Sidewalks and Scaffolding: A Summer of Construction

Connecticut Writing Project Summer Fellows 1993
Sidewalks and Scaffolding:  
a Summer of Construction

by

Members of the  
Connecticut Writing Project  
Summer Institute 1993

Edited by Laura Baione Hayden

Connecticut Writing Project  
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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 166 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 practise writing themselves. 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 programs, please write or call the director:

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As a girl in school I copied poems from the board. Neat, crisp, cheerful poems for school children. This may have been the moment of genesis for me as a writer. I can't be sure. Which moment actually marks a beginning; the birth - the first words of one's own that appear on a page? Or does the gestation count; ingesting the rhythm of words with the chalkdust unconsciously collecting raw data for the moment of production?

Regardless, the classroom of that small girl sitting quietly at a slanted wooden desk imitating the poems of accomplished writers is as good a place as any to begin. It was in that classroom that I found comfort in the reading, writing and reciting of words. I have no doubt that THERE was the important connection. Words had more power than I had imagined. Words could soothe me, caress my spirit, bring happiness. Bring escape. Words were safe and words were my own.

Red, yellow, orange brown
See the leaves come tumbling down
Orange yellow brown red
Jump in them don't bump your head

And there was peace.

If I wrote for the comfort of the lilting rhyme as a child, I wrote for the opportunities of re-creation as an adult. Here on the paper I could view and rework my self; that amorphous thing that continually changes shape, color and definition. I could capture it in ink, take look at it, discover something, change something, mold it, cherish it, rebuke it. In many unfinished spiral bound notebooks I have recorded (or is it created) the babyhoods of my children, the undoing of my first marriage and the lonely misadventures of my single parent years.

Loneliness lies in wait for me
Stalking my security
A cunning predator

Privy to all fragility
This intimate foe assails me
With calculated skill

And with fleeting vengeance
Siphons my plentiful soul
To emptiness

The writing was intense and erratic, as demanding as my babies for my milk, calling for undivided attention in the working of a metaphor, the turn of a phrase. If only I could get
the words right - there would be peace.

You see,
I built a house with you.
We two
Double vision:
Planning and plotting
Boards and nails
Sweat and blood
In the passion of creation
I did not notice
The change in your rhythm
I did not see you put down your tools
I only collapsed from the weight I was bearing
When you walked out the door.

You see, I built the poem myself, singular vision. I created a visible experience. One I could taste and see and leave behind.

And there was peace.

Now I teach. I am a teacher of writers. I teach children, small ones seated at not so slanted wooden desks. I teach them that letters make sounds and words. That sentences tell stories, make poems. We chant and recite the careful words of accomplished writers. They write the comfortable lilting songs of their childhoods, offered up like gifts to my sometimes still weary spirit.

I like school.
1 2 3
Can't you see?
4 5 6
I am ready
7 8 9
For the bus
10
Do it all over again.

They write, they discover, they connect. With each other and with me.

Today is Wednesday May 22, 1991

Oh I will never forget that you are my mommy and daddy. Oh I will never forget that you are my teacher. Oh I will never forget that you are my friend. Oh I will never forget what I have learned. I love youooooooooooooooooooou.

The teaching year came to an end. I asked my class why they loved to write.

"You get to think," they said.

"But don't you have to think when you read?" I replied. The answer came.

"Yes, but Mrs. Lysaker, when you read you concentrate on someone else's words. When you write the words are your own."

Yes, there was peace.
A WILLOW WHISTLE IN THE RAIN

Adam Knight

Slightly to the left of virtuous he stands, thumb outstretched, tapping a hand-carved willow whistle on his thigh to no music but the rain, ready to blow a note for a ride. Scowling upwards, "Like a goddamned cow on a flat rock," he hunches raintent over a slightly frayed backpack and a sign he hopes might bring coherence. A steady stream of cars rushes the access ramp and leaves him, one by one, in a sour taillight mist, yielding finally to a hopeful orange as the last driver in the procession flicks his hazards and slips to the gravel shoulder.

"You looking for one or advertising one?"

"Eh?" He twirls the whistle on the palm of his hand and squints through the downpour and darkness.

"Your sign . . . says connection doesn't it? You heading to the airport?"

Connection? And where'd you learn to read? "Says Con-nec-ticut. Saybrook actually."

The thinning hope grunts and shrugs. "Nope, not me. Hey, good luck, though."

"Or advertising one?" the hitcher asks incredulously as the car spits gravel onto the ramp in a revving, high-end exit. "As if I were trafficking anything to some connection, I'd be looking for a ride in this mess . . . Heh . . . More th'n likely on the road to Manchester. I am jonesin' for a ride, dude, take a later flight." He heh's again at the outburst and blows a few notes of an uncertain song he has heard manifold times from the carved flute. More or less improvised, adapted and mutated, of course, he thinks as he spits the whistle from his lips.

The next driver comes easily, unhurried by traffic and sipping a hot, though perhaps not fresh, cup of coffee. He signals right before using the warning lights and rolls the van alongside the soaked hitcher. A finger switch slides the passenger window into the door. "Bluebox Cab, at your service." He leans awkwardly across the seat and pops the door open. "You've been invited, tripper. Enter before you soak the fine upholstery. Come on."

A flurry of backpack, trash-bag poncho and sign, a hop from the ground, and the now rider swings himself gymnast-style into the splintered, therapeutic roller-ball seat cover. A soft whump and the unit seals itself against the weather.

Shiver.

"William." The driver gestures with four fingers to his chest. "Where ya off to? And in the interim we'll see how far we get, you and I."


Smoothly the driver bobs the van on fluid, cushioned struts, back into traffic and up the ramp. Streetlights begin to slip in a halogen stream over the hood, and the driver adjusts in line behind empty lights floating on the backs of meaningless entities.

To the passenger they are finally cutting through the mist outside and around his mind. He shivers slightly in the controlled climate, drier but still cooler than the air outside, and stares at the backwash of a semi which begins to flow across the windshield. Imperceptibly the driver inches the heat through the vents until the passenger stops his light spasms. "I just got coffee, there." He gestures between the seats. "Help yourself if you need some. The passenger simply nods and stares deeper out the window. "At Middletown I need to go west, but it's a chunk of the road anyhow."

"Sounds good." The passenger rasps in a voice laced with a dying-peace sort of fatigue. "It's never completely closed in Middletown. Sounds cooler than standing on that on-ramp. Thanks."

At the mouth of the autobahn into Hartford, an emerald Jaguar speeds past and sinks into the lane in front of the van.

The passenger phiss's at the phantom, shaking his head after it.

William draws slightly on the parking brake. "Nice little ride, I suppose. If you can afford the insurance."

"Obscene." The passenger throws his arms up. "Obscene!"

The driver thinks he looks to be an anti-technological purist, all wiry and unshaven -- he looks like he's been beating his clothes on a rock for the past six months.

"Obscene," the passenger near-whispers this time, smiling a wry grin that looks like he just swallowed a rotting pigeon. "Prejudices is all," he qualifies himself. "Some family plucked me off Mount Katahdin the day before yesterday. Kept pestering me with questions as I led them down the roughest trail that I could find on the map 'bout where'd I come from and was I often alone when I camped. 'Journeyed' I thought, but they offered a ride at any rate. I thought afterward more as punishment to their bratty kids than anything. Cause after hours in a BMW coupe packed with more than ripe old me--then more than now -- and those two alternately rolling down and rolling up at their parents' command. Well, I wondered. And I didn't know if I could risk another ride like that. It rather reinforced the idea that if you can't walk there, then no use when you get there."

"Oh?" William inquires as he draws again on the brake. The insurance Mecca Hartford swallows the meaningless emerald Jag down an exit gullet.
Quizzical eyebrows then answer, "Well, just that I finished walking Georgia to Maine, and now nothing seems too far to walk anymore." In an underpass the concrete retaining wall looms too barrier-close. "And it's ever-more striking now, that when you consider what you can get by on." He points to the back. "One bag. And then look at what most others seem to think they need to live. Well, I guess you begin to understand the relativity of the terms over- and under-equipped."

"Mm. I guess I'll buy that. It's just another one Einstein didn't figure on." The driver punches the cruise control and they accelerate beneath one flyover, then another and out of the city downtown in a blink or two. "What's it like, then, to walk for... how long is that?"

The passenger is lost out the window along the rain-soaked roadway thinking a hundred and eighty degrees from this. "Twenty-one hundred-odd miles of solitude." Rain streaks the side window and suddenly he wishes to be out in the weather again, if only not by the roadside. "It's enormous, foreign, astounding, lonely, frightening, painful, friendly and threatening all at once."

"I can imagine that." William identifies not knowing for sure if he means the trail, the blisters involved, or the sentiment altogether. He signals, and the van floats from the left-passing to the center-travel lane. His lower leg starts to itch, and he struggles against the steering wheel and keeping the vehicle straight to quiet it. Comfortable, he adds, "I'd give anything to find out for myself, though."

"Why not. All you really have to do is get yourself fired, quit school, get out of prison."

Chuckle.

"Maybe getta hold of some decent boots."

"Seems like it should be that easy sometimes." The rain ploughs more forcefully into the windshield to emphasize the point. "It's nice to have the capacity to plan your life."

"Yeah. It does take a bit of that, planning, alright. But careful, because if you set your mind to anything, you can do it. You master your destiny kind of idea. No argument it takes a little doing, but anyone can muster the endurance to see the changes through."

"But what about when you can't be party to the decision to make the change?"

"You believe that?" not accusingly.

"Mm. In some instances." The asphalt reels with him. "Sounds terrific, though. It's a walk I'd like to think of taking myself sometime."

Another rise in the road brings the interior of the van to the passenger's throat. A frost heave after the next he thinks this is a kind ride, still in walkable reach if need be; and conversational, too. "Well, if you ever have a few months and the gumption... just mind the rogues and thugs around Virginia. Just dutiful low-life enough to be card-carrying Republicans, but they'll take just about whatever it is you've got."

Snicker.

At least we share the same in bad humor. The driver now minds the exits although it is still miles before Middletown comes to enumeration. Neither one of them had made for the coffee; sure it must be cold by now. He sips at it anyhow to find it still warm. All this talk about decent boots and walking -- is it for him not to be aware or I only to be aware? He offers the cup across, jogging it slightly over an expansion piece in an overpass. "Still got a little warm to it."

