

Friend of the Family

Al Carty

During the early 1940s, my family lived on a two-hundred acre citrus ranch in the California foothills; my father was foreman of the ranch. The mountains began outside the back door of our little house and wildlife visited the property regularly. Choirs of coyotes sang laments each night from the near hills. Large oak trees grew in our front yard and beyond them was the barn and shop. Next to the shop was our chicken-house, a special attraction for nocturnal hunters. Sometimes wild and hungry eyes flashed from the dark groves.

Occasionally my father or brother would go outside and fire a few shots to drive them further away, but it was seldom necessary. Twenty-four hour security was provided by Ringy, our fox-terrier. Although he weighed less than thirty pounds, he was a fierce offensive fighter and had no fear of any animal, regardless of size. In his capacity as watchdog and general protector he allowed no trespassers. He challenged all who dared come on the property and chased the offenders back to their own regions.

Deer found the bark and tender shoots of young lemon trees a tasty snack and could easily kill an immature tree. Ringy kept this problem to a minimum. As he charged into a group of browsing deer the bucks would turn and stand their ground, heads lowered, trying to hook him with their antlers. Ringy darted in and out, around and under, snapping and barking,

enthusiasm wrinkles the soul.” Samuel Ullman ~§~ “Even with all

somehow avoiding the sharp hooves and horns, and nipped their ankles until the intruders were gone from his territory.

When in the house he was no less alert, and the family learned not to latch the screen door in front of him. If his senses picked up a danger signal his only thought was to get to the enemy and send it packing, and a locked screen would be left in tatters. Coyotes, twice his size, would not approach him singly, but stayed back in the grove in twos and threes, taunting him. He would chase them through the trees and into the hills where the pack waited in ambush. My brother and sister found him one morning lying by the edge of the grove. He had been badly mauled and was barely conscious. They carried him home and prepared a place for him by the kitchen stove. In a few days he was mended sufficiently to limp about the house and stare out the screen door. In another week he was back in action.

My father returned home one afternoon after planting trees on the upper flats behind our house. He noticed white feathers blowing along the ground, and more near the corner of the shop. He found Ringy behind the building with the remains of a chicken between his paws. The blood and feathers on his muzzle left no room for speculation. The dog lowered his head and looked away. My father stood there for a long time, disappointed, angry, sad...betrayed. The loss of the hen was insignificant, but a simple, elemental, taken-for-granted relationship had suddenly changed; a bond had been broken. A partnership had dissolved.

My father picked up the carcass and rubbed Ringy's nose in the gore, speaking to the dog all the while, roughly, tonelessly, the affection gone. He picked up the little fox-terrier and put him in the back of the ranch truck and drove away. He returned several hours later, alone.

We were shocked that our faithful little dog had killed what he had protected for so long, but couldn't believe our father had

my wrinkles! I am beautiful!" Bessie Delaney ~§~ "What's more

seen fit to take him away. There was much pleading and crying. He had been a valuable and much-loved family member.

“But Dad, couldn’t we keep him in the house?”

“Tom, couldn’t we tie him up for a while?”

“I’ll keep him in my room, Dad!”

But our father stood firm. “I won’t have a dog that kills chickens, or that has to be tied up! I can’t trust him anymore and I don’t want a dog I can’t trust!” So he had given him to a man who owned a small grocery store in Glendora. We missed the dog terribly; we had lost a friend. There was little to smile about for the next few days and we had little to say to our father. He had become an unpopular man.

With Ringy gone the predators began edging closer. My father chased coyotes away the first couple of nights and shot one several nights later. By the end of the week we saw bobcat prints in the yard. Then one evening my father stepped out into the yard and saw the cat clawing at the door of the chicken-house. He threw a rock at it and chased the animal down the trail along the base of the hill. The bobcat climbed a large, dead, pepper tree and spat and snarled from the topmost limb.

My father would have to return to the house for his rifle and a flashlight, for it was growing dark rapidly. He removed his shirt and hung it on a branch, hoping the man-smell would keep the animal in the tree until he returned. The moon would not be up for some time, and he picked his way carefully along the trail back to the house.

As my father pushed shells into the rifle and checked the flashlight, he looked about the house for volunteers. Someone would have to hold the light while he aimed the rifle. My brother happened to be staying the night at a friend’s house, so was unavailable. Even had she been asked, my sister would not have gone down that dark trail under any circumstances. And I was too young. My father explained the situation to my mother,

enchanting than the voices of young people, when you can't hear what

and while she understood the need for immediate action, she was less than enthusiastic.

