Look at the puppies, kittens, and little birds. You think we won't get a small thing? I'm calling us humans, and the repro baby, and then child and children, so get up to speed here.

"Look at my belly—you think I ate a watermelon? Good grief, man. That's what we agreed to call the oval green thing on the ground that's red inside and sweet to eat. Oval—that's a shape, sort of like the sun only smashed a bit. No, not yellow—green, same as a leaf. Don't go there, you know what it is we call a leaf.

"Honestly, sometimes I would like to get out of this enclosure, just to see if there is another woman out there. I would like to talk to someone who would listen and get it.

"Go talk to that stupid snake and give me some peace. And whatever you do, don't touch that red fruit on the snake's tree."

If You Could Ask One Question

Sarah Fine – Toronto, ON
 e-circle 3, e-circle 4

If you could ask one question of G-d, what would it be?

I don't remember any specific questions from my childhood. I likely had requests added to my nightly prayers, around birthdays or Christmas. I may have asked for help with some of my larger problems. I remember thinking G-d must be very busy if He watched every sparrow.

As a young woman, I asked, "When will I get married?" and as I got older, "Will I ever get married?" I wanted to know so that I could plan. I was under the impression—"under" being the operative word here—that a woman's life could only really begin after she was married, that you had to get that accomplished, unless you became a nun like my great-aunts.

In my 20s and 30s, the question was, "What is my purpose; why am I here?" By this time, I gave G-d a 50/50 chance of existing in some form or another. I also believed that while She/He may have created our world, She/He no longer exerted any control, nor could She/He be held responsible for the sorry state of affairs both historical and present day. It was up to us to fix the problems.

I found my purpose in being of service.

And now the questions I ask, I ask of leaders and politicians, doctors and researchers, friends and philosophers. At my age, death and the whys and wherefores of that stopping place are a central theme to my questions. From the innocents murdered in unholy wars to my friends dying from cancer, I find myself asking "Why?"

But rather than rail about senseless murders to a G-d who apparently helped establish "them and us" with the Tower of Babel, or try to understand why some friends die too young, I am learning to accept that for some questions there are no answers, at least no answers that make sense. All I can do is make my small place in the world kinder and more peaceful every day.

Offering a Nugget

Debra Dolan – Vancouver, BC
Debradolan1958@gmail.com

If there is one thing that I would label a pet peeve, it is unsolicited advice. For some unknown reason I cannot quite cope when expressing openly a personal true-life heartache, medical or financial worry, and a solution is recommended by a colleague, friend, or family member when not requested. What I love, though, are the pearls of wisdom—the gems that can occur seemingly out of nowhere and quite unexpectedly, and remain in our hearts and minds. One I particularly remember was delivered from a former Police Captain on the occasion of his fortieth wedding anniversary, when he stated, “One hour a day, one day a week, one weekend a month, and one week a year—APART.” I have shared this often.

While working at the second largest research university in Canada, I had hoped to offer a nugget myself. When you entered the foyer of the Henry Angus building (sometimes referred to as Hairy Anus or Heavy Anguish), there was a rather large sign, which read, “The Future of Management Thinking.” It was our mantra and we were encouraged to “think-outside-the-box,” a popular expression at the time. My task was to set-up a lunch meeting for three senior academics, including the dean, of the business faculty where I worked as an administrative assistant. They were answering one of the Ph.D. candidates’ questionnaires on community as a component of his research. I wondered to myself, “What do they know of this subject? All three of them have private offices, commute to work in single-occupant vehicles, live in detached homes, work in seemingly isolated spaces.”

Although working for them was somewhat intimidating, as I laid out their lunch, I suggested that it might be more appropriate to have someone like me complete the survey, as well as others in the typing pool, given we work with others in open spaces, live in co-ops or apartments, thereby sharing laundry facilities and other amenities, and take public transit to work. ALL DAY and EVERY DAY we are in community.

You should have seen their faces as they escorted me out the door!

CONGRATULATIONS to **Jane Gragg Lewis**! She is this quarter’s winner of a free 1-year extension to her SCN membership. Jane was randomly selected from a pool of this issue’s True Words authors. It’s great to know that she’ll continue to be a part of Story Circle.

A reminder to our members to submit your work to your writing circle or to True Words. Sharing your writing is an empowering experience – and you might win a year of membership, too!

Time to Write

Cynthia Davidson – Hope Valley, RI
wisdomwheelwoman@gmail.com,
www.thewisdomwheel.com

This morning I reach for the kettle. Its metal body has a black Bakelite handle and a lid that pops open when pressed by a thumb. My friend Linda told me to throw away my previous one of white plastic. Her breast cancer tumors had the dioxin in them that leaches out from heated plastics. Pouring enough fresh well water in for one cup of tea, I switch it on. The conducting coils go to work inside the round black base. Soon the water will boil. The pot even turns off automatically afterwards.