Shiver and nod. "Rain kinda got through the sweater." He sips and the latest round of shudders quiets in the wake of slight warmth. "It's Ed, by the by. And I formally say I appreciate this."

Strange. The kid not only tips his hat, he bows a little as well, in order to say that, and if the hand I wasn't shaking with wasn't occupied then I do believe he'd offer that knife on his belt as his sword. "Pleased to meet you, formally."

A doe, puzzled by the erratic rush of traffic and light, gazes from the tree belt with reserved curiosity, and at once is out of sight and still staring as the beast's fiery red tails flash past.

"That rain does go through, doesn't it." The passenger still shivers sporadically, even with the increased heat pumping intrusively through the vents. But if I turn it any higher, thinks William, he'll fog up the windows, and I'll fall asleep. He takes the thick, faded trapper blanket from his lap end flops it offeringly across. "I've been warming this all along the way. See if it helps."

"Thank you. Appreciate this, too."

"Nah. There's not enough there to justify that yardage of wool."

Under the lights at EXIT 13, as the van swoops down the ramp, Ed takes as long a look as the fading light and stretching shadows will allow. He had not made note of the blanket when he climbed in, nor found it queer that the interior map lights were never lit. Now he notices the long cycling shorts tucked under considerably above where the knees ought to and thinks all those dumb quips about boots and stories about walking.

"Course the flip side of the blanket is that you have to stare at these stumps and not ask any questions or utter another word." William smiles to rift the tension genuinely, warmly telling Ed say what you will, it cannot hurt.
Ed registers a string of pumping brake lights and flashing red, white and yellow strobes some hundred yards in the distance and waits as William stops on a smoother dime than Ed had ever, then decides, "Didn't seem relevant or important to ask how."

"Isn't. I's in the wrong place at the wrong time. Just say it's evidence of the true weight of heavy machinery. I only wish sometimes that I'd been left completely without. They get to be cumbersome pieces of meat from time to time." He chuckles at that, all the while shaking his head. "Only then I'd couldn't be a candidate for prosthetics." The van inches closer to the tie-up. "Now what's this, here?" He rolls down his window, prepared to make his inquiry for directions as quickly as he can. A helmeted member of the fire police stands on the centerline waving an orange-tipped torch down a narrow farm road. "Is it obvious?" William calls as he passes and watches the director nod emphatically as he rounds the corner.

The rain yields little by little to thick fog as the van rolls along the detour, and William slows down to keep track of the road. A snap under the carriage makes him follow, in the rearview, a section of rotted branch rolling slovenly in the backwash. He continues, "No I can't walk, so please don't call me handi-capable. I mean I can't even build a birdhouse, and my wheelchair always gets stuck at the checkout line in the market.

"So what about a walk you'd like to take?" Ed kneads his feet together discreetly and uneasily.

"Well, I can drive. That's one of the benefits of being a double-amputee with a garage-owner for a friend. He rigged this thing with hand brakes and cruise control so it'll climb Mount Washington with the rest of the leaf-peepers . . . only I never managed to break down and buy one of those bumper stickers." He laughs again and Ed along with him almost, politely anyhow.

"Sorry to be so quiet." And stare while not staring. "Just, ah, I've never learned how casually, candidly, ah, nonchalant they might be . . . or to be about — "

"Around someone with no legs."

"Or how blunt." Ed adds.

"Bah. Nonsense. You can't ever really know, can you? Cause all us crips are people, bound to be completely different form the next. Is that blanket helping?"

"Very much, thanks . . . again." The fog settles patchier over cleanly harvested corn fields the further they go. Nearly two miles from where they turned Ed decides this is the deepest detour he has ever taken.

"If you don't know what to say, though . . . Well, do something else, like I dunno, toot that whistle you were blowing before I picked you up. That piece of stick it looked like you were chewing."

"It's a whistle." Ed affirms and draws it from his pocket. He rubs the notches in its bark and passes it to William who holds it up in the headlights of the following car. "It's more of a slide-flute, I guess. A book I had as a kid told, roughly, how to make them. Once you splinter enough branches, finally one might let you knock the wood out of the bark. I found it easiest . . . well, most effective if you can find a couple of solid rocks to use as a vise. A little work with a pen-knife and you get this sort of fragile trombone. I've got another one back here." He reaches over the seat and rummages through a pouch on his pack. "I kinda experimented with a couple. This one I wedged in half and carved out down the center, punched a few holes and then slipped the bark back over to hold it together." He holds it up and brushes his forefinger over the craftsmanship. "I like this one. It rather sounds like a tin penny-whistle, except a lot more breathy."

He cues up a ten-penny jig and what William once found to be a cheerful tune becomes pensive, even brooding as well. The fog thickens the further south they go until they reach the beaten path again where it becomes a blanket thicker than wool and the streetlamps seem to float over the cloud-bank.

When they reach Middletown the traffic lights rest cushioned over hidden intersections and the belltower, which could be a mile away or twelve, tolls ten. Ed puts down the last few, drifting notes of the song and thinks again, this has been a kind ride, while looking for a twenty-four hour coffee shop at which to jump out.

"That was terrific." William comments, "Like nothing you'll find on the radio."

Ed bows a little. "At least, I figure, I can play for change on a street corner in good conscience." A greasy-spoon establishment hovers in a pink and green neon halo three lights from where they sit waiting for a permissive green. "Or a cup uh joe, given the right audience. That diner, there, looks like I might make the last stretch from it tonight."

William nods and moves to the rockier right lane and dips in and out of the storm drains as he slows and watches for the driveway.

"Listen man, lissen. Can I ask you something, well . . . ask you something blunt?"

The driver looks a bit defensive, raising a shield with his eyes in case the question comes as a blow. "Shoot."

"Well, the way I see . . . This is probably out of place, Ed reminds himself. "If you consider someday, that walk for real . . . the way I see, you'll need, and no offense . . ."

Some taken already.

"A litter team. Some of those slopes are too steep for a wheelchair — or crutches."

"Yes I suppose so." Some inconsequential question. As if the kid thinks I could really undertake that. William wheels the van slowly over the cracked concrete in the
The Flowers Bloomed

Elaine Violette

Lively green sprouts of new growth sprang from the crimson geraniums planted only the week before. She chose geraniums to plant because they were sturdy and survived the hot, blistering summer days. Today she planted some rose-colored begonias with airy white and deep purple petunias. The begonias would do fine. Their strong, rubbery leaves held its tender blossoms snugly and provided needed moisture, and the sprinkling of tiny flowers were pleasing to her. She showed some concern for the petunias. They didn't always fare as well for her. If they weren't nurtured almost daily their stems would pale to a sickly green and wither. But she cared for them protectively, watering regularly, and picking the pesty, tough weeds that threatened the flowers' fragile existence.

Bright yellow marigolds were added last. She always planted a few of these because they would bloom through October and sometimes longer. In November she set out pots of mums that usually lasted until Thanksgiving. Christmas season was the most difficult time, but evergreens stayed fresh and a little decorated Christmas tree came out during the holiday season. Fortunately the evergreens lasted until early March. Easter plants were added in April, and this year she promised herself that she would plant tulip bulbs in the fall to avoid the barrenness in early spring.

As she worked, her knees pressed into the soft blanket of cool green grass that surrounded the plot. She dug deep into the soil, cradling each tiny new plant in both hands and gently placing it in the damp earth. When she finished the neat rows, she glanced at the varied colors and slowly lifted her head as she noticed the sun reflecting off the deep rose-brown marble. The flecks of mica imbedded in the stone glistened like crystal in the noon day sun. Her eyes moved slowly across the inscription she had read hundreds of times before. Yet, even now after six and a half years, the words were unreal and seemed to melt inside her causing her chest to cave inward, her back unconsciously falling back as her weary body seemed to crumble and come to rest on the heels of her soiled sneakers.

Heavenly Father, We commend our beloved son

David Michael
May 11, 1969 - Dec. 5, 1986

to your tender care. Through your love and mercy may we be reunited in your eternal home. In Jesus' name we pray.

She gazed at the roses entwined around the granite cross which bordered the words, two fully bloomed, one, only a bud, reaching up and away from the cross and bathing in a streak of sunshine. She had designed the stone herself in pained, searching hope that life could somehow breed within the marble, reach to a silent God, a prayer be heard, answered...someday.
Sheila Johnson

Some events in our lives are so dramatic or traumatic that they become demarcations in time. "After I left college..." or "since we've been married...", or "before the children came..." For our family, one such event occurred on December 20, 1984. This time-altering experience was unplanned and unwelcome, but, when it was over, in addition to marking time from that point, we would look back and know that for us as a family, it had a deep and lasting significance.

The day started innocently enough, even if it was a typical "Murphy's Law" kind of day. I had originally wanted the day off from work. There were only four shopping days until Christmas and I was so far behind. Worse than usual. In the preceding weeks, I had been frantically sewing presents and block printing cards, while sick kids had been underfoot. Now, I needed time to wrap gifts and address the cards that crisscrossed my kitchen like lines of wash off a tenement building. However, the Executive Director had other ideas.

"What do you mean, you're taking tomorrow off? We're starting a new payroll system and you have to be here." Finally, he softened a little, "Well, come in, at least, for an hour to meet with a representative of the company." Reluctantly, I agreed. However, the meeting had taken two hours, instead of one, and then it seemed as if I couldn't get out of the place. Everyone wanted "just one minute of my time." Freed at last, I scooted up the hill to our house, hoping that all of the boys were in their respective schools and Brian had gone to work. I needed peace and quiet.

When I saw the column of smoke pouring out of the chimney, I decided Brian had stayed home to help out, and the smoke was from the wrapping paper he was burning in the fireplace. Instead of being grateful, I was annoyed. Didn't he know that stuff was toxic? Within minutes, I realized that not only was smoke pouring out of the living room chimney, but out of the one for the Franklin stove, the furnace, and even the little vents for the bathrooms. Our house was on fire.

I sprinted toward the front door and threw it open, only to be greeted by a churning mass of brownish smoke that made visibility impossible. Standing there I called my sons' names. "Brendan. Brian T. Gavin. Is anybody in there? It's Mommy. Do you need help? Can you hear me?" Only silence answered. What if they hadn't gone back to school, as we had planned. I wanted so desperately to charge into the darkness to search for them, but my knees locked as a voice inside my head screamed for me not to enter the burning building. I called again, only this time I added the names of our cat of eight years, and our recently acquired setter. Still silence.

