The Connecticut Writing Project offers opportunities for growth and professional development to teachers of writing in all disciplines who recognize the worth of using writing as a means of learning any subject matter. A program of The University of Connecticut, Department of English, the Connecticut Writing Project is affiliated with the widely-acclaimed National Writing Project, which now has 138 sites in this country and abroad.

In the Project, experienced classroom teachers are trained as Teacher/Consultants in an intensive Summer Institute where they share their expertise and practice writing themselves. Then, during subsequent school years, they present workshops on composition theory and practical strategies for teaching writing to teachers in participating districts.

The approach has proven effective by generating widespread interest in good writing and by upgrading students' abilities as writers and learners. For further information about the Connecticut Writing Project and its programs, please write or call the director:

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I stand staring at the pink slip clutched in my hand. Panic starts as a knot in my stomach and spreads to my chest and my legs. I feel nauseous and dizzy and reach out to steady myself on the mailbox. I quickly look around to see if anyone has noticed. People hurry by oblivious... the streets of my neighborhood, so safe and familiar just seconds ago, now seem threatening and ominous. Thoughts shoot through my head like laser beams of light...the baby...the children... how will we live...how could this be happening to me...this is New York...they don't lay off teachers in New York.

I pick up the groceries from the stoop and stumble into my apartment. I check the baby... the other two are playing in our tiny back yard. Find an apartment with a yard for the kids. I was so confident...so proud of my careful calculations...my first independent act after the divorce. Now it seemed so reckless...so impulsive.

I set down the groceries on the kitchen table and begin pacing from one room to another, still holding the crumpled piece of paper in my fist. I stifle an impulse to run. I sit down in a corner of the couch and curl up in a ball. Oh God...don't let the baby wake up yet. Don't be scared...don't be scared...I try to gain control of the hysteria welling up in me. Alone...you're alone...the words repeat themselves like a chant...a mantra...over and over. I cover my ears and close my eyes to make it stop.

The doorbell rings...comes a steady stream of friends, each with a bag of groceries, each with a look of compassion, or is it guilt...or relief. I try not to look into their eyes. I want someone to know what I'm feeling but I can't bring myself to put it into words. I swallow hard to keep the words from escaping...take care of me...someone. No one dares ask...what will you do now? They put arms around me and assure me things will work out. A smile is frozen on my face. Soon they all go home. I'm left with eight loaves of bread and ten quarts of milk.

The easiest task suddenly seems overwhelming. I have to feed the kids. Lee needs help with her homework. Chris keeps falling down and crying. Scott, so tiny, lays in his
cradle, hypnotized by his fingers, making sweet sounds. He needs to be changed. Somehow I deal with the chores...one by one...and soon the children are asleep. The house is quiet. I sit myself in the old rocker next to Scott's cradle and I start to cry. Huge sobs come...I stifle them into his blanket so as not to wake him. I can't seem to stop, but a curious thing happens...I begin to relax...it's almost a relief. I look at Scott again. I remember the day...the moment...he was born. The pain was a purple place behind my eyes. I felt primitive...animal-like...ferocious in my need for us both to survive. I remember bringing my mind to a place above the purple. The pain was happening but I could separate myself from it. I was in control.

An out-of-state car pulls into the driveway and a young couple emerges. From the front yard eyes observe them walking hand in hand, pausing, smiling at each other as they enter the house. A young couple, probably their first home. The eyes smile approvingly.

A glance out the door and the eyes rest on workers carrying their tools into the house, probably in need of repair. Curious eyes speculate on the changes to be made.

I begin to take control again. I tuck away my fear into a corner of my stomach. It's there and will probably stay there...but for now, I can will it away.

I reach for my pad..."Things to do." Under that I write "shelter". Unemployment will cover the rent. I write that down and I feel the exhilaration that comes when you finish a puzzle or solve a math problem. I check off "shelter" and feel a surge of optimism.

Headlights flash into the room. A curtain is pulled aside and squinting eyes observe young girls and young men, arms linked together or draped over a shoulder, promenade into the house. Outraged eyes glare at the shameless acts to be committed.

Muted sounds penetrate the night's sleep. A hand lifts the slat of the blind and anxious eyes peer at the young men who hesitantly steal into the house.

I'm exhausted. I lay down the pen and my list. I glance at the baby...not a care in the world beyond his next dry diaper and his next meal. I lean close to him and promise in a rough whisper...don't worry...tomorrow Mommy gets us some food stamps.
THE SAND BOX
Joseph Ball

A young man, barefoot, dressed in black, stands in the high background exercising his arms and smiling straight ahead across the ocean, the audience.

His role is an amiable Angel of Death.

The victim, center stage, angrily propped on one elbow in the sand, is Grandma. Her voice is crackled with age and everything she says feigns to ignore him.

Daddy and Mommy, son-by-law and daughter, much more kin than kind, have escorted her like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on commission, seeking a cure for what must be madness in travel and the sea breeze or death which she resists—not like Hamlet—not for the unknowing of it, for she is old and knows, her own princely lover long gone over.

(Perhaps at midnights he makes ghostly appearances and says things like, "Molly, it's not so bad.")

And she is not so foolish nor tragic nor senile as to believe the muscular appealing Angel comes to refresh appetites that are now only memories.

When he approaches her (Exeunt—Mommy and Daddy) like Polonius, he offers homilies and she can see his strong arms will lift her easily.

There is a certain charm in his method, but she would rather drink from the poisoned cup, make a scene of dying, toss about the stage in dramatic gestures.

Just exiting like this, an Ophelia sliding under a gentle wave, has no revenge in it.
MRS. CHARLES ROBS A BANK
Beatrice Bennett

Jennie Charles had hoped to take her children on a vacation trip that summer. For months she had been putting money aside for just that purpose. In the four years since she had been a widow, she had learned how to use every skill she had ever acquired to earn the necessary funds to keep life on a somewhat even keel. Among other things, she tutored, typed, designed clothes, and even had a day nursery in her home for a while. She had been too busy to feel sorry for herself; besides, the marriage had not been a good one anyway. Any need she had for love and affection was more than fulfilled by her relationship with the children. The youngest was now three and a half; the others, five and seven. They wanted to go to Disney world, and they were worthy of such an extravagance.

Extravagance was something Jennie had never allowed herself. Her last vacation had been that awful trip to Paris with Arthur before the children came. Her feet had hurt so much, but Arthur would not hear of taking a taxi, "You can't take pictures in a taxi. What's the matter? You getting old?" (He derived some perverse pleasure in pointing out that she was several months older than he was.) Now, however, she needed a vacation. At twenty-nine, she was tired of working twelve to eighteen hours a day -- first tending to the children and the house, then earning money by the work she did at home until two in the morning...or later. There had been no insurance. Arthur did not wish to relinquish a penny of his "hard earned" money for such nonsense. "If I die, Kiddo, you'll just have to get up off your backside and bring home the bacon yourself," he said laughingly. "Of course he has no intention of dying. He just never thinks ahead," she thought to herself at the time. Since then she had done much thinking ahead.

She was so proud of herself, having put away $1,257.43 in a little over eight months. Then the faithful old station wagon she named Antediluvia ("Auntie Loovia," the littlest one called it) broke down. That was bad enough, but the day after the repair bill of $456.49 was paid, the stove suddenly refused to bake or broil, and the hot water heater burst. Replacing the hot water heater had cost another $351.79, and the stove problem was placed "on hold", but her big plans for the summer had shrunk like the baby's last pair of pajamas. Actually, she had counted on having at least $150.00 left at the end of the trip, so things could hardly have been more grim.

At first the idea was just her own private little joke -- one she had resurrected from her first days as a single parent. "I'll have to rob a bank," she would say to herself, as she fell into the bed each night, bone weary from work and worry. Gradually, however, she stopped laughing to herself about such an absurd idea. "How much money might a person actually be able to... acquire in this fashion?" she wondered. "$1,257.43? Taking just that little bit wouldn't be so terribly evil. But wouldn't it be nice to get a new stove out of it, too? And then there's poor old Antediluvia who really deserves a nice retirement at Bob and Al's Junk yard. We really do need a larger wagon -- one with air conditioning -- for the trip," she reasoned. And so it went, until Jennie's list of needs included a nice new, well-furnished house and college education for the three children, as well as a healthy bank account in Switzerland.

How to accomplish this now terribly earnest objective was almost too simple. The biggest bank in town had a new main vault. It was on the top floor of the old Bartlett building, and it was entirely operated by computer. Jennie thought it strange that it had not been robbed already. If ever there was one thing she was really good at, it was computers. Her husband had been a computer expert, and Jennie had absorbed just about all he knew. Planning carefully, she reviewed everything she knew, concentrating on hacking, data banks, and secret codes. She took out books from the library and learned more. She drew plans in her mind of that old, familiar place where she had addressed envelopes on Saturdays for 35 cents an hour when she was in high school.

The newspapers were especially helpful. There were many articles about how successful the new system was in preventing robberies. According to The Daily Courier, anyone could take the self-service elevator up there, but the vault was impenetrable. "Impenetrable? We'll just see about that," she grinned. And occasionally, she scared herself with her own confidence.