I marvel at the ease of my modern life. If I’d had to walk to the village well for this water, or go to an outdoor hand pump, this morning ritual would’ve cost me double or triple the effort. And to get a fire going, I would have searched for sticks and twigs. It takes quite a few to get a blaze hot enough to boil water. The original people here put hot stones into their animal skins and dried bladders to heat their nettle teas and medicine potions, until we settlers arrived with our metal cauldrons, muskets and gunpowder.

The bag of tea I draw from the box would have required considerable time to harvest myself. Plucking tender leaves from the bushes in the proper season didn’t occur in England despite the advertising. The contents of these perfectly wrapped sachets probably originated in Sri Lanka, where brown women labor on the terraced hillsides, bent over under the sun with large woven baskets strapped to their backs. I raise my cup to acknowledge them before my first sip.

Who dug the fine white clay my porcelain mug is made from? While pouring the now boiling water over the tea bag inside, I admire the cup’s decoration. A colorful graphic depicts a female hand, holding a black feather quill pen. My son chose its message when marking this mug for my birthday.

“Cynthia should be writing,” it says. Indeed. What a privilege to be able to.



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.

The Secret Life of Dictionaries

Sara Etgen-Baker – Anna, TX
Sab_1529@yahoo.com

Mother brewed herself a cauldron of thick, black coffee, poured herself a steaming cup, opened her dictionary, and studied its pages the same way a sorceress studies a book of magical potions.

“Words are things of beauty,” she said as I nestled up next to her. “Each is like a magical powder that can be combined to create powerful potions and spells.” But all I saw was a flat object full of flimsy pages on which were printed lots of funny dark squiggles.

I suppose Mother wanted me to share her passion for words and to learn how to create my own powerful spells with them. So, on my eighth birthday she gave me my first dictionary, *The Oxford Children’s Dictionary*, and I became her rather reluctant apprentice. While most children my age listened to bedtime stories, my bedtime regime included listening to Mother read a page from the dictionary—a practice that continued well into my high school years.

At suitable times, I graduated to more age-appropriate dictionaries, learning bigger, more complex words and the hidden nuances that lie within the words’ letters and etymology. Somewhere along the way, a strange thing happened—my reluctance turned to enthusiasm, and I fell in love with words, intrigued by their subtle magical power. But like any inexperienced sorceress, I didn’t always know how to properly unleash my power.

Such was the case the day I uttered these words to my seventh-grade nemesis: “Jimmy, you’re the most obtuse person I’ve ever met!”

I felt powerful, knowing I’d insulted Jimmy with him being none the wiser. But my English teacher witnessed my misguided use of the word “obtuse” and sent me packing to the principal’s office wherein Mother was summoned to appear.

After learning of my impropriety, Mother offered these words of wisdom: “Words are more than simple sounds or blots of ink on paper. When carelessly used, they’re hurtful and vulgar; they can crush confidence and provoke anger; they can turn sorrow into joy; and they can bind hearts or separate them. Words are sacred. They deserve your respect. Use them wisely.”

Dad

Marjorie Kildare – Halifax, NS

Loved ones die
grief and relief mix
without measure

your funeral cars
wind the ribbon of highway
glad to see you go

sad to see you go
drinking smoking cursing buddies
sealed apertures

you are fifty-two
no “Happy Birthday”
funereal memory

funeral
fifty-second birthday
beneath the ground

Why they bury you?
Is this not your birthday?
your life’s elegy

a few years sober
your birth-ordained event
Happy Birthday grave

I Am the Master of My Fate

Patricia Roop Hollinger – Westminster, MD
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“I am the master of my fate”
Hoping I really was before too late

Depression had descended upon me
Hope became impossible for me to see

From ministers answers I would seek
But they didn’t understand; my future looked bleak

Finally, one understood my plight
Ah! no longer did I have to fight

Electroshock treatment and therapy were recommended
It was more than could be comprehended

I soon felt I was recovering
With new insights I was discovering

I began my life anew ... it was not too late
Yes, “I am the master of my fate.”

The Stinging Truth

Jessica Heriot – Hendersonville, NC
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My Aunt Frances was funny and wise, and her truest words of wisdom were: “Vanity never dies.”