My mother was of a quiet and gentle nature, and enjoyed her family and her role as home-maker. She liked to have things in their places, and to see everyone with his own job to do. At the end of the day's work she enjoyed a book, or the radio, conversation with friends or family, or Chopin, for she was an accomplished pianist. A bobcat up a tree in the middle of a dark night aroused no interest in her at all. But she knew the cat must be dealt with, so she put on a sweater and scarf and followed my father out into the night.

The cat began snarling as they approached the tree. My father put on his shirt and explained my mother's duties to her. She stood a few steps behind him and shined the light up through the branches. The wild-eyed bobcat glared down at her. My father cocked the rifle and took aim. All in one instant the rifled roared and recoiled, the cat sprang from his perch, and the light went out. With darkness all around him, seeing only the muzzle-blast imprinted on the retina of his eyes, my father could do nothing but stand and listen to a screaming bundle crash down through the dead branches and land at his feet. Then it was quiet, except for the sound of running feet behind him.

"And she took the flashlight with her!" This line always drew a big laugh when my father told the story of the bobcat in the tree. It was one of his favorites, and whenever my parents had company, and the cake and coffee were finished, he would point at the gray-and-brown pelt that lay on the hearth and work his way around to that night.

Not long after the incident my father returned from town and parked the truck under the big oak tree. He opened the truck door and Ringy jumped out, ran up to identify each of us, ran to the shop, ran by the chicken-house, then came back to receive pats and hugs. He was very excited, his wagging tail a blur.

they say?" Logan Pearsall Smith ~S~ "If you're starting to look

When we questioned our father about bringing the dog home, he was slightly hesitant with his answer. "Oh, I was driving through town and looked in the mirror and saw Ringy chasing the truck. I pulled over and let him in." This answer seemed vague for a man who loved a good story, but we were too happy to pursue it further. Our friend was back.

Ringy made his rounds of the yard again and seemed satisfied that things were where they belonged. The chickens were in the yard, scratching and pecking. The dog gave them a wide berth on the way to the house, and turned his head away when one came near him. As he entered the house he began sniffing the air, then worked his nose along the floor. When his investigation brought him into the living room, he bristled slightly at the sight and smell of the bobcat pelt. He circled it a few times, smelling it carefully, then lay down on it. He looked as though the bobcat might suddenly spring up had he not guarded it; from then on he kept constant watch on the pelt.

My father came in from the kitchen with a cup of coffee. He bent down and scratched the dog's back. "Ringy," he said, loud enough for my mother to hear, "you should have been there. You see, I heard a noise out by the chicken-house and went outside to see what it was. Well..."

My mother turned up the music on the kitchen radio and began singing along with it. Then she turned it down and asked, over her shoulder, "Was he mad?"

"Was who mad?" answered my father.

"The man at the grocery store...when you told him you wanted Ringy back."

My father drank coffee, patted the dog, but said nothing. My mother came from the kitchen, drying hands on her apron.

"O.K.," she said, looking at her strangely silent husband, "O.K."

wrinkled, don't worry. It covers the scars." unknown ~§~ "When grace

Hobby

Joy Harold Helsing

Second year in retirement
he decides to collect
butterflies

Buys a book of instructions
identification guide
long-handled net
glass-covered display case
pins for mounting
hiking boots
hat to cover his bald head

That whole summer
he traipses fields and hills
stared at by cows
growled at by dogs
laughed at by teenagers
gets lost for an afternoon
tears pants on barbed wire
wanders through poison oak
falls in a creek
is stung by a bee

is joined with wrinkles, it is adorable. There is an unspeakable dawn

Manages to catch
a few common specimens

Next spring
takes up fishing

Why Plums No Longer Make Good Metaphors

Rhoda Greenstone

Black plums used to have layers of flavors.
Remember when the skin was so sharp, so rich,
A shiver of recognition caused sweat to pop out
On your upper lip, a mustache of anticipation
For that splashy first bite? Its sour cloak used to
Be so thick it left a heady undertaste that the flesh
Of the cool wet pulp clung to, soothing, coating
The uvula, readying the tongue for that first
Encounter with savory multilinear sweetness.

An initial dip into a bouquet of delicate tastes used
To explode into a fragrant fountain that set off a lust
For a second, third, fourth nibble to get the teeth and
Gums and tongue and cheeks saturated in plum
On the way to the rich, deep red center, that fabulous
Fragrant meat that coddles the plum's stone.
Then, from a mouth crowded with lush sensations,

in happy old age." Victor Hugo ~S~ "The true evil is not the

Purple dribble escaped, spilled down my chin (my lips
Unable to contain the sweet and sour crescendo).