In six days Jennie Charles felt perfectly ready to proceed. She parked the car down the street in the church parking lot and walked purposefully the half block to her destination. It was only five in the afternoon, but no one
was in sight. No apparent witness saw Jennie go in the
glass doors and up to the elevators, but she dared not look
around. That would look suspicious. Law firms, insurance
companies, and consultants of one sort or another still
occupied the first three floors, so it was entirely possible
that her presence might be noted by someone working late.
For the first time, she began to feel very uneasy:
Nevertheless, she assumed the posture and expression of a
bank official on her way up to the vault on official
business.

Her most recent information about this
computer-controlled vault came from WXXT's evening news
program. George Fogarty, their personable anchor man, had
followed one of the bank people all the way over there and
back with the minicam unit. The banker had no guard, no
police escort, or anything. He just walked over to
Bartlett's himself, got on the elevator, rode up to the
fourth floor, punched in the words, "OPEN, PLEASE" on the
wall-mounted keyboard in the lobby (using the "hunt and
peck" system, if you please), and walked right into the
inner room where the computerized vault was. Granted, the
minicam unit crew did not follow him into the vault itself,
but it was clear that he punched in "OPEN, PLEASE" once more
on another keyboard to enter the vault. He undoubtedly had
to add a code as well. There was a brief moment when the
cameraman shifted to Fogarty, who just had to make a
humorous remark about how he was definitely returning later
that evening himself!

Not a soul on the elevator. What luck! Still, someone
could get on at the second or third floor. The only thing
that could stop Jennie now would be the appearance of a
"real" bank official entering the elevator on the second or
third floors or showing up at the fourth floor lobby from
one of the other three elevators. If asked, she would
explain her presence by saying she was meeting her dinner
date at his office and had evidently pressed the wrong
button on the elevator. Her luck held. No one appeared.

In spite of the fact that she had met no one on her way
up -- or maybe because of it -- her uneasiness began to
escalate, and she began to perspire. Huge drops ran
unnoticed down her forehead into her eyes. As deliberately
and assertively as a female vice president might proceed, she
punched in the letters to form the words, "OPEN, PLEASE"
and the door responded cordially. Proceeding in her role of
legitimate access person, Jennie stepped smartly inside.

Closing the heavy door behind her, she wiped her face with
the corner of the scarf she had bought in a little boutique
on the Champs Elysees, regretting that she had not worn one
less dear to her.

The inner room, bright with the summer sun streaming
down through the skylights, used to be Bartlett's old credit
department. They had removed the cubicle offices, but had
made no effort to clean up the mess left after the firm
moved to their new quarters. Dust balls, a few yellowing
applications, a broken chair, and two dented metal
wastebaskets remained from busier days. The vault, new and
extremely impenetrable looking, occupied one whole wall at
the far end of the now empty fourth floor.

Jennie and Arthur had purchased their bedroom furniture
from Bartlett's, and she remembered sitting in one of those
little cubicles while Arthur went over their application for
credit with a skinny old man who was very intimidating. The
poignant memory of her happiness as a new bride dissolved
her cool and calculated mindset further, and Jennie felt a
throbbing in her head which echoed each loud beat of her
heart. She had not expected her footsteps to sound so loud,
so she removed her shoes, then proceeded towards the vault
with them in her hand. Each step was a tremendous effort as
all the individual muscles in her body trembled. As she
approached the second wall-mounted computer keyboard, the
trembling increased to such an extent that the high-heeled
pumps in her hand clicked like castanets. She set them
down, miraculously without dropping them, silencing the
terrible clattering. That small success gave her the
necessary courage to take a deep breath and concentrate on
entering the vault.

On close inspection of the access board, Jennie
realized she would have to go to "Plan B", which allowed for
a strange keyboard. It was exactly like the one in the
elevator lobby, except that it had bypass keys labeled X1
through X10. She punched in the "Open, Please" command
exactly as she had seen it done on WXXT, her mind already on
the next step, which would be to enter the secret code the
minicam people had not captured. Having noted the exact
length of time between the first command and those few
seconds in which George Fogarty had made his funny comment
about coming back later that night, she knew that the code
could consist of only three characters and that those three
characters would form the name of the computer, which could
not contain any of the letters in the words "open" or
"please." With only a second of hesitation, she punched in the letters B-U-O with a choking lump in her throat.

Instantly, from an unseen loudspeaker, came a woman's voice in that taped maternal pleasantness which strikes one as an awful affectation. "You are not authorized to enter The Third National Bank's new impenetrable vault," it said. "In approximately fifteen minutes, someone will arrive to arrest you. Please wait."

Caught like a bird that inadvertently enters an attic or garage, she flew straight across the littered floor to the door she had closed so carefully behind her, slamming her fists on its unyielding metal surface. She raced desperately from one window to the next, horrified to discover that glass panes had been replaced with dusty-looking but escape-proof acrylic material. As in a nightmare, she upended one of the dented wastebaskets in a futile attempt to reach the skylights on the roof. Finally, tears of despair and resignation took over. She was acutely aware that she would no longer have to look ahead. She would spend the rest of her life looking back.

That was five years ago. She remembered the interrogation and how remorseful she was, how the bank officers could not believe she had engineered the whole caper without help, how they had been convinced finally of her proficiency with computers, so much so that they offered her a position in their security department. It was to her credit that she had been such a devoted and caring mother, managing to provide for her children without asking for pity or handouts. And, of course, she was on probation for three years, but that was all behind her.

Now, bemusing the adventure that had led her to become the bank's vice-president in charge of security, she made her way unhesitatingly across Bartlett's fourth floor carrying a man-sized burgundy leather attache case with her initials stamped in gold. Smiling, she punched in the five-character code name which opened the vault: K-I-T-T-Y. It was still gratifying to know that she had been correct about the code not containing any of the letters in the words "open" and "please." Leisurely, Jennifer Charles packed the beautiful money into the attache case as calmly as she might arrange her son's socks in a drawer. The money would be untraceable to her or to anyone. She had prudently set aside the hundred thousand unmarked bills in many little nooks and crannies in the huge vault — a few each month —
"Laura, what's the matter?"

She stomped into the living room as the screen door slammed shut behind her small, solid frame. I reopened it gingerly and entered as she plunked into the rocker and stared.

"What's wrong?" I said. "The headmaster gave me your message. I decided to skip lunch and come home."

"It's here! I hate this place. It's so god damned surreal -- just like that Rousseau painting with the tiger grinning from the verdant bushes. The quiet is nauseating."

She paused.

Dazed, I stared at the tiny alarm clock on the mantel.

"Tick, tick, tick." The noise of the second hand grew louder.

"I took your dog for a walk down Spinning Wheel Lane...Walk down Spinning Wheel Lane sometime when you've nothing to do. It's actually quite pleasant," Laura said in her mock League of Women Voters voice.

"Well, what's so bad about that? I love the quiet here, it's so peaceful. I thought you would like it -- you could write while I went to meeting at sch--"

"It's fake! It's not real, it's a gigantic fairy tale with a badly twisted ending."

"C'mon, Laura, we all don't have to be starving artists working in the garret. There's plenty of sweat and work here...Jeff works long hours in the city, I've got my hands full between teaching and working on the house..."

"Yeah, and it's all for those little green bucks! So you can drop dead in your rectangular boxed houses with little Christmas bows attached."

"Then go home if you don't like it! Can't you bear it for two more days before the hike?"
"There's no way, Laura..."

She folded her bandana over and over until it was a thin strip of blue, tied it around her head hippie style, and jerked it tight, knotting it defiantly.

"We'll go real slow. We'll get there."

She stood up. "I'll go ahead and find the foothold, and you can follow."

Pinpricks radiated through my back. If only I'd taken Jeff's advice and had just gone camping for these three days!

Laura strode to the base. She lay down on the path sloping upward, her elflike hands grasping the first foothold. Slithering up the side, she crouched in the hold then stopped, glancing back at me.

"Go ahead -- I just need time to rest another minute."

"Take your time -- I'll wait."

My knees trembled as I resumed the squatting position and slowly stood up. I hobbled over and lifted my left hand upwards to where her brown shoe was. As her shoe left the rock, I hoisted myself up, feeling the pack bearing down on my neck and my right knee traveling upwards.

I balanced in the new foothold. Sensing Laura was waiting, I began the motions all over again -- reach, hunch forward, ignore the weight bearing down, squinch up, bring that right knee up, balance, steady myself, rest, rest, reach, hunch forward...

A blue dab of sky appeared as I glanced furtively upward at the last switchback path. Slithering up, I noticed the brown outline of Laura's sleeping bag on top of her pack appearing against the sky, then her blue shirt.

Reaching for the last foothold, I pulled myself up and out and crouched, wobbling in the clearing. Steadying myself, then standing up straight with my pack, I limped over to where she was. The view slowly came into focus. She smiled at me gently. Now I was an equal.

I have great respect for teachers -- and hand-me-downs. Now it might seem that the two are unrelated, but this unlikely combination helped me to become a writer.

I was sixteen (sweet of course), and heady with pride of a driver's license. As the youngest in my family, I had survived years of receiving hand-me-downs. The license I held in my hand represented something I had done on my own, not something inherited. I was on top of the world. I fell off that night at dinner.

"Instead of selling the family car," Dad declared with gameshow-host enthusiasm, "I'm giving it to Wendy!"

My fork fell out of my hand. I was shocked, but wasn't fooled for a minute: Dad's Santa Claus act was his way of saving the cost of my bus transportation; his present was more like a punishment.

The family car, or latest leftover, was a monstrosity that made scuffed shoes and dented bicycles seem like treasures. It belonged on a battlefield, not a city street. I wasn't ready to do combat; I just wanted to drive! Even my older sister, who drove a new Ford and knew nothing of humiliation, smiled sympathetically.