I didn’t grow up with women obsessed with their looks and overly concerned with their appearances. Though they liked clothes, they were not “clotheshorses.” They admired intelligent women who were informed about art, music, books, and politics. Yet female beauty and fashion were constant topics of conversation. If the female stars of television and movies could have heard what my aunts had to say about them, they would have never left their trailers and dressing rooms.

Aunt Dora: “Look at her lips? Thin as a blade of grass.”

Aunt Frances: “And her squinty eyes.” Frances scrunches her face. “She looks like a prune.”

So, beauty or brains, I split the difference. I didn’t spend much money on clothes, didn’t ride the crest of every fashion wave, but cared about my appearance. I used makeup, but not too much, and I loved lipstick but didn’t need to wear it all day. I wasn’t one of those vain, shallow women who dwelled on their appearance and allowed their minds to gather dust.

The summer I turned 63, I knew the jig was up. In a sun-drenched cottage on Cape Cod, perched on a high bluff overlooking the bay, I obsessively looked in the mirror or any other reflecting surface, trying to resurrect the face I had worn throughout my adult years.

You would think that looking old at 63 would not come as a shock. Be it luck, good genes, or a middle-class American lifestyle, my face and body held their own longer than I had any right to expect. That summer, I knew that no lotions or potions, make-up, or hairdos could fix the face. I looked old.

My song is every older woman’s song as we are saturated with never-ending images of youth and beauty. When I began writing this book, I was 74. I’m now 77, and sadly the shallow bowl of vanity still wars with the graceful urn of acceptance.

My dear aunt was right. “Vanity never dies.”

Wisdom I Know to Be True

Abby November – San Diego, CA
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Grow where you are planted, Bloom amongst the weeds.
 Don’t kvetch, but breathe, don’t whine but sing.
 We are all connected: by DNA, air, sky and angels
 Breathe, don’t leave, expand your lungs, like you expand your mind
 [not your waist or buttocks]
 Take only what you need, give more than you take.
 Smile: fake it ‘til you make it. Breathe, no kvetching ...
 Wine, not whine, love, not loathing.
 And yes, always wear clean underwear ...
 Justin Case, whoever he be.

Lessons from a Marigold

Ann Haas – Mogadore, OH
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Marigolds
 Cheery soldiers
 Straight and tall
 Orange and yellow rows

Heads unbowed
 Against wind and weather
 Standing with fierce resiliency
 As the last trace of frost
 Lays to rest these cheery soldiers
 Until the coming spring

I see myself in the image
 Of a sturdy marigold
 After a bitter frost swept over me
 Following my husband’s death

Sunny yellow during fair weather
 Brown seed heads in the wake
 Of the chill autumn without my love

Holding tight to a
 Garden of withered seed heads
 I move through the lessons of autumn
 And yearn for spring
 To shed my grief
 And reach for the
 Beauty of the open sky

Scarcity

Pat Anthony – Fontana, KS

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e-circle 4

Take five o'clock morning, darkness before the sun rises to glint off raindrops, add the backs of cats stirring from the barn, their antsy meows. No chatter of bird song, just this kitchen and this paper gone on some 50 years. She hadn't much time,

tumors growing, but she filled her days writing down the old recipes, embellishing with asides for creaming butter, sugar *rest anytime you need to*. No beaters, just the wooden paddle we'd named from making apple butter. Her voice in my ear

I mix her traditional applesauce cake, replete with raisins that were such a luxury she admonishes in the margin to *use only a scant cup if available*. I hear her saying scant, spicing language like hoarded nutmeg, cinnamon. Her writing cramped, blue ink slanted up

faded paper, I'm having to sort out good times from bad to be able to bake this but I'm starting to get that they didn't have the meds for her that I use for the bipolar part of me, nor would she have taken them, preferring sweet clover tea, a bit of poke.

Fighting the leukemia, she made this cake more and more even when it wasn't a holiday. I fold in abundant raisins, wonder what it was like to raise three kids alone, dodge neighbors' gossip, rise past dragging poverty, ride buses for thrift store clothes,

haul the Radio Flyer to the A&P, create breads and pies, puddings from scratch, food the one thing that could stand up to everyone's scrutiny. I press my fingers against yellowing paper, hoping to distill those conversations I wish we might've had.

My Better Angels

Sarah Fine – Toronto, ON
e-circle 3, e-circle 4

I wish I'd listened more to my better angels—the ones who whispered praise and encouragement, the ones who said, “You are okay, and this effort you are putting forth is good enough. You are a work in progress and so is everyone else.”

Remember when someone criticizes you, it says more about them than it does about you. When someone hurts you, it might be because they are broken themselves.

That boss who is so determined to give you a hard time will be one of many bosses, and someday forgotten.