I turned and ran up the road toward a neighbor's house, totally ignoring my car, still running in the driveway. On this day, our always-at-home neighbor was Christmas shopping. Frantically, I headed back, screaming, begging for someone to help me. By now, I saw that
three or four people had begun to congregate in our front yard. A passing motorist had seen flames leaping up from the rear windows and called 911. The curious and concerned, summoned by the CB scanner, had reached the house before the fire department.

Another neighbor, one I barely knew, Mrs. St. John, was there and insisted I go home with her. I protested that I couldn’t leave my vigil, not knowing for certain if my children were inside. She coaxed me away, saying that I could call their schools from her house. I went.

Some of the details of that day are a blur. I remember calling each school and being assured that "yes, my child was there." I’m told that I sounded calm and rational, but when the last call was made, I put my head down on Mrs. St. John’s table and wept. I remember pleading with a telephone operator to please place my "bill-to" call, because my house was on fire and I needed my husband who worked in Hartford. She insisted that unless someone at my home phone number would take the charges, she wouldn’t even consider it. I agreed, feeling it was futile and wondering when and how I’d ever make contact with Brian.

A few minutes later, a very subdued operator got back on the line. She had dialed my number and a man answered. As she began her preset speech about "Will you accept the charges," a voice interrupted her saying, "Listen, lady, I’m trying to keep a house from burning down, I have no time for this." I often wondered why a fireman would answer a ringing telephone in the middle of putting out a fire. Habit, I guess. But, in the end it didn’t matter, Brian wasn’t there. His co-workers promised to get him on his car radio. All I knew was that I needed him badly and I wanted him with me.

I sat there in Mrs. St. John’s kitchen, feeling helpless and at a loss. I had no experience in this, (who does?) so I didn’t know what to do next. She kept offering me tea and talking to me reassuringly, telling me everything would be okay and that I would survive this terrible ordeal, but I didn’t really believe her. I sat dazed and kept asking her if she was sure that my life would be all right again. Finally, she told me of her own personal tragedy, a son shot by a sniper while jogging. "You will survive," she said again. I looked at her, feeling humbled by the enormity of her grief, and knew from her tone that she spoke from experience.

Most people expect the story to end here, because they think that the horror of a fire coincides with the day it happens. But like death, a fire is never over for the survivors on that day. Rather, in the beginning, people are in a state of shock and operate on raw nerves. This is followed by the days when the survivors feel inexpressible gratitude at the generosity and compassion of others. That’s what carries the victims through the first weeks of the rebuilding process.

That first day we arrived on the doorstep of a seventy-three year old friend. “Will you shelter us?” we asked. A childless widow, our friend, Jean, claimed that we gave her an opportunity to fuss over the family she never had. All I know is that she nurtured us in every way imaginable, including gourmet dinners served on warm plates with elegant table settings - flowers, linen napkins, candles, and soft music playing.
family's possessions. Every sock, every tie, every towel, every dish, every can of food, every spice jar, every tube of medicine, everything needed to be recorded on sheets with a description of the item, the date it was purchased, the price we had paid, and its value on today's market. It meant sifting through the charred, scorched, and burned remains in the house.

To comprehend what it was like, picture yourself in a room without heat, electricity, lights, or water, sorting through the remains of a campfire, and writing down everything you find. The only thing that made the task bearable was Fran and Ernie, who gave new meaning to the word, "friends." They took vacation time to come and help us with this grim job. Thanks to them we saw some humor in the situation. Fran gladly threw out Brian's sport shirt, the one that looked like an Italian tablecloth with white paint spattered on it. I use to have to fight with him not to wear it when we went out. She also tossed out a tie that looked like an orange and green medieval tapestry. He still hasn't forgiven her. Of course, my pink, polyester bell-bottoms, that I knew would come back into style some day, also made the discard pile amid much guffawing.

Memories, heirlooms, family photographs, and keepsakes, those were the difficult things to part with. My wedding dress, the baby pictures, our wedding album, the family Bible, the boys' Little League trophies, the fire consumed in a non-partisan fashion. Often it wasn't the most expensive, but the priceless, that made the task at hand so hard. However, the insurance company had been explicit, no inventory, no check. So, we plodded on.

Things were no better for the house, except that then we had a contractor they could hassle, too. Our insurance read that we could replace what we owned with "like kind and quality." So, the adjustor argued about the value of everything, making us prove the worth and without a doubt T's best buddy, hadn't been so fortunate. He was the only casualty. The fire marshal that the blaze had started from faulty wiring in an electric blanket on T's bed. Brian T. At the time T was a ten-year-old sixth grader. The day of the fire, we learned from Chief was the dog who watched T depart on the school bus every morning and waited patiently for him to come home every night. Chief slept by T's bed, and would eat alive anyone who attempted to enter T's room without permission. Whenever T lay on the floor to read or watch television, Chief would insinuate himself by T's head, gradually inching closer, until T used Chief's side as a pillow. The two of them could have been a painting labeled, "Boy with His Dog."

After the fire, T's behavior changed dramatically. He was balky, insolent, and uncooperative. He wrote dirty words and pictures on school papers, and his A grades plummeted. In the weeks that followed the fire, I was called in by the teacher to conference about what was happening with T. We were both stymied, and when asked what the problem was, T would merely shrug his shoulders. Brian and I tried to give T some latitude, realizing that it was so traumatic for us to be dislocated and stripped of everything we owned, how much more so for a boy of ten. But the more tolerant and understanding we became, the more obnoxious he was.

Finally, one day about two months after the fire, I snapped. I don't remember slapping him, the action was that fast and unpremeditated, but I do recall the red mark on his cheek. T's chin quivered, but he didn't cry, as he looked me squarely in the face with the saddest expression I have ever seen in anyone's eyes.

I went to see a child social worker I knew and explained the situation. "I'm only speculating," David said, "but it sounds as if T wants to be punished. As if, somehow, he feels he deserves it."

That night T came home with a writing project for school. He had to write an essay, and the best ones were going to be sent on to a book contest whose first prize was two hundred dollars. T wanted that money desperately.

"I'm going to write about Chief," he announced, "and about the fire."

T sat writing at the kitchen table. I was at the sink doing dishes and furtively watching him working hard on his paper. Suddenly, the activity stopped. I waited. After a while I asked him what the problem was. He replied, "I'm stuck."

"Will you read me what you have so far?" I asked. It was all about how Chief had come to our house and the relationship that had developed between them.

T had always been a good writer, and the first part of the story was interesting. His writer's block seemed to be when he began to talk about the day of the fire. He had stopped with the line, "As Brian climbed on the bus, he saw his friend watching him out the window."

Now T looked at me defiantly. "This is a dumb assignment," he said. And the teacher's dumb too for making us do it. "He stood up and raised his arm to throw his pencil across the room.

"Perhaps, if you talk out the story," I suggested. "Sometimes that helps writers say what doesn't go down easily on paper."

He looked at me, his gaze so earnest that it was painful to watch. "Don't you understand, anything? I can't write the next word. I just can't."

Thinking it was a question of choosing the right word or spelling, I persisted. "Why can't you write the next word? What word are you trying to say?"
"I can't write it because I have to say," he stumbled and halted and tried again. "I have to say... It's that... I'm a murderer. I killed my best friend."

As the words came tumbling out of his mouth, his sturdy body sank into the chair, shuddering and quaking with each sob that issued from him. Hearing his crying, Brian came into the room and between us, we cradled T's heaving little body and stroked his blond head. I prayed more intently than I had ever prayed in my life, that God would help me know the right words to say to this suffering child, because somehow I knew that what we did that night in the kitchen would heal or harm for a long time to come.

We realized we were in part to blame because we had stifled his earlier attempts to tell us of his pain. We had rushed in with reassurances that no one held him responsible, when what he wanted was a chance to tell us what he was feeling. We had forgotten how important a pet can be to a child. We had negated what Chief had meant to him by saying that we were glad it was only the dog that perished, as long as T and his brothers were safe. We had failed to see that regardless of who else held T responsible for Chief's death, he held himself accountable. His bed, his blanket, his best friend. Somehow for him that was all the connection that was needed.

This time we didn't hush T with our attempts to mollify him. We let his suffering and his sobbing expend themselves. And it took a long time. When we spoke, we apologized. We explained that our love for him was as great as his love for Chief, so that in our relief that he was all right, we forgot to comfort him for his loss. We explained that accidents do happen, sometimes with tragic consequences, but that arson wasn't permitted at any age, and if he had truly been at fault, the police would have come to talk to him. I silently thanked God that T seemed to be accepting all of this, but I knew he still had some difficult unfinished business. In order to exorcise Chief's ghost, T had to tell the world.

"You must put your whole story on paper, T, because when you put your aching on paper, it will never hurt you or eat up your insides again."

Too weak to write, T agreed to talk, while I wrote. He spoke beautifully and poignantly of a little boy named Brian, who was convinced that he was responsible for his best friend's death. He talked of feeling sick inside and believing that everyone was calling him a murderer behind his back. When it was finished, T insisted it had to go into the contest, because he wanted that two hundred dollar prize money to buy a new dog, "Just like Chief."

Well, T didn't win the contest, but he was a new person after writing his story. Once more his old self, T found there was no longer any need to seek punishment; after all, "it was only an accident." His father and I bought T a new dog, whose name is Becky. She is the image of Chief and guards T just as fiercely as her predecessor. One thing I learned from this experience is that sometimes bad behavior can be a child's voiceless plea for help and understanding.

On June 7, we moved back into our rebuilt home. We threw a "house cooling" party to celebrate, reasoning that the house had been "warmed" enough for one year.
Say Goodbye

Jane Carriera

I don't remember anything except for the funeral mass. It was the only part of the services I had been allowed to attend because I was told that I was too young. The problem was that I was not too young; I just didn't know how to say goodbye. And that frustration appeared in the form of tears that spilled like a river onto my pink and white checked dress.

Nana's summer cottage was right around the corner from our beach house. It had been a wonderful place with just my older sister and me there, and now that was about to change. They were here. The old beige VolksWagon square back pulled into my grandmother’s driveway. My mother and father had come back with a new bundle of wonder covered in a light cotton blanket.

