

Somewhere between
the dream life predicted
in our high school yearbooks
and now, lies the Path
we actually walked:

This Path

A Silver Boomer Book

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Dedication

*to all the lantern holders and trail
markers who helped us make our
way*

*also Ginny wanted to dedicate to
AWG and Juanita Zachry*

Other Silver Boomer Books

Silver Boomers

*a collection of prose and poetry
by and about baby boomers*

March, 2008

Freckles to Wrinkles

July, 2008

Under Eagle Wings Press Imprint

Writing Toward the Light:

A Mother's Grief Journey

by Laura Flett

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*We look back
on paths
we walked...*

Paths

Barbara B. Rollins

A hundred years of nights and days
since Robert Frost surveyed two paths,
while time careened through history's maze
and culture burst with heat that crazed
the china mores of the past.

A simple time, a wooded place,
within, without, choose this or that.
New England's order, peace and grace
mock Texas plains where rocks replace
leaf-covered ways with vast grass mat.

Nothing stands to block my way;
a hundred paths each step could birth.
I long for order – yea or nay —
as choices wail to have their say
and force a measure of their worth.

Would Frost concede the challenge worse
or scorn the shallow weight I give,
my literal reading of his verse?
I'll never know. We can't reverse
time's path but each the now will live.

Prodigal

Becky Haigler

Why do we not value
what is most abundant,
most needful? No tax on air?
No levy on sunshine?
My father's love was so free
I thought it worthless.

But when purchased pleasures failed
I sought the coin of his favor,
the currency of his covering.
So I came, muddy
and smelling of pigs' dung,
and my father embraced me.

Boundaries

Lynn Pinkerton

Keeping pace with the slow rhythm of hot, southern days, rivers of sweat meandered lazily down my young, naïve body. It was August of 1965, as I reluctantly navigated tall, sheltering pines to attend my next class. Marooned in a small college town in deep East Texas, days were filled with summer school classes, welcomed trips to the local Dairy Queen and cool nights with friends piled into my blue and white fifty-five Ford looking for boys and diversion at the town's only drive-in movie. It was the summer the Beach Boys happily crooned about "California Girls," while we slept soundly in unlocked dorm rooms. Little of importance existed outside this sphere of security and comfort.

My routine trip to class was sharply interrupted by a friend who excitedly announced that "Black Power had gone crazy in California." He went on to explain that he had heard on the radio that wild bands of Negroes were burning down Los Angeles and white people everywhere were worried their city would be next. I had never heard of a place called Watts and could not imagine what could upset people enough to burn down their own neighborhood. I mustered up a dutiful amount of shock and concern, made a mental note that I needed to buy new eyeliner and hurried off to class.

In the days to follow, fragments of the drama unfolding 1,500 miles away pricked the safety net of my small world. With one

TV set in the dorm living room, only three television networks, a payphone down the hall, a city newspaper the size of a large greeting card and local radio stations more captivated by the daily Farm Report than national news, outside information was slow to come.

It was the first time I remember hearing the word “riot.” The echo of Martin Luther King’s appeal for non-violence was drowned out on the streets of Watts by angry cries of “Burn, Baby, Burn.” Generations of simmering racial hopelessness and frustration boiled over into raging fires, looting, violence and bloodshed. Fourteen hundred National Guardsmen and fifteen hundred police finally restored a fragile peace. Dawn of the sixth day revealed that much of this segregated Los Angeles neighborhood lay stunned in still-smoking, charred, black rubble. Thirty-four people were dead, one thousand injured, four thousand arrested and \$35 million worth of damage had been inflicted on neighborhood homes, shops, cars and cafes.

Unfamiliar, distant reality poked at the boundaries of my cozy cocoon, as my middle-class, white friends and I sat around the dorm eating popcorn, playing Beatles records and trying to sort it all out. For the most part, we were well-intentioned in our efforts to reach out and understand the despair and dreams of our far-away neighbors. But exams were coming up and there was also no Internet; no email, blogs, YouTube, I-Reports; no cell phones or twenty-four-hour news sources. We remained an island surrounded by narcissistic collegiate life, disconnected from what was happening across town and across the country.

Looking back at the Sixties several decades later, I am astonished I rambled through college relatively unaware of the breaking news continuously happening around my country. While I grooved to the sounds of “Hang on, Sloopy” and flipped hopefully through *Bride’s Magazine*, humans left first-time footprints on the faraway moon, Timothy Leary powered up the

“psychedelic sixties,” the sexual revolution roared to life, women flung off their bras and aprons and demanded more from life, four hundred thousand tie-dyed hippies gathered on a rural New York farm for a legend-in-the-making called Woodstock, the anguish of the Vietnam War was shouted from flag-draped caskets and burning draft cards, Camelot was gunned down and The Great Society born.

I rode the white line right down the middle of this exciting, historic phenomenon of radical social and political revolution and did not know I had been there. Like the Watts summer rioters, I lived segregated and apart, isolated by invisible boundaries of youthful self interest and small-town myopia. Only later did the quiet riots of time and perspective bring my global village into sharper focus.

Predator of Forever

Carl L. Williams

Time is ever hungry and kills to eat,
mauling the hours and savaging the days,
swallowing whole the tender portions,
yet chewing slowly on the gristle,
licking up the seconds like the flow of blood,
consuming lives and dreams and memories,
while tracking the ages with ravenous intent,
devouring decades without mercy,
and feeding on eternity, insatiate.

The Road

Lynn Pinkerton

Her fresh footsteps
innocently wiggle forward
gambling
on the imaginary road ahead.

Early days of
original promise
stretching
out in benevolent possibility.
Small hands
chase flickering fireflies
dodging
frozen moments in glass prisons.

Time topples into
pimples and proms
teetering
on fleeting feet of change.

Tender days
of budding vision
flaunting
virgin skin and saluting breasts.
Birthdays repeat

like rapid-firing guns
drilling
holes in plans and plots.

Dimming dawn unfurls
billowing skirts
revealing
sagging sunsets and graying finales.

Undaunted, her wrinkled hopes
gobble up change, still
gambling
on the imaginary road ahead.

Silver Breeze

Ginny Greene

Watching that woman
wearing grey
around her temples
Looking back at an empty nest
throwing off shackles and
charging down a new road
Cheers to the woman
roaring past gray
and on beyond purple

security

Becky Haigler

crisp uniform, jacket
with official patches
tall, folded into
rolling desk chair
phone pressed to
lined face awkwardly
maybe a hunter, tanned
but not work-burned
thinning gray, neatly trimmed
brushy mustache, comfortable
no weapon, this job is
a bird nest on the ground

Black River

Charles P. Ries

As I entered the third of a four-hour meditation, my legs began to cramp and my back ached. My mind continued to run in circles, but slowly it came to a standstill when for a long, calm, clear moment I saw him. I saw my father sitting next to me. He wasn't the father I'd known, but a Hindu monk. He was young, with a shaved head, but I distinctly knew it was my father and it dawned on me that prayer and service had not been enough to keep him in heaven. God had played a cruel trick on him when He made him return as a parent. What the monastery couldn't do we, his seven children, would. We'd grind his ego, temper, and impatience to powder and send him back to God without a blemish. In a flash the vision was gone. I'd seen him. I'd known my father before, as a monk. And when I found him again in this life, he was still a monk. Perhaps parenting – not the priesthood – is the path to God, I thought.

So many stories. So many memories.

During the vigil prior to my father's burial, I walked up to his open coffin and slipped in an envelope filled with rose petals I'd been given years earlier after completing an advanced yoga training. I had left Catholicism long ago (if anyone ever truly leaves Catholicism) and was determined, through therapy and spirituality, to heal myself. I worked with a Jungian therapist to understand the meaning of my dreams. I studied Buddhism and Hinduism. I even traveled to North Africa to learn the mystical

teachings of Islam. I left no rock unturned in my search for happiness. I discovered that when I calmed my mind, my thoughts became less self-critical. It wasn't perfect, but it was better.

That evening I drove out to where the mink farm had been. The sheds were gone and the massive yard that housed our ten thousand animals had been replaced with a Super K-mart and a Piggly Wiggly. But the house my father and his brothers built sixty years before was still standing. After a difficult divorce and needing a place to stay at a good price, my cousin was renting it. My parents did what they'd always done and practically gave it to her. She was, after all, family.

I glided to a stop on the gravel drive leading to my parents' home and climbed out of my car. My cousin Joan was already waiting for me on the back porch. "Hey, Cousin, mind if I sit back here for awhile and think? I could always see further when I sat back here," I said as she reached out to give me a knowing embrace.

"Sure thing. You want a beer to keep you company?" she asked. "Hey, your dad was a good man. He just didn't have much to say. He came from a generation of silent men. Men who didn't burden others with their feelings. He showed his heart in other ways."

"Right. I know that."

Joan looked at me for a moment longer and then turned to go inside. When she returned she handed me a bottle of Kingsbury and gave me another long hug as I struggled to fight back a rising wedge of emotion.

My father was a hard guy to figure and, although I'd worked hard to forget him, he remained a primary suspect in the emotional arch of my life. I'd become a sweet, silent middle-aged man – successful, spiritual and divorced twice with two teenage daughters. I'd worked hard to know about life, to

understand how it worked and yet I was still subject to sweeping self-doubt and sadness.

As I sat looking east from the back porch, I again tried to remember my life. I heard nothing but the crickets and the occasional car passing by. I thought about my father who'd be buried the next day and I longed for the kind of sustained joy that I'd read about in Buddhism or the here-today zest that I saw in my Uncle Pete and his children. But I realized I was not one who could sustain long joyous flights. I was a careful, thoughtful plodder, just like my old man. I was a Ries.

And a final memory came to me.

It was the dead of winter. The temperatures were far below zero and a deep blanket of snow covered the ground. I had come home from college to help with pelting. My dad and I continued to bump heads and argued from time to time. But generally we maintained our truce. I was surprised when he invited me to go on a walk with him. It was the height of pelting season, and he wanted to go for a walk – with me – go figure. Maybe the old man's going to give me some sage advice. Finally the pearls of wisdom he's been storing up will be shared with me, I thought.

It was a just before dusk as we drove the pick-up a few miles south of Sheboygan and parked it alongside a county trunk road that crossed over the Black River. Wearing thick winter gloves, boots, jackets, and wool hats we got out and jumped down a slight embankment that led to the snow-covered surface of the river and began to walk side by side. First one hour going up the river and then an hour going down the river. The trees groaned as the wind gently moved them and our boots crunched the fresh dry snow. We walked through rolling hills, silent tree groves, and open fields. Beneath a slate gray sky, we saw no one, not a bird or an animal. We just walked, keeping our thoughts locked inside. When we arrived back at the truck we lifted our silence

up into the cab and drove home. There would be no pearls of wisdom today.

“How was your walk?” My mother asked us we entered the back hall, stomping the snow off our boots and removing our coats.

“Well, it was fine,” my father replied. “We had a good walk and nice talk, didn’t we, Chuck?”

“Everything’s cool, mom. Dad and I did some big-time male bonding,” I told her. She smiled with relief. She was pleased to know her husband had taken time to be with her son.

Our walk was one of his gifts to me. He’d reached deep within himself and told me he loved me. It was a grand gesture from a silent man, and it was good enough. There are the parents we are given, and the parents we find. We are shaped by all of them. After years of prayer, God had given me my miracle. A parade of angels disguised in baseball caps, floral skirts, and bib overalls had conspired to convince me that I was enough.

There are days I wish I could leave the small boy within me behind. To finally stop feeling the yearning and disquiet he felt. But none of us ever truly outgrow our childhood. We have the option to understand it and embrace it. We can learn to view this life as half-full and say, “God only gives us what we need, so bless what we’ve been given.” But even with years of therapy, hours of meditation and the love of friends, each of us is, in the end, a bit of that child who believed in angels, saw ghosts in the shadows, and worked just as hard as he could to find love.

Requiem for a Sailor

David Davis

I never lived
for my father.
He died
before I made ten.
I do remember
the vodka bottle
he pulled on
to still the nightmares
of war in the Pacific.
I do recall
his trembling hand
as he lit
another Camel
while sitting
on the side of the bed.
The frogs and crickets
outside
chanted a midnight requiem
for his coming death.

To Old Moon

Rebecca Hatcher Travis

looking tired
in her less than perfect shape
edging tattered
a few days past full
moon now shares the sky with sun
still up there
in the piercing light of day

I understand her reluctance to set
for on the other side of the zenith
days are less rushed, more precious
I want to savor them beyond this moment
make them last a little longer
prolong their sweet flavors
in the golden afterglow

Raspberries and Tea

Brianna Cedes

At the counter of the high-end deli, we bought food for our first afternoon together. Henry appeared to be totally at ease. I was excited and nervous. We choose cheese, a baguette that we would later tear apart, chocolates, red wine, and raspberries in a honey syrup. Looking at the raspberries, their dark red flesh curled into tiny succulent cups, I asked, “Do you like to put your tongue into the little hole?” Up shot his bushy eyebrows! “Of course!” He grinned and his light blue eyes gleamed wickedly at me.

So many of my memories of him involve food! He had no interest in health foods, nutritional content, or calories. Food was to be enjoyed, savored, relished and shared. His approach to food was about sensuality and connection.

Henry filled my largest soup pot with piles of washed spinach leaves, and handfuls of raisins and pine nuts. After the spinach steamed down to soft, dark green leaves, he tossed in olive oil and sharp pepper. We ate it with grated cheese on slippery pasta.

We ate lobster together, and mussels, licking the winery, garlicky broth from our fingers.

He grilled huge, juicy hamburgers for my children and me, and served them on toasted English muffins, with ketchup, mayo and “little pickle circles.” In the summer we sometimes ate outside, at his uncle’s home, in a beautiful garden of

vegetables and wildflowers. Beyond the garden were grasses and scrubby trees; past the fence the land sloped down toward the bay. Rabbits visited the garden, and Henry gave my children saltshakers and instructions to wait quietly for the bunnies. “If you can sprinkle some salt on the bunny’s tail, then you can catch it,” he solemnly told them.

He made sun tea, setting out water and bags of tea in big cylindrical glass jars stoppered with thick, wide corks. One summer afternoon, he photographed my little dark-haired daughter smiling beside a jar of amber-colored tea.

Henry baked chocolate cake and created ice cream concoctions for birthdays. In warm weather, he made thick chocolate malts; in the winter, pots of hot chocolate with marshmallows and cinnamon, his glasses fogging from the steam.

During the day as we worked together, we drank endless cups of Earl Gray tea, the strong flavor softened with sugar and milk. When I smell the bergamot-aroma of that tea, I always think of him near the stove, carefully brewing the tea. The dark brown-red berries on the wallpaper that covered the walls and the ceiling in the kitchen were the exact color of the tea.

Our business went belly up. What followed was a year of fears that neither of us dared to share, misunderstandings, and too many conflicting demands. I found a job in another city, and the children and I moved away. After some years, when our anger and disappointment had cooled, we cautiously began writing. Every Monday morning, I would find an email message from him, often with a recipe or a description of a meal. He married. For awhile, he and his wife Marta lived on a houseboat, and he wrote about making sun tea and grilling fish on the deck of the boat. He sent chocolates to my children, and sent me kitchen gifts – aged balsamic vinegar, fragrant olive oil, a baker’s knife. I sent him music and T-shirts with opera logos. In

his last message, Henry wrote that a growth had been found in his intestines, and asked me not to try to contact him.

About a year after Henry's death, I visited his daughter Beth and her family. The baby, eleven months old, had Henry's blue eyes and soft blonde hair. Seven-year-old Janey sat on my lap and read me a storybook. She showed me the necklace that she had made herself and worn to her grandfather's funeral. It was cold, and in the late afternoon Beth brewed Earl Grey tea. She served it properly, from a pretty china teapot, with milk and sugar. The chatter and laughter of the four children pulled me back into the present, away from my memories. Then Beth softly asked her daughters, "Do you remember? Grandpa always loved to drink this tea."

Rootin' - Tootin'

Carole Creekmore

When I grow up,
I want to be Annie Oakley —
So when I'm shot at,
I never get hit.
 You missed!

Then I want to be
There-She-Is-Miss-A-mer-i-ca,
With long, blond hair,
Strapless gown, roses, a crown.
 Oh my!

When I'm tired of that,
I'll be a bride,
With white lace, veil, luggage,
And, oh yeah, a husband.
Maybe Ken.

Then I can be Mrs. Wife,
Homemaker and Mother —
— All at once —
Polish floors in high-heeled shoes.
How bright!

So many wonderful choices,
For little girls my age.
When I try some on for size,
Annie Oakley wins every time.

Bang! You missed again.

Welcome Wagon

Carlos Colon

Have you ever sold your house
And left your neighbors gladly,
Then moved next door to Norman Bates
And two down from Boo Radley?

I Shall Not Wear Purple

Betty Wilson Beamguard

I shall not wear purple, at least not with a red hat, froufrou, bling, and a feather boa. Not that I mind other women doing so. Hey, it breaks the monotony. But as I understand the poem on which the Red Hat Society is based, it's all about daring to be different. Yet how different can a member be when each is required to dress in purple and wear a red hat?

Goodness knows, the Red Hatters make every effort to create variety and express individuality within those limitations. Members can choose skirts of any length, long or short sleeves, buttoned or zippered closures, pearls or sequins, suits or dresses. The hats can flop with a brim wide enough to shade the wearer's entire body or crown the head Jackie Onassis style. Still, even with those many variations, the outfits are about the same shade of purple and the hats are all red and way overdone. The result – they all look pretty much alike.

As for tea parties, which is what these ladies dress up for, forget it. I'm the picnic-in-the-meadow type, since I didn't grow up in a tea-party environment. My mother didn't have time for parties of any kind. She worked and had probably never even heard of hot tea. Sweet ice tea was the beverage of choice wherever we went – that or lemonade. This was the fifties, before travel and advertising made hot tea popular in the South.

I don't even remember playing tea party as a child, except when my cousin Rosemary visited. Her mother was a war bride

from an upper-class Australian family, so Rosemary loved to play society matron. I usually served the tea and wasn't invited to join the lady for refreshments.

When my best friend Elizabeth Ann and I played, we slouched around our make-believe trailer puffing cigarettes and flipped through the pages of movie magazines as we flashed hot-pink fingernails that were an inch long in our imaginations.

The neighborhood gang usually played family. The kids would throw tantrums and those in the parental role would beat them cross-eyed. We'd never heard the terms dysfunctional family or child abuse. One summer my mother observed our aggressive disciplinary measures and asked why we always played mean mothers. She said, "The neighbors will think that's the way I treat you. Why don't you read to the children and play games with them?"

Now I ask you, what could be more boring? A tea party perhaps. We wanted action and drama.

I've never been much of a hat person either. The only time I wore hats and gloves was on Easter Sunday, and then only at my mother's insistence. The spring I started driving, Mother had to work the Saturday before Easter, so she sent my sister and me to downtown Nashville to choose our own hats. We hit all the main department stores, but I never found one that suited me. I tried – really tried – but my heart wasn't in it.

When my mother discovered I'd come home without a hat, her reaction was about the same as if I'd been caught shoplifting – anger and extreme disappointment. She'd trusted me to buy a hat and I'd let her down.

I've changed a lot since then, but I'm still not the hat-wearing, tea-party type. I dress for comfort in jeans and Reeboks. Therefore, I do not wish to cake on makeup and pile decorations onto my aging form to spend a few hours looking at other made-up wrinkled faces grinning under feathered red hats.

Neither do I wish to join the much looser – in a number of ways – Sweet Potato Queens. For one thing, I don't have the bustline, and I can't picture myself wearing a red wig of Dolly Parton proportions. Besides, the Queens are so wild, we don't even have a chapter in our conservative little town.

But far be it from me to discourage those who are having fun as Queens or Red Hatters. It's wonderful they can get together and play dress-up. I say, take it and run with it, gals. But please, leave me out.

A Distant Garden

Peter D. Goodwin

As bombs rain down on a distant land —
I remember a garden
lush with large blossoms,
white and pink and beautiful
very popular with the bees —
a growing boy quietly approaches
the beauty and the busyness
and with a baseball bat
whacks the blooms and bees —
our conquering hero.

Silver Strike

June Rose Dowis

Like a striking snake
That first gray hair
Is a mighty blow
No victim spared
Panic, then planning
As you mull your fate
Mortality knocking
Will have to wait
With a flash of steel
and a chop to the head
In a moment's notice
The culprit is dead
Smugness accompanies
Your aggressive stand
Till sunlight connects
With another strand
Hard fact muscles in
Fears can't be hushed
You know there are more
Coiled in the brush

Past Passed

Errid Farland

Chantu Kao wore her hair long, had bangs, favored long Indian print dresses, wore sandals, burned patchouli incense, had beanbag chairs, ate cross-legged at low tables, smoked pot. And she was fifty-nine years old. She'd hung with this gig for forty-five years now, maybe forty-seven. Probably forty-seven, though she wasn't real clear on dates.

One date she was crystal clear on, though, was March 16, her birthday. She'd be sixty years old. She looked in the mirror at the deep lines that came from her skin's alluvial flow – a bunch of gentle arcs under her eyes where her lower lid bulged and folded, under her cheeks where the great flood basin of her smooth cheeks ended in two smile-looking wrinkles above and either side of her lips. And her lips! All those years of puckering around roaches carved deep canyons into her upper lip.

How could she be sixty? How could this have happened? And what had her life been, if not a stop-action of a magic time she wanted to live in forever?

"I don't like patchouli," she told her image in the mirror. "There, I've said it. I don't like it. What will you do about that?"

Her image waited dumbly. It blinked. It lost patience.

"I'm not saying I never liked it. That's not what I'm saying," she said to herself. "I used to like it, until, oh, about ten or twenty years ago."

She waited for her image to extend her the courtesy of a reply, then she frowned at it. “It’s just that, after all those years, it defined me, you know? How could I just stop?”

She gave up on the mirror, started for the bedroom, then stopped and turned back to it. “I know you’re just my image,” she said. “It makes me feel less of a fool to say it to a face, even if it’s my own.”

Still, she couldn’t help being pricked that the mirror didn’t at least try to participate.

“It’s that I’m a fraud. There, I’ve said it. Freaking fondue pots! My daughter and son-in-law sent freaking fondue pots for my gift!”

Finally she walked away, through the bedroom with its ambience of candles placed on trays and bamboo stalks planted in groupings – three for wealth, five for health, or whatever the hell they were for – into the living room. Truth was, she was still poor, scrambling to make ends meet, hoarding her weed so it would last to the next paycheck, and she was going to die. Soon, too. Oh, maybe it’d be another ten years, maybe even twenty, but, hell, that’d be gone in the snap of a finger, the blink of an eye.

She sat on her couch and with her turquoise and silver-covered fingers, picked up the joint from the ashtray, put a lighter to it until glowed red, and hit on it with a few hard, quick puffs until it yielded a smooth flow of smoke. She looked at the fondue pots on her low table and said, with that held-breath-alien-freak voice, “I’m too freaking old to sit on my ass to eat fondue anymore.”

Then she threw up her hands in exasperation. “But what else can I do? This is all I’ve ever been.”

The phone rang. It was Tom, her ex-husband, who’d been more a friend than a husband. Their marriage lasted twenty-some-odd years, Chantú didn’t know how many, but it had never

been a marriage, per se. They believed in open love and all that bullshit, but found, after the first three years, that open love wasn't conducive to such close quarters. So they separated, but just didn't bother to get divorced for a couple of decades.

"Happy birthday," he said.

"It's tomorrow."

"I know, I'm going to be on a plane. I'm going to Seattle to celebrate for you."

"That's thoughtful of you," she said with a smile. Tom always made her smile.

"Did you hear from Kallie?"

"She sent fondue pots."

"Do you still have that cheese recipe? Remember that kick-ass cheese fondue you used to make?"

"Tom," she said, "did you ever wonder what might have been had I, you know, worn make-up or something?"

"Are you having an old-life crisis?"

"Did you?"

Too long a silence passed before he said, "Naaa. That just wasn't you."

"I think I need to find myself."

Again Tom let too much silence fall into the gap.

"Do you remember my real name? Before I was Chantu?"

"I've been feeling it, too, Cathy," he said. "Like we outsidersed ourselves into a rut."

She smiled again that he'd let Cathy roll off his tongue so easily. "Birmingham," she said. "What would have happened if I'd lost Chantu Kao and become Cathy Birmingham about thirty or forty years ago?"

"Hell if I know," he said.

"I don't like patchouli," she said. "Don't bring me any more patchouli incense."

"It's probably bad for your lungs."

“Probably,” she said, which reminded her of the joint in her hand. She relit it and hit on it and said, “Have fun in Seattle.”

“I will. Happy birthday.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey,” he said, then he paused.

“Yeah?” she prompted.

“I loved you best, even if I couldn’t stand you.”

She smiled again. “I know,” she said.

After she hung up, she crunched the glowing end of the incense stick into the ashtray. She carried it to the trash, and brushed off her hands, as if to offer her final pronouncement on the matter.

“Too little, too late.”

Audio Tour of Edinburgh Castle *Frances Hern*

A voice through my earphones
tells of the tiny chapel
perched on castle rock,
built for Margaret, queen then saint,
by her son.
My mother catches my eye,
mouths words,
holds out her audio wand.
“How do you turn the sound up?”
Now Randolph’s men scale precipitous rock
to re-capture the castle

for Robert the Bruce and
mother is shaking my arm.
“My fingernails aren’t long enough.”

The Bruce invades England,
forces Scotland’s independence
“that’s invalid,”
on King Edward already
marching his army north.
“What number is it?”

Mary Queen of Scots births a son
but flees leaving the infant
King James of Scotland behind.
“This isn’t working,” she cries,
as the medieval cannon
booms time’s passage to
the Port of Leith.

Bundled against squalls my mother looks
smaller than she used to.
Her soft hand holds no resilience
as I take her wand.
Eighty-five and she lives alone,
drives to the shops,
leads six-mile hikes for her rambling club,
puts on skits for the old folk.

I gaze over castle walls,
see its history stretching further than I will know,
unlike my mother’s

Oasis

Lee Ardell

I didn't go back for years
the drive was too long
the roads too rough
the land so empty
but fate or circumstance or luck finally
pushed me to the ranch where I grew up.

I climbed the barbed wire fence,
an intruder in my own life
and walked up a dry creek looking for memories.

Bare trees lined the creek banks
dead leaves swirled across the gravel
and every step took me back

until I found a shallow pool of water
surprising in a drought
unexpected, unremembered
and completely beautiful.

I heard a voice calling, reminding me
of walks to the forgotten spring
of laughter, hope, love

and I reached up, a child again, to grasp my father's hand.

String of Pearls

Nancy Purcell

Outside Austin, Russell Featherstone drove his Cadillac onto the shoulder of Highway 290, threw the gear into park, and turned to the woman beside him. “What do you say we get married?”

Ellie Pickett’s head jerked toward him so fast she heard her vertebrae crack. At first, when he’d pulled off the highway so abruptly, she thought something was wrong with the engine, but now she believed it was her hearing. “Married? Land sakes, Russell, we just met two weeks ago! Married?” She blinked a few times then fixed her eyes on him. “You’re not one of those crazies, are you?” She shook her head. “You know what I’m sayin’? One of those men that meets a gal, favors the swing of her skirt, and decides to marry her?” Her brow wrinkled and she lowered her chin. “Tell me you’re not some sex maniac. There’ve been plenty of warnin’s on television about men like that.”

Ellie’s husband, Leland Pickett of Seneca, South Carolina, had passed on to Glory some three years ago. Whenever someone inquired about his death, she’d snap her fingers and answer, “Died in his sleep, just like that.” They had one daughter, Lisa, who’d moved to Texas – Austin – with her husband twenty years before.

Ellie and Leland had never visited Lisa during those years; there was always an excuse: too far, too costly, too whatever. In

reality, Leland just preferred staying home. So when Lisa invited her mother to Austin for a month, she grabbed the opportunity. Since her husband's death Ellie had an itch to do something with her life. She'd grown tired of hearing folks gush about their cruises to everywhere. Tired of watching people on TV jump up and down because they'd won a trip to some island she didn't know existed. And it was because of that itch that she now found herself parked on a Texas roadside with a man named Russell.

"Good Lord, Ellie. All I said was 'Why don't we get married?'" Russell let loose of the steering wheel and slumped in the seat. He gently placed his hand on her forearm as if to reassure her she was safe. "I like you, Ellie," he said in a voice as sweet as a songbird's. "Hell, I'm crazy over you! Sure we just met, but I've closed deals for millions with less time invested." He blew out a lung full of air, turned up the air-conditioning fan, and waited for her reaction.

"That may be so," she shot back, wagging a finger at him, "but I'm not some oil field you're biddin' on. Not this gal!" She turned down the visor, leaned forward, and studied herself in the lighted mirror. Ellie knew that, despite her age, she was still attractive; the mirror renewed her opinion. She ran her tongue across her teeth and rubbed her lips together, smoothing out pink lipstick. A quick wipe of a finger beneath each eye cleared away smudged eyeliner. As she primped her full white hair and batted the lashes of her blue eyes she could hear her daddy teasing about boys chasing after her. "You'll soon have as many beaus as pearls on a string," he'd say, then slap his knee and let loose a belly laugh. Ellie pushed the visor back up, wiggled her fanny into the leather seat and opened her handbag. "Hmm . . . thought I'd put a handkerchief in here before we left Lisa's." While she was rummaging, Russell stared at her. Out of the corner of her

eye Ellie caught him watching her and wondered if he still thought of her as a “pint-sized bit of dynamite.”

It was Lisa who’d introduced them to each other. That is, Lisa and her best friend Barbara, who also happened to be Russell’s daughter. The two fifty-year-old empty nesters dedicated way too much time to makeover television shows and romance novels. Having lost control of their children’s lives, and finding themselves unable to exercise little, if any, control over their husbands, they cooked up a plan to enrich the lives of their elderly, single parents: Russell, age eighty-six, and Ellie, eighty-four.

“Well?” Russell queried. Ellie was engaged in zipping and unzipping the eight compartments of her handbag, searching for a hanky. “Ellie! Have you gone deaf?”