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Reaching for the last foothold, I pulled myself up and out and crouched, wobbling in the clearing. Steadying myself, then standing up straight with my pack, I limped over to where she was. The view slowly came into focus. She smiled at me gently. Now I was an equal.

"I think I'll take a spin around the block," Dad went on, ignoring my look of disgust.

"You are, after all, only sixteen," he said. "You'd ruin anything that was new." (He always treated me like my age was my I.Q.)

After dinner, I was given the keys.

"I think I'll take a spin around the block," I said yawning to show my enthusiasm. I didn't get very far. The gas gauge didn't work. I ran out.

In the weeks that followed, I discovered that this heap didn't use gas--it was addicted. I had to get a part-time job to support its habit. A few more months of this, and I might as well forget saving for college.
Depressed, and broke, I decided to write what I
couldn't say. In a free choice essay for English, I wrote
passionately about every hand-me-down that I could recall,
embellishing on the latest.

Sixteen years of little sister blues were soon captured
in a piece entitled "Traveling in a Tank."

When the essay was returned, my English teacher (who
until that day had been only a nice man who wore loud ties)
told me that I got an "A" because I made him laugh.

"Make an editor laugh," he said, "and he might pay
you."

He taught me how to query an editor and encouraged me
to send my "article" to a teen magazine. Writing had always
brought me pleasure. Was it possible that I could be paid
for doing what I enjoyed? After all, I was a student, not a
writer.

Three months later, my first article was accepted for
publication in SEVENTEEN Magazine. I received what I have
since come to know as "tear sheets", or copies of the
article in print. They had given my article an artist's
sketch of a young girl leaning on a battle-scarred tank;
they gave me a check—for $100! Even at sixteen, I could
appreciate the irony in receiving money for writing about a
car that was saleable only as scrapmetal. I could also
appreciate a curious warmth toward that hulk of metal I'd
been forced to drive.

I went outside and stood in front of it. The
headlights, catching a glint of the sun, peered at me like a
squinting giant. The front grill, laced with holes from a
parking lot collision, seemed to be locked in a wide,
toothless grin. A sudden breeze caught chips of paint and
rust, scattering them like so much confetti.

"Yes, you old rustbucket," I thought, "we can
celebrate: You are a celebrity, and I am a writer."

Since that first sale, writing has become my vocation.
I have learned that it's wise, and profitable, to laugh at
my misfortunes. I love to put words on paper to let the
rest of the world know what it's like to be me. And to
think, I owe it all to a teacher -- and a hand-me-down.
BRINGING IT TO A CLOSE
Carol Fancher

The bell rings, marking the round. Is it the beginning or the end? One last gulp of coffee, a final glance at my Plan Book, can my bladder hold out until lunch? Lockers slam shut on adolescent secrets, narrow clippings of Matt Dillon, Paulina, the Soloflexman. The pandamonium swells then abates as stragglers race down the hall trying to get their bodies on the right side of the door before it closes. Another period begins. I look out over twenty-seven pairs of eyes. We’re in this thing together, but I feel very much alone....

Room 105 is on the south side of the building. I like it because even in February when the boilers are losing their battle against the cold, my room is comfortably warm. During my free period, I close the door to the drafty corridors and let the emptiness fill with quiet. It is then that I can sense the school breathing, thinking, daydreaming. Seven hundred minds and bodies engaged in the peculiar ritual that is education, yet I feel very much alone....

A similar sensation came to me at the first meeting of the Summer Institute three weeks ago. So many of the “fellows” already knew each other from school or previous institutes; was I the only one who had never attended a workshop, let alone given one? Process writing, personal voice, say back, what did I have to offer these people? I felt strangely apart from the group....

These three personal reflections point to what in my mind is one of the supreme ironies of the teaching profession. While it is supposed to be a community enterprise, it seldom operates as such. Our days are scheduled into blocks of time, some assigned to teaching, others given over to answering the constant demands of our students and administrators. Rarely is there a block set aside for the exchange of ideas among colleagues. Rarely is there time to sort through all the papers and plans to find our true agenda. Our fragmented and overly-extended schedules provide us with few opportunities to learn from each other.

Through the Summer Institute, I have come to understand the importance of establishing and maintaining a viable and working community of teachers. I now see the value of sharing. From the first free-write to the final workshop I have experienced kinship on many levels. Writing groups, discussions, whole-group shares and lunch on the patio provided me with both formal and informal peer-tutoring. In three weeks we have exchanged many precious gifts. This must continue.

I have also come to understand the importance of writing as a tool of discovery. It was with writing that I struggled to find meaning in all the “stuff” I read and heard. It was writing that revealed some common goals and interests among the group. Hopefully, writing will help bridge the gaps between my students, their education and me.

As I prepare to bring my Summer Institute experience to a close, I find that I am both more and less alone than when it began. I am less alone because of the eighteen people who helped me discover that I have something to say and can say it; less alone because I know there is an audience out there that wants to listen too. I am more alone because in one month I will go back to a school where most of the doors are closed, some to the cold but many more to change. Prophets are often shunned (at Catholic High).
Cynthia paid the taxi driver and got out of the cab near the Registry of Vehicles on Middle Road. As far as she could tell from her Singapore Street Directory, the driver seemed to have taken the shortest route. Next week, she and David were moving out of the hotel into their apartment. (She had been calling it a flat until Pat, the wife of the man whose job David was taking over, had explained to her that in Singapore a flat was small and cheap. Expatriates lived in apartments.) When they had their own car, she would have to learn to get around the city on her own, so she studied the maps whenever she could. Taxis were pleasant to use though. Not like New York. Here the drivers seemed pleased with tips. Of course, taxis were cheap. When she converted the Singapore dollars to U.S., she felt she could afford a generous tip.

To get to the slightly run-down but still imposing government building, she had to walk past a few shops along the covered sidewalk. She felt rather smug knowing from her reading that the locals called the sidewalk the five foot way. When David had told her that the bank wanted to send him to Singapore, she had gone straight to the library. There weren't many books about Singapore because it was so small and apparently unimportant. Cynthia wished she could ask her but the girl was staring out into the rain. The other woman, Cynthia knew, was a black and white amah. Pat had pointed one out on the way back from the newcomer's coffee at the American Club. These were very traditional Chinese women, professional amahs, who never married. They all dressed in baggy black silk pants and white over-blouses. The only color on the old lady was the green jade bangle on her wrist and her red plastic sandals. The amah stood muttering something under her breath. Cynthia, whose own hair was pulled back in a loose bun, was fascinated by the amah's thin braid of hair. Years of pulling it tight had apparently caused her hairline to recede from her face, leaving a high forehead of shiny skin. Cynthia looked away and sighed. As soon as they moved out of the hotel, she'd have to hire an amah cook because David said they'd be doing quite a bit of entertaining. In fact, his boss was coming out next month. She liked the idea of having a black and white amah, but Pat had said they rarely
Almost on cue, as if it knew the show was over, the rain stopped. The people on the sidewalk smiled briefly at each other and went on their ways. Cynthia smiled at them too and went into the ROV, composing in her mind the amusing story she's tell David and write home to her parents when she got back to the hotel.

By now the open drain between the five foot way and the road was filled with rushing water. Suddenly Cynthia saw that there were several large insects crawling up the pillars of the five foot way - big black cockroaches, smaller black things, centipedes and some spindly-legged red bugs. What was worse, as the water spilled over the drain, more of them were starting to crawl onto the sidewalk, the same high ground that Cynthia and her companions were retreating to. She knew she would scream and start stomping on the bugs if they came much closer. Would the others just stand there? They didn't seem to have noticed.

Looking for an escape, she glanced out into the street, where the rain continued to pour down. There was little traffic. A bechak was approaching, coming down the middle of the street to avoid the puddles which now spread out from the drains on either side. The driver, hunched forward under his topi, peddled doggedly. His passenger was neatly enclosed in a plastic sheet that came down from the room of the bechak and tucked into the bottom. As the bechak came closer, Cynthia thought she was seeing things. There was a large grey rat running along underneath it. She stared in amazement. Just when it passed in front of them, the amah cried out and pointed. The Chinese men stopped talking and stared. Even the Indian girl laughed. The driver, oblivious, peddled down the street and out of sight.

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Behind my house is a rock garden. It is not finished but I can take pleasure in its present form. It is a composition created from granite rock and alpine plants of varying shades of green. The tone is quiet -- yellow green moss, blue green sea grass, silver green cactus, and brown green daisy. The tone is resilient. Each green plant has a texture of its own -- dried brittle daisy, and the slippery myrtle. This mass of gray granite and alpine plant is blanketed by beach pebble. It has a tone and shape that sets limits to what belongs. There are few weeds. They disrupt the quiet, yet resilient garden voice.

The day the work began was the day I tore out the azalea. I had no plan for the garden. I did not know what I would find. Each finding led me to the next. Quietly I uprooted, plant by plant, clump by clump, scarlet bushes past their prime. Roots of the azalea do not grow deep. Once empty, the shallow bed, exposed stones intended to support the bush now gone. These small boulders, now devoid of purpose, did not belong. Two by two I removed the stones, each about the size of two cupped hands.