Nana knew that my sister and I were not pleased about this inevitable event. I knew that Kate especially, felt out of the spotlight because Nana tried so hard to make her laugh. She would take the eyes out of the metal owls that held the wood in the fireplace and put them over her closed lids. Then she would raise her hands above her head and make all kinds of noises that would playfully frighten a five and a seven-year-old. She would play Yahtzee with us too, and she would always let us win, but never without a fight.

In the coming years, when my younger sister got me into trouble, I always would run to Nana’s house. She tried to make me realize that 'Bitty' was a good person, and deep down I would eventually realize that I loved her. She would always tell me this over my favorite cucumber-and-mayo-on-white with a sliced pickle on the side. We never had pickles at my mom’s. I don’t think I ever realized how special it was to have such an important person in my life live right around the corner.

Then a few years later, she was gone. I had been sailing in a small boat race that morning on the lagoon in front of Nana’s cottage, Snug and Cozy. She always watched me from her porch, cheering me onto pass the last boat to become the first-place finisher. I remember crossing the finish line, basking in my nine-and-three quarters old glory that I had passed my rival at the last possible second to capture first place. Then, I saw it - an ambulance was in Nana’s driveway, lights flashing. I distinctly remember thinking that she had missed my moment. Now it seemed as if a very different kind of moment had come, and instinctively I knew what that moment was.

Sixteen years passed before someone else in our immediate family died. Shortly following Easter, I watched my younger sister wrestle with grief for the first time. As I saw her fight her own frustration about how to say goodbye to my father’s mother, Grammy, I remembered how cheated I felt about not being able to fully say goodbye to Nana.

Kate and I watched her pace back and forth in the hallway just outside the room of the funeral home, trying to decide whether or not she could face the emotions. Her indecisiveness showed in her tears, flowing just as mine were flowing now and sixteen years earlier. Nana had been right - I had discovered that I loved her. It was because of this love that I went out to her and told her my story about saying goodbye to Nana. I talked about it as a type of 'letting go' process for the people that are left behind, and that she was lucky to have this opportunity.

We knelt next to the casket that night, me for the second time, and Liz for the first. We cried together and held hands. And she allowed herself to say goodbye to Grammy, and I allowed myself to say goodbye to Nana, too.
On the occasion of my 48th birthday my sister presented me with a gift that was a surprise for two reasons. First, I hadn't expected my sister to arrive on my doorstep bearing anything and second, the gift was a 17x21 inch frame displaying 19 pictures capturing my life from birth to high school graduation. For most people this would seem like a nice gift; for me it was a revelation.

There were my parents, embracing as youthful lovers. A picture of my father showed a young, handsome man with a lopsided grin that would be echoed in my firstborn's smile. My mother, a 1940's bathing beauty, stood smiling at life long before Alzheimer's was to rob it from her. In another photo, my aunts and grandparents gathered in their finery, the women laughing, the men serious. Were they at a special event? While they were a vision of my ancestry, what captivated me were the pictures of my youth.

In the center was a picture of me as an infant with my two older sisters - Kathleen, the eldest, clutching me in her lap while Virginia laughed into the camera. I stared at the bald-headed baby seeing the infant for the first time. There I was - a chubby baby, enjoying my thumb as my sisters posed for the camera.

Another photo where I was three showed me with the strap of my sunsuit seductively slipping off my shoulder as I reclined on the glider on my grandparents' porch. The glider was a wonderful experience. It was a sofa that creaked in rhythmic movement with the slightest urging. Sitting in the second floor screened-in porch was the best thing about a visit to my grandparents' home. Some nights, when I was older, I would be lulled to sleep by the city's noise or the bells of St. Augustine's chimes calling the parishioners. This of course was the signal for my Great-aunt Bridgie to amble off to see her friends. She had iron gray hair that turned pure white a week before she died at the age of sixty-seven. It was my first innocent and accepting introduction to death in contrast to my reaction to my father's death in my adult years.

Another photo of me on the porch depicts me clutching my mother's purse, a defiant pout on my lips, perhaps a precursor of my stubbornness. Was it my destiny to be remembered as a petty thief? I remember I had wanted change for an ice cream cone and had been denied it, so I took matters into my own hands - or rather sticky fingers - and had been caught in the act. While others laughed, I had bemoaned the fact that I would get no special treat that day!

A photo captured me at five years old, sitting on a tricycle. I never remember having any kind of cycle, tri or otherwise, but there I was, squinting into the camera, my open mouth uttering silent words, my long legs stretching to meet the pedals while a lone shirt flapped on the clothesline behind me. The picture was surely taken on Henry Street, the site of my introduction to pedestrian safety. When I had run into the street and was hit by a car, I had learned that pigeons can waddle around in the street and somehow escape any injury, but I should refrain from mimicking them.

In another Henry Street photo, slightly out of focus, I am sitting in Ray and Alice Ahern's big living room chair. The Aherns, who lived in the apartment above us, had the distinction of owning a television set years before anyone else we knew had one. They had no children so they loved us as an extension to their family. We took every opportunity to sneak up there, especially eluding my mother on bath night. When not there, we devised a game, "Up to Ray Ray's" where one of us would lay on our back and perch another on the upturned soles of our feet. At the given signal, up the rider would go to "Ray Ray's." This was quite a treat that lost its fun when we moved to Crown Street and could no longer scamper out of my mother's grasp to run up the stairs to our friends. Going "up" no longer meant to Ray Ray's but to the Sorenson's, our new -- unfriendly -- neighbors.

A communion picture showed me with hands posed piously in front of me, the big snowball tree that grew in the yard of our home on Crown Street forming the backdrop. I don't remember much about my first communion except maybe the long line of the properly dressed and prepared boys and girls. Ringing in my memory was the nuns' admonition that the Host was not to touch our teeth or, for all I knew, we would probably go straight to hell. This made receiving communion an interesting and physical event. It was sort of like trying to swallow whole a very dry quarter. Years later, when chewing the Host was allowed, I still remembered the words from my youth and would juggle the wafer in my mouth, usually getting it stuck on the roof and spending the rest of the Mass trying to peel it off with my tongue.

Anyway, there I was in my finery posed in front of the snowball tree. I don't know the proper name for it, but we called it the snowball tree because of the obvious similarity between the big white blossoms and the icy orbs. It reminded me of how ingenious we were in our youth. One summer, my sisters and I stripped the tree and went house-to-house trying to sell the flowers to the neighbors in spite of the fact that the plant grew practically wild in the neighborhood. The proceeds of our efforts would finance a trip to the corner store, a favorite haunt right across from school. Rows of penny candy beckoned me with open boxes and a myriad of colors. Fireballs, jaw breakers, Sugar Daddys, root beer barrels, Squirrels, Mary Janes - they could be savored for hours in your mouth. Licorice (only the black kind) came in clusters of long strands. Tootsie Rolls and Baby Ruths were the choice when greater resources allowed us to purchase a whole bar of candy - the mark of a true floral entrepreneur.

The picture from hell. You know the one - the school pose where someone forgot to tell you you were ugly or at least point out that your hair was sticking out in all the wrong directions. There I was, in all my splendor, before perennials would give "body" to my hair or at least twist it into some shape that resembled a stab at styling. What makes this photo remarkable was the way in which the photographer was able to capture the Grand Canyon that separated my two front teeth. I was at the age to consider this an asset. Who else could spit with their teeth clenched? Of course the enormity of this feat waned as I reached puberty and braces adorned my once illustrious claim to fame.
In another picture, taken to commemorate my graduation from high school, I stand sandwiched between my parents. On my right is my father in a new suit, one of the few times he was so attired. My mother stands on the left, wearing an outlandish hat and white gloves. White gloves! Have they become symbols of another era? We stand before the Ford Fairlaine 500 that, in its twilight years, ferried me to college. It had two fins on the sides that could wipe out pedestrians just by their backdraft. The front headlights were shaded by the hood extending out like eyebrows. Cream and dark green - what a dream! Nearby a young red maple bends in the breeze belying its destiny to be felled by a hurricane.

Long after my sister returned to her home in New York I reflected on her gift. For most of my life I had believed there were no pictures of me taken before I was about seven years old so most of these were photos I had never seen. Once, when I had asked my mother for an explanation, she had answered that I was born just after World War II had ended and times were tough. She offered that maybe the camera had been broken and never fixed and other such excuses. But this did not account for the pictures of my brother, a year younger, and my sisters, three and four years older. It seemed as if I was the forgotten child. Was I adopted and dropped into their lives when I was six? This of course led to a whole series of other fantasies not easily explained by the fact that my sister and I bore a striking resemblance to my mother and almost every Grady family member. I had come to believe that I had not been worth the time and effort to capture on film. But here was proof I was wrong. The photos seemed to be more than just reproductions of moments in history. My life took form before me. Stories long forgotten pricked my memory as changes in my life were displayed. My sister’s gift had helped me appreciate the child that had crafted the woman I had become.

The telephone rings. Spaghetti is in the pot on the stove as steam ascends to the ceiling. On another burner, the spaghetti sauce bubbles away. The computer screen has been left on because I will get back to it before the night is over! Hang up the phone - the Police Benevolent Association wanted money. Oh NO! How much did I promise them anyway? I glance around the kitchen. What a mess the floor is with its sprinkling of crumbs around the edges. With a heavy sigh, I place my hands on my hips and feel a bit spongy around the middle -- more so than four weeks ago. How depressing. In four weeks the body has gone to hell. That’s probably why I have such a poor attitude. The lack of physical stimulation has negatively affected my outlook. Anyway, hop back onto the computer after a quickie. No, I mean dinner. Oh my goodness. It’s 12:02. Time to get to bed for a few minutes of sleep. Sleep? What’s that?

“I’ve got to fly like an eagle to the sea.”

Wouldn’t that be nice. The sea. How relaxing. Flying like an eagle. That’s not what I’ve been doing. Rather, the alarm begins screaming at 6:00 A.M. SLAM! My hand goes down onto the clock radio. I stumble out of bed and take a cold shower to get the blood flowing and the mind working. I’m awake NOW! Running around the apartment, I finally get some clean clothes on. Get dressed, make breakfast, eat breakfast while standing at the counter to prepare lunch, pull together the blue whale and the learning log responses. PHEW! I’m already sweating but no wonder, it’s 80 degrees outside with the humidity rising. Run into bedroom and kiss husband. Is that him? I almost didn’t recognize him. He’s still in bed and my jealousy is mounting. Wouldn’t it be wonderful to crawl back in and fall into a deep slumber? Oh well. Down the stairs and out to the car. 7:26 A.M. I still have enough time to stop and get a large cup of strong coffee at the Whole Donut. With only six hours of sleep, I will definitely need the caffeine. Time to meet Pat in the Stop and Shop parking lot before we head to Storrs for the day. We’re flying. Flying like chickens with our heads cut off so as not to be late for our 9:00 date.