This summer the black plums have thin skin. Tasteless.
Unless it's sour. But mostly it sticks to the palate
Or snags onto a front tooth, an embarrassment
When I attempt to smile (once I even choked on a piece
Of the damned plastic-wrap-textured thing – does that
Sound like an inspiration for good poetry?)
Inside I find a uniformly yellow piece of fruit, one
That has no nuances, no complex flavors, no blush
Of aromatic red paling to pale orange like before.
Nothing to get hung up about. Wasn't it William

Carlos Williams who wrote a famous tanka
(Well, it was famous back when poets read poetry,
Assuming everyone would get his allusion when
He scribbled, "The plums in the icebox were so sweet/
I ate the whole bowl." I'm paraphrasing. Not that it matters.
Who reads Williams, anyway? More, who remembers plums
So worthy of hoarding, someone would risk getting the runs
Yet still feel guilty about scarfing them down? Those could
Only be a tease on display at Von's or Ralph's. Outer beauty.
Straining today's blank plums into metaphors muddies the
page
And hardens my already constipated pile of limbic verse.

weakening of the body, but the indifference of the soul." Andre

I Loved Lucy

Sally Clark

When I was growing up, one of my favorite rituals was watching *I Love Lucy* with my dad on our black-and-white TV set. Sometimes Mom joined us and sometimes she didn't, but Daddy was always beside me on the sofa in the den. Lucy's antics cracked us up. Desi's accent made ordinary words hysterical and Ethel was Daddy's favorite character, played against Fred's grumpy attitude.

One particular night, I asked my dad a question while we were watching the show. I don't remember what the question was, I just remember he didn't answer me. In fact, he didn't even look at me. I asked again. Still no response. I snuggled up under his arm, waited maybe a minute to see if any words were forthcoming, and then asked again. Still no answer.

This was not like my dad. He always answered me and he always looked at me when he talked to me, except when he was driving. Maybe he was driving, in a sense, that night. All I know is that although his arm tightened around my small shoulders and he held me close, his hand patting reassuringly on my arm, he never said a word.

After a few minutes, true to my childish nature, I forgot my question and turned back to watch the show. Yup, Desi was mad at Lucy again. What on earth had she done this time?

Maurois ~S~ "Character gives splendor to youth, and awe to wrinkled"

Many years later, as a grown woman with children of my own, I was visiting my dad when, from out of nowhere in my conscious memory, I recalled the incident on the sofa.

“Daddy, I remember one time when we were watching *I Love Lucy*, I asked you a question and you didn’t answer me. Do you remember that?”

His eyes started to crinkle and the corners of his mouth slowly turned up.

“Yes,” he said, “I remember.”

“You didn’t say a word. In fact, you didn’t even look at me. Do you remember what I asked you?”

His stomach started shaking like it did when he was about to laugh.

“You asked me why Lucy and Desi slept in twin beds.”

“I did?”

“Yes, and I didn’t know how to answer you. You were our third child and I was prepared to explain why married people slept in the same bed, but when you asked why they slept in separate beds, you really stumped me. I couldn’t think of any way to explain it to you without making sex between married people sound like something negative, so I just hugged you and hoped you would stop asking.”

Once again, Lucille Ball’s timeless comedy had us laughing. I think she would have loved that.

skin and gray hairs.” Ralph Waldo Emerson ~S~ “...every wrinkle

The Circle Will Be Unbroken

Barbara B. Rollins

The weekend of our parents' fiftieth anniversary my sisters and I, with two of my nieces, sang for our hometown church. I had a twinge of laryngitis but nobody in the family worried about that. They were the singers; I was there for the solidarity. While we tested the sound system on Saturday, the church's music director said he couldn't hear me. As though rehearsed, my three sisters answered in unison, "That's okay."

It took decades for me to realize my voice is not bad – it's just not up to the family standards. I sing at church from the pew and occasionally a stranger comments on my voice. I treasure those moments, but I still know I'm the one of Sam Breedlove's children who didn't get his voice.

Substitutes helped fill the gap. I normally played the piano when Daddy or my sisters sang, though Mary Ellen and Kathy played as well or better. When I was twenty years old, I'd had twenty-one years formal music training: eight of piano, two of organ, ten years in band, and a year's attempt at voice lessons. My saxophone quartet went to state, but I couldn't carry a tune without wandering to another key.

