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Thoughts at Fourteen

_Sandee Bisson_

I wish I were prettier, more popular. People seem to like me. Think I’m nice, or smart. But I want them to think I’m cool. I want popularity. Popularity is everything. Popular girls have everything. The cute boys like them. They have breasts, Do you think the popular girls have breasts because they are popular, or are they popular because they have breasts? Popular girls have the cool clothes, which look so good when they cling to their popular breasts. I don’t have breasts really. I have braces, the big metal ones. My teacher just sent mom a note saying I need my eyes checked. Fabulous. I am the breast-less, braced, four-eyed, smart, nice, girl who won’t be kissed ‘til she’s twenty.

7/2/03
Finding the Babies

Carolyn Bordeau

We drive up the hill, up the steep, sharply curving road, through the iron gate (which is padlocked shut at night but swings open now to allow us in, though we may not stay past twilight) under the twining arch proclaiming “Saint Mary’s,” and into a quiet world, apart.

As the road suddenly levels then twists again, we burst onto a plateau of silent, ordered lawns. Rows of monuments align in a perfect grid. The car’s slow progress reveals the optical illusion, perspective shifting from squared to diagonal. Across the lush green grass, neatly manicured, stretch lines of solid gray rectangles, polished or rough, some flecked with mica from which a sudden reflected ray of sunlight flares, then is extinguished so quickly it might not have been at all. A few squares of pink-hued, black-flecked marble stand out, almost colorful. Amidst hundreds of right angles, a lone heart and one weeping angel.

Crickets scream in the silence. Traffic is a muffled whisper in the distance. One side shielded by trees and steep embankment, the other bounded by a gently sloping meadow rising to a cloud-puffed horizon, this place seems to hover above the town. A narrow bed of pine needles and oak leaves, form a pungent hem around the edge. A ribbon of rusty barbed wire threads through the trees, then swells to become a fence binding the meadow out.

My uncle’s shady grave lies near the corner of the cemetery. My parents pull the car onto a narrow shoulder of grass, and stop. From the trunk of the car, my father hauls the heavy wooden bucket of red geraniums, purple blooms, and variegated leaves, carefully placing it at my uncle’s head, between the granite marker and the slight ridge in the grass. My mother tells me not to step on the grave. My father chuckles at her: “Do you think he will feel it?” He laughs, and tells us again of the Oriental custom of leaving a bowl of rice for the dead. My father thinks this is no sillier than leaving flowers. The dead can appreciate neither. Still, he prunes the withered leaves and tamps the earth around the tender roots in the bucket. While my mother waits, I skip alongside my father to seek out a hidden spigot, where we slop water onto our shoes and into a milk bottle, then carry it back to the flowers.

My aunts arrive, admire the splash of color now adorning the gray stone of a brother. I see no tearful grief in them, only stories. Their anguish has worn dull now that I am old enough to listen. My mother speaks in low tones, still the outsider to this conversation marked by gentle laughter at memories she does not share, stories of the dead and stories of the disconnected living, the widow and the children who have fled.
I wander away, feeling safe to stray here where there are no cars, no people. I weave from grave to grave, reading one dull stone after another: Smith, McCarthy, Dubanovich… until I have read myself past the perimeter, outside the neatly groomed grass of “perpetual care” and into the shaggy, piney earth, onto unconsecrated ground, by the steep edge of the gully. And here I find them: baby graves, garishly decorated with ribbons and plastic pink or blue flowers. Markers of wood or metal stakes driven into the ground, with paper tags, typed names fading quickly in the sun and rain. O’Connor, Baby Boy. Sinlinsky, Twins. Sometimes the dates of birth and death are the same; sometimes a few days of life recorded. I am fascinated by these little mounds, removed from the tidy rows of solid granite, removed from the grace of groomed lawn, floating between the cemetery and the abyss of the gully. These graves are whispy, fluttering, as though their little souls could still escape the clutch of earth, leaving their mark only for a short while on forest floor. I am lulled into a trance of wonder…

My mother screams and runs to catch me, yanking me back from the edge.
On Faces, Knowing and Being Known

Sarah Bucken

I look into your face
searching to see you.
Amidst the swollen cheeks
and lips and eyes.
Familiar features masked in
the aftermath of surgery.
Through your wired jaw
we talk, or try to,
You mumble;
your mother and I interpret for each other.
We try to be ourselves.
I joke and lightly tease--
that is what we always do--
You acknowledge my gestures by a nod,
a movement of your hand.
I look again, unsuccessful,
I cannot find the girl I know
behind the unfamiliar image.
I look into your face,
and I am scared.
I search for you,
the image of you that I know
and I cannot find it.
I am scared, not because I cannot find you,
but because I need to.

I look into another face,
the face of a man I once loved (dearly).
Your smiles can still move me,
your closeness a retreat that can still draw me.
I look into your face in search of you,
(Or is it me I search for in you)
I search for what I found in you,
for what made us..
I try to look away
but don’t.
My eyes make demands:
Give it back to me,
Look at me!
Let me see you again, please.
Your eyes are closed to me
and I cannot find you.
I am scared again—
This time because I cannot stop myself from looking.

I look into my own face,
seeing each reflected detail,
searching and wondering about myself.
I stare, watching the image slowly change
until I no longer recognize the face that is before me.
It is distant and unknowable.
I reach out to touch it,
The movement of my own hand startles me.
I look away, and wonder,
Which image of me do I choose?
Or do I choose at all?
I am frightened now
because I do not know.
The Storm

Lori Colby

Sara looked up through the broad leaves of the horse chestnut tree to scan the sky for clouds. The breeze, slight though it was, smelled of rain. She felt the familiar tingle of anticipation, but dismissed it quickly. It would not do to rush things.

“Soon,” she whispered, her voice low and full of promise. She smiled softly as a cool breeze brushed against her cheek like a tentative caress. Her smile broadened as she sensed rather than saw the darkening sky through the canopy of green above her. She raised herself up on her elbows and turned to look at the house. She could not see the door from where she was lying in the cool grass, but she expected to hear the screen door squeak and then slam as her mother stepped outside to call her inside before the storm reached them.

She listened for a moment, hearing the faint hum of insects in the tall grass of the hay field and the soft, mournful lowing of the cows from the farm next door. Nothing yet. She was hungry. It had been a long time since her breakfast of oatmeal and bread. She liked the texture and smell of the yeast bread that her mother baked fresh every Saturday. Toasting the bread ruined it, made it hard and brittle and burned the smell of the yeast away. “Making bread is about the only thing that bitch does right.”

Sara jerked her head around, frantically searching for her mother. Had she spoken aloud? She let out her breath in a shaky laugh as she realized that she was alone. She turned toward the door, feeling her heart pound against her ribcage as she imagined her mother standing there, the wrinkles around her mouth deepening into trenches as she pressed her already thin lips into a hard, white line.

She would try to take the storm away from her. She always did. She would make her go inside where she would have to watch the storm through the thick, dirt-streaked pains of glass of the living room windows until her mother made her move away with a quick slap and a long lecture on the terrors of lighting. But for now her mother was still inside, locked away in her cocoon of wood and shingles. Safe from the storm. Invisible. Unseeing and unseen.

Sara’s mind shifted from the unpleasant image of her mother as the breeze brushed her hair from her eyes and traced the contours of the back of her legs. She sighed with pleasure.

Her stomach growled as she rolled over and leaned on her elbows to watch an ant struggle through the thick grass. She idly plucked stalks of grass to place them in front of the ant, barring his way. She liked to confuse the ants. They always seemed so intent to her, almost frantic, as they hurried through their tasks. Ants never dawdled.

She wished she had a piece of her mother’s white bread right now. She would share it with the ant. She wanted to see if the ant would stop trying to get to the tree (or wherever it was going) to pick up the bread. She had never seen an ant eat anything; they just scurried around with food in the mandibles. Ants were pitiful creatures. They, like her mother, never just experienced the moment, never just lived.
A sudden gust of warm wind plucked at her blouse and dried the sweat that had pooled at the base of her spine. She raised her head and turned full into the wind. Mmmm. She loved the feel of the wind just before a summer storm. She didn’t know why, but this storm would be special somehow. She could feel the electricity in the air. She took a deep breath, drinking in the dark moisture. This was her storm.

“It’s coming from the East,” she thought, as she pulled herself up from the ground gracefully. She brushed at the bits of grass that had stuck to the back of her knees and grimaced at the faint impressions the grass had left on her legs. She scanned the ground for the ant she had been playing with and noticed that it had managed to move quite a distance across the lawn despite her attempts to waylay it. With a satisfied grunt, she raised one sandaled foot and carefully stepped on the ant. She smiled as she twisted the toe of her sandal through the grass, laughing as her foot tore the tender stalks of grass from the ground. “Sucks to be you,” she murmured as she moved slowly and carefully from beneath the canopy of the tree.

Once out in the open, Sara could witness the storm’s approach. She turned full east and sucked in her breath as the full impact of the approaching storm hit her. The Eastern sky was a rich, dark purple. “It’s like a bruise,” she thought, idly rubbing the bruises that stretched along both arms from elbow to shoulder. “A fresh bruise.” She quickly pushed away the image of her mother’s rough hands digging in the tender flesh of her arms as she punctuated the now-familiar lecture about dishes left in the sink with fierce jerks that snapped her head back and forth until she feared that she would snap in two like a branch in the wind.

Sara tore her eyes from the storm to look to the west. She squinted in the flat, faintly greenish light. Time seemed suspended. Nothing moved. She imagined that she could see each leaf on each of the saplings that bordered their farm. The light seemed to penetrate everything, separating each leaf and branch and rock so that they stood out in sharp relief from their surroundings. She nodded with satisfaction as she noticed that the pale green leaves of the poplar at the edge of the yard were twisted so that their undersides showed. This was a sure sign of a storm. She wondered, briefly, what she looked like in this strange light, but before she could look down to examine herself, the breeze picked up and she retuned her gaze to the east. She followed the wind with growing excitement as it moved through the tops of the trees from left to right.

Her eyes stopped as she reached the last of the forty-foot pines that edged the dirt road along her farm. She had felt compelled to climb the tree four years ago when she was twelve. It had taken most of the afternoon to climb to the top and perch precariously on the thin, sticky branches. The day had been mild, but a slight breeze had come up, and as she rested for the climb back down, she rocked back and forth as the tree bent in the breeze. The experience had moved her. She was one with the tree, cradled between earth and sky. The tree danced with the wind, and she was part of that dance. Only the darkening sky had persuaded her to leave her perch to begin the arduous journey back down. She imagined that she felt heavier as she moved through the ever-thickening branches toward the ground. She paused as she stood on the lowest branch. Beneath her sap-stained hands, the rough bark of the tree felt warm and alive. Her mother’s voice calling to her to sounded shrill and loud in the dim light. It jarred her from her revery and she released her hold on the tree and dropped the last four feet to the ground. She nearly cried when the last bit of lightness left her body with a solid thwump as her sneakered feet slammed into the earth.

When she returned to the house, her mother had punished her for “worrying her so.” Sara had clenched her teeth as the strap raised bright red welts on the back of her legs, but she hadn’t
cried. Her mother could keep her from climbing, that was true, but she couldn’t stop her from remembering. She kept the memory of her dance with the wind close to her always.

Now, as the storm moved through “her” pine, Sara closed her eyes and made the climb once again. This time the dance with the wind was frantic and wild. She and the pine were flung from side to side in a frenzy that left her breathless with fear and excitement. She swallowed tears of joy as they poured down her cheeks, and her body was wet with sweat. The violent movement and the wind sucked the air from her lungs, leaving her gasping for breath. She was drowning. She had never felt more alive.

The storm called to her, snapping out her name with each creaking limb and rumbling with a deep, booming laughter that moved along her spine and set the hairs on her arms on end.

