

Real Women Write

Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives



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

Volume 17, 2018

...for women with stories to tell

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Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives

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Welcome to the 17th edition of Story Circle Network's annual anthology, *Real Women Write: Sharing Our Stories, Sharing Our Lives*. We're proud to present this extraordinary collection of lifewriting, fiction, and poetry from our members.

SCN's mission is to help women share their stories, as well as to create greater public awareness of the significance of women's writing, and to validate both their lived experience and their creativity. In this year's gathering of diverse and fascinating works, we are fulfilling that mission.

Here you will find brave acknowledgments of trauma, remarkable moments of bliss, explorations of childhood memories, efforts to understand intimate relationships, appreciations of friendship, thoughtful re-evaluations of parent-child bonds, profound transformations, deeply moving insights, and much more.

All of these pieces, in one way or another, represent women working to become their best and truest selves. Be it the confused perceptions of a child, the fresh perspective that comes with loss, the vulnerability of looking for love, or the wise acceptance of age and change, these authors are writing to learn about themselves and others. Even in funny stories, or spooky stories, they offer something meaningful. And every woman represented here gives us a gift born from her creativity. Every woman here is a lover of words and story, and we are fortunate to hear what she has to say.

While we have included a large sampling of the entries received, as always space restricts our selections, and so do other editorial considerations, such as subject, imagery, style, and coherence. We have worked hard to choose the best writing—fresh, engaging, worth your time—while balancing opportunities for new writers and those with more experience. Though we are never able to share all the good work that is entered, every piece submitted is greatly appreciated, for every one speaks from the heart. And any of them might be the one that reveals something to you—a deeper meaning, greater understanding, or unexpected confirmation.

Editing this collection is an honor, a new experience every time, and one that has growth in it. Yet many more Story Circle members are vital to producing this annual celebration of women's writing, from the Publications Workgroup to the Board of Directors. Each contributing member is vital and I am grateful to all. Especially, thanks go to Peggy Fountain, our now-retired Executive Director, who made all things technical and public work smoothly, and has been at the root of SCN's ability to have impact over the years; to Robin Wittig, our layout and production expert, who manages each year to create a beautiful book from many disparate elements; to our founder, Susan Wittig Albert, who continues to inspire and is generous with the guidance that began and sustains SCN; and to Jeanne Guy, our president and resident wit, whose kindness, perspicacity, and strength is leading SCN and the anthology as we change and grow into the 21st century.

Real Women Write is an annual opportunity to recognize our commonality as women, and as sister writers. It demonstrates the lesson valued by member Noëlle Sickels, whose beloved teacher helped her know “that writing matters and that it can take you down avenues worth exploring.” When we keep writing, we keep growing, and that journey of self-discovery takes us someplace new. Story Circle Network, by inspiring and sharing women's writing, keeps us moving forward on our authentic and unique paths. That's the kind of support that lifts our voices, and turns them into a powerful, life-changing chorus. Here are women singing out!

Susan Schoch, editor
Idledale, Colorado

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

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

Editor: Susan Schoch

Layout Designer: Robin Wittig

Story Circle Network 723 W University Ave #300-234,
Georgetown TX 78626

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Nova Scotia

Noëlle Sickels – Los Angeles, CA

It's quiet in the fourth-grade classroom in the basement of Ralph Waldo Emerson Elementary School. All our heads are bent over our papers as we write. Our windows are high up in the wall, and when I raise my eyes now and then, I see wind-blown brown leaves leaning against the panes and tufts of frost-stiffened grass in the yard beyond. Sometimes when I look up from my paper, I encounter the upturned face of another student who has also paused to think. We quickly avert our gazes from each other, as if we're committing some small infraction. There's no rule against occasionally looking around while working, but we all know, instinctively, that what we're engaged in—the writing process—needs to be protected, even from a casual exchange of glances between classmates.

Imagine yourself an inanimate object, our teacher, Miss Jordan, has said; imagine yourself an animal; imagine, imagine. And write. And later, stand up and read it aloud. It's Miss Jordan's first year in our school. I think it is, indeed, her first year teaching. She is young and glamorous. She doesn't look like any of the other teachers, nor like any of the housewives of my 1950s suburban neighborhood. Her short, boyish hair shows off large, gleaming clip earrings. She wears stylish sack dresses, and her make-up is smooth and perfect. She's tall and is on her feet most of the time, yet she wears spike heels. Our principal also wears spike heels, but she spends her day sitting behind a desk. I see her there when I pass in the hall because she keeps her door open, the better, I think, to keep an eye out for mischief. Our principal is an intimidating figure, though why I feel that way I don't know. I've never had a direct interaction with her. Perhaps it's just the aura of her office and her business suits. And those high heels. But though Miss Jordan's shoes make her tower above us, she isn't intimidating. She's regal.

Miss Jordan has told us she grew up in Nova Scotia. I know nothing at all about Nova Scotia, except where it sits on the map, but to me, it's the height of exotic. My godmother is Venezuelan and lives across the bridge in New York City and speaks with a soft accent, but somehow she doesn't have Miss Jordan's allure. My godmother has given me a little silver pin from Venezuela, and she's described the huge moths and other alarming insects that live there, but I've never thought about Venezuela as a real place, never considered that someday, somehow, I could visit there if I wished. We go to Long Island to see my cousins, and to the Jersey shore for an annual summer trip, and into Manhattan to see the Christmas lights. I never yearned for more. But simply by hailing from Nova Scotia, Miss Jordan has stirred a new awareness in me, the sense of other places as three-dimensional, vibrant locations

where lives are being lived contemporaneous with mine, where lives had been lived before mine. I decide that some day I will go to Nova Scotia.

I am the oldest in my family. My sisters and brothers will all follow me through Emerson School. The sister right after me, coming only two years behind, will be compared to me by some teachers. She and I are very different; I am bookish and serious and dark, she athletic and blonde. She will not fit the comparing teachers' expectations, but I don't worry about that, I won't know about that. My mother and her sisters also went to Emerson School, but, of course, that was too long ago for comparisons. In any case, Miss Jordan is all mine. I bring my first drafts to her desk as solemnly as if I were approaching an altar. Once, I dispute with her when she says I misspelled "sincerely." I'm a natural speller. I never get words wrong. But, of course, she is correct.

When my brother is born in January, my father brings a photograph of him home from the hospital, and I proudly take it to school to show Miss Jordan. He's my second brother and my mother's fifth child. He will become my favorite sibling. Though I liked my earlier teachers, I had never shared anything personal with them. But I know Miss Jordan will be interested in the picture of my new brother, because she's interested in all of us, in what we think and know and how we express it. Miss Jordan has taught us that expressing ourselves is important. She didn't tell us that, she let us find out for ourselves. By giving us the opportunity to write and the opportunity to listen. By giving us enough time. In my memory, all of our class time was spent on creative writing. I don't remember lessons in math or reading or history. I don't remember tests or homework assignments or even books. I remember writing.

I would have become a writer even if I hadn't had Miss Jordan as a teacher. My mother's love of reading and writing was a big influence, and my own love of stories, and my inclination for observation and analysis. But Miss Jordan helped me on my way. She let me know that writing matters and that it can take you down avenues worth exploring.

I have yet to go to Nova Scotia. Now that I am a seasoned traveler, Nova Scotia doesn't shimmer as enticingly on my horizon as it did in 1957, yet it's still on my list of places to see. But perhaps I won't go. Maybe I will keep it safe from reality. Maybe it should remain Miss Jordan's mysterious homeland, just as that fourth-grade class remains exclusively an endless writing workshop in a brightly lit, overheated basement room on a blustery New Jersey afternoon.

Spotlight on a Writer and Her Students

Teaching and learning about writing are an important part of Story Circle Network's mission: to help women of all ages share the stories of their lives. Here we spotlight a remarkable writer/teacher and two of her blossoming students, all of them a part of fulfilling that mission.

Len Leatherwood, our Online Classes Coordinator, is an award-winning teacher; she has the passion for language and story that can spark a growing author. An active writer who sets an industrious example, she takes time for her students, and they thrive. New SCN members, Giselle King and Lara King—yes, they're sisters—have studied with Len in several online classes. Their lifewriting essays evidence the skills of their teacher as well as their own gifts. With individual perspectives and tender voices, both Giselle and Lara tell of self-discovery, and touch the heart of what it is to write. Story Circle Network is enriched by these three women, and pleased to share their work with you.

A Cantaloupe Kind of Girl

Len Leatherwood – Beverly Hills, CA

I am not an apricot kind of girl, all small and soft, squishy and sweet. No, if I had to choose a fruit to characterize myself, I would have to pick a cantaloupe: a rough exterior, but sweet once you find a way to break me open.

This exercise we're doing in group therapy today is stupid. Who cares what kind of fruit we think we are? Don't we need to get down to something more hard core, like why we're all stuck in this dead-end hospital with its puke-green floors and pee smell? Wouldn't that make more sense?

But now the therapist—god, she looks as if she's barely five years older than me—just asked us to pick a flower that might represent ourselves.

Squishy face, across from me, pulls at her mole and says, "Daisies!"

Of course, she'd pick some common flower like that, ones that grow in every field around here. She has not uttered one unique sentence since I got stuck in here. Every day, she squashes up that face of hers and says, "Good morning, Cecille. How are you today?" as if we're at some country club and it's time for golf. I haven't answered so far. That's my big "problem," I refuse to talk. But if I did talk, I'd say, "Back off, happy girl. I do not share your enthusiasm for life."

Yes, that's the other reason my parents saw fit to put me here. No enthusiasm for anything. No school, no friends, no shopping, no smiles. I have not felt exactly happy in a long time.

"Cecille? What color represents you?" the therapist asks me again and I pick up a crayon and hand it to her. It's the color of lilacs.

"Very pretty," she says. "Can you say that word for me?"

I hate it when people talk to me like I'm stupid. Of

course, I can say the word, I just don't want to. I turn my back and stare out the window.

"Lilies, that's what would best suit me," I hear from behind me. I know this is David and he's staring right at me as he talks—shouts—from the far wall. He has impulse control problems and he has to sit away from all of us or else he might get mad and slap somebody. That was what he did at school and here he is.

"Lilies? Tell me more about that choice, David."

I want to puke. That therapist sounds as if she just read a textbook on "appropriate responses." Tell her to go screw herself, David! Tell her she's an idiot!

David clears his throat and says softly, "My grandmother's garden was filled with lilies and I loved my grandma more than anybody in the world."

The quiet room erupts into noise. We all shift in our seats at the same time and everybody—including me—stares at David. After all, he's never said anything besides, "Go screw yourself."

"Can you tell us more about her?"

I expect this will trigger David's rage. Instead, he stares out the window at the asphalt parking lot and says, "She was soft and warm. And she gave me chocolate."

Squishy face sighs. "That is so nice. I wish my mean ole granny had been like that."

"Is she still alive?" the therapist asks, and I'm glad because I want to know, too.

David turns away. "No," he shouts at the wall. "No, no, no!"

It's my turn to sigh. So David is grieving. I don't have to go to some fancy school to figure that one out. But little Smarty Pants won't ever get me to break open like that.

"Cecille, can you say something to David that might help him right now?"

I look up to see her green eyes staring at me, her eyes the color of the avocados that grow in my backyard on the tree I've climbed since I was three. I shake my head. I don't know what to say.

Miss Pushy walks over to where I am and puts her hand on my shoulder. "Is David your friend?"

I pull away. No fair. Of course, he's my friend. I know his pain. I try to avoid her, but she asks me again. "Is David your friend?"

I tap my fingers on the edge of the chair. David is looking at me as if he's going to start tearing up his whole side of the room if I don't answer. I look back at the therapist and nod.

"Can you tell him that you care?" she asks. "I think David could use some reassurance right now."

I look back over at David and he's staring at me like he's going to pop if I don't say something.

I lick my lips and gulp. "Sorry." My voice sounds far away, as if I were calling from a hilltop five miles off.

The therapist puts her arm around my shoulder and pulls me so close I can feel the softness of her sweater as it tickles my arm. "Thank you."

I look over at Squishy face, who looks as if she's going to melt, her face is so red. "You talked!" she says, jumping up and down. "I heard you. You talked!"

David moves a little closer to the circle, still halfway across the room, but not all the way to the far wall.

"I think we can celebrate our day today," says the therapist. "I am happy that David picked lilies because of my name."

We all look at her the same way: confused.

"Huh?" David says, "What does that mean?"

"My name is Lily."

David's face breaks into a big grin, the happiest I had ever seen him, and Squishy face hops up and down like a mechanical bunny.

I feel my face shift just a little; I remember this is how I used to smile.

Poco A Poco

Giselle King – Alpena, MI

At seven years old, every Tuesday, I trudged into my piano teacher Loretta's studio, dropped my leopard-print bag on the floor, and plopped down on the piano bench. "Hello, Giselle," Loretta would say, "Did you enjoy the E major scale?" Squirming, I replied, "Oh, yes," then proceeded to bang out notes I had not practiced. Loretta would raise an eyebrow, then patiently review finger

placement before having me practice that scale over and over. This excruciating process went on for two long years as I learned the basics and how to read music.

When I was nine, our family moved to New Zealand to be near my grandmother, who had Alzheimer's. Everyone was a new person to her, but she had one skill that never escaped her memory. After her caretaker helped her over to the piano, Grandma placed her delicate fingers on the cream keys and played pieces from memory that were both difficult and beautiful. I was struck by the irony that Grandma, who had forgotten the name of her youngest child, could access entire songs from her faded mind, as if they were hidden away like precious jewels, just waiting to be rediscovered.

One day, my mom asked me to play for the family, and as I walked over to the piano, I noted that Grandma was staring vacantly at her pink wallpaper. I chose one of the few songs I had been practicing. As I struggled through a difficult part, I heard Grandma mutter, "That was a bum note. I can play better than that." I smiled, marveling at her lucidity when it came to music even while the rest of her memory was so clouded.

After my grandmother died and we moved back to my hometown in Michigan, I grew tired of playing the same three songs, so my mother suggested I try lessons again. When I walked back through my piano teacher's door, Loretta and I greeted each other as if we had only said goodbye yesterday, not eight years before. Except one thing had changed—my desire to play the piano. I was now playing for my own enjoyment and consequently my lessons took on a completely different feel.

While I was away, Loretta had relaxed her rules about playing only classical pieces. She now allowed two songs of my choice along with one classical selection in order to learn piano techniques. I picked "City of Stars" and "Mia and Sebastian's Theme" from *La La Land*, along with Mozart's "Symphony No. 14," and went home to practice. When I returned the very next week and played these songs, Loretta's brown eyes lit up, she clapped her hands, and she exclaimed, "I love Giselle concerts!" I felt happy that my hard work had paid off. From that point forward, I have loved practicing, looking up music on the Internet, and playing my favorite songs. I also enjoy surprising others by playing their favorite music. Recently, I shocked my five-year-old cousin Blake by playing, "Time to Say Goodbye" by Andrea Bocelli. Blake gasped, "This is the song I listen to before school every day!" Seeing his big smile made me smile.

I relate to how Mia in *La La Land* describes her aunt in *The Audition*:

*She captured a feeling
Sky with no ceiling
The sunset inside a frame*

This is how I view my grandmother's musical ability. Although her memory was compromised, once she began playing a song, she "captured a feeling" that was palpable and connected her to her listeners in a way she could no longer achieve with words. She demonstrated the true power of music.

I now go into piano lessons with a different attitude. Though I still carry my music in that leopard-print bag, I skip rather than trudge into the music studio. After all, I have a mini-concert to perform for Loretta, and besides, I want to make my grandmother proud.

Stumbling Through Childhood

Lara King – Alpena, MI

Though I was diagnosed at age three with Childhood Apraxia and briefly received intensive speech therapy at the University of Michigan, my first real memory of talking differently was when I was five, proudly introducing myself as "Wawa." The people I was addressing looked confused, struggling to understand what I had just said. My twin sister, serving as my interpreter, said, "Her name is Lara." Not long after, I became aware that people's eyes glazed over as they waited for me to finish my sentences, and I found myself holding my breath to see if they understood. I sighed with relief when they did and felt frustrated when they did not.

By six, I was reading and writing, no doubt because books and journals were in the realm of written language rather than oral. In those journals, I had a ready outlet for my imagination, emotions, and memories. Teachers described me as a child who preferred the company of books over my classmates. Even though I was receiving one-on-one speech therapy twice a week, I still could not enunciate clearly enough to be understood and accepted by my peers.

By age seven, I became known as the 'quiet' twin, whereas my sister was the 'confident' one. People sometimes commented on my "accent" and asked where I was from. "I'm from here," I would respond meekly. My peers teased me, pointing out that I did not say words "right." On one occasion, my sister and I had an argument at a family event and my aunt reassured my sister that she was automatically superior because I had a speech impediment. Whether indirectly or directly meant to be hurtful, I dealt with constant reminders that I was different from those around me and that I was flawed.

To me, my speech impediment was a birthmark that refused to be concealed by makeup, a part of me that I could never detach from myself. Enunciating a sentence was like being trapped in a dense forest, stumbling over logs and rocks as I fought to find my way out.

When I was in 10th grade, my parents encouraged me

to enter a local speech contest on the topic, "What the World Gains from Optimism." They thought it was a chance to prove to myself that I was capable. Ironically, although the speech was centered around optimism, I was pessimistic on the day of the contest. One of my competitors was my sister, who recited her speech perfectly and consistently. I imagined the judges comparing us, pointing out my flaws while praising her strengths. Driven by benign sibling rivalry, I practiced multiple times a day until I spoke each word smoothly, altering the flow of challenging phrases to accommodate my speech difficulties. In order to remain within the time frame, I practiced speaking at a steady pace, surprising myself with my ability to articulate every syllable rather than slurring sentences together.

On the day of the contest, my sister and I agreed that regardless of the results, our relationship would not be impacted. This temporarily relieved the pressure I had placed on myself, but my anxiety rose when I was chosen as the last contestant. Finally, I was called to the podium. Gazing out into the audience, I smiled and recited my speech from memory. Miraculously, my voice did not mix up sounds or stutter syllables. As I continued, I could see people engaged rather than looking confused. Gaining confidence, I made more eye contact and added small hand gestures. Soon, I reached the end of my speech and retreated to my seat, feeling relieved and happy. When the winners were announced, my sister took second place and I won first! I could not stop grinning as I realized I had finally risen above my speech impediment.

My win has inspired me to take on more challenges in my life. I have been motivated to take harder classes in a wide range of subjects and to become a leader in my community. I now let my personality and confidence speak for me and know that as long as I don't get in too big of a rush, people will understand me. I have come a long way from those "Wawa" days.

Memories / Summer

Susan DuMond – Ashland, OR

A girl holds a popsicle.
It's grape.
She runs her tongue
up one side and
down the other
licking the sweetness
of summer on
a stick. Heat
swirls around her
like a cape, heavy,
sticking to her skin.
Her metal skates,
tied together,
hang over one cotton-
covered shoulder.
She saunters slowly through
the thick warm air of
her tenth summer
wondering how long
she can make the
purple last.

All For the Love of Meatballs

Pat LaPointe – Prospect Heights, IL

“Mommy, the meatballs smell so good, can I please have one?” asks nine-year-old Pat.

“It’s the third time you’ve asked. You know we don’t eat meat on Christmas Eve. You can have them tomorrow. Now go sit down and stay out of the kitchen. You’re moving around so much your curlers are coming undone. You will be a mess by the time we go to midnight mass,” replies a frustrated, angry Mom.

I stomp off, loose curlers bobbing, and drop myself into my Uncle Henry’s Lazy Boy chair in front of the Christmas tree. I’m mesmerized by the bold blue, green, red, and white bulbs. The gleaming silver tinsel looks like sparks of light weaving between the branches, illuminating the colorful glass ornaments. I start to sing along with the carolers walking on the street below.

It was really a bad idea to drop so heavily into the chair. It was even a worse idea to pull the lever to lift my legs. I only realize this as the leg rest clips the tree and it falls on me. I scream, and it seems like an eternity before anyone sees what happened and comes to rescue me.

Uncle Henry, shouting Italian swear words, pulls the tree off me. He’s so angry that he tosses the tree, lights, tinsel, and ornaments out the front window, out to the

sidewalk below. Good thing the carolers had moved on.

Mom, with pasta sauce dripping from a ladle, rushes in from the kitchen shouting, “What have you done now?”

She quiets down when she sees my new tights have burn holes from contact with the hot lights. All the adults converge upon me to pick off tinsel and shards of glass ornaments. They unroll the wire curlers, thankful the wires from the lights didn’t cause sparks.

I, of course, am still in shock, but sobbing.

Mom leaves the room only to return with a juicy, sauce-soaked meatball.

“I think God will forgive you for eating this before midnight,” she explains.

It was the best meatball I have ever eaten.

On Being Loved

Pat Bean – Tucson, AZ

As a child, I grew up feeling only my grandmother loved me. I was only 10 years old when she died—and then I was *sure* nobody loved me. I didn’t understand back then that just because my mother wasn’t a hugger or verbally loving that she showed her love in other ways, like making sure we children had a hot dinner every night and a roof over our heads, not an easy task when one’s husband gambled and drank away his paycheck every Friday night before coming home. I didn’t even consider that my dad loved me because I rarely saw him. He left for work in the morning before I got up, and didn’t get home until after I was asleep at night.

The more I felt unloved, the more I craved love, at least my idealized understanding of it. At 16, I married the first man who said he loved me. It took me way too many years, and five children along the way, to accept that while he said the words, the only person he loved was himself. He constantly put his personal desires ahead of his wife and children.

After 22 years, I finally divorced him. But I took the action only after I realized I would rather spend the rest of my life alone and unloved than spend another minute married to that man. My few friends at the time congratulated me on the decision. That hurt and demoralized me. I had pretended, to myself as well as others, that ours was a happy marriage. That they had recognized the truth, even before I did, was a blow to my pride.

As consolation to me, almost everyone said that I had stayed for my kids’ sakes, that I had no other choice. Bullshit! I knew they were wrong. I had finally acknowledged to myself that I had both married, and took

almost a quarter of a century to divorce, because I felt nobody else would ever love me. It was to the sad detriment of my kids, who were hurt along the way, that I had locked the bad parts of my relationship away in a closet, while keeping a smile on my face.

The next few years were difficult ones. Because my ex-husband had taken everything in our small bank account to set himself up in a new place, I had to borrow money to pay my first month's rent. I was in a new place with only a part-time job at the time. As a last-ditch effort to make the marriage work, I had left my editor/writer job in Utah, and followed my husband to Texas and his new job. The day he moved out of the house, I got a second job to help make ends meet. It would be another four months before I landed a job as a reporter at the Fort Worth Star-Telegram, which would allow me to once again live a normal life with a decent paycheck.

Meanwhile, my three oldest children, who had already left home, scattered around the world, and my contact with them was infrequent. My fourth child was nearly 18, and he, too, soon took off. It would be several years, and not until grandchildren began to arrive, that my relationships with my children began to heal.

But before then, as if by magic, I began to discover that love has many faces, and not just family ones. I opened myself up to the love of friends, including one gay colleague who helped me survive that first year of trauma. I was also surprised to discover there were men out there, nice men, who wanted to date me. A couple over the years even wanted to marry me. These temporary lovers gave me more love than my marriage ever had. And though I eventually parted with them, I can still feel the temporary love we shared, and the affection that continued ever after the relationships were over.

But none of them were the soul mate I so desperately searched for, before finally realizing I was my own soul mate. I hadn't grown up loving myself, and most of my earlier years I didn't even like myself. Thankfully, time—soon 80 years of it—taught me how important it was for me to love myself, the person those years, the good ones as well as the bad ones, had created.

Love continues, in all its many forms to surround me—from the love of my great-grandson Junior, who recently told me that I would always be his favorite Nana, even if I didn't play Nerf guns with him, to my friend and neighbor Jean, who turned on my air conditioning and had fried chicken and chocolate cake waiting for me in my refrigerator when I returned from a three-week road trip to Texas to visit family and attend a writing conference, where I felt the love of writing colleagues through their many welcoming hugs.

I felt loved when one of the maintenance guys here at

my apartment complex helped carry my suitcase up three flights of stairs, then gave me a hug and said: "Welcome back." I felt it when my canine companion, Pepper, eagerly greeted me on my return. No one should ever dismiss the love of a faithful dog.

Love is everywhere. I wish I had known that before I ever said: "I do!"

Never Ending Story

Carol Ziel – St. Louis, MO

Even priests have their needs
My mother said
I bled.
And the other men, I ask?
It happens to most girls
Those are the facts
My mother's face a mask.
My own face hard as wood
I stood
Aching heart
Aching womb
My youth a tomb.
No Easter mystery for me
No resurrection from what was done
Was done
Was done
No place in the sun
For first chaste kiss
First sweet touch
First time bliss
I walk the labyrinth under the moon
Picking up salvation crumb by crumb.

Rite of Passage

Claire McCabe – Elkton, MD

"Try tampons, they are much easier than pads," Laurel said.

It was a typical hot and humid Virginia summer, the first one since I'd started my period a few months earlier. At 14, my period had come later than most of my friends. Laurel had been having her period for two years; I was still using pads. I hated the elastic belts used to hold the sticky, sweaty mass of cotton between my legs, and I feared the bulkiness could be detected through my light cotton shorts. Laurel and I walked to the drugstore tucked into the nearby strip mall. I handed my money over and let her pick out the

tampons, then followed her to the public bathroom on the second floor of the shopping center.

Laurel smiled, gave me the paper bag with tampons, and said, “Go for it.”

Inside the metal stall, I dropped my shorts and underwear to my ankles and tried several times to insert a tampon while standing up. When that didn’t work, I looked at the pictures on the tampon information sheet that offered a number of positions for insertion. One was a line drawing of a woman with her foot on a toilet seat. I stepped one leg out of my panties and put my foot on the seat to try again. Still no luck standing. The dry cotton wouldn’t slide in. Laurel had purchased tampons with built-in lubricant, but the glue-like coating was not contacting enough moisture to activate its viscosity. I turned over the instruction sheet to find a drawing of a woman sitting on a toilet. I tried again imitating that posture, but still no luck.

“How’s it going?” asked Laurel.

“Umm, terrible,” I said. “It won’t go in.”

“Think of a cute guy,” Laurel, who was more carnal than I, suggested.

We were both virgins, so I wasn’t quite sure how that was supposed to help. And pushing a hard cylinder of cotton against my body had no correlation to the grinding slow dances I’d had with guys. I decided to read the instructions again—something about pointing the tampon toward the middle of my back. Maybe I’d been trying to go straight up. I sat on the toilet and tried again.

“Well?” said Laurel.

“I’m going to need a little more time.”

I heard a sigh, then the strike of a match followed by the smell of smoke. Laurel passed me a cigarette, menthol, under the stall door and kept one for herself.