“Honey, Learn to Be Where You Are!”

Brenda Baranowski – San Angelo TX
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I sat alone on a bench at the skating rink,
My college textbook in my hand.
“I should be reading my chapter
But in this noisy place, I don't think I can!”

My grandson skates close by
And hollers, “Grandma, look at me!”
Distracted again, frustrated, I sigh.
The words are now blurry and hard to see.

A friendly lady sits down beside me.
She's about my age. I am 58.
Her name I don't remember, but she's in college too.
She has no textbook and the warmth of her smile is shining through.

“I should take her advice” as we chat,
“Honey, Learn To Be Where You Are!!!
Put away that textbook and let's have some fun!
A round of putt-putt golf? Birthday cake, anyone?”

“How could a stranger know
That I struggle every single day
(And especially this day!)
To be where I am?”

Outta bed in the morning, I want back in.
In traffic, I wish I was already at work again.
At work, I am mentally planning dinner at home.
During family time, I am studying and thinking about school.
In school, my mind is on family that I miss.
In bed at night to sleep, I am wide awake,
Laying there in the dark saying my prayers,
I remember the stranger's words.
I ask Jesus to bless her in her world tonight
And please, Lord, remind me each tomorrow
To truly be where I am.

There will be others who will support and honor you. That beau is not the one for you. There will be others you will love, who will love you in return.

You are good. You are valued. You are loved.

Those better angels, whose voices got stronger as the years went by, who accompany me now in my wonderful life, were always there—if only I had listened more.

Felice

Lesta Bertoia – Makawao, HI

she walks through the undulating landscape of the city
 tilts her head toward the man on wheels
 listens
 to his missing legs still crying
 sends into his brittle eyes
 a ray of recognition and acknowledgement
 a stream of tiny bubbles through clear water
 unclouding his capacity to run
 in his imagination
 at the end of the block
 she pauses
 in his imagination
 he taps her on the shoulder
 she turns
 and catches the sparkle in his eye
 and with a laughing glance tosses it skyward
 tiny rainbow bubbles falling all around the children in the park

Pants: The Long and Short of It

Pat LaPointe – Prospect Heights, IL
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I love you when I see you on a rack that says “Petite.” In fact, I can hardly control myself as I approach you.

I don’t love that you are the only pair in my size.

I love that you’re on sale.

I don’t love you when I try you on. You lied. Your tag says for 5’3” and under, but your inseam says 28 inches. OK, maybe that works for the 5’3” woman, but not someone who has gradually shrunk to five feet.

I don’t love that I must decide—do I buy you and pay to have you hemmed to my 26½-inch inseam, or leave you on the fitting room floor?

I try to love the way you feel on my body when I put you on. Enough room in the waist and the butt doesn’t sag like a kid in a full diaper.

I don’t, however, love all the stretch you have. I’ve been there before. By the time I leave home, the knees will have wrinkled, looking like synthetic cellulite, and the cuffs will be over my shoes.

I don’t love the dilemma that persists. Buy you and have you not only hemmed but taken in at the knees? Wear you with a high heel? Or pretend no one will notice you are dragging on the floor?

While I don’t hate what comes next, I can’t say that I love it. I look longingly at you as I hold you in my arms, always wondering if there’s any chance I’ll grow taller or my legs grow longer. I sigh and look for another rack, one I’ve relied on many times before.

Head down and muttering words that are beyond R-rated, I hand the cashier my credit card and place two pairs of capris with 26½-inch inseams on the counter.

Whale Dreams

V.J. Knutson – London, ON
<https://vjknutson.org>
 e-circle 4

Exposed we are, voyageurs,
 crossing a great expanse—
 one tiny vessel bearing
 the weight of our lives,
 two oars to navigate.

Unknown depths below
 and shadows, murky—
 we push on. Row. Row.
 Sights set on new land,
 uncharted possibilities.

A shape emerges—
 great hulking mass
 of being, parting waters,
 rising and transforming—
 a caricature of our fear.

I am mesmerized, read
 divinity’s presence, he
 shrugs, pragmatically
 notes the St. Lawrence
 is home to such mammals.

I dream of whales, crave
 communion, project
 mystical wisdom, equate
 size with spirit, marvel
 at potential connections.

Just as I wait for a sign
 from the departed, inviting
 a simpler life, inspiring hope—
 a shore life from which
 I can observe the numinous.

Ouch

Abby November – San Diego, CA
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My heart hurts
 where ur words cut into it
 bleeding, tender, jagged
 words like pointed poisoned pens
 stung worse than a root canal
 cut deeper than a carving knife
 depth of which can’t be mended
 glued or
 healed
 can’t be forgotten, can be forgiven
 but why?