“Shush, Russell. Can’t you see I’m thinkin’?” She zipped a small side pocket closed and screwed up her face. “Has it occurred to you that I don’t even know your middle name?” She folded her hands atop the purse and turned her attention to the flowers growing along the roadside. Lovely bluebonnets, she thought. They’d sure look pretty on the kitchen table. I always wanted to do that – keep a white pitcher full of daisies on the table. It’d be like waking up to sunshine. Leland had been allergic to pollen, so fresh flowers in the house were always out of the question. “That’s why the darn things grow outside,” he’d told her. The man even went so far as to chop down the stately pines in the front yard. Their crime: dropping yellow-green pollen come spring. Ellie wondered if Russell had allergies.

“Elvin,” he said. “My middle name is Elvin. Now will you marry me?”

Ellie turned in her seat, reached forward, and lowered the fan speed. “What kind of name is Elvin? Sounds like a family name. Don’t reckon I’ve ever heard it before and, believe me, in South Carolina we’ve got a slew of weird names. Did I ever tell

you my husband Leland's younger brother's name was Bowser? Family just called him Bow-wow. Now ain't that an awful thing? Saddling a child with a name like Bowser? I told Lisa if she ever —"

"Ellie, for God's sake, what are you talkin' about? Who the hell cares if some kid grew up with the name Bow-wow?"

"Bowser."

"Bowser, schmowser. Who cares? Certainly not me, and certainly not today!" Russell reached over and picked up a can of lemonade from the console, took a sip, and set it down. "Mighty tasty for being canned," he mumbled. He smacked his lips and ran a finger along his mustache then pushed the fan dial up one speed. "I'm talking marriage here and you're talking gibberish." Just then an eighteen-wheeler passed by with such speed that the Cadillac rocked.

"Mercy," Ellie shouted, her hand flying to her chest. "We'll be killed parked out here in the middle of nowhere, Russell. I don't think this is a good idea." She glanced at the key in the ignition as if to will it to turn. Nothing happened. Noticing the Cadillac emblem she recalled how Leland had favored Chevrolets. He always was tight with the dollar. He'd never have bought anything as fine or pricey as this Cadillac. She slid her hand along the soft leather; smooth as a newborn. Wouldn't take much for a gal to get used to this kind of luxury.

Ellie picked up the conversation. "So I'm talking gibberish, am I? Is this a preview of how I can expect to be treated? Brought up short every time I share a memory?" She peered at him and pursed her lips, then returned her focus to the highway. "There's enough traffic out there to make a body think it's a holiday. I suppose if I were to ask why you have those longhorns stuck up there on your hood, well, that'd be gibberish, too." Without waiting for him to catch up or answer, she leaned forward and opened the glove compartment. "Any chance I'll

find a pack of tissues in here? I think I'm gonna need them." She began removing papers, folders and gadgets, and piling them on her lap. Leland's old Chevy had a glove compartment about the size of a sandwich, she told herself. Russell's packed enough junk in it to fill a file cabinet.

While she was busy with her latest project, Russell heaved a sigh and offered a thought. "You know, the last time I pulled over on the side of a highway was back in 1988 – or was it '89? Blew out a tire – right front, I think – could have been right rear, now that I call it to mind. Damn near scared me to death." Just then two trucks flew past, honking their horns in unison. "Well, talk about being scared to death. You all right, Ellie?" No answer. "Hmm. Where was I?" He gripped the steering wheel as if he could squeeze an answer from it.

Meanwhile, Ellie had emptied the glove compartment without finding any tissues. She began folding old oil change receipts, inspection check-up sheets, and flattening folded pages in the ownership manual. After studying the registration certificate, she started putting the papers back in the compartment.

"Oh, yes. The flat tire," he said, picking up his train of thought. "Well, anyway, I changed the thing myself and it made me realize that, sixty-nine years old or not, age was just a state of mind." He smiled at her, as if expecting a reply.

She blinked a few times then fixed her eyes on him. "What are you talkin' about? How'd you get from 'Let's get married' to a flat tire in 1988?"

"Could've been '89."

"I asked the simple question, 'What's your middle name?'" Ellie said, "and you go on about a flat tire – coulda been 1988, coulda been 1989, coulda been right front, coulda been right rear. Lord, Russell, and you just said I talk gibberish. Ain't that just like a man? By the way, do you have allergies?" He shook

his head no and she continued returning things to the glove compartment. A gold charm on a chain with a key attached caught her eye. It was one of those key rings sold in gas stations and gift shops, the kind with every name from A-to-Z hanging on a spinner. Ellie turned it over. ADA was painted in bright red letters. "Thought you said your wife's name was Frances? Who's Ada?" She dangled the key chain in front of his face.

"Ada? Where the heck did that thing come from?" He reached for it but Ellie pulled it back. "I just want to see it. Maybe it'll refresh my memory."

"Russell Featherstone, you'd better come clean. I've got no intention of marrying a man who's a two-timer. My sister Callie married one of those and lived to regret it. Had four children by that man, kept a clean house, and cooked every night. No matter. He still couldn't keep his pants zipped."

Upon hearing the word "zipped," Russell asked, "Honey pie, did you unzip that outside pocket when you were looking for your hanky?" He motioned with a finger to a zipper on the front of her handbag.

Ellie's eyes flicked to his face, then down at her bag. "Don't believe I did." She pulled the silver tab and withdrew a pale blue handkerchief. "You're so smart, Russell," she said, leaning toward him and pecking his cheek.

A broad grin covered the old gentleman's face, as if he were finally on firm ground and could return their discussion to the core issue: marriage.

"That's what surprises me," Ellie went on. "Smart man like you takes a lady out for a drive in his big-fancy-Texas-oilman car with all intentions of proposing and leaves evidence of another woman in plain sight." She slowly reached for the fan dial and turned it down.

"Wasn't in plain sight. You found it when you were poking around in the glove compartment. Remember?"

Ellie fingered the key chain, turning it over and over. "What kind of car did she have? Or maybe I should say does she have?" Now she was swinging the key back and forth. Outside tumbleweed dancing across the terrain caught her eye. I love dancing. Wonder if Russell likes to dance?

"Ellie Pickett, you are one frustrating woman. How the hell do I know who Ada was? Could have been a friend of one of the grandchildren. Could have been one of those nurses I carted back and forth to care for Frances. Heaven help me if you ever find a phone number scratched on a piece of paper and I can't remember whose it is! Guess once you say you'll marry me, I'll have to examine every nook and cranny of my house or you'll change your mind."

So . . . I guess he's planning on moving me into the same house he lived in with Frances. Now that would be just too strange. What if the furniture's in poor taste? Lord, Leland hung on to that ratty old sofa of his mamma's like it was spun from gold.

The couple was so engrossed in conversation they never noticed the car that had pulled up behind them. A knock on Russell's window caused both of them to jump in their seats and their mouths to drop open.

"Sorry if I scared you, sir," yelled a fortyish man with hair tied in a ponytail and a tee shirt that read "Viva Zapata." "I just wondered if you might need help. You know, maybe needed a cellphone or something?"

"No, no," Russell said. "We're fine. Thank you for stopping." He had cracked the window and now abruptly closed it and turned the air-conditioning up a notch. He made the mistake of asking Ellie, "Where were we?"

"I was gonna say that that's how Callie caught Edgar."

"Stranded on the side of the road without a cellphone?"

“No, no, silly. A phone number on a slip of paper. See, she was cleanin’ out his pockets, gettin’ his pants ready for the dry cleaners, and she came upon a slip of paper with a phone number and a woman’s name written on it.” She looked down at the key ring. “Name could have been Ada for all I remember. Wouldn’t that be a coincidence?” She closed her fist around the key. Poor Callie, she told herself. She never did get over that. Threw him out and then had to work at that cotton mill ten hours a day. Ellie opened her fist. “If you really don’t know Ada, then I expect you wouldn’t mind if I opened the window and tossed this away, would you?” Her finger tapped on the window control button.

A look of relief crossed Russell’s face. “Be my guest. Throw it out. Bury it, if it’ll make you happy. Then let’s get back to discussing something important, like marriage.”

Ellie studied him: he was still a good-looking man, one of those men instantly recognized as a quality person. His gray hair was combed back, sort of longish, and his full mustache was neatly trimmed. She’d been taken with him since that first Sunday after she’d arrived from South Carolina.

It was right before church when Barbara had voiced her surprise plan: brunch with her father at his country club. When they entered the clubhouse foyer, there he sat – quite dashing in a green sport coat and khaki pants, his boots highly polished. For some reason Ellie’s stomach had fluttered, but at the time she attributed it to gas. Now she noticed the twinkle in his chestnut brown eyes. So why this nagging fear of giving him the answer he wants?

It wasn’t because her daughter would be upset, or because she – Ellie – didn’t want to let go of her old life. Truth was she wanted nothing more than to leave that other life. It’s why she’d flown a thousand miles to Texas. Hoping to find something she’d missed. She had loved Leland but she was only eighteen

when they married. What did she know about life, about anything? She'd never traveled anywhere, other than a visit to the State House in Columbia. Besides, Leland was a homebody, a worker; travel held no excitement for him. So Ellie packed away her dreams like too-small clothes, saving them for another day. After Lisa's invitation, Ellie aired out those little dreams and carried them to Texas. Now she wondered if her hesitation was nothing more than the fear of beginning a new life chapter.

Her fingers worried across the letters A-D-A and she decided to throw her caution and the keychain to the Texas winds. Ellie pushed the window button and flung the key chain as hard as she could. As the window slid noiselessly to a close, she said, "And don't you be drivin' out here to mile marker 142 searchin' for that thing!"

Russell took her hand in his, brushed her fingertips with his mustache, then kissed them. "Does that mean your answer is yes?" He waited.

"Let's just say I'll give you my answer after you've told me what those longhorns are about and answered my other question."

"Which one?"

"You know. I asked if you were a sex maniac."

"Well, the first one's easy; I put them there because I could. When I was a youngster every rich Texas oilman had longhorns on his car hood. I decided if I ever hit it big that's what I'd do. And I have, so I did. Whenever I look at them they tell me, 'Ease up, Russell. Grab life by the horns and live a little.' Which is why I'm working so hard at roping you in." And he pinched her cheek.

"I'm still waitin' for the answer to my other question."

"Now that one's going to be more difficult. You'll have to marry me and find out for yourself!"

Ellie giggled, reached over, and ran her fingers through his hair. “You’re a handsome devil, know it?” She kissed him and then wiggled herself down into the seat.

Russell hit the directional signal and pulled onto the highway. Twenty minutes later he looked over at her and chuckled. “What number did you say that mile marker was?”

Sweetness painted Ellie’s face and she answered in a singsongy voice, “Maybe it was 124, or it coulda been 241. Nope, I think it was 142. But I’m not certain. Anyway, I imagine my memory will get a lot better once I’m Ellie Featherstone.” She leaned forward and began fiddling with the radio, searching for an oldies station. She also lowered the air-conditioning fan. “That’s the thing about getting older. Unimportant things slip your mind so easily.” Suddenly she ramped up the volume and shouted, “Russell, listen! It’s Glen Miller’s band playin’ ‘String of Pearls.’ Did I ever tell you I love to dance? You do like dancin’, don’t you?”

After the Beach at Sixteen

Sharon Lask Munson

We saunter down Jefferson Avenue —
unfamiliar territory to west-side girls,
past streets lined with apartments,
sidewalks stamped Detroit Public Works,
small family-owned shops closed on Sunday,
their windows replete with upholstery samples,

ready-made silk draperies, bulky rolls of oilcloth,
and advertisements for dry cleaning Pendleton wool.

Our arms linked, red and blistered,
bodies sticky with Coppertone,
sand gritty between our toes,
lips and nails ruddy with Revlon's Fire and Ice.
We walk tall, aware, stomachs flat,
shoulders high, in step,
listening to the flip-flop beat
of our summer sandals.

We stop at Lucille's Eastside Barbecue,
gnaw blackened ribs, spicy, dripping red —
as non-kosher as the lean and tawny
blue-eyed, blond-haired boys we ogle.

We lick our fingers,
push back our chairs,
adjust our filmy skirts to the tight
still damp suits beneath,
sashay out the door
and take the Dexter Bus
west, past downtown
the rest of the way home.

good at any age

Carl Palmer

so what do you say
wanna give it a try
I know we're both out of practice

remember the last time you did it
me either
we'll start out slow and easy
be patient and understanding
no use rushing right into it
there is nothing to prove
no need to keep score
I'm sure it won't be anything
to write home about
or tell a close friend
to keep secret

it's really nobody's business
how well we
bowl

The Front Seat

Lynn Pinkerton

In one of my favorite “Peanuts” cartoon strips, Charlie Brown reminisces about falling asleep in the backseat of his parents’ car on the way home from a night outing. He relishes how sweet it is to be a little kid sleeping in the backseat, while the big people sit up front and do the worrying and when you get home, your dad picks you up and carries you into the house, and you don’t have to worry because they take care of everything.

~§~

It’s a lot of work to get old. And to die. And it’s really a lot of work to do it responsibly. Suddenly it’s your turn to sit in the front seat and take care of things for those tucked in behind you. It becomes serious business to spin a meaningful life for yourself and at the same time, sensibly plan an exit strategy that is the least intrusive to those waving good-bye. The whole thing is like a trip to a giant Geezers Super Center. The aisles are long and daunting and none of the choices are particularly appealing.

One aisle unfurls into an endless array of paperwork. Attorneys smiling suitable smiles beckon you with big wills written in small print, directives to the doctor about when to disconnect you from tomorrow, plans for who takes over if dementia sets up shop in your memories, power of attorney for those life-altering hospital hallway conversations and HIPAA forms deciding who gets to know about it. Thinking of it all is

overwhelming. You want to leave your basket in the middle of this bizarre shopping trip and flee into the joyous, yellow sun and let nature take its course.

Another aisle, sparse and unassuming, touts the virtues of clearing out the clutter in your life, so that nosey relatives are spared the chore. It's a good exercise, regardless of how many years you plan to hang around, but thinking about what the next generation might do with my "I Walked on Fire with Tony Robbins" T-shirt, puts a different spin on it. For over thirty years, my dead grandmother's china has sat in the garage packed up and dusty. It's up for grabs. Who wants the Santa collection? Photos of forgotten college friends? The blue velvet dress my grandmother made me when I was seven? It's exhausting to figure out what's clutter for those posthumous packers or if in fact, I might wear that T-shirt on Saturday.

Next is an aisle filled with high-energy wizards of Wall Street preaching the virtues of financial peace. They can't tell you exactly how much money you will need for your time left, but can tell you it's probably not enough. They are filled with information on how to be debt-free and dozens of ways to swell your savings. They make you insecure about Social Security, but can shore you up with IRAs and investments. And if it turns out you're going to be watching *Wheel of Fortune* in a friendly facility of some sort, there is long term care insurance. Although the cost is enough to make you consider a shortcut to your appointment with St. Peter.

The Geezer Super Center also offers responsible pre-planning for your last big hoorah. Soft spoken funeral planners become sympathetic tour guides through your final send-off shopping excursion. Traditional burial or cremation? Embalming and beauticians and organists and cosmetology and picking out just the right outfit. And then there is the casket. Themed design options include musical, occupational, military

or humorous (“Return to Sender” motif from the folks touting they “Put the Fun in Funeral”.) Bikers can select removable keepsake hardware emblazoned with “Live to Ride” made from genuine motorcycle parts. For Al Gore groupies, there is an “eco-casket”. The do-it-yourselfers can purchase a casket kit and the long-term planners can select casket furniture. Furniture for a lifetime...and beyond. Or skip all this rigmarole and opt for trouble-free cremation.

Another turn in the Geezer Super Center reveals a calmer, more serene aisle showcasing ways to get your spiritual life in shape. The offerings include blessings and prayer beads and retreats and priests and pilgrimages and healers and sweat lodges and books and mentors and ministers. It seems the pursuit of a peaceful spirit is also a little mystifying. Conversations with yourself at 3:00 a.m. ache for reassurance that your time on earth has in fact made any sort of difference and that the essence of you will continue on.

Meanwhile, the dance with life picks up speed. Mortality marches on in relentless pursuit as 80 million baby boomers strive to live their “Best Life Now” with Oprah, get “real” with Dr. Phil, stay positive with Joel Osteen and check in with Chuck on investment strategies. We keep the juices flowing stronger and longer with veggies and fruits and tofu and treadmills and scans and check-ups and hot sex and Harleys. We breathe deep and meditate, shout hopeful prayers and align our *chakras*, color our hair, take vitamins and slather on magic creams – all while trying to finally find our real, true passion before it’s too late.

It’s exhausting work to always sit in the front seat and steer the course. It wears you out and you miss highlights of the World’s Best Road Trip. Best bet is to gas up the car, put it on cruise control and trust the journey.

Relics

Sharon Lask Munson

All my dime store turtles are buried
under the spreading yellow rosebush
in the back yard of the Burlingame Street house.
Someone coming years after may find their tiny bones
along with two blue-green marbles,
a plastic Sky King decoder ring,
the tattered leather collar of a well-loved puppy,
and the beginnings of a silver ball
made from cigarette and gum wrappers
found behind ash cans in the rank and narrow alleyway.

Digging further, they might come across a red rubber ball,
bits and pieces of one Captain Marvel comic book
borrowed from Melvin Markowitz and never returned,
along with a card from the deck of Go Fish.
What can't be found will be gentle voices
echoing down the pathways of time
David, David Appleman, dinner
Leansies, clapsies, twirl around to backsies
A my name is Alice, B my name is Babs
and the summer evening's organ grinder
the chatter and chain of his monkey
as they shuffle down the street.

Can You Play?

Sharon Ellison

You don't have to be very old to make choices that color the rest of your life. When I was five, I decided I needed piano lessons. Two of my cousins, only a few years older, were taking lessons and would entertain the family when we visited their house. There was just one small problem. We had no piano.

"Can I take piano lessons?"

Mother smiled.

"Can I?"

"We'll have to think about it."

Tap and ballet lessons had lasted only a few weeks. I could sing "I'm a Little Teapot" with motions; that's about it. Mother probably thought the same thing would happen with piano lessons. Plus, lessons and a piano were expensive.

My cousin taught me to play "Chop Sticks." We played duets at her house; so I kept asking at home, "Can I take piano lessons?"

One day, when I was seven, mother surprised me. "Yes. We'll try it."

I could hardly believe my ears. Startled, I responded, "What about a piano?"

"The music teacher said you can start lessons without a piano." That seemed odd, but lessons began.

About a month later, mother came home from work with a toy piano. A TOY! Oh, it was cute and it even had a little bench

that fit me pretty well; still, it was a toy. Mother borrowed it from a friend...actually her friend's daughter. I set my music book on the piano, pulled up the bench and played the first two songs I had learned. It worked! The toy worked! There were about 20 keys. Plenty for a beginner.

I sat in my room and played the little songs. Fortunately, I got a new song almost every week, so my parents didn't have to listen to the same ones over and over for very long.

There were some surprises. Nobody had mentioned music theory. I hated it, but I wanted to play the piano, so I tried to learn what I needed to know.

Six months later, a huge, old, upright piano was delivered to our house. Was I excited! No more practicing on the toy. I guess Mother and Daddy believed I really was serious. For them, it was quite an investment.

A year later, there was a change of teachers. Now there were two, and they insisted I practice one hour each day! Mother and Daddy set up a routine for me. I had to practice 30 minutes before school and 30 minutes after. Neighbor children would show up at my door and ask, "Can you play?" I would roll my eyes, responding, "No, I have to practice first." It was harder on weekends, but as I recall, I didn't have to practice on Sundays. Ah! A day of rest.

A couple of years later, one of the teachers looked at my hands and exclaimed, "You'll never be able to play the piano. Your fingers are too short!"

I was shocked and hurt. My mother was furious! She dialed the teacher's number and said, "Listen! I realize you know a lot about music, but we are paying you to teach our daughter to play the piano...not to tell her she can't do it!" That spring marked the final lesson with this husband and wife team.

For the next two years, I had lessons from a nice young woman who was a student at one of our local universities,

complete with recitals and entries in Music Guild contests. By then, I was playing the piano while my parents sang duets in church. They reasoned that since I practiced with them at home, I should play for them at church. So it was, and I also began playing in the children's departments.

For five and a half years, I took piano lessons and practiced every day. I'm certain my parents were sick and tired of hearing me practice scales. I was certainly tired of them. Sometimes I played for my sixth grade choir and was playing "as needed" at church. I had reached the point where I wanted to play fun things instead of what the teacher chose. Classical music was her preference. It was okay, but church music and popular songs, like some of my friends were playing, were my choice. So I asked...okay, I begged my parents...to stop lessons.

My playing, however, did not stop. Accompanying the seventh grade choir was challenging. At first I was quite timid and played softly. A comment by the choir director changed all that. After halting the choir mid-song, she said, "Sharon, if you're going to make a mistake, then make a loud one! The choir needs to hear the piano." I took that advice to heart and still play with a heavy hand.

Filling in for the church pianist almost became a part-time job...without pay, of course. I may not have been great, but I was willing. One summer, my best friend and I took organ lessons for three months because our church had bought a new organ and only one person knew how to play it. We both filled in as needed. It wasn't so difficult, especially since we had both taken piano lessons.

Although I have a B.B.A. degree in Management, I never stopped playing the piano. People assumed I would get my degree in music, but I wanted music to be fun. Getting the degree would have been serious work! I never aspired to be a concert pianist. I simply wanted to be able to sit down and play

music I love. I can and I do, as often as possible. The first year we were married, my husband told me he could tell exactly what kind of day I had at work by the way I played the piano when I got home. It's how I unwind.

For over 50 years, I have played the piano – mainly for church services – but also for soloists, quartets, duets, ensembles, anniversary parties, open houses, civic club meetings, weddings and funerals. For 22 of those years, my husband and I served our church – he as music director and I as church pianist and choir director.

Is there something you have always wanted to do? Set your heart on it. Get started. Don't wait any longer. If you have the desire, you can do it. What is the path to your passion?

Who Was That Masked Man?

Sarah Getty

For years, in front of those black-and-white TV's,
we believed we'd grow up to be cowboys.
Boys, girls, not one of us escaped the dream —
the drop to horseback from the balcony, the ride
through the dust to catch the black hat, the umpteenth
daring rescue of somebody helpless and blonde.

Oh, it was fun to be the good guy, it was easy.
All it took was a white hat, a pair of six-guns,
and a strong, good-natured horse. The bad guys

had their own guns, of course, but were handicapped by being stupid and so unbelievably bad we knew they had to lose, or what was the point of goodness?

Every day we sat on the floor and watched them, after we'd made our escape from school – Roy Rogers, Hopalong, the Lone Ranger galloped to the rescue while our fathers, wearing hats, were heading home for dinner, riding in trains and car pools. How we wished for silver stallions to ride instead of beat-up Schwinn!

Like cowboys tied to chairs with our guns out of reach on the table, we were stuck in the unrescuable state of childhood, bound by homework and chores. We believed we could master the thousand ways they taught us to escape – the candle flame, the broken glass, the signal flashed to the good Indian hiding outside the cabin.

No girl dreamed of being that goody-goody sidekick, Dale Evans. We would twirl lariats, wear chaps, and ride after bad guys every day. Sometimes we would even help Roy escape from the abandoned mine, bind up his wounds with one hand and gun down desperadoes with the other.

It was hard to believe our mothers could tell us to get up and set the table, or run to take in backyard laundry from the rain. To rescue our dignity, we obeyed, muttering that we would run away for good and live on a ranch if only we could get the train conductors to believe that we were older. Now we are older —

and not one of us is riding down bad guys through the dust. Where are our trusty horses? Our guns? Our bunk beds

on the ranch? A weekend in Vermont is our "escape,"
and our children, watching medics holler "clear!"
and gangsters escaping with semi-automatics, would laugh
at our dreams of rescue – those leaps to horseback,

those bloodless chases, those miniature six-guns.
They know it's not easy as black and white to tell
the bad from the good, and that when you're tied up
with the fuse burning, you can forget about riding
back to the Bar-B Ranch beside the blonde. Yet
somehow, we secretly believe that we're too good

to end up losing. Before the sun sets, one more
beyond-belief rescue! There are a thousand ways —
the fuse fizzles, the bad guy drops the gun,
the sidekick escapes, and listen! – over the hill,
the cavalry comes riding!

Corners and Edges

Carol Bryan Cook

I've teetered on the edge
turned every corner
walked without direction
fallen off the ledge

found love that didn't last
trusted the wrong friend

stumbled around in a blur
run from a sorry past

survived, a bit broken, bent
for sure rounded my last comer
taken my last trip to the edge
never return to the hell I was sent

Life's Buffet

Mary Carter

Forrest Gump said life is like a box of chocolates,
but I think it's more like the buffet line at Luby's.
You can see exactly what you're getting,
but you still don't always know exactly what it is –
can't tell by looking whether a sauce is sweet
or hot, if the corn has too much salt or not enough,
and certainly don't know if the meat loaf inclines
to indigestion. After a while you learn some things –
not to fill up on salads, to skip the brown gravy,
which bread is too dry, and that you should always
leave room for pie.

Ode to Lovell Paul Phillips at West Ward School

1953-54

Judy Callarman

Through pale green halls we marched for years.
In sepia tones we sat still under austere gazes of
Washington and Lincoln.

Wise and kind grandmothers, their gray hair knotted,
taught us perfect upper- and lowercase handwriting,
addition, subtraction, antics of Dick and Jane and Spot.
We learned our lessons – all but Ray and Tommy,
ably paddled every day by our somber
one-armed principal, Mr. Midkiff.

Fifth grade dawned, part of seven years' drought.
Swirling red dirt crept through school windows into ears,
made teeth gritty.

The playground was bare ground, windswept mesquite,
splintery see-saw.

Amid pervasive dust, a suddenly new principal appeared with
bow tie, black wavy hair, bright eyes.

Mr. Holmes would teach us geography, wave his two arms
and laugh.

Mrs. Phillips, her husband gone to war,
would pass her time teaching us music.

Music?

Mrs. Phillips was young. And pretty.

We did not know young teachers existed. Wide-eyed, open-mouthed,

guilty, we hoped her husband would stay gone a while.

From dusty black and white and sepia we danced
into bursting music and color,
like Dorothy into Oz.

In song we proclaimed mighty Texas, blessed amber waves of
grain,
trampled grapes of wrath, sat by firelight under a million
stars.

O dear Sorrento, we yearned for thee, bound away,

longed to see the rolling river of Shenandoah.

Swing and turn, waving scarves of red and green and blue and
yellow

burst on our sepia sight, from her heart to ours.

Did she yearn and long for Mr. Phillips, gone to war?

He would return, we knew, and take her from us.

We marched on to sixth grade, back to our loved, somber
one-armed principal, Mr. Midkiff.

But now, the world's austerity wore bright swirling skirts
and scarves of vermillion.

Blowing red dirt was meaningless.

She had armed us against sepia.

a computer, dad

Carl Palmer

my dad asks “What’s that contraption, son?”

a computer, dad

like going to the library

only quicker

we can stay right here

not a TV, a monitor

watch what is typed

view search results

it can’t see you, dad

or hear you

no need to whisper

okay, I’ll ask it

rhode island red rooster

enter and presto

see, wasn’t that quick

oh really

a hen

let’s try something else

no need to whisper, dad

tomorrow's lottery numbers
no, it won't tell you that
okay I guess you're right
I'll turn it off

Me, My Father

Richard T. Rauch

Spending time
Now a hobby of mine
Noticing how
Old I'm growing
Looking more
In less subtle ways
Like him
Becoming more
Like him
Seeing more
Of him
In me
Of me
In him
Seeing the future
This bitter reflection
This trick of time
My Father
Watching me
Watching himself

Growing old yet again
Both of us
Reliving the pathos
The irony
The mediocrity
The regrets and shame
The nostalgia
Of second chances —

Could this be immortality?

Ostrich

Rebecca Hatcher Travis

frown lines like apricot pits
deepen daily
go away!

stare straight ahead
rush by the ever-seeing oval mirror
waiting inside the door

don't check your hair
don't check your collar
hurry by!

the mind's eye
always
prefers its own image

The Dance Class

Carole Ann Moletti

Months have passed since last August when I was toned and in top form, at least as top as you can be when what used to be freckles on your nose now speckle your chest. One week before a significant birthday I was trying my best to ignore, I took ballet class *en pointe*, dripping sweat in New York City humidity so oppressive the haze wrapped around me like a shroud. I toweled off and went home to pack my aching feet in ice.

One week later, the day before the birthday I pretended wasn't going to happen, a surfing instructor confirmed I was "goofy" before I grabbed my board and paddled into the swells. He was referring to the natural stance you take, either right or left foot forward, when you jump onto your board. I was thinking more of "crazy," imagining that not counting birthdays stops the passage of time, and the inevitable toll it takes on the body.

I've been an athlete and dancer since childhood. Reality drove me to abandon Olympic dreams and aspirations of being carried across the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House, *en arabesque*, in the muscular arms of Mikhail Baryshnikov. I just wasn't good enough. A career in the health professions gave me the security, and income, a true Virgo requires.

So, on the cusp of the fall of my life, I danced to the music, defying reason and gravity, allowing a vision of what could have been to push the woman looking back at me in the mirror out of

the way. I rode one wave on my knees but Johnny, the surfer boy, assured me it was a very respectable achievement for a first timer. I'd gotten my sense of balance and next time, I vowed to be up on my feet.

The birthday I ignored came and went, but time didn't stop. I limped into an orthopedist's office on crutches one crisp September day, my pain scale somewhere between appendicitis and labor, with a torn ligament in my right knee. Not from dancing or surfing. Like most things in life, it's the unexpected that gets you. I tripped over a rug, landed a graceful *jeté*, and twisted my aged limb just enough to render me immobile, in a Vicodan stupor, and full leg brace.

Three months of physical therapy later, I got the go-ahead to return to dancing, but to take it easy. But before I got my leotard and tights out of a bottom drawer came another wipeout. This time the pain was psychological, but no less incapacitating.