“Just relax,” she urged.

I took a couple of puffs then balanced the cigarette on the back of the toilet and went back to the instructions. I briefly considered lying down, but even as desperate as I was to make this work, I would not lie on the tile floors in a public bathroom.

I tried standing up again and pushed on the applicator. The tampon came out of its cardboard tube and went from a cylinder to the shape of a palm tree in a hurricane—sideways. I put it into the sanitary disposal box then peeled the white paper off of the next one. I wiggled the applicator a little to see if it was working. The last one had pinched my sensitive tissue, and I was quickly developing an aversion to everything tampon. I tried again with the same poor results.

I heard Laurel turn on the faucet, and then the sizzle of her cigarette going out. I looked at my cigarette on the back

of the toilet. Its long tail of ash had dropped to the floor. I rolled the remaining filter to the floor, crushed the ember under my sandal, and started to cry.

“Stop it,” said Laurel. “Just take a deep breath and give it one more try. When you’re standing, you still have to squat a little bit. Think of sucking it into your body.”

I peeled the delicate white paper from tampon number three, made sure the string tail was hanging out the proper end of the applicator and stood with a slight squat. Then, aiming toward my back, I felt my body yield a bit and the tampon seemed to move toward the targeted area.

“Is it in?” asked Laurel.

“Almost,” I replied.

I wiggled it a little to make a readjustment, and it went in a bit more. When I stood up straight, I knew that it was still not quite right; part of the tampon was slightly outside of my body. But I couldn’t tell Laurel that. I pulled up my panties and shorts, opened the stall door, and smiled.

“Well, I’m glad that’s done,” Laurel said.

I nodded. The dryness from the tampon and the feeling of the string were uncomfortable, but far better than the elastic belts and pads. We headed home, me kind of waddling. But I was still counting this as a successful rite of passage and was grateful for Laurel, who mentored me through the process.

Surviving Mother

Janice Kvale – Austin, TX

Surviving motherhood can be tricky
Not for my children
(though I don't know how they feel about it)
I mean surviving my mother
Oh, just at times
Already I am hedging
as though many years dead
she still has power to render me
a shell with a girl hiding inside

Photo Wall

Bonnie J. Watkins – Austin, TX

An ugly scar from spilled airplane glue had removed the paint from the mantelpiece where I put my fifth grade popsicle stick project to dry. Grabbing a rag, I tried to rub up the oozing, smelly glue. That just made the smear longer and removed even more of the paint. My mom would be back any minute from buying another bauble to try to escape her housewife boredom and my dad's drinking. Every tick on the mantelpiece clock across from the scar accused me, as I knew she would soon.

Shaking in fear, I heard the roar of her car pulling into our country driveway. The porch screen door slammed and the wooden door to the house opened as she struggled inside, dropping her load of packages on the sofa.

"What's that smell?" She never missed anything.

"Oh, that's the glue I used for my project."

"Well, spray some air freshener. It stinks in here."

Emptying half the can in relief and hope, I raced outside to try to hide.

"BONNIE!" Time to pay. For what seemed forever, the shouting escalated. Holding my breath, I waited for the wire flyswatter she used for spankings, but no, today I had escaped with the yelling and another deposit in the bank of resentment toward her.

Years passed. My hard-heartedness toward my mother began to crack a little more around the edges with increased insights into the complexities of my own marriage and parenting. And, my mom told me more stories about her childhood that made her behavior clear. Living in a multi-generational home with an autocratic, yelling German grandmother, along with frequent beatings with the leather strap Grandpa used to sharpen his shaving straight razor, explained a lot about the cycle of abuse that was my inheritance. In addition, her husband, my Daddy, had committed suicide at 49. Can you imagine ever wiping away the visual image of finding your husband one morning on the barn floor having put a shotgun to his head?

Mom had a mental breakdown after Daddy's suicide, went into a deep depression, and endured shock treatments, a common practice then for depression that wouldn't respond to less effective medications than we have today. And as she aged, three hours away, she couldn't manage alone. The neighbors began to call and say that she was a nuisance, calling them often for help. "You are the family; do something."

When we moved her out of her house and had an estate sale, the saleslady said to my sister and me, "Oh, there are dozens of family pictures in the guest closet. Your

mom didn't choose any to take with her. I thought you might want them for yourselves." We opened the closet to dozens of studio pictures, all professional and ornately framed in her beloved gold leaf. In a hurry, we scooped them all up into a box without sorting through them.

Mom got settled into her new gorgeous two-bedroom apartment near me, with her froufrou miniature Schnauzer. As we walked down the hall and other friendly residents opened their doors, their walls and dressers were full of family photos. Not Mom's.

Sis was living near her children now in South Carolina, and so I was Mom's caregiver. Dutifully, I took her to her many doctors' appointments, visited, and had her visit in our home. Mom wouldn't drive to the nearby shopping center even though she had her car. She was angry, negative, and pouty, despite her agreeing to the move.

Always, I did things for her, but only dutifully. Never cheerfully. I hugged her even though she didn't return the hugs. I switched to calling her "Mama," what she called her mother, a more endearing term, hoping that my feelings would follow my actions.

Later, my heart was flooded with just a little more love, rather literally. One May at midnight, during Austin's frequent flooding season, the ceiling broke over her bed and water poured onto her head as she slept! She moved to our house for a month during her repairs. I was teaching full-time and in a cast myself for an injured ankle. She couldn't get out of the chair by herself, so we hired day help while I was working.

We were quite a pair. Evenings, she clumped ahead of me on her walker and I crutched behind her to the bathroom. We couldn't get into the bathtubs, and our house had no walk-in shower. So, I sat on a chair while she held onto the sink and together we took sink baths. As I bathed my mother with the warm cloth, scented with fragrant soap, my heart cracked open with more love. She had done this for me.

Soon after, I dragged out all those boxes of gorgeously framed studio pictures with us immaculately dressed. There I saw Mama's love. The only love she could give. Not hugs. Material things were what she had to give. Probably that was all she had ever been given. After arranging all the pictures on my bed, next I hung them in a gallery that filled the wall. Thanking Mama for the pictures and showing her my photo wall, she said, "That looks nice."

Some peace had come, even if lately. Now, every night for ten years since her passing, before my evening prayers, I look at that wall and say "Oh, Mama." Just those two words. They speak volumes of forgiveness, understanding, and thanksgiving for what I did have.

The First Time He Touched Me

Susan Flemr – Des Moines, IA

At 13, I worked for a man
my father's age.
My shift had ended,
and I was halfway
up the stairs to the exit,
when he started down.

He stood on the step above me,
smiled.

Oh, have I caught you?
I forced a syllable
against the lump in my throat.
Yep, I said.

He placed his hands on my shoulders,
lowered them to my arms,
leaned over and pressed a kiss
into my forehead.
His rough whiskers scraped my brow,
the pungent odor of tobacco
penetrated my nostrils.

I wonder how long I stood on that step
before he moved aside to let me pass.

Gorgeous Lady of Wrestling

Carol Ziel – St. Louis, MO

I should have been a Gorgeous Lady of Wrestling, showing up for work in a spangly sequined leotard, full of feathers, glitter and bangles. I should have had a name like Spanish Red, Matilda the Hun, Thunderbolt, Beastie, Broadway Rose, or Lightning. I should have been part of the drama between good and evil played out each night in the ring, even spanking the devil's hiney—symbolically, of course. I should have belonged to a group of women who used the full strength of their bodies to enact that struggle. I could then have known the complete abandon of leaping and tumbling, flipping, bouncing, and felt the trust each woman had in the other, no matter the role.

I grew up Catholic. Female wrestling was not an option. Getting married or becoming a nun were the careers of choice. I entered the convent, a splendid decision in that historical moment. But what if the bishop, instead of requesting one vocation from each family, had said: “Do whatever makes you strongest. Be wild and adventurous for Spirit. Test your physical and creative muscles to the limit because that is your true vocation?”

Of course, now that I'm 70, it's a little late to change professions. I'm seriously overweight, have had three knee surgeries, and am getting ready to retire. I became a social worker instead of a wrestler, frequently fighting injustice and encouraging healing from a cubicle. For many years, I was wired to a headset. My uniform was usually navy blue slacks and shirt, instead of feathers and glitter. The evil I most frequently battled was the bureaucracy that hired me, but then created obstacles to actually doing the job. Still, I think I did some good.

How I would have loved to tussle with a corporate figurehead in the ring: suit and tie against myself in that sequined, spangled unitard. I'd start with a Leg Drop, and follow up with a Knee Shot to the Ring Post. I'd use the Arm Wringer, Gorilla Press, and Glam Slam. Then the Keister Bounce, Spike Piledriver, Monkey Flip, and Atomic Drop. I'd flip him from rope to rope and toss him like a pizza until he begged for mercy.

But he'd get no mercy until I had his pledge, a pledge to give us the time and space and staff to be truly compassionate. The grace to be more focused on the soul of our work, and not the financial gain. The imperative to put the client first. The clarity that corporate rules were to serve the wellbeing of the client, and not primarily the company's Fortune 500 status.

That can never happen except in my dreams, and it's time to retire. I am grateful for the trust that clients had in me when they revealed their pain, confusion, and loss. It was a privilege to be part of their lives, and I frequently believe that they have gifted me more than I have gifted them.

I will never know how I would have made it as a gorgeous lady of wrestling, but I do know that I had a splendid career as a social worker. And now it's time to retire to the garden and grandkids and Quaker friends, to writing and reading and sitting in the sun on a late summer day. It's time to say goodbye to one chapter and step onto the brink of everything.

Thief

Lucy Painter – Williamsburg, VA

I knew it was wrong to steal. My mother drummed that, along with other “don'ts” into my 10-year-old head, but I stole it anyway.

It was a perfect pink shell that lay on my neighbor Mrs. Fretwell's mantle, a gift from her husband years ago. She told me the story of how it came to sit there among her many porcelain figurines. One week in their first year of marriage, Mr. Fretwell had to travel to Virginia Beach on business, but Mrs. Fretwell, almost nine months pregnant,

couldn't go. Walking the beach one night, missing his wife, Mr. Fretwell picked up the shell and brought it home to her, telling her its beauty reminded him of her. Together they placed it on the mantle where it still lay.

Not long after that summer, their young son still a toddler, Mr. Fretwell died in South Korea. Now years later, Mrs. Fretwell was old and suffered from arthritis, so I often helped her with chores. While I dusted or swept or washed her dishes, she often told me her story—the telegram that came, the years of raising a child by herself, the loneliness. But there was always the shell to remind her of those happy days with Mr. Fretwell.

Why I took it, I don't know. She was in the kitchen and I was dusting when its pink perfection called to me. I picked it up and slipped it into my pocket.

At home, I hid the shell in my dresser drawer, but it was not happy. And neither was I. I couldn't sleep that night, knowing it was there, imagining the pain Mrs. Fretwell felt when she noticed it was gone. I imagined I heard the shell sighing to me, "Let me out. I don't belong here. Take me home."

I did. The next morning I entered my neighbor's kitchen to see her sitting over a cup of coffee, still in her bathrobe. This from a woman who rose with the birds and dressed for the day in her shirtwaist and stockings, hair combed and face powdered.

I knew what was wrong. And I knew what I had to do. I told her the truth, ready to take whatever punishment she gave me. She only told me to go home and listen to my own conscience. With shaking hands, I placed the shell back on the mantle and went home as she asked.

Several days went by without word from Mrs. Fretwell, days I fretted and nights I lay sleepless until the day she came to the our door and asked for me.

"Where have you been?" she asked. "Weren't you going to help me with my canning this week?" And she smiled at me.

Red Lipstick

Jane Gragg Lewis – Laguna Niguel, CA

Marsha wears lots of mascara, and boy, does she ever love that red lipstick! I'm not sure, but I don't think she's old enough for all that makeup.

She gets on my school bus at the trailer park, the last stop on the way to Berryhill School. She's the only person I know of who lives in a trailer park.

It doesn't matter if she's getting on the bus or getting off, all the older boys elbow each other and get stupid-looking grins on their faces. Then they do that wink-wink thing.

All these boys sure do like Marsha, but she has no use for them. She mostly keeps to herself. I don't think she has any friends 'cause the girls her age never ask her to sit with them. They're probably jealous 'cause she's so beautiful.

Marsha's a seventh grader, I think, and I'm only a second grader, but when she walks past me, she smiles back when I smile at her. I wonder if I'll be that pretty when I grow up—except without that mascara and red lipstick. If I wear lipstick, I'll get that Bazooka Bubble Gum pink color like Mrs. Furr wears.

Marsha pulls some of her long, curly blonde hair up on top of her head and ties it with a really big bow that matches what she's wearing. She lets the rest of the curls fall over her shoulders. I wish I could do that, but Mama says long hair is too much trouble for her.

Marsha's ears are pierced. Can you believe it? I don't know anybody else at school with pierced ears. Come to think of it, I don't know anybody anywhere who has them. She always wears these big, shiny gold hoops, and I think they look so cool.

One day when Marsha gets off the bus, a mean boy reaches up and grabs one of her earrings and pulls it off. I mean like it rips her ear from the hole all the way down. I gasp and slap my hand over my dropped-open mouth, but Marsha just grabs her ear and turns to look at the laughing boy and his dopey friends. Giving him the best drop-dead look I've ever seen, she tells him in an icy voice, "Give me my earring, Tommy." They all stop laughing, and Tommy hands her the earring. Nobody says a word. Seriously, it sounds like time has stopped. Then she holds her head high and gets off the bus. Daddy would say that Marsha is one tough cookie, but I watch her out the window as we drive off, and I think I see her wipe her eyes.

She doesn't have a daddy, but I don't know why. Her mama works at a diner next to the trailer park. A boy who seems to know all there is to know about that diner says her mama is a waitress, but then he does that wink-wink nonsense.

Everything about Marsha is a delicious mystery that I keep trying to solve. I spend a lot of time on the bus watching Marsha and wondering about her—the makeup, the gold hoop earrings, her trailer park life, things the boys say about her mama.

The last time I see Marsha is the day she runs to get on the bus looking a bit ruffled. For once those boys don't act like the stupid idiots that they are.

I can't imagine what happened. She always looks like a movie star, but today her perfect red lipstick is smeared across her left cheek, her blouse is pulled out on one side, and it looks like tear drops have dripped that dark stuff under her blue eyes. Even her hair is a bit mussed. I don't know; maybe she got up late.

The next day Marsha isn't at the bus stop. The know-it-all boy tells everybody that Marsha and her mama moved. He says her mama married some customer from the diner, but the man likes Marsha a lot better than he likes her mama. Then he does that disgusting wink-wink thing again. I need to ask Daddy what all that winking means.

I sure hope Marsha's life will be better now that she has a daddy who really likes her. Maybe things are looking up.

A Love Story

Kit Dalton – Martinez, CA

You should know that my mother disliked cats, unlike me, her eldest daughter, whom she accused—with some truth—of liking cats better than people. Mother told me the reasons (to the extent such tastes follow reason) for her dislike of cats: too intelligent, too hard to “read.” And I think I heard in what she said a sense of the elusiveness so often attributed to cats.

There was one cat my mother truly loved, though. He was a brown tabby, un-neutered like most cats of that era, the ruff around his face typical of an intact male, the amiable disposition quite untypical. He appeared, unheralded, on the ridgepole of one of our barns, a rat bite on one leg. Mother, a sucker for injured animals of any species, tended to him as she would have one of her own children.

If at first we knew little about the cat's provenance, we learned it soon and brutally. He belonged to our local mailman, a shell-shocked war veteran who thrived on any opportunity to upbraid the people along his route. When he somehow discovered where his cat was hanging out, he immediately began to harass and even threaten us. “The nerve of you city people, stealing a man's cat,” he would rant every time he stopped to deliver our mail. So, dutifully, we returned “Barn Cat” (as we called him) whenever he came our way, noting that each time we did this, our journey would begin to the accompaniment of peaceful purring and end with a muttering growl.

After several weeks of this pattern, Barn Cat vanished for a time, and while we worried about his fate at the mailman's hands, we were also relieved to see less of the man. By and by, the cat did return to us, the victim of an encounter with a farm machine that left him with three legs instead of four. My mother suspected the mailman, or somebody connected with him, of inflicting the injury. In any case, the cat was already compensating for the missing leg with a pretty functional hobble.

We saw plenty of Barn Cat (and nothing of the mailman) after that. Initially, his visits seemed random, but little by little we sussed out a pattern. A neighbor from down our dirt road first alerted us to it. “Durn good mouser, that

three-legged feller,” he observed one day. When we asked how he knew, he replied that the cat was doing rodent duty in his cow barn. “Not every day, mind you,” he explained. “Seems like he's somewheres else on weekends. ‘Twouldn't surprise me if you saw a bit of him then.” And he was right: the Cat was showing up on Friday nights, so reliably that stepfather Ned won a few bets on the subject with skeptical visitors.

Our mother and stepfather had recently returned us from Rockland County, NY, to rural northern Vermont, seeking the “simple life.” My sister Beth and I thought this unfamiliar term might be code for our life during World War II—when we'd first owned our farmstead, and our mother had renovated it for when the man of our family finally returned. “Finally”—always an elusive concept—had come around, but our daredevil father, by then a stranger to all of us, was dead of a sniper's bullet. After a year of deep mourning, Mother remarried and relocated to New York.

Vermont beckoned continually, though, in the form of that big Colonial house, that “simple life,” until the parents finally succumbed. Back we went, as luck would have it, to the same house, for sale by the people who'd bought it from my mother, and unchanged in just about every detail.

But fate was against us. True, for a while, life was smooth and close to normal, but before long, our parents were shocked out of their naive optimism by a culture that was light-years away from the one we (like it or not) represented. Indeed, the mailman's attitude to his cat was pretty typical of the assumptions of much of the rest of the community. And we were those consarned “city folk,” much as we tried (with varying degrees of commitment and success) to fit in.

Our parents had about reached the end of their rope with the local culture and were considering other locations, when one night our mother (a poet), writing late, heard a car speed by. Thinking of the mailman (a notorious hell-driver) and soon hearing a barely audible scratching at the porch door, she went to investigate. Outside, she found Barn Cat, bleeding, fur coat akimbo, near death. She stowed him in a towel-lined box behind the wood stove and kept watch. Come morning, he was dead.

Next day, Ned buried the body en route to town meeting. For the first time ever, Mother skipped that event; she had long been growing disillusioned with it, anyway. Mid-morning or so, home alone, she noticed a car, creeping down our road and slowing down before one or another house. When it lingered before ours, Mother went out to find out what was needed, and a man asked if she knew of any houses for sale in this wonderfully pastoral neighborhood. Her instant reply: “This one.”

That was her story, anyway, and if it lacked a few crucial details, it at least conveyed the drama of the occasion, the significance of love for a favorite cat trumping

love for a magnificent, completely personalized house. And it was essentially Mother's only cat story, though often retold, as she never did befriend another cat and had little patience with the ones that I (rather haphazardly, I'm afraid, in those years) took in. About the house, however, there were never any stories. Telling of it would have been much too painful.

A "Dad-Shaped" Hole in My Heart

Kali' P. Rourke – Austin, TX

Another Father's Day, and although I continually rejoice in the wonderful Dad that my daughters have, I take no such joy in my own.

He was an unsolvable mystery to me. He married my mother when she was seventeen and they had me when she was nearly nineteen. My only impressions of him as I grew up came from family members, who shared stories of his selfish, immature treatment of Mom during their short marriage. He seemed unable to connect emotionally with others, and from an adult perspective, I wonder if he may have been somewhere on the autism spectrum.

Soon after my birth, my mother divorced him and married her next husband. He was the one I would think of as "Dad," until that marriage dissolved when I was about six or seven years old.

My father checked back in briefly when I was fifteen, traveling from Memphis, Tennessee to Tulsa, Oklahoma to sue for my custody, when my mother temporarily gave my guardianship to my manager. I was a professional singer, living in Oklahoma with my manager at that point, while my family stayed in Washington. I attended junior high during the week, performed in nightclubs and television shows on the weekend, and toured during the summers. My father was confused, thinking my mother was "giving me away" and some paternal impulse evidently surfaced, causing him to come to act as my rescuer.

He strode into the Tulsa courtroom that day, acting as his own attorney, and seemed totally oblivious to the realities of the situation or any emotions I might have about meeting him for the first time. He lost his case, but my manager graciously invited him to her home to meet with me. I sang for him for the first and last time in my life, and tears came to his eyes.

Silly me. I thought we might have connected.

Later, I received a bus ticket to travel to Memphis to spend a week with him and his latest wife (he married multiple times), and I must admit, I was hopeful.

My strongest memory of this ill-fated expedition was meeting his wife, who immediately gave me a gift. It was a

set of shorty pajamas in bright purple, green, and orange colors and I was thrilled. I wore them when I went to bed and made sure that they knew that I was delighted with the present.

The next morning, she scolded me for "flaunting myself at my father," making me feel foolish and ashamed. My father said nothing at all and seemed emotionally disconnected, as usual. I called my Mom, told her I would be taking the next bus home and left, never to see him again. Now, I find myself wondering how much emotional damage and insecurity his wife suffered in that marriage.

I wrote him once after I graduated from high school. It was an immature and anger-filled letter that I would take back if I could—it was so emotionally vulnerable and that is something, I have concluded, he would never appreciate. I took him to task for not being in my life, not being a dad, and in a burst of teen drama, I whined that he couldn't even take the time to send his only child a graduation card!

You see, at that time, I thought I was his only child. But in getting to know my grandparents (mostly over the phone), I found to my surprise that I had a younger half-sister by another of his marriages. I actually contacted her in my early 20s and we met face-to-face, making me realize how lucky I was that my mother, although sometimes overwhelmed by her responsibilities and choices, was much preferable to the mentally ill mother she described. Her anger at our father was palpable, and she was convinced at the time that if either of us had been boys, "Dad would have stuck around."

I have no idea if that was true, but God saw fit to give him two daughters and six granddaughters between us.

My father and I spoke a few times over the phone through the years (I suspect Grandma made him do it), but he had no real interest in me or his two smart and beautiful granddaughters. I eventually wrote him off.

"Ignore me if you like, but my daughters will never deserve that," I thought.

When he committed suicide in prison at the age of 59, it was as if a stranger had died, leaving the "Dad-Shaped Hole" in my heart to be forever unfilled.

Promise Me!

Sara Etgen-Baker – Anna, TX

The folding doors opened. I clambered up the short set of stairs, dropped my fare into the change receptacle, and inched my way down the narrow aisle that divided the seats on either side of the city bus. It jerked into motion and I grabbed hold of one of the leather hand loops that hung from the ceiling, swaying back and forth as the bus buzzed down the freeway then zigzagged its way along the downtown streets. From the smudged glass windows, I watched the lavender early morning as it lit the faces of the steel-framed monoliths. Just before my stop, I pulled the wire signaling the driver. The bus bolted to a halt, and the folding doors opened. I stepped down onto the sidewalk and stared up at the glistening giant that now stood before me.

I walked forward, but the sidewalk, damp from an earlier rainstorm, forced me into a child's game of leapfrog over small pools of water. I smiled remembering when I was a little girl and the fun I had after a rainstorm jumping in puddles and scattering water over my red rain boots. But those days were long past. I was 17 going on 18, and today was the first day at my summer job working downtown for an insurance company.

I checked my reflection in the plate glass window, adjusted my dress, moistened my fingers and smoothed my *Mary-Quant-ish* bangs. I slid through the revolving glass door and took the elevator to the tenth floor, where Nancy, my supervisor, greeted me—her arms folded across her chest.

“You must be my new summer recruit,” she said in a wheezy voice. Nancy twisted open her tattered cigarette case and retrieved a cigarette, positioning it in the corner of her mouth. She struck a match, bringing the tip to the end of her cigarette, engulfing it in the match's tiny flame. She inhaled and flicked the match onto the floor, extinguishing it underneath her shoe. “Follow me,” she demanded, cigarette smoke billowing from her nostrils. She marched in perfect rhythm across the scuffed-up, gray linoleum floor; I obeyed and stepped behind her, keeping my elbows tucked in as we paraded down the narrow strip of tiles between row upon row of neatly dressed, army-green file cabinets, which appeared to be standing at attention just waiting for her next command.

“We use a color-coded, alpha-numeric filing system,” she explained. “Every morning you'll pull files for insureds whose policies are up for renewal. After the policies are rated, typed, and mailed, they're refiled. Refiling is done every afternoon. Don't leave until you've refiled the files in your section. This,” she pulled my time card from the clock card machine, “is where you'll punch in. Punch in every day or you won't get paid. Be on time. No dilly-dallying in my department,” she said with her lips tightly pursed. “The work we do here is important. Don't be sloppy.”

Using one of her yellowed fingers, Nancy tapped her cigarette ashes onto the floor by my feet and handed me a piece of paper. “Here's your list of files to pull this morning. Bring 'em to me when you're done. Lunch is from noon to 12:30; the cafeteria is on the sixth floor. You get all that, recruit?”

“Yes ma'am.” I resisted the urge to salute.

“Get to work!” Nancy did an about face and strutted toward her office.

Thus began my first summer job. Despite Nancy's surly personality, I liked working for her. She was direct and clear; I always knew where I stood with her. During the ensuing weeks, Nancy taught me some important office skills—typing, filing, time management, answering the telephone, problem solving, and handling conflict with strangers. I matured, became more confident, and developed a taste for earning my own money.

As summer came to an end, I contemplated quitting high school and continuing to work. When Nancy learned of my plan, she hailed me into her office. “Look at me,” she huffed like a cannon, her chest pushing out smoke in rapid, deliberate bursts. “I don't have a family. I don't have a career. I don't have money, and I sure as hell don't have a future. Don't sell yourself short and settle for life here like I did!” she said with protest in her eyes. “You're smart, and you're sure as hell better than this place. Don't be mediocre! Don't trap yourself and become cynical like me. Leave this place, PLEASE. Graduate from high school. Go to college. Don't come back here.” Nancy ground her smoldering cigarette into her ashtray. “Promise me!”

“Okay, Nancy!” I agreed, my face stiffening like iron and my body tensing with shock. “I promise.”

I was true to my promise, never forgetting it nor the crusty woman who steered me away from a dead-end job and down the path toward high school graduation and college. College was difficult; I often doubted myself and my abilities. On more than one occasion, I wanted to quit. When I struggled, Nancy's advice echoed in my mind, encouraging me and giving me the fortitude to carry on. I kept my promise to her and graduated from college, obtaining a teaching certificate with a major in business and English.

When I walked across the stage on graduation day to receive my diploma, I looked out upon the crowd. For just a moment, I thought I saw Nancy applauding from a front row seat. She wasn't there, of course; but she was there in spirit. To this day, I'm grateful for Nancy; her advice altered the course of my life and forever changed me. My college education strengthened me, broadened my perspective, opened endless doors of opportunity, and afforded me a life rich with possibilities and adventures that I wouldn't have experienced had Nancy not been passionate enough and brave enough to challenge me to a promise, an agreement to claim a life beyond mediocrity.