A passion for genealogy only compounded the problem. I knew Daddy's sister was a music major with a powerful voice, that a cousin was a concert pianist, another a professional singer. I remembered Grandmom playing all over the piano keyboard though she couldn't read music, singing to fill the sanctuary as

but a notch in the quiet calendar of a well-spent life." Charles Dickens

she played. As I studied the family I discovered deep roots to the dominant music gene.

In 1942, my grandfather said of his father-in-law, “Death for him was as simple and beautiful as was the life he lived. Quietly, with never a word of foreboding or fear, he slipped through an open door last Sunday morning and now is singing with that magnificent bass voice of his youth in the heavenly choir.” Great-granddaddy Richards got his voice through his mother’s side of the family. The dominance of great singing as a family trait is recorded the last two hundred years.

Like the final runner on a relay team staring at the baton she dropped, I lamented my ineptitude. The Gaithers recorded a medley of the songs “Daddy Sang Bass” and “Will the Circle Be Unbroken,” but the songs had been joined in my mind many years before that. “Daddy Sang Bass” doesn’t really fit since Daddy sang baritone and Mother only sang when she taught little children who didn’t care how it sounded. Since I only had sisters, “Me and little brother” didn’t join right in there. When I did join, my lack of self-confidence constrained me.

On road trips we passed time by singing. A song invariably included was, “When we all get to Heaven, what a day of rejoicing that will be. When we all see Jesus, we’ll sing and shout the victory.” I guess I’ve always thought of the family reunion in Heaven as being around a piano, the unbroken circle, Grandmom singing with her grandmother Ray, Richards and Breedloves echoing off the golden walls.

I expect to be at the reunion. I’m guessing somebody else will man the piano. Maybe the new body the Apostle Paul speaks of will include a new voice, a Breedlove voice. I don’t know. I do know, though, it’s okay that I didn’t get Daddy’s voice. The circle will be unbroken – the circle here on earth is unbroken. My son was five when he was singled out by the choir director for a solo because he had such a sweet, clear voice

~§~ *“Freckles are the pigment that paints a smile on the beholder.”*

and because he carried the tune so well. He sang “The Little Drummer Boy” and went on to sing in the Wesley Foundation Crossbound Choir at A&M. He’ll tell you his voice is not great, but I know better. His voice holds the circle together.

Ten-Cent Dreams

Joanne Faries

Held my grandfather's hand
 Skipping down the sidewalk while his long legs ambled
 Plaid suspenders clung to stooped shoulders
 He tipped his shapeless hat to ladies
 Shop door clanged and Pop-Pop jangled change
 We peered into the pickle barrel and laughed
 The green floating wedges looked silly
 On a hot day we lingered at the freezer
 Discussed the merits of a cherry popsicle versus an ice cream
 cone

Pop-Pop tapped his pipe into a trash bin
 Opened a fresh pouch of tobacco
 With deliberation, he prepped it
 I danced in front of the glass candy jars
 Rainbow of wishes, a cavalcade of choices
 He dropped a dime into my outstretched hand
 I fancied red licorice

Ginny Greene ~S~ “We are happier in many ways when we are old”

Legacy

Joy Harold Helsing

Over and over
my mother dreamt
she lost her purse

A nightmare born
from dread of growing old
being poor

Nothing could reassure her

Last night I dreamt
my purse was stolen

I set it down
on a shop counter
Then it was gone

Frantic, I roamed the streets
searched dumpsters
followed suspects
asked strangers
if they had seen the thief

Awoke with pounding heart
told myself
it was not her dream

than when we were young. The young sow wild oats. The old grow

The Rivvel Woman

Betty Jo Goddard

When I was small, walking alone at night clutched chill at my back. At any moment, the Rivvel Woman could steal from behind a tree and I would feel the rake of her claws, her long, sharp claws, swiping bloody across my back.

On summer evenings, as soon as we finished supper, my brother Jim and I dashed next door to visit Pearl and Walter, the Edwards twins. We usually found them lounging on their front porch, swapping stories. Pearl and Walter were eighth graders, grown-up and worldly-wise. From their fund of superior experience, they conjured up authoritative stories, awe-inspiring and blood-curdling, to tell us little kids.

One of their stories was about the Rivvel Woman. According to Pearl and Walter, the Rivvel Woman was old, shriveled, and misshapen. She had long claw-like fingers. Her back was hunched, her nose warty, her mouth toothless. She lurked at night. And she always carried a large sack – a sack where she stuffed little kids.