When the Dogs Howled

Jane Gragg Lewis – Laguna Niguel, CA
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My grandpa died yesterday, and I'm going to have to miss third grade for a few days. Normally, I'd be pretty happy about that, but I don't want to go to a funeral and, most of all, I don't want to see Grandma so sad. I'm worried 'cause I don't know what to say. Daddy told me, "You don't have to say anything. Just give her a big hug and that will say it all."

When we get to Grandma's, I hang back and don't run up the back steps the way I usually do. By the time I go up to the kitchen, most everybody has wandered into other rooms. Grandma is standing beside the stove, looking out the window at the kennels where Grandpa's huntin' dogs are. "Not hunt-ing dogs," he used to tell me. "Huntin' dogs. There's a difference, you know."

I slowly walk over and give her a hug from behind—the biggest hug I can manage. She turns a bit to wrap her arm around me, pull me to her side and give me a squeeze.

"You know, your grandpa died at 1:02 yesterday afternoon. I hadn't gone back to the hospital yet. Your Uncle Bruce came to tell me, but before he had a chance, I told him, 'I already know. Your daddy died.'"

"How did you know?" I ask. "Did somebody call you?"

"No. I was standing right here, looking at his dogs. All of a sudden, they all put their noses up and started howling up a storm. Didn't think they'd ever stop. Such a mournful sound. I looked up at the clock, and it was just a tiny bit after one o'clock. I knew they were howling for your grandpa."

Viera

Jan Marquart – Austin, TX
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The pen stops, then touches the whiteness
of the page's horizon and I take in a
breath that freezes in midair.

My lungs fill but I can't exhale.

I'm afraid I'll disappear with my own breath
as I try to write about your failing body and our
decades of friendship
as you lay on a
high mattress with your two children on either side.

I was too sick to fly to the coast to say
goodbye and knew something in me
would die with you and never come back.

Black Raspberries

Juliana Lightle – Canyon, TX
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Mom filled the white bowl with
black raspberries.
I poured Bossie's white cream over them,
watched it form a pattern,
flowing around the raspberries—
designs in deep purple and white.
I thought it almost too beautiful to eat.
I was seven.

Now I rarely find black raspberries. Red ones won't do. They lack the intensity, the beauty. When I was a child, every year we went to Hunt's Orchard, north of Amazonia, Missouri, to buy black raspberries, took them home, sorted to discard the imperfect, then threw them way behind the garden next to the timber, huge trees, oak and hickory.

Eventually, these transformed into thriving black raspberry bushes. We had our own patch, created from the discarded, the imperfect.

Mom fed us fresh raspberries for a few days. The rest she used to create her famous pies, froze a freezer full. Baked, they transformed a wintry kitchen into the warmth and sweetness of my mother's family devotion.

I bake pies, many kinds of pies. I have never baked a black raspberry pie.

Five Haiku

Cyndi Lloyd – Riverton, UT

pulled weeds
an emptiness filling
my mind

(Chrysanthemum 22, Oct. 2017)

sunlight through leaves
patterns the grass—
somewhere an answer

(Wild Plum Spring/Summer 2016)

garter snake skin
getting to know myself
again

(Modern Haiku 47.2, Summer 2016)

forest fire—
believing I'll be
reborn

(Full of Moonlight Haiku Society of
America's 2016 Members' Anthology)

one way
or the other ...
sunflowers

(tinywords 16.2, Sept. 2016)

Opus 1

Kathi Kouguell – New York, NY
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The first time he left many years before
I threw the music stands against
the windows hoping they would shatter the glass

I picked up the ceramic pots on the front porch
and
smashed them
against the house

He came into the house and held
my arms against the sides of my body
to stop my shaking and ranting

He picked me up that night
to take me to his orchestra rehearsal in the Catholic church

I sat in the back and rehearsed
what I would say to the priest
so that he might help me.

Goddesses of Age

Madeline Sharples – Manhattan Beach, CA
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The crones—our mothers, grandmothers,
aunts, old friends, and teachers—
walk arm-in-arm in pairs
on the old cobblestoned streets.
They are squat, stout
with veiny legs and thick ankles,
their bare feet in flat sandals
showing jagged toenails
or clothed in thick hose
and wide oxfords.
Some move slowly
clutching each other for support.
They are perfectly coifed.
Their hair short and bleached
hides their age but not too much.
They wear suits with skirts
always below their knees.

They talk almost in a whisper
to solve the world's problems,
impart their age-old wisdom
or decide what they'll cook for dinner.
They wear their age as an example.
Softly, simply, elegantly
they are our muse.
They rejoice in their age.
They thrive in their togetherness
as we follow behind.