It Was Only a Job – Sears, 1966

Judy Watkins – Myrtle Creek, OR

“It took me quite a long time to develop a voice, and now that I have it, I am not going to be silent.”
—Madeleine Albright

The world of working women has changed completely from the time when I entered the workforce and the experiences of today’s professionals. I was blessed to be part of the group of women that opened the doors for the many.

It was 1966. My children were both in school, and I wanted to take this opportunity to find a part-time job. If I could work from 10:00 to 2:00, the family would never know that I was gone. I couldn’t believe the excitement I felt at the thought of having freedom outside the home and a little money that I could call my own.

I had never had a job before. I married at sixteen and did not finish high school. What kind of job would I be qualified for? I found a job answering the telephone and taking catalog orders at our local Sears Store. I was one of four order-takers and we sat in a room that was not visible to the public, yet there were rules that had to be followed:

1. Dresses and nylons were a must. There could be NO bare legs.
2. Perfume was a must. We “worked in close quarters” and had to be respectful of others.

Today I smile at the dress-code rules. Nobody wears nylons anymore, especially in buildings without air conditioning, and perfumes are discouraged due to the many people with allergies.

My next job was at J. C. Penney’s in the fabric department, again with the same four-hour shifts. I learned to sew in high school and at the local Home Extension after I was married. I sewed for my family and I had enough knowledge to help customers with fabrics and patterns. Each month the store featured a different fabric and as an employee, I could have a free pattern and fabric, if I made a dress using that fabric and wore it during the promotion. I loved it. I had never had so many new clothes in my life.

Within a few years I wanted a “real” job, but I knew my qualifications were limited. I applied at the temp agency, Manpower. They first placed me with a fancy jewelry manufacturing company to help with the inventory. This store made everything from solid gold golf clubs to custom jewelry and their customers were from all over the world. Each day I came to work in a black or navy dress and was locked in a vault alone, where I counted loose diamonds and recorded their values.

These were the jobs that showed a new world to the shy and sheltered girl who had never had a job outside the home and had not been exposed to adult conversation before. That

world was opening for me and I faced it with awe and amazement. Who would ever have guessed that I would be management material with an MBA before my career ended?

The Other Side of the Bed

Debra Dolan – Vancouver, BC Canada

If you were to look at photographs of men I have let into my heart or into my bed or just into my home, you would not see anything physically similar; however, if you were to spend an evening talking over a bottle of wine with them, you would easily see similarities, a common thread of what I have always been attracted to. Each of these men are intelligent, strong-minded, independent, handsome, and at a certain point in their own story, found me interesting, playful, sexy. Most of them were wounded in various ways and they were all vulnerable, sweet and caring, even if I was unable to appreciate or recognize it at the time.

I have always loved men and adored their attention. They fascinate me. I am attracted to their smells and bodies, their entitlement and confidence, their ability to be covered in dirt or grease and moments later spring from a shower looking fetching, refreshed and instantly ready. In forty years of being involved with the opposite sex, I have made some very-very bad decisions. I gave some men ‘long ropes,’ which were not often deserved or warranted, and others short ones, when they were deserving of so much more. Given I never saw myself as attractive until I was in my late thirties, I realize I was overly grateful anytime someone paid me any kind of attention, and I paid a hefty personal price for that. Like Mary Cantwell has written, “I have run to men more often than I wish to acknowledge. ... They are enormous easy chairs in which I like to sit a while.”

I have a long history of unfulfilling relationships and falling in love—believing I am in love—with impossibly difficult men. Perhaps it is the ‘daddy thing,’ the longing for a strong, caring, loving man to guide me through the minefield of relationship as well as life challenges. I am no longer interested in knowing the root cause of so many bad-bad-bad decisions. I survived the experience with each of them, sometimes barely. So much angst. I cannot believe how much writing I did about men in my early twenties and, again, in my late thirties—especially waiting for a man. Waiting for them to call, waiting for them to arrive in my life, waiting for them to decide if I am worth their love and companionship, waiting for them to reach their potential, waiting for them to respond to a letter, honor a commitment, or show up on time.

I looked to them to validate me, keep me company, entertain me, or fill up the emptiness inside. All my insecurities were exposed at those times in my life, as I

especially was attracted to the imposing ones that knew how to restrain their dominance, although I sensed it within them and wanted (perhaps, desperately) to receive it. As a young girl, I had observed it in my mother and her interactions with my father and stepfather. No matter how disturbing and dysfunctional, it was oddly familiar and I was blindly comforted. It was a dance, the music was fast, and I didn't always know the steps or have rhythm. I didn't know how to say no when a man reached for my hand to lead me to the floor. Once I learned my own capacity to influence, and started dating like most men (casual, no commitments, self-satisfaction), I had an incredibly fun time. It didn't last long, however, as it was too hard for me to sustain, and others were attracted to me in ways that I didn't expect nor was prepared for.

Writing about the men I have known is difficult yet transformative, because with each one I nurtured a strong sense of self and learned to set boundaries. Yes, I could learn to love him without losing myself. There is much shame in my relationship past. Too often I was drunk, stoned, and woke in wrong places. For several years, I was participating in a workplace affair. Some people warned me about him, even two senior administrators who I respected. He was what you'd term a 'player' and some saw me as an innocent, newly separated in 1993, and alone in the city. Each time he came to me I wanted him more and more, which I find so strange because I liked him less and less. I didn't care what kind of person he was, as I was looking for a distraction, not a boyfriend. It was a time in my life when my judgment felt broken and I was seeking direction in all the wrong places. It certainly made going to work more fun but eventually wasn't worth all the anxiety of being discovered. He was like a drug and I was addicted.

As I review forty years of journals, it is evident that I have always wanted a loving, intimate relationship with a man. It amazes me how many men I have had in my life, as I have always considered myself solo. Upon reflection, I send thanks out-into-the-world to them for not only the time we were with one another, but also, for the generous sharing, fun, heartache, hard lessons, trust, and challenges they brought into my life at the time. Not all of these relationships were sexual, yet other than the few men I have truly loved, these men have been the most memorable in my life for a variety of reasons—mostly exploration and the time of our connection. Not all of these relationships were honest or true, and I must accept that two or more may be hard pressed to remember me if asked, since so much time has passed.

They all led me to Michael, my darling man, who has solidly been in my heart these past sixteen years. He is truly 'my person' and the only man I have ever experienced love, lust, and friendship with—even on the same day.

The Dance of Attraction

Carol E. Anderson – Ann Arbor, MI

The dining hall is a cacophony of clanging silverware, loud greetings by friends not recently seen, and dishes clattering against each other. Smells of sesame tofu and steamed vegetables drift in from the kitchen. My chatting with the woman across the table is interrupted by the man seated next to her as he shouts an enthusiastic greeting to someone strolling down the narrow aisle behind me. "Hey, you!" he bellows. I sense the person he has greeted has stopped squarely at my back and continues to rest there as though her rootedness in proximity to me is a portent of things to unfold.

Turning around, my eyes travel upward as I glimpse the full stature of this woman's six feet of slender, elegant presence. Short rakish brown hair falls over her right eye, and high angular cheekbones carve a silent statement of strength augmented by the intensity of her radiant brown eyes. She has an intelligent face and is dressed in that studied casual way of serious environmentalists—a plaid shirt and faded Levi jeans with the occasional tear across the knee that comes from real work, like chopping wood or rescuing an endangered species. Her striking physical features are softened by her voice and the ease with which words slide like honey out of her mouth in a disarming Southern drawl.

"Hi, ya'll, my name is Archer. I'm looking forward to spending time with you," she says to everyone and no one.

Fortunately, I am able to stifle the voice inside my head as it reverberates internally with a distinct and animated tone, *WHO are you?*

My colleagues and I are at Point Reyes, California, to provide a week-long workshop on leadership in Sustainable Agriculture. We all gather for the first session the following morning, where I am the lead-off presenter engaging the group in exercises on self-awareness and personal impact.

I take confident steps toward the front of the room and welcome everyone. Archer is seated in the circle, folded in a chair too small to hold the whole of her. Sitting up straight, I notice how tan and muscled her arms are, exposed by her sleeveless shirt. I observe how the curl of her mouth widens as she reveals her pleasure in watching me come in. I focus my attention on others in the room and pretend that I don't see how her eyes are fixed on my compact form as I move back and forth, my leather boots slapping against the wooden floor and my hands punctuating sentences for effect. The intensity of her gaze inspires me and now I am performing for her alone. The edginess of attraction sweeps in circles around us, and it's hard to imagine others in the room don't feel the fire even if they are unaware of the source.

“People used to find me intimidating,” I say. “But since my \$100,000 worth of therapy, I am much more approachable.” I hear her laugh along with the others and I laugh, too, hoping to dissipate the tension that is building.

While she is friendly to everyone, there is a reticence about her—taking time alone on break to walk outside, holding back in group discussions, though she is very bright and thoughtful in her comments. I am guessing she is an introvert, a quality that heightens her appeal.

The activities of the day are over. We leave the building separately but somehow find ourselves walking side by side up the hill to dinner. The smell of the sea air adds to the feelings of intoxication as she speaks. “I really loved your presentation today. You have a great sense of humor. Would you like to eat together?”

“I’d love to,” I answer, feeling both shy and excited that she asked, and I quicken my pace to keep up with her long strides. We find a table and set our things down, then get in line for the buffet. Dinner speeds by. We’re so engrossed in conversation, we fail to notice that the dining hall has emptied.

Eager to continue talking, we find a bench outside. I keep looking at her hands. Her fingers alone, so finely shaped and articulate in their movements, could tell her story. I can easily imagine her as a small, frightened child of five, alone in a house with two brothers and two sisters, living with the fear that her mother could die during a complicated operation, and no one to attend to the anxiety rising in her.

The day is not long enough to learn everything I want to know, and as we rise to leave, it is evident that both of us are reluctant to part. We say good night and I return to my room alone. I know she has slipped past the boundary of my royal blue silk shirt with the upturned collar, straight to a place under my skin. I feel myself teetering on the edge of a cliff. Falling would be a relief—standing still, a kind of torture. I close the door and murmur to myself, “Oh My God! This is so terribly inconvenient.”

Calling my partner, Anna, I feel the strain in my voice to sound nonchalant, even cheerful. “How was your day? Did you finish planting the garden?”

She asks, “How are Hal and Vicki? Did your presentation go well?”

I am talking but I am not present. My mind returns to images of Archer—her crumpled white shirt tucked into washed out jeans, her long legs crossed at her ankles, her short brown ruffled hair, and her Southern accent. I recall the chill that ran through me when I felt the warmth of her leg as our knees touched sitting on the bench.

“Are you okay?” Anna interrupts.

Even as I mouth the word, “Yes,” I’m quite certain the answer is No.

Avoidance

B. Lynn Goodwin – Danville, CA

“A friend is someone who knows all about you and likes you anyway,” according to Mark Twain. Roxie kept that in mind every time she sat down for a conversation with her good friend Lucy. She’d known the woman for years and loved her enthusiasm for life, but Lucy had her flaws—big time.

One of them was her mouth. She was addicted to the sound of her own voice.

“Don’t you just love your true friends, the ones you’ve had for years, the ones you can trust with any secret, the ones you can go to for advice?” Lucy asked as she popped open her third beer.

Roxie nodded. She was Lucy’s best friend as far as she knew, and right now that gave her permission to nod instead of verbalize. Lucy was off on another rant. Roxie could swear she was OCD. Lucy refused to be tested.

Some friends were more draining than others. Some were more needy. Just like lovers, Roxie supposed. She didn’t actually have a lover. She had platonic friends and considered herself asexual. Keeping a healthy distance from men made her life much simpler.

Other women had needs. Not Roxie. Whenever she said that, a little part of her squirmed inside, like the truth was submerged under layers of beer and tea and chatter and projects and helping others and binge-watching TV. Dating was just too complex. She wasn’t going there. She never looked right or smelled right and her curves had morphed into bulges.

How can fat bulges suppress a voice? Roxie had no clue. Nothing suppressed Lucy, but she was lean and energetic, and she bulldozed over problems. People loved her energy and her drama. She was a show and great fun to watch, but Roxie had never heard anyone say they wanted to be like Lucy when they grew up.

A couple of students had told Roxie how much they admired and respected her. She liked the sentiments and loved the distance. Or she was relieved by it. Sometimes it was hard to tell the difference.

She was a good middle-grade math and science teacher. She avoided the arts. Avoided anything with feelings. She didn’t know why and she didn’t care enough to figure it out. Some people were born spectators. She liked being on the edges of drama, taking scenes home and replaying them in her head. She liked being in control. It made it easier for her to control a classroom full of kids.

She didn’t like the confusion that used to rise up whenever a tall man or a handsome man talked to her. It was better to shut it all down. Wasn’t it?

Thirty Years Later

Marian McCaa Thomas – Leawood, KS

THE PRISON – October 1983

“Shut your eyes,” they said,
“Picture yourself somewhere else.”

I saw a prison—
Four tall stone walls,
No windows,
Secure.

It was my own house.
Four human walls—
Peter, Steven, Julia, Tim.
Standing within
I am bound,
Secure.

BREAKOUT – October 2013

Only one wall remains.
Three have fallen away,
Their stones used for other walls
Created to make the world
More beautiful.

I am still bound
But now there are
Many windows
Giving me sights
And sounds of the
World that will be mine
When the last wall falls.
But then, I will no longer be
Secure.

Why I Get Sentimental About Old Kitchen Appliances

Judy Gruen – Los Angeles, CA

After twenty-five years of teamwork, I reluctantly retired one of my most dedicated kitchen workers: my trusty Panasonic Kitchen Wizard. This humble mid-sized appliance helped me to make thousands of meals.

It sliced, it diced, it blended. It shredded coleslaws, whipped up dressings and marinades, and massaged flour, eggs, sugar, and oil into cookie dough. You name it, my Kitchen Wizard did the job reliably. It never called in sick. It never complained, not even when the kitchen was nearing 90 degrees in August, or when I filled it with smelly garlic cloves.

My daughter kept asking me why I didn't upgrade to a fancier, more versatile machine, like a KitchenAid, considering all the cooking I did. But I resisted. I was loyal to my Kitchen Wizard, just as I was loyal to my old Crock Pot, even after one of the handles on the lid cracked, making the job of lifting the lid to serve hot soup a dangerous proposition. After one too many steam burns, I bought a sleek new Crock Pot, but I missed the battle-weary look of the old one. We had a history, that Crock Pot and me, and I respected its signs of wear—the telltale dark stains where some stew had spilled and burned onto the unit were a tangible reminder of the marvelous soups and stews it had slowly simmered over the years, providing so much gustatory pleasure to my family and friends.

Magazine photos of professional chefs always show them working in kitchens with cookware that looks like it never fried a single egg. The pots and pans look like they were just unwrapped, the instruction booklets still inside. But, like cookbooks tattooed with smudges of oil or cocoa powder, kitchen appliances that gather scratches, stubborn stains, or even a little warping from uneven heat, send a message: I work here. I count.

I had no choice but to replace my Kitchen Wizard when I realized it just couldn't cut it anymore—literally. Blending even the most pliant ingredients, such as canned chickpeas, taxed it beyond its capacity. My Shabbat guests assumed that I made my hummus unusually chunky on purpose, but I knew my Kitchen Wizard was now a Kitchen Wizeded, and it was time to say goodbye. To give it full honors, I gently set it out on a chair in the backyard, lying in state, until I brought home a new Cuisinart.

It may seem ridiculous to wax sentimental about a minor kitchen appliance, especially since I have no emotional attachment to many other material possessions. I don't think twice before tossing away shoes whose soles have worn down, even though the shoes have carried me where I wanted to go. I am happy to give the heave-ho even to big-ticket items like a ratty couch, though it, too, rendered faithful service as a reliable, comfortable place to read, sip wine, and talk to family and friends.

In a relentlessly consumerist society, I know that I own too many things. Sometimes I buy myself a new shirt or pair of earrings and then forget about them. When I discover them again and realize I had not even missed them, I feel the guilt of falling into the consumerist trap myself. I know: “First World Problems.”

But the tools of my trade in the kitchen? That's different. I invest a great deal of time cooking for my family and for guests—for my Sabbath, for holidays, and the occasional Sunday dinner. I often spend most of a Friday shopping and cooking special meals, and they are infused with spiritual intentions. We eat these meals wearing more formal clothing, and even though it requires

hand washing, I often serve them on my gold-rimmed Wedgewood china.

This is why I wax a bit lyrical over my kitchen appliances. These are the tools and vessels that allow me to transform the raw materials of fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, flour, rice, oil, and spices into so much more than the sum of their parts. They fill the kitchen with promising aromas of sautéed onions, chicken soup, roasts, and chocolate cakes. The meals I prepare and present, seasoned with the spirit of Shabbat, wouldn't have been possible without them. They nourish both body and soul.

So I appreciate them.

Why I Write Letters

Linda M. Hasselstrom – Hermosa, SD

Many of the writers I know are quite proud of it.

“Oh, I never write letters anymore,” they say, nodding. “I’m just too busy. I email or text.”

Elsewhere, I’ve already confessed to how I changed my mind about computers when I realized how efficient they were for preparing manuscripts.

And I’ll even admit that when pressed for time—let me rephrase that—when PARTICULARLY pressed for time—I may do a little recycling with a letter. I’ll write a letter saying what I’ve been doing lately and then change the “Dear _____” part to fit the recipient. After I print it out, I add the personal notes at the bottom before mailing—and I usually say, “Excuse the generic letter.”

But I stubbornly continue to write personal letters to many friends. Not only that, but I hand-write some of them, proving that I am stuck in antediluvial times, sinking in the swamp of prehistory.

Here are some of my reasons.

I have only a few of my father’s letters, usually headed with the date and “At the breakfast table.” My parents lived in what is now my retreat house, which doesn’t much resemble the way it looked when they were there. The round oak table at which my father wrote is gone; the curtains he pulled aside to look out have been replaced by modern shades. The buffet on which he kept a dictionary so he could look up any word about which he was uncertain is in someone else’s home.

But when I see my father’s handwriting on those letters, I can picture him just as he was on those mornings, the blue eyes, the smile he never wore for photographs because he hated them. My mother is cooking breakfast in her blue bathrobe. He has been out and looked at the weather, recording the night’s low in his journal. He’s

planning his day. And he’s writing words of advice and love and encouragement to his daughter.

These letters are particularly precious considering how his life ended, in anger and bitterness and confusion. Without seeing that strong handwriting, I might gradually let the good memories be submerged in the horrible ones. The handwriting provides an anchor; a typed copy of the letter would not be the same. Had he been emailing his thoughts, they’d have long since vanished.

Perhaps nothing I write to any of my friends is as important as those notes my father wrote, and it may be that none of my friends keep my handwritten notes. That doesn’t matter either. I like the feeling of holding that pen and seeing the words flow onto the paper, even the recycled scraps I sometimes use for notes, tucking them into envelopes with a few clippings of news stories I can imagine discussing with my friends.

I like seeing in my mind’s eye my friends taking those envelopes out of the mailbox, slitting them open, sitting in their favorite chairs. My handwriting conveys my voice, my thoughts, my image in a way no computerized facsimile ever could.

And when I am hand-writing a letter, my mind slows down. I take time to form the letters, picturing the person to whom I am writing.

Fairly often, as I scribble I discover a thought that had been eluding me while I sat at the computer and pecked and stabbed and jabbed and dug and prodded the keys, a thought that could not be borne as the cursor blinked.

So whether the post office is efficient or not, and no matter much it charges me for the privilege, as long as mail service exists, I’ll keep folding those letters, hand-addressing the envelopes and hauling them to town, thinking of the people whose handwriting will be on the envelopes I’ll get back in a few days.

A War Story

Elaine Thomas – La Grange, TX

The minute I pulled into Renate’s driveway, I knew something was wrong. Instead of beaming with delight, she stood ramrod straight, her face washed in anger, or was it anguish? Hurley, her rescue pup, who usually trembled with excitement when he saw me, stood at attention beside her, unusually calm, as if he sensed Renate’s distress.

I racked my brain. Had I said or done something to upset my client, who had become a treasured friend during the process of writing her life story? At a loss, I got out, acting nonchalant.

The elderly German war bride looked through me.

“Come,” she said.

I noticed Renate's hair and clothing were uncharacteristically disheveled as we approached an oversized road map of Germany covering the dining room table.

“I was there,” said Renate, pointing to a road between Weimar and Bad Berka. “I saw him and I ran.”

Her eyes filled with tears as she pulled out a book from under the map and turned to page 120. It was *Saddles and Service*, the biography I had written about Canadian Winston Parker. After his Lancaster bomber was shot down over Germany in World War II, he spent three years in a notorious prisoner-of-war camp, Stalag VIII B. The prisoners' lives irrevocably changed, and not for the better, on January 22, 1945, when the Germans moved them out, walking westward on a cruel and inhumane march.

But why had Winston's recollections upset her?

“Read aloud,” she told me, pointing to a page of his story.

The first day, the group I was in marched 35 kilometers at a pretty fast pace that sure tested our limits. Then they gave us shorter marches. We would march 15 kilometers some days.

We got so very little to eat that we literally were starving. Sometimes, we'd go to wherever we were to stop for the night and after two or three hours of just hanging around, the Germans would bring in big tubs of soup called keebles. Some nights, there would be a ration of bread for us. Other nights, we were fed nothing.

Sometimes we found leeks still growing in the ground. Eating those frozen leeks caused us to suffer from terrible dysentery. A medical officer, who began the march out with us, taught us to burn wood and eat the charcoal in an effort to help control the dysentery. That was the only medicine we had.

As POWs, we were very aware that the Germans considered us the lowest form of life in the country. Whenever others came along the road where we were marching, we were kicked off to let them pass.

The British would come bombing at night and invariably, it seemed, they dropped bombs where we had slept the night before. It gave us great comfort to tell each other, “They know where we are.”

One night when the British dropped the bombs too close to our column, one or two of our fellows were killed, but I was just shaken up.

The Germans would sometimes put us into brick kilns or sheds at night. Occasionally, there were two or three sheds, yards apart, with 300 men here and 500 men there. Some nights, we just slept out in the open. In the latter part

of the march, sometimes as many as six to eight fellows just didn't get up in the morning. They didn't make it.

We zigzagged on roads until we were south and west of Hanover, a long distance from where we had started. There, the Germans turned us around and marched us back in the direction that we'd just come.

One morning, we awoke to find there were no German guards. They had gone away in the night. The next thing we knew, some American jeeps and a tank or two came rolling toward us. We were liberated! The date was April 11, 1945. We had spent nearly three months on the road and traveled over 1,000 kilometers. I'd been on one the longest forced marches of World War II, which became known as the Death March.

“Now read what I told you,” Renate instructed.

On the road, we saw a group of men in filthy striped uniforms marching, more dead than alive. There was so little life left in them, they were so beaten up, that they looked neither left nor right. They plodded along, with just enough energy to put one foot in front of the other. These were Allied prisoners taken from a prisoner-of-war camp before the Russians or Americans liberated them. The guards with these men looked half-dead themselves, although they wore different clothes.

The men were so pitiful they frightened and unnerved us. As 18-year-old hospital nurses, we had seen a lot of misery among the wounded soldiers, and we had witnessed death, but somehow, this seemed worse.

Raising her head, Renate met my eyes.

“I was afraid of them and I ran. I am so ashamed. Will you tell Winston that? Will you apologize for me?”

I returned home and called Winston. “I know I've mentioned the German lady, Renate, whose life story I am writing. She says she saw you during your march out. The date and location check out. She's sorry the Germans put you through that ordeal and she is ashamed she didn't treat you prisoners with more respect. Will you forgive her?”

“Tell Renate,” Winston responded, “that she need not apologize because we were at war. Tell her I know the German civilians suffered, too. Tell her I have had a good life, and I hope she has, too.”

Upon hearing Winston's response, the anguish on Renate's face began to dissipate and she looked years younger. She nodded, clearing her throat and smiling hesitantly.

“Well, then,” she said. “We recorded no stories last week, so we are a little behind. Let me tell you how I came to meet Harvey.”

Checkpoint!

Mare Stephens – Irvine, CA

We traveled to Europe in 1973, during the Cold War and the Watergate scandal, just after the press revealed how our government prolonged the senseless carnage in Viet Nam rather than admitting defeat. Oh, the squandered lives!

My History minor focused on 20th century Europe, so I keenly understood the evil of Nazis. Nearly thirty years after the Allies occupied defeated Nazi Germany, we still saw an eerie World War II motif of razor wire, pocked buildings, and military camouflage. In spite of sobering visits to Hitler's Kelstein House and Dacchau, my new husband, Tim, and I were vibrantly adventurous and eager to experience the Soviet occupied zone.

We had to exchange license plates at the East German border before proceeding into Communist territory, down a thin road that was edged by double rows of barbed wire with landmines ploughed in between them (or so we were told). Gentle rain lent a grainy-photo quality to the lightly forested fields. We passed fairy tale homes with thatched roofs, their rock chimneys puffing pale smoke. But any whimsical giants or witches were fully overshadowed by the actual pall of Hitler and Stalin. I felt privileged and safe as we headed to the divided capital city of Berlin.

World War II had barely ended when Soviet Communists built a wall to keep their citizens in. Right away over 2 million young, smart people climbed, bored through, or tunneled under it as fortification increased. By the time we saw the famous Berlin Wall, it was a wide military death-strip filled with mines and crisscrossed wooden barricades, patrolled by snarling dogs and overlooked by ominously armed towers: the dark comedy of a country armed against its own. The Western side of the wall was cut off stone buildings that had filled-in doors and windows full of graffiti and memorials. Black wreaths and simple shrines sat in littered burned areas, mourning those who died trying to escape. We drove to Checkpoint Charlie, the crossing that allowed tourists in the East side of the city. Tim exchanged Deutsch marks for DDR marks. We waved at smiley soldiers at the simple Allied kiosk and headed across the bridge to the multi-lane metal sheds and stone towers where East German guards scowled at our van, aggressively stamped our passports, and gestured angrily at the psychedelic swirls I had painted on our luggage, apparently offended by whimsy. Their resentment flooded me like a shower of sewer water. I knew we exuded the vitality of freedom and I wished it for them to no avail. Their guttural words slammed into the pinging and popping sounds of our VW motor, but we were sure the guard waved us to go ahead.

Tim drove slowly toward the block house with its raised red and white striped barrier several hundred yards away. We didn't see anyone, so we continued through the

raised gate. Suddenly the barrier karate-chopped the roof just above my head. We stopped. In spite of my shame over Nixon, and the police brutality I had witnessed in college, in spite of feeling vulnerable, I had a certain confidence in being American, knowing Kennedy had protected Allied passage before. Tim was furious, fully in the paradigm of basic rights. "We followed all of your rules," he said to the newly visible guard, who could easily have lowered the rail in front of us instead of on us.