Sara, Sara, Sara, the storm shouted her name. Suddenly, the voice seemed almost frantic and menacing. She was flung violently to the right, and she almost lost her perch. Sara clutched at the narrow trunk of the tree and squeezed with all of her might. The Storm was testing her. Could she hold on? Could she continue the dance? She clutched at the tree with an iron grip, luxuriating in the growing tightness in her shoulders as she struggled to maintain her grip. She laughed with sheer abandon, as her fingers seemed to melt into the bark of the tree. She could almost feel the tree’s lifeblood pulsing beneath her fingers. Sara squeezed against the pulse beneath her hands. Her fingers ached and the muscles of her arms screamed in agony. Still she hung on. She steeled herself against the violence of the storm as she was flung from side to side. Gradually, she felt the thundering pulse beneath her cold fingers slow as the storm lost its intensity. She felt the bark of the tree stiffen beneath her hands and slowly, ever so slowly, as she released her grip. She held her breath as she waited for a fresh onslaught of the storm. She felt her own pulse slow as the now gentle rain cooled her feverish forehead. Exalted, Sara raised her arms above her head in triumph and shouted into the storm.

She had passed the test. She had held on. She had stayed with the storm until it changed. She had changed. She had passed through the storm and become something new. She opened her new eyes. And staggered. She was on the ground! How had that happened? She laughed because she realized that it didn’t matter. She had borne the storm and been reborn.

She shivered and realized that she was sopping wet. She pulled a clump of sodden hair into her mouth and sucked at the wet. Her hair tasted of Storm, sweet and dark and cool. She turned to move back toward the house, not caring that she would most certainly be punished for staying out in the storm. Her mother didn’t frighten her anymore. She was infused with the strength of the storm. She was the storm.

She smiled as took a step toward the house, imagining the shocked look on her mother’s face when she saw her strength. Surely her eyes must shine with the same eerie green light that split the world before the storm, or maybe they simmered with the heavy purple darkness that swallowed the light, or maybe they snapped and sparked like lightning.

Sara grunted as she tripped over an exposed root on the ground. She flung her out her hand to grab the trunk of the tree to keep from falling and fell flat on her face as her hand swept through the empty air. What had she tripped on? It wasn’t a root that was for sure.
Mildly annoyed, Sara turned on her side to see what had caused her fall. Crab-like she scampered backward as she spied the dark form of a body lying on the wet grass. The body was lying on its side with its back toward her. One arm was draped over its head as if to keep off the rain. “What the hell?”

Sara lurched to a stop and settled back onto the grass, grimacing slightly as the cold wet seeped through the thin linen of her shorts. The body looked familiar. Slowly, she raised herself up onto her knees and crawled through the grass and mud toward the body. She took a deep, rain filled breath, and pulled at the shoulder so that the body rolled toward her.

Her mother’s wide, brown eyes stared up at her. Sara watched in fascination as the rain pooled in the unseeing eyes and poured in long rivulets down one cheek. Sara’s eyes followed the tiny rivulet down the check to the neck. She gasped as she saw the mass of dark purple bruises.

She didn’t know how long she sat there in the rain, staring at the darkening bruises and avoiding looking into those staring eyes. A distant rumble of thunder called to Sara. She felt her body respond to the sound: her breath quickened and her heart lurched against her chest in an effort to match the rhythm of the coming Storm.

Sara raised her eyes and stared into the dead eyes of her mother. She rose gracefully to stand beside the lifeless body. “Sucks to be you,” she said quietly as she turned away and headed east—toward the approaching storm. ☼
Sisters, blisters

Jennifer Dumont

Years ago, in the misty days of their childhood, they had often fought. Elaine was always tagging along behind Janet, who sometimes tolerated it. As she approached her teens, it became tiresome.

One summer night, as the family was vacationing at their rustic lakehouse, Janet got away. A boy from down the street had come to the door, asking for Janet. The two of them strolled down to the lake together. As they were pushing the canoe out into the water, Elaine came running towards them.

“Wait for me,” she called. “I want to come too!”

Janet was already in the canoe. The boy was clambering in, rocking the boat from side to side. Janet grabbed an oar from the bottom. “Come on,” she said. “Paddle!”

The two of them paddled intensely, propelling the canoe away from shore and from Elaine.


Later, when it was very dark, they returned. After a shy good night kiss, the boy ran from Janet’s front door. Janet sailed inside and into the bedroom that she shared with her sister. Elaine was already there in bed. As Janet was pulling on her nightgown, Elaine sat up.

“Hi,” Janet said.

Elaine swung her legs onto the floor. She stood up.

“Where are you going?” Janet asked.

Elaine walked a few paces until she stood in front of Janet.

“What?” Janet said nastily.

Elaine grabbed the front of her nightgown. She pulled her fist back and punched Janet squarely in the mouth.
Now, in the stark days of adulthood, they were very close. Only two years apart, they had developed a strong friendship in their older teens. As adults, they spoke at least every other day and had dinner once or twice a month, just the two of them. Their relationship was fluent, punctuated by moments of deep emotion and flashes of girlish hilarity. They rarely fought now, but when they did, it was lightning quick and dangerous. They would forgive, but they never forgot.

Their parents, Rhea and Tom, were aging. They had retired to live full time at the lakehouse, in a sleepy little village in Maine. At the age of 65, Tom had a heart attack. He was life-flighted to Maine Medical in Portland, where Janet lived and worked as a graphic artist. Being self-employed, it was easy for her to take off of work and spend the days at the hospital with her mother. Rhea stayed at Janet’s apartment at night. Every few days, Elaine would come up from Yarmouth, which was “down the coast,” as Mainers say. She would spend the night with them, and the three of them would stay up late drinking wine and laughing over old times.

Tom improved. It was almost time for him to go home. Elaine came up for his last night in the hospital. That night, at Janet’s apartment, Elaine put her arms around her sister.

“Thank you for taking care of Mom this whole time,” she said.

“Don’t be silly,” Janet said. “What else was I going to do? Let the old bag sleep on the street in front of the hospital?”

“I’m serious,” Elaine said. “You really helped her, and me, a lot.”

Months later, Janet sat in a restaurant in Portland with her husband Roger. They were just eating when Janet looked up and saw a familiar face enter.

“Oh, no,” Janet said to her husband.

“What is it?” Roger asked, turning around.

“Don’t look, don’t look,” Janet urged, but it was too late. Marie had seen them.

Janet was not entirely thrilled to see Marie, who had worked for Tom when Janet was a child. Tom had owned a mortgage company, which provided funding to people who could not get an approval from the bank. He had helped many people in their hometown of Yarmouth to build or hold onto their homes during tough times. Marie had been a sales associate for him for ten years, before she had decided to try to start her own
mortgage company. Unfortunately, she tried to take half of Tom’s clients and two of his major funding sources with her. The attempt failed.

Tom had not born any ill will towards Marie. He had even gone so far as to try to help her get on her feet, once all of his clients returned to him. Janet, however, had always felt a special sort of hatred for Marie. That she could betray a man as giving as Janet’s father was a testament to how low people could sink, Janet thought.

“How are you?” Marie exclaimed, bearing down on Janet.

Janet half-stood and returned Marie’s hug, a little off balance.

“Good, how are you?” Janet replied.

“Great!” said Marie. “Still living in Yarmouth, of course. Do you ever get home?”

“Once in a while, to see Elaine,” Janet said. “But more often than not we all meet in Shapleigh instead. At the lakehouse.”

“Oh, right, I remember the lakehouse,” Marie said. “I just saw Elaine, in fact. Glad to hear your father’s doing well.”

“Yes, he’s almost fully recovered,” Janet said. “Thank God. He’s a strong man.”

“Absolutely,” Marie said. “Elaine told me about everything. Sounds like it was a rough couple of weeks.”

“It was,” Janet said. “But we made it through.”

“Thanks to Elaine,” Marie said. “What a wonderful person she is.”

“Yes, I know,” Janet said, hesitantly. She was confused, but didn’t want to say anything specific to this woman, who had no right to know their family business.

“She told me all about how she took off of work so that she could be there,” Marie plowed on. “She said she and your mother stayed in a hotel for weeks, so that you could continue your work. She said, you know, that your studio is in your house and so they didn’t want to disturb you. So, you were able to continue working and your life didn’t have to be disrupted.

“She’s so wonderful, so giving,” Marie continued.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Janet murmured. She didn’t correct Marie, because she didn’t care what Marie thought.

“Well, I must run!” Marie said. “Gotta eat! Great to see you.”
“Bye,” Janet said.

“I don’t understand,” she said a moment later to Roger. “Why is Elaine lying about these things? I didn’t take care of Mom out of any sense of competition. I was just there; I mean, we live there!”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Roger said.

Janet waited a few minutes. He didn’t continue. “What do you mean?” Janet persisted.

“Well, she’s jealous, she always has been,” Roger replied. “Haven’t you always said that she was a bit too critical of you? Of your degrees? Of your job?” He smiled craftily. “Of your dashing husband?”

“Stop it,” Janet said. Roger was probably right, but she hadn’t thought of it that way in years. Elaine was a successful businesswoman; she had a wonderful husband, adorable kids. Janet didn’t have kids – didn’t that somehow put Elaine first? The winner? Now, as adults, didn’t it seem implausible that Elaine could still feel this way about her older sister?

They met for dinner a week later. Janet was so distracted during Elaine’s stories about screaming kids and complaining customers that she had to ask her to repeat herself several times. Finally, Elaine gave up.

“What is your problem tonight?” she asked, exasperated.

Janet almost told her. About Marie, about the hospital. She started to explain, desperate, that she didn’t mean to take any credit for letting Rhea stay at her house. As she talked, an image crept into her head. A young girl, standing on the lakeshore, screaming, “I want to come too!”

“You know what?” Janet said. “Just forget it. I’m just thinking about Dad and feeling guilty for some stupid reason. It doesn’t matter.”

She smiled at her sister.

“I’m just so glad Dad’s OK,” she said.

“Me too,” Elaine said, smiling back. 🌞
Père Blanchard and a Schoolboy’s Sadness
Jacques Finlay

“Entrez! Come in!,” Père Blanchard says to my parents in an authoritative, but concerned voice. As he leads my parents and me into his office, I can hear the swish of his soutane, the long black robe that Jesuit fathers wear. Father Blanchard is the Prefect of the middle school of the Ecole Franklin, a private Jesuit school in Paris located within walking distance of the Eiffel Tower. I am in cinquième, a grade level equivalent to seventh grade in an American school.

“Please have a seat,” he says to my parents. As my parents sit down in the upholstered chairs, I look timidly around the oak-paneled office, wondering if I should sit or stand. I stand awkwardly, hands clasped in front of me. Père Blanchard points to a small wooden chair with a straight back, where I sit, hands now clasped on my lap.

Père Blanchard’s office is on the third floor of a five-storey building and overlooks the large recess yard. The shouts of young boys chasing one another with wild abandon or playing random games of soccer or handball rise up from the courtyard below only to meet the awkward silence in the Prefect’s office.

“I have invited you here,” Père Blanchard begins, “because I am concerned that your son, Jacques, has become a little too serious, even by our standards. As you know, his grades are exemplary. He is one of the top students in Latin and Greek. In all of his other subjects, he is in the top half of his class. He follows the rules only too well. But there’s a lack of joy and spontaneity in his manner. It’s as if he is taking refuge in his studies. Perhaps you can enlighten us as to why he is so serious.”

“We’re not exactly sure,” says my mother. “Perhaps he misses his two older brothers who are away at a boarding school in the United States.”

I shift uncomfortably in my chair and place each of my hands beneath my thighs. I feel more like the object than the subject of this conversation. I listen impassively, hearing the words as they are spoken, but disconnected from their meaning or importance.

“Of course, we’re pleased with his grades,” says my father. “I’m not aware that either of us places any undue pressure on him to get good grades. We never have to urge him to do his homework. He seems especially drawn to his Latin and Greek studies, subjects that neither of us ever took in school.”
Yes, it’s true. There’s something magic about opening up my Xenophon textbook and seeing all those strange ancient Greek letters on a page, asking to be deciphered, those mysterious words waiting for me to pronounce them, to read them, to translate them into French. And those opening lines of the Vergil’s Aeneid: “Arma virumque cano…” “I sing of arms and the man”. They make Latin homework something I look forward to doing in the evening. Still, I am reminded that this is not what they are here to discuss.

Père Blanchard pensively runs his right hand over his brow and over his bald head and then says, “Of course, we’re pleased with his dedication to his studies. It’s just that his teachers and I hardly ever see him smile. We like to see a balance between work and play in our students.”

“We live in the suburbs, ten miles from Paris,” my mother says. “Jacques either takes the train to and from the Gare St. Lazare or his father drops him off on his way to work in Paris. Usually it’s seven by the time he gets home. It’s not easy for him to get together with his friends after school or in weekends.”