Guts

Cheryl Suchors – Cambridge, MA
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My daughter is brave. In her teens, she walked pumas
on a leash. Even a tiger! She let monkeys sit on her head,
held koalas and coatis, wore an extremely large snake
wrapped around her shoulders and arms like a feather boa.
At three, a man painting windows in a neighbor's yard
greeted her with "Hello, little girl," as we walked by. I saw
her right shoulder rise, a sure sign she was unhappy. We
turned around, walked back to him so that she could speak
her mind: "I'm not little."

She stayed by my side during my chemotherapy, giving
me Reiki energy—her idea, not mine. Two years later, age
12, she encouraged me to add another peak to my first
4,000-footer in the White Mountains of New Hampshire
after treatment—believing in me, remembering who I was
before cancer, and reminding me, too. Though my husband
practically had to carry me down, we did those two peaks,
together.

In college, she climbed Pike's Peak at night—all 14,114
feet of it—so that she and her friends could watch the sun
rise from its summit. It snowed. Another thing I was glad to
hear about only after the fact.

In the city where she moved after college, where she
knew no one, she has lived and made friends, found a
boyfriend, jobs, apartments, and promotions for the last six
years. She has refused to read my website blogs. "Too much
like reading your journal," she said. Too close, in other words.
Now I wonder if she will find the courage to read my memoir,
to bear witness to her mother telling her truths.

My book arrives in the world in September, the month
in which she, too, arrived.

If she reads it, what will she think of me afterward?

Am I brave enough to find out?

Marriage Wisdom

Abby November – San Diego, CA
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Mom told me it's not 50/50 or 70/30%
Always give 100% and expect nothing.
You will always be surprised by the unexpected.
Bring small gifts like a single perfect rose like her
Major goof, an extra-large anything ... or a nose hair clipper.
A friend was giving advice to a newly wed guy
Be loving and respectful.
Faithful in your heart, avoid lusting in your mind.
Don't criticize her family or her fur baby.
Most of all, remember the three words she most wants to hear:
"You're Right, dear!"

Age Is Not Just a Number

Judy Watkins – Myrtle Creek, OR
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 e-circle 3, e-circle 6, e-circle 9

Over the 59 years I've been married, I can't count how many times I've been asked about the 14 years difference in our ages. I'm sure I've never truthfully verbalized the challenges involved. Somehow circumstances saw me through, but I could never fault the many that couldn't hold on to the words like duty, obligations and promises.

I met and married when I was 18 and he was 32. This was my second marriage; I married at 16 and had a year-old daughter. I had never been on my own, I'd never had a job, and I quit school two years early. He had more issues than I had. He was an alcoholic, divorced with five children. He stayed in a fog to help forget. Yes, we were quite the pair.

In the beginning we were needy and propped each other up. By the time I was 25, I had the need to party and have fun. He was 40 and ready to slow down. We had financial issues. He worked seasonal construction and there was child-support to pay. He would never allow his wife to work (if I knew how). For years I was introverted, subservient and shy. I was thankful for what I had. He did not beat me as my father and first husband did.

Eventually I broke out from my self-imposed imprisonment. I found a job and returned to finish my education. I grew and I blossomed, but he remained the same man that I married.

He retired the first year that I made more money than he did. We had \$7,000 in savings and a mortgaged house, but he had a new truck, RV and boat. I retired 12 years later.

Life has been challenging and I think that I made it through because I stayed busy with continued education and a demanding job. I was too busy to care what was happening in the world around me. The timing of our needs remains significantly different and it is too late to worry about it now.

It Is Time

Lesta Bertoia – Makawao, HI

it must be time
 why else are we so driven
 to reveal what we've been shown
 it's because there's more to all of this
 than time alone has known
 time mirrored into doubles and quadrupled into go
 time swirling and unfurling like a vortex in the flow
 time ripping through the veils of separation from our fates
 time merging worlds and promised lands
 and kingdoms with their mates
 the body of my knowledge bursts the body of my flesh
 but time, relentless, hears the cry, the hungry human wish
 time, seeking its own timelessness
 speaks visions through our lips
 and tells us we are time's endeared and long-awaited ships

Witnessed

Maria Ernst Weber – Buena Vista, CO

My husband and I were changing the bed
 when came a knock at the door.

Two women stood there and one of them said
 We're here to quiz you and more.

Pamphlets—one of them held in her hand—
 I figured what was in store.

I said we were busy keeping the house,
 my husband and I together.