The azalea gone, my eyes were drawn to three gray humps of granite. Breaking the surface, these gray humps were perhaps bedrock that would connect beneath the earth. Intuiting the possibility of such a unity, I began to dig. My tools were the pickaxe to cut through invading roots, the shovel and the wheelbarrow. There were stops and starts. The work was hard. But most of all I remember an energy coming from the unearthing and exposing of the stone structure beneath. Shoeful by shoeful, I moved the dirt, discovering as I worked a pattern created from clusters of porous stone and hard bedrock. My work was experience digging and exposing, digging and exposing, digging and exposing...
of my rock garden. The exact nature of the plants, the exact location of the planting did not matter. In this garden it was setting, not character, that would dictate. This is the style of a rock garden.

The intense interaction between the garden and myself was replaced by the more social encounter between myself and others. I conferred with Oliver's, the closest experts on rock gardens I could find, with books borrowed and bought, with friends who knew or would listen to the talk of rock gardens. I am learning the language of the rock gardener.

My rock garden is not finished. It is exposed to the sun and rain, is constant in its quiet change – the wearing away of the rock bed, the flourishing and dying of the plants. The unearthed rocks and the alping pants, however, are a product of my creation. They can be judged by the understanding rock gardener. And I, having created the garden, can appreciate the rules of evaluation. If judgement leads to improvement, I can benefit from the language of evaluation. I want my garden to grow deeper and richer.

She drove up, parked and got into his car leaning to kiss him. He delighted her.

He'd called early in the morning and after two hours of driving waited for her in the parking lot of the farm market. Blue sky, fat white clouds, bright sunshine -- a perfect day for picking strawberries.

They drove to the field, got their baskets and holding hands, walked deep into the wide, red rows, breathing great gulps of strawberry air.

"I'm so happy you called today. I have another chemo tomorrow." "I know."

They knelt to pick and half hidden among the wooden trellis work, held each other for a long relieved kiss. The had not been together for three weeks.

She wrote him bright notes, the kind her own college-age daughter enjoyed, and long convoluted letters dealing with her illness. He acknowledged his understanding with frequent calls in which they spoke of his courses, his apartment life with his buddies, trips with the track team, her treatment, and the next time. Funny stories, nothing heavy. She wasn't the complaining type.

Now they gave themselves over to filling their baskets, giggling and feeding each other on the sly. No eating was allowed.

"I've never done this before." "Nor I, I don't even know what I'll do with them all." "Jam, jelly, strawberry shortcake." "Original ideas."

The berries bounced and rolled into the boxes, onto the ground, and the two crept along on their knees crushing fallen fruit and sneaking warm berry kisses, until their containers were heaped high.

"Had enough." "Yeah."

They rose and balancing the buckets began walking out.
"Let me take you down, 'cause I'm going to Strawberry Fields, nothing is real, and nothing to get hung about...."

He knew all the words and she hummed under them.

Their gleaned weighed and paid for, they climbed back into his car.

"There's a great pond near here." "Fine."

After winding down narrow green lanes for some minutes they parked, took some berries and the blanket, and pushed through the bushes to the waterside.

She lay down, face to the sun. He knelt, took a joint from his pocket, lit it, inhaled and passed it to her. She sucked in and returned it. They smoked to its end, happily.

Have some strawberries m' dear." "Don't mind if I do."

He slid the basket over and hungry now, they ate greedily.

"Wait," she said.

He stopped and she drew his face closer to her and licked the strawberry juice from the corner of his mouth. They made quiet, careful love and came apart stained with warm berry juice.

"Are you ever afraid?" he asked. "Sometimes," she stared straight ahead into the afternoon sun. "Sometimes, when I feel just so tired of it all, that frightens me."

When they returned to the parking area she gathered everything, kissed him once quickly and slipped out of the front seat.

"Thank you." "Good luck."

He liked the way she moved and shielding his eyes from the sun, he watched her climb into her car and drive off.

In May of this year, our family will celebrate, with Ya Ya, the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Greek Church in Laconia, New Hampshire. Ya Ya, the Greek word for grandmother, is my husband's 84 year old mother. She wants to have us all present at this commemoration if she is still alive.

Efthemia Hatzes was born in a small town north of Salonika, in Greece. Her mother had six children. Efthemia's father came to the United States to find a better way of life. He sent for his wife when it seemed there were good opportunities for raising a family. It was difficult to convince his wife to leave her birthplace with no hope of returning.

Efthemia was ten when she and her family arrived on Ellis Island. Her first fruit was a banana which she promptly peeled and ate the yellow skin.

The family moved to Laconia. It was necessary for the entire family to help financially. Efthemia was needed although she had little schooling but her life was not unhappy.

When it became evident that Effie would not have opportunities to meet a husband, arrangements were made to match her with a good Greek man. Effie married George Mastoras in 1927. George was known as an intelligent, honest man who had come from a town similar to the one Effie's family had left. He opened a restaurant which prospered. Arthur and Ann were born.

George, along with three other men, felt the need to establish a Greek Church for the growing Greek population. He offered the top floor of his restaurant as the original meeting place. The year was 1936.

Fifty years later, the Church has expanded and been moved to the more familiar edifice. The members wish to honor the original founders. Only one, Ya Ya, George's wife, is alive to accept this homage.

Ya Ya wants her children with her. We come from many directions. Ya Ya is sparkling; her white hair and dark
eyes. She laughs like a young girl on her first date. She walks with more energy and purpose than we have seen in years.

Arthur reminisces about his hometown as we drive toward the school gymnasium. The festivities will be held there because the Church is too small for the large gathering of relatives and friends.

Greek music transforms the room into a Greek taverna. Old, middle-aged, and young are dancing the folk dances kept alive in America. People gather around Ya Ya and are introduced to her family. We are drawn into the circle of dancers and the star performer is Ya Ya, leading the others in the familiar 'tsamiko.' Colors blur as the rhythm becomes faster and the chain of people move as one. When we stop, there is an exhilarating emotion as the community moves toward tables laden with Greek food.

Suddenly, the music stops and there are murmurs of admiration as a large cake shaped like the present church is brought to the center of the room. The women of the Parish have worked on this for weeks. Ya Ya is asked to cut the first slice. She says softly in a strong accent, "I am so happy."

Marcia Mathews

The return address on the large white envelope read: E. Hanson, 126 Maple Lane, Booth City, Pa. I don't know any E. Hanson, Jane thought. Opening the envelope, she learned that it was from (the former) Emily Andrews. Jane and Emily had been majorettes together twenty years ago.

Jane read on with excitement. "Oh, my god," she exclaimed, "a high school reunion. We're going to have a 20th reunion!"

Michelle, her sixteen-year-old daughter, overheard her mother but couldn't understand why anyone would ever want to go to a reunion. Her philosophy was, if they're your friends, you keep in touch. Otherwise, who cares.

"Mom," she said, "are you really thinking of going? You know, you don't have to worry about leaving me behind."

"Michelle, if we go, you'll have to stay with Amy or one of your other friends. I don't want you home alone. Yes, I really do want to go. Maybe Lynn will be there. Gee, I hope so."

Michelle listened politely.

"Other than Lynn, I haven't kept in touch with anyone. What will we ever talk about? I left there after graduation, and Booth City isn't exactly like Connecticut!"

"Mom, I'm sure that you'll think of something. After all, you can talk about your wonderful family!" beamed Michelle.

The date was set for November eleventh, and it would be held at the Knights of Columbus Hall. Jane counted off the remaining months. If she really worked at it, she could lose twenty pounds by then. She had to!

Bob, Jane's husband, did not share her enthusiasm for the news. She used her best psychology when she said, "You know, Bob, I don't want you to think that you have to go to this. That really is your decision. Why not take a few days to think about it? I won't send back my reply until
Sunday." Jane knew that Bob, if for no other reason than curiosity, would be there.

The next evening Bob mumbled to Jane over the clanking of dinner dishes, "I'll go, but I won't go on any diet, and I won't shave off my beard!"

The months flew by. Jane lost the weight, and then gained back ten of those pounds. Bob lost twenty-three pounds and looked better than he had in years!

The drive to Pennsylvania took six hours. They found a room at the Tally Ho Motel and rested for a few hours. Jane found that she could not relax. Will they know me? Will I recognize them? What do we talk about after we show the pictures of our kids and exaggerate about all of our accomplishments? Could Lynn show up after all, or will this all turn out to be one big, boring evening. She found herself pacing the floor, deep in thought. The only sounds were the squeaks in the floor, the dripping of the water faucet, the traffic outside, and Bob's snoring, and she heard none of them.

The dinner dance was set to begin at eight o'clock. Jane and Bob got there about 8:15 to the sounds of laughter and squeals of "I can't believe it's really you!" coming from the doorway. Butterflies started to churn in her stomach but Bob was oblivious to her anxiety because he was busy checking out the crowd.

"Jane, who's that over there in the red dress? She's a knockout!"

"I have no idea," she tersely replied. She hoped that Bob would be on his best behavior.

The Knights of Columbus Hall was decorated in the school colors, red and white. The mascot, a bulldog, was prominently displayed on a large banner hung over the side of the head table. This table was set up for the committee that organized the reunion, not for the original class officers. Jane couldn't remember who those officers were, or what they ever did, except get themselves elected.

All graduates were given a name tag with their name and yearbook picture on it. Escorts of graduates were also issued name tags.

Jane looked radiant. No one seemed to notice that she had gained the weight since graduation. Actually, others had changed even more than she. It wasn't easy figuring out who everyone was, even with their name tags. As teenagers, those men didn't have beards and moustaches. Those haircuts in high school were a far cry from the styled, moussed look today. Only a few people looked much like their photo. Some people even refused to wear their name tags (because of this photo).