I squeezed in my annual mammogram between Christmas shopping and baking cookies. Just before New Year's, the letter informed me there was a "new finding" which "required additional imaging." Being a health professional, I know new isn't good when it comes to X-rays. And though the odds of it being benign were good, too many women I know who were far too young and healthy didn't beat them.

The seven-day wait seemed like seven years, during which time I had decided it would be a wig, not a turban, while on chemo. I'd spend more time with my husband and children so they would remember the good times. Of course, I'd quit my job and finish all my stories so everyone would recognize the genius after my death.

~§~

I sat with nine others, naked from the waist up, shivering in a white gown decorated with blue flowers, specially designed to

tie in the front, allowing one breast at a time to be exposed, squashed, and twisted. The odds were that at least one of us would get bad news. Was it wrong for me to wish it was someone else?

The tech squeezed and contorted, a tight-lipped smile on her face. "I'm sorry, I know this hurts."

Just do it! I wanted to scream. "That's okay," I said and smiled back.

She took the films to the radiologist, told me to wait, and ordered breakfast.

The sonographic technician traced the offending breast in radial strokes, the machine clicked and whirred. How many of them are there? I thought, lying in the darkened room, with my name and future illuminated on a tiny screen.

"Does it hurt there?" she asked, seeing me grimace.

"It does now," I answered.

"I'm not supposed to tell you, but it looks good." Her smile was real. "I'll go get the radiologist."

Too many minutes passed during which time I shivered, but didn't feel cold. I studied the image on the screen, with no idea what I was looking at, still not daring to believe.

"Good news," the radiologist walked in and announced. "Just two simple cysts which don't need biopsies."

He talked for a while but I recall little more than his last words. "We'll see you in six months."

That will be just before my next birthday, I thought, remembering how good it felt in the summer of my life, when my body behaved the way it was supposed to and I could count on good genes and lifelong fitness.

~§~

My midwinter lips chapped, cuticles cracked and bleeding from the cold, I don my leotards and walk into adult ballet class

at the midtown Manhattan studio. The room is filled with women and men too old (or not good enough) to make it in the dance world. Professional dancers from the City's best companies teach there, allowing us to dream to live piano accompaniment.

I pull on leg warmers to keep my muscles limber. Black power stretch tights hide the varicose veins. I flex and extend my feet, coaxing them to curve correctly despite an orthotic in my left slipper to keep pressure off an old stress fracture. Dancing, particularly on *pointe*, isn't kind to aging ballerinas, even the ones who have earned the right to call themselves that.

All the regulars are there. Most are forty-somethings, or older, hair pulled up into buns frosted with gray. The younger and ponytailed, no doubt find comfort in the fact that youth gives them an advantage they don't have when competing with wrinkle-free peers. The men's tights reveal sagging behinds and the precise orientation of their frontal anatomy. My sheer black skirt provides no more than an illusion of a flat tummy and cellulite free thighs. This is a group who has long since passed the stage of caring what-the-hell anyone else thinks.

I'm not the only one who has escaped from the riptides and undertow. The anorexic with Goth hair, piercings, and tattoos no longer looks like a skeleton, but keeps glancing in the mirror at what she must think is a huge butt.

A blonde beauty, my age, still wears a slinky, backless leotard with no skirt. As she exercises her feet and stretches, I notice worry lines carved deeply into the face that last summer, held up a confident, smiling chin while she danced. She must have donated ten pounds and twenty years to the anorexic; her skin looks dry and leathery, dotted with bruises and Band-Aids over venipuncture sites. I feel a pang of guilt and suspect she was one those who didn't get good news. I want to hug her, but she's not here for a pity party. The instructor prances in on the

balls of her feet and does *une chasse* around the studio, greeting the class.

“Carole, how nice to see you back.”

I explain my absence, leaving out a lot of details.

“Take it easy, no jumping or twisting,” she says, moving on.

She gestures to the pianist and he begins to play. We do our *barre* routine and she corrects body position, adjusts an arm here, tips a chin up there, praising our efforts. The blonde struggles to hold her balance.

“Don’t push yourself,” our teacher whispers, stroking a battered arm.

“Very nice body position. Beautiful feet. Show the rest of the class how this is supposed to look.”

The anorexic smiles with pride and demonstrates an exquisite *combré* that only a younger body can achieve.

“Gentlemen, your flexibility is increasing.”

“Carole, lead the group across the floor. You know the combination. Five, six, seven, eight.”

Can I do it? I think. It’s been months. I know the steps but my brain doesn’t communicate with the feet. Try to keep up and don’t fall down.

“Thank you all for your time and effort.” The instructor ends the class with reverence.

We bow to her and to the pianist, who, in his own musical rapture, seems oblivious to our struggles. We rush back into the freezing headwind of real life.

I suppress thoughts of what the next year will bring. Odds are I’ll take *pointe* class again, after my muscles have remembered what they’re supposed to do. Next August, I have a date with surfer Johnny on Nauset Beach. I’ll ride the waves, still goofy, but standing firm on my feet.

Great Aunt Pearl

Becky Haigler

Unlike the oyster,
which covers intrusion
with soothing layers
to create a gem,
since childhood
she has added offense
to irritation, complaint
to grief, to form a knot,
accreted misery, polished
with self-righteousness.

Bossa Nova Hand Dance

Kenneth Pobo

Late that summer we swayed
to Connie Francis singing
“Bossa Nova Hand Dance,”
got married. Now we’re
divorced

amicably. You met a tree
surgeon and I met a realtor.
I wonder do you and your
lover hand dance? Do you
dance at all? Are you

like me and my lover, our
dancing days done, thousands
of pots and pans before us
'til we get ample
paid-in-advance plots?

Should we have stayed
together? We can't revive
the bossa nova.
My joints are bad. Often

in bed with the realtor
I see you as a samba
at the edge of my life. You
move like hibiscus. I slip
into sleep thinking of flowers
falling.

Several Silent Sorrys *(To Elaine)*

Jim Wilson

I was stunned by the announcement of your death.
Poor guy said it like he was reading the news
And my startled cry-look confused him.
He had not even used your name. Just, we went to
Kenny Shaver's wife's funeral last Saturday in Tyler.

Magic mental time travel in an instant blur back to 1969
To the crystal clear image of a little skinny college girl
With ear short poofy blond hair who really loved me —
I can still see it in your eyes that last time I walked away.

Back to me, a lonesome soon to be ex-teenager,
Who offered you frightened love and then jerked it away
Like teasing a sweet baby kitten with a feather pull toy.

Back to a monumental fork in my life's road.
The one path chosen and thirty years traveled.
The other shrouded forever in the impenetrable mortal mist
Of what we might have been if I had not lost my nerve.

China Guilt

Lynn Pinkerton

The family china. I've moved it across Texas five times...unopened. The over-sized boxes sit covered in dust in a lonely corner of my hobbit-hole storage area. It hasn't seen natural light in over twenty-five years. It's hibernating there, waiting to be resurrected to finer glory days.

In the hierarchy of our family tree, I am ranked the first grandchild on both sides of the family. This distinctive positioning is the sole reason that I am now in possession of the family china. By some quirk of fate, both of my grandmothers had the same china pattern. When they died, the aunts called a summit and decided that as the first grandchild, the china from both grandmothers should pass to me. My birth order bequeathed me 24 place settings of rose-rimmed china, assorted serving platters, cups, saucers and of course, the often-passed gravy bowl.

Although comfortable, neither set of grandparents came from money. Extra cash was spent on new overalls or roast for Sunday dinner. Fine china was a prized extravagance – something proudly displayed in shiny glass cabinets and reverently reserved for the most special of holidays.

I have tried hard to conjure up the proper respect for this heirloom gift. Throughout my childhood our large, close-knit family gathered around this china for traditional holidays and enthusiastically relished the bounty from both grandmothers'

kitchens. These rose-strewn, delicate dishes cradled roast, turkey, ham, cranberries, pickled peaches, last summer's black-eyed peas, marshmallow-topped baked sweet potatoes, cream gravy, fresh ambrosia, pineapple-upside-down cake, hot home-made rolls and hotter coffee. The same china has been a silent collaborator in the women's after-dinner laughter and family gossip while washing dishes. I cherish each of these family get-togethers, but cannot summon up a flicker of interest in the china.

With every good intention, over the years I have periodically attempted to bring the china into my life. I've tried hard to think of twenty-four people I know who would sit down to a formal dinner served on china. Then I would scale back and think I could dig out just a couple of place settings for a special intimate dinner. Or maybe a creative silk flower arrangement for the gravy bowl. At the very least I could buy a fine glass-fronted cabinet and display it for the viewing pleasure of my grandmothers' ghosts.

With deep apologies to Honey and Mama Pink, my two grannies who started it all, my attempts at befriending the china are, for the most part, a failed concept. I live life as a single woman and have no children. There are no pre-destined china heirs in my current lineage. Repeated rummaging around in my mind for other family members to tag "Caretaker of the Family China" comes up empty. Most of them eat take-out dinners in front of the television and would grow weak at the thought of washing all of those dishes by hand.

Although certainly appreciative of the finer, formal side of life, I lead a mostly laid-back lifestyle. My idea of a fun get-together is throwing chicken on a backyard grill and using paper plates from Wal-Mart. I'm more comfortable in bare feet than expensive shoes and prefer casual conversation with friends on

my patio, drinking wine from plastic goblets. Try as I might, I can't wrangle a reasonable way to adapt fine china to my life.

China guilt periodically nips at my heels. I turn and stare it back down into submission. The china may not be on proper display, but interspersed throughout my home are old family photos and cherished mementos and keepsakes. Tender memories of relatives rest in my heart and I gratefully honor the broad path they have cut for me. Only the china sits neglected and not properly loved.

For now, dozens of tiny pink roses still bloom inside the dark, dusty boxes. Odds are that when kinfolks come to pack up after I'm gone, someone will claim it, bypass the Goodwill Store and haul the cumbersome family china home. Maybe to a fine display case. Maybe for special dinners. Or maybe just to stash away in a forgotten, sometimes guilty corner as an enduring reminder of the wide wake left by those who traveled the waters before them.

Room for Improvement

Becky Chakov

Sometimes I reach unheralded heights
And grandly cope in a crisis.
Too soon I revert to my feet of clay
And my usual quota of vices.

Chimera

Sharon Mooney

Someday, perhaps,
I'll quit my job,
escape the bosses
breathing fire,
plaguing me with
deadlines, dull demands.
I'll pick up paper, pens,
paint brushes, move
to France, where I will
sit for countless hours
contemplating flowers,
write a poem or two,
paint girls in blue
with yellow parasols,
drink wine, eat bread
and cheese, give in
to foolish fantasies,
embrace the Seine,
escape the sane,
the sensible, my small,
contracted world,
someday, perhaps

Going Home

Terrence J. Kandzor

The fog has delayed our flight for a while longer. I came to find you because I didn't want you to be alone. It has been a long time and I missed you. We said we would stay in touch. Yet the years have gone by fast, and we never drank that beer together.

Weren't those were the best years...college and the awakening of the spirit? We were idealistic about life. All we wanted was to be like Steinbeck and Charlie and hit the road in a Jeep to find America. Somehow that innocent quest was forgotten after the Chicago riots in '68. Those riots were about change and the new consciousness young people felt toward a government that no longer seemed to listen. Young people were divided. Some felt that violence was the answer to start change in the country. But, there were other voices that said love and peace were the answer.

Unsure of our choices we at least donned the costume of the new age: the long hair and buckskin coats and peace sign patches. We would give the 'peace sign' to everyone we passed, even when we received the 'finger' in return. The punks in the pickups with their baseball caps and high school letter jackets chased us a time or two and beat us up because we were those long-haired-pinko-commies their folks told them about.

When we heard the call of the Mamas and Papas to go to San Francisco, we went and spent a "Summer of Love" before our

senior year. We were free of worry because we still had our student deferment and didn't need to face the decision to go to Vietnam or go 'north' to Canada. I was just happy to kick back and crash wherever I was and share a bong with some willing sweetie. Oh yeah, we spoke about protests and the revolution. We carried signs about making love, not war. We stood together while the cops dragged people off to the paddy wagons or hit us with water from fire hoses. To me this whole thing was a lark. It was the dues to pay for the free sex. I was as sincere as the next guy. "Get us out of Vietnam!" I shouted or "Stop the baby killing!" All the time I still felt the same Midwestern conviction that this war was our generation's turn to win freedom just like our dads and their dads before them. To me the soldiers were saving the world from Communism.

I know you had idealistic goals. While I was chasing chicks, you were going to meetings and rallies. You had to do something...right now! I admired that, my friend. But I only thought you were being influenced by that blond you were always with. I couldn't blame you; she was a beautiful flower child named Jamie. I thought she just might share your name after the winter snows came and the Summer of Love was over. I had no idea who the SDS was or the Weather Underground group that you joined. At least I didn't until the bombs exploded.

Soon September was upon us and people started loading up their VW buses and heading for home or school again. My folks sent me money for the train, and I packed up. It took awhile to say goodbye to all the girls I had "loved" that summer. Funny but most of them didn't even remember my name. So much for the impression I made on them.

Yet the stories I would tell the guys back at school would make me much more the Cool Dude than I really was. Oh yeah, the girls, the drugs, and the sense of community everyone felt was all just 'California Dreaming' since real life was going to

school and preparing for the future. I would be like my dad. I would get a good job and get married, and have a house in the suburbs. When friends asked what I did in the Seventies, I would have stories to tell of life at Haight and Ashbury.

I was surprised when you said you weren't coming. I asked if you would be coming later, and you said no. You had a commitment there. I felt uncomfortable with your sense of dedication to a cause that I thought would simply blow away with the winter winds. That was when you told me that you were involved with people who were planning the revolution. You told me about the criminal things you were doing to push your cause and bring the government to its knees! Man, what had happened to my good pal, Frank? While I was playing you grew up and wanted to fight the Man. I could not get you to change your mind and come with me.

As I was leaving you gave me your guitar to keep until you saw me again.

Over the years it became a symbol of that part of you that I hoped was still like me. I believed you wanted the old guitar saved for the time that you weren't running from the 'Man' and could go back to being who you once were. Before we parted I said I would keep it for you until we could meet again and drink a beer together. The group America put words to the conversation we might have had when we did:

"Ain't the years gone by fast; I suppose you have missed them. I understand you have been running from the Man. Funny, I've been there and you've been here. We never drank that beer together. Oh, I almost forgot to ask. Did you hear of my enlistment?" (The Sandman, America) I can picture you getting a laugh at that line! But it seems we took opposite sides, and I became the Man. [1]

As soon as the fog lifts we will be going home again. They will be waiting for us at the airport. It is cold in this hangar, but

I don't guess you feel it. I brought a can of Molsons. So, before we go I'll drink that beer to us and the past.

Déjà Vu

Barbara Darnall

I remember hearing "It's a boy!"
through cushioned softness.

My husband's smile alone
lit up the darkened room.

A tiny, pixie face, dark hair,
and eyes so startling blue,
he snuggled close as if to say,
"I'm home."

Today, I saw the same electric
smile on that boy's face,
as he, grown tall, reached out
to place within my arms
a precious form. "Here's your grandson,"
he breathed, with pride and awe.

I held them both, and whispered soft,
"You're home."

Eating Early

Terry Sanville

When Cynthia backed our minivan out of the driveway early Saturday morning, she almost smacked into the guy delivering newspapers. He leaned on his horn and drove up onto the sidewalk to get around us.

“Don’t you dare say anything,” my wife warned. “You know I’m no good when it’s dark out.”

“Your daytime driving’s not much...” She gave me the look and I shut up.

We had ten hours of mind-numbing motoring ahead, pushing eastward from the California coast past Phoenix into the Sonoran Desert. The back of our van was crammed with her easels, canvases, and all manner of artist’s claptrap that creaked and jingled with each road bump.

Two hours after leaving Santa Barbara, while sucking smog in the middle of Los Angeles, my pint-sized bladder and inflated prostate gave a warning twinge. Cynthia pointed us down an off ramp and we slid into a Chevron station. I had my seatbelt off and the door half open before we stopped, made a dash for the men’s room, and patty-melted into its locked door. After retrieving the key and almost wetting myself, I pushed inside. The stink from the urinal cakes made my nose run. But like a NASCAR pit crewman, I focused on the job at hand, groaning with relief. Back in the car, I took over the driving.

“Why don’t you just bring a pee bottle?” Cynthia asked.
“They sell fancy ones that can hold...”

“Give me a break,” I shot back. “I’m not an old fart yet.”

“What? Holding your water is something only young studs do?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

She laughed. “You’re just bashful...as if I haven’t seen...”

I clicked on the radio to shut Cynthia up but found only right-wing talk shows or rock music that sounded like my old garage band tuning up. I clicked it off. In relative peace, I drove into the sun and thought about the week ahead: winter mornings in the empty desert, reading escapist novels while my wife splashed paint on huge canvases.

“Did you bring your leg warmers?” she asked, breaking my reverie.

“No. Was I supposed to?”

“Remember that trip to Yuma? Your legs got so cold you could hardly walk.”

“If it’s that cold I’ll stay in the car.”

“And leave me alone with the scorpions and rattlesnakes?”

“They wouldn’t dare bite you.”

“Ha ha, very funny.” She pulled her sun hat over her eyes and fell asleep.

We ate lunch while buzzing along the Interstate east of Blythe. The desert wind pushed at the van. I white-knuckled its shuddering wheel while Cynthia shoved cashews, chocolate-covered raisins, and cold pear slices into my mouth. Hopscotching our way from gas station to gas station, we fought through Phoenix’s afternoon traffic and pulled up to the Best Western in Apache Junction just shy of four o’clock. The sprawling town was brown: brown desert floor, brown buildings bordered by the brown Superstition Mountains. Even the sky was brown from dust and car exhaust.

“I’m starved,” I grumbled. “Let’s unpack later and grab an early dinner.”

“Fine with me. But where?”

The desk clerk chimed in. “The restaurant across the parking lot has pretty good food.”

“Are they serving dinner this early?” Cynthia asked.

The clerk chuckled. “You haven’t spent much time in snowbird country, have you?”

“No, I’m here to paint the mountains.”

“Awesome. That’ll be a great conversation starter with the old far...I mean, ah, with our patrons.”

The lot was full of Buicks, Oldsmobiles, and Cadillacs parked crookedly in their stalls. We snaked our way between cars and I yanked open the restaurant’s front door. A blast of humid air hit us. The foyer was crammed with white-haired people sitting against the walls on padded benches. Only a few were talking to each other, whining or grumbling.

“Jesus, that woman looks just like my great aunt,” Cynthia whispered, motioning to a stooped lady grasping a walker with a built-in seat and a hand brake. I always wondered what those brakes were supposed to do: stop speeding walkers? Make parking on hills easier? There were three of them lined up, like some kind of showroom display.

After checking in with the hostess, we stood as more people crowded inside. Cynthia and I were the only ones with dark hair, except for one guy wearing an incredible rug that didn’t match his snow-white muttonchops. As seats became vacant, we let others take them.

Someone tugged on my shirtsleeve.

“Does your wife want to sit down?” an old guy asked between rasping breaths.

I glanced at Cynthia and smiled. “Thanks, but we’ve been sitting all day. It feels good to stand.”

“Ya don’t have to rub it in,” the man grumbled, fingering his cane. For a moment I thought he was going to whack me with it.

“He’s just trying to be chivalrous,” Cynthia whispered in my ear.

I leaned down toward him. “Is the food good here?”

“Reminds me of Army food. But it stays down, and the Chablis is cheap.”

I thought about ordering a carafe and drinking it right there in the foyer. But the hostess suddenly called our name and we hustled after a high school kid in a bow tie, winding through a maze of parked walkers, wheelchairs, and canes protruding from Naugahide booths.

Cynthia sniffed. “I can’t smell anything over the lavender.” She held a Kleenex to her nose, her allergies in full attack. I kind of liked the perfume smell. Reminded me of my Granny, sitting at her sewing machine with straight pins clamped between her seamed lips, humming an old Polish tune while we neighborhood kids played “I’ll show you mine if you show me yours” in her backyard.

The bow-tied kid seated us at a table against the wall. A girl brought menus. I stared at the glossy photographs of delicious-looking food and compared them to meals just delivered to a table across the isle. There was no resemblance. A crowd of seniors circled the salad bar. A woman who looked like Mrs. Claus bonked her head on the Plexiglas spit guard as she tried to bring the soggy-looking vegetables into bifocal range.

The wait staff ran everywhere. Made me tired just watching them.

We ordered. The food arrived hot, the drinks cold and appropriately intoxicating. I loosened my belt and leaned back in the chair. At the tiny table next to us a woman picked at a pork chop and drank green tea. Her long gray-yellow hair was

uncombed, her brown cardigan buttoned wrong. She retrieved lipstick from her purse and, with a trembling hand, began applying it, missing her lips and streaking her chin and cheeks.

Cynthia leaned toward her. "Ma'am, can I help you with that?"

The woman's face flushed. "What? Am I making a mess?"

"Well, yes, a little bit. Here, let me."

"I lost my compact somewhere, and my hands shake so bad..."

"That's all right. Hold still for a moment."

Cynthia dipped a napkin in a glass of water and gently rubbed the woman's chin and cheeks. The lady smiled, showing off perfect dentures.

"I feel like a little girl getting my face wiped by my mother."

"I'm sorry," Cynthia, said, "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"No, no. It's a good memory."

"Do you live here or are you just visiting?"

"We moved to Apache Junction in '87. But my Harold passed two years ago... and I've been out of sorts ever since."

Cynthia looked at me and frowned, then turned back to the old dear, holding the lipstick as firmly as one of her paintbrushes. "I'm an artist. Going to paint the mountains tomorrow."

"I kinda thought you looked the bohemian type."

"Why?"

"My hair used to look like yours. You wait. Ten years from now it will be just like mine."

Cynthia's frown deepened.

"No need to be sad about it, dear. We all get old. Look at this crowd, a gaggle of geezers, all of us." Her high laughter tinkled above the clatter of plates and silverware.

Outside in the parking lot, Cynthia scowled. "Ten years... I'm nowhere near her age and..."

“Relax, hon. I’d give you at least twelve years before you...”

“Look who’s talking, bladder boy.” She grinned and dug me in the ribs.

We slept well that night, glad for strong hot showers and a king-sized bed fitted with Magic Fingers to ease the ache of tired muscles, sore backbones, and bruised egos that just weren’t yet ready to surrender. Me, I hope to get a jet pack with my walker.

Running

Brianna Cedes

I have worn all sorts of shoes: saddle oxfords; red cowboy boots, with jeans in winter and even with shorts in summer; black patent-leather pumps with three-inch spike heels and pointy toes – dancing shoes, rubbed with Vaseline to keep them shiny; brown tailored high heels, with dresses or suits in the fall; flats, low-heeled shoes, in the lab or while walking in cities with uneven cobblestone streets; hiking boots; ski boots; Earth shoes; lots of sandals, one pair with white, soft straps to tie around my ankles, bought from a street vendor in Venice.

Now, I mostly wear sneakers – lightweight mesh and leather running shoes with lots of padding and marvelously constructed soles. They protect

my ankles, accommodate my orthotics, reflect light
back to oncoming cars, and never pinch my toes.
I replace them every three hundred miles
or every few months, when the cushioning wears out.

The saleswoman at the shoe store asked,
"Are you a runner?" Yes, I am. As I walk,
fast, around the mall or along the edge
of the high school track, I am running
from osteoporosis and heart disease,
high cholesterol, and all the other ails
that are racing behind and beside me.
The other walkers and I nod cordially;
we're not competing with each other.
The challengers are those invisible racers
relentlessly pursuing us all.

I am running toward what is next –
to the next stage of my long distance run,
out on my perimeter of time – not yet
into the final sprint, I hope. I am running.
I love the race. I run through fears,
singing an old song about a high and narrow bridge.
I run with hope and prayer.
I run with joy and gratitude.
In my yellow-banded sneakers,
I am running.

Flying Free

Ginny Greene

Two pretty birds
expensive, too,
perched on window sill
watching wild birds fly

Woman watching
let them go
out the door
higher, higher

Husband, home, asks
“Where’s the birds?”
“I let them go,” she said
“I had to let them go.”
“But, now
they’re gone, Hon.”

“They flew,
they flew free,
if even only once.”

What I Didn't Learn in School

Phillip J. Valentine

I was sitting in a meeting room the other day when a lady made the statement, “You need to process what you read.” A chill ran through my body. It was exactly what my fourth grade teacher had told me over and over again. I told the group about a boy and his struggles in school and why I couldn’t read very well: I had trouble “processing” sentences.

My story begins in small-town rural South in 1956. When I began first grade, I was the last of a family of twelve children – three deceased, four married, and me the youngest of the five living at home. I mention this because my family was very close-knit and supportive. This would prove to be both good and bad for me.

Miss Ward was the first grade teacher. As best I can remember, she taught the children their colors first, then reading. I didn’t learn my colors; didn’t learn to read either. The school was so small the elementary teachers each taught two grades. So, in second grade the same thing – I didn’t learn anything then either. By then, I was the class clown and village idiot.

In third grade, my brother, Boo, three years older, took care of me. He fought my battles, did my homework, wrote my book reports, did everything he knew to help me get by in school. I also had three sisters still at home, so any book Boo hadn’t read,

they had. He could get enough from them to make any report sound plausible.

This continued until fourth grade. Then things got complicated. Teachers had always let me get by if I stayed quiet and turned in homework. But Boo got involved in other things and I got further behind. Once, he wrote a book report for me and signed his own name without thinking. Mrs Cox hadn't realized until then that Boo was doing all my homework.

There are some things you just can't lie your way out of. After what seemed hours and hours of interrogation, Mrs. Cox came away with the opinion that maybe there was hope for me after all. She asked what my favorite subject was; I told her geography. She gave me a new geography book and told me to read it cover to cover – however long it took to just keep working on it.

That wasn't bad. I was actually learning something and my private study of geography continued the rest of the term. The next year, I was back in fourth grade and Boo was in a new building across campus. The first time I didn't do my assigned homework, I intended to let Boo work my math problems at recess. But Mrs. Cox made me stay in at recess and work on it myself. She also made me read every damn day. The battle lines were drawn; the war was on.

Mrs. Cox and I had some interesting conversations that year, none of them pleasant for me, but when it was just the two of us, she let me say whatever I wanted and never sent me to the principal's office. I learned later from a classmate that if she had sent me to the principal, I would have been expelled.

A few days after I first had to miss recess, someone smarted off at me. I jumped on him and he beat the crap out of me. The teacher had separated me from my "enabler" brother and I was on my own. Boo had joined the basketball team and a lot of

other activities. He didn't even have time to write book reports for me anymore. My sweet brother was turning into a calloused teenager. Very seldom I did my homework; very seldom I went to recess with the other children.

My reading was improving, though, and I could identify nouns and verbs. Every day, Mrs. Cox had me read while the other children were out of the room. She didn't actually teach me how to read – she taught me how to survive. Every day she reminded me, “You'll need to process everything you read.” I tried to block this out of my mind and I think I did for thirty-eight years. I left school thinking she was the worst teacher in the world. From fourth grade to graduation I referred to her as “Warden Cox.”

In fifth grade, a new teacher, Miss Wayne, first moved me to the front of the room for talking. About a week later, a photographer came to take our picture for the yearbook. It was early September, and I was barefooted. Miss Wayne thought it would make the school look bad to have a barefooted boy in the new yearbook and wanted me to move to the back of the class again. Before I got out of my desk, a little skinny twelve-year-old girl stood up beside me and looked Miss Wayne in the eye. She said, “If you make him move because he doesn't have shoes on, I won't have my picture made with this class.” The other kids jumped on the bandwagon and Miss Wayne left me in my seat.

We couldn't afford a yearbook, but I've seen the picture in other people's books. That was the day our class grew up – the girls for sure; the boys maybe a decade later. But after that, the fighting stopped in our class. We helped one another when there were problems and we have remained close through the years.

I finished fifth and sixth grades and moved on to junior high. Daddy died but the family struggled along somehow. Boo and I worked during summers to make enough money to buy school

clothes. Mother made the girls' dresses. We ate pinto beans and cornbread almost every day. (After leaving home, I didn't eat another pinto bean until I was fifty years old.)

The only time I ever got cross-wise with Boo was when a bunch of wild boys and I planned to have a big drinking party one weekend while their parents were out of town. Boo found out about it, like you always do in a small town. He sat me down and explained the situation to me. "We're just barely paying our bills, Sonny. You can't go with those boys and take a chance on getting in trouble and wasting your money. Do this for me. It will be the payment for me taking care of you all these years." If not going with the rowdy boys would settle all the debt I owed Boo, it sounded like a good deal to me. We shook hands. And to this day, I have never drunk a beer.

By that time, Pam and I were dating and things were getting serious. She was a "straight-A" student, but I thought I would be able to tell her how poor my grades were. She told me that she had never made a "B" in school. I told her I hadn't either. (The only test I ever made an "A" on was a blood test.) I guess Pam wasn't all that smart because later she married me anyway.

At graduation time I thought, Oh, boy – go to work; make some money have some fun. Then I received "Greetings" from Uncle Sam and went for my physical the next Wednesday. The doctor said, "You can't go airborne." Why? "You're colorblind." I stepped back up against the wall and slid down to the seat. The good doctor said, "It won't hurt you."

I asked him, "Are you colorblind?" He said no. I said, "Well, how the hell do you know it didn't hurt anything?" The doctor had no way of knowing how much frustration and aggravation being colorblind had caused me. I remembered that not being able to distinguish colors was the reason my first-grade teacher had given up on trying to teach me to read. Anyway, the next week I was reclassified 1-H and was never drafted.

Thirty years later, after working in the wilderness, piney hills of north Louisiana, I reached the point where I was ready to go back to my home town. Mrs. Cox was deceased by then, so I went to the cemetery and gave her one last cussing – for dying before I could apologize to her face-to-face. As I departed the cemetery, I stopped and buried my old memories there. To my amazement, on the other side of the cemetery gate, I found my “dreams” waiting for me. I think they had been there all along but were covered by bad memories.