Both women smiled, the older one asked
 What would you tell young people—

Advice you would give to the youth of today
 about making a marriage work?

Searching my brain for something profound,
 all I could think of was this:

Couples should equally share all they do
 the chores of living a life.

(My husband meanwhile was waiting for me
 to help him finish the bed.)

The older woman, about my age,
 said this was a great response.

From marriage she switched to Adam and Eve,
 and what did I think of that?

(In truth, what has kept us together so long
 is humor, forgiveness, and cats.)

But when she switched to the reason they came,
 I thanked them and said goodbye.

The women drove off, their mission complete.
 They checked me off of their list.

My husband had gone to sleep on the bed
 Waiting for me to assist.

Heaven

Mahani Zubedy – Austin TX
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“Ni, pray, pray so we will meet (in heaven) ...”

The sadness in my mother’s voice strikes me. This is not one of her nags. This she tells me once in a long while; it comes without warning and it hits me—how it must seem to her. She believes in the hereafter with certainty. She believes if I don’t pray, we will not meet. There she is in heaven, with all the sweetness God promised, and her children, the people who mean the most to her, are nowhere to be found. She’s not even sure my father makes the cut.

I tell her God is not mean; God will not punish her.

What else can I say?

My mother prays five times a day. Every day.

When I was a kid she prayed now and then. When she finishes, she sits with her head up, her hands cupped, murmuring special requests:

“God let my daughter do well in her tests.”

“God let my son’s brain be sharp.”

“God forgive my father’s sins, let him into heaven.”

“God ... etc., etc.”

Then my mother says my grandfather’s name and the names of her uncles and aunts who have passed. She recites *al Fatiha* for each of them. This list grows longer as relatives die. My mother struggles to cull the list—the guilt of leaving out an uncle or aunt as she replaces them with her mother, her sisters, and my father through the years. What to do? She only has so many hours in the day.

“Ni, send *Fatiha* to your father.” This comes up once a week or so during our daily Skype calls. “He is waiting there. When I send, there is a wall; when his children send, it reaches him directly.”

Who tells her these things?

“I send to my father and mother, every day, five times a day.”

“Why are we sending to them?” I say when I’m feeling plucky. “They are all set there in heaven; they should be sending to us.”

Like the Pieces of a Puzzle

Ariela Zucker – Ellsworth, ME
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I watched him from the side, the new man in my daughter’s life. The first time I saw him, his face was masked by a dense beard; without it, his chin slightly jutting but nicely shaped. The nose, just the right size; his hands, big and callous, those of someone who uses his hands for daily work. But his eyes I couldn’t read. Not brown or green or blue. Slightly yellow and lacking warmth like those of a reptile praying for a juicy catch. Had I read his eyes I would have known; he was up to no good.

Now I know, looks can be deceiving; old appearance can mask a young inquisitive mind and vice versa. If I can only master the ability to split them open and put them back together, people will open like the layers of an onion.

The outline of a mouth, the color of the eyes, the shape of the hands, the tilt of the head—they create a whole, as at the same time they stand for themselves. I try to imagine people at various stages of their lives. Chubby babies, all pink and giggly, now old and wrinkly, full of imperfections. The tired bagged eyes once shiny and bright, the shaky hands once strong and skilled.

Looking at people as if they are whole and at the same time a unique structure of many separate elements is not a novel idea. We humans are a masterful creation of limbs and inner organs, adept fingers, an upright posture, and a brain to orchestrate it all. We are well-oiled machines that operate as one, just because each part is skilled in its role.

But this perfect machine, this running apparatus, cannot hide the secrets a trained eye can detect—in the smile, in the laugh lines, in the tilt of the head, in the soft touch of a hand. I am still working on perfecting my skills in reading. For the next time, I will remember: you never read a person fully until you read his eyes.

Sand Castles

Jane Gragg Lewis – Laguna Niguel, CA
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Sitting on the beach,
Daddy and I patiently drip wet sand from our fingertips,
one drop at a time,
he more patiently than I.
Slowly the drops form
a castle worthy of a fairy tale:
turrets and bridges,
spires and buttresses,
fit for a magical king and queen of the right size.
We dig a moat and fill it with the foamy, green Atlantic,
to protect our fortress from fanciful foes.
Then patiently we wait—he more patiently than I—
for the covetous waves
to sneak up on our creation
and cajole it back into the sea.