“Of course, I understand,” says Père Blanchard.

“Each Wednesday after school, he and some of his classmates take the métro to the Porte de Chaillot to play a soccer match against another team from his same age group. He is also a member of the Petits Chanteurs de la Croix de Bois, the boys’ choir.” My mother is now enumerating to Père Blanchard all the extracurricular activities I participate in after school.

I listen with some embarrassment as she tells him about my travels last year with the choir and Monsieur Prudhomme to the Champagne region of France and to Belgium.

“This year he’ll be going with the choir to Rome,” she adds, “where they’ll perform in St. Peter’s Basilica in front of the Pope.”

Père Blanchard does not seem very impressed. He has the look of someone who has done his best to get his point across and now realizes that it’s a losing proposition.

Perhaps it’s just a phase he’s going through,” adds my father.

There are signs that this uncomfortable conversation about me has reached an impasse and that it will soon end without me having uttered a single word or answered a single question, much to my relief.

Polite parting salutations are exchanged. Soon we are walking out the large front doors of the Ecole Franklin.
Late on a Wednesday afternoon, I am returning by train from a soccer match at the Porte de Chaillot, still in my soccer uniform. My mother is meeting me at the Vaucresson train station. She has taken this opportunity to do some food shopping at the stores near the train station. As I step off the train onto the station platform, I see her sitting on a bench, one large straw shopping bag on either side of her. Several baguettes are sticking out from the top of each one. We greet each other with a kiss on the cheek. I grab the two bags and we proceed to walk up the hill to our house on the Rue du Butard. The hill is fairly steep, so we keep our small talk to a bare minimum.

Reaching the top of the hill, the two of us pause to catch our breath. I’m finding it hard to conceal the wave of sadness that has suddenly enveloped me.

“How was your soccer match, Jacques?”

Tears are welling up in my eyes. I dam them up as best as a twelve- year old boy can. But my mother has not failed to notice.

“What’s wrong, Jacques?” she asks.

“I don’t know,” I reply.

“You miss your brothers, I think”, she says. “I think it’s probably time for you to go to the States also, much as your sister and I will miss you.”

“No, it’s not that, Mom,” I insist. “I just feel sad.”

From the top of the hill, I look down at all the houses and gardens we have passed on our way up.

My mother and I have each known - at different stages of our lives, of course - the feeling of living in two cultures and wondering which was the one in which we would ever truly find ourselves at home.

We say nothing, but I sense in her face that she has read between the lines and glimpsed the sadness of a twelve-year old boy on the verge of stepping into young adulthood.
We keep our thoughts to ourselves, fearful of saying more than our emotions can manage. We take a right at the Rue du Butard and walk a hundred meters or so to the front gates of our house. We walk across the large lawn and make our way up the large stone steps, carrying the bags of groceries into the house.

It’s almost dinnertime. ☀️
Reclaiming Fall
Gretchen Hildebrand

The leaves had nearly all come off the trees and she couldn’t put it off any longer. Crisp blue sky and sunshine seemed to bounce off bare branches and the breeze was blowing just enough to be refreshing but not to be frustrating in the effort of raking leaves. With such a beautiful day at her fingertips, why was this such a dreaded task? But she knew why without allowing herself to think deeper for the moment.

Making her way across the yard to the shed, she noted the back patch of woods that led down to the river – her property’s boundary – and then turned abruptly, momentarily thinking she heard the baby crying in the portable, crankable swing. What foolishness that was – ‘the baby’ was now 10 years old and on a birthday sleepover across town. Shaking her head at her own over-active imagination, she pried open the lop-sided, rotting shed door to get at the tools inside. The light from outside filtered in past pitchforks and the mower, spotlighting the weed-whacker. She briefly toyed with grabbing it instead. “That needs doing, too” she argued aloud to no one. “…and without the baggage.” Then, almost as if against its will, her left hand wrapped around the shaft of a rake and she ducked back out of the musty shed to tackle the lawn.

How can I get the memory to go away?

It cheats me so on days like this. Days that should be reveled in for their beauty are instead reviled. Reveled…reviled…what clever word play that is! With the change of ONE VOWEL it all goes to Hell. Well, well, now. That was an understatement. At the change of one set of sheets it HAD all gone to Hell…nine and a half years ago. That is for sure. Funny how one little thing like a bed sheet explodes and seethes and covers a life in fresh lava, making it impossible to move on in a normal way as you avoid the tendrils of fire that find you everywhere you turn.

Returning her attention to the task of leaf-raking, she dug the rake in deeply, making furrows in the dead grass, scraping the claws through the leaves with far more force than was necessary.

God, I hate this. I hate the smell. I hate the drudgery of it. I hate the time I am wasting when I could be doing something else.

But she knew the truth of all that. She didn’t hate the smell, for working outdoors was as natural to her as breathing. She didn’t hate the ‘drudgery’ or the ‘wasted time’, for in other circumstances there was nothing else she’d rather do more than get dirty and sweaty working outside. What she hated was her vulnerability to the memory.
Anger, disbelief and hurt were rising now, like familiar companions in her act of raking.

Why didn’t I know? Why was I so stupid? So naïve. So blind. Was it because little Katie was the center of my days and nights? Was it because I was busy with school … and a baby … and house chores … and cooking … and family obligations? Was it because I was no longer his ‘woman’ but a full-blown cow with calf?

Why did it take me so long to know? A year and a half of infidelity happened under my nose. While I carried, bore, nurtured or first child as he slept with (screwed more than slept to be sure) a girl 10 years our junior, who also had been my student, dorm child, and friend.

Finally, it was the sheets, the clean sheets on the bed, that had disclosed the betrayal. It was when I went upstairs that lovely autumn day to change into raking clothes that I noticed them. He was never a domestic and I was not sure if he even knew HOW to change the sheets, much less that it would ever be a conscious act. But with their changing, came the changing of my consciousness. Somewhere I had known and, having no hard evidence, forced the reality away.

On the slope of the yard now, heart pounding and eyes burning with tears from the bottomless well of despondency, she raked furiously, unaware of the absence of leaves in that spot or that the fresh blister in the crook of her thumb had started to bleed.

How had I been able to go out raking that day? My skin crawled and my breath wouldn’t come, that much I remember. But the confrontation didn’t come until that afternoon, when the yard was leafless and my words of inquiry had been chosen with cold precision.

“I thought you knew.”

“I thought it would be fine with you, since you love her, too.”

“Don’t worry. It’s YOU I married and YOU I decided to stay with.”

She stopped mid-pull and let her eyes take her to that woodsy space at the back of the yard. As she had done many times before, she watched herself run to those woods, breath snagging on sobs, reality totally obliterating reason. For the first moments she had thought those pronouncements would kill her, she reflected, but in the end they had served to enshroud her in her own icy-hard calculation and deceit.

A mental emergency is what I call it. Did I have any self-awareness or was I an automaton? I lived for several years in that marriage without a whiff to outsiders of my disillusionment, wrath, or hopelessness. After all, the girl was long gone. I went on to have the second child I had always wanted. I was on the Planning Board and he was the School Board Chairman (my boss). What a
picture-perfect life devoid of affective confession, self-respect, or any apparent way out.

Worst of all, he seemed to think everything was fine and I had no desire to tell him otherwise. I walked through that life without being in it.

Finally aware now that she had actually stopped raking and started forcing small piles of leaves et cetera into the old barrel, she decided to take a break for some water. Studying the sore thumb as she took the back steps to the screen door, she was greeted by her cat who had simply nudged the door’s frame to exit the house. The latch was broken.

Add to the list … one door latch… hardware store…later today.

Grabbing the handle, at first intent on noting what type she needed for the replacement latch, she was seized by the memory that ended it all.

Fall of 1989, the screen door latch was broken. I went to the hardware store and purchased a replacement, found all of the proper tools, and successfully replaced the latch. Boy was I proud and feeling a bit competent – a sensation different from the ‘incompetent, immature primary teacher’ persona I had grown accustomed to. When he came home from wherever that evening, I pointed out my handiwork, taking special care to focus on the shim I had fashioned for proper closure.

He nodded his approval and inquired about whether I had found all the tools I needed – really asking if I had replaced them to their proper homes.

By the next afternoon, the latch had been removed, refitted and reattached … the shim painted to blend with the frame of the door. That’s when I knew, simultaneously, that I would never be good enough for him … but that I was just fine for me.

The ‘mental emergency’ had ended at that moment.

Back outside now, after the refreshing elixir of water and empowering memory, she walked down the slope to retrieve the barrel-full of this year’s debris. She had filed for divorce in November, 1989 and it had been finalized by spring of 1990. Painful memories linger, but the raking gets easier every year.

The barrel wasn’t as heavy as usual, it’s contents more colorful than she had remembered from past rakings. She dragged the barrelful into the woody back patch down by the river and dumped the contents – watching the leaves pour out. Some got caught on the tree branches below, but most made it to the river this time and were swept away on the current.

As she twig-snapped her way back towards the lawn area, she heard the woodpecker insistent on finding one more insect and saw the few straggler-leaves in the treetops
pointing to that beautiful blue sky. She sucked in the breeze and blew out one last thought.

*The painful memories linger.*
*But the raking gets easier with every year.*
*Maybe I can reclaim the fall after all.*
The Stranger
Vicki Kelly

“Here are the artichoke hearts. I think I’ve gotten all the fuzzy stuff off them.” Devon placed the steamed hearts on the counter next to Jan. She added more broth to the risotto.

“Thanks sweetie. Can you get the salad spinner and rinse the spinach? It’s in the cupboard over by the dishwasher.” Devon dutifully did as he was told.

“Can you taste this Jan?” I spooned my margarita mix into her mouth. “I’m never sure about how much lime juice it needs.”

“Oooh! That’s fabulous! Can you make mine without salt this time? I’m trying to cut down.”

“Sure. How about you Dev?”

“Salt for me. It hasn’t killed me yet. Ah ha! It was way over here Jan.” Devon held up the salad spinner in triumph.

“Oh, that’s probably my fault. I had put away duty last week, remember?” I ran a slice of lime around Devon’s glass.

“I know, I found the egg strainer in with the baking utensils yesterday.” Jan took the risotto off the heat. She carefully folded in the artichoke hearts. “Dev, I need that spinach.”

“I’m working on it. Hey, isn’t an egg strainer a baking utensil?” Dev and I did not understand Jan’s kitchen filing system. We were always getting grief from her about putting things away in the wrong place.

“Actually, it’s a miscellaneous utensil. It is used for baking, but also for general cooking. It goes in the mixed use drawer.”

“Well, Cara thought it was a baking utensil. I would think a surgeon would know her utensils.” Devon loved to mock Jan about her obsessive organization.

“Hey! I know my scapulas, but I am not prepared to have at it with Jan in the kitchen utensil department.”

“I’d like to watch that! And maybe we could quit searching for Mr. Right.”
“I don’t need you to find Mr. Right for me. I’m quite capable, thank you.”

“Cara, you’ll never find someone that fits your list of qualifications. Just look at Jan and me; she would die if she didn’t have me to drive her crazy.” He crossed the room with the dripping spinach in the spinner, heading for the cutting board on the island. On his way by the stove, he pinched Jan’s behind.

“Devon! Spinach!” Jan suppressed a smile. I dipped the lime soaked glass into a plate of salt.

“Ok, Ok! But you’re just changing the subject.” He was teasing, but he knew enough to drop it.

“I really think you’re going to like Sam, Cara. Just give him a chance ok?” Jan meant well with her setups. She was probably right, but I really like my life the way it is. I don’t have time for the chaos of relationships. The timer went off on the double ovens.

“Oh, the bread’s done! I’ll get it.” I left my margaritas, perfectly presented with fruit on the rims and drips wiped of the sides of the glasses.

“Perfect timing! I just have to stir in the spinach. Sam will be here any minute. Let’s eat on the deck.”