“I want to fly like an eagle. Let that eagle carry me.”

Floating. Where have the careless, lazy days of summer ’93 gone to? Scaffolding. Vygotsky. Bizzell. Construction noise. Long commutes and very long days. Dead battery. Tasteless meals. Piles of dirty laundry and dusty furniture. Worth it? I can say yes only because I am closer to the end of this chaotic frenzy that has metamorphosized in the last four weeks. Time now to get back on the balance beam of life and soar with the eagles as “Time keeps on slippin’, slippin’, slippin’ into the future.”
"Mrs. Bush, we have to operate. Do we have your permission?"

Winnie heard the words of the lean-jawed young emergency room doctor through a blur of pain.

The pain had begun at the nursing home last night. It was not the familiar arthritis ache but a searing, all-enveloping pain she had never known before. She had tried to keep herself from moaning out loud so that she would not wake Anna, her roommate, but the moans had burst from her as if with a will of their own. Why hadn't the nurse taken her more seriously? Didn't she realize Winnie had never acted this way before?

She had forced herself to wait until morning before fumbling for the telephone on her bedside table and dialing her daughter's number, but then she had used the strongest words she knew: "Pat, I'm ready to kill myself, I'm in such terrible pain." Pat had arrived about twenty minutes later looking disheveled. It had been another half hour before the ambulance arrived.

Now the doctor was finally here with the results of the X-rays. Lying on the cold stainless-steel X-ray table had itself been an ordeal; her ninety-two year old body had no fat padding her bones. But the terrible pain in her abdomen had obliterated everything else. She had closed her eyes and tried to transport herself somewhere else - to the road in front of the South Carolina farmhouse of her childhood. She had tried to feel her toes squeezing the soft sand at each step, to smell the decaying sweetness of the overripe figs under the big tree in the front yard, to picture the moss-hung branches of the live oak at the crook of the road, on the way to Aunt Pink's.

But here was this urgent young man, saying something.

"What did you say? Septic belly?"

"Yes. We have to take you to surgery right away."

"Do I have a choice?"

"No. Your abdomen is septic. If we don't operate you will die."

The threat of dying had no force. But he said there was no choice. At least in surgery there is anesthetic, she thought.

"All right then. I know I can't stand this pain any longer." The knifelike stabs had again become unbearable.

A nurse appeared with a syringe, and Winnie began to drift into unconsciousness. She was being wheeled down a hallway on a gurney, her daughter and son-in-law Jerry trotting alongside, trying to hold her hand. Pat looked scared.

"Why don't I feel frightened?" Winnie wondered. She had vowed many times that she would never consent to any more surgery. She had already had more than her share of operations, and she had never been able to forget the moment when, in the middle of her kidney operation, while she was pregnant with twins, she had come out of the anesthesia and felt the scalpel. But she didn't fear that now. She could imagine nothing worse than this maddening pain.

When Winnie regained consciousness, she was dimly aware that something was wrong with her throat and mouth. A nurse approached her, and when Winnie tried to ask her for some water, she realized that she couldn't talk. Something hard and foreign was in her mouth and throat; it hurt when she tried to form words.

"Oh, you're awake, Mrs. Bush. Don't try to talk. This machine will help until you are able to breathe on your own."

Winnie pushed her parched tongue out of her mouth. The nurse understood.

"I can't give you any water. You're getting fluids intravenously. Would you like me to moisten your lips with some glycerine?"

Winnie nodded. The tube in her throat made her gag when she moved her head. The nurse attached a small bottle to the IV tube, and Winnie felt herself lose consciousness again.

Whenever she opened her eyes during the next several days, it was impossible to tell how much time had passed. The lights were always glaring; there seemed to be no night or day. Several times she awoke to find Pat sitting by the bed holding her hand; another time Jerry was there reading aloud her favorite Psalms. When she tried to lift a hand to acknowledge their presence, she found that her arms and hands were swollen up like footballs; she couldn't lift them.

Other times she found her hands were tied to the bed. Wires and tubes were everywhere. The breathing tube seemed to have worn a raw path down her throat. She tried to concentrate to figure out what was happening to her, but it was hard to think.

Once she struggled against the large plastic mouthpiece to form a question with her lips. The nurse held in front of her a child's magnetic alphabet board. Winnie painfully lifted a finger and pointed at a "W," then her hand fell to the bedspread. She could never spell a whole question. The room blurred. She didn't want to be here.
Years of living with arthritis had led Winnie to devise two tricks for dealing with pain and depression. She had become ingenious in using both of them. The first method was to concentrate on doing something - no matter how small - for someone else. Say hello to a stony-faced new patient at the nursing home. Ask a harried waitress in the dining room about her boyfriend and her plans for the weekend. Write down the names of the aides who helped her dress and talk with them about their children, their lovely accents, or their homes in Puerto Rico or Cambodia. None of that was possible now. She had tried once or twice to smile her thanks to the nurse in intensive care, but she couldn't manage it. Instead she would have to depend on the second method—going somewhere else.

She had plenty of wonderful places to go. She imagined herself now on the back of Gladys, her father's big work horse. She could feel the mare's sturdy bare back between her thighs as she kicked her with bare heels. Behind her was energetic, mischievous Hilda and squeezed in front little Breeland, a beloved younger brother.

The memory of Breeland destroyed the illusion. Why did ten-year-old Breeland have to die, while she and Hilda lived into their nineties? And why was she allowing herself to lie here, letting this monstrous machine do her breathing for her when she had for decades impressed on her doctors and children her dread of being kept alive by a machine? But she was too groggy to think more about it now.

"... We haven't been able to wean her from the machine. She tries, but she is just too weak to breathe on her own. We'll try again tomorrow."

Winnie raised one eyelid for an instant.

It was the nurse talking to Pat and Jerry. They looked haggard.

The thing filled her throat. She fought it, gagging and trying to form her mouth into a word around the mouthpiece. Forcing her eyelids open, she saw Pat's contorted face.

"Oh, Mom." Pat's words were choked. "What are you thinking about all this? If only you could talk to us."

Winnie tried to nod a reassurance, but she was too woozy to stay awake. She soon found herself back in Uncle Joe's Merchandise Store. Hilda whizzed past her on roller skates, followed by their brother Edward. It was one of those times when their red-haired cousin Faber had talked Uncle Joe into letting them clear a space to roller skate in the center of the large store. Winnie put out a hand to steady herself on a bag of grain as she rounded a curve, but Edward zoomed past her, arms swinging in front of him to balance.

"Has she had a dose of morphine recently, or do you think we can get her attention?"
It was Pat's voice.

"It's almost time for her medication now. If you want to try to ask her, this is a good time."

"Mom! Mom, can you hear me? I love you so much, I can't bear to see you suffering like this." Winnie tried to flicker an eyelid in response. She hurt all over.

"Mom, the doctor says we have to ask you a question. Can you hear me?"

Winnie felt Pat's face rest on her swollen hand. It was hard to concentrate. The world of bright lights, tubes, and pain was one she didn't like to enter any more. It was better to stay away. But this was her child; her child needed her.

"Mom, the doctor says he can't leave the breathing tube down your throat any longer. It's already been ten days. He has to do a tracheotomy - insert it in your neck or else ..." Pat's head was touching Winnie's hand again.

"Or else ... Remember your Living Will? You always said you didn't want to be kept alive on a machine. Mom, what do you think of all this? Do you want the doctor to do the tracheotomy? Try to nod your head if you do."

Winnie lay still. She nestled on one of the broad horizontal branches of the fig tree, reading. Soon, when Papa finished hitching the mules, Kit and Mary, to the buggy, he would call her and Hilda and the four boys to come get in, and they would all ride over the Salkehatchie River and the swamp to Aunt Rosa's house, the children counting each of the 26 bridges as they crossed them. Mama would bring a pie made of their own pears to help out with dinner. Papa would put on his alpaca coat and run a comb through his few strands of hair as they climbed out of the buggy. She and Hilda would race up the steps to the broad front porch and claim their seats on the joggling board, stable at the ends but slack and limber in the unsupported middle, where they would get their joggling ride before giving a turn to Edward and Breeland or holding Jack and Francis on their laps to give them a ride.

"... He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters ...

It was Jerry's voice. How did he know those words were what she needed?

Her eyes flickered open in thanks. She felt Pat's hand try to enclose her swollen one. The words were better comfort.

"Mom, we love you. We want to do what you want. You have always wanted to make your own decisions. Can you do that for us now?" Pat's voice was hoarse, as if she had a tube down her own throat.

"The doctor says he can't wait any longer. He said to ask you whether you want him to do a tracheotomy, or ..." Pat stopped. Winnie could hear her take a deep breath. "Or whether you want him to just ... remove the breathing tube."
"I know it's hard for you to move, but try. I'm going to ask you the questions. If you want to say 'yes,' try to nod your head or lift your hand."

"Do you want the tracheotomy? Mom, if you do, try to nod or lift your hand."

Winnie lay as still as she could. She felt her chest rise as the ventilator forced air down her throat. The breath was expelled. Then another filled her lungs.

"Mom, do you want the doctor to take out the breathing tube ... and let you die peacefully?"

Winnie had her eyes closed, but she could see the contorted face of a child — her child. It was her four-year-old coming to her with a bloodied knee, coming for help and comfort. It was necessary to force herself to be here in this place.

Using all her will power, Winnie tried to remember how to move this body that had lain inert for so long. Very slowly, but deliberately, she lifted her hand.

Gripping

Joan N. Hofmann

Anne carried her tray out to the front porch. Carefully, she moved the bowl of cereal, glass of grape juice, and plate with cantaloupe wedge to the table. Grabbing the fork and spoon with napkin wrapped around them, with one movement she whisked the tray aside and sat down to her meal.

This was her favorite time of day, with the early morning sun shining through the etched outline of the maple leaves canopy, enveloping the lawn. "Do the birds know it's Saturday?" she wondered, as she watched them darting among the shaded foliage. She loved being up early enough to hear their morning song and watch their playful movement around the yard. This was her special time, quiet and alone before any intrusion.