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Susan Wittig Albert: Author of mysteries, historical fiction, memoir, and nonfiction. She is available for a limited number of speaking engagements. www.SusanAlbert.com
Author, Speaker

Patricia A. Dreyfus: Patricia Dreyfus was born in the previous century, near the center of the North American Continent, in Harvey, North Dakota. She has lived in California since she was three years old and is "of" that Golden State. Today she lives in Corona del Mar, California, with her first and favorite husband, Gary. <http://patriciadreyfus-writer.com> **Author, Editor, Teacher**

MaryAnn Easley: Award-winning author & educator, MaryAnn Easley teaches memoir & fiction writing, poetry & journaling, hosts literary salons & poetry events, and does occasional boutique publishing. Awards include Junior Library Guild Selection, teacher of the Year, Quick Picks, and California Reading Association Award of Excellence. authormaryanneasley@gmail.com **Author, Publisher, Speaker**

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Editor, Reviewer, Writing Coach, Interviewer, Mentor.

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 **Teacher**

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 **Teacher/Coach**

Mary Jarvis: Librarian, quilter, and author currently living and working in the Panhandle of Texas. Email: mejarvis@suddenlink.net **Author**

Pat LaPointe: Psychotherapist who conducts both group and individual consultation. She uses this experience to create programs designed to enrich women's lives through interactive writing workshops. She facilitates online and on site writing groups including groups designed to assist senior women in legacy writing. www.changesinlife.com
Author, Editor, Teacher


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> **Author**

Donna Marie Miller: Author of *The Broken Spoke: Austin's Legendary Honky-Tonk*, published in April, 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*. donnamariemiller2013@gmail.com
Author

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. salliemoffitt@yahoo.com **Author, Freelancer**

Amber Starfire: Amber Lea Starfire is an author, editor, and creative writing teacher whose passion is helping others tell their stories. Her website (below) 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. <http://writingthroughlife.com> **Author, Editor, Teacher**

Barbara Stark-Nemon: Barbara Stark-Nemon lives, writes, does fiber arts, swims and cycles in Ann Arbor and Northport, MI. She is the author of the novels *Even in Darkness* (historical fiction) and *Hard Cider*, (contemporary women's fiction). She has taught English, led writing workshops, and been a speech and language therapist. bstarknemon@gmail.com **Author, Speaker, Teacher**

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Reflections Personal Essay Contest Opens Sept. 15

Story Circle Network is seeking entries to its third annual Reflections Personal Essay Contest. “Leaving Home” is the topic this year.

Home is an emotionally packed word, powered by heart-felt memories. Think about the first time you left home. Some of us married and started our own homes, others went off to college or entered the military, and still others set off to find a job and become independent career-minded women. Whatever the reason, leaving home marked an important transition from what we were to who we were becoming.

In an essay of no more than 1200 words, tell us about leaving home for the first time. What did you take with you, and what did you leave behind? How did leaving home change you? What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about the meaning of home?

There is a \$15 entry fee, and the contest is open to current SCN members.

Deadline is Oct. 15.

The judges look for entries that are fresh and original, tell a compelling story in a clear and authentic voice, are

responsive to the topic, and have been polished *and* proofread for presentation in the competition. The most successful submissions are rich in evocative detail and avoid generalizations and abstractions.

Entries will not be returned; evaluations will not be available. The judging team will be made up of Story Circle Facilitators and published authors.

Awards will include one prize of \$100, one prize of \$50, and one prize of \$25. Winning essays will be published in the March 2019 issue of the Story Circle Network Journal and will be featured on SCN’s award-winning website.

For a complete list of rules and how to submit, go to <http://www.storycircle.org/Contests/reflections.php>



Story Circle Network, Inc.
PO Box 1616
Bertram, TX 78605

True Words

Share your story! Your writing sisters make a great audience! We want to hear the voices of real women, in evocative detail, telling the struggles, challenges, and resolutions of their very real lives. Submit your work here:

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

Write on these topics, or choose your own, for these upcoming issues of the *Journal*:

- December, 2018: Dreams Can Come True (deadline October 15)
- March, 2019: Mother Nature (deadline Jan 15)
- June, 2019: Unanswered Questions (deadline April 15)

CONGRATULATIONS to *Jane Gragg Lewis*! She is the winner of a free 1-year extension to her SCN membership. Jane was randomly selected from a pool of this issue's True Words authors. Submit your work and you might win, too!

Italy in the Spring! *plus* Writing with an Expert!

SCN and member/author Teresa Cutler-Broyles are developing a writing workshop in Italy during the spring of 2019. “A Writing Adventure in Italy” will be 8 days (excluding travel) and will be centered in the gorgeous Perugia area of central Italy, where Teresa is a visiting professor. With day trips to Florence, Assisi, and Rome, Teresa is creating an experience that will inspire you for years to come. Keep an eye out – details are coming soon!