~

They only live next door, but several acres of forest land sloping down into a beaver pond separate our two houses. There’s a path through the woods that’s probably been there forever. I think Jan said it was a cow path at one time a hundred years ago or so. Anyway, I spent the evening with them as I did every Wednesday. They invited Sam hoping he would be the one. He was a friend of one of Devon’s coworkers from the university. He didn’t really seem like the professor type, but neither did Devon. He asked a lot of questions about my work, more than I really wanted to answer. He was especially interested in the pro bono work I do with burn patients from overseas. He said he had been in Kenya with the Peace Corps for two years. He had also hitchhiked across Europe into Asia and volunteered in the Antarctic for six months. He had so many experiences that had happened by accident. I couldn’t live like that. There has to be a plan. We ended the night with a dip in the hot tub.

So I was wet. I hadn’t bothered to change, just said goodbyes, wrapped in my towel and headed home carrying my clothes under the light of the full moon. My sandals flip flopped sending pine needles and dry loam sand up to speckle the back of my wet legs. I heard Lonnie, Devon’s Irish setter barking as she went out one last time before bed. I saw bats maneuver through the tree tops, blindly devouring the insect population. An owl hooted somewhere to the north of me and another echoed from the south. Toads
lingered in the path, waiting for unsuspecting insects to come their way. Fireflies flashed here and there giving charm to the night air.

I strolled along, relishing the memory of Jan’s tiramisu when a dried branch cracked under the pressure of a foot. It wasn’t my foot. Jan, Devon and I keep the cow path clear of debris. But it wasn’t far away. I looked in the direction from which it seemed to come, expecting to see a deer or moose passing through. I kept moving and began to sing so it would know where I was and not run into me. “Come sail away; come sail away; come sail away with me. . . .” spilled out of my mouth. I couldn’t see anything.

Then I heard footsteps, but very slow footsteps just ahead. Not generally afraid of the dark, I was startled by the realization that I was indeed frightened. It’s easy to be fearless when one lives a life carefully planned to be free from surprises. I have to admit, I noticed a bit of a thrill welling up inside my chest.

It occurred to me suddenly that, not only were the footsteps very close by, but that they seemed very soft and methodical, plodding. And then, without any grand entrance, the biggest snapping turtle I have ever seen moved into the path in front of me. It was easily 18 inches across and probably two feet from head to toe. The moonlight shone on its enormous humped shell, and its ancient head bobbed slightly as it moved.

I crouched to get a closer look and it stopped. After a moment I took a step closer, but remained at a careful distance. It didn’t look towards me or move away, but stood perfectly still. After a minute or two, I sat on the ground, unable to crouch any longer. It never moved. Finally, after half an hour or so, I felt my body falling asleep and decided that, if I was going to get to bed tonight, I’d better make my way by this creature.

So I stood, and carefully took a step towards it. It didn’t move. I continued to walk, watching for signs of alarm, but it never moved. I wasn’t sure what would be worse, stepping off the path into the poison ivy and who knows what else or getting as close to the turtle as I would have to in order to get around it. I decided to take a chance and step around it. I headed for the back side, the farthest side from the mouth – just in case. It was so bizarre. It never moved; I was beginning to think that it had arrested at the sight of me in the moonlight, abruptly ending its obviously long life.

“It was nice to meet you,” I said and waved goodbye. I was sorry to leave it behind. I spend so much time making people beautiful again. In many ways this creature was ugly, even hideous, but its rough, wild indifference were incredibly appealing. As I turned to go I dropped my t-shirt. As I stooped to pick it up I noticed that the turtle had turned as well and was now facing the direction I was heading. Well, at least it wasn’t dead.

I considered lingering it a bit longer, but my watch beeped, 1:00. I had to get to bed or I’d never get up in the morning. So I kept walking, but slowly. Somehow, I
sensed that I wasn’t alone and I turned to see the turtle, standing perfectly still, but it had moved and was remarkably keeping up with me. It stood only six feet or so behind me.

“You’re making me nervous, sir,” I said as I turned around and continued walking. “I believe I excused myself.” I was really only talking to myself. I was actually wondering what the turtle might be thinking and how fascinating it would have been if it could have told me where it had come from and where it was going. Do turtles plan their voyages? I soon approached the end of the path, the opening to my yard. I turned once more expecting that it had gone back into the woods, continuing its journey, but it remained back where I had last seen it, standing still. “Goodnight now.” I waved again.

I showered, changed into my nightshirt and went back outside to hang my wet towel and swimsuit on the clothesline to dry. I was approaching the granite steps that led to my door when I nearly jumped out of my skin. There it was, the turtle, standing at the bottom of my steps. It bobbed its head now, turning to look at me like it was an invited guest and had been waiting for me to get home.

“What do you want?” I said less annoyed and more frustrated by my inability to communicate. I thought maybe it was hungry, so I stepped over it and went to search in the chiller of my refrigerator. I remembered Tommy Jones from third grade who had a little box turtle, Sparky. He showed me once that he fed it leftover vegetables. So I found some carrots and spinach and a piece of zucchini. I brought these treasures out and placed them on a paper plate on the ground in front of the turtle, still standing there at the bottom of my steps. It didn’t move.

“Well, I don’t know whether you’re a man or a woman, but you look like an old man to me, so I’m going to call you Mr. Greenjeans, OK? It seems that, if you’re going to visit, you ought to have a name.” I was babbling. It was very late. But I noticed that, as I talked, the turtle began to move. It stepped closer to the snacks I had set out for it. I kept talking. “My mom taught me not to talk to strangers. Did yours? Maybe that’s why you don’t talk to me?” Mr. Greenjeans had started to munch on a spinach leaf. I watched, but realized that he had stopped eating as I stopped talking again.

So I talked on. Mr. Greenjeans didn’t talk to me; he only bobbed his head, chewing with what, if I used my imagination, looked like a grin on his face. Each time I stopped for a moment, he stopped eating and stood still. I began to imagine that he was a child’s toy, the kind that can be turned on and off, and that my voice or movement somehow triggered the switch. Finally, when the greens were all gone and half the zucchini, he stopped chewing. I kept talking for a few minutes and he continued bobbing his head. When it seemed that he would eat no more, I said goodnight one more time, picked up the plate, and went inside, locking the door, just in case.
When I awoke to my alarm this morning, I stretched letting the morning sun warm my muscles. Then I remembered Mr. Greenjeans. I ran down to the door and looked out. I didn’t see him anywhere. I went out, walking around the yard in my nightshirt and bare feet, searching for him. I checked under bushes and in the garden. I even went to the cow path, walking all the way to Jan and Devon’s. Lonnie bounded over to me, licking my knees. I shooed her away and went home. I never found any turtle prints in the soil, not that I knew what to look for. In fact, there was no sign at all that Mr. Greenjeans had ever crossed my path. When I returned to the yard, I retrieved my towel and swimsuit, now dry on the line. I walked into the house, trying to dismiss Mr. Greenjeans as a figment of my imagination, but I couldn’t help but hum the tune to Come Sail Away, as I made my breakfast. I noticed the light blinking on my answering machine: the phone must have rung while I was outside. Jan’s cheery morning voice spoke to me from the machine.

“Hey Cara. I just wanted to let you know that Sam is going sailing on Saturday. He was hoping we would all go with him. What do you think? Call me. I’ll be in my office all day.”

I don’t know. Maybe that wouldn’t be such a bad idea. Maybe I’ll wait and take a walk to Jan and Devon’s tonight, just in case. ☀️
I falsely assumed that teaching next to a diverse community meant that my school would be diverse also. To my surprise, I entered Columbus High School during my first month of teaching to a sea of white faces and just a handful of minority students. Race seemed to be a common issue in my classroom and in my life that first month at Columbus High. My freshmen wrote in their journals about the everyday racial slurs they heard in passing in the hallways. Students giggled through the first three chapters as I read Huckleberry Finn aloud. A new African-American student in my advisory moved to our small town only to have his family driven out by countless businesses that refused to hire his parents. I threw two kids out of class for yelling “niggers and spics” as an answer during a class discussion. One student announced to the class that he would never shake hands with a black man. I had to call the janitor three times to paint over swastikas graffitied on the tar outside the library. “Come on Heather. Kids will be kids” my principal assured me.

I started to come to school everyday a little afraid. I had a big secret: my boyfriend was black. It wasn’t that I consciously made an effort not to let that fact be known. I talked about my boyfriend with my students, stories of trips and funny incidents. It just didn’t come up in conversation. It would be a little awkward just to throw it in. “My boyfriend and I went to Florida this summer. Oh, by the way, he’s black.” In October I brought in pictures from a wedding we attended to show my class. “Your boyfriend’s black?” (Holy cow, he is!) “Miss Lucas, how come you didn’t tell us?” (I’m so sorry!) “He’s cute, can he be our chaperone for the field trip?” (No!) “Does he wear a pick in his afro?” (Sometimes.) “Do black people tan?” (Yes.) A small group of students seemed enthusiastic over this new revelation. Others sat back, stunned, as the girls giggled over the photographs. I was finally out of the closet. I felt a sense of relief, but at the same time I half expected to find “Nigger Lover” spray painted on my car after school one day.

The weeks after our holiday break seemed to drag. I was praying for the rest of the semester to fly by; I just wanted to get it over with. I had a particularly hellish group of freshman who continually made me question if I really wanted to be a teacher. The last day of the semester, I flipped through my pile of evaluations. I threw most of them in the garbage. I didn’t want to remember my first semester as a teacher a failure. I juggled two armfuls of finals, returned books, and other teacher paraphernalia, and went back to my classroom.

The hallway was silent and I was glad for it. Finals ended at noon and by five past the school was nearly empty. As I threw my stuff on my desk I noticed a pamphlet resting on top of my calendar. I picked it up and dropped it quickly as if it burned my fingers. “LET’S GET BACK TO OUR RACIAL ROOTS! ELIMINATE THE BLACKS! ARYAN PRIDE FOREVER!” was written on the front in large bold letters. My stomach dropped. I grabbed the pamphlet and ran to the principal’s office. “I can’t
do anything about it, Heather.” I demanded he take it to the police station to have it fingerprinted. “I wish I could, but nothing’s going to change.”

I had a feeling deep down that I knew who did it. I had a group of six possible subjects from my second block freshman class. I was convinced it was the boys who dressed in black and wore their hair in colorful Mohawks. The boys who drew confederate flags on their notebooks and groaned when we read slave narratives. The boys who sat in the back of my classroom whispering and laughing. For the next month I secretly eyed them in the hallway. I looked at the ground when they passed not wanting them to see the anger in my eyes. I didn’t want them to know they had defeated me. I stopped wanting to come to school. I stopped wanting to eat breakfast. The tension I felt was unbearable. I hated those boys. I wrote about them in my journal at home. How I bet their parents were high school dropouts, how they would end up in jail. I dreamt about them in Ku Klux Klan outfits outside my house. I hoped these boys would have a miserable life.

The next year I left Columbus High to teach at a different school. At a state conference I meet up with a math teacher from Columbus who filled me on the further decline of the school. The school was losing their accreditation, two teachers were fired for going drunk to prom, and Sue Peters was caught handing out her father’s Aryan pamphlets. My mouth dropped. I remembered Sue Peters, plain Sue who got good grades and never said a word in class. She wrote that I was a “nice teacher” on her evaluation and carried a purple duffel bag. Quiet, unsuspecting Sue. Sue who wrote about Polar Bears for her research paper and who talked with a lisp. I thought of the six boys who I hated, who I judged unfairly. I finally understood what it meant to be prejudice.

 Crest
Undertone
Chuck Mathis

Today we name the parts.
The manual I have here has all the answers.
Responses will be scripted according to school board policy.

The posters, anatomically correct,
sanitize the human bodies.
(Real bodies are warm and wet, hungry with urges.
These urges conspire to steal your childhood.)

That term is slang, gentlemen (not the school board approved erection
that you are required to have).

Direct your attention the efficient diagram.
Girls are different from you
(in case you haven’t noticed).

They are your other half.
You’ll find yourself attracted to them for a number of reasons
(except for the bewildered ten percent of you who sense a difference
that I cannot address).

I’ll answer the questions you ask
(but not the ones you need to know.
I should tell you to love
whomever your heart tells you to love,
tell you to be yourself without shame,
and tell you to use condoms when you inevitably begin
to heed your body
when it screams irresistible commands.
So many things I want to say.)