I remembered that Mrs. Cox had me read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. It was very appealing to me – a book about the South, with adventure and humor. What more could a person ask for? When I went back to visit Mrs. Cox was when I decided I wanted to be a writer, to tell the stories of the people I knew and the area I lived in.

My wife told me, “You can’t be a writer. Your grammar is awful and your spelling is worse.”

I told her, “I’ll write in my native language – Hill-billy-onics – until I can find a translator or learn.” So I started writing. This is the beginning. I’ve learned a lot; I have a lot to learn. And, just for the record, I saw a rainbow the other day that was the prettiest I’ve ever seen – all three colors – and they were as beautiful to me as all the shades anyone will ever see.

On Being Seventy

Barbara Darnall

Seventy is old.
My step is uncertain,
my muscles and bones complain,
and breathlessness belies
the eagerness with which I greet
the light of each new day.
Seventy is old,
but my heart still quickens
at a toddler's laugh or lover's touch,
at singing birds and stormy nights.
Occasionally, I find myself
wishing upon a star.
Seventy is old.
Still, I have decided
my body may be seventy, but my mind
reels with thoughts still unthought,
songs not yet sung,
and my heart, oh, my heart
is not yet twenty-one.

The River Maze

Janet Hartman

As a seven-year-old on vacation in the 1950s, I played endlessly in the salt water behind our summer home. I seemed to channel energy from the tidal water. The river never slept – waves rolled into shore, boats and water-skiers zoomed up and down, fish jumped. Occasionally it appeared calm and flat, but even then crabs scuttled along the bottom and fish swam beneath the surface. The stillness yielded to a gull coming in for a landing or a mother duck passing with her flotilla of ducklings.

From our beach, we could see far up the river, presumably to its source, but it was too distant to tell. One day, Dad took Mom and me upriver in our 14-foot wooden runabout, considered a mid-sized boat back then. We passed patches of beach between stretches of spartina backed by shrubs and trees of cedar, pine, and an occasional oak. The banks gradually closed in on us and we entered a watery maze lined with dense marsh grass sprinkled with mostly dead trees and a few shrubs. Toppled tree trunks protruded into the narrow waterway. To me, it looked like a strange new world.

Dad slowed down the outboard engine until our boat was barely moving. An eerie quiet surrounded us. The air and water were still, and cormorants sat in the dead trees like sentries watching us. As we passed, they did not move. This was their domain, and they knew it. The relentless sun seared everything into submission. Even breathing required effort. Dad held an

oar over the side, rhythmically dipping it in the water to test for depth and sunken objects. No beach appeared on either side, no place to stop and go ashore. The waterway divided several times as we went deeper and deeper into the marshy maze. Did Dad remember the way out? I didn't. I thought of Hansel and Gretel, but even if I had crumbs to mark our trail, they would not stay put in the water.

The cormorants began to give me the creeps. Why did they keep staring at us? What if we lost our way in this labyrinth? What if the propeller hit a submerged tree trunk and the engine died? No one would find us. We could die here, surrounded by water without a drop to drink, shriveled by the sun or eaten by birds just like in the Hitchcock movie. I dared not voice my fears – one never questioned my father. Mom had the power to make him see reason, but her face showed she did not sense danger.

We followed a sharp bend in the water, then ducked quickly to clear a branch. At least there were no birds sitting on it. Then the oar hit something in the water and a thump on the bottom of the boat stopped us. I held my breath...were we doomed?

"Guess it's time to turn around," Dad said. He put the engine in reverse and turned the boat. As we rounded each bend, I leaned forward hoping to see the river. Should we have turned right instead of left at that last divide? Dad looked around, too. Did he really know where he was going? After a long series of turns, we exited the maze and the river widened before us. I exhaled, grateful for my deliverance.

* * *

Decades have passed since that excursion and the river has changed. Houses parade up both banks. Stretches of marsh grass became stretches of alternating sand and docks before new laws protected the wetlands. Ducklings are a rare sight. Marinas expanded to berth larger boats – thirty-footers look small today.

Fish and crabs are so depleted that few people attempt to catch them. The river is now a highway for boats headed to the ocean. The changes came slowly at first, but finished in a burst before we knew their full extent.

When I heard a new marina was built upriver, I had to check it out. I had not seen that area in years. From the main road, I drove down a mile of rough blacktop and gravel to reach it. Smaller boats were berthed here, right next to the scary maze I remembered from childhood. I asked a group of boaters if they ever went up there. They stared as if I were an alien. "No one ever goes in there," they said.

Chicken, I thought, a smug smile on my face. Not a sound came from the maze. From where I stood, it looked the same as I remembered. Nature and the river had finally stood their ground against further human intrusion. The place I once feared had become one I wanted to preserve. I wondered if birds still sat sentry in the trees, but I did not attempt to find out. Other people might get ideas.

Mother, May I?

Sarah Getty

During the screened-porch dinner of corn on the cob, pork chops, tomatoes like red meat, warm and bleeding, I felt the first stirring. The air moved, cracked the damp heat that stood around the house in blocks. The backyard maple rustled, twenty thousand green hands waving a signal. Robins up and down the block began

scattering their coded notes. Our yard stretched larger
as the sky lost light. Out by the lilac hedge,

imaginary shapes conspired. I had to scrape
scraps into the kitchen can, rinse and stack the plates,
while outside, I knew it, everything was starting
without me. On the porch, the kittens, one tiger,

one marmalade, were climbing right up the screens
to chase the white moths that bumped on the other side,
dying, like dumbbells, to enter our box of light.
I stood on the sill, where tomatoes were lined up

to ripen, and unhooked the tiger from the screen.
Under the fur my fingers felt her secret, hot,
skinny body; her heart like a tom-tom hammered.
Then I heard Roger calling down the block, and John

did that whistle with his fingers. The dishes clinked
in the pan. Better not ask. Just, carefully,
open the porch door a crack, so the kittens won't
escape from safety, and slide out, like gliding

into warm, easy water. I ran on the grass;
I was gone. The air had a secret, sweetened
and heavy, like Hawaii, like honeymoons. Kids
were lined up already, across a yard where no

father was watering, solemnly wig-wagging
his hose. "Red Rover," was first. Whoever got named
had to charge like a ram into the other line,
try to break their phalanx of linked arms. Over
and over we flung ourselves, crashed and bounced and broke.
Later came "Mother May I?" and then "Statues": grab

somebody's arm and whirl him around and around
and let go! He must freeze in whatever funny

pose he's flung into – Frankenstein, ballet dancer,
airplane, ape. Our bodies amazed us, taking shapes,
by chance, stranger than we could plan. Then, suddenly —
“Not it!” “Not it!” “Not it!” – we switched to Hide and Seek.

It was real night now, moon blue and humid. Mothers
would be calling soon. I hid in the hydrangea;
John was It. Lightning bugs rose in constellations
and sank, and rose again, blinking their welcomes. Sweat

prickled my neck, my scraped knee bled. I was hidden,
but anyway my heart beat hard. I was holding it,
secret, like a lightning bug cupped in my hand.
I let it rise in rhythm with its kind.

Wafting

Richard T. Rauch

walk hard walk solid
take stands make impressions
and then go lightly by
like a pennant tracing
breezes in the sky

Give me a title

Kerín Riley-Bishop

We have allowed magic to slink off into the corner,
hide in the shadows and lie in wait.

It is patient; it has learned to linger

Magic is always near...

It is in the slow-flowing stream
which trickles gently down the side of the mountain,
and in the thunderous clouds pouring life
back into the earth's waters.

It is in the glittering stars of night
as they cast their subtle glow
on the worlds surrounding them.

It is in the first green buds of spring,
the blazing summer sun along the beaches,
the last orange-red fire blossom leaves of autumn
and the crystalline snows of winter.

Magic does not hide,
it throws itself in our path
makes us look, listen, love
until we are aware of it.

And then it grows

The Misfit

Judith Groudine Finkel

Sundays I watched my friends in their white gloves and patent leather shoes walking by my home on their way to church. While they were gone, I entertained myself by hiding my brother's favorite toys or giving my Toni doll yet another Toni home permanent.

Starting at eleven o'clock, I became a sentry at my parents' bedroom window, looking for my friends' return. But even when I spotted them, my agony wasn't over. My mother, afraid I would disturb Sunday after-church lunches, wouldn't let me go to their houses. I had to wait for them to come to me.

"We can't offend our Christian neighbors," she said in a tone that made me afraid something terrible would happen if we did.

The one Sunday I looked forward to was Easter. That was because of Catherine May, who lived two houses away in our small industrial town of McKees Rocks, just outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Catherine had a back yard big enough for a swing set, went to parochial school and had long, gold-flecked hair.

She would come by after Easter church services with a chocolate Easter bunny and let me eat its ears.

When I was six, and about to break off my treat, she stopped me by saying, "You killed Christ."

"Who's that?"

"Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior."

I searched my memory and then spoke with assurance. “I never even met the man. So how could I have killed him?”

As Catherine pondered my logic, I chewed on a chocolate ear.

The holiday that was the most difficult for me was Christmas. In school I mouthed the words to the carols. The songs were about the beliefs of my friends, not mine.

Then there was the Christmas tree on the stage of the auditorium. Other children brought lights and tinsel and ornaments for the tree trimming party. I stood apart, eating the cookies their mothers had baked, trying to be inconspicuous.

I felt most isolated during the December nights. Every house in the neighborhood except ours had Christmas lights.

At some point those of us who are different make a decision to hide it, ignore it or celebrate it. Without realizing it at the time, I made my decision in 1953, in the third grade.

My teacher that year was the imposing Mrs. Noble, who was tall and wide, had hair the color of my red Crayola and yelled a lot. Her reading from the Bible that morning had been about the birth of Jesus. At recess, while the other children drew pictures on the blackboard, I approached her desk.

I blurted out what had been on my mind all morning. “Mrs. Noble, I know all about your holiday, and you know nothing about mine.”

She stopped grading our spelling tests and peered at me over her glasses. “What do you mean?”

“Chanukah starts tonight, and none of you knows about it.”

“Do you want to tell us?”

“Tomorrow,” I said.

After school, as I trudged through the snow up Wayne Avenue Hill and slid down it, I was worried. Not about telling the Chanukah story. I knew it by heart. I feared I had done what

my mother had admonished me never to do – offended our Christian neighbors.

When I got home, I took off my white rubber boots and red leggings and walked slowly up the stairs to our apartment. I went into the tiny kitchen where my mother was standing over a frying pan, making potato latkes for our Chanukah dinner. I begged her to let me eat just one of those special small pancakes. When she agreed, I felt even more guilty.

So I confessed.

“I’ve got to call your father,” she said.

I’d really done it this time.

“Norm, you’re going to be so proud of Judy.”

The next day I was in front of the class with my family’s menorah, telling the story of how ancient outnumbered Jews defeated the Greek Assyrians and then experienced the miracle of one day’s worth of oil lasting eight days so that the Eternal Light in the temple never went out. I explained that’s why we lit candles on eight nights, and why I got a present on each of them.

What I remember most about that day is how Mrs. Noble, whom I’d never seen smile before, smiled at me throughout my presentation.

When I finished, she said, “Next year I want you to tell the Chanukah story to the whole school when we’re all together in the auditorium for the tree trimming.” And so I did, year after year, until I graduated.

Callers

Carl L. Williams

We have more callers at the door,
bringing cakes and hams and bowls of sympathy.
Inside, the grateful others rise —
“Oh, here comes someone, and really we must go —”
from where they’ve perched on sofa edges.
Impulsive hugs of commiseration,
a sudden glance of trembling,
a well-intentioned patting of the hand,
provoking mutual tears, and then they’re gone.
“We’re so very sorry,” say the callers,
unsure of what will follow
or where to set the dishes.
So many have come to offer what they can,
yet one dread visitor who came before,
staying briefly, intently seeking,
silently turned and took so much away.

Spaceholder for Masterpiece

Kerín Riley-Bishop

We have six pages here, and Karen's working on a piece and Ginny's working on a piece cutting down a much longer piece by somebody else. We are at this point, with these six pages, 2 pages over a 8 page divisible number, so we need to add six more or cut down two, and it doesn't have to be here. It seems to me that Thomas Wheeler's is quite long and we might cut some of that, or we can cut a piece we don't like, so long as we cut out even numbered pages together (leaving a prose piece where a prose piece needs to go.)

Another issue is that we don't end on a strong prose piece, and I think we need that even though we've got the kids pieces at the end.



I Must Go Down to the Sea Again

Barbara B. Rollins

I could sit and look at the ocean forever. Never living closer than an eight-hour drive, I've visited from time to time. Once, with my parents and two sisters, again when my own sons were quite young, from time to time during conferences and meetings, on two ocean cruises, and flying over the expanse of the Atlantic, I've savored it. From time to time I've waded, probably never more than knee deep. Until now.

Far too often I've stood on the beach, the sideline of life, afraid to get into the game. I'm available for commentary, ready and eager to direct or describe the action, but the *mêlée*? I leave that to the actors. Conversation? Let me talk to the group. One on one? Too scary.

Life begins at forty? I must be slow, for mine peeled off the beaten path with a roar at sixty.

I snuck up on my fear, buying a swimsuit in May, carrying it to a June retreat but didn't dare to swim. Carrying the garment from Texas to Wisconsin, I never removed it from the suitcase, ignoring invitations and the pool beneath my window.

Today – September – the suit got wet. With salt water. I announced I intended to play in the surf, but over the swimsuit donned shorts and a shirt, for the trip across the street from the hotel. I carried my drivers' license, credit card, cell phone, and new fancy camera. Did I really expect to get into the surf? Probably not. I did wade at the water's edge, as I had before.

The strap of the camera bag encircled my neck, fear of falling paralyzing me. Sand eroded under my feet with surging and ebbing water. I ventured a few feet further, anxious, nervous.

I scanned the beach for an acquaintance attending the same conference, somebody I knew but had never conversed with of course. Maybe I would ask them to watch the camera. Should I take it back to the hotel? Could I leave it with the desk clerk? Three strangers sat in lawn chairs on the beach. Were they trustworthy? Better to disguise it as clothing piled, invisible among other piles.

There weren't other piles. Did I trust a family playing together? On a wave of courage I put the bag on the concrete base of a pier, far from the water, close enough to the seawall few people walked up there. Resting on sandals, wrapped in the clothes, perhaps the large camera became innocuous enough. In my untried suit, wearing trifocals, I ventured into the surf.

I resolved to get the suit wet. Finally water splashed the garment. Mission accomplished! I could return and retrieve the camera. No. Not enough. I went further out, and further, and further, surprised when a wave splashed on my face. I took off my glasses, held them tight, and moved further yet, marking my progress by the nearby pier. It could be marvelous to stand even with the building spread out near the end. I got close, about three feet the goal, but the waves were covering my head, the sun long since down, and I was swimming alone, though the family of four were within sight, paying no attention to me.

I didn't need to prove anything – more. I was far enough. Standing and relishing long enough to soak in the moment, I worked my way to shore, dressed, and climbed to the top of the sea wall where on a bench I pulled out the camera to take pictures of the area. In the darkness the quality suffered.

It's okay. The images in my head will remain pristine. I have dared to live in tomorrow.

August 1, 1966

Janis Hughen Bell

This is a story from long, long ago. Before cell phones, personal computers, or fax machines. It was an innocent time.

It was a wonderful summer day. Things were going so well for me – spending the summer working and going to school at the University of Texas. What a lark.

I was in Austin for the summer to take six hours credit. I needed to lower next year's course load so I could be editor-in-chief of the 1967 *Cactus Yearbook*.

I was twenty, but after three years at Texas, I still felt like a kid. Of course, school was hard work, but there was so much else going on to make life exciting. Student life was easy-going. There was an innocence and peacefulness you could feel about campus.

My second class had finished and as I walked across campus that Monday, it was unusually pleasant out for almost noon. On that sparkling, perfect day, students who usually scurried to class were more relaxed than usual. Even with the heat of the day approaching, campus denizens seemed fresh and alive.

I crossed the South Mall with its carnival spirit and its vast openness. A crowd grew as I leisurely passed the Journalism Building. I thought about stopping at the *Cactus* office, but decided to go on early to my job as student counselor at Kinsolving dorm. Today, I would work lobby desk duty.

Besides, this would give me another two blocks to enjoy the beautiful day.

But as I continued my walk down the tree-canopied sidewalk, something suddenly felt strange. People started walking really close to me then passed me by. I was walking at a good pace and this surprised me. People were hurrying past me, but not really hurrying. They seemed to be gliding, as if in slow motion. They were so close for a moment and then they seemed to vanish ahead. It felt almost dreamlike. The sun was shimmering and people were floating by. Probably just a part of the magic of this beautiful day, I thought.

A student on a bicycle brushed passed me and I was startled. Looking up quickly, I saw him suddenly jump off his bicycle and leap into the air. I thought, what a crazy thing to do. But I never saw him hit the ground as I was suddenly shoved to the side and someone whispered to get down. Some one else said, "Be quiet and head for those bushes."

Flat on the ground, piled under a hedge with others, I heard: "Shooting is coming from the Tower in all directions."

A boy near me said, "Stay down until the shooting starts on the other side. Then run as fast as you can until they start shooting on this side again."

I ran for cover like this three times before I made it up the front steps of Kinsolving dorm. Inside, I heard the word "snipers," and about the dead on the ground. I thought of the kid on the bicycle. My life was changed forever.

My part in this day was small. I was assigned to the exit door closest to campus. The campus police instructed me to lock the door and not let anyone enter when the snipers were shooting on our side of the Tower.

"You must be crazy," I said. "I was out there and I know these girls need to get inside. How can I lock them out?" I was told to do this to keep them from running up the steps to the

door and exposing themselves to gunfire. I had a megaphone to shout out when I was locking the door, but this didn't work, as the girls would not stop coming. And I could never be sure that the firing had stopped.

The task was the most traumatic I would ever face. Girls would run up the stairs and scream and cry when they reached the safety of inside. It was worse when they pounded on the locked door. I soon stopped locking the door. If a girl made a run for it, I sure wasn't going to be the one to lock her out.

The siege seemed to go on forever. I never knew how long. Someone came and got me and told me it was over and I was urgently needed for phone duty at the lobby desk. Parents were calling in hysterics to find out if their daughters were alive. We had a list. This list was of the few girls who had checked in at the lobby desk. Everyone living at Kinsolving dorm was told to come to the desk and tell us they were safe.

The scene was still chaotic and not many had come forward by the time I arrived. The phone circuits were jammed but the phones rang non-stop. "Handle the calls quickly. If the girls are not on the list then tell the parents to call back. Try to calm them," the officer said. It was awful trying to console the parents. They cried whether their daughter was on the safe list or not. It was so long before I could match a parent with a girl on the list. It was odd to have so many phone calls. Our means of communication was limited then and most families only traded weekly letters. Few indulged the luxury of long distance calls.

I worked the desk late into the night and well past my normal shift. Part of me wanted to go to my dorm room and cry too, but I knew I had to stay. Kinsolving dorm had been my college home for the last three years and I knew how much the staff needed my help this day. Many of the residents camped in the lobby all night – no one wanted to be alone. Besides, the only

TV was in the lobby and we wanted to see the news. We had heard only scattered information from the radio and the parents who called.

We were stunned as we watch the TV that night. Our beautiful campus looked like a battlefield as image after image showed the massacre. There had been only one sniper and the rampage had lasted 96 minutes. The madman-shooter was a UT student, Charles Whitman, 25 years old. He looked like the all-American boy. Slowly, the facts unfolded. We would hear the final toll –16 dead and 31 injured. Awful details. The worst was the senseless shooting of an un-born baby carried in his eighteen-year-old mother's womb. She was the first person hit and lay unaided on the South Mall with the other dead and wounded until the siege was over.

The injured were terribly maimed. Several were paralyzed for life. The Drag (our name for Guadalupe Street) would claim the most victims killed. I am not sure if classes were held on Tuesday. They probably were, as everyone wanted things to return to normal. We kept our vigil in silence.

We had been taught to get over things we could not change and we desperately wanted the return of our innocence. People didn't talk about the terror of that day. We were in shock. How could this happen to our wonderful lives? The authorities were worried about copycat murderers so the tragedy was not discussed much. The last weeks of summer were haunted as we dealt with our pain. Finally though, the fall semester came with its normal distractions. We could begin again and put the summer behind us. Football games, outdoor fun, and the start of fall classes occupied our days. But most of all, new students arrived who had not been on campus the first day of August. I stayed busy with studies and work on the *Cactus Yearbook*. "The Tower Tragedy," dubbed by National TV and magazines as the worst homicidal incident in recent history, received the

briefest mention – almost an afterthought in the yearbook’s Chronology section. But since that horrible summer day, August 1, 1966, I felt unprotected walking between classes, on the Drag, and even on the streets around campus. I did not walk on the South Mall until my graduation ceremony the next year. I never talked about my role on that sad frantic day until now, but the horror followed me all these years.

The suddenness and closeness of death stayed with me. I no longer feel safe in open spaces and I no longer trust strangers. I still circle around the South Mall now when I visit campus. I know the terror that happens when a madman takes the Tower. I remember a day forty years ago when the Forty Acres changed for me forever.

The Banquet

SuzAnne C. Cole

In my dream a wedding banquet’s almost set.
The bride and her maidens – attired in white
with scarlet accents – enter as I, a woman
of a certain age, fuss over flowers, purple and gold.
“My table,” says the bride, “represents the seasons.
You’re arranging autumn,” pointing to a cake
with dancing scarecrows, “and down at that end –
where the crow stalks and hoarsely cries –
that’s winter – where you’ll be going next.”

A Maze

Jim Wilson

All my life
Trying to manufacture
An awesome personal destiny
I wake up
In the same dream limitations
Seeing no door
I have enough nerve to open
Deep knowing
That if I do choose, open —
Walk through and close
All other doors in this room
Disappear
And in that new room of life
As I focus
Twice the more doors
Will be crying
“Open me! Open me!”

Colors of War

Pat Capps Mehaffey

We walked the drab halls to green-walled classrooms in the red brick high school building. In the study hall, one wall of windows offered yellow sunshine filled with dancing beige dust motes. Framed faded prints of George Washington and Abraham Lincoln furnished our art education.

Washington, with his crowded mouth of false teeth and his powdered hair clubbed into a ponytail, offered little inspiration. Lincoln appeared equally depressing in his black suit, with sad eyes and lines of affliction carved into his face. We viewed these paintings every morning during assembly in the auditorium.

The burgundy draperies with golden fringe opened to reveal the Stars and Stripes swaying from a gilt pole on the stage. With hands over hearts, we recited the solemn words of the Pledge of Allegiance and sang the soaring notes of “The Star Spangled Banner.”

On the first floor, near the front door, crouched the sinister offices of the principal and the superintendent. Lined with ancient brown paneling, these offices personified fear and despair. On one wall of the principal’s office, suspended on a nail from a short leather strap, hung a pale pine paddle. Two feet long and an inch thick, it had a row of holes drilled in one end. Boys whose skin displayed fiery red welts from whippings with this paddle starred as heroes.

For serious crimes such as skipping school or failing grades, a student, accompanied by his parents, could be summoned to the superintendent's office. Only the picture of a smiling Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the pastel fabrics of the shirtwaist dresses worn by the school secretary lit up this room.

Not one teacher under the age of fifty presided in our classes. The Selective Service drafted the young men, and the young women learned they could earn more money and help their husbands and sweethearts win the war by working in defense plants. They preferred serving as Rosie the Riveter to being stuck in a classroom. Now grandmothers who appeared cut from the same pattern taught every subject. Each had steel-gray hair arranged in tight marcelled waves or screwed into a bun at the nape of the neck. They wore sensible big-heeled shoes that announced their approach and ugly tan cotton hose. Nylon hose, obtainable only through the black market, had no place in our lives. The resolute replacement teachers stood before the blackboards writing wisdom with white chalk to a group of bored, disinterested teenagers.

One room on the second floor presented some sparkle – the chemistry lab. Here the glass test tubes and petri dishes, reflecting the glow of the overhead bulb, and the hot blue flames from the Bunsen burners brightened our days.

World War II cast its gray pall of anxiety and worry over every aspect of life. The homes of many classmates displayed the Mother's Gold Star in its red, white and blue frame in front room windows. The war took the lives of several hometown boys – some only four years older than me.

By collecting green ration stamps for shoes, families bought school shoes for each child by order of age. Due to strict rationing of gasoline, we all walked everywhere we could, and shoes wore out early.

My mother said, “When you get off the school bus every day, tie the strings of your shoes together and loop them over your neck. By walking home barefoot, you can save shoe leather.”

No longer did the high school marching band, resplendent in crimson and black uniforms and carrying gleaming musical instruments, perform on the clipped green grass at football game halftimes. Suspended for the war’s duration were all athletic competitions. Since tires played a vital part in the wartime effort, rigid rationing applied to those for civilian use. Without extra tires, the yellow school buses could not transport teams from town to town. Retired teachers drove the buses for pickup and delivery of children in rural areas and applied recycled patches to punctured inner tubes and tires.

Mr. Lee, the principal, substituted as our typing teacher until a replacement was found. He surprised us one day by escorting a young war bride into the room saying,

“Students, meet Mrs. Lambert, your new teacher. Please make her welcome. Her brave husband is serving in the Marine Corps in the Pacific Theatre, and she’s living here with her mother until he comes home.”

Into our dreary existence Mr. Lee had delivered a beautiful miracle. With quickened interest, we absorbed the look of her long brown hair, her snapping dark eyes, and her wide white smile. She wore an orange (of all colors) twin sweater set over a rust tweed skirt and a strand of milky pearls at her throat. She had turned-down ankle socks with white and brown saddle shoes – just like every girl in the room. We almost swooned with pleasure. Anxious to please her and bring out her radiant smile, we learned to type with speed and talent. That was October 1944.

In February 1945, as we sat before our Royal manual typewriters pounding with efficiency, the preacher from the Baptist church knocked on the door and came in. Right behind

him stood Mrs. Lambert's mother, wearing a ghastly paleness and wringing her hands. They took Mrs. Lambert into the hall and closed the door. That didn't keep out the purple bruising sounds, however. We heard Mrs. Lambert screaming and sobbing. "No, No! Not Mark! I cannot live if Mark is dead. He can't be dead."

But he was. Totally and irrevocably dead – one of the 6,825 U. S. Marines killed in the battle for Iwo Jima. As the first troops landed on the island, they instantly learned the volcanic ash of the beaches afforded no cover from enemy fire. With no trees, no grass, no boulders, they were exposed. The Japanese didn't fire at once, however, but allowed the fighters to move closer to the entrenched artillery. At a covert signal, the red blood of American Marines flowed out onto the black mounds of crushed lava. Rows upon rows of the best of America's young men were mowed down by machine gun fire. Mark Lambert fell among them. His wife, our beloved teacher, would never see him again. How could she bear it? How could we?

Mr. Lee returned as our typing instructor. Every day, we looked at his thick, black-rimmed glasses and his black bow tie, at his white hair receding from his shiny pink forehead. His colorless voice droned in the room and disturbed the sandy dust motes. We faced a bleak, desolate landscape and yearned to see an orange sweater set and milky pearls.

His Face Kaleidoscoped

Yvonne Pearson

At Omaha Beach he swam with
one hundred pounds on his
twisted back to a body-
littered beach. Bombs
clotted the moon, spilled
its colors through the sky.
Medic by moonlight, socks
rotted on his feet.
His wound – the shaking hands.
And so I'm not a surgeon,
he explains to us again.

When wood fires warmed October,
he'd come around the kitchen door,
bouquets of mallards gathered
in his hands. He'd laugh and tell
us hunting stories, promised
he'd always be our fire.

The wound was already there,
his father's moon gone first,
his father the immigrant who cried
to talk of treeless winters on the
plain. They held in common that hole

my father filled with hunting rifles,
valium, polished cars, us.

He courted me with apple blossoms
and in his emptiness he ate my heart.
So how do I warm myself now? His face,
kaleidoscoped, stares past me.
When the coyotes howl, when
the loon's cry sails the lake,
I wait for him to say
this is yours.

Saturday Nights

Helga Kidder

As dusk strolled down the lane,
Mother gathered us girls like produce
to scrub in a zinc tub. Father swept
the day away in front of our house.
After supper Mother tucked us between
fields of cut hay. Father
fastened the shutters
and closed the bedroom door.

I held my favorite doll like an apple.

Star Gazers

Craig S. Monroe

“Crap, what bunk. I can’t believe we paid good money for that. You coming into money, what a laugh.” Rick’s arms flailed in the air, his leather jacket reflecting the nightlights of the carnival midway. “Don’t see how that’s going to happen. You don’t even know anyone with money.” Rick walked on scuffing his boots, kicking loose dirt into the air spreading dark soot over brightly colored autumn leaves. Sam’s smaller size caused him to push harder to keep up with Rick’s long stride. Sam was still in high school, but he and Rick were best friends, back to elementary. Sam had attended Rick’s graduation and in September came to his nineteenth birthday party.

“Money?” Sam paused. “It could happen.” His head bent forward, looking at the ground. “You know, things happen sometimes.”

“Come on Sam, get real,” Rick said. “Look at me, I still don’t have a job. Things like that don’t happen to guys like us. That old gypsy can’t see things in the stars.”

“Still maybe” Sam’s voice disappeared into the cold wind that blew his collar across his face.

A calliope sprayed its happy tune into the air, carneys called their promised treasures through loud speakers. The smell of sausage, onions and cotton candy mingled in the air like a strange soup that alternately beckoned and violated the nose.

Kids and adults played games and showed off to their sweethearts. "Everyone's a winner," the barkers yelled.

Rick kicked at an island of weeds in his path and grumbled.

"What's the matter with you?" Sam said. "You been on edge all night. What was your fortune anyway?"

"Mine...mine makes no sense," Rick said. "She said I could expect an 'auspicious event possibly leading to renewal,' or something."

"Or something?" Sam said. "What was the something?"

Rick stopped.