"You don't understand our language," he sneered in perfect English. The moment expanded, full of all we did not understand, and all that we did. He eyed my long blonde hair, my embroidered peasant blouse, surveyed Tim's tie-dyed T-shirt, his bushy hair and sideburns. I studied the guard's dark blue uniform, his thin hands, his hollow pimpled cheeks. I felt soft, like a hermit crab out of the shell in a vast ocean. We were alone and far from the Allied side. What, really, was his plan? I mustered my female defense: cooperation. I grabbed my German-English dictionary to attempt asking what he wanted us to do.

I heard the groan of the barrier hoisting, felt the van lift, saw his elbow poke sideways, heard him say, "Go." We parked our dented van and walked across the bridge. Perhaps his crude justice gave him the same thrill that abused children get by kicking the child of the kindly mother.

The rare spectacle of a parade was scheduled in East Berlin that day. Communist banners abounded, and oompah music played as young soldiers marched in a colorized newsreel of the Third Reich. Mindful of threats to confiscate our camera, I took no pictures of the bright fake show. When the parade ended, all the color disappeared, leaving only dingy streets, hollow buildings, and a few shabby old people avoiding us. We donated our DDR money because there was nothing to buy except dinner at a very smelly fish restaurant. We returned to the West without incident, across the bridge with all the escape tunnels beneath it. The USA never held anybody in. Masses yearned to enter.

I thought of Jefferson's words, "The price of liberty is eternal vigilance." I thought of my embarrassed outrage at Watergate, and the revelations in the Pentagon Papers. Suddenly I acknowledged the gift of that very outrage. Our protesters were disparaged by the press but not railroaded off to work camps, at least not yet. People protested the police shootings. The Supreme Court had not allowed Nixon to silence the press. He wasn't above the law. The cumbersome gears of check and balance were working. I appreciated being married to a person who watched and read politics every day, admired his well informed intellect and knew that together we would be vigilant in guarding our precious freedoms. We, the people, still had a voice, and I vowed to not let it be lost. I was overwhelmingly grateful to be an American.

When A Son Goes to War

Kathleen Rodgers – Colleyville, TX

For too many years, I lived with the unholy fear that a blue Air Force staff car would pull up in front of my living quarters. The doorbell would ring, and the somber faces of uniformed death angels would block my escape route. “We regret to inform you,” they’d begin.

But before they could deliver another word, I’d flee through the house and smash through the back door. I would run far away from the devastating news that my fighter pilot husband and the father of our two sons had crashed and burned and he wasn’t coming home.

My two young sons and I would get a front row seat to a dignified memorial service. A sharp airman with chiseled features would present the folded flag, and then my boys and I would get kicked off base and into oblivion.

Flying fighter jets in peacetime training missions proved risky business.

In one year, my husband lost eleven good pilot friends in jet mishaps. Then Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, and my husband deployed to the Middle East and into harm’s way. When my two young sons and I dropped off their daddy at the base flight line, we didn’t know if we would ever see him again.

But we did see him again, and shortly after Tom came home, he retired from the Air Force and flew for the airlines for twenty-two years. For over two decades, I had a reprieve from the worry of a military staff car pulling up next to the curb in front of my house.

Then our youngest son joined the Army.

On a recent weekend, in a parking lot at Fort Hood, Texas, I stood with my family as we gathered to say farewell to my youngest son, a first lieutenant in the United States Army, as he prepared to deploy to an undisclosed location in the Middle East. Even though we were all smiling with pride, our hearts were already breaking. I held it together for the send-off, but I fell apart after we got back to the hotel.

For me, sending a son to war is worse than sending a husband into harm’s way. No matter how much you love your husband, you didn’t wipe away his childhood tears, chase away the boogeyman hiding under the bed, or cheer him on through freezing rain, eye-stinging dust storms, or blazing heat in sporting events that never seemed to end.

Whether your child is five or twenty-five, mother love never changes. You might not take a bullet for your beloved, but you sure as hell would for your son.

So once again, I am living with the unholy terror of a military staff car pulling up to my home, but this time it’s in the quiet civilian neighborhood where we raised our sons since my husband left the military.

In May 2012, my son’s roommate from Officer Candidate School was killed in action by an IED. From the moment our son called us with the news, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan came crashing into our home. War is no longer some abstract action taking place halfway around the world where other people’s grown children battle it out. War is personal, and my baby son is now in the thick of it.

In a parking lot at Fort Hood, surrounded by hundreds of soldiers and their families saying farewells, I watched my son interact with the men in his platoon. The little boy I once cradled and sang hymns to at night, had turned into a grown man right before my eyes. A leader of men I would want to follow if I were going to war.

Even as I embraced him for one more hug, I already missed him.

(Note: This essay was written in 2014. Since then, the author’s son has safely returned home.)

Independence Day

Pat Anthony – Fontana, KS

He finds it hard to read
the note saying she's left him

how she wants to nest above ground
chink spaces between twigs
with moss and possibility

weave a womb that sways gently
not to be shaken free from limbs

anchor herself against unpredictability
so often blown in on his wind

she says she'll argue freely with hawks
discourse with eagles watch the shafted flight
of a falcon diving to earth then ride above it

how when he reads it she will already be
soaring beyond hills where only she can see
barely hear his combines seining waiting fields

she doesn't tell him how when air goes silent
she will still be able to hear the screams

from between the stubble, how she will swoop down
then to glean what remains in the wake
of grinding devastation cradle the shards of

the meadowlark's nest its spray of tiny corpses
shriveling in an Independence Day's sun.

Meth

Merimee Moffitt – Albuquerque, NM

In the cold Catholic hospital,
I slept in the unwed mothers' wing.
You coughed for hours to get your little
lungs clear and going. I knew you'd make it.
I felt peaceful in recovery.
43 years ago. Now I wonder where you are.
A truck pulled up in front and I thought,
"It's him, he's returned home, again." My husband smiled.
And the driver pulled away; no one exited. A wrong address,
wrong house. Wrong truck. I wrenched my eyes back to the
growing boxes we were covering for winter,
the greens we'll pick in the cold, for salads, soups,
eating fresh from the box like cows grazing.

Eight years we've had the boxes, three more years
than your falling-apart time: business gone, family broken,
owing friends, accidents fixed with pills that really
cooked your goose. Smashed your wagon.
I turn to my own recovery, address a willingness to live
as if an envelope to myself. I chose to live for you back then,
now I choose for me. Spinach, chard, kale, daughters, another son,
grandkids, husband, in-laws, friends, peacefully
not needing to toss ourselves down the well, to aggravate Chaos.
Silly son. Chosen one. What a card to draw.
Your bike sits poised for you, your clothes stacked up clean.
I won't ask where you've been. No one needs
a picture of sofas in hell, big TVs and smoking porches.

Your tools under my table in their cases, under the bed
and your couches, tools in the trailers and garage.
I put the pliers you had arranged like a surgeon's tray, away,
your knives hiding out of sight; did they disappear as trade
for basic needs, Camels and meth? Oh my dear son
this can't be you, your job notes so neat with names and dates.
If gone, your son might follow you. Return dead or alive.

Footprint

Mary Jo West – San Clemente, CA

Using the metal shaker
kept in my garden
I sprinkle white crystals
of sea salt
over the skin, and
take a long, slow bite
as if it were an apple.

Lucious, deep red tomato
plucked from the vine,
with its yellowish white seeds
oozes all over my fingers and
down the front of my white blouse.

Placing a fresh basil leaf
on the last morsel,
I salt again
and in a flash
it's gone.

My splattered blouse
is the footprint

of a moment in my garden.

"Communication is truth; communication is happiness. To share is our duty; to go down boldly and bring to light those hidden thoughts which are the most diseased; to conceal nothing; to pretend nothing; if we are ignorant, to say so; if we love our friends, to let them know it."

— Virginia Woolf

She's Come Undone

Kathleen M. Rodgers – Colleyville, TX

Stepping out of the pool
wearing nothing but a dare,
she looks around.
No roofers in sight,
only the neighbor's cat
curled under the Mimosa
and a gecko doing push-ups on the fence.
She crosses her arms in front of her
covering herself like a shield.
It's the Pilgrim in her you know.
Then slowly, she drops the facade,
lifts her arms wide
and does breaststrokes in the air.
The stars aren't even out,
high noon howls at her back
as she glides this way and that,
barefoot in the sun,
pirouetting in grass that's still green
until the scarecrows come out.
A hawk flies overhead,
his high-pitched *keeee* calling her
to join him.
She takes off across the yard
and decades fall behind her,
shedding the years until she is five
and running through sprinklers.
Diving into the blue,
she torpedoed through the water
propelled by an energy
she hasn't felt in years.
When she comes up for air,
she spots two lily pads of cloth
floating nearby...the discarded suit.
Flipping on her back,
the buzz of a light plane catches her attention.
And she laughs at the moment
when she defied convention.

First Tracks

Julie Weston – Hailey, ID

Limelight was trashed. Nancy reached the top at 9:12 a.m. What should have been a pristine snowy slope was marred by tracks. She eked out a powder triangle here, a long oblong there. Even with cut-up snow, she reveled in the way her own skis, bright red and short, glided through more than a foot of new fall.

It's not fair, Nancy thought. She had rolled out of bed by 7:00, left a message at work saying she wouldn't begin cooking until almost noon, once again risking her job. At 8:15, she was first at the chairlift. While the line grew behind her, John Midas arrived with his investment buddies and their three private instructors, engaged at great expense. At 8:31, they loaded onto the chairs, bypassing the hooting hoi polloi, who waited for the official start time of 9:00.

Nancy's skis sliced through snow and she forgot her anger at the 'haves.' Only the faint *sipp, sipp* as she zipped down the fall line and the occasional click of metal ski against boot interrupted the mountain quiet until she shouted, "Wahooo!"

Low booms underlined her turns. Dynamite. On the mountain backside, the ski patrol worked in the bowls to set off cornices built by the storm. Fourteen inches all at once didn't happen often. A skier could wait weeks to enjoy mind-bending, lighter-than-air, better-than-sex true powder.

At the top, ropes closed off the bowls. A glaze of white a quarter-mile wide, no tracks, offered nirvana to the skiers huddled near a gateway, waiting. Nancy eased forward, desperate to be one of the first to go. To her right, she noticed Midas-and-group hiking along the ridge toward one of the farther bowls. Their money couldn't buy them first tracks there. They followed other thrill-seeking climbers. *Boom. Boom.* By 10:00, skiers lined the ridge across all five bowls, like a horde of Indians in a western movie waiting to attack.

A scheme came to Nancy. It might work. "Too many," Nancy said to those around her. "It'll be Custer's Last Stand. I'm out of here." She backed up.

"No guts," one man said.

"You're right," she answered. "Got to get to work. Slavey's lunch crowd waits for no man, or woman." No crowd today. The fry cook could fill in. Everyone was up here skiing, maybe the fry cook, too.

Nancy skied over the edge of Christmas Ridge and worked her way down the rope between the run and the bowls. The skiers along the top multiplied. Everyone on the mountain waited. She scooted under the rope near a stand of trees, about two hundred yards lower than the hordes. Her timing would have to be perfect if she didn't want to lose

her pass for skiing a closed run. It cost two months' wages. Without it, she couldn't ski at all. No guts? Ha!

Two ski-patrol scooted away from what should be the last explosion. *Boom*. No avalanche, which didn't mean the snow wouldn't slide when the crowd hit. Last year, one of the bowls slid mid-day. Skiing was risky business.

The line of skiers hovered, not yet moving. Then she saw a patrol jacket heading for a gate. It was time.

With her red skis aimed down, Nancy didn't need to push off as if through a start gate. Gravity took her. Powder gathered around her knees and thighs and flew up toward her face in tingling cold clouds. Around alpine firs, past a rock outcropping, Nancy skied Bowl 75, hidden by the trees, her first tracks a long ess behind her. The steep deep challenged. She slipped through weightless feathers, feeling her quads' strength. Ever since she raced as a youngster, she found her real self in skiing. Behind her, a storm of shouts, curses, and yodels announced the charge.

Nancy's spirit soared as sunlight glistened off ice crystals. Breathe, she told herself. If she stopped, the horde would pass her by. When she reached the pillowed moguls at the end, she glanced up. Skiers trashed Easter Bowl, bumping into each other, some tumbling and others leaping free.

Laughter bubbled up. Nancy still chuckled as she swooped up to the chairlift. John Midas, gasping for breath, and his instructor bypassed the crowd blooming behind her. The instructor asked to step in front of Nancy. She shook her head. "No. I'm first."

Midas stared. "How did you beat us?"

As the chair came around and bumped her butt, Nancy called back, "With skill and daring!"

As I Gaze Upon Nature's Blessings

Maya Lazarus – Caldwell, TX

a wild blackberry,
blushing Texas paintbrush,
ebony caterpillar, stiff oak leaf,
cagey roadrunner,
tall switch grass, and purple spiderwort flowers—
they move me
to a spiritual place, a soul connection.
I lift my face to the burn
of noontime sun. My eyes closed,
I feel safe and loved.

The Chapel

Kathy Dempsey Zimmerman – Littleton, MA

for Marg

Six years younger, a couple of brothers in between, we didn't begin to build our bond till we'd both left home, when build we did, one stone at a time, our friendship—a hallowed place, like a chapel.

English teachers, 300 miles apart,
courses and conferences became vacations.
I remember the Emily Dickinson week,
the evening we filled our to-go mugs
with martinis, walked the streets of Amherst,
stopped to dance to the reggae band in the back
parking lot of that new Cajun restaurant.

The years we'd pack up our three kids
and meet at the little camp on the lake
in Vermont showed us we'd begun to inhabit
each other's spaces; like twins we'd have packed
the same clothes and food, we'd giggle to find
we'd even brought the same wine.

We loved to push and glide, push and glide through
fir trees laden with snow when I'd visit you
in the Northeast Kingdom. We'd ski for hours
in subzero air clear and quiet, sometimes chat,
mostly not. I remember the stone chapel
we found way off in the woods at the Von Trapp's,
how we rested there a long time, got so silly
singing songs from *The Sound of Music*.

A catastrophic blood clot to the brain the doctor said
on an ordinary day last February. Nothing could be done.
You were gone, an empty space where you'd been.
Sometimes lately I've been able to fill that space
in the chapel our friendship built. It's in me now
and it's a bit like that stone chapel we skied to
in the woods. Only it's ours, you and me, you in me.
I see both of our gardens' flowers gracing the altar
right beside a martini bar. There is a wood stove,
it's warm. Our chapel has a dance floor and pumps
music and I can go there now and see us dance
and ski and dance and dance.

Dear Margot

Linda C. Wisniewski – Doylestown, PA

Today on NPR, a woman reporter's voice carried me back to you. Margot Adler, host of Justice Talking, gone too soon from cancer in 2014. I recalled how your voice, moderately deep, sometimes grew soft with compassion as you told the stories of New Yorkers like yourself.

We met only once, but we had so much in common. Born in the first year of the Baby Boom, we shared the same faith, though you were much more active in the pagan wing than I. And both of us had little boys.

Early spring, 1992. You breezed into the conference hall, ribbons of long black hair flying, black clothes swinging around your tall frame until you stopped at my table.

"May I join you?"

"Sure!" I glanced at your name tag and double-taked back to your face. Like the fan girl I was, I stared at you, my role model journalist.

"Man, I need this coffee!" You sat across from me, hands wrapped around your mug. "I hardly slept last night. Alexander has the flu. Then my husband started throwing up. He said 'You're not still going, are you?'" We shared a chuckle before you went on. "I gave him the neighbors' phone numbers and ran for the train."

In the next five minutes, I suddenly discovered how truly alike we were. We shared stories of "elderly" motherhood, both giving birth at 43. Like me, you "failed" at breastfeeding. You were disappointed at having a C-section after all those Lamaze classes.

"We do it to ourselves," you said. "Feminists fall victim to our own dogma. We must have a natural childbirth, we must breastfeed."

No one noticed us together, laughing like girlfriends, though I hoped they would. You went on to give an inspiring speech to a hundred Unitarian Universalist women eager to learn about the goddess in us all. At the very end, you taught us to ululate, that long, wavering, high-pitched wail used by women in many cultures to express grief or celebration. I hung onto your every word, though I couldn't quite master getting my voice to make that weirdly beautiful sound. The last time I saw you, you were leaving the stage, your mouth in a wide grin, right arm raised as a hundred women made a joyful new noise.

That morning over coffee, I discovered that even role models must deal with everyday life.

I treated myself to a spiritual reading the year after you died. When all my questions had been answered, the reader asked if there was anything more I wanted to know. I thought for a moment.

"Yes, what about Margot Adler? Is she okay?"

He closed his eyes for a second, then gave me a skeptical look.

"You didn't know her very well, did you?"

"No, I only met her once. But I really liked her..."

"Well, she says 'Thank you, but do I know you?' By the way, she went right into The Light."

Reaching for a Star

Madeline Sharples – Manhattan Beach, CA

It used to be comforting to see her
at her computer as I passed her office door.
Sometimes we'd nod or say hello.
Other times I sat in her guest chair
against the wall and we'd chat.
I don't remember about what—
our work maybe, her art projects, my poems,
or an exhibit one of us had seen
at the Getty, LACMA, a gallery at Bergamot Station.
Now her door is closed,
her name and title still on it,
but she doesn't work in there anymore.

Instead we sometimes chat in her nice
third floor room in a tall building
on Prospect Avenue in Redondo Beach
with her favorite books around her
along with photos, writing papers, art supplies—
even a big screen TV—
all the comforts of home.

Not at a computer anymore,
she sits propped up
in bed in an aqua gown,
an oxygen tube in her nose
and a permanent IV shunt in her arm
to receive the doses of morphine
that increase day by day.
We look at the ocean as she tells me
her plans for her death.
Her ashes will fertilize several gardens
and her spirit,
happy to miss the daily catastrophes
of the living world,
will soar to her own personal star.
If all goes according to schedule,
she'll be there in time
for her 52nd birthday in August.

Halifax Haiku Series

Marjorie Kildare – Halifax, NS Canada

black and white tugboats
glide Halifax Harbour
drag floating docks

I watch east
thirteen moons rise
each year

ghost of summer dawn
tremulous Eastern sky
Orion the Hunter

Cassiopeia
August North-East sky Queen
Lady of the Chair

boasts her beauty
Nereides offended
by her sky throne

an aberration
Cassiopeia
toppled upside down

seagulls screech
across darkened skies
tear asunder twilight

traffic noise ceases
ocean breeze brushes
sapphire salt air

seabird chorus
glorious symphonies
middle-age summer

three nights in a row
kaleidoscopic colours
burst ebony sky

swing, rumba, cha-cha
summer evening dancers
waltz the boardwalk

engrave on my mind
the pre-dawn
silence

My Mother's Beauty

Ethel Lee-Miller – Tucson, AZ

I don't think anyone ever said of my mother that she was 'a beauty.' A childhood photo when she was nine shows a slender and almost delicate girl on pointe in a ballet tutu and perfect pose. Her face is serious.

Photos from her teen years show a serious pensiveness—no smile, but no frown either. Was she always serious? Perhaps this was before the era of family events that are marked by photo opps and parents' admonitions to 'smile.'

Photos with my dad before they were married remind me of two kids having fun together—doing acrobatic tricks, or side by side, she's smiling and standing tall and straight, feet together, but toes out. She is dressed in an oversized one-piece sunsuit with wide-leg pants of the 1930s; he's in pants with suspenders, a T-shirt, and that wide smile that charmed just about everyone.

When my mother was raising children in the expected full-time-mom era, the words I ascribed to her were serious, strong, determined. She was determined her three girls would be accomplished, and achieve all she set out for them. The few times I remember her dressed up, she was still tall and proud in dresses that swished when she walked.

The day I noticed her beauty was in early winter, when I walked into Regency Gardens Nursing Residence. By then her children were grown, even her grandchildren were grown, and she had been a merry widow until a stroke slowed her down in 2002.

Sitting in her wheelchair by the window, both feet—now in permanent retirement—were propped on the footrest. My first glimpse was the back of her head. It was midmorning.

Winter sunlight coming in a window holds none of the frigidness of a Northeast winter, only a softer light. Her hair was a silver halo. Coming a few steps into her room, my view of her shifted like a camera on a dolly curving around and in on its model. Her stroke-affected right arm curled up and into her chest at the elbow as if her hand were like an infant wanting to be close to its mother. Her left hand supported her chin. Her face was at rest. A small oval face, pale, held up by an arthritic and age-spotted hand.

She turned, and a smile, small and slow, embraced her face. She was beautiful. It was almost as if her face got lighter, not more pale but suffused with a light, like when the sun comes from behind a cloud and the shadow it has cast slides away. Her head tilted a little to the side as she looked at me. "I didn't think anyone was coming to visit today."

And because my heart filled with love, she was even more beautiful.

Transcendental Flesh

Lois Ann Bull – Easton, CT

A new woman arrived at the “Y” pool for a Silver Sneakers AquaSize class. She had a tattoo—a small yellow butterfly on her right breast.

“I love it!” I said to her. “When and where did you get it?”

“While I was on vacation in Mexico, two years ago,” she answered. “I’ve always wanted one and that seemed the right time and place.”

Two years ago, I thought looking at her white hair and lined face, she was already a senior. That’s amazing! I never heard of anyone getting a tattoo in their golden years. She’s one special lady!

“It’s beautiful!” I said. I was so excited by the idea you’d have thought I was going to get my own immediately. Mexico was a little far for me, and I worried about the cleanliness of the operation. But would a local parlor be cleaner?

I vicariously enjoyed her butterfly from then on.

Two years later, my son, Christopher, invited me to join his family on a cruise. I was a free babysitter and it promised quality time with four grandchildren.

After Christmas, as cruise time grew closer, I thought about that lady’s yellow butterfly. She did it on vacation. Maybe I could do the same. The cruise would stop on Cozumel, a Mexican island. But would it be clean? What about infection? Scary thought!

Then I remembered something else. My daughter-in-law, Christiane, had three tattoos—one when young in Brazil, but two done locally—and she’d never had an infection. Maybe I should go to the parlor she used in Lancaster, PA, ahead of the cruise.

By text, I asked Christiane for help. “Could I come a day early? I want to get a tattoo at your parlor.”

She texted back, “How exciting! Yes, I’ll make the arrangements. Do you know what tattoo you want?”

In 1987, I had journeyed to the Great Barrier Reef in Australia and stayed at the resort on Dunk Island. What paradise! Perfect days of glorious sunshine and the warm water of the South Pacific with Blue Empress butterflies flitting everywhere. As a souvenir, I returned with a small matchbox that bore the picture of the resort’s butterfly logo. Thirty years later, I still had the matchbook and that’s what I wanted for a tattoo.

I took a photo of the matchbox cover, sent it to my daughter-in-law, and told her not more than an inch.

Two or three weeks later, my son called. He began,

“This is the Voice of Reason.”

I’m thinking, what now?

He says, “You’re coming here again in April, right? Would you consider postponing your tattoo from March til April? Once being tattooed, you can’t get wet nor sunbathe for two weeks. Think what you’d miss on shipboard.”

I gave a quick think to his words and realized he was right. “Okay, I’ll postpone.”

Besides, I had some research to do. Could I have a tattoo and still have my annual MRI? I asked the technicians and they said, “We image people with tattoos all the time. But you must avoid metallic ink. They make the tattoo heat up in an MRI machine, and we have to take you out of the tube, finished or not!”

Armed with this knowledge, I had my daughter-in-law make the necessary inquiries. There was no metal in the ink. So my tattooing was a Go! However, the one person I didn’t tell was my ninety-five-year-old husband. Being of a different generation, he’d be mortified. In fact, he was two or three generations behind. So I remained mum.

My excitement began the moment I stepped off the train. It was finally time.

Stewart, my artist, couldn’t have been nicer. His deferential treatment made me feel a woman of the moment not a seventy-seven-year-old. First, he told me what I would experience. Afterwards, he explained my aftercare. He said, “You won’t get an infection if you follow the rules.”

The needle didn’t hurt! It just felt scratchy as he worked on my left breast. The right breast had had breast cancer eight years earlier, so no tattoo allowed.

As for my daughter-in-law, Christiane kept me engaged with all sorts of chitchat during the procedure.

Once back at my son’s house, we had an unveiling. The two grandchildren were unimpressed. It’s small. My son liked it and commented on the fine artistic work.

My oldest granddaughter called me on FaceTime and had to have a look. She liked it, then asked me why I had gotten a tattoo. My answer, “Because I could!” And a butterfly because, according to Marlo Thomas, they’re Free!

My daughter was upset. She explained, “You wouldn’t let me get one when I was sixteen and I wanted one so badly! Now you’ve got one. Why the change of heart?”

I answered, “When you’re sixteen, you have your whole life ahead of you. I didn’t know if you’d be happy with the tattoo further down the road. I’m seventy-seven and I have ten years left, if I’m lucky. It’s now or never!”

The women in the pool in my AquaSize class think my

butterfly is discreet, tasteful, and very pretty. They're the only ones who see it, because it only shows in a bathing suit.

As for my husband, seven days after I returned, he asked me why I wasn't going to my AquaSize class. I swallowed hard, decided it was time for the truth, and admitted, "Because I got a tattoo while in Lancaster and it can't get wet for fourteen days." I stiffened waiting for his reply.

He guffawed twice and said, "I hope it's on your bottom where nobody can see it, including me," and then he went silent and has stayed silent about the tattoo ever since.

November 2000

Kathi Kouguell – New York, NY

The age of 68 looms

It's not too terrible since the whole past year I've
mistakenly thought it was my age already.

I feel the need to do my work.
To express myself.
Have to do it now
and get it all in.
How much time do I have?

Why do the tears well up so suddenly?
Morning, noon or night.
Mornings in the shower my tears run alongside the water
from the tap.

It's clearly out of control though my rational side tells me
that if I
want to stop this
I can
I try
and mostly I can.

I have anger from years past
I thought I was done but I am not it seems...

I leaf through a magazine and see a young woman reclining
on a large bed
and biting into a granny smith apple without finding her
front caps
standing upright in the apple.

Oh well, those days have fled.

The Letter

Patricia Roop Hollinger – Westminster, MD

I arrived home with plans to serve up Greg's favorite meal. Lately he had been very depressed as there was evidence that his memory was fading. Being a college professor who taught English, he feared losing his ability to read, write, or have a heated discussion about the latest novel he had read. The woods often called him for lengthy walks. Fallen trees begged to have their limbs chopped into logs that would fit into the woodstove, which was stoked during the winter months for Greg and I to sit and read by.