I’m sorry, boys,
today I can only name the parts. ☯
Sailing to Catalina

Judy McChesney

The alarm clock buzzed and I rolled out of bed. Although it was December, the temperature reached 80 degrees by nine o’clock in the morning. I jumped up dressed quickly, grabbed my backpack, and cycled down to the harbor. Upon arrival, I surveyed the rows of boats for a 42 foot catch rig catamaran christened, The Lotus. Locating it, I headed down the dock and was greeted on deck by Bill dressed in cut-offs and a blue striped shirt with long blonde curls, and eyes as blue as the waters of Catalina.

"Ahoy! Glad you made it! We are about to set sail" Mac smiled, "Hop on board and grab a life vest." After I fastened my life vest, I watched him as he began untieing the ropes on the starboard, moving with grace and agility, sending a reassuring message that he knew his way around a boat.

Navigating out of the San Pedro Harbor, we weaved our way between ships to the open channel. Quickly, Bill hoisted the two main sail using a winch, while his friend Jerry steered. The wind caught the sail and we soared like a bird taking flight. The sky is clear, the temperature balmy and I could faintly see Catalina on the distant horizon.

An hour passed when suddenly, Jerry shouted, "Hey look guys off the starboard bow." In front of us the water flickering with silver and black streaks, as the dolphins, followed by pilot whales chasing a huge school of tuna. The dolphins feverently pursued their favorite delicacy, tuna. I went onto the bow sprit and lay across the netting to get a closer look. Below I saw the dolphins swimming next to the bow. They moved so quickly yet the size of the school was unusually large and we sailed through the school for over an hour.

Before I knew it the isthmus was in sight. The bay at the isthmus was a low point between the north and south sections of Catalina Island. An hour later, Bill quickly lowered the 2 main sails leaving only the jib and Genoa up. As we neared shore, Bill lowered the anchor.” I wish I would have remembered the rock anchor, all I have is the sand anchor, I’m sure it won’t be a problem” mumbled Bill under his breath. I grabbed my backpack and headed for the dingy. Once on shore we decided to go hiking and look for the buffalo that Mr. Wrigley placed on the island after he purchased it. Hiking up the step canyon walls lined with sage, chaparral and cactus we reached the summit. In the distance we saw small brown specks surrounded by a cloud of dust, the famous buffalo. We decided not to pursue them but return to the ship for a mid-afternoon meal.

After lunch, Jerry and Bill decided to go surfing.

“Boy, with waves this great I wonder if a storm is coming” asked Jerry.

“Maybe I should check the radio for a forecast”

“No, we’ll check it later, There isn’t a cloud in the sky” answered Bill. Grabbing their surfboards from below deck and rapidly changing into their wetsuits they were soon
ready to surf. Angela, Jerry's girlfriend and I chose to stay onboard and relax. While reclining on a hammock I felt a spray of water against my face. I sat up to look for its origin and along side the boat was a killer whale covering the distance of 3/4 of the boats length. "Angela, quick look at the port side!" I whispered. She looked into the water, speechless at the enormity of this magnificent animal, so close she almost reached down to touch it with her hand. We sat there watching it circle the boat numerous times, until without apparent reason it headed back out to sea. On the horizon, I noticed wispy clouds trailing across the sky.

Before long, Bill and Jerry returned reminiscing of the waves. We sat on deck as Jerry played his sax and Mac played the guitar as the sun setting behind us, turning the sky to palette of pink, orange and red hues that illuminated the sky. Suddenly, a dolphin popped its head out of the water as if a member of an audience listening to a concert. When the music stopped the dolphin dived under the surface, as the music resumed it popped its head out of the water again. This enticed Jerry and Bill to switch from playing the blues to jazz. The dolphin responded by bobbing his head to and fro and emitting a clicking sound. Then suddenly, like the killer whale it was called back to sea. We stayed at the isthmus for a few days and then sailed around to the leeward side of the island, the ocean side. Our destination was Little Harbor a small, well protected harbor with a sandy beach. On our way to Little Harbor we stopped at several point breaks where Jerry and Bill surfed. This caused us to enter little harbor around dusk. It was getting dark and Bill asked Jerry,"Do you want to dock on the beach?" The lotus being a Warren designed catamaran was unique in that it could park itself on the beach in as little as two feet of water. Jerry replied.” Let’s anchor the boat out here on the outer edge of the harbor. We can see the rocks better in the morning. We’ll anchor on the beach tomorrow”.

Night was creeping in, and Bill and Jerry checked the anchor to make sure it was secure. We headed below deck, and I fell asleep, in Mac's arms to the sound of the waves lapping against the hull.

"Shit! Something's wrong! Stay below deck!" Mac said as he sprang out of bed dashing up the stairs. A sailor's worst fear had happened the anchor had dragged out to sea. Unknown to the crew, a hurricane from Mexico had moved up the coast over night. It had turned into a tropical storm with winds blowing ninety-five miles an hour and the waves swelling to twenty-five feet, crashing over the thin cable that surrounded the deck as a railing and poured through the slotted teak deck. Mac ran down to the other hull of the catamaran and woke Jerry up, "Jerry, Jerry, get up! The anchor has dragged the boat out to sea!"

Jerry scrambled out of bed, shouting to Diana, "Get on a life vest and stay down below".

Jerry and Mac put on their wet suits scrambled on deck and secured themselves with harnesses, if you fell over board in a storm like this there was little chance of recovery. Jerry grabbed the steering bar and desperately tried to turn the boat around back towards the harbor. But the wind was blowing directly out to sea making it impossible to sail back into Little Harbor. Bill was on deck securing the sails so they wouldn't rip in the zealous wind. He only kept the main sail at half mast. The wind and rain continued to
beat upon the boat relentlessly. In desperation, Bill tried to start the motor pulling the starting cord over and over until exhausted. The motor was drenched and refused to cooperate. He glanced up at the sky was as black as a pool of tar with no stars in sight for navigation. The ocean emitted a green glow from the photo plankton that was churned up from the bottom of the ocean floor. The crew had no choice but to try and sail around the island

Somehow Jerry had managed to steer the boat back to shore. As they got closer they realized they had not cleared the island but were at the isthmus. The sound of the waves crashing and wind blowing muffled his voice. Jerry shouted to Mac, "Shit there isn't any place to anchor; the only thing to do is head out into the channel where I can navigate back to San Pedro". “Look at the compass and set a course for San Pedro”

For the next four hours, Bill and Jerry desperately tried to sail back to San Pedro. They rolled up and down enormous waves, being tossed around like a toy boat. One wave broke halfway up the mast. Luckily, Jerry saw it coming and turned the boat to surf the wave. At times, they almost capsized and everyone down below was seasick from the rocking motion.

Finally, they sailed into the eye of the storm and everything turned calm. They were at the entrance to the San Pedro Harbor and large freighter ships were moving in front of them unaware of their existence. The Lotus didn’t have a bell or lights. Bill began to fear that they would be run over by the large ships. He scrambled below deck and got the flare gun. Standing on the deck he fired the flare gun up towards the sky and raised the emergency flag on top of the mast. They waited and didn’t hear any response. Frantically, Jerry began untying the small dingy to get ready to abandon ship. There wasn’t any wind to sail, the motor refused to start and the Lotus was drifting towards the jetty.

Unexpectedly, a coast guard ship came around the bend. It threw us a line and towed us to our slip in the marina. Once the boat was docked, they wrote Bill a ticket for not having the appropriate safety/emergency equipment on board. Bill laughed” I don’t mind paying a fine for saving my life”. The coastguard had told us that many ships had capsized that night. All through the night they answered hundreds of distress calls. We were all lucky to be alive! ☼
Making Connections

Rebecca McCuin

"Will you give me a dollar?"

I looked into the bright eyes of a ten year old boy at Mandella Park outside Johannesburg, South Africa. I was on concert tour with sixty-five friends from the New Hampshire Friendship Chorus. We were celebrating the tenth year anniversary of the group. The park is a tourist stop where shipping containers are arranged in a straight line, like a row of protesters marching through the streets. They contain news articles about a boy who was killed there when the National Guard fired into a crowd of protesters.

"No," I replied. "Do you go to school?"

His face lit up as he responded, "Yes!"

His friends surrounded us, wanting to join in the conversation.

"What subjects do you like?"

Their preferences were varied: history, gym, music, science, math.

"Do you go to church?" I asked.

They all nodded, "Yes."

"Everyone sings in Africa." I said, looking at each face. It was their eyes that drew me to them, as much as their lively spirit. The music is wonderful!"

Laughing, they responded, "Yes, we like to sing."

"I really enjoy the way that one sings a lead and the rest of the people sing a counter melody. How are the lead singers chosen?"

The boy who had first approached me answered. "The elder chooses a leader and he is trained by a lead singer. My brother is training to be a lead and I am going to when I am older."

"What do you want to do when you finish school?"

They answered me politely.

“I want to be a policeman.”

“I want to be a fireman.”
“I want to be a teacher.”

Those options happen to be the most readily available jobs open for black people in South Africa right now. They are better than mining, prevalent before apartheid. More opportunities await this generation than any before.

Other members of the tour had gravitated to us to see what was happening. They initiated conversations with the boys too. It was getting interesting. Before reluctantly loading back on the bus, we gave the boys small gifts from New Hampshire as a gesture of good will and friendship. They seemed pleased and waved good bye as we started off for our next stop.

Could that interesting cross-cultural exchange have happened if I had given a young boy one American dollar? Their beautiful smile remains a cherished memory with me and, hopefully, with the boys.

Tour guides have sternly warned us to never give money to beggars. If the children figure out that they can make money by begging, they will stay out of school to beg, with approval from their parents. That only serves greed. The technological skills that they need to survive and thrive in today’s global economy will be missed. On every concert tour with the New Hampshire friendship Chorus and the Pemigewasset Choral Society, we have seen beggars. My burning question is how to draw the line between compassion/philanthropy and allowing/encouraging people to reach their full potential.
Trails

Rebecca McCuin

Glacial erratics are strewn about
As from a giant's hand,
Like a woodpile that has toppled over.
Their grey color blends
With the slate of the lake,
And the sun glints off the wing of a swallow.
Boats leave a trail behind them,
So quickly erased by the wind.
Will my teaching really touch the lives of others
In a way that will have no end?☆
A Big Splash!
Barbara Patterson

The midsummer day began hot, hazy, and humid as many do during this season in the Great North Woods of northern New Hampshire. It had been far too hot to rest in the uninsulated attic of the cramped, crowded home, so Nick had spent his night sleeping on the flat shed roof up out of the way of the horses and other animals that might trample him accidentally. As he always said, "Cover yourself with bug dope, and you can sleep almost anywhere if you're tired enough." Trying to keep up with the antics of four older brothers and the work load of his father and mother certainly made Nick tired enough. He had actually rested quite well through this smothering night.

The faint, dewstruck, early morning sunshine had been his first silent alarm clock. The second, not so silent alarm, was his ravenous stomach growling its demands to be fed. Nick sat up, listening to the tweeting, trilling song birds calling to one another from the towering pine trees. He could hear the clucking hens begin their busy day of gobbling up the foolishly chirping crickets. His still sleeping brothers were scattered around the lawn and garden like pieces of clothing cluttering the floor of a bedroom. No sounds came from the still darkened house. His mom, dad, and Annie, his youngest sister were not awake either.

Nick's thirteen-year-old stomach demanded immediate attention. He slid slowly down the roof and sprinted quickly to the backdoor opening it ever so gently. His father's rasping snores hit his ears, while the home's hot, enclosed, musty smell hit his nose. On the sideboard he saw leftover cornbread from last night's supper. Nick grabbed a huge piece backing carefully out the door as he shoved chunk after chunk into his mouth. His hunger taken care of, Nick surveyed the situation before him. With everyone sleeping, no one had immediate work for him to do. He had woken up free--free to do whatever he wished to do for a little while at least, and what Nick always loved to do was to go fishing.