"Death, damn it...death." It came from deep in his throat like a muffled cry. Rick turned to Sam, his eyes looking past him. "I got my induction notice this morning."

"Oh man...what did your Grandfather say?"

"I ain't told him yet."

"How come?"

"Don't know what to say to him, that's all." Rick looked at the Ferris wheel spinning ahead of them. The colored lights whirled, the buckets with their fragile human cargo swayed like pendulums as each went over the top. A guy in one screamed; Rick's gut shuddered and stiffened. "God, I don't even know where Vietnam is. It scares the hell out of me, seeing all those body bags every night on TV."

"Ya, I seen them too," Sam said. "What the hell are we doing there anyway?"

Rick shook his head. "Killing commies, I guess."

The Ferris wheel stopped and riders jumped to the platform, laughing.

"That sausage sure smells good," Rick said. "You got any money, Sam?"

Sam thrust both hands into his pockets. "Not much," he said. He opened his right hand, to expose a quarter and two nickels mixed in with some string and a toothpick. "Ha, so much for

coming into money,” Rick said. “Looks like I got a dollar though. Maybe we got enough for one.” A smile spread across Sam’s face.

At the side of the stand, there was a large oak tree with two picnic tables under it. Sam threw the sandwich down on one and Rick cut it with his pocketknife. Sam climbed on top of the table and sat down, his heavy boots on the seat. He took a bite and gazed at the ground, his eyes wandered as he chewed. His head lowered as if looking through his eyebrows, and then he jumped down and picked up something. “Rick, look.” He waved a \$100 bill under Rick’s nose.

Rick pulled his head back. “Where was it?”

“On the ground over there.” Sam pointed to a spot next to a plastic cup snagged on a root, dancing in the wind.

“Let me see it,” Rick said and reached with his hand.

“No way, you won’t give it back. I found it and it’s mine.” He turned and started walking down the midway, digging his heels into the dirt, the money in one hand, and the sandwich in other.

Rick, still standing with his hand outstretched watched his friend retreat. “All right, it’s yours. I didn’t mean...come on, wait up. Hey, the gypsy was right; you did come into money.”

Sam made no indication he heard Rick, and kept walking. After a few steps, he turned around and started walking backwards while looking at Rick. “I guess I did. Maybe the fifty cents paid off after all.

“I guess that means my fortune will come true? Damn!” Rick slammed his fist into the palm of his hand. “Why is this happening to me?”

“Don’t know,” Sam said. “Maybe you could go to Canada. Jim over in Union City did that. One day he gets a notice and the next day he’s gone. Folks get letters from him every now and then. He says he’s all right.”

“What would I do in Canada?”

“Same as you are doing here, not a hell of a lot of anything.” A small grin darted across Sam’s face, but Rick looked away.

“My Granddad wouldn’t be happy if I did that. He and my dad had their wars and came back alive.”

“There, you see,” Sam said crossing his arms in front of him, holding a rigid pose. “What more do you need?”

“Great,” Rick said. “Granddad has a hard time hearing cars coming and his knee causes him to wake up at night swearing. I don’t want that, or maybe worse. Mom says Dad wouldn’t talk about the war when he came home. She said he stayed with us just long enough to find the river of booze, and then followed it to its source she guessed. He never wrote, never said anything, just left. Doesn’t say much about war, does it.”

“Sam, I’ve got to do something, but I don’t know what.”

Rick reached down, picked up a stick, and rolled it in a sawing motion between the palms of his hands. “I had a bad dream last night.”

“Dream?”

“I marched up a winding road at night. Dark clouds blew across a crescent moon like a procession of waves. Someone behind me kept yelling, ‘Keep going; don’t stop or you’re dead.’ I could see where the road disappeared over the top of the hill. There was a crooked tree, with no leaves – tall against the sky. A hangman’s noose swayed from a long branch over the road. My legs hurt and I could hardly move – as if something held me back. The voice kept getting louder as if it would blow my ears apart. I turned and saw my Granddad looking down on me. ‘Keep going, don’t stop.’ I couldn’t figure what he meant. He reached out and put his hand on my shoulder. At that moment, I knew that he meant I’d be all right.” Rick pulled his arm back and threw the stick at a tree in front of him. The tiny stick bounced off the tree and fell in a pile of leaves. He picked up the stick and cradled it in his hand. “You know, you just want to run

away as fast as you can, but you know when you get where you're going, it'll be there waiting, – because it's in you."

"That's pretty creepy," Sam said.

"I can still feel the fear from that dream; I'm not sure what to do." Rick could see the stars through the trees. "Look Sam, Orion."

Sam looked up. "All I see is trees."

"There through that opening. Granddad's been showing me that since I was a kid. He said Orion stands guard defending us against the darkness beyond, his sword held high. Whenever I see it, I should remember that he protects us from the unknown that's out there in the dark. He says he believes what the government is telling us about Vietnam – the commies need to be stopped. I don't know as I care one way or the other, but I don't believe you should bury your head either. I guess what is going on in Vietnam is wrong, isn't it?" Rick looked over at Sam, but Sam was digging a hole in the ground with the toe of his shoe. "Are you listening Sam?"

"It won't be long and it's my turn," Sam said.

"Maybe the stars look different in Vietnam," Rick said. He walked to the tree and leaned against it, his eyes still on Orion.

"How would I know, I've never been there," Sam said still digging.

Rick pushed himself away from the tree, forced back his shoulders, and took a deep breath. "I need to talk to Granddad."

Message for My Family

Diana Raab

The day after I die
and hours after my ashes cool,
find a purple urn with a window.
Purple nurtures my spiritual strength
and windows keep me alive. Remember
I'm claustrophobic and the thought
of being stuck inside a box frightens me,
since I must indulge in my favorite hobby
of people-watching, which sends me to my journal where I
find joy and solace.
Remember writers need time alone —
once a day my window should be closed,
just once a day after I die.

No One Calls

Ken Paxton

The old man's hands carefully brush aside the snow revealing a bronze headstone embedded in the frozen turf. Struggling, he twists free the thermos stopper, always screwed on tighter than need be, and pours hot water on an icy recess in the plaque's center. Steam rises and mingles with his own soft breath in the chill afternoon air. Around him snowscape and heavy sky merge into a misty curtain of driftwood grey.

The handle in the recess turns easily, for which he is grateful. He pulls out the vase stored upside down there and sets it upright back into its socket. Rotating firmly, he locks it securely into place, a little tighter than need be. A ceramic oval bonded to the vase still reveals her likeness. He'd chosen a rare smiling photo from the latter years, too small and faded now to catch the ambivalence in her eyes.

After pouring the remaining hot water into the vase, he sets in the roses. Their deep velvety scarlet soothes his tired eyes. It's been a week since Valentine's. Arranging them purposefully, almost sacramentally, he reaffirms his personal acceptance of the day.

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In another town hundreds of miles to the southeast, where snow is rare and rain common, a young mother helps her three-year-old daughter loosen the bow from her hair. She thinks of

another bow that needed untying years ago, belonging to another little girl very much like her own. She sees the troubled fingers that helped her then. Intensely maternal, this youngest daughter-mother knew not when or how such urges were born in her heart. They weren't of the early years. A tempest of the soul tore through their home when she as a child gave a child's love magnified through innocence. While elder siblings had love abounding in which to delight during the early years, she received nurture only from brief and uncertain latter years. She learned much more of love's fragile beauty, fretful eyes looking right through her, displaced but not unkindly.

Hoisting her daughter to the top bunk bed, she's distracted by a wall calendar. The February picture shows a fluffy grey kitten clutching a ball of indigo yarn. "February twenty-first," she whispers and checks her watch. "Still have time to call." Her daughter softly catches her face, gives a big kiss and merrily bounces all over the bed before plopping onto her pillow. More kisses, long, fervent, three-year-old prayers...she turns out the light and walks down the hall. Call to say what? "Hello, how are you?" To talk of children and vacations, weather and gardens? Were they not all longing to be together, yet thankful to remain apart and...unreminded?



To the northeast on a rocky coast the middle son-father tips his recliner back and gazes into the receding flames of his old stone fireplace, half asleep after dinner. Thoughtfully reminiscing, he strokes the aged golden lab sitting next to him like a wise old counselor. He brought home the puppy years before to teach his little sons the joy and responsibility of caring for other beings.

Most of the day he'd been a bit pensive. That morning when he rose early to pray and think things through, he noticed his

devotional book gave the date and lesson scripture as "February 21 - She hath wrought a good work on Me. (Mark 14:6)" Now he recalls warm coconut macaroons in winter, cool strawberry shortcake with the sweetest homemade whipped cream in summer, and wooden spoons wielded by a tender voice that never rose in anger in the early years. A voice that patiently soothed his first-grade fevers and miseries which seemed never to end.

The lab looks up at his master who fidgets in his chair, remembering another voice from the latter years: her profoundly forlorn, unsettled, and confused tones like a smooth flowing, beautiful river suddenly cast across a ragged jumble of broken bedrock. How those jagged boulders failed to rip him apart as he floated past, helpless in the current of her suffering, he knew full well. It was her own tender love while yet she could give it, developing in him an acquiescence more powerful than the chaos of those latter years. It was as well his father's steadfast commitment. His isolated love, stripped to its barest essential, never wavered.

Those years ended unexpectedly. Shortly afterwards, Uncle Sam gave this son-father an offer he couldn't refuse. He returned from Vietnam two years later to find his baby sister just starting high school. Before long he set out to discover a sparse corner of earth indifferent to his irrepressible memories. The din of coastal surf and seasonal storms provided a counterpoint expression of his desire to roar back at something larger than himself. Now faith and time, and his growing family, promote new roots and he is relieved no one calls on this day. "She has wrought a good work on me," he thinks and regards it an unimaginable miracle.

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Brightly colored fabrics with a variety of textures portray an opaline creek curving across a grassy pasture and winding through emerald willows as it fades from sight. The eldest daughter-mother directs fabric through a whirring sewing machine. The peaceful scene depicts a favorite childhood picnic spot their family visited each summer near a snow-fed artesian creek that divided a broad meadow dotted with willow trees. As the last piece of the scene is appliquéd into place, she hears an older machine, not so quiet as her own, clacking evenly along cloths of delicate prints and hues guided by those steady hands of the early years.

Laying the finished quilt cover across her bed, she snaps a digital photo to document her achievement. The image in the LCD monitor is labeled at the bottom with the date and time: 02/21/04 06:05PM. “Today,” she thinks, briefly startled. She hadn’t been close to home in the latter years, but before she left, the tempest came. Her adolescent estrangement prevailed over her youthful adoration and she resolved to go forth alone. She moved to the other side of the mountains to study accounting in a small college town. Not many years elapsed when she discovered love on her own terms, rekindling the joy that sprang from a merry childhood. Her recollections and images of the early years, most complete and least tended to, form a private place in her heart like a secret garden full of hidden joys, which she seldom visits. Often she recalls wearing clothes sewn by that gentle soul with gentle hands that brushed her auburn hair until it shone.

Setting the camera down and bending to pick up the cover, she wonders if her father maintains his annual rite of roses, given the degenerative arthritis in his knees. He never mentions it. For several years every February she went with him after she, her husband and children moved back to the hometown, before they settled out east.

On the bedroom radio Lucinda Williams sings, "See what you lost when you left this world, this sweet old world." Vague reflections become keen regrets suddenly swirling up in her heart like sunken autumn leaves disturbed from the bottom of a quiet pond. The song continues, "Didn't you think anyone loved you?" and she recalls other questions as much a bother to ignore as they are to...to what? You call, assuming a kindred frame of mind will answer, as interested in questions as you, but you're not there to see the ache in their eyes. Who could be so presumptuous, so intrusive? No one calls.

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Clearing more snow off the rest of the headstone, the elderly husband-father stops to reflect on the inscription under her name. Quietly he recites, "Mother Sweet," and remembers the joy they shared in the early years when it was a delight to call his bride by such a holy expression. A hollow breeze rises in the heavy evergreen boughs of solitary cedars stirring gently across the hillside like mourners. Further off in the overcast a lone goose marks its flight with muffled honking. "Come to Me all ye who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28)," he reads from the plaque's lower edge and adds, "Rest now."

He screws the lid back onto the thermos, a little tighter than need be, and takes one last look at his bride's picture. Forcing himself to rise from the snow against the sharp complaint of his knees, he shuffles back to the wrought iron gate and turns onto an empty sidewalk leading him home. The street lights turn on and chase back the twilight. He knows he'll call one day soon when the sun is bright. When Canada geese fill the skies returning north to bear and raise their gangly, fuzzy offspring, he'll call and talk about children and vacations, weather and gardens

Note to an antiquary

Phil Gruis

If, on a far-off day,
you were to poke around
a cluttered junk shop,
musty with old sighs,
and come upon a camera
that once was mine
and buy the camera
and find in it a roll of film
brittle with age,
and process the film
and find on it
a single image,
that image would be
of her, at 18, living
safe from time,
her eyes still burning,
her lips about to speak
my name.

Back In The Basements

Marian Kaplun Shapiro

Dark. Damp. Most of all, Dangerous. These were the basements of Parkchester, where I grew up from 1939-1959. Girls were NEVER to descend into their depths lest the unsayable happen. I knew that to explore their labyrinthine corridors would be the absolutely scariest experience I could conjure up, one I couldn't share with anyone, even tell anyone. If my parents were to ever find out.... Well, I wouldn't want to have to finish that sentence.

Starting at my building, 1480 Parkchester Road, these aisles of terror wandered from building to building, underground. If successful, I could get all the way to the "lower circle," approximately four blocks away. But success was not a foregone conclusion. At any point a connecting door might be locked. Even worse, an open door might slam shut, and then – entombment forever.

No one ever went down there, at least as far as I knew. Constructed as space for tenants to store such things as bicycles and baby carriages, the basements remained unused. Bats. Rats. Sounds in the dark (and in my imagination) followed me on my at-least-annual expedition. My heart beat seemed louder than the old bell-jar clock on my parents' folded dining room table (without a dining room, it remained folded, its narrow top reduced to a shelf). My eyes, uncorrected at 20/800, dark-adapted as I made my way from shadow to shadow. Finally, the

light beckoned under the final door, and I emerged, triumphant with my secret. Safe for another year.

What made me do such a thing? Yes, I was a bit of a daredevil, skating backwards down “Dead Man’s Hill,” swinging upside down from the monkey bars, head dangling just above unforgiving concrete. (Imagine what parents would say to that playground design today!) I’d had my encounters with serious danger – for one, a narrow escape from a rapist in a Parkchester elevator. I’d learned all the rules of survival: Walk confidently as if you know where you’re going, even if you’re lost; ignore catcalls, etc. I did it all as if it were easy. But the fact was, I knew in my heart that I was a coward.

So my basement adventures were my self-designed boot camp exercises. I reasoned that if I could survive them, I could survive anything. Maybe forty years later, I remembered that learning. Driving alone in New Hampshire, a stranger to an unlit highway late at night, a pickup truck chased me, trying to force me off the road. With all my girl-in-basement energy I drove my old car at almost 90 mph, 20 mph faster than I’d ever driven in my life, chanting “Keep your eyes on the road, keep going, keep your eyes on the road...” until I had outrun him. I was grateful once again for my early self-training. The Bronx was with me once again, this time in New Hampshire.

Mother, Edith, at 98

Michael Lee Johnson

Edith, in this nursing home
blinded with macular degeneration,
I come to you with your blurry
eyes, crystal sharp mind,
your countenance of grace —
as yesterday's winds
I have chosen to consume you
and take you away.
“Oh, where did Jesus disappear
to,” she murmurs,
over and over again,
in a low voice
dripping words
like a leaking faucet:
“Oh, there He is, my – my
Angel of the coming.”

Mirror, Mirror

Joy Harold Helsing

Mirror, mirror on the wall,
it's growing harder to recall
that time when I was fair and slim
with pleasing face and shapely limb,
looking forward to each day,
thinking life would go my way.
Mirror, mirror, now you show
every burden, every blow,
every scar I tried to hide,
all the tears I never cried.
Every trouble left its trace
on the parchment of my face.
Mirror, mirror, let me keep
some dignity until I sleep.
Let my sturdiness of bone
testify to battles won.
Let the challenge in my eye
hold the fears of night at bay.
And no matter how I fail,
let the laughter lines prevail.

Of Cotton-Patch Lessons & Air-Raid Drills

Bill Neal

“The time has come,” the Walrus said,
“To talk of many things:
Of shoes – and ships – and sealing wax –
Of cabbages – and kings.”

Lewis Carroll
(“The Walrus and the Carpenter”)

When I first started remembering things, the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl days of the 1930s were drawing to a close. I do recall there always seemed to be two constants in our daily lives: work and the land. Or, more specifically, saving our land. More specifically still, struggling to survive and make those dreaded annual mortgage payments on our small ranch. My family, and our neighbors, were pioneer stock who came to our little West Texas community bringing with them very little in the way of worldly goods, but carrying with them a very big dream: to own their own piece of land. In the 1930s that dream was in serious jeopardy as the vultures of foreclosure seemed always to be circling ominously in the distance.

By 1941, conditions had improved, and I sensed an easing of my family’s anxiety: it appeared that we were going to be able

to save the ranch after all. Yet we had barely survived the double-whammy of the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl drought when fate struck us – and the rest of the nation – another devastating blow. This one I remember and remember very clearly. When I was five years old, nearly six, I distinctly recall a very sunny Sunday afternoon in December when two couples – friends of the family from Quanah – came out to the ranch. We all saddled up and spent a pleasant afternoon riding to the hills located on our ranch. (Locally called the “medicine mounds,” the four geographic anomalies rose abruptly out of the surrounding plains to a height of about 1700 feet. The Comanche, there before us, believed the largest mound had spiritually-endowed healing powers, hence the name. The nearby village was therefore Medicine Mound.)

We got back to the headquarters, unsaddled and went into the house. Everyone was laughing and joking. Then, just before sundown, somebody turned on the radio. The good times abruptly ended. No one spoke a word while we listened to the unbelievable news: War! The date was December 7, 1941, – Pearl Harbor Day.

For the next four years laughter and good times were in short supply. Every night we sat riveted to the radio listening to war news, and the news in the first years was seldom good. Would the Japanese or the Germans invade us? Would we lose the war and have foreign devils take over and enslave us? Kill us? Many neighbors and family members enlisted or were drafted, and soon we began getting news that some had been killed or wounded or were missing. One neighbor boy, Norman Tidwell, who had not reached his 20th birthday, was killed. Our rural mail carrier got the War Department letter addressed to Norman’s parents which contained the news. Somehow, he was aware of (or guessed) its contents and arranged for several neighbors to

be present at the Tidwell farm when he delivered the dreadful missive.

Meanwhile, the family's economic struggle continued. Yet despite wartime shortages, rationing of gasoline, tires, etc., we somehow scraped together enough cash to meet those annual mortgage payments. Still, there were incidents of humor, if only recognized in retrospect. When I was in the first grade in our tiny community school in Medicine Mound, we held weekly air-raid drills, and it was very serious business for one and all. When the warning bell sounded, we all dutifully rose from our desks. On signal, we solemnly marched to the basement where, in darkness and silence, we anxiously awaited the "all-clear" signal. Years later, I often imagined a top-level military staff meeting in 1942 Tokyo: *War minister Hideki Tojo strides into his headquarters, and all snap to attention. Then Tojo barks his orders: "Send secret coded message to Admiral Yamamoto. All planes to be fully armed and in the air at 0600 hours tomorrow. Strike and annihilate that damned grammar school over at Medicine Mound, Texas. Take no prisoners!"*

First Grade was the year I learned an indelible lesson in economics – a lesson that wasn't taught in school. That class opened in a cotton patch. Although cattle-ranching was our primary pursuit, Dad planted about 40 acres of cultivated land in cotton. The cotton harvest usually began in the middle or last part of September and went on for six weeks or so. Most of our neighbors were small farmers, and cotton was their main crop. Therefore, when cotton harvest rolled around there was no time for frivolity – it was a daylight-to-dark grind to get the crop to the gin. In those days, there was no such thing as a mechanical cotton-picker. As a result, it was the custom in our community for school to be dismissed for about a month in order to allow students to help with their family's cotton harvest.

Dad gave me a cotton sack and, like the other kids, I dragged it up and down the rows “pullin’ bolls” – a most hot, dusty and unromantic task. But, hey, I was making good money! (Since I was a first-grader, I didn’t have to pick all day; after about three hours I was excused.) Like the other pickers, Dad paid me two cents per pound. Every evening we weighed our sacks in the field and marked down our take. By late October, I figured I was nearly rich, having acquired a fortune amounting to almost ten dollars, if memory serves. Then came the annual community Halloween party held in the school gymnasium. There were all kinds of booths and games set up and prizes to be won. How exciting! I took my nearly-ten-dollar fortune and joined in the games with gusto, and I won a few prizes which, at the moment, seemed grand. However, after a couple of hours, my fortune was gone, and those prizes suddenly seemed kind of dinky and tawdry. A sobering thought then occurred: all those hours and days of dragging that cussed cotton sack around on sore knees and with an aching back, and now it was all gone – gone so quickly and for so little! This was the lesson I took from that episode: It sure is a lot harder to make money than it is to spend it, and it sure doesn’t take very long to spend what it took a very long time to make.

Today I am the owner of a small ranch. Located in the shadow of those medicine mounds, it is paid for. No vultures of foreclosure circle overhead.

And I never, ever once planted a single row of cotton on it.

country cream

Sheryl Nelms

I wish I could slip back
into that bedroom

with the lilac scented breeze
fluffing the starched and stretched
Irish lace curtains

Big Ben ticking
and the “Girl Watching Robin” print

to my grandmother
with her white hair and quiet talk
who gave me credit for worthy thoughts

to the turtle dove coos
drifting in from the walnut tree

to the embroidered pillow case

and the love that swaddled me
from the world

when life was full
of afternoon naps

under the whir
of Philco fan
blades

back to the '50s
when the way
was easy

and the mulberries hung ripe
ready to fill the
evening

The Poet Interviews a Lobster *Becky Haigler*

What does it feel like, inside,
just before you split open the old skin
and wriggle out, all soft
and vulnerable and wobbly-legged?

Do you itch?
Is there a tightness in your chest?
Do you pace at night,
thinking your head might explode?

And later, do you regret it?
Do you miss the old shell?
I need to know, because...
I think it's happening to me.

The Reunion

Madelyn D. Kamen

Here we sit, the six of us. Betty, Lois , Smitty, Sharon, Ellen, and me. Glenda didn't come. She was embarrassed. She had gained too much weight. Sandra wasn't there either; but then, we didn't ask her. Sandra was never part of the group. She was the girl at school who 'did' the football team. Dated every single one of them. We tolerated her, but we didn't like her. The rest of us were the girls from Kinsolving Dorm, fifth floor, section B. Tight as friends could be.

We went back there last year. To Kinsolving. We wanted to see our old rooms. They called us "ma'am" and marveled that we were all still alive when we told them how old we were. We didn't think it was all that old; but, to them, we must have seemed ancient.

Kinsolving, we found out, is no longer a single-sex dorm. It is co-educational. Now, we're not prudes – well maybe Sharon is – but I think we were all taken aback when we saw guys sprawled across the beds in some of the rooms. Especially when that young man came out of the shower with only his towel around his hips. I was praying he wasn't going to take that towel off and dry his curly blond locks before he made it to his room. He didn't. Whew!

Our rooms look so small, now. Back then, they seemed so much bigger. They were our world, our home base, hum-did-um years ago. The stories we could tell about life in them.

There were the marathon bridge games during finals, when we sat on the floor and ate potato chips and Oreo cookies, and other gifts from parents' care packages. When one of us had to study for a final, there was always someone else around to take over her bridge hand.

And there were the times we all crowded together on the same bed and sang off-color songs. "Oh, she looked so fair in the midnight air with the moon shinin' through her nighty...." I can still recall most of the words.

There were discussions on how to make your boobs bigger. The prevailing remedy during that time was to rub peanut butter on them. Smitty tried it but I couldn't see much difference. Ellen had a better idea. She took nylon hose and stuck them into her bra cups. Of course, everyone could see what looked like brown boobs through her white lace bra.

This year, we decided to meet in Fort Worth for our reunion. Today, we went to the Cowgirl Museum and rode the bucking bronco. It's not really a bronco. It's this large rocking chair that they make to look like one. They take movies of you rocking on it and splice in other film, so it looks like you are participating in a real rodeo. Then, they put the film clip on the internet for all your friends to see. What a hoot that was!

Right now, we're all in a restaurant, doing what we do best – talk. I'm between Ellen and Betty, looking around the table at my dorm-mates of yesterday. And an odd thing keeps happening. I call it the "toggle-switch effect."

Most of the time, I see the girls looking just like they looked all those years ago. Nothing has changed. Then, all of a sudden there is a toggle, and I see a group of aging women talking. That can't be us, can it? Is that grey-haired old lady really Betty? Is that heavy-set woman really slender, little Sharon, blown up like a balloon? Are those really crow's feet radiating from the perimeter of Ellen's eyes? And who is that lady I can see in the

wall mirror – the one who has a good start on jowls and a double chin? Oh, my God! Could that be me?

Fortunately, my mind won't let me look at those old hens for very long. It mercifully toggles back, and I'm again transported to seeing my friends as they were when we sprawled on the bed and sang about "the moon shining through her nighty."

Lovely, isn't it, seeing old friends?

*Names changed to protect the author.

Breathing

Janet Morris Klise

A shiver passes
as I see my father,
a life time ago, half-lying
in the old brown recliner,
his head pulled back,
the dry insides of his lips
moving in and out
like blue parchment.

A fast sucking noise
comes from inside him,
and his hand reaches
for the yellowed clear mask,
the large toy nose.
Slowly, he pulls the elastic

over his face, behind his ears,
over the coarse dark hair.
The veins in his hand
know the valve.
He turns it clockwise.

I imagine
that I can see the oxygen
making its way
through the tube.
Now I try to imagine
that I wasn't there
when I was 11 years old
and it didn't work.

The Hunt

Yvonne Pearson

I was his first son
walking through yellow maple leaves.
“Shoot, Yvonne!”
No kick from my new .22,
just an easy crack
and the small striped body
writhed at our feet.
I didn't hesitate, still
somehow he must have known.
We did not share a solitary hunt again.

Hand-Me-Downs and Potato Soup

Rita Rasco

Somewhere in a far-away land, World War Two raged; but in my home, there was security and happiness. I was four, and Mother and Dad didn't talk much about the war; but I remember Dad being very quiet when we listened to the war reports on the old radio so full of static every evening. I was happiest when we an laughed listening to the antics of Amos and Andy or Fibber Magee and Molly.

Mother had a special war rations coupon book. Certain foods were scarce, and Mother traded her sugar coupons for items we needed more, like the flour she used to make her delicious potato soup. We never complained about how often the soup graced our table, because it was so good. Besides, those were times before children ever griped about what they were given to eat!

Cloth for clothing was limited, but I always had pretty dresses. Mom sewed beautifully, and she always happily handed down her secret. Our neighbor owned the feed store, and he gave Mother first pick of the pretty feed sacks she later turned into my great dress creations! Lucky were the little girls that got my hand-me-downs out of the church boxes.

I never felt the hunger so many people experienced. Because of Mom's delicious potato soup, no one ever knocked on our back door and went away hungry.

I couldn't understand how a war so far away in a country I never heard of could affect us until the day Dad told me that our neighbor's son had been killed in battle. That evening we went to their house to tell them how sorry we were. A large American flag hung over their fireplace. They said it had been placed on the casket of their son's grandfather who also gave his life for his country. Handed down through the years, the flag was very special to the family. Mom left them a large pot of potato soup.

I grew up and had a family of my own. They became very familiar with potato soup. First, because as a young couple we struggled financially, and the soup was inexpensive. Later, because some cold days just called for a good hot bowl of soup. Now I fix it when I need "comfort food," and it always seems to do the trick.

My mother and father handed down the intangibles to me that are so very important – love, faith, security, the need for good morals and good character. I hope I've already passed these down to my children and grandchildren; but when I'm gone, there's a tangible hand-me-down someone will inherit and hopefully share. It's a wrinkled, yellowed and often used piece of paper – Mom's recipe for potato soup!

Nora Lee Benefield

Janet Klise

Ninety-seven and her hair, curly and white and silver for forty years, is streaked with tobacco brown. She got Jesse James' autograph when she was a child in Joplin, and she was Carrie Nation in a church play, smashing donated furniture with a red-handled axe. She kept a dried vanilla bean in each bureau drawer and all her slips smelled like pound cake. She dabbed gardenia cologne behind her ears when she wanted to remember the smell of Missouri the day her husband proposed. Given now to low wordless murmurs, she shakes the bed rail at regular intervals, her color gone bad, her knees bent up almost to her chest. She scolds her children as if they were all still alive and the nurses as if they were her children. In the middle of the night, loud, she starts into "Bringing in the Sheaves," no sense of sight or time. It's hell getting her to quiet down before she's finished the last verse. She's like the small shriveled zucchini she used to leave on the vine for field mice to gnaw at, or yellow crook-neck squash, cleaned and boiled and waiting.

Yesterday and Today

Lee Ardell

We met again at a college reunion.
I felt he held my hand a moment too long
 until I broke away
 and looked at his nametag.

His face told me nothing,
middle age rounds out features and hides past lives,
but his eyes seemed to know a secret I'd forgotten,
 a promise thirty years too late.

I waited for a heart jump, sparks and fireworks,
 but all I remembered was sweet kisses
 with a long-lost skinny boy,
not enough to return today's wanting look.

Endless Possibilities

Carole Ann Moletti

I became a nurse in 1979 but have been one since the day I turned seven. I awoke hearing gulls screeching as they dropped shellfish on the rocks and picked over the ruins for breakfast. Another voice, one I didn't recognize, raised an awareness in my schoolgirl's soul. I went downstairs to enjoy the remnants of summer: the sun and the warm bathtub called Long Island Sound. "I want to be a nurse," I told my parents as I cracked open a soft-boiled egg."

"That's nice," they said, no doubt assuming I would move up the list to ballerina or rock star.