I was whistling as I opened the door to the kitchen. Whoa! I was stopped dead in my tracks by a kitchen chair with an envelope sitting on it. "What could this be?" I wondered aloud. I quickly put the groceries down by the door with no thought that the ice cream might melt. This envelope must be opened NOW!

My fingers were shaking as I unsealed the envelope. The first words I read were: "Diana, sit down before reading this." The words were written in Greg's handwriting. I wondered why he would be writing me a love letter and sharing it in such a dramatic method. He was not known for being very demonstrative regarding his feelings, but since my birthday was approaching, he may have had a change of heart. It still seemed odd though that he would request that I sit down before he told me what a good lover I was. Yes, I was the best, he said. His first wife reportedly was a cold fish. She died years before our marriage. I briefly reminisced as I recalled those early years of marriage. The challenges of our blended family often interfered with our love life. But now we had an empty nest and lovemaking could happen anytime of day or night. Maybe this was a proposal for an afternoon of hot lovemaking and the letter would be my instructions to prepare myself.

I turned to the second page. "Diana, I have shot myself back in the woods. Do not come to look for me. Call 911 immediately. I am sorry to leave you in this manner, but I had to do it before my memory was completely gone. I hope someday you can understand. I recall with fondness our sexual escapades. Please, no burial. Just a memorial service, if you are so inclined. I know there will be those who tell you that there is a stigma regarding my choice to commit suicide. However, I believe that in time you will understand and not judge me harshly."

By this time I was shaking and tears were rolling down my cheeks. I called our children who came to be by my side. The groceries were forgotten and melted ice cream was lapped up by the stray cat that had appeared. Had Greg sent the cat?

Resolving Grief

Lois Halley – Westminster, MD

My husband was buried on our 48th wedding anniversary, leaving a gaping hole where my heart had been. Grief was not a stranger to me, but how could I go on without my soulmate?

The next five months were a blur of downsizing, which meant getting rid of most of our possessions. I found out there are dozens of details to handle when someone dies. I had no children or siblings, but friends and relatives pitched in wherever they could. Alone at night, mere crying was not enough, so I howled like a she-wolf who'd lost her pack. In bed, my dog and cat lovingly snuggled against me to help me forget my Joe was missing.

My home of 36 years sold in one week to a person who would love it as much as we did and would continue to feed the birds and feral cats. I think she was sent by my guardian angel.

By the end of 5 months, I was living in a retirement community, in a 795-square-foot cottage, but I still had to find a way to heal.

Without a fenced yard, my dog had to be walked. Long before forest bathing became popular, I always felt the soothing effects of nature. So my papillon, Lulu, and I headed out 3 times a day, no matter the weather, and walked until my legs felt like rubber.

We walked through symphonies of cicadas, perfumes of honeysuckle and lilac, and melodies of song birds. Sunny days began to warm my soul. The wind blew webs of sadness from around my heart. Rain began to wash away my tears.

Dodging acorns and hickory nuts as they fell en masse from trees, I began to laugh. Misty, drizzling nights were my favorite. Then I could imagine that my husband would emerge from the shadows and wrap his arms around me once again. I was embraced only by the fog.

Meanwhile, I found that community living meant new friendships were formed almost in an instant, so I joyfully mingled the old with the new. I enrolled in lots of classes, from chair yoga to mindful meditation, art history, and others.

After walking for four seasons, I had a tombstone placed on Joe's grave. It's a double stone, with my name and birthdate carved next to his. One day I will again lie next to my beloved.

It has been two years since his death. Where am I now? A word and definition are given to newcomers to this village, and it perfectly answers that question.

"Liminality – the ambiguity or disorientation that a person often feels when standing at the threshold between their previous way of structuring their identity, time, or community, and a new way that becomes necessary because of the transition into a new life stage."

I am on the threshold.

Someone Cares

Lucille Martindale – West Monroe, LA

"I'll come over and put your hurricane shutters up."

"Doug is on his way over to start your generator."

"I have a brand-new RV with air conditioning that you can use until your power comes back on."

"I have fifteen gallons of gas you can have if you need it for your generator."

"We have power and Internet. You can come over and pay your bills online."

"We have power. Would you like to take a hot shower and a place with air conditioning to sleep?"

"Lady, I'll be right back to help you."

Random acts of kindness can come in many ways, many forms, and from many different people in your life. Is it better to be on the giving or receiving end of an act of kindness?

I have always prided myself on my independent nature. In August 2017, I turned seventy-four, and given my independent mindset, I never thought I would need help to survive a hurricane and its aftermath, but I did. I was so fortunate that family, friends, and even strangers, saw I needed help and took charge. I didn't have to ask; they just showed up and helped.

When I semi-retired in July 2014, one of the things I wanted to do was to be available to help others. I was using the pay it forward mentality in reverse. I thought if I helped people out as I saw a need or it was asked of me, then when the time came I needed help, it would be there for me.

That time came at 11:30 p.m. on Sunday, September 10, 2017. Hurricane Irma was bearing down on Brandon, Florida. Earlier, at 2:45 p.m., I lost my power well before the hurricane even hit. Now at 11:30 p.m., inside my home when I turned off the battery-powered light to save the batteries, it was pitch black. The hurricane shutters on the windows allowed no ambient light through. Outside the wind was howling. I could hear the rain beating against the shutters and pounding the roof. At times there were noises in the attic. Occasionally I heard things hit the house. What were those things? My imagination was working at warp speed and my mind's eye could see all manner of things being blown through the air until they met a solid object: the outside walls of my home. Would my roof be gone? Would the massive oak trees looming over my house come crashing down? What would I see in the aftermath of the storm tomorrow?

I constantly switched stations on my battery-powered radio to find the latest location of the hurricane's eye, until I came across the play-by-play of Sunday Night Football. Sports announcers really get into the game and their voices

become animated and grow louder and louder depending on the action they are describing. I turned the volume up all the way in an effort to use their voices to drown out the frightening sounds outside. I could not even tell you who was playing that night or who won, but listening to the announcers did help and I was distracted from the stress of ‘what might happen’ at least for a short time.

Who could sleep with all that noise and danger? My cat Lily Belle could. She was curled up on my feet, sound asleep. Fearless Lily Belle. Maybe she had a sixth sense that everything would be OK. Finally, at 3:00 a.m., it got quiet outside and I could sleep, too.

In the morning, with great trepidation, I carefully opened the hurricane shutters covering my sliding glass door and peeked out. My entire yard was covered with tree debris. There was not a square foot that did not have some form of debris. Some limbs were longer than I was tall and the trunks were bigger around than my upper arm, some were mere twigs, and there were leaves everywhere. Cautiously I stepped out to survey the damage. I examined my home from the roof to the ground. I walked all the way around my home looking for damage. I turned my gaze to the giant oak trees and landscaping. The trees stood firm, but minus many branches and leaves. The landscaping was covered in a layer of tree limbs and leaves, but otherwise not harmed.

I felt completely overwhelmed. Where to start? What to do first? A little voice deep in my brain said, ‘Better get on with it. If you don’t do it, who will?’ But this time there was someone to help me. As I was dragging a very long, hard-to-wield limb to the street, a minivan pulled over to the curb and a thirty-something man I had never seen before leaned out. He said, “Lady, I’ll be right back to help you.” He left and shortly returned with rakes, bags, and his eleven-year-old son. They proceeded to help me drag limbs to the ever-growing pile at the edge of the street, then raked my entire front yard, bagged the refuse, and placed the bags beside the pile of limbs. I offered to pay them, but he would not accept any payment. He said, “Your thanks is enough payment for me.” When I asked his name he gave me only his first name, René, and said he lived “over there.”

In the aftermath of the hurricane, I experienced more random acts of kindness. My daughter’s ex-husband came to help me with my stubborn-to-start generator and offered me the use of his brand-new RV to live in. I had many offers of help until my power came back on. Now I ponder the question, ‘Is it better to be on the giving or receiving end of an act of kindness?’ I have experienced both, and can say it feels good to be the giver, but it also feels good to be on the receiving end and know someone cares.

Remembrance

Mary Jo Doig – Afton, VA

Charles Dickens described my recent summer perfectly: It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.... It was the season I happily completed my memoir, as I also tumbled into the most painful grieving season of my life. So many cherished friends and a long-time family pet departed in numbers so close together my heart was overwhelmed with grief.

Was it really just last week, shortly after the deaths of two treasured friends, that my daughter Polly, friend John, and I sat circled around our beloved Macy beneath the birch tree outside the vet’s office? For twelve years Macy had given us her unending and sometimes goofy love. We tenderly stroked her now-gray coat and softly murmured memories to the black lab—beach vacations...sweet dreams of chasing squirrels in her Blue Ridge mountain home...long hikes on those mountains...delicious treats from the bakery...joyful belly rubs...treasured rides in the car with Macy’s drool often running down the window... and more.

As her breathing slowed, the compassionate vet eased her final transition. “Go to sleep now, Macy,” she softly said. Our hands stroked Macy’s worn-out body as we said our final words. John’s were especially poignant, “We’ll be back right back, Macy,” words he told her each time he or they left the house during all their years together. And then the golden sun above our shade canopy reached down to lift our girl’s beautiful spirit into the eternal light.

Polly and John brought Macy home to bury her. Rain silently fell on the deck as I walked inside my house. Later the sun broke through the gray clouds. I searched for a rainbow, to no avail. “Somewhere in this town a rainbow has to be shining on Macy,” I emailed to Polly. “It’s right here,” she wrote back.

A few hours later, my beagle Addie barked at a small, wildly-unkept cat huddled in a corner behind the hollyhock bush. Wishing I had a Hav-a-Heart cage, I contrived the next best thing: I put some tuna inside a cat carrier and slid it near the feline. Immediately, she went inside and I fastened the door.

When she’d licked the bowl clean, I brought her in to a small room in the house and released her from the carrier. The size of a three-month old kitten, she looked around her new surroundings and then walked over to me and rubbed her head against my leg. Could I believe my ears? She was purring.

I wrapped her in a towel and picked her up, pushing aside long, knotted hair, so I could look into her eyes.

Serious, wise dark eyes stared into mine. *How did you get here, little girl?* I asked, as I lay her in my lap, noting she had the notched ear of a spayed feral. Her condition was as awful as her scent: mud was clumped to the bottom of each small paw, hard fur knots covered her entire body, and worst, when I reached to scratch behind her ears, my hand slid over a lump, the size of a lemon—and hot—below one ear.

How can I help you? I anguished to the muted gray/orange calico, tenderly stroking her snarled fur. As I pondered, I began to gently brush her and noticed she seemed to stretch out to help me. She never flinched as I carefully removed one knot after another after another. Periodically we took a break and I lifted her to my shoulder as I would a newborn. She purred loudly and nuzzled her small face into my neck, her trust and love filling my sad heart.

What to do? I envisioned thousands of dollars of vet bills. I decided to call the Charlottesville SPCA. “Bring her in,” they told me. “We’ll accept her as a stray and hold her for a mandatory time to see if an owner comes forward.” When I surrendered her, cautiously I said I might be interested if no one claimed her and if they could give me a sense of her medical needs. They noted my name on her record. A few days later I called to ask if I could visit. No visitors, unfortunately, were allowed in the section where she was held. The hold date expiration came and passed with no word. Certain I knew why, I silently blessed her sweet soul.

Several days later, my phone showed the SPCA call. “Hello?”

Was I still interested in the stray? She was twelve years old with three serious, yet non-contagious medical conditions: renal failure, severe oral problems, and the inoperable cancer. The staff were moved by her sweet nature, felt that while she was pain-free, she could enjoy some quality of life if I wanted to offer palliative care.

Stunned and admittedly fearful of the commitment, I asked for time to think. For the next hour I did small housekeeping chores, knowing I was procrastinating. Sit down and focus, I finally told myself. *What do you want to do?* My answer was immediate: I wanted to give her all the happy purring hours she could have until she had to leave. I called the SPCA.

She is home now with me for whatever time we’ll be given. Each day I wonder, with awe, how one small cat, who has seemingly been given so little, if any, care in her twelve years of life, can be so filled with love, that she freely gives to her human? The same love that Macy, with all she was given by contrast, also gave so abundantly.

She is Rose.

For remembrance.

The Waiting Room

Sarah Fine – Toronto, ON Canada

We wait in the waiting room and I reason through the delay. One hour past appointment time—maybe there’s no change and no rush to tell me. Other people face more dire news. They have a right to go first. I read my mystery book. My husband reads the paper, commenting occasionally on some untruth or someone’s unbelievable decision.

The world goes on around us. It’s Toronto after all, and a mayoralty race is heating up. Israel is in the news and not in a good way. Another airliner has crashed. There’s tension in Ukraine, murder in Iraq, ongoing war in Syria.

Our small waiting room is just that—life brought down to an individual level. We wait to hear CT scan results for a cancer diagnosed and treated 18 months ago, not cured but stopped for now, as I’ve stopped worrying about it. Living with cancer is okay as long as the cancer cooperates, stays quiet, plays dead, and *is* dead.

My husband thinks the tumor will shrink farther as my body reabsorbs defeated cells. I am happy if it stays the same, stays in remission, lets me carry on. He thinks the scan report will say “no change” for the fifth time.

I was scanned every three months the first year, every six months this year and will be scanned once a year from now on. Diminished radiation can only be a good thing as far as I’m concerned.

I say I’ve got a 50% chance of an “all clear” report and I can live with that.

I haven’t felt entirely well this past month. Nothing easily articulated—just a thickness, tightness, heaviness in my chest.

“How do you feel?” has become the most difficult of questions for me. I tell friends I am fine, then make notes for the doctors, without knowing which “feelings” are relevant, which are normal, or what is the “new” normal.

The usual aches and pains, natural effects of aging, are less easily distinguished from the effects of treatment or the cancer itself. My attitude so far has been to lay blame on the aging, to counteract it with yoga, exercise, and a healthy diet. Or to think it might be the long-term results of treatment, and know I can live with that.

I am grateful to have been treated, to have had the cancer allayed. I am almost grateful for the scans. Though sometimes I worry the scan radiation could cause more cancer.

So, here we are, one week after just such a scan, and it’s finally our turn. I am measured and weighed, then taken to a small examination room. The nurse approves my healthy size. Thinness is a problem for them.

The nurse brings a gown, in case the doctor wants to examine me. She is casual. I have no indication from her that something may be off, some news that's not so great, so I still expect a reassuring message from the doctor, who arrives smiling as usual and asks about the children.

She examines me without comment and asks how I feel, but doesn't seem as interested in my answers as she was before. She has something to tell me, and for a few moments her smile disappears.

It's not the original cancer, but it is abnormal cells in the same area. She calls it a "local recurrence." Since I responded so well to her treatment 18 months ago, she wants to do it again, to aggressively go after this new soft tissue threat. She has a plan.

That plan includes tests, a September consultation, and a quick start to treatment with radiation and chemotherapy. She smiles again. "Is that a plan?" she asks me. I smile back, "That's a plan."

Then I try to absorb the news. I am taken by surprise and my mind stalls for a moment. It's not the old cancer but a new one, and I think, "That's not great news, but it's not terrible either." The Doctor agrees it's not as bad as the first time. My breathing isn't threatened. I'm not as sick. I am actually quite healthy.

I realize I had been counting on, hoping to be, among the 51% of lung cancer patients to survive beyond five years, and I want to ask, do I have to start the count again? Is this a new zero? But just as we never asked for a prognosis, preferring to call it a "crap shoot," I doubt I will ask about the new zero.

I will just go home, hunker down with my family and my writing, do the tests they need to determine the course of treatment, do the treatment they prescribe, and in between live each day, seize each day with as much light as I can manage.

It's a sunny August day outside. The lake at the end of our street is summer blue and swept with the brightly coloured sails of joyous windsurfers. The guitarists on the boardwalk play Bob Dylan songs to raise money for Parkinson's research. Dogs of all sizes enthusiastically chase balls, sticks, and each other in the off-leash area.

Friends call. The family laughs together over dinner. It's a 100% chance of a good life today, no matter where the journey takes me.

Six Lessons About Living and Dying: The World According to Debra Winegarten

December 29, 1957 – September 10, 2018

Jeanne Guy – Austin, TX

I sit next to Debbie's hospital bed, hold her hand, watch her smile.

The life and future plans of my writing friend of eight years have been up-ended by a sudden and surprising diagnosis of an aggressive cancer. First the lungs, ultimately metastasizing to her hip bones and brain. Prognosis: maybe two years.

When I first walked into the room, I found her sitting in bed on a phone call. The speakerphone allowed me to hear her friend say, "So it sounds like this has been brewing for a while. Do they know when it started?"

Due to a paralyzed vocal cord that struck earlier in the year, Debbie whispered, "I didn't ask. I only ask questions to which there are answers that will move me forward."

A dialogue begins in my head. How many hours have I wasted ruminating on things I could do nothing about?

Debbie closes the call with, "You know, my blood type is B positive so that's what I'm going to be." The whispered message is loud and clear.

Lesson #1: We can't go back. Dump the rumination. It wastes precious time and energy.

* * *

A week has passed. The two-year prognosis has been changed: two months. I am bedside, listening to her spirited views of life.

She explains Tikkun Olam. In Jewish teachings, it means any activity that improves the world, bringing it closer to the harmonious state for which it was created.

Debbie insists I can make my little corner of the world better than how I found it. We are all called, she says, to repair or fix the world. The trick is to know your part. I think that's why she encouraged all her writing sisters (an email group of Story Circle Network writers) to practice making "Outrageous Requests." Sort of like doing something out of your comfort zone to strengthen your "courage" muscle and improve your ability to improve the world.

"You are powerful and don't know it," she says. "Look how empowered I am. I have an effect on the world, and I'm lying here in a fucking hospital bed."

Lesson #2: Do what is yours to do. Do your part.

* * *

I sit next to her hospital bed, hold her hand, feel the warmth of her smile.

The four weeks of hospitalization and radiation have come to an end. She is going home where she will be on hospice care. I have learned over these weeks not to ask unanswerable questions.

I quietly say, "What will it feel like to be home?"

Debbie loves her home. Home is where her beloved wife and beloved kitties are, where her books are, home of the esteemed Sociosights Press, her publishing company.

She pauses before saying, "I don't know. I can't think that far ahead. I can only be here with you now." Her sweet smile pulls me into the moment.

Lesson #3: This moment is all we have. The moment is everything. Be present.

* * *

She is temporarily moved to Hospice Austin's Christopher House to adjust meds.

Her bed has been shifted, giving her a better view through an open door of a painted tropical scene on the outside wall of an adjacent building.

I realize it is her Sabbath. "This is Saturday. It's a holy day for you, right? Should I say or do something special?" I lean in to hear her whispered guidance.

"Yes," she instructs. "Go over to the refrigerator, find the chocolate, and bring two spoons."

I rummage through the small fridge and spot a clear plastic container with a domed top revealing whipped cream sprinkled with shaved chocolate.

"This?" I look at her for approval and receive a confirming smile.

"Shabbat Shalom," she whispers as she feeds me the first bite.

The nurse comes in with liquid pain medicine. Debbie holds the little plastic cup as if it is a chalice of fine wine, says a prayer in Hebrew, and drinks it.

The nurse leaves. Debster winks at me. We go back to sharing our chocolate.

Lesson #4: Sabbath, Rituals, and Humor Matter

* * *

Later during our visit, she complains that her bed has deflated. Nurses arrive and test the bed. I step forward to assist. Debbie looks me straight in the eye, points her finger at me, and says, "You. You don't worry about this. Understand?"

I nod and stand back as a nurse calls for assistance. A handsome young man, who looks like he should be the star of a Prana clothing ad, appears. He is cordial, quiet, and attentive. And handsome. I already mentioned that, didn't I.

He and Debbie share their lives in a moment of remarkable conversation. I offer him assistance as he works but am again admonished by Debbie and stop for fear of being turned into salt like Lot's wife. "You are not to worry about this. If you do, it's misspent energy and then I have to worry about you—not a good use of my time."

Lesson #5: Don't do what is NOT yours to do. It depletes your energy to deal with what IS yours to do.

* * *

I sit next to her bed, hold her hand, watch her smile. She is not long for this world.

Debbie has been home for about three weeks, in a hospital bed situated in her large bedroom, the walls of which Cindy, her beloved, has adorned with her favorite paintings and pictures. Her face resembles a happy sunburst, beaming as she listens to her talented brother Marc play the piano in the living room. The music—old show tunes, love songs, and classics—fills the house with love.

Though weak and non-verbal, Debbie lights up the room and my heart. She sees my eyes glisten with tears, squeezes my hand, and we both know this will be our last visit.

She falls asleep. Before I leave I kiss her cheek and whisper, "Bye for now. I love you."

Lesson #6: Love is a matter of life and death.

The Big 4

Nancilynn Saylor – Austin, TX

Smiling faces look out from a snapshot that was taken most likely by my father in 1957 or 1958. The "big 4" is written on the back. I guess this is to indicate to someone that our baby sister Paula, who came eight years after Dan, was not included. (If it was before late November 1959, she was not yet on the planet.) Everyone looks delighted with cheerfulness, smiling on cue to my dad's perpetual request to, "Okay, say Cheese."

The big four consisted of my first-born sister, Barbara, then me, next was my little sister, Jennifer, and finally brother Danny. Poor Danny, he was the times wished-for son, in a family three-deep with girls. Mother had once said Dad was really hoping for a little boy when she was pregnant with Barbara. He was going to be named Jimmy. Each pregnancy produced another female until what they

thought was the “last.” I mused over why Dan was not Jimmy, but it only seemed to be another snippet of information that either was never answered or long forgotten. He was officially Daniel James so I just assumed the “Jimmy” was going to honor my grandpa.

We four were stair-stepped; each approximately two years apart, more or less. We made a respectable viewing as we marched up the center aisle to a pew for Sunday Mass, a “Good Catholic family,” lots of children in the pew.

It is summertime in the picture because we girls are in sleeveless blouses. We lived in the Alaska territory at that time, so summer nights were warm and lasted until near midnight. The smiles on our faces could be for any number of reasons. We could be heading out to camp somewhere in the wilds, sometimes driven out, in shifts, to an island on Lake Wasilla, in Dad’s little aluminum boat. Once we were all there, we would remain for the duration—often a week or more.

Barbara and I were Brownie Scouts and mother was Troop leader. We knew how to build and tend a fire after gathering tinder and firewood. I remember making a hand-washing station from a large coffee can that we poked a nail in to allow water to stream out. A few drops of dish soap were added to achieve the washing and a perfect twig plugged up the hole when we were done. We suspended it from a tree, and then dug a shallow hole below, for a twig covered drain.

Water from the lake was only a short distance from camp. We stored our cold food and drinks in a big metal ice-chest, right in the lake.

I don't remember having much fear of wild animals, until once Dad pointed out bear tracks and said to always go into the woods with another person. One night I heard “scratching sounds” in the night, while we were asleep in the tent. I looked across the tent filled with sleeping bags to see if my Dad heard. He did. His hunting rifle stood in a corner by the tent door, if he ever needed it. He never had to use it that night.

Looking back on our innocent faces, you could not predict how life would evolve for us. My father spent his entire adult life in service to our country, retiring from the Air Force by age 50. Mother never worked outside the home. She was Troop Leader to all of her scouting daughters and Den Mother to brother, Dan. We had a nuclear family, unbroken by divorce. We all attended Mass as a family until we left home to be married. We all grew up healthy and we were afforded travel through our military lifestyle. We changed schools often, only a few times in one school more than a year or two, at most.

That picture shows us in our “core tribe” tradition. Cameras and photographs documented our life and location changes. In later years, there are pictures of each of us and

our children and a various assortment of spouses, all changed through time.

We gather at our parent’s former home in San Antonio each year for Thanksgiving. Brother Dan lives there now. The group around the table grows smaller every few years. Our parents are gone—Mom in 1998 and Dad in 2013. Last year’s gathering was the final time for the Big 4, plus baby Paula. Jennifer left us this awful hot summer. Her death still sends shockwaves through the four who remain.

I keep the photograph in my bathroom and look at it often. We were so close-knit at that age. Now, it seems, we are growing back to that closeness, as we decrease in number.

She’s My Sister

Susan G. Weidener – Chester Springs, PA

When I first enter the nursing home, she cries, “Susie!” I rush to her and hold her close. She buries her head against my chest and weeps. “What is it?” I ask, stroking what is left of her hair. I know she feels such relief to see me, because she lives in a world of anxiety heightened each day on the precipice of a fast-moving disease, like the wildfires out West—some say it’s Alzheimer’s, others dementia, but no matter. It is incinerating her.

“Are you a relative?” A woman slides a tray of food in front of Paula. “She’s been my best friend for fifty-five years,” I tell her. “You’re not a relative then,” she says. Paula has been the sister I never had, the kindest, most pure of heart person I have—or ever will—in my life. “She’s my sister,” I say with defiance.

Truthfully, it took all my strength and courage to get here, to face this. “Be prepared,” the nurse says before I enter the room, confirming my worst fears. “When was it you last saw her?” Five months, I think. The nurse repeats, “Be prepared.”

The words echo another time, another place, where he lay dying—a sunken, hollowed-out shell of a once vibrant man, who passionately loved me and I him. Now this. The girl who made me believe in myself, who saw me through many lonely nights, our phone conversations rippling with laughter and her astute observations about the world and the people in our little orbits—the crazy news editor, the narcissistic lover, the abusive parent.

I still couldn’t grasp that Paula was what they said—Alzheimer’s. Being a woman alone is hard enough, but this—this diagnosis takes away all that is and ever will be. “She has no short-term memory, although her long-term memory is still fairly good,” the nurse says.

“We’ve tried everything,” her nurse goes on, as if seeking some sort of salvation. “All kinds of medications

to try and control the anxiety, but nothing seems to work.” I want to scream at her, “Wouldn’t you be anxious if your life had been taken from you?”

I pull out the coloring book I’ve brought at a friend’s suggestion. “Here,” I say in a soft tone. “Let’s color. Isn’t this pretty?” I point to a picture of a barn, a horse, flowers and grass. “I have one of those,” Paula says of the coloring book. The ugly red plump hot dog that is her lunch sits on her plate along with limp French fries.

Paula picks a fry off the plate, studies it, a slight frown creasing her brow. *The red ketchup perhaps?* She thoughtfully places the limp thing in her mouth and slowly chews....

“It’s good she still has an appetite,” a nurse says, as if Paula isn’t in the room.

After a few more bites, Paula weeps again, whispers, “I don’t know what to do, I don’t know what to do.”

“I know what you mean,” I tell her, reaching for her arm. I stroke it. I am desperate to recapture some of the old rapport. “I don’t know what to do either,” I say. A flash of her old self—that sweet smile, perfectly straight teeth, a laugh. “Yes,” she says.