Nick sprinted for his bike leaning against the side of the gray barn. Now, this was no common, everyday, run-of-the-mill bike. It was special! Every single part had come from the dump piece by piece. In moments of spare time, Nick had fashioned this two-wheeled vehicle into a model of flying wonder. The spokes had been individually tightened to make the wheels truly round. The fenders came from other discarded bicycle frames. Nick hammered their dents out and cleaned them with a blow torch to take away any remaining specks of paint. The used handlebar was fastened on with a nut and bolt found in an old can in the shed. When his traveling miracle was complete, Nick carefully painted it "meadow green" with paint left over from giving the kitchen and living room in the house a new color. This bike might be a second-hand rose, but it wouldn't look like one if Nick had his way. His miracle was a beautiful reincarnation indeed!
Nick pushed his cap over his hair that was as light as the early morning sun streaming down through the trees. He grabbed his handmade fish pole from inside the barn. To make this pole, he had whittled the branches off a five-foot tall sapling, tied a five-foot long piece of fish line to the end of the pole, and fastened a hook and lead sinkers to the end of the line. He always said, "If the pole is five feet long, and the line is five feet long, when you're finished fishing, just hold the pole in the air and the line will come right to your hand." What an efficient fellow he was!

Now, he was good to go. Nick pedaled his bike down the dirt drive and headed toward his favorite fishing spot on the Barney Brook two miles away. The quickest way to get there was to ride smack dab through the Rumney Bible Conference grounds. Nick never considered that he might be trespassing on this pristine area. It was simply the shortest route between two points--where he was and where he wanted to be. His trusty bike carried him by the man-made pond on the grounds which was used for ice skating in the winter and fishing and swimming in the summer. A wooden wharf surrounded on one side with squat, wooden rowboats jutted out into the water twenty feet. Nick knew the end of the wharf was an excellent spot for diving into the ten-foot deep pond. He had watched many of the young people who stayed at the conference center having a glorious time playing on and in this cool, shaded pool. He was just a town boy, and so he had never been invited to join them. Now, the conference grounds were just as quiet as his home next door. No one was up here at this early hour either.

Nick continued on the narrow, shaded path through the woods. Chipmunks and squirrels scurried here and there in short jerky moves. Swallows swooped low protecting their nests of young from the intrusion of this early interloper. The leaves from last fall crackled while twigs broke in half as he hurried on his way. Almost there. The brook came nearer the path in a tumbling rush of cascading water. This was a wonderful spot to wade in on these hot days, but the small rainbow trout nestled in the quieter spots of the brook further ahead. Nick traveled on past the ancient maple tree carrying the scars of past maple sugar seasons, past the huge orange-grooved oak tree, finally arriving at the swamp maple tree which would turn brilliant red in the fall. This was his very favorite spot in the whole world. The water eddied in small pools flowing gently over smooth, slippery rocks. The trees were sheltering, the damp, green moss grew thick and deep here, and the whole atmosphere was one of peacefulness. It was a true haven from the tumbling noisiness of home. Also, the little brookies loved this place as much as Nick.

To get bait for his hook, Nick turned over rocks near the edge of the water. The large, reddish-brown, slimy night crawlers loved these damp, dark places. When he had collected ten of these beauties, one for each of the fish he would hook, Nick began his fishing routine. He carefully threaded one squirming, wiggling worm on the curved hook without hooking himself, wiped his slimy hands on the moss at his feet, threw the line, sinkers, and bait into one of the rippling eddies, and then waited for that all important nibbling feeling which would tell him to jerk that line FAST. Fishing was a game that required patience. Fishing was Nick's game. Besides this morning he had extra time. It would take the family an hour to eat, and it would take another hour for his father to plan out their day, maybe more on this particularly hot day. And so Nick fished, catching one
after another of the little speckled rainbows. Each time he caught one, the fish was secured on a forked stick he had broken off a nearby bush. This was Nick's homemade "fishing basket". Two hours later, Nick had caught his limit of ten trout. These would be part of the family's dinner that afternoon.

Riding his bike and now carrying his fish pole and his catch of fish, Nick retraced his route down the narrow, winding path to the conference grounds. He whizzed past the landmark trees, past the cascading brook, back to the pond. Two and a half hours had made a huge difference in the amount of activity on the grounds. Gardeners were working in the flowerbeds, painters were painting the entrance sign, and children were playing at the playground. As Nick neared the wharf, he noticed that this area also had new activity. Two young, virtuous, pretty, very pretty girls, Debbie Peters and Matilda Moses, were sitting on the wharf staring into the reflective water as they quietly visited with each other. They never noticed the boy coming toward them on his marvelous, moving machine.

Nick's adolescent hormones immediately started flowing as he thought to himself, "Girls! Matilda!! Matilda!!! I need to impress them so they'll think I'm the coolest guy around! They will never forget me! Yes! Perfect! Here I go!!" And out loud Nick screamed, "YEEEEEEE-HAW," as he, his flying machine, fish pole, line of fish, and cap went careening down the path, thumping and bumping over the wooden wharf behind the girls' backs to go sailing into the Rumney Bible Conference grounds' ten-foot deep pond. As Nick recalled the incident later, the first fifteen seconds were glorious, truly glorious. He just knew those girls had been most properly impressed by his heroic deed. In those first fifteen seconds, his clothes filled with air making him almost buoyant as he and all his entrapments continued to sink to the bottom of that morass. It was the next two minutes that almost did Nick in. The clothes which had helped keep the mosquitoes off him during his night's sleep now filled with dragging water. Desperately Nick clutched his bike, fish pole, and line of fish with his left hand while swimming back up to the surface for life-giving air with his right hand. The girls were completely forgotten for the moment, as he struggled for his life and for his treasured possessions beneath the water. Slowly, ever so slowly he came nearer to air still grasping all his prizes. His lungs now felt as though they would explode within his very being, but he continued on determined that he would survive this ordeal. Finally, his feet touched the blessed bottom while his head touched the top of the water bringing his nose up for ragged gasps of air. He coughed and gagged his way to shore now grabbing his cap which had floated in the same direction he had traveled. Nick never even looked back at those girls. This whole incident had become a complete embarrassment. Perhaps they hadn't recognized him as he performed that amazing circus act for them. Most importantly now, Nick realized he had saved everything that had gone into the water with him, most especially his treasured bike.

The next issue for Nick on this summer morning was a smaller one. It is fine for a fisherman to slip and slide on the slippery stones of the brooks in New Hampshire soaking his sneakers and even his pants right up to the waist. That is an indicator of a truly successful fishing trip. It really doesn't matter whether the fisherman brings any fish
home or not, as long as he returns smelly and soaking wet on the lower half of his body. Now, Nick was soaking wet not only on the lower half of himself, but also on the top half. A person can't return home with ten beautiful fish waiting to be cleaned for dinner with his clothes soaking wet from his shoes to his cap. All those cluttered articles of clothing which were lying around on the ground were now up and about and they would ask questions. If his dad learned of this foolish excursion, the back of the woodshed awaited his arrival. His dad's father's words of wisdom for all these boys had always been, "Learn to swim and then stay to hell away from the water." No, Nick took a very long, sunny route home with his clothes air drying on his body as he went. When he arrived home, he immediately went to the wood block to begin cleaning his ten beauties. The family ate them at the next meal never knowing until years later the full story behind the day of their capture.
The Demise of Moe
Robin Perskie

We’ll never know if Moe was born bitter and frustrated or just evolved into the dog that he was under our care. His brother Fritz was a sleepier bit of puppy, calmer right from the beginning, and would have been my choice. My mother insisted on Moe; she called him Mozart – a pretension she did not even intend to uphold. Not to sound resentful but I suspect she liked the look of a miniature dachshund to go with her new summer home.

My father, all six feet and two hundred and fifty pounds of him, would heave his full weight onto the puppy’s back every morning. The whimper. The micro pause to see if the dog really was damaged. Then “Damn that dog!” Moe would shoot into my room and continue de-fluffing my pink slippers under my bed. No other dog was on the horizon, and he soon got big enough to withstand the attention of a five year old with a lot doll dresses and bonnets. I loved Moe.

My father even started to love Moe. “Did the dog eat yet?” he would yell to my mother. “You care more about that dog than you do about us!” This, of course, was not true, but my mother hated any reference to dinner or the serving of food at all. We were prohibited from asking what she was making. “Whatever I serve you!” Most of the time, Christine, our maid did the cooking anyway. So Moe began to discern the adequate flavors and ingredients that most suited him. He would eat only what we ate and often something different when our food was not to his liking. His inner character was about as debauched as any dog I have known; his true love, carnal love so to speak, was a woolen blanket that we had to hide in a closet when guests came. Between nibbling sensually on his disgusting blanket and eating rich, gout producing food, Moe was soon toothless, except for two back molars. His tongue hung constantly out of his mouth. He left five prints on the sand whenever we ran on the beach: four impressions from his paws and one thin tenuous line where his tongue dragged after him.

One by one my brother and sister went off to boarding school. One by one Moe proceeded to ruin every single carpet in the house. My blue rug was dappled by greenish blots in no particular order. My mother lost faith in Moe, her belief in a future together was gone. A kind of divorce was proposed, a joint custody situation was arranged. Moe was to spend the week with Christine and come home on weekends, so I wouldn’t feel too upset. Those weren’t the times or the household in which I expressed opinions. I hid this arrangement from my friends because having a divorced dog was the most embarrassing luxury I ever had to live down. A maid was bad enough. “Where’s your dog, Robin?” I remember my horror at answering that question. My mother finally rescinded the order and Moe circulated once again. Even started a new blanket.

My mother used to call them “spite jobs” – his strategic carpet ambushes. They were usually linked to some sense of abandonment or revenge or perhaps an “I can do it”
need to prove one’s dog-self. The last spite job my mother witnessed was his second most spectacular one.

We had just moved into a new home, the show piece. My mother had finally begun her dream white-on-white living room. She special ordered sculpted wall to wall carpeting and spread a gate across the entrance to maintain the pristine flow. Moe was foiled. An interior decorator came to discuss furnishings and my mother served tea but forgot the sugar and ran to the kitchen. The interior decorator was alone, waiting for my mother to return, when she saw something blur through the now open gate. “Excuse me, but I think your dog just peed on the rug.” My mother laughed. She too loved Moe, in the same way you love difficult people.

She once heroically rescued Moe after he was hit by a car. It was twilight and Moe had been running along Atlantic Avenue during traffic hour. A car clipped him and he rolled into the gutter. We all jumped up from the dinner table when we heard his yelping and the brakes screeching. My mother got to him first, untied her wrap-around skirt, bundled Moe up like an infant, and walked back to our house in her shimmering beige slip. We all drove over to Uncle Doc’s office, our family doctor, and he laughingly stitched Moe’s head with royal blue thread. “This is the best set of stitches any dog has ever gotten.”

Moe’s worst spite job was sometime in 1979, a few weeks after my parents had died. My brother, sister, and I had left him for a few hours. As soon as we drove up, I could see his little black snout bouncing at my window…he had been in my room. He sped past me as I made my way down the hall. I turned on my lights to find a soppy puddle, next to his poop which he seemed to have divided into portions, a bit here and bit over there, spreading as much as he could. The elegant touch was that final flourish, a true achievement in Moe’s ho-hum history of spite jobs. He had actually wiped his dog butt the full length of my wallpapered wall. A long “no” bar through a plane of white space dotted with orange butterflies, like crossing out mistakes in a rough draft. My brother and sister actually laughed, but Moe’s end was in the making.

As so many things were divided up, Moe had to go with my sister. She was married and would actually provide a home. Her husband, Mario, had already started a small framing business in Indiana, and Moe would go live with them there. Only a few months later she called me.

“Robin, Robin.” She stopped in between sobs. “Moe died.”

“You scared me. That’s okay, Lisa. He was old.”

“But I think we killed him!” She was crying uncontrollably. “Mario made him sleep in the garage. He said dogs don’t need to sleep in the house. It got cold.”
I already knew he had a blanket with him, cold or no cold. “Lisa, I think he just died.” What I really thought was it was an ending to an era. One I had no more tears for. And to my greatest shame I actually started to laugh. ☹
My weekend in Peterborough was an accidental vacation. Up until the day I left, I hadn’t been sure whether I would go or just stay home. Finally I piled everyone into the van without a firm plan as to how much of the weekend I would pass in the town where I grew up. On the first hot afternoon, I took the family to Peterborough’s new town beach on Cunningham Pond.

When I was growing up, no one had been able to swim in this pond, because it was the town water supply. I had all sorts of fantasies about this, about what it could mean to dip my big toe into the waters. It served to make me a bit afraid of the water there. This mattered, because I actually spent quite a bit of time on Cunningham Pond. My grandmother’s house was on the other side of this body of water, and she owned a boat house, where sometimes we had family parties and where I spent one very strange week on an April vacation when I was in high school.