"But there's no savoring this morning, as beautiful as it is," she thought as she bounced to her feet. And no waiting for someone's errands or requests to distract her from the work at hand. This day has long been planned out; now it's just a matter of "getting down to it," as Mom used to say.

As she placed the dishes in the sink, she glanced at her mother's picture taped to the front of the refrigerator. Her mother had gone to the nursing home the month before. Just like her brother had last year. They both seem to have some form of dementia, probably Alzheimer's the doctors think. In the end the exact diagnosis doesn't really seem to matter; the result is the same. "And this picture is probably going to be on the refrigerator a long time," she thought.

"But enough of that," she scolded herself. There's been enough time spent on ruminating over it. Today, just tackle the task you promised yourself you would finish: begin the process of cleaning out some of the things in Mom's house. Just like Mom did a couple years ago when she handled Dad's things after he died. Mom just went about it quietly, slowly and little by little Dad's things were removed from the house. Well, most of them anyway. His chair and books are still there, as they've always been.

She stopped at the supermarket and picked up several boxes for sorting things. She anticipated a triage of sorts: some things that would be kept, some to go to the Salvation Army bin and some that would be thrown out. She could envision herself in her mom's bedroom sorting out the bookcase and digging into the bottom desk drawer weeding through papers. Not an insurmountable task, but certainly enough for today.

The July sun was getting hotter as she pulled into the driveway. As she looked at the small Cape Cod house, she couldn't help but think to herself how it looked the same as it always had. Sure, the swing in the tree had been replaced with a hammock years back. And
there was no hammock this year. But the yard looked the same with its self-sufficient gardens of pachysandra and myrtle curled around the base of the house and trees.

She fliened. "What? Who's that? What? Oh my God!" For a split second she caught a glimpse of her mom kneeling there in the garden, transplanting yet again. The flash caught her unawares. Where did that image come from?

Get a grip on yourself, Anne.

Showered with Friends and Memories
Amy G. Allan

"Clink." A toast had been made in honor of the soon-to-be bride. Six friends sat together in one room. Reminiscing the past, catching each other up on the present, and discussing the future. College seemed like it was so long ago, but it actually only had been three years since they had shared an apartment together. Those days were filled with the best of memories. Although they now lived all over the country, they took the time to keep in touch and celebrate special times.

Since Terri would be Sheryl's maid of honor, she arranged the get together. Jen and Colleen drove in from Syracuse. Amy and Michelle from Connecticut. Things never changed. Colleen arrived complaining about the traffic ticket she received in the first twenty minutes of her trip. She told her friends that she had expected a ticket, but not so soon. She was just outside Syracuse when it happened and, because it was so soon into the trip, she had to drive slowly. The two travelers from Connecticut arrived an hour late with excuses as to why the trip had taken so long. Dinner had already been eaten but leftovers were heated up for them.

During the "second" dinner, the girls told Sheryl how the shower had been formulated. Terri had done an excellent job arranging the weekend. She had begun planning the shower last summer when Sheryl had announced her engagement. By early fall, Terri had contacted Sheryl's fiancé, Randy, and told him that she wanted to arrange a surprise trip to bring Sheryl from California over to the East Coast. She instructed Randy to tell Sheryl that he had planned a weekend get away for the two of them. Once he got to the airport though, he left her to board a plane to New Jersey alone. Everything went perfectly and Sheryl was surprised.

Once everyone had eaten, the girls sat down to watch Sheryl open her gifts. They teased her that her intended marriage would leave behind a string of broken hearts. Although Sheryl denied it, her friends knew the truth. Sheryl was gorgeous and carried herself with an air of sophistication. Only her friends knew this was a farce. Behind her glamour girl good looks was a "spaz." Reminders of her behaviors were written in her cards. The girls laughed as they remembered the time she got her tongue stuck to a popsicle on an extremely hot day at Disneyland or when she gave Colleen a black eye playing racquetball. She had felt so bad, that she promised to be her slave until Colleen recovered. Those are the memories of Sheryl that stood out in each of their minds, not the sophistication.

Terri took charge of things soon after Sheryl's gifts were opened. Once the wrinkled wrapping paper was thrown away and the food wrapped and put in the refrigerator, she shared the weekend plans with her friends. Terri being a careful planner had every detail figured out. Even in college she had been very meticulous. In those days, she even cut her food up into tiny pieces. She told the girls what was in store for them the next morning. Since there were six girls, and they wanted to get into the city before noon, she put together a shower
schedule. Eight would be the wake-up hour and each girl had a 15 minute allotment in the bathroom to "shave, shit, and shower." She told them that she had an egg-timer and she would use it if she had to.

The girls decided to get ready for bed since the next day would be a long one. It was a very hot and humid night but the air conditioning kept them cool and soon everyone was fast asleep.

Morning came too soon. Each girl took their turn in the bathroom and was ready to go before 10 o'clock. Breakfast consisted of brownies, taco dip, fruit salad, buffalo wings, soda, and orange juice. Colleen, one of the first ones done, helped herself to a hearty breakfast. She became a little disgruntled when she shook the orange juice and it was spilled on her because Amy had not tightened the lid. Colleen had a habit of creating commotions over little things. Usually, they were minute matters, but she felt the need to stir an uprising. Earlier that morning, she accused certain people of not using their bathroom time correctly. Some of the girls in the group chose to brush their teeth after everyone showered. Colleen did not think that it was fair because they should have done that during the 15 minutes. She wasn't a trouble maker though. Colleen had a unique sense of humor that really shined during her commotions. By the time she had finished stirring up trouble about the orange juice, she had everyone laughing and in good spirits.

Leslie, the seventh roommate, called just as the girls were about to head out the door. She had recently moved to Colorado and could not come out for the weekend. Each girl took a turn talking to Leslie and caught her up with each of their lives. They would not get to see her until the wedding in September. It was too bad that Leslie could not make it, but everyone agreed that her move was something Leslie had to do. She tended to be more of a free spirit and enjoyed trying new adventures. Anything different was something Leslie was guaranteed to try. At one point she had one earring of a stick figure man she named Leroy which she wore everywhere. Colleen, who happened to be a little bit more conservative, could never figure out why Leslie refused to wear two of the same earrings. It was her style though. Her music and taste of clothing went against the grain of those who were conservative too. The girls reminded one another of the tapes she used to play in the apartment. They swore that it sounded like a pack of horses running through the hallway. That was Leslie.

Soon, the girls were on their journey to New York. They separated into 2 cars but reunited on the train. They continued the conversation there as if the car ride had not interrupted it. They reached the city in no time. The heat of the day hit them full blast as they stepped off the train. The forecast had predicted about 100°, and it was definitely getting up there.

The first agenda for the day was sight-seeing and window-shopping. When they became too hot from the heat, they rested in the doorways, letting the air conditioning that escaped from the stores cool them off. They decided to rest and look around St. Patrick's Cathedral. The girls were astounded by its beauty. It was an oasis away from the dirty, smelly streets of New York.

Even after resting at St. Patrick's, the heat was getting to them. A decision was made to go to Tiffany's because they no longer could rely on the doorways to cool them off. They went into the store and proceeded to pick out their favorite pieces of jewelry. Although they weren't purposely drawing attention to themselves, the salesclerk kept an eye on them, since they did not resemble the typical Tiffany shoppers. Clad in shorts, tank tops, sneakers, and pony tails, it was obvious that they were only browsers.

After cooling down, they headed down to F.A.O. Schwartz to check out the stuffed animals, specifically the koala bears. Jen's favorite. Before they even entered the store, Jen pointed out a man dressed in a soldier suit displaying a bubble gun that was sold in the store. She was a "little worried" because it was way too hot to wear this outfit. Jen had been a "little worried" at times in college too. Maybe she had reason to. Jen was level-headed and at times was the calming effect for the rest of the group. She wasn't a mother hen though. She liked to have a good time, and when she let loose, the others enjoyed sitting back and watching her.

The girls checked out the toys and by the time they were through, they were famished. They decided to go to Planet Hollywood for lunch. This unique restaurant is filled with movie memorabilia. While waiting for their table, Terri excitedly pointed out some of the different objects hanging on the walls. In the bar, they sat right next to the gun the Joker used in the movie Batman. After about a 15 minute wait, the girls were seated. The discussion turned to the high class service that was given in the bathrooms. There was a girl attendant passing out towels and squirting soap into people's hands. No one could believe the soap part of it. Against the back of the sink, there were about 20 bottles of perfume to use. The bathroom also had hand cream, toothpaste, and other things to freshen up. Michelle, who becomes easily intrigued by things, went to check things out. She was so impressed, she tipped the attendant a dollar.

After lunch, the group headed down to Greenwich Village. It was the only time that they used the train to move around in the city. The sights there were definitely interesting. There were people swimming in the fountain, a man painted head to toe in white paint, another man holding a sign promising free braids to topless women, and a man walking around from one garbage can to another looking for beer cans that were partially full. This last sight did not seem to shock Michelle as much as Amy. This is probably because Michelle was a survivor. She had undergone some hard times in her life and she came away as a stronger person. One time, in her senior year, a girl had picked a fight with one of Michelle's roommates. Amy cut in line with Michelle to get some toilet paper to blow her nose. The girl thought she was cutting in line to use the bathroom. Five-foot Michelle told the six-foot giant what she thought of her after this Amazon had ripped her friend's shirt. Thank goodness, this girl eventually left them alone. Who knows what would have happened if the argument had kept up. It was funny to know that a short girl like Michelle would stand up to someone who could pulverize her in a single blow. Like a yappy Chihuahua going after a strong Great Dane, it had been Michelle's mouth that had won the battle.

Once they had seen enough of the Village, the girls walked over to South Side Seaport. According to the map and Sheryl and Terri, who read it, the trip was not supposed
Preaching Memories

John Landry

"Come on Jack! It's my turn to shoot," the old man heard as he walked through the Nachaug State Forest. A small, young boy was pleading with a lanky, dark-haired adolescent who was angling the barrel of an air rifle upwards toward a grey squirrel in a hemlock.

"Are you sure you want to shoot the rifle?" asked the old man pivoting on his hickory walking stick.

"Wh- What?" replied the blond-haired child startled by the unnoticed stranger.