During the idyllic childhood that comprised my first life, I did belt out my own karaoke version of Carol King's "It's Too Late" in front of a bedroom mirror from time to time. At Miss Tessie's Bronx School of Ballet, I dreamed of floating across the stage in toe shoes. But a Virgo realist, I fixed up dolls and toys, rescued stray animals and injured birds, and bandaged playmates injured in playground accidents.

At fourteen, I volunteered in nursing homes and with handicapped children. While my friends perfected their skill at applying the latest makeup, I worked as a nurse's aide. I was only sixteen when a woman with breast cancer, as yellow as the moon, disease oozing from open sores all over, died as I bathed her. Her devastated husband looked into my eyes, tears leaking down his cheeks, and thanked me for being there in her last

moments. So began my second life and the resolve didn't waver until years later.

In my third life, as burned out as a lump of charcoal, I'd scream at a woman in the mirror I no longer recognized, "You must have been out of your mind!" Ass-backwards, the adult me struggled to figure out what I wanted to do when I grew up.

After I became a nurse-midwife, Grandpa Al introduced me to my great-grandmother, Jenny Bruno. He told me about her career as a midwife a century ago, and how he drove his mother to calls in a Model T Ford in the same Bronx in which I now practice. His nieces passed the torch by sending me their family treasures: Jennie's instruments, license, and assorted anecdotes.

A battered, immigrant Italian, Jennie gave birth to thirteen children, eight of whom survived. She achieved more than most women in 1911 could ever have imagined – a license signed by three male physicians that said she was "qualified to practice midwifery" in the days when mothers and babies routinely died. That crumbling, yellowed testament hangs restored in my dining room, adorned with Jennie Bruno's smiling face watching patiently. She straightens me out with an occasional kick in the ass, knocks out the self-pity, and reminds me I'm doing this for the women. I sometimes hear her voice, just like the day I turned seven. "Go tell your stories so that everyone will understand."

~§~

During twelve years of Catholic school, the Sisters of the Divine Compassion punished violations of the Ten Commandments by banging heads against blackboards. They reined us in with lariats fashioned from rosary beads. Yardsticks did double duty, swatting us into silence and teaching math lessons while measuring skirt length. Sister Mary Assumpta set the consummate example: Never flinch or you're done for.

Like a bird let out of a cage, I flew off to Lehman College: a New York City University in the era of free tuition and open admissions. There were no nuns and no one cared how short my skirt was. A big black dude weighed and sold marijuana as a daily special in the cafeteria. Following the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of God, did not get me into closed-out classes, but flirting with department chairmen worked very well. For everything else, there were sit-ins.

I stayed away from drugs and building takeovers protesting budget cuts. Nothing was going to stop me from getting that nursing degree. Against the backdrop of impending bankruptcy, New York City felt like a scene out of *Batman*: racial tension, vigilantes, murders, and arson. I walked the streets and saw the desperation caused by poverty, racism, and urban blight. When the blackout of 1977 hit, the glass started breaking, the looters took to the streets, and I barely got to my car in time. With no traffic lights, I battled my way home prepared to run over anyone who swung at my windshield with a baseball bat. I was going to be the one that made a difference.

I survived, and graduated, ready to take on the world. Progressing through a logical sequence of job titles and levels of responsibility, I descended towards hell and onto the mean streets of the South Bronx, Harlem, and Washington Heights. This “whitey” from the Bronx was fascinated (or crazy) enough to stick it out during the crack cocaine epidemic of the 1980s that made heroin addicts look like kindly old souls.

The dawn of the AIDS epidemic and the horror of working in the hospital on September 11, 2001, book-ended a career during which time speaking up made me part of the enemy camp, not the liberating forces.

Video clips of domestic violence deaths, child abuse, infanticide, rape, incest, and the degradation of women played over and over in my mind. My theoretical model for dealing

with families in crisis was of little use at 2 AM, standing in between the guy who just beat up his pregnant wife, the woman bleeding to death, and the clerk getting insurance information before we could get blood for transfusion.

I had bargained with the gods to keep the demons away but no good deed goes unpunished. They stole my soul and reneged. Divorce from my high school sweetheart, the inevitable loss of beloved family members, and my own personal health challenges gave me pause to ponder the endless impossibilities of life.

I focused on my family, thankful for the second chance at marriage and motherhood. I once battled sexism, racism, conservatism, and elitism. Well into my third life and tired of fighting, I moved past activism into escapism.

~§~

The night seemed full of endless possibilities, like life thirty-five years before. I stood in the lobby of the posh Marina Del Rey at the 75th anniversary of the Saint Frances de Chantal grammar school, Bronx, New York. The 50s vintage dress that called to me at an antique show fit like it had been custom made. I thought I looked pretty good with the gray dyed out and six pounds lighter than last year. Those anti-wrinkle creams seemed to work. They sure cost enough.

I never attended a high school reunion but instead, was drawn way back to my grammar school days. I remember only a few names and faces, most notably, Marianne. We don't see each other often, but just like tuning into a soap opera you haven't watched in years, we easily pick up the story line and move on.

I waited for Marianne, watching the lights of the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge glimmer over cold, dark Long Island Sound like tiny beacons. I moved across the bridge to Queens

seventeen years ago. I still work the streets of the Bronx but death, distance, or the ravages of time have broken all ties to friends and family. Alone, mesmerized by the tinkling fountain, I held back tears remembering when this neighborhood was an innocent idealist's only view of the world.

The cell phone bleated. "Sorry, I'll be there in a minute, got stuck in traffic." Marianne rushed in from the parking lot and gave me a hug. "You look fantastic."

We studied the collage of old class pictures. Marianne picked me out: the girl with a headband and hair in a pony tail, tights, uniform dress with a bow tie, and a big smile. We sipped drinks, nibbled hors d'oeuvres, and found the "Class of 1971" table.

John, one of the two "boys" who had been my close friends smiled when he saw me. "Hi, Carole Ann. You haven't changed a bit."

Sister Mary Lucille, at least eighty, peered at me and waved a gnarled, bony finger. "You're one of the Moleti girls, and none of you took French."

"That's right, Sister," I said, "but Spanish served me well." Nuns never give up.

George suggested we take the few surviving sisters for a boat ride in the dark and dump them overboard to get even for all those bruises. We laughed, reminisced, and tears flowed on my way home in the pouring rain as I crooned Streisand's tune "The Way We Were."

I drove over the bridge, from my first life, past the second, and into the third. I let the dog snooze on the couch and walked through the dining room where Jennie was still smiling at me. The kids were tucked in; the cat warmed my side of the bed. I snuggled next to my sleeping husband and lay there in the dark and quiet thinking about all the stories still to be told.

"Get back to work," Jennie said.

And I did.

Paradise Born

Barbara B. Rollins

Meredith drifted to paradise
leaving a shell to be born,
to be mourned.

Meredith's milestones are
would-have-beens.

Meredith lives like the perfect dream
vanishing as I wake.

Meredith Rollins Warren, – May 29, 2000



Unreality Show

James Penha

A member of the original television generation, I grew up in front of a small cathode ray tube. Color cartoons in black and white . . . *I Love Lucy* . . . and especially the quiz shows. I think I gained more cultural literacy from Hal March and Jack Barry and Bert Parks and all the other TV quizmasters than from my beloved books, and although I learned to reason in school, my mastering of the intricate rules of those first video games honed a sense of cause and effect – an imperfect sense I learned later.

The new wave of reality quiz shows on the tube these days reminds me of the unreality of those older programs and of my tiny role in the saga of the scandal that ultimately rocked American television in the fifties. My own part was barely a pebble – so small that, at the time, I didn't even notice its place in the landslide.

Because my family lived in New York City, the capital of live television in the 1950s, I frequently had the opportunity, during my childhood, to join the studio audience for my favorite quiz shows. At the close of every broadcast, as the hot lights dimmed, each show's producer invited audience members interested in appearing on future programs to remain for interviews. I knew I was too young to have a chance on *Dotto* or *Tic Tac Dough* or *Break the Bank*, but *The Big Payoff*, a daily program on the Columbia Broadcasting System, presented a

weekly segment on which a child could win \$500 in prizes by answering three general-knowledge questions.

One day, after my mother and I had witnessed a Big Payoff broadcast, I waited for an interview. I wanted my shot at the \$500 and at TV stardom! The producer asked me my name and age and what my hobbies were. He sought to discern, I knew, whether I had the ebullience and fluency required of a contestant on live TV. As well, he focused his attention on my intellectual ability to survive a contest. “What subjects do you enjoy in the third grade, Jackie?”

“History and Reading,” I replied.

“What are you studying in History now?”

“The discovery of America.”

“Can you tell me how many ships Columbus had?”

“Three: the Niña, the Pinta, the Santa Maria,” I proclaimed loudly, ebulliently. I congratulated myself: how smart a little boy I was!

“Very good. And what book have you read in school lately?”

“The fairy tales of Hans Christian Anderson.”

“Then have you seen,” said the producer, “that new Danny Kaye movie?”

“Oh, yes, for my birthday my mom took me to see Hans Christian Anderson at Radio City Music Hall. I love musicals; I love Danny Kaye,” I said. Might my appearance on *The Big Payoff* mark the debut of a new Danny Kaye, I wondered.

“Do you like pop music as much as you enjoy movie musicals?”

“Sure.” My family didn’t own a record player in those days, so radio’s top forty determined my tastes in songs. “I really like ‘That’s Amore’ by Dean Martin.”

“Can you sing any of it?”

Here was an opportunity to demonstrate the kind of ebullience producers think viewers want to see on quiz shows.

I stood and belted it out: “When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie . . . that’s amore . . . “ I’m sure my squeaky voice made me sound more like Jerry Lewis than like Dean Martin . . . but was I ever ebullient!

“Okay, Jackie, if we ever decide to invite you to be on the show, we’ll call you the week before the broadcast.”

By the time my mother and I had reached home after our long subway ride from Manhattan, my elder brother had already answered a telephone call from the producer: I would be a contestant on *The Big Payoff* the following Tuesday!

On that day, I skipped school to be sure to be at the studio well in advance of the program’s three o’clock start. My mom made me wear a blue shirt (better for television, the producer had told her) and my most colorful bow tie.

Soon after three PM, hostess Bess Meyerson escorted me to my mark opposite quizmaster Warren Hull. I was on the air! I heard the audience applaud although I could not see beyond the lights and cameras trained on Warren and me. I noticed Warren’s pock-marked face; it didn’t look that way on the TV screen at home. And I saw that Warren said no word but those he read from big posters hoisted by a crewman (Welcome Jackie. If you answer three questions, you will win prizes worth \$500 including a nineteen-inch Sylvania television set and a cocker spaniel puppy!) or from the small question-and-answer cards Warren held in the palm of his hand:

“Okay, Jackie, here’s Question One: In 1492, Christopher Columbus sailed to the New World with three ships: the Nina, the Pinta, and . . . what was the name of his third ship?”

Without a pause I yelled, “The Santa Maria!”

I heard Warren say “RIGHT,” and the audience applauded. Warren proceeded. “Question Two: In the current movie, what actor-singer plays the title role of fairy-tale writer Hans Christian Anderson?”

“Danny Kaye!”

“RIGHT again.”

This was even easier than answering questions at home. One more and I was a winner.

“Now, Jackie, here’s your musical question. Listen to the band play a few notes and name the popular song from which they come.”

I listened. What luck! How well I knew those notes. I sang the words to myself ... *When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie* ... until the band stopped, and then I shouted, ebulliently, “That’s Amore!”

“RIGHT!” screamed Warren. Out came Bess with my new puppy.

The dog died within the week, but my celebrity lingered in the neighborhood, in my family, and at school.

No one knew that the fix had been in. It never even occurred to me that I had been anything but so, so smart ...

... until the newspapers revealed those scandalous secret arrangements by which the winners and losers on supposedly fair TV quiz shows had been pre-ordained by producers and executives. Then I realized just how smart I had been on the all-too-accurately named *The Big Payoff*.

Side Trip

Alene Píneo

When misery followed me day and night, I decided to run away from the Dempsey foster home. My two dollars wouldn't go far. I needed a plan. There were a lot of tobacco farms in St. Mary's county along the Potomac. I figured someone might let even a ten-year-old work for a few bucks.

I went upstairs to the attic where we all slept. I had a couple of T-shirts, some panties and a pair of jeans. All of it fit inside a pillowcase. I climbed in bed with my clothes and sneakers on. Downstairs, the kids argued over TV programs, a scary movie or the Orioles' game. Mrs. Dempsey snored on the sofa.

The stuffy attic stunk of old urine, so I breathed through my mouth and kept the covers pulled up to my chin. I liked to died from the heat before the boys turned off the movie. Mrs. Dempsey woke up drunk as a skunk, banged around the kitchen, knocking over chairs while the twins snickered. Pretty soon they came upstairs.

It was 'way past midnight, maybe closer to two, when I crawled out of bed. I unlocked the back door, slipped outside into the blessed clean night air. Moonlight shone on the corn field. In the distance, the river washed against the sea walls. I filled my lungs and struck out through the field. I thought hard about what to do. Word of a runaway spreads fast, though as long as my foster Mom got her check for my keep, I'd be safe.

It was cooler. The wind having changed directions brought whiffs of manure and hay and replaced the tidal smells of the Chesapeake Bay. There wasn't any cover through the corn fields in the middle of August. Heat lightening flickered from cloud to cloud, but I wasn't scared. Excited. I thought of myself as pretty smart to outwit the old lady.

My feet hurt, probably because I'd out grown my sneakers. And I'd run out of the burst of energy of my escape. I'd walked for a long time, although I wasn't sure how far I'd gone. I saw a dirt road that would take my feet to freedom. Ahead the dark shape of a large building looked like a barn. Even if there was a farm house, I didn't see myself knocking on someone's door. People in the country usually had at least one dog. I didn't know much about dogs, except the big ones scared me.

The building turned out to be a long tobacco shed with open spaces between the slats for the walls. I felt my way around to a pair of double doors hanging open on rusty hinges. I pulled open a door. It smelled sort of nice inside, except for the dust. I got to coughing and wheezing until I had to sit down. I took off my sneakers to give my feet a rest, leaned back against the shed door to watch the sky and think.

Probably I'd gone about three or four miles – not nearly far enough – but if I stayed off the road to Piney Point, I'd be safe. Though I tried to have a plan for tomorrow, I fell asleep, hugging the pillowcase with my spare underwear.

In the morning my sneakers had disappeared. I couldn't figure out how. Then I saw pieces of the rubber soles next to a dog turd in the dirt. My sneakers were torn to shreds.

I walked across the dirt road into the next field where the tobacco had been picked. Dry tobacco stubble hardened by the summer's heat hurt my feet. It made me all the more determined to go on. Turning back never entered my mind. But my big plan

to run away had left out a few details like food and water. It dawned on me I might be even thirstier before the day ended.

When the sun got high, the heat shimmered through the cloud of dust from the tobacco fields. I kept walking, hoping to find a tree for some shade and branches to climb in case something chased me. My throat went so dry it hurt. I found a few pebbles to roll around on my tongue.

The road came to a bend where tall blackberry thickets, swarming with bees, grew on both sides. My stomach growled with thoughts of how good they'd taste. The brambles moved. A head in a bandana stuck out, a hand emerged holding a tin bucket.

"Shit!" said the head as I watched it gradually turn into a black woman in patched overalls. "Too many snakes for the likes of me."

I backed up in case a snake slid out. The woman, old and bent, had the weathered skin of an old boot when she worked her way out of the brambles, grunting and cussing. Her eyes widened at the sight of me. "Who you?"

"I'm Jessie." I stared at the glistening berries. "And I'm really, really thirsty, Ma'am."

She thrust the pail at me. "Take you a handful, girl."

She took me to a shack she called her "place" where she kept chickens and umteen cats. She had a funny gait, dragging one swollen foot so we walked real slow. She wasn't much bigger than me and said her name was Noony Sparks. I got to drink water at her hand pump before I fell asleep on her porch.

Noony let me hang around for a few days. She bandaged my sore feet in rags soaked in a comfrey poultice and fed me sweet potato pone. Her "place" surrounded by thick woods stood in a clearing in what had once been a farm. All that was left was her shack and a silo without a roof.

When the moon rose, headlights bobbed along the dirt road toward her shack.

“You kin watch, but keep still, you,” she said.

Old cars and pickups rattled to a stop. Men got out, carrying cages with squawking roosters, and filed into the roofless silo. I followed them under the guarded eyes of Noony, suddenly in charge – kerosene lanterns hung only where she allowed.

The men, mostly black, lined the silo’s walls behind a chicken wire fence with their cages. They passed whiskey bottles and jugs between themselves. Noony limped around collecting money in a baseball cap. A teenager dressed in town clothes took a blackboard with names and numbers, hung it on a nail and a low rumble of excitement began.

Her face glistening in the yellow lamplight, Noony climbed onto a wooden crate, holding up her hand for silence. “First round. All ya’ll place your bets.”

They called it a cockfight, I’d later learn. Thrust into the ring, roosters fought to their bloody deaths. They wore metal spikes on their legs to attack each other in a crazy war of feathers and spilled guts and chicken shit while the men yelled. This was too much for me. I had to run outside before the first round ended. Noony didn’t see me go. The fights would go on all night, I figured, so I made myself as comfortable as possible inside the shack. I had a queer feeling the ruckus inside the silo broke the law. In my view, it was wrong to hurt birds and animals, except big dogs who eat a person’s sneakers.

The awful noise grew, made bigger by the silo’s height. I pulled one of Noony’s quilts over my head. The yelling seemed to last forever like a TV set no one thinks to turn off. The distant hum of motors made me uneasy. As tired as anyone could be, I went outside to see who or what headed this way. They didn’t use headlights.

Police! They were everywhere. A loudspeaker boomed, “Come out with your hands up!” State police vans filled the clearing. The men poured out of the silo with their hands over their heads, but a few fast ones slipped into the pines. A truck drove in with a sign that said Humane Society. The roosters got loose, attacked each other, scared Noony’s cats into the woods, then took after the people with their useless nets. It was better than a circus.

Noony was the last one out of the silo. With her bad foot she couldn’t outrun the police. I didn’t see who hauled her away because I hid in the privy until the last cops drove off, then I went back to the silo. One lamp lit up the mess inside the cock ring. Did it ever stink! I kicked some empty whiskey bottles around, trying to think where to go or what to do. Under Noony’s crate was the baseball cap full of dollar bills. Now I’d pretty nearly go anywhere I wanted. What I hadn’t counted on was the last cop to drive away. He waited for me by the blackberry patch.

I had a side trip to Leonardtown’s Juvenile Hall.

breathe deep

Sheryl L. Nelms

whole wheat bread
baking a crisp crust
on a December morning

a cedar shelter belt
after a sudden shower

fresh mown bluegrass
under the July sun

hamburgers grilling
over a charcoal fire

red clover
blooming
in a Kansas field

apple muffins
split and steaming cinnamon
as the butter melts

a Peace rose
in a crystal bowl
on my kitchen table

my baby boy
bathed and powdered
cuddling against my cheek

life is full
just breathe
deep

My Father's Truck

Ellen E. Withers

In the 1960s, my father was the proud owner of a basic pick-up truck with no interior carpet and no toolbox in the bed. Although a child, I loved the truck as much as my father did.

All of the tools he needed were carried around with him; they just rolled around deafeningly on the floor of the passenger compartment. All practical tools a man might need were found there. There were flashlights, pliers, screwdrivers, wrenches, hammers, jumper cables, batteries of various sizes and shapes, and tractor parts scattered under the seats and on the floorboards. When he took a sharp corner, his entire inventory of tools rolled past your feet.

Most of my days I rode with my mother in her car, so any opportunity to ride in my father's truck was a special treat. At a young age I learned to use caution to open the passenger door of the truck. I would approach it warily, my feet strategically placed to avoid injury, making a long stretch to push the button on the handle with my thumb and pull back the door never knowing what tool or tractor-part might descend upon my tootsies. I tried to jump out of the way of falling items, but the effort was usually in vain. It didn't take many experiences of hopping around on one foot, howling in pain, to train myself to stand as far away from the door as physically possible.

Once inside, we'd roll down the window using the handle provided for that purpose, not with an electric knob found in

today's trucks. The breeze from the open windows provided respite from the heat, as air conditioning was not a luxury afforded in my dad's truck. Who needed air-conditioning when cranking down the window would cool you off just as well? My father felt real men didn't need air conditioning and it's likely that he didn't want to pay extra for it either.

When I'd look over at my dad and see his elbow out the window, I too, would put my elbow out the window. It didn't matter that I was a girl and a lady should never be seen riding with her elbow hanging out of a truck. I relished the freedom and the pure fun of truck travel with my dad.

As we drove, my father acknowledged all the oncoming vehicles on the road, usually by lifting his fingers from the top of the steering wheel and the oncoming vehicle did the same. I was convinced he knew everyone in the world.

The truck was useful for carrying fishing poles, tackle boxes and other equipment associated with fishing. I remember sitting between my parents with the minnow bucket at my feet, trying to catch the minnows with my hands. I'd try, usually fruitlessly, to keep the water from splashing out as we rounded corners or hit deep holes in the roads. Many times I chased a live minnow around the interior of the truck that I'd lost from my grasp. Once caught, I would place it back into the bucket, hoping the waterless adventure would not be detrimental.

Our journey home from our excursions usually included a stop for an ice cream cone. I'm the one who needed lots of napkins because I never seemed to finish my cone before the bottom became soft and started to drip. Unlike my mother, Dad never seemed to mind ice cream on his seats.

Mom would spend hours brushing the tangles out of my hair after my truck rides, telling me to put my hair in a rubber band next time, but I never did. I refused to sacrifice the joy of feeling the wind blowing across my face and through my hair while

riding in the truck. I felt sorry for girls who didn't have the chance to fish, ride in a truck with their dad, and spend the day exploring the countryside.

When it was time to learn how to drive, my father insisted I couldn't drive my mother's car with an automatic transmission until I mastered the three-on-the-column shift in his truck. Although his face was the picture of sheer torture as I tried to shift smoothly, Dad held his tongue when I ground the gears.

While I learned the fine art of clutch-to-gas-pedal transitions on this manual transmission, Dad would wave away anyone unlucky enough to get caught behind the truck on a hill or incline. I resented the sneer on people's faces as they circled around us while I struggled to master the hill, but Dad laughed. He explained it was the same with anyone learning to drive a standard transmission.

When I left for college, the aging truck was conscripted into service. The peeling paint and rusty fenders made me feel quite conspicuous as we pulled into the parking lot of my dorm with other freshmen disembarking from mini-vans and sleek sedans.

Once settled into my new home, I waved to my parents as they got into the old truck. It was my independence day. I should have been happy, but found that melancholy was a more accurate description of my mood. The twinge of pain I felt as the small red lights of the truck disappeared into the darkness surprised me.

My mother, my father and the truck were a little worse for wear, but they'd carried me through some of the most important lessons in life and for that, I'll be eternally grateful.

The lessons came back to me when my own children were born. With my boy and girl, I once again experienced fishing, the joy of bumping along the countryside in a truck with your elbow out the window, and dripping ice cream cones.

Summer Child

Linda Kuzyk

Look down...

Bare feet

Small, tan, sturdy

Avoiding sharp stones, thistles, bumblebees

Earth

Shades of green, patches of brown

Wild flowers, bees, butterflies, gentle breezes

Look up and around...

Summer sky

Azure, occasional white shapes teasing the imagination

Crows, gulls, swallows surfing air currents

Summer views

Ocean; blue, calm, serene, inviting

Forest; always a sanctuary

Look Within...

Freedom

Long summer days, outside in the sun

Totally alive

Wisdom

The child within, barefoot, free, alive

The elder remembers, smiles, and takes off her shoes

The Possum That Changed My Life

Thelma Zirkelbach

I am a member of a club I never wanted to join: The Society of the Recently Widowed. I never wanted to go it alone. I'm a team player, a tandem rider. I had a roommate after college, a partner in my business and two husbands – at different times, of course.

Widowhood puts me in good company. In most species, from humans to chimpanzees, to chickens and even fruit flies, females outlive males. I thought I had outsmarted biology by falling in love with and marrying a man five years younger than I. I hadn't counted on cancer depriving me of my spouse. But what seemed like an annoying sore throat was the first symptom of acute myelogenous leukemia, an insidious disease that would claim my husband's life in less than a year.

Widow. I hate that word. It evokes a dried up old lady with a prune face, squeaky voice and faltering step. Mostly it means "alone." I didn't want "alone." I didn't think I could bear it.

My husband Ralph was the center of my life, my compass, my best friend and confidante. Even while he was hospitalized the last seven months of his life, he talked me through every problem, every decision.

Suddenly he was gone. Our life was over; my life had begun.

I thought I had prepared myself, but no one is ever prepared for a loved one's end. Death isn't real until it happens. Even then, you can't believe you'll never share another conversation, another argument, another hug. How would I make my way emotionally, financially, practically?

There is a Yiddish proverb that says, "*Az me muz, ken men*; When one must, one can." I resolved to make that my mantra. My first venture into independence came when I arrived home from Ralph's funeral in Iowa. The house seemed larger and darker than I remembered. I sank down in Ralph's chair, and my future stared me in the face. Evenings of loneliness to come.

Then I told myself I'd lost my husband, but I hadn't lost his voice. His greeting was still on our answering machine, saying in a flat, Midwestern twang, "You have reached the Zirkelbachs. Please leave a message at the sound of the tone. Thank you." I'd keep his greeting there for practical reasons. It's safer to have a man's voice answer the phone. But more importantly, hearing his voice was the closest I could be to him.

One day I was really lonely for the sound of Ralph's voice. I picked up the phone. There was no dial tone. I tried another phone. Dead. I tried all six of our phones. None of them worked. A searing pain hit my chest. With the phone dead, Ralph's voice was gone. Crying, I called my daughter Lori on my cell. She was tired and grouchy and had no suggestions at all.

I wandered into Ralph's study and stared at the console, pushed button after button to no avail. Could this happen at a worse time? I'd buried my husband and now the last vestige of him was as unreachable as his body.

I sat in his chair and rested my head on the desk. My gaze traveled to the floor. And there I saw the telephone cord. Unplugged. I plugged it in. Then I raced into the bedroom and grabbed my cell. Holding my breath, I dialed our number. The answering machine picked up. "You have reached —"

Laughing with relief, I called Lori. "Guess what. I fixed it."
"How?"

"I plugged it in."

Lori chuckled. "Your first technological triumph."

Only a small one. Technology is not my friend. When my hard drive crashed, hurling a completed manuscript into cyberspace, I felt as if huge chunks of my life had evaporated.

After grieving the hard drive for a month and berating myself for not backing up my work, I sat down and rewrote the manuscript on the new drive. Other household problems cropped up: a gas leak in my hot water heater, air conditioning coils that gave out, a broken fence.

The first thing my grandson said after Ralph died was, "What will Thelma do if something breaks down?" Usually I cry. Then I pay someone to repair it. Last week I fixed a leaky toilet all by myself. Ralph wouldn't have believed it.

As I trudged through the first year of widowhood, I survived a fall in the middle of the night that required a trip to the emergency room for stitches – I drove myself – a carpal tunnel release and a hysterectomy. I slogged through the legal quagmire that follows death. Emotionally, I took baby steps: joined a grief group, filled a memory box, cleaned Ralph's office. Each was a move toward independence, but I didn't feel I'd arrived until I met the possum.

One Friday I woke in the middle of the night to the sound of breaking glass. Instead of being frightened, which would have been logical, I was annoyed. My cats had probably had a fight and knocked something off a shelf.

I got up to look and found Toby, Cat Number One, asleep. Then I heard a meow from my bathroom. Tiki, my second cat, sat with ears perked, tail swishing back and forth.

From the corner of my eye, I saw something move, something gray. Another cat? No, sitting on my counter, staring

placidly at me, was a possum. He looked enormous, as big as a Great Dane. Of course he wasn't, but at 2:00 a.m., who's measuring? Our gazes met and held. We were members of two rival gangs, staring each other down. Shades of "West Side Story." The Jets versus the Possums.

What to do? Certainly not go in and confront the animal, not with those sharp teeth and vicious looking claws. "Dammit, Ralph," I muttered as I slammed the bathroom door, "I need you." Then I asked, "If Ralph were here, what would he do?" I realized he would have been no better able to deal with a wild animal than I was, so I did exactly what he would have done. I made sure the bathroom door was securely shut, got in bed, and went back to sleep. Next morning I called around and located a private animal control company. By the time they arrived, the possum had disappeared. "I'm not crazy," I told the young man who stood in my bathroom. "I know there's a possum in here."

"Don't worry. We'll find him."

Now that help had come, I was worried for the possum. "What will you do to him?"

"Let him go in the woods."

They searched and found my guest hiding in a large bag in my closet and took him away.

Soon after they left, a friend called. "You sound tired," she remarked.

"I am," I admitted. "I had an overnight visitor."

"Oh," she said. "I didn't know you were dating."

"Well, I had a male guest but he was a possum."

"All night? Weren't you scared?"

"No," I answered. "After I found it, I went back to sleep."

"You're a tough lady."

Me? I hadn't considered that. But she was right. I'd handled the possum encounter with aplomb. No pounding hysterically on my neighbor's door or phoning my children in the middle of

the night. Of the two of us, the possum was probably more frightened by the encounter.

I don't know how he felt afterward, but for me our staredown was a surprisingly transformative experience, working wonders for my self-esteem. Now I felt brave enough to face anything. Well, not a bear or the slopes of Everest, but strong enough for situations I might reasonably expect to encounter. Thanks to that midnight visit, I have become a self-actualized person, confident that I can meet whatever life tosses at me.

Not that I've stopped missing my husband. I long for his sure hands when I need something done that seemed inconsequential when Ralph was here: unscrewing a tightly closed jar, getting a box down from a high shelf, changing a light bulb I can't reach even with a step ladder, fastening a necklace. I have spent special days alone – New Year's Eve, Ralph's birthday, Valentine's Day – mourning for the person I loved most.