As I swam out into the deep still waters of the pond last Thursday, I strained to see across to where the boat house was, but the shoreline folded in on itself where I was sure the structure must be, and I couldn’t bring it into view. Suddenly I stopped swimming, caught up on a memory I was just recovering. I was remembering how, when I had annoyed my parents and the other adults on some of these Sunday visits to my grandmother’s, they would ask me to walk around the lake. I would stumble off on what seemed to me to be an incredibly long journey on a little woods trail that circumnavigated the pond. I wondered if the trail were still there.

My youngest child was eager to set off with me around the pond if we could find the path. Max is always up for adventure. He scampers up rocky slopes and through any woodland trail. We often walk together around Plymouth. Perhaps his propensity for walking comes of the fact I hiked some trails in the White Mountains the day before he was born nine summers ago. He has known walking, even prenatally; perhaps that has influenced him to set foot in wild places. It seemed fit we should set off together to walk back into my past.

The trail seemed surprisingly easy to find. I was interested to notice that the path was still wide and worn. We stepped over exposed roots and bare dirt in the first part of the trail. There were even benches provided at wide intervals. I felt a little cheated. I remember the trail as being narrow and rough and even swampy in places. Unlike the son who skipped on ahead of me and scaled the tree trunks that had fallen over parts of the path as we got further in, I had been a bit squeamish as a child. Where he directs his energy out into acting upon the world, I would remain more encased in my interior life.

Each time we encountered a fallen limb, Max would scurry ahead to scale it. I walked around to the side, or gingerly stepped over it. Although I had put on my shorts
and sneakers, I was still wearing only my bathing suit on top. I felt oddly exposed. We had to keep moving to outrun the mosquitoes.

As we followed the trail around one bend, we could peek out through the leaves and see the beach over on the other side of the pond, looking small across the expanse of the pond. The distance gave me a sense of eerie wonder, as if a spell were being cast by the fall of our footsteps in the deepening woods. I felt the way I can feel when reading fiction--as if I had entered a world of pure imagination.

I could feel the presence of memory. It was as if the girl I had been were right there with me, not in the body of my son, but in me. It was as if I were simultaneously moving my adult body along the trail and feeling the traces of the child form I had inhabited, as if I were still her as well. I felt the sensation of being in my little girl body. I have sometimes felt, especially if I haven’t visited a place for a long time and then come back to it, the company of ghosts. I’m not talking about the supernatural, just the sense that all of the people I knew are still there, still living those lives they lived then. It is as if places themselves are possessed of emotional memory and it matters to them what has gone on there before. But in this place it was more than feeling my child self, it was being her as well, and simultaneously living out the experience with my real and physical child, who began to keep pace at my side. As the woods closed in on the trail we drew closer together. He stumbled slightly and muttered, “Dumb flip flop.”

He wanted the convenience of being able to run in sneakers. His body was charged with potential energy, with the drive to move on and on. I do not remember being so driven, except that once I was on this trail, I don’t ever remember turning back. An hour or so later, I would emerge triumphant in the same spot at the boathouse again, hoping the adults would notice me.

Finally we were able to glimpse the boathouse through the forest cover and I felt a little start of recognition, as if the structure itself were emerging out of memory. We approach the boathouse and I show Max where the water comes in underneath the structure. This is the stuff of my fantasies and I can see it working on my child as well. The boathouse is a little bit creepy. The history of its use predates any of my memories. I don’t remember seeing boats launched from here, only knowing that they had been there. The underbelly of the structure is dim and cobwebbed. The pond was high, and water covered the concrete border of the boat docks. Max asked about all of the things that I too wondered about, the round copper fuses, the latticed gate that opened onto the pond. And I could have been my own older cousin who explained these things, with some disdain, to me.

I have at times what I guess you could call generational confusion. I refer, sometimes, in conversation to my nieces as my cousins, to my friend’s daughters as my friends. It is as if I have transposed the essence of the relationships across generations. The slips are not random, but seem to speak to something about my place in the world. It’s not that I want to be young, or that I am denying who I am; it’s just that I am also still the one that I was. What happens to a body, and a consciousness, once they have been
outgrown? Does that consciousness still live on in us, and are we like onions simply layering on more mature versions of ourselves?

I wonder, as I circle back around the pond with my son, my traveling companion in this life journey, if I am not still in that consciousness. Perhaps we never leave those other selves behind. Perhaps they still live within us, to emerge in moments such as this one when, with companions such as my intrepid son; we can venture back to find them. I discover, in one of the revelations of this accidental journey, that I am still back there, still back here, still circling this pond once more. ☾
On my first full day of school, I’d run home. I didn’t have a good reason. Nothing noteworthy happened that morning. My mother had sent me with a lunch – a peanut butter sandwich and an apple – so I wouldn’t have been hungry. I’d been in school for quite some time, really, what with pre-school and kindergarten and Sunday school. I kept telling myself I would stay, reminding myself this was my first full day right up until the last minute when it was time to get out our lunches. I stood up at my desk, honestly planning to reach inside it for the bag. I stood and in that instant I felt the world drop out from under me, and inside me was an endless emptiness, a vacuum into which rushed sorrow, pain, and despair. I ran. I didn’t stop running until I was home again, blocks away, and fortunately my mother had been home. In my haste, I’d abandoned my bagged lunch – along with my coat and all my other school things. She made me soup and we talked about what had happened.

“I really thought you’d be able to do it,” she’d said, and I’d nodded. “You’re a big boy now, and the school day is only until three.” She reminded me that we’d talked about this before and I’d said I was ready. I hadn’t forgotten. “I planned to go shopping today,” she’d said, “you’re lucky you caught me.” I’d apologized. “Don’t worry about it,” she’d said, “just try. I think you’re ready.”

I thought I was ready too, and back to school I went.

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Our teacher’s name was Ms. Tree. I’d seen her name on a plaque on the wall outside the classroom door, high above my head. T-R-E-E, that was her name. And she was tall, too, which would have been very funny if it weren’t for everything else about her. She always seemed to be frowning. Her face was deeply scored with lines, wrinkles on wrinkles on wrinkles making canyons and chasms like a wadded up paper bag. Her eyebrows were drawn on and today one was arched and higher than the other, under the odd tangled mass that was her hair or, some of us believed, her wig. Her hands were wrinkled too, and so big, with long, dark red nails. She held a ruler at the ready, twisting it in her hands like she could wring it dry. She smelled bad, like cigarettes, garbage, and sickly sweet perfume. All of these things we might have forgiven her if it were not for her voice. Her words rasped or growled out of her, or cracked sharply like pistol shots, always aimed at someone – one of us. Surely she must have been happy once, danced carefree at a ball or watched an awesome sunset. Surely she must have been happy once, but the memory was buried too deeply inside her for us to see it.

Ms. Tree had been away, but now she had returned. And it was time for reading, the first time we read as a class. We got out our readers.

We sat in a matrix of desks on one end of the room. Not every desk was full.
She called on another Matthew, Matthew Yanacobi, first, saying his name, walking nearer his desk. She motioned for him to stand and he did.

“L-l-l-“ he said, but the letter wasn’t L, it was T, the T in “the.”

Her ruler slapped his desk. The sound was like an earthquake.

“That’s wrong,” her words were knots of barbed wire tumbling from her mouth, “you really must learn to read. Practice your reading. Look, it’s a T. This word is ‘the’ - Say it.”

His face reddened and his breath was ragged like he was ready to cry, but he said the word, and she moved on.

Peter was next behind Matthew.

Peter read, taking shallow breaths. He sounded out the letters, letters becoming words, one word and then another. And then a mistake. “... tawba-lee,” he said, not table. The ruler came down again with a smack and we jumped in our seats.

Peter’s face went a leprous white with red blotches. He slumped over, not standing, not sitting, leaning, his face down near the book, his arms around his stomach.

“That’s wrong,” she said. She jabbed at the picture of a table with a red fingernail.

“What’s this?” Peter made a sound, but no words came.

“Sit and calm yourself down.” She said. One side of her mouth drooped, and her arched eyebrow twitched.

There were other students in that row, two more. If she followed the pattern, she would go to Claire next and then to Eric and then come back to my row, and it would be my turn.

“Matthew” she said, and she turned.

I read.

Words became sentences, and sentences paragraphs. When we turned the page, I could hear the whole class turning the same page.

Louder, she said. And I read louder.

Words lost all meaning and became mere symbols of sounds, sounds that I need to make. I could just barely see the next word while I was reading this one. Tears boiled up into my eyes. I blinked them back.

Faster, she said.

And I read faster and another page turned.

Glaciers retreated. Civilizations rose and fell, and still I was reading.
Write About It

*Kathy Staley*

White hot. Blue-white flame
nudges liquid metal toward union and form.
A dance of timing, of elegance.
A graceful line here; a texture there.
Drama. Flow.
The glow of molten orange pushed
by the rush of air and gas.
Separate entities splice. Intense timing. Cooling.
Attach rod to the base.
Bend to capture the image. Attach again.
Silhouette. Turn. Silhouette again.
Sketches and photos on the walls
guide memory, hands, eyes, energy.

My studio stands empty.
Half-done sculptures stand waiting,
as if wondering,
Where is she? Why doesn’t she come?

Writing about it, the reality of it,
makes it seem possible to return.

I suit up in denim cover-alls.
Oversized over old clothes.
Natural fabrics. Natural flame-retardation.
I flip down a dark, full-face mask,
shield against intense heat and sparks.
Suit of armor.
Leather apron. Heavy leather workboots.
A heavy-duty fan, 900 cubic feet per minute industrial fan.
Some day a new studio. A shed refurbished.
Shorn up. Some day.

My grandpa, beloved grandpa, had a tool shed he loved.
My mother’s dad wore bib overalls and a denim barn coat.
Probably had a Lincoln arc welder like mine.
Compact and portable to go where farmers go.
My grandpa wanted to start a garage.
He was good at repairing cars and machinery.
His mother bought him a farm to support his family.

My dad sold life insurance to support his.
His passion? Restoring old houses.
He was a genius at that.
I come from people
who love to work with their hands,
but get side-tracked by making a living.
Is this happening to me?

My basement studio is ten by ten.
Along with the mega-electric arc welder,
I have two tanks: oxygen and acetylene.
I love the flame they make with the torch.
With it, I bend, cut and weld
steel rod the size of coat-hangers.
And sheets of metal
like pieces of fabric “sewn” together.
Dancers, animals, and less representational forms.
I love working with metal and flame.

It takes some getting used to.
If I’m away from it for any length of time,
it takes a while to get my touch back, my timing.
It’s like meditation when I get into it.
I can do it for hours. I can also
let my life pull me away from it for years.

Writing about it makes it seem more possible to return.
For now, my studio stands empty.
Is it the weight of the armor?
Combined weight of all obstacles?
There is only a certain amount of time
and energy in a day, a week, a life.
What causes me to pull away
from what I need to balance my life?
Do I feel compelled to earn a living?
Do I simply need to schedule time for priorities?

Unlike my grandfather and father,
I love my “day job.”
I feel called to teach,
an energy source of its own.
And to write.
To reflect on what I value in writing
helps me visualize stepping back,
into the suit,
the studio,
the intensity of that flame.

Writing about it makes it seem possible. ☁
Evelyn drove her car artfully alongside the bank’s drive-through window, pleased that she’d parked exactly one foot from the electronic drawer rather than two or three. She wouldn’t have to open the car door and risk dropping money onto the pavement. Perhaps it would be a good day.

The teller Evelyn secretly called “the Mona Lisa” was working. Evelyn called the woman this for her unflappable demeanor and peaceful countenance—along with her long dark hair, high forehead and pale skin. Evelyn noticed that today, the Mona Lisa wore a pale peach cameo brooch at the top of her prim white blouse—very fitting. After Evelyn slid her check and deposit slip into the drawer, she surreptitiously glanced down at her coat to see if she’d dropped any powdered sugar down her front. She had, of course; it looked like trail at Tenney Mountain. After glancing at the Mona Lisa, who smiled gently and tapped away at her keyboard, Evelyn brushed viciously at the swathe of white on her black wool coat. Her eyes darted sideways to the rearview mirror to check for chocolate between her teeth. The doughnut had, naturally, been sugared chocolate—the better to make a mess with, as Evelyn was always doing.