In hushed voices, Pearl and Walter revealed our danger. On dark nights, the Rivvel Woman hid behind a tree, waiting for little kids to come by. As soon as they passed, she jumped out from behind the tree and grabbed them. My imagination finished the story: Her claw-like fingers digging, the fiendish stuffing of her sack, her unseen journey, dragging her prey to her laboratory in back of the cemetery. Then oblivion.

sage.” Winston Churchill ~§~ “Each child is an adventure into a

I never asked about this laboratory. Oh, no. Not me. Instead, I put my hands on my hips, thrust out my jaw, and said to Pearl and Walter, “Aw, you can’t scare me. I don’t believe you. I’m not scared of any old Rivvel Woman. Uh-uh! You can’t scare me.”

Jim and I sat on the Edwards front porch, mouths open, listening to Pearl and Walter’s blood-chilling stories. The sky turned gray. Night sounds started. Darkness came and breathed its mystery around the two maples between our house and the Edwards house, two big maples, two dark maples, two maples hiding – who knew what?

Our screen door opened and Mom called, “Ji-im, Betty Jo-oooo. Come ho-ome.”

As we turned to leave, Pearl and Walter hissed, “Careful, now. Don’t let the Rivvel Woman get you. You’d better run fast or she’ll get you for sure.” Then they laughed and slapped their thighs.

Jim took off running as hard as he could tear. I stood alone on Pearl and Walter’s steps, facing the dark, ominous distance between our house and the Edwards house. I paused, then flounced around to face Pearl and Walter. “Aww, you can’t scare me,” I repeated. “I’m not afraid of any old Rivvel Woman.”

I stuck out my chest and walked down their steps. I left the safe porch and moved into the boding night. Pearl and Walter wouldn’t see me run. Nosiree. With fists clenched, chest thrown, legs stiff, I walked. Cicadas hummed, crickets chirped, locusts rasped. A gust of wind, sudden and chill, rustled leaves and other unseen things. Darkness enveloped me. Ahead loomed the first maple tree.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched the shadows around that tree. Any moment clawy hands might grab me. Shivers tightened my stomach. Tingles ran down my back. My arms prickled with goose bumps. Clutching my elbows hard, I pulled

better life - an opportunity to change the old pattern and make it

my arms across my chest. I tucked my head and scrunched my bottom, tightening my body forward to elude the sweep of the claw. Stretching my legs, I pounded my heels. Faster, faster. faster.

Whew! Made it past the first tree. The black bulk of the second tree awaited me. Slap, slap, slap, my shoes hit the sidewalk as I picked up speed. Tense, alert, heart racing, I waited for the grab.

Heels digging, legs thrusting, I passed the second tree and pounded into the home stretch, up our walk, onto our porch, and – whew! – into the lighted safety of our front room. I had escaped the Rivvel Woman once again. And I had walked every inch of the way. Pearl and Walter couldn't scare me. Nosiree!

Booming Late

Meg Pearce

Now that I'm a boomer,
It's time the truth was told.
In my younger days,
I wasn't half so bold.

Today, in my red hat,
I'm quite the fashion plate.
But much like in my youth,
I find I'm booming late!

new." Hubert H. Humphrey ~§~ "Whatever poet, orator, or sage may

The Three Ages Of Europe

Janet McCann

Young she was an explorer
jumping nude into languages and oceans
sharing strange vehicles with stranger men
learning European words for hangover:
Katzenjammer, gueule de bois, resaca

Middle-age made of her a traveler
riding the metros without a map
sitting on concrete jetties
eating prosciutto and melon
dangling her feet in the Mediterranean

But now she's just a tourist
following the guide with red umbrella
who herds her along with other sheep
to the bus, or to the chosen bistro where
ready baguettes and coffees line the bar

say of it, old age is still old age." Henry Wadsworth Longfellow ~S~

Aunt Elsie's Telephone

Ruth Sellers

“Hal-lo,” Aunt Elsie said into the black mouthpiece of the oak-cabineted telephone. “Yes, I can tell Mrs. Frizzell. She lives about a block away. What did you want me to tell her? Un-hunh. The new dress she ordered from Montgomery and Ward came in and she can pick it up between eight and six. It’s how much? \$3.98. All right.”

Such messages came over that old wall phone several times a day. After World War I, Uncle Henry went to work for the Cotton Belt Railroad. Aunt Elsie subscribed to the telephone service in case he needed to call home should he be unexpectedly detained out of town overnight.