Jane and Bob mingled for about half an hour before her squinting, myopic eyes spotted what she thought was a familiar face. The woman had arrived late, alone, and was just signing in. "I think it's her. I think it's Lynn," she exclaimed to Bob. "You're blind without your glasses (they were in her purse). You said she probably wouldn't be here."

"Well, I'm sure it's her. I'll be right back."

Yes, it was Lynn. Lynn's husband couldn't attend, so she came alone. Being in California, she and Jane had kept in touch over the years by phone and letters.

"Lynn, why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"I wanted to surprise you. I know how much you love surprises."

"I do, but this is too much! It's so good to see you. This is fantastic! Here we are together, I just can't believe it! Let's grab some seats over at that table. My shoes aren't broken in yet."

Jane and Lynn spent the next half hour filling in the gaps left in spite of phone calls and letters.

Having Jane leave to find Lynn was what Bob had been waiting for. Off he went to find that woman in the red dress. On the way it occurred to him that his name tag could also have a picture on it. He clipped his driver's license to his tag. What a clever idea, he thought.

Her name was Barbara, and she wasn't amused. After a few minutes of polite, stilted conversation, she excused herself to fade off into the crowded room. wounded, Bob made his way to the bar.
Conversation over dinner was possible because the band was also eating. There was only so much you could say to people you once knew so well. How much could you really say about your family, your life since then, and who really believed you anyway?

By the time dessert was served the group at Jane's table had discussed how Ann Rogers was now Ann Rogers Jackson Ames Wilmington, how you could wear jeans only if your family proved poverty, how getting drunk was quite serious back then, how no one at their table ever thought of cutting class or school, how they all used to meet after the football games at Joe’s Diner, and how the town seemed so small now.

With several pregnant pauses in the conversation, dinner seemed to drag on. Perhaps it was because we are so different now, she thought. We've all drifted apart. I thought we would all remember about the time the football team beat Central, but we didn't. She wondered what she really had in common with this roomful of people, other than being in their graduating class.

The topic that served to unify them all was quite surprising. There was something that had happened so many years ago, that they had vivid memories of, even Bob. Perhaps they carried these memories because they were so young and impressionable then. Having your President shot was something that they had never even thought of.

As if on cue, everyone at the table joined in to share where they had been when they heard the news. Overhearing the topic, people at nearby tables extended that conversation.

Jon said, "I was going to Mr. Curnin's class when I found out. Kids were out in the hall, crying."

"I didn't want to believe it," Jill said. "We were in school but didn't have any classes for the rest of the day."

Jane and others nodded in agreement. Twenty years later. Such vivid memories.

The evening closed with many promises of keeping in touch. For most, their next contact would be at another reunion. Another had been promised in five years.

Bob and Jane drove back to the motel after a tearful goodbye to Lynn. "Well," Jane said, "what did you think of the reunion? I'm so happy that you got to meet Lynn. Wasn't Tom just too much with that orange suit? Didn't Lynn look great?"

Bob thought a moment about how great he thought he looked and that no one had mentioned it to him, and then replied, "Lynn, oh, yeah, she looked great." He said this as he was thinking of that woman in the red dress. "That was some class you were in. Hank is quite a character. Isn't that weird how we all remembered so much about J.F.K.'s death? Yeah, this was some night."

Bob and Jane returned home the next day to be greeted by Michelle. "Well, Dad, how was it?" she asked.

"After a while I got tired of people looking for a picture on my name tag, to see if I was 'one of them.' Some of us 'others' formed a group in the back (at the bar). Actually, it wasn't that bad."

"Mom?"

"Great, simply great! Lynn surprised me and showed up. It was so good to see her again. She hasn't changed a bit. There were some real surprises in how people turned out. Our class clown turned out to be a minister!"

"Michelle, grab a suitcase. Help me unpack."

That evening, as Jane lay in bed, exhausted but unable to sleep, she wondered about Michelle. Would she ever change her mind about going to a class reunion? Probably. What topic would her group identify with? What event would be so dramatic, so tragic, that they would say,"Yeah, I remember...when I heard about it."

Jane fell off to sleep.
EBONY
Sally Matz

Will you look at that! The crow is actually moving toward us. See what it does when we step back. It's really following us! Feed it some more. Oh, I just love that sound of it swallowing the food - gurgle, chortle, satisfying, happy, fulfilling. What a silly sound. I thought crows only cawed.

Who would have ever believed that we could raise an orphaned baby crow. We only just moved to the woods. We still were learning the names of the birds which came to the feeder outside the kitchen window. No experience, no research, and no lessons, only canned dog food, time, and observation became the main ingredients of a thrilling experience.

"That small down-covered thing reacts to our giving! We move; it moves. We give; it takes. We actually have a relationship after only two days. I wonder if he loves us as much as we love him?"

Ebony learned to fly all by himself. It happened so quickly, much to the relief of my father who had taken complete charge of all the activities belonging to the crow. Dad became a real bird trainer. Suddenly one day, the bird jumped out of his box, hopped on to the various crates and work benches which were in the garage, then, he flew his "first flap." Much to our amazement, surprise, and complete delight, Ebony then flew to Dad's shoulder and gave that recognizable gurgle sound meaning that it wanted to be fed. The new baby gave his first word.

As the weeks came and went that summer, Ebony proved to learn more about becoming a member of our family than we learned about a crow's lifestyle. He proved to be a lover of fun and was a master at practical jokes. One of his favorite tricks was to remove the clothes pins from the freshly hung laundry. This antic happened regularly until we were forced to do the laundry at night. Ebony lived outside somewhere in the trees, but, whenever he saw any member of the family, down he would swoop with that familiar sound, asking for food. He was always rewarded. The outdoor picnics were a bit difficult at times, but that was our fault, I suppose, for not teaching him the meaning of "No". His favorite food was potato chips. He'd dive down out of the blue and steal a chip or two, then fly off to a near by tree where he'd unsuccessfully try to jam it into the bark, I guess to brace it for eating. Of course that never worked, and he'd return to the table until there were no chips left on anyone's plate. The more we made a fuss about his thievery, the more he pestered. He seemed encouraged by our annoyance. He even moved on to another food when the chips were all gone.

Ice cubes gave him another delight. I don't know if it was the sparkle in the reflection, the challenge of the floating ice cube he'd bob for, or the delight in playing with water. Eventually, and predictably, he was not satisfied until he had tried to bathe in every glass of any liquid on the table.

The neighborhood picnic was coming and the suggestion was made to have it at our house. We were happy with the honor, but what would we do with Ebony? I'm sure that the neighbors, who were entertained by our stories, wanted to see our bird perform but I also know that not one of the friends would be as patient, understanding, and loving as we. What would Ebony do this time? No one could predict.

Maybe the crowd of strangers would frighten him a little and he would hide in the trees somewhere. What a relief when the picnic was held and there was no sign of the big black bird. Not everyone can gracefully stand the jolt and surprise of a 4-5 foot wing span bird landing on their shoulder. The party was over and it had been a success for two reasons. There had been no tricks put upon us by Ebony and the rain held off until now. "What perfect timing - the sun had set and the food was all gone. If the guests felt cheated because of the lack of entertainment, it was not noticeable and we certainly did not share in their feelings. The crowd left as a single group. The driveway was narrow and it just proved to be easier for everyone to go together instead of shuffling the cars in and out. The drops of rain speeded up the exodus.

The first car started to pull out and then it stopped abruptly. The second driver slammed on his brakes too, as if on cue. As a matter of fact, all the drivers got out of their cars like a single line of puppets on a string. Each driver peered over his windshield examining something very closely. The scene looked ridiculous and we should have been laughing, but we had one horrible word come to our minds, "EBONY"!
Ebony had pecked off all the rubber from every windshield wiper. He had not touched our car, however. Some guests thought we had a conspiracy going. A few just laughed and were amused by the bird's tricks. Others shouted some unpleasant words, while a couple of people kept those same words under their breaths. For sure, no one expressed their approval of our fun-loving or clever bird. What I still don't understand is the guests' lack of complaint to us. They all drove off muttering to themselves.

As we cleaned up the party's mess, we did laugh among ourselves. How could we have been so sure of Ebony's shyness and think that he was hiding in the woods? We did marvel at his knowing the cars -- or rather not touching our car. But, would he some day play this same trick on us? Doubts were now beginning to filter through the air. We realized that there was no control or predictions over the actions of Ebony. What could we do about that? Did that really pose a problem? After all, what harm, really, could a small bird, well, a medium-sized bird make? We started to recall all the bothersome antics that our beloved bird had accomplished in one short summer. We also realized that these tricks could be accepted by the family, but sharing them would only lead to bad feelings in the neighborhood.

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We had to set Ebony free. Free? He was already free! He only played with us. He lived outside in the trees. Now he ate Nature's own crow food, and he came to us when we were on his playground.

Dad volunteered to drive Ebony into the next county and let him go. We all knew that Ebony could get his own food, that he was cautious with strangers, and we were confident he would survive and become a full-feathered, mature adult crow. The bird and Dad left in silence. We all shed a tear as the car disappeared into the dark night. "Good-bye and good luck," we prayed silently to our dear departing friend.

We sat silently for what seemed like hours. How far did Dad think it necessary to travel?