As she sucked noisily at a stripe of chocolate lodged between two front teeth, Evelyn imagined the Mona Lisa’s breakfast: probably something like an energy drink in a small, tidy can, sipped daintily through a straw. Or perhaps sliced fruit in manageable bite-size chunks which would spear easily on a fork, and which wouldn’t drip. Evelyn sighed heavily, but at the sound of the electronic drawer opening, she flashed her breeziest, most “I’m-a-young-professional-woman-in-complete-control” smile at the Mona Lisa, who smiled placidly in return. At least there was no dog bone in the tray, which the teller often included if Digby was in the car. Evelyn most often dropped the biscuit trying to slide it out of the drawer, and would have to sheepishly open the car door to retrieve it from the pavement.

At work, Evelyn found a wide (and therefore not tricky) parking space for her car, and was able to drive in with one smooth turn, no reverse gear and additional angling required. She walked at a brisk clip toward the brick building on Main Street that housed her workplace: Benedict Insurance Agency.

After work that evening, Evelyn met three of her friends in the lounge of a local restaurant. They often met for a drink after work, and Evelyn routinely regaled them with tales of her day. On her way through the lounge to find a seat at the bar, Evelyn saw the Mona Lisa sitting at a quiet table for two against the wall. She was with another woman from the bank, and the two were drinking white wine and sharing a plate of
potato skins with melted cheese. Evelyn noted that Mona cut each skin into small bites and ate them one at a time daintily, with a fork; whereas Evelyn would have picked up each potato half with her fingers, a precarious, snowy mound of sour cream topping it that would squeeze out the corners of her mouth and drip down her chin with each large bite. Evelyn nodded to the Mona Lisa as she passed, then smiled to herself. Mona was reaching for the parsley sprig; naturally she wouldn’t let a nutritious garnish go waste.

Once the three found seats at the bar, Evelyn leaned her head in and remarked, “Check out that table by the wall—with those two bank ladies? Doesn’t the one with the long, dark hair look like that painting called “the Mona Lisa”? I always call her that in my head. But listen, here’s my klutz story for today.”

Evelyn had another installment of her ongoing saga of the office coffeemaker. “I’ll tell you another reason I hate that coffeemaker. If you don’t click the filter basket perfectly, the friggin’ thing overflows like lava out of a volcano. So I’m noticing this sputtering noise behind me from the coffee counter, and the phone rings. I pick up and it’s one of our biggest commercial clients, Frank from the bakery, and I’m trying to put him through to my boss, but I’m also trying to snap the friggin’ coffee basket in place and reach for paper towels to wipe up the mess, and what do you think? I disconnect Frank! Hang right up on him! He was none too pleased, I’m sure, but I called right back and explained what happened. Asked him if those industrial coffee-makers like they use at the bakery are any less prone to disaster…”

Evelyn’s friends were sitting to the right of her at the bar and she was angled toward them as she told her story. With their laughter, Evelyn did not notice a man take the stool to her left until she heard a deep voice say, “Your ankle chain is very sexy. Is it meant that way?” Before turning to meet the man, she widened her eyes at her friends in mock horror.

She turned to the man and his eyes locked immediately on hers in an intense, brooding gaze. He had dark hair parted in the middle and pulled into a ponytail. His skin was a ruddy brown and he wore a dangling earring with a long white crystal and a brown feather. His face and hands were clean, but his hair and red tee-shirt were covered in a fine, white dust.

Evelyn looked down at the gold chain beneath her nylons and said, “Sexy? Sure, but sexy is just a bonus. Mostly I wear it so I know what leg to stick in when I Hokey Pokey. You know, ‘You stick your left leg in, you stick your left leg out, you stick your left leg in and you shake it all about…” Evelyn recited the words and jiggled her ankle-chained leg toward the man’s bar stool. A bemused smile began to play on his lips, but then his attention was diverted to something just over Evelyn’s shoulder. She spun on her stool and followed his gaze to the table where the Mona Lisa now sat alone. Mona was spinning the stem of her wine glass slowly, studying her green paper placemat and smiling a serene smile.
The Ponytail Man turned to Evelyn and her friends and said with his deep voice and serious manner, “Excuse me, ladies. I hope you have a happy Hokey Pokey evening.” He ambled over to the Mona Lisa’s table and she gestured delicately for him to have a seat.

Evelyn turned to her friends and in a stage whisper hissed, “Did you see that? I just got dissed so he can to talk to Qualude Lady. Becky, you gotta listen in. Fill me in on the Mona Lisa’s secret to her animal magnetism!”

Becky, who was sitting the farthest from Evelyn and therefore the closest to Mona, cocked her head to listen and stage whispered her version of the proceedings. “I take it he’s been doing some construction work out front of the bank. She’s asking about his ear protection, whether it’s adequate to protect his hearing…She’s asking if he was hot today, and how much longer the job will last…Oh Evvie, catch this: he’s a jackhammer guy! That’s why he’s all dusty. Now he’s asking her about her brooch (you’ll love this, Evvie), telling her it’s sexy! And the Mona Lisa’s saying…It’s an heirloom piece. Came from her grandmother…a wonderful woman, blahblahblah, the most sensual woman she’s ever known. Oh my God! The Mona Lisa is good! ”

Evelyn had heard enough and cut in. “This guy is getting played big time! Who would think to mention their hot, sexy grandma as part of a pick-up?” The four friends hooted and laughed, but a prickly sensation was spreading across Evelyn’s chest and her throat felt sore and lumpy. It didn’t seem fair that the Mona Lisa, already so tidy, poised and serene would also have the gift of social graces. At that moment, deep laughter erupted from the Ponytail Man. She had to admit it to herself: it seemed likely Mona had a sense of humor, too. Evelyn reached quickly for her glass, nearly tipping it, and scrabbled to retrieve an ice cube from her empty drink. She popped it in her mouth and worked it to the back of her throat to soothe it. Her eyes darted toward the table with the blossoming courtship, when a glimpse of something, a shadow, passed her field of vision and startled her. Evelyn swallowed her ice cube whole. She blinked and glanced again, to see if her eyes were playing tricks on her. They weren’t. The prickly sensation across her chest subsided in an instant. Evelyn turned to her friends and grinned widely, arching her eyebrows and bobbing her head toward Mona’s table.

“You gotta check this out,” she told them. “The Mona Lisa’s got parsley stuck in her teeth.” ☺
School of Dreams

Elizabeth Jane Whittington

In my dream, poets gather on the grassy slope Dante has constructed in terza rima stanzas just above the entrance to Underworld. Homer is here, reciting metric repetitions that will outlive time. Sappho reclines on a bed of new grass, sings her seductions. Nameless innocents sit in circles, speak their longing into the clouded air suspended over this landscape of unbelief. I am among them, have been spared the terrible lip of hell simply because I am willing to entertain the idea of heaven.

Suddenly, the scarlet slash of an ancient, dangerous sun rises behind me and burns into my skin, a knife of light angled into my lower back, a metaphor so obvious it wakes me.

I open my eyes, begin the climb back to consciousness, see there are no poets meditating on the meadow of my bed quilt, no angry Sun God blazing rays into my body, only my husband's hand touching my back from where he stands beside the bed, telling me it's 10 AM, maybe I should consider getting up. I am gripped by a familiar sense of dread, and just as quickly I am released: it is summer, school has ended. I am free.

I am a high school English teacher. No, I was a high school English teacher, until the 20th of June, when I cleaned my classroom, turned in my grades and my keys, and drove my standard transmission, economy Ford Escort tin can of a teacher's car out of the parking lot and into the deep breath called summer vacation.

The words summer vacation constitute a misnomer, however, when they are used to describe my experience as a person who, for a couple of months each year, is not expected to begin her workdays contained in a classroom at 7:30 am with 27 teenagers, whose eyes are open, but who will not actually be awake until the end of First Block.

Furthermore, I do not leave school on the final day of the academic year and drive directly to the beach, and I suspect the image of teachers leaving the schoolyard and heading for the luxuries of warm sand and popular novels is a misconception fabricated by the wizards of unwealthy careers.

I am not magically transformed from teacher to regular person on the last day of school. Regular people have not been limping along on less than five hours sleep per night for the previous ten months. When I arrive home, quite late on the night of the last day of school, my hands stiff with the bleach I used to scrub student desktops clean of adolescent erotica, I am rock tired, I drop like a stone into a hard sleep in the deep pond of my bed. During the slow-glowing night hours of summer, I will dream and dream the days I have spent teaching. My dream self will call up the faces of students and parents, other teachers, administrators, janitors who have helped me out to my car with boxes so many cold, late nights throughout the year. The things I said, the ways in which I said them, the best of my work and the worst will repeat in living color as though videotaped through a telephoto lens. I will startle awake in the joy of remembered successes and toss...
in the trap of mistakes I might have made, whole days I wish I could go back and do better.

Several nights each week, from mid-June until after the 4th of July, the brushstroke of my teaching will follow the shadows and the clean light of my most recent work. Years of overlapping experiences will underscore the music of a world that is at once exhilarating, relentless, full of conflict, and rich with purpose—a world that is never really quite clear or quite fair.

"Go to the crossroads," Sonia tells Raskolnikov. "Bow down to the people, kiss the earth..." I dream I am sitting with students in a circle of desks, discussing Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment.

"Do you understand?" I ask. "The author is telling us, all of us, that we must confess—whatever wrong we have done, whatever secrets we continue to keep, we must confess what we know." One student, six feet tall, with long arms he is not yet accustomed to using and impossibly clumsy legs, laughs, tips back in his chair, falls into a low bookcase behind him, keeps laughing, and soon we are all laughing. A former student, gone from the area for years, appears beside my chair. She tells me she loves me, bends to kiss the top of my head, then vanishes. Now there is a sky of white stars strung over the circle of desks. Poets of witness arrive, speak darkly of shattered glass, serve my students bread and wine. I try to remind them there are rules against drinking in school, but my words are swallowed by wind.

Throughout my life, especially when I am very tired, depleted by good work, difficult loss, change I failed to predict, I have had vivid, disturbing, instructive, even healing dreams. My school dreams are as intense as any I have experienced, and I think the frequency with which they occur during the early weeks of summer is related to the amount of processing I need to do and cannot do when I am engaged in the whirlwind of teaching, planning, evaluating, revising, trying again.

I have a repeating dream that I am locked inside my house and cannot get to school. I see a huge clock free-floating through my kitchen. Time is ticking down. Suddenly a key appears in my hand, and at that moment I remember that I do not need a key to get out of the house, I need only to turn the doorknob. I am relieved until I realize my son is still not ready to go. I need to take him to his school before I can go to mine. The clock drifts by, ticking loudly. I begin to yell to my son, who pretends not to hear me. I look around and see the house is in utter chaos. A telephone rings, but I cannot find it. I leave the house, leave my son, the hungry cats, the unmade beds, and I begin to walk to school. I wake from this dream angry with my son, and then I realize that his appearance in my dream is a sign—I am almost home from school.

In July, my school dreams begin to fade, are replaced by quieter sleep scenes. Summer sounds enter my consciousness and fall into my dreams—children calling to one another outside, bird songs, summer thunder, the uneven beat of rain.

There are those who believe that dreams occupy their own authentic dimension, and though I cannot begin to have a meaningful opinion about such a possibility, I do
think the disembodied living that occurs in dreams connects to waking life in ways that are concrete and significant.

I don't think dreams are entirely random, because too often I wake up having solved a problem, made a difficult decision, grieved deeply, forgiven myself. Dreams I have about school, when school is not in session, often seem to be a necessary torment, and, as the nightmare quality of the dreams subsides, I am able to reflect on their content, which I usually record. It becomes clear to me that my dream people are also my teachers, and I am in summer school.

The poet Mary Oliver writes remarkable poems about the mind and the body in concert with one another and with the natural world. She pulls body, mind, and nature together in all their complexity and gives the three a single heartbeat, as is evident in the following lines, excerpted from "At the Lake."

Inside every mind
there's a hermit's cave
full of light,
full of snow,
full of concentration.
I've knelt there,
and so have you,
hanging on
to what you love,
to what is lovely...

(From White Pine, by Mary Oliver, San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1994)