Aunt Elsie’s was the only telephone in a three-block radius. She kept up with all the news and passed it on to anyone who wanted to know. Her nature led her to pry into everyone’s business, a kind of trade for her, and the telephone served as a tool of that trade.

Her four-party line, the least expensive service offered by the telephone company, allowed her to learn about the Douglasses, the Lawhons, and the Barbees. She knew each subscriber’s ring. Her ring was one long; the Douglas’ two longs; Lawhon’s two shorts; and Barbee’s a long and a short. She quietly picked up the black receiver from its cradle on the left side of the oak box and held it to her ear to hear the neighbors’ conversations.

“What is the worst of woes that wait on age? What stamps the wrinkle

She knew her nature of listening in gave her an edge about what went on in the neighborhood and everyone else on the party line knew it, too. The party line experiences were a little bit like the soap operas of today; they were her entertainment.

The neighbors not fortunate enough to own a phone used Aunt Elsie's in emergencies.

Mrs. Bartels, a neighbor from a block away, came. "Mrs. Bickley, Lewis has a terrible stomach ache, and I need to call Dr. Rice."

"Well, what caused his pain?" asked Aunt Elsie.

"We don't know, but he was up all night with it, didn't eat any breakfast, and feels hot like he has a fever."

"Do you know Dr. Rice's number? The directory hangs there on the wall by the phone." Aunt Elsie stayed close enough to hear the conversation.

"Operator, ring 332," Mrs. Bartels said into the black mouthpiece. "Hello. This is Mrs. Lewis Bartels. Is this Dr. Rice's office? Un-hunh. Can he come out and check on my husband; he has a bad stomach ache. Been up all night with it...He's not in? When will he be back? My husband's awful sick...You say you can get in touch with him on the phone?...Well, he knows where we live. Just have him come on out as soon as he can. If you need to give me a message, call this number, 387. Thank you, ma'am.

"Mrs. Bickley, if Dr. Rice's lady rings, will you let me know? Lewis really needs some help."

"I'll be right here, Mrs. Bartels. Can I do anything for you now? Maybe some chicken soup would help him. I'll kill a chicken and fix him some soup."

Aunt Elsie kept her promise, stayed by the phone and fixed that chicken soup, too. She was just naturally a good neighbor. But if she had been a cat, her curiosity would have wiped her out long ago. She just could not help listening in on the party line.

deeper on the brow? To view each loved one blotted from life's page,

One day she hung up just dying laughing. She hung up to keep from letting Mrs. Barbee know she heard the story about Mr. Barbee and the outhouse mouse.

It went like this. He rushed out of the house to the little building, readied himself to get rid of the water when a mouse ran up his britches leg. He let loose and sprayed the entire interior of the toilet trying to get that mouse out. He unfastened his overalls and came out the door undressing right in the middle of the pasture. He danced the original “Stomp” right there in front of the outhouse. All the time he was shouting a rhythmic, “Oh, Oh, Oh, oh no!”

Of course, Aunt Elsie could not keep this tidbit locked within her head. She shared it with everyone. Not only did her party line rumble, but every party line in the community carried the story. When it came back to Mrs. Barbee, she was mortified.

“I never told anyone but my daughter, Bobbie. How did all these people learn about it?”

“Well, did you tell Bobbie over the phone, Gertie?” Mrs Lawhon asked.

“Yes, I sure did. I should have known Mrs. Bickley would hear it. She listens in on everyone’s conversations.... It is a funny story, though.” She broke into laughter when she thought of the sight of Mr. Barbee trying to get rid of that mouse.

In spite of Aunt Elsie’s listening to everyone on the party line, everyone in the community loved her. Her natural giving spirit prompted her to help all the people. If anyone was sick, she prepared food for them and did what she could to help them mend. So, in a way, her good nature of helping and her less desirable nature of being a busybody balanced out each other. No one seemed to think any less of this good woman for eavesdropping on telephone conversations. Not only did she take messages, she often made calls for people hesitant about using the unfamiliar telephone. Without her phone, she might

And be alone on earth, as I am now.” Lord Byron ~§~ “Of all the

never have known when someone needed her help, and it was her nature to offer that, too.

That old phone served the community well because of Aunt Elsie's service to others through eavesdropping on the party line. Today's communication services lack the personal touch of Aunt Elsie's old oak telephone that hung on the wall, and when she rang "Central," a real person answered.