Her downhill slide is stunning since last I saw her. She is in the belly of the beast now. “Stand up? Can you stand up?” I ask. Paula nods. *Yes.* I try to help her get out of the wheelchair and some ungodly high-pitched beeping sound splits the air. Someone rushes over, a young Asian woman with an apologetic smile. The cord attached to Paula has come loose. It’s enough to stoke the anxiety again and the effort to stand evaporates.

“I don’t know what to do,” Paula repeats. She hasn’t colored anything yet, while I try to remain cheerful, staying within the lines—the vertical beam of the barn in brown, the flowers. I select a rose-colored pencil. “Isn’t this a pretty color? You know me. I always loved the color rose,” I say to Paula, who nods. She views the page of horse and barn with disinterest.

“Would you like me to visit more often?” Her large beautiful blue eyes take me in. “I think that is a good idea,” she says. “I love you,” I say. “I love you, too,” she says. Then the weeping starts, and her mantra, “I don’t know what to do.”

Before I leave, I start to wheel her down the hallway to her room. “She can’t be in her room alone,” a nurse sitting behind a station on the floor declares in a firm voice. “Besides, she needs to be showered now.”

Paula begins shouting. “No! Dammit, no! I don’t want a shower.” She keeps repeating and shouting “Dammit!” as helplessly I watch her nurse wheel her away.

The Forgotten

Antoinette Truglio Martin – Sayville, NY

Jen glanced at the child’s dry diaper, smeared salve on the raw sores, then re-taped the diaper around the spindly legs and jutting hip bones. She redressed the child in a pink onesie and carefully fitted matching booties over swollen feet. The child winced at the touch to her stiff ankles and raw skin. There was no cry.

Jen held the child close to her chest and shuffled to the crib. With a free hand, she grabbed the yellow crochet blanket and finally plopped herself into the lounger. She cradled the child’s head into the crook of her bony right arm then draped the blanket over her shoulder. The blanket covered the child completely.

Jen leaned back in the lounger. Warm exhaustion enveloped them. Jen stared at the blanket’s even stitches and imagined a faceless caretaker crocheting the popcorn stitches in the same lounger while waiting for her loved one to take his last breath. How did she know they were popcorn stitches?

“There, there, Baby Doll. All snug...as a bug...in a rug.” Jen grinned. Did she remember that rhyme? Maybe it was a song. She had forgotten songs.

Jen gently pressed her chapped lips on the child’s burning forehead and breathed, “I won’t leave you, Baby Doll. I promise.”

A light tap at the door announced the social worker, Pearl, breezing in. Jen looked up at the large woman waddling into the room, laden with an opened messenger bag.

“There you are, my dear,” she puffed, releasing the bag on the floor. Several folders and colored papers threatened an escape. She smiled warmly with faded red lips, leaned into Jen’s arm and lightly fluttered her fat fingers to pull the blanket from the child’s face. It was still and dusty.

“There’s our Baby Doll,” she cooed. Pearl pulled a chair with a duct-taped seat cushion next to the lounger. She wiggled herself to the edge of the seat so that her sneakers lay flat, unzipped her jacket, and raked a halo of copper-colored hair into a clip on top of her head.

Pearl quickly surveyed the room. A metal crib with stiff white sheets stretched on a plastic mattress filled one wall. A dresser that served as a changing table stood under a cloudy window. The lounger and an un-tethered IV pole sat along the remaining wall. A pull cord for emergencies and instructions for the Heimlich maneuver were the only wall art.

“This looks good, Jen. Clean.”

Jen nodded, closing heavy eyelids. Pearl looked at the

emaciated girl. Jen's mouse-brown hair hung in strings over gaunt cheekbones, brushing the sharp jaw line.

"How are we today, dear?" "We are very sleepy." "I know, dear, but I needed to see you." Pearl reached for a folder, "I know you just got here from the hospital."

Jen adjusted her shoulders against the back of the lounge and lifted her face toward Pearl. "Her diaper is still dry. They said..."

Jen swallowed the words. Pearl patted Jen's arm. The frail girl looked decades beyond her 23 years. Pearl's thick folder chronicled the waif's slippage.

Throughout her childhood, Jen was dragged from a drug addict mother into loosely defined family homes and a lineage of foster care placements. She averaged three residencies a year. Pearl thought that if Jen's mother had surrendered custody, the girl could have been adopted. With her gentle nature and soulful green eyes, Jen could have been loved. There could have been hope.

Instead, Jen remained neglected. When the system abandoned her at 18, she was snatched up by the bowels of society offering drugs and prostitution as a family. For five years, Jen strayed off the grid until she wandered into an ER, hungry, filthy, shoeless, carrying a wheezing eighteen-month child wrapped in a tattered blanket. Pearl was called in to untangle Jen's disjointed memory, the child's birth, the nomadic camp of vagrants in the woods and the public health threat. Jen and the child suffered from advanced AIDS.

It took weeks for Pearl to gain Jen's trust while they sat with the child tied to liquid nourishment, useless antibiotics, and fresh oxygen. Eventually, a local hospice agreed to take in the terminally ill child with a sick mother. But time was running out. Pearl had to secure a placement for Jen as a sick childless mother.

"I know you are tired, dear, but we have to take care of business." "I don't want to talk about it, now."

Pearl opened the folder on her wide lap. "Our Lady of Hope has space for you, dear. You can get the medicines you need and walk the grounds. You will have a private room considering your condition."

Jen nodded. "Do I have to go now?" "Probably tomorrow, dear."

Jen cast her heavy eyes at the dusty child. "She is a pretty baby. Everyone says so."

"Of course, dear," sighed Pearl. "We need to get everything signed by tonight; before the space is taken."

Jen nodded, locking her gaze on the child. "I just wanted someone to love."

Pearl pulled a pen from behind her ear....

Pearl left the dark room and lumbered down the hall, listing to the left with the weight of the messenger bag.

Jen slipped the last three capsules into her mouth, and dry swallowed them in painful gulps. Her smooth shoplifting yielded a bounty of narcotics from the med carts. Somehow, she knew how to pace the pills so there would not be a rescue.

"We are snug as a bug in a rug," whispered Jen. She drew the child tightly into her body, summoning her remaining strength as the fragile body quietly quivered, then, finally, surrendered.

In the hushed calm, Jen sank deep into the darkness, under the shroud of the yellow popcorn stitches, following a forgotten song.

Age and Obstacles

V.J. Knutson – London, ON Canada

Sloth-like she shuffles –
each stride an argument
against unwilling muscles –
ignores spasms, lips pursed
in concentration, advances.

Cockeyed he totters –
step...hop...step – poker-hot
stabs punctuating his effort,
moves swiftly as if to outrun
pain, face set in determination.

They are out of sync, oddball
awkward sightseers, obstacles
for the fast-moving able-bodies
that whirl past unable to fathom
motivation in crooked spines.

The race here is against time –
propelled by insatiable thirst,
they forage for snippets worthy
of hoarding, squirrels readying
for winter's harsh call, days when

minds still alert will hunger
despite bodies inert – they will
dine on memory, boast about
the daring, reminisce fondly
over adventures hard won.

A Meryl Streep Doppelganger

Abby November – San Diego CA

from work with San Diego street people, 2013-2018

I've watched as she morphed in reverse,
A butterfly, a 'Meryl Streep clone' four years ago...
As she holds her stately neck high and sits nursing a cup of coffee all day...
Using the restroom frequently...for increasingly longer stays.
Adding more cream and sugar as the coffee drains down in the cup...
She eats...nothing.
Talks silently to her friend, hidden in her mind.
Slowly over the many months, she enters more and more of a cocoon.
Her outward looks grow silently sloppy and shallow,
Her hair and clothes more and more unkempt.
Ignoring basic daily hygiene—her nails and teeth almost the same sallow color,
Once lovely coiffed hair in shambles and cascades of webbing and tangles—She is unaware.
Talking, not silently anymore, but in excited tones to her unseen friend, She is angry...and confused:
Once she had a job, wealth, and a love—
Now she struggles to meet simplest needs...meals, clean bed...clear mind...
Silently, her once regal bearing carries her as she drags her shopping cart and suitcase
Down the tangled narrow streets strewn with trappings of lives no different from her own.
What caused her demise? Was it drugs, booze, or the warped tangles of her grey matter?
She decomposes in the daily view of others
From Pristine Princess to scullery maid of the castle.
She is Meryl Streep no longer.

Cracks That Need Healing

Jo Virgil – Austin, TX

As I walk along the Violet Crown trail,
Just below my feet and deep underground
Limestone rocks keep the earth steady, firm, solid.
Trees learn to wind their roots around the stones,
Or maybe through them.

The rocks have cracks, have holes, have tiny caverns.
The aquifer runs through the cracks,
Seeping water from here to there, twisting and winding,
Sinking deeper, then finding a cliff and falling, falling,
Into a river, becoming one.

So are our hearts sometimes—firm and steady,
Until one day a crack forms, and the tears seep through it,
Twisting and winding, sinking deeper, falling, falling.
But then all that love and compassion that is in our heart
Finds its way out, lets the tears evaporate into the sky.

And our heart, our love, our trust, becomes steady, firm, solid,
And once again, we find ourselves peacefully flowing
Into all that is or ever will be.

Little Gems

Martha Slavin – Danville, CA

We all have stacks of stuff, don't we?

I took a box to the shredder yesterday that was full of a decades' worth of my daily journals. I stopped writing in them each day about four years ago and they have languished on a high closet shelf ever since. These journal entries contained the emotional garbage that I didn't want others to read. Three years ago, I attempted to shred them, but discovered that my shredder's mouth wasn't wide enough for the journal pages. I put them back on the shelf because I wasn't ready to let them go.

This last week I reached up to the journals once again. I discovered I had no interest in reading any of the entries. I realized I have become a different person than the woman captured on those pages. I spent an hour or so tearing off the covers and pulling apart the string binding and dumping the remains in a box, which I took to the shredder. I felt no regret, no hesitation about handing the box over to the young man at the shredders for the paper to be chopped into miniscule pieces. Those pages had served me well long ago, but I no longer needed them.

That action doesn't mean that I don't have journals left. I have art journals full of sketches and practice paintings. I have writing journals full of lists and half-started stories. These I treasure because inside them are little gems.

I picked up my writing journal from 1987 with its lovely blue flowered cover and read my first words: "I have decided to write down my thoughts for a half hour each day."

What followed was a list of events from my life that filled several pages, including everything from standing on the headwaters of the Mississippi to sitting in the elegant living room of Helene Rubenstein's apartment overlooking Central Park in New York City. I was ready to begin my story.

I re-read some of the entries and found the writing somewhat awkward. I was glad that after all these years I could see improvement in my writing. I also found some little gems that could be a new starting point for another piece.

- "My life has been a paper bag with a hole in it—filled with memories that randomly drop out behind me without my noticing them."
- "They lived on the shrinking edge of money."
- "He had fine lines that came out of the corner of his eyes and traced in a circle up to his forehead, as if the synapses of his brain were visible."

In my art journals and stacks of paintings, I have many studies that will never be framed. I have a small piece of paper with a small square cut out of the middle. I place it on top of one of the paintings, and I move it back and forth until I find a small gem of a painting. This exercise is a good reminder to me that within those practice pieces are good beginnings.

What little gems do you have tucked away in your stacks?

Conversation With the Inner Critic

Sandra Shackelford – Green Bay, WI

"You're nothing. No matter what you do, you're *still* nothing." I rush my hands to my ears trying to silence the voice in my head. It's *my* voice, one I can't quiet, telling me again and again that no matter what I do, how hard I try, what "successes" I achieve, I'll never be worthy, never be enough. It's my Inner Critic's voice speaking.

"Shut up," I cry. My hand sweeps across my desk, sending endless memoir rewrites to the floor. I place my head in my hands. I'm tired of this.

It's seven in the morning. I've been up since six. For the past several weeks, I've been hunting for a particular memoir rewrite. It's the most recent one, depicting in descriptive prose my father building our house atop the four-acre hill he christened Gobbler's Knob, the moniker in tribute to the Kentucky countryside with its woods and creeks, where he played in the early 1900s on his grandparent's place.

The past few weeks have been hell. I'm surprised I have any hair left on my head. Out of frustration, I've pulled at it as I sorted through manila folders crammed with old copies of short creative nonfiction, reportage, oral histories and memoir, trying to locate the vagrant piece. Divided by genres, wobbly paper piles rise like dull-toned mountains from atop an old blue footstool. Beside me on my second-hand couch, another stack threatens to topple over and fall onto the rug. I look through each folder, trying to locate the most recent edit, before returning it to its proper square plastic storage container.

This morning, my desktop now relatively free of clutter, I see what's usually hidden underneath my computer keyboard, my 14 x 24-inch calendar. Every two-inch square is a scribbled-on testament to my attempt to prove my Self worth, each a solitary cell. Out of each comes the cry of a prisoner. *I* am the prisoner. It's my *Inner* Voice that cries out for release, the silenced voice of the Siamese sister alive and miserable, seeking release from this negative space.

Today is Sunday, Visitors' Day at the imaginary prison. Today I confront her, hear her out.

"Why the hell can't you leave me alone?" I ask. I've clearly run out of patience. She's been holding me up, interfering with the free flow of written words. "What have I ever done to *you*?"

"You abandoned me," she replies. "As soon as you stepped onto life's stage, you forgot about me. You left me behind, hidden away in the truth compartment of your brain, while on the outside you performed for all the world to see. I'm sick of it. Sick of being neglected. I'm here to tell you the truth."

I wait, staring at today's calendar date, already crammed with activities, and people to call, things to do.

"You're a sham, a performer. You put on quite a show, oh sister of mine, but *I* know who you are. You're part of *me*."

"Well," I break in, feeling a twinge of guilt. "What can I do to right this wrong?"

"Set me free."

I'm quiet. The tennis ball of her well-being is in my court now. *I* hold the key to her future. But what would happen if I release her? Will she take over my life? Push me around? Continue to challenge or block my creative muse? Will she take control as she's done in the past? I'm not willing to relinquish my freedom for hers. I grow quiet. Compromise. I must compromise. I turn the volume down on her voice and think.

Why not give her a role in my writing life? Why not come up with a position that would suit her? Maybe then she'll shut up, leave me alone. Then, unexpectedly, an idea's 60-watt light bulb goes on in my head. How about hiring her, making her part of my creative team? What about making *her* editor-in-chief? That would give her a position in my life and something to do other than sit alone invisible and depressed in her dark cell? I reach for my pencil and draw up a contract. We'll become partners. She'll have to sign it, of course. I'll invite her into my mind's office, but only after I've completed the agreement's first draft.

"Would you consider being my editor-in-chief?" I ask.

I hear a deep intake of breath. "You want to help *me*, release *me* from this dark place, become part of *your* enterprise?" she asks.

"Only if you stop bugging me, stop reminding me of what a fraud I am."

"I think I could do that," she says. I sense a smile on her invisible face. "When do we start?"

"How about after I finish this piece?" I say.

"Okay. I'm happy to help you."

Dilemma settled. But there's another problem I'll have to work on. It's me, the former performer / newly integrated *me*. Finding value as I am, without always having to prove my self-worth. "BE"ing rather than always "DO"ing. But that's the next task.

Maybe my Inner Editor can also help me with that.

A timed fictional writing on the phrase: "His pocket watch had no hold on him"

Maria Weber – Buena Vista, CO

To the contrary, Salvador Dali's pocket watch had a firm grip on him. Each night Dali put his paintbrushes, turpentine, and canvas by his bed. He placed his pocket watch next to his ear, set with an alarm to go off at one o'clock in the morning. Dali had learned that one in the morning was his most creative time, and time itself was subjective. His dreams formed themselves into surrealistic visions. At one a.m., the watch would sound a single "ding" awakening Dali and he would paint on his lap with the bed covers over his knees and a wool shawl around his shoulders. He painted a fractured world that art critics didn't understand. His watch took on a life of its own in his canvasses—eventually melting into a puddle. Time itself was insecure, as Dali came to believe—and as weeks melted into months, he no longer needed his pocket watch to awaken him. As winter melted into spring, he sleepwalked to his studio at one o'clock. When he came to his senses, he would find a completed painting crafted totally from his creative imagination, while his conscious mind slept. His contemporaries thought him mad. Future generations judged him a genius. No others followed his painting regimen because he kept it secret. He was laid to rest with the famous watch on his chest. But before the casket lid was closed, the funeral director noted that there was no longer a watch on his chest, but a puddle of solidified gold metal over his heart.

Be Persistent and Do What You Can Never Do Again

Barbara Stark-Nemon – Ann Arbor MI

Having grown up with a mother given more to issuing orders than advice, those pearls of life wisdom she chose to pass on stood out—both because they were rare, and because she so clearly lived by them herself. Given our entirely different personalities, and her impatience as a mother, I spent the first three decades of my life resisting, defending against, and otherwise distancing myself from my mother’s influence. Once she no longer felt responsible for me, and we were both adults, that all changed. She is now 93, and I am grateful to have had all the time I needed to appreciate her wisdom and how she has modeled two important life philosophies.

Her first and most abiding piece of guidance comes from the famous Calvin Coolidge quote. Be persistent. “Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful people with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated failures. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.”

All of my siblings, and all of our children, received printed copies of this quotation from my mother. In her mind, being persistent meant that work was important, and one worked on tasks until they were finished (and before play). When my mother said she would do something, she reliably and competently did it, and expected the same from her children. Details mattered, excuses didn’t. My mother had learned English as a 13-year-old refugee, she married at 20, had four children, earned a degree in languages before 30, began a career as an interpreter and translator at 40, and worked until she was 85. As a dreamy kid easily lost in a book or on a bike ride, this disciplined, regimented view of how to get things done didn’t sit well with me, and led to much conflict. Now, however, I recognize how my own work ethic, and confidence in what I can accomplish, derives from my mother’s early advice and her example.

Persistence derives in part from my mother’s early German upbringing, but her second piece of guidance actually surprised me when I heard her offer it. Do the thing you can never do again. When presented with a choice between two desirable activities or experiences, my mother advised, do that which you are unlikely to have the opportunity to do in the future. At first glance, this sounds like an amazing grasp of the obvious, but given the rule-governed, rigorous, orderly pattern of her conduct and expectations, this advice demonstrated a narrow but powerful rebellious and adventurous side of my mother. She became a pilot, a skier, a master seamstress, and a semi-professional vocalist. She hated cooking, and did the

minimum necessary. She never attended a PTA meeting, and stopped shopping for us as children as soon as we could take a bus and handle money ourselves. She assumed we did our homework and never checked. (We did). We all got driver’s licenses on our 16th birthdays, and she never drove us anywhere again. We had loose requirements for curfew and where we were allowed to go because she believed we were smart enough to stay out of trouble. (Mostly we were.)

Recognition that she had a tightly controlled but energetic piece of her personality, which led her to make some unconventional and sometimes challenging decisions about her own life and relationships, went a long way toward helping me understand that people are multi-dimensional. Her more severe and regimented behavior could in some way be mediated by this ‘bad girl’ side of her. Believing that life offers us chances to do the unexpected and perhaps scary, and that we should take those chances, helped me to realize my long-held dream to become a novelist.

My mom’s independence and disregard for what others thought of her choices added to the evidence in her own life that satisfaction lay in working hard, being persistent, and remembering to capture the unknown. I have nothing but gratitude for this wisdom.

The Military Pilot Who Broke Barriers for Women

Sarah Byrn Rickman – Colorado Springs, CO

Nancy Harkness Love broke the military gender barrier when she led 303 civilian women pilots for the Army Air Forces’ Ferrying Division in World War II. (‘Ferrying’ means to fly the aircraft—not passengers or cargo—from one place to another.) President Harry Truman awarded her the prestigious Air Medal for her job well done.

No one would describe Nancy Love as a kick-ass personality. To the contrary, her remarkable achievements came as the result of her focused, cool-headed leadership of the women in her charge, coupled with her insight into how best to use women pilots in a military aviation setting. She stuck to her guns despite interference from Jacqueline Cochran, who promoted a very different concept.

Love’s success, and that of the women who flew for her, began with the December 1941 decisions the U.S. military was forced to make after Pearl Harbor.

We were not prepared for war. We lacked ships, aircraft, tanks, munitions...men. Case-in-point, we had too few pilots. Love recognized the pilot shortage and sold Ferrying Division Commander Colonel William H. Tunner on using experienced women pilots to pick up small training aircraft from the factories that built them and deliver those trainers to flight schools.

The first women Love recruited had a minimum 500 flight hours. Most had more—including a 35-year-old flight instructor and mother of three with 3500 hours, and a 23-year-old barnstormer with 2900. Every woman pilot who could deliver an aircraft freed a male pilot to be assigned to—you guessed it!—a more important job.

The women didn't care. They wanted to fly for their country. Throughout 1943, Love's pilots delivered trainer aircraft. Between May and October, their ranks grew.

Cochran, whose goal was to command a women's air force, had sold AAF Commanding General 'Hap' Arnold on training women pilots to do what she called the Army's 'dishwashing' jobs. In spite of this, the first 275 graduates of the Army's only women's flight school were sent to fly for the Ferrying Division where they were needed. Named Director of Women Pilots, Cochran coined the name WASP—Women Airforce Service Pilots—but Love retained the leadership of the women ferry pilots.

By 1944, the emphasis had changed. America and its Allies were winning the war. The crucial need now was swift fighter aircraft, called pursuits. These were complex, high-powered, single-engine, single-cockpit aircraft—only one pilot; your training flight was a solo. Pursuits were needed to escort and protect America's four-engine B-17s and B-24s on bombing runs deep into Germany.

Training men to ferry pursuits proved to be a waste of valuable time, as the male pilots were more urgently needed to fly bombers overseas. Already, Nancy Love had flown the P-51. She was Tunner's first woman pursuit pilot. Eight of her original squadron followed her lead. Tunner knew and trusted Nancy and he knew her women pilots could do the job.

Tunner was adamant: The women would ferry pursuits.

Fifteen of Love's best pilots graduated in the first two classes at the newly opened Pursuit School. Throughout 1944, women ferried those newly built, high-powered aircraft to the docks at Newark, New Jersey—926 P-51s alone. There, the planes were loaded aboard ships bound for England and the war.

Unlike Cochran, Love was never interested in command. She wanted to fly aircraft, not a desk. But she worked with the men of the Ferrying Division to prove the concept that men and women pilots should be under the same command, treated as pilots, judged on their capabilities, and allowed to transition into higher-performance aircraft as their skills permitted.

The airplane doesn't 'know' the sex of the pilot flying it.

Love had the full support and backing of the men she worked with in the Ferrying Division. Given her example and the record achieved by the women flying for her, Tunner and his men saw to it that male and female pilots

were given the same opportunities for advancement—an early model for what exists in today's military. But it wasn't a done deal.

On December 20, 1944, the WASP were disbanded and sent home, though the war wasn't over. Out-of-work male pilots and combat veterans returning home wanted those 'dishwashing' jobs the women were doing. The 'brass' caved. Women were banned from the cockpits of military aircraft. The Women Airforce Service Pilots' performance—stellar and greatly appreciated by their commanding officers—wasn't the reason for the ban that lasted until the mid-1970s. The reason was gender politics at work.

What exists in today's military is what Nancy Love and the men of the Ferrying Division first achieved in WWII. Male and female pilots fly and advance based on individual skills and determination—not their gender.

Fiery Determination

Shelley Thrasher – Tyler, TX

January 1918

The White House

Alice Paul sat next to Lucy Burns outside the Oval Office, warming her gloved hands. Images from her visits here during the past five years marched through her mind in an orderly procession.

"Remember the first time we led a small delegation to meet President Wilson, Lucy?" she whispered.

"Oh, yes. Back in early 1913? Five years ago. He admitted then that women should have the vote."

Alice stifled a laugh. "He also said he didn't realize we 'ladies' felt this strongly about it."

"That floored me. Women have crusaded since before the War Between the States."

"We certainly have."

"What did he think that huge parade the day before his inauguration was all about?" Lucy asked. "Why, half a million people watched five thousand women march!" Alice nodded. "At least during our first visit he said he'd vote for the state referendum in New Jersey—but as a private citizen."

Alice rubbed at a spot on her glove. "And I immediately informed him the referendum would fail. It already had, in the majority of states, since only men could vote."

Lucy chuckled. "How you stood up to him, though he towered over you. His blue eyes looked like glaciers, but he didn't intimidate you."

Alice sat up even straighter. “I do have a Ph.D. in economics and politics. Yet I don’t have any voice in running our government. Surely I can cast my ballot more competently than an uneducated or newly naturalized male can.” She wrinkled her forehead. “Why hasn’t the President ever understood that fact?” Lucy merely shook her head. “Surely he comprehended that we can achieve suffrage only if he urges Congress to support us on a national level.”

Lucy stared into the fire. “Evidently not. Or he didn’t want to. He just stood there. But then he explained he was a native of Virginia and Georgia and believed in states’ rights.”

“States’ rights. Hmph!” Alice scowled. “I can still see him adjusting his blue-silk necktie, fidgeting and glancing toward the door. His mouth barely moved when he tried to smile. And I’ll never forget his words: ‘I don’t intend to abuse my presidential power by pressuring Congress to act on this issue.’”

“How noble.” Lucy’s eyes flashed.

A log popped in the fireplace, and Alice glanced at the watch pinned to her suit jacket. “We’ve already been here three hours, as usual.”

Lucy shrugged, and Alice mulled over a few details from a visit in 1915. The bright brass studs and animal skins covering the settees and chairs in the Oval Office had stirred her to speak more forcefully than usual.

The President, barricaded behind his massive desk, had clenched his square lantern jaw and told her and the others, “You will have to change public opinion.”

Alice had studied the dark-green curtains, especially the golden eagle on the sconce above his head. It grasped an olive branch in its claws, but its ferocious beak had reminded her of the type of justice America doled out to its women. The only “public opinion” that counted was men’s.

The logs in the fireplace had almost burned out before the receptionist added three fresh ones. As the fire blazed anew, Alice glanced at her watch again. Then she sighed, and Lucy seemed to rouse from her own reverie. “Remember when we were here last year?”

Alice nodded, hoping the receptionist couldn’t hear their murmurs. “The President certainly did seem distracted, running his hand over his thinning hair.”

“I was surprised he even agreed to see us, but he didn’t give us much time.” Lucy sat slightly slumped.

“As usual, he told us he couldn’t do anything his party didn’t want him to.”

“What a weak excuse.”

“At least his advice for us to secure public support for our cause pushed us into action.”

Lucy straightened her shoulders. “Our Silent Sentinels caused quite a sensation, didn’t they? People couldn’t believe women would stand quietly in front of the White House and hold up signs and banners all day.”

“Yes. Not speaking, because President Wilson refused to speak up for us, was a good touch.”

“Remember how cold it was?” Lucy asked.

“And how so many onlookers ridiculed and abused us, though some of them were friendly—at first.”