"I said are you really sure that you want to shoot that rifle?" The old man stepped off the path and into the grassy clearing where the boys were standing. Stopping before he reached the boys, the old man methodically unhooked the brass buttons on his faded denim suspenders and sat on the trunk of a fallen birch.

"Are you the park ranger or something?" asked Jack nervously letting the butt of the Crossman rifle fall to the ground by his feet.

"No, I'm just an old man that wants to share a story with you." The color returned to Jack's acne-covered face.

"Well we're kind of busy right now," said Jack.

"I knew a little boy a long time ago. Oh, he was about your age I guess," said the old man ignoring Jack and gesturing toward the young, blond-haired boy. "This boy used to bundle up and go out into the December chill with his cupped hands filled with sunflower seeds. He would go to a spot under a little maple tree and try to feed the birds by hand. I've got to give the little guy credit, he was determined. He would stand under that tree for hours and watch the little chickadees bounce from branch to lower branch. The boy did this day after day. Finally, on a bitter cold morning, one of the little black-masked birds landed on his red fingers and plucked a seed from his palm. The boy was so excited that he dropped the remaining sunflower seeds and ran into his house. 'Mommy, Mommy,' shouted the boy, 'it was so tiny and light and I could feel the warmth of its body.'"

"Yeah, and one day I held my grandmother's parakeet, Squeaky. And, and he was light too," the young blond-haired boy chimed in. He had moved closer and sat at the old man's feet to listen to the story.

"Come on Billy, let's leave this old man," sneered Jack, "I think I've spotted the squirrel in that tree over there."
Billy shifted his weight off his arms and began to rise. "Wait Billy! You have to hear the rest of my story; I haven’t finished yet," the old man demanded. His sun-baked lips quivered beneath his grey beard as he waited to see Billy’s response. Billy, captured by the intensity of the old man’s gentle brown eyes, sat back down and crossed his legs.

"Years later the boy received an air rifle for his birthday, much like the one that you want to shoot, Billy. The boy cherished the rifle. He would go out in the backyard every day to practice shooting by setting up acorns along the top of a wooden fence. After he became good at shooting the acorns off the fence, the boy would create games to keep himself interested. He pretended the acorns were aliens from Mars and he would have to kill them all to save the earth. To make it challenging, he would set up eight Martians and only put eight BB’s in his rifle. In a single day he would save the earth twenty times. The boy became bored with the rifle and he used it less and less."

"One day months later the boy had a friend over and..."

"How old was his friend?" asked Billy unable to remain silent.

"Oh, he was older than the boy. Probably about the same age as Jack over there," said the old man.

"Yeah, right, old man," Jack howled. "You’re making this whole story up and I’m getting sick of it. If I want to hear some old man tell stories I’ll go to church and listen to the priest."

"Anyway the boy and his friend were playing in his room," the old man continued ignoring Jack for a second time. '"Hey, I didn’t know you had that,’ the boy’s friend said, pointing at the dust-covered rifle leaning in the corner of the room. 'Let’s go out and shoot it.' When they got outside the friend noticed a robin in the backyard. He shot at the bird and missed. 'Come on Jonny, I saw where it went. It’s your turn to shoot,’ the friend said."

"The robin had disappeared into a depression in the woods. The boy and his friend crawled up to the edge of the depression and peered down into the bowl-shaped land. The robin had come to rest on a rusty coffee can in front of an old white refrigerator that the boy’s father had dumped there years ago."

"Oh man, this is a perfect shot,’ the friend said. The boy knew his friend was right because when he took aim the robin was clearly in focus against the white background, but his heart was pounding so hard against his chest that the boy was sure the robin would hear it and fly away. The boy squeezed the trigger. He heard a fleshy thump as the steel BB hit the target."

"You hit it,’ the boy’s friend shouted for joy, as he got up to get a closer look at the robin which looked like a trout out of water flopping up against the refrigerator. The robin’s bright red blood could be seen clearly smeared on the refrigerator. The boy threw down the rifle and ran back to his house. ‘Mom I killed a bird,’ the boy cried. ‘I never knew their blood was red like ours.’ "

"You see Billy,” the old man said, "when the boy ran back to his mother his heart was beating just as frantically as the wounded robin’s wings, but when the boy’s mother calmed him down his heart beat normally again. The robin’s wings will never beat again."

"Come on Billy let’s get out of here,” said Jack. "We’re going to have to find another squirrel; I’ve lost sight of this one."

"O.K.,” Billy replied, "but let me shoot this time." The young blond-haired boy scrambled to his feet and took the Crossman air rifle from the dark-haired adolescent. Billy and Jack disappeared through the low boughs of the hemlock.

Jonny stood up and methodically fastened his brass buttons. As he turned back toward the path he had come down, he leaned heavily on his hickory walking stick. A tear rolled down his cheek and into his grey beard.
How Many More?

Elizabeth Bowen

Ann leaned back against the wall behind her potter's wheel to study the silhouette of the vase she was throwing. Her eye took in every segment of the line from bottom to top, looking for imperfections, hoping to find none. She thought about the kind of ecstasy that producing the perfect line can bring. That moment when hard work and sheer inspiration come together is seldom achieved but constantly sought after—the impetus to throw vase after vase, pot after pot. This pot was coming close to perfection, just a little more flare on the lip of the opening would give it the sense of grace that she was searching for today.

She sat up straight and leaned forward for a moment to stare down at the pot from above. The vase had been difficult to center on the wheel head and she wanted to be sure the pot was not out of round. For the past several weeks she had tried to throw larger and larger amounts of clay, making each pot bigger and bigger. With every increase in amount of clay, she had to use more and more strength and skill. This particular pot had started out as a ten pound lump of stoneware carefully weighed and then wedged to remove any air pockets.

She picked up a small piece of chamois cloth, dipped it in the water bucket, squeezed the dripping water out of it, and poised her hands to reshape the angle of the lip. Her foot pressed on the pedal and the vase began to rotate. She carefully lowered the piece of chamois against the clay and almost imperceptibly changed the curve of the lip.

Again she leaned back against the wall to appraise the change she made. She felt a moment of satisfaction, not the emotional high she had hoped, but enough to say to herself this pot is done. She rummaged through her tool box that sat on the long table next to her wheel, and found the trimming tool she needed to finish the bottom. As the pots she created got larger so, too, had the tools she needed to make them. This one she ordered from her supplier the day two months ago when the consuming urge to make larger pieces had come over her.

As she pulled the plastic filament under the bottom of the vase, she thought back to March seventh, her fiftieth birthday. Most birthdays had not affected her one way or the other. She still felt the same creative urges and compulsions that she had at 21. Over the ensuing years, she had pursued a graduate degree in ceramics and had a number of full and part-time teaching positions to support her compulsion to make pottery.

She had not thought about the significance of this birthday until her friend Nancy insisted that they go to Fin Bouche for dinner. In the continental candlelight of French wines, petite pain, and truffle pâte, Nancy had wondered aloud about the possibility of living to double that age. How many people were living to be one hundred or more? Could you dare to think that you had only lived half your life? Now that she, too, would soon be fifty, she worried that most people, including the president, would be younger than she. How had the two of them reached this age so quickly?

An image of a frail, white-haired woman sitting in a wicker rocker floated into Ann's consciousness. The background of the image filled in as drawn by an unseen hand to reveal a cottage over looking Lake Michigan. Where had this woman come from? She knew no one who looked like this. She would have remembered the silvery-white locks framing that long, weathered face. The image lingered in Ann's mind even as Nancy continued to speak. The woman seemed to stare into the distance as though looking for something. As she rose from the rocker and reached for the porch railing, her hands whithered into knotted ropes.

Nancy shook Ann's shoulder. "What is the matter with you? You're spilling wine down your dress." Ann suddenly felt the trickle of liquid moving along the front of her white pique bodice.

"Oh, damn! What a waste of good cabernet."

"What were you thinking about? You seemed to be in a trance."

"I don't know." Ann realized that she could not put into words the image that had now faded from sight. Something about the woman had chilled her. She wanted to think about something else, anything else.

After that evening, Ann had recurring dreams in which this aged woman appeared and each time the same thing happened to her hands. Now she sat at her wheel trying to decide how many more pots she could throw before she would call it a day. A long ray of reddening sunlight shot through the window and glanced off the still wet lip of the vase she had finished. As the shadows of the waning daylight moved across the studio she glanced down at the pot and saw the old woman looking back at her.
The Drive

Victoria Nordlund

As she walked home from her afternoon drama class, she wondered how she could meet the deadlines which continually sucked the life out of her. Even though her mind owned the monologue, Rachel still worried about the consequences of failing. One vertical self-imposed worry crease resided on her brow — "Got to get the work done" was her mantra chant. Her ponytailed hair, makeup-free face, unwashed sweatshirt and baggy pants screamed comfort. Rachel's bursting pastry unfortunately screamed discomfort both to her back and her mind. Her feet crunched over the dry, brittle leaves the university had still neglected to rake, as she trudged to her off-campus apartment to immerse herself in work. The journey home seemed endless.

"God I hate this place," Rachel muttered as she approached her 'home.' This three-hundred dollar-a-month, run-down shack, amidst a sea of other three-hundred dollar-a-month, beer-stained cabins, was not exactly conducive to studying. She pictured a serial killer jumping out of the wooded background at any moment. Her boyfriend, Trevor, talked her into coming in between them.

Continuing to hear his strained voice emanating from the ear piece of the phone: "Honey, I want you to come home, something's happened—that's all I can say. I don't want you driving...and...no one is with you.

She was numb and felt alone in an empty dingy apartment. She mumbled something -- anything -- to Trev's father and hung up the heavy phone. Gathering herself, she left her now insignificant assignments to console Trevor.

The drive home — endless and timeless. "Why?" she wondered over and over in her head. While she fretted over her silly assignment, someone was blowing his brains out. "Damn, I had just seen him last week, why didn't I see anything..." Nothing had been wrong. Rachel, Trevor, and Steve had attended a talent show. Steve, quiet as usual, seemed OK. Rachel searched for his words but could not remember one. She prided herself in her perceptiveness and had obviously failed. "There were no fucking signs," she said aloud to herself.