Finally, the car's lights shone in the driveway. Even they looked dim and dreary. The car didn't even move at the usual speed. Poor Dad, he must really be upset.

"I don't understand. I don't believe it. I drove that bird 50 miles away into the next county." Dad was upset,
Why it was called High Street will forever baffle me. It differed not at all from the other streets running parallel or perpendicular to it. It was not high by any means, containing a mixture of tenement, row houses with an occasional single dwelling dwarfed by the older and overpowering buildings.

31 High Street was more delapidated than its surrounding counterparts, maybe because it was the only seven-unit building in the area.

The cheap shingles must have been white in their virgin state, but decades of neglect had turned them the color of Lena's hair...not yellow, not gray...just dingy and bland.

The beige sand of the front yard seemed too sterile to produce anything, yet a cluster of weeds flourished here, looking menacing and overreaching the high gray chain link fence, like claws scratching at unknowing arms and legs.

The back of 31 High Street was even more gloomy than the front. A three-car garage stood tilted to one side, its insides empty except for grime and abandoned small car parts. The jagged and broken windows seemed to sneer at me, and I usually skirted this structure quickly, always looking behind me as my legs quickly pumped up the three flights of open back stairs.

Having reached the safety of the top porch, I inevitably turned for one last glimpse of the garage, now at an angle where I could peer through one of the smudged windows.

Always I was positive I saw movement within; as always, I said nothing to anyone.

The weeds which survived in the front of 31 High Street were not powerful enough to endure in the back. Yet, shattered bottles and an occasional broken toy cluttered the rear and seemed to grow in numbers and depth during spring and summer.

Here I lived, played, and thrived for nine years of my life. 32 High Street was my arena for baseball,
favorite cat’s eye shooter, an amber marble unlike any other. With a grimy popsicle stick, I was so involved with my digging that I never saw the change occur in the sky.

When the thunder and lightning bolt which followed it sprang forth I was caught by surprise; the popsicle stick snapped with pressure, but the jagged edge was what was needed to free the marble. One powerful plunge and the amber cat’s eye was sent flying. I stood, only to be pelted with raindrops powerful enough to sting my eyes and make my skin tingle.

The marble traveled across half the front yard, landing on the other side of the fence, inches from the cellar opening. Without hesitation, not heeding the warnings of seasons gone by, I scaled the chain links to retrieve my shooter. One shoelace, like a miniature snake, became untied; and soggy, it slapped against my bare ankles in punishment. Even the fence tried to hinder me, imprisoning first a sneaker toe, then a heel. Determined, I finally made it up, over, and down, eyes steeled to locate my prized possession.

The rain was relentless, and wet curls hung over my face, while the wind lashed cruelly at my eyes. With muddied stubby fingers I quickly wiped one way and then another trying to clear a visual path.

The next streak of lightning erupted directly overhead and blinded me even more. Only inches from the cellar opening I stumbled. The sting of concrete brought tears to my eyes. My hands and knees burned from fire, and sand and grit made me cough and saliva ran from my mouth, mixing with blood, rain, and mud.

She was there. I sensed and smelled her before she appeared. It was Lena and I...together...alone. The storm was her doing, her way of capturing me. There was no escape, and we both knew it.

The warmth of my own urine trickling down my thighs felt comforting against the cold of the concrete and the rain and the slime.

From the darkened opening of her cave, slow, shuffling sounds became louder. There was no need for her to hurry. I was impaled in time and space.

The pungent smell of dampness, mold, and wet earth assaulted my nostrils, as the scraping sound of a heavy door opening attacked my ears. I saw nothing, perhaps because of the darkness, perhaps because my child’s world dictated that closed eyes would not only make horror disappear, but make me invisible to the horror.

Then I felt Lena, felt her paper-like skin and falcon nails, felt her moist breath pass quickly over my damp hair. She tugged at my arms and muttered phrases, none of which made sense, either in form or meaning to me. It mattered not; I was slipping, or being pulled into another world, from which there would be no exit.

My arms, legs, and torso banged roughly against the seven steep steps, and hard-shelled creatures quickly skittered across my moistened exposed flesh.

I once opened my mouth to speak, to cry, to scream, to beg, but only the sour lava of lunch erupted, part liquid, part solid, oozing down my chin, neck, and chest.

Then nothingness!

When Lena sent me forth an hour later, washed, dried, dotted with ointment and band-aids, my stomach soothed from herbal tea and homemade cookies, I climbed the cellar steps slowly, reluctantly to leave my new-found friend. The steps, no longer so steep, nor so dark, were actually clean, as was the rest of her underground home. The dank smell, more filled with unusual cooking aromas than with scents from the underworld, now was pleasurable to my nose.

Lena was not a monster: blind, yes, deformed, bent almost in half, but not a monster. She didn’t speak a language I had ever heard then or have ever heard since; and dozens of times over the past three decades, when in the midst of a metropolitan, multi-ethnic center, my attention has focused on the myriad of spoken tongues, but none has ever resembled Lena’s, either in sound, in structure, or in intonation and resonance.

The day after my pilgrimage I was determined that all of High Street should know the truth about Lena, about her caring, gentle ministrations to an unknown child who had been injured at the doorstep of her tomb. Others had to
know the truth, to destroy the myth entangling our lives on High Street.

The right moment came two days later when the three new children at 47 High Street merged with our already in-bred group. After the initiation rites of show of strength, fingers started pointing in the direction of Lena’s earth quarters, and angelic faces became demonic, as children unfolded the tales of the underworld monster.

All faces turned and eyes grew wide as one voice emerged above the din of chatter, shouting hoarsely and almost hysterically, with a tone of knowledge and experience: “You’d better stay away. She has long dagger nails that scratch with poison. There’s no eyes in her head. She eats worms and beetles and has a mouth that sucks in little children!”

A pink tongue swabbed at a spot of spit, as the speaker pulled an amber sphere from a jean pocket with such enthusiasm that the marble sailed into the air, struck the corner of the curb, and shattered.

I stopped hating my father one August night, I think it was 1974. My father exploded. After years of drinking and being deceived and little hurts and disappointments, he went off. The spark was my sister cracking up the car and trying to hide it from him, with my mother’s help.

He was screaming, throwing things, threatening. I finally had to pin him against the wall when he went after my sister. Holding him there, yelling back, I told him I loved him. It had been a long time since I had said that, a long time since I’d realized it.

He stood there straining mad at me for stopping him, thanking me for stopping him. He seemed so fragile, so vulnerable, so human. I’d always expected him to be perfect. I’d blamed him for everything. I realized then that I would have to do it. I realized then that I would start giving. I’d have to make the first move, start the conversation, avoid the temptations to argue, avoid the landmines and pitfalls we’d set between us.

He ran from the house and jumped in his car. Like a scene from a movie, we stood there, the mother with tear reddened eyes, screaming, “Don’t leave me. Don’t leave me alone.” The daughter, her head on her knees sobbing, “I’m sorry. It’s my fault.”

“Let him go,” I heard myself say, in a voice older than mine. I put my arms around them. “He’ll be back.” Calmly I said it. “He needs to be alone, but he’ll be back.”

He did come back, when his anger wore out. I left him alone with my mother, but it was different after that, a little at first, then slowly more and more. I’d offer him his chair or the paper or ask him about his day. He wasn’t perfect. He couldn’t control me but that wasn’t his job. It was mine. He needed my help as I needed his. More equal now, I worked at being friends.
THE WRITING LESSON
Ann Rousseau

The little girl of her youth would come to her and crawl upon her lap and look into her face. Wiping her tears, the woman would whisper, "It's alright, Dolly. He didn't mean to hurt you. He just didn't know."

A little girl, standing on tiptoes, carefully unfolded her fingers and pushed the coins across the glassstop counter. The clerk didn't return her smile but patiently stood by while she touched, turned, and examined each plastic pencil. The red one was too dark. The green one was possible. She held the blue apart; its crystalline brilliance shone jewel-like. It was right. She would purchase beauty for her father on the occasion of his birthday. He would never see it. He was blind.

A year before the little brown-legged girl in the crisp, green sundress had made dusty step-foots in the sandy gravel as she walked hand-in-hand with the man in dark glasses who saw only shadows. The early September air was rich; the first lines of red and amber laced green leaves in the yellow light of late afternoon.

"Tell me what you see, Dolly. You will have to be my eyes now." Her first lesson in writing.

"There's a pretty tree. The leaves are green and red." Even then she felt the inadequacy of the words. She was like a dancer whose legs are shriveled and palsied, or a singer whose flat, dry tones mock the tune. She would have to find the right words, the words that were good enough.

As she grew up, she learned to study words. Occasionally a phrase came together which pleased her, but always her joy was short-lived, for she sensed that the mark had been missed. How could she replace the beauty which had been his loss? Could a word ever rival a leaf? How careless and cruel was the man who had set her upon this impossible task.

She looked in the place she knew best, the place of secrets. Wandering the empty beach, she listened to the language of the waves. Enveloped in the sweet scent of sea-roses, she searched the spaces between the reeds. She floated close to the sea-grasses, studying their carefully choreographed dance. She crawled into tiny shells and enjoyed the little lessons of the tidal pools. She found no answers.
STARTING TO TRAVEL
Del Shortliffe

The story of my train ride is simple enough. I found my berth, met a man, and watched him break down; he left, and I rode on alone. Yet it's a story hard to tell for, as I did then, I wonder now, and now much more, who I was in that stranger's nightmare, and who I was in the final solitude of my pristine couchette.