“I’ll never forget those nice people who brought us warm drinks and heavy gloves. And hot bricks to stand on. My feet almost froze until April rolled around.”

Alice frowned. “But in a few months the police started to arrest us and throw us into prison or the workhouse.”

“I’d rather forget all that.”

Alice fingered her hair back into its bun. It had begun to gray, though nothing like the President’s had. “I need to get back to my office, Lucy, but I just had a perverse thought.” Lucy raised an eyebrow. “If the President resists something like women’s right to vote—which he supposedly believes in—for so long,” Alice murmured, “what does he do with things he opposes?”

They chuckled. Today, they merely wanted to thank him for finally encouraging Congress to support them. The House had just passed the Susan B. Anthony Amendment. Now the Senate had to vote on it.

Alice held her ringless hands out to the blazing fire. After so many hours of sitting in a damp, frigid jail cell this past year, she found it sinfully luxurious.

The receptionist appeared. “I’m sorry, ladies. President Wilson can’t speak with you. The War, you know.”

Alice managed a tight smile, though Lucy grimaced. The President was so predictable.

“Please tell him we appreciate that he has finally spoken *for* us, whatever his reasons.”

Alice pulled on her plain blue overcoat and matching wide-brimmed hat and hurried out the door, Lucy by her side.

What type of banners should they display while they stood on the steps of the Senate Office Building tomorrow?

The Senators simply had to pass the suffrage amendment during this session of Congress.

Shades of Truth

Jazz Jaeschke – Austin, TX

I paint it as I see it, as it changes—
what I see at any moment shaded
by my hauntings, my perceptions
hovering over all in view

I am learning to filter discord,
practicing restraint of uttered response
to the unexpected—easier
to hold my tongue in the moment
than later try to take back, swallow
something spit into the glare
fanning the flames of an eruption

If you and I were equally inclined
to tame our conflicting truths
(if understanding were a mutual priority)

I'd dare more open sharing
of feelings, their relatable origins

But you are not so curious, not prone
to look inward with questions—
thus I hold my tongue, my thoughts
till I can sit with my journal
then: *let it all out!*

The upside of this waiting
keeps reproving itself:
writing it down—calms me down

Clear in hindsight:
My pen increasingly paints in hues
of respect, gratitude, curiosity

"I write to listen. I write out of silence. I write to soothe the voices shouting inside me, outside me, all around me. I write because I believe in words. ... I write because it is dangerous, a bloody risk, like love, to form the words, to say the words, to touch the source, to be touched, to reveal how vulnerable we are, how transient. I write as though I am whispering in the ear of the one I love."

– Terry Tempest Williams

Amelia

Charlotte Wlodkowski – Pittsburgh, PA

The main focal point in the room is the huge, worn oak desk. It has seen many years of constant sitting at, the straight back chair now fitted with a pad to soften the long hours of writing. On one side is a sentimental paperweight given to him by his deceased wife. Its job is to secure papers when the oversized windows allow a Southern breeze to enter. The papers are happy to occupy that space until a brilliantly written story is penned.

Sara, the five-year-old dip pen, speaks first. "I hear his shuffling feet. It's rather early for him to be done, don't you think?"

"It really depends on his other commitments," Sophia wisely states. While flaunting her owl plumage, she continues. "We'll find out how things are progressing once Amelia settles in."

Shaking the dust off his thick shaft, Harold thinks out loud. "I hope he chooses me the next time."

"Harold, you're the newest here. You need to give him a chance. Although, he does prefer the old tried and true, like Amelia and me." Harold presses himself further down into his filigree stand in disappointment.

They all stand erect, except the two he laid down some time ago, now covered with newspapers and a journal. All turn to face the door, as his steps grow closer. "We'd better be quiet," Sophia reminds them.

The antique door knob lightly squeaks as it turns. Sara whispers, "I'm always excited when one of us returns." He carefully deposits Amelia in her place of honor, on the right side of the desk. Grabbing some papers, he murmurs something and exits the room. Sara immediately cries out, "Amelia, tell us the story. Did Huck Fin survive? Was Tom able to save him?"

"Ladies and Harold, please—let me catch my breath. This writing is hard work. Actually, we didn't work on the story today. Instead, we wrote another lecture piece. The man is inspirational, a literary giant I tell you. Of course, he couldn't do it without my help. Every once in a while, I interject my interpretation of where the story should go. He doesn't realize it, but I guide his hand to write what I want to tell."

"How long have you been with Mark?" Sara shyly asks.

"It's been over two decades. His dear mother chose me as his first writing instrument, and I'm still going strong. The best years were traveling to the Sandwich Islands, Nevada, Europe, and the Middle East. We feverishly wrote many travel letters on those trips, and every one was published. My Samuel once piloted a steamboat, you know. From that experience, he chose his pen name—Mark Twain. It's steamboat slang for twelve feet of water—just a little trivia for you all. Sara, his real name is Samuel Clemens. Is my quill feather still fluffy?"

Meeting on the Internet

Juliana Lightle – Canyon, TX

Who are you?
Are you
who you
say you are?

Is your profile
a lie to
attract the gullible
or your heart's
outpourings,
your soul
open
for all
to see?

Will you tell me
truths or
lies copied
off a website
designed for
predators
cleverly disguised?

Will we dream of
touching,
mouth to mouth
passion,
bodies hungry,
or a relapse
into despair,
malaise?

Will we grow
to love,
happiness,
or cynicism,
disillusionment,
a lie?

My White Knight (or was it child abuse?)

Carol Ingells – Santa Fe, NM

How does a 41-year-old man, a Christian minister no less, fall in love with a 15-year-old girl and it not be child abuse? I've lived with this question for sixty years and have yet to come to peace with an answer.

It was the late '50s, an era when pastors were generally respected, distinguished leaders in their communities. Many climbed the ladder of success. The larger the church, the larger the salary and prestige attached. He was such a man.

He was, at best, a very lonely person; at worst, mentally ill. Married, with a son my age, he seduced my older sister when she turned to him for help. He plied her with gifts, paid her for work he didn't need to have done, dashed to her side when she became seriously ill. In spite of that, she did not return his interest.

That's where I come in. I was the little sister, awed that he was sitting in our modest northern Michigan home. What a dazzling and seductive personality he had. He could make night seem like day, so skilled was he with words. He began to show great interest in me. That was late summer. Soon began frequent letters between us, as well as after-school phone conversations. I felt guilty, but thrilled that someone like him could find me attractive. Having parents who seldom praised or encouraged, I had little sense of who I was or was becoming. He offered me new life: joy, understanding, encouragement in my music, awareness of my smile, my laugh, my eyes, my intelligence, introduction to a more sophisticated way of life, including instruction in etiquette and other social niceties.

That fall we went to see the movie "Gigi," about an older man who falls in love with a young Parisian woman. This, over the initial objections of my father, which he managed to dissipate. Following an elegant lunch, we held hands throughout the movie, which became "our" movie and "our" music. Just before reaching home, he stopped on a side street and kissed me several times. He never touched me inappropriately. I remember being in Seventh Heaven. I loved him; he loved me; and somehow God had arranged it all.

We continued our correspondence, him writing long letters two or three times a week, speaking the most romantic words I'd ever heard, opening me to such classics as *Sonnets from the Portuguese* by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran.

Well into the spring, I floated on air. For Valentine's Day he sent a heart-shaped box of chocolates. On my 16th birthday, a dozen red roses arrived. During a trip to California, he sent a gold rope bracelet with a heart and key dangling from it and the word IMP, his pet name for me, engraved on the heart. Why my parents did not interfere, I have no idea.

Surviving my Husband's Midlife Crisis

Judy Gruen – Los Angeles, CA

Then the crash came. Suddenly no letters; he wasn't available when I called. Eventually he told me: his wife had discovered our relationship. He was forced to stop communicating. And he was taking a new church in the East. I was devastated. I couldn't accept that it was over. Months later, my sister declared that the only reason he showed interest in me was because she had rejected him. Was that true? I never believed it.

He had implied that his wife's ill health would mean an early death. In my childish heartbreak, I had it figured out. I would go to college and by graduation he would be free. We would spend the rest of our lives together. I wanted nothing more. I never for a minute doubted his honesty, his integrity, his sincerity.

Before he moved, I saw him once more, his last Sunday at the old church. He came to my aunt's for dinner. Over and over he signaled (we had our codes) his love for me. I can still see him waving as he stood in her yard and our car headed out of sight.

I'm unsure what communication we had through college and my early married years. Maybe I blocked it out. I do know that each time I called him (he never called me), he spoke as though nothing had changed and made promises he couldn't and didn't fulfill.

Until 1978. I was 35; he was 61. He visited our town and called saying he would be at the old church for worship the next day. I didn't even think how my husband might feel. Nothing could stop me. I went the next day and met him on the front steps of the church. We were both speechless and overcome with joy.

On Monday I proudly took him to my office at the church where I was Director of Religious Education, thinking he would be pleased that I had followed in his footsteps. His reaction felt patronizing, like "Well, that's very nice, dear." There was clearly no interest or pride in me or my achievements. His conversation focused on money and the things it can buy. I was disappointed and disillusioned.

However, the next day we went to a beautiful rose garden park, where I had imagined we would have our fairy tale wedding. When I mentioned that, he suggested we do it now. Mesmerized by his charm, as always, I followed him to the spot where weddings happen. We recited vows. We walked the garden, arms around one another, spent some time in the car kissing passionately. He dropped me off at my church, implying that there would be more in the future. I never saw him again.

On my 40th birthday, I called him. We shared a brief and stilted conversation. He was dying of cancer, he said. No, there was nothing I could do. And we said goodbye for the last time. My heart broke once more. Yet, I've never regretted that love.

Last night my husband came home sweating the honest sweat of a man who had just torched at least 2,000 calories and released at least 10,000 endorphins at the gym.

"Great workout!" he announced, before I could even inquire. "I rode 10 miles on the bicycle, did 75 push-ups, and lifted weights for 25 minutes. I feel like a new man."

"Fantastic!" I replied, faking enthusiasm. After all, while my husband was toning his muscles to the consistency of marble, my greatest physical exertion had been hefting groceries into the house, shoving more cereal boxes into the cabinet, and chopping vegetables for dinner. I might have burned 67 calories, if I was lucky.

It's been like this ever since my nearly-50 hubby had an epiphany that would change both our lives: "Hey!" he announced. "I forgot to exercise in my 30s and 40s!"

This realization put the fear of atherosclerosis into him, which is a good thing, of course. But it also sparked a determination to compensate for more than a decade of tepid exercise, of haphazard jogging and changing air duct filters in the attic. Even our kids had grown too big to use as free weights. Now, resolute to recapture the fitness of his youth before we both qualify for senior discounts, Jeff is a man possessed, literally—with a new set of hand weights, workout gloves, and moisture-wicking workout clothes.

I shouldn't complain. Legions of middle-aged men have had midlife crises far more threatening to their wives, such as shopping around for younger replacement wives who have way lower BMIs, or discovering an urgent need to buy a boat and navigate around the Horn of Africa. Usually, the only maritime experience these men have ever had involved steering rubber duckies in the tub at age five. And since they will refuse to ask for directions as they search for the Horn, they will never be seen or heard from again.

Still, when Jeff started inviting me to join him at the gym, I found excuses to beg off. I had learned long ago that as a couple we could survive many things, but competitive athletic endeavors were not among them. Years earlier, you see, he tried to teach me to ski. It was an unmitigated disaster. He couldn't understand why I kept falling down, and I couldn't understand why any sane person would strap their feet tightly onto two wooden sticks and then try to zoom vertically down a mountain. I decided then and there that any sport that required ambulances on-site was sheer madness.

For a while, my excuses were remotely plausible. "I wish I could go with you," I said in faux wistfulness, "but

I'm waiting for the washing machine repair man. He said he'd be here by Thursday and I can't leave the house." I used this gambit until all of our household appliances were unambiguously in working order.

Then I got desperate, claiming on one occasion that I had an emergency collagen treatment appointment. Another time I claimed I had a flare-up of post-post-childbirth-stress disorder, a rare syndrome that strikes women as much as fifteen years after the birth of their children and is characterized by a requirement to lie down and reread "Pride and Prejudice" until the episode passes.

Meanwhile, the kids caught the fitness fever and our house morphed into a mini-gym. I got kneed in the midsection while walking down the hall, by a kid hoisting himself up with the new chin-up bar. I learned to tread carefully in the family room to avoid tripping over the huge balance ball, used for sit-ups by everyone but me.

Eventually, my competitive spirit kicked into gear. If I didn't do something soon, Jeff and the kids would be entering "Tough Mudder" competitions as I watched from the sidelines, with contours more *balabusta* than *bellissima*. I also had caught a case of endorphin-envy, as all that exercise kept my husband, and even the teenagers, in finer fettle than me. That's when I summoned my courage and joined a women-only gym, determined to match my husband sinew for sinew. As I walked into my first aerobics class in years, I gave my body a pep talk as if it were The Little Engine That Could: "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can!"

Much to my shock, I managed to mostly keep up with the group—fueled by Bruce Springsteen's "Rosalita" and an industrial-sized mug of caffeinated coffee—to levels of frenzied energy I didn't even know I still possessed. After class, the instructor high-fived me and gushed, "You did an amazing job!" in a tone so startled it was no longer a compliment. This just proves that the work of a dedicated Jewish mother has vastly underappreciated rewards, including strength training. After all, over the years we perform hundreds of thousands of bicep curls, lifting children, grocery bags, school backpacks, and pot roasts.

Now, with a sense of purpose as hard-boiled as I hope my muscles will become, Jeff and I are heading out for a hike. He once described the path we're taking as having "a slight incline," which is like describing the Dead Sea as "slightly high-sodium." So here I go, athletic shoes tied, water bottle at the ready, wearing my new T-shirt that says, "My husband had his mid-life crisis and all I got was this lousy FitBit."

Weeping Beauty

Marilyn Ashbaugh – Edwardsburg, MI

In February, 2002, I travel to Ojo Caliente, New Mexico, for my first writing workshop. I am unfamiliar with the workshop leader, have not read his writing, but an acquaintance desperately wants to attend and she convinces me to be her companion.

On the opening evening, I enter a large teepee to find over forty people inside. I spot an empty chair next to a petite woman with long reddish hair. I want to say hello and introduce myself but as soon as I sit down I am overcome by a wave of sadness and reflexively begin to shed tears. It is as if an invisible cloud of sorrow hangs in the air and my tears are its outward manifestation. I sense this cloud but I am not personally sad, yet the tears continue to flow. My friend finds me and sits on my other side. I am wiping my tears away with my hand but I cannot stop. I am embarrassed and apologize to my friend. I cannot explain what is happening to me, I tell her.

"You are shedding my tears," the petite woman on the other side of me whispers without looking up. "I cannot cry or I may never stop."

Astonished, I whisper back, "What has happened?"

She points to her moccasins, which look handmade and brand new, "These are my niece's. She died in a car accident." I want to express my sorrow, but I remain silent as she points to her dress, "This is my other niece's dress. She died in the same car accident." She gathers a woven bag near her feet and removes a small leather pouch. "This is my nephew's. Their funeral is today. I wanted to attend but my family insisted I go to this workshop in their memory. I have saved a long time to be here. My name is Dolores."

The workshop leader requests that we find a partner, so Dolores and I become writing companions. The leader also requests that each of us find a sacred spot somewhere on the Ojo Caliente property that we should visit at least twice a day. I select a meadow of golden-brown shrubs. I invite Dolores to my sacred spot and she comments on its beauty and ease and gives me the name "fields of gold". I am astonished, for the song by the same name always reminds me of my father, who died less than a year ago on Mother's Day. "You'll remember me" the song begins and I always do. Little do I know that in six months my mother, too, will be dead, or that in three years, death will visit my eighty-one-year-old uncle and my eighteen-year-old nephew.

The workshop leader stands on a stage and reads from his writings. He dismisses others who dare to have a voice different than his own and praises those who imitate his style. He surrounds himself with his people—those who follow him from place to place, those who remain mute to their own stories. I am not one of his followers and am never called upon to share my writings. I eventually stop attending the lectures for other things pull my attention.

Ojo Caliente, with its natural mineral springs, has drawn people to the area for thousands of years. Alone, I walk the wash where glints of mica dance in the sun. I see an image in the corner of my eye, but the image disappears when I turn my head in its direction. Altitude: 6200 feet means not enough oxygen for my sea-level lungs, I tell myself—but this self-talk does not reassure me. There are statues of Our Lady of Guadalupe along the sides of the wash, some with artificial flowers at their base. Is it she I see out of the corner of my eye? Arroyos are dangerous during rains: is this a warning?

Delores, and my roommate and I travel to Chimayo, to a small mission church said to be the sight of miracles. There are crutches on the walls surrounding the statue of an infant Jesus. As if sleepwalking, I follow a group of pilgrims to a small room behind the statue. There in the earthen floor, pilgrims dig in a small hole to take some of the earth. I remove a very small plastic bag from my purse and fill it with the miraculous clay soil. Who doesn't need a miracle? It will be the earth I place on my mother's casket in less than a year, but I know nothing of its destiny nor my own.

The return flight home is uneventful. I no longer see the image at the corner of my eye, but that does not mean I forget her. I name her the Black Madonna and I speak about her with Joan, an artist who works with block glass. It is our first experience working together but we seem to have a telepathic connection for this project and months later, Joan calls to tell me the Black Madonna is complete. I place her in a porch window overlooking a stream. I spend many hours sitting beneath her in prayer and meditation.

Again months later, Joan shares the challenges she encountered creating the Black Madonna. Her usual block glass source does not have the colors she needs, and in the midst of her work a dear friend of hers dies. She is grief-stricken and is not sure whether or how to continue, but among her friend's possessions is the very color of ruby glass that she needs.

Joan visits her creation at my home. We sit together in silence looking up at the Black Madonna and then Joan turns to me, and whispers, "Did you notice her tear? It's new!"

A tear
On her cheek
Weeping Beauty

Lilacs and Formaldehyde

Laurie Ann Doyle – Berkeley, CA

Late at night I heard my mother cleaning, the roar of the Hoover, the sound of chairs scraping across the floor. Smells of Lemon Pledge and sudsy ammonia wafted into our bedroom.

"Zach, do you hear something?"

"Not really," my boyfriend grunted. "Maybe."

"What's happening?"

"Beats me." He rolled over and fell back to sleep.

My mother died six months ago. She'd had high blood pressure, high cholesterol, high and low blood sugar, doctor's appointments all the time. Last January, she beat back double pneumonia and was her old self again. Calling me two, three times a day, wanting me to come over and fix the TV, check the checkbook, dust. The last time she phoned she asked me where the Kaopectate was. I told her in a not-very-patient voice. Then feeling guilty, I offered to bring over chicken soup. She was my mother, after all. And I, her only daughter, my father long gone. She pulled in a raspy breath. "It's nothing," she said, not sounding very happy either. "I'm fine. Really."

That night my mother died in her sleep. Quickly, the doctor said.

Now here she was furiously cleaning my apartment. I heard her humming "Stormy Weather" and talking to the furniture the way she always used to whenever she rearranged it. "Not bad." Then, "Old friend."

I didn't want to go see. Maybe her face was decayed and half crumpled in, maybe she was just a bodiless voice, a vacuum running through air. Or maybe she looked the way I remembered her as a child, just five foot three, but huge to me, with a long pale neck and eyes that went from brown to green in bright sun.

In life, cleaning had not been her thing. Rearranging furniture, yes, but never cleaning. She'd sponge the kitchen counter in big fast circles, leaving behind a thick rim of crumbs. Before Zach and I moved her into the senior facility, I had to scrub congealed blood out of the refrigerator meat compartment. Now I heard my mother washing dishes with a vengeance at three in the morning.

Something crashed. Then something else.

I was out of bed in my pajamas and bare feet, heading into the kitchen. She had pulled out the garbage can and was standing next to it, holding up a Blue Onion plate to the light. Soapy water dripped off a Playtex-gloved finger.

"That's my plate," I said. She smelled like lilacs—her favorite scent—and formaldehyde.

"Well I was the one who gave it to you." My mother flung it in the trash.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s cracked. Can’t be eating off cracked plates.” She looked at me long and hard. Her hair was back to its original dark red. Two flushed spots of mauve stood out on her blue-white cheeks. She wasn’t wearing the black pantsuit we’d buried her in, but turquoise slacks and a bright gold sweater still covered with Esmeralda’s cat hairs.

My mother dragged on her Pall Mall until it glowed. Apparently she had decided in death she could start smoking again. The long ash tipped, but didn’t fall.

“It was only chipped,” I said.

“Could have cut you.” Her voice had that stubborn Fresno twang it could get. She dunked a milky glass in the foamy water with the same intense energy I remembered.

Growing up, when my mother turned all her attention on me, life seemed magical. She’d take me to her office on Van Ness and introduce me around like I was the smartest kid in the world, to Golden Gate Park where we’d float silver balloons up into the eucalyptus until the treetops glittered. But long gray months also went by when she ignored me. Babysitters picked me up right after school and stayed way past dark. Even my mother’s toothbrush was missing, away at the office.

As adults, we fought and made up on a regular basis. Had I tipped the waiter enough? Did she take all her pills? Was this really the best parking spot? But we shared a closeness, too, from hours in bookstores where she’d head off to history and me to art, and holidays spent ice skating in endless circles around the rink in Union Square.

“Why are you here?” I asked. After my mother died, memories kept coming out of nowhere: her fingers setting a warped picnic table in Yosemite, the salty smell of Rice-A-Roni, her red-lipsticked lips opening to the green olive in a dry martini. Sometimes I’d forget she was dead and pick up the phone to call. But lately, I don’t know, whole days went by when I barely thought of my mother at all. Maybe I was done grieving, I’d thought.

She held another heirloom plate up to the light.

“Don’t!” I reached out and touched her arm. My hand didn’t go through. Her skin felt cool and firm, something between damp clay and moist cement. Smoke drifted around her face. She put down the plate and stubbed out the cigarette in an old rosebud ashtray she must have dug out of a box somewhere. My mother reached into the cupboard and pulled out a mug with Emmie! and a blue stick dog that she’d painted for my eighth birthday.

“Pretty good,” she said, “don’t you think?”

Suddenly I was crying, tears spilling down my pajamas and staining my cheeks.

“Oh, honey,” my mother said. She placed her cool hand in mine and pulled me out into the night.

Miss Ross and The Ghost

Milana Marsenich – Polson, MT

My aunt, who people in town call Miss Ross, even though she was married and divorced three times by the winter I came to live with her, sits straight up in bed when she hears the flop-eared dog barking. I tell her again, for the third time that night, that it’s just the dog being ornery, that’s all it is, a flop-eared dog scared of her own shadow. But Miss Ross, my aunt, doesn’t hear me and already she sees the ghost that only she can see. She walks toward the living room and looks with those eyes that twitch and jerk—blue and kind, but not really her own—at something on the couch. It just looks like air and a red couch to me. She holds a flat palm toward me, as if to say, wait a minute. Listen just a minute here.

She tells me that the ghost followed us up from the reservation funeral, where just yesterday we buried her car-riding friend. Oh, the rides they took, she says, driving the back roads near Arlee, listening to the radio, rejoicing the day that they could drive north as well as south and still get that clear, sweet signal.

They cried when they learned about the earthquake in Haiti and the tsunami in Japan. They laughed their heads off to Bill Clinton and My Little Pony on “Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me.” The next day, on the very next ride, they’d report the news to each other as if they hadn’t just listened to the exact same broadcast on the previous day. Once, they drove up Hellroaring Gulch and hiked up to the avalanche chute, leaving the radio during the news and returning to Yo-Yo Ma playing the cello. Up and down 93, say on Evaro Hill, on a simple, snow-filled Montana day, the music of Tchaikovsky and Beethoven transported them around the world.

“I’m gonna miss her,” my aunt says, more to the red couch than to me. “On our last ride, we drove to Ronan, taking a detour into St. Ignatius, listening to Bob Dylan’s Basement Tapes.” In the pitch black cold, they howled “I Shall Be Released” as they passed the cemetery where my aunt’s car-riding friend is now buried. “Must be she caught a ride home with us,” my aunt says, looking at that couch. “Must be she just wanted one last listen to the radio.”

She jerks her eyes toward me and tells me to go outside now, at three o’clock in the morning, to her back yard, where the rain splatters the snow, and to gather some wild rosebush branches. And her being my aunt, I do whatever it is she tells me to do.

When I come back inside, she’s got her head on the flop-eared dog’s head, which is in her lap. She looks at me—her eyes kind and blue, really her own again. Her face is streaked and wet, like maybe she’s been out in the rain, too, but it’s not rain and I know it. She tells the flop-eared dog that she shouldn’t be afraid, being a dog. Ghosts don’t

bother dogs, and with the wild rosebushes, she'll help her car-riding friend pass on to the other side where she now belongs.

The flop-eared dog, whose eyes are always her own, turns her head toward me as if to ask, "Shouldn't we do something? This being the third time tonight and all, shouldn't we do something?" I hold the rosebush branches out in an answer and my aunt waves me over. She uses the rosebushes to send the ghost away, back to the cemetery, or up to the sky, or wherever it is that ghosts live. When my aunt goes back to her room with the flop-eared dog, I hear the radio, turned down low, the BBC maybe, lulling my aunt back to sleep, I hope, where she dreams about her friend, somewhere else now, maybe listening to a soft cello playing on her own radio.

Rose Petals

Bette J. Lafferty – Boerne, TX

Entering my room
their sweet fragrance
greets me with your thoughtfulness.
Deep red, they stand ready
to express your heart.
Your eyes filled with desire
whisper longings beyond my expectation.

Time filled with laughter, joy and warmth,
country drives, silly shopping and meaningful worship
turn the pages of time, until
like the dance at our reunion,
the music eventually stopped,
and we went our separate ways.

But I will remember forever,
with a thankful heart,
love offered
but not to be,
like the rose petals
gently floating from their place.
Their beauty spent,
their purpose fulfilled,
their time had come and gone.

The Lake

Kateri M. Swavely – Easton, PA

Now the lake is silent and still, the moonlight reflecting brightly off the quiet waters. I had felt as though I disrupted everything when I crashed through the trees, desperate for the cool, cleansing relief of the water. My shoes now rest somewhere out in those waters, never to be clean again, and dirty wet socks will be sure to make my trek back through the woods spectacularly miserable.

Everything about this night has been miserable. It wasn't supposed to end this way. He was supposed to listen to reason. He knew we couldn't go on like this. It was only a matter of time before... Well, that is irrelevant now.