"Who had been hurt?" she thought, "Mom? Dad? Trevor? A robbery? An accident?" Suddenly the memory of the essay flooded her tender memory. Steve had never shared anything with her before last month. He proudly brought an essay he had written for his English class the last time he visited the apartment. He analyzed The Awakening, Rachel tried desperately to remember the words in the paper — but could not. Busy booting up her own essay, which dealt with this painful novel about suicide, Rachel lost sight of Steve's message and wrapped herself around her own. Rachel saw the meaning in every dead piece of literature; however, she missed the significances that surrounded her. Finally, the light turned green allowing her to pass but she was unaware of the change. An impatient motorist notified her of the metamorphosis, and she was abruptly brought back to reality with the blast of an uncaring horn.

Of all the possibilities she considered, this was not one of them. At that moment her emotions hit her with the force of an emergency door opening in an airplane 10,000 feet in the air. Mom, Dad and Trevor -- her precious circle -- alive. Trevor's best friend -- dead. She wondered how Trevor was feeling. He had known Steve for eight years. They had played in a band together in high school and continued to create music together as a college hobby. Eight years... she had shared four of those years. Her first date with Trevor had been a band practice at Steve's house. A gentle, shy, introvert greeted the couple with an awkward grin. She remembered how young, how bad, they sounded. Trev's immature guitar sound complemented Steve's tentative drums. They had grown together.

She continued on her journey home, turning on to the highway in a daze. Not a school daze, a reality daze — a mortality daze. Death had visited her own safe world that she had cushioned with classes, books and essays. The pain she had read about breathed all of the air in her car. The other cars, oblivious to her distress tooled aimlessly home. Silence. Rachel could not bear the triviality of the radio. She was also too hurt to weep.

"Where were all of those souls going so fast? — They breezed past her, going eighty an hour, desperately trying to find their way home to an inconsequential task. Brows, knitted; fists, clenched. Minds, fretting and fussing over piddly little chores they would never
recall in two weeks. Two yuppies laughing haughtily, three kids screaming to be heard, one dopey dog, and a car full of immortal teenagers, all came zooming into and out of her life in brief glimpse. All of them — oblivious members of the community of the cosmos. Rachel shifted her focus to the stickly branches framing her drive that she had never noticed before...

Hunting, another hobby the two boys both shared, abruptly arrived in her memory. She thought of their obsession with guns. She thought of the gun he kept by his bed. Why didn’t she see anything was wrong?

Steve had an empty look in his eyes. Even at the happiest moments, Steve’s heart wept. Rachel remembered the trip to New York City. The three walked thirty blocks that day because of Trevor’s cheapness. They inhaled the Museum of Modern Art, the Hard Rock Cafe, Trump Tower, and the Empire State Building. Steve and Trevor had never been to this landmark. It was dusk, Rachel recalled, and they trekked up to the top. It was a pleasant August night and the stars, oh the stars, they took everyone’s breath away. Rachel thought she saw them sparkle for a moment.

For a moment, she thought she missed the exit for she was wrapped so tightly in her thoughts. Everything familiar seemed foreign... new... peculiar. What would she say? Poor Trevor. She imagined his guilt, pain, and numbness times a thousand. Her mind, alive with images and memories swirling and competing and questioning. Her spirit, weighted with the finality of the news.

As Rachel pulled into the driveway, she sensed that somehow they both would live through this pain — together.
I put my empty coffee cup down on the table, telling myself that my empty feeling today would soon be replaced with my enthusiasm for a new project. I glance down at my watch. "7:45!” I blurt out. "It can’t be that late," I shout, jumping up from my chair. I grab my book bag, pat the dog a quick good-by, and with keys in hand, race out the door. I am off to the Connecticut Writing Project.

My husband, Aaron, always thinks of himself as a careful person when it comes to things he likes. Taking care of our boat is an example of his attentiveness. He polishes, washes, cleans the motor as well as anything that is faintly connected to this boat. Also, he avoids pain or injury to people he is close to. He always makes a comment, "Be careful" or "Watch out."

Careful is not always my thing as I am quick, sometimes impatient, and tend to hurry through completing tasks. Therefore, I am not considered careful.

That reminds me of the weekend that we went camping on Lake George. We tented on an island and my husband had promised my daughter Ellyn an ice cream cone. We planned on tying the boat to the dock at the marina and walking to the ice cream store. It sounded very simple. We were in for a surprise.

To tie the boat up or in boaters talk, “docking the boat” may look like a simple job but is not. Of course, it looks like parallel parking, but there are no brakes. The boater must consider the wind catching the boat and moving it away, the currents pushing the boat, or the boats crashing into your boat. It takes two people to make sure that there aren’t any problems and everyone has a responsibility.

Our family has an unspoken division of labor. Because I am not "careful," I have the mundane job of tying the ropes or lines to the dock. I have tried to trade or negotiate this job but it has fallen on deaf ears. Since my husband considers himself more careful than I, he has the exciting and responsible job of driving the boat up to the dock. Until recently, I was annoyed with his attitude but I have taken on a new philosophy. I realize that I can insult him if he damages the boat, bends the propeller, or has some type of boating accident.

Going into town for an ice cream this day, my husband was not his cautious self, although his position on this issue is different than mine. We putted up towards the dock. Of course, Aaron was driving the boat. I was in the back with a line, as always, ready to throw the line around a pole and jump onto the dock. The steering wheel is on the right and therefore the opposite side of the boat is most difficult when docking. As he retells the story, “It wasn’t on the easy side of the boat,” which meant that the left was the harder side to maneuver. Every time the boat got close to the dock, something happened. First, the wind blew the boat away from the dock. After that, there were a series of problems such as currents, and the wind. As the problems became bigger, his temper started to explode like a volcano erupting. This mild-mannered man began mumbling under his breath and yelled for all to hear, "Jump, Jump! You were close enough. Why didn’t you throw the lines?"

Of course, I was very calm and was yelling back, "No, No — you’re not close enough — Aaron, get closer to the dock."
My daughter put her two cents in and asked, "Daddy, how come you can't get the boat closer?" which definitely infuriated my husband. After a few minutes of bickering, I thought we were close enough so that I could jump from the boat to the dock, and I did. At the same time, Aaron decided to back up and start the procedure all over again.

In that split second, I jumped off the "Missy Marcia" and in midair thought, "Oh, shit." I was so surprised not to have my feet land on the dock but in the water which was warm and wet. I felt the bottom of the soft and muddy lake as I came up for air. I gasped as if I would never breathe again. I tried to pull myself out of the water and on to the dock. I was very low and couldn't get the momentum to propel my body, heavy with wet clothes onto the dock. Many people ran to help tie the boat up and help me. One young man grabbed my jacket and dragged me out of the water. I looked like a drowned rat and was very embarrassed by the whole incident. Of course, my husband was apologetic. I turned to him and scowled. I probably should have asked for a ring, expensive piece of jewelry, or something of great value, but I didn't. I went into the cubby cabin and changed.

We did eventually get our ice cream. For the rest of the summer, I was referred to as the lady who fell into the water. Whenever Aaron thinks he is careful, I always remind him of our docking adventure on Lake George.

"Doring, Doring, Dumbbell Dooring... Dooring, Dooring, he's so boring." Such were the childhood songs of Brian Dooring. Me, I was a member of the chorus, of course. Fifth grade was active and alive with our youth and excitement for our school, our friends, our emerging selves; at least that was what it was like for me. I had seldom wondered what it was like for Brian Dooring. On the last day of that glorious year I learned.

The fifth grade for me was indeed glorious. The bounty of that time seemed to know no bounds. I loved my school work, I was the lead in the Christmas play, Jeff Sargent was my boyfriend (even consenting to hold my hand on the way home from school), and Lisa Gledich was my best friend. What more could an eleven year old want? I could have stayed eleven forever. If I could have, I would never have left the fifth grade and my teacher, Mr. Pirani. I adored Mr. Pirani, I adored the fifth grade.

That last day of school in grade five was to be my last year in the elementary school. I and my classmates would be marching on to the middle school in triumphant hordes eager to dazzle. Naturally with the thrills of sixth grade ahead, the closure of my elementary years should have been a cause for grand celebration and, for most, it was. I could not share in the sentiment. I spent the day in the corner fighting back tears of anguish over leaving Mr. Pirani and this utopia behind. What was I to do? The yellow cupcakes with chocolate frosting being passed around the room while everyone signed "have a great summer... see ya next year" on our final report cards did nothing to ease my melancholy. I was led out to bus number seven that day and remember being cajoled and coddled by Mr. Pirani's final words to me. "You were a special student Jeanne... I will miss you. Don't forget to come back to see me when you are at the middle school." Bla, Bla, Bla. I was devastated.

I didn't sit in the back of the bus that day with all of my "cool" friends who were insisting on continuing their annoying celebration. I sat up front to be alone — to cry. It wasn't until I was half way home that I realized I was not alone in the front of the bus and not alone in my tears. Brian Dooring, "Dumbbell Dooring," was sitting opposite me with his head down, shoulders shaking, his bright blond hair blocking my view of his face. Brian Dooring was crying too.

"Why are you crying?" I asked, but there was no reply.

"Why are you crying?" He finally said.

"Because I don't want to leave this school or Mr. Pirani. Why are you crying?" I tried again.
“What would you care?” he replied. It was a fair question.

“I just do.”

“I’m moving to Florida and I won’t ever be back here. Nobody cares, though. I’m glad I’m leaving,” he choked out at last.

Brian Dooring had not been anything to anyone in the fifth grade except the last one picked for the kickball team, the kid alone at the other end of the table at lunch, and the inspiration for boundless childhood cruelty. He would leave our elementary school glad, glad for the chance to start again. Before that day I had never thought about Brian Dooring as a person. I had never picked him to be on my kickball team, never sat with him at lunch, and always helped my classmates laugh him out of all of our other reindeer games. Dumbbell Dooring was nobody’s friend and everyone’s joke. We were all so wrong.

“I’m sorry you are so sad about sixth grade and not having Mr. Pirani for a teacher anymore,” Brian said to me as I got off the bus.

“I’m sorry you have to go away,” I told him.

I was, too. I was sorry for not having the second chance that Brian Dooring had. I would never get the chance to trade homework assignments with him, cheer at a pep rally next to him, or run for student council against him. I would never get the chance to take back all the erasers I had thrown, names I had called, and jokes I had played. I would never get the chance to show him the kindness he showed me that day I was crying on the bus. None of us would ever understand how our laughter hurt “Dumbbell” Dooring. I understood that day and was sorry, truly sorry.