The Gate

Barbara Crooker

Here is a gate. Since it was discarded,
 rusty, unhinged, it locks nothing out,
 keeps nothing in. No boys swing on it,
 no wind sings through its grate. It leans
 against a green shed, divorced from its fence,
 its hedge of lilacs, the crushed-stone walk.
 Wrought iron filigrees, curlicues.
 "What hath God wrought?" I wrote, in the curls
 and loops of Palmer cursive, blotching my copybook.
 Once, I confused the signals for fire and atomic bomb
 drills, stayed huddled on the cool tile of the girls' room,
 waited for the all clear, while the teacher searched frantically,
 calling and calling my name. Humiliated, my face flamed
 every shade
 of red, from Brick to Maroon to Indian, those politically
 incorrect
 days. I worried, would my scarred wooden desk be enough

barbarous middle ages, that which is most barbarous is the middle age

protection if the bomb landed on it? We saw the bombs
 bursting in air
 on the fourth of July, and knew they were no bigger than our
 hands.
 We ducked and covered, did as we were told. Later that year,
 we would be Polio Pioneers, roll up our sleeves to test the
 Salk
 Vaccine, line up in blind faith for our shot in the dark.
 The Cold War blazed on. Elvis swiveled his hips, Little
 Richard
 put on eye liner, and rock 'n roll was born. We wrote our
 secrets
 in diaries, powder-puff vinyl covers, tiny silver keys. The
 future
 seemed to be locked in place, latches clicking, doors closing,
 but then a gate swung open to the rainbow garden of the
 sixties,
 and nothing would ever be the same.

Letting Go

SuzAnne C. Cole

Butterfly – orange, black
 defined in white —
 alights on my leg;
 as impossible to hold
 as the adult children
 sharing this holiday.

of man!" Lord Byron ~S~ "Children's talent to endure stems from

Nearing Menopause, I Run into Elvis at Shoprite

Barbara Crooker

near the peanut butter. He calls me ma'am, like the sweet southern mother's boy he was. This is the young Elvis, slim-hipped, dressed in leather, black hair swirled like a duck's backside. I'm in the middle of my life, the start of the body's cruel betrayals, the skin beginning to break in lines and creases, the thickening midline. I feel my temperature rising, as a hot flash washes over, the thermostat broken down. The first time I heard Elvis on the radio, I was poised between girlhood and what comes next.

My parents were appalled, in the Eisenhower fifties, by rock and roll and all it stood for, let me only buy one record, "Love Me Tender," and I did.

I have on a tight orlon sweater, circle skirt, eight layers of rolled-up net petticoats, all bound together by a woven straw cinch belt. Now I've come full circle, hate the music my daughter loves, Nine Inch Nails, Smashing Pumpkins, Crash Test Dummies. Elvis looks embarrassed for me. His soft full lips are like moon pies, his eyelids half-mast, pulled down bedroom shades. He mumbles, "Treat me nice." Now, poised between menopause and what comes next, the last

their ignorance of alternatives." Maya Angelou ~S~ "While one finds

dance, I find myself in tears by the toilet paper rolls,
 hearing “Unchained Melody” on the sound system. “That’s all
 right now, Mama,” Elvis says, “Anyway you do is fine.” The
 bass
 line thumps and grinds, the honky-tonk piano moves like an
 ivory
 river, full of swampy delta blues. And Elvis’s voice wails
 above
 it all, the purr and growl, the snarl and twang, above the
 chains
 of flesh and time.

Thrift

Joy Harold Helsing

He drives an old car
 shops for bargains
 wears out his clothes
 heats up leftovers
 reuses aluminum foil
 paper bags
 recycles newspapers
 bottles, cans
 mends, repairs
 whatever he can
 turns out the light
 when he leaves a room
 uses even words
 sparingly

company in himself and his pursuits, he cannot feel old, no matter

Outhouse Blues

Sheryl L. Nelms

so much of my early
life was spent
suspended

above that black
and gargoyled
pit

hanging there
in the cold ammonia draft

remembering the horror
stories of a cousin
who disappeared
forever

when he was
grabbed
from

below

what his years may be." Amos Bronson Alcott ~S~ "Age is whatever

Snips, Snails and Puppy Dog Tails

Jo Anne Horn

If God created anything more complex, yet more delightful than a boy, He did not share it with us. Boys are a hardy crop and can be found everywhere, growing in wild profusion. They bloom like myriad flowers, each with a special beauty, but together they comprise a wondrous bouquet.