I rode the Orient Express, several years ago now, from Paris to Istanbul. There I would launch into eastern travels, searching for some power which I imagined was best found amidst draped clothing, strange tongues, exotic rituals and landscapes. I began this journey in a haze of exhaustion, born from thirty-six sleepless hours of little food, when, in the Paris station at two a.m., I entered through archways the massive tunnel where the great dark trains pulled in. Idling engines billowed steam, across platforms and up into the cathedral arching of the shadowed ceiling. A conductor on board directed me to my place -- car 99, berth 24 -- and I walked down the window-lined corridor to my door. Only in movies had I seen trains of this style, and it was grand to be walking through one.

Directly opposite its door was the couchette's window, only yellow light and rising steam beyond it now. To one side and running the length of the right-hand wall were two bunks, one over the other, designed to fold together to make a daytime couch. On the window's left and built diagonally into the corner were a tiny sink and a pitcher on its stand. A mirrored cupboard with wrapped glasses and soaps was built in over the sink, and to the left of this were first a thin closet and then the couchette's other bed, another fold-down bunk, against which the compartment door, opening to the left, came to a stop. The whole couchette was lined with dark-grained paneling, a fine strip of copper-color inlay running just inside the perimeter of each wall. I was thrilled by the luxury I would enjoy. I claimed the top bunk, trusting my sleep would be least disturbed there, and then, noting a sign which warned against drinking the tap water, I went briefly out. When I returned, with my bottled water and thinking only of sleep, one of my traveling companions had arrived.

With his suitcase by my pack on the luggage rack and his large net bag -- crammed with cheeses, rolled meats, and bread -- staking his claim on the bunk below mine, he stood with his back to the window. He was tall and angular, dressed in a white shirt, a narrow black tie pointing down to black slacks, dark socks, and brown and pointed shoes. A khaki overcoat hung loose from his slack shoulders as he moved towards me, his hand extended but his smile made shy by the vague, ducking nod of his head. The gesture was awkward and obsequious to me at first but seemed genuine enough, when I suppressed the instinctive judgement. I returned his hand shake and shook off enough exhaustion to greet his now open gaze.

He seemed perhaps forty-five, with skin glistening below hair just graying and close-cropped on the sides. His hair above was thick black, fronted by two slight waves mirror-imaged around a straight, white middle part which defined a line with the aqualine nose and tapering chin. This line down his face, the narrowness of his tie, and the length of his thin legs made him an oddly symmetrical man, oddly divided into halves. His face was softened though by a wide mouth and by round, sad, welcoming eyes.

Such is my memory of the man. He told me his name but I don't remember it. He was a Yugoslavian returning home and so would not be with me the next night, when the train would cross into Bulgaria. He spoke no English, I no Serbo-Croatian. We seemed to share about that poor amount of French I had acquired in high school. It was with him then, and his memory since, that I first learned how much can be said through gestures and smiles, soft sounds and tears; and how much might be said by a gaze averted or tears unoffered.

We had barely greeted one another when the third occupant of our compartment entered. He was a burly, white-haired Swiss with a quiet manner. We shook hands all around and then he, after expressing his approval of the solo bunk behind the door, went down the corridor to the lavatory. My other roommate went restlessly down the platform and I climbed to my bed, removed my boots, and slid beneath the blanket. The Swiss returned and was putting on pajamas when the conductor came to check our tickets. I remember the Yugoslavian's returning in time to show his also, and then I was asleep.

It was a fitful sleep and I had a most disturbing dream. In it, I was sleeping in my actual train bunk but
the mattress, warm and pulsing, slowly became flesh, and soft arms grew out of the flesh, to embrace me with long caressing hands. With pleasure or with fear, I arched my back but found bed and flesh were one, that those strange arms were somehow part of me, and with my own body warming blood expanding. I became partly awake but still was bathed in the warmth of the dream, my senses rising and sinking in the rocking train and the darkened couchette. I was thus caught between waking and sleeping until, afraid blankets and clothes had fallen from me, I suddenly awoke.

The reading light in the bunk below dimly revealed the Swiss, white head and blanketed body, as he slept and slightly snored. Distant lights of homes and streets passed by the window. The mirror gleamed in its corner. I thought about the dream, what coupling of desire and anxiety it might reveal. I found my journal and recorded the dream, but only briefly, without reflection, and then the steel rhythm of the train pulled me back to a more peaceful sleep.

When I next awoke it was to the Yugoslavian's gentle patting on my chest. He stood next to the bunks, his welcoming awkward smile level with my eyes. As soon as he saw me conscious, he explained.

"J'ai faim. Et vous?" he said and I, still dazed with sleep and now with wondering, recalled my hunger, and said yes. He stooped briefly to his bed, then returned offering cold meats and black bread in his long hands. I had eaten no meal since leaving New York; only my exhaustion had overwhelmed my stomach's grinding emptily on old airline snacks and railroad crackers. I thought it odd a stranger should awaken me with such offerings, but my hunger reinforced my first traveler's conviction -- that judgement must be reserved and trust offered. I thought I will be no Ugly American. I thought, this man is lonely, traveling sleepless in the night. And I propped myself on one elbow to receive his food.

With my acceptance came more offers. Cheese and chocolate, more meats and cookies, and somehow even cool beers in short green bottles, one of which I gladly took with my dark bread and slab of cheese. He became garrulous, Serbo-Croatian peppered with hesitant French. I smiled over the food, nodded agreeably, and was content to be making this first human contact of my travels, to be discovering someone across national and language barriers.

My new friend remained wakeful and enthused. More meats emerged, more cheeses and more breads, jars of spiced mustard, dried fruit and pickled herring. I began to shake my head at the offerings, still nodding my approval of the beer I still held. I drank happily. The Swiss stirred and grumbled slightly at our noise. My host talked on. But eventually, I had to sleep again, and he was saddened though deferential as I said, "Je suis tres fatigue. Je regret. Je regret." I smiled apologetically, but having eaten, I was disposed to sleep again. Sleep serene and dreamless.

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And again I was awakened. He was standing once more beside my upper bunk. With one hand, he was brushing the hair back off my brow. The other rested gently upon my blanketed thigh. In his eyes there was a melancholy appeal, and his weak smile was pleading. It seemed very quiet, as he began whispering to me. I liked the sound of his voice and I liked having my hair brushed back, but I knew I had to stop him now, and I was briefly, distantly sad. I reached from beneath my cover and took hold of his hand. Perhaps I furrowed my brow as I smiled a little and shook my head. I propped up on my elbow and placed his hand beneath the edge of my bed.

Looking dejected and surprised, he withdrew his other hand and stumbled back a step, staring at me, quizzical. Whispering some sudden, hard phrase, he pointed one long finger at me briefly, but his hand, like his legs, began to lose direction and he took one further step back, and lowered himself to the compartment’s empty bunk. These last gestures confused me and I tried to think of some way to say I did not understand but, with his head down and one slack arm awkwardly raised, he was waving off any comment or gesture of mine.

I fell back to my pillow. A low and whimpered droning, like groans from a distant room, mixed with the sounds of the train on its hard rails. After a little while, I heard him move to his bunk below mine, but that distant, anguished sound went on. It was something like a sound I had heard before, when I was twelve and my dog, hit lightly by a neighbor’s scar, had broken one front leg. The dog had whimpered in his sleep throughout the night beside my bed, and I remembered that night again. But this is not a dog, I thought, and something more than a leg is broken. But I didn’t know what it was, and I didn’t know how to help. And though I tried to think about it more, as if I really were being called on just to think about it more, I could feel the sleep coming back, in the rocking world of the nighttime train. And as I did fall back and into sleep, his sound beneath me seemed to be, or so I dimly told myself, a melancholy granting of forgiveness.

I slept poorly then, my consciousness rising intermittently to the sounds of his talking to himself. Later, in the haze of my sleep and the grey dawn, I saw him pace about in the little room, still drinking from the small green bottles, sometimes leaning at the window to gaze out over snowy cliffs and steep roofs. I thought that I should rouse myself for a view of the Alpine gorges and villages, the splendor of a tourist’s fare, but his voice was mumbling on and I was exhausted still, and I did not even stir.

When I truly awoke, it was to a steelly morning, grey and cold, but with great soft snow falling on the Swiss village station where the train was stopped. My roommate was not there, though his suitcase was on his bunk. A conductor came to check my Italian visa. We were in our last Swiss stop, just prior to crossing the border.

When the train moved on, I sat, hoping finally to contemplate the passing Alps. It was foggy, though, and my view obscured. The grandeur of the mountains was suggested only by the railbed’s falling off sharply, and by the fog’s parting, as we ascended into regions rocky and steep, regions swept by a ghostly mass of clouds moving greyly among summits they largely hid. When the clouds closed in completely, I climbed back to my bunk to write in my journal about the obscure view. It was a cursory note, my second entry since leaving New York, and I never mentioned my Yugoslavian companion.

While I was writing, he returned to the compartment. He was disheveled and somber, wearing the khaki overcoat which was stained, perhaps with spilled beer. His tie was unknotted, hanging limply along his rumpled shirt. There was no part to his hair; instead it was in disarray, from fingers, I thought, being pulled through it. He glanced at me coldly and, stumbling with the motion of the train and the unsteadiness of his own long night, went to his suitcase. He unlocked it, after searching several pockets for the key, rummaged about inside for a while, and then closed and locked it again.