Grief is a puzzle. It comes and goes, washing over one at unexpected moments. Going through a file, I come across a paper with Ralph's handwriting and start to cry. Cuddled under Ralph's old brown robe, I sit on the couch that looks out onto my garden. On New Year's Eve at midnight, I dialed our phone number to hear his voice on the answering machine so that, in some way, we could welcome the New Year together.

As I find my way alone, the path is sometimes rocky, sometimes smooth. I'm pleased that I'm stronger, more self-reliant than I was when I was half a couple. Because I have to be, and when one must, one can.

Off the Mark

Jim Wilson

I will affix no labels
And
Make no judgments —
Because
I might
 Be right.

And I might crush
Some struggling soul —
Who
Had planned
To change
 Tonight.

Sink or Swim

Jeanne Holtzman

This week started out pretty okay. By Friday, nothing bad had happened. A bunch of planes flew over, but they didn't drop any bombs so they weren't the Russians doing a surprise attack. No one got stuck in the elevator. I didn't even have any elevator nightmares. And I got home in time for supper everyday, so I didn't have to beg my best friend Diana to walk me all the way home and up seven floors to keep my dad from hitting me, not that it usually worked anyway. She just walked me halfway.

On Saturday, as usual, I walked across the street to Diana's house. She's my first friend who lives in a private house. We sat on her stoop listening to the radio. Back in June we couldn't wait for third grade to be over, but by late July we didn't want to admit that we were getting a little bored.

Diana's sister Sheila came out and gave us the death stare. "Get out of my way, you babies," she said, pushing past us. Last summer, if her friends weren't around, she would jump rope or roller skate with us. Help us fish our bounce balls out of the sewer with a bent hanger. But this summer Sheila wouldn't even talk to us. All she did was chew gum and walk around the neighborhood dragging her shoes, her hair all ratted up with the teasing comb she stole from Woolworth's. She looked like a dead mummy, with all that black eyeliner and white lipstick.

After Sheila left, Diana's mom came out and sat on the stoop and smoked a cigarette. Diana's mom was kinda scary, not like

a regular mom. She wore tight dresses and high heels, and went to work on the subway. She didn't work on Saturday though, so she was wearing short shorts and a tube top, and I could see the top of her bust. I'd never seen a bust in person before. It was creepy. Diana's mom took a long drag on her Viceroy and said, "It's going to be a scorcher tomorrow. How'd you girls like to go on a picnic in the country?"

I looked at Diana and she looked at me. It was a long, boring drive to get to the country, and then you couldn't roller skate or bounce ball and there was no one around. Just lots of trees and grass and mosquitoes. But Diana's mom said we could go swimming in the cow pond. I went inside to call my mom and she said I could go.

It was already hot when we left. Me and Diana and Sheila were squashed in the back seat of their old two-tone Plymouth and my hair kept blowing and smacking me in the face. Me and Diana started to sing, "The Bear went over the Mountain," but Sheila told us to shut our faces. She had so much hairspray on that her hair didn't even move.

When we finally got to the picnic area, it was time for lunch. I unwrapped the sandwich Diana's mom gave me and felt sick. It had mayonnaise. I hated mayonnaise. I didn't say anything, tried not to gag and ate what I could, washing it down with juice. I said thank you.

We couldn't go swimming for an hour after we ate because we might get cramps and drown. We walked barefoot in the grass to wait down by the water. Diana said she'd been to this pond before, and there was so much cow piss in the water it was really easy to swim. I didn't know how to swim yet. Sheila said the water was gross and she wasn't going in. She walked in front of us in her bikini with all her makeup on, and tried to tune in a rock and roll station on her radio.

"Stupid hick music," she whined, rolling the dial past static and country songs. "I can't believe I had to come here with you two dips."

Suddenly, she stopped and pointed. "Ew. Look at that!"

In the grass in front of us was a dead animal. It was so gross, I couldn't stop staring at it. The only dead things I'd seen before, besides squashed bugs and dried up worms, were my goldfish and my parakeet,

and they looked pretty normal, just not moving. This had flies buzzing around it, and hundreds of little, white worms crawling all over its fur and in and out of where the eyeballs used to be.

“It’s a muskrat,” Sheila said all braggly like a show-off. “Those worms are maggots.” She looked at us and smirked. “You know, maggots are in everyone’s bloodstream all the time. They’re just waiting for you to die or get sick or even scared, and then they come crawling out to eat you.” She made a scary face and wiggled her fingers in our faces.

Now I really felt like throwing up. I wondered just how sick or scared you had to be for the maggots to start coming out. I was sure I could feel them wriggling in my blood. I looked down at the blue veins that sometimes popped out in my hands to see if any maggots were swimming inside them. I squinted, but I couldn’t see anything.

We stepped around the muskrat and kept walking. When we got to the pond, Sheila lay in the sun on her towel. She finally found a good station, and turned it up as loud as she could. Diana and I waded into the shallow water and threw rocks.

“She’s probably just making it up, about the maggots, to scare us,” Diana said, but she didn’t sound convinced.

“You think?” I asked.

“Yeah, probably.”

Finally the time was up and we could go in the water. Diana jumped in and started swimming toward a big rock. I went to get my tube, but then stopped. Instead, I waded in up to my waist, cupped my hands the way my father had showed me, lay down and pulled with my arms and kicked my feet. And I didn’t sink. I was moving. I was swimming. I swam all the way out to the rock. It was true. Cow piss did make it easy to swim!

We played in the pond the rest of the day. Now that I knew how to swim, I could jump off the rope swing. It was a great day.

The ride home seemed shorter, even though we stopped for hamburgers, and Sheila complained the whole time about her sunburn, and how she needed Noxzema. When we finally got back to the Bronx, it was dark and I was falling asleep. Diana's dad took Diana and Sheila to their house, and her mom said she would drive me home and take me up to my apartment.

"That's okay. You can just drop me off downstairs and I can walk up by myself," I said, even though I was so tired I didn't know how I would ever make it up seven stories.

"No, I don't think so," she said sliding into the driver's seat. "It's too late. I'll just ride you up in the elevator."

I didn't say anything. I couldn't ask her to walk me up the stairs. I didn't know what to do. We walked into the lobby, and she pushed the elevator button. I looked over at the entrance to the stairs. I felt my breath and heart going fast, and my face getting hot. I checked my veins.

The door to the elevator opened, and Diana's mom got in. I put my head down so she wouldn't see me cry, and stepped into the car.

"You're on seven, right?" she asked.

I nodded without looking up.

The car shook when the door closed. I held my breath, waiting for it to move. It jerked a little, and then started to go up. My stomach hurt. My mouth closed tight like lockjaw. I just stared at the word "Otis" on the floor near the door and waited for the cables to snap, and the elevator to crash down. Or for it to get stuck between floors. I didn't want to die in the elevator with Diana's mom. I wanted my own mom. I wanted to get out. I didn't want the maggots to eat me.

And then the elevator shuddered to a stop, and the door opened, and we were on the seventh floor. I wasn't dead. I rang my doorbell, and my mother answered. I mumbled thank you and ran to the bathroom. I could hear the two moms talking.

By the time I washed my hands, Diana's mother was gone. My mom gave me a big hug. "How was your day, sweetie?" she asked as she smoothed my hair.

"It was great," I said. "The pond was so full of cow piss I learned to swim!" Before she could say anything else, I yawned and said, "I'm really tired, Ma. I'm going to bed."

I slipped under the bedspread my mom sewed, and waited for sleep. The window was open, and I could hear a plane flying over. Not a Russian. I thought about jumping through the air into the pond, and how the water held me up. I hoped I wouldn't dream about elevators. Or maggots.

Life's Buffet

Mary Carter

Forrest Gump said life is like a box of chocolates,
but I think it's more like the buffet line at Luby's.
You can see exactly what you're getting,
but you still don't always know exactly what it is –
can't tell by looking whether a sauce is sweet
or hot, if the corn has too much salt or not enough,
and certainly don't know if the meat loaf inclines
to indigestion. After a while you learn some things –
not to fill up on salads, to skip the brown gravy,
which bread is too dry, and that you should always
leave room for pie.

Perspective

Bobbye Samson

Relentless days wrest center stage
from forebears hardly ripe
as calendars slough off each page
with calibrated swipe.

From Gerber pears to bubble-gum
seems but a month or less
and calculus replaces sums
like tic-tac-toe to chess.

So halt that whirling dervish time;
suspend it by sheer will
and patty-cake to nursery rhyme
while child is cuddly still.

This is a placeholder.

This One Can

Ginny Greene

“This one can.” Few words with a big impact, they were said by my 6th grade teacher when accosted by a flustered librarian. My life has taken me miles and years away from the pivotal moment they were first spoken, yet this short utterance from the past follows me wherever I go. I find it amazing to still hear their echo across time.

I’m vacationing back home just now, and those words float across my mind again while driving past the neighborhood where I grew up. Going home for a visit isn’t merely miles of bumpy roadway, but emotional topography as well. Finding myself on the street three blocks from where our elementary school used to be sat me back at my school desk that day I heard those words in the mid ’50s. There I am! Fifth seat back, third row from the door. The air in our classroom tingles with mounting excitement as we sit at our desks, not calmly, but like popcorn. In a few minutes we get to do something we haven’t done before. We get to walk out to the playground single file (no shoving, please – stay in line, boys) to explore the new thing added to our school schedule – the first weekly visit of the Public Library Bookmobile.

The librarian welcomes us inside and explains the procedures for using the mobile facility. Pointing to the right, she shows us the rows of children’s books. A sudden scramble fills those three aisles. Too crowded for me, I poke around,

checking out what other treasures fill this wonderful library on wheels. The children's section takes up only one corner, and there are still a lot of bookshelves to explore. Our classroom collection of books seems insignificant compared to this. And besides, we know most of those stories by heart.

A shop full of ice cream cones couldn't be any more delectable. Into my arms goes a big book about horses. A beautiful mare and her foal grace the cover. Next is a bio about the creator of the printing press. The photo of the mechanical mystery caught my eye since we'd recently studied it in class. I found a cookbook (the lure of chocolate desserts on the cover proved irresistible), and a romance (my Prince Charming?).

That's when the librarian grabbed my shoulders and steered me across the room. Her words matched the cadence of our enforced march. "These are not books for little girls!" Hauling me up before Mrs. Flanagan, she said, "Your students can't read these books from the adult section!"

My teacher took the books from my arms and looked through the titles. Her finger went automatically to her chin while she reviewed the romance bookjacket. That's when those words came out of her mouth. "This one can."

I was permitted to check out books above the class reading level. Somehow the romance novel went missing from my stack of books. In its place was a beautiful love story of a pioneer couple separated by a wagon train incident before they had the chance to be married, and reconnected by a chance meeting after their hair had turned gray.

Sixth grade was a difficult year for me, and I spent most of it quietly inside of myself. And even at that age I sensed my teacher's preference for the noisy bundle of girls who hung around her desk.

She tended to the verge of impatience, urging me to be more social and to participate more actively in class. She'd call on

me for answers because I didn't volunteer. While most of the girls flocked to her on the playground during recess, I'd be out on the perimeter by myself. She'd ask me why I didn't join in the fun with the other girls and I'd say, I don't know. She'd see me staring off into space and ask me what I was doing. I'd reply, Thinking.

There weren't many points at which she could connect with me during that time. What great testament to a teacher's commitment to her students and her career that she found a way to encourage me. Language (oh, and chocolate) were the great joys of my school days. I can't really say which was better, a Mars Bar or a spelling bee. Mrs. Flanagan knew of my infatuation for words and found her opportunity to draw me out.

That year, I read Daphne du Maurier, Edna Ferber, Taylor Caldwell, and Pearl S. Buck. Their novels were wonderful rich tapestries weaving adventure and relationships, with big words I had to look up. The dictionary became my friend. And, thanks to Mrs. Flanagan, I read those books with the hearty blessing of the librarian. It was years later that I learned of the conspiratorial guidance between teacher and librarian who directed my reading selections for the next couple of years.

"This one can." Important words at an important time. Simple words that flavored the soup of my life. The teacher who spoke them could not have known what magic she stirred into the mix, but in my brain there is a notch, a cog, a benchmark – something that helped foster a love of books and words. Because of three words spoken decades ago, a teacher made a difference in my life that keeps me writing and reading even today.

Driving Down to Nogales

Sheryl L. Nelms

I glance out my side window
glimpse
white cement humped
beside the highway
packed with red plastic tulips and roses
wink of votive light
prevailed over by the blue Virginity
of a plastic Mary
speeding on I know
sacrilege
need to do a U-Turn
need to stop to pray
for someone somewhere

A Different Wrinkle

Madelyn D. Kamen

I finally get my nerve up and call the number. She asks me what procedure I am requesting.

"I don't know," I gulp. "I've got a little furrow between my eyebrows that I'd like to have smoothed."

"In what manner?" she asks.

"I thought you guys were going to tell me what I need," I respond meekly.

"We don't get involved in those kinds of decisions. We just give you the information and let you decide for yourself."

"Okay, then. I'll see you at 9:45 tomorrow morning."

I hang up and immediately begin the same preparation I use for dealing with all other difficulties in my life: I start to eat. "This is no way to attack a problem," I tell myself, spitting out a potato chip. "What I need is to do is a search on the internet."

I sit down in front of the computer and started surfing the web. What are my choices of procedures? How much do they typically cost? What are the risks?

I am overwhelmed. Not in my wildest dreams did I believe they can do so many things to a person's face. They say they can peel, inject, abrade, lift, tuck, cut and paste, implant, replace, resurface, suck, enlarge or reduce. And this isn't even a porn site.

Then, if I can decide what process I want, there are a variety of creams, implements, medicines, or acids that can be stuffed

in, rubbed on, beamed at, or smeared over. The costs of each varies from expensive to incredibly expensive.

The risks are yet another eye opener. I can experience blood clots, swelling, numbness, infection, scarring, bleeding, weeping, bruising, skin loss, tingling, redness, throbbing, burning, allergic reaction, protrusion, asymmetry, and permanent nerve damage – to name a few of the more colorful outcomes.

After a couple of glasses of wine and a therapy session, I determine that what I want is probably a simple botox injection, the cheapest of all of the procedures, which can run as high as \$400 per shot and which needs to be applied between two and three times each year to maintain. It is a lot; but, I reason, I only live once. I might as well look better if I can.

Now, I am prepared to go see the doctor. With printouts in hand, I go to his office. While in the waiting room, I notice that there are magazines there with luxurious items that the rich and famous can purchase. Fur coats, fancy cars, diamonds, \$1000 leather purses, days at the spa.

I think to myself this one little procedure is not even as expensive as one of those fancy handbags in the magazines. I don't indulge myself like many women do with all those fancy things. I deserve a little tune-up. It will be a small extravagance.

Soon, I am escorted into the doctor's office. He hands me a mirror and says, "Here. You hold this while I do the evaluation." He looks down at me. He is clearly distressed. He starts to move my skin around. He moves the loose tissue above my brows in three different directions. Then, he proceeds to my lids, lifting the skin just outside of them, making me look a little like I pulled my ponytail too tight.

I peer into the mirror. The light in the office is harsh. Is that on purpose, I wonder, or does he have no choice in his office lighting? I can see every pore, every zit, a few potential new

zits, every fold, every wrinkle, each crow's foot, and every discoloration. I look up at him, disconcerted, anticipating the worst. I'm not disappointed.

The doctor says nothing. He moves to my mid-face, pulling and pushing on my cheeks and my cheekbones. Then, he proceeds to my mouth and jowls, and, horror or horrors, to my neck. He says something that sounds like, "Tsk, tsk."

"What?" I say.

"You know," he say, "I can't look at just the brow without seeing how it relates to everything else."

"Is there a problem?"

He moves some of my flesh around again. "You look in the mirror while I talk."

He continues for the next ten minutes, demonstrating all of my problem areas. Now, I know I am not all that great looking, but I have learned to live comfortably with what God gave me. However, after the doctor finishes with me, I am convinced that I am hideously deformed and a candidate to play the female version of Quasimodo.

"We can fix most of this," he assures me. "And I am willing to give it to you at a bargain price just short of \$22,000. That's cheap for what I will need to do. . . ." He doesn't finish his thought.

In your dreams, I think to myself. Around Christmas, gift-purchasing time, is definitely a bad time to visit a plastic surgeon. I want to get out of there as fast as possible, but the torture is not over. As part of the evaluation process, the doctor invites his "perfect ten" office assistant in to provide skin care information. I am not kidding when I say this girl has no pores – just smooth silk stretched over her perfect bone structure. It is her job to describe an array of treatments and make-up that I can purchase before and after the surgery to tighten, cleanse, and disguise my nearly worn-out skin. She is followed by

another movie star who takes a front-and-side mug shot of my face.

“Don’t forget to put my prisoner number on the bottom,” I say as I look at the photo.

Next, a nurse practitioner comes in to tell me she will need a full medical history if I decide to have the surgery. I don’t have the nerve to tell her there is no need to worry about it. She isn’t going to need it. Eventually, I am able to escape from the doctor’s office. I stop off at the lady’s room and look in the mirror.

“Maybe, a little furrow in the brow isn’t so bad,” I say and hurry home.Space surrounds us

Give me a name

Kerín Riley-Bishop

Void and solid both
Which yearn to shape our form.
We are comprised of
Positive and negative light.
Forces warring for balance
Which we must strive for
Within and without.
That we may walk the paths of our ancestors,
Cross the bridges of forever,
And become our yesterday, today, tomorrow.

My 20-Year Love Affair

Stewart Caffey

I was happily married when I entered into a 20-year love affair back in February 1964. It was a difficult decision, but one that I ultimately embraced whole-heartedly. Although I had little money in my account, I made arrangements to accommodate her in my daily life. My wife knew about this decision. At first she certainly was not in agreement with me, but in time she came to accept it.

Soon the “love of my life” was going everywhere with me, and she caused heads to turn everywhere we went. I could understand why: she had a sleek body, causing people to gape and even reach out to touch her. She met my every need so beautifully – year after year. It was a love affair I will probably never duplicate again in this life.

In time, however, the years began taking a toll on her, which the whole family found hard to accept. People were no longer captivated by her good looks. But she continued meeting my needs. We were all but inseparable. Then the inevitable happened. After 20 years, this love affair was cooling. Finally I turned her over to another man. I hoped he would enjoy her company as much as I had. Yes, it was difficult – not only for me but also for my wife and then my three children – to sell our 1964 VW Beetle!

Bought at a time when very few Beetles were seen around Central Texas, ours came to seem almost like a member of the

family. On February 28, 1964, I had traveled to Abilene, Texas, where I paid \$1,797 for a brand new, light tan Beetle. Max Fergus Motors gave me a trade-in allowance of \$127 on my 1957 Ford, which lowered the price to \$1,630. However, they also added \$40 for state tax and 1964 plates so I essentially walked away with a new car for \$1,670. My note at Comanche National Bank was for \$60.11 per month for three years.

It was a great decision for our family, and the rewards for us were numerous.

We still miss her and talk nostalgically about her. We'll never ever forget "her" and all the fun we enjoyed together! Indeed, over time the entire family had developed a love affair with our little "Bug."

The Banquet

SuzAnne C. Cole

In my dream a wedding banquet's almost set —
the bride and her maidens, attired in white
with scarlet accents, enter as I, a woman
of a certain age, fuss over flowers, purple and gold.
My table, says the bride, represents the seasons.
You're arranging autumn — pointing to a cake
with dancing scarecrows — *and down at that end* —
where the crow stalks and hoarsely cries —
that's winter — *where you'll be going next.*

Twenty-Six Cents

Thomas Wheeler

I do not remember the origin of the bet and neither do my brothers. At some time, however, when twenty-six cents was the amount available for such purpose, some brother bet another brother that he could not do some stupid or dangerous thing. The bet was like a dare only with a princely sum riding on the outcome. The challenged brother could decline but it was rare that the opportunity to earn in excess of a quarter was not taken, even by a brother in his 30's or 40's. There were no rules but in the event of success, it was incumbent on the newly-flush to find some equally do-able but dangerous task for the loser to do to get his money back. There were hundreds of such bets over the years. Among the favorites were the following:

1. "I bet you twenty-six cents you can't knock that wasp nest down with your bare hand without getting stung." The bigger the nest and the more numerous the protectors, the more adrenaline-filled the dare. The event required speed, stealth, and a clear get-away path. A wasp is aggressive and quick but can be outrun if you get a step on it, do not trip and are appropriately motivated. To a bunch of pre-teen and teenage boys...and nowadays to a couple of 40-ish types, there are very few things as funny as seeing a swarm of angry wasps hot on the trail of a brother moving with speed that only fear can generate.

2. "I bet you twenty-six cents that you can't put that whole egg in your mouth." This one came up mostly when a double-

yoked egg was gathered and our grandmother was not around. The trick was generally not in inserting the larger-than-normal egg. The problem was removing it. A guy with an egg causing his cheeks to puff out is a pretty funny sight. Even the egg-filled brother wants to smile or laugh but cannot because of his condition. With a sibling or two laughing their backsides off, it is very difficult to relax the face long enough to get the egg maneuvered out. It was always a scream if the egg happened to break.

3. “I bet you twenty-six cents you cannot catch that (usually huge) bull snake without getting bit.” Bull snakes, at least the big ones, have nasty dispositions. After they are caught and handled for a while, most will settle down enough so that the holder can let go of their heads without getting bitten. For years, it was a Wheeler boy that held the snake and moved through the crowd during the “snake dance” performed at the end of Boy Scout camp by the scouts clad in Indian garb. The initial meeting with a big bull snake is almost never a friendly encounter. A bull snake does not have fangs but the rough edges of its mouth hurt like crazy if it gets you on a bare spot.

4. “I’ll give you twenty-six cents if you put this mouse down Sister’s shirt.” Putting things down a sibling’s shirt is not as easy as it sounds. It was, however, great fun. We Wheeler kids were an untrusting lot. Whether a mouse, a lizard, a harmless snake, a rotten egg or a piece of over-ripe fruit, the great feat was getting close. You also never knew for sure whether the two (bettor and target) were working together and the target was waiting on you to get close so that he or she could whack you with one or more solid or semi-rotten objects. For those of you that do not know, the record is 2.8 seconds to remove a t-shirt and shake out a lizard.

5. “See that fence? Bet you twenty-six cents you can’t jump it.” Three or four-strand barbed wire fencing surrounded most

of my grandparents' farm. My oldest brother and I were high school gymnasts. My other two brothers fancied themselves athletes. In our younger years, hopping the fence was not that great a feat. Our maturing brains, however, failed to adjust to the loss of "ups" which had afflicted our aged legs. In the big picture, there is very little as funny as some 30-ish guy, trying to relive his glory days, taking a running leap at a fence and hooking a toe on the top strand.

6. "Twenty-six cents says you cannot eat that piece of watermelon." This bet usually came at the end of a monstrous meal where all participants were stuffed to a point of being ill. Sometimes it was watermelon. Sometimes it was pie or chicken or potatoes. The humor generally came twenty or thirty minutes later when the eater was crying from a painful stretching of a stomach that will not hold another gram of material and the dared party still had five bites to go.

7. "I bet you twenty-six cents that you can't catch that seven-lined race runner (a lizard) by yourself." Again, the particular type of lizard or animal was not important. Any reptile, mammal, insect or amphibian would do so long as the chances of the thing being caught were reasonably small. Believe me, it is worth the money on the line to see a kid or a grown man hopping around the tank or the pasture, matching wits with something which, at that instant, probably had just as many brain cells working as the chaser.

8. "Let's toss this egg back and forth and whoever drops it owes the other twenty-six cents." The egg generally was a presumably rotten one that was found in some nest which one of the hens had hidden for a few days or weeks. The eggs could not be used because it was difficult to tell which were fresh and which stunk really, really badly. The object of the contest was to move one step farther away after each toss. The trajectory of the toss was intended to be such that, if the egg broke, the

contents would splash all over the stone-handed catcher. Over-ripe fruit could be substituted for rotten eggs.

9. “I bet twenty-six cents you cannot skip a rock eight times or more.” If curling remains an Olympic sport, rock skipping must soon become one. Skipping requires the selection of the proper stone, a testing of the wind, a solid throwing stance and just the right angle. It requires a ton more skill than pushing a rock object down the ice. I also strongly suspect that more folks rock skip around the world than do that thing on ice. Lots of money, sometimes upwards of two dollars, can be won or lost on a still afternoon.

The twenty-six-cent thing is rooted in a basic manly need to show who is the toughest, smartest or most talented among the gathering. The question of who is alpha male among the Wheeler boys is still undecided despite decades of overeating, fence jumping, rock throwing and monitored expulsions from bodies. It’s a question that needs to be answered before one of my brothers starts using his advanced age as an excuse. A backcountry camping trip offers far too many opportunities to continue the quest for superiority... and for potentially bad things to happen.

Every mid-July, a couple of brothers (the related kind) and I head to the Pecos National Wilderness in New Mexico and lose ourselves in the backcountry for a few days. The trips are sometimes a bit challenging since we leave behind a number of items my first wife would consider “essentials.” Two notable events took place during the most recent of these back-to-nature treks. I hesitate to give many details regarding the first event since my wife might bring it up during the commitment proceedings she periodically threatens. Let’s just say that it involved the bet and a large rock being thrown in an attempt to break a good-sized log into fire pit-sized pieces. The log did not break but, instead, trampolined the stone into the nearest soft

object – my head. I am now able to state without reservation that laughter is not the best medicine, at least not when it comes from a couple of unsympathetic brothers. I am overjoyed to report that the next event did not directly involve me.

My brother Chuck has classic “dude” characteristics: tough (or acts so), self-sufficient (unless you ask his wife) and self-reliant (“I don’t need no doctor for this. I have nine other fingers.”) Turns out, however, he is not so tough. In fact, he is quite a weenie. His claim to alpha status, already weak in my opinion, took quite a beating on this trip and pretty well eliminated him from any serious future consideration.

The revelation came to light during the second day of the trip. His evening meal was a packet of freeze dried spaghetti. That meal selection is not, by itself, of great significance unless you consider the hog trough sounds he was making while the rest of us were choking down ramen noodles and tuna. The significance came to light an hour or so later during a card game. A loud “glurg” sound came from the general direction of my brother.

“Glurg” is not a word you will find in your standard Webster’s. Glurging is not a condition described in the Physician’s Desk Reference. It is, however, an appropriately descriptive gathering of letters in some circumstances. A glurg is a sign...a warning. A glurg is a precursor to a duck into the bushes or a sprint to a bathroom. A glurg is pretty funny when it is “voiced” by a friend or brother. It’s not so funny when heard coming from the direction of a wife or child in a car. It’s anything but humorous when it is one’s own chili or jalapeño consumption that is speaking.

There is a special, unique look in the eye of one afflicted by a serious glurg: fear, surprise, determination, resignation, urgency...generally a combination thereof. It’s not the look exhibited by a man in charge. My brother’s were not the actions

of a tough guy. It was a little sad to see a grown man walk funny to his backpack, hear him whimper a little while he looked for tissue and walk/waddled with an awkward gait toward his pre-selected special place. The abandoned card players knew the score. Still, that walk to the bushes was pretty funny.

The selected spot being pretty far away, we were spared most of the sound effects. We did, however, hear some words appropriate for a church or seminary. There was a definite beseeching of God and a promise of significant reduction in a variety of sins including excessive beer consumption. I swear there was a “Thank you, Jesus” a couple of minutes later, right before my brother strolled from the bushes with a sweaty but relieved look on his face.

From my perspective, my brother’s inability to handle a little old camp meal is a sign of a weak constitution. It’s telling. It speaks of what he is made of. I’m embarrassed to publically admit to being his relative. Definitely not alpha male material. But I’ll bet you twenty-six cents he never packs spaghetti in his camp rations again.



*...and we plan
future paths.*

Untitled

Jordan Reyes, age 10

I stood beside the small, clear, and remarkable pond, I stared deep into the six-inch pond, until a soft breeze blew through the strands of my hair.

I still was focused on the sight of the pond until the breeze got stronger and stronger, than it began to sprinkle, then lightning and the sound of thunder began to burst into different places in the sky.

I started to walk trying to act brave during all the commotion, and I walked upon the dead dried leaves listening to the crunching sounds of them, then I began to walk faster, then I began to run.

I was so frightened I tears began to pour out of my eye uncontrollably, and every step I took made my feet numb, and then I was so focused I obviously tripped over a large tree stump, and plus even though I was determined getting home I got back up then I was so out of breath I stopped and bend down, and just a few seconds later I turned around to see what I was running from, then right the second I looked at it, I started running again.

Carlsbad Caverns

Riley McCone at age 10

The Carlsbad Caverns were the best caves I have been in so far. The rocks were amazing; one of them looked like three scoops of ice cream on a cone, and I thought “rock flavored ice cream, Yum!”

I could feel the moist air and its horrid smell. The air smelled like rotten eggs; it was nauseating.

The pools were so clear I didn't see them at first and I thought they were ditches because of the reflection. Sometimes water from the stalactites dripped on my sister and me. My sister freaked out.

There were some stalagmites that looked like popcorn. I could just taste that buttery popcorn. Mmm!

We also got to be the last people to go in a special part of the tour with the bottomless pit; it was marked off. We got to because it was our first trip to Carlsbad Caverns, so we also did not plan very well.

At the end of the tour, we got to go on an elevator to the top. We also got to see the bats fly up from the caves.

I had to give up the West Texas Fair and Rodeo for the Carlsbad Caverns, but I would not trade it for anything. All and all I had a great time.

Untitled

Annalynn Miller, age --

I am from Pink Converse and rainbow barrettes.
From the spring day that is the photo-booth photo.
The two laughing girls that are attacking each other.
I am from the notes hidden away in sheet music.
The chords of fragments of broken songs.
The lost voice of the singing bird.
I am from the chocolate mess on the stove.
It's still oozing from many sunny days ago.
From the snap shotted moments.
The too big smiles and sparkling eyes,
And fights in the kitchen about who is doing the dishes.
All captured in the Kodak.
From the pearl earrings I had wanted to show off.
I am from the mirror with paintings prisoner inside.
From the strands of multi-colored rainbow yarn hair of the
dish towel doll.
And from the plastic of the glow-in-the-dark bracelet —
“Candy”.
I am from the strawberry patch that made me sick.
From the huge trampoline that felt like a cage.
The glass ballerina that never fit on the Christmas tree.
Smoke that fills your lungs even when Marianne is outside.
I am from the worries that fill my friend, my sister's mind.
The worries and memories that dance through her during the

night.