A boy can be a joy, a paradox, a blessing, or, at times, compare only to the seven plagues of Egypt. He consists of many things. He is the happiness of a puppy, the softness of a kitten, the stubbornness of a mule, and the unsullied innocence of the very young. He is the impetuosity of a summer breeze, the unpredictability of a sudden storm, a lump in the throat and a pain in the posterior.

He is a combination of freckles, skinned knees and scabs, held together with Band-Aids. He is too old to be kissed and cuddled, and too young to be deprived of affection. He loves superheroes, chocolate ice cream and spiders – and everything that is bad for him. He hates baths, girls, dancing and church – and everything that is good for him.

A boy is a cacophony of sound. He is shrill in excitement, groaning in despair and bellowing in pain. He can imitate twenty birdcalls, a fire engine, and blast the air with whistles. He can make rude, though innocuous, sounds by instrumentation of his body. These armpit symphonies usually occur at

you think it is. You are as old as you think you are.” Muhammad Ali

inopportune, embarrassing moments – Mother’s bridge parties, Tupperware parties and family reunions.

A boy spills incessantly throughout the early part of his life. He spills milk, soda, the goldfish bowl, and sunshine into the dark corners of our lives. He spills breakfast, lunch, dinner, and laughter, infecting those of us who have forgotten how to laugh.

Without a doubt, a boy is the bravest of hunters. He stalks his prey, either real or imaginary, fiercely and relentlessly. He captures living creatures of all possible size – cats, dogs, frogs and snakes – and stores them in impossible places – the toy chest, shower, Mother’s hatbox, and the refrigerator.

The thrill of the hunt is superseded only by a boy’s love of demolition. Ah, how he breaks! In the short span of boyhood, he breaks bottles, vases, records, windows, dishes, and many, many mirrors. Later, he will break bikes, furniture, bones (hopefully his own), curfews and hearts.

A boy is a blameless creature, and, therefore, is not accountable for his actions. He blames his brother, his cousin or friend equally and impartially – and often.

“Somebody Else” is a convenient culprit who dwells in almost every household that boasts a boy. “Somebody Else” loses shoes, coats, gloves and books. “Somebody Else” leaves a boy’s room in total chaos and the bathroom in shambles. “Somebody Else” wets his bed.

A boy does not deem it necessary to develop an extensive vocabulary. When he is very small, he need only grunt to make his desires known. One grunt may concern anything in the matter of creature comforts. Two grunts may mean all progress made toward potty training has suffered a reversion, and three grunts usually mean the situation is serious and an investigation is in order. At age three, “Why?” is sufficient and seems to serve as a response to any discussion. At eight, the words, “He did

~§~ “For little boys are rancorous When robbed of any myth, And

it!" will suffice. At twelve, "I don't know" will cover any question a parent may ask on any subject at any time.

A boy is a miniature master of prestidigitation. With unsurpassed dexterity, he can make a multitude of things disappear without a trace – skate keys, one sneaker, the spacer for his teeth, Daddy's pipe, and the cake for Mother's bridge club. With just a smile, he can chase away frowns and change a gray day to gold.

A boy is equipped with a driving personality. He drives, and ferociously, firetrucks, tricycles and bikes. Later, as a teenager, he may drive motorcycles, his mother to tears and his father to desperation.

A boy is a collector of things. He leaves behind him on the road to growing up an assortment of planes, trains, boats, a crooked old kite, and a knife with a broken blade. He leaves behind the gnarled old oak that held him on long summer afternoons. It stands with branches sad, waiting for that boy who will not come again. Tomorrow it will raise its leafy arms to embrace another small boy who will seek its heights.

Too soon this mercurial creation, the boy, is gone. He becomes a tall, young man crossing the bridge to manhood, leaving behind a world of no return. I gaze with pride, but I miss the boy who is gone. He will always be just around the corner constant in my memory, ever-freckled, ever-noisy, and beloved.

Tony
(1954 – 2000)

spiteful and cantankerous To all their kin and kith." Phyllis

Powdered Milk

Dianna M. Raab

Every year of my childhood
mother would stack emergency
supplies in our dark basement—

grocery bags of candles, flashlights,
batteries, powdered milk, matches,
peanut butter, crackers, and dried raisins

as if these items could protect us from
the reason for the weekly grade school
drills which no one explained,

of hiding under our desks for protection
in case of emergency. I knew nothing
else would matter, but me grabbing

my favorite Tiny Tears doll
for the very last time, before
we had to whisper good-bye because

some indescribable force of nature
could have possibly decided
there was a better place for us both.

McGinley ~S~ "To know how to grow old is the master work of wisdom,