Holding the edge of my bunk, still swaying on uncertain legs, he then turned to confront me. First he simply stared, his jaw slack, eyes damp and weak. Then he mumbled. Then demanded. Why had I been so cold to him? Why so cruel? I wondered. Had my sleep been cruel, my amazement mean? I apologized. Stupidly smiled. But the issues were far too complex for our language now, and I could only wonder why he was so very upset, wonder whether to attribute it all to drunkenness merely. The questions were all unspoken. Upon his thrusting neck, his head hung loose, but his eyes were fixed upon my face. I did not know where to look. And suddenly he began to cry.
His face absolutely melted -- mouth wrenched open, nose running, cheeks and chin flooded with tears. He no longer fixed a gaze on me but looked beyond me, to some horror outside our train or time. He lost his hold and slumped back towards the opposite wall, now clutching his face in his hands, now raising clenched fists, now addressing speeches to and from I could see, speeches which suddenly broke from his cracked and stretching throat. This went on and on, outbursts of anger interrupted by onslaughts of tears, fierce speeches fractured by sobbing. I sat, stupid and mute. Eventually the ranting slowed. Eventually, when he became aware of me again, it ceased. His arms, dead weight, hung by his sides. He stared at me again and, after a moment, he sneered. Then he pulled himself erect and, hunching back his shoulders, dropped his coat behind him on the floor. He cocked one arm before his chest, and with his other hand unbuttoned the cuff and rolled up the sleeve of that raised arm.

The gesture was melodramatic, and oddly terrible. I felt unthreatened yet afraid as he walked towards me where I raised myself on one arm in my bed. He held forth the smooth inner side of his forearm, and on the white skin were the blue stenciled numbers. The numbers bore their obvious meaning -- Auschwitz or Dachau, or some lesser camp with a name I did not know, and just as surely with a nightmare and a meaning beyond my knowing. My companion turned, picked up his coat, and left the couchette.

I remember little of what I did then. Really, I did nothing. Perhaps I slept again. The memories are vague, surely because the time was vague. There was nothing to be done, little sense to be made. What was there to think? In the Trieste station, perhaps two hours later, I bought some rolls, cheese, and water for breakfast. Munching my food during the stopover, I stared at a lurid poster, advertisement for some Italian gangster film, a gaudy picture filled with long gun barrels and sharp-jawed leering faces; When the train pulled out of the Trieste station, I returned to my compartment.

Soon my roommate returned. He was unhesitatingly drunk. He weaved about the couchette, occasionally leaning towards me, laughing foolishly, singing fragments of songs. He was not at all loud, not at all angry. I might have been pleased, had I just been meeting him, to laugh with such a jovial drunk. If only his face had not been stained with tears.

He went again to the large suitcase on his bunk and, after patting pockets clumsily, found the key and, fumbling more, locked the fold-down couch and, smiling sweetly but with cold fire, I thought, in his eyes, made his way back to the hall. I had been sitting for some time, with my journal and a book, and views out the window, when he returned to our room. He was being closely followed by an enraged little man, balding and barrel-chested, irate in Italian. Clearly my Yugoslavian companion had been too insistent, somewhere else in the train. Once in our compartment, he turned and calmly faced the angry Italian who, seemingly satisfied that the drunk was back in his own couchette, stalked away.

Still calm and steady, apparently less drunk than when I'd seen him last, the Yugoslavian turned again, went to his suitcase on the fold-down couch and, patting pockets, began to hunt for his key. Unable to find it, he put down his photo album and took up the search with both hands, digging into pockets, repeating the process, still coming up empty. I watched this from the corner of my eyes, pretending to read but aware of his darting looks at me. Suddenly he reached with his long arm, lightly socked my shoulder, and pulled his hand back sharply. I faced him and he calmly stared at me. "Vous avez mon cle," he accused. It was absurd. I had not seen his key since he had last opened the case. I greatly wished he had it still. But he did not honor my denials and repeated the charge. "Donnez-moi cle," he said, and I had no key to give. In an offer to help him, I felt about the seams of the couch and around the suitcase, but he lightly slapped my hands away and then became aloof. Back in my corner of the couch, I watched him ignore me.

He raised himself up and, after rebuttoning his exhausted shirt, knotted his tie and pulled it to his throat. He combed his hair in our little mirror, loosened his trousers to retuck his shirt, tightened his shoe laces.
He glanced at me, briefly, when he buttoned his shirt cuffs, and then, with his overcoat folded on top of his suitcase, which lay between us on the couch, he sat with his album in his lap and contemplated the hands which he folded upon it.

Then the little Italian man returned. With him he had a conductor, with whom he hoped to see justice done. I could not tell what he was saying to the conductor, but his anger had clearly not abated after all, and the Yugoslavian's indifference to the charges, his continued aloofness from the very scene, only enlivened his enemy more. The conductor spoke to my companion, for some little time receiving no response but, because the accused remained so calm, the conductor seemed ready to ignore the accusations. He shrugged a bit and gestured to the fuming Italian, as if to say, "But look, he does no harm now," when suddenly the Yugoslavian did speak. He told the conductor I had stolen the key to his suitcase. Skeptical, with eyebrows cocked, and even slightly smiling, the conductor looked towards me. No, I assured him, I had not seen the man's key, had no idea where it might be. The conductor spoke English and understood my denial. He even went on to suggest that perhaps the key had been lost while its owner had wandered the train.

The conductor's sympathy for my story enraged the Yugoslavian. He rose, faced the conductor where he stood in the doorway, and with one long arm pointing towards me, unleashed accusations. I could not understand what he said. I sensed that the key was the least of his concerns, but I could not follow his argument, could not know what he meant to say. The conductor may have been as lost as I, but like me, and like the Italian, who now gloated to see his charges verified, he recognized the madness which seized my companion. While the Italian smiled, silently pointing an accusing finger from his place in the hall, the conductor tried to soothe the irate man. Soon, fully aware of the full problem, the conductor turned to assure the Italian that all would be taken care of, sent him on his way, and concentrated on the Yugoslavian's chaos. His offer of an arm around the raging shoulders was refused but the conductor remained kindly and calm, and the Yugoslavian's mounting despair, his churned slapping of offered hands, turned finally to honest tears and gulping sobs again.

Now the conductor was able to ease the exhausted traveler from the room. He picked up the suitcase and the photo album. The Yugoslavian took the album from him and, clutching it to his chest, began to leave but then remembered the key. Without accusations, he asked us both about the key again, and so we all searched the couchette one last time. Even his pockets were reconsidered, but we did not find the key. Assuring him somehow that not all was lost, the conductor eased my companion from the room. As they left, the conductor turned briefly to assure me. "Enough is enough," he said. "You must be tired also. Perhaps now you can sleep."

For a while, I sat in the quiet little room, my book open in my lap, fields and arbors and brown farm houses in the rain beyond the window. I was concerned to feel so little distress, but this feeling also did not last. I was oddly tired, sleepy not exhausted, and I did think perhaps I would nap again. I doubt I ever looked to my book at all. Perhaps I thought of writing but told myself I lacked the energy for the journey. I watched the rain on the grey landscape, but it did not make me sad. Then I found the key.

A small portion of its rounded end stuck out from under the raised, lower edge of the washstand. The key was on the carpet, near the wall beneath the sink, where it had been unknowingly tossed, perhaps by me, as I remade the day couch and briefly moved the suitcase. Its dull silver edge had caught my wandering and idle eye, and I knew the earlier search for the key had not been thorough, not heartfelt. My impulse was to take the key and go after the traveler who owned it; the train had not stopped since he had left the room, and surely he could not be hard to find. I even took the key in my hand and started towards the door.

But then, I suddenly didn't want to go. I assured myself that suitcase locks were not difficult to undo, that suitcase keys were often interchangeable. I didn't want to search the train, find the conductor, see the sad Yugoslavian again. I put the key back beneath the washstand, a bit of its rounded end sticking out where I could see it. For a while, I was concerned about what I had chosen to do.

My train ride ended in Istanbul. There I met a friend who had already spent several months sightseeing in Europe. Together, we planned to pass overland to the Far East. It was the mystery of India which had most called us to our
travels. We would move on through Nepal and Burma, Thailand and Vietnam, Hong King and Japan, to San Francisco and our hitchhike home to Connecticut and whatever our futures held. It was to be our Grand Tour, and his Boston apartment had been filled by our excitement when we first planned the trip.

He met me in the train station. I was exhilarated by the robed Turks and looming minarets. His face glowed with youthful freedom. We hugged and laughed and, me with my backpack on, we made our way through the twisting crowded streets to our hotel and a meal of rice and kebab. We praised adventure and our own daring. I was still speaking of the mysterious joys with which life would go on greeting me.

And so it is finished this coming together of ours, writers in a circle as monks in old rituals secret sharers tale bearers
Writing is the heart of what matters.
In faded blue jeans and borrowed sweaters savoring coffee and ideas not slaves to any process not to work within, but with - cells that split and split again.
Writing is the heart of what matters.
Only we share this particular history this weather and geography of carousels and Turkish mountains, of ears, and a night train full of sadness, of strawberries and ‘not poetry’, chrysanthemums and collaborations.
Writing is the heart of what matters.
Some snowy day this winter or a rainy afternoon next spring, working hard waiting for some wonder - in that dazzle of a student’s just-discovered voice we’ll know it all again, feel our distinct kinship.
Writing is the heart of what matters.