She is counting the ways she will fail.

I am from out of the dark, begging her to pick roses with me.

“Too afraid of thorns. Too afraid of pain.”

She is more afraid of the tears she has yet to shed.

I am from that fear, those worries, and those tears.

From the glossy picture with bright neon pink hair.

I am from the real world, the one with big problems.

From the spray paint, blue smoke, and broken hearts.

The sad stories that aren't mine, but I'm in them.

I write them. I illustrate them.

I breathe life into them.

Aerials

Cody Holloway, age 16

The stifling humidity in the evening air is surpassed only by the sheer number of mosquitoes which swim through it, obsessively seeking an unsupervised child or small dog to carry away into the night. The lake is serene, and the same can be said of the lakeside. Essence of stale beer and cigarette smoke and droning conversation lingers over the contented laziness of the lake's surface. There is a simple stage with an amp and a stool, lit faintly by strings of glowing bulbs that surround its perimeter. A relatively small group of mends and family sits directly in front of the stage, rambling on about how good the dinner of home cooked barbecue was, and how nothing has changed and

never will change in their familiar little town. I sit in their midst, absentmindedly immersed in the tranquility and simply existing, when the first note is plucked. My uncle Brent has materialized on stage, cradling on his knee a worn acoustic guitar. The first tone is but a whisper, a mystery that pleads infinitesimal questions of life. But, it is followed by another of its brethren, then another and another, until the floodgate has been fully opened and a seamless torrent of euphony pours forth. Serpentine melody entwines itself about the last rays of the retreating summer sun; this crescendos to the zenith of deep chords that resonate beautifully amongst dark crowned mesquite thorns and red dust. His fire roars through his closed eyes, reverberating within the nature around him, fervor enveloping his every stroke of metallic string...

As the final harmony faded into nothing, I was drawn out of my mesmerized stupor and back to the lake that had seemingly drifted into the distant past. The idea of ten fingers and a guitar pick (much less a solitary person) blazing with so much energy, so much life, would have been labeled completely absurd to me had I not just witnessed the epitome of human emotion. This is the vividly painted image that I will always idolize and remember. Not only did Brent aid in nurturing my love affair with music (I took up guitar shortly after), but he also left an imprint that has grown to be more significant than anyone will know. My uncle's passion is something I long to experience, to feel, to call my very own; thus, I have emulated how I live my life by his standard: finding something you love to do and expressing it with no bars to hold you back.

Meet the Authors

Lee Ardell is a native Texan, currently living in Houston and Galveston with her husband, Bob. She graduated from Austin College with a degree in history and serves on the College's Board of Trustees. She took up writing after a career in banking. Her work has been published in *New Texas*, *Bayou Review* and *400 Words*.

Betty Wilson Beamguard writes full-time, specializing in magazine features, short fiction, and humorous essays. She has received over 30 honors for her writing, and her work has appeared in *Women in the Outdoors*, *South Carolina*, *Sasee*, *ByLine*, *The Writer* and more. In her humorous novel, *Weej and Johnnie Hit Florida*, two middle-age woman spend a week in Florida trying to lose the jerk who is following them. Her most recent book is the biography of a woman who drives a draft horse with her feet – *How Many Angels Does It Take: The Remarkable Life of Heather Rose Brooks*. www.home.earthlink.net/~bbeamguard

Janis Huguen Bell is a native Houstonian. She graduated from The University of Texas at Austin, where her writing vocation began as editor of the *Cactus* yearbook. After a 30-year career as a commercial interior designer, she retired to pursue writing and art projects. She lives in Houston, Texas and Georgetown, Colorado with husband Richard Bell.

Stewart Caffey, a copyeditor, and his wife, Donajean, moved to Abilene when he retired from teaching in 1996. He publishes *The Sidney Eagle*, a quarterly nostalgic newsmagazine about the Sidney school and community (Comanche County, Texas) and serves

as newsletter editor for the Abilene Retired Teachers Association. Caffey also remains active in his church, Abilene Writers Guild (past president and lifetime member), and the Texas Oral History Association. His books include *My 20-Year Love Affair*, *A Gallon of White Lightning*, and *Patchwork of Memories*.

Judy Callarman lives in Cisco, Texas. She teaches creative writing and English at Cisco Junior College and is chair of the Fine Arts Division. She enjoys writing mostly nonfiction and has recently discovered she loves writing unrhymed poetry. Several of her works have won contests and been published in newspapers and journals. Two of her long nonfiction narratives were competition finalists in the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference of the Southwest in 2006 and 2007; a short nonfiction work was published in. She is working on a collection of World War II memoirs based on letters from her father.

MARY CARTER BIO

Brianna Cedex recently started writing, after twenty years of teaching science on the primary and secondary levels in public schools in Oregon. Her favorite part of her work was encouraging young girls to think about having careers in the sciences. She has four grandchildren, and occasionally does messy science experiments in the kitchen with them.

Becky Chakov lived in Minneapolis, Minnetonka and Mound, Minnesota; Los Angeles, Chicago and Philadelphia before moving to Bemidji, Minnesota. She began writing years ago and had poems published in *Poetry Parade*, *Christian Century* magazine, the *Chicago Tribune*'s column, "A Line O' Type or Two," and the Bemidji State University's women's anthology, *Dust & Fire* 2007. She is 82.

Suzanne C. Cole writes from a studio in the woods in the Texas Hill Country. More than 350 of her poems, essays, short stories and articles have appeared in commercial and literary magazines, anthologies, and newspapers. She was a juried poet at the Houston Poetry Fest in 2003 and 2005, a featured poet in 2004, and once won a haiku festival in Japan. She was pleased to be included in the anthology *Silver Boomers*.

Carlos Colon, a reference librarian in Shreveport, Louisiana, is the author of 11 chapbooks including *Mountain Climbing* and *Clocking Out*, two collections of haiku and concrete poetry, and *Circling Bats* and *Wall Street Park*, two books of concrete renku written with Raffael de Gruttola. Colon's work has appeared in *Modern Haiku*, *Louisiana Literature*, *Journal of Poetry Therapy*, *Writer's Digest*, *Byline*, and other publications. In addition, he is editor of Shreve Memorial Library's *Electronic Poetry Network*.

Carol Bryan Cook has hundreds of works of poetry and short stories published. Traveling and living in seven countries and thirty-nine of the fifty states for over twenty-five years allowed her to gather glimpses of people and life along the way. Her travels, unique and myriad experiences, friendships, and losses encountered, provided never-ending material. Stories of heartache, love, life, and entanglements endured and touched her heart. An artist and author retired from the business world, she and her artist husband live beside a tranquil lake in Texas.

Carole Creekmore, a Baby Boomer who grew up in rural Eastern North Carolina, is a widow with two adult children, two lovely granddaughters, and an English Bulldog, Okie. With degrees in English from Wake Forest University, she teaches composition, literature, creative writing, and Humanities at an Atlanta-area college, writes prose and poetry whenever inspired, and enjoys traveling, genealogy, and photography. She has had several articles and poems published over the years, as well as the essay "Holiday Expectations – Then and Now" recently published in *Silver Boomers*.

Barbara Darnall the daughter of a high school English teacher and a West Texas lawyer and rancher, has been surrounded by words all her life and grew up telling stories and writing scripts for her playmates to perform. She graduated from Baylor University with B.A. and M.A. degrees in drama, and taught at the college level for several years. She writes poetry, articles, and personal narratives, and has written and directed numerous short dramas for her church. She has copyedited one book and several manuscripts, and, as a tax consultant for more than thirty years, she particularly enjoys the letter-writing contests she occasionally gets into with the IRS!

David Davis is a humorist, cartoonist, writer, and speaker. He is the author of ten published books so far. He grew up in San Antonio, Texas, and currently lives in Fort Worth. Most of his stories draw on his Texas roots, and his "baby-boomer" love of music. Davis is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. His *Jazz Cats* and *Ten Redneck Babies* were both named to the Children's Choice Top 100. *Jazz Cats* was a finalist for the Texas Golden Spur Award. His satirical *Night Before Christmas* books are perennial comedy best-sellers. His picture books, *Texas Mother Goose* and *Texas Aesop's Fables* will delight Texans of all ages. His website is www.DavidRDavis.com.

June Rose Dowis reads, writes and resides in Shreveport, Louisiana. As a church librarian, she is in constant contact with the world of words. Her essays have been published in *Birds and Blooms*, *Byline* and *Appleseeds* magazines. After a year-long stint as a freelance writer for a local publication, she is currently plunging into the world of poetry.

Sharon Ellison

Errid Farland lives in Southern California and writes at a cluttered table where a candle burns to create an aura of serenity. Sometimes she accidentally catches things on fire which turns the aura into angry yellows and reds and sort of wrecks the whole serenity thing. Her stories have appeared in *Barrelhouse*, *Word Riot*, *storySouth*, *Pindledyboz*, *GUD*, and other places. One of her stories received an editor nomination for storySouth's Million Writers Awards.

Peter D. Goodwin, born in New Jersey, lived (mostly) in England until the age of eighteen. After college in Virginia, he travelled and taught in Europe, Asia and the United States; moved to New York, worked as a playwright; moved to Maryland, bought a boat, and writes poetry while providing succulent treats for wildlife. His poems have been published in *September eleven*, *Maryland Voices*, *Listening to the Water*, *The Susquehanna Water Anthology*, *Rattle, Scribble, Dreamstreets*, *Lucidity*, *LunchLines*, and *Prints*.

Judith Goudine Finkel left the practice of law to complete her legal thriller *Texas Justice* and her memoir *The Three Stooges Gene*. Excerpts from the latter, including "My Cousins, the Three Stooges" and "Betty Crocker and Me," appeared in the *Houston Chronicle*. Her short stories have been published in the *Birmingham Arts Journal*, *The Cuivre River Anthology* Volume III, *The Heartland Review* and *Sin Fronteras Journal*. She is the recipient of a Summer Fishtrap 2008 Fellowship.

Sarah Getty's second book of poems, *Bring Me Her Heart* (2006, Higganum Hill Books) received Pulitzer and NBA nominations. Her first collection, *The Land of Milk and Honey*, was published in 1996 by the University of South Carolina Press, as part of the James Dickey Contemporary Poetry Series. Her poems have

appeared in *The Paris Review*, *The New Republic*, and *Calyx* and in anthologies including *Birds in the Hand* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004). Sarah has published fiction in *The Iowa Review* and has recently completed a novel about growing up in the Midwest in the Fifties.

Ginny Greene likely arrived on Planet Earth with a blue pencil clutched in her fist. Past president of Abilene Writers Guild, her writing life includes years of newspaper lifestyle features, a newspaper column, and a handful of newsletters, including seven years editing the Guild's newsletter. For fun, Ginny writes poems and works crossword puzzles. She edits everything, even street signage, especially yard sale signs, even in her sleep. She's happiest seeing her love of words spilled over to her children and grandchildren, including daughter, Karen, also a Silver Boomer Books editor. While still loving her Northwest hometown, Ginny is at home with Larry near Abilene, Texas, and her grown family. Ginny's book *Song of County Roads* is scheduled for publication in 2009.

Phil Gruis is a former newspaper editor who took up poetry in 2002 – challenging the old dog/new trick theory. His poems have since appeared in dozens of journals, and his photos in a few. He's the author of two chapbooks, *Outside the House of Normal* (2006) and *Bullets and Lies* (2007), both published by Finishing Line Press. He lives on Kootenay Lake in British Columbia, and in North Idaho.

Becky Haigler is retired after 24 years of teaching Spanish and reading in Texas public secondary schools. Her poetry has appeared in national and regional periodicals. Her short stories for adolescents have been published by several denominational publishing houses. Two of her magic realism stories are included in the anthology *Able to...* (NeoNuma Arts Press, 2006.) Becky currently resides in Shreveport, Louisiana, with her husband Dave Haigler. She is the mother of two daughters and grandmother of three granddaughters. Becky is currently working on a collection of magic

realism stories. More of her poetry appears on her family blog, www.xanga.com/anchorpoet.

Janet Hartman, a software developer who chose early retirement and spent six years cruising on a sailboat, now lives on land in Beaufort, North Carolina. Her writing has appeared in *SAIL*, *Latitudes & Attitudes*, *Living Aboard*, and the anthology *Making Notes: Music of the Carolinas*. She currently serves as president of Carteret Writers.

Joy Harold Helsing is an ex-salesclerk, ex-secretary, ex-textbook editor, ex-psychologist, ex-college instructor, ex-New Englander, ex-San Franciscan who now lives in the Sierra Nevada foothills of Northern California. Her work has appeared in *Bellowing Ark*, *Brevities*, *Byline*, *California Quarterly*, *Centrifugal Eye*, *Leading Edge*, *The Mid-America Poetry Review*, *Möbius*, *Poetalk*, *Poetry Depth Quarterly*, *The Raintown Review*, *Rattlesnake Review*, *Writers' Journal*, and elsewhere. She has published three chapbooks and one book, *Confessions of the Hare* (PWJ Publishing).

Frances Hern divides her time between Calgary, Alberta and Golden, British Columbia. She loves Calgary's sunny skies and puts up with cold, snowy winters because she enjoys downhill skiing. She's had numerous poems published for both adults and children, along with two books of non-fiction and a children's picture book. She is currently writing an historical novel for young adults.

Cody Holloway

Jeanne Holtzman is an aging hippie, writer and women's health care practitioner, not necessarily in that order. Born in

the Bronx, she prolonged her adolescence as long as possible in Vermont, and currently lives with her husband and daughter in Massachusetts. Her writing has appeared or is forthcoming in such publications as *The Providence Journal*, *Writer's Digest*, *The First Line*, *Twilight Times*, *Flashquake*, *Salome*, *Hobart online*, *Hip Mama*, *Every Day Fiction* and *The Iconoclast*. You may reach Jeanne at J.holtzman@comcast.net.

Michael Lee Johnson is a poet, and freelance writer. He is self-employed in advertising and selling custom promotional products. He is the author of *The Lost American: From Exile to Freedom*. He has published two chapbooks of poetry. He is also nominated for the James B. Baker Award in poetry, Sam's Dot Publishing. He is a contributor in the *Silver Boomers* anthology about aging baby boomers, by Silver Boomer Books. Michael Lee Johnson presently resides in Itasca, Illinois. He lived in Canada during the Vietnam era and will be published as a contributor poet in the anthology *Crossing Lines: Poets Who Came to Canada in the Vietnam War Era*, publication scheduled for early 2008. He has been published in USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia, Scotland, Turkey, Fuji, Nigeria, Algeria, Africa, India, United Kingdom, Republic of Sierra Leone, Thailand, Kuala Lumpur, and Malaysia. Visit his website at: <http://poetryman.mysite.com>.

Madelyn D. Kamen is a free-lance writer who has published short stories, poems, and essays in local and national magazines and online. Prior to establishing a document development company, she was an associate dean and professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston. She was a graduate of the Leadership Texas Class of 1992, and was listed in Marquis' *Who's Who in the Southwest*, *Who's Who in American Education*, and *Who's Who in America*. She is currently working on an anthology of short stories about everyday life.

Terrence Kandzor lives on Whidbey Island in Puget Sound where he writes part time. His non-fiction entry, "My

Next Story,” was published in the 2005 *In the Spirit of Writing* Anthology. “My Next Story” was recognized as a winner in the annual competition sponsored by the Whidbey Island Writers Association. His story, “The Fall of the (Hero” was published in the *Silver Boomers* anthology, 2008. “Christmas 1949,” a memoir received an award in the 2007 *In the Spirit of Writing* competition, and was included in the Whidbey Island Writers Association publication. He writes non-fiction and literary short stories that have a touch of the unexpected.

Helga Kidder has lived in the Tennessee hills for 30 years, raised two daughters, a half a dozen cats, and a few dogs. She received her BA in English from the University of Tennessee and MFA in Writing from Vermont College. She is co-founder of the Chattanooga Writers Guild and leads their poetry group. Her poetry and translations have appeared in *The Louisville Review*, *The Southern Indiana Review*, *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Comstock Review*, *Eleventh Muse*, *Snake Nation Review*, *Voices International*, *Moebius*, *Free Focus*, *Phoenix*, *Chug*, and others, and three anthologies.

Janet Morris Klise is a retired Writer-Editor-Photographer-Darkroom Technician, having fulfilled these duties for 40 years for high school, college, university and federal government publications. She finds that after so many years of loving to read, write and edit, she cannot leave the reading and writing alone. She limits her editing to her own writing and to Letters to the Editor sent to the local newspaper. Janet was born in Monroe, Louisiana, but has lived in California since the age of four. She now resides with her husband Tim, son Jonathan and cat Kaylee in Clovis, California.

Linda Kuzyk is a contributing author of the book, *How To Use the Internet in Your Classroom*, published by Teachers Network. She wrote two state-level award winning WebQuests. She is a contributing author of the story “Anvil Floats,” which appears in a student literary magazine, *Sneakers, Stilettos, & Steeltoes*, published by Curry Printing and Mailing. Linda's interview with author Simon

Rose is posted on the NWFCC website. Kuzyk is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, Maine Writers and Publishers Alliance, and the Children's Writers' Coaching Club of the National Writing for Children Center.

Riley McCone

Pat Capps Mehaffey received a degree from Southwestern Graduate School of Banking at Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, and worked as a bank officer for over 30 years. After retirement, Pat and her husband, Howard, moved to a lake home where they enjoy birds, gardening and grandchildren. Pat has published two books of daily devotionals, *Lessons for Living* and *Strength Sufficient for the Day*. Her short stories appear in publications, including *Cup of Comfort*, *Rocking Chair Reader*, *The Noble Generation*, *The Upper Room* and the Guideposts series *When Miracles Happen*. Her work has won awards in journalistic contests.

Annalynn Miller

Carole Ann Moletti lives and works as nurse-midwife in New York City. She lectures and writes on all aspects of women's health with a focus on feminist and political issues. In addition to professional publications, her work has appeared in *Tangent Online Review of Short Fiction*, *The Fix*, *Vision Magazine*, and *Noneuclidean Café*. Carole's memoir *Someday I'm Going To Write a Book*, chronicles her experiences as a public health nurse in the inner city. She is at work on her second memoir *Karma, Kickbacks and Kids*, the title of which is self-explanatory.

Craig Monroe is a leading edge Baby Boomer who holds a B.S. in Physics and an M.S. in Finance. He is recently retired from the Electronics Industry and is now following his passion of writing fiction on the Florida West Coast. He recently published his first story, a recollection of his younger days in Michigan. He has completed other short stories of various genres and is researching a novel.

Sharon Fish Mooney, a native upstate New Yorker, teaches nursing research and gerontology on-line (MSN, PhD, University of Rochester). Her revised edition of *Alzheimer's -- Caring for Your Loved One, Caring for Yourself*, was recently published by Lion Hudson for a UK audience. She has authored and co-authored articles and books on nursing, ethics and spirituality and is a contributing writer for *Christian Research Journal*. She coordinates monthly poetry readings for the Write-On Writers of Coshocton, Ohio. Sharon and her husband Scott spend weekends blazing trails in the woods for their future home and writing/poetry retreat center.

Sharon Lask Munson grew up in Detroit, Michigan. After thirty years of teaching overseas and in Alaska, she is retired and lives in Eugene, Oregon. She has poems in *A Cup of Comfort Cookbook*, *has been published in Sandcutters, Manzanita Quarterly, Windfall, Verseweaves*, and *Earth's Daughters*. She spends her free time biking quiet country roads, writing poetry, gardening in pots, and taking long and interesting road trips to places she has never been.

Bill Neal

Sheryl L. Nelms, Kansas native, graduated from South Dakota State University in Family Relations and Child Development. Her poems, stories and articles have appeared in periodicals and anthologies including Readers' Digest, Modern Maturity, Capper's, Kaleidoscope, Grit, Cricket, over 4,500 times. Twelve collections of her poetry have been published. Sheryl has taught writing and poetry at conferences, colleges and schools. She was a Bread Loaf Contributor at the Bread Loaf Writer's Conference, Middlebury, Vermont. She has served as editor for many journals, including her current post as essay editor of The Pen Woman Magazine, the membership magazine of the National League of American Pen Women. She holds membership in The Society of Southwestern Authors, Abilene Writers Guild, and Trinity Arts Writers Association.

Carl Palmer doesn't own a wristwatch, cell phone or pager since retirement. With no structure or guidance, every day is Saturday. Carl gladly smiles when he can't remember the date.

Ken Paxton, married for over thirty years, is the proud grandfather of one, father of two and master of none. Employed in the hard disk drive industry he wonders, "Will flash memory one day make all drives obsolete?" For fun he enjoys hiking, camping, doodling on the piano and guitar, and writing...most anything.

James Penha, a native New Yorker, has lived for the past sixteen years in Indonesia. *No Bones to Carry*, a volume of Penha's poetry, is just available from New Sins Press, www.newsinspress.com. His award-winning 1992 chapbook *On the Back of the Dragon* is now downloadable from Frugal Fiction, www.frugalfiction.com. Among the most recent of his many other published works are an article in *English Journal*; fiction at *East of the Web* and *Ignavia*; and poems in *THEMA* and in the anthologies *Silver Boomers* (Silver Boomer Books), *Queer Collection* (Fabulist Flash Publishing) and *Only the Sea Keeps: Poetry of the Tsunami* (Bayeux Press). Penha edits a website for current-events poetry at www.newversenews.com.

Yvonne Pearson is a writer and clinical social worker who lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her poetry and essays have appeared in a variety of publications, including *Sing heavenly Muse! Transformations*, *Wolf Head Quarterly*, *Poetry Calendar 2000*, and *Studio One*. She is the recipient of a Loft Creative Non-Fiction Award, has participated in readings at The Loft, the University of Minnesota, and the American Association of University Women, St. Paul branch, and is the co-author several books.

Arlene Píneo's friends call her 'Arly,' a late bloomer who went back to college when her last child finished. She's had an interesting life, a third of it spent in Heidelberg, Germany and Paris, France. Returning to the States in '92, she settled in Bedford, TX where she discovered the Trinity Writers Workshop and began to receive awards for her writing. She mainly writes narrative-driven fiction.

Lynn Pinkerton announced in the fifth grade that she wanted to be a writer when she grew up. After careers in social services and special event marketing, Lynn reclaimed her childhood aspiration and joined a writing group. She is contentedly writing and publishing and wondering why she didn't listen to her young self sooner. She lives in Houston, Texas.

Kenneth Pobo, in addition to having a poem in the first *Silver Boomers* anthology, has work in *Colorado Review*, *Nimrod*, *Antigonish Review*, *Hawai'i Review*, and elsewhere. In 2008, WordTech Press published a new collection of his poems called *Glass Garden*. He teaches Creative Writing and English at Widener University in Chester, Pennsylvania.

Nancy Purcell - she sent this as a speculative submission and didn't put the bio with it.

Diana Raab M.F.A., essayist, memoirist and poet, teaches at the UCLA Extension Writers' Program and the Santa Barbara Writers Conference. A columnist for InkByte.com, she writes and lectures on journaling. Her memoir, *Regina's Closet: Finding My Grandmother's Secret Journal*, is a finalist for Best Book of the Year by *ForeWord Magazine*. She has two poetry collections, *My Muse Undresses Me* and *Dear Anais: My Life in Poems for You*. Her writing has appeared *The Writer*, *Writers Journal*, *Skylight Review*, *Rosebud*, *The Louisville Review*, *Palo Alto Review*, *Oracle*, *The Binnacle*, *Homestead*, and *Red River Review*. She's the recipient of the Benjamin Franklin Book Award for *Getting Pregnant and Staying Pregnant: Overcoming Infertility and High Risk Pregnancy*. Visit her web site: www.dianaraab.com.

Rita Rasco Bio

Richard T. Rauch holds a doctorate in theoretical physics and has worked in various scientific and engineering disciplines in academia, industry, and the government. He currently manages rocket propulsion test activities in support of NASA's Constellation Program to send human explorers back to the moon and on to Mars. Rick lives along Bayou Lacombe in south Louisiana, exploring the many possible universes of poetry in his spare time.

Jordan Reyes

Charles P. Ries lives in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His narrative poems, short stories, interviews and poetry reviews have appeared in over two hundred print and electronic publications. He has received four Pushcart Prize nominations for his writing. He is the author of *The Fathers We Find*, a novel based on memory and five

books of poetry. He is the poetry editor for Word Riot (www.wordriot.org). He is on the board of the Woodland Pattern Bookstore (www.woodlandpattern.org) and a founding member of the Lake Shore Surf Club, the oldest fresh water surfing club on the Great Lakes (www.visitsheboygan.com/dairyland/). You may find additional samples of his work by going to www.literati.net/Ries.

Barbara B. Rollins lives in Abilene, Texas, a judge who writes while waiting for lawyers. A member of SCBWI, her children's books include the novel *Syncopated Summer* and a forensic series *Fingerprint Evidence*, *Ballistics*, *Cause of Death*, and *Blood Evidence*. Her work has appeared in *Byline*, *Kidz Ch@t*, *R*A*D*A*R*, and *Off the Record*, an anthology of poetry by lawyers. The past president of Abilene Writers Guild maintains the group's web site as well as those of other nonprofit organizations besides her www.SharpWriters.com. Like many Baby Boomers, she shares her husband with two dogs while worrying about aging parents, two sons, and daughters-in-law. She is a principal in Silver Boomer Books.

K. Riley Bishop gets a bio if she sends something to include.... hint hint.

Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, poems, an occasional play, and novels (that are hiding in his closet, awaiting editing). Since 2005, his short stories have been accepted by more than 70 literary and commercial journals, magazines, and anthologies (both print and online) including the *Houston Literary Review*, *Storyteller*, the *Yale Angler's Journal*, and *The Southern Ocean Review*. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished

jazz and blues guitarist – who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

Marian Kaplun Shapiro grew up in a low-cost housing project in The Bronx, and practices as a psychologist and poet in Lexington, Massachusetts. She is the author of a professional book, *Second Childhood* (Norton, 1988), a poetry book, *Players In The Dream, Dreamers In The Play* (Plain View Press, 2007) and two chapbooks: *Your Third Wish*, (Finishing Line, 2007); and *The End Of The World, Announced On Wednesday* (Pudding House, 2007). She is constantly amazed at her good fortune, which includes her husband, two children, and four grandchildren. A Quaker, her poetry often reflects the splitscreen truths of violence and peace, doubt and belief, despair and abiding hope.

Rebecca Hatcher Travis is a native Texan and an enrolled citizen of the Chickasaw Nation. Her writing often reflects her native heritage and the natural world. Her book length manuscript, *Picked Apart the Bones*, was selected winner of the 2006 First Book Award for Poetry competition by the Native Writers' Circle of the Americas. Published work appears in literary journals, anthologies, the Chickasaw Times and Texas Poetry Calendar 2008.

Phillip J. Volentine is a forestry technician in the same Louisiana woodlands where he was born. He came late to the world of literature but yearns to be a teller of stories in prose and poetry. Phillip and his wife have one son and two grandchildren.

Thomas Wheeler bio

Carl L. Williams is a Houston author and playwright. His short stories and poems have been published in literary magazines. One of his stories finished seventh in the *Writer's Digest* short-short-story contest, appearing in the May/June, 2008 issue. His full-length and one-act plays have won numerous national competitions, with productions around the country, including off-off-Broadway. Over 20 of his plays have been published. He is a member of the Dramatists Guild of America.

Jim Wilson is a veterinarian in private practice for 31 years who seven years ago began treating his poetry seriously and saving it. He now has four published books: *Distillations of a Life Just Lived*, 2002; *Coal to Diamonds*, 2003; *Taking a Peek*, 2004; and *Down to Earth Poetry*, 2006. He's been published recently in *Border Senses*, U.T. El Paso; *Concho River Review*, Angelo State University; *The Desert Candle*, Sul Ross State University; and *Spiky Palm*, Texas A&M University at Galveston, and won sweepstakes in the Cisco Writer's Club annual contest for 2007. He says, "I write about everyday events every day."

Ellen E. Withers is an insurance fraud investigator by day and a freelance writer by night. She is the editor of *SIU Today Magazine*, an international fraud awareness magazine, and a regular contributor to *Life In Chenal Magazine*. Her work has been included in seven anthology publications including *Tales of the South*, *Echoes of the Ozarks* and *Silver Boomers*.

Thelma Zirkelbach, a native Texan, is a recent widow who lives in Houston. She is working on a memoir of her last year with her husband titled *The Final Chapter: A Love Story*. She has written romance novels for Harlequin and Silhouette under the pseudonym Lorna Michaels. After many years as a speech pathologist in private practice, she continues to work half time with children, enjoying the opportunity to share in their lives and language.

Let go my bone!

The Quartet

Becky says italics, Ginny says quotes. I vote resent.
 You do understand it's a typo (or a freudian slip!), right?
 Freudian typo.
 Does anyone care that this is a made-up word?
 What's that noise?
 Old dogs learning new tricks. Woof!
 Arf!
 Ruh! Roh!
 Barbark!
 Oh Gawd! people are going to start
 questioning our sanity if we add barks
 arfs and ruh rohs to a poem!
 (You're just going to add this line as well aren't you?)
 I think it's woof, because I feel an ARF coming....
 Oh, it's stuck. Well, next time.
 That's disgusting!

quark quark quark
 quack quack quack
 You know you have to add Quark to the TM list, yes?

"Freckles to Winkles" – is that with one eye or two?
 Only "Hawaii" has two I's.
 wink-wink

And yes, I think we're done!
Except for the paranoia bit.
You people scare me

That whooshing sound was this whole conversation thread
going right over my head.
I'm going to leave you nuts here on the tree and go to bed.



Attributions