My horse snorts softly and paws the ground, ambling toward the end of the lake. He carefully places his hooves on the mossy rocks at the water's edge and bends to take a drink. I hurry over and remove my saddle from his back. It is a mark of my panic that it has taken this long for me to remember my faithful steed. Never have I so carelessly seen to my own needs before his. As I brush his coat, I am able to briefly forget what brought me to this place, this moment. It is very brief, though. A fox rustles in the underbrush and I startle, as memories of the past few hours come rushing back. The woods around the lake suddenly seem to be closing in around me. Aged trees with their low-hanging branches that once gave me such a feeling of friendliness, safety, and privacy, abruptly look menacing. The vines hanging from the limbs behind me cast shadows that seem to look like a hangman's noose. The ripples my horse's nose makes in the water suddenly seemed to boil, and I imagine monsters reaching out from the cold depths and dragging me under, never to see sunlight again. Closing my eyes, I press my forehead against my horse's side and force myself to calm my breathing.

I'm not sure how much time passes before I open my eyes, but the trees have retreated, the water is once again still, and I no longer see death in every shadow. Enough time has now passed that the animals have returned to their watering hole. From the other side of the lake, a doe keeps a wary ear pointed towards me as she and her fawns sip their nighttime drink. I see the white of her tail flick only once—she apparently does not consider me a threat. A ghost of a smile touches my lips at the thought.

I almost wish I hadn't come to this place. It is practically sacred, my refuge ever since I was small. Showing it to Georgia was probably a mistake. They will come looking for me, and she will send them here. But I couldn't have known when I brought Georgia here three years ago where we would all end up. If I were a lesser man, I would blame Georgia for this whole mess. Her brother was the one who started it, after all. I sigh heavily, burdened by the weight of my mistakes. That is all history now.

The deer across the lake suddenly looks up, and with a wave of her tail, dashes off into the woods, her fawns close behind. Other small creatures I haven't even seen scramble into the underbrush. Soon I hear the voices, too. As I wait, I stare out at the waters, contemplating the moon's reflection and wondering if I will ever see it again. My actions saved lives, and I do not regret them, but I know I will never find the peace and serenity of this lake, and this place, ever again.

All My Yesterdays

Ariela Zucker – Auburn ME

“I have learned that if you must leave a place that you have lived in and loved and where all your yesteryears are buried deep, leave it any way except a slow way, leave it the fastest way you can. Never turn back and never believe that an hour you remember is a better hour because it is dead.”

— Beryl Markham, *West with the Night*

My husband and I and our twelve-year-old youngest daughter left our home of twenty-five years with two suitcases each and no plans. To an outsider, it could have appeared as if we were escaping a place we could no longer endure, and the truth was that we were. Only it was love that we were fleeing from, love that was decreasing with each day that we stayed.

Sometimes the best way to leave is any way but the slow way; but in the coming years I would discover that this supposedly clean cut was nothing but a sustained illusion. Every time I turned back, here they were, trailing behind, the roots I thought were ripped out on that day we closed the door behind, picked up our suitcases and walked.

There are two parts to the act of leaving: the physical one that we mastered, and the emotional part that I soon learned was never over. Just because I closed a door and flew across the ocean did not mean that I was not still attached to my former home, by many unseen cords.

Attached —

To the language that holds me hostage with its familiar sounds, and words that can be said only one way to transmit the exact meaning.

To the color of the sky, to the shades of blue of the sea, and to the desert with its vast emptiness, where echoes roam and raise with the clouds of dust, old stories.

Still attached to my childhood memories, those that I fondly abuse in my stories; but they are written now in a foreign language.

To the black and white photos, in falling-apart albums, where the dry paper corners can hold them no more.

To the nonverbal communication that only people who grew up in the same tiny country can conduct.

To this day, I can be stopped abruptly by the view of a cluster of trees, a hill on the horizon, a passing cloud, and for a second be transported over the distance and time.

“It looks like...” I hold my breath, and the vision is gone.

A familiar smell can open a hidden compartment I thought was closed for good. A part of a melody brings tears to my eyes.

Away but never away, close but no longer there. When we left our home in Israel, seventeen years ago, I did not know what my parents always knew from their own experience but did not tell me. You cannot shed a home like an old skin.

I remember how my mother sighed every spring, and the look in her eyes when she said *What you call green is only a pale shade of the real color* and only years later, on a trip we took to her family town in Europe, I understood what she meant.

But I can tell you about brown, and about the desert where I lived most of my adult life. The tapestry of shades and changing shadows, as the day goes on. How the rising sun lights fires in the otherwise brown landscape, how this same brown shimmer is almost white at noon, and how it wears soft pink hues at dusk. How haunting is the vast space glinting under the full moon and secretive under the velvety night sky.

I can tell you about my childhood home in Jerusalem, a city that is so old that even the houses appear bent under the heavy burden of history and the constant rivalry. Where every stone moved opens a chapter in a troubled, beautiful tale, and how the beauty and the repulsive intertwine to create a timeless masterpiece.

I can tell you about a dream that is fractured, about my parents when they were young in a country brimming with dreams. With visions of a flawless new future for their children, many of them, like me, are no longer there.

An hour you remember, is it a better hour because it is dead?

What a puzzling question to settle, to find a satisfying answer, when all that I do is hang words and images on the hooks of time. Without all these dead, remembered hours, what will remain of me?

Karma

Marilea C. Rabasa – Camano Island, WA

Our first house in Virginia boasted an outdoor speaker system so we could listen to music while we were sitting on the patio. But it was broken and we never had it fixed.

Instead, the speaker provided a nesting place for a number of birds in the six years we lived there. Every spring, forgetting that it was right next to our kitchen door but high enough for the birds to feel safe from curious humans, I would start to notice the flight of a couple of birds back and forth to the same spot. And there was a maple tree in front of the fence we put up, where one of the birds always watched.

“They’re back!” I excitedly shouted to my neighbor who was pulling up weeds. I felt foolish, tipping the birds off.

“I want to see how many eggs she’s laid. Please bring over the ladder,” I asked my husband as he was hanging up a picture.

“Don’t be crazy,” he reminded me, “if they see you go anywhere near their nest, they’ll abandon it.”

So I left it alone, watching Mom and Pop swoop in and take turns sitting on the eggs.

One May morning I heard a lot of chirping coming from inside the broken speaker, and I observed the parents, one at a time, bringing food to their hatchlings. Such a simple cooperative effort, ensuring the welfare of their young.

Hatchlings became nestlings, and then came the end of the swooping. There were no more parents taking turns on the nest, and the comforting sounds of life, the chirping, had stopped. I realized the babies must have been strong enough to leave the nest and test their wings. They had become fledglings, and they were off.

But I saw the female soon afterwards in the maple nearby singing.

Gosh, those baby birds must be miles away by now, I thought to myself. And there was Mom hovering nearby, probably thinking the same thing.

Yet I wonder, sometimes, if they can hear their mother singing her songs.

Cooper’s Hawk

Betty McCreary – Austin, TX

Blue Jay cries disrupt my nap
I peek into the hot backyard and
Follow the sound of the frantic jay
Who jumps around in the green leaves of our pecan

Below, in the 100-degree-shade
Long, yellow legs end in clawed toes
That grip the birdbath’s edge, while
Red eyes scan for danger

She lowers her beak for a dainty sip, as if
Attending an afternoon tea, and
Ignores the noisy jay
‘Too hot for a warm meal’

And then
The silent splash as she dips down into the water
Ruffling grey feathers in delight
Drops flying outward

Watching her from the bedroom’s cool
I ponder that
The pleasure she brings me,
She will never know

Not the only one

Lesta Bertoia – Makawao, HI

when I was little
I saw it everywhere
and thought that everybody else did, too
but then I noticed people never looking up
never looking out or around in awed silence
stunned into ecstatic immobility
brimming with wonder
I was puzzled
didn’t it make them happy just to look at it?
look, look!
how can you ignore it?
I tilted their chins and pointed
and I saw the film of gray over their eyes
stabbed
by the pain
they did not feel
I hardly dared to look around
until the day
my little child
standing in the yard, looked up
with shining eyes
and turning slowly
let his mouth drop open and said
Oooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!

Print & Online Contributors

Carol E. Anderson – Ann Arbor, MI

Carol is author of the award winning memoir, *You Can't Buy Love Like That: Growing Up Gay in the Sixties*. Her essays have been published in The Huffington Post, Pop Sugar, The Advocate, Curve Magazine and Living Better. She lives with the love of her life and their sassy pup in a nature sanctuary.

Pat Anthony – Fontana, KS

Pat writes the backroads, often inspired by soil and those that work it. A longtime educator, she has work in Cholla Needles, Heron Tree, Nature Writing, Third Wednesday, The Avocet, The Courtship of Winds, Open Minds Quarterly, Passenger, Red Wolf Journal, Snakeskin, Awkward Mermaid and others.

Marilyn Ashbaugh – Edwardsburg, MI

Marilyn Ashbaugh is a poet, writer, and nature photographer, whose work appears in national and international publications.

Pat Bean – Tucson, AZ

Pat spent 37 years as a newspaper journalist, then traveled the country in an RV with her dog Maggie for nine years. Her book, *Travels with Maggie*, details that journey. She currently lives in Tucson, where she writes and enjoys the company of her current canine companion Pepper. She blogs at <https://patbean.net>.

Lesta Bertoia – Makawao, HI

Lesta is author of the mini-memoir *Somewhere Between Here and Perfect* and the novel *Why Not*. She is also an artist, whose portraits and visionary paintings can be viewed at www.lestabertoia.com. She lives on the island of Maui.

Lois Ann Bull – Easton, CT

Life is meant to be lived. How can you know if you never try. I now have a kaleidoscope of butterflies and plan on a few more. I write to record a life well-lived, hoping to inspire my grandchildren.

Kit Dalton – Martinez, CA

I am a longtime (32 years) resident of California, where I own a bungalow in the far-eastern San Francisco Bay Area. As my story suggests, I adore cats, and I presently have three of them. I enjoy gardening, too, and music, and reading, and—of course—writing.

Mary Jo Doig – Afton, VA

Mary Jo has been a Story Circle member since 2001. Within that amazing circle she found sacred space to write her story, *Patchwork: A Memoir of Love and Loss*, published in October 2018.

Debra Dolan – Vancouver, BC Canada

Debra lives on the west coast of Canada. She went searching for rain and found it. In the lushness of Vancouver's natural paradise, she is reviewing 50+ years of journals as she recovers from a head injury.

Laurie Ann Doyle – Berkeley, CA

Laurie Ann's new book of short stories is *World Gone Missing*. Winner of the Alligator Juniper National Fiction Award and a Pushcart Prize nominee, her stories and essays have appeared in many journals. She also teaches writing at the San Francisco Writers Grotto and UC Berkeley. www.laurieanndoyle.com

Susan DuMond – Ashland, OR

Susan's poetry has appeared in publications including Prism International, Chelsea, The Smith, and others. Her memoir, *Another Place Called Home: Surviving Foster Care*, came out in 2018. Susan holds a BA in Liberal Arts/Theatre from Bennington, and a PhD from the U of Oregon in Educational Policy and Mgmt.

Sara Etgen-Baker – Anna, TX

A teacher encouraged her writing but Sara chose another career. After retirement, she re-discovered her inner author and began writing. Her manuscripts have been published in anthologies and magazines including *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, "Guideposts," *Times They Were A Changing*, and more.

Sarah Fine – Toronto, ON Canada

Enthusiastic writer. Happily retired teacher/social worker. Proud mother of three amazing adult children. Enjoying life on the shores of Lake Ontario with my supportive spouse. Rich in friends. Grateful.

Susan Flemr – Des Moines, IA

A former nurse, then pastor, Susan now enjoys her retirement. There is precious time for reflection, writing, and playing her cello. Always encouraged by her husband, Bill.

B. Lynn Goodwin – Danville, CA

Lynn owns Writer Advice, www.writeradvice.com. Her memoir, *Never Too Late: From Wannabe to Wife at 62*, was a National Indie Excellence Award Winner. She's also written *You Want Me to Do WHAT? Journaling for Caregivers* and *Talent*. She is a reviewer and teacher at Story Circle Network.

Judy Gruen – Los Angeles, CA

Judy is the author of five non-fiction books, including *The Skeptic and the Rabbi: Falling in Love with Faith*. Her work has appeared in the Wall Street Journal, Chicago Tribune, Woman's Day, Jewish Journal, Jewish Action, and many other media outlets. She is also a book editor and writing coach.

Jeanne Guy – Austin, TX

Jeanne has been a reflective writing coach, group facilitator and speaker for 20+ years. She is co-author of *Seeing Me: a guide to reframing the way you see yourself through reflective writing*. She offers self-awareness writing workshops and retreats, blogs, and recently finished her memoir, *You'll Never Find Us*.

Lois Halley – Westminster, MD

Lois has been writing since she was 12 years old. Her nonfiction, fiction, and poetry have appeared in numerous publications, including Angels on Earth, Maryland Dog, Rescue Me, The Story Teller, and others. She wholeheartedly thanks SCN for the support they give to women writers.

Linda M. Hasselstrom – Hermosa, SD

Linda's 17 books of poetry and nonfiction originate on her South Dakota ranch, where she also conducts writing retreats and online writing consultations. See www.windbreakhouse.com. Also find her on [Facebook.com/Windbreakhouse](https://www.facebook.com/Windbreakhouse), and read her blog at Windbreakhouse.WordPress.com.

Patricia Roop Hollinger – Westminster, MD

Pat is a retired Chaplain/Pastoral Counselor/Licensed Clinical Profession Counselor who lives in a retirement community with her husband and their cat "Spunky." A mother, grandmother and great grandmother, she now pursues giving voice to her own words.

Carol Ingells – Santa Fe, NM

A retired hospital chaplain and spiritual director from Lansing, Michigan, Carol now shares life in Santa Fe with her partner, Robert. She is 75 years old and enjoys writing stories of her life at the request of her adult daughter.

Jazz Jaeschke – Austin, TX

Jazz found poetry at mid-life. Now photography, labyrinths, nature, SoulCollage(R), and travel arouse her muse and poems spill forth. She also writes life prose and nurtures an active journal practice. Visit Jazz's blog: www.stepsandpauses.wordpress.com

Marjorie Kildare – Halifax, NS, Canada

I live facing Halifax Harbour and have a 180-degree view of sea, sky, and sheer beauty in all seasons. I can barely take my eyes from the seven-foot windows, so writing short – haiku – is best, for now.

Giselle King – Alpena, MI

Giselle is a senior in high school in Northern Michigan. She has taken many Story Circle online classes. Her hobbies include playing tennis, playing the piano, and sailing.

Lara King – Alpena, MI

Lara is a 16-year-old senior in Michigan who has taken several SCN online courses. She won a Silver Medal in the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards, the oldest and most prestigious writing contest in the US for youth. After high school, she plans to attend college and major in English.

V.J. Knutson – London, ON Canada

Former educator, avid blogger, and poet, I am currently immersed in discovering creativity through writing, painting, and photography. My husband and I have just relocated to a small town in SW Ontario, after having travelled the past year in a 41' motor home, across the U.S. and Canada.

Kathi Kouguell – New York, NY

Kathi is a writer and visual artist, who combines the powerful use of words, colors and design. Her writing often leads to installations, framed pieces, or large hand-painted and quilted hangings. Each piece is a strong combination of words, story, feelings and emotions, colors, design, and textures.

Janice Kvale – Austin, TX

I recently sold my home and moved into an over-55 apartment. I guess that makes me a senior citizen officially.

Bette J. Lafferty – Boerne, TX

Bette is retired and a recent transplant from the Tampa Bay area to Texas. She is author of life stories, Christian devotions, Bible Studies and skits, and is an award-winning poet. She sends out her work as Monday Morning Offerings on email. Contact her at: bette.j.lafferty@gmail.com

Pat LaPointe – Prospect Heights, IL

Pat is a past President of SCN and the editor of the "Changes In Life" monthly newsletter for women. She facilitates women's writing groups online and on site. Her anthology of women's stories is: *The Woman I've Become: 37 Women Share Their Journey from Toxic Relationships to Self-Empowerment*.

Maya Lazarus – Caldwell, TX

Maya moved to Texas three years ago with her husband and four dogs. Retired, she enjoys journal writing, flash fiction/non-fiction and haiku poetry. She wrote a memoir, *Through the Rabbit Hole: One Family's Bipolar Success Story*, to give hope to other parents who have a child with a mental health condition.

Len Leatherwood – Beverly Hills, CA

Len is a published author of poetry, flash fiction, and flash memoir, and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize in 2015. She is also a nationally recognized writing teacher in Los Angeles, and serves as the coordinator of online classes for Story Circle Network.

Ethel Lee-Miller – Tucson, AZ

Ethel enjoys a love affair with words in her essays, oral and written stories, and improv scenes. She blogs regularly about people, the power of words, and the writing life. She is the author of *Thinking of Miller Place* and *Seedlings, Stories of Relationships*. Get in touch with her at: <https://etheleemiller.com>

Jane Gragg Lewis – Laguna Niguel, CA

Jane is a member of a writing group that inspired and encouraged her self-published memoir of growing up in the South, *A Jar of Fireflies*. She has also published an ESL text, *Dictation Riddles*. She loves to write and play with words, while her best critic, furry friend Tipper, patiently lies at her feet.

Juliana Lightle – Canyon, TX

A former SCN board member, Juliana teaches, sings classical music, and raises horses in the Panhandle of Texas. Her 2014 book, *On the Rim of Wonder*, includes a poem published in the 2017 *Real Women Write* anthology, and her third book, a food memoir, will come out in late 2018 or early 2019.

Milana Marsenich – Polson, MT

With graduate degrees in Mental Health Counseling and Creative Writing, Milana has worked as a mental health therapist for the past 20 years. Her first novel, *Copper Sky* was chosen as a Spur Award finalist. Her second novel is *The Swan Keeper*. Also find her work in Montana Quarterly, Feminist Studies, and more.

Antoinette Truglio Martin – Sayville, NY

Antoinette is the author of *Hug Everyone You Know: A Year of Community, Courage, and Cancer* (a memoir) and *Famous Seaweed Soup* (a children's book). She blogs family stories and musings at *Stories Served Around The Table*. <https://antoinettetrugliomartin.com/>

Lucille Martindale – West Monroe, LA

Lou is a semi-retired technical writer, webmaster, and editor. She recently relocated, with her cat Lily Belle. She wrote her veteran father's biography and is currently working on her 96-year-old mother's. Her own life story is in progress. "Technical writing pays the bills, but life story writing feeds my soul."

Claire McCabe – Elkton, MD

Claire splits her time between Delaware and Maryland, living with three cats, two dogs, and a life partner. She teaches writing at the U. of Delaware and writes poetry with both on-line and local writing groups—loving every minute of it. She is working on an MFA in poetry at Pine Manor College.

Betty McCreary – Austin, TX

Born and raised in Austin, I find peace and inspiration in nature, and have devoted more of my time to writing in various genres, often inspired by the natural world of critters.

Merimee Moffitt – Albuquerque, NM

Merimee returned to school at age 50 to earn a Master's degree in creative writing at UNM in Albuquerque. She has taught writing at CNM community college and through SCN, while she writes her own stuff. She has published four books and is busy on projects five and six. She is grateful for all the blessings, all of it.

Abby November – San Diego, CA

Abby is a former Texas Dept. of Health Nutritionist turned stand-up comic, performing widely. A decade ago, her original OWL writing group inspired her. She is currently writing on her interactions with the homeless in San Diego, and enjoying being the world's most inappropriate grandmother.

Lucy Painter – Williamsburg, VA

Retired from teaching high school, Lucy began writing down family stories she heard growing up in western Virginia, stories she found universal after many travels around the U.S. and Europe. An active SCN member for 9 years, she lives with her husband of 50 years, two dachshunds and one very old cat.

Marilea C. Rabasa – Camano Island, WA

A retired ESL teacher, Marilea authored *A Mother's Story: Angie Doesn't Live Here Anymore*, under the pen name Maggie C. Romero. It won great acclaim, including the International Book Award. Her travels are backdrop for her sequel memoir on overcoming lifelong depression and learning to "dance in the rain."

Sarah Byrn Rickman – Colorado Springs, CO

Sarah has written and published eight books about the women who flew in World War II, including *Nancy Love and the WASP Ferry Pilots of World War II*. Her second bio on Nancy Love will be out in late 2018. Sarah has earned a masters in Creative Writing as well as her Sport Pilot license.

Kathleen M. Rodgers – Colleyville, TX

An award-winning novelist whose stories and essays have appeared in Family Circle Magazine, Military Times, and many other publications, Kathleen is the mother of two grown sons, and lives with her husband and two rescue dogs. She just completed her fourth novel, set against the backdrop of the 2016 election.

Kali' P. Rourke – Austin, TX

Kali' is a wife, mother, writer, singer, volunteer, philanthropist, and a proud Seedling Mentor and BookSpring board member in Austin. She blogs at Kali's Musings and A Burning Journey—One Woman's Experience with Burning Mouth Syndrome. Kali' also coordinates the SCN One Woman's Day blog.

Nancilynn Saylor – Austin, TX

Nancilynn lives with her beloved Romeo in Austin. She enjoys writing stories and poetry and spending time with her family. When not busy writing, she crafts handmade custom journals.

Sandra Shackelford – Green Bay, WI

A long-time member of the Story Circle Network, Sandra is a writer, instructor, and professional artist. She facilitates several writing circles in Green Bay, and participates in the annual UntitledTown Author and Book Festival.

Madeline Sharples – Manhattan Beach, CA

Madeline is the author of *Leaving the Hall Light On: A Mother's Memoir of Living with Her Son's Bipolar Disorder and Surviving His Suicide*. She also co-authored *Blue-Collar Women: Trailblazing Women Take on Men-Only Jobs*. Her work appears online and in print. Her blog is Choices. <http://madelineshaples.com>

Noëlle Sickels – Los Angeles, CA

Noëlle is the author of four historical novels and the memoir, *Searching for Armando*. She posts a new story and poem each month, mid-month, on her web site: www.noellesickels.com.

Martha Slavin – Danville, CA

An artist and writer, Martha creates the blog Postcards in the Air, www.marthaslavin.blogspot.com. She also writes poetry and personal essays. She began writing again after her son's birth to share family stories with him. She lives with her husband in Danville.

Barbara Stark-Nemon – Ann Arbor, MI

Barbara is the author of an award-winning first novel, *Even in Darkness*, and the newly released novel, *Hard Cider*. She enjoyed a teaching and clinical career working with deaf children. Now Barbara writes, cycles, swims, does fiber art, and gardens. Find out more at <http://www.barbarastarknemon.com/>.

Mare Stephens – Irvine, CA

I'm a grandmother who wants to bring my personal history to my family.

Kateri M. Swavely – Easton, PA

Kateri is a high school theatre director, animal lover, and aspiring novelist. She lives in eastern Pennsylvania with her husband, an adorable hound, and three demanding cats.

Elaine Thomas – La Grange, TX

The award-winning author of several books, as well as numerous feature stories, newspaper columns and special publications, Elaine spent decades as a corporate business writer before concentrating on capturing the memories of those in small towns and rural communities. Visit her at www.elainethomaswriter.com.

Marian McCaa Thomas – Leawood, KS

Marian has been writing limericks, haiku, and other forms of poetry her whole life. She is a keyboard musician (organ, harpsichord, and piano), companion to her husband of 55 years, mother of three, mother-in-law of two, and grandma of two. She appreciates hearing stories and poems from other women in SCN.

Shelley Thrasher – Tyler, TX

Shelley Thrasher, retired college professor and current editor, has published three novels and one book of poetry. She loves to travel, garden, write, and live in East Texas with her wife, Connie, and their five pets.

Jo Virgil – Austin, TX

Jo is SCN's True Words editor, and had a full career working with writers as Community Relations Manager for Barnes & Noble, and as a feature writer for the Fort Worth Star-Telegram. Published in journals, books, and online, Jo's work reflects her love of writing and her deep appreciation for nature.

Bonnie J. Watkins – Austin, TX

Bonnie has taught high school 25 years and at Austin Community College. She has written numerous education articles, parenting articles, poetry, and memoir. A frequent contributor to SCN, she was given a gift membership the year after it began!

Judy Watkins – Myrtle Creek, OR

SCN has been part of my life for quite a few years and I enjoy the women I have met there. Sharing stories makes us know we are not alone. I am 78, retired since 2001. I live in a small town with one stop-light and a husband of nearly 60 years. There are always new stories to share as life changes, even at my age.

Maria Weber – Buena Vista, CO

I've been writing with a local group of seven women for over fifteen years—The Writers BLOC. I'm also part of a poetry group, the Shavano Poets. These activities plus some watercolor art, pottery making, cat husbandry, rock collecting, and cloud watching keep the creative juices flowing.

Susan G. Weidener – Chester Springs, PA

A former staff writer with *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Susan started the Women's Writing Circle, which offers monthly read-arounds, critique and writing workshops in fiction and memoir. The author of two memoirs and a novel, she offers editing services and also talks and lectures on writing life stories.

Mary Jo West – San Clemente, CA

I started writing about six years ago and have enjoyed being immersed in the process. My memoir was published in 2016 and I also published a recipe book with recipes handed down by my Italian family. I live with my husband of 60 years.

Julie Weston – Hailey, ID

Julie has published a memoir and two mysteries. Her mysteries are *Moonshadows* and *Basque Moon*. The first was a finalist in the Sarton Literary Awards and the second won the WILLA Literary Award for Historical Fiction. Julie writes, skis, reads and lives in central Idaho with her photographer husband.

Linda C. Wisniewski – Doylestown, PA

Linda lives with her retired scientist husband and rescue cat, Denyse, in Bucks County, where she teaches memoir workshops and volunteers as a docent at the home of Nobel prize winner Pearl S. Buck. Linda's memoir, *Off Kilter*, was published by Pearlsong Press. She blogs at www.lindawis.com/blog.

Charlotte Wlodkowski – Pittsburgh, PA

Several years ago I put pen to paper and have been enjoying it ever since. Writing gives me an outlet for creativity. I intend to keep learning the craft and sharing stories along the way.

Carol Ziel – St. Louis, MO

I have been an enthusiastic member of SCN for almost 10 years. I'm also a gardener, grandmother, and Goddess-oriented Quaker woman, who just retired. I glean my writing from all of these roles, and am grateful to SCN for guiding, inspiring, and encouraging me.

Kathleen Dempsey Zimmerman – Littleton, MA

A newly retired high school English teacher, I taught for 37 years in a variety of settings: a winter sports academy, a juvenile detention home, a federal prison and a couple of large suburban high schools. I am a mother to 3 great millennials. I've loved poetry a long time and am excited to have more time for writing.

Ariela Zucker – Ellsworth, ME

Born in Jerusalem. My husband and I left Israel on September 2001. Followed by three of our daughters, we decided to stay in Maine. We live in Ellsworth, in the motel we own and operate.

Story Circle Network, Inc.

723 W University Ave #300-234,
Georgetown TX 78626



...for women with stories to tell